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THE GOD'S WIFE OF AMUN IN THE 18TH DYNASTY IN EGYPT

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My aim in this paper is to outline what we know of the office of god's wife and its function during the 18th dynasty, and then to look briefly at the careers of three of its holders.

First, I shall sketch in the historical background. The 18th dynasty royal family with which we shall be dealing was no more than a continuation of the 17th dynasty, which may be given the rough dates of 1650-1565 BC. Although the rulers of the 17th dynasty used the titles of king, they only controlled the south of Egypt with their capital at Thebes. The north was in the hands of the Hyksos, who had moved into Lower Egypt from Syria-Palestine. While it seems that north and south existed fairly peaceably for some time, the rulers in Thebes became increasingly restive at the situation, probably for mainly economic reasons, though national pride may have played its part.

The last king of the 17th dynasty, Kamose, has left a record of his offensive thrust against the Hyksos, in which he had some successes, but it was left to the next king, Ahmose, to complete the expulsion of the foreigners, some time in the second half of his 25-year reign. The absolute date cannot be precisely calculated, but we can put it very roughly around 1550 BC.

In retrospect, Ahmose was considered the founder of the New Kingdom and of a new dynasty, the 18th. Although his family was from Thebes, he moved the administrative capital north to Memphis for geographical reasons, since that city lay at the meeting point of Upper and Lower Egypt, and was close both to the Delta, by now the economic centre of the country, and to the land and sea routes to the Near East. Thebes, however, remained the provincial administrative centre for Upper Egypt, but, more than this, it became the religious capital for the whole of Egypt. The god Amun of Thebes had first come to prominence as a national god under the earlier Theban ruling families of the 11th and 12th dynasties at the beginning of the 2nd millennium, and was already then associated with the sun god Re, the national god of the Old Kingdom, in the form Amon-Re. With the victory of another line of Theban princes, the paramount position of Amun was reinforced.

The successes of the 17th and 18th dynasties were attributed to him, first those against the Hyksos, and then every victory that the warrior kings of the New Kingdom achieved, as they directed their aggressive energies towards building up Egyptian control in Syria-Palestine. The temples of Amun were made rich with booty and endowments, and eventually became the wealthiest in the land and the priesthood the most powerful.

It is against this background of expansion of the wealth and power of Amun and his priesthood that we must set the god's wife of Amun, for the title immediately links the holder with the god Amun and his city, Thebes.

Before we ask what the title meant to the Egyptians of the 18th dynasty, it will be useful to look briefly at the material which we must use in our enquiry, and the sort of information we may hope to get from it. First, it must be stressed that we have to rely on chance finds, so that we must assume that there are gaps, possibly large ones, in the evidence, and that much vital information has simply not survived. Stone monuments, such as temples, stelae, tombs and statues, have a good chance of coming down to us, but they often suffer from weathering or deliberate attack, so that important details may be missing. Further, buildings were often subject to dismantling, and many have only been recovered in fragmentary form. Smaller objects, both royal and private, such as vases, scarabs, cosmetic items and jewellery, survive haphazardly, often with no provenance, and the information they give is fairly limited. Some of the material may provide us with long texts, such as the biographies of officials, and building or triumphal inscriptions of kings, with short inscriptions, such as captions to scenes and titularies, and possibly with representations. What we do not have are texts, official or unofficial, which explain the position of the god's wife, or any documents, such as letters or diaries written by the women themselves, which would give us a glimpse of their individual characters. It is doubtful whether these types of document would have ever existed.

This material, royal and private, comes, therefore, from an official milieu and reflects the official view of things, but rarely explains it. So the kind of information which we can glean about the god's wife of Amun will be concerned with her official position rather than with the individual woman, although it is possible that the amount of material surviving for each god's wife suggests roughly the importance of these women, relative to each other.

