

Dr. Yasmin El Shazly

I'm very pleased to have with me today Dr. Mariam Ayad and Dr. Jacquelyn Williamson who will be talking to us about female Pharaohs in ancient Egypt. Dr. Mariam Ayad is an associate professor of Egyptology at the American University in Cairo. In 2020 to 2021, she was a visiting Associate Professor of Women's Studies and Near Eastern religions and a research associate of the Women's Studies in religion program at Harvard Divinity School. Ayad studied Egyptology at AUC, the University of Toronto, and Brown University and was a tenured Associate Professor of art history and Egyptology at the University of Memphis before returning to Egypt in 2011. She is the author of *God's wife, God's servant: the gods wife of Amun (c. 740-525 BC)*, and the editor of three volumes on Coptic culture.

Dr. Jacquelyn Williamson is Associate Professor of Ancient Art and Archaeology at George Mason University. She has held several significant research positions, including at the Smithsonian and Harvard University. She is a senior member of the Tell el-Amarna expedition. She identified the sun Temple of Nefertiti, which is the subject of her first book. Her ongoing work focuses on Nefertiti as well as gender and power hierarchies. Thank you so much for being here today. I'm very excited about this podcast.

Dr. Jacquelyn Williamson

Thank you so much for having us here.

Dr. Mariam Ayad

It's a pleasure to join today.

El Shazly

My first question is for both of you: the fact that females could rule in ancient Egypt, and that there were female Pharaohs like Neferusobek, Hatshepsut, and Cleopatra has given the women of ancient Egypt a

reputation that they were ahead of their time in terms of status. How accurate is this perception? Dr. Ayad.

Ayad

I think it's very accurate, especially considering how women were socialized and other ancient cultures, whether you look at Achaemenid Persia or even later in Athens, in the classical world, and even the Roman Period. So, I think Egyptian women generally, not just at that level of the ruling class, had it much better than their counterparts in many of the ancient societies and even some contemporary societies today.

El Shazly

Dr. Williamson?

Williamson

Yeah, I completely agree. And I think one of the interesting things that we sort of think today is that the women's rights are sort of going from an awkward and irrelevant past to a more progressive and powerful present. And so therefore, women who hold positions of power in the past, we hold up as women worthies as people who are significant and all of this, but in reality, is as Mariam pointed out, the opposite is true that we're not going on this simple progression. History is not so simplistic, and it's not on an irrevocable march towards anything. And so, we actually see is, especially in antiquity, that women were accorded positions of authority and power in a way that we today would find surprising, because we're so biased about the quote, unquote, primitiveness of the past. And of course, the idea of primitiveness of the past is based on the idea that anybody but us must, therefore be primitive. And so that's obviously a problem.

El Shazly

That is a problem.

Ayad

And just interject here for a minute. To tag on to what Jackie just said, I think it's, in this apprehension and misrepresentation of history to think of it as a linear narrative. Because it never is, it's often much more complicated even when we're dealing with a culture as long surviving as ancient Egypt, right. So, we try to think of it as linear as progressive also from old to new. And, and this is just a construct for Ancient Egypt and also in relation to what Jackie was just speaking about ancient Egypt versus today, nonlinear and it's not so neat and tidy.

Williamson

I absolutely agree. 100%.

El Shazly

Okay, so let me ask Jackie, a few questions. Egyptologists refer to Egyptian female rulers as kings. Why is that? Why do you think that is?

Williamson

That's a great, well, one of the main reasons that we refer to them as kings is because that's how they self-identify. So, we're kind of just working with how they call themselves. So, in order to be a ruling individual in Egypt in order to be able to have power to be recognized as being legitimate, you have to be the man of the living manifestation of the God Horus, the son of Osiris, and therefore the proper, eternal, maat king of Egypt, or ruler of Egypt. And so therefore any ruler of Egypt must embody these male concepts that is inherent to Horus. And so, a ruler must therefore, if a prop, if a ruler is proper, they are therefore Horus. If they are Horus, then therefore they must be male. And so, when individuals adopt this identity, they become identified as forests and forest as inherently that the Office of kingship

