

1

The Setting

This book is about daily life in Ancient Egypt, at a specific representative time in its long history. It reconstructs everyday life in Egypt as experienced by a young girl of the middle class. Focusing on a young girl rather than a male and on someone from the lower middle class rather than from the elite makes the task doubly difficult, as the textual evidence was written by the male scribes and reflects life from their point of view. The words of women, children, and the bulk of the population that was illiterate have not been recorded. Nevertheless, material evidence has survived that can be combined with a judicious reading of the texts to formulate a sketch of daily life.

The town of Lahun was selected rather than the better-known settlement of Deir el-Medina (Fig. 1.1) in part to take advantage of newly published textual data from the settlement of Lahun and to re-examine the archaeological finds. But it was also selected as representative of the Middle Kingdom – a time period that in many ways can be considered as the Classical Age of Ancient Egypt. As far as possible, evidence from Lahun and other contemporary settlement and mortuary sites is used as the main data to address issues related to everyday life.

Throughout the book, the sources for our knowledge are stressed, so when we have physical artifacts available from that specific time, they are discussed, as is the way the artifacts might have been produced and used. This book thus attempts to provide an authentic representation of daily life in Egypt's Classical Age as experienced by an individual of a certain status, without creating the false impression that the realities of life were the same for individuals from all levels of society or from different times or locations. It is hoped that by applying a gendered approach, this reconstruction will locate within the context of Egyptian society representatives of the lower middle class, including women, children, and infants, who usually remain invisible in discussion.

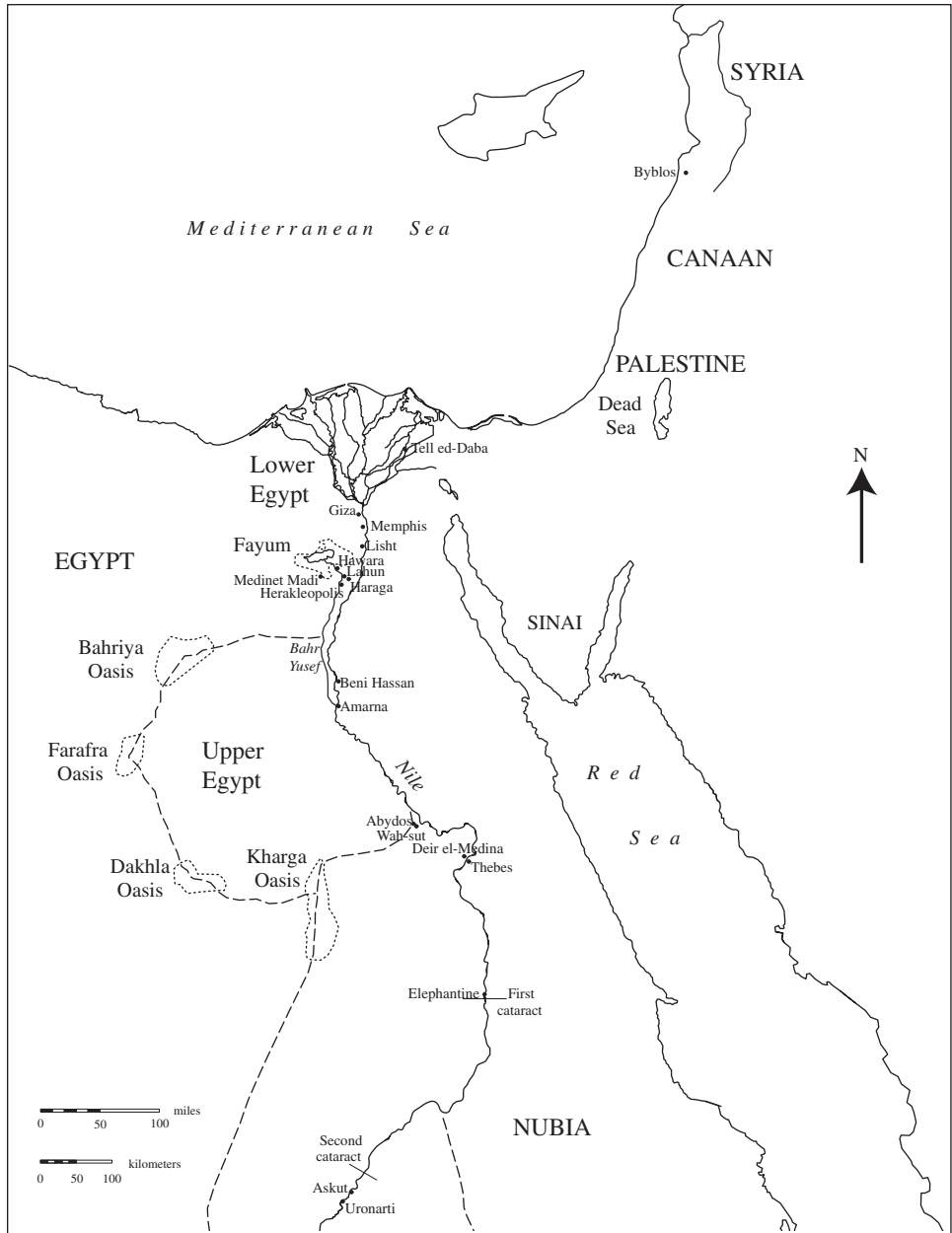


Figure 1.1 Map of Egypt (courtesy of JJ Shirley).

Historical Context

This book is set relatively early in Ancient Egypt's long history. Because time periods are often referred to in this book, it will be useful to begin with a brief historical overview up through the Late Middle Kingdom, the time in which this book is set.¹ Egypt's history begins with the Predynastic Period, a time before the culture was formally unified and ruled by a single pharaoh. Culturally distinct groups lived in settlements near the Nile under the protection of local rulers or chiefs, and unified slowly over time. The material evidence on which we must rely (this was a time before the development of writing) indicates that cultural unification was a slow process that eventually resulted in a single ruler laying claim to the dominion of all of Egypt in about 3000 BC. This series of events was symbolized in the famous commemorative palette of the ruler Narmer,² which encompassed many of the ideals and symbols that were to be a part of the Egyptian worldview for its entire history.

The binary topography of Egypt, with its northern agricultural landscape of the Delta region (Lower Egypt) versus the more arid southern region (Upper Egypt), was complemented by the visible differentiation of agricultural land versus desert. This duality became a fundamental concept in the ideology of the culture as reflected in the victory of order in its struggle versus chaos – themes that were reflected in the development of series of paired symbols. Upper Egypt was represented by a white crown, a lily, and a vulture goddess, while Lower Egypt was represented by a red crown, a papyrus, and a snake goddess. The ideal state, that of a unified Egypt, was represented by combinations of these icons – for example, the double crown combined the white and the red and was worn by the pharaoh in his capacity as ruler of all of Egypt. While Egypt was unified, it was always in danger of splitting back into the two culturally distinct areas. Recognizing this, historians have divided Egyptian history into a series of “kingdoms,” which are epitomized by the country being governed by a single pharaoh, and “intermediate periods,” characterized by the country's separation into two or more territories with their own rulers. These historical divisions are further subdivided into dynasties, which are composed of sequences of pharaohs who were often, but not necessarily, related. Our understanding of the historical time periods relies on a combination of native Egyptian king lists, copies of texts based on those of Greek historians, and archaeological evidence.

