

Introduction

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The God's Wife of Amun was the highest-ranking priestess in Ancient Egypt. The institution which she headed was centered at Thebes since its inception at the beginning of the New Kingdom, c. 1550 BC. Several queens are attested as holders of the title "God's Wife of Amun". But with the religious changes of the Amarna Period, it fell out of favor.

In the 10th century BC, the title was revived and it continued in use down to the 8th century; for the next 200 years (8th–6th century) the institution of the God's Wife of Amun gained religious, political and economic influence. A king's daughter chosen for the office was expected to remain unmarried and to adopt a daughter of the next king as her 'heiress'. Therefore, the choice of the sacerdotal successor had a political dimension: as the royal palace and capital were in northern Egypt, the God's Wife acted as the king's 'deputy' in the south. She assumed a royal titulary with two names written in cartouches and had the authority to build chapels in Karnak Temple and mortuary edifices at Medinet Habu. As head of the Theban priesthood, she controlled one of the largest contemporaneous economic institutions in Egypt, and thus, to a certain extent, she headed a "theocracy" situated at Thebes. Within this economic network she integrated the high-ranking families of the Theban aristocracy. But her major duty was her active involvement in the cult: she performed the offering ceremony before Amun in the temple. Moreover, she participated in other rituals that asserted the king's territorial authority as well as Amun's universal power.

Earlier research

The office and some of the office holders have been known since excavations brought the Adoption Stelae of Nitocris and Ankhnesneferibre to light in the late 19th century,¹ and, shortly thereafter, the first evidence for the Osiris chapels in Karnak was uncovered. But it was some decades until the first general discussion of the institution itself was published in 1940, by Constantin E. Sander-Hansen. His study (*Das Gottesweib des Amun*) provided an overview of the God's Wives of Amun from the 19th to the 26th Dynasty and incorporated research on the institution's function, the officials serving in it, and the religious and political dimensions of the office of God's Wife, and he included the five essential texts then known (in the mid-20th century) in handwritten hieroglyphs.

At about the same time, the memorial chapels of the God's Wives of the Late Period at Medinet Habu were excavated and then published in 1954 by Uvo Hölscher (*Medinet Habu V. The Post-Ramesside Remains*). The presentation of the archaeological material and Hölscher's commentary focused on the architectural remains and their interpretation – the latter with enduring consequences until only recently challenged by Mariam Ayad and Carola Koch.²

The monuments of the God's Wives at Thebes of the 25th Dynasty were compiled in the seminal study of Jean Leclant (*Recherches sur les monuments thébains de la XXVe dynastie dite éthiopienne*), published in 1965. The hieroglyphic texts known today that relate to the God's Wives in documents from the 21st to the 26th Dynasty are included in Karl Jansen-Winkel's corpus of inscriptions of the 1st millennium BC (*Inschriften der Spätzeit I–IV, 21.–26. Dynastie*, 2007–2014). But neither of these invaluable contributions includes research on the God's Wives themselves or on the institution.

¹ Cf. the concise overview of the early era of investigation into the institution provided by Koch 2012, 3–4.

² See their contributions in this volume with citation of earlier literature: Ayad, p. 167; Koch, p. 155.

While Erhart Graefe intended his study of 1981 (*Untersuchungen zur Verwaltung und Geschichte der Institution der Gottesgemahlin des Amun vom Beginn des Neuen Reiches bis zur Spätzeit*) as a compilation of the sources for the functionaries and an investigation of the administration of the institution, he provided insight as well into the evolution of the office of God's Wife, its changing duties and influence. Since Graefe covered the history of the institution as then known his book remains fundamental for the ongoing engagement with the subject.³

The God's Wives of the earlier New Kingdom and Ahmose-Nefertary, the founder of the institution, in particular, were the subject of in-depth investigation by Michele Gitton (*L'épouse du dieu Ahmes Nefertary*, 1975 and *Les divines épouses de la 18^e dynastie*, 1984). The subsequent phase of the institution's history, spanning the 19th to the 21st Dynasty, was the focus of Luc Gosselin's study (*Les divines épouses d'Amon dans l'Égypte de la XIX^e à la XXI^e dynastie*, 2007). These publications provide background information for the contributions in this book that deal with the forerunners of the Gods Wives of the Third Intermediate and Late Periods.

