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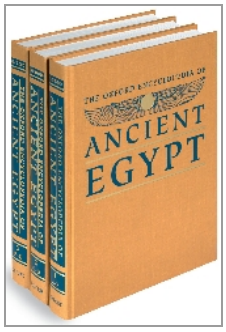

The Oxford Encyclopedia of Ancient Egypt
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Work Force.

The prodigious building achievements of the ancient Egyptians are clear evidence of a well-organized and well-supplied work force. The labor recruitment and organizational skills that made these feats possible also supplied and allocated labor for other state and nonstate projects. However, as with all aspects of Egyptian society, it is the elite levels of administration that are most visible in the evidence; the character, origins, and experiences of the work force itself are rarely recorded.

Evidence

The widest variety of information about the organization of labor survives from the mortuary sphere. Both royal and nonroyal tombs sometimes contain archaeological evidence of the organization of their creators in the form of patterns in quarry marks or characteristic artistic styles. The numbers and hierarchy of a complement of tomb builders and cult functionaries can be seen in the distribution of house sizes in the planned towns that were built in or near cemeteries to accommodate them, and sometimes also in the architecture of the institutions that employed them. The so-called scenes of daily life found in tomb-chapels depict people working at a variety of tasks, although this evidence must be used carefully.

Textual sources give a different kind of detail. Tomb autobiographies and lists of titles found in tomb-chapels mention a few titles that can be related to labor organization. Legal texts that describe the construction of tombs and assert the satisfaction of the workers with their remuneration were sometimes recorded on chapel walls. Mortuary cult personnel were occasionally granted exemptions from taxes and corvée labor in decrees that specify the kinds of labor that might otherwise be required.

The evidence outside of cemeteries is scarcer. State-sponsored settlements for workers in remote areas have been excavated. Rare administrative papyri record names of workers, assignments of duties, or pay distributions. Literary works may, in passing, give information on labor and its typical organization. School texts often give exaggerated

accounts of the horrors of manual labor in order to frighten students into studying for administrative positions. Quarry texts record the officials and sometimes also the workers who took part in such expeditions; isolated tools are inscribed with the names of the administrative units that used them.

Terminology for Work

Philology can also suggest patterns in the way work was viewed. Several Egyptian words for "work" are attested at different periods. The most basic appears to be *kȝt*, which seems to have the same general application as the English term. It is often used for construction activities (as implied by its determinative, a man carrying a basket on his head), but it can also be applied to crafts, agriculture, and service, and the work it describes can be done by animals, gods, and the king, as well as ordinary people. The alternative term *bȝk* seems to imply heavier physical labor and menial service, although in the abstract *bȝk* can also be done to produce articles of craftsmanship. *Bȝk* can also be applied to taxes and foreign tribute, and hence may have overtones of labor that is owed; it was not done by kings or gods. The nouns *bȝk* and *bȝkt* ("male and female servants/slaves") exist; there are no corresponding nouns derived from *kȝt*.

Rarer and possibly more specialized words include *pss*, which is used only in the New Kingdom. It is always written in group writing, and so may represent a foreign borrowing. The term *š* in one Old Kingdom text, and perhaps also in several titles, is used to describe stone-carving; it is unclear whether it has a wider application. *Sšr* also occurs in the Old Kingdom; its determinative suggests a connection with cloth, and it may refer to work paid for in that commodity.

Members of the Work Force

Work in the public sphere was generally done by men. Women took part in domestic and agricultural labor, but after the Old Kingdom they are rarely seen to work outside of the home except as weavers, as servants, or as musicians in temples or at private parties. Even during the Old Kingdom, when artwork and titles sometimes suggest more extensive work outside the home, women seem to have been employed mainly in service activities in the local economy, rather than being attached professionally to state institutions. In exceptional cases, women in the Old Kingdom filled such roles as stewards of the estates of other women, priestesses, and physicians. However, most work done by women was an extension of their traditional household activities: child care, weaving, sewing, and entertaining with music. There is no unambiguous evidence for prostitution in the pharaonic period, although it has generally been assumed that prostitutes existed. Lists of laborers recruited for state projects sometimes include women's names, but it is unclear what services they performed.

