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The ritual scenes of smiting the enemies in the pylons of Egyptian temples: symbolism and functions

Abstract: *The use of symbolism by the ancient Egyptians is an important and powerful way of imposing their view of life. By definition, symbols represent something other than what they actually depict, based on conventionally agreed-on meanings. The case of the civilisation of ancient Egypt is paradigmatic because the ancient Egyptians expressed and affirmed many of their ideological and political ideas, for example, through symbols and symbolic languages. In the representational forms of Egyptian art visual symbols were employed to manifest some ideas of political domination. Is the case of the ritual scenes of smiting enemies, a topos of the Egyptian iconography of a military nature which runs through Egyptian history almost in its entirety, from the 4th millennium BC until the 2nd century AD. In this paper we would like to present some important examples of the use of the ritual scenes of smiting enemies, especially in architectural structures (pylons of divine and funerary temples), to understand the meaning and functions of this visual symbol.*

Keywords: symbolism, Egyptian architecture, ideology, ritual scenes, winning pharaoh

Building houses on Earth for gods was always one of the pharaoh's main activities at all times and in many cases represented an activity with an intended project to declare and to consolidate policies, as well as an active means of claiming legitimation and political dominance on the Egyptian territory.¹

When building temples for the male and female divinities of Egypt, the so-called *hut-nejter*, “mansion of the god”, the pharaohs would decorate them with thousands of meaningful scenes related to the traditional Egyptian iconographic and symbolic program and represented themselves using the traditional symbols of pharaonic power: kilt-*shendjit*, a false beard, bull's wavy tail, crowns of Upper and Lower Egypt and other insignias of royal power.

One of the distinctive architectural elements used in the great divine Egyptian temples, also present in some funerary temples (e.g. Medinet Habu), was the pylon (*bekhenet*, *bḥnt*, fem. sing.), which symbolically evoked the two main mountains of the horizon between which the first Sun, the giver of life (imitating the hieroglyph *ꜥḥt*), will emerge “on the first morning” of the Universe or, in another symbology, the two banks between which the Nile River flows, this too being a giver of life. From a mythological point of view, the two massive banks were identified as being the goddesses Isis and Nephthys, who praised the morning-Sun god, helping with its daily rise.²

From the New Kingdom on, around the 2nd millennium BC, the pylon was used to form the temple facade and was closely related to the colossal royal sitting statues and obelisks, on one side, and to the open-air courtyard, on the other. Some temples had more than one

¹ S. SAUNERON, H. STIERLIN, *Derniers temples d'Égypte. Edfou et Philae*, Paris 1975, p. 105; S. AUFRERE, J.-C. GOLVIN, J.-C. GOYON, *L'Égypte restituée, sites et temples de Haute Égypte (1650 av. J.-C. – 300 ap. J.-C.)*, Tome I, Paris 1991, p. 217; G. HÖLBL, *A history of the Ptolemaic empire*, London-New York 2001, p. 257.

² Di. ARNOLD, *The Encyclopedia of Ancient Egyptian Architecture*, Cairo 2003 (hereinafter referred to as: *The Encyclopedia*), p. 183; H. SOUROUZIAN, *L'apparition du pylône*, *BIFAO* 81 (1981), pp. 141-151; S.B. SHUBERT, *Studies on the Egyptian pylon*, *JSSEA* 11 (1981), pp. 155-164.

pylon (e.g. the Karnak complex which possessed ten; the Temple of Isis from Philae which had two and the funerary temple of Ramses III in Medinet Habu, which also had two), a phenomenon that sprang from several factors such as the size of the temple structure itself or the architectural historical development of the place in question.

Among the decorative scenes used on the walls of the pylons, those that depict the ritual massacre of enemies, also known as military triumph scenes, deserve special attention. These scenes were meant to glorify the sovereign as being an irreplaceable medium among the symbolical spheres of order and disorder, making the theme of the warrior victory ritual an essential one in the pharaonic ideology. The pylon acts as gigantic «political posters» where the pharaoh's victory is proclaimed as being indispensable to the good functioning of the cosmic order.