Recent archaeological work, particularly in the Upper Egyptian area known as Abydos, has revealed that there were also kings prior to Narmer, who ruled Upper Egypt. The term “Dynasty 0” has been coined for these rulers, but it is not until Egypt was unified under a single pharaoh that the historical period begins. The Early Dynastic Period (beginning c.3000 BC³ and encompassing Dynasties 1–2) featured the establishment of the basic administrative and political structure, the foundation of religious and funerary beliefs and practices, the encoding of symbols, and the development of writing. Most of the characteristic features of Ancient

The Setting

Egyptian culture were ingrained by the end of the Early Dynastic Period, although subject to changes and modifications over time.

The Old Kingdom (Dynasties 3–6) begins about 2800 BC. The time period is one of the most familiar to the general public today, in large part due to the development of massive pyramid complexes as tombs and cult centers for the pharaohs. This time is also called “the Pyramid Age” for this reason, and is characterized by a strong central government with the divine pharaoh as supreme ruler. The world’s earliest religious texts can be found in this time period, as well as biographies providing deeper insights into the careers and public lives of the people themselves. The social and class structure develops with a marked rise in power of the upper classes, particularly toward the end of the Old Kingdom. At the end of Dynasty 6, in tandem with the steady rise of the upper classes, there are clear signs of a decline in the power of the king and royalty. Indeed, the First Intermediate Period (c.2200–2025 BC) is ushered in with no central authority, but rather a number of local governors who act as kings over their territories.

The complexity is apparent, as there are concurrent and overlapping rulers and the country is divided, with independent rulers in the north centered on Herakleopolis (Dynasties 9 and 10) and in the south centered on Thebes (Dynasty 11). In funerary autobiographies, the local rulers stress how well they take care of the people living within their jurisdictions in troubled times. That there was a lack of centralized control is apparent in the material culture, which shows wide regional differentiation. The art shows a range of styles, individuality, and experimentation that was expressed by artists and workshops that had less contact with each other. Even the pottery shows a marked distinction in shape and material reflecting the opposition between northern and southern traditions. Although there were no more giant royal funerary complexes, the burial assemblages of many men and women of the upper classes show an increase in wealth.

To judge from later king lists as well as contemporary sources, the Eleventh Dynasty seems to have begun with a series of three rulers laying claim to the kingship and dominion over Upper Egypt.⁴ These individuals, all bearing the name of “Intef,” took as their power base the strategically located city of Thebes, and from there attempted to extend their rule. But it was not until the middle of the Eleventh Dynasty, in approximately 2025, that the next Theban ruler, Mentuhotep II, succeeded in reunifying Upper and Lower Egypt into a consolidated state, and ushered in what we call the Middle Kingdom (Dynasties 11–13). To clarify the extent of his dominion, he even changed his throne name (kings had multiple names) from “he who causes the heart of the two lands to live” to “unifier of the two lands.” This ruler and his immediate successors made Thebes the capital of Egypt and ruled from the south.

The first ruler of Dynasty 12, Amenemhat I, was not related by blood to the previous rulers and it is unclear how he came to the throne. Perhaps to emphasize his legitimate right to rule and to emulate the divine rulers of the Old

The Setting

Kingdom, he moved the capital north to a new capital, just at the boundary between Lower and Upper Egypt. This town was called “seizer of the two lands” *Itchy-tawy* (probably around the area of modern-day Lisht). Whereas the kings of the Eleventh Dynasty built tombs underground separate from their mortuary temples, Amenemhat I and his Twelfth Dynasty successors returned to the practice of building pyramids as their tombs. In the thirtieth year of his reign, Amenemhat I was assassinated – an event that was mentioned in two major literary texts. He was succeeded by his son Senusret I, who may have reigned jointly with his father for a few years prior. During his long reign, like his father before him Senusret I focused on rebuilding temples around Egypt and keeping the country stable. He campaigned in Nubia and began a program of building forts to control trade and imports. His successor, Amenemhat II, is less well known, though inscriptions reveal that he sent expeditions to the Sinai to mine precious stones such as turquoise. After a brief co-regency, his son Senusret II took the throne.

Senusret II is perhaps best known for beginning a major reclamation project in the region of the Fayum to increase its agricultural potential. Dykes and canals were built to extend the links of the lake that already existed there with the Bahr Yusef, a major tributary of the Nile. He also chose that region to build his pyramid. Lahun, the town upon which this study is based, was built nearby to house the workers who would build this complex. When Senusret III succeeded his father, he greatly expanded Egypt’s borders deep into Nubia, increasing Egypt’s wealth and control through a complex network of fortresses strategically placed along the Nile in Upper Nubia. His successor, Amenemhat III, is most famous for his immense building campaign throughout Egypt, and for building “the labyrinth,” a massive pyramid located in the Fayum. The reign of Amenemhat IV was short, and he was succeeded by his sister, Sobeknoferu, who ruled not as queen but as the last pharaoh of Dynasty 12. Like her probable father Amenemhat III, Sobeknoferu concentrated her efforts on the region of the Fayum, though unlike her more powerful ancestor, she left little to indicate her activities outside of this region. Following the reign of this female pharaoh, the rule of a single family ended. Early Dynasty 13 featured rulers that are poorly attested in both the archaeological and textual sources, and who probably came from the most prominent administrative families of Egypt. The middle of the dynasty seems to have stabilized with rulers well attested throughout Egypt, though again not necessarily related by kinship. Eventually, however, their dominion seems to have weakened until they could lay claim to the southern region alone, and the Middle Kingdom was clearly over.

After the political turmoil of the preceding First Intermediate Period, the Middle Kingdom in general was characterized by an increase in controlled bureaucracy and centralized education. Literature and the arts flourished, and this is often regarded as the Classical Age of Ancient Egypt. The powerful pharaohs expanded Egypt’s territory particularly in the south, into Nubia, and the army correspondingly rose in prominence. Peaceful trade and contact with foreign

The Setting

cultures such as those based to the east in the Levant and those to the north in the Mediterranean (such as Crete) increased.

In the Late Middle Kingdom, the setting for this book, there was a marked increase in foreigners migrating into Egypt, particularly within northern settlements such as Lahun. Some of the settlers in the Delta, whose origins were in the Levant, eventually took advantage of the weak rulers at the end of Dynasty 13, and proclaimed themselves rulers of the north. In Egyptian these were known as “rulers of the foreign lands” *heqaw khasut*, a word that is retained today as Hyksos. Once again, Egypt was split into two, with the Hyksos ruling in the north, and native Egyptians in the south. This time period, known as the Second Intermediate Period (Dynasties 14–17), was rich in change and innovation. It left an indelible impression on the Egyptians of that time and on future generations, for this was the first time that Egypt had been ruled by foreigners. The southern rulers who eventually ousted the Hyksos from power and reunified Egypt were determined it would not happen again.

