Widowhood in Ancient Egypt

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According to the British Encyclopaedia, a widow/widower is one person who spouse has died and has not re-married. In Ancient Egypt this loss did not have the same meaning for man as it did for a woman. Some authors\(^1\) have suggested that the social status of Egyptian women with regard to their contemporaries of others civilizations was very favourable; since they had quite independence, their legal position was equal that of men, they could acquire and dispose of their own properties, sell and buy, inherit etc., in spite of this, the man was always overriding to woman. Théodoridès has argued that “It must have existed a masculine dominance of economic origin in the family life in Ancient Egypt”\(^2\) and this supposed, obviously, that death of the husband could leave a woman in a precarious situation. In addition, as Meskell\(^3\) says, the vulnerability of the women could be more significant, since the man not only assured her welfare in life, but he would be also the responsible for guarantee her provisioning for After Life.

This economic and social inequality did that many women after the death of their husbands might be in a precarious situation. This is one of the reasons that explain the different treatment that we can find between widows and widowers in ancient Egyptian texts. Whereas the presence of the widow in the documentation is enough frequent, the widower only appears nominally. The texts are more explicit doing reference to the widows. They are documented in religious and literary texts, in wisdom texts, in legal documents, in census and in the distribution of grain rations…, ultimately, in all those scopes of the Egyptian reality, whereas the widowers are more difficult to detect.

The presence of the widow as a recurrent motive is not a simply rhetorical resource, but it is an indication of a social reality, there was a group of women who were helpless after the death of their husbands. As Eyre has argued “the widow or divorced woman need a ‘husband’, a ‘brother’ or a ‘son’ to stand up for her rights”\(^4\). In spite of her relative independence, the protection that the woman needed was always masculine. The nature of this protection was social, economic and legal. These were the values that the male figure represented.

Although the presence of widowers has also been reported for all periods of ancient Egyptian history, the interesting fact is that the texts do not talk about them like such. About men it is said that they “sit alone” or that they are “alone”\(^5\), without making a distinction between single, married, divorced or widowers. Sometimes we can only

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\(^4\) Eyre, C.J., The Adoption Papyrus in social context, JEA 78, 1992, p.221.

\(^5\) Hms waw Wb. I 277, 13-14 „allein sitzen“, „allein wohnen“ or „unverheiratet sein“
deduct the man’s condition by the context in which the references appear, and this allows us to discern between unmarried, divorced or widower.

The conception of widowhood for ancient Egyptians was so linked to woman that the masculine form to designate it, $\text{xArY}$, habitually translated as “be wiveless”6 , „weiblos“ or „ohne Frau“7 is documented in one unique case8 in the Middle Kingdom9 .

Our intention is to investigate and to try to demonstrate that the ancient Egyptians conceived the widowhood as an inherent condition of the woman.

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7 HL 1, p. 583; HL 2, p. 404, 409 „weiblos“, „ohne Frau“; The Wörterbuch refers to the word $\text{xArY}$, widow Wb. II 232, 1-2.
8 pLeiden 344 rto. 7,14-8,1, see Gardiner, A.H., The Admonitions of an Egyptian sage from Hieratic papyrus in Leiden (pLeiden 344 recto), Leipzig, 1909.
9 The word appear also in the pAnastasi VI 75, 32, but as Gardiner pointed out its reading is uncertain, see Gardiner A.H., Late Egyptian Miscellanies, BIAe VII, Bruselas 1937, 75a, n. 2a.