

Reading the Coffin of Meresamun
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As made explicit in its formal title, the current Oriental Institute temporary exhibit, “The Life of Meresamun: A Temple Singer in Ancient Egypt,” purports to illuminate the specific “life” and cultural environment of an individual who performed a known religious function in a particular region and era. In one of several articles serving to publicize the installation, Emily Teeter, the exhibit's curator, has noted: “Oddly, the beautifully painted coffin and the mummy within have never previously been the focus of a study... Considering the lack of attention, an in-depth look at Meresamun and her times proved to be an ideal subject for a temporary exhibit at the Oriental Institute Museum in 2009.”¹ Opening in February 2009, the exhibit was accompanied by a formal catalogue bearing the same name.² The following remarks are less a conventional revue of the exhibit and its associated publicity than a reflection on proper expectations of public exhibitions on Egyptological themes. Put simply, what is required or allowable in terms of content, spatial and temporal range when presenting to the public an overview of a specific period, reign or individual? The exhibit on Meresamun presents one opportunity to examine this question.

¹ Emily Teeter, “Meresamun. The Life of a Temple Singer,” KMT 20/2 (Summer 2009): 29-36, quote on p. 29. Further publicity articles make the same point: Emily Teeter, “The Life of Meresamun A Temple Singer in Ancient Egypt,” The Oriental Institute News and Notes 201 (Spring 2009): 3-7; Eti Bonn-Muller, “A Mummy's Life,” Archaeology 62/2 (March/April 2009): 36-39; Lydialyle Gibson, “Life Under Wraps,” University of Chicago Magazine 101/4 (March-April 2009): 39-41; William Harms, “Exhibition recreates life of temple singer,” The University of Chicago Chronicle 28/9 (2/5/2009): 1 and 8: “A goal of the study and exhibit was to make the past less abstract by recreating the life of a specific individual” (p. 8); William Mullen, “Working Woman, ancient Egypt,” Chicago Tribune 2/10/2009, § 1, p. 13.

² Emily Teeter and Janet H. Johnson, eds., The Life of Meresamun: A Temple Singer in Ancient Egypt, Chicago: 2009.

Since absolutely nothing of Meresamun's individual life survives except the coffin and enclosed mummy, this assemblage is necessarily the primary focus of the exhibit. The mummy itself has now been subjected to an advanced forensic examination with the latest CT scanner (the Philips iCT 256-Channel CT Scanner), and it is to Dr. Michael Vannier, radiologist at the University of Chicago Medical Center, that credit is owed for the most significant insights on the physical life of Meresamun.³ Studies of mummies using advanced Computerized Tomography, or CT scans, have become common, as have exhibits built around them. The most impressive of these remains the 2004 traveling British Museum exhibit on the mummy of Nesperennub, about whom far more is known—in terms of discovery, genealogy and textual documentation— than the obscure Meresamun. That exhibit, with its 3-D film and tightly-focused catalogue, will continue to serve as the inspiration for any future mummy-themed exhibition.⁴ The later Oriental Institute exhibit employs newer technology, but the goals are necessarily similar.

It is thus particularly surprising that the associated objects and catalogue of the Oriental Institute installation have so little direct relevance to the person of Meresamun, while the most important witness to her cultural world has been ignored. Of the 72 objects in the show (including duplicates like ear plugs, beads and small vessels) only 13 (18.05%) are securely dated to the general period of the “life” of Meresamun, with 8 of uncertain date (11.11%), for a potential total of 29.16% of the objects possibly linked to her era.⁵ The remaining objects range in date from the Old Kingdom

³ Aside from the right hand, detailed analysis does not extend below the shoulders in the catalogue.

⁴ John H. Taylor, *Mummy: The Inside Story*, New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2004. Textual material related to Nesperennub (including the coffin) appears on pp. 10-15.

