

Decoding the Medinet Habu Inscriptions: The Ideological Subtext of Ramesses III's War Accounts

Abstract: The temple of Medinet Habu in Thebes stands as Ramesses III's lasting legacy to Ancient Egyptian history. This monumental structure not only contained luxury goods within, but also a goldmine of information inscribed on its outside walls. Here, Ramesses adorned the temple with stories of military campaigns he led against enemies in the north who hoped to gain control of Egypt. These war accounts have posed a series of problems to modern scholars. Today, the debate still rages over how the inscriptions should be interpreted. This work analyzes Ramesses's records through the lens of socioeconomic decline that occurred during his rule in order to demonstrate the role ideology—namely *ma'at*—played in his self-representation and his methodology to ensure and legitimize his rule during these precarious times.

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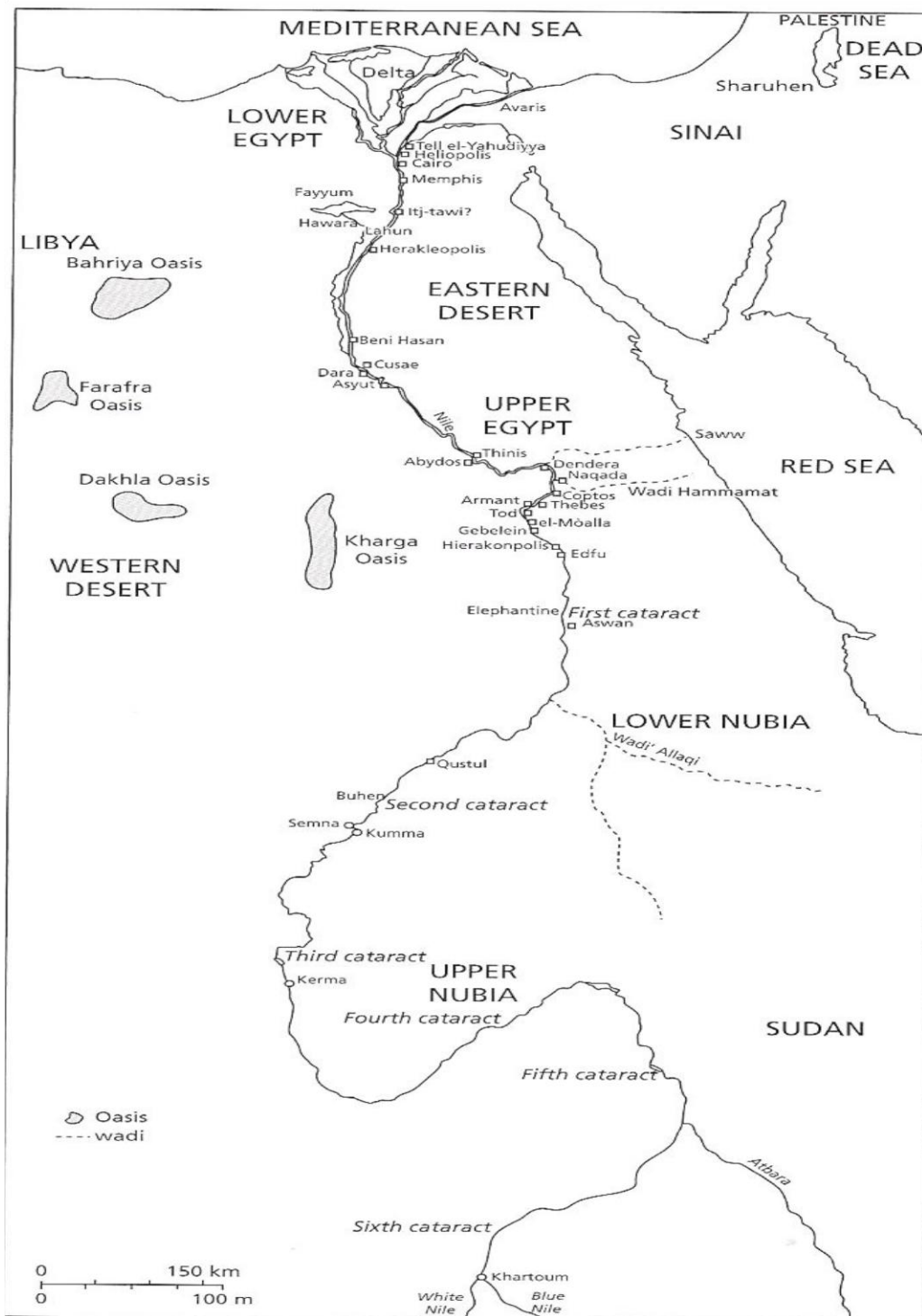


Figure 1: Map of Ancient Egypt with key sites. Image reproduced from Marc Van De Mieroop, *A History of Ancient Egypt* (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 28.

Introduction

When describing his victory over invading forces in the north of Egypt, Ramesses III, ruler at the time, wrote:

...Those who came on land were overthrown and slaughtered...Amon-Re was after them destroying them. Those who entered the river mouths were like birds ensnared in the net...their leaders were carried off and slain. They were thrown down and pinioned...¹

This excerpt, which dates to 1181 BCE, is only a small fragment of a much larger collection of inscriptions that details Ramesses's military campaigns in the Delta Region.² These inscriptions, located on the Temple of Medinet Habu in Thebes, discuss conflicts that Ramesses faced in years five, eight, and eleven of his rule. According to Ramesses's records, invaders in the Delta region launched a series of attacks during those years in an attempt to gain control of Egypt. Ramesses alludes to the formidable nature of these enemies, crediting them with the destruction of the major Near Eastern states of the period. Yet, thanks to his leadership and excellent strategy, Egypt was able to thwart the invaders' advances. The inscriptions conclude with Ramesses's triumphant return to Egypt and a list of the spoils of war he brought back with him.³

While Ramesses's accounts seemingly provide a goldmine of information, modern scholars have questioned their validity. Nancy Sandars refers to Ramesses's records as "panegyric and bluster," adding "as a historical record they are meager."⁴ Marc Van De Mieroop echoes these ideas, writing that "Ramesses III's portrayal of

¹ William F. Edgerton and John A. Wilson, *Historical Records of Ramses III: The Texts in Medinet Habu Vol I and II* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1936), 30-31. This work will also use the translation of James Henry Breasted, *Ancient Records of Egypt Volume IV* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1906), 3-83. Both translations are widely accepted and for the purpose of this study they will be used interchangeably.

² All dates are based upon the chronology provided by Ian Shaw, *The Oxford History of Egypt* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 480-89.

³ See pages 6-9, *The Medinet Habu Inscriptions*, for a more detailed discussion of Ramesses's narrative.

⁴ Nancy Sandars, *The Sea Peoples: Warriors of the Ancient Mediterranean 1250-1150 BC* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1978), 119-120.

sudden invasions was certainly false.”⁵ The question, then, is why Ramesses went to such great lengths to detail his victories in what are believed to be fictitious military campaigns. If he did not aim to leave behind an accurate historical record, then what was his intention?

Although no conclusive evidence exists to corroborate Ramesses’s accounts, his inscriptions do, in fact, provide a useful historical record; they help reveal the fragile nature of his power and can be interpreted as an attempt to legitimize his authority. When placed within the chronology of the larger Near East, Ramesses’s rule, which dates from 1186-1154 BCE, coincides with the collapse of the Near Eastern International System.⁶ This international system, which lasted from 1600-1100 BCE, was a period defined by cross-cultural and economic exchanges between palace complexes that ruled over the various Near Eastern territorial states. The most prominent of these included Hatti and Egypt in the west, Babylonia, Assyria, and Elam farther east, and the Mycenaen civilization in the Aegean.⁷ Historians equate the end of this system with the collapse of the Near Eastern Bronze Age and the beginning of a “Dark Age,” which lasted from 1100-900 BCE.⁸

Ramesses’s accounts can be placed within this larger framework of international collapse, providing evidence for the problems he confronted and the loss of control he suffered. The conflicts Ramesses describes in the Delta suggest that Egyptian authority was weakening in this area, and the cultural heterogeneity he mentions further threatened

⁵ Marc Van De Mieroop, *The Eastern Mediterranean in the Age of Ramesses II* (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 242-43.

⁶ Shaw, *Oxford History*, 485.

⁷ For an overview of this period see Mario Liverani, *International Relations in the Ancient Near East, 1600-1100 BC* (New York: Palgrave, 2001).

⁸ Robert Drews, *The End of the Bronze Age* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 3-7.

the stability of the region. The inscriptions from Medinet Habu also suggest the increased role of religion in Egyptian politics; support from religious authorities was needed to bolster a faltering political system. The Medinet Habu inscriptions therefore served as an ideological counter-argument to the problems of social unrest which Ramesses faced during his rule. In this regard, they represent one example in a long-standing pattern in which pharaohs sought to justify and preserve their power via grand ideological narratives portraying their proper adherence to Egyptian customs and depicting themselves as military heroes. At the heart of this narrative about royal power and royal legitimacy was the concept of *ma'at*, a quality of strength, wisdom, integrity, and piety that a good pharaoh was thought to embody. It is my contention that both Ramesses's textual inscriptions and the images that accompanied them served to present him as a ruler who upheld *ma'at*. In the tumultuous years of his reign, this sort of display was essential for justifying his authority.

This thesis will be divided into three parts. The first describes the Medinet Habu inscriptions along with modern scholars' interpretations of the accounts. After the historiographical groundwork has been laid, the text will move to a discussion of the internal situation in Egypt during Ramesses's rule. Here it will be argued that the problems in Egypt at this time threatened Ramesses's power because they weakened his claim to *ma'at*. The final section of this thesis will then analyze Ramesses's Medinet Habu inscriptions more closely, in order to demonstrate how they present him as a ruler embodying *ma'at*.

The Medinet Habu Inscriptions

The Temple of Medinet Habu is located in the western part of Thebes, an important religious center and pharaonic power base in Upper Egypt.⁹ William Murnane has argued that it resembles a fort as much as it does a temple, containing high defensive walls and limited entryways to restrict access. The temple also contained rooms accessible to only Ramesses and his closest attendants, and the remains of what appear to be an artificial moat surrounded the temple's exterior.¹⁰

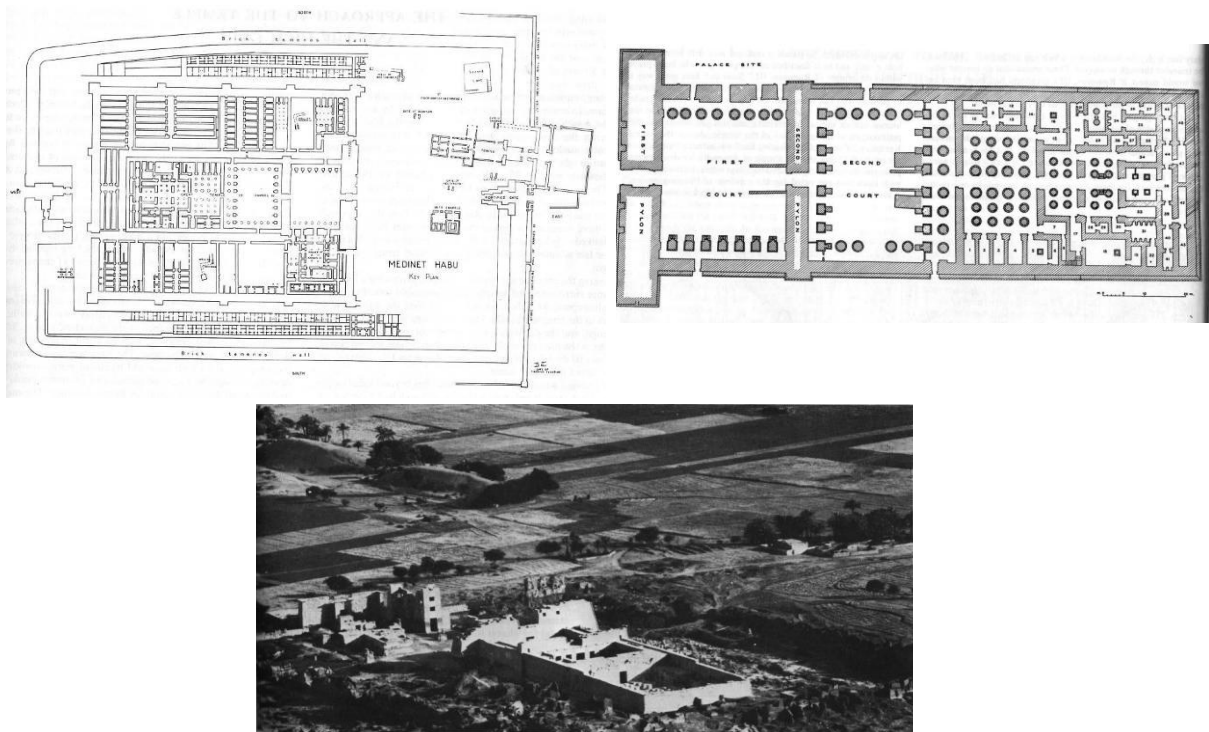


Figure 2: (left) Overall layout of the Medinet Habu Complex. (right) Detailed plan of Ramesses III's inner court. His war reliefs are found on the northern and western walls of this court. (bottom) Aerial view of the Medinet Habu Complex prior to extensive excavation. Images reproduced from Murnane, *United With Eternity*, 5, 8, & 3, respectively.

On the northern and western walls of this temple, Ramesses inscribed a series of both written and pictorial reliefs that recounted his battles against enemies in the north.¹¹

⁹ Van De Mierop, *A History of Ancient Egypt*, 248-50.

