

SEKHMET

Sekhet, lady of Sa, Sekhet, lady of Rehesau, Sekhet, the great lady, the queen of Ant, Sekhet in Bāshu, Sekhet in Sah, Sekhet-Nut in Het-khāt, and Sekhet in Nefar (?) - Shuu. The principal titles of Sekhet were "Mighty lady, lady of Flame, Tefnut in Senemet, Ptah, lady of heaven, mistress of the two lands," "lady of Tep-nef," "lady of Tchār, and of Sehert," "chief of the Libyan lands, mistress of Pa-mertet," etc. The name "Sekhet" appears to

THE MANY NAMES OF SEKHMET, SPELT HERE "SEKHET"
 "THE GODS OF THE EGYPTIANS", E.A. WALLIS BUDGE, 1904

PATRON GODDESS of HEALERS and PHYSICIANS

SOFIA AZIZ



"Her gaze was pleased by it. Then she drank and it pleased her heart. She returned, drunk..."

"The Destruction of Mankind", from the "Book of the Heavenly Cow"

This text forms part of the tale of the Destruction of Mankind, a New Kingdom text dealing with Ra's brutal suppression of a rebellious human plot against the sun-god. In his wrath he decided to punish mankind by sending forth an aspect of his daughter, the "Eye of Ra": *"Let your Eye go, that it may smite them for you, the schemers of evil. . . . May it descend as Hathor."* Thus the nurturing goddess of the good things in life (love, sex and music) set about slaughtering the scheming humans and wading in their blood. The story continues with Ra suddenly having a change of heart after seeing how much enjoyment Hathor was gaining from the carnage: *"I have overpowered mankind, and it was pleasure to my heart."* With Hathor planning on returning for a second bout of butchery, this time in the form of a raging lioness, Sekhmet, Ra hatches a plan to stop her. When dawn broke the goddess came to the place *"of which she had said 'I will slay mankind there,'"* and found that the fields were flooded with blood. Ra's way of stopping his bloodthirsty daughter was to inundate the fields with beer mash stained with haematite (a reddish mineral) to look like human blood. A delighted Sekhmet (see text above) gorged on this and promptly passed out. When she awoke her bloodlust had dissipated and humanity was saved.

The name *Sekhmet* was derived from the word *sekhem*, which means "power". In ancient Egyptian mythology Sekhmet was the lion-headed goddess who, with her husband Ptah and son Nefertem, completed the Memphite triad of deities. But Sekhmet was not only a goddess in her own right, as we've seen, she was also an instrument of the fiery wrath of her father, Ra.

Her volatile reputation meant that great efforts were made to appease Sekhmet and invoke her not to use her powers for evil. With the goddess sedated by a constant flow of adoration, and, as we'll read later, drunken ritual, one could be placed under the goddess' protection. Simply by withholding her destructive potency (as in the above tale), she bestowed life.

One of the 22 statues of Sekhmet in the collection of the Museo Egizio of Turin. The goddess has the head of a lioness atop a woman's body. Behind her wreath of fur, and forming an effective juncture to the body is a wig. She also wears jewellery: a large beaded collar, as well as anklets and bracelets. Above her head is a large sun-disk, representing Sekhmet's association with her father, the sun god.

Sekhmet was a particularly ferocious goddess; a bringer of violence and illness. On the other hand, her left fist on her lap clutches an ankh, the symbol for 'life'. While her fury could bring terrible suffering, she was also the one called upon to protect and heal.

The 18th Dynasty's Amenhotep III especially revered (or feared) Sekhmet as he had an enormous number of her statues erected in his memorial temple in Thebes. Why did the king feel the need to appease Sekhmet to such an extent? Theories range from rallying her support during his ritual rejuvenation ceremony, to helping an ailing king by providing a supernatural defence against plagues raging across the Near East.

PHOTO: NICOLA DELL'AQUILA/MUSEO EGIZIO. ACC. NO. C.253.



