Chapter 1

Getting Grounded: The Geography and History of Ancient Egypt

In This Chapter

- Exploring the landscape of Egypt
- Unifying the two lands
- Examining the hierarchy of Egyptian society

The ancient Egyptians have gripped the imagination for centuries. Ever since Egyptologists deciphered hieroglyphs in the early 19th century, this wonderful civilisation has been opened to historians, archaeologists, and curious laypeople.

Information abounds about the ancient Egyptians, including fascinating facts on virtually every aspect of their lives – everything from the role of women, sexuality, and cosmetics, to fishing, hunting, and warfare.

The lives of the ancient Egyptians can easily be categorised and pigeonholed. Like any good historian, you need to view the civilisation as a whole, and the best starting point is the origin of these amazing people.

So who were the ancient Egyptians? Where did they come from? This chapter answers these questions and begins to paint a picture of the intricately organised culture that developed, flourished, and finally fell along the banks of the Nile river.

Splashing in the Source of Life: The Nile

The ancient Egyptian civilisation would never have developed if it weren't for the Nile. The Nile was – and still is – the only source of water in this region of north Africa. Without it, no life could be supported.

Ancient Egypt is often called the *Nile valley*. This collective term refers to the fertile land situated along the banks of the river, covering an area of 34,000 square kilometres. This overall area has not altered much during the last 5,000 years, although the course of the river Nile itself has changed, and with artificial irrigation the fertile land has been increased a little. See the Cheat Sheet for a map of Egypt.

In de-Nile: Size and scope

The Nile is the longest river in the world, running 6,741 kilometres from eastern Africa to the Mediterranean. Six *cataracts*, or rapids, caused by rock outcrops on the riverbed, separate the southern section of the Nile between Aswan and Khartoum. The first cataract at Aswan created a natural boundary for Egypt until the New Kingdom (1550 BC), when the ancient Egyptians began travelling further and further south in the hunt for gold and areas to build up their empire. (See Chapters 3 and 4 for more information about this era of ancient Egyptian history.)

The Nile flows from south to north – from the interior of Africa to the Mediterranean Sea. Southern Egypt is called *Upper Egypt* because it is closest to the source of the Nile, and northern Egypt is called *Lower Egypt*.

The northern part of the Nile fans out into a series of canals, all leading to the Mediterranean. This area of northern Egypt is known as the Delta and is primarily marshland. The zone is particularly fertile – papyrus (on which many surviving ancient Egyptian records were written) grew in abundance here.

The failing flood

During the reign of Djoser in the third dynasty (refer to the Cheat Sheet for a timeline), Egypt is said to have experienced seven years of famine because of particularly low annual floods. The king was held responsible for the situation because he was an intermediary between the people and the gods, and the famine was seen as punishment from the gods for the king not doing his job. On the Island of Sehel in the south of Egypt, Ptolemy V (204–181 BC) commissioned a stela recording this famine and Djoser's actions:

I was in mourning on my throne. Those of the palace were in grief . . . because Hapy [the flood] had failed to come in time. In a period of seven years, grain was scant, kernels were dried up . . . Every man robbed his twin . . . Children cried . . . The hearts of the old were needy . . . Temples were shut, Shrines covered with dust, Everyone was in distress . . . I consulted one of the staff, the Chief lector-priest of Imhotep . . . He departed, he returned to me quickly.

Imhotep, the builder of the step pyramid (see Chapter 14), traced the source of the Nile to the island of Elephantine and the caves of Khnum. He assured Djoser that renewed worship of Khnum would start the floods again. Khnum then appeared to Djoser in a dream:

> *When I was asleep . . . I found the god standing. I caused him pleasure by worshipping and adoring him. He made himself known to me and said: 'I am Khnum, your creator, my arms are around you, to steady your body, to safeguard your limbs . . . For I am the master who makes, I am he who makes himself exalted in Nun [primeval waters], who first came forth, Hapy who hurries at will; fashioner of everybody, guide of each man to their hour. The two caves are in a trench [?] below me. It is up to me to let loose the well. I know the Nile, urge him to the field, I urge him, life appears in every nose . . . I will make the Nile swell for you, without there being a year of lack and exhaustion in the whole land, so the plants will flourish, bending under their fruit . . . The land of Egypt is beginning to stir again, the shores are shining wonderfully, and wealth and well-being [?] dwell with them, as it had been before.*

