Ancient Egypt's mother goddess Mut was depicted in various guises at her temple, from Hathor, the goddess of love (left), to Sekhmet, a fierce, lion-headed goddess (top right).

Johns Hopkins University

Egypt's Ageless Goddess

by Jennifer Pinkowski

A modern pilgrim visits the temple of Mut.

Turning my back on the great temple of the god Amun at Karnak, I looked out over the remains of the shrine of his consort, the goddess Mut. I'd seen aerial photographs and site plans of the temple precinct, but its scale still surprised me. All around lay colossal arms and knees, chopped-up stone blocks, truncated columns, and sculptures of sphinxes, rams, and goddesses from sloe-eyed Hathor to lion-headed Sekhmet. Straight ahead were the ruins of the Mut Temple itself, with two front courtyards, halls, chapels, and the sanctuary in which the statue of Mut had stood. Beyond the temple was the *isheru*, a horseshoe-shaped sacred lake. A half-dozen isheru existed in antiquity; this was the only one to survive.

Busloads of tourists make the pilgrimage to the restored temple of Amun, where they gape at monumental gateways and obelisks, and pose for photos next to hieroglyph-etched columns. Yet few know of the temple of Mut, even though it's still linked to Karnak by an avenue of sphinxes. Both the temple and the avenue are closed to the public—only goats and dogs walk the processional these days—so the tourists couldn't visit even if they were aware of it. But in a year or two that may change, thanks to Brooklyn Museum and Johns Hopkins University archaeologists who have worked at the Mut Temple precinct for years.

Headed by Richard Fazzini and Bill Peck (Brooklyn) and Betsy Bryan (Johns Hopkins), their projects combine excavation, conservation, and restoration to illuminate the site's history and protect its monuments from a rising water table. Their discoveries have revealed how, for some 1,600 years, rulers from Egypt's famous female pharaoh Hatshepsut to the Roman emperor Tiberius built, rebuilt, expanded, restored, and maintained the only temple in Egypt exclusively dedicated to Mut.

This past winter, I made my own pilgrimage to the site to ask the archaeologists: Why Mut, and why for so long?

Mut never had the widespread popularity of some other goddesses, but she was an elite deity associated with kingly power. Ancient Egypt's mother and protector, she was the wife of Amun, the chief god, and mother of the moon god Khonsu. Her complex character was reflected by an identity that merged at times with that of other goddesses: Isis, the model of wifely love and devotion; Hathor, goddess of love and protector of women; Bastet, a feline-headed deity who guarded against evil; and the fierce Sekhmet. Mut's central position in the pantheon of Egyptian deities and her variable identity contributed to the longevity of her cult. Depending on their needs, rulers might associate themselves with particular facets of her character, perhaps highlighting her might and power, or her familial and motherly aspects.

Chapels were built to Mut all over Egypt—and eventually as far away as Sudan—but

Statues of Sekhmet, among the hundreds found at the site, face the first couryard of Mut's temple. The arrangement of the statues is authentic, but they now sit on a protective base.

the Mut Temple was her earthly home. It housed the sacred statue considered her literal embodiment, which was presented offerings of food in daily rituals conducted by the pharaoh and Mut's high priest. And it was here that her cult thrived through 16 centuries of changing dynasties and rulers.

Back in the 1890s, Margaret Benson was the first to do a large-scale excavation of the site (and the first woman to excavate anywhere in Egypt). When she first visited the Mut Temple, it was a sand-choked structure, about 300 by 150 feet, and surrounded on three sides by the isheru where locals watered their cattle and washed their hands and feet before evening prayer. Benson, the well-educated daughter of the Archbishop of Canterbury, had come to Egypt for its healthful climate, but over three field seasons she and her partner, Janet Gourlay, dug up a rich store of statuary and architecture. When they departed, sand reclaimed the ruins.

The site was bustling with activity when I arrived on a shimmeringly hot January morning. There were archaeologists, conservators, and local digging crews at work. The Brooklyn team drew and photographed trenches as diggers in loose-fitting *gallabiyas* took their trowels to mud-brick rooms built against the temple's first pylon (monumental gateway) in the late second century A.D. Conservators filled cracks in an upside-down sandstone sphinx with epoxy to prepare it to be rejoined to its base. Piles of bricks and cement awaited use by the Hopkins crew, which was excavating, taking apart, and reassembling the temple's interior. Conservators and a mason worked to protect foundations, statues, pillars, and columns, dug up in previous seasons, from disintegrating because of ground water. Beyond the sacred lake, teams of diggers and students labored in trenches along a ridge.