The Egyptians loved their dualities: Upper and Lower Egypt, the Black (fertile) Land and the Red (desert land) Land, the realms of the living and the dead. Sekhmet embodied this duality perfectly: while she had the power to bring illness and destruction, she also could offer protection and health. In fact, the need to appease Sekhmet resulted in the *wab* (𓁹) (“pure”) priests of Sekhmet practising medicine alongside professional physicians 𓂏𓂏𓂏 *swnw* (although perhaps not with quite the same status).

Sekhmet evolved from a force to be reckoned with into one with a benevolent side, while still retaining elements of her destructive nature. To the Egyptians, it wasn’t at all confusing to regard Sekhmet as the “lady of terror” as well as the “lady of life”, the patron of physicians and healers.

In medical terms, her priests played an important role in healing which sometimes included magic rituals in which they would invoke Sekhmet’s powers to assist them in driving out demons that were believed to cause sickness.

The Edwin Smith papyrus is the oldest and one of the most prized of the ten major medical papyri that survive from ancient Egypt due to its surgical nature. It is named for American Egyptologist Edwin Smith, who purchased it in Luxor in 1862. The front of the papyrus—likely a New Kingdom copy of a Middle Kingdom text set down around 1900 B.C.—is divided into 48 medical cases describing patients suffering from fractures and trauma.

What’s fascinating is that the papyrus is almost free from magical spells and prayers, and actually follows rational lines of diagnosis and treatment. After diagnosis, the cases are even classified by three different verdicts: “an ailment I will handle,” (i.e. confident of a positive outcome via a proven remedy), “an ailment I will fight with,” (meaning there may be a less hopeful outcome), and “an ailment for which nothing is done,” (no known treatment—say goodbye). Interestingly, even in these cases, the physician doesn’t turn to magic as a last resort.

Case #1 (a head wound penetrating to the skull) on the Edwin Smith Papyrus describes the examination of the pulse by not just the physicians but also the priests of Sekhmet. This is remarkable because it is around 1,600 years earlier than the pulse first makes an appearance in Greek medical treatises when Hippocrates once again revives logic in medical thinking.

“There are canals in it [the heart] to every member. Now if the priests of Sekhmet or any physician put his hands or his fingers upon the head, upon the back of the head, upon the two hands, upon the pulse, upon the two feet, he measures the heart, because its vessels are in the back of the head and in the pulse; and because its pulsation is on every vessel of every member”

The verso of the papyrus, however, is totally different and contains incantations directed at some form of annually recurring disease called “the pest of the year.” The most prominent deity to be invoked in these incantations is Sekhmet, for example:

“Another (incantation) for exorcising the plague beating wind, the demons of disease, the malignant spirits, messengers of Sekhmet. Withdraw, ye disease demons. The wind shall not reach me, that those who pass by

may pass by to work disaster against me. I am Horus who passes by the diseased ones of Sekhmet..., (even) Horus, Horus healthy despite Sekhmet.”

Incantations such as this were directed towards disease-bearing demons. This particular incantation was to be uttered outdoors to prevent dangerous winds from entering the house. This could very well be the earliest notion of pestilence or disease-bearing winds.

Wab priests of Sekhmet most probably practised a form of medicine which was a mixture of magic and empiricism. Some of them, in addition to being priests of Sekhmet, also bore genuine medical titles. For example, inscriptions in the 5th Dynasty tomb of Wenen-Nefer in Saqqara state that he was not just a Wab priest of Sekhmet but also a 𓂏𓂏𓂏 *sehedj swnw*, “inspector of physicians”. Other wab priests of Sekhmet with additional titles include the 12th Dynasty’s Nedjemu-Seneb (𓂏𓂏 *wer swnw*,



METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART. GIFT OF HENRY WALTERS, 1915. PHOTO: CHRISTINE COSTELLO.

“master physician”) and Heryshefnakht (𓂏𓂏𓂏𓂏 *imy-r hekau*, “overseer of magicians” and 𓂏𓂏 *per aa swnw*, “court physician”).

