

# The Old Women of Deir el-Medina

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Dedicated to Richard, Jessica, and Rosalind who sat in the audience

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**Abstract:** Older women – those aged over thirty – constituted a distinct age group at the ‘middle class’ workmen’s village of Deir el-Medina. Drawing on the rich textual material from the site, and placing it alongside gerontological theory, will enable us to consider and evaluate such aspects as demography, transferable women’s pensions, disinheriting one’s ungrateful children, the Wise Woman, and the worship of female ancestors. Being a woman and old at New Kingdom Deir el-Medina implied considerable rights, freedom, and even an authoritative status. This picture is in remarkable contrast to the ‘double jeopardy’ which sociologists tell us older women – the over fifties – are facing in today’s society through sexism and ageism.

Ten years ago my husband and I wrote our *Getting old in Ancient Egypt* (Janssen and Janssen, 1996), without any knowledge of gerontological theory. Conscious of this glaring omission, which is about to be corrected in a new edition,<sup>1</sup> I decided to study for an MSc in Life Course Development at Birkbeck College, University of London. This degree focused on the sociological and psychological aspects of mid- and later life, while my dissertation demonstrated how the theoretical aspects of one discipline could be applied to the material of another one.

The dissertation, submitted in 2002, focused on societal attitudes to old age at the unique ‘middle class’ village of Deir el-Medina on the west bank of Luxor (Figure 4). This New Kingdom community of c. 1300 BCE was home to skilled artisans who were decorating the Pharaohs’ tombs in the Valley of the Kings, and those of members of the royal family in the Valley of the Queens.

With what McDowell (1999: 4) refers to as its at least 40% literacy rate, the settlement provides an extraordinary rich and unique textual archive: there are some 5,000 published ostraca (hieratic texts on potsherds or limestone flakes), with perhaps 10,000 or more unpublished. My aim was to test three sociological theories of historical ageing, each of which will be briefly summarized:

## Modernization Theory

Over thirty years ago, the anthropologists Cowgill and Holmes (1972: 1-13) put forward the argument that the loss of status of older people in both the family and in society

in general was a product of economic development following the Industrial Revolution. As such they reinforced the myth of a lost ‘golden age of senescence’, a romantic picture based on the notion of a previous respectful attitude towards old age in past societies, such as that promoted by Richardson (1933, republished 1969) for Ancient Greece.

Modernization theory has been highly influential and has been embraced by Egyptologists, notably Wessetsky (1972: 154-156) and Baines (1991: 123-200), both of whom envisage Ancient Egypt as a gerontocracy.

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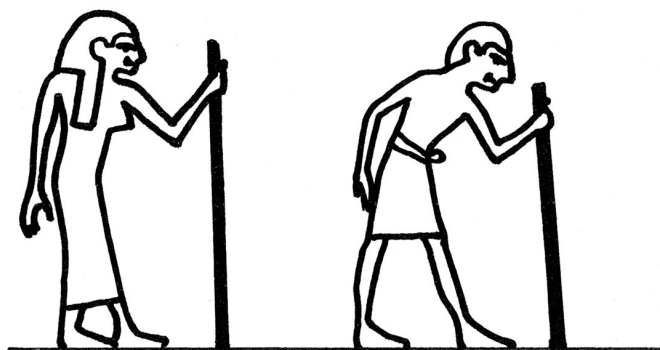


Figure 1: The hieroglyphs for old age showing a stooped elderly woman and man, each leaning on a staff for support.

## Revisionism Theory

The counterpart of modernization, revisionism theory can be summed up as seeing an “unmitigated progress towards retirement and the welfare state” (Troyansky, 1997: 49), implying that older people have never been as well provided for as they are today with modern health care and pension provision. Here is not the place to debate how far this holds true in 2007! As such, the 1990’s have almost been envisaged by the revisionists as the utopia of a ‘golden age of senescence’ (Johnson, 1998: 211-225).

These two theories can be regarded as ‘master narratives’ of simple decline or progress, prominent for the last thirty years. The past decade, however, has seen the emergence of a third intermediary stance.

