

Egyptian gender relations

Overview Male power, in ancient societies, is a given: the patriarch is there from the beginning and stays there--til today, but the freedom and respect granted to women was noteworthy in ancient Egyptian culture. We can note a few aspects of this welcome state of affairs.

Marriage and family Ancient Egyptian sculpture abounds in depictions of husbands and wives standing side by side, holding hands. The guy is frequently a step or two ahead, and has the look of being in charge of things--but who knows, maybe he's not. We appreciate the uncertainty. There seems universal reverence, in the culture, for the wonders of the goddess Ma'at, who guarantees harmony and order in life.

Women and family power In many regards, within the family and out in the society, ancient Egyptian women enjoyed power. In the first place they were not railroaded into marriage, but customarily had full freedom in the choice of their marriage partners. (Pre nups were not rare, guaranteeing wives financial security in case of divorce, which was itself easily obtainable, and in which the woman could normally be represented by legal counsel. In the case of divorce, women had custody over children, as well as over their own property.)

Women and worldly power Out in the world, women were a normal part of the working society. They tended and marketed their own gardens, kept sheep and goats, or worked and sold in the markets for cloth, textiles, and (for example) beer, the drink for the man on the street. On a more elevated achievement level women were known as physicians, and scribes, the latter one of the society's most influential roles--as the scribe needed extensive training in order to be able to read and write. Women were an important part of the priesthood, which was itself influential on the highest levels of society. Tending the major temples--which were at the same time banks and lending agencies-- women exercised a role in government; as interpreters of dreams, and advisers to the highest officials, as well as placators of the always watching gods on whom the security of the state depended. In their priestly role women could on occasion rise to the level of God-wife, surrogate spouse of God. And then on the very highest levels women could be found serving in high diplomatic posts, or even as Pharaoh, as in the dramatic instance of Hatshepsut (1507-1458 B.C.E.), the fifth Pharaoh of the 18th Dynasty.

Observation Women are one half of society. When women are happy, men are happy, and the society has a leg up on succeeding. Egyptian society lasted intact for three millennia, not bad. We should be so lucky, in our advanced Western experimentation.

Readings

Tyldesley, Joyce, *Daughters of Isis: Women of Ancient Egypt*, London, 1995.

Graves-Brown, Carolyn, *Dancing for Hathor: Women in Ancient Egypt*, New York, 2010.

Discussion questions

Ancient Egyptian society, of course, was predominantly agricultural. Most women lived on the land. What kind of farm work did they perform? How did they balance farm work with taking care of children? Were there schools for their children?

How do you explain the difference between Fifth-century B.C. Athens and Egypt, in the issue of freedom for women? Wasn't there a brilliance of freedom and originality in the great Athenian century? Didn't it include women at all?

What jobs did priestesses perform, at the sacred temples of ancient Egypt? What does it mean that they were in charge of maintaining the statues of the god worshipped in their temple? What was a God-wife, and what did it mean to a priestess to become a God-wife?