

## WOMEN IN ANCIENT EGYPT

<sup>1</sup> Egypt treated its women better than any of the other major **civilizations** of the ancient world. The Egyptians believed that joy and happiness were legitimate goals of life and regarded home and family as the major source of delight. It was taken for granted in the ancient world that the head of the house was the man. Marriage and children were always considered desirable, but in some societies wives were simply servants and children were only important when they grew up.

Egyptian women were **fortunate** in two important ways:

1. they were regarded as totally equal to men as far as the law was concerned. They could own property, borrow money, sign contracts, **initiate** divorce, appear in court as a witness, etc.
2. Love and emotional support were considered to be important parts of marriage.

### MARRIAGE

<sup>2</sup> Athenian men married out of a sense of **civic duty** at the age of 30 or more, at which time they married girls half their age whose youth made them easier to control. In contrast, Ancient Egyptian men and women valued and enjoyed each other's company. Love and affection were thought to be important, and marriage was the natural state for people of all classes.

<sup>3</sup> It is interesting to note, however, that there is no record anywhere of an actual marriage ceremony. We have records of divorce, we know that adultery was **forbidden**, and it is clear that everyone knew who was married to whom. Some scholars believe that the absence of any information on an actual marriage ceremony is merely a fluke. Others argue that there was no ceremony: a couple was married when they began to live together.

<sup>4</sup> A small handful of documents mention a man giving permission for a marriage, but all are sufficiently ambiguous (confusing) to leave open the question of whether or not a father's permission was necessary as it was in other societies of the time.

<sup>5</sup> Kings, particularly those in the New Kingdom, had several wives, although only one bore the title King's Great Wife and functioned as Queen. **Monogamy** seems to have been the norm for the rest of the country. A high death rate, particularly in childbirth, meant that many Egyptian men and women had more than one spouse in their life time, but there is no clear evidence of **polygamy** among anyone other than the king.

**MISTRESS OF THE HOUSE** Marriage was the natural state for Egyptians, and the most common title for non-royal women was "mistress of the house". There is little doubt that in Egypt, as in the rest of the ancient world, the man was expected to be the head of the family, but a popular bit of advice urged husbands to avoid interfering in household matters and trust their wives to do the job properly. There was certainly enough work for everyone as food had to be prepared from scratch; in fact, if you wanted a loaf of bread you would even have to grind the grain yourself. You might buy sandals but most other articles of clothing were made in the home. Those who could afford it had servants and slaves to do the actual work, but the 'mistress of the house' would still be expected to **supervise** and to see that everything was done properly.