

Women's Monumental Mark on Ancient Egypt

by Barbara S. Lesko

Grand temples and tombs and colossal statues bear many reminders of Egypt's ancient queens and female pharaohs, but even common women left a monumental mark. This legacy consists of tomb chapels with extensive wall decoration, portrait statues, funerary and votive stelae, and offering tables, all bearing the names and titles of their owners or dedicators (even those of their nearest relatives). This corpus is not well published and is little studied, but has survived in unbelievable quantities, often because these objects were made of stone. Publication and analysis of these monuments has unfortunately not kept pace with their discoveries, so the information gleaned from them thus far will be subject to correction, or enhancement, as more source materials become available.

Although there is no firm agreement among Egyptologists on the civil rights and economic levels of the different classes in ancient Egyptian society—or, indeed, how to distinguish among them—we know that common women as well as women in the elite and royal classes were commemorated by physical monuments. I will concentrate on these monuments, both artistic and architectural, as a way of illustrating the independence, responsible positions and self-respect enjoyed by various classes of women in ancient Egyptian society.



Even female workers were usually portrayed with dignity and grace, such as these female farmworkers decorating the Fifth Dynasty tomb of Ti at Sakkara. Drawing by Leonard H. Lesko.

What Tomb Art Reveals of the Average Woman

Ancient tombs are found throughout the Nile Valley, its limestone cliffs having provided convenient and easily cut rock that could be used as building blocks or hollowed into, depending on the preference of the age.

Vast expanses of wall decoration dating from the later Old Kingdom and subsequent Middle and New Kingdom periods (see accompanying

chronological chart) offer the rare opportunity to look at a society going about its business, not just religious and funerary rites but agricultural, hunting and economic pursuits as well as entertainment and sports. The svelte, attractively groomed and fetchingly garbed

Egyptian woman cuts a striking figure in almost all scenes. Even female workers are usually portrayed with grace and dignity. The wife of the tomb owner usually figures prominently in tomb scenes as her husband's companion and supporter. In Old Kingdom scenes children and retainers are typically rendered on a much smaller scale.

When viewing tomb walls, it is easy

to fall into the trap set by the ancient artistic perspective, where figures that are meant to be shown seated side by side appear to be sitting behind one another. Because the wife is most often depicted as the survivor and mourner, she is often portrayed as supporting or otherwise clasping her husband. It was important for the Egyptian artist to present the entire human figure, and this necessitated placing the wife in such a way that she appears to be taking a position behind her husband when in fact, she is meant to be seen as sitting or standing beside him, as in sculptured groups that survive from the three major early periods.



This scene from the tomb of Nakht at Thebes, dating to the Eighteenth Dynasty, shows female musicians entertaining at a banquet. Scenes such as this indicate that ancient Egyptian women fully mingled in society. Photo by Leonard H. Lesko.

Throughout Egyptian history women prominent in tomb scenes are most often depicted as companions of the men being commemorated. Their attainments, such as literacy, or their most prestigious public activities are usually only subtly hinted at in these portraits (through the ornaments they hold) and are mentioned very briefly, if at all, in the accompanying inscriptions. We can also wonder why more detailed descriptions of a man's career, whether in the military, the civil service, or the temple hierarchy, are not shown, whereas in Old Kingdom tombs and some tombs dating to later periods the supervising of work on estates and workshops is emphasized. It is likely that religious motivation was behind the choice of tomb scenes. Perhaps the perpetual abundance of food and water in the beyond, even the renewal of the life cycle, is being assured and not the continuation of earthly concerns and identities. Thus tomb scenes are only of limited value in reconstructing peoples' lives, offering a partial and biased look at the Egyptian family and society.

Nevertheless it is obvious from these tomb scenes that ancient Egyptian women were respected and that they fully mingled in society, playing many roles, whether in the household, the temple cults, or the economic realm. Peasant women are depicted as helping with the harvest and trapping birds; townswomen are shown as professional mourners, musicians and dancers, members of a temple staff and party guests. Rare, though extant, are scenes of a woman commanding a boat or buying and selling goods in the marketplace

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Iyt-hotep, bearing the title Mistress of the House and Chantress of Amon, is pictured in this wall decoration from tomb number 96 at Thebes. Notice she is carrying an ankh and other cult implements. Photo by Leonard H. Lesko.



(Fischer 1989: 21). This gives us a strong indication that women wielded the family's purchasing power, a prestigious and definitely not universal position. Also significant is evidence that in the earliest historical periods weaving workshops were filled exclusively by women, whereas men did not move into this important industry for several centuries.

In the Old Kingdom, titles denoting positions of responsibility and authority belonged to women of the elite class, who generally were closely tied by blood or marriage to the royal family. Tomb inscriptions of some women provide startling evidence of their professional involvements. One woman tells of being an overseer of female physicians (Ghalioungui 1975). Another used the important titles of judge and vizier, although they may have been purely honorific (Fischer 1976: 74–75). There is, however, an abundance of titles for women in positions of authority, such as Director of the Dining Hall, Overseer of Funerary Priests and Overseer of the Weavers' House, to name a few (Fischer 1976: 70–71). It would seem that few restrictions were placed on women of ability and high social status in the Old Kingdom. It is interesting to note that religious positions were not limited to noblewomen, for we have found priestesses of major goddesses who bear humble titles such as tenant farmer.

Many administrative, honorific and priestly titles for women have been recovered from Old Kingdom monuments; fewer have been found from the Middle Kingdom, which followed the First Intermediate Period, a time of social and economic



Throughout Egyptian history prominent women in tomb scenes are most often depicted as companions of the men being commemorated. Here are Renutet, priestess of Hathor, and her husband, Yuni. This New Kingdom portrait dates to the Nineteenth Dynasty. Photo courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (15.2.1, Rogers Fund).

piece as being unmistakably from the Old Kingdom.

