**Marriage and Motherhood in Ancient Egypt**

Joyce Tydesley

We may all know about Nerfertiti, but what was life like for the less-famous women of ancient Egypt? Joyce Tyldesley describes in a piece adapted from her forthcoming book, the restraints and freedoms operating on daughters of Isis.

Found your household and love your wife at home as is fitting. Fill her stomach with food and provide clothes for her back ... Make her heart glad, as long as you live. (Old Kingdom wisdom text)

Those of a cynical disposition may take the view that marriage is merely a contract intended to create an efficient working unit, strengthen alliances and legitimise children. For women in particular the wedding ceremony may also mark the transition from child to adult and the start of a new role in society. All these generalisations are true of marriage in ancient Egypt, where the formation of a tight-knit family unit provided much-welcomed protection against the harsh outside world. And yet the Egyptians, through their paintings, their statutes and their lyric love songs, have passed on to us their satisfied contentment with the romance of marriage. To marry and beget children may have been the duty of every right-thinking Egyptian, but it was a duty which was very much welcomed: the Egyptians were a very uxorious race.

The state was remarkably relaxed in its attitude to marriage, placing no restriction on unions with either foreigners or slaves, and permitting both multiple marriages and the marriage of close relations. However, polygamy and incest were never rife in ancient Egypt. With the exception of the royal family who inter-married to safeguard the dynastic succession and emphasise their divine status) there is no evidence for widespread brother-sister unions until the Roman period, while parent-child incest is virtually unrecorded. The use of the affectionate term ‘sister’ to encompass a wide group of loved women, including wife, mistress, niece and aunt has contributed to our misunderstanding of the prevalence of sibling incest. The often-quoted evidence for polygamous marriages is a papyrus in which the lady Mutemheb states that she is the fourth wife of Ramose, adding that two of his other wives are dead while one is still living. Although the precise circumstances of this marriage are not spelt out, there is nothing further to suggest a polygamous alliance, and it may well be that Ramose had divorced his third wife before marrying his fourth.

There was no legal age of consent, although it is generally assumed that a girl would not have been considered eligible before the onset of menstruation at about the age of four- teen. A 26th Dynasty document recording a father's refusal to agree to his daughter's wedding because ‘her time has not yet come’ supports this view. However, evidence from Rome, where female puberty was legally fixed at twelve, indicates that ten or eleven-year-old brides were not uncommon, and we have no reason to doubt that equally young girls were married in Egypt. Indeed, it is only within the past fifty years that in modern rural Egypt marriage for girls as young as eleven has been prohibited by law. There is evidence from the Graeco-Roman period for Egyptian girls marrying as young as eight or nine, and we have a mummy label, written in demotic, which identified the body of an eleven-year-old wife.

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I see my sister coming. My heart exults and my arms open to embrace her … Oh night, be mine forever, now that my lover has come. (New Kingdom lover's song)

The Egyptians regarded marriage as a personal matter of no concern to the state. Consequently it required no religious or legal ceremony. There was no Egyptian word meaning wedding, no special bridal clothing, no symbolic exchange of rings and no change of name to indicate the bride’s new status. The cohabitation of the happy couple served as the only outward sign that the marriage negotiations had been successfully concluded, and it was by physically leaving the protection of her father's house and entering her new home that a daughter became universally acknowledged as a wife. The nuptial procession, where the young bride escorted through the streets by a happy crowd of friends and relations was an occasion for great family rejoicing, with wedding celebrations lasting well into the night.

The new husband assumed the father's former role of protecting and caring for his bride, although he in no way became her legal guardian. The wife retained her independence, and was able to continue administering her own assets. Although the husband usually controlled any joint property acquired during the marriage it was acknowledged that a share of this belonged to the wife; she was able to collect her portion when the marriage ended. One Ptolemaic text gives us a very clear picture of the legal equality of women when it records the business deal of an astute wife who lent her spendthrift husband three deben of silver to be paid back within three years at a hefty annual interest rate of 30 per cent.

