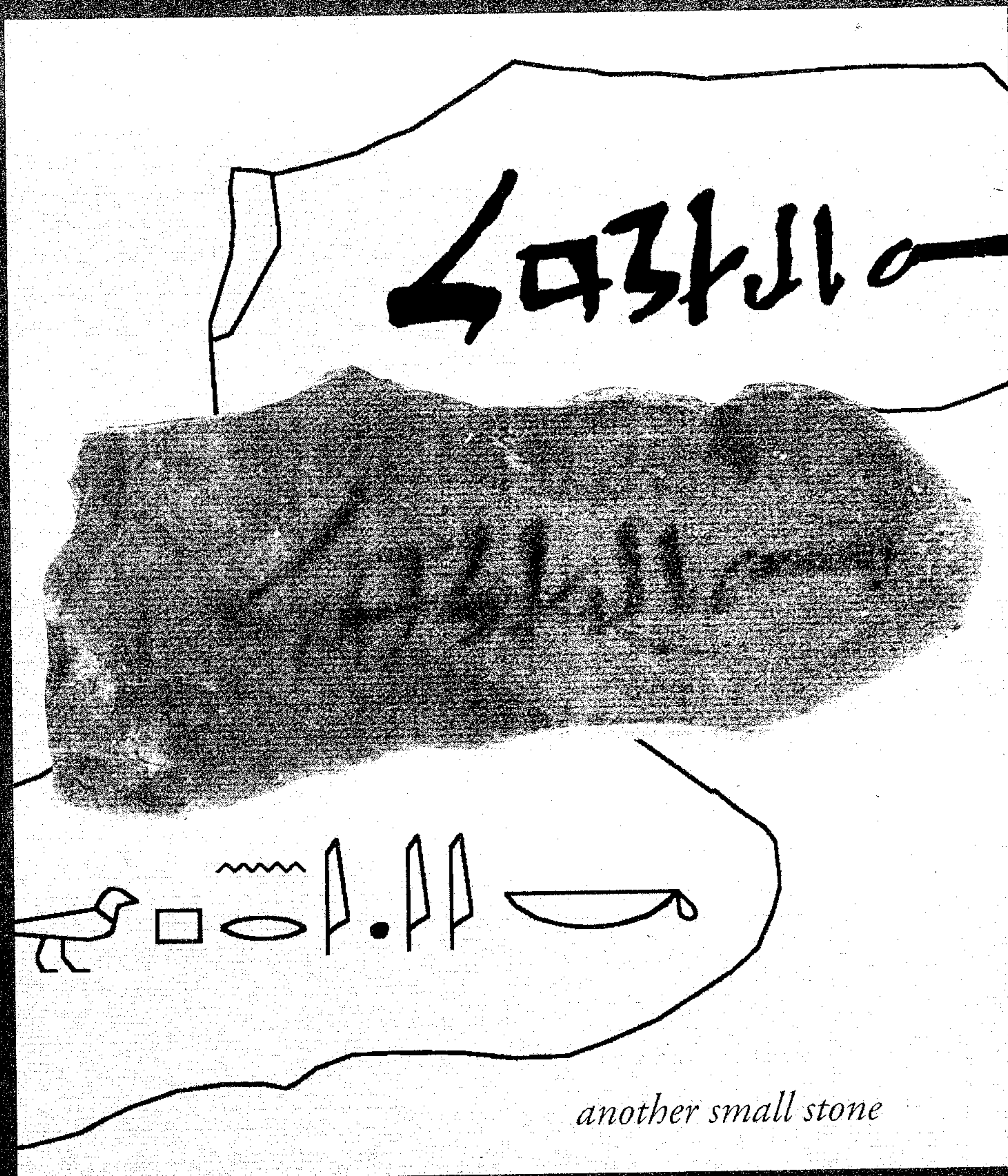


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Living and Writing in Deir el-Medine

Socio-historical Embodiment of Deir el-Medine Texts

Women Growing Older in Deir el-Medina¹

Deborah Sweeney

Introduction

This article attempts to envisage how the process of ageing might have influenced women's lives, using the well-documented village of Deir el-Medina as a case study. In principle, I will focus on women's capacity to support themselves when faced with the challenges of physical ageing. However, it is not clear whether women derived material benefits from each and every one of the activities I will discuss. Taking a wider perspective, we could argue that even if participating in cultic activity, for example, was not necessarily financially remunerative, it enhanced the participants' lives by offering social contacts, self-esteem and variety. As people age, their quality of life depends not only on their financial resources but also on their social capital, their relationships with family and friends, and their cultural capital, such as their expertise on various rituals or other sought-after types of specialist knowledge.²

Little is known of the lives of elder women in Ancient Egypt. They are doubly invisible in the sources, poorly attested both by being female and by being older. Most of the literature on ageing in Ancient Egypt, such as Rosalind and Jac. Janssen's book, *Getting Old in Ancient Egypt*, and Andrea McDowell's work on the care of the elderly in Ancient Egypt, has focused on male ageing, apart from Jaana Toivari-Viitala's recent path-breathing book *Women at Deir el-Medina*³ and as yet unpublished work by Rosalind Janssen.⁴ Heike Behlmer has discussed elder women in Coptic Egypt as part of a more general article on ageing at this period.⁵

Sociologists often discuss ageing in terms of chronological, physical and social age,⁶ which are not necessarily in tandem.⁷ However, these criteria are often difficult for Egyptologists to apply to given individuals in Ancient Egypt. Chronological age is difficult to identify, since the Egyptians did not normally record age, except for a few exceptionally long-lived individuals who boasted of how long they had lived.⁸ Although, to some extent, people's ages can be calculated if they appear in a series of dated documents, this is much less easy to do for women, who are often less well attested. At a rough guess, we might argue that people could be considered old when they had

grandchildren, or, as Jaana Toivari suggests, several adult children.⁹

For workmen (and probably also for women who worked outside their homes), the social watershed between maturity and old age seems to have been the point when they could no longer work. Elite men, on the other hand, were at times permitted to preserve their dignity and status by having an assistant, a "Staff of Old Age" appointed as their subordinate, who would take over many of their responsibilities.¹⁰

Women whose main work was running their own household may have tapered off their work gradually

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2 Caplan 1998, 100 f.

3 Toivari-Viitala 2001.

4 E. g. lecture on "Gerontology and Ancient Egypt" at the Fourth Annual Current Research in Egyptology Symposium for Graduates, University College London, 18–19 January 2003.

5 Behlmer 1998, 22 f.

6 E. g. Matthews 1979, 21, 35–37.

7 Crews 1993, 417; Arber/Ginn 1991, 2.

8 See for instance LÄ I, 157 f. s. v. "Altersangaben" (W. Helck); Hornung 1992, 59. It is not clear whether the Egyptians themselves had a concept of a chronological benchmark for ageing; no list of characteristics of specific ages or life stages has been preserved. (For such lists in Mesopotamia see Wilcke 1998, 24 and Westbrook 1998a, 9; for Coptic Egypt Behlmer 1998, 20 f.)

9 Toivari-Viitala 2001, 207.

10 McDowell 1998, 201 f. McDowell 1998, 210 f. suggests that in Deir el-Medina, some elder men seem to have been supported by their sons, sometimes in exchange for taking over their place in the crew.

and experienced a less marked transition.¹¹ Maybe, as Rivkah Harris argues for Mesopotamia,¹² women's ageing might have been considered to begin when the possibility of childbirth ceased.

This may also be true for Ancient Egypt, since bearing children was such a key part of how women's identity was constructed, but it is difficult for modern Egyptologists to pinpoint for any given woman. It might, in fact, also have been difficult for the Egyptians themselves to recognise it: in traditional societies amenorrhea caused by nutritionally unbalanced diets and the disruption of the menstrual cycle by pregnancy and breastfeeding probably made it difficult to diagnose the onset and ending of menopause.¹³

However, the changes in women's body chemistry at menopause would have given rise to osteoporosis, increased tooth loss and wrinkled skin, and other signs that would have been obvious to their contemporaries.¹⁴

Some signs of physical ageing can be traced from human remains, where illness left traces on the skeleton or body tissue, and very occasionally, from texts, as in Adel Mahmoud's recent discussion of the mummy of *Jj-nfr.tj* (iii), where physiological information about her extensive tooth decay can be supplemented by a stela bearing her plea to the moon-god to deliver her from blindness.¹⁵ However, given that few of the mummies from Deir el-Medina have been investigated, our information in this area is very scant.

By and large, life expectancy in the modern West is far greater than it was in Ancient Egypt.

Melchiorre Masali and Brunetto Chiarelli suggest that the average age of death was 30.¹⁶ However, average life expectancy seems have varied somewhat between different places and periods – Eugene Strouhal offers a much lower life expectancy of a mean age at death of 20 for the Roman period cemetery from Wadi Qitna in Nubia, and of 23 for secondary burials in Horemheb's tomb at Saqqara.¹⁷

In Ancient Egypt, women were at greater danger than men from an early death because of the risks of post partum infection or bleeding to death when giving birth. For instance, Elke-Meinrad Winkler and Harald Wilfing have calculated from mortuary remains at the site of Tell el-Daba that women who survived their childhood had an average life expectancy of 30 years, whereas the average life expectancy for men was 34 years.¹⁸

The physical changes associated with ageing vary a great deal between individuals,¹⁹ but nonetheless they are quite common, and allow us to extrapolate to some extent to make some general comments about women's experience of ageing. We may reckon, ultimately, with symptoms such as loss of sight and hearing,²⁰ memory loss, fatigue,

rheumatism or arthritis,²¹ loss of mobility, also osteoporosis,²² osteoarthritis,²³ incontinence,²⁴ problems with breathing,²⁵ and reduced ability to cope with heat or cold.²⁶ In Ancient Egypt, one might also suffer from parasites²⁷ such as guinea worms, spinal damage from dragging heavy objects²⁸ and severe tooth decay.²⁹ On the other hand, one might argue that in an era that had very few defences against infection, long-lived individuals must have been fairly tough.³⁰ By and large, elders would have been performing tasks which they had been doing all their lives, and movements which their bodies were used to making, so that it might have been easier for ancient Egyptians to continue physical labour in old age than it is for elder people in the modern West who have led sedentary lives to exert themselves.

