MUT OR NOT? ON THE MEANING OF A VULTURE SIGN ON THE HERMITAGE STATUE OF AMENEMHAT III

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Richard Fazzini was one of the first colleagues whom I had the pleasure to guide in the Egyptian gallery of the Hermitage as its keeper. At that time, he was much engaged in excavations of the precinct of Mut at Karnak and, of course, an inscription on the Hermitage statue of Amenemhat III that may be interpreted—or not—as the earliest known record of Mut was one of the subjects of our discussions. More than 15 years have passed since that time, but the problem of the beginning of the cult of Mut is not much clearer now than it was in the eighties, and the nature of the “Hermitage vulture” still remains obscure. This makes me write this small paper and dedicate it to Richard, an excellent museum Egyptologist and a kind and brave man.

A statue of Amenemhat III in the Hermitage Museum (fig. 1) occupies a special place in the history of Egyptology: a comparison of its face (fig. 2) with that of one of the Tanis sphinxes made by Goléniščeff in 1893 initiated stylistic and iconographic studies of Middle Kingdom royal portraiture. Goléniščeff was interested mainly in the facial features and the name of the king represented and, thus, he paid only minimal attention to other aspects of the inscriptions on the throne. He reproduced one of them in standard typographic hieroglyphs; the last preserved sign of both inscriptions, that of a vulture with a flagellum, of which only the upper part survives in either case, was shown as complete. The meaning of the vulture sign was beyond any doubt for Goléniščeff, who translated the inscription as “Le dieu bon, source de richesses (mot à mot: faisant les choses), Māt-n-Rā, fils du Soleil, issu de son flanc, Amenemhāt, ami (ce mot est emporté par une lacune) de la déesse Maut.”

Very little was done for the study and interpretation of the statue after Goléniščeff, in spite of its obvious importance as one of the best portraits of Amenemhat III, attributed to him not only stylistically but also on the grounds of inscriptive evidence. Although its general view was repeatedly reproduced (mainly by means of reprinting Goléniščeff’s photograph), only one publication touched upon the inscriptions—and in a very unsatisfactory manner. In the catalogue of Egyptian sculpture in the Hermitage by Lapis and Matthieu (the entry written by the latter), the vulture signs are lacking in the handwritten copy of the texts and their existence is not reflected in the translation either—the mistakes unfortunately characteristic of that poorly published and badly edited book. Traces of the signs, however, are visible on a photograph in a picture-book

1 Inv. no 6729. Black granite, h. 87 cm. Provenance unknown, modern history uncertain; the earliest record of its presence in the Hermitage is G. Treu, ‘Über die ägyptische Sammlung der Eremitage’ (St. Petersburg: Schmitzdorff, 1871), S. 24. Matthieu supposed that it could have been bought by the Russian Academy of Sciences with the collection of Carlo Ottavio Castiglione in 1825 (Iryna Aleksandrovna Lapis, Militsa Edwinovna Matysz, Древнеегипетская скульптура в собрании Государственного Эрмитажа [Москва: Наука, 1969], 43 [Iryna Aleksandrovna Lapis and Militsa Edvinovna Matthieu, Ancient Egyptian Sculpture in the Collection of the State Hermitage (Moscow: Nauka, 1969), 43]), but this is only a conjecture, possible but unconfirmed by the early museum documentation.


3 Ibid., 133. Actually Goléniščeff published a reconstructed combination of two similar mirroring inscriptions: it is oriented as the proper left column, but the cartouche with the name Imn-m-ḥt.t is shown undamaged, as it is in the proper right one.

4 Ibid. The same translation had earlier been published in Wladimir Goléniščeff, Ermitage Imperial: Inventaire de la collection égyptienne (S. l., 1891), 85.

5 See PM 8, 15, 800-365-700.

6 Lapis, Matysz, Древнеегипетская скульптура…, 43, табл. 1 (кат.№ 6). The translation is inexact also in other respects.
devoted to the Hermitage pharaonic collection published five years later by Landa and Lapis, but their shapes are too indefinite for sure reading if based only on the photograph.

The inadequateness of publications might be the reason why the inscriptions were not discussed as a possible source for the early history of the cult of Mut for a long time. Only 65 years after Golénischeff, Vandier devoted some words to them in Manuel d’archéologie égyptienne, but since he had never seen the original, he entirely relied upon Golénischeff’s reading and understanding. Due to the alleged presence of Mut, Vandier supposed that the statue came from Thebes (i.e., from the temple of Mut at Karnak). Thirty more years passed, and at last the Hermitage sculpture was discussed by Fay in her most thorough manner as the closest parallel to the figure of Amenemhat III from the sanctuary of Heqaib at Elephantine split between the museums of Vienna and Aswan. According to her, the two monuments are so similar that they seem to have been made in the same workshop; however, she definitely and convincingly discarded the possibility of the manufacture of the Hermitage statue in a Theban workshop (although admitted that it could have been made for Thebes elsewhere) and cast doubt on the interpretation of the vulture sign as the name of Mut. In a later paper, Fay demonstrated that the “slight upward pull at the corners of the lips” of the St. Petersburg statue is characteristic of the images of Amenemhat III produced in Lower Egyptian workshops. In a paper by Polz devoted to the statuary of the last kings of Dyn. 12, it is mentioned as an example of the “stilisierende Stil” in the sculpture of Amenemhat III, but is not interpreted at all. Thus, although there is obvious progress concerning the artistic aspect of the issue, a new discussion of the inscriptions is no doubt a must.

The inscriptions (fig. 3) are identical, placed symmetrically on the front surface of the throne at either side of the king’s legs and continued on the horizontal upper surface of the base; unfortunately, the front of the base, with feet and the terminal parts of the inscriptions, is lost. They read:

\[ nfr \ nfr \ i(M)-t \ N(l)-m\bar{s}\bar{t}-r'(w) \ s3 \ R'(w) \ n \ h.t.f \ \text{Imn-}m-h.t \ / / / / \]

“Younger God” who performs rites, Nimaatre, son of Re of his body, Amenemhat.

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7 Natalia B. Landa and Irma A. Lapis, *Egyptian Antiquities in the Hermitage* (Leningrad: Aurora, 1974), no. 21 (better in the proper right inscription, worse in the proper left one).
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15 On *ir(l)* (Ih.t) see now Carolyn Diane Routledge, *Ancient Egyptian Ritual Practice: Ir-lt and Mt’*, PhD diss., University of Toronto (Toronto: National Library of Canada, 2001). The cartouche, its contents, and parts of the preceding hieroglyphs are broken off in the proper left inscription, perhaps with a single blow that could be intentional.