World History Name:

Mr. Murray Date:

Hatshepsut, The King Herself Block:

Source: *The King Herself,* by Chip Brown, National Geographic (2009)

New Kingdom Egypt lasted from 1500-1000 BCE. The New Kingdom saw the reign of over 30 pharaohs (through the 18th, 19th, and 20th dynasties), including some of the biggest names most people are familiar with: Thutmose III, Amenhotep, Akhenaten, Tutankhamun (King Tut), and Ramesses II (known for having a multitude of wives and over 100 children). This group alone is full of big names with even bigger accomplishments. So it comes as a shock that one of the most significant rulers of the New Kingdom was a woman: Hatshepsut.

Hatshepsut was the extraordinary woman who ruled Egypt from 1479-1458 BCE and is famous today less for her reign during the golden age of Egypt’s 18th dynasty than for having the audacity to portray herself as a man. Today, Hatshepsut is covered in linen, raveled around her neck like a fashion statement gone horribly awry. Her mouth, with the upper lip shelved over the lower, is a gruesome crimp (she came from a famous lineage of overbites). Her eye sockets are packed with blind black resin, her nostrils plugged, unbecomingly, with tight rolls of cloth. Even still, she must have been a thing of beauty in her years of rule because it was of her that was written, “To look upon her was more beautiful than anything.”

Hatshepsut’s mummy was discovered in 2007, but her discovery brought up even more questions. In 1903, the famous archaeologist Howard Carter had found Hatshepsut’s sarcophagus (coffin, or tomb) in the 20th tomb discovered in the Valley of the Kings—KV20. The sarcophagus, one of three Hatshepsut had prepared, was empty. Scholars did not know where her mummy was or whether it had even survived the campaign to eradicate (erase) the record of her rule during the reign of her co-regent and ultimate successor, Thutmose III, when almost all the images of her as king were systematically chiseled off temples, monuments, and obelisks. But a search in 2005, led by Zahi Hawass, an Egyptian archaeologist, Egyptologist, and former Minister of State for Antiquities Affairs, seems to have finally solved the mystery of Hatshepsut. Hawass and his team of scientists zeroed in on a mummy they called KV60a, which had been discovered more than a century earlier, but was not thought significant enough to remove from the floor of a minor tomb for further examination. The mummy, after all, had no headdress, no jewelry, no gold sandals, and none of the treasures associated with other kings, like King Tut, who by comparison, was a pip squeak next to Hatshepsut.

Hatshepsut’s rule is an interesting one for sure. She seems to have been more afraid of anonymity than of death. She was one of the greatest builders in one of the greatest Egyptian dynasties. She raised and renovated temples and shrines from Sinai Peninsula to Nubia (modern day Sudan). The four granite obelisks she erected at the vast temple of the great god Amun at Karnak were among the most magnificent ever constructed. She commissioned hundreds of statues of herself and left accounts in stone of her lineage, her titles, her history (both real and concocted), even her thoughts and hopes, which at times she expressed with shocking honesty. Expressions of her worry were inscribed on one of her obelisks and still echo her insecurities with a sense of charm: “Now my heart turns this way and that, as I think what the people will say. To those who see my monuments in years to come, and who shall speak of what I have done.”

Hatshepsut came from a strong stock of leaders. It is possible that her grandfather, Ahmose, was the one who drove out the Hyksos invaders. Her father, Thutmose I was a formidable general. She was married to her brother, Thutmose II; they produced one daughter. A minor wife of Thutmose II, Isis, would give Thutmose the male heir that Hatshepsut was unable to provide. Thutmose II did not rule for long, and when he was ushered into the afterlife by what CT scans 3,500 years later would suggest was heart disease, his heir, Thutmose III was still a young boy. In time-honored tradition, Hatshepsut assumed effective control as the young pharaoh’s queen regent. She was to rule until the young pharaoh became of age to rule Egypt himself.

At first, Hatshepsut acted on her stepson’s behalf, careful to respect the conventions under which previous queens had handled political affairs while juvenile offspring learned the ropes. But before long, signs emerged that Hatshepsut’s regency would be different. Early reliefs show her performing kingly functions such as making offerings to the gods and ordering up obelisks from red granite quarries at Aswan. After just a few years, she had assumed the role of “king” of Egypt, supreme power in the land. Her stepson—who by then was probably fully capable of assuming the throne—was relegated to second-in-command. Hatshepsut ruled for a total of 21 years.

But why did she break with tradition? Her motives are still of question of historians. Was it a social or military crisis that forced her to rule? Were dynastic policies changing? Was there a divine intervention from the god Amun? Did she have an insatiable thirst for power? The kingship of Egypt was to be passed down from father to son, not daughter; religious belief dictated that the king’s role could not be adequately carried out by a woman. When her husband died, she chose to go by the title of God’s Wife of Amun, rather than King’s Wife.

Hatshepsut never made secret of her sex in texts. Her inscriptions frequently employed feminine endings. But in the early years, she seemed to be looking for ways to synthesize the images of queen and king. In one seated red granite statue, Hatshepsut is shown with the unmistakable body of a woman but when the striped nemes headdress and cobra, symbols of the king. In some temple reliefs, she is dressed in traditional restrictive ankle-length gown, but with her feet wide apart in the striding pose of the king. In her later years, she seemed to avoid the issue of sex altogether. She had herself depicted as a male king, in the pharaoh’s headdress, the kilt, and the false beard of Ptah—without any female traits. Many of her statues, images, and texts seem part of a media campaign to legitimize her rule as king. In one relief, she even depicted her father, Thutmose I, attending her coronation and urging her to be King. But who was this media campaign for? The nobility? High Priests? The gods? Political allies? The people of Egypt? The future? Most likely, it was the people, for that was a group she consistently referred to in her works.

After her death, sometime around 1458 BCE, her step-son Thutmose III went on to secure his destiny as one of the great pharaohs in Egyptian history. He too was a monument maker, but also a talented warrior who stood without an equal. Known as the Egyptian Napoleon, he led 17 military campaigns during his 19 year reign. But it is his destruction of Hatshepsut’s temples and monuments that most interests us. It appears as though he decided to systematically wipe his stepmother, the king, out of history.