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Upper Intermediate Student’s Book

Life

The king herself

Today she is in the Royal Mummy Rooms at the Egyptian Museum in Cairo, reunited at long last with her family of fellow pharaohs, with a sign saying she is Hatshepsut, the king herself (1479–1458 BC).

But in 1903, when the archaeologist Howard Carter found Hatshepsut’s sarcophagus in the Valley of the Kings, it was empty. Had her mummy been stolen or destroyed? The truth only came out a century later when Egyptian scientists positively identified a mummy called KV60a, discovered more than a century earlier in a minor tomb, as that of Hatshepsut. None of the treasures normally found with pharaohs’ mummies were with it. It was not even in a coffin.

For Hatshepsut, a pharaoh who did not fear death as long as she was remembered, the irony is great. As one of the greatest builders in one of the greatest Egyptian dynasties, she raised numerous temples and shrines. She commissioned hundreds of statues of herself and left accounts in stone of her titles, her history, even her hopes and fears. Inscribed on an obelisk at Karnak are the words: ‘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.’

But following her death, her successor and stepson Thutmose III set about erasing her memory, ordering all images of her as king to be removed from monuments and temples. At Deir el Bahri, at the temple designed to be the centre of Hatshepsut’s cult, her statues were smashed and thrown into a pit. Images of her as queen were left undisturbed, but wherever she proclaimed herself king, the destruction was careful and precise. Why?

Hatshepsut was the eldest daughter of Thutmose I and Queen Ahmose. But Thutmose also had a son by another queen, and this son, Thutmose II, became pharaoh when his father died. As was common among Egyptian royalty, Thutmose II married his sister, Hatshepsut. They produced one daughter; another, less important wife, Isis, gave Thutmose II the male heir that he longed for, but Hatshepsut was unable to provide.

When Thutmose II died not long after from heart disease, his heir, Thutmose III, was still a young boy. As was the custom, Hatshepsut assumed control as the young pharaoh’s queen regent. And so began one of the most intriguing periods of ancient Egyptian history.

At first, Hatshepsut acted on her stepson’s behalf, respecting the convention that the queen should handle political affairs while the young king learnt the ropes. But before long, she began performing kingly functions, like making offerings to the gods. After a few years she assumed the role of ‘king’ of Egypt, supreme power in the land. Her stepson was relegated to second-in-command and ‘the king herself ’ proceeded to rule for an amazing 21 years.

What caused Hatshepsut to break so radically with the traditional role of queen regent? A social or military crisis? A desire for power? A belief that she had the same right to rule as a man? No one really knows. Maybe she felt, as a direct descendant of the pharoah Thutmose I, she had a greater claim to the divine line of pharaohs than Thutmose III. At first she made no secret of her sex – in images her body is unmistakably a woman’s – but later she is depicted as a male king, with headdress and beard, standing imposingly with legs apart.

Her hieroglyph inscriptions have frequent references to ‘my people’ which suggest that she knew she had broken with tradition and wanted her subjects’ approval. Whatever their opinion was, there is no doubting the frustration of the king in waiting, Thutmose III. After Hapshepsut’s death, he took his revenge, wiping his stepmother’s reign as pharaoh out of history. But in the long term it is she, the King Herself, who has achieved greater fame.

coffin (n) /ˈkɒfɪn/ a box in which a dead body is place to be buried

commission (v) /kəˈmɪʃn/ to order and pay for something to be made

divine (adj) /dɪˈvaɪn/ related to god

heir (n) /eə/ a successor

Life