

Getting Curious with Jonathan Van Ness & Dr. Kathryn Howley

JVN [00:07:19] Welcome to Getting Curious. I'm Jonathan Van Ness and every week I sit down for a 40 minute conversation with a brilliant expert to learn all about something that makes me curious. On our first episode back of the year, we are going to go way back in time with Egyptologist Dr. Kathryn Howley, where I ask her: Who gave ancient Egyptians permission to be so advanced? Welcome to "Getting Curious," this is Jonathan Van Ness. I'm so excited to introduce our expert and our guest this week, Dr. Kathryn Howley. You are an Egyptologist and the assistant professor at IFA and NYU. Welcome.

DR. KATHRYN HOWLEY [00:00:39] Thank you so much. I'm really happy to be here.

JVN [00:00:41] Oh, my gosh. I'm so excited that you're here. So you study ancient cultures and civilizations in Egypt and what is currently Northern Sudan?

DR. KATHRYN HOWLEY [00:00:53] Absolutely. Yes. In the Nile Valley, basically, if we want to put it in more geographical terms.

JVN [00:00:59] Love. OK, the Nile Valley. So I just want to kind of rewind a little teensy weensy bit geographically and time wise for people to kind of get into the flow of, like, picture it, Egypt, Sudan. You know, the BCE of it all. So then I-

DR. KATHRYN HOWLEY [00:01:17] Yes.

JVN [00:01:18] Pulled up a map of the Nile in Sudan. So, if, if anyone is not driving now and you want to pull this up on your thing, you can. So I have it pulled up. I'm just going to look at it just again really quick. OK. So when you say the fourth cataract of the Nile, so is one of those the cataracts? Like.

DR. KATHRYN HOWLEY [00:01:41] No. So. So, Jonathan, right now he's pointing at the kind of triangular bit at the very north of Egypt. That's actually called the Delta. So that's where the Nile goes into the Mediterranean Sea. But if you go south, basically to the border of modern Egypt and Sudan, you get these really rocky areas in the Nile. And those are called cataracts and they're really important. And they were in the ancient world, because that means that you can't easily sail across them so they're almost like natural barriers in the river. And there's actually six of them. And they stretch from the southern tip of Egypt down to modern day Khartoum in Sudan.

JVN [00:02:23] Oh, I see Khartoum. OK. So they're six.

DR. KATHRYN HOWLEY [00:02:25] Yes.

JVN [00:02:26] So there's six cataracts that go from the very southern bit of Egypt. And then where does the Nile stop?

DR. KATHRYN HOWLEY [00:02:34] Oh, well, it kind of, so it splits in Khartoum into the Blue Nile and the White Nile. And one of them goes to Uganda, and the other one goes to Ethiopia.

JVN [00:02:48] Ok, so ancient Egypt, honey. The original reason that I got curious and why I wanted to have you on was, like, what was life like in, in a day of, like, an ancient Egyptian? That was what the broader question is. But on top of that, it's, like, the era of ancient Egypt, is that, is that era so big that you could even say, give an average of what a day, like, did one era not have running water and then another one, like, did or something? Like, how much did they evolve in ancient Egypt?

DR. KATHRYN HOWLEY [00:03:20] Yes. So, so ancient Egypt, we always talk about it as if it's one thing and it's, it's really not. I mean, even from a conservative point of view, you're really talking about three and a half thousand BCE all the way through to around 30 BCE. So you've got a stretch of millennia and actually you can go even further back. And there's human occupation in what is now Egypt back to eight or even ten thousand BCE. So it's, it's really difficult to, to generalize like that. And it's also really difficult to generalize because what a day would have been for an ancient Egyptian would have varied just hugely depending on. Yeah. Your social status, what your position in society was. Were you a man or a woman? This, this would have caused huge differences in, in how different people would have experienced life in ancient Egypt.

JVN [00:04:22] OK, so I definitely want to ask about all those things. So. But when. OK. So that one thing that you said at the very beginning about, like, you found ancient Egyptians from when to when?

DR. KATHRYN HOWLEY [00:04:33] So if we stick to kind of the traditional viewpoint, then from about three and a half thousand BCE to 30 BCE, which is when Rome, the Battle of Actium, when August-, the Roman Emperor Augustus comes into Egypt and there aren't any more pharaohs after that.

JVN [00:04:54] so after that battle, that's when there is no more pharaohs. Like he was the last pharaoh?

DR. KATHRYN HOWLEY [00:05:00] Yeah.

JVN [00:05:01] And then Egypt-.

DR. KATHRYN HOWLEY [00:05:01] And then you have the Roman emperors ruling over Egypt instead.

JVN [00:05:05] You do. And Rome is after Greece, right?

DR. KATHRYN HOWLEY [00:05:09] Yes, more or less. Yeah.

JVN [00:05:11] So. OK. So that is when ancient Egypt, like, it like, was over the way that we think about it?

DR. KATHRYN HOWLEY [00:05:18] Yeah.

JVN [00:05:19] But their cultures and stuff couldn't have just, like, stopped?