A more attractive female portrait is the Middle Kingdom statue of Lady Sennuwy, wife of the Nomarch Hapdjefi. Originally from Assiut and now in the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, this statue is a supreme example of life-sized Egyptian portraiture carved in granite. The grace of the female figure is enhanced by the unknown sculptor's dispensing with the back pillar, which too often mars Egyptian sculpture in the round. A very full coiffure lends necessary support for the head, resulting in a

instability. Middle Kingdom titles for women seldom reflect positions of authority (Ward 1989: 34–39), which suggests political and economic changes. Instead, they reveal a range of jobs in the service industries, from scribe to hairdresser, gardener to miller (Ward 1986: 8–17).

During the prosperous empire of the New Kingdom, the civil service and temple hierarchies became even more professionalized, yet there is evidence that women again served in the cults of major as well as minor temples and that they filled some administrative positions, such as controlling access to temple stores (Lesko 1987a: 21). Numerous texts have survived from this period, including court documents and private letters revealing that women had their own independent legal identity on a par with men and that they could inherit or purchase property and dispose of it without a male co-signatory or legal guardian. Indeed, women were heads of households, testified in court, witnessed documents, acted as executors of their family estates and assumed the obligations of a citizen vis-à-vis the State.

Numerous records show this was true of free women in general, not just those of the gentry (Allam 1985: 14–22). On a personal level, it is clear that women enjoyed freedom of movement and association, that they could marry and divorce at will, that they engaged in commerce and that they were able to exercise authority over others in the workplace or temple.

Statuary of women. In addition to wall scenes, tombs and temples contained private statuary of both women and men. Private monuments from ancient Egypt tend to be diminutive, especially if carved out of stone.

For much of its history, the pair statue showing a husband and wife (sometimes a son and mother) seated side by side was popular. A woman was not only portrayed in the company of her husband or son, however, as individual portraits of women are found from throughout the centuries. One example is the *Mitr.t*-priestess from Giza discovered earlier this century by an excavation team from the University of California. The simple dress, stocky build and bold planes of the statue characterize this

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This Middle Kingdom portrait of Lady Sennuwy of Assiut, wife of the Nomarch Hapdjefi, is a supreme example of life-sized Egyptian portraiture carved in granite. Note that the unknown sculptor used a full coiffure instead of the usual back pillar to support the head, resulting in a graceful, more lifelike portrayal. Photo courtesy of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (14.720).

more lifelike portrayal. Still, one wishes for more autobiographical information from these monuments. Mysteriously, this statue was found far from her home in the Dongola region of the Upper Nile, part of a barbaric burial. Determining how, when and why it got there is problematic. Similarly, a much smaller statue of an Egyptian female nurse, now in the Metropolitan Museum of

Art in New York, was found at Adana in Asia Minor.

Egypt's empire continued to expand in the New Kingdom, resulting in greater cosmopolitan sophistication. During this period portraits of women were created in all media and sizes, with the woman's social status or wealth generally reflected in the size of the statue. The wife of a high official might be commemorated in a life-sized sculpture, while women of more humble stations had to be content with statuettes measuring only a foot or two in height. Although a woman was

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usually paired with a male relative, there are several statues in which a woman is paired with a female relative (usually a mother and daughter), and there are individual portrait sculptures as well. Typically in this more voluptuous age the artist took great care to delineate the curls of the wigs and the texture of the dresses. Some of the most enchanting individual portraits of women are done in wood and come from the Ramesside age. The lines of their slim and always youthful bodies are shown through diaphanous linen robes with folds and pleats that are especially easy to portray in this softer medium. Idealistic portrayals were very common apparently because the Egyptians believed that when such depictions were placed in tombs they would perpetuate them into eternal life. After all, who would not like to remain young forever? **Private stelae.** Even more common

than statues, presumably because they were easier to produce and cost less, are stelae dedicated to preserving the memory of individuals. These stelae depict the deceased, and sometimes family members, seated at a table loaded with food and drink. They are inscribed with the names and titles of the owner (and usually family members) together with an invocation that was meant either magically to perpetuate the offerings of "a thousand each of bread, beer,

