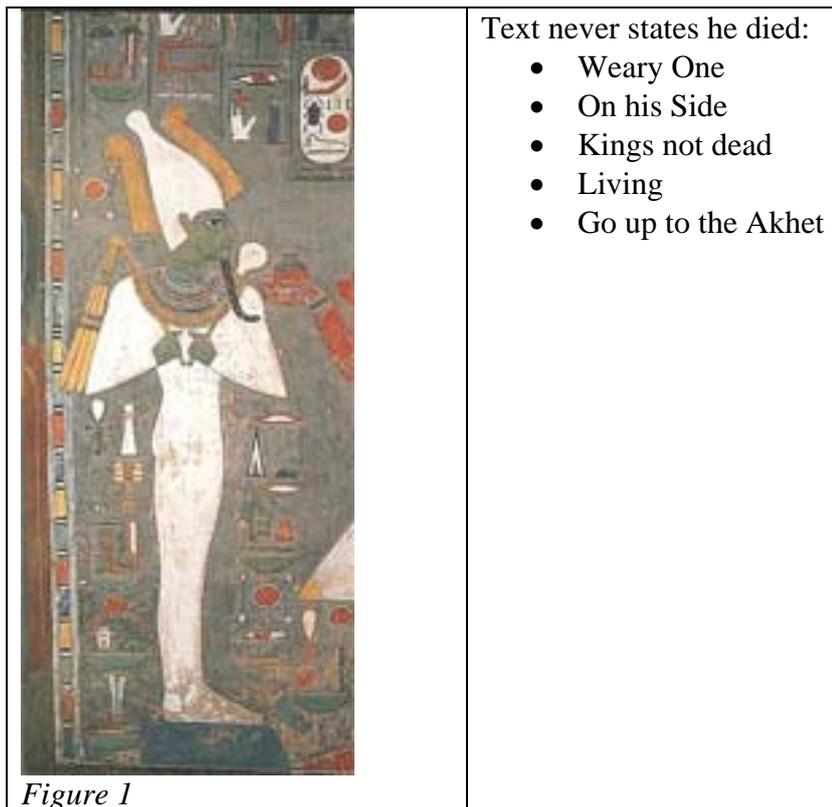


## Maintaining Ma'at: The Iconography of Kingship in New Kingdom Temples"

Cindy Ausec (Ph.D. Candidate, Department of Near Eastern Studies, U. C. Berkeley)

Cindy Ausec described the iconography of kingship in Egyptian art with reference primarily to temples and monumental sculptures of the New Kingdom period, approximately 1539 to 1075 BCE. She focused on the area around Thebes, in particular the mortuary temple of Ramesses III. In general, the images presented depict Egyptian kings as high priests, as commanders, and above all as preservers of "ma'at," or order, against the threat of chaos or non-existence. They were created not for the sake of their aesthetic beauty, but rather in order magically to allow Egyptian kings to give and receive offerings, and to continue to preserve *ma'at* in the afterlife.

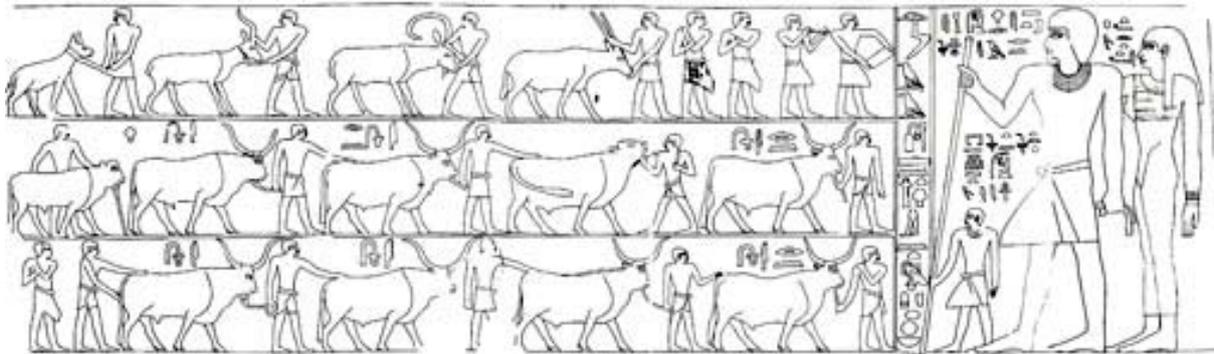
Almost all surviving Egyptian art was created in order to serve this magical function. The Egyptians believed that images and words were closely linked and powerful, since pictures could have linguistic functions in a written sentence. They could be activated by magic and thereby made to perform their function forever. No king could be referred to as "dead," for example, for fear that the utterance of the words would cut his afterlife short and condemn him to death forever (*figure 1*).



*Figure 1*

The need to make images capable of serving particular purposes when activated by magic explains why Egyptian figures seem stiff and (except in certain cases) not naturalistic: they were created in accord with a canon of rules meant to give conceptual clarity to what was being depicted. Human images were conglomerations of hieroglyphs, with heads, torsos, and legs depicted in profile, and shoulders depicted frontally. Particular objects were assigned to par-

ticular hands. Figures were also depicted on a scale that indicated their place in a hierarchy (*figure 2*): parents tended to be larger than children, and the owner of the tomb in which an image appeared was especially large. The king himself was larger than all other humans—as large as the gods—because he himself was divine, by virtue of the royal "Ka" or "life force" that each king possessed and passed down to his successor.