The scenes of ritual massacre of enemies are, in fact, a *topos* of Egyptian iconography related to military affairs, which appear throughout the history of Egypt from the 4th millennium BC to the 2nd century AD.³

The oldest of these scenes is shown in a painting on tomb no. 100 at Hierakonpolis, one of the most important archaeological sites in the south of ancient Egypt for understanding the foundations of ancient Egyptian society, and is dated as of approximately 3500 BC, in the Predynastic period (Naqada II), in which a figure that is bigger than the others holds a weapon in one hand and, in the other, holds three smaller figures on a rope (the archaic plural expressed in the repeating of elements thus conveying the idea of “many” enemies). These are kneeling and facing the other way.⁴

Also of the Predynastic Period, a cylinder-seal in ivory from the same city of Hierakonpolis shows a scene which appears several times in several registers, in which a bigger man wearing a beard and a kilt, smites a smaller man whose arms are tied behind his back. The bigger figure holds the *hedj* mace in one hand and grabs the enemy-prisoner with the other. The enemy is standing and has his back to the pharaoh.⁵

In the Dynastic Period (Dynasty 0: approximately 3100 BC), the famous ceremonial palette of King Narmer (CG 3055; JE 32169), also from Hierakonpolis, the document that registers the birth of the united kingdom of Egypt, refers iconographically anew to the theme of victory over enemies: the pharaoh Narmer, in a relatively static pose, with the left foot advanced, holding the *hedj* mace by the middle of the handle before a kneeling enemy on both knees and grabbing him by the hair. He is shown as being barefoot with the kilt-*shendjit*, with false beard, and for the very first time with a bull's wavy tail and a royal crown, in this case, the white crown of Upper Egypt. The kneeling enemy is in bodily contortion and has his back to the pharaoh and his head facing the king; his arms falling by his side means that he is a *bedesh*, *bdš*, “defeated”. The goddess Bat, depicted as a human face with cow ears and horns, supervises the scene approving the pharaoh's behaviour.⁶

These three scenes of Hierakonpolis (the painting on tomb no. 100, the cylinder-seal in ivory and the ceremonial palette of King Narmer) are not decorative patterns of Egyptian temple pylons, but, in the archaeology of symbols, they are the first certified patterns that have been systematically reused over the centuries until achieving the status of undeniable symbols of the pharaoh's power and hence used in the decoration of temple pylons.

There are, in fact, a countless number of examples of palettes, ivory labels, reliefs and fragments of reliefs from the Old Kingdom to the New Kingdom that have reached us. This

³ J. DAS C. SALES, *Poder e Iconografia no antigo Egipto*, Lisboa 2008, pp. 115-118.

⁴ E.S. HALL, *The pharaoh smites his enemies, A comparative study*, Munich-Berlin 1986 (hereinafter referred to as: *The pharaoh smites his enemies*), p. 4, Fig. 5; R.B. PARTRIDGE, *Fighting pharaohs. Weapons and Warfare in Ancient Egypt*, Manchester 2002 (hereinafter referred to as: *Fighting pharaohs*), p. 5.

⁵ HALL, *The pharaoh smites his enemies*, p. 4, Fig. 6; PARTRIDGE, *Fighting pharaohs*, p. 32.

⁶ HALL, *The pharaoh smites his enemies*, p. 5, Fig. 8; PARTRIDGE, *Fighting pharaohs*, pp. 1, 2, 159, 410; L. COTTRELL, *The warrior pharaohs*, London 1968 (hereinafter referred to as: *The warrior pharaohs*), pp. 11-14, Pl. 3.

means that the scene of the massacre of enemies of military background became a royal symbol which crossed the two fundamental moments of the Pharaonic State (the Old Kingdom and the Middle Kingdom) and set a compulsory theme of iconographical discourse on Egyptian royalty.⁷

During the approximately 2,000 years that led up to the Middle Kingdom, the scene underwent some changes but its basic structure remained: a bigger figure, this is, the pharaoh, barefoot in a more static or in a more dynamic pose, with a *hedj* mace and several other symbols of pharaonic power (the red crown or *desheret*, the white crown or *hedjet*, the double crown or *pschent*, the kilt *shendjit*, the bull's wavy tail, with or without the false beard, with or without the headdress with *uraeus*, with or without necklace), is about to dominate an enemy or several enemies, shown as smaller figures: standing or kneeling, back turned but head facing the pharaoh, arms up in the air (begging for mercy, pity and forgiveness) and with the left hand poised on the knee. Some of the main Egyptian divinities (Bat, Hathor, Uadjit, Thoth...) are included in the scene, approving the pharaoh's ritual massacre of enemies.

