Hatshepsut, King of Egypt

by S.L. Ager

In the last issue of *Labyrinth* we took a look at one of the most notorious families in Egyptian history: the Eighteenth Dynasty ruler Akhenaten, his principal wife Nefertiti, and their daughters. Nefertiti was evidently a queen of great influence and played an important role of her own in the royal family and the history of the period. Even so, she operated for the most part within the traditional bounds of queenly behaviour. Her chief function was as wife of the king and mother of his daughters.

Not so an earlier royal woman of the Eighteenth Dynasty. If some of Nefertiti's present fame springs from her conventionally feminine attribute of remarkable beauty, the fame of Hatshepsut rests on her very unconventional tenure as King of Egypt.

Egypt was ruled by monarchs for 3000 years, through a series of 31 dynasties, a series which came to an end in 332 with the conquest of Alexander the Great. In all that time, only four women ever held the supreme power, though many other royal women exercised authority in their own indirect way. Both before and after Hatshepsut other women occupied the king's throne of Egypt: Nitiqret (Herodotos's Nitocris) perhaps in the last days of the Old Kingdom; Sobeknefru at the end of the Middle Kingdom; and Twosret at the end of the Nineteenth Dynasty. But Hatshepsut truly stands alone in three millennia of Egyptian history. She, unlike the other three ruling women, was not the ephemeral last-ditch hope of an exhausted dynasty. Hatshepsut was on the throne for at least a decade at a time when the royal family and its hold on power were flourishing.

How did such a circumstance come about? Initially, of course, through a dearth of strong male heirs to the throne. Ancient Egypt was no more accustomed than modern Britain to the notion of granting the kingly power to a woman as long as there was a suitable man in the picture. Hatshepsut first appeared in the royal life of the Eighteenth Dynasty as eldest daughter of the ruling Pharaoh. She was destined to become a royal wife as well, but no one could have thought that these typically feminine roles would ultimately lead to the office of king.

Hatshepsut ("Foremost of Noble Ladies") was the daughter of Tuthmosis I and his queen Ahmose. By the time Tuthmosis died (in about 1518 BC), his two eldest sons were already dead. The youthful third son, Tuthmosis II, inherited the throne, but his youth made his position weak. It was therefore thought best that he be married to his elder half-sister Hatshepsut. Such incestuous marriages were the rule rather than the exception in Pharaonic Egypt, and served to consolidate and sanction royal power. In spite of Tuthmosis II's apparent ill health (he died in his early thirties), he clung to life for the next 14 years, ruling jointly with his sister-wife Hatshepsut. She was not his only mate, however: Tuthmosis had no male children with Hatshepsut, and sired his son and heir on one Aset, a woman of the harem. When Tuthmosis II died (about 1504 BC), the throne was theoretically supposed to pass to this male child, Tuthmosis III.

But obstructing the full realization of this plan was Hatshepsut, a woman who had been co-regent now for many years, a woman who had evidently discovered that she had the taste and capacity for power. It is perhaps one of the most remarkable facets of Hatshepsut's career that her grasp of the royal power was motivated chiefly through her own ambition. The extenuating circumstances that can be found are few and far between; in fact, they consist solely of the youth of Tuthmosis III. Hatshepsut, therefore, established her own claims very largely through the force of her own personality. Even during her joint reign with her brother-husband Tuthmosis II, she was clearly a queen to be reckoned with: "[Tuthmosis II] arose on his throne as king of the Two Lands [of Egypt] and ruled on the seat of the one who begot him. His sister, the god's wife, Hatshepsut, controlled the affairs of the land."

Such a woman was clearly not anxious to defer to a youthful stepson. By the second year of Tuthmosis III's reign, his stepmother Hatshepsut had begun to declare her intentions. Her official iconography begins to show kingly rather than queenly traits; reliefs depict her making offerings directly to the gods, a king's prerogative; and she is given the title "mistress of the Two Lands", an obvious parallel to the Pharaoh's title "king of the Two Lands".

By the seventh year (at least) of her stepson's reign, and perhaps before, Hatshepsut abandoned her persona as queen and transformed herself into a female king. The artwork on various monuments portrays her as a male (complete with beard), and she declares in inscriptions that her father had chosen her as his successor and had presented her as such to the court and the gods of Egypt. Her own divine birth was depicted on the walls of her mortuary temple, as any Pharaoh's would be. Hence even the god Amun had designated her as his heir, siring her on her mother Ahmose.

Hatshepsut could not possibly have established her unique position without some support. Some key members, at least, of the (male) bureaucracy must have been her adherents. Perhaps during the years of Tuthmosis II she had

proven her ability. One individual at any rate, Senenmut, was clearly the recipient of this unusual king's faith and friendship. He was steward to the king and tutor to her daughter, Neferure. Rumour had it that he owed this position to an "intimate relationship" with Hatshepsut, but this is difficult to determine, since it's typical of the kind of slander that would be levelled against a woman who stepped outside the bounds of convention as much as Hatshepsut did.

Her decision to pursue her ambition directly, rather than cloak it in a guise of "suitable" female behaviour, is more to be wondered at than the ambition itself. Hatshepsut was by no means the only royal Egyptian woman to feel the thrill inherent in the exercise of power. But she stands alone as a woman who demanded—and got—outright kingly authority. Perhaps one reason those around her were willing to accept her is that she apparently never considered taking the route that many regents in history have taken: that of murdering the legitimate heir. Without Tuthmosis III, of course, her own claim to power would have been considerably weakened. So Tuthmosis remained in the picture as her co-regent, giving his name to the regnal years; but it was Hatshepsut, crowned with a full royal titulary, who ruled.

If Hatshepsut treated her husband's son and heir Tuthmosis III with forbearance, the same cannot be said for the young Tuthmosis's attitude to his stepmother. Hatshepsut drops out of the record about 1483 BC, and some have thought that her unexplained disappearance (which must signal her death) suggests that Tuthmosis finally got tired of waiting and had this unnatural king killed. Those who think that Tuthmosis succumbed to the jealousies and hatreds springing from having his own ambitions thwarted for over two decades point to the *damnatio memoriae* which Tuthmosis carried out once he was sole ruler. The monuments of Hatshepsut the king were mutilated and defaced, and her name was omitted from the inscribed king lists.

Perhaps Tuthmosis III truly hated his stepmother, and did his best to wipe out her memory. But monuments of Hatshepsut in her more feminine, queenly roles were left untouched; and even the monuments of the kingly Hatshepsut were left alone for several years after her death. So perhaps even her stepson (grudgingly?) recognized her ability and authority, and it was only the inevitable and overpowering pressures to restore *maat*, the proper order of things, that eventually led to the obliteration of the memory of Hatshepsut the king.