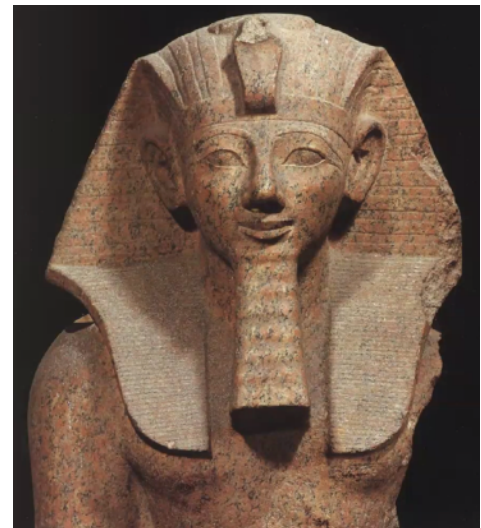


Essex Egyptology Group: Hatshepsut and Senenmut: A Romantic History?

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In June, Dr Filip Taterka gave the group a talk over Zoom about the possible relationship between Hatshepsut and Senenmut; the talk being a summary of his research to be published in a forthcoming book, co-authored with Andrzej Ćwiek.

Hatshepsut, daughter of Thutmose I and widow of Thutmose II, became regent for the latter's infant son, Thutmose III and later co-regent with him. So while the young Thutmose III reigned 'de jure', Hatshepsut was enabled to rule as 'de facto' king. Egyptologist Herbert Winlock (1884-1950) took the traditional view of his era that Hatshepsut, being a woman, was not interested in military affairs, though she is known to have organised a military campaign to Syria, and participated in an elephant hunt. For Winlock, Hatshepsut was viewed as a young woman who needed to be guided or manipulated by older men. The conclusions drawn by later scholars such as William Kelly Simpson and Christiane Desroches Noblecourt have led to her being cast in the popular imagination as an evil stepmother by taking power from Thutmose III. This is not supported by contemporary texts or scholarly literature.



Sphinx of Hatshepsut (MET)



Drawing of Senenmut (TT353) - Photo: Harry Burton

Senenmut, previously thought to come from common stock, is more recently considered to be of mid-level status with parents named Ramose & Hatnefer. He is thought to have been a one-time soldier, possibly participating in a military expedition. However, his later title: 'overseer of the armoury' was as a civil official rather than a military one. Similarly, his titles associated with temple administration were also of a civil nature, not a religious one.

During the construction of Deir el-Bahri, Senenmut's involvement is without doubt, but his role of chief architect is less certain. Among his 26 preserved statues are ones made of quartzite, a material usually reserved for kings. Was his special status more than ordinary royal favour? There were previous examples of court officials being granted even greater numbers of statues by the king. Senenmut's privileges were truly extraordinary, but do these special favours amount to more than a sovereign's relationship with a key courtier? Were they lovers, or was this just a

case of greater favour than others? Senenmut's quartzite sarcophagus was found smashed into many pieces, but when reconstructed by the MET, it is the same shape as Hatshepsut's own sarcophagus.

In the chapels of Deir el-Bahri, there are 75 inscribed images of a kneeling Senenmut praising Hatshepsut and worshipping the gods behind where the wooden doors would have been. Winlock interpreted these as being viewed sacrilegiously by Thutmose III, though there is no evidence to support this view. Winlock's 1928 discovery of a second tomb of Senenmut at Deir el-Bahri (TT353), along with other images of Senenmut at Karnak and Elephantine are among this total. Tomb TT353 was considered to have been built partially underneath Deir el-Bahri, though the tomb's 'Chamber C' may have been obscured by the later construction of temple forecourts over TT353 rather than vice versa.



Senenmut praising Hatshepsut - Deir el-Bahri Chapel (Image: Gilberto Modonesi)

The text on the Celestial ceiling in TT353 only mentions Senenmut but does not make any allusion to him being Hatshepsut's lover. Senenmut had no known wife or children. Although it was expected for Egyptians to marry and have children, there are other examples of courtiers such as Djehuty, the overseer of treasury in Hatshepsut's time, and Amenhotep, son of Hapu who were not married. It is notable that no suggestion of a sexual relationship between Djehuty or Amenhotep, son of Hapu and their respective royal masters has been proposed, yet Hatshepsut's relationship with Senenmut is suspected of being sexual (without any explicit textual evidence). All we have is implying secret meanings and unsubstantiated interpretations from a heteronormative lens.



Senenmut holding Neferure (Image: Instagram)

The text on a statue of Senenmut holding Hatshepsut's daughter, Neferure, states that he has been allowed to act as Neferura's father in the capacity of her educator, though Barbara Switalski-Lesko has interpreted this as Senenmut actually being Neferura's father, rather than Thutmose II.

The image which is usually cited to confirm preconceived notions that Hatshepsut and Senenmut had a sexual relationship is the graffito found in TT353. It represents rear penetrative sex of a female by a male, but there is no inscription that names them as Hatshepsut and Senenmut. This graffito is part of a larger set of graffiti images of figures and hieroglyphic text. The sex act graffito is thought to have been added last. As a widow, Hatshepsut may have had lovers, but that wouldn't necessarily have to include Senenmut. We have no evidence to say one way or the other, so it is unwise and unscholarly to draw speculative conclusions.



Graffito Attributed to Senenmut and Hatshepsut - (TT353, Deir el-Bahri)

Did Senenmut fall from royal favour or did he die suddenly? He is still attested in Thutmose III's regnal year 16, but then disappears from the record, so may have died shortly after that. Did Hatshepsut decide to get rid of some favoured officials including Senenmut? The Punt Portico scene at Deir el-Bahri shows that the figures of Nehesy, Senenmut and an anonymous figure representing other officials have been chipped away, but Senenmut's name has different erasure marks, suggesting his name and title were erased earlier. Most likely it was erased by Hatshepsut's orders.

During the Q&A section following the talk, someone asked Filip Taterka: "Is it frustrating to you as a scholar that facts can be altered in order to fit a storyline and does it advance the field of Egyptology to squash a 'good story' in order to maintain truth?" The talk clearly showed that exactly that has been done regarding Senenmut's relationship with Hatshepsut.

Michael Tweddle, 17/6/26