

“In Their Proper Place”
Women in Ancient Egypt



Dates

June 19, 2020 - August 14, 2020

Time

Friday, 5:00 p.m. (EDT)- 6:00 p.m. (EDT)

Location

Zoom Meeting Link:

<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/81935205107>

Zoom Meeting ID:

823 5574 6687

Overview

What did it mean to be female in ancient Egypt?

What roles did women hold in society?

How did women negotiate power within those roles?

Women accounted for half of the population of ancient Egypt, but their voices are often absent from the written record. While there are many texts that talk *about* women, there are relatively few that reveal what women had to say. Despite the lack of textual sources from the point of view of women, Egyptologists have at our disposal a large number of texts that offer portraits of women, both ideal and real, that can be used to recreate how they were perceived by society at large and how they lived in reality. Our investigation of gender in ancient Egypt will take a varied approach, using modern gender theory in conjunction with literary, documentary, and religious texts. We will examine the lives of “ordinary” women from throughout Egyptian history, moving away from the focus on the royal woman to gain an understanding of what their lives were like and how they changed over time. In addition, we will explore the intersections between gender and other aspects of identity, including status, sexuality, and ethnicity. We will then use this understanding to discuss how women transcended the limitations of their identity and negotiated power in their world.

Structure

Each of our weekly meetings will focus on a discussion of the assigned readings for that particular session. These readings will often be primary sources, but some weeks will include secondary readings drawn from the fields of

gender and sexuality studies. Since our group is entirely discussion based, to get the most out of the discussion it's best to do the readings in advance and come prepared with talking points and questions. I aim to provide all readings at least a week in advance to account for schedules. I want this discussion to be informal and inclusive, so come prepared to talk as little or as much as fits your comfort level. Camera on or off, microphone on or off, we'll work so that everyone has a chance to share their thoughts. Please feel free to use the chat feature if that's where you're most comfortable!

Our sessions will be thematically organized, starting with a historical overview of studying women, looking at a definition of women, and then examining the roles of women in ancient Egypt. I hope to provide a mix of texts that feature women as society viewed them vs. the words of actual women. Since we're limited in our time, we won't be able to cover everything. Please feel free to reach out if a certain session interests you, and I can provide additional readings.

Schedule

Our schedule will develop as we go, but I will aim to give you the reading list at least a week in advance. My apologies this first session is going up a bit close to the wire!

For this first session, we'll look at secondary literature to establish a foundation for how gender studies can be applied to Egyptology.

Meeting 1 (June 19): Introduction and Historical Overview

Secondary Sources:

- [Scott, "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis," *The American Historical Review* 91\(1986\): pp. 1053-1075.](#)
- [Gay, "Introduction," in *Women in Ancient Egypt*, pp. 11-20.](#)

Further Reading/Follow Up Points:

- Female Literacy
 - [Bryan, "Evidence for Female Literacy from Theban Tombs of the New Kingdom," *Bulletin of the Egyptological Seminar* 6 \(1985\): pp. 17-32.](#)
- Sexuality in Ancient Egypt
 - The Case of Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep (Debate still, are they twins? lovers?)
 - http://www.egyptology.com/niankhkhnum_khnumhotep/
 - [Dowson, "Queering Sex and Gender in Ancient Egypt," in *Sex and Gender in Ancient Egypt* \(2008\): pp. 27-46.](#)
 - [Reeder, "Queer Egyptologies of Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep," in *Sex and Gender in Ancient Egypt* \(2008\): pp. 143-155.](#)
 - [Vasiljevic, "Embracing His Double: Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep," *SAK* 37 \(2008\): pp. 363-372.](#)
 - The Story of King Neferkara and General Sasanet
 - [Van Dijk, "The Nocturnal Wanderings of King Neferkara," *BdE* 106/4 \(1993\): pp. 387-393.](#)
 - The Contendings of Horus and Seth
- Royal Nurse Motif and Self-Presentation of Women
 - Earliest attestation of royal nurse holding a child on her lap from the tomb of Kenamun (TT93), Kenamun depicts his mother with the figure of Amenhotep II on her lap

