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ROYAL INSCRIPTIONS

النقوش الملكية

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ROYAL INSCRIPTIONS

النقوش الملكية

Shih-Wei Hsu

Königsinschriften
Inscriptions royales

Royal inscriptions are historical records concerning ancient Egyptian kings. Throughout the pharaonic period, they were carved on durable media, including temple walls, stelae, obelisks, statues, and objects. Depending on genres and styles, they could serve various purposes. Royal inscriptions were initially primarily pictorial, but over time became entirely textual. Since they were created for kings, they provide a rich source of historical information about the nature of kingship and royal ideology. For modern scholars, these royal records are invaluable aids in reconstructing ancient Egyptian history and in understanding royal deeds, activities, and discourse.

النقوش الملكية هي سجلات تاريخية تتعلق بملوك مصر القديمة. خلال العصر الفرعوني، كانت تُنقش على أماكن مقاومة لعوامل الزمن، مثل جدران المعابد، واللوحات، والمسلات، والتماثيل، وبعض القطع الأثرية. وبحسب الأنماط والأساليب المتبعة، فقد كانت تخدم أغراضًا متعددة. كانت النقوش الملكية في البداية ذات طابع تصويري في الغالب، لكنها مع مرور الوقت تحوّلت إلى نصوص مكتوبة بالكامل. ونظرًا لأنها أُعدت خصيصًا للملوك، فهي تُمثّل مصدرًا غنيًا بالمعلومات التاريخية حول طبيعة الحكم الملكي والأيدولوجيا المرتبطة به. وبالنسبة للباحثين المعاصرين، تُمثّل هذه السجلات الملكية أدوات ثمينة لإعادة بناء تاريخ مصر القديمة وفهم إنجازات الملوك ونشاطهم وخطابهم السياسي والديني.

Royal inscriptions are usually considered to be texts that record a ruler's official activities, competence, and qualifications. These records were intended to endure and thus were usually inscribed on durable materials rather than fragile everyday writing media. However, Egyptologists have avoided defining the term "royal inscriptions" and rarely use it, preferring instead "historical texts," "political literature," or "narratives." Van Seters (1983: 139-141) acknowledged that the category of royal inscriptions was tentative but asserted

that the definition of royal inscriptions is that they reflect the precise intentions of the kings. Eyre (1996: 432) argued that in historical inscriptions, "literary" often contrasts with "historical," referring to fictional or creatively shaped elements that prioritize storytelling over factual accuracy or ideology. In certain historical inscriptions, "literary" refers not to the content but to the formal structure, describing texts that follow a unified narrative format, such as the *Königsnovelle*, as opposed to those texts that are less formally structured (Assmann 1974: 118). However, Hsu (2012:

269) regarded royal inscriptions as a form of historical literature that developed over time, encompassing their purpose, intended audience, and potential utility for reconstructing ancient Egyptian history (Lichtheim 1963; Hoffmeier 1992; Popko 2014).

Definition of Royal Inscriptions


The ancient Egyptians did not name or define genres of historical texts, except for “annals,” which they termed *gnwt* (Redford 1986: 65-79). Classifying ancient Egyptian texts is challenging, and no precise and widely accepted definition of ancient Egyptian royal inscriptions exists (Schenkel 1996; Assmann 1974; Parkinson 1996: 297; Blumenthal 1998). Unlike “nonroyal inscriptions” (Baines 1997: 136-141), royal inscriptions are, as the name would suggest, conventional texts associated with a king. However, not all texts in which a king is mentioned or named are regarded as royal inscriptions, as the king might play a secondary role in the narratives of some inscriptions, and a king’s name is sometimes used merely as a dating device (Quack 2010: 6-7). Such texts do not promote the king’s supreme position, actions, or public image, but instead focus on events led by other primary figures.


In a broad sense, royal inscriptions were created to commemorate the deeds and achievements of pharaohs, assert their divine authority, and communicate their connection to the gods. The king is the central figure throughout these texts, with his names, titles, epithets, and the dates of his actions recorded in detail. These inscriptions were often lapidary (Stauder-Porchet and Stauder 2020), written in hieroglyphs on durable surfaces such as temples, stelae, obelisks, sculptures, and other monuments, in accessible places where audiences could see them (Eyre 1990: 138). Occasionally, royal inscriptions were written in the hieratic script on other materials, such as leather, tablets, or papyrus. Regardless of medium, they were rarely hidden from sight as they were intended to be visible for eternity. They provide significant information about the actions of kings,

including their outstanding deeds or heroic exploits, as well as their political ideas, wars, building programs, dedications, offerings, and festivals to the gods. These inscriptions were thus regarded as a form of “prospective memory (*prospektive Erinnerung*)” (Assmann 1992: 169). Some inscriptions found in non-royal tombs feature the king as the protagonist; among these, some appear to be royal inscriptions, given to the official as a token of the king’s largesse (Stauder-Porchet 2017: 35-73; 2021). Since royal inscriptions presented historical accounts that addressed a particular political issue or presented a strong political argument (Eyre 1996: 423), they presumably provide a chronological framework for the “writing of history” (Hoffmeier 1992: 291; Popko 2014: 4-10) and can inspire new thoughts on historiography (Van Seters 1983; Baines 2019).

