

S1 Episode 1 Transcript

Kingship- Ideology and Succession

This podcast transcript is copyright Kate Bernasconi, Musegyptology.

Note for students etc:

I have not cited my sources in this transcript. I mostly used Shaw, Garry J. *Pharaoh, Life at Court and on Campaign* (2012) London: Thames and Hudson, in addition to my own knowledge of ancient Egypt gathered through years of studying, reading and academic lectures. This is not a piece of academic writing, however the research techniques etc follow academic research guidelines. My own theories are marked by an asterisk at the beginning and end of the statements; if you wish to use such statements please cite this podcast/transcript as the source (check your university's academic reference guidelines for how to reference an online source). If you wish to use this transcript as information/inspiration for an academic essay, please back up your statements with academic sources (including Shaw's book) and primary evidence, where applicable.

Hello, welcome to Season 1 Episode 1 of a brand new podcast called Musegyptology. In this podcast I'll be talking to you about the fascinating world of ancient Egypt and the museums that celebrate it.

Before we start this episode, which is about ancient Egyptian pharaohs and kingship, I wanted to briefly introduce myself and this podcast. My name is Kate, and I've loved ancient Egypt since I was 12. I have a Bachelor's degree in Egyptian Archaeology and Master's in Egyptology from the University of Liverpool, and a Master's in Museum Studies from the University of Leicester. I've always wanted to be an Egyptologist, and am passionate about teaching people about it, so I've created this podcast as my way of doing so. I really hope you enjoy it.

In this first season I will be talking to you about the most fundamental subjects that are essential for you to understand ancient Egyptian civilisation- kingship and pharaohs, geography and the Nile, religion and the gods, and death and the afterlife. In Season 2 onwards I'll be talking about a wide array of different topics, so if there's anything you want to learn about, please get in touch through the Musegyptology social media accounts.

I have chosen to talk to you about ancient Egyptian kingship in the first two episodes of the podcast because it is so fundamental to the history of Egypt and its existence as a state, it pervades so many aspects of the ancient Egyptian world, and you cannot attempt to learn about or understand ancient Egypt without holding this information in the back of your mind. Luckily for us, it's fascinating too.

If I were to stop people on the street to ask them what comes to mind when they think about ancient Egypt, I'm certain that most of them would say something related to the Egyptian pharaohs- for instance, Tutankhamun's funerary mask, which is an iconic example of how ancient Egyptian kings were represented in 3D art with their regalia and crowns; the Giza pyramids, the magnificent, monumental tombs of three of the Old Kingdom kings; or the temples they visited if they were lucky enough to go on holiday to Egypt, commissioned by the kings as part of their role as High Priest of all Egyptian gods. That's because the pharaohs had such a huge impact on Egyptian society. *Perhaps the typical ancient Egyptian citizen, working hard in their fields to sow, cultivate and harvest enough food to feed their family and trade for other necessary goods, wouldn't have felt that the king had much of a direct impact on their life. But the taxes they were obligated to pay in exchange for being allowed to farm on the king's land, the irrigation canals the crown had dug and maintained to help them to grow more crops, or the procession the pharaoh made past their village while travelling along with

the Nile on his glorious royal barge would have reminded them that the king was the most important person in ancient Egypt.* But even without these reminders, the very presence of the pharaoh on the throne, and the fact that he was performing his essential duties in this supreme, divinely-ordained role, enabled this farmer to feel that their world was safer because of him: that the sun would rise tomorrow, the Nile should flood just enough (not too high, not too low), and that their village wouldn't suffer from criminals or invading foreigners. Because without the pharaoh, everyone knew: Egypt would descend into chaos.

This episode is about the ideology of ancient Egyptian kingship and the succession when the old pharaoh died and the new king took the throne. Episode 2 is on the roles of the pharaoh as commander of the army, head of the government, high priest of all gods and supreme judge. I'm not able to go into much detail about most topics relating to pharaohs, as this episode would be hours long! I'm only able to talk about the standard and traditional characteristics of kingship here, so in the future I'll do episodes focusing on the stranger cases in the history of ancient Egyptian kingship.

