

Chapter 12

Daily Life in Ancient Egypt

Objective

To learn about how the Nile River Valley provided for the daily needs of the people.

Mystery

How did the land of Egypt provide for the daily needs of the people?

Discussion and Research Projects

1. What happened when the Nile River rose too high or not high enough?
2. What was deposited on the flood plain when the waters of the Nile receded?
3. What did the Egyptians eat? What was their favourite drink?
4. Why did the pharaohs have scenes of themselves on hunting and fishing expeditions painted on the walls of their tombs?
5. Where did people find the materials needed to build houses and make containers?
6. How were bricks manufactured for building houses?
7. How did the homes of the wealthy differ from those of the craftworkers and peasants?
8. What was the main mode of transportation in ancient Egypt?
9. What were the skiffs (boats) used for fishing and hunting in the marshes made of? Why was this material particularly buoyant?
10. How did the climatic conditions facilitate travel up and down the Nile?
11. How were boats used for ceremonial purposes?



12. How did people travel on land?
13. What crop was grown to make clothing?
14. Describe the clothing worn by men and women of the working class. What else did they wear besides clothing?

Creative Projects

1. Write a story about a day in the life of a person your age in ancient Egypt.
2. Make jewellery similar to that worn by the ancient Egyptians.
3. Both men and women wore loincloths, tunics and wraparound garments made from a single piece of woven flax. Find out how much material was needed and how it was placed on the body. Using a piece of cotton cloth of similar size, demonstrate how men and women wore their garments.
4. Find photographs of the model boats that were found in Tutankhamun's tomb. Try making a model based on one of them.
5. Use **Activity Sheets 29 and 30** to learn about daily activities.

FACT SHEET: Daily Life in Ancient Egypt

Food

Each summer, starting in July, the Nile River rose, flooding the low-lying plains on either side. Swollen by the monsoon rains of Ethiopia, it deposited a layer of black soil over the land, rich in nutrients needed for growing crops. The river rose about 8 metres (27 feet) on average. If it rose 2.5 metres (8 feet) higher or lower, disaster struck. When it rose too high, villages were flooded, causing extensive damage and loss of life. When it did not rise high enough, the fields did not receive sufficient nutrients and moisture to support the crops, which resulted in famine.

Under normal conditions, the flood plains supported a rich variety of plants and animals that provided food for the ancient Egyptians. The vast majority of the people were involved in farming.

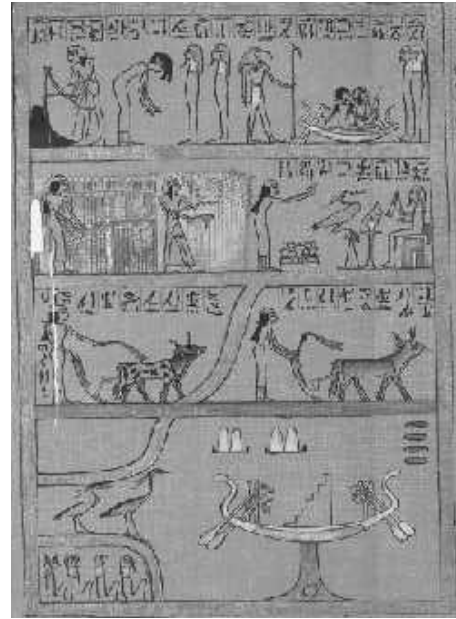
When the flood waters began to recede in mid-September, farmers blocked canals to retain the water for irrigation. The principal food crops, barley and emmer, were used to make beer and bread, the main staples of the Egyptian diet.

Grains were harvested and stored in granaries until ready to be processed. The quantities harvested each season far exceeded the needs of the country, so much was exported to neighbouring countries, providing a rich source of income for the Egyptian treasury.

A large variety of vegetables were grown, including onions, garlic, leeks, beans, lentils, peas, radishes, cabbage, cucumbers and lettuce. There were also fruits such as dates, figs, pomegranates, melons and grapes, and honey was produced for sweetening desserts. The Egyptian diet was supplemented by fish, fowl and meat, although peasants probably enjoyed meat only on special occasions.



Woman plowing the fields



Farmers work the wheat fields of the afterlife
Photo: Harry Foster (CMC S98 3569)



Workmen crush grapes for making wine

Painting: Winnifred Needler
Photo: Harry Foster (CMC S97 10792)



Tutankhamun and his wife hunting birds in a papyrus thicket
Photo: Harry Foster (CMC S98 3526)

Domesticated animals raised for food included pigs, sheep and goats. Grapes were processed into wine for the noble class, but beer was the favourite drink of the common people. Food was served in pottery bowls, but no utensils were used for eating.

