

Was Hatshepsut a Successful King of Egypt?

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I. Introduction

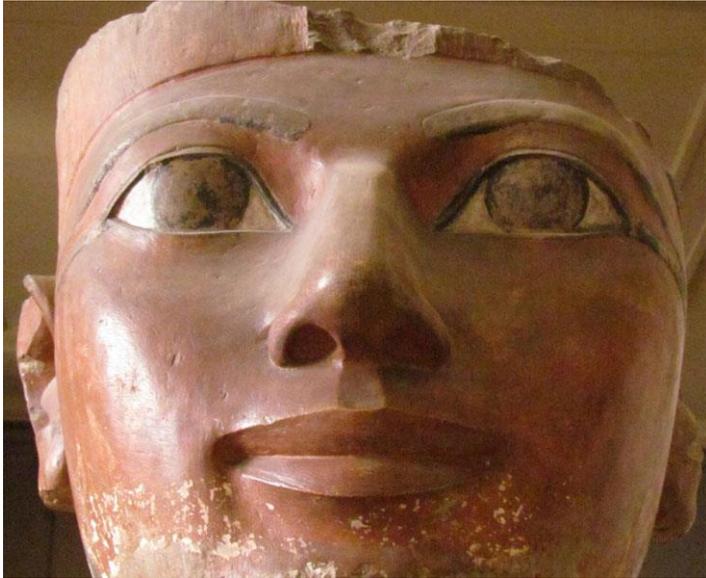


Figure 1 King Maatkara - Hatshepsut – Egyptian Museum (Author's own 2017)

As I will attempt to show in this Essay, Hatshepsut was indeed a successful king of Egypt. However, the fact that she, a woman, was a successful ruler of the Two Lands for 22 years, 20 or so of which as the senior king in a coregency with Tuthmosis III, her nephew and stepson, created a precedent that threatened to undermine the established ideology that Pharaoh must be a male (Wilkinson, 2010, p. 231 and Tyldesley, 1998, p.50). It is ironic and sad that despite her success as a female Pharaoh, the idea of a female king was conceptually difficult to accept for the religious establishment, and this was the reason that late in the reign of Tuthmosis III, there was a systematic attempt to erase any record of her *as a king* (Dorman, 2005, p.269). Her images as queen were left untouched (Cooney, 2014, p.273).

Hatshepsut was not the first or the last woman to sit on the throne of Egypt. Sobekenfru ruled for just short of four years at the end of the 12th Dynasty and Tawosret also ruled for about two years at the end of the 19th Dynasty. However, Hatshepsut was different. She did not rule briefly nor did

her rule mark the end of a dynasty. More importantly she developed the concept of a female king with all the attributes of kingship, including divine birth.

For Hatshepsut, being female was not an impediment to becoming a king. For her, once a woman was crowned, and through the coronation process itself, which transformed mere mortals into divine beings by uniting them with their royal *Ka*, she would become a king with all the attributes required for kingship even male attributes. On the walls of her temple to Pakhet known as the Speos Artemidos, we see this transformation with the utterance of Amun-Ra:

“O my beloved daughter Makere, I am thy beloved father. I establish for thee thy rank in the kingship of the Two Lands. I have fixed thy titulary.”

(Ibrahim, 1966, p.3).

Hatshepsut promoted the idea that her royal *Ka*, created on a potter’s wheel by the God Khnum was male, while her earthly form was female (Tyldesley, 1998, pp.103-105). In telling the story of her divine conception and birth on the walls of her magnificent mortuary temple *Djeser-Djeseru* (Holiest of the Holy) on the west bank of Thebes (modern Luxor) now known as ‘Deir-el-Bahari’, she portrays herself as a male child. As we will discuss below, far from being an affront to *maat*, this revolutionary idea was intended to preserve continuity of rule and stability, the very core of *maat*. At the time of her coronation Hatshepsut added two huge obelisks to the Karnak temple (which she had ordered some years earlier). Thus, she made a very strong statement.

“Only a king thus graced by gods could have achieved such a feat...The obelisks were evocative of masculine virility...but also of sunlight itself.”

(Cooney, 2014, p.105)

II. Successful Kingship and the Concept of *Maat*

In order to provide an answer to the central question that this Essay seeks to answer, we need to understand the criteria of successful kingship as defined by the ancient Egyptians themselves. For each criterion, we then need to evaluate Hatshepsut's performance as a king.

The primary function of an ancient Egyptian king was to maintain and safeguard *maat*. The term has been interpreted as 'justice or truth' (Tyldesley, 1998, p.8) and as 'the correct order of the universe' (Kemp, 1991, p.266). The concepts of order and stability represents perhaps the foundation of the ideology on which the Egyptian State was established (Kemp, 1991 p.20).