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I shall not leave him even if they beat me and I have to spend all day in the swamp. Not even if they chase me to Syria with clubs, or to Nubia with palm ribs, or even into the desert with sticks or to the coast with reeds. (New Kingdom love song)

The marriage ended either in death or divorce. Death loomed as an ever present threat to happiness; young girls married to older men frequently became teenage widows, while the dangers associated with childbirth contributed to the many motherless families. Fortunately the woman’s right to inherit one third of her husband's property meant that a widow was not forced to rely on the charity of her children or to return to her father's house. Tomb scenes indicate that loving couples torn apart by death confidently expected to be reunited in the afterlife. In the meantime re-marriage after widowhood was very common, and funerary stelae indicate that some individuals married three or even four times.

Just as marriage was not seen as a matter for state intervention, so divorce was an equally private affair. Almost any excuse could be cited to end an alliance, and in effect any marriage could be terminated at will. Those who had had the foresight to draw up a marriage contract were bound to honour its terms, while those who became involved in acrimonious disputes over the division of joint property could invest in a legal deed to resolve their differences. Legal cases were, however, unusual, and most of marriages ended with the couple separating. The wife left the matrimonial home and returned to her family, setting both parties free to marry again.

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Man is more anxious to copulate than a donkey. What restrains him is his purse. (Scribal advice aimed at young men)

The more intimate aspects of married life were very important to the Egyptians who held the continuing cycle of birth, death and rebirth as a central and often repeated theme in their theology. Intercourse naturally formed an integral part of this cycle, and the Egyptians displayed no false prudery when dealing with the subject of sex. Unlike modern views of heaven, which tend to concentrate on spiritual rather than physical gratification, potency and fertility were regarded as necessary attributes for a full enjoyment of the afterlife, and consequently false penises were moulded onto the mummified bodies of dead men, while their wives were equipped with artificial nipples designed to become fully functional in the afterlife.

The Egyptians were not coy about sexual matters. However, as most of the evidence which they have left us comes from religious or funerary contexts where explicit references to intimate subjects would have been inappropriate, we do not have much opportunity for archaeological voyeurism. Love songs, myths and stories all make veiled references to intercourse, while crude graffiti, dirty jokes and explicit drawings scribbled on potsherds are far more basic.

One of the world's earliest examples of pornography, the so-called Turin erotic papyrus, contains a series of cartoons depicting several athletic couples cavorting rather self-consciously in a wide variety of imaginative and uncomfortable-looking poses. Unfortunately, we do not know whether the papyrus was a true record of observed events or, as seems more likely, simply represented the draftsman's more extravagant fantasies. Certainly, basing our understanding of conjugal relations on the Turin papyrus would be similar to believing all that is suggested by blue movies to be typical of modern Western life. More down-to-earth evidence compiled from texts and ostrich confirms that ‘face-to-face’ positions and intercourse from behind were the preferred sexual postures for most couples.

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Then Seth said to Horus: ‘Come, let us have a party at my house’. And Horus said to him: ‘I will’. When evening had come a bed was prepared for them, and they lay down together. During the night Seth let his penis become stiff, and he inserted it between the thighs of Horus. And Horus placed his hand between his thighs and caught the semen of Seth.  (New Kingdom tale)

We must assume that alternative sexual tastes did exist, but the Egyptians themselves maintained a discreet silence in these matters. Homosexual activity, which was by no means frowned upon in the ancient world, seems to have played little part in Egyptian daily life, while lesbianism is completely unrecorded. The Book of the Dead lists abstinence from homosexual arts amongst the virtues but gives us no indication of how common such acts might have been, while the homosexual episode in the New Kingdom tale of Horus and Seth, quoted above, has been variously interpreted as either a symbol of Seth's general unfitness to rule or as a sign of Seth's physical dominance over his nephew.

