



R E W R I T I N G   A N T I Q U I T Y

# WOMEN IN ANTIQUITY

REAL WOMEN ACROSS THE ANCIENT WORLD

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# 15

## WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN THE RELIGIOUS HIERARCHY OF ANCIENT EGYPT

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*No woman is dedicated to the service of any god or goddess; men are dedicated to all deities male or female.*

*(Herodotus, ii, §35.4; translation Godley 1920)*

Ancient Egypt has always seemed a very pious place, with Pharaoh himself positioned as both divine and a high priest of all the gods who delegated authority to a vast hierarchy of religious specialists. Those specialists took care of the daily rituals of the gods and the running of temple business. Temples and the extensive funerary rites that the Egyptians favored are two of the most recognizable aspects of ancient Egypt, and a considerable amount of scholarship has gone into explaining the religious beliefs of the ancient Egyptians as well as the role of the men who populated the aforementioned hierarchy.<sup>1</sup> As Herodotus' quote indicates, priesthood was primarily a male occupation. The role of men in this world is hard to miss. Priesthood was a common vocation and priests were depicted on temple walls performing their duties and enjoying a special proximity to the gods to which normal people were not privy. Women's participation in the religious life of ancient Egypt is an aspect that has historically been overlooked and undervalued. Thankfully, this is changing and several works have appeared that attempt to address the role of women in the religious hierarchy.<sup>2</sup> From these works we can see that women in priestly roles are far less common than men, but not at all insignificant.

### **Defining priesthood**

For the Egyptians, the role of priests and priestesses was to serve the deities, usually by ministering to them in a specific deity's temple, which was considered the deity's home. They were cultic specialists who likely had a special status since they were allowed to be close to the image of the deity in the performance of rituals. Although there is no specific ancient Egyptian term for "priest" as an umbrella category, we know that there were many specialists who served the gods, and therefore could qualify to be included in this western category of definition "priesthood." It is clear that the Egyptians understood the priesthood to consist of a variety of different functionaries. Chaeremon, a Roman era writer and priest who lived around

40 CE, described the priesthood as divided into head priests, priests in charge of sacred vestments, sacred scribes, shrine bearers, and others. He also claimed that the priests sang hymns to the gods three or four times a day, morning, noon, and sunset (Van der Horst 1982: 69). This gives us some idea of what the duties of the priests were. Priests did not serve a congregation of worshipers, neither did they enforce or teach a specific moral code associated with the religion. Chaeremon's characterization of the priesthood is consistent with respect to what was depicted in the earlier pharaonic period as the elements necessary for taking care of the deities and their homes. Images of priests offering food, libations, clothing, incense, and music in the daily rites for the upkeep of the gods are common on pharaonic temple walls. The scenes mainly feature men in charge of these tasks, but women were sometimes included at the head of groups making daily offerings to the gods in their role as musician priestesses.

One possible reason there were more priests than priestesses is that there were additional administrative duties often associated with priesthood. The temples served many functions, including economic ones, and required scribes, accountants, and overseers of various departments within the temple (such as granaries, storehouses, or livestock). Over time the priesthood acquired a bureaucratic nature and an administrative hierarchy. A phyle system (Egyptian *sAw*) organized both male and female priests into groups or cohorts that served in a specific position episodically, working one month in four, then rotating out of active duty (Roth 1991). The Egyptians did not recognize a specific divide between religious and non-religious modes of behavior. In fact, they did not have a word for the concept of religion. Therefore, it was natural to concentrate power in the hands of stable institutions like the temples, and to award those administrators with priestly titles. Traditionally, women did not hold administrative offices, although exceptions exist. The professionalization of priestly administrators is likely one factor in the array of reasons women were not equal partners in caring for the gods. Women were never completely excluded from religious roles, however. Priestly titles and duties evolved over time, but the most enduring aspect of the participation in the cult was an association with ritual music.