itself is inherently male. So, but again, it's one of the things I think, Mariam and I both have talked about, as far as I can hear, as well that the Office of kingship is not so binary, you know, we today have this tendency to always talk about power in Egypt as embodied by kings, king this, and king that. But that's also a modern bias, the Egypt I don't think the Egyptians would have seen it that way. The Queen was a goddess in the same way that the king was a god. And without her, he lost a lot of his legitimacy in the same way that he was the embodiment of the son of Re, and Horus, and all these other gods, he was the embodiment of Isis and Hathor and all these other deities as well. And without that sort of matching binary, we don't have a legitimate ruling family at all. And so, you know, you never find a king who's a bachelor. You know, so yeah, and even when we do have queens who have who accede to the throne, and or individuals who exceeded the throne, who are female who become king, they then figure out a way to deal with the lack of that feminine, I shouldn't say feminine, female aspect, right? So, Hatshepsut turned to Neferure and things like this, right. So, you know, we must have the male and female components of rulership, in order to properly have King. And kings themselves were actually not universally seen as only male, either. A lot of their titles incorporate female elements. And so, it's clear that kings are not as simplistic. Only males sort of identity, they're also sort of, I don't know, amorphous creature than that they are indeed divine and the divine in ancient Egypt is an amorphous creature. It doesn't. It's not a simplistic binary, black and white. So that was probably way too long an answer that you wanted?

El Shazly

No, no, it's a good answer. It's a very good answer. But I have a question. But you know, it is the concept of kingship is much more complex than we would think. But it's still a male occupation. So how did female rulers legitimize their rule? They have to compensate somehow for the fact that they were not male.

Williamson

Yeah, yeah. And that was something we just sort of talked about as well. Right. So, the idea was, of course, that you know, once you acceded to power as female and you wanted to wield power in that, you know, Royal, you know, sort of identities or a sense that then you did have to figure out a way to, you know, be part of Egyptian tradition, and it's something that we see Hatshepsut doing and the other female rulers, female kings, is again adopting this Horus identity as a means to identify themselves as the proper, legitimate King. One of the things too, that I think that I find sort of intriguing is this idea of legitimation itself, this is something I've been kind of scratching my head about. Because to us today, legitimation suggests a degree of almost subterfuge, right? That you're kind of trying to convince someone that you're telling them the truth, right, you know, that like, you know, of course, we today don't really trust our politicians and so perhaps, you know, that's the origin of us kind of, Oh, you know, legitimation that can be a bad thing. Um, but it, I don't know that the ancient world would have seen it that way. When we say things like propaganda and legitimation, they carry with it is sort of over to these modern overtones of attempting to persuade someone to have an opinion they perhaps don't already have. It may not have been the case that the Egyptians were so up in arms about the idea of a person who is not, you know, physically embodied in a male body, having power that may not have been as much of a problem to them, as we as moderns who again, are steeped in this sort of modern understanding of women might have assumed so it's an interesting, you know, it's an interesting question, you know. Like, I don't know that they necessarily had to work to legitimate themselves, if you know what I mean, like, in the way that we think of, you know as in working against a negative assumption that they need to get off the stage. You know what I mean?

Ayad

You know, I like what Jackie just said a lot about how legitimation is a modern concept tied very closely to propaganda, and how these may have negative connotations. So, I think when we're talking about Egyptian kingship, or maybe a different word to use with the investiture.

Williamson

Well, I like that word.

Ayad

When the person becomes a ruler, when they ascend to the throne, they are invested with certain attributes that are conferred upon them by the gods, and that investiture is what makes that person a king. So, investiture is about an office. It's about becoming equipped to hold that office and I think it may more accurately describe all the different rituals involved in the coronation process. And later on, in the celebration of the set festival. That's just an idea.

EI Shazly

Interesting. Okay, let's move to Hatshepsut since you brought her up, Jackie. So, Mariam, of course, Hatshepsut is one of the best known Egyptian female rulers, how did she ascend the throne?

Ayad

Well see, that's a big mystery, right? Because if you read the history books that are attempting to present the linear narrative, they would use a lot of these terms that Jackie just pointed to legitimization and propaganda. And they would use these terms and in very derogatory ways, or very biased ways. And the idea is for her to sell to her people, her idea of being king, there's also an assumption that she usurped power. So even sometimes that's stated outright in the history books that unfortunately, our students read, because they there are no alternatives yet.

EI Shazly

Or you're going to write the alternative. Both of you.

