

The role and status of women in the ancient Egyptian family

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Abstract---Women in Ancient Egypt held a prestigious status and enjoyed unique legal and social rights that were not available to their counterparts in contemporary civilizations. The Ancient Egyptian viewed woman as man's partner in building society and as a symbol of stability and fertility. Her role was not confined to managing domestic affairs; rather, it extended to owning property, litigating before courts, engaging in trade, and even ascending to the highest positions of political and religious authority as a queen or priestess. Consequently, she became a fundamental pillar in preserving the cultural and social identity of the Ancient Egyptian state. Through this study, we seek to trace the familial journey of the Egyptian woman, beginning with childhood—where she received care and basic education—moving through youth and marriage, and culminating in her most noble role: motherhood. This study aims to understand how this age progression and the accumulation of responsibilities contributed to refining her personality and building her strong moral character. It further explores how she transformed from a child learning values into a mother serving as a guardian of traditions and an educator of generations, rendering her life path a rich experience of psychological and social balance.

Keywords---Women, Ancient Egypt, Marriage, Family, Education.

1. Introduction

Women in ancient Egyptian civilization enjoyed a distinguished and exceptional status compared to their counterparts in other ancient societies. They were regarded as the backbone of the family and the driving force behind the stability of society as a whole. Women possessed extensive legal and social rights and were highly respected as the mistresses of the household, responsible for managing domestic affairs, raising children, and instilling moral and ethical values. However, this pivotal role was neither

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static nor confined to a single lifelong function. Rather, it evolved significantly alongside their physical and social development. At each stage of life, women acquired new rights and assumed different responsibilities that corresponded to their maturity and family status. From this perspective, the following fundamental research question emerges: What were the roles assumed by women within the ancient Egyptian family, and how did their responsibilities and rights evolve throughout the different stages of their lives?

2. The Role of Women in the Ancient Egyptian Family

Throughout the history of ancient Egypt, women occupied a prominent position in various aspects of life, making them true partners of men and, in many respects, one of the principal factors behind the growth and prosperity of Egyptian civilization. Consequently, it was not surprising that Egyptian society held women in high esteem. The role of Egyptian women was often equal to that of men. Their responsibilities encompassed two main spheres: the private sphere of domestic life and the public sphere within society. In addition to being mothers and wives, women were companions to men throughout life's journey and their indispensable partners in carrying out various activities.

Literary texts and archaeological remains further illustrate the high status enjoyed by women in ancient Egypt. They possessed the same legal rights as men and were not subjected to discriminatory attitudes that prevented them from owning property, inheriting wealth, concluding contracts, managing businesses, or appearing before courts of law. Instead, ancient Egyptian society regarded women as equal partners to men, enjoying the same rights while bearing comparable responsibilities. This can be better understood by examining women's roles within the family and society, tracing the course of their family lives, studying the principal positions and offices they held, and highlighting the distinguished legal status they enjoyed.

I. Girls During Childhood

Research on childhood in ancient Egypt reveals that girls received considerable physical and emotional care. Egyptian mothers devoted great attention to their daughters from the moment of birth, nursing them, expressing affection through loving words and caresses, and continuing this care for as long as three years, according to the teachings of the sage Ani.¹

1. Childhood Nudity in Ancient Egypt

Once the breastfeeding period ended, girls entered a new stage that may be described as early childhood, generally lasting until they began formal education, during which they gradually interacted with the outside world.² Artistic representations from the Old Kingdom commonly depicted girls as naked until they reached puberty. In contrast, girls of the Middle Kingdom were portrayed wearing garments that were essentially miniature versions of adult clothing.

During the New Kingdom, girls were sometimes depicted nude and at other times clothed.³ It should be noted, however, that such scenes of nudity did not always reflect reality. The Pyramid Texts frequently mention children's garments and swaddling clothes, and archaeological discoveries have confirmed the accuracy of these accounts.⁴ Excavations at Tarkhan uncovered linen garments belonging to a child dating back to the First Dynasty. Likewise, archaeological investigations in the tomb of King Tutankhamun revealed nearly fifty children's garments, in addition to clothing for an infant, gloves, and head coverings.⁵

The Egyptian scholar Abdel Aziz Saleh argues that the persistent depiction of children as nude, despite contradicting reality in most cases, may be explained by one of the following reasons:

First: Artists inherited this convention from their predecessors and regarded it as an artistic tradition that should be preserved.

Second: They considered nudity an effective artistic device for symbolizing youth and childhood.

Third: They intended nudity to express the simplicity and innocence of childhood in general.⁶

2. Recreational Activities for Girls

During their early years, young girls preferred playing with dolls and figurines.

⁷As they grew older, they gradually shifted from individual games to group activities. Ball games were among their favorite forms of recreation. In one popular game, two girls climbed onto the backs of two companions while the riders tossed three small balls rapidly between them. If one player failed to catch a ball, she descended and exchanged places with the girl carrying her⁸.

