As ancient farming societies became more established, they also grew more sophisticated and complex. With this growth came new challenges and opportunities for humankind. Developments such as commerce and trade brought outside influences to formerly isolated empires and kingdoms and new challenges to those who ruled them.

To keep their empires strong, these leaders had to be more than powerful warriors. They also had to possess the political savvy that would tell them when to curry favor with the enemy and when to defend their empires against them.

Men led many of these efforts, but as you'll discover in this chapter, women played an important role in a number of them as well. Their numbers may have been small, but they knew how to kick some serious *gluteus maximus* when they needed to, both on and off the battlefield.
Woman in Pharaoh’s Clothing: Hatshepsut

Only men were supposed to rule as pharaohs in ancient Egypt. Obviously, someone forgot to tell Hatshepsut about that.

All told, there were actually five women who ruled as pharaohs over Egypt. But Hatshepsut was one of the most successful Egyptian rulers of either sex. Her brilliance on the throne makes her the best known of the female pharaohs as well.

The daughter of the pharaoh Thutmose I, Hatshepsut rose to power when, in keeping with royal tradition, she married her half-brother, Thutmose II. When he died, his son, Thutmose III (also Hatshepsut’s nephew) was next in line for the throne. But he was too young to govern, and Hatshepsut ruled in his place.

When Thutmose III came of age, Hatshepsut, believing she had a stronger claim to the throne than her nephew, refused to yield it to him. Instead, she proposed that they rule together. Hatshepsut then took the title of pharaoh by declaring herself a man and by wearing the traditional false beard, headdress, and kilt of the pharaohs. She also declared herself the daughter of the great Egyptian god Amon-Re and claimed that her ascendancy to the throne was ordained by Amon-Re himself.

Hatshepsut and Thutmose III ruled their country together from 1489 to 1469 BCE, late in Egypt’s Eighteenth Dynasty. During their reign, Hatshepsut fought battles against the Nubians and also increased trade with them. She established other trade routes as well.

She restored many of the Egyptian kingdom’s ancient ruins and built beautiful new structures, including a breathtaking temple dedicated to herself at Deier el-Bahri near the Valley of the Kings on the west bank of the Nile River. She also honored her “father,” Amon-Re, by installing pink granite obelisks in his temple at Karnak. Always the self-promoter, she ordered the royal stoncutters to carve inscriptions and images detailing her life into them, including scenes from a glorious trade expedition to the Land of Punt (Somalia) that she organized.
Unlike the reigns that preceded and followed her, Hatshepsut’s rule was one of relative peace. This changed, however, following her death in 1468 B.C.E. Tired of years of kowtowing to his aunt, Thutmose III not only set Egypt on a more militant course, but he also halted all of Hatshepsut’s building projects. In a final gesture of revenge, he defaced any structure having to do with Hatshepsut, erasing her name whenever and wherever he could.

**Fulfilling a Prophecy: Jael**

Like most ancient societies, the Israelites had to fight off a number of enemies. Not only that, they often had to battle oppressors sent by God to teach them a lesson when they ignored their responsibilities to Him. They were helped in one of these skirmishes by a woman named Jael.

The story of Jael is told through Deborah, one of a number of leaders, or judges, raised up by God to help the Israelites shake off their oppressors. In this case, the Canaanites were pestering the Isarelites, and Deborah decided to ask the Israelite general Barak’s help in fighting them off. When she called on Barak with her request, she prophesized victory for all if he would join the cause. Barak agreed to do so, but only if Deborah would fight as well. She agreed to do so.

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**Hear Me Roar**

Most blessed among women is Jael,  
The wife of Heber the Kenite;  
Blessed is she among women in tents.  
He asked water, she gave milk;  
She brought out cream in a lordly bowl.  
She stretched her hand to the tent peg,  
Her right hand to the workmen’s hammer;  
She pounded Sisera, she pierced his head,  
She split and struck through his temple.

—From the Song of Deborah in Chapter 5 of the book of Judges
Barak and Deborah led the Israelites to victory over the Canaanites, who were led into battle by Sisera, the captain of the Canaanite army. After he lost the battle with the Israelites on the plain of Esdraelon, he fled for safety to the settlement of Heber the Kenite on the plain of Zaanaim. Heber's wife, Jael, received the fallen leader in her tent with apparent hospitality and gave him milk in "a lordly bowl."

After drinking the milk, Sisera laid down and sank into weary sleep. While he slept, Jael crept up to him, took one of the tent pegs in her hand, and drove it through his temple with a mallet. She then led Barak, who was pursuing the enemy leader, into her tent and showed him what she had done.

