



Saqqara scenes: Women in the marketplace

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The Old Kingdom mastaba tombs of Saqqara and Abusir are well known for their 'daily life scenes', presenting their visitors with vivid images of Old Kingdom society, including agriculture, trade, leisure and preparations for the tomb owner's funeral. The purpose of these scenes has been explained in many ways, from symbolic methods of regeneration to more pragmatic and esthetic intentions. The truth undoubtedly lies somewhere in the middle. It is apparent that the scenes explicitly show elite life and not the afterlife, nor kings and gods. The decoration was meant to be diverse and appealing, in order to stimulate the offering cult, and to perpetuate the name and social status of the tomb owner. Notwithstanding their specific function and context, we can learn a great deal about life in the Old Kingdom by carefully observing and comparing types of scenes across different tombs, times and places. A dichotomy is apparent between the elite tombs surrounding the capital Memphis and those found in the provinces, and a development in style and thematic

execution from the early to the late Old Kingdom can be observed. The connection between the tombs of the elite and the pyramids and sun temples of their ruling kings should also not be disregarded, as the similarities between their decoration schemes still invites further research.

One of the rarer topics depicted only in Memphite tombs is the so called market scene. It occurs in just seven tombs at Saqqara,¹ two from nearby Abusir² (perhaps to be regarded together as one cemetery), as well as the causeway of Unas. In the market scenes, often spanning several registers, we see sellers and buyers of all kinds of produce, including bread, beer, vegetables, fish, poultry, meat, vessels, linen and inscribed seals. What is so interesting about these scenes is that we can observe individual transactions taking place (e.g. beer in exchange for fish) and even in rare instances the relative value of the bartered items (six *šmd* loaves are worth two measures of *zw.t* wheat – see fig. 1). The scenes present a market that is crowded and lively, with merchants

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¹ Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep, Ti, Tepemankh II, S 920, Kagemni, Mehu and Ankhmahor.

² Ptahshepses and Fetekta.