Girls also participated in games with boys. Artistic scenes frequently depict boys and girls racing and jumping together in a game resembling leapfrog. However, instead of bending over, the player stretched out her arms one above the other, and her companion had to jump over them without making contact.⁹

Although wrestling was generally considered a masculine activity, girls also practiced it by grasping one another around the waist and engaging in friendly wrestling matches.¹⁰ Some girls became skilled in archery. One artistic scene portrays a girl shooting arrows with a bow at three circular targets, demonstrating that girls practiced activities associated with warfare, hunting, and combat, just as boys did.¹¹

Some girls also learned to swim. Archaeologists discovered two statuettes depicting women in swimming positions, lying as though floating on water with their arms extended. One figure holds a small cavity that may have contained cosmetics, while the other holds a duck. In addition, a dish from the tomb of Psusennes I (Twentieth Dynasty) bears an engraving of girls swimming among fish, indicating that swimming was one of the favorite recreational activities of girls during that period.¹²

Girls' Daily Life in Ancient Egypt

The lives of girls in Ancient Egypt were not limited to play alone; rather, they were gradually trained to perform the duties they would undertake upon reaching adulthood. Mothers taught their daughters how to prepare bread and beer, spin thread, and weave textiles. Girls were also prepared for motherhood at an early age by being entrusted with the care of their younger siblings,¹³ thereby easing the burden on their mothers.

In addition to these domestic responsibilities, daughters of poor families were often required to work for wealthy households in order to support their own families. The walls of the tomb of User, dating to the Eighteenth Dynasty, depict a girl arranging the fringes of a chair, while another scene shows a girl smoothing a linen sheet over a bed.¹⁴ Girls also assisted in agricultural work, as evidenced by a scene depicted on the walls of the tomb of Djoser-Ka-Re Seneb, dating to the Eighteenth Dynasty, in which a young girl is shown gathering ears of grain and placing them into a basket.¹⁵

It should be noted that the employment of young girls, whether free or enslaved, was subject to certain conditions. The work assigned had to be appropriate to the servant's age, and no girl was to be burdened with tasks beyond her physical ability. Evidence of this can be found in a letter sent by Ahmose-en-Iyineti to his master Tay, in which he complained that someone had taken his young maidservant and transferred her to another person, even though she was still a small child and incapable of working.¹⁶

3. Female Circumcision in Ancient Egypt

Some scholars have long believed that female circumcision originated as an ancient Egyptian (Pharaonic) practice. However, this view has been challenged by numerous researchers. Dr. Abd al-Mun'im Abd al-'Alim Sayyid refuted this claim, stating:

"...The fact is that Pharaonic Egypt did not practice this custom. No depictions of female circumcision have ever been found among Egyptian monuments, despite the abundance of representations of male circumcision. Likewise, the ancient Egyptian medical papyri contain no reference to treating wounds resulting from female circumcision, although they include numerous prescriptions for diseases and inflammations affecting the female reproductive organs. Furthermore, examinations of female mummies have revealed no evidence whatsoever of this procedure..."

Further evidence supporting the absence of female circumcision in Pharaonic Egypt comes from the Greek historian Herodotus, who visited Egypt during the fifth century BCE. In three different passages of his work, he explicitly mentioned that Egyptians practiced male circumcision, yet he made no

reference whatsoever to female circumcision, despite his well-known fascination with documenting Egyptian customs that differed from those of the Greeks.¹⁷

The Egyptian researcher Mohamed Fayyad argues that female circumcision became known in Egypt only during the period of decline, when the country came under the rule of the Nubian (Ethiopian) kings from the south. It was therefore natural, in his view, that some of their customs and social practices—including female circumcision—were introduced into Egypt during their occupation.¹⁸

4. Female Education in Ancient Egypt

The available evidence indicates that there were no formal barriers preventing girls from receiving an education. Beginning at approximately the age of four, some girls were permitted to attend schools and the Houses of Life (Per Ankh). Undoubtedly, the first beneficiaries of such education were the daughters of nobles and princes.¹⁹ Singing was among the most popular fields of study for girls, as it enabled them to enter the priesthood, where the majority of temple chanters were women.

