

Preface

The time has come for a book that *quantifies* what women were doing in early Egyptian history. ‘Not another women’s study!’ I can imagine the outcry. The androcentric groans and whispers echo down the hallowed halls of academia. Alas, this is often the reaction to women-specific studies. I have had many conversations, some misogynistically inclined, that claimed the topic has already been done. Egyptian women have been prominent in Egyptological scholarship for over a generation! Had I considered using the current preference of third-wave gendered approaches, which offer comparative studies that evaluate how male and female activities come together? I have encountered many forms of resistance to my chosen research topic over the last half a decade. So why persist? What relevance does a twenty-first-century study of women in early Egyptian history have to offer to the broader study of women’s history?

To answer this question, it is necessary to condense a lengthy and complicated historical account of women’s history into a short narrative. Firstly, I want to applaud all those who came before me and paved the way to raising the profile of the often-neglected stories of the long-past daughters, sisters, mothers, aunts, and grandmothers of antiquity. Even before we consider such narratives, it is only fitting to express our gratitude and respect for first-wave feminists such as Mary Wollstonecraft and the many women of the Suffragist Movements. They initially fought to reform society for women’s social inequality, the benefits of which many of us enjoy today. Ironically, one of the earliest publications on ancient Egyptian women was on their legal status (Paturet and Revillout 1886). Yet at the same time, women across the globe struggled to attain any such status or fundamental civil or social equality.

The women’s liberation movement from the late 1960s and early 1970s continued the call of first-wave feminists. Second-wave feminism sparked a global interest in restoring women to all areas of prehistory and history. Armed with feminist critique, they systematically challenged the reified androcentric frame of reference in Sociology, Archaeology and History discourses.¹ Egyptology, however, was a latecomer to the women and gender arena (Navrátilová 2012, 153–4), especially when you consider that Scandinavian archaeologists had started publishing feminist studies in the 1970s (Graves-Brown 2010, x). In contrast, the often-cited book *Ancient Egypt: A Social History* (Trigger et al. 1983) offers a single entry in the index for ‘women’. The omission of half the population from the authors’ enquiry into ancient

Egypt’s social history is indicative of scholarly insouciance more than an absence of scholarship on ancient Egyptian women at that time.

A number of works had considered primarily royal but also non-royal women. Mertz’s unpublished dissertation, *Certain Titles of the Egyptian Queens and Their Bearing on the Hereditary Rights to the Throne* (Mertz 1952) was followed by Wenig’s *Die frau im alten Aegypten* (Wenig 1967), Reiser’s dissertation *Der Königliche Harim im alten Ägypten und seine Verwaltung* (Reiser 1972), and Millard’s *The Position of Women in the Family and in Society in Ancient Egypt, With Special Reference to the Middle Kingdom* (Millard 1976). A couple of years later, Lesko published *The Remarkable Women of Ancient Egypt* (Lesko 1978). The individual works *Untersuchungen zu den ägyptischen Königinnen der Frühzeit und des alten Reiches: Quellen und Historische Einordnung* (Seipel 1980) and *The Development of the Titulary and Iconography of the Ancient Egyptian Queen from Dynasty One to Early Dynasty Eighteen* (Sabbahy 1984) considered various aspects of the iconography and titulary of queenship. These were followed by Troy’s ground-breaking theoretical work reconstructing the patterns of queenship from ancient mythology, published in 1986 as *Patterns of Queenship in Ancient Egyptian Myth and History*. Peter Schultz’s *Frauen im Alten Ägypten: Selbständigkeit und Gleichberechtigung im häuslichen und öffentlichen Leben* was published the same year as the flagship interdisciplinary Conference on Women in the Ancient Near East that was held by Brown University. The conference proceedings were published as *Women’s Earliest Records: From Egypt and Western Asia; Proceedings of the Conference on Women in the Ancient Near East, Brown University, Providence, Rhode Island, November 5–7, 1987* (Lesko 1989), heralding the start of a new era of Egyptological women’s studies.