Although the land was worked by the peasants, it was owned by the king, his officials and the temples. Farmers had to meet grain quotas, which were handed over to the owners as a form of taxation. They were allowed to keep a portion of the crops for their own benefit. If they did not produce the quantity expected, however, they were severely punished.

Pharaohs and nobles participated in hunting, fishing and fowling expeditions, a means of recreation that had ritualistic and religious significance. Hunting scenes often depicted on temple walls and tombs reinforce the prowess of kings and nobles. Rabbits, deer, gazelles, bulls, oryx, antelopes, hippopotamuses, elephants and lions were among the wild animals hunted for their meat and skins.

Fishing allowed the working class to add variety to its diet. The poor substituted fish for meat, which they could not afford. The Nile, the marshes of the delta and the Mediterranean Sea offered them a rich variety of species. Birds, including geese and ducks, were also hunted in the marshes and papyrus thickets along the Nile.

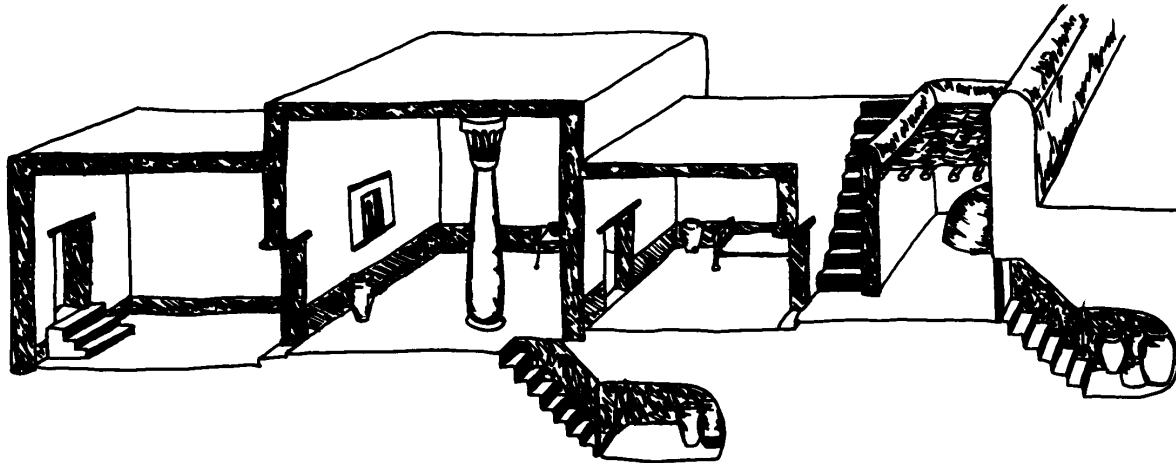
Shelter and Containers

The banks of the Nile provided the mud and clay used to make bricks and ceramic ware. Food was cooked in clay pots, which also served as containers for grains, water, wine, beer, flour and oils. Baskets were the other type of container found in the home. They were made from reeds and the leaves of date palms that grew along the Nile.

Most houses were made of brick. Brick makers collected mud, added straw and water to it as needed, and stomped it with their feet until it reached the right consistency. The mixture was then placed in a mould. Once shaped, the bricks were removed from the mould and left on the ground to dry in the sun.



Fishing on the Nile River
Photo: Steven Darby (CMC S97 10823)



Cross-section of a typical house in the workers' village at Deir el-Medina. The workers who built the tombs in the Valley of the Kings lived in this village.

Drawing: Catherine Fitzpatrick

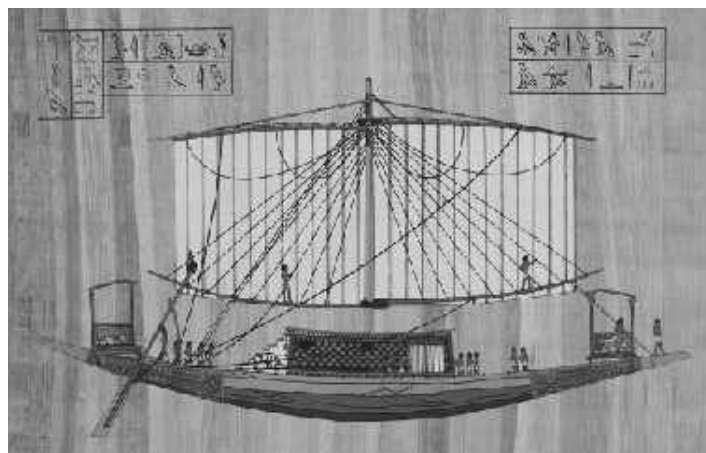
Egyptian peasants would have lived in simple mud-brick homes containing only a few pieces of furniture: beds, stools, boxes and low tables.

