

Episode 3

Bex: Welcome to the Nile Chronicles. You have successfully made it to episode three. This episode is all about gender roles and women in society. But before I talk about that, I want to talk a little bit about mythology. The Egyptian mythology, because I can't really talk about gender roles without talking about mythology. I mean, I can, but it's not as fun. Besides, I get to talk about one of my favorite goddesses in ancient Egyptian myth. So I'm going to be using a few different sources here today. Uh, one of them being *Black Women in Antiquity*, which was edited by Ivan Van Sertima. And it's a short book and it's a really quick read, but there's a whole section about ISIS in there. Another one that I might reference, I haven't decided yet, um. Is a visual reference guide for mythology. And I picked this up at Barnes and Noble a while back and I was like, this is going to come in handy. Um, it's by Philip Wilkinson and Neil Philip. Um, There's a little bit about Isis and the Egyptian gods and goddesses in here, so I might use that. Um, another book that I might use, oh, how much is actually in here about Isis? It is another book that I once again picked up from Barnes & Noble in the book *Annex*. And it's titled *Egyptian Myths and Legends*. Um, so I just have a few books here about Myths and Legends. And this is... Edited by J.K. Jackson, foreword by Dr. Chris Nonton. Um, so yeah, so getting into Egyptian women's roles.

Let's talk about Isis. So I'm, if you hear rustling in the background, that's just me fiddling with the book. So I'm going to start in, um, Ivan Van Surtima's book. And... This is really interesting because personally I have known a bit about Isis before starting this, but what I didn't know is how many different titles she has. And in this book, in this chapter, um, this chapter is by Eloise McKinley Johnson, and it's titled *Egypt's Isis, the Original Black Madonna*, which I think is very great. So she starts off and says, the great goddess Isis. The lady of a thousand titles is like Cleopatra, her most illustrious devotee, a great enchanceress. Of infinite varieties. Some of her other titles are, quote, "Lady of Heaven", "Womanly Tenderness", "Sisterly Love", "Mistress of Magic", "Lady of Light", "Chamber of the Birth of a God", "Lady of the sunrise", "the beautiful and the beloved lady of abundance", "queen of the south", "queen bee maker of honey", "The lady bountiful who fills the fields with crops and Egyptian cradles with newborn sons." And also "she who weeps".

So just a few different names, um, there for Goddess Isis. And I was not aware of all of these different titles. And Johnson continues to talk about this title that she's given called *She Who Weeps*. And it's because the ancient Egyptians acknowledged ISIS as the source of their prosperity and And Herodotus recorded that the, that the Nile or Egypt is the gift of the Nile and Facts, right? This wouldn't, this civilization probably would not have existed, arguably, without the Nile as their life source. And Johnson continues This whole idea of she who weeps is because they believe that the Nile began with Isis's tears

splashing from the heavens as she mourned her murdered husband, Osiris. Now, I'm going to switch over... Two backgrounds of Isis and who she is and who she belongs to. So I'm switching over to that visual reference of mythology that I picked up and let me get to the page here. Now this book is great because it has, uh, the Americas, the Asias, Africa, um, all sorts of good stuff. So, there's... A few different gods and goddesses in ancient Egyptian mythology, but I'm going to start with the Enneid. And... It says here, after the birth of the stars, Shu cursed his daughter so that she would never again give birth in any month of the year. But Nut, the sky goddess, gambled with Toth, who is actually the, who I failed to mention in a multilingualism episode, or not multilingualism, the last episode talking about scribes. Toth was the god of the scribes. He was credited with a lot of and he was actually named the chief judge in ancient Egyptian society when going through their afterlife processes, the last test is Your heart be weighed against a feather to determine your purity for the underworld.

