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# Some Observations on Status of Ancient Egyptian Women up to the End of the Middle Kingdom

**May Farouk**
*Tourism Guidance Department, Faculty of Tourism and Hotels, University of Sadat City*

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**ABSTRACT**
The present article examines the status of ancient Egyptian women until the end of the Middle Kingdom, acknowledging the challenges of studying such a vast historical period. Despite extensive research, knowledge about non-elite women remains limited due to reliance on artifacts from temples and tombs, which often depict women in secondary roles. Economic empowerment played a significant role in women's influence, particularly in weaving during the Old Kingdom. However, a decline in women's roles is evident from the Old Kingdom to the Middle Kingdom, marked by fewer administrative titles, a shift towards domestic service roles, economic power loss, reduced participation in agriculture, disappearance from beer production scenes, and a lack of self-presentation texts. This decline is attributed to political disunity and instability during the First Intermediate Period, which weakened central authority and led to a shift towards emphasizing masculinity in societal structures.

**KEYWORDS**
Women, economy, self-representation, religious roles, administrative titles.

# بعض الملاحظات حول مكانة المرأة في مصر القديمة حتى نهاية الدولة الوسطى

**مى فاروق**
*قسم الإرشاد السياحي، كلية السياحة والفنادق، جامعة مدينة السادات*

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**الملخص**
المقالة تفحص وضع النساء في مصر القديمة حتى نهاية المملكة الوسطى، معترفة بالتحديات المرتبطة بدراسة فترة تاريخية واسعة كهذه. على الرغم من الأبحاث المتعمقة، تظل معرفة النساء غير النخبوية محدودة بسبب الاعتماد على القطع الأثرية من المعابد والمقابر، التي غالبًا ما تصور النساء في أدوار ثانوية. لعب التمكين الاقتصادي دورًا مهمًا في تأثير النساء، لا سيما في النسيج خلال المملكة القديمة. ومع ذلك، من الواضح أن هناك تراجعًا في أدوار النساء من المملكة القديمة إلى المملكة الوسطى، حيث يتمثل ذلك في انخفاض الألقاب الإدارية، والتحول إلى أدوار الخدمة المنزلية، وفقدان القوة الاقتصادية، وتقليص المشاركة في الزراعة، واختفاء مشاهد إنتاج البيرة، وعدم وجود نصوص تعبيرية عن الذات. يُعزى هذا التراجع إلى الانقسام السياسي وعدم الاستقرار خلال الفترة الانتقالية الأولى، التي أضعفت السلطة المركزية وأدت إلى بروز الذكورة في الهياكل الاجتماعية.

**الكلمات الدالة**
النساء، الاقتصاد، التمثيل الشخصي، الأدوار الدينية، الألقاب الإدارية.

## Introduction

The study of ancient Egyptian women has captivated Egyptologists, leading to a wealth of scholarly publications. These works span a wide spectrum, including general overviews and focused investigations into women's roles in administration, religion, specific historical epochs, geographical contexts, certain female individuals and their multifaceted societal contributions. However, the vast expanse of ancient Egyptian history—from early prehistoric settlements along the northern Nile valley to the Roman conquest in 30 BC—poses a challenge when attempting to analyze consistent societal norms and cultural practices over such an extended duration. Consequently, conclusions drawn regarding women's status and their roles in ancient Egyptian society often tend to be broadly generalized and impressionistic.

While it is indeed acknowledged that ancient Egyptian women held diverse positions and played pivotal roles, there remains a research gap concerning the evolution of their presence in administration and the economy. Despite abundant evidence of women carrying royal, elite, and non-elite titles, the specific patterns of their involvement in administrative and economic spheres remain relatively unexplored. This lacuna invites further investigation into the dynamics of women's participation and influence during ancient Egyptian times. The current study aims to chronologically trace the rights and positions of Egyptian women until the end of the Middle Kingdom. By examining periods of flourishing or decline, we seek to explore whether specific historical epochs witnessed a loss of rights or privileges that women had previously gained.

Acknowledging the influence of gender norms within ancient Egyptian society—much like in many other patriarchal cultures—is crucial to understanding the dynamics of women's roles. These norms frequently reinforced a distinct division between the domestic sphere, where women were primarily associated with household management, child-rearing, and family obligations, and the public domain, which was often viewed as the realm of male authority and activity. However, this binary framework does not fully capture the complexity and fluidity of women's lived experiences in ancient Egypt. Over time, the balance between domestic and public roles for women was neither fixed nor universally restrictive. It evolved in response to broader social, political, and economic transformations, including shifts in dynastic power, religious developments, and changes in legal structures. Women could hold titles, own property, manage estates, and even participate in temple and state functions, particularly in periods where female agency was more culturally or politically accepted. Examining this delicate and shifting equilibrium not only deepens our understanding of women's status and autonomy in ancient Egypt, but also challenges static interpretations of gender roles, revealing a society that, while patriarchal, allowed for moments and spaces of female empowerment and influence.

## State of research

The position of women in ancient Egypt has attracted considerable scholarly interest, resulting in a rich body of literature that explores their economic, religious, political, familial, and legal roles. Scholars used a range of primary and secondary sources, including iconography, wall inscriptions and documents, to examine both the extent

and variability of women's agency during different periods of ancient Egyptian history.

A critical area of inquiry has been the analysis of administrative roles and bureaucratic status. Groundworks by Ward (1986) and Fischer (1985) set the stage for surveying non-royal women's administrative and bureaucratic titles. These indices are essential tools for researchers identifying and quantifying female officeholders both at the household and estate level, with further quantitative and comparative depth provided by Stefanović (2009) and Doxey (1998). These works align with modern studies—such as El-Kilany and Kamal (2020) which use both texts and iconography to reveal that women operated as musicians, dancers, supervisors of weaving and spinning, bakers, brewers, and importantly as household managers.

