

Problems in the Ancient Egyptian Peasant's Life

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Abstract

There were some problems broke the calm of the life of the ancient Egyptian peasant, either these problems were caused by nature, or by human. For instance, inundation, diseases, dangerous creatures were caused by the nature, while taxation with its various types was so heavy and burden the peasant, without regarding the circumstances of the peasant, robbing, punishment, hard continuous work, were from the problems caused by human. The research will discuss these problems in detail and will show how the ancient Egyptian peasant dealt with them.

Key words: peasant, problems, taxation, inundation, robbing, disease, and health.

Introduction

The ancient Egyptian peasant was patient, struggler, and hard worker. However the poor man was full of joy, he faced a lot of problems. If good fortune came to a poor person, it was not considered a blessing or a credit to him, but a sign that something was wrong with the world.¹ There were some problems broke the calm of the life of peasants, either they were caused by the nature, such as: inundation, diseases, dangerous creatures, or by human, such as: taxation and punishment. For instance; inundation, which paralyzed the peasant's works in his land, in addition that too high flood could destroy irrigation works, food stores and livestock,² while low flood changed the quantity of the crops, resulted in food shortages and famine.³ The harsh life, taxation with its various types was so heavy and burden the peasant, without regarding the circumstances of the peasant, poverty, hard continuous work,

¹ Brier, B. and Hobbs, H., *Daily life of the ancient Egyptians*, 2nd ed., The Greenwood Press, Westport, 2008, p.67.

² Katary, S., "Agriculture Pharaonic Egypt", In: Bagnall, R., et.al. (eds.), *Encyclopedia of Ancient History*, Blackwell Publishing LTD, p.214-217, 2013, p.214; Noaman, M.N. and El-Qousy, D., "Hydrology of the Nile and Ancient Agriculture", In: Satoh, M. and Aboulroos, S. (eds.), *Irrigated Agriculture in Egypt: Past, Present and Future*, Springer, Switzerland, p.9-28, 2017, p.18; Butzer, K.W., "Long-Term Nile Flood Variation and Political Discontinuities in Pharaonic Egypt", In: C. J. Desmond & B. A. Steven (Eds.), *From hunters to farmers*, University of California Press, Berkeley, p.102-112, 1984, p.105.

³ Christensen, W., *Empire of Ancient Egypt*, Chelsea House, New York, 2009, p.10; Butzer, *From hunters to farmers*, p.105; Noaman & El-Qousy, *Irrigated Agriculture in Egypt*, p.18; Simpson, W.K., *The Literature of Ancient Egypt*, Yale University press, London, 2003, p.390; Allen, J., *The Heqanakht papyri: Publications of the Metropolitan Museum of Art 27*, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 2002, p.171; Coulon, L., "Famine", *UEE*, 2008, p.1; Hassan, F. A., "Droughts, Famine and the Collapse of the Old Kingdom: Re-Reading Ipuwer." In: Hawass Z. A. and Richards, J. (eds.), *The Archaeology and Art of Ancient Egypt: Essays in Honor of David B. O'Connor*, Vol. I, Annales du Service des Antiquités de l'Egypte, Cahier no. 36. Supreme Council of Antiquities, Cairo, p.357-377, 2007, p.359; *دومينيكا فالبييل و جونيبييف هوسون، الدولة والمؤسسات في مصر من الفراعنة الأوائل إلى الأباطرة*؛ 1995، ص. 97. الرومان، (ت) فؤاد الدهان، دار الفكر للدراسات و النشر و التوزيع، القاهرة، 1995، ص. 97.

punishment,⁴ injustice or robbing, unprotected houses made the peasant live a miserable life, also diseases, the bad nutrition, and the extreme exposure to the sun rays with its side effects;⁵ are all resulted to health problems.

The miserable life of the ancient Egyptian poor peasant was pictured in the tomb scenes, as in tombs of : *Meryruka*, *Baket III*, *Nebamun* and *Menna*. In addition to texts of literature, which declared more about their harsh life, as in the letters of the scribe "*Wenemdiamun*", advising his son to be a scribe, "*Instructions of Dua-Khety*", "*papyrus Anastasi V 15*", "*Papyrus Brooklyn 35.1446*", and other Miscellanies.

1. Taxation

Biographies of Middle Kingdom tombs shed light on the tax-collecting activities of nomarchs, while an important administrative text, "*Papyrus Brooklyn 35.1446*", deals with forced labor.⁶ Until the first millennium BC, taxes were paid in the form of grain, cattle and other commodities,⁷ as the ancient Egyptians did not use coinage as money, until the 26th Dynasty, issued by kings in the 29th Dynasty.⁸ Not only taxes of peasants were paid in kind, "corvée labor", a system of enforced state servitude by peasant workers in all areas of the economy, was a form of taxation as well.⁹

Taxation was heavy.¹⁰ Government officials regulated the yearly taxes,¹¹ and the officials' main function was to ensure that the peasants paid their taxes either by persuasion or even by physical force.¹² Taxes were not based on how much an acre