Some quick notes: I will use the terms 'king' and 'pharaoh' interchangeably, as they mean the same thing, and I will use the pronouns he and his to refer to the king generally, as although there were a few female pharaohs during ancient Egyptian history, according to royal ideology the king was traditionally supposed to be male, and the majority of pharaohs were male.

OK, let's get started!

Part 1- Ideology of kingship in ancient Egypt

Historical and divine origins of kingship

In order to understand ancient Egyptian kingship, we have to learn about the ancient beliefs of its origins, in this case, its mythical history. The Egyptians believed that gods were the original kings of Egypt, according to the stories in three fascinating myths about the deities Osiris, Isis, Horus, Seth and Ra.

Osiris had been a good and fair god-king of Egypt, but his brother Seth murdered him to steal the throne. Osiris' sister and wife, Isis, magically brought him back to life and conceived their son Horus, who later fought with his uncle Seth in order to claim the crown as the rightful heir to the throne. A tribunal of gods had to judge who was worthy to be king of Egypt, and they decided that Horus would be the king of Egypt, Osiris would be the king of the afterlife, and Seth, the loser, was made to be the god of chaos, based in the desert. Horus was therefore perceived by the Egyptians to be the god of kingship, and he eventually passed the crown to human pharaohs. These stories also provided mythological justification of a core tenet of kingship ideology- that the throne must pass from the king to his eldest son in an unbroken lineage, rather than to the king's brother.

The Egyptians also believed that early on Ra, the sun god, had ruled the country. However, mankind plotted against his rule and Ra nearly killed them all in revenge. Fortunately, he stopped himself doing so out of pity for mankind, who he had created, and decided to pass on the throne of this imperfect world to a human king. The king therefore served as Ra's deputy and representative on Earth, ruling in his stead.

However, archaeological evidence disputes these mythical stories as the origins of Egyptian pharaohs. Instead, it demonstrates that ancient Egyptian kingship evolved from leadership of early towns at the beginning of Egyptian history when it was not yet a unified country. Very briefly, over time some of these local chieftains went from being in charge of their villages and towns, to becoming progressively

more powerful through control and access to resources and trade, success in battle and expansion of land. Eventually one strong ruler in the south took control of larger areas of land that ultimately united with the northern regions, whether through warfare or political and cultural amalgamation, or some combination of these, and became the sole ruler, or king, of the newly unified country. The pharaoh was therefore later known as Lord of the Two Lands, because he was ruler of both geographical regions of ancient Egypt, the north and the south - this was an important part of the king's identity throughout the pharaonic period. This first king, the historical forefather of all future ancient Egyptian kings, was possibly a person named Narmer, and was contemporaneously identified by some of the same iconography, regalia and titles that the pharaohs still used throughout their 3000 years of rule.

Divinity of the king

As the ancient Egyptians believed that the gods had assigned the role of kingship to human kings, the pharaohs therefore held a divinely-ordained office. They also believed that the king had divineness in him, but the extent of how divine he was perceived to be is debated by Egyptologists. Was he a man, or more than a man?

It's true to say that the king was mortal as his body could die and he had human failings and emotions, but he also had mythically-derived power from the gods and was believed to be a manifestation of the god of kingship Horus. The Egyptians believed he possessed three powers granted to him from the gods which enabled him to perform his duties, called *hu*, *sia* and *heka*, being divine utterance, knowledge and magic respectively. His biological father, the old king, was also divine to the same extent as he was, and the Egyptians believed at the same time that Amun-Ra, chief god, was his mythological father, but his mother was human. Importantly, he wasn't considered divine when he was prince. Instead, ancient texts make it clear that it was at the moment of the king's coronation when Amun placed the crown on his head that he became somewhat divine, as the divine spirit of kingship entered his human, mortal body and made him pharaoh, and more than a man.

