

# Oracles as an Instrument for Political Decisions and Royal Legitimation: A Case Study of Ancient Egypt

**Abstract:** The divine oracle was a very common method to use religion for political purposes in pharaonic Egypt, probably since the early periods. At least since the 18<sup>th</sup> dynasty (15<sup>th</sup> century BC) oracles are tangible in the Egyptian ‘state religion’. Several pharaohs used it for the purpose of legitimization. This paper exemplifies two of them – the female pharaoh Hatshepsut and Ramesses II of the 19<sup>th</sup> dynasty.

Since a female pharaoh was never intended in Egyptian royal ideology Hatshepsut needed to take special measures to justify her claim to the throne. She developed the so-called legend of the divine birth to set her descent from the god Amun. So, she used an oracle in which the same Amun chose and confirmed her to be pharaoh. On the other side, the theological conception changed considerably under the reign of Ramesses II, in particular the legitimizing significance of Maat. Instead of the pharaoh it is now the god who maintained Maat as the religious and political order of the world. In consequence, the king has to earn the favour of the god in order to legitimate himself as ruler.

According to the Ramesside royal ideology the gods became an active and vital parameter in political rule, a phenomenon called “Theologie des Wissens” by Jan Assmann. The will of the gods manifests itself not in the form of constantly established Maat but in singular signs and oracles. This leads to a professionalism and social differentiation of the priesthood as the very social class which is able to interpret these divine signs and by that to get influence on political decisions.

**Keywords:** Hatshepsut, Hapuseneb, Nebwenenef, Ramesses II, High Priest of Amun

When we deal with religious personnel in Ancient Egypt, we must understand an important difference in the self-conception of this professional group in comparison to priests or shamans of tribal societies, for example. Therefore, a short introductory digression into the sociology of religion might be necessary.

Max Weber<sup>1</sup> distinguished in his sociological reference book on economy and society between personal and official charisma<sup>2</sup> with regard to the analysis of a rule. The most important difference is that personal charisma is tied to a specific person

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1 Weber 1980.

2 Weber 1980, 144, 661–781.

and usually cannot be transferred. The official charisma was not *a priori* inherent in its bearer, but was conferred upon him when he was put in his office – be it a civil, religious or ruling one. The sociologist of religion Joachim Wach<sup>3</sup> applied this conceptual distinction to his systematics of religious specialists and defined different types of religious authorities within a certain hierarchy (Tab. 1).

**Tab. 1:** Hierarchy of different religious authorities according to J. Wach.

Religionsstifter	founder of religion (Wach 1944, 341–344)
Reformator	reformer (Wach 1944, 344–346)
Prophet	prophet (in a biblical sense), (Wach 1944, 346–351)
Seher	seer (Wach 1944, 351–353)
Zauberer	magician (Wach 1944, 353–356)
Wahrsager	diviner (Wach 1944, 356–357)
Heiliger	saint (Wach 1944, 357–360)
Priester	priest (Wach 1944, 360–368)
Religiöse	religious people (Wach 1944, 368–370)
Zuhörerschaft	audience (Wach 1944, 370–374)

Wach's typology and the order of his authorities are determined solely by their subjective charisma, their communion with the gods. Following Joachim Wach<sup>4</sup> and Jörg Rüpke<sup>5</sup>, the crucial point for this concept was the *sensus numinis*, the sense for transcendental matters. The religious specialist feels the transcendent power, he is not actively engaged but waits passively for a divine address. The first three specialists in particular are characterised by a high degree of personal charisma. Here the difference to Ancient Egypt, but also to other ancient civilizations becomes clear, because this personal charisma or *sensus numinis* was not necessarily a precondition to be a priest in ancient cultures.

Anyway, not all of these authorities are relevant for premodern cultures. With regard to Ancient Egypt only seers, magicians, priests, and religious audience are of interest.<sup>6</sup>

In Ancient Egypt – as well as in Ancient Near East – religion was not only part of the social life but its solid foundation. The religious system in Egypt was never challenged, with the exception of Akhenaten and his religious revolution in the 14th century BC.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Wach 1944, 331–374, cf. Weber 1980, 245–259.

<sup>4</sup> Wach 1944, 333–337.

<sup>5</sup> Rüpke 2007, 128–130.

<sup>6</sup> In Ancient Egypt, strictly speaking, the Pharaoh is to be included here, as he is considered the highest religious official. Qua office he is the highest priest, but only nominally and not active as such. This article is primarily concerned with the active personnel and the religiously intended influence on the king's political actions.

