



# ESSEX EGYPTOLOGY GROUP - REVIEW

## May 2021 Meeting

by Margaret Patterson

### **“The God’s Wife of Amun (Dynasty 23-26): Rise to Power & Assumption of the Priesthood.”**

**Dr Mariam Ayad**

For the May 2021 meeting of the Essex Egyptology Group Dr Mariam Ayad (<https://hds.harvard.edu/people/mariam-ayad>) talked to us on Zoom about the God’s Wives of Amun, which she has published a book on: God’s Wife, God’s Servant (<https://smile.amazon.co.uk/Gods-Wife-Servant-Mariam-Ayad/dp/0415819504/>). The focus of her talk was to be the God’s Wives who held the office during the Third Intermediate Period and into the Late Period, but she began by tracing the history of the title before that. The earliest evidence for the titles is in connection with Ahmose-Nefertari at the very beginning of the 18th Dynasty, on a donation stela at Karnak. She’s shown wearing the crown which is later associated with the God’s Wife of Amun and the text gives her a series of titles including that of God’s Wife of Amun, alongside Chief Royal Wife. The text discusses her husband Ahmose purchasing the title of Second Priest of Amun for her, and she is given that title simultaneously with her acquisition of the title of God’s Wife of Amun. The estate that he gives her as her endowment for these titles is to stay associated with her and the title and be passed on to her successors.

This is the earliest occurrence of the title, and it doesn’t happen in a vacuum. The political situation of the time is that Ahmose (who is the first king of the 18th Dynasty, and thus of the New Kingdom) has just succeeded in expelling the Hyksos after a protracted war which had been going on during the reigns of both his predecessors on the throne. Now that he has reunified the country under his control he’s embarking on a series of reforms, of which his sister-wife becoming the God’s Wife of Amun is just one. He also instigates the title of King’s Son of Kush, which we also sometimes translate as Viceroy of Kush. There is no word in Ancient Egyptian that directly means Prince, so here “King’s Son” is intended in that less literal sense – this is the Prince of Kush, the ruler of Kush subordinate to the King of Egypt. During this period of Egyptian history Kush is becoming an integral part Egypt, and so this new title is part of recognising the importance of the region whilst keeping it firmly under Egyptian control. So the use of the new title of God’s Wife of Amun isn’t just the king bestowing a title (and associated estate) on his wife, it’s part of a wider administrative reform.

Ayad told us that she thinks the title may also have something to do with the new narrative of the divine origin of the king which is seen in the 18th Dynasty. She showed us the scenes from Luxor Temple where Amenhotep III’s conception is depicted – in these scenes the King’s Mother is shown being impregnated by Amun. This conception sequence was not unique to Amenhotep III, the earliest known version of this sequence was used by Hatshepsut in her temple at Deir el Bahri, and Amenhotep III’s version appears to be a copy of this. In both versions the queen is not fooled: the god Amun may have taken on the form of her husband, but she

knows it's not her husband because he smells different – he smells like a god. Ayad stressed that in these sequences the queen is never identified as the God's Wife of Amun, she's in the scenes as the earthly wife of the king being impregnated by the god – this seems like a related idea but there isn't a direct link between the title and the divine origin of the king.

Hatshepsut herself uses the title of God's Wife of Amun, and continues to use it even after she becomes king. Ayad showed us an inscription on a kohl jar where the name of Hatshepsut is written in a form she only uses once she becomes king, and it also gives her the title of God's Wife of Amun. So even when she is king she is also still representing herself as a woman and as the God's Wife of Amun. One idea is that this title and position of power may have been the power base from which she gained support in order to take the throne for herself (rather than as regent for her step-son/nephew Thutmose III). However Ayad then mentioned that in an upcoming book on Egyptian women that she's editing there is a paper that she thinks convincingly argues that Hatshepsut didn't seize power against the wishes of the Egyptian establishment, instead she filled a power gap that existed in order to support the establishment. In that case she wouldn't need a power base (whether based on her God's Wife of Amun role or not) in order to “seize” power!

Ayad next talked us through some scenes on the Red Chapel at Karnak, dating to the time of Hatshepsut. In these scenes there is a God's Wife of Amun present, but she is not named – the idea is that this depicts not an individual doing these rites, but instead the office itself doing them in perpetuity. The God's Wife of Amun is shown making herself pure in order to enter the temple, and then performing rituals within the temple. She's part of a groups of priests (including one given the title God's Father), and she takes precedence over these men. One of the rituals she's shown taking part in is a symbolic burning of the enemies of Egypt – this is a unique scene not attested elsewhere for any other type of priest whether male or female. It's a ritual intended to maintain Egyptian domination over all other lands, and the God's Wife of Amun is first shown lighting a brazier then using the fire to burn a fan which has on it images of the enemies of Egypt.