Illahun

This book focuses on life in Egypt from mid Dynasty 12 to Dynasty 13. The scene is set when, at the height of Egypt’s Middle Kingdom, the reigning pharaoh, Senusret II, chose to build his pyramid complex at the entrance to the large fertile depression of the Fayum (Fig. 1.2). His complex included a smaller pyramid for his queen, shaft tombs for the royal family, and *mastabas*⁵ for his courtiers. On the eastern side of the pyramid he had his mortuary temple built, and in a direct line approximately 1.2 km to the east, he had his valley temple where the cult of the king could be maintained. This was no small matter, for the king was the living embodiment of Horus, the falcon god who represented kingship on earth. When he died, the king was identified with Osiris, the god of the dead, and he continued to be worshiped for up to two centuries. Part of the king’s role was to guard and maintain *maat* (a fundamental Ancient Egyptian concept that embodies the concepts of justice, truth, right, and order on both a cosmic and a social scale) in the world, and to act as the intermediary between mankind and the gods. During the Middle Kingdom, the deities most closely connected to the pharaoh were actively worshiped with him. Indeed, in the early Middle Kingdom, the mortuary temples of the Eleventh Dynasty rulers focused primarily on the gods (specifically Amun-Ra, whose name reflects the hidden nature of the sun god). Perhaps the decision of the rulers of the Twelfth Dynasty to return to the Old Kingdom custom of building pyramids for their tombs was in part inspired by the desire to emulate the royal cult of that earlier time that was focused first and foremost on the king. Thus the entire complex that Senusret II had built at Lahun was dedicated to venerating his memory and divinity, perpetuated by a religious cult that was maintained by rotations of priests.

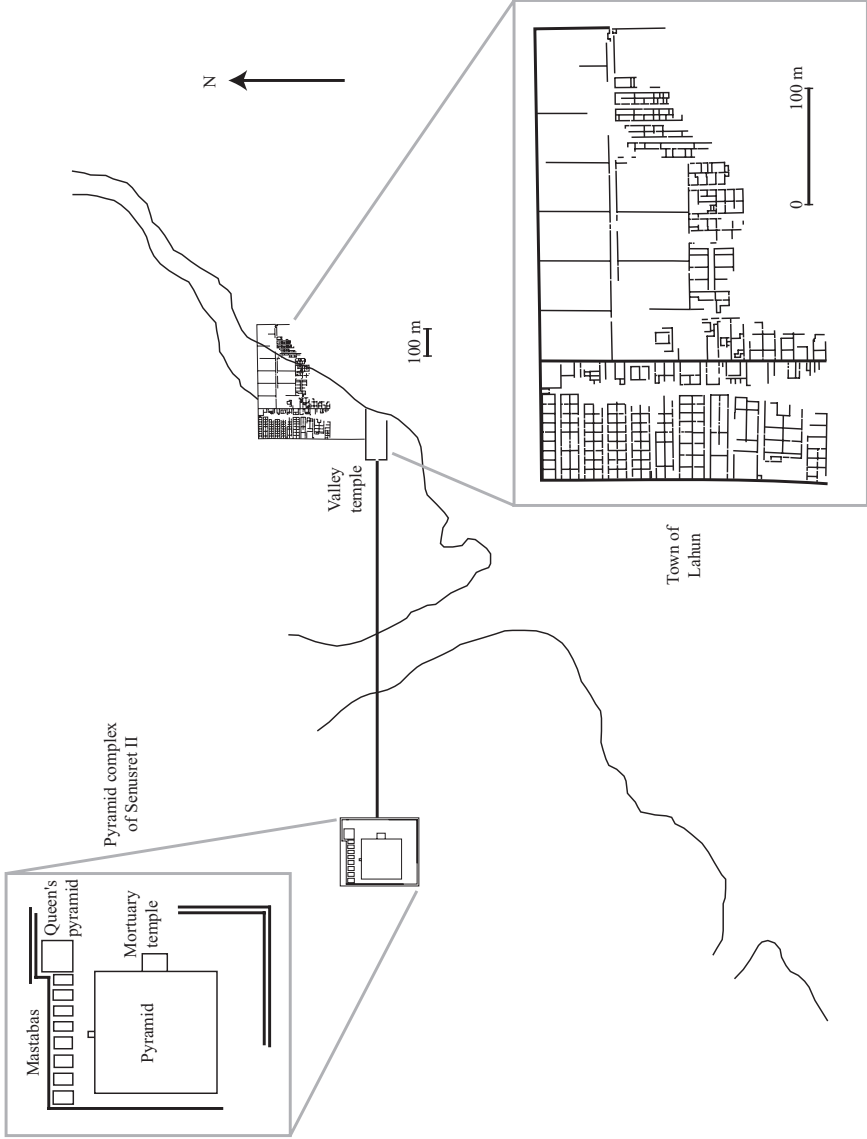


Figure 1.2 Plan of Illahun region (courtesy of JJ Shirley).

The Setting

Constructing the pyramid of a king, the royal tombs of his family and top officials, and the mortuary and valley temples was a vast undertaking, and resulted in an immense expenditure of resources in terms of materials, labor, and time. Settlements had to be planned and built nearby to house the labor force. Thus, just to the north of his valley, Senusret II had a town constructed to house not only the workmen and builders, but also the many different types of people one would expect to find worshipping the king and living in an active Ancient Egyptian town: priests, officials, craftsmen (and all the Middle Kingdom representational and textual evidence suggests that, with the exception of textile spinners and weavers, they were men, sometimes aided by children), weavers, cooks, and soldiers along with their families. The purpose of this book is to build up a picture of daily life in this town that the Egyptians called Hetep-Senusret “Senusret is satisfied,” and that in modern times we call “Lahun”.

Trying to describe daily life even in the modern world is not an easy task. Lifestyles vary tremendously depending on the individual’s circumstances: the time period, location, class, wealth, gender, and age. Life in Ancient Egypt during the time of Cleopatra was certainly vastly different from life nearly 1800 years earlier, the time which is under consideration here. Unfortunately, it is often a temptation to see Ancient Egypt as a monolithic, static culture, and to assume that activities, rituals, practices, and beliefs can simply be transplanted backward by centuries. But because so much of our evidence, particularly textual, comes from the elite, it is their world, or that of the king and his retinue, that is most often presented in discussions on daily life. Compared to the cemeteries and tombs situated in the dry desert areas, few settlements have survived to offer us insights into how the Egyptians lived. The reasons for this are many. Buildings in towns tended to be made of more perishable material (such as mud-brick) than temples and tombs that were built of stone. Settlements were also often built close to the moist soil of the banks of the Nile, which hastens decomposition particularly of organic material, compared to the sealed tombs in the dry desert. In addition, good-quality locations were often reused, and many of Ancient Egypt’s dwelling places lie below those of the modern Egyptians. Nevertheless, some of the ancient settlements, buildings, furnishings, and items that were used in life have survived the millennia, as well as documentary texts such as accounts, legal documents, and letters. By examining the evidence from one of these sites, and using contemporary data from other sites judiciously and with the understanding that it may reflect different lifestyles, a more accurate picture of life in a time period may be developed. This book will focus mainly on material from the settlement of Lahun itself, inhabited in Egypt’s Late Middle Kingdom.

