

S1 Episode 2 Transcript

Pharaoh's Roles and Duties

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Note for students etc:

I have not cited my sources in this transcript. I mostly used Shaw, Garry J. *Pharaoh, Life at Court and on Campaign* (2012) London: Thames and Hudson, in addition to my own knowledge of ancient Egypt gathered through years of studying, reading and academic lectures. This is not a piece of academic writing, however the research techniques etc follow academic research guidelines. My own theories are marked by an asterisk at the beginning and end of the statements; if you wish to use such statements please cite this podcast/transcript as the source (check your university's academic reference guidelines for how to reference an online source). If you wish to use this transcript as information/inspiration for an academic essay, please back up your statements with academic sources (including Shaw's book) and primary evidence, where applicable.

Hi, welcome to season 1 episode 2 of the Musegyptology podcast. My name is Kate, and I am the curator of Musegyptology and your host. Thank you to everyone who has listened to episode 1, which was on the ideology of ancient Egyptian kingship and what happened when the old pharaoh died and the new king took the throne. If you haven't listened to it, I recommend you do that now, as it is the part 1 to this episode. Today's episode is about the pharaoh's duties, as the most powerful and important person in ancient Egypt.

Maintaining Ma'at – Order and Control

The ancient Egyptian pharaoh wasn't a figurehead; he had real responsibilities and duties. These are neatly summarised in a text from the Ramesside Period called the King as Sun Priest, quoted here from the book *The Pharaoh: Life at Court and on Campaign* by Garry J. Shaw.

"Re has placed King N in the land of the living for eternity and all time; for judging men, for making the gods content, for creating Truth, for destroying evil. He gives offerings to the gods, and invocation offerings to their blessed spirits"

These duties in the king's divinely-ordained role were essentially to keep Egypt safe and prospering, because the Egyptians believed there was a dangerous threat to the country which could lead to catastrophe. They understood that there were two fundamental forces in the world- Ma'at, which was order, control and justice, and isfet, or chaos, which was the opposite of Ma'at. Both had a place in the world, and needed to be kept balanced, but if chaos overran order, Egypt would suffer and eventually descend into disaster. Chaos could win in a number of circumstances, for example if evil forces such as enemies invaded from abroad, if the gods abandoned Egypt, or, of key interest to us, if there were no king to rule the country. The pharaoh's presence on the throne was essential, as fundamentally he was a symbol of order and control, but most importantly he needed to carry out his major role of maintaining the correct balance of Ma'at and isfet so that Egypt would stay safe and prosper. To do so the king had to govern effectively and look after his people, defeat the enemies of Egypt both internal and external and defend its borders, perform the gods' cults and build temples, and maintain law and order.

Pharaoh as defender of Egypt

The Egyptians believed that Egypt was the home of Ma'at, a place of safety, comfort and order. In contrast, the rest of the world outside of the borders of the Egyptian Nile valley and Delta was the home of chaos. This not only included foreign countries, but even the deserts that are part of modern Egypt, as represented by Seth, god of disorder, chaos, storms and the desert. When an Egyptian person went abroad they could be at risk from this chaos, and if a foreigner came in, they could bring it with them, and chaos could overrun Ma'at.

The ancient Egyptians believed that foreigners were manifestations of the chaos that was present in their countries, and therefore they could, in theory, be enemies to Egypt. *The vast majority of the foreigners who entered Egypt never caused a problem for the country; but the king and his government knew that as well as being a potential metaphorical threat against Ma'at, foreigners could be a threat to Egypt in reality.*

This became true several times throughout the 3000 year history of ancient Egypt, in the worst way the kings could imagine. Egypt faced several invasions from their foreign enemies and instances of foreigners occupying the throne, such as the Hyksos, Persians, Assyrians and Nubians, as well as incursions from groups of nomads in the western desert and the Sea Peoples from the Levant. While foreigners ruling Egypt became much more acceptable during the tumultuous Late Period, when many Egyptians would have been satisfied to simply have a strong king on the throne, during earlier periods of Egyptian history the idea of foreign occupation and a foreigner on the throne was thought of as having an enemy on the throne. This would potentially allow chaos to overrun Ma'at, and would certainly have been an Egyptian pharaoh's worst nightmare.

