The Precinct of Mut at South Karnak

An Archaeological Guide

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Who Was Mut?

“Mistress of peace and of the war cry. Lady of heaven, queen of the gods—Great Mut. Creator. Protector. Lady of joy. Cobra of dread. The vigilant mistress of Karnak. Mighty ruler in her Theban Temple. She whose spirit exists because her temple endures. She whose temple and city will exist for millions of years.”

Excerpts from a hymn in praise of Mut

Eye of Re Goddesses

Mut was an important deity with more than one primary identity. In the early New Kingdom, including during the reign of Hatshepsut (c. 1478/72–1458 BC), Mut’s primary role at the temple of Isheru was as an “Eye of Re,” one of a group of goddesses that were daughters of the sun god and could be both benign and dangerous. They included Sekhmet, Isis, Hathor, Bastet, Nekhbet, Wadjet, and others who could be both gentle cats and fierce lionesses. As the uraeus goddesses, perched on the sun god’s forehead, they influenced the Nile floods and brought health or illnesses as the god determined. The cults of Eye of Re goddesses became vital to Egyptian life and rule.
By the reign of Amenhotep III (c. 1390–1353 BC), Mut’s second role, as the consort of Amen, one of Egypt’s most important gods, and the mother of the moon god, Khonsu, had become more prominent and is the guise in which she is perhaps best known. As the home both of Amen’s consort and of the Eye of Re, her temple precinct in Thebes was an important religious center for almost two thousand years.

In her human form, Mut bore and preserved Egypt’s kingship and, therefore, the king himself. Some kings, including Taharqa of the Twenty-fifth Dynasty, depicted themselves as the physical son of Amen and Mut. As lioness-headed Sekhmet (“The Powerful”), Mut was the fierce protector of Egypt, bringing defeat and death to its enemies and guaranteeing its annual renewal of life for the faithful. She could threaten Egypt, too, if the proper rituals were not performed to turn her into a gentle cat.

Stories of Sekhmet and the Eye of Re
There are two main myths about the Eye of Re. In the first, an aging Re becomes angry with humanity, which has become rebellious. He decides to destroy it, sending his Eye, Sekhmet, from his forehead to carry out the deed. Eventually the other gods convince Re to change his mind and call Sekhmet back, but she refuses. Re decides to trick her: he has a lake filled with beer dyed red and Sekhmet, convinced it is blood, consumes it all. Drunk on the beer, Sekhmet no longer wants to kill and returns to Re. In later periods, the Mut Temple, surrounded on three sides by a sacred lake called the Isheru that is specific to Eye of Re goddesses, represented the refuge in which Sekhmet was kept content and where she could bear her children in peace and safety.

In the second tale, Re and Sekhmet quarrel and she disappears to Nubia, refusing to return. Re sends Thoth (or other gods, depending on the version of the story) to convince her to come back. He finally succeeds, after many tricks and despite
Sekhmet’s furious temper. On her return, she is greeted with celebrations and festivals throughout the country. The return of the distant goddess marked the return of the waters of the Nile at the start of the inundation and was celebrated throughout the country for centuries.

It was essential to keep the dangerous Eye of Re happy and contented to prevent her from unleashing death and destruction on the country. The rituals to placate Mut and Sekhmet involved singing and dancing, feasting and drinking. A scene in the precinct’s entrance (the Propylon) shows a Ptolemaic king and two priestesses playing music before the goddess in her two primary forms: queenly female and lioness-headed woman.
Sekhmet Statues
The site has long been famous for its statues of Sekhmet. Today many are housed in museums around the world. In the nineteenth century, the Sekhmets were what attracted the few photographers who visited the site. This photograph of the Mut Temple’s First Court was taken by French photographer Henri Béchard sometime between 1869 and the 1880s.
Some have suggested there were originally 730 Sekhmet statues: two for each day of the year. They formed a “litany in stone” as one scholar called it, guaranteeing that the rituals to appease Sekhmet would continue even if there were no longer priests to perform the rites. Many scholars today believe that the statues originally stood in Amenhotep III’s funerary temple on the west bank of the Nile, where more continue to be discovered. There is also the possibility that two separate sets of statues were created, one for each temple, and the probability that there were well over 730 is now a strong one.

Most of the statues show Sekhmet seated on a throne with an ankh held in her left hand and a sun disk on her head. The majority are slightly larger than life size (about two meters tall), but there are several on a larger scale, including the torso and lap of one enormous statue on the east side of the Mut Temple’s Second Court. The head of this statue, found by Margaret Benson and Janet Gourlay in 1896 (see page 16), is now in the Luxor Museum.

The best-known Sekhmet is the one shown on page 7. She is over-life size and is crowned with a modius of cobras that would originally have supported a sun disk. Found by Benson and Gourlay, and restored in 2013 by Egyptian conservators taking part in an advanced conservation field school organized by the American Research Center in Egypt (ARCE), she sits regally in the Mut Temple’s Second Court.

Standing statues of Sekhmet are less common, and the Mut Precinct itself boasts only a few, one of which was never finished and stands in front of Temple A’s Second Pylon (left).
Another standing statue, also unfinished and missing its feet, (left) was found by the Supreme Council of Antiquities (SCA) in 2011 during the work to prepare the site to open to the public. It is now in storage at the Luxor Museum.