

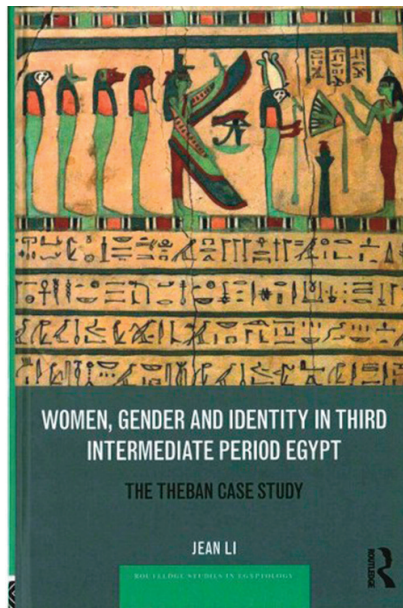


**REVIEW**  
**WOMEN, GENDER, AND IDENTITY**  
**IN THIRD INTERMEDIATE PERIOD THEBES:**  
**THE THEBAN CASE STUDY**

by Jean Li  
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Reviewed by Staff

The first millennium BCE has traditionally been a period somewhat neglected by Egyptologists, who have generally been far more interested in the archaeological and textual glories of the unified Kingdoms than in the web of foreign cultural influences and decentralized political administration that mark the Third Intermediate and Late Periods of Egyptian history. However, this has left a gap in our understanding that is now inspiring both new archaeological work (particularly in Thebes) and synthetic works of scholarship that bring together previously excavated evidence, most notably Aston's magisterial *Burial Assemblages of Dynasty 21–25*.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, trends in archaeological scholarship over the past several decades have sparked interest in the very same factors that have in the past deterred scholars from this period, with theories of identity (especially ethnic identity), social organization and gender particularly prominent. Women have long been recognized to have held an unusually prominent position in Third Intermediate Period Egypt, when kings of both Libyan and Nubian origin ruled over the country, and therefore the promise of a study of women in the first



millennium BC informed by the insights gained from Egyptology's sister discipline is great. Li's book, based on her 2011 doctoral thesis, uses data drawn from women's burial assemblages in Thebes in the 8th–6th centuries BCE (a period of time that, it should be noted, falls mostly in the Late Period rather than the title's Third Intermediate Period) to offer a material culture-based analysis of how women in ancient Egypt conceived of and presented themselves in the context of the tomb, reassessing the traditional scholarly view of them as primarily wives and mothers.

The women of ancient Egypt are often seen in popular imagination as having enjoyed more rights than those of Greece and Rome. Women in the Third Intermediate Period in particular are recognized by scholars to have had particularly high status, with those holding the title of God's Wife of Amun rising to almost royal heights in their power. The author thus seeks to examine more closely the role of women in this time period, using two databases that were compiled from the corpus of excavated tombs of Theban women, and from unprovenanced funerary objects that are identified as having belonged to Theban women.

Her methodologies for interpreting this evidence are derived from “archaeological, anthropological and sociological theoretical perspectives.” The author points out that women in ancient Egypt have been previously studied through limited viewpoints that have emphasized their roles in relation to the family, and stresses that she will use the rich burial record of women in Third Intermediate Period Thebes to demonstrate that, during this period, women were not reliant on men to construct their identities.

An introduction sets out the rationale for the book, and summarizes previous scholarly approaches to women in ancient Egypt. The first chapter supplies an overview of the historical, cultural and religious background to the 8th–6th century BCE evidence with which the author is dealing, constructing a narrative of a rapidly changing society in which elite women were able to flourish through the changes in Egypt’s political, cultural and religious environment. Chapter 2, “Rank, Status, and Axes of Identity,” asks how the nuances of gender roles for women in ancient Egypt might be investigated, given that normative presentation of the roles of women in ancient Egypt in text and visual culture was structured overwhelmingly through the frame of the female body and its reproductive functions. Identity theory, long popular in archaeological and anthropological approaches, is briefly introduced as one way to address this problem, noting that gender would have been only one of the ways in which women defined themselves. The author attempts to access information about identity of Third Intermediate Period women through the analysis of their titles, positing that titles are “identity markers” that reflected social trends. She argues that women’s titles were not purely ceremonial and denote more responsibility than has previously been assumed. She finds that “functional” titles are given precedence over household titles in ordering, and that while women often listed their genealogical affiliations on their funerary goods, they do not usually mention their husbands. Li therefore concludes that a husband was not a necessary component for women’s identity construction in the 8th–6th centuries BC, and that the wifely role was no longer of central importance to women’s self-presentation.

Chapter 3, “Materiality, Memory and the Mortuary Landscape of Thebes,” strives to apply theoretical insights from landscape and memory studies to the interpretation of the Theban landscape, and thus “complicate discussions of landscapes in Egyptology” (p. 58). Li argues that the reuse of older monuments as tombs in the 8th–6th centuries BCE is an act of memory

performance by groups and individuals for the purpose of identity definition. Women at this time were often buried in family groups with their own families, rather than with their husbands. A small number of women were buried individually in their own monumental tombs, further demonstrating that women’s status was independent of their husband’s position. Evidence from outside Thebes also shows a marked absence of husbands from the burial records of women in the Third Intermediate Period.