The first time part of Egypt was ruled by people of foreign origin was likely the most shocking and damaging to the psyches of the present and future Egyptian kings, and brought about a period of international warfare, diplomacy and empire during the New Kingdom. This was during the Second Intermediate Period, when Hyksos kings, whose ancestors came from the Levant in Western Asia, took control of the north of Egypt after the collapse of the Middle Kingdom. After 100 years of Hyksos rule over the north, and disunity of the country, the dynasty of Egyptian kings who ruled the south finally decided they had had enough of the so-called foreign enemies on the northern throne. The southern king therefore decided that he and his allies needed to defeat their rivals in battle and reunify Egypt under one, Egyptian, pharaoh. Successive southern kings Seqenenre Tao and Kamose had tried to defeat the Hyksos, but both had died before they had been successful, Seqenenre Tao's mummy showing he died a violent death, perhaps in battle. King Ahmose was finally able to defeat the Hyksos and drive them out of Egyptian territory. The country was therefore reunified under an Egyptian king's rule, theoretically re-establishing Ma'at.

Ahmose's royal successors in the New Kingdom were therefore anxious to protect Egypt's borders and keep the country safe from its enemies, potential invasions and chaos- this was a major role for the pharaohs of the early 18th dynasty. During this period, when international diplomacy was immature, one of the ways the pharaohs tried to defend their borders and prevent foreign invasions was to, ironically, command the Egyptian army to march into foreign lands and defeat their armies in battle. Having demonstrated his military strength, the Egyptian king was content that the foreign ruler was now too weak and ashamed to invade Egypt and try to seize the throne. But rather than acting as a deterrent, when the foreign king had regrouped his troops, and with the need to reclaim his own reputation as a strong ruler, he would, of course, march his troops towards Egypt and attempt to retaliate.

The Egyptian kings therefore commanded the army to invade enemy territory and seize control of neighbouring parts of foreign lands. This new empire acted as a buffer zone to prevent enemy

troops and the chaos that accompanied them from getting close to the traditional Egyptian borders. Egypt was one of the most powerful states in the ancient world during this part of the late Bronze Age, in part because of its empire which gave it valuable advantages such as control of a huge area, access to trade routes and natural resources.

As discussed, the pharaoh commanded his army in their offensive and defensive duties, but he was actually supposed to have a hands-on role. The king was officially Egypt's military commander-in-chief and perceived as the ultimate warrior, but this wasn't supposed to be a nominal role as it was technically his duty to lead the army into battle on the frontline. As temple reliefs representing the king in the midst of battle show, it was always the king himself who was depicted killing the enemy. Famous scenes depict pharaohs firing arrows from a gilded chariot before a mound of dead, injured and fleeing troops, or smiting captured enemies by hitting them on the head with a mace in a ceremonial act representing him defeating all of Egypt's foes. Officially, the king was the only person in ancient Egypt who was allowed to kill anyone, so artistic decorum and propaganda dictated that in battle scenes he must always be represented as a strong and powerful warrior pharaoh, shown killing enemies alone, without his fellow troops. In his account of the Battle of Kadesh, Ramesses II even claimed that his troops fled in fear of the Hittite army, and he was left alone on the frontline to fight the enemy single-handedly!

But in reality, of course, the Egyptian soldiers were on the battlefield killing their opponents, and while it's possible that the king was in the throng of battle with them, it's more likely that he was a safe distance away from the frontline, as he was obviously too important to lose. The extent to which the kings actually fought is debated by Egyptologists, and it also changed over time, as being war leader was one of the pharaoh's main roles during the New Kingdom, but he had less direct responsibility in warfare during other periods such as the Old Kingdom.

It's difficult to answer the question of whether pharaohs actually fought. As mentioned, king Seqenenre Tao died a violent death, but it's only one theory that he died in battle, and another suggestion is that he may have been assassinated, so this isn't proof he fought on the frontline. Texts describing the king fighting in wars aren't completely reliable either, as like artistic depictions of the king in battle, they are also dictated by propagandistic rules. *Some pharaohs wouldn't have been physically able to fight if they were elderly or unwell, and some just might not have wanted to.* We know from the victory stela of 26th dynasty king Psamtik II that instead of being anywhere near the battlefield in Nubia where his troops were fighting, he chose to go sailing around Elephantine island instead. Also, some princes were delegated military roles in place of their father, for instance Seti I who was in charge of military campaigns on behalf of his elderly father Ramesses I, and Ramesses IV also served as commander of the army when he was prince.