Despite three small excavations at the site after Benson and Gourlay's, most of the Mut precinct was obscured by sand and halfa grass when Fazzini arrived in 1976. Peck, then with the Detroit Institute of Arts, joined him two years later, and throughout the early 1980s they removed layers of Islamic, Coptic, Roman, and Greek deposits, and expanded the dig outside of the Mut Temple proper.

One of their first discoveries was that, contrary to what scholars had long thought, the Mut Temple wasn't built by Amenhotep III (1388–1348 B.C.), despite the hundreds of black granite Sekhmet statues found at the site that bear his name. Hatshepsut (1472–1457) built it some 75 years

Ground water poses a threat to sculptures at the Mut Temple. After conservation, a ram is placed on a protective pedestal using a crane on loan from a French archaeological project.

Brooklyn Museum (3)

Johns Hopkins University (3)

A newly found statue of a wife of Amenhotep III and priestesses carved on reliefs in Hatshepsut's Red Chapel (left) reflect women's importance in the cult of Mut.

earlier, possibly replacing an older mud-brick structure. In the temple's oldest section, Fazzini and Peck found a fragment of her cartouche, and a gateway they uncovered on the precinct's western side bore her name and possibly that of her steward, Senenmut. Further evidence for her building activity at the temple turned up when Bryan, who began working at the site in 2001, found a beautifully preserved doorjamb depicting Hatshepsut making an offering to Mut.

Though she was known centuries earlier, Mut became really visible in the period of Hatshepsut, Bryan explained as we walked the path next to the isheru. "It's been very interesting to look into how Hatshepsut represented Mut. The potential for her fierceness is emphasized—her dangerousness as a goddess."

One of the few women to rule as pharaoh, Hatshepsut came to power after the death of her husband, Thutmosis II. She first ruled as regent for her stepson, Thutmosis III, but then assumed the throne herself. So her promotion of Mut as a powerful goddess, mother of Egypt, makes sense. Moreover, Hatshepsut was the first pharaoh to claim to be Mut's descendant, and it was during her reign that Mut began to be depicted wearing the double crown representing the united lands of upper and lower Egypt. She was the first deity shown in such earthly regalia.

Why did Hatshepsut link herself with Amun's consort in legitimizing her claim to the throne? She was the pharaoh, after all, and often depicted as male. Why not Amun?

Bryan suggested that while Hastshepsut wished to focus attention on herself as pharaoh, she wanted to do more. "I also think—and maybe I'm going to sound a little crazy here—that Hatshepsut's attention to Mut was designed to emphasize the feminine aspect of her own rule. She wasn't shying away from the issue of her being female. And the reason I'm willing to say that is because of the Red Chapel."

Reliefs on the interior of the Red Chapel, Hatshepsut's shrine at Karnak, depict the daily rituals that took place in the temple of Amun, as well as the shrines that Hatshepsut built along the processional avenue of sphinxes linking Karnak to Amun's other temple at Luxor two miles south. Strikingly, almost half of those shown in the ritual scenes are priestesses. "It's the only example we have of that," said Bryan. Most depictions of Egyptian religious rites feature males.

More evidence for how Hatshepsut used the cult of Mut to highlight her power comes from the doorjamb Bryan found in 2004. On it, Hatshepsut is depicted making an offering to Mut, who is shown as a woman. But Hatshepsut is also shown on the reliefs with the feline goddesses Bastet and Sekhmet. This year, Bryan found blocks and columns from a large structure built by Hatshepsut at the temple's entrance. Inscriptions on the columns describe the Festival of Drunkenness, an orgiastic appeasement ritual of drinking, dancing, and sex. According to myth, the sun god Ra sent Sekhmet to kill the irreverent. But Sekhmet didn't stop with them. She continued her slaughter, only ceasing when she was tricked into drinking beer dyed red, which she mistook for the blood of humanity. In the ritual, Mut, in the guise of Sekhmet, was sated with red-dyed beer.