Social Context

There are two basic approaches to understanding society in the ancient world. One is to try to discover the classification system used by the peoples themselves,

The Setting

and the other is to approach the culture with our own categories, and use our own criteria in order to make cross-culturally relevant comparisons. In terms of the former approach, we are to a certain extent lucky, for the Egyptians themselves have provided clues as to how they categorized their world and their peoples. A number of “onomastica,” lists of the phenomena that made up their world, organized in categories have survived.⁶ Most date from the New Kingdom but a fragment of one of these was found dating to the Middle Kingdom.⁷ The Middle Kingdom papyrus fragment does not contain categories of people, but these can be found in the later versions. The most complete example is the New Kingdom “Onomasticon of Amenemipet,” and his ambitious goal is clearly stated at the start:⁸

Beginning of the teaching, explaining to the heart, instructing the ignorant, to know all that exists, created by Ptah, brought into being by Thoth, the sky with its features, the earth and what is in it, the bend of the mountain, what is washed by the waters, consisting of all this is useful, illumined by Ra, all that is made to grow upon earth, reported by the writer of god’s books in the House of Life Amenemipet son of Amenemipet.⁹

Not surprisingly, the categories do not always reflect those that are prevalent in the modern west. For example, bats appear under the category of birds, and crocodiles with fish. In this composition, there are hierarchical groups of beings. The first of these lists the god (*netjer*) and goddess (*netjeret*); male transfigured dead (*akh*) and female transfigured dead (*akh*); the king (*nesut*) and the goddess of kingship (*nesyt*); the king’s wife (*hemet nesut*); king’s mother (*mut nesut*); king’s child (*mes nesut*); the leader of the nobles (*iry pat*); vizier (*tjaty*); sole companion (*semer waty*); and eldest son (*sa nesut semsu*). To a large extent, this category reflects our understanding of the highest echelon of Egyptian society. Later in the text categories of people are listed. These reflect Egyptian categories that do not correspond directly to ours and are still poorly understood. These include the people (*remetj*), nobles (*pat*), the populace in their function as worshipers of the king (*rekhyt*), the populace in their function as worshipers of the sun king (*henmemet*), followed by military personnel that reflect a New Kingdom hierarchy rather than that of the Middle Kingdom, groups of foreigners and foreign lands, and finally people grouped by age or life-stage. Because the terms themselves are problematic, and the classifications do not correspond to those of our own culture, it is useful to approach the question from the outside.

As with other aspects of life in Ancient Egypt, to do this we base our understanding of the social structure of Ancient Egypt on archaeological evidence. Cemeteries are useful in our reconstructions as individuals are rarely buried randomly, but are carefully placed in groups.¹⁰ These patterns often reflect kinship ties, and on a broader scale, the spatial stratification reflects class and status.¹¹ Unfortunately Middle Kingdom cemeteries are rare, and most of the ones that

The Setting

have survived were hastily excavated decades ago and were poorly recorded. Recent re-examinations reveal no clear interpretations, even with careful analysis. For example, wealth could have been displayed by the size of the tomb, by the materials used for burial goods, by diversity of types of goods, or by a combination of these.¹² Housing patterns within settlements can also reflect stratification, but without certain clues as to who inhabited the apparently different quarters, details are again obscured. Textual evidence in the form of titles is illuminating, but mostly in terms of the elite and literate ranks. Each of these sources in isolation is insufficient, but together they allow scholars to formulate a basic picture of Late Middle Kingdom society. One of the scholars who has extensively studied this aspect of the Middle Kingdom is Wolfram Grajetzki, and the following summary is based on his reconstruction.¹³

In the Late Middle Kingdom, the pinnacle of mankind was the pharaoh, who was also considered divine – the living manifestation of the god Horus. His role was to act as an interface between the people and the gods, to maintain *maat*, to protect Egypt, and to watch its people. The royal family, while enjoying many special privileges such as the honor of being buried closest to the pharaoh, played no obvious role in terms of administration or politics. The sons are rarely mentioned, and few are even known by name. Judging from the lack of references to husbands and the fact that they were buried close to their father, the daughters of the king seem to have played some role in the palace, probably a religious one. There is also no reference to their being married to officials. The king's wives are barely known either, and from the slim evidence it seems as though they were not necessarily of royal birth, although it is likely that they were members of the higher classes.

Second in power only to the king was a small group of ministers who came from elite families throughout Egypt, though their offices were not hereditary. Based in the royal residence, they were loyal to the king, and privileged to be his closest counselors. This group included not only the vizier (or prime minister), the treasurer, and the high steward, who between them constituted the chief authorities in terms of the administration of justice, the main economic institutions, and the agricultural lands, but also all the other state administrators. The latter consisted mainly of state bureaucrats whose titles can be divided into five basic groups associated with the administration, military, priesthood, organization of labor, and certain non-specific classifications. These offices could apparently sometimes be inherited and links were formed between particular powerful families. While there was social mobility within this level, the likelihood of an Egyptian from a poor lower-class family rising to this rank was virtually nil. There is some evidence, however, for outsiders such as foreigners being able to attain a high level, even if their own background was poor, by virtue of their close association with a master of high rank. A lower stratum of bureaucrats modeled their local administration upon that of the state level. Many of the titles attested at the royal level were used by these officials, whose authority was more localized and limited to the town or at best the nome that they governed.¹⁴ Nevertheless,

The Setting

they were also members of the elite, and were part of those upper classes who constituted a minority of the population and who left behind the most evidence.

The preponderance of the population was illiterate and has left behind little textual evidence. For them we must rely on other types of archaeological evidence. These included marginalized groups – those such as “marshland dwellers” and beggars, who lived literally on the fringes of society, and who are but rarely referred to in texts and representations. The working classes made up the largest group, and these included the peasants and farmers, herdsman and fishermen, laborers and builders, craftsmen and entertainers. At this level we can also place the many servants who seemed to have been dependent either on a private individual or on an institution. These subordinates could be either native Egyptians or foreigners, in particular foreigners that had been captured and brought back to Egypt during military campaigns.

There was no Middle Kingdom term for a class of “slaves” such as existed in the Roman Empire, though there were two terms for “servants.”¹⁵ One of the terms, *bak*, reflected the status of one subordinate to another, and was used with pride by individuals to emphasize their loyalty, especially in relation to the king. The other term, *hem*, referred to individuals who served a household and were economically dependent upon it. They were connected to that specific area, and could not randomly disconnect their service to it without negative repercussions. It has been noted that this does not constitute slavery, for even in the modern workplace one cannot simply leave one’s place of employment without consequences.¹⁶ The work of the *hem* was tied to a household or to land, but because these dependents did seem to have some sort of social mobility and rights (although the rights to their labor could be transferred along with the land or the household with which they were linked), they should not be considered as slaves.