Meeting 2 (June 26): Women's (Normative) Social Roles -- Mothers, Wives, Daughters

Primary Sources:

- [Selections from Wisdom Literature](#)

Second Sources:

- These are a bit long, but they contextualize the normative roles of women. Please read them if you have time, but no worries if not. Many of the primary sources they cite overlap with the selections above, but there are also interesting sections from other literature and some documentary texts.
- [Graves-Brown, "Reversing the Ordinary Practices of Mankind," in *Dancing for Hathor: Women in Ancient Egypt* \(2008\): pp. 33-50.](#)
- [Graves-Brown, "Birth, Life, Death," in *Dancing for Hathor: Women in Ancient Egypt* \(2008\): pp. 51-72.](#)

Hi, I (Ling-Fei Lin) am sharing two articles about the idea of "dangerous" women (here Tabubue), which are written by my advisor Steve Vinson at Indiana University:

[Vinson, Stephen. 2011. Strictly Tabubue: The Legacy of an ancient Egyptian femme fatale. *KMT: A Modern Journal of Ancient Egypt*, 22.3:46-57.](#)

[Vinson, Stephen. The Names Naneferkaptah, Ihweret and Tabubue in the First Tale of Setne Khaemwas, *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 68.4, pp. 283-303.](#)

Meeting 3 (July 3): Women's Economic and Legal Roles -- Women at Work

Primary Sources:

- [Readings on Women's Legal Roles](#)

Secondary Sources:

- These two readings came from the catalog for an exhibition at the Oriental Institute on Meresamun, a singer for the Temple of Amun. They include catalog entries for accompanying artifacts, but feel free to skip those sections and just look at the pictures!
- [Johnson, "The Social, Economic, and Legal Status of Women in Ancient Egypt," in *The Life of Meresamun* \(2009\): pp. 82-97.](#)
- [Lorenz, "Women and Their Employment," in *The Life of Meresamun* \(2009\): pp. 98-109.](#)

Further Reading/Follow Up Points:

- [Donker van Heel, K. *Mrs. Naunakhte: The Women of Ramesside Deir el-Medina* \(2016\).](#)
- [Donker van Heel, K. *Mrs. Tsenhor: A Female Entrepreneur in Ancient Egypt* \(2014\).](#)
- [P. Salt 124: The Petition of Amennakht \(details Paneb's crimes\).](#)
 - Here's a [link](#) to a recent post on Jenny Cromwell's blog "Papyrus Stories." It discusses a letter that seems to record a mob from Deir el-Medina going after a woman who had been sleeping with a married man.
- Transfer Documents/Wills
 - [Stela of Senmose](#) - New Kingdom transfer document/will where a wife inherits all the property of her husband. In this case, he has not adopted her.
 - [S. Cairo 42208](#) - Third Intermediate Period transfer document/will where a daughter inherits all the property of her parents.
- Annuity Contract -- These are sometimes called marriage contracts, but that term is a bit misleading. They didn't establish the marriage (no contract was needed for that), but rather handled economic aspects of marriage between individuals wealthy enough to need it. They outlined the property rights and financial obligations of the spouses.
 - [P. Hawara 1](#)
 - [Photo](#) of the contract, which is itself a symbol of conspicuous consumption. They were written on long pieces of papyrus, with much of the papyrus left blank.
- Here's a [link](#) to an older post from Cromwell's blog on child donation in the Coptic period. I also generally recommend her blog, which features short posts on many topics using a text on papyrus as the frame. While much of it is for the Late period and Coptic period, earlier texts do show up from time to time.
- [Ritner, R. *Egypt under Roman Rule: The Legacy of Ancient Egypt*, pp. 1-33.](#)

Meeting 4 (July 10): Women's Religious Roles

Primary Sources:

- [McDowell, "Religion," in *Village Life in Ancient Egypt* \(1999\): pp. 91-126.](#) This section has many primary sources related to religious practice, so I've highlighted the ones that are most closely connected to women's religious roles.