But regardless of whether he actually fought, the pharaoh was still head of the military, wars were declared by him alone and battles were fought in his name. He was responsible for protecting borders, ensuring enemies were defeated and that chaos did not win.

King as head of the Egyptian government and looking after his citizens

The king was also in charge of the government, as the supreme lawmaker and highest authority in the land. The ancient Egyptian government was substantial, as was required to run such a relatively advanced society. He was supported by the vizier as his deputy, who was similar to a modern Prime Minister, high officials running the various departments and thousands of other officials and scribes, working together to make sure the country functioned efficiently and remained stable so that Ma'at won over chaos.

The pharaoh was the ultimate decision-maker in Egypt, as was a god-given role in this divinely-ordained office, so one of his major duties was to make new laws, and he was the only person allowed to do so. As he was intermediary between the gods and mankind, it was understood that the king was able to receive messages from the gods through dreams, signs and miracles, such as rare natural phenomena like witnessing a comet, as Tuthmosis III did during his reign. Some of these divine messages were interpreted as instructions from the gods on how to rule the country. The ancient Egyptians therefore believed that the gods commanded the king, who in turn commanded his people under the gods' instructions by making them into laws or policies. However, many of the king's laws would have been his own ideas; *or all of them, if you have an atheist mind-set and believe that this so-called divine inspiration would have come from his subconscious, inspired by the philosophical and ethical models established by ancient Egyptian mythological beliefs.*

Once the king had an idea or so-called divine inspiration for a law or policy, he would invite his courtiers to discuss it with him in an audience in the palace, where they expressed their opinions and debated the matter; however the king always had the last word and the ultimate decision. As in pre-democratic states, he ruled by decree, and once he had made his decision it was final and the law was quickly enacted. It was published on papyrus for archiving and on stone stelae for public view, and the population was then subject to this law and would be judged by it. *However, by using the written medium this would have limited the number of people who were aware of the new law to the tiny percentage who had the skills to read, so there must have been some sort of word-of-mouth communication among towns and villages to ensure the population behaved according to new laws. Otherwise, you could find yourself in court for doing something you had no idea was a crime!*

The pharaoh was, overall, also responsible for looking after his people through his governmental policies, to ensure his subjects had what they needed to live. To do so, he needed to impose taxes on his subjects. The most important revenue was through agricultural tax; as the king owned all of the land in Egypt, he imposed taxes on people who used his land to earn an income, such as farmers. As ancient Egypt was a moneyless society, this tax was collected as a percentage of the crops the farmers grew on his land. The government stored this in state granaries, and the king commanded that much of it be redistributed as wages to his employees who needed food deliveries, i.e. people who worked in jobs where they didn't produce their own food, such as government officials, soldiers and builders of the king's tomb. Most importantly, a proportion of the stored crops was stockpiled to feed the population during periods of bad harvest in order to prevent famine.

The crown took other actions to make life easier for people. They dug and maintained irrigation canals to enable water to flow from the Nile further into fields for higher yields of crops, which enabled people to grow more for their families and for trade, and of course this would allow the government to collect more crops as tax- a win-win situation. They also maintained shipping routes for people to use for trade, and provided housing for some workmen, such as those building the king's tomb. *By taking these actions to give people what they needed and keep them satisfied, he was trying to ensure that they followed the laws he had commanded and didn't need to revolt or resort to crimes to get what they needed; therefore ensuring Ma'at.*

Pharaoh as supreme judge

Earlier we discussed how the king maintained Ma'at by defending against and defeating Egypt's foreign enemies, *but the king also needed to protect himself and his people against the ever-present threat of chaos within Egypt's borders. As one of the conceptual definitions of Ma'at is order and justice, a literal method for ensuring that Ma'at won over chaos was for the king to enforce what we now call law and order. People who broke the law were spreading isfet, or chaos, the force

that the king was trying to control, so he had to ensure that his citizens behaved correctly, crimes were prevented and criminals were punished, so that chaos didn't win.*

One of the pharaoh's roles was supreme judge, with a duty to judge the most serious crimes such as murder, and to pass sentences for the harshest punishments. The vizier, who was in charge of a court called the great kenbet, judged slightly less serious but still major crimes, while local courts judged lesser crimes and many legal matters.