When the New Kingdom is concerned (dynasties 18th-20th) there are many known and significant cases of scenes of massacres of enemies that can be evoked through (steles, reliefs, *talatat*), some quite visible on the pylons of the great divine or funerary Egyptian temples. In this case, they are:

1. the VII pylon of Karnak, where one can observe in the north and south facades, the low-reliefs in which «the Napoleon of Ancient Egypt», Thutmose III (18th dynasty; approximately 1500 BC), evokes his victorious military campaigns in Syria and in Nubia (**Figs 55-56**);⁸
2. the VIII pylon of the temple of Amun in Karnak where the decoration elaborated by Amenhotep II (also from 18th dynasty) represents him massacring his enemies, in an allusion to his military incursions to Retenu and to Naharina, the Ancient Egyptian names for Canaan, western Syria and the land of Mitanni in the northern Euphrates region (**Fig. 57**);⁹
3. the pylon of the temple of Ramses II in Wadi es-Sebua (19th dynasty), in which the victorious pharaoh is the famous Ramses II; he smites the captives before Amun-Ra and Ra-Horakhty (**Fig. 58**)¹⁰ or
4. the pylon of the temple of Ramses III in the first courtyard of the Great Temple of Amun in Karnak, in which the second pharaoh of the 20th dynasty is presented offering the enemies to the god Amun-Ra (**Figs 59-60**).

The most spectacular case is perhaps that of the pylon at the entrance of the funerary temple of Medinet-Habu which was built for the pharaoh Ramses III (approx. 1182-1152 BC in the 12th century BC), to many scholars the last great pharaoh of the New Kingdom and even of the independent Egypt (**Figs 61-62**).¹¹

This is one of the most impressive pylons of the religious Egyptian buildings. Originally, it measured 66 m in width, 24 m in height x 11 m in depth.¹² It was decorated with colossal

⁷ R.J. LEPROHON, *Ideology and Propaganda* (hereinafter referred to as: *Ideology and Propaganda*), [in:] M.K. HARTWIG (ed.), *A Companion to ancient Egyptian art*, New York 2015, pp. 313, 315.

⁸ PM II², pp. 167, 170; HALL, *The pharaoh smites his enemies*, pp. 16, 17; COTTRELL, *The warrior pharaohs*, pp. 75-79, 86, 87.

⁹ PM II², pp. 175, 176; HALL, *The pharaoh smites his enemies*, p. 18; COTTRELL, *The warrior pharaohs*, pp. 90-95.

¹⁰ PM VII, p. 58.

¹¹ HALL, *The pharaoh smites his enemies*, pp. 35, 36; CL. LALOUETTE, *L'empire des Ramsès*, Paris 1985, p. 344; N. GRIMAL, *Histoire de L'Égypte ancienne*, Paris 1988 (hereinafter referred to as: *Histoire*), p. 334; S. REDFORD, *The harem conspiracy. The murder of Ramesses III*, Dekalb 2002, p. 141; PARTRIDGE, *Fighting pharaohs*, pp. 272, 273.

¹² U. HÖLSCHER, *The Excavation of Medinet Habu*, Vol. III. *The Mortuary Temple of Ramses III*, Part I, Chicago 1941, p. 4.

images, which were engraved and painted with bright colours, of the pharaoh offering his captive and subjugated enemies to the gods (Amun-Ra on the south side and Ra-Horakhty on the north side). On the left facade of the pylon, the pharaoh grabs his Asian enemies by their hair and displays the crown *pschent* of the unified Egypt and gives a fatal blow with the axe-mace *mibet* (axe-mace with a semi-circular head). On the right facade, the pharaoh appears with the crown *desheret* of northern Egypt, holds the *hedj* mace and offers the Nubian and Libian enemies.¹³

In both scenes, the gods offer the pharaoh the *khepesh*, the weapon of victory – a sickle-shaped sword of metal. Victory is symbolically seen as a gift from the gods; in the end, they are the real winners. That is the message conveyed by the huge iconographic representations of the first pylon of Medinet Habu. The representations are situated in a free access zone to the temple giving them, at the same time, a clear propaganda function.

