

Women in Ancient Egypt: the religious experiences of the non-royal woman

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DECLARATION

I, the undersigned, hereby declare that the work contained in this thesis is entirely my own work and that I have not previously in its entirety or in part submitted it at any university for a degree.

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the importance of the function of religion in the life of the average, non-royal woman in Ancient Egyptian society. As Ancient Egyptian society and the historical documentation thereof were dominated by the male perspective, the extent of religious participation by women was, until recently, underestimated. Recent research has shown that women had taken part in, and in some cases even dominated, certain spheres of Ancient Egyptian religion. This included religious participation in public, as well as the practice of certain religious rituals in the home.

The religious lives of ordinary women of non-royal families were studied by looking at their involvement in the public aspects of Egyptian religion, such as temples, tombs and festivals, as well as at the influence of religion on their identities as women and mothers.

The research method followed was that of an iconographical analysis of original sources, which were classified and examined in order to establish their religious links to women of the middle and lower classes.

A catalogue of sources is given, including sources depicting women participating in public rituals and objects used in a more domestic sphere. The first included tomb paintings and reliefs from tombs and temples, as well as objects given as public offerings to various deities. The second group included objects and visual depictions relating to fertility, birth and death.

This thesis attempts better to understand and illuminate to what an extent the ordinary women of Ancient Egypt were involved in religious participation in their daily lives, as well as to illustrate the dimensions of this participation.

OPSOMMING

Hierdie tesis ondersoek die rol van godsdiens in die daaglikse lewe van die gewone vrou in Antieke Egipte. Aangesien die Egiptiese samelewing en die geskiedkundige optekening daarvan in die verlede meestal vanuit die manlike perspektief gesien is, is die omvang van die godsdienstige beleving van die vrou tot onlangs toe nog onderskat. Meer onlangse navorsing toon egter dat sekere aspekte van die Egiptiese godsdiens wel deur vroue beoefen, en selfs soms beheer is. Hierdie aspekte sluit in beide publieke deelname en die beoefening van godsdienstige rituele in die huis.

Die godsdienstige beleving van hierdie gewone vroue vanuit die laer en middelklasse is bestudeer deur te kyk na hulle betrokkenheid by die openbare aspekte van die Egiptiese godsdiens, soos tempels, graftombes en feeste, asook die invloed van die Egiptiese godsdiens op hulle sosiale identiteit.

Die navorsingsmetode wat gevolg is, is die ikonografiese ontleding van oorspronklike bronne. Hierdie bronne is geklassifiseer en daarna bestudeer om hulle religieuse verband met die vroue van die laer en middelklasse te bepaal.

'n Katalogus van bronne is ingesluit. Hierdie bronne beeld die religieuse deelname van vroue aan publieke rituele uit, en sluit ook voorwerpe gebruik in tuisaanbidding in. Voorbeelde uit graftombes en tempels, asook voorwerpe in die openbaar aan gode gewy, maak deel uit van eersgenoemde, terwyl die tweede groep visuele voorstellings en voorwerpe wat verband hou met fertiliteit en geboorte insluit.

Hierdie tesis poog om die omvang en dimensies van die godsdienstige beleving in die daaglikse lewe van die gewone vroue in Egipte toe te lig.

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Introduction

1. The view of women in Ancient History

When looking at Ancient History, most of it seems very male-dominated, as history was recorded and preserved under the Western view of patriarchal authority. However, recently it has come to light that the Ancient Mediterranean societies may not always have been based on a system in which men held all the high positions of power. There were women who were highly educated in many of the ancient societies, and many women held powerful positions – even in religion, although most history books say little about the subject. The study of gender is relatively new in archaeology, thus 'Women in Egypt' is also still a new field of study. Some female Egyptologists – Lynn Meskell (2002), Gay Robins (1993), Barbara Lesko (1991) and Barbara Watterson (1991) - for instance - have made great inroads in this area, although the general impression shared in the popular mind is that women only existed in Egypt as beautiful and decorative ornaments to 'the great and the good'.

More recent research has shown that, at one time or other, the women of the ancient civilisations around the Mediterranean participated extensively in the most revered and sacred aspects of worship. Historians, however, have often reduced the significance of these women holding priestly titles by explaining them away as honorific, or by associating the women with prostitutes or divine concubines. Women who were given priestly titles often had to carry a position of high status in society in order to be able to complete the duties required by these specific positions. Examples of Egyptian positions that required education are that of 'God's Wife of Amun' or 'God's Wife'. According to Lesko (1991:12), pharaohs during the early Dynasties developed this role out of need for strong representation in South Egypt. Women who carried this title (usually one of the pharaoh's daughters) held a chief role as a priestess in the national cult centre and the main function for these women was to represent the pharaoh's interests in the southern part of Egypt. The 'God's Wife of Amun' was to carry out the official religious functions that were usually

reserved for the king. Knowledge in how to run a country or community was necessary for anyone, even a woman, who was to carry out this role successfully.

2. Sources for women in Egypt and their religion

Written evidence for ancient Egypt is invaluable in reconstructing ancient society. It often seems, however, that the written word is seen as the only evidence for Egyptian social history. Literature does have an important part to play, but so does archaeology and iconography (e.g. Meskell 1999 and 2002), especially when looking at ordinary (illiterate) people.

Looking at past precedence, archaeology has tended to look for that which is the same, rather than that which is exceptional. In Egyptology, the abundance of material evidence should, theoretically, make the examination of the individual easier, but there are problems.

We do have extensive studies of the lives of individual kings and their courtiers. However, in studying only the élite, for which we have more evidence, we may overlook the ordinary individual. For example, funerals, for the élite, were a highly visible, public display, often seen and experienced by the whole community. With the less privileged, it was perhaps a smaller, more personal affair, as has been demonstrated for Deir el-Medina by Meskell & Montserrat (1997).

How does this relate to women? Some writers see women as a static and inert group. Concentrating on literature at the expense of archaeological evidence may exclude areas which will illuminate the female perspective, as women were not often able to write and thus excluded from access to the written wor(l)d. Writing was also often idealized and not about factual events. Thus the information the Egyptians wrote about themselves is biased because it was written by a small group of people (less than one percent of Egyptians were literate) and because it was generally intended to present an ideal rather than realistic image.

The wealth of archaeological data is providing new insights into most aspects of daily life, seen more clearly in the settlement remains of the majority of the people. Despite a slow start, studies that focus upon women now seem to be more in vogue in Egyptology. Many of the studies of women in Egypt, however, are of the 'powerful women in Ancient Egypt' variety, that does not deal with the role of women in general, but only with a small selection of society. Tyldesley (1996) writes extensively about the female pharaoh Hatshepsut, who was one of the handful of female rulers in Ancient Egypt. Because of her gender, writings about Hatshepsut's reign have concentrated not on her policies but on the relationships and power struggles within the early 18th Dynasty (Graves-Brown 2000:13). More recently, Tyldesley (1994) and Watterson (1991), for example, take women as a uniform category and describe their lives according to Western concepts: economics, law, love, marriage, dress, etc.

Although the title of 'God's Wife of Amun' was held by a royal princess, many other women would also have held positions of stature within the Egyptian religious context, as religion was an integral part of life in ancient Egypt, for women as well as for men. Even women without specific titles would have felt a need for some religious participation, as Egypt was a country where religion and society went hand in hand. There was no choice but to participate – if you were part of the community, you would have been part of the religious reality of the community. The two extremes were the formal state theology and bureaucracy versus the unofficial traditions of magic, superstition and witchcraft. Between these poles there still were the semi-official religions of regional and family cults (Tyldesley 1994:243).

Evidence from Deir el Medina shows that more personal family-based cults were as important as the worshipping of state gods (Tyldesley 1994:244), with serious emphasis on the gods associated with childbirth and pregnancy. What, then, comprised the religious role of the ordinary women, the 'mothers of the masses'? Women of the household maintained ancestor cults and kept shrines in their homes dedicated to deities, especially divinities who were involved in guarding the woman and child through the pregnancy and

childbirth process, like the household god Bes. In addition to the domestic observances and household shrines, many women also participated in religious life and temple service, from the Old Kingdom onwards.

3. Research problem, aim, content and method

Religion was one of the fundamental cornerstones of life in ancient Egypt for women as well as for men. Yet markedly different spiritual fields were fused into the conventional term 'Egyptian religion'. This included the extremes of state theology and its elite-controlled temples at the one end and commonplace superstition and magic at the other, with regional and family cults in between.

Women were often not included in the major state-dominated religious rituals, and had to look elsewhere for spiritual contentment. This was done by focusing on the so-called 'minor' aspects of religion such as family cults and magic. What made up the different aspects of the religious lives of these women, and how did they reach spiritual fulfilment in a society where the major religious spheres were male-dominated and controlled by the state? Although several general studies of Egyptian women exist, few touch on the religious lives of ordinary women per se.

The aim of this thesis is to explore some of the religious concepts that appear in sources from Ancient Egypt. The term 'religious' is broadly defined as 'the cultural means by which humans deal with the supernatural' (Rosman & Rubel 2001:209). At first the key elements and aspects of Egyptian Religion will be identified and explained. In the first chapter, the origins, methodology, and rituals of the religion will be described, and the different deities listed.

These concepts of religion will then be examined and analysed from the perceived perspective of women who did not belong to the royal family. These women would have experienced and practised religion in a different manner from royal women because of their economic situation as well as their position

in society. In an attempt to explain the relationship between religion and the ordinary, non-royal women within Egyptian society, the extent of their religious involvement on a daily basis will be examined.

The employed method will be social-historical, including the analysis of original iconographic sources. In order not merely to reiterate the opinions of others, a body of original sources was collected (Chapters 2-3). After collecting these sources which portray links, however tenuous, between Egyptian women and religion, the sources will be categorised and the strength of their religious links determined. In order to illustrate the necessity of the spiritual and religious awareness of women of the middle and lower classes in Ancient Egypt, a selection of visual and textual sources will be described in Chapters Two and Three.

The collected sources are divided into two main categories, according to their form and function. These categories are named the 'public sphere' or the 'domestic sphere', also referred to as the 'private sphere', after Meskill (2002), as this aspect of religion was mostly practiced by women in their private lives as mothers and wives. According to this division, sources from the public sphere are those depicting non-royal women engaged in religious rites outside the home, whereas sources from the domestic or private sphere primarily show the practice of religion by these women inside their homes and personal spaces. The 'public' sources will be listed in Chapter Two, and the 'domestic' or 'private' sources in Chapter Three.

After listing and describing the material, both visual and written sources, they will be utilised to examine the religious and spiritual lives of these 'ordinary' women of Egypt, as is done in Chapters Four and Five. Chapter Four will examine the 'public' sphere, and Chapter Five the 'domestic' sphere. Chapter 6 contains the conclusions.

Chapter 1

A short synopsis of Egyptian Religion

The ecology of Egypt, with the presence of fertile ground and a good water source, was a crucial determinant in the development of societies. During the Neolithic period, when people started to live together in communities, the first concepts of religious beliefs and experiences developed. As people were always aware of the influence of the environment and natural forces, the unique ecological composition of Egypt gave birth to the core concepts in the Egyptian view of the world. The Egyptian idea of creation made up the fabric of this ancient religion, which in turn strongly influenced many of the conventions of Egypt, such as ideas about kingship, death and burial, and influenced the social order on all levels: from the king to the peasants (Aldred 1961:72).

Religion was the integral aspect of Egyptian life that most dominated and influenced numerous Egyptian cultural elements, and, thus, the whole civilisation. Religion pervaded most aspects of their everyday existence in addition to laying the foundation for their funerary beliefs and customs. Agnosticism was impossible, as everything was a manifestation of the religious beliefs of the people. The religion was followed at state level, in the temples, and also on a personal level in homes (David 1998:101).

1.1 Origins

The ancient Egyptians chose to personify all that was crucial to them, including natural phenomena and abstract concepts (Oakes and Gahlin 2002:440). The phenomenon of the yearly rise of the waters of the Nile, with its cycle of destruction and rebirth, entered into the Egyptian consciousness and determined their idea of the world and their cosmology (Aldred 1961:71). The dominant Egyptian idea of the moment of creation, when the ground emerged from the primordial waters of the void, mirrored the annual events in the cycle of the Nile and the surfacing of the land covered with fresh silt after

each flood (Quirke and Spencer 1992:60). In each sunrise the Egyptians sought the assurance of their own rising after death. In the daily circuit of the sun they saw the never-ending task of upholding the order of the universe (Quirke and Spencer 1992:64). The power of the sun was regarded as the great creative force and sustainer of all living things (David 1998:59) and the powerful and widespread influence of the solar cult dominated Egyptian civilization (Aldred 1961:99).

Most of the major advances in Egyptian civilisation were first introduced to assist religion before they were applied to secular requirements (David 1998:209). The Egyptians were intensely concerned with the proper social behaviour and consequently it comprised the ideal at which they persistently aimed. One of the ways in which the society was made aware of its identity was the daily act of worship. This was intended to call attention to the mutual, and not individual, character of the people (White 1970:36). The worship of the gods was designed first and foremost to assure the worshipper of his place and participation in the great scheme of things. The gods were respected more for their magical than for their moral powers (White 1970:35). As the gods were a form of nature, they were inevitably bound to the recurring natural phenomena such as the yearly inundation, the growing of crops, as well as light and darkness. Thus the life of a particular deity often took the form of a cycle, recurring each year. The birth, triumphs, death and rebirth of the god were observed by the deity's worshippers with appropriate annual festivals (Quirke and Spencer 1992:76).

Our knowledge of Egyptian religion is based on both archaeological and literary sources. The former include buildings, statues and the representations of the gods and goddesses in paintings and on reliefs on the walls of temples, as well as objects such as amulets and household items. The latter include hymns and litanies to the gods, as well as rituals and dramas of ancient myths inscribed in tombs and temples. Information was also found on papyri and in the writings of the Greeks and Romans (Hayes 1953:75).

The development of Egyptian religion was dependent on, and closely

followed, the political development of the country (Hayes 1953:76). The religious beliefs of the Egyptians from before the Old Kingdom are indistinct as there were no definite religious structures. It was only in the 3rd Dynasty that religious belief and practice left significant evidence. Texts and images concentrated on the belief in the sun as creator and in defending life and order from the agents of chaos (Quirke and Spencer 1992:58).

1.2 The gods and goddesses

The basis of the religion of ancient Egypt was the worship of the local god or goddess of the individual small village, township or community. Many deities with a local following gradually acquired a wider popularity through shifts in political power and religious power, but this was not necessarily so in all cases (Hornung 1982:70). This rather happened in conjunction with a circle of deities whose cults were already spread over Upper and Lower Egypt (Hornung 1982:72).

These local deities were all essentially similar in character, although there were differences in names and cult places, as well as in the objects in which the deities manifested themselves. Over 2000 deities were worshipped in Egypt at one time or another (White 1970:21). The deities, who were mostly nature deities with their own ceremonials and festivals, were spirits believed by the realistic, literal-minded worshippers to reside and to manifest themselves in certain natural forms. These beliefs started with localised cults, who worshipped most deities in an animal or fetish form, as these were seen as symbols through which the divine power could manifest itself (David 1998:101). These deities were inevitably bound to recurring natural phenomena such as the annual inundation, the growing of crops and light and darkness, observed by worshippers with appropriate annual festivals (Hayes 1953:75-76).

Individual deities sometimes merged to form syncretistic deities with the combined elements of the individual deity. There existed different types of syncretism, or links between deities. In kinship, a deity might be the son or

spouse of another, or a deity might be the 'image' of another. In some cases there was even a union of two deities (Hornung 1982:93), although this did not imply a fusion of the identities of the two deities. Thus, Amun-Re was not merely a synthesis of Amun and Re, but rather a new form that existed along with them (Hornung 1982:97).

The Egyptian deities cannot be strictly defined (Hornung 1982:99), and most deities had no definite attributes. The deities were patterned after humans, and were also born, fought, and even died. The numerous allusions to the belief that all deities were born (*msj*) can be seen in the many forms of child gods (Hornung 1982:145). A single deity could be represented in human form, zoomorphic (animal) form, and mixed animal-human form (Brewer and Teeter 1999:84-85). The early depictions of deities in human form showed a body without separate limbs (Hornung 1982:105). During the first two dynasties a group of purely anthropomorphic deities appeared in addition to the deities in purely animal form, but mixed deities, combining human and animal elements, were still missing (Hornung 1982:109).

In a town, the deity was provided with a house, or temple, staffed by a hierarchy of priests. The principal dwelling of the deity was in the innermost sanctuary of this temple, where the divine being was also represented by his cult statue. At the performance of each rite in the daily service, a priest read or recited the magical ritual (Oakes and Gahlin 2002:360-361). In return for these services, the deity was expected to function as the universal benefactor of the people of his or her own community. He or she was to ensure a high Nile, fertility and victory in war (Hayes 1953:76).

In addition to the nationwide belief in deities such as Ra, Horus and Osiris, the Egyptian religion had a great assortment of gods and goddesses, in various grades of importance. The role of the deity could have shown evidence of some changes from one period to another, but the religion itself showed remarkable constancy (Quirke and Spencer 1992:58). Above all deities was the creator god, who had various names, with the most important being the sun (Quirke and Spencer 1992:60). As Amun existed outside nature, he was

the only god by whom nature could have been created. Texts recognised this by identifying all the creator gods as manifestations of Amun (Allen 1997:127). The sun as the god Ra dominated all religious texts as the supreme incarnation of power and was represented above all in the shape of a falcon. At Heliopolis Ra also took the name of Atum ('the all'), the most important in creation. Atum emerged from the primeval ocean (Nun) to bring forth the world from himself. Atum later became associated with Ra, the sun god. Atum gave birth to Shu (god of air) by spitting him out, and then vomited out his daughter Tefnut (goddess of moisture). From the union of Shu and Tefnut a son Geb (earth) and daughter Nut (sky) were conceived. Geb and Nut, in turn, had two sons, Osiris and Seth, and two daughters, Isis and Nephtys. Together these deities made up the Heliopolitan Ennead, the most famous of the families of deities (David 1998:103).

Isis married Osiris and Seth married Nephtys. Osiris was jealously murdered by Seth and his body scattered. His loyal and loving wife, Isis, gathered the pieces and reunited them, thereafter conceiving a son, Horus. Horus avenged the death of his father Osiris by fighting Seth. When they finally appeared before the council of deities, the council, after hearing evidence, favoured Osiris and Horus. Osiris was resurrected, to become king and judge of the dead. Horus was appointed as king of the living, with Seth, the Evil One, banished (David 1998:103).

Most episodes in Egyptian religion are about Horus and Osiris and their names are found in the names of kings, magical formulae and funerary texts (Quirke and Spencer 1992:60). Osiris was the personification of fertility, as found in the 'Black Land', opposed to Seth, who personified sterility, as found in the desert. The cycle of the life and death of Osiris was a symbolic rendering of the progress of the seasons and the annual rise and fall of the Nile. As the god of every green thing, Osiris passed into the body of every man who ate a plant or part thereof. Osiris was thus truly a living and dead god (White 1970:28).

Horus was the primary god of kingship, represented by the falcon. The king

was thus a manifestation of a god of heavenly power. Horus was in opposition to the god Seth, who was made up of disorderly features and embodied disorder. As life involved a constant struggle between the forces of order and anarchy, rituals evoked the conflict between Horus and Seth in an effort to preserve the balance of power.

At death, each Egyptian sought resurrection both in the daily cycle of the sun and the story of Osiris. The sun brought resurrection of nature and Osiris resurrection of the body. The end of the Old Kingdom brought the emergence of Osiris as god of the dead and ruler of underworld (Quirke and Spencer 1992:65-67). The cult of Osiris was important because it offered resurrection and eternal life to those followers who lived by its rules. It emphasised that goodness, and not wealth, ensured immortality.

According to the Memphite creation myth, Ptah was the creator of the universe. His main cult centre was at Memphis, where the royal workshops were also situated. As he was the god of creation with metal work (both metal objects made and production involving metal tools), he was also the patron of the great architectural projects, as well as arts and crafts. He established ethics and morals, created food and drink and absorbed the function of all the other deities. He is always portrayed in human form as a mummy, and was later associated with Sokar, the hawk-headed guardian of the necropolis. He was also worshipped in the form of the Apis bull, but was not as popular as Osiris because he did not have such an important mythology (David 1998:104). Sekhmet, Ptah's wife with the lion head, and Nefertem, the child and life-giving scent of the lotus joined Ptah to form a triad. Sekhmet, the ferocious aspect of female divinity, like most Egyptian goddesses, had a dual character. This enabled them to exchange places and iconography with ease (Oakes and Gahlin 2002:294).

Other gods were Thoth, the ibis-headed scribal god of wisdom, Anubis, the jackal-headed god of cemeteries and embalming and Sobek, the crocodile god (a form of Seth) (David 1998:104). The moon was sometimes deified as Thoth, represented as a baboon, but later the role of moon god was taken

over by the god of childbirth, Khonsu (Quirke and Spencer 1992:65). The names of the cosmic deities were not the same as the elements in the cosmos which they embody. Thus a deity could not just be called the 'moon god' or 'earth god', as their natures were far more multifaceted (Hornung 1982:68). The Theban triad, consisting of Amun, Mut and Khonsu became important in the 18th Dynasty

In Egyptian religion, there was a striking lack of personification in the pantheon of the waterways or stretches of water – the 'Nile gods' were only fertility figures for the annual inundation (Hornung 1982:77). There existed not one river god of the Nile or deities of the lakes, delta or sea (Hornung 1982:79). In the New Kingdom, a sea god was actually 'imported' for this purpose. Although Osiris ordained the annual inundation, the god most associated with the river itself was Hapi, a human figure with large belly whose softness represented the bounties of Egypt. The god has a papyrus plant sprouting from the top of his head (Hassan 1997:18). Other waters were perceived as governed by the gods in crocodile form. There were also many gods with bird forms, but not really with fish forms (apart from Hatmehit) (Hornung 1982:79).

One of the most honoured and most worshipped goddesses was Hathor, the daughter of Ra who was sent out as the eye of Ra to destroy mankind. When she became bloodthirsty, she had to be intoxicated by a lake of red wine to make her sweet. She was seen as the power of female sexuality and also incorporated motherly love the fury of motherly protection and fertility (Oakes and Gahlin 2002:283-284). In a similar way the power of Isis, sister wife to Osiris and mother of Horus, was the solution to the human predicament of death and disease. The protective power of this goddess was often harnessed by an amulet.

Some deities were only worshipped in homes and not in temples. At these household shrines the peasants worshipped Bes, who protected women and children in birth and was the god of marriage, and Taweret, the goddess of all females and fruitfulness (David 1998:105).

The cult of the Aten (sun disk) also had its importance. A number of deities were usually worshipped at any one time (polytheism), except in the Amarna period, when the king Akhenaten elevated the god Aten to a supreme place. It was a form of monotheism, although the goddess Ma'at was also still worshipped (Brewer and Teeter 1999:91).

Some 'personifications' in religion remained the objects of belief for millennia, like Ma'at, the personification of the order of the world established at the time of creation (Hornung 1982:74), who had an own priesthood from the 5th dynasty (Hornung 1982:75). Ma'at was a central concept in Egyptian religion, best explained as the embodiment of justice, truth and universal balance. This sense of order was personified in the goddess Ma'at, but was also of prime importance in one's correct daily behaviour. Proper behaviour and actively engaging in what was right was necessary for the accomplishment of ma'at (Hornung 1992:135). If one went against order, chaos ensued: then the sun would not rise and the Nile not flood. The king had to maintain this orderly state through intercession with the deities (Brewer and Teeter 1999:87). Ma'at also included the protection of those who were underprivileged and the dispensation of justice (Hornung 1992:141). Eventually most people embraced the belief that, if they lived by ma'at, they could declare a blameless life in the 'Hall of Two Truths' and thus be admitted into the company of the deities (Brewer and Teeter 1999:88).

1.3 The King as god

The Egyptians themselves considered the position of king to date back to a mythical era when the land was still ruled by gods. All kings were considered descendants of the early gods (Brewer and Teeter 1999:69) and the reigning pharaoh was the link between the world of the deities and the world of humankind (Eyre 1997:101).

Supposedly, after the creation of the world, Egypt was ruled by a succession of divine dynasties. At the end of his life on earth, Horus bequeathed the

throne of Egypt to a line of human pharaohs. In dynastic times, every pharaoh could thus claim direct descent from the god Horus, and was actually thought to have become the reincarnation of the falcon god (White 1970:8). In practical terms the king was mortal, but still differentiated from his subjects by his divine nature (Brewer and Teeter 1999:69). The pharaoh in turn, was to resist physical offensives against Egypt, as well as the spiritual enemy in the shapes of Seth and Apophis. Their influence was thought to be apparent in the darkness that constantly attempted to overthrow Egypt by amongst others, interfering with crops and the yearly flood of the Nile. Only the pharaoh, as deity, had the influence to combat these cosmic powers (White 1970:8-9).

The other gods most often associated with the pharaoh were Ra and Osiris. When the pharaoh died, he was no longer seen as the guardian (Horus), but instead transformed into Osiris, who was also reborn as king of the afterlife. Osiris was also the divine force associated with the fertility of earth and its eternal growth cycles (Silverman 1997:111). After his death, the pharaoh was also associated with Ra, uncontested leader of the Egyptian pantheon and the state god of the entire land (Hayes 1953:66).

The spiritual strength of the king was greatly enhanced by the purity of his lineage. Supposedly, he was of the blood of the sun god, as transmitted by Horus. The mother of the king, a mortal woman, was only the vessel for the divine seed. The child was in effect entirely the offspring of his divine father, the creator (Quirke and Spencer 1992:70).

As the king was equal to a god, everything associated with the king was also divine and under divine protection. The king was also worshipped as a god, and temples were built in his honour. Although these were called mortuary temples, the cult of the king was already in operation during his reign (Quirke and Spencer 1992:73). When the king died, he did not completely abandon his position as king of Egypt, as he applied a continued spiritual influence on the government of the country from his 'stone palace of eternity' (White 1970:18).

The king was the primary focus of Egyptian ritual life and in theory enacted all the sacred rites in the temples. Even funerary offerings for the soul of the late individual would be made in the name of the king (Teeter 1997:148). According to Egyptian belief only the king could stand on holy ground in the company of the gods, as he was considered the son of the gods. For this reason only the king was depicted on the temple walls as offering to the gods. In practice, however, the king delegated his role in the cult to priests who were able to enter the sanctuary (Quirke and Spencer 1992:74).

There were many rituals for the eternal rejuvenation of the living king. On the thirtieth anniversary of his accession to the throne there was a jubilee, repeated every three years thereafter. During this festival representatives of the different cities and districts brought sacred images of their local deities and witnessed the regeneration of the royal power in a series of ritual performances. In this ceremony the 'old' king, in the form of a statue, was buried and the 'new' king symbolically enthroned, wearing his ritual robes and symbols (Hornung 1992:53). This festival was designed to maintain and strengthen the reign of the king and took place at an interval of 30 years (Quirke and Spencer 1992:70). A new age was said to have begun with the succession of each new pharaoh to the throne (Hornung 1992:53).

Rejuvenation festivals were thus established by rulers, as there was an insistence to regenerate this existence on a continual basis. It was thought that, after a rule of thirty years, or a generation of rule, the king had presumably aged enough so that a new, or at least renewed king was needed to secure the continued existence of the world. The old king was buried in the form of a statue, and the renewal of creation was also celebrated with the founding of a new temple as a new residence for the gods on earth (Hornung 1992:53-54).

1.4 Temples and priests

As worship was an official state enterprise, temples were official institutions and the great temples economic powers. This interdependence of temple and

state was possible because religion impacted upon all the aspects of culture (Brewer and Teeter 1999:75). Riches were bestowed on the deities and their temples. These riches were drawn from the full diversity of Egypt's financial resources, both substances and revenue. The temples thus had a very important economic role (Kemp 1989:191).

Temples were built as homes for the deities who resided in the inner sanctum of the temples, but were also connections between this world and the next (Hornung 1992:118). The deities, like humans, required food, drink and clothing to sustain them as the protectors of mankind against the forces of chaos. These needs were met in temple rituals before the cult statue, seen as the abode for the deity's soul. These cult centres created a strong bond between people of all levels of society (Kamil 1996:55).

In theory, the king as the highest priest, approached the temple sanctuary three times a day; purified the statue, and placed the offerings on the altar (Brewer and Teeter 1999:75). In reality this was done by the high priest of the temple as representative of the king. Processions of the statue of the deity were also an important feature of the cult (Brewer and Teeter 1999:86).

Great numbers of men and women held priestly titles. These positions were for most of their adult lives, if not the whole (Teeter 1997:162-163). The priests were the servants of the deities. Their main duty was to act on behalf of the king (son of the gods) in the temple and perform rituals (David 1998:108). Priests had no pastoral duties and were not expected to preach to people or oversee their moral welfare. Their behaviour did include a measure of discretion in speech, honesty and fairness, but they were not expected to have a vocation or divine revelation. They were only expected to become dedicated officials, and it was their privileges and wealth that often attracted men to this position (David 1998:109).

After their appointment novices underwent training in religious knowledge and ritual practices before initiation. Their duties were assigned on a rotational basis of three months per year (one month on, three off). They could pursue other careers in the intervals, as well as marry and live outside the temple

complex. On duty, however, they had to reside at the temple. They had to be purified before their duties, shave all their hair every day and practice sexual abstinence for this period. Some foods and materials were also forbidden (David 1998:109-110).

In the priestly hierarchy the high priest of Amun was the most important. He also had great political power and great wealth. In the smaller temples there were three categories: senior priests for the daily rituals, minor clergy responsible for the running of the temple, and auxiliary staff who were cleaners and prepared the food (David 1998:110).

