

Hekanakhte (Heh-KHAN-akt) who lived about 2000 B.C.E., was the *ka*-priest of a chief government minister who had died a generation earlier. As a *ka*-priest, it was his duty to tend the tomb of his patron, near the city of Thebes, in order to protect the deceased individual's guardian spirit or soul (*ka*). Wealthy individuals, like the great minister Ipi whom Hekanakhte served, left money or other resources to support a priest who would perform these duties. If the *ka* were not honored with these ceremonial offerings, Egyptians feared that it would die a "second death" or be annihilated.

In this case, the minister Ipi had left a large estate to support Hekanakhte and his family. Hekanakhte also supervised other properties left to his care, and he had to be gone visiting them much of the year. We know much about him because during his absences he wrote many letters to his eldest son, Mersu. Mersu read and eventually discarded them in a local tomb, where they were forgotten but where the dry desert climate preserved them until they were discovered by an archaeologist in 1922. These letters give us an interesting picture of family life in the Middle Kingdom. We discover that Hekanakhte had a large family that included five sons, two of them married, and all of them living at home. He also supported his mother, a poor female relative, and a widowed daughter.

Perhaps because he had such a large household, Hekanakhte's letters to Mersu give advice on cultivating and tending the grain crops. Some of the letters were written during a bad year, when harvests were slim because of inadequate Nile flooding. The priest tells his son that he is sending some food, but he carefully lists what each family member is to receive. He tells Mersu to remind family members not to complain, since "half life is better than dying together." Hekanakhte orders that only those who work should get food and urges Mersu to "make the most of my land, strive to the uttermost, dig the ground deep with your noses." He also tells his son exactly what seeds to plant and where to plant them. And he warns his son not to overpay the help, saying that if he does, his own personal funds will be reduced. Trust between father and son seems to have been in short supply.

Family disputes in Hekanakhte's household were a frequent topic in these letters. Apparently Hekanakhte had spoiled Mersu's younger brother, Snerfu, because he constantly reminds Mersu to give this youngest son things he wants. In addition, Hekanakhte apparently decided late in life, after his wife died, to take a young concubine, Iutenhab (YOU-ten-hob), who disrupted the household with her many

requests. In one letter, the priest tells his son to fire a maid who had offended Iutenhab. Given the nagging tone of many of Hekanakhte's letters to his long-suffering son, it may not surprise us that one of the letters found in the debris of the tomb had been left unopened.

Questions for Extra Credit: to be placed in the Drop Box for Week 3

1. What were the duties of a ka-priest?
2. What do these letters tell us about family relationships in this social class?

Be sure to use direct examples to explain each question.