The medical papyri testify to the role of Sekhmet’s priests in healing. Paul Ghalioungi (Senior Professor of Medicine at Ain Shams University Cairo, 1963) even suggested the Wab priests of Sekhmet could have functioned as veterinary surgeons. However, the evidence for this is actually rather patchy. Some late First Intermediate Period graffiti in the Hatnub alabaster quarries (around 16 km southeast of Amarna) inscribed by the *wab* priests of Sekhmet, Heryshef-nakht and Aha-Nakht, carry an interesting description. According to the hieratic text, Heryshef-nakht’s junior colleague, Aha-nakht, is:

“... capable and skilled of his brotherhood, who places a hand on a man when he knows it [i.e. the illness], skilled in examining strongly and one who knows oxen.”

The Metropolitan Museum of Art’s seven Sekhmet statues arrived in the U.S. in 1919, having left Egypt a century earlier. The statues were likely sourced from the Temple of Mut at Karnak and taken to England in 1819 by Giovanni Belzoni and Giovanni D’Athanas, who were working for Henry Salt.

The first detailed description of the Sekhmet statues in England was as part of a Sotheby’s auction in London in March 1833. A contemporary issue of the “Gentleman’s Magazine” records that just one was sold—for 20 guineas. The same magazine described the statues as, “representations of the goddess Isis, distinguished by the lion’s head and the mystical key [ankh] of the waters of the Nile, or perhaps the portals of hell, as she was the Proserpine of the Egyptians.”

In 1919 the Met explained that “arrangements for the purchase of the statues for the Museum had been concluded in the summer of 1914, just before the outbreak of the war, but, owing to the risks and uncertainties of transportation since then, they have but recently reached the Museum....”



WALTERS ART MUSEUM. ACQUIRED BY HENRY WALTERS, 1924. ACC. NO. 57.540

An aegis is a sculpted model of the two-part floral and beaded collars worn by both Egyptian men and women, combined with a divine head. In front is a broad, layered collar called the 'wesekh', and falling behind the neck is a v-shaped counterpoise (the 'menat') to balance the weight of the collar.

This stunning golden aegis with the head of Sekhmet is dated to the Third Intermediate Period (21st–24th

Dynasties, ca. 1069–747 B.C.). In this example, the head of Sekhmet conveys her ability to both to protect and to nourish the king. The front features her stern and watchful face, while on the reverse, the lioness is shown as a mother suckling a young prince.

The aegis would have been mounted at the prow of the sacred boat of Sekhmet in which a cult statue of the goddess was carried in procession during festivals.

Does “one who knows bulls” (𓂏𓂐𓂑𓂒 *rekḥ kau*) mean that Aha-nakht was involved in some form of veterinary practice? Around 1,200 years later, in the early Ptolemaic tomb of Petosiris at Tuna el-Gebel (ancient Hermopolis), an inscription appears to support the idea of Sekhmet’s priests being involved in animal care. A text in the tomb has Petosiris’s daughter saying:

“Your herds are numerous in the stable, thanks to the secrets of the wab priest of Sekhmet”.

On the other hand, the Kahun Veterinary Papyrus—discovered by Flinders Petrie in 1889 and the only document ever found on veterinary practice—makes no mention of Sekhmet’s priests in the care of animals. It may be that rather than being involved in the healing of ailing cattle, Aha-nakht’s quarry inscription can also be interpreted as him carrying out the responsibility of determining the suitability of bulls for sacrifice, ensuring that ensuring that no sacred bull, with its special markings, was slaughtered.

With such fickle evidence, it might be that the wab priests played a parallel role in treating sick animals but were not actual veterinary surgeons.

We can find evidence of Sekhmet’s role in healing in temples throughout Egypt. Paul Ghalioungui tells us: “Her figure, engraved on the walls of King Sahure’s Temple of Abusir (5th Dynasty) acquired fame for the miracles it wrought, and special chapels attended by her own clergy were consecrated to her in the temples of Egypt, where she became the object of universal worship.” The Abusir mastaba tomb of the 5th Dynasty vizier, Ptahshepses, carries this graffito from the time of Ramesses II:

“Year 50, 1 Peret 16. There came the scribe Ptahemwia with his father the scribe Yupa to see the shadow of the pyramids [at Abusir], when they had come and voiced praise, to offer... [to Sekhm]et of Sahure...”