<sup>7</sup> Further reading: Hornung 1995; Assmann 2012; Assmann 2014; Hoffmeier 2015.

Akhenaten promoted the sun disk Aton to be the one and only god with himself and the royal family as the only persons to communicate with him. He banned most of the other cults, especially the most powerful god Amun. The temples all over Egypt had been closed, priests dismissed from their offices, and cults have been banned. But for the common people it was existential to consult the gods in every aspect of life, so they developed their own idea of religious practice.<sup>8</sup> The roots of this concept of personal piety already existed before<sup>9</sup> but it experienced an extremely dynamic development during this time. So, this Period, commonly referred to as Amarna Period can be seen as a ‘catalyst’ for cultural development, especially for religious phenomena such as personal piety.

Nevertheless, gods have been omnipresent in Ancient Egypt, even during the Amarna Period. Therefore, the first three authorities, founder of religion, reformer and prophet, are usually not an issue in Ancient Egypt or Ancient Mesopotamia. If every aspect of social life is created by the gods and dependent on their will, a person proclaiming religion is certainly not required. In both cultures the gods are in the centre of the worldview and accordingly in the centre of the royal self-perception. As a representative for the mankind the pharaoh, as well as the Mesopotamian king had to provide the gods with everything they need in the daily cult and at the feasts, to keep them gracious and well-disposed. The main task of the king was the maintenance of law and order and the satisfaction of the gods.

The Egyptian ruler was the “earthly embodiment of the gods”,<sup>10</sup> he was situated between the divine and human sphere and was, as it were, a mediator between the two worlds. The living king was both the recipient and the actor of ritual acts. The divinity of the pharaoh was immanent to the office, and only at the moment of his coronation does his divinity come to fruition. It was the title of Horus that symbolised the divinity.<sup>11</sup>

In Mesopotamia it was similar, here the ruler also stood at the top of society and as such between the human and divine spheres. The office of king was conferred by divine recognition,<sup>12</sup> the decisive element in the legitimisation of the Babylonian king was his election by the gods. With his accession to power, the ruler entered the world of the gods, so here too it is not the person who is divine, but the office.<sup>13</sup> He qualified himself by a personal achievement and in return was appointed as ruler by the gods,

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<sup>8</sup> Private religion in Amarna: Stevens 2003; Stevens 2006; DuQuesne 2011.

<sup>9</sup> Personal Piety in general: Luiselli 2011a, Luiselli 2011b.

<sup>10</sup> Blumenthal 2002, 54.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Blumenthal 2002, 53–54.

<sup>12</sup> Sallaberger 2002, 85.

<sup>13</sup> Sallaberger 2002, 94.

followed by enthronement.<sup>14</sup> The concrete actions of the king were determined by the divine mandate.<sup>15</sup>

Both, the Egyptian pharaoh and the Mesopotamian king owe their position as legitimate rulers to the gods.<sup>16</sup> Thus, one of their core tasks was to build and to maintain temples, to care for the gods and to stay in close contact to them.

With regards to the possibilities of contact to the gods and to fathom their will there has to be noticed a significant difference between Egypt and Mesopotamia. In both cultures various practices of divination did exist, such as oracles or dream interpretation. But only in Mesopotamia an elaborate system of *omina* can be observed by the cuneiform documentation.<sup>17</sup> The interpretation of *omina* was based on the observation of nature and sky or on the investigation of the intestines of a sacrificial animal (*extispicium*), which surprisingly was not common in pharaonic Egypt. Some of these *omina* are restricted to the royal sphere and could only be performed by the ruler. This suggests a special role of these *omina* in politics.<sup>18</sup>

Especially the *extispicy* must have been of greatest importance in Mesopotamia, measured by the extent of sources dealing with this topic. Numerous texts of different genres are recorded from the late old-Babylonian period onwards (18<sup>th</sup> century BC).<sup>19</sup> Among them are comprehensive manuals which were also used for teaching purposes.

Furthermore, there are detailed ritual descriptions with instructions and interpretation, compendia of *omina*, records of certain inquiries or relevant correspondences. Royal inscriptions or literary texts also refer to this topic.<sup>20</sup> The wide range of sources allows conclusions to be drawn about the keen interest of the Mesopotamian rulers in this kind of divination. The specialist for the hepatoscopy was the *barû*, the seer. He is to be seen as a scholar and scientist<sup>21</sup> who qualified himself by studying the science of *omina*. He needed this knowledge for the interpretation of the *omina*, but his professional success rather depended on the mercy of the gods and their willingness to communicate. In practical terms, that means the liver of the sacrificial animal did not show a special feature, which was necessary for the divination. If this feature was not visible, the god was not present and accordingly not able to answer.