In Chapter 4, “The Symbolic Economy of Mortuary Practices,” Li turns to an examination of funerary objects, perhaps a richer seam to mine than the typically undecorated Third Intermediate Period tomb structures. Analysis of previous scholarship on the subject shows that the assemblages of women did not differ materially from those of men. In Li’s dataset, women without titles owned the greatest variety of objects, made from the most diverse materials, meaning that women without titles comprised a surprisingly significant portion of property owners. This raises an important question: if high status titles and high status tomb goods did not correlate in the Third Intermediate Period, how should we define social status and “elite” in ancient Egypt, and is Egyptologists’ usual conflation of status, power, and wealth appropriate? Li uses Bourdieu’s concept of “capital” to address this problem, arguing that titles provide symbolic capital, but those without titles invested economic capital in order to create the verisimilitude of social status: one form of capital was used to create another. A final chapter offers conclusions, summarizing the arguments of the book. The main contribution of the analysis of data from women’s tombs in the 8th–6th centuries is to demonstrate that women were prominent in Theban society not as appendages of their husbands, but because of their own social prominence and professional identities.

Throughout the book, Li convincingly shows through analysis of her dataset that women in Thebes in the 8th–6th centuries BCE were independent individuals, not reliant on their husbands. That women seem to have regarded their genealogical connections as more important in the funerary sphere than their marital links is particularly interesting. Although the author singles out women for examination at the beginning of her project, it quickly becomes clear that there is no great distinction between the material culture or status expression of women and men in the Third Intermediate Period. Women had functional, “professional” titles as men did, owned the same burial goods as men did, and were interred either in their own personal tombs or in

the tomb of their family (rather than those of their husbands). As Li notes, the “axis of identity” that concerned women in Third Intermediate Period Egypt seems to have been social status, rather than gender. One wonders whether categorization on the basis of gender was not a meaningful way in which society marked difference in the 8th–6th century BCE, and if therefore such studies focused on women more usefully provide comparative evidence for other cultures and time periods than insights into Third Intermediate Period Egyptian culture.

While the data analysis is illuminating, the author’s application of anthropological theory to the Egyptian evidence is not wholly successful. The introduction states that she has “a desire to test the applicability of contemporary archaeological, anthropological and sociological perspectives in the analysis of ancient evidence.” Not only is this now a common approach in Egyptian archaeology already known to be highly productive, but it also foreshadows the problem that, especially in chapter 3, theory is applied not to understand a particular problem arising from the evidence but almost as an experiment to see what results: as the author says, to “complicate” the picture, but without offering new insight. Thus every famous theorist from Butler to Gell is referenced in passing, without these references changing our interpretation of the Egyptian evidence, or the Egyptian data adding new perspectives to the theoretical models. The one notable exception is the application of Bourdieu’s concept of “capital,” discussed above, which suggests productive new ways for Egyptologists to think about the problematic divide between social and economic status.

In a similar vein, the author’s use of the term “identity,” central to her thesis, is also problematic: firstly, “identity” in archaeological literature has generally been used to discuss membership of various socially-defined groups (whether ethnic, gender, age or otherwise). Li, conversely, searches for “individual identities” among the Theban women, examining their unique combinations of titles and burial assemblages. If the “identity” of every individual is unique, we run the risk of making “identity” into a useless analytical concept, since it can tell us nothing about the social organization of society. Although the author acknowledges the problem on p. 24 and mentions

the alternative concept of “personhood,” in which the individual is a far more prominent unit of analysis, she does not discuss this in any great detail and persists in using the term “identity” throughout the book. The problem becomes especially acute since in order to read an individual identity into women’s tomb assemblages, Li must argue that, for example, women were able to choose which titles would be inscribed on burial goods, and that women would have had complete conscious control over their burial assemblages. If titles were hereditary, though, and many women were buried not alone but in family tombs alongside many of their male family members, the ability of an individual woman to exercise such control over her self-presentation is far from clear, and a more nuanced discussion of this issue would have been welcome.

It is striking that, for a recommended price of \$150, this is a very slim volume (under 200 pages) with no color plates and relatively few illustrations. However, the astonishing number of typographical mistakes on display will raise eyebrows at the expense even higher: at least eleven were found in chapter 2 alone (reflecting the general rate within the volume), with some errors appearing repeatedly (“honourific” for “honorific” every time it appears, and the howler “NecropolisNecropolis” on both p. 58 and p. 65, suggesting an unfortunate find-and-replace error). An artistic “cannon” is even fired on p. 23. Routledge would do well to examine their proofreading and copy-editing procedures, especially when asking such a high price for a book.

The insights gained from Li’s book come mostly through data analysis rather than theoretical discussion, and anyone working on gender in ancient Egypt or on the Third Intermediate or Late Periods will find the conclusions reached here on the societal position of women, and the discussion of women’s use of titles and genealogies, enlightening and useful. Given that the possible influence of Nubian women’s status on women in Thebes during the 25th Dynasty is not discussed, the work of Lohwasser will provide a useful supplement.<sup>2</sup> Those whose primary interests lie in identity in ancient Egypt may perhaps be better served by other works that better integrate data and theory, and take a more focused approach to the concept of “identity”: the classic work on Egyptian and Nubian ethnic identity remains Tyson Smith’s *Wretched Kush*,

which also offers interesting insights into the identity of women in Egyptian colonial society of the New Kingdom.<sup>3</sup> For a nuanced discussion of the difficulties of accessing individual as opposed to group identities in the archaeological record, see Wendrich's article in *Egyptian Archaeology*.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> David A Aston, *Burial Assemblages of Dynasty 21–25: Chronology, Typology, Developments* (Wien: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2009).

<sup>2</sup> Angelika Lohwasser, *Die Königlichen Frauen Im Antiken Reich Von Kusch : 25. Dynastie Bis Zur Zeit Des Nastasen* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2001).

<sup>3</sup> Stuart Tyson Smith, *Wretched Kush: Ethnic Identities and Boundaries in Egypt's Nubian Empire* (New York: Routledge, 2003).

<sup>4</sup> Willeke Wendrich, "Identity and Personhood," in *Egyptian Archaeology*, ed. Willeke Wendrich, 200–219 (London: Blackwell, 2010).