⁵ Contra the publicity: “She gathered some 70 artifacts from the Oriental Institute's holdings that date to around the same period during which Meresamun lived ...”; Bonn-Muller, “A Mummy's Life,” p. 39. The suggested dating of each object is properly noted

to Byzantine times, and spatially from the Delta to Meroitic Nubia. The implicit notion that objects from any period or region of Egyptian history can illustrate any other period or region is both dangerous and misleading. The inclusion of a much later oracular statue, Ptolemaic-era mummified cats and ibises and Demotic annuity contracts all attested only centuries after the death of Meresamun gives no insight on the world of the chantress, merely on the much broader theme of women in Ancient Egypt.⁶ Just as significant is the question of the relevancy of certain topics to women of varying social status.⁷ Does a stereotyped discussion of beads, cosmetic pots, weaving and bread baking properly reflect the concerns of an elite woman who will certainly have had a household staff and intellectual concerns beyond mere self-decoration?

True insight into the intellectual life of Meresamun comes from the single text composed for her benefit on the coffin that encloses her mummy. Aside from a citation of her name, title and an (incorrect) statement on parentage, this critical text is untranslated and undiscussed,⁸ although an enhanced photograph of it appears on

in the catalogue. The Third Intermediate Period objects include catalogue nos. 1, 6, 7, 11, 21, 22, 31, 33, 51-54 and 61. Objects of imprecise date are nos. 9, 23, 30, 38, 39, 45, 46 and 48.

⁶ The problem lies exclusively with the curator's conception, not the solicited contributions of others. The discrepancy is noted in the catalogue regarding the Demotic "marriage" documents, first attested in the Persian era three centuries after Meresamun and in a script from the Delta that was developed in contrast to the Theban tradition to which Meresamun's society belonged.

⁷ Teeter removed from the catalogue discussions of age-related rites of passage relevant to all women; see Robert K. Ritner, "Household Religion in Ancient Egypt," in John Bodel and Saul M. Olyan, eds., *Household and Family Religion in Antiquity*, Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2008, pp. 171-96; and Barbara S. Lesko, "Household and Domestic Religion in Ancient Egypt," in *ibid.*, pp. 197-209.

⁸ Emily Teeter, "Coffin and Mummy of Meresamun," in Teeter and Johnson, *The Life of Meresamun: A Temple Singer in Ancient Egypt*, p. 21. A transcription of the name appears on the title page of the catalogue. Rather ironically, the anonymous popular guide to the exhibit "Meet Meresamun!" stresses that "We know about Meresamun because of the information on her coffin" (p. 2).

both inside covers of the catalogue (figure 1). Extending on the cartonnage case from below her broad floral collar to the top of her toes, the hieroglyphic text takes the form of a customary funerary prayer, the hetep-di-nisut formula, but the content is anything but customary:

ḥtp dī ny-sw.t n R^c Ḥr-ḥ.ty ḥtm nb t3.wy ḥwny Pth Skr Wsr
 nb šty.t Wn-nfr nb t3 dsr ntr ^c3 nb p.t dī=f ḥtp.(w) n Wsr
 ḥs.(t) (n.t) ḥnw n ḥmn Mr-s(y)-ḥmn m3^c.t-ḥrw s3.t ḥh.(t)-ḥmn
 m3^c-ḥrw

“An offering which the king gives to Ra-Horachty-Atum, Lord of the Two Lands, the Heliopolitan, Ptah-Sokar-Osiris, Lord of the sanctuary of Sokar, Onnophrios (‘The Perfect Being’), Lord of the Sacred Land, the Great God, Lord of heaven, so that He might give offerings to the Osiris, chantress of the interior of Amun, Meresamun, the justified, daughter of Akhet-Amun, the justified.”

The text preserves the theoretical statement that funerary offerings derive ultimately from royal offerings, subsequently redirected to private graves by divine temples (a process known as “reversion of offerings”). Dating the formula has specifically turned upon the change from parallel grants by the king and gods in the Old Kingdom to a later process whereby the king donates to one or more gods who in turn transmit the offerings.⁹ If the critical phrase is “so that he might give” (rather than “so that they might give”), only a single god is intended as the intermediary. This is precisely the case with the prayer on Meresamun's coffin, but the “single god” is decidedly complex, reflecting a new “pantheistic” religious development directly linked to Meresamun's era and the very temple where she may well have served: the small temple of Medinet Habu in western Thebes, currently the focus of work by

⁹ Sir Alan Gardiner, *Egyptian Grammar*, 3rd ed., Oxford: Griffith Institute, 1957, pp. 170-72.

