HATSHEPSUT
THE FEMALE PHARAOH

Continuing our look at women in ancient Egypt, John Ray considers the triumphs and monuments of Queen Hatshepsut, the only female Pharaoh.

Insctrutable? Hatshepsut portrayed as a sphinx in an 18th-Dynasty painted limestone relief from Deir el-Bahri.

The Pharaoh of ancient Egypt is normally described as the typical example of a divine ruler. The reality was more complex than this, since the Pharaoh seems to have been a combination of a human element and a divine counterpart. This duality is expressed not only in the ruler’s titles, which often have a double aspect to them, but also in the king’s names. Every Pharaoh had a human name, given to him at birth and used in intimate contexts throughout his life. These names are the ones by which we know them. Since such names tended to repeat themselves in families, we now need to distinguish kings with the same name by numbers. In addition, there was a throne-name, conferred at the accession and containing the immor-
tal form of the ruler’s divinity. The king was an embodiment of the sun-god, an eternal prototype, and the human frailties of the individual ruler did not affect this embodiment: a convenient system, surely, for having the best of both worlds when it comes to government. The Pharaoh was essentially an icon, much as the imperial Tsar was an icon, and even the president of the United States sometimes appears to be.

How far can icons be stretched? Pharaoh was the manifestation of the sun in time and place: he could be old, young, athletic, gay, incompetent, boring, alcoholic or insane, but he would still be Pharaoh. Examples of all these types are known, or hinted at in the sources. But could he be female? The theoretical answer to this question may have been ‘yes’, since there are several ancient Egyptian texts describing creator-gods with both male and female attributes, but it was one thing to concede an abstract possibility and another to welcome its embodiment. Female rulers are attested in the long history of dynastic Egypt, and later tradition puts the names of queens at or near the end of both the Old Kingdom (c. 2200 BC) and the Middle Kingdom, some five centuries later. (The Old Kingdom one, Nitocris, later attracted considerable legends, and appears prominently in Herodotos). However, the important point was that tradition placed these queens at the end of their particular dynasties: female Pharaohs were unnatural, and meant decline and retribution. Egyptian
society gave remarkable freedoms and legal rights to women – far more than in the rest of the Near East or in the classical world – but limits were limits, even by the Nile.

Egypt was, and is, a Mediterranean country, where the most powerful man can frequently be reduced to confusion and paralysis by a remark from his mother, but women were limited to their sphere: if they had no other title, they could always be honoured as ‘lady of the house’. If they stayed within this domain, they could expect to retain status and protection. Agriculture beside the Nile was intensive, and this meant that women’s contributions were essential, as opposed to the more nomadic societies of the Near East, where females were often seen as an encumbrance. Many Egyptian women may not have thought their position a bad bargain; pregnancy and childbirth were expected but dangerous, and support outside the family was unknown and perhaps impossible. Security, and the real possibility of influence over the holders of power, may not have seemed so poor a prospect, especially if a woman produced a son or two, while divorce and inheritance rules for females were relatively favourable. Why break the mould?

The early part of the Eighteenth
Dynasty is often known as the Tuthmosid period, after the name of its principal rulers. Tuthmosis I (c. 1525 – 1512 BC, although another reckoning would lower these dates by twenty-five years) was a warrior ruler, who took on the scattered principalities of Lebanon and Syria and carried his arms far beyond the Euphrates, setting up a victory stela on the banks of what the Egyptians described as the ‘topsy-turvy’ river, since it flowed the opposite way to the Nile. In retrospect, this is the beginning of something resembling an Egyptian empire in Asia, a subject which was to preoccupy foreign policy throughout the next two dynasties. However, retrospect is a one-way street, and contemporaries may have thought that one show of force was enough. It may equally be that the modern concept of empire is an anachronism for the period; ‘sphere of influence’ might be a closer guide to Egyptian thinking. Tuthmosis I was followed by another Tuthmosis, a Pharaoh of whom little is known and arguably little worth knowing. However, he was married to Hatshepsut.

Hatshepsut was Tuthmosis II’s half-sister (marriage to close relatives was not a problem in the Tuthmosid royal family, and this may explain the prominence given to queens in the early years of the dynasty; all were equally descended from the dynasty’s heroic founder). However, it is likely that the king was worried about his wife’s ambitions; her name, after all, meant ‘Foremost of the noble ladies’. On his premature death (c. 1504 BC) he and Hatshepsut had produced only a daughter, Nefru, and the official successor was Tuthmosis III, a young son by one of the king’s minor wives. Clearly the boy was in need of a regent. His aunt thought herself qualified for the job; more importantly, she had convinced enough others of the same truth that she was able to stage a coup. She and Tuthmosis III were declared joint Pharaohs. There were precedents for this in earlier dynasties, and this may have gone some way towards blurring the innovatory fact that one of the co-regents was not male. In a few early scenes she is shown dutifully following her partner, but this soon changes. This was to be a co-regency that was far from equal. For the next twenty-two years it would be ‘goodnight from her, and goodnight from her’. The reign of Hatshepsut had begun, and her throne-name was Maatkare, ‘Truth (a female principle which also embodies the ideas of justice and harmony) is the genius of the sun-god’.

