

Significances of the Hands in Scenes of Celebrating Victory of King Ramesses III at the Temple of Madinet Habu

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Abstract

The paper displays conditions of some hands in scenes of celebrating victory of king Ramesses III mainly over the Libyans and Sea people in the temple of Madinet Habu. This includes suggesting the gestures significances of the king, officials and captives as well as the symbolism of cutting hands of the enemies.

Keywords: Medinet Habu, Hands, Celebrating Victory, Ramesses III, Captives, Cutting hands.

Introduction:

The temple of Madinet Habu¹ has marvelous battle scenes of king Ramesses III which include celebrating victory². There are four scenes showing victory celebration over the Libyans³ and one scene over the Sea People and another over the Syrians⁴.

The celebrating victory scenes mainly illustrate the mighty king Ramesses III while watching the Egyptian officials and the soldiers who are escorting the captives. The scenes also include counting the piles of hands which had been cut in front of the king.

This paper aims to suggest the concept of the ancient Egyptian artist is showing the hands' positions and gestures of the king, the officials and the captives. In addition the paper shall display the symbolic meaning of showing the severed hands of the enemies in the scenes.

I. Scene of Celebrating Victory over the Libyans⁵

The scene represents king Ramses III standing in his chariot and in front of him there are high officials. Behind the high officials in five registers there are scribes who

¹ The Temple of Madinet Habu had been erected by king Ramesses III and it is located in the western bank of Thebes. For further information see W.J. Murnane, "Madinet Habu" in D. B. Redford (ed), *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Ancient Egypt* vol. II, Oxford University Press, 2001, p. 356-358.

² G. Abdel Razeq, "Representation of the Victory Procession in the ancient Egyptian Art till the End of the New Kingdom", in *JFTH 16*, 2019, Alexandria University, p. 3.

³ The scenes of the Libyans are also described in M. Geyer, *Rameses III und Sein Medinet Habu*, Ren's, 2010.

⁴ Breasted, J.H., *Madinet Habu I: Earlier Historical Records of Ramses III*, The university of Chicago Oriental Institute Publications 8, Chicago, 1930, pl. 22-23-42; Breasted, J.H. and Allen, T.G., *Madinet Habu II: Later Historical Records of Ramses III*, The University of Chicago Oriental Institute Publications 9, Chicago, 1932, pl.74- 75- 96.

⁵ Medinet Habu temple, exterior, North wall, third scene from north end; After: Breasted, J.H., *Madinet Habu I, OIP 8*, pl.22.

are counting piles of hands which had been cut from the enemies. There are also soldiers who are leading the captives by force (fig. 1)¹.

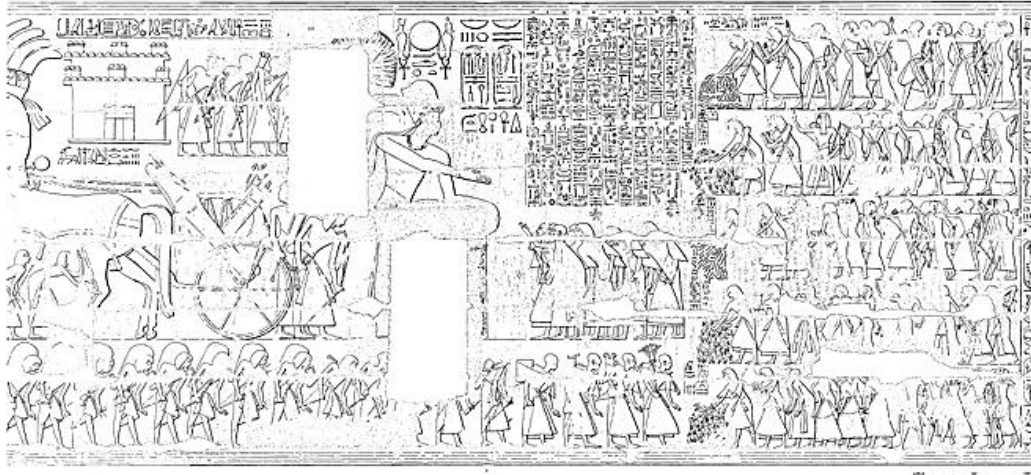


Fig. 1: Ramesses III is celebrating victory over Libyan. After J.H. Breasted, *Madinet Habu I: Earlier Historical Records of Ramses III*, pl .22.