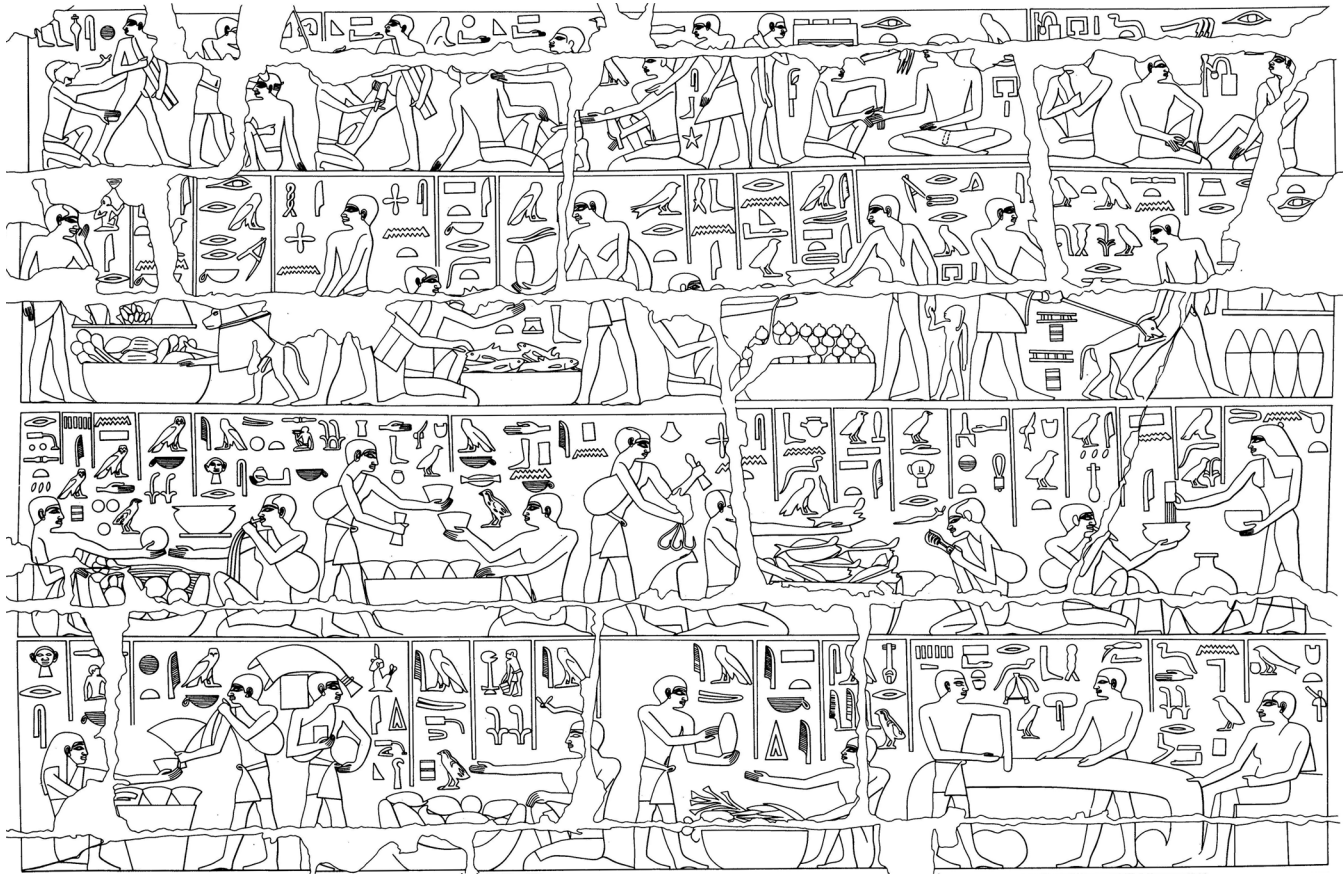


Fig. 1 Market scene from the tomb of Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep at Saqqara.³

praising their wares, people haggling, guardsmen with baboons on a leash, and a variety of old men, young men, women and children.

In fact, nearly half of the scenes contain women actively buying and selling items. In the tomb of Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep (fig. 1), who were both overseers of the manicurists in the palace of king Niuserre during the Fifth Dynasty, a woman with a child in tow is buying what appear to be figs or pomegranates. She hands a dish to the seller, either to fill it with the fruit of her choice or as/containing the item of exchange. Unfortunately the captions accompanying these

scenes are not always clear, but it seems the child is eager to start eating from the purchased fruit. In the next register, a woman is seen pouring beer into the dish of a squatting man who is nibbling on a spring onion. He is loaded with shopping bags and comments: "Fill me up, although I'm full. The grain is of a good kind." The woman is called *tn.t* or 'bowl woman'. Effectively, she is selling drinks to passing customers. Another register down, a woman is squatting behind a basket of drinking cups, offering one to a passing buyer with signature pouch and onion, who is carrying or offering a fan in return. She praises her ware with the words: "See, something from which to drink."

³ A.M. Moussa and H. Altenmüller, *Das Grab des Nianchchnum und Chnumhotep* (Mainz, 1977), fig. 10.