The God's Wives of the 1st millennium were only very recently subjected to detailed study by Mariam Ayad (*God's Wife, God's Servant. The God's Wife of Amun c. 740–525 BC*, 2009) and Carola Koch („Die den Amun mit ihrer Stimme zufriedenzustellen“. *Gottesgemahlinnen und Musikerinnen im thebanischen Amunstaat von der 22. bis zur 26. Dynastie*, 2012). Ayad dealt with the five holders of the office in the 23rd to the 26th Dynasty, and discussed these outstanding personalities within the historical framework of the times when they lived. She focused on their religious obligations and the mythological rationale for them, and on the legitimization of these women which resulted in political influence. Ayad tackled several aspects which are essential for understanding the interaction of religion and politics, even if her intention was primarily to demonstrate the inherent potential they provide for future research. Koch's study compiled all documentation for the God's Wives of the era – works of art as well as architectural remains and texts. She considered each God's Wife separately, situating the sources for each individual in her historical context, analyzing her induction into the office, her duties, and her status, as well as her relationship to the gods and to the female clergy within the institution.

An entire issue of the journal “Égypte – Afrique et Orient” (EAO 56 (2010)) was devoted to the subject of the God's Wives. The contributors focused especially on specific individuals (Isis, Karomama, Nitocris), but with details of their material legacy (bronze plaques, ushebtis) considered as well.

Several articles have dealt with aspects of the subject that came up at the Münster symposium. Jeremy Pope traced the enigmatic Meritefnut (2013), and subsequently Shepenwepet II's relationship to the Kingdom of Kush (2015). Laurent Coulon investigated in several articles how the God's Wives were given monumental and pictorial expression. Recently he discussed the Divine Adoratrices' quarters in Malgata (2014a) and the processions depicted on their monuments (2014b). His continuing research on the Osiris chapels at Karnak yields new results annually (2015). Ilaria Davino's work centered on ritual activities (2012), and Dina Metawi described monuments of the chamberlain Pedesi (2013). Finally, in 2014, Benoît Lurson and his team could announce the discovery of the tomb of Karomama, God's Wife of the 22nd Dynasty.

In the process of setting the agenda for the conference it became clear that the issues we intended to address had not been scrutinized in any detail previously, despite the notable advances made in the available literature sketched above.

Objectives

The God's Wife of Amun is above all a religious office: a woman of the royal family is the earthly wife of the highest god in the contemporaneous Egyptian pantheon. Her function comprised the duties of a high priestess, including the performance of various cultic rituals. With her authority at Thebes, she might even commission diverse chapels in Karnak Temple and at Medinet Habu. Whether she was required to be celibate and thus childless, as often supposed, is unproven, even if the documented long life of the office holders can be cited in favor of their being spared childbearing. At first glance, the

³ Graefe continues to update regularly the data about the officials of the God's Wives: Graefe 2012, 2013.

picture of a royal lady, chosen to serve Amun's cult in his state temple at Karnak, would seem to reflect a purely religious role. But there are additional aspects of the office which complement its religious dimension.

The domain of the God's Wife of Amun was a prosperous economic institution from the moment of its inception in the New Kingdom. Fields and flocks provided a substantial income which was administered by officials who often enjoyed high status. The importance of this economic aspect varied during the existence of the institution, but in the 1st millennium BC it seems to have again achieved a high level.⁴ Apart from the ability of the God's Wives to sponsor building activities, they might also commission sculpture, as numerous statues of them and of their officials (for example, Harwa) attest. The latter were able to build enormous temple-like tombs in the Theban necropolis – the largest non-royal tombs anywhere in Egypt among them – which presumes that their owners drew a substantial income from the institution of the God's Wife.

As usual, economic strength can be expected to go hand-in-hand with political influence. Investigating the relationship – the apparent entanglement of the religious and political aspects of the institution of the God's Wife – was one focus of the conference. In an age of weak dynasties with their capitals in the north, the institution of the God's Wife seems to have acted as the royal power base in the south. But was she really powerful or did the High Stewards pull the strings? These men originated from long-established, respected Theban families, hinting at the development of a subculture and the manifestation of power at Thebes. The relationship of the God's Wife to the High Priest of Amun is very specific. These men gained royal power in the 21st Dynasty, but after several revolts, the office was left vacant. In fact, it was the God's Wife who acted. As the office of the High Priest of Amun had achieved political power only a few generations earlier, there can be little reason to doubt that the political importance of the God's Wife originated at the same moment. But was her political role active or passive? Did she really possess political clout or was upgrading the religious office only a (possibly also political) ploy?

This question is closely related to the development of the institution and to yet another question: what made the God's Wife more influential than other priestesses? Can we detect a turning point where the evolution of the office developed in a different direction than that of a traditional priestess?

Femininity was another significant aspect of the persona of the God's Wife – especially in the context of influence and power. Her gender must be seen in relation to the gender of the king – a man, of the High Priest – also male, and of her High Steward – male as well. In several scenes in the Osirian chapels at Karnak, the God's Wife is depicted just like a king, playing the king's (male) role as the “master of the ritual”. At times her office even subsumed that of the High Priest. The High Steward as the chief administrator of the institution of the God's Wife of Amun was accountable to her. Therefore, one objective of the conference was to identify the impact gender might have had on the construction of the God's Wives.