When coming into power, around the 4th century BC, the Ptolemies understood at once that because they genetically derived from Macedonia, they needed to be recognised and legitimised as authentic Egyptian sovereigns. To do so, just like ancient native pharaohs, they established a programme of divine and enduring constructions (*menu*), that displayed their reverence and respect for Egyptian divinities.¹⁴

The great temples of Philae, Kom Ombo, Edfu, Esnah and Dendera that were built or recovered by them in Egypt were the results of conscious liturgical acts that depicted them as followers of traditional Egyptian customs and rituals. In this sense, the Ptolemaic builders kings behaved like pharaohs and that helped politically legitimise their authority.¹⁵

In the ideological and symbolical way, this is true too: the organisation and the decoration of these temples (for example, Philae and Edfu) are perfect models of the classic Egyptian temple and the ritual scenes of warrior triumph used by them were taken from the traditional Egyptian programme.

The first pylon of the Isis Temple at Philae/Agilkia, with its height of 18 metres and width of 45.5 metres, presents through its two massive, enormous representations of the Pharaoh Ptolemy XII *Neos Dionisios* (the father of the well known Cleopatra, the VII) in the traditional pharaonic pose: standing and holding his kneeling enemies by their hair, ready to sacrifice them to the divinities of the temple, Isis, Horus and Hathor (**Fig. 63**).

In the two low reliefs, the pharaoh can be seen wearing a set of insignias and symbols linked to the function and attributes of an authentic Egyptian sovereign. They are all inserted in the millennial iconography and Egyptian military ideology: powerful and victorious, the pharaoh uses the *shendjit*, the bull's tail, a ceremonial fake beard, the old mace, several *uraei* and the crown *hemhem* (formed by three crowns *atef* which are juxtaposed). Like in ancient times, the enemies can be seen kneeling on the ground, with the arms above their heads waiting for the final blow, with all the energy and power that one can find in these scenes of enemy massacres.

As a matter of fact, the semantics of the signs is obvious: divine favouritism and military victory belongs to the figure who is standing, wearing several insignias, dominating an inferior and unprotected group of enemies.

Practically the same political and symbolic components, with minor differences, appear certified in the monumentally sculptured decoration of the two low reliefs of the pylon of

¹³ HALL, *The pharaoh smites his enemies*, p. 36; W.J. MURNAME, *United with eternity. A concise guide to the monuments of Medinet Habu*, Chicago-Cairo 1980, pp. 19, 20.

¹⁴ GRIMAL, *Histoire*, p. 458; G. HUSSON, D. VALBELLE, *L'état et les institutions en Égypte. Des premiers pharaons aux empereurs romains*, Paris 1992, p. 291; D. KURTH, *Microcosme en pierres: les temples de l'époque ptolémaïque et romaine*, [in:] R. SCHULZ, M. SEIDEL (eds), *L'Égypte. Sur les traces de la civilisation pharaonique*, Cologne 2001, p. 297.

¹⁵ S. AUFRERE, J.-C. GOLVIN, J.-C. GOYON, *L'Égypte restituée, sites et temples de Haute Égypte (1650 av. J.-C. – 300 ap. J.-C.)*, Tome I, Paris 1991, pp. 217, 218; S. SAUNERON, H. STIERLIN, *Derniers temples d'Égypte. Edfou et Philae*, Paris 1975, p. 105; F. DUNAND, C. ZIVIE-COCHE, *Dieux et hommes en Égypte. 3000 av. J.-C. – 395 apr. J.-C. Anthropologie religieuse*, Paris 1991, pp. 223-225.

the Temple of Horus at Edfu.¹⁶ In the splendid facade of this temple, Ptolemy XII appears subjugating and sacrificing prisoners to the gods, Horus and Hathor (**Fig. 64**).¹⁷

The ideological and symbolic message is the same: the figure presented is, by his pose, actions and idealised emblems, a victorious warrior; a supposedly invincible one. Focus is brought upon the courageous warrior acts of a single king. It is meant to emphasise his required exceptional position and the divine support subjacent to his acts.

