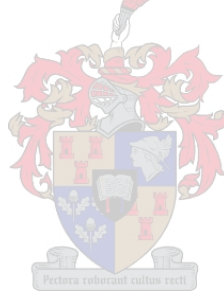


# **ASPECTS OF THE FAMILY IN ANCIENT EGYPT**

BY

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THESIS PRESENTED IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE  
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF  
MASTER OF ARTS (ANCIENT NEAR EASTERN STUDIES)

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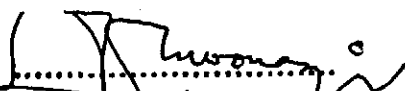
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DECEMBER 2002

*Declaration*

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## **ABSTRACT**

This study deals with the ancient Egyptian family. Cultural anthropology is used as a point of departure to reconstruct the daily lives of the ancient Egyptians. Cultural anthropology usually applies to living communities but most of the principles it uses are just as relevant in the study of a dead culture. The emphasis of this study is on the different cultural domains, which include education, religion, family livelihoods, family recreation, entertainment and travel and social organization and how these are interrelated. Most of our ancient Egyptian knowledge comes from the tombs of wealthy individuals, and thus incomplete since we have no record of how peasants perceived the world, as they could not afford a good burial. Other sources are the ancient documents and artefacts from town sites all associated with wealthy individuals. While peasants were too poor to send their children to school, wealthier Egyptians did send their children to school especially boys. Agriculture was central in ancient Egyptian life. The nobility and other higher classes depended on the toil of the peasant for basic commodities and food. The peasant families in the rural areas were unable to attend the lavish festivals in the cities. Their basic focus was centred on their homes, families and on the success of the harvest. The peasant had his own private god or gods to whom he could turn for aid or comfort in times of trouble. Surplus items of food, clothing, oil and such like could be used for barter for purchasing essential items for everyday living. During their spare time the Egyptian families entertained friends, engaged in the various pastimes and travel. The peasant, as providers of food, formed an important social base for the Egyptian state.

## OPSOMMING

Hierdie studie handel oor die Egiptiese familie. Kulturele antropologie word gebruik as metode om die daaglikse lewe van die antieke Egiptenare te rekonstrueer. Kulturele antropologie word gewoonlik op "lewende" gemeenskappe toegepas, maar die beginsels daarvan is net so relevant vir die bestudering van "dooie" kulture. Die fokus van hierdie studie is op die verskillende kulturele domeine wat insluit onderrig, religie, familie aktiwiteite, familie ontspanning, vermaak, reis en sosiale organisasie en hoe hierdie domeine op mekaar inwerk. Meeste van die kennis oor antieke Egipte word verkry uit die grafies van ryk individue en is daarom gebrekkig ten opsigte van kleinboere en hul siening van die wêreld, omdat hulle nie behoorlike grafies kon bekostig nie. Ander bronne is die antieke tekste en artefakte wat gevind word in dorpe, wat ook meestal behoort het aan ryk persone. Die kleinboere kon nie bekostig om hul kinders na 'n skool te stuur nie, maar ryk Egiptenare kon wel – veral dan seuns. Landbou was baie belangrik tot Egiptiese lewe. Die aristokrasie en ander klasse was afhanklik van die sukses bestaan van kleinboere om hulle te voorsien van die basiese goedere en voedsel. Kleinboer families, wat in die platteland gebly het kon nie die groot feeste in die stede bywoon nie. Hul persoonlike oortuigings het daarom gefokus op die huishouding, familie en suksesvolle oeste. Kleinboere het 'n persoonlike god of gode gehad wat tot hul hulp kon kom, of troos kon bied in tye van krisis. Surplus goedere soos, onder andere, voedsel, klere en olie kon as ruilmiddel gebruik word om ander items wat benodig word, te bekom. In vrye tyd het families vriende onthaal, verskillende stokperdjies beoefen en rond gereis. Die kleinboere, as verskaffers van voedsel, het 'n belangrike sosiale basis van die Egiptiese staat gevorm.



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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## CHAPTER 1: GENERAL INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 INTRODUCTION

According to Lesko (1987:65) the decipherment of Egyptian hieroglyphic writing and the preliminary documentation of the great temples in the first half of the nineteenth century, marked the real beginning of modern Egyptology. This began with the expedition of Napoleon in 1798 subsequently leading to the discovery of the Rosetta Stone in August 1799 by a group of soldiers. All the knowledge of hieroglyphics had been lost since the fourth century AD and it was not until 1822 that a breakthrough was made by the French scholar Jean Francois Champollion (1790-1832). Watterson (1984:31) regards this scholar together with Emmanuel de Rougé (1811-1872) as two of the greatest of the early Egyptologists. Champollion was the founder of Egyptology who deciphered the hieroglyphic script; de Rougé was the founder of Egyptian Philology, the first man to lay down the rules for reading and translating hieroglyphic texts. It has now become possible to study contemporary sources and to construct the ancient Egyptian way of life.

Pinch (1995:363) argues that the sources available should be treated with caution since the representations of private life on tombs and temples represent the viewpoint of the elite ruling class rather than that of the mass of Egyptian society. She also gives the same warning about ancient Egyptian literature. However, tombs, temples and literature provide us with information on many aspects of the private lives of ancient Egyptians. Some genres such as biographical inscriptions in tombs, love poetry and instruction texts can provide useful information on daily life. Instruction texts deal with ethics and manners and advise young men on how to become the perfect Egyptian. The surviving Middle Kingdom examples were addressed to the sons of the ruling elite, but the later instructions texts were aimed at people lower down the social scale. Correspondence is not a major source of information since relatively few personal letters survive

from Dynastic Egypt. Legal documents can provide valuable insights into private life, but they mainly relate to an urban middle class of artisans, priests and minor officials. Illiterate peasant farmers formed the bulk of the population, but their homes rarely survive and little is known about their customs and living conditions. The most extensive archaeological evidence for daily living comes from towns and villages built by the state for special purposes. Conditions in these planned settlements were not necessarily typical of life in the country as a whole.

## 1.2 AIM AND VALUE OF RESEARCH

The aim of this study is to research the family in ancient Egypt. In the absence of living informants about life in ancient Egypt we shall rely on secondary sources and illustrations where appropriate. The study will focus on the daily lives of family members in such activities as education, economic activities, religious rituals, agricultural activities and family recreation, entertainment and travel.

Robins (1996:804) enumerates the topics of the subject matter that has been covered in scenes of everyday life by different authors. Among these are:

- |                                 |                               |
|---------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| 1.2.1. Agriculture and famine   | 1.2.11. Flora and Fauna       |
| 1.2.2. Architecture             | 1.2.12. Foreigners            |
| 1.2.3. Astronomy and astrology  | 1.2.13. Household activities  |
| 1.2.4. Banquet scenes           | 1.2.14. Hunting and fishing   |
| 1.2.5. Caricature and satire    | 1.2.15. Industry and commerce |
| 1.2.6. Death and funerary rites | 1.2.16. The King              |
| 1.2.7. Deities                  | 1.2.17. Landscape             |
| 1.2.8. Demons                   | 1.2.18. Music and dance       |
| 1.2.9. Erotica and pornography  | 1.2.19. Navigation and travel |
| 1.2.10. Festivals               | 1.2.20. Patterns and designs  |

Our *aim* is to study the Egyptian family (of all the social classes) in a comprehensive manner taking into consideration all aspects of life. Janssen and Janssen (1990 and 1996) wrote books on childhood and ageing in ancient Egypt respectively. Whale (1989) makes a textual analysis regarding the family but her analysis is concerned mainly with the question of matriarchy in the ancient Egyptian family and her work is confined to the eighteenth dynasty. Erika Feucht (1995) also has written extensively on ancient Egyptian childhood, using visual representation (iconography). Not one of these studies were done according to cultural-anthropological models. The cultural-anthropological approach followed in this study allows us to study in detail *all* aspects of life of the ancient Egyptians, ultimately to learn more about ourselves and the human condition in general.

### 1.3 THE METHOD AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The method of research will involve assembling material from various secondary sources pertaining to the different cultural domains as given above. The use of cultural domains for the classification of sources means that our approach is a cultural-anthropological one. This method allows us to describe the past in its complexity and to emphasize the interrelatedness of all spheres of life. The logic here is that change in one cultural domain can have significant repercussions throughout the cultural system. For example, ecological factors produced the unique Egyptian civilization while political changes eventually led to the demise of that civilization. We thus use anthropological insights to make sense of historical events and are thus able to relate these to one another. Rosman and Rubel (1981:5) define *culture* as the integrated totality of the way of life of a people including the people's behaviour while Haviland (1993:30) defines it as a set of rules or standards shared by members of a society, which when acted upon by members, produce behaviour that falls within a range of variations the members consider

proper and acceptable. These authors use the cultural-anthropological approach in cultural analysis and their definitions include symbols, meanings and values that define reality and determine standards of good and bad, right and wrong. In the discipline of "Cultural Anthropology", the study of culture is usually described in terms of interrelated cultural domains each of which contributes directly to the specific nature of a given culture.

## 1.4 RESEARCH DESIGN

For the purposes of this study "Ancient Egypt" covers the period from the Old Kingdom (circa 2600-2180 BCE) to the end of the dynasties c. 362 BCE.

### **PRE-DYNASTIC (3000-2600BCE)**

<b>Dynasty 1:</b> Aha	3000
<b>Dynasty 2:</b> Peribsen	2680
<b>Dynasty 3:</b> Huni	2625

### **OLD KINGDOM (2600-2130)**

<b>Dynasty 4:</b> Snefru	2625
Khufu	2585
Khafre	2555
<b>Dynasty 5:</b> Menkau-Ra	2532
Sahure	2486
<b>Dynasty 6:</b> Pepi II	2288

### **FIRST INTERMEDIATE PERIOD (2130-1938)**

<b>Dynasty 11:</b> Mentuhotep II	2008
----------------------------------	------

### **MIDDLE KINGDOM (1938 - 1630)**

<b>Dynasty 12:</b> Amenemhet I	1938
Sesostris III	1836
Amenemhet IV	1773
Sobeknefru	

### **SECOND INTERMEDIATE PERIOD**

**(1630 - 1540) (HYKSOS)**

<b>Dynasty 15:</b> Apophis	1676
<b>Dynasty 17:</b> Seqerere	1543

### **NEW KINGDOM (1540 - 1075)**

<b>Dynasty 18:</b> Ahmose	1539
Thutmose I	1439
Hatshepsut	1479
Thutmose III	1479
Amenophis III	1390
Amenophis IV/ Akhenaten	1353
Tut-ankh-Amen	1332
<b>Dynasty 19:</b> Haremheb	1319
Seti I	1290
Ramses II	1279
Meren-Ptah	1213
<b>Dynasty 20:</b> Ramses III	1187
Ramses XI	1104

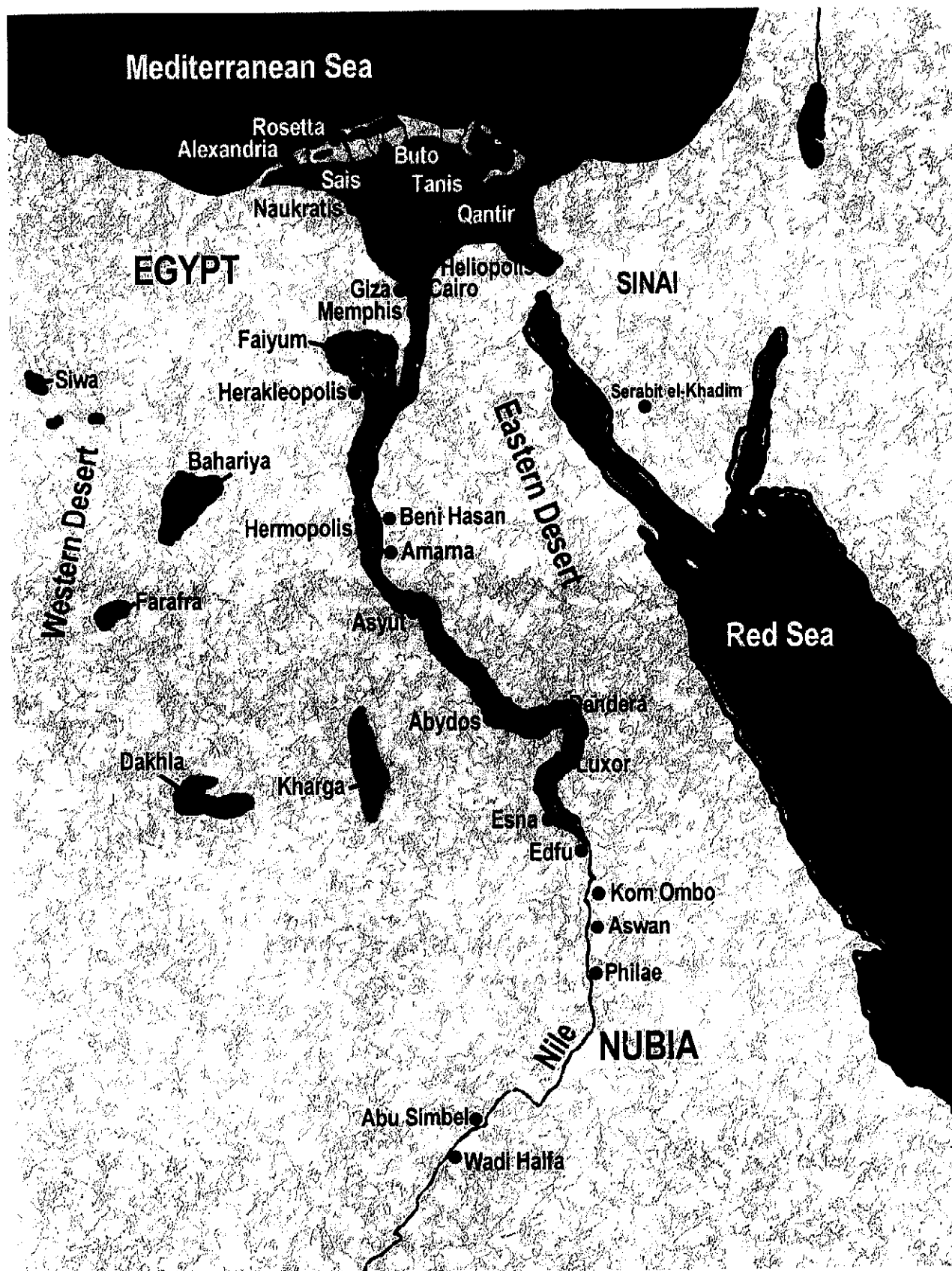
### **THIRD INTERMEDIATE PERIOD (1075-656)**

<b>Dynasty 21:</b> Osorkon	990
<b>Dynasty 22:</b> Shoshenq I	945
<b>Dynasty 23:</b> Osorkon III	796
<b>Dynasty 24:</b> Tefnakhte	727
<b>Dynasty 25:</b> (Kushite)	
Piye	747
Taharqa	690

### **LATE PERIOD (664-332)**

<b>Dynasty 26:</b> (Saite)	
Psamtik I	664
Necho II	610
<b>Dynasty 27:</b> (Persian)	525
<b>Dynasty 30:</b> Nectanebo II	362

*CHRONOLOGY OF ANCIENT EGYPT (Cornelius & Venter 2002:30)*



MAP OF EGYPT (Cornelius & Venter 2002:26)

The area covered by ancient Egypt consisted of the Nile Valley, the Delta and the Faiyum, though Nubia or the Kingdom of Kush was regarded by Egyptian pharaohs as coming under their influence. The valley and the delta together form an area of about 34000km<sup>2</sup> according to Baines and Malek (1984:16), with minor variations of arable and occupied land over the millennia. The border on the west was the western desert and the entire area west of the Nile Valley was called Libya. To the east of Egypt was the eastern desert, an important source of minerals. The Faiyum was the lakeside oasis west of the Nile Valley, south of Memphis. It was fed by the Bahr Yusuf, a branch of the Nile but has dwindled gradually through the centuries. It covered 12000km<sup>2</sup> at its most prosperous stage but is now a desert. A smaller area similar to the Faiyum was the Wadi el-Natron, a natural oasis close to the delta. It was the chief source of natron, which was used for cleaning, ritual purposes such as mummification and the manufacture of Egyptian faience and of glass in ancient times, but is poor in agricultural production.

While using the cultural-anthropological approach, we shall also follow the lifespan approach beginning with the birth and ending with the death of the ancient Egyptian. Chapter 2 deals with the Egyptian society focussing on the structured social inequality focussing on the different social classes in ancient Egypt. Chapter 3 looks at the birth and education of a child concentrating mainly on the upbringing of the young boy and girl. Chapter 4 traces the economy of Egypt and concentrates on family livelihoods. Chapter 5 deals with the agricultural activities of peasants and their families especially as providers of food for the Egyptian state. Chapter 6 deals with family recreation, entertainment and travel. Chapter 7 tries to unravel the mystery of Egyptian religion which was a way of life, unorganized as gods were completely integrated into society and differed from area to area. We concentrate on the religious rituals of the family. The last chapter is the conclusion which sums up what has been done.



## CHAPTER 2: EGYPTIAN SOCIETY

### 2.1 INTRODUCTION

The pyramids of Old Kingdom Egypt are at once the most famous, monumental and magnificent structures of the ancient world. Knapp (1988:114) regards them as very effectively symbolizing ancient Egyptian society and economy. It was suggested that the capstone represented the pharaoh, the rest of the pyramid the Egyptian state. The great pyramids at Giza, likewise reflect the extreme centralization of the Egyptian government by the time of the Fourth Dynasty (about 2600-2500 BCE). Permission to erect a tomb within the pyramid complex was an expression of divine favour. The tombs of princes and faithful court officials are arrayed in rows at the feet of the royal pyramids as sign of subservience to the pharaoh in death as in life.

The great pyramids testify to the immense power and resources of the Egyptian state. They also stand as the grandest expression of pharaoh's immortality and divinity in ancient Egypt's scheme of things. Such massive construction could only be achieved with the support of an agricultural surplus and an extensive labour supply. While the soldiers protected the state, the dignitaries supervised the workers. The workers returned to the land after the inundation and supported the state by remitting as much as fifty percent of their harvest in kind to the state (Knapp 1988:117).

