

Sinuhe the Egyptian: A Novel Study Guide

Sinuhe the Egyptian: A Novel by Mika Waltari

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Plot Summary

Sinuhe the Egyptian is the memoirs of a physician who wants to treat the poor but is drawn into politics and warfare, feeling himself fated always to be alone—perhaps because he is a son of a Pharaoh cast upon the waters of the Nile at birth.

Exiled from his beloved Thebes, Sinuhe records the events of his life, in which he can never marry, have children, and treat the poor as a physician. Sinuhe grows up believing he is found in the Nile shortly after birth and adopted by a physician, Senmut, and his wife Kipa. He grows up happily in the poor quarter of Thebes, assisting his father in treating poor patients and hearing his mother's stories. After elementary school, Sinuhe is accepted as a student in the House of Life thanks to his father's friend, the royal skull opener, who later selects Sinuhe to assist him at Pharaoh Amenhotep III's deathbed. That night, the royal heir leads Sinuhe into the desert and sees a new god, Aton, during an epileptic seizure. That night Sinuhe also meets the future general and pharaoh Horemheb.

Early in his career, Sinuhe signs over to the beguiling Nefernefernefer his infirm parents' property, and guilt over their suicides haunts Sinuhe for the rest of his life. It also helps motivate a three-year journey abroad, which broadens his scope and helps him mature. In Smyrna, he makes friends with King Aziru of Amurru before being sent by Horemheb to survey Mitanni, Babylon, and Hatti. In Babylon, Sinuhe meets one of the loves of his life, beautiful Minea, whom he accompanies home to Crete, knowing she is fated to die in the labyrinth. After grieving piteously, he returns to Thebes.

There Sinuhe sets up a simple practice, legally frees his slave Kaptah, learns that Kaptah's sound investments have made him wealthy, and falls in love again with Merit. Intuiting his special destiny, she refuses to marry him, but shares her sleeping mat. Too late, he finds out that she bears him a son. Another spell of royal epilepsy brings Sinuhe to the founding of Akhetaton, where, as royal physician, Sinuhe know the patient is deranged, but is attracted by his idealistic teachings about Aton. On a visit to Thebes, Sinuhe is recruited by assassins, pieces together information suggesting that he is royal, and loses Merit and Thoth in rioting.

Angry enough to administer poison to Akhnaton, Sinuhe accompanies Horemheb to liberate Syria, a campaign that ends when Horemheb becomes Pharaoh. Sinuhe wishes Aton's utopia could be realized, heretical words that bring about his exile, where he writes his memoirs to comfort his own heart.



Book 1, The Reed Boat

Book 1, The Reed Boat Summary

Sinuhe begins writing his memoirs in the third year of an exile ordered by his one-time friend, Pharaoh Horemheb. Sinuhe is the son of Senmut, a physician to the poor in Thebes, and his wife Kipa, a storyteller, who names him after a legendary adventurer when she finds him in a reed boat shortly after his birth. Although they live in a squalid, noisy quarter, childhood is golden. While still a child, Sinuhe begins learning medicine and at seven attends his first sacrifice and must decide on a career. Senmut takes him to Inteb, once a renowned warrior, to dampen his interest in the military.

Unable to afford temple schools, Senmut entrusts Sinuhe to a gentle priest, Oneh. Sinuhe notices that physically he looks more like the nobles than his working-class classmates, and an artistic friend, Thothmes, sculpts his portrait. When Senmut humbles himself to visit the House of Life seeking admission to the medical school for Sinuhe, he meets an old classmate, Ptahor, now highly-placed in Pharaoh's household. The "Opener of Royal Skulls" visits the house, gets drunk, reminisces, falls asleep, and in the morning takes a liking to Sinuhe and Thothmes. He will patronize their further education but warns that it will take place among priests of whom they must be wary. Next day, Ptahor sends Kipa a sacred scarab for her burial and she forgets all her cursing about their drunkenness.

Book 1, The Reed Boat Analysis

Book 1 begins with Sinuhe the Egyptian explaining he is in comfortable exile, thanks to a former friend, Pharaoh Horemheb. In the early books, he talks obliquely of another Pharaoh whose name may not be mentioned. Sinuhe longs for his birthplace, Thebes, and the Nile River and running through the memoir is the precept that once one drinks Nile water one can be satisfied with no other drink. Sinuhe is given to aphorisms. He explains briefly that he does not know when or to whom he is born, but has many times heard about his adoption, being taken from a reed boat as a newborn. All classes in Thebes cast unwanted babies on the waters, so his heritage could be any. Later he will suspect he is of royal blood. Early on he notes his coloring is not that of the working classes. Class and race consciousness run through the novel.

Sinuhe describes his happy childhood in a noisy, impoverished quarter of the city and with admiration talks about his adoptive parents, Senmut and Kipa. He sees being named for a legendary adventurer as an omen of his own fate, given by his superstitious mother. He is early discouraged from the military and is sent to a school whose pious, humane methodology he describes. His father, skeptical about religion, arranges for him to meet the royal skull opener and through him gain entry to the House of Life.



Jaded old Ptahor warns the lad to be wary as jackals, cunning as serpents, and harmless as doves around the priests, who run the program. This allusion to Jesus' comment in Matthew 10:16 shows the author's assumption that readers are literate in the Judeo-Christian scriptures. Sinuhe many times remarks on the practice of casting babies on the waters, leaving Moses' fate far from unique.



Book 2, The House of Life

Book 2, The House of Life Summary

Ammon's priests control higher education in Thebes, and boys must qualify for the lowest grade of priesthood before entering the House of Life. Because he is assisting in his father's practice, this takes Sinuhe two years. He remains aloof from classmates and mistrustful of priests, fritters his time copying texts, and grows rebellious and depressed. Sinuhe takes initiation seriously, though fighting unbelief, and fights to remain undefiled when lovely Nefernefernefer with green eyes entices, frightens, and enamors him. Weak from fasting Sinuhe keeps vigil while classmates carouse. In the morning, he alone has no story of how Ammon reveals himself. For this, he is mocked, and to graduate has to pretend to hear Ammon's voice. Sinuhe is shocked by impiety and unhappy when he is anointed and enrolled in the Book of Life.

Medical students next memorize much before being ritually purified, gowned, and assigned to small procedures, all of which Sinuhe has done with his father. As rumors spread that Pharaoh is dying, Ptahor appears at the House of Life to practice opening a few skulls before working on the royal one. He singles Sinuhe out to assist.

Book 2, The House of Life Analysis

Book 2 describes Sinuhe's higher education. The first part is theological, preparing him to be anointed as an entry-level priest of Ammon. While this is a mere formality, required of all would-be professionals, Sinuhe takes it seriously and is appalled by his classmates' and teachers' impiety. Many times in the book he recalls the priest spitting on the statue's face and wiping it with his dirty sleeve rather than wasting holy water and oils. Sinuhe never resolves his doubts about the gods and never escapes the treacherous field of theology, as the middle of the novel amply shows.

Sinuhe falls for the first of three beautiful women in his life. Nefernefernefer, with eyes green as the Nile, puts his hand on her breast, talks tauntingly and seductively, and kisses him, and he is captivated for years. When he goes to his first brothel he is uninterested because no girl has Nefer's eyes (but he is intrigued how breasts he has seen clinically look different than when swaying sensuously). The brothel visit takes place with his artist friend who has also run afoul of convention. Sinuhe seeks him out after seeing his parents in declining health and preparing for death. Note the proximity between the Nefer story and the introduction to Egyptian afterlife mythology, for it is in this context that Nefer will come between Sinuhe and his parents in Book 4.



Book 3, Thebes Fever

Book 3, Thebes Fever Summary

A throng keeps vigil as Ptahor and Sinuhe arrive. Naked, Pharaoh looks like any other dying man. Queen Taia holds his head during the bloody operation while the heir, Amenhotep, and his sister Baketamon, look on. Predicting death by dawn, Ptahor bandages Pharaoh and commends him to Aton. At a sumptuous meal, Ptahor's tongue is loosed by wine. After putting him to bed, Sinuhe is led by the Prince into the desert, where the Prince suffers convulsions. Horemheb, a young falcon keeper who wants to enter Pharaoh's service approaches. Waking up, the prince talks of eternal life and recoils at the idea of shedding blood, making Horemheb wonder about the Prince's sanity. He is by this time Pharaoh. As custom requires, the failed physicians suffer mock execution, and Sinuhe is obliged to add to his name "He Who Is Alone."

Returning to the House of Life in his gift clothes, Sinuhe is honored, writes up an account of Pharaoh's treatment and death, and learns he is qualified to practice medicine and may select one of 14 specialties. Wealth and fame are more attractive than more learning, and Sinuhe buys a small house and a scraggy one-eyed slave, Kaptah, and commissions Thothmes to decorate his waiting room and to drink with him when no patients arrive. Thebans are gossiping about Taia becoming Pharaoh while her son continues his strange devotions, and installing Eie at her side. Six-year-old Mitanni Princess Tadukhipa arrives to marry the prince.

In an officer's uniform, Horemheb visits Sinuhe to complain about lack of war and ask for something to suppress his desires for Baketamon. They visit the Temple of Bast and Sinuhe sees Nefer, who flirts with Horemheb but takes Sinuhe home. She teases him, flirts, takes him to bed, complains of his performance, and throws him out for the night, but next day Sinuhe is back. Nefer is primping for a merchant to obtain a valuable ornament. Before she will consider more sex with Sinuhe, she demands he sign over his house, but when he does so she sends him away. Sinuhe informs Kaptah, who laments and suggests they flee to the Red Lands where Egyptian physicians are valued, but Sinuhe cannot bear to leave Thebes. Kaptah is dismayed to be owned now by a beautiful woman and blames himself for not keeping close enough tabs on his naïve master, who still thinks about Nefer.

Book 3, Thebes Fever Analysis

Book 3 takes the reader inside Pharaoh's bedchamber to watch the opening of his skull, the traditional last measure for Pharaohs who linger before death. Queen Taia emerges a strong character and it is little wonder that she later puts on a false beard to reign as Pharaoh herself rather than her mystical son ruling. Old Ptahor is again too loose with his tongue after drinking wine and discloses the anomaly that no male children are born in the palace. The Crown Prince, who has seen Sinuhe assist Ptahor, takes him out into



the desert and falls victim to the "holy sickness" (epilepsy). While he is disabled, Horemheb approaches, handsome and godlike, and lusting to be a soldier in Pharaoh's service. By order of his new god, however, this Pharaoh—now that his father has expired—renounces the spilling of blood and anything that disrupts the universal brotherhood of mankind. From this first three-way encounter, conflict is inevitable.

Given the choice between continued training to specialize and beginning to collect fees from patients, Sinuhe chooses the latter. This seems odd when one considers how he becomes a dedicated life-long learner later in life. He sets himself up with a house and a most remarkable slave with whom he will spend most of his life and with whose rises and fall in fortune he is linked. Sinuhe also runs into the green-eyed woman over whom he has obsessed. Having been warned by his mother about drinking and women, Sinuhe needs to lose his virginity with her (she scoffs at the thought he has kept himself for her). Sinuhe signs over all he owns to Nefer and still is mocked and misused. Kaptah's melodramatic rantings continue throughout the book, as does the stock figure of speech that one's talk is like the buzzing of flies around the ears. Kaptah's plea that they flee to Syria is not followed immediately but does come to pass in later chapters.



Book 4, Nefernefernefer

Book 4, Nefernefernefer Summary

Twice more Nefer's servants mistreat Sinuhe and she for a new day's pleasure demands new presents: first his parents' house and then their tomb and prepaid embalming. Each time, she withholds his pleasure. Sinuhe finds Kaptah disguised as a Syrian, planning to run away and guard Sinuhe from his naiveté. Only after Nefer's second refusal, when she has her slaves throw him out and beat him senseless, does Sinuhe listen. First, however, he learns from Kaptah that his parents are dead, borrows money, and barter his services in the House of the Dead in exchange for the corpse washers' services. Senmut's suicide note exonerates Sinuhe, commiserates with his bad luck, and assures him that they die an easy death.

In the House of the Dead, Sinuhe sees and smells things horrible even to a physician. The poor simply soak in a bath of salt and lye for 30 days, but the wealthy require disemboweling and oiling. Since only criminals work here and can never leave, being stinking outcasts, they steal anything valuable, sell organs to sorceresses, and have sex with female corpses. Elderly Ramose, who specializes in extracting brains, teaches Sinuhe his craft, and helps him properly embalm his parents and place them in a coffin that Sinuhe carries to the City of the Dead in a stolen reed boat.

Finding the City of the Dead too well guarded, Sinuhe takes his parents to the desert forbidden valley where the Pharaohs lie. As he digs a shallow grave, Sinuhe finds a sacred scarab, which he takes as a sign of his parents' peace. Saying farewell, he recrosses the Nile and sleeps in the reeds.

Sinuhe finds Kaptah badly beaten by his new master and mother; Kaptah is anxious to leave their evil house. A big ship is preparing to sail to Smyrna. Too ashamed to look anyone in Egypt in the face, Sinuhe resolves to leave forever and hands Kaptah his scarab for luck. Kaptah puts on his disguise and they board the ship, Sinuhe's medical services granting them free passage. It takes 18 days to reach the border of the Two Kingdoms, 18 more to reach the Delta, two more to enter the sea, and eight nauseating days to reach Smyrna. Kaptah vows never to board a ship again.

Book 4, Nefernefernefer Analysis

Book 4 concludes the story of Nefer's maltreatment of Sinuhe, directly contributing to the suicide of his parents and the beginning of his lifetime of self-loathing that no degree of success and fame can wipe away. Some of the novel's most sensual passages occur as Nefer turns love-besotted Sinuhe into a pauper. His guilt over signing over his parents' prepaid burial plans moves him to volunteer to serve in the House of the Dead for the duration of their embalming. He describes the horrible conditions there, the fraud and thievery in graphic terms. When he comments on the practice of necrophilia, he



hints at racism in Egyptian society, which grows into a consistent theme. The suicide note and description of funereal practices provide a good overview of how Egyptians view the afterlife as a weighing of souls and passage Westward to bliss. Some, such as Sinuhe's father, disbelieve and embrace quick death as relief from life's extended suffering. This theme also recurs. One of the most dreaded Egyptian tortures appears to be hanging criminals head-downward from the city walls for birds of prey to consume. It is never made clear whether people are hung pre- or postmortem, but Sinuhe and Kaptah are anxious to avoid having it happen to them throughout the book.