⁴ Castillos, J. J., "Peasants in ancient Egypt", In: *GM*, 260, p. 43-52, 2020, p.45; Katary, S., "Taxation (until the End of the Third Intermediate Period)", *UEE*, Vol.1(1), 2011, p.7; Wilkinson, J. G., *The Manners and Customs of the Ancient Egyptians: Including Their Private Life, Government, Laws, Art, Manufactures, Religion, and Early History*, Vol. 1, London, 1841, p.132; Amin, O. S. M., *The Egyptian Tomb-Chapel Scenes of Nebamun at the British Museum*, article on Academia.edu., 2016, p.30; Simpson, *The Literature of Ancient Egypt*, p. 434; Hoch, J. E., "The Teaching of Dua- Kheti: A New Look at the Satire of the Trades", *JSSEA*, Vol.21-22 (1991-1992, published 1994), p.88-100, p.94; Lichtheim, M., *Ancient Egyptian Literature: Volume II: The New Kingdom*, University of California Press, 1976, p.170-171; Brier & Hobbs, *Daily life of the ancient Egyptians*, p.85; Caminos, R., "Peasants", in: Donadoni, S. (ed.), *The Egyptians*, Chicago, 1997, p.14; سليم حسن، موسوعة مصر القديمة، الجزء 17، الأدب المصري القديم: في القصة و الحكم و الأمثال و التأملات و الرسائل الأدبية، هنداوى، ويندسور، المملكة المتحدة، 2018، ص.232

⁵ Castillos, J. J., "Poverty in ancient Egypt", *RSUE*, Vol.38, 2021, p.3, 9; Graves-Brown, C., *Dancing For Hathor: Women in Ancient Egypt*, London, 2010,p.62; Bouchama A. and Knochel, J.P., "Heat Stroke", In: *N Engl J Med*. Vol. 346, No. 25, p.1978- 1988, 2002, p. 1978; Armstrong, *Exertional Heat Illnesses, Human Kinetics*, USA, 2003, Watterson, B., *The Egyptians*, Cambridge, 1997, p.19; ؛ محمد صقر خفاجة وأحمد بدوي ، هيرودوت يتحدث عن مصر، دار القلم، 1966، ص.208 حسن كمال، الطب المصري القديم، الهيئة العامة للكتاب، القاهرة، 1998، ص.33

⁶ Katary, *UEE*, 2011, p.2.

⁷ Katary, *UEE*, 2011, p.3.

⁸ Bleiberg, E., *The Official Gift in Ancient Egypt*, University of Oklahoma Press, Norman, Okla. and London, 1996, p.25; Curtis, "Coinage in Pharaonic Egypt", *JEA*, Vol.43, p. 71-76, 1957, p.71-72; Katary, *UEE*, 2011, p.3.

⁹ Katary, *UEE*, 2011, p.3; *مجلة كلية الآداب جامعة الفيوم (الإنسانية) والعلوم الاجتماعية*، ج.13، ع.2، 2021، ص.3674.

¹⁰ David, R., *Handbook to Life in Ancient Egypt*, New York, 2003, p.146.

¹¹ Erman, A., *Life in Ancient Egypt*, London, 1894, p.10.

¹² David, *Handbook to Life in Ancient Egypt*, p.143.

had produced that year;¹³ they were by the result of the inundation.¹⁴ They measured how high the Nile rose during its annual inundation by using the "Nilometers".¹⁵ The earliest records for taxation are found on the Palermo stone which dates back to the 5th dynasty.¹⁶ When a governor did not deliver the taxes on time, he would also be punished, as in a scene from the mastaba of *Khentika* from the 6th dynasty.¹⁷ This scene represents five district governors, who were brought before the vizier to receive their punishment which was a corporal harsh punishment as they were charged with the corruption of tax collection (fig.1).¹⁸

Each year the agricultural census officials were sent to measure the arable area, and to gather a list of the institutions, and private owners who held the land. This enabled them to estimate the year's crop and the probable tax.¹⁹ Once the crops had begun to be grown, other inspectors returned to make a final tax valuation.²⁰

Each one had his amount of taxes.²¹ For instance, in the reign of *Tuthmosis III*, the collected taxes from wealthy landowners were in the form of cereals, livestock, fruit, and provisions.²² The greater part of the harvests which the peasant-serfs gathered from the lands, and what woven or spun by their wives, were belonged to the state, and were collected. However, the harvest might have been bad, the scribe came to the peasants' houses accompanied by Negroes with sticks to punish them, if they did not give them the tax; when he demanded the corn, and the peasant told him that he had nothing; they were beaten by the Negroes. Sometimes, when someone unable to pay taxes, he would be either, punished or incurred debts. A debtor would swear an oath in which he invoked the king or a god, and confirmed that he would repay this obligation in the future. In the Late Period, there was also another solution to pay tax or overdue loan by "self-sale"; which means that a person selling himself into servitude in order to meet the demands of an (working off his debt).²³ Sometimes, the peasants hide part of the crops to lower their tax.²⁴

Many scenes in tombs show how the peasants beaten because of not paying taxes,²⁵ for instance; in the tomb of *Meryruka* in Old kingdom, a representation of punishing those who did not pay taxes. They were brought before local tax officials and whipped, the whipping post being shown at the right end of the scene, while

¹³ Brier & Hobbs, *Daily life of the ancient Egyptians*, p.73.

¹⁴ Erman, *Life in Ancient Egypt*, p.10; Brier & Hobbs, *Daily life of the ancient Egyptians*, p.73; Katary, *UEE*, 2011, p.5.

¹⁵ Brier & Hobbs, *Daily life of the ancient Egyptians*, p.73.

¹⁶ Redford, D. B., *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Ancient Egypt*, Vol. 3, Oxford, 2001, p.351.

¹⁷ James, T.G.H. and Apted, M. R., *The Mastaba of Kehntika called Ikhekhi*, London, 1953, pl.IX.

¹⁸ Redford, *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Ancient Egypt*, Vol. 3, p.352.

¹⁹ Ruiz, A., *The Spirit of Ancient Egypt*, Algora, New York, 2001, p.68; David, *Handbook to Life in Ancient Egypt*, p.143.

²⁰ David, *Handbook to Life in Ancient Egypt*, p.143.