### 2.2 EGYPTIAN SOCIAL GROUPS

#### 2.2.1 THE ROYAL FAMILY

Aldred (1984:177-198) gives a full description of the hierarchical structure of the ancient Egyptian society. At the head of the social pyramid was the pharaoh, the god incarnate, a tangible deity, water diviner and controller of the Nile. Immediately below the king was the royal family, consisting of the queen and her sons and daughters. While the king was the incarnation of the

supreme god, the queen was also regarded as embodying the goddess Isis, the mother of the sky-god Horus. Other royal family members were the king's mother and "subsidiary wives" and their children. The chief queen gave birth to the future king. She also played part in the government of the realm. It was also possible for the heiresses of the chief queen to ascend the throne as in the cases of Hatshepsut and Nefertiti. The career of the royal sons is not clear but they were trained in the military arts by army veterans and were taught to read and write by scribes. Princesses were also taught to read and write and paint in watercolour. Daughters could marry their fathers or brothers so as not to dilute their divinity.

### 2.2.2 STATE OFFICIALS

Below the royal family were the state officials. The vizier who was the deputy of the king headed state officials. In theory it was the king who governed the country but in practice he ruled through officials. Officials were either the relatives of the king or ordinary people who had risen to prominence by their education. The officials of the palace acted as a privy council and helped the king to govern. Upon the reunification of Lower and Upper Egypt there were two viziers, one for each region. The vizier's responsibilities were to collect taxes, supervise the king's bodyguard, the cutting of timber, irrigation, direction of village headmen as to summer cultivation, inspection of water resources, consideration of the state of the fortresses on the borders, take measures against raids by robbers and nomads, see to the fitting out of ships and preside over important civil cases referred to him by the lower courts. He dealt with questions of land tenure and the witnessing of wills; he considered criminal cases requiring heavy sentences in his capacity as Chief Justice. He received foreign embassies and supervised workshops and building enterprises including the work on the royal tomb. In all this the vizier was helped by the legion of scribes, stewards, runners and guards (Aldred 1984:187-188).

### 2.2.3 SOLDIERS

Wilson (1997) also describes the different roles of the king, the men at the top, scribes, priests, craftsmen and artists, soldiers, farmers and builders as well as common men, women and children. Soldiers formed another class below the state officials. An army career was the dream of every youth. Every soldier in a victorious army shared in the spoil of the war in the form of cattle, weapons, clothing, ornaments and other loot from vanquished enemies. The ordinary soldier, however, led an extremely hard and unpleasant life. Since most conscripts were taken from the mass of peasant workers who were needed in the fields, the army had to be released for the planting and harvest seasons. Officers were the only career soldiers, but even they would hold non-military titles and have responsibilities in the administration other than their army duties. The royal bodyguard was the only permanent force maintained by the Crown and in many periods this unit performed purely ceremonial duties (Wilson 1997:169).

### 2.2.4 THE SCRIBE

Another important class in ancient Egyptian society was the scribe. Wilson (1997:78) argues that though the scribe was for the most part anonymous he was always well respected. People of all ranks up to and including the pharaoh divulged information of the most sensitive and personal nature to the scribe who committed it to writing. The skill of writing emerged early in Egypt's history and the ability to read and write was essential to the smooth-running of the administration of the country in all periods. Becoming a scribe could lift even the most lowly-born boy out of poverty and having a scribe in the family was a mark of status. It is important to note that scribes wrote much of the information we have today on ancient Egypt. A formal education was available in one of the schools attached to the temples. During the seven-year training period the students' families supplied food and clothing. Boys from wealthy homes received private tuition

and were often groomed to follow in the footsteps of their fathers. Teachers were harsh and punishment was severe. Students studied liturgical books, poetry and works of fiction. They learned how to compose letters, contracts and accounts which also required a basic knowledge of arithmetic. These would have been lessons in the theory of record-keeping, filing and labelling, so that any half-competent scribe could perform that most essential of all Egyptian scribal functions, the making and updating of lists. Exercises in note-making, summarizing and writing from dictation would have been included in the syllabus to prepare scribes for their duties as clerks or secretaries.

James (1985:150) counts immunity from taxation as one of the most positive advantages enjoyed by the scribe. The scribe paid no dues because he had no produce worth taxing. On the other hand it was the scribe who exacted taxes from the poor who are shown being beaten for failure to pay up what they owed. The scribe exercised authority because much depended on the written word. Literacy was highly valued as it was exploited daily in the transaction of business at many levels of society; it was by no means restricted to the ranks to the court and to the superior officers of state. The scribe also did not work like other labourers but usually enjoyed a blissful career, avoiding all physical discomfort, exercising authority, and participating in government to some extent. But most scribes, employed in the lower echelons of administration and in the remoter areas of the land, probably knew little of the claims of superiority made on their behalf in the pompous passages of the Miscellanies. Their modest superiority must be measured against the lot of the peasants and labourers among whom they plied their trade.

### 2.2.5 THE PRIEST

Egyptologists have been successful in trying to recreate the religious practices of the ancient Egyptians. Religion was the way of life in ancient Egypt and religion was in the hands of a

special class of priests. The Egyptian word for priest meant “servant of the god”. Wilson (1997:106) states that most of the information we have about temple organisation comes from the New Kingdom. The majority of senior priests were not permanently residents in the temple, instead the priesthood was organised into four phyles, each working one month in three. For eight months of the year the servants of the god carried on their normal profession or business, whether in the political, administrative or commercial sector. Among the priests were numerous “purified one’s”, a title conveying the importance of ritual purity inherent in the priest’s title. Temple ritual demanded that priests be clean. Bodily cleanliness was achieved by scrupulous washing with natron. Purity allowed them to enter the presence of the god to perform the daily rituals. These rites were not for the benefit of the congregation, nor even an act of appeasement or sacrifice performed by the priests on behalf of the people. Their purpose was to honour the god by paying him the same courtesies and providing him with all the comforts that any visiting dignitary would expect. The deity, in the form of a cult statue, was housed in a shrine within the innermost sanctuary of the temple. There were at least three religious services every day each corresponding to a meal.

Part-time workers employed by the temples in whatever capacity, including that of priests, enjoyed a better standard of living during their period of service than most would have been able to afford for the rest of the year. They all shared the god’s wealth, each according to status and the type of work performed. The success of a religious foundation as a business was reflected in the level of “wages” paid to its workers. Morenz (1973:101) mentions the fact that priests earned their living as laymen and took turns to serve the deity. They formed a broad stratum of intermediaries between the faithful and the sanctuary. In small places they will have constituted a most vital element. The lay priesthood flourished during the Old and Middle Kingdom. Later it was displaced by a class of priestly officials.

### 2.2.6 ARTISTS AND CRAFTSMEN

Artists and craftsmen formed another class. According to Drenkhahn (1995:331) the majority of the artifacts preserved from ancient Egypt are the products of artisans and artists who mastered the techniques of working with wood, stone, metal, ivory, glass, leather, faience and clay. The products of these craftsmen included statues, statuettes, reliefs, furniture, weapons, jewellery, containers, and more generally, objects made for daily use and the cult, as well as the entire inventory of equipment used in burials. The craftsmen also created the reliefs and paintings which decorated Egyptian monuments. Artisans had an important position in the organisation of society. Their works were also significant for cult and religion, being tangible expressions of religious conceptions and devotion as well as a medium through which those conceptions were made visible and communicable. The scenes of craftsmen in non-royal tombs of Old, Middle and New kingdoms are extremely informative, for they include detailed depictions of members of various trades at work, among them carpenters, metal workers, stone-vase makers and sculptors. In addition to the information these scenes provide about working practices, they contain much evidence concerning the social position of artists and artisans, their conditions of work, their patrons and the organisation of their work. Drenkhahn (1995:334) further argues that though craftsmen worked for their patrons, in certain cases some craftsmen undertook private work on their own time. The advantage of being a craftsman was that he was sheltered from the demands of the state. They were able to produce objects independently and were paid (in kind) for them by private patrons. In the late New Kingdom, some of the state-employed artisans of Deir el-Medina conducted an active business life on their own account. In their free time, these people produced a variety of objects destined for use in daily life or as funerary equipment. Among these objects were baskets, mats, sandals, textiles, beds, chests, coffins, canopic jars for mummified organs and wooden statues.

James (1979:187-238) identifies various arts and crafts that ancient Egyptian craftsmen engaged in. Among these were stone working, painting, brick making, ceramic, terracotta, faience and glazed stones, glass, metal-working, woodworking, ivory-work and weaving. He gives a detailed description of the techniques used to produce objects of fine craftsmanship.

### 2.2.7 THE PEASANTS

The last and lowest group were peasants and labourers (Aldred 1984:198). Most of these people were illiterate and their feelings were never recorded. Their superstition and belief in untested information enslaved them. They really believed that the water snake was on its way to the north when the flood came. Their work included draining the marshlands, reclaiming land for further cultivation, clearing the irrigation channels, removing sand from fields and the labourious watering by hand of the higher-lying fields. They weeded the fields in summer and harvested the crops when ripe. Their lives were spent in villages run in traditional ways usually headed by a headman. Though they led independent lives in the villages there were times when they were called up for compulsory labour in the fields for the government.

Kitchen (1982:184) argues that if hard, the farming life was by no means all misery, and the shrewd peasant-farmers learned how to maintain themselves through most difficulties. In contrast to the propaganda by bookish scribes, the paintings in the tomb-chapels show the rosy side of the farming life: good Nile floods, abundant crops, fine cattle, an aura of prosperous contentment with land worker and supervisor alike. The farmer had also his vegetable plot for lettuce, cucumbers, melons and the like, beside the grain, flax and cattle fodder that was his from the fields. And the Nile fishermen regularly landed very large quantities of fish.

### 2.2.8 SERFS AND SLAVES

The lowest grade of the labouring classes were the serfs or slaves who were particularly numerous from the later Middle Kingdom until the end of the New Kingdom. These were mostly foreigners from Asia and Kush who had been sold into slavery or captured in war and as early as the middle of the second millennium BCE; it is possible to see already established institution which existed in the Near East until the end of the last century (Aldred 1984:202). Slaves enjoyed few privileges. They could not enter temple courts, being ritually impure. The limit of their religious devotions was the observance of some local cult at a wayside shrine. They were too poor to afford a tomb or burial in family plots, their corpses were evidently thrown into the Nile for the “eater of the dead” to scavenge and so assimilate them to that primeval force that came out of the waters of Chaos in the form of a crocodile. Though their freedom had limits, the slavery system required that in life they should be reasonably well treated. In addition to food and lodging, they received yearly allowance of clothing, oils and linen. Their working hours were reduced when the weather was hot. The personal slave of a high-ranking Egyptian would be more affluent than most of the native peasantry. A simple declaration by the owner before witnesses could make a slave a “freedman of the land of the Pharaoh” (Aldred 1984:202).

### 2.2.9 PRISONERS

The most wretched of pharaoh subjects were the criminals (Aldred 1984:203). Some of them were officials who had been found guilty of corruption; they were banished to the lonely frontier fortress of Tjel, or forced to labour in the mines of Sinai and Nubia, often after their noses had been cut.



## 2.3 CONCLUSION

Essentially Egyptian society consisted of two groups: elites and non-elites. The king and those around him formed the elites and those who laboured on the land were the not-elites. Thus the elites comprised the hereditary nobility, the civil administration, the priesthood and the upper echelons of the military. The non-elites comprised commoners who toiled on the land. These are the people who built the pyramids as seen today.

## CHAPTER 3: BIRTH, CHILDHOOD AND EDUCATION

### 3.1 INTRODUCTION: MARRIAGE

Egyptologists agree that the basic social unit in ancient Egypt was the nuclear family: father, mother and children (Lorton 1995:347). It was a man's duty to get married and raise children while he was still young. This was necessitated by the fact the life expectancy in ancient Egypt was short (Wilson 1997:53). There seems to be no evidence that any marriage ceremony was conducted by any government or religious official (Lorton 1995:348). Wilson (1997:56) says that the couple married by public acclamation. This was a result of discussion and negotiation between the families involved. The occasion of marriage was marked by the bride leaving her family to live with her husband. There was a procession in the streets of the town with a parade of wedding gifts and this public acclamation sealed the marriage. Ancient Egyptians married young, mostly at age 12 or 13 for women and husbands were two or three years older than their wives. It was not uncommon for relatives to marry probably to keep property in the family. Dowries and bride prices were agreed upon between families though many were notional being demanded when the marriage failed. Women had a right to property and retained any property they brought into the marriage while they also kept the right to inherit their parents' estates. They were also entitled to one-third in any property acquired during the marriage (Wilson 1997:66).

White (1963:173) argues that the ancient Egyptians were a romantic race and many marriages were love marriages rather than arranged marriages. The king, as a custom, had many wives who were local beauties as well as foreign princesses who were sent to Egypt to become his brides. Government ministers and rich men could also marry several wives (White 1963:170). Young lovers grew closer to one another in later life and matured into dignified and devoted couples as seen on the monuments (*Figs. 3-14*).

The devotion of a woman to her husband is illustrated by Isis who journeyed through Egypt and as far as Syria to retrieve parts of her dismembered husband's (Osiris) body. She was setting an example to future wives to help in the resurrection of their husbands and as indirect saviours of mankind. Apart from the cult of Isis there were older cults regarded wives as mysterious sources of life, possessors of psychic powers beyond the male experience and guardians of the myths and traditions of the race. Thus women held a high social status in ancient Egypt which was not evident in other cultures in the ancient world except perhaps for the Etruscans (White 1963:169). The art of ancient Egypt shows women as the equal of men, but there are also cases where they are still inferior to men (Cornelius 2001 and Robins 1994; cf. Robins 1997:72-73 and *Excursus A*)

#### *EXCURSUS A: Husband and wife stelae (Figs. 3-14)*

There are various statues depicting husband and wife in ancient Egypt. These also reflect the *social status* of women. *Gender hierarchy* as Robins (1994) calls it is reflected by these images. The woman is in some cases of the same size than her husband, in other cases much smaller. Right-handed dominance is reflected by the statues. The woman is mostly on the left holding her husband, but without him showing any affection (*Figs. 3-4*), but cf. in contrast *Figs. 8-9*. On reliefs and paintings women are facing the left with the husband on the superior right-hand side (*Figs. 17-20*) as the worshipper face the god or deceased on the left (cf. *Figs. 47-48*).

- 3: Pharaoh Menkaure and wife on equal footing, but woman shorter than wife.
- 4: Non-royals in same pose: Ptah-kheniu a supervisor of palace retainers and wife.
- 5: Seated pair of prince Rahetep and his wife Neferet.
- 6: Seated limestone statue of official Katep and wife Hetepheres.
- 7: Seated pair from Ramesside period, note the similar colour scheme in contrast to # 4 and 5.
- 8: Man and wife holding each other, wife smaller than her husband.
- 9: Seated husband and wife holding each other, approx. of the same size.
- 10: Man holding two wives.
- 11: Seated Demedji and standing wife Hennutsen, note her size!
- 12: Standing man with kneeling wife (very small), with son standing on his right.

### 3.2 PREGNANCY AND BIRTH

The main purpose of marriage was to produce and rear as many children as possible (Pinch 1995:376). Children were regarded as a safeguard against old age and were valued by parents for their help in working the land. Children were also valued for bringing property into the family through marriage and thus were not regarded as an economic burden (Pinch 1995:376). Children were a man's insurance for the afterlife. The oldest surviving son would be in charge of his father's funeral and mortuary offerings to perpetuate the memory of his parents (Wilson 1997:55). A son was needed to follow the profession or office of his father.

There were many myths and stories associated with conception in ancient Egypt. The sky goddess Nut, was believed to swallow the sun every evening at dusk in order to give birth to a new dawn every morning (*Fig. 1*). The hero Bata, in the New Kingdom "Story of the Two Brothers", is transformed into a tree. When this tree is felled at the request of the Queen, Bata's ex-wife, a splinter flies into her mouth. She immediately becomes pregnant and, many days later, she gives birth to a son. There are more realistic ideas in other stories. In the New Kingdom composition "Truth and Falsehood" a lady spies a blind tramp that has been found under a thicket, and she desires him because he is handsome. He sleeps with her and she conceives a son that night. In the contemporary "Table of the Doomed Prince" there occurs a king who has no son. He begs one from the gods and they decree that an heir should be born to him. That night he slept with his wife and she became pregnant. When she had completed her pregnancy, a son was born (for translations see Lichtheim 1975). Medical papyri of the time contain rational beliefs about conception. These papyri contain advice on ways to stimulate it as well as indicating methods of birth control (without using contraceptives). Unwanted pregnancy was not unknown as there were also prescriptions to stimulate an abortion, together with those designed to prevent the occurrence of a miscarriage (Janssen and Janssen 1990:1).

According to Pinch (1995:376) to be childless was a shameful affliction. The "Instruction of Ptahotep" urges that it was wrong to divorce the childless but a letter from a workman from Deir el-Medina jeers the village scribe for not being a proper man because he cannot make his wife pregnant. Childless couples treated themselves with herbal remedies, appealed to their ancestors for help or slept in temples in the hope of a favourable dream from a deity.

Childbirth took place in special surroundings, a distinctive structure known as the confinement pavilion (Janssen and Janssen 1990:4) or in what Pinch (1995:376) calls a specially built arbor or hut outside the house or in an upper chamber like those found on the roof of some houses at el-Armana. This was done to maximise magical protection and to save the rest of the household from ritual pollution. The mother and child remained in seclusion for at least two weeks then there was a purification ceremony. It is worth noting here that multiple births were regarded as weird, an accident or even a misfortune (Janssen and Janssen 1990:13). The woman was assisted during her labour by some elderly female relatives. It is doubtful whether trained midwives existed. Some pictures show the mother attended by girls who are as naked as she and sport the same hairstyle. In a few instances a Nubian boy is also in attendance. This personnel assists the lady at her toilet and waits on her with food and drink. Birth was a dangerous event and many wives may have preceded their husbands to the tomb (Janssen and Janssen 1990:9).

There seems to have been a high rate of miscarriage and infant mortality as medical science was still in its infancy (*Fig. 2*). Stillborn infants and young babies have been found buried under houses. There was a hope that if babies were buried in this manner their spirits would re-enter their mothers and be born again. Spacing of the family was aided by the ancient Egyptian practice of breast-feeding a child until it was three years old. Wet nurses were sometimes employed who sometimes performed magical dances and made amulets to protect children from perceived threats from foreign sorcerers, demons and hostile ghosts and gods (Shaw and

Nicholson 1995:64). Infanticide did occur in times of famine (Pinch 1995:376).