Secondary Sources: As always, please feel free to read as much or as little as you'd like/have time to read!

- [Graves-Brown. "Women's Work," in *Dancing for Hathor: Women in Ancient Egypt* \(2008\): pp. 73-98.](#) No need to read this entire chapter! I highlighted a few sections that spotlight the work that women did to support the religious institution of the temple.
- [Teeter, E. "Inside the Temple: The Role and Function of Temple Singers," in *The Life of Meresamun* \(2009\): pp. 25-29.](#) This short chapter from a museum exhibition gives more information about the specific role of temple singers in Egypt.
- [Robins, "Personal Religion and Death," in *Women in Ancient Egypt* \(1993\): 157-175.](#) This chapter from Robin's book on women deals with women's religious role at home and is a nice balance to the other readings which are more state religion focused.

Further Reading/Follow Up Points:

- [Abydos Birth Brick.](#)
- [Childbirth Magic, Bed Figurines.](#) Here's a short write-up on the beds written by the author of the recent dissertation I mentioned.
- [Ritner, "Magic in Medicine," pp. 326-329.](#) This short work has info about the use of mother's milk in magical and medical practice.
- [Ritner, "Household Religion in Ancient Egypt," in *Household and Family Religion in Antiquity* \(2008\), pp. 171-196.](#) This chapter talks about puberty, pregnancy/fertility, and birth through the lens of religious practice.
- [Ritner, "A Uterine Amulet in the OI Collection," *JNES* 43 \(1984\), pp. 209-221.](#)
- [Ritner, "Isis and the Name of Re," in *The Context of Scripture*, pp. 33-34.](#) In this text, Isis is called "a wise woman" and her role as a magical practitioner is highlighted. This role comes up again in *The Contendings of Horus and Seth* and it could be that women who acted in the role of wise women were connected to the magical power that Isis possessed.
- [Cooney, "The Problem of Female Rebirth in New Kingdom Egypt: The Fragmentation of the Female Individual in Her Funerary Equipment," pp. 1-25.](#)

- [Cole, "The Gendered Individual in Funerary Papyri of the Ptolemaic and Roman Periods,"](#)
[JARCE 49, pp. 201-214.](#)

Meeting 5 (July 17): Sexuality

Primary Sources:

- [Selections from the Love Songs](#). As you might imagine, texts where women talk explicitly about sexuality are rare. The love songs, however, give a glimpse into the topic. The songs here are all marked to be recited by women, though whether they were the composer is more difficult to say.

Secondary Sources:

- [Graves-Brown, C., "Sexuality, Art, and Religion," in *Dancing for Hathor: Women in Ancient Egypt* \(2000\): pp. 99-127.](#)
- [Meskell, L., "Re-embedding Sex: Domesticity, Sexuality, and Ritual in New Kingdom Egypt," in *Archaeologies of Sexuality* \(2000\): 253-262.](#)

Meeting 6 (July 24): Representation and Self-Presentation: Women in Their Own Words

Primary Sources:

- [The False Door of a Woman and the Stela of a Man Accompanied by His Wife.](#)
- [Two Stelae of Third Intermediate Period Women.](#)
- [McDowell, A. Some Letters from Women, in *Village Life in Ancient Egypt* \(1999\), pp. 41-43.](#)

Secondary Sources:

- [Ayad, M. "Women's Self-Presentation in Pharaonic Egypt," in *Living Forever: Self-Presentation in Ancient Egypt* \(2020\).](#)

Meeting 7 (August 7): “Dangerous” Women

Primary Sources:

- [The Tale of Setna and the Mummies](#)
- [The Tale of the Two Brothers](#)

Secondary Sources:

- [Vinson, S. “Strictly Tabubue: The Legacy of an Ancient Egyptian Femme Fatale,” in *KMT* 22.3 \(2011\): pp. 46-57.](#)

Meeting 8 (August 14): Female Agency: How Did Women Negotiate Power