

Fatma Ismail:

Today we are discussing the aftermath of King Tutankhamun's reign with Dr. Maggie Bryson. She specializes in the history and art of the later new kingdom and is currently preparing a book on the reign of the general turned Pharaoh Horemheb. Thank you so much for agreeing to do this interview with us today at ARCE, Maggie. This is an extra special time that we get with you knowing that your due date is a week from today.

Maggie Bryson:

Hi Fatma, it's really good to talk to you. Thanks for having me.

Ismail:

As someone who has studied the history of the end of the 18th dynasty, can you tell us about what you think happened after King Tutankhamun died? Was there a struggle for the throne?

Bryson:

If anything, it almost seems as though there may have been a struggle for the throne brewing before Tutankhamun had died. It's odd because looking back on it, it seems that there wouldn't have been any way to know what the succession would look like after Tutankhamun. But already during his reign, powerful men, powerful officials, held an amount of influence that was, you know, to some extent unprecedented in Egyptian history. We have the famous men behind the throne, the three men who were sort of the inner circle of Tutankhamun, the General Horemheb, the advisor Ay, and treasurer, Maya. And these men held not just real political influence, to an extraordinary degree, but they also had a degree of visibility, a degree of prestige, that was very unusual for officials in ancient Egypt, where the king, of course, was normally the conceptual center of the universe. They had, for instance, the ability to make monuments for themselves. Horemheb famously has this magnificent tomb at Memphis, on a scale that's just very rarely seen for private official up to that point. And their titles, when you talk

about the way that these men presented themselves in texts, they claimed to do the kinds of things that a king might do. Maya the treasurer, for instance, was known to claim as a kind of epithet the term “one who pacifies the two lands or one who unites the two lands with his plans.” Under normal circumstances, only a king would present himself doing those things. Ay showed himself in extremely close contact with Tutankhamun and with Ankhesenamun as a queen. He was represented in art, very close to the royal couple. He oversaw the building, during Tutankhamun’s lifetime, probably, of his Mansion of Millions of Years, as Memorial Chapel at Thebes. And Horemheb, of course, in addition to the real influence, he must have wielded as the leader of the Egyptian army, also seems to have already been positioning himself with a series of titles, with a series of epithets, with presenting himself in a way that he was the king's deputy. He was the king’s eyes and ears throughout the land, he was the person that the king could sort of count on to do all of these royal things. And in some ways, there is an idea that Horemheb may already have been positioning himself as the royal successor even during the lifetime of Tutankhamun - he held a title Iry Paet that is normally a sort of formal title meaning someone who belongs to the hereditary nobility. But when used by itself, it's associated in the New Kingdom with royal sons and later was a title that was adopted by the person who would become the successor of the reigning king. And it can be and often is translated as Hereditary Prince or Crown Prince. So all three of these men held an extraordinary degree of power and extraordinary degree of visibility and influence, long before Tutankhamun had died. So when we start looking at the events that unfolded after the death of Tutankhamun it becomes clear that this struggle didn't erupt, necessarily, in just in the uncertainty that followed the King's death, there seems to have been a very interesting power dynamic in place already.

Ismail:

These powerful officials seem to have remarkable amount of influence that was, as you said, unprecedented in Egyptian history. They claimed royal titles, had magnificent tombs, one shouldn't be

surprised them that they positioned themselves early on to succeed Tutankhamun even though he was still a young boy.

Bryson:

Exactly.

Ismail:

Another vivid example of how these officials claim unique sorts of positions is how the high official Ay is depicted in Tutankhamun's tomb. He is represented there performing the Opening of the Mouth Ceremony on the mummy of the king. That's definitely an unusual funerary scene for a royal tomb

Bryson:

It really is. And we know that in ancient Egypt, the person who buried a man was typically paid for his funeral who officiated at the funeral, who performed that ritual was typically the person who was designated or intended to be that person's heir. Ay by showing himself performing Opening the Mouth ritual was really laying claim to a role as Tutankhamun's natural successor, the correct successor.