Economic agency is another important axis of recent scholarship, as evidenced in both broader syntheses and site-specific studies. Foundational works by Robins (1993), Lesko (1996) and Watterson (2011) together with large exhibition volumes like Capel and Markoe (1997) offer syntheses of archaeological, iconographic, and written evidence, showing that women regularly participated in (and sometimes managed) textile workshops, agricultural production, and property affairs. Localized studies, such as Quirke's on women of Lahun (2007) identify specific households in which non-royal women supervised economic activity, confirming and contextualizing evidence from broader administrative corpora.

The religious sphere presents yet another domain in which women's agency may be traced across multiple registers. Classic studies like Blackman (1921) documented early forms of musical-priestess and ritual service roles available to women from the Early Dynastic period onwards. More recent research, such as Koen (2008), Lesko (1996) and Teeter and Johnson (2009) confirm that non-royal women held priestly titles and benefitted from endowments. Artistically, Wildung and Schoske (1985) and Schmitz (1985) provide rich visual evidence for women as ritual participants and as the focal points of female identity in art and burial. The role of gender performance within religious and familial settings is further developed by Robins (1995), Graves-Brown (2008) and Li (2019).

Legal status—particularly concerning marriage contracts, property rights, inheritance, litigation, and autonomy—constitutes an area of rich and evolving debate in the works of Pestman (1961), Johnson (1996), Andriëtte Ferreira (2004), Lohvynenko (2023) and He (2024). Iconographic analyses of tombs and mortuary stelae—such as those by Swinton (2003) Vasiljević (2007) and McCorquodale (2013) explore the roles of women within the family and the institution of marriage, as represented through the reliefs, paintings, inscriptions, and statuary found in the tombs of elite bureaucrats. Franke (1983) and Lustig (1993) further examine the ways kinship structure and familial authority created pathways for economic advancement and protection. Kóthay (2006) highlights the emergence of the "*nmḫyt*" titles and their welfare implications.

Yet despite extensive research, studies on ancient Egyptian women inadequately depict the lives of the majority of the female population. That is because our information about women in ancient Egypt primarily stems from surviving temples and tombs, which were resource-intensive to construct. As a result, non-royal and non-elite women remain underrepresented, leaving us with limited knowledge about their daily lives. Additionally, even when women of royal or elite status appear in

various sources, they are often portrayed as secondary figures to the male tomb owners. Thus, as Ayad (2022, p. 221) observed, the depiction in these textual and artistic representations primarily reflects a ‘’dual male perspective: that of the male relatives who commissioned the work and that of the scribes and artists involved in its creation’’. Another significant limitation in reconstructing and comparing gender roles across dynastic Egypt is the inconsistent number of surviving scenes and inscriptions from different periods. The quantity and richness of visual and textual sources vary greatly across time, making comparisons between eras methodologically challenging. For instance, the Middle Kingdom—despite being well known for its tomb models and literary texts—has yielded far fewer tomb scenes involving women than the Old Kingdom. This disparity complicates efforts to assess whether the apparent decline in women's visibility and roles during the Middle Kingdom reflects an actual societal shift or is partially the result of an uneven archaeological record. Consequently, any analysis of continuity or change in gender roles must be approached with caution, acknowledging the gaps and biases inherent in the surviving evidence.

Moreover, contemporary interpretations of women’s roles in the ancient world introduce an additional layer of complexity. As noted by Kelly (2022), numerous gender biases encountered in historical scholarship originate from the prevailing gender assumptions within the authors’ society. For example, Egyptologists, influenced by their own biases regarding body art, still interpret tattoos on ancient Egyptian women as a symbol of lower class, associating them with dancing girls and prostitutes (El-Kilany, 2017) although this perspective should have prompted a shift in Egyptologists’ understanding of female body art since three female mummies were discovered at Deir el-Bahari **(**Keimer, 1948), an area renowned for royal and elite burials. Moreover, gender bias is mostly apparent in Egyptology in the tendency of translating titles that grant women certain status and designate them as active participants in public life as merely honorary. For instance, a lady called Nebt of the 6th Dynasty held the title *tꜣyty zꜣb ṯꜣty* meaning vizier which is the highest administrative title in the Old Kingdom being second only to the king. Yet Fischer (2000) speculates that her remarkable position was due to an intimate relationship with the king, as she also held the title *smrt bit* (Jones, 2000, 3292), signifying her role as the companion of the king of Lower Egypt. Fischer even goes to assume that Nebt’s husband, Khui, was the one fulfilling the duties of a vizier. This assertion persists despite the existence of several masculine counterparts to the title *smrt*, such as *smr pr-ꜥꜣ* (Jones, 2000, 3288) and *smr pr nswt* (Jones, 2000, 3289), which were not interpreted as indicative of an intimate relationship with the king. In addition to that evidence on women literacy is often discarded, for example, The Papyrus Boulaq, dating to the Middle Kingdom, includes the title *sš̌t r.s* (Robins, 1993) which literally translates to “scribe of her mouth”. While many scholars interpret this title as referring to a “painter of her mouth,” akin to a cosmetician, a connection with scribal position remains more likely. Furthermore, even when confronted with clear evidence of women’s literacy, Egyptologists sometimes seek alternative explanations. For instance, Brunner (1957) argued that the writing palette and brushes belonging to Princess Meketatun were used for painting due to the inclusion of colors beyond the usual black and red typically associated with writing.

## Economic empowerment of ancient Egyptian women

Research consistently shows that the economic sphere plays a crucial role in assessing women's empowerment and gender equality. This domain encompasses aspects such as employment, financial decision-making, and income generation (Goulart et al, 2021). It is widely recognized that when women have access to economic resources, they experience increased confidence, assertiveness, and a more influential voice in society.

