



*STORY
of the
SYSTRUM*

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~ A PICTORIAL ESSAY ~

Introduction

*Welcome! My name is Tahya ~ an Arabic name meaning 'Greetings' or 'Welcome' ~ and I am delighted to welcome you to this elementary compilation prepared particularly for newcomers to the Systrum although as the word implies, I welcome all to this introduction with the intent of revitalizing the use of the [Ceremonial Systrum™](#) in the 21st Century. For those who want delve deeper, there are other *excellent* resources some of which are a part of the bibliography and others which I am happy to recommend upon request!*

I am woman lovingly raised by wonderful parents who did their very best to instill good family values in me and my siblings. A devout Catholic family man, my father had me attend parochial grammar school. Now mind you this was before Vatican II (which essentially shaped a modernization of the Catholic Church including a changeover from the Mass being celebrated in Latin to English) so my earliest memories include attending Mass ceremoniously celebrated in Latin with incense burning.

I distinctly remember the weekly benedictions attended as school children because a) we vacated the classroom (yay!) and b) the chanting of Latin phrases and the singing of sacred tunes amidst plumes of incense provided an intoxicating and hypnotic atmosphere to a young impressionable me. Nevertheless, in the Catholic Church, it being a patriarchal hierarchy after all, there was no role for a girl (or a mature woman for that matter) anywhere near the altar other than to maybe iron the priest's vestments and, of course, the church ladies could polish the pews! No higher it seemed could a woman aspire than to enter a convent to learn to become a teacher at best ~ a most noble profession to be sure but prestigious or high ranking, maybe not so much. So, in my late teens, when I discovered that thousands of years ago there were matriarchal cultures wherein women held esteemed positions in ancient sacred temple ceremony, I wanted to learn MORE!

Thus began my independent life-long study of traditions, movements and rhythms steeped in women's history. Along the way learning the dance as well as learning to play frame drum and finger cymbals, a history of ritual and processions was unveiled, if you will, wherein women played a prominent role. I delved into a study of artifacts related to this history collected and archived at venues like the Metropolitan Museum of Art and in books ~ e.g., [When the Drummers Were Women](#). And then in February 2007 I travelled to Egypt allowing me to visit ancient temple sites and personally view depictions of processions carved in stone, rendering for millennia accountings of ancient ritual.

Upon my return home following that trip to Egypt, I was inspired to add a sistrum to my personal collection of percussion instruments which I play and utilize for various public performances as well as for personal purposes and/or community ceremony. However, at that time (in 2007) there was no sistrum in the "marketplace" which even remotely resembled what I'd seen engraved on the ancient temple walls. After that initial search I shrugged my shoulders and considered it a darn shame I could not find what I was looking for: Harumph!

Not long after, maybe only a couple weeks later, I awoke with a start from a deep sleep experiencing a feeling of being startled awake and yet, I still felt half asleep in a predawn dimension between night and morning. Somewhere between conscious, unconscious and sub-conscious, I suddenly sensed a "knowing" of what the gods intend through me. It felt like a wake-up call and I chose to answer this "call" beckoning me to re-emerge the percussion instrument associated with the Goddess Hathor, a prominent deity of ancient Egyptian cosmology.

Ten years hence, after diligently working to manifest the [Ceremonial Systrum™](#) in the 21st Century, I feel honored and privileged to now take the time to amass and relay to you my dear reader some of its rich and magnificent history while inviting you to join me in envisioning this ancient instrument's sublime and splendid future.

– Tahya 11/2017

Intent / Content

This document is designed to be a companion/informative text to the [Tahya Ceremonial Systrum™](#) presented with the intent to inform & inspire and to complement the information available at the website dedicated to the [Tahya Ceremonial Systrum™](#). (See "[About the Systrum](#)")

Buried by the sands of time for thousands of years, this historic instrument and ritual implement has re-emerged in the 21st C designed by Tahya based on personal research and travel to Egypt.

Depicted in bas reliefs, tomb paintings, papyri, ancient temple wall carvings, and free-standing sculptures of queens and musician-priestesses, the sistrum was a sacred instrument used as rhythmical accompaniment to chanting in temple ritual as well festival processions.

