

Hatshepsut:

The Powerful Female Pharaoh

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Hatshepsut was a powerful pharaoh who ruled in the Eighteenth Dynasty. Her rule was an era of peace and prosperity, during which time, Egypt flourished and grew in power. Hatshepsut was the daughter of the pharaoh Thutmose I and was married to the succeeding pharaoh, Thutmose II. When Thutmose II died, she was appointed regent for her nephew and stepson, Thutmose III. In approximately the seventh year of Thutmose III's "reign" and her own regency, Hatshepsut took the title of pharaoh and the powers and privileges conferred with it. However, Hatshepsut also faced a litany of issues due to her gender and due to the ethno-cultural norms she both upheld and transgressed.¹ The question to be asked then is, how did Hatshepsut shape and legitimize her reign in view of her gender and in relation to her ethno-cultural boundaries? I will examine how she legitimized her reign in light of her gender and how she used her ethno-cultural norms, common to the Eighteenth Dynasty pharaohs, to accomplish this action. Hatshepsut modified these practices and incorporated additional ones to suit her situation. An important facet of these adaptations was how she substantiated her rule through art, with particular regard to her own depictions as pharaoh. These modifications were also particularly evident with regard to her travels to Punt, her projects concerning infrastructure, and her relationship with the cult of Amun.² Essentially, Hatshepsut both followed and manipulated the established practices of Eighteenth Dynasty pharaohs to legitimize and found her reign.

To understand how Hatshepsut used and contravened the ethno-cultural limits of her society, one must understand the norms of the Eighteenth Dynasty pharaohs. The Eighteenth Dynasty pharaohs had

1 By ethno-cultural norms, I mean the accepted and typical customs relating to a particular ethnic group's culture.

2 Amun, also known in the Eighteenth Dynasty as Amun-Ra, the creator and the sun; the king of all the gods. However, Egyptian gods tended to be rather fluid in their aspects. Their attributes and names often changed over time.

three key aspects of their reign. Firstly, they were usually warrior pharaohs, as opposed to simply being living gods; they were no longer just the physical manifestation of the divine, but the actual and incarnate hand of the particular god's will. They had turned from being passive objects, to dynamic actors. These warrior kings based their rule on expansionist policies and practices, thus creating a new method of rule which was very different from that of the Middle Kingdom.³

Secondly, these pharaohs had a specific purpose for their rule. Once again, they could no longer be passive. They had active duties and objectives which had to be fulfilled. The most important of these duties was the unification of Egypt through the protection and benefit of the populace. This concept is vital to my third point.

Thirdly, the pharaoh had to support the preeminence of the cult of Amun. In honouring this cult, the pharaoh gave gold, tribute, and buildings to the god in gratitude for successes, thus bettering the overall status of the empire and the people.⁴ In addition, the pharaoh cultivated a deep and personal relationship with the god. In this relationship the pharaoh became the god's son, in addition to being the physical embodiment of the god, and of his divine will.⁵ This connection was essential to the pharaoh's position as the rightful ruler of Egypt.⁶ Hatshepsut utilized these methods and conventions to cement her reign. She both realized and altered the ethno-cultural practices of the Eighteenth Dynasty pharaohs to better suit her own personal and specific needs. In an almost alchemical process, Hatshepsut managed to use the traditional methods of conferring rule in a new and untraditional way which, nevertheless, still bestowed power and authority.

Another typical aspect of pharaonic power which Hatshepsut used greatly to her advantage was the language of art and statuary. This subtle form of communication was not so much a value of the Eighteenth Dynasty pharaohs, as their military prowess, language of unification, or devotion to Amun was, but was rather a standard feature and system of expression of their rule. It was Hatshepsut who made these designs extraordinary through her use and alteration of them. The pharaohs always had traditional methods of art which had conventional symbols and motifs expressing the fact that they were pharaoh and, with this portrayal, their privilege and power of rule. Hatshepsut, in her typical fashion, then transformed this innocuous and mundane expression of rule into a revolutionary expression of her assumption of royal pharaonic power. Quintessentially, she used

3 Phil Sheppard, "New Kingdom Egypt," Phil Sheppard Video Production, 2010, 6.48.

4 Tribute, meaning general gifts and valuables given to the god Amun.

5 Phil Sheppard, "New Kingdom Egypt," 7.40, 8.50.

6 Ibid., 5.00.

statues and other artistic portrayals of herself as a male pharaoh to further legitimize and affirm her position as a female pharaoh.⁷