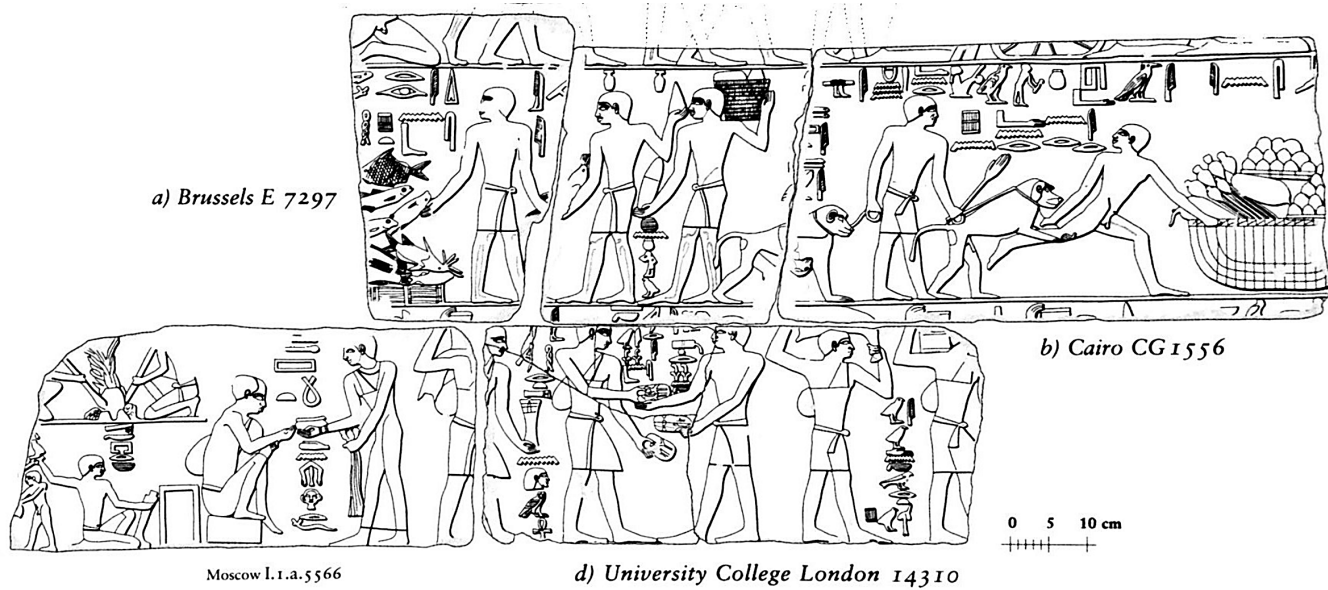
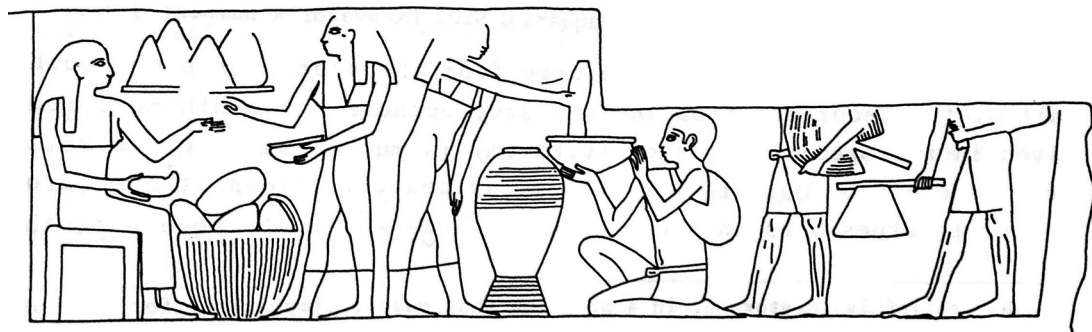


Fig. 2 Market scene from the tomb of Tepemankh II at Saqqara.⁴

In 1980, a relief block from the Pushkin Museum (Moscow I.I.a. 5566 – see fig. 2) was found to neatly fit with the market scene from the tomb of Tepemankh II,⁵ who was overseer of the department of palace attendants during the Fifth Dynasty. On it, we see a balding man sitting on a low stool, inspecting an alabaster bowl presented to him by a woman. She tells him to inscribe it with the words ‘for the Ka-priest’. In one hand she holds a

bunch of spring onions. To the right of the woman and on the register above, more barter activity takes place: slippers are traded for grain, fish is selected from a big pile, and a guardsman’s baboon is clutching the thigh of a young man (or thief?) in a comical scene. Servants or tradesmen are piled high with items. To the left and behind the engraver, carpenters and metalworkers are depicted, highlighting the link between craftwork and the marketplace.

Fig. 3 Market scene from tomb S 920 at Saqqara.⁶



⁴ Metropolitan Museum of Arts, *Egyptian Art in the Age of the Pyramids* (New York, 1999), fig. 126 on p. 405.

⁵ S.I. Hodjash and O.D. Berlev, ‘A market-scene in the mastaba of *ḏ3ḏ3-m-ḥj* (*tp-m-ḥj*)’, *Altorientalische Forschungen* 7 (1980), 31-49.

⁶ Y.M. Harpur, ‘The identity and positions of relief fragments in museums and private collections: Reliefs from a dismantled tomb in the Saqqara necropolis’, *SAK* 13 (1986), 107-123, fig. 4.



The owner of tomb S 920 at Saqqara is unfortunately unknown, but a relief fragment from its walls (Cairo JE 39860 – see fig. 3) contains another interesting scene. A sitting woman is selling bread to a female customer, who is holding a bowl. Another woman is pouring beer into the bowl of a squatting man carrying a shopping bag. The tomb, which is preserved only in fragments, probably dates to the Fifth Dynasty, and contains besides the more common scenes of agriculture, cattle and offerings, a scene showing the manufacture of stone vessels (Cairo JE 39866).