From the scene the following points concerning the hands can be indicated:-

(a) King Ramesses III extends his right arm with open hand towards the officers. In general the open hand was symbol of giving ². This might lead to suggest image of the king greatness in granting victory to Egypt over its enemies. Hand of the king might also reflect his good character through accepting the officials' gratitude because of his great work in defeating the enemies.

(b) The first official in front of the king is upraising his arms towards the king while the other officials their arms are near their bent back bodies. Normally the first official praises the king and expresses appreciation on behalf of the other officials whose lying arms near their bodies show respect to the awe of the king.

(c) Arms of men are directed so close to the piles of hands and phalli which had been severely cut from the enemies. This shows their extreme attention to count the piles of the cut members. Behind the men who are counting the hands and phalli there are the scribes who are holding papyrus rolls and feather to register the numbers of the cutting members ³ is adequate way.

The concept of cutting the hands might symbolize victory of the king who kept out hands of the enemies from assaulting Egypt. For the idea of cutting the phalli this symbolized the king's success to prevent the enemies from putting their seeds in

¹ W.F. Edgerton and J. A. Wilson J.A., *Historical Records of Ramses III: The Texts in Medinet Habu, Vol I and II*, in SAOC 12, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1936, pl.22, p.13.

² R.H. Wilkinson, "Gesture" in D. B. Redford (ed), *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Ancient Egypt* vol. II, Oxford University Press, 2001, p. 22.

³ W.F. Edgerton and J. A. Wilson J.A., *Historical Records of Ramses III: The Texts in Medinet Habu, Vol I and II*, in SAOC 12, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1936, pl. 22, p.13.

Egypt¹. It is known that the Libyan tribe known as the *Tehenu* had different cultures and they made attempts to plant themselves in the land of Egypt².

Idea of the king who had seized the enemies and destroyed them was expressed in the text which mentioned that the arm of the king was great and mighty to defeat and conquer the enemies³.

(d) Hands of the enemies are tied with ropes which are clear evidence to their complete defeat and surrender to receive punishment by the king's order.

II. Scene of Celebrating Victory over the Libyans.⁴

This scene almost resembles the previous one with slight differences. Here the king sits on his chariot. Before him are four registers; each one contains a row of captives accompanied by officers and a pile of cut off hands and phalli at the beginning of each register. The third register is distinguished by a group of officials who are upraising their two arms (fig.2)⁵.