The earliest royal inscriptions were primarily pictorial, supplemented by minimal text, e.g., brief and formulaic inscriptions bearing just the king’s name and titles to label objects and buildings, identifying the king as donor or benefactor. Over time, continuous inscriptions on monuments emerged, influenced by other written genres, including administrative and legal texts like royal annals and decrees, and literary forms from the early Middle Kingdom on. Therefore, in a narrow sense, “royal inscription” is the generic term for the following text genres, which correspond to the above-mentioned features but also have their own specific characteristics:

- Labeling inscriptions (*Vermerke*): These are non-sentential in form and their meaning arises from their contextual association with the object or referent to which they are attached. Jansen-Winkel (1990) distinguished between labels that referred to a specific “object” (labelings: King NN/[this is] King NN/God NN) and those that referenced a specific event (commemorative labels), which can be divided further into two groups: event and person labelings (*Ereignis-* and *Personenvermerke*).
- Annals: These are texts compiling the most significant events of each year of a king’s

reign, arranged in chronological order. The events include royal journeys, such as the “Following of Horus” (*šms-Hr*), rituals and festivals, dedications, and campaigns (Hsu 2010: 83-85). Each year was named after a particular event. The annals were usually carved on stone (e.g., the Palermo Stone, annals of Amenemhat II, annals of Thutmose III) and provide evidence for an Egyptian “sense of history” (Baines 2008: 34). The Egyptians referred to them as *gnwt*  (Redford 1984; 1986: 65-79).

- Orders and decrees: These texts, loosely categorized, could comprise official written orders issued by the king to be carried out by the royal court; a narrative by the pharaoh recounting his achievements to an audience; a straightforward letter from the king offering political advice to a high official; or a response to a flattering letter of greetings (Vernus 2013: 260). Royal decrees contained royal commands typically expressed in the verb form *wđ* (Vernus 1991: 239). The term *wđ-nswt*  is translated (after Vernus 2013) as “royal command.”

- *Königsnovellen*: A clear definition for this category of texts is still under dispute. The *Königsnovelle* has been defined as a narrative presentation of an episodic aspect of royal action, applicable to various royal deeds (Loprieno 1996: 279). Stauder (2021) proposes a more restrictive definition, viewing it as a textual modality centering on the king’s performative words uttered in ceremonial public contexts and followed by immediate tangible effects. *Königsnovellen* are often regarded as a group of texts related to royal propaganda, as they intended to portray the king as the protagonist (Jansen-Winkel 1993: 107) and were usually displayed in public areas.

- Self-praises and eulogies: These inscriptions, in which the king asserts his divine right to rule, his accomplishments, and his connection to the gods, were written in the first-person singular and addressed to an often unnamed audience (Jansen-Winkel 1994: 169). They illustrate deeds that, in the eyes of the king,

are especially significant, without specifying any temporal and/or causal relationships.

Visual and Written Presentations of Kingship

The earliest royal representations are pictorial (Hendrickx, Darnell, and Gatto 2012). Iconographic records of royal acts with varied motifs such as “smiting the enemies” (fig. 1) (Hall 1986; Schoske 1994) emerged in the late Predynastic Period, providing a form of “illustrated history” (Van Seters 1983: 140). This term refers not to factual chronicles but to generic forms serving to historicize the king’s identity. Large reliefs of the king “smiting the enemies” first appear in the Third Dynasty. Reliefs on the causeway of the Fifth Dynasty funerary temple of Sahura depict royal activities such as hunting, trapping, fishing, and harvesting; the king’s expedition to Punt; and military exercises and the training of nautical crews (el-Awady 2009). King Sahura is even depicted as a griffin trampling his enemies (Berlin *ÄM* 21832; Borchardt 1913: 21-23, 83-84). These reliefs have been interpreted as the earliest visual examples of the *Königsnovelle* (Spalinger 2011: 363-369).



Figure 1. A famous scene of “smiting the enemies” from the Narmer Palette.

Inscriptions of royal names on various surfaces are known from as early as late Dynasty 0. Short labels inscribed on ivory in the First Dynasty, then on natural rock from the Old Kingdom on, celebrate royal deeds using the infinitive verb form, for example, *d3(r) h3swt* “suppressing the foreign lands” (fig. 2) (Gardiner and Peet 1917: pl. II, 5) and *sqr h3swt nbwt* “striking all the foreign lands” (fig. 3) (Gardiner and Peet 1917: pls. V, 8; VI, 10; VIII, 16). The Egyptian state monumentalized various types of written records. These included year names and annals: year-by-year records used for administrative and commemorative purposes. Royal decrees and state archives, which were originally written on papyrus and personally sealed by the king, could later be inscribed on stone or stelae as well. However, with the emergence of longer narrative texts (for example, the so-called *Königsnovelle*), a broader range of royal deeds, such as victories in foreign lands, triumphant expeditions, the completion of building and restoration projects, and the accession to the throne, came to light. This development peaked in the New Kingdom, particularly during the Ramesside Period, with monumental pictorial and written presentations of the king’s military prowess organized into three main themes: before the battle, during the battle, and after the battle (Heinz 2001). These scenes, accompanied by captioning as well as self-standing inscriptions, adorned pylons and outer walls of temples. The combination of pictorial and written narratives as well as the choice of media and locations allowed generations of both literate and illiterate people to understand the kings’ accomplishments and ideology (fig. 4).

