

THE TEMPLES AT WEST THEBES

MEDINAT HABU & HAPSHEPSUT: DAY TO DAY LIFE IN ANCIENT EGYPT

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Visiting the impressive temple complexes of Luxor and Karnak is a full day's tourist work and exhausting, but you ain't seen even half of it yet! West Thebes on the other side of the Nile is certainly another highlight. Especially recommended is the hot air balloon trip at sunrise. You will experience breathtaking views and be able to take unforgettable pictures from above which will be much better than what Google Earth can offer.

This side of the Nile is home to the two most famous necropolis, the Valley of Kings – *Biban el-Moluk*, and the Valley of Queens – *Biban el-Harim*.

In addition there are more than a dozen major palaces and funerary temples, some of which we are going to explore in more detail. But let's first take a step back and look at the typical Egyptian architecture and temple layout 4,000 years ago.

Architecture & Temple Lay-out

Egyptians loved set rules and objected to any change to keep the balance, which they called *maat*, and their many gods' happiness. So temple lay-out didn't change over thousands of years. So what were the standards used by ancient Egyptian architects to construct a perfect temple complex? First they started with high mud brick perimeter walls to make temples invisible for the public.

A long sphinx lined alley was leading to the first pylon entrance gate, which used to be the highest structure of any building. This gate was always closed by double wing metal doors depicting the respective temple deity worshipped at the temple.

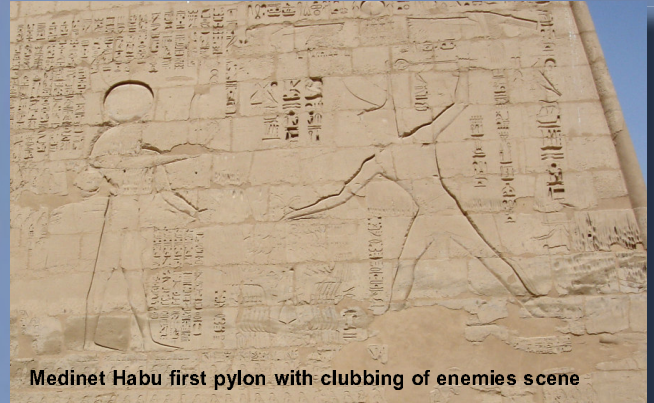
In front of the pylon wall, four massive wooden masts surpassing it in heights carried four coloured flags indicating the presence of gods. In addition pharaohs had two obelisks erected, as well as positioning one or more colossal statues of themselves in front of the pylon to demonstrate their power and who was master of this temple.

Behind the first pylon followed one or more open court yards in *tenemos* style surrounded by rows of columns. At first the public was not allowed in side temples, but later in the New Kingdom Period Ramses

Hatshepsut with the double crown *shemti* of Upper & Lower Egypt plus male royal beard and holding *heqat* & *sechem*



Medinet Habu side entrance



Medinet Habu first pylon with clubbing of enemies scene

It allowed them to participate in the first open court yard. Every hall which followed was separated by another pylon gate and doors. In Karnak for example, there were more than 10 pylons.

After the open courtyards, the main covered halls were built with colossal columns carrying the massive cedar wood roof beams. Thereafter various smaller halls followed some including side chambers.

But one of the main concepts of ancient Egyptian temple layout was that the more halls leading to the inner most holy sanctuary area, which was reserved only for the pharaoh and the high priest, the smaller and darker these rooms got. This was achieved with steps and raised floor levels, lower ceilings and smaller chambers with nearly no light. In those chambers the holy barges were kept for residing and visiting deities.

And not to forget that each temple complex also featured a holy lake to symbolize the arch ocean, from which, based on Egyptian mythology, all life appeared. This lake was used in

many ceremonies and played an important role in festivities.

