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Was Hatshepsut The First Female Pharaoh

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The Enduring Question: Was Hatshepsut the First Female Pharaoh?

The ancient sands of Egypt have yielded countless stories of power, divinity, and human ambition. Among the most captivating narratives is that of the female rulers who dared to wear the double crown. When we speak of women who ascended to the throne of the pharaohs, one name dominates the conversation: Hatshepsut. Her impressive mortuary temple at Deir el-Bahri and her successful reign, lasting over two decades, have cemented her place in history. Yet, a critical question persists for historians, archaeology enthusiasts, and curious minds alike: **Was Hatshepsut the first female pharaoh?**The short answer is complex, and the long answer takes us on a fascinating journey through lineage, political maneuvering, and the very definition of power in ancient Egypt. While Hatshepsut is undoubtedly the most famous and one of the most successful, she was not technically the first woman to rule the Nile Valley. To understand this nuance, we must explore her predecessors and the unique circumstances that allowed women to grasp the reins of power in a deeply patriarchal society.

Defining the Term "Female Pharaoh"

Before we can answer whether Hatshepsut was first, we must define what it meant to be a female pharaoh. The title of "pharaoh" was inherently masculine, linked to the god Horus. For a woman to rule as a sovereign king, she had to overcome immense theological and political barriers. She needed to be depicted with the traditional regalia of power, including the false beard, the kilt, and the crook and flail. This wasn't simply a matter of gender; it was a performance of divine kingship.

Several women in Egyptian history held power in various capacities, but not all of them were pharaohs in the truest sense. We can categorize them as follows:

- Regents: Queens who ruled on behalf of a young son, but did not take the full title or regalia of a pharaoh. They governed as "king's mother" or "god's wife."
- Usurpers or Co-Regents: Women who claimed the throne outright, often taking on full pharaonic titles and iconography. This is the category that includes Hatshepsut.
- Ruling Queens: A later, rarer occurrence where a woman held the throne as a last resort to preserve a dynasty.

With this distinction in mind, we can see that a "female pharaoh" is a woman who ruled as a king, not merely as a regent. This framework is essential for evaluating Hatshepsut's place in the timeline.

Early Female Rulers: The Case of Queen Merneith (1st Dynasty)

Long before Hatshepsut donned the false beard, there was Queen Merneith. Her name means "Beloved of Neith," and she lived during the 1st Dynasty, around 3000 BCE. Merneith was the wife of King Djet and the

mother of King Den. When her husband died, her son Den was likely too young to rule. Merneith took on the role of regent, but her case is particularly interesting.

Archaeological evidence, including a lavish tomb in Abydos (the burial place of early kings), suggests she held unprecedented power. Her name was found in a royal seal alongside the names of other kings. Some Egyptologists argue that she may have been the first female pharaoh, ruling in her own right, rather than simply as a regent. However, the evidence is inconclusive. While she was buried with the trappings of a king, including a large enclosure and sacrificial burials, she is not consistently shown with the full pharaonic regalia (such as the Horus name) in the way Hatshepsut was. She exists in a historical gray area—a powerful woman who likely ruled, but whose exact status remains debated. For this reason, she is often considered a regent rather than a fully acknowledged pharaoh by mainstream consensus.

The Sobekneferu Precedent: The First Clearly Acknowledged Female Pharaoh

Moving forward several centuries to the 12th Dynasty of the Middle Kingdom, we find the strongest candidate for the title of "first female pharaoh": **Sobekneferu**(also spelled Neferusobek). She was the daughter of Pharaoh Amenemhat III and the half-sister of Amenemhat IV. When Amenemhat IV died without a clear male heir, Sobekneferu stepped in to fill the void. Unlike Merneith, there is no debate about Sobekneferu's status.

She ruled for approximately four years (c. 1806–1802 BCE). In official records, she took the full five-fold titulary of a pharaoh, including the Horus name and the Nebty name. She is depicted on statues and reliefs wearing both the kilt and the symbolic regalia of kingship. While she sometimes appears with feminine features, she also adopts the masculine iconography of power. The Turin King List, an ancient Egyptian papyrus listing pharaohs, records her reign explicitly as a king. This makes Sobekneferu the first woman for whom we have unequivocal proof that she reigned as a pharaoh.

Her reign was short, and her legacy was largely lost to time until modern archaeology rediscovered her. She had no obvious successor, which led to the end of the 12th Dynasty. Yet, her existence created a powerful precedent. She proved that a woman could legally and theologically hold the throne. It is very likely that Hatshepsut, who came later in the 18th Dynasty, knew of Sobekneferu. The strong argument, therefore, is that Sobekneferu, not Hatshepsut, was the first female pharaoh.

Comparing the Reigns: Sobekneferu vs Hatshepsut

If Sobekneferu was first, why is Hatshepsut so much more famous? The answer lies in the scale and duration of their respective reigns.