Running from slavery and presumably abetting it warrant this punishment, but Kaptah is so fed up with his new masters that he is willing to risk it. His first attempt at convincing Sinuhe to come along so he can take proper care of him fails, but by the time Sinuhe returns from burying his parents, he is so depressed that he is ready to flee Egypt for good. Kaptah reminds him that once one drinks Nile water, nothing else will do, but they steal away to Smyrna in northern Syria. Sinuhe leaves, feels accursed and dishonored before gods and men and knowing that the newly-crowned Pharaoh, whom he has met and rather liked, is causing turmoil in Egypt.



Book 5, The Khabiri

Book 5, The Khabiri Summary

Syria and the Red Lands differ from the Black Lands of Egypt in every way. Kaptah hires criers to proclaim Sinuhe's fame and insists that Sinuhe meet the most renowned physicians and assure them that he has come to learn, not to steal patients. The Syrians approve. Several operations and medicinal cures later, Sinuhe is famous and wealthy, but remains lonely. Kaptah buys him a slave girl, who brings little pleasure and becomes such a pest that Sinuhe gladly gives her to his patient, King Aziru of Amurru, to marry.

To see war and Horemheb, Sinuhe goes to Jerusalem. Before battle, soldiers mock a young priest's praising Aton as he consecrates a temple. Warriors' cries and buzzing arrows then make Sinuhe tremble and his donkey carries him into the thick of battle. The sun goes down on a plain of corpses. The Egyptians celebrate while Sinuhe, dubbed "Son of the Wild Ass," tends the wounded of both sides. Horemheb believes that he (Horemheb) has a special destiny since seeing a burning bush in Sinai, but is ordered to disband the army, so Horemheb commissions Sinuhe to travel through Mitanni, Babylon, and Hatti making military and political notes. Sinuhe falters but accepts.

Book 5, The Khabiri Analysis

Book 5 finds Sinuhe and Kaptah in Smyrna. Sinuhe describes in fine detail the many ways in which Syria differs from Egypt. Kaptah begins serving as his shrewd business manager and they prosper. The Syrian cults of Baal and Astarte/Ishtar are glossed over in the usual Western caricature—as bloodthirsty and orgiastic respectively—as a segue to introducing the slave girl Keftiu as a solution to Sinuhe's loneliness. Kaptah swings unthinkingly into one of his sales pitches, trying to get a bride price for her from King Aziru, but Sinuhe settles for the King's undying friendship. The royal couple reappear in the novel, particularly in a touching scene near the end.

The focus shifts to the Egyptians' battle with the Khabiri—Hebrews—near Jerusalem, still a minor town. The Khabiri are raiders who seasonally lay waste to Syria's borders. No Egyptian commanders want the job of fighting them, but Horemheb accepts and is happy to see his friend Sinuhe visit. He fills him in on news from home, including the sudden, mysterious death of Pharaoh's child-consort and his marrying the daughter of the conniving priest Eie. Horemheb is ordered the impossible: not to shed blood while building and consecrating a temple to Aton, about whom Pharaoh increasingly theologizes.

A great battle ensues, in whose midst Sinuhe is inadvertently and comically caught, and which he describes with terror, excitement, and grizzly detail. During the victory



celebration, warriors deposit the severed hands of those they have defeated in a high mound before the goddess of war, Sekhmet the Lionhearted. Sinuhe tends the wounded on both sides without knowing why: many Egyptians die because their greedy comrades withhold food and water, and the Khabiri will, at best, be sold into slavery.

The chapter ends with Horemheb ordered back to Thebes to disband the army. He knows that throughout the region—Hatti, Mitanni, Babylonia, and Syria—princes are arming to throw off Pharaoh's economic yoke. In particular, he has heard about new technologies in Hatti to temper blades stronger. Past Pharaohs have employed spies, but this one is a fool. Knowing that his fame as a physician will get Sinuhe inside palaces and position to make useful observations, Horemheb commissions him to travel and observe.



Book 6, The Day of the False King

Book 6, The Day of the False King Summary

Kaptah rejoices when Sinuhe returns alive to Smyrna, credits the scarab, and does not relish the coming travels but feels obligated to go. Joining a caravan, they marvel at the cedars of Lebanon, visit Kadesh, and are greeted in Naharani by people worried about the Pharaoh's pacifism. Sinuhe is sad that these people, stuck between Babylonia and Hatti, are doomed without realizing it. Their physicians are skillful and teach Sinuhe much. When he opens a man's skull and removes a tumor, Sinuhe's reputation goes before him to Babylon.

In this land of commerce, drawing people from all nations, Sinuhe is summoned to the palace. On Kaptah's advice, Sinuhe rides a luxurious chair a day after the summons. Kaptah's fearful reaction to the royal pet lion amuses the spoiled boy-king, Burnaburiash, who quickly turns to his purpose in calling Sinuhe: a painful abscessed tooth that he allows no one to touch. Sinuhe speaks boldly, gives narcotic, seizes the boy's head, and lances the jaw. Relief is instant and Burnaburiash amuses himself again with Kaptah and the lion. Two weeks later, after verifying that the day is propitious, Sinuhe assists the nervous royal dentist and calms the king's wrath by showing him how to turn water into blood. In return, Sinuhe asks only to watch Babylon's troops in parade, thus determining there are 216,000 infantry and 60 chariots.

Sinuhe dares not decline Burnaburiash's offer to visit the harem but enjoys none of the women. The boy-king tells of the coming "Day of the False King," which promises amusement, but Sinuhe feels foreboding. Sinuhe acquires much occult knowledge from sheep's livers and oil thrown on water, and the priests intuit that at birth he is set adrift. They tell about King Sargon's beginnings and mighty deeds and astrologers determine that Sinuhe must be royal and destined to rule. Remembering his crimes, Sinuhe feels cursed and oppressed by the future, hoping to destroy no one else.

Spring arrives and Babylon celebrates the resurrection of its god and holds a fair that ends in the "Day of the False King." Before dawn, drunken soldiers demand Kaptah, bow to him as king, pledge loyalty, rush him to the palace, rudely strip Burnaburiash of the trappings of royalty, and the boy-king joins laughingly in making prostrations before Kaptah. Catching the spirit, Kaptah orders food and drink, sweeping Sinuhe's cautions aside. A horn summons Kaptah to pass judgments in the House of Justice, but he wearies and heads for the harem. No longer laughing, Burnaburiash explains to Sinuhe that annually on this day the stupidest man in Babylon becomes king for a day and is killed at sundown, horribly if Burnaburiash wishes or gently.

Before Sinuhe can warn against touching the wives, Kaptah emerges howling about a wild beast who assaults him. Eunuchs tell Sinuhe that a young woman acquired yesterday is raving and waving a knife. Minea demands that Sinuhe help her escape or she will cut her wrists. She has dedicated her virginity to her god. Hearing this,



Burnaburiash looks forward to watching her lashed. Anguished, Sinuhe resolves to rescue Kaptah and Minea, even though this be costly. He arranges for both to appear to die and offers to dispose properly of their bodies. Then, racing to the river, he loads them on a waiting boat and has the oarsmen cast off.

Book 6, The Day of the False King Analysis

In Book 6, Sinuhe and Kaptah are no sooner reunited than they set off to visit Mitanni and Babylon. Sinuhe describes in detail how both differ from Egypt, physically and culturally. He sees that Mitanni is destined to be crushed by its more powerful neighbors, learns new things from its physicians and impresses them by performing a trephining (skull opening)—local physicians do not invading the body to affect cures.

Babylon is described in even more detail than Mitanni. When Sinuhe refuses to come to court on the seventh day, he is obeying a Babylonian taboo which centuries later influences Jewish priests to formulate the commandment against working on the Sabbath. Sinuhe is introduced to the Babylonian style of fortune telling by studying the livers of animals sacrificed to Marduk and by casting oil on water and reading the portents. He never grows proficient but is strongly influenced. His teachers compare his birth story with that of King Sargon the Great. Thereafter, Sinuhe becomes obsessed with his true parentage and destiny.

Much of the chapter deals with the spoiled but attractive boy-king, Burnaburiash, who delights in Kaptah's clowning. Not fawning like the royal doctors, Sinuhe takes charge of lancing the royal abscess and drawing the tooth. He is always careful not to step on the toes of the local medical establishments wherever he goes. To divert the boy from his pain, Sinuhe turns water into blood—another Mosaic reference. It is worth noting that the Exodus occurs at least a century later than these happenings. The highlight of the visit to Babylon is Burnaburiash's "Day of the False King." Sinuhe glosses over the rest of the spring festival, which begins with the god's resurrection, to focus on how a fool is treated as king for a day and then killed. They are well into the day before Sinuhe learns about the death sentence, and Kaptah is so enthusiastic that he cannot be pulled away. His naive antics liven many pages. Sinuhe resolves to save his life.

At the same time, Sinuhe takes pity on a beautiful girl who has been forced into Burnaburiash's harem. Minea is destined to become a major character and the next love of Sinuhe's life. Unfortunately, she is a dedicated virgin. In the harem scenes, note that supposedly inferior African women are positioned to pleasure Kaptah outside the Women's Court; if he gets past them he will suffer a terrible death from the jealous boy-king, who appears not to be well endowed or interested in more than voyeuristic sadism. Note the Babylonian taboo against travel by night, which recurs, and the clever ways in which Sinuhe obtains the supposed corpses of his friends. Once assumed dead, Kaptah is placed in a large funereal jar; although the Babylonians do not practice embalming, they having no objections to Sinuhe arranging it for his late servant. Minea is wrapped up in a mat (as were Sinuhe's parents) to be taken away, the eunuchs hoping that the king will not notice his plaything has disappeared.



Book 7, Minea

Book 7, Minea Summary

When Kaptah wakes up in the jar and screams, the rowers flee overboard. Hidden in the reeds, the escapees bathe and eat, and Minea dances for her god. Spellbound, Sinuhe wants to marry her. She is not trying to seduce him, but finds him alluring, but has vowed to keep her virginity. She is enslaved before her turn comes to visit the god of the sea, which she must do (and survive) before coming to Sinuhe. They abandon the boat and earn their way back to Mitanni as entertainers. Not wanting not to part with Minea, Sinuhe takes her on an uneventful trip to Hatti, where the Keeper of the Archives dodges questions, saying only that the world will soon learn lessons from and about Hatti. Minea is choosy about which ship to board for Crete, but when the right one appears, Sinuhe insists on accompanying her. Kaptah does not object but is sure he will perish.

Book 7, Minea Analysis

Book 7 shows Sinuhe and Kaptah getting Minea and themselves out of Babylon, where surely King Burnaburiash will be hunting them for their escape. Pretending to be wandering entertainers—Sinuhe fortunetelling as he has learned in Babylon, Kaptah telling his tall stories, and Minea dancing—they make it unscathed to the border, but Sinuhe needs to have a look at Hatti for Horemheb before sailing to Crete and thence home. Sinuhe describes at length a closed, militaristic land whose king is unavailable for an audience. It has the bleak sound of the Stalinist regime, which were being established when this novel is written. A Hittite official ominously suggests that the world will soon learn fearsome rumors about the Hittites are sometimes overblown and sometimes understated. They believe in power, like to annex lands unspoiled (for convenience), define right as anything they want and wrong whatever others want. Friends by definition live far away; neighbors are to be gobbled up. Reaching the coast, Sinuhe insists on accompanying Minea home.



Book 8, The Dark House

Book 8, The Dark House Summary

Minea is herself again at sea. Arriving home, she changes clothes and takes Sinuhe to her meet an elderly patron, to the palace, to the house of the bulls, and to the fearful high priest, Minotauros, who insists that Crete's living god ensures they rule the seas for as long as he lives. No Cretan youth has refused to enter the god's house, nor will Minea. Hearing rumors that the god has died and a replacement is being sought, he hopes Minea may return. After dancing with bulls, she says a cold last goodbye, but after dark sneaks into Sinuhe's room, refuses to go to Egypt and marry, and blindly believes that her god will let her return. Sinuhe asks for her golden ribbon as memento, assures her that she is desirable, and asks her to marry with Kaptah as witness. They spend a platonic night and all evil leaves Sinuhe's heart.

Next morning, Minea dances again but cannot spend the night with Sinuhe. On the third morning, he goes with the festive crowd to the god's house at the foot of a seaside mountain. The dedication takes place in a small temple beside the great copper gates. Minea is arrayed in gold. As the moon rises and the gates are pulled back, Minea disappears inside with Minotauros, and the gates are re-locked. Sinuhe falls into despair. When Minotauros emerges, Sinuhe demands to know where Minea is, but is shaken off. Feigning drunkenness, he asks to remain for the revelry and forgiveness for breaking taboos. Kaptah spies the secret door and where the key is hung, and drugs his master to sleep.

When Sinuhe awakens, clearheaded, the partying is winding down. The wantonness sickens him. Preparing to sneak into the labyrinth, Sinuhe plies the guards with wine daily and tries to send Kaptah back to Smyrna, but Kaptah, gravely and obstinately, insists that he must serve his new mistress. While the guards and priest sleep, they slip through the secret door and, well inside, light torches. From Babylon, Sinuhe knows that labyrinths are laid out like the viscera of sacrificial bulls and selects a passage to follow. Kaptah cautiously has brought a ball of thread. They wander endlessly, backtracking often, and a terrible stench intensifies until they come upon a huge dead animal. Kaptah points out her body underwater, stabbed, her face eaten away by crabs. Sinuhe screams, swoons, and has to be restrained.

Leaving behind a wine jar to give Minotauros something to think about, Sinuhe and Kaptah backtrack and lock up. Sinuhe cannot be bothered about Crete's fate without its god or with killing Minotauros. All that he loves lies underwater, as his fate decrees. When Kaptah calls for an end to Sinuhe's drunkenness and grief, they catch the last ship of the season to Syria.



Book 8, The Dark House Analysis

Book 8 continues and concludes the saga of lovely, simple Minea. As they sail toward Crete, the dolphins bring her messages from the sea god and sailors venerate her for her approaching sacrifice, as propitiating the sea god is what keeps them safe and prosperous. In old age, Sinuhe is still too bitter to talk about the sacrifice but almost rapturously describes the carefree and voluptuous Cretan people. He pays special attention to the women's bare-breasted wardrobe and to Minea in particular. She seems culturally defensive about the style but proud of her own body. Slowly, Sinuhe pieces together her life before being shipwrecked as she leads him about and he sees she is less enthusiastic about the role she is about to play, but still dedicated. Having lost faith and respect in gods and religions, Sinuhe laments that she is too blind to see and save herself. Minea is torn between the strong physical attraction she feels for Sinuhe and desire to please him physically and the certainty that she will die if she does. Sinuhe knows that she will not return from the labyrinth but tries to believe she will. They marry and spend one night together platonically.

