

Discussion paper response

How did the ancient Egyptian goddess cults influence women's lived religious experiences?

Rosie Davey

Rosie's paper explores how ancient Egyptian goddess cults shaped the lived religious experiences of women, arguing that divine female power did not necessarily translate into authoritative female religious standing. In this regard, Rosie notes that links between a woman's lived experience and that of divine religiosity are not always as straightforward as they may initially appear and she cites several extant examples which include:

- Women being 'othered' in artistic representation: i.e. only being seen in relation to a male.
- Priestly roles predominately taken by men, while women were mostly placed in roles that were largely symbolic and at best supportive such as that of a chantress.
- Ma'at as a female personification of justice and order which gave legal authority and strong female standing but not equal religious authority within state religion.

Rosie further notes that while goddesses such as Isis, Hathor, Sekhmet and Bastet embodied roles central to women's lives—motherhood, fertility, protection and healing—women's most meaningful religious engagement appears to have taken place within domestic and community settings rather than formal temple hierarchies, which remained largely male-dominated. Archaeological evidence from the household shrines at Deir el-Medina and Amarna seem to indicate that votive offerings and ritual objects demonstrate that women's religious life was predominately located in the home, however there is also evidence of worship at Shrines outside the home such as the one to Hathor at Mirgissa.

There is a noteworthy section on temple participation and domestic religious life which suggests that elite women were able to acquire positions of authority within the temple and this is well referenced and I would suggest that if this was developed as part of the thesis, that it could be discussed in terms of temple access (could non-elite women enter the temple at any time) and in terms of the roles of non-elite women in temple practice. The representation of women in art is a very interesting discussion, and I would be interested in seeing if there are any statistics around this. Whilst exceptions do exist, so these only exist in representations of the goddesses – including living deities?

Rosie really effectively highlights the methodological challenges of interpreting a record shaped by elite and male perspectives and considers if Amarna and Deir El-Medina are effective extant sources, and if they are indeed representative of Egyptian life in general given the villages' very specific functions. Ultimately, Rosie suggests that women's religious lives were shaped less by institutional roles and more by everyday ritual, local shrines and the transmission of oral religious knowledge within the home.

I would be interested in any evidence for the literacy or otherwise of Egyptian women generally. I suspect that some women were literate, especially female scribes and some of the wives of the artisans at Deir El-Medina, albeit in low numbers.

Overall, I found this paper really engaging and interesting, and I think that any of the headings, including an exploration of the methodological challenges could become a 4000 thesis. My suggestion therefore would be to choose one area to use as a springboard to assessment 1b.

Thanks for letting me respond to your paper Rosie, I thoroughly enjoyed reading it and it was very though provoking.