An Image of Youthful Kingship
The Luxor Museum Statue of Thutmose III

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Even though the Luxor Museum is now adorned with the superb collection of pharaonic statuary brought to light just three years ago during the celebrated discovery of the Luxor temple cachette, one of its jewels remains the exquisite statue found almost 90 years ago, on the 8th of May 1904, by Georges Legrain in another famous deposit - that of the Cour de la Cachette at Karnak.

The statue was formerly kept in Cairo Museum where it bore the catalogue number CGC 42054. It is now registered as Luxor Museum J.2. Made of green graywacke or schist, the statue is quite small being only 90 cm high (though it survives only from the knees upwards). Its size, however, has nothing to do with its impressive impact, for this undoubtedly comes from the very quality and dynamics of the sculpture itself. The greenish stone is one of the hardest materials employed in Egyptian stone carving. The block had to be chosen carefully to enable the sculptor to make good use of the fine and compact grain. The ancient artist's name will remain unknown to us, but he has bequeathed to the modern world a masterpiece of the first order.

The king is simply equipped, wearing the nemes headdress and shendyt kilt (both symbols of kingship). He strides forwards in a confident though peaceful motion, his arms tightly set at his sides. He holds in his hand the Inmyt-per scroll, the proof of his inheritance of the Egyptian throne. This unassuming image is without doubt a true manifestation of kingship in all its splendour.

The body is slimmer though powerful. The muscles play gently under the skin. The face, however, shows little of the real personality of the king; in fact, without the cartouche engraved on the buckle of his belt, we might have some difficulty in identifying our serene ruler. It is thanks to the surviving premones that we can declare the statue to be the likeness of Men-keperre Thutmose III, the great military leader and empire builder of the 18th Dynasty. The face reminds us of statues of Hatshepsut or some of her portraits in the offering rooms in central Karnak. The artist modelled the kings features with a gentle idealisation, producing a pleasing but almost bland expression which appears to have been more characteristic of the early 18th Dynasty family rather than a faithful portrait of any individual ruler. The king's eyebrows curve neatly towards the root of the nose which is in itself gently arched. The face is certainly youthful. All these points tend to date the sculpture to the early years of Thutmose III's reign, when, as a young man still not into his third decade, he was co-regent with his aunt, Queen Hatshepsut.

Brought to kingship around the age of six, Thutmose was to rule Egypt for almost 54 years. He was the son of Thutmose II by a lesser wife named Isis. When his father died, the Crown

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Prince was too young to rule by himself and this led to the long 20-year coregency between Hatshepsut and Thutmose III. The scenario of a peaceful joint rule is now favoured by most scholars rather than a palace coup d’état instigated by his politically powerful aunt, the former queen of Thutmose II and daughter of Thutmose I - a theory which had been popular throughout the last 100 years of Egyptology.

The evidence seems quite clear: Thutmose was regularly represented along with his aunt on Hatshepsut’s pharaonic monuments (such as the in the scenes from the queen’s red granite shrine at Karnak), even though it is true that she assumes first place in all the ceremonials. It is now evident that Thutmose, when he became sole ruler, still continued most of the building programmes set up by Hatshepsut. If he really had engaged in the defacement of the deceased queen’s monuments, it must have been relatively late in the reign, perhaps because he was previously preoccupied with his military campaigns and his own construction programme. There is thus no conclusive evidence for a long-hidden hatred of Hatshepsut by her coregent nephew as has so often been stated. The true culprits of the Hatshepsut defacements may have been the early 19th Dynasty Ramesside kings who took it upon themselves to eradicate the histories of all the female pharaohs who had ruled before them.

For the two decades following his accession as sole ruler over Egypt, Thutmose III occupied himself almost entirely with military campaigns in Nubia and Western Asia. Though his first campaign seems to have been somewhat forced upon him by an Asiatics revolt soon after Hatshepsut’s death, he always claimed his real aim was to widen the boundaries of Egypt as had been commanded by the the supreme deity, Amun-re of Thebes himself. He thus confronted one northern enemy after another during his seventeen different campaigns.

Historically, it is clear that most of these military operations are to be taken as policing actions, either to demonstrate the Egyptian presence in the northern realm on an annual basis, or as punitive strikes when Egypt’s Asiatic client-kings had instigated local insurrections. It seems nevertheless that the Annals thus relate some kind of reasoned conquering politic, executed patiently and with a clear strategy, aiming to weaken the real power in Asia, the kingdom of Mitanni. Even if appearing only for the first time during Thutmose’s eighth campaign, it must have been this northern power who was, behind the scenes, the instigator of some of the conflicts, moving men and armies around the Levant in a gigantic chess game with Egypt.

The first enemy coalition, lead by the ruler of Kadesh, was severely weakened as a result of the defeat at the battle of Megiddo, inflicted by Thutmose in his Year 23, the city itself being captured and made into Egypt’s protectorate. The ruler of

Statue J2 on display in the Luxor Museum. This schist masterpiece shows the king wearing the nemes headress and shenyt kilt whilst carrying the imyt-per (‘house document’). [Photo: D. Rohl]
in boats built in the Phoenician ports and carried to the river boundary of the to all the Montu temples: a peripheral shrine at Tod and other installations at
The decoration of the ‘Botanical Garden Chamber’ in the Akhmen, showing plants and animals said to have been brought from Syria, indicates for the first time some kind of scientific interest in foreign fauna and flora. In some scenes at Karnak, Thutmose is shown writing his own annals in partnership with the scribe god, Thoth. His ability to handle hieroglyphic script is praised by the Vizier Rekhmire who then compares it favourably with that of both Thoth and Seshat. His interests in writing also turned him towards the ancient documents and records of the kingdom, making him a prime candidate as the first ‘historian’ of Ancient Egypt. This aspect of his personality is again reflected most clearly in his obvious reverence for the pharaonic ancestors through the many acts of commemoration recorded in his inscriptions and reliefs.

Pharaoh Menkheperre Thutmose was always destined to take a prominent place in the collective memory of the Egyptian state and was soon referred to as ‘the Father of Fathers’ in scenes of private devotion, this status continuing right down into Ptolemaic times. His military exploits and the civilised equilibrium he brought to Egypt became the ingredients of legend. In fact, he was, for the later rulers of Egypt, the ancestor king par excellence - a leader of the Egyptian people to be much revered. Indeed, it was Alexander the Great himself who chose to refer to Thutmose III as his ‘father’ in some of his monumental works at Karnak.

The Luxor statue which instigated this article cannot in any way signal the great achievements-to-be of this young and promising Egyptian monarch. We are not face to face with the mature and powerful king exemplified by another statue of Thutmose now in Cairo. Thutmose III appears here in an idealised freshness, eternally young, in the apparel of a king but striding with the supreme confidence of a deity. Yet, in spite of his youthful image, Thutmose already bears the serene majesty of a great ruler whilst also retaining the physical perfection of a living god. Smiling faintly, the face of the boy-king seems untouched by the ravages of time. The great achievement of the unsung sculptor of this magnificent masterpiece may yet have left his name to posterity but his work will live forever through his masterful representation of a legendary king in the making.

This article is dedicated to Professor Mohammed Ibrahim Bakr to offer my congratulations upon his appointment as Chairman of the Egyptian Antiquities Organisation.

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