The Greek myth of the minotaur is acted out rather than told. No Daedalus is named as the builder of the labyrinth, and the cream of Cretan youth, rather than Athenians, feed the monster, and there is no Theseus to kill it, for it appears to die on its own of natural causes. The crucial ball of string motif, however, is maintained, albeit joined with Sinuhe's Babylonian learning about labyrinths being designed like the viscera of sacrificial animals. The language grows oppressive as Sinuhe and the terrified Kaptah explore below ground, and the mood deepens as they find human remains, a gigantic pile of excrement, and finally a monstrous decomposing corpse. Sinuhe experiences a moment of renewed hope, only to see Minea's body underwater, being eaten by crabs. He admits to losing his mind and having to be tranquilized. Kaptah has told him about the next few days, which are a haze. Kaptah is emerging as an independent character—and human being—using his stories to find his place in the world, still dedicated to his master, but less subservient, bolder, and usually right.



Book 9, The Crocodile's Tail

Book 9, The Crocodile's Tail Summary

In three years abroad, acquiring knowledge good and bad, Sinuhe matures. He is shocked to learn of anti-Egyptian rioting over taxes and alliances between the Syrian cities. Patients lump him with the oppressors and he decides to go home and report to Horemheb. Before he can leave, a messenger fetches him to treat Aziru's ailing first-born, who is merely teething. Aziru talks about paying agitators to kindle hatred of Egypt in Syria and not fearing a Pharaoh who sends out "symbols of life." He boasts of controlling Megiddo and laughs at Sinuhe's warnings of Egyptian retribution and Hittite duplicity. They part friends as Sinuhe leaves for Smyrna, bound for Egypt.

Although he has no home in Thebes, Sinuhe is at least is not haunted by sorrow and shame and longs for the Black Land. Thebes seems more densely packed and feverish. Sinuhe sets up a simple practice like his father in the poor quarter, in a house bought from a copperfounder. His simple doctor's sign welcomes rich and poor, to which Kaptah objects. Sinuhe would like to adopt an abandoned child, but Kaptah says children are troublesome and recommends Sinuhe buy a sturdy slave girl. Sinuhe refuses, but authorizes hiring a servant to free Kaptah from domestic chores so he can manage Sinuhe's investments.

Sinuhe can find neither Thothmes nor Horemheb and Ptahor is dead. A soldier reveals that Horemheb is in Kush disbanding the disheartened forces. Sinuhe finds the temple forecourt strangely empty and silent and is shocked by Aton's massive new temple. The artwork depicts Pharaoh with utter realism on 40 pillars, revealing fanaticism. Few worshipers are present, most of these are rich, and no one understands the new prayers. Unshaven priests mock old people wanting the old ways back but explain seriously to Sinuhe that Aton is Ra's latest manifestation who lives in his son, the Pharaoh. All other gods are but idols. All people are equal in his sight; nothing happens without his will, and he enables Pharaoh to see people's secret thoughts. Aton is as perfect as the disk of the sun and perfects those who believe in him. Human words cannot enlighten non-believers, but Pharaoh lives by truth. Sinuhe wonders if they have found ultimate truth.

Kaptah sneers at how little money Sinuhe makes treating poor patients, but Sinuhe is happy and his fame spreads. When Sinuhe legally frees him, Kaptah reveals how he has been making sound investments rendering Sinuhe financially independent. Kaptah is suspicious of the fertile lands that Ammon is selling hastily, cheaply, and in secret, but has bought up rental properties, built a storehouse, and purchased grain futures to hold until prices rise. He wants to buy slaves, but Sinuhe forbids this. He accepts Kaptah's invitation to the Crocodile's Tail inn.

The inn is in the center of the crowded harbor quarter. Merit delivers "tails" in mussel-shell-shaped goblets, rebukes Sinuhe's familiarity in addressing her, but hopes he will



come again. Drinking the potent liquid, Sinuhe feels blood rush to his head and doubts he can refrain from touching Merit, who reveals that Kaptah has bought the inn, hoping to learn the formula. Kaptah has always wanted to be an innkeeper and feels his stories will increase profits. People will drink, so it is the safest investment, and the scarab will protect the inn when fighting breaks out between Ammon and Aton.

Kaptah hires aged, unobtrusive Muti as housekeeper. As summer arrives, so does unrest, and in the Crocodile's Inn Sinuhe hears an incense dealer curse Pharaoh for banning voyages on the Eastern Sea. Wise Queen Taia should govern her son better; the priest Eie means to overthrow Ammon, and Nefertiti cares only about fashion. Kaptah likes the idea of women baring their private parts, but Merit explains the outfit's modesty. Later, Sinuhe tells Merit he would like to see her in such a dress, and she considers it.

Book 9, The Crocodile's Tail Analysis

Book 9 opens with an evaluation of Sinuhe's new maturity as he returns to Smyrna, marked by a greater solitude. Politics occupies much of the chapter, as Sinuhe experiences for the first time discrimination as an Egyptian and then a brutal assault. Summoned by his friend King Aziru, who is a caricature of a first-time father, certain that his heir is dying, and then proud as can be to show off the tooth that brings fever and screaming, Sinuhe learns more about the hatred that is spawning revolution. For a second time he hears contempt for the pacifist Pharaoh. He warns that an alliance with Hittites is like lions and jackals hunting together.

Traveling home by sea, Sinuhe describes springtime, when Syria and the Sinai appear truly red from offshore.

Sinuhe returns to the temple where he had been educated and is shocked by the new cult of Aton. An earnest priest explains the fine points and his remarks about the inexpressible make Sinuhe wonder if they have not come upon something valid. Once he has been set legally free, Kaptah reveals how he has been managing Sinuhe's finances, investing in rental properties, and speculating on grain futures. The stockpile he begins amassing becomes important late in the novel. Kaptah has also purchased the Crocodile's Tail in, a famous and exclusive establishment in which many scenes take place going forward. The former owner's daughter, Merit, is a lively character destined to become the third woman who captures Sinuhe's heart. He sees sadness in her eyes and smile and she holds him aloof, although she admits to being far from a virgin. An enraged bar patron reveals how royalty's wisdom is despised and allows Sinuhe and Merit to flirt a bit. Horemheb's return at the head of his troops signals a deterioration in the political situation, as Sinuhe acknowledges by saying he must start a new book to describe it.



Book 10, The City of the Heavens

Book 10, The City of the Heavens Summary

Summer is at its hottest when Horemheb arrives and Thebes is full of dread. Sinuhe visits Horemheb on his warship just as he is turning over command to Pepitamon but predicting Pharaoh will return him to command. Sinuhe takes Horemheb to the Crocodile's Tail, where Horemheb reveals that Ammon will be deposed and his vast possessions confiscated. Pharaoh foolishly insists that it be done openly by day, allowing people time to arm. Horemheb weeps for Egypt and falls asleep before Sinuhe can tell of his travels.

All night long Ammon's priests egg on followers to pledge their lives for his sake, wanting Aton to be guilty of shedding blood. At sunrise, Pharaoh's decree is read: Ammon the false god is deposed and accursed and his name is to be erased everywhere; his temples and property are forfeit to Pharaoh and Aton, and his lands will be dispersed to the landless. The mob shouts for Ammon. Tens of thousands are killed before the priests barricade themselves in the temple. Overnight, troops riot, setting fires and looting. On the fifth day, facing mutiny, Pharaoh cedes power for three days to Horemheb, who convinces the priests to demolish the statue, orders Ammon's name effaced everywhere, and restores civil order.

Sinuhe asks guardsmen to snatch Nefernefernefer and carries her unconscious, wrapped in black cloth, to the House of the Dead as a gift to the corpse washers for as long as they desire. He feels no better for the revenge and swears off women, but Merit, who gives him the idea, objects that he has never been with a woman that wishes him well. She takes him to bed; they make love, and he thinks of Minea without nightmares. When he proposes marriage in the morning, she tells he is always welcome on her mat but, not wanting to bind him, declines.

During a royal procession, the mob yells for Ammon's return and Akhnaton's exile. Chariots escort Akhnaton to the royal barges, where he has a seizure and Sinuhe is called. As they sail, Akhnaton talks of a society where schools are transformed and literacy is universal; hatred and fear are gone; all are brothers, and war is banished. Sinuhe knows Akhnaton is mad but resolves to encourage him. Not all will accept it, and even if poverty is ended, stupidity, power, and cunning will corrupt, for only the dead are wholly good. So far, only the crocodiles and vultures are profiting from Aton.

On the 15th day, they stop and begin construction that lasts all winter. Horemheb is allowed border guards but no standing army, even after word of trouble in Syria, as Akhnaton gives Aziru the benefit of the doubt. When Horemheb departs in anger, Akhnaton tells Sinuhe that losing Syria may let Egypt return to simpler ways. Meeting evil with evil brings evil; meeting evil with good brings less evil. Sinuhe sees Akhnaton's madness as more beautiful than sane people's wisdom.



The founding of Akhetaton, "City of the Heavens," divides the royal family, as Taia and Baketamon stay in Thebes, where Eie sits on the throne. Nefertiti returns to Thebes to give birth to her third daughter, Ankhsemet, and leaves the harem in Thebes when she goes home. Within a year the splendid new city is dedicated to Aton. The boundaries of where Pharaoh is willing to walk are marked and roads paved only that far. Work begins on a House of Death, staffed from Thebes. Sinuhe asks Ramose about his caper with Nefer, and learns that she leaves them fighting and broke in 30 days.

Book 10, The City of the Heavens Analysis

Book 10 describes how a new capital, Akhetaton, the "City of the Heavens" is founded fifteen days' travel downriver from Thebes. The narrative begins in the heat of summer, with confrontation between the followers of Ammon and Aton certain. Horemheb returns with his mercenary troops but is relieved of command when he says he cannot overturn Ammon without bloodshed. He seems bemused as he turns over the marks of rank to his milquetoast successor and warns the troops to behave, for he will be back with a vengeance. He is not an old soldier to just fade away. Within five days Akhnaton cedes power long enough for Horemheb to restore civil order. Curiously, the upper classes, seeing who prevails, turn out to celebrate Aton and the women avail themselves of the Nubian troops' "virility." During the pitched battles, the black Africans with faces painted red and white are particularly scorned by all Egyptians. The racial theme intensifies.

How Akhnaton stirs the mob to violence by breaking tradition and moving during a parade is not made clear, but when they call for his exile and, seeing blood flow for the first time in his life, he obliges. Another seizure brings Sinuhe to his side as he finds his utopia. En route, word of unrest in Syria arrives, but Akhnaton wants to believe the best about King Aziru. In long passages, Akhnaton shows himself an idealistic, absolute pacifist and religious zealot. Having several times declared himself fed up with gods and religion, Sinuhe slips under Akhnaton's spell, considering that this Aton may be different, and his message of peace and harmony may get only this one opportunity. Sinuhe thinks of cynical, practical Kaptah's reaction to these schemes and concedes that only the dead do no wrong to others.

Nefernefernefer plays a role as at the height of the civil strife, Sinuhe has her kidnapped and drops her off with his former colleagues in the House of the Dead where, it will be remembered, necrophilia is a favorite pastime. They are ecstatic to receive a live woman. Provision for a new House of the Dead in the City of the Heavens brings part of the old crew north. Sinuhe learns how Nefer- whom they rename more appropriately, just as Pharaoh and his new general rename themselves to honor Aton and others will follow) torments them before departing, smelling badly but otherwise no worse off. Sinuhe muses about vengeance. Sinuhe finally has sex with Merit, but is turned down for marriage. She becomes the focus of the next chapter.



Book 11, Merit

Book 11, Merit Summary

Sinuhe's ten years in Akhetaton are a brief, lovely dream. Suffering outside the city is hidden from Akhnaton. Eie and Horemheb rule in Thebes, leaving Akhnaton to ponder religion. Aziru's brutality turns Egypt's vassal princes into allies, but Akhnaton insists it is better for Syria to confederate and trade freely than to fight. Horemheb knows that Sinai and the Lower Kingdom will be invaded, but Pharaoh scoffs at the idea. Sinuhe sees that he (Sinuhe) has been a bad counselor but is too comfortable to make waves. When Pharaoh's second daughter, Meketaton, falls ill, Sinuhe neglects rich patients to care for her.

Pharaoh allows Sinuhe to visit Thebes, and along the Nile living skeletons and failing schools convince Sinuhe that everything Akhnaton touches is blighted. Finding his poor house cramped, he realizes how he has been spoiled and is ashamed. Merit is slow in recognizing him, but they admit to missing one another. She takes Sinuhe to see how Thebes has changed. Priests of Ammon are openly venerated.

Kaptah has grown fat and rich, but falls at Sinuhe's knees and weeps for joy. Sinuhe brushes off business talk, saying he trusts Kaptah and understands nothing. Kaptah has been speculating in grain futures and thinks Sinuhe crazy when he orders an immediate distribution of seed grain at no profit. That night, Sinuhe and bemused Merit make love, but she again declines to marry.

Muti welcomes Sinuhe home with motherly nagging and a meal that Merit shares and then assists in examining patients. Sinuhe rushes late to an audience with Queen Mother Taia, the "black witch," who asks about opening her son's skull to relieve the madness, and, over beer, confides how, on her "husband" Eie's advice, she invents Aton to improve her son's position by deposing Ammon. Sinuhe has seen the knots that Taia is tying and promises to keep silent when she confides about eliminating male babies born in the harem. In exchange, she promises him the mat she is making.

Sinuhe visits the House of Life to refresh his skills in opening skulls, where he is shunned by older physicians until one boasts of being able to heal without knife, fire, medicine, or bandages, and takes him to a demonstration, blindfolded. Sinuhe certifies three diverse afflictions—and subsequent healings—after priests perform ecstatic rites, a wall opens, an image appears, and they stand up and walk. With no fear of Pharaoh or his agents, the priest identifies himself as Hrihor. He has followed Sinuhe's career, knows his love for the Pharaoh and feelings about Aton but maintains that persecution has made Ammon more powerful than ever. While Sinuhe sees a new era of equality dawning, Hrihor wants freedom to work and worship and the preservation of natural hierarchy in society. Hrihor shows Sinuhe a waxen image of Pharaoh transfixed by pins, working slow sorcery, and offers an undetectable potion to take away the Pharaoh's



headaches forever. For giving it, Sinuhe will be blessed forever and have every desire granted. Sinuhe takes it, promising nothing.

Taia suffers an asp bite and Sinuhe certifies her death. Eie does not mourn but hopes popular unrest will end. Joyful citizens murder her sorcerers. Sinuhe reveals to Baketaton Horemheb's boyhood crush on her, but she is determined that only the purest blood will ever touch her. An ugly, old courtier, Mehunefer is summoned to mourn officially. Sinuhe plies her with wine and flattery, getting her to gossip and revealing that Taia has set three royal newborn boys downstream in reed boats, including Princess Tadukhipa's, who knows that the stillborn girl they substitute has the wrong color and head shape for her bloodline. This occurs at the time of Sinuhe's birth. Shocked, Sinuhe is slow freeing himself from her kisses, but drugs her and escape.

