Excursis III: The Status of Women in Ancient Egyptian Society

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This document contains links to three other documents, which are translations of primary sources or detailed recapitulations of long texts and inscriptions, including: 1) a Twelfth Dynasty will (imyt-pr) from el- Lahun; 2) the Will of Naunakht; 3) the Inscription of Mes. To access these documents, click on the blue-colored text where they appear in the body of this essay. For bibliographical references related to the role and status of women in Egyptian society, see the Course Description, page 13.

INTRODUCTION

Unlike the position of women in most other ancient civilizations, including that of Greece, the Egyptian woman seems to have enjoyed the same legal and economic rights as the Egyptian man--at least in theory. This notion is reflected in Egyptian art and historical inscriptions.

It is uncertain why these rights existed for the woman in Egypt but no where else in the ancient world. It may well be that such rights were ultimately related to the theoretical role of the king in Egyptian society. If the pharaoh was the personification of Egypt, and he represented the corporate personality of the Egyptian state, then men and women might not have been seen in their familiar relationships, but rather, only in regard to this royal center of society. Since Egyptian national identity would have derived from all people sharing a common relationship with the king, then in this relationship, which all men and women shared equally, they were--in a sense--equal to each other. This is not to say that Egypt was an egalitarian society. It was not. Legal distinctions in Egypt were apparently based much more upon differences in the social classes, rather than differences in gender. Rights and privileges were not uniform from one class to another, but within the given classes, it seems that equal economic and legal rights were, for the most part, accorded to both men and women.

Most of the textual and archaeological evidence for the role of women that survives from prior to the New Kingdom pertains to the elite, not the common folk. At this time, it is the elite, for the most part, who leave written records or who can afford tombs that contain such records. However, from the New Kingdom onward, and certainly by the Ptolemaic Period, such evidence pertains more and more to the non-elite, i.e., to women of the middle and lower classes. Actually, the bulk of the evidence for the economic freedom of Egyptian women derives from the Ptolemaic Period. The Greek domination of Egypt, which began with the conquest of Alexander the Great in 332 B.C., did not sweep away Egyptian social and political institutions. Both Egyptian and Greek systems of law and social traditions existed side-by-side in Egypt at that time. Greeks functioned within their system and Egyptians within theirs. Mixed parties of Greeks and Egyptians making contractual agreements or who were forced into court over legal disputes would choose which of the two legal systems in which they would base their settlements. Ironically, while the Egyptians were the subjugated people of their Greek rulers, Egyptian women, operating under the Egyptian system, had more privileges and civil rights than the Greek
women living in the same society, but who functioned under the more restrictive Greek social and legal system.

**WOMEN'S LEGAL RIGHTS**

The Egyptian woman's rights extended to all the legally defined areas of society. From the bulk of the legal documents, we know that women could manage and dispose of private property, including: land, portable goods, servants, slaves, livestock, and money (when it existed), as well as financial instruments (i.e., endowments and annuities). A woman could administer all her property independently and according to her free will. She could conclude any kind of legal settlement. She could appear as a contracting partner in a marriage contract or a divorce contract; she could execute testaments; she could free slaves; she could make adoptions. She was entitled to sue at law. It is highly significant that a woman in Egypt could do all of the above and initiate litigation in court freely without the need of a male representative. This amount of freedom was at variance with that of the Greek woman who required a designated male, called a kourios, to represent or stand for her in all legal contracts and proceedings. This male was her husband, father or brother.

**WOMEN'S PROPERTY RIGHTS**

There were several ways for an Egyptian woman to acquire possessions and real property. Most frequently, she received it as gifts or as an inheritance from her parents or husband, or else, she received it through purchases—with goods which she earned either through employment, or which she borrowed. Under Egyptian property law, a woman had claim to one-third of all the community property in her marriage, i.e. the property which accrued to her husband and her only after they were married. When a woman brought her own private property to a marriage (e.g., as a dowry), this apparently remained hers, although the husband often had the free use of it. However, in the event of divorce her property had to be returned to her, in addition to any divorce settlement that might be stipulated in the original marriage contract.