A *barû* in the service of the king normally was a high dignitary with ministerial status who also had other official tasks and obligations. He was a carrier of confidential information. His political influence and power become visible by the fact that di-

<sup>14</sup> Ambos, 2017, 67; Sallaberger 2002, 91.

<sup>15</sup> Sallaberger 2002, 85.

<sup>16</sup> Egypt: Gundlach 1995; cf. also Otto 1969 (partly outdated); Mesopotamia: Steible 2001 (3<sup>rd</sup> millennium BC); cf. Janowski 2008, 149–153.

<sup>17</sup> Maul 2003 for a first overview, furthermore Pongratz-Leisten 1999 and Radner 2011.

<sup>18</sup> For an overview see Böck 2016, and cf. Sallaberger 2002, 86.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Maul 2003, 58–59, Pongratz-Leisten 1999, 128–201.

<sup>20</sup> See for example Maul 2003, 45–88, Janowski/Wilhelm 2008.

<sup>21</sup> Sweek 2002, 46.

viners took the oath by the king. An oath from the Palace of Zimrilim in Mari (18<sup>th</sup> century BC)<sup>22</sup> handed down that the *barû* was not allowed to share any results of the extispicy with other parties and he was not allowed to act against the king on the basis of this information. He was also obliged to report any conspicuous findings. To avoid abuse, betrayal or mistakes it was possible to assign more than one team of seers or to have the results of an extispicy confirmed by another *barû*. The compendia and manuals were apparently not used mechanically, but left room for interpretation and creative thinking.<sup>23</sup>

Seers sometimes seek the protection of powerful cults, patrons, protective associations, or political rivals of the king which is also a sign for their influence.<sup>24</sup> They can be seen as a kind of translator between god and king. But if there are particularly sensitive inquiries, it was possible to degrade this translator to a kind of instrument. So, for example, the king himself wrote and sealed his inquiry, so only the god would know his plan.<sup>25</sup> The *barû* submitted the divine response without knowing the question, so to speak.

In the end the king had several possibilities to keep this very important process of extispicy under his control. But on the other hand this strategy and the large amount of sources imply that there might have been incidents of abuse.

This was just a very short insight to show which important role the different kind of *omina* played in the Ancient Near East. In contrast to this, we are not able to prove *omina* to the extent in Ancient Egypt before the 1<sup>st</sup> millennium BC even though there are so many parallels between the royal ideology or religion of both cultures.

Instead, in Egypt existed divine oracles.<sup>26</sup> Important decisions were made by an oracle during the processions in Karnak, and it was also used for the legitimization of the king. I would like to illustrate the role of the divine oracle and of the responsible priest as well as the related problem by two examples. However, I will start with some general remarks.

The political state system of Ancient Egypt has to be considered as a so-called “Sakral- und Rechtskönigtum”<sup>27</sup>, where political actions took place always on behalf of the gods and should never be detached from religion. The pharaoh was the highest priest and only mediator between gods and men like in Mesopotamia. Theoretically and officially nobody else was allowed to take up contact to the gods and to practice the daily cult and ceremonial rituals. In the temple reliefs we see only the king serving the gods. In view of the large number of gods and temples in Egypt this was of

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22 Cf. Maul 2003, 76 with further literature, cf. also Pongratz-Leisten 1999.

23 Maul 2003.

24 Sweek 2002, 42.

25 Starr 1990, No 129–138.

26 Kaiser 1958; Černý 1962; Von Lieven 1999.

27 Assmann 2010, 96.

course practically impossible to realise. So, the king delegated every cultic and ritual service to the priests who acted as his representatives.

The Egyptian priests were part of the society like any other officials. They had been organised in so-called *phyles* in a rotating system. In each respective temple only one of the phyles was in charge. So, a priest served the gods only 3 months per year, while being occupied with other offices for the rest of the year. It is not at all unusual that an Egyptian official held both priestly and civil posts. Priests had to respect certain purity rules, as we know first and foremost from Herodotus.<sup>28</sup> They did not follow a divine calling or had to have certain abilities, first and foremost, it was a regular profession.