By far the best example of the type of worship that Ghalioungui refers to can be found during the 18th-

Dynasty reign of Amenhotep III (ca. 1390–1352). A staggering 700 or more statues of the lion-headed goddess that once stood around three sides of the first court of the Temple of Mut in Luxor are a testimony to the king’s devotion to Sekhmet. In fact, most of the Sekhmet statues that inhabit museums around the world come from this temple. Although most of the statues bear the name of Amenhotep III, some belong to Ramesses II (19th Dynasty) as well as the high priest Pinedjem (21st Dynasty)—probably reinscribed. Egyptologists generally believe that most—if not all—of these statues did not originally stand in this district, but were moved after the memorial temple of Amenhotep III was devastated by an earthquake during the 19th dynasty. It was also during this time that Mut and Sekhmet became more closely associated.

The sheer magnitude of the production of these statues has held the attention of both scholars and the general public for two hundred years. Why did Amenhotep III have so many statues of the goddess Sekhmet? Many have speculated that it could have been because he was suffering from ill health. His mummy was found in 1898 in a side chamber of KV35 along with several other mummies and was identified by docketts on the mummy’s wrappings and coffin. Egyptologist Dr Aidan Dodson informed this author that “his mummy shows major dental problems, but there are no obvious signs of pathology. The severe damage to the mummy, and its unusual technique, make any definitive views problematic. The idea that he was ‘ill’ (other than through bad teeth) has been promoted through the fact that a statue of Ishtar was sent from Babylon to Egypt during his reign (as revealed in the Amarna Letters). Many have stated that this was to improve his health, but this is purely a modern assumption and may or may not be right.”

Another theory is that Amenhotep III acted in response to a series of epidemics that ravaged the Near East during his reign; the statues were made to either ward off the epidemics or give thanks for being delivered from them.

Alternatively, we know that towards the end of his reign, Amenhotep III increasingly identified himself with the sun—particularly the life-giving energy of the sun represented by Aten, the sun-disk. Dr. Hourig Sourouzian, Project Director of the Colossi of Memnon and Amenhotep III Temple Conservation Project, states that Sekhmet played an important role in Amenhotep III’s royal jubilee, in which she would “protect the sun-king against the enemies of the sun”.

What is clear from Amenhotep III’s reign is his close association with lions and felines. In fact he marked the 10th anniversary of his accession to the throne by issuing two commemorative scarabs one of which praised his great skill as a hunter of lions: he boasts that he killed a staggering 102 lions during these ten years. The second scarab announced his marriage to Princess Kiluhepa the daughter of King Shuttarana II who ruled the powerful Syrian state of Mitanni. Amenhotep III reigned at a time of relative peace, and the veneration of Sekhmet could have been to retain this political stability. Sekhmet, after all, personified the most destructive aspects of solar energy in ancient Egypt myth and was thus invoked in magic rituals to protect the state.



METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART. PURCHASE, EDWARD S. HARKNESS GIFT, 1926. ACC. NO. 26.7.264.