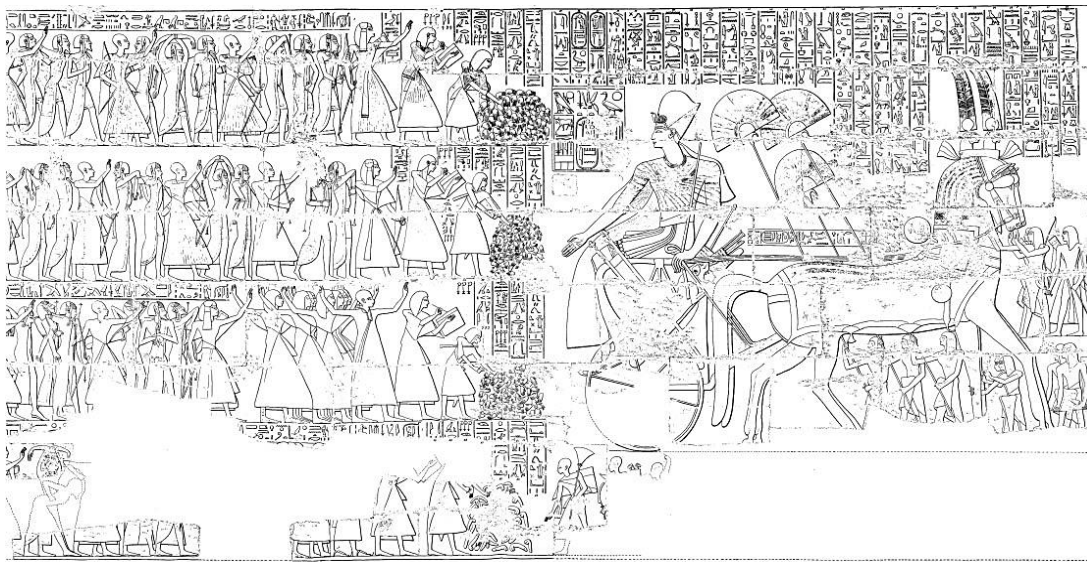


Fig. 2: Ramses III is celebrating with his victory over the Libyans, while watching the counting of his Libyan captives. After, Breasted, J.H., *Madinet Habu I: Earlier Historical Records of Ramses III*, pl. 23.

¹ H. Ezz Eldin Z. Morsi, "Allegory of Identifying the *Tehenu*-Warriros with *Wns*-Animals in Victory Text of King *Sety I*" in *Egyptian Journal of Tourism Studies*, vol. 16, no.2, 2017, p. 6-7

² A.J. Spalinger, *War in Ancient Egypt*, Blackwell Publishing, 2005, p. 197 and A.H.S El-Mosallamy, "Libyoo-Berber Relations with Ancient Egypt. The *Tehenu* in Egyptian Records", in *Symposium on Libya Antique*, Paris, 16-18 January, 1984, p. 2.

³ W.F. Edgerton and J. A. Wilson J.A., *SAOC 12*, pl. 22, p.13, L.1.

⁴ Medinet Habu temple, interior, second court, south wall, easternmost scene of lower register; After: Breasted, J.H., *Madinet Habu I, OIP 8*, pl.22.

⁵ W.F. Edgerton and J. A. Wilson J.A., *SAOC 12*, pl.23, p.14.

For the hands in this scene:-

(A) King Ramesses III extends his right arm down on his knee with open while his left hand rest on the back seat of the chariot while holding the saddle of the horses. The right open hand is believed to represent idea of the king who gave victory to Egypt which was incarnated through the process of cutting the parts from the body members of the enemies. It might also refer to the act of receiving the booty of victory¹. For the left hand which is resting while holding the horses' saddle this might reflect the king with full confidence and comfortable because he succeeded to defend Egypt from its enemies. This hypothetical idea is suggested because left side of the body is seat of the heart center of senses and emotions².

(B) In the third register both arms of officials upraise to symbolize their extreme happiness while celebrating victory³.

(c) Amazingly it is noticed the image of the man who is upraising his hands towards the horses of the king. The man's arms and hands might lead the seers to think that he is attempting to calm the horses because they became active because of the high voices of the Egyptians who saluted the king⁴.

(D) As mentioned above the piles of hands and phalli refer to the extreme victory of the king over his enemies and preventing them from penetrating the land of Egypt.

(E) Arms of captives are bound with rope and their hands are tied in front or backward or on their head. This signifies their powerless, fear and sadness⁵.

III. Scene of Celebrating Victory over the Libyans⁶

King Ramesses III stands over head of captives extending his right arm with open hand to the crown prince. Behind the king there are two fan bearers. There are three rows of captives which were escorted by officers to the king (fig. 3)⁷.

¹ Madkour H.A., *the Use of Gesture and Body Language in the Writing and Scenes of the New Kingdom*, p. 36.

² E. Teeter, "The Body in Ancient Egyptian Texts and Representations (Plate 6)", in *The Bulletin of the American Society of Papyrologists*, vol. 37 no. 1/4, 2000, p. 157.

³ Madkour H.A., *the Use of Gesture and Body Language in the Writing and Scenes of the New Kingdom*, p. 23.

⁴ See the texts of the officers who show gratitude to the victorious king in W.F. Edgerton and J. A. Wilson, *SAOC 12*, pl. 23, p. 13-14

⁵ Wilkinson, R.H., *Reading Egyptian Art. A Hieroglyphic Guide to Ancient Egyptian Painting and Sculpture*, London, 1992, p.19.

⁶ Medinet Habu temple, Exterior, north wall, lower register, between pylons; After: Breasted and Allen, *Medinet Habu II: OIP 9*, pl. 74.

