

New Kingdom Egypt society during the Ramesside period

An exploration of Ramses the Great through *Ramses & the Gold of the Pharaohs* will provide you with an insightful understanding of Egyptian society during the Ramesside period. Throughout your visit you will be able to see a range of ancient sources that reveal the importance of the pharaoh, military, economy, religion and the cultural and everyday life of Egyptians. Before your visit, this booklet will take you through many parts of the syllabus and provide you with the opportunity to engage more effectively with the objects when you arrive at the exhibition.

Geographical setting and significant sites

Egypt was rich in natural resources, relying on the Nile to flood each year and dump layers of fertile silt which created rich farming land. The main crops included wheat and barley; however, a range of vegetables and fruits were also grown by farmers such as lettuces, leeks, figs and grapes. The river also provided a hunting ground for wildlife throughout the year.

Using sources A and B, discuss what the ancient sources reveal about the importance of the Nile to Egyptian society with your peers.

Egypt has soil which is black and easily breaks up, seeing that it is in truth mud and silt brought down from Ethiopia by the river . . . It is certain that they gather fruit from the earth with less labour than any other men . . . for they have no labour in breaking up furrows with a plough nor in hoeing nor in any other of those labours which other men have about a crop; but when the river flood and waters their fields, each man sows his own field and turns it to swine, and when he has trodden the seed into the ground, he waits for the harvest; and when he has threshed the corn by means of the swine, then he gathers it in.

Source A: Herodotus, Histories, Book 2

The History of Herodotus, By Herodotus (gutenberg.org)



Source B: Menna and Family hunting in the marshes in the Tomb of Menna
Nina M. Davies, CCO, via Wikimedia Commons

Social Structure and Political Organisation

Role and image of the pharaoh and the concept of ma'at

During New Kingdom Egypt, the pharaoh was both a representative of the gods and the head of state, wielding absolute authority over their people. Their main responsibility was to maintain ma'at, the universal order in the world, which involved upholding concepts such as truth, harmony and balance. Ma'at was preserved through properly honouring their pantheon of gods by observing religious rituals and festivals, effective administration of the government and protecting Egypt's borders.

Pharaohs were the son of Re and the earthly reincarnation of Horus, son of Osiris. To the Egyptians, the pharaoh was a god themselves and mediated between the people of Egypt and their deities. At the exhibition you will be given the opportunity to see a range of objects that depict Ramses as a god including the innermost sanctuary of Abu Simbel. Ramses II is seated alongside the sun god Re, the chief state-deity Amun and Ptah, craftsmen god of Memphis, three of the most important Egyptian deities.



Source C: Ramses II sits alongside Egyptian gods Ra, Amun-Ra and Ptah in the inner sanctuary of Abu Simbel. Diego Delso, CC BY-SA 4.0 <<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/>>, via Wikimedia Commons

Considering the divine role of the pharaoh, what does source C reveal about how Ramses constructed his public image?

Role of the vizier and members of the religious and administrative elites

Egyptian government was a complex system that was composed of administration of the royal estate, as well as the military, religious and civil matters. Pharaohs would typically appoint members of the nobility or exceptionally talented 'outsiders' as the head of each branch.

The vizier was the most powerful position after the pharaoh and was the administrative head of the government. Their role is expressed through the 18th Dynasty text 'Instruction of Rekhmire' also known as 'Installation of the Vizier' or 'Duties of the Vizier'. Rekhmire was the vizier to Thutmose III and Amenhotep II and had a detailed text inscribed on the walls of his tomb which recounts his personal narrative, how he attained the position of vizier and how viziers should serve in office.

Use the internet to find a translation of 'Instruction of Rekhmire' and find extracts that relate to the following roles.

Kings Deputy: personal executive to the pharaoh, providing them with communications regarding Egypt.

Head of palace administration: responsible for running the palace complex including security.

Head of civil administration: responsible for finances, agriculture, legal matters and construction.

Due to the growing Egyptian Empire during the New Kingdom, Egypt had a vizier for Upper Egypt and a vizier for Lower Egypt throughout most of the Ramesside period.

At *Ramses & the Gold of Pharaohs* you will come face to face with a block statue of Vizier Paser (Source F), who served under Seti I and Ramses II.

Block statues were common memorial statues in New Kingdom Egypt. They consisted of a squatting figure, and the simple shape created many flat surfaces that could be used for inscriptions.