### 3.3 CHILDHOOD

Children were cherished in ancient Egypt and were a man's insurance for the afterlife. Many reliefs and statues have been found which show parents with their children. Feucht (1995:400-410) classifies these family groups into four categories:

- a couple with three children (*Fig. 19*)
- a couple with two children (*Fig. 13*)
- a couple with one child (*Fig. 14*)
- and one parent with a child or children (*Figs. 15-16*).

These pictures (cf. *Figs. 13-22*) show us that the bond between husbands and wives and their children were long lasting and profound (White 1963:169).

*Fig. 17* is a rare case in depicting the pharaoh and his family. Akhenaten and Nefertiti are playing with their daughters. The children are depicted as lively, playing beings (contrast them with the children of Seneb on *Fig. 13* who are mere ideograms).

On a painting of one of the artisan families from the worker's colony at Deir el-Medina (*Fig. 19*) the deceased grandmother is seated on the left, or behind her husband; their children on the right face the left to emphasize the dominance of the seated pair (the dead dominate over the living). The grandchildren of the seated grandparents are not only smaller but also naked to indicate they are *children* (another social statement – Egyptian children did not always run around naked).

Children grew up under the careful eye of the mother or nurse and had little contact with their fathers. Old Kingdom tomb reliefs depict children dancing or playing acrobatic games (6.5).

Girls and boys usually played separately. Arm wrestling, tugs-of-war, leapfrogs and other jumping games of catch are known. The toys, which survive, include spinning tops, pull-along, wooden animals and dolls with movable limbs, (Pinch 1995:378). Children also owned pet animals like birds (*Figs. 19, 22*).

Ancient Egypt seems to have been a society lacking in rites of passage, except those associated with death. Major life events such as births, puberty and marriage were probably celebrated in the home and this were rarely recorded in temples or tombs. Birth ceremonies have been recorded at settlement sites but puberty rituals are hard to come by. Classical writers credited the Egyptians with inventing both male and female circumcision. There is evidence that a whole age group was circumcised together at a puberty ceremony. Boys were circumcised (*Fig. 23*), but there is no evidence, however, that any type of female circumcision was an Egyptian practice. It is not known whether a girl's first menses was celebrated but it seems likely that some ceremony marked the event since parents would want the community to know that their daughter was now marriageable. (Pinch 1995:379). For both boys and girls, the cutting-off of the sidelock of hair worn by children (seen on the many depictions of children) was part of the transition to adulthood. (Pinch 1995:379). Apart from playing, children were introduced to *work* at an early stage. This is because the majority of ordinary youngsters and virtually all the girls never attended school. As they grew older they took part in their parents' activities, at home, in the fields, and in the workshops (cf. 4.4). Their duties at home included running errands, performing small chores in the house, attending to poultry and sheep, collecting fuel for the oven, looking after younger siblings, bringing offerings to gods and the deceased and are depicted accompanying their parents in hunting, market and agricultural scenes (Janssen and Janssen 1990:49-51).

### 3.4 EDUCATION

According to Pinch (1995:379) literacy was the key to success in Egyptian society. She says that there were scribal schools attached to temples, palaces and other state-run institutions. It seems also that some scribes ran private schools taking boys and perhaps girls at a time. The ruling class may have had private tutors. Education was geared towards the future career of the boy, especially the civil service. Subjects included the three-R's (reading, reckoning and [w]riting). Pupils learned by copying standard texts. The more esoteric subjects such as magic, medicine and theology must have been studied in temple schools or acquired from manuscripts or oral traditions passed down from generation to generation within a family or professional group (cf. White 1963:173-181).

Janssen and Janssen (1990:70-71) observe that during the Old Kingdom no regular schools seem to have existed, except at the court. It is also unclear as to who taught the learners except for the "royal prince" called Kaemtjenent from the 5th dynasty who writes that he taught another prince. Ordinary schoolmasters are unknown from this period. Fathers and elderly men trained their sons and took sons of others as their pupils. Court schools also seem to have accepted ordinary boys. We, however, know little about the organisation of schools and their method of teaching or the school system in general.

Apart from the government officials there was yet another category of people for whom literacy was essential: the artists, draughtsmen and sculptors. Their task was to convert hieratic texts written on papyri and ostraca, into hieroglyphics on tomb and temple walls as well as inscribing them on statues. Knowledge of both scripts was thus essential (Janssen and Janssen 1990:68).

White (1963:173) writes that in order to win the favour of his parents a boy had to do well at school. Lessons were serious and thorough. The ancient Egyptian boy endured long silent



hours at school and discipline was strict and beating were frequent. The maxim was: "a boy's ears are in his backside". Writing was first practised on inexpensive material such as a sliver of limestone, a piece of broken potsherd or a simple wooden board that could be wiped or scraped clean. Eventually he would copy his exercises on a roll of papyrus. The form of script used was the hieroglyph. Since this was difficult to write at speed, the hieratic script was used as shorthand for writing official documents. Later a faster script, the demotic, was used as a kind of double shorthand of the original hieroglyphic script. Ancient Egyptians wrote from right to left. Sometimes, however, they would write up and down in columns or even write one line from right to left and the next from left to right in the curious serpentine style known to handwriting experts as boustrophedon.

In mathematics the ancient Egyptians had no feeling for algebra, handled fractions in an elementary way and had clumsy ways of multiplying and dividing. They had no idea of nought and never invented individual symbols for the numbers 2 to 9. However, they invented symbols for the powers of ten. They also had a good working knowledge of geometry and could calculate areas and volumes, which helped them in architecture and land surveying (White 1963:179).

Formal education was not usually given to boys of the peasant class (Watterson 1991:124). Girls could also attend school, although until the New Kingdom it was usually only those of the upper classes who received it, and sometimes, perhaps, the daughters of scribes. Each state institution had its own school, reserved for boys. Boys appear to have been sent to school as boarders until, at the age of sixteen, most of them were apprenticed to a craft. Only those intended for the priesthood or aiming to take up posts in the civil administration received a longer, academic education. Girls were not sent away to school, and their education must have been inferior to that of the boys'. Sometimes richer families banded together and arranged for their children's education to be taken by a private tutor. Royal children were taught in the palace

by a tutor, and the children of nobles were often permitted to share their lessons. *Fig. 24* shows a schoolboy following his master (note the staff) carrying a writing tablet (cf. for other examples Feucht 1995:334-336). At school, great emphasis was placed on honesty, humility, self-control and good manners, and on respect for parents. Discipline was strict. Their mothers taught girls good behaviour. Brothers home from school did not hesitate to offer themselves as examples to their sisters. The most widespread system of education consisted of informal instruction at home, where boys would be taught their father's craft and girls instructed by their mothers in domestic affairs. In families with a son at school, it was a mother's responsibility to provide him with his daily rations of bread and beer.

### 3.5 CONCLUSION

After pregnancy a woman delivered the baby in special surroundings, namely in a distinctive structure known as the confinement pavilion, or else in a particular room of the house. Children were clearly regarded as a great blessing by ancient Egyptians: they were fond of and indulgent towards them. Even the poorest of them welcomed all the children born to them. Children accompany their parents on many occasions. Education meant being apprenticed to the father for poor boys from poor families and girls learnt housekeeping from their mothers while boys from wealthy homes attended schools at state institutions.

## CHAPTER 4: ECONOMY AND FAMILY LIVELIHOODS IN ANCIENT EGYPT

### 4.1 INTRODUCTION

Apart from satisfying their everyday needs, the ancient Egyptians had several reasons for accumulating wealth. One of the reasons was to prepare for a good burial. The private responsibility for a good burial was enshrined within the law: “Let the possessions be given to him who buries,” says the law of Pharaoh.’ (Kemp 1989:241). Under normal circumstances the whole inheritance would go to whomsoever undertook to have the actual burial carried out. A potential heir would disinherit himself or herself by ignoring this. Secondly, wealth was accumulated to provide goods which daughters and sons needed to acquire to create the joint properties which formed the basis of a marriage contract. Thirdly, material wealth was the means of purchase, and lastly, to settle obligations or to gain favours. For ordinary folk wealth was in the form of grain, fresh produce, livestock, stolen precious metals and finished goods. Acquiring and disposing of goods was done by barter. Metals themselves were used in exchange but not a coinage. Ancient Egypt was rich in metals such as gold, silver, copper and bronze. Everyone had to pay taxes. These were also paid in kind, in animals, agricultural products and the like.

### 4.2 MEN’S WORK

Men occupied various positions in ancient Egyptian society. There were farmers, builders, scribes, priests, artists, craftsmen and soldiers among ordinary men. At the top were noblemen and administrators and the king himself, while on the lowest levels of society were slaves and serfs.

Pinch (1995:374) describes an ideal Egyptian as a devoted family man who honoured his parents, loved his wife and brought up his children strictly. The bulk of the income of most Egyptian households was probably derived from a man working for the state or farming land on

behalf of a state institution.

Aldred (1984:107) counts, among other things, emmer wheat, barley, vegetables and fish as the usual payment in kind for most of the workers and officials of state. The two viziers, one for Lower Egypt and one for Upper Egypt, represents the king with regard to the economic welfare of his people. According to White (1963:125) the vizier scrutinized tax returns; the receipts of the royal granaries; the latest census of livestock and animal-feeding stuffs; and the routine reports on recent rainfall and the height of the Nile. The vizier was paid well, probably to discourage corruption.

Wilson (1997:94) suggests that scribes were able to earn a very respectable living by writing and painting copies of the funerary text now commonly known as the *Book of the Dead*. Priests and part-time workers employed by the temples in whatever capacity enjoyed a better standard of living during their period of service than most would have been able to afford for the rest of the year. They all shared the god's wealth, each according to status and the type of work performed. The success of a religious institution as a business was reflected in the level of "wages" paid to its workers.

Most conscripts in the army were drawn from the mass of peasant workers who were needed in the fields for the planting season. Aldred (1984:56) argues that even the less distinguished soldier shared in the cattle, weapons, clothing, ornaments and other loot captured from luxurious Asiatic cities. He was pensioned off with grants of livestock, serfs and land from the royal domains, on which he paid taxes but which continued to be held by his family as long as they had an able-bodied male available for military service. Warriors who had shown bravery in the field were promoted to officers, given prisoners as serfs and decorated with the "gold of valour". Such awards took the form of massive flies in gold, gold or silver weapons and jewellery of considerable intrinsic value.

Artists and craftsmen, like everybody else, were employees of the state and were paid in kind. Aldred (1984:197) mentions wood for fuel as an addition to staple food. Occasionally, certain bonuses in the form of salt, wine, sweet beer and other luxuries were distributed. Master craftsmen designed the objects for production by lesser craftsmen.

Romano (1995:1605-1618) mentions copper, gold, silver, glass and precious stones such as lapis lazuli, turquoise, carnelian, amethyst, feldspar, red garnet, jasper, obsidian and quartz as material used for decoration. In addition alluvial silt or marl clay were used for pottery. Workmen were needed for the mining of these materials as well as for smelting, moulding, crushing or washing of metal.

According to James (1985:142) the most privileged of ordinary men was the *scribe*. It was the profession which produced surgeons, accountants and surveyors. A scribe used his reading abilities as a priest, or a civil administrator, or simple secretary or a keeper of archives. He escaped the corvee and the toil of the farmer. He enjoyed many special advantages, one of them, most probably, the exemption from taxation. The scribe paid no such dues because he had no produce worth taxing. On the contrary, he played a central role in exacting taxes from the ever-suffering farmer on whom his petty authority could be exercised with little restraint, including beating those who failed to pay up what they owed. Aldred (1984:131) adds literature as one of the achievements of the scribes. These not only included lyrics, poems and novels, but also hymns, meditations, instructions and lamentations. Scribes received the "temple day" as payment. This was a unit of income on which the pay of all employees of the temple was based. Even such pay had to be calculated by scribes themselves.

Many of the common people were farmers or peasants. Their work is dealt with in Chapter 5.

### 4.3 WOMEN AT WORK

Pinch (1995:374) suggests that women left behind by their menfolk must have been forced to develop self-reliance. Many men were absent from their homes for long periods. Peasants might be taken away by the corvee. Craftsmen might be sent on quarrying expeditions or work on distant temples. Soldiers might be sent to serve abroad, officials had to travel on government business and landowners had to visit scattered estates.

Wives carried out the official business of their husbands and the family's economic affairs. The wives of scribes usually distributed the wages of the workmen when their husbands were away. Other possible sources of family income were part of the wife's responsibilities. Some married women worked at temples and other state institutions as outworkers, producing or finishing off textiles. At home it may have been women and children who cared for the vegetable plots and animal pets. Women were also responsible for the marketing of household products which were in excess. The market scenes that appear in a few Old Kingdom tombs show women bartering for food-stuffs and selling pottery and cakes (*Figs. 33, 35*).

The traditional Egyptian division of labour decreed that the man should work outside the home while the woman worked within it (Tyldesley 1994:122). This ignores the thousands of women who were forced to work for a living outside of the home (like today!). Work available to these women can be divided into three broad categories: professional posts for the well connected and well educated; musicians, weavers and professional mourners for those with appropriate skills and talents; and domestic service for those with little or no formal training. Professional women only supervised female workers and there is no evidence of women holding positions in the civil service, the army or in agricultural administration. They worked mainly as administrators in households. Female administrators seem to have held their most influential posts during the Old Kingdom. There were several women "stewards" and some "treasurers".

Many of the women were employed as musicians, dancers and singers, while others were employed as professional mourners. These mourners were hired to enhance the status of the deceased by only grieving at his or her funeral. A few women were hired as mortuary priests and received payment for ensuring that the tombs of the deceased were properly maintained with all the ritual offerings duly made.

Girls entered domestic service at an early age. Their wages were meagre and most middle- and upper- class homes had at least one maid who could be trained in domestic skills while helping out with the more arduous household chores. Anxious mothers relied upon responsible householders to protect their young daughters while providing them with a good basic training.

As has been observed above, families added to their income through private enterprise. Tyldesley (1994:137) argues that though women were expected to work within the home, they did, in fact, help their husbands with their daily work. An example would be the wives of fishermen who were expected to gut and then sell their husband's catch and a few tomb illustrations show women labouring in the fields alongside their menfolk, picking flax, winnowing wheat and even carrying heavy baskets to the storehouses.

Women are also shown providing refreshments for the labourers, while gleaning was an approved female outdoor work. Women and children are shown following official harvesters and picking up any ears of corn which have been left behind. The most important economic activity conducted by women was the exchange of surplus food. One wife would, for example, agree to swap a jug of her homemade beer for her neighbour's excess fish. This exchange formed the basis of the Egyptian economy as was a man's exchange of his labour for his daily bread. This type of freelance trading by both men and women made an important contribution to the household budget and brought an immediate reward. Many workers, weavers, brewers,

dressmakers and potters supplemented their official income by supplying the immediate needs of the neighbours, while the skilled draughtsmen, artists and carpenters moonlighted by working unofficially to provide funerary equipment for the wealthy aristocracy.

Many women who managed to produce surplus bread or vegetables were able to offer their goods to a wider public by trading at the local market where they benefited from a more varied range of exchange of goods. Here local traders met with visiting merchants. Professional jewellers offered customers baubles, bangles and seals while humble peasants offered bread, beer and gutted fish. Craftsmen sold their wares here while snack bars served take-away food and drinks.

Women were not exempted from the corvee. All Egyptians were bound to donate their labour to royal projects such as the building of public monuments or the digging of irrigation ditches. Only those who were already employed by the state in its various institutions were legally exempted from this conscription although wealthy individuals or families would pay bribes or send a replacement and thus exempt themselves from their public duty. The heavy burden of the corvee therefore fell upon the poor, the uneducated and the peasants.

Watterson (1991:30) argues that not all women's work was done indoors. Peasant women looked after their children, cleaned their houses, cooked for their families and washed clothes. Many of these chores were performed outside the house; cooking was done out of doors, clothes were washed communally on the banks of the canals or of the Nile and water had to be fetched from the canals, the Nile or the wells. They also helped at harvest time in the fields. Upper class women enjoyed an easier life. They employed men as their household servants. In earlier times women did the washing, spinning and weaving but in later dynasties men became weavers and launderers. Men did the cooking in upper class households but the daily task of grinding grain by hand on a stone saddle quern was performed by female servants.



#### 4.4 CHILDREN AT WORK

Stoof (1978) and Cornelius (1999:4) show clearly that children took part in many activities, some of them directly connected with the family budget. Children worked with their parents in the field, helping to sow and gather and winnow the harvest (*Figs. 25-26*). They tended poultry and sometimes even cattle, bringing food to the goatherd (*Fig. 27*). They help to unload a boat (*Fig. 28*), assisting fishermen and boatmen and in the butcheries and shops (*Fig. 30*). Their main job in the fields was to glean left-over ears of grain, also helping to gather thrashed grain into baskets (*Fig. 31*) and often helping to carry the baskets to the storehouses. They helped in the harvesting of grapes (*Fig. 32*) as on a scene from the tomb of Ptahhotep (5<sup>th</sup> dynasty). Children are shown accompanying their mothers to the market to buy figs and fish (*Figs. 33, 35*). A girl holds her mother who is buying figs by the hand (*Fig. 33*). Another carries fish, while her older sister handles the “shopping basket” in a scene of fishermen from the tomb of Ipui from the time of Ramses II (*Fig. 35*). An unfortunate aspect in the economic value of children is that they could be sold as slaves in cases of bad debt (cf. Stoof 1978).

#### 4.5 CONCLUSION

It can never be over-emphasised that the Egyptian economy largely depended on the labour of the peasants, the poor and illiterate bulk of the Egyptian society. They were called up for the corvee and toiled in the fields for the good of all Egyptians. Their women did their own household chores without help and were only spared such work during frequent periods of childbirth. They worked as servants for the aristocrats and generally saw to the happiness of their masters and mistresses. Their children entered the world of work at a tender age to help their parents make ends meet.