After learning about the Queen's death, Merit angrily points out the lipstick on his face. Sinuhe wants to tell the story but fears to reveal the royal secret and spends a sleepless night thinking about his lonely fate. Next morning, he looks at the relief of the beautiful, young, lonely princess who may be his mother. Merit is still jealous when he goes to reconcile, tells him Mehunefer has visited the inn, and hands him her letter begging him to hasten to her—or she will find him. Sinuhe reveals everything to Merit while she keeps her secret. Asking if he likes children, Merit produces four-year-old Thoth and proposes they all sail to Akhetaton. Thoth and Sinuhe quickly bond and Sinuhe again proposes but, citing her low birth and his high destiny, she refuses.

Merit and Thoth go home and Sinuhe sees Akhetaton as a mirage. When Horemheb sends Aziru's mutilated victims to Pharaoh, he preaches Aton to them and suffers a seizure. Akhnaton orders Sinuhe to visit Aziru to buy peace at any cost. Fearful, Sinuhe plans to avoid this until he hears that Mehunefer, dressed as a bride, waits in his home. Sinuhe joins Thothmes, who must deliver a statue of Horemheb to his birthplace, for the voyage, ordering his servant to say that he has perished in Syria and sends her home.

Book 11, Merit Analysis

Book 11 is long and crucial to several story lines. It opens with Sinuhe's remarks about the water clock, one of the earliest ways of telling time. He sees its dripping as a symbol of boredom, typifying the ten years he spends in Akhetaton as the court physician. He remarks that his talents and physical condition both decline. Later in the chapter, when he is seeing indigent patients at home in Thebes and feeling useful, Sinuhe wants the water clock to stop flowing so he will have more time doing what he enjoys. The theme continues in Chapter 12, which draws its title from the ancient timepiece.

After summarizing for the reader how power is divided between the two capitals, with Eie and Horemheb sharing administrative duties while Pharaoh writes hymns to his god, and showing the rising tide of violence in Syria, Sinuhe records the furlough he receives to Thebes. Living conditions along the Nile are dismal with the peasants in far worse shape than they had been when dragged out of the towns to enjoy free land. They eventually learn basic agricultural techniques but are still suffering crop and herd losses.



Many are giving up. Aton crosses are being used to ward off locusts, but not effectively. Educational reforms are no more successful than agricultural ones. Sinuhe arrives in Thebes concerned about the people and disillusioned of Pharaoh, who he has been encouraging.

Hearing how Kaptah has been speculating in crop futures (the uninteresting process being rather meticulously described) Sinuhe jumps upon the idea of helping the peasants by releasing the stored grain during the planting season and not taking interest on the loan at harvest time. This is revolutionary and, Kaptah points out, foolish for a capitalist, but Sinuhe is above all a humanitarian and insists. He is not a businessman, so Kaptah's descriptions of the evil, graduated income tax and the dodges he uses to avoid paying top rates holds no interest for Sinuhe. This too gets tedious, but Kaptah also admits he is making enough not to need to steal from Sinuhe as he had while a slave. Kaptah has always been forthcoming about this "tradition."

More dealings of the part of the royal family that remains in Thebes in protest to Akhnaton's innovations emerge when Sinuhe has an audience with Queen Mother Taia, known to the people as the cruel "black witch." She talks about her African sorcerers, remarking how the ladies of the court enjoy their sexual favors, although she refrains. She and the priest Eie live as husband and wife, although they cannot marry, and he is behind the plot to keep the harem from producing no male offspring other than her own deranged son. She coldly defines good as what succeeds and evil as what fails. This is not far from the utilitarian view espoused earlier by the Hittites.

Sinuhe meets one of the leaders of the underground Ammon priesthood, Hrihor, and is convinced to take an assassination potion back to Akhetaton—without promising to administer it. Hrihor argues that Egypt cannot be restored until Akhnaton is removed. Miracles of healing and a voodoo doll win Sinuhe over. Note that Hrihor wants law, order, and freedom to work and worship as one wants, but insists that society must be hierarchically ordered: the same thing that Kaptah says in his meditation on the reed earlier, when they first return to Thebes. Akhnaton's universal brotherhood is too radical.

Taia's sudden death and the requirement that an official mourner sit with her body until the House of Death claims it fills in more details about the royal infanticide she practices. The ugly but libidinous "bag," Mehunefer, personally collects the reeds from which Taia fashions the boat in which child-bride Tadukhipa's newborn son is sent down the Nile precisely at the time that Sinuhe is plucked from the Nile. He notes that his complexion resembles hers and begins wondering in earnest if he should now be Pharaoh. Mehunefer's lust causes trouble with Merit but is worked out, and she introduces affectionate young Thoth as a kind of godson. Their three-way relationship is developed going forward with its inevitable tragedy, given Sinuhe's fate since birth. Mehunefer's showing up in Akhetaton convinces Sinuhe to undertake a dangerous, and for Egypt, humiliating embassy to Syria.

Also worthy of note are Taia's contention that women are naturally superstitious and Mehunefer's that they are unavoidably susceptible to flattery. Sinuhe is superstitious

about giving a child a god's name. Thoth's seems particularly dangerous to bestow, as he is the god of writing and the sciences, human and divine.



Book 12, The Water Clock Measures Time

Book 12, The Water Clock Measures Time Summary

In Memphis, Horemheb explains that Gaza remains in Egyptian hands, protected by the Cretan fleet, and he is personally financing Syrian guerrilla forces. He intends to conquer Aziru while the Hittites are consolidating their conquest of Mitanni, rants that buying peace is shameful, and forbids surrendering Gaza. In Tanis, Sinuhe picks up an escort that abandons him as soon as Syrian chariots are seen. Sinuhe is dragged to camp, where Aziru is appalled at Sinuhe's treatment.

Aziru shows off his fine seven-year-old son and heir and downplays Sinuhe's contention that the Hittites are untrustworthy and that when Babylon stops providing grain, Syria will starve without Egyptian help. Unbound by treaties and welcoming "honorable peace" with everyone, Aziru demands control of Gaza, Egypt disarming the guerrillas, and reparations, all of which Sinuhe rejects. After days of haggling in which Sinuhe concedes only minor points, and a failed assassination attempt, Aziru signs the meaningless treaty.

Heading home, Sinuhe is shot at in Gaza and hauled over the wall in a basket before sailing home under Pharaoh's pennant. Horemheb congratulates his negotiating success and reinforces Gaza, which would soon have fallen. Sailing up the Nile with King Burnaburiash's envoy, Sinuhe sees everything pointing to reaching the end of an era. The envoy acknowledges that no god has revealed himself as Aton does but fears his doctrine is dangerous. Sinuhe finds the Pharaoh burning with visions and wasting away. Ammon's followers make an unprecedented open attempt on Pharaoh's life that cannot be hushed up, and Akhnaton redoubles his persecution, which increases unrest. Pharaoh marries off his eldest daughters, Meritaton and Ankhsenaton, to pliable believers in Aton: 15-year-old dreamer Sekenre and 10-year-old sickly Tut, respectively. Tut is sickly, docile, and trusting.

Sailing to Thebes, Sinuhe feels instantly liberated but sees starvation. He orders the oarsmen to race him to Thebes and, when they point out all are equal in Aton's sight, he insists on sharing the rowing. When he pays them in Aton's name, they accept grudgingly. After greeting Merit, Sinuhe hears Kaptah's report about full barns, prices at an all-time high, and wealth that cannot be calculated. There has been a mysterious demand for empty jars in Syria, and Kaptah has obtained and sold thousands. Sinuhe orders Kaptah to buy all the grain he can (not futures) to avert autumn famine. While Thoth lives with Sinuhe and learns letters, the Thothes' followers wearing their respective signs—cross and horn—fight. Few can stay neutral. As businesses must show their loyalty, the Crocodile's Tail chooses Aton. When Pharaoh summons Sinuhe back to treat his headaches, Merit declines to go along.



Book 12, The Water Clock Measures Time Analysis

Book 12 shows Sinuhe playing an important factor in the great game of international politics. Horemheb outlines the situation and threaten to kill his old friend if he botches negotiations for peace when he has worked so hard to pull off a successful undercover war. Sinuhe remarks that as a Syrian, Aziru naturally enjoys haggling over a treaty and in the end signs one that costs Egypt little. Returning to Memphis, Sinuhe learns that had he not secured Gaza by treaty, it would soon have fallen as the Cretan navy ends its protection for the Egyptian port. Continuing to Akhetaton, Sinuhe talks with a Babylonian envoy who says Marduk's priests foresee a radical change in eras on earth.

Seeing the countryside as barren as ever, Sinuhe hurries to Thebes and orders Kaptah to release stores of grain to feed the starving. Note the trade with Syria in empty jars. Its sinister intent soon becomes clear. As Sinuhe is recalled to Akhetaton, where Pharaoh has set up male heirs by marriage, Thebes turns into two armed camps, wearing the symbols of their rival gods. Everyone must choose signs. The Crocodile's Tail chooses Aton. Sinuhe appears to leave with a sense of foreboding and, of course, writes with the benefit of hindsight. He warns readers that nothing but evil remains to be told.



Book 13, Aton's Kingdom on Earth

Book 13, Aton's Kingdom on Earth Summary

Weak, distant, raving, and disillusioned, Akhnaton notes that suffering animals are put down. He goes into isolation and fasts, ignores Aziru's and Babylon's grievances, and believes that the Hittites have only liberated Mitanni. As winter famine spreads, word comes that Aziru with Hittite help is attacking Tanis. Eie and Horemheb rush to consult with Pharaoh, who after a night of pacing and prayer, declares all gods but Aton must be obliterated and all people free and equal. Egypt may be defended bloodlessly.

Sinuhe goes to Thebes to bash the images of gods, promising Horemheb financial backing and grain. He finds Kaptah dressed like the poor, reminding patrons he is a former slave. Rank and wealth are dangerous. When ordered to distribute free bread in Aton's name, Kaptah sees this as their ruin. After 40 days and nights of turmoil, Kaptah warns Sinuhe to flee with Merit and Thoth, but blindly Sinuhe believes Aton will triumph. During three days of brawling Sinuhe and Merit treat the wounded. Word comes that Sinuhe's house is on fire. Mercenaries "purify" the Crocodile's Tail with fire; Merit and Thoth are slain, and Sinuhe knocked out. To restore his senses, Kaptah reveals that Thoth is Sinuhe's natural son. Eie metes out grim judgment to Aton's defeated hordes and takes Sinuhe to get the Pharaoh to abdicate.

Horemheb races upriver to compete for power with Eie, who tells Pharaoh submit to Ammon in Thebes or abdicate in favor of Sekenre and offers the crown to Horemheb, who knows better than to accept it in troubled times. They agree they must ally and Horemheb pledges to support Eie in exchange for the right to marry Baketamon and to reign after him. Realizing that Sinuhe has overheard their treason, they allow him to administer the potion and tie himself with them. When Sekenre talks of preaching Aton, he suffers a boating accident, while Tut cares only about his tomb. Overlooked, Nefertiti turns to Horemheb to complain about her father but is rudely ignored. As Akhetaton quickly reverts to desert, Tutankhamon is enthroned in Thebes; Sinuhe hears from Muti that Kaptah is dead, attends the enthronement, after which Horemheb offers sacrifice and prays for victory, proclaims a holy war against the Hittites, and accompanies Horemheb to Memphis. Horemheb believes he is now Egypt—and divine.

Book 13, Aton's Kingdom on Earth Analysis

Book 13 brings a dramatic, heartrending climax. Pharaoh is not sane and becomes a reclusive mystic, but Sinuhe cannot abandon his dream of a better world. Shining with the light of Aton, Akhnaton delivers his final speech, declaring that Egypt's misfortunes are his fault, but his surprising reason is that he has not purged all the false gods, only Ammon, and failed to turn Egypt into a classless society. Hearing such unbelievably disjointed ravings after explaining to Akhnaton the dire situation—Egypt will for the first time in history be conquered by a vicious foreign army and enslaved if it does not starve



to death first—the old rivals (if not outright enemies), Eie and Horemheb are drawn together in an uncomfortable alliance.

Sinuhe manages to miss Akhnaton's second request to be put out of his misery and interprets his duty instead as going to Thebes to help obliterate the false gods' memories. As violence envelops the city, Sinuhe mouths Aton orthodoxy, drawing laughs. He ignores pleas to take Merit and Thoth into hiding, relying on his reputation to spare them. Sinuhe snaps out of his fatal delusions only after Merit and Thoth perish before his eyes and outside the burning Crocodile's Inn, Kaptah reveals Merit's secret, which she has entrusted to him: Thoth is Sinuhe's biological son and, therefore, royal. Kaptah is perplexed that Sinuhe has failed to see the resemblance.

To avenge their horrible fates—their burnt bodies cannot be preserved for immortality—more so than to nobly save Egypt, Sinuhe administers the fatal potion to his old friend, whom he claims still to love; Horemheb also loves the idealistic pharaoh. Note the parallel between their first meeting and their last, with Akhnaton lying flat and Horemheb placing his shoulder cloth over him to keep him warm. Horemheb makes the suicide an act of patriotism; Sinuhe has mixed emotions. The conspirators arrange for the complicated succession, whose machinations fill the remaining 100 pages.



Book 14, The Holy War

Book 14, The Holy War Summary

Preparing for war, Horemheb dictates sacrifices to the wealthy, recruits among refugees and prisoners, and races on captured Hittite chariots into the desert to deny their foot soldiers water stored at intervals. In the Sinai, he forces weary troops to prepare obstacles that cost the Hittites greatly during four assaults. The Hittites lose far fewer men than the Egyptians, but their retreat emboldens Syrian cities to revolt against Aziru. A thirsty man coming out of the desert with a password brings the Egyptians to Gaza, where poisoned horses defeat the Hittites. In the dungeon, Sinuhe finds Kaptah, Horemheb's chief spy, who settles for the sole rights to buy and sell war plunder as payment for past services

Horemheb sends spies to proclaim that he comes as a liberator to restore prosperity and warns that any towns that fail to revolt against Aziru will be plundered. Joppa serves as a brutal example. Plague turns Syria into a great open grave before Horemheb besieges Megiddo, Aziru's capital, which brings Babylon into the war. The Hittites wisely make a three-way peace. Aziru, Keftiu, and their two sons are turned over to Horemheb. The night before their execution, Sinuhe visits Aziru, who has been badly tortured, orders him cleaned up to look like a king and fed. Aziru is glad they all go to the land of death together, but mourns for Syria. Sinuhe secures for them swift beheading rather than the tortures Horemheb had planned. Horemheb takes advantage of the armistice to restore order in Kush

Tutankhamon cares only about his tomb but is blamed for the cost, with Eie encouraging dissent, but asking Horemheb to reach victory so he can claim the throne. Sinuhe learns while coming home that the young Pharaoh has died mysteriously, thus spoiling the victory celebration. Having seen great evil, Sinuhe vows never to leave Thebes again, but this is not his destiny.