DR. KATHRYN HOWLEY [00:05:23] No. No, absolutely not. And actually, that's one of the questions that most excites me about ancient Egypt. I'm really interested in what happens when ancient Egypt interacts with other cultures. So that's why I do my work in Sudan. I also find it really interesting when the Romans come to Egypt and how they, how they kind of mix their cultures together and how people deal with that cultural clash. That's something I find really interesting. And it's, it's fascinating to study.

JVN [00:05:54] So 3000 BCE. What does BCE stand for again?

DR. KATHRYN HOWLEY [00:06:00] Before the Common Era.

JVN [00:06:02] Before the Common Era. And then, and I, when I was little in the Midwest, they used to say it was like Before Christ Entered or something, but isn't, like. But like. But isn't that kind of like the same? So like 30 BCE would be like that was like 30 years before 0?

DR. KATHRYN HOWLEY [00:06:17] Exactly. Yeah. BC and BCE is, it, it refers to the same time period. BCE is just a more inclusive way of talking about it. Yep.

JVN [00:06:27] So, like. But so, like, the Common Era started like in zero and so like, like ancient Egypt or ancient Egypt and like Greece and all those other things like happened like in BCE.

DR. KATHRYN HOWLEY [00:06:39] Yes. Yes.

JVN [00:06:40] Ok. Great, great, great. So then, so 3000 BCE. What was the evolution of ancient Egypt from like 3000- or 3700 BC or whatever that was to 30 BC, like, what was there? Was there ever, like, a, like, like, Egypt getting really powerful and then, like, a big fall and then they had to, like, come up again in that time?

DR. KATHRYN HOWLEY [00:07:02] Yes, in fact, that happened numerous times. So if you're going all the way back to 3500 BCE this is in the era before pharaohs even existed. There was no such thing as a centralized Egypt. You had different cultures living in different places in Egypt. And from what we can see archeologically, it seems as if the society was a little bit more egalitarian. So you don't see huge differences between the richest people and the poorest people in society. And then once you get to about 2500 BCE, you get the emergence of kings. And that means that society becomes way more stratified. You have kings at the very top of your social pyramid, and then they are just way more powerful and richer than than everybody else. So when you have these powerful kings, you have a centralized government. And that means there's lots of temple building, there's lots of pyramid building, lots of resources being put into creating art and architecture.

But every so often, normally there's, there's either a problem within the royal family or there's maybe an environmental problem, which means that it becomes difficult to govern Egypt as one land. And then normally these centralized kingdoms kind of crumble. And you get what we call intermediate periods. And that's when Egypt becomes more fragmented. You tend to have smaller local rulers instead of these super powerful kings ruling over the whole of Egypt. And there tends to be more conflict in society. But that also means because you don't have one person controlling all of the art and architecture, the archeology tends to get really interesting in

those intermediate periods as well, because it's not centralized. That means that people can experiment a bit more. And you find some really weird and wonderful looking art.

JVN [00:09:09] So but when you think about, like, that classic, you know, 3500 to 30 BCE, what was the most technologically advanced period or like the most like science-y period or, like, progressive? Or how would you even tell that?

DR. KATHRYN HOWLEY [00:09:25] Yeah. Well, yeah. So how would we tell that? We, we have to look at the archaeological remains. So what, what can we actually see in the ground from these time periods. I think you could, Egyptologists would probably love to debate this question, but you could, for instance, think about the old kingdom in about 2500 BCE, which is when they built the pyramids. And we know that these are just incredible feats of stone architecture-.

JVN [00:09:55] Like 4000 years old and they're still there.

DR. KATHRYN HOWLEY [00:09:59] Yeah. Yeah. More than 4000 years old, in fact. And not just the kind of immense amounts of labor and effort and money that would have had to have gone into constructing them. But even kind of the mathematical knowledge that was needed in order to, to make them so perfectly. So even at that really early time period, we know that the ancient Egyptians were, were very technologically advanced.

JVN [00:10:27] Now, I learned when I was in London, I went to this, I think it was a King Tut exhibit. And they were saying how, like, with hieroglyphics and, like, the like being able to learn how to read and write was like very rare. And it was, like, very controlled because, like, information was very controlled. Is that true?

DR. KATHRYN HOWLEY [00:10:43] Yes. So, I mean, I can tell you, as someone who's learned hieroglyphics myself, it's not the easiest language to learn how to read and write. So it would have created, it would have required like a really long education, in order to actually become literate, I guess, in, in ancient Egyptian hieroglyphics. So we know that that's, that job would have only been opened to the highest elite people really. So if, if you were a scribe, somebody who learned how to read and write, you would have had a fairly lofty position in, in society. And I'm not sure whether that was really on purpose, designed to control information. But that was the-.

JVN [00:11:40] Effect.

DR. KATHRYN HOWLEY [00:11:41] That was the effect that it had because even with the most generous estimates, we think only about 1 percent of the Egyptian population would have been able to read and write.

JVN [00:11:50] What was like the biggest, like New York City of ancient Egypt?

DR. KATHRYN HOWLEY [00:11:55] Well, it depends on the time period, but there were two main ones. The, one of the big ones is Memphis. So that's up in the north basically where modern day Cairo is. And that's a really great place to put an important capital city because you're really close to the Mediterranean and all these trading routes with, with all these other places. And then the other one is Thebes, which is in modern day Luxor. And that was really a religious

center. So if you wanted to go and worship gods at the biggest temples in Egypt, you would have gone a little further south down to Thebes.

