

# Ancient Egypt: Women in society

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The Wilbour Plaque at The Brooklyn Museum in New York shows the heads of an Egyptian king and queen. They were most likely Akhenaten and Nefertiti. Queen Nefertiti is shown almost as large as her husband. This indicates her importance. Photo from: Wikimedia Commons.

Ancient Egyptian civilization lasted for several thousand years. It spanned from 3000 B.C. until 30 B.C, when Egypt was annexed, or taken over, by the Roman Empire.

Many of the discoveries and practices of ancient Egypt have survived an even greater test of time. The sands of the Nile River Valley hold many clues about this mysterious, progressive and artistic ancient civilization.

## **Women held high positions of power**

Women in ancient Egypt were ahead of their time. They could not only rule the country, but also had many of the same basic human rights as men.

One of the first women to hold the rank of pharaoh was Hatshepsut, who began her rule in about 1,500 B.C.E. Hatshepsut took care of her people and built temples to the gods as well as other public buildings. Egyptian custom dictated that a pharaoh, who was considered a god, could not

marry a mortal. As a result, pharaohs chose spouses from within the royal family. Her husband, Thutmose, was her half-brother.

Nefertiti was another Egyptian ruler. She married Amenhotep IV, who preached and supported monotheism, or the belief in only one god.

### **Cleopatra was perhaps the most famous**

Cleopatra became the most famous of Egypt's female leaders. She was extremely intelligent, ambitious and spoke several languages — she even studied astronomy. At 18, she became queen of Egypt.

Cleopatra constantly battled jealous, ambitious people who wanted to kill her and occupy her throne. For a time, she was removed from power and banished. She sought help from Julius Caesar, the leader of the powerful Roman Republic.

When Caesar visited Alexandria, a large Egyptian city, Cleopatra saw her chance. She could not even enter the city to see Caesar because her jealous brother hired spies to kill her on sight. Craftily, she sneaked into the city rolled in a carpet. She was brought to Caesar, and the two developed a relationship. The couple had a son named Caesarion, and Caesar helped her recapture the throne. The relationship ended abruptly when rival Roman rulers murdered Caesar in the Roman Senate.

When Marc Antony became leader of Rome, he, too, fell in love with Cleopatra. The two had children and together ruled the most powerful empires of the Mediterranean. Eventually, a rival defeated Antony's armies, and Antony drew a sword on himself in despair. As he was dying, he wanted to see Cleopatra one last time. He died in her arms. Later, Cleopatra killed herself by placing a poisonous snake on her chest. The greatest political soap opera of the age was now over.



### **Roles for the common women**

These were examples of elite Egyptian women. But what about the common folk? A woman's role as mother and wife still came first in Egyptian society. Some professions in which women worked included weaving, perfume making and entertainment.

Egyptian women could have their own businesses, own and sell property, and serve as witnesses in court cases. Unlike most women in the Middle East, they were even permitted to be in the company of men. They could escape bad marriages by divorcing and remarrying. And women were entitled to one-third of the property their husbands owned. The political and economic rights Egyptian women enjoyed made them the most liberated females of their time.

## Quiz

- 1 Choose the answer that BEST fits into the blank to complete the summary.
- Women in ancient Egypt had more rights and responsibilities than most women from that time period.
- \_\_\_\_\_.
- Some, like Nefertiti and Cleopatra, even ran the empire.
- (A) Egyptian Pharaohs were not allowed to marry commoners.
  - (B) Egyptian women were able to divorce, own property and run businesses.
  - (C) Julius Caesar and Marc Antony were important leaders.
  - (D) An ancient Egyptian woman's most important job was to be a wife and mother.
- 2 What is the MOST LIKELY reason the author included information about Cleopatra and Hatshepsut in this article?
- (A) to show how ambitious Cleopatra was
  - (B) to tell about the greatest political soap-opera of that time
  - (C) to give more information about Egyptian pharaohs
  - (D) to show that women had a lot of power in ancient Egypt
- 3 Which sentence from the section "Roles for the common women" compares ancient Egyptian women to other women from that time?
- (A) Unlike most women in the Middle East, they were even permitted to be in the company of men.
  - (B) A woman's role as mother and wife still came first in Egyptian society.
  - (C) Some professions in which women worked included weaving, perfume making and entertainment.
  - (D) They could escape bad marriages by divorcing and remarrying.
- 4 Which sentence from the section "Cleopatra was perhaps the most famous" suggests that Marc Antony killed himself?
- (A) As he was dying, he wanted to see Cleopatra one last time.
  - (B) He died in her arms.
  - (C) Eventually, a rival defeated Antony's armies, and Antony drew a sword on himself in despair.
  - (D) Later, Cleopatra killed herself by placing a poisonous snake on her chest.