Thutmose III was not merely a warrior king. True, following in the footsteps of his grandfather, Thutmose I, he ushered in a policy of conquest and expansion, marching north to war a total of seventeen times over a twenty-year period. These military adventures were recorded in his Annals inscribed on the walls of the Temple of Amun at Karnak. No similar record exists of his campaigns south of Egypt, but he surely engaged in battle more than once to maintain Egyptian control there. Ultimately he formed a coalition of states that stretched south all the way to the Fourth Cataract on the upper Nile and north to the Euphrates River in Asia. In modern terms, he created an empire.

If surviving records are any indication of the truth – and some of them, such as the ‘botanical garden’ in his Festival Temple at Karnak, are too extraordinary to be mere bombast – he was also a man of intellect, interested in many and varied subjects. Much of the vast amount of wealth he received as spoils of war and tribute was bestowed on the gods, especially Amun, whom he credited with his numerous military victories. One would expect a man such as him to build memorable temples – and he did.

Prior to Year 22, he shared the throne with his aunt/stepmother Hatshepsut, playing what, on the surviving monuments, appears to be a subordinate role to the woman who called herself king. Their true relationship is unknown and controversial. Suffice it to say that after she ‘disappeared from history’ he completed some of her temples and had his name placed on others.

His most noteworthy architectural achievements were the three ‘Mansions of Millions of Years’ he built in or near the southern capital of Waset (modern Luxor). Although the phrase has traditionally been thought to signify a mortuary temple, at least two of the three structures may have served different purposes at differing times during and after his life.

**Henket-Ankh**

Early in his reign, while Hatshepsut was still serving as regent, he erected the first of his Mansions of Millions of Years, which scholars have long believed to be his mortuary temple. This was one of the first of a long row of similar structures constructed by later kings along the edge of the cultivated plain of western Thebes. Named Henket-Ankh, or ‘Offering Life’, it was built across the Nile from the Temple of Amun at Karnak, slightly south of the entrance to Deir el-Bahri. It was excavated twice in the Twentieth Century, but was in such a ruined state that neither effort revealed much about it. It is currently being re-excavated in a collaborative project between Egypt’s Ministry of State for Antiquities and the Academy of Fine Arts of Seville, Spain.

The temple, built of limestone and sandstone on the natural rock sloping up gradually from an earlier cemetery, is believed to have had two courts bisected by ramps leading to a rectangular temple. This was fronted by a portico with a roof supported by ten Osiride pillars, which may have been similar to those at Deir el-Bahri. Behind lay a court surrounded by a columned portico. Next came a hypostyle hall, then a small transverse hall, and finally the Amun sanctuary, which was probably flanked by rooms devoted to the...
deities Mut and Khonsu, the god's consort and son. This core area was apparently built of limestone, with fluted columns and corbel vaults. A false door (now at Medinet Habu, see below left) dedicated to the king was set in the rear wall of the sanctuary, whose ceiling was decorated with the hours of day and night. The temple contained a chapel with a high altar dedicated to the sun god. Remains of a temple to the goddess Hathor were found south of the main building. The sacred precinct was enclosed within walls partly cut from local rock and partly built of mudbrick.

Only minimal ruins of the entrance pylon and a portion of the enclosure wall still stand.

**Festival Hall**

The second and most easily accessible of Thutmose's three Mansions of Millions of Years can safely be called his greatest surviving architectural achievement. Known in antiquity as Akh-Menu, 'Most Splendid of Monuments', it is more popularly known now as the Festival Hall in Karnak's Amun temple complex (see above and below right).
Construction of this sandstone building began in the king’s twenty-fourth year, early in his sole reign. It lies at the eastern end of the Temple of Amun behind a large open space where once stood a Middle Kingdom temple. Its exact purpose is a matter for conjecture. It has been suggested that it was intended as a heb-sed jubilee temple, a memorial to Thutmose and his ancestor cult, or simply, because of its location at Karnak, a temple to Amun. No one can say for sure.

French archaeologists began systematic excavation of the huge temple complex in the middle of the Nineteenth Century and are still working there.

Akh-Menu was not added onto the Temple of Amun, but was a separate structure located close behind and built at right angles to the larger building. A path outside the god’s temple led to a lateral door in the west wall of the new edifice. The hypostyle hall, built across the east-west axis of the main structure, had a central nave supported by two rows of columns believed to represent tent poles and aisles to either side whose roofs were supported by shorter, square pillars. Clerestory windows provided light. A chamber located at the southwest corner of the hall was devoted to the king’s ancestors. This portion of the temple is in good condition, with the colors still vivid on columns and architraves. Early Christians converted this impressive hall into a church and traces of their presence can still be seen (see above right).

The chambers behind the hypostyle hall are in a considerably more ruined state. A suite of rooms dedicated to the funerary deity Sokar lies off the southeast corner of the hall; this includes a columned hall, three chapels, and storerooms.

