

Women's religious roles in the Pharaonic and Coptic periods of Ancient Egypt.

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The Pharaonic period:

- Priestesses (hemet netjer) were the original's who served deities in a deity's home or in a temple, during the Old and New Kingdoms. Responsibility consisted of caring for the deities' home and leading rituals. However, in the New Kingdom and Third Intermediate period saw the title changed and it became associated with music.

- Music was an essential part of religious worship in ancient Egypt. Women's roles were consisted of chantresses, (Smayt), singers, (Hsy), and sistrum players (sxmyt). Music was used for caring and appeasing the Gods.

• Sistrum Players (sxmyt):

- To worship the Goddess Hathor sistrum players were a key component. Egyptian women would use an instrument, a sistrum, a rattle and a menat to invoke the goddess in ceremonies or rituals and was popular in the New Kingdom.
- Women continued to use the instrument outside the temples in funerary rites and as such music become an essential part to women and their religion in ancient Egypt.



Image taken from Dr Katharina Zinn PowerPoint: Session 3 The religious life of women in ancient Egypt, slide 72.



Image taken from online e-book, Women in Antiquity: real women across ancient world by and ed. Stephanie Lynn Budin and Jean MacIntosh Turfa, 2016, in Chapter 15 by Suzanne Onstine.

• Chantress (Smayt):

- This title was used to replace hemet netjer from the Old and Middle Kingdom in the 18th Dynasty until the 22nd Dynasty. The most common priestesses were the chantresses of Amun and acted similarly to the old function of priestesses as they could have served multiple deities and temples.
- In the 18th dynasty, elite Egyptian women used this title and would showcase them on their tombs and monuments. The Third Intermediate period saw middle-class women using this title as well.

- Comparison between the pharaonic and Coptic period saw a change in women's roles in Egyptian religion. It became very Christianised, and women's roles and involvement started to be controlled by the Church. Women's roles consisted of monasticism, donations, and helping monks in their everyday lives.

• Women's monasticism:

- Women were prohibited from entering or serving in the priesthood. However, between the third and fourth centuries, women were seen to have lived as hermits and ascetics. By the seventh century, women's monasticism was established.
- Female monks (monkake) followed the same structure for men, such as devotion exercises, manual work, and 'obedience to the monastic population'. (Terry G. Wilfong, 2002)
- Women's monasteries continued to grow from the 5th centuries, however, they were under the supervision of a male monk, alongside an elder female monk. This would continue, as the monastery grows, due to the fear of women's disobedience.

• Women and Monks outside the monastery:

- Egyptian' women engaged with religion through helping monks outside the monasteries.
- Women, mostly relatives to monks, would look after businesses and finances. Their role was to handle money, send messages back and forth to the monastery, buy and sell goods, handle property and so forth. This was a role women mostly filled at this time.



Figure 1 Mural painting of a deceased wife called Theodosea, after Bénazeth, "Les costumes funéraires," 106-107.

Image taken from Women's Modesty in Late Antique Egypt through Coptic Artefacts by Engy Eshak Yousef Hanna, (2018), pp. 113-14.

• Female donations:

- Compared to the pharaonic period, donations were made to the church rather than to the gods. Donations were a way to appease family members rather than gods/goddesses. For example, some Egyptian women would donate children to the church.
- This was a crucial part to women's involvement in the religion.

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