## CHAPTER 5: AGRICULTURAL ACTIVITIES OF THE ANCIENT EGYPTIAN FAMILY

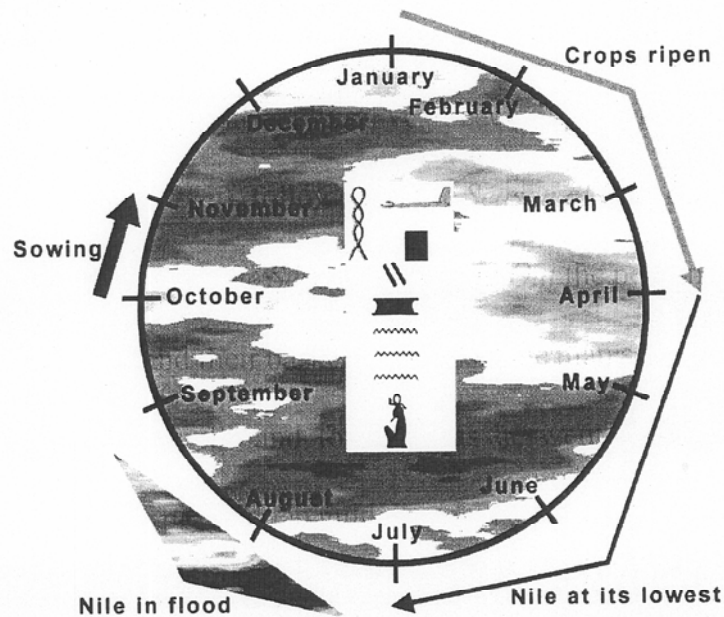
### 5.1 INTRODUCTION

Egypt is, as it was in ancient times, an inhospitable hot desert. What is today known as the great Ancient Egyptian civilization would not have existed were it not for the Nile River. The annual inundation, eagerly awaited by both peasant and state official alike brought life to the Nile Valley. The flood brought silt-laden waters to the valley which made it fertile and tillable. This was supplemented with irrigation from the river when the flood water receded. The river supported human, animal and plant life where this would have been impossible.

Irrigation served the dual purpose of watering the crops and the reclamation of the desert. According to Butzer (1976:46) there are vague suggestions of canal digging and basin creation from the Old Kingdom and rudimentary artificial irrigation well prior to the First Intermediate Period. Water lifting in Old Kingdom times was limited to manual transport of buckets, shown attached to a shoulder yoke in Middle Kingdom tomb paintings. Later the *shaduf*, capable of raising containers of water well over 1m. appears. The animal-drawn water-wheel or *saqiya*, able to lift a fairly substantial quantity of water, almost continuously, to elevations in excess of 3,5m. was only introduced in Persian or Ptolemaic times. The rudimentary artificial irrigation of the Old Kingdom was not only restricted to home and market gardens but also designed to amplify the acreage and yield of winter crops, to reduce the effects of year to year flood variability, and to protect settlements and fields from flood damage.

## 5.2 MEN AT WORK

White (1963:162-167) writes that the native born Egyptian peasant, without being a slave, was a serf or bondman. He was bound to the service of his master and his master's land. A peasant could, however, possess land and property of his own and could be prosperous.



*Egyptian agricultural calendar* (Cornelius & Venter 2002:29)

There were three seasons in the agricultural year, each divided into four months. There was the *Season of the Inundation* (*akhet*), followed by the *Season of Going Out* (*peret*) and then the *Season of Harvest* (*shemu*). During the *Seasons of Going Out* the peasants went out into the fields with their wooden ploughs and their baskets of seeds. One man scattered the seeds across the moist soil, chanting magical spells and formulae as he went about his job. A pair of ploughmen followed him. The one ploughman guided a team of cows while the other would lean on the handles of the plough to keep the share in the soil and thrown up ridges of soil on the fallen seed. When the ploughmen had done their job herds of pigs and sheep were driven into the fields to churn up the topsoil and to make sure that the seed was well covered. The surface was

then slightly raked over. Aldred (1984:198) says raking over was done by dragging a log over the ground.

Agricultural work for the farmer and his family was hard labour. Work included that draining of the marshes to extend the cultivated area, clearing the irrigation channels, removing wind blown sand for fertile fields and the watering by hand of high lying fields. Sometimes the farmer had to enrich the soil by mulching rotting vegetation into the soil. Preparation for the new season was hard and required concentrated work in order to complete preparation for sowing before the moisture evaporated from the fields. (Aldred 1984:198)

The growing crops needed weeding and a fair amount of this was needed during the growing season. Fences were erected, probable with stake or picket fences, or with simple barriers of thorny wood brush, to deter wild animals from damaging or eating crops. (Wilson 1997:20).

According to White (1963:166) the growing crops did not take up all the peasant's time. The peasant had to work in his master's garden and in his own. He had to tend vines and vegetables, he had to breed cattle, tend bees and fatten birds in the yard and fatten fish in the pond. Hunting animals for domestication was part of a peasant's work. Several hunters armed with bows and arrows, lassoes and cudgels would go out to the fringes of the desert, accompanied by hunting dogs. Sist (1988:66) says that the main purpose of a hunting expedition was to capture animals alive, which could then be domesticated and used in livestock raising. Various types of antelopes, deer, wild goats, hares, foxes, hyenas, giraffes, ostriches, as well as lions, leopards, panthers and even wild bulls were hunted.

Stouhal (1992:99) writes that when harvest time arrived, the entire family took part. The farmer rubbed an ear of corn between his fingertips and pronounced it ripe. The harvesters usually worked in a straight row, advancing steadily to the rhythm of song. The harvesters

grasped a bunch of stalks and sliced them through at the level just above his knees, then tossed the ears aside to be picked up by his helpers. The sheaves were in turn loaded into nets or baskets to be taken on donkey back for threshing. At the threshing floor cattle or donkey were driven into the enclosure to thresh out the grain with their trampling. Cleaning of the grain was done on a breezy day on some well-swept piece of flat ground. This was usually a job for young girls, who tossed the grain into the air with short handled wooden shovels. The wind carried off the lighter chaff and so on, while the heavier grain fell back onto the ground. The grain was then sacked up and carried by manpower or donkey power to the granary. Another staple crop, flax, was pulled rather than cut. This was the work for a man and his wife side by side. After the removal of roots and seed-heads, the stalks were laid to dry in the sun in small bundles for about a week, plunged into water for 10 - 14 days and finally beaten against stones and combed out with a wooden or metal instrument to separate the long fibres. Further processing took place in the weavers' shops or homesteads for the production of cloth.

Completion of the harvest did not mean that the farmer could rest. Strouhal (1992:101) suggests that the time between the harvest and the next flood could have been used for a second crop. This was usually a vegetable though there is evidence of a second cereal crop being grown.

### 5.3 WOMEN IN THE FIELDS AND AT HOME

According to Wilson (1997:61) peasant women had to work in the fields alongside the men. They had to perform the usual household chores and crafts like making clothes for the family and cooking. Very few women were professionals such as priests or state officials.

Watterson (1991:26-27) writes that peasant women looked after their children, cleaned their houses, cooked for their families and washed clothes. Many of these chores were performed outdoors like cooking, the washing of clothes and the fetching of water from the river, canal or

well. During the harvest winnowing was usually women's work and young girls were tasked with gleaning. Women not men went to the market, and they carried much farm produce in baskets on their heads, or, in the case of birds, in their hands.

Research conducted by Robins (1989:111) shows that agricultural scenes involving ploughing, sowing, hoeing, reaping, winnowing, threshing, counting, transporting and storing corn, and pulling and carrying flax have one thing in common: the majority of workers involved are men. During the grain harvest, women are often shown following the male reapers gathering fallen ears of grain into baskets, and sometimes women bring refreshments to the workers in the fields, but they are not shown wielding a sickle for themselves. They, however, take part in harvesting flax, which is not cut, but pulled out of the ground. Women's work was mainly domestic but the prominence of women in tomb decoration suggests that they occupied an honoured and important position within the family.

Wilson (1997:66-71) provides a catalogue of household chores performed by women in the home. The grinding of grain into flour needed for the baking of bread, the predominant food for ancient Egyptians was time consuming and back breaking. Breaking up the grain started in a limestone mortar set in the floor. The grain, emmer wheat or barley were pounded with a heavy wooden pole. The partially broken grain was transferred to a grinding stone in which it was crushed. The miller, in this case a woman, knelt at the higher end of the grinding stone holding a smaller crushing stone with both hands and crushed the grain. The coarse flour was collected on the other end of the grinding stone in a trough or basket. The flour was then sieved through woven reeds or grasses and was ready for processing into bread. The collecting of fuel for cooking was also women's work. Fuel was predominantly animal dung as the cutting of trees was strictly controlled. Water for all household needs had to be collected from the river, well or nearest cistern several times a day. The preparation of food and drink in the home was the prime

concern of every housewife. Partially baked bread and a flavouring agent such as dates were put in a container with water to allow fermentation to take place. The fermented mash was pressed through a sieve and the liquor collected in beer jars. Beer was a mildly alcoholic thickened barley drink and was another source of nutrition for the population. The beer brewing process also produced the liquid yeast which was used to leaven bread. Keeping the house clean, was another important duty of the housewife. Floors were swept with brooms made from reeds or from bundles of palm fibres. Cleaning also was intended to protect the house from rats and mice and snakes. Another housewifery occupation was spinning and weaving to make clothes for the family.

#### 5.4 CHILDREN'S WORK

As this aspect has already been dealt with under 4.4 it need not be repeated in detail. Boys are shown picking grapes and harvesting grapes. Other duties included helping in capturing birds with nets and chasing birds from the grain. Boys also helped in the fields, sowing or making animals tread in the seed. Others had to look after the cattle. Girls, as well as boys, helped their mothers to glean. They cared for their siblings and accompanied their mothers to the market.

Janssen and Janssen (1990:49-52) provide us with evidence of the work of children. Children took part in the parents activities at home, in the fields and in the workshops first as a natural matter for fun by role play and progressively more seriously. Boys ran errands and fed animals at an early age. By the age of twelve they fulfilled essential duties in the tilling of fields. Old Kingdom scenes show boys watching flocks or tending cattle, thereby assisting herdsmen. A boy also had his own duties in the kitchen while other scenes show the boy assisting at ploughing or him sowing. Girls were also sent out at an early age on errands and performed small chores in the house, in the preparation of food or attending to poultry or sheep. After reaching the age of

approximately seven years they helped in baking bread and collecting fuel for the oven. Children, particularly girls, were supposed to look after their younger siblings.

## 5.5 CROPS PLANTED

Sist (1998:49-74) counts cereals, bread, honey, beverages, wine, milk, vegetables and fruit, oil, meat and fish as the main ingredients of the ancient Egyptian diet. Cereals were the principal source of nourishment. These were emmer wheat and barley. After grinding the grain described above, the flour was then mixed with water and made into dough. Leavening the dough meant adding the remains of acidified bread made several days previously to the dough. Baking the bread consisted of putting bread directly on the fire or on slabs of stone placed over the flames. In the Old Kingdom, common use was made of moulds, these were heated to desired temperature before being filled and then covered. Bread shapes varied, including conical, circular, semi-circular, ovoid, ring or triangular shapes.

The brewing of beer was directly related to the making of bread. Bread and beer were the staple foods, they were distributed each day to the workers, farmers, soldiers and were to be found on the tables of the wealthy and the poor alike. Though there is an abundance of tomb scenes involving beer brewing, the process remains unknown. It must have resembled modern beer brewing produced by the process of fermentation. Bread and beer shared the preliminary stages of preparation from the use of flour derived from the same cereal to the preparation of the dough and the methods of baking. After baking, the bread was crumbed, soaked once more and made into dough with the addition of a aromatic liquid made from dates, rich in fragrance and sugar content. When the desired fermentation was achieved the dough was filtered and poured into large jars. These were closed with a stopper which was then covered with mud and sealed. Cereals were also used for foodstuffs other than bread. Evidence of the sort of barley soup has



been found in a 2nd Dynasty Tomb of a Princess at Saqqara. Good quality cereals were sometimes served toasted and crumbled.

Sist (1988:60) also shows evidence of wine as an ancient Egyptian beverage in the Old Kingdom. The vine growing regions were the Delta and the Western Oasis. Grapes were gathered in large baskets. These baskets were emptied in large basins in which five or six grape treaders, grasping hold of a stake, trampled the grapes. The juice collected in the basins but the remnants were placed in a sack at the ends of which were threaded two poles. Four men revolved the poles so as to squeeze the sack and press out the remaining juice. A fifth man oscillated between the two poles keeping them apart with his hands and feet. The juice was then left to ferment in open amphorae. At the end of the fermentation process the jars were stopped up and sealed. Sometimes grape juice was consumed unfermented.

Wilson (1988:21-26) provides information of the cultivation of vegetables and fruit in ancient Egypt. These included garlic, onions, lettuces, radishes, cucumbers, melons, legumes such as beans, peas and lentils. Among the fruit was the sycamore fig, the date palm, the vine, the pomegranates, the persea, mandrake fruit and Christ's thorn. The apple and citrus fruits were introduced in later dynasties. Horticultural scenes are to be found as early as the Old Kingdom. Small plots of domestic crops would have been cultivated between the larger fields of cereal.

Sist (1988:65) includes oil as part of the ancient Egyptian diet. Oil was extracted from the nuts of the moringa tree. The oil extracted from lettuce, seed and flax (linseed) was used for cooking. Oil was extracted from radishes and this was called sesame oil. There is also evidence that olive oil was available in ancient Egypt.

## 5.6 FAMILY LIVESTOCK

The ancient Egyptian family kept farmstead cattle descended from aurochs domesticated in prehistoric times. Janssen and Janssen (1989:27) say cattle were kept for their meat, milk, hides, and as draught animals. Apart from those bred locally, cattle were imported in large numbers from neighbouring countries as booty, tribute and merchandise. Families with a large number of cattle were accorded a high social status and cattle represented economic value. Hides were used for thongs, sandals, shields, chairs, seat and webbing. Dried dung was used as fuel. Some oxen were confined to stables for fattening and slaughter while other herd roamed freely in the pastures, mainly used for ploughing, threshing and milk. Beef provided food for the rich.

According to Sist (1988:63) milk was consumed in various forms, such as butterfat, curds and cheese, in addition to being a drink. It was also used for cooking.

Janssen and Janssen (1989:31) include goats and sheep among household animals. The ancient Egyptians called them "small cattle". The sheep were kept for their meat, milk and skin. Woollen textiles were scarce until the Middle Kingdom. Flocks were used for treading seed into the fields after sowing. Goats were far more numerous than sheep because of their adaptability to dry conditions and their ability to browse while sheep demanded grass. Goats were kept for their meat, skin and perhaps milk. Goat's meat constituted party fare for peasants.

New Kingdom scenes depict pigs treading seed into the soil. They were, however, kept mainly for their meat. Pork was poor man's food, beef being the prerogative of the rich. There is evidence of extensive pig farming in every ancient town.

Doll (1982:46) includes donkeys as well as geese and ducks in the farmstead. Other birds were usually snared and penned during migration season. Domestic chickens may have been known too, even if they were not commonly kept by farmers. It is interesting to note that Sist (1988:61) includes the donkey as one of the milk givers.

Fish was one of the most important sources of protein for the poor. Sist (1988:74) writes that fish was easily obtained from the river which was rich in a variety of fish. Fish was scooped by hand, harpooned, netted or scooped with baskets. Men were responsible for fishing but it was the responsibility of women to cook the fish in the home.

## 5.7 CONCLUSION

The farmer had to contend with many problems apart from hard and often thankless labour. The scribes never tired of rehearsing the ills of the farmer to their pupils to keep them at their studies. Farmers faced many problems including inadequate inundation, the harvest tax, the locusts, the birds, the Nubian policemen, the mice, the hippos and the snakes. The farmer faced the corvee during the Inundation when no work was possible on the fields.

Kitchen (1982:184) says that the work of the farming family provided the base on which the imposing social pyramid of the Egyptian state was built – the provision of food. Life was tough for the farmer, but it also had its rosy side. There were the good Inundation, the abundant crops, fine cattle and most Egyptians from other walks of life liked to show them as raising the wondrous crops of the After Life. Agricultural life was the ideal life in the After Life.

## CHAPTER 6: FAMILY RECREATION, ENTERTAINMENT AND TRAVEL

### 6.1 INTRODUCTION

Ancient Egyptian families have a respite from the dreary life of earning a living during religious festivals. Holidays gradually became numerous so that by the time of the New Kingdom, Theban tombmakers were spending a third of their time in celebration. (Romer 1984:48). Their eight-day working week was broken up by two- or three-day weekends amounting to sixty-odd days in the year. There was a further sixty-five days of celebration dotted throughout the ancient Egyptian calendar. These festivals included most of the full-moon days as well as other celebrating the beginning of spring, the harvest and the river's flood.

It was during such holidays that peasant families relaxed and enjoyed themselves with good meals, games and music. Romano (1990:39-45) counts music, banquets, hunting, fishing, fowling and reading among the pastimes of the rich and landed families. Young men often faced problems with their elders when they were caught frequenting brothels. Ancient Egyptians also imported opium for medicinal purposes, but this was also used as a narcotic.

For transport, the river provided the necessary highway for visitors and travellers. White (1963:108) says travellers from different parts of Egypt used the river to travel between their villas and townhouses, their temples and palaces and their cities and cemeteries.

### 6.2 FAMILY PASTIMES AND ENTERTAINMENT

The workers' community at Deir el-Medina who were skilled artisans each weekend received supplies, worked for themselves or each other or settled disputes in tribunals. On those days food and drink flowed freely, offerings were made to the gods and all made merry. (Kitchen 1982:199).

Romer (1984:52-54) offers a detailed account of the celebrations during festivals. During the New Kingdom the tombmakers of Thebes were supplied with vast quantities of food by the order of the vizier. In king Merneptah's eighth year, four hundred blocks of salt were sent to the villagers, along with ten oxen for slaughter, twenty-five donkey-loads of fish, some four donkey-loads of beans and sweet oils, eight donkey-loads of barley, nine thousand loaves of bread and eight donkey-loads of natron, the soap of the day. These supplies for food and drink ensured that the Festival of Opet was very well celebrated.

All meats were spit-roasted whole, though villagers would also have cut and boiled pieces of their beef. Meat and wine were not everyday fare but during festivals everyone had his share. There was music and dancing and most guests sat with lotus-flowers in their hands. Drummings, rattlings and stringed percussion and the sounds of lutes and flutes accompanied the nude dancing girls. Serving girls, the children of the feasters, helped to serve the food. Meat and other food was held in the hand and eaten as such. There were bowls of brown beans, bright chickpeas and soft lotus seeds. Fresh grape juice was also drunk alongside the heavy beer brew. Guests ate pomegranates, grapes, jujubes, honey cakes, heads of garlic and the figs of the sycamore. Other meats included pork, Nile ducks and desert game while celery, parsley, leeks and lettuce were eaten fresh from the fields.