Examining the economic roles of Egyptian women up to the end of the Old Kingdom, Kelly (2022) meticulously compiled, categorized, and indexed 1,400 women—both royal and non-royal—from Dynasties 1 to 6. Her research identified 35 titles that link women to the public and economic sectors capturing a wide range of women's roles across the domains of: domestic service, physical care service, textile industry, lower-level administration, service of the royal estate, entertainment and funerary service. Through this survey, she showcased women's active involvement in the economic structure of ancient Egypt during the first six dynasties. Notably, 60 percent of these women held supervisory titles such as *imy-r3, sḥḏt*, and *ḫrpt*.

Although there are no visual depictions of weaving during the Old Kingdom, several scholars, including Fischer (2000) Hudakova (2019) Millard (1976) and Kelly (2022) concurred that weaving held immense economic importance for women during this period. Many women held titles such as overseer of the house of weavers (Jones, 2000, 464) and overseer of the house of weavers of residence (Jones, 2000, 466). Actually, the Old Kingdom witnessed a complex textile organization, with numerous civil service titles associated with spinning, weaving, and clothing management. These roles provide insight into the scale and intricacy of textile production during that era. According to Junker (1941) weaving held significant importance in the state budget. Special deliveries were specifically designated for the king, the royal family, and the court. Additionally, state weaving workshops supplied temples, as they did not yet have their own workshops as in later times. Egypt's renowned fine fabrics also played a crucial role in foreign trade since ancient times. Consequently, a large state-operated organization was established in the fabric industry, and its officials held esteemed positions.

In the Old Kingdom, the weaving industry often operated within families, and there is evidence of family businesses led by mothers. For instance, Moussa and Altenmuller (1977) documented a weaver family in the mastaba of Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep in Saqqara (figure 1). The scene depicted ten family members, including the mother and siblings. The mother, *rwḏ-z3w.s*, held the title *imy-r3 pr iriwt* (overseer of the house of weavers), a title also shared by her daughters, *mḥwt* and *ḥztn-ptḥ*. Interestingly, her son, *titi*, carried the title *imy-ḫt prw-iriwt* (sub-head of the houses of weavers). Despite being older than his sisters (since he is represented nearer to his parents), *titi* held a subordinate title, hinting at potential gender preferences in weaving administration during the Old Kingdom.

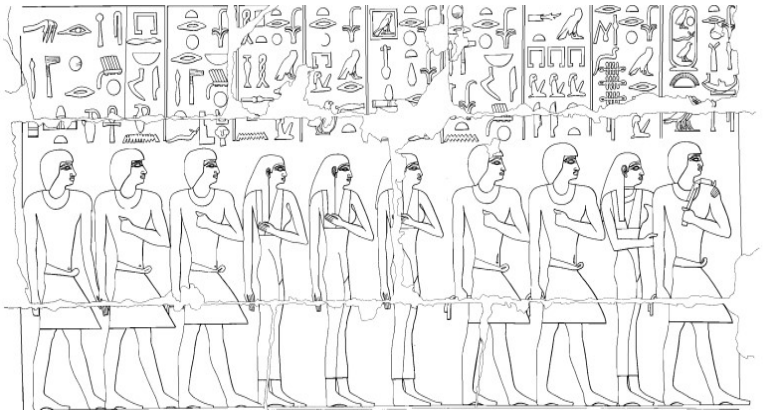

Figure 1. The Family of Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep. From *Das Grab des Nianchchnum und Chnumhotep: Old Kingdom tombs at the causeway of King Unas at Saqqara (Figure 11)*, by A. M. Moussa & H. Altenmüller, 1977, Verlag Philipp von Zabern.

In Abusir, a false door (Borchardt, 1937) depicts three family members associated with weaving titles. The mother, named *wsrt-k3*, held the title of overseer of the house of weavers, a position also shared by her husband, *ntr-Nfr,* and her son, *ḫnmw-ḥsw.f*. During the Old Kingdom, visual depictions of spinners and weavers are notably absent; they did not appear in tombs until the First Intermediate Period (Soliman et. Al, 2023) although scenes related to flax harvest cultivation were common during the Old Kingdom. However, several Old Kingdom tombs depict the rewarding of female weavers with gold after the delivery of their goods. For instance, in the tomb of Ptahhotep in Saqqara (Junker, 1941) shows that in addition to gold, women are given payment in the form of grains, bread and meat in exchange for the garments they weaved. A scene depicted on a slab from the tomb of Akhtihotep (Junker, 1941) (now housed in the Louvre) shows him receiving a papyrus record of textiles (figure 2). These textiles are exchanged for gold pieces, and some women are seen receiving this precious metal. The inscriptions read:

*rdi nbw*: The handing over of gold.

*rdi ḥswt*: The handing over of rewards.

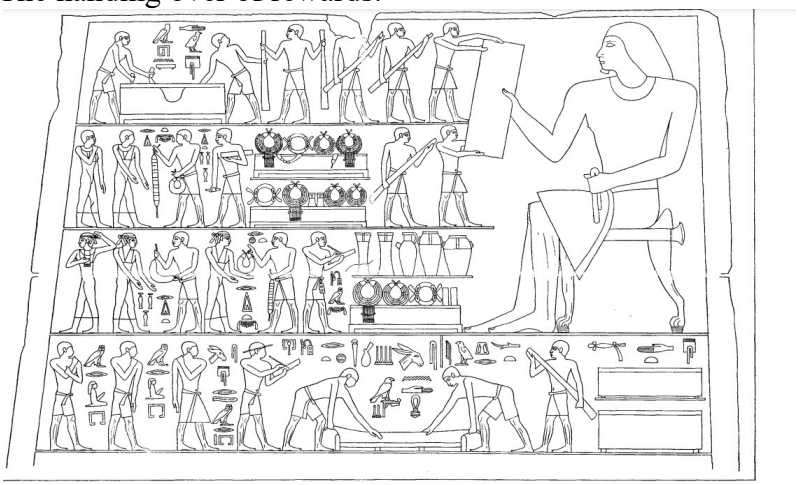

Figure 2. Slab of Akhtihotep. From *Gîza 5: Die Mastaba des Snb (Seneb) und die umliegenden Gräber (abb. 9)*, by H. Junker, 1941, *Akademie der Wissenschaften in Wien Philosophisch-historische Klasse Denkschriften 71, Abhandlung 2*. Hölder-Pichler-Tempsky

In addition to that, two badly preserved scenes seem to follow the pattern of rewarding females for their weaving craft, one in the tomb of Nebemakhet (Junker, 1941) in Giza (G 8172) and another in the tomb of Ptahshepses at Abusir (Vachala, 2004) (figure 3). The golden collars were likely prestigious adornments, and their presentation to the weavers suggests the importance of female workers in the textile industry.