Book 14, The Holy War Analysis

Book 14 examines the brutal three-year Syrian war in which Sinuhe serves as a medic. It opens with Horemheb lecturing the rich on how they inevitably grow richer in a war economy and defying the priests of Ammon by enlisting enslaved devotees of Aton. Horemheb boldly attacks a Hittite light chariot unit, which both builds morale and makes a swift crossing of the Sinai possible. He needs to destroy the water supplies that have been stored—in Kaptah's water jugs—to sustain the infantry as they move into Egypt. Horemheb's army cannot stand up to such a force. A lightning raid on the Hittite headquarters stuns the enemy and brings the chariots out angrily, directly into a trap set by the Egyptians. They set up defenses in a canyon. Exodus imagery accompanies their travels, in pillar of dust by day and a pillar of fire by night, albeit explained by



natural causes. The battle and underlying strategies are described in great detail, as are the magnificence of the Hittite force.

After the victory, Horemheb waits until a coded message comes from Gaza. The plains before Gaza is ideal for chariots, so the Hittites would have the advantage, had their horses not been poisoned. The culprit—or hero—is Kaptah, supposedly murdered in Thebes. Horemheb's chief spy, Kaptah has been held in the Gaza dungeon for a week by the suspicious garrison commander, after having sold the Hittites forage laced with poisonous herbs. The commander is raving mad by the time the Gaza seige is relieved, so the story comes out slowly, as befits Kaptah. He is, at any rate, assured of making a new fortune on war booty.

Peace puts Aziru into Horemheb's hands and Sinuhe keeps a death watch with his old friend, who has been savagely tortured. Sinuhe reminds him of his responsibility for this war but does not say "I told you so" about Hittite treachery. He fails interceding with Horemheb for the lives of Aziru's wife and sons, but obtains for them a swift, dignified death. The family members support one another's spirits as the sword swings four times. Sinuhe spends his remaining money offering prayers to Baal for the quiet of their souls. Another death sets up the final part of the novel: Tutankhamen, blamed for Egypt's woes, dies suddenly on the day the peace treaty is signed. Eie is anxious to become "The Peace King."



Book 15, Horemheb

Book 15, Horemheb Summary

Eie plans for Baketamon to appear as Sekhmet and have her union with Horemheb divinize him to serve later as Pharaoh. Jealous Nefertiti, however, interferes, convincing the vain princess that she must liberate Egypt from the low-born. Horemheb and Eie uncover their plot, put the women under guard, and, disguised, take captured tablets to Sinuhe. King Shubbiluliuma is sending his son Shubattu to marry Bakematon. Sinuhe is sent to intercept Shubattu in Sinai and kill him without raising suspicion. Tempted to flee, Sinuhe obeys, knowing the mission is probably suicidal.

Shubattu is well-protected, as expected. Poison is the only practical approach, but tasters check everything Shubattu is served. If he appears to fall ill, Hittite doctors will be called to cure him, not an Egyptian. A forged letter from Bakematon brings an invitation to see the prince, who is anxious to assimilate to Egyptian ways. Sinuhe claims that he must examine the prince to check his virility and, doing so, remarks that he appears to be suffering diarrhea. Astonished, Shubattu admits to "desert fever," and accepts from his physician a "binding" potion that Sinuhe knows will make more effective the poison he has prepared. Drinking oil to protect his own system, Sinuhe drinks a cup of the poison-laced wine, proclaiming it unparalleled, enticing Shubattu to demand a drink. Tasting the prince's cup to prove it safe, Sinuhe watches him drink it, followed by Hittite wine on which Sinuhe feigns drunkenness. Back in his tent, Sinuhe vomits everything up, but still feels the effects of the poison. All night long, Sinuhe visualizes the smiling, happy youth.

A proud Hittite, Shubattu pretends not to be suffering stomach pains and the journey continues. By afternoon, he falls into a coma and Sinuhe pretends to join in the lifesaving procedures. That night, Sinuhe feels no pride watching the pitiful death, but rather sees the curse continuing. Before he dies, Shubattu declares the doctors and Egypt innocent. Returning to Thebes, Sinuhe reports to Eie and Horemheb, who rejoice and send him to tell Baketamon, who curses him for desecrating the blood of Pharaohs.

The people are too weary to challenge Eie, know that Horemheb holds the power, and wonder why he declines the throne. Horemheb marries Baketamon and heads south to subdue Kush. She bears a son, Rameses, rejects Horemheb's gifts when he comes home, and threatens scandal if he touches her again. He drugs and impregnates her and sets off for Syria. After delivering Setos, Bakematon arrays herself in royal linen and offers herself, day after day to the dregs of Egyptian society, asking one stone per lover, whose size appraises her performance. Thebes buzzes about the pleasure goddess. She offers sex to a builder to turn the diverse stones into a pavilion, and while he works, gathers more. Horemheb hears nothing when he comes home.

During Eie's reign, Sinuhe isolates himself in his rebuilt house, watching fish in his pond and being cared for by Muti. Sinuhe talks to merchants and judges about their



injustices, and they fear he is a spy. When he turns to the nobles, they revile him and drive him away. Returning home depressed, Sinuhe watches his fish.

Kaptah returns, fatter and richer than ever, telling about the war in Syria and mentioning that people are talking about Sinuhe stirring up trouble for Horemheb. Sinuhe vows to return to practicing medicine and to take up a hobby—collecting memories about Aton from his patients. They have none.

When Eie dies of starvation, Horemheb lets the Hittites keep Kadesh, hurries home, and denounces Eie as a false Pharaoh who has made Egypt suffer. Horemheb summons Sinuhe to talk about bringing back the old times, but finds him unfriendly. Sinuhe fears Horemheb's absolute power and begs him to restore Aton for their old friend Akhnaton's sake. Men must be brothers and wars must end. Horemheb intends to unite past and future, to end excessive wealth and excessive poverty and no one—god or man—will oppose him. Disappointed, Horemheb goes to see his family.

Baketamon wards off her husband's affections, leads him to her pavilion, and reminds him of her promise to humiliate him. She remembers the donor of every stone. When he raises his knife, Baketamon reminds him she is a priestess of Sekhmet and only by marriage to her does he have a claim to the throne. Her revenge is perfect: he can do nothing but live alone, suspicious and self-conscious, seeing the pavilion he cannot destroy.

Horemheb becomes a great and beloved reforming Pharaoh, traveling incessantly, rooting out abuse. Trade with Punt is restored; temples are built honoring all the gods—including himself. Kaptah becomes the richest man in Egypt and names Horemheb his heir. He lives opulently, thanks Sinuhe for starting him on his path, and promises to care for him in old age. Sinuhe finds no joy in practicing medicine, nags everyone, and satisfies no one.

Sinuhe's criticism of Horemheb's Hittite-like rule and indulgence of his army "scum" reaches Pharaoh's ears and he is banished from Egypt for life. Forbidden to take leave of his few friends, Sinuhe is taken across the Eastern Sea to an isolate spot. Guards build a comfortable home and provide for all his needs, including writing materials. Muti comes to care for him, accepting endless exile as a fresh start and blessing. Time passes quickly. Kaptah keeps Sinuhe informed and sends provisions. Sinuhe takes up writing his memoirs to bring peace to his own heart. He knows the guards will be ordered to destroy them when he dies, but Muti will do her best to hide and preserve them. As a human being, Sinuhe lives in everyone who has ever lived or will live. He desires no immortality for his name.

Book 15, Horemheb Analysis

Chapter 15 examines the reigns of Pharaohs Eie and Horemheb. Both become obsessed and self-defensive. Having ordered assassinations, perhaps they are justified. Eie appears as a Howard Hughes recluse, finally starving himself to death. Finally



achieving power, Horemheb condemns his predecessors for all the evils that have befallen Egypt and counts his reign as starting in the death of the great Amenhotep III. Despite his opposition to what might be called Horemheb's essentially Hittite management style and megalomaniac personality, Sinuhe credits him with great reforms and numbers him among the great Pharaohs.

The conclusion is set up by dynastic scheming by jealous Nefertiti and Bakematon, who, like Eie and Horemheb, realize they need one another. They secretly arrange for Bakematon's marriage to the heir to the Hittite throne, Prince Shubattu, which would disqualify Horemheb from becoming Pharaoh. The old plotters send Sinuhe to assassinate him without raising suspicion. Sinuhe describes the difficulties of getting at a Hittite prince to poison him, and regrets his success, even if it is for the good of Egypt. He grows severely depressed over all the death he has caused.

Horemheb wastes no time marrying Bakematon, who haughtily despises him as low-born. Twice he commits what can only be described as marital rape and races off to more warfare, and twice she gives birth, cursing her fate. Having warned Horemheb that she will cuckold and humiliate him, Bakematon does a spectacular job of it and the passages in which bewildered fish gutters, cesspool cleaners, and their ilk contemplate what she is offering them are among the most charming in the novel. She deliciously choreographs Horemheb's homecoming, all sexually charged up, so she tells him what she has been up to on the pavilion whose every stone is a monument to her infidelity. When he makes to kill her, she reminds him she is his key to royalty. Sinuhe wryly credits Bakematon with building no more structures thereafter.

Returning from campaigns in the south, Horemheb's new troops—all Africans—are said to fill Thebes with "dark-skinned children," the last of the racial comments in the novel, probably intended as an explanation of the complexion of the average contemporary Egyptian. When deciding on Sinuhe's place of exile, Horemheb rules out the Kush because Sinuhe still retains the discredited Pharaoh's view that in Aton people of all colors are equal.

As exile approaches, Sinuhe's remaining friends appear, that their story lines may be completed. Kaptah has become the richest man in Egypt (cf. the Joseph story in the Bible) and Muti remains his surrogate mother. Sinuhe's seeking to keep the idealistic teachings of Aton alive alienates all classes of people to whom he preaches. Note that only the rich resort to violence to get rid of him. In his final days in Thebes, Sinuhe becomes a Christ figure, much as Akhnaton is earlier, calling for the forgiveness of those who "know not what they do."

The novel ends with Sinuhe explaining that he has written his memoir not to preserve his memory but to ease his own heart. He feels responsible for so many deaths that he needs to review all that has been his fate. In the end, he is part of the human experience and lives in every human being. He needs no other immortality.



Characters

Sinuhe the Egyptian

The narrator and principal character in this fictional memoir, Sinuhe is born in the same year as Pharaoh Amenhotep IV, downriver from the palace. He is found by a physician's wife, Kipa, and adopted by her and Senmut. He grows up in the poor quarter of Thebes, assisting his father treating poor patients and hearing his mother's stories. Early on he sees that he resembles the nobility more than workers, but only late in life puts together enough pieces to conclude he is the son of the late Princess Tadukhipa.

Sinuhe studies theology and medicine in the House of Life thanks to his father's friend, the royal skull opener, who later selects Sinuhe to assist at Amenhotep III's deathbed. That night, the royal heir leads Sinuhe into the desert and sees a new god, Aton, during an epileptic seizure. Sinuhe also meets the future general and pharaoh, Horemheb. Early in his career, Sinuhe becomes enthralled by a beautiful temptress, who leads Sinuhe to actions, which cause his infirm parents to commit suicide. Guilt over this haunts Sinuhe for the rest of his life and motivates his first travels outside Egypt. In Smyrna, Sinuhe makes friends with King Aziru of Amurru, destined to be Horemheb's greatest opponent, before visiting Mitanni, Babylon, and Hatti, to take notes for the general. In Babylon, he rescues beautiful Minea, quickly falls in love, and accompanies her home to Crete and her fated death.

Back in Thebes, Sinuhe sets up a simple practice, legally frees Kaptah, learns he is wealthy, and falls in love with Merit, who is willing to share her mat but not marry. Another spell of royal epilepsy brings Sinuhe to Akhetaton, where, as royal physician, he sees Akhnaton is deranged but finds his idealistic teachings attractive. He is approached by an underground priest of Ammon, accepts an undetectable potion, but promises nothing. Only after Merit and Thoth, whom Sinuhe learns later is his natural son, perish in street fighting is Sinuhe angered enough to administer the poison. After Horemheb becomes Pharaoh, Sinuhe still longs for Aton's utopia, speaks too freely and is sent into exile, where he writes his memoirs to comfort his own heart.

Kaptah

Sinuhe's crafty, one-eyed slave, Kaptah gives the novel tragic-comic relief and a number of long-winded moralistic monologues. He is easily the most colorful and attractive character and probably its noblest. Picked up at a slave auction at a cheap price because he is missing one eye (the result of a bar fight), Kaptah quickly enhances his master's fortunes and freely admits to stealing from him as is the custom of slaves. He rejoices that Sinuhe does not pour scalding water over his feet in punishment as many slaves' owners apparently do. He accepts beatings with reeds and sticks as part of life.



In Smyrna, Kaptah is for all intents and purposes Sinuhe's business manager, and Sinuhe treats him nearly as an equal. Kaptah clings to a scarab amulet during the sea voyage there and at all times of crisis. Kaptah's worst brush with death comes in Babylon when the child king, Burnaburiash, is so amused at Kaptah's fear of his pet lion that Burnaburiash puts him center-stage on "The Day of the False King." Kaptah plays the role of monarch with gusto, not knowing that the actor is put to death at sundown. Learning this, Sinuhe is able to whisk Kaptah away. Still fearing water, Kaptah accompanies Sinuhe and Minea to Crete and against his better judgment and descends with Sinuhe into the labyrinth, unwinding a ball of string so he find their way out.

Kaptah remains in Thebes while Sinuhe serves Pharaoh in his new capital and invests heavily in rental properties and grain futures. He juggles the books and bribes officials to avoid taxation. He tries to talk stubborn Sinuhe into fleeing chaotic Thebes with Merit and Thoth. After they perish in the burning of the Crocodile's Tail inn, Kaptah informs Sinuhe that the boy is his natural son. Sinuhe does not believe stories that Kaptah is killed in the rioting and is indeed reunited with him in the dungeon of the Gaza garrison. Kaptah serves as Horemheb's chief spy in Syria and later the sole agent for buying and selling war booty. By the end of the novel, Kaptah is the richest man in Egypt, immensely fat, and still loyal to his one-time master as Sinuhe goes into exile.

