



Women in Ancient Egypt

Gay Robins

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An idealised version of women appears everywhere in the art of ancient Egypt, but the true nature of these women's lives has long remained hidden. Robins' book, gracefully written and copiously illustrated, cuts through the obscurity of the ages to show us what the archaeological riches of Egypt really say about how these women lived, both in the public eye and within the family.

The art and written records of the time present a fascinating puzzle. But how often has the evidence been interpreted, consciously or otherwise, from a male viewpoint? Robins conducts us through these sources with an archaeologist's relish, stripping away layer after interpretive layer to expose the reality beneath. Here we see the everyday lives of women in the economic, legal, or domestic sphere, from the Early Dynastic Period almost 5,000 years ago to the conquest of Alexander in 332 B.C. Within this kingdom ruled and run by men, women could still wield influence indirectly--and in some cases directly, when a woman took the position of king. The exceptional few who assumed real power appear here in colorful detail, alongside their more traditional counterparts. Robins examines the queens' reputed divinity and takes a frank look at the practice of incest within Egypt's dynasties. She shows us the special role of women in religious rites and offices, and assesses their depiction in Egyptian art as it portrays their position in society.

By drawing women back into the picture we have of ancient Egypt, this book opens a whole new perspective on one of world history's most exotic and familiar cultures.

Women in Ancient Egypt Details

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From Reader Review Women in Ancient Egypt for online ebook

Mel says

This was by far the best book on Egyptian history I've read so far. Robins set out in the beginning stating exactly why she was looking at the subject, why it was important and what the evidence stated. It definitely was written more as a social history, with Robins paying particular attention to changes over time, and made sure to include when the sources that she was talking about were found. One small complaint about this was that rather than including the dates in brackets after the dynasties (as is done in Chinese histories) the reader was left to flip to the chart at the front of the book to check the dates for what was being discussed. Overall Robins gave a great sense of caution to interpreting the different evidence of the position of women. At times this sense of doubt seemed to be taken a bit too far, for instance when she said that just because there was a word for women scribes, and women were seen with scribal tablets and writing equipment under the seats, shouldn't be interpreted that they were actually women scribes, or that they were even literate. She suggests how women writing letters to each other could easily have been written by a male in the household and read out to the women recipients. Which seems to be trying to stretch the evidence a little further than necessary in the opposite direction but all told I'd rather read a cautious writer to one who took the flimsiest evidence and ran with it. The book looked at royal women, the working lives of women, their legal status and their role in religion. The legal status and the role in religion I think were the most interesting. It was good to see how much control and independence, and how much legal protection women actually had. I felt that I learned quite a bit even if not much is known for sure.

Lisa says

I **adored** this book.

Gay Robins has produced an excellent resource on Ancient Egyptian women. Most of the book deals with the everyday life of non-royal women, and Robins admits that this mostly deals with women of the elite, as little evidence of the lives of lower class women has survived.

The first two chapters, however, are dedicated to the royal women of Ancient Egypt. The first provides a general overview, while the second profiles notable queens. My one criticism of the book is that this second chapter, bar one exception, is focused entirely on eighteenth dynasty queens, bypassing some fascinating women.

The rest of the book deals with non-royal women, with chapters dedicated to marriage, pregnancy, the roles women played in and out of the household, the economic and legal rights women had, the religious functions women performed, and, finally, the image of a woman pictured in Ancient Egyptian literature and art.

Robins appears to be very reliable, mainly because she does come out and admit to the gaps in the evidence and what this means for our knowledge of Ancient Egyptian women when discussing a topic, such as literacy. Robins is also honest when her theories lack solid historical data, which is refreshing to see. However, this honesty doesn't prevent valuable insights into women's lives, or everyday life in Ancient Egypt, being made.

I loved that each chapter ended with a few suggested books or articles for further reading. Thus, if you were

interested in the chapter topic, you had about four references you could go and look up straight away. What's more, though *Women in Ancient Egypt* was first published in 1993, Robins has gone back at a later stage and provided references to more recent articles and books.

Robins is perhaps more realistic, certainly more pessimistic, in her take on Ancient Egyptian women than other writers. It becomes clear that though Ancient Egyptian women did have it better than women from other cultures, entry to Egypt's ruling bureaucracy was only open to men, and the Egyptian society was that of a patriarchy.

To finish this review, I want to quote a line from the blurb, because it sums up why this book is so awesome, so here we go:

...without glossing over the tantalising gaps which exist in the evidence, she [Robins] offers fresh and revealing insights into women's lives and therefore into ancient Egyptian society as a whole.

Kendra says

This book provides a good overview of women in ancient Egypt, but wasn't always as in-depth as I wanted. Many of the images are also scattered across the book, so I'd find stuff from chapter three in, say, chapter nine. It was still informative, though.

Mrs. Bunny says

Clear, thorough, and informative - if a bit dry.

Fluvia says

(English review after Spanish)

Últimamente he estado bastante interesada en las cuestiones de género en el Antiguo Egipto, así que tenía bastante ganas de leerme este ensayo. La profesora Robins hace un recuento bastante exhaustivo de diversos aspectos de la vida egipcia, y los pone en relación con el papel de las mujeres. He descubierto muchos detalles que desconocía, y me ha hecho plantearme nuevas dudas. Lo único que lamento es que este campo esté tan poco estudiado, y sea tan difícil de conocer más sobre ellas (aunque hay que tener en cuenta que este libro fue publicado en los 90, la investigación debe de haber avanzado), puesto que hace que el libro se quede cojo en algunas partes, aunque como he dicho, es por falta de información. En general, una buena base para todos aquellos investigadores que queremos comenzar a saber más, y una buena obra divulgativa.

Lately I've grown interested in gender in Ancient Egypt, so I was really looking forward to reading this

essay. Professor Robins makes a very good account of many aspects of daily Egyptian life, and relates them to the role women had in them. It has made me discover many details that I didn't know about, and also to ask myself new questions. However, it's a pity that this field is so scarcely studied and the difficulty we encounter to know more about women, as this makes the book quite faulty in some aspects I would love to know more about; this is due to lack of sure facts on the field though (and this book was published in the 90's, so I hope there's more to know about the women nowadays). To sum up, a good start point for us researchers who want to deepen our knowledge in this field, and a good essay for the public.

Maja - BibliophiliaDK ? says

Ancient Egyptian women are hard to study, mostly because of the lack of texts and other evidence we have by women or describing women, but also because Egypt was male dominated, which means, that the few things we do have concerning women are biased and made with a male point of view. Gay Robins not only realises these problems but works with them and carries them with her every step of the way through this book, which was a tremendous joy for me, since a lot of scholars usually tend to ignore such things simply to be able to give answers. Robins did no such thing. She was straight forward about the problems relating to her study, and never once put anything in absolutes. It was refreshing that she was able to say 'we may presume that things were like this or like this because of this or that, but the truth is that we simply don't know'. A lot of scholars need to learn from this approach, especially when dealing with obscure subjects such as ancient Egyptian women. The only thing that bothered me about this book was the placement of the figures, which was off more often than not. It is tiring when you constantly have to go either back or forth to find the figure described in the text.
