

A lion-king and his prey – transformations in the linguistic substratum of an Amenhotep III inscription

I have long been interested in the interplay between what we might think of as a text's surface – i.e. what might be perceived in performance when a text was read aloud (surely the way that it reached most of its audience) – and what takes shape below that audible surface, perceptible only in the written hieroglyphic signs themselves. Determinatives are responsible for much of a text's sub-surface communication, but not exclusively. There can be meaning in the arrangement and shape of signs, even phonetic signs whose physical forms do not necessarily contribute to the semantic content of a word. Texts may also spin webs of meaning within themselves, linking different elements with each other through the choice of signs to complement, echo or even contrast. One such text to demonstrate the interplay between textual surface and sub-surface is a rock inscription of Amenhotep III, discussed below.

The inscription in question is one of two carved into the granite rock face between Aswan and Philae. It has been known since the Prussian expedition led by Lepsius, and a copy was included in his *Denkmäler*. Since the late 1990s, a DAINST epigraphic mission has been re-examining and recording (sometimes for the first time) the series of rock inscriptions of which Amenhotep's two inscriptions form a part (e.g. Seidlmayer 2013)¹. It is thanks to a photograph provided generously by the DAINST for consultation that this short discussion is possible².

The Year 5 inscription is carved into the red granite rock-face, in different styles of relief. The figures of the king and the gods are carved into the surface of the rock, and yet internal details are picked out in what seems like internally raised relief. This is in stark contrast to the rendering of humiliated enemy figures, being held down by the king and offered to the gods: they have been left as blank outlines, carved into the rock's surface but unelaborated by any internal detail. In the inscription proper, many of the hieroglyphic signs are difficult to read due to the nature of the medium, explaining why those who have recorded the text in the past – e.g. Lepsius (III.81g), de Morgan (I 4), Helck (Urk. IV. 1665, 5-1666, 20) - have varied from each other in their interpretation of particular signs. Thanks to the aforementioned DAINST photograph, many of these contentious signs are more readable.

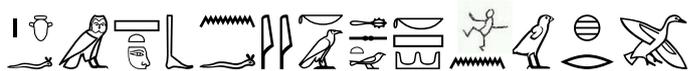
The text is arranged in 12 horizontal lines and is oriented for reading from right to left with the signs facing to the right. The content concerns a plot by the Nubians which is easily foiled by the king, and is not particularly remarkable in that respect, and indeed perhaps not to be believed (cf. Gils 2014-15). If it is read aloud in Egyptian, it would seem to follow the usual parameters of royal bombast. However, two parallel dramas are embedded in the

¹ <https://www.dainst.org/projekt/-/project-display/25882>

² I'd like to thank Daniela Rosenow for providing me with a photograph for consultation.

written text enhancing the voiced message of the text. Indeed, only aspects of these would have been part of the text’s performance; those that are not relayed in the text’s phonetics rely on the manipulation of unvoiced determinatives. Thus to appreciate the full impact of the text’s message, we must venture below its surface, where messages conveyed through phonetics and through the signs’ iconicity intertwine and provide a fascinating insight into the ideological substratum of the text³.

The first of the aforementioned dramas focuses on the Nubian enemy, to whom we are introduced in l. 4:



p3 hrw n kš hst k3y.n=f bšt m ib=f

‘The enemy from vile Kush – he had envisaged rebellion in his heart.’

The hieroglyphs are revealing. The use of the definite article spotlights a particular leader who starts the trouble. He is not named here at least⁴, but the word used to encapsulate him is telling: *hrw* means ‘the fallen one’. He is already doomed to failure before his rebellion becomes reality. The determinative echoes this prediction of doom. Helck and de Morgan both show the typical fallen man sign (A15: ). Lepsius records only damage at this point. An examination of the photographed inscription shows a fallen enemy, but not fallen on his stomach as is customary. Instead, he is shown mid-topple, arms and legs splayed, as if in the dynamic process of his feet giving way beneath him. It is also notable that he seems to display a different orientation to the rest of the text – a deliberate attempt to show him in disarray?

The next time we hear of the enemy is in l. 7. The king has come to deal with him and his followers, and in no time has made captives of them:



s 30,000 m skr-ḥ

‘... 30,000 men were (taken) as living captives.’

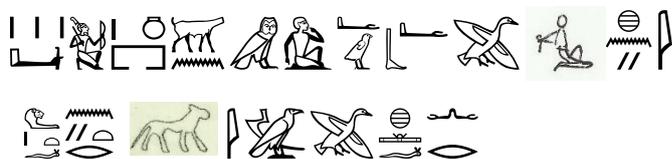
³ A technical note: I think it’s enormously important not only to include a transliteration alongside translation, but also to give a rendering of the original text. However, this is a challenge for the current inscription since there are so many idiosyncratic signs. In addition to using digitised renderings using J-Sesh where possible, I’ve included hand-drawn renderings of certain signs using the DAINST photograph as a guide to capture the likeness of signs that have no equivalent in J-Sesh.