Special treatment of the king

Obviously, the pharaoh was a very special person and held a unique position. *His partial divineness, and the divinely-ordained office which he occupied, explain why the king was perceived, treated and represented in special ways.* These include how the king was represented in art, the names and titles he was referred to by, the crowns and regalia he wore and the extraordinary royal tombs and funerary cults. These all set him apart from the rest of the population, including the richest families and highest officials. *The level of respect people paid to him was closer to being treated like a god than a human*- for instance, those entering the king's presence had to prostrate themselves prone on the floor in front of him, and everyone, even his closest friends, were forbidden from touching him without express permission.

Royal regalia

When you think of a pharaoh, perhaps the first thing that comes to mind is two and three-dimensional art such as temple reliefs and statues, in which he is depicted wearing a crown, a uraeus on his brow, a false beard, perhaps holding the crook and flail, and wearing beautiful jewellery. These crowns and accessories that only the king was allowed to wear are together called royal regalia. They not only identified him as pharaoh and set him apart from everyone else, including the rest of the royal family, but they were all powerful symbols of kingship and divinity. The crowns especially were imbued with the divine power that Ra had instilled in them when he delegated kingship to the human pharaoh.

When the king was off-duty, so to speak, or spending time with his friends and allies among the elite, he may not wear any regalia, and would look much like one of his officials. However, he wore his crowns and symbolic accessories when carrying out official duties and when he appeared in front of his people. The king's regalia included a golden uraeus snake and vulture worn at his brow,

representing the goddesses of Upper and Lower Egypt, who would protect him, for instance the uraeus snake was believed to spit venom at his enemies; a false beard worn on his shaven chin which connected him to the gods and referenced his own divinity as the gods themselves had beards, and a replica of a bull's tail, which represented how strong and fertile he was, like a bull, an animal which was also connected with kingship from the earliest times.

When the pharaoh put a crown on his head, he took on the authority of the gods that had been instilled by Ra, and *by performing his kingly, ritual and ceremonial duties, I think it could be argued that the pharaoh was magically recharging the crowns with his own royal power*. There were several different crowns in the royal ritual wardrobe, each worn by the king at specific occasions, and each with their own divine power and royal and religious associations. For example, the king wore the nemes headdress, the striped cloth crown Tutankhamun famously wears in his funerary mask, as an everyday crown- this was associated with the hugely important religious belief of solar rebirth. The king was often depicted wearing the helmet-like Blue Crown in warfare scenes. It was ritually presented to him by chief god Amun-Ra during the Opet festival, an extremely important annual royal ceremony in which the king reconnected with the royal ka-spirit and his divine power, and was rejuvenated with youth. The double crown, which was made up of the red crown of Lower Egypt and the white crown of Upper Egypt, represented the king as ruler of the whole of Egypt, an important message to convey, when he tried to practically and ritualistically retain power over a country that was, at times, the victim of civil wars and divisions of the state.

The King represented in Egyptian art

The pharaoh was represented larger than everyone else in iconography, due to his importance and the respect society had for him. The rules of Egyptian art and hierarchy, called decorum by Egyptologists, dictated that in two-dimensional art so-called superior people, such as overseers, be depicted larger than so-called inferior people, such as the staff they were in charge of. As the king was the most superior being in the world, apart from the gods themselves, he must always be depicted larger than every other person in the scene. The only exception is when he was depicted with the gods; in this case the king was represented as the same size as them, which demonstrated that he was considered to be of similar status to the gods. But he was actually subservient to them, and is nearly always represented in service to them as he was their high priest, for instance making offerings to them.

Titulary

Another key part of royal ideology that was integral to the king's identity and power were his names and titles. Uniquely, the pharaoh had five names and titles which only he was allowed to use, known in Egyptology as the fivefold titulary. They were called the Horus, Two Ladies, Golden Horus, *nsw-bity*, and Son of Ra names. The titles linked the pharaohs to the gods and to the ideology of kingship, for instance reiterating that he was the king of the whole unified country, the son of the sun god Ra, and connecting him in two titles with the god of kingship, Horus.