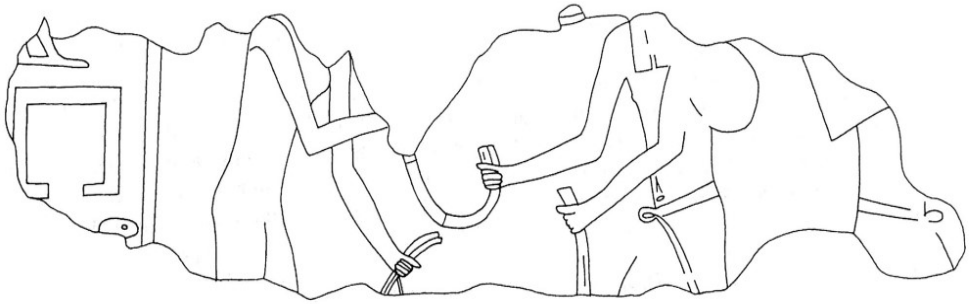

Figure 3. From *Abusir VIII: Die Relieffragmente aus der Mastaba des Ptahschepses in Abusir (p.14)*, by B. Vachala, 2004, Czech Institute of Egyptology.

Following the Old Kingdom period, depictions of cloth production began to appear in scenes. In a study by Hudakova (2019) seven scenes were examined, revealing that the entire cloth production process—from flax processing and spinning to preparing wrap threads, setting up the loom, and weaving on the ground loom—was predominantly carried out by women. Only a few men were involved in this intricate craft.

In the tomb of Dagi (TT 103) in Thebes, a scene (Davies, 1913) depicts the various steps involved in clothes preparation, including flax processing, spinning, warp thread preparation, and weaving on the ground loom. Additionally, in the tomb of Djehutihotep at Deir el-Bersha (Newberry, 1894) we witness women spinning and weaving, their skilled hands deftly crafting textiles. The upper register of the scene captures the intricate steps involved in textile production: flax processing, spinning, and warp thread preparation. Meanwhile, the lower register focuses on additional warp thread preparation, loom setup, and quite possibly the act of weaving itself.

In the tomb of Baket III (Kanawati and Evans, 2018) and Khety (Newberry, 1893b) two scenes depict a group of women weaving and spinning to the right. Standing to the left are a male overseer and a female inspector. The female holds the title *ỉr.t kȝ.wt* (keeper of works), while the man behind her bears the title *ỉmj-rȝ ḏȝt.t* ('overseer of weavers'). Notably, the man is positioned closer to the workers, suggesting a potential hierarchy where the female supervisor holds a subordinate role to the male supervisor. The scene implies that although females actively supervise weaving, they themselves are under the supervision of males.

In the tomb of Khnumhotep II (Newberry, 1893a) at Beni Hassan, we encounter a supervisor whose gender remains a topic of speculation, although it is likely male. His title is *ỉmy-rȝ mrw* (Ward, 1986, 199) signifying the overseer of servants. This suggests that during the Middle Kingdom, weavers held a status akin to that of servants. Also, a papyrus from Lahun (UC 32203) (Collier and Quirke, 2002) which dates to the Middle Kingdom contains a letter from a lady called Ir who bore the title *nbt-pr* to her master (*nb*), seeking instructions on how to handle *ḥmwt* (maids) who

were failing to produce clothes for the temple. Moreover, the Brooklyn Papyrus 35.1446 (Hayes, 1955) which exhibits a writing style reminiscent of the Middle Kingdom although dating to the 30th Dynasty, features twenty female servants who are skilled weavers.

During the New Kingdom, four scenes depict linen production (Hudáková, 2016). These scenes feature vertical looms, with men actively engaged in weaving. It is commonly believed that the adoption of vertical looms during this period led to a shift in large-scale weaving from female to male operators. However, written sources indicate that women persisted in weaving for household purposes, particularly in Deir el-Medina (Spinazzi-Lucchesi, 2022)

In summary, during the Old Kingdom, weaving served as a primary economic resource for upper-class women. They held titles related to weaving administration and received direct rewards, including gold and other goods, when selling their textile products. In the Middle Kingdom, the textile industry continued to be dominated by women who served as both workers and supervisors. However, despite their active involvement, women were not granted official supervision titles, at least not within the social class accessible to us—the elite. Interestingly, in upper-class circles, weaving was now considered menial work carried out solely by servants within large households. These female supervisors (likely *nbt-pr*) were themselves under male supervision. Finally, during the New Kingdom, textile production in large households shifted to being predominantly male-dominated, possibly due to the introduction of upright looms.