Another dimension is the cultural background of the office holders during the 1st millennium BC when several God's Wives were Libyan or Kushite. In neither of these non-Egyptian cultures is an institution comparable to the God's Wife of Amun reported. But during the reigns of both Libyan and Kushite kings, the office was not only maintained but reached its zenith. How the tenure of Kushite and Libyan God's Wives might have reflected their different cultural backgrounds was necessarily also a topic on the conference agenda.

*General introduction to the contributions*⁵

This volume is organized chronologically, beginning at the end of the New Kingdom, with articles subsuming the 21st and 22nd Dynasties as well. But the focus of most contributions is the period of the 23rd to the 26th Dynasty, since the sources for the God's Wives Shepenwepet I, Amenirdis I, Shepenwepet II, Nitocris, and Ankhnesneferibre are much more abundant than for earlier office holders.

⁴ Graefe 1981, 111.

⁵ This section includes the concluding remarks at the conference, since not every question raised initially was covered in the contributions published here.

The succession of studies published here provides insights about the development and the changes the institution of the God's Wife of Amun experienced, but there are also several byways which are highly pertinent for our research objectives. The contributions approach our concerns in different ways and lead to additional statements, which open avenues with new research priorities.

The first, preparatory step for analyzing the God's Wife in the 1st millennium BC must consider the chronological setting. Relative (as well as absolute) dates are at issue with two crucial points in particular: the order of succession in the 25th Dynasty and its effect on the length of the tenure of the contemporaneous God's Wives. A reversal of the traditionally accepted order Shabaqo – Shebitqo, suggested a few years ago by several colleagues,⁶ has a bearing on how long Amenirdis I and Shepenwepet II served as God's Wives. The Wadi Gasus graffiti are thoroughly and intensely discussed documents, for it goes without saying that its interpretation is highly pertinent. Mariam Ayad (*Gender*) and Robert Morkot (*Historical and Art-historical questions*) highlight the various implications of these chronological issues, leading on to the problems of succession, installation, and adoption. Apart from the Adoption Stelae of Nitocris (Anke Blöbaum: *Adoption Stela*) and Ankhnesneferibre, as well as the block from Deir el Bakhit mentioning the God's Wife Isis (Amr El Hawary: *Figurative Power*), we are uninformed about who was responsible for the installation of the God's Wives. The politically relevant act of choosing a woman for this powerful institution is discussed by several contributors to this volume (Ayad: *Gender*; Morkot: *Historical and Art-historical questions*; Angelika Lohwasser: *Nubianess*). With the installation of a daughter (or sister, as suggested by Ayad, *Gender*) the king stabilized his political power in the Thebais together with his influence among the religious elite of the region (Blöbaum: *Adoption Stela*). To fill a position of religious authority with a woman is suggestive of a clever stratagem intended to prevent strife between royalty and the clergy. The actual power in the Thebais seems to have rested in the hand of the officials of the God's Wife, although they bear only “non-powerful” titles like *ḥm ntr*. There is a remarkable evolution in the entourage of the God's Wife; an entire microcosm developed around the institution. Power was exercised through subtle assignments of officials, and an attempt was made to concentrate power in a single office, e.g., namely that of the High Steward who exerted influence from Heracleopolis south all the way to Elephantine.

But what can be said about the political role of God's Wives? Given that they go unmentioned by Pianchi, Tanwetamani, and the Assyrians in the historical record, any actual role of the God's Wife in politics appears to have been passive. Her position as king's deputy was important for its high propaganda value and its intimate relationship to the religious legitimacy of kingship. But the economic impact of the institution was of major importance, with administration in the hands of the High Steward.

During the revolutions and civil war in the 22nd Dynasty, the office of the High Priest underwent significant alternation when the opposing parties appointed their supporters to the post. Subsequently, after the tenure of High Priest Osorkon B, the office lost influence and remained vacant until the reign of Shabaqo/Shebitqo, while at the same time, the power of the God's Wife increased (Ayad: *Gender*, Raphaële Meffre: *Political Changes*). The late Libyan kings maintained good relations with those representing the most significant institutions at Thebes: the God's Wife and the clergy of Montu (Meffre: *Political Changes*). The foundation for the potential of female power was laid in the 20th Dynasty (El Hawary: *Figurative Power*); women gained in authority during the 21st Dynasty as wives of the High Priests of Amun (Meike Becker: *Female Influence*). Female influence in the 21st Dynasty, was closely connected to the income and economic impact of the institution of the God's Wife, essential factors in the increasing power of the institution. Shepenwepet II's tenure seems to represent the pinnacle of this development for she united several purely royal privileges in such a way as to suggest she had considerably more influence and could exercise more power than her predecessors (Wienke Aufderhaar: *Sphinxes*).