Since it is vain to ask questions which the material cannot answer, we must be content to examine the official position of the god's wife of

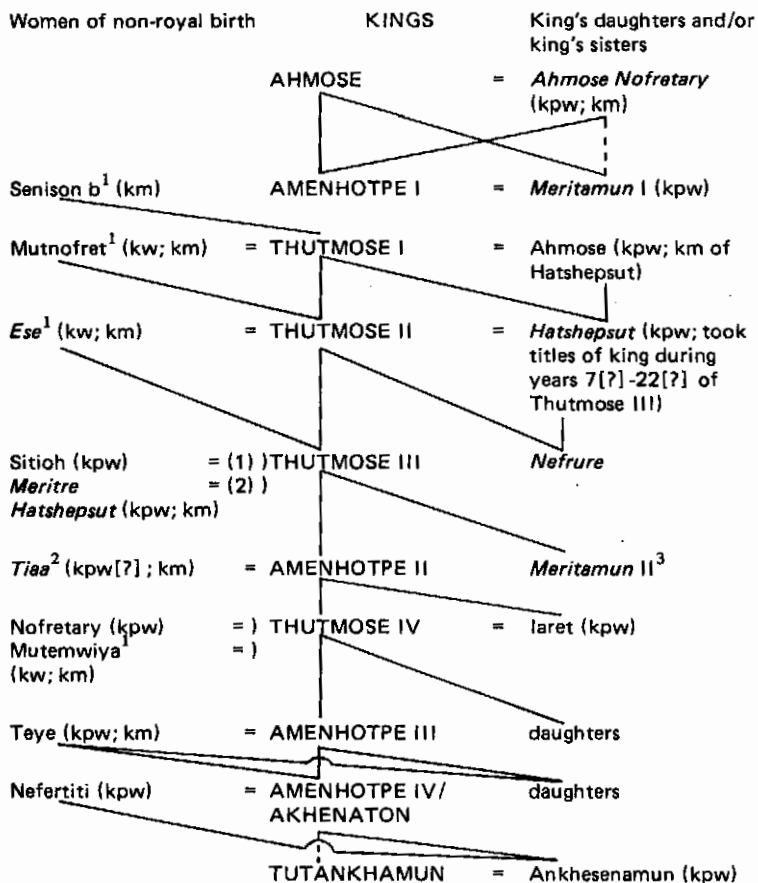
Amun in the 18th dynasty. First, the title is held by women of the royal family. Taken at face value, it suggests a woman dedicated to the service of Amun, with a sexual role to play towards the god. While this may conjure up the vision of a virgin consecrated to the god alone, it is quite clear that in the 18th dynasty this was not the meaning, for the title could be used by women who were kings' wives and kings' mothers. This has given rise to a misconception about the role of the god's wife, which has its origin in ideas that became current at the end of the last century concerning the role of royal women in the transmission of the right to the throne. These gave rise to the belief that the right to the throne of ancient Egypt passed through the female line, so that the king, even if the son of his predecessor and his predecessor's wife, had to legitimise his claim to the throne by marriage with the royal 'heiress', who would be the daughter of the previous king and his principal wife, and so normally the sister or half-sister of the reigning king. Thus the right to the throne would have descended through the female line, but the office of king would be exercised by the man the 'heiress' married.

Two kings of the 18th dynasty, Hatshepsut and Amenhotep III, have left reliefs depicting the myth of their divine birth. In them, it is related how the god Amun came to their mothers and fathered the future kings. The idea that the king was the bodily child of a god, by the 18th dynasty Amun, but earlier the sun god Re, was a well-established tradition, and probably applied to all the kings of the 18th dynasty. Here, it was thought, was a sense in which the king's wife was literally the god's wife of Amun, and so the title was linked with the 'heiress' theory, and the legitimisation of kingship. Not all bearers of the title were mothers of kings, nor even wives of kings, so it was assumed that the title marked the designated 'heiress', that is, the king's daughter destined to become king's principal wife, and, hopefully, the mother of the heir.

If this ingenious theory is correct, each king must be shown to have married a woman of royal birth, who together should form a line in direct descent from one another. Egyptian kings were polygynous, and Egyptologists normally consider that the 'heiress' must be the principal wife of the king. If this were not so, the idea would become impossible to examine. Secondary wives are rarely mentioned, and if the king could make any woman his principal wife, provided he had the 'heiress' safely in his 'harem', it would be impossible to discover evidence for or against her existence. However, if the king could only claim the throne through marriage to the 'heiress', one might expect that this would be part of the official myth of kingship, and that there would be evidence of the existence of the 'heiress' on the monuments. That this is not so

Figure 5.1: Genealogy of the Kings of the 18th dynasty, Ahmose to Tutankhamun (c. 1565 B.C.–c. 1350 B.C.), showing god's wives of Amun (underlined) king's principal wives (kpw), king's wives (kw) and king's mothers (km)

The table is to be read from top to bottom, with lines running from parent (mother or father) to child. A broken line means filiation is not certain.



