

The Tomb of Queen Meryetamun

I The Discovery

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The dig that took up the second half of the Metropolitan Museum Egyptian Expedition's 1929/30 season involved finding the answers to so many of the everyday problems of excavation that it may be worthwhile telling the tale as we lived it on the spot. It had the usual delays and disappointments, the invariable surprise when the find was actually made, the laborious groping after the explanation of what had been found, and finally the arrival at a conclusion that seemed to fit the facts discovered. If the reader finds the tale involved in the telling, he will get a very fair idea of the way things generally happen in the field.

On the hillside just north of the Hatshepsut temple in Thebes we had noticed two chip heaps, weathered during centuries, and almost hidden by drifted sand and by fallen rock. We could see that the chip was shale from the lowest strata of the cliff and

that it lay much higher up the slope than any natural agency could have carried it. Of course it was possible that we were dealing with heaps of shale dug out in leveling the temple courts below, but it was hard to see why the quarry chip from there should have been carried so far uphill – and across a ravine, at that. On the other hand it was equally possible that what we had were heaps of chip from the tunneling of some undiscovered tomb or tombs in the shale strata, and it was on this that we pinned our hopes.

The gang of workmen were started at the foot of the hill, one half of them clearing the slope up to the cliff on the north, and the other half working along the bottom, facing west, just outside the north wall of the temple. These last men soon found themselves crowded into a little natural ravine, cut across at the bottom by the temple wall. Above, it was choked with

1. The hillside above the Hatshepsut temple before the excavations

2. Clearing the ravine outside the temple wall



3. The ravine outside the temple wall cleared, with the mouth of the tomb exposed

4. The top of the brickwork blocking the entrance to the tomb, and the rubbish filling the pit

water-washed sand and gravel; with rubbish thrown out from the temple in the Eighteenth Dynasty; with more water-washed sand pitted with shallow graves of the Roman period; and finally with debris from the modern clearing of the temple. In fact, the ravine had almost disappeared and its rocky sides only emerged slowly under the picks of our men, about twenty feet below what had been the surface of the hillside when we began to dig. Day after day and even week after week passed in dully shifting dirt, with nothing to show for the expenditure of time and money, until the usual doubts began to haunt us as to whether or not the job here was justified.

On February 23 – six weeks after we had started the work on the hill – the Reis Gilan (a foreman) reported that the men had found a rough hole in the rock under their feet, in the side of the ravine toward the temple. It was obviously impossible to explore the hole then with the loose sand and rock on the face of the excavations still overhanging it and threatening to cave in on it. In due course we decided that we could clean out just the mouth and see what the hole might be. We chose a weekly market day, when the work is always shut down, and set a few men to digging. They cleared out an irregular, jagged opening in the rock, and when they were about waist deep, brought to light some rather carelessly laid brickwork on the side of the pit toward the temple.

Even that, however, failed to get us excited. True, brickwork down a pit meant the entrance to a tomb, but that carelessly dug opening and shoddily laid brickwork suggested nothing but a rather miserable late tomb such as we had often found before. Lots of comparatively poor people had been buried around the temple in the later periods, but our hopes were set on much higher game.



5. The corridor of the tomb as seen from the entrance pit

Still, as a matter of routine, we put guards on the spot, filled the hole up again, and waited for three more days until we had a good clear space around it.

On February 28, when we had plenty of room, we went about our job again in a leisurely way. Just as we had thought, the bricks of which we had had a glimpse were merely stuffed into the mouth of an opening facing toward the temple, and were only held in place with a little clay smeared along the top of them. The pit itself was filled with any old thing that had been lying handy around its mouth in ancient times – dirt, rags, bits of a large white coffin, and the lids of straw baskets (Figure 4). In fact it seemed to be a rather disreputable rubbish hole, but, still keeping to our routine, everything was photographed before it was moved. Then we took out a couple of bricks and flashed an electric torch inside.