However, it is important to keep in mind that each individual woman's lived experience would have been somewhat different, just as their households and their families and their work would have differed at other points in their lives. Many factors would have come into play³¹ – whether a woman was rich or poor, her state of health, whether her husband was still alive and capable of earn-

- 11 A recent ethnographic account from traditional society in Tanzania describes an elder woman, who cooks and cleans her house, fetches firewood and water, cultivates land (meadowland, which might be easier than her previous plot) and makes raffia mats for sale. Her children give her food and clothes and some cash (Caplan 1998, 107). However, the amount of mats that women can produce for sale declines as they grow older (Caplan 1998, 112).
- 12 Harris 2000, 88 f. This transition from the status of mother to that of female elder at menopause is attested elsewhere: Kawai 1998, 149 f.; Jewish lawyers in the Middle Ages also used menopause as a criterion for defining the beginning of women's elder years (Westbrook 1998a, 9).
- 13 Cf. Banner 1992, 184.
- 14 Botelho 2001.
- 15 Cf. Mahmoud 1999.
- 16 Masali/Chiarelli 1972.
- 17 Strouhal 1988.
- 18 Winkler/Wilfing 1991, 82.
- 19 Crews 1993.
- 20 Jette 1996, 95; Morgan 2000; Mangione 2000.
- 21 Strouhal 1979, 327; Kanawati/Hassan 1996, 26.
- 22 Strouhal 1979, 327; Molto 1986, 122; Podzorski 1990, 61; Crews 1993, 410; Leidy 1994, 242; Kanawati/Hassan 1996, 26.
- 23 Podzorski 1990, 59; Strouhal *et al.* 1997, 422.
- 24 Gallo *et al.* 2000, 242; Ouslander 2000.
- 25 Jette 1996, 95; Gallo *et al.* 2000, 239.
- 26 Crews 1993, 416.
- 27 Nunn 1996, 68–72.
- 28 Cf. Davies/Friedman 1998, 86.
- 29 Nunn 1996, 203; Kanawati/Hassan 1996, 25.
- 30 Behlmer 1998, 14. She also argues that in the absence of antibiotics one's last illness would probably have been mercifully short (Behlmer 1998, 24).
- 31 Cf. Caplan 1998.

ing a little, how much property the couple had accumulated during their working years, how helpful her children were in supporting her, the practical and emotional help available from friends, family and other connections, and, not least, her own initiative, determination and skills. Any or all of these elements together could make the difference as to whether a woman ended her life in destitution or in comfort and contentment.

In the post-modern West, people often retire in their mid to late sixties and remain healthy for another fifteen or twenty years. In these circumstances, staying active and continuing to grow in one's elder years has rightly become an important ideal.³² Similarly, Pat Caplan argues for elders in Tanzania: "Although some aspects of old age are outside an individual's control – such as their own ill-health, or the illness and even death of a spouse or child – many others can be influenced by the accumulation of various forms of capital (economic, social and cultural). Viewing old age in this way enables us to consider old people not as passive victims, but as agents, who have strategized their concerns during their lifetimes, and continue to do so in old age."³³

I admit that, in my focus on women's efforts to support themselves and their families, I may be reading this concern into the Egyptian material. The Egyptians themselves may have viewed ageing differently.

Retirement at a certain chronological age is a relatively modern, Western phenomenon. In Ancient Egypt, for most people, as in many societies to this day, it was often essential to keep working if one was to survive.³⁴ People seem to have worked as long as they were able and retired from work only when physical ageing made it impossible for them to keep working.³⁵

Continuing to work hard in old age may not necessarily have been considered positive; it may have been interpreted as evidence that one was too poor to have any other option. For instance, there are several depictions of elderly woman performing tasks which entailed bending down or squatting, such as winnowing grain, which would have entailed constant bending down and straightening up again to throw the grain into the air,³⁶ or, during the Old Kingdom, grinding grain into flour on a horizontal quern.³⁷ This continual bending and stretching would probably have been difficult for an older person,³⁸ and it seems likely that they were working from necessity, since these tasks demand little accumulation of experience or skill.

The Ramesside love poems mention "the peaceful days of old age"³⁹, and amongst its praises of the king, an encomium to Merneptah⁴⁰ states: "They will rest in old age." Since these seem to be envisaged as positive phenomena, we might wonder whether the ideal of at least some Egyptians was in fact to rest and take their ease after a lifetime's hard work.⁴¹

To some extent, then, the focus of this article on women supporting themselves may not have been an Egyptian ideal at all. However, we should not fall into the trap of assuming a simple dichotomous contrast between 'then' and 'now': people's elder years would have varied, as I have explained above, and there may have been a variety of different attitudes to ageing.

In principle, it was expected that children would help their parents as the latter reached old age.⁴² This was expressed very aptly in the *Wisdom of Ani*, a text which was known at Deir el-Medina:⁴³

"Double the bread your mother gave you
and support her as she supported you ..."⁴⁴

However, one's children were not always supportive. *Njw.t-nht.tj* (i), a woman living in Deir el-Medina during the late 19th and the first half of the 20th Dynasty, found that as she grew older four of her eight children failed to help her. She went to court and made a public declaration

32 E. g. Friedan 1993; Laslett 1996; Gibson 2000, 20; Maierhofer 2003. The cultural ideal that elders should be independent for as long as possible, including living in their own houses, whilst receiving support of various kinds, is also found elsewhere (e. g. Caplan 1998, 101).

33 Caplan 1998, 123.

34 Cf. Gibson 2000, 32.

35 Finley 1981, 168 describes a similar situation in Ancient Greece and Rome: "The only exit from the genuine labour force, free or slave, self-employed or hired by others, was through physical incapacity or death."

36 Junker 1943, pl. 14b, ill. 47, and p. 148.

37 E. g. Louvre E 7704bis: see Ziegler/Barbotin/Rutschowskaya 1990, 29.

38 For grinding-specific arthritis elsewhere see Molleson 1994; Martelle 1999, 135.

39 O. DeM 1266 + O. CGC 25218 rto. 6.

40 KRI IV, 11,11.

41 Cf. Anderson 1982, 149 for recent Peru; Toivari-Viitala 2001, 235, suggests that older women in the households at Deir el-Medina probably had to perform the least chores, being at the top of an age-based hierarchy (see for parallels Brown 1982, 153). One might compare the position of *Hq¹-nht.w*'s mother in the Hekanakhte letters. Goedicke 1984, 14 remarks that *Hq¹-nht.w* addresses his mother and a female relative named *Htp.t*, who might be his aunt, at the opening of his letter, lists them first for the distribution of rations, whereas three other women, who might also be relatives of his, are named at the end of the rations list, following the male members of his household. This might indicate that old age, or at any rate one's aged mother, was respected – to the point, I might add, where *Hq¹-nht.w*'s mother is demonstratively given precedence over the young active men who were supporting the household.

42 For parallels in traditional African society see Caplan 1998, 113 f. In O. BM EA 5634 rto. 11 *Pn-nbw* (i) is recorded absent because his mother was ill; presumably he was looking after her.

43 O. DeM 1 rto. and P. Chester Beatty V vso. 2,6–11.

44 Ani 20,17–18.

preventing these four children from inheriting any of her property after her death.⁴⁵

However, *Njw.t-nht.tj*'s (i) case shows the limitations of parents' ability to obtain their children's help in old age.⁴⁶ Firstly, the only sanction she could take was to disinherit her ungrateful offspring; although she might have shamed them in public, she could not actually compel them to support her.⁴⁷ Secondly, out of her eight children only half continued to help her.⁴⁸ Thirdly, although *Njw.t-nht.tj* (i) seems to have inherited landed property (*s.wt*)⁴⁹ from her first husband, the scribe *Qn-hr-hpš=f* (i), and a storeroom from her father⁵⁰ and was probably fairly well-to-do in Deir el-Medina terms, she and her second husband still needed support in their old age. (However, it is possible that most of her wealth was tied up in immovable property, and that the couple had relatively little income to live on.) Alternatively, it may be that *Njw.t-nht.tj* (i) was not actually in need but felt that she deserved to be repaid for bringing up her children.

Incidentally, *Njw.t-nht.tj*'s (i) children gave her an *oipe* of grain and a *hin* of *sgnn*-oil per month,⁵¹ twice as much grain as the servant women earned.⁵² The grain would give her an amount of about 312 g of grain a day. Admittedly, her calorific requirements would have been less than those of a woman working all day long at physical labour,⁵³ but it is still a meagre amount. *Sgnn*-oil seems to have been used as ointment or for lighting,⁵⁴ rather than being consumed as food.

A number of other women are listed as receiving gifts or allowances, and even sometimes rations,⁵⁵ although it is not necessarily clear whether they were old.

The following women from Deir el-Medina can be identified as older, using the following criteria:

Dated texts

Njw.t-nht.tj (i)

Njw.t-nht.tj (i) made her declaration in court in year 3 of Ramesses V. Her first husband was the scribe of the tomb *Qn-hr-hpš=f* (i), last attested in year 1 of Siptah,⁵⁶ 53 years earlier. Her age at marriage is not known, but Egyptologists assume that Egyptian women married young to maximise their fertility. If she married at 14, she would have been at least 69 when she made her declaration in court. She does not appear in the later declaration by her second husband *H'-m-nwn* (i) in year 4, so probably she had died by that point.

However, in other cases it is difficult to know whether documents mentioning the same name a number of years apart actually refer to the same woman. A case in point is that of *Sn.t-nfr.t*. Her burial, in year 2 of Amenmesses, was attended by the entire crew (O. Varille 26

rto. 8–9). Jaana Toivari suggests she might be identical with *Sn.t-nfr.t* (i) the mother of the scribe *Qn-hr-hpš=f* (i).⁵⁷ If so, she must have reached a considerable age since he himself is first attested in year 40 of Ramesses II,⁵⁸ when he would probably have been about 20; if we conjecture that he was born in about year 20, *Sn.t-nfr.t* herself would have been born in year 6 or so of Ramesses II, making her at least 72 at the time of her death. However, this reconstruction is highly conjectural.

45 Černý 1945.

46 The mechanisms of enforcement may have been more effective in other ancient cultures; King Lipit-Ishtar claims in the prologue to his law code that he made the father support his children, and the child support his father. However, as Westbrook 1998b, 243 f. points out, it is not clear how he did so.

47 This is also hinted at in the Wisdom of Ani:

"Don't let her scold you
and raise her arms to the god
so he hears her cry." (Ani 21,2–3)

Assmann 1992 has argued that people invoked curses in situations where legal sanctions could not be enforced. This text might indicate that an elder who was not supported might be in a very vulnerable position. However, since the obligation to look after one's mother is mentioned in a wisdom text that formed part of the literate elite's education, people who failed or refused to support their aged parents could well have faced social sanctions such as disapproval.