Importance of Scribes

Besides their temples for religious function, were also administrative centres and housed many civil servants. So these complexes included libraries, offices, a school for scribes, pharmacies, clothing rooms, food and incense stores, wine cellars, wells, bakeries, butcheries and quarters for the many priests and temple servants.

But let's talk a bit more about the important position of scribes. This centrally organized state and vibrant economy with over two million people could not have survived for 3,000 years without their scribes. They meticulously kept record of every bag of grain produced and every two years they oversaw the famous counting of all animals countrywide. Nothing really went unreported in ancient Egypt and actually they were

the first accountants in history. Imagine were the name "bean counter" came from.

Scribes recorded rental and loan agreements, prices and payment terms, purchase and sale of any goods, work completed and payment in kind to workers. To learn their skills well, scribes had to go through years of schooling to become an expert in the complex hieroglyphic writing. For this they used clay pieces or *ostraka*, the first ancient notepads, many of which were found with corrections in red paint. Thinking of my school days, nothing has changed, has it?

Ostrakas were used daily for all types of notes, how many bricks were used for a certain construction and which workers showed up for work or didn't. Once documented work was finished, these notes were copied on to papyrus rolls for archiving at the temple library.



Medinet Habu first pylon gate with 2 spaces each side for large flagpoles and super large engravings



Enormous precinct wall Medinet Habu



Court yard with Osiris columns Medinet Habu

Egyptians also produced at the beginning of the Middle Kingdom around 4,000 years ago the first school book, which they called *kemit*. This book listed all official greeting formulas, how to address state officials, all official titles and jobs, all names of towns, temples, holy sites and all 500 gods. In addition it had guidelines for biographies, standard texts for burial chamber walls, as well as all mathematical, geometrical and technical terms.

Medinet Habu

It is recommended to start your visit to West Thebes at the most southern site called Medinet Habu, because with 60% of buildings still in situ today it is one of the best preserved. This was a multi-functional complex and served as palace and funerary temple for Ramses III and was also used as main administrative and production centre. Later it housed the harem and part of the lower ranked royal family of succeeding pharaohs.

At Medinet Habu priest Butehamun also stored and re-embalmed royal mummies, which he recovered from burgled royal

tombs in the Valley of Kings and Queens, to rebury them in secret places. It was also the location of the famous grave robber trial, which was reported by scribes in detail in antiquity. So we can conclude that the first organized crime and tomb robbery took already place during the New Kingdom Period.

A massive 17m high perimeter wall protected the Medinet Habu complex, which could be regarded as a mini city supported by land grants producing the necessary food supplies to feed it's numerous inhabitants. The 22m high pylon gate was covered on both sides with typical relief scenes showing the pharaoh holding enemy heads by their hair and beating them with a club to symbolize the re-balancing of the cosmic order.

Texts with praises of pharaoh deeds and a list of all subdued kingdoms with descriptions of Libyan wars were also part of the pylon relief scenes. Ramses III is also depicted with the so-called *shemty* or double crown of Lower and Upper Egypt sacrificing prisoners to main deity Amun, as well shown hunting bulls, seen as a demonstration of strength and power in Egyptian mythology.

Medinet Habu surrounded by huge precinct wall



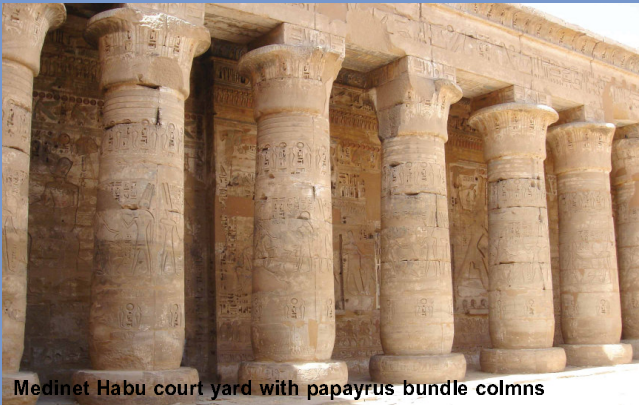
Very rarely maritime war scenes are found in ancient Egypt, except for here at Medinet Habu. For 2,000 years Egyptians did not have a navy, they just navigated the Nile river and delta.