It was only then that we had our first hint that our tomb was not so simple and uninteresting an affair as we had supposed. A jumble of white shawabti boxes and a headless Osiris figure could be seen just inside the opening. Beyond were several big round baskets, to which the lids in the pit seemed to belong, piled against the wall of a corridor that stretched into the gloom farther than the ray from the electric torch would reach (Figure 5). We had been prepared for a little tomb and here was one that stretched forty feet or more underground without coming to an end. The little shawabti boxes and the crude Osiris figure might appear to be the sort of late dynastic funeral furniture which we had expected, but those big baskets were the kind of thing which one usually associated with Eighteenth Dynasty tombs. And then another look and it was obvious that the tomb was already an old one when the shawabti boxes were put into it – they lay on top of dirt and rubbish covering the entire floor.



That night the tomb was sealed up again and heavily guarded and the next day was spent in building a sort of old-fashioned cellar door over the pit so that we could lock the place up securely as long as our work lasted. Then we started to remove the brickwork from the entrance, photographing and planning it as we did so. One fact was soon established. Originally the corridor had been closed with a carefully built brick wall. All but the bottom courses of this wall had been broken down and the tomb entered a second time, after which it had been reclosed with bricks and stones. Later all but three courses of this second blocking had been removed and the tomb entered a third time. During this last entry, dirt had fallen over the remains of the previous blockings and on this dirt the last, carelessly built sealing of the tomb had been placed. Thus, even before we had actually set foot in the tomb, we knew that we should have to account for three separate entries with whatever we might find inside.

The last people in the tomb had made a path for themselves along the corridor by pushing everything over to one side. On March 3, as soon as all the blocking of the entrance was removed, I crawled in and gingerly followed in their footsteps, stepping warily so as not to disturb anything which they might have dropped. The passage was clear almost to the end, but there my way was blocked by a yellow, varnished coffin (Figure 6). Its lid was missing, and inside it there lay a mummy with bandages absolutely intact and with garlands over its face and a wig at its head. Beyond it the lid of a large outer coffin was propped up on its side in a doorway leading to the right, and just beyond the doorway lay the empty outer coffin, the missing lid of the inner coffin, and the cover which belonged over the mummy itself (Figure 7).

Here was a most surprising state of affairs. We were used to the confusion in which things were left by robbers, but this did not look like their work. These coffins seemed to be lying just as they had been dropped by a burial party when something had interrupted them – and another flash of the torch into the gloom ahead showed what that something was. I was on the brink of a deep well that made an absolutely impassable gulf across the corridor. The real crypt of the tomb must lie beyond, and in the far left-hand corner across the well I could see, on the level on which I stood, a passage leading off to the left, far out of reach and turning off at too sharp an angle for me even to peer into it from my side of the abyss.

For the time being we were completely balked. We could not cross the well without bridging it, and it was impossible to bring the necessary beams and planks down the corridor while the coffins and baskets and boxes were still in the way. Before they could be moved, Burton had his photographs to take, Hauser had his plans to draw, and I had my notes to write. However, we had seen enough already to work out at least the last chapter in the history of the tomb.

The Osiris figure which we had seen from the entrance of the corridor bore the name of “the House Mistress, the Chantress of Amun Ra, the King’s Daughter of his body, his Beloved, Entiuny (Nany)” and the same name appeared on the shawabti figures in the boxes nearby. Although the coffins had originally been made for a woman named Tanetbekhenu, her name had been erased and that of Nany substituted for it. From the style of the coffins it is quite certain that they are contemporary with those of Henettawy, the daughter of King Pinodjem, which we found not far from this tomb a few years ago. Hence we could safely conclude that we

6 (below). *The inner coffin and mummy at the end of the first corridor*

7 (opposite). *The empty outer coffin on the brink of the well*





8. *The last doorway and the coffin
of Meryetamun*

had discovered another daughter of Pinodjem, named Nany, who died and was buried, probably, in the years just preceding 1000 B.C. We had a fair approximation, therefore, of the date of the third and last closing of our tomb.