The title falls into oblivion following Hatshepsut, in the sole reign of her successor (and co-regent) Thutmose III. It is held by two early queens of the 19th Dynasty – a wife of Ramesses I and a wife of Seti I – but other than that it isn't used again until the reign of Ramesses VI in the 20th Dynasty when it's given to a daughter of his called Isis. Ayad pointed out that it is sometimes conflated with other high ranking female titles to do with Amun, which can lead to confusion. She said that there are three separate titles: God's Wife of Amun, God's Hand, and Divine Adorer. The title of Divine Adorer in particular is conflated with God's Wife of Amun by many historians. During this period this title is often given to the wives of the High Priests of Amun (rather than women of the royal family), but this is not the same as the God's Wife of Amun title.

As the country becomes fragmented after the end of the New Kingdom it gets very messy politically. In the 22nd Dynasty there are many kings who claim in their titles to be King of Upper and Lower Egypt, as is traditional, but in practice their power only really extends a little way out from the city that is their power base. By the time the 25th Dynasty (from Kush) conquers Egypt the country is split into 5 or 6 separate entities rather than being a cohesive whole. The period is sometimes talked about as if it was solely a split between the North and the South, but this is not the case – the tensions are between more regions than that. And there are closer links between North and South than one might expect – such as during the 21st Dynasty one of the High Priests of Amun (the de facto ruler of the South) became King of the North ruling from Tanis. It is during this turbulent period of Egyptian history that the title and role of God's Wife of Amun is reintroduced.

Ayad said that part of why it is so difficult to sort out what is going on in this period is that everyone important shared a small pool of names, and the God's Wives of Amun are no exception. She put up a slide of which women were God's Wife of Amun in which (approximate) years, and which king they were related to. There's Shepenwepet I, daughter of Osorkon III in the 23rd Dynasty who held office c.754-740 BCE. Then Amenirdis I, daughter of Kashta (Kushite King, predecessor of Piye who conquered Egypt) in the 25th Dynasty who held office c.740-700 BCE. Then Shepenwepet II, daughter of Piye in the 25th Dynasty who held office c.710-650 BCE. She was followed by Nitocris, daughter of Psammetik I in the 26th Dynasty who held office c.656-586 BCE, and finally Ankhnesneferibre, daughter of Psammetik II in the 26th Dynasty c.595-525 BCE. It was these women who were the subject of the rest of Ayad's talk (which is why I have copied so much detail down off the slide!). The dates of all of them are debated – Ayad said the only case where we have any certainty is Nitocris where we have an adoption stela with dates on, which she discussed in more detail later in the talk.

Long after the title of God's Wife of Amun ceased to be held by queens the iconography and regalia of these women continued to have queenly connotations. The God's Wives of Amun continued to wear queenly crowns like the vulture headdress – Ayad showed us a slide comparing the headdress of Hatshepsut's mother with that of a Nubian God's Wife of Amun so that we could see the similarities. The God's Wives of Amun also had cartouches round their names, and used feminised forms of the royal titulary. So instead of "Son of Re" they used "Daughter of Re", and instead of "Lord of the Two Lands" they used "Lady of the Two Lands". They also used the serekh around one of their names, with a feminised falcon on top.

During this period of Dynasty 23 to Dynasty 26 the God's Wives of Amun had chapels constructed (mostly at Karnak) in their own right, and the information preserved on these chapels gives us the best clues for the religious role of these women. The chapels all reference the god Osiris in their names, and one of the questions at the end was why this was, given that the role is associated with the god Amun. Ayad said it isn't clear what the reason is, but one thing that is noticeable is that while the names of the chapels reference Osiris the decoration and inscriptions only show and name Amun-Re.

The Chapel of Osiris-Neb-Ankh in Karnak was originally built by Shepenwepet I, the first of these God's Wives of Amun. She was the daughter of the Libyan king Osorkon III in the 23rd Dynasty, and she held office for 40 years. Her official name – her throne name or prenomen – was Khneme(t)ibamun which means "the one who joins the heart of Amun". This is almost the same as an epithet that Hatshepsut used. This is a common thing that kings do when they are composing their royal titulary – they use a title that is almost, but not quite, the same as an illustrious ancestor. A small element is changed in order to make it easy to tell which king's name is written, but the connection and reference to the earlier king is clear to everyone. So Shepenwepet I is doing the same thing here and linking herself with Hatshepsut. Her elevation to the role of God's Wife of Amun coincides with her brother's elevation to High Priest of Amun, so part of her father projecting his power south to Thebes (he ruled from Tanis). Ayad said that some scholars have assumed that this meant that the 23rd Dynasty (or at least this part of it) was based in Thebes, but she disagrees.

