

This engraving shows students in a scribe school, working at their writing.



9.5 Scribes

In the social pyramid, scribes were one level below priests. Scribes were Egypt's official writers and record keepers. They were highly respected and well paid. Most scribes worked for the government. Others worked for priests or nobles.

Only men were allowed to be scribes. They came from all classes of society. Becoming a scribe was one of the few ways that men could rise above their parents' social class.

Scribe Schools Boys who wanted to become scribes had to attend scribe schools. The schools were run by priests. Most students came from artisan or merchant families. Very few boys came from the peasant class.

Schooling started around the age of five. Students typically spent 12 years or more learning **hieroglyphs**, the symbols used in the Egyptian system of writing. This writing system was quite complicated. Most students first mastered a simpler form of writing and then worked their way up to hieroglyphs.

Students had to memorize over 700 hieroglyphs. They spent as many as four years copying the signs, over and over. They practiced their writing on pieces of wood, flakes of stone, and even broken bits of pottery. As their skills improved, students were allowed to write on papyrus, a type of paper made from the papyrus plant.

Students in scribe schools did not have an easy life. Classes sometimes lasted from dawn until sunset. Teachers were strict and often treated their students harshly. Teachers punished students for being lazy or for not paying attention. Beatings were common. One stern schoolmaster wrote, "A youngster's ear is on his back; he only listens to the man who beats him."

hieroglyph a symbol used in hieroglyphics, a system of writing developed around 3000 B.C.E.

The Work of the Scribes Ancient Egyptians kept all kinds of records, so scribes held a wide variety of jobs. They recorded accounts of the grain and food supply. They wrote down the results of the government census, which counted the people living in Egypt. Some scribes calculated and collected taxes. Legal scribes recorded court cases and helped enforce laws. Military scribes kept track of the army's soldiers and food supply, and the number of enemies killed in battle.

Every scribe used the same tools. For pens, a scribe used finely sharpened reeds. For paper, he used a sheet of papyrus laid on a writing tablet. The tablets were made of wood or stone. Each tablet contained two wells, one for black ink and one for red ink. A small container held water that was used to wet the ink.

A scribe carried his tools with him wherever he traveled. His tablet hung from a cord slung over his shoulder. Attached to the tablet were leather bags and cases that held his other tools.

Scribes also carried rolls of papyrus. This paper was a remarkable Egyptian invention. The Egyptians made paper by first cutting the inner part of the papyrus plant into strips. These strips were soaked in water for several days until they were soft. The soft strips were laid out in a crisscross pattern, and then pressed between two sheets of cloth until all the water was absorbed. Finally, the papyrus strips were pressed one more time to form a sheet of paper.

This relief shows two scribes. Only men were allowed to be scribes, although women were sometimes taught to read and write.