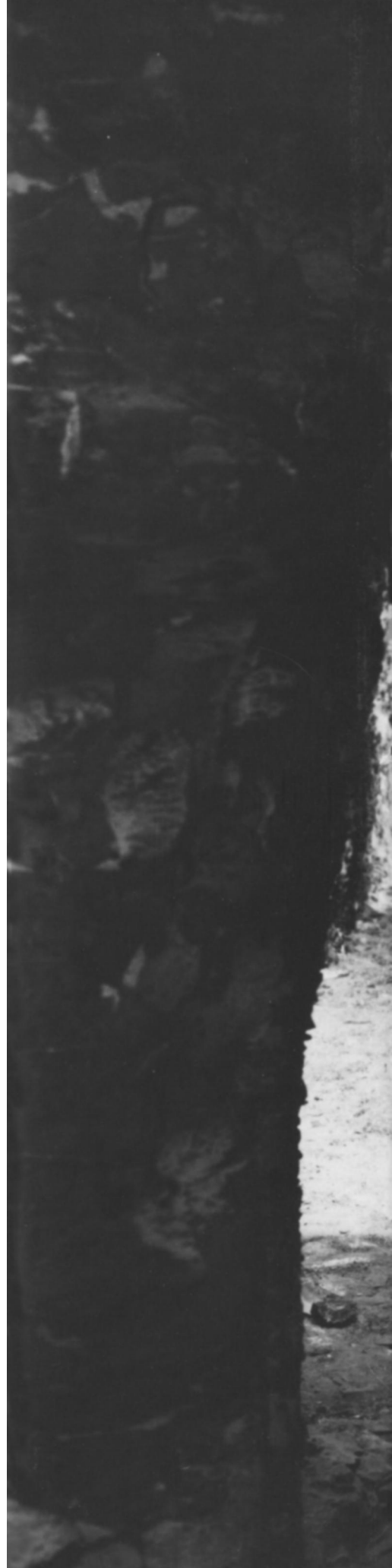
When Nany died, somebody had known of the existence of this tomb, and her coffins and mummy, her shawabti boxes and Osiris figure were brought up to it. The pit was dug out, the blocking broken through, and the heavy outer coffin and the three lids were started down the passage just ahead of the body itself, in the inner coffin. As soon as the first of the bearers had turned the corner at the end of the corridor, they found themselves on the brink of the well and dropped their burdens where they stood. The bearers crowding from behind with the body had to drop it, in turn. Probably a discussion followed, which ended with some of the party leaving the others while they went off to look for a beam to bridge the well. At any rate some were left out of sight among the coffins long enough to chop the gilded faces off of all three lids, scattering the chips all over the floor. We could picture them hiding their plunder under their clothes when they heard that no beams could be found. We could see how the Osiris figure had been passed down to them so clumsily that its head had been broken off against the low ceiling and had rolled behind one of the baskets, and how the shawabti boxes had been carelessly dropped just inside the entrance. And we have already noticed how a few bricks had been hastily stuffed into the entrance and the dirt and rubbish lying around raked into the pit, leaving the Princess Nany lying just where she had been dropped on the brink of the abyss.