²¹ Ruiz, *The Spirit of Ancient Egypt*, p.68; David, *Handbook to Life in Ancient Egypt*, p.143.

²² David, *Handbook to Life in Ancient Egypt*, p.146.

²³ David, *Handbook to Life in Ancient Egypt*, p.147.

²⁴ Brier & Hobbs, *Daily life of the ancient Egyptians*, p.73

²⁵ Shaw, I. and Nicholson, P. T., *The British Museum Dictionary of Ancient Egypt*, Cairo, 2002, p.17.

scribes are depicted at the left end of the scene (fig.2).²⁶ In the tomb of *Bakt III* from the Middle Kingdom, a scene represents a group of herdsmen with their cattle, while going to pay the taxes and another group whose hands were tied together did not pay the taxes about to be beaten (fig.3).²⁷ In the tomb of *Menna* from the New Kingdom, a famous scene for some peasants who are depicted receiving punishment as they did not pay the taxes (fig.4).

There were many reasons from not paying the taxes, for example, the harvest or the tax was stolen from the peasant, the low harvest, the crop spoilage, and the political instability.²⁸ However, some reasons were out of the peasant's control, there were no excuses until the decrees of king *Horemhab*.²⁹ A letter shows the suffering of the peasant at the time of paying the taxes, "*Amunemone speaks to the scribe Pentawere. Do you not remember the condition of the field hand in the face of the registration of the harvest tax, the snake having taken away half of the grain and the hippopotamus having eaten the remainder? The mice are numerous in the field, the locust descends, and the cattle eat. The sparrows bring want to the field hand. The remainder which is on... the threshing floor is finished, and it is for the thieves.*"³⁰

Other miscellanies indicate the sufferings endured by the impoverished farmer, terrified of the tax collectors and their bully men, who abused his wife and children when he came up short (*papyrus Anastasi V 15, 6–17, 3*).³¹

However, heavy taxes were collected from the peasants on their estates,³² peasants owned very little, and everything they produced was heavily taxed,³³ while the royal clergy who were large estate-holders were paying no taxes.³⁴

A stela of *Harmhabi*, unfortunately damaged, shows the misfortunes which were exposed to the peasants who left their home, even those who undertook a journey to pay taxes to Pharaoh.³⁵ The servant *Thothmes* of the temple of *Thoth* had during the four years from the 31st to the 34th year, required of him³⁶ a large amount of taxes which was hard for him. a shepherd called *Thothmes* lost a donkey, *Pa'ere*, who ought to have given it up, had chosen on some pretext to keep the useful animal. The work of the donkey here is the tax which *Thothmes* had to pay for the use of the animal.³⁷

²⁶ حجاج، مجلة كلية الآداب جامعة الفيوم (الإنسانيات والعلوم الاجتماعية)، مج.13، ع.2، ص. 3683.

²⁷ حجاج، مجلة كلية الآداب جامعة الفيوم (الإنسانيات والعلوم الاجتماعية)، مج.13، ع.2، ص. 3683.

²⁸ حجاج، مجلة كلية الآداب جامعة الفيوم (الإنسانيات والعلوم الاجتماعية)، مج.13، ع.2، ص. 3676-3679.

²⁹ حجاج، مجلة كلية الآداب جامعة الفيوم (الإنسانيات والعلوم الاجتماعية)، مج.13، ع.2، ص. 3679.

³⁰ Simpson, *The Literature of Ancient Egypt*, p.438, 439.

³¹ Katary, *Encyclopedia of Ancient History*, p.215.

³² Christensen, *Empire of Ancient Egypt*, p.78.

³³ Christensen, *Empire of Ancient Egypt*, p.87.

³⁴ Christensen, *Empire of Ancient Egypt*, p.78.

³⁵ Maspero, G., *Popular Stories of Ancient Egypt*, Putnam, 1915, p. xliii.

³⁶ Erman, *Life in Ancient Egypt*, p.122.

³⁷ Erman, *Life in Ancient Egypt*, p.123.

For the taxes of the Smallholders of the cattle or lands; a cattle census "tnwt" every two years was issued,³⁸ since the 2nd Dynasty onwards, followed by a "census of gold and fields".³⁹ Smallholders who were "private possessors" or "virtual owners" of their plots, paid taxes on the harvest of their land at a fixed rate of 1½ sacks per *aroura* (1 *aroura* equals 0.27 *hectares* or 0.66 *acre*). These plots were usually 3 or 5 *arouras* in size. Larger tracts of cultivated land in non-apportioning domain,⁴⁰ were worked by field laborers incurred a tax of 30 percent of the harvest.⁴¹

There was also the poll tax which was paid in kind.⁴² The revenue officer regularly gathered the information to raise this tax from the head of each family. He had to declare all the members of his household; the number of pregnant women in each household was also noted so that the officer could assess how many new taxpayers might be expected the following year.⁴³

2. The Inundation

Egyptians annually recorded the Nile water level and registered it in official records. The oldest record for the flood levels is found on the "Palermo Stone",⁴⁴ on which 63 Nile water levels were recorded. The Egyptians used *Nilometer* to record the level of the river during the inundation (fig.5).⁴⁵

However, the blessings of the Nile were many, changes of its levels could result in crisis; that too high flood could destroy dikes, irrigation works,⁴⁶ settlements, food stores and livestock, increase epidemic disease, and endanger seed stocks.⁴⁷

Low or short floods did not reach some of farm lands, which by result reduced the wetted area, the degree of soil saturation, and the amount of fertile silt deposited, but increased the salt concentration of waters reaching fields along the desert margins. This all reduced the cultivated area as well as the unit productivity,⁴⁸ resulting in food crises ranging from food shortages to famine, that even 2 meters drop in the level of the Nile flood could leave as much as a third of the floodplain not watered.⁴⁹ More clearly it means that at the time of non-flooding not only the peasants were affected,

³⁸ Allen, R.c., "Agriculture and the Origins of the State in Ancient Egypt", *Explorations in Economic History*, Vol. 34, p.135–154, 1997, p.148.