JVN [00:12:34] And now for the Memphis, it was like modern day Cairo, like, because there's a modern day city built on top of it. Like, how would you really excavate it? And, like, be able to see what was there?

DR. KATHRYN HOWLEY [00:12:45] That's a great question. And in many cases, we actually can't. And that's a problem we have for a lot of Egyptian cities. Ancient Egyptian cities, because they're all, both the ancient and the modern cities are built really close to the Nile. So what happens is the modern cities tend to be built on top of the ancient ones. And then you can't excavate them because someone's living on top of the archaeological site. So that means we don't actually know all that much about ancient Egyptian cities, especially in comparison with burial places and cemeteries.

JVN [00:13:20] OK, we're using a really quick break. We'll be right back with more right after this. Welcome back to "Getting Curious," we have Dr. Kathryn Howley. So ancient Egypt is a very long time, it took the span of, like, 3000 years, you know. So that was a long time. So and it had intermediate, intermediate periods where there, like, wasn't major royal families happening. And it sounds like you were saying that like the two cities that, like, it would be like if you saw, you know, like, "Oh, my gosh, here's Chicago or here's New York." And then like, they're not so much there anymore, it would be, like, the Luxor and the Memphis. But Luxor is still there. You can see this stuff, right? That's like where the Sphinx is and stuff?

DR. KATHRYN HOWLEY [00:14:04] No, the Sphinx is actually by the pyramids in modern day Cairo, but the, for instance, Karnak Temple. That's a really famous one. That's in Luxor. The Valley of the Kings. That's also in Luxor. So Tut's tomb, that's, that's down there as well.

JVN [00:14:21] So what was, like, the last untouched, like Egyptian tomb that was discovered?

DR. KATHRYN HOWLEY [00:14:28] Oh, goodness. Untouched. Yeah.

JVN [00:14:34] Is there any? Could there still be any out there that we haven't found?

DR. KATHRYN HOWLEY [00:14:38] Oh, sure. Well, I don't know if you've been following the news about the possible hidden tomb within Tutankhamun's tomb.

JVN [00:14:45] Yes. Yes.

DR. KATHRYN HOWLEY [00:14:47] So that's a possibility that maybe there is a hidden chamber behind one of the walls of Tutankhamen's tomb. And if there was something there, then it's highly likely that that would be untouched. So that's a really exciting prospect as, as we move forward. But, but most tombs have been looted in, in one way or another, because they were full of such precious things that- Yeah. Even in ancient Egyptian times, people just really wanted to rob them.

JVN [00:15:20] So I want to talk a little bit about, like, ancient-, what do we know about like ancient Egyptians and like what the day in the life of an ancient Egyptian would have been? Kind of

like the Farmer's Almanac, if you will. Like, what was, like, the average lifespan for an ancient Egyptian? because we know a lot of pharaohs died early because they were like murdered, poisoned, like didn't that happen a lot like for power?

DR. KATHRYN HOWLEY [00:15:40] I'm not, it certainly happened occasionally. But we also have very, quite a lot of pharaohs who we know lived for a really long time. So, for instance, I've just been teaching the Middle Kingdom to my, my students and there were numerous pharaohs in the Middle Kingdom who reigned kind of 30, 40 years or more. So. So, if you were a pharaoh, actually, you had a pretty good chance, I think, of living until you were, were old and old and gray.

JVN [00:16:12] But weren't so many of them, like, married to their families and didn't that create health problems?

DR. KATHRYN HOWLEY [00:16:18] So later in Egyptian history. In fact, at the very end of Egyptian history. Yes. We do know that pharaohs married their sisters on a fairly regular basis, but that seems to have been the exception rather than the rule, thankfully.

JVN [00:16:34] Oh, so that didn't happen as commonly as like what people think?

DR. KATHRYN HOWLEY [00:16:37] No, no.

JVN [00:16:38] And it's really more just like at the very end?

DR. KATHRYN HOWLEY [00:16:40] Yes.

JVN [00:16:41] Interesting. What was, like, a normal time, a typical average life expectancy in ancient Egypt? And did it fluctuate?

DR. KATHRYN HOWLEY [00:16:50] Yeah. So it's, average life expectancies are kind of hard in the ancient world because if you calculate them, it tends to be something really, really low, like, you know, 30 years old. But that's a little bit misleading because so many people in the ancient world died in childhood that that really skews the average. So basically, if you lived through childhood, you had a pretty good chance of making it until you were, I don't know, 50 or something like that. But childhood was obviously a very dangerous time. As for fluctuating throughout time, I'm not sure, but we know that the Egyptians, they, like everyone in the ancient world, suffered from many health problems and many of them were probably in quite a lot of pain when they died. So there's been a lot of anatomical studies of, of mummies and bodies done. Pretty much every Egyptian had really terrible teeth. There was a lot, you know, there's a lot of sand in Egypt and a lot of that sand got into the bread. And then when you eat the sandy bread that wears all your teeth down, lots of tooth decay, lots of diseases like malaria, of course. So that, those kind of things would have been absolutely endemic. So you might have made it to your 50th, even your 60th birthday, but it might have been quite painful to, to be alive a lot of the time.