48 These particular children continued to support their father. Naunakhte Doc. IV relates how their son *Qn-hr-hpš=f* (iv) received a bronze washbowl from his father in return for supplying him with grain, and the documents were drawn up by his brothers *Jmn-nht* (xxvi) and *M³³-nht.w=f* (iii). We do not know what the relations were between the father and his other children after *Njw.t-nht.tj*'s (i) death.

49 See Robert Demarée's article in this volume, *supra* p. 57–66.

50 Naunakhte Doc. I 4,9–10.

51 Naunakhte Doc. I 3,9–11.

52 See the article of Tobias Hofmann in this volume, *supra* p. 113–118.

53 Older people need less calories than active younger people: a figure of approximately 1800 calories per day for elders in current America is quoted by Lowenstein/Stanton 1988 and McMurtly *et al.* 1992, but this amount may vary by gender, age and place: Yoshimine 1990 suggests 1600 calories for men and 1400 for women in their 60s and 1460 calories for men and 1270 calories for women in their 80s in current-day Japan.

54 Janssen 1975, 336 f.

55 McDowell 1998, 213; Toivari-Viitala 2001, 212. For instance, a widow in O. Strasbourg H. 110 rto. 4 received rations of 4% sacks over a period of three months.

56 Davies 1999, 85.

57 Toivari-Viitala 2001, 221.

58 Davies 1999, 84.

Physical remains⁵⁹

- a. *Jj-nfr.tj* (iii) (lived to be about 75)⁶⁰
- b. *T³-⁶.t* (age estimated at 40 by Bruyère)⁶¹
- c. *M⁶.d³* from tomb 1370 in the Eastern Cemetery⁶² said by Bruyère to be aged⁶³
- d. Anonymous aged woman from tomb 1379 in the Eastern Cemetery⁶⁴
- e. Woman aged about 50–60, whose mummy is now in Prague⁶⁵
- f. Woman aged about 30–40, whose head is now in Prague⁶⁶
- g. Woman aged about 30–50, whose head is now in Prague⁶⁷

Artistic representations

Not all representations of parents in their children's tomb chapels and burial chambers, or parents together with children on stelae, can necessarily be used to argue that these individuals lived to be elderly, since the Egyptians also represented dead members of the family in this context. However, it is possible to argue that people lived to be elderly when they are represented with white hair or wigs,⁶⁸ which is fairly unusual, or when they are shown in some activity in this world with their adult children. However, since tombs cannot necessarily be dated with precision, it is not always possible to show when these individuals would have been elderly.

White or greying hair or wigs

- a. *Hwy* (i), mother of *P³-šdw* (x)⁶⁹
- b. *Wj³*, *P³-šdw*'s (x) mother-in-law⁷⁰
- c. *S³tj*, *Wj³*'s mother⁷¹

Alan Zivie dates *P³-šdw*'s (x) tomb to the first half of the thirteenth century BC, the reign of Ramesses II.⁷² However, this is a fairly broad span of time, and it is also not clear whether the women were contemporaries of Ramesses II; since *P³-šdw* (x) was chief workman relatively early in his reign, they may have lived earlier.

- d. *T³-Wsr.t* (i), mother of *Jrj-nfr* (i)⁷³
- e. *Mr-Jmn-dw³* (i), the wife of *Hr-Mnw* (i), is represented with white hair on the jamb of a naos from the village.⁷⁴

Activity with adult children

A mother and daughter pair of mourners, the mourner *Hm.t-ntr* and her daughter the mourner *Jj*, are represented together in several tombs in Deir el-Medina – nos. 2, 218, 219, 250 and 335.⁷⁵ They also dedicated a stela together to the god Re in his form as a cat.⁷⁶

If *Jj* was adult, *Hm.t-ntr* would probably have begun to age.

Nonetheless, this list of individuals is not especially helpful in isolating the activities of elder women, for several

reasons. Firstly, women are much less well attested in texts than men and the texts in which they appear are often undated, which means that their age when the text was written is not necessarily clear. For example, a text mentioning a woman named *Njw.t-nht.tj* making purchases is discussed by Jaana Toivari;⁷⁷ this may very well be the woman discussed above, but it is not clear how old she was at that point.⁷⁸

Secondly, although the tasks discussed in this article were performed by women in Deir el-Medina, so it is likely that the women listed above all performed at least some of them, it is often not known which tasks a specific individual performed.

Thirdly, the physical condition of several of these individuals during their later years is not known, because their bodies have not survived. When physical remains have survived, certain suggestions can be made about a given woman's activities but they are difficult to verify in the absence of documentation. For instance, it is possible that *Jj-nfr.tj* (iii) continued to spin after she went blind,

59 *Mry.t*, the wife of the chief workman *H³*, was not necessarily old (contra Toivari-Viitala 2001, 206 f.); the report of Delorenzi/Grilletto 1989, 34 f. describes her as adult and does not mention her being aged; there is some mention of calcification of the ligaments, which might indicate ageing, but against this, her teeth are said to be perfectly normal and there is no mention of the extensive wear and tooth loss which might indicate an older individual. I thank Francis Breyer for help with the Italian text.

60 Mahmoud 1999.

61 Bruyère 1937a, 105.

62 Material from the Eastern Cemetery should be used with caution, however, since it has recently been suggested that this cemetery does not belong to the village (Pierrat-Bonnefois 2003).

63 Bruyère 1937b, 150.

64 Bruyère 1937b, 175.

65 Strouhal/Vyhnánek 1980, 31–33.

66 Strouhal/Vyhnánek 1980, 69–71.

67 Strouhal/Vyhnánek 1980, 72–74.

68 I thank Guillemette Andreu for raising this useful point.

69 Zivie 1979, pl. 24.

70 Zivie 1979, pl. 24.

71 Zivie 1979, pl. 24.

72 Zivie 1979, 132; discussion of family relationships 121.

73 Valbelle/Gout 2002, 78; Davies 1999, 263 dates *Jrj-nfr* (i) to the first half of the reign of Ramesses II.

74 Bruyère 1939, 194. Davies 1999, 170 argues that *Hr-Mnw* (i) is attested in the mid-20th Dynasty, from year 2 of the reign of Ramesses IV to year 4 or year 17 of Ramesses IX.

75 Bruyère 1927, 65 f. pl. 6.

76 Stela Turin N. 50053. See Tosi/Roccati 1972, 88 f. They also appear on stela BM 150 + 1754.

77 Toivari-Viitala 2001, 124.

78 Janssen 1975, 28 dates the text to the 20th Dynasty, and Gutgesell 1983, 439 to the reigns of Ramesses IV and V, but they do so only because of the presence of *Njw.t-nht.tj* (i), so we cannot say definitely that she made this purchase when she was old.

since blind spinners are attested elsewhere,⁷⁹ but it might have been more difficult for her to look after cattle.

Tasks performed by women in Deir el-Medina

I now move to the main topic of this paper, women's ability to support themselves as they grew older, faced with the challenges of physical ageing. I will begin by identifying various tasks done by women living in Deir el-Medina attested in texts or pictures from that site. I have omitted tasks associated with women elsewhere, such as growing garden produce, which are not attested at Deir el-Medina.

We should note, however, that many of these tasks were not confined to women alone but were also performed by men, on their own and probably also together with women. By and large, elder women probably continued to perform the same tasks as they had all their lives, although it is not impossible that their responsibilities changed as they grew older.

The following tasks are attested as performed by women in Deir el-Medina:

1. Cloth manufacture

The chief workman *P³-nb* (i) is claimed to have required the workmen's wives to weave clothing for him,⁸⁰ and in O. DeM 132 a woman asks another woman to weave a garment for her. Men also produced textiles at times.⁸¹

2. Trading⁸²

Both women (e. g. O. DeM 116, O. DeM 125, O. DeM 587) and men were active in selling and trading, sometimes as middlemen. In O. DeM 118, *Dhwtj-ms* (i)/(iii)? asks *P³-R'-hpt* (i)? to exchange a goat worth 20 *deben* for 25 pigeons, but not to say, "It belongs to the women" (*njj sw n³ hn.wt*). Kenneth A. Kitchen translates this phrase: "Do not say, 'It's women's (work).'"⁸³ His translation implies that small-scale trading could be construed as women's work. However, this is not the only way to read the text: it could also mean that *P³-R'-hpt* (i)? is asked not to object that the goat for sale might actually belong to other people.

3. Religious activity on behalf of others

a. Cultic singers

Many of the women in Deir el-Medina were cultic singers of the gods. They may also at times have taken an active

part in the offering cult, since in one chapel women are represented bringing offerings together with the men.⁸⁴ Women also seem to have participated in at least one personal piety group.⁸⁵

b. Mourners

Several tombs at Deir el-Medina depict women mourning at the tomb-owner's funeral.⁸⁶

c. Mortuary cult

Jaana Toivari has suggested that probably the women performed the mortuary cult during the working week, when the men were absent at work.⁸⁷ This is not attested in non-literary texts,⁸⁸ but this may well be because, unlike the men of their families, women did not need to absent themselves from their official work in the Valley of the Kings to perform this ritual and there was no need to record their absence as was done for the men.⁸⁹ There is, however, an example of women performing mortuary rituals in a literary text, cited by Koen Donker van Heel in his work on pouring water at Deir el-Medina: in the story of Khonsemhab and the Spirit, Khonsemhab promises the spirit to supply five menservants and five maid-servants to pour water for him.⁹⁰

d. The *rh.t*

Several ostraca from Deir el-Medina mention *t³ rh.t*, "the wise woman" who could identify the gods responsible for the misfortunes of human beings, diagnose illness and occasionally predict future events.⁹¹

79 Pelling 2001, 37.

80 P. Salt 124 rto. II, 19–20; A woman delivers cloth (of her own manufacture?) in O. DeM 769, and another woman weaves a garment in O. Leipzig 3 rto. 3.

81 E. g. O. DeM 428; O. Gardiner 103; O. Gardiner 120 for a man dyeing a garment; for further references see Toivari-Viitala 2001, 234 note 9. In LRL 9, 19,8–9 the *md'j K³s³* is assigned to weave yarn.

82 Discussed by Toivari-Viitala 2001, 123–130. At times it is difficult to draw the line between barter and intrafamily exchange; for instance in O. DeM 587, where the sender addresses the recipient as his sister (see Allam 1998a, 5).

83 KRI-TAT III, 373.

84 Bruyère 1948, 103.

85 O. Turin N. 57062. O. DeM 354 mentions the serving woman *B³k.t-dw³* making the feast of Amenhotep.

86 Bruyère 1926, 67, sitting in front of the coffin, although it is not clear what stage in the proceedings this represents; Bruyère/Kuentz 1926, pl. 3; Bruyère 1937b, 29; Maystre 1936, pl. 7 (family members); Cherpion 1999, pls. 14, 31; Donadoni Roveri 1989, 218.

