

READING 6-1

W. Durant. 1954. Our oriental heritage. Chapt. 8. The Story of Civilization. Simon and Schuster, New York. p. 156–157.

The Civilization of Egypt

Agriculture

Behind these kings and queens were pawns; behind these temples, palaces and pyramids were the workers of the cities and peasants of the fields. [The population of Egypt in the fourth century before Christ is estimated at some 7,000,000 souls.] Herodotus describes them optimistically as he found them about 450 BCE.

They gather in the fruits of the earth with less labor than any other people,...for they have not the toil of breaking up the furrow with the plough, nor of hoeing, nor of any other work which all other men must labor at to obtain a crop of corn; but when the river has come of its own accord and irrigated their fields, and having irrigated them has subsided, then each man sows his own land and turns his swine into it; and when the seed has been trodden into it by the swine he waits for harvest time; then...he gathers in it.

As the swine trod in the seed, so apes were tamed and taught to pluck fruit from the trees. And the same Nile that irrigated the fields deposited upon them, in its inundation, thousands of fish in shallow pools; even the same net with which the peasant fished during the day was used around his head at night as a double protection against mosquitoes. Nevertheless it was not he who profited by the bounty of the river. Every acre of the soil belonged to the Pharaoh, and other men could use it only by his kind indulgence; every tiller of the earth had to pay him an annual tax of ten or twenty per cent in kind. Large tracts were owned by the feudal barons or other wealthy men; the size of the some of these estates may be judged from the circumstance that one of them had fifteen hundred cows. Cereals, fish and meat were the chief items of diet. One fragment tells the school-boy what he is permitted to eat; it includes thirty-three forms of the flesh, forty-eight baked meats, and twenty-four varieties of drink. The rich washed down their meals with wine, the poor with barley beer.

The lot of the peasant was hard. The “free” farmer was subject daily to the middleman and the tax-collector, who dealt with him on the most time-honored of economic principles, taking “all that the traffic would bear” out of the produce of the land. Here is how a complacent contemporary scribe conceived the life of the men who fed ancient Egypt:

Dost thou not recall the picture of the farmer when the tenth of his grain is levied? Worms have destroyed half the wheat, and the hippopotami have eaten the rest; there are swarms of rats in the fields, the grasshoppers alight there, the cattle devour, the little birds pilfer; and if the farmer loses sight for an instant of what remains on the ground, it is carried off by robbers; moreover, the thongs which bind the iron and the hoe are worn out, and the team has died at the plough. It is then that the scribe steps out of the boat at the landing-place to levy the tithe, and there come the Keepers of the Doors of the (King's) Granary with cudgels, and Negroes with ribs of palm-leaves, crying, “Come now, come!” There is none, and they throw the cultivator full length upon the ground, bind him, drag him to the canal, and fling him in head first; his wife is bound with him, his children are put into chains. The neighbors in the meantime leave him and fly to save their grain.

It is a characteristic bit of literary exaggeration; but the author might have added that the peasant was subject at any time to the *corvée*, doing forced labor for the King, dredging the canals, building roads, tilling

the royal lands, or dragging great stones and obelisks for pyramids, temples and palaces. Probably a majority of the laborers in the field were moderately content, accepting their poverty patiently. Many of them were slaves, captured in the wars or bonded for debt; sometimes slave-raids were organized, and women and children from abroad were sold to the highest bidder at home. An old relief in the Leyden Museum pictures a long procession of Asiatic captives passing gloomily into the land of bondage: one sees them still alive on that vivid stone, their hands tied behind their backs or their heads, or thrust through rude handcuffs of wood; their faces empty with the apathy that has known the last despair.

Religion

Profound, too, was the myth of Isis, the Great Mother. She was not only the loyal sister and wife of Osiris; in a sense she was greater than he, for-like woman in general she had conquered death through love. Nor was she merely the black soil of the Delta, fertilized by the touch of Osiris-Nile, and making all Egypt rich with her fecundity. She was, above all, the symbol of that mysterious creative power which had produced the earth and every living thing, and of that maternal tenderness whereby, at whatever cost to the mother, the young new life is nurtured to maturity. She represented in Egypt-as Kali, Ishtar and Cybele represented in Asia, Demeter in Greece, and Ceres in Rome-the original priority and independence of the female principle in creation and in inheritance, and the originative leadership of woman in tilling the earth; for it was Isis (said the myth) who had discovered wheat and barley growing wild in Egypt, and had revealed them to Osiris (man). The Egyptians worshiped her with especial fondness and piety, and raised up jeweled images to her as the Mother of God; her tonsured priests praised her in sonorous matins and vespers; and in midwinter of each year, coincident with the annual rebirth of the sun towards the end of our December, the temples of her divine child, Horus (god of the sun), showed her, in holy effigy, nursing in a stable the babe that she had miraculously conceived. These poetic-philosophic legends and symbols profoundly affected Christian ritual and theology. Early Christians sometimes worshiped before the statues of Isis suckling the infant Horus, seeing in them another form of the ancient and noble myth by which woman (i.e., the female principle), creating all things, becomes at last the Mother of God.