1.5 The religion of the people

Commoners had little access to temples, with right of entry restricted to the outer courtyard on special festivals. However, their means of contacting the deities were very personal, and done in an ever increasing number of ways (Teeter 1997:162-163). Every person who did not hold priestly titles also actively participated in religious rituals by praying, presenting offerings at shrines and attending processions in honour of a deity. There were many shrines easily accessible at the front gate or back wall of a deity's temple. Here the common people came to pray directly to the deity of the temple for divine intercession and blessings. They also pleaded to the 'intercessory statue' or image of a deity, or a deified human being thought to have access to the deities (Teeter 1997:162-163). The common folk also had access to their deities in processions. Many small shrines associated with specific deities were seen everywhere (Brewer and Teeter 1999:85).

The domestic deities were worshipped at household shrines filled with stelae, offering tables and vases. This shrine was usually situated in a specific separate area of the home. Worship at home greatly reflected the rituals in the temples, with food offerings and incense placed in front of the statue of the deity (David 1998:119). Niches for stelae and busts of deceased family members were also found in houses, such as at the village of Deir el-Medina (DeMaree 1983). People had to honour the spirits of the dead as they

influenced the affairs of living – both positively and negatively (Robins 1997:189-190).

The household cults involved the worship of the domestic deities Bes and Taweret. Their worship echoed the concern for the continuity of the family line through the fertility of its women as the most severe threat of death during Egyptian life came with childbirth (Quirke and Spencer 1992:83).

Although Bes and Taweret were associated with the relatively peaceful environment of the household, they were still powerful forces. Bes was possibly rather a benevolent demon than a deity. Taweret usually clutched an amulet, or had paws resting on the 'sa' sign of protection (Oakes and Gahlin 2002:448). Numerous amulets of these two deities were discovered, as they were probably worn by women to protect themselves during childbirth (Robins 1997:85). Amulets of these deities were also found in furniture designs, pottery, and musical instruments – a testimony to their omnipresence in Egyptian lives (Oakes and Gahlin 2002:449).

Childless women often turned to the divine world for solutions to their problem. There is thus a great deal of evidence pointing to fertility rituals in the house as well as at sacred places, such as temples and shrines (Oakes and Gahlin 2002:456). Fertility figurines were also important, often as offerings at the shrines of Hathor, a goddess also closely associated with sexuality, fertility and childbirth. The figurines were usually left as a request for children, or in gratitude for children born safely (Robins 1997:85).

1.6 Magic

Egyptian magic involved the application of metaphysical knowledge for practical and religious purposes. It was one of the manifestations of direct contact between the divine and human worlds. Knowledge of magic was regarded in the same category of learning as ritual, myth and medicine (Eyre 1997:100).

The Egyptians saw no difference between magic and religion. According to them, magic was the apparent manipulation of supernatural forces to influence things or events, and, they believed, the key to attaining wisdom. There was no real distinction between magic and religion, as magic was seen as a sacred science and creative force. Extensive use was made of 'magic' to help with their survival in a world troubled with dangers such as disease and lethal animals. Magic, or *heka* was present at creation as the life-force of the creator. *Heka* expressed the sense of the energy that made creation possible. *Heka* was associated with *sia* (divine knowledge) and *hu* (divine utterance). *Heka* was neither good nor bad but could be focused in any direction (Oakes and Gahlin 2002:440).

The belief in *heka* appeared at all levels of society and was not restricted to a specific social class (Quirke and Spencer 1992:82). The magical force was also personified in the god Heka, represented in human form with snakes held in front of him. No major centres were dedicated to him, but his presence was ubiquitous at temples throughout Egypt (Oakes and Gahlin 2002:441).

Magicians were seen as priests and scholars (David 1998:119). Every community in Egypt had at least one person the locals turned to in time of need. This person was believed to offer advice and perform rituals using *heka* to solve problems (Oakes and Gahlin 2002:440). These local magicians, who practised their enchantments to protect individuals against their own fears, did private magic. They were said to block off negative forces to overcome problems caused by them (David 1998:119). Private magic protected individuals against their own fears by simple spells and healing skills. Religious artifacts, amulets and lucky charms were thought to have special beneficial properties. They could attract good forces and protect one against bad ones (David 1998:114).

Magical rituals were most easily understood as the deflection of enemies by cursing formulae. This was accompanied by the ritual destruction of wax or clay figures. Magic also had a divine purpose. The primary technique used in

magic was to compel, not request the assistance of divine powers. In spells the magician or subject was often identified by name with a deity to endow him with power of the specific god. A magician sometimes also threatened a deity if the demands were not met (Eyre 1997:100).

The future was often ascertained by questioning oracles or cult statues. Dreams were seen as a point of contact through which the gods could make themselves known to human beings (Oakes and Gahlin 2002:468-469). Magical protection was provided by amulets that were carried by both the living and the dead. They were believed to have made a real difference to a person's fortunes. Magical spells written on papyrus were also used as amulets (Oakes and Gahlin 2002:454-455).

1.7 Life after death

An important feature of Egyptian culture was their awareness of death and the elaborate preparations made for the end of life. They were not obsessed with death, but on a quest for eternity. Their apparent preoccupation with death came from their delight in living and their enjoyment of the good things in life. Their solution to the frightening prospect of death was to transform the end of life into something understandable (Brewer and Teeter 1999:148). Thus they had the desire to have the same things in the afterlife and prepared their 'eternal dwelling' during their lifetime (Hayes 1953:80). An Egyptian desired to continue his or her earthly life as far as possible after death, except with a newly required divine status (Ritner 1997:132). At every level the Egyptian's hope was for an afterlife consisting of the best available in the earthly existence (Quirke and Spencer 1992:86).

Central was the belief that life continued after death. At first only the pharaoh and his direct family were permitted to ascend to heaven after death, but later all worthy (and wealthy!) people could aspire to individual immortality (White 1970:9). This life was to be led in the sky and underworld, not on earth (Hornung 1992:110). Different classes still maintained different views about the location of the afterlife and experiences there, but they all planned to

prepare a burial place that would protect the body and provide a location for the spirit to return for sustenance (David 1998:139).

They had a complex conception of this transition. The 'soul' was composed of three aspects. The *ka*, or the life energy, seen as a physical double, had material needs after death. The *ba*, seen as a bird with a human head, was the aspect of the deceased maintaining communication with the living after one's death. The *akh* was the blessed spirit that survived death; the spirit of the deceased that mingled with the deities (Brewer and Teeter 1999:148). Neither the spiritual or physical part of the living ever disappeared completely. Although death separated these two components, they had to be re-united in the afterlife (Hornung 1992:107). When the dead entered the world of the gods, they blended with them and became deities themselves (Hornung 1992:92). Revival and resurrection happened night by night in the underworld, where the dead again had power over their bodies (Hornung 1992:172).

At death, the spirit was free to go where it chose. However, it was felt that the spirit still required a visible, tangible form in which to dwell, preferably the body itself. Every precaution was taken to protect the corpse of the deceased from disintegration, as the original body had to be recognisably preserved as a home for the *ka* and *ba*. This was the reason for mummification. The identity of the body had to be preserved, and the *ka* had to be sustained with food etc (Brewer and Teeter 1999:150). However, pictures could substitute physical objects.

From the Old Kingdom onwards, the viscera were removed from the body and placed in four jars, the canopic jars. The contents of these jars were placed under the protection of four minor deities called the 'Four Sons of Horus'. They were the human-headed Imsety who held the liver and gallbladder, baboon-headed Hapy who held the lungs, jackal-headed Duamutef who held the stomach and falcon-headed Qebhsenuf who held the intestines. The jars themselves were identified with the four protective goddesses Isis, Nephtys, Neith and Serket (Quirke and Spencer 1992:91).

After the mummification process, which took 70 days, the mummy passed in procession from the embalming house to the tomb. The mummy was in an open booth, like a shrine, decorated with bouquets. This was on a bier-shaped boat on a sled drawn by oxen. A priest walked in front, and foods and other offerings followed, carried in procession (Oakes and Gahlin 2002:418). There would have been professional female mourners who wept and cried.

The key rituals were the final act of purification with water and the anointing of the body with sacred oils. The 'Opening of the Mouth' ceremony was also performed on any statues of the deceased. All stages of the funeral were accompanied by recitations from the funeral texts. The mummy was placed inside the coffin and deposited in the burial chamber with the canopic chest containing the organs. After the burial, there was a feast for guests and family (Oakes and Gahlin 2002:419).

Egypt's imagined Afterlife was seen as a perfect version of life as they knew it, supposedly in the Nile valley with a constant abundance of produce (Oakes and Gahlin 2002:391). The three main concepts of the afterlife were eternity in the sky, in the tomb, or in the Field of Reeds, the kingdom of Osiris. These reflected the hopes and aspirations of the royalty, wealthy and middle classes, and the peasants (David 1998:142). The Egyptian paradise was also associated with the western horizon, or the place of the setting sun. After death one ascended into the 'Afterlife' in several ways. The funerary texts were mostly the guidelines for these routes (Oakes and Gahlin 2002:391).

The two main cults associated with death and resurrection were those of Ra and Osiris. The deceased was identified with a god, either the sun god, Ra, or Osiris. The daily pattern of the sun's life, death and rebirth was the model for the life, death and resurrection of the king (David 1998:143). Both these theories were first devised for the king and later adopted by all (Hayes 1953:81).

Later the Osiris theory became more popular, because his mythology offered all his followers an own chance of personal immortality (David 1998:148). The

deceased person became a distinct aspect of the god of the underworld and was addressed as Osiris. Through this merger he or she attained divine status and powers, while still retaining their individual personality (Ritner 1997:133).

Central to the conception of the underworld was the idea of a divine tribunal presided over by the great god Osiris. Like the divine examples, the deceased Egyptians were also required to confirm their morality before experiencing the blessings of eternal life. A strong emphasis was thus placed on the morality and righteousness of man's existence as a requirement for the life hereafter (Hayes 1953:82).

The soul was steered into the presence of Osiris and 42 divine judges (Ritner 1997:133). The deceased had to name all judges and swear he did not commit crimes. If innocent, he was allowed into the afterlife. There was also the symbolic ritual of the weighing of the deceased's heart on scales against the principle of truth (ma'at), represented by a feather. If his confession was truthful, his heart would be lighter than the feather, and he may then pass into the afterlife (Brewer and Teeter 1999:151-152). If the heart was too heavy and the scales did not balance, the heart was grabbed and eaten by the beast Amit. As the heart was thought to be the centre of thought and emotion, it was the most important organ, and was essential for rebirth in the afterlife. Without it, one just ceased to exist (Oakes and Gahlin 2002:394).

1.8 Tombs

This democratisation of the religion led to the immediate desire for men and women to supply and equip their tombs with a lavish range of goods. Those who could afford to prepare for the afterlife did so (David 1998:148). The rooms in the tomb were decorated with scenes of daily life. Their true purpose was to sustain the tomb owner by the magical power of the representations to supply the food required for the afterlife (Quirke and Spencer 1992:112).

Magic, especially the knowledge of suitable magical spells, was also believed to play a large part in overcoming the obstacles and meeting the challenges of

the world in and beyond the tomb (Hayes 1953:82). The spirit's survival depended on the dead's knowledge of arcane theology and his command of potent magical spells. The perceived complexity of the underworld and its dangers demanded the production of funerary literature to ensure success (Ritner 1997:133). The funerary writings were a vast series of magical formulae, compiled with the single purpose of ensuring the wellbeing and happiness of the deceased Egyptians in the afterlife. Most of the writings were spells to be recited by the deceased self, or the priest. There was no problem for a dead Egyptian that was not covered in the books by an appropriate spell (Hayes 1953:82).

To ensure further protection, amulets were placed on the mummy and in the bandages. Some amulets were made specifically for the burial. The most important of these was the heart scarab, which was made of green stone and placed over the breast. The underside was inscribed with a quote from the 'Book of the Dead'. Other popular amulets were the *wedjat* eye of Horus, the *djed*-pillar and the 'Girdle of Isis'. Small figures of deities and sacred animals were also used (Quirke and Spencer 1992:94). From the New Kingdom, four bricks of unbaked mud, each with an amulet, were placed in four niches in the four walls of the burial chamber. This was to prevent the approach of the deceased's enemies from any of the four cardinal points (Quirke and Spencer 1992:96).

The building of a proper tomb was very important, and great resources were used for construction. The tombs were mainly for the storage of the goods required to sustain the deceased for eternity. Individuals already started planning their tombs in young adulthood (Brewer and Teeter 1999:168). Tombs were built or rock-hewn (Brewer and Teeter 1999:155). Royal tombs were at first pyramids, and then later tombs cut into the rock as in the Valley of the Kings (Brewer and Teeter 1999:164).

The decoration and architecture of the tombs had special ritual significance. It stressed the association of the king with the sun god. The tombs of individuals ranged from graves to tombs like those of the early kings. Although there was

great development in form, many features stayed the same, for example the false door. The architecture and funeral texts strove to ensure that the king was equipped with the knowledge to navigate the darkness and emerge reborn as the sun god at dawn (Brewer and Teeter 1999:168).

From the Predynastic period, burials contained the personal possessions of the owner, as well as food and drink for use in the afterlife. Funerary arrangements became ever more elaborate to provide the deceased with the requirements for his life after death (Quirke and Spencer 1992:86). Many real things were replaced by dummy reproductions, and then magic transformed all the symbolism in the tomb into certainty. This gave life to the mummy and all else present (Hayes 1953:80).

Later the *shabti*, a funerary figurine from the Middle and New Kingdom, became an essential part of the burial equipment. The Egyptians believed that there was also regular need for agriculture in the afterlife and the *shabtis* were regarded as the dead's deputies to avoid labour in the afterlife. Magical texts were used to secure these substitutions. It was to perform these tasks on behalf of the dead owners that the *shabtis* began to carry equipment to work with. They carried amuletic emblems and were inscribed with prayers to provide food offerings. At first there were only a few, but by the end of the New Kingdom there were so many that *shabti* boxes were included in tombs. Eventually there was one for every day of year as well as 36 overseers, identified because of their whips (Quirke and Spencer 1992:96-97).

The coffin was not merely a container for the mummy. Most of the important items of the tomb equipment were intended to protect the deceased in a magical way, and to ensure safe passage into the afterlife. These magical associations were responsible for the form of the coffin, its decoration and its position in a tomb. The religious significance was reflected in the manner of positioning the coffin in the tomb, as well as in its decoration. It was orientated with its head north and the body inside on its left side. The head was supported by a headrest. The dead thus faced east, with painted eyes through which the dead could look, at where the sun rose as a symbol of rebirth.

There usually was a false door for the spirits to pass in and out. Texts invoking the deities to provide the dead with the necessities of existence were also included. Changes in the decoration of coffins reflected developments in religious significance and later the coffin was more related to rituals, aimed at bringing about the deceased's resurrection through an association with the creator gods Osiris and Ra (Quirke and Spencer 1992:104).

1.9 Religious texts

The interior of the coffin was inscribed with religious texts designed to guarantee the dead's wellbeing. These texts developed from the Pyramid and Coffin texts, later including texts of the same genre such as the Amduat, 'Book of Gates' and 'Book of Breathing', to hymns and rituals. These texts were recorded on papyri, the walls of tombs and temples as well as stelae. Many of the cult rituals in the temples had associated dramas depicted on temple walls or recorded on stelae and papyri. In homes the written spells and rituals focused on fertility, childbirth and protection against disease. Spells against demons, enemies and any form of evil were written on a variety of materials (Silverman 1997:238).

The funerary texts were at first only set phrases to ensure the survival of the individual beyond his death by preserving his name and the magical supply of food and drink. The texts and images regarding this concentrated more on the survival of person as divine spirit. The earliest longer texts were the inscription of the Pyramid Texts on the chamber walls within the pyramids (Quirke and Spencer 1992:97). These were inscribed in formal hieroglyphs on the walls of the burial chambers (Hayes 1953:82) and were mostly concerned with the ascent of the king to join the sun and stars and achieve resurrection (Quirke and Spencer 1992:97). The texts included some 700 utterances, composed over a long time and reflecting a number of different beliefs. These texts were devised exclusively for the king and were composed in such a way that they could not apply to any other person (Hayes 1953:83)

By the 6th Dynasty the Pyramid Texts were replaced by the so-called Coffin Texts, which now appeared mainly on non-royal coffins (Quirke and Spencer 1992:97). The Coffin texts were the Middle Kingdom versions of the ancient funerary teachings of Egypt. They contained the spells and rituals in an altered fashion to make them appropriate for use by private individuals. New material was added and the texts were not carved, but written in cursive hieroglyphs on the interior surfaces of coffins (Hayes 1953:82). These texts depicted the deceased's hope for resurrection, mostly based on the cycle of the sun, but with new elements such as the inclusion of the family in the next world as well as the right of appeal to the tribunal there (Quirke and Spencer 1992:97).

During the 17th Dynasty new texts appeared on shrouds. Some were derived from the coffin texts but most were new compositions. This body of texts gained the title 'Formulae for Going Out by Day', also known as the 'Book of the Dead'. About 200 formulae were known (Quirke and Spencer 1992:97). The texts were now written on papyrus rolls and placed on the mummified bodies of the deceased (Hayes 1953:82). The selections from the whole body of literature from the 'Book of the Dead' varied, and no manuscript was found with all the texts. In the New Kingdom, although it still included texts and images from the 'Book of the Dead', the principal decoration of the burial chamber mostly depicted different forms of the conception of the next world as well as the journey of the sun through the night sky to its morning resurrection (Quirke and Spencer 1992:97).

Other important texts were the *Amduat* (the 'Book of What is in The Underworld'), the 'Books of Caverns, Portals, Day and Night' (Quirke and Spencer 1992:97) and the 'Book of the Gates'. These were magical guidebooks describing the journey of the sun through the subterranean regions. Funerary magic and funerary belief also found expression in other, related literary forms. A number of ancient offerings and rituals of worship, prayers and petitions on behalf of the deceased were expressed in writing (Hayes 1953:82). Letters to the dead were pleas for help written to recently deceased relatives. This came from the widespread belief that the dead could

remove invisible obstacles in daily life, such as ill health or domestic conflict. Later these became direct appeals to deities (Quirke and Spencer 1992:147).

Hymns were among the most important texts that preserved religious knowledge and formed a central part of the religious practices. These hymns were often recorded on walls as decoration. Eulogies to deities consisted of titles and descriptions that built up the poetic definition of a deity. The narrative myths, recounting the lives of the deities, did not really have a role in religious practice, as single episodes of the encounters between the gods were sufficient for the purposes of performances and festivals. Although the hymns were originally for the state cult, they were adapted for private use. The texts evolved into the expression of a personal dependence on the deities, with emphasis on the individual relationship between a person and a deity (Quirke and Spencer 1992:133).

Chapter 2

The public sphere: sources and analysis

The sources in this section are categorised according to the particular role of the depicted women and what rituals they were partaking in. Women were known to have acted as priestesses to certain gods, danced and played musical instruments in temples, mourned the dead at funerals and made offerings to gods at public temples.

2.1 Priestesses

Although men were mostly in charge of temples and administration, women could and did hold offices as priests, particularly of goddesses such as Hathor. The situation did change over time, though, as more titles were held by women in the Old Kingdom compared to the New. Many of the priestesses were also married to priests, thus their positions were often reliant on that of their husbands (Oakes and Gahlin 2002: 366).

2.1.1 Iyemeret, priestess of Hathor, with lotus blossom

Egyptian Museum, Cairo

Source: Strouhal 1992:61

Date: Late 4th or 5th dynasty.

Provenance: Saqqara.

Size: unknown



Description: This image is from the false door of the tomb of Ika. These 'false doors' were sculptural representations of doorways that allowed the deceased to enter the chapel to receive offerings and then return to the burial chamber (Taylor 2001:156). In the Old Kingdom many elite women became priestesses of the goddess Hathor. The lotus was a major symbol of rebirth, as the young sun god came forth from a lotus (Robins 1993:188 - 189).

2.1.2 Female offering bearers

Hildesheim, Pelizaeus Museum

Source: Martin 1987 plate 36

Date: 19th Dynasty

Provenance: unknown

Size: 42 cm x 63 cm



Description: This block shows a procession of female offering bearers, carrying a variety of offerings. Three of the four women depicted are carrying lotus flowers, a major symbol of rebirth. Other offerings include livestock (a goat, calf and duck) and libation bowls.

2.1.3 Painted *shabti* box of Theban priestess Henutmehyt

British Museum, EA 41548

Source: Quirke and Spencer 1992:63

Date: c. 1250 -1150 BC, 19th -20th Dynasty

Provenance: Thebes

Size: 33.5 cm in height, 19.2 cm in width



Description: This *shabti* box portrays a priestess from Thebes adoring two of the canopic deities. Henutmehyt wears the flowing robe, long wig and lotus flower fashionable when she lived. The canopic deities known as the 'Four Sons of Horus', were the embodiment of the jars used to store the viscera removed from the body during embalming and before burial (David 2002:20). The *shabtis* were intended to carry out laborious activities in the afterlife on behalf of the tomb-owner (David 2002:21).

2.2 Musicians, singers and dancers

Many Egyptian women were associated with temples as musicians (*shemayet*). At Thebes they were usually known as ‘musician of Amun’, whereas the local deity was chosen elsewhere. The musicians usually served in four rotating groups with one group in service and three off. They would accompany ceremonial dances and rituals by shaking *sistra* and rattling the *menat*. They also played instruments like harps, tambourines and clappers in the temples of gods and goddesses (Oakes and Gahlin 2002:367).

2.2.1 Naos sistrum

Egyptian Museum, JE 29168

Source: www.globalegyptianmuseum.org

Date: Old Kingdom

Provenance: Upper Egypt

Size: 14.4 cm



The oldest form of the sistrum was the naos sistrum, which often had Hathor’s head depicted on the handle. It was often made of faience and dated back to the Old Kingdom. On the twin heads of Hathor, a naos box was placed. To form the rattle, rods were passed through the inside of the box.

2.2.2 Bronze arched sistrum

British Museum, EA 36310

Source: www.thebritishmuseum.ac.uk

Date: Late Period, after 600 BC

Provenance: Unknown

Size: 38.4 cm in height



Description: The [sistrum](#) was a rattle comprising an inverted U-shaped section with an attached handle. The U-shaped arch then had a number of cross pieces with metal discs threaded on them. When the sistrum was shaken, the discs rattled. The top of the handle was often decorated with the head of the goddess [Hathor](#), as she was associated with music (Quirke 1992:130).

2.2.3 Sistrum

British Museum, EA 30735

Source: Quirke 1992:130

Date: Late Period, after 600 BC

Provenance: Unknown

Size: 29.4 cm in height



Description: The sistrum was one of the main musical accompaniments used in festivals and cult rituals, often played by temple songstresses and priestesses. The sound of rattling was also supposed to drive off evil forces and prevent them from spoiling the festivities (Quirke 1992:130).

2.2.4 From Tomb of Nakht:

picture of wife Tawy

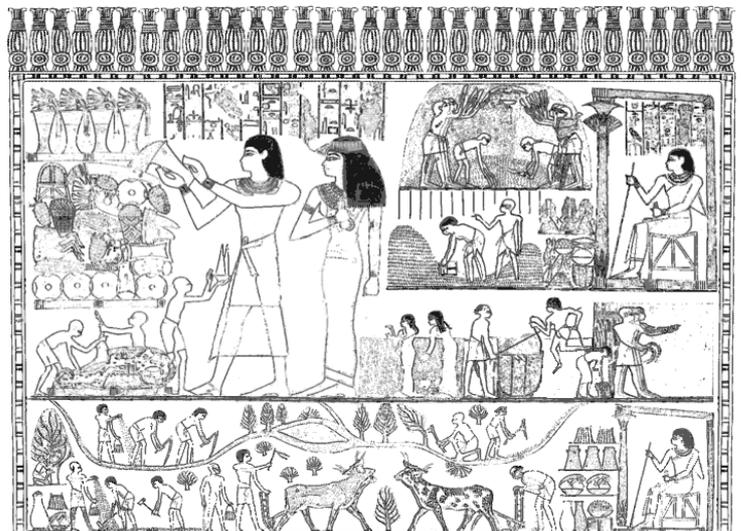
Tomb at Thebes

Source: Robins 1993:101

Date: New Kingdom

Provenance: Shaykh Abd al-Qurna, Theban tomb 52

Size: unknown



Description: This tomb-painting from the tomb of the scribe Nakht shows the tomb-owner and his wife in front of offerings of food and lotus blossoms. His wife Tawy holds a sistrum and *menit*. The sounds of these instruments were supposed to be relaxing to the gods and goddesses. The sistrum also offered magical protection and gave a woman the powers of the goddess Hathor (Hodel-Hoernes 2000:29). The

menit-necklace, made up of several strands of beads, was associated with the joy of life and vital strength, also suited to Hathor (Robins 1993:146).

2.2.5 Titiw, singer in temple of Amun, with sistrum

Images Colour Library: www.imagecl.com

Source: Silverman 1997:148

Date: 20th Dynasty, c. 1150 BC

Provenance: unknown

Size: unknown



Description: This excerpt from the 'Book of the Dead' of Anhai shows the singer Titiw, who served in the temple of Amun. During the New Kingdom and Late Period many names were given to the performers of sacred music. Performers could usually play an instrument in addition to singing, and served Amun most frequently, followed by Hathor (Manniche 1987:124).

2.2.6 From *The Book of the Dead* of the priestess Anhay

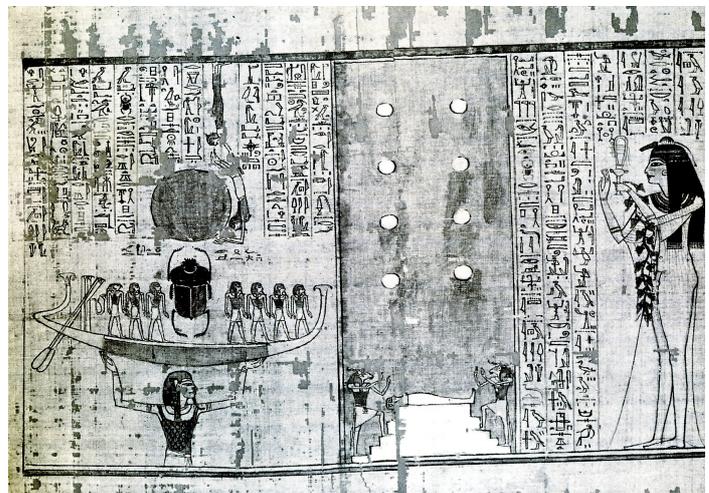
British Museum, EA 10472

Source: Quirke 1992:24

Date: c. 1150 BC, 20th Dynasty

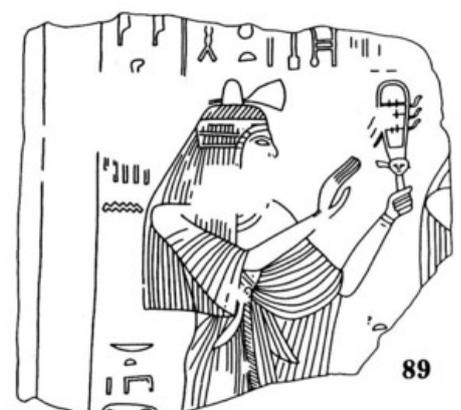
Provenance: Thebes

Size: 42 cm in height



Description: In this scene from Anhay's 'Book of the Dead', she is shown holding a sistrum and plant while stretching out her other hand in adoration. A beetle with the sun-disc represents the sun-god and is shown on a boat lifted by the primeval waters Nun.

2.2.7 Female holding sistrum



Jerusalem, Studium Biblicum Franciscanum Museum

Source: Martin 1987: plate 30

Date: 19th Dynasty

Provenance: probably Saqqara

Size: 23 x 24.6 cm

Description: This fragment of a block relief shows a woman holding a sistrum in her left hand, while she raises her right hand in adoration of an unknown deity.

2.2.8 Female musicians playing loop sistra, tambourines and pipes

Relief at Thebes

Source: Roberts 1995:57

Date: 19th Dynasty

Provenance: Thebes



Description: On this relief from the tomb of the scribe Amenmose at Thebes, various musical instruments are played by women taking part in a procession. A career in music was followed by many women, as it was the proper accompaniment to religious ceremonies. Many of these professional musicians played a whole variety of instruments (Watterson 1991:49).

2.2.9 Troupes of male and female dancers and musicians

Relief at Karnak

Source: Robins 1993:103

Date: New Kingdom

Provenance: Karnak

Size: unknown



Description: This relief from the temple of Hatshepshut's 'chapelle rouge' at Karnak show a number of entertainers. At the bottom left are four acrobatic dancers, while at the top right three priestesses or musicians hold aloft sistra.

2.2.10 Female musicians at feast

Brooklyn Museum 68.150.1

Source: Martin 1987: plate 35

Date: Ramesside period

Provenance: probably Saqqara

Size: 30 x 54.8 cm



Description: This sunken relief with incised inscriptions portrays a number of female musicians performing at a feast. The text above mentions a 'uraeus (royal cobra and sign of kingship) of gold'. This may be an extract of a hymn being sung by the performers. On the right a libation is being poured, while the woman in the middle may be playing a tambourine, which was often used at scenes depicting, or linked to, birth and fertility (Manniche 1987:65).

2.2.11 Block from Giza tomb

British Museum, EA 994

Source: Russmann 2001:73-74

Date: c. 2300 BC, 6th Dynasty

Provenance: Giza

Size: 86 cm



Description: The central part of the limestone block is quite unusual. On the left are some musicians, dancers and boys with sticks. One of the boys is wearing a unique lion mask and holding a hand-shaped wand. At the right seem to be a group of boys wrestling. The boy with the mask may perhaps represent a forerunner to the lion-maned Bes, Egyptian god of fertility and many other basic human concerns. The scene has been interpreted as a harvest rite, a protective rite, or perhaps a rite which took place at the onset of puberty (Pinch 1994:120).

2.2.12 Pair of ivory clappers

British Museum, EA 20779

Source: Pinch 1994:85

Date: c. 1300 BC

Provenance: Thebes



Size: Width: 5.1 cm Length: 32.7 cm (right hand) and: 33.3 cm (left hand)

Description: The curved shape of these clappers shows that they were made from hippopotamus tusks. They are in the form of a pair of hands with the head of the goddess [Hathor](#) on both clappers. Hathor was often associated with music and entertainment. The clappers were used as a musical instrument, together with [sistra](#), harps and pipes, although the noise of clapping, banging and rattling was also thought to drive away hostile forces.

