

## WOMEN IN ANCIENT EGYPT: GENDER ROLES

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## Women in Ancient Egypt

- No people, ancient or modern, said Max Müller, "have given women so high a legal status as did the inhabitants of the Nile Valley."

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# Women in Ancient Egypt

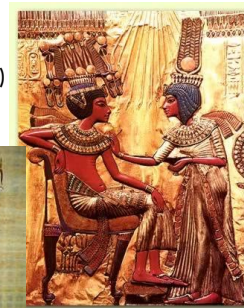
- Marked contrast to customs in other cultures during the same period
- High level of respect for women made Egyptian society unusual for its time
- Remarkably modern, sophisticated legal and financial rights
- Women in the royal household could become especially influential
- Women could rule as co-regents until their sons came of age
- Ahhotep ruled, while her son Ahmose reached adulthood
- Female pharaoh Hatshepsut successfully ruled for some 20 years

Found in the chapel of Merya at Armana, this drawing depicts Queen Nefertiti accompanying her husband, the pharaoh Akhenaton, from the royal palace to the temple. Because of exceptionally high status, Nefertiti rode in her own chariot.



# Women in Ancient Egypt

- Egyptian deities tended to mirror their mortal worshippers
- Goddesses
- Queens
- Motherhood: Nurturers, child-bearers, magic powers (ISIS)
- Protectors of gods
- Music/ dancing/ pleasure (HATHOR)
- Nature, sky, storms personified (NUT, SAKHMET, TEFMET)
- &
- Pharaohs!



# Goddesses

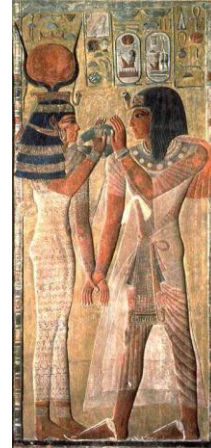
## Women in Ancient Egypt

- Ancient Egyptian society treated men and women equally.
- Women participated in the political, economic, and judicial world of ancient Egypt on the same terms as men
- This social system reflects Egyptian mythology, where Goddesses played an equal, if not chief, role.
- The primeval mother figures in the earliest prehistoric Egyptian myths are female.
- Female deities were kept separate from the males, with their own temples and followers
- Egyptian goddesses are also creator deities, and the protectors of the pharaohs in the form of the cobra, vulture, or lioness.



## Women in Ancient Egypt

- Royal women >> goddesses / power
- Ordinary women >> egalitarian



The Egyptian goddess Isis was one of the most important deities of the ancient world. Originally the goddess of motherhood and fertility, Isis became the mother of all gods and was worshipped throughout Egypt until the 6th century C.E.

## Women in Ancient Egypt



### Statuette of Isis and Horus

Thirtieth Dynasty-Early Ptolemaic Period,  
ca. 380-200 B.C.

This exquisitely detailed statuette shows the goddess Isis nursing her son, Horus.

Isis and Horus were frequently depicted in this pose in the form of amulets, or charms.

Amulets of Isis, particularly when accompanied by her child, Horus, were favored by women, to provide protection during pregnancy and childbirth.

## Women in Ancient Egypt



**Statuette of the Goddess Taweret**  
Late Period, ca. 712-332 B.C.

Pregnancy, birth, and its aftermath were times of great risk for both mothers and their offspring, and women needed deities to whom they could turn for protection against the dangers involved.

One such deity was the goddess Taweret, who was depicted with the head of a hippopotamus, the limbs and paws of a lion, a mane in the form of a crocodile's tail, pendulous breasts, and a belly swollen by pregnancy.

## Women in Ancient Egypt

- Female deity Maat – symbol of cosmic harmony / balance
- Pharaoh must govern by her rules
- Universe as a complete duality of male and female



**Book of the Dead fragment: The goddess Ma'at in the Hall of Judgment**  
Painted papyrus; Egypt; Late-Ptolemaic periods (525-30 BCE)

## Royal (wealthy) women

## Women in Ancient Egypt

- Pharaohs, unlike ordinary Egyptians, were polygamous
- One principal queen, whose male children would be heirs
- **New Kingdom period Egyptian queen became an essential part of her husband's reign**
- Divine order of goddess Ma'at dictated rule with consort
- Egyptian queen expected to support her husband
- Variety of religious and political duties
- Queen Tiy, wife to Amenhotep III, born a commoner
- Queen Nefertiti – full participant in religious ceremonies honoring Aten, the sun god
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□ Cleopatra sarcophagus



