Hatshepsut: A Master Of Politics And Dynastic Visionary

Hatshepsut broke tradition in a predominantly male dominated world and became a master of politics and dynastic visionary, eventually crowning herself as ‘King’ of Egypt during the 18th Dynasty. Her contribution to the ancient society during her matriarchal reign of nearly 22 years has undergone much scrutiny and opinionated observations over the course of time. Although, the impact and success she provided for Egypt during her reign is considerable when regarding her devotion to maintaining and exceeding Egypt’s military, economy and political achievements and successes. Her dedication to these sectors was something that ensured Egypt’s prosperity, vigorous growth and internal peace.

Egypt prospered under the reign of Hatshepsut, who, unlike previous rulers in her dynasty, was more interested in developing Egypt’s economy, building and restoring a magnitude of monuments and developing the ancient society’s trading relations with other countries (New York Times, 1983). Her travelling and trading expeditions were a key component in the success of the Egyptian economy during her reign.

A very notable achievement was the trading expedition to Punt in the 9th year of Hatshepsut’s reign, where many metals and other materials that were not found in Egypt were discovered and accumulated for the construction and adornment of the many beautiful temples and palaces that were built (Biography, 2019). Joshua Mark, a scholar of Egyptian history and retired professor of Philosophy revealed in an article that Punt was a partner in trade with Egypt since the Middle Kingdom, but until Hatshepsut, few expeditions were carried out to the country because they were very expensive and time-consuming.

Considering Hatshepsut could launch such a tedious and costly expedition is a testament to the prosperity of her reign. Many inscriptions and artworks were dedicated to immortalising the fabled accomplishment, and as portrayed in Hatshepsut’s mortuary temple (appendix 1), Egyptian soldiers are seen carrying a menagerie of exotic materials like myrrth, ebony, gold, electrum, incense, animals and many other items (National Geographic, 2019). This large-scale relief, previously only a collection of fragmented pieces, was treated and repaired in the Chemical Laboratory in the Egyptian Museum in the 1960’s (Millet, 1962, 55). Other details of the fractured relief reveal a scene that depicts Egyptian ships arriving at the distant land of Punt (appendix 2), where the landscape is scattered with beehive shaped dwellings on stilts and surrounded by their native trees (appendix 3) (Tyson, 2009). A modern illustration of the landscape scene suggests that Punt was a tropical land with a variety of lush trees and wildlife, a stark contrast to the Egyptian lands (appendix 4) (Holloway, 2018). This successful expedition was a significant campaign that enhanced her reputation as a female ruler.

Hatshepsut has been considered one of Ancient Egypt’s greatest rulers due to her many achievements, in particular the building projects that were carried out. The numerous monuments and building projects allowed for a large quantity of job opportunities to open up for the ancient Egyptian population. Also, a greater number of skilled craftsmen and artists were required, something that in turn boosted the economy. These structures were also an easy platform to express her economic and political agenda.

Hatshepsut continues to remain a perplexing figure in modern times, partly because, much like in her time of rule, there is still a lot of controversy and uneasiness about women striving for public power (Kara Walker, 2015). Hatshepsut had gone to extraordinary lengths to legitimise herself and the idea of a female sovereign during her reign, and despite her gender, she assumed the role as King of Egypt. Her assertion to the throne as Pharaoh was plagued with controversy, as she rose to a position of power and authority that was traditionally possessed by men. The extensive building programs and trading expeditions carried out by Hatshepsut were a platform for her propaganda campaigns. These would include her divine conception and male representation, which were integral in ensuring that her rule was one of peace and illustrate the lucrative nature of her reign.

Architectural depictions at Hatshepsut's mortuary temple are a testimony to her supposed divine birth and conception and act as propaganda to legitimize her right to the throne (Ritz, 2011). In order to 'secure' her position as ruler, Hatshepsut fabricated a coronation inscription (appendix 5) in her funerary temple that emphasises on her divine origin and birth, proclaiming her to be the rightful heir to the throne and encourages the people of Egypt to be loyal to her (Peter Dorman, 2010). This was accomplished by reproducing a supposed speech by the prestigious figure of Thutmose 1 that addresses the people and courtiers of Egypt in an audience hall, where he supposedly claims her to be the next Pharaoh (Galen et al, 2010).