According to Pinch (1995:363) the wealthier classes entertained in style. Guests sat on mats or on low chairs and maidservants washing and dried the hands of the guests and anointed them with scented oils, presented them with garlands and poured spiced liquids into their bowls of wine. Female entertainers sang and danced for the guests.

There is one unique scene (*Fig. 34*) from the tomb of Neferhotep where a woman and two children are thrown out by the gate-keeper. The woman is still drinking and carries a sistrum musical instrument. Perhaps they were part of a dancing group and the woman misbehaved?

Romano (1990:41-43) discusses a number of ways in which Egyptians spent their leisure time. They took great delight in their pets, usually dogs and cats (cf. *Fig. 22*). The dog was the Egyptian's most popular animal companion and many families adorned them with collars and buried them with elaborate rituals. Monkeys from sub-Saharan Africa were luxury pets found mainly in the homes of the wealthy.

Egyptian families enjoyed board games in the quiet of their homes. The most popular board game was known as "passing" and was played by two people. In literate households reading seems to have been a restful diversion. Literacy was not restricted to the nobility as evidence shows in books recovered from the New Kingdom worker's village of Deir el-Medina. Pinch (1995:370) adds listening to stories and sight-seeing as other ways of relaxing. Egyptians told stories such as animal fables or tales of magic which were enjoyed by both sexes in the household. Graffiti left behind by literate Egyptians show that people went on sight-seeing trips to ancient temples and tombs. Leisure to sit and talk with family members and friends was a welcome diversion from hard work. The men were probably entertained by the master of the house while the wife was entertaining the women in her quarters.

The whole family took part in leisure trips on the Nile when birds or fish were hunted. This was more the prerogative of the upper classes and various paintings from tombs depict the family hunting in the marshes (*Fig. 18*). The noble is standing while his wife stands next to him and his son is holding his legs.

Other scenes depicting festivals show girls accompanying the musicians and dancers. One scene which commemorates the inauguration of an official show them among the dancers with tambourines making music with castanettes (*Fig. 36*). Small children dance with female musicians and dancers at a festival, one is waving a branch (*Fig. 37*).

### 6.3 MENS' SPORTS

Pinch (1995:370) mentions wrestling, boxing and stick fighting as sports in which men participated. Men of lower classes carried out these sports and upper classes of society, though they did watch, did not take part. Punt jousting was popular among boatmen in the Old Kingdom. Some Middle Kingdom tomb scenes show fighting between bulls taking place as part of religious festivals. Hunting and fishing activities had mainly been a necessity for poor people but became a leisure pursuit of the wealthy male Egyptian. These men used bows and arrows to kill desert game, throw sticks to kill or stun marsh birds and spears to kill fish. In the New Kingdom the upper classes began to lay more stress on physical strength and dexterity. Rowing, chariot-driving and competitive archery were adopted as pastimes by the elite. Romano (1990:40) mentions fowling as one of the Egyptian pastimes. The fowler, often holding a live bird as a decoy, usually felled his prey with a throw stick (*Fig. 18*).

### 6.4 WOMENS' PASTIMES

Pinch (1995:370) counts music and dancing as suitable accomplishments for women of all ages. Tomb scenes from the Old and Middle Kingdoms show the tomb owner relaxing in his bedroom while his wife plays the harp to him. Music and dancing were pleasures integral to the daily life of the ancient Egyptian. Tomb scenes record the work songs of herdsmen, peasants and boatmen. Young girls might dance to entertain men, but adult men and women did not dance together.

According to Romano (1990:38-39) the most elegant banquets always featured a small orchestra. Stringed instruments such as harps, lyres and lutes were a standard element of any Egyptian musical performance. Both long and short double flutes appear in many orchestral scenes; oboes, trumpets and an instrument resembling a modern clarinet were also known in antiquity. Percussionists favoured drums, tambourines and small ivory clappers. In certain

religious ceremonies a worshipper, usually - although not always - a woman, would shake a bronze or copper rattle called a sistrum. Anderson (1995:2562) says that there was a strong family connection with music in the Old Kingdom. Various 5th Dynasty tombs at Giza reveal that family members acted as overseers of singers, directors of singers or inspectors of singers. Instrumentalists used flutes, harps and clappers. Dancers were more often women than men. Considerable numbers of dancers performed at a given time. In one tomb fifteen women take part, whereas in one, thirteen female dancers are shown hand in hand in the same solemn movement. In another, a female dwarf carries a sistrum, with seven others apparently encircling her. A mirror dance achieved fame in the Sixth Dynasty. The female dancers held mirrors and clappers ending with a human hand. Both mirror and clapper were associated with Hathor, and with the "mystery of birth". The female participants are often shown with a weighted ball or disk attached to the end of a long tress of gathered hair or fixed to the head by a band of white cloth.

Women would go to great lengths taking care of themselves and decorating their bodies. Before festivals and banquets women wore massive wigs, as wide as their shoulders, and their faces were exquisitely made-up. (Romer 1984:54). Eyebrows were shaped to narrow arcs, eyelids were carefully painted and coloured. Both men and women wore jewellery: fragile faience bracelets and rings, ear-rings and necklaces, and for special feasts large collars made of fresh flowers and aromatic plants strung together with beads and fine linen tassels. Perfumes formed part of this elaborate display. Yellow-scented saffron oil was a favourite perfume. Other exotic varieties were imported from neighbouring countries.



## 6.5 CHILDRENS' GAMES

Janssen and Janssen (1990:55) suggest that games were not simply pictures of daily life but were connected with religion and the afterlife. They were supposed to possess didactic contents as a preparation for adult life and a psychological aspect concerned with the repression of sexuality. Girls performed acrobatics which was closely connected with dancing. Boys also learned dancing but did not do the somersaults. Acrobatics played a role in the cult and was accompanied by musicians playing harps and sistra.

A painted limestone group from the 5-6<sup>th</sup> dynasties show a boy and girl playing (*Fig. 38*). Boys performed balancing acts as part of physical exercises. A boy stands on his head, his arms crossed over his chest. Elsewhere, three lads carry a fourth on their shoulders. The “donkey-game” appears in an Old Kingdom scene where an older boy on all fours carries two small children on his back; the smaller boys hang like sacks on a donkey. In the “star-game”, two boys stand in the middle, holding with outstretched arms two, or even four others, who lean back balancing on their heels. (*Fig 39*).

Another game known is “jumping over the goose”. Two boys sit face to face, each putting his feet and his hands with outstretched fingers in a tier upon each other. So they form a living bundle over which a third lad has to leap. He has to jump over the hands and the feet of both friends in a single bound, or, after alighting halfway between the two, he must leap again. (*Fig 40*). Both depictions of the “star” and “jumping game” come from the mastaba of Ptahhotep at Saqqara (5<sup>th</sup> dynasty).

There may also have been some kind of wrestling and leapfrog but writers are uncertain. Another contest was that of tug-of-war. This was, however, played without a rope. The captains grasped each other by the wrists. Behind them other boys stood holding the one in front with both hands around the waist, forming a human chain. At a given command they began to pull. Another

game was what the British call “elbows”. An ancient Egyptian variant was played standing up. The boys interlock their hands behind their necks averting their faces. They try to hit each other’s elbows so as to knock the opponent off-balance. Janssen and Janssen (1990:60) also mentions the juggling of balls by girls. They suggest that this was a ritual performance for the entertainment of the deceased and that sometimes it alluded to the sacred marriage of the pharaoh and a goddess, such as Hathor.

A “hut-game” from the Old Kingdom has one boy forced into an enclosure while others prevent him from escaping. He will try by all means to get out of the hut (*Fig 41*). It has been suggested that this activity was connected with puberty rituals because huts are associated with such ceremonies among African peoples.

The game of “Cops and Robbers” had the task of teaching the children that the law and order of the community should be maintained. In this game, a bound captive, his elbows tied behind his back, is led away on a cord by a group of other naked boys.

White (1963:184) writes that Egyptian girls were greatly addicted to dolls. Some dolls were plain and utilitarian (*Fig.42*), but others were fine and life-like and equipped with different sets of clothes. If *Fig. 43* is really a doll, is still a matter of dispute. An assortment of toys includes tops, balls of fibre and even an animal with movable jaws (*Fig. 44*).

## 6.6 TRAVEL

White (1963:108-111) gives an account of how the Egyptians travelled between their villas and townhouses, their temples and palaces, their cities and cemeteries. The Nile river was the main thoroughfare between Upper and Lower Egypt and together with its network of canals, it permitted free traffic to the citizens. Larger rafts were made of timber while smaller boats were made of bound papyrus.

Land travel was not so important. A commonly seen vehicle was the carrying-chair or palanquin for the pharaoh. For travelling long distances the sides of the palanquin were boarded or covered with linen panels.

Chariots were used later for military purposes or for hunting long after the Old Kingdom. The donkey and the ox were mainly used as beasts of burden and not for transport, the donkey being used only when a person was ill.

Tyldesley (1994:143) remarks briefly about whole families enjoying the day together and picnics at the tombs of the ancestors or boating expeditions of the Nile. Boating expeditions were popular, especially the days spent hunting and fishing in the marshes. The entire family squeezed into a light reed boat in order to watch the men of the household attempt to bring down birds with a traditional curved throwing stick (*Fig. 18*).

Royal expeditions were carried out mostly on foot. Though Egyptians loved life, they were very superstitious. Romano (1990:48) cites the example of a calendar that told them which days of the year were auspicious and which were adverse. Unlike the modern horoscope the "magic calendar" applied to everyone. August 1 was considered very favourable and any effort was likely to succeed; October 17, however, was a day of misfortune when no journey was to be started.

Very few countries in ancient or modern times are as dependent on its waterways as Egypt. (Kees 1961:96). Land routes on either side of the river are used for local traffic between villages and to and from the riverbanks. It is by ship that one travels and that goods are conveyed up and down the river. In ancient Egyptian all words concerned with this aspect of life are determined by the idea of sailing : to travel south is "to go up-stream", to travel north is "to go down-stream" even when referring to travelling outside Egypt.

Ancient Egyptians operated a ferry service even in the poor localities where in fact it was a greater necessity for daily life than anything else. The ferryman was an important figure both

for men and animals. His occupation was regarded as lucrative even though his "pay" was actually a handful of farm products. Even the royal dead would have fared badly in the Other World without a ferryman. The dead had to be transported across the river on the way to the necropolis, or at least had to cross canals or travel along them. Religion, as early as the Old Kingdom, obliged the wealthy families to ferry anyone without a boat particularly the corpses of the poor, just as it was their duty to bury those who had no son to do it for them. (Kees 1961:98). The ferryman was taxed by the state for the service he rendered. In the Ptolemaic Period there was a tax on ferries "in the King's House", a sort of poll-tax. Until recent times there existed throughout Egypt, a sort of local ferry monopoly over which the villagers exercise strict control.

## 6.7 CONCLUSION

The ancient Egyptian family took part in many recreational activities and those who could afford it could wine and dine with friends in style. Recreation took place at week-ends and on public holidays especially during festivals.

Every sanctuary had its calendar of festival days on which important events of the myth of the local deity were commemorated publicly. (James 1979:142). In small religious centres these festivals were held as local celebrations, but the festivals of the national gods became great occasions for public demonstrations of enthusiasm. During these days food and drink was plentiful and women decorated themselves with various ornaments of precious stones and metals in the form of beads, pendants and rings.

Both men and women had their own pastimes. Children played games to pass their time when they were not working and families travelled together to picnics in the river or to cemeteries.

Festivals had an agricultural background connected with ploughing and sowing and harvest. Great festivals were held in the season called "the coming-forth", which included the time when the Inundation reached its height and the subsequent start of the sowing when the peasant confirmed "the earth has made its appearance and it is ready for ploughing" (Kees 1961:55).

## CHAPTER 7: RELIGIOUS RITUALS OF THE ANCIENT EGYPTIAN FAMILY

### 7.1 INTRODUCTION

The ancient Egyptians seem to have been a very religious people. They believed in the supernatural powers and had household, regional and national gods. They practised their religion everywhere: in temples, sanctuaries, at home and at work. Religion was life in itself and not merely a way of life. Most of our knowledge of ancient Egyptian religion is derived from compilations of prayers and ritual utterances which were used in sacred ceremonies. The largest of such compilations from the Old Kingdom is what is known today as the "Pyramid Texts." From these evolved the "Coffin Texts" of the Middle Kingdom from which, in turn, evolved the New Kingdom funerary texts known as the "Book of the Dead".

The "Pyramid Texts" were inscribed on the walls of the burial chambers within royal pyramids of the Fifth and Sixth Dynasties. Mythologies were also developed in priestly colleges or centres of religious learning and funerary rites were recorded in book form and kept in libraries. (Wilson 1997:100-101).

Tomb inscriptions and scenes on tomb walls give us much information about religious life in ancient Egypt.

### 7.2 ANCIENT EGYPTIAN RELIGION

#### 7.2.1 GODS, GODDESSES AND DIVINE FAMILIES

In ancient Egyptian mythology, Ptah was the creator god. The Shabaka Stone records the theology of Menes of Memphis who taught that all local and former mythological traditions are brought to their theological goal in the god, Ptah. The text is a description of the creation of the world and the unity of land of Egypt, a process in the ordering of the world. All things, including

the gods, are created by Ptah from notions in his heart and are then pronounced by his tongue. Things entered into material forms coming from concepts of Ptah's mind, be they stone, metal, wood or a god. Memphite mythology also includes the Horus and Seth myths from the Old Kingdom. These two deities contended for authority over Egypt. Geb, the earth-god, mediates by partitioning Egypt between the two. He later changes his mind and gives the entire country to Horus. In Memphite theology Menes, the pharaoh of the time, is identified with Horus. Also Geb is homologous to Ptah. In another Old Kingdom myth, the sun Atum is regarded as the creator. He makes Shu and Tefnut (air and moisture) out of himself and they in turn produce Geb and Nut (earth and sky). Geb and Nut produce Osiris, Isis, Seth and Nephtys. (Frankfort 1977:149).

The first four gods create the cosmos and the later four are mediators between humans and the cosmos. Osiris is the symbol of the dead king who is succeeded by Horus, the living ruler. Isis is the consort of Osiris and after his murder by Seth she reconstitutes his body. Horus, the son of Osiris and Isis ultimately conquers Seth. Seth is related to the desert of Upper Egypt. As the deity of the clouds, he opposes Atum, the sun.

It is interesting that the idea of the "family" is central to Egyptian mythology. According to Egyptian myth the first creator, Atum brought the brother and sister pair Shu and Tefnut into being. They begat the sister-brother pair Geb (earth) and Nut (sky). From them came the brothers and sisters Osiris and Isis and Seth and Nephtys. Through her magic Isis conceived Horus – together with Osiris they form the divine family as on a piece in the Louvre (*Fig. 45*). Horus is often depicted as a child on his mother's lap. Images of the Isis (Madonna) Lactans were very popular in Egypt, and became an icon of the devoted mother, an image which spread throughout the ancient world and still lives on today (*Fig. 46a*).

Children were depicted with the hairlock of Horus, sucking their finger and sitting on their mothers' lap (*Fig. 46b*). A woman is taking care of her child while collecting fruit (*Figs.*

46c-d) on a painting and relief in the Brooklyn Museum.

Magical stelae called *cippi* show the Horus child standing on crocodiles and holding serpents and scorpions (Shaw and Nicholson 1995:133). These were magical stelae which were very popular among ordinary people, especially in the Late Period. Water was poured over the stelae and a magical text recited to protect children against the dangerous animals over which Horus prevailed.

### 7.2.2 POPULAR RELIGION

Although most Egyptians were religious, not all could go and pray in the great temples where gods were thought to dwell. Only the king and priests could enter the inner recesses of the temple. Romano (1990:45-49) writes that the nobles could enter the temple forecourt but could go no further. Ordinary people like peasants and workers contented themselves with occasional glimpses of their gods during state festivals when gods were carried from one temple to another. They could, however, worship at small local temples or sanctuaries.

At these places they left inscribed statues or stelae in which they proclaimed their devotion to a particular deity or prayed to the dead king for advice in the resolution of a dispute. They also had household deities which they kept in their homes and believed in deceased family members as “excellent spirits of the sun god Re.” The household gods were believed to protect the home and family. These minor gods included Bes, Aha, Hayet and Taweret who, together with her male counterpart, also safeguarded pregnant women and the newly born. Renenutet, as observed above, was the Lady of Harvest and together with Meretseger, goddess of the Theban necropolis in the New Kingdom, guaranteed a good harvest and protected the workers from snakes and scorpions.



Lorton (1995:350) remarks that activities of a religious nature were a part of people's lives. In prehistoric communities, local deities were worshipped at shrines, the forerunner of the later temples. During the New Kingdom villages had small temples of their own. At Deir el-Medina, some individuals even built little private chapels. The small temples were staffed by the workers themselves and individuals were excused from work to participate in their temple festivals.

According to Wilson (1997:113-114) ordinary people could not attend temple festivals but the larger religious festivals provided an opportunity for the people to get close to their gods. During these festivals gods came out to meet them outside the temple. The statue of the god in the shrine was carried by priests as well as the sacred book. Along the ceremonial route incense was burnt and offerings made at significant stopovers. During these festivals the gods were accompanied by priests, local dignitaries and the king and royal family if they were in attendance. People travelled great distances to witness the procession and to share in the free handouts of bread and beer. The ancient Egyptian calendar included such festivals as the New Year festival, First of the Month festival and the New Moon festival. There were several major annual festivals held at major temples each lasting several days. The people enjoyed celebrating these festivals because they allowed them to overindulge in food and drink and offered an excuse from work.

## 7.3 ANCIENT EGYPTIAN TOMBS

### 7.3.1 ROYAL TOMBS

According to Grimal (1992:103) the pyramid is the perfect image of the Old Kingdom. The tombs of the elite at Abydos and Saqqara during the Old Kingdom and earlier periods were in the form of a mastaba. The mastaba was an architectural development that had begun with the predynastic tumulus. The evolution of the mastaba to a pyramid was brought about by Djoser.