³⁹ Katary, *UEE*, 2011, p.5.

⁴⁰ Katary, *UEE*, 2011, p.9.

⁴¹ Redford, *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Ancient Egypt*, Vol. 3, p.353; Katary, *UEE*, 2011, p.10.

⁴² David, *Handbook to Life in Ancient Egypt*, p.147; (ت. حسن) *الحياة الاجتماعية في مصر القديمة*, فلندرز بيترى، جوهري و عبد المنعم عبد الحليم، الهيئة المصرية العامة للكتاب، القاهرة، 1975، ص.207.

⁴³ David, *Handbook to Life in Ancient Egypt*, p.146.

⁴⁴ دومينيكا فالبييل و جونيفيف هوسون، الدولة والمؤسسات في مصر من الفراعنة الأوائل إلى الأباطرة الرومان، ت. فؤاد الدهان، دار الفكر للدراسات و النشر و التوزيع، القاهرة، 1995، ص.97.

⁴⁵ Redford, *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Ancient Egypt*, Vol. 3, p.351; Gad, A., "Water culture in Egypt", *Options Méditerranéennes*, Série A, Num. 83, p. 85-96, 2008, p.92.

⁴⁶ Katary, *Encyclopedia of Ancient History*, p.214; Noaman & El-Qousy, *Irrigated Agriculture in Egypt*, p.18.

⁴⁷ Butzer, *From hunters to farmers*, p.105.

⁴⁸ Christensen, *Empire of Ancient Egypt*, p.10; Butzer, *From hunters to farmers*, p.105.

⁴⁹ Noaman & El-Qousy, *Irrigated Agriculture in Egypt*, p.18.

but the country as well. It could be said that the fields and the agricultural areas were the first places affected by the flood, and the peasantry life as a normal result.

Many literary sources described that the time of non- flooding was a hard time. For instance; on "*Sehel Island*" near the first cataract, was erected the "*Famine stela*" which dates back to Ptolemaic period.⁵⁰ It describes seven lean years in Egypt occurred at the time of king "*Djoser*".⁵¹ The stela shows how the inundation was necessary and how the non-flooding affected the whole country.⁵² It is a decree from King "*Djoser*" to "the governor of the south" at Elephantine.⁵³ The texts saying "..... *My heart was extremely sad since the Inundation had not come on time for a period of seven years. Grain was scarce, the kernels dried out, everything edible in short supply. Every man was so restrained by his taxation that they went inside so as not to go out. The child was in tears, the youth astray, and the elderly—their hearts were miserable,*".⁵⁴ In another part of texts Khnum saying " *I know the Inundation will embrace the fields with an embrace that joins life to every nostril, even as embracing the field will rejuvenate it. Thus I shall have the Inundation flow forth for you, with no year of want or sluggishness for any land. The fields will grow, bowed down beneath the growth of their meal.*"⁵⁵

The letters between *Hekanakht*, a landowner from the 12th Dynasty, and his dependents showed the difficulties encountered by various strata of society at a time when the Nile partially flooded the cultivated lands. That caused his normal surplus to be eliminated in this year comparing with a normal flooded year with about 140 sacks of barely.⁵⁶

The inundation had an effect on the type of the crop and its quantity as well, which affected on the income too.⁵⁷ Some theories mention that the decline after the 6th Dynasty and the end of the old kingdom occurred because of the food shortage and famines resulted by the low inundation.⁵⁸

During the flooding season which lasted from June to September, when water covered much of the land and it became impossible to cultivate. Farmers had to wait for the waters to go down before they could work in the fields. In these seasons of the year, some jobs were paralyzed which led the peasant who was always diligent and hardworking in finding another job at this time.⁵⁹ In the "*Instructions of Ankhsheshonq*", he says: "*Teach your son to write, to plow, to fish, and to trap against*

⁵⁰ Bunson, *Encyclopedia of Ancient Egypt*, p.136.

⁵¹ Simpson, *The Literature of Ancient Egypt*, p.386; Török, L., *Between Two Worlds: The Frontier Region Between Ancient Nubia and Egypt*, Brill, Leiden, 2009, p.403.

⁵² Ellenblum, R., "How Did Climate Change Cause the Collapse of Civilization in the Historical Past", In: Arregui, A., et.al (eds.), *DEcolonial Heritage: Natures, Cultures, and the Asymmetries of Memory*, Waxmann Verlag, New York, p.55-74, 2018, p.59.

⁵³ Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, Vol. 3, University of California Press, USA, 2006, p.94.

⁵⁴ Simpson, *The Literature of Ancient Egypt*, p.387; Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, Vol. 3, p. 95-96.

⁵⁵ Simpson, *The Literature of Ancient Egypt*, p.390.

⁵⁶ Allen, J., *The Hekanakht papyri*, p.171; Coulon, *UEE*, 2008, p.1.

⁵⁷ فالبييل وهوسون، التولية والمؤسسات في مصر ، ص.97.

⁵⁸ Hassan, *The Archaeology and Art of Ancient Egypt*, p.359.

⁵⁹ David, *Handbook to Life in Ancient Egypt*, p.141.