87 Toivari-Viitala 2001, 226.

88 Donker van Heel 1992, 22.

89 Donker van Heel 1992, nos. 1–8, 11, see also Table 1 on p. 29.

90 LES 93,1–6.

91 Karl 2000; Toivari-Viitala 2001, 228–231.

4. Looking after children

Women looked after children, their own and sometimes other people's, as in O. Letellier; in this case, with a very sad outcome since two children in her care died.⁹² They also acted as wet-nurses on occasion.⁹³

5. Midwifery

Midwifery in Ancient Egypt is generally argued to have been an all-female profession,⁹⁴ partly because none of the medical papyri give practical instructions to doctors for delivering a baby and men are not included in any of the scenes depicting women giving birth.⁹⁵

6. Housework

Housework is included in this survey because it was such a basic part of women's activities, and also because, even though one did not earn by doing one's housework, one saved by doing it well; running one's own household efficiently prevented waste and maximised the use of one's resources. In Deir el-Medina, government-issue servants worked for a number of days each month in each household. However, if we envisage a total of 60 crew members, 30 households per side and six servants per side of the crew,⁹⁶ then each household would have had the help of a servant for 5 days during the thirty day month. They would still have had to do the remaining five-sixths of their housework.

Certain household tasks, such as laundry and fetching water from the Nile, were not done by women at Deir el-Medina in any case because they formed part of the government service package for the workmen's families and were performed by the service crew.⁹⁷

7. Dancing and making music

Scenes in the tomb of the chief workman *H*,⁹⁸ wall paintings⁹⁹ and ostraca¹⁰⁰ from Deir el-Medina depict female dancers and musicians.¹⁰¹

8. Looking after/renting out animals

Families in Deir el-Medina also owned animals, which they could sell or rent out. Sometimes they might have kept animals at home, in which case the women of the family would presumably have looked after them during the working week: for example, in O. DeM 582 a man arranges for a donkey to be looked after by a woman whilst he is absent for three days,¹⁰² and O. Turin N. 57150 describes a woman named *B³k.t[-n]-Stj* selling or delivering a bull for objects worth 45 *deben*. An oracle question, O. IFAO 884, asks whether a woman has a share in an *jh*-calf. O. Louvre N 696, the scribe *Bw-th³*-

Jmn's (i) lament for his dead wife *Jht'y*, mentions her taking care of cattle (rto. 15–17).

9. Agriculture

Andrea McDowell suggests that there was some agricultural activity by the workmen in Deir el-Medina.¹⁰³ Some families in Deir el-Medina owned land, from which they could derive income either by having it cultivated or cultivating it themselves. Almost all the evidence relates to men: the evidence referring to women seems mostly to be about arranging agriculture: for instance, in LRL 36 the singer *Mw.t-m-jp.t* is asked to arrange for a third party to receive a field and to have it planted with fruit, to have wood cut and land cleared, and to arrange for a calf to be fed, and in P. BM EA 75018 rto. 5–6 one woman asks another to give seed to a third party.¹⁰⁴ In O. Gardiner 165 a woman undertakes negotiations with a man, and offers him a field in Armant instead of the donkey he demands from her.

92 O. Letellier, see KRI VII, 257 f.

93 Turin Strike Papyrus vso. 5,13. Although this word might be the personal name *Mn't-nhtj*, McDowell 1999, 36 is probably correct in translating it as "wetnurse" since the striking man determinative is found for the word elsewhere (LRL 5, 10,10; LEM 101,16).

94 E. g. Goedicke 1985, 24 f. For parallels in traditional societies elsewhere see Barton 1923, 49; Balzer 1981, 857.

95 E. g. Brunner 1964.

96 The number of workmen fluctuated: the total of 60 is derived from O. Berlin P 12654. O. DeM 707 gives a total of six servant women per side of the crew. See Tobias Hofmann's article in this volume, supra p. 113–118.

97 Černý 1973a, 186.

98 PM I 1, 16.

99 Andreu 2002b, 28.

100 Minault-Gout 2002, 49–51.

101 Krauss 1997, 182–184 suggests that the servant women may have entertained the men by singing, dancing and sexual services, but this is purely conjectural with the evidence at our disposal.

102 In O. CGC 25722 and O. DeM 636 a woman arranges for a bull to be looked after. For additional references see Toivari-Viitala 2001, 125 notes 194, 195.

103 McDowell 1992.

104 Many thanks to Robert Demarée for sending me a copy of his unpublished translation of this text.

Women are depicted in tomb paintings sowing,¹⁰⁵ collecting grain after the reapers,¹⁰⁶ and pulling flax.¹⁰⁷ Deir el-Medina examples refer to the Field of Reeds in the afterlife and it is fairly questionable whether women from the village sowed grain and pulled flax in real life. However, in O. DeM 117, one woman asks another to pick vegetables for her, which might refer to gardening, and O. Louvre N 696 mentions possible agricultural activity by *Jbt*³y, but the text is very broken.¹⁰⁸

These tasks required different skills and capacities; some of them were affected drastically by age, whereas others were not. For instance, carrying goods for sale to the market probably became more difficult as one aged, whereas one's bargaining skills were not necessarily affected by ageing.

I will analyse these tasks according to a set of criteria derived from the research of Linda Hurcombe on gender and task division in the ancient world,¹⁰⁹ supplemented by other factors suggested by the work of Janet Spector and Tina Tuohy.¹¹⁰ Complex tasks may be broken down into different stages, which can then be analysed separately.

Knowledge

Skill

Physical requirements

Alone or with others

Continuous time or intermittent time

Location

Equipment/special conditions

The boundary between the categories of knowledge and skill is somewhat fuzzy. To differentiate between them more clearly, I define knowledge as factual information, which can be passed on by word of mouth, even out of context. By contrast, I define skill as the practical knowledge necessary in order to perform the job competently (for example, how to hold the threads when setting up a loom), which is often best learnt by watching an experienced person model the skill and then practising it under supervision.

Task analysis and age¹¹¹

1. Linen manufacture

The following description of spinning flax and weaving linen is based on Gillian Vogelsang-Eastwood's analysis of the textile industry in Ancient Egypt.¹¹² Although the New Kingdom iconographic sources represent mostly male weavers, it is clear from the texts from Deir el-Medina discussed above that women also wove. We should

note, however, that this description is based on earlier iconographic materials from other sites: it is likely that the process was the same or similar in Deir el-Medina, but there may be local variations of which we are unaware.¹¹³

At Deir el-Medina, women worked at home, producing cloth for their family's needs and a surplus to sell. However, most representations of weaving in Ancient Egypt show a workshop, where several people worked together and each of them was responsible for a specific step, like a modern production line. Actually, most steps in the process did not actually require several people to be working together at the same time and in theory one person could have performed the entire process from start to finish. However, scholars such as Elizabeth Barber who have worked with traditional looms, found out that at some points, it was very useful to have the help of a second person, such as arranging the thread on the loom.

In principle, it was possible to spin thread and weave linen cloth on the same premises, but they could also be manufactured separately,¹¹⁴ so that one could also simply

105 Deir el-Medina, Field of Reeds: TT 1 *Sn-nḏm* (i) (Wreszinski 1923, 19b); TT 217 *Jpwy* (i) (Wreszinski 1923, 367). This world: TT 16 *P³-nhsy* (Wreszinski 1923, 112).

106 Deir el-Medina, Field of Reeds: TT 1 *Sn-nḏm* (i) (Wreszinski 1923, 19b); TT 215 *Jmn-m-jp.t* (i) (Wreszinski 1923, 14). This world: TT 81 *Jnnj* (Wreszinski 1923, 58); TT 88 *Ph-sw-hr* (Wreszinski 1923, 279); TT 38 *Dsr-k³-R^c-snb* (Wreszinski 1923, 142); TT 52 *Nbt* (Wreszinski 1923, 177); cf. gleaning – TT 69 *Mnn³* (Wreszinski 1923, 231); TT 57 *H^c-m-h³t* (Wreszinski 1923, 193).

107 Deir el-Medina, Field of Reeds: TT 1 *Sn-nḏm* (i) (Wreszinski 1923, 19b); TT 217 *Jpwy* (i) (Wreszinski 1923, 367). This world: TT 52 *Nbt* (Wreszinski 1923, 177); cf. women removing heads from flax stems – TT 57 *H^c-m-h³t* (Wreszinski 1923, 193); bringing food for workers – TT 57 *H^c-m-h³t* (Wreszinski 1923, 192); TT 69 *Mnn³* (Wreszinski 1923, 231); supervising loading onto a ship – TT 217 *Jpwy* (i) (Wreszinski 1923, 363).

108 The fragmentary text mentions 52 *oipe* (rto. 14), many fields (rto. 17–18) and that she was one who *šd* her *šd.t* (rto. 13–14). The verb *šdj* has a great variety of meanings (Lesko/Lesko III, 170–172) including 'to dig', so there may be a reference to agricultural activity.

109 Hurcombe 2000.

110 Spector 1998, 151–153; Tuohy 2000, 142–144.

111 Some of this material is conjectural from lack of material, and, because ageing varied so much between individuals.

112 Kemp/Vogelsang-Eastwood 2001.

113 Andreas Dorn, personal communication.

114 Kemp/Vogelsang-Eastwood 2001, 435. They note that in the New Kingdom, women tended to spin and men to weave, but this distinction was far from absolute.

spin thread and sell it, or buy thread and weave cloth.¹¹⁵ Given that their freedom of movement might have been limited, it is unlikely that the inhabitants of Deir el-Medina went to pick their own flax, but the presence of spindles and spinning bowls on site¹¹⁶ indicates that they spun their own thread from flax. On the other hand, prices for thread are also known,¹¹⁷ so it could be bought ready-made.

The fibres for making thread are those lying just under the outer bark of the flax. They may be obtained by soaking the flax in water to break down the hard outer skin and then picking out the fibres by hand.

a. Retting – breaking down the fibres by soaking the flax in water

Knowledge	Optimal soaking time
Skill	None
Physical requirements	Strength to lift canes
Alone or with others	Either; probably with others
Time	Once set up can be left. Several days
Location	Access to body of water (pond, canal, Nile)
Equipment/ special conditions	None

b. Scutching – picking out the fibres from the flax

Knowledge	None
Skill	None
Physical requirements	Nimble fingers, good eyesight
Alone or with others	Either
Time	Intermittent
Location	Anywhere
Equipment/ special conditions	Large wooden fan or sticks held in hand ¹¹⁸

However, when Barry Kemp and Gillian Vogelsang-Eastwood attempted to reconstruct the process, they discovered that one could just smash the flax stems with a heavy object and pick out the fibres.¹¹⁹ G. Vogelsang-Eastwood suggests this was probably the procedure at the workmen's village at Tell el-Amarna. I suspect the same applies to Deir el-Medina, where all the water had to be brought in by water carriers.

