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Hidden Voices: Unveiling Women in Ancient Egypt

Kasia Szpakowska

The problems encountered when attempting to reconstruct life in Ancient Egypt in a way that includes all members of society, rather than focusing on the most prominent or obvious actors, are much the same as for other cultures. The loudest voices tend to be heard, while those in the background are muted and stilled. To an extent, when looking to the past, we find what we are looking for, and investigations focusing on previously marginalized groups, such as women, children, the elderly, and foreigners, are allowing hidden lives to be revealed. In all cases, a nuanced view is required—one that avoids hasty generalizations. Work on gender studies emphasizes that there is no monolithic category of “women,” a fact that has been well-discussed in relation to Egyptological studies (Meskell 1999). Temporal and geographical contexts must be borne in mind, as well as the status, ethnicity, class, wealth, and age of the individuals under study. There would be little in common between the experiences of an adolescent girl living in a small house in a planned settlement near the Fayum in Egypt of 1800 BCE and those of a royal wife of a Ramesside pharaoh living in the city of Memphis 1200 BCE. In all cases, the interpretations are based on the data that has survived the millennia. It is this evidence, specifically from Ancient Egypt prior to the Ptolemaic period, and the methods of approaching it that are the focus of this essay. The aim is to call attention to some of the specific complications that can be encountered, as well as to highlight some of the recent innovative approaches now underway in current studies on women in Ancient Egypt.

1 Textual Evidence

The range and number of surviving texts remain both helpful and hindering when trying to understand Ancient Egyptian women. They are indispensable for learning about aspects of life that are less visible in the archaeological record, particularly those that pertain to emotions or psychology such as dreams, fears, ambitions, and even love. However, our comprehension of the texts is hampered by their variable survival rate and incomplete state

of preservation, as well as our limited understanding of the languages and scripts in which they were written. The grammar may be understood, but metaphors, figures of speech, idioms, and humor are always culturally bound, their meaning opaque to the outsider. Monumental texts have a better chance of survival over a wide area, but the bulk of the papyri and ostraka come from a handful of specialized sites that cannot necessarily be considered as typical. These pockets of evidence provide only snapshots of life in a particular place and time. In addition, those with a high level of literacy (able to compose and write) and those responsible for most written record-keeping formed a small segment of society: elite educated males, many of whom were members of the court or in the priesthood. The texts are inherently biased in terms of what they reveal about women of all classes and thus cannot be read at face value.

Textual evidence can be divided into two categories: literary and documentary. Pre-Ptolemaic literary genres include tales; didactic texts; hymns; poems (including love poetry); biographies; and royal, ritual, divinatory, and religious texts, while the documentary genres include decrees; lists; legal texts; spells; labels; correspondence; titles; and scientific, administrative, and medical texts, with of course much overlap. In all cases, the texts are formulaic, and they fit within the decorum of the time. Problems of interpretation are compounded by the fact that there are few known examples of biographies, didactic texts, or literary compositions written by women.

Broadly speaking, the literary texts tend to present a more idealized view of the world—their goal is not to reproduce reality but to present a model of society that is sanctioned by the state. When women are mentioned they conform to the conventional ideals of the time and in a capacity to further the aim of the author. When contemporary documentary texts are examined, however, a very different picture may emerge. For example, Middle Kingdom didactic (teaching) texts present themes that emphasize that the main place of women is in the home, as mothers, wives, and providers of pleasure, and men are advised to keep them from power, as the following text from the *Instructions of Ptahhotep* illustrates: “If you prosper, found your household, love your wife with ardor, fill her belly, clothe her back, ointment soothes her limbs. Gladden her heart as long as you live! She is a field, good for her lord . . . keep her from power, restrain her.”