It was the morning of March 11 before the well could be crossed. The

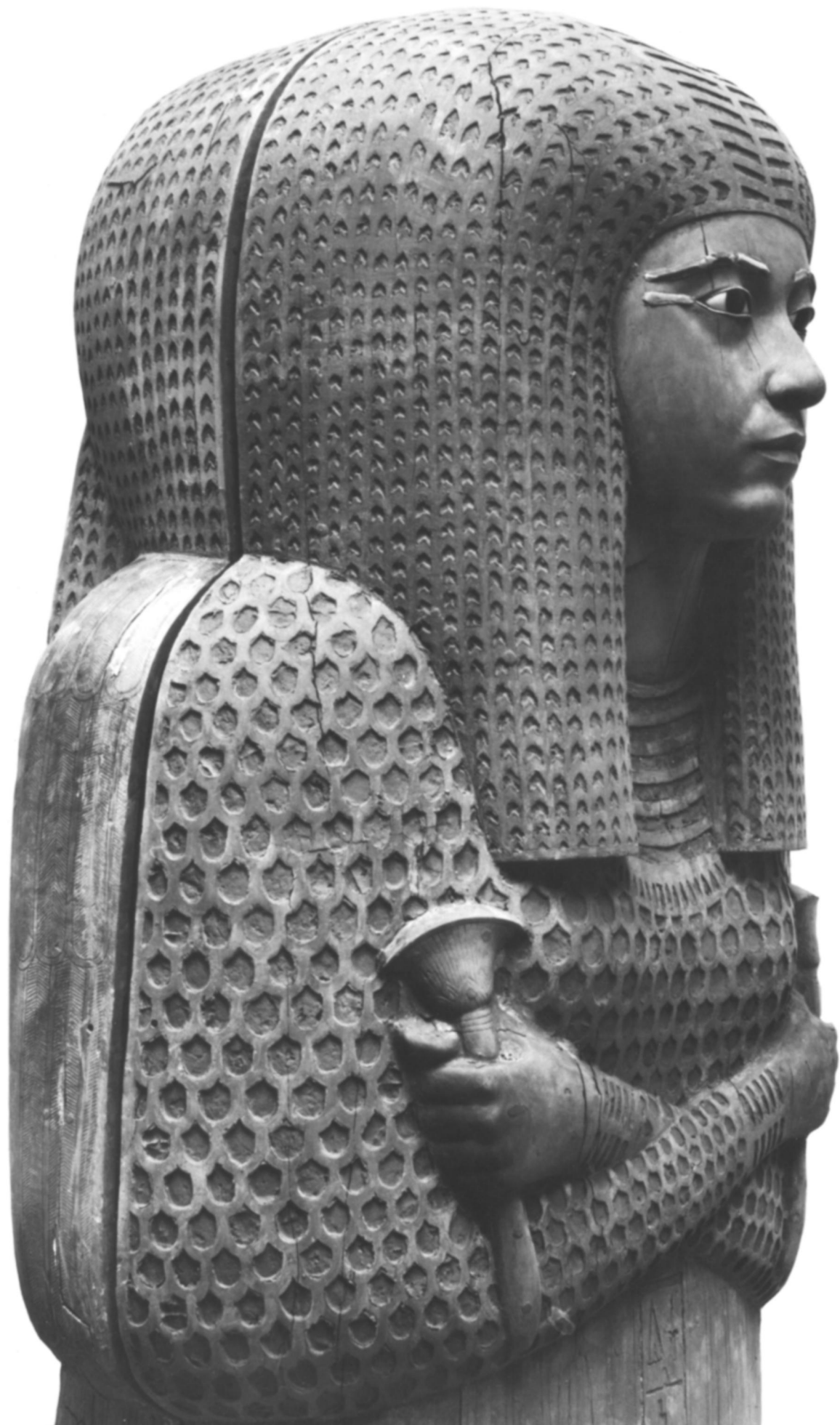
night before, Hauser had finished his detailed plan showing the location of every object up to the well; Burton had taken his last photograph that morning before breakfast; and then the Reis Hamid had taken out the last of the coffins of Nany. I had already tried a surveyor's pole four meters long (about 13 feet) and had found that it would not only reach across the well, but that it would turn the corner in the passage. In fact, the wall on the left side of the corridor had been cut away in ancient times to allow a timber of just that length to make the turn. When all was clear we brought down a light beam and worked it across the well on to the doorsill on the opposite side. On the first we slid a second beam, and on the two, a board. Together they would hold my weight and I crawled across on my hands and knees.

Even if a rather apathetic state of mind when we first opened the tomb has been confessed, that was all gone long before this. We had been held up by that well, wondering what might be beyond, for a week, and under the circumstances no one could have crawled across that plank without tingling with curiosity.

From the doorway on the other side there was one step down and then inky blackness. I turned on my torch and flashed it around. I was in a chamber just high enough to stand up in, seemingly interminably long in the gloom – and blankly empty. For a moment the bottom seemed to have fallen out of everything, and then my light shone on a narrow doorway at the far end. I took the eight or ten strides across the empty chamber and came to a standstill just within the doorway beside three little empty saucers and a dried and shriveled bundle of leaves lying at the foot of an enormous recumbent figure (Figure 8). My light flickered along it and came to rest on a great placid







face staring fixedly upward in the deathly silence of the dark crypt (Figure 9). Then it flickered back and followed down a column of hieroglyphs announcing that “the King gives a boon to Osiris, the Great God, Lord of Abydos, that he may cause to come forth at the call, bread and beer, beef and fowl, bandages, incense and unguents and all things good and pure on which a god lives, and the sweet north wind, for the spirit of the King’s Daughter and Sister, the God’s Wife, the King’s Great Wife, joined to the Crown of Upper Egypt, the Mistress of the Two Lands, Meryetamun, true of voice with Osiris.” The silence, the dark, and the realization of the ages that coffin had lain there – for it was a coffin – all combined in creating an eerie effect; and whatever one may expect, that does not happen so very often in digging.