- Length of Reign: Sobekneferu ruled for only about 4 years. Hatshepsut ruled for nearly 22 years. This longevity allowed Hatshepsut to complete massive building projects and establish a stable bureaucracy.
- Building Projects: Sobekneferu added to the pyramid complex of her father at Hawara and did some work at Heracleopolis. Hatshepsut, on the other hand, was one of the great builders of Egypt. Her mortuary temple at Deir el-Bahri is a masterpiece of architecture. She also restored temples damaged by the Hyksos invasion and erected obelisks at the Karnak Temple complex, one of which still stands today as the tallest surviving obelisk.
- Trade and Economy: Hatshepsut famously launched a major expedition to the Land of Punt (likely modern-day Somalia or Eritrea), bringing back myrrh trees, gold, incense, and exotic animals. This expedition was recorded in detail on the walls of her temple. There are no records of such large-scale expeditions under Sobekneferu.
- Military: While Hatshepsut is often portrayed as a peaceful ruler who built rather than conquered, evidence suggests she led military campaigns in Nubia and Syria. Her stepson, Thutmose III, became a great warrior pharaoh. Sobekneferu's reign shows little evidence of major military action, though she likely maintained stability.

In essence, Sobekneferu opened the door, but Hatshepsut walked through it and built a palace on the other side.

Hatshepsut's Rise: A Masterclass in Political Legitimacy

To fully appreciate Hatshepsut's achievement, we must understand her context. She was the daughter of Thutmose I and his Great Royal Wife, Ahmose. She married her half-brother, Thutmose II. When Thutmose II died, his son by a secondary wife, Thutmose III, was a young child. Initially, Hatshepsut served as regent—a role that had been filled by queens before. But around the seventh year of her regency, she made a bold move. She crowned herself pharaoh, adopting the full royal titulary.

Hatshepsut's propaganda was brilliant. She claimed that her father, Thutmose I, had intended her to be king. She also propagated a story that the god Amun had visited her mother in disguise and impregnated her, making Hatshepsut the divine offspring of the chief god. This theological claim was essential to legitimize her rule. She erected a great obelisk at Karnak, telling the people that she did so out of love for her father Amun, solidifying her divine connection. While she allowed Thutmose III to retain his position as co-king, she was clearly the senior partner for the majority of her reign.

Her reign was a period of peace, prosperity, and artistic renaissance. She is often considered one of the most effective pharaohs of the New Kingdom, regardless of gender.

The Erasure of Hatshepsut: A Deliberate Act of Damnatio Memoriae

One of the most intriguing aspects of Hatshepsut's story is what happened after her death. At some point during the later reign of Thutmose III (or possibly his son Amenhotep II), a systematic campaign was undertaken to erase Hatshepsut from history. Her images were chiseled off temple walls, her cartouches were defaced, and her statues were smashed or buried.

This "Damnatio Memoriae" (condemnation of memory) was not necessarily a personal vendetta against a woman. It was a political act to ensure the legitimacy of the male line. Thutmose III had been kept in the background for two decades. To solidify his own rule and that of his son, it was necessary to rewrite history, pretending that Hatshepsut had never been king. The irony is that this attempt at erasure is what has made her so famous today. When archaeologists uncovered her cartouches, they found them in deep relief or in obscure places that were missed by the defacers.

Other Contenders and Later Female Rulers

While Merneith and Sobekneferu are the two primary contenders for the title of "first," we must also mention others to complete the picture.

- Nitocris (6th Dynasty): Mentioned by the Greek historian Herodotus, she is a legendary figure. She is listed in the Turin Canon, but evidence for her historical existence as a pharaoh is scant and highly debated. Most modern scholars consider her a myth or a misinterpretation.
- Twosret (19th Dynasty): She was the last pharaoh of the 19th Dynasty. She was the wife of Seti II and regent for the young Siptah. After Siptah's death, she ruled as pharaoh in her own right for a short time (c. 1191–1189 BCE). Her reign was tumultuous and ended in civil war.
- Cleopatra VII (Ptolemaic Period): The famous Cleopatra was a Macedonian Greek pharaoh of the Ptolemaic dynasty. She was a skilled diplomat and politician, but she was a foreign ruler in a period when Egypt had been under Greek control for 300 years. She does not qualify as a native female pharaoh.

Each of these women faced the same fundamental problem: how to be seen as the living embodiment of a male god while being biologically female.

Women in a Patriarchal System: The Unique Egyptian Context

It is important to understand that while ancient Egypt was a patriarchal society, women had significantly more rights than in many other ancient cultures (such as Greece or Mesopotamia). Egyptian women could own property, initiate divorce, and engage in business. The concept of *Maat* (order, justice, truth) was central to Egyptian kingship. In times of crisis, when the male line was broken, a woman could step in to preserve *Maat* and prevent chaos. This unique cultural context made it possible for female pharaohs to exist, even if they were seen as exceptions.

The female pharaohs were often depicted with masculine bodies and regalia. This was not a denial of their gender; it was an artistic convention to show that they embodied the office of the king. Hatshepsut is famously shown wearing a kilt, a crown, and a false beard. In private, she likely dressed as a woman. The public image was about the office, not the person.

Conclusion: So, Who Was First?

When we ask, **Was Hatshepsut the first female pharaoh?**, the most accurate historical answer

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