## ‘Diversity’ Theory

The inverted commas indicate that this represents my term since the theory has as yet no name. This school, dominated by the Australian historian Pat Thane and rapidly gaining



Figure 2: The British road sign for older people.

precedence, dismisses the notion of a ‘golden age of senescence’ as a myth (Johnson and Thane, 1998). Instead it sees the diversity of old age with a persistent ambivalence beginning in the art and literature of the ancient world (Thane, 2000; 2005). Such “co-existent competing conceptions” (Thane, 1995: 31) were based upon an older person’s physical status, social class, and gender, i.e. *health*, *wealth*, and *gender*, and even their mental state (Thane, 2005). In our *Getting old in Ancient Egypt*, my husband and I unconsciously embraced this model, seeing “both attitudes ... that of respect for elderly men and that of derision for the decaying body” (Janssen and Janssen, 1996: 9) as present in the written documents and in the artistic products.

## Methodology

I applied these three macro-theories to the microcosm of Deir el-Medina. My aim was to ascertain the extent to which there was a ‘golden age of senescence’ in this village. What was the role of health, wealth, and gender, and the importance of chronological age?

An initial search of The Deir el-Medina Database of the University of Leiden<sup>2</sup> produced 62 hits. However, many of these were quickly rejected since they referred to ‘old clothes’ rather than to ‘old people’! I therefore ended up drawing on approximately 50 texts which contained the word for ‘old people’.

In order to triangulate my findings, as is essential in the social sciences, I used the vivid daily life sketches on ostraca (and papyri). These so-called figured ostraca were executed by the artisans in their moments of leisure. From some 1,500 published items, only a dozen instances were ultimately found useful.

The experience of old age as revealed by the texts and drawings ultimately supports the ambiguity of the ‘diversity’ school, since they reveal both respect and disdain for old age. Chronological age was the predominant factor in

determining diverse attitudes based upon individual *health* and *wealth*. As in Classical Antiquity, personality also played a role (Parkin, 2005). However, *gender* was decidedly less crucial, since, as we shall see, the old women of Deir el-Medina were surprisingly free.

My research therefore revealed that there was no ‘golden age of senescence’ at Deir el-Medina. Rather, the reality of old age varied greatly from individual to individual, as in contemporary society. The inference is that no historical society was absolute heaven or hell for its senior citizens.

## Words for Old Age

Among several Egyptian words for old age, the most frequent is *i3w* determined by a bent man leaning on a stick. Significantly, in one case only – in the Mastaba of Ti at Saqqara<sup>3</sup> – do we see an old woman determinative. Whatever, it is of interest to compare these hieroglyphic determinatives for old age (Figure 1) with the modern British traffic sign (Figure 2). Showing older people crossing the road, this is normally placed close to residential homes and portrays old men and women as decidedly bent figures. The man, who is in front, leans heavily on his stick for support. This indicates that images of the decrepitude of old age have not really changed across the millennia. Perhaps the designers of this modern traffic sign, with its ageist “frail elderly” people titling in the *Highway Code*, even found their inspiration in these Ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs. By contrast, it was interesting to see that the equivalent Australian traffic sign is far more positive with its two upright figures – the woman here leading – both of whom seem to be walking at a brisk pace (Figure 3).



Figure 3: An Australian road sign for older people who it seems ‘walk tall’. (North Stradbroke Island, Qld)





**Figure 4:** The northern end of the New Kingdom workmen's village of Deir el-Medina showing the remains of dwellings and streets (Photo: the editor 1976).

## What is Old Age?

While the ideal lifetime was the Biblical 110 years, the actual life expectancy from birth in Pharaonic Egypt was probably more like the 22.5 for women and 24 for men estimated for Roman Egypt by Bagnall and Frier (1994) using census data. Toivari-Viitala (2001: 207) estimates a general 30 years life expectancy – crucially from age one. Her reasonable suggestion that this was old age is accepted by Sweeney (2006) in her own fundamental study.

This proposition is supported by Masali and Chiarelli's (1972) study of Dynastic Turin skeletons. This demonstrates a reduction of the adult population to one-half around the age of 30, and to one-quarter at the age of 43. Adult females up to age 30 had a higher mortality rate than males. This rate then becomes reversed, which means that the majority of the few people who reached 70 were women. At age 70 the male/female curves, representing a very low percentage of the population, cross each other again reversing the situation once more.

Life expectancies in Ancient Egypt differed in terms of *social class* and *gender*. The inhabitants of Deir el-Medina, as a comparatively well-off 'middle class' stood a better chance of reaching a relatively high age, and the men even a great old age, past 70. As Thane states in her editorial introduction to a recent fine compendium on the history of old age, it is a cliché to say that in earlier times people did not live to a great age (2005: 9-30).