Girls also received instruction in playing musical instruments and were trained in acrobatic movements that qualified them to participate in performances associated with religious and funerary rituals. The walls of the Temple of the goddess Hathor at Kom El-Hisn preserve two scenes depicting the director of the goddess's harem instructing a group of young women in music and singing. In one scene, he is shown teaching ten girls how to perform sacred melodies while holding a sistrum in each hand, whereas each student holds a single sistrum. Another scene portrays him accompanied by female singers clapping in rhythm to the musical performance.²¹

It is evident that the ancient Egyptians were keen to avoid the mixing of boys and girls during the educational process. One Egyptian literary text recounts a teacher reprimanding one of his pupils after finding him seated among the girls.²²

Although girls' education was relatively limited and largely directed toward religious service, the surviving documents demonstrate that some women were literate, contributed to intellectual life, appreciated literature, and corresponded through writing.²³ Texts dating to the Old Kingdom refer to three educated women: one served as the queen's scribe, another was fluent in reading hieroglyphic writing, while the third held the titles "Judge of the Palace," "Vizier," and "Daughter of Thoth." Likewise, a woman of the Middle Kingdom bore the title "Scribe," a distinction that had traditionally been reserved for men.

Khenu-Ardu, a servant in the court of one of the wives of King Mentuhotep I, described his mistress's distinguished literary status and referred to her establishment of a cultural institution at Dendera dedicated to the education and intellectual development of women.²⁴ He stated:

"...My lady appointed me supervisor of her private library and that of her mother in Dendera. She was passionately devoted to learning and the arts. I increased the number of books in the library and acquired for her many valuable works..."²⁵

The Ramesside Period provides evidence of four female letter writers. Among the most notable is a letter sent by Setika, a musician of Hathor, to her friend Sekhmet-Nefret, a musician of Amun, in which she described the beauty and magnificence of the city of Memphis. Another letter was written by one of the ladies of the royal harem in the Faiyum to King Seti II, informing him of her success in educating and training a group of foreign boys who had been entrusted to her care.²⁶

If this was the level of education attained by a daughter of a wealthy household, it is reasonable to conclude that the education and upbringing of royal princesses and the daughters of princely families were considered essential. The life of Princess Neferure provides a clear example, as responsibility for her education was entrusted to Senenmut, the chief official of her mother's court. Furthermore, writing implements belonging to Queen Meritaten, the daughter of King Akhenaten, were discovered in the tomb of King Tutankhamun.²⁷

II- The Girl During the Pre-Marital Stage

Ancient literary texts indicate that, despite the conservative nature of ancient Egyptian society, young men and women were nevertheless able to meet and exchange feelings of love and affection, as reflected in the love poems and romantic songs preserved in museums around the world.²⁸

These poems suggest that young people enjoyed considerable freedom in choosing their life partners. They also reveal the depth of affection that a young man felt for his beloved. Among the surviving love hymns is a poem in which a lover praises the beauty of his beloved, saying:

"...The mouth of my beloved is like a flower bud, her breasts are like apples of love, her arms embrace me like a bow, her forehead is like a trap made of cypress wood. I am the wild goose, and her hair is the snare that my eyes have swallowed, causing me to fall into the trap..."²⁹

A lover might even pretend to be ill in order to attract the attention of his beloved, saying:

"...I wish to lie down at home and feign illness. My neighbors will come to visit me, and my sister will be among them. She will mock the physicians because she knows the true cause of my sickness..."³⁰

Likewise, the young woman was not devoid of emotion; she too expressed the feelings that stirred within her whenever she saw her beloved, saying:

"...I passed by his house, and its door was open. My brother stood beside his mother, surrounded by his sisters and brothers. Everyone who passed by and saw him was captivated by his appearance. He is the most handsome of young men, without equal, possessing a graceful presence. He looked at me as I passed by. I was alone, yet I rejoiced within myself. How happy I was, my brother, that you had seen me..."³¹

Another young woman, unable to contain her impatience, longed for a happy ending and spoke to herself as though addressing a companion, saying:

"...The voice of my brother makes my heart tremble. He lives next to my mother's house, yet I cannot go to him. My mother prevents me from seeing him, and thinking about him pains my heart because I am deeply in love with him. Truly, he is a foolish person, and I resemble him, but he does not know how much I long to embrace him... Come, so that I may behold your beauty, and that my father and mother may rejoice at the sight of you. Then the men will celebrate you and proclaim you my brother..."³²

Some young women resorted to magic in an attempt to win the affection of an indifferent lover by reciting magical incantations in various forms, one of which reads:

"...Rise, and let the one upon whom I gaze become my beloved, for I worship his face..."

Similarly, a rejected lover might respond with equal determination, even going so far as to threaten the gods if they failed to help him persuade the woman he loved to respond to his wishes, saying:

"...Greetings to you, O Ra-Horakhty, father of the gods. Greetings, O Seven Hathors... Cause so-and-so, daughter of so-and-so, to follow me as the bull follows its fodder, as the servant follows the children, and as the shepherd follows his flock. If you do not make her follow me, I shall cast fire upon Osiris and burn her..."³³

Once the lovers agreed to marry, the young man formally proposed to the girl's father in accordance with the Egyptian customs of the time. If the father was absent, the girl's paternal uncle or her adoptive mother could assume his role. Subsequently, the young man's parents would give their blessing to the union. Upon obtaining the bride's family's approval, the groom was expected to present his fiancée with engagement gifts, commonly known as the "virginity gift," which usually consisted of a bracelet made of gold or silver.³⁴ Ancient Egyptian customs also required the bride to remain in her parents' home throughout the engagement period until the wedding day.