Ismail:

What about Tutankhamun's widow? What do you think happened to her after the death of her husband?

Bryson:

Neither her mummy nor her tomb has ever been discovered. And there's no certain evidence about what happened to her. The short answer is we really just don't know.

Ismail:

I am curious to know if you think she was the so-called Amarna queen? She's this mysterious figure who wrote to the Hittite King asking for his son's hand in marriage after her husband died. And what would that mean within the wider context of New Kingdom history? What implications will that have for the aftermath of King Tutankhamun's reign?

Bryson:

Right! So I'm sure that most of your listeners probably know that what we're talking about here is what's called the Dahamunzu episode. This is an event that are a series of events that's recorded in Hittite text called the deeds of Shuppiluliuma. That records the reign of the Hittite king Shuppiluliuma I in this text we hear about a queen whose husband had died. The Queen is referred to as Dahamunzu, which is a corruption of the Egyptian term ta Hemet Nesu, which simply means the king's wife, and the name of her husband does not tell us which King she's referring to. It could have been Akhenaten, it could have been to Tutankhamun. The way the Hittites wrote the names of Egyptian kings, it's impossible to tell unfortunately, exactly which king was meant. So the story is really tantalizing. It tells us that the Hittite king got a letter from the queen of Egypt asking for a Hittite Prince as a husband, and this is something that would have been completely unheard of from the perspective of the ancient Egyptians. The ancient Egyptians, as you know, were famous for never marrying their daughters to foreign princes.

Ismail:

Yeah, it's usually the opposite.

Bryson:

Right! Exactly a royal Egyptian royal son might take a wife from abroad, but an Egyptian royal daughter would not marry a foreigner. And so for the Hittite king to have gotten this letter must have been quite extraordinary. But what it said was, "I'm Queen of Egypt, my husband has died and I have no son, please send me one of your sons to be my husband so that I don't have to marry my servant." The

Hittite King is recorded in these deeds of Shuppililiuma as having reacted incredulously, as having been so surprised that he didn't believe what the queen said – “That doesn't make sense. Surely you have a son.” He actually is said to have sent a messenger to Egypt to verify, to fact check this because it was so extraordinary. So they established that - the Hittites established to their satisfaction that the queen was telling the truth and they agreed to send a son, a prince by the name of Zananza, to Egypt to marry the queen. And he was murdered on route and never reached Egypt. And then we don't really hear any more about this episode about what unfolded in the aftermath. And so we just don't know who the king was who had died. And it's really tantalizing to wonder which queen this was. And the two sort of main candidates are Nefertiti; Akhenaten's widow, or Ankhesenamun; Tutankhamun's widow.

Looking at it on the face of the evidence, to me, Ankhesenamun just makes more sense. Especially because now with a recent study, there is a growing confidence that Tutankhamun was actually the son of Akhenaten. When Akhenaten died, there would not have been a situation in which there was no royal son. And what's more, when you think about the way that Akhenaten had presented his family, had developed his family as royal personages, as political players over the course of his reign...he had daughters, he had surviving daughters when he died, who had been very visible, very prominent, while he was alive and who seem perhaps to have been being groomed, if not for sole rule than to take a real significant role in the governance of the country, and to serve as the basis for a continuation of Akhenaten's dynasty. So had Tutankhamun not existed as a royal son, even then there were daughters positioned to take the reins, so to speak, and to kind of shepherd in a continuation of that dynasty. And of course, if we think of Nefertiti as the widow who was writing, who would have been writing to the Hittite King, she herself was tremendously powerful. If we, if we posit that she survived Akhenaten, she may have become king in her own right in his wake. Right? There's this idea that Nefertiti actually restyled herself as a female King. So there are a lot of different ways that Akhenaten's dynasty could have continued even had not there been Tutankhamun. And we know, of course, he was there. So it seems kind of out of the question that the Dahamunzu was Nefertiti. It could have been Akhenaten's daughter Meritaten, who had been elevated during his reign as chief queen and who seems to have

married you know, the ephemeral Semenekhkare, who could have been the pharaoh who died leaving Meritaten a widow with no sons. Even then, you know, because of the way that Akhenaten's daughters even were positioned, it seems unlikely that they would have reached outside of Egypt, outside of this royal family that had been so carefully cultivated and sort of built up, for a husband.

