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Thutmose III

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Introduction

Thutmose III, often eulogized as the “Napoleon of Egypt”, occupies a preeminent place in the annals of ancient history. Ascending to the throne as a child in a time of dynastic complexity and intrigue, Thutmose’s reign would ultimately become a defining epoch for the Egyptian empire. Over a ruling period that stretched more than half a century, he transformed Egypt into the preeminent power of the ancient Near East, not simply through the might of arms, but by forging a sophisticated administrative and cultural legacy.

This biography traces the remarkable life of a king whose story is as much about survival and adaptation as it is about conquest and grandeur. The rise of Thutmose III was far from straightforward; crowned as a child, his throne was held in proxy by his formidable stepmother, Hatshepsut, who ruled as pharaoh for over two decades. Her presence in his formative years, and the resulting co-regency, profoundly influenced Thutmose, preparing him for a future where both diplomacy and decisive action would prove essential.

The military exploits of Thutmose III are legendary. He waged at least seventeen campaigns during his reign, and his battlefield innovations and bold maneuvers expanded Egypt’s borders farther than any ruler before him. Yet, military genius was but one facet of his leadership. The enduring accounts carved onto the walls of Karnak reveal a meticulous strategist and a ruler invested in the orderly administration and cultural prosperity of his dominion. Each conquest brought tribute and talent to Egypt, enriching its people and its monuments.

Beyond the tumult of battlefields, Thutmose was a patron of architecture, art, and scientific curiosity. He undertook vast building projects, leaving his mark on iconic sites such as the Temple of Amun at Karnak, and promoted advances in art and craftsmanship. The wealth of this era allowed a flourishing of creativity in sculpture, tomb painting, and glass-making—lasting testaments to an age when Egypt reached the zenith of its power.

Yet, as with all great rulers, Thutmose III’s legacy is complex. His late effort to erase Hatshepsut’s reign from memory, the intricate affairs of his royal household, and the eventual succession reflect the personal and political dramas that colored his years on the throne. After his death, the tombs and temples he built, the annals he inscribed, and the empire he forged outlived him, inspiring awe in later centuries and securing his reputation as one of Egypt’s greatest pharaohs.

In the chapters that follow, this biography will explore the full arc of Thutmose III’s

life—from his enigmatic childhood and unprecedented conquests to his role as builder, patron, and statesman. By weaving together historical records, archaeological discoveries, and the latest scholarly debates, this book seeks not only to recount the achievements of a master tactician, but to illuminate the world that shaped and was shaped by Thutmose III.

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CHAPTER ONE: Early Life and Lineage

The sands of Egypt, in the fifteenth century before the Common Era, cradled a civilization already ancient, yet pulsating with a dynamism that would soon propel it to unprecedented heights. This was the world into which Menkheperre, later known to history as Thutmose III, was born. The Eighteenth Dynasty, of which he would become the sixth pharaoh, had risen from the ashes of foreign domination, forged in the crucible of liberation wars against the Hyksos. It was a lineage of warriors, builders, and divine kings, who had reasserted Egyptian might and were steadily extending its tendrils of influence beyond its traditional borders. The air itself seemed to hum with the promise of empire, a promise young Thutmose would one day spectacularly fulfil.

His birth, around 1481 BCE, occurred during a period of relative stability and prosperity, built upon the foundations laid by his formidable ancestors. The concept of Ma'at – divine order, justice, and harmony – was the bedrock of Egyptian society, and the pharaoh was its earthly guarantor. To be born into the royal sphere was to be born into a world where divinity and mortal existence intertwined, where the fate of the land was inextricably linked to the vitality and wisdom of its ruler. The child Thutmose, though his path to ultimate power was not yet clear, was nonetheless a scion of this potent tradition.

The story of Thutmose III's lineage properly begins with his grandfather, Thutmose I, a figure who cast a long shadow over the dynasty. Thutmose I was not born to the purple; he was a military man, possibly related to the preceding royal family through his mother, Seniseneb, whose own lineage is somewhat obscure. He ascended the throne through his marriage to Ahmose, a princess of the direct royal line, cementing his legitimacy. But it was his actions as pharaoh that truly defined him. A vigorous and ambitious ruler, Thutmose I campaigned aggressively, pushing Egypt's borders further than ever before. He led his armies deep into Nubia to the south, reaching past the Fourth Cataract of the Nile, securing valuable gold mines and establishing Egyptian dominance. To the north-east, he ventured into Syria, even crossing the Euphrates River – a feat that would resonate with his grandson decades later. He was a builder too, initiating significant projects at the great temple complex of Karnak, the religious heart of the empire, dedicated to the mighty Amun-Ra. Thutmose I, in essence, set a martial and expansionist tone for the dynasty, a blueprint for imperial ambition.

His son, Thutmose II, the father of Thutmose III, inherited this legacy, though his own reign would prove to be considerably shorter and, by most accounts, less impactful than that of his father or his eventual successor. Thutmose II was the son of Thutmose I and one of his secondary wives, Mutnofret. To strengthen his claim and adhere to dynastic tradition, he married his royal half-sister, Hatshepsut. She was the daughter

of Thutmose I and his Great Royal Wife, Ahmose, possessing the purest royal blood of her generation. Such sibling marriages were not uncommon in the Egyptian royal family, intended to consolidate power and maintain the sanctity of the divine bloodline.