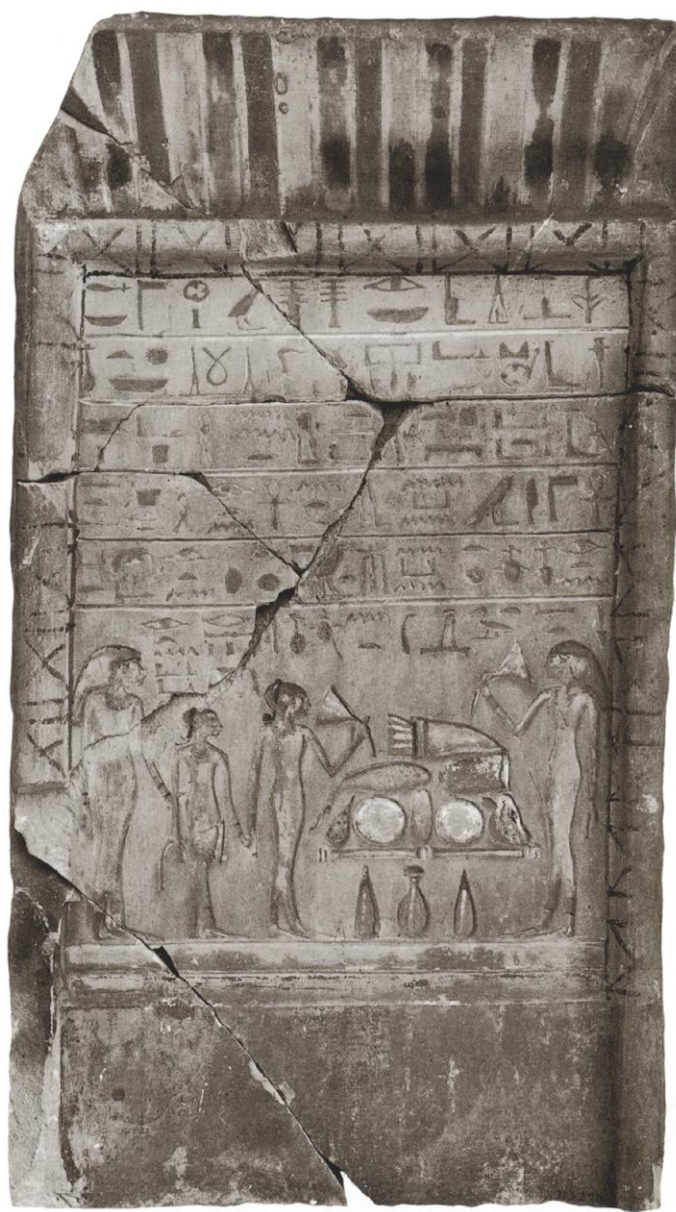


As Egypt's empire continued to expand during the New Kingdom, a greater cosmopolitan sophistication resulted. Typically in this more voluptuous age sculptors took great care to delineate the curls of women's wigs and the texture of their dresses, as exemplified by this wooden statuette of Lady Teye dating to the Eighteenth Dynasty. Photo courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (41.2.10, Rogers Fund).

oxen, and fowl" or at least provide a text for passersby to recite and thus ensure sustenance to the deceased (and family).

The majority of stelae depict husbands and wives, but some women had stelae exclusively of their own or shared them with female relatives. Stelae donated by daughters to commemorate their mothers have been found. In any case, the names of the women are often accompanied by their titles, whether secular or religious. Many female members of the Old Kingdom elite bore the title of King's Acquaintance, also known from monuments of men. Later, the most common title, regardless of social status, was Mistress of the House. A woman who could claim a clerical title was sure to mention it on her tomb, statue, or stela. Such monuments tell of the roles women played in ancient Egyptian society, which, when compared with dates of the source materials, changed over time. For instance, more women held high-ranking priestess positions in the Old Kingdom than in the centuries immediately following it (Galvin 1989: 26).

Up until the Twelfth Dynasty (Middle Kingdom), stelae were made for funerary purposes only, but about half the pieces dating to the Middle Kingdom seem to have been dedicated during a person's life as votives for gods. Similarly, small stone offering tables bearing the names and titles of the dedicators were a favorite form of commemoration as well as an expression of a person's piety. A group of 14 offering



Even more common than statues are stelae dedicated to preserving the memory of individuals. These stelae depict the deceased, and sometimes family members, sitting at a table loaded with food and drink. They are inscribed with the names and titles of the owner together with an invocation designed to ensure sustenance to the deceased and family. The majority of stelae depict husbands and wives, but some women had stelae of their own or shared them with female relatives. This painted limestone stela from the Middle Kingdom is dedicated to two women, Inyotefankh and Meswet-Netrettek, by four other women, presumably of modest means. Photo courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (36.3.270).

tables dedicated by women were found together at Lisht. They were apparently dedicated by women of modest means, with titles ranging from hall keeper to housemaid and, possibly, cleaning lady (Ward 1989: 33–34).

Iconographic changes in scenes depicted on stelae have been studied, and it is interesting to note that as the Twelfth Dynasty progressed the mother seems increasingly to displace the wife in prominence in family scenes on stelae owned by men. Even when the father is depicted, he is never portrayed as prominently as the mother (Pfluger 1947: 128–29). The importance of the mother in the Egyptian family is reflected in the literature of all periods as well as in the fact that Egyptian men, even those of the highest social class and in highest ranks of the civil service or the military, often placed only their mothers' names on their monuments and other documents. Family groups predominate on stelae from all periods. As with stelae depicting only men, the number of stelae designed exclusively for

women seems to be small. Scenes on funerary stelae usually show a male figure, probably a son, performing rites before his parents, but occasionally a female figure officiates. Female votive stelae, on which only the women dedicator is depicted worshiping her favorite deities, have been found in numerous town and cemetery contexts, such as at Deir el-Medineh and Abydos.

Nineteenth-century archaeologist Auguste Mariette found 23 Late Period stelae of women bearing the religious title chantress together in one part of the great national shrine and necropolis of Abydos, which was sacred to Osiris, a god of the dead (Mariette 1880: numbers 1173–94). Of the 23 stelae, only five included a husband's figure and name,

whereas 18 belonged to women alone. Most of these were chantresses of Osiris, but three served Isis and two served Amon. This group of stelae suggests that women could exercise freedom of choice when it came to their funerary monuments; it also furthers the possibility that wives depicted in limited roles in what appears to have been their husbands' tomb chapel art may not always have been buried with their husbands. They could have maintained their own religious funerary monuments at cemeteries and holy shrines of their choosing. Because funerary and other religious monuments contain little biographical information and do not focus on the concerns of everyday life, it is fortunate that Egyptian texts in the form of personal letters and administrative documents abound. From these documents a much clearer picture of the lives led by ordinary Egyptians can be reconstructed (compare James 1962, 1984; Černý 1973; Bierbrier 1982; Romer 1984; Lesko 1987a, 1987b).