Musician-priestesses (a few of whom are depicted herein) were responsible for chanting adorations and ritual incantations accompanied by the shimmering sounds of the sistrum in celebration and worship of the goddess Hathor (pronounced Hat h'ôr), the cow-eared goddess of love, joy, motherhood, music and dance.



This is the hieroglyph for HATHOR (Greek form of Egyptian **Het-Heru** which means "the house of Horus", derived from Egyptian *hwt* "house" combined with *Hr* the god Horus).

In Egyptian mythology she was the goddess of love, often depicted with the head of a cow. Hathor is the Ancient Egyptian goddess who personified the principles of joy, feminine love, and motherhood. She was one of the most important and popular deities throughout the history of Ancient Egypt.

Priestesses and temple chantresses of ancient Egyptian culture whose main instrument and ritual implement was the SYSTRUM aka sistrum used in ancient Egyptian culture over hundreds and hundreds of years will be introduced here as well as a few queens and pharaohs of The New Kingdom (1550–1077 BCE), covering the [Seventeenth](#), [Eighteenth](#), [Nineteenth](#), and [Twentieth dynasties of Egypt](#) ~ i.e., the period from the 16th to the 11th century BCE. Specifically, I will make mention of four of the well-known pharaohs of the New Kingdom.

Among the most "celebrated"/renowned from the [Eighteenth Dynasty](#) who ruled c.1550 -1292 BCE:

Hatshepsut (1479-1458 BCE), generally regarded by Egyptologists as one of the most successful pharaohs, reigning longer than any other woman of an indigenous Egyptian dynasty. According to Egyptologist James Henry Breasted she is also known as "the first great woman in history of whom we are informed." Hatshepsut was one of the most prolific builders in ancient Egypt whose buildings were grander and more numerous than those of any of her Middle Kingdom predecessors.

Akhenaten (1352-1334 BCE), also known as Amenhotep IV, whose exclusive worship of the Aten is often interpreted as the first instance of monotheism

Tutankhamun (1333–1324 BCE) made "famous" to the discovery of the treasures in his tomb by Howard Carter and Lord Carnarvon, an English aristocrat best known as the financial backer of the search for and the excavation of Tutankhamun's tomb in the Valley of the Kings. Lord Carnarvon was an enthusiastic amateur Egyptologist who in 1907 sponsored the excavation of nobles' tombs in Deir el-Bahri (Thebes). Howard Carter joined him as his assistant in the excavations. In 1922, he and Howard Carter together opened the tomb of Tutankhamun in the Valley of the Kings, exposing treasures unsurpassed in the history of archaeology.

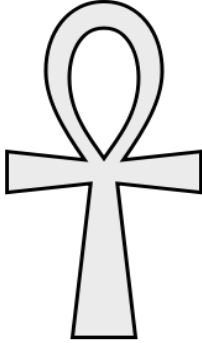
Note: Lord Carnarvon's country house, Highclere Castle, served as the location of the TV/PBS television series Downton Abbey.

The [Nineteenth Dynasty](#) pharaohs ruled from 1292 to 1186 BCE and includes one of the "greatest" pharaohs: [Rameses II](#):

Rameses II, also known as Rameses the Great, who is often regarded as the greatest, most celebrated, and most powerful pharaoh of the Egyptian Empire (His successors and later Egyptians called him the "Great Ancestor").

Background

The sistrum or sistrum aka *sesheshet* was a prevalent instrument used in processions as well as ceremony and ritual. In ancient Egyptian ceremony and temple ritual for example it was played during the annual Opet Festival, celebrated annually in Thebes (now known as Luxor). Statues of the gods and goddesses were escorted in a joyous procession which included playing frame drum and sistrum along with harp and clackers.



The sistrum's basic shape resembles the *ankh*, hieroglyph/symbol for life, thus, I believe, also carrying that hieroglyph's meaning.

Here is the *sesheshet* (sššt) hieroglyph:



The sistrum was a sacred instrument used in dances, processions and religious ceremonies

- primarily played by women musician-priestesses, particularly in the worship of the ancient Egyptian deities, prominent among them the goddess Hathor, revered as a deity of music, dance, love and joy (among other things)
- constructed of a handle and an upside-down U-frame with jingles that move on crossbars to produce a sound that ranged from soft to loud jingling
- the word 'sistrum' derives from the Greek verb 'seistrōn' meaning "that which is being shaken."



