

# Domestic Space and Gender Roles in Ancient Egypt

## A View from Amarna and Deir el-Medina

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Amarna Workmen's Village, 2009. Photograph by Rodolfo Valverde.

The importance of the household in ancient Egypt is clearly reflected in the language, where among the words for marriage were *'q r pr*, literally translated 'to enter a house', or *grg pr*, meaning 'to establish a house(hold).<sup>01</sup> The commonest title for a married woman is *nbt pr*, 'lady of the house.'<sup>02</sup> However, it is noticeable that there were no specific words for each room or area of the house, as was, later, the case in Hellenistic Egypt.<sup>03</sup> The interpretation of the relationship amid gender and space within ancient Egyptian village households will be the focus of this paper. The term 'village houses' refers to small domestic units of the middle and lower classes of the society, which were located in small self-contained villages. The two best preserved sites comprising such architecture are two New Kingdom workmen's villages one at Tell el-Amarna and the other at Deir el-Medina.

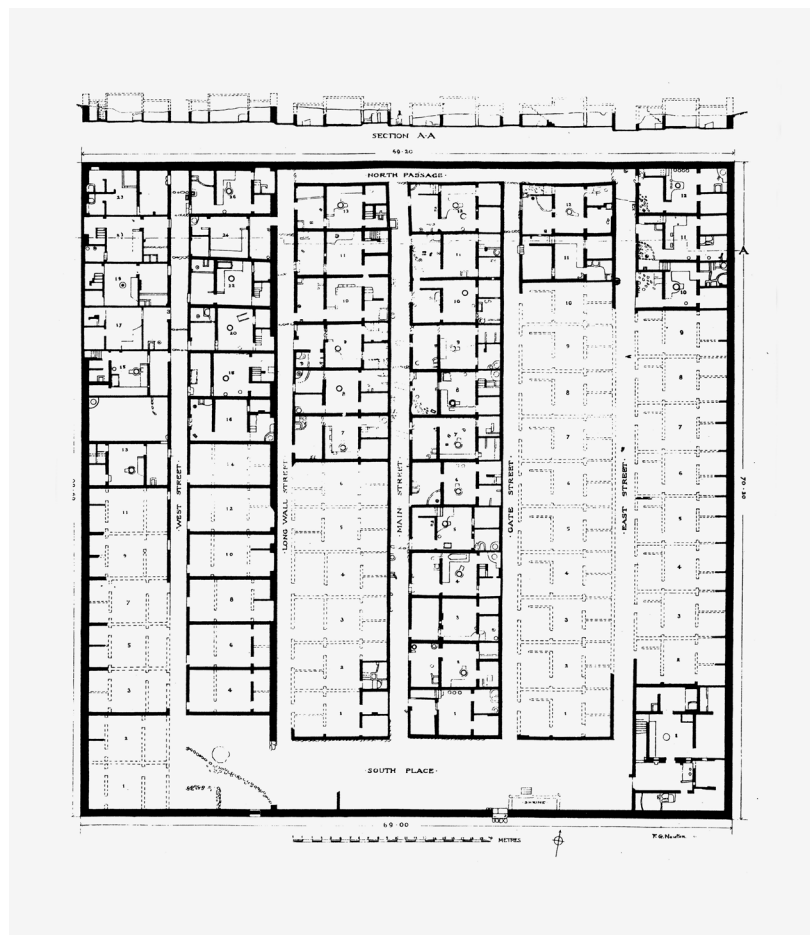
01 Pieter W Pestman, *Mariage and Matrimonial Property in Ancient Egypt* (Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers, 1961), 9–10.

02 Jaana K. Toivari, "Women at Deir el-Medina. A study of the status and roles of the female inhabitants in the workmen's community during the Ramesside period", unpublished dissertation thesis (University of Leiden, 2000), 17–20.

03 Geneviève Husson, *OIKIA Le Vocabulaire de la maison privée en Egypte d'après les papyrus grecs* (Paris: Éditions Recherche sur les Civilisations, 1983)

### THE WORKMEN'S VILLAGES AT AMARNA AND DEIR EL-MEDINA

The Workmen's Village in the area of Amarna (in Middle Egypt) lay in a small valley between the cliffs east of Akhetaten, the new state capital established by the pharaoh Akhenaten. The village was built in order to house the workmen of the Royal Tombs. It was walled and almost square with two gateways at the south, and consisted of six rows of houses, divided by five streets. The site was initially excavated by Peet and Woolley in 1921–1922, when 36 houses were excavated.<sup>04</sup> The excavation was careful, considering the archaeological methods of the period, and the publication rather detailed, with a reasonable interpretation of the function of each room. Recently, Barry Kemp excavated 4 more houses in the village.<sup>05</sup> The thorough publication, with detailed description and analysis has provided a substantial material for the study of the domestic architecture in the village.