Monuments of Egyptian Queens

Tombs belonging exclusively to women have survived from the beginning of Egyptian history. Some queens of the early dynasties were commemorated with tombs as large as those of kings, testimony to their all-important heiress position and to their religious significance as daughters and wives of god-kings. However, the best preserved evidence for the status of noble women in the initial stages of pharaonic Egypt survives from the Fourth Dynasty (Old Kingdom) necropolis at Giza. The wives and mother of Khufu (Cheops), builder of the Great Pyramid, shared with him the royal pyramid style tomb, its magical qualities and the royal funerary religious literature (Edwards 1986: 189–96, 296–302), a privilege not granted even to the male heir apparent. Later in the dynasty other royal women had their large, flat-topped (*mastaba*) tombs intermingled with those of their brothers



*The best preserved evidence for the status of noble women in the initial stages of pharaonic Egypt survives from the Fourth Dynasty necropolis at Giza. **Above:** The queens' pyramids at the pyramid of Menkaure, pictured here, show that women shared the pharaoh's royal pyramid style tomb. Photo by Leonard H. Lesko. **Below:** Later in the Fourth Dynasty other royal women had their flat-topped (*mastaba*) tombs intermingled with those of their brothers in the royal Eastern Cemetery. Queen Mersyankh III, who died before her husband King Khafre and her mother Queen Hetepheres II, was laid to rest in a large *mastaba* with above-ground chapels inside and outside the superstructure as well as an elaborate, beautifully decorated subterranean set of rooms hewn in the rock. Hetepheres and Mersyankh are portrayed in this pair statue. Photo courtesy of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (30.1456).*



in the royal Eastern Cemetery. For instance, Queen Mersyankh III, who died before her husband King Khafre and her mother Queen Hetepheres II, was laid to rest in a large *mastaba* with above-ground chapels inside and outside the superstructure as well as an elaborate subterranean set of rooms hewn in the rock and beautifully decorated with wall reliefs and sculpture hewn from the living rock (Dunham and Simpson 1974).



This impressive tomb built by Queen Khentkawes lies between the causeways of the second and third pyramids at Giza. Living at the end of the Fourth Dynasty, Khentkawes is believed to have been the dynastic link to the Fifth Dynasty because her most significant title translates as Mother of Two Kings of Upper and Lower Egypt. One of the sons must have been King Neferirkare, who built on the south side of his pyramid tomb at Abu Sir a smaller pyramid tomb for Khentkawes. Photo by Leonard H. Lesko.

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This colossal figure of Queen Nefertari, flanked by those of her husband, Ramesses the Great, are cut into the facade of Nefertari's temple at Abu Simbel, located several hundred yards to the north of the main temple. Larger-than-life statues of queens appeared in the Old Kingdom and continued into the Middle Kingdom, but it was during the New Kingdom that the most dazzling array of monuments commemorating great women was produced. Photo by Leonard H. Lesko.



Duality of rulership seems to be expressed by this powerful Fourth Dynasty portrait group of King Menkaure and Queen Khamerernebt, as the figures are of equal size and stance. Photo by Leonard H. Lesko, courtesy of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

become well-known from another portrait that recently traveled the world as part of the Ramesses the Great exhibition.

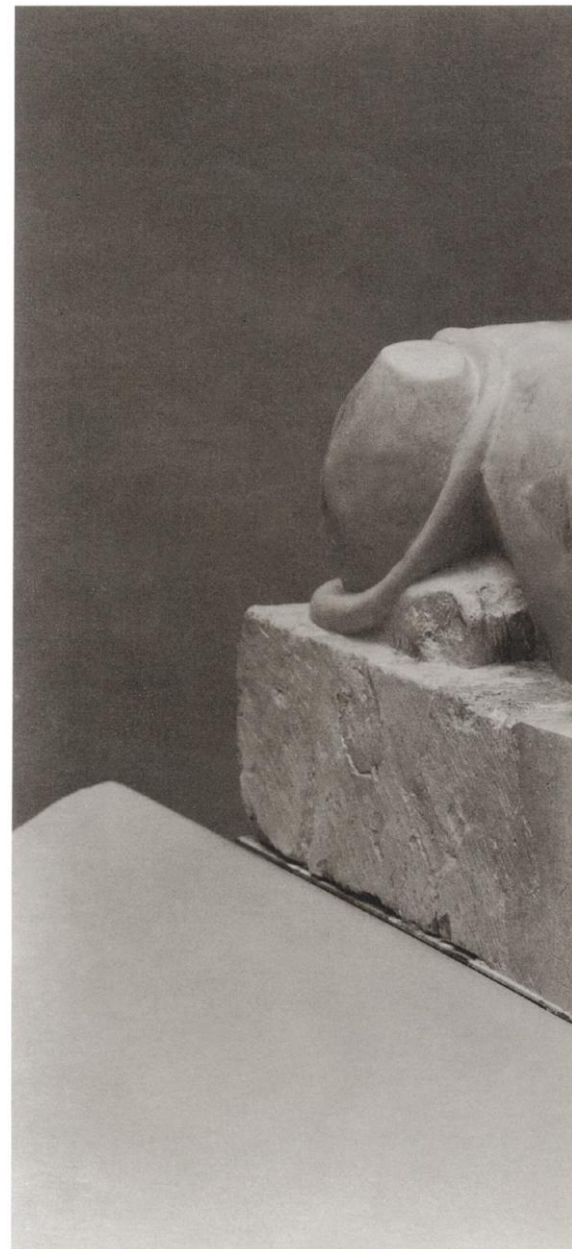
If the wife and family of Ramesses II are lilliputians next to his four colossi at Abu Simbel's greater temple, so too is the supreme god Re, depicted on his perch above the entrance door. The fact that the king's family were often depicted at the level of the legs of his colossal figure should not blind us to the importance of the great royal wife in Egyptian history. The queen was often of purer royal blood than her husband, whose claim to the throne she legitimized. In religious terms, the queen was the embodiment of the goddesses Hathor (wife of Re) and

the Fourth Dynasty, had also elected to have this same style of tomb, which looked like a giant sarcophagus mounted on a high podium. However, the practice of providing a pyramid tomb for queens continued into the Sixth Dynasty and the Twelfth Dynasty, after which time royal pyramids were abandoned in favor of more hidden, rock-hewn sepulchres.

