BE A SCRIBE!

Working for a Better Life in Ancient Egypt



Michael Hoffen, Christian Casey, and Jen Thum

CALLAWAY

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Introduction

Have you ever wondered what ordinary life was like in ancient Egypt? If so, this is the book for you! It will take you on a journey through the hopes, fears, struggles, and skills of the ancient people who lived in the shadows of the pyramids.



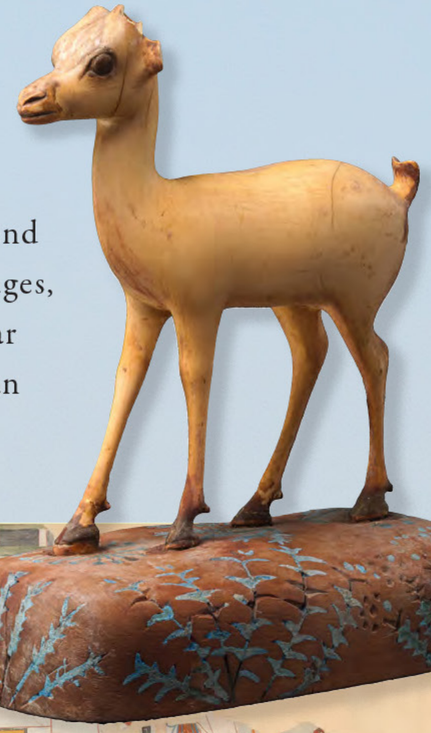
This is the story of a father, Khety, bringing his son, Pepi, up the Nile to a school far away so that he can learn to read and write. With those skills, Pepi might have a chance at a better life as a scribe in the royal court. In order to make sure his son studies hard and learns as much as he can, Khety tells him about the many terrible other jobs that he might get if he isn't hired as a scribe. He lists 18 of them, all of which you'll learn about here. Along the way, Khety gives Pepi some fatherly wisdom to help him navigate the dangerous environment of the capital city on his own.



The original story was written in the ancient Egyptian language, but it's translated here into English. Sprinkled throughout this book are more than one hundred real ancient Egyptian artifacts that help explain the fascinating story of Khety and Pepi. Some of them are things that ancient people actually used in their everyday lives, and others are modern copies of ancient paintings showing daily life as it looked to the people who lived it.

This story takes place during the time we call the Middle Kingdom (see #timeline), almost 4,000 years ago. Since it is thousands of years old, it can sometimes be hard to understand. Whenever things get tricky, you'll find helpful information to explain what's going on.

Everything in this book is ancient. Spend enough time flipping through these pages, and by the end, you'll have a pretty clear understanding of what it was like to be an ancient Egyptian!