The image of the monarch punishing his enemies became a mandatory reference of royal ideology in the Ptolemaic Period. Even if the combat represented is fictitious or the achievements of the warrior exaggerated, these artistic works are particular witnesses to royal propaganda. The Ptolemaic sovereign is portrayed in an idealised way using all the apparatus linked to his warrior function.¹⁸

On these terms, military triumph does not represent something exceptional, but something expected, inevitable and compulsory. The scenes that depicts military triumph are, therefore, ideologically an obligation.

Later, this iconography even crossed the Egyptian border, as in the case of the pylon of the temple of the sun and warrior god with the head of a lion, Apedemak, at Naga-Meroe dating back to the end of the 1st century BC and the beginning of the 1st century AD. Here, depicted in classic Egyptian attitude, we can see King Natakamani (on the left) and Queen Amanitore (on the right), though bearing meroitic details in their clothing and personal adornments, also dominating an inferior and unprotected group of enemies (**Fig. 65**).¹⁹

Final remarks

The smiting scene is a typical and a repetitive scene of ancient Egyptian ideology. The tradition of having images of the pharaoh smiting his enemies goes back to the Predynastic period (as of approximately 3500 BC) through to the 2nd century AD, with particular examples of representations on the pylons of the Egyptian temples in the New Kingdom and during the Ptolemaic period.

The smiting scenes are found outside of the temple pylons for all to see. The composition was to magically protect the temple's sacred grounds behind the entrance pylon. These scenes make for an important visual and symbolic contribution to the cultural construction of the memory of Egyptian royalty, probably being the most certifiable iconographical motif of royal ideology: in terms of historical periods and places of Egypt (all over the territory) in which it appears represented as well as in terms of the number of representations and in terms of support and means of representation (tomb walls, cylinder-seals, ceremonial palettes of various stones, ivory labels from tombs, stone markers, funerary temple walls and wall reliefs in divine temples, facades of pylons at divine and funerary temples, royal jewellery, on ceremonial weapons, on private stelae, ostracas, scarabs and ceramics). We are before a symbol that required several means; that which some authors call a case of multi-mediality.²⁰

¹⁶ D. KURTH, *The temple of Edfu. A guide by an Ancient Egyptian Priest*, Cairo-New York 2004, p. 66; PARTRIDGE, *Fighting pharaohs*, pp. 294, 295

¹⁷ ARNOLD, *The Encyclopedia*, p. 78; R.H. WILKINSON, *The complete temples of Ancient Egypt*, London 2000, pp. 204-207; B. WATTERSON, *The house of Horus at Edfu. Ritual in an ancient Egyptian temple*, Gloucestershire 1998, pp. 39, 47, 48; S. CAUVILLE, *Essai sur la théologie du temple d'Horus à Edfou*, Caire 1987, p. VI.

¹⁸ PARTRIDGE, *Fighting pharaohs*, pp. 50, 51; P. VERNUS, Des relations entre textes et représentations dans l'Égypte pharaonique, [in:] A.-M. Christin (ed.), *Écritures II*, Paris 1985, pp. 45, 45.

¹⁹ PM VII, p. 268; HALL, *The pharaoh smites his enemies*, pp. 44, 45.

²⁰ M.M. LUISELLI, The Ancient Egyptian scene of 'Pharaoh smiting his enemies': an attempt to visualize cultural memory?, [in:] M. BOMMAS (ed.), *Cultural Memory and Identity in Ancient Societies*, London-New York 2011, pp. 17, 18.

The scene of smiting the enemies (*seker, skr*, “crush”) is a way of celebrating a victory: be it is a real military victory or a supposed one. In the case of the scenes that celebrate real military victories, we witness eternal celebrations of victory, updated by the representations, helping these build a mythical glorious past. The other fictitious scenes, true symbolic battles, have propaganda purposes, as well as serving as a means of dissuading enemies. They are scenes with deep ritualistic and apotropaic purposes.²¹

Through the representation of the scenes of smiting the enemies, with a more historical or fictional tone, the pharaoh is always an eternal winner over his enemies. Since the fallen enemies were almost always foreigners, the symbolic meaning of the scene was the King repelling the enemies, seen as a representation of chaos.