By associating herself in this way to Mut-Sekhmet, the most powerful, bellicose form of the goddess, Hatshepsut had carved in stone and shown in ritual that she was pharaoh—the

earthly incarnation of the mother of Egypt—and not to be crossed without dire consequences.

Worship of Amun and Mut was suppressed by Akhenaten (1360–1343), the heretical pharaoh who promoted a cult of the sun or Aten. But under his successor Tutankhamun, the preeminence of Amun and his consort was reestablished, and subsequent pharaohs were careful to associate themselves with these deities once more.

During the thirteenth century B.C., Ramesses II rebuilt an earlier temple facing the same forecourt as the Mut Temple and dedicated it to himself and Amun. Clearly, he was capitalizing on its proximity to Mut's temple: He erected colossal statues of himself facing the forecourt, and everyone entering would have to pass his temple on the way to Mut's. He also paid attention to the Mut Temple itself, adding stone facing to a gateway, and reliefs and inscriptions to one of its courts.

A relief shows a Ptolemaic pharaoh (center) and priestesses (left) playing musical instruments to placate Mut and Sekhmet (right). Ptolemaic observance of Mut's cult also featured the god Bes, protector of women in childbirth (facing page below).

New Kingdom pharaohs had their own political agendas for attending to Mut's cult, and later rulers were no different. With the turn of the first millennium B.C., central authority weakened greatly. It was only when the Kushites of the 25th Dynasty (752–656) came into power that Egypt was once again largely reunified. Hailing from Sudan, the Kushites saw themselves as the restorers of Egyptian religion and culture. And as many foreign rulers of Egypt recognized, control of Egypt meant control of religion. For the Kushites, associating themselves with Mut and Amun was a way to demonstrate their right to rule, but they did this in a markedly different fashion than Hatshepsut had, with her appeal to the powerful war goddess Sekhmet, or even male pharaohs had when they used Mut to emphasize their own kingliness.

The Dynasty 25 pharaohs, most notably Taharqa (690–664), undertook perhaps the most extensive building activity at the Mut Temple precinct. They expanded it to include Ramesses II's temple, which they transformed into a *mammisi*, a shrine celebrating a god's birth, in this case Amun and Mut's son Khonsu. Reliefs, some still hued with mineral paints, show the young god's circumcision. This conversion reflects the increasing importance of the cult of divine birth—a politically expedient association for a foreign-born king who wanted to be considered the son of Egypt's national deities. The message that the Kushites emphasized with Mut was simply that they were part of the family, not outsiders at all. Making a literal family connection, they also installed their daughters in the preeminent position for women at the Mut Temple, an office that held great prestige and political clout.

While later foreign rulers did not have the same religious traditions shared by the Kushites and Egyptians, they could adapt their beliefs to her cult. "There's a lot of Ptolemaic activity at Mut," Fazzini said. That could be because the Ptolemies—the Macedonian dynasty established by Alexander the Great's general Ptolemy—may have also found aspects of Egyptian religion simpatico with their own beliefs. For example, they adopted as their own the Egyptian god Bes, the protector of women and goddesses in childbirth, who adorns one of the Mut Temple's gateways. Moreover, Ptolemaic additions to the temple are covered with inscriptions of dancing, singing, and chanting devotees. The Mut precinct was no place for somber reflection, but a place of lively, daily ritual.

The need to appease the goddess is a recurring theme in the precinct's iconography, from Hatshepsut's day to the Ptolemaic period. "The Egyptians seemed to have a greater worry that female gods would go berserk, more so than the male gods," Fazzini said. Though she had familial roles as wife, mother, and daughter, she was also the ferocious protector of Egypt, and her violent tendencies needed to be properly

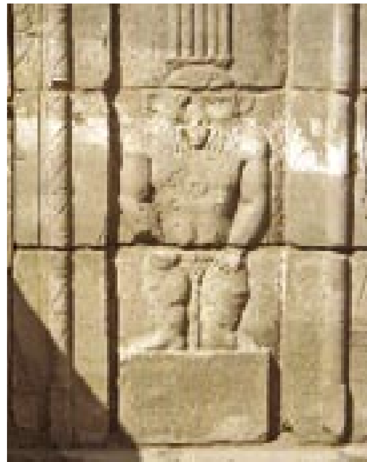
Brooklyn Museum (2)

The temple of Amun, Mut's husband, rises at the end of this ceremonial avenue that once connected it with the Mut Temple.