Turning attention to another economic sphere to explore female participation, agriculture warrants consideration as it was the principal vocation responsible for supplying sustenance to the widespread population. In the Old Kingdom, agricultural scenes abound within tombs. One crucial step in ancient agricultural process was winnowing, where chaff (the outer coverings) is separated from the grain. This occurs just before the grain is meticulously recorded and stored. Interestingly, in nearly every Old Kingdom scene, this task is carried out by women (Harpur, 1978). For instance, the tombs of Merruka, Ankhemahor and Mehu (Harpur, 1978) prominently depict women engaged in the act of winnowing. Gleaning is the practice of collecting leftover crops from farmers' fields. While the earliest certain example of a female gleaner dates back to the First Intermediate Period, such scenes became increasingly common during the Middle Kingdom. For instance, in the tomb of Intef at Thebes (Jaros-Deckert, 1984) we encounter a depiction of this activity. Notably, Hudakova (2019) observed that after the Old Kingdom, female winnowers gradually gave way to male counterparts. Middle Kingdom tombs portray both male and female winnowers. However, during the New Kingdom, winnowing is predominantly performed by men. Graves-Brown (2010) observed a decline in representations of women performing agricultural work during later historical periods. Among the 32 agricultural scenes from the Middle Kingdom, only a few examples depict women actively participating.

Turning to cooking scenes in ancient Egypt, these typically feature three recognizable components: bread, beer, and meat. According to Millard (1976) all stages of meat production were carried out by men, and women were conspicuously absent during the meat-cooking process. Hamed's survey (2016) of cooking scenes in Middle

Kingdom private tombs revealed a higher frequency of men in these depictions, with no women engaged in meat processing. Similarly, Fitzenreiter (2000) noted that women were never represented cooking meat in the servant statues of the Old Kingdom. In ancient Egyptian tomb scenes, bread and beer are depicted as essential elements for both the living and provisions for the deceased. Beyond their symbolic significance, these staples played a crucial economic role in a society without currency. They were collected as taxes and distributed to workers as wages.

The Oxford Expedition to Egypt scene database holds 54 baking and 46 brewing scenes that date to the Old Kingdom (Archaeology Data Service, 2024a). In addition to that there are numerous small statues that portray the preparation of bread and beer. Bread-making involved several stages, including grain processing, shaping conical bread loaves, and proper storage. In these depictions, women are actively engaged in tasks such as pounding, winnowing, sieving grain, grinding, and preparing conical bread loaves. When it comes to brewing, females are shown rinsing or sieving the mash.

Interestingly, the gender dynamics of bread-making remained consistent during the First Intermediate Period and the Middle Kingdom. However, Hudakova (2019) observed that women gradually disappeared from scenes depicting beer production after the Old Kingdom. Going back to the predynastic period, beer production in ancient Egypt extended beyond household activities—it was a state-funded industry. Large-scale state breweries were established in Hierakonpolis and Tell El Farkha. In 2018, an impressive 5,000-year-old brewery was discovered at North Abydos (Princeton University, 2024). This facility, likely dating to the time of King Narmer, had the capacity to produce up to 5,900 gallons of beer at once. It featured eight spacious areas for beer production, each containing around 40 earthenware pots arranged in rows. The purpose of this brewery may have been to supply the royal rituals conducted within the funeral facilities of Egypt's kings. Interestingly, the absence of representations of women engaged in beer-making suggests that female brewers were likely replaced by men in these large-scale beer production workshops after the Old Kingdom.

According to the database of the Oxford Expedition to Egypt (Archaeology Data Service, 2024b) there are 11 market scenes that date to the Old Kingdom. They are located in Abusir and Saqqara (Livingstone-Thomas, 2011). Van de Beek (2016) surveyed all Old Kingdom scenes which show women in the marketplace. Interestingly all such scenes date to the Fifth Dynasty. In the tomb of Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep, a scene depicts a woman serving beverages to the market visitors while another woman crouches by a container of cups, presenting one to a passerby, who seems to offer a fan in exchange. A scene in the tomb of Tepemankh II depicts a woman offering onions to a man in exchange for inscribing an alabaster jar. A sitting woman depicted in tomb S 920 at Saqqara is selling bread to a female customer, who is holding a bowl. Another woman in the same tomb is pouring beer into the bowl of a squatting man carrying a shopping bag. The tomb of Fetekta at Abusir likewise features women in the process of bartering. One lady is seen buying oil, while two others seem to trade fresh fish in exchange for a measure of grain. Although the Middle Kingdom is well known for tomb scenes and models representing several trades and economic activities, no market scenes date to the period. Women continued

to be represented in market scenes during the New Kingdom and they are shown as sellers or buyers in 4 scenes dating to the 18th and 19th dynasties (Pino, 2005).

## Women in Religious Roles

The earliest religious posts for ancient Egyptian women were traced by Kelly (2019) who identified 13 women from the late 1st Dynasty onwards bearing the title *sḫn*(*.t*)-*ꜣḫ*. This title, found in funerary stelae from Abydos, Helwan, and Abu Rawash, is translated as "one who seeks" or "one who embraces the spirit" and it might indicate a role within the mortuary cult as funerary priestesses. The higher-ranked version of the same title, *sḫn*(*.t*)-*ꜣḫ nswt* ("funerary priestess of the king"), is documented on a funerary slab from Helwan. Although the specific functions and duties of these roles remain undetermined, they suggest significant involvement in rituals and funerary practices. Kelly's research highlights the influential role of women in the religious and ideological practices of Early Dynastic Egypt.

Since the Fourth Dynasty, ancient Egyptian females were permitted to take part in temple rituals dedicated to both gods and goddesses, assuming religious titles such as *ḥmt-kꜣ* (female ka-servant), *ḥmt-nṯr* (priestess), and, in one known instance from the Old Kingdom, *wʿbt* (female purification priest). These roles not only conferred spiritual prestige but also offered material benefits; in fact, an Old Kingdom document reveals that male and female priests received equal remuneration (Lesko, 1987).