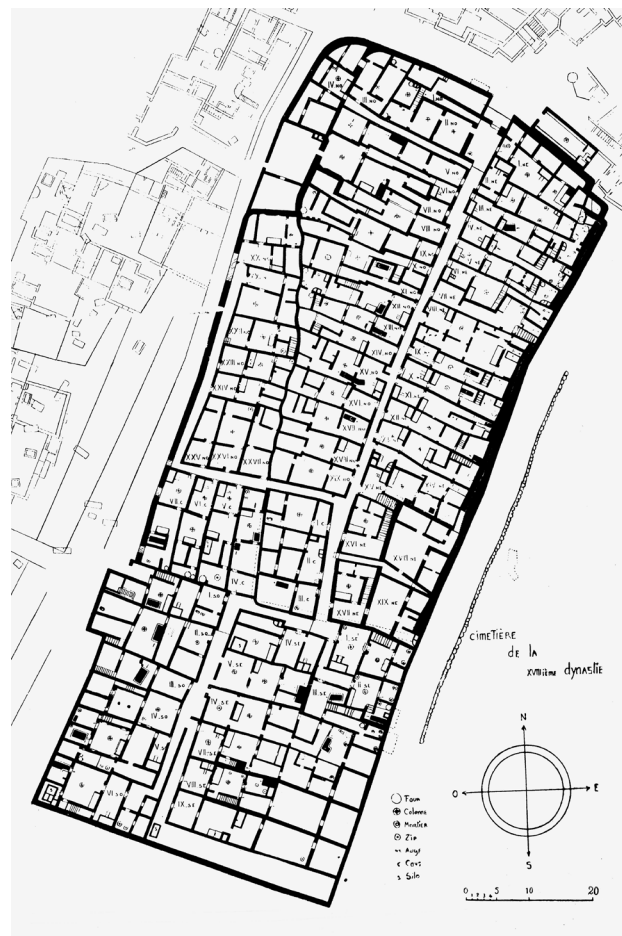


Plan of Amarna Workmen's Village after Thomas Eric Peet and Charles Leonard Wooley, *The city of Akhenaten I*, (London, 1923), pl. XVI; reproduced with permission of the Egypt Exploration Society.

<sup>04</sup> Thomas Eric Peet, "Excavations at Tell el-Amarna: a preliminary report," *JEA* 7 (1921): 175–178; Charles Leonard Wooley, "Excavations at Tell el-Amarna," *JEA* 8 (1922): 48–59; Thomas Eric Peet and Charles Leonard Wooley, *The city of Akhenaten I*, (London, 1923), 51–91.

<sup>05</sup> B.J. Kemp, "Preliminary report on the el-'Amarna survey," *JEA* no. 64 (1978): 22–34; Barry John Kemp, "Wall paintings from the workmen's village at el-'Amarna," *JEA* 65 (1979): 47–53; Barry John Kemp, "Preliminary report on the el-'Amarna survey, 1979," *JEA* 66 (1980): 5–16; Barry John Kemp, "Preliminary report on the el-'Amarna survey, 1980," *JEA* 67 (1981): 5–20; Barry John Kemp et al., *Amarna Reports III* (London: Egypt Exploration Society, 1986), 1–33; Barry John Kemp et al., *Amarna Reports IV* (London: Egypt Exploration Society, 1987), 1–46, 132–159.

The village of Deir el-Medina lay at the West Bank of Thebes between the Valleys of the Kings and the Queens and was also built to house the workmen of the Royal Tombs. It was excavated by Bruyère during the second decade of the twentieth century. In the publication the interpretation seems to have influenced the presentation of data. As a result of a largely unsupervised excavation, only the impressive or precious finds are recorded with the distinction of the room in which they were discovered.<sup>06</sup> Recently some parts of the village were re-excavated by Bonnet and Valbelle to reveal the stratigraphy of the site.<sup>07</sup> The occupation of the village continued from the early 18<sup>th</sup> until the late 20<sup>th</sup> Dynasty, undergoing several extensions. The village is roughly rectangular in plan and surrounded by an enclosure wall. The final layout contained 68 houses. As at Amarna, the plan gives the impression of terraced housing built in rows attached to each other. The village had one main gateway at the north, leading to the main village street.



Plan of Deir el-Medina after Bernard Bruyère, *Rapport sur les fouilles de Deir el Médineh* (1934-1935) (Cairo, 1939), pl. 63; reproduced with permission of the Institut Française d'Archéologie Orientale.

<sup>06</sup> Bernard Bruyère, *Rapport sur les fouilles de Deir el Médineh* (1927-1928) (Cairo: Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale, 1928); Bernard Bruyère, *Rapport sur les fouilles de Deir el Médineh* (1930) (Cairo: Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale, 1933); Bernard Bruyère, *Rapport sur les fouilles de Deir el Médineh* (1931-1932) (Cairo: Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale, 1934); Bernard Bruyère, *Rapport sur les fouilles de Deir el Médineh* (1934-1935) (Cairo: Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale, 1939)

<sup>07</sup> Charles Bonnet and Dominique Valbelle, "Le village de Deir el- Médineh. Reprise de l'étude archéologique," *Bulletin de l'Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale du Caire* 75 (1975)

Charles Bonnet and Dominique Valbelle, "Le village de Deir el- Médineh. Étude archéologique (suite)," *Bulletin de l'Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale du Caire* 76 (1976)

The general layout of the Amarna village houses is highly standardised: they were rectangular and their floor area was consistently about 5 by 10 m. Each house was divided into three unequal parts: a rectangular front room, and almost square middle one and a rectangular rear part, which was divided into two smaller areas. Most of the excavated houses possessed a staircase, either in the front or the rear part. The ground plan and the size of the village houses in Deir el-Medina closely resemble those of the Amarna Village. The Deir el-Medina houses were not quite as standardised as those in the Amarna Village, but this is a result of individual alterations over a much longer period of occupation. Almost all the houses share the same basic features being roughly rectangular and consisting of four successive rooms, rather than three as was the case for the Amarna ones.