During the Old Kingdom, princesses and wives of powerful men were often provided with stelae and statuary for their tombs from the royal workshops. In time their *mastaba* tomb chapels, like those of their husbands, became more and more elaborate. Whole suites of rooms invaded the mass of the *mastaba*, their walls covered entirely with depictions of the owners, their retinues, and activities on their estates. It is unfortunate that the publication of one of the most significant tombs of the Sixth Dynasty, that of Prince Mereruka, neglected the rooms devoted to his wife, Princess Watetkhethor, and concentrated on only the husband's part of the tomb

(Duell 1938). Such were the biases of male researchers in the 1930s.

The monuments of ancient Egyptian queens or great royal wives (as they were called) are too numerous to recount here. Many are familiar to everyone, however, such as the painted portrait bust of Queen Nefertiti, wife of the controversial pharaoh Akhenaten, or the colossal figure of Nefertari, wife of Ramesses the Great, sculpted into the facade of the smaller temple of Abu Simbel. Larger-than-life statues of queens appeared in the Old Kingdom and continued into the Middle Kingdom, but it was during the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Dynasties that the most dazzling array of monuments commemorating great women was produced. The colossal pair statue of Amenhotep III and his common-born wife Queen Tiye dominates the main court of the Cairo Museum, and a colossus (31 feet tall) of the daughter of Ramesses the Great once stood beside his colossus that still stands at a temple in Akhmim. The attractive features of this princess, Meryetamun, have



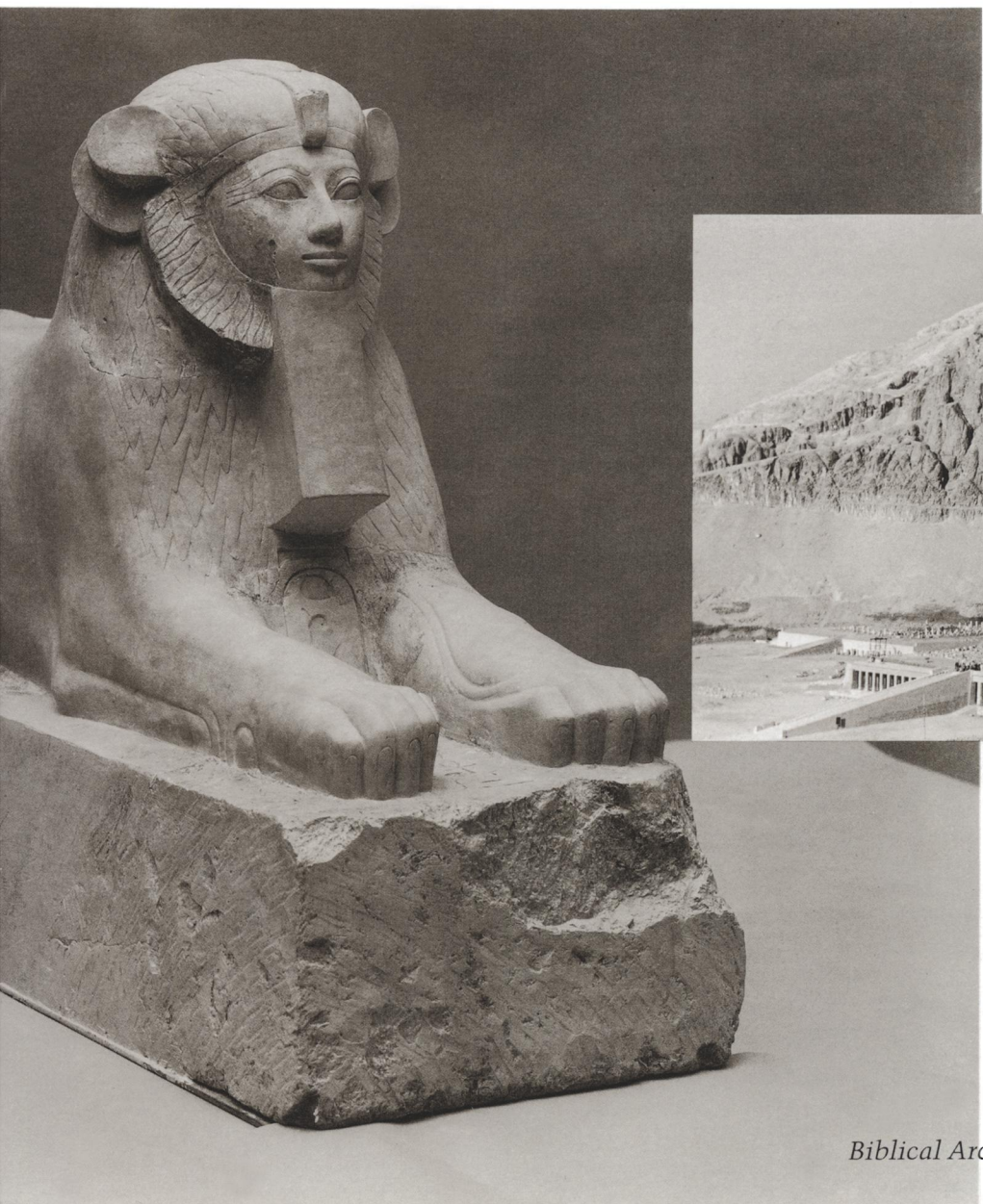
Mut (wife of Amon); in earlier ages she was closely associated with the goddess Neit. The famous pair statue in the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston depicting King Menkaure, builder of the third Giza pyramid, and his queen, Khamerernebt, is the epitome of equality in size and strength. The two figures share the traditional masculine stance of left foot forward. The queen's features are repeated on statues of the goddess Hathor found nearby in this temple.