Between the bulk of these lower classes and the elite minority lay a level of untitled yet wealthy individuals that we call the middle class. As Grajetzki argues, the question of the possible existence of this middle class, defined by him as “a significant social stratum of people not belonging to the administrative class but with a certain level of wealth,” is exceedingly complex, and certainly debatable.¹⁷ A level of independence may have been achieved by this class as well. In her recent work on her investigation of socio-economic differences revealed by mortuary patterns in the Middle Kingdom, Richards suggest that bureaucratic control seems to have been rigidly enforced

on matters directly related to government trade, building, and finances and on the members of social and economic groups in society most closely connected with those government concerns: the wealthy, the titled, specialist workers such as royal craftsmen, and conscripted laborers. However, the combined evidence from cemeteries and other avenues of archaeological, textual, and pictorial data seems to indicate the existence of several social and economic groups in society whom the

The Setting

government may not have chosen to control, or could not control, for ideological or logistical reasons. There existed a flexible private system, and a widely differentiated society, functioning at least partially outside a regimented government rubric.¹⁸

These individuals were able to attain their own wealth, although it is unclear through what professions. Within this class, there was also a range of levels that are manifest in the mortuary data, as will be discussed later. The focus in this book is on reconstructing the life of a family belonging to this middle class.

If the outline of this social structure were sketched, it might resemble a somewhat bulbous pear, with certain professions such as the military, priesthood, and scribes running vertically through all but the lowest horizontal strata. The social structure of Ancient Egypt in the Late Middle Kingdom was hierarchical, but not inflexible. There do not seem to have been any prohibitions against marriage between individuals of different social classes, and an individual could (at least theoretically) move up in rank, even if in practice it was only minimally, regardless of parentage. Positions were not generally inherited, but a good family could certainly help.

Settlement Context

Geography, environment, and landscape play important roles in the development of the cultural identity of people, but so do the settlements themselves. Egypt's dependency on the Nile for food, water, and transportation was reflected in its religion and in lifestyles. One of the unique features of Egypt is the 3,000-mile-long river Nile, which flows from its southern origins deep in central Africa northwards to empty out into the Mediterranean. Lower Egypt consisted of the area in the Delta to the north and Upper Egypt consisted of the southern regions. Boats could easily travel north by gliding with the flow of the river, while because the prevailing winds blow from north to south, sails were used for travel upriver to the south. In the region of Middle Egypt, one branch of the Nile led westwards until it reached a natural depression called the Fayum. A deeper section filled with water, creating a vast lake, now known as Lake Moeris. Even in Predynastic times this was recognized as an ideal location for a settlement, with plenty of fishing and hunting (though the latter should not be considered a primary method for acquiring food), and of course it was a rich agricultural region. However, after this time it was largely uninhabited by the living, but was used as a burial ground right through the Middle Kingdom. Late Middle Kingdom pharaohs initiated intense reclamation projects in the region to increase its agricultural use, which included irrigation canals as well as the building of a large earthwork dyke at the mouth of the Fayum. It also was the site chosen by Senusret II to build his pyramid tomb and complex, leading to the development of the town of Lahun.

The Setting

This area as a whole is often called Illahun, on the basis of the nearby modern Arabic town of el-Lahun. The town is sometimes called Kahun, because this was the name that Petrie, its first excavator, heard used for it in 1887. Apparently, he misheard the name, but today it is still referred to as Kahun, as well as the more precise Lahun, or sometimes as Illahun. To the Egyptians it was probably Hetep-Senusret, but for the sake of consistency, in this book it will be referred to as Lahun.

It is difficult to say whether Lahun should be considered a typical town for Middle Kingdom Ancient Egypt. So few settlements have survived the millennia, and each of them has unique features. Probably the best known and the one about which the most is written is the New Kingdom town of Deir el-Medina. Located on the west bank near Thebes, this settlement was built to house the workers who constructed, carved, and decorated the tombs of the pharaohs in the Valley of the Kings. Both textual and non-textual remains have survived from Deir-el-Medina, but because it was a planned community of elite workmen, it is debatable whether or not it represents a typical town. The settlement of Amarna, built at the end of the Eighteenth Dynasty to provide a new capital for the pharaoh Akhenaten and his unique religious practices, may be a unique example as well. The recent excavations at the workers' village that was inhabited by the builders of the pyramids at Giza also offers insights into the life of a planned community.

Turning to other Middle Kingdom towns, Elephantine was located far to the south on a rocky island in the region of the first cataract, the traditional southern boundary of Ancient Egypt (near modern Aswan). This settlement was founded in the Predynastic Period and was inhabited continuously through the Roman Period. Its strategic location made it ideal for the control of trade and peoples moving in and out of Egypt from the south. But the immediate environment was a dramatic contrast to that of Lahun, and although there are certain similarities, especially in terms of practices that seem to be common in settlements throughout Egypt, the dissimilarities are equally obvious. The structure and layout of the town itself were different, as were individual homes, reflecting the limited space on the island, the rocky environment, and the town's different function. At the other extreme, the recently excavated eastern Delta town of Avaris (modern Tell ed-Daba), while certainly more similar to that of Lahun (especially in terms of domestic architecture), was a melding of native Egyptian traditions with those of the Asiatics who had settled there. These foreigners probably intermarried with the local population, and the merging of the two distinct cultures is manifest archaeologically, particularly in the burial practices, which are unlike those found anywhere else.

To the south of Lahun, but also on the west bank of the Nile, a Middle Kingdom town called "Wah-sut" is being excavated at Abydos. In some respects this town is the closest parallel to that of Lahun, at least in terms of elite homes, but Middle Kingdom Abydos also served a very different purpose than Lahun. As a religious center dedicated to the cult of Osiris, Abydos was an important

The Setting

destination for pilgrimages by people from various parts of Egypt. An annual festival was held there, re-enacting the mysteries of the god of the dead, in which the public could participate. During the Twelfth Dynasty the town also maintained a permanent population associated with the mortuary complex of Sensuret III, which included workers, but also administrators, officials, and a mayor. In this respect, it perhaps most closely parallels the social structure of the town of Lahun. Continuing excavations here will eventually reveal much more of life in the Late Middle Kingdom.

Lahun, on the other hand, began as a town built to house the workers who built the pyramid of Senusret II and the tombs of his family and top officials, the priests who worked to maintain his cult for decades, and the administrators who managed the entire complex. Even after the construction was finished the town continued to be inhabited, though its character seemed to change. Some of the smaller homes were expanded to house the growing families of the laborers, but so were the homes of middle-class families who inhabited medium-sized residences, while royal officials, including the mayor, lived in larger mansions. Both the material and textual evidence testifies to the existence of a productive, complex society living here, and yet after a relatively short period of 100 years, the town seems to have been suddenly abandoned. The cause of this evacuation remains a mystery, but from an archaeological standpoint it is a convenient happenstance. For whatever reason the inhabitants vacated their town, they left within it many of their household goods, the tools of their trades, their personal possessions, and caches of documents. From these, we can attempt to reconstruct a picture of what their daily life might have been like.