But documentary evidence from letters, administrative texts, and scene captions reveals that in reality women held important positions outside the home as priestesses, temple workers, managers, and producers of linen—one of the most important commodities of the time. For example, in a letter from the Middle Kingdom town of Lahun, a woman writes (or dictates a letter) to the lord of the estate about weaving women who refuse to work, and offers an excuse that “there aren’t any clothes, because my responsibility is directed to the temple—the threads have been set up, but cannot be woven!” The text here reveals a woman who does hold power, who supervises weaving women (who themselves have the confidence to refuse to work), and who holds a position of responsibility in the local temple. For the study of women, the most useful texts thus may be the administrative texts, titles, and letters. The surviving letters, whether or not they were actually scribed by women, are usually concerned with administrative matters. A number are written from women who are—at least temporarily and perhaps permanently—in charge of managing an estate or an aspect of production. Administrative texts such as attendance rolls and inventories can show where women worked, and in what capacity. New work on textual evidence applying linguistic methodologies is beginning to shed light on the previously hidden voice of women by reading between the lines. Deborah Sweeney, in particular, has

been using discourse analysis to uncover the gender of the speaker in mourner's laments, correspondence, love poems, legal texts, and requests (Sweeney 2006).

Titles are important as well, for they are perhaps the most abundant source for the various positions women might have held. They are also found throughout the entire range of textual sources. It is particularly important, however, to keep both the date of the source and where it comes from in mind when analyzing the meaning or historical significance of any title. For example, a study of titles from the New Kingdom based on those found only in Theban tombs should not, without corroborating evidence, be over-generalized as indicative of titles that would have been held in the Delta or elsewhere in the land of Egypt. In addition, the decorated tombs generally belonged to elite men, or at least those employed in skilled crafts and labor. The titles included would be ones that they considered important or advantageous in the afterlife. Titles in general are the subject of debate, and it is often difficult to tell which were held simultaneously, which were held consecutively, which were honorific (ones awarded as a mark of esteem, status, or distinction), and which were earned. Nevertheless, these titles, which have been the subject of a number of careful analyses, have revealed the complexity and range of roles played by women in Ancient Egypt.

2 Representational Evidence

The art of Ancient Egypt has been the subject of so many museum exhibitions, books, and television documentaries, and has been reproduced so frequently, that most people, even young children, can easily recognize it. This recognizability, however, is problematic, for it makes the art of Egypt seem familiar and easily accessible, the images seemingly straightforward to interpret. Geographic, temporal, and social dimensions are often ignored, and Egyptian art is thought of as static and unchanging. Indeed, representations of a very small segment of the Ancient Egyptian populace tend to stand for Egyptian society as a whole. Representations of gender, however, must be interpreted within the larger context of Egyptian art: it is critical to why the art was produced and for whom. Formal Egyptian art was practical and performative—what was represented was believed to be enacted through the process of depiction, and therefore became real, destined to perpetually recur through time. We should understand this imagery as representing an idea rather than reflecting a reality. Created by elite male artists, formal art represents an ideal, a world in which men are tall, active, and powerful while women are slender and passive. Both men and women are generally represented as blemish-free and in their prime; their images conform to contemporary ideals of beauty and represent visually their subject's social status. Age, sickness, and non-conformity are rarely depicted; when they are, they generally mark subjects from the lower levels of society. In their formal, public art, Egyptians, not surprisingly, wanted to be remembered at their best and in a positive light.

Informal art, such as drawings and sketches found on ostraka (Figure 2.1), was not necessarily designed to be seen by anyone other than the artist, and often provides glimpses of Egyptian life that are strikingly at odds with the better-known formal representations. For example, while graphic scenes of sexual intercourse can be found on ostraka, such subject matter is only hinted at in formal art. In the temple of Hatshepsut, there is a scene that shows the god Amun taking Hatshepsut's mother by the hand, followed by a scene in which her pregnancy is discretely indicated by a small stomach bulge, and then finally we



Figure 2.1 Limestone ostrakon of a woman suckling an infant. Note the shelter in which they sit, and the unusual hair and shoes. Below is another female (?) carrying a mirror and cosmetics. Photo: © Trustees of the British Museum.

see Hatshepsut's mother presenting her child to the gods. The mundane human details of sexual intercourse tend not to be represented.