JVN [00:18:19] Any records of, like, the oldest person in ancient Egypt? Was there ever anyone who made it to, like, 80? Do we know? It's kind of a random question.

DR. KATHRYN HOWLEY [00:18:27] Well. Yeah, no, that's a great question. We, probably the best records we have are for the Kings because we know how long they ruled. So there's one king in

the old kingdom, Pepi the Second, he came to the throne as a really young boy. And then he reigned for well over 60 years, I think. And Ramses the Second, who, of course, is the- the really famous pharaoh because of Passover. He also reigned for a really long time. So probably lived into his 80s.

JVN [00:19:03] Oh, really?

DR. KATHRYN HOWLEY [00:19:05] Yeah. Yeah.

JVN [00:19:06] So like what were, like, some of, like, the different jobs of, like, of like the most thriving ancient Egypt? Was there hairdressers?

DR. KATHRYN HOWLEY [00:19:14] Yeah. Yeah. In fact, being a hairdresser was if you were a hairdresser to the king, then you were set for life. You were someone in the really high elite and you got a really swanky tomb. So, yes, you could be a royal hairdresser. That would be a great job to have in ancient Egypt. We know that both men and women wore makeup and they had some really elaborate hairstyles and they really loved wigs.

JVN [00:19:42] What, what about haircuts? Did they get haircuts or was it just really long hair?

DR. KATHRYN HOWLEY [00:19:46] So generally they actually shave their hair off and then they would put a wig on top of that. You could also be a royal manicurist. That was very important. So if you were, if you were an elite member of ancient Egypt, you would probably have a, an administrative job, maybe even several. So that could be in the royal household. That could be in the army. You probably also had some kind of priestly title as well. So you had some kind of role in the temple. Maybe if you were a little lower down the social ladder, you could be a scribe or a priest, maybe even an artist or an artisan for the, the royal tombs.

JVN [00:20:32] And then what did, like, poverty look like in ancient Egypt?

DR. KATHRYN HOWLEY [00:20:37] Well, that's something that we kind of have to guess at really, because the thing is, if you're poor, you don't have many material possessions and that means that you don't show up in the archeological record, unfortunately.

JVN [00:20:52] Do they not talk about them? In like writings, or?

DR. KATHRYN HOWLEY [00:20:56] Sometimes. Yes, but the writings that tend to talk about poverty, they tend to be one, they're written by the elite. So it's a very biased picture. So a lot of the elite in ancient Egypt, they love to write about how great they were during their life and they'll say, "I fed the hungry and I clothed the naked." So this basically means that they looked after poor people. But of course, we're only seeing, we're only seeing that then through, through the rich people's eyes. Yeah. And we have a very small number of literary compositions which tell us about kind of farmers, not necessarily really poor people, but people who would certainly lower down the social ladder.

JVN [00:21:44] And then what about, like, a judicial system or, like, you know, governmental systems that we think of like now? Was there a judiciary branch?

DR. KATHRYN HOWLEY [00:21:53] Yeah. So I'm not sure whether we'd call it a judiciary, but there was certainly kind of a system of legal process. So one of those literary compositions I just mentioned. There's a, it's a story called "The Tale of the Eloquent Peasant" and the peasant, the farmer, he gets wronged by, by somebody and he decides that he doesn't want to stand for this. So he actually decides to go and see the mayor and then the king in order to sort his problem out and he's able by going through this legal process to actually make sure that justice is served and that he, he gets to keep his, his possessions.

JVN [00:22:35] Do you know what that story was about? Like someone came and tried to tax him for his goats or something? He was like, "Fuck you, these are my goats!" or something?

DR. KATHRYN HOWLEY [00:22:43] Yeah. Basically, yes, that's exactly what happened. So a powerful man, kind of does, does him wrong and beats him with a stake and steals his stuff. And then he decides that he's going to stand up for the little man and make sure that he, he, he gets his, his just desserts.

JVN [00:23:03] So there was, like, beauty, like, there was like hairdressers. But there probably really wasn't like books that were, lots of books because there wasn't public consumption of words. So maybe not, like, tons of books, but there was tons of architecture.

DR. KATHRYN HOWLEY [00:23:19] Yep.

JVN [00:23:20] What do we know about like sex in Egypt? Was there gay stuff? I love gay stuff. Or just any queer stuff? Poly stuff.

DR. KATHRYN HOWLEY [00:23:30] Yeah. So we do have a few references to gay sex in-.

JVN [00:23:36] We do?!

DR. KATHRYN HOWLEY [00:23:37] Yes, yes, we do. That's one of the most famous myths in ancient Egypt. It's called the "The Battle of Horus and Seth." And Horus and Seth are the two gods and they're, they're battling it out to be king of Egypt. And they have lots of different fights. And sometimes one comes out on top. Sometimes the other one comes out on top. And then at a certain moment, Seth decides that in order to try and beat Horus, he's actually going to try and rape him. So, so this is a, an instance of gay sex. And it seems that from, from looking at that reference and also some other references in ancient Egyptian literature, it seems that the Egyptians, they, they were perfectly aware that people with same sex desire existed. But if, if you were the receiving partner, that was somewhat looked down upon. But if you were the, the senior, the active partner, then that wasn't quite so-.