¹⁰ William Murnane, *United With Eternity: A Concise Guide to the Monuments of Medinet Habu* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 1-6.

¹¹ Murnane, *United With Eternity*, 11.

According to these inscriptions, Egypt was attacked from the north on three separate occasions during his reign. Ramesses writes that the first conflict of year five was instigated by Libyan tribes that had moved into the northern and western parts of the Delta. The conflict of year eight also involved the Libyan tribes, but the main antagonists were a group known as the “Sea Peoples” along with their cohorts from the “Asiatic Hill Countries.” The final conflict of year eleven involved a group of people known as the Meshwesh, who recruited Libyan support in an attempt to enter Egypt.¹²

While the perpetrators in each war may have been different, they were all accused of committing the same egregious acts. In his narrative, Ramesses maligns his opponents for “violating his frontier” and criticizes them for their ambitions to rule over Egypt.¹³ The records also imply that some sort of political association existed between Egypt and the Libyan bands, which Ramesses claims the Libyan chieftains disregarded.¹⁴

After making clear the malicious goals of his enemies, Ramesses describes his own preparations for battle and retells the victories he achieved. While many details of the actual campaigns are omitted, Ramesses focuses on his rallying of the people of Egypt and the battle strategies he devised. Before the start of each campaign, Ramesses is shown addressing “the entire land gathered together: the Court, the royal sons, the chamberlains [of] the palace, all inhabitants of Egypt, the (military) classes, and every youth who is in this land” from a balcony atop his “migdol.”¹⁵ He explains to those

¹² For the year five campaign, see either Edgerton & Wilson, *Historical Records*, 19-35 or Breasted, *Ancient Records IV*, 35-58. For the year eight campaign, see either Edgerton & Wilson, *Historical Records*, 49-59 or Breasted, *Ancient Records IV*, 59-82. For the year eleven campaign, see either Edgerton & Wilson, *Historical Records*, 87-94 or Breasted, *Ancient Records IV*, 83-114.

¹³ For Ramesses’s year five accusations, see Edgerton & Wilson, *Historical Records*, 26. For the accusations of year eight see 55. For the accusations of year eleven see 91.

¹⁴ Mention of this political association can be found in the year five record, Edgerton & Wilson, *Historical Records*, 25-6 and in the year eleven record, 91-92. No such mention is made in the year eight records.

¹⁵ Edgerton & Wilson, *Historical Records*, 52.

gathered before him of their enemies' plans but assures them that he will emerge victorious. Ramesses devotes much space to explaining his plan to defeat the Sea Peoples in his year eight campaign, a strategy that involved firing arrows onto enemy ships from a series of hidden encampments along the Delta.¹⁶ As Ramesses tells it, his enemies abandoned their ranks and fled in confusion as he charged toward them in his chariot.¹⁷

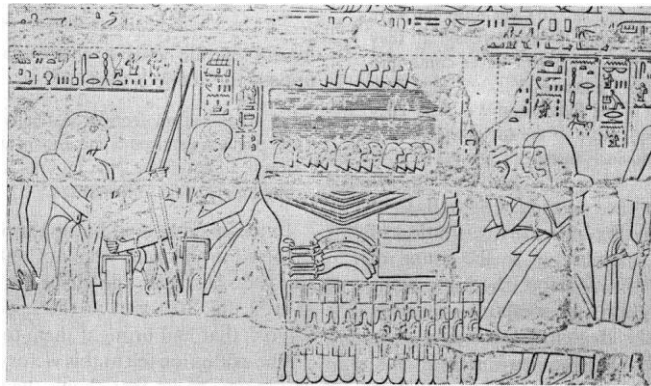


Figure 3: Ramesses III distributing arms to his soldiers before their battle against the Sea Peoples. This image accompanies Ramesses's year eight inscriptions. Image reproduced from Murnane, *United With Eternity*, 14.

A large portion of the Medinet Habu inscriptions recounts the aftermath of the northern campaigns and Ramesses's return to Egypt. The inscriptions list the number of hands and phalluses severed from the slaughtered enemies and depict captured enemies being led back to Egypt in chains.¹⁸ Ramesses writes that these prisoners of war were given to the temple complexes to be used as laborers, and he also lists gifts of land that he granted to the temples.¹⁹

¹⁶ Edgerton & Wilson, *Historical Records*, 41-3 & 54-5.

¹⁷ Edgerton & Wilson, *Historical Records*, 45 & 56.

¹⁸ Edgerton & Wilson, *Historical Records*, 15, 60, & 63-8.

¹⁹ Edgerton & Wilson, *Historical Records*, 33, 58, 63-70, & 103-5. See Drews, *End of the Bronze Age*, 47-51, for a review of Ramesses's numbers and an explanation of how circumcision may have played a role in Ramesses's ethnic classification of his enemies.

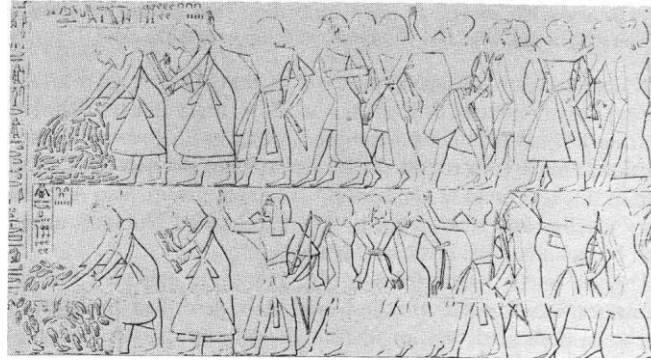


Figure 4: Egyptian soldiers collecting hands and phalluses of defeated enemies after the First Libyan War (War of year five). Image reproduced from Murnane, *United With Eternity*, 13.

In addition to the military narrative itself, much of the inscriptions discuss life in Egypt under Ramesses's rule. Ramesses describes Egypt as a land "rich in supplies and provisions" and proclaims that the country was "filled with jubilations" because of his successes.²⁰ The overall tone of the war reliefs is celebratory: Egypt under Ramesses is compared favorably to the unproductive and insecure times before his ascension. Ramesses seemingly swats away the northern aggressors who appear to be the only source of agitation during his kingship and an insignificant one at that.

Historical Inaccuracies and Problematic Interpretations

Some scholars have accepted Ramesses's statements at face value in an effort to explain the events occurring in Egypt under his rule. These analyses are often too literal, however, and they lack the close scrutiny required. Alessandra Nibbi's work, for example, demonstrates the problems that arise from a surface-level study of the text.²¹ Nibbi uses Ramesses's accounts to redefine the traditional borders of Egypt, concluding that Ramesses had completely lost authority over the Delta at this time. She fixes

²⁰ Edgerton & Wilson, *Historical Records*, 33 & 52.

²¹ The following is a summary of Nibbi's argument, drawn from Alessandra Nibbi, *The Sea Peoples and Egypt* (New Jersey: Noyes Press, 1975).

Egypt's new northern border at Heliopolis because Ramesses claimed to have both stopped his enemies' advances near the mouth of the Delta and because he referred to the city directly as the seat of his power.²² Nibbi's argument also relies on a re-interpretation of the accepted translation. She interprets the isles in Ramesses's claim "as for the foreign countries, they made a conspiracy in their isles" to mean the marshlands of the Nile Delta instead of islands in the Mediterranean that were home to the invaders Ramesses fought.²³ She anachronistically associates the phrase "Great Green," which scholars have translated as "Sea," to its original meaning of locations in the Delta Swamps containing long scrolls of papyrus.²⁴ In addition, Nibbi argues that Ramesses's listing of Lower Egypt as one of the "Nine Bows," a term traditionally referring to the kingdom's enemies, shows that the Delta was no longer part of Egypt.²⁵ Using this evidence, Nibbi concludes that the Delta inhabitants never considered themselves part of Egypt proper, and she points to earlier skirmishes within the region to suggest that Egyptian history could be defined through Upper Egypt's struggle to maintain control over the Delta.²⁶

Although Nibbi's argument is persuasive in some respects, it also poses several problems. While she correctly argues that unification was often achieved through a pattern of conquest in which dynasties from Upper Egypt took control of Lower Egypt, no evidence exists to suggest that Lower Egypt actively resisted this unification effort. On the contrary, it is likely that the Delta region supported this unification, since both iconography and politics indicate it to be an integral part of the Egyptian system. Indeed,

²² Nibbi, *The Sea Peoples*, 69-70.

²³ Nibbi, *The Sea Peoples*, 48-51.

²⁴ Nibbi, *The Sea Peoples*, 35-8 & 44-8.

²⁵ Nibbi, *The Sea Peoples*, 7-9.

²⁶ Nibbi, *The Sea Peoples*, 9-31.

only when a king claimed control of both Upper and Lower Egypt was the realm considered united, a concept expressed pictorially through imagery such as the sedge and papyrus and the lung and windpipe.²⁷ That Memphis, a city located along the mouth of the Delta, had long served as an important seat of pharaonic power also reveals the key role Lower Egypt played in Egyptian society.²⁸ The priesthood of Ptah, which also resided in this city, became an official palace cult and maintained a strong following throughout the Delta.²⁹ Furthermore, the Delta was integral to Egyptian trade networks, as sailors leaving Egypt needed to navigate through the Delta Region to reach the Mediterranean Sea, and those entering would need to traverse it before reaching the Nile proper. While alternate trading routes through the *wadis* (riverbeds) in the eastern deserts did exist, the Delta was a crucial part of the Egyptian economy.³⁰

A second problem with Nibbi's argument is that she relies solely on the Medinet Habu inscriptions without considering other sources of evidence. While Ramesses's claims may merit changing Egypt's northern border if considered in isolation, outside of these accounts there is no evidence to validate such a change. Egypt's control over the Delta might have been waning, but there is little reason to believe Ramesses had fully lost authority over the area. Contemporary textual and iconographic records continue to depict the Delta as part of Egypt, meaning that Nibbi was likely wrong to claim that it

²⁷ Van De Mieroop, *A History of Ancient Egypt*, 35-6. The sedge and papyrus are the symbolic plants of Upper and Lower Egypt, respectively. In Egyptian hieroglyphs, the lung and windpipe share the same sound as the verb "to unite." See Van De Mieroop, *A History of Ancient Egypt*, 27 for further information. Unification of Upper and Lower Egypt under one dynasty was understood as the natural state of Egyptian society.

²⁸ Van De Mieroop, *A History of Ancient Egypt*, 30.

²⁹ Richard H. Wilkinson, *The Complete Gods and Goddesses of Ancient Egypt* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2003), 123-126.

³⁰ Marc Van De Mieroop. "Economic Theories and the Ancient Near East," in *Commerce and Monetary Systems in the Ancient World: Means of Transmission and Cultural Interaction*, ed. R. Rollinger & C. Ulf. Munich (Franz Steiner Verlag, 2004), 54-64. See also Van De Mieroop, *Eastern Mediterranean*, 186-188.

existed as a separate entity.³¹ Nibbi's interpretation also falters because it distorts the context of the inscriptions. While Ramesses does indeed list Lower Egypt as one of the Nine Bows, he does so only on one occasion during his eighth regnal year; references to the Nine Bows made in years five and eleven do not include Lower Egypt.³² Furthermore, in light of the events that occurred throughout the wider Near East during Ramesses's reign, it is highly improbable that the islands to which he refers represent Delta marshlands. Rather, most scholars concur that these islands are located in the Mediterranean and were home to the Sea Peoples, although their exact location remains fiercely contested.³³

James Weinstein adopts a more conservative approach in his analysis but also tries to connect the inscriptions to actual events, arguing that while Ramesses was “a plagiarizer and self-aggrandizer of the first order...[his] claims to have fought the Sea Peoples have the ring of historical reality.”³⁴ To this end, Weinstein presents five pieces of evidence that suggest the battles Ramesses described may have actually occurred. He argues that both the names of the invaders and locations of attack differ between Ramesses's records and earlier accounts, meaning that Ramesses was not simply copying earlier claims. In addition, Weinstein interprets the lack of Sea Peoples' style pottery in Western Asia and the Levant as indicative that Ramesses expelled them from these areas.

³¹ Evidence of a split between Lower and Upper Egypt is only found later, during the Third Intermediate Period (1069-715 BCE). During this time, we see the emergence of two separate (and competing) power bases, Tanis in Lower Egypt and Thebes in Upper Egypt.

³² See Edgerton & Wilson, *Historical Records*, 46, for the sole mention of Lower Egypt as part of the “Nine Bows.”

³³ While the questions surrounding the origins and identity of the Sea Peoples will not be tackled in this work, there is a large corpus of information on the subject. Central works include Eliezer Oren, *Sea Peoples and Their World: a Reassessment* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000), Nancy Sandars' *Sea Peoples*, and Immanuel Velikovsky, *Peoples of the Sea* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1977).

³⁴ James Weinstein, “Collapse of the Egyptian Empire in the Southern Levant,” in *The Crisis Years: The 12th Century B.C.* Ed. William Ward & Martha Joukowsky (Iowa: Kendall-Hunt Publishing, 1992), 148.

The discovery of Egyptian style pottery in these same places led Weinstein to conclude that Egypt still had control over these regions during Ramesses's early years.³⁵

Although Weinstein's analysis is superior to Nibbi's because it examines both the inscriptions and the archaeological record, it too contains serious flaws. Two of the five points Weinstein provides are based on a *lack of* positive evidence, not any existing supplementary materials. Furthermore, Weinstein's final point concerning Egypt's territorial extent seems unlikely in light of the internal stagnation and decline of Egyptian society under Ramesses's leadership. Weinstein's initial claim regarding the unique names and places listed in the Medinet Habu accounts also relies too heavily on a literal reading of the text, especially considering the identity of Ramesses's enemies is still relatively obscure.

