



MYTHOPOUCH

RETELLING

Hatshepsut's Divine Birth

The inscriptions at Deir el-Bahari

A modern educational version for readers aged 15 and up

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Chapter 1: The Walls at Deir el-Bahari

On the middle terrace of Hatshepsut's mortuary temple at Deir el-Bahari, a sequence of reliefs and inscriptions tells an extraordinary story about the birth of Egypt's future female pharaoh.

The scenes occupy the northern half of the middle colonnade. They present Hatshepsut's birth not simply as a royal family event, but as something planned by the gods before she entered the world. Amun chooses her mother, Queen Ahmose. He fathers the child. Khnum fashions Hatshepsut and her ka. Divine beings attend the birth, receive the newborn and nourish her. From the beginning, the language of the inscriptions points towards kingship.

This is royal theology expressed through stone and image. The purpose is not to give a modern biography of Hatshepsut's birth. It presents her existence and future rule as part of the divine order.

The idea itself was not invented from nothing for Hatshepsut. Egyptian kings had long been called sons of the sun god, and traditions of divine royal birth were already known. What makes the Deir el-Bahari sequence remarkable is how completely the idea is shown and applied to Hatshepsut. Closely related scenes were later used for the divine birth of Amenhotep III at Luxor.

Chapter 2: Amun in the Queen's Chamber

The story begins among the gods.

Amun sits before a council of deities and announces the future power of the child. Although much of the inscription was already damaged when it was recorded, part of his promise survives: the Two Lands will be united for her, and lands and countries will be placed under her authority.

Amun then consults Thoth. The surviving words identify Ahmose, wife of King Thutmose I, as the woman who will bear the child.

Amun goes to her.

The inscription says that he assumes the appearance of her husband, Thutmose I. Queen Ahmose is sleeping in her palace when she wakes to the fragrance of the god. The scene is not merely symbolic courtship. Breasted's translation makes the sexual nature of the encounter explicit. Amun reveals himself in divine form, and the queen receives him.

Afterwards Amun announces the child who has been conceived. He names her Khnemet-Amun-Hatshepsut and declares that she will exercise kingship in the land.

Before Hatshepsut has been born, the inscription has therefore already given her three things: a divine father, a royal identity and a promised future as ruler.

Chapter 3: The Potter's Wheel

Amun next summons Khnum, the creator god traditionally shown as a ram-headed potter.

He commands Khnum to make his daughter together with her ka, the vital spiritual counterpart that accompanies a person through life and beyond death. Amun promises the unborn Hatshepsut life, stability, joy, offerings and royal authority.

Khnum agrees.

On his potter's wheel he fashions two small figures: Hatshepsut and her ka. The goddess Heket kneels nearby and extends the sign of life towards them.

Khnum's words leave little doubt about the intended destiny of the child. He gives Hatshepsut life, health, lands, peoples, offerings and food. He declares that she will appear upon the throne of Horus

and shine as King of Upper and Lower Egypt.

The scene carries an interesting trace of the artistic tradition from which it was made. Breasted observed that the little figures themselves were drawn according to the conventional model of male royal children, yet the accompanying Egyptian grammar refers to Hatshepsut as female. The artists were using an established royal birth pattern for a daughter who was being prepared for kingship.

Chapter 4: The Right to Both Lands

The sequence now moves from creation to birth.

Thoth appears before Queen Ahmose, although the surviving inscriptions around their meeting preserve little more than titles and praise. Then Khnum and Heket take the queen by the hands and lead her towards the place of birth. Other deities accompany them, with Amun at the head of the divine company.

In the birth scene Ahmose is shown holding the newborn child. Divine midwives reach towards her. Among the gods and goddesses associated with the scene are Isis, Nephthys and Meskhenet, goddess of birth. Bes and Taweret, both strongly connected with childbirth and protection, also appear.

The newborn Hatshepsut is then brought before her divine father. Hathor presents the child to Amun, who welcomes her as the part that has come forth from him and speaks of her taking the Two Lands upon the throne of Horus.

The next scenes turn to nourishment. Hatshepsut and her ka are suckled by cow-headed Hathors, while Hathor cows below also nurse the child and her spiritual double.

This is not yet Hatshepsut's coronation. Breasted treats the coronation as a separate sequence beginning after the divine-birth cycle. Here the point is that the newborn child has been created, protected, recognised and nourished by the gods as someone destined for kingship.

