

Women in Pharaonic Egypt

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♀ On the road of ancient Egyptian history, there are many great landmarks and the role played by women is one example.

By means of mutual understanding and appreciation, both men and women managed to fulfill the great achievements that Ancient Egypt is so proud of.

In the household, and among family members, women were almost ideal as they laboriously worked and toiled to help their husband as well as care for their children. This fact is yet manifested through art and literary scenes.

Being well respected from the family, women earned many titles; the most eminent of which was “Mistress of the House”.

In the community, women`s role became exceedingly eminent; 6 queens reigned Egypt during its history, Hatshepsut of the 18th dynasty was the most celebrated of Egypt`s queens as she managed, with a strongly-willed character, to make Egypt flourish and prosper .


Other queens, though not in ruling power, were also effective. Ti, Nefertiti, and Nefertari are but examples.

Queens were always at the side of their husbands, the kings, in ruling the country. Royal women played a vital role in kingship; no one was allowed to be king unless born to a royal mother.



Ordinary women, however, participated in almost everything concerning community affairs and they sometimes succeeded in occupying very high offices.

They were priestesses, scribes, medical doctors, architects, musicians, singers, dancers, weavers, and the list goes on.

 Women in Ancient Egypt received many honorary titles as tokens of appreciation from their community .

A woman was depicted as: the kind one, the elegant one, the charming one, the beloved one, the mistress, and so forth.

The literature of Ancient Egypt also showed a great deal of respect and appreciation for women and the role they played in all walks of life.

Ancient Egyptian art, on the other hand, depicted them as elegant as one may ever expect. They earned their rights in marriage, divorce, and inheritance and in return they met their duties with a high sense of responsibility.

Ladies and gentlemen, let me say a few words regarding the historical outline of Ancient Egypt. The term pharaonic or Ancient Egypt refers to the period from 3100 BC till 332 BC when Alexander the Great invaded Egypt.

This period was divided by an ancient Egyptian historian Manetho, in the 3rd century BC, into 30 dynasties. Modern historians and Egyptologists categorize these dynasties into periods: Old kingdom, Middle kingdom, New kingdom... etc.



Going through world ancient history, one will notice that men usually held the upper hand in life affairs. Thus spoke the well-known Greek historian Herodotus in the 5th century.

When visiting Egypt he stated that Egyptian women had no actual role in society but practicing their natural roles as wives and mothers.

But Herodotus, together with many others, were not accurate in their accounts as they failed to grasp the depth of the Egyptian community, owing to their lack of ability in reading the ancient Egyptian language; a matter that was only made possible by 1822 when the French Scholar Champollion managed to decipher the Hieroglyphic script.

♀ Ancient Egyptian documents tell us that the role of women was of great importance. Since thousands of years, Egyptians have been trying to invest the efforts of all citizens, whether men or women, in an attempt to reach perfection for a community that did not base itself on gender discrimination.

Accordingly, men and women found themselves living in an atmosphere of commitment to the land of Egypt, and hence they cooperated, within an almost ideal frame, to bring to their people and humanity such a great fruit of their varied achievements; that is, the ancient Egyptian culture.

Examining all ancient Egyptian monuments, objects and documents concerning women; such as statues, reliefs, painting, jewelry, dresses, daily life requirements, titles and professions, will necessarily give us a clear picture of their familial and communal role.



As a wife, an ancient Egyptian woman started her matrimonial life early, as the marriage age started at 14 for women and 16 for men, with only some exceptions.

Wise men used to advise young girls and boys to marry and settle down. Such tendencies towards early marriage made women practice their role as wives and mothers in a most proper way through establishing a happy family.

Documents of family life testify to this fact; family members were looking blissfully happy, settled, cooperative; also women appeared elegant, slim, beautiful, healthy, well-dressed and ornamented.

Full respect and appreciation were paid to women from their spouse, families and community as each held the title *nbt pr* “Mistress of the House” in addition to many other titles and epithets to which I will refer later on.

Ancient Egyptian traditions and laws gave much attention to women rights in marriage, divorce, inheritance as well as in cases of selling and buying.

This natural role is universally played by women everywhere, but what distinguished the women of ancient Egypt comparable was the role they played in society; a role that becomes only clearer when observing the titles and professions they maintained and in their ascension to the throne country during the early history of Egypt.

Referring to some of her titles and epithets, a woman was depicted as: the scholar, the possessor of knowledge, she who seizes the two lands (Upper and Lower Egypt), mistress of appearance, beautiful face, great of love, sweet of love, shining as the sun, refreshing heart, mistress of



elegance, mistress of pleasure, mistress of sweet breeze, mistress of happiness, great of respect, the wise one, the pure of heart and hand, the noble one, mistress of attraction, beloved of her husband, great of favor, and the kind one.



On the other hand, she earned some titles that proved her influence in society: King's mother, king's wife, king's sister, king's daughter, god's wife, mistress of the two lands, related to the king, great in the palace, mistress of all women.

Women continuously struggled to improve themselves by gaining more education and knowledge until they managed to hold high positions as: priestess, high priestess, great of concubines, overseer of king's ornament and king's dress, overseer of king's entertainment, of the king's musicians and dancers, singer, musician, harp-player, nurse, mourner, chanter, head of the treasury, scholar, supervisor of rituals.

Within the frame of kingship traditions in Ancient Egypt, royal women played an outstanding role. They were the bridges that kings crossed to reach the throne of Egypt since such traditions required that the King of Egypt should be the son of a royal mother.

Otherwise he could face difficulties for, if not; he has to marry one of the royal princesses and if this was proved difficult too, he has to search for a political solution. Under the umbrella of the god as well, the divine birth was one the ways to allow the king to reach the throne.



The king announces that the god married his human mother and he is the result of this marriage, hence his becoming a king is legalized and commonly accepted.



We have the examples of Queens Hatshepsut and Amenhotp III.

Women continued to hold further responsibilities in their community by ascending to the throne and ruling the country.

What is really fascinating is that women did not wait long to rule the country, but they succeeded in achieving that as early as the 1st dynasty (3100 BC). This was apparently agreed by men, An example in this was Mrit-nit whose title was the king of Upper and Lower Egypt.

Other examples include:

- Queen Khentkaus of the 4th dynasty.
- Queen Nit- Iqret of the 6th dynasty.
- Queen Sokek- Nfrw of the 12th dynasty.
- Queen Hatshepsut of the 18th dynasty.
- Queen Tawsret quarta dinastia.

No doubt that Hatshepswt was the most powerful among them all, she ruled around 18 years in the 15th century BC, wherein Egypt enjoyed stability, peace and wealth. She is the owner of the most elegant temple in Deir bahri, in the western bank of Luxor. As a ruler, she was buried in the Valley of the Kings.

Apart from being reigning queens, Egypt is proud of some queens who played an eminent role within their capacities as wives, mothers, daughters of kings.



1. Ahmes Nefertari who was considered divine.
2. Ti who was partner.
3. Nefertiti.
4. Nefertari, the wife of Ramses II.

This was a brief round in the heart and mind of the Egyptian community to try to identify the position of the society and one of its two pillars; women.

The outcome of this round is glorious as it showed an illuminating picture of the Egyptian women who played together with men an amusing symphony that offered to the ancient and modern world a great example of how cooperation between men and women builds communities.

