

# Hatshepsut: Egypt's Revolutionary Female Pharaoh

*The Woman Who Would Be King*

*"Hatshepsut, Foremost of Noble Women... Perfect Goddess, Lady of the Two Lands, King of Upper and Lower Egypt, Maatkare, Daughter of Ra, Hatshepsut, Khenemet-Amun, may she live forever." —  
Inscription from Hatshepsut's temple at Deir el-Bahari*

## Early Life and Royal Blood

Born around 1507 BCE, Hatshepsut was a royal princess during Egypt's 18th Dynasty, a time of great prosperity and imperial expansion known as the New Kingdom. She was the daughter of Pharaoh Thutmose I and Queen Ahmose, positioning her within the highest echelons of Egyptian nobility.

Like most royal daughters, Hatshepsut was expected to fulfil certain roles to strengthen the royal bloodline. Around the age of 12, she married her half-brother Thutmose II, who became pharaoh after their father's death. This brother-sister marriage, while shocking to modern sensibilities, was common practice among Egyptian royalty to preserve the divine bloodline.

The marriage produced a daughter, Neferure, but no male heir. Thutmose II did have a son, the future Thutmose III, by a secondary wife named Isis. This would prove significant for Hatshepsut's future.

## From Queen Regent to Female Pharaoh

When Thutmose II died after a short reign of about 14 years, his son Thutmose III was still too young to rule effectively. As the King's Great Wife and royal widow, Hatshepsut became regent for the young king, a traditional arrangement that should have ended when the boy reached maturity.

What happened next was unprecedented. In approximately the seventh year of her regency (around 1473 BCE), Hatshepsut took the extraordinary step of claiming the title of pharaoh herself, essentially elevating herself to co-ruler with her stepson.

This transition from regent to ruler was carefully crafted. Hatshepsut maintained that the god Amun had appeared to her, proclaiming her the true ruler of Egypt. Temple reliefs at Deir el-Bahari depict her divine birth as the daughter of Amun, legitimising her claim to the throne through divine right.

## Ruling as King, Portrayed as Male

Hatshepsut knew that ruling as a woman in a position traditionally held by men required careful political manoeuvring. While she never denied her female identity — she often used feminine titles and her name means 'Foremost of Noble Women' — she increasingly adopted male royal iconography.

In statues and reliefs from later in her reign, Hatshepsut is frequently depicted with the traditional male pharaonic regalia: the false beard, kilt, and crown. Inscriptions referred to her with male pronouns and titles. Yet she did not wholly abandon her femininity, as some texts still acknowledged her as female even while portraying her in male attire.

This duality was not necessarily about deception; Egyptians understood that the office of pharaoh was inherently masculine, associated with male deities like Horus. By adopting male imagery, Hatshepsut was demonstrating her legitimate authority as pharaoh while maintaining her identity as a woman.

## **A Reign of Peace and Prosperity**

Ruling for about 22 years (circa 1473–1458 BCE), Hatshepsut's reign was characterised by peace, economic prosperity, and ambitious building projects. Rather than engaging in numerous military campaigns, she focused on strengthening trade networks and domestic infrastructure.

One of her greatest achievements was sending a trading expedition to the mysterious land of Punt (possibly located in modern-day Somalia or Ethiopia). This diplomatic and commercial mission, extensively documented on the walls of her mortuary temple, brought back exotic goods including myrrh trees, ebony, gold, ivory, and exotic animals.

Under Hatshepsut's rule, Egypt experienced a period of economic growth and artistic flourishing. She commissioned hundreds of construction projects throughout both Upper and Lower Egypt, employing more builders, engravers, and sculptors than had been employed since the time of the Great Pyramids a thousand years earlier.

## **Architectural Legacy**

Hatshepsut's most significant architectural achievement was her mortuary temple at Deir el-Bahari near the Valley of the Kings. This multi-terraced, colonnaded structure, designed by her steward and possible lover Senenmut, stands as one of ancient Egypt's most beautiful and innovative buildings.