Content and Purpose of Royal Inscriptions

Royal inscriptions had multiplex contents, often combining the following themes:

- Divine legitimacy: Kings often claimed to be chosen by or descended from the gods, and inscriptions emphasized this divine connection, regardless of whether rulers justified their legitimacy through hereditary bloodline, their effectiveness as rulers, or

mythical foundations (Gundlach 1997: 11). The inscriptions of the divine birth and coronation of Hatshepsut demonstrate her legitimization by the god Amun through the divine-birth legend and show that Amun confirmed her as pharaoh through a coronation oracle (Sethe 1906a: 216:9-234:10). In the Dream Stela, Thutmose IV claimed his kingdom was granted to him by his father, Hor-em-akhet-Kheperi-Ra-Atum (Helck 1957a: 1542:17-1543:5). The Coronation Inscription of Horemheb (Turin Museum Catalog 1379; Helck 1958b: 2114:9-2116:8) reveals that he was acknowledged and elevated by Horus of Hutnesu (today’s el-Kom el-Ahmal Sawaris), his local deity, who introduced him to Amun during the annual Opet Festival in Thebes. In more conventional terms, Ramesses II asserted in his inscriptions that Ra had chosen him “while he was (yet) in the egg” (Kitchen 1979: 327:11-14). Similarly, Sethnakhte was described as Ra’s own flesh-and-blood son, created to rule the entire land (Papyrus Harris I, 75:6-7; Grandet 1994: 335). Crucial to every king’s reign was his legitimacy, which was rooted in his relationship with the most important gods, reinforcing the institution of divine kingship.



Figure 2. The scene of “smiting the enemies” of King Sneferu from Wadi Maghara, Sinai, with the labeling inscription *d3(r) h3swt*, “suppressing the foreign lands.”

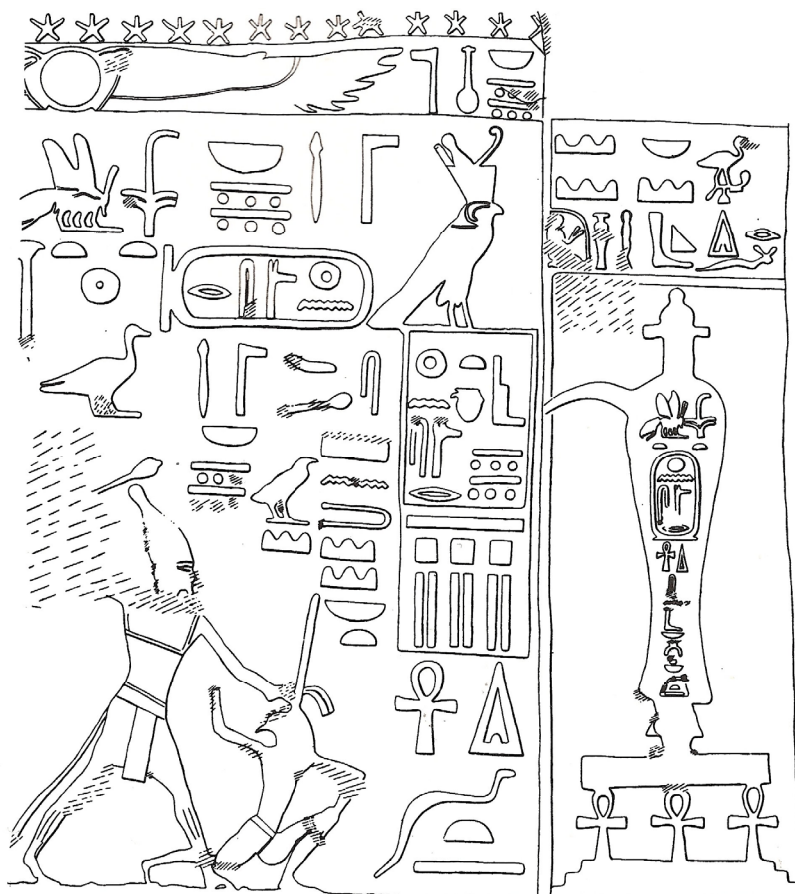


Figure 3. The scene of “smiting the enemies” of King Neusera Isi from Wadi Maghara, Sinai, with the labeling inscription *sqr ḥswt nbwt*, “striking all the foreign lands.”

