

Queens of the Nile

In April, nine BCH “queens” and one “regent” enjoyed a very informative guided tour of this exhibition on loan from Turin to the Rijksmuseum voor Oudheden, Leiden.

The period covered was approximately 500 years from 1500 to 1000 BC, and the role of the queens and the rights of women in general were highlighted. In ancient Egypt, society was female friendly and women were allowed to ask for divorce, own property and bring up children as single mothers. The earliest queen mentioned even took charge of the army after the death of her regal husband. The pharaoh had to be seen to be appeasing the deities (of whom there were many), especially those connected with the Earth. It seems that quite a number of brother-sister marriages took place, probably to prevent the intrusion of foreigners into the kingdom. It was important to have a male heir and Nefertiti failed in her female duty with Akhematen, giving him six daughters. Rameses II outlived his own children who numbered around 100, sired from numerous “queens” in the hierarchical setting of the harem. The harem was far from being a place of leisure. The women of whatever rank in the pecking order of “horizontal refreshment” were employed in the making of linen. In fact, it appears that the chief queen was a sort of CEO of a linen company. As a pharaoh could have several palaces (some had up to six or eight) there was an overseer in each palace who recorded not only the linen production but also how the education was proceeding with for instance “child 7 of wife 14”.

