

What About The Workers?

Egyptian tomb craftsmen had a culture of their own.

The workmen's village at Deir Al-Medina which is situated on the outskirts of the Valley of the Kings near Thebes was founded early in the 18th Dynasty, in the reign of Tuthmosis I, 1550 until 1525 BC, the first Pharaoh definitely to be buried in the Valley.



Workmen's Village at Deir Al-Medina

At that time there was no resident community, just a village of about forty houses to accommodate workmen hired for short periods of time.

This then grew in size and became a more permanent home to accommodate a special group of expert craftsmen numbering more than a hundred families, including children, who lived in the village for several centuries as the situation demanded.

The situation changed in the 19th and 20th dynasties, 1307 until 1070 BC. When the artisans working in the Valley of the Kings and the Valley of the Queens lived, worked and died at Deir Al-Medina, and built large and finely-decorated tombs for themselves.

Texts have survived which tell us about their lives and the organisation of their work.

During their working week, the workers stayed in makeshift shelters in a small camp built on a ridge above the royal valley for ten day periods and they were divided into two teams, one working on the left side of the tomb, the other the right side, the numbers varying according to the size of the tomb.

They were managed by a foreman, and several scribes reported the progress of work, worker absence, and payments.

The designers and scribes ranked highest, artists, painters and draftsmen next on the scale, then quarrymen and masons, and at the bottom of the scale were the porters, diggers and mortar mixers.

In charge of the whole community was a Director



Paser - Vizier to Seti 1

of Works, the Vizier, and the various foremen immediately under his control.

Attendance was strictly recorded and an absent worker had to account for himself.

The written excuses, which have survived the centuries, reveal that one had to "visit my mother-in-law"; another had to get urgent supplies from the market; and illness was a frequent excuse.

Payment came regularly each month in the form of charcoal, dried meat, fish, bandages and cloth, along with materials for their work. When the caravan failed to turn up and there was a backlog of salaries, this led to the famous Revolution of the 20th/21st dynasties written on papyrus.

Gradually the workers formed this elite class, as is evident from the contents of their homes and their tombs at Deir Al-Medina.

The tomb of Sennedjem, pictured, discovered early in the 20th century, reveals the high quality of life expected in the afterlife, a lifestyle based on that on earth.

He and his wife are shown dressed in white linen, ploughing and reaping in a fertile hereafter; with protective deities guarding his sarcophagus; while other wall paintings show the deceased and his wife returning from a journey to Abydos.

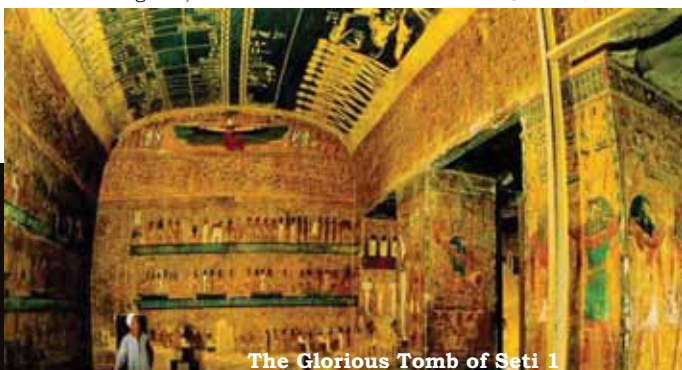
These paintings are some of the finest in the workers' village.

A succession of scholars has worked on the masses of archaeological and literary evidence recovered from a large pit containing some 40,000 pieces of pottery and scraps of papyrus.

Through these, the mission has been able to trace the family histories of each of the inhabitants of the village throughout a span of nearly three centuries: as well as their daily activities, religious ceremonies, marriages, pride in their work, magic texts, and even their antagonisms and jealousies.

At first no one realised what the community was for, but it soon became apparent that this was really a construction department and it has provided by far the largest amount of evidence of a workmen's community ever to be found.

Today we know more about the lives of the workmen who cut the New Kingdom royal tombs



The Glorious Tomb of Seti 1

PASER was a vizier during the reign of Seti I, and he continued to serve under Ramses II.

His job was to organise and direct major projects of state and to supervise production and officiate at major religious festivals, as here shown in a scene from his tomb at Thebes.