Shepenwepet I's chapel was a single room – all of these chapels are small structures. Ayad talked us through some of the scenes in the chapel and what they show us about the status of Shepenwepet I. The first scene she discussed shows the God's Wife of Amun being suckled by a goddess – this is a type of scene that is normally reserved just for the king. The milk of the goddess is thought to imbue him with divinity, so it's quite striking that Shepenwepet I has three scenes of this sort in her

chapel. She also wears king regalia, like the double crown. Actually in the scene Ayad showed us Shepenwepet I was wearing two double crowns facing each other on her head – Ayad said there are a lot of odd-looking crowns in this chapel!

Another key scene shows Shepenwepet I playing the sistrum for three gods, who as depicted are standing in a queue facing her but were probably in actuality three statues arranged in a row in front of her. Behind her is a large offering table piled high with food for the gods, and then behind that is the king, her father, making offerings to those same gods. That is a very very odd scene – it's unusual to have a woman shown standing in front of the king, and even more unusual for them to be separated by the large offering table as well. One interpretation is that the three (the God's Wife of Amun, the offering table, and the king) are actually all in a row with the God's Wife of Amun closest to us – this is a typical way to interpret the iconographical conventions of Egyptian art (like with the three gods that are also in this scene). Another interpretation is that the relief actually depicts two different ritual actions that happen in quick succession and that one should read it from right to left – so first the king makes offerings, and then the God's Wife of Amun plays the sistrum. But Ayad didn't seem to think that was very plausible, not only is it not the standard way to “read” a scene like this, but the two actions (of offering and of sistrum playing) are normally done together (based on other evidence for these rituals). So this is an odd scene with a woman, the God's Wife of Amun, taking precedence over the king himself. And it was not a hidden, out of the way scene, as the chapel was originally built this was on the exterior facade of the building. When painted (as all reliefs once were) it would have been visible from a distance as you approached or passed by the chapel.

Next to this unusual scene were more scenes that emphasise the high status and power of the God's Wife of Amun. One shows her being crowned by Amun-Re. Some scholars in the past have said that Amun-Re was “adjusting the headdress of Shepenwepet I”, but Ayad was fairly scathing about that interpretation – this scene is identical in gestures and layout to the many other scenes of a king being crowned, so changing the language used to describe it in this case is just about not giving Shepenwepet I the status her own chapel's reliefs gave her. Another scene was one of the ones where Shepenwepet I is being suckled by a goddess. The goddess in question is damaged on the relief, but it's probably Sematweret which means “the Great Cow” and is another name for Hathor. Ayad showed us a couple of comparisons for this scene. One of these was Taharka (penultimate king of the 25th Dynasty) being suckled by a lion headed goddess who was probably Sekhmet – and in this scene he is explicitly being transformed into the divine Horus. All these scenes of Shepenwepet being shown with a status akin to that of the king were on the outer wall of the facade of this chapel when it was built in the 23rd Dynasty, this was a public declaration of status. The God's Wife of Amun completely dominates the decorative scheme of the chapel, and Ayad suggested it was built to commemorate the instalment of Shepenwepet I as God's Wife of Amun.

When the Nubians invaded and conquered Egypt they recognised the importance of the role of the God's Wife of Amun and the importance of Shepenwepet I in that role. As a result her chapel was kept intact and added to (rather than replaced). A new room was built on the front of the original one – both honouring the previous incumbent and demonstrating the Nubians' greater power and access to resources as compared to the 23rd Dynasty. The new room at the front of the chapel is slightly larger than the original, and is made of much better quality stone. The Libyan chapel was made of differently sized blocks, and looks like they may have reused blocks that were available at Karnak. The new room is made of better quality evenly sized blocks.

This new room was called the Chapel of Osiris, Ruler of Eternity. It's the chapel of Amenirdis, who was installed by her brother Piye, but the chapel was built during

the reign of Shebitku (who was Piye's successor as king) although it's Amenirdis who is credited as the person who commissioned it. One of the scenes Ayad showed us from this chapel was of the God's Wife of Amun performing the stretching of the cord ritual in the presence of the goddess Seshat – this ritual is to do with the laying out of the building plan at the beginning of construction. This is often seen as part of the decorative scheme of temples – but usually performed by the king and the goddess Seshat.