1. First attested in the reign of her son.

2. Last attested god's wife in the 18th dynasty, the title only being found on monuments dating to the reign of her son. The title god's wife is revived in the 19th dynasty for Sitre, the wife of the founder, Ramesses I, after an interval of 80-100 years.

3. Only attested from the end of the reign of her father.

makes the theory suspect to start with, and a simple examination of the genealogy of the dynasty (Fig. 5.1) shows that there is no such line of 'heiress' queens. Although brother-sister marriages occur in the royal family of the 18th dynasty, they are not consistently practised, as the theory would demand. In fact, the whole 'heiress' theory is founded on very shaky grounds, and is an example of an idea which has become generally accepted without being subjected to a critical examination.

In one direction, the roots go back to Fraser and *The Golden Bough*. Fraser said that all Egyptian men married their sisters, and although inheritance appeared to pass from father to son, it did so really in the son's dual role of his father's sister's son and his father's daughter's husband; that is, inheritance went through the women. Around that time, texts from the tomb of a man called Paheri became known, in which he traced his descent through the female line. Further, in giving filiation, many Egyptians named only their mothers. All this suggested to scholars that Egyptian society had once been a 'matriarchy' with descent going through the women, that it had then been overlaid by a system of 'patriarchy', but that strong 'matriarchal' tendencies remained, most notably in the royal family, where the women continued to carry the right to the throne.

Today, the work of Fraser and his followers cannot be accepted uncritically, and thus the very origins of the 'heiress' theory makes its reappraisal necessary. Fraser's original statement that all Egyptian men married their sisters is clearly untrue. Not only is such a model unrealistic and unworkable, but it has now been demonstrated that full brother-sister marriage among ordinary people was rare, if it existed at all, in Pharaonic Egypt. Although it is unknown why some Egyptians gave filiation only to their mothers, there are clearly other possible explanations besides 'matriarchal' tendencies within the society. The reason for Paheri's interest in his descent in the female line was probably because his only important ancestor, a hero of the Hyksos wars, lay in this line.

Neither the way the term 'matriarchy' has been used, nor the idea that primitive societies were originally matriarchal and that many patriarchal societies contain memories of the earlier system is acceptable to anthropologists today.

If we return to brother-sister marriage within the royal family, and look at the genealogy of the dynasty (Fig. 5.1), it is clear that while this type of marriage is practised, it is not obligatory. The existence of such marriages has been one of the main supports of the 'heiress' theory, but they can be explained in another way. These unions are not found with non-royal people, but they occur among the gods. This is a result of the

type of creation myth in which a creator god produces a pair of offspring, who in their turn produce offspring, and so on; in creation, but not necessarily thereafter, choice of partner is limited to brother or sister. Therefore, by practising brother-sister marriage, the king removed himself from his subjects and approached the divine circle. Thus his sister would be a desirable marriage partner for the king.

Since there is no evidence for an 'heiress' either on the monuments nor in the pattern of royal marriages, the idea of transmission of the right to the throne through the female line should be discarded. This obviously affects our understanding of the title god's wife, which has been so firmly linked to the 'heiress' theory. Although it cannot mark the non-existent 'heiress', it might still belong to the woman picked out to be the mother of the next king. An examination of the two surviving birth cycles, however, shows that neither of the two king's mothers involved is called god's wife. We must, therefore, accept that the title god's wife had nothing to do with the myth of the king's divine birth. Looked at from a practical point of view, we can say that a queen's involvement in the birth cycle must be retrospective; that is, only once a particular prince has obtained the throne can the myth be applied to him and his divine origin known, together with his mother's part in it. Of course, the title god's wife might have been bestowed retrospectively, but these two cases show that it was not.

