



# NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC

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## The King Herself

What motivated Hatshepsut to rule ancient Egypt as a man while her stepson stood in the shadows? Her mummy, and her true story, have come to light.

By Chip Brown

Photographs by Kenneth Garrett

PUBLISHED April 2009

There was something strangely touching about her fingertips. Everywhere else about her person all human grace had vanished. The raveled linen around her neck looked like a fashion statement gone horribly awry. Her mouth, with the upper lip shelved over the lower, was a gruesome crimp. (She came from a famous lineage of overbites.) Her eye sockets were packed with blind black resin, her nostrils unbecomingly plugged with tight rolls of cloth. Her left ear had sunk into the flesh on the side of her skull, and her head was almost completely without hair.



I leaned toward the open display case in Cairo's Egyptian Museum and gazed at what in all likelihood is the body of the female pharaoh Hatshepsut, the extraordinary woman who ruled Egypt from 1479 to 1458 B.C. 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. There was no beguiling myrrh perfume in the air, only some sharp and sour smell that seemed minted during the many centuries she had spent in a limestone cave. It was hard to square this prostrate thing with the great ruler who lived so long ago and of whom it was written, "To look upon her was more beautiful than anything." The only human touch was in the bone shine of her nailless fingertips where the mummified flesh had shrunk back, creating the illusion of a manicure and evoking not just our primordial vanity but our tenuous intimacies, our brief and passing feel for the world.

The discovery of Hatshepsut's lost mummy made headlines two summers ago, but the full story unfolded slowly, in increments, a forensic drama more along the lines of CSI than Raiders of the Lost Ark. Indeed the search for Hatshepsut showed the extent to which the trowels and brushes of archaeology's traditional toolbox have been supplemented by CT scanners and DNA gradient thermocyclers.

In 1903 the renowned archaeologist Howard Carter had found Hatshepsut's sarcophagus 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 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. The search that seems to have finally solved the mystery was launched in 2005 by Zahi Hawass, head of the Egyptian Mummy Project and secretary general of the Supreme Council of Antiquities. Hawass and a team of scientists zeroed in on a mummy they called KV60a, which had been discovered more than a century earlier but wasn't thought significant enough to remove from the floor of a minor tomb in the Valley of the Kings. KV60a had been cruising eternity without even the hospitality of a coffin, much less a retinue of figurines to perform royal chores. She had nothing to wear, either—no headdress, no jewelry, no gold sandals or gold toe and finger coverings, none of the treasures that had been provided the pharaoh Tutankhamun, who was a pip-squeak of a king compared with Hatshepsut.

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A grand expression of royal power, Hatshepsut's mortuary temple rises against a desert bluff at Deir el Bahri. Reliefs in the porticoes record the greatest triumphs of her 21-year reign.

And even with all the high-tech methods used to crack one of Egypt's most notable missing person cases, if it had not been for the serendipitous discovery of a tooth, KV60a might still be lying alone in the dark, her royal name and status unacknowledged. Today she is enshrined in one of the two Royal Mummy Rooms at the Egyptian Museum, with plaques in Arabic and English proclaiming her to be Hatshepsut, the King Herself, reunited at long last with her extended family of fellow New Kingdom pharaohs.

Given the oblivion that befell Hatshepsut, it's hard to think of a pharaoh whose hopes of being remembered are more poignant. 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 the Sinai to Nubia. 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 confided with uncommon candor. Expressions of worry Hatshepsut inscribed on one of her obelisks at Karnak still resonate with an almost charming insecurity: "Now my heart turns this way and that, as I think what the people will say. Those who see my monuments in years to come, and who shall speak of what I have done."

Many uncertainties plague the early history of the New Kingdom, but it's clear that when Hatshepsut was born, Egyptian power was waxing. Her possible grandfather Ahmose, founder of the 18th dynasty, had driven out the formidable Hyksos invaders who had occupied the northern part of the Nile Valley for two centuries. When Ahmose's son Amenhotep I did not produce a son who lived to succeed him, a redoubtable general known as Thutmose is believed to have been brought into the royal line since he had married a princess.

Hatshepsut was the oldest daughter of Thutmose and his Great Royal Wife, Queen Ahmose, likely a close relative of King Ahmose. But Thutmose also had a son by another queen, and this son, Thutmose II, inherited the crown when his father "rested from life." Adhering to a common method of fortifying the royal lineage—and with none of our modern-day qualms about sleeping with your sister—Thutmose II and Hatshepsut married. They produced one daughter; a minor wife, 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 fashion, Hatshepsut assumed effective control as the young pharaoh's queen regent.

