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[Back to Normal View](#)

Mud Brick Houses

by Edward Brovarski

Most Egyptians in the Old Kingdom were farmers and lived in modest homes of only one or two rooms. Made from wickerwork and mud or from sun-dried mud brick, these homes had a courtyard for animals. More substantial houses belonging to priests who served the mortuary cult of Queen Khentkawes I were found at Giza. These houses were also built of sun-dried mud brick. Their thick walls helped keep them cool in summer and warm in winter. Inside and out, these walls were coated with dark yellow plaster. Although the surviving walls are now only a few courses high, walls of later periods suggest that the windows were most likely small and placed high-up in the walls. This arrangement kept out the glaring Egyptian sunshine and let in cooling breezes.

Although these houses were part of a planned community and are all similar, they may perhaps be taken as representative of houses that belonged to average Egyptians of the official class.

As Selim Hassan, the Egyptian archaeologist who excavated the Giza houses, remarked: The architect who designed the houses was evidently an expert in domestic architecture, as he placed the kitchen to the southeast of the living and sleeping rooms. Since the prevailing wind in Egypt is from the north, this placement prevented the smoke and smells of cooking from spreading throughout the house. The English archaeologist J.E. Quibell noted in another connection that the position of the bedroom in the southwest corner would also ensure a good current of air most nights, and the owner would not be awakened by the first dawn.

No elite houses of Old Kingdom date have yet been excavated in the Nile Valley. Nevertheless, representations of workshop scenes on tomb walls show carpenters working on an elaborate type of locking mechanism for a formal door and on a wooden lotus column. These images indicate that a middle- or upper-class home of the time probably resembled house models found in a tomb dating to some 500 years later.

The side of the house facing the street had no decoration, only a great, double-paneled central door with an elaborate openwork fanlight above. Probably used only on formal occasions, the central door would have been flanked by a single-paneled entrance for daily use. There may also have been a tall, latticed window.

At the back of the house was a court fronted by a porch. With its brightly painted, wooden columns that were crowned with an open lotus flower design or with papyrus or lotus buds, the porch provided a refuge from the noonday sun. In the center of the court, a pool shaded by trees, cooled the surrounding air by a few degrees.

In the houses of the wealthy, rooms would undoubtedly have been larger and more numerous. In addition, the rear of the house was probably given over to domestic quarters for live-in servants and to workshops. By custom, the servants in these houses provided many of the necessities used by the inhabitants.

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