Study of the mummies from Deir el-Medina provides some evidence: a female now in Prague was aged at between 50 and 60, whilst the wife of Sennudjem (Figure 5) was 75 (Toivari-Viitala, 2001: 206-207). Therefore old age was seen as a distinctive

stage in the life course and features as such in the Deir el-Medina documents.

An example is a text describing a mob which was attempting to beat a woman who had an adulterous affair with a married man:

*Your people, their old and their young,  
both men and women.*<sup>4</sup>

This shows that older people were still actively taking part in the goings-on of daily life.

Further indications of old age – beyond the merely chronological – were women who had several (adult) children. Furthermore, the menopause – which occurred earlier than today – was linked by both men and women with the inability to bear children. Even Ramesses II writes about it in vivid terms in a letter to the Hittite king Hattusili. Hat-



**Figure 5:** Sennudjem and his wife depicted in their tomb. Both are shown as youthful (photo: the editor 1976)

tusili had asked Ramesses to send him a man to prepare medicine to enable his sister to bear children. The Egyptian Pharaoh writes of her:

*A 50 year old!! Never! She's 60! Look, a woman of 50 is old, to say nothing of a 60 year old! One can't produce medicine to enable her to bear children! ...<sup>5</sup>*

### Ageing in Art

The process of becoming old, especially for women, is seldom represented in Ancient Egyptian art (or writing). This probably explains why our book is still the only one devoted to the subject! The sole concession to 'middle class' old age, in just three Deir el-Medina tombs – viz. Pashedu (TT 3), Ipuw (TT 217), and Irinefer (TT 290) – is grey, white, or salt-and-pepper hair. Nevertheless, the faces of these older people – both men and women – are perpetually youthful and unlined. Therefore in the official tomb art we encounter the same positive imagery of infinite youth and the denial of decrepitude as in today's consumer society with its advertisements for anti-ageing creams and cosmetic surgery (Featherstone, 1991; Blaikie, 1993).

### Ageing in Deir el-Medina Texts

The value attached to old age is shown in the opening formulae to some letters:

*May god keep you healthy, keep you alive, and let you achieve a long lifetime and a ripe old age.<sup>6</sup>*

But generally there is a two-fold attitude to ageing, even of a universal ridicule of its physical aspects, as proved by an ostracum in the Petrie Museum at University College London:

*Do not mock an old man and an old woman when they are decrepit; beware lest they place a curse on your old age!<sup>7</sup>*

This ridicule is seemingly confirmed by artistic representations from the Village: the caricature on a figured ostracum of the ageing Queen of Punt, copied two dynasties later from the walls of Hatshepsut's Deir el-Bahri temple (Peck



**Figure 6:** Two of the twelve scenes from the Turin Erotic-Satirical Papyrus. This may be an example of 'successful ageing' rather than ridicule of the elderly. (line drawings: courtesy of Patrick Houlihan)

and Ross, 1978: fig. 46 on 115). Then there are the twelve scenes in the infamous Turin Erotic-Satirical Papyrus (Papyrus 55001) (Figure 6). This shows seedy older workmen – with 'middle-aged spread' and bald heads – being ridiculed for the marked flagging of their sexual energies (Omlin, 1973; Houlihan, 2001: 130-136). Or is it another matter altogether? Was the ancient draughtsman actually denoting a picture of what Gerontologists refer to as activity theory (Havinghurst, 1963: 299-320)? This claims that in order to achieve 'successful' or 'productive' ageing, older people need to continue to be active in the same way as they were at middle age. So the papyrus might instead be implying in a positive manner that older workmen were still capable of engaging in the sexual activity of their youth. This explains exactly why Egyptology needs Gerontology! Whatever, balding was clearly a common sign of ageing for the Ancient Egyptians as evidenced by a dozen prescriptions for hair loss in the Ebers medical papyrus (Nunn, 1996: 95, 149).