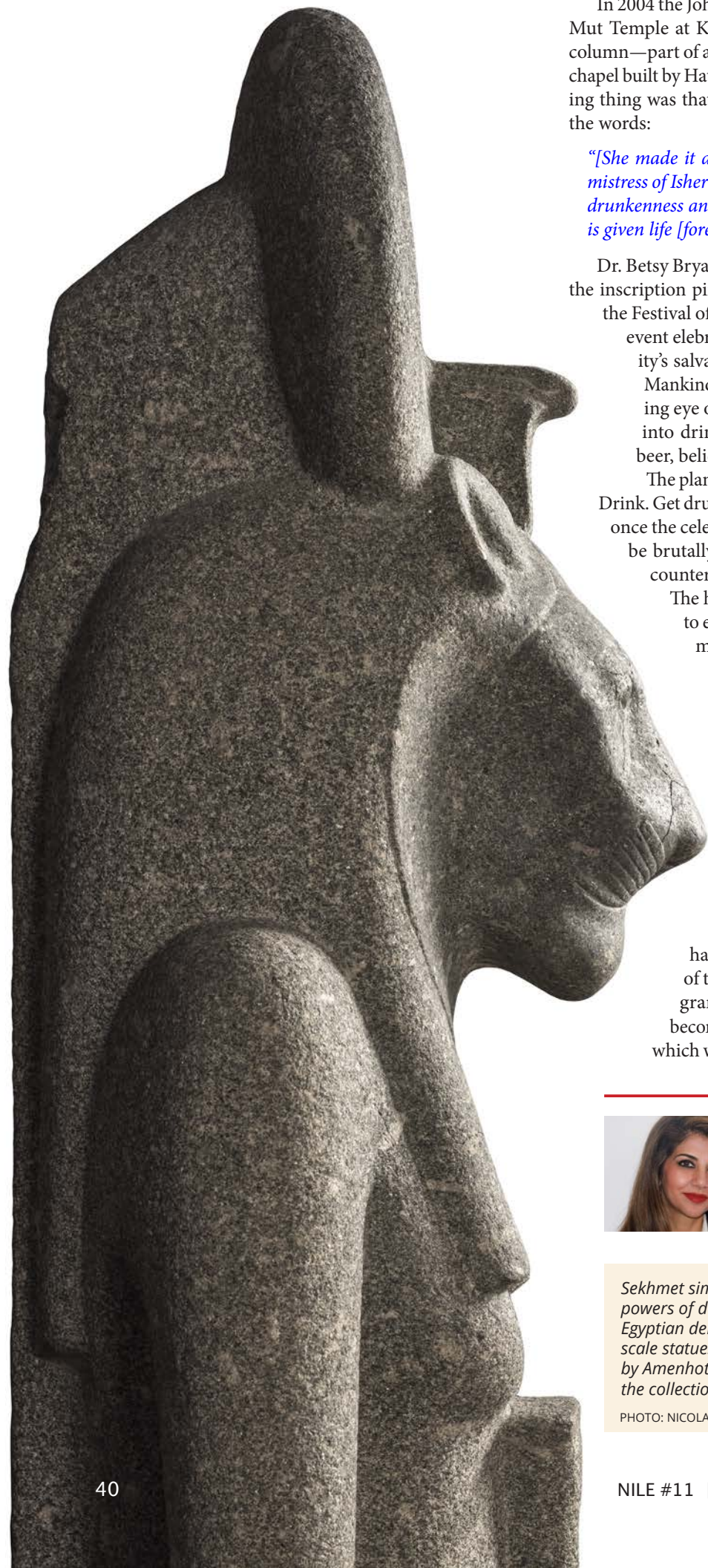
During the reign of Amenhotep III (ca. 1390–1352 B.C.), a series of large glazed steatite scarabs were issued to glorify the king and his wife Tiye, and commemorate his accomplishments. This scarab, now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, commemorates the king’s prowess as a lion hunter—and hence victory over chaotic forces—during his first ten years as king. The final three lines contain the details of his mastery of the bow:

𓂏𓂐𓂑𓂒 𓂏𓂐𓂑𓂒 𓂏𓂐𓂑𓂒 𓂏𓂐𓂑𓂒 𓂏𓂐𓂑𓂒 𓂏𓂐𓂑𓂒 𓂏𓂐𓂑𓂒 𓂏𓂐𓂑𓂒 𓂏𓂐𓂑𓂒 𓂏𓂐𓂑𓂒

“List of the lions brought in His Majesty by his own shooting, beginning with year one up to year ten. Lions fierce 102”.

As the tale of the Destruction of Mankind relates, both Hathor and Sekhmet could operate as the “Eye of Re”, and were capable of the most violent rage. E.A. Wallis Budge wrote that Sekhmet, in particular, was “a destroying element, and in texts of all periods she plays the part of a power which protects the good and annihilates the wicked. Clearly, you wanted to be this goddess’ good side.

We’ve seen how the fiery power of the sun (and wanton slaughter of mankind) was only subdued through the judicious use of alcohol. Only by getting the goddess rolling drunk was disaster averted, and the myth likely inspired



both goddesses' association with inebriation.