⁴ Note that both Gils and Gundlach accept that a word later in the text is this enemy’s name rather than an epithet used of him like this one. See below.

hieroglyphs. Its form reminds us of the determinative of *hrw* in l. 4 but it is not identical to it; the determinative of *hdbw* seems stiller because while its arms are splayed, its legs are closer together as if its fall is complete.

In parallel, while the enemy is gradually being brought low - first pinioned, then made to fall first to his knees and finally to the ground – the king is undergoing his own transformation. Animal metaphors are readily applied in royal epithets and titles. Some we would barely label as metaphors, they become so conventional in royal texts. We might not call particular attention to transformative descriptions like *Strong Bull*. Nor would we be surprised to see that bovine element echoed in epithets like *ḥpš* or *nb ḥpš*. Similarly, we expect the king to be called the *Horus*, written with a falcon ideogram, but we might notice that he is overtly likened to a falcon again in l. 6 when he arrives to deal with the enemy like a falcon flying: *mī ḥ(wi)t bik*. The word *bik* has the expected falcon determinative, but it has its wings spread and perches on a standard, emphasising dynamism and divinity. Transformations abound at this point: the king is also compared to Montu in his manifestations, perhaps again a reinforcement of a falcon form since that god could assume one.

However, when the king actually meets his enemy, a more pronounced transformation ensues. It plays out on the text’s surface – i.e. it would be perceptible when the text was read aloud – and is reinforced subtextually by the choice of determinatives. In l. 9, the king and his enemy meet. The enemy is at a disadvantage because while he might think he is facing an ordinary man, the text makes it clear this is not the case:



iḥny p3 ḥw mḥnw mš

n rḥ=f p3 m3i nty r-ḥ3t=f

‘The troublemaker⁵, that one who boasted in the midst of his army:

He did not recognise the lion that was before him.’

That the king should be called a lion – again with emphasis provided by the definite article – is not so surprising. The lion determinative is striking – it is given a lot of space and is relatively clearly articulated with its powerful body, wide striding stance and long tail. But the image is reinforced again in the next sentence with an emphatic *-pw* clause:



⁵ This is taken sometimes as a name (e.g. Gils 2014-15, 67), but it seems more likely to be a derogatory epithet.

nb-m3^ct-r^c -pw m3i

‘(for) Nebmaatre is a lion...’

In what seems like a deliberate strategy, perhaps as a way to strengthen the force of the *-pw* clause’s metaphor, the phonetic signs for lion stretch themselves out. They are compressed when *m3i* is first written in the previous clause, but within the following *-pw* clause, they expand almost in a pounce. While the first *m3i* certainly has a lion determinative, the second caused confusion for the various copyists. Helck duplicates the first lion sign; de Morgan does too. Lepsius has a lion, but one with an upraised tail. The original shows that Lepsius was correct – the animal’s tail is raised, but it is not a lion: it is a seated Seth animal, markedly differing from the initial *m3i*-lion determinative in its downturned snout, its erect pointed ear and its upright forked tail. Is it to be read ideographically, perhaps reading *nšny* ‘raging’? Since the Seth animal is used so widely ideographic use beyond the writing of Seth’s name is not common, because of the danger of ambiguity. Then perhaps it is a determinative? It then carries all the connotations of Sethian violence and strength, pouring them into the king’s lion form, and it makes a pleasing nod to the reinforced falcon-nature that was emphasised for the king earlier. This is the other side of the royal dichotomy: the dark side of the king’s divinity, visited upon an enemy.

Several descriptions follow:



ḥs(3)w 3m ḥnwt=f kš ḥst

‘a savage one, whose claws have bitten down on vile Kush’

The royal lion is described ‘savage’⁶. The word *ḥs3w* has what looks like a jaw sign with sharp teeth protruding as its determinative, followed by a papyrus roll. Is this meant to underscore the king’s animal nature now? The next descriptive element continues to characterise the king, whose animal transformation is highlighted and demands to be reflected in the translation by what seems to be an innovative choice of determinative for the verb *3mm*. It customarily has a fist determinative and is often used in royal texts to describe the king grasping his enemies. But here seems to have an animal determinative. The sign is not clear, and it could be either a *bḥ*-tooth (in which case it might pick up on the toothed jaw determinative of *ḥs3w*) or a downward pointing claw, which would anticipate the subject of the verb that follows. Whatever choice we make, it should be reflected in the translation. Thus above I have chosen the former reading, and adapted the usual translation of ‘grasp’ to reflect the animal nature of the action.

⁶ The signs here could be read differently. It is unexpected to have what looks clearly like a papyrus roll sign (Y1) following *bḥ*, therefore what has been read as a *bḥ*-sign may be a determinative. With this text, words are written idiosyncratically so parallels from other texts may not clarify the reading.

Thus it is with animal weapons – teeth and claws imbued with Sethian savagery – that the lion-king devastates his enemies.

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