As a result, a succession of English publications on the women of ancient Egypt was delivered in the 1990s. The sub-discipline, now termed ‘gender studies’, initially focused nearly exclusively on women. These studies generally employed two different approaches. The first was the traditional descriptive approach that focused on locating women and their details in the archaeological record, Meskell’s ‘finding women’ (Meskell 1997, 598), but not all publications were regarded as being of equal value. A number of these books were delivered as compilations that were censored for their broad scope and non-theoretical contributions, perceived as applying an ‘add women and stir approach’ (Lesko 1993, 207; Meskell 1997, 598). The compilations of *Women in Ancient Egypt* (Robins 1993) and *Mistress of the House, Mistress of Heaven: Women in Ancient Egypt* (Capel and Markoe 1996), however, were more positively received due to their engagement with, and critical analysis of the archaeological data (Eyre

¹ See: Conkey & Spector (1984); Dommasnes (1992); Meskell (1997, 1999); Gero & Conkey (1991, 1997); Wylie (1992, 1997); Spencer-Wood (1992, 2000, 2007); Sweely (1999); Meyers (2003); Nelson (2004); Pyburn (2004); Adovasio, Soffer & Page (2007); Spongberg et al. (2005); Sørensen (2007); Balme & Bulbeck (2008); Wilfong (2010); Skogstrand (2011); Praetzelis (2016).

1995, 232–3). The analysis of the philology, art, and archaeological artefacts placed these contributions into the ‘sound study of women’ category (Meskell 1997, 597). While these books offer specificity and detailed knowledge of women’s lives, there was still no embodiment of individual women (599). An aspect this book wishes to illuminate.

The second approach adopted more gendered analytical methods, addressing research topics from different standpoints, crossing disciplinary boundaries, and considering feminist perspectives, which were more often theoretically based. An early instance was the study of the village of Deir el-Medina, which has been pivotal for gender-based investigations of New Kingdom society. One of the earliest interdisciplinary approaches to the village was the journal article ‘An Archaeology of Social Relations in an Egyptian Village’ (Meskell 1998). While her work was innovative and instrumental to the discipline, in 2018, Rocha da Silva faulted Meskell’s work as it engendered the usage of space based on outdated binary forms of females being inside (private) and males outside (public) (Rocha da Silva 2018, 299–300). This dichotomy is now out of step with third-wave approaches. Other studies considered the roles and status of women from the community (Toivari-Viitala 2001), and included a rarely considered aspect in Egyptology, that of the ageing women in the village (Sweeney 2006).

Another theoretical approach is the progressive field of Afrocentric scholarship that aims to place ancient Egyptian women (and men) back into an African context (for examples, see Alameen 2013; Alameen-Shavers 2018). Afrocentrism stems from Martin Bernal’s seminal work of *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classic Civilization* (Bernal 1987). The Afrocentric approach derives from Molefi Asante’s conceptual framework, which is based on the principles of *Maat*, ‘the quest for justice, truth and harmony’ and *Nommo*, ‘the productive word, and here it describes the creation of knowledge as a vehicle for improvement in human relations’ (Reviere 2001, 710–11; Asante 1987, 1990). The Afrocentric approach challenges traditional Eurocentric research. More recently, Sesanti addressed the decolonisation argument in her article on ancient Egyptian queens, where she described the impact of ‘the reduction of African women ... into objects of denigration by European colonialism’ (Sesanti 2019, 431). Regardless of whose standpoint, traditional descriptive studies, or gendered analytical investigations are discussed, these studies collectively continue to contribute to the augmented knowledge of the historical and cultural context of women and gender practices in ancient Egypt.

So why a women’s study and not a gendered or comparative study? To achieve third-wave feminists’ aims to displace dichotomous research by investigating how men’s and women’s activities come together situationally, we need to gain a fundamental understanding of women’s activities in key structures of Egyptian society. This area remains under-represented in modern scholarship. The administration,

officials, and their titles have received extensive study, with Egyptologists compiling an immense corpus and gaining a wealth of knowledge about male title holders. Women’s titles have not received the same attention, and therefore there is a need to develop a greater understanding of women’s active and public engagement in the early Egyptian state. The predominance of males employed in centralised state administration, private sectors, and religious positions has overshadowed the roles of the female workforce, leading to an academic perception that women were excluded from these sectors. Therefore, this book explores the various roles of women in the earliest Egyptian state through the lens of their titles and iconography as revealed in early inscriptions of the third millennium BCE. While not yet a comparative study, it does apply theoretical aspects to ancient inscriptions and historical evidence to demonstrate female involvement, influence, and impact in social power domains and the socioeconomic structure of the early state.

The aim of feminist studies is not to identify men and women as equals, but to examine their differences and to demonstrate that in individual ways, both men and women are indispensable members of groups, tribes, cultures and societies (Sørensen 2007, 75).

Regrettably, gendered inequality is still prevalent worldwide within many diverse cultures. Comprehending identifiable factors that have led to inequality is one key to deconstructing the legitimisation of discrimination based on gender, ageism, ableism, and all other marginalised categories imposed on humanity. Accumulating evidence of positive female references from antiquity is important; doing so assists in destabilising the philosophy behind women’s oppression still current in many modern patriarchal societies. For that reason, I hope this research on historical women contributes to engendering better futures for all women.