For ancient Egyptians, order, *maat*, the banishment of chaos (*isfit*) was critical:

“Uncontrolled chaos was dreaded more than anything else and a kingless period, which was by definition a maat-less period...”

(Tyldesley, 1998, p.8)

For the Egyptians this abstract concept was made concrete in the form of the goddess Maat a daughter of the sun god Ra, depicted with a feather on her head.



Figure 2 The goddess Maat (www.stillnessinthestorm.com viewed January 7, 2018)

A king was required to maintain *maat*. First by acting as intermediary with the Gods so that *he* (and that includes Hatshepsut) guarantees cosmic stability. The sun rises every morning, the Nile inundation continues regularly and is sufficient etc. Therefore, the King was the chief priest of every cult (Tyldesley, 1998, p.41). The second role in the Kingship duality, was more *secular* in nature. For Egyptians everything in the cosmos was interrelated, the gods were not separate from the world, on the contrary they personified all material elements and even abstract concepts as we have seen. Nothing was purely secular. The term ‘secular’ is not used here as entirely divorced from theology, but rather to denote the practical aspects of ruling the Two Lands and governing the institutions of the State.

III. Secular *Maat*

We can identify some important conditions required for maintaining secular order and stability: (i) unity and internal stability; (ii) protection of the borders and (iii) prosperity and wealth of the State.

III.1 Unity and Internal Stability

Egyptian culture developed, from the very early stages, a duality in world view. This is reflected in the concept of the Two Lands, Upper and Lower Egypt, the South and the North; the two crowns the White and the Red; the two protective goddesses Nekhbet and Wedjet; the black land along the Nile and the red land of the dessert etc. From the very earliest dynasties, starting with Narmer, the unification of the Two Lands and the maintenance of this unity was a critical role for a successful king. Two of a king’s titles confirm that *by definition he must rule the Two Lands*:



Figure 3 King's titles (www.purplepeacepapyrus.wordpress.com viewed January 7, 2018)

On the left in Figure 3 is an example of the NEBTI title He of the two Ladies (Nekhbet and Wadjet the two protective Goddesses of Upper and Lower Egypt) meaning Ruler of the Two Lands; and on the right an example of the title HE OF THE SEDGE AND THE BEE (symbols of Upper and Lower Egypt) preceding the King's prenomen meaning Lord of the Two Lands.

Hatshepsut came to power at the start of the Tuthmoside family rule early on in the 18th dynasty. Her father Tuthmosis I succeeded Amenhotep I, the son of the Great Ahmose, the unifier of the two Lands following the second intermediate period (Tuthmosis I was not Amenhotep I's son and was not directly related to him – although he may have been related by marriage). Hatshepsut (*Hat Shpswt* meaning '[at the]forefront of noblewomen'), was the daughter of Tuthmosis I. When she came to power as Queen Regent after the death of her half-brother and husband Tuthmosis II (c.1479 BCE), there was no immediate threat to the unity of the two Lands. Throughout her 20 years of coregency with Tuthmosis III, this internal stability continued without interruption. Tuthmosis II died quite young and only after three or four years on the throne. The only potential male heir was his son Tuthmosis III (from a lower ranked wife). Calculations based on the length of his rule, and his age at death, indicate that he was only a toddler when his father died.

We must appreciate that historically the end of a dynasty could lead to a power struggle, weakening the State and undermining *maat* (e.g. the end of the 6th and 12th Dynasties bringing about periods of disunity). Had Hatshepsut continued only as Queen Regent for her stepson, the death of

Tuthmosis III as a child before he could sire an heir (children and infant mortality was quite high) may have meant the end of the 18th Dynasty. By establishing herself as coregent, Hatshepsut substantially increased the chances of continuity for the Dynasty; which in fact continued for a further 150 years. Far from being a scheme for illegitimate usurpation of power undermining *maat*, this was an astute political maneuver intended to safeguard order and stability.

III.2 Protecting Egypt's Borders

Tuthmosis I expanded the borders of Egyptian hegemony well into the South up to the third cataract in the Nile and deep into the Near East, up to the river Euphrates. Throughout the Old and Middle Kingdoms, the King's military role was not in essence expansionist. With Tuthmosis I a tradition of expansionist aggressive military policy was established. Apart from empire building and associated prestige and plunder, this New Kingdom policy sought *to protect the borders* by aggressively pre-empting threats (Wilkinson, 2010, pp.223-227).

There is no evidence of Hatshepsut conducting aggressive military campaigns in the East. There is, however, evidence that points to a major military campaign in Nubia. Apparently, Hatshepsut's policy in trade and foreign relations was sufficient to maintain the safety of the borders in the East without the need for any military campaigns.

