

THE FITZWILLIAM MUSEUM

EDUCATION DEPARTMENT

Fact Sheet

The Ancient Egyptians Food and Farming

The Gift of the Nile

For the last 6000 years Egypt has been an agricultural country and farming has formed the foundation of its economy. Since ancient times, the produce of the rich and fertile Nile lands determined the welfare and prosperity of the people who have lived there. When we think of ancient Egypt we usually think of the treasures and monuments of kings, the wealth and splendour of the tombs and pyramids but it was the farmer and labourer, the 'peasants' of the time, who formed the backbone of the Egyptian way of life. As people in ancient Egypt moved from being hunter-gatherers to becoming more settled cattle-raisers/farmers, the culture was able to develop and grow.



**Tomb Model of Bakers and Brewers (Gallery 19, Case 25)
E.71d-1903**

The River Nile, the longest river in the world, was central to life in Egypt both physically and spiritually. The river allowed the people to farm and grow crops in a land that was essentially a desert. Every year, swelled by the rains that fell in the southern uplands, the river flooded. This was the "gift of the Nile" that the Roman historian Herodotus described: "When the Nile inundates the land, all of Egypt becomes a sea, and only the towns remain above water". As the floodwaters receded, they left behind a layer of fertile silt - called "black land" by the Egyptians, as opposed to the "red land" of the desert. The Egyptian agricultural year revolved around this annual event -

- the "inundation" or time of the flood, started in July, peaked in September and reached a low point again in October. It was during the inundation, when the land was flooded, that the people were able to work on building projects for the Pharaoh.
- the "emergence of the fields from the waters" was when the crops were planted and lasted from October until about February.
- the "drought" was when they harvested and threshed.

The most important crops grown were wheat and barley, which were used to make bread and beer, the staple diet of most Egyptians. In addition, fruit and vegetables were grown on small scale in house gardens, and many of these smallholdings also reared goats, sheep and sometimes pigs. Small farms were self-sufficient - a small peasant farm milled its own flour, baked its own bread and brewed its own beer. Large estates grew, spun and wove flax to make linen, made oil from castor beans, sesame and flax seed (linseed) and reared cattle for their meat. It was only the rich who could afford to eat beef and the average ancient Egyptian relied on fish and wildfowl for protein.

Bread and Beer

Granaries

Bread was the staple of the Egyptian diet and grain needed to be stored to ensure a good supply throughout the year. Crop yield varied according to the water level of the Nile, so preserving and distributing this most basic foodstuff became an organised and highly controlled process. Well-designed granaries were essential. A domestic granary consisted of a courtyard protected by a wall, which surrounded one or two rows of conical mud buildings. Each of these had two windows: one near the top, which was reached by a ladder, was used to fill the granary and grain was fetched from the lower window, as necessary. Larger estates had large flat roofed granaries like the one on display in case 25 (see below).

Grain was a taxable commodity and, early in the growing season, fields were measured to assess the likely yield. At harvest time, grain was collected to be stored in the local estate or temple granary. Scribes and officials went into the fields at harvest time to observe and record the harvest as it was being collected and check that none had been lost or stolen.

Milling grain was a daily household task. The grain was crushed in a stone mortar, which was set into the floor before being milled on a saddle quern. The flour was coarse as it contained wind-blown sand and stone dust from the millstones and this is thought to be the cause of the worn-down teeth found in many mummies. Sieving flour through rushwork sieves was important as this helped to remove some of the impurities.

Baking and Brewing

The model shown above, made of painted wood, linen and clay, shows a group of eight men and women engaged in the related processes of baking and brewing. Two women grind grain, another is sifting flour; a man mixes dough and a woman sits baking loaves in conical moulds; a man carries water jars, another sieves lumps of bread into a vat where it will ferment with water to make beer.

For baking, dough could be cooked on a flat stone over the fire, on the outer walls of a clay oven or in heated moulds, most of which were conical. Both leavened and unleavened breads were eaten. Leavening was probably achieved by the same method that is still used today in many Egyptian villages - the remnants of dough left in the bowl are mixed with water and left to sour overnight, as a raising agent forming the basis of the next day's baking. There is also evidence that yeast was used in Egypt for baking and brewing as early as 1500 BC.

To make beer, loaves, partly baked so as not to destroy the enzymes needed for fermentation, were sieved into large vats, mixed with water and left to ferment. The resulting soup-like liquid was strained into large jars from which it was decanted as needed. Beer was the favourite drink of the ancient Egyptians and was the required liquid funerary offering. It was made in a similar way to the modern Sudanese drink, *bouza*.

Tomb Models

Ancient Egyptians believed that models, like the one pictured above, placed in the tombs, could be magically active in the afterlife. The deceased person would, therefore, have all their physical needs provided for by virtue of these models. These models give us a wealth of information about daily life in ancient times depicting people in boats, butchering a cow, and storing and preparing food and beer.

Tomb Models of Granary, Baking and Brewing and Butchering

Gallery 19, Case 25

The granary would have belonged to a wealthy household or larger institution. A scribe takes notes and records from the flat roof of the building.