Jael's story is told in prose and in verse in the book of Judges in the Old Testament. In the verse version, also known as the Song of Deborah, the Israelite judge venerates her as the most blessed of women for her heroism in slaying the Canaanite general and insuring Israel's victory over his people.

Hear Me Roar

So as regards these great obelisks,
Wrought with electrum (fine gold) by my majesty for my father Amon,
In order that my name may endure in this temple,
For eternity and everlastingness,
They are each of one block of hard granite,
Without seam, without joining together!
—Queen Hatshepsut

A Woman's Place

Judith, another ancient Israelite, also played an important role in delivering her people from the enemy. Judith saved the Israelites from the Assyrians by assassinating Holofernes, the Assyrian king. She did it by disguising herself as an informer, which allowed her to infiltrate the enemy's camp. Once there, she was invited to join Holofernes for dinner. When the king got drunk and passed out, Judith chopped off his head and took it with her in a sack. She then showed it to the Israelites, whose morale had been dragging. The trophy gave them renewed desire to vanquish their enemies. They attacked the Assyrians, who had a hard time putting up a united front with their leader dead, and defeated them.

The Renaissance artist Artemisia Gentileschi, who was fond of painting heroic women, used the story of Judith for one of her most famous works, Judith and Maidservant with the Head of Holofernes.
Chapter 3 ➤ Queen for a Day: Rulers and Warriors

Fighting for Her Country: Cleopatra

The oldest daughter of the Egyptian king Ptolemy XII, Cleopatra had it all—brains, beauty, and power. Although many of her actions appear motivated by her hunger for power, they were often driven instead by her desire to protect her kingdom from Roman annexation. Her fierce struggles for power, coupled with her legendary beauty, which she was clearly willing to put to its best use possible, made her the most famous Egyptian queen and an enduring icon to this day.

Whatever Cleo Wants …

Cleopatra’s rule began in 51 B.C.E. when, at age 18, she married her 10-year-old brother, Ptolemy XIII, following their father’s death. It wasn’t an auspicious time for the two young rulers; there was famine in the land, the Romans were threatening Egypt’s borders, and there was plenty of familial strife going on. But Cleopatra proved to be a natural ruler. She greatly enjoyed the power she had as queen of Egypt, and she set out to expand her control.

From here, Cleopatra’s life begins to read like a lurid soap opera. Just take a look at all the twists and turns that follow, the plotting and intrigue, all in the name of power and most of it orchestrated by the infamous queen of the Nile herself.

… Cleo Gets

In her thirst for power, Cleopatra sought assistance from the people she felt could best help her, whether they were enemies or not. When the Egyptian chief minister tried to remove her from the throne as co-ruler, she went straight to the leader of the civilization that was posing the greatest threat to Egypt at the time—the great Roman emperor Julius Caesar.

Much taken by Cleopatra’s beauty and intelligence, Caesar decided to intervene on her behalf. In the battles that followed, Cleopatra’s adversary, the chief minister, was killed.

Hear Me Roar

Her form, coupled with the persuasiveness of her conversation, and her delightful style of behavior—all these produced a blend of magic.

—Plutarch

A Woman’s Place

According to legend, Cleopatra’s first meeting with Julius Caesar took place after she was smuggled across enemy lines rolled up in some bedding. Some accounts have her wrapped in a carpet.
Part 1 ➤ *The Ancient World*

**Down with Ptolemy**
But there was still the matter of Cleopatra’s brother, Ptolemy XIII. Two years of bickering between the two of them became a blood battle when he demanded his share in leading the country at age 14. According to legend, she had him poisoned.

**And Up with Ptolemy!**
Cleopatra then married another brother, Ptolemy XIV, who became her new co-ruler. But, in a surprise move, she decided to leave Egypt in her brother/husband’s hands and followed Caesar to Rome. She cruised up the Nile in an elaborate barge provisioned with the finest food, wine, and jewels. Once in Rome, she moved into Caesar’s villa and became his mistress.

**And Down with Ptolemy Again …**
Caesar was assassinated on March 15, 44 B.C.E. (the famous Ides of March) by forces jealous of his power. A civil war broke out after his death, during which Cleopatra fled from Rome and returned to Egypt. She then had Ptolemy XIV drowned in the River Nile and made her son Cesarion, who may have been Caesar’s son, co-ruler.

