

Women of Power and Influence in Ancient Egypt

By Brian Alm

Ancient Egypt was highly unusual in its acceptance of women in roles that elsewhere would have been the sole province of men — at the domestic level, managing the household finances and directing servants, running home-based businesses such as weaving and pottery, even negotiating deals and entering into legal contracts; and at the royal level, governing as regents and even ruling as female kings. This commentary is focused on the most interesting among those women in high places who wielded power and influence, some of whom rose to ultimate command of Egypt and directed its destiny.

Unfortunately and inevitably, less is known about the common people of either gender than about the elite and royals, but it is clear that the housewives of Egypt had remarkable levels of responsibility and authority, as well as legal rights, compared to the rest of the ancient world.

Try to imagine another ancient culture in which women could hold, and did hold, positions of power and prestige, and commoners who had actual legal rights, the same as men. (For a thorough look at the domestic life and rights of women, I recommend especially *The Life of Meresamun*, Emily Teeter and Janet Johnson, eds., Oriental Institute, University of Chicago, 2009.)

Indeed, much has been published on all of this, and I would direct all those interested especially to these monumental books on the topic: Joyce Tyldesley's *Chronicle of the Queens of Egypt*, 2006, and *Daughters of Isis*, 1994; Toby Wilkinson's *Lives of the Ancient Egyptians*, 2007, and *The Rise and Fall of Ancient Egypt*, 2010; and Gay Robins' *Women in Ancient Egypt*, 1993. My own contribution is simply the compilation of these women by category, defined and collected in one place instead of scattered about amidst all the rest of history.

Although my focus here is on the elite and royal women of influence, it must be noted that all Egyptians, men and women alike, had a fundamental obligation to support the king, whose ultimate responsibility was to preserve the order of the universe. No one wanted to be the weak link in that grand cosmology.

So even for commoners, the idea of "influence," at least on the domestic level, must have informed the self-esteem of the ancient Egyptian woman. The term *nebet per*, "mistress of the house," meant more than simply "housewife." On the home front, the Egyptian woman did her part in the maintenance of order (*ma'at*).

In the *Instructions of Ani*, this New Kingdom 18th Dynasty scribe admonishes: "Repay your mother for all her care. Give her as much bread as she needs, and carry her as she carried you, for you were a heavy burden to her. After you were born, she still carried you on her neck. For three years she suckled you and kept you clean." Also Ani cautions: "Do not control your wife in your house.... let your eye observe in silence. Then you will recognize her skill." This kindly respect for women in an ancient culture is remarkable.

It would be good to know more about the common people. But we must content ourselves with the royal women of power and

position who served as kings' wives, regents, co-rulers or sole sovereigns, or in whatever way influenced Egyptian history — and their stories can be astonishing.

Despite the ubiquitous mention of "queens," the Egyptians had no such word. Royal women's titles were expressed in terms of their relationship to the king: King's Mother (*mut nesu*); King's Great Wife (*hemet nesu weret*), the senior queen; and King's Wife (*hemet nesu*), of whom there could be several or many, most or all of them resident in the harem.

Conventional terminology was not prepared for the possibility of a female monarch, but when circumstances required, accommodations had to be made — cultural and religious fundamentals demanded it. A crucial concept of order in Egypt was duality — the binary complement, a whole of two halves. Therefore the king's consort was a necessary complement to kingship. Even when a woman was king, she might appoint another woman to assume the role of King's Great Wife in order to preserve that necessary duality.

Of course, the ideal is inevitably vulnerable to collision with reality. So it was with ancient Egypt. And as for reality, Egypt had it all — murder mysteries, palace intrigues, conspiracies, sexual liaisons, incest, mayhem, shrewd political maneuvering, bloody battles, intricate international diplomacy and life-or-death power plays. And in all of that, some of the key players were women.

A prime example from the dark side is the palace *coup d'etat* launched by Tiy, a secondary wife of Ramesses III in the 20th Dynasty, probably in a futile attempt to secure the succession for her son, Pentaweret. The so-called Harem Conspiracy was not successful; even though Ramesses probably did die as a result of it, the plot was discovered, the succession of Ramesses IV went forward, and the conspirators paid dearly for their impertinence, all but two of them with their lives.

But the interesting thing is that a woman did it and managed to get forty people in the palace, including men, even the chamberlain and head of the treasury, to join her. And what's more, it wasn't the first time: as far back as the 6th Dynasty, a coup was launched against Pepi I by one of his wives, Weret-Imtes. That too was a failure, but it happened.

Now let's have a look at some of these powerful and influential royal women. For clarity, I've sorted them into six categories.

Six Categories

1. Full-titled, bona fide kings: Sobekneferu (12th Dynasty, Middle Kingdom), Hatshepsut (18th Dynasty, New Kingdom), Tawoseret (19th Dynasty, New Kingdom) and Cleopatra VII (Ptolemaic Period, regarded by some as the 33rd Dynasty).

2. Almost surely king, but unproven: Nefertiti (18th Dynasty, New Kingdom). It is clear that there was at least one king between Akhenaten and Tutankhamun, and to many it seems likely that there were two, both of whom may have been in a co-regency with Akhenaten: Smenkhkara, probably a younger brother of Akhenaten, and Akhenaten's wife Nefertiti-Neferneferuaten, who probably (almost surely?) ruled briefly on her own. Of course it gets more complicated, as we shall see, and the uncertainty of all this places Nefertiti in the next category also.

3. Possible—probable: Merneith (1st Dynasty, Early Dynastic Period), Khentkawes I (5th Dynasty, Old Kingdom), Neithiqerti (6th Dynasty, Old Kingdom) — possibly even Neithihotep (wife of Narmer, 1st Dynasty), but that is really too speculative to count — and Nefertiti, as mentioned above.

It remains uncertain whether these women ruled as full-fledged kings or simply as regents but with kingly authority. A case for kingship may be imagined, but the hope of certainty has long since vanished in the depths of time. Indeed, it is not entirely certain that Neithiqerti was a woman, or even that she existed, but certain enough to include her.

We might label this category “The Jury’s Still Out.”

So thus far we have four women who were kings, one who almost certainly was, and three more who may have been: a total of eight. Now we come to some who might as well have been.

4. Regents. Many King's Great Wives served as regents for their minor sons, assuming sole rule as *de facto* monarchs, some of whom were especially conspicuous in this interim role, going back to the Old Kingdom and perhaps even earlier — again, time obscures our vision.

Several of the most powerful and prominent regents appeared in the 18th Dynasty: Ahhotep, who ruled for her son Ahmose; Ahmose-Nefertari, for Amenhotep I; and Hatshepsut, for Thutmose III. We might wonder what the 18th Dynasty would have been like without the presence early on of Ahhotep, and Tetisheri before her; indeed, we might wonder whether the institution of the God's Wife of Amun (Category 6) would ever have risen to the position it did in the Third Intermediate Period without the driving force of Ahhotep, Ahmose-Nefertari and Hatshepsut in the 18th Dynasty.

At least two of these regents, Hatshepsut and Tawoseret (19th Dynasty, New Kingdom), enjoyed the royal role so much that they made themselves kings. That may have been in Sobekneferu's mind also, back in the 12th Dynasty, because she too served as both regent and king.

We might add those in Category 3 to this group, should scholarship ever provide the jury with evidence sufficient to render a verdict.

5. Neither king nor regent, but very, very influential: including Hetepheres I, wife of Seneferu (4th Dynasty, Old Kingdom); Tiye, wife of Amenhotep III (18th Dynasty, New Kingdom); and at the end of the 17th Dynasty, leading into the 18th, Tetisheri, the wife of Senakhtenra Tao I and mother of both Seqenenra Tao II, who began the revolt to overthrow the Hyksos at the end of the Second Intermediate Period, and his sister-wife Ahhotep, who arguably was instrumental in completing it.

6. God's Wife of Amun. The sixth category defies easy definition, being neither king nor regent, but extremely influential and moreover, official, unlike those in Category 5. The concept, purpose, operation and stewardship of this office changed over time, which makes defining it all the more difficult. Its roots were in the early 18th Dynasty but its fulfillment as a political force, fused to religion, comes much later, in the Third Intermediate Period, when these women assumed responsibility for maintaining order in Egypt, consorting with god, and ordaining their own successors — the very and fundamental functions of a pharaoh.

Theoretically, the chief duty of the God's Wife of Amun was to arouse the god, who would reciprocate by keeping Egypt fertile and maintaining the cyclical eternity of the universe (*neheh*) forever (*djet-ta*). At least that was the official story. In practicality, the office ultimately was a means for the pharaoh to keep a lid on the Amun priesthood in Thebes and the political milieu in general by linking church and state. With his own daughter in control of the priesthood down south, the king could devote more attention to matters up north.