His names set him apart from the rest of the Egyptians, even the royal family, due to their significance and number, as while the king had five names, all of his subjects only had one official name, the one they were given at birth, and possibly a nickname. When parents named their children they often gave them names that were narrative phrases with important meanings, such as Amenhotep, translated as the god Amun is satisfied. Royal parents did the same for princes, who kept their birth names if they became king, but when ascending to the throne new kings also carefully chose four extra names, the meanings of which were often politically or religiously symbolic. For example, one of Ramesses II's names *mk kmt wsf h3swt* means 'Protector of Egypt who curbs foreign lands'.

In addition to these names being symbolic and meaningful, they can be seen as setting the tone or a goal for the king's reign; in the case of Ramesses II, curbing the power of foreign lands over the Egyptian empire was definitely a major ambition for his reign. *I think of it like a politician or a company choosing a slogan for their campaign or rebranding- it's a memorable way to understand something important about their identity, and helps people to know what they aim to do, and that they mean business.*

Besides his fivefold titulary, the king was also referred to by other titles, such as *hm=f* which is often translated "His Majesty", and *ity* meaning "sovereign", but one of the most interesting in my opinion is the title *per* 𓂏. From the New Kingdom the king was sometimes referred to by this phrase, which literally means great house, or palace, the place where the king, his court and his administration were based and worked. It's the same as in modern politics, when 'the White House' is used to refer to the US President, and '10 Downing Street' or 'Number 10' refers to the British Prime Minister. The phrase *per* 𓂏 eventually came down via ancient Greek to modern English as the word 'Pharaoh'.

Funerary provision

Of course, one of the most famous ways in which the king was treated differently to everyone else was his tomb and his funerary cult. While the elite, in other words high-ranking people who could afford it, had impressive tombs, pharaohs' tombs were extraordinary in their size, grandeur, and monumental nature. They also had amazing funerary chapels or temples built for them so that priests could make daily offerings to their souls for years after death.

During the Old Kingdom, pharaohs' tombs were where a huge focus of royal income, bureaucracy and manpower was spent. Khufu's pyramid in Giza, known as the Great Pyramid, was constructed from around 2.3 million blocks of limestone weighing nearly 6 million tonnes, and took around 20 years to build. Even the relatively more simple royal tombs of the New Kingdom in the Valley of the Kings, carved from the cliffs off the west bank of the Nile, required a village-full of generations of skilled craftsman to chisel out thousands of tonnes of rock from each tomb and decorate them over the course of nearly 500 years, and even more to construct their large and impressive funerary temples. Overall, a massive amount of resources, time and energy were directed to the king's funerary needs, far more than for any other individual.

Part 2- Succession- The King has Died, Long Live the King

When the pharaoh died, this triggered a series of events in which the kingship was practically, ritualistically and magically passed onto his successor. As per the Osiris and Horus and Seth myths, royal ideology and tradition dictated that kingship must pass from the pharaoh to his eldest son in direct succession, so throughout his reign the king worked to ensure that this would take place when he died. However, sometimes this situation didn't eventuate, and instead there could be interesting cases of usurpers or foreigners seizing the throne, non-royal politicians or queens becoming pharaoh, conspiracies and assassinations.

The pharaoh was responsible for securing the dynasty- this basically meant producing an heir and some spares to ensure the kingship stayed within his family. The king and his advisors were aware of the succession problems of some previous reigns which they wanted to avoid, whereby old reigning dynasties had ended because the pharaoh had no heirs, and a new dynasty of kings from another family took the throne. In a time when child mortality was high, and adults could die from illnesses that are easily treatable now, the king had many children by several queens simultaneously so he would definitely have at least one heir to the throne. In an extreme example, Ramesses II had over 100 children with his many wives, which was lucky because he lived such a long life that 12 of his heirs

to the throne died before him, and his 13th son and successor Merenptah was around 70 years of age when he became king. In addition to having many wives, a privilege which only the king was allowed, in the New Kingdom he was even allowed to marry his half-sisters, in an effort to keep the throne within his family.