Of course, the bulk of the images that we have to work with come not from informal drawings on ostraka but from stone buildings that have survived through the millennia—the temples and tombs, with the imagery from the latter in particular being used as a key source for gender analyses. Stone architecture, along with its decoration, was built by the Egyptians to last for eternity and to be visible in the world of the divine. The subject matter is therefore related to these aims. In the case of temples, this imagery mainly comprised scenes that depicted the pharaoh as protector of Egypt, administering justice and maintaining the cult of the gods. Women are portrayed as divine: as goddesses in their own right, as consorts of the main gods or the king, or as participants in the service of the cult, mainly as singers or musicians. Even when the main deity is female, however—such as at the New Kingdom temple of Mut in Karnak—the predominant actors in the cult are men. Because males are represented as cultic actors far more frequently and in a greater range of roles than women, women are often thought to have had a less important or more passive role, as background accompaniment to the main male agents in the ritual. However, another viable interpretation is that the music, song, gestures, or movements performed by the women were critical elements of the ritual, and just as necessary to its success as the proper recitation by priests.

Interpreting art from tombs is even more complex. Most tombs consist of a subterranean area reserved for the dead and the gods, and a superstructure or chapel where the living could visit and commemorate the memories of their dead friends and relatives.



Figure 2.2 Menna supervises agricultural work. Mural painting from the vestibule of the Tomb of Menna in Thebes, Egypt. Photo: © DeA Picture Library/Art Resource, NY.

Representations in each area must be analyzed with the intended audience in mind, and with the understanding that in most time periods the owners of decorated tombs were men. Men are thus presented as the main actors, the heroes, in their stories. Again, images of the elite are better known from this context, but closer attention to subsidiary detail in many scenes, especially those placed in the chapel area, reveals the presence of women. In the tomb of Menna (see Figure 2.2), for example, a busy agricultural scene includes a depiction of girls playing (or fighting), another of one girl tending to the foot of another, and a woman carrying a basket. In the background, there is yet another woman seated with her legs out, ankles crossed, and a child on her lap, held tight by a cloth sling. As the woman picks figs from a tree, the child reaches up to play with the woman's earring. The scene is rare, but the fact that it is included means such an image conforms to the Egyptian vision of an ideal world. It is probably not meant to represent a particular woman (she remains unnamed), but it likely represents an event that actually did occur and could regularly be seen. From this image, one could reasonably suggest that women did pick figs, and that this was an activity that could be undertaken even while minding a child. Whether the woman is actually the mother of the child is unclear, and because of the high rate of maternal mortality the care of children would often fall to a host of relatives, nurses, and men. An image such as this belies the stereotype that women worked only indoors in Egypt, and it reveals the presence of children at many activities. Interestingly, this image is not unique, for it also appears a few centuries later in a Late Period tomb.

Finally, it must be remembered that representations are encoded with symbols that are culturally embedded, and not necessarily transferable. Understanding the Ancient Egyptian codes often requires a deeper familiarity that is not possible without material witnesses. Clothing in particular (and the lack thereof) is useful in all cultures to convey specific messages. In Egyptian art, nakedness has been interpreted as representing lower classes, divinity, real practice, youth, or overt sexuality. Here again, interpretations vary and are not necessarily consistent. It has been suggested that women are shown with erect nipples to emphasize their sexuality, but the same interpretation is not applied to contemporary images of bare-chested men. Tattoos, mirrors, hair, mandrakes, lotuses, and monkeys are just a few of the items used in artwork to convey a particular message that was focused and clear to the audience of the time. Decoding that meaning today, however, is difficult, especially for those signs and symbols found repeatedly in Egyptian art but that have yet to be the subject of rigorous and systematic study. Indeed, traditional interpretations of commonly represented objects and symbols are particularly hard to overturn. A case in point