JVN [00:24:45] So you're talking about topping and bottoming.

DR. KATHRYN HOWLEY [00:24:48] Frowned upon in the same way. Yes, I am talking about topping and bottoming, yep.

JVN [00:24:50] So if you were a bottom, they were like "ew." But if they were topping, they're like, "Oh, that's OK."

DR. KATHRYN HOWLEY [00:24:57] Yeah.

JVN [00:24:59] How rude! Bottom shaming in ancient Egypt.

DR. KATHRYN HOWLEY [00:24:59] I know, I know. But it seems to be somehow tied in with ideas of masculinity and the fact that the man should always be the top in a sexual relationship, whether that's with a woman or with another, another man.

JVN [00:25:15] Were there people that were like, considered now, would there have been, like, transgender people in ancient Egypt? Or do we see like a non-binary or, like, a transgender sort of, is that ever talked about?

DR. KATHRYN HOWLEY [00:25:28] I can't think of any examples from kind of real life. But what we do see is actually several gods who have kind of tendency, features of both sexes. So, for instance, as the god Hapi, who is the god of fertility and the Nile, and he's always shown with breasts, for instance. So he has a very androgynous body. And then there is actually one famous king, Akhenaten, who lived in about 1200 BC and he shows himself in a lot of his artwork, also with a very androgynous body. So he has breasts. He has kind of wide hips, which, which look quite feminine. And this probably doesn't talk about his actual body. We are pretty sure that he fathered children. So, you know, he, he was a functioning man in that sense. But it's probably related to these ideas of fertility. And, and in order to kind of show that he was a king who could look after Egypt and ensure its continued success. He chose to show himself with this kind of androgynous body, which really emphasized ideas of fertility.

JVN [00:27:50] What about lesbians? No lesbian love in ancient Egypt at all?

DR. KATHRYN HOWLEY [00:27:55] I'm afraid-.

JVN [00:27:56] Are you fucking serious?

DR. KATHRYN HOWLEY [00:27:57] We don't have any evidence for lesbians in ancient Egypt. Unfortunately, yeah. But, like, so many women in the ancient world, they never, almost never get to tell their stories.

JVN [00:27:08] What the fuck is that all about? What about Cleo-fucking-patra? What was her deal?

DR. KATHRYN HOWLEY [00:27:14] Now, well, she. She was special. And any woman who actually managed to make it onto the throne in ancient Egypt, like they, they were amazing. In order to get to that position and then be successful. We know that they must've been just forces.

JVN [00:27:30] Well, let's talk about that. Let's talk about all that.

DR. KATHRYN HOWLEY [00:27:34] Ok.

JVN [00:27:34] So was there like a law where, like, you couldn't really, like, be a pharaoh if you were a lady, but then someone changed that?

DR. KATHRYN HOWLEY [00:20:40] So there's, there's no law, but the problem comes with the religious aspects of the role of Pharaoh. So the the word for "king" is genetically masculine in ancient Egyptian. And there's no feminine equivalent. So if you're a queen in ancient Egypt because you're married to a king, you're actually just called "wife of the king." You're not called "queen." And then there's all sorts of religious aspects of the role, which, which basically means you have to be a guy in order to be a successful king in the Egyptian religious conception. So what that means, my favorite female pharaoh is called Hatshepsut. And she had to do some amazing things in order to be successful. And what she did actually was basically start portraying herself as a man in her inscriptions and in her statues. So it's actually kind of a misnomer to call her Queen Hatshepsut because she was, she was a King. She called herself King. She dressed like a king. She did everything that a king should do. So, you know, we should really call her King Hatshepsut, even though she was, she was a woman.

JVN [00:29:00] Did she have a husband?

DR. KATHRYN HOWLEY [00:29:02] She did not, no, but she did have a trusted adviser by the name of Senenmut, and we know that her relationship with her advisor was a source of gossip, I guess, in ancient Egypt. So there's even a very naughty graffito in, in a place in, in Thebes where an ancient Egyptian has gone and drawn King Hatshepsut having sex with, with Senenmut, basically. So we know that there were scandalous rumors about the two of them, but they were not in fact married.

JVN [00:29:42] And she didn't have kids?

DR. KATHRYN HOWLEY [00:29:44] So she did. So she was, she was the reason she came to the throne. Sorry. Is because initially she was married to a king. The king then died and there was no son to, to immediately take over the throne. So what she did was take on the Regency for her stepson, who was at that time far too young to become, to become king. And then she decided she both kind of liked being on the throne and was kind of good at it. So she, she basically stayed on the throne until she died. And not just as regent, but as full blown King of Egypt.

JVN [00:30:25] And then did the stepson take over?

