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Olabarria, Leire

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Panel Discussions (invited)

XX-Cavations: Women in Ancient Egypt and Modern Egyptology

Moderator: Leire Olabarria; Panellists: Solange Ashby, Kathlyn (Kara) Cooney, Yasmin El Shazly, Carolyn Graves-Brown

Leire Olabarria[1,*]

[1]Department of Classics, Ancient History and Archaeology, University of Birmingham, UK

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Abstract

This report summarises the main themes addressed during the inaugural *Interdisciplinary Egyptology* discussion series panel *XX-Cavations: Women in Ancient Egypt and Modern Egyptology*. During our conversation, we talked about why we study women in the past, how we do research and communicate it to the public, and what part women play in Egyptology today. The role of women, past and present, in the study of ancient Egypt and Sudan has often been overlooked, and this panel highlighted those contributions while celebrating the diversity of approaches in the field.

Keywords: women, gender, bias, intersectionality, inclusivity

المرأه في مصر القديمة وعلم المصريات الحديث

الملخص

يلخص هذا التقرير الموضوعات الرئيسية التي تم تناولها خلال جلسة النقاش الافتتاحية بعنوان المرأة في مصر القديمة وعلم المصريات الحديثْ. خلال حديثنا ، تحدثنا عن سبب دراستنا للنساء في الماضي ، وكيف نجري أبحاثًا عنها وننقلها للجمهور ، وما هو الدور الذي تلعبه النساء في علم المصريات اليوم. غالبًا تم تجاهل دور المرأة في الماضي والحاضر وفي دراسة مصر القديمة والسودان ، فسلطت هذه الجلسة الضوء على تلك المساهمات مع الاحتفال بتنوع النهج اوالأساليب في هذا المجال.

الكلمات الدالة نساء، جنس او نوع، إنحياز، تقاطع، الشمولية

[*]Corresponding Author: l.olabarria@bham.ac.uk

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1 Introduction

The session *XX-Cavations: Women in Ancient Egypt and Modern Egyptology* was the 11th panel scheduled for the launch of *Interdisciplinary Egyptology* and it attracted significant public attention with over 200 attendees. The premise of the panel was that women have only rarely been the focus of Egyptological studies until recent years, being often overlooked in what was (and lamentably to some extent still is) an elite 'Boys' Club'. This panel was meant to highlight the contribution of women, past and present, to the study of Egypt and Sudan, advocating for a need for gender balance and inclusivity in Egyptology as a field.

As section editor for Gender Theory in *Interdisciplinary Egyptology*, I was honoured to be invited to moderate this panel. Yet, in the run-up to the event, I was asked why there should be a session on women at all. We had had many other excellent launch panels, ranging from scientific methods to teaching practices to how to communicate our work to the public, but for some reason people only felt compelled to question the existence of this panel on women. A session on women is needed because they have been systematically excluded from the historical narratives as agents, being always measured against and interpreted in relation to men. In addition, studying women and gender in the past provides a thought-provoking framework for interrogating gender and power structures in the present, as argued in this report.

This panel featured a diverse line-up of speakers with a variety of approaches to the brief. This resulted in a lively discussion that demonstrated that there are multiple and complementary ways of doing research on and by women. Several topics were brought up during the panel, and I think these can be grouped together into three main themes, namely the study of women in ancient Egypt, how we do research and communicate it to the public, and the role of women in Egyptology today.

2 Studying women in the past

Since its inception, Egyptology has been a patriarchal field of study, fostered and developed by elite white men, with important contributions by women often going unrecognised (although see the work that TROWELBLAZERS are doing to identify the role of women in early archaeology, including the archaeology of Egypt). This male bias has historically shaped Egyptology's approach and scope, favouring androcentric interpretations of material culture and textual sources. A predominantly male gaze being cast on the sources over the years has resulted in a masculinisation of the discipline that is often completely ingrained in mainstream interpretations. Rather than projecting normative Western expectations into the past, new critical and theoretically-informed methods can offer opportunities to reassess the evidence, allowing previously underrepresented voices to shine.

