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Date: _____

Egyptian Citizenship

There are a number of Egyptian expressions which are often translated as citizen: Shawa, ankh, ankh-en-nut, nedjes, generally having meaning of being poor, humble and mean. Yet these people served as low level priests, sat on kenbets judging their peers, had property and paid taxes on their houses and wells, and owned land.

In keeping with the apparent legal equality of the genders, women as well as men were referred to as citizens in official documents. In times when people only rarely travelled far, when they generally grew up and died in the place of their birth, the bond between the citizen and his community was strong. One of the harsher punishments to which some criminals were condemned was exile to a distant place, one of the oases of the western desert or the city of Tharu on the eastern border of the country. Exiles were often disfigured as part of their punishment.

During times of oppression or unrest some citizens could not find protection in their own town. In a song to Ramses IV in honor of his accession to the throne, by which all wrongs were supposed to be righted, these refugees could return to their homes:

O beautiful day! Heaven and earth rejoice,

Thou art the good lord of Egypt!

Those who fled have returned to their cities,

Those who hid, have come forth....

Citizens of the army

The walls surrounding some cities had to be maintained and manned during war. There were periods when Egypt had standing armies, but they were mostly small and often used for policing desert areas or even just quarrying stone.

Most of the time, when there was a military emergency, the political leaders relied on their citizenry to defend their own cities at least.

He says: "O ye mayors, scribes, ritual priests, attendants, citizens (anH.w) of the army, as your city-gods favor you, and love you, as ye would bequeath your office(s) to your children after old age..."

Stela of Keres, 11th dynasty

The people of Egypt had religions temples at the center of their cities each representing a patron god or goddess. The influence of the local gods was immense: their temples possessed a large proportion of the land surrounding their cities. Over time the identification of belonging to a city with the following of its god became ever stronger.

Today I have come from the city of my god: Memphis

It is the true one of all the beautiful homes in this country.

Book of the Dead, New Kingdom

So closely were the god and his city tied together that local patriotism found its expression in songs of praise to the city god:

I sustained no town except your town,

I failed not to place its fame before all;

My heart sought justice in your temple night and day,

You rewarded me for it a million times

~Stela of Somtutefnakht, Late Period