



## TURNED WEAPONS IN EGYPTIAN ICONOGRAPHY – THE DECORUM OF DOMINANCE

Richard H. Wilkinson  
University of Arizona

### ABSTRACT

*While numerous studies have been published on Egyptian weaponry over the years, relatively few have looked at symbolic aspects of the use and display of weapons in Egyptian art and in actual combat. In the 1990's the present author produced a series of studies on the symbolic use of the "turned bow" showing its actual and representational use as a symbol of dominance and submission. The present article greatly expands that research by examining the use of other weapons in similar circumstances. The results confirm the conclusions of the earlier studies of the bow and show that all weapons having a "front" and "back" were used in the same manner for the display of dominance. Although the present article considers only the evidence from Egypt, a broader significance of its findings is suggested by the fact that the earlier research showed the use of the bow in dominance display was part of a lingua franca of gesture symbolism used throughout many areas of the ancient Near East and the Mediterranean world, from Achaemenid Persia in the east to Greece in the west.*

### INTRODUCTION

Well over twenty years ago the present writer published a series of articles on the "turned bow" in Egyptian art.<sup>1</sup> Those studies examined the curious orientation and positioning of the war bow in representations of kings and deities in ancient Egypt (as well as in the art of other ancient Near Eastern and Eastern Mediterranean cultures) and pointed out the way in which the weapon was apparently used to reflect the status of the holder of the bow in relation to other figures.

Now, after a small delay, it is a pleasure to offer this short article<sup>2</sup> in honor of my friend and colleague Nanno Marinatos in order to show that the same principle of dominance "turning" – with exactly the same manifestations – is also to be found in Egyptian representations of subjects holding edged weapons such as the *kbepesh* sickle sword, the battle ax, and bladed mace. This fact was not immediately obvious when the turned bow research was completed, due to both the extremely large corpus of evidence that needed to be examined when all weapons are considered, and the fact that Egyptian representational display of edged weapons exhibits some seeming anomalies which are now more fully understood after further research.

Although the principle of the turned bow was thoroughly examined in the earlier series of articles, it is briefly reiterated here for the sake of completeness in the present study, and to introduce the concept of gestural "turning" in the edged weapons (i.e., those having a blade with a "front" and "back").

### THE WAR BOW

In formal contexts in Egyptian art<sup>3</sup> and in the art of a number of other ancient Near Eastern cultures,<sup>4</sup> the dominant individual in group representations invariably holds the bow backwards with the bowstring turned toward the subordinate individuals, as in Figure 1, where the god Horus holds the turned bow toward the king and the prisoner before him.<sup>5</sup> Less dominant figures hold the bow naturally, with the body of the bow pointing outward and the string toward themselves, as in Figure 2 where the king holds the bow naturally in the presence of Amun. However, the Egyptian king turns his bow away from himself and toward his captives, or other subordinate individuals, in the "turned bow" gesture when no god is present, as in Figure 3. The bow is held in exactly the same manner – turned away from dominant figures and toward subsidiary or subjugated individuals – under the same circumstances in ancient Mesopotamian, Persian and Hellenistic Greek art.

Figure 3 shows another aspect of the symbolism of the turned bow which is found in many New Kingdom battle scenes. In these representations surrendering enemy troops are often shown holding their own bows above their heads, with the string toward themselves, as if to place themselves under the turned bow and thus symbolically under the dominance of the conquering Egyptian king. In this instance, the victorious Seti I snares a Libyan with his bow turned in the gesture of dominance (there would be no practical reason to hold a bow backwards in the midst

of pitched battle), while the large enemy figure -- who functions as a type of the enemy in general -- places himself under his own bow in abject capitulation. Such depictions in Egyptian art indicate that this gesture of surrender was understandable to a number of ancient Near Eastern cultures, just as raising one's hands in surrender is internationally understandable today.