Knowledge	None
Skill	None
Physical requirements	Nimble fingers, good eyesight, some strength in arm for hammering
Alone or with others	Either
Time	Intermittent
Location	Anywhere
Equipment/ special conditions	Suitable heavy object

c. Hand-rolling: splicing the fibres together to make threads

Knowledge	None
Skill	None
Physical requirements	Nimble fingers, good eyesight

Alone or with others	Either
Time	Intermittent
Location	Anywhere
Equipment/ special conditions	Round object to rest on

d. Coiling the threads into balls

Knowledge	None
Skill	None
Physical requirements	Nimble fingers, good eyesight
Alone or with others	Either
Time	Intermittent
Location	Anywhere
Equipment/ special conditions	None

e. Spinning the single threads together to make a multi-ply thread whose strength compensated for the weak joins between the individual fibres¹²⁰

Knowledge	None
Skill	Spinning
Physical requirements	Nimble fingers, good eyesight
Alone or with others	More efficient with several people ¹²¹
Time	Intermittent
Location	Anywhere
Equipment/ special conditions	Spindle, spinning bowl ¹²²

In each case, the spinner would set their spindle spinning twisting the thread attached to it, and then let it drop as far as possible in order to twist as long a thread as possible before winding it back up on the spindle to keep it twisted.

Ancient Egyptian sources depict this stage of spinning in three different ways:

1. Sit and hold the thread up in one hand whilst spinning with the other.

115 O. Petrie 64 mentions a woman delivering a quantity of yarn. Cf. Kemp/Vogelsang-Eastwood 2001, 435, 451 and Eyre 1998, 180 for yarn-deliveries at other sites.

116 Bruyère 1939, 49, 250, 262, 278, 345; Bruyère 1953, 66, 83, 88.

117 Janssen 1975, 436–438. In O. DeM 564, thread is said to be in the possession of the laundrymen, but it is not clear whether they played any part in the process of textile manufacture – for instance, by washing the thread before it was woven.

118 Vogelsang-Eastwood 1992, 11.

119 Kemp/Vogelsang-Eastwood 2001, 30, 479.

120 Kemp/Vogelsang-Eastwood 2001, 75–77.

121 See note 123.

122 Flax thread has to be damped a bit to make it easier to manipulate. The spinning bowl allows one to pass the thread through a weak adhesive to make it easier to work (Kemp/Vogelsang-Eastwood 2001, 79).

2. Stand and roll the spindle on one thigh and let it drop.¹²³
3. These last two arrangements would probably have been uncomfortable for an older person. However, the third option, running the thread through a support or ring above one's head, would have worked well,¹²⁴ although one would have needed to reach up or one might only have had a short drop. In the tomb of *Dhwtj-nfr* at Thebes we actually see an older person¹²⁵ spinning using this method. It was known at Deir el-Medina since it is represented on the figured ostrakon O. DeM 2453.¹²⁶

It should be stressed that spinning enough thread by hand to produce a garment is extremely time consuming. A figure of 60 days working 12 hours a day to produce one ounce of the fine yarns used in Indian muslins is known.¹²⁷ Hero Granger-Taylor notes that in Japan, very fine yarns of ramie are used to weave summer kimonos – as little as 7 g of fibre may be processed in one day and enough fibre to make a single kimono may take 700 days to prepare and spin.¹²⁸ In early modern Europe, the ratio of spinners spinning flax by hand to the linen weavers they supplied with thread was about eight to one.¹²⁹ However, it is difficult to translate ethnographic parallels more precisely into Egyptian terms, because of the different numbers of warp yarns and thickness of thread.¹³⁰

f. Winding the thread around a series of pegs on the wall, or on a frame, to set it up for the loom

Knowledge	Order of arranging the thread
Skill	Arranging thread
Physical requirements	Nimble fingers, good eyesight, standing, stretching
Alone or with others	Either
Time	Intermittent
Location	On wall (when using pegs)
Equipment/special conditions	Pegs/frame

g. Transferring the thread to the loom

Knowledge	Order of setting up loom
Skill	Arranging thread on loom
Physical requirements	Nimble fingers, good eyesight, bending, stretching
Alone or with others	Either ¹³¹
Time	Intermittent (several days?) ¹³²
Location	Anywhere
Equipment/special conditions	Loom

Up until the middle of the second millennium only horizontal looms were known. In the 18th Dynasty vertical looms also appear.¹³³ The only representations we have of them shows them being used mostly by men, but this was not necessarily true in all cases.¹³⁴ B. Kemp and G. Vogelsang-Eastwood argue that ground looms were more

difficult to warp up and required much more skill than vertical looms.¹³⁵ One might then argue that if an older weaver were still agile her experience would give her an advantage here.¹³⁶

h. Weaving

Knowledge	Weaving
Skill	Weaving
Physical requirements	Nimble fingers, good eyesight
Alone or with others	Either alone or with partner ¹³⁷
Time	Intermittent

123 Gillian Vogelsang-Eastwood suggests that often the spinner would work with two spindles alternately, with two different workers supplying her with thread. Instead of constantly bending down to pick up her spindles she would have someone else pick the spindles for her (Kemp/Vogelsang-Eastwood 2001, 75). Meanwhile, the spinner deals with the thread on her other spindle, and the women sitting behind her release yarn from their hanks to supply her alternately.

124 Kemp/Vogelsang-Eastwood 2001, 77. I would imagine, however, that an elder woman might need some help to arrange the thread running through the pulleys since it would probably involve bending and stretching.

125 Some think that an older woman is represented here (Kemp/Vogelsang-Eastwood 2001, 77), some suggest an older man (Shedid 1988, 128). The sagging bosom is more typical of elder women, but not impossible for elder men (one side effect of bilharzia can be breast development in men; cf. Nunn 1996, 69). The figure's hairstyle and clothing are more typical of men at this period, although women were also occasionally portrayed working stripped to the waist in the New Kingdom (e. g. Tomb of *Nbt* – Kemp/Vogelsang-Eastwood 2001, 193). The other weavers in this particular workshop are all men.

126 Kemp/Vogelsang-Eastwood 2001, 78.

127 Kemp/Vogelsang-Eastwood 2001, 451.

128 H. Granger-Taylor, in: Cartwright/Granger-Taylor/Quirke 1998, 107.

129 Schneider 1989, 190.

130 Cf. Kemp/Vogelsang-Eastwood 2001, 308.

131 Barber 1994, 18 notes that it is very useful to warp a loom with someone else, both to save the time and energy of walking to and fro from one end of the loom to another, and to have company to relieve the monotony.

132 Cf. Kemp/Vogelsang-Eastwood 2001, 317.

133 TT 50 (*Nfr-htp*), TT 104 (*Dhwtj-nfr*), and TT 133 (*Nfr-rnp.t*) (Kemp/Vogelsang-Eastwood 2001, 336 f.).

134 Roehrig 1996, 21 argues that horizontal looms were still in use in the New Kingdom because textiles are found with an fringe of loops along one of the wefts, which also appears in earlier depictions of women working with horizontal looms. However, Kemp/Vogelsang-Eastwood 2001, 311 argue that this weft fringe is a mark of quality irrespective of loom type.

135 Kemp/Vogelsang-Eastwood 2001, 336.

136 Cf. de Garis Davies 1923, 76, who argues that in Egyptian art elder craftsmen are often represented executing the more difficult tasks.

137 The vertical looms depicted in the tombs of *Dhwtj-nfr* and *Nfr-rnp.t* (Kemp/Vogelsang-Eastwood 2001, 336 f.) represent people weaving both on their own and in pairs. Women are depicted

Location	Anywhere
Equipment/ special conditions	Loom

From the point of view of physical ability, an elder woman alone could have undertaken most stages of textile manufacture,¹³⁸ although if she had arthritis the continual fine hand motions might have been difficult. Just for comparison, in a survey of early modern Norwich, 78% of the elder women who were working were spinning, and they continued to spin even when very old, one-handed or nearly blind.¹³⁹ Similarly, in third millennium Mesopotamia, elder women were employed as spinners, "despite their experience"¹⁴⁰. In Egypt, by contrast, insofar as any age differentiation can be detected, elder women seem to have worked both at spinning (at the workshop shown in *Dhwtj-nfr*'s tomb) and weaving (depicted in the tomb of *Hnm-htp* at Beni Hasan).

An elder woman's main problems would probably have been setting up the thread on the wall and setting up the loom because of the standing, bending and stretching involved, especially if she had a ground loom, and here an older woman might have found some help useful.¹⁴¹ All the stages of weaving and preparing thread can be done for as long or as brief a time as one wants, so that in theory an older woman could have worked for shorter hours or stopped to rest when she grew tired.

2. Trading

Knowledge	Optimal or acceptable prices
Skill	Bargaining, negotiation
Physical requirements	Going to market and carrying objects to market, if need be; agile enough to fend off thieves at market; reasonably good eyesight to check goods offered in payment
Alone or with others	Either
Time	Intermittent
Location	Market? Sale from home? Sell from door to door?
Equipment/ special conditions	Containers? Donkey for haulage? Scales?

Although some women sold at markets,¹⁴² it is not definite that women at Deir el-Medina actually went out of the village to a market outside.¹⁴³ If they did, they would have needed to transport the goods to the market, but they might also have sold objects from home,¹⁴⁴ or to their neighbours, or delegated the sale to someone else.

The physical requirements for trading might become more difficult with age. They could be offset to some extent either by co-opting help from other people during the journey or at the market, or by selling closer to home. On the other hand, bargaining and negotiation skills might increase with practice, in which case age might be considered an advantage.