In 2004 the John Hopkins University Expedition to the Mut Temple at Karnak discovered part of a sandstone column—part of a “porch of drunkenness” from a Hathor chapel built by Hatshepsut (ca. 1473–1458 B.C.). The exciting thing was that the column drum was inscribed with the words:

“[She made it as a monument for her mother Mut], mistress of Isheru, making for her a columned porch of drunkenness anew, so that she might do [as] one who is given life [forever]”

Dr. Betsy Bryan, Director of the mission, believes that the inscription pinpoints Mut Temple as the location of the Festival of Drunkenness (𓆎𓅓𓏏 heb tekḥ). This event celebrated—and tipsily re-enacted—humanity's salvation in the story of the Destruction of Mankind, whereby Sekhmet, acting as the avenging eye of Ra, was only subdued by tricking her into drinking vast amounts of ochre-coloured beer, believing it was blood.

The plan for the festival-goers was pretty simple: Drink. Get drunk. Pass out. In the early morning hours, once the celebrants were soundly asleep, they would be brutally awakened by loud drumming to encounter the sacred cult statue of the goddess. The hope—in this drowsy, boozy state—was to experience heaven: an intense communal moment with the divine.

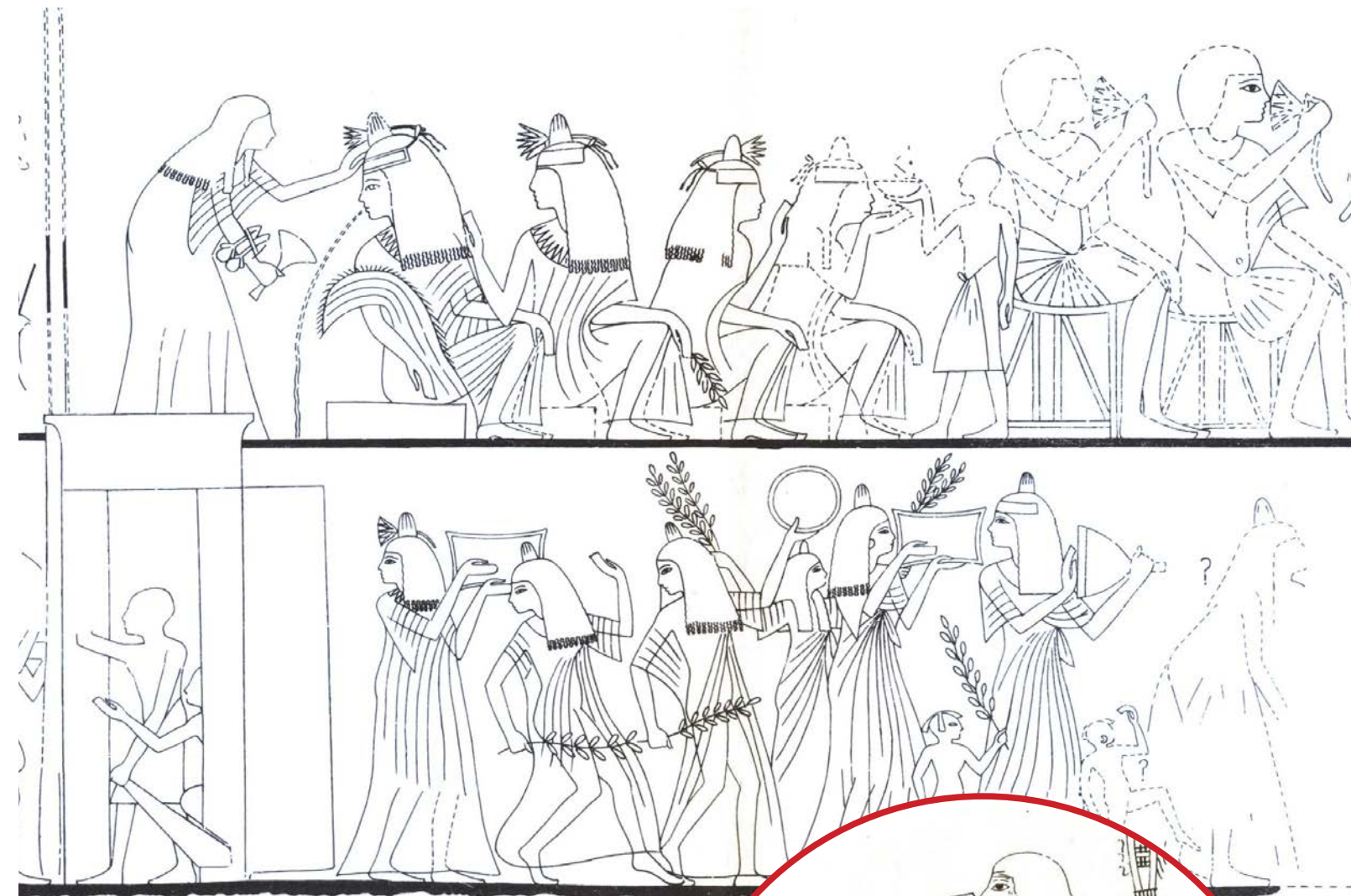
Sekhmet's alluring powers continue to this day and she is a favourite amongst tourists and museum visitors. Awe-inspiring statues of her continue to be discovered in Egypt, and in 2017 a further 66 made from diorite stone were uncovered during Amenhotep III's temple conservation project led by Dr Hourig Sourouzian (see Nile Magazine #7, April–May 2017). Just a year earlier, Egypt's Ministry of Antiquities had revealed the discovery of six statues of the goddess Sekhmet, all carved in black granite. In the modern era Sekhmet has become an icon of female power and strength, which was very much her role in ancient Egypt.