According to the Demotic wisdom text recorded on the Insinger Papyrus (17,22–18,3), a boy would begin to work when he was about ten years old, for a ten-year training period. The years from twenty to thirty would be spent accruing sufficient property to support himself and his family, and from thirty to forty gaining wisdom, leaving his last sixty years to enjoy the fruits of his labor and his knowledge. This chronology relates to professional and elite occupations (and is idealized as to the length of life expected); nonetheless, it suggests that the working life of most men was comparatively short, from twenty to forty. If a man followed the advice of other sages, he would marry at age twenty, so that by the time he was forty he would have a son nearing his prime working years, and so could retire.

Because of biblical references to the labors of the Hebrew people in Egypt, there has been considerable interest in the foreign component of the Egyptian work force. It is clear that foreign captives were brought to Egypt as early as the Old Kingdom, and the Palermo Stone records that Snefru brought back seven thousand Nubians and eleven hundred Libyans, presumably from military campaigns. At least in the New Kingdom, foreign captives were sometimes awarded to successful military men, for whom they presumably worked. Foreigners working for private individuals would mostly have been engaged in agricultural work, but the king may also have retained some captives for state labor. Other non-

Egyptian laborers may have been voluntary immigrants, and among these there probably were craftsmen skilled in trades and methods unknown to the Egyptians. The foreign names appearing in some Middle Kingdom lists may also have belonged to voluntary immigrants. One particular class of foreign workers were the *mḏ3y* (*medjay*) of Nubia, who seem to have served as policemen throughout Egypt in the Middle Kingdom and later. Although the word implies a Nubian origin, the term may have come to be a professional label, so that all members of it were called *medjay*, regardless of their ethnic origin.

Types of Labor

The following discussion deals with classes of workers as defined in the Egyptian socio-economic system.

Scribal and administrative labor

The class of literate men formed the elite of Egyptian society. Scribal training was the principal engine of upward social mobility, and carried a great deal of prestige. The schools supplied the state, the temples, and the administrative levels of the army with their personnel, so training was broad and unspecialized. Advancement seems to have been to some extent merit-based, although family and social relationships were also important. Outside large institutions, scribes might also work for high officials as stewards or as officials in their mortuary cults. It is widely assumed that a class of independent scribes-for-hire was available to the general population for writing letters and dealing with legal documents; however, there is little evidence for scribes who were not attached to an institution.

Crafts and other skilled labor

The evidence for crafts labor and similar specialized nonagricultural labor is both limited and biased. Labor of this sort is often depicted in relief carvings and models placed in tombs and tomb-chapels. These figurines were meant to provide the deceased tomb owner with such labor and skills in the afterlife. Although these depictions are probably accurate as to the processes employed, the happiness of the laborers, their dress, and even their numbers may be distorted. The textual sources are even more biased, because they consist mainly of descriptions of crafts work intended to inspire students to study hard for a bureaucratic career in order to avoid such employment. Such texts as the *Satire on the Trades* (Papyrus Sallier II) emphasize the unpleasant nature of crafts work. The archaeological evidence for such work is less biased but scanty. At Giza, bakeries and other food-processing areas have been excavated, in addition to areas that may have been used for sculpture and other crafts connected with supplying tombs and mortuary cults. The short-lived New Kingdom site of Amarna has more extensive evidence of workshops, and smaller installations are known from the sites of el-Lisht, Malqata, and Kataana-Qantir.

