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Queens, Pharaonic Egypt

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The word for queen in ancient Egypt was *hemet-nesw*, "wife of the king," making clear that the position and importance of this women was her physical relationship to the king. Her position was not equal or parallel to that of her husband, however. The ancient Egyptian king held an office that was divine; he was the incarnation of the god HORUS on earth, who inherited the throne from his father, OSIRIS (*see* KINGSHIP, PHARAONIC EGYPT). The queen, however, though she could consort with divinity, was not considered divine. Unlike the king, the ancient Egyptian queen had no mythological backing, nor a divine role to fill. This position changed somewhat in the New Kingdom, when the queen was more closely associated with the goddesses TEFNUT and HATHOR.

At the very beginning of the Pharaonic state, with the period now known as Dynasty 0 (3300–3100 BCE), the mythology and symbolism of kingship had already been set. The king was Horus, stated in the first name of his titulary, the Horus name. The king wore the crowns of Upper and Lower Egypt, donned the royal kilt with bull's tail, and held the white mace. On the other hand, evidence for the titles of the queen in the 1st Dynasty is still not completely clear (Sabbahy 1993), and symbols and accoutrements of the queen do not begin to be used until the Old Kingdom. Even then, the main royal female symbol, the vulture headdress, was just for the queen who was *mwt-nesw*, "King's Mother," a title from the reign of her son, not her husband. The importance of the *mwt-nesw* was that she was the medium by which royal power transferred from father to son. The *mwt-nesw* also always held the title "daughter of the god," referring to her father, the deceased king, indicating that she was passing divine birthright onto her son, thereby giving him a legitimate right to rule. The *mwt-nesw* was depicted wearing the vulture headdress, an attribute of goddesses in the Old Kingdom. The vulture headdress might also have been chosen because the ancient Egyptian word for both "mother" and "vulture" was *mwt* (Sabbahy 1998).

By the time of the Middle Kingdom, both the queen and the princess wear the *uraeus*, the rearing cobra that adorned and protected the forehead of the king. These Middle Kingdom royal women could also wear a *modius* with double plume. In the reign of Amenemhat III (1831–1786), his daughter, princess Neferu-ptah, put her name in a cartouche, and from the early New Kingdom, the cartouche was regularly used by queens. At the beginning of the New Kingdom, the queen also held a flywhisk that resembles both the king's flail and the hieroglyphic sign *mes*, which means "to give birth." By the reign of Amenhotep III (1390–1352), in the later 18th Dynasty, the ancient Egyptian queen wore the sun disk, double plume, cow's horns, and single or double *uraeus*. This headgear became standard for queens, and goddesses in general, from then on.

The sun disk and horns were symbols of the goddess Hathor, as were the two feathers, which Hathor could wear when she appeared in her form as a cow (Robins 1993: 54). As daughter of Re, Hathor could be depicted as the wife of Horus. In the later 18th Dynasty, Queen TIY, wife of Amenhotep III, was deified as Hathor in a temple her husband built at Sedeinga in Upper Nubia. Queen NEFERTARI, wife of Rameses II (1279–1213) of the 19th Dynasty, is also deified as Hathor in the small temple at ABU SIMBEL.

The son of Amenhotep III, Amenhotep IV (1352–1336), elevated the cult of the Aten, the physical disk of the sun, preeminent over all the deities in Egypt (*see* ATEN/ATON). Amenhotep IV, in the role of son and prophet of the disk, became Shu, first-born son of the sun god, while his queen, NEFERTITI, became Tefnut, Shu's twin sister and wife (Troy 2003: 101). It is perhaps because of this mythological position that Nefertiti became so important.

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Figure 1 Nefertari playing senet. Detail of a wall painting from the Tomb of Queen Nefertari, Valley of the Queens. Thebes, Egypt. © The Bridgeman Art Library.

She appears in scenes traditionally reserved for the king and also wears her own version of the Blue Crown, the king's war helmet. Amenhotep IV built at least four sun temples at KARNAK, dedicated to the worship of the Aten, before regnal year 5, when he changed his name to Akhenaten and moved to his city at Tell el-Amarna (*see* AKHENATEN (AMENHOTEP IV); AMARNA). In one of these temples, known as the Hwt Benben, dedicated to the sun's sacred stone, Nefertiti is the one depicted in the offering scenes to the Aten, not the king.

By the end of the Old Kingdom, the king had a set fivefold titulary. The titulary of the queen was never as standardized or as constant; only the very basic title of *hemet-nesw*, which first appears in the 2nd Dynasty, did not vary. In each of the Old, Middle, and New Kingdoms, the queen had a different main title and different subsidiary titles accompanying *hemet-nesw*. In the Old Kingdom, the titles "the One who sees Horus and Seth, great of affection, great of praise" were the three most common titles, along with *hemet-nesw* and *sat-nesw*, "king's daughter." In the 4th Dynasty of the Old Kingdom, queens also held titles of priestess, either priestess of the goddess Hathor, or priestess of different divine aspects of the king, although these titles were not used after that.

By the time of the Middle Kingdom, there were two simple and basic patterns to the queen's titulary: "hereditary noblewoman and king's wife," and "king's wife and She who is joined to the White Crown." Subsidiary titles of a more political nature appeared in the

Middle Kingdom as well, such as "mistress of women" and "mistress of the Two Lands." At the very end of the Middle Kingdom, the title *hemet-nesw weret*, "King's Great Wife" (*see* GREAT QUEEN) appeared, establishing a clear ranking system within the harem of the king.