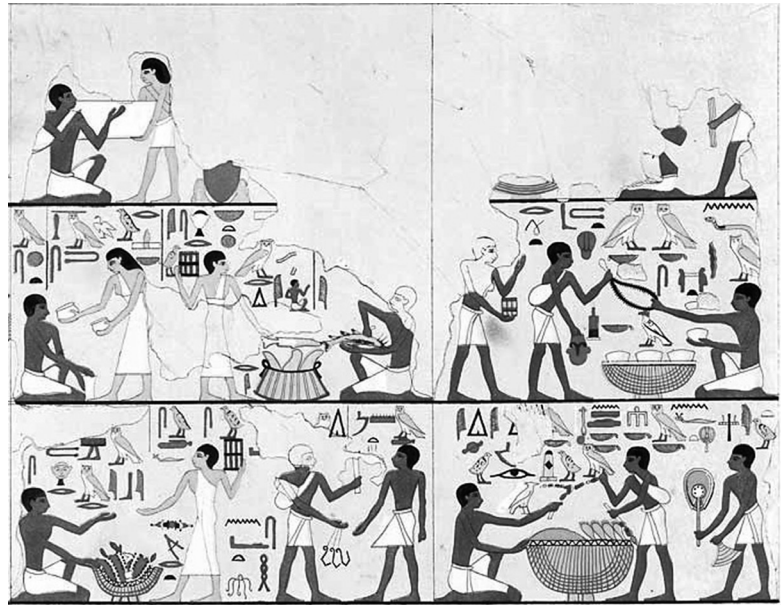


Fig. 4 West and south side of a pillar featuring a market scene from the tomb of Fetekta at Abusir.⁷

The tomb of Fetekta (a funerary priest) at Abusir, also probably dating to the Fifth Dynasty, likewise features women in the process of bartering (fig. 4). One lady is seen buying oil, while two others are wanting to trade fresh fish in exchange for a measure of grain. One of the female buyers is mentioned by name: she is called Minmeret. Bárta furthermore recognizes a market overseer in the

figure on the right of the lowest register on the west side of the pillar.⁸ He is wearing a kilt with triangular front and appears to be handling a dispute. Bárta associates this overseer with the guards leading baboons in other market scenes.

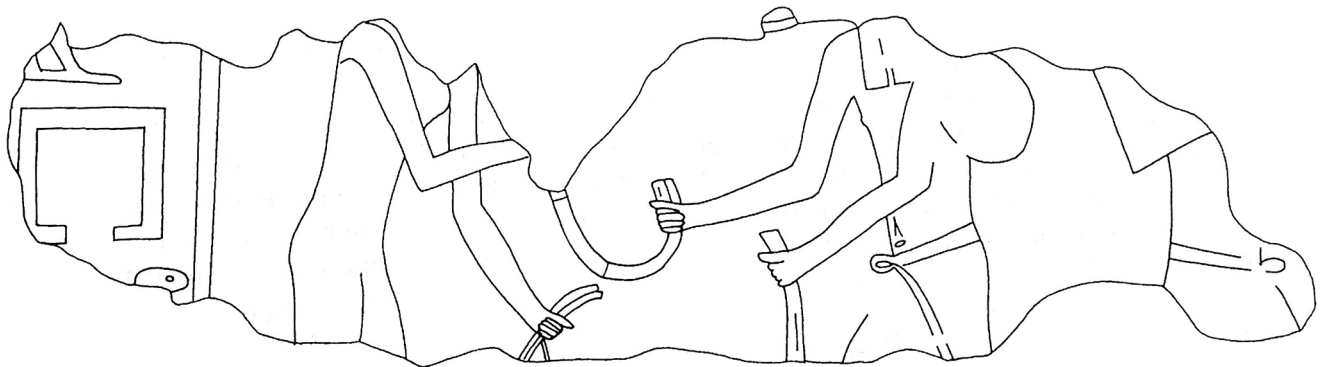


Fig. 5 Fragment of a possible market scene in the tomb of Ptahshepses at Abusir.⁹

⁷ C.R. Lepsius, *Denkmäler aus Aegypten und Aethiopien* (Osnabrück, 1849-1856), part II, pl. 96.

⁸ M. Bárta, 'Die Tauschhandelszenen aus dem Grab des Fetekty in Abusir', *SAK* 26 (1998), 19-34.