The funerary cult, a cornerstone of Old Kingdom religious life, was primarily maintained by *ka*-servants (*ḥm-kꜣ* and *ḥmt-kꜣ*), who ensured the deceased's well-being in the afterlife. A portion of the deceased's estate was often set aside for this purpose, giving these cultic personnel access to significant resources. Although men overwhelmingly held the title *ḥm-kꜣ*, women were not excluded. Jones, for instance, lists several women with the title *ḥmt-kꜣ,* including Azhert, depicted on the false door of Nefretnswt in Giza. Casado's analysis (2019) highlights that while *ḥmt-kꜣ* is far less frequently attested, women could still be part of the ka-service institution. Occasionally, determinatives representing both genders appear in reference to this role. However, titles linked to managerial authority within the cult—such as *sḫḏ ḥmw-kꜣ* (supervisor) and *imy-ḫt ḥmw-kꜣ* (overseer)—were exclusively male, suggesting gendered boundaries in cultic hierarchies. Furthermore, iconography depicts *ḥmt-kꜣ* largely in supportive roles like preparing or carrying offerings, unlike their male counterparts, who are shown engaging in high-status rituals and administrative scenes.

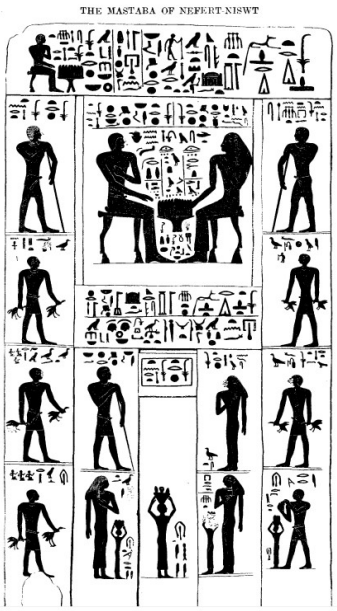


Figure 4. False door of Nefretnswt. From *Gîza II: The Cemetery of Gîza*, *(Figure 94)*, by S. Hassan, 1934, Government Press.

Among the most significant religious roles for women was that of *ḥmt-nṯr*, or "priestess," particularly in the cult of Hathor. Galvin (1981) documented more than 400 Old Kingdom women who held this title and were devoted to Hathor's worship, forming one of the largest known female religious collectives. In the provincial necropolis of Naga ed-Deir, several tombs from the late Old Kingdom to the early Middle Kingdom bear the title *ḥmt-nṯr ḥwt-ḥr*. Yet, after the 11th Dynasty, the title vanishes from the archaeological record, indicating a decline in institutional female priesthood. Ward (1986) argued that by the Middle Kingdom, women constituted only a small fraction of temple personnel, which had become increasingly male-dominated.

This trend continued into the New Kingdom. Classical authors like Herodotus observed that women no longer served as priestesses (*ḥmt-nṯr*) in either the cults of gods or goddesses. Elite women participated in temple rituals instead as *šmʿyt* (Onstine, 2001) (musician-priestesses), engaging in musical and dance-based worship rather than handling sacred duties like feeding or clothing the divine statue—roles reserved for male priests who held the *wʿb* (pure) status. Still, there are rare but telling exceptions. The earliest known woman to bear the *wʿbt* (female purification priest) title was Ihi, likely from the late Old Kingdom. Her name appears on the false door of her husband Idy (CG 1449), himself a *wʿb* priest. While no other instances are known from the Old Kingdom or First Intermediate Period, the title resurfaces in the Middle Kingdom and is attested in at least twelve women (Wilson, 2014) often signaling a privileged connection to either the king or a specific deity.

Koen (2008) too acknowledged the fact that a greater number of women held priestly titles during the Old Kingdom compared to the New Kingdom. A greater number of women held priestly titles during the Old Kingdom compared to the New Kingdom. According to Gillam (1995) this shift likely reflects growing concerns about ritual purity, as women's natural bodily functions, such as menstruation and childbirth, were increasingly viewed as obstacles to fulfilling the role of *ḥm-nṯr*.

The disappearance of the title *ḥmt-nṯr* during the Middle Kingdom closely parallels the decline of *šps nswt i*n the same period, both reflecting deliberate and far-reaching political and societal restructuring. Elkashef (2022) analyzed eighty known instances of women bearing the *šps nswt* title from the late Old Kingdom through the First Intermediate Period. Although the title occasionally appears in the Memphis necropolis, it was predominantly held by provincial women in Upper Egypt—an indication of the intricate ties between the monarchy, local elite families, and male tomb owners of high status. By the end of the Sixth Dynasty, some women bearing this title were merely related to lower-ranking provincial officials, suggesting a diffusion of the title through familial rather than state-sanctioned prestige. This shift led Elkashef to propose that the title was passed down through family networks rather than conferred by royal favor. Ward (1986) reinforces this decline, noting that while the title was widespread in the Old Kingdom, all Middle Kingdom attestations stem exclusively from the Eleventh Dynasty. He interprets these as archaizing survivals—remnants of a now obsolete status system. Onstine advances this argument by proposing that *ḥmt-nṯr,* long associated with elite women, was purposefully eradicated during the Twelfth Dynasty's centralizing reforms. These reforms sought to curtail the political and religious power of provincial aristocracy, consolidating authority under the crown. The concurrent disappearance of *šps nswt* suggests a systematic dismantling of elite female roles, representing not mere administrative change but a targeted erasure of noble women's agency. The revocation of these prestigious titles marks a profound transformation in the political landscape, where women's public and symbolic roles within elite families were deliberately curtailed to reinforce monarchical dominance.