Um, and Toth was being a scribe and being highly educated. Toth was the one that made that decision. Anyway, back to this. Toth was also the moon god and time reckoner and won five extra days from him to be added to the twelve lunar month Months of thirty days each. On these days she gave birth to her five children, Blind Horus, Osiris, Seth, Isis, and Nemphus. And so all of these children are nuts children, this guy got us. Um, and she is Depicted in ancient Egyptian art as the sky. So if you ever come across an image, and I'll probably put one in my documents alongside this episode. Nut is stretched across, um, her feet are on one side, her body is stretched across people, and her hands are then on the other side. It'll make more sense looking at that photo, but that's Nut. Uh, if you ever see any sort of thing, that's the sky goddess. So Isis is one of the daughters of Nut. The last four of these joined Ra, Shu, Tefnut, Geb, and Nut from the Aeneid, Egypt's nine greatest gods. So Nut's children ended up joining the nine greatest gods. And Ra is the sun god, he is a, he's a big character, especially when you get into, like, the composite gods of ancient Egypt, because they did just kind of attach names, um, like Amun-Ra is... A composite god and anything else where it's like a two-named god, that's called a composite god. I could do a whole episode on that. And you know what? I just might. Getting into ancient Egyptian mythology is quite a fun adventure, I must admit. But anyway, sticking with Isis in particular, so she's also associated with snakes, and she kind of is a little bit mischievous, and I love her for it. So... So, um, this mythology book continues And says under plot synopsis bitten by a snake. Each evening Ra became old, his mouth grew slack, and his spittle dribbled to the ground.

The goddess Isis, the mistress of magic, Collected the spittle, shaped it into a snake, and left it lying in Ra's path. The snake bit him, and Ra, king of the gods, fell down with a terrible cry. His limbs trembled as the poison surged through him like the Nile in flood. And then he says, I've been wounded, blah, blah, blah. My heart is burning and my body is trembling like the waves. So then Isis comes in and she doesn't only save him, but she

also steals his name. So Isis, radiant with power, said she would drive out the poison if Ra would tell her his secret name. Um, the poison burned in his veins so he allowed his name to pass from his body into hers. Then she chanted, flow out poison and spill to the ground. I, Isis, command you by the name which has passed from Ra's heart to mine, flow out and spill to the ground. By the power of his name, Ra shall live and the poison shall die. That's what it says. And then continuing on, there's this whole sibling rivalry. That goes on. And, uh, let's see. Let's get to it, shall we? Here we go. Where, where is it? Hold on. Let me pause real quick and I'm going to find this for you. Okay, I found it. So here is where it gets a little bit messy.

So there's the key characters here are Osiris, who was the first king of Egypt. Seth, who is Osiris' brother, god of chaos and confusion. Blind-Horus, Osiris' brother, who gets killed by Seth. Isis, who is married to Osiris as his sister wife and Nephys, Osiris' sister, Seth's sister wife. Okay. So here we go. It says, Osiris was the first king of the upper world. He earned the name Wenifer. Now that's a key point there. But Osiris had a violent brother named Seth. That fits accordingly considering he's the god of chaos in ancient Egyptian mythology. Had a violent brother named Seth who had already killed one brother, Blind Horus, and now decided to murder another. I would hate to have him as a brother. Anyway, he tricked Osiris into a wooden chest which he sealed with molten lead and floated down the Nile.

Osiris' wife Isis rescued his body but Seth found it... So Seth found the body, he cut it up, and scattered the pieces all over Egypt. Quote, it is not possible to destroy the body of a god, he said, but I have done so. Well, he's a little bit hubris and Isis and his and her sister Nephys gathered all of the fragments so they searched up and down Egypt to find all of Osiris' fragments. And with the help of Anubis, who's the jackal god of the dead, and Toth, the moon god, the sisters pierced, sorry, not pierced, sisters pieced them together to make the first ever mummy. Then Isis transformed herself into a kite and hovered over Osiris's body, fanning breath into it just long enough to become pregnant. She fled from Seth, accompanied by seven scorpions. When a rich woman refused her shelter, the scorpions stung the woman's son, but Isis took pity on him and saved him. Later, when her infant son Horace was bitten by a scorpion, Isis was unable to save him. Because she had used up her power. But her anguish was so great it halted Ra, the sun god, causing the whole world to falter. Ra saved the day and the world by sending Toth to cure Horus. And then there's a whole long sibling rival history that continues even on beyond that. But remember when it said that Isis was... Isis had taught women these important life skills. So we already know right there that ISIS was um, was connected with women in some way. So going back to The chapter by Eloise Johnson. She says, the ancient Egyptians believed that Isis taught women how to comb and curl their hair and that she taught them the pleasures and powers of perfume And of cosmetics in general. To Isis, they attributed the custom of wearing wedding veils and wedding rings. They said she