Djoser awoke and was pleased at the message. He passed a decree of an increase of taxes to be paid to the temple of Khnum:

> *All the peasants working their fields with their labourers and bringing water to their new and high-lying lands, their harvest shall be stored in your granary in excess of the part that used to be your due. All fishermen and trappers and hunters on the water and lion catchers in the desert, I impose on them a duty of one tenth of their catch. Every calf born by the cows on your land shall be given to the stables as a burnt offering and a remaining daily offering. Moreover one tenth of the gold and ivory and the wood and minerals and every tree stem and all things which the Nubians . . . bring to Egypt shall be handed over together with every man who comes with them. No vizier shall give orders in these places and levy a tax on them, diminishing what is being delivered to your temple.*

Once these gifts had been given to the temple of Khnum, the floods would once again reach the appropriate level, restore Egypt to the agricultural haven it once was, and re-inspire the people's faith in king Djoser.

However, because this stela was written more than 2,000 years after the date of the event, historians have difficulty assessing its accuracy as a historical document. Some scholars believe the stela is a copy of an Old Kingdom example erected by Djoser; others believe it was created in the Ptolemaic period as a means of justifying new goodies for the temple of Khnum. The truth may never be known.

The inundation: Surviving and thriving

Every year for the months between July and October the Nile flooded, covering the land on both banks with as much as 2 feet of water. When the water receded, very fertile black silt covered the land. Because of this, the Egyptians called their country Kemet, which means 'the black land'. Through careful crop management and intricate irrigation canals, the Nile valley became a major agricultural area.

Although the inundation of the Nile was essential for the agricultural success of the ancient Egyptian civilisation, a risk always existed of the Nile flooding too much or not enough. Either situation resulted in crop failure, famine, and death.

Since 1830 AD, a series of dams and sluices at the southern end of the Nile have checked the floods. In 1960 AD, the Egyptians built the High Dam at Aswan, which has stopped the Nile flooding altogether. Although these new technologies create a more stable environment for the modern Egyptians to farm, the steady nature of the present-day Nile makes imagining the up-and-down aspects of ancient Egyptian life more difficult.

Meeting the Ancient Egyptians

The ancient people who lived in the Nile valley were a melting pot of many ethnic groups, with many different origins. Prior to 5000 BC, the Nile valley did not have any settled people, because the surrounding area was rich in vegetation and was inhabited by a number of nomadic hunter-gatherer tribes, which followed large animals such as lions, giraffes, and ostriches as a source of food.

However, due to climatic change in approximately 5000 BC, the area surrounding the Nile valley began to dry out and was no longer able to sustain the large animals. This climate shift meant that the nomadic tribes all converged on the Nile valley because the river was slowly becoming the only source of water in the region.

As a result, the first Egyptian population was a collection of different nomadic tribes, which slowly integrated with each other and created a new society:

- **In the south of Egypt,** the origins of the people were closer to Nubia, resulting in a darker people.
- **In the north of Egypt,** the origins of the people were more in the Near East, creating a paler people.

By 3100 BC and the start of the pharaonic period of Egyptian history, a brand new culture – the Egyptian culture recognised today – had developed from this collection of different people, cultures and languages.

Dating the ancients

One of the most confusing aspects of Egyptian history is applying specific dates to eras, reigns, and even recorded battles and ceremonies. Also, the history of ancient Egypt spans more than 3,000 years, which is a lot to get your head around.

Making matters more difficult, the Egyptians themselves did not have a centralised dating system such as the one used today (for example, BC and AD). Instead, they referred to dates in regnal years of the current king. For example year 5 of Ramses II or year 16 of Akhenaten.

This system probably worked well in ancient times, but it doesn't help modern Egyptologists a great deal – especially when a number of kings are missing from the records or the exact length of some reigns is uncertain. So, for example, dating something from year 4 of Ramses II to year 2 of Merenptah made perfect sense to an Egyptian, but if you don't know how long Ramses II ruled and you don't know whether another king came between Ramses II and Merenptah (the king historians believe followed Ramses II), ascertaining true periods is very difficult.

A passion for all things Egyptian

For centuries – millennia, in fact – people have been fascinated by ancient Egyptian culture, including its language, history, politics, religion, burial practices, architecture, and art. Indeed, even the Greeks and Romans (ancient cultures themselves by any historian's account) were intrigued by the people of the Nile, arranged sight-seeing excursions to the area, and ended up transporting Egyptian treasures back to their homelands.

