TELL ME, RICHARD—DID THE ANCIENT EGYPTIANS REALLY WEAR SUSPENDERS? (THOUGHTS ON THE VIZIER’S INSIGNIA AND ONE OF THE MEN WHO WORE IT DURING AMENHOTEP III’S REIGN)

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This fine limestone bust (figs. 1–6), presumably broken from a seated statue, offers tantalizing clues to the identity of the person it represents. Stylistic features and the man’s attire, taken together, identify the subject as one of the viziers who served Amenhotep III.

The man’s shoulder-length, straited wig, traces of his short beard, and the cloak, edged with looped fringe that encircles his shoulders, recall Middle Kingdom representations of officials. The heart-shaped face, however, and the almond eyes with fine, double lid folds, tapering cosmetic lines and arched, tapering brows, are stylistic features that could only have been created during the New Kingdom in one of Amenhotep III’s own sculpture studios.

A cord worked in raised relief is visible at both sides of the man’s neck. This feature, which occurs in relief and painting as well as sculpture, was part of the vizier’s official attire at least as early as Dynasty 11; it has often been mistakenly identified as straps, or even “suspenders.” Reliefs in the tomb of the vizier Dagi at Thebes (TT 39) clarify the purpose of the cord (figs. 7–8). Dagi, who served Mentuhotep II toward the end of his reign, wears a white cord around his neck in each preserved representation. A large blue (lapis lazuli or glazed steatite?) cylinder-shaped seal, with caps at each end, probably of precious metal, hangs from the cord. The prominence of these representations in Dagi’s tomb may be a reflection of the novelty of the “necklace”—as if this badge of the vizier’s office were something new.

1 Ex-collection, Sir Sidney Nolan (artist: Melbourne 1917–London 1993). Fine hard limestone, with some quartz (?) veins, cream to light raw sienna in color. Present whereabouts not known. Height 21 cm, width 18 cm, depth 15 cm, height of face circa 3.3 cm, width of face 6 cm, height of eye 0.56 cm, width of eye 1.73 cm, width of mouth 2.36 cm, height of ear 3.43 cm, width of beard bridge 1.65 cm, width of cord 0.32 cm, width of cloak fringe 0.32 cm, width of back pillar 8.5 cm, depth of back pillar at break edge 2.2 cm, width of break along diagonal 20.5 cm. Condition: nose, mouth, chin, beard, earlobes, and front left of head smashed away. Numerous chips over surface. I thank Marianne Eaton-Krauss, Georg Meurer, and L. Joseph Stecher for reading versions of this text. Jürgen Liepe, Berlin, prepared all photographs for publication.

2 Discernible as a series of short, incised loops; the initial attempt to carve the cloak edge was abandoned in favor of a higher placement. Presumably, the sculptor realized his first angle would have taken the cloak around the back of the sculpture instead of upward around the neck, where it customarily disappears beneath the wig.

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5 See Arielle P. Kozloff and Betsy M. Bryan with Lawrence M. Berman, Egypt’s Dazzling Sun: Amenhotep III and His World (Cleveland: The Cleveland Museum of Art, 1992), 146–147, for a discussion of the characteristics of Amenhotep III’s limestone and calcite sculptures.


7 William C. Hayes, The Scepter of Egypt, Part 1 (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1953), 162, col. 2, draws attention to the “cord from which was suspended the seal of his exalted office,” but does not apply the identification to later representations, where only the cords are represented and the seal is tucked into the front of the skirt. Vizier’s vestments are also discussed by Wolfram Grajetzki, Die höchsten Beamten, 40.

A relief fragment in the Metropolitan Museum (39.1.5) found near the South Pyramid at Lisht preserves the torso...
During the Old Kingdom, viziers are not represented in any medium wearing this insignia, and few statues are preserved from Dynasty 12 that include it; when well enough preserved, they show the cord tucked under the front edge of the kilt (figs. 9–10). Statues of viziers with the insignia are more common in Dynasty 13, when these officials are depicted wearing a skirt (as opposed to a cloak); the seal is tucked under the upper edge of the skirt so that only the cord is visible (figs. 11–12). By the reign of Amenhotep III, a “clasp” appears at the back of the vizier’s neck (fig. 13). Ostensibly to secure the ends of the vizier’s cord, it is depicted in both relief and sculpture, where it may be decorated with the name of the king under whom the vizier served.

The skirt wrapped high on the chest is also worn by other officials, not just viziers. Usually mounded at the front as if covering a large belly, it has been interpreted as symbolic of high status (corpulence = plentiful food = wealth). A few contemporary reliefs show that full-front skirts do not necessarily conceal impressive bellies, but were created by layering garments (figs. 14–15). A kilt is the undermost garment; over it, skirts of increasing length are wrapped, the end folds overlapping at the front, until the desired girth is achieved. The skirt with the mounded front is a symbol of status and wealth not because it conceals a large belly, but because an abundance of garments documents the wearer’s position and wealth.

The vizier, who performed the duties of prime minister and chief justice, was probably more powerful than any man in ancient Egypt except the king himself. Since the reign of Thutmos III at the latest, the vizier’s duties were...