introduced fragrances to soothe the living and embalming procedures to preserve the dead. They believed, too, that she dreamt That she sent dreams as mysterious messengers to warn and to console them. They revered Isis as a moon goddess and as the embodiment of all the feminine qualities which Render women desirable. And she kind of continues into more about different aspects of the goddess Isis. And Isis does have temples throughout the Roman Empire. And she lives in, I believe, about the same belief as in ancient Egypt. And I, you know, I fully could have misspoken, but... I do believe not much has changed.

Here, Johnson says, in the spread of Isis, Or Isiac worship during the empire, Ethiopians played a substantial role. In their native Ethiopia, Isis was one of four deities whom the people in the vicinity of Maori were... Worshipped because they believed that these particular divinities had been benefactors of the human race. So Isis has a very long history and now that we're about. fourteen minutes into this podcast episode already and I haven't even mentioned ordinary women. Now remember when I was talking about how ISIS put together, uh, Osiris? Well, That moment in their mythology right there, they, right, right then and there, they were like, wow, women are powerful. Uh, they recognize that strength that Isis had. To put together her brother husband, I guess. I don't know if she's his sister wife, I don't know.

I guess he's her brother husband. Uh, but anyway. Isis nonetheless was a powerful goddess and she's the women, she's the reason why women in ancient Egypt had as many rights as they did, especially royal women. Now, I want to do a deep dive as much as I want to do a deep dive into every single aspect of ancient Egyptian gender roles. I want to keep this as condensed as possible and later on I'll probably release an episode, um, or a mini-series within this series talking about the difference, uh, doing a deep dive into the different roles of women. But when it comes to women in society and gender roles and what that meant, what it meant to be an ancient Egyptian woman, you actually had a pretty good stable relationship. Right. Especially when my favorite is when it comes to marriage, it wasn't a lawful exchange. It was simply they would move in together and then if the woman wanted a divorce, then she could just move out. And that was it. Marriage wasn't recognized by the state in ancient Egypt, which I find fascinating. And also previously talking about, um, Arulia and Lolila, uh, who was it? Lolila, I believe, no, Arulia had land rights. She owned land and that's something you don't see in other parts of the ancient world. Around the time of Egypt's existence, which is very cool. So not only were women able to have some hand in, in land ownership without having a man with them. They also could marry whoever they wanted and divorce whoever they wanted. So a lot of what we know about women, a lot of it comes from elite women and Higher ups in society. And one of the books that I am using is Is a reference guide and I figure this reference guide, um, edited by Bella Vivante is just a really good overview of what women did in ancient Egypt. And there is another source I believe I have, um, yes,

the Edwards source, and she primarily talks about The queens and the royals and not so much ordinary women because we know less about them, but we know that they existed because we can see it in papyri and in other inscriptions. So, this may be a little bit longer episode, but now that we got through the mythology, let's get into the roles of women. Okay, so getting into the roles of women,

I am actually not going to start with that reference book. Rather, I'm going to start with an article Called Hidden Voices, Unveiling Women in Ancient Egypt. And this is a chapter of a book titled A Companion to Women. In the ancient world. And this specific chapter, I believe it's chapter two, is written by Kasia Spachowska? Um. I think that's how you say your last name. I don't know. It's very pretty. I just don't know how to say it. So let's, let's start with gender roles. So in gender roles, there's real women versus ideal women. Women, which is what this article reflects. So in the instructions of Tahotep. Which is one of Egypt's oldest wisdom texts. Men are told to love their wives, but also to keep them from power. Barf, basically. Big yikes. So in this sense, women are painted into the roles of pleasure givers, child bearers, and keepers of the home. That's the ideal. That's what I feel like women have the role, women have been painted into that role, role far beyond ancient Egypt. So, the real picture is a lot more complex, so I'm gonna try to keep it as, I don't know, comprehensive, but...

