

The Eloquent Peasant

Extended Biography

You may wish to share this biography with students, or just to read it for your own information.

Sometime between 2160 and 2055 BCE, a peasant¹ named Khunanup set off for a journey from his home in Wadi Natrun² (an oasis located in the northwestern fringe of Cairo) to Heracleopolis, the capital of Egypt at the time. While we do not know many details about his life prior to this journey, we do know that Khunanup had a wife named Merit, some children, and some land where he grew barley.³ A few days before his departure, Khunanup informed his wife that he was going to the urban center to get provisions. He then loaded his donkeys with various goods, including animal skins and hides, medicinal plants, pigeons, seeds, grains, berries, and other commodities to sell or trade. Finally, he instructed his wife to “[g]o and measure for me the barley which is in the storehouse, that which remains from last year’s barley.”⁴ From this surplus, Khunanup’s wife made him enough daily rations of beer and bread to sustain him along the way, and his wife and children were left with “twenty rations of barley as food.”⁵ It seems clear that though Khunanup lived in a rural area and was clearly a farmer, this was not his first trip to “Egypt” (Heracleopolis) but likely a routine journey and regular source of (supplemental?) income and/or sustenance.

Such economic activities would not have been an uncommon way to earn a living in Ancient Egypt during Khunanup’s lifetime. In the five centuries or so leading up to this period, Egypt experienced drastic political, economic, and environmental changes that caused the collapse of the Old Kingdom. Previous rulers, particularly those belonging to the fourth dynasty, had invested heavily in massive, overly opulent building projects that far surpassed the wealth of the treasury. Though the first ruler of the fifth dynasty, Userkaf (reign 2465–2458 BC), attempted to initiate some reform, the economy was already in serious decline and the central government severely weakened. This gave more power to regional political authorities called nomarchs (provincial governors), and soon, a series of civil wars between these various nomarchs arose leading to widespread violence, disease, and famine across Egypt. Perhaps more importantly, for our purposes, the region also experienced a severe drought between 2200 and 2150 BCE, which prevented the annual flooding of the Nile and thus disrupted agricultural production, making it extremely difficult to survive as a farmer.

By the time Khunanup was born, however, Ancient Egypt had entered a new era known as the Middle Kingdom, in which the once fractured region was reunified under a single ruler and the period of drought ended. Though many people returned to farming at this time, the new ruler began to invest heavily in trade (and even navigation to expand existing trading networks). In the aftermath of the previous political, economic, and environmental crises, and in the context of a newly stable polity, it is no surprise that peasants like Khunanup might have engaged in a diverse range of economic activities, including both farming and trade. This mixed-economy approach might have provided a sense of security to farmers should they face another environmental crisis that would threaten their harvests.

1 As Chike Jeffers notes, the term “peasant” here, which has become the common translation, does not actually represent an agricultural worker, but rather a person from the countryside. Some translations even use the term “marshdweller” instead of “peasant.” See Stephen Quirke, *Egyptian Literature 1800 BC: Questions and Readings* (London: Golden House Publications, 2004), 151–65.

2 This is the modern name of the region. In the original text it is called Sekhet-Hemat, “Field of Salt.”

3 It is not clear that he owned this land, but he had clearly lived there for a long time (it was a permanent residence) and he grew barley. Enough to have a surplus!

4 William Kelly Simpson et al., *The Literature of Ancient Egypt: An Anthology of Stories, Instructions, Stelae, Autobiographies, and Poetry*, (Yale University Press, 2003), 26

5 William Kelly Simpson et al., *The Literature of Ancient Egypt*, 26



However, Khunanup never made it to his destination. As he was heading south toward Neni-Nesut, in the district of Per-Fefi, he approached a man blocking the road. The man was Nemtinakht, a subordinate of the Chief Steward, Rensi (a regional political authority). Upon seeing Khunanup coming up the road with donkeys and desirable goods, Nemtinakht devised a plan to steal the traveler's goods. He first sent a servant to fetch some cloth, which he placed on the road. When Khunanup reached the man, Nemtinakht warned him not to trample his clothes and instead find another path. With a body of water on one side of the path and a field of barley on the other, Khunanup decided the only other feasible path was up the embankment and through the barley field. As Khunanup made his way through the field, his donkey took a bite of barley. With that, Nemtinakht accused Khunanup of stealing his barley, beat the peasant severely, and stole all his belongings.