*a year of low inundation, and he will find the profit in what he has done".*⁶⁰ In the "Tale of the Two Brothers", when the inundation confines men and beasts within doors, the younger brother seats himself at the loom and weaves.⁶¹

The peasants were liable to corvée duty (the king could call upon them for any duty). Sometimes, the wealthier could pay someone else to take on their allocated tasks. These peasants could be used for stone quarrying, gold mining, building works, and sent on military service.⁶² For example, the corvée which provided the workforce to build the pyramids, was the peasant labor which was conscripted during the floods. Hassan has argued that Herodotus' account of the building of the Great Pyramid was essentially correct and that it involved 84,000 men working 80 days a year for 20 years.⁶³ This means that community affairs, including irrigation and flood control, continued to be organized at the grassroots level by corvée (forced labor) under the direction of village headmen.⁶⁴

3. Harsh life

The ancient Egyptian peasant suffered a lot in his life. Many literary resources show the miserable moments in his life. For example; in the letter-writing made by the royal scribe and chief overseer of the cattle of Amen-Re, the scribe "Wenemdiamun", who advises his son to be a scribe. The letter involving the misery of some jobs, which the father did not like to see his son occupying one of them. In the letter a description of the misfortune of the peasant,⁶⁵ saying: *"Let me also expound to you the situation of the peasant, that other tough occupation. [Comes] the inundation and soaks him. . . , he attends to his equipment. By day he cuts his farming tools; (6,1) by night he twists rope. Even his midday hour he spends on farm labor. He equips himself to go to the field as if he were a warrior. The dried field lies before him; he goes out to get his team. When he has been after the herdsman for many days, he gets his team and comes back with it. He makes for it a place in the field. (6,5) Comes dawn, he goes to make a start and does not find it in its place. He spends three days searching for it; he finds it in the bog. He finds no hides on them; the jackals have chewed them. He comes out, his garment in his hand, to beg for himself a team. When he reaches his field he finds [it] {broken up}. He spends time cultivating, and the snake is after him. It finishes off the seed as it is cast to the ground. He does not see a green blade. He does three plowings with borrowed grain. His wife (7,1) has gone down to the merchants and found nothing for {barter}. One says (to him): "Give grain." "There is none." He is beaten savagely. He is bound, thrown in the well,*

⁶⁰ Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, Vol. 3, p.173; Simpson, *The Literature of Ancient Egypt*, p.517.

⁶¹ Maspero, G., *Popular Stories of Ancient Egypt*, ABC-CLIO, California, 2002, p. CXXIV.

⁶² David, *Handbook to Life in Ancient Egypt*, p.142; 207. ص. *الحياة الاجتماعية في مصر القديمة*، ص.

⁶³ Allen, *Explorations in Economic History*, Vol. 34, p.148.

⁶⁴ Butzer, *From hunters to farmers*, p.104.

⁶⁵ Lichtheim, M., *Ancient Egyptian Literature: Volume II: The New Kingdom*, University of California Press, 1976, p.170; *في القصة والحكم و* سلیم حسن، *موسوعة مصر القديمة، الجزء 17، الأدب المصري القديم: في القصة والحكم و* الأمثال و التأملات و الرسائل الأدبية، هندأوى، وبنسور، المملكة المتحدة، 2018، ص. 379-380.

*submerged head down. His wife is bound in his presence. His children are in fetters. His neighbors (7,5) abandon them and flee.....*⁶⁶

The peasant's day is too hard even if he was sick, he had to work. The "Instructions of Dua-Khety" (also known as "The Satire of the Trades") which dates back to the Middle Kingdom, shows the suffering of the peasant,⁶⁷ saying: "The field hand cries out forever. His voice is louder than the {raven's}. His fingers have become {ulcerous} with an excess of stench. He is tired out in Delta labor, he is in tatters. He is well among lions but his experience is painful. The forced labor then is tripled. If he comes back from the marshes there, he reaches his house worn out, for the forced labor has ruined him."⁶⁸

Also, the letters indicate that the harsh treatment that the peasants received made them to run away, as happened when three peasants of the king's estates fled from the overseer of the horse stable, *Neferhotep*; that after he struck them.⁶⁹

The peasant had no choice to schedule his work to another time,⁷⁰ even if he was ill. In addition, in some seasons some activities stopped such as in the season of inundation the agricultural works stopped, and also in the season of summer those who depended on fishing as a source of livelihood found it a bad season of fishing, as a result they turned to practice another job such as sharing in the mining expeditions or in any work to gain some food for their families.⁷¹

However, the peasant made a lot efforts during his work in the fields , he did not enjoy the facilities of transporting over a donkey, that usually the donkeys were for transporting the crops.

The peasant was obligated to show respect or pay homage to the high official or he would be punished. For instance, in the tomb of *Nebamun*, a scene for peasants bow down and pay homage and respect towards *Nebamun*. The man behind them holds a stick and tells them: "Sit down and don't speak!" (fig.6).⁷²

The peasants did not have the chance to be educated. As a result, the poor ignorant man was described as "like a heavily-laden donkey, he is driven by the scribe," while the fortunate man who "has set his heart upon learning, is above work, and becomes a wise prince".⁷³ When a farm laborer grew old and developed osteoarthritis he could no longer work in the fields, and it is reasonable to suppose

⁶⁶ Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature: Vol. II*, p.170-171.

⁶⁷ حجاج، مجلة كلية الآداب جامعة الفيوم (الإنسانيات والعلوم الاجتماعية)، مج.13، ع.2، ص.3678.

⁶⁸ Simpson, *The Literature of Ancient Egypt*, p. 434; Hoch, *JSSEA*, Vol.21-22, p.94;

حسن، موسوعة مصر القديمة، ج. 17، ص.232.

⁶⁹ حسن، موسوعة مصر القديمة، ج. 17، ص.388.