Both the archaeological remains and the tomb models seem to indicate that most crafts production was done in small workshops. With larger institutions, these workshops were not enlarged, but duplicated many times to achieve the desired level of production. Such a modular system prevented any significant economies of scale, but it allowed a well-established system of training and administration to be adapted for the production of any quantity of goods desired. In addition to cemeteries, workshops might be found attached to temples, to the palace, and to other large institutions, as well as to the estates of elite officials. Depictions of people buying and selling crafts objects in markets suggest that workshops of this type also existed independently, supplying the crafts needed by the local population. These independent workshops were probably the model emulated by the larger state institutions.

Domestic crafts production also existed. In the Old Kingdom (and probably later periods as well), women could sell cloth produced in their homes, both in the open market and to large institutions. (The control of women over cloth and clothing is emphasized in two stories, the Webaoner story of the Westcar Papyrus and the *Story of the Two Brothers*; in both stories, women attempting to seduce men offer them clothing.) The textual evidence from Deir el-Medina also suggests that small-scale production of funerary equipment was done in the home by some state workers, as a

sideline.

Agricultural labor

By far the largest component of the Egyptian labor force was involved in food production, mainly of wheat. Tomb scenes routinely depict the sowing of seed, plowing it under, harvesting, threshing with donkeys, and winnowing of grain. (This last task alone is usually shown being performed by women.) Most Egyptian accounts of this kind of labor (in satirical works, such as Papyrus Sallier I) depict it as undesirable, unrewarding work, although some account must be taken of the didactic purpose of such descriptions.

Most agricultural laborers were probably tenant farmers, who paid a part of their crops to a landlord and another part to tax collectors for the state. In some cases (for example, as reflected in the Old Kingdom exemption decree from Dahshur), cult functionaries and possibly other low-level officials themselves worked the lands of their institution's endowment (presumably rent-free), as remuneration for their nonagricultural work; such workers would have had to return a portion of their crops to their institutions, in addition to paying any taxes from which the cult had not been exempted.

Some agricultural workers may have worked for private entrepreneurs, as suggested by the letters of Hekanakhte, one such entrepreneur. He seems to have rented a variety of different types of land (to create a “diversified portfolio”), and then had them cultivated by a group of dependents. In exchange for providing the security of the rent, he presumably pocketed a large share of the proceeds. The details of this arrangement are, however, somewhat unclear. While texts like Papyrus Sallier I and the Hekanakhte papyri tend to depict farming as done by a single family or household, tomb depictions imply a more communal organization, with plowing, sowing, and reaping done by large groups of men working simultaneously. These scenes suggest that a different kind of farming was done on large estates, with the owner or lessor of the land providing a large number of workers to farm the land together.

It is unclear to what degree these workers, like medieval serfs, were tied to the land. Autobiographical texts of favored officials state that the king rewarded them with land and with people, presumably to work it. Many of the men so rewarded were soldiers, in which cases the people granted with the land were presumably captured foreigners, and tantamount to slave labor. It seems likely that even Egyptian peasants' choice of where or whether to farm was limited. A telling passage occurs in the story the *Eloquent Peasant* in which the complaints of the peasant against a powerful steward are dismissed because “perhaps it is one of his people who has gone to someone else besides him.”

Corvée labor

Work for the state seems often to have been staffed by workers drafted from the general population. These groups were probably summoned for projects such as mining and quarrying, military expeditions, the building of pyramids and other state construction projects, and for domestic maintenance such as road-building and work on canals and the irrigation system. Corvée labor is attested by decrees exempting members of institutions such as temples from the draft and, rarely, by administrative texts listing the laborers.

To judge from the long list of official ranks to whom exemption decrees are addressed, it is clear that a variety of government departments had the authority to call up workers, although the actual recruitment (and sometimes the supervision) of these laborers seems to have been done by local officials. The recruits are often referred to as *nfrw*, “young men,” so age may have been a criterion of selection for the draft.