Unlike the imposing, closed pyramids of earlier pharaohs, Hatshepsut's temple featured open, airy terraces that harmonised with the surrounding cliffs. Its walls told the story of her divine birth, her expedition to Punt, and her legitimacy as ruler.

She also erected massive obelisks at the Temple of Karnak, one of which still stands today as the tallest surviving ancient obelisk in Egypt. These monuments, cut from single pieces of granite and topped with precious metals, demonstrated both her piety toward the gods and her impressive command of resources and labour.

## **Key Figures in Hatshepsut's Court**

Several notable officials supported Hatshepsut's unusual reign. Her steward Senenmut, who rose from humble origins to become one of her most trusted advisors, oversaw many of her building projects and served as tutor to her daughter Neferure. Some scholars have suggested a romantic relationship between Hatshepsut and Senenmut, though evidence remains circumstantial.

Other key supporters included the High Priest of Amun, Hapuseneb, who helped legitimise her rule through religious authority, and the royal steward Nehsi, who led the famous expedition to Punt.

## **The Young Thutmose III and Co-Regency**

Throughout her reign, Hatshepsut maintained Thutmose III as co-ruler, at least nominally. He was educated as a military leader and appeared in some official contexts, but Hatshepsut clearly held the primary authority.

Contrary to popular misconceptions, there is little evidence that Thutmose III chafed under this arrangement during Hatshepsut's lifetime. Records suggest the co-regency functioned smoothly, with each ruler having defined roles.

## **Mysterious End and Attempted Erasure**

Hatshepsut disappeared from the historical record around 1458 BCE, likely dying in her early 50s. Her mummy was not identified until 2007, when a tooth found in a wooden box bearing her name matched a mummy previously discovered in tomb KV60.

Approximately 20 years after her death, Thutmose III (or perhaps his son) began a campaign to erase Hatshepsut from history. Her name and image were chiselled from monuments, her statues toppled and destroyed, and her accomplishments attributed to male pharaohs.

This systematic erasure was not necessarily born of hatred — more likely it represented an effort to correct an anomaly in the royal succession and ensure a smooth transfer of power to Thutmose III's son, Amenhotep II. By eliminating references to a female pharaoh, the normal male succession could be preserved in the historical record.

## **Rediscovery and Legacy**

Hatshepsut remained largely forgotten until the 19th century when scholars began deciphering Egyptian hieroglyphics. In 1822, the Rosetta Stone's decipherment allowed linguists to read ancient Egyptian texts, and in 1828, scholars started uncovering references to a mysterious female ruler.

By the early 20th century, excavations revealed more statues and texts related to Hatshepsut. The discovery of her temple at Deir el-Bahari with its detailed inscriptions provided the richest source of information about her remarkable reign.

## **Historical Significance**

Hatshepsut stands as one of history's earliest and most successful female leaders. While not the first woman to rule Egypt (Queen Sobekneferu of the 12th Dynasty preceded her), she was the first to exercise full pharaonic authority for an extended period during Egypt's most prosperous era.

Her reign challenges the common narrative that women in the ancient world were universally oppressed or powerless. As pharaoh, she wielded authority equal to any man in the ancient world, commanding one of history's greatest civilisations at its height.

Hatshepsut's innovative approach to gender presentation — adopting male regalia while maintaining aspects of her female identity — reveals the complex interplay between gender, power, and religious symbolism in ancient societies.

Her focus on trade, diplomacy, and domestic projects rather than military conquest offers an alternative model of leadership in the ancient world. Under her rule, Egypt prospered through commerce and construction rather than conquest.

Perhaps most importantly, the attempt to erase her from history ultimately failed. Nearly 3,500 years after her death, Hatshepsut is recognised as one of Egypt's most remarkable and effective rulers, her architectural achievements still standing as testimony to her extraordinary vision and authority.

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*"I have done this with my heart... I have not slept forgetfully... I raised up what was dismembered beginning from the time when the Asiatics were in the midst of the Delta... I have raised up what was a dismembered beginning from former times, when the Asiatics were in the midst of the Delta, in the abandoned districts." — Hatshepsut's inscription at Speos Artemidos*

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