

# *The Impact of Religion on the Status of Women in Ancient Egypt*

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**Abstract:** The study of ancient Egyptian religion and femininity in today's academic world has become increasingly sophisticated and comprehensive, but there are still some gaps. This paper explores the impact of religion on women's status in ancient Egypt. Through case studies and literature review, the author analyses the positive impact of religion on women's status in ancient Egypt and the limitations that still exist from the perspectives of cognitive archaeology and femininity. As discussed and analysed, it can be seen that women in ancient Egypt did not have access to higher power and status due to the lack of educational opportunities and the domestic duties they had to undertake, but on the bright side, the existence of the religion in ancient Egypt and its widespread worship guaranteed women's religious participation and allowed them to gain power and status in the religious sphere, which in turn gradually extended their well-being in the practical sphere.

**Keywords:** Religion, Status of Women, Ancient Egypt, Priestess

## 1. Introduction

Ancient Egyptian civilization is of great value for the study of both its history and religion due to its antiquity, and women with functional titles in the history of the pharaohs are more in the minority. The motivation for this paper stems from the author's interest in ancient Egyptian religion, as well as the current gap in academic research on the relationship between religion and women's status in ancient Egypt. The paper introduces women's symbols and imagery in ancient Egyptian religious myths and studies religious rituals as well as the power and social roles of women in ancient Egypt. Since Egyptology and women's studies are both popular and novel directions at present, and the current academic world focuses more on the interpretation of cultural relics and religious texts, this paper intends to explore the impact of ancient Egyptian religion on women's status from the perspective of cognitive archaeology and women's studies through the case study method and the literature search method, in the hope of filling the gaps in the study of women in Ancient Egypt.

## 2. Female Symbols and Imagery in Religious Mythology

The status of women in ancient Egypt was closely related to their religious beliefs, and this paper discusses the religion of ancient Egypt in terms of myths and rituals. Myths are an expression of ancient Egyptian religion as well as the religions of other ancient civilizations, and they served as the basis for religious rituals. In ancient Egypt, myths were used as a means of expressing emotional

impulses and strong hopes and prayers. Further, in mythology, the title and image of a god not only represented the power he wielded but also reflected the prayers and aspirations of the people who believed in him at the time [1]. There are quite a number of goddess figures in Egyptian mythology. For example, Mut (the pre-eminent goddess of Thebes), Nut (goddess of the sky), and Hathor (goddess of love, childbirth, music, and dance) were among the many symbols of the Pharaoh's mother. Examples also include Ma'at (goddess personifying all the elements of cosmic harmony, including Truth, Justice, and Moral Integrity), who symbolizes unchanging cosmic order. Another example is the toad goddess Heqet, who symbolizes fertility and fecundity. Of the large number of goddesses who are concerned with power and status, the most typical is Isis, the Goddess of immense magical power and symbolic mother of the king [2]. It is clear from her title that her religious cult was no longer just a worship of the Mother Goddess, a spiritual belief in the harmony of public order and good morals, or a wish for abundance and life, but rather a link to the power of the king. Similarly, Nephthys, the Funerary goddess and a protector of the pharaoh who is sometimes described as being her menstrual blood [3], has a title that abstracts the symbols of kingship in a very feminine way, embodying both the worship of women's fertility and the worship and the pharaoh's desire for the goddess to shelter them in power.

In order to explore whether women in ancient Egypt could use the ancient title of goddess to symbolize their political legitimacy and cultural capital, a particular population is introduced here. The priestesses, or prophetesses, of Hathor worked in the temples from prehistoric times until Roman times, serving this Foremost of Heaven and Chantress of Amun, or having the full range of symbols about women. However, in Ancient Egypt, women's unique bodily functions, namely childbirth and menstruation, made them considered "impure," and only a pure body could be a servant of a god or goddess [4]. Thus, while these women continued to perform music and dance in the temples as part of their duties, they were merely exercising religious participation, not gaining religious power or status. It is true that there was no shortage of exceptional people with official titles among them, but they were mostly daughters of the king. Even so, this has given archaeologists a glimpse of one of the better forms of female participation in the religious context of ancient Egypt.

### 3. Religious Rituals and Female Empowerment in Ancient Egypt

Religious rituals were a way for people to reproduce myths and practice their will, and, more importantly, religious participation was also an important way for ancient Egyptians to demonstrate their power and social status, and for rulers to consolidate their religious legitimacy and the continuity of their power. As a result, the status and power of women in ancient Egypt tended to follow the positions they held in religious cult practices as well as the political situation, and in the previous point, this paper has already mentioned the most typical and potentially power-symbolizing of these positions, the priestess. However, the majority of Hathor priestesses were more like mere temple workers and did not embody official divine authority. The following paper focuses on one specific priestess and looks at one of her ritual artifacts to explore in more detail the changes in the power of the priestess in ancient Egypt.

The subject of the study is the papyrus of Nestanebetisheru; frame 63. This papyrus depicts a scene that appears in large numbers in ancient Egyptian tombs, but this time, it behaves differently. The content depicted on this papyrus is from *The Book of the Dead*. It is an incantation, or recitable text, created to teach the dead how to protect themselves from demons on the way to the underworld, and how to answer questions from the 42 gods, or even fool them during the judgement. In the Middle Kingdom, they were written on the walls of the tombs, together with pictures, which is why they are also called "coffin texts". Finally, in the New Kingdom, it was written on a scroll, on

papyrus, and placed inside a coffin. *The Book of the Dead* was initially used exclusively by the pharaohs, but later, it was extended to other officials and finally spread to the people.

