



When Women Ruled the World: Six Queens of Egypt

Kara Cooney

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This riveting narrative explores the lives of six remarkable female pharaohs, from Hatshepsut to Cleopatra--women who ruled with real power--and shines a piercing light on our own perceptions of women in power today.

Female rulers are a rare phenomenon--but thousands of years ago in ancient Egypt, women reigned supreme. Regularly, repeatedly, and with impunity, queens like Hatshepsut, Nefertiti, and Cleopatra controlled the totalitarian state as power-brokers and rulers. But throughout human history, women in positions of power were more often used as political pawns in a male-dominated society. What was so special about ancient Egypt that provided women this kind of access to the highest political office? What was it about these women that allowed them to transcend patriarchal obstacles? What did Egypt gain from its liberal reliance on female leadership, and could today's world learn from its example?

Celebrated Egyptologist Kara Cooney delivers a fascinating tale of female power, exploring the reasons why it has seldom been allowed through the ages, and why we should care.

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From Reader Review When Women Ruled the World: Six Queens of Egypt for online ebook

Iset says

If you'll indulge me, I precede this review with a seemingly tangential but ultimately relevant anecdote. A few years ago, as part of a male-dominated gaming group, I observed a discussion regarding how more female players could be attracted to the game. The earnest solutions suggested included pink paint jobs in the store, and adding more caring and nurturing tasks. After attempting and failing to stifle my laughter, I explained that these stereotypes are not in fact biologically in built into women, and that my personal favourite aspect was the combat, because it offered the most challenge and variety, with no two encounters the same. I was then immediately undercut by an older, evidently traditionalist woman who loudly announced that I was talking rubbish and that a competitive drive just wasn't in a woman's natural make up. I wondered just how she explained my lifelong aggressively competitive energy, and of course, it couldn't possibly be that society's narrow parameters are too restrictive in their definition of masculinity and femininity; it must be that I and other women like me are some kind of aberrant freaks, despite having never felt any kind of gender dysphoria or confusion about my female identity.

Why do I mention this incident? Because Kara Cooney's *When Women Ruled the World*, well-meaning as it is and trying to highlight the reigns of some of ancient Egypt's female rulers, is marred by scientifically unsupported, irrational stereotypes like those above. Even as Cooney sheds light on the historical facts of these women, she infers baseless stereotyped interpretations, such as that these women's successes as rulers were because they ruled in a different style than men – they ruled *better* than men, Cooney tells us, avoiding rashly going to war and fostering Egypt's prosperity like loving mothers. Given that the pool of female rulers is so small, it's difficult to draw any conclusions about whether female pharaohs were averse to war. I couldn't believe such nonsense in a non-fiction work from a credited historian – and yes, that is my professional Egyptologist's opinion. This reading ignores mountains of evidence to the contrary (the many men who have successfully led from economic, diplomatic, scientific, and other foci, with reduced emphasis on war; as well as the women who have successfully and without compunction pursued the more martial arts), and is a biased and limited assessment of both men and women. I don't base that on opinion. The work of neuroscientists, psychologists, and behavioural scientists have shown that much of the notions of in-built feminine empathy and male logic are founded on confirmation bias and unscientific method, while rigorously conducted studies evidence parity and even reversal.

Cooney seems confused about her own point, in one moment highlighting how Hatshepsut's reign was erased from the record by the male kings who followed her, but the next moment discussing how in the face of the dearth of women in modern politics society should take a lesson from ancient Egypt, which "*valued a woman's calmer, more nuanced political skills.*" She plucks out six queens from Egyptian history, though there were arguably more of unusual power. Even so, this score of prominent, power-wielding women in ancient Egypt is a small number when compared to 3000 years of history which was for the most part ruled by men. Ancient Egypt is a notable example of female freedom and power – when compared to other contemporary neighbouring societies. But it was still male-dominated, and at times – usually when she is comparing to modern women in politics – Cooney implies it was an idyllic utopia. This doesn't really ring true – we are closer to gender parity today than at any time in the past – and Cooney does not properly place ancient Egypt in context by making it clear that although it was closer to gender parity than its contemporaries, it was still nowhere near modern standards, let alone an aspirational model.