is the “cone” that frequently appears on the head of the deceased and other individuals in New Kingdom tomb scenes. For years this object was interpreted as representing perfume or unguent, or a cone of wax or fat. However, a recent systematic study (Padgham 2008), based on the analysis of over 1000 scenes in over 100 New Kingdom tombs, suggests instead that the cone on the head of the male tomb owner was a symbol related to cult offerings. This research could provide a model and a basis for further studies investigating the same symbol on the heads of women. Understanding such ubiquitous icons is an important step to understanding what was being depicted in these highly codified representations.

Clothing, hair, and adornments can also signify a specific role rather than being related to gender. On certain temple walls and columns, Hatshepsut, one of Egypt’s female pharaohs, was portrayed wearing a kilt, false beard, and crown—in other words the same clothing that was worn by a male pharaoh. This has led some to describe her as a cross-dresser pretending to be a man. This attire does not symbolize maleness, however: it is royal regalia worn by a pharaoh as the living embodiment of the god Horus. In a similar fashion, when female barristers in the UK wear the same powdered wigs and robes as male barristers, they are not cross-dressing or pretending to be men—rather, they are donning the distinctive garb associated with that specific office, a costume that both masks their individuality and marks them as different from non-barristers.

Finally, conservatism reigns supreme in formal art. Goddesses, for example, are depicted through the millennia wearing the same type of dress they had always worn since the Old Kingdom. Conventions of representation also developed that codified what should and should not be depicted, and these sometimes changed over time. For example, while Old Kingdom figures do show women making pottery, men were more typically involved in crafts such as pottery making in tomb reliefs; indeed, female potters seem to drop out of the artistic record after the Old Kingdom. One should not assume from this that women only engaged in pottery making during the Old Kingdom, but rather that the conventions of representation changed, particularly in scenes of production centers. Women surely continued to make pots, but were simply not shown doing so.

3 Three-Dimensional Finds

For the purposes of this discussion, the archaeological finds will be divided into two categories: objects created and used by humans, and the human remains themselves. The main three interpretive problems that arise when attempting to deal with objects revolve around determining their function, their makers, and their users. Stereotypes abound—kohl (black or green eyeliner) continues to be associated with women, yet all evidence shows that it was used as much by men as women. When jewelry is found, it is assumed to have belonged to a woman, though few studies have actually been done to correlate specific artifacts with a specific gender; and again, such studies would need to be temporally and geographically bound (see also Liston, this volume, Chapter 9).

Anthropoid figurines are notoriously difficult to interpret in any context, and those that have been classified as female are a good example of the problems that can arise through hasty generalizations and oversimplification. This is the case not only for Egyptian figurines but also for prehistoric ones found elsewhere. Gimbutas used objects that she termed “Venus figurines” as evidence of near-universal goddess worship in the prehistoric world (see Talalay, this volume, Case Study I). More recent studies of this material (particularly by Beck 2000) show that no clear criteria were applied by Gimbutas in

determining which artifacts would be included in the Venus group. Many of the figures, in fact, are androgynous in appearance, while others are clearly male. The time range was also vast, ranging from 32,000–9000 BP (before the present).

The same situation applies to anthropoid figurines from Ancient Egypt. The assignment of gender has not been based on clearly defined criteria. In general, figures that appear to have breasts or have their pelvic region emphasized are labeled as female, while those that have no breasts or have a phallus are labeled as male. Figures that have no distinguishing gender markers, however, are also labeled as male. Figurines that are large around the belly are variously described as fat, or pregnant, or full-bodied, too often without an explicit reason given. Those labeled female (the male or ambiguous figurines have not yet been the subject of serious investigation) are often lumped together as a cohesive group, regardless of differences in material, features, or context, and associated with sexuality, divinities, or fertility. Only more recently have they been studied as ritual objects (Figure 2.3), as scholars such as Pinch (1993) and Waraksa (2008, 2009) have



Figure 2.3 Wooden female figure, probably Middle Kingdom. Photo: Courtesy of Egypt Centre, Swansea University, Wales.

begun to analyze them more carefully, with rigorous attention to distinguishing characteristics, find-spots, and material. The initial step of establishing a strict typology is tedious, but it must be performed in order to ensure that subsequent analyses, arguments, and interpretations are based on valid premises. We know little about the identity of either the makers or the users of these objects.