Some daughters of the god, as full-blooded royal princesses were called, not only legitimized a half-brother or an unrelated candidate's claim to rule, they actually took the reins of government. The best known example of this was Hatshepsut in

the Eighteenth Dynasty. Her magnificent mortuary temple at Deir el-Bahri is the greatest monument to a woman surviving from antiquity. Numerous statues of her have been uncovered by excavations, most of which are on display at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. They include leonine sphinxes and towering Osiride statues, all bearing the queen's delicately feminine face. Some sculptures show Hatshepsut in garb traditionally worn by male pharaohs; others show her in a dress.

New Kingdom pharaohs were apt to provide chapels for their predecessors within their own mortuary temples, but Hatshepsut, instead of dedicating a chapel for her late husband, turned it over to services

for her father. Inscriptions in the temple purport to quote Thutmose I as pronouncing his daughter his heir and asking the chief men of the realm to support her (Neville 1898: plates LXI-LXII). Not content with this paternal political support, Hatshepsut also clarified her divine right to rule by recording the miracle of her birth on the walls of the second terrace, north end, with vast and detailed scenes of her divine conception and birth (Neville 1896: plates XLVII-XLIX; LIII-LIV). Also illustrated are how Amon, king of the gods, designated Hatshepsut's mother to be his bride; how she conceived Hatshepsut; how all the great ancestral goddesses aided her birth and suckled her; and, later, how the great god arranged and presided over her coronation. To celebrate 15 years on the throne, Hatshepsut held a jubilee and erected obelisks sheathed in gold alloy; they were taller than her father's and loomed above the roof line of the Karnak temple.



Above: The terraced mortuary temple of Queen Hatshepsut at Deir el-Bahri on the west bank at Luxor is the greatest monument to a woman surviving from antiquity. **Left:** There are numerous statues of this Eighteenth Dynasty queen, who reigned during an age of prosperity, sophistication and relative peace. This sphinx emphasizes Hatshepsut's kingly role by presenting her as a lion, an age-old motif regarded as the prerogative of kings. Photo courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (31.3.94).

Hatshepsut reigned in an age of prosperity, sophistication and relative peace, which she claimed to have kept herself by joining her troops across Egypt's southern boundary in displays of military force. Hatshepsut was followed on the throne by her nephew, the highly capable ruler Thutmose III, who has been called the Napoleon of Egypt for his empire building (although he was really repeating exploits of Hatshepsut's father). Thutmose III is believed to have been responsible for the eventual destruction of Hatshepsut's monuments. If so, we must suspect that the memory of this strong female pharaoh lingered in the minds of her people and was viewed as a threat by her male successors.

Hatshepsut came from a long line of dynamic women. Among these was Queen Ahmose-Nefertari, wife of Ahmose, founder of the Eighteenth Dynasty. Ahmose-Nefertari was given considerable authority in the cult of the King of the Gods when she was made God's Wife of Amon, a position that held a chief role as a priestess in the national cult center and was provided with goods and property legally documented and published for all to see on a monumental stela set up in the temple of Amon at Karnak (Robins 1983: 70–73). There is no question that Ahmose-Nefertari functioned actively as a priestess in the Amon cult and that she wielded considerable economic power and controlled building projects at several cult sites throughout the country. Even beyond this, her royal titles included the exceptional Female Chieftain of Upper and Lower Egypt, which makes it likely that after her husband died she ruled as regent for her son, Amenhotep I. New Kingdom queens generally had to be content with having their funerary cult place within the mortuary temple of their husbands, but Amenhotep erected a mortuary temple for her. Ahmose-Nefertari outlived Amenhotep and was honored as well by his picked

successor, Thutmose I, when he set up a colossal statue of the old queen in the court he built at Karnak. It was Thutmose's daughter, Hatshepsut, who later succeeded to the God's Wife position.

During the last 10 dynasties private statuary markedly decreased.

After her death, Ahmose-Nefertari was deified, and her name was evoked in prayers alongside those of the Theban holy triad. Her cult was popular in Egypt for many centuries, particularly among the

Wall paintings in many private tombs memorialize the great queen.

Major monuments of another Eighteenth Dynasty queen came unexpectedly to light when a University of Toronto excavation team led by Donald B. Redford set out to recover temples that the heretic king Amenhotep IV (Akhenaten) built at Karnak and dedicated to his new god, the solar disc, Aten. Such structures were known to exist because of the thousands of loose, small stone blocks (*talatat*) that had lain un-assembled for many years, like misplaced pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, in the shadows of the Karnak temple. When Canadian and Egyptian archaeologists began to study the blocks and uncover more from the interior of the second and tenth pylons (where the blocks had been reused after Akhenaten's temples had been torn down), the excavators were astonished to find that the predominant royal figure in the cult of the god was Queen Nefertiti.