Nor was there time to let it last very long then, for evidently we had quite a job on our hands. In the first place it would be just as well to let the Reis Hamid have a look as head of the native workmen, so that the rumors which were bound to start would have some relation to fact. Then it was evident that before anything in a royal tomb of this sort was touched it should be seen by a representative of the Service des Antiquités. A note was therefore sent to Tewfik Effendi Boulos, the Chief Inspector in Luxor, and the tomb was locked up until his arrival. Tewfik Effendi came on the thirteenth and saw the coffin as it lay. The next day was spent in flooring over the whole well and in photographing. On the fifteenth, with Tewfik Effendi present again, we raised the gigantic coffin lid and exposed a disproportionately small coffin inside (Figure 12). That in

turn was photographed as it lay and then opened and we were looking at a slender little mummy simply wrapped, and festooned with garlands still fresh enough to show the colors of their flowers (Figure 13). By nightfall both of the coffins and the mummy were safely stored in the workshop at our house.

II The Plundering and the Repair

The big coffin of Meryetamun is a remarkable object (Figures 9, 10, 16). Not only is it of gigantic size – 10 feet 3½ inches – but it is a piece of superbly skillful joinery, made of carefully selected cedar planks tenoned together and carved inside and out to a uniform thinness. The carving of the face has been studied with the most subtle knowledge, and accomplished with a surface as soft and smooth as the features which it portrays. The eyes and eyebrows are inlaid with glass; the wig and the torso are carved with deeply incised chevrons and scales painted blue; and the body is sheathed in feathers lightly engraved in the wood. But the glass of the eyebrows and lids is cheap and is carelessly stuck in the place of some more valuable material. The incisions in the decoration of the wig and torso and in the inscription are partly filled with a cement which still retains the casts of inlays. And finally, over the body there are rows of little nail holes which show that, except perhaps for the face, the whole coffin was once sheathed in sheets of gold, both inside and out. Obviously this coffin was once of a richness comparable to that of the outer coffin of Tutankhamun.

10. The outer coffin of Meryetamun



11. The inner coffin of Meryetamun within the outer

The inner coffin, while much smaller (6 feet 1 inch), had been almost as lavishly decorated (Figure 12). On the head we found a tenon hole which had once held the golden vulture head of a queen's crown, and all over the body there were the rows of nail holes showing that within and without the entire coffin had been incased in sheets of gold, which must have been chased with the feather pattern still to be seen lightly scored in the wood. None of this richness was left, however. In place of the vulture head on the brow a uraeus had been painted; the wig was colored blue and the face yellow; a blue and yellow collar had been daubed over the breast; right across the feather pattern down the front was painted a copy of the inscription on the big coffin, and the body was given a red wash.

Even down in the crypt we had noticed some of these evidences that the coffins had been stripped of their riches and then refurbished. Taking this fact with obvious signs of forcible opening on both coffins, we had a pretty clear story. At some time in antiquity the tomb of Meryetamun had been robbed and on the discovery of the outrage all that was possible had been done to cover up the damage. The coffins had been



12. The inner coffin of Meryetamun



13. The mummy of Meryetamun lying in place inside the inner coffin



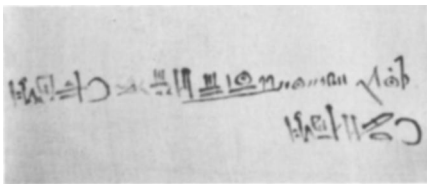
cleaned and painted, the mummy had been shut up in them once more, and the little offering dishes and the wreath of leaves (Figure 14) had been placed at the feet.