I'm trying to condense this as much as possible because I could spend a whole episode just talking about this article, but I'm trying to get to the letters. Um, so let's see here. Uh, we find letters written by women as I have mentioned and these women Oversee weaving workshops and temple supplies. Administrative records show women managing estates like, um, the stories in the cases of Aurelia. As well as Lolaila, but Lolaila being more illiterate. Um, and, because remember, Aurelia had all those, what is it, forty-two documents, and a lot of them were about land management. They also... Held titles and would supervise laborers. Some even served as priestesses and chancestresses in religious rituals. Rituals? That was a lot of R's. Their roles being passive but essential. So they were, I guess in modern terms, essential employees as we would think of them today. Now, about the famous Egyptian art, while public tomb and temple art presents women as graceful, passive, and secondary to men, Often, for religious or symbolic reasons, informal sketches tell a very different story, and this is all in the, um, article, the Spatskosia article, um, One of these sketches shows a mother breastfeeding her baby under a shelter. Another scene in the tomb of Menea depicts women picking figs while tending to children. It's raw, it's human, and it's proof that women were active participants in daily life, even if they weren't named or immortalized as heroes. So Spetskotsa goes on to Talk about the bodies themselves, uh, beyond the, beyond just what the art reflects. But before talking about the bodies and the bones, I want to say that she mentions that textual evidence can be divided into two categories, literacy, literary, And documentary. And she says, pre-Tolomeic literary genres include tales, didactic texts,

hymns, poems, which include love poetry, biographies, And royal ritual, divination, and religious texts. While the documentary genres include decrees, lists, legal texts, Spells, labels, correspondence, titles, and scientific, administrative, and medical texts, which with, of course, much overlap. So there's not many biographies of women. Literary texts tend to present a more idealized view of their world. Um, And there's so many different pictures. In reality, women held more important positions outside the home, such as priestesses, temple workers, managers, and producers of linen, one of the most important commodities And because they were producers of linen, regardless if they were literate or not, because they could weave, that meant they were a part of the economy. They contributed to it, which I think is very cool. So, going back to the bodies, forensic science studies are opening up a whole new window as we know in the field of archaeology. Women's skeletons show sign of hard labor, suggesting that gender divisions in work were not always strict. And those sites are in Abydos? Abydos? I can't remember how to say it. Um, so, yeah, women took a shovel into the dirt. They I think Szpakowska also talks about women in manual labor as well. So regardless, there's a fresh debate around the assumption Assumptions like early marriage and childbearing long held as the norms in ancient Egypt, but Szpakowska points out that factors like malnutrition may have delayed menstruation, challenging that entirety of Entire narrative of childbearing and birth and everything. And to go along with that, like, women's roles in the house, they were... Yeah, about what we expect, but they didn't just stay in the house, right? I mean, they would go and do manual labor and attend an economic affair and be part of the royal court, which is pretty cool.

Um, that they were a part of more than just the house and the royal scene. So as far as secular power and sacred spaces, women held agency. They're depicted performing libations in household shrines. Play votive, uh, stela, or stela, often dedicated without reference to male relative, show women as independent participants in cult worship. So, yeah, cult worship is just religious worship, um, and it's interesting. And those altars in front, in the front rooms of the houses at Deir el Medina, they were once thought to be birthing beds. Those front rooms. But now they're understood as places of worship where women likely led or participated in domestic ritual life. So that's, that's a very condensed version of what Szpakowska says. But yeah, I mean, women in ancient Egypt, they were They had power, they had rights, they had political rights. I mean, I could do a whole episode dedicated to the pharaohs and the queens of Egypt. There's so much to know. So I'm gonna briefly talk about the reference book because I know this episode is getting quite lengthy. Um, but talking about women in Egypt unspecifically, just talking about the gender roles that they Had in society takes up a lot of space and it should. So let me crack open this reference book and refer to my notes here. Okay, so according to this reference book and talking about women's religious roles, mostly men performed the rituals, but women also served, um, specifically in the Old Kingdom and the beginning of the Middle Kingdom. Elite women were priestesses of the goddess Hathor, and we can