#### SPACE USE OF THE INDIVIDUAL ROOMS IN THE HOUSES OF THE AMARNA WORKMEN'S VILLAGE AND DEIR EL-MEDINA

The front room of the houses in both villages was rectangular or roughly rectangular. Inside the room the staircase was sometimes constructed, which generally had a cupboard underneath. A short coping wall divided the room into two smaller parts in some Amarna Village houses. There are strong elements to suggest that this room was used for keeping animals in many cases.<sup>08</sup> When the room was subdivided, its one part was meant usually for keeping animals, and that was also the case for the cupboards under the staircase.<sup>09</sup> Texts from Deir el-Medina inform us that the villagers possessed animals such as donkeys, cattle, pigs<sup>10</sup>, which were kept for their products, their meat and their services.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, there is clear evidence for the keeping of pigs in Amarna Workmen's Village, either in animal pens outside the village or within the houses.<sup>12</sup> A number of other domestic activities were also taking place in the front room, such as grinding and sometimes cooking or bread making.<sup>13</sup> Horizontal looms were sometimes put inside the front rooms, indicating that weaving also happened there.<sup>14</sup>

The front room has been generally considered as a roofed area.<sup>15</sup> In the recent excavation of the house at Gate Street 8 in the Amarna Workmen's Village<sup>16</sup> no roof fragments have come to light from the front room, and the excavator suggested that this part of the house was an open court. In addition, the vast majority of ancient Egyptian house models represent houses with a walled front court,<sup>17</sup> while a two-dimensional representation of a similar tripartite house in a block from Karnak also depicts the front room as a court.<sup>18</sup> The activities that took place in this room, *i.e.* animal keeping, grinding, baking, or weaving, do not require a roofed area. In modern Egyptian rural houses such activities and space uses concen-

08 Thomas Eric Peet and Charles Leonard Wooley, *The city of Akhenaten I*, (London: Egypt Exploration Society, 1923), 60–61;

Aikaterini Koltsida, "Social aspects of ancient Egyptian domestic architecture," unpublished PhD dissertation. (Liverpool University, 2001), 58–64.

09 Peet and Wooley, *The city of Akhenaten I*, 60, 72.

10 Jac J. Janssen, *Commodity Prices from the Ramessid Period. An Economic Study of the Village of Necropolis Workmen at Thebes* (Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers, 1975), 164–178;

Andrea G. McDowell, "Agricultural activity by the workmen of Deir el-Medina," *JEA* 78 (1992): 195–216.

11 Patrick F. Houlihan, *The Animal World of the Pharaohs* (London: Egypt Exploration Society, 1996), 11–31;

Jac J. Janssen and R. Janssen, *Egyptian Household Animals* (Aylesbury: Shire Publications, 1989), 27–36.

12 Kemp et al., *Amarna Reports IV*, 40.

13 Koltsida, "Social aspects of ancient Egyptian domestic architecture," 51–64, 119–121.

14 Koltsida, "Social aspects of ancient Egyptian domestic architecture," 58–64, 73.

15 Peet and Wooley, *The city of Akhenaten I*, 55–61.

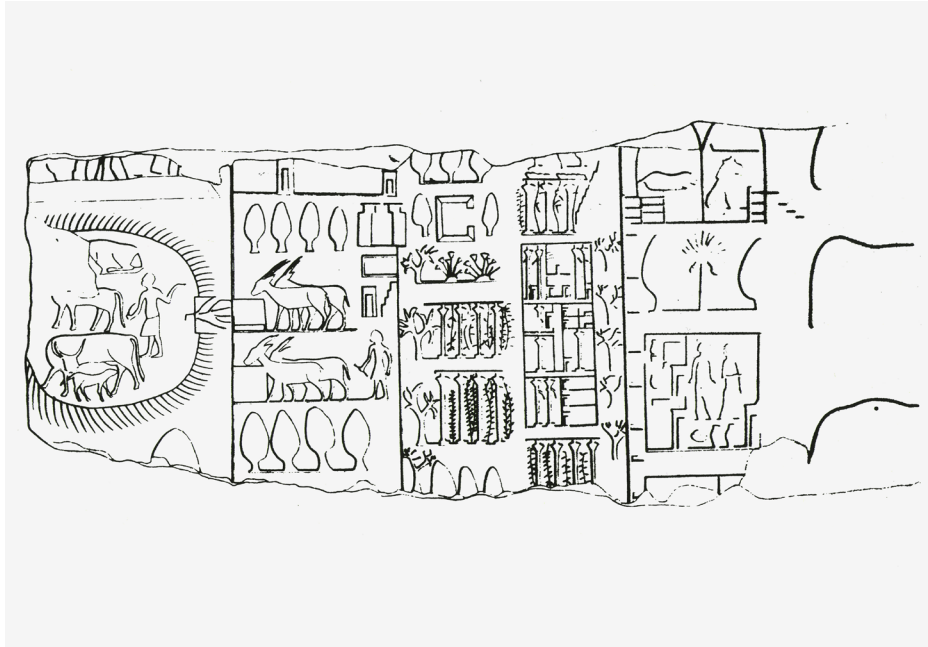
Bruyère, *Rapport sur les fouilles de Deir el Médineh (1934-1935)*, 54.

16 Kemp et al., *Amarna Reports III*, 1–27.

17 Koltsida, "Social aspects of ancient Egyptian domestic architecture," 30–40.

18 Muhammad Hamad and Hans F. Werkmeister, "Haus und Garten im alten Ägypten," *Zeitschrift für Ägyptische Sprache und Altertumskunde* 81 (1955): 104–108.

trate in an unroofed area, and in particular the front court.<sup>19</sup> Therefore, it is feasible that the front room in the houses of both villages was either totally an unroofed space or occasionally covered with possibly a semi-permanent roof.



House representation from a block in Karnak after Muhammed Hammad and Hans F. Werkmeister, "Haus und Garten im alten Ägypten," *Zeitschrift für Ägyptische Sprache und Altertumskunde* 81 (1955): fig. 1, reproduced with permission of Akademie Verlag GmbH.

