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Women, Pharaonic Egypt

LISA SABBAHY

There is abundant evidence, both written and pictorial, for women in ancient Egypt. We can glimpse the lives of royal, noble, as well as peasant women, although there are limitations on how clearly we can comprehend their actual status and role in ancient Egyptian society. Most of the pictorial evidence we have is from tombs, which only royalty or nobility could afford to build, and the reliefs and statuary in them show a perfect world meant for the eternal afterlife, not a truly realistic depiction of everyday life. Royal women had their own tombs, but non-royal women shared the tomb of their husband and are shown according to an elite male perspective, produced by male artists and craftsmen.

Written evidence is more balanced, in the sense that we have letters and documents from everyday life, but the people doing the writing appear always to have been male. Although we assume “pockets” of female literacy (*see* LITERACY, PHARAONIC EGYPT) among royalty and nobility, and in particular among women in the workmen’s village of DEIR EL-MEDINA (*see* Toivari-Viitala 2001: 187–9), there is no direct proof for female literacy in ancient Egypt. Only male children attended school and, once trained as scribes, went on to work in the government. From the king down, the power structure of ancient Egypt was all male. We can reconstruct a view of the lives of women in ancient Egypt, but it is filtered through a masculine lens (*see* GENDER, PHARAONIC EGYPT).

Royal women, by virtue of their family relationship with the king, were placed at the pinnacle of status and power (*see* QUEENS, PHARAONIC EGYPT). An important difference between the queen and the king, however, was that the king was divine, and filled a divine role, while the queen was not, but could consort with divinity. She passed divinity and legitimacy onto her son, and could also rule for him,

if he took the throne as a minor. This type of regency by the king’s mother is known from as early as the 1st Dynasty (*see* MERNEITH).

The queen was also in a position to be able to assume power in unusual circumstances, at the death of her husband, the king. Queen SOBEKNEFRU has a well-documented but short reign of about four years at the end of the 12th Dynasty. It would appear that there were no more males in the royal line, and therefore she took the throne. In the 18th Dynasty, HATSHEPSUT started as a king’s daughter, and then married her half-brother, becoming king’s wife. Then, after the death of her husband, she served as regent for her minor stepson, Thutmose III (*see* THUTMOSE I–IV). She ultimately assumed power as king with him in a co-regency and ruled for twenty-two years until her death. The king of ancient Egypt ruled by virtue of the fact that he was the god HORUS, son of OSIRIS, and he inherited the throne from his father (*see* KINGSHIP, PHARAONIC EGYPT). Sobekneferu “circumvented” the problems created by her gender by proclaiming herself a “female Horus,” wearing the garb of the male king over her own female clothing. Hatshepsut took this one step further when she became king and for state purposes simply had herself portrayed as a man.

Women in ancient Egypt held many different types of jobs, and these changed over time. From the period of the Old Kingdom (2650–2150 BCE) we have women given titles as weaver, overseer of weavers, singer, overseer of singers, dancer, grinder of grain, food vendor, winnower, domestic servant, stewardess of the queen’s household, as well as overseer of ornaments, overseer of cloth, and seal-bearer. Women of higher status, because of their husband’s position, could be part of the royal court and carry a title such as “Noblewoman of the King,” or “Ornament of the King.” In terms of religious positions, a woman could serve as a mourner at funerals, maintain tomb offerings as a “Servant of the *Ka*,” or be a priestess of the goddess HATHOR or the goddess NEITH.

In the Middle Kingdom (1750–1700), women's titles remained very much the same, except that titles such as "overseer" or "administrator," or titles indicating work of importance in the royal palace, were no longer used. Middle Kingdom women "were not appointed to positions where they held authority over other people, even in private households" (Ward 1989: 37). Another difference in the titles from the Old and Middle Kingdoms is that work seemed to be more clearly divided by gender in the Middle Kingdom. With few exceptions, titles show that women did work inside buildings, while men worked outside, doing all agricultural labor, as well as crafts (Ward 1989: 38). As shown in documents from the late Middle Kingdom town of EL-LAHUN in the FAYYUM, it was only in the production of textiles that women, not men, were the important laborers (Quirke 2007: 251). One new title, *nebet per*, "Mistress of the House," appeared in the Middle Kingdom, indicating a married woman in charge of a household.

Most of the evidence for female titles of the New Kingdom (1550–1070) comes from tombs in the Theban necropolis. The restricted titles of the Middle Kingdom continued, and women as wives were still distinguished by the title "Mistress Of The House." The title of priestess had disappeared, and wives of high officials had the religious title *shemayit*, or "chantress" of a deity, particularly Amun of Thebes and also Hathor. The chantress held a rattling instrument called a *sistrum*, as well as a heavy bead necklace with a counterpoise, both objects sacred to the goddess Hathor. Chantress seems to be the only female religious title in the New Kingdom, other than "God's Wife of Amun," which was a title held only by royal women (see GOD'S WIFE OF AMUN). Another title of importance that could be held by wives of high officials in the New Kingdom was *menat nesu*, "Wet Nurse of the King." This woman would obviously have been virtually part of the royal family, and her position would have meant not only royal favor,

but also perhaps advancement for male members of her family (Robins 1993: 117).

From what we can tell, women in ancient Egypt enjoyed legal equality with men. Women could inherit property and will it as they pleased. They could buy, sell, and trade, although "men were normally the 'public' partner of a marriage and handled business deals and property transactions, sometimes acting in their wife's name" (Johnson 1999: 170). Women could bring cases in court and also serve as witnesses. They could also be arrested, tried, and given similar punishments to those of men (Toivari-Viitala 2001: 133). If women were divorced, they retained their own personal property and received one third of the communal property. In the Late period (664–332 BCE), a woman could have a "marriage contract" stating that her husband had to pay her a specified sum in order to divorce her (see FAMILY, PHARAONIC EGYPT).

Elite women, depicted in statuary or scenes in their husbands' tombs, are represented following the highly gendered conventions of ancient Egyptian art (see Robins 1994). The woman is shown light-skinned, reflecting her indoor existence. She is also shown in passive poses and in statuary stands with both feet together. She is physically smaller than her husband and also shown touching or embracing him, stressing her secondary or inferior position. The elite woman was only shown young and beautiful, the perfect state that she should be in forever. Non-elite women could be represented in daily life scenes in the tombs, showing the activities of the tomb owner's estate. In these scenes, the women are active and working: weaving, mixing mash for beer, serving food, and pulling up flax. Their figures are not bound by the same conventions as elite women, because what is important is showing the production of food and goods, not the people doing it.

In ancient Egyptian literature, women are portrayed as having two different natures: "good" and "bad" (see Troy 1984). As stated in the instructions in the Insinger Papyrus:

“It is in women that good fortune and bad fortune are upon earth” (Bryan 1996: 46). On the one hand, there is the perfect, virtuous wife and loving mother, and on the other hand, the unfathomable, dangerous woman, who can lead a man astray. All ancient Egyptian wisdom literature contains advice for men about staying away from the second type of woman, and the consequences he will suffer if he does not. This type of literature also stressed how important the ideal wife and mother was, and how a man must care for his mother when she is old. The Instructions of Ani has a lengthy description of the sacrifices a mother makes for her son and exhorts a man to “double the food your mother gave you, and to support her just as she supported you.”

SEE ALSO: Co-regency.

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