2.3 Mourners

Women played an important role at funerals and mortuary cult rituals and a career in mourning was followed by many women. If a family could afford it, professional mourners were hired to grieve about the house for the 70 days it took for the body of the deceased to be embalmed and mummified. These mourners would then follow the funeral procession to the tomb, casting dust on their heads, rending their clothes, scratching their cheeks and wailing (Watterson 1991:45).

2.3.1 Group of female mourners

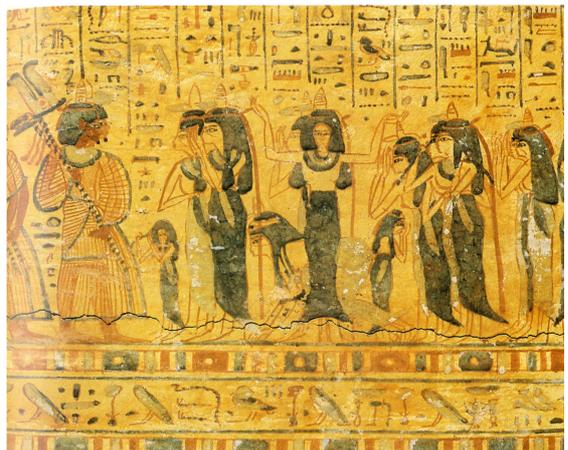
Painting on coffin

Source: Taylor 2001:189

Date: Early 22nd Dynasty

Provenance: Thebes

Size: Coffin size 210 cm



Description: The exposed breasts and vigorous gestures of these female mourners are conventional expressions of grief. These acts of bewailing and mourning the deceased were not limited to the women of the immediate family, but often also included hired mourners who were paid to lament the dead's virtues and good deeds (Nur al-Din 1995:83).

2.3.2 Widow mourning death of husband

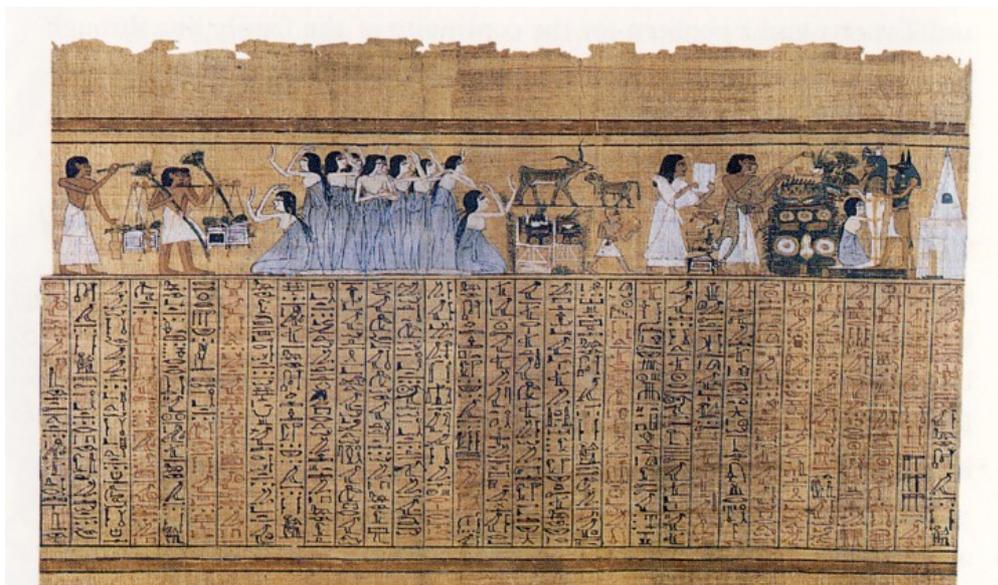
British Museum, EA 104.70/6

Source: Silverman 1997:86

Date: 19th Dynasty, 1125 BCE

Provenance: unknown

Size: unknown



Description: The 'Book of the Dead' of the royal scribe Ani indicates that, although the priesthood was dominated by males in the New Kingdom, women were still taking part in religious rites. This excerpt shows Ani's widow mourning his death before his upright coffin and the god Anubis. A large group of women, possibly made up of hired mourners as well as family members, also mourns the deceased by wailing and tearing at their hair.

2.3.3 Tomb of Ramose: wailing women

Tomb at Thebes

Source: Hodel-Hoenes 2000:54

Date: New Kingdom 1390 – 1336 BC

Provenance: Theban Tomb 55



Description: These wailing women are from the tomb of Vizier Ramose. The portrayed women have undone hair and they have tears running down their cheeks. The group of nine kneeling women is shown as also throwing ash on their heads. Some are striking themselves on their arms and legs. At the far right four women are clad in red and yellow dresses that leave their chests bare. They are beating their breasts and holding offering bowls in their hands (Hodel-Hoernes 2000:54-55)

2.3.4 Tomb of Neferhotep: wailing women

Tomb at Thebes

Source: Hodel-Hoernes 2000:184-185

Date: New Kingdom

Provenance: Al-Khokha, Thebes

Size: unknown



Description: In this tomb painting, a procession of wailing women follows the coffin and canopic shrine to the tomb. Between the two are wailing women. It was the ritual that a woman embodying Nephtys followed the sarcophagus, while the one embodying Isis walked in front (Watterson 1991:40).

2.3.5 Widow bewailing death of her husband

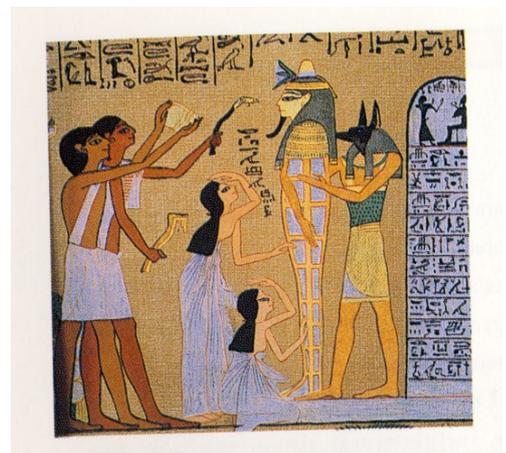
British Museum EA 9901

Source: Silverman 1997:80

Date: 19th Dynasty, 1317 – 1301 BC

Provenance: Thebes

Size: 23 cm



Description: This excerpt from the 'Book of the Dead' of Hunefer shows his widow before his mummy and the god Anubis, bewailing his death. With her is a female relative.

2.3.6 Funeral scene with female mourners

Havana, Museo Nacional

Source: Martin 1987: plate 8

Date: late 18th Dynasty

Provenance: Saqqara

Size: 47.3 cm x 38 cm



Description: This raised relief shows a scene at a funeral with women mourning the death of the tomb-owner. The son of the deceased supports the father's mummy. Behind him is the figure of Anubis on a plinth, as well as the Eye of Horus. The women are tearing at their hair and wailing in the traditional gestures of mourners. Behind them priests are offering libations and performing rituals.

2.3.7 Female and male mourners and offerings

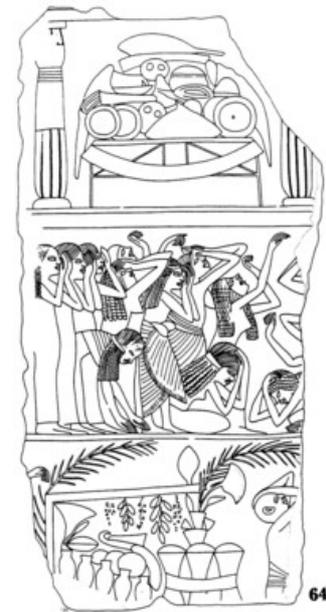
Detroit Institute of Arts 24.98

Source: Martin 1987: plate 25

Date: late 18th or 19th Dynasty

Provenance: Saqqara

Size: 52.7 cm x 26.5 cm



Description: This block shows parts of three registers. It depicts male and female mourners as well as offerings. The large number of female mourners in the middle register may be an indication of the status of the deceased.

2.4 Offerings and stelae

2.4.1 Stelae

Stelae were commemorative slabs, usually made of stone, but also of wood and other materials. They were used in various contexts, with some set up in temples and others carved on rocks. The largest category was funerary stelae set up in tombs and mortuary temples. Many were also used as votive offerings to deities (Taylor 2001:155). Although used by private individuals, many of these stelae were found at public places of worship. Many of the stelae found belonged to women.

2.4.1.1 Stela of mistress of the house Hetepamun

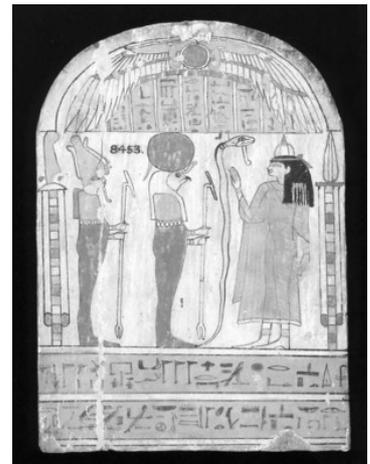
British Museum EA 8453

Source: Robins 1997:224

Date: 25th Dynasty

Provenance: Thebes

Size: 31.5 cm



Description: This stela is made of sycamore and fig wood and depicts the deceased woman adoring the gods Osiris and Ra-Horakhty, as well as a bearded snake. A winged sun-disk decorates the curve at the top and at the bottom two line of hieroglyphs contain an offering formula (Robins 1997:224)

2.4.1.2 Stela of Djed-khonsu-es-ankh

Oriental Institute Museum (OIM 1351)

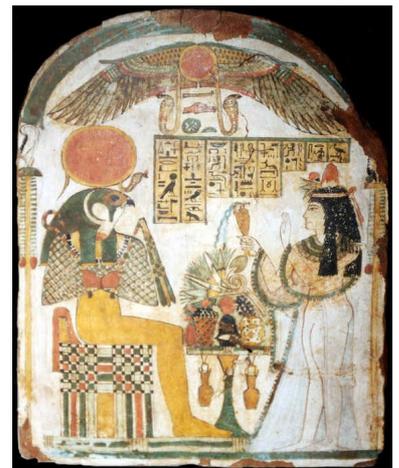
Source: www.hethert.org/steleofra.html

Date: 22nd Dynasty

Provenance: Luxor Ramesseum

Size: unknown

Description: On this stela, the falcon-headed Re-Harakhte is seated on a throne, with the lady Djed-khonsu-es-ankh pouring a libation in front of him. Again a table laden with offerings stands between them. The winged sun-disc above them is accompanied by two cobras.



2.4.1.3 Stela of Tentesamun, Chantress of Amun

Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge

Source: www.hethert.org/steleofra.html

Date: 22nd Dynasty

Provenance: Thebes

Size: unknown



Description: This simple stela also portrays a seated god holding a sceptre, with an adoring woman in front of the throne. The offering table only contains objects used in the pouring of libations, and not provisions as in many of the other stelae.

2.4.2 Votive cloths

An unusual type of offering found at Deir el-Bahri was a selection of painted textiles showing a donor or donors before a form of Hathor, either as a woman or as a cow. None of these were donated by a man alone.

2.4.2.1 Painted votive cloth of Hathor as cow

British Museum, [EA 43215](#)

Source: Quirke and Spencer 1992:189

Date: 19th Dynasty, about 1250 BC

Provenance: Deir el-Bahari, Thebes

Size: Height: 18.2 cm and length: 49 cm



Description: This cloth was given as an offering to the goddess Hathor, at her sanctuary at Western Thebes. Cloths like these were usually donated by women and are probably associated with Hathor's role as a deity promoting fertility. The five women presenting the offerings and flowers dedicated the cloth. Some of the donors are holding offerings while others are raising their hands in adoration. Hathor is depicted as a cow coming from the mountain of the West (Pinch 1993:123).

2.4.2.2 Painted votive cloth from 11th dynasty temple

British Museum, [EA 43216](#)

Source: Pinch 1993: plate 15

Date: 11th Dynasty

Provenance: Deir el-Bahari, Thebes

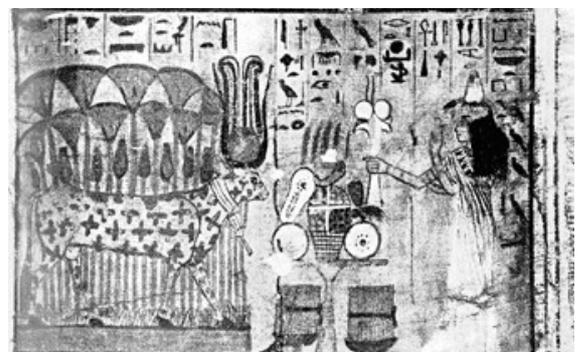
Size: unknown



Description: This cloth shows Hathor in her standard human form, wearing her disc and horns headdress, seated on a raised throne on a dais and holding a sceptre. This votive cloth has more in common with a tomb painting than a traditional stela or offering. (Pinch 1993:128)

2.4.2.3 Votive cloth from Deir el-Bahari

St Petersburg, H 2400



Source: Pinch 1993: plate 25

Date: unknown

Provenance: Deir el-Bahri

Size: unknown

Description: This fine linen votive cloth shows Hathor in cow form in the context of a papyrus thicket. The cow also stands on some kind of plinth on a sled, indicating that it may be a representation of a divine image. The single portrayed donor of the cloth is shown as dedicating an offering to the goddess (Pinch 1993:111).

2.4.2.4 Long-sleeved linen tunic

British Museum, [EA 43071](#)

Source: Pinch 1993: plate 20

Date: 19th Dynasty

Provenance: Deir el-Bahri, Thebes

Size: Width: 19.7 cm and length: 34.3 cm



Description: This small tunic has an image of the goddess Hathor as a cow coming out of the mountain of the West. This motif was very common in Thebes as it was associated with burial and rebirth. Hathor's cult was prominent on the west bank of the Nile at Thebes, in the area of the temples of Deir el-Bahari. Below the image is an inscription of the *woman* who dedicated the tunic.

2.4.3 Other offerings

The gods and spirits of the dead were supposedly satisfied by offerings of food and drink (and other things like linen) made to them. In addition to the physical offerings placed on the tables, representations of them were carved on the table's surface as well as on the walls of the tomb. The depicted offerings included beer and wine, as well as bread, meat and flowers. This was to ensure an eternal supply of symbolic sustenance for the gods.

2.4.3.1 Male and female offering bearers

Brooklyn Museum, 37.39E

Source: Martin 1987: plate 17

Date: Late 18th – 19th Dynasty

Provenance: Tomb of Ry, Saqqara

Size: 65.5 cm x 87 cm



Description: This sunken relief is very worn and damaged. It shows a procession of alternating male priests and females, probably priestesses, delivering offerings of food and lotus flowers.

2.4.3.2 Woman before Isis

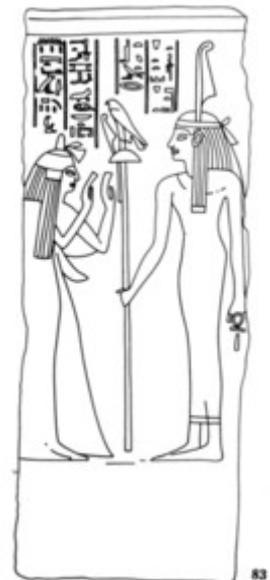
Hannover Museum, 4506

Source: Martin 1987: plate 32

Date: 19th Dynasty

Provenance: Saqqara

Size: 63.8 cm x 25 cm



Description: This sunken relief shows a woman with her hands lifted in adoration standing before the Western goddess Isis, as identified in the text above. Isis is carrying an *ankh*, symbol of life and breath, and holding a sceptre with a falcon, representative of Horus.

2.4.3.3 Stela of woman offering to ancestors

British Museum, EA 270

Source: Pinch 1994:148

Date: 12th BC

Provenance: Deir el-Medina

Size: unknown



Description: This limestone stela shows two 'ancestor busts' at the top. Below them, a woman is making offerings to another 'ancestor bust'. Similar stelae and busts depicting family ancestors were found in Egyptian houses of the 2nd millennium BC, especially at Deir el-Medina. These busts were usually kept in niches in the walls of houses and appealed to by villagers to act as intermediaries in the divine realm (Pinch 1994:159).

2.4.3.4 Funerary stela of musician of Amun Takha

Museo Archeologico di Firenze, 2591

Source: Robins 1993:170

Date: 19th – 20th Dynasty

Provenance: Saqqara

Size: unknown



Description: This stone stela shows the deceased adoring the gods Osiris, Isis and Nephtys in the upper register. In the lower register she is receiving water from the goddess Hathor as part of a tree, identified by a glyph. As this stela belonged only to a woman, and she is not accompanied by a man, it was probably dedicated by a female relative such as a daughter or sister (Robins 1993:172).

2.4.3.5 Hathor as Lady of the Sycamore

Tomb of Sennedjem

Source: www.touregypt.net/featurestories/senn6.jpg

Date: 19th Dynasty

Provenance: Deir el-Medina



Size: unknown

Description: This scene depicts Sennedjem and his wife Lyneferti receiving offerings of food and beverages from the goddess of the sycamore.

Chapter 3

The domestic sphere : sources and analysis

The sources in this section are categorised according to the roles Egyptian women filled in their domestic lives and what religious rituals they followed in doing so.

3.1. Fertility and childbirth

3.1.1 Stelae

Many shrines in temples or homes of the New Kingdom and Late Period had *cippi* stelae, or Horus *cippi*. These statue-stelae were believed to bestow protection from the attacks of certain animals, especially snakes, scorpions, crocodiles and other venomous creatures (Nunn 1996:107).

A typical *cippus* showed a three-dimensional carved Horus-the-Child, or Harpokrates, as a human child standing on one or more crocodiles and wielding animals like scorpions and snakes in his hands (Quirke and Spencer 1992:83). This was indicative of his ability to wield power and to show that he could not be victimised by such creatures. It also symbolised a more sacred victory over evil forces, especially supernatural beings taking animal or reptilian forms.

In conjunction with the protective role of these stelae, they were also used to cure those who had been stung or bitten by poisonous creatures. A *cippus* was normally inscribed with spells against different poisons and venoms (Pinch 1994:100).

The origin of this belief originated with the idea that the goddess Isis, with her care of her child combined with her magical skills, was the perfect deity to be called upon for protection and cures (Nunn 1996:98). This stemmed from the myths in which Isis defended Horus from the dangers of life, amongst others,

diseases and venomous animals. The patient was identified with Horus (Quirke and Spencer 1992:83), and the mother with Isis, thus forming part of their religious sphere.

3.1.1.1 Painted wooden *cippus* showing Horus standing on crocodiles

British Museum, EA 60958

Source: Shaw and Nicholson 1995:133

Date: Late Period, after 600 BC

Provenance: Memphis

Size: Height: 42.5 cm, width: 23.3 cm, depth: 10.5 cm (base)



Description: According to myth, the infant Harpokrates ([Horus](#) the child) was bitten or stung by a poisonous creature while in hiding with his mother Isis in the Delta. He sent down his messenger [Thoth](#), who cured the child by reciting a long list of spells. These spells were then inscribed on stelae to prevent and cure stings and bites, as well as many other complaints. This type of [stela](#) that healed and protected against snake bites and scorpion stings was called a *cippus*. It was thought that water poured over the *cippus* gained healing properties. *Cippi* typically show the infant Horus standing on crocodiles and holding dangerous animals such as snakes, scorpions and lions in his hands. This example also has at the top the head of the household god Bes, who protected the family, especially women and children, from malign forces.

3.1.1.2 *Cippus* or 'Horus stela' showing Horus as child with power to overcome harmful forces

British Museum, EA 36250

Source: Quirke and Spencer 1992:84

Date: Late Period, after 600 BC

Provenance: Memphis

Size: 31 cm



Description: Many *cippi* from the New Kingdom were made of wood, whereas the Late Period *cippi* were mostly of stone (Quirke and Spencer 1992:84). This example shows the god Horus as a nude human child with a sidelock, standing on two crocodiles. In his hands he brandishes animals often found in the desert, such as scorpions and snakes. By implication he can thus not be overcome by them, as he has power over them. This example also includes, at the top, the prominent head of Bes as protector of infants.

3.1.2 Fertility figurines

'Fertility dolls' or figurines were used throughout most of Egyptian history, as a woman's ability to bear children was of such importance to her marriage and her social position. Many women thus turned to the gods connected to childbirth, particularly household deities, as well as the ancestors, for help if they had problems conceiving (Hawass 2000:84).

These figurines were made from different materials, like wood, faience, terracotta or even limestone (Pinch 1994:126). They were mostly nude females with little attention paid to details of the breasts and faces, but great emphasis on the hips, buttocks, genitalia and pubic triangle (Watterson 1991:86).

Some figures have been found holding a child, some in the form of a woman with a child on a bed, or some even taking the form of a phallus (Hawass 2000:84). The function of the figurines was primarily to ensure conception and birth, although many were also presented as offerings at shrines and temples, placed on domestic altars, or found in graves as offering for the dead for aid in conception (Robins in Silverman 1997:85).

3.1.2.1 Blue faience fertility figurine

Berlin: Ägyptische Museum

Source: Silverman 1997:85

Date: Middle Kingdom

Provenance: unknown

Size: unknown



Description: Like others of its kind, this fertility figurine emphasizes the genitals of the curvaceous female form. Although most figure were roughly shaped out of clay, this particular example was of the more expensive and durable blue faience.

3.1.2.2 Fertility figure suckling child, seated

British Museum, EA 23424

Source: Pinch 1993: plate 47b

Date: Middle Kingdom or Second Intermediate Period

Provenance: Unknown, possibly Deir el-Bahri

Size: unknown



Description: This figurine is made of clay and of rather simple workmanship. The legs are long and straight, and the figure is seated and suckling a child. The head is flattened and the features reduced to a beak nose and slits for eyes. Holes around the face would have been threaded with long strands of artificial hair, similar to that of some 'paddle dolls' (Pinch 1993:201-202).

3.1.2.3 Inscribed fertility figurine



Berlin: Ägyptische Museum, 14517

Source: Robins 1993:58

Date: Middle Kingdom

Provenance: unknown

Size: unknown

This fertility figurine is carrying a child on her left hip. The figurine also has a text inscribed on its right thigh in which an ancestor is asked to grant the offering bearer a child.

3.1.2.4 Clay fertility figure of woman

Berlin, Ägyptisches Museum

Source: Strouhal 1992: 19

Date: Middle Kingdom

Provenance: unknown

Size: unknown



Description: This fertility figure is crudely made, but has a prominent bust and pudenda. This emphasizes the figure's erotic nature. The importance of fertility for the Egyptians is shown by many images of nude women found throughout Egypt, often wearing a hip girdle with pubic triangle marked, as in this case. These images were used in the household cult and may have been placed on domestic altars, and their primary function was to ensure conception and birth (Silverman 1997:85).

3.1.2.5 Faience fertility figurine with cowrie-shell girdle

British Museum, EA 52863

Source: Pinch 1994:126



Date: c. 1900 – 1800 BC

Provenance: Western Thebes,

Size 8.5 cm

Description: This fertility figure of blue faience has details added in black. The belly and pubic area is emphasized with a girdle of cowrie shells. The legs intentionally end at the knees (cf. fig. 3.1.2.1) – a common characteristic of Middle Kingdom figurines of this type. This was either to limit the power of movement of the figurine, or a sign of the unimportance of the lower legs for the essential function of the figurine. These figurines were important for the ideas of fertility as well as family continuity, both in this life and the next.

3.1.2.6 Painted wooden ‘paddle doll’

with mud beads for hair

British Museum EA 6459

Source: www.thebritishmuseum.ac.uk

Date: Late Middle Kingdom, around 1750 BC

Provenance: Thebes

Size 19 cm



Description: This type of female figurine was placed in burials of the Middle Kingdom (2040-1750 BC) in Thebes. Its particular shape, reminiscent of a paddle, led to the name 'paddle doll'. Most of these figurines emphasize the hips and hair of the woman. The body is often painted with a colourful design to represent the dress of the woman. The current opinion about these figures is that they were representations of human fertility. They were placed in burials to guarantee eternal rebirth, symbolizing the sexual aspects of regeneration.

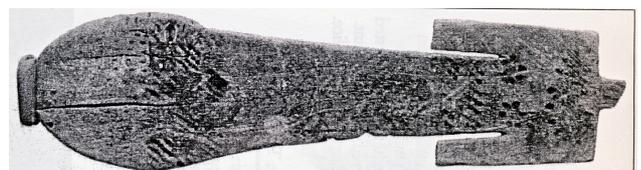
3.1.2.7 Wooden ‘paddle doll’

Egyptian Centre, Swansea, W769

Source: www.swan.ac.uk/egypt

Date: Middle Kingdom, 2055 – 1650 BC

Provenance: Possibly Deir el-Bahri



Size: unknown

Description: The end of the paddle is possibly an exaggerated pubic area and the marks on the 'body' are thought to be tattoos. As such dolls were found mainly in female graves, it suggests that they were to ensure fertility in the afterlife.

3.1.2.8 Faience fertility figurine of nude woman lying on slab

Cambridge, Fitzwilliam Museum

Source: Pinch 1993: plate 51D

Date: Late 18th Dynasty or Ramesside Period

Provenance: Serabit el-Khadim

Size: 7.3 cm



Description: This figurine is flat-chested with elongated limbs. The woman is lying on her back with her arms at her sides, and wears a heavy wig. There is no jewellery, but features, nipples and pubic triangle are picked out in dark blue (Pinch 1993:207 – 208).

3.1.2.9 Limestone figurine in the form of a woman and her baby on a bed

British Museum, EA 2371

Source: Stead 1986:17

Date: 19th Dynasty, 1300-1200 BC

Provenance: Thebes

Size: Length: 23.5 cm, width: 9.5 cm, height: 6.3 cm

Description: This magical wooden amulet of a nude woman wearing a heavy wig, lying on a bed with her child next to her, had the purpose of ensuring a safe and easy birth (Strouhal 1992:19). If a woman had difficulty conceiving, pleas were made to the deities connected to childbirth and votive objects like these dedicated at Hathor temples (Hawass 2000:84). Here the emphasis on the



hips, pubic area and breasts indicate a combination of the role of the woman as the 'lady of the house', and as a sexual individual.

3.1.2.10 Painted limestone statuette of reclining woman

Kelsey Museum, 71.2.174

Source: www.umich.edu/kelseydb/exhibits/women_and_gender/female68.html

Date: Late-Ptolemaic periods (525-30 BC)

Provenance: Egypt

Size: 8.25 cm height, 18.5 cm length



Description: This statuette of a woman lying on her side on a bed is another example of a figurine ensuring fertility and an easy birth. This figure dates from the Ptolemaic period as opposed to an earlier dynasty as in the example above. The difference can be clearly seen in the position of the woman (on her side rather than on her back) as well as in the emphasis on the breasts which were earlier not as rounded and pronounced.

3.1.3 Vessels

Some figures had the magical purpose of warding off complications during pregnancy and averting still births. These include vases and jugs in the shape of naked pregnant women, sometimes kneeling with their arms across their laps. This was similar to the hieroglyph for 'conceive' (Strouhal 1992:15).

If the mother happened to be short of milk, there were again magical remedies she could turn to. Especially popular were ceramic jugs depicting the nursing mother squeezing her breast. These hollow female figures had an opening at the top into which milk could be poured. The milk then ran out through holes in the nipples. This was an example of sympathetic magic, although the vessels could also have been used to store extra milk (Hawass 2000:89).

The milk from mothers who had borne male children was regarded as a potent ingredient in medicine. It was stored in little jugs shaped like a kneeling Isis holding Horus to her bosom, and used to treat intestinal complaints, infant's colds, sleeplessness and eye infections, amongst others (Strouhal 1992:22).

Pregnant women often massaged themselves with perfumed oils against stretch marks and to ease the pains of birth. This liquid was sometimes stored in special containers taking the form of a naked, childbearing figure, standing or even squatting (Janssen and Janssen 1990:3)

3.1.3.1 Jar in form of Isis suckling Horus

Hermitage, St Petersburg

Source: Strouhal 1992:21

Date: 18th – 19th Dynasty

Provenance: Saqqara

Size: Between 11 and 17 cm in height



Description: Over a dozen of these vessels in the shape of women with babies have been found. It is believed that they were made to contain mother's milk and were of possible ritual significance. The milk of lactating women was believed to have magical powers and was an important ingredient in spells and remedies (Oakes and Gahlin 2002:451 – 452).

3.1.3.2 Milk jug with shape of pregnant woman

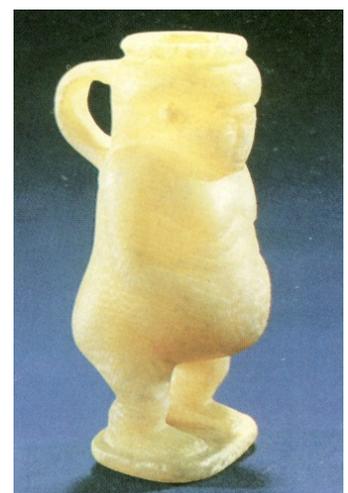
Leiden Museum

Source: Nur al-Din 1995

Date: 18th Dynasty

Provenance: unknown

Size: unknown



Description: This jug made of alabaster shows a naked squatting figure with the hands placed on the stomach as if rubbing it. The figure shows some similarities to the usual portrayal of the protective deity of Taweret (Robins 1993:80). Although similar to jugs holding ointment and oil, the wider opening at the top indicates that this vessel was probably used for milk.

3.1.3.3 Ointment container

British Museum, EA 24652

Source: Quirke 1992:110

Date: 18th Dynasty

Provenance: unknown

Size: unknown



Description: This painted terracotta container for oil or ointment is in the form of a kneeling woman with a child on her back. She is holding a horn-shaped ointment vessel. The oil in these containers would have been rubbed on the pregnant woman to minimise stretch marks and may have had some herbal or medicinal value.