DR. KATHRYN HOWLEY [00:30:28] He did. Yes, eventually. Yes. And then about 20 years after Hatshepsut died, someone went around Egypt carving her picture and her name out of all of her temples. So it was almost as if they were trying to erase her from history. And there's been a lot of debate in Egyptology about exactly why that was. And a lot of people have liked to think that it was because her son Thutmose, her stepson, he, he did not appreciate having his stepmother on the throne. But we don't know whether that's, that's true or not. It might have something more to do with them, political events, which we don't fully understand.

JVN [00:31:16] Oh my God, I could talk about this all day. I'm so interested but so we have to take a really quick break.

DR. KATHRYN HOWLEY [00:31:20] Ok.

JVN [00:31:20] We're going to be right back with more right after this. Welcome back to "Getting Curious," we have Dr. Kathryn Howley. OK, so, you are. I mean, I think with ancient Egypt,

it's, like, between burial and what was a life like and all of, I mean, it's so many things. And I really could talk about it for seven hours. But you, what you have been studying recently is that the Temple of Saman. Did I say it right again?

DR. KATHRYN HOWLEY [00:31:49] Sanam. You got the "n" and the "m" wrong, it's fine.

JVN [00:31:50] Dang it! Sanam. The Temple of Sanam. So basically, what's really interesting from what I can tell of the research is that, you know, for hundreds of years now, like, 1800s, 1900s, this idea of, like, you know, finding these tombs in Egypt and finding the pharaohs was I mean, people were talking about that the 1800s and 1900s in the United Kingdom and stuff. So it's like those sites have been very much pillaged, seen and all this. But in these fourth cataracts and all these cataracts, like, as you get farther down towards Sudan, it's like they haven't really been touched as much. Isn't that right?

DR. KATHRYN HOWLEY [00:32:22] So yeah, there's been a lot less archaeological exploration in Sudan than in Egypt. Mostly for practical reasons, because Sudan has been a lot kind of harder to access than Egypt. It's a lot less developed than, than Egypt. But recently, a lot more archaeologists have been starting to work in Sudan instead of Egypt. And the, the archeology is just fabulous. Yeah, really exciting.

JVN [00:32:48] And so does archeology in Sudan, like all kind of run along the Nile like it does in Egypt as well?

DR. KATHRYN HOWLEY [00:32:55] Yes, mainly, not, not entirely. But in the ancient world, just as today, people, people needed water to live. And there is very, very little rainfall in Egypt and Sudan. So that means if you, if you need a water source, you're really reliant on the river. So that, in a sense, makes our jobs easier, because if we're looking for habitation sites where people lived, we know roughly the area where we need to look. But there's also lots of interesting archeology now going on in the deserts. Sudan had a lot of natural resources, lots of gold and precious materials like that. And that was all quarried out in the desert. So a lot of archaeologists now are doing really interesting work, basically following the ancient trade routes out into the eastern and the western deserts and finding those really remote sites out there.

JVN [00:33:53] Now, if we think of ancient Egypt as ancient Egypt, what was like ancient Sudan? Like what was that? What was that culture called? Or?

DR. KATHRYN HOWLEY [00:34:03] So we normally call it ancient Nubia. And that refers to the other, the northern parts of Sudan, basically from about the level of modern day Khartoum up, up to the Egyptian border. But again, that's also a bit of a simplification, simplification because we know that many different cut, cultural groups were living in ancient Nubia and it was actually a lot less centralized than ancient Egypt. So you always have a lot more cultural variation going on in the, the southernmost parts of the Nile than you do further north.

JVN [00:34:38] So it's just, like, a little bit more "Game of Thrones"-y in the sense that there was, like, more kinds of clans, more tribes, more people, like, self-governing.

DR. KATHRYN HOWLEY [00:34:45] Absolutely. Yep.

JVN [00:34:47] And a lot of that is just generally more undiscovered than Egypt?

DR. KATHRYN HOWLEY [00:34:51] Yeah. So we know less about it, partly because there's just been much less archeology done, partly because Nubian cultures, for instance, they, they didn't build much in stone. They tended to build in mud brick. And stone, of course, preserves much, much better than mud brick. So it's, it's much harder to find the mud brick architecture in Nubia than it is to find the huge stone pyramids in Egypt.

JVN [00:35:17] Right.

DR. KATHRYN HOWLEY [00:35:18] And then the other reason is that the Egyptians, of course, had a written language. They wrote lots down for us. So that really helps us understand the culture. The Nubians for most of their history were a non-literate people. So that means they, they don't have any, any written records. And that means that we're reliant entirely on the archeology. And that really limits the kind of questions we can ask. But it also makes the job much more exciting because, yeah, you don't have it kind of all laid out on a papyrus there for you.

JVN [00:35:51] Right. So what have you discovered about ancient Nubia?

