During my time at the University of Memphis, I had the great privilege to study with Dr. Murnane. Those seminars, one on Amarna history and the other focused on Egyptian imperialism, were some of the most stimulating I have experienced. Dr. Murnane’s sharp mind, depth of knowledge, and probing questions made each meeting a beautiful challenge. His unfettered generosity with his time, always happy to provide guidance, references, and suggestions made a huge impression. So too did his absolute passion for Egypt and his drive to record her endangered monuments as thoroughly as possible. It is with this in mind that I dedicate this article, an initial presentation of my dissertation project, to the memory of Dr. Murnane.

Introduction

The hundreds of scenes at the temple of Medinet Habu usually feature the king in a variety of contexts (ritual, ceremonial, battle, etc.) and allocate to him regalia involving an array of attributes. For example, in many scenes he wears a hprš-crown. In others, he wears a ḫdīt-crown, a šnjt-kilt and a royal beard (the šnjt and the beard seemingly never appear with the hprš). Do these and other attributes form significant clusters of spatial distribution and association that would enhance our understanding of the various levels of meaning potentially embedded in the scenes? But how would we study such patterns of clustering and association given the massive number of attributes and the variability of the contexts/scenes involved?

Thanks to generous awards from the American Research Centre in Egypt, the Samuel H. Kress Foundation and the Institute of Fine Arts of New York University, I hope to be in a position to help answer such questions and much more. With their assistance, I was able to spend January to May 2006 in Egypt gathering essential data for my Ph.D. dissertation, The Regalia of Ramses III: A Contextual Study into the Variations and Significance of Royal Costume. This dissertation is under the astute direction of Dr. David O’Connor and aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the contextual importance of select royal regalia in the New Kingdom through detailed examination of depictions of the pharaoh in a variety of settings.1 The mortuary temple of the king at Medinet Habu, with its abundance of well-preserved relief, is the focus of this project.

The primary goals of this dissertation project are: 1) to create a total digital color photographic record of Medinet Habu, of which approximately 90% is completed; 2) to develop a relational database to track all Medinet Habu scene attributes (and those of comparative data sets); 3) through advanced statistical analyses, to discover pairs and/or triads of correlated attributes of royal regalia; and 4) to provide a methodology which would be valuable for similar studies by others in the future.

Using the visual data assembled during my field season, individual elements of royal dress, as well as attributes and signifiers appearing in association with the king (such as chariot equipment or insignia), are being examined in conjunction with accompanying texts and epithets. This will facilitate an exploration into the ways in which those elements interact with each other and with the body of the king, as well as how they function together as a whole to provide him with a visual projection of royal power, divine strength, and apotropaic protection. The communicative aspect of royal regalia and the ways in which items of...
pharaonic costume impacted audiences will also be explored.

For this particular project, rather than attempting to examine all of the depictions of Ramses III and the contexts in which he appears at Medinet Habu (a daunting task to say the least), a reduction of focus depth to a more manageable amount of material was clearly necessary. While an entire dissertation could certainly be written on an examination of the variations in royal regalia that are seen within a single genre of scenes, a more productive and interesting angle is a comparative study of the regalia that appears in the battle cycles and the festival reliefs.  

There are several reasons to approach the topic in this way. Both types of scenes display the king engaged in terrestrial interactions—quite unlike the cultic and mortuary scenes where he is focused solely on the divine realm. Both groups portray the pharaoh as ‘facing off’ against chaotic forces, albeit forces of differing types. Both are also venues where pharaoh had a human audience, although those audiences were disparate in nature. Additionally, the reliefs themselves would have had a living, if limited, audience. This audience points to the importance of the communicative aspect of royal regalia and the ways in which items of pharaonic costume interacted with and conveyed information to those who saw his image, whether in the flesh or etched in stone. The physical locations of the festival and war reliefs also speak of an implied connection, especially in the courtyards of Medinet Habu where they are directly juxtaposed.

By comparing the two ‘public’ venues of warfare and festival, selected patterns of regalia related to the particular powers to be emphasized and/or different levels and different types (i.e. physical vs. cultic) of vulnerability the pharaoh experienced may become discernible. Within each broad group of war and festival and in each individual cycle (e.g. Sokar festival, First Libyan war, etc.), I will be searching for regalia patterns of geographical, temporal and seasonal elements. Patterns may emerge of certain elements being used in scenes with specific enemies at particular times of the year, or discernible shifts in selected elements may be visible over a span of time (e.g. First vs. Second Libyan wars). Differences in costume related to the type of audience, how they would have seen the king, and how they were intended to view the king could be most telling.

These data should be most revealing in terms of the selection of particular attributes, or combinations thereof, for specific contexts and duties. Individual components will be carefully examined in an attempt to determine their distinct natures and the powers they suggest. Ensembles will be investigated to ascertain how individual accoutrements symbolically integrate to provide support and divine strength to the king while outwardly projecting different aspects of those powers. The role of regalia as an apotropaic unit functioning to shield him from any potential danger, terrestrial or otherwise, will be explored. Now that field-based research is completed, detailed analyses of the symbolic, historical, and ideological associations of select elements of royal regalia is currently under way.

‘Regalia’ applies to more than headgear, and this project will also examine the contextual interactions of dress, jewelry, apron, sandals, scepters, and many other elements. Previous research into pharaonic costume has tended to focus on individual aspects or has approached the topic from a more technical standpoint. Useful information has emerged as a peripheral result of research on specific rulers in specialized contexts, but is by its very nature limited in scope. While a number of studies have been written about crowns and other items of pharaonic dress, they are generally examined in isolation.  

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References:

2 By ‘battle cycle’ I refer to the entire sequence that begins with the commission from the gods to carry out a military action and finishes with the presentation of spoils to the gods, following (most recently) Susanna Heinz, Die Feldzugsdarstellungen des Neuen Reiches (Vienna: Verlag der Osterreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2001).


4 For one example, see W.R. Johnson, “Monuments and Monumental Art under Amenhotep III: Evolution and Meaning,” Amenhotep III: Perspectives on his Reign, eds. D. O’Connor and E. Cline (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1998), p. 84, where he discusses the elaboration of costume that accompanies the deification of the living king.