3.1.3.4 Ointment vase in form of woman carrying her child

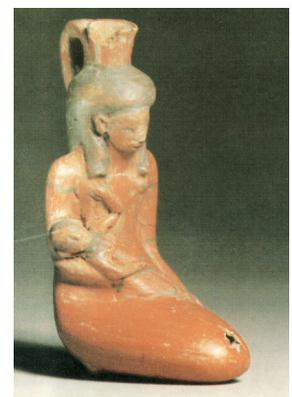
Berlin Museum

Source: Nur al-Din 1995

Date: unknown

Provenance: unknown

Size: unknown



Description: This ointment container is also made of terracotta in the form of a kneeling woman, although the child is on the lap of the woman and not on her back.

3.1.4 Bes and Taweret

The two deities associated most closely with the protection of the household, women and children, were Bes and Taweret. Together with Taweret, Bes safeguarded women in labour as well as children. Bes and Taweret were often depicted with ferocious grimaces and carrying knives or the hieroglyph for 'protection' or 'life'. Their images appeared frequently on household objects, such as chairs, beds, mirrors and cosmetics jars (Robins in Silverman 1997:85). This served to keep demons away throughout the house. The people also believed figures of Bes would bring luck and good humour, and might divert anger and sadness from their homes (El Mahdy 1991:140).

The chief deity of women in fertility, childbirth and breast-feeding was the goddess Ipet-Taweret. She was depicted as a pregnant hippopotamus, standing on her hind feet and carrying a magic knife or the wondrous knot of Isis (*tyet*) (Gros de Beler 2004:110). This symbolized the tampon tied in the depths of Isis' womb by the god Atum to protect the unborn Horus from the destructive wiles of Seth (Strouhal 1992:19). To make her look even more ferocious, she had the tail of a crocodile and the muzzle of a lion.

Of great concern was the continuity of the family line through the fertility of its women, thus most private houses contained an area devoted to the household cult, which involved the worship of these two domestic deities (Robins in Silverman 1997:84).

The two deities were also often depicted on amulets worn around the neck for constant protection against evil forces. Some were probably worn by women to protect them during pregnancy and labour (Davies and Friedman 1998:170).



3.1.4.1 Painted wooden figure of dancing Bes

British Museum, EA 20865

Source: Strouhal 1992:18

Date: 18th Dynasty, c. 1300 BC

Provenance: Thebes, Egypt

Size: 28 cm

Description: The dwarf god Bes, with the head and mane of a lion, was particularly associated with protection of the home. This statue is made of wood and covered with a layer of gesso. Figures like this one were placed inside houses, often on the domestic shrine, or images of the god were painted on interior walls. Bes, often shown holding a knife with which to fight evil forces, was often depicted as a musician, dancing or playing a drum, tambourine or harp, amongst others (Manniche 1987:57). Here he is using music to ward off evil spirits with the noise and dancing to defeat the forces of evil by symbolically trampling on them (David 2002:273).

3.1.4.2 Figure of Bes

British Museum, EA 2569

Source: www.thebritishmuseum.ac.uk/egypt

Date: New Kingdom

Provenance: unknown

Size: Height 11.6 cm

Description: This cosmetic container in the form of the god Bes was carved in wood. Bes is shown with leonine features and wears a kilt. This container has a hole drilled in the top to contain make-up, but the stopper is now missing.



3.1.4.3 Figure of Bes

British Museum, EA 17072

Source: Quirke 1992:108

Date: New Kingdom, c. 1350 BC

Provenance: Thebes



Size: Height 6.5 cm

Description: This ivory figure of the god Bes was probably originally part of an item of furniture, such as a bed.

3.1.4.4 Block with Bes

Dendera temple

Source: Pinch 1994:129

Date: 1st c BC – 1st c AD

Provenance: Temple of Hathor at Dendera

Size: unknown



Description: At the beginning of the Ptolemaic era there was a great increase in the number of images of Bes. He started appearing on a large number of reliefs in many sanctuaries such as Dendera, and also on many amulets (Gros de Beler 2004:28), indicating that his worship had moved from the private to the public sphere.

3.1.4.5 Breccia statue of the goddess Taweret

British Museum, EA 35700

Source: www.thebritishmuseum.ac.uk/

Date: Late Period, after 600 BC

Provenance: Unknown

Size: Height 108 cm



Description: [Taweret](#) was a fierce goddess who had no human elements, consisting of the head and body of a hippopotamus, the tail of a crocodile and the legs of a lioness. All these creatures were known for aggressively

protecting their young. Taweret was thus seen as the goddess who protected the mother and child during childbirth.

3.1.4.6 Statue of Taweret, protectress in childbirth

Museo Egizio, Turin

Source: Davies and Friedman 1992:171

Date: 19th Dynasty

Provenance: Deir el-Medina

Size: unknown



Description: As most births took place inside or near the home, Taweret was considered a household deity. Figures of her were placed on the household altars in every home and in large temples. These statues were generally small and often made of wood or clay. Her statues were regarded as [amulets](#) and guaranteed the protection of the goddess against evil forces that might threaten the women and children of a specific household.

3.1.4.7 Figure of Taweret

British Museum, EA 13162

Source: Quirke 1992:109

Date: Late Period, after 600 BC

Provenance: Unknown

Size: Height 20 cm



Description: This blue glazed figure of the goddess Taweret shows the protective goddess of mothers and children in her usual form of a pregnant hippopotamus, with the tail of a crocodile. Her prominent belly and heavy breasts give a reassuring image of a pregnant woman (Gros de Beler

2004:110). She also wears a horned sun-disk and a double-plumed headdress.

3.1.4.8 Gold Taweret necklace

British Museum; EA 59418

Source: Quirke and Spencer 1992: fig 134

Date: 18th Dynasty, 1470-1350 BC

Provenance: unknown

Size: 43.5 cm (as strung)



Description: This string of alternating hollow gold beads and Taweret amulets is an example of the amulets worn by women of all social groups to promote fertility and ease childbirth. They were most often mass produced and made of [faience](#), but could also be made of various types of stone. The examples on this necklace are of gold and are mould-made and hollow.

3.1.5 Depictions of birth

Little is known about the rituals surrounding childbirth itself, as it was not often depicted in art.

To prevent demons from overrunning the house during birth, the mother retired to a special and secluded place until two weeks after giving birth. The delivery of the baby took place in these special surroundings, either a distinctive structure (birth pavilion) or in a particular room of the house. The former is depicted in New Kingdom wall paintings at Deir el-Medina and Amarna (Davies and Friedman 1998:169).

There was no particular furniture in a pavilion, with the woman being assisted during labour by elderly female relations. She kneeled or squatted on two large bricks, known as birth bricks, and was attended by midwives

representing Isis, the epitome of good mother, and her sister Nephtys (Davies and Friedman 1998:171).

In rural areas the birth tent was hung with vines and bowers. At Deir el-Medina, because of crowded living conditions, it was usually an enclosed platform or 'birth box', a rectangular construction of mud brick, partially or fully enclosed with an opening on the long side. It was often decorated with images of Bes and Taweret (Davies and Friedman 1998:170).

All terms associated with childbirth developed a special ritual significance and became invested with particular magical powers. Even the birthing stool or bricks were now personified in the form of the goddess Meskhenet (Tyldesley 1994:258). A spell to be said over these bricks was actually a hymn to her portrayed in her human form with the uterus of a cow on her head (Janssen and Janssen 1990:6).

3.1.5.1 Woman giving birth with support from Hathor

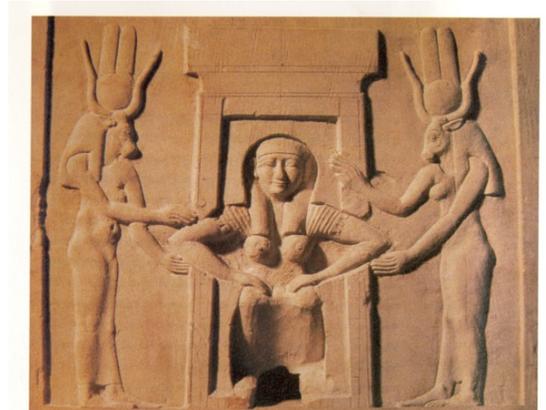
Cairo. Egyptian Museum, 40627

Source: Davies and Friedman 1998:171

Date: Graeco-Roman Period

Provenance: Temple of Hathor at Dendera

Size: unknown



Description: This relief shows a royal woman, assisted by two Hathor birth goddesses, in the process of giving birth, although commoners would have followed more or less the same procedure. She is squatting on the 'bricks of birth', two large bricks with a gap between them, in the 'birth box'. This was a rectangular construction of mud brick, partially enclosed, which was often painted with the images of Bes and Taweret. The goddess of love and fertility,

Hathor, is supporting the woman on both sides. Hathor was often appealed to and invoked in the birthing process (Strouhal 1992:16-17).

3.1.5.2 Limestone ostrakon of woman suckling child

British Museum, EA 8506

Source: Robins 1997:191

Date: c. 1300 – 1100 BC

Provenance: Deir el-Medina

Size: 16.5 cm



Description: This *ostrakon*, a flake of limestone that has been used as a writing or drawing surface, shows a healthy new mother with her hair dressed in a special way, wearing special sandals and jewellery. Breast-feeding her baby, she is seated on a stool in a columned pavilion (the so-called 'birth arbour'), a pavilion with papyrus stalks as columns. These columns are in turn covered with convolvulus tendrils. There are garlands on the walls, and the structure is clearly specifically erected in a garden or on a roof (Janssen and Janssen 1990:4). The woman appears to be enjoying the festivities as she rejoins the community after a period of seclusion following the birth of her child (Davies and Friedman, 1998:170). At the bottom of the *ostrakon*, a Nubian girl (recognisable by her distinctive hairstyle and facial features) holds a mirror.

3.1.6 Wands and rods

Birth was a dangerous event and therefore surrounded by an aura of magical superstition. A particular magic artefact connected with pregnancy and children was the apotropaic or 'magical' wand. This wand had a curved sickle

shape (Janssen and Janssen 1990:9). Almost all were carved from hippopotamus teeth, an obvious link to the deity Taweret (Tyldesley 1994:259), although some were also made of calcite, faience or ebony.

These magical wands or apotropaic wands were supposed to avert evil. They were used in ritual and laid either on the stomach of the pregnant woman or on the body of the baby (Janssen and Janssen 1990:9). They were also used to draw a circle of protection around the mother to be and later also the child. As these were supposedly too powerful to be placed in a grave intact, they were broken in antiquity (Davies and Friedman 1998:73).

Some wands had inscriptions such as 'protection by night, protection by day' or 'cut off the head of the enemy when he enters the chamber of the children whom the lady has borne' (Robins 1993:87), while the flat side often had inscriptions with the name of the juvenile boy or his mother (Janssen and Janssen 1990:9).

Amulets of the protective deities such as Bes and Taweret were often worn by mothers. Spells and amulets were used to protect the newborn, who was identified with the child-god Horus. Other spells to drive out demons of illness were recited over amulets which were then placed around the neck of the child (Hawass 2000:88).

3.1.6.1 Apotropaic wand for the 'Lady of the House of Seneb'

British Museum, EA 18175

Source: Pinch 1994:40

Date: Late Middle Kingdom, 19th – 17th century BC

Provenance: Thebes, Egypt

Size: 36 cm



Description: This curved staff made from a hippopotamus tusk was brandished against enemies of the mother and child. On the one side it is adorned with images of forces to defend the innocent. In the centre one finds the scarab beetle of rebirth, and on its left there is a figure with a leonine head, representative of the god Bes (Quirke and Spencer 1992:83). To the right the goddess Taweret is depicted in her usual guise as pregnant hippopotamus. The wand also depicts a frog, representing Heket, goddess of pregnancy and childbirth, as well as lions and snakes. The staff has a crack running through it, indicating that it was broken in antiquity, probably when placed in a burial. It may have been seen as too powerful an object to be placed next to the dead for rebirth.

3.1.6.2 Apotropaic wand for 'Lady of the House of Seneb' (reverse side)

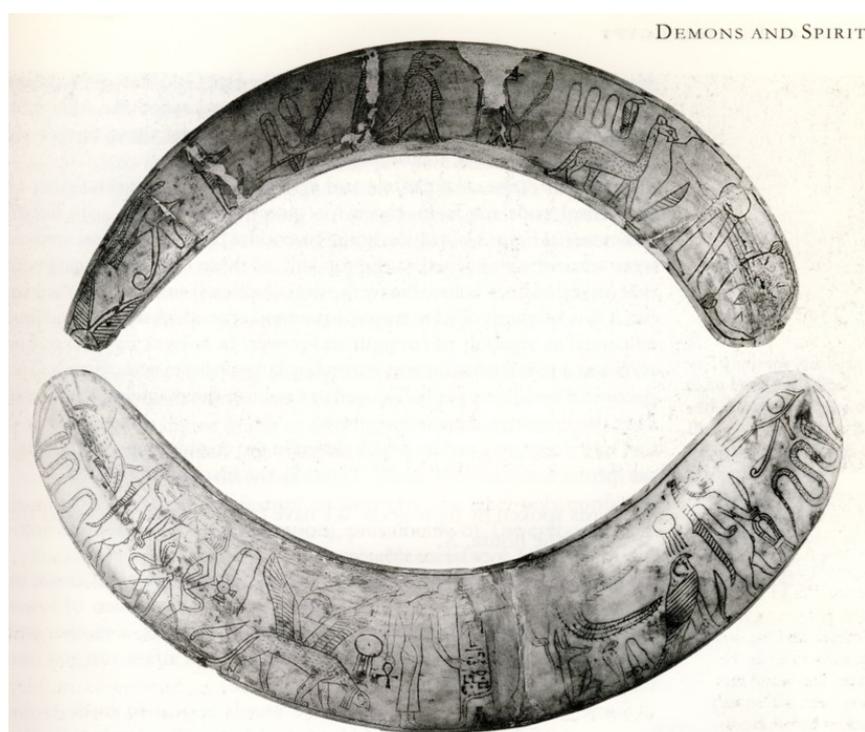
British Museum, EA 18175

Source: Pinch 1994:41

Date: Late Middle Kingdom, c. 1750 BC

Provenance: Thebes, Egypt

Size: 36 cm



Description: This side of the curved wand described above has an inscription of a formula that promises protection to the owner. Two images of knife-wielding Taweret are shown, one leaning on the *sa*, or sign of protection. A griffin with two sets of wings, another figure of Bes, snakes and other creatures also appear.

3.1.6.3 Apotropaic wand made of ivory

British Museum, EA 24426

Source: Pinch 1994:131

Date: 19th – 17th century BC

Provenance: unknown

Size: unknown



Description: This wand has also been broken in ancient times, and then mended afterwards. On this wand Taweret with her protective knife and the frog goddess Heqet are depicted again. The other monstrous creatures on the wand include a bull with two heads, the head of the Seth animal, a winged griffin and the head of a jackal.

3.1.6.4 Ivory apotropaic wand, partly broken

British Museum, EA 58794

Source: Pinch 1994:79

Date: Late Middle Kingdom, 19th – 18th century BC

Provenance: unknown

Size: unknown



Description: This ivory apotropaic wand, also broken in antiquity and then lashed together with cords suggesting frequent use, has several creatures portrayed on it. These include a turtle, Seth, Beset, Taweret and the head of a panther.

3.1.6.5 Turtle and two frogs: part of rod warding off danger at birth

British Museum, EA 22892

Source: Quirke 1992:107

Date: Middle Kingdom, c.1750 BC

Provenance: unknown

Size: Length 5.2 cm



Description: This segment from a hollow cuboid rod is made of steatite. The turtle and two frogs depicted on this segment represented forces supposed to ward off danger at childbirth. A turtle would probably have been attached to the rod as well.

3.1.6.6 Apotropaic rod with images of protective animals

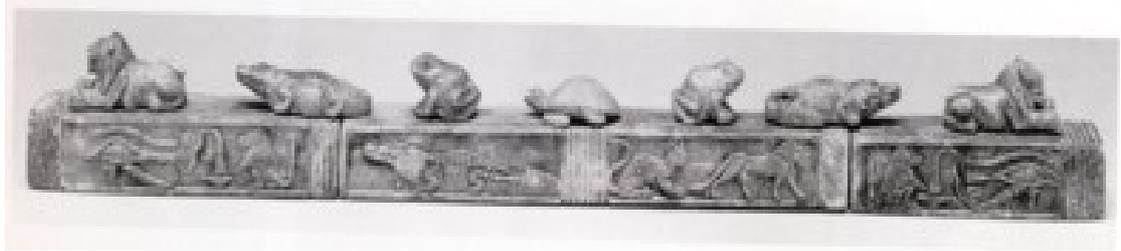
New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art

Source: Robins 1997:115

Date: Late 12th to 13th Dynasty

Provenance: Possibly Heliopolis

Size: Length 28 cm



Description: This cuboid rod is made of steatite and consists of three hollow segments. The two segments at the ends depict a *wedjat*-eye, lamp and squatting baboon carved on both sides. The middle section, divided in two, has a cat and crocodile on the one side, and a crocodile, cat and lion on the other. At the top of the rod individual animals are attached. At each end a lion faces outwards. Between them are a turtle, two frogs and two crocodiles. The rod, symbolising the triumph of the sun over nightly dangers in the underworld, was also supposed to protect the newly deceased, as child mortality in Egypt was quite high.

3.1.7 Magic paraphernalia and amulets

A variety of unusual objects have also been discovered whose definite use will probably always be uncertain. Magic was a part of Egyptian culture and most societies had magic practitioners of different categories among them, who all worked magic in their own way.

3.1.7.1 Pair of ivory clappers

Manchester Museum

Source: Davies and Friedman 1998:172

Date: 1900 – 1750 BC

Provenance: From Lahun in the Fayum

Size: unknown



Description: These clappers, although at times just used as magical instruments in rituals, were found with other paraphernalia pertaining to childbirth. It is thus thought that they were used to frighten and drive away evil spirits and hostile forces, who were believed to be afraid of noises like clapping, banging and rattling.

3.1.7.2 Painted canvas mask

Werner Foreman Archive, London

Source: Davies and Friedman 1998:172

Date: 1900 – 1750 BC

Provenance: From Lahun in the Fayum

Size: unknown



Description: This full-sized canvas mask, made of three layers of canvas, would have been worn by an attendant imitating the goddess to channel the power of Beset during the protective rites at the birth of a child. The mask was covered with stucco and painted black (David 2002:285)

3.1.7.3 Statuette of Beset

Werner Foreman Archive, London

Source: Davies and Friedman 1998:173

Date: 1850 – 1750 BC

Provenance: Thebes

Size: unknown



Description: The naked lioness-demon Beset was the female counterpart of the god Bes (David 2002:285). This wooden statuette with moveable arms holds a snake staff in each hand. This is similar to other depictions of Beset on apotropaic wands.

3.1.7.4 Faience amulet of goddess with child

British Museum, EA 66632

Source: Robins 1997:25

Date: Third Intermediate Period

Provenance: unknown

Size: Length 8.5 cm



Description: The amulet is made of blue-green faience. The goddess depicted offers her right breast to the child on her lap. A sun-disk between two cow's horns rising out of a *uraei* circlet is on her head. Although cow' horns were at first associated with Hathor, it later came to be seen as part of Isis' costume when holding her son Horus. This amulet was meant to be worn (a loop for hanging is attached to the back) by women and children to protect them from disease and accidents (Robins, 1997: 25).

3.1.7.5 A uterine amulet

Kelsey Museum, 26067

Source: www.umich.edu/kelseydb/exhibits/women

Date: Middle Kingdom

Provenance: Unknown

Size: unknown



Description: This haematite amulet was meant to control contraception and childbirth by "opening" and "closing" the womb with its special "key." The one side depicts the uterine symbol, with Khnoum, the ram-headed god touching the knob of the key. Above, Isis and Nephthys flank Anubis and an unidentified figure, possibly the patient. On the reverse side is the inscription to be recited.

3.2. Death and the afterlife

Women were usually buried with their husbands or another male relative (Hawass 2000:180). Nevertheless, women expected an afterlife in their own right, not as dependants of men. Women were afforded similar, but less rich funerary equipment as men of equal status, although they were expected to share the same afterlife (Robins in Silverman 1997:87). Their funeral rites were the same as for men, also incorporating a journey through the underworld and interrogation in the judgement hall of Osiris. Male rituals were simply changed by changing male pronouns to female. After passing the required tests and becoming one of the justified dead, women also enjoyed the realms of the 'field of offerings' and 'field of reeds' – either alone or with their husbands (Hawass 2000:181). They were also associated with the male god Osiris in death, although in the Late Period Hathor was sometimes placed instead of Osiris (Graves-Brown 2000:26).

3.2.1 Funerary cloths and stelae

In funerary stelae, the offering table in front of the stela was usually filled with food offerings and libations. Rectangular and round-topped varieties occurred, and the majority just had the name of the owner inscribed in hieroglyphs, sometimes with a figure of the deceased. Later a figure of the deceased seated before the table of offerings became more popular (Taylor 2001:155). Stelae formed part of both the religious side of a woman's life as seen by others (as they were publicly displayed) and the private side (as they often served an individual purpose).

3.2.1.1 Funerary cloth of Isetnefret

British Museum, EA 65347

Source: Robins 1993:132

Date: New Kingdom, 1300-1070 BC

Provenance: unknown

Size: Height 28 cm, length 43 cm



Description: This linen panel was placed on the coffin, thus forming part of the burial itself. It portrays the woman Tii pouring a libation before her deceased mother. Water was often used in rituals to ensure purification. Both women are dressed in fashionable robes with wide collars, heavy wigs and, in the case of Tii, hoop earrings – all indicative of the fashion in the New Kingdom.

3.2.1.2 Tashay's shroud

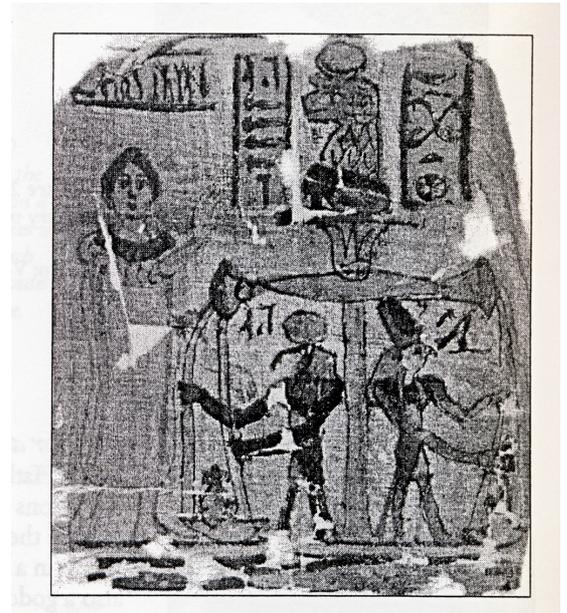
Swansea Egyptian Centre, W651

Source: www.swan.ac.uk/egypt

Date: c.110 -160 AD

Provenance: unknown

Size: unknown



Description: The woman Tashay's heart is being weighed against the feather of truth. Tashay lived somewhere between A.D.110 - 160. This is a picture from her shroud showing her being judged just as people of all genders were believed to have been.

3.2.1.3 Stela of Djedamuniu(es)ankh worshipping god Re-Harakhte

Egyptian Museum, Cairo RT 25.12.24.20

Source: Nur el-Din 1995

Date: 3rd Intermediate Period, 22nd Dynasty

Provenance: Deir al Bahri

Size: unknown



Description: On this funerary stela, a woman is raising her hands in adoration to worship Re-Harakhte, who is holding the

ankh symbol of life. On the table between them are an arrangement of offerings, including grapes, lotus flowers and lettuce. A winged sun disc stretches above both of the figures.

3.2.1.4 Wooden stela of Deniuenkhons

British Museum [EA 27332](#)

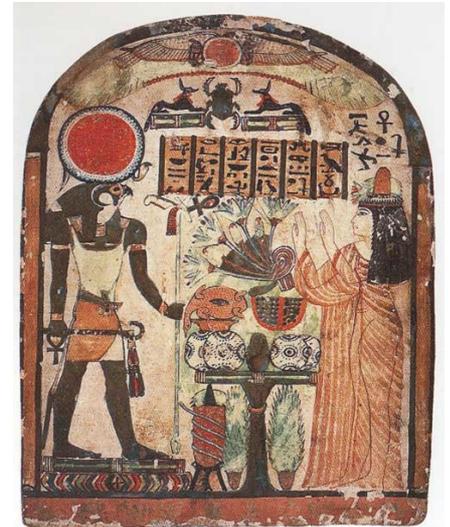
Source: Quirke and Spencer 1992:59

Date: Third Intermediate period (about 950-900 BC),

22nd Dynasty

Provenance: Thebes

Size: height 33 cm



Description: This funerary stela of the priestess Deniuenkhons, musician of Amun, is painted on sycamore fig wood and depicts the priestess adoring the falcon-headed sun-god Re-Harakhte-Atum. She stands next to a table heaped with food offerings (bread, birds, fruit and lotus flowers) to the god. Under the table of offerings is a jar of drink and two lettuces (Silverman 1997:140). The sun, represented by a winged sun disk, arches over the whole scene. The sun is also represented by the scarab beetle, flanked by two jackals, pushing the disk over the horizon (Robins 1997:204).

3.2.1.5 Funerary stela of Lady Taperet

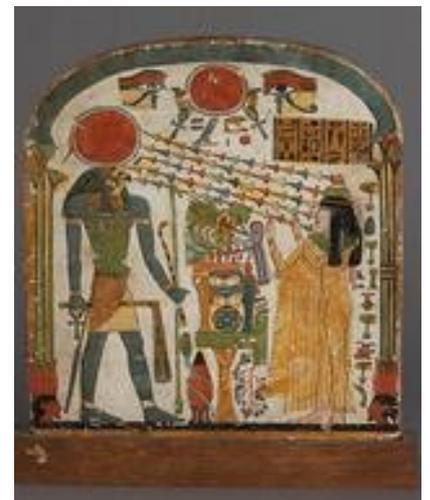
Louvre E 52, Paris

Source: Silverman 1997:170

Date: 22nd Dynasty, c. 1000 BC

Provenance: unknown

Size: unknown



Description: This small wooden stele is painted on both sides. Each side has an image of Lady Taperet praying to different aspects of the sun: Re, the sun at its zenith, on one side; and Atum, the setting sun, on the other. Through these images, Lady Taperet is linked to the eternal cycle of the sun

and its daily resurrection. The positive effects are illustrated by the rays of flowers illuminating the deceased's face, which is an unusual image. Lady Taperet is offering Re a table filled with food, while the hieroglyphs behind her back guarantee *'thousands of loaves of breads, beer, meat, and poultry'* for her (Andreu (et al.) 1997:171-174).

3.2.1.6 Painted limestone bust of ancestor

Collection of Freiherr von Richter

Source: www.cesras.org/Voronezh/Bust.html

Date: 19th Dynasty

Provenance: Thebes

Size: 23x15.7x7.5cm



Description: This is an ancestral bust from Deir el-Medina. Ancestral busts or stelae like these were set up in niches in the walls. Prayers and offerings were also given to deceased relatives.

3.2.1.7 Relief of women worshipping Qedeshet

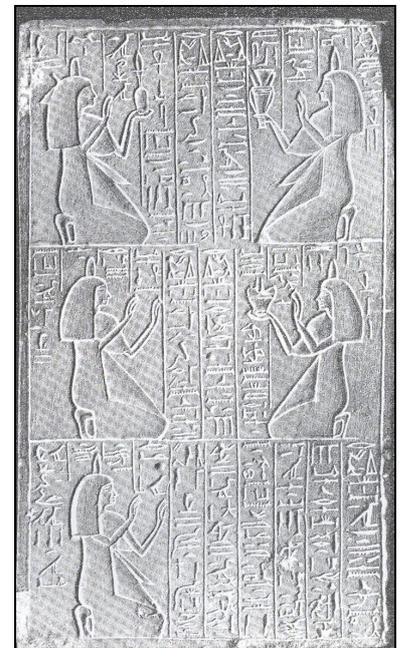
Paris, Louvre C.86

Source: Boreaux 1939: fig 1

Date: 19th Dynasty

Provenance: Deir el-Medina

Size: 31.5 cm



Description: On this stela, a female dedicator and her four daughters are worshipping the Syro-Palestinian goddess Qedeshet, depicted on the front of the stela (Cornelius 2004:124).

3.2.2 Coffins and mummies

Once the technique for mummification developed, women were also mummified. The body was placed in a coffin or set of coffins and the viscera in canopic jars (Robins 1993:166). Although most tomb scenes depict male burials, there is evidence that the same ceremonies were carried out for women when they were buried (Robins 1993:168). Coffins of males and females were largely similar, although men had better quality coffins, with minor differences occurring in style.

3.2.2.1 Coffin of woman Henutmehyt

British Museum, EA 48001

Source: Robins 1997:187

Date: 19th Dynasty

Provenance: Thebes

Size: 187 cm



Description: This coffin belonged to Henutmehyt, musician of Amun and mistress of the house. The coffin has hieroglyphs and figures in red and blue on a yellow background typical of the period. The upper part of the coffin is covered in gold, indicating the wealth and status of the owner as well as her association with the sun god. Other symbols on the outer coffin include a pair of *wedjat* – eyes, a depiction of the sky goddess Nut and the four sons of Horus. The fine quality of Henutmehyt's funerary equipment shows that she was an individual of considerable wealth. As well as an outer and inner coffin,

her mummy was covered with a mask and openwork case. This combination of mask and cover is known as a 'mummy board', and is typical of Egyptian burials of the Nineteenth Dynasty (about 1295-1186 BC). It was placed directly over the bandaged body within the inner coffin.

3.2.2.2 Coffin of unidentified woman

Theban coffin

Source: Taylor 2001:173

Date: 22nd Dynasty, about 850 BC

Provenance: Thebes

Size: 171 cm



Description: This mummy-case made of cartonnage has only a blank space where the name of the owner was never inserted. A red 'stole' of leather is represented on the breast. Below that are depictions of the winged solar-disc, Sokar-Osiris as a mummified falcon, the Sons of Horus, winged serpent goddesses as well as two *ba* -birds.