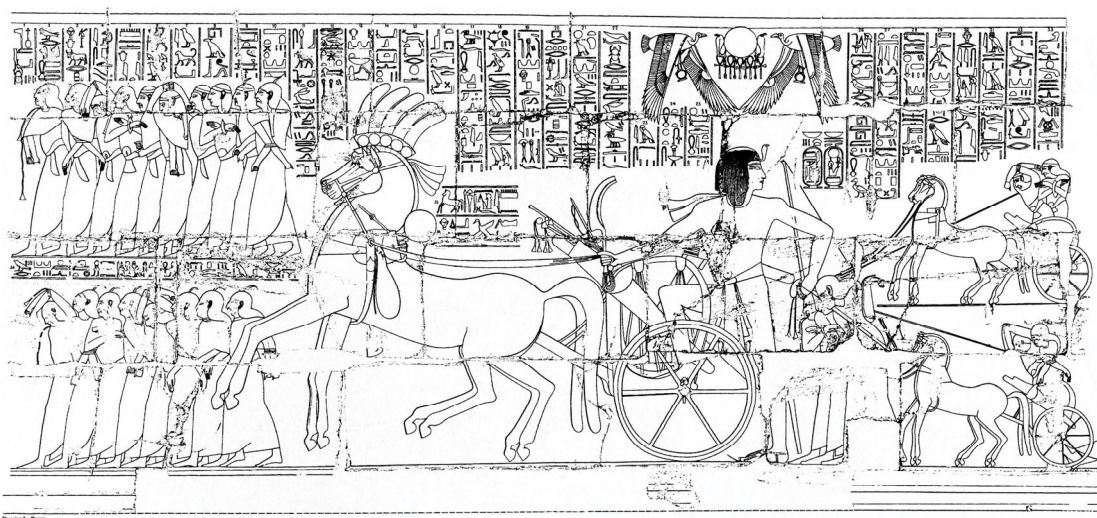


Figure 4. Sety I returning from battle with Hittite prisoners.

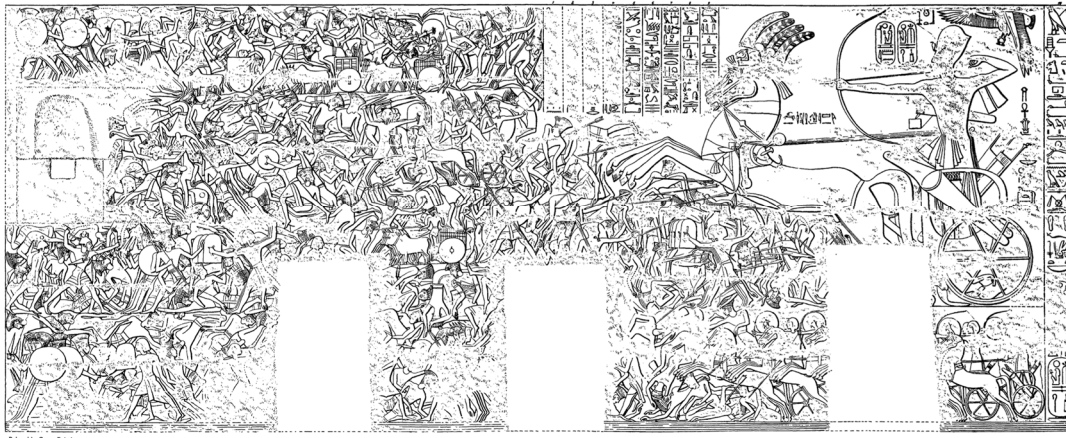


Figure 5. The battle of Ramesses III against the Sea Peoples.

- **Military achievements:** Starting with Kamose, at the dawn of the New Kingdom, many inscriptions recount military campaigns and conquests, often with grand praises of the king’s valor and divine favor. These records were intended to glorify the king’s reign and depict him as an invincible ruler, as well as to celebrate the booty or tribute that was brought back and dedicated to the temples in which the inscriptions were presented. The inscriptions typically portray the king as heroic and emphasize his physical and “sporting” prowess (Decker 1971). Several prominent inscriptions include the Stela of Kamose (Luxor Museum J43; Habachi 1972), the Battle of Kadesh of Ramesses II (Kitchen 1979: 2:1-147:16; Von der Way 1984), the Great Libyan War Inscription of Merenptah (Kitchen 1982: 2:9-12:6; Manassa 2003), the Sea Peoples’ War of Ramesses III (fig. 5) (Kitchen 1983a: 37:7-43:1), and, after the New Kingdom, the Triumph Stela of Piankhy (Cairo JE 48862 [+ 47086-47089]; Grimal 1981). The king’s deeds were often accompanied by praises or eulogies (Spalinger 2003: 427, no. 79), which could comprise the bulk of the inscription, even becoming its central element, as it is, for instance, in the eulogy to Ahmose on his stela (Cairo CG 34001; Sethe 1906a: 14-24:6; Spalinger 2006: 87-121). Lengthy royal eulogies were common during the Ramesside Period (Maderna-Sieben 2018), but self-praising ones, in which the king spoke in the first-person singular (e.g., the Twin Stele C22 of Abu Simbel [Kitchen

1979: 320:9-321:6]), were rare. Most surviving eulogies from this period are embedded in narrative texts that do not specify the speaker or audience (Maderna-Sieben 2018: 59-63). These texts typically begin with a full date, followed by the king’s complete titulary (five names), then a eulogy, and finally a historical narrative (Spalinger 2003: 416). The Poem of the Battle of Kadesh (Kitchen 1979: 3:1-101:14) and the Account of the First Hittite Marriage (Kitchen 1979: 233:5-256:4) are representative examples.

