

EGYPTIAN WOMEN: **ADDITIONS TO TEXTBOOK**

In recent times, with feminist writers taking an interest in ancient Egypt, there has been a reassessment of the roles of women in that early civilization and a new understanding of their vital contributions. Up until recently, women were hardly mentioned in histories of Egypt because a male bureaucracy was dominant throughout the 3,000 years of history and it was built on gender inequality. Scribes who were part of this bureaucracy and wrote the histories hardly mentioned women and women's roles. Furthermore, male scholars who researched Egypt in the 1800's and 1900's A.D., also ignored and omitted women.

Our textbook describes Egyptian women on page 50 and the account is generally correct except for one paragraph which says "As noted above, Egypt was a matrilineal society from top to bottom. All property was inherited in the female line. Even pharaohs had to marry a sister in order to be sure of the crown. The leverage this gave the Egyptian woman must have been considerable." This information is not accurate. There may have been some instances in certain eras in certain regions of matrilineal descent, but overall Egypt was not a matrilineal society. All property wasn't inherited by women. Women got 1/3 of the property if their father or husband died. See discussion below regarding pharaohs marrying sisters.

INTRODUCTION

Egyptians believed creation began by the interaction of a male and female, Geb (earth) and Nut (sky). They also believed the human and divine worlds reflected each other and interacted with each other. The interactions between male and female were the driving force for cosmic renewal. Isis and Osiris were an archetypical couple.

Women of different social classes had totally different lives and different experiences. Women were ranked hierarchically and class distinctions caused wide disparities between women. Women around kings had elements of divinity.

EGYPT'S FOUR WOMEN PHARAOKHS

In 3,000 years of Egyptian history only 4 women became Pharaohs out of approximately 100 pharaohs altogether. The most famous of these was Hatshepsut the daughter of Pharaoh Thutmose I and the wife of pharaoh Thutmose II. As wife of Pharaoh Thutmose II she was considered "God's wife" and "principal wife". When her husband died, she was considered regent for her son, Thutmose III. In this role she offered daily rituals to the gods, and sometime during Thutmose's reign she became Pharaoh. She wore the Pharaoh's dress, adopted to a male gender role, and made the most of her power. She carefully chose court officials who were loyal to her and co-ruled with her son Thutmose III as the dominant partner. She ruled between 10 and 20 years. Because her name was obliterated from monuments, it is speculated her son may have had her assassinated. Her son ended up ruling alone.

Nitigret ruled at the end of the 6th dynasty, Nefrusobk ruled at the end of the 12th dynasty, and Tansret ruled at the end of the 19th dynasty. These were mothers or wives of Pharaohs who ruled as a last resort.

ROYAL WOMEN AND QUEENSHIP

While we know women were present at the court, we know very little about them as individuals. These women were referred to as the "King's mother" "King's principal wife" "King's daughter".

The concept of divine queenship can be seen in the queen's wearing of the vulture headdress. This headdress consisted of a cap with vulture wings against the sides of the head and the head of a cobra jutting forward from above the forehead. It dates from the Old Kingdom and was originally worn by the vulture goddess Nekhbet who was paired with Wadjyt the cobra goddess of Lower Egypt. This headdress was originally a divine crown and continued to be used by goddesses, queens and royal women. This shows there was a concept of divine queenship.

Egyptian Queens were also depicted holding the Ankh which was the hieroglyph for life, symbolizing male and female together. This also shows a notion of divine queenship was a vital part of royal ideology through the ages.

The Queen's household consisted of lands, estates, cattle, and it was administered by men. Royal children were brought up on these households.

RITUAL ROLES OF PHARAOH'S MOTHER AND PHARAOH'S PRINCIPAL WIFE

Both the Pharaoh's mother and his principal wife were singled out with special titles, dress, symbols and contexts in which they were depicted. Both were treated like queens. The Pharaoh's divine birth meant that his mother was impregnated by the top god Amun-Ra. When a Pharaoh was not the son of the Pharaoh's principal wife, during that Pharaoh's reign, his mother was always called the Pharaoh's principal wife, even if it wasn't true.

Some mothers and wives acquired much power. One stele fragment was inscribed "When the god's wife Nefertari flew to heaven." And Ahhotep, King Ahmose's mother, was praised on a stele at Karnak for "looking after Egypt's soldiers, bringing back deserters, and pacifying Upper Egypt."

FATHER-DAUGHTER, BROTHER-SISTER MARRIAGES

Although much has been made of marriages between certain Egyptian Pharaohs and their daughters or certain Pharaohs marrying their sisters, it is now thought that these instances were very unusual. The practice may have originated because certain brother and sister deities married each other, so royal brother and sister may have emulated this and married each other. Some scholars have speculated that royal families inter-married to safeguard dynastic succession and emphasize their divine status. The use of the affectionate term "sister" to encompass a wide group of loved women including wife, mistress, niece and aunt has contributed to a misunderstanding of the prevalence of brother-sister incest. It is true that there were instances of incest. Pharaoh Amenhotep III married his daughter, Satamun, the daughter of his principal wife Tij. Ramses II married his 3 daughters who eventually became principal wives along with Nefertari his first principal wife, Asetnefret, his second principal wife, Henutmira, his sister, 2 Hittite princesses, 1 Syrian princess, and 1 Babylonian princess. He had over 100 children.

QUEENS OF NON-ROYAL BIRTH

There were inscriptions which said "King's principal wife" and "King's wife" and others which indicated "King's wife of non-royal birth". Pharaoh Thutmose III's principal wife, Satish, was the illegitimate daughter of a nurse who raised him. Pharaoh Amenhotep III's wife Tij was the daughter of an army officer. In Egypt as in many other early civilizations, the best way for a non-royal family to gain prestige was to have a daughter married to the Emperor, or even to have a daughter be the mistress or concubine to the Emperor.

MARRIAGE TO FOREIGN PRINCESSES TO CEMENT DIPLOMATIC ALLIANCES

Thutmose III married 3 Syrian women who were daughters of Syrian rulers. They received an honorable Egyptian burial when they died. In some of these diplomatic marriages the foreign woman was the daughter of a King, in others she was the daughter of a defeated ruler. In a letter written in the international diplomatic language Akkadian it was written to a Syrian "Send your daughter to the Pharaoh and send also 20 healthy slaves, silver chariots and healthy horses." The ruler had to comply or be in defiance of Egypt. These marriages occurred when Egypt was at the height of her imperial power. One King of Jerusalem said in a letter "I gave 21 maidens as a gift for the Pharaoh." Another said "I have given 500 cattle and 20 maidens." These women were probably vulnerable, lonely and exploited. They were little more than commodities, tokens for an alliance, and cogs in the workings of the international diplomatic system. This system was run by men, but women were needed to make it work.

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