Horemheb

A historical figure, the great reforming Pharaoh Horemheb first appears in the novel as a common soldier, Sinuhe's age, born with "dung between his toes." He happens upon Sinuhe and Crown Prince Amenhotep in the desert on the night of the great Pharaoh's death. Horemheb remains a major force throughout the novel, first becoming the pacifistic new Pharaoh's frustrated military ruler. Horemheb worships the god Horus, acknowledges Ammon but thinks him too powerful, and abhors Aton. Horemheb believes that he has a special destiny after seeing a burning bush in Sinai. Being ordered to Egypt to disband the army, Horemheb commissions Sinuhe to travel through Mitanni, Babylon, and Hatti making military and political notes.

Akhnaton cashier Horemheb for failure to accept orders to overturn Ammon non-violently. As Horemheb predicts, the mission fails and Thebes is thrown into chaos. Akhnaton has no choice but to cede power for three days so Horemheb can restore order. Horemheb sees that he must ally with the ambitious priest Eie if Egypt is to be saved. After Akhnaton is poisoned by Sinuhe's hand—with Horemheb again covering his shivering old friend Akhnaton with his shoulder cloth as at their first meeting, Horemheb allows Eie to reign as Pharaoh while Horemheb conquers Syria, thereby shirking blame for wartime privations. When Eie dies, Horemheb ascends the throne as consort of Princess Baketamon, who hates and publicly cuckolds him Horemheb ules justly, putting Egypt back on its feet. Finding his old friend Sinuhe a danger, Horemheb sends him to a comfortable but lonely exile across the Eastern Sea.



Amenhotep III and Taia

Historical figures, the great Pharaoh Amenhotep III is an avid devotee of the god Ammon. He and his short, plump, haughty, and majestic consort, Taia, wait 22 years for a son, who she regrets is insane, and who is born six months before Sinuhe is born. A daughter, Baketamon, follows

Of common birth—a fowler's daughter from Lower Egypt—Taia is discriminated against for her dark skin when brought into the harem. She beguiles the elderly Pharaoh, however, by the "strange practices of the blacks," overcomes intrigues, gains revenge, eliminates male babies born to other wives, and sees that female babies are married off at birth to eminent men. She regrets that the son she bears is insane.

Taia stoically holds Amenhotep's head while his skull is opened on his deathbed and succeeds him on his death while the prince continues his devotions to his new god. As Queen Mother, Taia lives openly with the priest Eie and develops a reputation as a "black witch." During an audience shortly before her death, Taia tells Sinuhe about inventing Aton to improve her son's position and eliminating male babies born in the harem. After Taia dies of an asp bite, Sinuhe learns more details that convince him he is the son of Amenhotep III and Princess Tadukhipa.

Amenhotep IV / Akhnaton

A historical figure, Amenhotep IV is Pharaoh during most of the novel, albeit under the name Akhnaton in honor of his new god, Aton. Amenhotep IV is born half a year after Sinuhe. They first meet when Sinuhe assists at his dying father's skull opening, and they spend the night in the desert, where Sinuhe tends Amenhotep during an epileptic seizure. He gives Sinuhe the nickname "He Who Is Alone." Horemheb happens upon them and covers the prince with his shoulder cloth, but they are instantly at odds over how they (Horemheb and Amenhotep) view life, for that night Amenhotep sees the god of non-violence and human brotherhood, Aton.

The Queen Mother Taia reigns as Pharaoh for an undisclosed length of time before Amenhotep IV is crowned and soon afterwards renames himself Akhnaton, initiating a war of the gods that has Thebes seething. With slavery banished, the mines empty and Egypt's economy plunges. Anger grows when Akhnaton's child bride Tadukhipa suddenly dies, and he takes the priest Eie's daughter Nefertiti as consort. When he pushes the campaign against Ammon to the point of ordering his statue overturned non-violently the city is thrown into chaos. Akhnaton must cede power to Horemheb for three days before peace is restored. Disgusted, Akhnaton moves downriver to an empty spot and builds from scratch Akhetaton, "The City of the Heavens," lives purposefully cut off from the outside world. Eie, Horemheb, and Sinuhe decide that Akhnaton must die for the good of Egypt, and the weary, tormented Pharaoh accepts the poison cut from Sinuhe's hand gratefully. Declared a false-Pharaoh, his name is forbidden even to be mentioned.



Aziru and Keftiu

A historical figure, Aziru is first seen in the novel as a white-skinned, black-haired young man needing Sinuhe's dental skills after a battle in Smyrna. The King of Amurru falls in love with Keftiu, Sinuhe's plump Cretan slave bought by Kaptah to raise Sinuhe's spirits. Keftiu fail to uplift Sinuhe and drives both of them crazy, so Aziru takes Keftiu home to be his wife, vowing eternal friendship. He begins accumulating power in northern Syria and causing problems for Egypt. Aziru and Keftiu are next seen when Aziru summons Sinuhe to doctor his infant son, who is refusing to eat and running a fever. The new parents do not recognize teething. Having toured the region, Sinuhe tries to warn Aziru against trusting the Hittites.

Pharaoh Akhnaton sends Sinuhe to negotiate peace with Aziru at any cost. Observing that Aziru has a Syrian's natural love of haggling, Sinuhe concedes little. The peace is flimsy, and the Syrian towns are encouraged by Horemheb to revolt. The Hittites turn Aziru and his family over for horrible execution. Sinuhe holds a death vigil with his tortured friend, who weeps for Syria's freedom, not himself or his wife and two boys. Sinuhe convinces Horemheb to grant them a swift, honorable death, and they are beheaded.

Baketamon / Baketaton

A historical figure, the Priestess of Sekhmet, Princess Baketamon, is a haughty soul, determined to keep her virginity until an appropriate royal comes along. Egged on by the jealous Nefertiti, Bakematon (the two versions of her name honor whichever god, Ammon or Aton, is currently in favor) convinces the Hittite King Shubbiluliuma to send his handsome, virile son and heir, Shubattu, to marry her.

When Shubattu dies mysteriously, Bakematon is forced to marry Horemheb, whom she scorns, and twice is taken sexually by force, and twice gives birth to unwanted sons, Rameses and Setos. In vengeance, while Horemheb is waging war in Syria, she offers herself sexually to the lowest classes of Theban males, receiving in payment from each a single stone. She has these made into a pavilion with which she taunts her concubine, reminding him that he cannot slay her and still claim Pharaoh's throne. Sinuhe approves of her not undertaking any more building projects.

Burnaburiash

A historical figure, the "Lord of the Four Quarters," Burnaburiash, is still a spoiled and sulky boy, enjoying toys and strange tales when Sinuhe and Kaptah visit Babylon. Burnaburiash is suffering from an abscessed tooth, which he has not allowed his physicians or dentist to touch, but responds to Sinuhe's brusque manner. The king's pet lion beside the throne scares Kaptah, and Kaptah's fearful antics so delight the king that he puts Kaptah center-stage on "The Day of the False King." That day Burnaburiash allows himself to be stripped of royal honors and plays waiter during the banquet. At the



end of the day, Kaptah will be put to death—painfully or mercifully as Burnaburiash decides. Sinuhe rescues Kaptah and flees Babylon, giving up all the profits that doubtlessly would have come his way from the king.

Eie

A historical figure, the ambitious priest of Ammon who becomes Pharaoh, Eie gains entry to the royal palace by having his wife serve as wet nurse to Crown Prince Amenhotep, while also suckling her daughter, Nefertiti. When Queen Taia becomes Pharaoh (or perhaps merely regent) following Amenhotep III's death, she elevates the unknown priest Eie to Keeper of the Seal. During the brief reign of "Aton's Kingdom on Earth," Eie handles all administrative matters in Thebes, freeing Akhnaton to deal with his god. Eie schemes with rival Horemheb, the great general, to assassinate the insane monarch and after a brief reign by the boy Tutankhamen, assumes the throne. Eie soon grows paranoid and becomes a recluse, eventually starving himself to death. Horemheb succeeds to the throne, as planned, blaming the war and all of Egypt's woes on Eie, and declaring Eie a false-Pharaoh, to be forgotten.

Hrihor

A priest of Ammon of advanced rank, Hrihor takes Sinuhe deep underground to demonstrate the outlawed god's increased power under persecution by healing three certified invalids. Hrihor entrusts Sinuhe with a potion to kill Pharaoh painlessly and undetectably, which Sinuhe eventually uses.

Intep

The greatest warrior in the age of Pharaoh Thothmes III and Senmut's former patient, one-armed Intep is reduced to begging for fish and wine and convincing young boys that the military life is wretched. Senmut introduces seven-year-old Sinuhe to him and tells him that if he must become a warrior, he must learn to read and write in order to become an officer.

Mehunefer

An ugly but libidinous old court widow, "keeper of the needle case," Mehunefer is summoned to perform the official mourning for the Queen Mother Taia until her body can be taken for embalming. As Mehunefer performs, Sinuhe plies her with wine and complements, and accompanies her to her room to continue wheedling information about Taia's practice of infanticide. Mehunefer provides enough information for Sinuhe to conclude that he is of the royal bloodline. When Mehunefer pursues Sinuhe with romantic intentions, he flees Thebes for Akhetaton and Akhetaton for the battlefields of Syria.



Merit and Thoth

Raised in the Crocodile's Tail inn in the poor quarter of Thebes, Merit is the third beautiful woman who attracts Sinuhe's attention. She is older than fellow bar maids and does not dress seductively, but has beautiful liquid eyes that reveal sorrow, which she confesses in words as being "much alone and past the spring of life." Sinuhe's recently-freed slave Kaptah buys the inn from her father and works to connive the secret formula for its fiery signature drink from Merit and her father.

Sinuhe repeatedly asks Merit to "break the jar" with him (marry), but she demurs, saying she is too low-born, but invites him to her mat whenever he wishes. When Sinuhe returns from years of travel, Merit introduces Thoth, her godson, and encourages the lovely young boy to call Sinuhe "father" on a trip down the Nile. Sinuhe worries about naming a child for a god—the god of writing and all sciences—but it seems not to bother the boy. Only after both die in the violence that surrounds the overthrow of the god Aton does Sinuhe learn that Thoth is his biological son, a secret that Merit reluctantly withholds after learning that Sinuhe is probably of royal blood.

Minea

A beautiful young Cretan girl, newly-acquired for the harem of King Burnaburiash of Babylon, Minea is ranting violently and brandishing a knife during the "The Day of the False King" celebration. Minea gradually entrusts herself to Sinuhe's care and they fall in love. Their love is doomed by the fact that she is a virgin consecrated to the Minoan god and would already have entered his domain, never to return, had she not been kidnapped. Sinuhe spirits her out of Babylon, makes a quick trip to Hatti in order to have more time with her, and then accompanies her to Crete. There, he learns that she is related to King Minos and has grown up in luxury.

Minea dances before bulls in preparation for her trial in the labyrinth of Crete, determined to be the first offering to the god to return alive, and offers herself to Sinuhe, but he settles for cuddling their last night together. Sinuhe and his slave Kaptah sneak into the labyrinth and discover Minea's body being consumed by crabs beside the stinking corpse of the Cretan god. For the rest of his life, Sinuhe sees Minea's death as part of his fate to be alone.

Muti

Sinuhe's sharp-tongued housekeeper, Muti considers all males to be nasty little boys at heart. She takes care of her master and follows him into exile. Her nagging reminds him of his mother.



Nefernefernefer

A woman of exceptional beauty with eyes as green as summer Nile water, Nefernefernefer instantly captivates the young theological students Sinuhe, who struggles to remain "undefiled." Later, when he is already a noted physician, Nefer seduces him into signing over not only his own property but that of his aged parents, including their tomb. Sinuhe never lives down this betrayal. When he has become famous and rich, Sinuhe carries Nefer, unconscious but alive, to the House of the Dead to be abused by the body washers. She quickly defrauds them, too, of all their riches and escapes, to Sinuhe's consternation. They call her Setnefer—"the devil's beauty."

Nefertiti

A mysterious figure in Egyptian history, Nefertiti is depicted in this novel with no ambiguity. The beautiful, conniving daughter of the scheming priest Eie, she is married to Pharaoh Akhnaton, with whom as a baby she suckles at her wet nurse mother's breast. Surprising—and frustratingly—she gives birth only to daughters (six, all told), but remains the clear favorite in Pharaoh's harem. Early on in the novel, Nefertiti is shown caring only about fashion, but she soon proves her intelligence and guile. Overlooked when her husband dies, Nefertiti fails to seduce Horemheb but convinces the vain Princess Bakematon that she must liberate Egypt from the low-born by marrying a Hittite prince. Horemheb and Eie uncover their plot and put the women under guard, and Nefertiti disappears from the story.

Oneh

Sinuhe's first teacher of writing, the elderly priest Oneh is gentler than most in his profession and recites pious stories that keep the students' attention. In his school, held on his veranda, the sons of tradesmen and soldiers are taught in exchange for whatever their fathers do for a living. Sinuhe meets his best friend, Thothmes in Oneh's school.

Pepitamon / Pepitaton

The paunchy, pop-eyed officer who replaces Horemheb when Pharaoh Akhnaton fires Horemheb, Pepitamon changes his name to Pepitaton in honor of Pharaoh's new god, Aton. Once a capable general, Pepitamon now cares more about his pet cats than the army.

Ptahor

The "Opener of Royal Skulls," described as bowlegged, "swagbellied," rich, renowned, given to drink, and rather miserable, Ptahor is a schoolmate of Senmut in the House of Life who has risen to the top of the medical profession. He becomes Sinuhe's patron



and also does his best to get Sinuhe's friend, Thothmes, into art school, admonishing Thothmes to be more than a flatterer of the rich. When Amenhotep III is on his deathbed, the shaky surgeon takes Sinuhe to the palace as his assistant, putting him in a position to be befriended by the heir.

Senmut and Kipa

Sinuhe's adoptive parents, Senmut is a physician serving the poor, while Kipa keeps a tidy, thrifty home while longing to be rich. She is kind and generous to the needy. Barren and advancing in years, Kipa finds a newborn in the Nile in a reed boat, claims him, and hangs the boat over his bed. She names him for a legendary adventurer and tells him many stories. Senmut teaches Sinuhe much about practical doctoring before arranging for him to enter the House of the Living, his own alma mater, for formal training. Early in his career, Sinuhe becomes enthralled with beautiful Nefernefernefer and signs over to her not only his own property but that of his infirm parents, including their tomb and prepaid embalming. Evicted, they commit suicide, leaving a note forgiving Sinuhe for everything. Guilt over their deaths haunts Sinuhe for the rest of his life.

Shubbiluliuma and Shubattu

The King of Hatti, whose name brings dread in his city of Hattushash, Shubbiluliuma has unified the Hittites. He never appears in public, even to receive foreign envoys. He has reigned for 28 years when Sinuhe visits. During the troubled transition following the death of Pharaoh Akhnaton, Shubbiluliuma sends his handsome, virile son and heir, Shubattu, to marry Princess Bakematon. Sinuhe is sent to intercept Shubattu in the Sinai and kill him without raising suspicion.

