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*Religion de l'Égypte ancienne*  
**Ancient Egyptian kingship**

Lectures in the year 2011-2012

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## *Religion de l'Égypte ancienne*

M. John Baines

Directeur d'études invité

Université d'Oxford, Grande-Bretagne

### ***Ancient Egyptian kingship***<sup>1</sup>

*Lectures in the year 2011-2012*

The aim of this course was to review the study of Egyptian kingship as the central institution of society and cosmos, with a focus on how the king related to court institutions surrounding him, as well as how his role in relation to the gods was projected and is now interpreted. The presentation was partly chronological, with the first lecture considering origins and the last surveying the institution in the long term. The nearly four millennia from which kingship is attested can only be sampled. Much of the evidence treated was iconographic rather than textual. One aim was to bring out the importance of visual forms for the performance, display, and meaning of kingship, in a mode that probably spoke more eloquently to many people than texts did. Another focus was the sophistication of the sources.

#### **I. Introduction: existing scholarship**

##### **Sources: archaeology, iconography, texts; origins of kingship<sup>2</sup>**

Egyptian kingship has attracted a vast body of research and publication for more than a century. The first task was to consider existing studies and to extract some threads of discussion (including earlier publications by the lecturer). Present-day research is founded upon works of numerous scholars that were summarized in the introduction to Georges Posener's, *De la divinité du pharaon* (Paris 1960), which itself derived from a course at the EPHE. Several chapters of that book focused on the king's status as a divinized or divine being, or a god, a prominent example of the last of those being the emphasis on divinity in Henri Frankfort's *Kingship and the gods* (Chicago 1948), which was strongly countered by Posener himself and envisaged rather more neutrally by Erik Hornung<sup>3</sup>. A continuing major theme is the king's role in temples and in royal ritual. Such work was pioneered by Alexandre Moret<sup>4</sup> and taken up by many writers, some of whom treat the topic through exegesis of texts together with selected images. An example of fruitful exegesis is Katja Goebis, *Crowns in Egyptian funerary literature* (Oxford 2008).

1. The course was delivered in French. Original title: « La royauté de l'Égypte ancienne ».

2. Original title of the lecture: « Introduction : état des questions. Les sources : archéologie, iconographie, textes ; origines de la royauté ».

3. E. HORNUNG, « Zur geschichtlichen Rolle des Königs in der 18. Dynastie », *MDAIK* 15 (1957), p. 120-133 ; *Conceptions of God in Ancient Egypt*, Ithaca, New York 1982 [1971], p. 135-142.

4. A. MORET, *Le rituel du culte divin journalier en Égypte : d'après les papyrus de Berlin et les textes du temple de Séti I<sup>er</sup>, à Abydos*, Paris 1902.

Such studies unavoidably normalize the king's status and role, because their sources expound what ought to be rather than what is.

Much in the course consisted of attempts to complement those works and others, notably the conference publications published in Germany since the late 1990s, by analysing kingship partly through its institutional development and partly through its embedding in circles of court and administration, as well as addressing some issues for which widespread interpretations are problematic. The living world of the king, the ultimate context and probable core of kingship, can only be modelled. Increasing numbers of studies, often of long-known evidence, valuably emphasize the significance of less formalized interactions of kings with others and of the negotiation of his role in relation to the past and to elites who had their own strategies and focuses of legitimation.

The session then returned to origins of kingship, treating evidence from later prehistory and Early Dynastic times. Definitions of kingship vary greatly, and issues of definition and of any threshold to the institution's presence were left aside. Early evidence is primarily archaeological and iconographic.

Forerunners of symbols and institutions of kingship can be traced in Naqada II (ca. 3500-3300 BCE) or a little earlier, being visible in the patterning of cemeteries and elite practices memorialized there, in a monumental statue that was later reduced to thousands of fragments, and in pictorial motifs found in Tomb 100 at Hierakonpolis that were probably also present on other, lost media. Tomb U-j at Abydos (Naqada IIIA, ca. 3200 BCE), the source of the oldest known Egyptian writing, was the burial place of someone who should probably be termed a king, but the context of his rule and the institutions underpinning it escape analysis. The decorated palettes that can be placed in sequence from around the same date onward offer a chance to study some of the visual evolution of kingship ideology. They end with the Narmer Palette, for which recent interpretations complement previous, political analyses by emphasizing cosmological aspects of the king's presence.