In the ancient Egyptian language its name was *sesheshet* (sššt), an onomatopoeic word derived from the sounds of the instrument ~ that is, a soft jangling sound resembling a breeze rustling/blowing through papyrus. This sound that was believed to please the deities of ancient Egypt and it is believed that the use of the sistrum might have originated in the practice of shaking bundles of papyrus* flowers, a symbol of Hathor.

NOTE: The papyrus marsh was an Egyptian symbol of creation and appears to be at the base of the mythology surrounding the sistrum. It is from a papyrus thicket that Hathor is first "seen" to emerge, and it is also in a papyrus thicket where Isis raised her infant son, Horus.

Excursion to Egypt 2007

Before I go any further, permit me to remind you that as mentioned in the introduction, my visit to Egypt in 2007 proved to be a great inspiration for me to re-emerge the systrum (aka sistrum), an instrument buried by the sands of time. Therefore, I want to share a few images from the trip that I believe relate to this journey:



~ Cairo Museum ~

The Egyptian Museum in Cairo contains an extensive collection of pharaonic antiquities. No visit to Egypt is complete without a trip through its galleries. The original collection was established in the late 1800's. In 1902 the artifacts were transferred to the current building at Tahrir Square. Among the first purpose-built museums in the world, the Egyptian Museum in Cairo was designed in the Neoclassical style. It boasts 107 halls filled with artifacts dating from the prehistoric through the Roman periods, with the majority of the collection focused on the pharaonic era.

In the courtyard of the Egyptian Museum among the first sculptures to greet me was this colossal head of the Goddess Hathor, revered as a beloved deity of music, dance, love, joy and the nurturing qualities of motherhood ... I admit I felt a sense of inexplicable affinity with the beauty in this sculpture; however, little did I know in that moment how influential the deity would become to me!



NOTE: When taking this photograph my focus was on the beautiful countenance of the deity depicted by the sculptor. After returning home while reviewing photographs from this excursion the light glowing in Her crown chakra “appeared” to me. Coincidence? I suspect not.

Temple Musicians & Chantresses

In ancient Egypt women served as temple musicians or chantresses and, although they were not necessarily persons of royalty, these roles carried with them a distinction of prestige. The daughters of priests, relatives of the royal family, and influential nobles were prime candidates for these posts.

Read more about these roles in the book entitled, "The Life of Meresamun: A Temple Singer in Ancient Egypt," Edited by Emily Teeter and Janet H. Johnson.

A sistrum is a rattle that was played primarily by queens, princesses, and priestesses in the course of offering rituals and sacred processions. The goddess Hathor, who was known as the Mistress of Music, was so strongly associated with the sistrum that her face decorated the handle of most examples. The sistrum is also connected to the worship of Hathor through a ritual called "plucking papyrus for Hathor" apparently because the sound of the sistrum was equated with rustling sound that papyrus made in the marsh. This equation was further stressed by a pun, for both "sistrum" and "plucking" were Seshseshet (Sššt) in the ancient Egyptian language.ⁱ



Meet **Ahhotep I*** (meaning "the Moon is satisfied").

Ahhotep I is an Ancient Egyptian queen who lived circa **1560- 1530 BCE**, during the end of the Seventeenth dynasty of ancient Egypt. She was (probably) the sister, as well as the wife, of pharaoh Seqenenre Tao.