Johns Hopkins University

The sacred lake at the Mut Temple is the only one still in existence. Plans are being made to save it despite efforts to lower the water table.

channeled. Like the Festival of Drunkenness, the Ptolemaic rituals were meant to placate her. "The inscriptions indicate that there was never a moment in this temple without singing, dancing, leaping, drinking, and music," he continued. "It implies that an ecstatic kind of religion to keep the goddess happy is somehow at home here."



Brooklyn Museum

When, exactly, the temple fell into disuse is unknown. The Roman emperor Tiberius renovated the site after a devastating flood and built a brick enclosure wall, and later emperors continued to maintain the precinct. But by the third and fourth centuries A.D., the temple was more a source of stone than a religious center. Mut's reign as the political goddess was over.

Yet ferocious women and fierce lions were still associated with the temple just a century ago. As Margaret Benson's workers told her, local lore held that if a single man walked alone near the temple at night, a beautiful woman would approach him, then transform into a lioness—and attack.

Why Mut, and why so long? A goddess for the elite and a key to political power, Mut was nonetheless flexible and multifaceted. Pharaohs and rulers over the centuries could adapt her cult to their needs or, later, meld it with their own foreign religions. Her temple was built, rebuilt, and maintained for so long because you couldn't rule without her—but you could choose the aspect of Mut with which you identified yourself and your dynasty.

What is our relationship to Mut and her temple? With each excavation season, the archaeologists are better able to reconstruct the site and, hopefully, open it to the public in a year or two. When that happens is the decision of Egypt's Supreme Council of Antiquities.

"If this site is going to be preserved and look reasonable, the interior of the temple should be made accessible," Fazzini told me as we stood outside the front of the temple near the row of ram-headed sphinxes. "Betsy's doing wonderful work with individual blocks; if they get enough of them to put [the interior] back together, that would be nice.

"But out here," he continued, scanning the region in front of the temple, "I think these statues look good fallen down." He gestured to the broken colossi of Ramesses II lying on their sides. "I mean, they're romantic. Maybe someday they'll stand back up. But unless we could rebuild the whole gateway behind them, what would they look like just standing up in the middle of nothing?"

And then there is the immediate environmental threat. The water table is high and rising. It's devastating to the stone monuments. While the Mut archaeologists build waterproof bases for statuary to rest on and attempt to restore the artifacts that have already been damaged, Egypt's Supreme Council of Antiquities has launched a multiyear project to lower the water table.

The project is widely supported by the international archaeological community, but there is a downside. It's destroying the isheru. At the time of my visit, there were only about three feet of water left, down from six. "They're de-watering Karnak and Luxor, and Mut is stuck right in the middle," said Bryan. "By the summer, this lake will be empty. Richard and I are really, really unhappy about it." The week before, she and Fazzini had met with local officials in charge of the project, but they had yet to figure out how to save the sacred lake. They were sure the lake would be completely drained by September.

I was baffled, and said so. If the site is going to open to the public, wouldn't the isheru be part of the draw?

Bryan nodded in agreement.

We stood between the temple and the lake among the chunks of statues and broken blocks so cavalierly treated by the Romans. The one upside, Bryan added, was that draining the lake would probably reveal the artifacts she's sure litter the lakebed. Benson and Gourlay had thought much the same thing. (Happily the Supreme Council, using a plan drafted by Fazzini and Bryan, intends to excavate the lakebed this fall and then refill it before the site opens to the public.)

We looked out over the water. Bulbous-eyed fish lingered near the surface of the still, green pool. Birds chirped and frogs croaked among the tall reeds, which shivered in the light, hot wind.

"It's just beautiful," I said.

"It really is," Bryan sighed. "And it's the only place of its kind in Egypt." ■

Jennifer Pinkowski *is a former editor at* Archaeology. *See www.archaeology.org for more on Maragaret Benson and her excavations at the Mut Temple.*