Ankhesenamun, on the other hand, really would have been in a position - we know that she and Tutankhamun didn't have surviving children. And at the time, when Tutankhamun died, there were powerful servants ready to step into the picture, as we just talked about. Again, we don't know that what they were positioning themselves for was really to take the throne when Tutankhamun died. In theory, no one could have known that he was going to die so young, without an heir. And it seems sort of unreasonable to think that this is part of some grand plot, we just don't have any reason to believe that. But at the same time, there were these powerful men, any one of whom could have been waiting in the wings to step in and marry Ankhesenamun when Tutankhamun died. So I think just on the face of it, it seems most likely that Ankhesenamun was the Dahamunzu. The problem is, at least recently, there's been a suggestion that based on the chronology, it must have been Akhenaten who had died. And either his widow Nefertiti or his daughter Meritaten and perhaps in the wake of Semenekhkare's death who wrote to the Hittites asking for a son. And the idea is that we don't really know how long Shuppiliuma reigned. We know that he was king during the reign of Akhenaten, we don't know for sure that he survived into the reign of Tutankhamun. And there's some very complicated arguments on the basis of synchronisms with, you know, Hittite political events and Egyptian political events that I just don't think really are susceptible to solution. I don't think you can really solve that puzzle based on the information we have. So my feeling is that it's Ankhesenamun out of all the candidates that have been proposed by historians. But there's unfortunately no conclusive evidence. It's one of those things that for the time being at least does remain a mystery.

Ismail:

To add to this puzzle, Percy Newberry mentioned that he saw a signet ring with the name of Ay and Ankhesenamun. The signet ring hasn't been found, unfortunately. But if it did exist, then perhaps Ankhesenamun ended up marrying one of her servants in a way.

Bryson:

Absolutely, I would absolutely point to that as you know, a reason to think that that she was the Dahameunzu. The ring doesn't necessarily mean that she married Ay, and Ay always presented the wife that he had before he became king as his queen. Her name is Ti. But he was definitely closely associated with Ankhesenamun. One of his sort of epithets, these terms that that Egyptian officials would take to sort of describe what it was that they did, what made them special, even if they weren't really official job titles, was 'The One Who Extends the Hand of the God,' which is a reference to the role of the queen in the religion of ancient Egypt, it seems that Ay was very close to Ankhesenamun in some way - he was represented with her, for instance, in this ring that has their two cartouches together, and in some objects from the tomb of Tutankhamun. So, this association, the fact that Ay was very close to the royal couple even when Tutankhamun was alive and that he might have been sort of, you can kind of picture him in the background sort of waiting to step in. Using our imaginations, it makes it very tempting to go with that reconstruction. Again, that's the kind of thing that we do with history, right? We read in these motivations, we read in character, even when it's not necessarily explicit in the evidence that we have. But I think in this case, you know, this fact right that when Tutankhamun died, there were so many possibilities. They were powerful servants. Yeah. One party or another, you know, so Ankhesenamun might have had allies at court that that wanted, for some reason to prevent one of the other the servants from taking the throne.

INTERLUDE

Ismail:

It's also important to think about Egypt's relationship with the Hittites. It's hard to believe that at any time in Egypt, there were no Egyptian candidates for the throne. There must have been a royal relative somewhere, a nephew of previous King, a brother, nobleman, who might have been considered an appropriate candidate for marriage to an Egyptian princess, or might have stepped into the royal role on their own, the way Horemheb eventually did, for example, and the question of why they would have wanted to bring in a Hittite when such a thing would have been so far outside the norm, is an interesting question.

Bryson:

It really is.