The Naqada III and Early Dynastic periods provide eloquent testimony for multiple changes in the ideology and practice of kingship, in contexts ranging from tombs with subsidiary burials to records of « events » on tags — the latter genre being confined to the 1st dynasty. Outstanding among longer-term developments is the monumentalization of what had been performed in the funerary enclosures of the first two dynasties, which was rendered into stone in the Step Pyramid complex of Djoser at Saqqara.

## **II. Duties of the king. King, court, and people: communication between the king and human society<sup>5</sup>**

The second session focused around obligations of the king toward the world of humanity. Discussion began by returning to Naqada III monuments. By dynasty 0 (ca. 3100-3000 BCE), significant rituals and actions of the king were presented

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5. Original title of the lecture: « Devoirs du roi. Roi, cour, peuple : la communication du roi avec la société humaine ».

to the gods while requiring the participation of many human actors as members of the court and as priestly personnel — categories that presumably overlapped. The Palermo Stone, a much discussed record that conveys probably authentic information about year names and actions of the first five dynasties, displays patterns that include for more than one reign the biennial « Following of Horus (*Šms Hr w*) ». This is thought to be a royal tour of duty through the land, in which the king, whose life had the character of a ritual performance, would act as mediator and authority in disputes as well as performing rituals and festivals in many places. In the 4th dynasty the annal format on the Palermo Stone was extended to include an explicit formula of royal action : « He made as his memorial for... (*jrj.n.fm mnw.fn*) ». The rendering of this formula is much disputed, but the topics it covers range from endowments, through actions, to the creation of often small « monuments ».

Representations of rituals of kingship are known from all periods. These are idealized and do not depict any specific performance. Examples where the element of performance is explicit include reliefs from the 5th dynasty complex of Sahure published by Tarek el-Awady<sup>6</sup>. In one the king's throne is literally wheeled in so that he can appear on it for a ritual and banquet celebrating the fruits of an expedition to Punt (the wheels are paralleled in a relief of Neuserre receiving benefits from the gods with court personnel in attendance). This large composition is significant also for a sub-scene showing favoured sculptors dining in the king's presence, a motif known for dependants of elites in some non-royal tombs and in late Old Kingdom biographical texts, as well as having parallels in many cultures. Study of these elements led to a discussion of practices associated with meals that transcend demarcations between royalty and others, bringing together not just king and elite but also the wider society.

Another composition shows Sahure's mastery of nature and technology in organizing the catch of birds with an arrangement of multiple clapnets. Variants of this rich motif are attested for the 1st dynasty king Den and in the 12th dynasty annals of Amenemhat II. The latter composition was explored in detail ; related evidence ranges down to the Graeco-Roman period, while examples from other civilizations show the centrality of hunting to roles of rulers. Meanings of hunting and of the defeat of enemies are mutually reinforcing<sup>7</sup>.

The lecture also discussed hierarchies of the court, starting from the seminal study of Klaus Baer, *Rank and title in the Old Kingdom* (Chicago 1960), touching on how shared concerns of king and subordinates are manifested in biographical inscriptions.

### III. The king and the gods<sup>8</sup>

Egyptologists generally assume that the king was the sole legitimate priestly actor in Egypt. This lecture addressed the presentation of kings as performers

6. T. EL-AWADY, *Abusir XVI. Sahure - the pyramid causeway : history and decoration program in the Old Kingdom*, Prague 2009.

7. See J. BAINES, *High culture and experience in ancient Egypt*, Sheffield 2013, chapt. 4.

8. Original title of the lecture: « Le roi et les dieux ».

and as recipients of the benefits of rituals, as well as distinctions in iconography between deities and kings, before discussing the question of king as priest.

