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Great Queen

LISA SABBAHY

The title *hemet nesw weret*, “king’s great wife,” or “king’s principal wife,” began to be used in ancient Egypt during the time of the very late Middle Kingdom, roughly around 1700 BCE, as an indication of rank within the king’s harem. The title first appears on scarabs with the queen’s name Ini, who may have been “king’s great wife” of Aya, the last king of the 13th Dynasty (Ryholt 1997: 38). Egyptian kings could have any number of wives, and this title indicated a rank above a queen who only held the basic title of *hemet nesw*, “king’s wife” (see QUEENS, PHARAONIC EGYPT).

Scholars used to think that the right to the throne of ancient Egypt passed through the royal female line. Every new king had to legitimize his right to rule by marrying back into the direct female line of the royal family. The principal queen with the *hemet nesw weret* title was thought to be this woman, and she then passed the kingship onto her eldest son (Redford 1967: 71–3). This so-called “heiress theory” has been disproved, as it became clear that kings did not always have a royal mother, and the woman who was their “king’s great wife” was not always royal (Robins 1983; 1993: 26–7). King Amenhotep III (1390–1352

BCE) states very clearly, in the commemorative scarabs announcing his marriage to the *hemet nesw weret* Queen TIY in his first year of rule, that her parents were not from the royal family.

The *hemet nesw weret* seems to have been the king’s first wife, and she retained her dominant position until her death. A good example of this is Queen NEFERTARI, “king’s great wife” of King Rameses II (1279–1213) who is prominently depicted alongside her husband throughout her lifetime. She appears with Rameses II in regnal Year 1, and is depicted on all his important monuments until Year 24 at Abu Simbel, when scholars think she must have died. It is only after her death that another queen, Istnofret, becomes important as “king’s great wife” (Kitchen 1982: 98–9).

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