A wife was entitled to inherit one-third of that community property on the death of her husband, while the other two-thirds was divided among the children, followed up by the brothers and sisters of the deceased. To circumvent this possibility and to enable his wife to receive either a larger part of the share, or to allow her to dispose of all the property, a husband could do several things:

1) In the Middle Kingdom, he could draw up an *imyt-pr*, a "house document," which was a legal unilateral deed for donating property. As a living will, it was made and perhaps executed while the husband was still alive. In this will, the husband would assign to his wife what he wished of his own private property, i.e., what he acquired before his marriage. An example of this is the *imyt-pr of Wah from el-Lahun*. 2) If there were no children, and the husband did not wish his brothers and sisters to receive two-thirds of the community property, he could legally adopt his wife as his child and heir and bequeath all the property to her. Even if he had other children, he could still adopt his wife, so that, as his one of his legal offspring, she would receive some of the two-thirds share, in addition to her normal one-third share of the community property.
A woman was free to bequeath property from her husband to her children or even to her own brothers and sisters (unless there was some stipulation against such in her husband's will). One papyrus tells us how a childless woman, who after she inherited her husband's estate, raised the three illegitimate children who were born to him and their female household slave (such liaisons were fairly common in the Egyptian household and seem to have borne no social stigma). She then married the eldest illegitimate step-daughter to her younger brother, whom she adopted as her son, that they might receive the entire inheritance.

A woman could also freely disinherit children of her private property, i.e., the property she brought to her marriage or her share of the community property. She could selectively bequeath that property to certain children and not to others. Such action is recorded in the Will of Naunakht.

WOMEN IN CONTRACTS

Women in Egypt were consistently concluding contracts, including: marriage and divorce settlements, engagements of wet-nurses, purchases of property, even arrangements for self-enslavement. Self-enslavement in Egypt was actually a form of indentured servitude. Although self-enslavement appears to have been illegal in Egypt, it was practiced by both men and women. To get around the illegality, the servitude was stipulated only for a limited number of years, although it was usually said to be "99 years."

Under self-enslavement, women often technically received a salary for their labor. Two reasons for which a woman might be forced into such an arrangement are: (1) as payment to a creditor to satisfy bad debts; (2) to be assured of one's provisions and financial security, for which a person might even pay a monthly fee, as though they were receiving a service. However, this fee would equal the salary that the provider had to pay for her labor; thus, no "money" would be exchanged. Since this service was a legal institution, then a contract was drawn up stipulating the conditions and the responsibilities of the involved parties.

In executing such an arrangement, a woman could also include her children and grandchildren, alive or unborn. One such contract of a woman who bound herself to the temple of Saknebtynis states:

The female servant (so & so) has said before my master, Saknebtynis, the great god, 'I am your servant, together with my children and my children's children. I shall not be free in your precinct forever and ever. You will protect me; you will keep me safe; you will guard me. You will keep me sound; you will protect me from every demon, and I will pay you 1-1/4 kita of copper . . . until the completion of 99 years, and I will give it to your priests monthly.'

If such women married male "slaves," the status of their children depended on the provisions of their contracts with their owners.

WOMEN BEFORE THE BAR
Egyptian women had the right to bring lawsuits against anyone in open court, and there was no gender-based bias against them, and we have many cases of women winning their claims. A good example of this fact is found in the *Inscription of Mes*. This inscription is the actual court record of a long and drawn-out private land dispute which occurred in the New Kingdom. Significantly, the inscription shows us four things: (1) women could manage property, and they could inherit trusteeship of property; (2) women could institute litigation (and appeal to the court of the vizier); (3) women were awarded legal decisions (and had decisions reversed on appeal); (4) women acted as witnesses before a court of law.

However, based upon the Hermopolis Law Code of the third century B.C., the freedom of women to share easily with their male relatives in the inheritance of landed property was perhaps restricted somewhat. According to the provisions of the Hermopolis Law Code, where an executor existed, the estate of the deceased was divided up into a number of parcels equal to the number of children of the deceased, both alive and dead. Thereafter, each male child (or that child's heirs), in order of birth, took his pick of the parcels. Only when the males were finished choosing, were the female children permitted to choose their parcels (in chronological order). The male executor was permitted to claim for himself parcels of any children and heirs who predeceased the father without issue. Female executors were designated when there were no sons to function as such. However, the code is specific that--unlike male executors--they could not claim the parcels of any dead children.