Rumours of more fantastic sexual behaviour were recorded by the Greek historian, Herodotos, who seems to have been particularly fascinated by the seamier side of Egyptian life: ‘In my lifetime a monstrous thing happened in this province, a woman having open intercourse with a hegoat’. Even if this was true it was clearly not a common occurrence. Necrophilia involving the abuse of freshly dead female bodies in the embalming houses, also hinted at by Herodotos, is again totally unrecorded by the Egyptians themselves.

Adultery, ‘the great sin which is found in women’, was the most serious marital crime which a wife could commit. Men in turn were expected to respect another man’s sole right of access to his wife, and indulging in sexual relations with a married woman was frowned upon. Relationships between two unmarried and consenting lovers appear to have been acceptable, but a liaison between an unmarried woman and a married man could be fraught with danger; one letter tells us how a group of Deir el-Medina villagers ganged together to confront a woman known to be conducting a clandestine affair with the husband of a neighbour. The wronged wife had attracted the sympathy of her community, and her husband was ordered to regularise his affairs at once. The adulterous woman was clearly seen as a temptress, and indeed Egyptian myths and wisdom texts are full of warnings to stay clear of wives who would deliberately snare men into sexual relationships.

A wife caught in adultery was open to the harshest of physical punishments. In theory she could be put to death; the New Kingdom Westcar Papyrus tells how an unfaithful wife was burned and her ashes scattered on the River Nile, while in the tale of the Two Brothers Anubis eventually kills his guilty wife and throws her body to the dogs. In practice divorce and social disgrace seem to have been the accepted penalty, and an adulterous wife was roundly condemned by everyone.

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Double the food which your mother gave you and support her as she supported you. You were a heavy burden to her but she did not abandon you. When you were born after your months she was still tied to you as her breast was in your mouth for three years. As you grew larger and your excrement was disgusting she was not disgusted.  (New Kingdom scribal instruction)

In the days following her wedding the bride would have eagerly looked for signs that a baby was on the way. It would be very difficult for us to over-emphasise the importance of her fertility to the Egyptian woman. A fertile woman was a successful woman. She was the envy of her less fortunate sisters and, as the mother of many children, she gained the approval of both society and her husband. Every man needed to prove his masculinity by fathering as many children as possible, and to do this he needed a fruitful wife. The wife, for her part, needed many children to ensure her security within the marriage. To produce a large brood of children was every Egyptian's dream, and babies were regarded as a cause for legitimate boasting; we must assume, however, that the 11th Dynasty army captain claiming to have fathered ‘seventy children, the issue of one wife’ was exaggerating to emphasise his virility.

Although the mechanism of menstruation was not fully understood the significance of missing periods was clear, and most Egyptian women were able to diagnose their own pregnancies. Those who were in doubt could consult a doctor who would conduct a detailed examination of the skin, eyes and breasts. As an additional test, a urine sample was poured over sprouting vegetables or cereals, with subsequent strong growth confirming pregnancy. Following a positive test it was possible to anticipate the sex of the unborn child by sprinkling more urine over sprouting wheat and barley: a rapid growth of barley would indicate a boy; wheat a girl.

Doctors developed a number of tests to determine whether a childless woman was ever likely to conceive. A physical inspection could prove helpful as, ‘if you and one of her eyes similar to that of an Asiatic, and the other like that of a southerner, she will not conceive’. However, even the most experienced of physicians could offer no hope to those faced with the tragedy of a childless marriage. Infertility was invariably blamed on the wife, and consequently barren marriages were often ‘cured’ by divorce, with the husband simply taking a different and hopefully more fertile partner. This harsh treatment was generally frowned upon, and a Late Period scribe advised ‘do not divorce a woman of your household if she does not conceive and does not give birth’. A more socially acceptable means of ending sterility was adoption. The short life expectancy and high birth rate meant that there was always a supply of orphaned children, and infertile couples frequently adopted the child of a poorer relation.