An important aspect that was addressed in the panel is the idea of power and to what extent women participated in that power. Egypt is often regarded as an example of an ancient society where women were relatively independent and had more rights. This may be true in comparative terms, and Cooney suggested that the regime of land ownership in Egypt, with temples rather than private families amassing most agricultural assets, could be one of the main reasons why women were at an advantage. Despite this, it is undeniable that power in Egypt was also manufactured and perceived through a patriarchal lens (see the introduction in COONEY, 2018). Indeed, women in ancient Egypt, including rulers, always had to negotiate their position and present themselves in relation to men.

Powerful women of ancient Egypt have always attracted the attention of both scholars and the public, perhaps because the very idea of women in power is still fascinating to many. The way we study these figures of ancient power is also tainted by patriarchal structures that, sometimes unwittingly, affect Egyptological analyses of ancient phenomena. For example, it is not uncommon to find sexist remarks about women and authority; while

a man holding power is seen as able and strong, a woman would frequently be criticised as deceitful, which is directly linked to an Orientalising hypersexualisation of women known in sources about Egypt since classical times (e.g. the seminal work of Vasunia, 2001). Ashby noted the insufficiency of English and other Western languages when it comes to translating titles of female power, presenting some examples from the Kushite context. In addition to conceptual difficulties in rendering titles, the use of gendered language often betrays those patriarchal biases of the discipline. For example, in the literature, the female counterpart of terms translated as 'lord' is often 'mistress', which has obvious sexual connotations and is directly linked to the Orientalising view of ancient Egypt pointed out above (on this issue, see also Hellum, 2020). Sometimes it is possible to circumvent this problem by using more gender-neutral terms; for example, rather than referring to women like Hatshepsut as 'female kings', 'ruler' would be preferred.

Egyptology has also attempted descriptive work of non-elite women from a few key sites, most notably Deir el-Medina, in what could be recognised as an 'add women and stir' attitude often associated with second wave feminism (term coined by Bunch, 1987: 140). The main problem with these approaches is that they often analyse 'women' as a general and undifferentiated category instead of delving into individual experiences, recognising them as unique and personal. Analytical work in which the lived experience of those women is set against the general backdrop of power structures in Egypt has been less common, and there is still work to do with regard to the study of dynamics of relationships among women. This would be an important step towards presenting women on their own terms rather than weighed against the role of men or as an indefinite category that homogenises the variety of female experiences in the past.

3 Doing and communicating research

The second theme discussed by the panellists dealt with the way in which we study women in the past, and how we communicate our research to the public.

This methodological question is part of a much wider debate, as Egyptology has often been regarded as an insular field that does not look beyond its own narrow disciplinary boundaries. It has a lot to offer to other fields, especially in terms of chronological depth and the identification of individuals in the archaeological and textual records, which facilitates prosopographic research. However, this abundance of data may have some shortcomings because Egyptologists can fall into the trap of exceptionalism. Comparison was argued to be a powerful tool to avoid insularity and situate Egypt within a broader cultural context—for example, in order to explore patterns of household use or to investigate an alleged dichotomy between public and private matters in relation to gender. Panellists were all in agreement regarding the value of ethnographic comparison, although the scope of that comparison was debated. Ashby stressed the importance of placing Egypt within its African context, hence favouring parallels with Nubia, ancient and modern, as well as with other Nilotic and North African cultures. El Shazly suggested that careful comparison of ancient and modern Egypt may also provide enlightening avenues of interpretation, seeing unique opportunities in the collaboration of archaeologists and cultural anthropologists in the field. Graves-Brown proposed looking far and wide, highlighting the value of global ethnographic approaches that allow researchers to focus on structural comparisons rather than on direct influences or alleged survivals. All these approaches share a critical stance and a preference for theoretically-informed methods, as well as a willingness to initiate dialogue with other disciplines beyond the traditional framework of Egyptological research.