Homes

The townspeople of Lahun also left behind the remains of the physical structures that made up their home. Built of bricks made of local mud, these have been much weathered and eroded over the millennia. In addition, the entire south-east section of the town lies today under the modern agricultural region, and will remain unreachable and unexcavated. Nevertheless, enough remains for us to have a good picture of its general plan in terms of the town as a whole, and of individual homes. Certain features are comparable to ones seen in the later New Kingdom planned communities of Deir el-Medina and the workmen's village of Amarna – settlements which were also developed by the state to fulfill a particular function. The town itself was rectangular in shape, measuring approximately 350 meters north to south by 400 meters east to west.¹⁹ A mud-brick wall, approximately 3 meters thick and perhaps originally 6 meters high, surrounded the settlement on the west, the north, and most of the east. Because so much of the east and the south has been lost, we cannot be certain that the wall enclosed the entire town, but on the basis of other settlements this is certainly a strong

The Setting

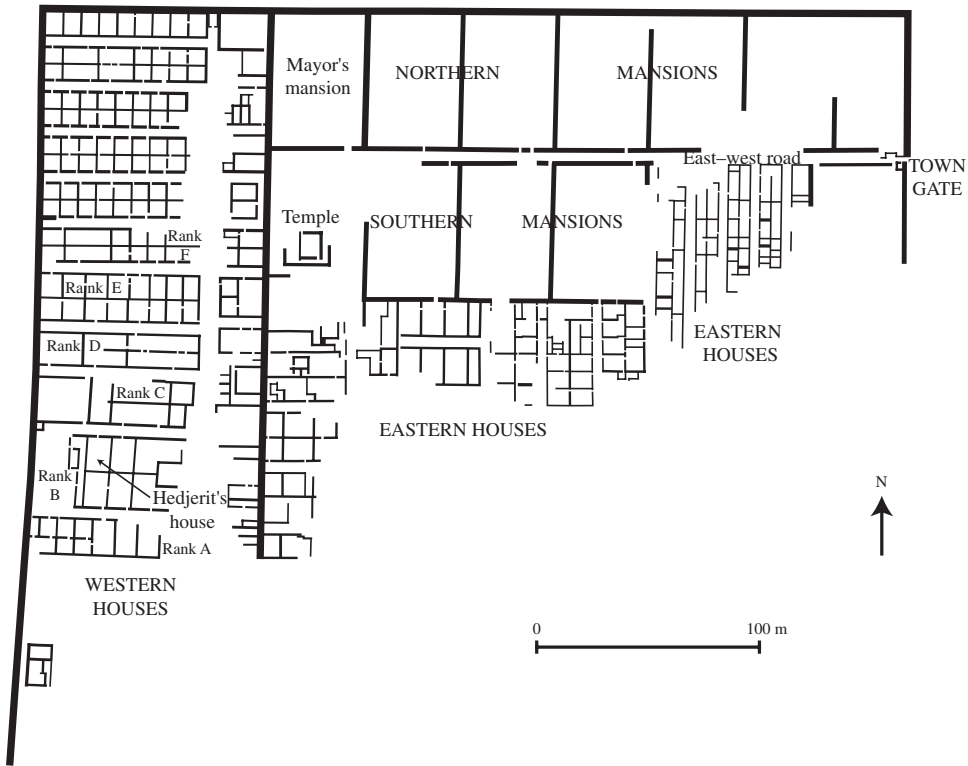


Figure 1.3 Plan of Lahun (courtesy of JJ Shirley).

possibility. Because the structure of the town has been discussed in numerous other works²⁰ only a general overview will be presented here.

As is readily apparent from the plan (Fig. 1.3), the town was laid out in an orderly fashion, with a wall dividing the rectangular western quarter from the square eastern quarter. The western quarter was bisected by a broad avenue (9 m across) running north and south, which had a drainage system in the center of bricks slanted downward from the road into the central trough. The homes were arranged in blocks of up to six connected small houses facing eleven streets running east and west, which at 4 m were also relatively broad. This section consisted of homes that were mainly small (50 m² and consisting of only three rooms) to medium (100 m² and double the number of rooms). To the north of the eastern quarter a series of palatial estates were built (2,700 m²) along a broad avenue running from the west to a gateway in the enclosure wall to the east. Three of the estates were built south of the avenue, with six to the north. Because the wind in Egypt blows from north to south, the ideal location to live would be in the northern section of the town. Those homes with porticoes and vents facing north would be able to take the best advantage of the fresh cool breezes.

The Setting

These mansions incorporated reception halls, granaries, administrative offices, kitchens, a pool, possibly stalls for animals, servants' quarters, and of course private living quarters, including dressing rooms and bathrooms for their owner, his family, and guests. In the north-west corner of the eastern quarter, an even larger mansion was built on higher ground. Its size and location suggest that this was the residence of the mayor of the city. Indeed, its size is comparable to the palaces found in the Delta site of Tell ed-Daba and at Dashur.²¹ Directly to the south is an open area, which contains the remains of a columned area. This may have been a further administrative area or a temple. The rest of the eastern quarter consisted of a mix of very small to medium homes, at least as far as we can tell bearing in mind that nearly half has been lost. Indeed, although the small size of many of the houses has been emphasized, the majority fall into the realm of medium-sized homes (31–84 m²) compared to the settlements of Amarna, Deir el-Medina, and Lisht, which featured a greater proportion of smaller homes.²²

As was the case with most domestic dwellings in Ancient Egypt, the homes of Lahun were built of dried mud-brick. They would have been roofed with wooden beams and poles, and straw or reed tied to the poles. Plastered with mud on the inside and outside, and sometimes supported by a column, the flat roofs may have been used as an extension of the living space. They may have been used for storage, but there are signs in other settlements that they could also be used as a place for cooking or other activities in the hot weather. Some reconstructions feature vents on the roofs that would have caught the cool breezes from the north, but as these are based on models of buildings that were placed in tombs (sometimes called “soul houses”) they may not reflect architectural features in the houses of the living.²³ More reliable evidence stems from New Kingdom drawings of residential housing, which feature vents as well as latticed windows that would let in light and air,²⁴ as well as a drawing from Lahun possibly depicting the front of the elite homes there.

Other models show details such as gardens and pools – features that are confirmed by the archaeological remains of elite homes, but may not have been part of dwellings of those lower in rank or wealth. However, many of the other main features of the actual living quarters were the same for homes whether they were palatial estates or small workmen's houses.²⁵ Because little is left of the buildings in Lahun, comparable houses in other settlements, particularly those at Lisht, Deir el-Medina, and Amarna, provide us with clues as to the layout and function of rooms. Settlements contemporary to that of Lahun, such as Elephantine and Tell ed-Daba, also provide some guidance, but some of these dwellings in the Middle Kingdom levels of those sites seem to follow a different plan, perhaps betraying their disparate functions or geographical locations. In general, however, the space in both Middle and New Kingdom homes can be divided into three zones: the one closest to the entrance was the most public and contained a reception area; the second was a columned hall or open courtyard that functioned as a communal area for the family, with stairs leading to the roof; while the private living quarters were at the back.²⁶

The Setting

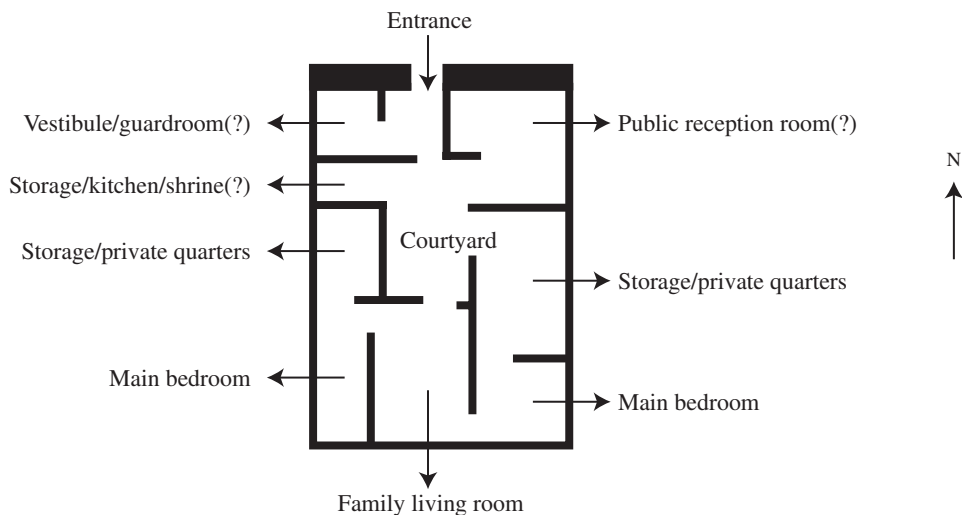


Figure 1.4 Plan of Hedjerit's house in rank B (courtesy of JJ Shirley).