The king's oldest son by his principal queen, the Great Royal Wife, was his heir to the throne, also known as the crown prince. However, if he died before his father, then the title passed to the next oldest son, his brother or half-brother, and so on. Therefore, it was important to train the crown prince and his brothers with the knowledge, skills and experience necessary to be a successful king. In their childhoods they were taught in subjects such as reading and writing, something the vast majority of the population couldn't do, including reading literature today known as wisdom texts that taught them lessons about courtly morals and how to be a good king. They also learned sports such as horse-riding and hunting, including learning to use weapons such as the bow and arrow, which would serve the princes well if they ever fought in battle.

Princes could also be given important jobs which would help to train them for their potential future role as king. During the first half of the Old Kingdom some were given positions such as vizier, the highest official of the land, akin to Prime Minister, or expedition leader, to discover valuable resources in foreign lands. During the New Kingdom many princes were given important priestly or military roles, for instance Tuthmosis III was a priest of Amun, and Amenmose, crown prince of Tuthmosis I but who died before he could become king, was overseer of the army. During the Ramesside period some princes even went to war with their fathers, for instance Ramesses II went on campaign to the Levant with Seti I. All of these offices are good training and precursors to the pharaoh's roles of High Priest of all gods, head of the military, and lawmaker.

There may have been a co-ruling practice amongst certain pharaohs called co-regency, including potential father and son pairings between the kings Amenemhat I, Senusret I, Amenemhat II and Senusret II of the 12th dynasty. The evidence suggests that the pharaoh may have invited the crown prince to rule with him when he was mature enough. This is controversial for two reasons. For one, Egyptologists debate whether co-regencies actually existed, as some argue that they did, and others argue that the evidence is misleading and they didn't exist until the Ptolemaic period. For another, co-regencies actually conflicted with kingship ideology as only one pharaoh was supposed to be on the throne at a time. However, its benefits would have overcome this issue. It would have been great training and experience for the crown prince, as rather than being thrown into the deep end when his father died, he would have been able to learn on the job, with the supervision of the current office holder. It would also hopefully have prevented an usurper from seizing the throne when the king died as the new king was already in place, ensuring the smooth passing of the throne from father to son, as it should be!

When the king died, the announcement was made that "the falcon has flown to heaven", a metaphor for the king's death and his soul's successful arrival in the afterlife. The palace gates would then be closed and a period of mourning would begin.

The crown prince would officially ascend to the throne the morning after the pharaoh died. *The enormity of this moment cannot be underestimated. His father had died, he was grieving and possibly in shock, and was thrown into the most important and stressful job in the country. He may have been preparing for this moment his whole life, or perhaps he had had an elder brother who was born to be king but who had died before his father, so he might not have expected to be king until recently, such as in the case of Tuthmosis II. Perhaps he had benefited from some training and experience in the roles assigned to him during his father's life or even during a potential co-regency, but could he ever have felt prepared for this role and the duties that came with it? Unlike taking over from someone

who had retired, the new king didn't have his father to consult when he wanted advice or instruction. And he was now the partially-divine monarch who had to be the professional and serious all-powerful leader, all during a time when he was still grieving, stressed and probably anxious about what was to come.*

This new pharaoh would have his coronation a few months later, after the old king had been mummified and the funeral rites completed. The mummification process possibly took around 70 days or more, so during this period the builders of the old pharaoh's tomb were instructed to make their final touches. While he was mourning, the new king was expected to leave his beard to grow, something that was unheard of in normal times for a pharaoh, due to the facial hair fashion among the upper classes in ancient Egypt, and the fact that as he was the high priest of the gods, the king was supposed to be clean shaven as an act of purity.