The object is a full page black line vignette of Spell 125 showing judgement and weighing of the heart against Ma'at. The deceased stands before an enthroned Osiris, with Isis and Nephthys behind him, as Anubis weighs the deceased's heart whilst Thoth records and Ammit stands by. In the top right corner is a separate register showing a winged beetle on a barque before four seated figures. Two separate hieroglyphic labels written in black ink identify Osiris [5].

Such scenes appear already in the Mid-Eighteenth Dynasty, but often on a small scale; from the end of the Eighteenth Dynasty to the Ptolemaic Period, the weighing of the heart is regularly the dominant image in the centre of papyrus, often with elaborate details. However, in this papyrus of the 21st to 22nd dynasties, in the same scene, it is Osiris who dominates the picture, not the weighing of the heart, which is a different pattern of evolution from most of the books of the dead of the same type.

During the 21st to 22nd dynasties, due to war and division, the power of the pharaohs declined, while the power of the priests became more and more powerful. More importantly, in such a special era, the owner of this object also possessed an extremely special identity. Nestanebetisheru is the daughter of the High Priest Panedjem II; Head of Leaders of the First Chorus of Amun; Head of Noblewomen; First Leader-in-Chief of Musicians of Amonrasothis; Priestess of Amun-Ra, Onuris-Shu, and Inheret-Shu, Lord of Iurud; Son of Ra; Servant of the Archive of Amonrasothis [6], which symbolizes the high degree of combination of divine and secular power in women, and as a priest she controls the people's spiritual world through a series of religious forces represented by Osiris, which in turn influences the politics and the economy, etc. It is very likely that the magnification of the image of Osiris is a figurative embodiment of this expansion of divine power.

In ancient (especially 21st to 22nd Dynasty) Egypt, the desire of the priests to extend their power in the secular world would be reflected in religious documents. Religious texts such as the Book of the Dead not only help us to understand the religious story, but also reflect the expansion of the power of the priests in ancient Egypt on a secular level, and women could also play such an important role in the political and religious arena and dared to break the secular norms.

#### 4. The Social Role of Women in Ancient Egypt

For the ancient Egyptians, religion was the answer to the explanation of all the remarkable powers of the universe and nature, and the order and laws of operation of human society, and the beginning of the state was founded by the gods and not by men [7], so that the whole ancient Egyptian society up and down the country was influenced by religious beliefs, and religion was an essential and fundamental part of the life of every Egyptian.

It is worth noting that a few of the Ancient Egyptian women already mentioned in this paper who gained power and status as a result of their religious involvement were of plebeian origin. In order to ensure the purity of their noble lineage and to prevent the exodus of power, most of them came from the closed hereditary aristocracy [8]. However, this does not mean that ordinary women did not have religious participation and the power that was given to them. In ancient Egypt, the social duties of ordinary women were not the same as those of men; educated men tended to be more likely to decide on important religious matters in public life, whereas women tended to be more responsible for domestic affairs and provide ancillary services to religious causes [9].

Naturally, the goddesses were favoured by ancient Egyptian women for their female symbolism, playing the role of Isis and Nephthys as weepers, or offering steles and libations at the temples of Hathor and the Nile goddesses. In a present-day archaeological excavation at the site of a temple of Hathor in Thebes, the number of stelae dedicated by women exceeded those dedicated by men [10].

In ancient Egyptian society, medicine was equated with magic, and this magic was chanted by doctors in the form of incantations that were used to ward off all sorts of poisonous creatures. Most of the magical incantations were for women, as the goddess Isis was in charge of magic, and they who chanted the incantations were the embodiment of the goddess, which led to the necessity of an educated population amongst the general female population to master these magics as well.

## 5. Conclusion

According to this thesis, the impact of religion on the status of women in Ancient Egypt can be broadly understood in terms of the religious beliefs of the ancient Egyptians and the roles played by women, as well as the social roles of women in Ancient Egypt. Through the distribution of religious beliefs, power, and religious offices, it is evident how women in Ancient Egypt gained and used power by virtue of their hereditary status and how the average woman of the time could only serve as a male support due to her lack of power to receive an education. The universality of religion in Ancient Egypt provided wide scope for the religious participation of ordinary women, but the lack of education and domestic duties reduced their chances of rising in power, although the presence of numerous goddesses in Ancient Egyptian religion still guaranteed religious participation and the right to education for a large number of women.

Regarding this thesis and research, there are still many limitations to be improved. Firstly, there is a lack of relevant literature and the knowledge read may be too one-sided. Due to the antiquity, diversity, and complexity of ancient Egyptian religion, the ideas in this paper may not be highly persuasive. Second, there is a lack of interdisciplinary thinking. The issues studied in this thesis involve complex topics in many fields, such as archaeology, feminism, sociology, and religion, and need to incorporate as many research methods from other disciplines as possible, and should not be confined to archaeology. Thirdly, not enough attention is paid to women. Women are the focus of this thesis, which may have focused too much on the religious aspect and neglected to show other important factors in the historical context, such as the social, political, and cultural environment. In this regard, the author will endeavor to find more ways to read academic works, master basic interdisciplinary research attitudes and methods, and design and think about the thesis in a more comprehensive way in future academic research.

In conclusion, this paper would like to point out further research on the group of priestesses in ancient Egypt, which hopefully can serve as a worthwhile direction for the future academic community.

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