

Priests in Ancient Egypt

Priests played an important role in ancient Egypt. The priesthood was responsible for ensuring the earth and heavens remained as the gods created them. Priests accomplished this through a series of rituals they performed each day in the temple. Members of the priesthood performed these ceremonies in the name of the King.

Many people served as part-time priests in their local temples and were rewarded for their service with a share of the food and drink offered to the gods. The king may have been involved in the naming of some high-ranking priests, especially to politically powerful positions. Many priestly positions were passed down from father to son.

Priests in ancient Egypt were very different from our modern priests. They were solely focused on specific temple tasks and did not serve as spiritual advisers. Some Egyptians were considered priests simply because they had undergone training in rites that enabled them to perform certain technical tasks in the temples. These men were considered priests, even if they did not have full access to all parts of the temple.

The structure of the priesthood became larger as temples grew in size and rituals became more complex. As the priesthood grew, it became more divided by rank, and the roles of individual priests became more specialized. Often, positions were held by up to four individuals, each of whom served for one month and then returned to their secular lives until it was their turn to serve as a priest again. Many priests only worked in the temple for three months a year.

As temples became more and more powerful, the priests began to take a more active role in the appointment process. By the Middle Kingdom (2055 to 1650 B.C.), people began to purchase priest positions. Positions in the priesthood were valued because of the wealth and power associated with them.

There was a period of apprenticeship for new priests, followed by purification and initiation rituals. They were required to bathe and shave and to abstain from certain things in order to be in the priesthood. Priests were only required to follow these regulations



Priests in Ancient Egypt

during the period of the year they were serving in the temple.

The most powerful priests in a temple complex were attached to the cult of the god. These priests served the deity's physical needs, like food and dress. They often held powerful non-religious positions as well.

In large temples, a hierarchy sometimes developed among the priests. Many of the upper level priests came up through the ranks, but sometimes they were appointed by the king as a means of keeping a check on priestly political power. For instance, during the Third Intermediate Period, the high priest of Amun in Thebes was often one of the king's sons.

Other priests had technical roles in temple, such as caring for clothing on the gods' statues and other cult objects. Some were responsible for reading the ritual texts aloud on a daily basis. They were masters of hieroglyphs and other forms of Egyptian writing. They worked in the temple library and cared for books on medicine herbs, magic, and theology.

Another set of priests focused on astronomy. They were in charge of determining when each religious act would occur. They wrote horoscopes and calendars of lucky and unlucky days, which were very popular among the Egyptian people.

Priests were not the only participants in temple rituals. Singers, musicians and dancers all played a role. Music and dancing were intended to ward off evil and bad luck. Members of this group of priests were frequently women. Although women had held positions in the priesthood since the Old Kingdom, (2686 - 2160 B.C.), their roles had become more specialized and limited over time.

The lowest ranking priests were those who carried out the everyday tasks necessary for maintaining the temple. Butchers, porters, and doorkeepers were all considered priests and were needed to keep the temple running each day. This group seemed to have the most limited access to the inner parts of the temple.

No matter their level, all temple priests were involved in an important ceremony performed every morning before dawn: the



Priests in Ancient Egypt

ritual re-enactment of the creation of the cosmos.

The ceremony began with a ritual called “Lighting the Fire.” This ritual was held in the most sacred room of the temple and was performed by the high ranking members of the priesthood in the name of the king. It was a reenactment of the first appearance, and daily reappearance, of the sun’s fire, which was thought to repel forces hostile to the sun god.

Next, they performed a ritual known as “Drawing the Bolt.” During this rite, the priests opened the door to the shrine where the main cult statue stood. The statue’s clothing was removed; and underwent ritual purification, dressing, and feeding. The lower ranking priests were responsible for preparing the ceremony and disposing of the food and water.

Simpler ceremonies were held throughout the day. At midday, the ceremony involved a ritual purification by water and incense and focused on the lesser gods and deified kings and queens. During the evening, a ceremony similar to the morning ceremony was held.

The temple rituals were only open to priests. Throughout the year, common people attended festivals where the image of the temple god was removed from the temple and taken to visit with the god of other temples. During these parades, people could directly address the god with questions, complaints, or requests.