There is a sense in which all history is about the meanings of words, and it is certainly true that to change history involves colliding with the language in which it is expressed. Hatshepsut does this. Traditional Pharaohs were the embodiment of the god Horus; Hatshepsut is also Horus, but the epithets she adds in hieroglyphs are grammatically in the feminine forms. Furthermore, she describes herself as ‘The she-Horus of fine gold’, fine gold (electrum) being an amalgam of this metal with the rarer and more valuable silver. It is as if she were to style herself the platinum goddess. Like other Pharaohs, she regularly refers to herself as ‘His Majesty’ (a closer rendering might be ‘His Person’). However, the word for majesty is turned into a new feminine equivalent. One is reminded of Elizabeth I of England, with her doctrine of the dual body of the monarch, one of which happens to be female. Rewriting language in the light of gender is not a twentieth-century discovery. It did not work in ancient Egypt (and it might not work now), but the attempt was none the less made. The changes either originated with the queen, or were approved by her, and they must correspond with her thinking. In conventional temple scenes, where the icon of a traditional Pharaoh is necessary, she appears as a male ruler. In sculpture, on the other hand, she is shown as female but imperial, with the typical Tuthmosid face and arched profile. Her portraits are unmistakable.

A characteristic of Hatshepsut is her preoccupation with historical context. It is as if she is trying to define her own role in events, to justify her intervention on to the stage and to issue a challenge at the same time. In a deserted valley in Middle Egypt, in the eastern cliffs about 175 miles south of modern Cairo, is an unusual rock-cut temple known by its classical name of Speos Artemidos, the grotto of Artemis. The goddess in question was known to the Egyptians as Pakhet, an obscure deity with the attributes of a lioness. On the façade of this temple is a long dedication, put there by Hatshepsut and her artists, designed, as she tells us, to ‘record the annals of her supremacy for ever’. In this text she announced the theme of her reign, which is no less than a complete rebuilding of the land of Egypt. Solar imagery abounds in the text, and Hatshepsut is described without any attempt at modesty as the one predestined since the moment of creation to restore the ritual purity of the temples, to recapture the perfection of the world’s origins:

I raised up what was desecrated, even from the time when the Asiatics were in the midst of (the Delta), overthrowing what had been created. They ruled in ignorance of Re (the sun-god), and acted not by divine command, until my august person.

This is a reference both to the resurrection of the god Osiris and to the occupation of Egypt by the alien Hyksos, which had preceded the Eighteenth Dynasty: an episode which was shameful, but by no means as barbaric as Hatshepsut makes out. Nor did it last as long as she pretended. This combination of historical perspective and return to religious purity is characteristic of Hatshepsut. Since her position as Pharaoh was unorthodox, an appeal to fundamentalism was necessary to correct the balance. This may well have corresponded to her own thinking, and need not be merely cynical.

Determination to rewrite history is also seen in the official version of the
Hatshepsut's standard bearer is followed by men carrying herbs and spices from the Punt expedition, underlining the possibility that its motive was economic.

(Facing page) A touch of the exotic - the 'fat lady' of Punt and her husband - one of the observations of Hatshepsut's artists from the walls of her temple on the expedition sponsored by the queen in years 8-9 of her reign.

(Below) Loading up the Egyptian ships at Punt (from Howard Carter's drawings at the turn-of-the-century of the Deir el-Bahri reliefs): among the 'booty' were the frankincense trees that stood in front of Hatshepsut's temple.
queen's proclamation and accession, where the choice of her as ruler is made, not by inheritance or acclamation, but by the oracle of the god Amun, leader of the Egyptian pantheon and ruler of the royal city of Thebes. An oracle of this sort probably happened, since it is suspiciously convenient and could easily have been arranged by the queen's followers after her seizure of power. What is more important is that the queen is cutting out any human medium, and going straight for an identification with the divine. As Pharaoh, she had this identification automatically, and there would normally be no need to labour the point. Hatshepsut is not normal, and she labours the point for all it contains, here and in her other inscriptions. The platinum goddess can be seen as the Egyptian equivalent of Gloriana, the mythical transformation of Elizabeth I. This is a comparison to which we will return.