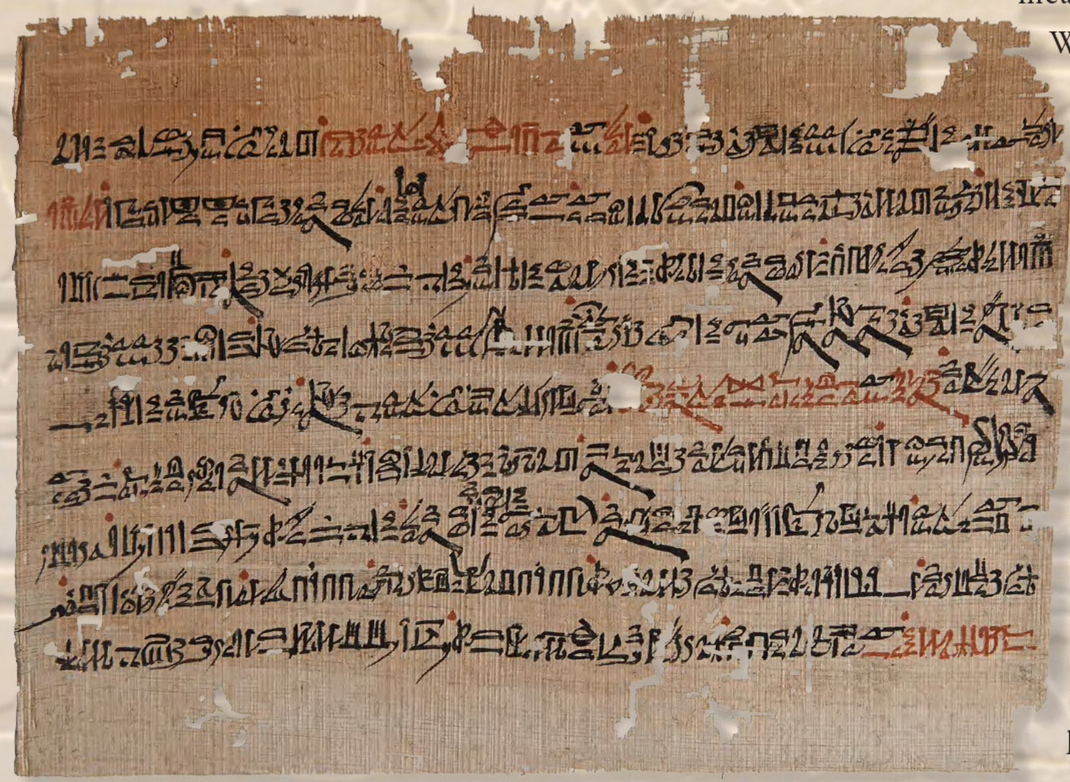




Ready to Learn Some Ancient Egyptian?

Throughout this book, you will learn some ancient Egyptian words. They'll be written in hieroglyphs and in two other ways: transliteration (the way Egyptologists spell out the sounds of the Egyptian language) and with a guide to the sounds of the words, to help you read them aloud. You'll also learn the meaning in English. Here's an example:





Papyrus Sallier contains the only complete copy of this story. It was written with ink on papyrus using a writing system known as Hieratic.

kmt (say: ke•met) "Egypt"

You can practice saying this word and the others in this book, and impress your friends with your new vocabulary!

What are hieroglyphs?





To the ancient Egyptians, hieroglyphs were known as *mdw nṯr* (say: med•oo net•cher) "sacred writing." The word "hieroglyph" comes from the ancient Greek translation of this Egyptian phrase: in ancient Greek, "hiero" means sacred and "glyph" means writing.



Hieroglyphs only represent consonants



Many people think that hieroglyphs are "picture writing," but that's not the whole story. For example, a hieroglyph such as 𓅱 can mean "bird," but it usually doesn't. While many hieroglyphs look like real-world objects and creatures, most often they represent sounds, just like the letters of the English alphabet. But unlike writing in English, hieroglyphs represent a different set of sounds: the sounds of the ancient Egyptian language.



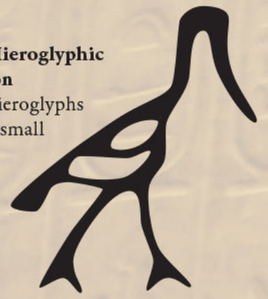
There were vowels in the ancient Egyptian language, but hieroglyphs only represent consonants. They leave out all the vowels. Egyptologists don't always know what the real vowels were, so they add in the letter "e" between consonants to make Egyptian words easier for people today to pronounce. For example, the ancient Egyptian word for "Egypt" is 𓆎𓏏𓊪. Egyptologists spell out (transliterate) this word as *kmt*, and pronounce it ke•met, adding e's between the consonants to make it easier to say.





Timeline

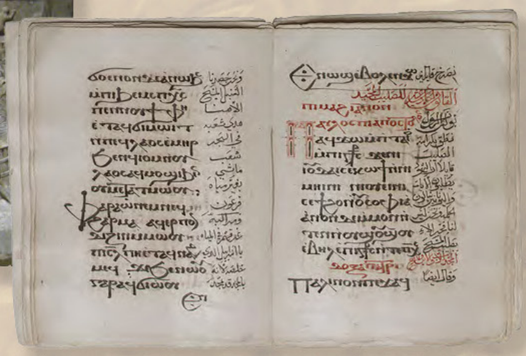
Earliest Hieroglyphic Inscription
The first hieroglyphs appear on small ivory tags found in Tomb U-j at Abydos.



Book of the Dead
The earliest versions of the "Book of the Dead" are written around this time.







Coptic to Arabic
Gradually, Coptic—the last form of the ancient Egyptian language—was supplanted by Arabic as the language of the Egyptians. Books from the medieval period use both languages side-by-side.

Unification
Menes (Narmer) unites Upper and Lower Egypt.



3000 BCE

Archaic Period

2500 BCE

Old Kingdom

King Khufu is buried in the Great Pyramid



First Intermediate Period

2000 BCE

Middle Kingdom

Re-unification
Mentuhotep II reunites Egypt, beginning the Middle Kingdom.



Second Intermediate Period

1500 BCE

New Kingdom

Re-re-unification
Ahmose I expels the Hyksos and declares the beginning of the New Kingdom.



Oldest Texts
The oldest copies of this story are written.

Reign of Hatshepsut
Egypt's most famous female king ruled at this time.



