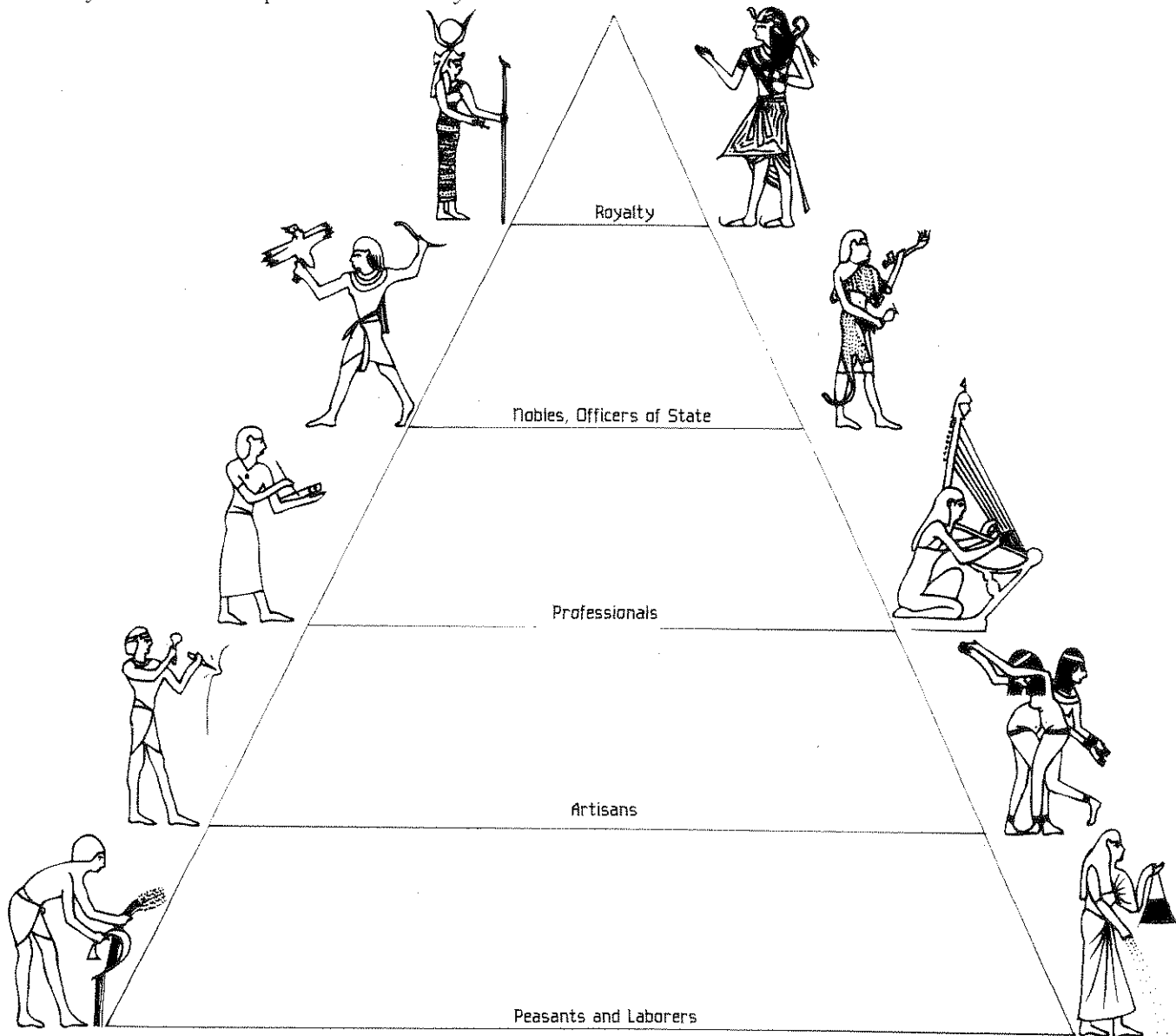


Egyptian children usually followed in their parents' footsteps, learning their trade from their parents. However, a son of a poor peasant farmer who showed great talent could go to a temple school and train to be a scribe. This could open the door to many professions. Scribes had a high opinion of themselves and were very aware of their position in society.



▲ Look at the pyramid showing the different levels in Egyptian society. Sort and write the occupations below on the pyramid according to which you think Egyptians thought were most important.

- |           |         |          |        |           |             |               |
|-----------|---------|----------|--------|-----------|-------------|---------------|
| sculptor  | scribe  | servant  | sailor | engineer  | high priest | water carrier |
| governor  | soldier | laborer  | potter | ferryman  | quarryman   | farmworker    |
| architect | vizier  | musician | priest | goldsmith | landowner   | tax collector |
| carpenter | queen   | surveyor | doctor | embalmer  | fisherman   | army general  |
| painter   | king    | overseer | dancer | goldminer |             |               |

## Teachers Notes

This activity illustrates how the levels in Egyptian society were drawn and considers the relative status attributed to different occupations.

## Extension

1. Imagine the life of a goldminer in the desert. Much of Egypt's wealth came from gold mined in the scorching heat of the Eastern Desert. Criminals, prisoners of war and slaves were used as gold-miners. Water was rationed.

Professional people first trained as scribes, which in itself bestowed a position of privilege above that of manual workers and confirmed loyalty to the ruling class. A scribe's training was arduous. Many years were spent laboriously copying out hieroglyphic texts extolling the virtues of being a scribe:

“Be a scribe! It saves you from hard work and  
preserves you from every kind of labor.”

It also encouraged an attitude of superiority towards the lower classes:

“The potter is buried in earth while he is still among the living.  
He grubs about in the mud more than any pig...”

As a scribe, it was possible to rise to eminence as an officer of state, although these positions were usually hereditary. Further training for a professional occupation was a more realistic aspiration. Many scribes trained to become architects, surveyors and engineers – the professional people needed for the extensive building projects undertaken by the state.

Officers of state often had elaborate titles, such as “Master of the Secrets of the Royal Decrees” and “Master of Largesse,” who was responsible for distributing gifts as rewards to favored officials and governors, and ensuring the needy did not starve during times of hardship. “Overseer of the Granaries” was a key position, for the granaries were the “banks” of Egypt, with responsibility for huge stocks of grain, enough at times to feed the nation for a year or more. Laborers and craftsmen received regular payments in grain so large consignments were continually being moved from the granaries, which all had to be recorded by teams of scribes.

Viziers were the power behind the throne. Second only to the king, they were able to carry out the affairs of the state in the king's absence. Upper and Lower Egypt usually had separate bureaucracies so there were two Viziers, one based in Thebes, the other in Memphis. Overseers, with their different responsibilities, were accountable to the respective Vizier.

By the Middle Kingdom, noblemen and their families were becoming extremely wealthy and powerful, living a life of unimaginable luxury. They accumulated their fortune from local taxes paid by peasants and craftsmen, as well as rent from estates and tributes from the king, who needed their allegiance. They also owned workshops and had farms with large herds of valuable cattle. They lived in magnificent country homes set in idyllic gardens with ornamental pools. Dancers and musicians frequently entertained at the many banquets. Skilled craftsmen, working with exotic woods and gold, produced all manner of finery to satisfy the desires of the ruling class.