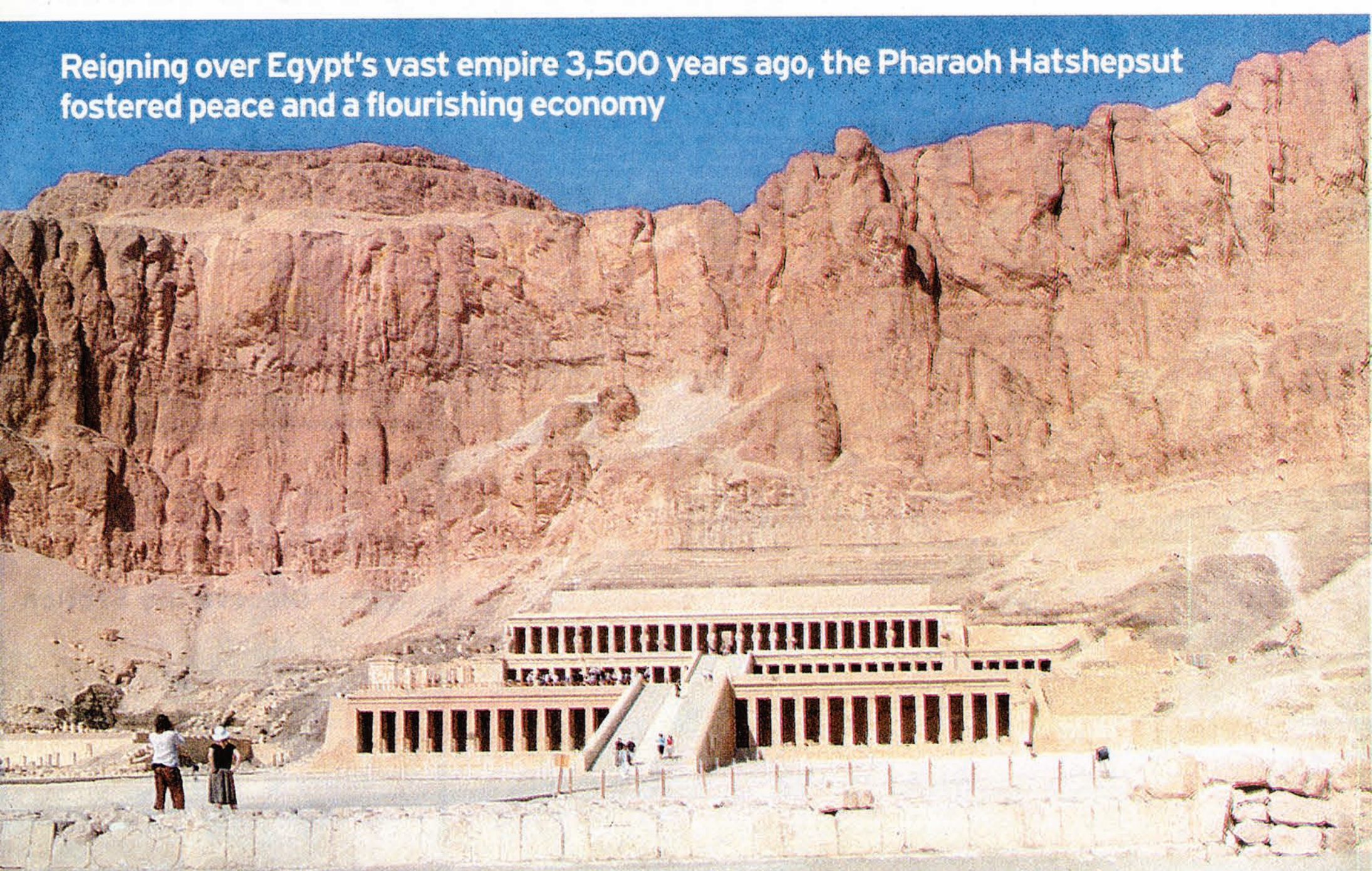


Reigning over Egypt's vast empire 3,500 years ago, the Pharaoh Hatshepsut fostered peace and a flourishing economy



Hatshepsut's most glorious architectural achievement, her mortuary temple Djser-Djeseru, was carved into the stark and rugged cliffs of Deir el-Bahri in Egypt.

BY BETH PARKS
SPECIAL TO THE NEWS

She was the daughter of a pharaoh, the wife of a pharaoh and the stepmother of a pharaoh. But did you know that she also held the title herself and was one of the greatest pharaohs in Egypt's long history?