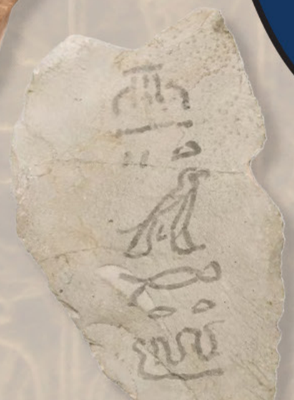
Complete Copy
Papyrus Sallier, the only complete copy of this story, was written during the New Kingdom.



1000 BCE

Third Intermediate Period

Copies of Copies...
Most copies of this story come from the Third Intermediate Period. They are written on small pieces of stone called ostraca.



500 BCE

Late Period

Battle of Actium
Roman forces led by Octavian defeat Cleopatra and Marc Antony's army, making Egypt a Roman province.

Year 0

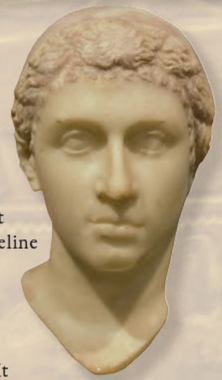
Hellenistic Period

Greeks in Egypt
Alexander the Great conquers Egypt, beginning the Hellenistic Period, a time when Greeks ruled over Egypt.



Roman Period

Last Egyptian Queen
The famous Cleopatra lived closer in time to us than she did to the building of the Great Pyramid. Check the timeline to see for yourself!



Christian Era
Christianity begins to spread to Egypt. It would eventually become the dominant religion, replacing the ancient Egyptian religion entirely.



Last Hieroglyphs
The last hieroglyphic inscription is carved on the temple of Philae in Upper Egypt.



Last Temple
The last functioning Egyptian temple, Philae, is closed by order of the Byzantine emperor Justinian.

500 CE

Byzantine Period

Arab Conquest
Muslim Arabs, led by Amr ibn al-As, conquer Egypt and set up an Islamic government.

1000 CE

Islamic Period

1500 CE

Ottoman Empire



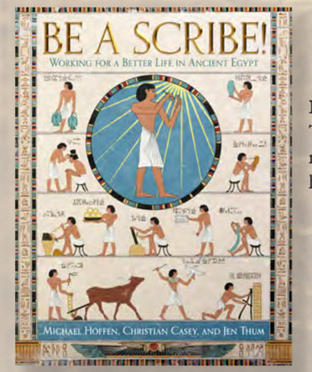
Birth of the USA
The Declaration of Independence is signed. Notice how recent this famous historical event is compared to the long history of Egypt.



European Colonialism

2000 CE

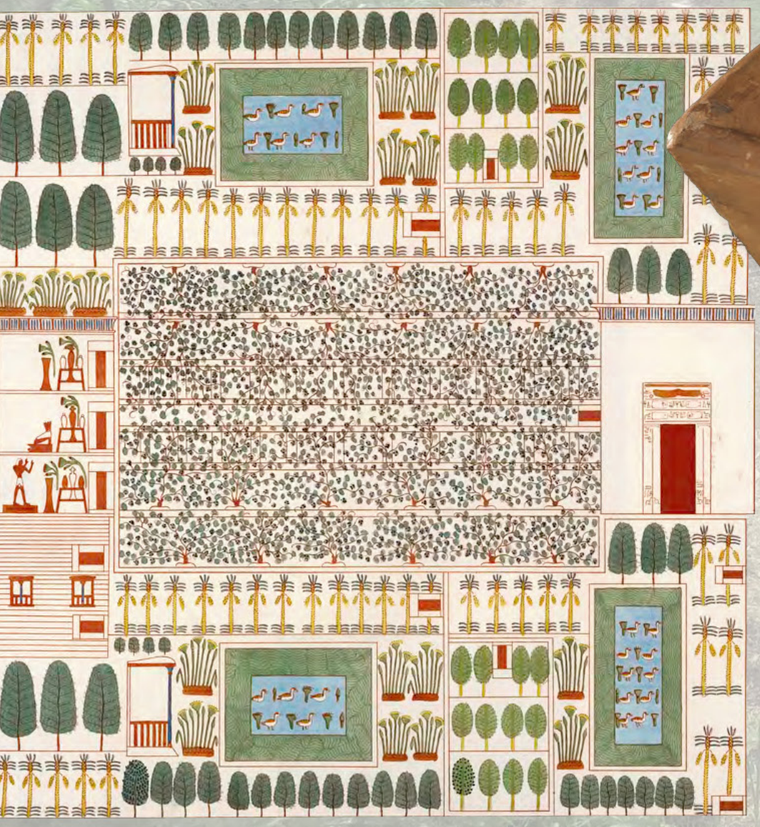
Arab Republic of Egypt



Be a Scribe!
The book you're reading right now hits the shelves.

