

Study Questions: Divine Birth and Coronation Inscriptions of Hatshepsut

In ca. 1473 BCE, a woman named Hatshepsut was crowned the pharaoh of Egypt. Queens—typically mothers or wives of the king—were common in ancient Egypt, and there is strong evidence to suggest that women had ruled as sole pharaoh earlier in Egyptian history. Unlike previous female pharaohs, however, Hatshepsut was an effective king who ruled over Egypt for more than twenty years. She ruled powerfully during a time when the country was strong, and her actions, including international trade and military campaigns, strengthened Egypt's place as an international power. She was unique, however, in that she was depicted not as a queen but as a king; she used male titles, and images of her show a male ruler, despite the use of female pronouns in her texts. In order to justify her rulership, Hatshepsut commissioned an inscription detailing her divine birth and her coronation. In the history she wrote for herself, her mother was visited in the night by Amon, one of the chief gods in the Egyptian pantheon, and she was the result of that union. Thus, in her retelling, Hatshepsut's coronation made perfect sense; she went from possibly being seen as a usurper to being the legitimate heir to the throne. In later years, after Hatshepsut's death, Thutmose III and his successors went to great lengths to downplay her rule and erase the record of her name. Far from erasing her memory, the obscuring of her records has only highlighted the power that Hatshepsut wielded as a female pharaoh.

1. Why would it have been necessary at the time for Hatshepsut to establish divine origins?
2. Traditionally, female monarchs have faced difficulties their male counterparts have not had to face. Locate information about another female monarch or regent—one possibility is Empress Dowager Longyu, discussed in “Articles Providing for the Favorable Treatment of the Great Ching Emperor after His Abdication”—and discuss how female monarchs have dealt with such difficulties, including questions about their legitimacy.
3. Compare and contrast this document with “Mandate of Heaven: The Numerous Officers.” What similarities and differences do you see in efforts of early monarchs to legitimate their rule?
4. What role did Hatshepsut play in the expansion of the Egyptian empire? Why did the Egyptians at that time feel the need to expand that empire?
5. The question is often debated as to whether Hatshepsut was a feminist icon or an aberration in the history of Egyptian pharaohs. Which do you think she was? What evidence supports your view?