This is a shame because, aside from reinforcing stereotypes about the way in which women rule, and misstating the quality of gender parity in ancient Egypt compared to modern day versus sitting among its contemporaries, Cooney does actually make solid points. She is quite correct in stating the studies which have found the modern female leaders are deemed less trustworthy and more strident than their male counterparts, and they are critiqued more often for their visual appearance than men are, instead of for their policies. She is quite correct in highlighting the enormous gender disparity in modern positions of power. And, to be fair, Cooney does mention that not all ancient Egyptian female rulers avoided war – though she still seems to take the view that in general female power is mysteriously inherently more nurturing and peaceful.

I know that a lot of readers strongly dislike historical non-fiction that thrives on “perhaps”, “might have”, and “probably”, so if you’re one of those, you’ll find plenty to dislike here. I personally do not object to it – the way I see it, it is hardly the author’s fault if the amount of evidence we have on a historical subject happens to be scant, and as long as the reader is fully aware of speculation, it can help us to examine possible interpretations and implications out of the evidence. However, sometimes Cooney makes statements out of what is really speculation, with no qualifying “perhaps”, “might have”, or even “must have” in sight; for example, stating that Ankhsenamun became Ay’s Great Royal Wife when in fact this is still heavily debated by Egyptologists since it is based on such scant evidence: (view spoiler) In another place Cooney says that late in the reign of Ramesses II, “12 crown princes were named and died in succession” before the succession was finally settled on Merenptah, the 13th born son who did eventually become the next pharaoh. This statement is not just misleading – it is unequivocally incorrect. (view spoiler) The section on Kleopatra VII is the most egregious in this regard. Cooney states that there were no female monarchs between Tausret and Kleopatra VII, even though there were several Ptolemaic queens who acted as regent, affirmed co-ruler, and even independent sole ruler, before Kleopatra, most of whom she mentions in Kleopatra’s chapter – so why say there were none? At one point Cooney says that Ptolemy XII had three daughters, citing Kleopatra VI, Berenike IV, and Kleopatra VII herself (view spoiler), but later in the chapter she finally remembers there was a fourth daughter, Arsinoe IV. She states that Arsinoe IV was assassinated in her early thirties, moments after telling us that Kleopatra was aged 28 and Arsinoe IV was her younger sister. I get the distinct impression that Cooney doesn’t know the subject of Ptolemaic Egypt that well. Cooney accepts uncritically the hypothesis that Kleopatra VII was illegitimate, without discussing the evidence at all. (view spoiler) Cooney also states that Kleopatra VII’s line died out with her grandson, Ptolemy of Mauretania, despite discussion by historians that there were in fact further descendants.

I really wanted to praise this book. I viewed Cooney’s previous book on Hatshepsut positively – yes, it was a popular history, and yes, it was highly speculative, but being aware of the caveats it was useful in examining the gaps in Hatshepsut’s history and the plausible scenarios that might have filled them. The basic premise of this book is one that I am interested in: female rulers of ancient Egypt, particularly those lesser known (Merneith, Sobekneferu, Tausret) rather than those more well-known (Hatshepsut, Nefertiti, Kleopatra VII). I am a little disappointed that Cooney went for the big names. She does mention in the course of the text some of the stories of yet more female regents, co-rulers, and monarchs (Neithhotep, Neferuptah, Ahmes-Nefertari, Nefertari, Kleopatra II, Kleopatra III, Berenike IV), but some are not mentioned at all (Khentkawes, Ankhesenpepi II, Tiye, Arsinoe II). I don’t even mind the copious speculation in the text. What is misleading is when Cooney accepts certain hypotheses uncritically and conveys them to the reader as fact instead of just one possible scenario, and she does this far too often. On top of this, the book is marred by Cooney’s adherence to disproven gender stereotypes, which comes across as unscientific and decidedly not objective.

Jo Burl says

I'm sad that this book was disappointing. I had pre-ordered on Amazon because I enjoyed Kara's book on Hatshepsut and I was hoping there would a lengthy chapter on Nefertiti with all of the current research on her. Additionally, I loved the episodes when she was on the podcast, Eric's Guide to Ancient Egypt (which I hope returns soon!!!).

Negatives:

I'm one of those people that hate the "perhaps, could have, might be" type of fill ins in non-fiction books. I know that a certain amount is necessary but after a bit I felt that there was to much of that in this book.

I understand that book was giving a feminist take on Egyptian rule, but it just seemed that after awhile the author went overboard and started man-bashing. It was like she objected to patriarchy, but to get her point across she took shots at "typical" male ways of thinking and ruling that are not as good as female ways, and so sounded misandrist instead. She indulged in what she disliked so much.