Childbirth was not considered a matter for male interference, and the medical texts offered little practical advice to the midwives who customarily assisted at the delivery. Indeed, the whole process of birth developed into a secretive female-controlled rite. This means that our understanding of the single most important event in the Egyptian woman's life has to be pieced together from fragments of surviving stories and myths combined with the illustrations of divine births carved on certain temple wails. This type of evidence is strong on ritual and symbolic content but rather weak on practical details.

The Westcar Papyrus gives our most detailed account of childbirth when telling the story of the birth of triplets to the lady Reddjedet. Reddjedet was assisted by four goddesses who arrived at her house disguised as itinerant midwives. Isis stood in front of the mother-to-be and delivered the babies, Nephthys stood behind her, and Heket used an unspecified technique to ‘hasten’ the births. Meskhenet then told the fortunes of the new-born babies while the god Khnum gave them life. All three infants were washed, their umbilical cords were cut, and they were placed on a cushion of bricks. Reddjedet then presented the midwives with a payment of corn, and ‘cleansed herself in a purification of fourteen days’.

Although ostraca recovered from Deir el-Medina suggest that women in labour may have entered a ‘birth bower’, a tent-like structure with walls hung with garlands, these representations probably have more symbolic than literal meaning, with most births occurring within the family home. For her delivery the naked mother-to-be either knelt or squatted on two low piles of bricks or sat on a birthing-stool, a seat with a hole large enough for the baby to pass through. Gravity was used to assist the birth, and the midwife who squatted on the floor was able to help the mother by easing the baby out. For more difficult cases there were several approved procedures intended to ‘cause a woman to be delivered’; these included bandaging the lower abdomen and the use of vaginal suppositories. The only surgical implement used by the midwife was the obsidian knife used to cut the umbilical cord after the delivery of the afterbirth.

Tragedies associated with childbirth were all too common. Pelvic abnormalities sufficient to make delivery difficult if not impossible have been recognised in several mummies; one of the worst examples is the 12th Dynasty mummy of the lady Henhenet which shows a dreadful tear running from the bladder to the vagina, almost certainly caused when a large baby was dragged through the mother's abnormally narrow pelvis. The royal family was not exempt from these tragedies, and the body of Mutnodjmet, wife of King Horemheb, was recovered with the body of a foetus or new-born child, suggesting that the queen had died attempting to provide an heir to the throne.

Few infant burials have been recovered, and it seems that a baby who was stillborn or who died soon after birth was not accorded full funerary rites; the recovery of small corpses buried under villages houses implies that the dead baby itself may have had some religious or superstitious value. This suggestion is reinforced by the discovery of two miniature coffins of gilded wood within the tomb of Tutankhamun. Each contained an inner coffin and a tiny mummified foetus. These could be two premature children born to the young king and his queen, but the inclusion of the small bodies within the tomb may have had a more complex symbolic meaning as yet unexplained.

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I made live the names of my fathers which I found obliterated on the doorways . . . Behold, he is a good son who perpetuates the names of his ancestors.  (Middle Kingdom tomb inscription)

The mother named her baby immediately after the birth, thereby ensuring that the child had a name even if he or she died. Names were very important to the Egyptians, who felt that knowledge of a name conferred power over the named person or object. One of their greatest fears was that a personal name might be forgotten after death. Dying a ‘second death’, the complete obliteration of all earthly memory of the deceased including the name, was too awful to contemplate, and specific spells ‘for not perishing in the land of the dead’ were routinely painted on coffins.

Most non-royal Egyptians were given only one name. We know of many examples of personal names being favoured repeatedly within one family; a good example is the family of the New Kingdom Third Prophet of Amun, where sons were named in alternate generations Pediamunnebnesttawy (‘Gift of Amun who is Lord of the Thrones of the Two Lands’) and Hor (‘Horus’). Family names were also given to girls, and it was not considered confusing that both a mother and one or more of her daughters should share the same name. The Egyptians did not baulk at very long names: Hekamaatreemperkhons son of Hekhemmut would not have felt particularly hard done by, although it is not surprising that nick-names were widely used. Naming children in honour of members of the royal family was popular, and attractive animals or flowers made nice names; Susan, ‘a lily’ was a favourite for Egyptian girls.