Conventional understanding has been that the God's Wives of Amun were celibate — unmarried and childless — and appointed their successors by adoption. Emily Teeter, of the Oriental Institute at the University of Chicago, has presented a compelling challenge to that; i.e., that there is no definitive evidence of obligatory celibacy in the Third Intermediate Period, that some of the God's Wives of Amun of that time were married and did bear children just as their 18th Dynasty forebears had done, and that adoption referred not particularly to a protocol for succession but rather to inheritance of property.

The matter is complicated further by the murky conventions of expressing personal relationships; “mut” (*mwt*), for instance, may in fact mean biological “mother,” but may also refer to a woman who raises or teaches a child, similar to the so-called M of Predication in grammar — for example, “he is (like=M) a son to me.”

On the conventional thought that the God's Wives did not actually bear children — taking “celibacy” to mean sexual abstinence — such “mother” references have been assumed to mean adoption. However, despite the denotation that it has acquired in common usage, celibacy refers only secondarily to sexual abstinence; its primary meaning is “unmarried.” But even that is not the point.

Regardless of how celibacy is to be defined — sexually abstinent or unmarried — the real issue concerning the role of the God's Wives of Amun in the Third Intermediate Period clearly seems to have been political expediency. The essential matter was twofold: the protection of the monarchy against challenges to dynastic succession and control of the Amun priesthood, both to be ensured by the royally appointed — and, most crucial, royally *related* — God's Wife of Amun.

Stability, Control and Order

Indeed, we can say that all of these roles — in whatever category we place them — were about stability, control, and ultimately order in Egypt, without which there could be no order in the universe (*ma'at*).

In diametrical opposition to that principle of order and control is the Ptolemaic Period, which virtually defines disorder. There were both female regents and sole rulers, albeit temporary and opportunistic failures — Cleopatra II, Berenice III and Berenice IV come to mind — but, with the exception of Cleopatra VII, none was equipped for or worthy of the role; in fairness, neither were the Ptolemaic men.

Suffice it to say, the women of this strange time defy placement in the categories that apply to the rest of Egyptian history, which were based on a regard for order; whereas Ptolemaic Egypt always seemed to be teetering on chaos.

The unusual Ptolemaic Period should not distract us from the fact that during the 2,800 years before, there were many women of power and influence who deserve our close attention.

The following are in chronological, not categorical, order.

Merneith/Meretneith

Merneith/Meretneith was the daughter of Djer, the wife of Djet, and sometime during the 1st Dynasty (3000-2890) the regent for her young son Den. It is clear that she ruled, but it is not clear that she ruled as king. In any case, a precedent was established: women could rule, at least as regents, and at least for the time being, or as long as necessary. (It is possible that Neithhotep, wife of Narmer, pre-3000, may have done so too.) Later on, during the reign of Nynetjer (about 2850), it was officially decided that women could occupy the throne, but the decree was a formality — Merneith had already done that, so it was a matter of policy catching up with reality.

For a long time, scholars thought Merneith was a male, but then they noticed that her name actually had the grammatical feminine ending *t* (Meretneith); despite that, traditionally she is still referred to as Merneith.

Hetepheres I

Hetepheres I, the wife of Seneferu, first king of the 4th Dynasty, was the mother of Khufu, who built a nice pyramid for her right next to his own on the Giza Plateau. Hetepheres' tomb was found mostly intact, minus her body, but full of precious furnishings and personal items — lavishly equipped, one of the finest collections of grave goods ever found in Egypt.

But for our present purposes, the most interesting of all were the inscriptions, which in addition to the usual, obligatory and grandiose epithets was this one: "Director of the Ruler, Whose Every Utterance is Done for Her." Difficult though it may be to imagine of the builder of the Great Pyramid, "It seems," says Wilkinson in *Rise and Fall*, "that Khufu took orders from only one person — his mother."

Khentkawes I

The actual royal role of **Khentkawes I**, 5th Dynasty (about 2400 B.C.), is confusing, but sufficient enough to include her as a woman of power and influence. The confusing thing is that an ambiguous inscription on her mastaba tomb could be read either as "Mother of Two Kings" or as "King of Upper and Lower Egypt and Mother of the King." She was apparently the wife of Userkaf and so maybe she was simply the mother of Sahura and

Neferirkara Kakai, but, as Joyce Tyldesley notes in *Chronicle of the Queens of Egypt*, the door jamb shows her "sitting on the throne, wearing a false beard and uraeus and carrying a scepter." The single uraeus was worn only by kings at this time; it wasn't worn by kings' wives until the Middle Kingdom, 500 years later. The "blatant assumption of kingly regalia," as she says, leads Tyldesley to believe that Khentkawes ruled Egypt in some capacity.

The size and grandeur of her mastaba tomb on the Giza Plateau signal royal status; some have even thought that it was originally intended to be a fourth Giza pyramid. She emphasized her close relationship to the sun god Ra, in this time of the Sun Kings, and the crown prince Sahura was too young to rule on his own when his father Userkaf died after only eight years on the throne, so it seems likely that she did rule as regent.

A papyrus from this dynasty tells the story of the divine births of Userkaf, her husband; Sahura, her son; and Nyusera, probably her grandson. So Khentkawes is presented as a king's mother impregnated by god. This idea of divine conception (theogamy) would become very important for Hatshepsut a thousand years later, and others after her.

Ankhenesmeryra and Neithiqerti

Ankhenesmeryra (a.k.a. Ankhesenpepi II) served as regent for Pepi II, who assumed the throne as a child and managed to total up 94 years as king. He married his sister and half-sister, and also his niece, among others.

During the second half of his reign the Old Kingdom was quivering to a halt. The nomarchs were grabbing power in their provinces and creating fiefdoms, central government was weakening, and Pepi couldn't keep it under control. He was succeeded by Merenra II, briefly, and then (probably) by Merenra's sister, **Neithiqerti**, in about 2175.

It is not entirely certain that Neithiqerti was a woman, or that she even existed, but it is far more likely that she was real and just happened to be there when the Old Kingdom came down. Nevertheless there is speculation that Neithiqerti was invented as an explanation for the demise of the Old Kingdom, thus removing that blemish from Pepi II by pasting it on a woman. That seems unlikely; at 94, Pepi II was fully capable of losing control of Egypt on his own.

Sobekneferu

Sobekneferu (12th Dynasty, Middle Kingdom) was the daughter of Amenemhat III, who was succeeded by Amenemhat IV, who probably was his son, although some scholars think he was a distant relative. Amenemhat IV ruled for perhaps ten years. There is reason to believe that Sobekneferu — his wife and probable sister, or half-sister — ruled as regent for at least part of his reign. When Amenemhat IV died, Sobekneferu assumed full kingship — Egypt's first (documented) female king — and ruled for just four years (sometime between 1782 and 1760), concluding the 12th Dynasty with more whimper than roar.

Amenemhat IV didn't amount to much, so Sobekneferu sought to distance herself from him and link herself to her father, Amenemhat III; and just to be sure, she deified her father as god of the Faiyum so she, now as the daughter of a god, could legiti-

mately be both king and female. She used male titles and had her statues sculpted distinctly kingly — wearing a male kilt and a *nemes* headcloth, and trampling Egypt’s foes like a man.

It would be easy to lose one’s sense of identity, given the complications generated by the clash of gender and duty, as we will see again 300 years later on when Hatshepsut faces the same predicament.

However, the 12th Dynasty was too weak by this point to continue and the government fragmented; in the following 13th Dynasty there were 21 weak kings for about 63 years, then six more kings for about 20 years, and so it went — at least 55 kings in 143 years. That becomes important as we try to understand the mentality and morale of the times, and what happens in the late 17th Dynasty and the early 18th — in fact, throughout the 18th Dynasty.

It is ironic that Sobekneferu, a woman, was blamed for the collapse of the 12th Dynasty, just as Neithiqerti, a woman, was blamed for the collapse of the Old Kingdom, because when we get to the end of the 17th Dynasty and the dawn of the New Kingdom, it is women who take charge and steer Egypt toward Empire.

Tetisheri

A special note is long overdue for **Tetisheri** (17th Dynasty, Second Intermediate Period). She was neither ruler nor regent, but she was the first in a string of extremely powerful women and it could be argued that she prepared the way for those who followed, starting with her daughter Ahhotep and granddaughter Ahmose-Nefertari, and culminating in the most eminent women of the 18th Dynasty, Hatshepsut, Tiye and Nefertiti.

Was Tetisheri the force behind this flood of influential women in the 18th Dynasty? Was she the spark plug? The matriarch? The example for her son and daughter and granddaughter? We might even wonder if Ankhesenamun would have been bold enough to write so brazenly to the king of the Hittites as she did, more than 200 years later, without the precedent of these strong women before her. Tetisheri is one of the many characters in the grand Egyptian drama who would be wonderful sources to resurrect and interview.