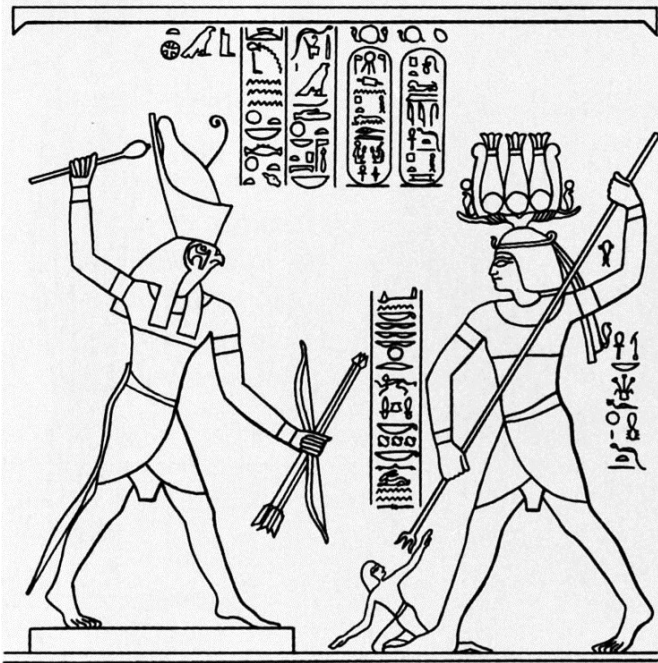


Figure 1: Ptolemy VIII Euergetes II destroys a prisoner before the god Horus-Behdet. Edfu (Drawn by Troy Sagrillo).

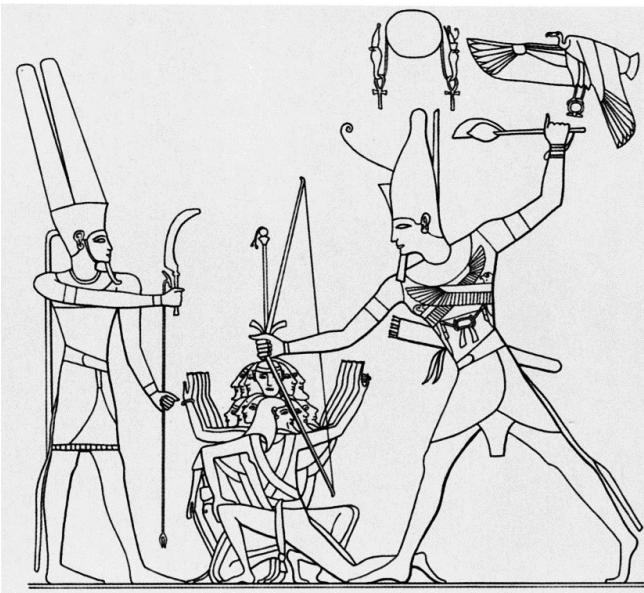


Figure 2: Ramesses II with prisoners of war, before Amun. Large Temple, Abu Simbel (Drawn by Troy Sagrillo).

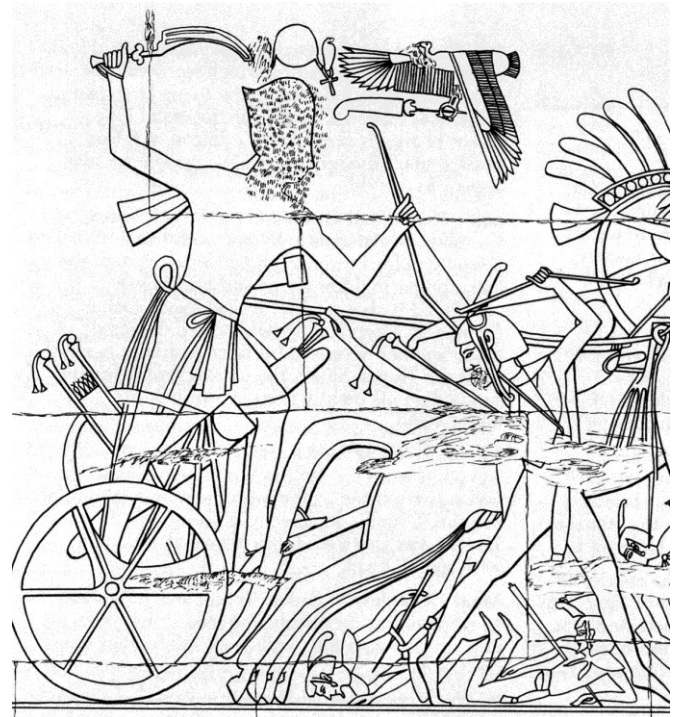


Figure 3: Seti I defeating Libyans. Temple of Amun at Karnak (Drawn by Troy Sagrillo).