Still, it is not appropriate to compare the provisions of the Hermopolis Law Code to the *Inscription of Mes*, since the latter pertains to the inheritance of an office, i.e., a trusteeship of land, and not to the land itself. Indeed, the system of dividing the estate described in the law code--or something similar to it--might have existed at least as early as the New Kingdom, since the *Instructions of Any* contains the passage, "Do not say, 'My grandfather has a house. An enduring house, it is called' (i.e., don't brag of any future inheritance), for when you take your share with your brothers, your portion may only be a storehouse."

**FEMALE LITERACY**

It is uncertain, generally, how literate the Egyptian woman was in any period. Baines and Eyre suggest very low figures for the percentage of the literate in the Egypt population, i.e., only about 1% in the Old Kingdom (i.e., 1 in 20 or 30 males). Other Egyptologists would dispute these estimates, seeing instead an amount at about 5-10% of the population. In any event, it is certain that the rate of literacy of Egyptian women was well behind that of men from the Old Kingdom through the Late Period. Lower class women, certainly were illiterate; middle class women and the wives of professional men, perhaps less so. The upper class probably had a higher rate of literate women. In the Old and Middle Kingdoms, middle and upper class women are occasionally found in the textual and archaeological record with administrative titles that are indicative of a literate ability. In the New Kingdom the frequency at which these titles occur declines significantly, suggesting an erosion in the rate of female literacy at that time (let alone the freedom to engage in an occupation). However, in a small number of tomb representations of the New Kingdom, certain noblewomen are associated with scribal palettes, suggesting a literate ability.
Women are also recorded as the senders and recipients of a small number of letters in Egypt (5 out of 353). However, in these cases we cannot be certain that they personally penned or read these letters, rather than employed the services of professional scribes.

Many royal princesses at court had private tutors, and most likely, these tutors taught them to read and write. Royal women of the Eighteenth Dynasty probably were regularly trained, since many were functioning leaders. Since royal princesses would have been educated, it then seems likely that the daughters of the royal courtiers were similarly educated. In the inscriptions, we occasionally do find titles of female scribes among the middle class from the Middle Kingdom on, especially after the Twenty-sixth Dynasty, when the rate of literacy increased throughout the country. The only example of a female physician in Egypt occurs in the Old Kingdom. Scribal instruction was a necessary first step toward medical training.

WOMEN IN PUBLIC

The Egyptian woman in general was free to go about in public; she worked out in the fields and in estate workshops. Certainly, she did not wear a veil, which is first documented among the ancient Assyrians (perhaps reflecting a tradition of the ancient Semitic-speaking people of the Syrian and Arabian Deserts). However, it was perhaps unsafe for an Egyptian woman to venture far from her town alone. Ramesses III boasts in one inscription, "I enabled the woman of Egypt to go her own way, her journeys being extended where she wanted, without any person assaulting her on the road." A different view of the traveling women is found in the Instructions of Any, "Be on your guard against a woman from abroad, who is not known in town, do not have sex with her." So by custom, there might have been a reputation of impiousness or looseness associated with a woman traveling alone in Egypt. Despite the legal freedom of women to travel about, folk custom or tradition may have discouraged that. So, e.g., earlier in the Old Kingdom, Ptahhotep would write, "If you desire to make a friendship last in a house to which you have access to its master as a brother or friend in any place where you might enter, beware of approaching the women. It does not go well with a place where that is done." However, the theme of this passage might actually refer to violating personal trust and not the accessibility of women, per se. However, mores and values apparently changed by the New Kingdom. The love poetry of that era, as well as certain letters, are quite frank about the public accessibility and freedom of women.

WOMEN'S OCCUPATIONS

In general, the work of the upper and middle class woman was limited to the home and the family. This was not due to an inferior legal status, but was probably a consequence of her customary role as mother and bearer of children, as well as the public role of the Egyptian husbands and sons who functioned as the executors of the mortuary cults of their deceased parents. It was the traditional role of the good son to bury his parents, support their funerary cult, to bring offerings regularly to the tombs, and to recite the offering formula. Because women are not regularly depicted doing this in Egyptian art, they probably did not often assume this role. When a man died without a surviving son to preserve his name and present offerings, then it was his brother who was often depicted in the art doing so. Perhaps because it was the males who
were regularly entrusted with this important religious task, that they held the primary position in public life.

