Lesson Three: Egyptian Society

6.17 Develop a visual representation of the structure of Egyptian society including the role of the pharaoh as god/king, the concept of dynasties, the importance of at least one Egyptian ruler, the relationship of pharaohs to peasants, and the role of slaves in ancient Egypt.

**Watch and Learn**

Take notes over the following social classes as you watch the following videos:

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The Social Structure of Ancient Egypt
What was life like for ordinary Egyptians?

The pharaoh was the most powerful person in all of Egypt, but he—or she—was not alone. Every person had a role to play in Egyptian society. Ancient Egyptians were born into a social group and usually continued in the same jobs as their parents. Thanks to the sculptures and paintings left behind in ancient cities, archaeologists have information about social classes in ancient Egypt.

Ancient Egyptian society was organized based on Ma’at. Ma’at was the proper order for society, and was established by the gods when the world was created. Ancient Egyptians depicted Ma’at as the goddess of truth, justice, and order. The people believed that each new king reaffirmed this order of society because he represented the sun god and was therefore the closest to Ma’at. Therefore, Egyptian social classes were strongly tied to religious beliefs.

Answer the following questions using the article.

1. Who was the most powerful person in all of Egypt?

2. What is Ma’at?

3. What was the connection between the pharaoh and Ma’at?

4. Fill in the blank: Egyptian social classes were strongly tied to ____________________.
Government Officials and Priests

How did the pharaoh maintain control over such a large empire?

The upper classes of Egyptian society usually worked directly for the pharaoh. These government officials and priests represented the pharaoh throughout the kingdom.

Government Officials

Government officials ran the kingdom and looked out for the needs of the people. The top government official was called the vizier. The vizier gave advice to the pharaoh and acted as the chief judge. Other top officials included the chief of the treasury and the general of the armies.

Beneath these top officials, many other officials carried out the day-to-day business of government. Governors and mayors led the governments in towns across the empire. They collected taxes, served as judges, and oversaw local building projects. Sometimes, these officials would have to travel to the capital to meet face-to-face with the pharaoh and other top officials.

Officials were usually from the wealthiest families and wore fine clothes. Often, the pharaoh would reward officials with gifts of jewelry. They also owned much of the land in Egypt.

Priests

The Egyptian people considered the pharaoh a god on Earth, but even the pharaoh could not be everywhere at once. To carry out rituals at temples throughout the kingdom, the pharaoh appointed priests. These priests performed healings, led ceremonies, and provided advice to the Egyptian people. Some priests worked closely with the pharaoh, giving him political advice. Others performed judicial duties in addition to their priestly duties, showing how closely tied religious life was to civic life. These dual roles made priests very important and powerful figures in society.

Like government officials, priests were wealthy. They often passed their jobs down through their families. Records show that some women became priests as well. They also show that priests often shaved their heads for cleanliness.

1. What were the two social classes that made up Egypt’s upper class?

2. What was the role of the government officials?

3. What was the role of the priests?

4. Infer: Why were these two social classes considered upper class?
# Soldiers and Scribes

**How did the Egyptian empire continue to grow and thrive?**

Government officials and priests may have represented the **pharaoh**, but without the strength of the soldiers and the records of the scribes, there would have been no Egyptian empire.

## Soldiers

How did the Egyptian empire get so large? The Egyptian army used well-trained soldiers to expand its borders and maintain control of the people. Some soldiers fought on foot using spears, shields, and axes. Others rode behind horses in chariots and shot arrows. During times of peace, soldiers continued to work for the government, digging irrigation canals for farms or building temples.

For a young Egyptian, life as a soldier was one opportunity to gain status. Young men could join the army and rise through the ranks. Successful soldiers were rewarded with gifts, including land and servants.

## Scribes

Whenever Egyptian officials needed to write something down, scribes, or official government recorders, were there to write it. Scribes recorded court cases, calculated taxes, wrote letters between government officials, and kept official histories. Scribes wrote official documents in a system of picture-symbols called **hieroglyphics**. They also kept records and wrote less formal documents in a simpler script.

Becoming a scribe took a lot of training. Scribes studied for many years, copying passages from sunrise to sundown. Only boys could train to be scribes, and many of those boys were sons of scribes. While most members of the elite and some skilled merchants and craftsmen could read and write, scribes created almost all of the written records in ancient Egypt.

