

WHO'S BEEN SLEEPING IN SITRE-IN'S SARCOPHAGUS?

THE MISIDENTIFICATION OF A LOST QUEEN

ABSTRACT:

Hidden in the back rooms of the Cairo Museum is the sarcophagus of Queen Hatshepsut's wet nurse named Sitre-In. However, it is my belief that the woman contained within this coffin is, in fact, one of the missing and powerful Queens of the late 18th Dynasty. My argument is predicated on three characteristics associated with this mummy: her height, the positioning of her left arm and her overall appearance. Measuring approximately 20 inches shorter than the interior dimensions of her sarcophagus, the mummy clearly was not originally intended to be interred in this coffin and was likely placed in this location long after her death. Furthermore, following extensive CT scans in 2007 it was determined that the mummy's left arm was originally positioned across her chest in the traditional pose of a Queen. This practice was reserved for elite female rulers of ancient Egypt, and it is unlikely that a nurse would be posed in this manner during the embalming process. Additionally, with her large eyes, prominent cheekbones, full lips, and squared jaw line, this woman was undoubtedly quite beautiful in life, and she resembles certain images of royal women dating from the late 18th Dynasty. There are a number of Queens from this period who vanished mysteriously and whose remains have not yet been conclusively identified including Meritaten, Ankhesenamun and Mutnodjmet, and it is my suspicion that the mummy interred in Sitre-In's coffin could be any one of these women. Through my analysis of the physical characteristics of this mummy, I intend to provide evidence that this woman is one of the absentee Queens of the late 18th Dynasty and thereby properly identify her as a powerful ruler of ancient Egypt.

ARTICLE:

Hidden in the dark and dusty back rooms of the Cairo Museum is the sarcophagus of a member of the 18th Dynasty royal family named Sitre-In. This woman dutifully served as the wet nurse for the great Queen Hatshepsut, one of the few female pharaohs to rule over ancient Egypt. Serving the Queen from infancy to adulthood, Sitre-In functioned in a maternal capacity and undoubtedly played a pivotal role in the life of the pharaoh. As Hatshepsut took hold of the empire and grew into a formidable ruler, she often paid homage to her nurse who assumed a venerated role similar to that of a pharaoh's mother. The women developed such a strong bond that it was believed after death they were placed next to one another in a small burial chamber located in the Valley of the Kings (known as "KV60"). This story would be a charming anecdote illustrating maternal devotion were it not for one problem—the woman contained within the coffin of Sitre-In is not Hatshepsut's nurse but is, I believe, one of the powerful and missing Queens of the late 18th Dynasty.

My argument concerning the identity of this mummy is predicated on three physical characteristics: her height, the positioning of her left arm and her overall appearance. Measuring approximately 20 inches shorter than the interior dimensions of her sarcophagus, this mummy clearly was not originally intended to be interred in this coffin and was likely placed in this location long after her death. Furthermore, following extensive CT scans in 2007 it was determined that the mummy's left arm was originally positioned across her chest in the traditional pose of a Queen. This practice was reserved for elite female rulers of ancient Egypt, and it is unlikely that a nurse would be posed in this manner during the embalming process. Additionally, with her large eyes, prominent cheekbones, full lips, and squared jaw line, this woman was undoubtedly quite beautiful, and her features resemble certain images of royal women dating from the late 18th Dynasty. There are a number of Queens from this period who vanished mysteriously and whose remains have not yet been conclusively identified including Meritaten, Ankhesenamun and Mutnodjmet, and it is my suspicion that the mummy interred in Sitre-In's coffin could be any one of these women.

I will begin my argument by providing a brief biography of Sitre-In and providing insight into why she is considered such an integral figure in the life of Queen Hatshepsut. I will then present evidence based on the physical characteristics of the mummy that indicates that her identity is not that of Sitre-In. I will conclude my assessment by examining a 2-dimensional reconstruction of the mummy's face and reporting any similarities she may share with depictions of royal personages of the Amarna/post-Amarna period. Through my analysis of the physiological characteristics of this mummy, I intend to provide evidence that this woman is one of the absentee Queens of the late 18th Dynasty and thereby properly identify her as a powerful ruler of ancient Egypt.