3.2.2.3 Coffin of woman Tentmutengebtiu

British Museum, EA 22939

Source: Quirke 1992:68

Date: Third Intermediate Period, c. 900 BC

Provenance: Thebes

Size: 169 cm



Description: On this painted cartonnage coffin, Osiris is shown in the form of a *djed* pillar. He also wears a sun-disk and has arms to hold the crook and flail.

On both sides of Osiris, Isis and Nephtys carry the *ankh* symbol on their arms. Lower down on the coffin the deceased is purified by the gods Horus and Thoth. They are using liquid represented by two streams of *was* and *ankh* symbols. These hieroglyphs represented life and power or dominion respectively.

3.2.2.4 Inside of coffin of woman Soter

British Museum, EA 6705

Source: Silverman 1997:117

Date: Roman Period, early 2nd century AD

Provenance: Qurna, Thebes

Size: 213 cm



Description: This coffin belonged to a woman called Soter, found in the Theban necropolis. On the inside of the coffin lid, a representation of the sky goddess Nut is surrounded by figures representing the signs of the zodiac. Twelve female figures at each side personify the hours of day and night, and the morning and evening suns in [barques](#) flank the goddess' head. At the sides of Nut's body are painted the signs of the zodiac, Leo to Capricorn on the left, and Aquarius to Cancer on the right (Silverman 1997:117).

3.2.2.5 Coffin fragment of lady musician

Swansea Egyptian Centre, W 1052

Source: www.swan.ac.uk/egypt

Date: Third Intermediate Period (1069 – 715 BC)

Provenance: Thebes

Size: unknown



Description: The dead person is shown as a man. However, the script shows the person to be female. The column of text on the left states that she is 'The Lady of the House, Musician of Amun-Re, King of Gods'. Perhaps the coffin was made for a man and then adapted for her.

3.2.2.6 Mummy of woman Katebet

Theban mummy

Source: Taylor 2001:85

Date: Late 18th or 19th Dynasty

Provenance: Thebes

Size: 165 cm



Description: This mummy is that of an elderly woman whose head is covered by a gilded cartonnage mask. On the torso there are several pectoral ornaments as well as a *shabti* figure.

3.2.2.7 Rear mummyboard of woman Tameniut

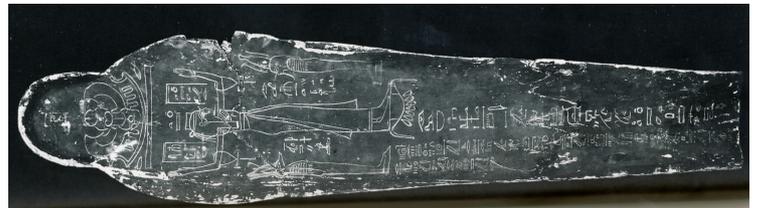
Theban mummyboard

Source: Taylor 2001:181

Date: Early 21st Dynasty

Provenance: Thebes

Size: 165 cm



Description: This rear mummyboard of Tameniut is covered with images of deities as well as a text invoking the protection of Nut.

3.2.2.8 Painted wooden pectoral

Theban pectoral

Source: Taylor 2001:18

Date: 19th dynasty

Provenance: Thebes

Size: 10 cm x 7.5 cm



Description: The pectoral shows a woman named Mehytkhati in a posture associated with ritual purification. She holds her heart between her hands to protect it, as it was of vital importance to retain the heart if the afterlife was to be entered after death.

3.2.3 Funerary literature

The placing of funerary texts in the tomb (on walls, papyri, coffins, stelae and amulets) was done to make possible, by magic, the replication of the acts which the texts described. The deceased thus obtained the knowledge he or she needed to attain the desired afterlife (Taylor 2001:193).

At the end of the Old Kingdom, more members of the elite started to have funerary texts included in their burials. This adoption of funerary texts by private individuals previously meant only for royalty was called the 'democratisation of the afterlife' (Taylor 2001:194). The majority of examples were found written in hieroglyphs on the surfaces of wooden coffins (thus Coffin Texts) but they were also found on tomb walls, mummy masks and papyri. They were often similar to the preceding 'Pyramid Texts', with additions from other sources (Oakes and Gahlin 2002:402).

By the New Kingdom a series of new texts existed. These texts were collectively called the 'Book of the Dead' or 'Spells for Going Forth by Day' and contained about 200 spells, of which most could be traced back to the 'Pyramid Texts' and 'Coffin Texts'. These spells were written on coffins and linen mummy shrouds, and later in ink on rolls of papyrus. They were also found on tomb walls, coffins and mummy-bandages (Taylor 2001:196).

The magical spells provided instructions to assist the deceased in his passage to the afterlife and in his existence there. Certain spells were meant to function as charms to protect or assist the deceased, and some had very specific instructions to be carried out (Taylor 2001:198).

3.2.3.1 Funerary papyrus of priestess Nesitanebetisheru

British Museum, EA 10554

Source: Pinch 1994:11

Date: c. 950 BC

Provenance: Thebes

Size: unknown



Description: In this excerpt from a funerary papyrus, the god Heka, shown in his human form, and the goddess of truth and justice, Ma'at, stand behind the throne of Osiris. In front of the throne are Thoth and Horus. The deceased is shown on the right of the papyrus.

3.2.3.2 Funerary papyrus of priestess Nesitanebetisheru (II)

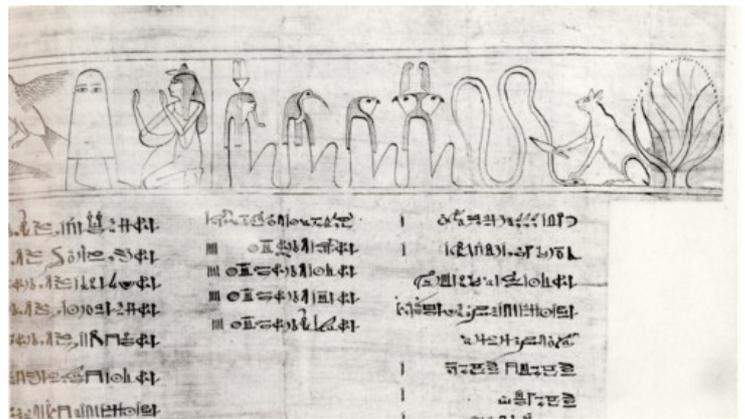
British Museum, EA 10554

Source: Pinch 1994:21

Date: c. 950 BC

Provenance: Thebes

Size: unknown



Description: In this excerpt from the same funerary papyrus mentioned above, the Great Cat, one of the forms of the sun god Ra, cuts up the chaos serpent Apophis. As the main enemy of the gods, Apophis daily attacked the solar boat in order to stop the process of creation.

3.2.3.3 Funerary papyrus of priestess Nesitanebetisheru (III)

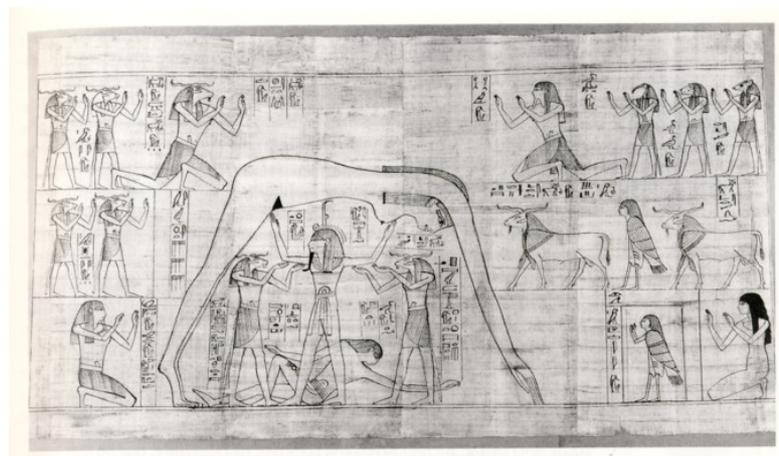
British Museum, EA 10554

Source: Pinch, 1994:25

Date: c. 950 BC

Provenance: Thebes

Size: unknown



Description: This is the third excerpt from the same funerary papyrus. Here the air god Shu is shown while separating his son Geb (the earth god) and daughter Nut (the sky goddess) so that Nut could give birth to her four

children (Osiris, Seth, Isis and Nephtys). In the right bottom corner the deceased as well as her *ba* is portrayed.

3.2.3.4 Book of the Dead of woman Tameniu

British Museum,

EA 10002

Source: Quirke 1992:49

Date: Third Intermediate

Period, c. 950 BC

Provenance: Thebes

Size: Height 28 cm



Description: The deceased, as well as the *ba* (the small human-headed bird at her feet) are depicted on painted papyrus together with the goddess Nut, from whom they are receiving cool water. Behind them is the goddess [Ma'at](#), whose head is replaced by the symbolic feather that is her emblem.

3.2.3.5 From *The Book of the Dead* of priestess Anhai

British Museum,

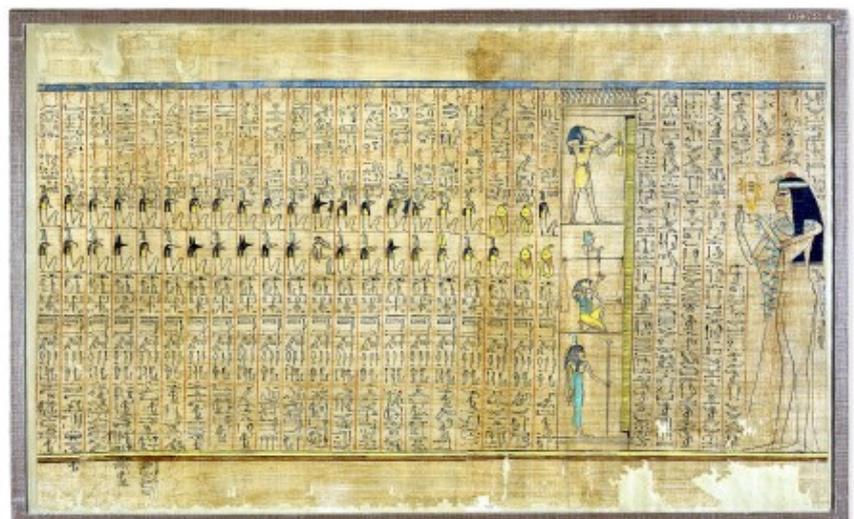
EA 10472

Source: Pinch 1994:34

Date: 21st Dynasty,
around 1050 BC

Provenance: Thebes

Size: 45 cm x 74 cm



Description: The ‘Weighing of the heart’ scene was a popular illustration in the ancient Egyptian *Book of the Dead* and usually accompanied the spell in which the heart of the deceased declares before the gods that he or she has not committed any of a long list of specific sins. A spell on the back of the heart scarab placed over the heart on the mummy ensured that the heart could not lie. The heart of the deceased was then also weighed against either a figure of the goddess [Ma'at](#) embodying the concepts of justice and truth, or her symbol, the feather. In this example, Anhai holds a [sistrum](#) and convolvulus vine and is portrayed as adoring the gods. The god Anubis is adjusting the scales and Thoth stands ready to write down the result (Pinch 1994:34).

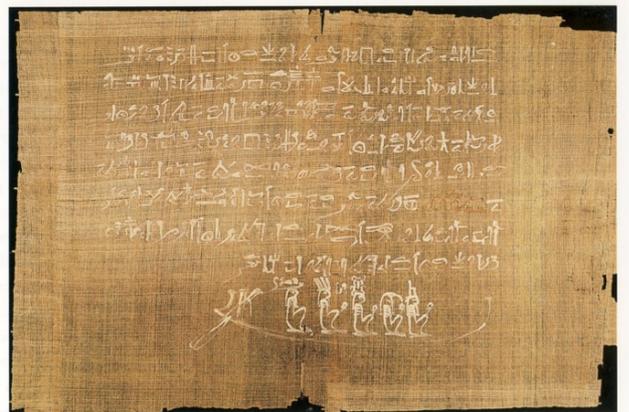
3.2.3.6 Funerary text of lady Henutmehyt

Source: Taylor 2001:197

Date: 19th Dynasty, about 1250 BC

Provenance: Thebes

Size: 41 cm in height



Description: This sheet of fine-quality papyrus was inscribed with a funerary text for the lady Henutmehyt. The text is from the *Book of the Dead*, spell 100. The papyrus was found placed over the outer wrappings of the mummy, as the directions for the spell prescribed. This is a very early example of the preparation of such texts as charms for the dead (Taylor 2001:197).

3.2.4 Other funerary equipment

3.2.4.1 Heart scarab of House Mistress Hatnufer

New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art



Source: www.metmuseum.org/works_of_art

Date: 1466 B.C.E.; Dynasty 18, New Kingdom

Provenance: Western Thebes

Size: 6.7 x 5.3 cm

Description: This amulet of gold and green stone belonged to the mother of Senenmut, the architect of Hatshepsut's temple at Deir el-Bahri. Heart scarabs, usually made of green-coloured stone, were placed over the heart of the mummy. The heart was considered the home of the spirit and was left in the mummified body. Heart scarabs were inscribed with a spell from the 'Book of the Dead'.

3.2.4.2 Set of magic bricks

British Museum, EA 41544

Source: Taylor 2001:208

Date: 19th Dynasty, about 1290 BC

Provenance: Thebes

Size: Height (left to right) 18 cm,
9.5 cm, 20.5 cm, 9.5 cm



Description: These magic bricks were found in the tomb of Henutmehyt, chantress of Amun. The bricks are made of unbaked mud and each supports an amuletic figure. The amulets are a figure of Anubis, a mummiform figure made of wood, a reed intended to hold a wick, and a *djed* pillar of blue faience. On the bricks are inscriptions with magical spells from the 'Book of the Dead', identifying the deceased with Osiris, Isis and Nephtys. Each brick was supposed to be placed facing one of the four cardinal points to protect the deceased from the enemies of the god Osiris.

3.2.4.3 *Hypocephalus* from burial of Theban priestess

British Museum, EA 36188



Source: Pinch 1994:157

Date: 4th – 3rd century BC

Provenance: Thebes

Size: unknown

Description: The *Book of the Dead* included a spell that had to be inscribed on a headrest. This was to prevent the deceased from having its head taken away. These circular headrests were known as *hypocephali* and were inscribed with spells and decorated with the images of deities. This example is decorated with scenes relating to the daily creation of the sun. The two boats represent the sun during the night (left) and the day (right). Below, baboons herald the birth of the sun, whose four heads represent the first four generations of creation. Below are figures associated with the Afterlife, including the four [sons of Horus](#), who looked after the internal organs of the deceased. The spell around the outside of the disc is an abbreviated form of Chapter 162 of the *Book of the Dead*.

3.3. Other magic

3.3.1 Amulets

Amulets were miniature devices dating back to the Pre-Dynastic period and were believed to give the owner or carrier magic protection or powers (Oakes and Gahlin 2002:454). The shape of amulets was manifold: some were in the form of symbols ensuring health, long life or happiness, while others depicted the gods or other animals. The magic number 7 often recurred (Strouhal 1992:25).

Most amulets had a loop attached so that they could be hung, and could have been man-made or natural objects. Amulets became more and more popular

during the later periods, and were made of gold, silver, semi-precious stones, glass or faience, or a combination of these.

Amulets often represented a little figure of protective deities or their symbols, and the goddesses Isis and Hathor were particularly favoured by women. A whole series of charms could be strung together (Hawass 2000:122). The wearing and keeping of images of the gods or sacred symbols had power, thus wearing amulets in life was a way of seeking the protection of the gods (El Mahdy 1991:139).

3.3.1.1 Necklace of shell and coral

British Museum, EA 59704

Source: Pinch 1994:10

Date: c. 4000 BC

Provenance: unknown

Size: unknown



Description: This amulet is a very early example of representational art in Egypt. The hippopotamus amulet attached to the shell, coral, bone and ivory necklace may be an early personification of the goddess Taweret, as the female hippopotamus was commonly associated with the protection of pregnant women.

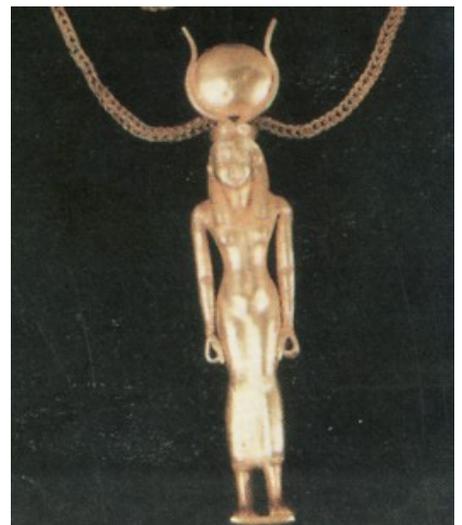
3.3.1.2 Golden chain with Hathor amulet

Egyptian Museum, Cairo

Source: Nur al-Din 1995

Date: unknown

Provenance: unknown



Size: unknown

Description: This precious amulet is probably from the later periods when amulets became more and more popular and were made of gold, silver, semi-precious stones, glass and faience. The amulets represented little figures of protective deities or their symbols. Isis and Hathor were particularly favoured by women, and often a whole series of charms could be strung together (Hawass 2000:122).

3.3.1.3 Divine decrees worn as amulets

British Museum, EA 10083

Source: Pinch 1994:36 - 37

Date: 11th – 9th century BC

Provenance: unknown

Size: unknown



Description: The use of amulets in the form of divine decrees issued in the name of deities was popular in the late second and early first millennia BC. A god or goddess would have been asked about the child's fate at its birth, with the result recorded in writing. These rolled-up papyri were then placed in amulet cases and worn by the recipients. It seems as if women needed more protection than men, as more female recipients were identified than male (Pinch 1994:116-117).

3.3.1.4 Figure of young girl with fish-amulet

British Museum, EA 2572

Source: Pinch 1994:107

Date: 19th – 18th c BC

Provenance: unknown

Size: unknown



Description: As the pelvis, with its connection to fertility and childbirth, was an area of danger to women, girdles with amulets attached were quite popular. This steatite figure of a girl shows her wearing a girdle of cowrie-shells. Cowrie shells were used as amulets against the Evil Eye in Egypt as well as in other cultures. The shape of these shells was thought to simulate the eye as well as female genitalia. Some girdles used real shells, but many shells were made of faience, silver or gold. The figure also has an amulet in the shape of a fish hanging from her plait.

3.3.1.5 Amuletic bangle with protective symbols

British Museum, EA 24788

Source: Pinch 1994:111

Date: c. 2000 – 1800 BC

Provenance: unknown

Size: unknown



Description: This bangle of gold and silver is decorated with a number of amulets characteristic of Egyptian culture. Some of the protective symbols on the bangle include the *wedjat* eye, or Eye of Horus, *djed* pillars (interpreted as the backbone of Osiris) and *ankh* signs. The *ankh* was the hieroglyphic symbol for the life-giving elements of air and water (life) and was supposed to lengthen life (Oakes and Gahlin 2002:455). Also shown is a variety of animals

with supposed magical powers or associations, such as a turtle, snakes, baboons, falcons, hares and the horned mask of the goddess Bat. The purpose of the ornament was to place the wearer in a protective circle (Pinch 1994:115).

3.3.1.6 Blue glass scorpion amulet

British Museum, EA 18905

Source: Pinch 1994:142

Date: 3rd – 1st c BC

Provenance: unknown

Size: unknown



Description: The problem of poisonous bites and stings, from snakes, insects and scorpions, was a subject for much preventative magic, especially for children. This scorpion amulet, made of glass with traces of gilding, would have been worn by the owner to protect against scorpion bites.

3.3.1.7 Gold ring with frog Heqet and Serqet

British Museum, EA 2923

Source: Pinch 1994:128

Date: 14th c BC

Provenance: unknown

Size: unknown



Description: This golden ring has decorations of wire and grains. Two goddesses also appear on the ring. On the one side is a scorpion symbolising

Serqet, who was a scorpion goddess belonging to the group of healer deities associated with Isis. Although her appearance as a scorpion with the head of a woman was terrifying, she was a kindly goddess with her priests viewed as excellent doctors and magicians, especially at curing bites and stings of any kind (Gros de Beler 2004:89). On the other side is a frog, symbol of Heqet, who was one of the goddesses associated with birth.

3.3.1.8 Hathor amulet

British Museum, EA 60288

Source: www.thebritishmuseum.ac.uk/egypt

Date: Third Intermediate Period

Provenance: unknown

Size: 2.35 cm x 2.14 cm



Description: This amulet of blue-green faience is in the form of the double-faced Hathor, showing her in both her role as woman and also as cow. The amulet portrays her with plaits and cow's ears. Hathor head amulets were common from the 18th Dynasty till the end of the Dynastic period.

3.3.1.9 Mirror of Sat-Hathor-yunet

Cairo, Egyptian Museum JE 44920

Source: Hawass 2000:123

Date: Middle Kingdom

Provenance: El-Lahun

Size: Height 28 cm, width 15 cm



Description: Princess Sat-Hathor-Yunet was one of the daughters of Senusert the Second. The silver disk of the mirror is attached to an obsidian handle which is in the shape of an open papyrus topped by the head of Hathor. From the Middle Kingdom onwards, mirrors often took the form of a sun disc of

bronze or copper. Mirrors were not only functional objects, but had symbolic overtones and were often seen in tomb paintings, especially in the New Kingdom.

3.3.2 Spells and written references

As a variety of ritual paraphernalia have survived from Ancient Egypt, so have collections of magical spells recorded on papyrus. The general aim of these was to ward off danger and to prevent or cure illness and medical problems (Oakes and Gahlin 2002:441). The very words used when reciting these spells were considered to have power (El Mahdy 1991:139).

There was no clear distinction between magic and medicine and the two were seen as interrelated. About ten papyri with magico-medical and religious texts have survived where the use of remedies were combined with spells, magical rituals, amulets and other devices (Oakes and Gahlin 2002:441).

Collections of written spells were available, like the 'Spells for Mother and Child' in Papyrus 3027 in the Berlin collection. The chief concern of these spells was to keep babies and toddlers safe from illnesses and evil spirits, especially in the poorer classes (Strouhal 1997:24). There was a great tendency to rely heavily on magical spells, although physical cures were also known and used (Janssen and Janssen 1990:2).

3.3.2.1 Berlin 3027 spell 65: spell for mother and child

Source: Borghouts 1978:41-42

Date: Middle Kingdom or later

Description: This spell is an example of the spells in the Berlin collection. The main concern in these spells is to safeguard babies and toddlers against the ills that afflicted a large percentage of them, especially in the poorer classes.

'You will break out, you who have come in the darkness, who have entered stealthily – his nose turned backwards, his face averted – having failed in what he came for.

You will break out, you who have come in the darkness, who have entered stealthily – his nose turned backwards, his face averted – having failed in what he came for.

Have you come to kiss this child? I will not let you kiss it.

Have you come to hush it? I will not let you do your hushing with it.

Have you come to harm it? I will not let you harm it.

Have you come to take it away? I will not let you take it away from me.

I have ensured its protection against you with clover – that means, use of force –garlic which harms you - from honey sweet, but bitter to those there - , with the tail of an abdu-fish, with the jawbone of a black cow, with the dorsal part of a Nile-perch.'

3.3.2.2 Papyrus Mich inv. 6666 = PGM CXXX

Text:

*[ia]rbath agrammê fiblô chnêmeô
[a e]e êêê iiiii ooooo uuuuuu ôôôôôô[ô]
Lord Gods, heal Helena, daughter of [...]
from every illness and every shivering and [fever],
ephemeral, quotidian, tertian, quar[tan],
iarbath agrammê fiblô chnêmeô
aeéiouôduoiêea
eéiouôduoiêe
éiouôduoiê
iouôduoi
ouôduo
uôdu uuuuu
ôô*

Source: Daniel 1983:147-154

Date: 3rd century A.D

Provenance : unknown

Size: unknown

Description: This papyrus amulet, written in Greek, was folded, rolled, and carried by Helena in a small metallic tube, to protect her from the onslaught of fever.

3.3.2.3 From a letter from daughter to mother

'May Hathor gladden you for my sake.'

Source: Wente 1990:63

Date: 11th Dynasty

3.3.2.4 From a letter from woman Wel to scribe

'Every day I am calling upon every god and every goddess who is in the district of the West to keep you healthy...'

Source: Wente 1990:147

Date: 19th Dynasty

Chapter 4

Public religion as experienced by women of Egypt

This chapter aims to describe the religious rites and rituals attended to by non-royal women outside their homes, and observed by others around them.

4.1 Priestesses

4.1.1 Introduction

Of the many religious activities practised by the ancient Egyptians, involvement in temple and funerary rituals were the most important. Religious beliefs concerning the hereafter applied equally to men and women and the two genders shared the same funerary formulas (Fischer in Lesko 1989:18). As religion was such an important focus of Egyptian life at all class levels, attending on deities (particularly female deities) and the idea of active participation in religious life and temple service appealed to both women and men (Lesko 1987:19). Of the available female professions (although severely limited), priesthood gave a woman the highest professional status. A woman could increase her social status by actively participating in religious affairs (Watterson 1991:38).

4.1.2 Priestesses in the Old Kingdom

As early as the 4th dynasty (2500 BC), women were allowed to participate in the religious life of temples and shrines, especially in attending the two female deities Hathor and Neith (Watterson 1991:39). Women as priestesses were particularly associated with the cult of Hathor (cf. fig 2.1.1), although priestesses of Ptah were also known (Fischer in Lesko 1989:19). Among other male gods that had priestesses serving them were Thoth, who once had a High Priestess and Anubis (Oakes and Gahlin 2002:366). The goddesses Min

and Pakhet also had priestesses and the goddess Neith had no male priests at all (Nur al-Din 1995:125).

Many non-royal women served as priestesses or *khemet netjer*, literally meaning 'wife of the god'. These women served in the temple cults and their husbands were often also priests (Oakes and Gahlin 2002:366). There was no social or economic discrimination pertaining to the title of priestess, and even the leading priest of a cult centre could be female (Lesko 1987:19). The members of the lowest classes were originally excluded from certain positions, but later all classes were allowed to participate. Some women were married, some not, and they came from all sections of society: from the upper class women to the wives or daughters of artisans with no hereditary connection to the temple. Women participated in these cults for both religious and social reasons. The holding of a title brought about respect, added prestige, and was an indication of intellectual abilities (Watterson 1991:39).

Priestesses were responsible for carrying out the daily rituals and feasts of the goddess (Hawass 2000:163). An Old Kingdom document showed that male and female priests received the same remuneration (Nur al-Din 1995:129). Women office-bearers in temples were compensated for their time by receiving a part of the temple's donations. In addition to this they were also given a share of the offerings (cf. fig. 2.1.2) presented to the gods like incense, oil, bread, geese, meat and wine (Nur al-Din 1995:129). Women could even be priestesses in more than one temple concurrently (Lesko 1987:19). The women were sometimes assigned to certain posts by the king or his representatives, or by high priests. In some cases positions were secured through heritage or were bought (Nur al-Din 1995:129).

Amongst the titles of women priestesses throughout most of the Old Kingdom period was that of 'priestess of Hathor' (Robins 1993:142). A group called *mrt* priestesses appeared to have been charged specifically with managing the fields and estates of the goddess. These women thus held crucial responsibilities for the real estate, agricultural and financial security of the particular cult centre (Lesko 1987:19). Among the other duties of the

priestesses was that of purifier. A priestess was required to express an opinion about slaughtered animals by examining the blood and deciding whether the particular animal was pure or not (Nur al-Din 1995:125).

Priestesses had little influence outside their temple precincts, but played an important part in the worship of temple divinities. In addition to the presentation of offerings, they also sang hymns, chanted litanies and used sistra. One of their most important functions was to act as impersonators of goddesses. When priestesses of Hathor danced to her honour, they consciously imitated the graciousness and benevolence the goddess was famous for (Wattersson 1991:40). Hathor's dancing game was played with mirrors and clappers. The ball, representing the eye of the evil snake Apophis, was beaten by sticks (Keel 1972: Abb. 358 = fig. 4a) symbolising the rays of the sun (Hawass 2000:163).



Figure 4a

Another temple official was the 'musician priestess', a title that goes back to the 4th Dynasty. Her role was to play music in the presence of the gods, especially at the Sed-festival, where she participated. The priestess who bore that particular title was represented under the form of Meret, goddess of music (Nur al-Din 1995:79-80).

Women also frequently served as funerary or mortuary priests, such as the *hmt-k3* or 'servant of the spirit', and there was even a female overseer of priests (Fischer in Lesko 1989:19). These priestesses enjoyed certain material benefits in return for maintaining the provision of offerings at a tomb. These roles were often hereditary (Tyldesley 1994:133).

Some women were also priestesses to the king. This was one of the highest religious positions for ladies in the Old Kingdom and Middle Kingdom. Their duties included the presenting of offerings, burning of incense and the pouring

of water. These priestesses were required to purify themselves before they carried out the rituals (Nur al-Din 1995:128). Women were also among the list of individuals men who performed certain ceremonies for the king's jubilee, but the nature of these duties is not clear (Fischer in Lesko 1989:19).

4.1.3 The cult of Hathor

The importance of Hathor and the persuasiveness of her cult gave her a central position in Egyptian religion. Although of extreme importance for the divine recognition of the king, the tombs of many non-royals had inscriptions referring to the tomb as 'venerated before Hathor'. The goddess had many associations, but to women one of the most appealing would have been her role as nurturer of humankind. In this role she was linked to a cow, as milk was recognised as having life-sustaining nutrients. It was thus not surprising that hundreds of women were drawn to priestly sisterhood of the Hathor cult (Galvin in Lesko 1989:28-29).

Many women were priestesses of Hathor, and the cult of Hathor gradually spread to other areas from its origin at Memphis. The goddess had many local temples through the country, and she was the subject of hymns sung by dancers and harpists. A specific musician, or percussionist, associated with her was called *hnwt*, or '*she who beats the rhythm*'. At Thebes and Dendera the priestesses of Hathor carried the sistrum (Fischer in Lesko 1989:18).