Apparently it was a close family and the superiority of its women was not lost on Tetisheri’s son Seqenenra Tao II, who married all three of his sisters, the main one of whom was Ahhotep.

Ahhotep

Ah, **Ahhotep**, who ruled as regent for about 10 years — with the assistance of her mother, Tetisheri — until her son Ahmose was 16. Both her brother-husband Seqenenra Tao II and (probable) elder son Kamose had fallen in battle, so she stepped in. That may be putting it mildly: for her perseverance and valor in battle against the Hyksos, she was awarded enough Golden Flies to make a necklace, which she took to her grave along with a dagger and an axe — not the usual trappings of a reticent matron. Gay Robins notes that a dedication stela erected by her son Ahmose credits her as the one who “has pacified Upper Egypt and expelled her rebels.”

Of course, in retrospect we know there were women who ruled Egypt much earlier, but now, as Tyldesley says, “For the

first time we have written proof that the queen regent could wield real authority.”

Dare we propose that Ahhotep may have been the real founder of the 18th Dynasty? In any case, she set a lot in motion and lived up to the expectations of her birth name, Ahhotep — “the moon (Ah) is pleased.”

Ahhotep named four of her children Ahmose (Egyptian *Ahmes*, “born of the Moon”), regardless of gender. So let’s proceed to Ahmose’s sister-wife Ahmose-Nefertari.

Ahmose-Nefertari

In the family tradition, Ahmose married his sister, in fact both of them, Ahmose-Nefertari and Ahmose-Nebta, but **Ahmose-Nefertari** was his chief wife, and in addition to the fact that she assumed the regency for her son Amenhotep I at Ahmose’s death, just as her forebears had done, she is particularly important for two other reasons.

First (and in light of future history, foremost), she was given (by King Ahmose) the title God’s Wife of Amun; more on that momentarily.

Second, as regent (and later, ceremonial consort) for her son Amenhotep I, she was instrumental in bringing a commoner soldier into the royal succession when Amenhotep’s sister-wife Meritamun died childless. This soldier was Thutmose I, “the first king in three generations to come to the throne as an adult,” as Wilkinson notes in *Rise and Fall* — i.e., without a regent mother to rule for him; moreover, the first of the bloodline that included all but two of the kings in the rest of the 18th Dynasty. Most significantly, this set a precedent for elevating a military commoner to royal rank and kingship — a model that would prove useful at the end of the 18th Dynasty and beyond.

The God’s Wife of Amun development had even longer-term ramifications, and certainly greater effect in regard to the position of women in the history of Egypt.

In the Middle Kingdom there had been non-royal God’s Wives — of Min and Ptah as well as Amun — but now in the 18th Dynasty, with the ascension of Amun as the preeminent national god and the burgeoning power of the Amun priesthood, Ahmose specifically related the office to Amun, reserved it for royal women, endowed it with self-sustaining resources and landholdings, and established the title God’s Wife of Amun in the royal titulary.

Eventually — in the Third Intermediate Period — this office would become the most powerful political position in Egypt.

The Brave New World

Tetisheri, Ahhotep and now Ahmose-Nefertari — three generations of very powerful and influential women in a row. In the First Intermediate Period and Middle Kingdom, women were virtually absent from the scene, except for Sobekneferu, whose reign was short and essentially sounded the death knell for the Middle Kingdom. But now, for most of seventy years, Egypt was governed, essentially, by women.

Let’s put all this together. With the defeat of the Hyksos, in which Ahhotep played a significant role, we have the restoration of Egypt’s dominion and order through military might. We

have the growing, nationwide cult of Amun and the ascendancy of Thebes as a result of that. We have a new dynasty under a new king, along with a new and powerful King's Great Wife who holds a new title and position of power — God's Wife of Amun — with unprecedented wealth, influence and independence to wield her financial power as she wishes. Also we have the establishment of a political and religious link between the King's Wife and the priesthood of Amun, and now we have the ascension of a commoner, a military man, to the throne. Incidentally, we also have a standing army, with new weaponry including the chariot, the composite bow and the khepesh scimitar. We have all the makings of Empire. This Brave New World is the New Kingdom.

What kind of power would women wield next? Who would follow this trio — Tetisheri, Ahhotep, Ahmose-Nefertari? Who could? Answer: Hatshepsut.

Hatshepsut

She was not the first female king, but the greatest ever to rule Egypt (even including Cleopatra VII), and one of the most fascinating women in Egyptian history — world history, for that matter. Enough has been written about **Hatshepsut** to make her so familiar to anyone who has read about Egypt that I need not belabor it.

So, very briefly then, Thutmose I was the father of both Hatshepsut and her husband Thutmose II. Thutmose II and Hatshepsut had a daughter, Neferura, and Thutmose had a son by a spare wife from the harem, Iset, who would become Thutmose III — eventually. Thutmose II died in about regnal year 13 (c.1479), when the boy was too young to rule, so his stepmother-aunt Hatshepsut took over as regent, but after about six years of that she decided she liked being in charge, and so she had herself crowned as king, in 1473.

Now we come to the most fascinating part of the story. She needed to legitimize her kingship, so she said the god Amun had revealed to her via an oracle that he had proclaimed her his daughter and ruler of Egypt. She explained that the god crept up on her mother while she was sleeping, arousing her with his divine fragrance. Oh, Amun had taken the form of her father, Thutmose I, so it was all okay. Amun told the queen that she would bear him a daughter and that she should name her Khenemetamun Hatshepsut: She Whom Amun Embraces, Foremost of Noble Women.

Incidentally, the usefulness of this justification was not lost on Amenhotep III three generations later, when he too wished to explain his divine origin, and told how his mother, Mutemwia, was deliciously overcome by Amun, disguised as her husband Thutmose IV, who then sealed the matter with the annunciation: "Amenhotep Ruler of Uaset is the name of this child that I have placed in your womb. He shall be a potent king in this entire land. He shall rule the Two Lands like Ra forever."

So there we have it, a divine birth: mortal woman visited by god — and a fine model for the Christians 1,500 years later.

Hatshepsut says that when she was born, Amun cradled her in his arms and called her "daughter of my loins, Maatkara, you are the king who takes the throne of Horus." Interesting! She says she got her throne name (prenomen) Maatkara at birth!

That's supposed to be only upon coronation. Then at her coronation she said: "I am king upon the order of my father from whom I came forth" — the father being Amun, that is — and on her obelisk at Karnak she testified: "I act under [Amun's] order. It is he who guides me." That makes her the legitimate king and both her husband Thutmose II and nephew-stepson Thutmose III usurpers — a convenient fiction, and indisputable — she was king, after all, and once enthroned, a king was a king.

It must be noted that all this time Thutmose III also was king — a king, that is, not *the* king. Hatshepsut let him take part in royal affairs and appearances, but as for sole rule, Thutmose would simply have to wait.

Well, to top it all off, she had herself pictured in male clothing, wearing a false beard, and she assumed the traditional kingly poses, trampling foes and whatnot, as Sobekneferu had 300 years before. She even had herself portrayed in colossal statues as Osiris, standing proud across the front of her cult temple.

Before, when Hatshepsut was King's Great Wife, she was also God's Wife of Amun. Now, as king, she needed a female to fulfill the feminine aspect of monarchy and complete the male-female duality required of kingship and *ma'at*, so she named her daughter Neferura to the post, and Neferura assumed the titles Mistress of the Two Lands (*Nebet-tawy*) and God's Wife of Amun.

It would not be a stretch to imagine that Thutmose III, waiting for his turn to rule on his own, might have had some concern that down the road this God's Wife of Amun Neferura could be a problem — especially after all those women at the outset of the dynasty, and now Hatshepsut, Neferura's indomitable mother.

Hatshepsut got right down to business, restoring and building temples all over Egypt — emphasizing Amun most especially, since he was now Egypt's chief national god and the basis of her claim to the throne.

Because Egyptian gods were not motile, they needed temples for residence throughout the land. That worked to Hatshepsut's advantage: a highly visible and broadly based public profile for the promotion of her claim of legitimacy despite the presence of a living bloodline successor to Thutmose II. And, as Lyndon Johnson said, politics is always local; all this construction created jobs.

She built a processional avenue from Karnak temple to Luxor, which included the Precinct of Mut, Amun's wife, and established a new public festival: Opet. Festivals were always popular, but this one was a propaganda engine with real horsepower. Once a year Amun traveled south, on the route that later became the Avenue of the Sphinxes, from Karnak to Luxor, and spent a month in residence there, restoring himself and the kingship by mating with the king's mother — all symbolically, of course, but real enough to the Egyptian mind for the builders to honor practicality and include a bed chamber and bed of stone at the extreme end of Luxor temple. Thus refreshed, Amun would return to Karnak via the Nile, having reaffirmed the divine birth of his daughter the king and her right to rule.

