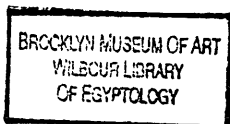


# ANCIENT EGYPT, THE AEGEAN, AND THE NEAR EAST

*Studies in Honour of Martha Rhoads Bell*

Volume I



edited by

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MUT AND OTHER ANCIENT EGYPTIAN GODDESSES

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An Egyptian story<sup>1</sup> dating from the Middle Kingdom tells us that one morning a man saw a woman (*st-mt*) who was not of the humankind when he was approaching a lake or a swamp with his cattle. The female being emerged from the waters of the lake and had her skin covered with fur like an animal. The herdsman tells us: "My hair stood on end when I saw her fur, she was not smooth." Of course, no civilized human being, and particularly not an Egyptian woman, should be hairy all over her body. Actually, the terrifying vision which the man saw with his own eyes was more like a lioness or a female sphinx. She was a goddess (*Ntrt*), as is told further on in the story. The totally perplexed herdsman adds: "Never would I have done what she suggested. The terror for her still pervades my limbs." Then he fled home with his cattle "to end the raging of the Strong One (*wsrt*) and the fear for the 'Lady of the Two Lands.' That 'Strong One,' that 'Overwhelming Being' was no less than the Lady of the Two Lands." But next day, again early in the morning, when the herdsman came again to the lake, the goddess approached him again: "She had come, bare of her coverings and she was mussing her hair." I don't know what happened next, because the rest of the "Story of the Herdsman" is lost. Egyptologists are trained to fill in the *lacunae* in texts, but it seems a bit dangerous even to comment on this man's experience with an Egyptian goddess. What we can say is that this second encounter with the goddess does not seem to have been quite so alarming as the first. The herdsman has already said: "My spirits are joyous." And, indeed, the second time, the goddess is not a monstrous being with animal fur, but is naked, bare of her coverings, and is playing provocatively with her hair.

A remarkable thing in this story (or, rather, fragment of a story) is its duality or ambiguity. On one morning the female appears as a hairy monster or a sphinx; the next morning she appears as a beautiful, attractive woman who is nice. The man also has mixed feelings: First he admits that the terror of her pervades his limbs, but some time later his spirits are joyous. This duality in the vision of the goddess and the feelings of the man is a reflection of the basic opposition of male and female, and of human and divine.

These relationships are not always simple, harmonious and constant. When a man meets a goddess it can be both positive and negative, when a male meets a female it can be yes and no. The Egyptian Wisdom teacher Ankhsheshonk wrote:

\* Lecture given at the symposium 'Temples, Tombs and the Egyptian Universe' at the Brooklyn Museum, 4 December 1993, and here dedicated to the memory of Martha Bell.

<sup>1</sup> A.H. Gardiner, *Die Erzählung des Sinuhe und die Hirtengeschichte* (A. Erman ed., *Literarische Texte des Mittleren Reiches* II, Leipzig 1909) 15, pls. 16-17; H. Goedicke, "The Story of the Herdsman," *CdE* 45 (1970) 244-66; P. Derchain, "La perruque et le cristal," *SAK* 2 (1975) 70-71 and the important remarks of S.-A. Naguib, "Hair in Ancient Egypt," *Acta Orientalia* 51 (1990) 12, 15.

"When a man smells of myrrh  
his wife is a cat before him.  
When a man is weak  
his wife is a lioness before him."<sup>2</sup>

The Story of the Herdsman does not only show the ambiguity of the male-female relationship, it also shows something of the religious experience of what theologians call the 'mysterium tremendum ac fascinans,' the awesome and fascinating mystery that is a god or goddess. In this story with erotic undertones, the goddess is called *wsrt* (the 'Strong One'), and she is called the majestic 'Mistress of the Two Lands.