The reservation against off shore naval battles can be explained easily with Egyptian mythology.

The body of a drowned sailor or officer could not be brought back to Egypt to be buried and rest in peace. Not having a proper burial in their home soil was the worst punishment for an Egyptian.

In the huge forecourt you will see two chapels built for pharaoh Amenirdis I and Nitokris/

Schepenupet II as well as the only chapel in Egypt dedicated to the 18 previous dynasties. The first court yard measures 33x42m and has a rare feature, a different type of column on each side, with special Osiris columns on one side – please see the respective picture in this article.



Medinet Habu court yard with papyrus bundle colmns



God Horus as falcon with shenti double crown

Again the walls are fully covered from top to bottom with endless relief scenes. They show Ramses worshipping several key deities, as well as in different war poses with bow and arrow in battle chariot drawn by horses attacking a fortress and war lions next to him.

Various triumph scenes cover one wall section depicting Ramses successful return after battle. Libyan and Asian prisoners are pictured in front of him, they are counted in detail by scribes who mention the number of cut off hands and penises. All prisoners are presented and often sacrificed to the main holy trinity god father Amun, his wife mother goddess Mut and their son war god Chons.

One of the most interesting series of relief

scenes shows the first sportive activity in history. Various reliefs depict strongly built wrestlers in different poses, even including the famous shoulder through and jubilant public. It is said that Ramses was an avid sportsman possibly practicing wrestling himself. Did really everything from farming, cattle breeding, beer brewing, medicine, architecture, mathematics, astrology, our calendar and even sport originate from the ancient Egyptians up to 6,000 years ago?

The pharaoh's palace was connected to the central temple and built on the south side of the two open tenemos style court yards. At certain opportunities the pharaoh showed himself to his subjects from a balcony in the south wall and it was common practice that he regularly rewarded his servants with gold jewellery for their achievements.

This palace was rather small to today's standards and consisted of an audience hall with a raised throne platform. It further included main bedrooms and as a surprise a real bathroom with running water toilette Arabian style. Adjacent were the rooms for his main queen and her maids.

Daily Life & Cost of Living

Looking at Egypt today one can not imagine, that in ancient times they were better organized than Germans are today. One could even say that they already invented, 6,000 years ago in the Pre-dynastic Period, a centralized market economy and no culture after them have managed any better, or developed their economic structure any further.

Intensive use of division of labour with high level of specialization was introduced early on to obtain high levels of quality and first standardized mass production. For example statues were carved by many artisans in close teamwork, everyone focusing on one body part, head, upper body, arms, hands, legs and feet. In this thoroughly organized country that ancient Egypt was, they started producing and storing surpluses from organized and irrigated farming areas along the Nile.

The only means of transport used was the Nile river, no road construction was therefore regarded necessary. Wages and prices were set and workers paid in kind. The normal size of field handled by farm workers was up to five arures equal to 10,000 square ells (Egyptian measured in cubits and ells) or 13,675m². They were left with 2 bags of corn per month,



Medinet Habu outer wall fully covered with engravings of text & images, massive compound precinct wall in the background

which was half the wage of an artisan. Each arure could yield on average 10 bags of corn and each bag had a volume of 76.8kg.

Farm workers were the lowest paid, so they could not save money for their burial and therefore no tombs of farm workers have been found to date. Artisan could use their skills and produce in their free time and earn some side income.

All workers were paid in kind called *djet*. An artisan living at Der al Medina and working at the Valley of Kings to create the many royal tombs, received 5½ bags of corn for him and his family and his foreman received 7½ bags. In addition they received beer, oil, vegetables, clothes and limited quantities of copper or silver serving as currency.