Here, Paser is represented holding emblems of the Theban triad which consisted of Amun, Mut and Khonsu. Paser was vizier of the south in Thebes and later became High Priest of Amun. He was responsible for overseeing the work of royal tomb builders who resided in Deir el-Medina, including the tombs of Seti I and Ramses II in the nearby Valley of the Kings.



Source F: Block Statue of Vizier Paser

Other administrative positions within government included administrative, religious and military roles, each of which worked together in a complex bureaucracy that saw the smooth running of Egypt.

The Chancellor who administered the royal estates was supported by a range of officials such as the Chief Steward who supplied the palace with food. Other roles were dedicated to the running of the empire and its relationships with its vassal states. These included the Viceroy of Kush who was the head of administration in Nubia and the overseer of the treasuries, who during Ramses II's time was married to Ramses II's sister.

Due to the importance of religious practice in Egypt, the high priests of the major temples were extremely important, and the roles were often given to members of the elite, such as Paser, in reward for royal service. Temples received loot from military campaigns and employed thousands of individuals, giving the priesthood considerable political and economic power.

Paser is not the only priest you will meet at the exhibition. You will come across a kneeling statue of Khaemwaset holding a figure of Ptah. Khaemwaset was Ramses II's son by his second Great Wife, Isitnofret, and was Crown Prince and High Priest of Ptah.



Source G: Statue of Khaemwaset Holding a figure of Ptah

Military Elites and the Army

The pharaoh was the head of the army and often appointed their son as the commander-in-chief who would accompany them on military campaigns. Ramses II accompanied his father and pharaoh Seti I on his campaigns in Syria-Palestine, providing him with the experience to launch his own campaigns into the region, most famously at the Battle of Kadesh. The viceroy of Kush was also responsible for a military force in Nubia, who would deal with revolts in the area and assist the northern and southern corps when the need arose. The importance of the military meant that pharaohs could come from a military background including Ramses I, the founder of the 19th Dynasty and grandfather to Ramses II.

By the 19th Dynasty the military was a professional army and was composed of archers, spearmen, axemen, slingers and chariotry. Ramses maintained four divisions of the army named after the gods Amun, Re, Ptah and Seth. Much like the equestrian class in other ancient societies, the chariotry was comprised of the nobility as the individual had to buy, equip and maintain their own chariotry. Other components in the military included the naval fleet which was initially used as transportation in the 18th Dynasty, but later used in naval battles by the time of Ramses III.

What does the evidence reveal about role of Egyptian elites and military? In your response explicitly refer to three objects from sources D, E, F and G and your own knowledge.

Role and Status of Women

Royal women enjoyed high status in Egypt based on their relationship with the pharaoh, the most prominent being the pharaoh’s mother, wives, sisters and daughters. Royal women were extremely influential in New Kingdom Egypt, and queens were highly visible. During the 17th Dynasty Ahhotep II ruled Egypt as regent upon the death of her husband, Ahmose; Hatshepsut rose to the position of pharaoh in the 18th Dynasty, and Nefertari attained the religious title *God’s wife of Amun* in the 19th Dynasty. Royal women in the Ramesside continued this tradition, enjoying status and wealth, holding religious titles and wielding political power. Queen Tausret, for instance, assumed the role of pharaoh after the death of her husband Seti II and his heir Siptah.

Source H shows the ring of Queen Tausret, which you will see at the exhibition. How might an historian use the source to consider the role and status of women during the Ramesside period?



Source H: Gold Ring with a Scarab

Our knowledge of non-royal women comes from sources written by men and often hold stereotypical views. Their main role would involve management of the household and child-rearing. Legal texts and tax records reveal that women were theoretically equal under the law and were able to enter contracts, own property independently, initiate court cases and divorce. Women would derive their social status from their male relatives, providing upper-class women with opportunities to become priestesses and chantresses, while lower-class women might work alongside their husbands. .

Discuss what the difference in colour of the following two objects at the exhibition say about the role of women compared to that of men.



Source I: Jasper (red) male hand



Source J: yellow portion of a female fist

Scribes and Artisans

The complex administrative system of the Ramesside period was dependent on scribes who could read and write hieroglyphics and hieratic. Scribes were employed across the government including temples, the palace complex and in the military. Training to become a scribe began at an early age and provided individuals with political opportunity to move up the social ladder.