One of the constituents of the front room of the Deir el-Medina houses that has raised a number of arguments for its use is the so-called 'elevated bed' (*lit clos*).<sup>20</sup> This is a brick, rectangular, elevated platform with a row of three to five steps leading to it, incorporated at one of the corners of the room and enclosed by thin walls.<sup>21</sup> Those platforms were either white-washed or plastered and painted, and their decoration usually depicts the god Bes in a celebratory mood or other motives and scenes, some of which are connected with female activities.<sup>22</sup>

Those altars have traditionally been interpreted as birth beds,<sup>23</sup> while most recently it has been implied that "they focused broadly on female life in all its aspects, including the procreative, the maternal and even the erotic."<sup>24</sup> Besides the fact that it seems most unlikely for such activities to have taken place in the most public part of the house, which was also dedicated to dusty activities, such as grinding or animal keeping, the similarities of those structures to the domestic altars, usually placed in the central room of the large Amarna villas<sup>25</sup> are considerable, and it seems conceivable that they served as domestic shrines, placed in the front instead of the middle room of the house, due to the lack of space in the latter. Therefore, instead of considering those structures as the place for deliveries, it is likely that they were the areas where, among other possible

19 Houssam Fakhouri, *Kafr el-Elow. An Egyptian Village in Transition* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1972), 18.

20 Bruyère, *Rapport sur les fouilles de Deir el Médineh (1934-1935)*, 62.

21 Bruyère, *Rapport sur les fouilles de Deir el Médineh (1934-1935)*, 56-57.

22 Koltsida, "Social aspects of ancient Egyptian domestic architecture," 67-69.

23 Bruyère, *Rapport sur les fouilles de Deir el Médineh (1934-1935)*, 59;

Emma Brunner-Traut, "Die Wochenlaube," *Mitteilungen des Instituts für Orientforschung* 3 (1955): 30-31;

Geraldine Pinch, "Childbirth and female figurines at Deir el-Medina and el-Amarna," *Orientalia* 52 (1983): 405-414.

24 Morton Herbert Fried, *The Evolution of Political Society: An Essay in Political Anthropology* (New York: Random House, 1967), 110.

25 Koltsida, "Social aspects of ancient Egyptian domestic architecture," 166-167.

rituals, fertility and successful childbirth were celebrated.<sup>26</sup>

The middle room was square or almost square. It possessed a sitting place –in the form of a low dais– against one or two of its walls, and a hearth, usually at the centre of the room or in close proximity to the dais. A central column supported the roof in most Deir el-Medina middle rooms, while in Amarna Workmen’s Village columns were less usual. The walls were usually whitewashed or plastered and painted and a painted dado (up to about 1m) was a commonplace. Niches and false doors were also usual, bearing traces for the placement of either lamps or stelae<sup>27</sup> and/or ancestral busts on them.<sup>28</sup> Water jars were commonly placed into floor holes, while tables, tools, spinning and weaving equipment, dining and drinking objects are usual among the room assemblages.

This room undoubtedly served as the main living room of the house, where people sat and relaxed, on chairs and stools placed on the dais or the floor, or directly squatting on a mat put on the dais.<sup>29</sup> In those cases they would possibly discuss family matters, play board games, entertain themselves with domestic pets, eat and drink, either with friends, or with other family members, as texts inform us.<sup>30</sup> It was also the area where prayers would be conducted to the divine, and rituals would be performed (connected with the stelae and/or ancestral busts). In some small houses the room was also used for spinning, weaving, stitching or embroidering, and possibly even for sleeping, when the house did not provide much space for all household members to sleep in a separate bedroom.<sup>31</sup> The roof, although traditionally considered as being higher than that of the other rooms, is most likely to have been at the same level as the other rooms.<sup>32</sup>

Of the two rear rooms of the houses the one was evidently a kitchen in most cases (except for those where cooking took place in the front room).<sup>33</sup> This is indicated archaeologically by the appearance of a fireplace and/or an oven within the room, while mortars, water jars, vases, plates, baking dishes, pounders and pounding pebbles, spoons, drills, razors and mallets were common among the deposits.<sup>34</sup> Silos for grain storage were also usual. The staircase, when not in the front room, was generally placed in the cooking area, with the cupboard under the stairs providing more storage space.

The other rear room of the house was always at the side of the kitchen in all Amarna Workmen’s Village houses, while in Deir el-Medina it was situated between the kitchen and the living room. The room was evidently used for sleeping as indicated archaeologically by the low daises that have survived against one of the room walls, and also by the bed supports, which have been preserved in at least two cases.<sup>35</sup> These daises were either used directly as beds, with the placement of a mat on them, like the one described as a ‘sleeping mat’ in an ostrakon,<sup>36</sup> or as platforms to support the bed, as two-dimensional representations indicate: in the palace bedroom depiction from the tomb of Ahmes in Amarna the bed is clearly placed on a higher level than the rest furniture of the room.<sup>37</sup>

Beds were undoubtedly parts of the workmen’s houses furniture as indicated by textual references,<sup>38</sup> but also by the discovery of beds in the

26 Kemp, “Wall paintings from the workmen’s village at el-’Amarna,” 53.

27 Robert J. Demarée, *The 3h ikr n R’–Stelae on Ancestor Worship in Ancient Egypt* (Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers, 1984)

28 Florence D. Friedman, “On the meaning of some anthropoid busts from Deir el-Medina,” *JEA* 70 (1985): 82-97;

Koltsida, “Social aspects of ancient Egyptian domestic architecture,” 134-136.