#### THE BATTLE AX

The study of a large number of scenes depicting the ax<sup>6</sup> most often used in warfare by the Egyptians – the piercing ax – shows that exactly the same pattern as has been identified in representations of the turned bow may also be found in the dominance turning of this weapon. In Figure 4 we see the normal manner in which the ax would be held and carried with the cutting edge of the blade facing forward toward the enemy. That these troops and others in representations of actual battle usage<sup>7</sup> are all depicted holding the ax in the same way demonstrates that this is normal usage. In representations of captive smiting scenes where the ax is held aloft, at the top of the arc of striking, the weapon is also held naturally with the edge of the blade uppermost, as we will see is the case with all other edged weapons.

On the other hand, when we consider scenes such as that shown in Figure 5, where the king holds the ax before subdued captives, we see that the weapon is held unnaturally, turned backwards so that the cutting edge of the blade faces away from the prisoners. Exactly the same pose is found, for example, in the same kind of setting in the representation of the king with prisoners at Beit el-Wali,<sup>8</sup> on either side of the window of royal appearances at Medinet Habu,<sup>9</sup> and elsewhere. Note that the weapon could not be used against the captive subjects as it is held – just as is the case when the bow is turned – so these examples of the turned ax would appear to represent the same aspect of implied dominance over individuals who are denigrated as being no threat to the weapon holder.

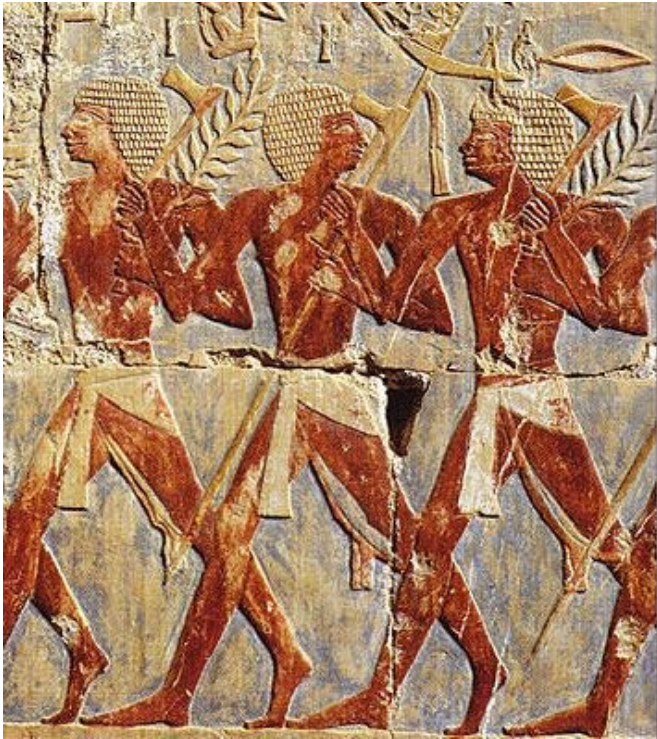


Figure 4. Egyptian infantry holding battle axes in normal carry position. Temple of Hatshepsut, Dcir el Bahri (UAEE Archive).

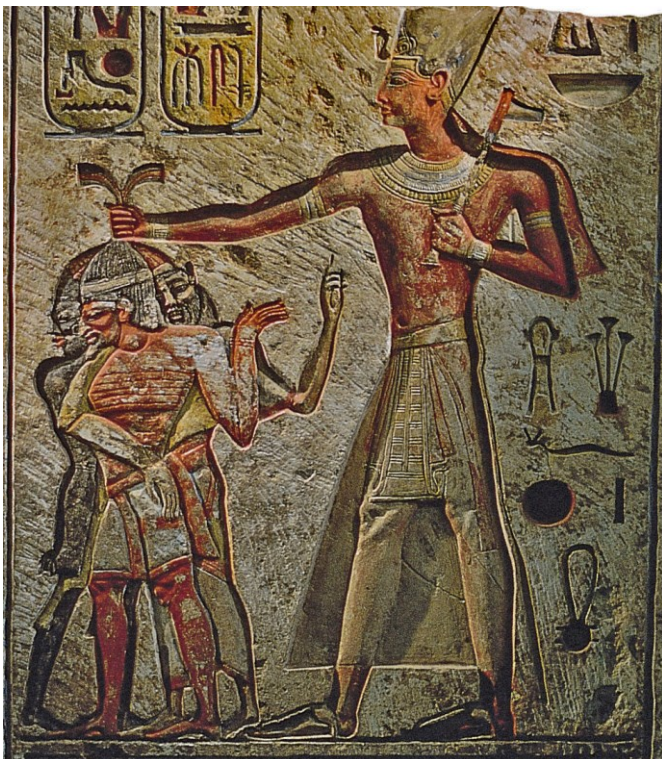


Figure 5. Ramesses II holding battle ax in turned position before Nubian captives. Egyptian Museum, Cairo, JE 46189 (UAEE Archive).