The Best Job

"I've never seen a job like being a scribe! By telling you about it, I'll make you love writing more than your mother. I'll show you what a good salary is like. Being a scribe is great, it's better than every job. It's like nothing on earth. Fortune starts for him when he is only a child, people already seek advice from him. He is sent to run errands, and before he comes back he puts on a kilt."



Scribes had many tasks other than writing, including making architectural drawings like this one!

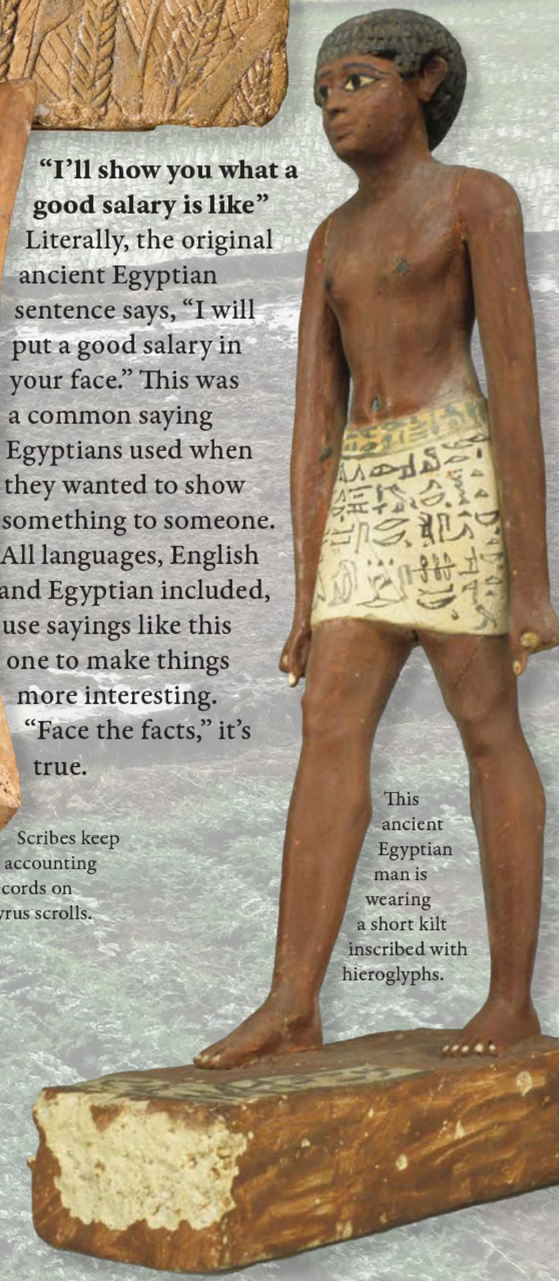


This wooden granary model shows scribes at work tallying up the amount of grain the workers are processing.

Workers pour grain into storage bins.

Scribes keep accounting records on papyrus scrolls.

"He puts on a kilt"
Ancient Egyptian men with high status often wore kilts. While most Egyptian children wore simple loincloths, children who were training to be scribes began to wear kilts from a young age. Wearing a kilt in ancient Egypt would be like wearing a suit in modern times—it was an unusual item of clothing for younger people.



This ancient Egyptian man is wearing a short kilt inscribed with hieroglyphs.

"I'll show you what a good salary is like"
Literally, the original ancient Egyptian sentence says, "I will put a good salary in your face." This was a common saying Egyptians used when they wanted to show something to someone. All languages, English and Egyptian included, use sayings like this one to make things more interesting. "Face the facts," it's true.

 *iꜣwt* **"job"** (say: ee•ah•oot)
This word is used to describe all of the jobs in ***Be a Scribe!***. Most ancient Egyptians learned their father's trade, but in ***Be a Scribe!***, the father wants his son to have a better job than he does. So he sends him to a scribal school, where he can have a greater chance of success.

Jobs

The Smith

"I've never watched a sculptor or a goldsmith do their work, but I have watched a coppersmith at the mouth of his forge. He has fingers like those of crocodiles, and is stinkier than an egg or a fish."



This tomb scene shows sculptors working on a statue.