The work of such conscripts is probably illustrated by the texts found on *shabtis*, tomb figures who are said to answer, should the tomb owner in the afterlife be drafted “to cultivate fields, to flood riverbanks, to carry sand from the east to the west.” This text, from chapter 6 of the *Book of Going Forth by Day* (*Book of the Dead*) probably reflects the most common tasks assigned to corvée laborers: agricultural work, maintenance of the irrigation system, and transport of materials. That such substitute figures are provided in tombs implies that the tomb owner may have used similar

substitutes during his lifetime to avoid these menial tasks. In the later New Kingdom, the large crews of *shabtis* provided in tombs were given overseers, one for every ten men. This suggests that close supervision was needed for this unwilling labor force.

It has often been thought, based on statements by Greek travelers, that state construction work, particularly on royal pyramids, was done only during the months of the inundation, when fields were flooded and agricultural laborers would be available. This assumption is not supported by the dates sometimes recorded in mason's marks (which seem to cluster in the other seasons) or by the system of rotating service that seems to have been in force. Moreover, the months of July, August, and September, during which the inundation occurred, would not be the most efficient months for hard physical labor in the desert.

Slave labor

As noted above, foreign captives were brought forcibly to Egypt, and formed a pool of slave labor available to the state and favored individuals whom the state wished to reward. The term *ḥm-nswt*, literally “king's slave,” which was often used to describe agricultural workers, may refer to people so designated. It is unclear whether these people's servitude was permanent or more limited, and whether their children had similar status. Nor is it clear what rights, if any, they had. That maltreating them was seen as objectionable is clear from a passage in the “Negative Confession,” given in chapter 125 of the New Kingdom *Book of Going Forth by Day*. There the deceased claims, “I have not denounced a slave (*ḥm*) to his supervisor.” Nonetheless, the fact that this sin had to be denied indicates that it was sometimes committed.

Another type of laborer who had little control over the conditions of his labor was the peasant attached to a piece of land. In addition to being bestowed on a landlord to work a grant of land, laborers were sometimes given by the king to supply personnel for other gifts. An example is the Old Kingdom autobiography which records the gift of a carrying chair that includes the people to carry it. The rights of these laborers were presumably similarly limited.

The words *ḥm* and *ḥmt*, usually translated “male and female slaves,” seem to have had a broad application. (The root is probably even related to the term used to refer to the king: *ḥm.f* “his majesty.”) In many cases it may be wiser to translate the word “servant” rather than “slave,” because the conditions of employment are so uncertain, and may differ significantly from better-known occurrences of slavery. This is particularly true of Egyptians who are assigned this status. Although legal texts of the late New Kingdom and later attest to cases where entire families were sold into perpetual slavery to pay off their debts, it is not clear to what extent this was an innovation, perhaps due to foreign influence. Earlier texts do not mention such sales, even though several classes of people with very limited autonomy clearly existed.

Administration of the Work Force

State labor of all kinds in Egypt tended to be closely supervised by a hierarchy of administrators extending from the lowest level supervisor of ten workers through the “overseer of works” of the central government, who was usually directly responsible to the king. Scribes painstakingly recorded the progress of the work, the presence or absence of the workmen, the distribution of rations and payment, and the breakage and replacement of equipment. Unfortunately, few of these records have survived, and the reconstruction of the organization of labor in different periods of Egyptian history depends on a few chance discoveries.

Old Kingdom

From the middle of the first dynasty through the end of the Old Kingdom, there are references to *phyles* (Egyptian *zꜣw*), a system of labor organization used to schedule several groups of workers, notably royal and nonroyal mortuary cult functionaries, construction crews, and possibly palace attendants. The system consisted of five named groups

(*wr, sṯ, wʒḏt, nḏs*, and *jmj-nfrt*) that worked in a repeating monthly rotation. (These names have suggested to some that phyles were originated as boat crews, but in fact the similarity of the terminologies seems to have been secondary.) In some cases, these groups were divided so that the cycle lasted ten rather than five months. It has been suggested (Roth, 1991) that these groups originated in predynastic clan groups that supported the king, and that membership remained kin-based even after the clans had evolved into a system of service that allowed the king to spread his patronage among a larger number of people. (The non-royal applications of the system were presumably adopted as a status symbol; tomb owners borrowed the expensive royal system to display their wealth.)