In the period from the beginning of the Old Kingdom to the First Intermediate Period 226 priestesses of Hathor have been identified. During this time women predominated in her priesthood with priestly titles such as 'king's acquaintance', sole royal concubine' or 'pure one of Hathor' (Galvin in Lesko 1989:29). These titles were not hereditary, and a woman could be a priestess in more than one temple (Watterson 1991:42).

According to the system a woman with the title as 'priestess of Hathor, mistress of the Sycamores in all her places' had authority over all other 'priestesses of Hathor, mistress of the Sycamores', as she had authority in all Hathor cult centres. In a list containing names of 73 priestesses of Hathor,

only two names belonged to men, thus it can be concluded that in this period, priestly titles in Hathor temples belonged mostly to women. These titles were not hereditary (Galvin in Lesko 1989:29 - 30).

Inscriptions from the late Old Kingdom refer to the new position of the 'Inspector of Priests and Priestesses of Hathor'. The majority of women in the Hathor cult now served as cult songstresses – as music and dance were of such vital importance in the worship of the goddess – although some women were still responsible for fields and other property belonging to the cult places (Lesko 1989: 19).

4.1.4 Priestesses in the Middle Kingdom

By the First Intermediary Period, Egyptian religion held opportunities for commoners once only reserved for royalty. The mortuary texts from the royal pyramids were now written inside the coffin of anyone who could afford them – both men and women. Women now served in the cults of gods as well as goddesses in the capacity of priestesses and as directors of work (Lesko 1987:20)

During the Middle Kingdom non-royal women were still plentiful in the cult of Hathor, but the head of the temple staff serving the goddess was always male (Ward in Lesko 1989: 34). Women were now restricted to the lower levels of temple hierarchy and were more prominent in performing arts than in administrative or managerial positions (Ward in Lesko 1989:43). Amongst the titles of women serving in the temples in the Middle Kingdom were *wabet* priestesses, *wabet* being the feminine of the male title *wab* priest (Robins 1993:144). At Beni Hasan, wives of nobles who owned tombs there were high priestesses of the local goddess Pakhet (Watterson 1991:43).

4.1.5 Priestesses in the New Kingdom and later

Priestesses were the most common in the Old and Middle Kingdoms. In the New Kingdom these positions disappeared, and women rather served as singers and dancers (Nur al-Din 1995:129). Especially under the female pharaoh Hatshepsut, cult titles for women were numerous. One can thus basically conclude that almost every female citizen participated in some cult, whether old, young, rich or poor, but that female titles had a lesser status than before (Lesko 1987:20).

Although women still found employment in temples as junior permanent priests, they were now rather honorary temple servants for limited periods. This was most common in the shrines of goddesses such as Hathor, Isis, Neith, Satis, Sakhmet, Bastet or in funerary temples where they prepared sacrifices for the dead (Strouhal 1992:59). They still received payment for services. Among specialist priests were women singing and playing tambourines and stringed instruments (Strouhal 1992:233). A consequence of this wide participation was a lessening of the status of female priests, and men became dominant in the priesthood. This was in sharp contrast with the position of women during the Old Kingdom, especially in the cult of Hathor (Tyldesley 1994:41).

In the New Kingdom, the wife of the High Priest of Amun at Thebes was also referred to as the Chief Concubine of Amun-Re or *duat netjer*. This title, also developed alongside the title of God's Wife during the New Kingdom, was held by the daughter of the high priest of Amun. Her duties were to supervise and lead the female musicians of the temple, who, in theory, formed the harem of the god. She also had to ensure the smooth functioning of temple life. The title of 'concubine' was not literally implemented, and no sexual responsibilities or duties were requisite (Watterson 1991:43).

During the Third Intermediate Period (21st dynasty), being a priestess was seen as the acquisition of a position of great power and influence. Priestesses were divided in four groups, and each would have been on duty for one month of four. The leader of a group was called 'great one of the musicians', and was

usually the wife of an important man. Although men were to remain celibate while on duty, the same was not expected of women (Watterson 1991:43).

4.2 Musicians, singers and dancers

4.2.1 Women in temple rituals

As the gods and goddesses liked music, temples employed bands of musicians and choirs of singers to enhance the communication with the deities (Tyldesley 1994:127). Singers, dancers and musicians were intimately associated with temple cults, and also included in the register of temple personnel. They had both a religious and secular function (Ward in Lesko 1989:35). Groups of singers were often portrayed as accompanying processions and festivals, singing hymns to the gods and performing vigorous dances (Robins in Silverman 1997:86). The noise of cymbals, rattles or castanets was also thought to scare off hostile forces. Lively protective dances to banish dangerous spirits were a common feature of Egyptian culture. Such dances involved much clapping and stamping to drive away evil (Pinch 1994:82).

Women are sometimes shown in subsidiary temple scenes taking part in religious rituals, portrayed alongside male priests (Robins in Lesko 1989:108). More women were shown as serving in the temples as singers, musicians and dancers. Women were thus employed on a regular basis and were given frequent coaching. From the most talented women were selected the professional simulacra of the goddesses Isis and Nephtys in the oldest mystery plays, celebrating the death and resurrection of the god Osiris. Women also held senior temple offices as the overseers of the chorus, orchestra, dancers and temple treasures (Strouhal 1992:59).

Non-royal women of the Middle Kingdom played a subsidiary role. Although they were numerous in certain priesthoods, they were only present in the lower priestly grades, and women were not found in administrative or managerial posts. Women were still prominent in the performing arts, both in

the temples and private households, but again no evidence exists that they directed such activities (Ward in Lesko 1989:43).

In the New Kingdom women continued to play an important role in temple ritual as singers and musicians attached to the cults of all deities. They were often wives of priests in the same cult (Robins in Silverman 1997:86).

4.2.2 Songstresses, chantresses and dancers

Singers had a very important role in the temple rituals, where they were required to sing hymns and say prayers during feasts and ceremonies. Gods who had singers included Amun, Horus, Hapi, Khnum. Similarly, the goddesses Bastet, Hathor, Mut and Isis also had singers (Nur al-Din 1995:76). Groups of women known as *hnr* (inhabitants of the harem) or individually as *hnrt*, were attached to various cults, including funerary cults. Their principal activities were dancing and singing (Fischer in Lesko 1989:19).

Every temple had a number of priestesses attached to it as musician priestesses and chantresses (cf. fig. 2.2.7). The title of 'singer' of a god or goddess was one of the most popular religious positions in Ancient Egypt (cf. fig. 2.2.5). The temples of the gods included many female singers who belonged to different classes, from the mothers, wives and daughters of senior officials to the wives of weavers and artists (Nur al-Din 1995:76). Temple songstresses would often perform in groups of three or more, singing hymns in praise of a god (Manniche 1987:63). They clapped their hands, and chanted 'he comes who brings, he comes who brings happiness and good fortune' to welcome the king into the temple. They played instruments like harps and tambourines during services, or clicked their fingers and beat clappers (cf. fig. 2.2.12) made of bone or wood (Tyldesley 1994:40). They probably shook sistra to divide the phrases of recitation. The rattling sound of the sistra could be complemented by the rattling of heavy necklaces made of rows of faience beads (*menat*) (cf. fig. 2.2.4). These were not worn, but carried in the hands (Manniche 1987:63).

A higher rank was that of the official songstress of a deity (Nur al-Din 1995:76) and many women describe themselves as a 'songstress' in their monuments. Although this was an honorary temple position rather than a paid job, these ladies were still held in high regard (Tyldesley 1994:128). By the New Kingdom, *shemayet* (singer or chantress) was the most common title for women of the elite classes. At Thebes almost every woman of status had the title of 'chantress of Amun' (Robins in Silverman 1997:86). Many high-ranking women portrayed in tombs of the New Kingdom carry loop sistra, and some bear the title of 'chantress' of the particular deity (Robins in Lesko 1989:107). The singers were divided into priestal groups. There are references to individuals belonging to the second and fourth groups, thus there must have been at least four groups in the temples (Nur al-Din 1995:76).

During the New Kingdom and Late Period many names of performers of sacred music were recorded. To the title of 'songstress of the goddess' (*hsyt*), another more specific title (*smyt*) was added. Both titles referred to someone who could play an instrument in addition to singing, and was most frequently given to servants of Amun, then to servants of Hathor (Manniche 1987:124).

A section of the necropolis at Abydos was set apart for the songstresses of a number of deities (Osiris, Isis, Horus and Mut) and their stillborn children. It is not known why these women had a separate burial place. Only one songstress was accompanied by her husband (Manniche 1987:124). For musicians, chastity was thus not required (Manniche 1987:124).

4.2.3 Dancers and musicians

Women could choose dancing as a career. Dancing was a religious occupation before it also became a secular pursuit (Watterson 1991:46). Dances involving the use of mirrors were associated with Hathor, as the 'mirror' dance was performed in honour of the goddess (Manniche 1987:20).

A career could also be followed in music (cf. fig. 2.2.9), as music was the proper accompaniment to many religious ceremonies. Professional musicians

played a variety of instruments (Watterson 1991:49) and musicians who were attached to the cult of a god were held in high esteem. They were in the unique position of being able to communicate with the deity and, through the singing of hymns and playing of instruments, kept the image of the deity alive (Manniche 1987:124).

Two forms of the title of musician existed: *khenut* and *kheneet*. The first (*khenut*) referred only to musicians of the goddess Hathor in the Old Kingdom. In the Middle and New Kingdoms the title of *kheneet* was used for musicians of Amun and Hathor. The function of these musicians was to shake the sistrum and play instruments in feasts (Nur al-Din 1995:79).

It would seem as if women were musical directors in the Old Kingdom and First Intermediate Period, but in the Middle Kingdom, these roles were mostly occupied by men (Ward in Lesko 1989:35).

In the New Kingdom women were more often named as the musician of a particular deity. Their role would have been to perform musical accompaniment to temple rituals. In paintings and reliefs they are often portrayed with the sacred rattle or sistrum, which they shook in rhythm with their chanting. In charge of the musicians were often women of high social status with the title of 'superior of the musical troupe' (Hawass 2000:165).

A wall-painting in the tomb of Amenemhet at Thebes, dating from 1400 BC, shows three ladies celebrating a Feast of Hathor on the first day of the fourth month of the inundation season. It is labelled 'musicians of Amun at Karnak, musicians of great Ennead at Karnak, musicians of Hathor at Dendara' (Manniche 1987:64).

A bowl dedicated to 'Lord of Coptos' around 500 BC shows row of female musicians proceeding towards a shrine, playing tambourines, lyres and clappers (Manniche 1987:60). Another scene from Medamud, a Graeco-Roman temple 8 kilometers north of Thebes, shows a temple musician performing in honour of Hathor and three women playing the harp, drum and

lute, with a fourth one singing (Manniche 1987:60). Some women precede the group with flowers and the caption reads ‘...songstresses in full number adore the Golden Goddess and make music to the Golden Goddess: they never cease with their chanting’ (Manniche 1987:61-62).

The musician priestesses of Hathor impersonated the great cow-goddess and provided followers of her cult with the music of the sistra and the rattle of bead collars (*menit*) (Lesko 1987:20). In depictions, when a priest of Hathor makes an offering, a musician of Hathor often follows blowing the double pipe (Manniche 1987:62). The dwarf god Bes was also a musician (see fig. 3.1.4.1) and was often portrayed as dancing, playing a drum, tambourine, harp, lyre or oboe (Manniche 1987:57).

4.2.4 Instruments with religious significance

Some instruments have more specific sacred associations, such as the sistrum (cf. fig. 2.2.1- 2.2.8), which was, in shape, merely a rattle, but also a cult object in its own right (Manniche 1987:62). The symbolic design of the sistrum is instructive and was described by Plutarch as an “instrument that kept creation in perpetual motion”. The main significance of the instrument for Egyptians was to control the excessive rage and violence of wrathful deities and to drive away divine fury. Playing the sistrum in a temple cult was a highly skilled accomplishment, as specific rhythms had to be learnt by the temple musicians (Roberts 1995:57).

A sistrum was a strip of metal bent into a loop, with the ends bound into a handle (cf. fig. 2.2.3). Three rods were passed from one end of the loop to the other and then threaded with metal beads, which rattled when the sistrum was shaken. At festivals priestesses danced through the streets, shaking their *menit* necklaces and rattling the sistra (cf. fig. 2.2.8 and 2.2.9). This was a way of bestowing life, stability, health and happiness on the population in the name of the deity of the temple (Tyldesley 1994:40).

The sistrum appeared in two forms. The older one dates back to the Old Kingdom, and is referred to as the naos sistrum (cf. fig. 2.2.1). It was usually made from faience, with a straight papyrus-shaped handle with a frame on top in form of miniature chapel or naos. In the frame were bars of metal with metal discs (Manniche 1987:62). By the New Kingdom there were two types of sistrum: the naos sistrum and the loop sistrum. The loop or arched sistrum, often depicted in New Kingdom scenes, was made from metal and had an arched frame (Manniche 1987:63). In the Late Period other elements were sometimes added: cats, figures of Bes or serpents (Manniche 1987:63).

As Hathor was the 'mistress of music', she was often linked to the sistrum, which, in design, often had the head of Hathor on (cf. fig. 2.2.2) (Tyldesley 1994:129). From ancient times a part of rite to Hathor had involved pulling up stems of papyrus and shaking them before the goddess. These stems produced a rattling sound, and were a reminder of the myth of how Hathor, with her son, took refuge in the swamps of the Nile Delta. Carrying the sistrum was an act of devotion to Hathor and also a symbol of life and adoration (Manniche 1987:63). The sistrum represented papyrus reeds and later became a religious symbol of life itself. The playing of the sistrum was often accompanied by the rattling of *menit* bead necklaces (Tyldesley 1994:129). The sistrum was also seen in the hands of songstresses of other gods. One particular one has engraved on the outer surface 'songstress of Isis Henuttawy' (Manniche 1987:63).

The tambourine is also linked to women and their religious experiences (cf. fig. 2.2.10). Many New Kingdom illustrations suggest a link between the tambourine and the Hathor cult (Tyldesley 1994:129). The tambourine appears in religious scenes, especially scenes closely linked to ideas connected with birth, where it is extensively shown being played by goddesses in ceremonies surrounding birth. Tambourines are also seen in scenes with the figures of Isis and Hathor, and with dancing girls who may be impersonating Bes (Manniche 1987:65) and, at a more popular level, played directly before Bes by naked females (Manniche 1987:119). In the Graeco-Roman period the birth of a king was celebrated by playing tambourines. At

Dendara 29 identical ladies were clad in the costume of Hathor, beating tambourines (Manniche 1987:65).

Hand-shaped clappers of ivory or wood (fig. 2.2.12) were used in music and dance. In these, the hand is sometimes combined with the mask of Hathor who, along with some other goddesses linked to creativity, was given the epithet 'Hand of Atum'. This refers to the myth of Re-Atum copulating with his hand (Pinch 1994:84).

4.3 Mourners

4.3.1 Women as mourners

Women appear to have held a monopoly with regard to certain funerary rites. More importantly, every town had a group of women who organized themselves and were employed as professional mourners (Lesko 1987:20). On a stela from Deir el-Medina, two women both used 'mourner' as title, indicating that they saw it as their occupation (Robins 1993:164). Thus, the act of bewailing the deceased was not limited to women of the immediate family. The family was able to hire mourners who lamented the dead's virtues and who could enhance the status of the deceased by openly grieving at the funeral (cf. fig. 2.3.7) These mourners had to purify themselves four times a day for seven days (Nur al-Din 1995:83).

Many representations of the funeral procession to the tomb show the dead person's wife and groups of other women mourning the deceased (cf. figs. 2.3.1 and 2.3.2). A mourning dress of white or blue-grey linen was worn and the mourners followed the funeral procession in an ostentatious display of grief, consisting of loud wailing, the beating of their exposed breasts and the smearing of the body with dirt (Tyldesley 1994:132). In New Kingdom scenes the most conspicuous mourners are women, recognisable by their dishevelled hair, exposed breasts, open mouths and contorted postures (Taylor 2001:188).

Judging by tomb paintings, a career in mourning started early, as the tomb of Ramose at Thebes shows a very young naked girl in the midst of the mourners (cf. fig 2.3.3)

4.3.2 Mourners impersonating Isis and Nephtys

An important role in the funeral was also played by the two women chosen to impersonate the two *djeryt*, Isis and Nephtys. These women, positioned at either end of the bier, enacted the parts of Isis and Nephtys mourning their brother Osiris, whom the dead was often identified with (Silverman 1997:87). They wore an archaic form of the sheath dress and a short wig, and walked passively next to the bier (Tyldesley 1994:133).

The origins of these mourners go back to the legend of Osiris, where the goddesses Isis and Nephtys mourned his death (cf. fig. 2.3.4). In funerary ceremonies, the female mourners who impersonated the goddesses Isis and Nephtys were called 'great kite' and 'little kite'. This comes from the bird forms that the two goddesses assumed to find the body of Osiris after Seth dismembered him (Watterson 1991:40). The two mourners, *djeret* and *djerty*, as the symbols of two kites or in human shape, had a very important role in the funeral rites performed for the deceased, from the death to the burial. They also took part in the funeral procession guarding the front and back of the coffin (Nur al-Din 1995:80).

4 3.3 Other mourning rituals

The mourners with the titles of *theset* were female mourners in the 19th Dynasty. The roles of these mourners were to perform funeral dances at the entrance of the tomb while the deceased was buried. This position was only attained after several stages of attending as mourning, as it gave a person a particular authority in the necropolis (Nur al-Din 1995:83). As mourners women were also associated with the *sndt*, or 'acacia house' and performed funerary dances and gave offerings (Fischer in Lesko 1989:19).

4.4 Offerings and stelae

4.4.1 Women as donors

Although individual women participated in temple cults (cf. figs. 2.4.3.1 and 2.4.3.2) and served as priestesses and musicians, these rituals still served the state religion and did not fulfill personal spiritual needs (Robins 1993:157). Women without a particular position in the temple were still able to go to the temple outer courts to 'pour water' for the god or petition the deities in their prayers (Hawass 1997:166).

It was only after the First Intermediate Period that private people could set up votive statues in temples to forge a more personal bond between deity and individual. Ordinary women, however, were not eligible to erect statues, but were able and did erect votive stelae (Robins 1993:157) (cf. fig. 2.4.4.4). They were also able to make votive offerings, often figurines or objects made of clay or faience. Those who could afford it, erected stelae within the temple precinct, which guaranteed a spiritual presence before the god (Hawass 1997:166).

The donors on the votive stelae and votive cloths are shown in front of a god or goddess, usually praying or offering libations (cf. fig 2.4.1.3). This deity was often Hathor, especially if the woman was portrayed without a male intermediary. This may indicate that women had a more active part in private cults than tomb scenes reveal (Robins in Lesko 1989:108). Many votive offerings were recovered from shrines dedicated to Hathor at Deir el-Bahari and other sites. Although few votive offerings reveal the identity of dedicator, some include depictions of female donors (Robins in Silverman 1997:86).

4.4.2 Sites visited by donors

Many visits were made to temples and shrines to make votive offerings. Both men and women visited the outer areas of the temples to pray and to present votive offerings to the gods (Robins 1993:162). In the New Kingdom, women visited state temples while traveling, during major festivals, as an annual ritual and also during times of personal crisis. It was thought that the cult images in the large state temples held more power than the household shrine; thus, these deities were often petitioned as a last resort (Pinch 1993:355).

Each local community had its own small temples where men and women of quite humble backgrounds could hold office and make offerings. On the north side of Deir el Medina, small temples serving the community were found. These were dedicated to Amun and Hathor. Men and women of the town performed the priestly duties in their local cult (Hawass 1997:166). Small chapels for popular worship were found in both Thebes and Amarna, where devotees could practice their religious rituals. Other, older buildings could also have been re-used for newly popular deities (Sadek 1987:294).

Some shrines, such as the Hathor shrine at Deir el-Bahri, were designed to be more accessible, and were thus probably more popular for votive offerings (cf. fig. 2.4.2.1) (Pinch 1993:337). As most evidence of these offerings were found in the inner temples and not in the open forecourts, it can be concluded that the votive objects were probably collected by priests and taken to the inner sanctuaries for dedication (Pinch 1993:337).

4.4.3 The goddess Hathor

Hathor was of extreme importance for women, as she was the goddess of sexuality, fertility, pregnancy and childbirth. Women visited her shrines with gifts and petitions (Robins in Silverman 1997:86). She was worshipped by women throughout Egypt who journeyed to her shrines to leave dedications asking for children. At Deir el Bahri, thousands of votive objects (cf. fig. 2.4.2.2) were offered to invoke her procreative and nurturing powers (Hawass 1997:164). The shrines at Deir el-Bahri were close to the largest urban settlement in Egypt and must have had a wide range of visitors. The most

uncommon feature here was the great number of female donors (Pinch 1993:342).

Hathor as the goddess of the pleasurable side of procreation was often invoked by young lovers (Hawass 1997:164). A fragmentary statue of a man has an added text to women visitors to the temple. The man promises that, in return for offerings, he will intercede with the goddess on the women's behalf for 'happiness and a good or potent husband' (Robins in Silverman 1997:86).

As Lady of the Sycamore (fig. 2.4.4.5) she also offered shade and refreshment, especially to the spirits of the dead (Hawass 1997:164). In Egypt, the sycamore fig tree could grow at the edge of the desert, away from the river – as long as it had water. Thus, the sycamore fig was seen by Egyptians as a symbol portraying life in the midst of death. Hathor took on the identification of the tree-goddess who nourished the *ba*-souls of the dead in the afterlife. She was also the goddess of rebirth in the afterlife, and as mistress of the west, she was a beautiful woman that welcomed the dead (cf. fig. 2.4.4.4). It was believed that, as the living were born from women, so it could be hoped for possible rebirth through her (Hawass 1997:165).

4.4.4 Stelae and votive objects

Stelae were commemorative slabs, made of stone, but also of wood and other materials. They were used in various contexts, such as funerary stelae (cf. fig. 2.4.1.1). Some were set up in temples while others were carved on rocks (Taylor 2001:155).

From the Middle Kingdom on, the elite set up votive statues and stelae in the temple precincts. The purpose of these stelae was to link the donor with the deity of temple for all eternity. Both men and women put up votive stelae. These usually showed the donor offering to or adoring the deity to whom the particular stela was dedicated (Robins in Silverman 1997:86).

Although most surviving stelae still have men as dedicators, many women accompanied men as dedicators on the male stelae. Women who erected their own stelae usually did not include their husbands, as the owner of a stela took primary position in the decoration and husbands would not want to be shown as being in a secondary position (Robins 1993:159). Women were not barred from dedicating votive stelae to male deities, but they seemed to have preferred female ones like Hathor, Isis (cf. fig. 2.4.4.4), Mut or the snake goddesses Meresger and Renenutet (Robins 1993:160).

From the New Kingdom stelae were usually large and round-topped (cf. fig. 2.4.1.2), made of limestone and brightly painted (Taylor 2001:160). Many votive stelae from Deir el-Medina contain words which indicate that the dedicators had transgressed against a god or goddess. In these prayers they beg the deities for mercy (Robins 1993:160).

Many votive offerings were found at the cult centre of Hathor at Deir el-Bahri, on the west bank of the Nile at Thebes. Although most of the votive offerings were phalli and fertility figurines, some votive stelae were also found. Of these stelae, more were dedicated by women than men. Here were also found unusual votive offerings in the form of textiles painted with the donor and Hathor in one of her guises (cf. figs. 2.4.2.1 to 2.4.2.4). Of the 35 surviving textiles, 17 were dedicated solely by women. The men present on the other textiles also seem to be priests – indicating that these votive textiles held more significance for women (Robins 1993:161-162). It was not necessary to pledge expensive offerings, as there was more emphasis on the symbolic value of an object. These objects were also used in conjunction with, and not in place of, prayer and sacrifice (Pinch 1993:355).

Chapter 5

The household or private religion as experienced by women of Egypt

Many everyday religious rituals of ordinary Egyptians were centred round the cults of family, both past and present. Family members' honouring of their immediate ancestors was regarded as a very important religious requirement, and many private tombs had a chapel accessible above ground level to allow the living to visit or make offerings (Tyldesley 1994:255).

If the tomb was not accessible, reverence was paid at the family altar or shrine. This could be anything from a decorated niche or cupboard (as at Deir el-Medina) to a free-standing chapel in the garden of a large villa and usually held small sacred images, carvings or statues. These represented an amalgamation of gods, the king, and the souls of dead family members. The function of the family shrine was not only for the benefit of the departed, but also a place to worship local cult gods, deities and the king (Tyldesley 1994:255).

People were allowed to view the many different religious festivals, but were denied any participation in the actual events (Tyldesley 1994:249). Thus, the private magic rituals practised by women were usually applied in the semi-privacy of the home, unlike public rituals which took place in temples and streets. As the cycle of life and death was inextricably part of the Egyptian state of mind and frame of reference, it is evident that the personal lives of women focused on these areas. Fertility and birth, health, love and death were all areas women saw as of prime importance, and were the areas mostly touched upon in their religious lives.

5.1 Fertility and childbirth

Supernatural influences were regarded as most important controlling factors in the events of daily life (Nunn 1996:96). The dangerous mysteries associated with the creation of new life led to the development of the female-orientated domestic

cult centred around fertility, pregnancy and childbirth. The process of delivery was physically dangerous for both mother and child, but also brought the whole household into contact with the forces of creation outside human influence (Tyldesley 1994:257).

The Egyptians had rational beliefs regarding conception. This was evident from the medical papyri, which contained advice on stimulating it, as well as indicating methods of birth control, ways of stimulating abortion and other ways of preventing miscarriages (Janssen & Janssen 1990:1). If a woman could not conceive, pleas were made to the particular deities connected to childbirth (Hawass 2000:84).

Despite classifying it as medicine and knowing much of the physical process, there was a great reliance on purely magical spells (Janssen & Janssen 1990:2). The air of mystery and ignorance which surrounded conception and birth meant that women who wanted to fall pregnant were far more likely to turn to magic and religion than to physicians (Tyldesley 1994:71). Magic was used to assist women in labour and birth. This magic was not different from the magic used to wake the gods in their temples, as it was the magical force of *heka* which made all forms of creation possible (Davies and Friedman 1998:174). Various spells and charms were used as protection against miscarriage (Hawass 2000:86) and various remedies were used to speed up the delivery and ease the pain of childbirth (Hawass 2000:87).

In Egyptian religion, human fertility was the domain of goddesses. The goddess Isis and her son Horus were frequently invoked to ensure a safe and speedy delivery. The commendable care for her child Horus, combined with her magical skills, made Isis the ideal deity to be called upon for protection and cure. The patient was also often identified with Horus-the-child (Nunn 1996:98). The mother was identified with Isis and prayers to Isis were also recited during labour. One particular spell was for 'speeding up the childbirth of Isis'. Images of Isis, together with her son Horus, were often featured in household altars, or worn as amulets (cf. fig. 3.1.7.4) by women (Strouhal 1997:22). The goddess Isis was often shown in the Late Period as breast-feeding her son Horus. This marked the

transition of Isis to a more universal recognition as the mother goddess. Her cult was constantly important to women as she was perceived as the patroness of marriage, protector in childbirth and the inventor of weaving (Tyldesley 1994:253).

Another highly influential goddess was Hathor, mistress of love, music and also drunkenness. She had widespread popularity among women (Tyldesley 1994:253), and the mother to be was also identified with the goddess (Hawass 2000:87). She was depicted on many day-to-day female items (like mirrors) that were symbolically linked with both fertility and childbirth. Her role as nurturer or provider was emphasised by her identification with a cow, and she was often depicted as a cow-goddess or a lady with cow's ears and horns (Tyldesley 1994:253). As the guardian of women and marriage, she was believed by Egyptians to be present at every birth to ensure a positive result (e.g. fig. 3.1.5.1). Many votive offerings on sites connected with Hathor were found to be offerings or pleas for offspring (Quirke and Spencer 1992:83).

The same function was also performed by the goddess Isis, her sister Nephtys, and the affable Heket with the head of a frog. The harsh pains experienced in labour were thought to be eased by the breath of the god Amun in the guise of a cool breeze from the north (Strouhal 1997:19). The untimely death of children was often blamed on the goddess Seshat, deity of writing and arithmetic, who settled the length of one's life at the moment of one's birth. The Fates, or Seven Hathors, also influenced the child's destiny (Strouhal 1997:21).

Other deities associated with childbirth were Khnum, as moulder of the human form, and Renenutet, the snake goddess of fertility (Quirke and Spencer 1992:83), who was identified with the household and family life. She was also linked to both human and crop fertility, as she was the patron goddess of nursing and the harvest, and also protected the home from vermin (Tyldesley 1994:256). Renenutet is often shown suckling a divine or royal child and was revered as 'the nourisher of children'. She was also the 'Lady of Granaries'. Renenutet was honoured in shrines set up in granaries and in the fields at harvest time (Pinch 1994:119). Snakes were also closely linked with women, fertility and childbirth.

Isis was often shown as holding Horus under the protection of two snakes (Tyldesley 1994:257). Other support of a link between snakes and femininity is evident in New Kingdom female fertility figurines lying on beds (cf. fig. 3.1.2.9) decorated with red and black snakes (Tyldesley 1994:257).

Many objects were used to protect women in the act of giving birth. Ivory clappers, in the shape of hands (fig. 3.1.7.1) to frighten away evil spirits, have been found, as well as female figurines (cf. fig. 3.1.2.1) used to ensure the mother's safety and continued fertility (Davies and Friedman 1998:173).

5.1.1 Stelae

Many shrines in the temples and homes of the late Period had objects known as Horus *cippi*, or 'Horus on the crocodiles' stelae. They range in date from about the thirteenth century BC to the second century AD. Some were set up in temples. Others come from houses or tombs (Pinch 1994:100).