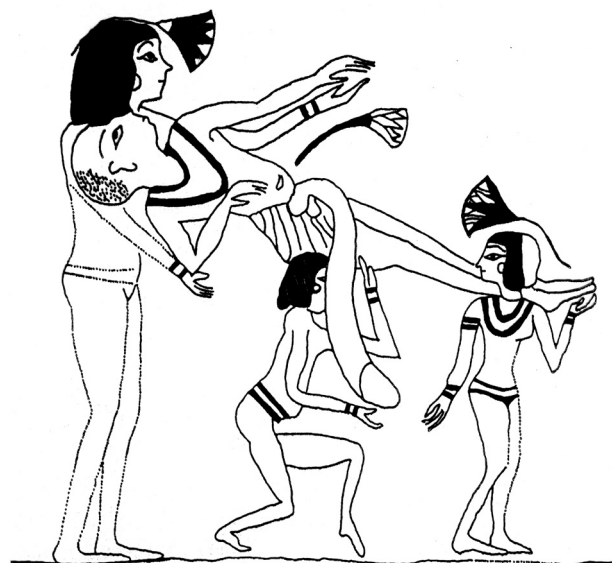
In contrast with this mockery we find respect for old age. The *Book of Kemit*, a school text, which was the most popular literary text in the Village, contains the sentence:

*I never did wrong to my father, I have not annoyed my mother.<sup>8</sup>*

This attitude is confirmed by a real life poignant message the scribe Butehamun appended to a letter by the prophet of Amenophis called Amenhotep to Butehamun's father Dhutmose, who was travelling in the Sudan:

*As soon as my letter reaches you, you shall write me a letter in your own handwriting that I may know that you are still alive. Indeed my eyes are going blind since they cannot see you.<sup>9</sup>*

Significant, of course, is the fact that it is the old father and not the son who is travelling.





## Demographics

Unpublished papyrus fragments in Turin known as the *Stato Civile* comprise two or more census lists drawn up at different times. A woman in one fragment, for example, is living in her husband's house, whereas in another she has moved in with her son and daughter-in-law. This indicates that older people, especially widowed mothers, were at critical periods taken in by their younger relatives. That they then returned to their own homes is attested by the case of a widow living alone (see further below).

These younger relatives resided in unexpectedly small nuclear families, refuting modernization theory's belief of the old as heads of multi-generational households in non-industrial societies (Cowgill and Holmes, 1972: 11). In turn, there is evidence of parents taking in their children following marital breakdown. Such a flexible 'nuclear reincorporation household system' (Laslett, 1989; Kertzer and Laslett, 1995), is also attested in Ancient Rome (Parkin, 1992).

Having one to four offspring appears to have been the norm, compared with the numerous children recorded on the tomb walls. Perhaps on average six to eight children were actually born, with a high percentage certainly dying young. Even childless couples are noted.

## Widows

There were probably never many widows at any one time in the Village, but widowhood was a state women referred to themselves as being in (Toivari-Viitala, 2001: 212). They were still very much involved in the affairs of the community. For example, there were no gender distinctions in legal cases: a widow could claim the landed properties of her husband from the local court. There is an instance of the court saying:

*The woman is right! And they were given to her.<sup>10</sup>*

A woman could also act as the executrix of her husband's will.

A specific example of a widow is the notorious Heria who committed two thefts. Her case was presented to the Vizier, who was asked to make a judgement which would act as a future deterrent:

*So that there shall be no woman like her, again to do likewise.<sup>11</sup>*

According to Toivari-Viitala (2001: 133) this exceptional statement suggests a gender category of "thieving women". But what is relevant for our argument is that the stolen goods – a copper chisel and other copper objects belonging to one of the local cults – were found *in her house*, indicating that widows were capable of acting as heads of households of their own. However, generally they would have turned to their families for lodging and support. They would have had minimal chores to do there, as heads of an age-based hierarchy.

## Care of Old Women

The Deir el-Medina grain-ration lists make it clear that older workmen received a state pension (Janssen and Janssen, 1996). "Old men" receive less than the younger workers: 1½ sacks as against 4 per month, indicating that they had been pensioned-off. Such an amount was still adequate for a retired couple for the basic needs of bread and beer.

Furthermore, the widows continued to receive monthly grain rations from the state, for they are also mentioned in lists of rations. To elderly spinsters were also distributed rations of 1½ sacks each. Even more remarkable is the fact that widows' pensions were transferable to fellow widows, as evidenced by the following letter written by a man:

*Now as for the message you sent about your mother, stating that she died. You said: 'let the wages that used to be issued to her be given to my sister<sup>12</sup>, who has been a widow here for many years until today'. So you said. Do so, give it to her until I return.<sup>13</sup>*

This is all very different from the rapidly worsening pension system being experienced by both Australia and Britain today! Moreover it contradicts the entire basis of revisionism theory as defined above.