⁹ B.Vachala, *Die Relieffragmente aus der Mastaba des Ptahshepses in Abusir* (Abusir VIII; Prague, 2004), 193.



Furthermore, a relief fragment from the mastaba of Ptahshepses at Abusir (director of hairdressers of the palace, vizier, and many other titles that show that he was close to king Niuserre of the Fifth Dynasty) is interpreted by the excavators as a market scene (fig. 5). It shows a man with a shopping bag handing necklaces to a woman. Unfortunately, it is unclear what product the woman is giving in return. This could well be a scene of a female weaver who is receiving payment for her work, rather than a market scene.¹⁰

How can we explain these markets? The ancient Egyptian economy is usually described as a system of redistribution, in which the state and temple were paramount. Müller-Wollermann in an article¹¹ patiently explains Karl Polanyi's theory on the market economy. Polanyi distinguishes between three types of exchange: reciprocity (gift exchange between equals), redistribution (where products are collected at a center and allocated from there, such as taxes and tribute), and market exchange. The latter is governed by market mechanisms, such as profit maximization and reducing production cost. According to Polanyi, market exchange is ruled out for 'archaic' societies where only the agricultural surplus is being traded. The market scenes in the Old Kingdom tombs are explained by Müller-Wollermann not from a perspective of market exchange, but as 'negative reciprocity', in which both partners try to gain from a transaction, and have no prior connection to each other.

Likewise, Kemp argues in his seminal work on the ancient Egyptian state that: "Having no word that we can translate as 'profit' they could not strive for it as an abstract measure of success in trading or making things."¹² Nevertheless he ascribes them 'an adequate business sense'. But in our market scenes we see a clear distinction between buyers (often squatting beside a basket full of products, unless they are pouring out drinks) and sellers (standing, carrying trademark shopping bags, unless they are sitting down for a cold beverage). We see individual transactions taking place, haggling for prices, shouted praise and guardsmen or overseers with baboons, perhaps in the process of catching a thief. We see hints of specialization of fishmongers, greengrocers, engravers, stick vendors and cloth merchants. We see drinking stalls and people paying in measures of grain. Even if there was no word for 'profit' and the market was not as pervasive as in our modern society, we can assume that ancient Egyptians (both men and women) were trying to get their value's worth, and making the most of their bargaining. It can hardly be the case that they did not set out to gain from their commercial transactions.

Even if a 'market economy' did not exist as such in Old Kingdom Egypt, the marketplace surely did. We can regard it as a distinct site where exchange of products took place, presumably located in the capital Memphis. From New Kingdom scenes in the tombs of Ipy (TT 217 – see

¹⁰ See also C. Ziegler, *Le mastaba d'Akhethetep* (Fouilles du Louvre à Saqqara I; Paris, 2007), fig. 35.

¹¹ R. Müller-Wollermann, *Warenaustausch im Ägypten des Alten Reiches*, *JESHO* 28 (1985), 121-168.

¹² B.J. Kemp, *Ancient Egypt: Anatomy of a civilization* (2nd ed.; London, 2006), 323.



fig. 6) and Kenamun (TT 162 - see fig. 7) we know that market stalls were located on the banks of the Nile at Thebes, where foreign trading ships docked and grain was unloaded. Unfortunately, detailed information about the location of the Old Kingdom marketplace is not available. We can observe that, in the tomb context, our market scenes sometimes appear next to scenes of craftsmen working their trades (Ptahshepses, Ti and Tepemankh II), sometimes near agricultural scenes (Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep, Ti and Mehu). Whether this connection was merely thematic (agriculture corresponding to the food market, crafts to the goods market) or also spatial cannot be said with any degree of certainty, but is an interesting aspect to consider. So far the market scenes have only been attested at Saqqara North and adjacent Abusir, not in other cemeteries or provincial tombs. Nearby Memphis is thus the most likely location for the represented market place(s).

What is apparent from the above examples is that out of the nine market scenes attested so far in Old Kingdom elite tombs, four contain clear evidence of women in the process of buying and selling products. Although it is easy (as has often been done) to disregard the role of women in the ancient Egyptian economy, this is hardly grounded. Fischer describes how weaving in the Old Kingdom was solely performed by women, who received payment in

jewelry (see also fig. 5).¹³ Furthermore they were highly involved in the bread-making process, and indeed, the marketplace. Other than that they were singers, musicians, dancers, priestesses, overseers and servants. Unfortunately, we know of no female scribes.