So began one of the most intriguing periods of ancient Egyptian history.

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 may have been fully capable of assuming the throne—was relegated to second-in-command. Hatshepsut proceeded to rule for a total of 21 years.

In a scene at Deir el Bahri, men carry a myrrh tree to Egyptian ships in Punt, a land still not clearly identified. Hatshepsut sent a trading mission down the Red Sea to procure luxuries there in about 1470 B.C.

What induced Hatshepsut to break so radically with the traditional role of queen regent? A social or military crisis? Dynastic politics? Divine injunctions from Amun? A thirst for power? "There was something impelling Hatshepsut to change the way she portrayed herself on public monuments, but we don't know what it is," says Peter Dorman, a noted Egyptologist and president of the American University of Beirut. "One of the hardest things to guess is her motive."

Bloodlines may have had something to do with it. On a cenotaph at the sandstone quarries of Gebel el Silsila, her chief steward and architect Senenmut refers to her as "the king's firstborn daughter," a distinction that accents her lineage as the senior heir of Thutmose I rather than as the chief royal wife of Thutmose II. Remember, Hatshepsut was a true blue blood, related to the pharaoh Ahmose, while her husband-brother was the offspring of an adopted king. The Egyptians believed in the divinity of the pharaoh; only Hatshepsut, not her stepson, had a biological link to divine royalty. Still, there was the small matter of gender. The kingship was meant 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. Getting over this hurdle must have taken great shrewdness from the female king. When her husband died, Hatshepsut's preferred title was not King's Wife, but God's Wife of Amun, a designation some believe paved her way to the throne.

Hatshepsut never made a secret of her sex in texts; her inscriptions frequently employed feminine endings. But in the early going, she seemed to be looking for ways to synthesize the images of queen and king, as if a visual compromise might resolve the paradox of a female sovereign. In one seated red granite statue, Hatshepsut is shown with the unmistakable body of a woman but with the striped nemes headdress and uraeus cobra, symbols of a king. In some temple reliefs, Hatshepsut is dressed in a traditional restrictive ankle-length gown but with her feet wide apart in the striding pose of the king. As the years went on, she seems to have decided it was easier to sidestep the issue of gender altogether. She had herself depicted solely as a male king, in the pharaoh's headdress, the pharaoh's shendyt kilt, and the pharaoh's false beard—without any female traits. Many of her statues, images, and texts seem part of a carefully calibrated media campaign to bolster the legitimacy of her reign as king—and rationalize her transgression. In reliefs at Hatshepsut's mortuary temple, she spun a fable of her accession as the fulfillment of a divine plan and declared that her father, Thutmose I, not only intended her to be king but also was able to attend her coronation. In the panels the great god Amun is shown appearing before Hatshepsut's mother disguised as Thutmose I. He commands Khnum, the ram-headed god of creation who models the clay of mankind on his potter's wheel: "Go, to fashion her better than all gods; shape for me, this my daughter, whom I have begotten."

Unlike most contractors, Khnum gets right to work, replying: "Her form shall be more exalted than the gods, in her great dignity of King. □..."

On Khnum's potter's wheel, little Hatshepsut is depicted unmistakably as a boy. Exactly who was the intended audience for such propaganda is still disputed. It's hard to imagine Hatshepsut needed to shore up her legitimacy with powerful allies like the high priests of Amun or members of the elite such as Senenmut. Who, then, was she pitching her story to? The gods? The future? National Geographic?

Abandoning the queenly attire of a regent, Hatshepsut came to adopt the classic regalia of a king. At left, she wears the royal headcloth of the pharaoh, yet softly rounded breasts and a delicate chin subtly suggest her female gender. As a sphinx (right), she displays the unmistakably male symbols of a lion's mane

One answer may be found in Hatshepsut's references to the lapwing, a common Nile marsh bird known to ancient Egyptians as rekhyt. In hieroglyphic texts the word "rekhyt" is usually translated as "the common people." It occurs frequently in New Kingdom inscriptions, but a few years ago Kenneth Griffin, now at Swansea University in Wales, noticed that Hatshepsut made greater use of the phrase than other 18th-dynasty pharaohs. "Her inscriptions seemed to show a personal association with the rekhyt which at this stage is unrivaled," he says. Hatshepsut often spoke possessively of "my rekhyt" and asked for the approval of the rekhyt—as if the unusual ruler were a closet populist. When Hatshepsut's heart flutters this way and that as she wonders what "the people" will say, the people she may have had in mind were the ones as common as lapwings on the Nile, the rekhyt.