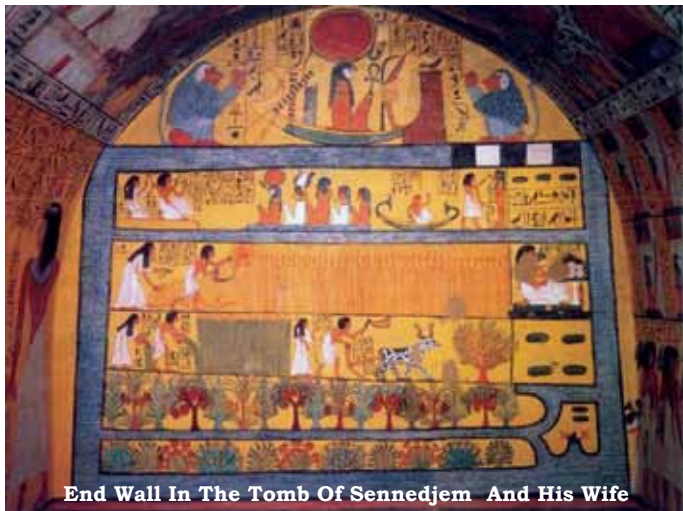
One of his main duties was to oversee the construction of his Pharaoh's tomb in the Valley of the Kings, and it was he who organised the necessary workforce, dividing the workers into two gangs.

The name of the foreman of the left side of Seti's tomb was Hay who spent his whole life working in the royal valley.

His father before him was a foreman, and young Hay worked beside him from childhood, continuing to work in the valley after his father died.

He appears to have been a kind and pious individual, and obviously a dedicated one because the tomb of Seti I, discovered by Giovanni Belzoni in 1817, far surpasses all others in the Valley of the Kings both in size and in the artistic execution of the sculptured walls.

Every inch of the wall space of its entire 100-metre length is covered with representations which were carried out by the finest craftsmen.



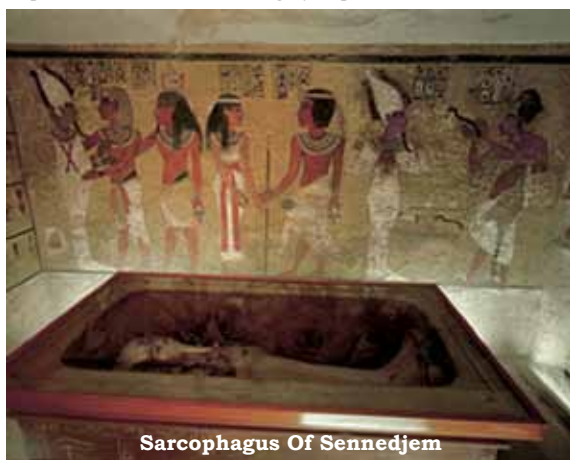
End Wall In The Tomb Of Sennedjem And His Wife

than we know about many of the Pharaohs for whom they were built.

With the death of Ramses X and Ramses XI, work at the royal valley came to a close.

The subsequent period was one of decline, during which no royal tombs were built.

What happened next has been discovered by scholars in a largely unpublished dossier of texts



Sarcophagus Of Sennedjem

in the time of Hatshepsut and Tuthmosis III.

The material revealed that, under Ramses IX, it was no longer safe in the village and the community took refuge near the Temple of Deir Al-Bahari where they created tombs for the Priests of Amun, and, under a new dynasty in Thebes, the ruling elite appears to have been given orders to empty the royal tombs and recycle the objects!

It is not widely known, but Tutankhamun was always a puny youngster and girls often made fun of his physique.

So when he reached 16, he decided to take up a rare Egyptian sport, body building!

When he reached 21, he had developed a great body which he was always showing off.

What is also not known to many but a trusted few, on his first date with Cleopatra he took her back to his pyramid.

Papyrus records tell us that one excavation led to another, and as he took off his armour breastplate, she looked at him admiringly and says, "Oy, Tutty, what a superb chest!"

"That's 100lbs of dynamite you're looking at Cleopatra," replies Tutankhamun, proudly.

As he takes off his trousers, she looks at him even more admiringly and says, "Oy yay, Tutty, what strong legs you have. And what massive calves!"...records tell us they sounded Jewish in those far off days!

"It's what I told you, Cleopatra my little asp," replies Tutankhamun, "I'm just 100lbs of dynamite."

As Tutankhamun takes off his Y-fronts, Cleopatra takes one look at him and starts to get ready to leave.

"What's the matter, Cleo?" asked Tutankhamun, "Why are you leaving so suddenly? Have I said something wrong?"

"No, Tutty, you've not said anything wrong," replies Cleopatra. "It's just that now I've seen your short fuse, I'm afraid to be near you with all this dynamite lying around."