There was also the Beautiful Festival of the Valley, which likewise linked Karnak to Luxor, but it also featured a trip across the Nile to the ancient and sacred precinct of Hathor in

Deir el-Bahari, right where Hatshepsut happened to have built her cult temple. Amun was resident there in the Holy of Holies (*djeser-djeseru*, Greek *naos*, Latin *sanctum sanctorum*), and side chapels enshrined Hathor and Anubis. She sited this massive monument conspicuously beside the temple of Mentuhotep II, who 600 years earlier had rescued Egypt from the dismal First Intermediate Period. Hatshepsut had a flair for appearances.

One other interesting aspect of these festivals featuring Amun is that his statue, along with those of his wife Mut and son Khonsu, were carried in a procession that included stopping at various spots, the Stations of the Gods, so the common people could ask the oracle questions. But moreover these processions, festivals and oracular counselings gave the people an opportunity to witness Amun's support of the monarch via Amun himself.

Hatshepsut also did some military campaigns, but she is best known for diplomacy and stability, and, in regnal year 9, the expedition to Punt, which extended Egypt's reach into exotic new territory and brought to Egypt some unique treasures and curiosities — fascinating in their own right, to be sure, but more-over tangible tools of propaganda. Here was a king who could project Egypt's dominion to far-off places across the globe, increase the country's wealth, and do it all without war — and a king who, incidentally, happened to be a woman.

She ruled for about twenty years on her own, often with the young Thutmose III at her side, at least for appearances. He was always acknowledged as co-ruler and his regnal years kept running as if he had sole rule — but there was no question about who was the king of Egypt. There apparently was no bad blood between them; it was simply the reality of Egyptian monarchy — a king is king and order (*ma'at*) is paramount. So Thutmose III grew up like this, and eventually, after Hatshepsut died, in his mid-twenties (1458), assumed sole rule at last.

It was not until twenty years later that Thutmose III had her images, monuments and declarations broken up or chiseled off — focused on only those references to her as a king. It was nothing personal, it was not a full-fledged *damnatio memoriae*, but simply a rejection of the idea of a female king, and a precaution against letting any more of that sort of thing happen in Egypt.

Oh, but there was more to it than male chauvinism. Why wait twenty years? Because it was not until then that Thutmose had to deal with practical politics — succession was at stake. He needed to make sure that his son Amenhotep would inherit the throne as Amenhotep II, and not Hatshepsut's daughter Nefertiti. Thutmose didn't want to take any chances. Hatshepsut had stamped her legitimacy with magical and enduring words. Therefore the words had to be erased.

Mutemwia

Mutemwia (18th Dynasty, New Kingdom), a minor wife of Thutmose IV, was the mother of Amenhotep III, who became king at the age of twelve. The more senior wives who outranked her failed to provide Thutmose with an heir. That presented Amenhotep with a problem — justifying his kingly status when his mother was so low born — but also a

ready solution: do as Hatshepsut had done. So again the perfumed and irresistible Amun stepped in to help by assuming the guise of the king's father, Thutmose IV this time, and mating with his mother. Presto, Amenhotep was not the son of just a third-string wife after all, but actually the son of god.

There were more regents than we are considering in this paper, so it might be asked why I am including Mutemwia here and not others. Three reasons stand out: one, the interesting recycling of the Hatshepsut-Amun divine-birth story for political purposes; two, the lofty honor in which Amenhotep III held his mother, obvious in the colossal statues that anchored his cult temple — the so-called Colossi of Memnon — in which she and his Great Royal Wife Tiye share equal status at the throne of the king; and three, the likelihood that Mutemwia was instrumental in bringing the Akhminim clan into the royal court, which leads us to Tiye.

Tiye

Tiye too was a commoner — but oh, what a commoner she was. It's hard to picture anyone reminding her of that. She was shrewd, smart and tough; a wise diplomat and trusted royal counselor, respected and feared by all. She had her sculptor, Iuty, capture her just as she wished to be seen and remembered: severe, superior and self-sure. "Larger than life," Toby Wilkinson says of her in *Lives of the Ancient Egyptians*.

Tiye came from the powerful Akhminim clan, a veritable cat's cradle of interconnectedness and clout. She was the daughter of Yuya and Tjuiu, Amenhotep III's most beloved courtiers. Yuya was the Prophet of Min and Tjuiu was in charge of the Harem of Min. Tiye's brother Anen was Second Prophet of Amun. It has been the common belief, which I share, that another brother was Ay, the vizier and a future king, although it must be noted that some question that for lack of evidence. Ay's daughter Mutnodjmet married Horemheb, general and later on, Ay's successor as king. Nakhtmin, a general under Horemheb, was possibly a son of Ay who did not outlive him and therefore did not succeed. Suffice it to say, the Akhminim clan was welded to the court.

Mutemwia, wife of Thutmose IV and Amenhotep III's mother, was in all probability Tiye's sister, and it now seems likely that she engineered the marriage of Tiye and Amenhotep, which unleashed an avalanche of history.

On the secular level, Tiye played a prominent role in diplomatic relations, helping Amenhotep III run the country, no doubt driven and informed by her politically astute Akhminim roots. Later on, during the reign of her son Akhenaten, the Mitanni king Tushratta — apparently in a fit of frustration over Akhenaten's disinterested manner in matters of state — wrote to him and urged him to consult with his mother, Tiye.

She was the first King's Great Wife to include the cow horns and sun disk in her crown, and she carried a sistrum, thus associating herself with Hathor. There's much more to that than the optics. Amenhotep III had become convinced of his own divinity, and also had developed a fascination with the old pre-Amun, solar religion, which emphasized Ra.

Whatever divinity he imagined for himself went also for Tiye, who, in filling the role of Hathor, linked herself to Ra. In fact, Tiye did not even take the title God's Wife of Amun, suggesting to Joyce Tyldesley that already by this time the royal

family may have been downplaying Amun. The Aten cult was starting up even in Thutmose IV's reign, and perhaps in some rudimentary way as far back as Hatshepsut, and was now gaining traction.

But Amenhotep may not have been entirely motivated by theology. The Amun priesthood was becoming a little too powerful; focusing on the sun god may well have been more strategic than sacred. In any case, he passed on to his second son and successor, Amenhotep IV, soon to become Akhenaten, his passion for self-deification and the roots of a new sun-oriented theology, plus his inclinations to political expediency.

There's some serious stuff going on here, not least the advancing deification of living royalty.

Nefertiti-Neferneferuaten

Amenhotep IV renamed himself Akhenaten upon decreeing a new religion centered on himself and his wife Nefertiti as the only direct connections to the deified sun disk, Aten, and in doing so, tossed out thousands of years of time-hallowed religious tradition. "Neferneferuaten" ("Beautiful are the Beauties of the Aten") was added to Nefertiti's name when Akhenaten instituted his Aten-based monotheism.

This turbulent interlude, the Amarna period, left an imprint on history much larger than anyone would expect of a brief run of only about 12 years. Egypt had always been about order — order in Egypt as a *sine qua non* of order in the universe, *ma'at*. Also Egypt had always accommodated a host of deities and beliefs without conflict. Now all that was overturned by Akhenaten's heretical reform and royal edicts.

The Aten rituals required both male and female agents to complete the duality: the received Egyptian concept of complementary principles of creation and order were retained in the new faith. Now the male-female complements were the royal couple themselves. Akhenaten envisioned himself and his wife as Shu and Tefnut, the original principles of air and moisture, in a divine triad with the Aten deity, the new religion's commanded transformation of Ra. Akhenaten and Nefertiti are depicted as the only direct recipients of life from the rays of the sun; they themselves were to be worshiped as the two earthly links between humankind and the Aten.

Altars were strewn around the temple courtyard so Akhenaten could commune with the sun. Nefertiti, too, is shown conducting worship and offering prayers directly to the Aten, on her own, in the role of the king/high priest. Never before was a woman so empowered.

In that capacity she was acting as a male and therefore had to have a feminine complement, so her daughter Meritaten filled the vacancy. It had nothing to do with gender superiority, everything to do with the formulaic preservation of order (*ma'at*). Likewise, it is believed that during Nefertiti's co-regency with Akhenaten or on her own, Meritaten served as Great King's Wife, since there had to be a consort to maintain the duality, gender notwithstanding.

Akhenaten was focused so intently on his new faith and the eminence of Nefertiti that on his sarcophagus he replaced the usual four tutelary goddesses of age-old Egyptian tradition with statues of Nefertiti. (See Wilkinson, *Lives*, p. 196ff, and Tyldes-

ley, *Chronicle of the Queens*, pp. 130-32.)

Mystery surrounds the Amarna interlude, and the issues at the heart of the mystery are these: the identities of Tutankhamun's parents, the individual buried in KV55 in the Valley of the Kings and the mummy known as the Younger Lady, KV35YL; the genealogies of Tutankhamun, Nefertiti, Meritaten and Smenkhkara; the line of succession at the end of Akhenaten's reign and after his death; and the relationship of Ay to Nefertiti and Ankhesenamun (nee Ankhesenpaaten).

