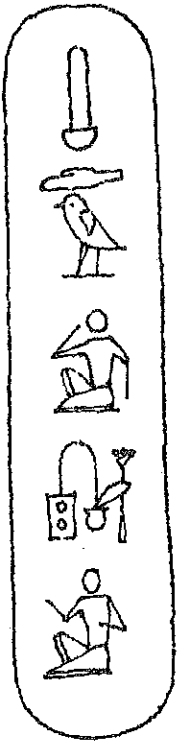


# Historical Note



Ancient Egypt lasted for more than 5,000 years, beginning in the Predynastic period in 5200 B.C. and ending with the Roman conquest in 30 B.C. The foundation for much of the daily life, education, agriculture, craft development, travel, trade, religion, recreation, and funeral practices began during the Old Kingdom, approximately 2686-2160 B.C. and continued through the New Kingdom, which ended in approximately 1069 B.C. In this book I have tried to re-create the voices of people who might have lived, worked, played, and died during this time.

**The Scribe:** Scribes played a significant role in all periods of ancient Egyptian society. People of upper and lower classes depended on scribes to send messages, record events, register livestock. By the time of the New Kingdom the use of scribes had multiplied, and some recorders had specialized duties such as keeping the census, measuring the grain, and tracking military gains and losses. Scribes used a palette, water cup, and brush holder like those seen at the top of the scribe hieroglyph. In the picture, the palette, which contains red and black ink, hangs over the scribe's shoulder.

**The Farmer:** Agriculture was the major occupation of ancient Egyptians. Peasant families worked the fields, made fertile by the rise and fall of the Nile. Flax and grain were the major crops. After the sowing, herdsmen brought sheep and goats to trample the seed. During the harvest, a flutist sometimes played lively tunes to keep the workers moving. When at last the grain could be stored, a scribe tallied the results and calculated the state tax.

**The Pyramid Builder:** Pyramids were built from the Predynastic period through the Middle Kingdom. These "Houses of Eternity" were designed to keep the body of the Pharaoh safe so his spirit could make the journey to the afterlife. The workforce was made up of farmers, bakers, butchers, toolmakers, and others, all directed by scribes. These workmen were not slaves. They worked for Pharaoh during the flooding of the Nile instead of paying taxes or serving in the military.

**The Herdsman:** Herdsmen watched over their animals with great care. They talked to the cattle like children and gave them names. They lived with their herd and knew how to assist cows with calving. But in all three Kingdoms, Old, Middle, and New, herdsmen—unlike scribes or goldsmiths—were looked down upon by villagers as having a lowly occupation.

**The Birdnetter:** Birds were plentiful in ancient Egypt. Twice a year migrating waterbirds would stop to rest on the Nile after crossing the Sahara or the Mediterranean. In the Old Kingdom, clap nets like the one shown in the picture were used to trap huge catches of birds for eating. However, tomb paintings from the New Kingdom show that when noblemen and their families hunted for sport they often used a throw stick (like a boomerang) to stun the birds before capture.

**The Washer of Clothes:** Keeping clothes clean in a hot dusty land was not an easy task in any period in ancient Egypt. The chief washer was an important part of royal and noble households as early as the Old Kingdom. Middle Kingdom tombs depict washing and wringing. A watchful eye had to be kept for crocodiles lurking in the Nile where the washers worked.

**The Weaver:** Ancient Egyptians were well known for their exquisite weaving. During the Old Kingdom, women who served in households worked on horizontal looms. By the Middle Kingdom, the loom was a vertical one. Some cloth was taken to the treasury, which was called the House of Silver.

**The Goldsmith:** Even before the Old Kingdom, goldsmiths were skilled at beating, twisting, molding, and melting gold. Items such as bracelets, chokers, and hair ornaments were evident in pictures found in tombs of the Old Kingdom. Earrings did not appear until right before the New Kingdom. The development of fine jewelry making reached its peak during the New Kingdom. Goldsmiths used the semi-precious stones turquoise, lapis, carnelian, and amethyst to decorate their jewelry.

**The Embalmer:** Ancient Egyptians believed that to gain eternal life, the body needed to be preserved so the spirit could live on. In the early days of the Old Kingdom, limbs were wrapped in linen, but the body was left intact. Gradually priests discovered that bodies would not decay as quickly if organs were taken out. Embalmers began removing organs and placing them in canopic jars, containers used in funeral rituals. Removal of the brain began in the Old Kingdom, but was done on a more regular basis during the Middle and New Kingdoms. Crystals of natron, a salt, were used to dry the body. During the Middle and New Kingdoms, many bodies were stuffed with straw.

**The Dancer:** Music and dancing were part of every major event, whether it was the gathering of the harvest or the feast of Eternity for a departed loved one. During the Old Kingdom, the dances were stylized with only occasional acrobatics. The beat was set by clapping hands. By the time of the New Kingdom, dancers threw balls, beat on tambourines, clicked castanets, and did high jumps and complicated acrobatics.

**The Carpenter:** Lumber was in scarce supply in ancient Egypt. Finding the right wood to make coffins, boats, and furniture was difficult, even as far back as the Old Kingdom. A Pharaoh sometimes sent as many as 40 ships to Lebanon and Syria to bring back cedar and pine for coffins and boats. Shipwrights were extremely skilled at boat-building and could turn out a huge sailing ship in as little as 17 days. Boats provided the major means of hauling goods, materials, and passengers.

**The Sailor:** The Nile was the primary highway in ancient Egypt. Early boats were made of papyrus and were easy to guide. Wooden boats as big as 100 feet long and 50 feet across appeared in the Old Kingdom. The sailor looked after the sail and repeated the pilot's commands. The pilot used a speaking trumpet to call to men on shore. The land of Punt, thought to be located near present-day Somalia, was reached by sailing south on the Red Sea. Accounts of these expeditions do not refer to trade but rather to gifts to Hathor, the goddess of Punt, and tribute to Egypt from Punt.

**The Marshman:** The papyrus plant flourished in the Nile Valley during ancient Egyptian times and had many uses. Marshmen gathered the reeds and sent bundles of them to a workshop where they were used to make sandals, baskets, nets, and paper. Some reeds went to boatyards, where they were shaped into light boats. We owe much of our knowledge of ancient Egypt to papyrus scrolls that were preserved for thousands of years by Egypt's dry climate. The papyrus plant eventually died out in Egypt, but it has been recently reintroduced and is being harvested and processed.