

# Makeover for Hatshepsut

A fresh assessment of excavatory records sheds new light on Egypt's most successful female pharaoh. Franz Lidz reports

In the 1920s, while excavating for tombs at Deir el-Bahri in Luxor, Egypt, archaeologists were confronted with a baffling crime scene — thousands of smashed statues and desecrated reliefs of Hatshepsut, one of ancient Egypt's few, and most successful, female pharaohs.

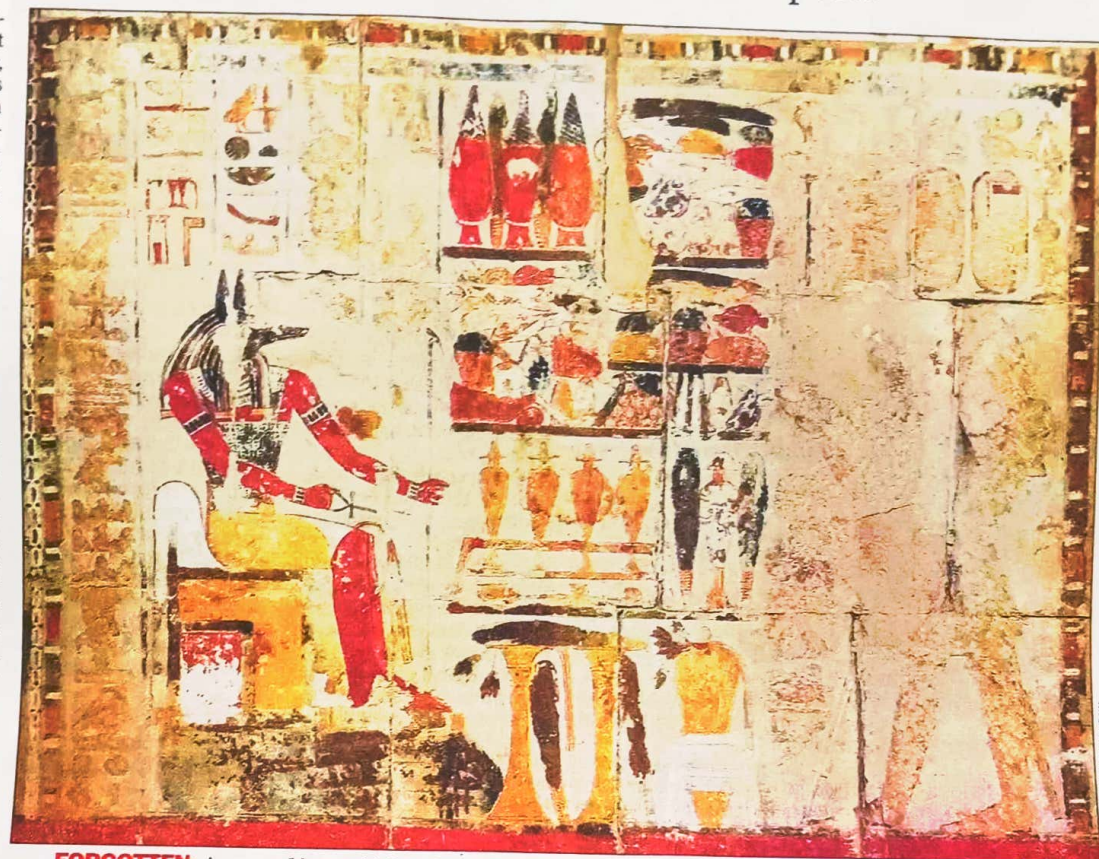
In 15th century BCE, Hatshepsut, the daughter of pharaoh Thutmose I, had carried out one of antiquity's most audacious power plays. After the sudden death of her husband-brother, Thutmose II, she appointed herself regent for her young stepson, Thutmose III, a child born of a lesser queen. Several years into the regency, Hatshepsut (pronounced hat-SHEP-soot) seized the throne; she ruled for nearly two decades, cementing her legitimacy by cultivating the persona of a living god and styling herself Lord of the Two Lands.

Scholars of the 19th and early 20th century typically portrayed her as a wicked stepmother. Egyptologists initially maintained that Thutmose III, who succeeded Hatshepsut, ordered the destruction after her death in a fit of spiteful erasure. But by the 1960s, the breakage was attributed to an orchestrated programme initiated some 25 years later.