Another topic discussed concerning how we do research on women dealt with the use of theoretical perspectives. While theory can open avenues of research and interpretation, encouraging us to question what we know and think critically about the data, some of the writings on gender theory are sometimes laden with seemingly

impenetrable jargon in a way that could be considered a form of gatekeeping.

Theoretical discussions play an important role in situating Egyptology within wider debates and advancing our knowledge, and jargon is often a convenient shorthand for expressing complex concepts. However, it is important to bear in mind the audiences we are writing or speaking for when we decide to use theory-heavy language. This was regarded as especially relevant by members of the panel, because a considerable amount of public-facing Egyptology is often done by women, who are actively trying to dispel the common perception of Egyptology as a non-communicative and inward-looking field.

4 Being a woman in Egyptology today

The panel finished with a thought-provoking assessment of the role of women in Egyptology today. All panellists felt that women had come a long way in the discipline, with many of them in leadership positions in field projects, museums, and universities. There was agreement, however, that there is still a lot to be done in relation to tackling institutional sexism, improving inclusivity, and avoiding the perpetuation of gender roles.

First, a gendered disciplinary divide was acknowledged, where aspects of the study of Egypt related to curatorial work seem to be often undertaken by women. The diversity of the panel allowed us to note that the gendered divide between art history, language, archaeology, and museum studies is not the same across the board, with strong regional variations. Cooney suggested that only since the humanities started to be regarded as inferior to sciences in public opinion have women and people at the margins been 'allowed in'. Class considerations also play a significant part in access to Egyptology, particularly in a context of continuous institutional and governmental undermining of the humanities.

Second, problems were recognised regarding a clear gendered bottleneck in promotions, where women take longer than their male colleagues to apply for senior lectureships and leadership positions (see Hamilton (2014) and Pope (2021) for a view from archaeology). This situation is even worse for women of colour, and panellists discussed the need for amplifying underrepresented voices and experiences. In relation to this, impostor syndrome was mentioned as a significant factor in promotion applications. Studies have shown that impostor syndrome is more acute among women (e.g. Cokley et al., 2015; Feenstra et al., 2020), who are more prone to stressing their own faults, blaming themselves and tempering their achievements, while men may be less likely to publicly admit lack of knowledge. As it happens, panellists started their introductory statements by pointing out their limitations and lack of expertise to talk about women in ancient Egypt in what was an unintended but symptomatic example of impostor syndrome at work. One may wonder whether impostor syndrome may be also especially prevalent among those who engage in interdisciplinary studies, as we may be prey to feelings of inadequacy and inexperience in more than one field.

5 Women, gender, and *Interdisciplinary Egyptology*

This panel took place on March 23rd, which was especially poignant, as March is women's history month. The 2021 campaign's theme was 'Choose to challenge', and I think the discussions in this panel demonstrated many of the ways in which women are choosing to challenge in Egyptology. We are not only questioning the processes of construction and perpetuation of Egyptological knowledge, stepping away from traditional androcentric biases, but we are also advocating for the change of interpretive frameworks in order to highlight the roles of women, ancient and modern.

Women, however, are not the only social actors that would benefit from a reassessment of conventional

approaches to the past. It is essential to acknowledge that women were inserted into a complex universe of social relationships. In this sense, studying women in antiquity is not only about populating the past with women in a tokenistic manner (i.e. 'add women and stir'), but about understanding their embedded role from an intersectional perspective that takes into account different aspects of identity—including age, class, or ethnicity—and ancient power systems. This is a broad conversation that should not involve exclusively those identifying as women; it also entails questioning an alleged universality of the female experience. In order to study women, we need to do it from a relational, performative, and intersectional perspective, which is something that gender theory will help us articulate.

As this panel has shown, there is no single way of approaching the study of women, but gender studies always encourages researchers to question the power structures of the past and of the present, which is the direction that I am hoping the section of gender theory will take in *Interdisciplinary Egyptology*. We do not want to simply 'add women and stir' Egyptology. We want it shaken, not stirred.

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