This gold ring made for the priest Sienamun shows the skill of Egyptian metalworkers.

gnwty **"sculptor"** (say: ge•noo•tee)

nby **"goldsmith"** (say: neb•ee)

ḥmty **"coppersmith"** (say: hem•tee)

Ancient Egyptian sculptors and smiths weren't artists in the modern sense. They were skilled craftsmen who had to work within a set of artistic traditions dating back thousands of years. There was little room for creativity. While they weren't praised for their uniqueness, they were recognized for their skill and ability.



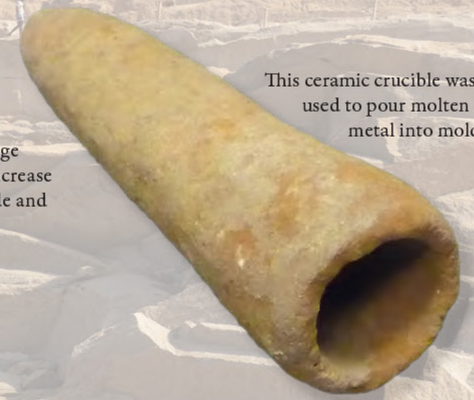


This tomb scene shows metalworkers pouring metal from a crucible into a large mold.

ḥryt **"forge"** (say: her•eet)

A forge is like an oven, except it's used to heat and shape metals instead of food. A worker would melt a piece of copper or gold inside a crucible (a ceramic cup used for holding molten metal) and then pour it into a pre-made mold. After some time the metal would harden into that shape and could be taken out of the mold.

This tomb scene shows a man using a forge to melt metal. He blows on the forge with a pipe to increase the oxygen inside and make it hotter.



This ceramic crucible was used to pour molten metal into molds.





Egyptian metalsmiths made many kinds of objects out of bronze (a mixture of copper and tin), such as this cat statue and fish pendant.



"He has fingers like those of crocodiles"

Crocodiles have rough, scaly fingers, just like metalworkers, whose hands become dry from hours spent working with molten metal and toxic chemicals. But a scribe, who didn't work with his hands, would not have "crocodile fingers."



The Barber

"The barber shaves until the end of the night. He puts the razor on the neck and then puts it on his elbow. He goes from street to street to find someone to shave. He will exhaust his two arms in order to fill his stomach, like a bee working to eat."



A cosmetic set, which belonged to an ancient Egyptian woman



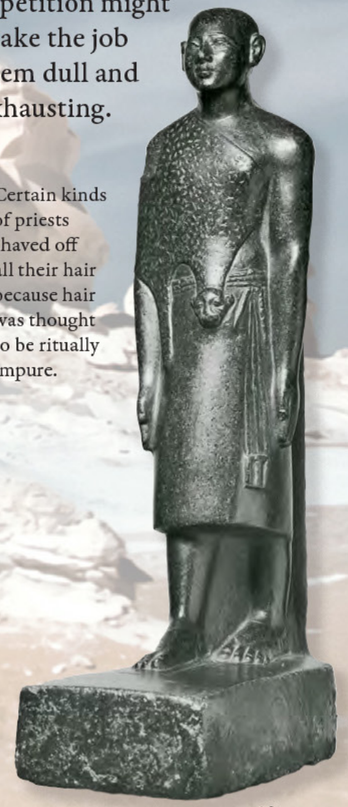
Egyptian children often wore a sidelock—a single braid on one side of the head.

Who went to the barber in ancient Egypt?
Everyone! At various times in Egyptian history, all sorts of people shaved their heads and wore wigs. (Notice that the shaving tools on these pages belonged to women.) Certain kinds of priests always shaved their heads and bodies as a way of staying clean and pure to enter the temple, while children's heads were shaved except for one lock of hair on the side.



A tomb scene depicting the ancient Egyptian equivalent of a barbershop—many people wait for the barber to cut their hair.

"He puts the razor on the neck and then puts it on his elbow"
Barbers always have to work with a clean blade to avoid cutting their customers. After shaving a customer's neck, the barber would wipe the razor on his elbow and then repeat this motion over and over again. This constant repetition might make the job seem dull and exhausting.



Certain kinds of priests shaved off all their hair because hair was thought to be ritually impure.





This is the burial mask of Hatnefer, the woman who owned the razor above.

 *ḥq* **"barber"** (say: khak)
In Egyptian, the words for barber and shave are the same. The last hieroglyph in the word for barber is a picture of the kind of razor they used in their work. Egyptian barbers traveled around searching for customers instead of working in a shop—that's why the barber in ***Be a Scribe!*** "goes from street to street."