During the New Kingdom Period the value of a bag of corn was 2 deben and a deben was divided into 10 qedet with a value of or equal to 91 grams of copper. The ancient Egyptian scribes fortunately left us a detailed record of the cost of living 4,000 years ago. Food prices were set and for 1 deben you could buy or barter 1 litre of wine or 6 kilograms of fish. For 2 deben you could carry home either one 76 kg bag of corn or 20 loafs of bread or 5 litres of beer or half a litre of honey. Meat and animals were more expensive with a goat or lamb setting you back 5 deben, a donkey 31 deben, a cow 60 deben and an ox 100 deben.

Clothes and furniture also had set prices with a pair of sandals costing 3 deben, standard cloths 5 deben and a *daju* coat 20 deben. The use of furniture was sparse, beds, chairs and storage chests was all what a family needed and tables were not used at all. The price for a bed was 17 deben, a simple chair cost 2-3 deben and a chest carried a tag of 10 deben.

But the most expensive item

in Egypt was a common burial with a total cost of 150 to 300 deben. In fact everybody was working life long to save for his burial, because a proper burial was the only possibility to enter the underworld and secure one's after life resurrection. This part of the Egyptian mythology is covered in more detail in the article about the Valley of Kings and their royal tombs.

Now let's be more specific, just the painting on a simple coffin cost 5 deben, added inscriptions came to 20 deben and more sophisticated paintings set common Egyptians back 65 deben, equivalent to 10 months earnings. The cost of a simple coffin was 30 deben with the top of the range coffin reaching 200 deben and mummy masks ranged in price between 15-40 deben.

In comparison royal burials were outrageously expensive and this led to the wide spread tomb robberies. For example Tutanchamun's sarcophagus alone contained 110kg of gold equal to 242,000 deben, or the monthly wages of 35,000 workers, not taking into account all the other numerous valuables found in Tutanchamun's 4 burial chambers each of which was filled to the top.

Ramesseum

The next important temple complex at the foot of the West Thebes mountain range is the Ramesseum, or funerary temple of the "Great Pharaoh" Ramses II. Unfortunately only 35% of the ancient structures are in situ today and this site does not figure on the normal tourist itinerary. So you have to ask your guide to include it, as it is worth seeing and will give you a deeper insight into ancient Egyptian architecture and administration.

This complex included a school for scribes and many inscribed

clay tablets *ostraka* have been found here. It also has the largest area of vaulted grain and food storage rooms plus stables found in Egypt, which indicates a striving economy during Ramses II reign.

The first pylon entrance gate wall measured 70m in width and in the first court yard a colossal Ramses statue with a heights of 18m was erected weighing up to 2,000 tons. A second court yard followed flanked with the typical Osiris type columns still in situ and three stair cases leading up the propylon. The main hall had 3 entrances and its roof was supported by 48 huge columns.

Two further small halls led to the all important inner sanctuary where the massive gold statue of main god Amun was kept and which only was accessible to the pharaoh, high priest and Ramses eldest daughter, who automatically became the spiritual wife of Amun and therefore was not allowed to be married. In this way the pharaoh had better control over high priests, who were exercising more power with increased economic income and independence threatening the pharaoh's position.

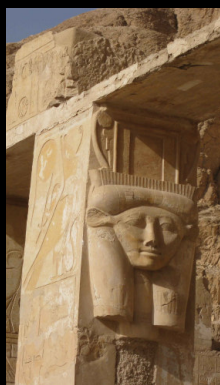
Ramses II

Ramses II was the most important ruler during the New Kingdom Period, which included the 18-20th dynasties covering 480 important years in Egyptian history from 1550-1070BC. He became co-regent to his father Seti I or Sethos at the age of 15 already and finally ascended to the throne at 25 and ruled alone for 66 years, until his death at the high age of 91. His long reign and a vibrant economy allowed him to start many new building projects, including a new 30km² capital in the Nile delta called Piramesse.