29 Koltsida, “Social aspects of ancient Egyptian domestic architecture,” 139-143.

30 Koltsida, “Social aspects of ancient Egyptian domestic architecture,” , 236-238.

31 Koltsida, “Social aspects of ancient Egyptian domestic architecture,” 243-245.

32 Koltsida, “Social aspects of ancient Egyptian domestic architecture,” 328-356.

33 Koltsida, “Social aspects of ancient Egyptian domestic architecture,” 52-65.

34 Koltsida, “Social aspects of ancient Egyptian domestic architecture,” 306-310.

35 Koltsida, “Social aspects of ancient Egyptian domestic architecture,” 260-310.

36 Jaroslav Cerný, and Alan H. Gardiner, *Hieratic Ostraca I* (Oxford University Press, 1957), 4

Andrea G. McDowell, *Village Life in Ancient Egypt. Laundry Lists and Love Songs* (Oxford University Press, 1999), 45.

37 Nigel de Garis Davies, *The Rock Tombs of El Amarna. Part III. The Tombs of Huya and Ahmes. Archaeological Survey of Egypt, Memoir 13-18* (London: Egypt Exploration Society, 1905), pl.XXXIV.

38 Kenneth Anderson Kitchen, *Ramesside Inscriptions, Historical and Biographical VI* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1983), 164-165, 664.

workmen's tombs, as the well-known examples from the tomb of Kha.<sup>39</sup> The bedrooms were also used for storage as implied by the appearance of cupboards, shelves, bins, storage or water jars.<sup>40</sup> Valuable things were usually kept in there, for the bedroom is the most private part of the house that a guest or a stranger would or could not enter. The fact that the bedrooms were used for storage is also evident from two-dimensional representations: in the scene depicting the bed from the mastaba of Mereruka several chests and jars are illustrated underneath the bed.<sup>41</sup>

### THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN A HOUSEHOLD

Having examined the room characteristics of the village houses we will now turn to a brief examination of the role of women in those villages. The wife was the mistress of the house<sup>42</sup> and her primary duty was to look after her house. The social importance of the status of a wife, achieved through marriage, was further increased with motherhood, and therefore, giving birth was a significant point in every woman's life and raising the children was mainly a female task.<sup>43</sup> Besides taking care of the house and children, women were also responsible for food preparation.<sup>44</sup> Those obligations were not easy and required a considerable amount of time. Texts inform us of the provision of female slaves to do the grinding in Deir el-Medina for some days in each household.<sup>45</sup> Textual references do not provide precise information about the degree that each household member had to assist in domestic activities, but it seems that young daughters were gradually involved, while elderly women would have perceptibly fewer obligations,<sup>46</sup> as is the case in modern Egypt.<sup>47</sup>

Keeping and care for the domestic cattle was also a female responsibility. Characteristically, Butetamun, a villager in Deir el-Medina, addressed his deceased wife, Ikhaty, in a letter to her, as 'she who fetched her cattle.'<sup>48</sup> Spinning and weaving were also female activities and women could increase their personal capital by exchange of self-made textiles or clothes for desired goods.<sup>49</sup> However, the extent to which they could expand their economic assets by textile production, without having to share profits with their husbands, remains unclear.<sup>50</sup> Nevertheless, women were generally involved not only in the production of goods but also in trading

39 Enrica Leospo, "Woodworking: furniture and cabinetry," in *gyptian Museum of Turin. Egyptian Civilization. Daily Life*, ed. Anna M. Donadoni Rover (Turin: Electa, 1988): 149–150.

40 Koltsida, "Social aspects of ancient Egyptian domestic architecture," 251–293.

41 Peter Duell, *The Mastaba of Mereruka* (University of Chicago Press, 1938), pl. 95.

42 Toivari, "Women at Deir el-Medina. A study of the status and roles of the female inhabitants in the workmen's community during the Ramesside period", 17–46.

43 Toivari, "Women at Deir el-Medina. A study of the status and roles of the female inhabitants in the workmen's community during the Ramesside period", 223.

44 Ursula Verhoeven, *Grillen, Kochen, Backen im Alltag und im Ritual Altägyptens: Ein Lexikographischer Beitrag* (Éditions de l'Université de Bruxelles, 1984);

Catharine H. Roehrig, "Women's work: some occupations of non-royal women as depicted in ancient Egyptian art," in *Mistress of the House, Mistress of Heaven. Women in Ancient Egypt*, ed. Anne K. Capel and Glenn E. Markoe (New York, 1996): 15.

Toivari, "Women at Deir el-Medina. A study of the status and roles of the female inhabitants in the workmen's community during the Ramesside period", 224.

45 Jaroslav Cerný, *A Community of Workmen at Thebes in the Ramesside Period* (Cairo: Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale, 1973), 175–181.

46 Toivari, "Women at Deir el-Medina. A study of the status and roles of the female inhabitants in the workmen's community during the Ramesside period", 224.

47 Houssam Fakhouri *Kafr el-Elow. Continuity and Change in an Egyptian Community* (Center for Middle Eastern Studies, University of Illinois, 1987), 63;

Huda Hoodfar, *Between Marriage and the Market. Intimate Politics and Survival in Cairo* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 167.

48 Jaroslav Cerný and Alan H. Gardiner, *Hieratic Ostraca I*, pl.LXXX;

Paul John Frandsen, "The letter to Ikhtay's coffin: O. Louvre Inv. No. 698," in *Village Voices. Proceedings of the Symposium Texts from Deir el-Medina and their Interpretation* ed. Robert J. Demarée and A. Egberts (Leiden: CNWS Publication, 1992), 33.

49 Toivari, "Women at Deir el-Medina. A study of the status and roles of the female inhabitants in the workmen's community during the Ramesside period", 233.