- **Construction and restoration works:** Inscriptions recorded the king’s building endeavors, including temples, obelisks, statues, and other significant architectural achievements, emphasizing his role as patron and enhancer of the kingdom’s cultural and religious landscape. These inscriptions highlighted the king’s piety, devotion to the gods, and efforts to restore and maintain order and prosperity in the land. For example, Senusret I decided to build a “monument” and establish “fixed decrees” for Horakhty in gratitude for what the deity had granted him (pBerlin 3029 I:5; Peust 2011). Similar examples include Senusret I’s building inscriptions from Elephantine and Tôd (Hirsch 2004: Dok. 47a, 71b). Senusret III set up his Semna stelae in connection with a royal statue; the stelae contain a strongly worded self-eulogy praising his strength and decisiveness against Nubians, set within framing statements proclaiming the

impermeability of the border in past and future, from the time of his forefathers to the time of his sons (Eyre 1990; Seidlmayer 2000). The restoration of temples, monuments, and religious artifacts was another key focus of royal inscriptions. For instance, in the inscription of Speos Artemidos, Hatshepsut stated that she had to rebuild the temple of the Mistress of Qusae, which had been destroyed by the Hyksos. Thus, a shorter narrative of the expulsion of the Hyksos is embedded in a restoration inscription (Allen 2002; Sethe 1906b: 386:4-13). These restorations were depicted as the king's duty to reestablish *maat* (order) and rectify the damages caused by previous neglect or chaos. According to Assmann (1988: 90-91): "Every monument symbolizes a collective and eternity. Even a monument dedicated to an individual does not honor the person but rather the representative. The claimed eternity of the collective stems from the sacred nature of the community, which Durkheim identified as a fundamental form of religion" [author's translation].

- Religious offerings and devotion: Royal inscriptions frequently documented offerings to the gods and the establishment or restoration of rituals, showcasing the king's piety and emphasizing his role as intermediary between the gods and the people, thereby

ensuring divine favor for Egypt. For example, the stela of Thutmose III in the Ptah temple at Karnak (Cairo CG 34013; Sethe 1907: 763:11-772:7) records the newly arranged sacrificial donations through which the king fulfilled his role as the provider for the gods. Festivals are also an important topic mentioned in royal inscriptions. The rock inscription at Wadi Hammamat mentions the first Sed Festival of Pepy I (Eichler 1993: 56-57, no. 82). Detailed depictions of Sed Festivals are found in Amenhotep III's records (Berman 1998: 16-17), the reliefs of the Sun Temple of Niuserra at Abu Ghurab (Nuzzolo 2015), Akhenaten's scenes at East Karnak (Uphill 1963), and the scenes of Osorkon II at Bubastis (Lange-Athinodorou 2019). The Opet Festivals, dedicated to Amun, are evidenced in both pictorial and written records (Darnell 2010). One of the earliest and most detailed sets of scenes of the Opet Festival is found on the south side of the Red Chapel of Hatshepsut and Thutmose III at Karnak. These scenes depict the overland transport of Amun's bark from Karnak to Luxor (fig. 6) (Burgos and Larché 2006 – 2008: 46-53, 60-65). In a stela from his royal cult temple at Luxor, Amenhotep III vividly describes Amun's golden bark made for the Opet Festival (Helck 1957b: 1652:10-1653:18). The Opet Festivals



Figure 6. The Opet Festival: the return of the divine bark to Karnak from Luxor.

were meant to rejuvenate the king's divine power and reinforce his connection to Amun, ensuring his legitimacy and continued rule. Aside from the various festivals, the kings also established separate offering systems for Amun (Spalinger 2015: 308). For example, Thutmose III instituted secular sacrifices to Amun after his return from Megiddo (Sethe 1907: 741:15-742:7), similar to the feasts held by Ramesses III to commemorate military victories against the Libyans, as recorded at Medinet Habu (Kitchen 1983a: 125:9-126:4).

