



JOURNEYS WITH GODDESSES AND MORE

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My current research is driven by a book contract addressing possible origins and early roles of five Egyptian goddesses: Neith, Hathor (with Bat), Nut, Isis, and Nephthys, a culmination of over twenty-five years of presentations on these deities initially focused on asking about the place of women in ancient Egypt in relation to its strong goddesses. The book works to bring together these presentations into a written and coherent whole, but it has not been as straightforward to accomplish as it initially appeared. For example, my first goddess paper, one on Nut in 1986 which was subsequently published in the *Journal of American Folklore*¹ and later in an edited volume,² was solid, but in retrospect, it left many unanswered questions, the most notable of which involved her possible origins. In looking at her, I simply did not think to question the background of her appearance in the Pyramid Texts as a mature, developed deity, even though I had long since considered the Pyramid Texts to be the written variants of a substantial oral tradition. Much research and reflection on both her possible background and that of the Pyramid Texts has occurred since that first paper, some results of which appeared in the paper I gave at the 2012 Annual Meeting of the American Research Center in Egypt in Providence, RI.

Neith, my “next” goddess, presents similar problems regarding origins, which is not too surprising given she is the earliest of the five (six) who appears in the materials – save possibly Bat, a late-comer to my research. Reviewing the resources on Neith in a systematic way shows she received cult from at least the Early Dynastic Period. In addition, we know of at least four First Dynasty queens,³ with Neith names, two of whose names actually appeared within serekhs, along with an extremely large number of non-royal individuals who bore theophoric names incorporating Neith’s name, attesting to her importance in that period. Indeed, many more individuals bore Neith-related names than for any other deity by a tremendous margin.

Into this mix then came a brief foray with Isis and Nephthys, goddesses who like Nut do not appear definitively until the Pyramid Texts, though both their names and their relation to *ḏrty*-birds and *ḏrty*-mourners in funerary depictions suggest a prehistory needing much more work. Related to these roles, I

completed a short piece early in 2012 on the “Lamentations of Isis and Nephthys” including a brief mention of the “Songs of Isis and Nephthys” as a contribution to the forthcoming *Cambridge Dictionary of Ancient Mediterranean Religions*. These late documents mirror well with the two goddesses’ actions in the Pyramid Texts.

And finally, in serious response to a question posed me by Anson Rainey in 2000 asking if Hathor was the original Mistress of Byblos, I settled into close to a decade of research on this goddess, even to asking if she were indigenous to Egypt (she is, but for Bat, her predecessor with ears and horns, it has been suggested otherwise).⁴ Tussling with Hathor’s origins as well as those of Bat in my current research has led me to do considerable reading and reflection on Egyptology’s radically changing understanding of the origins of a unified Egypt. As a result I attended “Egypt at Its Origins, the Fourth International Conference on Predynastic and Early Dynastic Egypt” held at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in late July 2011 as well as the lectures related to the exhibit “Dawn of Egyptian Art” at the same museum in May 2012. Recent and current work at Pre-, Proto-, and Early Dynastic sites throughout Egypt, notably at Abydos and Hierakonpolis and in the Delta, have unearthed much new and very exciting material with momentous results for changing our thinking about early Egypt – and we must get this into print for our students and for the general public. Hopefully this book, intended for the educated lay reader as well as any others interested, will assist in that endeavor.

An additional aspect of this research builds on other work I have done in the past which addresses the presence of Egyptian goddesses, namely Hathor and Isis, in the neighboring regions, especially the Levant. Much of that material dates to considerably later than the end of my time period for this volume – the end of the Old Kingdom – but some derives from Hathor-related artifacts found in third millennium BCE strata in Byblos. Curiously, however, despite the general acceptance of Hathor as the Mistress of Byblos, particularly related to the Amarna letters, never in that corpus is she mentioned by name!⁵ Her presence in Byblos also raises to some extent the question of the presence there of Isis, particularly due to Plutarch’s early second century

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CE narrative of Isis and Osiris.⁶ My research has found she does not appear in the Levant until nearly a millennium and a half after the arrival of the Hathor-related artifacts.

Not specific to the book underway at this point but oddly related is a project in which I was involved during 2011: reading, writing, and presenting on Riva Ulmer's *Egyptian Cultural Icons in Midrash*⁷ for a panel of Midrashic scholars at 2011 Annual Meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature in San Francisco.⁸

Given Midrash began around 200 CE, and extended up into the Middle Ages, long past the time of Egypt's floruit, this work led to a whole new awareness of the role of memory and tradition in people's thinking, an interesting perspective to have further honed in terms of our understanding of how the ancient Egyptians viewed their past and of how we of the current age look at its vast span of history.

NOTES

¹ Susan Tower Hollis, "Women of Ancient Egypt and the Sky Goddess Nut," *Journal of American Folklore* 100 (1987): 496-503.

² Susan Tower Hollis, "Ancient Egyptian Women and the Sky Goddess Nut," in Susan Tower Hollis, Linda Pershing and M. Jane Young (eds.), *Feminist Theory and the Study of Folklore* (Champaign-Urbana, IL: University of Illinois, 1993): 200-18.

³ Hetepneith, Herneith, Meritneith, and Nakhtneith. The names of Hetepneith and Meritneith appear in serekhs topped by the bilobate sign with crossed arrows, parallel to the serekh topped by the Horus falcon used by early kings: Wilfried Seipel, *Untersuchungen zu den Ägyptischen Königinnen der Frühzeit und des Alten Reiches: Quellen und Historische Einordnung* (Doctoral Dissertation, Hamburg, 1980); Lana Troy, *Patterns of Queenship in Ancient Egyptian Myth and History*. ed. by Rostislav Holthoer and Tullia Linders. Vol. 14, *Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis Boreas Uppsala Studies in Ancient*

Mediterranean and Near Eastern Civilizations (Uppsala, 1986).

⁴ Henry George Fischer, "The Cult and Nome of the Goddess Bat," *Journal of the American Research Center in Egypt* 1 (1962): 7-23 where on page 7, he suggested "her ears and horns may derive from Mesopotamia."

⁵ William L. Moran, *The Amarna Letters* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), index.

⁶ J. Gwyn Griffiths, ed., trans., commentary, *Plutarch's De Iside et Osiride* (Cambridge, ENG: University of Wales Press, 1970).

⁷ Rivka Ulmer, *Egyptian Cultural Icons in Midrash*. ed. by G. Stemberger, *Studia Judaica. Forschungen zur Wissenschaft des Judentums* (Berlin & New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2009).

⁸ Susan Tower Hollis, "Rivkah Ulmer's Egyptian Cultural Icons in Midrash: An Egyptologist's Response," in *Annual Meeting, Society of Biblical Literature* (San Francisco, CA, 2011), unpublished paper.