3. Religious activity on behalf of others

a. Cultic singers¹⁴⁵

Knowledge	Prayers, chants, ceremonies
Skill	Singing, playing sistrum
Physical requirements	Standing, walking in procession, singing
Alone or with others	Usually with others
Time	Uninterrupted time, maybe at set dates or hours. Might also include purification ceremonies and dressing up. Festivals were prescheduled and might entail rehearsals beforehand. To some extent it was possible to anticipate how long ceremonies would take
Location	Probably chapel
Equipment/ special conditions	Cultic equipment (e. g. sistra, menat)

Cultic activity required a certain amount of walking and standing, although maybe allowances were made for older members of the community.¹⁴⁶ It is not clear whether

weaving in pairs on ground looms in the tomb of *D'gjt* at Thebes (de Garis Davies 1913, pl. 37) and in three tombs at Beni Hasan: the tomb of *B'k.t* (Newberry 1893b, pl. 4), the tomb of *Hty* (Newberry 1893b, pl. 13) and the tomb of *Hnm-htp* III (Newberry 1893a, pl. 29). The scene of weaving in *Hnm-htp*'s tomb is especially relevant here since it depicts a younger and an older woman working together. Barber 1994, 197 notes that several women might work at the same loom: two passing the weft bobbin back and forth between them, one wielding the beater that packed the weft in tight, a fourth manipulating the heddle bar that raised the alternate warp threads, and maybe even a fifth keeping the unwoven part of the warp free from tangles.

138 Spinning was also sometimes delegated to younger people. See Vogelsang-Eastwood/van Haeringen 1992; Roehrig 1996, 20.

139 Pelling 2001, 37.

140 Wilcke 1998, 30.

141 Cf. Barber 1994, 18.

142 Eyre 1998.

143 See the article of Günter Burkard in this volume for the vexed issue of the workmen's mobility, supra p. 31–42, and also Ventura 1986, McDowell 1994 and Burkard 2003a.

144 Toivari-Viitala 2001, 233 remarks that it has been suggested that the long list of goods in O. CGC 25677 indicates that the woman in whose keeping these objects are is running a shop or storing goods to be sold.

145 Elder women have a special responsibility for ritual in some traditional societies, e. g. Balzer 1981, 856 f.; Brown 1982, 145; Kawai 1998, 150.

146 In the Monastery of the Poor Clare nuns in Jerusalem, which I know well, most of the seventeen nuns are over seventy years old and they all spend about seven hours a day at prayer. However, certain concessions are made: when they feel it is necessary members of the community may sit at points during the prayers where it is usual to stand, and they may stand or sit where it is customary to kneel.

it would have been possible to take a break from the ritual at any point to rest or to urinate (also a problem at times with increasing age). A good strong voice was also important, since at that period there were no artificial means of amplifying sound; the voice may be affected by age but not necessarily.

*Mr-Jmn-dw*³ (i), represented with white hair on the jamb of a small naos (see above) has the title of singer of Amun; this might be a title she held earlier in her life, or she may have continued her activities into old age.

Some elder women are well attested as carrying out cultic activity outside Deir el-Medina. Gay Robins has recently published a statue of *Hwy*, the 'superior of the musical troupes' of Amun and of Ra, and the god's adorer of Amun and of Atum, holding one grandchild on her lap and with other grandchildren depicted on the side of her seat.¹⁴⁷

Some of the Divine Adoratrices of Amun in the 25th and 26th Dynasties adopted their successors at a great age, so presumably they continued to carry out the rituals at least until that point. Shepenwepet II held office for 60 years and adopted Amenirdis II after 40 years; Nitocris held office for 70 years and adopted her successor Ankhnesneferibre in her 61st year of office. Ankhnesneferibre also ruled for 70 years.¹⁴⁸

However, the Divine Adoratrices were at the pinnacle of the Egyptian elite. A better diet, better medical care, freedom from physical labour and maybe freedom from childbearing¹⁴⁹ probably enhanced their chances for an extremely long life.

b. Mourning

Knowledge	Lyrics and tunes of laments
Skill	Singing, wailing, maybe improvising laments
Physical requirements	Standing, walking in procession, singing
Alone or with others	With others
Time	A couple of hours? uninterrupted
Location	In transit to and at necropolis
Equipment/ special conditions	No

A strong voice was very important for this job, a feature which might decline with age. This job also entailed a certain amount of standing and walking, although mourners are sometimes depicted kneeling down or squatting at the opening of the tomb,¹⁵⁰ so maybe they could assume more comfortable positions once the burial procession came to a halt. It is not clear whether it would have been possible to fall out for a rest or to urinate.

As in other New Kingdom tombs¹⁵¹ older women are shown as part of groups of mourners in Deir el-Medina. Some of the mourners depicted in the tomb of *Nbt-*

*Mnw*¹⁵² have sagging breasts, a feature often used to denote ageing. Elder women may have been included in pictures of groups of mourners for the sake of artistic variation, but it could actually have been useful to include older mourners since they might have known a greater repertoire of laments, and their presence would then imply that expertise was available so that the funeral could be as good as possible.

c. The *rh.t*

Knowledge	Information about the supernatural, Medical knowledge? ¹⁵³
Skill	Experience with the supernatural, Paranormal powers?
Physical requirements	Not known
Alone or with others	With clients?
Time	Not known; probably uninterrupted
Location	Not known
Equipment/ special conditions	Not known ¹⁵⁴

Although one might well imagine the *rh.t* as a wise elder woman, an image partly supported by parallels from other cultures, there is no information about whether she in fact was an elder woman. As Jaana Toivari notes,¹⁵⁵ it is unknown whether the *rh.t* received training or held

147 Robins 1999.

148 Derived from Kitchen 1996, 480.

149 Yoyotte 1962 argued that the Divine Adoratrices were celibate. However, Teeter 1999 has recently shed doubt on this point.

150 At Deir el-Medina: Bruyère 1926, 67, sitting in front of the coffin, although it is not clear what stage in the proceedings this represents; Bruyère 1937b, 29; Maystre 1936, pl. 7. Cf. Feucht 1985, pl. 18; Martin 1987, nos. 21 and 22.

151 E. g. de Garis Davies 1925, pl. 20; de Garis Davies 1948, pl. 5 (with sagging bosom); Martin 1987, no. 66 (with lined face).

152 Bruyère/Kuentz 1926, pl. 3.

153 In one of the texts on the Metternich Stela, Isis' son Horus is examined by a *rh.t*, who diagnoses snake or scorpion bite (Borghouts 1982a, 26), but it is not clear whether the *rh.t* also worked as a healer at Deir el-Medina. Karl 2000, 143 f., 159 argues that this is the case because divine wrath could also manifest itself as illness. On the other hand, the crew also employed a doctor and a scorpion controller to deal with scorpion stings and snake bite (see Janssen 1997, 26–29).

154 Lynn Meskell argues that certain unusual objects found in the tomb of the woman *M'd*³ at Deir el-Medina may have been magical, and if so, *M'd*³ may have been a *rh.t* (Meskell 1999, 180, 217). Unfortunately, it is not clear whether these objects belonged to *M'd*³ or to the man buried in this tomb; it is also not known whether the *rh.t* used magical objects. Claudia Näser argues that these objects may be part of the funerary offerings which other members of the community brought to the burial (Näser 2001, 378 f.).

155 Toivari-Viitala 2001, 231.

her post by virtue of her natural gift for spiritual discernment. It is therefore unclear whether or not her skills might have improved by practice.

d. Mortuary cult

Knowledge	Offering prayers
Skill	None
Physical requirements	Mobility
Alone or with others	Either
Time	Own discretion
Location	Necropolis
Equipment/ special conditions	None

This task would involve collecting the offerings, distributing them and taking one's own share home. Mobility would have been important, although in Deir el-Medina the distance to the necropolis was minimal.

4. Looking after children

Knowledge	Experience maybe useful
Skill	Amusing/teaching/keeping control of children
Physical requirements	Adequate eyesight to see what children are doing and some agility to follow them around/prevent them misbehaving or getting into danger
Alone or with others	With children
Time	As needed, but should be continuous
Location	Not known
Equipment/ special conditions	Not known

Older women would only have been able to look after children in the sense of baby-sitting: wet-nursing them would have no longer been possible.

5. Midwifery

Knowledge	Birth process, some female anatomy, magic
Skill	Nursing
Physical requirements	Strength in arms for pushing, massaging, ¹⁵⁶ holding ¹⁵⁷ or physically supporting woman giving birth etc. Need to crouch/bend over. Good eyesight
Alone or with others	Probably several women at once ¹⁵⁸
Time	No scheduled time but must be uninterrupted: could take hours or even days
Location	At new mother's house
Equipment/ special conditions	Magical objects, ¹⁵⁹ medicines, knife for cutting umbilical cord

The midwife would have needed to reach the new mother's house (mobility would be essential) stay with her during labour (which might take hours or even days, so she should be free of other commitments) and receive

and take care of the baby (for example, washing it and cutting its umbilical cord, as described in P. Westcar).

For midwifery, age would have been an advantage in some ways, since an aged midwife would presumably have been more experienced,¹⁶⁰ and there would have been fewer conflict of interests with her own family.¹⁶¹ On the other hand, in order to "hasten the birth," as Heqat is said to do in P. Westcar 10,23, the midwife might need to keep up some fairly strenuous pushing and massaging, though this could have been delegated to a younger colleague.

6. Housework

Grain preparation before grinding flour included sieving the spikelets, handsorting them to remove stones and weed seeds, pounding the spikelets, leaving the mixture to dry, winnowing, and sieving and hand sorting the grains a second time to remove the chaff.¹⁶²

a. Sieving grain spikelets

Knowledge	None
Skill	None
Physical requirements	Some strength in arms
Alone or with others	Either
Time	As long as it takes, but can take breaks
Location	Probably kitchen
Equipment/ special conditions	Sieve, container

b. Handsorting grain

Knowledge	None
Skill	None
Physical requirements	Good eyesight, nimble fingers
Alone or with others	Either
Time	As long as needed, but can take breaks
Location	Anywhere, probably kitchen
Equipment/ special conditions	Containers

¹⁵⁶ Suggested by Weindler 1915, 37.

¹⁵⁷ Weindler 1915, 30.

¹⁵⁸ Cf. P. Westcar 10,22–23, where Nephthys stands behind the mother, Isis in front of her, and Heqat hastens the birth, and the scenes of the king's or god's birth (Weindler 1915; Brunner 1964).

¹⁵⁹ Such as the 'dwarf of clay' to be placed upon the brow of a woman suffering painful childbirth mentioned in P. Leiden I 348 (Borghouts 1978, 39).

¹⁶⁰ For elder women as midwives in a traditional society see for instance Balzer 1981, 857; Kawai 1998, 150.

¹⁶¹ For such conflicts in a different setting see Paul/Paul 1975, 715.