In fourth dynasty construction crews, phyles were part of a more complex hierarchy. The smallest groups were probably called "tens," and were responsible for moving individual blocks of stone. They may have consisted of varying numbers of men, although it should be noted that *shabtis* were organized into groups of ten in later periods. There were apparently four or more such groups in each phyle, each of which was supervised by an "overseer of ten." The level of organization above the phyle was the *ꜥpr*, or "gang," of which there were two for every large section of the project, possibly so that competition between them would maintain the most efficient pace of the work. These gangs had names built on the names of the reigning king, such as "the companions of Khufu," or "the drunkards of Menkaure" (although joking names like the latter seem to have been confined to masons' marks, and do not appear in the monumental depictions). The titles *wr 10 šmꜥw* ("chief of Upper Egyptian tens") and *jmj-r ʒwšmꜥw* ("overseer of Upper Egyptian phyles") suggests that a similar system was used to administer corvée labor on state projects in Upper Egypt. (The five named phyles do not seem to have been used outside the Memphite region, except on projects organized from Memphis.) Other systems of rotating service are also known from the Old Kingdom. For his mortuary cult and the cult of Hathor of Tehne, the priest of Hathor, Nikaꜥankh, organized a twelve-month rotation of his wife and children.

Quarry work during this period is attested by inscriptions left in quarries in the Sinai, the Wadi Hammamat, Aswan, and Hatnub. The work was directed by several different kinds of officials, including "god's treasurers," "captain of a boat," or "overseers of the army" (or "expedition"; see Eyre, 1987, pp. 10–11). Unlike the workmen in construction crews, the organization of these laborers is clearly connected to boats in some cases, presumably because boats were necessary to transport the finished product to its destination.

Middle Kingdom

Comparatively little is known about labor organization during the Middle Kingdom period. In royal mortuary temples, the phyle system survived in an altered form, as attested in the Illahun papyri. There, there were only four phyles, identified by numbers rather than names; their monthly periods of rotation thus occurred consistently from year to year. However, the system seems to have been less important during the Middle Kingdom, and was used only to organize the lower levels of the priesthood.

The Illahun papyri also include lists of construction workers, presumably employed in building the nearby pyramid of Senwosret II. One list mentioned at least twenty-nine different groups of workers, who seem to have been employed for periods of two months. Each gang had a foreman, and consisted of five or ten men. A higher official, assisted by a scribe, exercised authority over all the gangs working on the project.

The other principal source for labor organization during this period is the Reisner papyri, from Nagael-Deir in Upper Egypt. These four papyri list the personnel of three construction projects and a tool shop attached to a shipyard. They record the family connections of each corvée worker, the kinds of labor done, and the rations and other payments received. The workers are called *mnjw*, "laborers," or, more generally, *ḥsbw*, "those who are counted." They are divided into crews of variable size (between one and almost forty men) and work under the supervision of a foreman (*ḫrp*), a crew leader (*ṯzw*), or, in the case of some of the smaller crews, a scribe. The work force seems to be under the control of the palace (*pr-ꜥʒ*). The tool shop accounts are somewhat different, consisting of orders sent by the vizier to the steward of the palace in the Thinite nome. These documents are particularly valuable because each records several

aspects of the same project.

New Kingdom

There is considerably more information about workers and their organization from the New Kingdom. The most detailed information comes from the settlement of Deir el-Medina, which housed the workmen who built the royal tombs of the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth dynasties. The crew of workmen on the royal tombs grew over time, as royal tombs became larger and more elaborately decorated, but it never numbered more than about 120 men. Documents recovered from the area reveal that the "crew" (*jst*) was divided into two roughly equal "sides" (*ỉrỉt*), called the "left" and the "right," which presumably corresponded to the two sides of the tomb on which the workmen worked. (See Černý 1973, pp. 100–103). Like phyles, "sides" have been associated with boat crews, but they seem better paralleled in temples by the "sides" of priests who bear the gods' carrying barks. The evidence of candle consumption suggests that both "sides" worked at the same time, rather than in rotation. Each side was directed by a chief workman, assisted by a deputy. Also organized into "sides" were several types of less skilled workers, who delivered messages, mixed plaster, carried water, and did other more menial tasks; women were responsible for grinding the grain that the workmen received as rations. In some periods, each "side" had a scribe assigned to it; however, more often a single scribe handled the administration of both "sides."

