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Moving Beyond Gender Bias

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WOMEN IN ANCIENT EGYPT

REVISITING
POWER,
AGENCY, AND
AUTONOMY

Edited by
Mariam F. Ayad



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Moving Beyond Gender Bias

Mariam F. Ayad

ANCIENT EGYPTIAN CULTURE is very well documented.¹ Its long history spans at least three millennia, and more if we consider cultural survivals into the Hellenistic, Roman, and Late Antique periods. Thousands of hieroglyphic inscriptions survive on temple and tomb walls, on stone slab stelae, and on various sorts of funerary equipment (offering tables, coffins and sarcophagi, canopic jars, and *shabti* figurines, to name a few). In addition to these religious texts, thousands of other texts dealing with various aspects of daily life survive on ostraca and papyrus fragments. Comprising administrative texts, personal letters, legal documents, tax receipts, and a myriad of other business-related documents, these texts are written in the cursive scripts of hieratic and demotic, and later, in Greek or Coptic. Egyptian women appear in all these texts, sometimes as the central figure in a text or on a monument, and other times less focally as a family member appearing in a tomb scene next to the tomb owner or mentioned in someone's genealogy or in personal correspondence.

Since the late 1960s, numerous studies and doctoral dissertations have focused on the role of ancient Egyptian women in their society, with books dealing with women in ancient Egypt appearing on an almost annual basis since the early 1990s.² With their ability to work outside the home, inherit and dispose of property, initiate divorce, testify in court, and serve on a local town council (*knbt*),³ women in ancient Egypt exercised more legal rights and economic independence than their counterparts throughout antiquity.⁴ Yet we still encounter statements in current scholarship that misrepresent ancient

Egyptian women by undermining their role(s) in their society and particularly their ability to act independently. This dismissive attitude is most obvious in three areas in particular: 1) women exercising power; 2) women's economic independence; 3) and female literacy. As will be demonstrated below, this dismissive attitude and associated labels are not grounded in evidence, but reflect a modern, predominately male, scholarly bias regarding what constitutes femininity and the accompanying notions of what women could do.

Women Exercising Power

Traditional attitudes regarding women exercising power in ancient Egypt share the assumption that women held their positions and titles in name only while a male relative or high-ranking official wielded actual power or pulled strings behind the scenes. This underlying assumption has been repeated in one way or another in published scholarship almost irrespective of the surviving evidence. In the next few paragraphs, I will discuss three illustrative examples where such attitudes are most pronounced.