50 Christopher J. Eyre, "The market women of Pharaonic Egypt," in *Le commerce en Egypte ancienne* ed. Nicolas Grimal and Bernadette Menu (Cairo: Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale, 1998), 173–191.

them, as indicated by iconographic,<sup>51</sup> and textual references.<sup>52</sup>

### SPACE AND GENDER IN THE VILLAGE HOUSES

A very important aspect of domestic life is the position of women in the household and their access, or otherwise, to specific areas of the house. Historically, the undertaking of household work has been ideologically designated as a female occupation; a woman's labour at home represents not strictly 'work' but a way of being.<sup>53</sup> Traditionally archaeology interpreted areas with a modern western gender bias; male persons were *a priori* assumed to have been active producers and the dominant figures within the society and the family, whereas women were meant to be passive users of the fruits of male labour and therefore having a subordinate role. Thus, a grinding pounder discovered in a female tomb, was taken to mean that it was buried with the person who used it. The same object, discovered in a male tomb, would be interpreted as being buried with the person who manufactured it, or for whom it was used.<sup>54</sup> However, the study of gender during the last two decades has been considered as a significant issue in understanding human behaviour and reconstructing the past.<sup>55</sup> Recent studies have also addressed the issue of the relation between gender relations and space use.<sup>56</sup> Following the aforementioned micro-spatial analysis of each room of the village houses, the final part of this paper will try to link the performed activities in each area with gender relations.

The front room of the village houses was a multi-functional area and most possibly an unroofed court (see above). The activities that took place in that room were typical female activities in ancient Egypt (grinding, animal keeping, spinning and weaving), and it would be legitimate to suggest that it was a primarily female oriented area. Indeed, Meskell<sup>57</sup> envisages the room as such, but her consideration is principally based on the speculation that the elevated bed was related to female sexuality. Nevertheless, this platform was presumably a house altar and, as such, it could be equally applied to men and women. It seems more possible that the room was a female territory during the day hours (when men were away working and women performed the daily domestic tasks), while for the rest of the day the area was evenly used by men and women.

Considering the front part of the house a court, then the middle room would be the only proper area for sitting and eating. According to Meskell's suggestion the living room in Deir el-Medina was primarily for the use of the master of the house and his male friends.<sup>58</sup> The dais, the column, the wall decoration, the niches and false doors, are considered male status symbols, while the primarily male use of the room is further implied

51 Nigel de Garis Davies and Raymond O. Faulkner, "A Syrian trading venture to Egypt," *JEA* 33 (1947).

52 Alan H. Gardiner, "A lawsuit arising from the purchase of two slaves," *JEA* 20 (1935), 140–146.

Eyre, "The market women of Pharaonic Egypt," 173–191.

53 Nancy Rollins-Ahlander and K. Slaugh-Bahr, "Beyond drudgery, power, and equity: toward an expanded discourse on the moral dimensions of housework in families," *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 57 (1995): 54–68.

54 Janet D. Spector, "Male/female task differentiation among the Hidatsa: towards the development of an archaeological approach to the study of gender," in *The Hidden Half* ed. Peter Albers and P. Medicine (Washington, DC.: University Press of America, 1983): 77–99.

55 Roberta Gilchrist, "Women's archaeology? Political feminism, gender theory, and historical revisionism," *Antiquity* 65 (1991).

Roberta Gilchrist, *Gender and Archaeology: Contesting the Past* (London: Routledge, 1999);

Marie Louise Stig Sørensen, "Is there a feminist contribution to archaeology?," *Archaeological Review from Cambridge* 7 (1988): 9–21.

56 Ericka Engelstad, "Gender and the use of household space: an ethnoarchaeological approach," in *Social Space. Human Behaviour in Dwellings and Settlements*, ed. Ole Grøn, Paal Ericka and Inge Lindblom (Odense University Press, 1990), 49–54;

Lynn Meskell, "An archaeology of social relations in an Egyptian village," *Journal of Archaeological Method and Theory* 5, no. 3 (1998a): 209–43;

Spector, "Male/female task differentiation among the Hidatsa: towards the development of an archaeological approach to the study of gender;"

Janet D. Spector, "What this awl means: feminist archaeology at a Wahpeton Dakota village," in Reader in *Gender Archaeology*, ed. Kelly Hays-Gilpin and David S. Whitley (London: Routledge, 1993), 359–63;

Ruth Tringham, "Households with faces: the challenge of gender in prehistoric architectural remains," in *Engendering Archaeology: Women and Prehistory*, ed. Joan Margaret Gero and Margaret W. Conkey (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990): 93–131.

57 Meskell, "An archaeology of social relations in an Egyptian village," 215.

58 Meskell, "An archaeology of social relations in an Egyptian village," 229.



by the appearance of the ritual areas within the room.<sup>59</sup> There is no reason to suspect that the dais, a common element in most houses, and one that also appears in other rooms, was genuinely related to men. In early modern Egypt *diwans* (which are the modern equivalent of the ancient dais<sup>60</sup>) were equally placed in the male and female areas.<sup>61</sup> Besides, the archaeological evidence for the existence of looms in the room clearly connects it with women. We may suggest that such activities might have happened while men were absent, but there is clear evidence in textual references and two-dimensional representations for the opposite. In the aforementioned Karnak relief, a man and a woman are depicted within the middle room of the house, which is also the case in the representation of the house of Thut-nefer.<sup>62</sup> In the ‘Tale of the two Brothers’, Bata (the younger brother) returns home and finds his brother (Anubis) sitting with his wife, in a room that was most possibly the living room of the house.<sup>63</sup> Among the ancient Egyptian terms for marriage is *hms* (*irm* or *m di*) is used, which is literary translated as ‘to sit/live with,’<sup>64</sup> while in some cases the wife is addressed as the ‘eating companion’ of her husband.<sup>65</sup> Furthermore, anthropological comparisons show that even in early modern Islamic Egypt, distinct specification of male and female areas appeared only in very large houses of wealthy families. Even in those houses women use ‘male’ areas, when men are not at home, and retire to the most private ‘female’ areas, when the male members of the family have guests.<sup>66</sup> To the contrary, in smaller or poorer houses, men and women were crammed together in all available house areas.<sup>67</sup> As for the rituals being primarily of male concern, although there is no clear evidence as to what was taking place during those rituals, the fact that men and women are among the dedicators and the dedicatees of the stelae shows that there is no particular reason to exclude women from participation in domestic rituals.