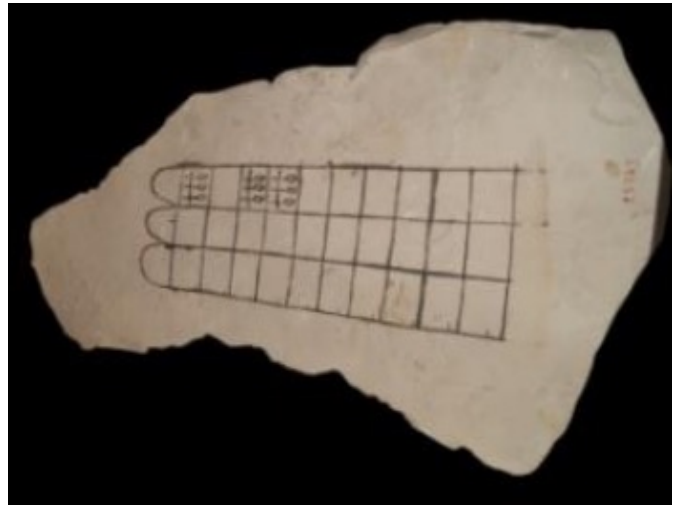
Due to the extensive building programs of the Ramesside period, there was a need for skilled artisans to work on building projects and to create the luxury items that filled the tombs of the royal family. Many of these artisans lived in Deir el- Medina, a worker's village for those who built the tombs at the nearby Valley of the Kings and Valley of the Queens.

At the exhibition you will be given a rare glimpse into the everyday lives of these artisans through a range of ostraca, which were discarded pieces of pottery or limestone flakes on which they sketched or wrote designs, building plans, doodle or lists.

Contrast what the ostraca reveal about Egyptian social structure as opposed to other objects you have already studied.



Source K: Ostrakon depicting a car herding geese



Source L: Ostrakon depicting a senet board (an ancient Egyptian board game)

The Economy

Importance of the Nile and agricultural workers

The economy of Egypt was based on agriculture and dependent on the Nile and its annual flood. The flood left silt along the banks of the Nile known as the 'Black Land', which was used to grow crops.

Agricultural workers would work eight months of the year, planting, watering and harvesting crops which would feed the people and sustain Egypt. Due to the constant need for agricultural workers, prisoners of war, slaves or criminals were also used alongside freemen. Seti I, the father of Ramses II, decreed that forced labour on temple lands could be a punishment for crime, while Ramses III used prisoners of war.

The Nile was undoubtedly the most important feature of Ancient Egypt. We have already discussed how it supported agriculture; however, it also supported the economy in other ways.

Complete some research on how the Nile supported the economy through animal husbandry and transport.

Animal husbandry

Transport

Crafts, Industry and technological developments

You will have an opportunity to view items constructed by these craftsmen during your visit to the exhibition including objects made of wood, stone and metal.

Craftsmen were engaged in the manufacture of everything from chariots to jewellery, made from materials found throughout Egypt or imported from its neighbours and vassal states. Some were engaged in producing household items, while others lived in workshops of royal estates or the workers' town of Deir el-Medina.

Timber was imported from Phoenicia and Nubia and was used to construct planks for boats and wheels for chariots, as well as to make weapons, coffins and household objects such as doors, among a range of other items.

Stone workers used local materials such as limestone, alabaster, granite, obsidian and schist to produce a range of objects that lasted much longer than those created of wood. These included:

- lintels, columns and facades for tombs and temples.
- obelisks and statues of pharaohs, gods and sphinxes
- inscriptions and reliefs on walls
- stone vessels such as cups and bowls

Metals such as gold and silver were used for objects for the noble and royal families. These objects included coffins, jewellery, death masks, gold overlay that wrapped chariots and other decorative items. Bronze, an alloy of copper and tin, was used to create weapons due its hardness. Metals were also used for utilitarian objects such as mirrors and cups.

Festivals

Festivals took place when the images of gods that typically resided in the inner sanctuaries of temples, were taken from town to town.

For the following festivals, complete research to find out the following:

- What does the festival celebrate?
- What took place at the festival?

Festival of Opet

Beautiful Feast of the Valley

Heb-sed Festival

Funerary texts

Proper funerary rights and preparations allowed individuals to overcome the dangerous journey through the Underworld in order to reach the Afterlife, of Field of Reeds. At the end of the journey, the deceased would stand in the Hall of Two Truths, where they would be judged by 42 assessor gods and have their heart weighed against the feather of Ma'at. Any error would cause their heart to be devoured by Ammit, ending their chance of entering the Field of Reeds. To assist those in this undertaking, funerary texts such as the Book of the Dead could be purchased which included spells, incantations and directions to enable safe travels through the Underworld.

The following are illustrations from the Book of the Dead found in a range of New Kingdom tombs from the Ramesside period. You will have the opportunity to view the coffin of Sennedjem at the exhibition, which was painted with a range of scenes from the Book of the Dead.