(KV35YL, the "Younger Lady," was found in a side chamber of Amenhotep II's tomb, KV35, which was appropriated at the end of the New Kingdom as a cache for the safekeeping of the Valley's vulnerable mummies; with her were KV35EL, "Elder Lady," who was certainly Tiye, Great Royal Wife of Amenhotep III, and an adolescent boy, who was probably Tiye's elder son, who would have succeeded as Thutmose V if he had lived; instead, the throne passed to his brother Akhenaten.)

Some things are known with enough certainty to be posited as facts, thanks in large part to the genetic evidence of the 2007-2009 Family of King Tut Project (FKTP) and subsequent reasoning that everyone essentially accepts: i.e., that the KV55 and KV35YL individuals were Tutankhamun's parents and that KV35EL, the Elder Lady, was conclusively identified as Tiye, Amenhotep III's Great King's Wife and mother of KV55.

That FKTP study, done under the Egyptian Supreme Council for Antiquities and funded in part by the Discovery Channel for broadcast in 2010, identified KV55 as "almost certainly" Akhenaten and said YL was the daughter of Amenhotep and Tiye, which of course led to the assumption that YL was Nefertiti, since there was no question that she was the wife of Akhenaten. On the DNA evidence, therefore, Akhenaten and Nefertiti had to be full siblings. It now seems clear that those conclusions were wrong.

How is it possible, we may ask, that DNA evidence — the Holy Grail of forensics — could be wrong? Well, it wasn't; the conclusions were. As shown by French Egyptologist Marc Gabolde, three generations of first cousins would produce DNA results identical to a brother-sister relationship. Gabolde was not alone. In the United States Dennis Forbes of *KMT* also pointed out that "mitochondrial DNA may be passed from grandmother to granddaughter via a son/father." And in England Kate Phizackerly had proposed in 2010 that YL was the granddaughter of Amenhotep III and Tiye.

One sticking point over the years has been the question of who Nefertiti's father was. Some say Amenhotep III, most say Ay; there is no genetic proof for either position, but if she was the daughter of Amenhotep and Tiye, therefore the full sister of Akhenaten, she would have been titled King's Daughter, but she never was so titled.

Tying Nefertiti to the court through the Akhmim connection via Ay has its own complications. Only one brother of Tiye is definite: Anen. Ay is never mentioned in the tomb of Tiye's and Anen's parents, Yuya and Tjuiu (KV46), and, given the prominence of the Akhmim clan in the Amenhotep court, it seems like he would have been, that's true. But even if he wasn't Tiye's brother, that does not eliminate him as Nefertiti's father; however, considering the apparently sudden appearance of the previously non-royal Nefertiti and her marriage to Akhenaten, some

link to the powerful commoners from Akhmim seems likely.

So who was the mother of Tutankhamun? M. Traugott Huber presents eight possible female candidates: Tiye's five daughters and daughter-in-law Nefertiti, and two granddaughters (*KMT* 30:1 Spring 2019). Of these only granddaughter Meritaten remains a possible contender.

But let's look at some of the impossibilities, just to be sure.

On genetic evidence and for other compelling reasons as well, it could not be Kiya, the secondary wife of Akhenaten who long held that mythical role. Akhenaten's sisters can be dismissed, on good reasoning and no evidence in their favor, in addition to which these others died very young, too young to be bearing children. Ankhesenamun likewise is excluded because she would have to have given birth to Tutankhamun when she was between three and six years old.

Nefertiti? Anthropology professor Don Brothwell concluded in 2003 that KV35YL was "young, 18 to early adult," a finding supported by the University of York in 2016. In fact, that was nothing new — in 1912 anatomist Grafton Elliot Smith put YL's age at less than 25. In any case, KV35YL died before age 20; therefore she could not be Nefertiti, who had to be at least 34 at her death, says Traugott Huber; other scholars say more like 40.

Also, Nefertiti is never referred to as a royal daughter, Amarna scholar W. Raymond Johnson observed in *KMT* (29:2 Summer 2018). "If the genetic analysis is correct and KV35YL is a daughter of Amenhotep III and Tiye," he wrote, "then this mummy cannot be Nefertiti."

Tut's mother is never named in any inscriptions anywhere to be found — as noted by Marianne Eaton-Krauss, she was already dead when he came to the throne; otherwise she would have been mentioned — and Nefertiti most certainly was mentioned, to put it mildly.

"The conclusion is inevitable," says Huber. "Not Nefertiti but one of her daughters is identical to KV35YL."

And only Nefertiti's daughter Meritaten fits the evidence sufficiently. She was born in Akhenaten's Regnal Year 1 and Tut in Year 12 or 13, perhaps a little later. That would be young for Meritaten to be giving birth, but certainly possible; the mean age for the onset of menstruation in Egypt even now is 13, notes Huber, and ancient Egyptian girls were customarily bearing children at very young ages — in fact, as soon as they were able. (Forbes puts Meritaten at 14 or 15 at the time of Tut's birth.) In fact, Forbes proposed Meritaten as mother of Tut in 1998, based on purely circumstantial evidence at the time and, it would appear, now with the benefit of genetic evidence, a remarkably clairvoyant hunch.

And Tut's father? Smenkhkara now emerges from the shadows — no longer "the ephemeral," "the mysterious," the "enigmatic" Smenkhkara, but Akhenaten's younger brother and husband of Meritaten. He was three or four years older than she, perhaps 15 or 16, when he fathered Tutankhamun.

Now, what exactly happened? "Exactly" is a word best not applied to the Amarna interlude, but this scenario — a speculation based on sound reasoning from multiple re-examinations of genetic, textual and linguistic evidence — now seems the most plausible:

Several royals died in Akhenaten's Regnal Year 13-14, very possibly due to a plague brought in from a foreign land at the

time of the international summit, known as the Durbar, in Year 12.

This was the same time that Smenkhkara appears. Aidan Dodson and Dennis Forbes have speculated that Akhenaten may have sought some protection of his royal continuity and his religious reform, should he too fall before his time. So, this theory goes, he put two adults in line of succession via co-regency, first Smenkhkara and then Nefertiti, to "smooth the accession of Tutankhamun," as Dodson says in *Amarna Sunset* (2009).

But — again, as this line of reasoning goes — Smenkhkara died before Akhenaten, when Tutankhaten/Tutankhamun was only seven or eight, at which time co-regent Nefertiti succeeded as monarch, and then served as regent for Tut, until, after a year or two, he was old enough to assume the throne.

Scholarship on the Amarna interlude has been full of complications — challenges to the line of succession, the individuals and their actual roles, even the very femininity of Neferneferuaten, which was "proven beyond doubt," says Dodson, with Mark Gabolde's 1998 recognition of the epithet "effective for her husband" that was attached to Nefertiti. Also put to rest at last was the view held by some that Nefertiti and Smenkhkara were one and the same; that idea had been challenged ten years earlier, in fact, by James P. Allen. But we may never reach a definitive end to the frustration.

Now, what about Meritaten? Forbes theorized in 2010 that Meritaten, instead of taking over as regent, took on her late husband's names — Ankh(et)kheperura Neferneferuaten, which he had shared with Nefertiti — and ruled in her own right, but died after two years; or that she got Tutankhaten, then 10, to marry her sister Ankhesenpaaten/amun and continued as co-regent until the court moved to Memphis and Tut took over as Tutankhamun, abandoning his Aten name.

A variant idea, expressed in *KMT* in 2010, was that Smenkhkara was married first to Sitamun, his sister, the eldest daughter of Amenhotep III and Tiye, who died giving birth to Tut, and that Smenkhkara then married Meritaten, his niece.

There are many theories to pick from. The June-July 2018 issue of *NILE* compiles the various major ones — a fascinating read.

Traditionally it had been held that Tutankhamun was the son of Akhenaten and a secondary queen named Kiya, who may have been a diplomatic bride from Mitanni.

A contrary view, with which I agreed until recently, held that Nefertiti and Akhenaten were full brother and sister, the offspring of Amenhotep III and Tiye, and the parents of Tutankhamun. The six daughters of Nefertiti and Akhenaten appear in artwork of the royal family, but no sons are shown. That doesn't actually mean anything — sons are rarely shown in royal family portraits, to avoid any implied contract or premature jockeying for succession.

But now DNA evidence and genealogical analysis point to Smenkhkara and Meritaten. Since Nefertiti and Akhenaten were the parents of Ankhesenamun (*nee* Ankhesenpaaten, in honor of her father's god), that makes Ankhesenamun Tut's first cousin, not his step-sister (as the Akhenaten-Kiya option would have it) or full sister (per the Akhenaten-Nefertiti version).

