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Gender, Pharaonic Egypt

LISA SABBAHY

Ancient Egyptian society was highly gendered. Participation in most aspects of ancient Egyptian life depended on whether one was male or female. Positions, jobs, and almost all types of labor were divided by sex. From the king, at the very top of the ancient Egyptian hierarchy, down to the lowest rank of official, the power structure and government administration was entirely male. The ancient Egyptian administration was highly bureaucratic, and working in government also meant being literate in order to deal with documents and record keeping (*see* ADMINISTRATION, PHARAONIC EGYPT).

Schools, often based at the royal palace, trained young boys to be scribes, and then follow a career in the government, military, or temple. All of these students were male (*see* LITERACY, PHARAONIC EGYPT). Although there is evidence for “pockets” of female literacy, such as royal women or wives of high officials who could afford to become literate, females never attended school like males, and never worked in positions of authority that required literacy. “For them the accomplishment would be useful in legal affairs and as an aid to a cultured life” (Baines and Eyre 1983: 85). In fact, it has been stated that, outside of the home, ancient Egyptian women “did not hold positions of administrative responsibility in any spheres of activity” (Ward 1989: 43). The situation of the working male official and his stay-at-home wife is perhaps best summed up in the New Kingdom (1552–1069 BCE) papyrus known as the Instructions of Ani, a text that gave advice to up-and-coming young middle class men. It states that a man is asked about his position, while a woman is asked about her husband.

Literate officials probably made up about 1 percent of the ancient Egyptian population, although the literacy rate may have varied and been slighter higher at times (Baines and Eyre 1983). The bulk of the population would have

labored in jobs where literacy was irrelevant. Labor seems to have been divided between males who worked outside, in physically active jobs, and females who worked inside, or near the house. Men plowed, threshed, caught fish, herded animals, quarried, built, sculpted, sailed boats, and served in the army, while women ran the household, raised children, wove textiles, ground grain, and served as wet nurses and professional mourners. Both genders worked as household servants, were associated with aspects of preparing food and drink, and played musical instruments. Also, both men and women could be conscripted for state labor.

Participation in religious positions differed based on gender, as well (*see* PRIESTS AND PRIESTESSES, EGYPT). In the Old Kingdom (2686–2181 BCE), while men could serve as priests in many cults, women were priestesses in the temples of only two female goddesses, HATHOR and NEITH. By the time of the New Kingdom, when the priesthood had become a professional career for men, women were restricted just to the role of “chantress” in temple cults, shaking the sistrum, a rattling instrument, and singing.

Human representations in ancient Egyptian art made gender, as well as status, absolutely clear. For the most part men were depicted larger than women, which signified their greater importance. Men were depicted with brown, or dark skin, while women had pale white or yellowish skin. It is thought that the lighter skin color reflected being indoors and spending less time out in the sun. In standing statues, men are shown striding, while women have their feet together, suggesting the difference between being physically active versus passive. In depictions of groups, the person who touches or holds another person was viewed as less important than the person being touched; almost always, a wife is shown touching her husband. Men, in tomb statuary and relief decoration, could be shown young and in prime physical shape, or old and corpulent, signifying that they were wealthy and powerful. Women, on the other hand, were

only shown young and beautiful, no matter what their age. Women were by no means excluded from being depicted, and in almost all scenes were shown accompanying their husband, but it is clear that “they took second place to the male owner” of the tomb (Robins 1990: 21).

Ancient Egyptian art was for the afterlife, and presented a highly idealized eternal existence. Art was found in temples and tombs, and the tombs in which statuary and scenes of daily life have been found all belonged to men who were important officials. The depictions of males and females, and what activities they were involved in, therefore, reflect elite, *male* attitudes. Moreover, all the artisans who produced this art were male as well.

It does not appear that ancient Egyptian culture was sexist in the sense that women were demeaned and seen as the inferior gender. Although men in ancient Egypt had higher status and role in terms of their authority, women do not seem to have been denied a meaningful role in society and family. The ideal marriage in ancient Egypt was monogamous and lifelong (*see* FAMILY, PHARAONIC EGYPT). The Old Kingdom Instructions of Ptah-hotep tell a young man to marry, to love his wife, and keep her happy as long as he lives. Mothers also received special respect and veneration. The Instructions of Ani point out the sacrifices a mother makes to raise her young, and how her grown children were obliged to look after her. However, men composed these instructional texts in order to advise other men on how to behave, so even here we have a “male-view of the place of women in ancient Egyptian society” (Robins 1990: 64).

Based on the written evidence preserved from ancient Egypt, women had the same legal rights as men. Both men and women could buy, sell, own, will, inherit, and be debtors or creditors. Men and women had the same status in courts of law, and both could bring suits against others, and also testify. Although Egyptian society was patriarchal and male-dominated, in legal matters, it

“recognized women’s rights to as great a degree as men’s” (Allam 1989: 133).

From the written material we have from ancient Egypt, it is difficult to come up with a document that makes an outright sexist statement. Nowhere is it said that boys are better than girls, or that one should have male children rather than female. The only example of such an attitude might be the advice in the Instructions of Ani that says to “take a wife when you are young, so that she produces a son for you,” a statement based on the fact that only a son could inherit his father’s job. On the other hand, there are amuletic oracle decrees known from the Third Intermediate Period (1069–730 BCE), in which a deity, or deities, proclaims protection and good health for a female, including that she conceive both male and female children, and for a male, that his wife bear both male and female children (Edwards 1960). This contrasts to the Greco-Roman period in Egypt, when Greeks and Romans exposed unwanted infants, and the Greeks in particular would do so if the baby were female (*see* EXPOSURE OF CHILDREN). Diodorus Siculus (1.80) makes the comment that contrary to this practice, the Egyptians raised all their children.

SEE ALSO: Infanticide; Sex and sexuality, Pharaonic Egypt; Women, Pharaonic Egypt.

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