One feature of Hatshepsut's reign is often noted: the apparent lack of military activity. There is evidence for minor campaigns in Nubia, and the period is not a complete blank, but the frantic action of the previous reign is lacking. This is sometimes explained as a deliberate attempt by Hatshepsut to adopt a pacifist and feminine approach to politics. This is so completely out of line with what can be deduced about her character that it cannot convince. Female rulers can be as warlike as any man, especially if they feel that they have something to prove. A more likely reason is that Hatshepsut could not trust the army. If she led a campaign herself, even if this were politically acceptable, what would happen if she lost? A female commander would be the natural thing to blame for defeat. If the army won, it might start agitating for more victories, and for a greater role for the queen's nephew, who would gain status as he grew in years. The whole subject was best avoided, especially if Tuthmosis I had already made the point that Egypt was the leading power in Asia. Some things could be left as they were.

If the army could not be used on a large scale, an outlet must be found elsewhere. This is one of the purposes behind the famous expedition to the land of Punt, which occupied the eighth and ninth years of her reign. The location of Punt is unknown, though it may have been Eritrea or part of Somalia, or somewhere further south, but it was the home of the frankincense-tree. The adventure is recorded on the walls of the queen's masterpiece, the great temple in the cliffs of Deir el-Bahri in western Thebes, the modern Luxor. Exquisite reliefs show the departure of the expedition, the arrival at the exotic land beyond the sea, the lading of Hatshepsut's ships with the produce of Punt, and the preparations for the voyage home.

The event was not simply a foraging mission, since it was accompanied by artists to record the flora and fauna of the Red Sea and of the African coast. It can almost be described as the beginning of comparative anthropology, even if the climax - the appearance of the grossly overweight queen of Punt accompanied by a donkey - has an element of the ridiculous about it. Part of the expedition found its way back to Egypt by way of the upper Nile, while five shiploads, including incense-trees, returned by sea. Walter Raleigh would probably have enjoyed Punt, although the reasons for the voyage are not entirely clear. It may have been imperial prospecting, although this is unlikely at this early stage in the dynasty. Perhaps it was economic, an attempt to corner part of the lucrative incense-trade for Egypt. It was certainly an exercise for an under-employed army, and it was propaganda for the queen as provider of the exotic. Perhaps it was also fun.

The roots of the incense-trees can still be seen before the Deir el-Bahri temple, where they were planted and where they perfumed the night air. The temple has been excavated slowly over the past century (its scenes were first copied by a young draughtsman named Howard Carter), and its plan is now clear. No one who walks the path over the mountain from the Valley of the Kings and looks down at the other side can ignore the series of terraces below, built into the western cliffs. It is one of the most dramatic sights in Egypt. The variety of its scenes, all showing the slightly austere elegance that is common to Tuthmosid art, the balance between light and shade which is necessary in such an exposed site, and the originality of its design make the building unique. Perhaps to contemporaries it was too unique; certainly the concept was never recreated. Manuals of classical architecture tell us that the Doric column was developed in Greece around the seventh century BC. The north colonnade of Deir el-Bahri was composed of them, eight centuries earlier.

Part of the temple was devoted to the divine birth of Hatshepsut, another piece of mythology which normal Pharaohs did not need to use. The god Amun himself desired to create his living image on earth, to reveal his greatness and to carry out his plans. He disguised himself as Tuthmosis I, went one day to see the queen, and the result, in due course, was Hatshepsut. Amun did not mind that his image was female, so why should anyone else?

Similar themes are explored in a rather strange medium, an inscribed
pair of granite obelisks which the queen set up in her sixteenth year before the temple of Amun at Karnak opposite Deir el-Bahri. The entire work, she tells us, took seven months. Obelisks in Egyptian thinking were a representation of the first ray of light which inaugurated the creation, or what we would now call the Big Bang. In the text Hatshepsut knows the mind of God: she was present with the creator at the beginning, she is the luminous seed of the almighty one, and she is ‘the fine gold of kings’ — another reference to electrum. This metal was even used to coat the obelisks, to make her splendid visible. Her sense of posterity, and the force of her personality, are clear from the words she uses:

Those who shall see my monument in future years, and shall speak of what I have done, beware of saying, ‘I know not, I know not how this has been done, fashioning a mountain of gold throughout, like something of nature’ ... Nor shall he who hears this say it was a boast, but rather, ‘How like her this is, how worthy of her father’.

She also tells us that her obelisks were situated by the gateway of Tuthmosis I, since it was he who began the obelisk habit. This preoccupation with the father is not accidental. Pharaoh was Pharaoh because his father had been Pharaoh; in Egyptian mythology, he was Horus to his predecessor’s Osiris, one god ruling on earth while the other reigned over the netherworld. However, this was conventional, and orthodox Pharaohs did not need to make it explicit. Hatshepsut, the female Horus, was not orthodox. Her kingship depended on mythological props, and also on political ones; in fact, she would not have made a distinction between the two. But there may well be a third element at work, a personal one.