### **Women in the temples**

There were several women's titles that can be included under this rubric of "priesthood." The most ubiquitous title for priests in general was *hem netjer* (Hm nTr or servant of the god). The feminized form of the title, *hemet netjer* (Hmt nTr), was the most popular title for women in the Old and Middle Kingdoms, especially in the cult of Hathor of Cusae in middle Egypt.<sup>3</sup> Women who held the title seem to have been of elite status as they also often held other high-ranking titles, such as "royal ornament" or were married to high-ranking men. The cult of Hathor of Cusae was one of the most economically powerful institutions of the late Old Kingdom and the large number of women who participated in the cult can be viewed both as a sign of their individual piety and of their political savvy. This is a pattern also observed for the chantresses of Amun in the New Kingdom and Third Intermediate Period. During those eras, the cult of Amun was the preeminent institution, and "chantress of Amun" was the most common title held by women in those eras.

Other titles, like chantresses (*Smayt*), singers (*Hsyt*), and sistrum players (*IHyt* or *sxmyt*), were largely the realm of women, although there were male chanters, for example. Chanters were extremely rare, however, compared to the large numbers of women who were involved in temple music.<sup>4</sup> Chaeremon's statement that priests sang hymns to the gods three to four times a day certainly can be borne out by depictions of musical specialists participating in various kinds of rites.

## Women, music, and the gods

*Observe the feast of your god . . . song, dance and incense are his foods.*  
(*The Instructions of Any*, 3.3–10; Lichtheim 1976: 136)

Music was an essential part of caring for the gods. It was used to appease the gods, and musicians are frequently depicted in scenes of temple rituals, religious processions, and at funerals. As previously noted, Chaeremon stated that priests sang hymns as part of the daily rituals. Different kinds of ritual performers were attached to temples as an important part of the temple personnel. In Tutankhamun's Restoration Stela he specifically mentions consecrating chantresses for the reopening of temples, and that they should be paid out of the royal treasury (Urk. IV 2030.6–8). Without musicians, the liturgy was not complete.

We can trace the association of music with priestesses to the importance of the cult of Hathor in the Old and Middle Kingdoms. *Hemet netjer* priestesses served in the cults of a variety of deities, but by the end of the Old Kingdom, the cult of Hathor was the most popular (Galvin 1981). Hathor was the goddess of music and dance, and, by the Middle Kingdom, musical instruments called the *sistrum* (a hand held rattle) and *menat* (a heavy beaded necklace, shaken to create rustling noises) were regarded as her sacred emblems and were used in her worship. The use of these instruments invoked the goddess and conferred on the ritual participants the blessing of the goddess. The use of the *sistrum* and *menat* was widespread by the New Kingdom and transcended their use as a strictly Hathoric cult implement. They were used by women who served in many cults, not just Hathor's. In funerary contexts they were depicted in the hands of women who were not named as priestesses at all, but nevertheless wanted to invoke the favor of the goddess. The instruments retained the aura of divinity, but were no longer restricted to strictly Hathoric contexts. It is probably the early association of the priestesses of Hathor with music making in the cult of Hathor that evolved into the role of the musician priestess by the New Kingdom.

It is significant to note that the *hemet netjer* title almost completely disappears after the Middle Kingdom. The decline of the title's usage after that can be attributed to many factors, not the least of which was declining central authority in the late 12th to early 13th Dynasties. Senusert III's governmental reforms may also have played a role. The reforms must have unseated some of the wealthy elite families, including the women, who had traditionally occupied the more important priestly positions. What we see in the New Kingdom and later, in the absence of the *hemet netjer* position, is a specific shift toward defining women's cultic roles as specifically musical, with titles like chantress, singer, and sistrum player. Rubrics for scenes that include groups of unnamed female performers may also include references to a musical troupe (xnr), or a choir (Sspt dxn).