After Hatshepsut's death, rebellion did arise in both East and South, necessitating aggressive action by Tuthmosis III. This renders support to the view that Hatshepsut's presence on the throne was a stabilizing factor (Tyldesley, 1998, p.143). Moreover, Tuthmosis III commenced his campaigns almost immediately following Hatshepsut's death, which means that the Egyptian army was well maintained and equipped during Hatshepsut's reign.

III.3 Prosperity and Wealth of the State

While the lot of most Egyptians was to work and toil during what, by modern standards, can be described as short, unhealthy and hard lives, nevertheless, a wealthy State could at least guarantee some relief in case of low Nile inundation and any resulting shortage of crops that may lead to famine. Moreover, prosperity was of course very important for the priesthood and the middle and ruling classes who benefitted directly from any increase in wealth.

Hatshepsut's famous expedition to Punt in regnal year 7 with the fabulous products brought back, as depicted on the walls of Deir-el-Bahari, as well as the evidence of extensive trade in the Mediterranean and the Levant, are all signs of a wealthy and prosperous State.

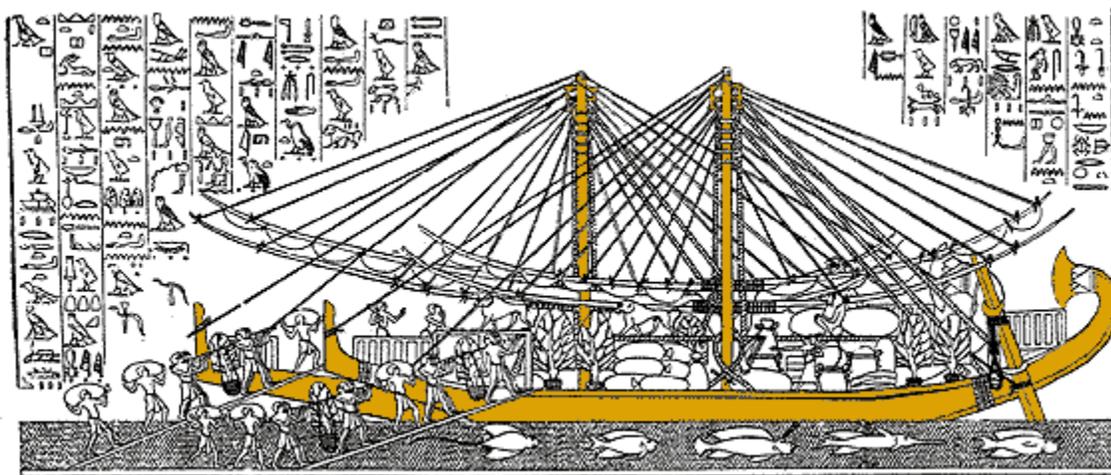


Figure 4 Loading of an expedition ship at Punt (www.judithweingarten.blogspot.com.eg viewed January 7, 2018)

Of no less importance were the many construction projects embarked upon by Hatshepsut. Architectural monuments played several roles. One role was to provide visible propaganda confirming the strength and wealth of the State (embodied in the king). The walls of such monuments also represented means of communicating ideas and messages to the people. For

example, the divine conception and birth of Hatshepsut were depicted in detail on the walls of Deir-el-Bahari was important to establish her right to assume kingship.

The extensive construction projects undertaken by Hatshepsut, apart from restoring the temples of the ancestors, included (this is not an exhaustive list) three pairs of obelisks, the magnificent Deir-el-Bahari temple, two temples to the goddess Pakhet in Middle Egypt, processional roads at Thebes, the Red Chapel and other additions to the Karnak temple.



Figure 5 Deir-el-Bahari, transcending time, as modern today as it was 3500 years ago (Author's own, 2010)

IV. The Gods - Cosmic Balance

The theological aspect of *maat* required that the king communicate successfully with the Gods. Thus stability, tradition and order at the cosmic level, just as the case with secular order, could be maintained. The king thus maintained and restored existing temples and established new ones.

Hatshepsut during her reign implemented an ambitious program of public works restoring temples of previous Kings. In Middle Egypt Hatshepsut established two temples for the goddess Pakhet (a lioness headed Goddess a local version of Sekhmet the embodiment of the fierce aspect of Hathor). The larger of these two temples is known by its Greek classical name of Speos Artemidos (referring to the Greek goddess Artemis). As mentioned earlier, she also made various additions to the Karnak complex, including the Red Chapel.