Ismail:

Did your study of Horemheb reveal much about Egypt's foreign relations with the Hittites and other foreign countries? Tutankhamun seems to have inherited a complicated situation at the borders. According to Amarna letters. For example, Egypt lost some of its influence over cities in Syria, and Palestine during the reign of his father.

Bryson:

Under Tutankhamun, it's possible that there was an Egyptian military expedition into Syria. We think in particular that the city state of Kadesh, which is famous from the later account of Ramses II's attempt to keep the city under Egyptian control, was a point of contention between Egypt and the Hittites under Tutankhamun. We don't know for sure whether there was actual military activity in Tutankhamun's reign. We have mention in the Hittite records of Shuppililiuma I that the Egyptians were active militarily in the region, but it's very difficult to date those records. It's not clear what the correspondence between the Hittite chronology and the Egyptian chronology was. So we don't know in every instance whether something that's mentioned in the Hittite annals happened under Akhenaten or Tutankhamun for

instance. But Tutankhamun is definitely shown in military contexts in his own monuments and artwork from his reign. So very famously, there are objects like this one particularly beautiful box from his tomb that show him in a military garb. There are also military scenes from Tutankhamun's mansion Millions of Years at Karnak. Ray Johnson was able to reconstruct to some degree these scenes and recognize their significance there - a lot of them are quite unique, and they show very unusually sort of vivid images of military activity under Tutankhamun.

Ismail:

Of course, just because the king was shown in battle, it doesn't necessarily mean that he participated in any military activity. This could be just a symbolic representation of an ideal King who's supposed to maintain order against the enemies.

Bryson:

And in fact, under Tutankhamun, we have reason to think that it would more likely have actually been Horemheb, who, if there was military activity in Syria, would have been in charge of the troops – that it would have been Horemheb who was actually in the field. Horemheb's tomb in Saqqara shows images of captives, including Asiatic captives, that is captives from Syria and including Hittites, being brought before Horemheb and petitioning for peace. And it may be that Horemheb played a really important role in whatever was happening with respect to Egypt's foreign relations and military activities during this period.

Ismail:

Do you really believe that by the end of King Tutankhamun's reign, Egypt, returned to the standard traditions of at least the early New Kingdom in terms of religion and politics? We know at least in the arts, Amarna style still persisted a little. Did other things carry over from the time of so called heretic King Akhenaten as well?

Bryson:

There are a lot of ways in which you could say that Akhenaten's reign really changed everything. Asking if anything continued, it's probably faster to ask what didn't, or what wasn't changed, at least, by the end of the reign of Akhenaten. The Egyptians who came after the king, the elites who came after the Amarna period would probably want you to think that they were returning to some ideal pre-Amarna past where Akhenaten had never existed. But it was really impossible for them to go back. And you can see this in a lot of ways, as you say, the artistic styles of the Amarna period are still visible, you know, into the reign of Seti the first. And some of that likely had to do with the need to retrain artists to develop conventions that were acceptable and to train people to produce art. Because you know, art isn't just something that you can magically alter overnight, the way the Egyptians created it, it would have required a certain amount of reconfiguring how people thought about art and made art. So of course, you know, a lot of these conventions, particularly in how the human body was depicted persisted. But there were other things as well. For instance, the Amarna religion didn't just vanish into nothing overnight. It didn't come from nothing either, it was part of a longstanding trend of increasing emphasis on the sun god over the course of the New Kingdom. So, Akhenaten didn't entirely revolutionize the Egyptian religion in the sense that there was something there that was a precedent for his elevation of the Sun God. And so when he died, even as the Egyptians reacted against the particular way that he had elevated the Sun god above all other gods and had directed resources away from the cult, so the other gods they didn't immediately, the Aten didn't lose its place as a member of the Egyptian Pantheon in the sense that it was still a form of the Sun God. And in fact, there was a temple to the Aten at Memphis that seems to have been active into the reign of Seti I. So they're...in a lot of ways it was not an overnight shift, at least outside of Thebes. At Thebes of course, which is where we have modern day Luxor, which is where we have Karnak temple, we have all of these famous private tombs, we have the Valley of the Kings, at Thebes is where you can see this reaction, this overwhelming rejection of Akhenaten and his religion most clearly because this was the stronghold of the god Amun. But in other