From the 18th Dynasty until the 22nd Dynasty, the title chantress (Smayt)<sup>5</sup> became the most popular religious title for women, replacing the *hemet netjer* title of the Old and Middle Kingdoms. Chantresses of Amun were the most common priestesses, because Amun had been elevated to a state god during the early 18th Dynasty, and his cult was widespread and powerful. Chantresses could, however, serve many deities and institutions. The title chantress was very rarely used in the late Middle Kingdom, but during the reign of Hatshepsut in the middle of the 18th Dynasty many elite women began to use it, recording the title on their monuments and in the tombs of the Theban necropolis (Onstine 2005: 87–97). By the reign of Ramesses II, the title was held by women of middle-class status as well. This popularity continued into the Third Intermediate Period, particularly in the Theban area. The title chantress of Amun was so ubiquitous in Thebes that it has been noted nearly every woman in Thebes held the title

(Blackman 1921: 9; Niwinski 1989: 79). While that is exaggerated, it does reflect a definite increase in the number of women who wanted to affiliate themselves with the cult of Amun. Given the power of the Amun priesthood in the New Kingdom and Third Intermediate Period, it is not surprising and follows the general trend of women being associated with the most powerful and popular cults of their eras.

Singers (*Hsyꜥt*) were also linked to various temples and the palace, but were more commonly associated with the goddess Mut at Karnak in Thebes during the New Kingdom. In the Third Intermediate Period, a few Theban women held the titles chantress of Amun, singer of Mut, and nurse of Khonsu, thereby associating themselves with the entire Theban triad. Singers of the interior of the temple of Amun (*Hsyꜥt nt Xnw n Imn*) were also known from the 22nd to 26th Dynasties, although not as common, and many probably served in the hierarchy attached to the God's Wives of Amun (Teeter and Johnson 2009: 17). At this particular time, the office of the God's Wife was especially powerful and so we can again make the connection between the way in which women held religious titles and the political power a particular cult wielded.

The use of female musical titles declined sharply after the 22nd Dynasty. Sistrum players (*IHyꜥt*) and singers (*Hsyꜥt*) did not completely disappear. They were not as numerous as in previous eras, but there were still women who recorded these vocations on their monuments. While there were fewer women who claimed such titles, it is clear there were still groups of chantresses and singers working in temples. The Canopus decree, a Ptolemaic decree that established the funerary cult of Ptolemy III's daughter, Berenice, (among other things) spells out the rites to be performed in her honor. Chantresses should praise the deified princess and offer her jewelry. Singers should sing daily for the soul of the princess (Onstine 2005: 20). The reasons for this shift away from the importance of the title are likely to be found in the unstable political environment of the Late Period that probably led to changes in temple administration as well as changes in religious practices.

The development of official musical troupes attached to temples happened alongside the use of individual titles, providing a glimpse into the possible venue in which title holders performed. The *xnr*, or musical troupe, and the choir (*Sꜣpt dxn*) are frequently depicted in larger religious gatherings like festivals or funerals. One of the most famous is a block in Hatshepsut's Red Chapel that depicts part of the Opet festival where male and female musicians perform: the women are labeled as the *Khener* troupe of the temple, and the men are labeled as a choir (Lacau and Chevrier 1977: vol. II pl. 9). These groups were, in part, made up of the musician priestesses. Titles associated with the *Khener* are less common than chantresses or singers, but women like Nebet-tawya (Figure 15.1) held multiple titles including "great one of the *Khener* of Mut." A *Khener* troupe could be attached to different deities, but Amun was the most commonly named god in titles. The title great one of the *Khener* of Amun Re King of the Gods (wrt xnrꜥt n Imn Re nsw nTrw) was commonly held by the women of the family of the High Priests of Amun in the Third Intermediate Period.

The daily rites in the temple as well as the festivals could be led by male and female musicians. Temple scenes depicting these rites sometimes include groups of unnamed women clapping and chanting as part of the activities. These groups may be labeled chantresses, or sometimes they bear no inscription. A scene at Karnak dating to the reign of Thutmosis III, for example, shows chantresses leading a procession of chanters and *wab*-priests to where rites before the god Amun are taking place (Figure 15.2). This puts them in direct proximity with the gods on the same level as the other priests, albeit the lower-ranking priests.