Deir-el-Bahari Hatshepsut's mortuary temple, as an architectural statement, did not only outshine all her other construction works, but is regarded by many, the author of this Essay included, to be one of the most beautiful buildings in the world, past and present. The ramps and terraced construction and the location of the temple were intended to confirm Hatshepsut as a legitimate king and a worthy successor to Montuhotep II, the 11th Dynasty King who united Egypt at the end of the first intermediate period (c. 2030 B.C.E) and whose temple was located just south of Hatshepsut's temple (Roth, 2005, p.147).

The king, as head of all the cults, was required also to fulfill the role of intermediary with the gods, through the celebration of rituals and festivals. Deir-el-Bahari's central shrine was dedicated to Hatshepsut's divine father Amun-Ra. The Temple was basically devised to receive the barque shrine of Amun-Ra during the 'Beautiful Festival of the Valley' when in a joyous procession Amun-Ra (as a statue in his barque) left his sanctuary at Karnak and proceeded to Deir-el-Bahari where he spent the night with Hathor. This was a festival of the dead in which the people of Thebes participated to make offerings to and honour their dead (Verner, 2013, p.265).

South of the middle level terrace there is a chapel dedicated to Hathor. Hatshepsut established a link with the powerful female mother goddess Hathor (Tyldesley, 1998 p.173), presenting herself as Hathor reborn (Arnold 2005, p.139). Hatshepsut's two temples in Middle Egypt dedicated to

Pakhet - a lioness headed goddess being a local version of Hathor – may lend support to this idea. Furthermore, the location where Deir-el-Bahari was built had been revered for a long time as a holy place associated with Hathor (Tyldesley 1998, pp.165-166). Hathor also plays the role of Hatshepsut's wet nurse in the story of Hatshepsut's divine birth engraved on the walls of Deir-el-Bahari.



Figure 6 Relief from Deir-el-Bahari showing the goddess Hathor in bovine form suckling Hatshepsut (www.godkingscenario.com viewed January 7, 2018)

It is understandable why Hatshepsut, a female king, was keen to venerate Hathor as the mother goddess personifying joy, love, music, fertility and the essence of the feminine. Hatshepsut emphasized Hathor's link with Amun-Ra through the Beautiful Festival of the Valley. Here perhaps was an attempt by Hatshepsut to further develop the New Kingdom theology, broadening the focus to cover both the male (Amun-Ra) and the female (Hathor) aspects of godhood and perhaps even kingship. The dual male/female essence of the divine, opening the door for divinely

born women with a male royal *ka* to become kings, could even be regarded as a reflection of the cosmic balance inherent in *maat*.

The promotion of the cult of Amun was an important theological feature of the New Kingdom. Amun (the hidden one) was an ancient god of Thebes, the city from which the 18th Dynasty kings originated. Kemp puts forward the theory that Amun, as Amun-Ra took over the position of the supreme god, as well as the myth of the divine birth of kings because Amun was more suitable, with his human form, as a divine counterpart for the kings of the New Kingdom (Kemp, 1991 pp.197-198).

Hatshepsut continued the promotion of Amun-Ra as King of the Gods. She made several additions to the temple of Amun at Karnak, and she dedicated the principal shrine at Deir-el-Bahari to Amun-Ra, her divine father. No natural or man-made disasters struck the Two Land during Hatshepsut's long reign. In terms of results, for an ancient Egyptian, the gods were not displeased and cosmic *maat* was certainly maintained.

V. Conclusion

There is no doubt, as discussed above, that as a king, Hatshepsut, was successful in fulfilling her duties. Hatshepsut ultimately failed to establish and develop novel theological concepts that would have legitimized the ability of women to be crowned as kings of Egypt. From our 21st century perspective we may feel that this was an unfortunate failure by Hatshepsut to establish some form of gender equality. But we should resist this modernistic perspective. Hatshepsut was a traditionalist. Gender equality as a general principle, was never her aim. She came from a tradition of strong ruling royal women (end of the 17th and beginning of the 18th Dynasties). She saw no disturbance of *maat* and tradition if these women could also become kings. From the perspective

of the ancient Egyptian view of kingship, the campaign against Hatshepsut, as king, had nothing to do with any failure in fulfilling her kingly duties. The campaign represented a response (albeit many years later) to the step that Hatshepsut took in promoting the role of these strong royal women beyond that of queens and up to that of divine kingship. Perhaps the rejection of this was inevitable in a society that eschewed change and regarded stability, tradition and continuity as sacred and holy.

The proscription campaign against Hatshepsut as king is not unlike the destruction of the cult of Aten following the death of Akhenaten. The difference of course is that if we apply the criteria of successful kingship as defined in this Essay, while we may safely conclude that Hatshepsut was a very successful king of Egypt, this conclusion would not apply to Akhenaten.

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B. Figures

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