Using the sources and your own research locate elements of Egyptian funerary customs and afterlife beliefs in these illustrations



Source U: Tomb of Sennedjem Anonymous Unknown author, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons



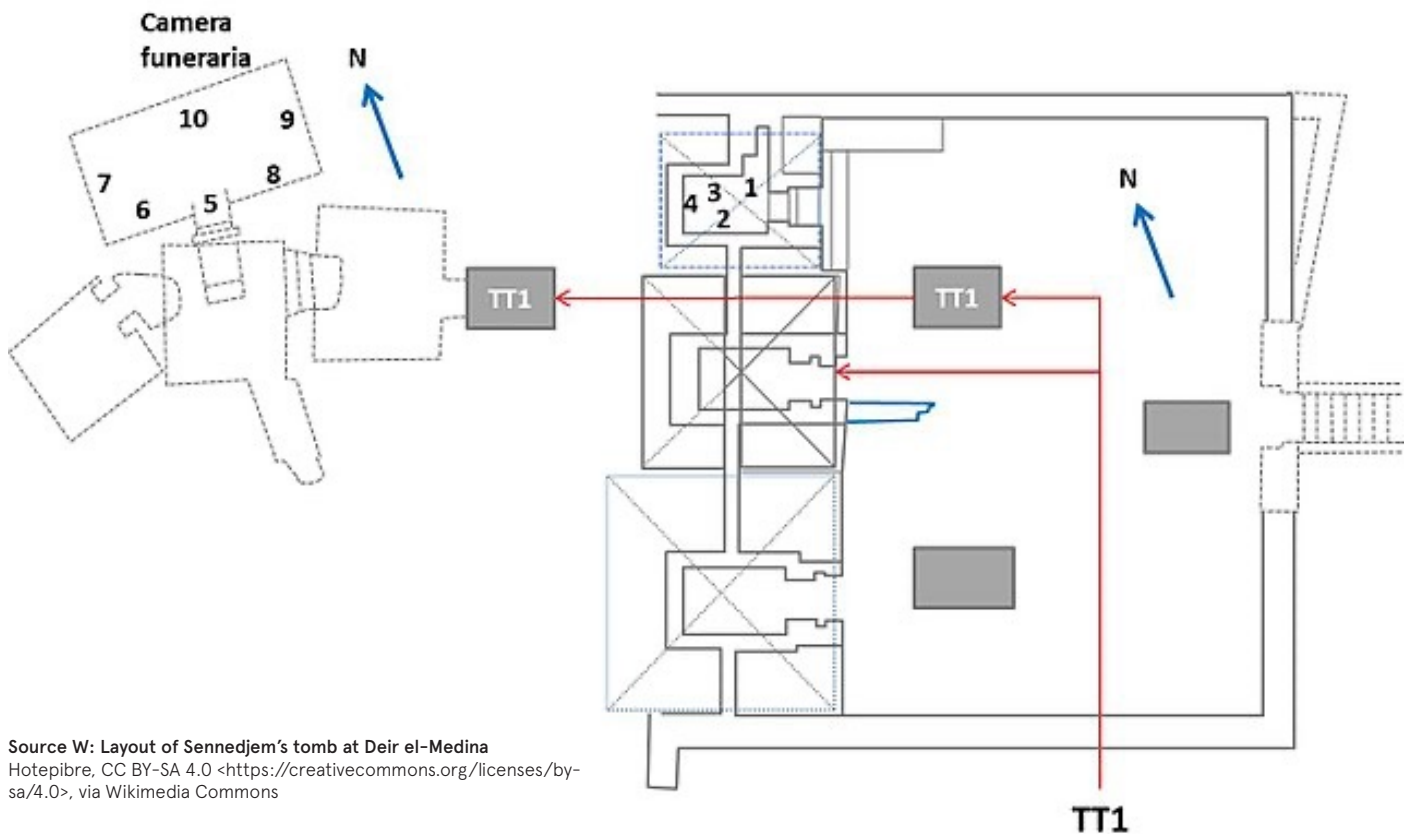
Source V: Papyrus of Ani British Museum, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons

Tombs

Tombs were seen as the eternal home for the deceased, meaning their construction and decoration were extremely important to the individual. During the Ramesside period, the primary burial place for the royal family was the Valley of the Kings on the west bank of the Nile. Tombs of nobles were cut into the cliffs nearby, with the highest officials buried on the upper slopes while those of lower rank were buried below.