In 1980, Hodjash and Berlev still claimed that 'the Egyptian market was only rarely visited by women', and that they are represented 'always as buyers and clients, never as sellers'. The examples related above argue against this. Kemp, in regard to New Kingdom market scenes, describes the female traders shown in the tomb of Ipy as 'women who sit with a single basket of produce in front of them',¹⁴ although they are wearing their finest clothes, are bedecked with jewelry and crowned with wax cones, and one of them is sitting in front of a canopy to keep cool the wine and beer she has on offer. The male traders in the tomb of Kenamun are however described as 'no longer housewives with a single basket of foodstuffs (...) The Egyptian traders look much more professional than the housewives in the tomb of Ipy' – although the two male and one female trader are all three represented in the same guise, with a canopy above them and a market stall full of products. Likewise, Eyre stresses that the foodstuffs and drinks sold by women on the riverbank market should be regarded as an 'extension of their household activities', not as commercial enterprises in their own right.¹⁵

¹³ H.G. Fischer, *Egyptian women of the Old Kingdom and of the Heracleopolitan Period* (2nd ed; New York, 2000), 20-21.

¹⁴ B.J. Kemp, *Ancient Egypt: Anatomy of a civilization* (2nd ed.; London, 2006), 324.

¹⁵ C.J. Eyre, 'The market women of pharaonic Egypt', in: N. Grimal and B. Menu (eds.), *Le commerce en Égypte ancienne* (Bibliothèque d'étude 121. IFAO; Cairo, 1998), 173-191.