Tutankhaten/amun married Ankhesenpaaten/amun at about age eight or so; she was at least three years older than he was,

perhaps as many as six. It is known that he fathered two daughters, both of whom died, one *in utero* at five months' gestation, one full-term but stillborn. Both fetuses were buried with Tutankhamun in KV62. It is not known who their mother was, but it was probably not Ankhesenamun; the most likely candidate was a minor wife known as KV21a, who was crippled.

Understanding the actual succession is complicated by the fact that subsequent kings and scribes sought to eliminate from the kings' lists everyone between Amenhotep III and Horemheb, in defiance of the monotheistic heresy of Akhenaten. That removes the reigns of five monarchs from the record — Akhenaten, Smenkhkara, Nefertiti-Neferneferuaten, Tutankhamun and Ay. Three were certainly bona fide Atenists — Akhenaten, Nefertiti and Ay; too little is known about Smenkhkara to be sure about him, but reform did start under Tut. Nevertheless, all were branded.

Because of that determination to expunge from the record all information about Amarna, it may never be possible for scholars to agree on a definitive understanding of the Amarna court — the exact names and precise reigns, co-regencies, parentage and offspring. Without the benefit of firm evidence, we all put together a scenario that we find most comfortable and believe to be a plausible sequence of events and a cast of key characters. But Amarna is a moving target. I've reversed my view of it and may do so again if and when evidence compels me.

Once the succession between the reigns of Akhenaten and Tutankhamun is behind us, mysteries still remain — the Amarna interlude never disappoints. In absence of a bloodline descendent, the vizier Ay assumed the throne — possibly as a power grab while Horemheb was away on campaign somewhere and unaware, or possibly with Horemheb's complicity in a secretly negotiated pact — and then Ay proceeded to marry Ankhesenamun.

If Nefertiti was Ay's daughter, as many believe even without conclusive evidence, Ankhesenamun was Ay's granddaughter; the alternative belief, that Nefertiti's father was Amenhotep III, offers only slight relief from that abhorrent idea — Ay would then be the young lady's great-uncle, 35-40 years her senior, assuming that he was Tiye's brother.

In any case, Ankhesenamun would have none of it. So she wrote to the king of the Hittites, Suppiluliuma, asking him to send her a prince to marry and become king of Egypt. Suppiluliuma was understandably suspicious, but eventually agreed, and sent his son Zannanza to Egypt. However, Zannanza was met at the border and killed.

It is a matter of speculation how that came about. If Ay and Horemheb had made a pact for succession, Horemheb may have used his role and rank as the top general to waylay Zannanza and pave the way for Ay and then for himself. Even without a secret deal, that may have been what happened. In any case, Zannanza was out of the picture.

Soon after Ankhesenamun's marriage to Ay, she disappeared from the record; no one knows whatever became of her, she simply vanished. Ay ruled for four years and died, so Horemheb stepped up as king. His first wife had died and he was now married to Mutnodjmet, who happened to be the daughter of Ay. (This lends some credibility to the possibility that the two men were not adversarial; i.e., that the succession plan may have

been mutually agreed upon.)

Horemheb had no heir, so he selected a favorite army general to succeed him: Ramesses I. Starting with those two, five senior military officers in a row became king — Seti I, Ramesses II (Ramesses the Great) and Merenptah — and all but the first two, Horemheb and Ramesses I, gained the throne via father-to-son bloodline succession.

Unlike the 18th Dynasty, powerful women were conspicuously absent from the 19th, until the very end. That is where we will take up the story next — along with political expediency, intrigue, treachery, murder and mayhem.

Tawoseret

At the end of the 19th Dynasty, intrigue again swept into the Egyptian court, and in order to appreciate where it all leads we need to follow it briefly before **Tawoseret** enters the picture.

Merenptah, Ramesses II's 13th son and successor, died in 1204 and several of Ramesses' grandsons began jockeying for position, two cousins in particular: Seti-Merenptah, Merenptah's first-born son and designated heir, and Amenmesse, another grandson of Ramesses II who may have been Seti II's nephew, or even one of his sons.

Amenmesse rose to power in Upper Egypt, leaving Seti II to reign only in the Delta and Lower Egypt as far south as Memphis. If Amenmesse was Seti's son, as some have suggested, he may have been unhappy with his father's succession plan — Seti had designated another son, also named Seti-Merenptah, as his successor, on the assumption that he, Seti, would become king without complication. Well, it didn't work out that way.

After four years of this split kingdom, Seti managed to wrest power away from the usurper Amenmesse, purged his henchmen, ordered a *damnatio memoriae* to seal the deal, and was at last sole ruler of all Egypt — but only for a year or two, and died. When his time came, young Seti-Merenptah was out of the picture, perhaps already dead.

(For more detail on the possible scenarios, see Toby Wilkinson's *The Rise and Fall and Fall of Ancient Egypt* [pp. 323-25] and *Lives of the Ancient Egyptians* [p. 262].)

Into this temporary vacuum stepped the ambitious chancellor Bay, a commoner and transplanted Syrian, a master manipulator who had risen to a lofty perch in the government and was now in a position to engineer the coronation of a young lad named Merenptah-Siptah, commonly known simply as Siptah. He was probably the son of Amenmesse, says Toby Wilkinson, but Joyce Tyldesley says he might also have been a son of Seti II by a secondary wife, Tiaa.

Whoever he was, it didn't matter much, because Bay's intention was to establish the boy as a figurehead and then run things himself. The fact that Siptah was weak and sickly and had a twisted leg, perhaps due to polio or cerebral palsy, no doubt encouraged Bay, too. (See Clayton, *Chronicle of the Pharaohs*, pp. 158-59.) However, Seti II's wife Tawoseret (Tauseret, Twosret) managed to wrench power away from Bay and have him executed.

Within a year, Siptah died and now Tawoseret ruled as king, with full titles, following the leads of Hatshepsut 280 years be-

fore and Sobekneferu 300 years before that. Tawoseret was careful to do a proper *damnatio memoriae* on both Siptah and Bay without delay; she had Siptah's name scratched out and replaced with that of her dead husband Seti II, and as for Bay, well, Egyptian records refer to him as "the great enemy" or simply "the Syrian upstart" — insult heaped upon execution. (See Wilkinson, *Lives*, p. 263, and *Rise and Fall*, p. 325.)

Tawoseret lasted only about four years but in her time she demonstrated strategic purpose and a ruthlessness that many a king might have admired. (Incidentally, Tawoseret was mentioned by Homer as the pharaoh who had dealings with Helen of Troy at the time of the Trojan War.)

Unfortunately, her legacy lacks the luster that normally attends admirable achievement. The dynasty led by such luminaries as Seti I and Ramesses II came to a whimpering end. Once again, a woman had presided over the demise of a dynasty, just as Sobekneferu had done 600 years before, and possibly Neithiqrti 400 years before that.

If we are tempted to draw a gender-based conclusion from that evidence, we will soon find ourselves corrected by reality; a monumental role of political leadership still lies ahead for women in Egyptian history.

But for now, the business at the end of the 19th Dynasty was to put things back in order, and again a military man stepped in to do that — Sethnakht, a strongman in the mold of the Thutmoseid kings, Amenhotep I and II, Horemheb, Seti I, Ramesses II, harkening back to Seqenenra Tao II and Mentuhotep II, as well — even to Khasekhemwy and Narmer, in fact. The necessity for Sethnakht, as it had been for Thutmose III, was to eradicate the notion of a female king.

Interestingly, he chose to take over KV14 for his tomb in the Valley of the Kings — Tawoseret's tomb. Sethnakht removed her remains and those of her husband, Seti II. Maybe he just wanted the place all to himself, but it's a big, big tomb; more likely, he wanted to erase Tawoseret from contemporary thought and historical record.

If that was his objective, it was not entirely successful. When a woman had presided over the collapse of government in times past, and even despite Hatshepsut's very illustrious reign, the idea of a female king was anathema to the Egyptians, and one might expect the collapse of the 19th Dynasty under Tawoseret to be another I-told-you-so moment that would banish women from positions of power from then on.

But in the years ahead, something very different lay in store. Authority would come to reside in the office of the God's Wife of Amun, a post open only to unmarried, royal females, in which power would be passed on via serial adoption of chosen successors. And that power — both sacred and secular — was considerable.

God's Wife of Amun

These women are not categorized as kings or sole-ruling regents or women of influence in the court, but they had enormous power and must be treated as a separate group of *de facto* rulers in the Third Intermediate Period.

In fact, their history goes back much earlier. The Middle Kingdom had God's Wives of Min and Ptah, but with the dawn of the New Kingdom, in league with the ascendancy of Amun as

national god, Ahmose established the office of the God's Wife of Amun and endowed it with the resources required to sustain it as a viable institution — ostensibly a religious office but moreover a buttress for the kingship.