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### Answer the following questions using the article.

1. **What was the role of the soldiers?**

2. **What would soldiers do during times of peace?**

3. **What was the role of the scribes?**

4. **List two facts about scribes from the passage.**
   a.)
   b.)

5. **Why do you think the text says there would have been no Egyptian empire without soldiers and scribes?**
Merchants and Craftsmen

How did the Pharaohs get so many artifacts for their temples and tombs?

Who filled the pyramids with artifacts? Who brought Egyptian artifacts to faraway lands like Kush and Phoenicia? Craftsmen created many of the objects we see in museums today. Merchants spread Egyptian goods and culture throughout the region.

 Merchants

Egypt was one of the wealthiest and most powerful empires of the ancient world. Goods from Egypt have been found throughout the Middle East and North Africa. These goods were carried by merchants, or traders. Merchants would carry gold, jewelry, clothing, rope, and other Egyptian goods out of Egypt. They would meet merchants from other regions and trade for goods that could not be found in Egypt, such as elephant tusks from the south or cedar wood from Syria. Merchants also carried goods along the Nile to other parts of Egypt.

Merchants did not always have a very high status, but they could become wealthy if they were careful traders. Wealthy officials often wanted rare goods from around the world for their homes and their tombs.

 Craftsmen

Almost every statue, jar, robe, or necklace from ancient Egypt that we see in a museum today was created by a craftsman. Ancient Egyptian craftsmen, also called artisans, usually inherited their trades from their fathers. At an early age, they began to learn to be stone carvers, metal workers, potters, jewelers, sculptors and weavers.

Craftsmen worked together in large workshops. Much of their work was created for government officials and other wealthy Egyptians. These powerful Egyptians used the art to decorate their homes and to fill their tombs. Ordinary Egyptians rarely had the wealth to buy the fine, decorated objects made by skilled craftsmen. The most talented workers in the shop became master craftsmen, with additional power and responsibility.

Answer the following questions using the article.

1. What was the role of the merchants?

2. Describe the job of a merchant.

3. What was the role of the craftsmen?

4. Infer: Why are merchants and craftsmen important to the study of ancient Egypt today?
Farmers and Enslaved People
Who supplied Egypt’s food and built the pyramids?

Farmers

Although pharaohs and leaders may be the best-remembered people from ancient Egypt, most Egyptians were farmers who lived off of the land. Some farmers owned their own land, but many were peasants who worked on the land of the pharaoh or wealthy officials. Peasants did not own their land, and most of the crops they raised went to the landowners for sale or trade.

Farmers lived in simple houses made of mud bricks. They used the government-built irrigation systems and camels to carry water to their fields. Farmers also paid large portions of the crops they produced to government officials as taxes, rent, or tribute to the local temple.

Most historians believe that farmers also built the pyramids, temples, and other large projects. As part of their duty to the pharaoh, farmers were required to leave their homes and work as members of temporary crews that moved stones, built ramps, or made tools. These workers slept in villages and were paid by government officials with daily portions of bread, fish, and beverages.

Servants and Enslaved People

Although most historians and archaeologists agree that enslaved laborers did not do the majority of the work to build Egypt’s temples and pyramids, enslaved people did fill a number of important roles in ancient Egypt. Enslaved people worked as servants in households or as laborers in fields. Some enslaved people also worked dangerous jobs below ground in copper or gold mines.

Enslaved people were often foreigners who had been captured in battles. Some enslaved people were peasants who sold their own freedom to pay off their debts. Enslaved people were considered the property of their owners and could be traded. The children of enslaved people became enslaved by their parents’ owners. Enslaved people could also buy their freedom.

Answer the following questions using the article.

1. What was the role of the farmers?

2. Infer: Why do you think most Egyptians were farmers?

3. Who is thought to have built the pyramids? Why do historians think they did this?

4. What was the role of servants and enslaved people?

5. List two facts about ancient Egypt’s enslaved people.
   a.)
   b.)
Evaluate

Create a visual representation of Egypt’s Social Structure. Include the title of the social class, a picture, and the roles and responsibilities of each class.