Chicago's Epigraphic Survey. Here the “one” god is composed of seven forms that combine the names of deities associated with both the daily solar circuit and the underworld, effectively uniting in one great god (ntr 𓆎) the theology of creation, death and rebirth: Ra, Horachty, Atum, Ptah, Sokar, Osiris and Onnophrios. Earlier theology had recognized the trinity of Ra, Horachty and Atum, and that of Ptah-Sokar-Osiris (and associated the epithet of Wennefer/Onnophrios with Osiris), but here all are explicitly unified in a godhead of multiple names and forms.

Published evidence of this theological development is limited, so that the text of Meresamun's coffin becomes all the more important for the broader study of Egyptian religion and for the religious speculation and cultic practices that will have occupied Meresamun personally. In 1965, a study of the Theban monuments dating to the Twenty-fifth Dynasty briefly noted the presence at the smaller Medinet Habu temple of a unique cult of Ra, Horachty, Atum and Osiris.¹⁰ The publication of two funerary papyri in Geneva's Bodmer collection (both for males) of the Third Intermediate Period in 1989 and 1991 provide further evidence of this local syncretism, and the papyri even include an image of the god invoked by Meresamun (figure 2).¹¹ The existence of male worshippers of the same deity is, of course, not surprising, but it underscores the fact that Meresamun's life will not have been as restricted to feminine concerns as the exhibit and catalogue imply. Enthroned in the shape and posture of the mummified Osiris, but with a falcon head, the god is styled in P. Bodmer 107 as “Ra-

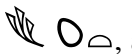
¹⁰ J. Leclant, Recherches sur les Monuments Thébains de la XXVe Dynastie dite Éthiopienne, Cairo: IFAO, 1965, pp. 285 and 306.

¹¹ Michel Valloggia, “Le papyrus Bodmer 107 ou les reflets tardifs d'une conception de l'éternité,” Revue d'Égyptologie 40 (1989): 131-44 (photo on plate 5); Michel Valloggia, “Papyrus Bodmer 103: un abrégé du Livre des Morts de la Troisième Période Intermédiaire,” Cahiers de Recherches de l'Institut de Papyrologie et d'Égyptologie de Lille 13 (1991): 129-36 and plates 18-20. For discussion, see Giuseppina L. Marchese, “La vignette initiale dans les papyrus funéraires de la Troisième Période intermédiaire,” Bulletin de la Société d'Égyptologie Genève 26 (2004): 51.

Horachty-Atum, Lord of the Two Lands, the Heliopolitan, Great God who has come forth from the horizon, who has been made to appear (or ‘crowned’) in his bark, Osiris, Lord of eternity, Foremost of the West.” The coffin of Meresamun includes these divine names and adds others; it is the most extensive example of its kind. This extraordinary cultic development at the little temple of Medinet Habu is surely to be associated with its importance as the burial site of the deities of creation (the Ogdoad), and therefore the universal axis of the forces of creation, death and rebirth. Such was the theology directly served by Meresamun, who was certainly buried on the west bank of Thebes, not far from the cult at Medinet Habu.¹² This is far more important for her personal life than pots, beads or bread.

The mention of Meresamun's father is certain, and refutes a statement by Teeter in the catalogue (p. 21): “Unfortunately, the name of her parents is not included in the brief inscription.” The author has failed to recognize the later writing (actually first attested in the Amarna era) of the epithet $m\ddot{s}^c.t-hrw$ “the justified” that completes Meresamun's name¹³ and the slightly malformed egg and “t” that spells “daughter (of)” before the unambiguous name $\text{ḫ}(t)-\text{ʾ}l\text{mn } m\ddot{s}^c-hrw$ “Akhet-Amun, the justified.” The abbreviated name Akhet-Amun is gathered in the standard reference work on Egyptian names, as is the fuller $\text{ḫ}(t)-\text{ʾ}l\text{mn}-r\ddot{s}w$ “The Effective Eye of Amun be against them.”¹⁴ Abbreviation was necessitated on the coffin by the simple fact that the complex inscription had reached the end of the toes.