*Figure 2* Official Iasen and his Wife Meryankh

In the case of landscape images (i.e., gardens), trees were depicted in profile and in such a way that their species can be identified. Other wildlife tended to be extremely lifelike and naturalistic, so that it would be magically available to a king in the afterlife (*Figure 3*). The common Egyptian belief that images were created to make what they depicted potent in the afterlife also explains why objects in boxes are depicted on top of them (i.e., so that they could be used), and why tomb robbers who feared that the dead tomb owner might reveal the crime to others gouged out the eyes in the image of the tomb owner.



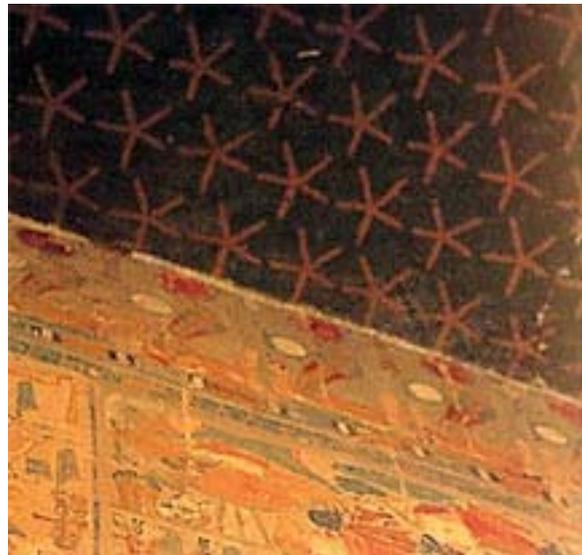
*Figure 3*

Images displaying the iconography of kingship can be found today primarily in temples, because non-sacred buildings—including not only normal houses but also royal palaces —were

built of mud brick, which was easily destroyed by flooding, and was often mined for fertilizer in later periods—therefore tending not to survive. Tombs, like temples, were intended to fulfill their functions for eternity and were therefore built of stone. But images of kings in royal tombs tend not to use the iconography of kingship. Temples, whose purpose was to ensure that offerings were made to the gods for eternity (which did not involve the storage of the king's mummified body), abound in images that show kingly deeds—kings preserving *ma'at* in their capacity as rulers, presenting offerings to the gods (whether in the form of wine, flowers, or *ma'at* itself - *figure 4*)), and conducting religious festivals.



*Figure 4*



*Figure 5*

The audiences for these images accorded with the placement of the images in the temple. Images in the larger, outer courts of a temple were visible to members of the upper echelon of society. Entrance to the smaller, darker, lower-ceilinged interior rooms of a temple was restricted to a "purer" audience: priests and the king, who by entering these rooms could "go back in cosmic time" (*figure 5*). Images displayed there were meant to be seen only by this smaller audience and by the gods.

As for the value of the images as historical documents, one cannot forget their primary, magical purpose: to allow a king to serve the gods and preserve *ma'at* for eternity. Understandably, the images depict these things as having taken place successfully. Battle scenes always depict the king as victorious (even in the case of battles that in fact did not end in victory), as trampling or otherwise defeating enemies who represent chaos (as in the case of the "Sea People," possibly Mycenaeans—*figure 6*), and as participating in battles actually fought by their royal predecessors.



Figure 6

Kings' success in preserving *ma'at* in the form of peace and security can be seen in scenes showing kings in control of nature (the scenes of lion and bull hunts), or exercising domination over foreign peoples.

Several questions from the audience raised issues not touched on by Ms. Ausec's lecture:

- (1) The Greeks produced far more images of nude bodies than the Egyptians, but there are in fact nudes in Egyptian art; they tend to be serving people and "lesser" characters. It is important to remember that Egyptian art was created not for its own sake, but for a magical purpose, Nudity would not have served this purpose.
- (2) There isn't much surviving art with a decorative rather than a magical purpose, possibly because the non-sacred buildings in which we would have found it have not survived.
- (3) Regarding the puzzle of the unfinished eye in the famous bust of Nefertiti: assuming that the bust in fact depicts Nefertiti (which is not certain), it is possible that the eye was not finished because the bust was used as a model of how to insert an eye into a portrait bust. In this case, as in many other issues of Egyptian art and religion, we do not have enough texts to be certain about the way we are interpreting the objects. We do have many examples of hymns with descriptions of creation and the afterlife. It is important for us continually to ask ourselves how we know what we know.
- (4) On the question of when archaeological excavations of Egyptian sites began: New Kingdom kings excavated and restored tombs from earlier periods. In many respects, the father of modern archaeology was Napoleon, whose savants made records of Egyptian monuments that no longer survive.

(5) On the allegation that Western art historians have exaggerated the whiteness of Egyptians' skin: this refers primarily to Tutankhamun. It is important to remember that long ago, as now, the Egyptian population was very mixed. Contrary to what is often alleged, the Egyptian population has never simply been replaced by Arabs. The color of ancient kings' skin changed from dynasty to dynasty—i.e., from family to family, depending on the family's origin. Note also that deceased kings are often depicted with a skin whose blackness represents the color of earth.

(6) The common historiographical perception of Egypt as separate from the rest of Africa is not simply a politically motivated myth. Egypt was geographically divided from other parts of Africa by water and desert; but there was contact with other Africans, among them the Nubians.

(7) Kay Corcoran (6<sup>th</sup> grade, Del Mar Middle School) recommended the following Web sites:

[Theban Mapping Project](http://www.thebanmappingproject.com/about/)

This fabulous site, sponsored by the American University of Cairo, Egypt, provides maps, short film clips, and overviews of current excavations & preservation efforts near Thebes.  
<http://www.thebanmappingproject.com/about/>

[Panoramic Tour of Ramesses IV Tomb](http://www.panoramas.dk/2008/flash/valley-of-the-kings.html)

<http://www.panoramas.dk/2008/flash/valley-of-the-kings.html>