⁷ W.F. Edgerton and J. A. Wilson, *SAOC 12*, pl.74, p.63.



Fig. 3: Ramses III is celebrating the victory over Libyan. After Breasted and Allen *Medinet Habu II: Later Historical Records of Ramses III*, pl. 74.

The king's extended right arm with open hand symbolizes receiving captives¹. His left hand grasps a bow near side of his heart. It symbolizes idea of the king who is ready to fight with emotion from his heart to protect Egypt in any time².

The arm of the crown prince extends with open hand towards captives. This might indicate role of the crown prince to pass on king's speech to the humiliated captives before presenting them to the king³.

In the upper two rows, officers grasp bow with one hand and this might give them powerful aspect. They raise the other open hand towards the king to symbolize praising and announcing loyalty to king⁴ as if they are ready to fight the enemies and bring them as captives to Egypt.

The arms of captives are bound forward, backward, upon their head or with bent elbow in front of face⁵. These might symbolizes the enemies' conditions of powerless, powerless, pain and extreme submission.

As for the fan bearers⁶, the position of the hands especially the raised right one expresses their power and loyalty for the king that they would never get tired while shaking the fans to wave air towards the king.

¹ R.H. Wilkinson, "Gesture" in D. B. Redford (ed), *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Ancient Egypt* vol. II, Oxford University Press, 2001, p. 22.

² E. Teeter, "The Body in Ancient Egyptian Texts and Representations (Plate 6)", in *The Bulletin of the American Society of Papyrologists*, vol. 37 no. 1/4, 2000, p. 157.

³ For the speech of both the king and crown prince see W.F. Edgerton and J. A. Wilson, *SAOC 12*, pl.74, p.63-64.

⁴ R.H. Wilkinson, "Gesture" in D. B. Redford (ed), *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Ancient Egypt* vol. II, Oxford University Press, 2001, p. 22.

⁵ Breasted and Allen, *Medinet Habu II: Later Historical Records of Ramses III*, pl. 74.

⁶ Breasted and Allen, *Medinet Habu II: Later Historical Records of Ramses III*, pl. 74.

IV. Scene of Celebrating Victory over the Libyans¹

King Ramesses III is represented watching counting the piles of hands and phalli which had been cut from the enemies. Before the king are the prince and the vizier. The Egyptian officials and soldiers are leading the Libyan prisoners (fig. 4)².



Fig. 4: Ramses III is reviewing Libyan prisoners and spoil. After, Breasted and Allen, *Medinet Habu II: Later Historical Records of Ramses III*, pl. 75.

The right arm of the king extends down towards the prince and vizier. It symbolizes acceptance of spoils which are presented by them. The left hand of the king rests on pillow. This might lead to think that the king is in the relaxing condition after spending much effort before obtaining victory over the enemies.

The right arm of crown prince extends with open hand towards the king to symbolize presenting captives to the king. It might also refers to confess from the prince to the mighty of his father in defeating the enemies which suits the inscription which stated that the strong army of the king had destroyed the enemies arm of the king³.

As previously mentioned the piles of the cutting hands and phalli not only symbolized victory of the king but they proved the ability of the king to deprive the

¹ Medinet Habu temple, Interior, first court, east wall, lower register, north of great gateway; After: Breasted and Allen, *Medinet Habu II: OIP 9*, pl. 75.

² W.F. Edgerton and J. A. Wilson J.A., *SAOC 12*, pl. 75, p.64.

³ W.F. Edgerton and J. A. Wilson J.A., *SAOC 12*, pl.75, p.65, L. 7-8.

enemies from attacking Egypt and prevent them from planting their seeds through making settlements in the land of Egypt¹.

There is an official who put one hand over the pile of the severed members to symbolize count their numbers in attentive way.

The upper register represents lifting arm of an officer while holding battle axe². This might refer to his power and control over captives beside it might lead to feet his full preparation to cut the hand of the enemies if orders were given to him.

V. Scene of Celebrating Victory over the Sea People³

King Ramesses III is represented standing on a podium and before him are rows of officials and captives before the king. The first register has two piles of served hands (fig. 5)⁴.