#### THE BLADED MACE

The exact nature of this weapon is sometimes said to be uncertain as actual examples do not seem to have been discovered,<sup>10</sup> and the representational evidence can be somewhat unclear. In most of its depictions, however, the weapon looks like a round-headed stone mace with an inset blade. Partridge describes it as such, but states that Petrie surmised that the small blade may have been of iron and that it may have been strengthened and given additional weight by adding an oval of bronze to each side.<sup>11</sup>

That the blade of this type of mace was held in a head of stone or bronze is certainly more likely than that the representations depict a single blade with a circular opening. Arguing against that interpretation are the facts that the blade, if not protruding from a mace head, often appears so narrow where it joins the haft as to be unsupported and weak, and such a baton would have a very light head – even with an iron blade – that would limit its effectiveness. Further, relief examples show the outward rounding of the mace head into which the blade is set; and finally, in late examples such as the representations of Ptolemy XII Neos Dionysos smiting captives on the Pylon of the Temple of Horus at Edfu and the First Pylon of the Temple of Isis at Philae, the blade clearly projects out and away from the mace head in such a way that it cannot merely be cut out from a single blade.

In any event, the ancient bladed mace is not found outside of Egypt, and it is infrequently found in Egyptian representations relative to the appearance of other weapons. But the bladed mace does appear in a number of scenes of “smiting” enemy captives, as seen at Abu Simbel (Figures 2 and 6) and in other instances such as the representations of Ramesses III smiting captives on the exterior of the north and south towers of the first pylon<sup>12</sup> and elsewhere at Medinet Habu.<sup>13</sup>



Figure 6. Ramesses II holds a bladed mace in smiting pose. Large Temple, Abu Simbel (UAEE Archive).

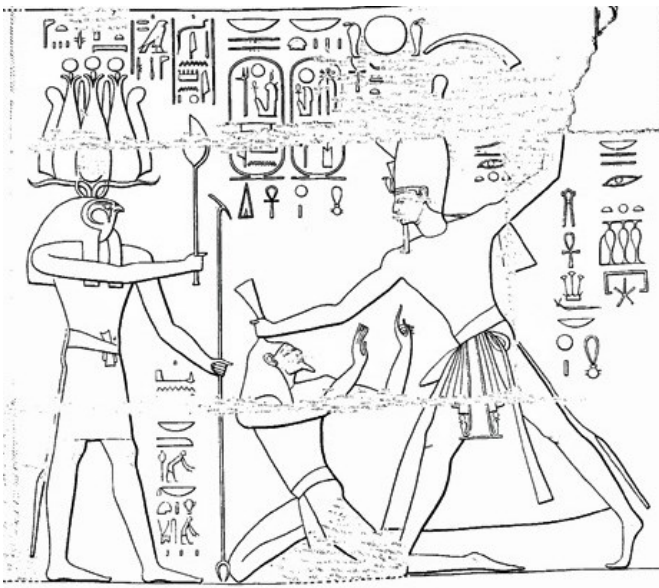


Figure 7. The god Amun Ra Horakhty handing a bladed mace to Ramesses III (After Epigraphic Survey, 1932).

In these smiting scenes the bladed mace is invariably held up in natural smiting pose, with the blade edge uppermost (as is also seen with the ax and the *khopesh*). The bladed mace is also sometimes found in scenes of kings appearing before gods. In these cases the mace is usually held down at waist height in such a way that dominance poses or protocols are clearly not involved. The weapon is rarely held by gods in New Kingdom Egyptian art, however, and although a very few cases do exist, they need explanation. Figure 7 is an example and shows the god holding a bladed mace with the bladed “front” being held toward the captive and Ramesses III in a smiting scene at Medinet Habu. While the manner in which the mace is held (with blade facing outward as though for use) may seem to be contrary to the rule of dominance, i.e., turning of the weapon away from subordinate figures, the reason for the exception is clear. The inscription accompanying this representation indicates that the god gives the king a bladed mace<sup>14</sup> and in such cases (as will be seen below in the discussion of the *khopesh*), the weapon is proffered as expected, in a normal manner, without any formal turning as is present in static dominance poses.