Modern *Egyptology*, a discipline that blends rigorous study of ancient history and archaeology with touches of sociology, art history, political science, economics, and more, began in earnest in 1823 when Jean-François Champollion was the first to decipher hieroglyphs, which led historians to begin deconstructing the many myths and misunderstandings of the ancient Egyptians. Check out Chapter 19 for ten profiles of noteworthy Egyptologists, including Champollion.

Today, Egyptology is bigger than ever. Many universities now offer degrees in Egyptology or Egyptian archaeology. However, the work available for professional Egyptologists is scarce, with limited opportunitites to teach in universities or excavate in Egypt. Many museums employ volunteers instead of paid staff, therefore hundreds of applicants often seek the few paid positions. Furthermore, excavating in Egypt is particularly difficult because Egyptian researchers are favoured over westerners. Many Egyptologists therefore work in other jobs and write books and articles on Egyptology or conduct field work on a part-time basis. Hard work, but someone's gotta do it.

Manetho to the rescue

Modern Egyptologists weren't the only ones who thought that the Egyptian dating system was confusing. Manetho, an Egyptian historian and priest from the third century BC, devised the *dynastic system* of dating that is still used today.

In the dynastic system, a dynasty change was introduced whenever a change occurred in the ruling family, geography, or any other continuity issue in the succession of kings. Manetho divided the kings of Egypt into 31 dynasties, subdivided into three main kingdoms with turbulent 'intermediate' periods between them.

- **Early dynastic period:** Dynasty 0–2, around 3150–2686 BC
- **Old Kingdom:** Third to sixth dynasties, around 2686–2181 BC
- **First intermediate period:** Seventh to tenth dynasties, around 2181–2040 BC
- **Middle Kingdom:** 11th to 12th dynasties, around 2040–1782 BC
- **Second intermediate period:** 13th to 17th dynasties, around 1782–1570 BC
- **The New Kingdom:** 18th to 20th dynasties, around 1570–1070 BC
- **Third intermediate period:** 21st to 26th dynasties, around 1080–525 BC
- **Late period:** 27th to 30th dynasties, around 525–332 BC

This dating system has been very useful, and Egyptologists have been able to add chronological dates to the dynasties. However, these dates do not match from publication to publication, and this discrepancy can be very confusing for beginners. For this reason, referring to dynasties rather than dates is often easier. The dates I use in this book are based on Peter Clayton's *Chronicle of the Pharaohs* (Thames and Hudson Press), a widely accepted general chronology.

Unifying the Two Lands

Despite some quirks in their dating system, the ancient Egyptians were a very organised civilisation. This is particularly obvious in their division of the country. The most important division politically was the north–south divide. This division, into Upper (southern) and Lower (northern) Egypt produced

what was referred to as the Two Lands – a concept that dominated kingship ideology from the reign of the first king, Narmer (3100 BC), to the final days of Cleopatra VII (30 BC).

The Narmer Palette, a flat stone plaque about 64 centimetres tall, shows King Narmer unifying the country – the earliest recorded battle in Egyptian history. It depicts Narmer dominating Lower Egypt to become the king of the Two Lands.

From this period on, any king needed to rule both Upper and Lower Egypt in order to be recognised as a true king of Egypt. The Egyptians considered this concept such a fundamental part of kingship that they incorporated the title 'king of Upper and Lower Egypt' into two of the five traditional names that the king received at his coronation.

These names describe certain elements of the king's rule. The traditional order of these names was:


- Horus name


- He of the two ladies (under the protection of the vulture goddess of Upper Egypt and the cobra goddess of Lower Egypt)
- Golden Horus name


- He of the sedge and the bee (under the protection of the sedge of Upper Egypt and the bee of Lower Egypt)


- Son of Ra

Representing the Two Lands

In addition to the king's titles, a number of symbols and hieroglyphs in Egyptian records highlight the importance of the unity of the Two Lands. Important imagery in kingship regalia included:


- The white crown of Upper Egypt


- The red crown of Lower Egypt


- The double crown of Upper and Lower Egypt


- The sedge of Upper Egypt


- The bee of Lower Egypt


- Nekhbet the vulture goddess of Upper Egypt


- Wadjet the cobra goddess of Lower Egypt

Additionally, the following images frequently appear in architecture, especially on pillars and as temple decoration (see Chapter 12). Although these images do not represent kingship specifically, they often define the region of rule of a particular king or, if both are shown, the unity.