- Historical events: Some inscriptions recount specific historical events, including treaties, alliances, and foreign delegations. The Palermo Stone (Schäfer 1905; O'Mara 1979, 1980; Wilkinson 2000; Hsu 2010; Nuzzolo 2021; Nuzzolo et al. 2021), for example, documented annual Nile flood levels and royal activities, often ritual in nature, in a tabular format and without narratives or context; the king's actions are presented in the simple infinitive. Dating to the Sixth Dynasty,

the “South Saqqara Stone” (Baud and Dobrev 1995) lists royal names and yearly records and includes information pertaining to the kings, such as their reign lengths, temple offerings, building projects, and military activities. The annals of Amenemhat II (Altenmüller and Moussa 1991; Altenmüller 2015) expanded on this tradition, providing detailed political, economic, and religious records to bolster royal legitimacy. Similarly, Thutmose III's annals (fig. 7) (Sethe 1907: 645:7-754:2) were derived from war diaries (*hrwyt nt mšꜥ*; Spalinger 1977; Jansen-Winkel 1993: 109-110), which highlight military exploits, and from day-books (Redford 2003: 3-7) that record the king's daily activities and movements. Despite the brevity of their entries and ideological tone, annals were vital commemorative and historiographical records of royal achievements (Baines 2011: 59). Written in the early first millennium BCE, the Chronicle of Prince Osorkon (Caminos 1958; Broekman 2008; Jansen-Winkel 2007b: 161-



Figure 7. The annals of Thutmose III from Karnak with the famous scene of “smiting the enemy.”

168, §20.7) is neither a true chronicle nor an annal; it is rather more akin to a *Königsnovelle* (Gozzoli 2006: 42-50), yet it provides valuable insights into the political and religious activities of the Third Intermediate Period.

- Legal and administrative orders and commissions: Some inscriptions documented the king's decrees, laws, and administrative actions, portraying him as a ruler who upheld law and order. The Coptos Decrees (Goedicke 1967) were initially written on papyrus and personally sealed by the king, but were subsequently inscribed on slabs, and thus monumentalized, in the entry of the Coptos temple. This practice ensured that royal decrees would endure for eternity, sacralized through the use of the hieroglyphic script, the lapidary surface of inscription, and the location where they were placed. In the New Kingdom, royal decrees for temples could include considerable details, such as the Nauri Decree for the Abydos temple (Kitchen 1975: 45-58), the Hermopolis Decree of Sety I (Kitchen 1975: 125-126), and the Elephantine Decree of Ramesses III (Kitchen 1983a: 342-345).

- Royal expeditions: Egyptian kings left inscriptions commemorating expeditions they commissioned, particularly to regions such as Sinai, Nubia, the Eastern Desert, and Punt. These inscriptions, found at harbors, mines, and quarries, served to glorify royal power and mark natural space (Tallet 2023a, 2023b). Some royal expeditions, such as those to Punt (Taterka 2016: 117-119), were recorded on temple walls in large-scale pictorial compositions accompanied by inscriptions, emphasizing their exceptional nature and ideological significance. Major examples are found from the Old Kingdom on the causeway of the funerary temple of Sahura at Abusir (el-Awady 2009: 155-186) and, from the New Kingdom, in a portico of the funerary temples of Hatshepsut at Deir el-Bahri (fig. 8) (Sethe 1906b: 315:1-355:1). These records highlight the exotic goods brought back—e.g., incense, myrrh trees, gold, and animals—additionally underscoring the prosperity and divine favor of which the kings were the beneficiaries.

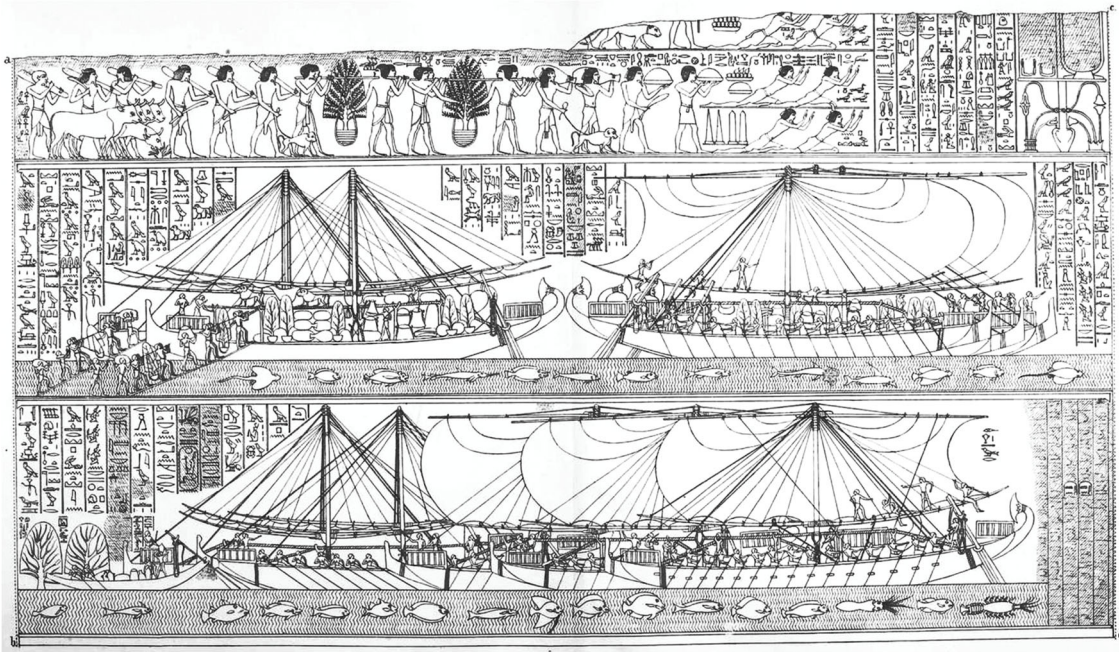


Figure 8. Hatshepsut's expedition to Punt.