Along the temple’s axis, a series of three chapels leads to a vestibule and the sanctuary dedicated to Amun. The walls of the vestibule, today known as the ‘botanical garden’ are noted for their reliefs of the plants and animals the king observed during his foreign campaigns. These have lost most of their colour, but are wonderful examples of the ancient artists’ ability to depict the creatures they observed (see above left). The images are so true to life that many have been identified by modern scholars. Dominating the sanctuary is a quartzite pedestal set into a niche, which once held the god’s statue.

The rooms at the northeast end of the building are heavily damaged but an upper room, probably dedicated to the rising sun, has been preserved. Against the back wall, the king erected a small external temple, which may have served...
as a place where ordinary people could worship the deity.

**Sacred Horizon**

The third Mansion of Millions of Years of Thutmose III, called *Djeser-Akhet*, ‘Sacred Horizon’, was erected late in the king’s reign. This temple, constructed of limestone and sandstone and dedicated to Amun, was perched on a platform above and between the temples of Mentuhotep and Hatshepsut, which abutted the high cliffs at the head of the sandy bay called Deir el-Bahri (see below). Scholars speculate that the structure was built to receive the barque of the god during the Beautiful Feast of the Valley, thereby replacing the mortuary temple of Hatshepsut as the ultimate destination of this important procession.

A massive rock slide occurred some three hundred years after *Djeser-Akhet* was built, destroying the structure. In the Eleventh Century the temple was quarried for stone and was later used as a cemetery for a nearby Coptic monastery. It was discovered in 1962 by the Polish Archaeological Mission.

Like the king’s mortuary temple of *Henket-Ankh*, the *Djeser-Akhet* temple was in an extremely ruinous condition. The sandstone blocks had been hauled away, while the poor quality limestone had broken or shattered. Bits and pieces of reliefs of an exceptionally high quality were scattered everywhere.

The temple was most likely built on three levels joined by two ramps. The lower ramp, whose base rested in a forecourt between those of the earlier, flanking temples, rose up the center of a porticoed terrace. A second ramp probably bisected a higher terrace and portico leading to the third level and the hypostyle hall. This hall stood on a large man-made platform that raised it 3.5 metres higher than Hatshepsut’s building and almost fourteen metres above that of Mentuhotep. The hall had a two-level...
roof supported by one hundred polygonal columns. Behind lay a chamber with four columns. A small room, perhaps an offering chamber, at the back of the building led to another room to the north that was probably the god's sanctuary.

Late in the Nineteenth Century, while excavating at Deir el-Bahri for the Egypt Exploration Fund, Edouard Naville discovered a small limestone chapel that Thutmose III created for Hathor in the guise of a cow protecting and nurturing the king. He came within centimetres of Djeser-Akhet, but never associated the brightly painted chapel with another structure. The reliefs covering the walls of the rectangular chamber reproduce those depicted in the Hathor chapel in Hatshepsut's mortuary temple, but on a considerably smaller scale. The vaulted ceiling is painted to represent the night sky. The chapel and the statue found within of Hathor as a cow are now in the Egyptian Museum in Cairo.

**Other Building Projects**

Thutmose III's Mansions of Millions of Years represent only a small portion of the many structures he built through his lifetime. In addition to Akh-Menu, which increased the size of the temple of Amun by almost thirty percent, he made innumerable alterations to the heart of that temple. He added pylons and obelisks, shrines, way stations, a sacred lake, and many and varied other structures located in or associated with the temple complex.

On the West Bank of the Nile, he excavated and decorated a unique tomb (KV34) in the Valley of the Kings. He constructed or altered several structures ritually significant to the cults of Amun and other gods.

He built or modified temples all along the Nile, displaying his devotion to deities worshipped throughout the land. Many of these structures vanished during the rebuilding efforts of subsequent kings, having been torn down to make way, and sometimes provide building materials, for new and grander temples. Others have been lost to time and to past quarrying, while a few may still be buried beneath the Nile silt or under the desert sands. A number remain, some as substantial ruins while the rest survive as mere remnants.

His most important structures may seem small and unimpressive when compared to the immense buildings erected by later kings such as Amenhotep III and Ramesses II, but at the time they were built, they were the epitome of architectural design and artistic elegance. And they were consistent in size with other structures of the time.

Whether built by Thutmose III alone or with Hatshepsut, these temples were rich in architectural design: tall obelisks, spacious sunlit courts, graceful pillars and columns, and elegant statues and painted reliefs. Their appeal lay in dignity and good taste rather than enormity. We can but feel sorrow for those that have been lost.

**Betty Winkelman**

Betty has a life-long interest in ancient Egypt and is the author (under the pseudonym of Lauren Haney) of a series of Egyptian mystery novels set in the Eighteenth Dynasty during the dual reign of Hatshepsut and Thutmose III.

All photos, except where indicated: RBP.
Copyright of Ancient Egypt Magazine is the property of Ancient Egypt Magazine and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.