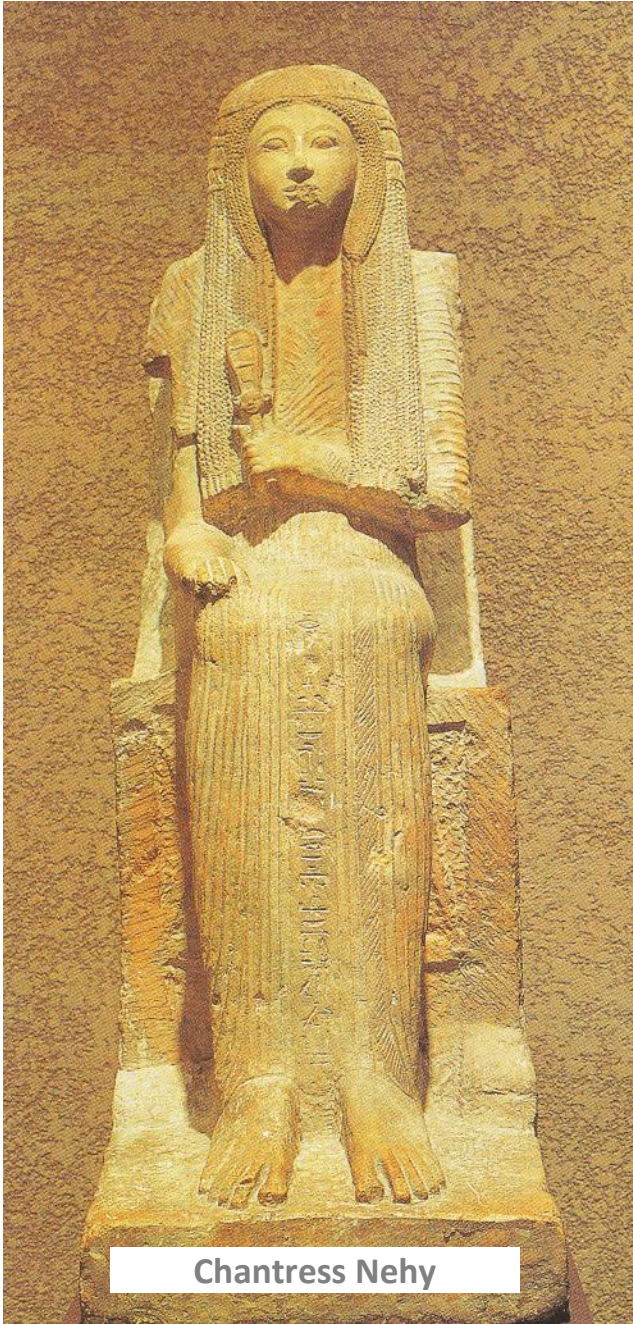
I first was "introduced" to Ahhotep I as she was presented in her very own exhibit case in the wonderful exhibit commemorating the 100th anniversary of the Metropolitan Museum's discovery of the tomb of Hatshepsut, the Queen who became Pharaoh in approx. 1478 BCE.

*daughter of Queen Tetisheri and Senakhtenre Ahmose
(See more on this family's lineage among end notes)

Notice the Hathor wig worn by **Ahhotep I**
(wig with curls was worn by queens and private women from the Middle Kingdom (circa 2050 BC and 1800 BC) to the early New Kingdom (between the 16th century BC and the 11th century BC, covering the Eighteenth, Nineteenth, and Twentieth Dynasties of Egypt)

Read more about Hathor / Hathor wig:

<https://henadology.wordpress.com/theology/netjeru/hathor/>



Chantress Nehy

Depicted much as she would have appeared in life, the **Chantress Nehy** sits on a chair and holds in her left hand the symbol of her profession, a sistrum used in the worship of the goddess Hathor. Judging from her fine clothing and elegant hairstyle, as well as the scale and quality of her statue, we may assume that Nehy was able to afford a fine burial to ensure her place in the afterlife.

Inscribed down front of skirt:

Everything which goes forth
before the lords of the necropolis:
bread, beer, oxen and fowl, wine, incense, libation-
water and all good and pure things for the Ka of
the Osiris,
the Mistress of the House,
the Chantress of the Mistress of Heaven,
She of the Southern Sycamore (Hathor), Nehy,
True of Voice.



Detail from **Papyrus of Ani**: Ani & his wife Tutu at the Weighing of their Hearts circa 1250 BCE from The **Papyrus of Ani** , a papyrus manuscript with hieroglyphs and color illustrations created circa 1250 BCE, in the 19th dynasty of the New Kingdom of ancient Egypt. Egyptians compiled an individualized book for certain people upon their death, called the *Book of Going Forth by Day*, more commonly known as the *Book of the Dead*, typically containing declarations and spells to help the deceased in their afterlife. The *Papyrus of Ani* is the manuscript compiled for the Theban scribe Ani.



DETAIL: Ani's wife Tutu depicted with sistrum in hand



(left) Another depiction of Tutu, wife of the scribe Ani, holding the sistrum in her right hand, papyrus and menat in her left hand.