#### THE *KHEPESH* SICKLE SWORD

Along with the bow, the *khopesh* sickle sword<sup>15</sup> is one of the most frequently depicted weapons in formal New Kingdom scenes of pharaonic empowerment by a god and of the king’s concurrent dominance over enemies. The weapon is depicted in a great many captive-smiting scenes with the sharpened edge of the blade (the outer curved surface, as opposed to the inner curved surface of an agricultural sickle) facing upward at the top of the arc of striking (in identical manner to that found in depictions of the ax and bladed mace), as seen in Figures 3 and 7.

When a god holds the *khopesh* before the king or before the king and enemies, however, the deity usually holds the weapon turned, as would be expected according to the principle of the turned bow, so that the sharpened cutting edge of the weapon faces back toward himself – as we have seen with all other weapons that are turned in a classic dominance gesture. We saw the sickle sword turned in this manner in Figure 2 where Amun Ra holds the *khopesh* before the king and his prisoners in a pose that is repeated many times in New Kingdom art. This formal dominance pose stands in contrast to the manner in which the *khopesh* was actually held in striking enemies, as we see in the stylized examples in Figures 3 and 7 and in the somewhat more naturalistic representation of Ramesses II slaying a Libyan from Beit el Wali (Figure 8).<sup>16</sup>

The only significant exceptions to the “turned weapon” rule in depictions in which the *khopesh* appears are found in representations where the weapon is actually being given to the king by the god, rather than being held in a formal dominance pose.<sup>17</sup> As was already seen with the bladed mace, when the weapon is actually being handed to the king by the god, the *khopesh* is not turned, but held naturally with the cutting edge outward toward the king. We see this same principle applied to the *khopesh* in Figure 9 where the god (probably Montu) gives the sickle sword to the king (as is confirmed in the text before him), along with the notched palm branch and symbols of long reign.

An explicit example of the transfer of the *khopesh* from god to king can be seen in the damaged depiction of Ramesses III before Amun at Medinet Habu where the god, in commissioning the



Figure 8. Ramesses II smites a Libyan with *khopesh* held in normal position of usage. Beit el Wali (After Rickett et al., 1967, pl. 14).

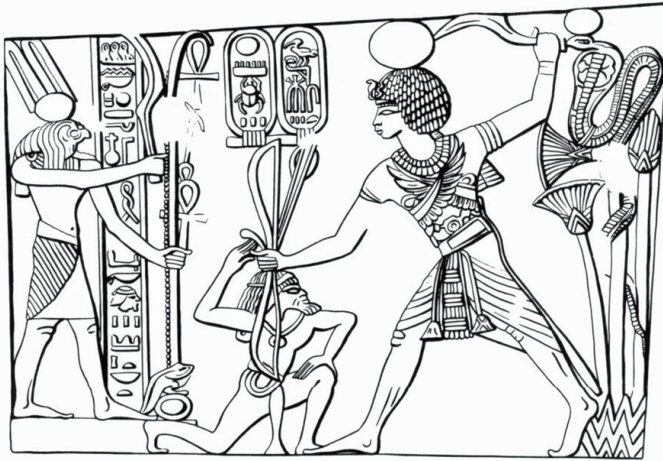


Figure 9. Thutmose IV given the *khepesh* by a god. Ivory wrist guard from Amarna (Drawn by Troy Sagrillo).

king to undertake a Libyan war, directly hands the sickle sword to the king in such a manner that the weapon is in the actual process of transfer from the god's hand to the king's.<sup>18</sup> As would be expected, the blade of the weapon is not turned away from the king but toward him. The same situation is also found on columns on the south side of the first court at Medinet Habu where Amun Ra and other gods proffer the sickle sword in the same manner, and the inscriptions tell us that the weapon is being given to the king.<sup>19</sup> In cases such as these where two images of the king before a god or gods are shown in juxtaposed representations, sometimes the texts alternate so that one refers to the *khepesh* while the other refers to "all the foreign lands" or some such gift being given to the king. In such cases the texts are simply following the typical Egyptian

varying (both iconographic and textual) found in juxtaposed images, and the underlying transfer of the weapon is clearly identical in both cases.