But lately, Hatshepsut has been receiving a reputational makeover, reimagined by scholars as a masterful diplomat whose reign was one of artistic innovation and economic growth. A recent study in the journal *Antiquity* further softens her image.

Jun Yi Wong, a doctoral candidate in Egyptology at the University of Toronto in Canada, reassessed decades of excavation records, including unpublished notes, photographs and field reports. He concluded that some of the damage to Hatshepsut's statues was not the handiwork of Thutmose III, and that the actions Thutmose III did take were less brutal than previously assumed.

Building on other recent scholarship, Wong proposed that Thutmose III's demolition of Hatshepsut's statuary was a ritualistic "deactivation" intended to nullify her spiritual power, rather than vendetta. By breaking the statues at specific points — the neck, waist and knees — Thutmose III aimed to



**FORGOTTEN:** An erased image (right) of Hatshepsut, on a wall of her temple at Deir el-Bahri in Luxor, Egypt

neutralise the inherent clout of these images before they were jettisoned.

The statuary of other kings, most of whom were not known to have suffered persecution, was treated similarly, Wong noted. Many sculptures of Hatshepsut were later repurposed as raw material, causing additional damage that obscured the nature of Thutmose III's actions.

By 2014, when Wong became interested in Hatshepsut, Egyptologists had long abandoned the dramatic narrative of a scorned stepson in favour of a colder, bureaucratic analysis. Scholars were split, increasingly interpreting the *damnatio memoriae* as a desperate attempt to legitimise a male heir, or a correction against a woman who had governed too effectively.

Wong spent more than two years studying the erasure of Hatshepsut's reliefs at her mortuary temple at Deir el-Bahri. But the shattered remnants of her statues posed an entirely different challenge — they resembled a chaotic puzzle that refused to be solved.

Eventually, he made a

## HER STORY

- Fourteen centuries before Cleopatra, Hatshepsut upended the patriarchal norms of the Nile region
- Some evidence implied that to cement her authority, she married off her daughter, Neferure, to Thutmose III
- Hatshepsut commissioned a series of statues and relief carvings that blended feminine subtlety with the muscular authority of a male monarch
- She established a stable era of prosperity and cultural significance, and a durable foundation for the New Kingdom
- By reviving long-lost trade routes she built the financial bedrock of the 18th dynasty
- Yet the remnants of her tenure were not simply forgotten; they seemed to have been vandalised in an attempt to scrub the memory of a dead monarch fallen out of favour.

breakthrough by applying the principles of taphonomy — the study of how artefacts are altered and deposited. Because most of the statues had not been buried after their disposal, they became

a convenient source of stone material in the centuries that followed.

Treating the temple grounds like a prehistoric kill site, he saw that regularly shaped bits of the statues — the most useful parts for reuse — were consistently missing. What had initially looked like a mess of mangled faces and torsos was actually the dross of an ancient recycling operation.

By reconstructing the findspots of the statues, Wong found that those with intact faces tended to be the least affected by reuse. This suggested that the wreckage caused by Thutmose III was far more limited — the statues had been deactivated, but their faces had been spared from harm.

"Much of the significant damage only occurred during the repurposing of material," Wong said.

Moreover, Wong's analysis of the two-dimensional images within Hatshepsut's temple unearthed a layered narrative that upends long-held Egyptological hypotheses and indicates that some of the modifications attributed to Thutmose III were carried out more than a century later.

When the radical mon-

otheism of the pharaoh Akhenaten swept through Egypt, the names and images of traditional gods were chiselled from history. This religious revolution did not last, and subsequent kings soon restored the traditional deities.

But the artisans restoring Hatshepsut's mortuary temple after this upheaval faced a twofold challenge. They had to repair Akhenaten's religious erasures while also navigating the jagged, intentional voids left by Thutmose III. Some artists replaced the damaged images of Hatshepsut with those of male kings. Misattributed to Thutmose III, these alterations have long skewed our understanding of Hatshepsut's persecution, Wong said.

Although Thutmose III did replace some of Hatshepsut's images, Wong argued that his campaign was a targeted, strategic edit, as changes were concentrated in areas where key festivals and processions took place. The temple's evolution reflects a practical effort to keep sacred spaces relevant for those events.