Duathathor Henuttawy or Henuttawy

("Adorer of Hathor; Mistress of the Two Lands")

was an ancient Egyptian princess and later queen

(Approx. 11th C BCE). She is likely to have been the daughter of Ramesses XI, last king of the 20th dynasty who reigned from 1107 BC to 1078 BC

Below is the sistrum attributed to belonging to Henuttawy:





Processional of priestesses depicted holding sistrum in their right hand on a wall in the Birth House of King Nectanebo II at the Hathor Temple complex at Dendera. The notched staff in their left hand indicates they will play their systrum for millions of years.... ..

Introduction to a few Pharaohs of the New Kingdom



Hatshepsut was the fifth pharaoh of the Eighteenth dynasty of Egypt who **came to the throne of Egypt in 1478 BCE and reigned for approx. 20 years** until 1458. Hatshepsut was one of the most prolific builders in ancient Egypt, commissioning hundreds of construction projects throughout both Upper Egypt and Lower Egypt. Her buildings were grander and more numerous than those of any of her Middle Kingdom predecessors'. During her reign, so many statues were produced that almost every major museum in the world has Hatshepsut statues among their collections; for instance, there is an entire room dedicated to Hatshepsut in New York City's Metropolitan Museum of Art.

"The mortuary temple of Hatshepsut, anciently known as *Djeser-Djeseru*, 'Holiest of the Holy,' is one of the most striking monuments to have survived from ancient Egypt.

"Built beneath the towering cliffs of Dier el-Bahri on the west bank (of the Nile) at Luxor, a locality where Hathor had long been worshipped, the temple stands directly opposite the great temple of Amun-Re at Karnak on the east bank of the river... (and) as a temple located in one of Hathor's holy places, there is an abundance of Hathorian imagery decorating its walls, including well-preserved reliefs in the Hathor shrine."ⁱⁱ



"The three ascending terraces and the decoration on each level were evidently chosen to reveal the three different manifestations of Amun-Re. The temple shows Amun-Re interacting with Hatshepsut within three different dimensions of divine existence corresponding to 'three worlds' The Terrestrial, Life and Primordial."ⁱⁱⁱ



Middle terrace with the Shrine dedicated to Hathor on the left



Detail from a wall inside the Hathor Shrine: depiction of Hathor as the Cow (life giving, nurturing) Goddess

Hathor Sistrum pillar



The Red Chapel or Chapelle Rouge in Luxor
constructed during the reign of Hatshepsut.



Detail from a block on the outer wall of the Chapelle Rouge depicting the Opet Festival, an Ancient Egyptian festival, celebrated annually in Thebes (now known as Luxor). The statues of the gods were escorted in a joyous procession. Note the sistrum players!





Gilded wood chair belonging to Princess Sitamen (1370 BCE–unknown), an Ancient Egyptian princess of the 18th dynasty, the eldest daughter of King Amenhotep III and Queen Tiye*, decorated with scenes of the princess seated with sistrum in hand receiving gifts from Nubia. As the eldest daughter of a powerful queen, Sitamun would have been groomed for a political role but never fulfilled this potential, despite having her own property and her high position at court. One possibility is that she was married to an heir who never assumed the throne. Another possibility is that she died prematurely or went into seclusion after her brother Akhenaten became king. She was an aunt of Tutankhamun.

Akhenaten (1352-1334 BCE), also known as Amenhotep IV, whose exclusive worship of Aten is often interpreted as the first instance of monotheism. As Amenhotep IV, Akhenaten was married to Nefertiti (Yes, the famously beautiful one). Recent (2010) DNA analysis has revealed that with one of his biological sisters, the "Younger Lady" mummy, Akhenaten fathered Tutankhaten (later **Tutankhamun**)



Tutankhamun (1333–1324 BCE) made “famous” by the discovery of the treasures in his tomb by Howard Carter and Lord Carnarvon, an English aristocrat best known as the financial backer of the search for and the excavation of Tutankhamun's tomb in the Valley of the Kings. Lord Carnarvon was an enthusiastic amateur Egyptologist who in 1907 sponsored the excavation of nobles' tombs in Deir el-Bahri (Thebes). Howard Carter joined him as his assistant in the excavations. In 1922, he and Howard Carter together opened the tomb of Tutankhamun in the Valley of the Kings, exposing treasures unsurpassed in the history of archaeology.