From dynasty 0 onward, images show the king as dependent on the gods (a topic also addressed in the final lecture). In the hierarchies of decorative modes and scene types developed in the early third millennium, human beings could only be depicted at smaller scales than kings or in subjection to them. Neither the king nor deities could be shown in nonroyal contexts. In a period when only very limited amounts of text were inscribed, content that might be imagined verbally was expressed pictorially. An example is the notion that royal estates contribute their bounty to the king's mortuary endowment, which is brought to life in sequences of offering bearers captioned with estate names, while more abstract aspects of similar ideas are expressed by figures of personified qualities.

Some of this system's subtleties were explored through analysis of Old and Middle Kingdom monuments, notably the chapel of Pepy I from Tell Basta and the White Chapel of Senwosret I at Karnak. New Kingdom sources are more diverse and include the composition incorporating the text published by Jan Assmann<sup>9</sup>, who started from the example of the reign of Amenhotep III. From the same reign comes other significant evidence, notably the king's deification as a lunar deity and his representation in colossal statues displaying standards that signify that he brings benefits from the gods to the world outside the temple. The king's *sed*-festival, which is depicted in several versions, shows humanity playing a much larger part than elsewhere in temples, a presence that is paralleled in part in depictions of royal aggression beneath which the motif of « adoration by all the subjects (*dw3 rhjt nbt*) » and accompanying captions incorporate humanity in general. Related ideas, which included the king's assumption of the role of Shu as son of the creator, can be traced through the Amarna period into the time of Tutankhamun, as well as beyond with the divinization of Sety I and the deification of Ramesses II in the 19th dynasty.

None of this material shows that the king was understood as belonging directly with the gods. Moreover, if a king is deified, his normal status can hardly be that of a god. This distinction between the gods and the king remains evident in sources of the Graeco-Roman period, when scenes of royal purification and induction into the temple were widespread. In accord with wider rules of decoration and decorum, the purifying figures are deities ; yet the fact that this step is necessary for the king to enter separates his status from theirs. The motif of adoration by the subjects is found on external reliefs facing the first courts of temples and in other exterior contexts, maintaining a traditional distinction. On temple walls the king is presented almost as an abstraction by the framing columns which spread his titulary over three or four registers of decoration, as discovered by Erich Winter<sup>10</sup>.

Texts that have been put forward as saying that priests performed their roles by delegation from the king assert rather that the king has appointed the priest to act in the temple and to see the god. Biographies of many periods state without

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9. J. ASSMANN, *Der König als Sonnenpriester*, Glückstadt 1970.

10. E. WINTER, *Untersuchungen zu den ägyptischen Tempelreliefs der griechisch-römischen Zeit*, Vienna 1968.

qualification that their protagonists acted as priests. The notion that priests were delegates needs rethinking.

#### **IV. Kingship defined by iconography and presented in statuary, with other ancient definitions of the institution and of the king's role<sup>11</sup>**

Part of the aim of the final lecture was to synthesize themes discussed in the first three. Separation of images of kings and of the nonroyal may not have been complete at the beginning of the Dynastic period, as is suggested by lifesize statues in the Cairo and Ashmolean museums. Relief compositions of the same date are clearer, and they do not show the king as completely divine. Rather, he is the manifestation of Horus in the palace, a conception that is conveyed for example by the finest statue of Khephren from his valley temple at Giza. The royal cartouche, which appeared during the 3rd dynasty and could be used in a much wider range of contexts than the Horus name or any pictorial image, functions in part to protect non-royal people from the king's power and to insulate the king's presence from the hazards of uncontrolled surroundings.

Details of iconography attested from the Narmer Palette onward display the king's cosmic role. Features such as crowns, kilts, and the sheathed dagger thrust into the belt, studied for example by Diana Patch<sup>12</sup> and David O'Connor<sup>13</sup> attest to a rich symbolism. Tomoaki Nakano<sup>14</sup> has identified the tooled leather belt attested only on statues of kings as another special marker. These elements need not have corresponded with costumes kings wore, which may have been much more elaborate and have covered more of the body. Fragmentary garments from the tomb of Tutankhamun show something of the reality of royal costume, for example enacting a king's claim to dominate forces of disorder through hunting. The temple of Ramesses III at Medinet Habu is another important source, complementing the king's « shawl » in the World Museum Liverpool.