The houses in the western quarter opened either to the north (thus taking full advantage of the cool north wind) or to the south. The plans for the north-facing ones were all of similar types, and while the ones to the south were based on a slightly different blueprint, the basic constituents were the same in either case. To set the stage, we shall use a medium-to-large residence (approximately 168 square meters) with a north-facing doorway in rank B of the western quarter²⁷ as an example of domestic quarters, and as the setting for this reconstruction of daily life (Fig. 1.4).

A single door made of wood (as were the door-bolts and the threshold itself), and possibly painted red to repel any hostile entities that might attempt to enter during the day or night, led from the street into the home. Most of the doorways were arched with two rows of bricks, proving that the Egyptians had already perfected this architectural technique. Because the homes were joined together on three sides, there would be no place for windows, except possibly in the front wall or in the form of skylights in the roof. The walls were smoothed with mud and whitewashed, and some retain traces of a painted dado. This was usually painted black or dark near the bottom, with red and black lines 1–1.5 m up, and a yellow wash above.²⁸ In many cases a corridor from the front door led to a central hall from which the other rooms could be reached. This hall was likely unroofed, thus creating an open courtyard in the center of the home that would also have allowed light and air in to reach the other rooms. Parts of the courtyard could have been shaded in order to protect the dwellers from the glare of the sun, perhaps with portable shades made of cloth on poles. It is in this room that stairs leading to the roof were usually found.

The Setting

Rooms to the west of the entrance of this residence and ones like it could have housed a shrine, or have been reception rooms, or a combination of both. Our model home includes a small room just to the right of the door. Most of the medium-sized south-facing houses in rank B had such a room just off the entrance, and in palatial estates this compact room may have served as guardroom for a doorkeeper who would control access to the estate. In the smaller non-elite houses, it may have served as a storage area for water jars or other goods. Although no toilets have survived from Lahun, limestone and wooden seats with holes in the center under which pots would have been placed have been found at Amarna, testifying to their use in the New Kingdom. In the Middle Kingdom, simple pots could have been used by the less affluent, and perhaps the small room could have doubled as a lavatory, allowing for quick and easy disposal of the waste into the central gutter of the street. In the large estates of Lahun, adjoining the bedrooms are smaller rooms which are thought to have been bathrooms (sometimes with an adjoining area for a lavatory). Some of these have breaks in the wall that may have allowed drainage via a channel to the main gutter conduit running down the center of the street.²⁹

Defining the specific function of rooms is difficult without clues and it is probable that, as is the case with modern urban and rural compact dwellings, most rooms were multi-functional. Although the homes were not cramped, maintaining versatility in each room would allow an efficient use of limited space for households that were continually expanding (through marriage, births, and even the moving in of dependants such as relatives or servants), or contracting (through deaths, marriage, or conscription). Indeed, there is evidence that the walls between houses were at times collapsed in order to expand the living space. Not only could walls be removed or modified, but the features within rooms could be as well. A bench could be used for sitting, conversing, and eating, but then could be converted into a bed by simply laying a sleeping mat and headrest on top of it. The most private areas were probably at the back, with the central room used as a main living room (on the basis of the occasional finds of columns in this room and the existence of wall decorations). The larger room on either side was probably used for sleeping, and the smaller for storage, as a bathroom or lavatory, or as an additional sleeping area. In general in the larger rooms, which contained a raised sleeping platform, that bed-niche was placed directly against the south wall of the room.³⁰ This area of the house was kept cool by the winds flowing in from the north (some houses may have had small vents in the roof to increase the airflow), by the layout of the walls and doors, and by the columns in the central areas, which would prevent the sun from shining in directly.

Furniture was fairly simple in form, and usually carved of wood or stone. Chairs, stools, small tables, pillows, and mats were the main pieces of furniture that might have been used in a middle-class home. Headrests were used by some for sleeping, and there is evidence that they could be padded as well for more comfort. Many examples are carved with apotropaic figures that would protect the vulnerable sleeper at night. When not in use portable goods, including

The Setting

clothing, dinnerware, pots, knives, jewelry, tools, and cosmetics, were stored in baskets and chests that were likely often nearly brimming, and could be stored under other furniture such as tables. To allow for ventilation, the cooking area could have been in an open section such as the central court, or in the case of our model house, in the corridor just before the court. Small granaries were found in many of the homes, and these would probably have been close to the kitchen area as well. In general, we can expect that the common areas and reception rooms were located at the front of the house.

Village Animals

Domesticated animals were also an important part of life in an Ancient Egyptian town, and some may have been welcome members of the household. Dogs in particular were well loved and given names by the Egyptians, and probably shared the living quarters with their humans. Cats were also popular, though they were less likely to have been kept within the home as pets, but were admired for their usefulness in catching rats, mice, and other pests. In the Middle Kingdom cats are commonly depicted in the context of marshes, thickets, and fields, thus emphasizing their association with the outdoors. Textual and artistic representations of monkeys kept as pets abound in the Old and especially the New Kingdom, but are rare in the Middle Kingdom.³¹

Livestock also are found in many towns in Egypt today, but any possible areas designated for the housing of animals do not seem to have survived from within the town of Lahun. Neither did Petrie note any accumulations of dung that might have indicated a gathering of a particular species of animal, or of animal bones as evidence of slaughter. While there is evidence for pigs being farmed at Elephantine, Tell ed-Daba, Memphis, and Amarna, they have left no sign at Lahun.³² Middle Kingdom depictions of swineherds usually show them as outside the town, but the possibility cannot be ruled out that families at Lahun kept pigs within the town. This has recently been discovered to be the case in the Middle Kingdom town of Wah-sut at Abydos, where evidence for pigs has been found in the larger homes. As has been noted there, pigs breed quickly, and “requiring very little care, pigs efficiently converted organic waste into protein.”³³ At Lahun, if pigs were allowed to wander in the streets, they would have readily helped in the disposal of food waste, keeping the waste drains cleaner than might otherwise be the case.