At Luxor temple, an unidentified group of female acrobats and musician priestesses form an important part of Tutankhamun's Opet festival reliefs, leading the parade into the temple.<sup>6</sup>



Figure 15.1 A woman in the tomb of Roy (TT 255) showing her titles: His sister, his beloved, mistress of the house, chantress of Amun, great one of the musical *Khener* troupe of Mut, great Singer of Hathor, (Nebet)-tawyai, true of voice. (Author's photo.)

The clapping chantresses are depicted crossing the gateway, implying that they are at least special enough to enter the temple, even if they are not high-ranking clergy members. Festivals provided an important opportunity for women to participate. These festivals would have required large numbers of musician priestesses at the head of processions. This situation probably allowed some women to express their religious devotion in an episodic fashion, rather than serving a month or more at a time in the phyle system.

Royal women also participated as chantresses in such processions. The women of Ramesses III's family are depicted on the exterior of the temple of Ramesses III in the first court at Karnak celebrating the Opet festival (PM II, 34 (121)). This temple may have been the starting point for the procession and the royal women accompanied it to the river's edge with chanting.

Scenes of musicians in religious contexts continued to be popular into the Ptolemaic and Roman eras. Several temples dating to this time period have reliefs that include music in gateways or the forecourts of temples, recalling the Opet procession of Tutankhamun above. One such example at Medamud shows two musicians—a male harpist and a female drummer.



*Figure 15.2* A choir of chantresses stands at the head of a procession made up of male chanters, *wab*-priests, and other offering bearers. (Author's photo.)

The rubric says, “pleasing the god with harp playing” (Figure 15.3). Similar scenes of musicians are found in the birth temples, or *mammisis*,<sup>7</sup> of Dendera and Edfu and at the Mut temple at Karnak.<sup>8</sup> Clearly, the intent of the music—to please the gods—remained the same throughout time.

### **Royal women**

Royal women formed a necessary complement to the king as high priest. The queen's role was not as visible or seemingly as central to religion, as she was not often the focus of monumental temple inscriptions. The role of the queen, however, included varying religious titles and epithets that demonstrated its importance. Lana Troy (1986) has made convincing arguments showing that the queen existed as part of a mythological framework, and that along with the king the royal couple embodied a mythic prototype that expressed the duality of creation. This special status, while not specifically marked as “priestess,” is probably the ideological backdrop for the development of the highest feminine priestly title, the God's Wife of Amun in the 18th Dynasty.

The God's Wife of Amun title was established and held by royal women of the New Kingdom starting with Ahmose-Nefertari, and continued to be in use until the end of the 26th Dynasty. The role was not uniformly used by royal women between the 18th and 26th Dynasties, however. During the New Kingdom it was a position initially held by the queen or a princess. In the 21st Dynasty, women of the High Priest of Amun's family occupied the role, but thereafter, princesses were again installed by adoption.

The center of power for the God's Wives was in the great temple of Amun at Karnak in Thebes.<sup>9</sup> The title does not refer to a belief in an actual union between woman and god, but



Figure 15.3 Musicians playing in the gateway of the first pylon at Medamud temple. (Author's photo.)

rather a ritual role played by the holder of the title, and created a powerful adjunct to the High Priest of Amun at Thebes. During the Third Intermediate Period, however, the title took on even more importance as the priesthood of Amun gained near autonomous power over the southern region of Egypt. The priesthood had amassed a great deal of power and wealth through the patronage of the kings of the New Kingdom. The Nubian and Saite pharaohs of the 25th and 26th Dynasties would come to view this position as a valuable adjunct to the throne. These pharaohs installed their daughters in the position at Thebes while they ruled from capital cities in the north, keeping a royal family presence in the south, and bonding the old power structure to the new regimes (see also Phillips, this volume). The office was discontinued by the Persians when they took over Egypt in the sixth century BCE and it was never resurrected.