This aforementioned strategy has engendered an enormous amount of debates concerning the connotations of Hatshepsut's change of garb, as she exchanged her queen's dress and vulture crown, for the uniform of a pharaoh complete with pleated kilt, crook, flail, fake beard, and headdress. Some have argued that this shift indicates that Hatshepsut did not consider herself a woman—rather, she thought of herself as a combination of man and woman, or a man. However, it is known that Hatshepsut was biologically female, as she did have a child. Everyone at court had known her since childhood so it is highly unlikely that she was attempting to obscure the fact that she was a woman. Further evidence that Hatshepsut still saw herself as a woman was her continued use of female pronouns, despite her new form of portrayal. This fact, far from crippling her efforts, awarded her even greater power as it allowed her to take on the features of female goddesses, such as names and specific female characteristics, something which male pharaohs could not do, and which allowed Hatshepsut to be both king and queen.⁸ Additionally, according to Professor Uros Matic, the system of gender in Egypt was a primarily binary system, though this established structure did not mean different gender expressions were forbidden or even penalized. Moreover, Matic argues that this tradition more likely indicated a certain type of divine being or a divine interaction even though there was a tradition of portraying individuals with both masculine and feminine features.⁹

Through assuming the garb of pharaoh, it is much more likely that Hatshepsut was appropriating the official garments in order to demonstrate that she was taking control of this type of pharaonic power. These clothes were not a simple outfit; they were a uniform which conferred the authority, power, and majesty of the pharaoh's position. They had less to do with assuming a gender identity, and more with assuming a new royal status and rank. These statues, displayed all over the empire, were a traditional expression of authority and it was their garb which held the power and station. This shift was the ritual representation of a new position.¹⁰

Even before Hatshepsut, women played an important role in the royal traditions of the Eighteenth Dynasty. Significantly, this dynasty

7 Artistic portrayals specifically refers to reliefs in temples and tombs.

8 Gay Robins, "The Names of Hatshepsut as King," *The Journal of Egyptian Archaeology*, no. 85 (1999): 106, 111.

9 Uros Matic, "Gender in Ancient Egypt: Norms, Ambiguities, and Sensualities," *Near Eastern Archaeology* 79, no. 3 (2016): 177.

10 Uros Matic, "(De)queering Hatshepsut: Binary Bind in Archaeology of Egypt and Kingship Beyond the Corporeal." *Journal Archaeological Method Theory*, no. 23 (2016): 819.

was already replete with powerful women such as Ahhotep and Queen Ahmose Nefertary.¹¹ Many of the pharaohs in this dynasty died young, leaving immature heirs and a space for powerful female regents. As Matic' states: "This means that women in the roles of kings' mothers or queen regents ruled Egypt for almost half of the seventy years before Hatshepsut."¹² Furthermore, it was the matrilineal line which conferred royal power and passed on the royal lineage.¹³ In addition, by this point, a female consort had become an imperative. The idea of both a pharaoh and a female consort had become an important and central concept of Amun's balance and of Maat.¹⁴

Despite Hatshepsut's many powerful female predecessors, it was still highly unusual and vaguely scandalous for a woman to declare herself pharaoh, especially in light of the fact the Thutmose III had already been crowned. Due to these circumstances, a great deal of Hatshepsut's efforts had to be expended securing and cementing her own rather precarious position.¹⁵ She lacked manhood—one of the most basic aspects that was usually necessary to be pharaoh—and as a result, many of her later actions were taken in an attempt to compensate for this "deficiency." Hatshepsut, despite this "set back," was a highly competent ruler; however, she needed to make sure that her subjects saw her as such in order to function properly and without serious threat.

In her aim to assert herself as the pharaoh of Egypt, Hatshepsut used many of the traditional ethno-cultural methods of her Eighteenth Dynasty forebears in her own unconventional manner. First, she fulfilled the dictates of a warrior pharaoh by expanding Egypt's reach. Not by military conquests, though she did lead several campaigns in Nubia, Syria, and the Levant, but by trade.¹⁶ This trading expedition was also fundamental to her accomplishing Egyptian unity, and to her devotions to the Cult of Amun. These trading relationships incorporated one of the most central and important aspects of Hatshepsut's affirmation of her reign, namely, her expedition to Punt. This expedition was the foundation on which she secured and anchored her reign and her assumption of power.

Punt was an ancient quasi-mythical kingdom abounding with rich treasures, such as gold, ivory, exotic animals, and most centrally, incense trees, among many other treasures. The location of Punt is debated in

11 Dimitri Laboury, "How and Why Did Hatshepsut Invent the Image of Her Royal Power?," in *Creativity and Innovation in the Reign of Hatshepsut: Papers From the Theban Workshop 2010*, ed. José Manuel Galán, Betsy Morrell Bryan, and Peter F. Dorman (Chicago: The Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, 2014), 86.