It must be said that accounts and even stories of face-to-face encounters between a human being and his or her god or goddess are extremely rare in Egyptian religion.<sup>3</sup> According to ancient Egyptian theology, such face-to-face encounters were expected to take place not on earth, but in the hereafter. The real form of a god or a goddess was a mystery (*sst3*). Gods and goddesses were known, or revealed themselves indirectly, through symbols such as statues, or animals, or the pharaoh, or through natural phenomena. In the 'Story of the Herdsman,' the goddess who was seen by human eyes is indeed animal or statue-like, a lion-headed woman like one of the famous Sakhmet statues or a sphinx with a human head. In the Middle Kingdom, royal ladies, mistresses of the Two Lands, were already represented as female sphinxes in art. The vision of the goddess was determined by artistic and religious conventions and, more than that, the religious experience of the herdsman and his vision of the goddess was a result of the Egyptian tradition, according to which a goddess could reveal herself in a natural phenomenon, the inundation of the Nile.

I have not so far mentioned that according to the 'Story of the Herdsman,' the vision of the goddess took place at the beginning of the annual Inundation of the Nile. If the Aswan Dam had not stopped the Nile inundating, and if we were to go to the herdsman's lake at the appropriate time of the year to try to repeat the religious experience he had by way of an experiment, we would probably not see a hairy monster, nor a beautiful queen rising from the lake, but only the rising water of the inundation, because we no longer participate in Egyptian religion. We would need ancient eyes to see the goddess and, even if we did succeed in visualizing a female emerging from the lake, she would probably be more like the Lorelei, a mermaid, or another lady of the lake in European romanticism, than an ancient Egyptian goddess.

<sup>2</sup> Ankhshehonk 15, 11-12. Cf. M. Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature 3: The Late Period* (Berkeley/Los Angeles/London 1980) 171 line (11). Lichtheim has changed her translation of this text from "cat" to "monkey" in her *Late Egyptian Wisdom Literature in the International Context: A Study of Demotic Instructions* (Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis 52, Freiburg/Göttingen 1983) 80 lines (11)-(12). I have been unable to find any motivation for this alteration. See also L. Troy, "Good and Bad Women. Maxim 18/284-288 of the Instructions of Ptahhotep," *Göttinger Miszellen* 80 (1984) 78, 81 n. 14.

<sup>3</sup> E. Hornung, *Conceptions of God in Ancient Egypt: The One and the Many* (London/Melbourne/Henley 1982) 128-35.

So what are Egyptian goddesses? Hornung<sup>4</sup> suggests Egyptian gods are formulae rather than forms ("eher Formeln als Gestalten"). I agree with him, insofar as we should not just look at the forms of Egyptian religion. We cannot trust our own eyes. We should try to find the formulae in or behind the forms. We have to learn the formulae to be able to understand the forms. The ancient Egyptians knew the formulae intuitively. They were brought up with the formulae of their religion, as they were brought up with their language. But we have to learn the vocabulary and the grammar before we can understand the language of their religion and its forms.

Since the 1970s, the Brooklyn Museum Expedition to the Precinct of the Goddess Mut in Karnak has collected material concerning the goddess Mut. The more material we collect, the more difficult it becomes to introduce the goddess and to tell you in a few words what her form and formula is. She is, to quote another of Hornung's expressions, "The One and The Many." A former generation of Egyptologists still called her "a colourless local goddess"<sup>5</sup> and, according to a former generation of Egyptologists, "a rather pallid figure who only achieved eminence as the wife of the powerful Amun."<sup>6</sup> We have indeed not found colourful and dramatic mythical stories about Mut comparable to those of Isis, the sister and wife of Osiris and mother of Horus. Although Mut may be seen again and again in the reliefs of the temples in the Luxor area in the company of Amun and Khonsu-the-Child, constituting the divine triad of Thebes, she is not just the wife of Amun. Since the New Kingdom at least, she had a temple of her own in Southern Karnak. It was the goddess Amaunet<sup>7</sup> who was at home in the temple of Amun in Karnak. Amaunet, as her name indicates, was the grammatical consort of Amun, that is, his female counterpart since the Middle or even the Old Kingdom. The more Mut increased in prominence, the more Amaunet, whose name means 'the Hidden One,' retreated into the shadows of history as a primeval mother or female Amun. She can be represented next to Mut and became more and more an aspect, a name, or an epithet of Mut. She is, to give one example, in the company of Mut together with the goddesses Ipet-weret, Hathor, Sakhmet, Bastet, Weret-Hekau and Wadjet, in the Mut chapel of the Triple Shrine in the Forecourt of the Luxor temple.<sup>8</sup> These are all goddesses with whom Mut had a certain relationship.