The researcher Abdel Halim Nour El-Din believes that there existed a period lasting up to one year that functioned as a trial stage (engagement), after which the marriage was either concluded or cancelled in exchange for compensation. Since both the young man and the young woman were often of a very young age, this trial period had little practical significance. Most likely, the agreement or disagreement between the two families was the decisive factor in determining whether the marriage would proceed or be called off.³⁵

III. The Girl During the Marriage Stage

1. Objectives of Marriage

The ancient Egyptians realized that marriage was an institution established to serve the interests of building society upon the foundations of solidarity and mutual support while taking into account the

needs of both the individual and the community. Marriage was not merely a means of producing children or satisfying the mutual desires of a man and a woman; rather, it constituted the basis of a relationship founded upon affection and harmony between spouses. It represented a bond of emotional compatibility and spiritual sympathy, and was always regarded as the legitimate and preferred relationship, in contrast to illicit unions, which were despised and rejected by society.³⁶

Although there was no legally prescribed minimum age for marriage in ancient Egypt, early marriage was strongly encouraged. Men generally married around the age of fifteen, while women commonly married at approximately twelve years of age. In an agricultural society, where having numerous ³⁷ children meant a larger workforce, early marriage was considered highly desirable. This is reflected in the advice of the sage Ani to one of his sons:

"...Choose a wife while you are still young... so that she may bear you a son. If she gives birth to him while you are still young, it will be easy for you to raise him properly... Blessed is the man with a large family, for he is honored because of his children..."³⁸

The Egyptian sages also advocated early marriage as a means of protecting young people from the problems associated with adolescence and the psychological difficulties and moral deviations that might result from delaying marriage.³⁹

Concerning illicit relationships, the sage Ptahhotep advised:

"...If you wish your friendship to endure in any house you visit, whether as a master, a brother, or a friend, beware of associating with women, for it is disgraceful conduct..."

Likewise, the sage Ani warned:

"...Beware of the strange woman of unknown origin. Do not gaze at her as she passes by, nor enter into physical relations with her. She is like the deep sea whose hidden depths no one knows. A woman who is far from her husband secretly says every day, 'I am beautiful,' seeking to ensnare you. By doing so, she commits a crime deserving the punishment of death..."⁴⁰

2. Marriage Contracts and Wedding Ceremonies

2.1 Marriage Contracts

Scholars differ regarding the existence of written marriage contracts in ancient Egypt because no marriage contracts dating before the Twenty-Second Dynasty have been discovered. This has led some researchers to argue that marriage in earlier periods consisted merely of an agreement between the bride's father and the groom. Such agreements were not recorded in written documents but were concluded orally, based upon the mutual consent of both parties, in the presence of witnesses. Alternatively, the groom would swear before members of both families that he would care for his wife. At the time of marriage, the bride's father would usually grant his daughter a portion of his property, and in some instances the bride herself contributed to furnishing the marital home by bringing furniture and textiles.⁴¹

Tuḥfat Ḥandūṣah supported this interpretation, arguing that formal marriage contracts were unknown before this period and that the consent of the parties alone was sufficient to conclude a marriage. She further explained that later developments in the family system made it necessary to document such agreements in order to safeguard the rights of both spouses during marriage and in cases of separation or the death of one spouse.⁴²

Evidence suggests that the bride's guardian continued to represent her in drafting the marriage contract until the seventh century BCE, after which society permitted the bride to attend and participate personally in the drafting of the contract. The contract specified the amount of the dowry in silver by weight and grain measures, together with deferred financial obligations payable by the husband in the event of divorce. One surviving late contract records a husband's undertaking to provide his wife with a daily ration of wheat, a monthly supply of oil, a monthly allowance for her personal expenses, and an annual allowance for clothing and adornment. He also pledged to pay compensation should he divorce her and marry another woman. The same contract deliberately emphasized that the annual allowance

for adornment was separate from the regular monthly maintenance payment. This clarification reflected established custom, particularly in view of the well-known enthusiasm of affluent Egyptian women for fine clothing, jewelry, perfumes, oils, flowers, mirrors, cosmetics, and fans, as vividly illustrated in surviving artistic representations and archaeological remains.⁴³

This is clearly illustrated in one of the marriage contracts preserved today in the Egyptian Museum, which states:

"...I have taken you as my wife, and the children you bear me shall be my children. I shall never deprive them of anything in order to give it to another of my children or to any other person. Every year I shall provide you with sufficient wine, silver, and oil for your food and drink. Your monthly and yearly provisions shall be guaranteed, and I shall give them to you wherever you wish. If I divorce you, I shall give you fifty pieces of silver; if I take another wife, I shall give you one hundred pieces of silver. Receive this marriage contract from the hand of my son so that he may execute all that it contains. I fully agree to these terms..."⁴⁴

Researchers have observed that the provisions of marriage contracts varied considerably and that no standard form existed. This diversity may be attributed to differences in the social and economic status of the spouses or to the historical periods in which the contracts were drafted. Nevertheless, all contracts shared a common objective: safeguarding the wife's rights during marriage and in the event of divorce. The principal clauses of marriage contracts in ancient Egypt included:

Date: The regnal year of the king, the month, season, year, and day.