12 Matic', "(De)queering Hatshepsut," 814.

13 Sheppard, "New Kingdom Egypt," 10.50.

14 Maat was the goddess of truth and balance.

15 Laboury, "How and Why," 50; Sheppard, "New Kingdom Egypt," 20.8.

16 Sheppard, "New Kingdom Egypt," 22.58.

the scholarly community, and its true geographical position remains unconfirmed. Punt had been an ancient trading partner of the Egyptians, dating back to the time of the Pharaoh Khufu, during a much earlier dynasty, and perhaps even preceding this pharaoh.¹⁷ However, as time had passed and confusion broke out during the Second Intermediate Period (1800 BCE to 1570 BCE), contact with Punt had been lost.¹⁸ A central reason as to why Hatshepsut's Punt expedition held so much symbolic significance was that, through this mission, she reestablished an old and revered trading route and with it a connection to Egypt's traditions and past. In successfully completing her mission, she was establishing herself to be worthy of her position, her god, Amun, and of her forebears.¹⁹

Though Hatshepsut had already declared herself pharaoh, the Punt expedition allowed her to truly cement her power and demonstrate her strength. This journey increased trade and brought a great amount of wealth to Egypt. During this expedition, many exotic luxuries were brought back, including many new and intriguing wild animals as clearly demonstrated by the relief on the wall of her mortuary temple. The most prominent and the most important of these spoils however, were the live Frankincense trees which she transplanted back to Egypt, in addition to the many other aromatics.²⁰ This mission, though it accrued the same amount of glory and prestige as a military victory, was focused entirely on trade and was in no way a military conflict.²¹

Furthermore, the expedition helped Hatshepsut to build relationships with the people of Punt. Compelling evidence for this relationship is, once again, provided by the relief in her mortuary temple. One panel of this relief depicts the queen and king of Punt, along with some of their royal attendants. However they are not portrayed in the traditional Egyptian style, but rather in a more emotive and realistic depiction, with very few Egyptian attributes.²² Yet, another panel which renders the king and queen of Punt after their peaceful interactions with the Egyptians shows the queen in

17 This dynasty extended from approximately 2613–2498 BCE.

18 The Second Intermediate Period was a time of great upheaval and unrest. During this time there were many different dynasties, including the Hyksos dynasty.

19 Joshua J. Mark, "Punt," *Ancient History Encyclopedia*, last modified August 1, 2011. <https://www.ancient.eu/punt/>.

20 Frankincense is an aromatic used to create incense and perfumes used in embalming and other religious practices. It was extremely valuable in the ancient world. These trees would have spawned new trees, in addition to providing the Egyptians with valuable aromatics and wood. Punt Relief Copy, (Hatshepsut's Temple), Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto, ON, Canada (15th century BCE); Sheppard, "New Kingdom Egypt," 23.48.

21 Sheppard, "New Kingdom Egypt," 24.20.

22 The traditional Egyptian style was slim tall bodies, long white dresses, and jeweled collars and hairstyles for royal women and a specific hairstyle with a linen kilt for royal men.

new Egyptian dress and shows the king and their attendants with new Egyptian attributes.²³ This change clearly indicates there was then a distinct relationship between these two cultures. Through the image of the Puntians taking on Egyptian fashions, Hatshepsut was showing how, not only had she established a relationship with this rich foreign land, but that the occupants of that land were in some ways submitting to the Egyptians and identifying with them.

The success the expedition accrued and the riches it brought back also helped to enrich Egypt's infrastructure and, in so doing, helped to create unity. Hatshepsut built relationships through her allocations of persons to oversee the expedition and through her distribution of goods on the expedition's return. She was also able to use the wealth and riches she gained on this trip to fund the building of new structures and temples which furthered her cause of bringing unity to Egypt.²⁴ In doing this, she also employed the use of very specific rhetorical strategies which were designed and formed to help further the unification process.²⁵

Hatshepsut also made good use of her distribution of Puntian treasure, particularly the aromatics, when it came to the Cult of Amun. She gave the temple of Amun massive gifts stating that all the glory of the venture was due to Amun, as he himself had ordered this expedition and had brought about its success. These gifts and honours had the dual purpose of gaining her the support of the Temple of Amun and legitimizing her own position.²⁶ The Cult of Amun was particularly important in Hatshepsut's legitimization of her reign. One of the ways she utilized this advantage was in a myth, which she popularized, concerning her conception and birth. According to this legend Amun made a specific decision to beget Hatshepsut and so took the form of Thutmose I so that he could have relations with Hatshepsut's mother, thus creating Hatshepsut through divine conception.²⁷ Furthermore, in this legend, there was a prophecy in which Amun stated his intention to create a daughter who was destined to rule Egypt.²⁸