Khunanup tried to reason with Nemtinakht and get his belongings back for a period of 10 days, but Nemtinakht continued to dismiss the peasant. Finally, Khunanup petitioned the Chief Steward, Rensi. Upon meeting Rensi, Khunanup delivered the first of nine long speeches explaining the injustice that was done to him. Rensi was so taken by Khunanup's eloquence, that he ultimately awarded the peasant with all Nemtinakht's belongings and property.

Each of these nine speeches were recorded by Rensi's scribes and were later circulated as a story called *The Tale of the Eloquent Peasant*. Through his own testimony, we hear conflicting perspectives about the peasant farmer experience. On the one hand, Khunanup seems to be doing relatively well as a farmer. Khunanup revealed that he and his family had a surplus of barley from the previous year's harvest. We also learn that he was traveling to the city carrying an "abundance of all the finest products of Sekhet-Hemat."⁶ In fact, his possessions were so valuable that a rich property owner wanted them for himself.

On the other hand, Khunanup repeatedly asserts his low socio-economic status as evidence of the severity and immorality of the crime committed against him:

Do not deprive a pauper of his goods, One known to you as a lowly man. His possessions are the very breath of a pauper, And stealing them is (like) plugging his nose.⁷

You were appointed as a dam for the destitute, That he might not drown, But behold, you are a torrent raging against him.

Even the king, who instructed Rensi to keep the peasant around so they could record more of his speeches, believed that Khunanup and his family were in dire circumstances:

...let his words be brought to us in writing, that we may hear them. However, provide the means so that his wife and his children may live, for behold, one of these *peasants comes to the city only when there is nothing in his house*. And furthermore, provide the means so that this peasant himself may live: you will see that food be supplied to him without letting him know that it is you who is giving it to him.⁸

This statement paints a different picture of Khunanup's financial position and raises questions about the value of or how he acquired the surplus of barley and quality trading goods. At one point, Khunanup compares Rensi to "...the supervisor of a storehouse Who does not permit a poor man to buy on credit."⁹ Perhaps, Khunanup's barley did not come from his own storehouse. Perhaps his surplus was bought on credit. Moreover, Khunanup seems to condemn people like Nemtinakht who have a surplus and the provisions they need, but still cheat the poor:

You have a plantation in the country, You have a salary in the administration, You have provisions in the

6 William Kelly Simpson et al., *The Literature of Ancient Egypt*, 27.

7 William Kelly Simpson et al., *The Literature of Ancient Egypt*, 22.

8 William Kelly Simpson et al., *The Literature of Ancient Egypt*, 20

9 William Kelly Simpson et al., *The Literature of Ancient Egypt*, 34.

storehouse, The officials pay you, and still you steal. Are you an extortioner? Do men bring (bribes) to you
And to the henchmen with you at the allotment of the farmlands?¹⁰

And the example for all men is now the deceiver of the entire land. He who tends the garden of evil waters
his field with corruption And cultivates his plot with falsehood, So as to irrigate iniquity forever.¹¹

What does Khunanup's story tell us about the life of a farmer in Ancient Egypt? Was becoming a farmer a good idea?

¹⁰ William Kelly Simpson et al., *The Literature of Ancient Egypt*, 20. It is important to note, that "storehouses" in Ancient Egypt were government owned.

¹¹ William Kelly Simpson et al., *The Literature of Ancient Egypt*, 23.