A century later, Thutmose III shut down the office as part of his campaign to protect Egypt against the possibility of another female monarch — or at least he stripped it of any meaningful power. His daughter-in-law Tiaa, mother of Thutmose IV, did hold the title, but she was the last until the office was revived somewhat in the 20th Dynasty.

But in the Third Intermediate Period the office of the God's Wife of Amun came into full bloom, fertilized by political expediency. On the surface the purpose of the God's Wife of Amun was supposed to be religious. The God's Wives could conduct rituals, make offerings, and serve as priestesses in ecclesiastical roles. Ultimately their role was to stimulate the god and perpetuate the order of the universe — pretty important stuff. At least that was the official story. In practicality, the office was a means for the pharaoh to get control of the Amun priesthood in Thebes.

In the Third Intermediate Period and after, the office of God's Wife became enormously powerful. Each God's Wife had a prenomen and nomen just like a king, and also a cartouche, which had always been the sole province of the royal couple. They even wore crowns. But to understand how it all came to that, we have to go back to the 20th Dynasty.

Royal authority declined after Ramesses III, who we may recall was the victim of a palace coup led by one of his wives. From his time on, the most powerful person in Upper Egypt was the High Priest of Amun in Thebes, who controlled the vast wealth, landholdings, workshops and food supplies of both Karnak and Medinet Habu temples, and therefore the entire economy and livelihood of the area. (See Wilkinson, *Rise and Fall*, p. 354ff.)

Throughout the rest of the New Kingdom, power oozed away from the king and his government up north, and in the south the priesthood of Amun gradually filled the vacuum with ritual, pomp and procession — especially procession, because it put the priests in direct contact with the public: the oracles in the procession connected the people with god, and the priests controlled the oracles. And gradually, over time, and driven by political exigencies, the God's Wife of Amun came to control the priesthood.

There is a great deal of history that comes in at this point, between the end of the 20th Dynasty and the early Third Intermediate Period, and it's complicated. So I will provide only a nutshell version. At the end of the 20th Dynasty Ramesses XI got the viceroy in Nubia, Panehsy, to quell a revolt against the High Priest, who was the king's proxy in Thebes. Panehsy did so, in fact so successfully that he took over power and set himself up as ruler of Upper Egypt. That wouldn't do, so Ramesses enlisted yet another strongman, Piankh, to eliminate Panehsy and set things right. But Piankh likewise assumed power in the south and named himself High Priest of Amun. Piankh then left for Nubia, to polish off Panehsy once and for all, and left his wife Nodjmet to manage things in Thebes. She was as tough and determined as he was, and she took charge.

When Piankh died, a general named Herihor was ushered in as High Priest, but Nodjmet, not to be sidelined, married Heri-

hor so as to have control over the succession — Herihor had 19 sons, so that sort of thing could not be left to chance.

As a consequence of all this political instability and the fading memory of the New Kingdom, whose last eight kings were weak and distant, the god Amun had risen to supremacy as virtual monarch; consequently oracles were more important than ever, for purposes of policy and propaganda. The High Priest of Amun in Thebes had all bases covered.

These leaders, naturalized Egyptians who were originally from Libya, were eventually defeated by Nubians from the Land of Kush — Kashta and his son Piye.

It may seem at this point that we have left our study of the powerful and influential women of Egypt behind. Not so, because now they bridge the gap from Libyan to Nubian rule, and back again: Shepenwepet I, daughter of the Libyan king Osorkon III and half-sister of the Libyan High Priest Rudamun, was God's Wife of Amun, and she was succeeded by the Nubian Amenirdis I, the Kushite daughter of Kashta and Piye's sister.

And the strategic succession continued. As time went on, the God's Wife of Amun accrued great power and influence.

Piye went back to Nubia, but first he made sure to arrange for his daughter Shepenwepet to succeed Amenirdis I, as Shepenwepet II, who in turn adopted the next king's daughter to succeed her, as Amenirdis II.

When Psamtek took over and founded the 26th Dynasty in Sais, 500 miles north, he too grafted onto the Amun priesthood by getting Amenirdis II, a Nubian, to adopt his daughter Nitqret, a Libyan. As it turned out, when Shepenwepet II died, it was Nitqret who succeeded her, and held the office for 70 years. Amenirdis II became Divine Adoratrice instead.

Eventually the office went to Ankhnesneferibra, daughter of Psamtek II, who reigned for 60 years, and also claimed the title High Priest of Amun. Clearly, the idea of a woman in a position of power and influence had fully evolved — at least in Egypt.

But not so for the Persians, who conquered Egypt in 525, executed Psamtek III, and immediately abolished the office of the God's Wife of Amun, bringing to an end more than 500 years of vested influence and power.

Shepenwepet II had been God's Wife of Amun through the reigns of three kings, a tenure even longer than that of Ramesses the Great. And by the 26th Dynasty the God's Wives of Amun were senior to the High Priest of Amun and in control of Egypt.

It was not only Thebes — the God's Wife of Amun had control of wealth and production of food and goods all over Upper Egypt — and it certainly was not all religious. The priesthood of Amun owned two-thirds of all temple land, 90 percent of the ships and 80 percent of the factories, and the God's Wife of Amun controlled the Amun priesthood, which virtually meant that she controlled Egypt (Clayton, *Chronicle of the Pharaohs*, p. 175).

Stability was preserved because the office was royally appointed and succession was controlled by adoption. That eliminated any dispute over which son of which King's Wife would succeed, and made such excesses as the palace coup of the 20th Dynasty unnecessary. The king could rest easy up north or in Nubia, knowing that Upper Egypt and the Amun priests in Thebes — such a royal pain to the 18th Dynasty kings — were under the control of the controlled.

Temple Singers and Priestesses

In the Old Kingdom, many elite women were priestesses — *hemet netjer*, “wife of god.” That declined in the Middle Kingdom and was essentially eliminated in the New Kingdom, since the priesthood by then was professional and full-time versus rotational and all-male. In the New Kingdom, the title *hemet netjer* was replaced by *henutet*, “servant of god,” or *shemayet*, “musician” — both suggesting ritual roles in temple worship.

But after the New Kingdom many women — often if not usually from the highest ranks of society — came to serve as priestesses and singers in the temple. The involvement of these women — the “musicians (or chantresses) of Amun” or the “Singers of the Interior” (i.e., the chambers of Amun) — was a direct consequence of the increasing religious authority of the God's Wife of Amun.

Many secular instruments are known, including harps, lutes, lyres, horns, oboes, flutes, drums and clap sticks, but in temple worship, up until the Greco-Roman Period, they played only two: the sistrum (either the hooped version made of bronze or the naos type made of faience, both of which had loose metal wires that made a rattling sound and were associated with Hathor), and the menat, a beaded necklace with a counterpoise to hold it in place. The menat probably made a swishing sound, perhaps somewhat like a rain stick, possibly to replicate the sound of papyrus in the primeval marsh, or the rush of wind, which could account for its use in rejuvenating rituals — the breath of life, stirred by Shu in the Heliopolitan Ennead or by Amun in the Hermopolitan Ogdoad. The menat was also protective; both deities and people are often shown wearing it or presenting it ritualistically as they would an ankh or lotus.

As the priestesses played these instruments, they chanted praises to the god. Ritual rhythmic dance may also have been an element of temple worship, because the purpose was to arouse and revitalize the god, and it was presumed that elite, fetching young women, dancing and cooing praises, would produce that result.

(For a close look at temple singers and roles of women in the Third Intermediate Period, see Emily Teeter and Janet H. Johnson, *The Life of Meresamun, A Temple Singer in Ancient Egypt*, Oriental Institute, University of Chicago.)

Cleopatra VII

Cleopatra VII, the last pharaoh of either gender to rule Egypt (51-30 B.C.), was a product and culmination of the Ptolemaic Period, which began in 332 B.C. and for the next 300 years remained awash in complexity and gore. Getting to Cleopatra VII leads us through a thicket of intrigue, skullduggery, incest, mayhem and murder, and plenty of women who took vicious delight in being part of it all.

In these 300 years a number of women served as regents or occupied the throne following the untimely death or hasty departure of their husbands as a consequence of treachery and murder within their own families; these were fairly common occurrences. Cartouches in reliefs were often left without names because of the “uncertainty as to who would be on the throne at completion” (Joyce Tyldesley, *Chronicle of the Queens*, p. 210).

To prepare ourselves for Cleopatra, we should steep ourselves in Ptolemaic mayhem by beginning at the beginning, with the murder of Alexander the Great's second wife, Stateira, by his first wife, Roxane. Alexander's posthumous son Alexander IV was murdered by his guardian, and Alexander's half-brother and heir, Phillip, was murdered by Alexander's mother, Olympia. Eurydice, Phillip's wife, was forced to commit suicide by her mother-in-law, who herself was executed two years later.