The hierarchy of functionaries attached to the Gods' Wives of Amun included female musicians. From the 22nd to the 26th Dynasty, the title "singer in the interior of the temple of Amun" was associated with the office of the God's Wives of Amun. Perhaps they were her personal retainers in the cult (Teeter and Johnson 2009: 17). Papyrus Abbott (a.k.a. the tomb robberies papyrus) also mentions that four tombs of "chantresses of the domain of the Divine Adoratrice of Amun Re king of the gods" were inspected during the proceedings to determine if royal tombs had been robbed. No specific woman has been identified bearing that title, so it is difficult to interpret how they would have fitted into the overall hierarchy.

### **Problems stemming from historical biases**

There are a few problems that tend to plague the study of women in religious roles. The first is an unfortunate tendency to view women's titles as honorific, or at the very least less

than serious vocations, with little responsibility. General articles on priesthood may echo this sentiment without evidence, relying instead on the notion that if a title is popular it must not be a serious job (Spencer 2010: 258). Nobody would argue that a male title, like *hem netjer*, although extremely well attested, meant little because it was very common. Other authors, such as Niwinski (1989: 79–89), argue that the chantresses in the 21st Dynasty, for example, should not be regarded as priestesses at all, because they are extremely common and their participation is episodic rather than professional. Neither of these arguments is convincing; it is not true that *everybody* was a priest or priestess of Amun during the 21st Dynasty, as he emphasizes, neither does episodic participation render the job non-priestly. After all, the episodic nature of priestly participation is a well known feature of priestly roles in general. Priests and priestesses were organized into phyles, where clergy served on a part-time basis instead of all year round (Roth 1991). For the twenty dynasties prior to the 21st, there is never a suggestion that this lessens the vocation of a priest. Authors such as Quirke start with the premise that elite women would have had no duties associated with their title, because of their economic status (Quirke 1999: 229), whereas the same is not true for elite men. So even while acknowledging that women have priestly titles, and there is evidence for women being paid for musical services in the temple,<sup>10</sup> he still goes on to explain away the nature of women's participation as "less intimate" and probably only carried out by women of lesser status (Quirke 1999: 229). There is no clear evidence for why we should doubt the participation of any title holders in daily rites or festivals except for preconceptions about what women and different classes of women do.

A second issue concerns lingering speculations on the sexuality of priestesses. The notion of the celibate priestess is a recurring assumption (for example Yoyotte 1961: 43–52; Donker van Heel 2014: 34). The supposed celibacy of the God's Wives of Amun, the most elite of the priestesses, is a continuing discussion. While some point out that there is no real evidence to support the celibacy of the God's Wives, or that it is impossible to know for sure either way (Teeter 1999; Ayad 2009), one continues to find the notion repeated with respect to the Late Period title holders (e.g. Doxey 2001: 73; Donker van Heel 2014: 34). Because the royal woman chosen to be the God's Wife often outlived the Pharaoh under whom she was installed, her successor had to be chosen from the women of the next ruling family which was sometimes not her own. The easiest way to ensure a peaceful succession was for the sitting God's Wife to adopt an heiress while alive. The heiress was the daughter of a High Priest of Amun or of the current king.

The most famous piece of evidence, the Nitocris Adoption Stela (Caminos 1964: 71–101) demonstrates why this was an issue. In it, Psamtik I, founder of the 26th Dynasty, gives his daughter, Nitocris, to the reigning God's Wife, Amenirdis II, a Nubian princess of the 25th Dynasty. The adoption of Nitocris by the previous dynasty's God's Wife ensures a smooth succession of the office in a period that was not so peaceful. During the troubled dynasties of the Third Intermediate Period and Late Period, this practice would have been an effective way of passing on the title and the property belonging to the God's Wife's estate to the family of the next king, whoever that may be. The emphasis in this inscription is on the rights and entitlements of the office, and on the gifts Nitocris is bringing to Thebes. There is no need to suggest that a celibate and therefore childless priestess was necessary to explain the issue of adoption.