The victorious warrior acts of the pharaoh are symbols of the approval of the god. The pharaoh is a favourite among the gods of victory. He transforms chaos into order, even when his military actions towards his opponents are more fictitious than real.

The usual answer given by the gods to the offerings of enemies by the pharaoh is clear with this offer of help: “I will strengthen your arm against your enemies.” Can there be a better way to express the symbolic value of these scenes?

²¹ LEPROHON, *Ideology and Propaganda*, p. 313.



Figs 55-56. Wall relief of Thutmose III. Pylon VII. Karnak (New Kingdom, 18th dynasty; approx. 1500 BC) (<http://ancienegypte.fr/> and https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Thutmose_III_at_Karnak.jpg, accessed 31 July, 2017)



Fig. 57. Wall relief of Amenhotep II, Pylon VIII, Karnak (New Kingdom, 18th dynasty, approx. 1420 BC) (E.S. Hall, *The pharaoh smites his enemies, A comparative study*, Munich-Berlin 1986, Fig. 29)



Figs 58. Ramses II smites the captives before Amun-Ra (left facade) and Ra-Horakhty (right facade). Third pylon of the temple of Amun of Ramesses II at Wadi es-Sebua, Nubia (New Kingdom, 19th dynasty, 13th century BC) (http://photos.wikimapia.org/p/00/04/51/57/82_full.jpg, accessed 31 July, 2017)



Fig. 59-60. Left and right facades of the pylon of the temple of Ramses III in Karnak, first courtyard of the Great Temple of Amun (New Kingdom, 20th dynasty, 12th century BC) (photograph by J. das Candeias Sales)

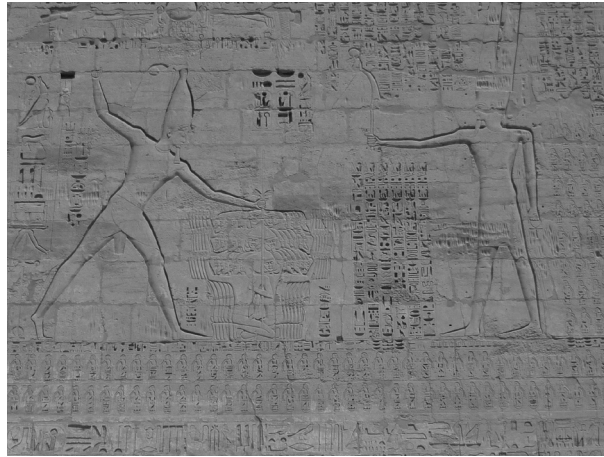


Fig. 61-62. Ramesses III offering captives and subjugated enemies to the god Amun-Ra, on the south side, and to Ra-Horakhty on the north side. Wall relief of Pylon I. Medinet Habu (20th dynasty) (photograph by J. das Candeias Sales)