The largest of the two Aten temples at Karnak (the Gem Pa Aten) had many rows of piers decorated with large scenes of Nefertiti and her eldest daughter, Meretaten, sacrificing to the sun disk at the high altar. Another temple, the Mansion of the Benben Stone (the age-old sacred totem of the sun god), was "wholly given over to the use of the queen" (Redford 1984: 138). Its pyloned gateways also had large scenes showing the queen and her eldest daughters as celebrants in the cult. The queen appears twice as often as her husband in the *talatat* scenes and sometimes in other pharaonic roles, such as in the guise of a warrior brandishing a scimitar, ready to smite a captive (Redford 1984: 78).

Egyptologists have yet to resolve the question of why Nefertiti is so much more prominent than Akhenaten in scenes at Thebes. Was she assigned to the sacred city as a representative of the king ruling from the old capital of Memphis in the north? Such a role later fell to the daughters

Ancient Egyptian Chronology 3100–30 B.C.E.	
First Dynasty	3100–2890
Second Dynasty	2890–2686
Old Kingdom	
Third Dynasty	2686–2613
Fourth Dynasty	2613–2494
Fifth Dynasty	2494–2345
Sixth Dynasty	2345–2181
1st Intermediate Period 2181–2050	
Middle Kingdom	
Eleventh Dynasty	2134–1991
Twelfth Dynasty	1991–1786
2nd Intermediate Period 1786–1567	
New Kingdom	
Eighteenth Dynasty	1567–1320
Nineteenth Dynasty	1320–1200
Twentieth Dynasty	1200–1085
3rd Intermediate Period 1085–747	
Late Period	
Kushite (Twenty-fifth) Dynasty	747–664
Saite (Twenty-sixth) Dynasty	664–525
Persian Conquest	525
Alexander's Conquest	332
Ptolemaic Rule 305–30	

tomb workers of the pharaohs who thought of her and her son as their special patrons because under them the workers' village in the great Theban necropolis was founded.

of the monarchs of the Third Intermediate Period. Akhenaten's predecessor, Amenhotep III, seems to have favored Thebes as his residence, and he may have had a closer relationship with Nefertiti than is usually thought, possibly as the surrogate father of her children. If medical experts are correct and Akhenaten suffered from Froehlich's syndrome (a malfunction of the pituitary that causes, among other conditions, sterility), he could not have fathered Nefertiti's six daughters (Harris and Hussien 1988: 126; Aldred 1988: 231–32). Her father-in-law, however, had already sired several daughters and would have been the only reasonable answer to the young couple's desire for heirs. Scenes depicting Amenhotep III as a corpulent old man were found at the site of Tell el-Amarna, where Akhenaten and

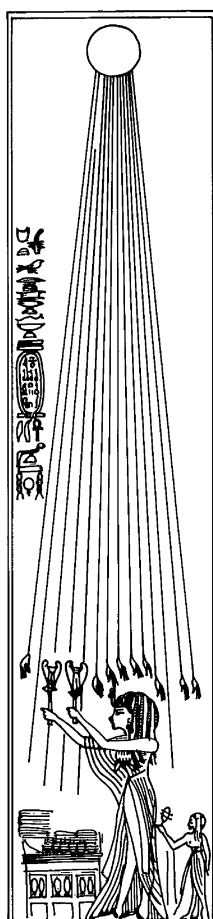


Above right: Nefertiti was the wife of Amenhotep IV (Akhenaten), the controversial Eighteenth Dynasty pharaoh who worshiped the solar disc, Aten, above all other gods. In this scene from one Aten temple at Karnak (now destroyed), Nefertiti and her daughter are shown offering sacrifices at the altar of Aten, whose rays shine down upon them. Courtesy of Donald B. Redford. **Above:** On some talatat scenes from Karnak, Nefertiti is shown in pharaonic roles, as in this image of her boat that includes a kiosk (top block, far left) in which she is portrayed as a warrior ready to strike an enemy. Photo courtesy of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (63.260, 64.521).

Nefertiti did not reside until year six of Akhenaten's reign. It is possible, as Cyril Aldred has suggested, that these and other scenes indicate Amenhotep III was still alive at the time (Aldred 1988: 176–82). Thus he could have fathered Nefertiti's children as well as been a strong backer of her leadership role to the disadvantage of his sickly and deformed son. It is also possible that Nefertiti,

being more obviously physically fit than her husband, may simply have arrogated to herself political and religious power. Once Amenhotep III died, however, Nefertiti seems to have gradually lost out to her eldest daughter, whose presence in inscriptions began to increase and who apparently became her father's new favorite (Redford 1984: 187–88).

Some scholars have argued for a



name change and even greater political power for Nefertiti in the guise of King Smenkhkare (Sampson 1985: 83–99), but recent research on the royal mummy found in tomb 55 in the Valley of the Kings (Harris 1989) seems to confirm that another young royal man, very likely a brother of Tutankhamun, preceded Tut on the throne of the pharaohs. Possibly Nefertiti had become ill or blind by middle age—blindness is a distinct possibility for anyone who stares directly into the sun's rays, especially on numerous occasions—but, in any case, her days of glory seem to have been in her youth.

During the last 10 dynasties private statuary noticeably decreased, perhaps as a result of economic uncertainties, but numerous monuments of various types—statues, tombs, temple shrines and monumental inscriptions—belong to women of rank in Egypt's postempire dynasties, the Third Intermediate Period and the Late Period. Pharaohs of the Twenty-first to Twenty-third Dynasties ruled from the north but felt the need to have a family representative based in the south, a position which, after the New Kingdom, became politically independent under the high priests of Amon. During this period pharaohs turned to their daughters and not their sons to represent their interests in the south. Thus a royal princess was customarily married to a Theban high priest and became a chief concubine of Amon-Re. The daughter of such a union would assume the old sacerdotal title of God's Wife of Amon. As previously discussed, numerous benefices accompanied this title. Decrees in the name of the King of the Gods were carved on the walls of Karnak's seventh and tenth pylons, confirming the proprietary rights of these royal women and extending deification to them posthumously. With estates and officials to serve them, the God's Wives lived like monarchs and carried out the official religious functions hitherto reserved for the king.