Interpretations such as those of Nibbi and Weinstein ultimately fail not only because of a lack of supporting positive evidence, but also because substantial records exist refuting Ramesses's claims of massive warfare and rampant invasion throughout the Near East. To this end, several modern scholars have explored the problems of accepting a literal interpretation of Ramesses's accounts. Van De Mieroop, for instance, argues that the attacks could not have occurred at the time or the place the inscriptions describe.³⁶

Ramesses explains that Egypt was the final target in a massive invasion of the Near East and credits his enemies with the complete and rapid destruction of "Hatti, Kode,

Carchemish, *Yereth*, and *Yeres on*" as they traveled toward Egypt's northern border.³⁷

Van De Mieroop, however, writes that the archaeological record does not support such a

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ Van De Mieroop, *Eastern Mediterranean*, 235-253. See also the corpus of literature listed on 253-54 from which he draws this analysis.

³⁷ Edgerton & Wilson, *Historical Records*, 53.

claim but rather indicates that the entire region suffered a prolonged period of gradual decline.³⁸ This argument was buttressed by the work of Jürgen Seeher, chief excavator at the Hittite capital of Hatti. The destruction layers of the city, he argued, indicate it was gradually abandoned with little sense of urgency and that although the city eventually burned to the ground, this occurred about a decade after it had already been depopulated.³⁹ Similar archaeological records at Mycenae, along with the discovery of fault lines which appear to be the result of an earthquake, further weaken Ramesses's claim that the enemies he fought caused the sudden and widespread destruction of the Late Bronze Age Mediterranean superpowers.⁴⁰

If the archaeological record casts the validity of Ramesses's narrative in serious doubt, then the absence of supporting Egyptian evidence further heightens these suspicions. Apart from his own boasts, no textual or material evidence from his years as king exist to support the military activities he describes. Only the Papyrus Harris, a document written after the death of Ramesses III, contains information concerning his campaigns in the north, and even this document is inconsistent when compared to the Medinet Habu inscriptions, differing in both the number of enemies captured or killed and the ethnic backgrounds of Ramesses's opponents.⁴¹ Leonard Lesko has argued, in fact, that the Papyrus Harris cannot serve as a supplement to the Medinet Habu

³⁸ Van De Mieroop, *Eastern Mediterranean*, 245-47.

³⁹ Jürgen Seeher. "Die Zerstörung der Stadt Hattusa", in *Akten des IV. Internationalen Kongresses für Hethitologie Würzburg, 4.-8. Oktober 1999*, ed. G. Wilhelm (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1999) 623-34. This is the original language source to which Van De Mieroop refers. See *Eastern Mediterranean*, 240-241 for his discussion of Seeher's work. See also Maureen Basedow, *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, Vol. 62, No. 4 (October 2003), pp. 310-311, for an English language review of Seeher's article.

⁴⁰ Drews, *End of the Bronze Age*, 33-47; Sandars, *Sea Peoples*, 179-196; Van De Mieroop, *Eastern Mediterranean*, 246-47.

⁴¹ For an English language translation of the Papyrus Harris, see Breasted, *Ancient Records IV*, 87-206.

inscriptions because the former is too vague and laudatory.⁴² The text begins with the phrase “See, I will inform you of other events which were done in Egypt since my reign,” which Lesko believes to mean that the accomplishments listed in the Papyrus Harris are not restricted to the reign of Ramesses III but also include those of previous pharaohs.⁴³ James Breasted, one of the earliest translators of the Medinet Habu inscriptions, cites two additional problems with Ramesses’s writings. Firstly, the inscriptions are unclear in subject, audience, and action, and Ramesses often makes no attempt to differentiate between speakers or events. Secondly, Ramesses’s narrative is highly poetic and uses figurative language whose true meaning could only be understood by contemporary readers.⁴⁴ The situation is further muddled because Ramesses often repeats statements from earlier texts. Most notably, the battles that he describes are nearly identical to those in King Merneptah’s (r. 1213-1203 BCE) Great Karnak Inscriptions of the Thirteenth Century BCE. Ramesses III also copies portions of Ramesses II’s inscriptions from the latter’s Ramesseum and transplants them onto his own reliefs.⁴⁵ The Medinet Habu inscriptions thus blur fact and fiction and are temporally inaccurate, making it difficult to construct a reliable narrative from them.

The Real Issues at Hand: A Crumbling Society and an Insecure Ruler

The question then becomes one of purpose: why did Ramesses go to such great lengths to show himself the victor in these massive, yet fictitious, military campaigns? If

⁴² Leonard Lesko, “The Wars of Rameses III. *Serapis* 6 (1980): 83-86 & Leonard Lesko, “Egypt in the 12th Century B.C.” in *The Crisis Years: The 12th Century B.C.* Ed. William Ward & Martha Joukowsky (Iowa: Kendall-Hunt Publishing, 1992) 151-156.

⁴³ Lesko, “Egypt in the 12th Century B.C.,” 153.

⁴⁴ Breasted, *Ancient Records IV*, 3-4 & 12-14.

⁴⁵ Lesko, “Egypt in the 12th Century B.C.,” 152-54. See also Van De Mieroop, *A History of Ancient Egypt*, 248-50.

he did not intend an accurate narrative, then what did he seek to accomplish? How should modern scholars interpret his inscriptions? Leonard Lesko, in his contribution to *The Crisis Years Anthology*, posed a set of similar quandaries, although his work only begins to scratch the surface of the issue. Lesko proposed that Ramesses's use of recut blocks from the Ramesseum and Karnak Temple, as well as the numerical and chronological inconsistencies between the Medinet Habu inscriptions and the Papyrus Harris, suggest that Ramesses was more interested in self-commemoration than historical accuracy, but he neglects to develop this idea further.⁴⁶

An analysis of the situation in Egypt during Ramesses's rule reveals why he might have sought to portray himself as protector of the realm under assault from outsiders. James Weinstein has argued that the first phase of the collapse of the Egyptian Empire began during the end of Ramesses III's rule, and the temporal gap between this period and the earlier Medinet Habu inscriptions is small enough to safely assume the issues that brought about this collapse had been brewing in his early regal years.⁴⁷ Indeed, the high levels of tension within Egypt during the construction of Medinet Habu are reflected in the highly defensive nature of the temple itself. This was a period of starvation, economic collapse, and overall unruliness of the general population. Although it is unlikely that the battles Ramesses described occurred, evidence does exist to show that during his reign Egypt suffered from tensions caused by foreign pressure and economic decline.

During Ramesses's rule, foreign pressure took the form of both immigration into Egypt and cultural diffusion. Robert Drews, in his survey on the collapse of the Late

⁴⁶ Lesko, "Egypt in the 12th Century BC."

⁴⁷ Weinstein, "Collapse of the Egyptian Empire," 147.

Bronze Age, has interpreted relief scenes on Medinet Habu depicting families in ox-carts entering Egypt to promote an argument that various tribes from the north and west migrated into the region at this time.⁴⁸ To this end, records from years five and eleven describe how the Libyans “disregarded the beauty of this god who slays the invader of Egypt⁴⁹, saying... ‘We will settle in Egypt,’” and documentation from as early as the reign of King Merneptah catalogues the movement of people from both Libya and lands to the east into the northern and western parts of the Delta.⁵⁰ While the Egyptians were never truly isolated from foreign peoples, the migration of groups such as Libyans and Syrians must have been alarming. Foreigners who entered Egypt were normally prisoners of war or part of diplomatic exchanges; that non-Egyptians would migrate into the land by their own will was unheard of.⁵¹



Figure 5: This detail from a year eight relief depicts ox-carts, women, and children in the battle scene. Images such as these have been used to argue that foreign peoples were migrating into Egypt during the rule of Ramesses III. Image reproduced from Sandars, *Sea Peoples*, 123.

⁴⁸ Drews, *End of the Bronze Age*, 48-72. See also Sandars, *Sea Peoples*, 120-124.

⁴⁹ Possibly Ramesses III referring to himself.

⁵⁰ This excerpt is taken from Breasted, *Ancient Records IV*, 57. For additional references to Libyan settlements in the Delta, see 23-24 & 52. For the records dating to Merneptah’s rule, See Van De Mieroop, *Eastern Mediterranean*, 51-52.

⁵¹ Whitney Davis, *The Canonical Tradition in Ancient Egyptian Art* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989). See also Van De Mieroop, *A History of Ancient Egypt*, 108-112, 118. This view of outsiders is evident even in the earliest hieroglyphic script (which emerged somewhere between 3250-2900 BCE), in which foreigners are depicted as bound captives.

Cultural diffusion also contributed a great deal to the social tensions in Egypt under Ramesses's rule. Liverani has defined the time between 1600-1100 BCE as the Age of Internationalism, a period marked by diplomatic and economic exchanges among the great powers of the Near East.⁵² Egypt readily integrated itself into this system, as evidenced by the discovery of Minoan artwork at Malqata and Akhetaten and lapis lazuli at Tod.⁵³ Cultural exchanges also played a crucial role. Along with artworks and foreign luxuries, Egypt opened its pantheon to foreign deities for the first time. Most notably, the Syrian gods were assimilated into the Egyptian pantheon. Given Egyptian counterparts, these Syrian deities were included in literary tales and had cults devoted to them.⁵⁴

This picture-perfect image of cultural integration was far from the reality of the situation, however, and the influx of foreign groups into Egypt was probably not well received. These new gods would have diluted the importance of established Egyptian cults, such as the Priesthood of Amun in Thebes, whose influence had become a necessary component of the pharaoh's power. The foundation of the Twentieth Dynasty itself is also evidence for the resentment Egyptians felt toward foreign influence. Sethnakht, Ramesses's father and the dynasty's founder, overthrew a Syrian-descended

⁵² Liverani, *International Relations*, 1-13. There is a large body of information written on this period. For other central works, see Van De Mieroop's *Eastern Mediterranean* and Immanuel Velikovsky, *Ramses II and His Time* (New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1978), both of which provide surveys of the Near East during this period. Marc Van De Mieroop, *A History of the Ancient Near East ca. 3000-323 BC* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 127-201 provides a territory discussion of the period as well as an explanation of how this system differed from ones before and after it in the Near East.

⁵³ Van De Mieroop, *Eastern Mediterranean*, 179-180. The earlier Amarna Archive of Akenaten (1352-1336 BCE) is also evidence of Egypt's role in this international system. See William Moran, *The Amarna Letters* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 1992) for further information.

⁵⁴ Van De Mieroop, *Eastern Mediterranean*, 215-220. For a more detailed discussion of the integration, influence, and depiction of Syrian gods in Egypt, see Izak Cornelius, *The Iconography of the Canaanite Gods Reshef and Ba'al* (Fribourg: Fribourg University Press, 1994).

ruler who was greatly disliked.⁵⁵ That a person of Syrian-decent could claim the throne of Egypt suggests the growing influence foreigners were gaining.

The economic collapse of Egypt under Ramesses's authority was also a significant cause of tension, and the rise in the *habiru*, or social outcast, population is indicative of these problems. *Habiru* were people who fled their villages, usually because they could not pay their taxes or had accumulated some form of debt. Viewed as robbers and thieves, the *habiru* lived on the fringes of society, and despite their being recruited as mercenaries to defend the palace complexes, relations between them and the settled people were mostly antagonistic.⁵⁶ During Ramesses's rule, both Egypt and the wider Near East recorded a significant rise in the *habiru* population, and documents from the Egyptian court demand neighboring vassal states to "Send [them] Habiru... about whom [they] have written with these words: '[The Egyptian Court] will give them to the cities in the land of Kush (Nubia), so [the court] can settle them in the place of those [they] have deported.'"⁵⁷

Here, the palace's concern centers on returning *habiru* to depopulated lands, probably an attempt to improve agricultural yield in the area. This passage suggests that *anachoresis*, or the abandonment of arable land, had become a major problem in Egypt. Hence, during Ramesses's rule, rising numbers of *habiru* combined with the growing pattern of *anachoresis* to reduce crop yields and augment socioeconomic tension. Even worse, the passage mentions that the Egyptian court wanted to recruit *habiru* to cultivate

⁵⁵ Van De Mieroop, *A History of Ancient Egypt*, 244.

⁵⁶ Van De Mieroop, *Eastern Mediterranean*, 48-50. For further reading, consult the bibliographic essay he provides on 67.

⁵⁷ Dietz Edzard. "Die Keilschriftbriefe der Grabungskampagne 1969," in *Kamid el-Loz—Kumidu. Schriftdokumente aus Kamid el-Loz*. Trans. Marc Van De Mieroop (Bonn. Rudolf Habelt Verlag, 1970) 55-62.

lands the government had deliberately depopulated. Acts of forced deportation usually stemmed from the court's desire to disrupt pockets of rebellious activity, thus suggesting that significant hostility toward the central government existed at this time.⁵⁸

The archive of Deir-El Medina, a village near Thebes populated by workmen who built pharaohs' tombs, provides further evidence for Egypt's economic decline and the tensions that resulted from it. It is unclear when this community first came into existence, although written records from the settlement date predominantly from the latter half of the Eighteenth Dynasty (1390 BCE) until the end of the Twentieth Dynasty (1069 BCE). The village of Deir-El Medina, which produced no food of its own because its villagers could not simultaneously engage in agricultural activities and their work on the tombs, was entirely dependent on monthly government rations. The workmen at Deir-El Medina are also unique because they were fully literate and often communicated directly with the central administration.⁵⁹

During the Twenty-Ninth year of Ramesses III's rule (1159 BCE), communication between these workers and the central bureaucracy turned to the subject of food: the villagers complained they had not received their allotted rations. After two months of delayed supplies, the workers went on strike and staged sit-down demonstrations in front of the temples of Thutmose III and Ramesses II.⁶⁰ The community again wrote to Ramesses III, explaining that "it is because of hunger and because of thirst that [they went on strike]. There is no clothing, no ointment, no fish, no

⁵⁸ Ellen Morris, *Architecture of Imperialism: Military Bases and the Evolution of Foreign Policy in Egypt's New Kingdom* (Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers, 2004), 705-706 includes a discussion of acts of deportation as they relate to the foreign policies of Ramesses III.