DR. KATHRYN HOWLEY [00:36:56] So the temple that we're working at is an interesting one. It comes from the middle of the first millennium, BCE. So it starts at about 650 BCE. And it's at a time when the rulers of Nubia actually became really, really powerful and they rose up and they conquered ancient Egypt. So for the first time in Nubia's and Egypt's history, it was the Black civilizations from the south that conquered the Egyptian civilization to the north. And that's super interesting because the Nubian kings, they adopted lots of Egyptian cultural elements. So they became converts to the Egyptian religion. They started building temples in an Egyptian style, just like the ones we're looking at. But they only pick- picked and chose the bits that were useful to them. So what you get is kind of this super interesting culture where on the surface it looks very Egyptian. But if you start just poking a little bit more, suddenly, all of these strange elements come out, which are actually elements of the Nubian culture. And a lot of those elements are things we haven't been able to see before because they've been building in mud brick, for instance, instead of stone. But now they're building like Egyptians. So they build a stone temple. And there's all sorts of interesting, interesting things there about how the Nubians kind of adopted the, the Egyptian culture and also kind of used it to serve their own interests.

JVN [00:37:41] So how far up do the Nubians conquer Egypt in 630?

DR. KATHRYN HOWLEY [00:37:48] So the temple where we work is 650, but the Nubians actually invaded Egypt in approximately 720 BCE. But they, first of all, they were just in the south. They went up to Thebes, modern day Luxor, and then King Taharqa, who's the guy who built our temple. He was probably the greatest of all the Nubian pharaohs. He goes all the way up to the Mediterranean Sea. And even further into kind of Syria, Palestine, in, in the Middle East as well. So he, he basically has an empire. So he, he has a lot of territory that he's in control of.

JVN [00:38:30] So he is considered an ancient Egyptian then? Like he was in that time of like 3500 to 30 BCE.

DR. KATHRYN HOWLEY [00:38:38] Sure. So he's often, because he was king of Egypt. Right? So he, he appears in all of the, the histories of ancient Egypt. But it's really important to remember that he, you know, Egyptian was probably not his native language. He came from a culture which was much further south, which has a lot more commonalities and links to other sub-Saharan African cultures than it, than it also does to Egypt, for instance. So he's, he conquers Egypt, but he is not himself an Egyptian. And I think that's, that's really important.

JVN [00:39:18] So did the scribes in Egypt kind of talk shit about him in the record a little bit, or were people like, like, "We can't believe that this guy beat us," or something, or was it not? Or did people respect him?

DR. KATHRYN HOWLEY [00:39:29] No. So. So, at the time when the Nubian Kings conquered Egypt, they were actually, as far as we can tell, reasonably popular because they, they were really religious. So they came into Egypt and they spent all of this money and resources on building beautiful temples and adding to temples, which already existed and basically giving lots of money to all the temples. So from that sense, I think probably they, they would have been welcomed, at least by certain sections of the population, as kind of true pious adherents of the Egyptian religion. However, after about 100 years, some of the local Egyptian rulers started getting a little bit antsy about the fact that it was Nubians ruling over them. So then an Egyptian king comes back to power. And then just like as happened with Hatshepsut, he sends his craftsmen out with their chisels and they go round all of those lovely temples that the Nubians built and they chop out all of the names. They leave the temples because they were really nicely built. And you don't want to offend the gods, but they just take out the Nubian names.

JVN [00:40:46] Got it. So that is the deal with, like, ancient Nubia. did Nubians end up learning how to write? Did they end up getting ancient Nubian scribes because they did adopt things?

DR. KATHRYN HOWLEY [00:40:56] Yes. So initially, it's really interesting to look at how this develops. So. So, first of all, what they do is they borrow the Egyptian language. So they would have been speaking Nubian. But if they wanted to write anything, they would do it in Egyptian hieroglyphic. But obviously, that's not, that's not a great fix because not every Nubian would have spoken Egyptian. Also Egyptian hieroglyphics, it just, like, that's that's a lot of birds to write in a row.

JVN [00:41:25] Yeah.

DR. KATHRYN HOWLEY [00:41:26] You know, it's, it's it takes a long time. So what they did was they then borrowed the Egyptian alphabet, if you like. And they simplified it, and then they used that alphabet in order to write their own language, which was a language known as Meroitic. So this is exactly what I was talking about. They take the bits that are useful to them and then they adapt them so that it actually fits their own needs. So then we have this whole new language, Meroitic, and we have quite a lot of texts written in it. The only frustrating thing is it's still undeciphered. So we have all of these wonderful texts which we're pretty sure are describing kind of interesting historical events, and we can't read them yet.

JVN [00:42:14] Is it because, how are you going to decipher that? Will you just have to compare it to hyper, hi-, hieroglyphics and hope that you can get some characters drawn out or?

DR. KATHRYN HOWLEY [00:42:23] So we know how it sounded because they used the Egyptian alphabet. So we can, the problem is that Meroitic doesn't seem to be related to any other language that we know. And that's really a problem for, for translating it. So there's, there's a lot of interesting work being done right now, trying to look at various modern African languages to see whether there are any connections and some connections have been found. So we can read very small parts here and there and be pretty sure we know what, what it says, but kind of the more intricate grammar, longer inscriptions, that still escapes us. And it's just gonna take a really long time, probably. And, hopefully, the more texts that are found by archaeologists, the easier it will become. Because the bigger your, your corpus is, the bigger the number of texts you have, the easier it becomes to decipher a language.

JVN [00:43:26] If there was ever, like, a key between like Meroitic and ancient Egyptian, would that be like the unlocking key that would be able to decipher all those things?

DR. KATHRYN HOWLEY [00:43:33] Yes. That would be amazing.