"Like a bee working to eat"
In English, a "busy bee" is someone who is always working. Ancient Egyptians used a similar metaphor. Khety suggests that the barber in ***Be a Scribe!*** can't take a day off work unless he's fine with skipping a meal. His income is so low that he is unable to save his earnings from one day to the next.

The Trader

"The trader travels downstream to the Delta marshes to make a profit for himself. He has done more than his two arms can handle. The mosquitoes have killed him, the fleas have bitten him. He has been bitten, and so he is punished."



A tomb scene showing a marsh with birds and papyrus plants



A tomb scene showing a boat being rowed on the Nile

bṯty **"trader"**
(say: be•che•tee)

Literally, this Egyptian word means "runner," since this person would travel swiftly from place to place to do their job. They would buy goods in one place and sell them for profit in another.

ḫdy **"to travel downstream"**
(say: khe•dee)

Remember that the Nile River flows from south to north, so when you're traveling downstream, it means that you're going north. If someone has to go downstream to get to the Delta marshes, it means that they are coming from the south, in Upper Egypt (see the map on page mp#).

"He has been bitten, and so he is punished"

The Nile Delta in Egypt (see the map on page mp#) is very watery, and that means there are many mosquitoes and fleas. Not only does the trader's job involve a lot of hard work, but it also takes him to a harsh environment where he is more vulnerable to insects than Egyptians living in other places.



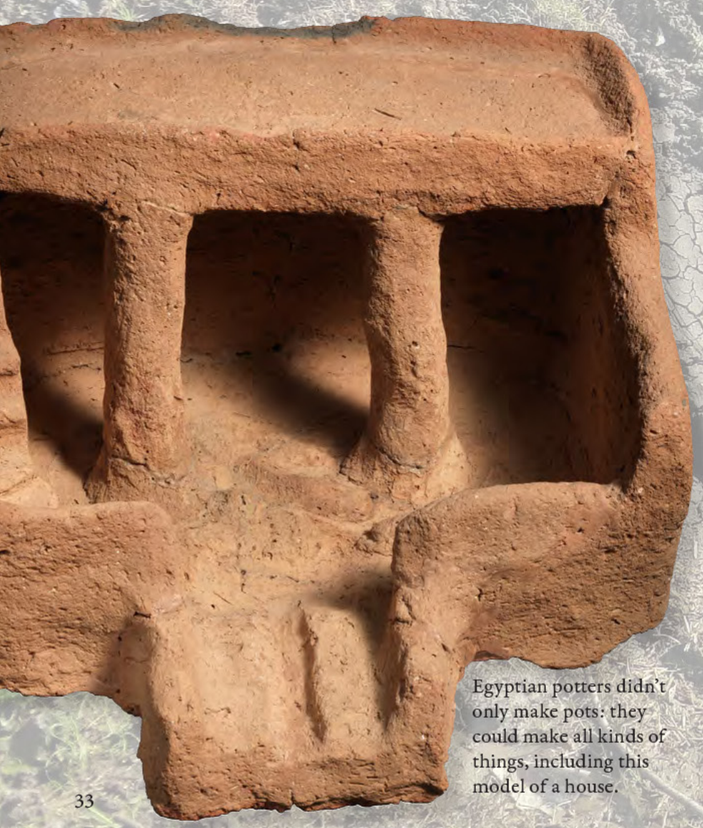
Mosquitoes and other flying insects are annoying pests. Amulets like this one were meant to keep them away.

This boat has a cabin in the middle to store goods. It has many rowers, perhaps because it is traveling downstream, against the wind.



The Potter

"The common potter is under the earth, even though he is still alive. He uproots more mud than a pig to fire clay under the ground. His clothing is as hard as a block of stone, and his belt is a rag. The hot air comes out from the fire and enters forcefully into his nose. He has to knead the clay himself—he stomps on it with his two feet. He is turned away from the courtyard of every house because he is covered in mud."



Egyptian potters didn't only make pots: they could make all kinds of things, including this model of a house.

Why does this story mention courtyards, out of all places in the house?

Courtyards were an important part of ancient Egyptian houses. Most houses had both indoor spaces and an enclosed outdoor courtyard. Unlike the other parts of the house, which were more private, courtyards were places where guests could visit—unless they were unwelcome, like the potter in ***Be a Scribe!***.



Egyptian craftspeople could make highly detailed ceramic figures.