No pharaoh before and after him constructed so many temples, erected so many statues and obelisks, but the most important



Unique Hatshepsut funerary temple



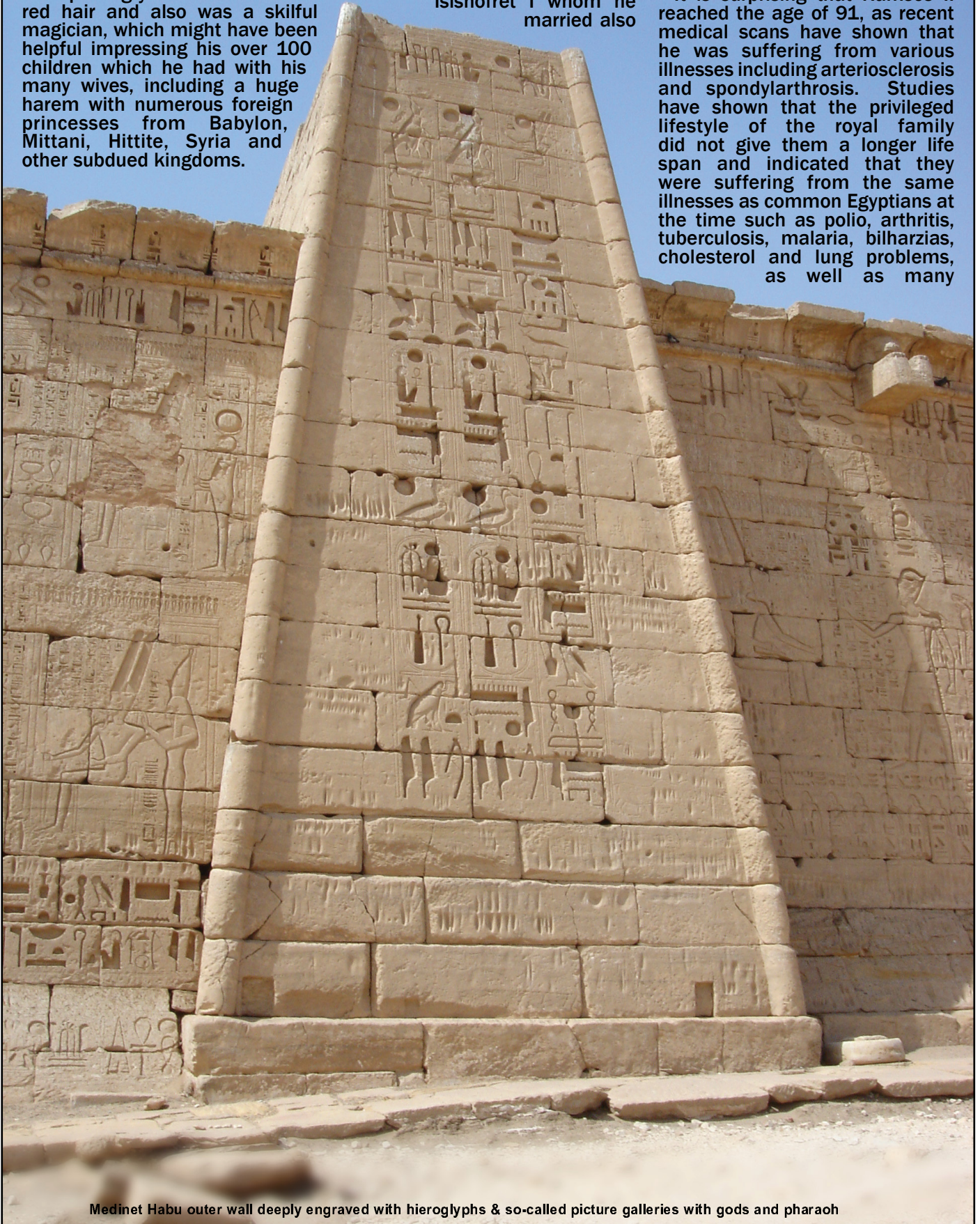
projects were the 2 new grotto type temples at Abu Simbel. Besides being the most active builder, Rameses II was also the first archaeologist restoring old buildings, such as the Unas pyramid, a ruler of the 5th dynasty living 1,100 years before him.