The name Mut is usually written with the hieroglyphic sign of the 'vulture,' mostly with the addition of the bread sign, 't.' This encouraged previous generations of Egyptologists to call her a vulture goddess, like the vulture goddess Nekhbet of El-Kab but in art Mut was not, or very seldom and then only secondarily, represented as a vulture or as a woman with a vulture's head. Mut is represented in human form and is sometimes

<sup>4</sup> Hornung (supra n. 3) 256; see also p. 257: "The image of a god was quite certainly more than a formula."

<sup>5</sup> H. Bonnet, *Reallexikon der ägyptischen Religionsgeschichte* (Berlin 1952) 494.

<sup>6</sup> C.J. Bleeker, *Hathor and Thoth* (Leiden 1973) 58.

<sup>7</sup> E. Otto, "Amaunet," in *LÄ I* (Wiesbaden 1972) 183; Hornung (supra n. 3) 84.

<sup>8</sup> G. Daressy, *Notice explicative des ruines du temple de Louxor* (Cairo 1893) 35.

lion-headed. Mut does wear the so-called vulture cap on her head, but so do many other goddesses and female royal persons wear the vulture cap. The vulture symbolizes femininity and motherhood. The Egyptian word for mother was already being written with the vulture sign in the Pyramid Texts. We cannot go into further details here,<sup>9</sup> but there can be little doubt that the name Mut means 'Mother.'

Having found the meaning of Mut's name, it looks as if we have also found her 'formula.' Mut is the mother goddess. But what kind of a mother goddess was she? Motherhood as such is a logical component of very many Egyptian goddesses as it is a possible and frequent aspect of femininity in contradistinction to masculinity. The most frequent epithet of Mut is great (*wrt*) and, when it is mentioned, it is always mentioned first. Many gods and goddesses have this epithet and it hardly seems to mean anything more than: not small or insignificant, but imposing. The greatness of the mother goddess Mut, however, seems to have the connotation of primeval, that Mut is the primeval mother goddess. In a Ramesside hymn to Mut,<sup>10</sup> it is said that both humankind and the gods are her offspring and, in a ritual spell for offering incense to Mut, one had to recite that the gods came into being from her tears, and that (even) Atum (the Primeval God) was vivified through her flesh.<sup>11</sup> Ptolemaic texts<sup>12</sup> say Mut is 'the one who came into existence in the beginning' or that she is 'the mother (*tm3t*) who was together with Nun in the beginning, the mother (*mwt*) who has given birth, but who has not been born herself (*mst n ms.tw.s*),' or 'the mother of the mothers, who has given birth to every god.' Mut is indeed the great and primeval mother goddess.

There is, however, a certain reluctance in the texts and reliefs of the temples of the Luxor area to call Mut directly the mother of Amun-Re. The Egyptian universe was conceived of as a multiplicity of cooperating or conflicting entities or deities. Gods and goddesses were brought into contact with each other, often in terms of family relationships: daughter, sister, and mother, or son, brother, and father. Even the sexual or matrimonial relationship between a male-female pair was defined in terms of family relationships. Osiris and Isis were brother and sister. Mut is not explicitly called the mother of Amun, as is Amaunet. Neither is she called the sister or wife of Amun, unless the priestly title 'God's Wife of Amun' can be counted as such. The priestess 'God's Wife of Amun' was indeed the earthly embodiment of Mut. In temple inscriptions all over Karnak and Luxor, Mut is called the daughter of Amun-Re. Several other goddesses are also called his daughter. Tefnut, Hathor, Bastet, Sakhmet, and others are daughters of the sun-god Re, or personifications of his Eye. They

<sup>9</sup> H. te Velde, "Towards a Minimal Definition of the Goddess Mut," *JEOL* 26 (1979-1980) 3-9. Cf. W. Brunsch, "Untersuchung zu den griechischen Wiedergaben ägyptischer Personennamen," *Enchoria* 8 (1978) 123-128.

<sup>10</sup> H.M. Stewart, "A Crossword Hymn to Mut," *JEA* 57 (1971) 87-104, pl. XXV, line 10 of the horizontal text.

