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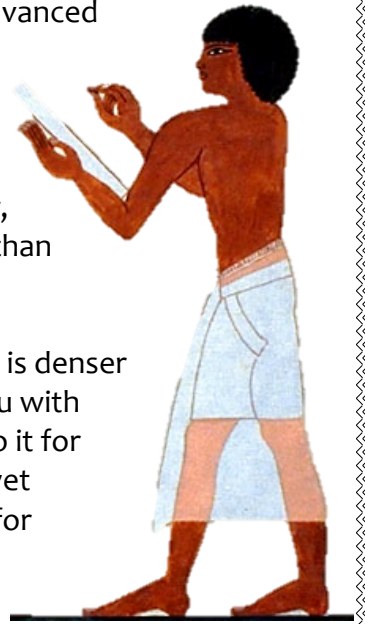
Period \_\_\_\_\_

# “If you have any sense, be a Scribe!”

About 6000 years after the birth of agriculture, great complex civilizations have developed in river valleys around the world. None is more famous today than Ancient Egypt. The primary source document below, known as the “**Papyrus Lansing**,” is a letter of advice from a high-level **scribe** named Nebmare-nakht, to his son and apprentice Wenemdiamun, urging him to learn the skills of a scribe. A **scribe** was a person who knew how to read and write, and usually worked for the government. Their position would be similar to lawyers, accountants, or government workers today. Read and annotate the letter and answer the questions.

[Apply yourself to this] noble profession.... You will find it useful.... You will be advanced by your superiors... Love writing, reject dancing; then you will become a worthy official. Do not long for the marshlands [out along the Nile]. Turn your back on throw-stick [hunting] and chase. By day write with your fingers; recite by night. Befriend the scroll, the palette. It pleases more than wine. Writing for him who knows it is better than all other professions. It pleases more than bread and beer, more than clothing and ointment. It is worth more than an inheritance in Egypt, than a tomb in the west.

Young fellow, how conceited you are! You do not listen when I speak. Your heart is denser than a great obelisk, a hundred cubits high, ten cubits thick... [T]hough I beat you with every kind of stick, you do not listen. If I knew another way of doing it, I would do it for you, that you might listen. You are a person fit for writing, though you have not yet known a woman. Your heart discerns, your fingers are skilled, your mouth is apt for reciting... You are busy coming and going, and do not think of writing. You resist listening to me; you neglect my teachings... [T]hough I spend the day telling you "Write," it seems like a plague to you. Writing is very pleasant!... See for yourself with your own eye. The occupations lie before you.



The author goes on to criticize all the different jobs of Egypt that require physical labor. He talks of the hardships of washing other people's clothes, being a merchant or a soldier. In all these occupations he notes that workers will often be tired from working too hard in the hot sun and will smell bad. Then he focuses on farmers...



Let me also expound to you the situation of the peasant [farmer], that other tough occupation... By day he cuts his farming tools; by night he twists rope. Even his midday hour he spends on farm labor. He equips himself to go to the field [with so many tools] as if he were a warrior. The dried field lies in front of him. He goes out to buy a team [of oxen to use for plowing the field]... Come dawn [the next day], he goes to [start his work] and does not find [the team] in its place. He spends three days searching for [them]. [Eventually] he finds them [dead] in the swamp. He finds no skin on them; the jackals have chewed them... Then, when he [returns to] his field he finds [his crops have failed]. He spends time cultivating (planting new seeds), and the snake is [following] after him. It [eats up] the seed as it is cast to the ground. [The farmer] does not see a [single] green blade [of plant growth at all]...

Now the scribe [working to collect taxes for the government] lands on the shore. He surveys the harvest [and says,] "Give grain." [The peasant replies,] "There is none." [So the farmer] is beaten savagely. He is bound, thrown into a well, submerged head down [to try to make him give up grain he is holding back]... When it is over, there is no grain [because he never had any to begin with].

If you have any sense, be a scribe. If you have learned about the peasant, you will not be able to be one. Take note of it!... [As a scribe,] you are dressed in fine clothes; you own horses. Your boat is on the river; you are supplied with attendants. You stride about inspecting. A mansion is built in your town [for you]. You have a powerful office, given you by the king. Male and female slaves are around you. Put the writings in your heart, and you will be protected from all kinds of toil (hard work)...

## Questions

1. Who is the author of this writing and who is the intended audience?
2. What was the author's purpose in this writing?
3. What arguments does he make to SUPPORT being a scribe?
4. What arguments does he make AGAINST being a farmer?
5. Do you think this author is biased? Why? Explain using evidence from the article.
6. What does this primary source document tell us about ancient Egyptian society? Think of as many examples as you can!
7. Do you think this father is similar at all to parents today? Why or why not?