Ayad

At least we're trying to push back. But it's, I think that she came in at a moment of history where there was a power vacuum and she had to step up to fulfill the role of a king not to subvert the sort of male dominance at the time, if you want to use a very modern term, often misused. But rather to carry on with the legitimacy of the ruling family because she was a full-blooded foreign person. On both sides, the parents will end the maternal, right. And it went back two generations all the way to the founder, the 18th dynasty to his ancestors to expel the Hyksos. So, she had the bloodline. And in that sense, you know, she's finding herself, the country finding itself really with no mature legitimate King. Her husband, Thutmose, having just died, her stepson the future Thutmose III being just a child. So, she had to step in, into that power vacuum. And she did that gradually. So, we see are sometimes wearing still feminine garb. But with Nemes headdress, like in the statue, and the Metropolitan Museum, and she her body is feminine, with breasts rounded breasts and narrow waist, and then there is a gradual progression in her iconography. And what I still have not seen is an attempt to not just chronologically study her statuary and the change in iconography, but also to look at the placement of these statues and the public view of them, and how these statues may have actually been placed in different places, depending on viewership. So, when I've seen the statues studied, and someone I think, wanted to use a very modern term about Hatshepsut going under the knife to do a gender transformation, on her statuary, but a nonlinear approach to her iconography, that is more spatial, would probably yield more accurate results and more informative.

El Shazly

But I have a question, because you said that she stepped, she stepped in to fill the power vacuum, which happens all the time in Egyptian history. You have women ruling on behalf of their sons who are too young to rule on their own. And that happens several times in Egyptian history. What was different about Hatshepsut? Why did she end up being Pharaoh, rather than regent on behalf of a younger heir?

Ayad

I think it's the duration of the time but also trying to think of other times when we know for sure that females became regent.

Williamson

I guess we could look at Pepi. Right. And his mother. At the same time, we also see that she, Pepi's mother, also really heavily manipulated a lot of her iconography turning her, you know, that the creating the first example of the vulture crown, you know, all of this associating her not only with Mut, but also Isis and etc.

Ayad

ISIS and her son, Horus sitting on her lap, her lap being the throne.

Williamson

So, you know, so we definitely have, you know, that that sort of thing. I mean, you know, so we do definitely have examples of women, you know, stepping into positions of Regency, but I don't know that in many of those instances, we don't also see the same kind of political situation that Hatshepsut found herself in, you know, like, she's the, I mean, relatively recently, for about 100 years before her, they had just come out of the Intermediate Period. And for the Egyptian perspective, that's, you know, pretty a brief amount of time, and they were terrified of the idea of losing that stability that they had finally regained. And, you know, again, that, and also, the memory of the first Intermediate Period was vivid and quite frightening for them, right, we see that in their histories and, and how they talk about intermediate periods, they're aware of them, freak them out. And so, you know, it's a question whether or not did Hatshepsut, then look at that history and look at her current situation and go, I've got a two-year-old, you know, who, you know, and not only that, but you know, that it doesn't seem like she had any other sort of scaffolding of royal power around her. And so did she then say, you know, what, we need somebody who is an inside power player, and she was, as Mariam said, she said, She's the

inside power player par excellence. You know, she was born into royal power. She was a Queen herself. She knew everyone, obviously, you know, she was obviously very well connected, not only to the priesthood, but everybody else. So, you know, it's an interest it's, so it seems to anyway, it seems to me that I think Mariam is 100% right. I think that she found herself in a very unique political situation where she needed to take power in a very immediate and active way.

Ayad

And there are two things to underscore what Jackie just said in the Hatshepsut inscription in, in the Speos Artemeos, she claims that she actually expelled the Hyksos, so the memory of that our dominating Egypt was still very much alive. Now, a lot of our former professors and more senior colleagues would look at that inscription say that it's a piece of propaganda that she's trying to make herself. But I think, Jackie's view of that, of that as being pragmatic, and her being able to fulfill that role in a way to make sure that that does not happen. Again, she does mention specifically, you know, going to specific areas in the Delta in that inscription. And the other thing is do people often forget that the late 17th dynasty, which is part of the family of the 18th dynasty, and the early 18th dynasty had some very powerful females involved in the expansion of the Hyksos in leading the army that eventually led to their expulsion when their sons were very young, you had an ancestor of a Hatshepsut, who has done exactly the same, one son is too young, another has just been killed. So, her husband just died in battle. So, she charges on, and then when the children are old enough, they take over the leadership of the army, and what we know of the early 18th dynasty that they are very much aware of their past; their family histories as well as the general past of the country.