⁵⁹ The information in this paragraph draws from Morris Bierbrier, *The Tomb- Builders of the Pharaohs* (London: British Museum Publications, 1982), 65-85.

⁶⁰ Bierbrier, *Tomb-Builders*, 40-42.

vegetables. Send to pharaoh our good Lord about it and send to the vizier our superior, that sustenance may be made for us.”⁶¹ When provisions still did not arrive, the workers invaded the Ramesseum and took its grain reserves. This solution was only temporary, however, and trouble flared up again when the grain stores ran out.⁶² In a response to the angered community, Ramesses III’s vizier sent an enigmatic message, writing, “Now as for your saying, ‘Do not take away our ration!’ am I the vizier who was promoted recently in order to take away? I may not give you what he who is in my position should have accomplished—it so happens that there is nothing in the granaries—but I shall give you what I have found.”⁶³

The tension between the Deir-El Medina community and the Ramessid government exposes many of the economic, political, and social problems of the time. First, these records highlight the extent of agricultural decline during Ramesses’s rule. According to the vizier’s reply, the granaries of the central government were empty. While this may be an exaggeration, it does reveal that the supply of food was growing scarcer. Furthermore, the government’s inability to provide food to the workmen can be linked to large-scale *anachoresis*, which would have dramatically lowered the crop yield and reduced the amount of grain the government could have collected. This in turn would have led to higher levels of taxation, because the central bureaucracy needed to increase its efforts to refill empty state granaries in order to feed the workers at Deir-El Medina. Oppressive levels of taxation would have fed into the cycle of *anachoresis*, further plummeting agricultural productivity while simultaneously elevating the number

⁶¹ William Edgerton, “The Strikes in Ramses III’s Twenty-ninth Year,” in *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 10 (1951) 137-45.

⁶² Bierbrier, *Tomb Builders*, 40-42.

⁶³ Edgerton, “Strikes in Ramses III’s Twenty-ninth Year,” 137-45.

of *habiru*. By the end of Ramesses's reign, social and economic tensions had in fact become so severe that the Deir-El Medina workmen fled their village and took refuge within the confines of Medinet Habu for protection.⁶⁴ The problems at Deir-El Medina also called into question the credibility of the Ramessid government. In his reply, the vizier sought to exonerate himself by noting that he had only recently been appointed. In the New Kingdom the vizier headed the central bureaucracy, and this vizierial change suggests instability within the palace. Constantly changing advisers would have weakened the palace edicts' efficacy and created a schism between the throne and the people.⁶⁵

Mario Liverani similarly argued that during the Late Bronze Age Near East, palace complexes throughout the entire region were at odds with the *vox populi*. While this period was an age of economic growth and exchange, only palace elites reaped the benefits of the international system. They accrued wealth and luxuries while the populace became further impoverished and burdened with increased labor demands.⁶⁶ Van De Mieroop underscores this point by arguing that the palace's isolation went beyond social and economic levels to encompass a geographical expression. He writes that territorial states at this time all founded new cities where they constructed new palaces, most of them located at higher elevation, surrounded by natural barriers, and often walled or otherwise protected.⁶⁷ People not associated with the palace continued to live in small villages, however, providing the agricultural goods needed to support the ruling elites.

⁶⁴ Bierbrier, *Tomb Builders*, 116.

⁶⁵ For the role of a bureaucracy in Egyptian politics, see Van De Mieroop, *A History of Ancient Egypt*, 40-42 & 177-80, and *Eastern Mediterranean*, 86-89.

⁶⁶ Liverani, *International Relations*, 141-146 & 151-155.

⁶⁷ In the case of Egypt, the new city constructed was Akhetaten, built during the reign of Akhenaten. Its construction actually predates Ramesses's rule by several centuries and it was abandoned before Ramesses came to power.

Because of the onerous demands of the palace, these villagers could rarely leave their farmlands.⁶⁸

It is therefore reasonable to conclude that in the eyes of the Egyptian people, the palace of Ramesses III lay at the heart of the problems that Egypt was experiencing. To this end, one significant source of concern for Ramesses must have been his lack of royal blood. Sethnakht was a man of unknown origins and without any royal heritage.⁶⁹ While this may not have been of concern at the time of the dynasty's founding, the subsequent internal problems that plagued Egypt may have called into question the legitimacy of his son's rule. Ramesses most likely found himself in a very precarious position: not only did waves of internal decline cause his rule to be questioned, but he was also without any royal lineage to which he could point to defend his credibility.

Taken together, the events at this time reflected circumstances associated with the loss of ma'at. Ma'at, which translates to "order" or "truth," was a necessary component of the pharaoh's power.⁷⁰ It provided the ideological foundation for his rule and justified his authority.⁷¹ Ma'at was considered to be a sacred bond between the king and the divine: if a ruler was believed to have lost ma'at, his rule would be invalidated and a dynastic change would ensue.⁷² While the concept of ma'at originated as something intangible and loosely defined, over time it developed into a codified dogma. Emily

⁶⁸ Van De Mieroop, *Eastern Mediterranean*, 71-93. For a discussion of life in both the palace and village sectors as well as the interactions between the two see also Mario Liverani, "Land Tenure and Inheritance in the Ancient Near East," in *Land Tenure and Social Transformation in the Middle East*, ed. T. Khalidi (Beirut: American University of Beirut, 1984) 33-44.

⁶⁹ Murnane, *United With Eternity*, 20.

⁷⁰ There is a large body of important literature on the topic of ma'at. In addition to those I will discuss below, central works include Jan Assmann, *Ma'at. Gerechtigkeit und Unsterblichkeit im Alten Ägypten* (Munich, Verlag C.H. Beck, 1990) and James Breasted, *The Development of Religion and Thought in Ancient Egypt* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1912). These works are the foundation upon which much later literature builds.

⁷¹ Van De Mieroop, *Eastern Mediterranean*, 78-9.

⁷² Emily Teeter, *The Presentation of Maat: Ritual and Legitimacy in Ancient Egypt* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 1.

Teeter explains that by the beginning of the New Kingdom the principle of ma'at became canonized to include a series of rules associated with its proper maintenance. These included practicing proper rituals and religious ceremonies, defending Egypt from foreign forces, and ensuring the temples were well maintained and provided with proper supplies. Events such as irregular flooding of the Nile, poor harvests, famines, and military defeats were equated with a loss of ma'at and subsequently a loss of political legitimacy.⁷³

In the Egyptian pantheon, ma'at appeared as a small, female deity often presented by the pharaoh to the gods, or vice versa, to indicate divine support for his rule.⁷⁴ Van De Mieroop explains that ma'at was also represented as a feather to indicate its fragility, a clear marker of Egypt's own delicate state of order and an implicit recognition that the pharaoh's job was to protect the land from forces of chaos.⁷⁵ By the time of Ramesses's rule, this ideological narrative played a prominent role in politics. Kings who claimed ma'at could justify their right to rule, even if their real political power was diminishing. Rulers who used ideological justification as a crutch to compensate for declining political influence were far from secure in their authority, however, as rebellious factions would often attempt to provide evidence that a king had lost ma'at, a clearly strategic effort to

⁷³ Teeter, *Presentation of Maat*, 2-17. This chapter traces the evolution of the presentation of ma'at throughout the New Kingdom, beginning with its first iconographic appearance during the reign of Thutmose III. See also Janet Johnson, "The Demotic Chronicle as a Statement of a Theory of Kingship" *Society for the Study of Egyptian Antiquities* 13, no. 2 (1983): 61-72. While this text deals with relations between the ruling Ptolemies and native Egyptians in later Ptolemaic Egypt, it does provide a good overview of ma'at, signs that indicated ma'at was properly upheld, and how loss of ma'at relates to dynastic changes.

⁷⁴ Teeter, *Presentation of Maat*, 26-31 and Wilkinson, *Gods and Goddesses*, 150-152.

⁷⁵ Van De Mieroop, *Eastern Mediterranean*, 78.

de-legitimize his rule. For this reason, pharaohs placed much emphasis on the presentation of ma'at as a means to block threats to their kingship.⁷⁶

Intertwined with political ideology during the Ramessid Period was the emerging role of religious orders, chiefly the Priesthood of Amun at Thebes. As the real political power of kings began to decline, this group acquired even greater influence. The Priesthood's power stemmed from its ability to consult with the divine via oracle, supposedly allowing it to directly hear Amun's wishes. For this reason, it is not surprising that kings devoted much effort and wealth to winning the favor of the Priesthood. In a time during which the pharaoh's power was linked to ideological justifications of his authority, gaining the support of the Priesthood would allow him to bolster his position. Proving that a king had ma'at was a simple task if he had the backing of the religious orders, but it was near-impossible if he was not on good terms with the Priesthood of Amun.⁷⁷

As Lesko suggested, Ramesses did not intend to create an accurate narrative, but he did aim to achieve something greater than simple self-commemoration. If Ramesses had lost ma'at, then his rule would have been considered illegitimate and a change in leadership would have been justified. Ramesses's Medinet Habu inscriptions attempt to show his rule remained in accordance with ma'at, because doing so would reaffirm his own power and weaken the ideological legitimacy of rebellions led against him.

⁷⁶ The information in this paragraph draws mostly from Teeter, *Presentation of Maat*, 2-17. For further reading on the role of ma'at in New Kingdom politics see Jan Assmann, "State and Religion in the New Kingdom," in *Religion and Philosophy in Ancient Egypt*, ed. J.P. Allen et. al (New Haven: Yale Egyptological Studies 3—Yale University, 1989), 55-88.

⁷⁷ The information in this paragraph draws from Van De Mierop, *A History of Ancient Egypt*, 247-271. For further reading on the role of the Theban Priesthood in Egyptian politics see Gertie Englund, "Gifts to the Gods—A Necessity for the Preservation of Cosmos and Life. Theory and Praxis," in *Gifts to the God: Proceedings of the Uppsala Symposium 1985* ed. T. Linder & G. Nordquist (Uppsala: Almqvist & Wiskell, 1987), 57-66. Boreas 15, and Wilkinson, *Gods and Goddesses*, 95-97.

Ramesses's intention was politically oriented, and the Medinet Habu inscriptions are a representation of power that served to ideologically legitimize his kingship.

A Loss of Control

Ramesses's Medinet Habu inscriptions were a response to the tensions existing within Egypt under his leadership, and they present a counter-narrative in which he is portrayed as a ruler who upheld ma'at. In his accounts, tensions take the form of northern invasions and represent an idealized version of the loss of control that he faced. One example of this loss of control is found in a year five inscription, entitled "Ramesses III Hunting Lions," which shows Ramesses standing in his chariot, firing arrows at several lions. These lions flee in disarray but eventually "gather themselves together in front of [Ramesses III], as wretched as jackals, while they howl like a cat." Recognizing their defeat, they ask Ramesses for forgiveness, while Egyptian soldiers and officials rejoice over their king's victory.⁷⁸



Figure 6: A bull-hunting scene from Medinet Habu. This image is analogous to the one accompanying the "Ramesses III Hunting Lions" inscription, the main difference being the portrayal of bulls as the victims of the hunt instead of lions. Unfortunately, the lion-hunt relief image has not yet been published. Image reproduced from Murnane, *United With Eternity*, 68.

⁷⁸ Edgerton & Wilson, *Historical Records*, 39-40.

Beginning with the Early Dynastic Period, pharaohs used lion imagery to represent kingship and symbolize their power.⁷⁹ While Ramesses continues in this trend, here his use of lions is meant to suggest a loss of control. By portraying people other than himself as lions, Ramesses is intimating that they too claimed the title of pharaoh and wanted to usurp his power. In this scene, however, Ramesses eventually emerges victorious over these usurpers, re-establishing control and re-affirming his legitimacy as the rightful king. That Ramesses portrays himself as one who would turn away claimants to the throne suggests, however, that his leadership was questioned and his rule insecure.

The events in this inscription parallel Ramesses's campaigns in the Delta but are told through animal images. In his narrative of the northern campaigns, Ramesses describes how the enemy chieftains were emboldened in their plans to take over Egypt but were unable to execute those plans in the face of his superior military forces. These chieftains, mournful after their loss, were brought before Ramesses and asked if they could "breathe the breath" that he gave to Egypt.⁸⁰ Similarly, Ramesses's enemies in this inscription were as emboldened as lions by the thought of ruling Egypt, but once defeated they knelt before him as debased as jackals. This allusion to jackals is possibly a reference to the god Anubis, who determined if the dead were worthy of entering into the Underworld by weighing their heart against a feather.⁸¹ In this scene, Ramesses himself assumes the role of Anubis, judging whether his captured enemies should be allowed entry into Egypt. When they appear before Ramesses, these enemies howl like cats and

⁷⁹ Davis, *Canonical Tradition*, 65. A bull can also be used in place of a lion, and the two are often interchangeable.

⁸⁰ For examples of parallelism between this inscription and those referring to Ramesses's Northern Campaigns, see Edgerton & Wilson, *Historical Records*, 24-34, 49-58, & 88-94. These refer to Ramesses's year five, eight, and eleven campaigns, respectively.

