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Women in Ancient Egypt

Edna Russmann: We know very little about how women of any social class, from queens down to farmers' wives, actually lived. One thing we do know: it was terribly important to Egyptians, both men and women, that they produce children and carry on the family. Women or couples who wanted children would often pray to a deity, usually a goddess.

And in chapels and temples, people often deposited fertility figures along with their prayers to bear children. They could vary from the very abstract, very simplified, flat, wooden shapes that you see two examples of here—they're known as paddle dolls. And another kind of fertility figure is that rather elegant little naked figure without any legs. The important part is there—the part that bears and nurses children.

Arnold Lehman: Now turn your attention to the relief showing a funeral procession—it's at the top right of this case.

Edna Russmann: Funeral processions are shown in most tombs and they always include groups of mourning women. Among the gestures that the women in this relief are making: the one on the right-hand side is actually turning her face away from the group as if to hide her tears; others seem to be wailing; some have their hands in front of their faces; and some—including the two in the foreground who are kneeling—they're picking up dust from the ground and dropping it on top of their heads. That's a mourning gesture that is practiced in many parts of the world.