**Movement and Consciousness: The King Facing God on the Reliefs of the Temple of Ramses III in Medinet Habu (12th c. BCE), Egypt**

**Abstract**

This study examines the role and meaning of movement as carried out by the Egyptian king in the rites performed before the gods in the temple. It focuses on the reign of Ramses III (12th century BCE), and especially the reliefs found in his mortuary temple in Medinet Habu, on the western bank of the Nile. This temple was the primary monument built by Ramses III, and a vast number of reliefs were preserved there, mostly in their original locations. These depict scenes of war and victory, holidays, and even intimate scenes of the royal family in the Migdol reliefs at the entrance to the compound. However the vast majority of portrayals are of the religious rites the king conducts facing the gods, chief among them Amun-Ra. The corpus selected for the discussion of royal movement in worship is from these ritualistic scenes, in which the king performs the rites directly facing the gods.

The uniqueness of this study lies in the combination of disciplines it brings to bear. The first is the Egyptological approach, which examines ritual representations within the Egyptian cultural-artistic context. Here the study of Egyptian art serves to clarify the iconographic message contained in these depictions within the Egyptian cultural and artistic context. The second approach is the study of movement, which has been the author’s main field of practice and study for several decades. In this discussion, the author aspires to bring the movement ‘to life’, to understand the movements being carried out and their possible effect on the person conducting them, and thereby to explain the role of movement in ancient Egyptian rites.

Examining movements that are depicted only in inanimate representations, with no continuity in living culture that could hint at the way they were performed, is very complex. To this end, the guiding principles of two-dimensional visual representation must be understood, as well as the Egyptian canon with its precise and strict dictation of the way in which the body, movement, and space are depicted in art. The cultural-artistic context must also be understood – this too was rigidly defined in Egypt, as art was intended to convey a message rather than serve as a means of personal expression as it is today. Egyptian art sought to communicate in ways understood by its contemporaries, and therefore it symbolized the represented phenomena without striving to depict them realistically.

Research on movement has only recently become a field of study, due to the nature of movement as a phenomenon that exists only at the moment it is performed, vanishing immediately on completion. Movement itself cannot be preserved for additional observation. Its traces may be found in secondary documentation assisted by additional media, such as painting, photography, film, sculpture, or written descriptions. The issue of movement in ancient art is even more complex and its study is very limited, usually conducted by scholars unschooled in the field of movement. This study is novel in that it considers the phenomena of ritual movement from both aspects.

The first step in studying movements based only on inanimate representations is defining the recorded action. Since there is no experience with the movements themselves, it is necessary to rely on criteria that define and classify them. After creating the definition that identifies the ritual movement, three movements depicted throughout the Medinet Habu temple were chosen for this study. They reflect distinct phenomena in which the king is seen dancing, kneeling, and striding arm-in-arm with several gods. Analysis of these movements is based on familiarity with the rules of the Egyptian artistic canon which clarifies what can be deduced about the depicted movement, and where our ability to decipher it is limited. In light of this data, the analysis of the movement itself was based on physical principles – kinesthetic and physiological – and was assisted by terms used by Eshkol-Wachman movement notation. This analysis brought to light unique phenomena that existed in these movements and served as points of origin for understanding the depicted movement, its role, and its meaning in the representations selected for this study.

Another phenomenon, directly related to both movement and ritual, is the impact on the person’s state of mind. The fact that movement also affects non-physical aspects of the person performing it is recognized and utilized in various fields, and is expressed in myriad ways in many traditions. Religious rituals also seek to generate a transcendental experience for the believer who performs them. Egyptian visual and textual documentation of rituals does not provide information regarding the nature and traits of the ritual experience. Therefore, rites in which the movement of the body serves to alter the state of mind in the ritualistic-religious context, which are documented and conducted to this day, were utilized to examine this issue. The rites were selected on the basis of their affinity to the movements appearing in Egyptian depictions. These are the Sufi Muslim ceremony of Sema and the practice of yoga from the Hindu tradition. Both shed light on the conscious experiences that may be generated by these movements. Another aspect for studying non-physical meanings of movement utilized by the author is the study of non-verbal communication. This scientific field provides information regarding the meaning of bodily gestures, facial expressions, and physical interactions among people. The “body language” derived from the analysis of these physical-movement elements helped explain the relationships between the figures in one of the selected models, in which the king and the gods touch during the ritual.

This paper also examines the role of movement in conveying the desired iconographic message. To this end all the selected postures were surveyed and compared with other instances of these postures in Egyptian iconography, both royal and non-royal, which provided a range of perspectives regarding their roles. This analysis revealed the multifaceted meanings of the movements and also reflected the use made of the physical position to elevate the king’s status above that of mere mortals. He is presented in ritual as possessing superior physical and mental abilities, an advanced being who is worthy of close contact with the gods. The Egyptian king was the high priest, and this ritual role was a central aspect of his royal status. Performing rituals was crucial for the stability of the cosmic order and the prosperity of the realm, and the king’s superior abilities, as portrayed in these depictions of ritual movement, anchored his regal-religious standing and his ability to guarantee the stability of the kingdom.

This study presents the role of movement in the visual depiction of the king vis-à-vis the gods in rituals as an iconographic means of empowering the king and queen. It also reveals an affinity between the rites conducted by the king in the temple and between the Sufi circle and the practice of yoga, an affinity that links the visual representation of the movement it depicts with the experience the movement aims to generate. This information sheds light upon the nature of the rituals conducted in the Egyptian temple. It reflects both the centrality of movement to ritual and its role as a means of conveying the royal message. Both ritual and message continue to echo in the silent testimony of the Medinet Habu temple reliefs.