

Pharaonic Priestesses & Desert Mothers of Coptic Egypt: A Comparison



Syncletica of Alexandria, *Menologion of Basil*

The responsibilities and actions of the two groups of women varied. Priestesses were quite often the daughters of high-ranking officials, whereas the Desert Mothers would renounce worldly goods and pleasures enjoying none of the luxuries that the priestesses might have had. Priestesses would be in charge of rituals and participation. They would often be devoted to a particular god or goddess, God's Wife of Amun being one of the highest honour that one could receive from the New Kingdom onwards. These women would often have an influence on estates and state affairs, which is vastly different to the Desert Mothers who had been removed from the normal affairs and it was a point to not be involved with matters of politics or economical affairs.

The way they would dress was also quite different in the two groups of women. Priestesses would have quite beautiful white robes with elaborate jewelry and beautiful headdresses. In comparison, these ascetic woman would wear plain clothes and robes, basic materials and basic colours to truly symbolize the simplicity of the monastic life.

A difference in representation in scholarship and media can also be seen between the Desert Mothers and the Pharaonic Priestesses. When it comes to the Priestesses in media specifically they are synonymous with religious practices and are at the forefront. Desert Mothers in scholarship are quite often looked over in favour of the Desert Fathers as is a common theme when it comes to Christianity, even with their contributions to the teachings of the Desert Fathers. It can also be seen when Victorian archaeologists originally excavated temples and tombs in Egypt they looked over Coptic remains to get straight to the tombs of the Pharaohs where the art and artifacts clearly displayed priestesses and their religious practices. Especially in earlier scholarship, there was a lack of writing on these early monastic Christian women.



Desert Mothers, *Exeter Cathedral*



Priestess of Hathor, *Egypt Museum*



Priestesses, *Egypt Museum*

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