⁷⁰ Brier & Hobbs, *Daily life of the ancient Egyptians*, p.85.

⁷¹ Montet, P., *Everyday Life in Egypt in the Days of Ramesses the Great*, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1981, p.135.

⁷² Wilkinson, *The Manners and Customs of the Ancient Egyptians*, p.132; Amin, *The Egyptian Tomb-Chapel Scenes of Nebamun*, p.30.

⁷³ Erman, *Life in Ancient Egypt*, p. 328.

that, if he had been industrious and trustworthy, a wise owner might well continue to employ him as an overseer.⁷⁴

They received their punishment in a way that punishing the peasant was in public and with a stick, as in case of not paying the taxes. The peasants who avoided the corvée were punished by another type of punishments, which could reach to their families. For example, in "*Papyrus Brooklyn 35.1446*" which describes the situation of (76- 80) inhabitants of Upper Egypt who fled their national service obligations in the reign of king *Amenemhat III*, they were sentenced to indefinite terms of compulsory labor on administered "*hbsw*" lands "plowlands", and their families imprisoned until their return.⁷⁵

The burden of forced agricultural labor was inescapable and often unfairly and ruthlessly applied despite pleas to the authorities from persons seized unjustly.⁷⁶

In describing the miserable life of the herdsman, it is said ".....*rustics who doubtless lived the harshest life of all the country's peasantry. There were uncouth, ungainly, awkward looking fellows, some bald, some with unkempt hair and matted beards; ill-nutrition had made some of them paunchy, some pinched and haggard. All were worn out with constant toil, bad food and the dank air of their habitat. The herdsman lived near the marshes with his cattle. He had no settled home, a miserable, lonely reed hut sheltered him at night and held all his worldly goods; a rush mat to sleep on, a clay water jar and a basket for his bread*".⁷⁷

The poor peasants such as herdsmen suffered also that they could hardly have fixed abodes to reside with their families.⁷⁸ The peasants found hardships in making their houses comfortable and safe, and to protect themselves and their children from: insects, rats, lizards, snakes, and birds of prey.⁷⁹

Sometimes, the peasant was exposed to robbing or even treated with an unjust official who could take forcibly anything from the peasant. For example, in the story of "*Eloquent Peasant*"; the peasant of *Herakleopolis* who was called *Khunianupu* farmed land in *Wadi Natrun (Sekhet Hemat)*, abused by a local nomarch who robbed his donkey, took his case to the pharaoh and became a popular sage when he triumphed legally.⁸⁰ In the case of the eloquent peasant who had proper education and

⁷⁴ Loebel, W.Y. and Nunn, J.F., "Staffs as walking aids in ancient Egypt and Palestine", *J R Soc Med*, Vol. 90 , p.450-454, 1997, p.451.

⁷⁵ Redford, *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Ancient Egypt*, Vol. 3, p.352; Katary, *UEE*, 2011, p.6; Katary, S., "Land Tenure (to the End of the Ptolemaic Period)", In: *UEE*, Los Angeles, 2012, p.6.

⁷⁶ Katary, *UEE*, 2011, p.7.

⁷⁷ Caminos, R., "Peasants", in: Donadoni, S. (ed.), *The Egyptians*, Chicago, 1997, p.14.

⁷⁸ Castillos, *GM*, p.45.

⁷⁹ Montet, *Everyday Life in Egypt in the Days of Ramesses the Great*, p.25-26.

⁸⁰ Erman, *The literature of the ancient Egyptians*, p.116, 131; Maspero, *Popular Stories of Ancient Egypt*, 1915, p. 45; Budge, W., *Literature of the ancient Egyptians*, Dent, London, 1914, p. 169-184; Bunson, M., *Encyclopedia of Ancient Egypt*, New York, 2002, p.131, 132; Ruiz, *The Spirit of Ancient Egypt*, p.16, 17; Bleiberg, *Arts and Humanities Through The Eras*, p.144; Parkinson, R. B., *The Tale of Sinuhe and Other Ancient Egyptian Poems, 1940-1640 BC*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1998, p.58-88;

قالبيبل وهوسون، الدولة والمؤسسات في مصر، ص. 136؛ حسن، موسوعة مصر القديمة، ج. 17، ص. 72-89.

love of oratory that helped him in expressing his problem by choosing the most expressive words to impress the ruler, he won the case. So, what if he was not cultured enough to make a complaint as any one of the peasants, of course, he would not be able to take his right from this unjust wealthy official.

4. Health ignorance

Given that the economic level of the persons, is a major reason for raising the health level, so when the economic level of the individual increases, the diseases and death rate decrease.⁸¹

In ancient Egypt, the fee of bringing a doctor was very expensive. As mentioned, a group of servants were bringing a doctor, his fee was a copper ingot, a set of vessels, and several little slave girls.⁸² This means that when the poor peasant got sick, he would not be able to afford the doctor's fee. As a result of the low economic level of peasants, led to a very low life expectancy of no more than 35 years, while members of the higher classes living longer lives and some kings reaching their 80s and 90s.⁸³

Living conditions for the poor were quite bad and unhealthy.⁸⁴ A problem for housing was the damp, to which mud-brick house are susceptible, is injurious to health, infection and diseases.⁸⁵ Many kinds of diseases that afflicted them and against which they had very little protection,⁸⁶ made the peasants suffer a lot. Most of the diseases were transferred by insects. Those who lived near the marshes used the nets to protect themselves from the mosquitoes, by surrounding the bed with the net and get inside it to sleep in safe.⁸⁷ To restrain insect pests, the house was washed with solution of natron, or daubed with a substance called "*Debit*" crushed on charcoal;⁸⁸ otherwise they would suffer from a lot of epidemics.