Craftworkers lived in one- or two-storey flat-roofed dwellings made of mud bricks. The walls and roof would have been covered with plaster and painted. Inside, there was a reception room, a living room, bedrooms and a cellar in which food and beverages were stored. Food was prepared in an outdoor kitchen equipped with a mud-brick oven. Stairs on the exterior of the house led to a roof-top terrace.

The homes of the wealthy were larger and more luxurious. Spacious reception and living rooms opened onto a central garden courtyard with a fish pond and flowering plants. Each bedroom had a private bathroom, and the walls, columns and ceilings were painted with beautiful designs inspired by nature. Elaborate and highly decorated furniture included beds, chairs, boxes and tables. Painted clay pots and vessels, as well as alabaster bowls and jars, were also found in the homes of the nobles.

Transportation

The Nile River was the highway that joined the country together. Up until the nineteenth century, travel by land was virtually unknown. Ships and boats were the main means of transporting people and goods around the country. Egyptian watercraft had a high stern and bow, and by the New Kingdom, they were equipped with cabins at both ends. The prevailing winds blew south, propelling boats travelling in that direction, while boats heading north relied on the current and oars.



Tutankhamun's royal ship

Photo: Harry Foster (CMC S98 3533)



A papyrus skiff in front of a wooden bark. Re-enactment scene from the film *Mysteries of Egypt*.
 Photo: Max Crier (CMC ECD98-029 #53)

The simplest type of boat used in ancient Egypt was the skiff, made from papyrus reeds that were tied together. Since the reeds are filled with air pockets, they are particularly buoyant. Skiffs were used for fishing and hunting game in the marshes, or for travelling short distances.

Large wooden ships were equipped with square sails and oars. Their planks, held together with rope, expanded in the water, making the vessel watertight. Acacia wood was used in Lower Nubia to build the ships that transported massive blocks of stone from the Aswan district to the building sites of the pyramids, temples and cities along the Nile. Ships could travel with ease up and down the Nile from the delta region to the First Cataract at Aswan.

Boats also served a ceremonial purpose. They were used to move images of gods from temple to temple, and to transport the mummified bodies of royals and nobles across the Nile to their tombs on the west bank. Even the sun god travelled by boat (the solar bark) on his daily journey across the sky. Today, the Egyptians still cross the Nile by boat. The vessel they use is the fellucca, a small boat with a large triangular sail.



Replica of a model barge found in Tutankhamun's tomb
 Photo: Harry Foster (CMC S98 3497)

The roads in ancient Egypt were little more than paths. To get around on land, people walked, rode donkeys or travelled by wagon. They carried goods on their head, but the donkeys and wagons hauled heavier loads. Camels were unknown in Egypt until the end of the pharaonic period.



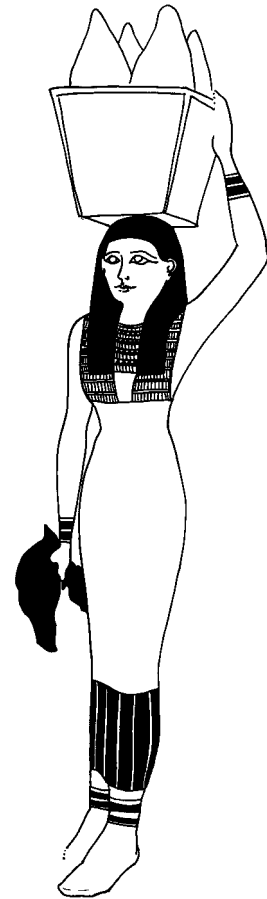
Servant wearing a short kilt
CMC S97 10432

The wheel was probably introduced into Egypt by the Hyksos, an Asiatic people who invaded the country and ruled it in the fifteenth and sixteenth dynasties. The Hyksos most likely had horse-drawn chariots, which were used in warfare. New Kingdom pharaohs and nobles adopted this mode of transportation for hunting expeditions, but it was not used for travel by the common people.

Clothing and Personal Adornment

Flax grown by farmers was woven into fine linen for clothing. Working-class men wore loincloths or short kilts, as well as long shirt-like garments tied with a sash at the waist. Kilts were made from a rectangular piece of linen that was folded around the body and tied at the waist. Wealthy men also adorned themselves with jewellery — a string of beads, armlets and bracelets. Both men and women wore sandals made of papyrus.

Women wore full-length wraparound gowns and close-fitting sheaths. In the Old Kingdom, elite women were portrayed wearing sheaths with broad shoulder straps. In the New Kingdom, they wore sheaths decorated with gold thread and colourful beadwork, and a type of sari made of light see-through linen. They enhanced their appearance with make-up, earrings, bracelets and necklaces.



Servant girl wearing a close-fitting sheath
Drawing: John Ide