Sitre-In clearly held an important position within Hatshepsut's royal family due to the intimate relationship she had with the fledgling pharaoh. Kara Cooney proposes two possible situations under which Sitre-In may have adopted the role of royal wet nurse: (1) she abandoned any desire to have more children in order to nourish Hatshepsut or (2) she recently suffered a stillborn child and therefore was a prime candidate to nurse a new child (25). Cooney goes on to describe the duties of the Royal Wet Nurse and explain that the maternal role of Sitre-In transformed her into a blood relation of Hatshepsut within the world of ancient Egypt:

[Sitre-In] would have been the person who gave the infant Hatshepsut most of her affection, who held her during countless hours of nursing, who cleaned her of filth and spit-ups, who held the baby while she burned with fever or screamed from the pain of erupting teeth, who slept with her during the night, waking to nurse her as much as she liked, cuddling her and murmuring her love, telling her "no" when she began to get out of hand. . . [Sitre-In] and Hatshepsut must have grown close to each other in the royal nursery. (25-6)

Indeed, the role of the royal wet nurse was a great honour and a coveted position reserved for elite women (Cooney 25). Hatshepsut essentially took on the role of Sitre-In's adoptive daughter and the two would have shared a bond essentially indistinguishable of that between a biological mother and child.

Sitre-In's exalted position within the royal family is demonstrated in a badly damaged sandstone statue of Hatshepsut that was placed in the pharaoh's temple at Dier el-Bahri (Tyldesley, Hatshepsut 80). In this sculpture, a miniaturized masculine Hatshepsut sits on the knee of Sitre-In in a pose from the Old Kingdom that was "usually reserved for depictions of the king on the lap of his mother or goddess" (Keller 161). Though the inscription on the statue is badly damaged, there is a limestone ostraca with a draft of this text located in the Ambras Collection in Vienna (Cline and O'Connor 98). This dedication underscores the exalted status Sitre-In held within the court of the Queen:

May the king Maatkare [Hatshepsut] and Osiris, first of the Westerners, [the great god] Lord of Abydos, be gracious and give a mortuary offering [of cakes and beer, beef and fowl, and thousands of everything] good and pure, and the sweet breath of the north wind to the spirit of the chief nurse who suckled the Mistress of the Two Lands, Sit-Re, called Yen [Inet], justified. (Tyldesley, Hatshepsut 80-1)

The reverential attitude expressed in this text demonstrates the cherished position that Sitre-In occupied within Hatshepsut's royal circle. It was this intimate bond between the Queen and her nurse that caused certain Egyptologists to assume that the two mummies found in tomb KV60 were the bodies of Hatshepsut and Sitre-In as they would likely be interred in close proximity to one another.



Fig. 1. Digital reconstruction of profile and frontal views of KV60-B mummy. Credit: Kevin McGuinness.

The mummy currently identified as Sitre-In was found in 1903 by Howard Carter in a small tomb located in the Valley of the Kings and was brought to the Cairo Museum approximately five years later (Tyldesley, Hatshepsut 81). According to Carter, the tomb was small and uninscribed consisting of a "very rough flight of steps leading down to a passage of 5 metres long, ending in a low and rough square, about 4 X 5 metres" (qtd. in Reeves and Wilkinson 186). Due to the location where her remains were found, this mummy was initially referred to as "KV60-B," and I shall hereafter refer to her by this title in this article. Carter described the mummy as a "fairly well preserved" mature female that had "long hair of a golden colour" (176). At the time of her death, this woman would have been approximately fifty years of age and she was suffering from a mild form of scoliosis. Her body was laid in the lower portion of a wooden coffin inscribed with the name "In or Inet" which led Egyptologists to believe that this was the remains of Sitre-In (Tyldesley, Hatshepsut 81). The mummy KV60-B was housed alongside a number of mummified geese, as well as an overweight female corpse that has subsequently been identified as Queen Hatshepsut through the use of DNA analysis. The unsophisticated and haphazard nature of this tomb indicates that it was not originally intended for the interment of these royal women though their original burial sites have never been discovered.