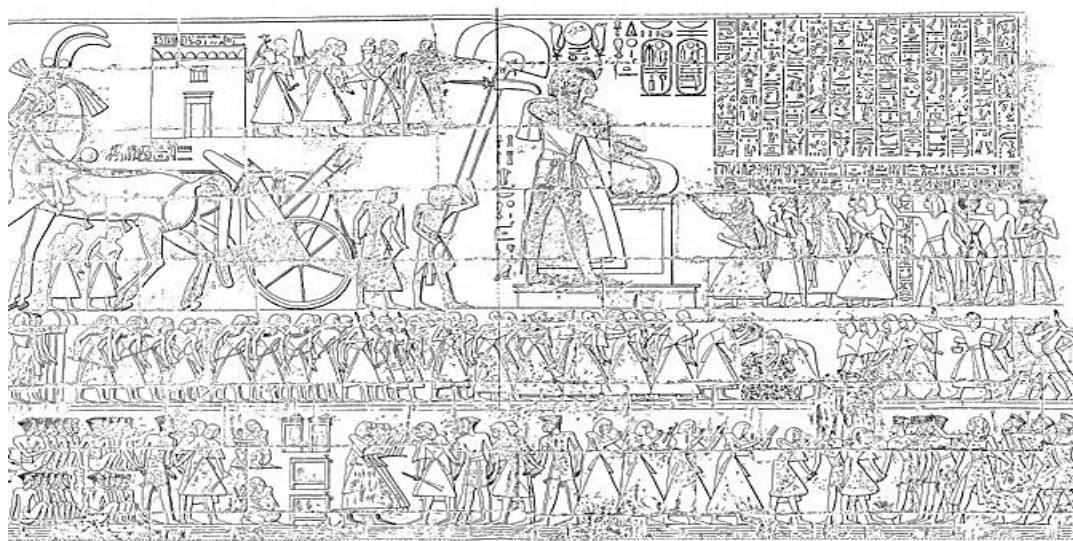


Fig. 5: Ramses III is celebrating the victory over the sea people. After, Breasted, J.H., *Medinet Habu I: Earlier Historical Records of Ramses III*, pl. 42.

The king extends his arm with open hand as if presenting victory to Egypt. The confident hand gives the king powerful appearance with pride as expressed in some texts that accompanied the scene. Firstly the arm of the king caused the enemies recognizes the might of the king⁵.

¹ H. Ezz Eldin Z. Morsi, "Allegory of Identifying the *Tehenu*-Warriros with WnS-Animals in Victory Text of King *Sety I*" in *Egyptian Journal of Tourism Studies*, vol. 16, no.2, 2017, p. 6-7

² Breasted and Allen, *Medinet Habu II: Later Historical Records of Ramses III*, pl. 75.

³ Medinet Habu temple, exterior, north wall; After: Breasted, J.H., *Medinet Habu I, OIP 8*, pl. 42.

⁴ W.F. Edgerton and J. A. Wilson J.A., *SAOC 12*, pl.42, p.42 and B. Cifola, *Ramses III and The Sea People: A Structural Analysis of The Medinet Habu Inscriptions*, Nova Series, vol. 57, No.3, 1988, pp. 275-306.

⁵ W.F. Edgerton and J. A. Wilson J.A., *SAOC 12*, pl.31, p.42, L. 7.

Secondly the hands of the king can reach their targets in any land¹. Thirdly the arms of the king are not only strong but they have the ability to know the place of its enemies and reach them². In this aspect the king can be regarded as the power of justice which purifies the lands from the wicked enemies. This suits the nature of the Sea People who came from foreign lands to cause destruction against the countries as mentioned in the texts³.

The officers extend their right arms with open hand to show respect, praise and gratitude to the king while leading the captives to him⁴.

The hands of the enemies are tied at their chests. This might have relation with the accompanied text which mentioned “*They were coming forward toward Egypt, their hearts relying upon their hands*”⁵. Thus placing their hands upon their hearts means that they were not having powerful brave hearts to enable them obtain victory in the land of Egypt. On the other hand the heart of the king and his hands are untied together. That’s to say his brave heart enabled his hands to achieve victory as indicated in the text which mentioned that his arms and hands were persistent and firm to never stop hitting the enemies⁶.