**Enter Marc Antony**
Cleopatra next took up with the Roman Marcus Antonius (Marc Antony), an ardent admirer and supporter of Julius Caesar’s who visited her in Egypt, presumably to assess the possibility of turning Egypt into a client state of Rome. But Cleopatra used her charm and political skills and persuaded him to abandon this scheme.

The two began their famous love affair (which lead to the end of Cleopatra’s dynasty, in 42 B.C.E.). After a few years in Egypt, however, Antony decided to return to Rome and married Octavia, the sister of Octavian, the future Roman emperor. But he couldn’t stay away from Cleopatra’s feminine wiles for long. They reunited in 36 B.C.E. during a military campaign that Antony lead against the Parthians. He divorced Octavia and married Cleopatra. They had three children together.

Cleopatra and Mark Antony remained in Egypt until the angry Octavian decided to avenge his sister’s honor. Joining Antony in battle, Cleopatra stood by him until Octavian’s troops defeated the Egyptian fleet at Actium in 31 B.C.E. Sensing their defeat, Cleopatra and Marc Antony fled to Alexandria. There, Cleopatra was taken captive by Octavian. Rumors of her death soon spread, and Antony killed himself. Rather than sharing her throne with Octavian or being held captive, Cleopatra induced a poisonous snake, or asp, to bite her. After Cleopatra’s death, Octavian murdered Cesarion and claimed Egypt for Rome.

With Cleopatra’s death came the end of true Egyptian rule, as Egypt became a province of the Roman Empire. Despite the fact that she was unsuccessful in keeping the Romans from conquering her homeland, Cleopatra’s never-ending willingness to fight for her country endeared her to her subjects.
Zenobia the Land Grabber

One of the greatest female warriors of ancient history was the Roman queen Zenobia, who came to power in the second century C.E. Claiming to be a descendent of the legendary Cleopatra, Zenobia took after her possible ancestor with similar beauty and intelligence. She spoke four languages—Latin, Egyptian, Greek, and Aramaic—and studied philosophy and literature. She also had a certain fondness for such male pursuits as drinking, trading, hunting, and riding—skills that would come to serve her well.

Zenobia rose to power in 266 C.E. as regent of Palmyra, a Roman state, after the assassination of her husband, King Odenathus. At the time, Palmyra, located on the northern edge of the Syrian Desert, was an extremely prosperous region with important trade connections. Not about to let such valued booty fall into unfriendly hands, Zenobia took control of the area for her son, Vaballathus Athenodorus. She then used her beauty and wiles to expand her domain as far as she could.

Victory Through Deception

Zenobia’s first military campaign came at a time when the Roman Empire was weak. This factor, coupled with some deception on her part—she continued to claim allegiance to the Romans—allowed her to seize control of neighboring Syria and part of Egypt in 269 C.E. without much resistance from those areas or from Rome itself.

In the following year, Zenobia continued to hide under her false cloak of loyalty to Rome. While doing so, she conquered neighboring Cappadocia and Bithynia, which gave her control over several key Roman trade routes.

With so much land under her control, Zenobia felt comfortable enough to break her ties with Rome. She even went so far as to begin minting her own currency. By then, however, the Romans smelled a rat. They decided to put the queen’s rebellion to rest by attacking her troops.

Zenobia Exposed

In 272 C.E., Emperor Lucius Domitius Aurelian invaded Zenobia’s realm and captured its outlying
areas. He then lay siege to Palmyra, where Zenobia, who saw the writing on the wall, was hastily negotiating her surrender. When captured by Aurelian, Zenobia abandoned her former independence and blamed the men around her for the rebellion.

Aurelian left Palmyra in ruins. He took Zenobia with him to Rome, where he first displayed her as a captive and then imprisoned her on an estate in nearby Tibor. But Zenobia triumphed in the end. She later married a Roman senator and became the leader of one of Rome’s most prominent intellectual circles, as well as a noted patron of the arts.

**Bodacious Boadicea**

Mediterranean and Middle Eastern empires weren’t the only areas that the Romans had set their sights on conquering. Roman rulers staged numerous campaigns against other civilizations and lands, even marching troops as far north as the British Isles. They took Britain for their own in 60 C.E. and ruled there for another 400 years or so, but not without first encountering strong resistance from a tribal queen named Boadicea.

Boadicea was the wife of King Prasutagas, the leader of Britain’s Iceni tribe located in what is now the county of Norfolk. But Prasutagas was a leader in name only, having conceded true rule to the Romans in 43 C.E. As part of his concession, Prasutagas struck a deal that allowed him to stay as regent under a Roman governor, Suetonius Paulinus.