Also, not all of her examples of modern women and how they are not taken as seriously or treated as fairly as men worked. That's okay. But there is a certain American politician that was brought up several times as an example of a woman treated unfairly. There are some of us women who just don't like this politician, not because she's a strong woman but because of some of her wrong doing. And yes, I don't like it when men do that either. This politician's gender did not enter into whether I liked he or not, I hope for an truthful, strong woman to come along that I can embrace. I hope to vote for her some day. Sooner rather than later, I hope.

Lastly, the title could have been reworked. The women in this book didn't rule even their own known world, only Egypt.

Positives:

I knew next to nothing of Merneith or Neferusobek, and now I find that I need to learn more, what little there is to learn. Even Tawoseret. I'm looking forward to digging into the footnotes and ordering some of the material there.

Footnotes!!! I love good footnotes. Thank you for providing so many. Now of only there had been a map or genealogy. But, the author explained what the name meant, especially throne names, and how they reflected what the ruler hoped to accomplish. Extra thank you!!

I know Nefertiti has been done to death, and I think I've read everything I can find on her, but somehow I never realized that there were 3 schools of thought on her (American, British and French? German?). That kind of helped me to mentally organize all the different theories on her. I wish someone would write a book with all three theories in one book, divided by school of thought. How convenient that would be to have it all in one spot. I'm uncertain which could be the correct theory, of if there is one not yet considered, but it makes for interesting reading. Every Amarnophile seems to have their favorite theory, but I bounce around.

Cleopatra. She gets a little boring, but I actually enjoyed this author's take on her. Never realized before how much the Roman version of history had colored my thinking. AND, I never realized just how inevitable her ending was.

Laurel Reinoehl says

The writing is drier than the Egyptian landscape, full of "probably", "should have", and "must have". Too much presumption, too little fact (although there may never be more definitive evidence about Egyptian queens). TOO MUCH repetition of the same point. And too much belief that the women were of course not acting in any self interest, or just really lucky, or anything but brilliant and striving against the odds heroically.

Craig says

This is a fascinating study of six women who ruled ancient Egypt, ranging from Merneith 5000 years ago to Cleopatra when the BC countdown ended. There isn't much truly documented detail for much of the volume, as she freely admits, but I found Cooney's conclusions and speculations convincing and fascinating. The time spanned through the various dynasties was really mind-boggling, and her portrayal of life both for the ruling class and the other citizens in the hierarchy was excellent; I learned a lot from the book and though it well worthwhile. My only reservation is that I felt she drew too many parallels from the ancient time to contemporary situations with too many suggestions on how we ought to conduct ourselves. It was a bit distracting at times. I agreed with her almost all of the time, but still felt she should have stuck with the straight history in the narrative and put her modern moral judgments in footnotes or otherwise kept them separate. I won a copy from the Goodreads Giveaway program and was quite delighted to have done so.

Joy says

3.5 stars, but I rounded up to 4 to be generous. I enjoyed this book, though unfortunately not as much as I had hoped. Cooney's writing is easy to read and accessible, but it could use a little more depth. Maybe she doesn't want to get bogged down by archaeological jargon, which is fine, but I wish she had spent more time exploring the evidence that exists for these women. And I feel like she should have given credence to various interpretations of that evidence, not just what she herself believes, and letting the reader make up their own mind.

Also, I find myself disagreeing with much of her broad generalizations about women, especially women in positions of power. That we all have a natural sensitivity that makes us good rulers because we are all more hesitant to take decisive action, that we all have a maternal instinct that makes us good protectors of our family, country, etc... and that women who do behave in more "masculine" ways are mere exceptions to rules. That's just... not true and somewhat antithetical to idea that women are equally as capable as men. I'm not at all opposed to a book of this nature including feminist discourse, I just don't agree with many of the statements Cooney makes on the subject.

Plus, she tells us at the beginning to disregard Roman sources when it comes to Cleopatra because they are all biased against her, but she proceeds to take a similarly negative view of her. She repeatedly praises other women that she writes about for acting for the good of their dynastic line, but Cleopatra acted "selfishly," because a woman who is ambitious for her own sake is apparently Bad. Hatshepsut was very similar in this respect but Cooney goes out of her way to describe the two women and their ambitions in very different terms. Why? Maybe Hatshepsut is just her favorite and she's less interested in Cleopatra. That's fine, but when you're writing a book about this you need to put all of these women on a level playing field. They each

deserve the same amount of respect.

tl;dr it was an easy and overall enjoyable read and I am especially grateful for the information about women whom I was not previously very familiar with (like Merneith and Tawosret) and the further reading section, which I feel will serve me better than the book itself did.