JVN [00:43:35] Does anyone think that that could exist?

DR. KATHRYN HOWLEY [00:43:37] But nobody has found one yet. It, it might. It certainly could. But we haven't found it yet, unfortunately. I'll keep my fingers crossed.

JVN [00:43:47] So with Meroitic and with the ancient Nubian cultures, so after about 100 years, they, like, the local Egyptians, like, rise up and they're like, "No, no, no." So what happens? Do the, the Nubian rulers go back down south and kind of take back over their own thing and they develop this language and then what happens with them?

DR. KATHRYN HOWLEY [00:44:07] So the Nubian rulers, they, they have a bit of bad luck, really, because unfortunately, they're ruling at a time when the whole Mediterranean region is, is kind of in a, in a bit of, a bit of a rough patch. So you also have the Assyrian Empire in modern day Iraq. And the rulers in the Assyrian Empire also want their own empire to play with. So they invade Egypt and they are really powerful. And unfortunately, that means the Nubians, they can't really deal with it. So they have to, they have to go back south. And they, they are just ruling over Nubia from that point on. But they still have powerful kings and they now have this incredible tradition of stoneworking, of religious ritual. And the longer they, the longer time goes on and they're not ruling over Egypt, kind of the more it diverges from Egyptian traditions. So they continue, for instance, to bury their rulers under pyramid grids. And one really cool fact, which very few people know, is that there are actually more pyramids now in Sudan than there are in Egypt. And that's because of these Meroitic rulers in the last half of the first millennium, BCE, who just go on a pyramid building spree. And all of the kings and all of the queens are buried under these really awesome, very steep sided pyramids. So the, the archeology is fantastic and the archaeological sites in Sudan are fantastic. And it's, it's really worth the visit for anyone interested in archeology because the sites are just amazing.

JVN [00:46:00] And then what are some of the biggest, like, differences between that ancient Nubian culture of the last half of the first millennium BCE and what we think about as, like, you know, ancient Egypt? From farther back and even at the same time?

DR. KATHRYN HOWLEY [00:46:12] Well, one of the coolest ways in which it differed is that women had a really prominent role in Nubian society and women could be queens, ruling queens in Nubia. So there were lots of really prominent female rulers of Nubia at this time when Egypt is still being ruled by men. And they are shown on, on monuments as these gloriously strong and curvy women holding huge weapons and smiting all the enemies of Nubia and making sure that Nubia is, is doing, doing okay. So, yeah, I think that's my, my favorite aspect of Nubian cultures at that time period.

JVN [00:46:58] Love that. OK, wait, we have to have you back on to talk more about ancient Nubia specifically and the differences 'cause I want to know about currency. I want to know about queer stuff. I want to talk about revolutions. I want to talk about all the things of ancient-. Was there any gay stuff in Nubia too?

DR. KATHRYN HOWLEY [00:47:16] I, off the top of my head, I can't think of any, I'm afraid. Sorry.

JVN [00:47:22] I wish there was some like nice gay love stories.

DR. KATHRYN HOWLEY [00:47:25] I know. Yeah, that would, that would be nice.

JVN [00:47:27] If you keep your eye out for that. If you hear about anything, let us know.

DR. KATHRYN HOWLEY [00:47:30] I'll look for it, Jonathan.

JVN [00:47:33] And before we let you go, Dr. Kathryn Howley, well of course, but is there anything that we missed that we need to just touch upon for people if they're really spending so much extra time at home, any really interesting stories that we didn't talk about that people should research or any little final parting thoughts?

DR. KATHRYN HOWLEY [00:47:51] Yeah. Just. Ancient Egypt is wonderful. And ancient Nubia is even cooler. So I really encourage you. Not many people have heard of ancient Nubia and parts of, parts of the reason why is because it's, it's a Black African culture. So it's never been part of our kind of cultural narrative. But I think it's really important that people know a little bit more about it and they understand how, how, how many cultural achievements ancient Africans actually had. So I would encourage them to go look that up on Wikipedia, learn a little bit more about it. You'll be glad you did.

JVN [00:48:26] Wow. That's fascinating. So and I see the ways that, like, racism would play into the over abundance of knowledge of ancient Egyptian.

DR. KATHRYN HOWLEY [00:48:36] Oh yeah.

JVN [00:48:36] Lighter-skinned histories and archeology, but not of the counterparts of darker skin. Wow, that is fascinating. Burying the lead, Jonathan, get it together. Dr. Kathryn Howley, thank you so much for your time. We have to have you back on. Thank you so much for talking to us.

DR. KATHRYN HOWLEY [00:49:51] It has been my pleasure. I would love to.

JVN [00:49:52] Thank you. You've been listening to Getting Curious with me, Jonathan Van Ness. My guest this week was Egyptologist Dr. Kathryn Howley.

You'll find links to her work in the episode description of whatever you're listening to the show on.

Our theme music is "Freak" by Quiñ - thanks to her for letting us use it. If you enjoyed our show, please introduce a friend - heck, introduce ten, like, ten thousand. However many followers you have, honey, tell everybody about it. Honestly, we love that type of support and we really appreciate it.

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