However, this pension was merely a basic support providing bread and beer, and the "old men" and widows were still for other necessities dependent upon their family, especially their children. There was a clear system of reciprocity, or what Walker (1996) terms the 'generational contract': parents were expected to provide for their sons and daughters. Adult children, in their turn, had the filial duty to care and provide for elderly parents as in Classical Antiquity (Parkin, 2005). Gradual retirement took place, where in old age a workman appointed his son or another person as helper – a "staff of old age" – sometime before he gave up his job because he was no longer physically able to work. A son then gave a regular grain stipend, comprising up to half his income, to his newly retired father (McDowell, 1998). There is also additional evidence of similar stipends being paid by members of the local community to widows and divorced women, although it is not always clear whether they were old.

## The Wise Woman

The Wise Woman is only known from five texts. Yet she was clearly a significant member of the community, and her very title – *t3 rkh.t* "she who knows" – suggests the wisdom that modern psychologists tell us comes with experience and is therefore a product of later life (Sternberg, 1990; Baltes, 1991). She acted as a diviner and healer (Borghouts, 1982). She was most probably old as such women still are in modern Egypt and Italy, and were in Ancient Greece and Israel.<sup>14</sup>

There was only one Wise Woman at any one time and she is always referred to by her title, omitting her personal name, which emphasises the social status of her office. She acted as a consultant for situations for which no immediate explanation could be found. Through her actions she helped to restore normality and harmony (Karl, 2000), since she possessed a deeper knowledge of the relations between the realms of the living, the gods, and the deceased. She was consulted by people who felt threatened and uncertain because there had been a “manifestation” of the gods. The reason for that was wrong behaviour which had offended the god in question, such as a false oath. The sign was often physical symptoms: distress, blindness, and pain in all limbs, or even the death of one’s children.

Indeed, by far the clearest and the most poignant of the five texts is a letter written by the workman Qenhikhopshef to Inerwau, perhaps the nurse of his two sons who have died in suspicious circumstances:

*Why is it that you failed to go to the Wise Woman concerning the two boys who died while in your charge?*

*Inquire from the Wise Woman about the death of the two boys. ‘Was it their fate? Was it their destiny?’*

*Inquire it for me, and get a view on my own life and the life of their mother. As for whatever god shall be mentioned to you, write me about his name.*

*[Fulfil the tas]ks of one who knows her duty.<sup>15</sup>*

Qenhikhopshef clearly wonders why Inerwau did not on her own initiative consult the Wise Woman. He wants to know why his two boys died, and whether his life and that of their mother is now in danger, and especially which deity was responsible for his misfortune.

This text provides a tantalizing glimpse of the esteemed role of this intriguing, but poorly attested older woman in Egyptian society in acting as a sort of oracle.

## Inheritance and Burial

Those children who looked after their parents in old age were likely to be treated advantageously by the testator. Normally all offspring inherited equally. But as in all eras, including Thane’s Athens (2000: 39), children sometimes failed to look after their ageing parents. It was therefore ultimately possible for parents to disinherit some neglectful children in favour of others, or to allot a larger share to some than to others. For example, the widow Naunakhte, who was certainly over 65, disinherited four of her eight children in her Will which is now in Oxford:

*But see, I am grown old, and see,  
they are not looking after me in my turn.<sup>16</sup>*

The older generation had to be taken care of after death, burial being an elaborate process involving mummification, preparation of the tomb, provision of funerary equipment

and offerings. Since the deceased could no longer repay the cost of this, Pharaoh had established a legal ruling:

*Let the property (of the deceased) be given to the one who buries.<sup>17</sup>*

Five texts indicate that by not burying the deceased, the heirs forfeited their rights to a share, while those who undertook the burial received everything (Janssen and Pestman, 1968). Thus a certain Huy had provided the burial of his mother, without the help of his brother and sisters, just as he had previously buried his father. This entitled him to his mother’s full estate, in support of which the legal ruling of Pharaoh is cited. This illustrates the importance of a good burial in Ancient Egypt.

## Ancestor Worship

The authority of the old while still alive in the Village is demonstrated by the role of ancestor worship. Recently deceased older (never young) family members were believed to still be part of the world of the living, counted among the ‘actual’ inhabitants of the Village. They were called *akhu ikr* or “the able spirits” (Demarée, 1983), indicating those who had been authoritative in life, by inference, the older members of the community. In times of difficulties people turned to them for help: i.e. to a parent still remembered, not to an ancestor of long ago. Some fifty small Akh-iker-en-Re stelae depict the venerated dead as part of a household, while seventy-five stone ancestor busts represent “the able spirits” (Friedman, 1985). Significantly, some of these were older women (Demarée, 1983). It was felt necessary to appease these ancestors with regular food offerings lest the dead turn into haunting spirits, capable of causing great misery. The older generation therefore clearly played a role in Egyptian society after death. Their powerful influence exerted from beyond the grave meant that they could continuously intercede, or at the worse interfere, on behalf of the living. Indeed, the only aspect where the status of the old here falls short is that it nowhere reaches the level of veneration.