Amenirdis was the first God's Wife of Amun to combine all three related titles (God's Wife of Amun, God's Hand, and Divine Adorer) since Ahmose-Nefertari. Ayad thinks that is a sign that Amenirdis was aware of her distant predecessor Ahmose-Nefertari and was making a deliberate call back to her as part of the consolidation of Kushite power in the Theban region. Ahmose-Nefertari certainly lived on in the cultural memory of Egypt – she was worshipped as a deity at Deir el Medina during the New Kingdom and there are scenes such as one where she's shown interceding between Ramesses III and the gods.

It's noteworthy that when the chapel was built on the front of Shepenwepet I's chapel they didn't alter the architecture or decoration of the original chapel, neither did they erase her names from the reliefs. They also added new scenes with Shepenwepet I in them. This seems at first to be rather odd – the 25th Dynasty were at war with Shepenwepet I's family (the 23rd Dynasty). But it is actually an integral part of this consolidation of Kushite power in Thebes. The scenes of kings (or God's Wives of Amun) offering to the gods are depicting a two way transaction. An offering of ma'at is made to the gods, and the gods give life back to the offerer. But in some of the the scenes in this chapel Shepenwepet I is shown offering to the gods, and then in the next scene Amenirdis is receiving life from those gods. A clever piece of iconography to indicate the passing on of the mantle of authority from Shepenwepet I to Amenirdis.



**Funerary Chapel for Amenirdis at Medinet Habu**

Amenirdis's successor is Shepenwepet II, who was Piye's daughter. She built a funerary chapel at Medinet Habu, which has an inscription on it saying that Shepenwepet II dedicated it to her "mother" Amenirdis (mother is in scare quotes as this is an adoptive relationship rather than a blood one). This inscription is a good indication of the succession, and it is accompanied by Shepenwepet making offerings to a triad of deities including Amenirdis. This and other scenes show the successor performing the funerary rites for her mother/predecessor. Ayad drew the comparison here to the scenes in Tutankhamun's tomb depicting Ay acting as "eldest son" to Tutankhamun, despite being an elderly man burying a teenager! It's the symbolism that matters and establishes a proper succession. Another scene of this sort depicts Shepenwepet II driving four calves towards the gods (Osiris, Horus and Amenirdis in this scene). This is a scene that is both ritual and agricultural in nature, and it is often performed by Pharaohs for their successors.

The fact that Shepenwepet II names Amenirdis as her mother in the texts is the first time that we know for sure that a God's Wife of Amun has adopted her successor as a daughter. Ayad said that taking together the reliefs and texts they show that Shepenwepet II is building up her authority by performing the funerary rite for her mother like a daughter (son) would, as well as by explicitly naming Amenirdis as her mother. She is also linking herself with Amenirdis by having her portrayed in the offering scenes.

Ayad also took us through some other scenes from this time period that show the God's Wife of Amun on a par with the king in terms of status and activities. One of these had the king and the God's Wife of Amun back to back in the centre of a relief aiming missiles at 4 targets on the edges of the relief. The God's Wife of Amun was using a bow, and the king was using a sling. The targets are shaped like the city sign, and are named to represent the cardinal directions. The two are protecting the cenotaph of Osiris, which is shown with a tree growing out of it. The texts that accompany the scene describes how they are protecting the kingdom against rebels. So this shows king and God's Wife of Amun asserting the universal dominion of the god and by extension of the king. As with the reliefs on the Red Chapel Ayad discussed earlier the God's Wife of Amun is not named, so that this stands in for all holders of the title not just the current individual.

Another collection of scenes showed the God's Wife of Amun partnering with priests to raise statues of four gods. Again the God's Wife of Amun is not named, and this time she isn't even given quite that title - she's referred to as "the God's Wife of this God". Ayad said that naming the person (the individual holder of the office) or naming Amun would have impacted the efficacy of the ritual that was being performed - what is important is the office and the god whose statue is being raised. In the Q&A session at the end someone asked about if there were God's Wives for other gods, given that this relief has the God's Wife of Amun acting as a wife of other gods. Ayad said that no, there weren't - this is unique role that is related to Amun and to Thebes.