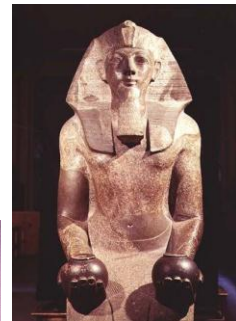
## Women in Ancient Egypt: Conflict

- Royal women undertook military campaigns
- Decorated for active role in conflicts
- **Women regarded sufficiently threatening to be listed as 'enemies of the state'**
- Female graves containing weapons are found throughout 3000 yrs of Egyptian history



## Women in Ancient Egypt: Rulers

- Ahhotep ruled while her son Ahmose was growing up
- Hatshepsut became Pharaoh (legitimacy from father)
- Queens were also given estates, - financial independence
- Could commission their own monuments
- Develop their own religious symbols
- **Queen perceived as being close to being a god**
- Amenhotep III and Ramesses the Great each built temples for their principal queens: Tiy and Nefertari (worshipped as gods)
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## Women in Ancient Egypt: Rulers

- Nefertiti shown actively involved in her husband Akhenaten's restructuring politics
- Shown wearing kingly regalia, executing foreign prisoners, ruling independently as king following the death of her husband 1336 BC
- Similarly Tawosret took the throne following the death of her husband Seti II in 1194 BC
- The last of Egypt's female pharaohs, the great Cleopatra VII – her eventual suicide in 30 BC marks the end of ancient Egypt



## Women in Ancient Egypt: Wealth

- The status and privileges enjoyed by the wealthy were a direct result of their relationship with the king, and their own abilities helping to administer the country
- Although the vast majority of such officials were men, women did sometimes hold high office.
- As 'Controller of the Affairs of the Kiltwearers', Queen Hetepheres II ran the civil service and, as well as overseers, governors and judges,
- Two women even achieved the rank of vizier (prime minister). This was the highest administrative title below that of pharaoh, which they also managed on no fewer than six occasions.





## Women in Ancient Egypt: Leisure

- Rich women – not required to produce large numbers of children – as labor source
- Ladies of leisure
- Alternative career choices
  
- Swathed in fine linen, bedecked in all manner of jewellery, her face boldly painted and wearing hair, both male and female servants tended to her daily needs.
- They also looked after her children, did the cleaning and prepared the food, although interestingly the laundry was generally done by men.
  
- Freed from such mundane tasks herself, the woman could enjoy all manner of relaxation, listening to music, eating good food and drinking fine wine.
- Women are also portrayed with their pets, playing board games, strolling in carefully tended gardens or touring their estates.
- Often travelling by river, shorter journeys were also made by carrying-chair or, for greater speed, women are even shown driving their own chariots.
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## Ordinary (poor) Egyptian women

## Women in Ancient Egypt: Roles

What about the common folk?

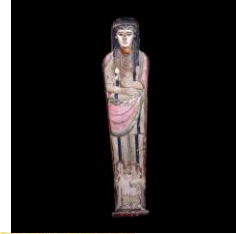
A woman's role as mother and wife still came first in Egyptian society

Some professions in which women worked included weaving, perfume making, and entertainment.

Egyptian women could have their own businesses, own and sell property, and serve as witnesses in court cases.

Unlike most women in the Middle East, they were even permitted to be in the company of men

The political and economic rights Egyptian women enjoyed made them the most liberated females of their time.



## Women in Ancient Egypt: Work

- Allowed to take paid work
- Farm work
- Weaving
- Bartering
- However – work outside frowned upon
- Primary work – look after home and children
- No contraception – pregnant / breastfeeding etc



## Women in Ancient Egypt: Work

- Religious employment connected to gender
- In general, men in charge of temples and their administration, but women filled a variety of religious offices especially as priestesses associated with the cults of such goddesses as Hathor
- By the New Kingdom, however, the priesthood had become part of the state bureaucracy, which excluded women.
- Instead an increase in the number of elite women associated with temples as "musicians" of a particular deity
- Female officiants were often associated with the cults of female deities.
- In general, goddesses tended to serve as protectors of the dead
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**Coffin fragment of a female musician of Amun**  
Painted wood; Western Thebes, Egypt; Third Intermediate Period (1070-656 BCE)

## Women in Ancient Egypt: Equity

- Women portrayed in a very public way alongside men
- Shown to coordinate ritual events, undertaking manual work
- One woman steering a cargo ship even reprimands the man who brings her a meal with the words, 'Don't obstruct my face while I am putting to shore'
- Surprising degree of financial independence
- **Surviving accounts, contracts, contracts show women receiving the same pay rations as men for undertaking the same job!!!**
- Royal women controlled treasury, owned their estates, and workshops



## Conclusion

This sums up life for Egyptian woman - a strange mix of the very traditional and the surprisingly modern.

They were limited by their gender, but they were also highly respected.

**Most remarkable, were the legal rights and responsibilities they held**

Western women would not achieve these for another 4,000 years



Q&A...