Note: Lord Carnarvon's country house, Highclere Castle, served as the location of the TV/PBS television series Downton Abbey.

Personal note: I believe the pair of sistra (pl. sistrum) found among Tutankhamun's treasures illustrate his belief in the pantheon of Gods and Goddess prevalent in Egypt before his father attempted to “convert” the country to monotheism. However, it is also my belief that out of respect for his father's beliefs he, therefore, did not have an image of the Goddess Hathor inscribed on his sistrum.

Sistrum found among the treasures in Tutankhamun's tomb.



Depiction on golden shrine box* that was part of King Tut's treasures where his wife is depicted holding a sistrum and blessing the young King... The queen extends toward the king a sistrum and a necklace with an elaborate counterpoise. At the front of the counterpoise are the head and shoulders of a goddess, surmounted by cow's horns and the sun's disk and having the uraeus on her brow. Human hands project from beneath her collar, each hand holding a sign for "life" (ankh) toward the king. The identity of the goddess is revealed as the Great Enchantress in the inscription beneath the necklace.

Addressing the king, the queen says: "Adoration in peace, receive the Great Enchantress, O Ruler, beloved of Amun!"

*Read more: <http://www.touregypt.net/museum/tutl55.htm#ixzz3RuhUZSmV>

The [Nineteenth Dynasty](#) pharaohs ruled from 1292 to 1186 BCE and one of the “greatest” Nineteenth Dynasty pharaohs was **Ramesses II** (1303-1213 BCE), also known as Ramesses the Great, who is often regarded as the greatest, most celebrated, and most powerful pharaoh of the Egyptian Empire (His successors and later Egyptians called him the "Great Ancestor").

Nefertari was the first of the Great Royal Wives (or principal wives) of Ramesses the Great. Nefertari means 'beautiful companion' and she is one of the best known Egyptian queens, next to Cleopatra, Nefertiti, and Hatshepsut. She was highly educated and able to both read and write hieroglyphs, a very rare skill at the time. She used these skills in her diplomatic work, corresponding with other prominent royals of the time.



Nefertari's lavishly decorated tomb is one of the largest and most spectacular in the Valley of the Queens. Ramesses also constructed a temple, also known as the Small Temple, for her at Abu Simbel next to his colossal monument there and it is at this site Nefertari is depicted offering sistra to Hathor.

The Small Temple was dedicated to the goddess Hathor and Ramesses II's chief consort, Nefertari. This was in fact the second time in ancient Egyptian history that a temple was dedicated to a queen. The first time, Akhenaten dedicated a temple to his great royal wife, Nefertiti.

Conclusion

Ritual is a repeated action or series of actions or type of behaviour regularly and invariably followed by someone ~ in this case *YOU*!

Utilize the Sistrum a percussive instrument and ritual implement to “clear the space” (be it your mind, your home and/or your workspace) as an antidote to the world’s chaos. Breathe and know that by so doing you are creating and entering a sacred space for yourself.