Declaration or Public Proclamation: Opening with words such as "declares" or "bears witness."

The Contracting Parties: Identification of the husband and wife.

Marriage Clause: The husband formally declares that he has taken the named woman as his wife and acknowledges that the children born of the marriage are his legitimate offspring.

Dowry Clause: Specifies the monetary or material dowry, including gold, silver, oil, and any compensation payable by the husband in the event of divorce or remarriage.

Guarantee Clause: Grants the wife full legal authority regarding her rights, guarantees maintenance including food and clothing, and commits the husband to fulfilling all contractual obligations.

Separation Clause: States the grounds for separation.⁴⁵

Property Brought by the Wife: Lists all furniture, jewelry, and household goods the wife brings into the marriage. Although the husband may use these items, they remain her property throughout the marriage, and their total value is recorded in the contract.⁴⁶

Protection of Children: If the husband initiates the divorce, he transfers to his wife, on behalf of their minor children, all the gold, silver, and other property acquired during the marriage. In such cases, the wife acts as guardian and trustee rather than owner.

Oath Clause: The husband swears that he will bring no legal claims against his wife.

Joint Property Clause: Lists jointly owned property and determines each spouse's inheritance rights upon the death of the other.

Parental Property Clause: Covers property inherited by the husband from his parents, from which the wife and children are entitled to inherit.

Bride's Payment Clause: Refers to monetary payments made by the wife to her husband.

Pledge Clause: Provides that all of the husband's property serves as security in favor of the wife.

Compensation upon Separation: Specifies the financial maintenance due to the wife in the event of divorce.

Protection Against Unlawful Claims: Safeguards the wife's property from illegal claims.

Protection of the Wife Through Legal Documents: Refers to the husband's property that becomes the wife's legal entitlement after the execution of the contract.

Final Undertaking: The husband promises to issue a written document specifying all payments made to his wife.

Drafting and Witnesses: The contract is prepared by an official scribe and witnessed by sixteen individuals whose names are recorded.⁴⁷

2-2. The Dowry

The dowry consisted of a sum of silver in addition to a quantity of wheat that the husband presented to his wife, and it was recorded in the marriage contract. The contract also specified the amount of money or particular property contributed by the wife, which the husband acknowledged receiving. Furthermore, the husband was required to fulfill social and legal obligations toward his wife, which were regarded as his duties and essential for maintaining and strengthening the marital relationship. He was therefore expected to provide her with the necessities of a dignified life, including food, clothing, and perfumes.⁴⁸

In most cases, the husband granted his wife what was known as "Shbn Sehmah" (the wife's dowry or the virginity gift), an amount appropriate to their social status and historical period. The dowry could be paid immediately before the consummation of the marriage, or it could remain deferred as a debt owed by the husband until he was able to pay it, or in the event of divorce initiated by him. In such cases, an agreed-upon compensation was added, ranging in value from half the dowry to ten times its amount. Consequently, the bride's family often required the groom to sign an inventory of the household furnishings that the bride brought to her marital home, together with a detailed valuation of each item, including wigs, bracelets, furniture, clothing, and mirrors.⁴⁹

Many ancient Egyptian marriage contracts contain the phrase: "...I have taken you as my wife and have given you a dowry..." This wording suggests that the bride did not require a legal guardian to conclude the marriage. It also reflects the degree of freedom enjoyed by women in choosing their life partners. The walls of one Egyptian tomb preserve a scene depicting the principal items that a woman brought to her marital home, including a bed fitted with headrests, dining tables, chairs, chests for storing household linens and clothing, and jewelry boxes containing bracelets, necklaces, earrings, and perfumes.⁵⁰

2-3. Marriage Ceremonies

Insufficient details have survived concerning ancient Egyptian marriage ceremonies, as the walls of Egyptian tombs do not depict wedding celebrations. This raises the question of whether formal wedding ceremonies existed at all. A careful examination of the scenes of daily life preserved on tomb walls reveals no representations of wedding rituals; instead, the majority of scenes portray husbands and wives together while engaging in everyday domestic and religious activities.