Thothmes

Sinuhe's lifelong friend, whom he first meets at Oneh's school, Thothmes is a soldier's son several years Sinuhe's senior who loses interest in the military but shows a talent for naturalistic art. This gets him into art school thanks to Ptahor's patronage, but he is soon expelled. While remaining in Thebes, Thothmes frequents the Syrian Jar, an artists' tavern. Thothmes goes on to become a great artist, patronized by Pharaoh Akhnaton in Akhetaton and ends up being murdered for his loyalty.



Objects/Places

Akhetaton

The beautiful, new capital of Egypt, "The City of the Heavens," hurriedly built in a single year by Pharaoh Akhnaton. Akhetaton is a monument to the one god Aton. Akhetaton is purposefully cut off from the outside world, and the fanatic Pharaoh knows nothing of the starvation inflicting the rest of Egypt. When he is assassinated, his successors return to Thebes and Akhetaton rapidly returns to the desert.

Amurru

A small, economically-destitute, northern Syrian kingdom, Amurru is ruled by King Aziru and Queen Keftiu. Aziru conquers the surrounding minor independent kingdoms and makes Megiddo its capital. Hittites insinuate themselves into his army as officers and eventually hand him over to Horemheb, who executes the whole royal family.

Aton

A manifestation of the more ancient Egyptian god Re-Herachte, Aton becomes the only god recognized in the pantheon when Akhnaton succeeds Amenhotep III as Pharaoh. Followers of the Sun god, symbolized by the ankh, fight with the far-more-numerous devotees of Ammon, symbolized by the horn. Because flowing blood is abhorrent to Aton and all humans are equal in his sight, Akhnaton orders the Egyptian army disbanded, slavery and penal servitude ended, and distributes rival Ammon's vast lands to city folk ignorant of agriculture. Eie, priest of Ammon, and Horemheb, ally to ban Aton and assassinate his royal partisan.

Babylon

A great and ancient empire east of the Arabian desert that vies with Egypt and the Hittites for dominance in Syria, Babylon is also known as Chaldea and the Land of the Kassites. It is utterly flat and made fertile by the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. Babylon vie with Egypt for providing grain to Syria. The chief gods are Marduk and Ishtar, and astrologers exert strong influence. Commerce draws people from all nations to Babylon, which is protected by proud mercenaries. King Burnaburiash, "Lord of the Four Quarters," is still a boy, enjoying toys and strange tales.

Crete

The Mediterranean island off the coast of Hatti (modern Turkey) and Greece, Crete is the birthplace of both Queen Keftiu of Amurru and Sinuhe's great love, Minea, dedicated



since childhood to the god of the sea. Sinuhe and Kaptah bring Minea home after her shipwreck and enslavement in Babylon. Although he knows he will bury his heart on Crete, Sinuhe describes it as "strange and fair," glistening, lucent, capricious, uninhibited, and fanciful." After the death of its god, Crete declines as a maritime power, ends the defense of Gaza, and its warriors divide loyalties between Egypt and Hatti.

The Crocodile's Tail

An inn located in the cramped harbor quarter of Thebes, the Crocodile's Tail is richly paneled inside and comfortable year-round thanks to its thick walls. Its specialty is a fiery drink served in goblets shaped like mussel shells, which patrons hold in the flat of their palm. Kaptah, while still Sinuhe's slave, buys the inn and tries to learn the secret recipe from Merit, the innkeeper's daughter. Merit and her son by Sinuhe perish in the fighting between followers of the rival gods Ammon and Aton, having been forced to side with Aton.

Egypt / Kem

The ancient kingdom in northeastern Africa whose agricultural richness comes from the flooding Nile, Egypt is also referred to as "Kem," meaning the Black Lands. This distinguishes it from Syria and the Sinai Peninsula, the Red Lands. Egypt is divided into the Lower Kingdom—the Nile Delta, whose principal cities are Memphis and Tanis—and Upper Egypt, whose capital is Thebes, located just north of the first cataract of the Nile. The eastern border of Egypt is the coast of the Eastern Sea (present-day Red Sea). South of the Upper Kingdom and subject to it is the land of Kush, inhabited by Africans. Egypt is ruled by the 18th Dynasty in this novel.

Gaza

The city on the coastline of present-day Palestine, Gaza holds the strategic key to the defense of Lower Egypt and the delta against its northeastern neighbors. When the Cretan navy withdraws support, Gaza nears defeat, but Horemheb insists it hold out until he can relieve it. Gaza's stubborn commandant, Roju the Bull-Neck, forces Sinuhe to come over the wall in a basket when he visits, imprisons the spy Kaptah, disbelieving the codeword he carries, and briefly loses his mind after the garrison is relieved.

Hatti / Hittites

The barren hilly land of the fearsome Hittite warriors, Hatti (also called Cheta) is located in modern-day Anatolian Turkey. Sinuhe visits it after fleeing Babylon with Kaptah and Minea. Trained from childhood in privation, Hittite warriors are fearless and tireless. There are many clans, each ruled absolutely under a great king/commander/judge who lives in Hattushash, a town little known in the world because foreigners are forbidden. Arms production is valued over commerce. The people are friendly but reserved. All



males of fighting age drill in the army. When Sinuhe visits, King Shubbiluliuma has reigned for 28 years. King Aziru of Amurru uses Hittite charioteers in his army, and they treacherously turn him over to Horemheb. Towards the end of the novel, Shubbiluliuma sends his son and heir, Shubattu, to wed Princess Baketamon, but Shubattu is assassinated en route.

Kush

The lands south of Egypt watered by the upper Nile River, Kush is populated by black Africans in traditional grass villages, who at times are drawn upon to serve as royal sorcerers and soldiers in Egypt. They are looked down upon by the Egyptians. After achieving a truce with the Hittites, Horemheb moves south to pacify Kush and recruits a new army.

Memphis

A major military depot for the Egyptian army, Memphis is located near the top of the delta, down river from Akhetaton and Thebes. For much of the novel it is Horemheb's bustling headquarters.

Mitanni

A weak kingdom caught between the Hittites and the Babylonians, Mitanni, whose capital is Naharani, traditionally provides brides for the Pharaohs, including Taia and six-year-old Tadukhipa, who is sent to Thebes as the next Pharaoh's consort. Tadukhipa dies mysteriously and is succeeded by Nefertiti. When Sinuhe visits Mitanni, he finds the people unaware that their country is dying and spend much time on such things as food preparation and wardrobe. Pale-complexioned, graceful, and delicate, they are clearly doomed.

Smyrna

The northernmost of the coastal cities of modern Lebanon, the Smyrna in Sinuhe the Egyptian is not to be confused with the famed city (modern Izmir) on Turkey's western coast, but is part of a cluster of towns including Byblos and Kadesh (see the volume's map). Smyrna, when Sinuhe and Kaptah visit, boasts a large Egyptian population upon their arrival, but the Egyptians are being persecuted when they return from their journeys east.

Thebes

The capital of Egypt at the start and close of this novel, Thebes is dedicated to the god Ammon and its life is dominated by Ammon's priesthood. Foreign merchants and



craftsmen throng the city, building temples to their own gods. The palaces are grand but the poverty outside them is crushing. The central thoroughfare is the Avenue of Rams, where royal processions take place. The national school of higher education, the "House of Life," is run by Ammon's priests and offers a variety of professional courses, including medicine. The "House of Death" prepares corpses for the afterlife. While Sinuhe is abroad, an enormous temple is constructed to the rival god, Aton, on a new plan and with sculpture in a shockingly realistic style. Warfare between partisans of the two gods reduces the poor quarter and waterfront to burning rubble, including the Crocodile's Tail inn, claiming the lives of Sinuhe's lover, Merit, and their son, Thoth. For speaking out against Pharaoh Horemheb, Sinuhe is exiled from his beloved city to the eastern coastline of the Eastern Sea.



Themes

Fate

The narrator in *Sinuhe the Egyptian* decries his fate to be alone and to cause suffering and death to those around him. He can only assume that this is the case because he does not know the day and hour of his birth, which are the data needed for astrologers to divine the stars, the livers of sacrificial animals, or the patterns of oil cast on water. In Babylon, where these arts are the most refined, the priests of Marduk sense that Sinuhe has a destiny other than as a simple physician. Only late in life, he pieces together that he is found floating in a reed boat on the Nile at precisely the time a newborn prince is cast onto the waters to keep him from gaining precedent over a different pregnant princess' child. Sinuhe sees that in times of trouble he should be Pharaoh.

Horemheb, Son of the Falcon who happens upon Sinuhe and the future Pharaoh Amenhotep IV / Akhnaton on the night the crown prince's father dies feels a special destiny from the time he sees a burning bush in the Sinai desert. He believes thereafter that he is invincible until his fate has been fulfilled. He accepts to wear Pharaoh's crowns only when he can declare that the unpopular war with the Hittites is over. Horemheb claims falsely to have opposed it and is thus free to concentrate on reestablishing Egypt's wealth. His fate ultimately is to be a just ruler that even someone he has thrown into exile (Sinuhe) must admit that fact.

A third character drawn entirely as a creature of fate is beautiful Minea. Raised to be a virgin dedicated to the Cretan god of the sea, she is chosen to be one of the year's dozen sacrifices but is shipwrecked and sold into slavery in Babylon. Sinuhe rescues her, falls in love with her, cannot dissuade her from her god or her fate, watches her disappear into the labyrinth, and finds her body being eaten by crabs. He realizes again he is fated to be alone.

Kaptah, who is evidently fated to be fabulously wealthy watches his fortunes rise and fall and depends on a sacred scarab to protect him against all bad forces. Several times it appears to let him down, but he keeps faith and ends up the wealthiest man in Egypt.

Wealth

Egypt in the time *Sinuhe the Egyptian* is set is a land of rich and poor. Thebes is a thriving commercial city where royal palaces, temples, and houses of higher education are cut off from the slums by the river Nile. Most of the wealth is concentrated in the hands of the god Ammon, who owns vast tracts of land and controls education. Only those who can read and write can become officers in the army; for everyone else it is just another place to perform backbreaking labor. It is expected and tolerated that slaves steal regularly from their owners. Bartering for services is common.



Kaptah, a one-eyed slave, helps Sinuhe, his master become financially independent so Sinuhe can do as he wishes—care for the indigent. Kaptah is a shrew businessman willing to take risks. Seeing Ammon's grip on society loosening, Kaptah buys up rental properties for income, but not low-priced farm lands that could be nationalized. Sinuhe forbids him to buy and sell slaves in Sinuhe's name. Later, hearing that there is a great demand for empty jugs, Kaptah has vast quantities purchased and sold at a profit in Syria. These turn out to be a water source for invading Hittite armies, but that knowledge comes after the fact.

Horemheb, the general who eliminates the Hittite threat, gathers rich Egyptians together and informs them of the sacrifices they will have to make for the war effort. As they grumble, he reminds them that a war economy is always profitable and that at any rate there are always ways to pass costs to the poor. Later, Horemheb grants exclusive rights to buy and sell war booty to Kaptah, his best spy, simply because it costs him nothing to do so. Kaptah becomes the richest man in Egypt.

At the other extreme is Pharaoh Amenhotep IV / Akhnaton, whose god, Aton, decrees that there are no differences between freeman and slave, there should not be excessive wealth or grinding poverty. People respond by stopping work, and Egypt is plunged into famine. When Horemheb becomes Pharaoh, he works tirelessly to eliminate both extremes with far more success.

Power

Sinuhe the Egyptian opens with the god Ammon and the extensive priesthood that serves him wielding such political power that Pharaoh's relatives see a need to curtail it. Eie and Taia invent a new god, Aton, who denounces warfare, slavery, retribution, and all other forms of power hoarding. Taia's weak-minded son, Amenhotep IV embraces this philosophy and assumes the throne as Pharaoh Akhnaton, son of the new embodiment of Ra. With a convert's zeal he begins a crusade against Ammon. Thwarted by the conservative masses, Akhnaton travels down river to establish a Utopian "City of the Heavens," where he loses touch with reality.

Akhnaton refuses to believe evil of fellow kings, even when they are bellicose. His chief general, Horemheb, sends Sinuhe to gather intelligence on potential enemies. In Hatti, he gets a clear exposition of the Hittite philosophy of power from the Keeper of the Archives: what they want is right, what others want is wrong. They take what they want, preferably intact, but do not shy from violence. The world will soon learn lessons from and about them. When Horemheb becomes Pharaoh, his views are not notably different from those of the Hittites, and Sinuhe, seeing that Aton may well be humankind's best hope, is exiled for refusing to shut up.

The novel does show limitations on power. The Hittite chariots appear invincible, but poisoning the horses' fodder leaves the chariots idle. Aton insists on bloodless change, but Ammon's fanatical followers force his charioteers to trample them. Although banned and actively persecuted, Ammon's priests re-emerge with their characteristic shaved,



oiled heads and white robes and are spontaneously venerated. There is a mystical or superstitious power at work that physical power—particularly when armed force is forbidden—cannot overcome.

Style

Point of View

In *Sinuhe the Egyptian* author Mika Waltari speaks through the main character in the third person past tense. Sinuhe has been in exile from his beloved Thebes for years when he decides to record his memories to lighten his own heart. He expects that the texts will be destroyed on Pharaoh's orders when he dies, but his servant Muti has been preparing ways of hiding and thus preserving them. He claims to desire no immortality for his name. He writes for himself.

Nevertheless, Sinuhe takes pains to explain to the readers who might happen upon his words how he comes to live his life utterly alone while surrounded by people. From the start he hints that he suspects his true ancestry, but tells of his adoption and education as they occur. He never conceals shameful thoughts and passions and readily admits guilt for his actions and the actions of those he somehow enables to do evil. The book relates his personal experiences, which include enough marvelous and fearful things to keep it lively. Only rarely does he report anything in the third person, such as palace gossip that helps establish motivations for coming events. These are minor. The book is about what Sinuhe has seen, heard, and done.

Setting

In *Sinuhe the Egyptian*, author Mika Waltari brilliantly portrays the final years of Egypt's 18th dynasty in the 14th/13th centuries B.C.E. The fictional narrator, Sinuhe, is born in Thebes during the reign of the great Pharaoh Amenhotep III, six months before Amenhotep IV, who renames himself Akhnaton after his new god, Aton. Amenhotep III's death is shown, followed by his widow's assuming power for an indeterminate length of time. Amenhotep III leaves Egypt powerful and respected.