Horses were not known in the Late Middle Kingdom, but donkeys would have formed an important part of the working life of many individuals in Lahun. Donkeys are depicted in Middle Kingdom decorated tombs, and are mentioned in texts such as those describing the expeditions to the great quarries of the Wadi Hammamat.³⁴ Most of the detailed testimony for their use derives from the textual evidence from the New Kingdom settlement of Deir el-Medina, but corroborating data from the Old to Middle Kingdoms indicates that donkeys would

The Setting

have played a similar role in Lahun. A recent study on donkeys by Janssen suggests that they were used for a wide variety of purposes.³⁵ Both male and female donkeys were critically important for the transportation of goods, especially heavy items. Water, wood, grain, hay, firewood, and dung would have been carried to the town by donkeys. Usually these goods would be loaded on the backs of donkeys, but there are rare references to donkeys pulling wagons as well. As well as using them for trampling and threshing grain, people could also profit both by selling and by renting out donkeys. While donkeys did not live pampered lives, they would have been valued and cared for – at least to some extent. There were cases of abuse, however, and Janssen's recent work on Deir el-Medina reveals one case where a donkey eventually died after being beaten with a stick, and notes a number of instances where donkeys died after having been rented out.

The documentation suggests that at night and when not working some donkeys were stabled. The structural remains of Lahun do not include any obvious zones for stables or pens within the town itself, but it has been suggested that some areas of the large estates would have been suitable for housing animals.³⁶ The dung of donkeys could have been collected for burning when dry from the unpaved streets or estate stables, and successfully used as a fuel.³⁷ Donkeys may also have been allowed to roam around outside the walls of the settlement near the floodplain, foraging on their own in the day, while for protection at night they would have been brought inside, perhaps into stables that were outside the town walls. Finally, the importance of donkeys in the daily lives of the Egyptians is highlighted by the fact that, at Deir el-Medina at any rate, they were given names.

Along with domesticated animals, Lahun would have had its share of wild visitors such as birds, butterflies, and bees, as well as less desirable creatures such as rats, mice, flies, ticks, fleas, spiders, scorpions, and the occasional snake. The walls that surrounded the town would have prevented any larger unwanted animals entering the town, leaving its inhabitants safe.

Sources

Millennia after the human and animal inhabitants of Lahun had left, a relative abundance of evidence testifying to their presence has survived. The outlines of the town and foundations of homes provide information on living and working quarters, as well as social stratification. In Lahun a veritable trove of texts was also discovered, which further enrich our understanding. Many of these will be referred to throughout this book, and one particular genre deserves to be noted – the accountancy texts. Though these documents are not often emphasized in discussions of Ancient Egypt, their importance in animating day-to-day life in any culture cannot be overemphasized. Though perhaps lacking in glamour and grace, these are the texts that can reveal what lies beneath the idealized

The Setting

image projected in formal literary texts and political statements. Collecting and analyzing a shopping list will give a much more realistic insight into a lifestyle than will even a direct interview during which positive elements are highlighted while other aspects that might be deemed more boring or less respectable are concealed.³⁸

While we do not have shopping lists from Lahun, more than half of the documents found there are hieratic papyri containing “administrative records, from commodity accounts to day-by-day copies of business letters and transactions (‘journals’).”³⁹ Their content reveals an administration concerned with registering what in Egypt were the main objects of control: people (as labor), grain, and livestock. Other staples of life such as tools, cloth, finer foods, and jewelry also appear.

The existence of many of the items documented in the textual evidence is corroborated by physical evidence. A wealth of objects remains, ranging from fragments of broken pottery vessels that were used repeatedly everyday to artifacts that are unique to this settlement and that raise more questions than they answer. Whenever possible, these objects will be used to illustrate life in that time and town. At times, however, examples must be drawn from other locations and times to present a fuller picture, and these will be duly noted. Interpretive problems will also be discussed, and indeed, this book begins with an aspect of life that is less readily visible than some of the others, and that is birth itself.

Notes

- 1 For a more detailed understanding of Egyptian history, see Shaw 2000 and Morkot 2005. For the Middle Kingdom in detail, see Grajetzki 2005.
- 2 Kemp 2006, 84.
- 3 For the sake of convenience this book follows the chronology of Quirke 2006.
- 4 The following historical overview is based largely on Grajetzki 2005 and Morkot 2005.
- 5 *Mastaba* is the Arabic word for “bench” and refers to tombs that had a rectangular mud-brick superstructure over the shafts leading to the tomb proper. The *mastaba* often had a cult chapel that was accessible to the family and friends of the deceased.
- 6 Gardiner 1947.
- 7 This is known as the Ramesseum Onomasticon because it was found in a box, along with other texts, in a shaft under a storeroom at the Ramesseum on the west bank of Thebes.
- 8 Quirke 2004a, 3–4.
- 9 Ptah is a creator god; Thoth is the chief registrar and god responsible for recording judgments; the primeval waters from which the initial act of creation took place are also called Nun; Ra is the main sun god; the “god’s books” are hieroglyphs; and the “House of Life” refers to the scriptoria where sacred knowledge was stored.
- 10 Humans are not unique in this regard – even ants spatially organize piles of corpses in consistent patterns (Theraulaz et al. 2002).

The Setting

- 11 This book largely follows the standard definitions of “class” (socio-economic level) and “status” (the social standing of an individual or group within a class) that are explained in Richards 2005, 16.
- 12 These issues will be discussed at a later point in this book.
- 13 For an accessible presentation see Grajetzki 2005, 139–65.
- 14 Egypt was divided into 42 regions called “nomes,” and the governor of each was called a “nomarch.”
- 15 See now Hofmann 2005.
- 16 Hofmann 2005, 257.
- 17 Grajetzki 2005, 149–51.
- 18 Richards 2005, 178.
- 19 The figures are based on those in Uphill 1988, 27–33.
- 20 See most recently Quirke 2006.
- 21 F. Arnold 1996, 13–14.
- 22 F. Arnold 1996, 13–14.
- 23 Quirke 2006, 54.
- 24 D. Arnold 2003, 110–12.
- 25 The following is based on Quirke 2006; Kemp 2005, 211–21; O’Connor 1997, 389–400; von Pilgrim 1996b; Bietak 1996; F. Arnold 1996; Uphill 1988; Petrie et al. 1890. Extensive research on Deir el-Medina has been published by Lynn Meskell (see for example Meskell 1999).
- 26 F. Arnold 1989.
- 27 Petrie labeled the rows of houses in the western quarter in alphabetical order from south to north and called them “ranks.”
- 28 Petrie et al. 1890, 24.
- 29 F. Arnold 1989, 83–4.
- 30 F. Arnold 1989, 77–8.
- 31 R. Janssen and Janssen 1989.
- 32 For pig consumption at Giza see Redding and Hunt 2007.
- 33 Rossel 2006, 41.
- 34 Osborn and Osbornová 1998, 132–6.
- 35 See J. Janssen 2005. The following section is based on this work, particularly 69–74.
- 36 Quirke 2006, 67.
- 37 See Delwen Samuel’s experiments with dung cakes for fuel and palm fronds for tinder in Samuel 1989. Donkey dung is a versatile ingredient and was used as temper in clay, and as an ingredient in a recipe to stop a woman from bleeding and seeing bad dreams.
- 38 Today, credit card companies and frequent buyer cards are well aware of this and use data on prior purchases to target consumers.
- 39 Collier and Quirke 2006, ii.