In most cultures the kitchen is a primarily female territory.<sup>68</sup> In Deir el-Medina women were mainly involved in grinding and food preparation (see above). It has been suggested that the rear rooms of the Deir el-Medina houses and the kitchen were areas for the lower status females of the household, such as the slaves/servants.<sup>69</sup> It is likely that most slaves/servants were employed/owned to work in the fields,<sup>70</sup> and that all household females were participating in food preparation. However, this does not exclude men from the use of the room, as they were involved in beer making, and are recorded as taking time out of work for that purpose.<sup>71</sup> It is characteristic that in the modern Egyptian village of Balat men can sometimes accompany women and children in the kitchen and eat there.<sup>72</sup>

59 Meskell, “An archaeology of social relations in an Egyptian village,” 230–232.

Lynn Meskell, “Cycles of life and death: narrative homology and archaeological realities,” *World Archaeology* 30, no. 3 (2000): 433.

60 Edward William Lane, *An Account of the Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians Written in Egypt During the Years 1833–1835* (London: John Murray, 1895): 22–28.

61 Jennifer Scarce, *Domestic Architecture in the Middle East. An Exploitation of the House Interior* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1996), 22–23, 31–32.

62 Nigel de Garis Davies, “The town house in ancient Egypt,” *Metropolitan Museum Studies I*, Part 2 (1929): 233–255.

Florence Doyen, “La figuration des maisons dans les tombes thébaines: une relecture de la Maison de Djehutynefer (TT 104),” in *Proceedings of the Seventh International Congress of Egyptologists*, ed. Christopher J. Eyre, (Leuven: Peeters Publishers, 1998), 345–355.

63 Alan H. Gardiner, *Late Egyptian Stories* (Brussels: Fondation Égyptologique Reine Élisabeth, 1932), 9–10;

Miriam Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature II: The New Kingdom* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976, 1976), 203–204.

64 Pestman, *Marriage and Matrimonial Property in Ancient Egypt*, 9–10.

65 Jaroslav Černý and George Posener, *Papyrus hiératiques de Deir el-Médineh I* (Cairo: Institut Français d’Archéologie Orientale, 1978), 19, pl.22; Deborah Sweeney, “Friendship and frustration: a study in Papyri Deir el-Medina IV–VI,” *JEA* 84 (1998): 103.

66 Koltsida, “Social aspects of ancient Egyptian domestic architecture;”

Guy T. Petherbridge, “Vernacular architecture. The house and society” in *Architecture of the Islamic World*, ed. George Michell (London: Thames & Hudson, 1978), 198.

67 Huda Shaarawi, *Harem Years. The Memoirs of an Egyptian Feminist*, ed. and trans. Margot Badran (London: Virago Press, 1986), 8.

68 Jill Dubisch, “Culture enters through the kitchen: women, food and social boundaries in rural Greece”, in *Gender and Power in Rural Greece*, ed. J. Dubisch (Princeton University Press, 1986), 194–204;

Hoodfar, *Between Marriage and the Market. Intimate Politics and Survival in Cairo*, 166–171.

Spector, “What this awl means: feminist archaeology at a Wahpeton Dakota village,” 359–363.

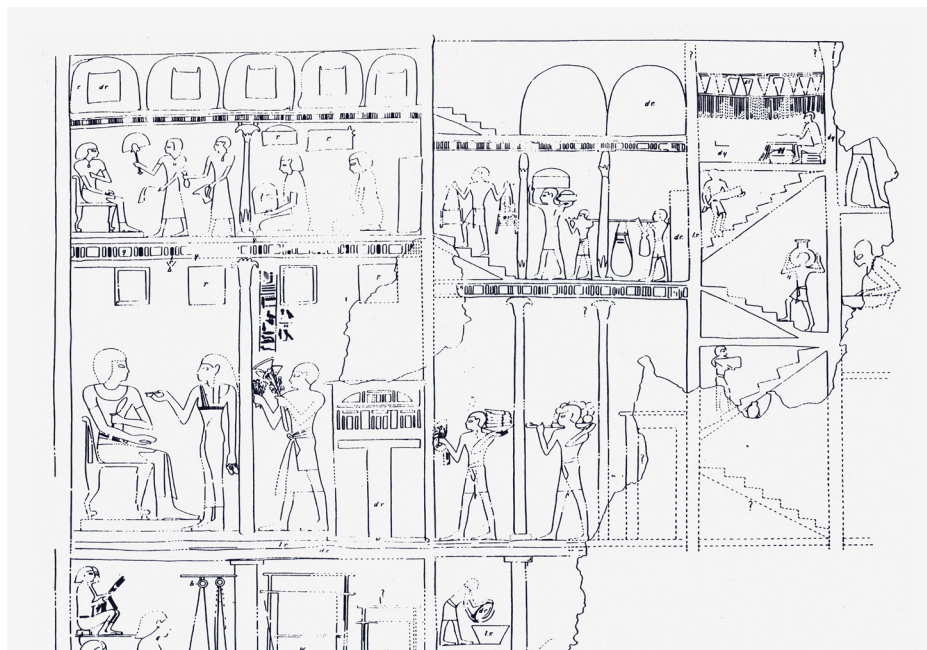
69 Meskell, “An archaeology of social relations in an Egyptian village,” 233.