## Female Self-representation

Women writing about themselves can be a powerful form of empowerment in society. When women articulate their experiences, thoughts, and aspirations, they exercise control over their own narratives. This act of self-expression can be transformative both personally and socially. Since it was usually men who commissioned great monuments, we have numerous sources of male self-presentation in ancient Egypt. Ayad (2019) conducted a survey of all forms of female self-representation texts in ancient Egypt. During the Old Kingdom, these forms included titles, the formula of *ḥtp-di nswt* cited for a woman, threats to tomb thieves cited by a woman, provisions made by a woman for another person, and stock phrases borrowed from men's biographies. However, during the First Intermediate Period, female self-representation texts were reduced to the Formula of *ḥtp-di nswt* cited for women (found on a group of stelae from Naga al-Dayr (Lichtheim, 1988) and one poorly preserved example of stock phrases for Djuhutinakht in Bersha. Finally, self-representation texts in the Middle Kingdom and Second Intermediate Period were further reduced to titles only.

In the context of self-representation it would be useful to shed light on the titles held by women during the Middle Kingdom. Two scholarly works have specifically surveyed these titles in ancient Egypt during that period. Ward (1986) was able to distinguish between three strata of females in the Middle Kingdom society above the peasant class (the highest, the intermediate and the lower stratum). He also classified

women of the Middle Kingdom to three groups based on titles of their husbands: wives of high officials, wives of minor officials and the group below that. After meticulously recording 69 titles held by females during the Middle Kingdom, he observed a decline in female titles containing the words "overseer" or "administrator" which suggests that women of that era were deprived of supervision roles, even within their own households. Millard (1976) on the other hand classified the Middle Kingdom society into 9 categories: the aristocracy, the upper middle and middle classes, concubines, wives of artisans, soldiers, sailors, huntsmen, the higher household servants, the lower household servants, the menial servants, field worker and peasants, children.

When comparing the pool of female titles compiled by Kelly (2022) to those of Ward's non-royal Middle Kingdom titles, several noteworthy points emerge. Notably, supervisor titles for females nearly disappeared during the Middle Kingdom, with only one out of 19 surviving—the "overseer of the storehouse". This shift means that women were no longer overseers of dancers, singers, and musicians; their roles were now limited to being dancers, singers, and musicians themselves. Even in their most prominent economic role, women were no longer supervisors of weavers; they were simply referred to as "weavers". Additionally, many surviving titles for women fell within the domain of personal care and domestic service, including roles like hairdresser, wet nurse, butler, attendant, and slave. Interestingly, several titles held by high-born ladies were more epithets of status rather than true functions they practiced, such as "wife of the ruler," "mistress of all women," and "daughter of a count."

The decline in the number of the administrative positions of women starting at the first intermediate Period is highlighted in the dissertation of Kroenke (2010) which surveyed tomb models in the provincial cemetery of Naga ed-Deir where the analysis revealed a distinct gendered divide in administrative roles within the burial record. Men of Naga ed-Deir were consistently represented in high-level administrative positions, including roles such as nomarchs, overseers of priests, scribes, judges, and overseers of agricultural production and temple operations. These roles are thoroughly documented through inscriptions, stelae, and a wide variety of funerary goods. In sharp contrast, no women in the corpus held administrative positions. Their titles were limited to honorific or cultic designations, such as *ḫkrt-nswt* (*wʿtt*) (lady-in-waiting of the king) and *iryt-ḫt-nswt* (royal acquaintance). Temporal trends further emphasize the limited presence that the women of Naga ed-Deir held in earlier periods faded almost completely by the Middle Kingdom, with few or no new titled female burials appearing in the later phases Kroenke surveyed

However, and despite this decline in administrative roles, the Middle Kingdom saw the widespread use of a title that became emblematic of women's roles in society: *nbt-pr*. The Thesaurus Linguae Aegyptiae online database (2024) though a work in progress, provides insights into the evolution of the title *nbt-pr* over time (table 1). It appears that this title had limited attestations during the Old Kingdom, but its usage widely spread during the Middle Kingdom, reaching its peak in the Late Period. This observation aligns with Millard's (1976) notion that *nbt-pr* was the most common of all women's titles during the Middle Kingdom. Indeed, the Mainz

database of Middle Kingdom names and titles (2024) recorded 2854 attestations of the title *nbt-pr*.

| Period | Number of attestations in TLA |
|---|---|
| **Old Kingdom** | 2 |
| **First Intermediate Period** | 0 |
| **Middle Kingdom** | 26 |
| **Second Intermediate Period** | 75 |
| **New Kingdom** | 45 |
| **Third Intermediate Period** | 47 |
| **Late Period** | 148 |
| **Greaco-Roman Period** | 46 |

**Table 1:** Attestations of title *nbt-pr* in online database of Thesaurus Linguae Aegyptiae.

The title *nbt-pr* (lady of the house) clearly signifies a woman responsible for managing the household. When used interchangeably with 'wife,' it underscores the societal expectation that wives would oversee domestic affairs, allowing their husbands to attend to landholding, official duties, or crafts. Szpakowska (2012) translates *nbt-pr* as 'lady of the estate,' reflecting the broader scope of this role. Commonly held by married women, the title entailed a range of responsibilities within large households, including supervising weaving workshops, coordinating food provisions, producing clothing, and maintaining fruit and vegetable gardens.

But despite the impression that *nbt-pr* held significant economic authority, Stefanovic (2009) conducted research on 500 individuals with this title during the Middle Kingdom. Surprisingly, 80% of them came from humble origins, and fewer than 60 were married. Additionally, several Middle Kingdom family stelae featured up to 12 instances of *nbt-pr*, a frequency that calls into question its association with elite status or real economic power.