- Papyrus of Lower Egypt
- Lotus of Upper Egypt
- The lotus and papyrus plants tied around symbolic 'heart and lungs' of Egypt, which indicates a unified Egypt

Uniting east and west

Although the Upper and Lower Egypt division was the most important (at least where kingship was concerned), Egypt was further divided into east and west. The Nile formed the dividing line between the two sides.

- **The east bank of the Nile** was used primarily for the construction of the cult temples (see Chapter 12) and settlements. The ancient Egyptians considered the east bank to be the Land of the Living because the sun rose each morning in the east, giving hope and bringing new life.
- **The west bank of the Nile** was home to cemeteries and funerary temples and was referred to as the Land of the Dead. West was where the sun set in the evening, starting the nocturnal journey into the afterlife until rebirth in the east.

However, exceptions to these divisions existed. Some settlements were built on the west bank, while some cemeteries existed in the east.

Subdividing further

If the divisions of Upper/Lower and eastern/western Egypt weren't enough, the whole of Egypt was further divided into 42 provinces, currently known as *nomes*. In Upper Egypt, 22 nomes were present from the start of the dynastic period; the 20 nomes in Lower Egypt developed later.

Each nome (or *sepat* as the ancient Egyptians called them) was governed by a *nomarch* or mayor who answered to the vizier and ultimately the king. Ideally, only one vizier monitored the government, but many kings split the role into two – a vizier of Upper Egypt and a vizier of Lower Egypt. Each nome had a capital city and a local temple for the worship of the local deity, complete with individual religious taboos, practices, and rituals.

Each nome was represented by a *standard*, consisting of a staff bearing the statue of its local deity and a regional animal or plant. The animals and plants are often represented in offering scenes, which highlight the crops of a particular region. Nomes often took their names based on their regional animal or plant, such as the ibis nome and the hare nome.

Following the Floating Capital

Although the Egyptians were very organised with a well-established system of governmental divisions, they were not as strict about the location of their capital city. In fact, Egyptologists have identified numerous royal residences and royal burial sites in cities throughout Egypt, which indicates that the capital moved according to the whim of the reigning king. In some reigns, rulers had two capitals: a religious capital and an administrative capital.

Pre-dynastic capitals

The Egyptian civilisation had not developed in the pre-dynastic period (prior to 3100 BC), so a capital city as such did not exist.

Instead, three sites that included settlements and large cemeteries seem to dominate (see Cheat Sheet for locations):

- **Naqada** was one of the largest pre-dynastic sites, situated on the west bank of the Nile approximately 26 kilometres north of Luxor. Archaeologists have discovered two large cemeteries here with more than 2,000 graves, a number of which belong to the elite and royalty.
- **Hierakonpolis** was also used as a royal cemetery and was the base for the funerary cult of the second-dynasty king Khasekhemwy. The most famous finds from this site are the Narmer Palette (see the section 'Unifying the Two Lands', earlier in this chapter), the Narmer Mace Head and the Scorpion Mace Head. These last two items are both on display in the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, and depict the early development of Egypt's kingship ideology.
- **Abydos** was a major site during the pre-dynastic period and remained prominent for most of the pharaonic period. The earliest settlement here dates to 4000–3500 BC, although most of the current remains are from the 19th and 20th dynasties. Abydos was a major religious centre with monuments of all the first-dynasty kings and two of the second-dynasty kings.

Moving to Memphis

The three pre-dynastic centres were abandoned as capital cities during the Old Kingdom (around 2686–2333 BC), and Memphis, near modern Cairo, became the new administrative capital. The location of Memphis provided easy access and control over both the Delta region and the Nile valley, ensuring that trade through this region was firmly under royal control.

The royal cemeteries of the Old Kingdom were also very close to Memphis, with pyramid fields at Giza, Saqqara, Dahshur, Abusir, and Abu-Roash (see Chapter 14) covering an area of approximately 35 square kilometres.

Memphis remained important throughout the New Kingdom as well. During the reigns of Sety I (1291–1278 BC) and Ramses II (1279–1212 BC), the royal harem (see Chapter 5) was located at Memphis, which shows the continuity of the city as a royal residence.