Surprisingly Ramses had red hair and also was a skilful magician, which might have been helpful impressing his over 100 children which he had with his many wives, including a huge harem with numerous foreign princesses from Babylon, Mittani, Hittite, Syria and other subdued kingdoms.

His first wife Nefertari was non-royal blooded, but nevertheless became famous. They were married before his ascension to the throne. Nefertari, who died in year 20 of his reign, gave him 10 known children, all of which died before their father with no chance to the throne. His second wife Isisnofret I whom he married also

before becoming pharaoh and who died in year 34 of his reign, gave him 6 known children, including his 13th son Merneptah, who possibly was his co-regent for some time and at the age of 60 became his successor when Ramses II finally died.

It is surprising that Ramses II reached the age of 91, as recent medical scans have shown that he was suffering from various illnesses including arteriosclerosis and spondylarthrosis. Studies have shown that the privileged lifestyle of the royal family did not give them a longer life span and indicated that they were suffering from the same illnesses as common Egyptians at the time such as polio, arthritis, tuberculosis, malaria, bilharzias, cholesterol and lung problems, as well as many



Medinet Habu outer wall deeply engraved with hieroglyphs & so-called picture galleries with gods and pharaoh

parasites and worm infestations. Rotten teeth, tooth fillings and even dental bridges fixed with gold wire were found in ancient mummies.

Hatshepsut Temple

The most impressive building in West Thebes is really the mortuary temple of female pharaoh Hatshepsut. This unique temple is very different from all other buildings through its post modern style, which would easily fit into any modern European environment 3,500 years later. Situated at the foot of a 300m high natural mountain amphitheatre it has been 90% rebuilt with some final touches still being done.

The stepped structure was laid out on 3 terraces with huge ramps in the middle dividing the halls on both sides. The lower terrace featured 2 lakes in antiquity and the 2 side halls are supported by a row of 22 columns each.

On the middle terrace you will find the famous punt relief with interesting expedition scenes from Punt, a kingdom in Somalia. Elaborate relief carvings show the loading of sailing ships with many different goods, animals and plant, including certain Red Sea fishes, which are particular to the Somali coastline off Punt.

It is interesting that the queen of Punt was very realistically depicted with her ill deformed body, which was against Egyptian relief picture protocol at the time. It was only 120 years

later during the Amarna Period a certain realism was introduced. The upper terrace features square Orisis type columns with impressive statues in front.

In honor of her late father Hatshepsut also included a Tuthmosis I chapel and for worshipping her preferred gods further chapels for Amun, Hathor, Re-Harachte and Anubis. Various Egyptologists assume that architect Senenmut possibly was Hatshepsut's lover and for this reason he was allowed to built his tomb deep under the entrance to the third terrace. But his tomb was never finished and Senenmut was actually buried at Sheik Abdel Qurna, the necropolis of high level royal court officials.

Female Pharaoh Hatshepsut

Hatshepsut was not the first female ruler, but she was the first who went through the full crowing ceremony receiving all official ruler regalia and titles. This made her the only representative of all gods on earth, a step never attempted before by any female ruler.

For lack of male successors some royal daughters took on the reign after the pharaohs early death, like in the first dynasty Meritneith, who became interim ruler for her under aged son Den, until he was crowned. And again in the 6th dynasty Nitokris stepped in for her son, until he was old enough to take over. Nefrusobek was another case

during the 12th dynasty, as was Towsret shortly after Hatshepsut in the 19th dynasty, ruling for her young son Siptah, before he became pharaoh.