The opposite is also true in that some authors have seen musician priestesses like the chantresses and singers as prostitutes or concubines (Naguib 1990: 236). For the musicians who are specifically attached to temples or institutions, there is no evidence of this (Onstine 2005: 9). The one woman labeled as a singer of Hathor on the Turin Erotic Papyrus

(Omlin 1973: 70 recto 19) is not enough evidence to classify a whole group as prostitutes. Presumably, *hemet netjer* and musician priestesses could enjoy normal family lives and sexual activities as most of them known from monuments were married and were depicted with their husbands and families.

A third problem is the assumption that titles are interchangeable;<sup>11</sup> that a chantress, a singer, and a sistrum player do the same thing so they can all be lumped together. This is demonstrably false. Not only were there very specific titles that meant different activities but they were found in different contexts (Onstine 2005: 9–10). Women could hold several musical titles throughout their lives. If they were actually interchangeable, however, why would a woman specify each one, and why was there no general term for “temple musician” instead of several different terms for specific activities? Whether they held these titles concurrently or in succession is unknown. The tendency to list all of them together on monuments complicates our ability to fully understand how a woman negotiated these varied duties or progressed through a priestly hierarchy.

## Conclusions

The nature of women’s participation in the religious hierarchy of ancient Egypt was strongly associated with music. This is demonstrated through their use of musical titles and their depictions holding *sistra* and *menat* necklaces or clapping in the performance of their duties. The importance of music for the cult of Hathor may have influenced this development early on. Music became an integral part of cult rituals, both private and public, and provided women with an opportunity to participate at many levels of the hierarchy. Class status was surely a significant factor in determining which titles women held. The evidence supporting their actual participation in the cult ranges from unnamed groups of chantresses up to named wives and daughters of the king depicted in action, performing the cultic rites, and celebrating the gods. There should be no doubt that women’s participation in these rites was viewed by the ancient Egyptians as an important and normal facet of religious life.

## Notes

- 1 Cf. Sauneron 1960; Helck 1982; Pernigotti 1997; Doxey 2001. Of an entire book dedicated to priests and the priesthood, Sauneron 1960 gives only three pages of attention to the female personnel (pp. 67–69).
- 2 Blackman’s work was one of the earliest comprehensive studies of women with religious titles (1921: 8–30). See also Fischer 1982; chapter 8 of Robins 1993; Onstine 2005; Teeter and Johnson (eds) 2009.
- 3 Galvin 1981, 1984; Gillam 1995.
- 4 There are many anonymous groups of men labeled as chanters and singers in temple reliefs, but one rarely encounters a specific man who holds a title “chanter of [a god].” For a more complete discussion of male chanters, see Onstine 2005: 78–81.
- 5 Onstine 2005.
- 6 PM II, 314 [77–86].
- 7 A *mammisi* is a smaller temple within a larger complex dedicated to the birth of the god to whom the temple is dedicated. The *mammisi* was common in Greco-Roman Egyptian temple complexes.
- 8 This is not a comprehensive list of such scenes and is a topic I am currently researching.
- 9 Cf. Ayad 2009.
- 10 The Tutankhamun Restoration Stela offers the clearest evidence for the payment of chanters and chantresses in temple service (Urk. IV 2030.6–8). Papyrus UC 32191 also may indicate a roster of payment to temple singers and dancers. Neither source includes any details as to their salary or how

they were paid for their service, see <http://www.ucl.ac.uk/museums-static/digitalegypt/lahun/festivallistmk.html>, accessed 21 May 2015.

- 11 Quirke says as much (1999: 229) and Naguib's evidence for prostitution is clearly mixing up chantresses and singers as the same thing (1990: 236, n. 239a/b). See also Onstine for a discussion of this issue (2005: 9).

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