During the time between accession and coronation the new king established himself as ruler, for example progressing up and down the Nile to visit important towns and cities, being a visual symbol of the continuation of strong monarchy, and likely making offerings to the gods in the temples he visited. The Ramesseum Dramatic Papyrus says that the king undertook an unofficial performance of the coronation ceremony in each place he visited. This would have ritually bound him to the important towns and cities throughout the country until he was crowned by the gods in his official coronation. This practice would have been essential to re-establish royal and metaphorical order and control in his realm after it had been disrupted when the old king died, when the throne had been left temporarily empty until the crown prince became the new king the morning after his father's death. In Episode 2 I will talk about an underlying force in ancient Egypt called Ma'at, which was order, control and justice, and in Egyptian ideology the king's most important responsibility was to ensure that Ma'at won over the chaotic forces of the world. They believed that if there wasn't a king on the throne, chaos would win, which was a huge risk when the throne was left empty for up to 24 hours after the old king's death. It was therefore essential for the new king to re-establish this order and control on his accession to the throne.

The first few weeks or months of the new king's reign would have been a dangerous time, *when he was relatively weak, he hadn't yet been officially crowned and hadn't established himself as a powerful and effective leader. He would have had some loyal supporters, particularly those who had backed his father, but rivals could have used this opportunity to try to manipulate, or even overthrow him. Therefore, by visiting important towns and cities, and probably meeting the local governors and regional officials, he would have hoped to secure their loyalty and establish his royal and political authority throughout Egypt.* By enacting unofficial coronation ceremonies throughout the country, he was re-establishing the metaphorical Ma'at control over chaos. *And through the official coronation ceremony a short time later, when the gods crowned the king, the royal ka spirit entered his body and he became the partly-divine pharaoh, he now theoretically had all the power he needed to rule the country successfully.*

The process of the crown prince becoming pharaoh as just described is ideally what would have taken place upon the old king's death. This new king would then theoretically proceed to reign as a strong, fair and wise monarch, successful in his efforts to look after the country and unchallenged on the throne, until he eventually died and his eldest son took over the throne, and so on. However, this isn't always what happened.

The king was responsible for ensuring that he had at least one male heir to the throne by the time of his death. If this situation came to pass, then in theory the throne was safe, but sometimes he wasn't so lucky. He may have been infertile, or may have outlived his sons, and therefore would have died without a male heir, as in the famous case of Tutankhamun. After Tutankhamun's death, his vizier Ay,

of non-royal origin, became king. While this was technically against the rules of direct royal succession, it was so essential that a pharaoh was on the throne at all times, that it was better to have a king of non-royal origin, particularly one who had the experience of helping to run the country as vizier, the king's right-hand man, rather than no pharaoh at all.

If the king left no sons, in rare cases his daughter may take the throne as pharaoh in her own right, such as Sobekneferu of the 12th dynasty, or in conjunction with a male king, such as Hatshepsut and Tuthmosis III. While it is seen as perfectly normal nowadays to have a queen ruling a country, especially when taking into consideration Queen Elizabeth II who reigned over Great Britain for 70 years, this was not the norm in ancient Egypt. As a female monarch went against traditional kingship ideology, there would have been people who didn't consider these women to be the true pharaoh, and just as there were rivals to the throne in normal times, there would have been disloyal people who would have rather had a male relative of the old king take the throne. Analysis of their iconography, titularies and texts reveal evidence for how the ancient Egyptians perceived these female monarchs. For instance, were these rare individuals fully presented as a pharaoh by using a complete titulary and wearing traditional kingly regalia? And how were they regarded posthumously by ancient Egyptians hundreds or even thousands of years later, for instance were they included, or omitted, from the lists of pharaohs in the ancient king lists? This is a subject which we've only been able to touch on very briefly here, it certainly deserves detailed discussion which we'll do in future episodes.