Tuthmosis I is prominent in many of her inscriptions, far more than is necessary. His sarcophagus was even discovered in his daughter’s tomb, where it had been transferred from his own. Clearly she intended to spend eternity with the man who had been her father on earth. She left her husband, Tuthmosis II, where he was lying in the Valley of the Kings, and her inscriptions never mention him, even though he was presumably the parent of her child. This is a trait which prominent females sometimes show. Anna Freud turned herself into Sigmund’s intellectual heir, Benazir Bhutto makes a political platform out of her father’s memory, and one is reminded of a recent British prime minister whose entry in Who’s Who included a father but no mother. Did Tuthmosis I ever call his daughter ‘the best man in the dynasty’, and is this why Hatshepsut shows no identification with other women? This is not entirely hypothetical: among Hatshepsut’s inscriptions is an imaginative reworking of an episode when she was young, in which her father proclaims her his heir before the entire palace. Such a text could have been based on a coming-of-age ceremony, or even a chance remark to an impressionable child.

Hatshepsut was determined to hold on to power, and the way she achieved this is clear. After the gradual disappearance of her father’s advisers, almost all her supporters were new men (women she could not have appointed, even if she had had a mind to). They owed nothing to the traditional aristocracy, little to conventional patronage: they were ‘one of us’. They were hers, and if she fell, they would fall also. Their tombs are still visible in the cliffs above Deir el-Bahri. They are easily distinguished by the terraced effect of their façades, which resemble the royal temple; even in their architecture they showed whose men they were. This must have been a court where many lesser lights danced attendance on the sun-queen.

The most prominent courtier of Hatshepsut’s reign is Senenmut. He dominates the temple of Deir el-Bahri, where he seems to be an overall but ill-defined master of works. His figure even appears in small niches in some of its chapels, worshipping the god Amun and his royal mistress. These niches are hidden behind the doors, but the gods would have known what was in them, and so probably did Hatshepsut. This must have been done with her approval. Senenmut’s place in the royal household is confirmed by his position as tutor to the queen’s daughter Nefure, and statues survive showing Senenmut crouching in the guise of a patient client, while the head of the royal infant peeps out from between his knees. Senenmut was given permission to be buried.

Divine links: Queen Hatshepsut kneels to have her crown affixed by the god Amun in this relief from a fallen obelisk in Karnak.
within the precincts of the great temple, an unprecedented honour.

Around the seventh year of the reign Senenmut's mother died, and she too was interred in the temple. Senenmut exhumed the body of his father at the same time, and reburied him in splendour alongside her and other members of his family. The father had no title (otherwise the Egyptians, who were obsessed with titles, would not have failed to mention it), and his original burial was tantamount to a pauper's. Senenmut must have come from a small town along the Nile, and rose to prominence entirely through merit and the queen's patronage. This sheds unexpected light on what could happen in ancient Egypt. Senenmut seems never to have married. Perhaps he did not dare to; did not Walter Raleigh fall from grace as soon as he married one of Gloriana's maids?

Recently evidence has emerged that the reign of Hatshepsut could inspire distinctly tabloid reactions. Some years ago, in an unfinished tomb above the Deir el-Bahari temple, a series of graffiti were found. One of these is a feebly drawing of Senenmut, but on another wall there is a sketch showing a female Pharaoh undergoing the attentions of a male figure, in a way that implies her passive submission. This may be a contemporary comment on the relationship between Senenmut and the queen, or it may be a later satire on the notion of an impotent female Pharaoh, or it may simply be the fantasy of a little man for something he could never attain, rather on the lines of the stories which later circulated about Cleopatra or Catherine the Great. If the scene is genuine, it is extremely interesting, even if its meaning is less explicit than its drawing.

The queen died on the tenth day of the sixth month of the twenty-second year of her reign (early February 1482 BC). She was perhaps fifty. Tuthmosis III, so long looped up, became sole Pharaoh and immediately led his army into Syria, where in seventeen campaigns he restored Egyptian overlordship of the Near East. At some point, though not for some years, he began a proscription of his aunt's memory. Probably he chose to wait until Senenmut and her other supporters had passed away. Perhaps he remained in awe of her. Her inscriptions were erased, her obelisks surrounded by a wall, and her monuments forgotten. Her name does not appear in later annals, which is why we refer to Tuthmosis by a Greek transcription, while hers is missing. The bodies of many of the New Kingdom Pharaohs survive, and are now in the Cairo Museum. As far as we know, hers is not among them. What we do know about her has been gained by excavation and careful epigraphy over the past hundred years. Perhaps this is as it should be, since the late twentieth century is a better time than most to think about the meaning of her reign. Will the feminist movement rediscover her, or will she be uncomfortable for us, as she was for some of her contemporaries?

FOR FURTHER READING:

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