The date when all this had happened had been recorded in a docket, written across the breast of the mummy itself in a bold hieratic hand, reading: "Year 19, Month 3 of the Winter Season, Day 28. On this day examination of the King's Wife Meryetamun" (Figure 15). For a long time we were at a loss to know what nineteenth year was meant, but we eventually settled that point when we came to unwrap the mummy. The mummy had been stripped almost to the bone, but it had been most carefully bandaged up again in clean, new linen and among the sheets we found several marked: "Linen made by the High Priest of Amun, Masaharet, true of voice, for his father Amun, in the Year 18." Since Masaharet was high priest in the reign of King Pinodjem, it was clearly near this king's reign – about 1054-1032 B.C. – that the mummy of Meryetamun had been restored.

We were learning a good deal about the history of the tomb. That second blocking of the doorway must have been done by the necropolis officials who restored Meryetamun's mummy. After they had closed up the doorway, they would naturally have been careful to hide the tomb once more, but in spite of their precautions its existence would have been known to lots of people working in the necropolis at the time. That is to say, the location of the tomb would have been known and would have been remembered for several years, but few could have seen it inside or would have suspected the existence of the well which cut off the back chambers. We can assume that when Nany died none of the officials who had ever been in the tomb were still active in the necropolis, and that those who chose it for her burial place were in possession only of this second-hand knowledge.



14. *Persea twigs and dishes that had been placed at the foot of Meryetamun's coffin*



15. *Docket giving the date of the restoration of the mummy of Meryetamun*

However, we had not yet settled to our own entire satisfaction the problem of the first blocking and the original ownership of the tomb. At the time when the robberies were becoming only too common, the royal mummies were often moved by the priests to hidden and unsuspected corners of the necropolis. Hence the mere finding of Meryetamun's mummy in this tomb did not necessarily mean that it had been hers in the first place. In fact, for some time we doubted whether it could have been, because no queen's tomb had ever been discovered anywhere nearby. So far we were still leaning toward our first idea that this tomb had originally belonged to one of Hatshepsut's courtiers.

It was only when we had cleaned the last of the rubbish out of the tomb that we changed our minds. A pile of rags had been thrown into the unfinished corridor to the left of the well. When we came to examine them they turned out to be the bandages cut and ripped off a mummy, and among them we found one marked: "The God's Wife, the King's Wife, Meryetamun, beloved of Amun. May she live!" These, then, were obviously the original bandages torn off of Meryetamun's mummy by the thieves. A pile of rubbish of all sorts had been swept out of the back chambers into the well and still lay where it had fallen on the far side of the well bottom. Among other fragments of funeral furniture this pile contained bits of an enormous wooden coffin plastered over with white gesso. Other pieces of the same coffin had been found already in the corridor and in the entrance pit, and, when they were put together, we discovered that it had been actually big enough to hold the great coffin of Meryetamun. In addition, we found the vulture head of the queen's crown from the coffin's brow. Obviously here was a third, outermost coffin of Meryetamun so completely wrecked by the thieves that it had

been simply swept out of sight at the time of the restoration of the mummy. From these finds it followed that Meryetamun had been robbed here in this tomb, for it was very unlikely that the necropolis officials would have brought scraps of her torn-up bandages and of her demolished coffin from a distance. Furthermore, the most minute examination of the rubbish from the tomb failed to show any trace of an earlier occupant. And thus it was that at the end of all of our theorizing we arrived at the conclusion that we had discovered the tomb of Queen Meryetamun and that it was at her funeral that the door had first been walled up.

It was understood that the mummy of Meryetamun, being that of a queen of Egypt, should be taken to Cairo, and in the Cairo Museum it has recently been decided that no longer are the royal bodies to be exposed to the gaze of the curious. We were in perfect sympathy with the ruling and not at all averse to Meryetamun's being protected from the public eye; but completely wrapped up as we had found her, with the garlands on her breast and the docket of the old inspectors written across her shroud, she had been interesting without being in the least gruesome. We had saved every single linen bandage as we had taken it off, making careful notes of how she had been wrapped, and we decided to bandage the queen up once more exactly as we had found her. And in doing it we had a very illuminating practical illustration of just how the ancient Egyptian had gone about his task. For one thing, we discovered that, in spite of the fact that some of the linen was now very frail and had to be handled with every care, the mummy could be rewrapped in one morning, and we feel quite sure that the restorers of the tomb of Meryetamun could have done all that they did there between sunup and sundown on the date of their visit to the tomb.