assume that they conducted rituals in her temple. Some women served as priests for other deities, and most priests other than those of Hathor were male. During the New Kingdom, there were few priestesses. Many elite women were actually musicians in the worship of various deities. So they were responsible for making music to accompany the performance of ritual by shaking instruments called sistras. Secret to the goddess Hathor. I believe they were Sistras. Um, their wall was of great importance since its purpose was to bring the dangerous aspect out. Ugh, whoa. Dangerous aspects of the divine under control through music and chanting so that humans could have contact with deities without suffering harm.

These women musicians were headed by the superior of the musical, Trope, who was usually the wife of a high-ranking official, often one of the top priests in the temple hierarchy. Male musicians were known to have roles in the temples. Elite men at this time don't have titles suggesting that they acted as musicians and it seems that there was greater status for women than men in being A musician, and that's all from the reference book. Um, all right, this, this idea of music in ancient Egypt and, and in antiquity, which I didn't even know really was a thing until I started taking, um. Archaeology and sound this semester and it's been very fascinating um, to talk about the different instruments that exist and that's a whole sub-field that's emerging of um, archaeology. So We see women in these religious roles, um, and the ones who didn't serve as priests, priestesses, uh, they served as musicians, which is really cool. Um... And then there's so much about funerary beliefs. And then we get into some royal women. And there was... Quite a few. So the queen, so in royal women there's the queen, the king's mother, and then the king's wife. And all of these women are always associated with the king. And In Egypt, as well as ancient Nubia, it was believed to be a matrilineal lineage from mother to son. And they got their power through the women, um, which is pretty epic. And in ancient Nubia, there was this whole concept of godwives of Amun, um, And that's, I believe, started in Egypt, um, actually. Or did it start in Nubia? I can't remember. But it existed in both places regardless. So anyway, there's the king's mother. Held one ritual role that she did not share with his principal wife. The importance of the king's mother and his principal wife leads to the question of how these women achieved their positions. There's a theory that king's mother, a king's mother was probably supposed to to be the previous king's principal wife, but a king's principal wife did not always produce an heir, so that kings could also be the offspring of secondary wives. Who were thus raised from obscurity to a position of prominence. So we see whenever there's a pharaoh there's usually women associated with him and they valued women In ancient Egypt, they valued them enough to even have weens. And like I said, that's a whole, that's a whole, whole episode in itself. So... To review so far, we have women in the house, we have women in royal scenes, we have them being queens, we have female kings like Queen Hachepsut who, if you do not know that name, Please, for your own edification, look at, look her up and do some research into her because she's quite amazing. And then there's this whole concept of

marriage and marriage rights. So in ancient Egypt, marriage wasn't Overseen by the state. It was woman could marry a man. There's even an instance of two Men who never married women who were always seen in art together who were presumed to be gay, um, presumed to be husbands. And... Then in the house, there's little, there's lesser known because those are like the lower status women. But when it talks about women's economic and legal positions, Women could not hold government office and receive salaries, but they could have their own incomes apart from their husbands if they ever married. And from the early kingdom onward, they could own land and other property. They retained their rights to ownership after marriage, so even after a divorce. Property was inherited equally by all the children regardless of gender or regardless of sex. Um, Women could generate income through cultivating, employing a worker to cultivate the land that they owned or rented. They could independently enter into business transactions. Uh, by trading commodities. And we see that, again, with the case of Arulia. Um, well, I guess hers is more so land-based. Um. But women... Killed it in ancient Egypt. Um. They were, they were, women were also responsible for producing textiles and vegetables themselves. They could own slaves. Records exist of transaction, um, trading textiles for slave workers. They could also accumulate wealth. Elite women shared In a system of wealth in which they could own resources in their own right which in turn gave them status and potential power within the society. They did not have access to regular incomes. Given to government officials, except as dependents. So, and then in public life, there's authoritative roles. And then it talks about the non-elite, the lower class of women.