parts of Egypt, it seems as though there may have been slightly more gradual transition, at least with respect to the religion of Akhenaten. And you also have to think that it wasn't just things that persisted from Amarna that we have to think about. Akhenaten's reign changed Egypt in other ways - it gave rise to new conventions and traditions. So for instance, after the Amarna period, we start to see non royal people, so people other than the king, depicted on the walls of their tomb chapels directly interacting with the gods. Before Akhenaten, there would have been a need to have the king sort of in place between a private individual and the gods, to act as a kind of intermediary people were shown interacting with the king, doing things for him, but not with the gods directly. It's possible that Akhenaten's fall, that the reaction against him after his death, damaged the prestige of the royal Institution altogether to the extent that now people have sort of lost that barrier to interacting directly with the gods.

Ismail:

So the Amarna period really did change everything, there was no going back to some pure time before Akhenaten. And it's interesting because we think about this a lot in religious terms. Akhenaten is so famous for being the so called first monotheist, regardless of whether he chose to consider his religion monotheistic or not. One of the things that interests us the most is what he did in terms of religion, and how his choice to focus on this one god resonates so strongly with us, given our experience of monotheism. But there was a lot more going on. There were a lot more reasons for people to react against or agree with Akhenaten at the time. In ancient Egypt is, you know, there wasn't a divide between religion and politics, religion and economy, people's livelihood depended on religious activities.

Bryson:

That's so true. And that's so critical to consider when you think about this period and its events. And it's interesting to think, as we noted, right, there was this development from early in the New Kingdom, to

have an increasing emphasis on the sun god - that didn't go away just because the cult of the Aten and by and large lost the prestige, and there was a reaction against this elevation and you don't have this cult of the Aten after Akhenaten. The Aten was very closely identified with the Re-Horakhty, so the Falcon form of the solar God as Horus. And it's interesting that in the post Amarna period, so the 20 years or so after the death of Akhenaten into the early reign of Ramses II, you start seeing a lot of officials...you continue to see a lot of if officials associate themselves with Re-Horakhty - that God, not the Aten, and it couldn't have escaped anyone that Re-Horakhty was a form of the sun god closely associated with the Aten.

Ismail:

Horemheb was a fascinating character. He was obviously a great military man and sagacious diplomat, how much do we know about who succeeded him?

Bryson:

The story of Horemheb's succession is an interesting one. Horemheb was succeeded not by a relative, but by a fellow military man who had risen to high office much the same way that Horemheb himself did. This man was Paramesu, Horemheb's vizier, and he held some of the same titles that Horemheb himself had held, including king's deputy and Iry Paat, which as we've said, can be taken to mean Crown Prince. He was almost certainly being positioned as the heir during Horemheb's lifetime. The most likely reason that Horemheb did this of course, is that he didn't have any sons, or at least none that survived him. But it would have been a very strategic decision, no matter what the circumstances had been. Paramesu, who took the throne as Ramses I, was not only an able military officer and administrator, but also had a very talented son, who would go on to become Seti I. So the succession was secured beyond just one generation. Paramesu in effect was a package deal. Interestingly, he may have been related by marriage to the family of queen Tiye. This is not certain. It's just something that there are hints of. But in this case, he would have combined the military acumen that he needed to deal

with the complicated situation on Egypt's northern border with the legitimacy that would have been conferred by a connection to the very powerful clan of queen Tiye from Akhmim

Ismail:

Horemheb is usually thought of as the king who brought traditions back to its heights of glory and to have finally restored it after Akhenaten did so much to undermine the authority of traditional cults. He's also thought of as this great sort of triumphant champion of God Amoun, the traditional Theban god of kingship. Is that all there is to it? Do you agree with this perspective?