A similar inscription in Hatshepsut's mortuary temple verifies her royal claims and describes the god Amun to be addressing 12 significant Egyptian Deities on his intention to father a daughter who will rule Egypt; 'We give her all life and good fortune on our part… She is at the head of all living Ka's together with her Ka as King of Upper and Lower Egypt on the throne of Horus, like unto Re, forever and ever.' (Shephard, 2009). Correspondingly, Hatshepsut presented herself as a direct successor to the god Ahmose, whose name was remembered by the Egyptians as their great liberator (Mark, 2016). This further strengthened her position on the throne and defended it against critics who could have claimed that she was unfit to rule in a traditionally male position.

The Punt expedition Hatshepsut commissioned was, as described in numerous inscriptions at Dier El Bahri, for purely trade purposes, not for the intention of conquest. It was made clear in the inscriptions that there were no deaths and there was an emphasis on the creation of peaceful relations between Egypt and its neighbors. The success and immortalization of the expedition reinforced her diplomatic, economic and trading competency.

Despite these numerous attempts to justify her legitimate (and fictional) ties to the throne as a capable candidate, Hatshepsut recognized that, in a patriarchal society like ancient Egypt, she would need the power of propaganda campaigns to help sway public opinions (Haley Millman, 2018). This led to the portrayal of her as a male pharaoh where, although the precise intentions are unknown, can be presumed to be to bolster her status and prove her strength as a ruler to be equal to that of previous male rulers.

Over the years, historians have radically changed the narrative and representation of Hatshepsut's life. The orthodox version of Hatshepsut's life was a highly dramatized perception, which ensued the brutal revenge and vaulting ambition of Hatshepsut, the wicked stepmother, who strove to steal the throne from Egypt's rightful heir, Thutmose lll (Corvan, 2019). In the early part of the nineteenth century, the common understanding and interpretation of Hatshepsut by historians was that she was aggressive and usurping, a perception that was

shaped predominantly by pre-feminist ideologies. This reaction from early male historians is a fearful response to a woman breaking gender roles and traditional appearances.

archaeologist Joyce Tyldesley wrote a modern analysis of the Hatshepsut debate and how many of the stories about her were predominantly shaped by gender. “Had Hatshepsut been born a man, her lengthy rule would almost certainly be remembered for its achievements; its stable government, successful trade missions and impressive architectural advances…instead, Hatshepsut’s gender has become her most important characteristic and almost all reference to her reign have concentrated not on her policies but on the personal relationships and power struggles.” (1996, 4).

Evidence of Hatshepsut’s remarkable reign (c. 1479-1458 b.c.) had not begun to emerge until the late 19th century, early 20th century, but until then, historians had crafted the very few known facts of Hatshepsut’s life into a soap opera of deceit, revenge and desire (Wilson, 2009). What was confusing to some scholars was Hatshepsut’s insistence on changing her physical appearance in artworks and statues to that of a male Pharaoh, with a male physique and the traditional pharaonic false beard and headdress (appendix 6) (Jeffery Lumb, 2004).

This representation was variously interpreted by historians as an outright act of deception or deviant behavior. Many early Egyptologists and historians also concluded that Hatshepsut’s elevation to a Pharaonic and godlike status was an act of pure ambition and power-hungry desires; “It was not long before this vain, ambitious, and unscrupulous woman showed...her true colors.” (Hayes, 2008). However, more recent research suggests that it was an act of political crisis, where there could have been a possible threat to rulership of the throne by a rival in the royal family, and to ensure her family’s assertion to the throne, Hatshepsut was obliged to become Pharaoh (Wilson, 2009).

Catherine Roebrig, the Curator of Egyptian art at the Metropolitan Museum in New York says that “Hatshepsut may have had to declare herself king to protect the kingship for her stepson.” The full story of Hatshepsut is likely to never be complete, as Hatshepsut and her life is “…like an iceberg, on the surface we know quite a lot about her. But there’s so much we don’t know.” (Tyldesley, 2011).

Hatshepsut was a remarkable ruler, and her time as a leader was spent building a legacy of peaceful trade, magnificent architectural and artistic feats and economic prosperity. Hatshepsut and her legacy have been a perplexing period of study for many scholars in the modern world, as she did not conform to any preexisting pharaonic norms. During her reign, she stayed dedicated to her role and remained a unique, strong female figure in the predominantly patriarchal society of Ancient Egypt even despite the controversies and backlash she received. This is something that has helped shape the way in which women in a position of public power are perceived.