By the New Kingdom, the most common three titles were *hemet-nesw weret* ("King's Great Wife"), *hemet-nesw* ("King's Wife"), and *mwt-nesw* ("King's Mother"), but, along with variations on these, there were many others describing the queen, such as "sweet of love," " possessor of charm," and "the one who fills the palace with the scent of her fragrance" (Robins 2003: 203–8). A New Kingdom queen could also be "God's wife of Amun," a title first held by AHMOSE NEFERTIRY at the beginning of the 18th Dynasty, and then passed on to HATSHEPSUT. This office not only entitled the queen to a place in the cult rituals for the god Amun of Karnak temple, but extensive land and income to support her position (*see* GOD'S WIFE OF AMUN).

A king in ancient Egypt could marry any number of queens. In earlier Pharaonic times, these women were from outside the royal family, but by the beginning of the Middle Kingdom, kings were also marrying women who were their half-sister or sister. In fact, it can be shown for the 12th Dynasty of the Middle Kingdom that if a royal princess did not marry her brother, she did not marry. Consanguineous marriages continue on into the New Kingdom. This practice undoubtedly began with Amenemhat I (1985–1956 BCE), the first king of the 12th Dynasty, because he was a usurper and very concerned about his family's hold on the throne. Such marriages also reflected the marriage pattern of ancient Egyptian gods and goddesses. In the Heliopolitan theology, which explains the creation myth of the sun-god Re, Re produced the first male and female, brother and sister pair, Shu and Tefnut. They produced the next pair, GEB and NUT, who then produced Osiris and Isis (*see* ISIS, PHARAONIC EGYPT), the parents of Horus. Not only was Horus offspring of a brother–sister marriage, but the pattern was set for the king, as a god, to marry his sister. A now discredited theory, the so-called "heiress theory," assumed that every new king had to legitimize his right to rule by marrying back into the direct female line of the royal family, and that this was the explanation for consanguineous marriages (*see* GREAT QUEEN).

At certain times in ancient Egyptian history a queen did rule the country. The queen who was *mwt-nesw*, "King's Mother," could act as regent for her son, if he became king while still too young to rule on his own. There seems to be evidence for this situation as early as in the 1st Dynasty (Troy 2003: 94–5; *see* MERNEITH), and there is clear evidence later. For example, the mother of king Pepi II (2278–2184 BCE) of the 6th Dynasty, ruled for him when he took the throne at the age of six. There were also times when a queen took over as king when there was no male left in the family line. This is well documented at the very end of the 12th Dynasty, when Sobeknefru, who seems to have been daughter of Amenemhat III and possibly wife of her brother, Amenemhat IV, reigned as king for slightly more than three years. She refers to herself as the "female Horus," and as "daughter of Re," but also sometimes as "Son of Re" (Callender 1998: 232). On a statue of Sobekneferu in the Louvre, she is shown wearing the *nemes* head cloth of the king over her hair, and the king's kilt over her dress, clearly making the statement that she is both female and king (Bryan 1996: 30, fig. 7).

Queen Hatshepsut, in the 18th Dynasty of the New Kingdom, started as regent for her stepson-nephew Thutmose III (1479–1425), and then went on to be co-regent and rule equally with him as king (*see* CO-REGENCY (EGYPT)). Hatshepsut was the daughter of King Thutmose I, and wife of her half-brother Thutmose II, who died as a young man. He left behind a son, Thutmose III, from a secondary wife. Hatshepsut served as regent for Thutmose III for at least two years, and probably as long as seven. The high official Ineni made the situation clear when he stated in his tomb biography that the king's son "stood in his place as king of the Two Lands having assumed rulership upon the

throne of the one who begat him," while the king's sister and god's wife Hatshepsut "was conducting the affairs of the country, the Two Lands being in her care"(Dorman 2006: 41).

When Hatshepsut took a throne name and proclaimed herself king as co-regent with Thutmose III, she was depicted for state purposes as male, with male physique and clothing. The king was Horus, son of Osiris, and so, for the purposes of being king, Hatshepsut became male. There is some evidence that at the beginning of her kingship she was depicted with a mixture of the attributes of king and queen, just like Sobekneferu (Dorman 2006: 49–53). It was clear, of course, that she was actually a woman, and this caused confusion in the pronouns used to refer to her. In a rock inscription describing Hatshepsut on a military campaign in NUBIA, her official stated:" I followed the good god, King of Upper and Lower Egypt, may she live! I saw when he overthrew the Nubian bowmen" (Redford 1967: 57). Their co-regency lasted twenty-two years, until Hatshepsut's death, and then Thutmose III went on to rule another thirty-two years on his own.

The last queen of Pharaonic Egypt to take the throne as king was the King's Great Wife TAUSRET, wife of king Sety II (1200–1194) at the end of the 19th Dynasty. First Tausret served as regent to her husband's son, SIPTAH, for six years until his death, and then ruled by herself for possibly another two years. Her reign is not well documented, and the king who succeeded her usurped the tomb that she began in the VALLEY OF THE KINGS.

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