New technologies now allow us to explore the surviving finds more thoroughly than in the past, and more attention is being paid to ordinary “things.” Smith (2003) has recently demonstrated how analysis of vessel shapes (for storage, service, and cooking), coupled with residue and faunal analysis, can provide insights into the type of cuisine consumed by the residents of an Egyptian fortress at Askut during the Middle and New Kingdom periods. He notes that foodways are often the last bastion for the transmission and retention of ethnicity, identity, and cultural traditions. At Askut, for example, the preliminary scenario that is suggested is that of an increase in the adoption of the local Nubian diet over time, perhaps introduced by servants or women of Nubian origin. Through these mundane pots, the influence of women can thus perhaps be unveiled in ways not previously considered.

Human remains are another resource of information that has been poorly treated, at least until the last few decades (see Liston, this volume, Chapter 9). Few statistics were kept as to the sex and gender of burials uncovered in mortuary sites; more importantly, any distinction that was made seems to have been based on less-than-objective reasoning. For example, once it had been decided that daggers appear more often in male burials, any burial with a dagger was identified as male, without corroboration from the physical remains. Age, as well, can be difficult to assign, a problem exacerbated by the profusion of ill-defined terms that have been used in publications to describe burial contents (e.g., infant, neonate, toddler, child, adolescent, girl, boy, woman, man, adult, old man, old woman). All these terms are relative, and it is only recently that scholars such as Baker et al. (2005) have attempted to ensure consistency in their use, or at least to be clear about what is meant by each term within the context of a specific excavation.

Assumptions related to biology are still cited as fact without having been supported by enough biological data. A case in point is the issue of menstruation. It is still stated that girls in Ancient Egypt would have been married and have begun bearing children by between the young ages of eleven to fourteen. Yet recent research shows that the onset of early menarche depends upon good nutrition, health, and body fat. Even in a single country, the age can be very young in privileged populations (even nine or ten), while menstruation might be staved off until fourteen to seventeen for girls brought up in poorer environments. Recent forensic studies of human remains at sites such as Amarna show a relatively unhealthy population—a finding that should affect our understanding of the maturation of adolescents in Ancient Egypt and in consequence the lives of women. In such areas, we may need to revise the usual scenario in which girls marry and start their child-bearing years early, continue to have children frequently, and produce large families. Higher rates of infant (and maternal) mortality are also associated with poor nutrition, and, again, forensic evidence at some sites has revealed that there may be trends from the Predynastic Period, where women had wider hips, to the New Kingdom, where the pelvic width narrowed, potentially causing further problems in successfully giving birth. Not enough data has been gathered from the mortuary evidence to know whether this was a trend throughout Egypt or whether those sites from which we have data were atypical.

Nevertheless, the often-neglected mortuary data is an important means from which to learn more about women in Ancient Egypt. The types of wear that are found on the bones,

as well as muscle and tendon insertions, can, aside from revealing the quality of health and nutrition, reveal the stress of repetitive tasks. These can be matched to the known physical toll of certain activities. Work in cemeteries at Abydos (Baker 1997) reveals that skeletal malformations associated with repeated heavy lifting and physical labor were found in male and female skeletons of all social ranks. This suggests that gender differentiation in terms of work was perhaps not as strict as is suggested by visual representations. Forensic analyses can also be applied together with task analyses, such as that undertaken by Sweeney (2006) on older women in Deir el-Medina, in order to determine the kinds of activities that certain population segments may have been engaged in. These studies focus on analyzing activities according to task stage and try to determine the requirements to complete a task. These requirements comprise things such as knowledge and skill, as well as equipment, fine motor skills, and good eyesight.