Chapter 5: Why the Story Was Carved

Hatshepsut already possessed genuine royal ancestry.

She was the daughter of King Thutmose I and Queen Ahmose. She later became the principal wife of her half-brother Thutmose II. After his death, the young Thutmose III became king, and Hatshepsut initially governed as his regent. She later assumed full pharaonic titles and ruled as senior co-ruler alongside him.

The divine-birth story should therefore not be read as an attempt to invent a royal family connection that Hatshepsut did not possess. She was already a king's daughter.

Instead, the reliefs place her kingship within the strongest religious language available to Egyptian monarchy. Her father is not only Thutmose I. At the divine level, her father is Amun himself. Her body and ka are formed at his command. Her future rule is announced before her birth. The gods attend her arrival, and Amun receives her as his daughter.

For a woman assuming the full office of pharaoh, this gave her kingship an especially powerful divine framework. The message was that Hatshepsut's rule belonged within maat, the ordered world of gods and kings, because the gods themselves had planned it.

Chapter 6: What the Reliefs Look Like

The story is told as a sequence of scenes rather than as one continuous written narrative.

Gods and royal figures sit, stand, walk, receive one another and pass the child from one divine setting to another. Hieroglyphic inscriptions identify the participants and preserve speeches, titles and promises. The viewer follows the sequence from the council of the gods, through conception and creation, to birth, presentation and nursing.

Not every surviving scene is complete. Some speeches survive only in fragments. In other places the image tells us more than the remaining text.

The conventional nature of the artwork is particularly revealing. Breasted pointed out that the figures representing the unborn Hatshepsut and her ka were fashioned according to traditional male-child models, even though the surrounding language is feminine. That does not mean the temple was attempting to disguise Hatshepsut's sex. It shows that Egyptian artists were adapting an established royal visual language to an unusual royal subject.

The divine-birth sequence therefore combines something traditional with something exceptional: familiar imagery of divine kingship used to proclaim the destiny of Hatshepsut.

Chapter 7: How the Text Reached English

The modern recovery of the story began with the excavation and recording of Hatshepsut's temple.

Édouard Naville and the Egypt Exploration Fund worked at Deir el-Bahari from the 1890s and published the birth reliefs in *The Temple of Deir el Bahari*. His plates preserved the scenes and inscriptions in scholarly form.

James Henry Breasted then published an English translation and commentary in 1906 in Volume II of *Ancient Records of Egypt*. His section titled "The Birth of Queen Hatshepsut" covers §§187-212, pages 75-86.

The condition of the Deir el-Bahari inscriptions created difficulties. Where parts of Hatshepsut's sequence were badly damaged, Breasted compared them with the closely related divine-birth reliefs of Amenhotep III at Luxor. He used those parallels cautiously to help understand missing or damaged passages.

That means the English witness is not simply a modern storyteller filling gaps. It is an early scholarly attempt to bring together the surviving Deir el-Bahari evidence and its ancient Egyptian parallels.

Chapter 8: What Survives

The divine-birth sequence has not survived untouched.

Images and inscriptions connected with Hatshepsut were later altered or erased. Amun's name and figure also suffered destruction during the religious changes associated with Akhenaten. Later restorations sometimes cut new inscriptions across already damaged ancient text.

The result is a monument with several layers of history written over one another.

Yet the central sequence remains recoverable. Amun plans the child. Thoth identifies Ahmose. Amun comes to the queen in the form of Thutmose I. Hatshepsut is conceived. Khnum forms her and her ka. Heket gives life. Ahmose is led to childbirth. Divine beings attend the birth. Hathor presents the child to Amun. The newborn and her ka are nursed, and the gods continue to prepare her future.

The cycle ends before the coronation narrative begins.

That distinction matters. The divine-birth inscriptions do not tell the whole story of Hatshepsut's rise to power. They do something more specific: they place the beginning of her life inside a divine plan.

Before Hatshepsut rules Egypt, before she takes the crowns and before she stands as pharaoh, the temple has already given its answer to the question of why she belongs on the throne.

Amun intended it.

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The public-domain English witness used for checking is James Henry Breasted, *Ancient Records of Egypt: Historical Documents from the Earliest Times to the Persian Conquest*, Volume II: The Eighteenth Dynasty (1906), "The Birth of Queen Hatshepsut," §§187-212, pp. 75-86. Breasted's work draws upon Édouard Naville's publication of the Deir el-Bahari reliefs.

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