A queen may also rule if the new king ascended the throne as a child. The young king's mother, or his step-mother, the old king's principal wife, could rule on behalf of him as regent until he was deemed old enough, such as in the case of Hatshepsut ruling for Tuthmosis III while her step-son was a child. As just discussed, people disloyal to the queen or those who didn't like the idea of a female in charge of the country may not have wanted the old king's wife to effectively, if temporarily, become pharaoh. But at least this queen was only acting as regent for the true pharaoh until he was old enough to rule the country on his own, while he still served as king nominally, for ideological and mythological purposes. However, in the fascinating case of Siptah and Tawosret, the queen used her role as regent to try to claim kingship for herself. Siptah was a 19th Dynasty pharaoh of unclear origin, possibly the son of an overthrown usurper of the throne of Lower Egypt called Amenmessu. Siptah was only a child when he came to the throne, so the old king Seti II's principal wife Tawosret was his regent. She reigned in his place, ruling almost alongside a royal chancellor named Bay, who certainly tried to claim too much authority over and above his place as a high official, declaring himself to be the kingmaker who put Siptah on the throne, commissioning his own tomb in the Valley of the Kings, and being represented as the same size, and therefore same status, as Queen Tawosret. For his attempts to gain so much power above his station, Bay was executed in year 5 of Siptah's reign. Despite this, Tawosret made efforts for her own authority to increase further throughout Siptah's period as king, and while she was ruler in all but name, just before Siptah died, Tawosret tried to claim to be pharaoh in name by adopting a full kingly titulary. We don't know exactly what happened at the end of her period of power, but the names of Siptah and Tawosret were destroyed on their monuments, demonstrating that the Egyptians wanted to forget this period of royal history, and ancient texts retrospectively describe this period as one of chaos and rebellion.

Even in times when the pharaoh matched the ideology and traditions of Egyptian kingship- a male monarch, ideally an adult, who was the son of the previous king, there could still be trouble in the palace. As mentioned, those disloyal to the king or the crown prince, or simply the power hungry, could try to usurp the pharaoh. They could try to seize the throne when the old king had just died, as in the case of former vizier Amenemhat I who became king after the death of 11th dynasty pharaoh Mentuhotep IV, or during the pharaoh's reign, seizing the throne from under him. The most drastic way to depose the pharaoh was documented several times in ancient Egyptian history, and mirrors

part of the Osiris myth; conspiracy to assassinate the king. One case, recorded by the Egyptian priest and historian Manetho sounds like the plot of a soap opera. Teti, a king of the troubled 6th dynasty, was assassinated by his own bodyguard, and an usurper named Userkare seized the throne, reigning for a few years. However, he was overthrown by Pepi I, the man who should have been king when Teti died. Pepi I had a long reign, but according to a contemporary source Pepi himself was almost the victim of a harem conspiracy, but the assassination attempt was unsuccessful. Pharaohs would have been anxious for this to happen to them, hence why they lived their lives in secure palaces.

It may seem strange that the ancient Egyptian court, officials and citizens would accept usurpers to be their king, especially those of non-royal origin, considering that this completely contradicted the traditions and ideology of kingship. However, it was obviously essential to have a strong king and not an empty throne, and there was a history of several kings of non-royal backgrounds whose reigns began some very successful dynasties of rulers, for instance Amenemhat I and Ramesses I, which solved the dynastic troubles of the previous reigns when the old, deceased king didn't have an heir. It seems that the practical priority of ensuring they had a king overrode the need to make the royal lineage mirror the template established by the tribunal of gods in the Horus and Seth myth.

Thank you for listening to Episode 1. In Episode 2, I'll be talking about the king's duties in his role of maintaining Ma'at, that concept of order, control and justice winning over the chaotic forces of the world. He was the high priest of all ancient Egyptian gods, commander-in-chief of the army, head of the government, and supreme judge, and was the most important person in ancient Egypt. So please tune into Episode 2, and thank you for listening to this very first episode of Musegyptology!