Settling in Thebes

During the New Kingdom, the major royal and religious capital was Thebes (modern-day Luxor), which was home to the powerful cult of the god Amun. This region includes the temples of Karnak and Luxor, as well as the New Kingdom funerary temples and the royal burials in the Valley of the Kings and Queens (see Chapter 13).

For the majority of the New Kingdom, Thebes was the religious capital and Memphis in the north was the administrative capital, ensuring that the king had control over both Upper and Lower Egypt.

Noting other short-lived settlements

Although Memphis and Thebes were important settlements for much of the pharaonic period, some rulers chose to have their capital elsewhere, although these locations did not maintain this important status for long:

- **Avaris:** The Hyksos rulers of the second intermediate period (1663–1555 BC) built their capital in the Delta. The settlement shows an interesting juxtaposition between two cultures: Egyptian and Palestinian (the latter where the Hyksos are thought to have originated). For more information, see Chapter 3.

- **Amarna:** This was the new capital city built by Akhenaten of the 18th dynasty (1350–1334 BC) and dedicated to the solar disc, the Aten. (Turn to Chapter 4 for more on this period of Egyptian history.) Amarna was situated half way between Memphis and Thebes in Middle Egypt and included a number of temples, palaces, an extensive settlement, and a cemetery. (Check out Chapter 18 for what you can see today.)
- **Pi-Rameses:** This city in the Delta, very close to Avaris, was built originally by Sety I (1291–1278 BC) as a harbour town and was important in controlling the transportation of goods from the Mediterranean into the Nile valley. Ramses II of the 19th dynasty (1279–1212 BC) greatly expanded the city and named it Pi-Rameses to serve as a rival to Thebes.
- **Tanis:** This was another capital in the Delta during the 21st dynasty, under king Psusennes I (1039–991 BC). Most of the city was built with reused blocks from Pi-Rameses.

These cities all had very limited lives. At the end of most of the kings' reigns, these sites declined in importance, and Thebes and Memphis were re-established as the capitals.

Populating the Nile Valley

From approximately 5000 BC, settled communities inhabited the Nile valley in an area of approximately 34,000 square kilometres. However, the population of this region was never recorded until the Roman administration of Egypt, which began in 30 BC.

Egyptologists have estimated population data based on the available area of agricultural land and the number of people it was able to support:

- Late pre-dynastic period: 100,000–200,000 people
- Early dynastic period: 2 million people
- Old Kingdom: 1–1.5 million people
- New Kingdom: 2.9–4.5 million people
- Ptolemaic period: 7–7.5 million people

The population fluctuated throughout the pharaonic period, with a marked rise during the Ptolemaic period due to an increased area of agricultural land, plus an influx of foreigners into Egypt after Alexander the Great (see Chapter 6).

Estimating the population of a warrior nation

More accurate population estimates can be calculated for specific periods of Egypt history. For example, in the period between the Saite dynasties (727–525 BC) and the time of Herodotus (fifth to fourth century BC), records state that Egypt had 410,000 warriors. Egyptologists assume that each soldier was part of a family of four, so the soldiers and their families during this time would have constituted around 1,640,000 people.

However, each soldier was given 12 *arouras* of land (1,200 square cubits or 0.63 square kilometres), a total of 4,920,000 arouras (3,099,600 square kilometres) of land for all the soldiers. This land constituted half of the agricultural land in Egypt at the time. Therefore, assuming that the other half of the agricultural land sustained the same number of people, the estimated population is $1{,}640{,}000 \times 2 = 3{,}280{,}000$ people.

Furthermore, historians believe that 2 arouras of land was able to sustain one person, so each soldier had enough land to sustain six people. This means that the population may have been higher: $3{,}280{,}000 \div 4 \times 6 = 4{,}920{,}000$ people.

Climbing the Egyptian Social Ladder

Egyptian society was greatly stratified. However, most evidence available today is only from the upper levels of society – royalty and the elite – because these individuals were able to afford to leave behind stone monuments and elaborate tombs.

The social structure of ancient Egyptian society from the Old Kingdom on was rather like a pyramid (how appropriate!). The king was perched at the top, followed by the small band of priests drawn from the elite, a slightly larger group of the ruling elite, and then the working class (including skilled trades and unskilled labour), which comprised the rest of the population.