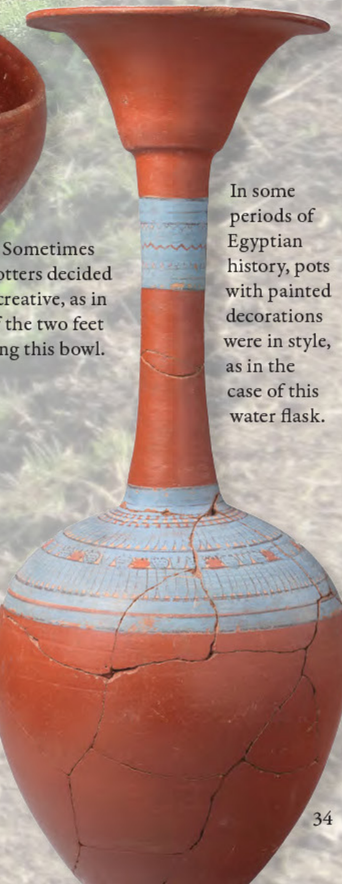
This model shows a potter making a pot using a wheel.



Sometimes potters decided to get creative, as in the case of the two feet supporting this bowl.



A typical ancient Egyptian storage jar: simple and practical



In some periods of Egyptian history, pots with painted decorations were in style, as in the case of this water flask.



iqdw **"potter"** (say: ee•ked•oo)

Pottery—baked clay containers—was made in ancient Egypt from at least 5200 BCE. Egyptian potters worked clay with their hands or on a pottery wheel. They formed the clay into cooking pots, jars for storage and transport, dishes for eating and drinking, and even molds for shaping bread. Once the clay was shaped, they baked it in a special oven called a kiln, which created the extreme heat needed to make solid, watertight containers. Kilns were often built below ground ("under the earth").

The Gardener

"The gardener is carrying a shoulder-yoke, and all of his joints are worn out. There is a large lump on his neck, it is producing fluid. He will spend the morning watering the grape vines. At night, he will water the coriander. By noon he is exhausted because of his poor body—but he only gets a chance to rest when he dies. In every aspect it is worse than every job."



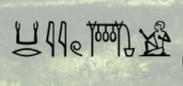
These men crush grapes into grape juice with their feet.



These men harvest grapes from the vine.



This gardener uses a counterweighted pole with a bucket on the end, called a *shaduf* in Arabic, to lift water from a canal to his plants.



kꜣryw **"gardener"**
(say: ka•ree•oo)

In ancient Egypt, there were no grocery stores—all food had to be produced locally. Gardeners were responsible for growing the fruits and vegetables that people ate every day, so they had a lot of work to do. Grapes were one of the fruits they grew, and the word for gardener contains a hieroglyph of a grape vine (the sixth hieroglyph from the left).

"He will spend the morning watering the grape vines, at night, he will water the coriander"
What is the connection between grape vines and coriander (a.k.a. cilantro)? When these two plants are grown together in a garden, they benefit each other. Coriander attracts bees that pollinate the grape vines, resulting in more grapes. At the same time, the shade of the grape leaves protects the coriander from the heat of the sun. Egyptian gardeners knew about this relationship and used it to their advantage.

What is a shoulder-yoke, and why does it hurt the gardener?

A shoulder yoke is a wooden beam with two containers, one attached on each end. It allows you to shift the weight of what you're carrying to your back instead of your arms, letting you lift more than you could before. However, it also puts a lot of weight on a person's back and neck. Over time, it can cause lumps and blisters like those Khety describes.

A model from the tomb of a man named Meketre showing a typical Egyptian garden, with fruit trees surrounding a pool of water in the center.



A small model of a shoulder-yoke with two baskets for carrying goods.

The Tenant Farmer

"The tenant farmer cries out for eternity with a voice as loud as a raven's. His fingers have sores on them from constantly rubbing against his tools. He is more tired than a reed-cutter from the Delta marshes, but he is still in rags. He's doing just fine—if being among lions counts as fine! His experience is painful. His corvée labor makes up a third of his income. He has to travel from the marshes all the way to work and only arrives home late in the evening. Walking has worn him out."



In this wooden model, a farmer uses a pair of oxen to plow his field.



In this tomb scene of people farming, the fields and canals are shown from a bird's-eye view, but the people working in them are seen from the side.

ḫwty **"tenant farmer"** (say: ah•hoo•tee)

You probably know what a farmer is, but what about a tenant farmer? In ancient Egypt, most farmers didn't own their own land. Instead, they rented it from a nobleman, who was their landlord, making them his tenants. They agreed to pay rent by giving a portion of their harvest to their landlord. In exchange, they were protected from robbery and other misfortunes. It was a hard job, and they didn't earn much. What's more, if they failed to pay their rent, their landlord might have them beaten.



