

AN ADVENTURE IN EGYPT

WALKING WITH GODDESSES

Birds fly in formation up the River Nile, as the orange glow of sunrise paints the surface fiery shades. It's the year 1400 BCE and you are aboard a skiff – a small boat made from papyrus leaves and rope. You are riding ancient Egypt's watery lifeline.

Along the north side of the river, enormous temples reach towards the lapis blue sky. They are dedicated to the gods and goddesses that have made this kingdom the envy of the world. Jumping from your rickety boat at Luxor, two staggeringly huge building complexes rise up in front of you. To your right is Karnak, the home of the chief of the gods, **Amun-Ra**. To your left, along an avenue of sculptured sphinxes, is the temple of his wife, **Mut**.

The townspeople are gathered in a noisy throng, performing the annual Opet Festival. They carry a statue of Amun-Ra on a golden boat along the avenue from one temple to the other. Now the god can enjoy some time with Mut. She is the primordial goddess of creation – the first mother. The Sun God, Amun-Ra, joined with the Goddess of Waters, Mut, to produce all life on Earth.

INSIDE MUT'S TEMPLE

Awaiting her husband in the dark recesses of her inner sanctuary, Mut's statue glimmers with bright colours, gold and jewels. On her head she wears the double crown of Upper and Lower Egypt, showing that she has power over the whole land. She might look composed, seated on her stone throne, but this all-powerful goddess could transform into a far more terrifying version.

STORMY SEKHMET

Born from the cry of the Sun God, **Sekhmet** represents vengeance. With the head of a lioness she came into being because the people of Egypt were constantly breaking the rules of their divine parents. Once released, she swept across the kingdom, killing everything in her path. The

Nile ran red with the blood of all she had destroyed. While Mut is a loving mother, Sekhmet is a violent storm of fury. Goddesses reveal all aspects of what it is to be human.

Leaping back in your skiff you make the trip across to the south bank of the Nile. Here, you begin your journey away from the bustling towns of the living, towards the land of the dead. Winding past more huge buildings, the fields disappear and the dust of the desert starts to scratch at your skin.

VALLEY OF THE KINGS

You are approaching the Valley of the Kings, where generations of rulers lie buried beneath the rocks in networks of complex chambers. Rounding a bend in the rocky path you see the steps of a shiny new temple stretching upwards towards the cliff face. It is bigger than any you've ever seen, and its stones gleam fresh as it has just been completed by the pharaoh **Hatshepsut**. It is a magnificent expression of her extraordinary power. Few women have ruled like she did, and her reputation eclipses all others.

Climbing upwards, step after exhausting step, you see the carved head of another goddess. Sometimes she is in the form of a gentle cow, and sometimes she has strong human features with a pair of horns emerging from her head. This is **Hathor** and she is everywhere alongside Mut, Sekhmet and Hatshepsut herself.



Gazing on the many representations of different types of women – goddesses, rulers, sacred female animals – you remember that the divide between lion and cow goddess, Sekhmet and Hathor, is blurred, because when the people saw Sekhmet's bloodthirsty rampages they came up with a plan. Knowing she was hungry for blood, they collected red ochre, which they ground up and mixed into 7,000 urns of beer.

They poured this blood-like liquid over the fields outside the city of Heliopolis. When the crazed lioness saw it, she began to lick the earth dry. The ale made her sleepy. She entered the great ancient city and was overcome with exhaustion so lay down still on the streets. She had transformed and become the gentle, nurturing cow goddess Hathor.

As you leave the temple you can't help but think how complicated the spiritual world of ancient Egypt is. But then I suppose it is no more complicated than people are themselves. The goddesses have all the same characteristics as people you know, but they have them on a superhuman level!

Learn more about Sekhmet, as well as 49 other empowering female figures, in the fabulous new book **Goddess**, by **Dr Janina Ramirez**.

Our friends at Nosy Crow have given us 5 copies of *Goddess* to win. Turn to page 45 to enter.