The personnel of the crew included ordinary workers, sculptors, and draftsmen; all three groups received the same pay, but it is from the latter group that the administrators were usually drawn. Work was conducted for eight of the ten days of the Egyptian "week," in two periods of equal (but unknown) length, probably divided by a break. Workers were provided with housing, rations, firewood, tools, and various services in exchange for their labor. Responsibility for the maintenance and direction of the crew was held by various high officials in the eighteenth dynasty, but by the Ramessid period it had been transferred to the vizier.

Other state labor in the New Kingdom seems to have been similarly organized, if less well documented. Overall administration was handled by an *js n kȝt*, "Department of Work," which controlled materials as well as the labor force. Its internal hierarchy is unknown. Specific projects could be directed by a variety of officials, particularly stewards of various institutions and overseers of the treasury. Less skilled labor in the New Kingdom was often supplied by the army, which was used for transport and other tasks similar to corvée labor. Workmen from the army were presumably supervised by the army administration.

Compensation of the Work Force

The way in which the work force was paid is difficult to determine. Even the elite classes have not left many records. The lower levels of scribes and officials may have been given a wage in addition to their rations, while the upper ranks probably lived on the rents collected from endowment lands attached to their positions. Craftspeople probably earned the selling price of their goods, less the cost of materials and, in the case of workshops, a share for the workshop administrator. Agricultural workers presumably were rewarded with a portion of the crop, although substantial taxes and rents would ensure that this compensation was far from generous. Corvée labor was provided with rations, and perhaps other payment; slave labor presumably received only rations.

For a few groups, partial evidence survives. Old Kingdom texts recording the wages of craftsmen who worked on private tombs suggest that payment was made in two parts: rations to support the workers during their labor, and a quantity of durable goods, usually cloth. Scenes in the Old Kingdom tomb of Akhethetep depict women receiving jewelry for the cloth that they have supplied. In neither case is the amount specified.

Two Middle Kingdom accounts of ration payments highlight a huge disparity between the ordinary laborers and their supervisors. In crew of tomb builders, the upper tier of supervisors received ten times the rations of ordinary laborers,

while the more specialized workers and lower-level administrators got twice to five times as much. The bread and beer rations of a quarrying expedition to the Wadi Hammamat were even more unequal: the leader of the expedition received two hundred loaves of bread and five jars of beer daily, while most of the workers got only ten loaves and one-third of a jar of beer. Lower-level administrators were paid three to ten times as much as a worker, while skilled workers made less than twice as much (see D. Valbelle, in Donadoni, 1997, pp. 39–40).

The New Kingdom workmen at Deir el-Medina were provided with houses and other necessities of living, as well as a basic monthly ration of 150 kilograms of wheat and 56 kilograms of barley. They also regularly received fish, vegetables, pottery, and firewood. Payments in more durable goods, such as clothing, were made annually or during visits by high officials. Rations were often delayed or incomplete, and when long periods passed without delivery, as happened during times of political turmoil and economic scarcity in the late twentieth dynasty, the workmen would leave their village and descend upon the temple granaries, where they would refuse to leave until their rations were supplied. Allusions to workmen's demands in Middle Kingdom texts from the royal mortuary complex of Senwosret II at Illahun suggest that this kind of strike had a long history. Although strikes seem to have had some success among state workers, those by less privileged workers would have been less effective.

See also SLAVES.

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