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Sekhmet simmered with opposing forces: the powers of destruction and protection. No other Egyptian deity is represented by so many large-scale statues—and almost all of them were erected by Amenhotep III. This fine example is cared for in the collection of the Museo Egizio in Turin.

PHOTO: NICOLA DELL'AQUILA/MUSEO EGIZIO. ACC. NO. C.260.



“THE TOMB OF NEFER-HOTEP AT THEBES: VOL. I”, NORMAN DE GARIS DAVIES, 1933

Too much of a good thing?

This lively banqueting scene with well-dressed guests and dancing musicians comes from the New Kingdom tomb of Neferhotep (TT 49) at Luxor. Neferhotep was a Chief Scribe of Amun during the brief reign of Ay (ca. 1327–1323 B.C.), and likely Tutankhamun before that.

The register above features one female guest in particular who seems to have overly-indulged in Neferhotep's hospitality. Another part of the larger scene includes the image on the right, where a woman, having clearly decided to not waste time with a wine cup, drinks straight from the pouring jar instead!

In 1933 when Scottish Egyptologist Norman de Garis Davies described this “moment of care-free merriment”, he wrote that the feast had “so far advanced that the more delicate stomachs of the ladies refuse further strain, and one of them has already over-estimated her powers of absorption. The serving maid is provided with the needful vessel, but though she does not wait to slip on the sandals she carries on her arm, she is too late even to modify the unseemliness of the accident.”

Modern scholarship by Egyptologist Dr. Cynthia Sheikholeslami, however, suggests that this untidy moment was no accident. Notice that there is no food at this party—only alcohol. Far from such overconsumption being frowned upon as bad behaviour, it seems that getting drunk was the whole point. What we see represented here is a communal banquet of drunkenness.

Just like the larger Festival of Drunkenness at Mut Temple, the purpose of the rollicking banquets portrayed in tombs was to be woken abruptly from a drunken stupor to receive

a vision of the goddess, who brings with her the promise of new life for their deceased ancestors.

It's likely that these revellers also commemorated the pacifying of a bloodthirsty Hathor/Sekhmet by similarly getting rolling drunk.

The tomb of Pahery at El Kab features a scene whereby the guests are settling-in for a bout of heavy drinking. One female guest makes her intentions for the night very clear: She says to a servant: “Give me 18 jars of wine. To be drunk is what I continually desire. The place within me is of straw.”