When examining the gendered funerary archaeological landscape, it becomes clear—albeit tentatively—that the increasing confinement of women to domestic service roles from the Middle Kingdom onward had profound implications for their visibility in the mortuary sphere. As women's engagement in public life and income-generating labor declined, so too did their access to the financial resources and social capital necessary to finance and commission tombs of their own. This economic marginalization helps explain the sharp decrease in independently constructed female tombs during the Middle Kingdom and later periods. While the title *nbt-pr* became the most common female designation during this time, its prevalence should not be mistaken for continued influence or economic authority. By contrast, the Old Kingdom presents the highest concentration of women's tombs, a period when women could still hold administrative, religious, and economic positions that afforded them a degree of financial independence. According to the Memphite volumes of Porter and Moss, 43 independent female tombs are attested from this era. While many belonged to royal women, several were constructed for high-status non-royals—such as Hetepheres, a priestess of Hathor from the Fifth Dynasty—whose tomb mirrors elite male

iconography, including scenes of offerings, cattle herding, musicians, and nature. In stark contrast, the Middle Kingdom yields very few examples of independent female tombs. The only well-documented cases are found within the temple-tomb complex of Mentuhotep II at Deir el-Bahri, where two prominent queens, Tem and Neferu, received individual tombs, and six other royal women were interred in shaft graves with limestone chapels. These royal exceptions only underscore the broader trend: the increasing centralization of resources and narrowing of gendered roles severely curtailed most women's ability to participate in the funerary landscape as independent agents.

## Reinforcing masculinity: gendered shifts in the First Intermediate Period

It is widely recognized that the First Intermediate Period in Egypt was marked by a fundamental reorganization of political, social, and economic structures, as documented by contemporary textual and iconographic sources. Specifically, the collapse of Old Kingdom centralized authority led to the decentralization of power, with local elites—especially provincial governors known as nomarchs—emerging as dominant figures in regional administration. Consequently, the resulting environment was characterized by increased competition among elites. This is evident in autobiographical texts and tomb iconography, which highlight military prowess, civic beneficence, and innovative claims to leadership. Moreover, this shift is evidenced by tomb inscriptions and stelae, which frequently depict these figures justifying their authority through references to public works, famine relief, and community leadership, rather than inherited rank or royal appointment (Demidchik, 2020; Demidchik, 2022; Lichtheim, 1988; Török, 2009).

Recent scholarship (Moreno García, 2024) has emphasized that the First Intermediate Period was not only a time of political decentralization but also of profound redefinitions of masculine identity, closely tied to warfare, trade, and regional cultural influences. Across the Near East, and increasingly within Egypt, weaponry became a key symbol of status and adult male identity—not necessarily linked to combat but to prestige, mobility, and trade networks. In Egypt, this was particularly visible in the iconography of the First Intermediate Period, where male figures, especially in Upper Egypt, were frequently represented with bows and arrows, a motif absent from earlier elite self-representations. This imagery aligned with a broader regional valorization of martial symbols and emphasized local leaders' autonomy and strength in the absence of centralized pharaonic authority. These symbolic and cultural transformations observed likely had significant implications for women's status and societal roles. As masculine identity became increasingly associated with martial imagery, autonomy, and public leadership—embodied in the widespread depiction of men with bows and military titles—women's roles were concurrently redefined and restricted.

The political fragmentation and the weakening of central authority during the First Intermediate Period also led to the rise of local elites who established patronage systems to maintain order and control (Campagno, 2014). Patrons provided protection and resources to their clients in exchange for loyalty and services. The patronage system often involved local elites taking control of economic resources and redistributing them to their clients. This shift in economic power could have reduced

opportunities for women to participate in economic activities, as these roles became more closely tied to the patron-client relationships dominated by men.

## Conclusion

The transition from the Old Kingdom to the First Intermediate Period and the Middle Kingdom marked a profound decline in women's societal roles, as evidenced by a constellation of interrelated changes. During this period, women held fewer administrative and supervisory titles, signaling a retreat from positions of influence and authority. Instead, their titles increasingly reflected domestic service or symbolic affiliations, often devoid of real power or responsibility. This retreat from public life coincided with a loss of economic autonomy, as women shifted from being independent producers—such as weavers—to performing more menial, subordinate tasks. Their involvement in agriculture also declined, with men supplanting them in activities like winnowing. Likewise, depictions of women engaged in beer production—once common in earlier iconography—vanished entirely during the Middle Kingdom. Even self-presentation texts authored by women, once a rich source of female voice and agency, diminished dramatically during both the Middle and Second Intermediate Periods. The title *nbt-pr* emerged as the dominant female designation, symbolizing the relegation of women to domestic roles and a broader retreat from public life—developments that limited their economic resources and contributed to the decline in independently commissioned tombs for women

These changes were not isolated but tied to systemic shifts in power and ideology. Most tellingly, the disappearance of elite female titles such as *ḥmt-nṯr* and *šps nswt* underscores a deliberate restructuring of women's status. Traditionally linked with powerful families and religious prestige, these titles were largely eliminated by the 12th Dynasty as part of wider reforms aimed at curbing the influence of provincial aristocracy and consolidating power under the monarchy. While *šps nswt* lingered briefly during the Eleventh Dynasty, its later attestations appear to be archaising survivals rather than evidence of active usage. The targeted erasure of such titles reveals a broader political agenda: reducing the visibility and authority of elite women as the monarchy reasserted central control. This de-authorizing of noble families—particularly their female members—reflects a conscious effort to reshape the social order by eliminating powerful roles for women in both the religious and administrative spheres.

At the heart of this transformation were the upheavals of the First Intermediate Period—a time of political fragmentation, economic instability, and social unrest. As centralized pharaonic power collapsed and regional governors vied for dominance, survival and leadership became increasingly associated with masculine-coded traits such as physical strength and martial prowess. Women, by contrast, were systematically marginalized. This shift in gender dynamics was not merely a byproduct of social instability but a structured reconfiguration of the social fabric, reinforced through the removal of female-centered titles, economic roles, and cultural expressions.

Despite these clear patterns, the role of women during the First Intermediate Period remains understudied and under-theorized. Gaps in the archaeological and textual record obscure the complexities of women's lived experiences during this critical

transitional era. Future research must aim to uncover regional variations in women's status and agency, and explore the ways in which women may have resisted, adapted to, or been shaped by the sweeping political and cultural transformations of their time.

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