The ancient Egyptians thought that the main reason for "*pestilence of the year*" (disease), was the dryness and cracking of agricultural land and the release of rats from it, as the pestilence was linked with its appearance. As the peasants were living and working close to the agricultural lands, they were the most exposure to this disease. The infection transmission of the pestilence to humans was by fleas that left the infected rats. The goddess *Sekhmet* was associated with this disease. "*Sallier IV papyrus (No.10184)*" warned from looking at the rats and their approach to homes, especially on the day 12 from the first month, of winter.⁸⁹

⁸¹ كمال، الطب المصري القديم، ص.33.

⁸² Strouhal, E., *Life of the Ancient Egyptians*, Cairo, 1996, p.244.

⁸³ Castillos, *RSUE*, Vol.38, p.9; Graves-Brown, *Dancing For Hathor*, p. 69.

⁸⁴ Castillos, *RSUE*, Vol.38, p.3.

⁸⁵ Watterson, B., *The Egyptians*, Cambridge, 1997, p.19.

⁸⁶ Castillos, *RSUE*, Vol.38, p.9.

⁸⁷ خفاجة و بدوي ، هيرودوت يتحدث عن مصر، ص.208.

⁸⁸ Montet, *Everyday Life in Egypt in the Days of Ramesses the Great*, p.25-26.

⁸⁹ عبد العزيز، مجلة مركز الدراسات البردية و النقوش، المجلد 37، العدد 1، ص. 84.



3bd 1 prtsw 12 ^ch^c ^ch^c ^ch^c imi.k m33 pnw nb(w) m hrw pn
imi.k tkn im.f m pr.k hrw pwy n w3d – mdwt.f (n)
shmt m hrw pn

"The first month of winter season, the day 12, bad, bad, bad. Do not look at all the mice on this day, and do not approach it in your house, because it is the day that gave its words to *Sekhmet* on this day".⁹⁰

The poor nutrition had exacerbated their problems.⁹¹ It was limited diet beside hard work with a lot of burnt calories,⁹² caused the extreme and fast fatigue. The literary texts described in the extreme fatigue of the peasant, such as, in "*The Satire of the Trades*" saying: " he reaches his house worn out, for the forced labor has ruined him".⁹³ Otherwise, this protected them from obesity.

Herodotus said that the peasants worked without covering their heads, so their skulls are stronger.⁹⁴ This means that their exposure to the sun rays was for a long time. Probably, this excess sun exposure caused another damages for the peasants. As the excess sun exposure in general causes sunburn, dehydration, heat exhaustion, and heatstroke.⁹⁵

Conclusions

To conclude, the main problems which faced the ancient Egyptian peasants in the countryside could be as following:

- The taxation with its various types, which was so heavy and burden the peasant, without regarding the circumstances of the peasant, especially in case of not having its value for any reason as the low harvest and the crop spoilage.
- The inundation, which paralyzed the peasant's works in his land, in addition that too high flood could destroy irrigation works, settlements, increase epidemic disease, destroy food stores and livestock, endanger seed stocks, and sweep away major transverse dikes; while low or short floods reduced the wetted area, the degree of soil saturation, and the amount of fertile silt deposited, resulting in food crises ranging

⁹⁰ عبد العزيز، مجلة مركز الدراسات البردية و النقوش، المجلد 37، العدد 1، ص. 85.

⁹¹ Graves-Brown, *Dancing For Hathor*, p.62.

⁹² Castillos, *RSUE*, Vol.38, p.9.

⁹³ Simpson, *The Literature of Ancient Egypt*, p. 434; Hoch, *JSSEA*, Vol.21–22, p.94;

حسن، موسوعة مصر القديمة، ج. 17، ص.232.

⁹⁴ كمال، الطب المصري القديم، ص.343.

⁹⁵ Bouchama and Knochel, *N Engl J Med*. Vol. 346, No. 25, p. 1978; Armstrong, *Exertional Heat Illnesses, Human Kinetics, USA, 2003*.

from food shortages to famine. Beside its effect on the type of the crop and its quantity as well, which affected on the income too.

- The harsh treatment, injustice or robbing, punishment, hard continuous work, poverty, the corvée, unprotected houses, made the peasant live a miserable life.
- The economic level of the poor peasant, the diseases and his disability of bringing doctors in case of illness to him or anyone of the family members, the insects which transferred the epidemics to peasants easily, the continuous fatigue, the bad nutrition, and also the extreme exposure to the sun rays with its side effects; are all resulted to health problems.

However, the various problems challenged the peasant in his life; he tried to solve these problems to live a normal life. In case of not having the tax's value, he would take debts or overdue loan by "*self-sale*". In case of the seasons in which some jobs were paralyzed, the peasant was always diligent and hardworking in finding another job at this time. Also, the peasants were liable to corvée duty. In case of injustice or robbing his products, he made complaints to regain his right. To protect the house from insects which spread the diseases, he covered the house with solutions and blocked the holes which from which the dangerous creatures could get out, and followed the instructions of the medical papyrus. In his nutrition, he depended on bread and beer which full of different nutritional values.

Figures



Fig. 1 governors' punishment for corruption of tax collection, Mastaba of Khentika, 6th dynasty, Saqqara

After: James & Apted, *The Mastaba of Kehntika called Ikhekhi* , pl.IX.