These early events set the pace for the rest of Greek rule, and it doesn't get any better. Let's just jump ahead a century or so and see how things are going.

Ptolemy IV executed his mother Berenice II and his brother Magas the first year of his reign — his mother poisoned, his brother scalded to death — and fathered Ptolemy V with his sister Arsinoe. He then took up with a mistress, Agatheclea, who with her brother Agathocles poisoned his wife and likely Ptolemy as well. Now Agatheclea and Agathocles named themselves regents for Ptolemy V, because he was only five or six, but then they were lynched by a mob for murdering Ptolemy IV and Arsinoe. The regency continued under the thumbs of palace officials.

At last, at age 12, Ptolemy V was crowned, an event highlighted by the impalement of some rebels and the announcement of some tax reforms, commemorated on the Rosetta Stone. At 13, Ptolemy V — already an old hand in the Ptolemaic way of dealing with your fellow man — nabbed the rest of the rebel band and had them tortured to death. Well, he was a troubled youth, and this sort of behavior ran in the blood of the Ptolemys — the “royal family's appetite for internecine rivalry,” as Toby Wilkinson puts it so well (*Rise and Fall*, p. 459).

Fast-forward again through another century of murder and mayhem, and we look in on Berenice III, who married her uncle, Ptolemy X, and assumed the throne at his death — again, a woman in power. She married her stepson, Ptolemy XI. That proved unwise, because within three weeks he murdered her and then 19 days later he himself was lynched. Then, without a bloodline heir, the illegitimate son of Ptolemy IX was pressed into service, crowned Ptolemy XII, and was married to his sister.

Despite his inauspicious start, the thing about Ptolemy XII is that he was the father of Cleopatra VII — the most fascinating of all the Ptolemys, and the only Greek pharaoh in 300 years who even bothered to learn the Egyptian language. We may not be in position to appreciate Cleopatra VII as fully as we might without considering the turbulent times preceding her — skullduggery, intrigue, murder, incest, royalty running off to hide in exile and whatnot; no soap opera could ever come close. But in Ptolemaic Egypt, whenever you think you've heard it all, there's something still ahead.

Now, Ptolemy XII and his sister-wife Cleopatra V had four daughters, Berenice IV, two Cleopatras (VI and VII) and Arsinoe, and two sons, Ptolemy XIII and XIV.

Berenice IV managed to take over in Egypt while her father was away, and took as a male consort one of her cousins, but a week later had him strangled and married someone else, who lasted two years — pretty long for a royal consort in the Ptolemaic court, and he died not at her bidding but at the hands of the Romans, who had invaded Egypt. Then when Ptolemy XII himself returned he had his daughter Berenice executed.

Happily, he had another daughter, who would one day be Cleopatra VII. She traveled with him to Rhodes, Ephesus and Rome, and picked up languages — she is said to have been fluent in seven — and apparently learned a lot about international diplomacy. It seems unlikely that she learned much from her father; more plausibly, she was very observant and self-taught.

She was 17 when Ptolemy XII died and she became pharaoh, in 51. However, she shared the throne with one of her brothers, Ptolemy XIII, who was then 10 years old.

Meanwhile, in Rome Julius Caesar and General Pompey had locked horns in a power struggle. Cleopatra decided to side with Pompey, which, as things turned out, seems strange, but that's what she did. She had problems at home, as well. Her brother-husband Ptolemy XIII plotted to have her killed, but she got wind of it and fled.

Civil war ensued — Cleopatra backed by her army in exile, Ptolemy XIII by his in Alexandria. Now Caesar won the fight with Pompey, who fled to Alexandria — where, instead of safe haven, he found himself a victim of Ptolemy XIII, who had him beheaded and presented his head — pickled — to Caesar, upon his arrival soon after. Imagine Ptolemy's disappointment when Caesar was clearly appalled at the barbarity. This would not go well for Ptolemy.

Seizing the moment, Cleopatra had herself smuggled into Caesar's quarters rolled up in a carpet — bizarre as that seems, it may in fact be true — and when the carpet was unrolled, what should appear to Caesar's wondering eyes but the estranged pharaoh of Egypt, the unique and always captivating Cleopatra VII.

The meeting went well. Caesar and Cleopatra holed up in the royal palace and spent the winter there, apparently consoling each other and cuddling. When they emerged, in March of 47, Cleopatra was pregnant.

Caesar backed Cleopatra, but Ptolemy XIII still claimed his own right to the throne, and to complicate things even more, there was also a movement afoot to make Cleopatra's younger sister Arsinoe co-ruler with Ptolemy XIII. But that was not to be. Ptolemy XIII drowned, Arsinoe was taken off to Rome in chains, and Cleopatra VII assumed the throne, unencumbered at last, with Ptolemy XIV, her 11-year-old brother, as consort. Then she had Caesar's baby: Caesarion, Ptolemy XV. Caesar was 52, Cleopatra was 21.

In 46 Cleopatra and her child husband-brother went to Rome and stayed two years. In 44 Caesar was assassinated, so Cleopatra went home. Young Ptolemy XIV died soon thereafter, not certainly but probably at her behest. Her sister Arsinoe was living in Ephesus, and there was still talk of putting her on the throne in Egypt. That posed an inconvenient prospect for Cleopatra, so she had Arsinoe murdered.

Rome was now in turmoil again as Mark Antony and Octavian, Caesar's appointed heir, squared off to see who would rule the Roman Empire in the wake of Caesar's assassination. They had divided the Empire and were governing on their own, Octavian in the west and Antony in the east; it was a dicey situation.

Meanwhile, Cleopatra needed a protector and ally. She chose Antony, who was 14 years older than she, and cemented the relationship as she had done with Caesar. She bore twins in 40 B.C., just as Antony was about to marry Octavia, who happened

to be the sister of Octavian. If that was his attempt to repair things with Octavian, it did not work very well.

War ensued. Antony and Cleopatra assembled an armada of 230 Egyptian ships and sailed north to Samos and Ephesus on the coast of Asia Minor, and then west to Athens. Antony repudiated Octavia, but of course that did nothing to improve things with her brother, Octavian.

Now he and Cleopatra were officially and publicly a couple, and headed for a reckoning known to history as the Battle of Actium, on the west coast of Greece in the year 31.

Antony soon discovered — as Toby Wilkinson puts it, with delicious understatement — that “his delusions of grandeur were not matched by his tactical abilities.” The battle was a disaster. Antony and Cleopatra fled to Egypt with 60 of their 230 ships. Antony holed up in Libya, Cleopatra in Alexandria.

At last, in 30, Egypt fell to Roman might and Greco-Egyptian entropy. Rome took it over, not as a Roman province but only as an imperial estate. Egypt’s 3,100 years as a sovereign nation were over and the country served now only as a supplier of produce and wealth for Rome.

But the Cleopatra story was not yet over. A pathetic and fittingly Ptolemaic ending was still to come. Somebody told Antony that Cleopatra had killed herself, so, consumed by grief, he fell on his sword. But he bungled it and survived,

though mortally wounded. Cleopatra was told and she had Antony brought to her apartment, where he then died. So she killed herself.

Legend has it that she let an asp bite her, and that may even be true. All the rest of this soap opera is true, so why not?

Oh, and the son of Caesar, Caesarion — Ptolemy XV? Eliminated, needless to say.

Cleopatra was, by all accounts and judging from her image struck on coins, not particularly attractive. However, she was captivating, and apparently irresistible. She was said to be extremely intelligent, charming, poised, shrewd, and fluent in seven languages — she had all the qualities that would appeal to, say, a Roman general or emperor.

But as a monarch, she was no Hatshepsut. Perhaps it was the destiny of the Greek rulers to fail — a genetic impediment to order that could not be overcome. Perhaps the temptations of self-indulgence and skulduggery were too overpowering to resist. Perhaps, after centuries of decline since the New Kingdom, Egypt had forgotten how, or had lost its will, to be great. After 300 years of Ptolemaic excess and deficiency, perhaps Cleopatra could do no better.

With her demise, our exploration of Egypt’s powerful and influential women, over the span of more than 3,000 years, comes to an end.

Author’s Note: This revision updates my original paper in light of recent research, particularly with regard to the Amarna succession — the genealogy of Tutankhamun and the identities of the KV55 and KV35YL individuals — and the God’s Wives of Amun. The DNA studies at the root of the Amarna issues remain under review, so further revision is always a possibility.

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For more detail on the Ptolemaic Period in particular, see Dodson-Hilton, *The Complete Royal Families*, pp. 260-74; Southern, *Antony & Cleopatra*; Tyldesley, *Chronicle of the Queens*, pp. 189-206; Wilkinson, *Lives*, pp. 317-24; Wilkinson, *Rise and Fall*, pp. 444-82; Clayton, *Chronicle of the Pharaohs*, pp. 208-17.