Representation of the pile of hands is to show an example of punishment against the enemies who attacked Egypt. It also carries a warning to anyone who intends to invade Egypt under the rule of its mighty king Ramesses III. It is clearly noticed the two persons who are getting close with their hands towards the pile of hands to count them⁷.

On the right hand side of lower register there are group of seated captives not bounded and one standing captive who is caught from his hand by officer to brand his shoulders to join the gangs⁸. This might lead to think that it symbolizes the miserable condition of the Sea People who were captured with terror and powerless.

VI. Scene of Celebrating Victory over the Syrian⁹.

The king stands in a rostrum extending his right arm with open hand towards the royal prince and officials. There are three lines of Syrians captives who are captured by officials¹⁰(fig. 6).

¹ W.F. Edgerton and J. A. Wilson J.A., *SAOC 12*, pl.31, p.43, L. 17.

² W.F. Edgerton and J. A. Wilson J.A., *SAOC 12*, pl.31, p.43, L. 18-19.

³ W.F. Edgerton and J. A. Wilson J.A., *SAOC 12*, pl. 46 lines 16-17.

⁴ R.H. Wilkinson, “Gesture” in D. B. Redford (ed), *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Ancient Egypt* vol. II, Oxford University Press, 2001, p. 22.

⁵ W.F. Edgerton and J. A. Wilson J.A., *SAOC 12*, pl.31, p.42, L. 4.

⁶ W.F. Edgerton and J. A. Wilson J.A., *SAOC 12*, pl.31, p.43, L.8-9.

⁷ J. Galan, “Mutilation of Pharaoh's Enemies”, in *Egyptian Museum Collections Around The world I*, M. Eldamaty and M. Trad(eds), Cairo, 2002, 443.

⁸ W.F. Edgerton and J. A. Wilson J.A., *SAOC 12*, Historical Records of Ramses III, p.42.

⁹ Medinet Habu temple, interior, first court, north wall, lower register, east end; After: Breasted and Allen, *Medinet Habu II: OIP 9*, pl. 96.

¹⁰ W.F. Edgerton and J. A. Wilson J.A., *SAOC 12*, pl.69, p.101.

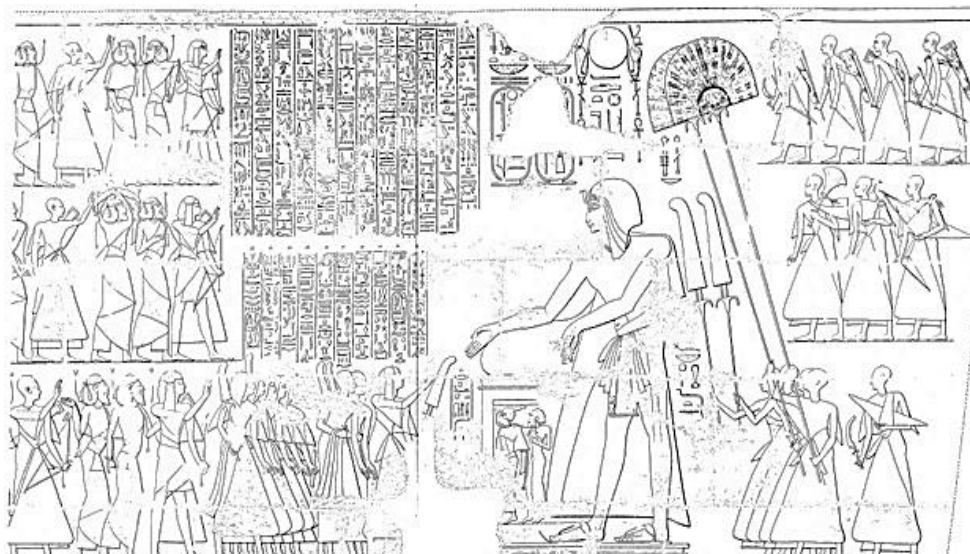


Fig. 6: Ramses III is celebrating his victory over the Syrian. After, Breasted and Allen, *Medinet Habu II: Later Historical Records of Ramses III*, pl. 96.