Tuthmosis II the husband and half brother of Hatshepsut only was in power for 3 years and had no male heir, other than one son born to his second queen Isis, who was a harem girl with no royal background. This child was three year's old at his death and fathered by the Amun high priest Inmutef. Being the only full blooded royal Hatshepsut stepped in for toddler Tuthmosis III. But with the prospects of Tuthmosis III one day taking over and his non-royal mother ascending to the influential position of king mother, Hatshepsut had other plans.

Using the oracle of Amun and buying the goodwill of high priests, she had herself declared pharaoh after 7 years of careful preparations. To bridge set pharaonic male doctrine, she had herself depicted in all relief scenes with male body and attire. Her daughter Neferure took on the official role of queen and that set up gave Hatshepsut 21 successful years in power, until she died of a natural death, possibly suffering from cancer and diabetes.

Unlike her father Tuthmosis I who was a military commander and who had married into the royal bloodline, Hatshepsut did not engage in any wars, other than the regular expeditions to Nubia



Medinet Habu side entrance with colorful reliefs

to keep these southern tribes and their gold mines under control. But she increased external trade and foreign relations, which greatly benefited the Egyptian economy. This included regular expeditions to the Kingdom of Punt in Somalia to import many valuable goods and for the first time the very sought after and priceless frankincense trees.

In addition many building projects were started and new ceramic forms were created, as well as a new decoration repertoire introduced. During her reign the rows of film-like tomb wall paintings, the so called "death book", were documented for the first time on papyrus and became the new standard for future reproduction to be used for the following 1,000 years without much change.

Tuthmosis III finally took over after Hatsepsut's death and must have built up over time a lot of frustration. Therefore he had teams dispatched all over the country to have Hatshepsut's name erased from all temple walls. It is not certain if this was personal, or with the idea of resurrecting the male principle of ruling and representation of god's on earth.

Female Role in Ancient Egyptian Society

Surprisingly women in ancient Egypt had full equality and participated in every matter of public life. Female inheritance was the rule and some called it a matriarchate. Women even had jobs with equal pay, kept their income and had control over family wealth, as well as decided on inheritance issues.

So there is no surprise that women occupied high level public jobs, including positions at the royal court and even worked as judges. They served also as priests in temples, performed all rituals and were nominated as so-called "divine wives" of main deity Amun. During the New Kingdom Period women were also reported to been active in the medical field and involved with the embalming process.

Therefore married women did not have their

husband as guardian, like in ancient Rome and Greece. And rather differently to most cultures, virginity was not a pre-condition to marriage in ancient Egypt. Women were even actively pursuing their search for the right husband. Mothers had a specially respected position in society, called "chef of the house" and were seen as important reproduction guarantor. In addition, expecting women were treated with special care. But birth was seen as unclean, therefore it was done outside the house, in either a garden shed, or up on the house roof.

Nevertheless ancient Egypt suffered from high birth mortality, even with the high level knowledge of medicine at the time. What is also surprising is that breast feeding was practiced until the third year. In wealthier families midwives were often used and they were part of the family.

For example midwives of pharaohs often had an important influence at the royal court. Goddess Thoeris was the one protecting young mothers and children. The role of mothers was so important because they defined children's identity, they gave them their names and thereby creating their existence. Based on Egyptian mythology a person without a name, or who's name was erased, did not exist and had no chance of resurrection after death.

Girls became mature at the age of 12-14 and subsequently could be married off in the traditional way or search for a husband when they were older. Men became mature only at the age of 20 years and could only marry, when they had a job and income.

Marriage contracts nevertheless were done with the father of young girls, with a copy deposited at the local temple, which always was the administration centre, where scribes took note of everything. Divorce was possible, but again was so expensive, that a man could not support a new family.



Rather destroyed Ramasseum with largest vaulted store rooms in West Thebes