4 Architecture and Space

The delineation of space within Egyptian architecture is the final evidence to be considered here. The woman's role within the domestic units in settlements must have been conspicuous. One of the most common titles in all times and places is "Lady of the House," which implies the management of the home and servants, whether it be a small household or a large estate that encompassed business, trade, and personal areas. This role is known through textual evidence but is far less visible in the actual archaeological remains. The question of the function of and areas of activity within dwellings is a subject of some discussion in other ancient cultures, and is beginning to be investigated in relation to Ancient Egypt (see also Trümper, this volume, Chapter 21).

Ethnographic evidence, which can be useful, is often cited in reconstructions. Seeing how other cultures deal with similar environmental conditions, such as heat, lack of rain, and relatively little change of hours of daylight throughout the year, can provide useful models to explore. The use of modern ethnographic analogy can also be risky, particularly when the cultures seem to be markedly different in terms of fundamental religious practices and mores. A case in point is the use of practices in modern-day Egypt to inform us about life in Ancient Egypt. In some respects this comparison can be quite useful, particularly to suggest possible scenarios related to technology, materials, and their production. However, it is clear that the precepts of Islam are fundamentally different from those of the Ancient Egyptian religion, particularly in terms of interpersonal relationships as well as interactions with the divine world and the environment, and therefore extreme care is needed when making such comparisons.

Using modern European traditions can be even more misleading. For example, in many cultures, sleeping quarters are typically located in more private locations within the house and are often situated so that they are sheltered from the wind. This seems to have been the case for Ancient Egyptian houses as well, and in some interior rooms there is sometimes remains of a platform upon which matting could have been placed to be used as a bed. But there is little evidence for specific sleeping arrangements, and we do not know whether women or children had separate rooms, or whether a wife regularly slept with her husband or they slept separately. Despite this lack of evidence, the segregation of women's quarters is often asserted even in studies of modest town dwellings. And, on ground plans of larger houses such as villas, various areas are often identified as "the master's quarters," "the wife's room," and "the harem," without further explanation.

In other types of settlements, the presence of women (as well as children, the elderly, and the sick) within the community has barely begun to be studied. The voices of men and elites resonate in the textual evidence from forts, administrative and military installations, quarries, and trading outposts at Egypt's boundaries. But closer examination of the small finds and architectural features can provide evidence of the domestic life within the residential quarters. At Askut, for example (see Smith 2003), the application of anthropological theory to the archaeology can show how foodways and religious practices provide visible expressions of ethnicity, revealing intermarriage and interaction between the local and temporary inhabitants. Rather than visualizing these areas as inhabited only by Egyptian men, models can be modified to allow for a more inclusive picture of these settlements as organic communities, populated with men, women, and children as well as the healthy, the sick, and the aging.

In religious spaces—whether large temple complexes such as that of Karnak, smaller chapels in forts and settlements, or those demarcated simply by the presence of a sacred cult figurine in a domestic context—the active role of women is indicated, but there is room for further investigation. The few monographs devoted to the study of the clergy in Ancient Egypt focus on the role of male priests in temples, with women only briefly mentioned as singers, dancers, musicians, and observers. This division of roles is based chiefly on the privileging of formal texts, hymns, and the few rituals engraved on temple walls. Temporal studies of religious titles in more fragmentary and administrative evidence show a more complex picture that shifts in terms of religious duties over time. For example, the title “priestess of Hathor” was prominent on statues and stelai during the Old Kingdom, while in the Middle Kingdom the titles are those of the priestess and high priest of a larger number of deities (both male and female), such as Amun, Khonsu, Pakhet, Neith, or Hathor. Unlike the title of ordinary “priest” (*wab*), the title of “high priest” (*hem-netjer*) in Ancient Egyptian was gender-neutral, and did not usually show the feminine ending “t.” Thus, the only way to tell the gender of the bearer is by the name of the individual and the pronoun. There is no evidence to suggest that this specific title was honorific in Ancient Egypt, so texts that relate the duties of high priests should not necessarily be treated as speaking about men only, particularly if these texts were composed in a period when female high priests were certainly known.