Obviously, the majority of the population were working class. They were responsible for working on the agricultural land and producing food for the elite classes and priests. Unfortunately, Egyptologists do not know the exact number of the elite – and very little information about the working class exists in written records.

The following sections discuss the experiences of individuals at each level of ancient Egypt's social pyramid.

Being king of the heap

The most powerful person in ancient Egyptian society was the king. He was born into the position, and ideally he was the son of the previous king – although on several occasions the king was a usurper who nicked the throne from the rightful heir.

As head of state, the king had a number of functions and roles that he needed to maintain, including

- High priest of all temples in the country
- Head of the army (in the New Kingdom especially)
- International diplomat for trade and peace treaties
- Intermediary between the people and the gods

The king was considered to be an incarnation of the god Horus on earth – and therefore a god in his own right. This divine status meant that he was able to converse directly with the gods on behalf of the population of Egypt. Keeping the gods happy was also his job. If Egypt were afflicted with disease, famine, high floods, or war, Egyptians believed that the king was being punished and that it was his fault for not keeping his people happy. That's a lot of pressure for one man!

Serving the gods

The priesthood was a very powerful occupation, especially in its upper echelons (see Chapter 2 for more details). The priests worked for the temple and were able to gain honours, wealth, and titles.

The priests were privileged enough to be in the presence of the gods every day, and many people made gifts to the priests (some say bribes) to put a good word in with the gods or to ask for something on their behalf. Even the king was not immune to this gift-giving, often bestowing land, titles, and rewards on the priests. These gifts eventually helped the high priests to become very wealthy. And with wealth comes power. For example:

- The Priesthood of Amun at Karnak was the richest and most powerful in Egypt. During the reign of Ramses III, this group owned 1,448 square kilometres of agricultural land, vineyards, quarries, and mines, in addition to riverboats and sea-faring vessels. Most of this agricultural land was rented to the peasants, who paid a third of their harvest to the temple as rent.

- The *daily* income of the mortuary temple of Ramses III at Medinet Habu from its associated land was 2,222 loaves of bread, 154 jars of beer, 8,000 litres of grain, plus meat and other commodities – enough to feed 600 families.

Throughout Egyptian history, the kings felt that appeasing the priests was essential because the priests worked on the king's behalf, keeping the gods happy and keeping Egypt safe. Hardly surprising that gradually the king's presents increased and the priesthood's power grew and grew, until it rivalled that of the king.

Powering the elite

In order to alleviate some of the pressure, the king had a large number of advisers and officials who helped in decisions and activities. Royal sons who were not destined for the throne were appointed by the king to fill many of the top official positions.

The easiest role to delegate was that of high priest. Obviously the king wasn't able to carry out all the rituals expected of him as high priest in every temple in Egypt. Even though the king was a god, he wasn't Superman!

Nomarchs, get set

In the Old and Middle Kingdoms, much of the power of the king was in fact delegated to local *nomarchs*, or mayors. They were in charge of their *nome*, or province, and controlled the economy, taxes, and employment of the people living there. The nomarchs ultimately relied on the generosity of the king and needed to make regular reports and payments to the king on behalf of their nomes.

Egypt's standing army

During the New Kingdom, the king did not have to rely so heavily on the nomarchs to conscript men for war or trade, because Egypt had a permanent standing army at the beck and call of the king.

Two generals led the New Kingdom army – one for the army of Upper Egypt and one for the army of Lower Egypt. This clever ploy by the king limited how much of the army one general controlled and prevented a military coup to usurp the throne. It clearly helped if the king was a little paranoid.

Many generals in the New Kingdom army were royal princes. Some were given the title when they were small children, indicating that this was an honorary title that gave the young princes something to do – playing with a sword and chariot – as well as keeping such powerful positions within the royal family.

My word is law

The tomb of the 18th-dynasty vizier Rekhmire includes one of the few inscriptions describing in full the role of the vizier, which was rich and varied and was clearly a position of great power.