Williamson

Absolutely, no, it's such a great point. I mean, you know, pivoting off of that, right, we also found that the golden flies with Ahhotep. And so, this is a clear indication that she is being in some way actively associated with war and aggression and being recognized as being part of that, you know, sort of effort,

you know, this this war effort, you know, that she's kind of recognition. You know, and I know that there's been this tendency, I think, in some scholars to look at them as like, oh, her, her son must have given them to her, you know, like, it's like, I mean, again, this is an example of us projecting our sort of societal structure onto them. This is not a little boy going, look, Mommy, I got a golden fly, like, that's not what's going on here, you know, like, it's just, you know, we have no examples of that kind of gift giving happening within the funerary environment, you know, like this is the only thing that you take with me with you into that environment is something that you yourself, that it's that is associated with you, yourself and your identity and who you continue for eternity. So, you know, those golden flies are likely an indication of her role for significance or how, you know, when all of this which of course, associates her directly with war. You know, so, you know, she wasn't sitting at home knitting sweaters, you know, she, she was actually ruling the country. So, you know, it's this is, you know, and she said, Mariam is exactly right, that, like, what so what we're seeing here are women, Hatshepsut is from a line of women who have stepped up and stepped into power. That's normative, you know, that's fine for the you know, in that so again, her political situation is unique, you know, to you know, and I don't I don't know that her people would have had the banana about it that we think they would have had, you know, like, I just, I don't know, you know, like we don't we don't get any specific like, so you know, of course, I'm an expert in Akhenaten. And so, Akhenaten himself says on the boundary stela that there's a lot of the people are talking bad things about him from like year 1 up until, you know, he moves to Amarna. And so, we have this clear indication of murmurs of discontent, you know, and we get no such evidence from Hatshepsut.

Ayad

Not only do you not get any such evidence, but also, there is such a strong modern bias against and against women in ancient Egypt in general, I'll just pivot and plug in my recent work on gender bias. So, Hatshepsut is often labeled as a usurper as using these false claims, false claims, right?

Williamson

How dare she!

Ayad

To Jackie's point none of her contemporaries seem to denigrate her, it's the modern scholars looking at ancient graffiti that..

El Shazly

It's the ancient graffiti...

Ayad

The woman in that particular graffito does not wear the crown. It's the tripartite regular headdress of any 18th dynasty elite woman. The modern assumption by our esteemed colleagues is that it must be Hatshepsut being taken from behind, whatever... But that's, that's our modern projection into how can we denigrate this woman.

Williamson

Absolutely. And also, too, I mean, and that's such a clever point, because, you know, it's our modern... Now, this might be an inappropriate thing, perhaps, to potentially discuss. But um, you know, the ancient Egyptians were not shy about sex and sexuality. And in many ways, they celebrated it. It's our modern question of the idea of sex being in some way, dirty or bad. That leads us to look at that graffito as an indication of her being insulted.

Ayad

Or the assumption that it's her.

Williamson

Exactly.

Ayad

The name is not there, the crown is not worn by the female figure

Williamson

Right, you know, and so it's not it's, it's so many different layers. It's like, not only do we assume that it must be her, we're also then assuming that this gesture must be a gesture of insult. Oh, so it's, it's all of these layers of modern assumptions that we're placing on that thing that again, says far more about ourselves, and our own issues than it does about Egypt. And in fact, that's actually I think, as Mariam's work has been brilliantly demonstrating, so much of our understanding of women in the past is actually more of a reflection about us and our concepts and wrestling through our identities, and it does not have anything to do with them.

El Shazly

Very, very true.

Ayad

And they see that as fact in history books. And, the myth is perpetuated because if you're a young freshman reading, you know, a standard history book on Ancient Egypt, for the first time you read that take it as fact. And then that affects how you later interpret evidence when you yourself are becoming a professional Egyptologist. So, it's not just bias in the field in general, but bias inherently in ourselves inherent bias. How can we break away from the mindset that says let's understand these ancient people according to our own norms, and let's start to understand them on their own terms.

El Shazly

Exactly. Okay. So, I have another question. What was Hatshepsut's relationship with Thutmose III? And why did he try to eradicate her memory? Mariam?

Ayad

I think we should both answer the question.

El Shazly

Okay. Sure.