And we only know them from visual material of the elite and as well from texts. In the New Kingdom, the labor provided by the state to households at Deir el-Medina was Uh, grind, the people grinding the grain were female. Non-elite women were also employed as household servants, musicians and dancers, hairdressers, and most likely wet nurses. And now all of these occupations are all indoor-based. There's far less evidence for non-elite women working outdoors. And... There's a clear division of labor based on gender that exists in certain scenes during the Old Kingdom and the Middle Kingdom. And it's because if you have an arm... If you have farmland in ancient Egypt, well, that's a huge, huge section of land, truthfully. Um, so you're going to need a lot of workers regardless of gender. Both men and women were called up for state labor, but it's not clear what tasks women were sent to. And when we talk about non-elite women outside of royal workshops, A lot of them made jewelry, um, and did metalworking, carpentry, sculpture, leatherworking, etc. And most of these scenes we know from Toon Chapels of the Elite. There's always workers behind the elite, of course, because the more workers you had, the higher status you had. So it's really interesting that There were only very limited places for non-elite women, but yet they still, they worked, um, they had in some sort of income, whether it was actual money or if it was Textiles of some kind. And basically there's a lot to talk about gender roles. And just by knowing what women did, what they

worked, where they existed in the social life, tells a lot about ancient Egypt as a society. In the sense that all of this shows that they respected women to some degree. They respected women enough to Ruled them as queens and pharaohs. They respected them enough to properly depict them in art. They respected them enough to write about them, which is huge. And to not write... Oh, what's the word? They didn't write about women in a degrading way, to my knowledge, um, in ancient Egypt. And one of the reasons I, I know why, why they became, why royal women could become pharaohs And again, that could be a whole episode about the succession lines of ancient Egyptian women. There's a lot to talk about. One of the reasons is that ancient Egyptians actually valued women in the sense of being more emotional and more rational. Which is something I feel like has gotten lost in history. But ancient Egyptian women... were valued by the sense that they wouldn't just declare war on somebody and they just wouldn't, they would act rationally and maybe based in emotion to show composure. That they would think things through before acting upon them and there were some pharaohs who did not do that at all and were very irrational. So regardless, this has been a very long episode.

But we have covered the mythology of why women had roles. And why they were respected in ancient Egypt because of goddess Isis and everything that Isis gave not only women in society, but because they believed she produced the Nile, ancient Egypt Egyptians would not have gotten far without the goddess Isis's contributions to them. And she gave them, the women, the sense of femininity and beauty and power within it. They had roles in the home. They had roles in the royal courts. They could, uh, they could be a part of the economy. They could own land. They had their own marriage rights. They could conduct their own businesses. They could have a sense of independent income. Even in the household, they would create linen. They would be a part of the economic balance of ancient Egypt and be able to contribute to that. These women, they were musicians. In the temples, those who didn't want to hold a role as a priestess, they could participate in different rituals. They were child bearers, they were mothers, they were loving people. And they could really do whatever they wanted and women in ancient Egyptian society were seen as an equal to men. A socially equal to men. And that's pretty incredible. And I love that being in ancient Egypt, if you were an ancient Egyptian woman, then you were pretty well off according to history. Which is pretty fantastic. Now, the question is, With these roles that women had in society, what on earth were they writing about? What did these personal letters reflect? What can they tell us? What is their significance? Why are they important and why should they? Be talked about in the studies of ancient Egypt. That's the next several episodes of the Nile Chronicles. Thank you so much for sticking with me. I know this episode was super long. But I'm glad you're still here if you are listening. I can't wait to start talking about these letters and I'm sure you're just as eager to listen to that or at least that's my hope. Until next time on the Nile Chronicles.

There is simply a lot to know about ancient Egyptian women and the roles that they played in society. So I thank you for bearing with me if you have made it this far. And I hope that you will continue on to the next episode, episode four, because that's when we really start to talk about some of these letters. What were these women writing about? Why were they important? Why should they be brought up more often in the study of ancient Egypt? I think they are incredible reading the words of these women because they were So, so incredible and the roles that they played and their day-to-day lives is all about what these letters are about. So until next time, I'll see you on the Nile Chronicles.