

Welcome to the Infinite Women podcast, I'm your host Allison Tyra, and today we're talking about the first female pharaoh - sort of. We know for a fact that multiple women reigned over the centuries in ancient Egypt, but understandably, the further back we go, the less clear the records get - because there simply isn't much documentation left after thousands of years. Apart from the natural causes of materials being lost, damaged or destroyed over time, there were also instances of deliberate attempts to erase women from history, like when one of Hatshepsut's successors had her statues destroyed, her monuments defaced, and many of her achievements attributed to other pharaohs, trying to undermine her more than 20-year reign. Based on this, the vandalism of Seti I's tomb has been used to suggest the 18th-century queen may have been more than a consort. In other cases, women rulers have been maligned by political enemies, as seen in much of the Roman accounts of Cleopatra.

But while Cleopatra and, to a lesser extent, Hatshepsut may be the best-known female pharaohs, they were definitely not the first.

Neithhotep may have been the first recorded female monarch in world history, circa 3,000 to 3200 BC. She is believed to have been married to either the first or second pharaoh of unified Egypt, and when her large tomb was discovered, with royal hieroglyphs surrounding her name, she was originally assumed to have been a male ruler. The nature of her tomb and evidence that she exercised powers a mere consort would not have had indicate that she was a co-ruler, and may also have acted as a regent for her son before he came of age. However, because the evidence is inconclusive about her possible regency, it can be argued that Neithhotep may have only been a co-ruler, instead of reigning a sole pharaoh. If that's the case, the next candidate is Merneith, who ruled circa 2950. She may also have been a regent for her son after the death of her husband, and, like Neithhotep, the supporting evidence largely comes from her tomb, as well as that of her son.

It can also be asserted that, even assuming both Neithhotep and Merneith ruled as regents, this was a temporary role until their sons came of age. Sobekneferu is believed to be the first female Pharaoh to rule Egypt in her own right, to claim to full titles of a pharaoh, and is also the first woman listed in the Turin King List, an ancient papyrus scroll compiled during the reign of Rameses II in the 1200s BC of all the pharaohs that came before. That being said, it must be noted that the list was seriously fragmented as the result of poor handling after it was discovered in 1820, and historians have discovered discrepancies between the list and other sources. So while valuable, it is not a definitive source of information.

Disclaimers aside, we know that Sobekneferu ruled for almost four years in the 18th century BC. But she may not have been Egypt's first queen regnant (meaning a queen who rules in her own right rather than as the wife or mother of a male ruler). Nitocris is a woman who may have ruled Egypt in the 22nd century BC, or who may have been a literary invention centuries later. According to Herodotus, she lured her brother's murderers into a banquet hall and then killed them by diverting the waters of the Nile to flood the room. Historians have since suggested that Nitocris never existed, that the name was conflated with a misspelling of a male ruler from the time. While that's probably true based on the current evidence - it's still a great story.

And of course there's always the possibility of powerful women whose legacy was erased more completely than Hatshepsut's and Seti I's, to the point that they have truly been lost to history. There may also be pharaohs who were assumed to be male but were actually female, as rulers like Sobekneferu and Hatshepsut are depicted wearing male clothing. But while we may not know for certain who the first female pharaoh was, we do know there were plenty of women who held power in ancient Egypt.

Join us next time on the Infinite Women podcast and remember - well-behaved women rarely make history.