Therefore, we must discard not only the 'heiress' theory, but also any attempt to link the title god's wife with the myth of the divine birth of the king, and we must look for the significance of the title elsewhere. The earliest attestations date from the Middle Kingdom, over 200 years before the 18th dynasty. They occur with the names of non-royal women, but, since there is no accompanying god's name, it is uncertain whether Amun is meant. In the First Intermediate Period, earlier still, a wife of Min is known, and from the Old Kingdom onwards, a related title, that of divine adoratrice of the god, appears in the cults of other gods. In the 18th dynasty, the title god's wife as used by the women of the royal family is shown to refer to Amun by the full version god's wife of Amun, but it more often appears simply as god's wife.

The first royal god's wife of whom we know anything is Ahmose Nofretary, the wife of king Ahmose, founder of the 18th dynasty. During her tenure of the office, a legal act formally established the office of god's wife on Ahmose Nofretary and her heirs. This is known from a document called the 'Donation' stela, which was set up in the temple of Amun at Karnak. Although there is not full agreement on its

interpretation, it is basically a legal document providing an endowment of goods and land which was to be linked with the office of god's wife and handed on with it in perpetuity.

The nature of the office is made clear by several scenes from the 18th dynasty showing a priestess who is called god's wife functioning within the context of temple ritual alongside male priests. So she appears as part of a procession of priests; she is shown being purified in the sacred lake before entering the temple; she takes part in the rite calling the god to his repast; she plays a role in execration rites, burning the image of the enemy; she is present when boxes of clothes are offered to the goddess Wadjet. The earliest of these scenes is from the reign of Amenhotpe I, and the priestess is clearly called Ahmose Nofretary; in the other examples, from the reigns of Hatshepsut and Amenhotpe III, she is unnamed. In all of them, she wears a short, close-fitting wig with a thin fillet tied at the back of the head with the ends falling down, which derives from the costume of priestesses in the Middle Kingdom, and is totally unrelated to the costume and insignia worn by king's mothers, king's wives and occasionally king's daughters. Clearly, the god's wife was a priestess.

At first, the title was held by women who were members of the royal family by birth, so that the holders before the sole rule of Thutmose III were all also king's daughters. During the sole rule of Thutmose III to the reign of Thutmose IV, three of the holders were not members of the royal family by birth, but only by 'marriage', suggesting a possible shift of emphasis from royal birth to simple membership of the royal family (Fig. 5.1). After this, the title disappears from the royal family until the beginning of the 19th dynasty.

The god's wives Ahmose Nofretary, Hatshepsut and Nefrure have left a large number of attestations, in which they make frequent use of the title god's wife, often as their only title. Between the end of the reign of Hatshepsut and the end of the reign of Thutmose IV, the evidence from the monuments suggests that there were no royal women of similar influence or calibre. While the mothers of Amenhotpe II and Thutmose IV should probably not be considered negligible, they are attested fewer times, rarely make prominent use of the title god's wife, and are seldom referred to by it alone. Undoubtedly, the wives of Amenhotpe III and Akhenaton, Teye and Nefertiti, should be considered on a par with Ahmose Nofretary and Hatshepsut, but, by this time, royal women no longer used the title god's wife. Thus the heyday of the title in the 18th dynasty was during the reigns of Ahmose to Hatshepsut, a period of roughly 80 years. I shall now look at the three

royal women, who according to the evidence were the most important holders of the title at this time.

The 'Donation' stela of king Ahmose's reign (above) is the first surviving official document concerning Ahmose Nofretary, and it at once introduces her as a person of importance. Later evidence, from the last years of Ahmose's reign, suggests that Ahmose Nofretary took an interest in the building projects of her husband. Two rock stelae carved at the limestone quarries of Ma'sara, across the river from Memphis, record the reopening of the quarry in year 22. Above the text of each stela is carved the cartouche of Ahmose in the centre, flanked on either side by the cartouche and very full titulary of Ahmose Nofretary, thus showing her involvement. Her name also appears in the alabaster quarries at Bosra near Assiut. A royal stela found at Abydos is concerned with the cult of the mother of the king's mother and the mother of the king's father, Tetisheri. Although this lady was already buried at Thebes, the stela records Ahmose's decision to erect a cenotaph for her at Abydos, and how he sought the approval of Ahmose Nofretary for his plans. Possibly, she stood in the same relationship to Tetisheri as Ahmose, explaining her interest in the matter, but it may also reflect a more general concern with the religious building projects of the reign. Such a participation is not recorded for any other queen of the period, and could relate to her position as god's wife. (I use the term 'queen' to refer both to king's mothers and to king's principal wives, since these women used the same insignia and titles, and were shown in similar types of scene.)