⁸¹ Wilkinson, *Gods and Goddesses*, 187-190.

beg for clemency, signifying their domicile nature.⁸² This image shows the true nature of Ramesses's enemies: outwardly strong, yet inwardly weak. On the contrary, Ramesses appears brave and just throughout the entire ordeal, attributes associated with a ruler who upheld *ma'at*.

Alternatively, this inscription can be analyzed in reference to the core elements of a canonical hunting scene. Davis writes that hunting iconography usually contained four main motifs, the first of which was “the wild animals, the victims of the hunt, [fleeing] before wild carnivores or the hunters and their dogs, away from the chariot or the hunters' arrows.”⁸³ Ramesses is able to accomplish this by portraying his victims as lions who flee before his arrows. The next core element is “a particularly fleet, tough carnivore or hunting hound [bringing] down a panic-stricken creature in flight, pouncing or driving for the throat.” Here, Ramesses again uses lion imagery to show himself attacking the other lions in the scene and forcing them to submit. These other lions, usurpers to the throne, transform into panic stricken cats in the wake of Ramesses's pursuit. In the third common trope, “the owner of the dogs or the human hunter observes the chase and often actively engages in it.” This motif is achieved through the active participation of Ramesses's soldiers and is also found in the latter half of the inscription, in which a human Ramesses stands above the captured animals gathered before him.

The final motif relates to the setting of the hunt, which often is “in a special locale, namely, the rocky desert land, flinty dunes, or mountainous wadis.” This provides an alternate explanation for why Ramesses described his enemies as jackals: they were usually found in these habitats and therefore were almost always included in hunting

⁸² For a discussion of cats in popular religion and domestic cults in New Kingdom Egypt see Jaromir Malek, *The Cat in Ancient Egypt* (London: The British Museum Press, 1993), 45-73.

⁸³ The four core elements discussed are defined by Davis, *Canonical Tradition*, 68-69.

scenes. Ramesses writes that they are “wretched” because jackals often destroyed tombs in the desert environments in which they lived.⁸⁴ This defamation of sacred sites is in contrast to Ramesses’s own claim that he “did not overturn the tombs of the lords of life, the tomb-chambers of the ancestors, the glorious place which was at the beginning, of the lord of Rosta, the divine way of the gods and the cavern-dwellers to the revered dead” when choosing a location for the construction of Medinet Habu.⁸⁵ In this way, Ramesses juxtaposes his proper adherence to Egypt’s traditions against the un-thoughtful nature of his enemies.

Further animal imagery can be found in bas-reliefs dating to years five and eight of Ramesses’s reign. Breasted writes that these reliefs contain a “tamed lion” who walks alongside Ramesses’s chariot as Ramesses leads his soldiers into battle.⁸⁶ As with the earlier “Ramesses III Hunting Lions” inscription, these later carvings symbolize Ramesses’s power in the form of a lion epithet. In this case, however, the lion appears pacified and subservient to Ramesses, suggesting it is now only Ramesses who claims the title of pharaoh. Because these reliefs were created after the “Ramesses III Hunting Lions” inscription, it is possible that those who tried to usurp Ramesses’s power had either accepted his leadership or met an untimely end. Another plausible interpretation is that new claimants to the throne emerged at this time, represented by the foreign enemies opposing Ramesses in these reliefs. If this were the case, then the tamed lion would signify that rightful authority lay with the true ruler, Ramesses III. Whichever the case, these reliefs represent idealized threats to Ramesses’s power, and they show Ramesses successfully regaining the control he had lost.

⁸⁴ For a discussion of jackals in desert habitats, see Malek, *The Cat*, 22.

⁸⁵ Breasted, *Ancient Records IV*, 4-6.

⁸⁶ Breasted, *Ancient Records IV*, 27 & 40.

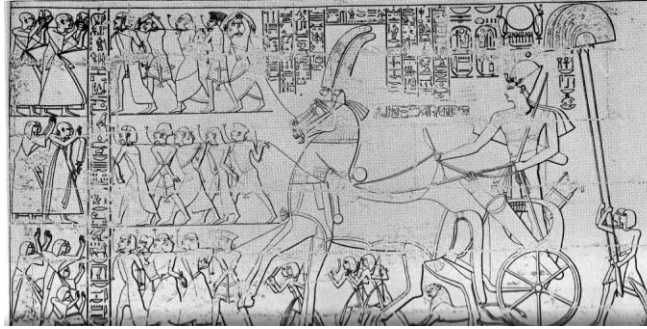


Figure 7: Ramesses III leading prisoners back to Egypt. Notice the “tamed lion” near the bottom of the image that walks alongside Ramesses’s chariot. Image reproduced from Nibbi, *The Sea Peoples*, 96.

Ramesses’s references to canonical animals indicate the highly metaphysical nature of the subject matter, and they illustrate that his main concern rested in providing cosmological justification for his rule rather than presenting an accurate recording of events. These types of inscriptions merit an overall ideological interpretation of the text. His loss of control was not only confined to animal imagery, however, and the diction used to describe his northern campaigns also implies the presence of a forceful opposition to his kingship, most likely domestic in its origin. His interchange between the terms “rebels/rebellions” and “invaders/invasions” implies that his northern enemies were not completely foreign forces, and his inclusion of “Lower Egypt” as one of the Nine Bows further indicates the hostility within the region.⁸⁷ In addition to Ramesses’s war accounts, the fortress-like nature of Medinet Habu itself served as a physical reminder of Ramesses’s power to those who hoped to overthrow him.

A Restoration of Order—Military

The Medinet Habu inscriptions not only depict the threats that Ramesses faced but also show how he restored order to Egypt. One way Ramesses achieves this restoration is

⁸⁷ For examples of this interchange, compare how Ramesses’s enemies are described in Edgerton & Wilson, *Historical Records*, 26, 41, 50, 80, 89, & 91. See also Breasted, *Ancient Records IV*, 33 & 36.

through military victory. Colleen Manassa, in her discussion of the earlier Great Karnak Inscriptions of Merneptah, argues that Merneptah's military campaigns represent a larger ideological struggle between order and chaos and insists that all Egyptian military conflicts contain these ideological undertones.⁸⁸ Manassa's theory, which is applied to the Medinet Habu inscriptions below, lends even more credence to Ramesses's intention for ideological justification.

Ramesses often describes himself as a "wall casting his shadow over Egypt" and claims that he maintained the integrity of Egypt's borders/boundaries.⁸⁹ These statements not only reflect the xenophobia that had resulted from problems presumably caused by mass migrations but also represent common tropes associated with the maintenance of *ma'at*. One plausible interpretation is that Ramesses was not describing actual campaigns as much as he was placing himself within a larger metaphysical struggle between order and chaos. In Egyptian mythology, a constant battle is waged between Horus, a deity associated with Upper Egypt, and Seth, a deity affiliated with Lower Egypt, the Nile Delta, and the deserts. At the end of the struggle, Horus prevails over Seth, leading to the unification of Egypt.⁹⁰ Similarly, Ramesses, who often identifies himself either as Horus explicitly or in anthropomorphic form ("I was like a falcon/hawk..."), defeats rebels in the Delta to reunify Egypt.⁹¹

This Horus-Seth analogy finds further support in that Seth was the Egyptian god of chaos, and here Ramesses is smiting forces of chaos in the form of Delta rebels. In

⁸⁸ Colleen Manassa, *The Great Karnak Inscriptions of Merneptah: Grand Strategy in the 13th Century BC* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 1-5 & 122-25.

⁸⁹ Breasted, *Ancient Records IV*, 37 & 39.

⁹⁰ Van De Mieroop, *A History of Ancient Egypt*, 27 & 69-70. See Wilkinson, *Gods and Goddesses*, 197-199 for a discussion of Seth, and 200-202 for a discussion of Horus.

⁹¹ This trope occurs frequently throughout the inscriptions. Good examples are Breasted, *Ancient Records IV*, 31, 46, 57.

addition, Ramesses's declaration of a "Victory in Thebes" further confirms the cosmological nature of this struggle.⁹² It implies the victory of Upper Egypt over the Delta, a pattern of conquest necessary to the idea of Egyptian unification.⁹³ Ramesses's final inscription on the First Libyan War also contains language suggestive of the cosmological nature of the conflict. Ramesses writes that after the battles, the neighboring countries brought tribute to him, and "south as well as north come to him with praise."⁹⁴ Again, this unity between south and north mirrors the outcome of the mythological battle between Horus and Seth. Ramesses's desire to mimic this cosmological conflict can explain some of the differences between his claims and those of Merneptah, such as why Ramesses writes that his enemies came from the north, while Merneptah describes campaigns he fought in the west.⁹⁵

Even if a more literal interpretation is adopted, the Medinet Habu inscriptions still contain several motifs clearly indicative of the restoration of order through military success. While much work has been devoted to uncovering the identity of the Sea Peoples, they were only one of the perpetrators in the Ramessid texts. More notably, Libyan tribes are the chief antagonists in the wars of years five and eleven, and they also fight against Ramesses in his war with the Sea Peoples in year eight. The Libyans were one of the traditional enemies of the Egyptian state, and their defeat symbolized continued Egyptian dominance through the vanquishing of a canonical force of chaos.⁹⁶

⁹² Edgerton & Wilson, *Historical Records*, 12, 40, & 62.

⁹³ Narmer's original act of unification involved the conquest of Lower Egypt from his base at Naqada in Upper Egypt. The formation of both the Middle and New Kingdoms was brought about by dynasties situated in Thebes.

⁹⁴ Breasted, *Ancient Records IV*, 26.

⁹⁵ This argument is in opposition to James Weinstein, who has described this difference as one of the five key features indicating the "ring of historical reality" present in the Medinet Habu texts. Refer back to pages 8-9 or see Weinstein, "Collapse of the Egyptian Empire," for his full argument.

⁹⁶ Van De Mieroop, *A History of Ancient Egypt*, 19 & 71.

Ramesses's depictions of Libyans being led into Egypt as captives maintains the *status quo* of Egyptian superiority and Libyan subservience.

Another key feature of Ramesses's victories is his cruel treatment of captured enemies. One such instance records that captured warriors were "bound...upon the place of slaughter, they [were] made into pyramids upon their ground."⁹⁷ A later inscription details a similar gruesome scene: "they were scattered, overturned, brought to the ground; their blood was like a flood, their bodies crushed on the spot, trampled-----. The army was slain...bound like fowl, laid low upon the [--] under the feet of his majesty."⁹⁸ John Darnell has argued that harsh punishments for defeated enemies became a standard representation of *ma'at* beginning in the New Kingdom, when Tuthmosis I, on his campaign to re-unify Egypt, hanged the corpse of the king of Kerma upside down to signify a damned afterlife for a person viewed as a force of disorder.⁹⁹ This practice can be traced even further back in time to the Early Dynastic Period, when Narmer, the first ruler to unify Upper and Lower Egypt, executed human enemies in order to "reaffirm the relationship between the king and the gods, and thereby the balance of order and justice."¹⁰⁰ Ramesses's slaughter of his enemies in a similar fashion, along with his documentation of the number of hands and phalluses collected from the battlefield is representative of the proper maintenance of *ma'at*, and it demonstrates how he restored order to Egypt.

The ideological significance of Ramesses's campaigns gains added meaning when compared to earlier accounts of warfare. While most historians chiefly draw parallels to

⁹⁷ Breasted, *Ancient Records IV*, 23.

⁹⁸ Breasted, *Ancient Records IV*, 58.

⁹⁹ John Darnell and Colleen Manassa, *Tutankhamun's Armies: Battle and Conquest During Ancient Egypt's Late 18th Dynasty* (New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, 2007), 17-18.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

Merneptah's Great Karnak Inscription, the Medinet Habu accounts also contain tropes borrowed from both Ramesses II and Ahmose, the founder of the 18th Dynasty and first ruler of the New Kingdom. The language that Ramesses III employs in the Medinet Habu inscriptions is the direct result of Ramesses II's influence. Breasted has defined the latter's narrative of the Battle of Qadesh to be a turning point in Egyptian military literature, remarking that all later accounts adopt a highly figurative and poetic tone in an effort to imitate Ramesses II's record.¹⁰¹ Lesko has similarly suggested that Ramesses III's use of blocks from the Ramesseum in the construction of Medinet Habu was an act of admiration for Ramesses II.¹⁰²

The similarities between the Battle of Qadesh and Ramesses III's wars in the north extend beyond this stylistic and physical imitation, and many of the enemies that Ramesses II fought at Qadesh also appear in Ramesses III's year eight war against the Sea Peoples. Specifically, the Shardana, a group who fought against Ramesses II at Qadesh now appear allied with Ramesses III. In addition, a group of northern invaders who wear what has been referred to as a "feathered-headdress," are depicted among enemy ranks in scenes from both Qadesh and Merneptah's Great Karnak Inscriptions.¹⁰³ Sandars has suggested that the re-appearance of these enemies in all three ruler's campaigns may indicate prolonged periods of conflict between Egypt and foreign tribes,

¹⁰¹ Breasted, *Ancient Records IV*, 12. See also James Henry Breasted, *The Battle of Kadesh: A study in the Earliest Known Military Strategy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1903).

¹⁰² Lesko, "Egypt in the 12th Century B.C.," 152-54.

