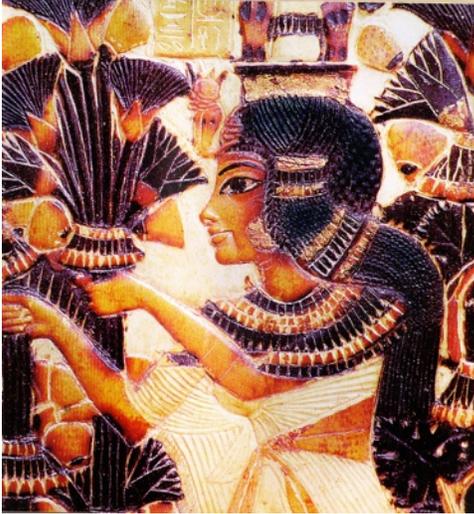


The Role of Women in Ancient Egypt

Princess with offerings



The role, contribution and influence women played in ancient Egyptian society extended well beyond their daily life and into the afterlife, with letters to the dead imploring help or control for the living. Women's roles in daily life have been demonstrated by the respected ideal of marriage, fertility and motherhood, the vital industry of weaving, as honoured priestesses in temples, and their confidence in the social order is noted significantly by striking from work when not paid. Women could be temple singers, appeasing the gods and impersonating goddesses and playing important roles in Egyptian religious society. Women were employed as public ritual mourners, displaying grief for the departed in gowns that denoted their status, a role reserved exclusively for females. Literature of all eras denotes the mother's name rather than the father of an individual on documents, confirming the importance and respect mothers held within the family hierarchy. Women even ruled Egypt on several occasions throughout history, either jointly with their sons, husbands or in their own right, and were formidable, decisive and capable in that role.

Art history demonstrates and commemorates the roles that women played, denoting the uniqueness of how they chose to be depicted. Although women's records of achievements were not always as highly demonstrative as men, we are assured by what we have often left to us of the significant role and spirit that women had and enjoyed at a

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time when their Mediterranean neighbours were far less independent. The private life of women in ancient Egypt was one that had freedom, independence, privileges and legal rights that was not equalled among contemporary foreign women, and in addition they were classed as full citizens. Central to the culture for ancient Egyptian women was the belief in matrilineal descent and equal inheritance, while her foreign female neighbours lived in a patriarchal society that only found watery ground among Egyptian women.

Women had the right to buy, retain and sell any property or goods they brought into a marriage and were able to be witnesses in court cases, sit on a jury, take injustices before a judge and perform some of their husband's official duties should he be absent. For a woman marriage was a respectable and principal symbol of her socialisation and economic status as an adult, and with a man providing for her she became 'mistress of the house'. Indeed, both for men and women to be fully incorporated into Egyptian society one needed to have the other. The title a woman assumed upon marrying, that of 'mistress of the house', is known from the Middle Kingdom through to the Ptolemaic period; another significant title held was 'citizenship'.

Egyptian society stressed the emphasis of fertility, of great significance for a woman; being fertile was a sign of success and acclaim of her husband and society. Religious ideals instructed the repetitive fundamental theme of birth, death and rebirth with fertility essential to fully benefit from the afterlife. Indeed, the epitome of Egyptian family ideal was centred on the ideal of fertility with marriage and children. The literature of the New Kingdom in *The Instruction of Any* stresses

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the importance of marriage and children for men and a principal role for women:

'Take a wife while you are young
That she make a son for you;
She should bear for you while you are youthful.
Happy the man whose people are many,
He is saluted on account of his progeny.'

Lichtheim (1976:136).

Sistrum



In the role of Temple Singers women were musician-priestesses and held an important and honourable place in Egyptian religious society, performing music and singing for the god Amun for his entertainment. By rattling their sistrums and shaking their menat necklaces the Temple Singers were believed to pacify the god, who in turn would favour society by protecting and assisting humankind.

Women were employed as ritual mourners at funerals, wailing and pulling at their hair and throwing dust upon their heads in a public display of grief, often depicted as lying prostrate or throwing their heads back as if in pain. In the annual role of a mourning goddess over the embalmment of Osiris, women would portray Isis and Nephthys and implement the funerary liturgy in Ptolemaic times, with evidence for this role indicated from the Old Kingdom. In the depiction below women are mourning and lamenting at a funeral, throwing dust

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on their heads in a public sign of grief and wearing an official mourning dress that exposed the breasts.



Women mourning wearing official mourning dress, Eighteenth Dynasty.

Source: R. Hall, *Egyptian Textiles* 1986, p.66.

Far more than the role of mother and wife, albeit a respected and sought after position in society, women contributed in a multitude of ways that may not always have been as well attested to as that of men, but which served to enrich society by their political, religious and social inclusions. From the role of peasants' wives to notable Queens, ancient Egyptian women left their significant mark on a magnificent society and the examination of their history leads us to understand a little of their souls.

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Cert Egyptology *Manchester*

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