Katie/Doing Dewey says

This is a history of six women who ruled ancient Egypt. I expected to really enjoy this, having given the author's first book (*The Woman Who Would Be King*) five stars. I also hate to say bad things about a book that a tour company was kind enough to send me. Unfortunately, the honest truth is that this was really bad. It's almost impressive how the author managed to both beat the reader over the head with a feminist message and be incredibly sexist at the same time.

The one positive quality that carried over from the author's previous book is that she managed to write engaging stories without glossing over uncertainty in the historical record. I appreciate that. On the less positive side, a lot of the uncertainties were left for footnotes. This is problematic because anyone who doesn't read the footnotes will be left to simply believe the author's narrative reconstruction is the truth. This book also felt lighter than the previous one, perhaps because there were so many uncertainties. She's also covering six women in one book, instead of just one.

OK, back to the most problematic parts of this book. On numerous occasions, the author states that 'women rule differently from men', endorsing outdated, gender essentialist ideas about men and women. She constantly refers back to stereotypes as though they are true and have useful explanatory power. There are so many examples of this, I don't even know where to begin. She also constantly compares the way women were treated in ancient Egypt to modern times. In many cases, I felt she was projecting current views onto ancient Egyptians without sufficient evidence. In every case, the references to current events felt jarring and will quickly date the book. Some of these references to current events include lectures about modern politics that only tangentially related to her point. For example, to demonstrate that people don't always act in their long term best interest, she treats us to a paragraph-long diatribe about global warming.

Basically, this whole book feels like the author just has an ax to grind. She's decided to focus on six women about whom very little is known. That doesn't make for a great story. She's just used them as a springboard to lecture us about how men and women are different; how women should probably be in charge because of those differences; and how women are still experiencing sexism today. The connections she makes between these women and modern figures are poorly supported, relying on insufficient evidence from both time periods to support her claims. Honestly, I can't imagine this book appealing to anyone, as the liberal politics are likely to annoy conservatives and the sexism is likely to annoy liberals. I'm incredibly disappointed that this was the author's follow up to a great debut.

This review first posted at Doing Dewey.

Natalie says

Kara Cooney has produced an interesting and fascinating book about 6 female pharaohs (Kings) in Egyptian

history - Merineth, Neferusobek, Hatshepsut, Nefertiti, Tawosret and of course Cleopatra. This book compares and highlights truths and historical facts/information as well as providing similarities of struggles in power/politics and patriarchy that women of power face today. I found it very interesting and could relate the essence of the books meaningful content to the world of power and politics today in our modern world. I have always been fascinated with Egypt's history and found this book a fantastic read. I would definitely recommend it to anyone with an interest in politics, history, egyptian history and pharaohs.

~Dani~ LazyTurtle's Books says

Read this review and more at Book Geeks Uncompromised!

When Women Ruled the World is a great look at the rise to power of six women in Ancient Egypt. One of the things that have fascinated me about Ancient Egypt is the culture's relationship and treatment of women. While still very much a patriarchal society, Egyptian women had more rights than their contemporaries in other parts of the world. They had the right to own property and the right to a divorce; things women in most of the world would not dream of being able to have and do.

Unfortunately, the records for a lot of the time periods involved are so vague and inscriptions have been struck through and marked over so many times in some cases that a lot of what is known is conjecture and generalizations. Because of this, there are a lot of "maybes" and "perhaps" in telling the story of individuals from thousands of years ago. This did get a little tiring to read at time but ultimately it is just part of the nature of the topic.

One of the things that Cooney generalizes fairly frequently is that women were needed at specific points in history for their tendency to avoid risk and avoid fights. While obviously not every woman falls into that generalization, it makes sense that a woman taking a man's place in a patriarchy must step carefully. Everything she touches must turn to gold or it would be her name stricken from the temples and tombs.

I felt like Cooney did a wonderful job at walking the reader through what life was like for these women and the circumstances that birthed their opportunities to rise to power. Many times the circumstances went back several generations and were quite complicated but I always felt like it was a story being told, reading about their lives never felt dry to me at all.

For someone like me that enjoys reading about ancient cultures but maybe doesn't know too much about them, I think is a great place to start. It not only explores these six women but also touches on various facets of Ancient Egyptian culture in a way that is very engaging and easy to read.