Thutmose II's tenure as pharaoh, estimated to have lasted perhaps a dozen years, or even as few as three or four according to some Egyptologists, remains somewhat enigmatic. There are records of military actions during his reign, including campaigns in Nubia to quell rebellions and expeditions into the Sinai and possibly Palestine. However, it is unclear how much direct involvement Thutmose II had in these campaigns, or whether his health was a limiting factor. Some scholars suggest he may have been a less robust ruler, possibly overshadowed by the strong personalities around him, not least his ambitious wife, Hatshepsut. He continued his father's building program at Karnak, but on a more modest scale. His contributions, though present, are often eclipsed by the monumental works of his predecessors and successors.

It was into this royal household, with a warrior grandfather as a recent memory and a father whose reign was competent but not epoch-making, that the future Thutmose III was born. His mother was a woman named Iset, sometimes rendered as Isis. Crucially, Iset was not the Great Royal Wife; she was one of Thutmose II's secondary wives, or perhaps even a royal concubine. Her own parentage is unknown, and she appears in the historical record primarily due to her status as the king's mother. This distinction in maternal status was significant in the hierarchical world of the Egyptian court. The children of the Great Royal Wife typically held precedence in the line of succession. Hatshepsut had borne Thutmose II a daughter, Neferure, but it appears she had no surviving sons with him. The absence of a male heir from the principal queen would have subtly, or perhaps overtly, shifted the dynastic gaze towards sons born to other royal consorts.

Young Thutmose, therefore, entered the world with royal blood in his veins, unquestionably a king's son, but not initially positioned as the prime candidate for the throne if other, more dynastically "pure" options had been available. Life in the royal nursery and the wider palace complex would have been one of privilege, surrounded by attendants, tutors, and the pervasive influence of religious ritual. Even as a small child, he would have been instilled with the reverence due to his father, the living god, and made aware of the traditions and expectations that governed the royal house. Thebes, the vibrant southern capital, with its sprawling temple complexes and bustling activity, would have been the backdrop to these early, formative years.

The exact circumstances of his infancy are lost to the mists of time, as is often the case with royal children who are not yet the direct heir. We can surmise that his upbringing would have followed the standard pattern for high-born Egyptian children, with an emphasis on discipline, education, and religious observance. However, the

political currents within the palace, the subtle shifts in power and favour, would undoubtedly have been a constant, albeit perhaps unperceived by one so young, feature of his environment. The health of his father, Thutmose II, may have been a growing concern, adding an undercurrent of uncertainty to the court.

Then, around 1479 BCE, Pharaoh Thutmose II died. The exact cause of his death is not recorded, though his mummy, discovered in the Deir el-Bahri cache, has been examined, with some speculating about a possible skin disease, though this remains inconclusive. His passing, whatever the cause, precipitated an immediate dynastic question: who should succeed him? His primary heir, through his Great Royal Wife Hatshepsut, was their daughter Neferure. While Egypt had, on rare occasions, seen female rulers, the established tradition strongly favoured male succession. The gods needed a Horus, a male embodiment of kingship, to maintain Ma'at.

This is where young Thutmose, son of the secondary wife Iset, came to the fore. He was a male child of the deceased king, and in the absence of a son from Hatshepsut, he became the most viable, indeed perhaps the only, candidate. He was a mere toddler at the time, possibly only two or three years old – an age far too tender to comprehend the weighty responsibilities that were about to be thrust upon his small shoulders. The intricate machinery of the Egyptian state, the powerful priesthood of Amun, and the influential courtiers would have moved swiftly to ensure a smooth transition, or at least the appearance of one.

The accession of a boy-king was not without precedent, but it always presented challenges. A child could not perform the essential religious duties of the pharaoh, nor could he lead armies or make critical state decisions. The reins of power would, by necessity, have to be held by an adult, a regent who would rule in the young king's name until he came of age. The selection of this regent was of paramount importance, requiring someone with unimpeachable legitimacy, political acumen, and the trust of the court.

Thus, the little boy, Menkheperre, was crowned Thutmose III, Lord of the Two Lands, rightful successor to his father. His divine titles were proclaimed, and he was, in theory, the embodiment of Horus, the falcon god, ruler of all he surveyed. The reality, of course, was that he was a child, entirely dependent on the adults around him. The most prominent and powerful adult figure in his immediate orbit was his stepmother and aunt, Hatshepsut. As the widow of Thutmose II, the daughter of the revered Thutmose I, and a woman of formidable intelligence and ambition, she was the natural, and indeed the only logical, choice to guide the young pharaoh and the ship of state through the uncertain waters ahead. The stage was set for a period of regency, a common enough occurrence in royal histories. What was to follow, however, would be anything but common. The early years of Thutmose III's reign would be inextricably bound to the remarkable ascendancy of the woman who first stood as his guardian.

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