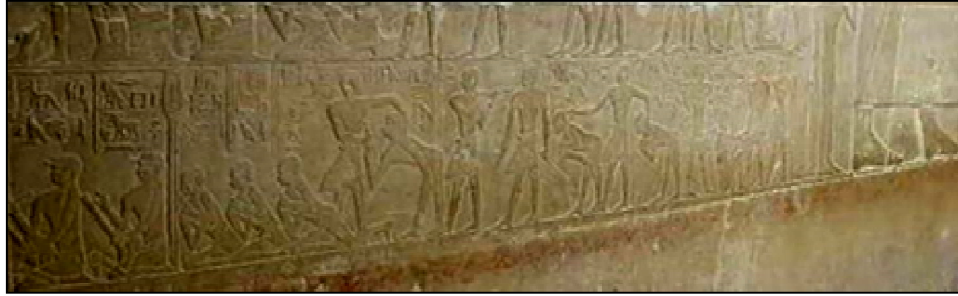


Fig.2 The punishment of villagers for the non payment of taxes, tomb of Mereruka, 6th dynasty, Saqqara

After: حجاج ، مجلة كلية الآداب جامعة الفيوم (الإنسانيات والعلوم الاجتماعية) ،مج.13، ع.2، شكل 5، ص. 3683

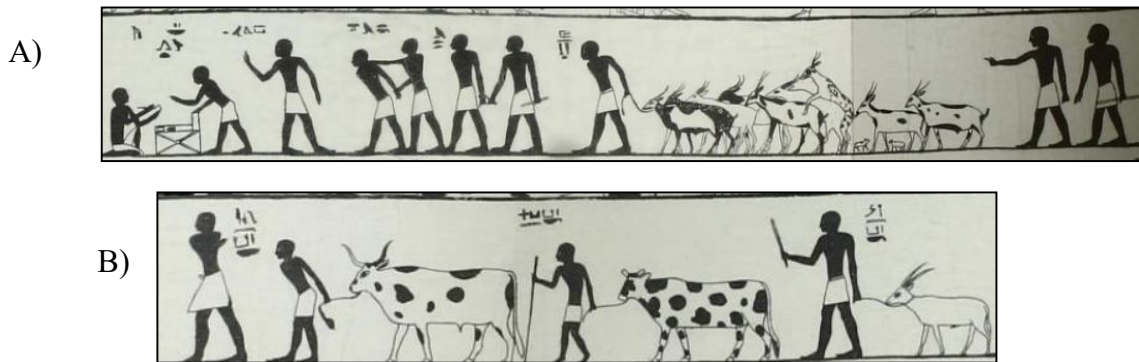


Fig.3 (A&B) tax collecting and punishing who did not pay taxes, tomb of Bakt III , 11th dynasty, Beni Hasan .

After: Newberry, P. C., *Beni Hasan*, part II, London , 1893 , plate IV;
حجاج، مجلة كلية الآداب جامعة الفيوم (الإنسانيات والعلوم الاجتماعية) ،مج.13، ع.2، شكل 5، ص.3684.

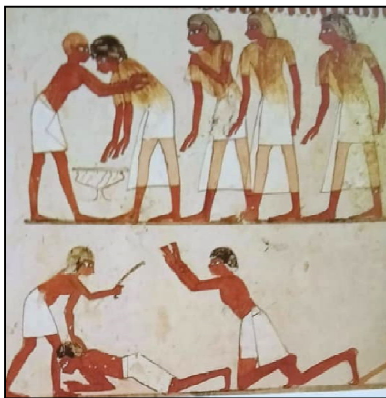


Fig.4 A farmer shaken by tax collector (upper) a farmer punished with a stick (lower), tomb of Menna, 18th dynasty, Sheikh Abd el-Qurna.

After: Strouhal, *Life of the Ancient Egyptians*, p.99.



Fig.5 The Nilometer at Elephantine Island, consisting of Stairs and gauges.

After: Noaman & El-Qousy, *Irrigated Agriculture in Egypt: Past, Present and Future*, fig.2.7, p.19.



Fig.6 A fragment from tomb of Nebamun, representing peasants bow down and pay homage and respect towards Nebamun, New Kingdom.

After: 3686. حجاج، مجلة كلية الآداب جامعة الفيوم (الإنسانيات والعلوم الاجتماعية)، مج.13، ع.2، شكل 9، ص.3686.

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الملخص العربي

مشكلات في حياة الفلاح المصري القديم

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بالرغم من كون الفلاح يخلق لنفسه حياة مليئة بالسعادة، إلا أنه واجه الكثير من المشكلات التي عكرت صفو حياته وحياة سكان الريف، وكانت هذه المشكلات إما كانت ناجمة عن الطبيعة مثل: الفيضانات، والأمراض، والمخلوقات الخطرة، أو بسبب الإنسان مثل: الضرائب والعمل الشاق المتواصل. وقد فصل البحث كل مشكلة كيف أنها كانت تزيد من صعوبة حياته؛ فعلى سبيل المثال: كانت الضرائب بمختلف أنواعها ثقيلة جدًا وتثقل كاهل الفلاح، دون مراعاة ظروف الفلاح، أيضا الفيضان الذي شل أعمال الفلاح في أرضه، بالإضافة إلى أن الفيضانات الشديدة قد تدمر أعمال الري ومخازن المواد الغذائية والماشية، بينما أدى انخفاض الفيضانات إلى نقص الغذاء والمجاعة. إن المعاملة القاسية والسرقة والعباق والعمل الشاق والفقر والسخررة والمنازل غير المحمية وأحيانا الظلم كانت من الأسباب التي جعلت الفلاح يعيش حياة بائسة، بجانب الأمراض الناجمة عن سوء التغذية، وكذلك التعرض الشديد لأشعة الشمس وآثارها الجانبية؛ كلها أدت إلى مشاكل صحية.

الكلمات الدالة: الفلاح، المشكلات، الضرائب، الفيضان، السرقات، الأمراض، الصحة.