Ayad

But I think it didn't happen immediately after his ascension to the throne, it took about 20 years for the effort to start to erase her name and her iconography. And then when the erasure happened, it wasn't just a matter of replacing his name, and putting it where hers was. But it was a very complicated process where occasionally the name of his father Thutmose II was placed on other occasions where the name of the of her grandfather, his grandfather Thutmose I was placed. So, for the longest time, this whole idea of which Thutmose came first was a big problem in Egyptology, that Thutmose succession because of that whole effort. It's not quite clear why he would do that. People have speculated that she acted against Maat being a woman herself, that it was a restoration of some cosmic order. It could be that and it could be something very mundane happening in the palace. We don't know about the other powerful women at the time. We don't know what happened to her daughter, Neferure, and the kind of power she may have held as God's wife, Hatshepsut herself was. And what we do know is that, starting with the reign of Thutmose III, the office of God's Wife, which had been held by all the illustrious women of the early 18th dynasty and Hatshepsut often use it as their own favorite title, often using it alone, even after becoming King. That title, starting with the reign of Thutmose III becomes very obscure. And so, I think there is a correlation here that it is possible that some other woman was accumulating a lot of power, we don't know, because it's, it didn't actually

materialize, if that was the case, but I think there are very many gaps in our knowledge. And I think an earlier generation of Egyptologists was so desperate to try and present a linear story that they filled in the gaps. We have someone like Helck, a German Egyptologist who would actually fill in the lacuna of the text in an attempt to prove that the Hyksos were Aryan, right. So, this idea of filling in the gaps, sometimes just taken to great lengths with greater repercussions. Helck was called out on it because it was very blatant. And because they were defeated, ultimately. But there are other attempts to fill in the gaps in the interpretation of the evidence. So, no one is as blatant as Helck now by trying to insert hieroglyphs, for people insert their own ideas, and they do not often, oftentimes, they do not couch their ideas as being speculative, speculative, or as being wrong. And instead of presented as, and I think that's where the danger is. So, the short answer is, I really don't know why he would erase her name 20 years in. But we can speculate as long as we label our speculation as speculation.

Williamson

I agree, I think one of the things that's very significant here, as Mariam pointed out, is the idea of this huge gap of time. So, if you're looking to immediately punish a predecessor, like, if you're furious with that predecessor, and you want to immediately destroy them, we see examples of Pharaohs going about that, absolutely immediately. So you know, and again, using Akhenaten as an example, as soon as he kind of gets his power base together, he starts attacking the names of traditional gods and even representations of his own father and all this. And then conversely, when he dies, his images and etc, are attacked immediately, right. It's not, it's not like, everyone waited for a while, you know, like so, um, this gap between Hatshepsut's death and the destruction of monuments indicates that there must be something else political going on. Yeah, there's a political trigger. Exactly. You know, and so what might that be? And I think it's I think Dimitri Laboury might have suggested that I think this is true, I could be getting it wrong, but I think he proposed the idea that Thutmose III is concerned for the legitimation and succession of his own son. You know, that of course, if Neferure was still alive, Neferure is technically more legitimate and in more direct line to the throne than Thutmose III's kid.

Because Neferure is technically a child of two kings. And she also was raised up to an incredibly high rank by Hatshepsut because she used Neferure to sort of stand in as almost a female component for male kingship. And so was Neferure a threat to Thutmose III's own child? It's entirely possible. And of course, you know, we have multiple examples throughout all of history all over the world of parents doing some rather remarkable things to make sure that their children come to the throne after them. So, you know, this may be a gesture of an attempt to legitimate his own son or to hold on to power or something else. But again, like the idea that this must be an immediate punishment for her holding power, as a woman, we would have seen that backlash immediately, not 20 years later, he wouldn't have sat on that for two decades, you know, this would have been an immediate thing, especially if the entire cause again, that also implies that the whole society wants to, quote unquote, punish her. And so, if an entire society wants to punish an individual, they do so collectively, immediately, not 20 years later, when the memory then becomes neutral, you know. And so, you know, it's an interesting question.

Ayad

You know, an example of the immediate backlash that Jackie's just referred to is the post Amarna restoration, because they didn't wait...was personal and the restoration of the traditional religion was, was promptly implemented. So, when they wanted something done quickly, they could do it, they could achieve it.

Williamson

Absolutely, absolutely. I mean, Tutankhamun was born Tutankhaten and changed his name, as you know, as soon as, I mean, immediate, almost immediately. So, you know, it's yeah, it's an interesting, Hatshepsut is fascinating, you know, it's one of those things, it's like we, you know, but we have these tantalizing gaps in our evidence. And so, as Mariam said, I think that one of the most important things that we need to do as scholars is to always label our speculation as speculation, you know. There's a

lot of stuff that we just don't know. And we also...one of the problems is as human beings we don't like that we don't like not knowing and so we kind of want to make up a story to fill in that gap. But that also ends up as Mariam was also saying is that prevents it, that that creates a barrier then to further to actual learning. Because if you if you've created a story that you want to be true, then you'll look to legitimate your own story, you know, using the pregnant word legitimation rather than you know, than genuinely having a kind of open mind towards the data.