After her death, around 1458 B.C., her stepson went on to secure his destiny as one of the great pharaohs in Egyptian history. Thutmose III was a monument maker like his stepmother but also a warrior without peer, the so-called Napoleon of ancient Egypt. In a 19-year span he led 17 military campaigns in the Levant, including a victory against the Canaanites at Megiddo in present-day Israel that is still taught in military academies. He had a flock of wives, one of whom bore his successor, Amenhotep II. Thutmose III also found time to introduce the chicken to the Egyptian dinner table. In the latter part of his life, when other men might be content to reminisce about bygone adventures, Thutmose III appears to have taken up another pastime. He decided to methodically wipe his stepmother, the king, out of history.

When Zahi Hawass set out to find Her Majesty King Hatshepsut, he was fairly certain of one thing: The naked mummy found resting on the floor of a minor tomb was not her. "When I started searching for Hatshepsut, I never thought I would discover that she was this mummy," Hawass says. For starters, she had no apparent regal bearing; she was fat, and as Hawass wrote in an article published in the journal KMT, she had "huge pendulous breasts" of the sort more likely to be found on Hatshepsut's wet nurse.

Firmly gripping the reins of power, Hatshepsut relegated her stepson, Thutmose III (left), to a supporting role. Reliefs on the walls of the Red Chapel at Karnak (right) hint at the

unusual nature of this arrangement. In a festival scene (above) she stands in front of him, but both are dressed as pharaohs, and the

Months earlier Hawass had visited Hatshepsut's tomb, KV20, to search for clues to her whereabouts. Wearing his trademark fedora, Hawass lowered himself 700 feet into one of the most dangerous tombs in the Valley of the Kings. The tunnel through friable shale and limestone reeked of bat droppings. When Howard Carter cleared it in 1903, he called it "one of the most irksome pieces of work I ever supervised." In the tomb Carter found two sarcophagi bearing Hatshepsut's name, some limestone wall panels, and a canopic chest, but no mummy.

Carter made another discovery in a tomb close by—tomb KV60, a minor structure whose entrance was cut into the corridor entrance of KV19. In KV60 Carter found "two much denuded mummies of women and some mummified geese." One mummy was in a coffin, the other on the floor. Carter took the geese and closed the tomb. Three years later another archaeologist removed the mummy in the coffin to the Egyptian Museum. The inscription on the coffin was later linked to Hatshepsut's nurse. The mummy on the floor was left as she was, as she had been since being stashed there, probably by priests during the reburials of the 21st dynasty, around 1000 B.C.

Over the years Egyptologists lost track of the entrance to KV60, and the mummy on the tomb floor effectively disappeared. That changed in June 1989, when Donald Ryan, an Egyptologist and lecturer at Pacific Lutheran University in Tacoma, Washington, came to explore several small, undecorated tombs in the valley. Prompted by the influential Egyptologist Elizabeth Thomas, who suspected that KV60 might house Hatshepsut's mummy, Ryan had included it on his application for a research permit. Arriving too late his first day to start work, Ryan decided to stroll around the site to drop off some tools. He wandered over to the entrance of KV19 and for the heck of it, thinking KV60 might be nearby, started sweeping the entranceway with his broom. He worked backward from the door of KV19. Within half an hour he'd found a crack in the rock corridor. A stone hatch revealed a set of stairs. A week later, with Beethoven's *Pathétique* Sonata playing on a tape deck, he and a local antiquities inspector entered the "lost" tomb.

A craggy bay in the Western Desert embraces Hatshepsut's mortuary temple. Behind its crowning ridge lies the great rift now known as the Valley of the Kings, the royal cemetery that holds the entrance to

"It was spooky," he recalls. "I had never found a mummy before. The inspector and I walked in very carefully. There was a woman lying on the floor. Oh my gosh!" The mummy was lying in a tomb that had been trashed in ancient times by robbers. Her left arm was crooked across her chest in a burial pose some believe to be common to 18th-dynasty Egyptian queens. Ryan set about cataloging what he found. "We found the smashed-up face piece of a coffin and flecks of gold that had been scraped off," he recalls. "We didn't know how much had been moved around by Howard Carter, so we documented it as an intact site." In a side chamber Ryan found a huge pile of wrappings,

a mummified cow's leg, and a stacked pile of "victual mummies," wrapped bundles of food laid up for the deceased's long journey through eternity.