You will have the opportunity to explore the decorations within Sennedjem's tomb at the exhibition (see Source U and P). Sennedjem worked on the tombs of Seti I and possibly Ramses II, bearing the title "servant in the Place of Truth", indicating his work with the royal tomb builders at Deir el-Medina where his tomb is located. Sennedjem's tomb is a rock-cut tomb typical of the Ramesside period, consisting of three pyramid chapels on the western side within a walled courtyard and a shaft that led to four burial chambers underground. The tomb is significant because it was undisturbed and contained over 20 burials belonging to Sennedjem's family, with illustrations of the *Book of the Dead* adorning the walls.

Using the layout of Sennedjem's tomb and the information above, label where the courtyard, pyramid chapels and burial chambers are.



Source W: Layout of Sennedjem's tomb at Deir el-Medina
 Hotepibre, CC BY-SA 4.0 <<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/>>, via Wikimedia Commons

Temples

As religion dictated the cosmic system of which Egyptians believed themselves to be part, honouring the gods ensured the peace and prosperity of Egypt. Pharaohs took a particular interest in temple construction and decoration which safeguarded their afterlife and was a political statement to their greatness and divine nature. Temples were the earthly home for gods and were modelled after the Egyptian creation story in which the world was created from atop a primeval hill in total darkness.

Temples were constructed on an upward slope and typically consisted of:

- an open and well-lit courtyard that was generally open to the public
- a colonnaded hypostyle hall which functioned as a transitional space between the publicly accessible areas and the restricted areas. This space represented the papyrus reeds that grew alongside the primeval hill.
- chapels were dedicated to associated deities of the primary god within the temple.
- the inner sanctuary of the god where their image and barque were kept in darkness and attended by a select few priests. This space represented the primeval hill.

Large temples such as the ones at Luxor, Karnak and Thebes included living quarters, workshops and other buildings to accommodate the large number of craftsmen and priests that worked there.

Mortuary temples were built to worship a deceased pharaoh who became the son of Osiris upon their death. They were built while the pharaoh was still alive were the location for their Heb-Sed celebration and the visit by the statue of Amun during the Beautiful Feast of the Valley.

When the pharaoh had died, priests would offer food, drink and objects to the deceased pharaoh and maintain their statues by way of washing, anointing and clothing them.

You will be able to explore items from a range of temples and learn about Ramses II's mortuary temple, the Ramesseum.

Using your own research, compare and contrast the Karnak temple complex and the Ramesseum.

Cultural life

Art

Art which included sculpture and wall painting typically had a religious and political purpose. Wall paintings during the Ramesside period were typical of the Egyptian style with the faces and legs of individuals in profile while the body was full frontal. Paintings showed natural scenes, religious themes and royal propaganda, often depicting the individual subject as successful as they observe the world around them.

Sculptures were similarly religious and political in function. Created by craftsmen of stone, pottery, faience and wood, sculptures served multiple purposes. They consisted of statues of nobles and royals made to honour them in life, and states that substituted for their bodies after death. Other statues included individuals such as scribes and workers who would continue their tasks in the afterlife. Royal sculptures included colossal sculptures of pharaohs and their families and were used to signify their political importance.

You will see the following examples of art at the exhibition. What does the evidence reveal about the religious and political role of art?



Source X: Painted and Gilded Limestone Relief of Deities and Cartouches of Ramses II



Source Y: Painted Granodiorite Upper Torso and Head of Merenptah

Jewellery

Jewellery including rings, earrings, pectorals, necklaces, girdles, amulets and bracelets were worn by both men and women and most social classes. Egyptians were often buried with some form of jewellery, with the materials and quality indicating the status and wealth of the owner. Wealthy individuals wore items made of gold, semi-precious and precious stones, while those from lower social classes wore jewellery made of bronze, wood, faience, clay and other cheaper substitutes. Much about Egyptian jewellery is learned from the wall paintings that depicted it, such as in the tomb of Rekhmire which showed workers drilling beads with bow drills while others string them to create a necklace.



Source Z: Stringing and Drilling Beads in the Tomb of Rekhmire Nina M. Davies, CC0, via Wikimedia Commons

Jewellery was not only aesthetic, but some were designed to protect the wearer from disease and evil and was thought to bring good fortune. It could also be symbolic of Egyptian beliefs about rebirth, as seen through the motif of the lotus flower on gold jewellery found at Dashur.

At *Ramses & the Gold of the Pharaohs*, you will see a range of jewellery from the Ramesside period, but also examples from the Middle Kingdom and the Graeco-Roman period.