¹⁶² Samuel 2000, 541.

c. Pounding grain

Knowledge	None
Skill	None
Physical requirements	Strength in arms
Alone or with others	Either
Time	As long as needed, but can take breaks
Location	Kitchen
Equipment/ special conditions	Mortar and pestle

Pounding grain demanded a certain amount of arm strength, which might have been difficult for some older women; a representation in the tomb of *Jmn-m-h³.t* (TT 53) shows an older woman, identified by her drooping breast, grinding grain at a saddle quern, whilst a younger woman pounds grain.¹⁶³ Pounding was also a time-consuming task, since only a handful of grain could be processed at once; if one filled the mortar too full the grain would just spill out onto the floor.¹⁶⁴ Delwen Samuel took about 15 to 20 minutes to pound 400 to 500 ml of spikelets in an experimental mortar of 2.4 litres capacity, although she remarked that an experienced operator could have pounded the same quantity faster.¹⁶⁵

d. Winnowing grain

Knowledge	None
Skill	None
Physical requirements	Strength in arms, stooping and bending
Alone or with others	Either
Time	As long as necessary, but can take breaks
Location	Outside
Equipment/ special conditions	Wind, scoop

e. Grinding flour

Knowledge	None
Skill	None
Physical requirements	Bending, stretching, exerting pressure
Alone or with others	Can be done alone
Time	As long as it takes, but can take breaks
Location	Kitchen
Equipment/ special conditions	Grindstone and grinder

At Deir el-Medina, grain was ground on a saddle quern,¹⁶⁶ rather than a grindstone on the ground. Delwen Samuel has argued that this raised quern saved its user considerable strain since it was possible to bend at the hips whilst leaning against the brick support of the quern,¹⁶⁷ whereas grinding on the floor entailed exerting considerable pressure.

Nonetheless, grinding corn in any position entailed bending, stretching and exerting pressure, and given the

small amounts, which could be processed at any one time,¹⁶⁸ it was time-consuming. A day's ration of bread for an adult would be about 800 to 1000 g; for a kilo of bread one needs about 700 g flour,¹⁶⁹ so a day's flour allowance for an adult would be about 560 to 700 g. Delwen Samuel has ground 1.2 kg of flour in somewhat under 2 hours, although she thought that a more experienced miller could probably have ground the same quantity in an hour and a half.¹⁷⁰ At this rate, flour for an adult would take from fifty-five minutes to an hour and twenty minutes, and flour for four adults would take from three hours forty minutes to five hours twenty minutes.

Nonetheless, older women did work at grinding grain, since some representation of millers portray older women.¹⁷¹ However, in Deir el-Medina this might have been delegated to the servant women.

f. Cooking, including making beer

Knowledge	Recipes
Skill	Cooking
Physical requirements	Sieving, mixing, chopping, some bending or squatting
Alone or with others	Either
Time	As long as necessary, once prepared can be left to cook/ferment and watched whilst doing something else
Location	Kitchen
Equipment/ special conditions	Oven, sieve, containers, knives, etc.

The oven and many of the mixing vessels would have stood on the floor, but one could have sat on the floor to

163 Wreszinski 1923, 87b.

164 Samuel 1989, 266.

165 Delwen Samuel, personal communication, based on Samuel 1994.

166 Bruyère 1939, 75–77.

167 Samuel 2000, 563. On the other hand, the reconstruction of the saddle quern emplacement in Bomann 1995, 18 looks more awkward since it does not support the miller's upper thighs. The representation of a raised quern in TT 60 also shows the user bending quite low (de Garis Davies/Gardiner/de Garis Davies 1920, pl. 11a). Maybe, however, emplacements could be adjusted to suit the person who usually used them.

168 Samuel 1989, 266.

169 Adrario 2002, 21.

170 Delwen Samuel, personal communication, based on Samuel 1994. Adrario 2002, 21 offers a more time-consuming statistic: it would take about 7 to 8 hours a day to grind 2.5 kg of flour. At this rate, an hour's grinding would produce between 312 and 357 g, and a day's flour for one adult roughly between one and a half and two and a quarter hours. To provide a day's ration of flour for four people, one of them would have to work grinding between six and a quarter to almost nine hours a day.

171 E. g. Louvre E 7704bis: see Ziegler/Barbotin/Rutschowskaya 1990, 29.

be at the same level. However, one might have had to bend down very low to blow into a floor-level oven.¹⁷²

I have included beer making under this heading since the process required basically mixing and sieving or straining. Since the men were away from home during most of the working week it is likely that women had to make their own beer on weekdays.

g. Cleaning

Knowledge	None
Skill	Little
Physical requirements	Some movement, including bending, good eyesight
Alone or with others	Either
Time	As long as it takes, can be interrupted
Location	Home
Equipment/ special conditions	Broom? Rags?

For one's own cleaning, one would need to be able to bend and stoop; one would also need to be able to see what one was cleaning.

If one had the services of a government-issue servant, this would save the householder some bending and stooping, but they would still need to supervise them. This would probably entail a certain amount of agility in order to move around the house, and good enough eyesight to see what the servants were doing, unless one was awe-inspiring enough to terrify everyone without getting up. In principle, this task might be done sporadically, or as needed.

7. Dancing and entertaining

Knowledge	Words and music of songs, movement of dances, how to play an instrument
Skill	Dancing, singing, rhythm, musical skills
Physical requirements	Agility and grace, good voice
Alone or with others	Either, but to audience
Time	Without interruption, at least for a short time
Location	Various
Equipment/ special conditions	Musical instruments, jewellery

Dancing was probably not feasible for older women, given both the physical demands and the aesthetics of performance. Possibly older women could teach the next generation.

8. Selling/renting animals

Knowledge	How to treat animals
Skill	With animals
Physical requirements	Some strength and agility – bending, pulling, restraining etc.

Alone or with others	Either
Time	Intermittent. Taking animal to feed elsewhere demanded uninterrupted time ¹⁷³
Location	At home/place where animals were kept
Equipment/ special conditions	Feeding troughs, leashes, saddle and bridle where appropriate

It might have been physically strenuous to look after a large animal such as a cow or donkey, since one might need to restrain it or drive it; one might also have to clean the place it was kept occasionally, which would entail bending and lifting.

9. Agriculture

a. Sowing

Knowledge	Right time to sow
Skill	None
Physical requirements	Freedom of arm movement to scatter seed
Alone or with others	Probably with others
Time	Probably continuous
Location	At field
Equipment/ special conditions	Container for seed

b. Picking up grain

Knowledge	Right time to harvest
Skill	None
Physical requirements	Bending, picking up, carrying
Alone or with others	Probably with others
Time	Probably continuous
Location	At field
Equipment/ special conditions	Container for ears of grain

c. Pulling flax

Knowledge	Right time to harvest
Skill	None
Physical requirements	Strength to pull up flax and carry stems
Alone or with others	Probably with others
Time	Probably continuous
Location	At flax field
Equipment/ special conditions	None

172 Cf. O. Leipzig 1894; Brunner-Traut 1956, 65 f. pl. 24.

173 McDowell 1992, 199 argues that tending cattle was irksome because they ate a great deal and one had to take them down to the cultivation to graze.

Sowing, picking up grain and pulling flax would entail physical activity – bending, picking up, pulling, throwing and carrying, which would be possible in moderation.¹⁷⁴ However, it might have been difficult for an older woman to keep pace with men in their prime.

By and large, activities which demanded a great deal of physical effort would become more difficult for women as they aged, although since the Egyptians depicted some older women grinding and winnowing, it is likely that some older women continued to do this work, probably because they had no other means of support. Activities, which demanded uninterrupted time, might also have become more difficult, either because women might find it difficult to stand for a long time or because they needed to urinate more frequently. On the other hand, activities, which demanded less physical effort and could be interrupted at will, such as most stages of the spinning and weaving process, remained accessible to women as they aged. Skills that improved with practice (negotiation, bargaining, weaving) and experience (midwifery and childcare) might in some cases even have given elder women an advantage.

<i>rb.t/</i> Textile work	Experience useful Process probably needs little modification
Midwifery/ Mourning and cultic singing/ Childcare	Experience useful Process may need modification
Trading/ Housework/ Animal care	Experience useful Process becomes more difficult and needs modification
Agriculture	Experience not necessarily useful Process becomes more difficult
Dancing and entertaining	Probably no longer possible

In principle, an elder woman might have worked with younger people and delegated the more strenuous parts of a task to them. Delwen Samuel also suggested that many household tasks were performed communally, so that people could do whatever was most appropriate for their skill and strength.¹⁷⁵

Delegation of tasks

Knowledge	Relevant area
Skill	People skills, negotiation
Physical requirements	None
Alone or with others	Either
Time	Intermittent
Location	Anywhere. Maybe travel occasionally to check up on work
Equipment/ special conditions	None

In the *stato civile* a woman called *T³-r^h-‘n* (iii) is listed living with her married son, his wife and his sister. Cases of older women joining their children's households are also known from other periods.¹⁷⁶

Elder women who joined their children's households could have helped the family appreciably by supervising children or the work of servants, or helping with the housework, thus freeing the young mother for income-producing work such as weaving. They could also have continued to work in textiles, weaving and/or spinning thread. This would have demanded a certain minimal amount of mobility and good eyesight.

Earning capacity

Virtually nothing is known about how much women earned in Ancient Egypt;¹⁷⁷ nor do we know whether it was customary for women to share their income with their husbands.¹⁷⁸ It is conceivable that women's wages were indeed lower than men's: the ownership of the joint household property as $\frac{1}{3}$ wife: $\frac{2}{3}$ husband¹⁷⁹ and a similar $\frac{1}{3}$: $\frac{2}{3}$ division in favour of the husband on the dissolution of the marriage by divorce¹⁸⁰ or the death of one of the partners¹⁸¹ might imply that women's earning capacity was generally lower than men's.

Not all these tasks were necessarily paid, but they could also enhance one's life by adding variety, self-esteem and human contact to one's life and promoting goodwill, which might make it easier to obtain favours in return from other people.

174 An older woman with drooping breast is depicted gleaning in TT 57 (Wreszinski 1923, 193).

175 Delwen Samuel, personal communication.

176 McDowell 1999, 51 f. Hekanakhte letter no. 2 shows that *Hq³-nht.w's* mother *Jpy* was living in his household (Wente 1990, 60 f.). Similarly, the grandmother and mother of the soldier *Snfrw* lived in his household at Kahun (Kemp 1991, 157 f.). On the other hand, the widow *Hr-j³* lived alone in the village (Toivari-Viitala 2001, 211). The widow *‘s.t* (vii) had to go to court in O. DeM 235 in order to stave off rival claimants to her house, which indicates that a woman living alone might have been in a vulnerable position.