Indeed, later pharaohs installed their daughters in this important post.

Impoverishment and insecurity marked the postempire period, and the Twenty-second Dynasty was marked by near civil war between Upper and Lower Egypt, leaving the door open to invasion from the south. A Kushite (Nubian) invasion in the Twenty-fifth Dynasty brought peace



Amenirdis I, daughter of the Kushite ruler Kashta, ruled jointly with Shepenupet I, daughter of the last native ruler, for at least 13 years during the Twenty-fifth Dynasty. As the God's Wife, Amenirdis left many monuments, including some finely sculptured portraits, such as this piece now in the Joslyn Art Museum in Omaha, Nebraska (1953.80). The style of the wig harkens back to Middle Kingdom and even Old Kingdom coiffures, but the crown is more suggestive of the New Kingdom. Photo courtesy of the Joslyn Art Museum.

only at the cost of many lives, and this peace was once again broken by attacks from the east. Not only did mighty Assyria invade Egypt twice, but Assyrian troops extended their rampage as far up the river as Thebes, where they desecrated the great temples and stripped them of much treasure. Through it all, in unbroken succession by adoption, the female

pontiff maintained her presence as the chief sacerdotal authority in Thebes. Indeed, most scholars who have written about this phenomenon believe that the God's Wife was a veritable sovereign of the Theban area and areas to the south. Certainly the royal women who functioned in this office dominated the official art of the period.

Shepenupet I, daughter of the last native ruler, was forced to adopt Amenirdis I, the daughter of the Kushite ruler Kashta, an ardent follower of Amon. Amenirdis I ruled jointly with Shepenupet I for at least 13 years. As the God's Wife, Amenirdis I left many monuments, including some finely sculptured portraits of herself. One portrait, now in the Joslyn Art Museum in Omaha, Nebraska, is not the most flattering of Amenirdis (although it plays down her foreign features) and harkens back to much older artistic traditions. More innovative and alive is the faience statuette in Cairo of the same God's Wife shown in the lap of the god Amon; they are in a close embrace, with their arms flung around each other. No product of Egyptian artists has ever better displayed such passion between lovers.

In addition to monumental inscriptions and individual portraits, royal women bearing the title of God's Wife left funerary monuments and tombs. Along the southeastern corner of the great outer wall of the mortuary temple of Ramesses III at Medinet Habu, located on the southern end of the west bank at Luxor, is a series of elegant funeral chapels (Hoelscher 1954: 17–29). Among the best preserved is the sandstone chapel of Amenirdis I with its fine, raised relief decoration and figures drawn in "classic proportions and purity of line" (Aldred 1980: 222). Amenirdis's inscriptions, like those of others who held the title of God's Wife, describe her as Mistress of Upper and Lower Egypt, and at death she was deified.

Less than a century after the

reign of Amenirdis, a northern Egyptian leader whose power base was the city of Sais in the Nile Delta came to the fore with Assyrian help and founded the Twenty-sixth Dynasty. This ruler, Psamtik, had his young daughter, Nitocris, adopted into the College of Divine Adoratrices at Thebes, although she had to wait her turn during the reigns of Shepenupet II and her adopted daughter (and actual niece) Amenirdis II. A huge granite stela set up at Karnak's west end documents Psamtik's formal entrance into Thebes and the endowment to be given to Nitocris after the death of those holding the title of God's Wife (Caminos 1964: 74–76). Nitocris lived for 70 years beyond the date of her adoption into the priestly hierarchy. She adopted her own great niece, Ankhes Neferibre,



In addition to monumental inscriptions and individual portraits, royal women bearing the title of God's Wife left funerary monuments and tombs. Along the southeastern corner of the great outer wall of the mortuary temple of Ramesses III at Medinet Habu is a series of elegant funeral chapels, pictured here. Among the best preserved is the sandstone chapel of Amenirdis I. Photo courtesy of The Oriental Institute of The University of Chicago.

who became the last God's Wife but lost her power in 525 B.C.E. as a result of the Persian conquest of Egypt.

Space does not allow for a review of the many monuments dating to the Ptolemaic Period and its famous queens (most notably Arsinoe II and Cleopatra VII). Suffice it to say that although Egypt's last independent rulers were foreign born they found

much to emulate from earlier Egyptian culture, the political importance of the royal women as well as the grand temples. These rulers also respected the age-old legal traditions of independence and greater rights for women by allowing two law codes to coexist so that women—Egyptian or Hellene—would not have to suffer the constraints of Greek laws but would have a choice as to which they would use (Pomeroy 1984: 119–20).

During the classical age, well-read authors were the best publicists for the independence of the Egyptian woman, which they found quite shocking. The Greek historian Herodotus, for example, commented:

As the Egyptians have a climate peculiar to themselves . . . so have they made all their customs and laws of a kind contrary for the most part to those of all other men. Among them, the women buy and sell, the men abide at home and weave; and whereas in weaving all others push the woof upwards, the Egyptians push it downwards. Men carry burdens on their heads, women on their shoulders (*History*, book 2, chapter 35; see Godley 1966: 315–16).

Conclusion

As these monuments show, modern archaeology has uncovered concrete evidence that ancient Egyptian women led full lives. Although monuments left by commoners are not as large in scale or as fine as those of royal women, they are most eloquent, for they speak of independence and self-respect on the part of many women who lived in Egypt more than 3,000 years ago.

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