

Women of the Ancient World

Egypt: Pharaohs and Physicians

| Transcript



Narrator: Compared to women in most ancient societies, women in Egypt enjoyed many freedoms under the law. They could work, enter contracts, own property, and choose who to leave it to in their wills, a right denied many women in the world until recently. Much of this freedom sprang from the ancient Egyptian religion. Egyptians believed the universe consisted of two elements: male and female. There were gods of both genders, each with their own domains. Balance was given by the female deity Maat. She symbolized cosmic harmony, and pharaohs had to follow her example.

But things aren't always as they appear. Does having the legal right to do something mean you can actually do it? Then, as now, the answer is "not necessarily."

Although Egyptian women had all those freedoms, most did not lead independent lives. Many women were considered to be dependents of their husbands, living under their protection. While men fought battles and worked on farms or for the government, most women wove, cooked, looked after their children, and ran the household. Some worked outside of their homes as bakers, brewers, waitresses, and entertainers. A few were slaves in wealthy households.

Slaves were often foreign captives from wars. While some worked as household servants and may have been treated well, other slaves received poor treatment and may have been used as forced labor. Free wives in the higher classes were often known by their husband's job, not by their own, to show their place in society.

Of course, there were notable exceptions. Some women had outstanding careers that have gone down in history. Among them is Merit Ptah, a female physician who lived around 2700 BCE. Believed to be the chief physician to the pharaoh, she's revered as the first female doctor in the world. As well as physicians, there are records of female scribes and priestesses, both occupations that would have required years of dedicated study. This suggests that at least some women were educated, particularly if they were upper class or from an educated family. Often the opportunities open to women depended on whether they were highborn or lowborn. The higher the status of their fathers, the more opportunities they had. This was particularly the case for royal women.

Although it sounds bizarre to us, members of the Egyptian royal families often married each other. This may have been to connect them with their gods, who also married their brothers and sisters. Like the powerful god Osiris, the lord of the underworld, who was married to his sister-wife Isis, the mother goddess. Or there may have been more practical political reasons for doing this. Although Egypt was a patriarchal society, some scholars think inheritance passed through the female line. This is known as matrilineal descent: passing property from mother to son, rather than father to son. This might have been done to make things clear-cut. After all, you can always tell who a child's mother is.

Royal women were important not just as the mothers of the next leaders, but as political advisers. Pharaohs often used their female relatives as their counselors. Women weren't generally considered a threat to the pharaoh, unlike male relatives, who might give advice in order to gain the throne for themselves. But the power of women went beyond giving advice.

If a pharaoh died while his son was very young, the kingdom was often ruled by the boy's mother, at least until he was old enough to take over. In such cases, the young pharaoh's mother had huge influence and could be the real power behind the throne, ruling as regent. The regency of women was seen as a safer choice, as they'd often step down once the child was old enough. Male regents, however, might be less willing to relinquish control.

In other cultures, the regency of women would have been seen as a weakness, leading to invasions from nearby countries. But Egypt was different. It was geographically isolated, surrounded by a barren desert on three sides and the ocean on the other. This allowed Egyptian culture, including the power of women, to continue unchecked, at least for a while. But what about the top job? What do we know about women who were pharaohs in their own right?

Women were often queens, being the wives of pharaohs. But did you know that some women were thought of as actual kings? Being considered a king meant that the woman ruled in her own right, not in association with a powerful husband. The first female pharaoh may have been Sobekneferu. She was depicted as wearing female dress, but with a masculine royal headcloth and kilt worn over the top.

A better-known female king was Hatshepsut, who reigned over 15 years. She started her reign as regent to her stepson Thutmose III, who was only two years old when his father, her brother-husband, died. Earlier statues and reliefs depicted Hatshepsut as female, but after a few years she chose to be portrayed as a man, even to the extent of having the traditional pharaoh's beard.

Hatshepsut also acted like a traditional male ruler. She mounted military campaigns against the Nubians and Ethiopians and had a temple built for herself near the Valley of the Kings. It seems this kingly behavior didn't please everybody. Attempts were made to erase Hatshepsut from history after her death. Her name was removed from her monuments, possibly on the orders of her stepson Thutmose III, who succeeded her.

There's another female pharaoh who's become one of the most famous people in history. Everybody has heard of Cleopatra VII Philopator, better known simply as Cleopatra. What many people don't know is that Cleopatra wasn't actually Egyptian. Her family were the Ptolemys, Greek rulers who took control of Egypt following Alexander the Great's death. Cleopatra married her brother, Ptolemy XIII. But when he tried to remove her from power, she had him killed, thanks to a little help from her friend and lover, the Roman general Julius Caesar.

When Julius Caesar was later assassinated by a group of aristocratic Romans, Cleopatra lost the support of a powerful ally. Desperate, she hooked up with Mark Antony, another Roman general. Together they dreamed of creating a great empire in the East. But their dreams were cut short when Octavian, who became the first Roman emperor, invaded Egypt. Cleopatra killed herself rather than face humiliation at the hands of Octavian.

Cleopatra's death didn't just spell the end of female power in ancient Egypt—it heralded the end of the Egyptian Empire itself. From then on, Egypt became absorbed by the Roman Empire and life in Egypt changed, slowly adopting more Greek and Roman culture.