¹⁰³ See Edgerton & Wilson, *Historical Records*, 53 for Ramesses's list of the tribes that constitute the enemy coalition. See Manassa, *Great Karnak Inscription*, 5-7 for Merneptah's listing of his enemies, and 77-91 for Manassa's interpretation. See Sandars, *Sea Peoples*, 117-20 for a discussion of the "feathered headdress" and 105-6 & 133 for a discussion of the Shardana.

although she herself admits it is “hard to know how far [these images] can be taken literally.”¹⁰⁴

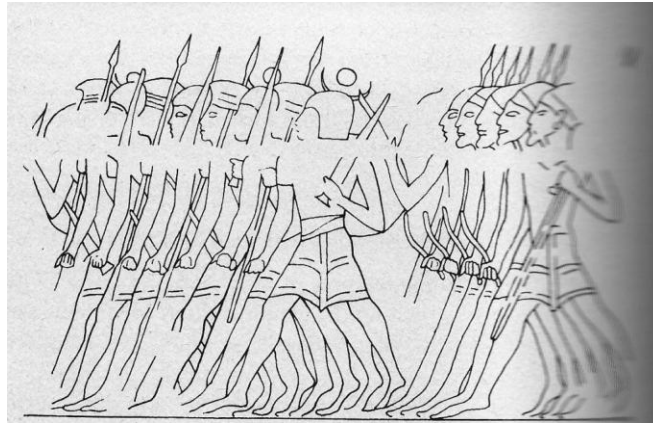


Figure 8: (top) Soldiers in Ramesses III’s army during his year five campaign. Notice the Shardana soldier (horned helmet) near the center and troops wearing the “feathered headdress” toward the front. The standard Egyptian troops appear behind the Shardana warrior. (left) Illustration of a Shardana warrior from reliefs dating to Ramesses II’s rule. (right) Illustration of a soldier wearing the “feathered headdress” from Ramesses III’s year eight campaign. While possibly allied with Ramesses in year five, this type of warrior was depicted among enemy ranks in year eight. Images reproduced from Sandars, *Sea Peoples*, 118, 108, and 120, respectively.

In keeping with the ideological subtext of Ramesses’s campaigns, one possible interpretation is that he used the Medinet Habu inscriptions to present a continuation of his predecessors’ conflicts. By continuing where they left off, Ramesses integrates

¹⁰⁴ Sandars, *Sea Peoples*, 120.

himself into a tale of military grandeur and shows that he is just as able to defend Egypt as they were. Since Ramesses III was without royal blood, inventing ideological ties between himself and successful predecessors would have served to strengthen his legitimacy. To this end, Ramesses III also emulates the appearance of earlier kings in temple relief images. His self-representation in the north wall scene depicting his battle against the Sea Peoples is highly similar to that of Ramesses II at Qadesh, and in terms of scale, both dwarf all other figures in the image, a trope signifying the importance of the ruler in achieving victory.

Just as Ramesses's written records contain cosmological undertones, the north wall image is also a pictorial representation of the struggle between order and chaos. The right register, which portrays Ramesses III and his men, is highly organized and follows the standardization of poses established by the Egyptian canon.¹⁰⁵ The Sea Peoples on the left, however, are not shown with any such order. Their boats are disoriented, warriors are shown falling out of their vessels and getting struck by arrows, and the boatmen/warriors tend to overlap and look frail. This confused scene presents the invaders as a force of chaos and disorder, stressing in pictorial form the mythological undertones of a Seth-Horus conflict. As in the textual accounts, Ramesses's victories are shown to have resulted in a restoration of order to Egypt. This is illustrated in the bottom register depicting lines of prisoners being led back to Egypt. This part of the image resembles the right half in its organized structure and use of canonical forms, suggesting that the end result of the battle between order and chaos (Ramesses and the foreigners) was the triumph of order. The *status quo* is maintained, as those who hoped to enter Egypt do so as captives.

¹⁰⁵ Davis, *Canonical Tradition*, 10-15 & 20-30.

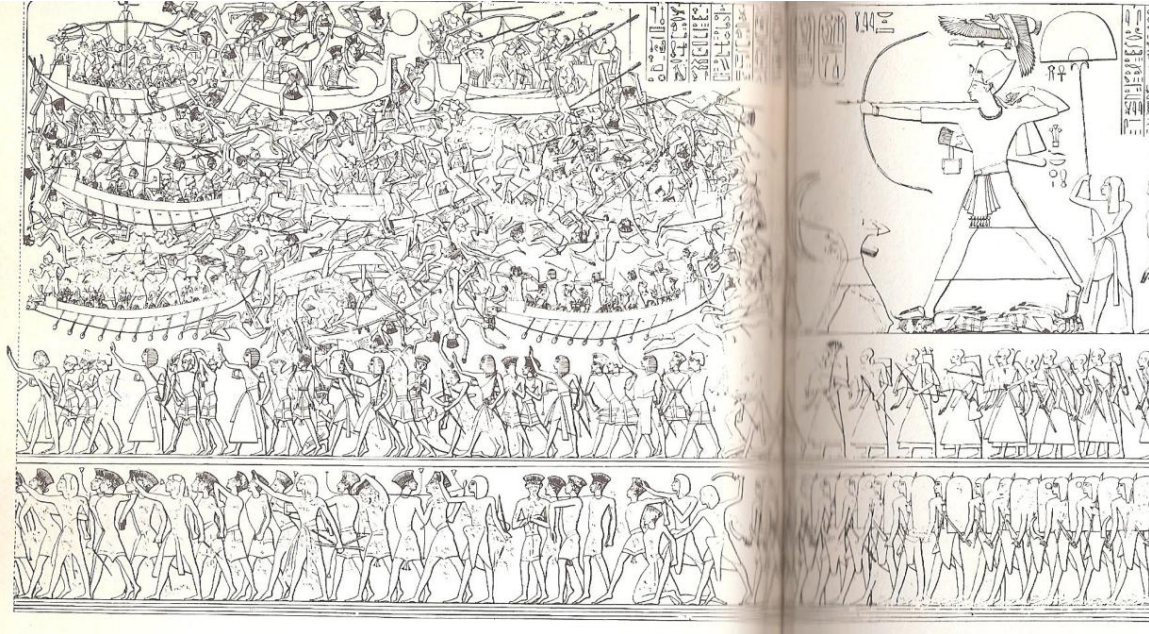


Figure 9: Scene from the north wall at Medinet Habu. Image reproduced from Sandars, *Sea Peoples*, 126-27.

Ramesses's wars in the north not only correspond to the cosmological battle between Horus and Seth, but they also contain tropes reminiscent of King Ahmose's unification of Upper and Lower Egypt leading to the formation of the New Kingdom. Before Ahmose's unification campaigns, Egypt was considered to be in a period of chaos, known as the Second Intermediate Period, during which foreigners overran the land.¹⁰⁶ According to the inscriptions found in the tomb of Ahmose Son of Ibana¹⁰⁷, the north of Egypt was controlled by the Hyksos from their base at Avaris in the Eastern Delta, while the south was under the authority of the Kushite Kingdom based in Nubia. King Ahmose, frustrated by the power these foreign groups held, led campaigns in both the south and the north, conquering the Kushite Kingdom and sacking its capital, and

¹⁰⁶ Van De Mieroop, *A History of Ancient Egypt*, 126-143.

¹⁰⁷ Ahmose Son of Ibana was a soldier in King Ahmose's army. The two are not genealogically related.

driving the Hyksos from the Delta into the region of Syria-Palestine. This narrative ends with Egypt once again unified under native rule.¹⁰⁸

The Medinet Habu inscriptions contain a similar story to that of Ahmose's unification. While the text overwhelmingly deals with Ramesses's northern expeditions, a few early inscriptions describe campaigns he led into Nubia. These southern campaigns precede Ramesses's First Libyan War but follow a narrative similar to his later, northern conflicts. As in the inscriptions pertaining to the Delta conflicts, Ramesses accuses the Nubians of "violating his frontier" and wages war against them until they "prostrate in their own blood before his horses." Similarly, he returns from these campaigns with Nubian captives, luxury goods, and precious metals.¹⁰⁹ Ramesses's Nubian campaigns, which modern scholars have outright rejected as an actual historical event, were included because the idea of victory in wars on both the northern and southern fronts became a trope associated with Egyptian unification.¹¹⁰ As does Ahomse, Ramesses shows himself expelling foreigners from both the north and the south, uniting Egypt under native rule, and restoring order and harmony in the land.

Precedent for Ramesses III's anachronistic claims of military achievement can be found in the actions of Queen Hatshepsut. Hatshepsut, who first served as regent for the young Thutmose III, refused to relinquish her power and instead ruled as full king even

¹⁰⁸ Van De Mierop, *A History of Ancient Egypt*, 159-164. Translation of Ahmose, Son of Ibana's inscription is after James Henry Breasted, *Ancient Records of Egypt II* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1906), 1-82.

¹⁰⁹ Edgerton & Wilson, *Historical Records*, 1-3.

¹¹⁰ Morris, *Architecture of Imperialism*, 784. Murnane, *United With Eternity*, 11-12 devotes only a sentence to the Nubian campaigns, writing that "the relief scenes are badly weathered and are not of great interest."

when Thutmose came of age.¹¹¹ In response to the intense opposition this caused, she commissioned the construction of numerous public works, including a temple at Beni Hasan, where an inscription was found that not only expressed her revulsion of the Hyksos but also claimed that she expelled them from Northern Egypt.¹¹² Hatshepsut's inscription represented an attempt to prove her legitimacy: by forcing a traditional enemy out of Egypt she appeared to uphold order and therefore ruled in accordance with *ma'at*. It is likely that Ramesses III was faced with a similar predicament: his lack of royal blood, along with the social tensions and economic decline incurred during his reign jeopardized his right to rule. As with Hatshepsut's records, the Medinet Habu inscriptions are a claim to legitimacy: Ramesses expels traditional enemies from Egypt in a manner similar to Ahmose, Ramesses II, and Merneptah. In so doing he inserts himself into a line of powerful and respected kings and traces his deeds back to the earliest instance of unification under Narmer. By comparing himself favorably to these earlier rulers, Ramesses aims to elevate his own status and demonstrate that he is justified to rule.

A Restoration of Order—Religious

In a fashion similar to his self-portrayal as a military hero, Ramesses's proper veneration of the gods is another important element meant to show that he restored order to Egypt. In the Medinet Habu inscriptions, Ramesses becomes synonymous with

¹¹¹ Van De Mieroop, *A History of Ancient Egypt*, 171-75. For a more detailed study on Hatshepsut, see Catharine Roehrig, ed. *Hatshepsut: From Queen to Pharaoh* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005).

¹¹² Van De Mieroop, *A History of Ancient Egypt*, 144-45. Translation of Hatshepsut's Beni Hasan inscription is by Donald Redford, "Textual Sources for the Hyksos Period," in *The Hyksos: New Historical and Archaeological Perspectives*, ed. Eliezer Oren, 1997: 17.

ma'at—he is the figurative representation of order and truth within Egypt and is pitted against foreign intruders who are representative of chaos and disorder. These enemies hope to dethrone Ramesses, thereby removing ma'at from Egypt. This narrative is best expressed in Ramesses's statement from his year eight campaign that, “[his] heart is filled with truth everyday, his abhorrence is lying ---- the gods are satisfied with truth.”¹¹³ This passage associates Ramesses with truth, thereby personifying ma'at through him. The fact that “the gods are satisfied with truth” means that they support Ramesses, as he himself represents truth. Furthermore, Ramesses writes that his “abhorrence is lying,” lying being the antithesis of truth and representing an element associated with the loss of ma'at. One can infer from this passage that Ramesses writes that he does not lie because this action would not satisfy the gods, who are interested only in truth. Truth, in turn, corresponds to the proper maintenance of ma'at.

Ramesses's boasts provide further examples of actions he took to appease the gods. He specifically denotes his gifts to the temples, writing that he “[increased] the divine offerings, [flooded] them with provisions, [and] doubled for [them] the feasts over what they were previously, to make [their] shrine festive again.”¹¹⁴ He further adds that he “fashioned [them] with divine images...equipped [them] with priests and prophets, serfs, fields, and cattle.”¹¹⁵ The purpose of these acts, which are only loosely related to his military campaigns in the north, is to align Ramesses with the religious orders in Thebes. To this end, Ramesses claims to have bequeathed 2,954 sq. kilometers of agricultural land and 107,615 male servants to the Egyptian temples, 80% of these gifts going to temples in Thebes, acts which clearly parallel the gifts given to the temples after

¹¹³ Breasted, *Ancient Records IV*, 40.

¹¹⁴ Edgerton & Wilson, *Historical Records*, 128.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*

his northern campaigns.¹¹⁶ While text and action should not be considered one and the same, Ramesses's real-life donations may be an attempt to add some truth to his bold statements, and may in fact provide the "ring of historical reality" that Weinstein believes exists in the accounts. More importantly, his large-scale gifts to Theban Temples are clear attempts to win their support, and they strengthen the argument that the Medinet Habu inscriptions should be read for their underlying ideological meaning.

It is for this reason that many of the laudatory portions of the text show Ramesses's proper veneration of the gods and describe his rule as divinely ordained: "Amun [selected and found him] in the midst of hundred-thousands, so that [he was] established upon [Amun's] throne in peace."¹¹⁷ Being chosen as "the sole lord of the two lands" by Amun both bolsters Ramesses's ideological power and tightens his affiliation with the Theban religious orders.¹¹⁸ Furthermore, Ramesses's constant declarations of a "Victory in Thebes" are additional attempts to align himself with the Priesthood of Amun: he shares his victory with them and acknowledges that only with the aid of Amun was his success possible.¹¹⁹ These near interminable references to Amun suggest that Ramesses was actively seeking approval from the Theban Priesthood in order to legitimize his rule.