This has led some scholars to argue that the principal objective of marriage among the ancient Egyptians was the establishment of a family and an independent household, with little concern for religious or legal ceremonial rites. Nevertheless, this does not exclude the possibility that wedding celebrations and festive gatherings were held in the homes of both the bride and the groom, where banquets accompanied by dancing took place following the public announcement of the marriage.⁵¹ Some narratives further indicate that the bride's father equipped her according to his wealth or bequeathed part of his property to her. The bride also received gifts from relatives and acquaintances before being escorted to her husband's home in the evening.⁵² This is illustrated in the Story of Setna, which recounts the wedding of an Egyptian princess to the son of a military commander. In the story, the princess declares:

"...The Pharaoh bestowed upon me gifts of gold and silver, and all the members of the royal household presented me with gifts..."

Thereafter, the groom entertained the entire royal court and subsequently accompanied his wife to the bridal chamber.⁵³

Several ancient Egyptian love poems also contain references suggesting the existence of wedding ceremonies. In one poem, a groom praises his bride, saying:

"...My sister, you have been destined for me, the golden one, as my wife. Come to me that I may behold your beauty. My father and my mother rejoice, and all the men raise their voices together in celebration, crying: 'Ah, my sister!'..."⁵⁴

The Egyptian scholar Abdel Halim Nour El-Din believed that marriage ceremonies were conducted in the temple in the presence of the relatives of both spouses. Accordingly, marriage assumed a religious character, with priests—particularly the priests of Amun during the New Kingdom—officiating the rituals, thereby conferring upon marriage a degree of sanctity and legitimacy.⁵⁵

IV. The Stage of Motherhood

1. Pregnancy

The ancient Egyptians recognized that the supreme purpose of marriage was to establish a family, bear children, and raise them to support their parents in old age. Consequently, pregnant women received great care and attention. The Egyptians were keen to protect them from the dangers associated with pregnancy by praying to the goddess Taweret to safeguard both the mother and the unborn child. Pregnant women also wore magical amulets to ward off evil spirits.⁵⁶ Among the most significant forms of care provided to expectant mothers was the fulfillment of their cravings and desires, as it was believed that denying them might adversely affect the development and health of the child.⁵⁷

Infertility was regarded as a distressing condition and a source of deep anxiety in ancient Egyptian society. Women who were unable to conceive offered prayers, vows, and sacrifices to the deities associated with fertility and childbirth, such as the god Bes, the goddess Taweret, the goddess Heqet, and above all the goddess Hathor.⁵⁸ Women also relied on special amulets believed to promote successful conception. Some of these amulets were fashioned in the form of female animals and reptiles renowned for their fertility, such as frogs and cats, while others depicted female animals characterized by large abdomens and breasts, such as female hippopotamuses.⁵⁹ Some husbands and wives likewise sought the assistance of revered ancestors and the blessings of the deceased in the hope of obtaining offspring. For example, one woman placed a small statue in her father's tomb bearing the inscription: "...I ask that you grant your daughter Sah a child...". Similarly, a young man left a letter in his father's tomb imploring him to help his wife conceive successfully.⁶⁰

Women also turned to medicine to treat infertility and to determine whether they would become pregnant. Numerous medical papyri dealing with gynecology and infertility have been discovered in Egypt, including the Berlin Papyrus, the Kahun Papyrus, and the Carlsberg Papyrus. Each contains a considerable number of prescriptions intended to determine whether a woman would conceive. Among these are the following:

Prescription No. 193 (Berlin Papyrus): A Test to Distinguish a Fertile Woman from an Infertile One

Watermelon juice is mixed with the milk of a woman who has given birth to a son. The woman wishing to know whether she will bear children drinks the mixture. If she vomits it, she will give birth; if she merely passes wind, she will not bear children.

Prescription No. 196 (Berlin Papyrus): Another Test

The woman lies down and her breasts and arms up to the shoulders are rubbed with fresh oil. The following morning she is examined. If her blood vessels appear healthy and the oil has not been absorbed beneath the examiner's finger, she will bear many children. If the vessels appear to withdraw like skin clinging tightly to the body, she is infertile. If the vessels appear fresh but their appearance is dark, she will conceive only after a considerable delay.

Prescription No. 29 (Kahun Papyrus): A Test to Distinguish a Fertile Woman from an Infertile One

The woman is struck lightly on the lips while the tip of the examiner's finger touches the end of her shoulder. If she shivers, she will conceive; if she does not shiver, she will never conceive.