The king's arm symbolizes receiving reports about the captives as a symbol of victory from the royal prince. This makes the seers that king Ramesses III has full trust with his son who would ascend the throne after him. The open hand of king might indicate his greatness as the one who gave victory to Egypt over all the foreign countries as expressed in the accompanied texts¹.

The right arm of officers upraise with open hand towards the king to symbolize praise and saluting for victory.

Arms of Captives are bound in different poses forward, backward and upon their head to symbolize their powerless, pain and sadness.

Conclusion:

From the previous the following points can be concluded:-

(A) The ancient Egyptian artists succeeded to use the hands postures and gestures of king Ramesses III to illustrate him as great victorious over his enemies.

(B) The king's extended right arm with open hand down has many hypothetical opinions represented in:-

(1) The king presented victory to Egypt.

(2) The king receives gratitude from the high officials.

(3) The king occupied the highest in Egypt and because of his greatness Egypt obtained victory through its strong army.

¹ W.F. Edgerton and J. A. Wilson J.A., *SAOC 12*, pl.96, p.101, L. 6.

(C) The king's resting left hand expressed the confident condition of the king who was having comfortable feelings after defeating the enemies.

(D) It is clearly shown that in the scenes of celebrating victory over the Libyans, their hands and phalli had been cut. This is because the ancient Egyptians had certain looks towards the Libyans. They considered them as invaders who penetrated the borders of Egypt in order to make their own settlements with their own cultures. So it was essential not only to cut their hands but also their phalli as an incarnation of presenting their seeds. This suggestion can be supported in scene of celebrating victory over the Sea People because only their hands had been cut.

(E) The soldiers of army hold their weapons in their hands giving suggestion with the strength of army as the military shows nowadays.

(F) The ancient Egyptian artists also succeeded in showing the high spiritual Egyptian soldiers who were having full control over the enemies and expressed their praise to their mighty king.

(G) Hands and arms of the Captives which were bound from elbow forward, backward or upon their head symbolizes their desperation, powerless condition and surrender to receive their punishment.

(H) The scenes of celebrating victory played important role to achieve political and psychological propaganda. Politically is illustrated the mighty king who protected Egypt in the eyes of the ancient Egyptians. Psychologically the image of the served hands and bound captives carry warning against the enemies who might think to conquer enemy that they would meet miserable fate represented in cutting off their hands and their future offspring.

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الملخص العربي

دلالات اليد في مناظر الاحتفال بالنصر الخاصة بالملك رمسيس الثالث في معبد مدينة هابو

ملخص

يتناول البحث دلالات اليد في مناظر الاحتفال بالنصر الخاصة بالملك رمسيس الثالث في معبد مدينة هابو بعد انتصاره علي اعداءه من الليبيين وشعوب البحر حيث يعرض اوضاع ايدي الملك وضباطه بالاضافة الى الاسرى وإيماءات كل منهم مع ذكر الايدي المقطوعة للأعداء التي ترمز لإنتصار الملك وقوته وكتحذير لمن يجرؤ علي الإعتداء بقطع يده التي هي مصدر القوة. ومن الجدير بالذكر أن مناظر الإحتفال بالنصر علي الليبيين إحتوت علي أكوام من الأيدي المقطوعة ومن العضو الذكري بخلاف مناظر شعوب البحر والتي ترمز لمعرفة المصريين القدماء لنواياهم بالاستقرار ووضع بذرتهم علي أرض مصر لذلك قاموا بمنعهم وقطع بذرتهم وبذلك دلالة علي قوة الملك وقدرته علي حمايتها. كل مناظر الإحتفال بالنصر المذكورة إحتوت علي يد الملك اليمنى ممتدة بكف منبسط تجاه حاشيته وجنوده كدليل علي إستقبال غنائم الحرب وأيضاً علي إهداء النصر لشعبه وجيشه. أما بالنسبة للأسرى فهم مكبلي الأيدي كرمز علي ضعفهم واستسلامهم لأمر الملك.

الكلمات الدالة: مدينة هابو- الاحتفال بالنصر- اليد- رمسيس الثالث- الاسرى- قطع الايدي.