Annise says

Many of the facts in this book are presented as being wishy-washy in some parts, and then somewhat absolute in other parts (i.e. in "Neferusobek" states Amenemhat IV and Neferusobek might have been siblings, and then goes on to state "when Amenemhat IV married his half-sister Neferusobek"...these unnecessary, un-clear titles were not needed. Cooney does mention the extreme difficulty of being an Egyptologist, but some of the research could have been more clearly explained. One part especially lends credit to another "well known Egyptologist" but didn't explain what differences to other ideologies there may

be within research.

This book was also unnecessarily charged with American politics. Even with my thoughts mirroring what was stated in this book (i.e. clear distaste of the Trump administration), it dates the book to this country and this time frame, and I honestly didn't really want to read anything so modernly politically charged when picking up a book about Egyptian female/genderqueer rulers. For being a National Geographic trademark book, if it were to be so politically charged, I would have liked to see more discussion about non-American politics.

Stephanie (Bookfever) says

4.5★

Jean says

Kara Cooney Ph.D. points out that ancient Egypt was punctuated by periods of rule by women. Many women ruled as regents for their young sons; then advised them privately when they took the throne in their teens.

Cooney reviews the reign of six female pharaohs of the Ptolemaic period that ruled in their own right. They are: Merineth, Neferusobek, Nefertiti, Tawosret, Hatshepsut and Cleopatra. The author discusses their similarities and differences of their reigns. Cooney describes how Hatshepsut and Cleopatra took and held power. The book is well written and meticulously researched. Cooney reveals how these women survived in a male-dominated world. The author points out that women in ancient Egypt had the right to own property, and the right to divorce. I found the book interesting and could not help but make comparisons in my mind to women's rights today.

I found the book most interesting and will look for more books by the author. Kara Cooney is a Professor of Egyptology at UCLA. The book is nine hours and fifteen minutes. I read the book as an audiobook downloaded from Audible. Kara Cooney narrated the book herself.

Cheryl says

I was ambivalent about this book. On the one hand, learning about how women rule differently from men, and how it was successfully accomplished in ancient Egypt, was very interesting. On the other hand, the hidden agenda and aside jabs detracted from the narrative so much, that in the end, I was more annoyed than inspired by the text.

Karin says

Based on archeological finds the histories of these queens are anyone's guess. Ms Cooney set forth some interesting conclusions and brings out new ideas on some old(ancient to be exact) subjects.

Gianna says

Oh wow, I did NOT like this book. It was pretentious, full of speculation and assumptions that seemed solely powered by the author's POV. Others, I'm sure could argue that as a Egyptologist she delivered information about the selected women in this book with details. However, half the information were riddled off like fact sheets about the era these women held power—no facts about their unique ruling styles, specifics about why these picks were greater than others, no proof given to back up the claims about how (if/when) they were able to manipulate the position of power in their favor.

What's more, she continued to run off on the notion that with each new dynasty the previous female pharaoh would have had her name wiped from history, so why continue to push the concept that the later female rulers were likely inspired by the former if they technically "didn't" exist? Skipping over the fact that she every chance she got to remind the reader of ancient Egypt's ideologies and mythologies when it came to the decision of selecting a woman as king essentially by default because they were seen as less hostile, less likely to cause wars or be erratic aka complicit.

The author makes a point of tying in details and examples of our current political climate and the "lack" therefore of the female presence. Not to say that this point was entirely wrong but she chose to ONLY point out the failures when making this point or any point to be honest. Strategically leaving out positive women in power today in terms of politics ie reasons why Hillary Clinton did not win the past presidential election in regards to her appeal to the public based on how attractive she is and is not?.

Moreover, how this is somehow connected to her time as the First Lady when she was seen (and in ways now) being seen as overstepping her bounds of what she is allowed to do and what she isn't. And it gets better; the current First Lady seems to know her "place" because she spends her time redecorating??—— I can't recall the full passage. I was rolling my eyes a lot here.

However, my point being, need we forget the eight years the Obamas were in office and the presence, influence and power they EACH held during that time?? I mean, I wasn't the only one who dreamed that right?? OR the 70+ women running in the 2018 Midterm elections across the country!!? I wanted to like this book so much but why??

Why take such a CIS, cynical, impersonal, allusive, and disappointing stance with this book? If I were to recommend this book to anyone it would be a straight, white male ?????? My full review on this book will be up later this week.

These notes are just the ones freshest in my mind after finishing this book, so I tried to be objective but ughh it was difficult.

Stefan Bach says

Barely made the cut. First time I understand all those people here calling for that half star.
It's barely even 1.5 stars. I blame my gentle heart.