As indicated at the opening of this article, I disagree with the identification of the mummy KV60-B as that of the Royal Wet Nurse Sitre-In. My hypothesis is based on three physical characteristics associated with the mummy. First, her height does not correspond with the dimensions of the sarcophagus in which she was interred. Secondly, her left arm is bent across her chest in a position traditionally reserved for Queens in ancient Egypt. Finally, her general appearance resembles the sculptural images of certain late 18th Dynasty royal women who, I believe, are more likely candidates for the mummy's identity. As I shall demonstrate throughout the remainder of this paper, this mummy is most likely one of the so-called "lost" royal women from the Amarna/post-Amarna period.

The evidence used to identify the KV60-B mummy as Sitre-In is based primarily on the coffin in which she was deposited that is inscribed with the name of Hatshepsut's nurse. However, as Zahi Hawass explains in his article "Quest for the Mummy of Hatshepsut" Sitre-In's 2.3m long sarcophagus is much larger than the 1.5m tall mummy placed within it. This discrepancy casts doubt on the mummy's identification as Sitre-In, as a sarcophagus created for a royal person would be custom designed to fit the dimensions of their body and it is therefore highly unlikely that this coffin was originally intended for this woman. The more likely scenario is that the mummy KV60-B was placed in a coffin appropriated from Hatshepsut's wet nurse (whose mummy was discarded) in order to protect it. This act was probably carried out by priests of the 21st Dynasty who relocated many of the royal mummies in the Valley of the Kings in order to conceal them from tomb robbers and vandals.

Furthermore, the mummy's left arm appears to have originally been stretched across her chest in a position traditionally ascribed to a Queen. This arm, which was severed from her body at some point in antiquity, was subsequently laid across the lower abdomen and was therefore ignored by Egyptologists who initially inspected the mummy. Also, the fingers of her left hand are clenched as though they originally held a lotus sceptre, the symbol of female political power in ancient Egypt. As Joyce Tyldesley explains, the left arm placed across the chest is "the standard position for 18th Dynasty women in art and sculpture, but is rarely found on mummies" (Tyldesley, *Chronicles of the Queen of Egypt* 123). In fact, the royal women posed with their left arms across their chests are almost exclusively Queens and include Hatshepsut and Tiye, both 18th Dynasty rulers. It is highly unlikely that a nanny, regardless of how beloved, would be bestowed such a grand honour as to be buried in the coveted position of a Queen.

The high political status of the KV60-B mummy is also reflected by the quality of her mummification which indicates a tremendous amount of time and care placed on the embalming process. Using frontal and profile photographs of her well preserved mummy, I was able to produce a two-dimensional digital reconstruction of this woman's appearance in life (Fig. 1). With her large wide set eyes, prominent cheekbones, and squared jaw line, this woman was undoubtedly quite beautiful and resembles sculptural images of the glamorous Queens from the late 18th Dynasty such as Nefertiti, Mutnodjmet and Tiye. As the bodies of all six of Nefertiti's daughters and her half-sister are missing, it is possible that mummy KV60-B could belong to one of these royal ladies. Indeed, this woman possesses certain refined physical characteristics such as a long graceful neck, a high brow line and full lips. Though her nose has been lost in antiquity, the nasal cavity is relatively high and narrow, indicating that she had a long and slender nose. Her plaited auburn hair resemble the locks found on the mummy of Queen Tiye from KV35, and much like the Queen's stresses, it appears that embalmers have treated her hair with henna to achieve its chestnut brown colouring. Her appearance serves to highlight a crass reality of the ancient world: beauty equals power, and it is entirely likely that this attractive woman would have enjoyed a privileged position within the Egyptian royal family.

The manner in which an individual was interred in ancient Egypt was reflective of their socio-political status and all of the characteristics associated with the KV60-B mummy's burial seem to indicate that she was an important historical figure. These circumstantial clues combined with the mummy's physical resemblance to images of Queens from the late 18th Dynasty point to the fact that she played a key role in Egyptian politics. Unfortunately, the evidence that I have presented in this article is largely qualitative in nature and therefore cannot conclusively determine the true identity of this mummy. Perhaps once the DNA profiles of all of the members of the 18th Dynasty royal family have been successfully analysed, it will be possible to ascertain her role within Egyptian history. Until such time, she will remain a beautiful enigma that taunts Egyptologists, her true identity a mystery just beyond the reach of modern science.

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