> *The vizierate is not to show respect of princes and councillors; it is not to make for himself slaves of any people.*
>
> *Behold, when a petitioner comes from Upper or Lower Egypt, even the whole land, see to it that everything is done in accordance with law, that everything is done according to custom, giving every man his right. A petitioner who had been adjudged shall not say: 'My right has not been given to me!'*
>
> *Beware of that which is said of the vizier Kheti. It is said that he discriminated against some of the people of his own kin in favour of strangers, for fear lest it should be said of him that he favoured his kin dishonestly. When one of them appealed against the judgement which he thought to make him, he persisted in his discrimination. Now that is not justice. It is an abomination of the god to show partiality.*
>
> *Cause yourself to be feared. Let men be afraid of you. A vizier is an office of whom one is afraid. Behold, the dread of a vizier is that he does justice. But indeed, if a man cause himself to be feared a multitude of times, there is something wrong in him in the opinion of the people. They do not say of him: 'He is a man indeed.' Behold, this fear of a vizier deters the liar, when the vizier proceeds according to the dread one has of him.*

Clearly the vizierate was such a powerful position that the population feared corruption and lack of justice. (In fact, records indicate a number of instances where the viziers were accused of this.) Rekhmire himself had a mysterious end to his life: He was never buried in his tomb, and many of the images in his tomb were intentionally damaged, perhaps to prevent him from having an afterlife. Was this vandalism due to his corrupt activities? Historians may never know, but it does make you think.

However, the king also relied on these nomarchs, especially in times of war or foreign expeditions. Before the New Kingdom saw the start of the full-time militia (see Chapter 4), the nomarchs were responsible for conscripting and training fit young men from their provinces to fight for Egypt or to accompany the king on foreign expeditions, either for trade or mining purposes.

Therefore the king had to keep the nomarchs on his side through payments and gifts. Otherwise these fit young men may be conscripted to march *against* the king and potentially steal the throne.

Vizier arising

The responsibilities of the vizier were varied and made him the second most powerful man in Egypt after the king.

The *vizier* was basically a personal assistant and secretary of state to the king and compiled a weekly or monthly report on all the key information for the whole of Egypt, based on daily reports from workshops and lesser officials. At times, the vizier acted as king by proxy, distributing land and the spoils of war to nomarchs or as rewards for loyalty.

Additionally, the vizier was responsible for hiring policemen and received reports from all the guard posts throughout Egypt regarding movements of enemy armies or other threatening activities. The vizier also presided over the court, dealing with the daily petitions of the ordinary people, including crimes and minor offences.

May the priest be with you

The most prominent power struggle in ancient Egyptian history took place during the reign of Ramses XI between the royal family and the high priests of Amun. At this time, the power of the throne was so diminished that a civil war broke out in order to decide who was to take over Ramses XI's throne – while he was still on it!

Throughout the first 12 years of Ramses XI's reign, the high priests of Amun held virtually the same power as Ramses and had his support because he was a particularly pious sovereign. However, the one difference between the high priests and Ramses XI is that the king had the military under his control, which gave him the edge.

However, at some point prior to year 12, one of Ramses's administrative officials – Panehsy, the Viceroy of Nubia, who was based in Thebes – came into conflict with the high priest of Amun, Amenhotep. This conflict denied Amenhotep his position for nine months, until he eventually turned to Ramses XI for help. Ramses commanded his army to destroy Panehsy, who was exiled to Nubia, and Amenhotep got his position back.

A few years later, Amenhotep was replaced by Herihor, whom the king also bestowed with the military titles that Panehsy held. For the first time in Egyptian history, one man held the top religious and military titles, making Herihor more powerful than Ramses. One gift too many, indeed!

Ramses was in a very weak position and was king in name only, while Herihor effectively ruled Egypt. Herihor showed his revered position by placing his name and high priest title in a cartouche in the manner of a king.

On the death of Herihor, his position passed to his son-in-law Piankhy, who ruled alongside Ramses in the same way as his father. At the death of Ramses, Piankhy continued to rule Thebes, while Lower Egypt was ruled by King Smendes from Tanis, who legitimised his claim to the throne by marrying a daughter of Ramses XI.

This started a period of divided rule and a dynasty (the 21st) of Theban high priests, all successors of Piankhy who held military and religious titles. Just goes to show you really shouldn't put all your eggs in one basket.

Shifting power

Although the king was the top dog in Egypt, at times lower-ranking officials such as the vizier, the military, or priests surpassed him in power. A prime example is that of Ramses XI of the 20th dynasty who was succeeded to the throne by the high priest of Amun. In fact, even throughout Ramses XI's reign, the high priests held equal or more power than he did. See the sidebar 'May the priest be with you' for more information.