#### CONCLUSION

The present article has shown that Egyptian iconography is careful to distinguish specific poses which were doubtless utilized in real life as means of declaring dominance relationships in group settings where weapons were depicted. The examples given show that in most cases Egyptian representations of edged weapons such as the battle ax, bladed mace and *khepesh* sickle sword carefully conform to the same principles of dominance usage as is found in representations of the war bow. This fact offers further support for the reality of the dominance gestures lying behind the turned bow in Egyptian iconography, and also shows that all weapons which have a clear front and back could be used in the same manner as representational markers of dominance.

It is important to realize that the examples upon which these conclusions are based were mainly taken from the New Kingdom representational corpus. Parallel scenes from later periods do not always show the turned weapon consistently in every situation.<sup>20</sup> In most later cases which exhibit careful archaizing, however, the pattern is followed perfectly (as in Figure 1). It seems likely, therefore, that the meaning of the turned weapon as a dominance gesture was gradually forgotten over the centuries once Egypt left her New Kingdom era of international power. Nevertheless, within the corpus of New Kingdom representations and in later representations based on them, it is clear that edged weapons were frequently used – as is the case with the bow – in the symbolic display of royal and divine dominance.



Figure 10. Two of a series of juxtaposed images of Ramesses III smiting captives before gods. Medinet Habu (After Epigraphic Survey, 1932, pl. 122).

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> See the bibliographic entries under R. H. Wilkinson.
- <sup>2</sup> The author gratefully acknowledges the research assistance of Noreen Doyle in the preparation of this study. Ms. Doyle helped in combing through and analyzing a great many images in the course of the research for the present article, as well as in contributing a number of valuable sources and kindly commenting on a draft of the article in terms of all the representations reviewed. I would also like to thank the anonymous reviewers of this journal for their comments on the ms. Last, but not least, I gratefully acknowledge Dr. Troy Sagrillo for several figures in the text – drawings he originally produced for the book *Symbol and Magic in Egyptian Art* (Wilkinson, 1994).
- <sup>3</sup> See Wilkinson, 1988-1, 1988-2, 1991 *passim*.
- <sup>4</sup> See Wilkinson, 1988-1, 1989, 1991 *passim*.
- <sup>5</sup> The fact that the bow is held here only in a “ready” pose (as opposed to the mace being raised for immediate use) does not explain the fact that the bow is unnaturally turned in the god’s hand.
- <sup>6</sup> Kühnert-Eggebrecht, 1969, provides examples through time.
- <sup>7</sup> See, for example, Ricke et al., 1967, pl. 12, lower center.
- <sup>8</sup> Ricke et al., 1967, pl. 11.
- <sup>9</sup> Epigraphic Survey, 1932, pl. 111.
- <sup>10</sup> So Partridge, 2002, pp. 50-51.
- <sup>11</sup> Partridge, 2002, p 51.
- <sup>12</sup> Epigraphic Survey, 1932, pl. 85 and pl. 105.
- <sup>13</sup> Epigraphic Survey, 1932, pl. 111; Epigraphic Survey, 1970, pl. 598, pl. 599, etc.; Ricke et al., 1967, pl. 27.
- <sup>14</sup> The text beneath the god’s arm implies that a presentation of the mace must be taking place. I thank J. Brett McClain who kindly checked this text and who read it as follows: di.n=(i) [n=k t3] nb m ksw ḥd=k ḥr tp.(w) wr.(w)=sn. [To you] (I) have given every [land] in obeisance, your mace being upon the head(s) of their chief(s). Because the king holds not a mace, but a *khepes* sword, “your mace” referenced by the god is clearly the mace the god proffers to the king.
- <sup>15</sup> For bibliography and an excellent recent discussion of this weapon see Vogel, 2013.
- <sup>16</sup> Ricke et al., 1967, pl. 11.
- <sup>17</sup> For later dissonance with this rule, see note 18 below.
- <sup>18</sup> Epigraphic Survey, 1930, pl. 13.
- <sup>19</sup> Epigraphic Survey, 1932, pl. 122.
- <sup>20</sup> This may occasionally occur at the close of the New Kingdom (see Epigraphic Survey, 1981, pl. 169), though the discrepancy mainly occurs in later representations such as those of Osorkon (see Epigraphic Survey, 1954, pl. 15) and subsequent rulers.

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