<sup>11</sup> H.J. Nelson, "Certain Reliefs at Karnak and Medinet Habu and the Ritual of Amenophis I," *JNES* 8 (1949) 341-42.

<sup>12</sup> K. Sethe, *Amun und die Acht Urgötter von Hermopolis* (Berlin 1929) 30.

have a leonine character, and Mut is also sometimes represented in this way. One should not denounce this so-called 'father-daughter' relationship as incestuous; it means rather that Mut was accepted into the family of Amun-Re. She did not remain a strange and dangerous female with whom a lasting relationship was impossible. It was not a relationship of equality as brother and sister, but of inequality. A mother-son relationship, such as Isis and Min in Coptos, or Neith and Sobek in Sais, was not a real option in Thebes, where Amun was the most prominent god. Nevertheless, Mut is called "the mother who became a daughter" and "the daughter and mother who made her creator."<sup>13</sup>

This primeval mother goddess who had become the daughter and companion of Amun-Re had a special relationship with kingship. She appears countless times in the reliefs and inscriptions of the Ramessid temples in the Luxor area which are published by the Epigraphic Survey of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago. If one peruses these volumes, one reads she has borne the king, has given him life and created his perfection. She has given him milk which enters into him as life and dominion. She promises the pharaoh longevity, millions of years and hundreds of thousands of jubilees, or a lifetime like Re in heaven and the years of Atum and an ideal reign upon earth like that of Horus, the throne of Geb and the office of Atum. She gives him strength against the South and valour against the North, dominion over the plains and hill countries, and every land in submission. Her arms are a protection around the king and her fiery breath is against his enemies.

Since the time of Queen Hatshepsut, Mut has been represented as a goddess not only wearing the vulture cap, but also wearing the royal crowns of Upper and Lower Egypt, the combined white and red crown, the double crown worn by pharaohs. Occasionally, she wears the so-called 'Hathor crown' consisting of cow horns and a sundisc, sometimes combined with two falcon feathers which queens and 'God's Wives of Amun' wear. But the typical distinctive headdress of Mut is the vulture cap and the double crown. The vulture cap is, as I have already said, a distinctive female symbol; the double crown is a distinctive male symbol. The individual white or red crowns are usually considered to be female symbols, but taken together they are a male symbol as the name with the masculine definitive article indicates: *p3 šmty* or *pschent*. Mut wearing the *pschent* is not a queen or the royal consort of Amun-King-of-the-Gods, but she is rather the divine model for a queen regnant or female pharaoh such as Hatshepsut and later Tauseret. Mut was said to be the mistress of the white and red crown and one of her usual gifts to the pharaoh is this double crown. Perhaps one should say it is her distinctive gift. In a Ramesside hymn to Mut, she is (among other things) hailed as King of Upper and Lower Egypt:

"She has no equal, the unique one who has no peer. There has come into existence none like her within the Ennead. There are no goddesses among tens

<sup>13</sup> Sethe (supra n. 12) 30.

of thousands of her form. Her manifestation on earth is kingship.”<sup>14</sup>

Egyptians were aware of many gods and goddesses, but it is not at all uncommon for them to stress the uniqueness of their own special god or goddess. Nevertheless, it seems telling to me that, immediately after the confession of the uniqueness of Mut, it is said that her manifestation on earth is kingship, a symbol of male authority.

One of the five names of the pharaoh was the ‘Nebty’ or ‘Two-Ladies’ name, referring to the two tutelary goddesses of Upper and Lower Egypt, Nekhbet and Wadjet. Pharaoh is said to be the ‘Two Ladies,’ or, more precisely to prevent misunderstanding, beloved or son of the Two Ladies. An epithet of Mut is *nbty* (not *nb.t*) *rhyt* ‘Sovereign of humankind.’<sup>15</sup> We touch here upon age-old and world-wide dreams of matriarchate and androgyny. This primeval mother, this divine daughter ‘whom Amun rejoices to see’ is also sovereign of humankind.