However, Hatshepsut went even further than promulgating this myth, stating that she was commanded and guided directly by Amun because of her deep and personal relationship with him. In this idea, she declared

23 Punt Relief Copy, (Hatshepsut's Temple).

24 Pearce Creasman, "Hatshepsut and the Politics of Punt," *African Archaeological Review* 31, no. 3 (2014): 401–40.

25 Susanne Bickel, "Worldview and Royal Discourse in the Time of Hatshepsut," in *Creativity and Innovation in the Reign of Hatshepsut: Papers From the Theban Workshop 2010*, ed. José Manuel Galán, Betsy Morrell Bryan, and Peter F. Dorman (Chicago: The Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, 2014), 29.

26 Creasman, "Hatshepsut and the Politics of Punt," 398–9.

27 Sheppard, "New Kingdom Egypt," 20.25.

28 *Ibid.*, 20.44.

that, because of her particular connection to him, it was she alone who truly knew his heart and his mind.²⁹ This connection acted to legitimize her further, as she was claiming a direct knowledge of a deity. She also used many phrases to demonstrate the high level of intimacy shared between her and Amun, giving herself many titles in which she is directly connected to Amun. These titles changed as her own position changed, but always kept the feminine pronoun. This use of titles was also in keeping with the ethno-cultural traditions of the Eighteenth Dynasty pharaohs as they also took similar titles, usually “the son of Amun” giving them political power.³⁰ Hatshepsut did the same thing, though while maintaining her own gender and pushing this connection further than ever before.

Hatshepsut also used her male relatives to help substantiate her own power. Despite the fact that royal power passed through the matrilineal line, and she was born of a queen, Hatshepsut still needed a male connection to legitimize her own control. As her position changed, so did the relation she drew power from. During her time as regent, she drew authority from her nephew/stepson Thutmose III. This connection is apparent from reliefs and statues where they are often portrayed together, though Hatshepsut always took precedence in both prominence and number. During her pre-coronation period, Hatshepsut drew prestige primarily from her deceased husband, Thutmose II, showing them together and in great amity. During the period after her assumption of the throne she was often portrayed by herself, and later, she is seen with both Thutmose I and III.³¹ This portrayal was another way in which Hatshepsut validated her reign. Through acting through her powerful male relatives, she was acting within the ethno-cultural bounds of the Eighteenth Dynasty tradition. However, these actions were necessitated due to her gender and the unconventional role it placed her in, as it broke the confines of her ethno-cultural bounds.

Hatshepsut was faced with many challenges as a female pharaoh. However, she ultimately used the ethno-cultural tools and customs of the Eighteenth Dynasty pharaohs to legitimize her own reign, using their practices to her own advantage. Hatshepsut accomplished the same and more, through her hugely successful Puntian expedition, as the warrior pharaohs did through their conquests. She brought great unity through her careful choices and through the wealth acquired from her excursions to Punt. Additionally, she enriched and gained power from the Cult of Amun, enhancing it with her own connections and through the valuable goods from Punt. She also expertly used the art and symbolic depictions of the period to further legitimize her reign, working within the conventions of her

29 Bickel, “Worldview and Royal Discourse,” 24–8.

30 Roger Dunn, “Hatshepsut: A Female King of Egypt and Her Architecture,” *Bridgewater Review* 20, no. 2 (2001): 10.

31 Laboury, “How and Why,” 85.

ethno-cultural limits to legitimize her distinctly unconventional rule.

In assuming power, Hatshepsut broke with royal tradition in naming herself pharaoh. This action led her to use both conventional and unconventional methods to validate and maintain her throne. Her rule was particularly prosperous and, despite much speculation, the consensus that she died of natural causes supports the idea that she was a highly competent pharaoh, as incompetent rulers, in the ancient world, were typically murdered.³² These facts did not protect her memory however; for reasons, such as fear of another female pharaoh, a later ruler, attempted to destroy her memory, erasing every trace of her being.³³ They failed in this attempt however—Hatshepsut is known and will continue to be studied and lauded. She is a bright symbol for many women today, exemplifying strength in the face of sexism and adversity and serving as a testament to just how powerful a woman can be.

32 It is postulated that Hatshepsut died of diabetes.

33 It used to be thought that, in a fit of vengeance, Thutmose III tried to erase Hatshepsut's memory; however, newer research suggests that Thutmose III did not in fact hate his aunt, and the desecration was caused by a later ruler.