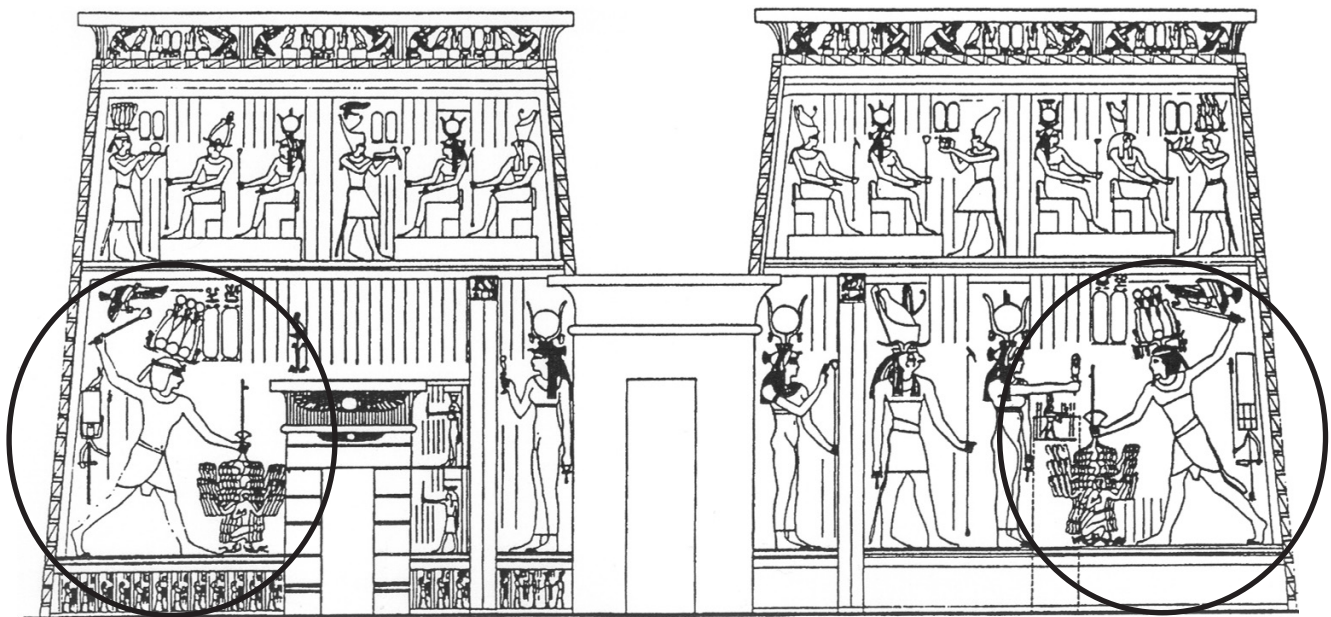


Fig. 63. The first pylon of the Isis Temple at Philae/Agilkia. Ptolemy XII Neos Dionysos subjugating and sacrificing prisoners to the gods (M. PETERS-DESTÉRACT, *Philae. Le domaine d'Isis*, Monaco 1997, p. 86)



Fig. 64. Wall relief of the pylon of Edfu. Temple of Horus (Ptolemaic Period) (photograph by J. das Candeias Sales)

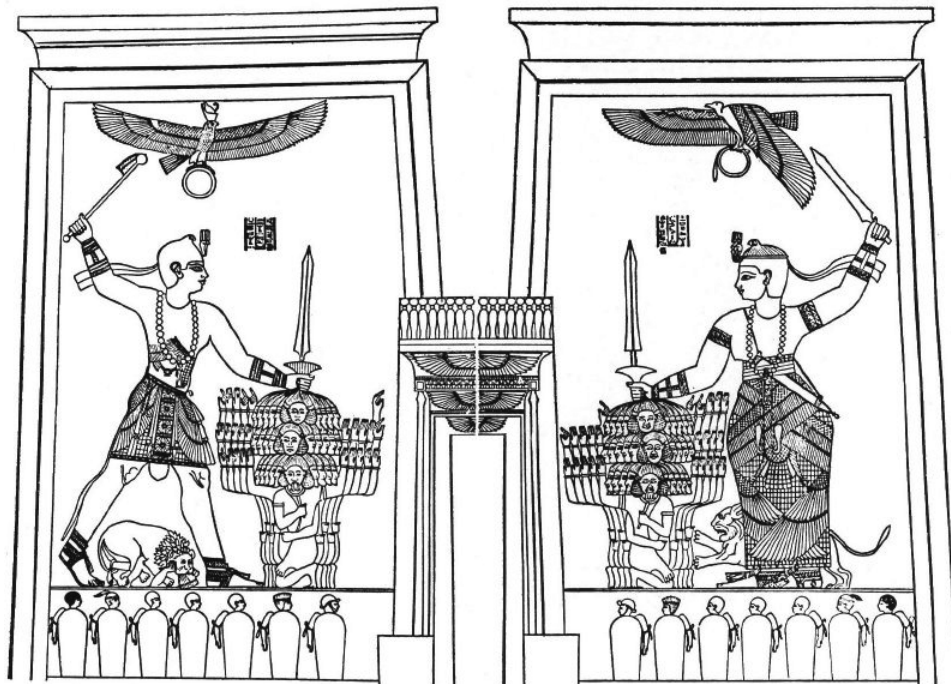


Fig. 65. King Natakamani (on the left) and Queen Amanitore (on the right) on a wall relief of the pylon of the Lion Temple. Naga, Sudan (centuries I BC-I AD)
(P.L. SHINNIE, *Méroe. Uma civilização do Sudão*, Lisboa 1974, pp. 88, 89)