## Conclusion

Today’s sociologists (Itzin, 1984) talk of a ‘double jeopardy’ facing women over 50 through sexism and ageism. Similarly, Parkin (1994) believes that in Classical Antiquity older women were marginalized once past the menopause, since they could no longer perform their primary reproductive function.<sup>18</sup>

Minois (1989), who wrote a global overview of the history of old age from antiquity to the renaissance, totally ignores old women since he was convinced that they had mostly died off in the rigours of childbirth. However, this paper has revealed that they were very much around in the Village of Deir el-Medina. Here being a woman and old implied surprising rights, freedom, and even an authoritative status as an “able spirit”. Older women clearly functioned almost on the same level as the men, confirming Thane’s view (2005:

28) that: “the story of old age is a much more hopeful one than, all too often, we are led to believe”.

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6. For example: Pap. Turin 1976 (translation by Wente, E. 1990 *Letters from Ancient Egypt*, Atlanta: Scholars Press, nr. 169) and Pap. DeM IV (Sweeney, D. 1998 Friendship and Frustration: A Study in Papyri Deir el-Medina IV-VI, *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 84, 108, and Wente, *op. cit.*, nr. 209).
7. O. Petrie 11. Published by Černý, J. and A.H. Gardiner, 1957 *Hieratic Ostraca*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, pl. I.
8. See for instance Barta, W. 1978 *Das Schulbuch Kemit*, *Zeitschrift für Ägyptische Sprache* 105, 13, and Wente, *op. cit.* (note 6), 15-16.
9. Pap. Phillips. Published by Černý, J. 1939 *Late Ramesside Letters*, Brussels: Édition de la Fondation Égyptologique Reine Élisabeth, 30. Translation by Wente, E. 1967 *Late Ramesside Letters*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 47-48 (nr. 15).
10. O. DeM 235. Published by Černý, J. 1937 *Ostraca hiératiques non littéraires de Deir el Médineh*, vol. III, Cairo: IFAO, pl. 21.
11. O. Nash 1 = O. BM. 65930. Published in *Hieratic Ostraca* (see note 7), pl. 46, 2.
12. A term which encompasses a female relative in general, or even a friend.
13. Pap. Turin 1977. Published by Abd el-Mohsen Bakir, 1970 *Egyptian Epistolography*, Cairo: IFAO, pl. 33. Translation by Allam, S. 1973 *Hieratische Ostraka und Papyri aus der Ramessidenzeit*, Tübingen: self published, nr. 279.
14. For Wise Women in modern Egypt, see Blackman, W.S. 1927, republished 1968 *The Fellāhīn of Upper Egypt*, London: Frank Cass. For Italy: Greer, G. 1991 *The Change: Women, Ageing and the Menopause*, London: Hamish Hamilton. For Ancient Greece: Bremmer, J.N. 1987 *The Old Women in Ancient Greece*, *Sexual Asymmetry: Studies in Ancient Society*, J. Blok and P. Mason eds., Amsterdam: Gieben, 191-215. For Israel: Schroer, S. 1990 *Weise Frauen und Ratgeberinnen in Israel*, *Biblische Notizen* 51, 45.
15. O. Letellier. Published by Kitchen, K.A. 1983 *Ramesside Inscriptions*, vol. VII, Oxford: Blackwell, 257-258. Translation by Wente, E. (see note 6), nr. 184.
16. Pap. Ashmolean 1945.95 + 1945.97. Published by Černý, J. 1945 *The Will of Naunakhte and the Related Documents*, *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 31, 29-53.
17. Pap. Bulaq X = Pap. Cairo 58092. Translation by Allam, S. *op. cit.* (note 13), nr. 268.
18. By contrast, Bremmer, J.N. (see note 14) believes that the women of Ancient Greece often enjoyed far *more* freedom after their menopause when getting pregnant was no longer a problem.

## Endnotes

1. To be republished in one volume as *Growing up and Getting old in Ancient Egypt* by Golden House Publications; due Spring 2007.
2. <http://www.leidenuniv.nl/nino/dmd/dmd.html>