The more Ryan studied the mummy, the more he thought she might be someone important. "She was extraordinarily well mummified," he says. "And she was striking a royal pose. I thought, Why, she's a queen! Could it be Hatshepsut? Possibly. But there was nothing to link the mummy to any specific individual."

Still, it didn't seem right to leave whoever she was lying naked on the floor in a mess of rags. Before he closed the tomb, Ryan and a colleague tidied the burial chamber up a bit. At a local carpenter's shop they had a simple coffin built. They lowered the unknown lady into her new bed and closed the lid. Hatshepsut's prolonged period of anonymity was nearing its end.

Hatshepsut's wet nurse (left), Hatshepsut (right).

Historians long cast Hatshepsut in the role of evil stepmother to the young Thutmose III. The evidence of her supposed cruelty was the payback she posthumously received when her stepson had her monuments attacked and her kingly name erased from public memorials. Indeed, Thutmose III did as thorough a job smiting the iconography of King Hatshepsut as he had whacking the Canaanites at Megiddo. At Karnak her image and cartouche, or name symbol, were chiseled off shrine walls; the texts on her obelisks were covered with stone (which had the unintended effect of keeping them in pristine condition).

At Deir el Bahri, the site of her most spectacular architectural achievement, her statues were smashed and thrown into a pit in front of her mortuary temple. Known as Djeser Djeseru, holy of holies, on the west bank of the Nile across from modern Luxor, the temple is set against a bay of lion-colored cliffs that frame the tawny temple stones the way the nemes frames a pharaoh's face. With its three tiers, its porticoes, its spacious ramp-linked terraces, its now vanished sphinx-lined causeway and T-shaped papyrus pools and shade-casting myrrh trees, Djeser Djeseru is among the most glorious temples ever built. It was designed (perhaps by Senenmut) to be the center of Hatshepsut's cult. Images of her as queen were left undisturbed, but wherever she had proclaimed herself king, the workers of her stepson followed with their chisels, the vandalism careful and precise. "The destruction was not an emotional decision; it was a political decision," says Zbigniew Szafranski, the director of the Polish archaeological mission to Egypt that has been working at Hatshepsut's mortuary temple since 1961.

By the time excavators cleared the debris from the mostly buried temple in the late 1890s, the mystery of Hatshepsut had been refined: What kind of ruler was she? The answer seemed self-evident to a number of Egyptologists quick to embrace the idea that Thutmose III had attacked Hatshepsut's memory as revenge for her shameless usurpation of his royal power. William C. Hayes, the curator of Egyptian art at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and a principal at the Deir el Bahri excavations in the 1920s and '30s,



wrote in 1953: "It was not long... before this vain, ambitious, and unscrupulous woman showed herself in her true colors."

When recent tests revealed that a tooth found inside a box with Hatshepsut's name (right) exactly matched a gap in the fatter mummy's jaw (left), the mystery of the lost pharaoh appeared to be solved.

When archaeologists discovered evidence in the 1960s indicating that the banishment of King Hatshepsut had begun at least 20 years after her death, the soap opera of a hotheaded stepson wreaking vengeance on his unscrupulous stepmother fell apart. A more logical scenario was devised around the possibility that Thutmose III needed to reinforce the legitimacy of his son Amenhotep II's succession in the face of rival claims from other family members. And Hatshepsut, once disparaged for ruthless ambition, is now admired for her political skill.

"Nobody can know what she was like," says Catharine Roehrig, now a curator in the same department once headed by Hayes. "She ruled for 20 years because she was capable of making things work. I believe she was very canny and that she knew how to play one person off against the next—without murdering them or getting murdered herself." Close to two decades after Donald Ryan rediscovered the location of KV60, Zahi Hawass asked the curators at the Egyptian Museum to round up all the unidentified and possibly royal female mummies from the 18th dynasty, including the two bodies—one thin, one fat—that had been found in KV60. The thin mummy was retrieved from storage in the museum's attic; the fat one, KV60a, which had remained in the tomb where it had been found, was transported from the Valley of the Kings. Over a four-month period in late 2006 and early 2007, the mummies passed through a CT scanner that enabled the archaeologists to examine them in detail and to gauge their age and cause of death. The CT results from the four candidate mummies were inconclusive. Then Hawass had another idea. A wooden box engraved with Hatshepsut's cartouche had been found in a great cache of royal mummies at Deir el Bahri in 1881; it was believed to contain her liver. When the box was run through the scanner, the researchers were astonished to detect a tooth. The team dentist identified it as a secondary molar with part of its root missing. When Ashraf Selim, professor of radiology at Cairo University, reexamined the jaw images of the four mummies, there in the right upper jaw of the fat mummy from KV60 was a root with no tooth. "I measured the root in the mummy and the tooth, and we found that they both matched," Selim says.