These *cippi* are usually in the form of statue-stelae into which the figure of Horus is carved in three dimensions (cf. fig. 3.1.1.2). Horus is shown as a naked human child, Horus-the-Child, with his characteristic side-lock, trampling on one or more crocodiles. He is often portrayed as gripping snakes, scorpions, and sometimes desert animals such as lions and oryxes. This shows he wields the power and cannot fall victim to the creatures (Quirke and Spencer 1992:83) symbolising his victory over evil forces. He was thus also known as Horus-the Saviour. A head of Bes often appears above the Horus figure to confer additional protection (Nunn 1996:107) and numerous protective deities may be incised on the stela (cf. fig. 3.1.1.1).

A *cippus* is normally inscribed with several anti-venom spells. The dual purpose of such statue-stelae was to repel actual poisonous animals and to cure those who had been bitten. They also functioned in a more general way against supernatural beings or demons in animal or reptile form. Divine statues of this type most commonly portray Isis, sometimes with Horus beside

her (Pinch 1994:100). Water would have been poured over the *cippi*, collected and then drunk as a cure.

5.1.2 Fertility figurines

The importance of fertility is shown by the many fertility figurines that have been found in both child and adult, male and female burials, and in the outer areas of family tombs throughout Egypt. Death was also seen as a passage to a new life, with the transition seen as a form of rebirth. The fertility figures probably also helped the dead to be reborn in the next world (Robins in Silverman 1997:85).

The figurines were also kept in house shrines where these images were used in the household cult. They may have been placed on the domestic altar to ensure conception and birth (Robins in Silverman 1997:85). Earlier in time, the major deities of the state-run temples were not so accessible, thus women prayed to the traditional deities of household shrines, such as Taweret and Hathor. Placing the figurines in the vicinity of a higher power, such as a deity or a transfigured spirit, charged them with *heka* to act as fertility charms (Pinch 1994:124).

Many votive objects were dedicated at temples or presented as offerings at the shrines of goddesses. In the second millennium BC they were dedicated in temples to Hathor, and in the first millennium BC to Isis. These figurines were presented to the goddesses with requests for children. Similar figurines were discovered in tombs or at other burial sites, where they were offered to the dead for assistance in conception. Often, the dead ancestors were also petitioned (Hawass 2000:84). To ensure pregnancy, women would often plead for help from the gods or the spirits of the dead. The dead were probably being asked to intercede with the great gods, rather than to make things happen through their own powers (Pinch 1994:124). One figurine (cf. fig. 3.1.2.3) includes the image of child and the words 'may a birth be granted to your daughter Seh', probably an appeal to her dead father to help the daughter conceive (Robins in Silverman 1997:85).

Such pleas were often inscribed on figurines of a naked woman holding a child. These figures, made of terracotta or limestone, are usually that of a naked woman lying on a plank or bed, sometimes with a male child beside the thigh or being suckled (cf. fig. 3.1.2.2 and 3.1.2.9). These figurines would have been placed in the outer areas of tombs. To reinforce the request, the figurine was in the form of the desired outcome — a young mother or nurse with a thriving child. These 'fertility figurines', which were used at most periods of Egyptian history, were made in stone, pottery, faience (cf. fig. 3.1.2.1) or wood. Their purpose was to ensure a successful sex life, culminating in the birth of healthy children (Pinch 1994:98). The baby may be female or male, since children of both sexes were desired to make up the ideal Egyptian family (Pinch 1994:124).

On these figurines, little attention was paid to the breasts and faces (cf. fig. 3.1.2.8) and more to the hips and buttocks, with special emphasis on the genitalia and pubic triangle (Watterson 1991:86). These women were often shown as wearing a hip girdle with the pubic triangle marked (cf. fig. 3.1.2.4). Some figurines wore amuletic jewellery such as cowrie-shell girdles (cf. fig. 3.1.2.5) and Horus falcon or crescent moon pendants. Some figures also display amuletic tattoos or body paintings. A minority have brightly patterned dresses of the kind worn by priestesses and dancers who served the cult of Hathor. The genitals may be shown below the dress to emphasize the sexuality of these figures (Pinch 1994:124). In some examples of the second millennium BC, the lower legs are omitted (cf. fig. 3.1.2.5), possibly because it was thought important to include only the parts of the body needed for the conception and rearing of children or, alternatively, to keep these figurines from absconding! The woman sometimes suckles or holds a child, or is lying on a model bed with a baby beside her (cf. fig. 3.1.2.9 and 3.1.2.10).

Rather than being connected to a deity, cowrie shells served as 'health amulets' or amulets of protection for women, due to their resemblance to the genitalia of women. Women from all levels of society wore these amulets strung as girdles. These included dancers, women anticipating conception, pregnant women and women in labour. The cowrie shell girdle is also seen on women depicted on 'birth arbour ostraca' and worn by female fertility figures.

Certain figurines called 'paddle dolls' were originally thought to be toys, but were later identified as being connected with fertility and rebirth (cf. fig. 3.1.2.8). Some had wigs made up of strands of beads that could be shaken while holding the body as a handle (cf. fig. 3.1.2.7). These figurines were intended to stimulate all aspects of fertility, and appeared in burial sites to impose a continuation of these functions in the netherworld (Janssen & Janssen 1990:7).

There were also other figures with the magical purpose of warding off complications during pregnancy and preventing still births. Alabaster vases in the shape of naked pregnant women were found, as well as jugs in the form of pregnant women, kneeling with their arms across their laps (cf. fig. 3.1.3.3).

Another piece of evidence that magical practices were customary is the discovery in a 'cupboard' at Amarna of a small limestone stela with a woman and her daughter worshipping Taweret, a terracotta female with a typical hairstyle and prominent breasts, and two painted pottery beds. All four objects refer to childbirth and were possibly used and then stored for another time (Janssen & Janssen 1990:10).

5.1.3 Vessels

Pregnant women massaged themselves with oil against stretch marks and to ease the pain of birth. During the 18th Dynasty this liquid was sometimes stored in special anthropomorphous containers. These took the form of naked, childbearing figures, standing or squatting (Janssen & Janssen 1990:3) (cf. fig. 3.1.3.3 and 3.1.3.4). The figures were often shown as rubbing their distended abdomens with both hands (cf. fig. 3.1.3.2). There was also a lack of genitalia (Janssen & Janssen 1990:3).

Various concoctions were supposed to help along the mother's milk supply. Pottery jars, in the shape of a kneeling woman holding her breast, could have been a vessel for holding milk. The milk also had medicinal properties if the child was male. The milk of the mother of a son was used as general ingredient in medical prescriptions and protective spells. It was stored in special mother-and-

child-shaped pottery containers. Such milk could be equated with the milk of the divine mother. In myth, the divine mother can be Isis or Hathor (Pinch 1994:82). The milk was then seen as a potent ingredient in remedies for intestinal complaints, infant's colds and sleeplessness (Hawass 2000:89). It was described by the deity Isis as 'the curing liquid that is in my breast' (Janssen & Janssen 1990:19) and stored in little jugs shaped like the kneeling Isis holding Horus to her bosom (cf. fig. 3.1.3.1). The milk was often used to treat intestinal complaints, colds and eye infections. The effect of the treatment was reinforced by spells, such as 'Flow out daughter of all colds, who breakest bones, gripst the skull and dost painfully molest the seven openings of the head! O companion of Ra, give honour to Thoth! Behold, I bring thee thy medicine, thine own saving potion, the milk of a woman who gave birth to a he-child...' Sometimes seeds and crushed papyrus stems were added to the milk, as it was supposed to make a child sleep (Strouhal 1997:22). Women who wanted to find out whether they could conceive drank the milk of a woman who had borne a son. If they vomited, they were or would become pregnant (Pinch 1994:82).

If a mother was short of milk, magical remedies were again suggested or incantations said: 'O thou who livest on the water, hasten to the Judge in his divine abode, to Sekhmet who walks behind him, and to Isis, saying "bring her this milk" '. There was possibly a magical purpose in the popular ceramic jugs depicting the nursing mother squeezing her breast, or it could just have been a storage vessel for holding extra milk. Another example of sympathetic magic was the hollow female figures into which milk could be poured. The milk then ran out through holes in the nipples (Strouhal 1997:22).

The faces and breasts of these figurines often showed obvious resemblances to the deity Taweret, and were normally made of calcite, a substance believed to possess additional magic force (Janssen & Janssen 1990:4). Another vessel was shaped like a goddess with a hole in the nipple through which milk flowed when poured into the vessel. At Saqqara a faience statue of Taweret was found from whose right breast milk emerged when the liquid was poured in through the mouth. Strange hollow horn objects with the head of Hathor were also found and could possibly have been vessels for sucking milk (Strouhal 1997:24).

5.1.4 Bes and Taweret

It seems from evidence found at Deir el-Medina that each house had its own domestic shrine, often housed in a small niche or alcove in the front room of the house, devoted to the household cult. This area was dedicated to the worship of the domestic deities Bes and Taweret and a concern for the continuity of the family line through the fertility of its women (Robins in Silverman 1997:84). A simplified version of the offering ceremony took place at certain times of the month or even each morning, when prayers were said, and food offered to the statue in the niche (Hawass 2000:89).

From the Middle Kingdom, the Egyptians tried to attract the attention of demigods within their houses. The figure of Bes became prevalent, as they believed it would bring luck and good humour and might divert anger and sadness. Taweret, again, would help women to conceive or survive childbirth. These two figures were more talismans than deities (El Mahdy 1991:140).

Bes and Taweret were often portrayed with fierce expressions and carrying knives or the hieroglyph for 'protection' or 'life'. Their images often appear on household objects, such as chairs, beds and cosmetics jars (cf. fig. 3.1.4.2). Numerous amulets of these two deities were also discovered. These were probably worn by women to protect them during pregnancy and labour. Houses also contained wall decorations relating to childbirth (Robins in Silverman 1997:85).

Bes was more a spirit of benevolent demon than a proper deity, but as he was created by and for the people, he was extremely popular in Egyptian homes. Bes was the expedient name for nearly a dozen different gods originally represented in identical ways, but eventually amalgamated into one. These included Aha, the fighter, and Hayet or Tetetenu who safeguarded women in labour as well as children (Davies and Friedman 1998:170). He was represented as a bearded and misshapen dwarf with crooked legs, and his expression ranged from amiable

to fierce. He was supposed to drive malevolent spirits and influences away by dancing (cf. fig. 3.1.4.1) and grimacing (Gros de Beler 2004:28).

The grotesque dwarf-god Bes was supposed to vanquish any demons assailing the mother and infant. Midwives would place a magic ivory knife (cf. fig. 3.1.6.1) on the belly of the mother. These knives were shaped in a crescent and decorated with the carvings of deities, along with snakes, lions, crocodiles, fabulous beasts and devils (Strouhal 1997:19). Images of Bes were carved on headrests of beds, furniture legs (cf. fig. 3.1.4.3) and mirrors. This supposedly served to keep demons away throughout the house. Bes amulets were often worn around the neck for constant protection (Davies and Friedman 1998:170).

At Saqqara four rooms were found with brick benches along the walls, which were decorated with the god Bes. Over thirty phallic figures were also recovered. These 'Bes chambers' would either have sheltered lady inmates or were worship places for those who needed encouragement for reasons of procreation (Manniche 2001:35).

In one spell the dwarf Bes is summoned and sent by the sun-god Re:

*Come down, placenta, come down, come down! I am Horus who
Conjures in order that she who is giving birth becomes better
Than she was, as if she was already delivered Look,
Hathor will lay her hand on her with an amulet of health!
I am Horus who saves her!* (Janssen & Janssen 1990:9)

This was recited 4 times by the 'midwife' over a dwarf made of clay or another amulet in the form of Bes. This figure was then placed on her brow if the woman was in difficult labour (Janssen & Janssen 1990:9). It is quite likely that Bes amulets were obtainable from the Hathor temple at Dendera (cf. fig. 3.1.4.4). Large quantities of votive objects were manufactured there for dedication (Pinch 1994:129).

The chief deity of women in childbirth and breast-feeding was the goddess Ipet-Taweret, depicted as a pregnant hippopotamus standing on her hind feet (cf. fig. 3.1.4.5) and carrying the magic knife of the knot of Isis (*tyet*). Her pregnant form (cf. fig. 3.1.4.6 and 3.1.4.7) and pendulous human breasts showed her

connection to childbirth (Davies and Friedman 1998:171). The goddess Taweret also sometimes had the head of a crocodile and the feet of a lion (Hawass 2000:88).

The most popular charms and amulets (cf. fig. 3.1.4.8) associated with childbirth were of the deity Taweret. Although strange at first glance, one should not underestimate her power, as even today, the hippopotamus kills more people in Africa than the seemingly more dangerous lions and snakes (Tyldesley 1994:258).

As medicine was of little help, women, as expected, turned to the consolation of superstition and magic ritual to ward off evil and assist in labour. A small collection of private votive material discovered in a 'cupboard' in Amarna contains a stela showing a girl and a woman worshipping Taweret (Tyldesley 1994:257). There were also two broken female figurines and two model beds.

5.1.5 Birth and its depictions

The duration of a pregnancy was roughly familiar from experience (Janssen & Janssen 1990:4). Birth was a dangerous event, and was therefore surrounded by an atmosphere of magical superstition (Janssen & Janssen 1990:9). The actual day of birth was seen as a joyous, but dangerous occasion, as demons were conspiring to cause harm to the mother and child. The deities had to use all their protective powers to prevent this from happening (Davies and Friedman 1998:169).

To prevent demons from overrunning the family house, the mother-to-be retired to a secluded or special place until two weeks after birth (Davies and Friedman 1998:169). These specially constructed 'Houses of Birth', or *mammisi*, were shrines to celebrate the birth of a god and were often outside, hung with vines and bowers. Such a 'birth pavilion' was perhaps found depicted in a New Kingdom wall painting at Deir el-Medina and Amarna, and painted *ostraca* show women suckling children in an airy pavilion whose columns are wreathed with columbine or bryony (Pinch 1994:127). An *ostrakon* from Deir el Medina (cf. fig. 3.1.5.2) show a fairly reliable picture of a pavilion with papyrus stalks as columns, covered with

convolvulus tendrils. There are garlands on the walls, and the whole structure was clearly erected specifically for birth, on a roof or in a garden (Janssen & Janssen 1990:4).

Many urban Egyptians will not have had the space to construct a garden pavilion, so part of the house had to be set aside for women and children. Some of the houses in the workmen's village at el-Amarna had an upper room decorated with protective figures of Bes and Taweret. In the artisans' village at Deir el-Medina, many houses had a room with a bed-shaped 'altar' and wall paintings showing naked women, Bes and Taweret (Pinch 1994:127).

An enclosed platform was often used, because of the crowded living conditions. This platform or 'birth box' was a rectangular construction of mud brick, partially or fully enclosed with an opening on the long side. The box was approached by steps and was often plastered and painted with the images of the deities Bes and Taweret (Davies and Friedman 1998:170). At Deir el Medina low walls of a kind of platform can still be seen in a front room (Janssen & Janssen 1990:6). Less wealthy women were usually confined to a normal room in the house, where wall paintings depicted Bes and Taweret.

Wall paintings and *ostraca* recovered at Amarna and Deir el Medina depict snakes together with a dancing Bes figures, Taweret and foliage. It may be a literal depiction of the birth bower, or a representation intended to protect the mother and child. Again it underlines how important childbirth was to a community as a whole (Tyldesley 1994:257).

The expectant mother was probably naked except for her protective amulets. Her hair might be bound up in the way depicted on some fertility figurines and birth arbour *ostraca*. Like the figurines, the *ostraca* were probably intended to promote a successful birth by showing the image of the desired 'happy event'. Many of the figurines have a cone of scented fat surmounting the hair. The application of such a cone seems to be mentioned in a birth spell of around the sixteenth century BC (Pinch 1994:127). In one depiction, the mother suckling the baby is naked (cf. fig. 3.1.5.2), wearing only a collar and girdle, with a conspicuous headdress and

bunches of hair on both sides of her head. It has been surmised that the hair of a woman in labour was initially tightly bound and later loosened in sympathetic magic to accelerate birth (Janssen & Janssen 1990:7).

All items associated with childbirth developed special ritual significance and became endowed with particular magical powers. Particular furniture would have been placed in the pavilion, with most births taking place with the woman squatting on bricks.

The woman in labour kneeled or squatted on birth bricks (cf. fig. 3.1.5.1) and was assisted during labour by some elderly female relations, one grasping behind and one kneeling in front (Janssen & Janssen 1990:6, cf. Keel 1972: Abb 337 = fig. 5a). She was also attended to by midwives representing Isis, the embodiment of the good mother, and her sister Nephtys. The goddess Hathor, as fertility goddess, was also invited, as amulets from her sanctuary could prevent prolonged labour (Davies and Friedman 1998:171).

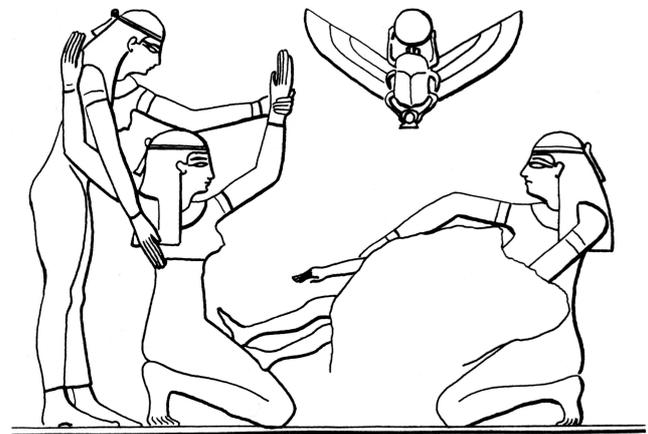


Fig. 5a

A specific spell to be said over the bricks was actually a hymn to the deity Meskhenet, the personification of the confinement chair portrayed in human form with the uterus of a cow on her head (Janssen & Janssen 1990:6). She was entrusted with the task of protecting the new-born infant. The birthing-bricks were well-guarded as the deity Thoth would write the future of the newborn child on them (Tyldesley 1994:259).

Egyptian midwives seem to have used both medical and magical methods to speed up labour. Medical remedies included swallowing a mixture of honey and fenugreek, or a vaginal suppository whose ingredients included incense, beer and fly dung. Spells of the second millennium BC for helping women in childbirth

involve a variety of magical techniques, most of them similar to those used for treating diseases and minor accidents. Identification with deities is often at the centre of these spells. The parturient woman is normally identified with either Isis or Hathor. In myth, Isis gave birth to a posthumous son after an unusually prolonged pregnancy. This made her an obvious model for women suffering from a long and difficult labour (Pinch 1994:128).

Spell 17 in the Book of the Dead suggests that the cutting of the umbilical cord had religious significance, and was also associated with ritual cleansing (Watterson 1991:91). The spell states 'when the navel-string has been cut, all ill which was on me has been removed' (Faulkner 1985:45). The placenta was linked in Egyptian thought with the concept of the *ka* or double. The umbilical cord and afterbirth both had magical associations, as they were thought to contain the spiritual alter ego of the child, and both the cord and the placenta seem to have been kept. They were in some instances dried and preserved to accompany the individual to the grave (Strouhal 1997:17). Dried human placenta was an ingredient in some fertility tests. The placenta was on occasion offered to the newborn; if the infant refused it, it was seen as a bad omen (Tyldesley 1994:74). Even today in Egypt, the afterbirth (or 'second child') is buried under the floor of the house. For a woman to conceive again, she will step over the buried placenta three or five or seven times (these viewed as lucky numbers) so that the spirit will enter body and become a child (Watterson 1991:91).

An infant was named immediately after its birth, mostly by the mother, as it was of prime importance to Egyptians that it will have a name even if it dies soon after (Tyldesley 1994:76). Care was taken to give a lucky name, as a name was seen as an essential part of a person (Watterson 1991: 92). Children were often named after some deity, such as 'Ra is good' or 'Thoth is powerful' (Strouhal 1997:22) or after the actual day of birth. If the birth was on a particular festival day, that could also be included in the name, e.g. Mutemwia ('Mut is in the bark') (Janssen & Janssen 1990:15). It was considered a good idea to include the name of the local god or goddess in the child's name, as the child was often seen as the gift of that particular deity (Tyldesley 1994:77).

In the Westcar Papyrus, the wife of a priest of Ra underwent post-natal cleansing for two weeks. This was probably the time women spent in the 'childbed arbour', as depicted on New Kingdom *ostraca*. A mother is also depicted sitting on bed with the legs carved to represent the god Bes with a baby (Strouhal 1997:19).

5.1.6 Wands

The apotropaic or magic wand looked like a boomerang, and obtained its sickle shape due to the fact that it was made of hippopotamus teeth. Some were also made of calcite, faience or ebony. About 150 examples are known, all from the Middle Kingdom to the 2nd Intermediate Period.

The wand typically has a flat and convex face. Inscribed on these wands were figures representing a mixture of weird and wonderful magical imagery. These included sun discs on legs, human-headed winged snakes, snake-breathing lions, griffins (cf. fig. 3.1.6.2) and snake-headed cheetahs. The wands also had more conventional images like frogs and crocodiles, as well as the deities Taweret and Bes (cf. fig. 3.1.6.1). They were also often decorated with amulets like the *sa* and *wadjet* eye, or ankh (Hawass 2000:89). The flat side also has inscriptions with the name of a juvenile boy or a mother (Janssen & Janssen 1990:9).

On these wands, the child was often identified with the young sun-god Ra, was threatened in his youth by monsters, battling chaos. As Ra is victorious every morning in order to achieve his own birth, so would the child be victorious with the use of the wand (Davies and Friedman 1998:173). As Ra survived, so, by inference, the new child will also be safe (Janssen & Janssen 1990:9).

These wands were used in ritual and laid either on the stomach of the pregnant woman or on the body of the baby. It could have been used by practitioners of magic or even nurses, to draw a circle of protection around the mother to be and later also the child (Quirke and Spencer 1992:83). Some wands have inscriptions, like 'protection by night, protection by day' (Hawass 2000:89). As

these wands were too powerful to be placed in the grave in intact form, they were broken in antiquity (cf. fig. 3.1.6.3 and 3.1.6.4) (Davies and Friedman 1998:173).

5.1.7 Magic paraphernalia and amulets

A collection of objects (cf. fig. 3.1.7.1) used in the practice of fertility magic was found in the tomb of a medical practitioner of the late Middle Kingdom near the Ramesseum at Thebes. A wooden box in the shaft contained literary and magicommedical papyri, including one devoted to spells for women and children. The wooden box also held a collection of amulets, figurines, and implements used to protect the mother and child (Davies and Friedman 1998:173). Close to the box was a statuette of a woman in a Bes mask holding snake wands (cf. fig. 3.1.7.3), with the actual snake staff of bronze discovered entangled in a mass of hair to strengthen the personal effect (Davies and Friedman 1998:173). The owner was more likely a priest or scribe who worked with female assistants of the type shown in the lion-masked statuette (Pinch 1994:131). In another kit, a life-size mask (cf. fig. 3.1.7.2) transformed the priestess or an attendant into a channel for the protective strength of Beset to give power to the spells on papyrus (Davies and Friedman 1998:173).

5.2 Death and the afterlife

In a world where the dead commanded a disproportionate amount of time from the living, very few women occupied prestigious tombs in their own right. Women were just not able to accumulate the wealth needed for such monuments (Tyldesley 1994:171) and were usually buried with their husbands or other male relatives.

In contrast, women did expect to experience the afterlife individually and not as the dependants of men. Women took the same way to the afterlife as did men and could only enter heaven if they were found 'true of voice'. After the Old Kingdom, women were also associated with the male god Osiris in death, just like men, although in the Late Period Hathor was sometimes used instead of Osiris (Graves-Brown 2000: 21).

The funeral rites of men and women were the same, but women were afforded similar, but less rich funerary equipment as men of equal status (Robins in Silverman 1997:87). Women were also subjected to the journey through the underworld and interrogation in the Osirian hall of judgement and the weighing of the heart against the feather of truth (cf. figs. 3.2.1.2 and 3.2.3.6). If they then were privileged enough to join the righteous dead, women also enjoyed the realms of the 'field of offerings' and 'field of reeds' – either alone or with their husbands (Hawass 2000:181).

This seems to embody the position of women in death in that no funerary beliefs specifically concerned women. Instead, male rituals were simply adapted by such methods as changing male pronouns in texts (Graves-Brown 2000:22).

Women also ritually participated in funerary cults. Rites to ensure the survival of the deceased in the next world were ideally carried out by the eldest son, but depictions on stelae suggest that female family members commonly play a part in these cults (Silverman 1997:87). As discussed earlier, women could specialize as the arrangers of funerals or be mortuary priestesses – in the Old Kingdom there were even instances of women as 'overseer of funerary priests' (Robins 1993:164). Women could also be *ka* servants – responsible for the upkeep of one or more tombs and regular offerings to the dead (Lesko 1987:20). They are portrayed as burning incense, pouring libations (cf. fig. 3.2.1.1) and dedicating offerings (Silverman 1997:87). Whereas women often supervised the process of dying, men usually took control when it came to the more formal burial rituals (Tyldesley 2000:262-263).

5.2.1 Funerary cloths and stelae

The most consistently important fittings in the tombs themselves were those acting as a focus for the funerary cults. These included stelae and offering tables, with one or more statues of the deceased. There was usually an offering table in front of the stela with food offerings and libations on the table.

Rectangular and round-topped varieties have been found (cf. fig. 3.2.1.4). The majority of stelae just have the name of the owner in hieroglyphs, with sometimes a figure of the deceased. Later a figure of the deceased was portrayed as seated before the table of offerings (Taylor 2001:155) (cf. fig. 3.2.1.3).

In the Old Kingdom a 'false door' was often included in the tomb. This was a sculptural representation of a doorway, which supposedly allowed the deceased to enter the chapel to receive the offerings and then return to the burial chamber (Taylor 2001:156).

Later, in the Middle Kingdom, stelae often had a subdivision of the surface into smaller rectangular compartments. Each of these was occupied by the figure of an individual related to the deceased. This practice continued into the 2nd Intermediate Period (Taylor 2001:160). Stelae depicting family ancestors were found in some Egyptian houses of the second millennium BC. A number of stelae from the village of Deir el-Medina show the dead of the community, both male and female, as 'able spirits of Ra' or *akhu*. These spirits had influence in the court of Osiris and travelled with the sun god in his bark (Pinch 1994:157). Another deity often worshipped by women was the Siro-Palestinian goddess Qedeshet (Cornelius 2004:124). On stelae from Deir-el Medina (cf. fig. 3.2.1.7), many people are shown worshipping her in the private context, and very often they are women.

Stelae and ancestral busts were also kept in the niches in the walls of houses and tombs. Their purpose was to appeal to the ancestors to ensure the continuity of the family line and also to act as mediators for them in the divine realm (Pinch 1994:158). In the New Kingdom stelae were usually large and round-topped made of limestone and brightly painted (cf. fig. 3.2.1.5). They were placed in pairs in the courtyard of a tomb. A new addition, or innovation, was the regular depiction of the deities Osiris, Anubis, Isis and Horus (Taylor 2001:161).

5.2.2 Coffins and mummies

Once the technique of mummification was developed, women were mummified in a similar way as men to have their bodies preserved for eternity (cf. fig. 3.2.2.1-3.2.2.3). Their bodies were also placed in coffins and the viscera in canopic jars (Robins 1993:166).

Coffins were usually made for men. Coffins of males and females were largely similar, although men had better quality coffins (cf. fig. 3.2.2.5). Excavations on the New Kingdom sites of Deir el-Medina show that for the élite, males tended to be buried with more jewellery and other gravegoods and in better coffins than females (Meskell 1999a).

There were also minor differences in coffin styles. Women in anthropoid coffins usually had open hands across their chests (cf. fig. 3.2.2.6) while men were represented with a clenched fist (Graves-Brown 2000:24).

In the Old Kingdom the word for the chest of a sarcophagus was *mwt* ('mother'). The goddess Nut was frequently identified with the mother of the deceased just as the deceased individual was identified with Osiris, the son of Nut, who was reborn (Graves-Brown 2000:26). The Pyramid Texts (616 d – f) state: 'You are given to your mother, Nut, in her identity of the coffin. She has gathered you up, in her identity of the sarcophagus. You are ascended to her, in her identity of the tomb.'

From the New Kingdom, there are quite a few depictions of the sky goddess Nut on the inside of coffin lids. She is thus shown as protecting the dead (cf. fig. 3.2.2.4 and 3.2.2.7). In the Pyramid texts, Hymns 427 – 435 are a series of praises to Nut, e.g. 'O my mother Nut, spread yourself over me, so that I may be placed among the imperishable stars and may never die' (Graves-Brown 2000:26).

The tomb as the place of rebirth led to the idea of tombs as female. Although the pyramid (*mr*) was masculine it was also sometimes referred to as 'my mistress'.

5.2.3 Funerary literature

Egyptian magic was both preventative and responsive. This means that magic was used to attempt the aversion of an undesirable situation as well as offer a solution to one. It was founded on a belief in the power of both spoken and the written word, and also in the use of amulets and ritual objects. Although used in temple cult, it was extensively used in everyday life, both performed on behalf of the dead (by priests and relatives in funeral rites) and for personal use of the dead in tombs, via texts, images and amulets (Taylor 2001:150). Funeral texts and literature thus were of great importance to the individual.

The main purpose of funerary texts was to enable the deceased to make a successful shift to the transfigured *akh* state. The deceased thus became equipped with the special knowledge it needed to attain the desired afterlife (Taylor 2001:193).

The oldest surviving funerary texts were the 'Pyramid Texts', exclusively the prerogative of the king and written in hieroglyphs on the inner walls of pyramids (Oakes and Gahlin 2002:400). With the introduction of the 'Coffin Texts' at the end of the Old Kingdom, there was a so-called 'democratization' of the afterlife, in that the funerary texts previously used by and for royalty, were now also used by private individuals – including women (cf. fig. 3.2.3.1 – 3.2.3.3). These texts were found on the surfaces of wooden coffins, and also on tomb walls, mummy masks and papyri (cf. fig. 3.2.3.4) (Taylor 2001:194).