¹² Contra Teeter, p. 21, who suggests that “nothing” is known about her tomb location.


¹³ Wb II, p. 17 bottom, particularly common for females in later periods. The same signs, variants of , are used on the stela of Djed-Khonsu-iu-es-ankh (catalogue 11) and Karama (figure 4).

¹⁴ Hermann Ranke, *Die ägyptischen Personennamen*, vol. I, Glückstadt: J. J. Augustin, 1935, pp. 2 and 3, no. 10.



The use of such an apotropaic name, designed to avert and curse foreign or demonic forces, attests to another primary feature of the age of Meresamun that receives but little attention in the exhibit and catalogue.¹⁵ The Third Intermediate Period during which Meresamun lived was a time of political turmoil and foreign domination, with strong undercurrents of xenophobia and ethnic competition.¹⁶ The choice of the stela of Djed-Khonsu-iu-es-ankh (OIM 1351 catalogue 11, p. 43) to serve as a generic representation of Meresamun and her colleagues should have been balanced by the inclusion of the contemporary stela of the lady Karama (OIM 1352, left on display in the Egyptian gallery, figure 3), whose Libyan name, more extended genealogy and rather thick proportions have been studied by Heidi Saleh.¹⁷ Both stelae were excavated at the same Twenty-second Dynasty cemetery at the Ramesseum and are more informative together than separated. The god worshipped in each case corresponds to the image of the composite deity invoked in the Bodmer papyri and fully named in Meresamun's inscription. The stela of Karama is but one of the many contemporary OI museum objects (real and model funerary papyri, small Sons of Horus figures that increasingly replace canopic equipment, genealogical statuary, donation stelae, etc.) which properly contextualize the era of Meresamun, but which

¹⁵ An exception is cat. no. 61, pp. 80-81, a Third Intermediate Period oracular amuletic decree.



¹⁶ See Robert K. Ritner, "Libyan vs. Nubian as the Ideal Egyptian," published in Stephen Thompson and Peter Der Manuelian, eds., Egypt and Beyond: Studies Presented to Leonard H. Lesko, Providence: Brown University, 2008, pp. 305-14.

¹⁷ Heidi Saleh, Investigating Ethnic and Gender Identities as Expressed on Wooden Funerary Stelae from the Libyan Period (c.1069-715 B.C.E.) in Egypt, BAR International Series 1734, Oxford: British Archaeological Reports, 2007, Stela no. 44, pp. 22, 62-63 and 198. Following the incorrect handcopy published in J. E. Quibell, The Ramesseum, Egyptian Research Account 2, 1896, plate XXI, no. 9, Saleh read the name as Ka-ra-aa. However, as recognized by Spiegelberg in his translation of the stela in the Quibell volume (p. 17), the reading Karama is certain. In a later correction faintly visible on the original, the stroke after $r\bar{3}$ was converted into the $m\bar{3}^c$ -sickle ; see figure 4. Cf. also Saleh Stela no. 22 = Djed-Khonsu-iu-es-ankh (Meresamun cat. no. 11).

were overlooked in favor of extraneous Old, Middle and New Kingdom, Ptolemaic or Roman selections.

Meresamun's era witnessed the most elaborate decorative treatment of mummy cases and coffins, and her surviving internal coffin is itself worthy of additional discussion. A full study of parallels is not possible here, but the iconographic repertoire of the coffin draws upon common themes, a fact unmentioned in the catalogue. The large floral collar, with flanking images of the Sons of Horus in the register below, central images of winged solar symbols (ram-headed or scarabs), winged goddesses (often in serpent form) beside striding rams, tit and djed amulets, and paired Wepwawets at the toes are all common, as are depictions of Apis below the mummy's feet symbolizing the bull carrying the deceased. Such features are readily found even in popular publications, and they have been examined in detail by Andrzej Niwinski, whose primary publications are absent from the catalogue's minimal discussion and bibliography.¹⁸ Meresamun's two winged snakes, crowned with solar disks and holding hieroglyphs of dominion  (w3s) and health  (wd3.t), are elsewhere accompanied (or replaced) by images of Isis and Nephthys, and the serpents could represent these goddesses here, although labels on other examples also name a pairing of Wadjet and Nekhbet (goddesses of Lower and Upper Egypt) or dual images of the goddess Neith. The epithets on Meresamun's coffin label the cobra on her left as “the one who encircles life and dominion” (šn ʿnh w3s) , with the