177 The only known wages of women are those of the servant women at Deir el-Medina, discussed by Tobias Hofmann in this volume, supra p. 113–118.

178 Toivari-Viitala 2001, 234.

179 Toivari-Viitala 2001, 96.

180 Toivari-Viitala 2001, 90.

181 Naunakhte Doc. 1.

1. Linen

It is very difficult to know how far a woman could support herself by making textiles. The relevant factors are:

- a) the spinner's initial expenditure on flax or the weaver's initial expenditure on thread,
- b) the price for which the thread or the cloth was eventually sold, and
- c) the time it took to spin the thread or weave the cloth.

Subtracting a) from b) would allow us to identify the profit from this manufacture, and dividing the result by c) would give us the income obtained.

However, there is not one text from this period, which provides all three factors.

a) Outlay: Ten bundles of flax were worth a *deben*,¹⁸² but it is not known how large the bundles were or how much thread could be obtained from this amount of flax.¹⁸³ In O. Brussels E 6311 vso. 7–10, someone is given two *h³p* (skeins of thread) and asked to weave a *hbs*-garment. "... and he said to me: 'Give the wood to have it made for the statue of *P³-t³w-m-dj-Jmn* (i)', and he gave me two skeins to weave a garment for him (it?) and <?> gave me three, making five, and <?> wove seven large garments, making a half [...]."

To the original two skeins, one of the parties adds three more, making five, and seven large *hnn³* garments are woven from them. At first sight, it seems as if these skeins would thus have been quite substantial. Infuriatingly enough, however, the information is inconclusive: if the garments were intended for the aforementioned statue, they may not necessarily have been life-size.

According to Jac. Janssen, thread prices varied considerably,¹⁸⁴ ranging from 2 sacks of thread for 10 *deben* of yarn¹⁸⁵ to 1 *hin* of oil (= 1 *deben*?) for 1 *deben* of yarn,¹⁸⁶ probably according to the quality of the thread. An even lower price of 10 *deben* of yarn for 2 *oipe* is known from O. Glasgow D. 1925.70 rto. 2.

b) Four weavers in a workshop mentioned in a letter of complaint (P. Anastasi VI, 7–50) wove 178 units (*mn-wjj*) of cloth in seven months, approximately one unit per weaver every 4½ days¹⁸⁷ but it is not clear what these pieces were worth. Obviously, prices varied according to the size and quality of the cloth. 87 of these units were royal linen, the finest cloth,¹⁸⁸ so it is likely that less fine cloth could be produced more rapidly.

c) In O. DeM 125 a woman asks another to *grg* (prepare) a *mss* for her and have it ready within 10 days. Gillian Vogelsang-Eastwood argues that it would therefore take 10 days to prepare a *mss*,¹⁸⁹ and that the *mss* was a piece of cloth about 1.6 metres long,¹⁹⁰ so it is not unrealistic to imagine weaving one in ten days. Modern weavers using traditional methods estimated that ten days would

be a viable time span;¹⁹¹ provided the thread was already ready; two metres of cloth approximately a metre wide could be woven in about ten days, but obviously the completion of any piece of work would depend on the weave and the thread used. If the weave was close and tight it would certainly take longer to weave this amount of cloth, but maybe such an amount could be completed in less than ten days if the thread was very coarse and the weave was loose.¹⁹²

The problem is that although the verb *grg* can mean "prepare from basic constituents" (for example, it is used of making medicine¹⁹³ and founding cities¹⁹⁴) it can also be used for preparing, in the sense of making ready, something which already exists,¹⁹⁵ so it is not clear whether or not this letter means that the addressee should weave a cloth or simply obtain one. Since the sender of the letter initially requests the addressee to *wh³*, "look for", a *mss*, it may be that the latter is the case.

However, if we follow G. Vogelsang-Eastwood that the garment should be woven during the next ten days, this would give us a possible bottom line of what might be earned by weaving: the *mss* cost usually 5 *deben* (sometimes 3 or 4),¹⁹⁶ so if a woman could in fact produce one in 10 days she could earn between 9 and 15 *deben* a month.¹⁹⁷

2. Trading

It is not clear whether traders, either female or male, actually aimed to make a profit from their activity, over and above commuting goods that they did not want or need into goods which they wanted or needed, or into

182 P. Turin Cat. 1907+1908 II, 8 in Janssen 1975, 364 f.

183 Kemp/Vogelsang-Eastwood 2001, 442. Allam 1998a, 6 suggests that when the woman *Hwnr* (ii)/(iii)? on O. UCL 19614 mentions the cloth she produced as equivalent to an *oipe*, she refers to her outlay on raw materials.

184 Janssen 1975, 436–438.

185 O. Glasgow D. 1925.70 rto. 2 (=HO 63,1).

186 P. Turin Cat. 1881 rto. 3.6.

187 Kemp/Vogelsang-Eastwood 2001, 428 f.

188 Kemp/Vogelsang-Eastwood 2001, 428.

189 Kemp/Vogelsang-Eastwood 2001, 429.

190 Kemp/Vogelsang-Eastwood 2001, 447.

191 Constance Johnson, personal communication.

192 Paula Johansen, personal communication.

193 Wb V, 187.22.

194 Wb V, 186.5–6.

195 LRL 28, 47, 14–15.

196 Janssen 1975, 262.

197 Similarly, in O. DeM 363 the addressee is asked to make some yarn into a *htrj n jsjj* within ten days. However, this object seems to have been less expensive than the *d'jw* cloth. Janssen 1975, 278 quotes two prices for this object: 3 *hin* in O. Prague H. 15, 3 and 7 *deben* for weaving a *d'jw* and a *htrj n jsj* in O. DeM 428, rto. 5–vso. 2.

goods which could be stored more conveniently in order to exchange later. On occasion, people did manage to exploit opportunities where they had something available at a point when the demand for it was high. For instance, one woman suspect in the trials at the end of the 20th Dynasty of people who had looted the royal tombs and mortuary temples was asked how she could afford to buy herself some slaves, the implication being that she must have had access to some of the stolen goods. She replied that she had sold produce from her garden:¹⁹⁸ since we know from other texts in this corpus that these were difficult years of famine,¹⁹⁹ it could well be that she had exploited this window of opportunity. Similarly, in P. BM EA 10052 vso. 11,7–8 a woman explains how she came to possess certain silver by claiming that she obtained it by selling grain in “the year of the hyenas when people were starving”.

By and large, the only ways to make a living from selling would be to sell objects belonging to someone else and ask a commission for the sale, to produce objects for sale, or to sell off one’s possessions. If one owned slaves, one could rent them out to other people. Inhabitants of Deir el-Medina might also sell off their servant days, as in O. Gardiner 123. That might decrease their quality of life in other ways, although it might be quite lucrative: for an amount of ten days per month during a whole year, multiplied by four,²⁰⁰ the woman in O. Gardiner 123 received 18½ *snjw*.²⁰¹

3. Animals

Raising animals would have been financially worthwhile. Donkey prices ranged between 25 and 40 *deben*,²⁰² cattle from 20 to 50 *deben* (really expensive cattle costing 100 *deben*).²⁰³ Small cattle range from 1 to 5 *deben*²⁰⁴ and pigs 1 or a half *snjw*, prices of 5 to 7 *deben* also being known.²⁰⁵ One could also hire donkeys out at a quarter to half *oipe* per day.²⁰⁶ On the other hand, it might have been difficult for an older woman to manage a large animal, although she could have delegated the care of it to someone else, and she would also have to pay for its food. On the other hand, she could probably have kept birds on her roof: they sold for about ½ to ¼ *deben*²⁰⁷ but would have been less trouble.

4. Other activities

It is not known whether childcare, dancing, mourning, the mortuary cult,²⁰⁸ cultic activity, midwifery, or the activities of the *rh.t* were paid for at Deir el-Medina, even in the form of gifts or having one’s meals provided when working, although in each case it is possible. Participation in these activities would have probably created goodwill and increased one’s social capital,²⁰⁹ especially, I think, the unusual activities of the *rh.t*.

In P. Westcar, the new father gives the midwives a sack of grain after they deliver his wife of triplets. It is impossible to know whether this was a representative wage: this sack of grain is important for later events in the story (*and* the mother gave birth to triplets!). In any case, sacks were smaller at that period, 48 litres as opposed to 76.8 litres during the New Kingdom. However, *if* it was a representative wage, the four midwives received 12 litres each for a few hours’ work, or at worst a few days’ work (as opposed to the 19.2 litres the servant women were getting per month), so helping deliver a baby could be quite worthwhile financially.

Conclusion

In this paper, I hoped to show some of the options open to women, as they grew older in Deir el-Medina. In many ways, their experience was probably similar to that of women elsewhere in Egypt, but the special situation of the village affected it in other ways: for instance, they probably had little opportunity to engage in agriculture, and if the villagers’ personal mobility was limited they would have had less possibility of selling produce in a market.

In other societies, women whose lives were very restricted during their fertile years, such as Ancient Greece, often enjoyed far more freedom after their menopause:²¹⁰ their getting pregnant was no longer a problem and they often enjoyed some authority over – or by means of –

198 P. BM EA 10052 vso. 10,15.

199 P. BM EA 10403 vso. 3,5–6.

200 Navailles/Neveu 1989, 120 argue for a period of four years; Allam 1998b, 141 for four servants at the same time.

201 Toivari-Viitala 2001, 126.

202 Janssen 1975, 172.

203 Janssen 1975, 175.

204 Janssen 1975, 166: most are valued at 2 to 3 *deben* but this clearly depended on the size and quality of the animals.

205 Janssen 1975, 177.

206 McDowell 1992, 200; Eichler 1991, 185, 204 suggests ¼ *oipe* a day.

207 Janssen 1975, 178.

208 The person performing the cult eventually received a share in the offerings in exchange for their services (Englund 2001, 568).

209 Compare the story told by the anthropologist Abu-Lughod 1986, 21, who narrates how her own weeping at a funeral in the community where she was doing research touched members of the family and increased her acceptance in the group.

210 Bremmer 1987.

their adult children.²¹¹ However, this does not necessarily apply elsewhere: in societies which are so poor that all women must work outside their homes, the young and healthy are at a premium and as women grow older, their value in the work-market fades.²¹²

Egyptian women seem to have less restricted than many women in the ancient world, and I know of no references to their lives becoming less restricted as they grew older.

Some aspects of ageing were beyond elder women's control, such as their health, but they were by no means pas-

sive victims. In many other contexts they could still make choices and undertake activities, which would nourish them body and soul.

211 Brown 1982.

212 Anderson 1982.