By the New Kingdom the series of new texts, 'Spells for Going Forth by Day' with more than 200 spells, most traced back to the 'Pyramid Texts' and 'Coffin Texts', provided instructions and access to magical power to assist the deceased in the passage to the afterlife (cf. fig. 3.2.3.7). These spells were also mostly personal and extensively illustrated (Taylor 2001:196) and could belong to women as well as men (Robins 1993:166).

5.2.4 Other funerary equipment

Other objects found in tombs and graves also had religious meanings and purpose. Magical protection was provided in the tomb by means of amulets.

Some amulets were included in the mummy wrappings, while others were laid on the outer surface (Taylor 2001:202). The appropriate spells from the Book of the Dead were inscribed on an amulet (cf. fig. 3.2.4.1) called a 'heart-scarab', which was placed on the mummy's breast or within the wrappings of the mummy (Taylor 2001:38).

The Book of the Dead also included a spell to be inscribed on a full-sized or miniature headrest which would prevent the deceased from having his or her head taken away. In the late first millennium BC, the head of the mummy often rested on a circle of leather instead of a headrest (cf. fig. 3.2.4.3). These circles, which are known as *hypocephali* (literally 'that which is below the head'), were inscribed with protective and life-giving spells. They were decorated with images of deities of the type invoked in everyday magic (Pinch 1994:156).

Magic bricks (cf. fig. 3.2.4.2) were sometimes placed in niches in the burial chamber. Each brick supported an amulet and each had texts inscribed on it (Taylor 2001:207). The purpose of these was to ward off hostile forces from the four cardinal points and the text was part of spell 151 from the 'Book of the Dead' which contained the specifications for the bricks and what the figures were to be made of (Taylor 2001:208).

In the Middle Kingdom and into the New, fertility figurines were frequently placed in tombs. These were often naked females on beds, some with children, and were intended to promote fecundity. They were possibly intended to give sexual powers to the dead and were also symbolic of rebirth (Taylor 2001:209).

5.3 Other magic

5.3.1 Amulets

An amulet is generally defined as a powerful or protective object worn or carried on the person (Pinch 1994:105). Spells and amulets as well as herbal concoctions were used as protection against evil (Hawass 2000:85) and the Egyptians believed that the frequent repetition of these spells and the wearing of certain charms would have preventative results (Strouhal 1992:25).

Amulets were believed to give the owner or carrier magic protection or powers and their use dates back to the Pre-Dynastic period (cf. fig. 3.3.1.1) (Oakes and Gahlin 2002:454). Amulets have been found in the excavation of private houses and from temples or shrines where votive offerings were made to deities. This shows that amulets were believed to be vital, even by the poorer members of Egyptian society (Pinch 1994:104). The wearing and keeping of images of the gods or sacred symbols had power, thus wearing amulets in life was a way of seeking the protection of the gods (El Mahdy 1991:139). Amulets were probably always reinforced with spoken magic (Pinch 1994:105).

Amulets, although widely used by the living, were also used by the dead. The amulets found in humbler graves were probably those worn by the deceased in life. They were left with the deceased to go on helping and protecting him or her in the afterlife. These amulets were considered too personal to be passed on to surviving relatives (Pinch 1994:104).

Some amulets were used for temporary situations, like childbirth or illness, while others were for permanent protection against evil spirits. The latter ones were often in the form of jewellery (Pinch 1994:105). Both men and women wore broad collars, but women were more likely to wear amuletic bracelets and anklets than men. Earrings were also mainly for women and children (Pinch 1994:112). Thus, in Egypt, jewellery was worn not only for beauty, but also because it conveyed magical power and protection. They depended for their potency on their shape and colour, the material from which they were made, and in particular ritual acts and incantations associated with them which rendered them effective (Taylor 2001:201).

The main wearers of permanent amulets were women and children. Amulets were found more often in the burials of women and children than in those of adult men. This may be because women and children were thought to be more at risk from supernatural dangers. Many spells from the second millennium BC emphasize the danger of the dead taking possession of young children. Children seemed to need amulets more than adults, as they also were more at risk from

illnesses and diseases (Pinch 1994:106). Amulets and figurines were also used to obtain the love of a man or a woman and also to allow people to keep their virility in the hereafter (Manniche 2001:44). Demons were believed to be more dangerous at nighttime, as each sleep was also a type of descent into the underworld. Thus, in death, women and men both needed the protection of amulets, as the deceased was actually entering the realm of spirits and demons (Pinch 1994:106).

The appearance of amulets was manifold. Rare or strange objects were thought to contain *heka* (Pinch 1994:107). Manmade amulets were usually pendants. Some amulets were made in the form of symbols ensuring health, a long life or happiness, while others depicted the gods, animals (cf. fig. 3.3.1.6), plants, human body parts and ritual objects. Most of these amulets were intended to convey to the wearer a particular quality of the being or object portrayed (Strouhal 1992:25).

Amulets could also be natural objects, like shells or pebbles with particular shapes, rather than manmade objects. Cowrie shells used as amulets against the Evil Eye were popular in ancient Egypt (cf. fig. 3.3.1.4). Their shape resembles the female genitals as well as the eye. The Egyptians often strung cowries to make girdles, usually worn in the pelvic region to protect a woman's fertility (Pinch 1994:107). Other amulets were made of natural materials like herbs or animal parts, such as hairs or bone, wrapped up together in linen. Such amulets, although described in magico-medical texts, rarely survived from ancient times (Pinch 1994:108).

Some Egyptian amulets consisted simply of the names of divine beings. The divine names were written on linen or papyrus or, in later times, on thin sheets of metal or the leaves of certain plants. These were often worn as a temporary protection during a magical rite (Pinch 1994:111).

One of the most widely worn protective amulets was the amulet called the *wedjat* eye, from which one of the general words for amulet was derived (Andrews 1994:6-7). The deity Thoth was seen as the general donor of amulets for both the living and the dead. Thoth had restored the damaged lunar eye of Horus,

enabling it to be used as a symbol of health and wholeness. The eye of the sun, brought back from Nubia by Thoth, could also be shown as a *wedjat* eye. A *wedjat* eye amulet often combined these two ideas, thus having the healing power of the Horus eye, and the protective power of the Eye of Ra. (Pinch 1994:110). This amulet was worn by the living, and often appeared on rings and as an element of necklaces (cf fig. 3.3.1.5). A *wedjat* eye could also be drawn on linen or papyrus for temporary use. Thousands of examples in more permanent materials survive. It was also placed on the body of the deceased during the [mummification](#) process to protect the incision through which the internal organs were removed (Andrews 1994: 6-7).

[Djed pillars](#) were among the [amulets](#) most commonly placed on mummies. The pillars were associated with the god [Osiris](#) and were said to represent his backbone. Gold was sometimes used to make *djed* pillar amulets since it did not tarnish and could endure for eternity, but it was expensive. Turquoise, lapis lazuli and blue [faience](#) were more commonly used as green and blue were associated with regeneration (Taylor 2001:203).

The *tit* or *tyet* [amulet](#), associated with Isis, was one of several which were placed on the neck of the deceased at the time of burial. It first appeared on mummies in the mid-Eighteenth Dynasty. From then on it was considered vital. They were usually made of red jasper, as prescribed in the [Book of the Dead](#), though many examples were of other red materials such as glass or carnelian (Andrews 1994:44-45). Some were also made of green [faience](#) or glass as green was symbolic of regeneration. The *tyet* amulet symbolised the girdle of Isis which was always red, as it represented the blood of the goddess and was linked with childbirth (El Mahdy 1991:152). According to Spell 156 of the *Book of the Dead* the amulet bestowed the protection of Isis against 'whoever would commit a crime against him' (Andrews 1998:154).

The scarab was also popular, both on seals and funerary amulets, as the scarab was associated with the sun god and notion of rebirth. The scarab beetle was an image of Khepri, the sun as rekindled at dawn. Khepri embodied the continuous process of creation. Thousands of scarab amulets were produced and the scarab

remained powerful in magical texts up to the fourth century AD (Pinch 1994:109). The most important function of the scarab as amulet was to protect the heart of the deceased. A spell from the 'Book of the Dead' prescribed that the amulet had to be carved from green stone and mounted in gold (Taylor 2001:205). The heart scarab amulet prevented the heart from speaking out against the deceased.

Amulets became more and more popular during later periods of Egyptian rule. They were increasingly made of gold, silver and semi-precious stones, but also of glass and faience. Amulets of a god or goddess placed the wearer under the protection of that deity. Amulets also identified the wearer with the deity to endow him or her with the god's powers or attributes. Some of the gods or goddesses thus employed were Isis, Horus and Nephtys. These amulets were often little figures of protective deities or their symbols. Isis and Hathor (cf. fig. 3.3.1.2 and 3.3.1.8) were particularly popular amongst women, especially those with children. A whole series of charms could be strung together for more effect (Hawass 2000:122). As the pelvis was an area of danger for women, girdles containing amulets were popular (Pinch 1994:112)

Amulets of protective deities were often worn by mothers (cf. fig. 3.3.1.7). Spells and amulets were used to protect the newborn, who was identified with the child-god Horus. Other spells to drive out demons of illness were recited over amulets which were then placed around the neck of the child. One spell involved 41 beads, including one of gold (Hawass 2000:88). To guard the vulnerable child, amuletic charms were often placed around its neck. It is uncertain which ones were particularly for babies, but it is likely that the Horus-eye would have been used, as it safeguarded the wearer against the evil eye (Janssen and Janssen 1990:22).

Spells from everyday magic were also written down (cf. fig. 3.3.1.3) and worn at the neck as an amulet (Pinch 1994:111). These were tightly folded and rolled into tiny packets which were bound with flax and inserted into small cylindrical cases of wood, metal, even gold. These were also worn as pendants suspended on a cord around the child's neck. In the Middle Kingdom charm cases often had loose garnets or amulets inside (Janssen and Janssen 1990:22). A charm found

in the grave of a child was in the shape of a hollow clay ball, with scraps of paper, rags and a hairlock of the child in it (Strouhal 1992:25).

Various parts of a child's body were protected by being identified with those of the gods.

'The crown of your head is the crown of Ra, oh my sturdy child, the back of your neck is that of Osiris, your forehead is the forehead of Satis, ruler of Elephantine, your hair is the hair of Neith, your eyebrows are those of the Mistress of the East, your eyes are the eyes of the Lord of the Universe, your nose is the nose of the Teacher of the Gods, your ears are the ears of the Two Cobras, your forearms are those of the Falcon, one of your shoulders is the shoulder of Horus and the other belongs to Seth...'

These words were recited every morning as the mother was tying an amulet to the child's arm (Strouhal 1992:25).

Using divine decrees as amulets was peculiar to the late second and early first millennia BC. Decrees were issued in the name of gods who, when a child was born, were asked to declare its fate in life. The results of the oracles were recorded in writing and placed in an amulet case or bag to be worn. The children named in the decrees are more often female than male. This fits into the general pattern of women needing amulets more than men. (Pinch 1994:116)

5.3.2 Spells and written references

People were supposedly born healthy, with diseases and infirmity caused by evil spirits. They thus relied heavily on magical spells to banish these evil spirits and remove illnesses (Tyldesley 1994:32). Many Egyptian spells from a great variety of contexts have survived. These spells were written on tomb walls and coffins, amulets, papyrus, clay and stone (Pinch 1994:61).

The spells and magical collections were supposedly written by the gods, and many funerary and everyday magic were adapted from these books (Pinch 1994:63) and were divided into three classes. *Seshau* papyri contained treatments, alongside with a diagnosis, prognoses and treatment. *Pekhret* papyri

contained prescriptions with lists of ingredients and instructions for the preparation and the application of medicine. These medical treatments were often accompanied by magic formulas. *Ru papyri* contained these formulae or religious texts to be recited during treatment.

Most Egyptian spells had to be spoken or chanted aloud. The spells were divided into the rubric, or instruction for the magician, and the script, or words to be spoken. Many spells also contained cryptic words claiming to be the names of demons and gods (Pinch 1994:68). Mothers and children, who were more exposed to danger, could thus be protected by pleas to the deities and reciting the accompanying texts (Quirke and Spencer 1992:82). There were spells to release the child from the belly of its mother, to make protection for the child on the day of its birth, tests to determine whether the baby would live or die, and incantations to restore the health of the mother (Davies and Friedman 1998:173). Deities were invoked in order to prevent or cure diseases or attacks by dangerous animals. These incantations were directly addressed to the supposed demons of disease, commanding them to leave the body (Nunn 1996:96).

An example of this can be found in Papyrus Berlin (Berlin 3027, spell 65), seen in fig. 3.3.2.1. This spell is an example of the spells in the Berlin collection. The main concern in these spells is to safeguard babies and toddlers against the ills that afflicted a large percentage of them, especially in the poorer classes.

'You will break out, you who have come in the darkness, who have entered stealthily – his nose turned backwards, his face averted – having failed in what he came for.

You will break out, you who have come in the darkness, who have entered stealthily – his nose turned backwards, his face averted – having failed in what he came for.

Have you come to kiss this child? I will not let you kiss it.

Have you come to hush it? I will not let you do your hushing with it.

Have you come to harm it? I will not let you harm it.

Have you come to take it away? I will not let you take it away from me.

I have ensured its protection against you with clover – that means, use of force – garlic which harms you - from honey sweet, but bitter to those there – , with the tail of an abdu-fish, with the jawbone of a black cow, with the dorsal part of a Nile-perch.'

(Borghouts 1978: 41-42)

In the spell the demon is addressed directly, ('you who have come in the darkness') and commanded to leave the child ('you will break out'). A number of protective remedies used against the evil spirit, such as clover, garlic and various parts of animals are also mentioned.

Written magic, however, was also powerful. In hieroglyphs, the power of the image and the power of the word were virtually inseparable (Pinch 1994: 69). The fundamental principle of Egyptian magical practice was that the written word itself held the power to bring about the required results, and to bring what was written into material existence (Taylor 2001:97).

Spells were sometimes written on linen or papyrus and hung around the neck or tied to the afflicted part of the body. At times, magical signs were drawn on the body itself. The physical contact formed part of the protective magic (Pinch 1994:70). A following text (fig. 3.3.2.2) from the 3rd century AD was written in Greek on papyrus, folded, rolled and carried as an amulet by Helena in a small metallic tube, to protect her from the onslaught of fever.

Many texts, which survived on papyri, identified a mother and her child with the goddess Isis and her son Horus, drawing on myths in which Isis defended her son from perils such as disease and dangerous animals (Quirke and Spencer 1992:82). Evil deities and disease-demons were believed to bring about many diseases. If the cause of a disease was supernatural, it was logical to look to the supernatural for a cure. As deities were such an accepted part of daily life, invoking their help would often have been the first course of action (Nunn 1996:96).

Most of the ten or so surviving papyri contain a mixture of medical and magical remedies. These remedies are grouped together according to the type of complaint rather than according to the treatment methods (Pinch 1994:133). The magico-medical papyri contain pregnancy tests and remedies for impotence, sterility, miscarriage and difficult labour, as well as spells to promote milk supply and protect newborn babies. Other general concerns for the health of the mother are also included in these papyri. Papyrus Kahun, Papyrus Berlin and Papyrus Carlsberg all contain an astonishing series of tests for fertility, pregnancy and to establish the sex of an unborn child.

The magico-medical papyri contain pregnancy tests and remedies for impotence, sterility, miscarriage and difficult labour, as well as spells to promote milk supply and protect newborn babies. The threats to human fertility mentioned in the magico-medical papyri are of four kinds: natural causes, threats from deities and demons like Seth, often associated with miscarriage and abortion, threats from the dead and threats from ill-disposed living persons. A supernatural threat called for a response that invoked or manipulated supernatural powers. For problems which seem to be attributed to natural causes, a range of 'medical', often herbal options were available (Pinch 1994:123).

The medical papyri also describe the means to ascertain whether a woman is pregnant. Some of the suggested methods were medically sound, like the measuring of a pulse, observing the colour of the skin and eyes, or analysing a woman's inclination to vomit. Other, far more irrational, magical practices were also adopted to discern the presence and sex of an unborn child (Janssen & Janssen 1990:2). The following test for fertility is from Papyrus Leiden.

VERSO COL. V.

(1) A medicament to stop blood juice of 'Great Nile(?)' plant (2) together with beer; you make the woman drink it in the morning (3) before she has eaten; then it stops.

(4) The way to know it of a woman whether she is enceinte: you make the woman (5)pass her water on this herb as above again (6) in the evening; when

the morning comes and if you find the plant (7) scorched (?), she will not conceive; if you find it (8) flourishing, she will conceive.

(Griffith and Thompson: 1904)

This fertility test provides ingredients for a potion that has to be drunk by the woman. Following that, her urine, passed onto one of the plants used in the potion, will either cause the plant to die or flourish. This will be an indication of her ability to conceive.

Of three Ramesside Papyri, one contained spells and prescriptions for pregnant women and newborn children (Nunn 1996:96). The Berlin Papyrus was concerned with childbirth and contraception, the protection of newborn infants and fertility tests (Watterson 1991:76). These reflect the desire of every Egyptian woman for the god-given gift of children. The main concern of the spells was to keep babies and toddlers safe against harm, especially amongst the poorer classes (Strouhal 1997:24).

Some of the medical papyri describe gynaecological examinations of women, something which would have been objectionable in most ancient cultures. There were instances of female physicians in the 3rd millennium BC and male physicians also used female assistants (Pinch 1994:140). Typical female modesty when having to endure physical examination probably brought about a certain reluctance for women to subject themselves to some of the more peculiar treatments suggested in some of the gynaecological papyri (Nunn 1996:191). Some treatments prescribed recitations although no words were mentioned. A women suffering from irregular periods were to say certain words while taking a herbal remedy. These words would probably have been taught to her by a doctor (Pinch 1994:135). The following female remedies for 'curing water' also appear in Papyrus Leiden.

VERSO COL. VI.

(1) A remedy to cure water in a woman. The first remedy; salt and oil; pound; apply to the vulva (?) daily (?) two days.

(2) After the two days, the second remedy: white lead, you pound it with a little pigment from an oil-dealer (3) very carefully; you put true oil of fine quality to it,

*together with an egg and pound them; you take a strip (4) of linen cloth which is fine-spun(?); you dip it in this medicament. She must bathe in the bath, she must (5) wash in good wine; you put the medicated strip on her; you draw(?) it in (and (6) out of her vulva for a short time, like the phallus of a man, until the medicament (7) spreads (?), you remove it, you leave her till evening; when evening comes, you dip a bandage (?) in genuine honey, (8) you put it on her until morning, for three, otherwise said four, days.
until morning, for three, otherwise said four, days.*

VERSO COL VII.

(1) Another to follow it: juice of a cucumber which has been rubbed down, one ladleful (?), water of the ears of a kle-animal, one ladleful (?) like the ladle (2) of a (wine-)cup; you add a uteh-measure of good wine to them; and she drinks it at midday, before she has (3) eaten anything whatever, after bathing in the bath, which she has done before; when evening comes, you put the rag (?) (4) with honey on her as above for seven days.

Another to follow : you take a new dish; you put (5) ten uteh-measures of old sweet wine on it; you put a half kite of fresh rue on it from (6) dawn till midday; let her bathe in the bath, and come out and drink it. When it is evening (7) you put honey on her as above again for seven days.

(Griffith and Thompson: 1904)

Magical spells protected houses and their inhabitants from the unwelcome attentions of the spirits of the dead. These spirits were especially potent at night, and were believed to bring various illnesses and bad dreams (Taylor 2001:44). At Deir el-Medina, wise women or 'knowing ones' were probably skilled in identifying possession by spirits. Magico-medical texts often describe ailments caused by ghosts or demons, although they do not explain the diagnosis. These women probably administered rituals of exorcism to drive out these malevolent spirits (Pinch 1994:140).

The patron goddess of lovers was also Hathor. A girl would often beg the goddess to appoint her as her lover's bride, while a boy would implore her to grant him the girl of his choice (Strouhal 1997:41). In many love poems lovesick

youngsters appeal to the goddess Hathor to grant them their beloved. The favour of this goddess was obtained by prayer and offerings in the conventional religious manner (cf. 3.3.2.3), but magic is also mentioned. In the poems, the power of love is compared with the power of *heka* (Pinch 1994:124).

From ancient times magic was also applied in erotic matters, and any picture possessed a magic force at work both in the daily life and in the afterlife. A papyrus written around 1000 BC includes recipes for love potions, although it is very fragmentary (Manniche 2001:100-103). Love charms were more concerned with giving birth than seduction (Quirke and Spencer 1992:83). In a papyrus from 1700 BC (Papyrus Ebers 475), a woman supposedly used a particular remedy to avenge a rival. Found after prescriptions for excess hair, this 'remedy to make hair fall out' asked for 'burnt lotus leaves to be steeped in oil and placed on the head of a hated woman' (Manniche 2001:105).

Dream books were often used to provide answers to the particular dreams dreamt by both men and women and two examples of Egyptian dream books (one for men and a separate one for women) did survive. Papyrus Carlsberg XIII, currently in Copenhagen, includes the dream book for women, which was written in the 2nd century AD, although the tradition went much further back in time. The papyrus also contains a number of interesting erotic combinations.

Chapter 6

Conclusion

In looking at religion in Ancient Egypt, we have the most evidence for the state religion. The important archaeological sites were almost all the focus of religious activities, such as cult temples or mortuary temples. From that, it can be deduced that religion formed a crucial and fundamental part of the life of every Egyptian, from the peasants, or lower classes, to the king or pharaoh. This public religious practice of the Egyptian religion revolved, to a large extent, around the king and his relationship with the deities, as this was of great essence in upholding the divine order of the universe. As seen in the festivals and rituals depicted in tombs and temples, he formed the link between the divine and the mortal (Graves-Brown 2000:20).

Although the ordinary Egyptians would have had some part to play in these rituals, especially on official holidays, it seems that there was also another set of religious practices. The many deities were worshipped and invoked to ensure their blessings in everyday situations. These popular beliefs were focused more on the home and ancestor worship, and also included magical rituals, both for the living and the dead (Graves-Brown 2000:24). These rituals touched on events and occurrences such as childbirth, the securing of a good harvest, illness, good fortune and even daily prayers.

While the men definitely held the power in the official state religion, committed religious practices in the home were perhaps associated more with women. This component of Egyptian religion is less documented and not as well-known, as it possibly also varied from region to region and time to time. The state religion, however, was well-documented, but was primarily a religion practiced on behalf of the people, not by them (Sadek 1987:1 – 2).

In Ancient Egypt, the state religion was very inaccessible and removed from the daily lives of the ordinary women. The men's religious needs were satisfied by the state religions and participation, as the tradition was male-

oriented and commanded by men, but women, who were excluded from full participation in all the religious rites and festivities, could not always understand the system of beliefs as followed by their men. These women thus had to turn elsewhere to find spiritual fulfillment. This was done by developing their own minor traditions without feeling deviant from the major state religion. In this personal religion, the focus was at home, at minor shrines and at the outer fringes of great temples (Sadek 1987:2).

These smaller regional cults thrived, as these 'local versions' of the gods were usually less specialized, and more accessible than their counterparts in the state pantheon, and were more associated with nature (Tyldesley 1994:244-247). Although not always acknowledged by the state, magic and superstition were seen as a vital part of the daily lives of the Egyptians, and was not an alternative to the state religion. State and popular religion were interconnected.

Women did take part in religious ritual, often thought to be the domain of men. As in many ancient societies, the public world was that of men, and men were the educated and enlightened ones. The knowledge and participation of women in a men's world were often overlooked and disregarded, especially in the documentation thereof. In Egypt, public life was the men's sphere of influence, but it seems that women had the greater responsibility in domestic affairs.

Although not nearly as involved as men, women did serve in many capacities in the religious realm. Although most women were avid spectators of processions and festivities, they did also take part in temple rituals (Robins 1993:142). Many women, especially those married to priests, served as priestesses of deities (especially the goddesses Hathor and Neith), and brought offerings and poured libations (cf. fig. 2.1.2). Some women were very low in the priestly hierarchy, but some individual women had quite pronounced positions in the temples of certain deities, such as the 'God's Wife of Amun' and 'Divine Adoratrice' (Graves-Brown 2000:31).

Most festivities in honour of the different deities included music and dancing. Here female musicians and dancers played a very important role. Many women danced and sang at festivals and during other religious practices and also made music, playing instruments (cf. fig. 2.2.8) like harps, tambourines (cf. fig. 2.2.10) and clappers (cf. fig. 2.2.12). Musicians accompanied temple rites, often by shaking *sistra* (cf. figs. 2.2.1 – 2.2.3, 2.2.5 and 2.2.7) and rattling their *menit* necklaces (cf. fig. 2.2.4), and also walked in the processions (cf. fig. 2.2.8) that took place to and from temples, whereas the dancers also performed in the temples themselves (cf. fig. 2.2.9).

Women also fulfilled an important role as professional mourners at funerals. They tore at their hair, wept and wailed, and threw dirt over themselves (cf. fig. 2.3.1 and 2.3.3). Two of the female mourners often impersonated the goddesses Isis and Nephtys. They also performed rituals in the tomb-chapels of the deceased (cf. fig. 2.4.3.1).

Ordinary people often brought votives as pleas to the deity, or to give thanks. They would come with an offering to ask something of the deity. This obviously depended on the deity's sphere of influence, as well as the interests of the individual. As producing offspring was seen as a crucial and essential part of being an Egyptian woman, votive items embodying pleas for pregnancy and safe childbirth (cf. figs. 3.1.2.1 – 3.1.2.10) were found in abundance at certain sites, especially at religious sites dedicated to the goddess Hathor, often associated with fertility and childbirth. If a woman's plea was heard, and the desired children made an appearance, the woman often returned to the temple to offer her thanks.

Health (for oneself or family members), protection (against evil creatures or spirits) and safe return from war were also asked of the deities. Some votive stelae from Deir el-Medina contain prayers which indicate that the owners or dedicators had committed certain transgressions against a deity, and, after perceiving something in their life to be punishment by the deity, begged for mercy.

From the Middle Kingdom, votive statues and stelae (cf. figs. 2.4.1.1. – 2.4.1.3) were set up in temple precincts by individuals. Most of the statues were dedicated by men, as women were not allowed to own scribe statues (Robins 1993:157). Women, however, could and did erect votive stelae, both in temples and at shrines. The person (or persons) dedicating the stela were usually portrayed as worshipping the particular deity or making offerings. Although vastly outnumbered by male-owned stelae, some dedicated by women did survive. These often honoured the female deities like Hathor (cf. fig 2.4.3.5) or Isis (cf. fig. 2.4.3.2), indicating that women did feel a greater kinship with the goddesses and their defining characteristics (Robins 1993:160).

Evidence from Thebes, where the goddess Hathor had one of her main temples at Deir el-Bahri and where many New Kingdom offerings were found, showed that more women offered votive stelae at this site than men (Pinch 1993). The many examples of painted textiles (cf. figs. 2.4.2.1 – 2.4.2.4) showing the donor (or donors) found at Deir el-Bahri also portrayed more female than male donors. It can thus be concluded that certain types of offerings, at the temples of mostly female deities, would have been brought mostly by women.

At Deir el-Medina evidence of household shrines has been found (Sadek 1987). These shrines contained many references to the prominent fertility deities of Bes (cf. fig. 3.1.4.2) and Taweret (cf. fig 3.1.4.6), and many fertility figurines were found. These, together with the depictions of the birth pavilion (as shown in fig 3.1.5.2) imply that women made extensive use of these shrines, especially as the men of the community were often absent from home (Robins 1993:163).

As women shared the same afterlife (cf. figs. 3.2.3.1 – 3.2.3.2) as men, they had to make preparations for it in the same way. They also had to make arrangements for their burial and cult, and it seems, were also buried in a similar way. They were also mummified, like men, received *shabtis* when these figurines gained popularity, and had a copy of the *Book of the Dead* (cf.

fig. 3.2.3.6) placed in their tombs. The funerary equipment (cf. fig. 3.2.1.2, fig. 3.2.2.1 and fig. 3.2.2.8) for women, though, was always less elaborate than that of their male counterparts. Women did not have their own tomb chapels (except in one or two very rare cases), as women's burials were usually the responsibility of a husband, son or other male relative. Women could, however, dedicate funerary stelae (cf. fig. 3.2.1.3) and statues, often to husbands, or parents. In many of the scenes depicted on these, the women hold sistras, linked to the deity Hathor and the promise of rebirth (Robins 1993:164).

Magic, as practiced in Ancient Egypt, was also not an alternative to the generally accepted religious norm, and *heka*, as magic was called, was seen more as an energy or power that made creation possible. Most magical spells, as employed or used by women, would have been to ward off some of the many dangers of the Egyptian world. These included the threats of snakes, scorpions (cf. fig. 3.3.1.6) and other poisonous creatures. Spells (cf. 3.3.2.1 – 3.3.2.2) were also used to cure illness or, especially with sympathetic magic, solve problems relating to fertility, pregnancy and birth. Amulets (cf. figs. 3.3.1.2 – 3.3.1.5) were also worn by women, especially during pregnancy and in childbirth, as they were supposed to endow the wearer with magical protection.

It thus seems as if we have been able to establish that in both spheres of influence, the public and the domestic, ordinary (non-royal) women did partake in religious roles to a greater extent. In the public sphere they were priestesses, musicians, singers, dancers and mourners, as seen in paintings, on reliefs and on stelae – all evidence found in public places.

In the domestic sphere, where women were far more actively involved in religious ritual on a daily basis, there is less evidence in paintings and tombs, but many more objects linking women to religious practices. These include fertility figurines, amulets and other magical paraphernalia. Some visual evidence was found on the walls of homes as seen at Deir el Medina, but evidence as to the involvement of women in religion also lay in who or what

was worshipped. The prevalence of the deities Bes and Taweret, with their links to fertility and childbirth, indicated strong participation by those whose happiness depended on it – women (Oakes and Gahlin 2002:448 – 449).

Although excluded from many parts of Egyptian society by means of their gender, with men dominant in the public lives of both state and state religion, non-royal women in ancient Egypt shared more than merely the ability to bear children. In full public view, many of them would have participated in and shared roles in the state cults. More importantly, and far more unifying, would have been their participation in the domestic religion, practiced in humble shrines and homes from Deir el-Medina to the Delta.

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