Prescription No. 05 (Carlsberg Papyrus): A Test to Distinguish a Fertile Woman from an Infertile One

The woman is fumigated through the vagina with hippopotamus dung. If she vomits, she will not bear children; if she immediately passes wind, she will conceive.⁶¹

The remarkable expertise of Egyptian physicians in the fields of gynecology and infertility earned them widespread renown. Evidence of this reputation is found in a letter sent by one of the Hittite kings to

Ramesses II requesting that he dispatch a physician to treat his sister, who had not yet borne children. Ramesses II, while inclined to refuse, replied:

"...As for Matazi, the sister of my brother, my brother the king knows her well. She is fifty years old—indeed, perhaps sixty. Surely no one can help her or prescribe a remedy for her unless the Sun God and the Storm God so will. Nevertheless, I am sending a skilled magician and an accomplished physician who will prepare medicines to assist in childbirth..."⁶²

The ancient Egyptians employed several methods to diagnose pregnancy and determine the sex of the fetus. One of the most curious techniques involved watering wheat and barley seeds with the urine of a pregnant woman. If the seeds sprouted, the woman was considered fertile. If the wheat germinated, the fetus was believed to be male; if the barley sprouted, the fetus was believed to be female.⁶³

It should also be noted that in cases of infertility, after all methods of treatment had failed, the ancient Egyptians resorted to adoption. A text from the Ramesside Period describes a childless man as stingy and selfish because he had not adopted a child. Adoption became particularly widespread among the inhabitants of Deir el-Medina. One of the best-known cases is that of the foreman Neferhotep, who adopted a man named Paneb, who later became chief of the workmen. Paneb, however, proved ungrateful to his adoptive father, and an ostrakon records an accusation that he threatened to kill Neferhotep. Another famous account from the reign of Ramesses II concerns the scribe Ra-Mose and his wife Mut-emwia. They first prayed to the goddess Hathor and offered her a stone model of a phallus inscribed with the following supplication:

"...O Golden One, beloved of those worthy of praise, O fulfillment of every hope, grant that I may receive from your sanctuary a gift befitting my person..."⁶⁴

2. Childbirth:

The process of childbirth took place after the completion of the estimated period of pregnancy, which the ancient Egyptians calculated to be approximately 271 days. It was accompanied by various preparations, including magical incantations and remedies made from herbs, honey, and wine, intended to protect the mother and prevent miscarriage, hemorrhage, or the death of the fetus during delivery. Since childbirth was regarded as a natural event, it was usually attended by midwives. Among the customary practices observed by women was that an expectant mother, shortly before giving birth, would arrange her hair in a distinctive style and then withdraw to a place known as the "Maternity Booth" or "Birth House," which was located within one of the temples. This period of seclusion continued for approximately fourteen days after childbirth.⁶⁵

Childbirth took place in a specially prepared environment. Some houses contained rooms designated for delivery, furnished with appropriate equipment such as a bed, a headrest, a mat, a pillow, and an open chair made from palm wood. Delivery was most commonly conducted while the woman sat in a squatting position on birth bricks. The midwife sat in front of the mother to assist with the delivery and receive the newborn. A basin of hot water was placed beneath the birthing chair so that the rising steam would help facilitate labor. Another midwife, or sometimes two women, sat on either side of the mother, encouraging her and supporting her arms while she pushed.⁶⁶

Dr. Mohamed Fayyad, a specialist in obstetrics, explained that the position adopted by women during childbirth provided physical relaxation and psychological comfort while allowing the fetus to move naturally toward the pelvic inlet, thereby facilitating the descent of the baby's head into the pelvis. He further noted that as uterine contractions intensified and the mother began pushing downward, she leaned backward and received support from the two women standing beside her. This assistance enabled her to exert greater force, making the delivery easier and more efficient.⁶⁷

Ancient Egyptian physicians developed several methods to facilitate difficult labor. A medical papyrus dating to the sixteenth century BCE records eleven different techniques for, in its own words,

"extracting the newborn from the woman's womb." Priests and healers also competed with physicians and midwives in treating complicated deliveries. Some wore distinctive garments and carried specially shaped wooden staffs, which they waved while reciting magical incantations intended to drive away the spirits and demons that the mother feared might gather around her and obstruct the birth process.⁶⁸ They also employed a variety of medicinal preparations to ease labor and relieve pain. These included poultices made from date paste, wheat dough, and herbs applied to the lower abdomen to facilitate the child's passage from the womb; mixtures of saffron seeds and beer used to massage the abdomen; and intoxicating beverages such as beer and wine administered to the mother to lessen her perception of pain. In addition, topical vaginal preparations were used, including a mixture prepared from juniper berry oil and pine resin.⁶⁹

Newborn children were exposed to numerous dangers, resulting in high mortality rates, particularly during the first weeks after birth. They were vulnerable to infections, intestinal diseases, and congenital deformities. The ancient Egyptians believed that the newborn's first cry foretold his or her destiny. If the infant cried "ni, ni" immediately after birth, it was believed that the child would live. However, if the cry sounded like "mi, mi," or if it was unusually loud, it was considered an omen that the child would die.⁷⁰