In the Egyptological scientific literature, both designations ‘priest’ and ‘prophet’ are regularly used for the cultic personnel. Both are partly correct but in the end not precise. The indigenous Egyptian designation of a religious specialist is *ḥm ntr* – ‘God’s servant’ which best describes the cultic tasks of an Egyptian priest. The religious leader of a certain temple in Ancient Egypt had been the *ḥm ntr tpj* – literally ‘1<sup>st</sup> God’s Servant’, also translated as ‘1<sup>st</sup> Prophet’ or ‘High Priest’. Most important were the High Priest of Ptah in Memphis, the High Priest of Re-Harachte in Heliopolis and the High Priest of Amun in Karnak. In his contribution of the particular volume, Nenad Marković will go into more detail about the High Priest of Ptah in the Late Period.

The High Priest led all ritual acts and had probably most competences not only in the religious and cultic part but also in the field of temple administration, which provides him with economic and therefore also with political power. In other words: Whoever had access to economic resources also possessed political influence. So economic and religious tasks are apparently highly connected which seems to be of special importance in the temple of Amun in Karnak for two reasons. Firstly, it is the biggest and economically the most powerful temple in Egypt during the New Kingdom. From the pHarris I we learn that the temple of Karnak during the 20th Dynasty (12th century BC) had around 86.000 workers, estates of more than 230.000 hectar, livestock of more than 400.000 cows and so on.<sup>29</sup> Secondly, the king in the New Kingdom had to be legitimized and confirmed by the god Amun.<sup>30</sup>

The person who was supposed to interpret and to communicate the oracular decision was the High Priest of Amun as the highest representative of the temple. In consequence, he hypothetically must have had significant authority and influence. *Vice versa* the installation of the High Priest of Amun must have been a sensitive and highly political issue.

Pharaoh Hatshepsut was the first to include the god Amun in her legitimation strategy at the beginning of the 18th Dynasty (15th century BC).<sup>31</sup> At that time the god

<sup>28</sup> See Hdt. 2. 37.1–5; 41.1–4; 42.1; 47.1–2; 64.1.

<sup>29</sup> Grandet 1994, 323–332; cf. Breasted 1906, 95–103, §§ 16–171.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. in general Gundlach 2002, 105–108.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. Gabolde 2014; Laboury 2014; for an overview cf. Kubisch 2017, 246–259.

Amun became more important and his temple in Karnak started to increase. The two most important offices in this context – High Priest of Amun and Gods Wife of Amun – were created immediately before.

Just for contextualizing the historical framework: Hatshepsut was the ruling queen who finally completed the restoration process after the foreign rule of the Hyksos.<sup>32</sup> She was the aunt of the legitimate but underaged king Thutmose III. As such she was supposed to act as regent for him until he came of age, but instead she initiated her own coronation as pharaoh. However, a female pharaoh was never envisaged in Egyptian royal ideology, so she had to take special measures to establish her claim to the throne. **Firstly** she used the so-called legend of the divine birth to set her descent from the god Amun.<sup>33</sup> Maybe this myth already existed in the pharaonic cultural memory but Hatshepsut was the first who set it out in writing and illustration. These reliefs are located in Hatshepsut's mortuary temple at Deir el-Bahari.<sup>34</sup> The inscriptions and reliefs describe and illustrate how Hatshepsut fathered by the god Amun, was elected by him to be king of Egypt and set upon the throne. In this context we also find **secondly** the so-called coronation oracle, which Amun gave to confirm Hatshepsut as pharaoh. Scenes of her coronation are also shown in the Red Chapel in Karnak.<sup>35</sup>

An oracle in the New Kingdom Egypt was not given verbally like the Siwa oracle but by means of a certain movement code. The cult image was placed in a closed shrine upon a wooden barque which was carried by several priests. To answer the oracular questions the god started to move in different ways. The translation of the Egyptian terms in this context is not conclusively clear, but only understood and interpreted by the priests. Indeed, these activities probably can be thought of as nodding or walking forwards and backwards. So, in fact the result of the oracle depends on the persons who carried the barque, or at least the superior priest who leads the procession.<sup>36</sup>

In the text of the birth legend of Hatshepsut there is described a procession of Amun, where the god did not show any reaction at the places where an oracle used to take place. Supposedly, he himself guided the procession to the palace of Hatshepsut, and thereby determined her as ruler.<sup>37</sup>

After this, she placed herself upon her belly in the presence of His Majesty (i.e. the god Amun), saying: "How much greater is this than the (customary) conduct of Your Majesty! It is you, my father, who plans everything which exists. What is that which you wished to happen? I will truly

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<sup>32</sup> Assmann 2006, 55–62.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. Assmann 2009, 11–25; Assmann 2006, 55–62. About the legend of divine birth cf. Brunner 1986; Assmann 1982, 13–61.