Prasutagas died in 60 C.E., naming Nero, the emperor of Rome, as his co-heir along with Boadicea and their daughters. But the Romans refused to recognize Boadicea’s inheritance and decided to take the regency away from her, first by seizing her personal property and that of the other Iceni royals, then by plundering all of Britain.

When the Romans came to take Boadicea’s jewelry, they flogged her and raped her two daughters. A furious Boadicea recruited an army and planned a revolt. She successfully organized a huge army—estimates vary between 80,000 and 120,000—composed of her own tribe as well as members of neighboring tribes. Along with a good supply of chariots and weapons, they set out to overtake towns that had fallen to Roman rule. She successfully attacked the Roman cities of Camulodunum (Colchester), Londinium (London), and Verulanium (St. Albans), leaving tens of thousands of massacred Romans and their allies in her wake.
When news of the battles reached Suetonius Paulinus, he immediately planned a counterattack against Boadicea’s weary troops. Sensing defeat, Boadicea fled to her kingdom, where she and her daughters committed suicide—in their eyes a far better fate than becoming Roman slaves.

Almost always portrayed as a substantial, statuesque woman with flaming red hair, the role she played in English history is memorialized in a statue opposite Big Ben on the Thames Embankment in London.

Preserving Their Country: Trung Nhi and Trung Trac

Sisters and Vietnamese noblewomen, Trung Nhi and Trung Trac showed similar valor in their efforts to protect their country from Chinese rule. Without them, there’s a good chance that Vietnam wouldn’t exist today.

Trung Trac and her younger sister, Trung Nhi, were the daughters of a Vietnamese lord. The two were very close as girls and remained so as adults when Trung Trac married Thi Sach, another Vietnamese lord.

At the time, Vietnam had been under the rule of the Han Dynasty of China for more than 100 years. Things had been relatively peaceful under Chinese rule, but they became less so around 39 C.E. when some of the Vietnamese lords, tired of Chinese domination, began plotting to overthrow their Chinese rulers. Whispers of the uprising reached the Chinese, and they retaliated by killing Trung Trac’s husband in an effort to keep the Vietnamese in submission.

Thi Sach’s death lit a fire under Trung Trac and Trung Nhi. Sensing the growing unrest among their Vietnamese compatriots, they decided to avenge his death and mount a rebellion against the Chinese. Their instincts were correct, as more than 80,000 Vietnamese royals and peasants—men and women alike—joined in a vast army led by 36 women generals, including the sisters’ mother.

The Trung sisters lead their army to the Chinese governor’s home, where they attacked and defeated Chinese forces. Similar battles in other key sites followed, and the Vietnamese emerged victorious.

The Vietnamese people honored the Trung sisters by naming them co-queens. They started out as popular rulers and become even more so when they abolished the taxes imposed by the Chinese and restored the traditional Vietnamese form of government.

A Woman’s Place

One of the women trained as a general in the Trung sisters’ army was Phung Thi Chinh. A fierce warrior, she fought while pregnant and even delivered her baby on the battlefront. Shortly after giving birth, she strapped her baby to her back and continued fighting.
The Trung sisters retained control over Vietnam until the Han emperor sent forces to recapture the region in 42 C.E. This time, the Vietnamese forces were badly defeated by the Chinese. Rather than being taken captive by enemy forces, the sisters committed suicide in the traditional way by drowning.

As the heroines who led the first national revolt against the Chinese, the Trung sisters occupy a special place in Vietnamese history and lore to this day. Their heroism is celebrated by a national holiday, and they are honored in temples built in their memory.

**Trien Au**

The threat of being enslaved to Chinese rulers inspired another Vietnamese warrior queen to fight against Chinese rule. Often called the “Joan of Arc of Vietnam,” Trien Au was a third-century Vietnamese peasant who fought against yet another Chinese occupation of her homeland. Images show her mounted on an elephant and wearing golden armor as she led her troops into battle following the fall of the Han empire.

Sadly, Trien Au wasn’t able to rack up the same successes as the Trung sisters did. Despite a lengthy and hard-fought battle, she and her army were defeated. Like the Trungs, she committed suicide rather than surrender to her victors.

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**The Least You Need to Know**

- Many warrior queens, as well as their less aggressive sisters, came into power through their relationships with their husbands or sons.
- Of the five women who ruled Egypt as pharaohs, Hatshepsut was the most successful.
- Royal birth wasn’t necessarily a requisite to becoming a warrior queen. Trien Au was a Vietnamese peasant.
- Honor was everything to the warrior queens. Many committed suicide in lieu of being captured by their victors.