3. Breastfeeding

Mothers in ancient Egypt devoted exceptional care to their newborns and were keen to breastfeed them naturally. However, scholars have disagreed regarding the duration of breastfeeding. Many researchers believe that the Egyptian mother breastfed her child for a full three years, based on the advice of the sage Ani to his son, in which he states:

"...Give more bread to your mother and support her as she supported you. You were a heavy burden to her. After she gave birth to you at the completion of your months, she carried you on her neck, and her breast remained in your mouth for three full years. She never recoiled from your filth..."⁷¹

Other scholars, however, question this lengthy period of breastfeeding. They argue that Ani deliberately exaggerated its duration in his advice to emphasize the immense debt of gratitude owed to one's mother. According to this view, the numerous responsibilities of women both inside and outside the household would have made it difficult for a mother to remain constantly attached to her infant for such a long time. Furthermore, given the well-documented desire of ancient Egyptian parents for large families, it is unlikely that a mother would have waited three years before becoming pregnant again. In addition, breastfeeding a child for three years is, in itself, considered unusual and would generally occur only in cases of illness or because of a mother's strong desire to indulge her child⁷²

Ancient Egyptian scenes and statues depict several breastfeeding positions adopted by mothers. Poor women are often shown seated on the ground or on reed mats with their children. The most common breastfeeding posture was for the mother to sit with her legs folded beneath her, placing the infant on her thigh while offering her breast. A less common posture depicts the mother sitting with one leg extended and the other bent, supporting the infant on the upright leg while nursing. Wealthier mothers, by contrast, are portrayed seated comfortably on chairs with their children, enjoying nourishing food while being attended by female servants and household attendants during breastfeeding.⁷³

Egyptian women employed various methods to facilitate breastfeeding. If a mother felt that her milk supply had diminished, she sought the medical treatments known in her time or relied on incantations and protective amulets. An ancient Egyptian medical papyrus records two methods for stimulating lactation. The first recommends burning the bones of a particular type of fish in oil, grinding them, and rubbing the mixture along the mother's spine. The second advises burning a moldy loaf of bread, mixing it with the plant known as Khasu, and consuming the mixture while sitting with her legs spread apart.⁷⁴

Given the importance of breastfeeding in ancient Egyptian society, wet nurses and nursemaids were employed whenever the child's mother died during or after childbirth or was unable to breastfeed her child herself. Archaeological evidence indicates that some women held titles such as "Chief Wet Nurse" or "First Wet Nurse of the Royal Palace." The wet nurse bore the title wet, and the nurse chosen to breastfeed a royal child was selected from a distinguished family and granted the title "Royal Wet Nurse." She enjoyed a high social status within society.⁷⁵ The widespread employment of wet nurses, particularly in the royal palace, is also reflected in the Holy Qur'an in the story of the Prophet Moses (peace be upon him): "And We had forbidden him (to be suckled by) foster mothers before that..."⁷⁶

Conclusion

The status of women in Ancient Egypt represents an exceptional model in ancient history. Women served as both the visible and invisible driving force behind the flourishing of Egyptian civilization. Historical studies have demonstrated that the roles performed by women were not confined to a narrow sphere; rather, they were dynamic and interconnected, making women a fundamental pillar of the stability and development of Egyptian society.

The Egyptian experience clearly illustrates that women were genuine "partners in nation-building," not only through their natural roles as mothers and homemakers, but also as legally competent individuals possessing full legal capacity. In the legal and economic spheres, women enjoyed financial independence, as legislation and customary practices granted them the right to own, buy, sell, and manage property, as well as to appear before courts to defend and claim their rights. This reflected a remarkably advanced societal awareness of the principle of equality in social roles.

On the practical level, women extended their contributions far beyond the domestic sphere and actively participated in public life. They held important positions within religious institutions as priestesses, singers, and musicians in temples, roles that afforded them distinguished social and spiritual status. In the professional sphere, women played a significant role in agriculture, textile production, retail trade, and even in archive administration, writing, and education. They also excelled in medicine and midwifery, possessing inherited scientific knowledge that contributed to safeguarding the health of mothers and children. In the field of education, girls were not merely passive recipients of knowledge but active participants in the educational system of the "Houses of Life," where they acquired literacy skills and engaged in literary and political correspondence, thereby becoming intellectual partners to men. Within family life, marital relationships were founded upon mutual affection and explicit contractual agreements. Marriage contracts safeguarded women's rights in cases of divorce or polygamy, providing them with legal and social protection that preserved their dignity.

A close examination of the diverse roles played by Egyptian women—as scholars, priestesses, mothers, household managers, business administrators, and partners in political and social decision-making—reveals a society that placed appreciation and respect at the core of its philosophy. The legacy of Ancient Egyptian women transcended the boundaries of their own era, shaping a civilizational identity founded upon balance and harmony. It affirms that the greatness of Ancient Egypt could not have been achieved without women occupying a central role in its history as active, influential, and legally protected members of society.

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