AN ELUSIVE FEMALE PHARAOH, 
AND HER “TEMPLE OF MILLIONS OF YEARS”

Pearce Paul Creasman

Figure 1. Virtual interpretation of the temple based on archaeological remains

Unfortunately, when Tausret’s reign came to an end, her tomb was usurped and her temple thoroughly destroyed. Presumably the shadow of the female queen was too dangerous to let linger, so the founder of the 20th Dynasty, Sethnakht, or his long-ruling son, Ramesses III, set out against Tausret’s memory and its physical manifestations. This dramatic refutation of the legitimacy of their unrelated predecessor likely made it easier for their own lineage to take root and overpower what must have been a substantial number of other potential claimants to the throne. Ramesses II, from whom Tausret is generally believed to be descended, had fathered as many as 100 children. Tausret’s royal cousins, and potential heirs, must have been legion.

The attacks on Tausret’s monuments proved effective, so much so that when the site of Tausret’s Theban temple was very briefly surveyed and selectively dug in 1896 by a team under the supervision of W. M. Flinders Petrie, “only a few stones of the foundation remained.” Despite Petrie’s declaration being accurate when compared to the better preserved temples in the area, it misled potential future investigators. Thought to contain little of further archaeological interest, the site went without further exploration for more than a century, until the UAEE’s excavations.

The UAEE excavations have made numerous discoveries at the site about the ancient structures, Tausret herself, and subsequent occupations. Perhaps most importantly, it seems that construction on the temple was either completed or very nearly so: it was later robbed of most of its stone, leaving the foundation trenches and mounds.
and 25th Dynasties. In either the later part of the 25th or 26th Dynasty, Tausret's temple was destroyed by this time, the later burials and chapels are almost certainly unrelated to any memory of the temple. Like much of western Thebes, there was an active burial environment interactions.

Use of the site did not end with the destruction of Tausret's temple. Like many of western Thebes, there was an active burial enterprise here during the Third Intermediate Period or Late Period. Because Tausret's temple was destroyed by this time, the later burials and chapels are almost certainly unrelated to any memory of the pharaoh queen. It is far more likely that the site simply provided a good burial plot, as it has little evidence of activity between the 20th and 25th Dynasties. In either the later part of the 25th or 26th Dynasty, the site sees renewed use. It is these later occupations that form the primary focus of the UAEE's current and planned excavations.

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Figure 3. Mud brick stamped with Tausret's cartouche from the temple sanctuary of unimpressive decaying mud brick seen today (Fig. 3). While the archaeological evidence presently suggests that the temple had not been fully adorned with reliefs or paintings before its destruction, it was nonetheless apparently functional, especially in the "holy of holies": the sanctuary.

Inscriptions on the temple's remaining foundation blocks mention Tausret's eighth regnal year, which has significant implications for the length of her reign. It is known that she served six years as regent for her stepson, the young King Siptah, before enjoying what has long been thought to be two years of independent rule. But if the foundations were laid in her eighth year and construction of the temple was completed, or nearly so, Tausret must have ruled long enough past her eighth regnal year to see this accomplished. At least an additional year, maybe two, would likely have been needed. This estimate doubles the length of her independent reign as it has been commonly accepted. Although only an adjustment of a few calendar years, this is likely to result in a significant reevaluation of Egyptian chronology in the late second millennium BCE.

The work of the UAEE has also shed light on Egyptological history, namely Petrie's work at the temple. His work was typical of the period, although his work at the site seems to have been exceptionally brief. Consequently, errors and oversights were made. For example, Petrie suggested that the plan of Tausret's temple was based on that of Merenptah's, which is the neighboring temple to the south. However, more detailed recording and intensive excavation have revealed that the queen's temple was based on an inner temple of the Ramesseum, and that the temple was also oriented in a nearly identical direction as Ramesses II's. Thousands of artifacts overlooked or deemed unimportant by Petrie's team have been recovered, recorded and curated. The UAEE excavations have clearly demonstrated the need to review old assumptions about historically excavated sites.

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Sources:
1. For a more detailed discussion of the length of her reign, including new evidence, see Pearce Paul Creasman, Excavations at Pharaoh-Queen Tausret's Temple of Millions of Years: 2012 Season, Journal of the Society for the Study of Egyptian Antiquities, forthcoming. In addition to three or four years of her own reign, she served as regent for Siptah for six: a total reign of nine or perhaps even ten years.
2. Under the direction of Richard H. Wilkinson from 2004-2012 and Pearce Paul Creasman from 2012-present. Our work would not have been possible without the permission of the Supreme Council of Antiquities/ Ministry of State for Antiquities and support from the members of the MSA Permanent Committee and dozens of archaeologists, administrators and inspectors over the years—all of whom are recognized in our annual reports, which can be found at <www.egypt.arizona.edu>. Further, the American Research Center in Egypt has equally supported our work, as have numerous donors whom we acknowledge here collectively.
4. W. M. F. Petrie, Six Temples At Thebes (Bernard Quaritch, 1897).

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