I am now going to draw your attention to another male aspect of Mut, this time not of authority but of aggression. In the temple of Hibis is a lion-headed figure called ‘great Mut,’ who is provided with an erect penis.<sup>16</sup> A comparable figure of Mut can be found in a vignette of the *Book of the Dead*, Spell 164. This spell is “to be said over an image of Mut having three faces — one like the face of Pakhet (a lion-goddess) wearing twin plumes, another like a human face wearing the white crown and the red crown, another like a vulture’s face wearing twin plumes — and a phallus and wings with a lion’s claws.”<sup>17</sup>

I cannot name any other Egyptian goddess represented as having a penis; as such, Mut is rather unique. To me, it seems to mean that, when Mut is provided with a penis, she takes over a male role: to scare away with typical male aggression the demons and enemies of the one who invokes her with the prayer in the *Book of the Dead*, Spell 164. Mut embraces not only the two female symbols of attractiveness and fertility, but also the two male symbols of aggression and authority. She embraces both gender roles. Of course, authority and aggression as such are not exclusively male symbols but, because they are connected with double crown and penis, in the case of Mut they are male symbols. There are aggressive and possibly also authoritative goddesses without explicit male symbolism ancient Egypt but, on the whole, the father god is authoritative, the son god is aggressive, the mother goddess is fertile, and the daughter goddess is attractive.

The goddess Sakhmet<sup>18</sup> is a notable example of an aggressive female. Her name probably means the most powerful one. She is one of the many forms of the eye or daughter

<sup>14</sup> Stewart (supra n. 10) pls. XXV-XXVI, line 46 of the vertical text; *nsy* (without ‘t’) ‘kingship,’ or ‘the king,’ not ‘the queen.’

<sup>15</sup> C. de Wit, *Les inscriptions du temple d'Opet, a Karnak I-II* (Bibliotheca Aegyptiaca 11-12, Brussels 1958-1962) 15 no. 30.D, 45 no. 91.D.

<sup>16</sup> N. de G. Davies, *The Temple of Hibis in el Khargeh Oasis III: The Decoration* (New York 1953) pl. 2.VIII.

<sup>17</sup> T.G. Allen, *The Book of the Dead or Going Forth by Day* (SAOC 37, Chicago 1974) 160-61 (Spell 164).

<sup>18</sup> P. Germond, *Sekhmet et la protection du monde* (Geneva 1981).

of Re, usually represented as a woman with the head of a lioness. As the eye of the sun, she is destructive and beneficent at the same time, disseminating as well as curing diseases, and protecting the king as well as attacking his enemies. All this and more can also be said of Mut; for example, both are mother goddesses. But the aggression of Sakhmet is even more conspicuous and proverbial. One can say of a goddess that she is as furious as Sakhmet and as friendly as Bastet, another lion or cat-headed goddess. Even the pharaoh at war can be compared with this bloodthirsty female: he is raging like Sakhmet.

Although Mut is not without dissipated or malevolent traits, she is more the type of a stately society lady who could indeed be provided, if necessary, with the penis of manly aggression, and who wears the double crown representing institutional authority of kingship. To a certain degree, Sakhmet is the dangerous aspect of Mut which has to be appeased. The many Sakhmet statues found in the temple of Mut in Karnak prove how closely these goddesses are bound together, but the basic opposition is authority and power. Sakhmet is the most powerful female and Mut is the authoritative Mother Goddess. She is the formal matron in the Theban triad who in the company of Amun and Khonsu is present at the Festivals of Opet, the Festival of the Valley and other religious ceremonies.

Saphinaz Amal Naguib<sup>19</sup> has called Mut the *nbt-pr* or 'mistress of the house,' as opposed to Hathor. The goddess Hathor is in fact much more the daughter or young female who sets the world in motion with erotic or sexual excitation. Hathor<sup>20</sup> is the goddess of dance, music, drunkenness, and love, with which motherhood begins. In an ancient society such as Egypt, eroticism and sexuality and the merriment, dancing and drinking combined with it, was intended to lead to fertility. "L'amour pour l'amour" just like "l'art pour l'art," was hardly acceptable: women should bear children. And, of course, Hathor had a child and also was a mother goddess. Derchain<sup>21</sup> has compared Hathor to Isis as the goddess of biological motherhood opposed to the goddess of social motherhood. Isis as the loving and caring mother of Horus is well-known. In this respect Mut is more like Isis than Hathor. Mut can be represented with a baby on her lap, but she is even better known giving maternal care or more formal royal protection to her son, the pharaoh, as long as he reigns.<sup>22</sup> Mut is indeed the goddess of social, institutional motherhood. She brings men and women together and gives the widow a husband. If Hathor is the goddess of joyful conception, Mut is the goddess of childbirth and the goddess who rears and protects the child just like Isis. Mut and Hathor are different, but they can complement each other. They can be found sitting next to each other or even combined into one divine figure,<sup>23</sup> but there are more moral doubts about