Djoser wanted to construct a traditional mastaba for his family members but the builders embarked on a radical modification of the external appearance of the tomb. The original superstructure would have been eight metres high but Imhotep, the architect, heightened the monument still further by transforming it into a larger pyramid of six steps reaching a height of about sixty metres. In the Fourth Dynasty, the pyramid had changed to its classic appearance with the steps filled in to form a true pyramid and reach a height of ninety-two metres. The perfect pyramidal form was finally achieved by Cheops at Giza where the natural plateau offered a more stable base for construction.

The substructure of the pyramid consisted of subterranean rooms including the burial chamber proper, the king's *ka* chamber, storerooms and granaries. A large shaft twenty-eight metres in length led to the burial chamber and was usually blocked with a granite stopper after the funeral. The king's burial chamber and that of his *ka* were decorated with blue faience tiles while the adjoining galleries were lined with granite. In the tomb chamber several objects were spread around the body, varying amounts of pottery holding food offerings placed at the disposal of the deceased and chests of precious objects like knives and arrows, jewels and gaming objects.

Hoffman (1979:283) writes of a ritual meal for the dead found in the tomb of a lady of the lesser nobility dating to the Second Dynasty. It consisted of:

1. Form of porridge made from ground barley;
2. A cooked quail, cleaned and dressed with the head tucked under the wing;
3. Two cooked kidneys;
4. A pigeon stew;
5. A cooked fish, cleaned and dressed with the head removed;
6. Ribs of beef;
7. Small triangular loaves of bread made from emmer wheat;

8. Small circular cakes;
9. Stewed fruit, possibly figs;
10. Fresh *nibk* berries.

With this meal were small jars containing some form of cheese and large pottery vessels for wine and perhaps beer.

According to Grimal (1992:106) there was an “offering formula” used for the continued flow of offerings to the deceased. This was a means of keeping the dead within the fabric of the universe. This was done to render the survival of the deceased as certain as that of the rest of the cosmos. The step pyramid itself was a means for the king to “climb” to the sky where he would undergo transformation into both the sun and a star.

### 7.3.2 NON-ROYAL TOMBS

Private individuals obtained life after death by placing their tombs in close proximity to the kings. Grimal (1992:128) writes that complete cities of the dead, called necropolises, grew up in this way. The tombs were arranged like houses into roads and quarters and the position of each occupant in the social ladder was measured by his distance from the pyramid. The king was regarded as a guardian of his subjects and took them with him into the hereafter.

Unlike the superstructure the tombs itself went through hardly any process of change.

Grimal (1992:129) writes that it was essentially the container for the corpse, sometimes square, sometimes rectangular or sometimes even circular. During the Old Kingdom tombs were built of mud-brick with a stone roof in the form of a “corbelled” vault. Each contained a rectangular sarcophagus made of either limestone or granite according to the means of the deceased. We are not sure whether at this stage the bodies were mummified since the remains of the dead buried in the great necropoleis of the Old Kingdom are very poorly preserved and there

is no scene in any of the chapels to confirm the practice of mummification. The tombs of the ordinary people were in the form of a mastaba, as they could not afford the expensive pyramids as most people were poor and even officials depended on the generosity of the king.

Lesko (1995:1766), however, says there is some evidence that mummification took place in the Old Kingdom. He quotes the mummification for one Old Kingdom queen which took 272 days to complete. He also quotes the case of one Old Kingdom body which had each of its limbs and digits individually wrapped in contrast to the New Kingdom practice of wrapping the whole body as a unit.

## 7.4 THE CULT OF THE DEAD

### 7.4.1 COMPONENTS OF THE SOUL

The ancient Egyptians believed that a human individual was made up of five elements. Grimal (1992:105) mentions (1) the *shadow*, (2) the *akh*, (3) the *ka*, (4) the *ba*, (5) the *name*; whereas Lesko (1995:1763-1764) mentions (6) the *body*, the *ba*, the *akh*, the *ka*, and the *shadow*.

The shadow was the one-corporeal double of each of the forms assumed in a lifetime. The *akh* was an aspect of the sun, the luminous element that permitted the dead to join the stars when they passed into the hereafter. The *ka* was the vital force possessed by every being; it multiplied according to the power of the being in question, Re, for example had fourteen *kas*. It had to be provided with food supplies in order to maintain its efficiency. It was the *ka* that allowed the body to resume a life similar to the one it had enjoyed on earth.

The *ba* was also a non-corporeal entity which possessed the power of its owner, whether a god, corpse or living being. It was a kind of double of the deceased, existing independently of the body. It was represented in the form of a bird with a human head, which left the body at the moment of death, only to return the process of mummification had taken place.

The body itself was considered an essential element that was animated by the *ka*. The ancient Egyptians also believed that the process of naming an individual was an act of creation. On every occasion that the name was uttered the individual was endowed with life even after he/she had physically disappeared.

#### 7.4.2 THE AFTERLIFE AND THE CONDEMNATION OF THE DAMNED

Lesko (1995:1768-1769) writes that the ancient Egyptians had diverse conceptions of the afterlife. Guidebooks offer different ways to achieve the desired afterlife. By the time of the Coffin Texts everyone could attain a good afterlife. If the basic spells were conducted, an individual could sail on the cyclic day-night journey with the sun-god Re on his solar bark and reborn.

Other conceptions describe the deceased working in verdant well-irrigated fields and orchards to produce farm produce for the god Osiris. Other versions describe the Elysian Fields or paradise where the deceased reaps the benefits of his labour for himself and enjoys all the most pleasant aspects of life to the highest degree.

According to Lesko (1995:1768) the *Negative Confessions* in the *Book of the Dead* is one source of information on the ancient Egyptian moral code. The sins listed include cheating, stealing and homosexuality. The list does not include assault, personal injury or adultery. At the weighing of the individual's heart, the "Devourer of the Dead" is depicted crouching menacingly beside the scale. According to Hornung (1992:101) the "Devourer of the Dead" is ready to consume the condemned and represents the nameless dangers that threaten all who are sinners. In another conception, terrible creatures sever head and slit throats, clutch at hearts and tear them from beasts and stage a bloodbath. The condemned go through a "place of destruction" which is inhabited by forces that destroy and dissolve everything entering their domain. The destruction of

the body marks the destruction of the *ba*; it effaces the shadows of the condemned and relegates their names to oblivion, to non-existence. In the *Book of Gates*, one scene depicts a tremendous serpent breathing fire on bound sinners setting them on fire. Other scenes depict fire-filled pits of the ominous Lake of Fire. The lake's red water is a burning liquid that brings the total destruction of both body and soul. It is, however, not all doom and gloom. According to Hornung (1992:102) the ancient Egyptians recognised that new creation could only be achieved by dissolution and extinction; renewed life must be preceded by a period of decay. The afterlife presents an opportunity for continual regeneration for all that exists. Osiris, who was murdered and dismembered by his brother Seth, comes back to life to become not only the ruler of the underworld but also a model for all the deceased. This is the ultimate triumph over death.

#### 7.4.3 PROVISIONS, FOOD AND FURNITURE

White (1963:85) remarks that one's imagination is numb at the thought of the splendour of the ancient Egyptian king's funerary equipment when compared to Tutankhamen's which in itself calls forth gasps of wonder though, apart from the honour due to him as the holder of a great office, was a cipher, a nonentity, an adolescent puppet.

From the earliest times basic provisions included various kinds of food. Lesko (1995:1773) includes various kinds of breads, beers, oxen, fowl, several kinds of wines and linens. Tutankhamen's tomb included much more than was usual. There were jars of fat and oils and baskets of grain, fruits and vegetable. There were also fabrics, clothing, sandals, gloves, bows and arrows, slings, boomerangs, sticks, swords, shields, full-sized chariots, ship models, lamps, vases, stools, chairs, beds, statues, jewels of all kinds, musical instruments, writing equipment, fans, drinking vessels, toys, games, sceptres, seals and shrines. This was a small royal tomb and as remarked above, one wonders what might have been contained by bigger tombs had

they not been robbed or what is contained in those still to be discovered. The walls of Old Kingdom tombs were covered with scenes of daily life. Such scenes depicted servants responsible for the provisions so they could continue to provide for the deceased in the afterlife. The extravagance of the funerary equipment of royal tombs must have been one reason for their being robbed.

Hoffman (1979:283) writes that there were thousands of stone and pottery jars and dishes in Old Kingdom royal tombs. In addition there were finely wrought large stone knives and flint end scrapers of amazing uniformity. Personal ornaments abounded including bracelets of schist, onyx, ivory and flint, while inlaid ivory, bone and wood gaming boards and gaming pieces reflect the early fascination for games of skill and chance admired by ancient Egyptians of all ages. Tombs were lined with wood and contained delicately carved and joined wooden furniture. There were baskets and leather goods including arrow quivers and sandals while cereal grains and animal bones remind us of the agricultural surpluses which supported the upper classes.

In addition to the physical provisions for burial, the ancient Egyptians also prepared written texts for the deceased. According to Lesko (1995:1767) the purpose of the texts was to provide the deceased with a compendium of knowledge required for the afterlife. This included the descriptions of surroundings envisioned in the afterlife such as mansions, gardens and boats where the deceased would abide in either celestial or terrestrial settings. The texts were a guide to the journey towards the afterlife. The deceased had to know in detail all the beings, demonic or divine, obstacles and parts of the boats on which they would travel.

According to the Pyramid Texts the main objective of the king was to join the sun-god Re in the afterlife. In the Coffin Texts of the Middle Kingdom, the afterlife that could be attained by non-royal persons had several variations or combinations of elements that might have allowed for the varied existence of the afterlife. Some might want to be stars in the sky with the moon-god

Thoth; some might want to remain in the lush Fields of Offerings of Osiris and some might want to sail with Re in his cyclical voyage.

#### 7.4.4 PRACTICE OF THE CULT

According to Grimal (1992:130-134) a deceased persons body was taken to a special house of purification. Surgically trained priests placed the body on a table and removed the brains and eviscerated the corpse. The internal organs were treated separately and placed in vessels but in later dynasties were put back into the corpse. The heart and kidneys were always left in the body since their locations made them more difficult to remove. The body was then “salted” by placing it in natron for about thirty-five days. After this the abdomen was stuffed with pieces of material provided by the family of the deceased. The material was first soaked in gums, herbs and various unguents so that the body could be preserved and restored to its original shape. After the body had been restored and preserved, it was then cleaned and purified. It was then wrapped in bandages. Linen strips were used to wrap each individual part of the body including the fingers and the phallus; then the body was covered with a large piece of material acting as a shroud and the whole of the torso was bandaged.

The process was the same for a king or individual except for the value of the amulets worn by the corpse. Finally the corpse’s face was covered with a mask usually of cartonage or gold and lapis-lazuli in the case of kings.

The funeral rites, including the Opening of the Mouth, were performed by the son or the closest surviving male relative of the deceased. He was assisted by his brothers or cousins and wore the priestly leopard-skin robe for the occasion. In attendance was the priest representing Anubis, the god of embalming, who wore a jackal’s head mask. Whoever conducted the funeral rites would stand beside a table bearing the implements, incense and natron required for the



Opening of the Mouth ritual and read the funeral liturgy (Wilson 1997:116-117). The prayers, inscriptions on the tomb walls and stela, pictures, lists and the very contents of the tomb were intended to ensure that the provisions of offerings continued forever and reinforced the wishes of the deceased. Sometimes wealthier people would arrange for their mortuary cult to be celebrated and ensure that the presentation of offerings was continued long after their death. This arrangement took the form of a donation or an endowment of land to the local temple. Revenues from the donation or endowment would be used to pay priests to carry out the ritual.

### 7.5 CHILDREN IN THE CULT

So far we have seen how much the ancient Egyptians respected their children and how children formed an integral part of Egyptian society. Egyptian children also took part in the cult. An ostrakon from Deir el-Medina describes a festival in honour of the deified king and that "They jubilated and drank with their wives and children for three days" (Feucht *s.a.*). Herodotus relates how children took part in the festival for the cat goddess Bastet.

Children are shown worshipping the gods with their parents on Egyptian stelae and paintings (*Figs. 47-48*).

Feucht (*s.a.*) argues that children were seen as innocent and closer to the gods. Through them the parents could appease the gods and find grace.

Children lament the dead (*Fig. 49*) and young girls are amongst wailing women, a very common occupation for women in ancient Egypt (*Fig. 50*).

### 7.6 CONCLUSION

Life in ancient Egypt was synonymous with religion. The ultimate objective in life was a good burial and a perpetual afterlife. Life was spent preparing for death. It is for this reason that everyone was a potential priest even if they made a simple offering. Multitudes of people lay

down their tools for religious festivals and kept miniature deities in their own homes to worship at every opportunity that presented itself. The afterlife was viewed with trepidation as full of dangers and the eventual annihilation of all those who conducted themselves insolently towards the gods. The process of mummification, the Opening of the Mouth ritual and the elaborate burials were all part of the earthly preparation process. The vast provisions of food and funeral equipment in tombs were also preparations for an enjoyable afterlife as desired by the deceased. Punishment by being annihilated could generally be avoided by those who prepared properly for death.

## CHAPTER 8: CONCLUSION

In this study we used the discipline of cultural anthropology to give us insight in the construction of the ancient Egyptian culture. The culture of ancient Egypt is a “dead culture”. We are unable to be “participant observers” nor do we have living informants to give us first-hand knowledge about ancient Egypt. The anthropological literature we study today applies to living communities in the first instance. However, most of the principles are just as relevant to ancient Egypt. Archeology has given us the material remains and literary artefacts which enable us to construct the culture of ancient Egypt.

There have been numerous definitions of culture. More recent definitions tend to distinguish more clearly between behaviour, on the one hand, and the abstract values and perceptions that lie behind that behaviour, on the other hand. Culture is thus more than just material culture as it includes all aspects (material and symbolic) which shape a particular group's or people's perception of the world. Various factors contribute to this peculiar representation of the world. These factors may be geographical, social, political, religious, etc. These representations of the world by people vary from cultural group to cultural group. What may seem logical to one cultural group in terms of their world view may appear ridiculous to another.

We hold the view that culture operates like a system with various interrelated cultural domains. These include social organisation, the economy, agriculture, recreation, entertainment, travel and religion. As an example, religious forms an integral part of a cultural system. It does not have a life of its own. Given the fact that a particular cultural group's conception of the divine is sometimes closely connected with the distinctive nature of its social organisation, it is understandable why in ancient Egypt, being a patriarchal society, the image of the deity as a

father occupies such a dominant role. The cultural anthropological theory as a model helps us find and describe the interrelatedness of cultural phenomena of ancient Egypt. Insights gained from other disciplines such as environmental sciences, economic sciences or religious sciences may suggest valuable concepts for the construction of narratives such as that of ancient Egypt. To put this in another way, we may say that our study of ancient cultures, like that of Egypt, is informed by our present-day scholarly, social, political, economic and other discourses.

We know a lot about the daily life of the ancient Egyptians today because of three sources: representations of mundane activities on the walls of Egyptian tombs, artefacts discovered in ancient town sites and burials, and the words of the Egyptians themselves, who left us hundreds of documents describing their relationships with their family and neighbours, their legal transactions, and their attitudes towards ideal behaviour.

The evidence is, however, imperfect. First the peasants did not have the means to afford an expensive burial and daily life scenes come from the tombs of the nobility. Second, these tombs probably present an idealized version of how most Egyptians lived. We, however, hold the view that even the poor must have yearned to emulate their wealthier countrymen. There is every reason to believe that the life of the common man and woman in ancient Egypt was more difficult than these reliefs and paintings suggest. One rare case which contrasts sharply with the image of the affluent families depicted in Egyptian art, is a scene from the causeway of pharaoh Weni (c. 2400 BCE). On the upper left a child is begging a mother for food, a scene reminiscent of contemporary photographs in newspapers of hungry children. On the lower left one person is even picking lice from the hair and putting it in her mouth (*Fig. 51* = Keel 1978:Fig. 88).

Not all town sites have been excavated in Egypt. Tombs are still being discovered (as recently as 2002). Our most detailed knowledge of ancient daily life comes from the French excavations at Deir el-Medina, a village inhabited by workmen who worked in the Valley of

Kings and the Valley of Queens across the Nile from the great city of Thebes.

The written record consists of the "wisdom literature" as well as correspondence and legal documents. Wisdom literature relates how the Egyptians thought life should be lived. Temperance, diligence in all efforts, and respect for authority were among their most honoured virtues. Correspondence and legal documents are valuable but very specific and do not reveal all we might wish to know. Yet if the evidence is examined carefully a reasonably accurate picture of the daily life of ancient Egyptians emerges.

From the evidence gleaned from the sources above it has been possible to trace the social organisation of ancient Egypt. The pharaoh was the cone that topped the structure of the Egyptian social pyramid. According to tradition the king was descended from Re, the sun-god. Below the king were noblemen and administrators.

An extensive civil service was necessary to administer the growing population on behalf of the king and in ancient Egypt we are able to see one of the most devoted bureaucracies and the most efficiently run states the world has ever seen. Then came the priests who performed the exact imitation of the religious rites performed by the pharaoh, the supreme priest of all, in his palace. The priests performed these rites in the distant temples and represented the king.

While the soldiers protected the state, the scribes recorded events, transactions and provided literature on which we depend today for our knowledge of the ancient Egyptians. Artists and craftsmen provide us with the funerary goods and engravings which give us a glimpse of the life of ancient Egyptians. These were ordinary people who, because of their work or education rose to prominence. The peasant carried out the will of the gods. If the great god Osiris was to arise each year from his grave in the earth in the form of life-giving wheat or barley, it depended as much on the peasant's labour as upon the incantations of the priests. The peasant knew his place and knew what was expected of him by his king and the gods.

Ancient Egyptians loved their children and a mother seems normally to have breastfed her child for the first three years of its life. Boys were apprenticed to their fathers to learn a craft and girls learnt housekeeping from their mothers. The wealthier families sent their children to school to become scribes or to learn professions. Children played games and had toys to play with. They helped in the fields especially at harvest and accompanied their mothers to the market. The father taught his son to be kind, prudent, modest and respectful. A good son had to look after his younger brothers and sisters, support his parents in their old age, and bury them with the proper rites when they die.