Some, if very limited evidence can be cited for the office of a God's Wife beyond the borders of the Thebais. In Heracleopolis a high priestess of the city god (?) is attested in the late 26th Dynasty (Olivier Perdu: *Épouse*). Estimating the effective influence of this Merytnebes on the basis of the meager

⁶ Bányai 2013; Payraudeau 2014; Broekman 2015; Bányai et al. 2015.

documentation available is difficult, although her existence alone is significant for showing that the title God's Wife was not exclusively Theban.

El Hawary (*Figurative Power*), Becker (*Female Influence*), Lohwasser (*Nubianness*) and Ayad (*Gender*) address the question of femininity, of the balance between male and female potentials and its effect on the concepts of legitimation and rule in the period of the 20th to the 26th Dynasty. El Hawary (*Figurative Power*) suggests that the starting point was female theology as expressed in the text of the crossword stela from the Mut-precinct in Karnak where "the Goddess" (i.e., Mut understood to subsume aspects of all female deities) is credited with primal creative power. This power, as the complement of male potential, was a fundamental component of Kushite ideals of kingship, and thus provided a means for the kings of the 25th Dynasty to legitimize and fulfil their rule in conformity with their indigenous ideology (Lohwasser: *Nubianness*). In Kush itself the introduction of a similar institution was not needed, since kings' wives and mothers fulfilled these roles of female power intrinsically.

The entanglement of male and female signifiers is manifest in the iconography and motifs used for depicting God's Wives (Ayad: *Gender*; Claus Jurman: *Karomama*; Lohwasser: *Nubianness*; Aleksandra Hallmann: *Iconography* and Aufderhaar: *Sphinxes*). Although the iconography *per se* of the God's Wives resembles traditional (royal) female appearance (Hallmann: *Iconography*), there are specific royal genres like the sphinx (Aufderhaar: *Sphinxes*) or contexts, such as the representation of the Hebsed and suckling scenes (Ayad: *Gender*), and, last but not least, the actively officiating God's Wife figures in the relief decoration of the Osiris chapels (Ayad: *Gender*; Jurman: *Karomama*; Hallmann: *Iconography*).

Apart from these interpretative analyses of the representations, other contributions also include art historical observations. While Morkot (*Historical and Art-historical questions*) presents an overview of changes in style from Shepenwepet I to Amenirdis I and Shepenwepet II, Jurman (*Karomama*) and Hallmann (*Iconography*) subject depictions of Karomama and Ankhnesneferibre, respectively, to in-depth analysis. The sphinxes of Shepenwepet II are likewise discussed by Aufderhaar (*Sphinxes*).

The chapels of the God's Wives at Medinet Habu, their interpretation and ritual function, are the focus of Carola Koch (*hwwt-k3*) and Mariam Ayad (*Reading*). Koch interprets these structures as ritual palaces commissioned by the successor for the worship of the deceased God's Wife represented by her statue in the cella. On the one hand, these chapels would then represent a specific variant of the temple-of-a-millions-of-years while, on the other hand, being forerunners of the wabet. Ayad (*Reading*) investigates the relationship of the texts to the reliefs, especially for the ritual of Opening the Mouth. She concludes that the successive ritual episodes of revivification and the achievement of immortality are symmetrically arranged, presenting Amenirdis I initially as mummy and culminating in the depiction of the wholly revived God's Wife on the chapel's south wall.

Installing a member of the royal family in this powerful institution was one means of legitimizing a king's rule (Lohwasser: *Nubianness*; Blöbaum: *Adoption Stela*). While fulfilling Kushite ideological needs (Lohwasser: *Nubianness*), it also served as a declaration of influence, as on the Adoption Stela of Nitocris (Blöbaum: *Adoption Stela*). The text commemorates the adoption of Nitocris as a national event. Beyond the text itself, the sophisticated composition delivers a complex statement concerning Saite rule and the legitimacy of the king with special emphasis on his duties as ritualist, the territory under his influence, and his relationship to the religious elite.

The varied contributions of participants in the conference complement and supplement each other to elucidate the role and importance of God's Wives of Amun. Their religious influence was based on the concept of purity, and during processions on the occasions of festivals they play an active role in the contact between god and humankind. Their political role seems to have been passive, rather than active, but the office with its connection to royalty and explicit femininity was essential in legitimation and the political activity of the era, albeit in practice, it was probably only the high-ranking (male) officials who actually exercised power.

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