¹¹⁶ These numbers are taken from the Papyrus Harris, whose limitations have already been discussed. For the purpose of this argument, the actual numbers will be deemed irrelevant and probably inaccurate, but the order of magnitude will be accepted as valid. These numbers can be found in Van De Mieroop, *A History of Ancient Egypt*, 249. Consult Breasted, *Ancient Records IV*, 95-206, for the full listing of goods supposedly donated by Ramesses III to the temples. For a more general discussion on the relationship between the pharaoh, the temples, and the Egyptian economy, see Jac Janssen, "The Role of the Temple in the Egyptian Economy of the New Kingdom" in Edward Lipinski (ed.), *State and temple economy in the ancient Near East: proceedings of the international conference organized by the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven from the 10th to the 14th of April 1978*, OLA 6, pp. 505-515. Leuven: Departement Oriëntalistiek, 1979.

¹¹⁷ Edgerton & Wilson, *Historical Records*, 52.

¹¹⁸ Ramesses's claim to be "sole lord of the two lands" (or variants thereof) can be found extensively throughout the record. For examples of this claim, see Edgerton & Wilson, *Historical Records*, 51, 70, & 86.

¹¹⁹ For the "Victory in Thebes," see Edgerton & Wilson, *Historical Records*, 12, 40, & 62.

Relief images along the temple walls also indicate the importance of the Theban Priesthood in Ramesses's political agenda and support the claim that Ramesses's war accounts were a tool through which he could gain their backing. One recurring motif in the reliefs is the depiction of the Theban Triad: the god Amun, his wife Mut, and their child Khonsu.¹²⁰ Most of the images depict Ramesses presenting offerings before the Triad or show the Triad bestowing power and signs of legitimacy upon him. This Triad also played a prominent role in the inscriptions themselves, asking Ramesses to partake in the northern campaigns, presenting him with a sword to signify his pre-determined victory, and confirming his kingship. In return, Ramesses delivers those he captured to them and respectfully acknowledges that he owes his successes to the Triad.¹²¹ This overt display of religious devotion enabled Ramesses to show that his rule was divinely supported despite the significant problems within Egypt.

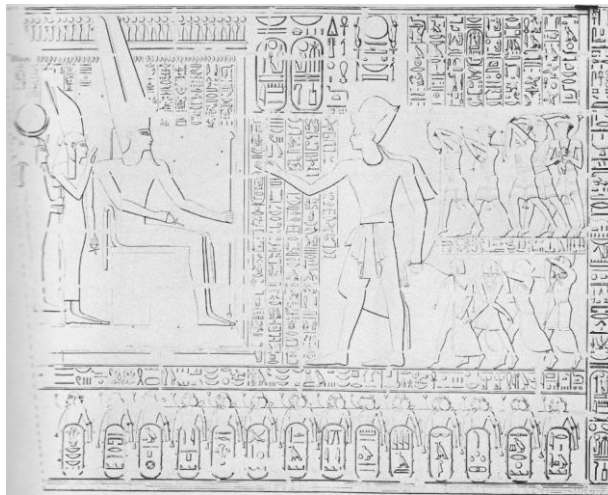


Figure 10: Ramesses III presenting gifts and captives before the Theban Triad. Image reproduced from Nibbi, *The Sea Peoples*, 83.

¹²⁰ See both Murnane, *United With Eternity*, 21-22 and Wilkinson, *Gods and Goddesses*, 75-76, for a discussion of the Triad.

¹²¹ See Edgerton & Wilson, *Historical Records*, 4-6 for an example of the Triad commissioning Ramesses to lead a military expedition. See 17-19 for Ramesses's triumphant return and delivering of offerings to the Triad.

A Cultural War

Establishing a rift between foreign and Egyptian is another undercurrent in Ramesses's narrative, possibly related to the influx of foreign peoples and spread of foreign cults into Egypt at the time. If Ramesses himself represents truth and order, then his enemies are representative of the "lie" hated by the gods, and by preventing them from entering Egypt, Ramesses is securing truth—and ma'at—throughout the land. Ramesses's northern campaigns can be interpreted as a cultural war in which he tried to maintain the integrity of Egypt's border from foreign contamination.

A chronological analysis of the Medinet Habu inscriptions shows that Ramesses increasingly tends to establish a binary between values associated with Egyptian identity and those associated with a foreign entity. This foreign entity, regardless of its ethnic affiliation, is always associated with Baal, one of the main deities in the Syrian pantheon. Murnane has suggested this to be a form of "loyalist propaganda" meant to remind the Egyptian people of Sethnakht's expulsion of the despised Syrian leadership.¹²² In terms of Ramesses's own situation, the influx of foreign elements into Egypt probably contributed to the social and economic decline of the time. He tries to right the ship in his inscriptions by distinguishing between foreign and Egyptian and associating himself with the latter. While Ramesses refers to himself as Baal in some year five inscriptions, these comparisons decrease in the latter half of his accounts.¹²³ Yet, his foreign enemies can still only understand him when he is associated with this deity. By creating this ideological rift between himself and his opponents, Ramesses demonstrates that he rules

¹²² Murnane, *United With Eternity*, 20.

¹²³ For Ramesses's mentions of Baal, see Breasted, *Ancient Records IV*, 25, 27, 42, 44, 49, 57, & 63.

in accordance with ma'at. He associates himself with the proper deities of Egypt, recognizes his power stems from them, and identifies himself in their image.

The inscriptions on the year eight war against the Sea Peoples and the Second Libyan War of year eleven best exemplify this pattern. When describing the campaigns, Ramesses refers to himself as a “bull/ram with two horns charging” into battle.¹²⁴ This is probably an allusion to the ram form of the god Amun, a cult image that was extremely popular in Upper Egypt and Nubia.¹²⁵ Conversely, his enemies describe him as “coming forth like Baal”; they cannot understand him through standard Egyptian terminology but can only explain his aura in relation to their own foreign pantheon.¹²⁶ By dissociating himself from what were considered threats and sources of disorder, Ramesses appears less accountable for their movement into Egypt and his rule seems more aligned with ma'at.

Ramesses accentuates the schism between himself and his enemies by contrasting his deep understanding of Egypt and her long-standing traditions with the ephemeral knowledge of the Delta inhabitants. He writes in his inscriptions that the rebels who waged war in the Delta “knew not Egypt forever.”¹²⁷ Ramesses advances his position by arguing that the rebels believed themselves fit to rule, but because of their lack of knowledge actually threatened the peace in their attempt to gain power. He questions how people so unaware of Egypt's customs could presumptuously express an intention to rule, and in a rationalization to justify his own power contrasts their actions against his proper adherence to traditional practices. Ramesses's narrative makes those he fought in

¹²⁴ Breasted, *Ancient Records IV*, 36, 40, 48, & 60-1.

¹²⁵ See Morris, *Architecture of Imperialism*, 199.

¹²⁶ Breasted, *Ancient Records IV*, 36, 42, 44, 46, & 48-49.

¹²⁷ For an example of this claim, see Edgerton & Wilson, *Historical Records*, 50.

the Delta look like foreigners while simultaneously elevating his own position as the guardian of tradition and order. The Delta groups appear as forces of chaos that Ramesses prevents from penetrating Egypt's borders.

To this end, Patricia Bikai writes that it is no coincidence “the rebels who know not Egypt forever...tell their people that Ramesses is like Baal.”¹²⁸ In reality, the Libyan tribes and coalitions of Sea Peoples probably would not worship Baal (a Syrian deity), but Ramesses was less interested in accurately identifying his enemies than in showing that they were *not Egyptian*. Who they were was not as important as the fact that they were simply foreign and therefore unfit to enter Egypt, and there was no better way to express this than to associate them with Baal as a way to stir up anti-Syrian resentment within Egypt. This narrative is a response to the increasingly blurred social situation in which Ramesses lived. With Egypt quickly becoming home to people from a variety of different backgrounds, Ramesses attempts to reassert his power by displaying his knowledge of traditional Egyptian values. In the face of an influx of foreign peoples and ideas, the Medinet Habu inscriptions show Ramesses to be rooted in tradition.

A Statement of Tradition

In a continuation of this trend, Ramesses's Medinet Habu inscriptions are replete with symbols traditionally used to display power. His emphasis on canonical imagery was a clear attempt to indicate that he ruled in accordance with *ma'at*. These symbols are found extensively in Plate 46, an inscription which details Ramesses's military

¹²⁸ Patricia Bikai, “The Phoenicians,” in *The Crisis Years: The 12th Century B.C.* ed. William Ward and Martha Joukowsky (Iowa: Kendall-Hunt Publishing, 1992), 136.

campaigns in the Delta in his eighth regal year.¹²⁹ In this plate, Ramesses carries the “crook and flail,” a canonical symbol of justice associated with the Delta.¹³⁰ This can be interpreted as an attempt to affix established Egyptian customs onto a region whose values had become diluted by the diverse populations living there. By holding the “crook and flail,” Ramesses illustrates that he still maintains order over the Delta and has prevented forces of chaos from successfully entering Egypt’s borders.

Ramesses’s similar use of regional crowns in this plate represents an additional example of the prominence traditional imagery had in his inscriptions. He describes himself as wearing both the separate White Crown of Upper Egypt and Red Crown of Lower Egypt, as well as the Double Crown that combines the two. This trope is not unique to Ramesses’s reign, but as Teeter explains, Ramesses portrayed himself wearing the royal crowns more than any other New Kingdom pharaoh.¹³¹ His repetition of this motif suggests the important role it played in his self-aggrandizement, and it also shows the Medinet Habu inscriptions to be part of a larger traditionalist response to foreign influences in Egypt. Both the crook and flail and the regional crowns give Ramesses the aura of a just and righteous king, unlike his Delta opponents, who are portrayed as forces of chaos that make them unworthy of Egypt and disruptive of ma’at.

Perhaps the clearest expression of traditional imagery is the bas-relief on the south wall of Medinet Habu, which depicts Ramesses III smiting defeated chieftains as they prostrate before him. He appears colossal in size when compared to his shirking enemies, and his pose closely resembles that of King Narmer from the Narmer Palette. Both adopt

¹²⁹ For Plate 46, see Edgerton & Wilson, *Historical Records*, 49-58.

¹³⁰ For Ramesses’s reference to the “crook and flail,” see Edgerton & Wilson, *Historical Records*, 51. For the symbolic importance of the “crook and flail” see Wilkinson, *Gods and Goddesses*, 120-121.

¹³¹ Teeter, *Presentation of Maat*, 23-24 & 36.

a wide-legged stance, drive what has been described as a “large wand” into their enemies, and wear the White Crown signifying authority over Upper Egypt. Narmer was considered to be the original founder of Egypt and his namesake palette shows him striking down his enemies in his campaign to unify the land.¹³² Narmer’s pose became an integral part of the Egyptian artistic canon as early as the Third or Fourth Dynasty, and here Ramesses borrows this oft used motif in an effort to justify his own power.¹³³ By copying this image, Ramesses creates both the illusion of a return to Egypt’s glorious past and portrays himself as responsible for this restoration. His decision to use this trope also relates to its underlying ideology—it implies a unification and order that is made possible by the defeat of forces of chaos within Egypt. These themes were of great importance to Ramesses, because he was confronted with a loss of control in the Delta. Adopting Narmer’s pose signified that Ramesses still maintained order—and held *ma’at*—in Egypt. To this end, the goddess *ma’at* has often been portrayed holding a wand or stave, and Ramesses’s driving of a “large wand” into his enemies further suggests the conquest of order over chaos and depicts Ramesses as a ruler who quite literally acted in accordance with *ma’at*.¹³⁴ Ramesses’s decision was also a logical one: this motif has deep ideological implications connected to the traditional story of Egypt’s first unification, and it is a trope whose meaning would have been understood by the native Egyptian populous. This scene of unification through violence would represent

¹³² Van De Mierop, *A History of Ancient Egypt*, 33-36. See also Barry Kemp, “Unification and Urbanization in Ancient Egypt,” in *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East*, 4 Vols, ed. Jack M. Sasson, 1995: 679-690 for a survey text describing the Early Dynastic Period in Egypt. Visit <http://xoomer.virgilio.it/francescoraf/hesyra/palettes/narmerp.htm> for high resolution images of the Narmer Palette.

¹³³ Davis, *Canonical Tradition*, 65-67.

¹³⁴ See Teeter, *Presentation of Maat*, 27 for a discussion of the wand/stave.

the climax of Ramesses's narrative and is perhaps the ultimate example of Ramesses casting himself in a positive light in the face of intense internal pressure.

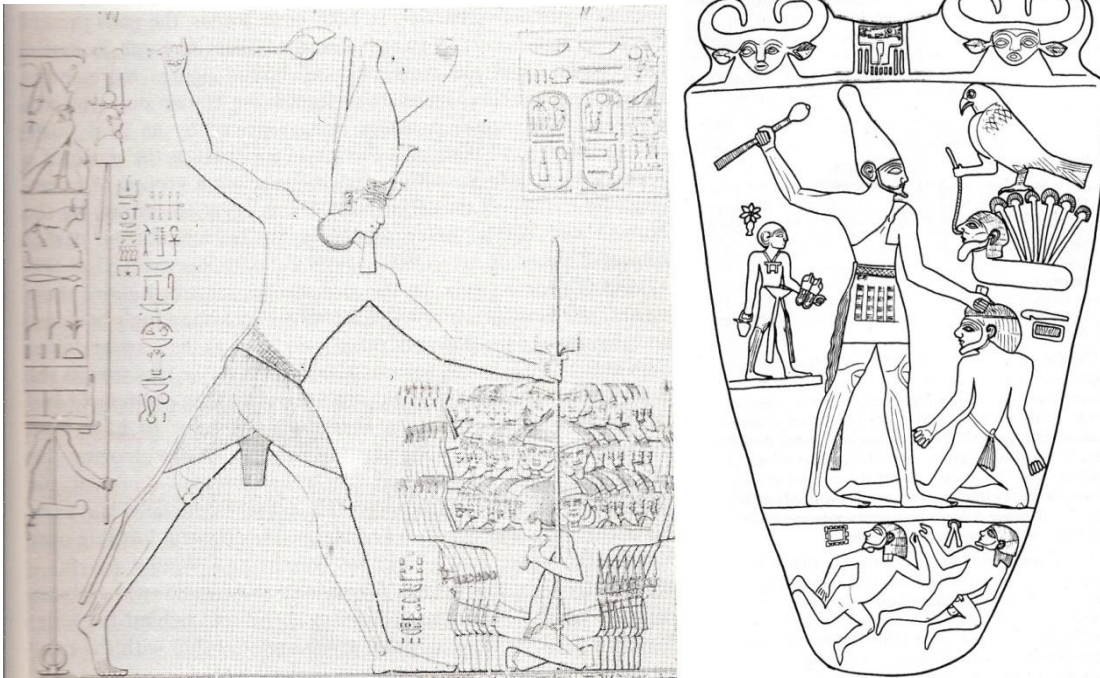


Figure 11: (left) South Wall Scene at Medinet Habu depicting Ramesses's triumph over the defeated chieftains. Image reproduced from Murnane, *United With Eternity*, 19. (right) Front side of the Narmer Palette, which probably served as the model for Ramesses's pose. Image reproduced from Nibbi, *The Sea Peoples*, 21.