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My son, O King, take thee to my breast and suck it . . . He has come to these his two mothers, they of the long hair and pendulous breasts . .. They draw their breasts to his mouth and evermore do they wean him.  (Old Kingdom pyramid text)

It was customary to breast-feed infants for up to three years, way beyond the point where the child would happily eat solid foods. Not only did breast milk provide the most nutritious, convenient and sterile form of nourishment for babies, it also had a contraceptive effect, reducing the chances of the new mother becoming pregnant too soon after giving birth. The image of a woman squatting to suckle a child at her left breast became symbolic of successfully fertile womanhood, frequently depicted in both secular and religious Egyptian art. Medical papyri suggested that the quality of the milk should be tested; ‘to recognise milk which is bad, you shall perceive that its smell is like the stench of fish’. To ensure a copious supply of milk the same texts advise rubbing the mother’s back with a special mixture, or feeding her with sour barley bread.

Mothers of high birth frequently left the feeding of their baby to a wet-nurse who would undertake to feed the child for a faxed period of time at an agreed salary. Late Period contracts usually included a clause stating that the nurse would not indulge in sexual intercourse for the duration of her employment as this may have resulted in pregnancy and the end of lactation. Throughout the dynastic period the position of royal wet-nurse woman could hold. However, by the Roman period wet-nurses had become less valued, and we have a number of contracts which make it clear that nurses were being paid to rear foundlings. These orphan children were later sold by their owners, a practice which made sound economic sense at a time of high slave prices.

As they grew up, children played with a range of carved animals, miniature boats, wooden balls and spinning tops which would delight any modern child. For those who could not afford such luxuries there were the open fields to run in and the river and canals to swim in, while the thick Nile mud made a satisfying modelling clay. However, childhood was a relatively short-lived experience, and as the children grew older they were gradually introduced to the work which they would be doing for the rest of their lives. Young children supervised their tiny brothers and sisters or cared for animals, girls helped their mothers around the house and older boys were sent to school or started to learn their trade.

After a mere thirteen or fourteen years the wheel had turned full circle. Parents could start to consider eligible marriage partners for their teenage girl, working hard to arrange a suitable marriage which would strengthen the family unit and re-enforce alliances whilst giving protection to both their child and future grandchildren. The age, wealth and social connections of prospective bridegrooms would all be subjected to detailed scrutiny. The daughter herself would already be eagerly anticipating the day when she would meet her intended husband and embark upon the most important female role in Egyptian society - that of wife and mother.

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**Further Reading:**

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* [History Today](http://www.historytoday.com/archive/history-today/latest) [Joyce Tydesley](http://www.historytoday.com/author/joyce-tydesley) [Archives](http://www.historytoday.com/tags/archives) [Archives (1980-2009)](http://www.historytoday.com/tags/archives-1980-2009) [HT\_SECTIONS](http://www.historytoday.com/tags/htsections) [Search Topics](http://www.historytoday.com/tags/search-topics) [This Month](http://www.historytoday.com/tags/month) [Top menu](http://www.historytoday.com/tags/top-menu) [WHAT](http://www.historytoday.com/tags/what) [WHEN](http://www.historytoday.com/tags/when) [WHERE](http://www.historytoday.com/tags/where) [Ancient Egypt](http://www.historytoday.com/ancient/ancient-egypt) [Editor's Choice](http://www.historytoday.com/editors-choice) [Volume: 44 Issue: 4](http://www.historytoday.com/archive/history-today/1994/volume-44-issue-4) [Africa](http://www.historytoday.com/africa) [Egypt](http://www.historytoday.com/africa/egypt) [Free](http://www.historytoday.com/availability/free)

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