To be sure, the scientists have proved only that a tooth in a box belongs to a mummy. The identification is based on the assumption that the contents of the box are properly labeled and were once vital parts of the famous female pharaoh. And the box inscribed with Hatshepsut's cartouche is not the typical canopic vessel in which mummified organs are found. It's made of wood, not stone, and might have been used to hold jewelry or oils or small valuables.

"Some would say we have not found absolute proof," Selim says. "And I would agree."

Visitors to the Temple of Amun at Karnak can see firsthand how images of Hatshepsut as a virile pharaoh were chiseled away years after her death. The likely culprit was her stepson, who may have hoped to keep her blood relatives from using the images to support their own claims to the throne.

Still, Hawass asks, what are the odds that a box identified with Hatshepsut and found in a cache of royal mummies contains a tooth that exactly matches a hole in the smile of a mummy found next to the beloved nurse of Egypt's great female pharaoh? And how marvelous that the tooth was there to connect Hatshepsut's cartouche with a mummy. "If the embalmer hadn't picked it up and put it in with the liver, there is no way we would have known what happened to Hatshepsut," Hawass says.

Already the CT scans have changed history, dispelling theories that Hatshepsut might have been killed by her stepson. She probably died of an infection caused by an abscessed tooth, with complications from advanced bone cancer and possibly diabetes. Hawass speculates that the high priests of Amun may have moved her body to the tomb of her nurse to protect it from looters; many royalty of the New Kingdom were hidden in secret tombs for security. As for the DNA tests, the first round began in April 2007 and has shown nothing definitive.

"With ancient specimens you never have a 100 percent match, because the genetic sequences aren't complete," says Angélique Corthals, a professor of biomedicine and forensic studies at Stony Brook University in New York and one of three consultants working with the Egyptians. "We looked at mitochondrial DNA for the suspected Hatshepsut mummy and her grandmother Ahmose Nefertari. There is about a 30 to 35 percent chance that the two samples are not related, but I cannot emphasize enough that these are just preliminary results." Another round of tests may soon deliver a clearer verdict.

Last spring photographer Kenneth Garrett asked Wafaa El Saddik, director of the Egyptian Museum in Cairo, to review a list of Hatshepsut treasures he hoped to photograph for this article: a limestone sphinx of Hatshepsut from the ruins of her temple, the wooden box containing the tooth, a limestone bust of Hatshepsut in the guise of the underworld god Osiris. El Saddik came to the final item on the list: the mummified body of Hatshepsut herself. "You want us to remove the glass?" she asked incredulously, as if the mummy, long neglected, now possessed something unspeakably precious. The photographer nodded. The director shuddered. "This is the history of the world we're talking about!" she exclaimed.

Hatshepsut's obelisk, sculpted from a single block of granite, soars a hundred feet above the ruins of Karnak. Defying the attempts to erase her from history, it now stands magnificently as the tallest such monument in Egypt.

In the end, it was decreed that one of the panels of glass could be removed from the case in the Royal Mummy Room without jeopardizing the history of the world. Staring at what was left of the great female pharaoh as the lights were being set up, I found myself

wondering why it was so important to authenticate her corpse. On the one hand, what could better animate the astonishing history of ancient Egypt than the actual woman preserved in defiance of nature and the forces of decay? Here she was now, among us, like an ambassador of antiquity.

On the other hand, what did we want from her? Wasn't there something oppressively morbid about the curiosity that brought millions of rubberneckers to the Royal Mummy Rooms and made a fetish of the royal dead in the first place? The longer I stared at Hatshepsut, the more I recoiled from those unfathomable eyes and the suffocating fixity of that lifeless flesh. Most of us live by the lapwing creed that is the antithesis of the pharaohs' faith: ashes to ashes, dust to dust. It struck me how much more of Hatshepsut was alive in her texts, where even after so many thousands of years, you can still feel the flutter of her heart.

Chip Brown has written two books as well as articles for more than 30 national magazines. Kenneth Garrett's photographs of Nubian pharaohs appeared in the February 2008 issue.