While Ramesses's use of traditional imagery is chiefly a response to the influx of foreign cultures into Egypt, his own lack of royal blood cannot be ignored. Ramesses's own ambiguous origins, complemented by the social and economic deterioration that his rule brought, would have left him searching for ways to manifest his credibility. His prolific use of imagery from the Egyptian canon and his desire to create an ideological schism between himself and his opponents are the means through which he achieved this goal. Ramesses was not only intent on showing that his opponents were not Egyptian—he was just as interested in showing he *was*.

In fact, Ramesses actually twisted the crutch that was his humble origins into an additional form of positive self-representation. The relief above the high gate of Medinet Habu, which depicts Ramesses III presenting ma'at, luxury goods, and war captives to a seated Amun, is an ideal example of such a portrayal.¹³⁵ This scene can be interpreted as an extension of Ramesses's war narratives, displaying the aftermath of his campaigns. As in the accounts themselves, Ramesses is shown venerating the gods and presenting them offerings. This corroborative evidence supports the notion that Ramesses's war narratives were aimed at gaining the favor of the Theban priesthood. More importantly, Ramesses portrays himself wearing sandals, a feature not often represented in scenes of veneration. One plausible explanation is that by representing himself this way, Ramesses was better able to win the favor of the Egyptian people. This relief was located in a portion of the temple accessible to common Egyptians and, as Teeter explains, sandals were common garb for the lower classes.¹³⁶ A shod Ramesses would have been easily recognizable to the Egyptian people and perhaps would have fostered a sense of unity between Ramesses and his subjects. This image turns one of Ramesses's weaknesses—his lack of royal lineage—into a powerful attribute. Here he uses his humble background to build an ideological connection between himself and his people: Ramesses shows himself as sharing a common, non-royal origin with the people of Egypt before his good deeds and faith resulted in Amun selecting him as king.

¹³⁵ Murnane, *United With Eternity*, 6-11. In this relief, ma'at appears as a small goddess that Ramesses's is handing to Amun.

¹³⁶ Teeter, *Presentation of Maat*, 26.

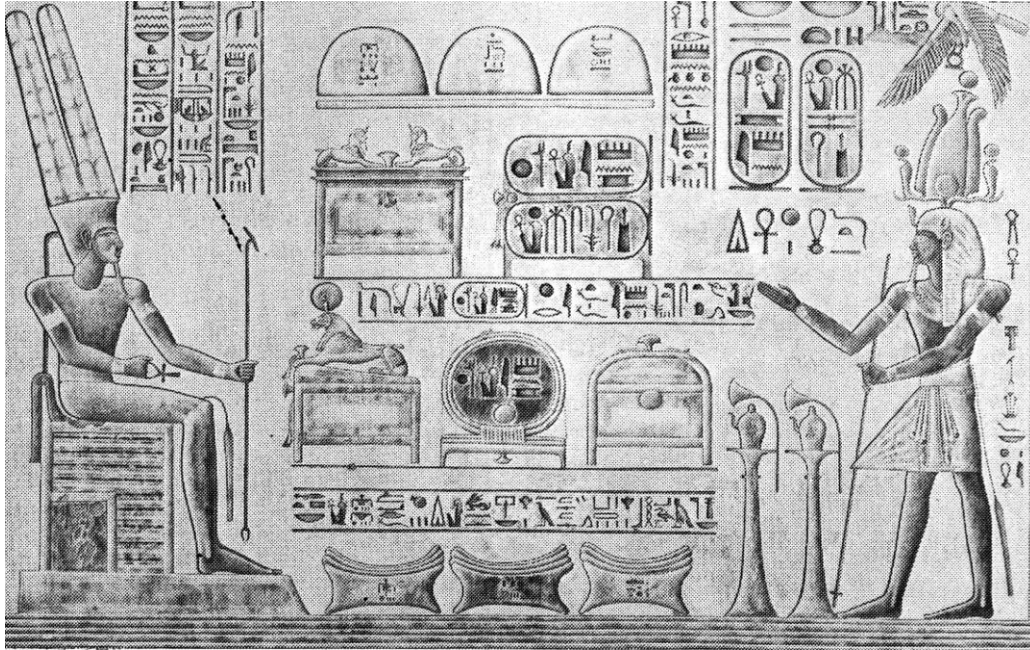


Figure 12: Ramesses III presenting gifts to a seated Amun. This relief is found in a private room along the South Wall of the temple, and unlike the High Gate relief, was probably inaccessible to most people. While Ramesses portrays himself wearing sandals in the High Gate relief, here he appears barefoot before the gods. Image reproduced from Murnane, *United With Eternity*, 47. Unfortunately, a reproduction of the High Gate relief could not be obtained for this work.

A Kingdom at Peace

Ramesses's depictions of Egypt are also an attempt to show that he ruled in accordance with *ma'at*. While in actuality the land was plagued with starvation and hardship, Ramesses describes Egypt as "festive with food and provisions," with "grains thereof being like the sands of the shore, [its] granaries approaching heaven, their heaps like mounds."¹³⁷ This was a clear claim to legitimacy on the part of Ramesses, because it was the pharaoh's responsibility to both ensure good harvests and maintain the food supply. These themes are repeated in an inscription dating to Ramesses's Twelfth regnal year, supposedly one year after his victory in the Second Libyan War. This inscription can be read as an epilogue to Ramesses's war narratives, showing the new age of peace and prosperity his victories brought unto Egypt. Here, the god Amun lists all the riches

¹³⁷ Edgerton & Wilson, *Historical Records*, 123.

Egypt has been blessed with under Ramesses's reign: "Niles bearing sustenance, [that the land is endowed] with wealth, food, and sustenance, so that [the people's] land is flooded in [Ramesses's] presence, and game is in the place where [Ramesses] walkest."¹³⁸ This picturesque image fits into the larger narrative that Ramesses was trying to construct: through his military victories, he kept the forces of chaos at bay and ushered in a new era of order throughout the land.

With its highly defensive fortifications, the temple of Medinet Habu itself was also a statement of security, and much like the text and images inscribed upon it, it demonstrated Ramesses's ability to protect his people. To this end, several portions of the text present Ramesses as the keeper of the peace within Egypt. One such scene is found in the prelude to Ramesses's Year Eight campaign, in which all the people of Egypt are gathered around Ramesses as he warns them of the approaching enemies but confidently assures all of his predetermined victory.¹³⁹ This image is a ploy meant to show Egypt as a united whole under Ramesses's leadership. It depicts all social classes accepting Ramesses's claim that he will defeat the northern enemies as they declare his "Victory in Thebes." Ramesses is recognized as the military protector of Egypt by all its people: they are confirming Ramesses's ability to uphold one of the chief tenants of *ma'at* and therefore recognizing his authority. This physical gathering of Egypt's people around Ramesses is a scene of harmony and stability, and is possibly a response to the social tensions rampant throughout Egypt at the time.

The final inscription of Ramesses's year five campaign against the Libyans can also be interpreted as an allusion to this peacekeeper motif. In this passage, Ramesses

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*

¹³⁹ Edgerton & Wilson, *Historical Records*, 52.

describes the security that his victory brought to Egypt: “the land is like – with untroubled heart. A woman goes about at her will, with her veil upon her head, her going extending as far as she pleases.”¹⁴⁰ Egypt is depicted as a land of peace, its people filled with a renewed sense of security because of Ramesses’s heroic efforts. Furthermore, this woman, whose mention appears strange and out of place in the context of the larger work, probably is a personification of ma’at. By literally placing a figural representation of ma’at in his narrative, Ramesses is indicating that through his victories, he has returned ma’at to Egypt. Ramesses’s mention that this woman can travel as far as she pleases serves a dual purpose: first, it illustrates a united Egypt. Since ma’at exists throughout the land, then Ramesses’s authority has been confirmed and accepted by all its people; there is no longer any need for domestic rebellions because the land has an “untroubled heart.” Second, it implies a sense of security associated with long distance travel and trade, a feeling which may have been comprised by the growing number of *habiru* during Ramesses’s rule. Ramesses demonstrates to the people of Egypt that the land is safe enough for even the most fragile of figures—ma’at—to traverse without fear. Egypt is united under Ramesses, who appears before his people “like Ra at early morning.”¹⁴¹ The enemies in the north—representative of lies, chaos, disorder, darkness—have been dispelled and ma’at has been restored to Egypt as a result of Ramesses’s heroic efforts.

¹⁴⁰ Breasted, *Ancient Records IV*, 26.

¹⁴¹ Breasted, *Ancient Records IV*, 26.

Concluding Remarks

Egypt under Ramesses III was a land plagued with economic, social, and political tensions. Fearing possible insurrection because of these problems, Ramesses devoted much effort to presenting himself as a ruler who possessed *ma'at* in order to justify his power in the face of internal tensions. The Medinet Habu inscriptions, which discuss how he protected Egypt's northern border from waves of external invasion, represent one of his presentations of power. While his claims should not be taken literally, the inscriptions have value in their underlying ideological messages that served to strengthen his authority. Ramesses appears as an ideal king in every way: knowledgeable of Egypt's traditions, respectful of its deities, and understanding of his own responsibilities as ruler. Thus, Ramesses's self-presentation is geared toward showing he ruled in accordance with *ma'at*. To further justify his authority, Ramesses used the inscriptions to associate himself with successful earlier kings and to align himself with the Priesthood of Amun. The Medinet Habu inscriptions therefore represent a propaganda device meant to legitimize Ramesses's power in the face of insecurities brought about by the troubled times over which he ruled.

Looking Forward

While this work attempts to provide an exhaustive argument in order to illustrate the ideological subtext present within Ramesses's accounts, there is still much that needs to be done before their meaning can be fully understood. One line of study would be to examine the organization of space of temple objects and reliefs in relation to the message that Ramesses was trying to convey. As previously mentioned, Ramesses's war

narratives are only one part, albeit a crucial one, of Medinet Habu, and it would be useful to explore how this section of the temple is spatially related to other scenes of self-representation or even how accessible these reliefs were to people not affiliated with the temple complex. We have already seen, for example, how Ramesses's self-representation in the High Gate relief is unusual because of its accessibility to all members of society. Yet, this image still expresses Ramesses's desire to show that he ruled in accordance with *ma'at*. Further comparative analysis of the temple reliefs themselves could help to clarify the role of the war inscriptions.¹⁴²

In addition, although this work does discuss similarities between Ramesses's inscriptions and those of earlier rulers, it shies away from a full-fledged comparative analysis. Despite the grandiose nature of Ramesses's war narratives, they are not unique in what they say or even how the events are described. More detailed analyses between Ramesses's accounts and the similar inscriptions of Merneptah could be useful in determining if the same problems that beleaguered Ramesses also afflicted Merneptah. Manassa has already discussed the ideological undertones of Merneptah's work: does this mean that he too was struggling to establish his legitimacy as ruler? If so, what problems presented themselves during his rule that made this kind of justification necessary?

If we look at Ramesses's later years, we see that his rule ended quite abruptly—with his assassination in the so-called Harem Conspiracy.¹⁴³ This successful attempt on Ramesses's life was the culmination of years of court intrigue and conflict, probably

¹⁴² Murnane's *United With Eternity* provides a holistic analysis of Medinet Habu's layout and would be a good starting point for this kind of work.

¹⁴³ A detailed discussion of the events surrounding the Harem Conspiracy can be found in Susan Redford, *The Harem Conspiracy: The Murder of Ramesses III* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2002).

brought on or made worse by the socioeconomic deterioration occurring throughout Egypt. The events of the Harem Conspiracy, which unfolded within the confines of Medinet Habu while Ramesses was there celebrating a religious festival, raise further questions concerning the stability of Ramesses's power. If he met his own end at the hands of his closest attendants, then how secure was his rule in his early years? Is Ramesses's self-portrayal as a powerful military hero completely ideological in design, or did fear for his own life serve as practical inspiration for this sort of self-representation?

Finally, much research still needs to be done to determine what historical truths—if any—the Medinet Habu texts contain. This work analyzes the inscriptions through an ideological lens and presents an argument built upon previous authorship discrediting the validity of Ramesses's accounts. This argument, however, represents merely a single niche in an ecosystem of scholarship, and ink is continuously being spilled in the hopes of uncovering the meaning behind Ramesses's narratives. Whether that meaning is based in practicality, ideology, or historicity, there is still a long, yet exciting, road of scholarship ahead.

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