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HATSHEPSUT: ONE OF THE FIRST GREAT WOMAN LEADERS IN HISTORY



"My command stands firm like the mountains." — HATSHEPSUT

Hatshepsut was the second female pharaoh of Egypt and the fifth pharaoh of the 18th dynasty during the New Kingdom era (1570-1069 BC). She came to the throne of Egypt in 1478 BC and governed for more than 20 years, delivering a period of relative peace and prosperity. During her reign she led a number of ambitious building projects, the greatest of which was her mortuary temple at Deir el-Bahari. Hatshepsut is regarded as one of the most successful pharaohs, reigning longer than any other woman of an Egyptian dynasty.

Background

Hatshepsut was the daughter and only child of Thutmose I and his wife, Ahmose. At the age of 12, her father decided she would marry her half-brother, Thutmose II to fortify the royal lineage. Hatshepsut was elevated to the position of God's wife of Amun, the highest honor a woman could attain in Egypt after the position of queen. Hatshepsut and Thutmose II had a daughter named Neferure. After having their daughter, Hatshepsut could not birth any more children. Unable to have a son, Thutmose II then fathered Thutmose III with Isis, a secondary wife.

Soon after Thutmose II coronation he fell ill and died. Hatshepsut, 15-20 years old at the time became a widow with a stepson, Thutmose III, who became pharaoh by default. However,

her stepson was too young to be pharaoh, and Hatshepsut became Queen regent, handling the affairs of the state until the young pharaoh came of age.

During her husband's reign, Hatshepsut had been a model consort. Images of her at the time show her in her rightful place behind her husband. She was given the title of 'Great Royal Wife'.

Hatshepsut then slowly took on the regalia (ornaments) and symbols of the pharaoh. She underwent a radical image change, where she began to be depicted in male form, wearing a traditional kilt, head cloth, and even a false beard. Being a woman, only a handful had attained the status of pharaoh.

After seven years, Queen Hatshepsut proclaimed herself as King of Egypt. Thutmose III was named her co-regent, but effectively she was the chief ruler in Egypt. Her daughter Neferure took on the role of consort, performing the same duties that her mother had done during her husband's reign.

Hatshepsut then took control of the government and army. She surrounded herself with a group of loyal officials who held key positions in her government. Hatshepsut also established the trade networks that had been disrupted during the Hyksos occupation and initiated a lucrative trade deal in Punt (modern day Somalia). She emphasised commercial expansion and traded Egyptian merchandise for gold, spices, tusks and ebony.

As trade increased, wealth increased, and Hatshepsut began building projects throughout Egypt which were of significant scale and creativity in comparison to her predecessors. She also rebuilt what had been destroyed in the past and expanded her father's building work and initiated her own. Instead of employing traditional architectural styles, she created new styles of building.

Although principally a peaceful leader, she led military campaigns into countries that bordered the vast Egyptian empire. She ruled for almost 22 years changing the mental and physical landscape of Egypt and phenomenally increased the wealth of the country. She died around 1458 BC of an infection from an abscess in the tooth.

What can we learn from Hatshepsut's life and achievements?

1. Ambition

During her husband's reign, Hatshepsut had been a model spouse. However after his death, Hatshepsut most likely felt she had as much right to rule Egypt as any man, and her depiction in statues stressed this. Her statues showed her in all her royal grandeur in the forefront, with Thutmose III rendered on a smaller scale behind or below her to indicate his lower status.

2. Controversial

In the seventh year of Hatshepsut's regency, she changed the rules and had herself crowned pharaoh of Egypt. She took on all the royal titles and names which she had inscribed using the feminine grammatical form but had herself depicted as a male pharaoh. This contrasted to earlier statues and relief sculptures where she had been represented as a woman. Her breasts did not show, and she stood in a traditional man's posture, rather than a woman's. Some reliefs were even re-carved to adjust her representation to appear more like a man.

In addition to this, there have been many theories over the years as to why Thutmose III tried to blot Hatshepsut's name from history; the most likely reason was that Hatshepsut's reign had been unconventional. He may have feared that other women might look to Hatshepsut for inspiration and try to follow her example, thereby departing from a tradition which maintained that men should rule Egypt and women should be only consorts.

3. She established her legacy

Hatshepsut commissioned hundreds of statues of herself and left accounts in stone of her reign, including her thoughts and hopes. She wrote "those who shall see my monuments in future years and shall speak of what I have done beware of saying it did not happen nor say it was a boast but rather how like her this is and how worthy of her father".

4. Visionary

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 abundant than those of any of her Middle Kingdom predecessors (2050-1710 BC). It is said that later pharaohs attempted to claim some of her projects as theirs.

Hatshepsut's greatest efforts went into these building projects, which not only elevated her name and honoured the Gods, but employed the people. The scope and size of Hatshepsut's constructions, as well as their elegant beauty, attest to a very prosperous period for Egypt.

5. Commercially savvy

Hatshepsut established trading relationships that had been lost during the occupation by the Hyksos that brought great wealth to Egypt. She oversaw the preparations and funding for a mission to the land of Punt. It set out in her name, with five ships, accommodating 210 men that included sailors and rowers. Many trade goods were bought in Punt, notably frankincense and myrrh. The delegation returned from Punt bearing 31 live myrrh trees. This was the first known successful transplant of trees from one nation to another in history. As well, Hatshepsut would grind the charred frankincense into kohl eyeliner. This is the first recorded use of the resin.

6. Strategic mindset

Hatshepsut began her reign by marrying her daughter to Thutmose III and bestowing on Neferura the position of God's Wife of Amun in order to secure her position. Even if Hatshepsut was forced to relinquish power to Thutmose III, she would still be in a strong position as his step-mother and mother-in-law and, further, she had her daughter in one of the most prestigious and highest ranking priestesses in the land of Egypt. To further strengthen her position and defend against detractors who would claim a woman was unfit to rule, she legitimised her reign by presenting herself not merely as Amun's wife in ritual, but as his daughter. She claimed that Amun had appeared to her mother in the form of Thutmose I and conceived her, thus making her a demi-goddess.

Summary

In comparison with other female pharaohs, Hatshepsut's reign was much longer and more prosperous. She was successful in warfare early in her reign but generally is considered to be a pharaoh who inaugurated a long peaceful era. She re-established international trading relationships lost during a foreign occupation and brought great wealth to Egypt. Such wealth enabled Hatshepsut to initiate building projects that raised the calibre of Ancient Egyptian architecture to a standard comparable to classical architecture that would not be rivalled by any other culture for a thousand years.

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