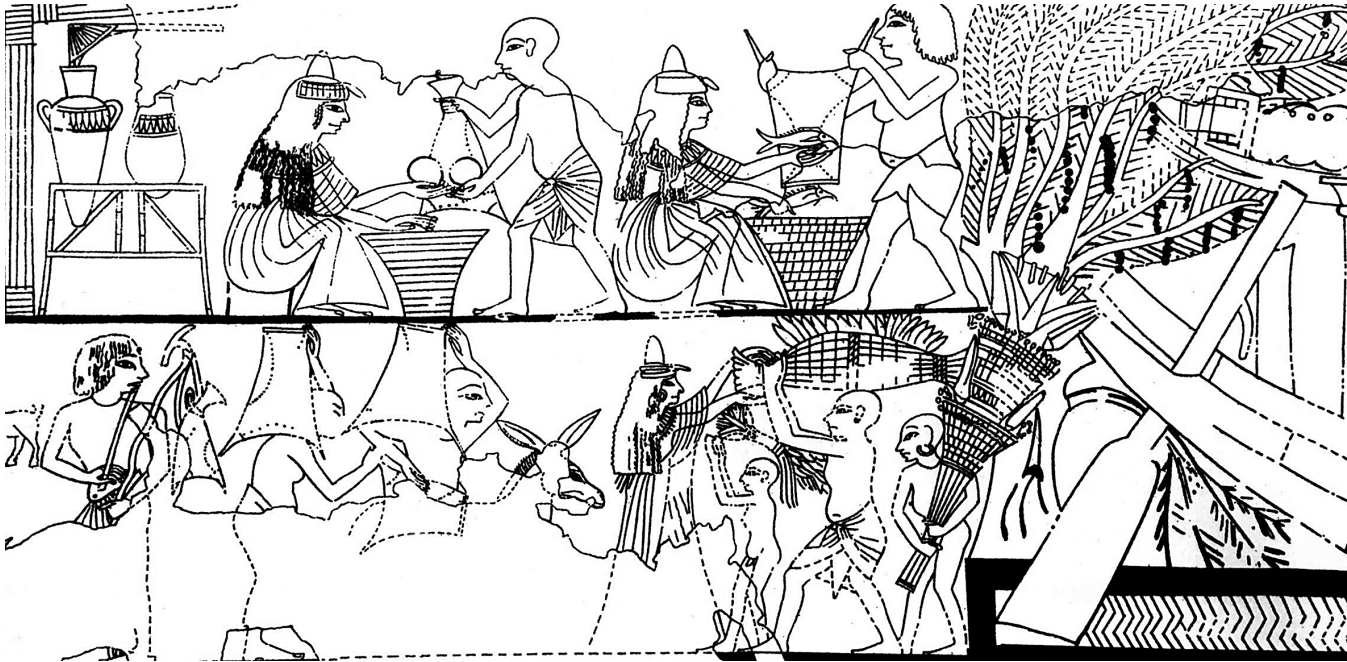
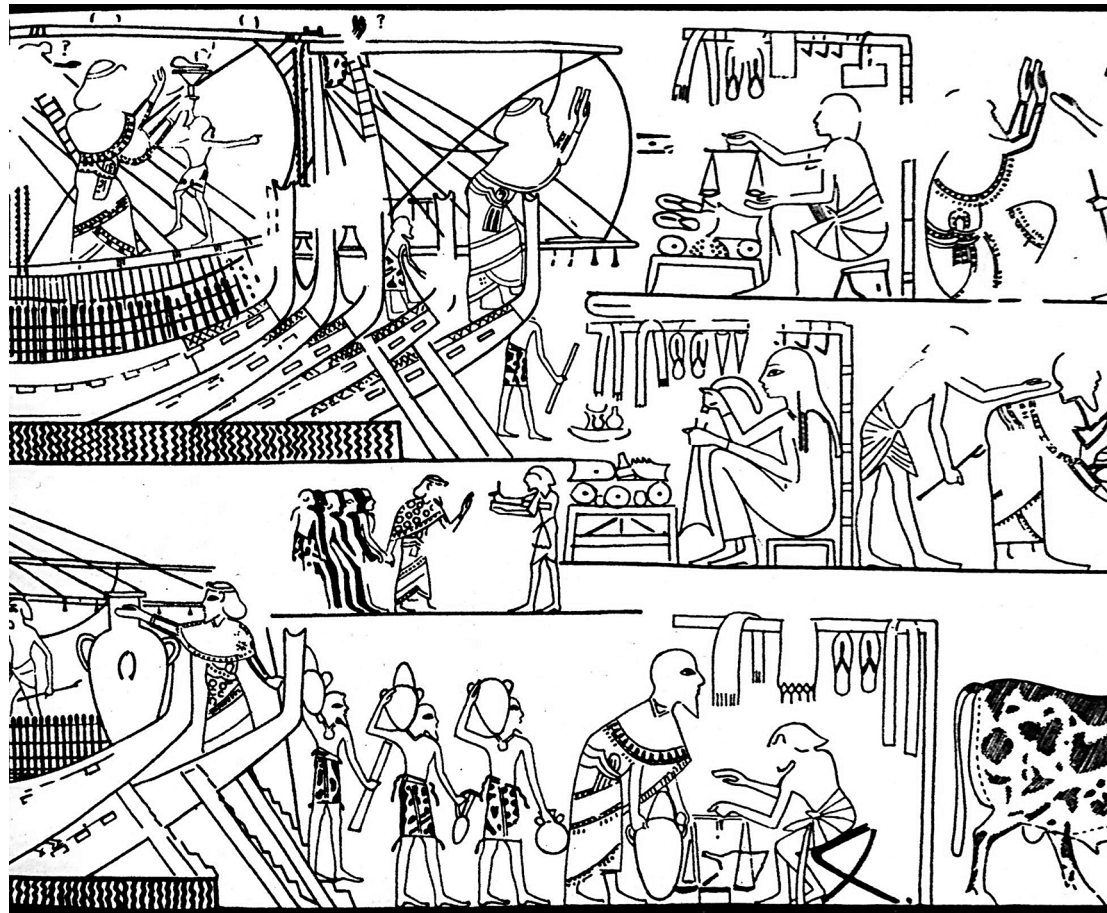


Fig. 6 Part of a market scene in the tomb of Ipy (TT 217).¹⁶

Fig. 7 Part of a market scene in the tomb of Kenamun (TT 162).¹⁷



¹⁶ N. de Garis Davies, *Two Ramesside tombs at Thebes* (New York, 1927), pl. XXX.

¹⁷ N. de Garis Davies and R.O. Faulkner, *A Syrian trading venture to Egypt*, *JEA* 33 (1947), pl.VIII.



Much is to gain from a further enquiry into the ancient Egyptian economy, and the role of women therein. It is too shallow to each time explain away women's positions as 'housewives', while the same occupations are deemed professional when they are carried out by men.

Just as it might be 'archaic' to regard ancient Egyptians as too innocent to yearn for profit. Hopefully, by scrutinizing the sources available to us, and with a fresh look, we can salvage some enterprising women from the swamp of Egyptian economic history.