Representations of female musicians and dancers abound in temples, and female musicians and dancers are mentioned in administrative texts and titles. In New Kingdom Egypt, it is now known that the role of the chantress was central to many ritual acts. These women are depicted in tombs and on temple walls, and are recognizable by their titles or the musical instruments that they carry (the sistrum, an instrument that would be shaken to create a rattling sound, is the most popular). However, their role is often considered passive and secondary. It may be, however, that, along with gestures and words recited by the priest, the sounds the chantresses produced with their voices and instruments were critical for successful fulfillment of the ritual. This is where spatial reconstructions may be particularly valuable. Visualization laboratories (such as those at the University of California, Los Angeles) have been conducting work on virtual reconstructions of sacred spaces in ancient cultures that include not only three-dimensional renderings but also sonification. For rituals in which sound was important, places with specific resonant characteristics such as caves and grottos were selected. Man-made sacred spaces were also designed to enhance these critical ritual elements. The importance of processions in Ancient Egyptian rituals has been acknowledged, but sound has not yet been explored—in part because there are few structures where the roofs have survived.

Nevertheless, churches, temples, chapels, and shrines were clearly designed in such a way as to enhance the source of the important sound in specific areas.

In the case of chapels and votive zones, the gender of the main agents is even less obvious. The structure of smaller chapels was modeled on those of larger temples. Some chapels at Deir el-Medina include benches, a few of which have inscribed names (all male), but interpreting these is difficult. The simplest explanation is that they demarcated areas reserved for the individuals named. But they could also have allocated spaces reserved for the household of the individual named, which would include women, children, and the elderly. Other sacred areas are recognized by the deposits of what has been interpreted as votive figurines. Sacred deposits dedicated to Hathor are prevalent throughout Egypt, and feature a range of objects such as female figurines, phalluses, models of cows, ostraka with sketches, textiles, and faience beads. Women are sometimes assumed to have dedicated these objects, but this is uncertain.

The recent discovery of a trove of over 500 votive stelai and about fifty figurines in a tomb at Asyut, in Middle Egypt (DuQuesne 2007), provides indisputable evidence of the active role of women in a cult of the New Kingdom up to the Third Intermediate Period. These stelai were made of the usual materials, such as limestone, sandstone, and alabaster, but also clay—a material not usually associated with stelai. While many have inscriptions (epithets of the deity they honor, the name of the donor, hymns, prayers, and offering formulae), others are decorated only with images. The stelai are dedicated primarily to the gods Wepwawet and Anubis, whose cult was prominent in that area from the time of the Middle Kingdom. Other gods such as Hathor of Medjed (the consort of Wepwawet), Amun-Re, Osiris-Khentyamentiu, Reshep, Ptah, Taweret, Sobek, Hathor, Harsaphes, and Re-Harakhty also appear. The titles and material reflect a range of class levels from the elite to the lowly. Both men and women are represented. A number of the women seem to have no affiliation with any man, and therefore can be considered to have acted independently.

Some of the clay stelai have holes in the top, so they may have been hung either in the tomb or in a household shrine. The latter were common sacred spaces found in the everyday dwelling places of the Egyptians, and it is here that the presence of women can be attested most firmly. Architectural remains from towns such as Amarna, Deir el-Medina, Elephantine, Lahun, and Tell ed-Daba reveal that religious emplacements, furnishings, libation basins, and altars were a common feature of many houses, and are found in the large estates of the elite as well as the modest houses of workers.