Agriculture was central in ancient Egyptian life and economy. Even well-placed Egyptians expected their afterlife to be preoccupied with ploughing and reaping. The processes of agriculture together with irrigation and other rural activities are specifically mentioned at the time of judgement when the dead Egyptian presented himself before Osiris and his panel of forty-two assessors. In his tomb he is shown in the context of life, surrounded by his colleagues, family, servants and all the activities which made his earthly life full and notable. As for the economy, the family depended on the “pay” of the peasant, artisan or labourer. It was in the form of grain, oil, cloth, sandals and such like and what was not consumed could be used for barter, for purchasing essential items for everyday living. New discoveries will certainly enlarge our knowledge about provisions for the remaining needs of daily life, but we shall, perhaps never know how the housewife went shopping (although *Figs. 33, 35* give us an idea).

During their spare time Egyptian families entertained friends, engaged in various pastimes and travelled. Various tomb scenes show Egyptians at banquets where they were entertained with food and music. They did not travel far but used boats to travel to nearby villages and cemeteries.

Peasant families in rural areas were unable to attend the lavish festivals in the cities. Their personal beliefs were centred on their homes and families and on the success of the harvest.

Statues of local patron deities or popular household gods such as Hathor, Isis and Bes may well have been commonplace in peasant households. The ancient Egyptian peasant had his own beliefs, his own private god or gods to whom he could turn for aid or comfort. The private individual was happy to construct with his own hands a small shrine near his house for his personal god.

## IMAGES

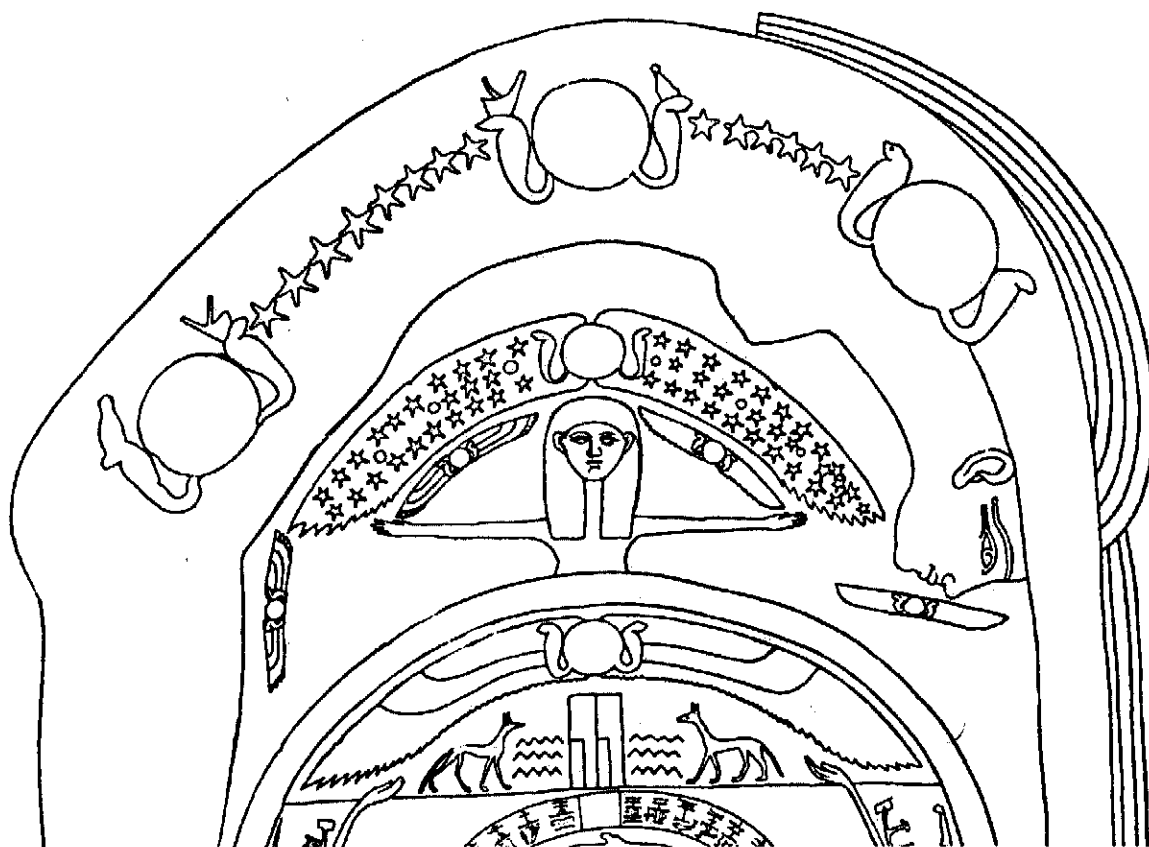
The visual material are sources in their own right, informing us on the daily life of the family in ancient Egypt and should not be seen as mere illustrations to the text.

All images without references are from the digital collection of the Department of Ancient Studies, University of Stellenbosch.

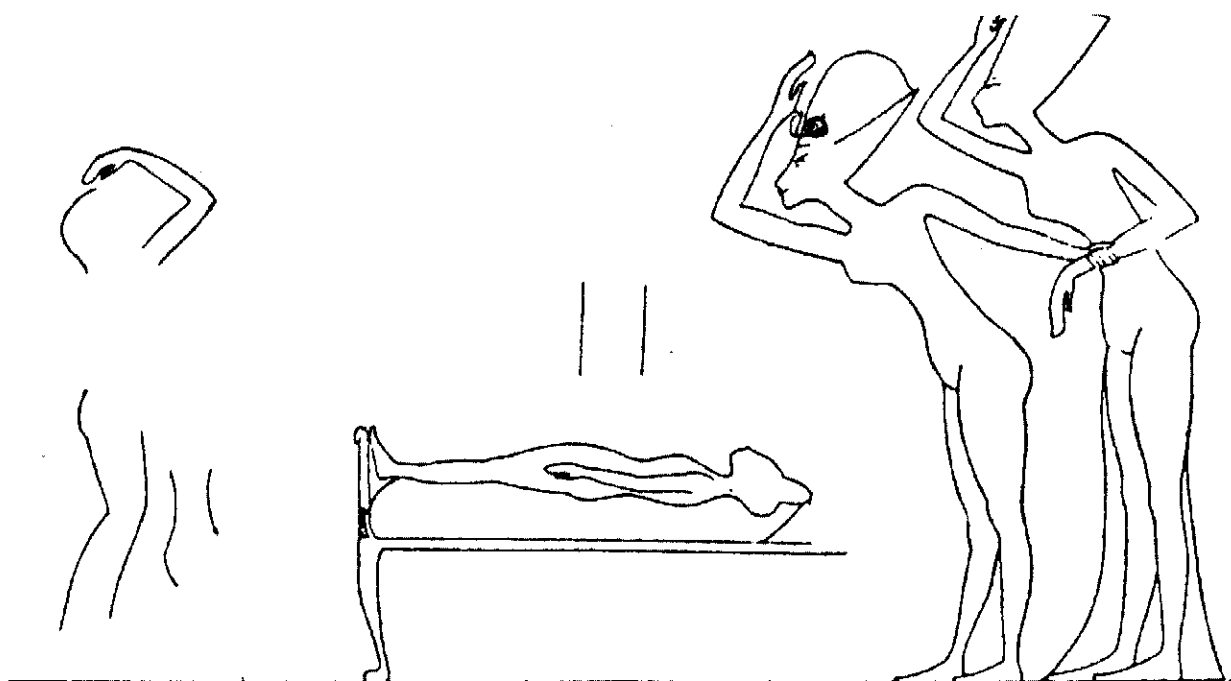
1. Sky goddess Nut: Cornelius 1994: Fig. 2.
2. Akhenaten and family mourning a deceased child 18<sup>th</sup> dynasty: Feucht 1995: Fig. 1.
3. Pharaoh Menkaure and wife 4<sup>th</sup> dynasty.
4. Ptah-kheniu and wife.
5. Prince Rahetep and wife Neferet, 4th dynasty: Robins 1997:Fig. 51.
6. Katep and wife Hetepheres, 5-6th dynasties: Robins 1997:Fig. 69.
7. Seated pair from Ramesside period.
8. Memi-sabu holding wife 6th dynasty.
9. Seated husband and wife.
10. Man holding two wives.
11. Demedji and wife Hennutsen.
12. Irukaptah, wife and son 5th dynasty: Feucht 1995:Fig. 37.
13. Seneb and family 4th dynasty.
14. Mersi with wife and son 18th dynasty: Feucht 1995:Fig. 41.
15. Woman with son 5th dynasty: Feucht 1995:Fig. Fig. 39.
16. Woman with child 13th dynasty: Feucht 1995:Fig. 40.
17. Akhenaten and family 18th dynasty.
18. Family hunting in the marshes 18th dynasty: Robins 1997:Fig. 11.
19. Family from Deir el-Medina 19th dynasty.
20. Syrian mercenary with Egyptian family.
21. Meni and family 4th dynasty: Feucht 1995:Fig. 46.
22. Nefer with daughter holding lapwing and pet dog Saqqara 5th dynasty: Janssen and Janssen 1990:Fig. 18.
23. Circumcision scene from mastaba at Saqqara 6th dynasty: Janssen and Janssen 1990:Fig. 35.
24. Scribe with student from tomb of Djoserkareseneb 18<sup>th</sup> dynasty: Janssen and Janssen 1990:Fig. 31.
25. Children at work: Stoof 1978:Fig. 1.
26. Children at work: Stoof 1978:Fig. 2.
27. Children at work: Stoof 1978:Fig. 3.
28. Children helping to carry flowers: Feucht 1995:Fig. 17.
29. Children on offering scene.
30. Boy helping in kitchen Meir 12<sup>th</sup> dynasty: Janssen and Janssen 1990:Fig. 21.
31. Children helping to fill sacks of grain.
32. Boy helping at grape harvest tomb of Ptahhotep Saqqara 5<sup>th</sup> dynasty: Feucht 1995:Fig. 14.
33. Mother and child at shop buying figs 5<sup>th</sup> dynasty: Feucht 1995:Fig. 15.



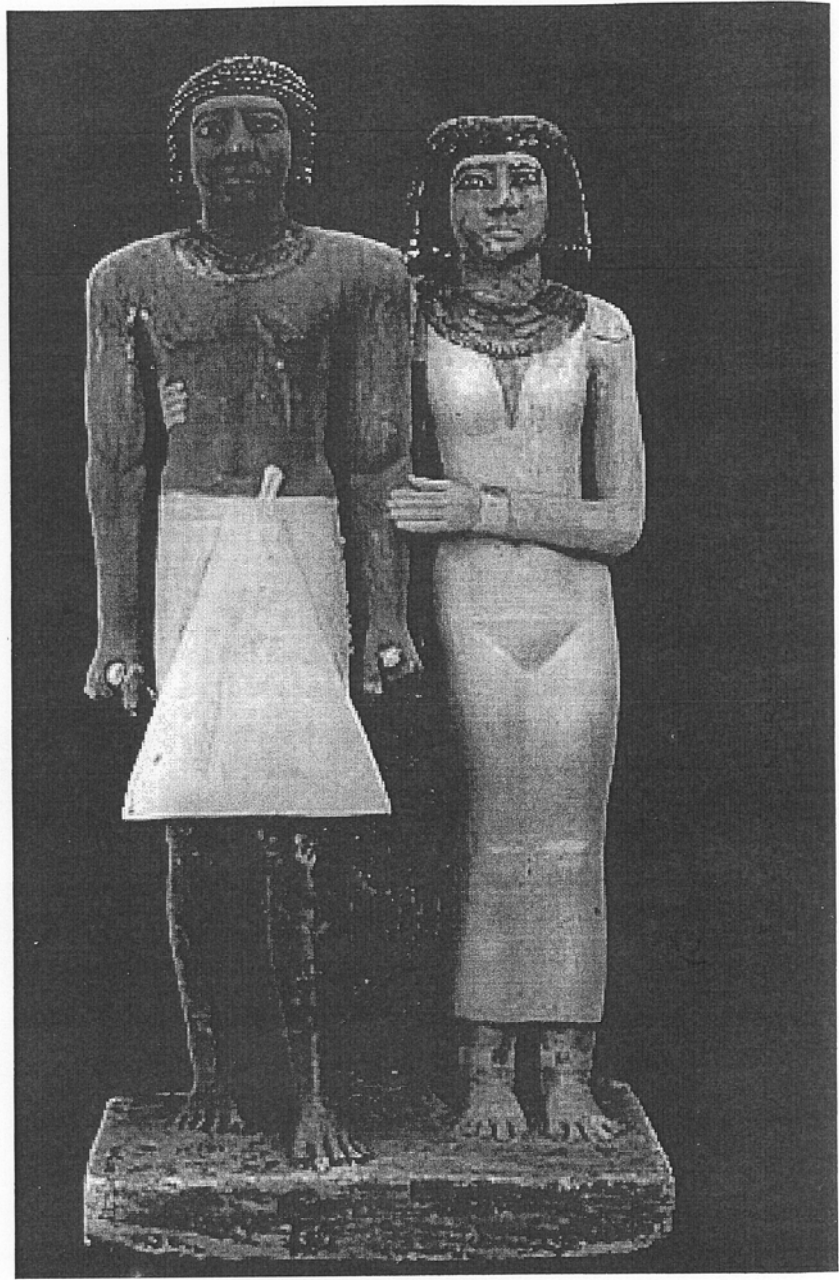
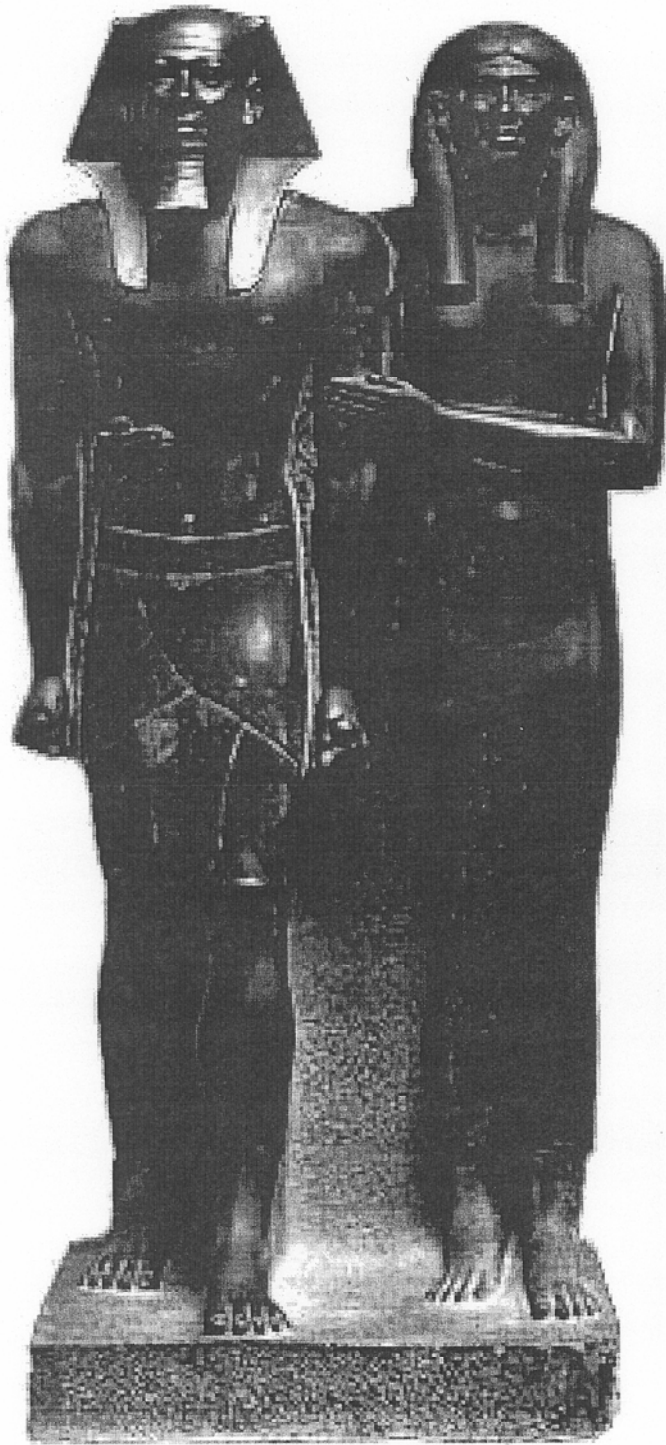
34. Woman with children tomb of Neferhotep 18<sup>th</sup> dynasty: Janssen and Janssen 1990:Fig. 22.
35. Children at the fish market: Feucht 1995:Fig. 16.
36. Girls dancing at inauguration ceremony.
37. Children dancing with musicians in procession: Feucht 1995:Fig. 29.
38. Limestone statue of boy and girl playing Giza 6<sup>th</sup> dynasty: Janssen and Janssen 1990:Fig. 25.
39. "Star game": Janssen and Janssen 1990:Fig. 23.
40. "Jumping game": Janssen and Janssen 1990:Fig. 24.
41. "Hut game" 5-6<sup>th</sup> dynasties: Janssen and Janssen 1990:Fig. 27.
42. Wooden doll 12<sup>th</sup> dynasty: Janssen and Janssen 1990:Fig. 20.
43. Female figurine.
44. Children's toys - reed and fibre balls and faience tops (Roman) and feline (New Kingdom): Janssen and Janssen 1990:Fig. 19.
45. Triad of Abydos – Horus, Osiris and Isis 22<sup>nd</sup> dynasty.
46. *a-d*: Isis with Horus bronze Ptolemaic, mother with child (various).
47. Paschedu with daughter worship Ra-Harakhty, Ramesside: Feucht 1995:Fig. 32.
48. Nachtamen and family worship Ra, Ramesside: Feucht 1995:Fig. 31.
49. Mourning children with priest and mummies 19<sup>th</sup> dynasty: Feucht 1995:Fig. 26.
50. Wailing women with smaller girls New Kingdom.
51. Famine victims causeway of Unas 6<sup>th</sup> dynasty: Keel 1977: Fig. 88.