At some point, while Sinuhe is traveling in Syria, en route to modern Turkey and Iraq, Amenhotep IV becomes Pharaoh and changes his name to Akhnaton, signifying his conversion to a unique god, Aton. He builds a new capital, Akhetaton, disbands the army, eliminates slavery, and persecutes the powerful priests of Ammon. Egypt declines rapidly.

The novel depicts a period of instability after Akhnaton's assassination when Tutankhamen rules, influenced by the old priest Eie, who assumes the throne after the boy's mysterious death. Stability returns only when Horemheb, Eie's co-conspirator in eliminating both Akhnaton and Tutankhamen, becomes the last Pharaoh of the 18th Dynasty. All these august personages are historical figure, seen through the eyes of the fictional physician who is bound up with each of them.



Language and Meaning

The narrator of *Sinuhe the Egyptian* is an educated physician putting down in writing the events of his long and exciting life while in exile from his beloved Thebes. As a prerequisite to studying medicine, he studies to become an entry-level priest of Ammon. He betrays his beloved adoptive parents by lusting for a beautiful woman. He falls in with brigands and with royalty. He travels widely and falls in love with women only to lose them tragically. He sees war. He negotiates peace. He lives as a commoner and preaches the outlawed gospel of Aton, and for this is sent into exile, for his words are powerful enough to be politically dangerous.

All these factors combine to produce a narrative that is not intentionally haughty or pretentious, but that certainly has an elevated level and rich vocabulary. One can detect a flavoring of biblical language, but it is quite subtle. The events narrated take place at least a hundred years before the Exodus, but details of that story are woven in, perhaps to connect Christian readers or conversely to show that things such as babies being found in the reeds and bushes burning in the Sinai are commonplace in Egypt. Pharaoh Akhnaton sometimes sounds like Jesus preaching on the highways and byways, and Sinuhe at the end picks some of this up also.

The story is hardly overly-pious, though. Kaptah provides a steady stream of antics, speeches, and lamentations. The trip to Crete is notable for the way in which the Greek myth of the minotaur is acted out rather than told. No Daedalus or Theseus is named, but the crucial ball of string motif is present, joined with Sinuhe's newfound Babylonian learning about labyrinths resembling the viscera of sacrificial animals. One could wish occasionally that Sinuhe would explain rituals and practices at greater length, but considering the lull that occurs when Kaptah goes off on tangents (e.g., taxation), it may be for the best that he takes for granted his readers will know about Kem or Sekhmet. When searching curiously, note that translator Naomi Walford rarely uses scholars' spelling of personal and place names. The rendering from Finnish is elegant and idiomatic.

Structure

Sinuhe the Egyptian consists of fifteen numbered and titled chapters, termed books. Each book is divided into multiple numbered but not titled sections. The books and parts vary considerably in length, but generally grow longer through the climax in Chapter 14.

Books 1, "The Reed Boat," 2, "The House of Life," 3, "Thebes Fever," and 4, "Nefernefernefer," relate the narrator Sinuhe's formative years in Thebes. In the opening pages, he states that he writes in exile, longs for the waters of the Nile, and writes with sorrow. After a happy childhood and anxious higher education, he commits a lustful blunder that costs him his adoptive parents, for which he bears the guilt for the rest of his life.



After burying his parents, Sinuhe goes abroad for three years during which he believes he learns much and matures. Book 5, "The Khabiri," finds him in northern Syria and with Horemheb in Jerusalem. Book 6, "The Day of the False King," finds him in Babylon. Books 7, "Minea," and 8, "The Dark House," finds him fleeing Babylon incognito with Kaptah and Minea through brooding Hatti to beautiful, carefree Crete - and into the fetid labyrinth where Sinuhe loses his love.

Book 9, "The Crocodile's Tail," shows Sinuhe bouncing back emotionally, emancipating Kaptah, and falling in love with Merit. He accompanies Pharaoh for ten years in the new capital in Book 10, "The City of the Heavens," returns to chaotic Thebes in Book 11, "Merit," and again goes abroad on a diplomatic mission in Book 12, "The Water Clock Measures Time." Egypt is at its economic and social nadir in Book 13, "Aton's Kingdom on Earth." Following Akhnaton's murder, Eie becomes Pharaoh and Horemheb in Book 14 declares "The Holy War" in Syria. When Eie dies, the novel concentrates in its final chapter, Book 15, on "Horemheb," showing a just ruler forced to exile his oldest friend because Sinuhe cannot let go of the past. The ending is quite philosophical.



Quotes

"I, Sinuhe, the son of Senmut and of his wife Kipa, write this. I do not write it to the glory of the gods in the land of Kem, for I am weary of gods, nor the glory of the Pharaohs, for I am weary of their deeds. I write neither from fear nor from any hope of the future but for myself alone. During my life I have seen, known, and lost too much to be the prey of vain dread; and as for the hope of immortality, I am as weary of that as I am of gods and kings. For my own sake only I write this; and herein I differ from all other writers, past and to come." Book 1, The Reed Boat, pg. 9

"What deceivers men are! You lie to me, too, Sinuhe. I cannot help my fondness for you—I am weak."

But when I would have taken her in my arms, she pushed me away and sat up, saying in a voice of bitter resentment, 'Weak, lonely though I may be, I will have no dealings with cheats and swindlers. You never told me that your father Senmut has a house in the poor quarter near the harbor. The house is worth little, but the ground it stands on lies near the quays, and his furniture might fetch something at the market. I might eat and drink and take pleasure with you today if you were to give me this property of yours—for no one knows what tomorrow may bring, and I must guard my reputation.'

'My father's property is not mine,' I said aghast. 'You must not ask of me what is not mine to give, Nefernefernefer.'

She tilted her head sideways, watching me with her green eyes.

'Your father's property is your lawful inheritance, Sinuhe, as well you know. And further, you never told me that he is blind and that he has entrusted you with the stewardship of his possessions so that you can dispose of them as if they were your own.'" Book 4, Nefernefernefer, pgs. 98-99.

"After this I could not join in the general merrymaking, although the palace and its forecourts swarmed with people who drank wine and beer and wildly applauded Kaptah's clowning—for he had already forgotten the awkwardness in the women's house. His black eye had been treated with slabs of fresh raw meat so that it was no longer painful though richly colored. But what was amiss with me I do not know. I reflected that I still had much to learn in Babylon since my studies relating to the livers of sheep were not yet completed, and I still couldn't pour oil into water as proficiently as the priests. Moreover, Burnaburiash was much in my debt both for my professional skill and for my friendship, and I knew that by remaining his friend I should receive lavish presents at my departure. Yet the more I pondered over this, the more persistently I was haunted by Minea's face. I thought also of Kaptah, who was to die that evening for a stupid whim of the King's, altogether without my consent, although he was my servant." Book 6, The Day of the False King, pgs. 187-188.

"They went on to tell me of their great King Sargon, who had gathered the four corners of the world under his sway and whose empire had stretched from the northern sea to



the southern sea and who had ruled also over the islands in the sea. They told me that as a newborn child he had been carried down the river in a pitched-reed boat and that nothing was known of his birth until his mighty deeds showed that he was born of the gods.

At this my heart was filled with dread, and I tried to laugh the matter off.

'Surely you do not fancy that I, a doctor, am born of the gods?'

They did not laugh but said gravely, 'That we do not know, but prudence is a virtue—therefore, we bow before you.'" Book 6, The Day of the False King, pgs. 176-177.

"The journey was profitable to me, for it taught me that, if the rich and powerful are everywhere alike and think in the same way, so also are the poor the same the world over. Their thoughts are the same though their customs differ and their gods bear different names. My heart melted toward them for their great simplicity, and I could not refrain from healing the sick when I saw the, from lancing boils and cleansing eyes that I knew would otherwise soon be sightless—and all this I did of my own will, asking nothing in return.

But why I so exposed myself to the peril of discovery I cannot say. Perhaps my heart was softened by Minea, whom I saw every day and whose youth warmed my side at night when we lay on those earthen floors that smelled of straw and pungent manure. Perhaps I did it for her sake, to propitiate the gods by meritorious actions; but it may also be that I desired to test my skill, lest my hands lose their steadiness and my eyes their keenness in the detection of disease. For the longer I live the more clearly do I see that what a man does he does for many reasons—reasons of which he himself may be unaware; therefore, his actions are as dust beneath my feet, since I cannot know his motives or purposes." Book 7, Minea, pgs. 205-206

"This leviathan had lived on human flesh—one meal in the month—a meal furnished by the rulers of Crete in the form of the fairest girls and most perfect youths, because these rulers fancied that by so doing they could maintain the sovereignty of the seas. From out of the dread depths of the ocean the creature must once, long ago, have been driven into the cavern by some tempest. A barrier had been thrown across the entrance to prevent its return and the labyrinth built for it to run in. It had then been fed with sacrifices until it died, and there could be no other monster in the whole world. Where then was Minea?

Mad with despair I shouted Minea's name and awoke the echoes in the cavern until Kaptah pointed to the rock on which we stood; it was stained with dried blood. Following the track of this down into the water, my eyes beheld Minea's body, or what was left of it. It stirred slowly along the bottom, dragged by sea crabs that were tearing at it ravenously. Her face was gone and I recognized her only by the silver net over her hair. I did not have to look for the sword gash in her breast, for I knew that Minotaurus had followed her here, thrust his blade through her from behind, and thrown her into the water, that none might learn that the god of Crete was dead. This he must have done to many a boy and girl before Minea." Book 8, The Dark House, pg. 250.



"Still with my eyes on her I raised the bowl and drank. Then I looked at her no longer. The blood rose to my head, I began to choke, and my throat seemed on fire. When at last I found my breath again I gasped, 'I will take back what I said of Kaptah, for in this matter, at least he did not lie. Your drink is stronger than any I have tasted and more fiery than the earth oil the Babylonians burn in their lamps. I do not doubt that it would fell even a strong man like a blow from a crocodile's tail.' My body was afire, and in my mouth lingered the tang of spices. My heart took wings like a swallow and I said, 'By Set and all the devils, I cannot think how this drink has been mixed, nor do I know whether it has bewitched me, Merit, or your eyes. Magic flows in my limbs and my heart is young one more—do not be surprised if I put my hand on your loins, for it is this bowl that will be to blame and not I.'" Book 9, The Crocodile's Tail, pgs. 290-291

"So acute was my distress that I took Merit to my house and told her everything. I told her the secret of my birth and all that I had wheedled out of Mehunefer. I told her also why I wished to believe that my birth had nothing to do with the golden house or the Princess of Mitanni. As she listened, she fell silent and laughed no more but stared past me into the distance. The sorrow in her eyes darkened, and at last she laid her hand on my shoulder.

'Now I understand much that was a riddle to me. I understand why your solitude cried out to me, voiceless, and why my heart melted when you looked at me. I too have a secret, and of late I have been sorely tempted to impart it to you, but now I thank the gods that I have not done so. Secrets are heavy to bear and dangerous. It is better to keep them to oneself than to share them. Yet I am glad you have told me everything. As you say, you will be wise not to fret yourself with vain brooding over what may never have happened. Forget it as if it were a dream, and I also will forget.'

I was curious to know her secret, but she would not speak of it, only touched my cheek with her lips, put her arm about my neck, and wept a little." Book 11, Merit, pg. 395.

"You are my home and my country, Merit. You are the bread in my hand and the wine in my mouth, and you know it well. You are the the one being in the world in whose company I am not lonely, and for that I love you.'

'Yes, indeed!' rejoined Merit a little bitterly. 'I am but the cushion to soften your loneliness—when I am not your worn mat. But that is how it must be, and I desire nothing else. Therefore, I do not tell you the secret that eats at my heart and which perhaps you should know. I will keep it to myself although in my weakness I had meant to tell you. It is for your sake I conceal it, Sinuhe, for your sale only.'

She would not confide her secret to me, for she was prouder than I and lonelier, although at that time I did not understand and thought only of myself. It is my belief that all men do so when they love, though this is no excuse for me. Men who believe they think of anything but themselves when they love are deluded. As they are in many other matters.

Once more, then, I departed from Thebes and went back to Akhnaton, and of that which



followed there is nothing but evil to relate." Book 12, The Water Clock Measures Time, pg. 436.

"Drink, Pharaoh Akhnaton,' I said. 'Drink for Aton's sake.'
And Horemheb said, 'Drink, Akhnaton my friend. Drink that Egypt may be saved. With my shoulder cloth I will protect your weakness as once before, in the desert outside Thebes.'

Pharaoh Akhnaton drank from the goblet, but his hand shook so that wine splashed down his chin. Then he gripped the cup in both hands and emptied it, and at last he sank back and laid his neck on the wooden rest. He said no word but stared with dim, bloodshot eyes into his visions. After a time he began to shiver as with cold. Horemheb slipped off his shoulder cloth and spread it over him, but Eie took the crowns in both hands and tried the feel of them upon his head.

So passed Pharaoh Akhnaton; I gave him death to drink, and he drank it from my hand. Yet why I did it I do not know, for a man does not know his own heart. I believe I did it less for Egypt's sake than for Merit's and for my son Thoth's. I did it less from love of Akhnaton than from bitterness, from hatred of all the evil he had brought about. But above all I did it because it was written in the stars that my measure should be full. When I saw him die, I believed that it was already full, but a man does not know his own heart, which is insatiable—more insatiable than a crocodile of the river." Book 13, "Aton's Kingdom on Earth, pgs. 467-468

"He went with a smile on his lips, for death comes at times like bliss after great agony, and his eyes before they faded saw strange visions. I surveyed him trembling, forgetful of his race, his speech, and the color of his skin; I remembered only that he, my fellow man, died by my hand and my wickedness. Hardened though I was by all the deaths I had witnessed during my lifetime, yet my heart quaked at the passing of Prince Shubattu, and the tears poured down my cheeks." Book 15 Horemheb, pg. 544

"For I, Sinuhe, am a human being. I have lived in everyone who existed before me and shall live in all who come after me. I shall live in human tears and laughter, in human sorrow and fear, in human goodness and weakness, in justice and injustice, in weakness and strength. As a human being I shall live eternally in mankind. I desire no offerings at my tomb and no immortality for my name. This was written by Sinuhe, the Egyptian, who lived alone all the days of his life." Book 15 Horemheb, pgs. 575-576.

Topics for Discussion

What roles does Muti play in the novel? Would Sinuhe's life and the novel be appreciably different without her?

How is art used in the novel to show changing times?

Does the death of Minea or Merit affect Sinuhe more profoundly? Could he have been happy married to either?

Could Sinuhe at any point have revealed his royal blood and made a difference? Could Thoth, had he lived?

What purpose does the execution of Aziru and his family serve in the novel?

What does the execution of Aziru and his family say about the principal characters?

Is Kaptah more than a comic sidekick? To what would you most attribute his success?

How is the Nile River used in the novel to set mood?