<sup>34</sup> Naville 1897 (part II).

<sup>35</sup> Laboury 2014, 52 note 13, 54; cf. also Gabolde 2014.

<sup>36</sup> Von Lieven 1999, 80.

<sup>37</sup> Assmann 2006, 69; Gabolde 2014, 35–36; Laboury 2014, 66–67.

do in accordance with that which you have commanded". Then the Majesty of this god performed very great and very many wonders.

Then he placed her before him and advanced her to the mansion of Maat, she receiving the insignia of her servant(ship) and her jewellery of the wife of the god who is within his temple.<sup>38</sup>

The following text says that Amun lead Hatshepsut into the coronation hall, where he himself crowned her:

I put you on my throne. I take for you crook and flagellum. I mould you, who I planned to create, so that you give offerings before your creator, so that you restore the sanctuaries of the gods, so that you protect this land by an effective administration, so that the criminals have respect for you, so that the rebels are enslaved of your power, so that you take power as the Lord of Force. Then the land will be under your control, mankind under your supervision and your subjects will praise you.<sup>39</sup>

In all texts a direct and exclusive communication between Hatshepsut and the god Amun is suggested. But it cannot be assumed that she wrote them all by herself. The sources of the birth legend and of the oracle required special theological knowledge and must have been composed by experts. Whom else one would expect in this context than the priests, possibly in consultation with the queen. In fact, this specific creation legitimizing the woman pharaoh was a highly political act which only could be realized by the assistance of the responsible priests.

In the case of Hatshepsut we even know various high officials, among them the High Priest of Amun Hapuseneb. He was one of several persons Hatshepsut promoted in the sense of *homines novi* in order to create an inner circle of loyal subjects.

Concerning his appointment as High Priest of Amun Hapuseneb said:

[. . .] one whom Her Majesty selected amidst millions, whom she made great among the Rechit because of the great efficiency in the heart (of the king).<sup>40</sup>

Hapuseneb held also other, partially secular offices beside the title of the High Priest, for instance Overseer of all works of the king and Overseer of the priests of Upper and Lower Egypt etc. There are some indications that he was already in office before Hatshepsut became pharaoh, so it is quite likely that he was involved in her legitimization program. But here we are at a point where we can't get any further. We know, the royal texts must have been written by religious specialists, and we also know some of these specialists but we are not able to prove that a certain priest like Hapuseneb was in fact responsible for its realization. Hapuseneb left several inscriptions in which he reported about different building activities in the temple and cultic equip-

<sup>38</sup> Transl. after Gillen 2005, 1–8.

<sup>39</sup> After Assmann 2009, 11–25.

<sup>40</sup> Sethe 1927, 472: 5–7.



ment he was responsible for.<sup>41</sup> So, we know from his monuments that he supervised the production of a door of copper, a wooden shrine and several cultic devices. But he did not give explicit information about the cultic or theological aspect of his office. Hapuseneb only mentioned that he was put into his office by the king. He had his/her absolute confidence and did his job to the highest satisfaction of the king. However, it is a biographic text written on the Bologna statue which says:

I carried out the orders he (= she = Hatshepsut) placed, I didn't neglect every business of the Lord of the Two Lands (the pharaoh) and I carried out everything he (= she) charged me with.<sup>42</sup>

Unsurprisingly we do not get more details, since the cultic aspect was most likely secret knowledge which was not allowed to talk about outside the temple walls. And so, Hapuseneb said in a text on the Bologna statue: "no fault of mine was discovered, there was no secret which I would have revealed outward."<sup>43</sup>