**Fig. 1**



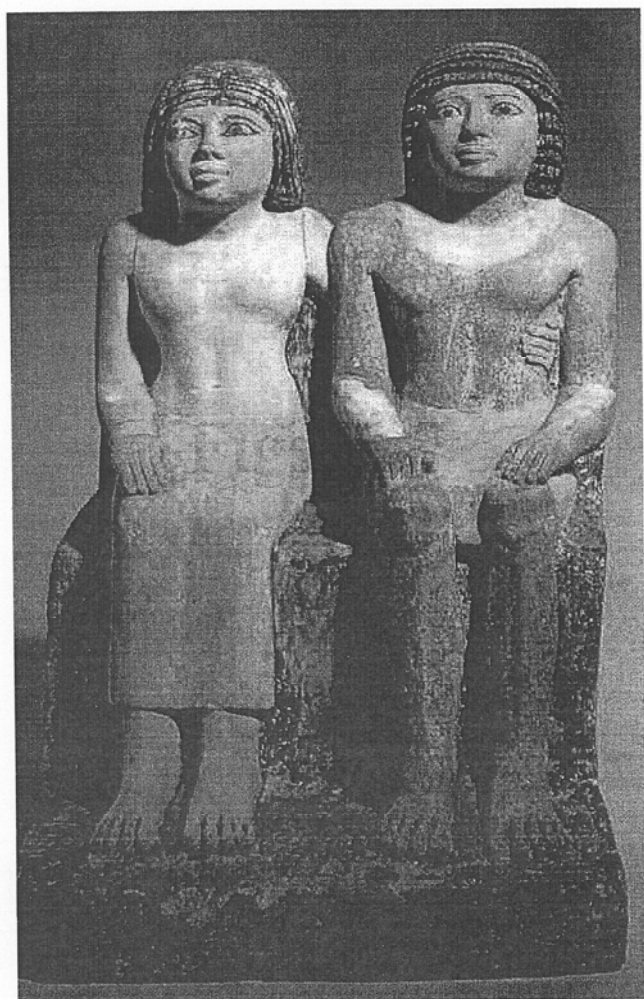
**Fig. 2**



**Figs. 3-4**



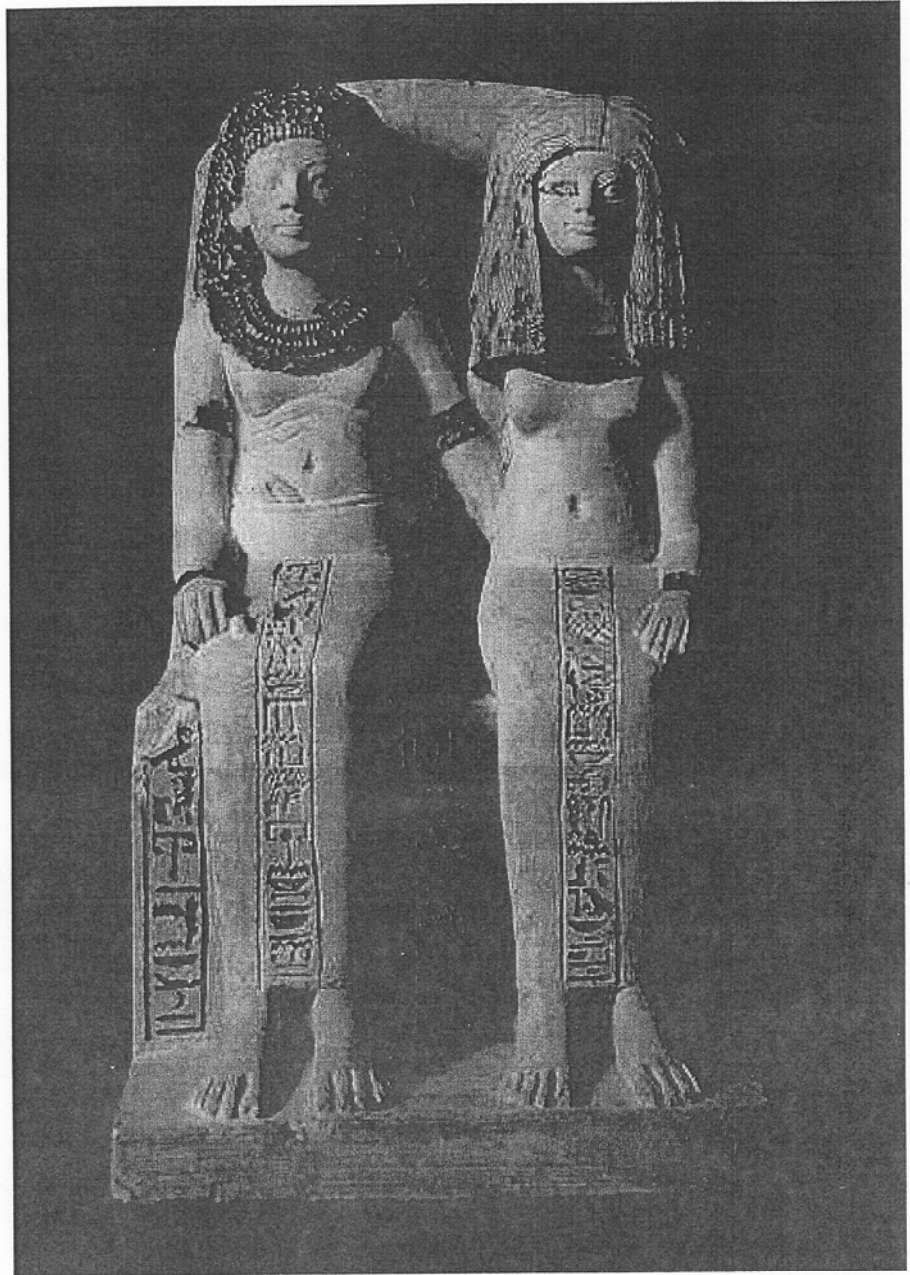
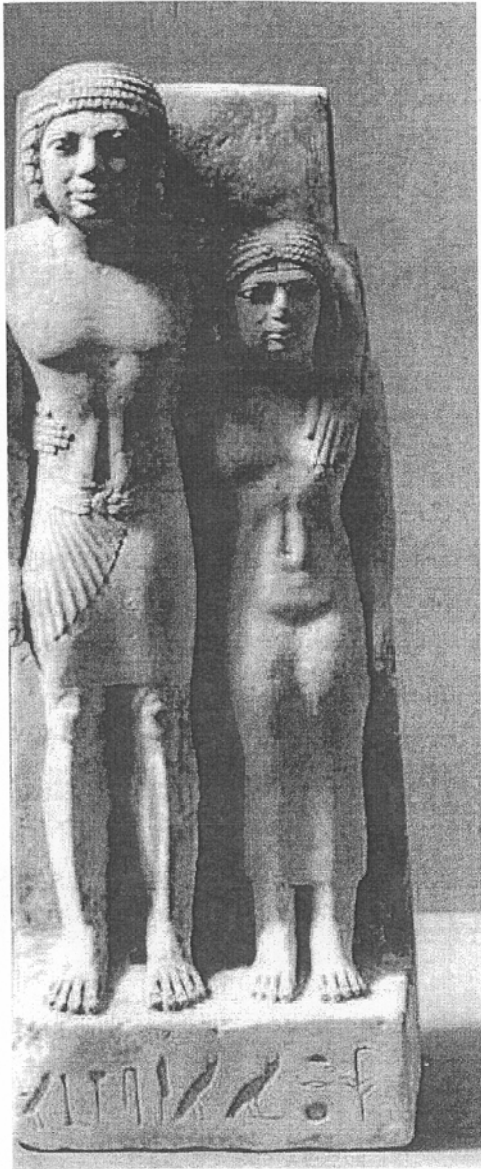
**Fig. 5**



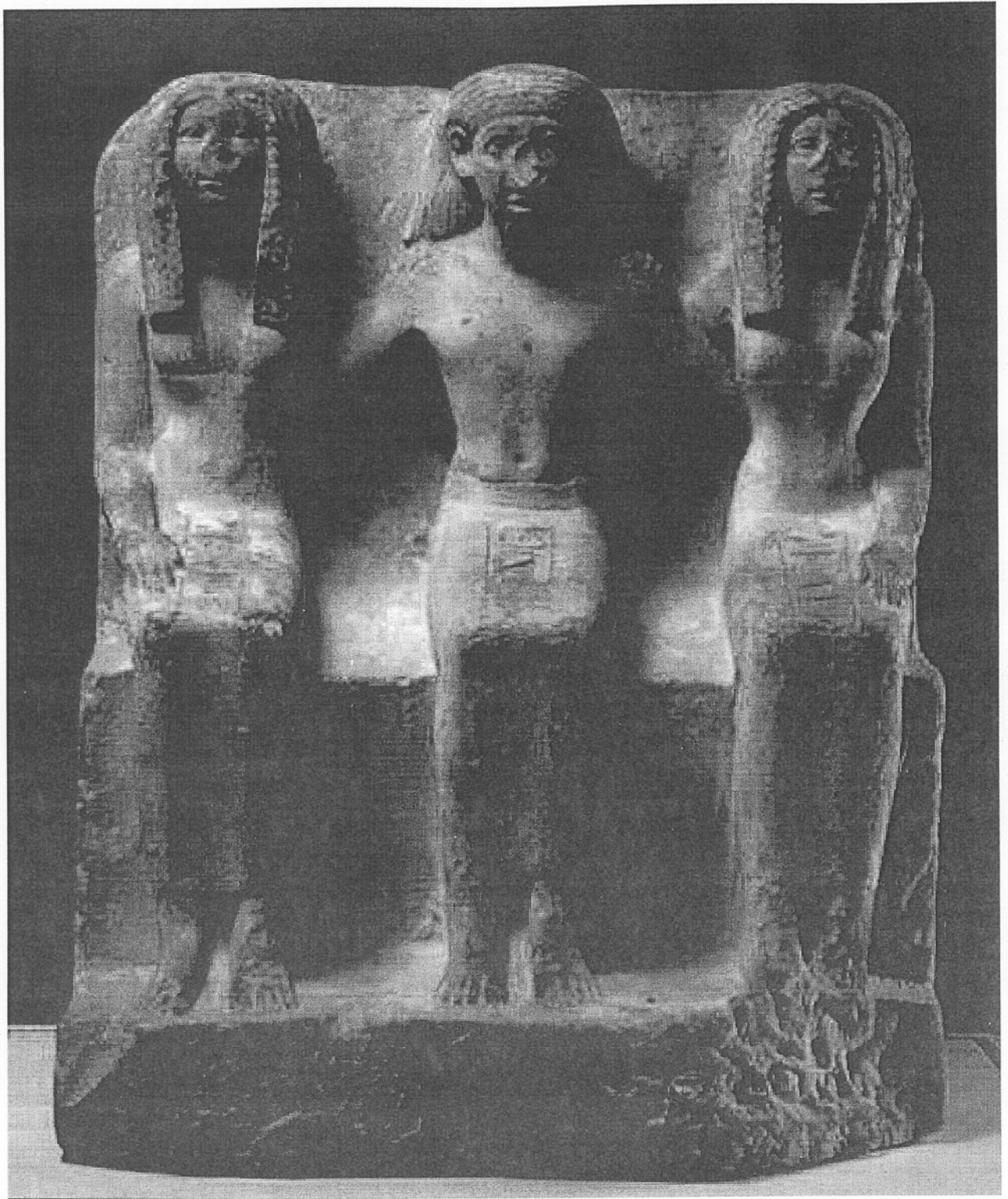
**Figs. 6-7**



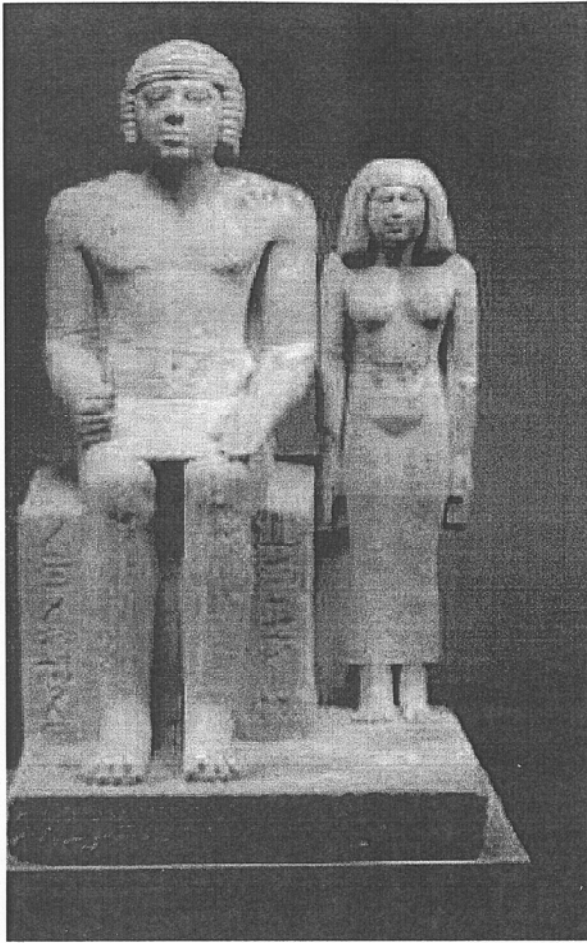




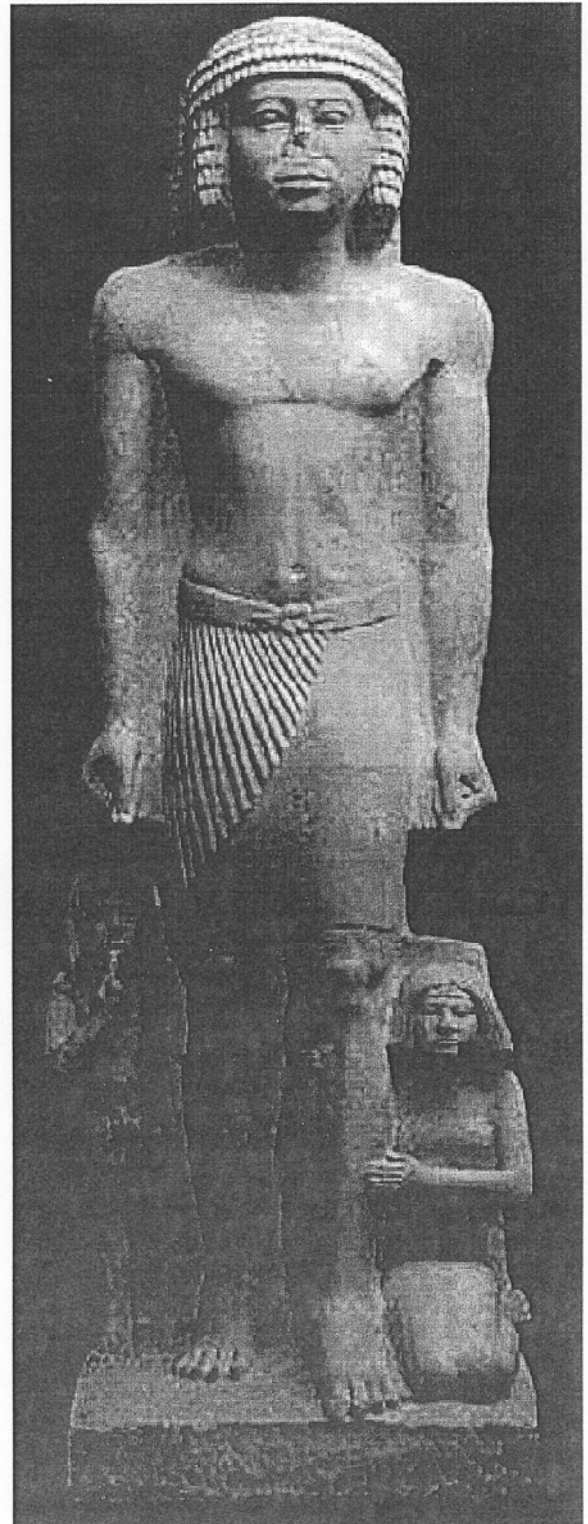
**Figs. 8-9**



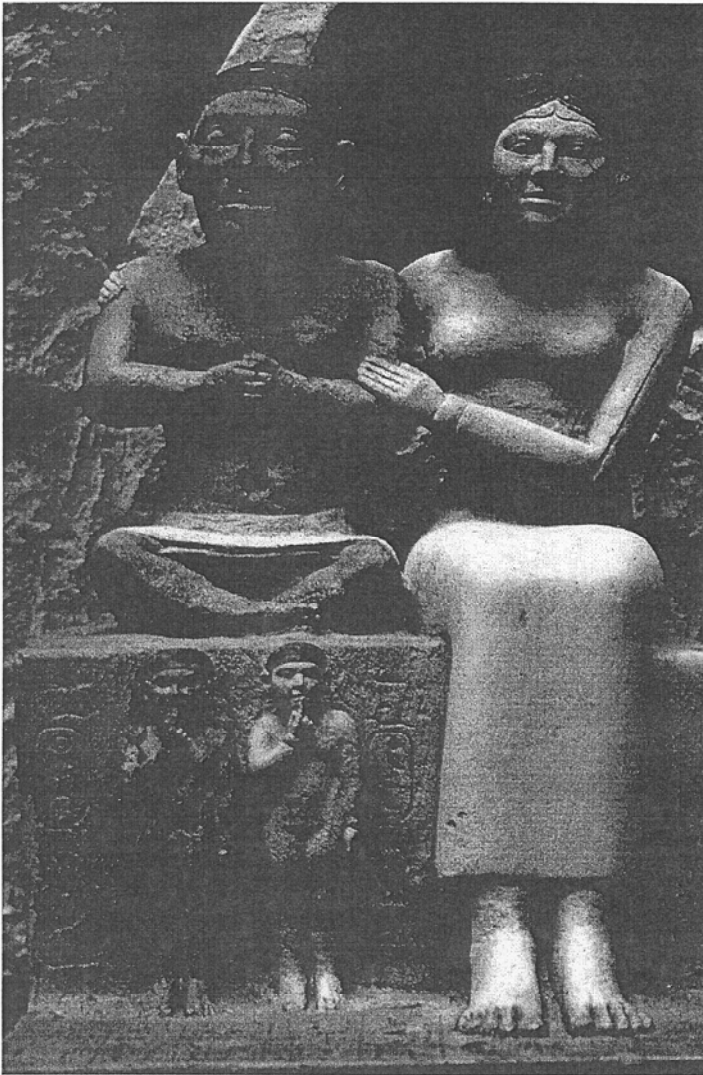
**Fig. 10**



**Figs. 11-12**







**Figs. 13-14**



**Figs. 15-16**