In the reign of her son Amenhotpe I, Ahmose Nofretary contributed bricks to his mortuary temple at Thebes, showing that she was continuing her interest in cult buildings. Amenhotpe also built a mortuary temple in honour of his mother, to house her funerary cult. There is some evidence that most members of the royal family had a place for their cult in the mortuary temple of the king with whom they were most closely connected. This separate building for Ahmose Nofretary stresses her special position.

Ahmose Nofretary survived into the reign of Thutmose I, still highly honoured, although Thutmose was most likely not related to her (Fig. 5.1). She appears on a stela of that king dated to year 1 of his reign, and a statue of her was set up by him in the temple of Karnak. A private stela actually mentions her death 'when the god's wife Ahmose Nofretary justified with the great god, lord of the west, flew to heaven', but no date or king's name is given.

A number of ritual objects dedicated by Ahmose Nofretary have

been found in temples at Karnak north, Deir el-Bahri, Abydos and the temple of Hathor at Serabit el-Khadim in Sinai. Other queens and kings also dedicated such objects, but chronologically and numerically she heads the list and perhaps set the trend. Ahmose Nofretary's involvement in cult, both in the buildings to house it and in its performance through participation and dedication of objects used in it, comes across clearly, and one may guess that it was partly related to her office of god's wife.

In the scene where Ahmose Nofretary functions as god's wife, she has none of the titles of a queen, but in the majority of her titularies as queen, the title god's wife is included. A study of queens' usage of titles shows that when only one title is selected to appear before the name, it is an important one, most frequently king's wife, king's principal wife or king's mother. Ahmose Nofretary had the right to these three titles, but used them rarely as sole titles, preferring god's wife. No other queen, except Hatshepsut (below), used god's wife alone like this, and it is clear that Ahmose Nofretary regarded her position as god's wife as very important, perhaps equal to her position as queen. The large number of scarabs with the title presumably relate to the estate of the god's wife, suggesting that it had a sizeable administration, which probably meant considerable economic power, at least, for the woman who headed it.

The mantle of Ahmose Nofretary seems to have fallen, not on her daughter Meritamun, who is poorly attested, but on Hatshepsut, the daughter of Thutmose I. While Thutmose was clearly the chosen and legitimate successor of Amenhotpe I, it is unlikely that he was either his son or his brother, and it is probable that he was of totally non-royal origin, in which case, Hatshepsut was no blood relation of Ahmose Nofretary.

Little is known of Hatshepsut during the reigns of her father, Thutmose I, or her brother and husband, Thutmose II. An undated stela from the reign of the latter shows her with the titles king's principal wife and god's wife, but she seems to have had little prominence until the death of Thutmose II. The biography of an official of this time explicitly states that Thutmose II 'went up to heaven and was united with the gods. His son arose on his throne as king of the Two Lands and ruled on the seat of the one who begot him. His relative, the god's wife, Hatshepsut, controlled the affairs of the land.' (In our terms, Hatshepsut was the aunt and stepmother of Thutmose III. The Egyptian term used here, normally translated 'sister', means a female collateral.) Since Thutmose III had a long reign of nearly 54 years, it

may be deduced that he came to the throne as a boy, and that Hatshepsut was regent for him. It is now that she comes into prominence on our material. She was still shown on the monuments as a woman, wearing the insignia and using the titles of a king's principal wife, although, like Ahmose Nofretary, almost the only title used alone before her name was god's wife. In addition, however, she appeared in scenes drawn from the iconography of kings, and used titles modelled on those used by kings, which described her position as ruler. Officials used titles and phrases which would normally contain a title or phrase referring to the king, but now contained the title god's wife or lady of the Two Lands. This last title is the feminine counterpart of the king's title lord of the Two Lands, and is used in titularies by other 18th dynasty queens, but its use as a sole title seems to be another example of adoption of a kingly usage. While Hatshepsut was still regent, she had a pair of obelisks quarried and set up at Karnak, and by doing so, took over an act which was the prerogative of the king. She thus reinforced her position as *de facto* ruler of Egypt by drawing on kingly iconography, titlature and actions.