This harvest scene shows tax collectors measuring the fields and calculating the total grain they produced.

ḥ3wt **"corvée labor"** (say: ha•oot)

Corvée (say: cor•vay) labor is a system where the government requires people to do unpaid work for the state instead of paying taxes. Ancient Egyptian corvée labor created a workforce for projects such as irrigation canals and roads, and even monuments such as the pyramids.

"He is more tired than a reed-cutter from the Delta marshes"

This is now the second time that ***Be a Scribe!*** has mentioned the Delta marshes. Reed-cutters were known to have been doing hard work, as this line shows, so it is interesting that the reed-cutter never gets a full section of his own in this entire story. Perhaps Khety and his son were familiar enough with this job that it didn't need much explanation. Or maybe there is a different reason. Why do you think it might be missing?

ABOUT THE AUTHORS





Michael Hoffen is the youngest-ever recipient of the annual Emerson Prize, awarded by the Concord Review for outstanding promise in history. While still in middle school he was introduced to the joys of translating ancient texts and never looked back. During the pandemic, Michael decided to embark on an ambitious project to bring ancient Egyptian literature to life outside the classroom. *Be A Scribe!* is Michael's first book in a series intended for young readers. When not chasing down new stories to translate or write, Michael enjoys biking, swimming, and rock climbing. He lives with his family in New York.



Dr. Christian Casey is an Egyptologist who specializes in the study of ancient Egyptian languages. He obtained his PhD in Egyptology from Brown University in 2020 and now works as a researcher at Freie Universität Berlin. He is especially interested in sharing the exciting world of ancient Egypt with young people and other interested members of the public.



Dr. Jen Thum is an Egyptologist, educator, and curator at the Harvard Art Museums. She studied Egyptology and Archaeology at the University of Oxford and Brown University. Jen's work celebrates the learning potential of ancient material culture, especially across disciplines. She teaches at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, writes and leads workshops about learning with art and artifacts, and is the lead editor of Teaching Ancient Egypt in Museums: Pedagogies in Practice.

BE A SCRIBE!

Working for a Better Life in Ancient Egypt



AN IMMERSIVE STORY OF DAILY LIFE IN ANCIENT EGYPT

Michael Hoffen is the youngest-ever recipient of the annual Emerson Prize, awarded by the Concord Review for outstanding promise in history.

This is an extraordinary translation of a papyrus dating from ancient Egypt's Middle Kingdom era, by Michael Hoffen, the 16-year-old author of *Be a Scribe!* with the help of co-authors Dr. Christian Casey, and Dr. Jen Thum.

The text was composed at the time of King Amemenhat I, the first Pharoah of the 12th dynasty of the Middle Kingdom (2040 to 1782 BCE), while the most complete manuscript, known as Papyrus Sallier II, was written sometime during the New Kingdom (1550–1077 BCE).

Michael Hoffen became fascinated by the text, known as The Instruction of Khety, when he discovered that it tells the tale of a teenage boy living almost 4,000 years ago—Pepi.

Pepi wonders what career path he should choose, an important matter still contemplated today by millions of teenagers forty centuries later. His father Khety takes him on a long journey up the Nile to enroll him in a school far away from home, where Pepi will learn to read and write. Along the way, Khety explains 18 other terrible jobs Pepi could end up having to work at if he is not hired as a scribe.

This tale of a teenage boy in ancient Egypt shows readers that working for a living has never been easy!

Sail up the Nile with an ancient Egyptian father and son and discover what daily life was like along the way. Experience the wonderful world of ancient Egypt with the help of countless artifacts and paintings. Delight in four-thousand-year-old humor and immerse yourself in the choices facing a teenage boy in Egypt then.

Children's / History

9.375" x 12" Portrait

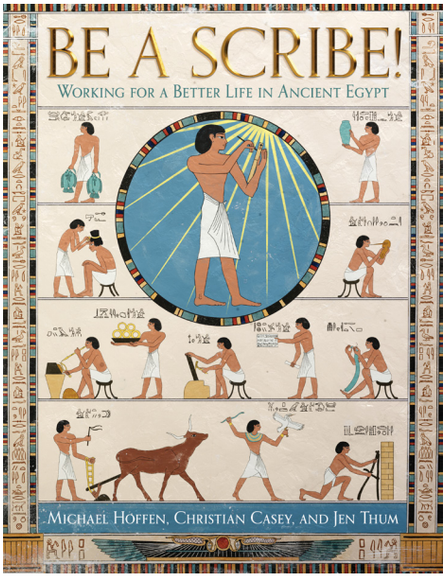
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