The vizierate was often used as a stepping stone to the role of king, with Ay in the 18th dynasty becoming king, and Bay in the 19th dynasty being the power behind the puppet king Siptah. In fact, the 19th dynasty itself started due to a shift in power between the royal family (ending with Ay, the uncle of Tutankhamun) and the military (with Horemheb, an army general who took over the throne). Horemheb then passed the throne to his general, Ramses I, and started a new military era in Egypt.

Other lesser officials grew in wealth – and therefore power – until they overshadowed the king. Of course, this wealth came from the king in the first place, in the form of titles, land, and gifts. So at some point the king obviously gave one gift too many. This imbalance of wealth is on clear display in the tombs and pyramids at the end of the Old Kingdom. The tombs of officials were expensively carved and decorated in stone, while the royal pyramids were small and built with desert rubble.

Even historians have difficulty identifying whether various new dynasties started due to the usurpation of power by a wealthy official or a natural change when the king lacked a male heir.

During periods of political instability, when the throne did not follow the traditional line of succession, the whole of Egypt was affected, especially the economy. Any battle over the throne resulted in neglect of international trade (albeit briefly), as well as increased spending on military action, resulting in further economic problems, such as the distribution of food and the abandonment of tomb-building projects (especially in the 21st dynasty and later).

One such problem occurred in year 29 of Ramses III's reign. The workmen at Deir el Medina had not been paid for six months and went on strike, protesting before the funerary temples of Thutmosis III, Ramses II, and Sety I, which stored the grain used for their wages. The strike worked, and they were paid. But later that year when payment was again late, Djhutymose, a scribe from Deir el Medina, decided strikes were not as effective as initially thought and went with two bailiffs to collect the grain himself from the local farmers and the temples. A true vigilante.

The vast working class: Producing the essentials

Although the officials and the military were essential to the safety and stability of Egypt, those in the working classes were essential to its success. Tragically, most of the information on these people is lost. Because they were mostly poor and often illiterate, the working class did not leave stone tombs, stelae (the plural of *stela*, a round-topped stone monument), or statues. (Chapter 2 pieces together a portrait of these individuals.)

Farmers: Salt of the earth

The majority of the working classes were agricultural workers, because farming and food production were essential for survival and for Egypt to participate in trade.

While no written evidence exists from farmers themselves, some tombs of members of the elite mention farmers who worked their land, thus preserving these farmers' names for eternity. One such farmer worked for the scribe Ramose from Deir el Medina. According to tomb records, the farmer's name was Ptahsaankh, and he ploughed the land with two cows called 'West' and 'Beautiful Flood'.

Most land was owned by the state or the temples and was only rented to the farmers. As employees of the state, farmers were expected to give a specific amount of their grain yields to the landowners, plus rent and tax (tax is always there). Farmers' earnings were whatever was left. The poor were clearly working for free.

Labourers: Serving the state

During the annual flood of the Nile, many thousands of farmers were virtually unemployed because they were able to do little while their land was under 3 feet of water. In these periods, the state often conscripted farmers to work as labourers on large monumental building projects, such as the pyramids.

Commentators often say that slaves built these monuments, but in reality this wasn't the case. While working for the state, unskilled labourers were well paid and provided with housing near the building site. After the flood waters started to recede in October, workers returned to their villages to work on their farms.

Hard manual labour, such as working in the quarries or mines, was done by prisoners of war or criminals. Because this work was punishment, these people were fed, but were probably not given any spare food with which to trade. While their work was dangerous, many of these individuals probably died simply as a result of trudging through the hot desert, thirst, or encountering violent nomadic tribes.

Craftsmen: Whittling away

The only existing evidence regarding craftsmen comes from special settlements built for specific work forces, including

- **Giza,** built for the workmen who built the Giza pyramids
- **Kahun,** which housed the workmen who built the Lahun pyramid
- **Amarna,** which housed the workmen who built the Amarnan royal tombs
- **Deir el Medina,** which was home to the workmen who built the Valley of the Kings

The workmen's villages of Amarna and Deir el Medina (where most available information about craftsmen and ordinary Egyptians comes from) housed extremely privileged workmen who worked directly for the king. They were not from the ordinary working class.

Although the information from Amarna and Deir el Medina is valuable and interesting (go to Chapter 2 to find out how interesting), it only describes the experience of elite workers – not the common, non-literate members of society. No doubt many craftsmen worked throughout Egypt on non-royal projects, but sadly information about them is lacking.