Now, let us jump from the 15<sup>th</sup> century BC to the 13<sup>th</sup> century BC, in particular to a slightly different case under Ramesses II at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> dynasty. Ramesses II took over the throne after a period of political instability. His predecessors Ramesses I and Sety I were both quite aged when they assume the government after the Amarna Period, therefore they had not much time to consolidate the political realm. Ramesses II in turn was very young when he became pharaoh and the question of his succession was not fully clear. A sign for that is the existence of an enigmatic hereditary prince who was eliminated from the reliefs and replaced with figures of Ramesses. In his 9th year, Sety I appointed his son as his successor. At that time Ramesses was only 18 or 19 years old. His father died 2 years later, so Ramesses was not more than 21 years old when he became pharaoh. This and the still unstable dynasty required a large-scale and well thought-out legitimization strategy, which is evident in the royal titles as well as in two long official inscriptions.<sup>44</sup> For sure, Ramesses II did not develop this program all alone. He was dependent on a reliable team of loyal officials, who are even to be seen as kingmakers. In the highest positions, which was the Vizier of the South and the North we find senior officials of merit. We know both viziers Paser<sup>45</sup> and Nebamun<sup>46</sup> already from the time of Sety I. Paser in particular has left us revealing texts from which we learn that he was appointed by Ramesses I, was in service under Sety I and was at the height of his career when Ram-

<sup>41</sup> Cf. Kubisch 2017, 246–254 for an overview.

<sup>42</sup> Bologna 1822: Sethe 1927, 484:5–6.

<sup>43</sup> Bologna 1822: Sethe 1927, 484:10–11.

<sup>44</sup> Accompanying inscription to the Festival of Opet in the Karnak temple: Brand/Feleg/Murnane 2016; and the Great Dedication Inscription in Abydos: Spalinger 2009; cf. also Kubisch 2018, 196–199.

<sup>45</sup> Sources about Paser compiled by Raedler 2004, 309–348.

<sup>46</sup> Sources about Nebamun: Raedler 2004, 303–309.

esses II became king.<sup>47</sup> In his rock-cut tomb, a biographical inscription was placed on each of two pillars, one referring to Sety I and the other to Ramesses II. The inscription to Sety I reads:

My lord (i.e. Sety I) commanded that this servant be promoted to first companion of the palace, and he appointed him to be overseer of chamberlains and high priest of 'Great-of-Magic'. Then again (*whm.n rd.t=f*) he placed him as city governor and vizier who judges what is right, and who is charged to receive tribute of foreign countries from south and north for the Treasury of the Victorious King.<sup>48</sup>

Since Paser already held the highest political office in Egypt under Sety I, it is more than likely that he was heavily involved, if not solely responsible, for Ramesses' program of legitimation, especially considering Ramesses' great youth when he took office. But what about the sensitive office of the High Priest of Amun at the beginning of the reign of Ramesses II? The High Priest of Amun played an important religio-political role because Amun had to confirm the new king.<sup>49</sup> But when Ramesses II took over the throne the post of the High Priest was vacant and he has to install a new official in his first regnal year.

This new official was a man called Nebwenenef, and we know the circumstances of his investiture from his well-known installation scene in his rock-cut tomb in the Theban necropolis (TT 157).<sup>50</sup> This large scene is located at a very prominent place – at the eastern wall in the broad hall close to the entrance. The scene shows King Ramesses II with his wife Nefertary in a window of appearance, maybe in the king's palace in Abydos. We see the portico in front of the window, where Nebwenenef is standing. He stretches his right hand towards the king, wearing the usual robe of a high official, his shaven head identifies him as priest. Behind him are the remains of five persons in portrait. Fortunately, Wilhelm Spiegelberg did squeezes of certain parts of the walls, including the installation scene. These squeezes confirm that there was no inscription next to these figures, so we can only assume that the two officials directly behind Nebwenenef are to be identified with the viziers of northern and southern Egypt – most likely Nebamun and Paser. They can be recognised by their special regalia – the long robe without folds and the sceptre. The associated text starts as follows:

Year 1, 3rd Month of Akhet, [ . . . ] when His Majesty sailed North from the Southern City, having done the pleasure of his father Amen-Re [ . . . ] in his beautiful Festival of Opet, (one) returned from there with favour, when favour had been received on behalf of the King of Upper and Lower Egypt, *Wsr-m3't-R' stp-n-R'*, living forever.<sup>51</sup>

<sup>47</sup> Cf. Raedler 2004, 346, and Kubisch 2018, 192.

<sup>48</sup> Kitchen 1975, 299:9–11, translation after Frood 2007, 151.

<sup>49</sup> See also Kubisch 2018, 189–203.

<sup>50</sup> Cf. Kubisch 2018, 193–199.

<sup>51</sup> Biographical inscription of Nebwenenef: Kitchen 1980, 283:1–5; cf. here and in the following Frood 2007, 35–37.