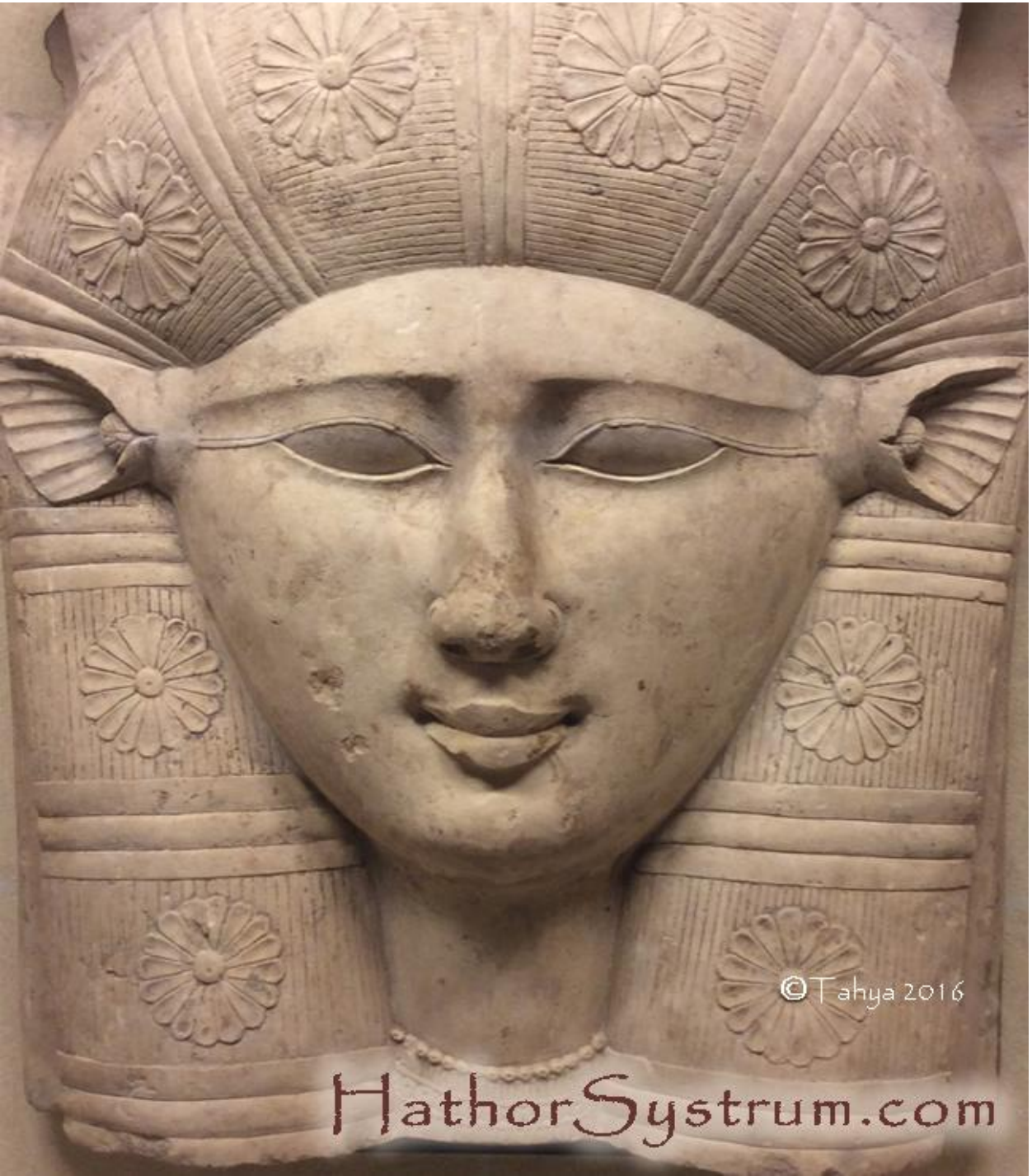
The act of shaking a sistrum was also thought to protect the goddess and her subjects. This protection is made clear by scenes at the temple of Hathor at Dendera that are captioned:

*I have taken the Seshseshet sistrum,
I grasp the sistrum and
drive away the one who is hostile to Hathor, Mistress of Heaven.
I dispel what is evil by means of the sistrum in my hand.^{iv}*

*“One wonders that people come back from Egypt
and live lives as they did before.”*

- Florence Nightingale

Letters from Egypt: A Journey on the Nile, 1849-50 by Florence Nightingale
(12 May 1820 – 13 August 1910) - British nurse, a pioneer of modern nursing, and a noted statistician.



Sublime image of the Goddess ~ capital of a column representing the Goddess Hathor with cow's ears and hair adorned with lotus blossoms. III century BCE, now in the Louvre Museum.

Please visit: www.HathorSysturum.com

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Roberts, Alison. [Hathor Rising](#). Vermont 1995

Teeter, Emily & Janet H. Johnson, [The Life of Meresamun: A Temple Singer in Ancient Egypt](#). Chicago 2009

See also: [When the Drummers Were Women](#) by Layne Redmond

ⁱ “The Life of Meresamun: A Temple Singer in Ancient Egypt,” Edited by Emily Teeter & Janet H. Johnson p. 30

ⁱⁱ HATHOR RISING by Alison Roberts p. 118

ⁱⁱⁱ HATHOR RISING by Alison Roberts p. 119

^{iv} “The Life of Meresamun: A Temple Singer in Ancient Egypt,” Edited by Emily Teeter & Janet H. Johnson p. 30