On another level, an emblematic lintel of Amenemhat III from the Fayyum, analysed by Heinrich Schäfer<sup>15</sup>, offers a telling example of the visual-verbal interlinking of deities and the king, always giving primacy to the former. Because the gods are many and he is one, neither this relationship nor its implications for humanity are simple. A rock stela of the 13th dynasty king Sebekhotep III shows the flexibility and potential of iconography<sup>16</sup> : he is grouped with his living, non-royal parents and family, an impossibility if he had acceded at his father's death.

11. Original title of the lecture: « La royauté définie par l'iconographie et dans la statuaire, avec d'autres définitions anciennes de l'institution et du rôle du roi ».

12. D. C. PATCH, « A 'Lower Egyptian' costume: its origin, development, and meaning », *JARCE* 32 (1995), p. 93-116.

13. D. O'CONNOR, « The Narmer Palette: a new interpretation », in E. TEETER (ed.), *Before the pyramids: the origins of Egyptian civilization*, Chicago 2011, p. 149-152.

14. T. NAKANO, « An undiscovered representation of Egyptian kingship? The diamond motif on the kings' belts », *Orient* 35 (2000), p. 23-34.

15. H. SCHÄFER, *Principles of Egyptian art*, trans. J. BAINES, Oxford 1986 (1974), p. 352-355.

16. M. F. L. MACADAM, « A royal family of the thirteenth dynasty », *JEA* 37 (1951), p. 20-28.

The standard titulary of kings can be examined fruitfully for variations in its content, primarily from the Middle Kingdom onward. The accession decree of Thutmose I from the early 18th dynasty<sup>17</sup>, attested in rock inscriptions from Lower Nubia, shows the deliberate development of such ideas in action while documenting a necessary practice of kingship that analysts might overlook. Another significant source, the narrative of the death of Thutmose III and succession of Amenhotep II in the self-presentation of the soldier Amenemhab (Theban Tomb 85)<sup>18</sup>, shows that occupying the throne was the essential act of accession, as is confirmed by many details of iconography, not least in the statue of Khephren.

A further rewarding source for ideas of kingship is the restoration stela of Tutankhamun, which contains explicit statements stimulated by the reversal of Akhenaten's policies<sup>19</sup>. The king is stated to have (re)appointed priests of different ranks, but they are not said to act as his delegates. According to the text anyone can approach a deity. Design and text emphasize the plurality of gods and goddesses — as befits the aftermath of the Amarna period — and of religious forms, in which the king is the enabler rather than the protagonist. This plurality fits with the increasingly prominent display of religion in the later New Kingdom.

Egyptian ideas of kingship were influential both in the Near East and, from the first millennium BCE onward, in the Aegean and later the Roman world. This diffusion is seen in motifs such as the winged disk, the Egyptian origin of which may have been forgotten by the second millennium, and in the motif of the « union of the Two Lands (*zm3-t3wj*) », which is found in free but meaningful variations in ivories from the Assyrian palace of Nimrud, as well as being appropriated in an imperial version with elaborate extensions for the Persian king Darius I. Egyptian royal iconography was used by the Ptolemies in both indigenous and hybrid modes, and it appears in Rome, before moving into what might be seen as pastiche in the muscled colossi identified as depicting Hadrian's favourite Antinous, who was said to have drowned in the Nile.

Comparable developments can be found from early within Egypt itself, where patrons and artists made constant recourse to past forms, which they re-employed in order to convey a rich range of ideas that is only beginning to be explored. As the king was central to Egyptian society, so was representation of his role essential to the land's cultural vitality.

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17. K. SETHE, *Urkunden der 18. Dynastie*, I fasc. 2, Leipzig 1906, p. 79-81.

18. *Ibid.*, III fasc. 9-10, Leipzig 1907, p. 895-896.

19. See J. BAINES, « Presenting and discussing deities in New Kingdom and Third Intermediate period Egypt », in B. PONGRATZ-LEISTEN (ed.), *Reconsidering the Concept of Revolutionary Monotheism*, Winona Lake IN 2011, p. 46-42.