70 McDowell, “Agricultural activity by the workmen of Deir el-Medina,” 195–206.

71 Jac J. Janssen, “Absence from work by the Necropolis workmen of Thebes,” *Studien zur Altägyptischen Kultur* 8 (1980): 146–147.

72 Jacques Hivernel, *Balat. Étude ethnologique d’une communauté rurale* (Cairo: Institut Français d’Archéologie Orientale, 1996), 22–23.

Furthermore, in the cases where the staircase was placed at the kitchen area, men would certainly use the room, at least as a passage to the roof or the upper floor. Therefore, we cannot specify the kitchen as an exclusively female area.



The house of Thut-nefer. Theban Tomb 104 after Nigel de Garis Davies, "The town house in ancient Egypt", *Metropolitan Museum Studies I*, Part 2 (1929): fig. 1; reproduced with permission of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

The specification of the gender use of the bedroom is not particularly clear from the archaeological record. Men and women are sometimes illustrated together on beds, either just sitting there (as in the mastaba of Mereruka at Saqqara)<sup>73</sup>, or having sexual intercourse.<sup>74</sup> In a three-dimensional model from the Late Period a couple is represented having sexual intercourse: the female is kneeling on what seems to be a low bench and the man is behind her.<sup>75</sup> Arguably, this bench is analogous with the bedrooms' daises. In 'The Tale of the Doomed Prince' the prince 'lay down on his bed' while 'his wife was sitting beside him.'<sup>76</sup> Anthropological comparisons with modern Egypt show that in poor families, living in small houses, brothers and sisters may sleep in the same bedroom.<sup>77</sup> Therefore, we can envisage the bedroom as a room used either by men, women, or both, according to the needs and preference of the family.

Meskeil has interpreted the room identified here as bedroom, as a room related to sexually mature women, during menstruation.<sup>78</sup> This interpretation is based essentially on cross-cultural comparison. Seclusion of women during menstruation is a custom well attested in other cultures,<sup>79</sup> where women used menstruation huts, constructed outside the village proper while special taboos for menstruating women are common to

73 Duell, *The Mastaba of Mereruka*, pl. 95.

74 Lise Manniche, *Sexual Life in Ancient Egypt* (London: Manning, S. W., 1997), fig. 21

75 Peter H. Schulze, *Frauen im alten Ägypten* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1987), 69.

76 Gardiner, *Late Egyptian Stories*, 7.

Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature II: The New Kingdom*, 202.

77 Unni Wikan, *Life Among the Poor in Cairo* (London: Tavistock Publications, 1980), 4.

78 Meskeil, "An archaeology of social relations in an Egyptian village," 236.

79 Patricia Galloway, "Where have all the menstrual huts gone? The invisibility of menstrual seclusion in the late prehistoric Southeast," in *Reader in Gender Archaeology*, ed. Kelly Hays-Gilpin and David S. Whitley (London: Routledge, 1998): 197–200.

many cultures.<sup>80</sup> There is only one relevant text from ancient Egypt, which comes from Deir el-Medina:

“Year 9, fourth month of the season of Inundation, day 13:  
The day when these eight women came out [to the] place of  
women when they were *hsmn* (menstruating)”<sup>81</sup>

The sense given to the term *hsmn*, is not absolutely certain. According to the most recent interpretation, women went to a particular location (the place of women) either due to an ‘ordinary’ period, or possibly due to some special circumstances related with menstruation, as dysmenorrhoea<sup>82</sup>, but it is also possible that it refers to young girls, having their first menstruation.<sup>83</sup> Furthermore, it has been suggested that *hsmn* had a polyvalent meaning, naming not only menstruation but also purification.<sup>84</sup> In any case, the text clarifies that those women were going outside the village proper. Therefore, a suggestion that the rear room of the house was constructed for such a purpose is less likely, bearing in mind that women who live together tend to have a synchronised cycle,<sup>85</sup> and therefore, such a room would be used in only five to seven days a month, while the evidence for benches in such rooms in both villages clearly connects the room with sleeping and sitting. The whole argument is anyway implausible, given the very limited space available in the house.

Concluding, women indeed occupied the houses most of the time, and this would be true throughout ancient Egyptian society and not just in the workmen’s villages. This does not necessarily mean that their decoration was generally or partially devoted to womanhood, childbirth, or aspects of female life. Even if this was the case, this was a male decision, as men seem to have decorated the houses. Of course, women could possibly influence their husband’s decisions, but to what extent, cannot be recovered. Archaeological, iconographical and textual evidence clearly suggests that the rooms in ancient Egyptian village houses had multiple uses and that there were not any clearly distinguished male and female areas within those houses, the rooms of which were equally used by men and by women.

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80 Thomas Buckley and Alma Gottlieb, “A critical appraisal of theories of menstrual symbolism,” in *Blood Magic: The Anthropology of Menstruation*, ed. Thomas Buckley and Alma Gottlieb (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 3–51.

Chris Knight, *Blood Relations: Menstruation and the Origins of Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991).

81 Terry Wilfong, “Synchronous menstruation and the “place of women” in ancient Egypt (Oriental Institute Hieratic Ostrakon 13502)” in *God of Praise: Studies in Honor of Professor Edward E. Wente*, ed. Emily Teeter and John A. Larson (University of Chicago, The Oriental Institute, 1999): 420.

82 Wilfong, “Synchronous menstruation and the “place of women,” 424.

83 Toivari, “Women at Deir el-Medina. A study of the status and roles of the female inhabitants in the workmen’s community during the Ramesside period”, 150.

84 Janssen, “Absence from work by the Necropolis workmen of Thebes,” 141–143.

85 Martha K. McClintock, “Menstrual synchrony and suppression,” *Nature* 229, no. 5 (1971): 244–245.

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