Her name was Hatshepsut. Tour guides will tell you to remember her name by calling her "Hat Cheap Suit" or "Hot Chick Soup."

Hatshepsut was neither the first nor last female pharaoh, but next to Cleopatra, who held power some 450 years later, she was Egypt's most famous female ruler. She reigned in the New Kingdom's 18th Dynasty, a golden age during which Egypt's empire triumphed over most of the known world. Later in this dynasty came Amenophis IV, who later called himself Akhenaten, his wife, Nefertiti, and Tutankhamen, who was quite likely that couple's son.

Hatshepsut was born about 3,500 years ago, the daughter of King Thutmose I and Queen Ahmose, both of royal lineage. Hatshepsut married her younger half-brother, Thutmose II, a common type of union designed to preserve the royal line because women were thought to carry the royal blood.

One of Hatshepsut's two older half-brothers normally would have come to the throne upon the death of Thutmose I, but both boys died prematurely. Hatshepsut's young husband and half-brother, Thutmose II, thus ascended to power. Hatshepsut seems to have ruled jointly with him, but he died after only three or four years as pharaoh. His mummy reveals that he may have suffered from a skin disease.

Egyptologists disagree on whether the union of Thutmose II and Hatshepsut yielded any children. Some scholars attribute at least one daughter, Neferu-Re, to them, and some say the child died young. Some also speak of Hatshepsut's second daughter, called Merira-Hatshepset. All agree that Thutmose II produced a son, Thutmose III, by a commoner. Thutmose III would become the next pharaoh, but experts disagree on

A Queen in the Valley of the Kings

whether Neferu-Re or Merira-Hatshepset would become his wife.

Because Hatshepsut had descended from a line of influential queens and because Thutmose III was just a boy when he was declared supreme ruler, Hatshepsut took control of the Egyptian government. She at first presented herself as the boy's regent, but within a few years had herself declared as pharaoh in her own right.

Hatshepsut's strategy for snagging the title of pharaoh was both gutsy and brilliant. First, she convinced Egyptians that the god Amon Ra had come to Queen Ahmose as Thutmose I when Hatshepsut was conceived, making her the daughter of the chief god. Second, she claimed that her father

appointed her as true king instead of her half-brothers.

Then, blessed with charisma, political astuteness, her own propaganda and the support of powerful and loyal government officials, Hatshepsut began a gradual physical transformation toward the appearance of a male pharaoh. She had herself depicted with a false beard, traditional kilt, royal crown and pharaonic headdress replete with the cobra emblem.

Hatshepsut ruled for about 20 years. Egypt's economy flourished under her leadership and she devoted herself to both administration and commerce. Her reign was characterized as peaceful, although she maintained military control. She also dis-

patched a fleet of ships to the mysterious land of Punt near what is thought to be present-day Somalia in East Africa. There, she traded for such goods as frankincense, myrrh, ebony, ivory, gold, resins and wild animals that included monkeys and baboons.

Hatshepsut was famed for her outstanding building projects. These included renovations of the portions of the great temple of Karnak and the construction of obelisks dedicated to her at Karnak. Other ventures included small temples, vast numbers of statues and a tomb for herself and her father in the Valley of the Kings.

Hatshepsut's most glorious achievement, her mortuary temple Djser-Djeseru, was carved into the stark and rugged cliffs of Deir el-Bahri. Strategically placed on the west bank of the Nile, where a passage could be cut from the Valley of the Kings, this remarkably beautiful temple lies on a direct line from Karnak on the Nile's east bank. The temple was designed by Hatshepsut's architect Senmut, a trusted adviser, holder of numerous titles, and thought by some to have been her lover.

Unfortunately for historians, many of Hatshepsut's images were later mutilated. Her name was typically scratched out and replaced by that of Thutmose III. Although some scholars believe that Thutmose III hated his stepmother and had her murdered, others believe that he simply asserted his own importance later in his reign or that early Coptic Christians played a role in defacing her artifacts. In any case, her rule ended about 1458 B.C. and much of what was known of her slipped into obscurity. Her mummy has never been identified.

Because existing images, hieroglyphics and dates are subject to interpretation, scholars may never agree on names, relationships or events. But if you have the chance, as I recently did, be sure to visit Hatshepsut's temple at Deir el-Bahri. As you stand in awe of this architectural marvel carved into the tawny cliffs, ponder the mysteries of Hatshepsut, the queen who would be king.

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