According to this inscription, Ramesses was on his way back from Thebes to the residence in Memphis when he stopped in Thinis near Abydos to inform Nebwenenef that he would be High Priest of Amun from now on:

Landing was made in the Thinite Province, and the (future) High Priest of Amun, Nebwenenef, justified, was ushered-in before His Majesty. Now, he was (then) High Priest of Anhur, and High Priest of Hathor, Lady of Dendera, and Superintendent of Prophets of all Gods.<sup>52</sup>

According to his biography, Nebwenenef was chosen by the god Amun himself. This statement was given more weight by dressing it up in a – presumably fictitious – speech of the king:

(I swear), as Re lives for me and loves me, and (as) my father Amun favours me, I set out for him the whole Court, and the chief executive of the troops. There were repeated (before) him the prophets of the gods, and the notables of his House, who were in his presence. But he was not satisfied with any of them, until I mentioned your name to him. (So), serve him well, according as he has desired you!<sup>53</sup>

However, the formal ceremony of investiture was also carried out by the King, which underlines the great importance of this act as well as of the office:

[Then] His Majesty [gave] him his two gold signet-rings, and his electrum-staff-of-office on being promoted to be High Priest of Amun, Superintendent of (Amun's) double treasury of silver and gold, Superintendent of the granary, Chief of Works, and Chief of all Craftsmen in Thebes.<sup>54</sup>

Nebwenenef, whom we only know from his biographical text as priest of a provincial temple without connections to the royal court, finished a meteoric carrier, which he owes in fact to the king, even if he officially was chosen by the god Amun. Now he was responsible for all institutions and foundations associated with the temple of Amun, and he also was the keeper of the seals of Amun's double Treasury. He was thus not only responsible for the entire assets of the temple, but also had unrestricted access to them. Compared to the size of these economic resources this means an enormous financial power. This system worked as long as temple and state, High Priest and pharaoh work by common agreement and in balanced relations. However, in the later Ramesside period, Ramesses III transferred several estates to the temple of Amun to such an extent that in the end he was no longer able to pay his workers.<sup>55</sup> The reasons for this transfer are unclear, but this is all the more incomprehensible as

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<sup>52</sup> Biographical inscription of Nebwenenef: Kitchen 1980, 283:5–7.

<sup>53</sup> Kitchen 1980, 283:10–13.

<sup>54</sup> Kitchen 1980, 285:1–2.

<sup>55</sup> This account goes back posthumously to his son Ramesses IV and is handed down on the Great Papyrus Harris I, cf. Grandet 1994, especially 225–232; on the political role of the historical section cf. Maderna-Sieben 1991, 57–90.

the balance between state and temple now no longer existed. Of course, there are other factors at play on this occasion, but the most important aspect is the fact that the temple was clearly not obliged to help in this situation.

But in addition, we probably have a representation of the oracle which nominated Nebwenenef. From the Great Dedication Inscription of Ramesses II in Abydos,<sup>56</sup> one of the two extended legitimization texts, we know that the procession of Amun to Luxor in the course of the Festival of Opet took place in Ramesses' very first regnal year.<sup>57</sup> During this festival, the young Pharaoh was confirmed as king by the god Amun, as we know from a pictorial representation in the temple of Karnak.<sup>58</sup> In the Hypostyle Hall in Karnak there is a relief of a procession on the occasion of the Opet Festival, the accompanying inscription of which mentions the accession of Ramesses II to the throne. Although it was probably carved a few years later, it is very likely that the relief refers to the particular Opet Festival when the oracle has elected Nebwenenef as High Priest of Amun.

On this relief we see the barques of the Theban divine triad Amun, Mut and Chons, in front of them the king burning incense. Because of the cartouches depicted above the king, we know that it is Ramesses II who leads the procession. The first and largest barque – that of Amun – is carried by the priests wearing masks with falcon- and jackal-heads. The barques of Mut and Chons follow in two registers. Beside each barque, a high-ranking member of the clergy is represented. It is clearly visible that the person near the shrine is not carrying anything, but raises his hand and stands out from the other people because of the leopard skin he is wearing. But the priest who is escorting the barque of Amun is additionally marked by his crown with an uraeus and by an inscription:

The first prophet of Amun, the king of Upper and Lower Egypt (*Wsr-mꜣt-Rꜥ stp-n-rꜥ*) the son of Re (*Rꜥ-ms-sw mrj Jmn*) given life.<sup>59</sup>

This inscription is extraordinary: In most representations of such processions, the priests who are depicted are not accompanied by an identifying inscription. In this case however, it is worth mentioning, probably because it is the king himself who is acting as High Priest of Amun. Kurt Sethe<sup>60</sup> presumed that there might be a connection between the installation scene in the tomb of Nebwenenef and the procession scene in Karnak in which Ramesses II is explicitly referred to as High Priest of Amun. This hypothesis is convincing, however it was probably not the installation of Nebwenenef which the king had in mind when he had this representation made, but rather other and more core issues concerning his own accession to power. He probably

<sup>56</sup> Cf. Spalinger 2009.