On a practical governmental level, we can image that she carefully chose the officials who were to serve her, and with whom she had to work. Some had previously held office under her husband or even her father, and some were new, but presumably they were all men who were congenial to her and whose fortunes were to some extent linked to hers, since at any change-over of rulers, officials always faced the possibility of being unacceptable to the new ruler. One wonders whether these officials were worried about what might happen to them when the young Thutmose III took control for himself.

At some point in Thutmose's reign, not later than year 7, Hatshepsut ceased to appear with the titles and insignia of a queen, and instead used the five-fold titulary of a king and, iconographically at least, appeared in the male costume of a king.

It was once supposed that Hatshepsut took the throne, because she regarded herself as the last representative of the pure royal line descended through the 'heiresses' from the beginning of the dynasty, while Thutmose II and III were only sons of so-called concubines. In addition, her claim to have been appointed king by her father was taken at face value. Now we know both that there was no line of 'heiress' queens, and that the account of Hatshepsut's coronation during her father's reign must be fictitious, since Thutmose I's successor was Thutmose II, and during his reign, Hatshepsut appeared only as his principal wife, being shown no differently from other queen consorts.

Her position changed only with the accession of Thutmose III.

Presumably Hatshepsut was meant to hand over control to the young king when he was considered old enough to rule for himself. But, like many regents, she probably found the prospect of giving up power unpleasant. Yet she could hardly prolong the regency indefinitely, nor would murdering her nephew help, since he was her means to power. There was, however, in ancient Egypt, a system whereby two kings might rule at the same time. Originally, it was instituted so that an ageing king might associate his heir with him on the throne, in order to accomplish a smooth transfer of power from one ruler to the next. Hatshepsut now made use of this system, and was crowned king with the full royal titulary, without having to oust Thutmose from the kingship. He remained king throughout her period of rule, and the regnal dates used during their joint reign are his. Although at this time he appeared less often on monuments than Hatshepsut, he was shown alongside her in temple scenes, even in her mortuary temple, and the names of the two kings were used together by a number of officials to head their own monuments. Hatshepsut, however, was clearly the dominant partner.

A careful examination of the monuments where Hatshepsut and her daughter Nefrure are named together shows that in most cases where Hatshepsut is god's wife, Nefrure is not, and that when Nefrure is god's wife, Hatshepsut is king. So it seems that Hatshepsut handed on the office of god's wife to her daughter, when she took the title of king.

Of all the king's daughters in the 18th dynasty, Nefrure stands out through her large number of attestations and occasional use of items of queenly insignia, and above all, by her almost consistent use of the uraeus, the royal cobra worn on the forehead, which at this time is attested on the contemporary monuments of no other princess.

Nefrure is not certainly mentioned in the reign of her father, Thutmose II, but she is in evidence by the time of her mother's regency. The majority of her attestations, however, date from the reign of her mother. At this time, Nefrure was shown in temple scenes following her mother who, as king, offered to a god. It is rare, but not unknown, for royal women other than queens to appear in this type of scene. In one such scene, Nefrure is called god's wife, and wears the short wig and fillet of this priestess (above). She also supplied bricks for her mother's valley temple at Thebes, which is reminiscent of Ahmose Nofretary's provision of bricks for her son's mortuary temple.

The large number of Nefrure's scarabs far exceeds those of other king's daughters and many queens. A few of the scarabs have only the

titles of king's daughter or king's daughter and king's sister, but the majority use the title god's wife, and must relate to this office and its estate.

The most extraordinary monument of Nefrure is a stela from Serabit el-Khadim at Sinai, now in the Cairo Museum, which shows Nefrure, followed by her steward Senenmut, offering to Hathor; the text below is almost totally illegible. Nefrure wears the double feathered crown on the vulture headdress which were the insignia of a queen. The stela is dated to year 11 under the person of the god's wife Nefrure. This date really belongs to the regnal years of Thutmose III, but even so, it is unknown elsewhere for either a queen or princess to have such a date attributed to her.