When someone was found guilty of breaking the law, the king or the vizier decided their sentences. Many punishments in ancient Egypt were very harsh, including capital punishment- for instance, the king sentenced the robbers of tombs in the Valley of the Kings to death and mutilation, and a judge who wrongly found an innocent man guilty was also sentenced to death. Only the king was allowed to sentence someone to death, as he was legally the only one allowed to kill people, *or at least to sanction their execution at the hands of someone else.* *These sentences would certainly act as a deterrent to most, but not all, as crimes didn't disappear completely, so the king had to continue his efforts to maintain Ma'at and keep isfet at bay through other means.*

King as high priest of all gods

The pharaoh was high priest of all ancient Egyptian gods, and intermediary between the gods and mankind, making offerings to them, performing their rituals and festivals, and communicating with them. This was an essential role as the ancient Egyptians believed that if the king didn't perform these duties, the gods would abandon them, so chaos would overcome Ma'at and Egypt would collapse into ruin.

The gods were the most important beings in ancient Egypt, therefore it was essential to maintain their cults, and an enormous focus of effort and resources was placed on serving them. In his hugely important role as ultimate high priest, the king was responsible for performing the daily rituals for the hundreds of ancient Egyptian deities inside temple shrines, as well as attending and enacting other religious rituals and festivals throughout the country. Magnificent reliefs represent the pharaoh performing these religious acts on the walls of the temples that were home to these deities, as proof to the gods and his people that he was performing his duties.

The reason the king had to perform these rituals and festivals, and make offerings to the gods, was to ensure that they were appeased, or kept satisfied, so that they would use their divine powers to benefit Egypt. Each god had their own characteristics and powers, such as solar deities including Khepri, Ra and Atum, who were responsible for the sun being reborn at dawn every morning, moving across the sky throughout the day, and then setting each night. The ancient Egyptians believed the gods controlled the majority of the natural phenomena and the mythological concepts that kept Egypt a comfortable and safe place to live. If you displeased the gods, such as not performing their rituals and festivals effectively, these gods wouldn't make the effort to look after Egypt, such as causing the sun to rise. The Egyptians feared what would happen if certain natural phenomena suddenly stopped, such as the Nile not having its annual flood, or the sun not rising every day. For purely practical reasons at least, their largely agricultural economy and feeding their population relied on these, to say nothing about what such signs would mean for the balance of chaos over Ma'at- Egypt would descend into poverty, struggle and chaos. Some deities such as Sekhmet and Ra were also believed to be capable of great destruction, so much so that they could destroy the world if they were angry enough. Therefore, appeasing the gods with offerings of mounds of high quality food, sacrifices of animals such as cattle, caring for the gods' statues in temple shrines, and carrying out their rituals and festivals, was essential for the wellbeing of Egypt and the balance of Ma'at.

However, the ancient Egyptians had more than 1400 gods in their pantheon, so it was, of course, impossible for the pharaoh to perform the cults of every god in every temple simultaneously. He therefore had to delegate his religious obligations in a large part to thousands of priests, who served as his deputies in state and local temples, performing the daily rituals and the frequent religious festivals on his behalf. But the king remained the ultimate high priest officially, in name and in image, as per the rules of ancient Egyptian propaganda and protocol. As was necessary for maintaining Ma'at, he still carried out rituals for the major gods' cults when and where he was able to, for instance he would have travelled up and down the Nile to many of the key religious festivals throughout the year, and he would likely have visited important local temples and performed rituals for the resident gods while there. *Think of him as the CEO of the national business of worshipping ancient Egyptian gods- he was the figurehead, commanded the overall strategy and major resources and liaised with the most important beneficiaries, but he also occasionally went to work on the 'shop floor' to play his part or when there were special occasions such as festivals. But however he achieved it, as long as these deities were happy the king had done his job, and Egypt was theoretically safe with the protection of the gods.*

Thank you so much for listening to this episode of Musegyptology. In season 1 episode 3 I'll be taking you on a mind's eye tour down the Nile, looking at some of the wonderful ancient sites that we pass on our journey, and learning about the geography of ancient Egypt and the Nile and how this impacted people's daily lives. In the meantime, if you wish to contact me, please do so via @musegyptology or www.musegyptology.net. I'll speak to you soon.