<sup>57</sup> Spalinger 2009, 22.

<sup>58</sup> Nelson/Murnane 1981, pl. 53; Brand/Feleg/Murnane 2016, 109; Kubisch 2018, 196–197.

<sup>59</sup> Brand/Feleg/Murnane 2016, 109.

<sup>60</sup> Sethe 1923, 54; cf. Lefebvre 1929, 117–121.

might not only be confirming Nebwenenef as High Priest of Amun but primarily aims to affirm his own position as the king of Egypt. This is the reason why the speech of Amun-Re near his barque says:

The wonders (*bjꜣ.t* = oracles) of my double-figurehead belong to your handsome face, for the two uraeus-serpents have become attached to your diadem. I foretell for you victories against all foreign countries [. . .] I have caused that your name might endure in the likeness of the sky. You shall exist so long as heaven exists, forever.<sup>61</sup>

In a similar way, the Great Dedication Inscription of Ramesses II in Abydos refers to that as well:

It was Amun-Atum in Thebes, that he came forth praised in power and might. It was with millions [of] years up to the lifetime of Re in heaven that he rewarded him. After [he] heard [his requests, he?] was rewarded with eternity and everlastingness (*nḥḥ* and *ḏt*).<sup>62</sup>

Amun legitimized the king as pharaoh and predicts him a long and victorious reign. The term *bjꜣ.yt* which is mentioned in the text, is the Egyptian word for the moving oracle, and the High Priest would be the person who was responsible for that. In this case, it was apparently the king himself, for which there are two indications. Firstly, the king is depicted as High Priest within the procession, in the identifying inscription he is called by his royal name and as *ḥm nṯr tpj n Jmn*. Secondly, it is assumed that Ramesses was on his way back from Luxor to Memphis after the Opet festival when he stopped at Thinis and appointed Nebwenenef as High Priest of Amun. In fact, at that time there was no High Priest of Amun except the king himself. Ramesses II therefore did not use the support of a High Priest of Amun for his own legitimation, but he himself was the High Priest. When he ascended the throne, however, he lost no time in filling this office. The special thing about the appointment was that the new High Priest was chosen by oracle and that the king appointed himself to the cardinal position for the oracle. In other words: He was able to influence the result of the oracle. This demonstrates that he did not leave the filling of this politically important office to chance. In the crucial situation, the king reduced the power of political influence by the High Priest, but installed a loyal fellow in this important position for his further reign.

We have no idea in what way Nebwenenef was deemed suitable to be chosen for this office. Maybe he got a promotion for his merits in the Thinite nome, for instance for a hypothetical work in the funerary temple of Sety I, or it had something to do with the situation in Thebes. Maybe nobody was suitable for this post or the king wanted to avoid nepotism. Nevertheless, the new king seemed to have changed the elite(s) at his royal court. This ultimately does not matter. The key for Ramesses was obviously that he could be sure of Nebwenenef's loyalty, because the king elected him for this high

<sup>61</sup> Brand/Feleg/Murnane 2016, 109.

<sup>62</sup> Spalinger 2009, 23.

office. Moreover, Ramesses ensured that this decision would (hopefully) never be questioned because the new High Priest of Amun was appointed by an oracle. It was thus a divine decision which left no room for discussion. At the end, this example clearly demonstrates how sensitive this priestly office has to be seen, especially since the temple of Karnak as an economically most powerful factor was located far away from the royal residence. Thereby this person has to be qualified for theological and cultic as well as for political tasks. The King had to elect very carefully a capable and loyal candidate who would be able to assert himself against “old-boy-networks” and to represent the royal interest. He created a loyal environment that is reliable and tractable in political decision-making situations.

The installation of a High Priest of Amun obviously was a matter of the king himself, but the priests took the opportunity to fill this post by themselves immediately when the occasion arose, which was the case under Ramesses III and IV. However, The case of Nebwenenef suggests that the high priest was involved in political decisions. His possibilities of political influence and decision-making are obvious but how much influence he really possessed and how great his room for manoeuvre was remains unclear in the details.

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