Authorship and Function of Royal Inscriptions

When examining royal inscriptions, one might ask the following questions: Who composed them? For what purpose? To whom were the inscriptions addressed? Answering these questions remains a matter of controversy and debate.

According to Gundlach (1987: 182), royal texts are “too complex and overloaded with ideological, magical, and thus political consequences for a single individual to compose them on a simple royal commission; these are state-commissioned works that can only be executed by an official authority” [author’s translation]. It is highly likely that royal inscriptions were composed at an official organ, and original versions were archived at the official organ as well (Beylage 2002b: 538). However, the precise relationship between state-approved texts and later inscriptions remains subject to dispute. It has been suggested that a central office, known as the *pr-ꜥnh* “House of Life,” may have been responsible for preparing standardized templates for royal inscriptions that were to be placed on permanent monuments everywhere (Helck 1977: 241; Grimal 1980: 39-40). However, an opposing view suggests that only summaries were sent to various locations and then elaborated on, on-site (Popko 2006: 57, no. 95). These copies or templates were usually written in hieratic script, and conversions into hieroglyphic could sometimes deviate from the original text to varying degrees. For instance, the final version of Thutmose III’s inscribed annals includes fewer details than does the text preserved on a leather roll (Redford 2003: 4-5). Scribes may have found the king’s deeds too numerous to convert into hieroglyphic script in their totality (Popko 2006: 55-56, no. 84), perhaps also due to constraints of space.

Popko (2006: 54-57) listed inscriptions in which the authors were named and suggested that the final texts of royal inscriptions were products of three levels or steps of authorship and production: 1) the king was the originator or task giver (*auctor*) and, in most cases, the narrator; 2) someone, or several individuals, then crafted the text according to the

originator’s specifications and information; and 3) priests of the temple library or outline draftsmen (*zhꜣw qdwt*) edited the draft while they converted it into hieroglyphic versions on various monuments. The extent of the king’s involvement in formulating the content of inscriptions remains uncertain. Nonetheless he, or those close to him, were indisputably the final decision-makers.

Whether all royal inscriptions could function as “political propaganda” is highly questionable. Nevertheless, the term “propaganda” is frequently used, particularly in relation to historical narrative texts such as *Königsnovellen* (cf. Grimal 1980; Bleiberg 1985 – 1986; Jansen-Winkeln 1993: 107; Simpson 1996: 443; Eyre 1996: 416), with reference to “a message, communication, or statement addressed by its author on behalf of an individual or group (a god, king, official, class) or ideology (cult, kingship, personal ambition, special interest group) to a specific or general audience” (Simpson 1982: 266). Beylage (2002a: 9-10) introduced the concepts of explicit and active propaganda and implicit and passive propaganda. Explicit propaganda presupposes two groups with opposing opinions competing on relatively equal terms. In contrast, implicit propaganda presents only one group’s opinions or actions as legitimate, appropriate, and goal-oriented. Ancient Egyptian historical texts fall into this latter category. Grimal’s observation (1986: 5), written well before Beylage’s publication, is nevertheless consistent: “This, broadly speaking, is the meaning that is generally attached to the word ‘propaganda.’ When applied to pharaonic Egypt, however, it is, in a sense, inappropriate. It does not correspond to a need for persuasion or conversion, since the pharaonic ‘discourse’ is addressed exclusively to those who are already part of the system it describes. It is simply a presentation of facts, expressed in a way that does not seek to distort them, but rather to restore them to their essential reality” [author’s translation]. Exclusiveness is also emphasized by Arnold (2003: 78-79): “Propaganda is based on a specific ideology; it aims to promote a particular view of reality that claims to be the only true one, reinforced

by the assertion that its explanation of the world is uniquely valid” [author’s translation].