What should we make of this princess? Her appearance in offering scenes with her mother is not unknown for a king's daughter, but it is rare. I would suggest, however, that this function of Nefrure was vital to Hatshepsut. As a female king, Hatshepsut could not have a principal wife, but in certain rituals it was necessary for a king's mother or king's principal wife to be present, or, much less commonly, a king's daughter. Since Hatshepsut's mother was dead by this time, she needed her daughter Nefrure to fill this role. (This may explain why Nefrure never married her brother Thutmose III.) The interpretation of the Sinai stela with its queenly insignia and regnal year attributed to Nefrure is more difficult. The monument was probably set up on the orders of Senenmut, Nefrure's steward, who appears on it. The large number of his monuments which link him with the princess suggests that he attached great importance to his connection with her. Perhaps he was simply trying to enhance her prestige, and thereby his own. It is unlikely that the stela represented the official status of the princess, for it was set up outside Egypt, and there is no hint of a comparable position for the princess on monuments from within Egypt itself.

When Nefrure died is uncertain. A stela of Thutmose III dating to the beginning of his sole reign may originally have depicted the princess. The name has been changed to that of Sitioh, first principal wife of Thutmose III, but the sole title given is god's wife, Nefrure's most important title, but one which is never attested for Sitioh.

After Nefrure, the god's wife never achieved such prominence again in the 18th dynasty, and the title finally died out in the royal family. The office had clearly been developed into a position of religious and economic importance by Ahmose Nofretary. It is possible that while she had worked in consort with the king, her successor, Hatshepsut, may have used the office as a base from which to achieve her own

ambitions to the detriment of the king. In this case, we might speculate that with the disappearance of Hatshepsut and Nefrura, Thutmose III took steps to reduce the office to its cultic function and to make sure that it could not again serve as a rival power base to the king.

I would like to finish by looking briefly at the society which produced the institution of god's wife, and by considering a few points arising from what we have established about this office.

The institution of god's wife developed within a society where women were respected both socially and legally. There is no obvious segregation of women. Tomb scenes show men and women mixing together from the peasants working in the fields to the official classes at their feasts. For want of a better word, Egyptologists often speak of the king's harim, but there is no evidence for eunuchs and all that goes with them. Legally, women could own property, carry on business, conduct law suits and make a will in their own right. Despite Herodotus's statement that 'no woman holds priestly office', women had a definite part in ritual as sistrum players, chantresses and priestesses.

The road to official success and power lay, however, in knowing how to read and write, and becoming a scribe. It is doubtful whether education was generally available to women, and they had no place in the bureaucracy as a whole. There is no reason to believe one way or the other that an exception was made for royal women, though it is hard to accept that the women we have been discussing did not acquire the skills of reading and writing at some point in their careers, even if they were not taught as children.

Given the favourable position of women in ancient Egypt, socially, legally and ritually, if not politically, we need not be surprised to find an important religious office vested in a woman. But we must be clear that the generally high regard that women were held in was not due to surviving matriarchal tendencies. Egyptian tradition makes it plain that the ideal was to hand on office, including the kingship, from father to son, and there is no hint that women played any part in this.

If we deny that royal women and the god's wife in particular have a role in passing on the throne and legitimising the rule of the king, then we must ask how this was done. First, we must rid ourselves of the habit of making subjective judgements by using terms like 'usurper', 'illegitimate' or 'of non-royal blood', based on Western usage; we must start from scratch and work from the Egyptian evidence. A full answer is unlikely ever to be possible, as the Egyptians naturally took the system for granted, and never wrote it down.

However, it is only when we have removed this question of

legitimation of the succession from any enquiry into the roles of royal women and of the god's wife that we begin to get acceptable answers to our questions about their nature. We can then see that the office of god's wife, although vested in the women of the royal family, is a priestly office distinct from the role of the king's principal wife.

The institution of god's wife shows that through ritual roles women in ancient Egypt could obtain a certain amount of power. However, lack of education prevented their entry into the bureaucracy, while the ultimate office of king was barred to them by the official myth of kingship which did not allow for a woman to be king. Hatshepsut and a few other women in the course of Egyptian history managed to occupy this office, but only by adopting the masculine role of the king. Thus while the position of women in ancient Egyptian society was a favourable one, they could not achieve political equality with men.

Further Reading

Background to 18th dynasty

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