In the New Kingdom, stepped platforms made of stone and mud brick (Figure 2.4), which have been interpreted as altars, were integrated as architectural features into the front room of some of the larger houses in Deir el-Medina (Koltsida 2006). These features are an example of the problems that can arise when attempting to distinguish gender roles in the use of space. When these elevated structures were first discovered, they were called by the excavator “*lit clos*” (closed or elevated bed). This name led to their identification as special beds for conception or as birthing areas. The arguments for associating these platforms with women have also relied on their decoration. A small number of them included preserved pieces of colored plaster featuring the god Bes, a protective deity often found in domestic contexts and sometimes associated with the safekeeping of women and children in particular. Other plaster fragments feature a dancing woman, or a man in a reed boat, or the legs of a woman kneeling. At the bottom of one platform is preserved the feet of a seated woman, behind which are a pair of dark feet. In front of this seated woman are two additional pairs of feet, behind which is a



Figure 2.4 Elevated platform in a house in New Kingdom Deir el-Medina. Photo: Courtesy of Kenneth Griffin.

convolvulus vine. In some ways this scene is similar to two other ostraka that more clearly show a woman breast-feeding an infant (Figure 2.1); this similarity has led to interpretations of the elevated brick structure as the setting for childbirth or sex, or as the main bed (see Koltsida 2006 for more detailed discussion). But such functions are highly unlikely: in nearly all cases, the platforms are located in a very public space, at the very front of the house and close to exterior doors, so that anyone entering the house would have had to pass by them.

Current interpretations now recognize that the Deir el-Medina structures were likely mainly used as altars or cultic spaces. Such a use does not, of course, preclude the presence of women. While the nature of the rituals carried out at these structures is unclear, other evidence suggests that women played an active role in domestic cults. Small shrines or niches have been found embedded in walls or columns in a range of houses. Some of these would have accommodated busts of generic individuals (called “ancestor busts”) or stelai dedicated to the dead (“ancestor stelai”). Other shrines and niches were dedicated to deities whose cult is usually associated with larger temples, such as Amun, Ptah, Hathor, Thoth, and Min. Deities whose presence was rare in the temple sphere, such as Bes, Taweret, Meretseger, Shed, and Renenutet, were also accommodated in these domestic installations, as were gods such as Reshep, Qadesh, and Astarte, whose origins lay outside of Egypt. These artifacts have been found in various rooms of the house, including the kitchen; many were likely placed within the niches, shrines, and altars and served as the focus of domestic worship and prayer. It is unusual to find accompanying texts or illustrations depicting both the finds and actual rites, and even more unusual to find the practitioner named, but at Deir el-Medina just such a discovery was made. A small stela was found (Figure 2.5) depicting a woman pouring libations before an ancestor bust. The text



Figure 2.5 After Auguste Mariette (1869–1880). *Abydos: Description des fouilles exécutées sur l'emplacement de cette ville. Ouvrage publié sous les auspices S.A. Ismail-Pacha* (Paris) v. 2, pl. 60.

below the image reads: “Performed by the Lady of the Estate, Irer,” and provides incontrovertible evidence for the role women played in the religious life of the community.

RECOMMENDED FURTHER READING

For problems in interpreting gender in material culture in general, see Beck (2000) and Meskell (1999). Robins (1993), Toivari-Viitala (2001), and Szpakowska (2008) provide general overviews. For examples of new scholarship applying a range of methodologies to uncover previously unexplored issues related to women in Ancient Egypt, see Troy (1986), Smith (2003), Asher-Greve and Sweeney (2006), Koltsida (2006), Sweeney (2006), and Graves-Brown (2008). Studies of women and religion in Egypt include Pinch (1993), DuQuesne (2007), Lesko (2008), Waraksa (2008, 2009), Ayad (2009), and Stevens (2009). Baker (1997), Baker et al. (2005), and Richards (2005) examine mortuary evidence. For museum catalogs, see Capel and Markoe (1996) and Wilfong (1997).