As far as occupations go, in the textual sources upper class woman are occasionally described as holding an office, and thus they might have executed real jobs. Clearly, though, this phenomenon was more prevalent in the Old Kingdom than in later periods (perhaps due to the lower population at that time). In Wente's publication of Egyptian letters, he notes that of 353 letters known from Egypt, only 13 provide evidence of women functioning with varying degrees of administrative authority.

On of the most exalted administrative titles of any woman who was not a queen was held by a non-royal women named Nebet during the Sixth Dynasty, who was entitled, "Vizier, Judge and Magistrate." She was the wife of the nomarch of Coptos and grandmother of King Pepi I. However, it is possible that the title was merely honorific and granted to her posthumously. Through the length of Egyptian history, we see many titles of women which seem to reflect real administrative authority, including one woman entitled, "Second Prophet (i.e. High Priest) of Amun" at the temple of Karnak, which was, otherwise, a male office. Women could and did hold male administrative positions in Egypt. However, such cases are few, and thus appear to be the exceptions to tradition. Given the relative scarcity of such, they might reflect extraordinary individuals in unusual circumstances.

Women functioned as leaders, e.g., kings, dowager queens and regents, even as usurpers of rightful heirs, who were either their step-sons or nephews. We find women as nobility and landed gentry managing both large and small estates, e.g., the lady Tchat who started as overseer of a nomarch's household with a son of middling status; married the nomarch; was elevated, and her son was also raised in status. Women functioned as middle class housekeepers, servants, fieldhands, and all manner of skilled workers inside the household and in estate-workshops.

Women could also be national heroines in Egypt. Extraordinary cases include: Queen Ahhotep of the early Eighteenth Dynasty. She was renowned for saving Egypt during the wars of liberation against the Hyksos, and she was praised for rallying the Egyptian troops and crushing rebellion in Upper Egypt at a critical juncture of Egyptian history. In doing so, she received Egypt's highest military decoration at least three times, the Order of the Fly. Queen Hatshepsut, as a ruling king, was actually described as going on military campaign in Nubia. Eyewitness reports actually placed her on the battlefield weighing booty and receiving the homage of defeated rebels.

**WOMEN AND CRIME**

These ordinary and extraordinary roles are not the only ones in which we see Egyptian women cast in ancient Egypt. We also see Egyptian women as the victims of crime (and rape); also as the perpetrators of crime, as adulteresses and even as convicts.

Women criminals certainly existed, although they do not appear frequently in the historical record. A woman named Nesmut was implicated in a series of robberies of the royal tombs in the Valley of the Kings during the Twentieth Dynasty. Examples of women convicts are also known.
According to one Brooklyn Museum papyrus from the Middle Kingdom, a woman was incarcerated at the prison at Thebes because she fled her district to dodge the corvee service on a royal estate. Most of the concubines and lesser wives involved in the harim conspiracy against Ramesses III were convicted and had their noses and ears cut off, while others were invited to commit suicide. Another woman is indicated among the lists of prisoners from a prison at el-Lahun. However, of the prison lists we have, the percentage of women's names is very small compared to those of men, and this fact may be significant.

CONCLUSION

The position of women in Egyptian society was unique in the ancient world. The Egyptian female enjoyed much of the same legal and economic rights as the Egyptian male--within the same social class. However, how their legal freedoms related to their status as defined by custom and folk tradition is more difficult to ascertain. In general, social position in Egypt was based, not on gender, but on social rank. On the other hand, the ability to move through the social classes did exist for the Egyptians. Ideally, the same would have been true for women. However, one private letter of the New Kingdom from a husband to his wife shows us that while a man could take his wife with him, as he moved up in rank, it would not have been unusual for such a man to divorce her and take a new wife more in keeping with his new and higher social status. Still, self-made women certainly did exist in Egypt, and there are cases of women growing rich on their own resources through land speculation and the like.