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[Back to Normal View](#)

Farmers: VIPs of Ancient Egypt

By Dorothy Phillips Mobilia

A **VIP** is a **V**ery **I**mportant **P**erson. Who are the VIPs in our world today?

In many ways, farmers were the most important people in ancient Egypt. After all, it was they who fed the country. During the flood season, farmers were also called upon by the pharaoh to do other work, such as building pyramids, mining gold, and serving in the army.

Most of the population of ancient Egypt were farmers and their families. Although not enslaved, farmers were tied to the land of a wealthy master. They worked the master's land, cared for the animals, and sometimes had a small plot of their own to garden.

With prayers and offerings to the gods for an abundant harvest, the farmer followed a calendar of three seasons:

1. Akhet, the flood season, went from around June through September. Monsoon rains in the African highlands to the south swelled the Nile River, flooding its banks and bringing rich nutrients to Egyptian fields. Farmers waited anxiously as the waters receded. Too much water and they could not plant; too little and the crops could not grow. Either case meant hunger for everyone.

2 Peret, the growing season, went from around October through February. Farmers broke up the soil in the muddy fields with a wooden plow pulled by men, oxen, or cows. Women scattered grain for crops of barley, wheat, and corn. Pigs, sheep, and goats were then let loose to roam the fields, pressing the seed into the soil with their hooves. If the farmer had his own plot, he might plant onions, garlic, lettuce, squash, beans, grapes, melons, and more.

After planting, farmers worked on the canals and irrigation ditches that brought water to their fields. Little rain fell during the growing season, so farmers had to divert Nile water to grow their crops. An important tool used by farmers was a *shaduf*. Invented by farmers in nearby Mesopotamia, shadufs were used to lift buckets of water by a simple system of poles and weights. (Shadufs are still used today in parts of Africa.)

3. Shemu, the harvest season, lasted from around March through May. During the harvest, singers chanted work songs while the farmers labored. Most of the harvest went to the landowner, but some went to the government for taxes, and some went to the farmer and his family.

Farming was hard work, but ancient Egypt survived—and thrived—on the labor of the farmers.

Nile, Protector of Egypt

About 4,000 miles long, the Nile is the world's longest river. The main branch starts in the central African highlands. Surging north for thousands of miles, it passes through a deep gorge, on to the Egyptian delta, and into the Mediterranean Sea.

In ancient times, invaders were discouraged by the gorge and the deserts to the east and west. Invading boats could not get around the rapids in the south; to the north, they were unable to navigate the lagoons, wetlands, and dunes of the delta.

Inside these natural barriers, however, things were different. The river was a rich resource of fish and waterbirds for food. Egyptian boats traveled easily between settlements, and trade was brisk.

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