Nevertheless, applying the concept of propaganda to ancient Egyptian texts and images is misleading, because it assumes that kings needed to legitimize their rule and also begs the question: Who were the intended audience, and were they being deceived or manipulated? (Bickel 2024: 45). Beylage (2002a: 10-11) affirms that the Egyptian state did not direct its eulogistic-dogmatic texts toward any readership because it did not need to convince anyone of the royal dogmas (Beylage 2002a: 10-11, no. 15). This leaves the question: Why were these inscriptions generally made visible and “publicly” accessible (with certain limitations)? The plausible reasons are as follows:

- What has been termed “royal propaganda” served as ideological communication more broadly. Inscriptions on temple walls that recounted the kings’ historical deeds were offered as votive gifts to the gods to whom the temple was dedicated. For instance, most passages of Thutmose III’s annals were intended for perusal by the god and senior priests; they were not meant for public recitation (Redford 2003: 6-7). The gods were considered responsible for political and historical events.
- Royal inscriptions were intended only for certain individuals, specifically, the literate elite who were interested in the king’s deeds, and common people, to whom they were recited during certain ceremonies (Quack 2012: 287). They served as “publicity tools” (*publizistischen Mittel*) for the “systematic dissemination of political and ideological ideas with the aim of influencing general [political] consciousness [author’s translation]” (Popko 2006: 115). Additionally, inscriptions provided models for future kings, encouraging them to imitate the *maat*-aligned deeds of their ancestors and prompting them to implement and restore *maat* with their own governmental actions.
- Since most people in ancient Egypt were illiterate, and among those who were literate, more were familiar with the hieratic script

than with hieroglyphs, only certain scribes and higher officials could read hieroglyphic texts and understand their implications (Popko 2006: 115). The king’s deeds were more accessible through hieratic texts handwritten on papyrus, such as the Poem of the Battle of Kadesh found in the Papyrus Raifé-Sallier III (Louvre E. 4892 and BM EA 10181) and in the Papyrus Chester Beatty III (BM EA 10683) (Von der Way 1984: 34-43; Spalinger 2002). The poem might have been a historically and politically significant text, known and accessible (through private and temple libraries) to more than just the higher scribal and government elite. It was certainly read in schools and was possibly recited at major royal festivals and state ceremonies to enhance Ramesses II’s reputation as a victorious ruler. The inclusion of the scribes’ names in the hieratic texts allows for reconstructing the specific circumstances of the papyri’s recording and preservation (Maderna-Sieben 2018: 5). The Late Egyptian Miscellanies contain royal eulogies similar to the Poem of the Battle of Kadesh (Gardiner 1937).

- Although the general population was illiterate, the public could still engage with these inscriptions. They were located on outer walls of temples and in public spaces in temples or elsewhere, where they could be “seen” and potentially explained by literate priests or officials during particular events. Additionally, the inclusion of large images depicting the king as a hero slaying his enemies or as a victor in battle, as well as the king offering to the god, would have conveyed messages of power, divine approval, and royal legitimacy, even to those who could not “read” or “understand” the text. The immediacy of their visual and emotional impact, and of the hieroglyphic writing itself, may have evoked a sense of awe and inspired respect for the royal power they conveyed.
- The inscriptions were also intended for posterity, ensuring that the king’s deeds and his connection to the divine were remembered and honored by future generations. This helped in maintaining the

king's legacy and the continuity of the pharaonic ideology.

Conclusion

The study of ancient Egyptian royal inscriptions reveals their multifaceted role in recording history, legitimizing kingship, and reinforcing ideology. These inscriptions, carved on monuments, temples, and stelae, were intended to immortalize a king's achievements, divine connection, and particularly in the New Kingdom, his military

proress. While often interpreted as propaganda, their primary audience was the gods, elite scribes, and future generations, rather than the general (largely illiterate) public. The combination of pictorial and textual elements, however, ensured that both literate and illiterate audiences could grasp the messages of power and legitimacy. To Egyptologists, royal inscriptions serve as crucial sources of insight into ancient Egyptian history, religion, and culture, as well as into an Egyptian sense of history itself.

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- Figure 1. A famous scene of “smiting the enemies” from the Narmer Palette. (Drawn by the author.)
- Figure 2. The scene of “smiting the enemies” of King Sneferu from Wadi Maghara, Sinai, with the labeling inscription *ds(r) h3swt*, “suppressing the foreign lands.” (Gardiner and Peet 1917: pl. II/5.)
- Figure 3. The scene of “smiting the enemies” of King Neusera Isi from Wadi Maghara, Sinai, with the labeling inscription *sqr h3swt nbwt*, “striking all the foreign lands.” (Gardiner and Peet 1917: pl. 6/10.)
- Figure 4. Sety I returning from battle with Hittite prisoners. (The Epigraphic Survey 1986: pl. 35; Courtesy of the Institute for the Study of Ancient Cultures of the University of Chicago.)
- Figure 5. The battle of Ramesses III against the Sea Peoples. (The Epigraphic Survey 1930: pl. 32; Courtesy of the Institute for the Study of Ancient Cultures of the University of Chicago.)
- Figure 6. The Opet Festival: the return of the divine bark to Karnak from Luxor. (Burgos and Larché 2006 – 2008: 64, bloc 66; Courtesy of Frank Burgos and François Larché.)
- Figure 7. The annals of Thutmose III from Karnak with the famous scene of “smiting the enemy.” (Photograph by the author.)
- Figure 8. Hatshepsut’s expedition to Punt. (Mariette 1877: pl. 6.)