

of women: the nature of the source material, its availability, and distortions caused by the personal interests of modern researchers. Source material for the earliest historical period in Egypt and the ancient Near East consists mainly of written texts ranging from economic accounts to very brief tomb markers and personal seals. Later, lengthier texts appear on the monuments, but these usually reflect the deeds of gods or kings and throw little light on the concerns or careers of common women. Archeologists have tended to concentrate more on excavating palaces, temples, and royal tombs than on town sites which could yield more valuable testimony to the lives of ordinary people in antiquity. Philologists who translate texts often give first priority to resolving lexicographical and grammatical problems and seldom analyze the content of texts as thoroughly as one might wish to aid in furthering understanding of social history. These factors combined with the fragile nature of the written document itself has meant that much data from the past has not survived or is currently unavailable.

Fortunately, law codes survive from Sumer, Babylonia and Assyria and these reveal much about these societies' attitudes toward women as well as the extent of women's rights. Unfortunately, no law codes survive from ancient Egypt, so tax rolls, business and personal correspondence, wills and contracts as well as records of court testimony must be sifted for details about women's legal and social status. From all the areas, names with titles help draw a picture of women's involvement in religious, economic and social life.

Not only her legal status, but the visibility of the ancient woman interests us. Surely these are linked. A woman restricted by law and custom to her home and child care is often regarded as a legal minor with no control over property, no ability to earn wages, and seldom participates in the religious and social life of the nation to any great extent. Work outside the home, full obligations of citizenship, the right to marry and divorce as she wished, the ability to attain positions of authority over others—these reflect a liberal society where the dominance of men is limited. Such conditions prevailed in ancient Egypt and earliest Sumer.

## EGYPT

### OLD KINGDOM

#### Royal Women

The Egyptian woman's legal status equaled that of the men of her own social class, and starting at the highest level, in the royal family, women enjoyed positions of great prestige and power. While not always practiced consistently,

in theory the right to succeed to the throne passed through the women of the royal family. Thus the king (considered an incarnation of the sky-god Horus) had to marry a princess of the royal blood known as the *Daughter of the God* because of her kingly father's acknowledged divinity. Often in the royal family brother married sister to keep the throne within the family. The king, however, could have more than one secondary wife and several concubines. The idea that the familial line of descent passed through the women of the family (matriliney) shows up frequently among African tribes and survived in the royal family because theology and tradition governed much of their life. One Fifth Dynasty list of kings records the names of mothers of the first kings of Egypt because of their role in succession.

Splendid tombs provide evidence of the high respect kings', mothers enjoyed. The golden furniture buried with Queen Hetepheres from her tomb alongside the great pyramid of her son Khufu of the Fourth Dynasty (ca. 2590 B.C.) demonstrates this queen's importance in the realm. Thousands of years later, chronicles in the Roman period identified Nitokerty, who reigned as female pharaoh at the end of the Old Kingdom (2686–2181 B.C.), as being the most beautiful and bravest woman of her age. Another queen, at the end of the Fifth Dynasty, seems to have owned a very large pyramid complex. This now-nameless queen had also probably attempted to reign alone after the death of her husband Djedkare-Isesi. Royal women did not dwell secluded in harems but took an active role in court life, assuming the duties of regents if their husbands died before the heir apparent came of age.

In the Old Kingdom the administration of Egypt was mainly in the hands of the ruler, so the entire royal family—including the wife, mother, and daughters of the king—occupied administrative positions. The women had religious functions and officiated as priestesses in the cults of major deities like Thoth and Hathor. A number of goddesses ranked high in the pantheon, among these the embodiment of the two regions of Egypt, the embodiment of the heavens, of the throne, and of justice. Indeed, the queen was the living image of the goddess Hathor and the goddess, the embodiment of the royal house, provided legitimacy for the ruler. Other high-born ladies called *possessors of reverence* held positions as priestesses in cults of the goddesses Hathor, Nut, and Neith.

At times queens became involved in political intrigue. A conspiracy against the crown implicating the queen took place in the reign of Pepi I (ca. 2300 B.C.). Once discovered, the King's Wife and Great of Scepter, Intes, was privately investigated by a judge and one other official. This plot against Pepi came to nothing, but Amenemhet I, founder of the Twelfth Dynasty (1991–1786 B.C.) did apparently die, in 1962 B.C., in an assassination plot hatched in his harem. His son later claimed that "women had marshalled the ranks" against him.