<sup>19</sup> S.-A. Naguib, *Le clergé féminin d'Amon thébain à la 21<sup>e</sup> dynastie* (Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta 38, Leuven 1990) 77.

<sup>20</sup> P. Derchain, *Hathor quadrifrons. Recherches sur la syntax d'un mythe égyptien* (Istanbul 1972).

<sup>21</sup> P. Derchain, review of M. Münster, *Unterspruchung zur Göttin Isis vor. Alten Reich bis zum Ende des Neuen Reiches*, *BibO* 27 (1970) 21-23.

<sup>22</sup> S.A. Naguib (supra n° 19) 244 calls her "la reine-mère, fondatrice des dynasties, celle qui donne effectivement le jour à l'héritier/ière."

<sup>23</sup> S. Schoske and D. Wildung, *Gott und Götter im Alten Ägypten* (Mainz am Rhein 1992) 169 no. 113.

Hathor, the goddess of attraction and sexual excitation, than about Mut, the goddess of fertility and social motherhood. In an Egyptian Wisdom text, one can read:

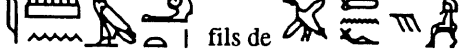
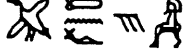

"The work of Mut and Hathor is that what acts among women, for it is in women that the good demon and the bad demon are active on earth."<sup>24</sup>

Here Mut is certainly intended as the goddess of the good, well-behaved women who conformed to the social pattern expected of a decent Egyptian woman. To prevent misunderstanding: Egyptian deities were not subjected to strict moral standards; they were too great, too overwhelming. One had to come to terms with the realities of life as reflected in the personalities and deeds of Egyptian deities. Even the wicked, sometimes scandalous, god Seth was worshipped for thousands of years in Egypt before he was demonized in the last millennium before the Common Era. Dancing and drinking had a place in the cult of Mut as well as in that of Hathor. A priest of Amun, married to a female follower of Mut, records on a stela that he inebriated himself in honour of the goddess Mut.<sup>25</sup> Drinking, including drunkenness, was socially acceptable at certain religious feasts and obviously positively regarded, because it tore down the barriers between humans and the goddess and gave way to more ecstatic forms of religion. Nevertheless, the work of Hathor was connected with the bad women because she was more the type of wild licentious female than Mut, the matron.

I must conclude. Much about Mut must remain untold here. I have said nothing about the particulars of the local cults of Mut outside Thebes, nor of the cruel but still authoritative Mut *hr-snwt.s*, to whom human beings were sacrificed in Heliopolis.<sup>26</sup>

Mut is the mother, sometimes the bad mother, but still '*La Mamma*,' an attractive and sometimes terrifying stately lady who was exalted to the highest honour, that of the divine queen-regnant or female pharaoh.

<sup>24</sup> P. Insinger 8, 18-19; cf. Lichtheim 1983 (supra n. 2) 204-205 lines (18)-(19).

<sup>25</sup> F. Bisson de la Roque, "Complément de la Stèle d'  fils de  époux de  , prêtre d'Amon qui réside à Karnak," *BIFAO* 25 (1925) 47-48; R. Engelbach, "Notes of Inspection, April 1921," *ASAE* 21 (1921) 190-92; F. Daumas, "Les objets sacrés de la déesse Hathor à Dendara," *RdE* 22 (1970) 75-76.

<sup>26</sup> J. Yoyotte, "Héra d'Héliopolis et le sacrifice humaine," *Annuaire de l'École pratique des Hautes Études* 89 (1980-1981) 29-102.