¹⁸ Cf. the popular study by Carol Andrews, Egyptian Mummies, Cambridge MA: Harvard Press, 1984, p. 46; Andrzej Niwinski, 21st Dynasty Coffins from Thebes, Mainz: Philipp von Zabern, 1988, pp. 2 (Wadjet and thus Nekhbet), and 94 (God's Sister = Isis or Nephthys, and Mistress of invocation offerings); and Andrzej Niwinski, The Second Find of Deir el-Bahari (Coffins), Cairo: Supreme Council of Antiquities, 1999, pp. 11-12 (Neith), 84-85 (“Northern One” and “Southern One”), and plate V/2 (Wadjet on shoulder). Other studies might have been noted in the catalogue, i.e. Beatrice Goff, Symbols of Ancient Egypt in the Late Period (Twenty-first Dynasty), The Hague: Mouton, 1979.

ankh-sign flanked by two was-scepters: . The right cobra's title, unillustrated in the catalogue (figure 5), seems a defectively written variant (lacking a horizontal line below the three reed signs) of a title attested in a similar circumstance for Isis:  (ḥnw.t sh.t [iʔrw]) “Mistress of the Field (of Reeds),” a likely reference to the Egyptian paradise.¹⁹ Since, as noted above, the coffin is the most significant record of Meresamun aside from her mummy, the minimal attention given its text and decoration in the exhibit and catalogue represents a lost opportunity, redressed briefly here. It was correct that “an in-depth look at Meresamun and her times” would be a proper focus for Oriental Institute scholarship. It remains so today.

¹⁹ See Andrews, Egyptian Mummies, p. 13. Note the serpent used to determine the title (or spell iʔrw ; cf. Wb. I, p. 32). The title can also be given to Wadjet; see Christian Leitz, Lexikon der ägyptologischen Götter und Götterbezeichnungen, vol. V, Leuven: Peeters, 2002, pp. 204-05. The right side of the coffin was not photographed for the catalogue.



Figure 1: The inscription of Meresamun. Catalogue inside cover photograph by Dan Dry.

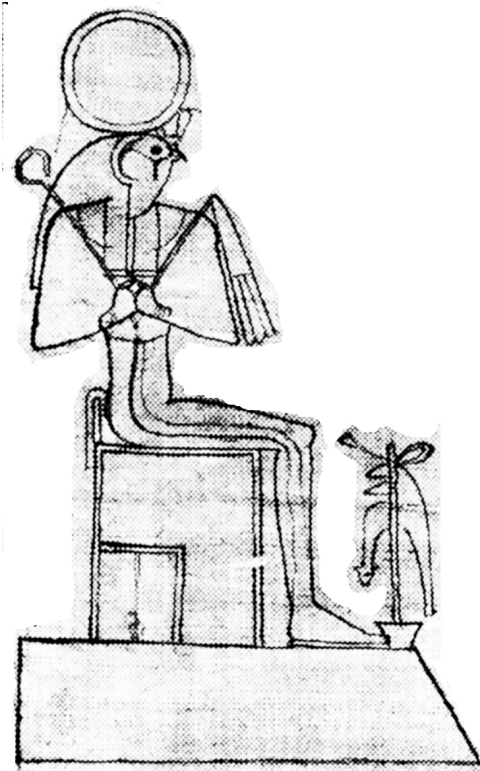


Figure 2: Detail from P. Bodmer 107, after Michael Vallogia, 1991.



Figure 3: The Stela of Karama (OIM 1352). Photograph by Laura D'Alessandro, 1987.



Figure 4: Detail from the OI Stela of Karama. Photograph by Luin Hough, 1947.



Figure 5: Title of the cobra from the right side of the coffin of Meresamun. Photograph by Robert K. Ritner, 2009.