Bryson:

Actually, if you look closely, I think you'll find that there's a lot more to it than that. And, in fact, that depiction of Horemheb as the triumphant restorer of order after the Amarna Period and as the champion of the God Amun, is not really an accurate reflection, I think, of what was going on at the time. First of all, it's important to recognize that what we would think of as religious concerns were not the most important thing at stake here. If that were the case, then Tutankhamun would have been the one who was remembered as the champion of Amun. It was under him, for instance, that the high priesthood of Amun was restored. We have the tomb of...a very beautiful and large tomb of an important High Priest of Amun during the reign of Tutankhamun. And the process of the restoration of the cult of Amun and the refurbishment of temples had already begun under him. So if it were a religious matter, Horemheb would not be the first person you think of. If you look at Horemheb's monuments he's not actually shown in connection with Amun that much or described in connection with Amun that much outside of Thebes, where you would expect him to be making reference to Amun all the time anyways. He was much more closely associated with, of course, his patron God, if you will, Horus, outside of Thebes. So there are some things wrong with the traditional account in that regard. The other thing to bear in mind is that order was not necessarily fully restored under Horemheb. In fact, there are a lot of indications that conflict continued well into his reign, perhaps through almost to the

very end. For instance, Horemheb's monuments are almost all usurpations. That is, they were almost all instances in which Horemheb erased the name of an earlier King, particularly Ay, and replaced it with his own, or where he found existing incomplete construction and finished it like in the case of the 10th pylon at Karnak. His tomb at Thebes is unfinished. There really just isn't that much original architecture from the reign of Horemheb. And there's not even that much original artwork, when you think about it. Most of the sculptures that we have Horemheb are sculptures of Tutankhamun that were repurposed. And it's hard even to reconstruct a sort of idea of what we should think of Horemheb as looking like. Most Egyptian kings have a kind of official portrait. But we really don't know what for Horemheb the official portrait should be thought of as. Horemheb may or may not have had really good control of all of Egypt throughout his reign. His monuments at Thebes fall off after the early part of his reign. We have a dated notation about him that's dated to year eight. But after that, we don't have any more year dates of his reign in the Theban region until we find wine jars from year 14 at his Theban tomb. There is the incomplete architectural record of his reign also, which indicates that he may not have been as active in building as you would have expected a king who ruled in a peaceful, consolidated way over the course of at least 14 years. Ongoing conflict of a political nature is very compatible with the record that we see under Horemheb. And so I think that to portray him as this triumphant restorer, and as the champion of Amun, is if anything almost the opposite of the truth. In fact, Horemheb - his greatest contribution to what we might think of as the restoration of order may have been to plan wisely for his succession, to put Paramesu in place as his successor, knowing that he would have secured the kingship for at least one generation or more to come.

Ismail:

Why did the ancient Egyptian King lists ignore the whole line of the Amarna kings then before Horemheb including Tutankhamun and Ay?

Bryson:

That's actually an interesting question. If the reason was primarily religious, and remember, the king list we're talking about appeared in a temple context, then you might think that Tutankhamun could have been included, because it's really under him that the cults, Amun and the other gods were fully brought back to life, so to speak, but he's skipped over along with the other Amarna kings. It's possible that in spite of the fact that he renounced Akhenaten's heresy, Tutankhamun was still close, too close to him for comfort. But then again, the answer may have had as much to do with the politics of succession as anything, even though he was the son and heir of Akhenaten, he was still a legitimate king in one important sense as a direct descendant of Amenhotep III. Horemheb and his successors could have preferred not to have a reminder of the way the royal lineage changed after Tutankhamun. And so Horemheb being the jumping off point for everything that came after the Amarna heresy was tied up in a lot of different things political, dynastic, as well as religious and conceptual. And so it's a really fascinating period with a lot of complexity. And there's a lot more work to be done to sort of tease out all these different threads.

Ismail:

Thank you for your insights today, Maggie, and good luck with your book and family addition.

Bryson:

Thank you so much. It was great talking to you. And I'd like to send my best wishes to all my fellow ARCE members.