Shepenwepet II also celebrated a sed festival - another thing that is usually a kingly prerogative. This is known from her own chapel, which was discovered reused as fill in the temple of Montu at Karnak and has since been reconstructed. Not all of the blocks still exist, but enough to put it back together into a single room edifice. Two of the blocks show a woman seated on a particular type of throne that is only used in the sed festival, and other blocks include other parts of the standard iconography of these scenes such as sem priests and the souls of Nekhen and Pe pounding their chests. Ayad showed us a relief of Thutmose III's sed festival so that we could see how similar the motifs were. Shepenwepet II is named in some of the texts, as is her deceased "mother" Amenirdis - so this is definitely Shepenwepet II's sed festival. The sed festival is sometimes translated as a "jubilee" or a "30 year festival" but these names are partly based on a misunderstanding of the Greeks about how the

festival worked. In truth it's neither regular nor every 30 years. There was a suggestion by a scholar in the 1960s that it is a festival "of the cloth" where the king acquires his priestly powers, Ayad says that she thinks this idea might be valid for the God's Wife of Amun (even if it may not be for the kings). Celebration of a sed festival is unique to Shepenwepet II – queens had been shown in sed festival scenes before but never as the primary person, and no God's Wife of Amun before or after Shepenwepet II had a sed festival. This shows how over the 25th Dynasty the Nubian kings had delegated more and more priestly power to the God's Wives of Amun.

Shepenwepet II is the last of the Nubian God's Wives. After her family were driven out of Egypt by the Assyrians the Saite Dynasty (26<sup>th</sup> Dynasty) gradually expanded their authority southward (after having started as puppet rulers under the Assyrian king). Nitocris is installed as God's Wife of Amun, successor to Shepenwepet II, by her father Psammetik I and sent to Thebes from Sais. She held the office for 60 years from 656-586 BCE, which suggests she was a small child when she took office. Ayad noted that all of the God's Wives seem to hold office for a long time – several decades – and maybe that means that all of them are installed as children. We know when Nitocris was installed with some certainty because her adoption record was set up as a large granite stela, which would have been visible to everyone. The document records the installation of Nitocris instead of the previous heiress, but the language is pretty vague (the king gives "her to her to be her daughter") so that it can be passed off as nothing having changed. Ayad said that the document looks like a historical document, because it has specific dates for events mentioned and follows a conventional format. It looks like a transfer of property document – Nitocris is given various estates by temples and Theban dignitaries give her estates and rations. The document also has named witnesses. It even identifies itself as a legally binding document, of a type called an *imyt-pr* which is a sort of document used to bequeath property to someone who is not the rightful heir (for instance an adopted child instead of a natural child) – so it's a contract, transferring the property etc. of the preceding Nubian God's Wife of Amun to the new Saite incumbent instead of the previous Nubian heiress.

The last God's Wife of Amun was Ankhnesneferibre, daughter of Psammetik II, who also held office for an incredibly long time – 70 years from 595-525 BCE. Her official name, Heqatnerfermut, references Amun's consort deity Mut – "female ruler of beauty is Mut." As with Shepenwepet II she is keen to present herself as the daughter of her predecessor, and as having performed the funerary rites for her "mother". Her adoption stela has a more Theban perspective than the Saite perspective of that of Nitocris – a sign of the power shifting even more towards the God's Wife of Amun. And Ayad said that in the time of this God's Wife of Amun the role finally completely subsumed the role of the High Priest of Amun – and Ankhnesneferibre took on the title herself, becoming High Priestess of Amun. But she was to be the first and last High Priestess, because she lived to witness the Persian invasion in 525 BCE when the 26th Dynasty was overturned and Egypt became a satrapy of the Persian Empire. The Persians had no interest in keeping the office of God's Wife of Amun going, unlike the Nubian rulers of Egypt. They saw no reason to break with their own cultural traditions and put a woman in a position of power – and Ayad pointed out that their king's daughters would not have been socialised to wield power, so would not have been effective in the office anyway.



**Sarcophagus of Ankhnesneferibre in the British Museum**

**Ankhnesneferibre's coffin shows how far the power and authority of the God's Wives of Amun had come since the time of Shepenwepet I – it portrays her on the lid with the crook and flail of royal authority. No previous (non-king) woman had been depicted with these accessories. But Ayad pointed out that at the same time these women never disguised their femininity – there is also a statue of Ankhnesneferibre which only discusses how pleased the god is with her voice and sistrum playing, the traditional feminine aspects of divine service with none of the priestly functions she also held. So even as the holders of the office of God's Wife of Amun took on more and more “masculine” authority and power they were still unapologetically women.**

**I found this talk fascinating – I didn't previously know very much about the role of the God's Wife of Amun. Ayad's description of how they took on more and more authority over time was really interesting, and made me wonder how far it would have gone if the Persians hadn't invaded when they did.**