Issues in Identifying Innovation, the Early Ramesside Era as a Case Study

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Possibilities and Pitfalls in Identifying Innovation: The Early Ramesside Era as a Case Study

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The remarkable staying power of ancient Egyptian culture is rivaled only by China in its longevity. Yet this unusual stability and cohesiveness has sometimes led to generalizations at the cost of accuracy. While it is common to make blanket statements about Egyptian beliefs, characteristics, and tendencies, such characterizations ignore the rich and complex reality that lay behind 3000 years of cultural continuation. Part of the reason Egypt’s culture survived for so long was its ability to adapt, appropriate, reinterpret, and innovate, all within the larger bounds of cultural cohesion, correctness, and decorum.¹

Surely the beliefs and practices of an Egyptian during the 1st Dynasty were not completely congruent with those of the Twenty-Sixth. For example, in an otherwise excellent paper presentation at the 2007 American Research Center in Egypt Annual Meeting, the speaker asserted that partially broken figures on the Narmer Macehead were not bound prisoners because they did not have some of the elements we frequently see in connection with bound prisoners in the Ramesside Era. Such a statement assumes that neither the practice of binding prisoners nor the artistic custom for depicting them had changed in nearly two millennia. If this type of generalization were unique, it would not be worth mentioning. However, this incident is not as uncommon as we would hope.

I recently spent a week grading AP World History exams. On one question, students were given a set of documents about China and another about Rome, and were asked to analyze a certain aspect of these societies based on the documents. For both areas, the documents spanned a 400-year period. Unsurprisingly, few students noted that there was, or could be, any kind of change in that amount of time (which would be akin to saying that there has been no change in American attitudes between the founding of Jamestown and now). What I did find surprising is that most of the professors and teachers grading the exam were of the same mind. I had to argue with colleagues in order to give credit to a student who tried to address this issue! As Egyptologists, we must and can do better than this.

The purpose of this paper is not to outline the reasons and contexts behind innovation and adaptations, nor is it to identify key innovative movements. Instead, using case studies, I will discuss some of the obstacles in identifying adaptation, reinterpretation, and innovation in the hope that this begins an academic conversation aimed at more accurately identifying these phenomena. This volume is intended to be a step in such an important conversation.

Obstacles in Identifying Innovation

There are reasons why we often generalize or ignore innovation, and in some instances this may be justified. The following discussion regarding five obstacles that hinder the identification of innovation is by no means exhaustive.

1 (1) The most obvious obstacle is also the most daunting, and leads to several of the other obstacles: as Egyptologists, we deal with an enormous expanse of time. It is simply impossible to be a specialist in every era of Egyptian history, nor are any of us able to be intimately familiar with every aspect of Egyptian culture in each phase of its history. Moreover, the discipline will have few new ideas advanced if those ideas, when first presented, must account for all aspects of change and innovation that affect the topic. For example, David Lorton² conducted an initial investigation into punishments in ancient Egypt. Because this topic had not yet been thoroughly investigated, he pulled together a vast amount of information from a variety of sources, combing a number of years of history. Studies that further refined the view³ were possible because of the beginning that had been made. If Lorton had not published his findings until he had comprehensively reviewed the topic chronologically, we would likely still be waiting for a publication on the subject. Hopefully, brief or initial investigations include both an explicit acknowledgment of their limitations and encouragement for further historical analyses.

2 (2) Dealing with diachronic issues, including adaptation and innovation, is often quite complex, leading to a tendency to generalize rather than delve into the complexities. This is especially true, and often necessary, when dealing with a lay audience. If in lectures, books, and articles aimed at

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laymen we were to include lengthy caveats for everything that changed over time, we would usually fail in keeping our audience or gaining publishing contracts. However, this tendency to generalize cannot be a typical part of scholarship aimed at the academy. We must address the complexities that lay behind adaptation and innovation. This is not to say that every aspect of change must be addressed at once. Progress often comes best in steps, so that identifying a change in one article and leaving the reasons that brought about that change for another is an acceptable, and perhaps pragmatic, process.4

(3) The expanse of time that must be covered and the complexity of dealing with issues involving change lead to a third obstacle: identifying issues of innovation, appropriation, and reinterpretation is a publication–space intensive process. The size of monographs, book chapters, and journal articles balloons when these matters are handled appropriately, and this may preclude many studies from being published. Internet publications lighten this burden somewhat, but carry their own set of problems. Many journals simply will not permit the space necessary to fully explore change, and so innovation is lightly brushed over or pushed aside. One solution to this dilemma has already been mentioned, namely to publish on a topic in stages, perhaps tracing a change in one article and then analyzing historical and cultural influences that both inform and are informed by change in a second and/or third article. Space constraints can be dealt with, and consciously being aware of the pressures of publication space will help each researcher to more formally outline how a specific research topic will handle this obstacle.

(4) The competition each scholar feels between the need to be both a generalist and a specialist affects the scholar’s ability to diachronically explore topics. This obstacle is also greatly amplified because of the large period of time Egyptologists cover. If one becomes too much of a specialist, it is impossible to deal with an element of Egyptian society diachronically because one will not possess the ability to competently deal with so many differing time periods. Yet, if one is too much of a generalist it is difficult to delve into the specific matters of which changes are made. The tension between generality and specificity is indeed taut in our discipline.

(5) Identifying innovation or any form of change in Egyptian history is greatly hampered by the inconsistency of data availability. We have far more evidence for some time periods than others, most notably the New Kingdom. The difficulty this presents for identifying innovation is that most arguments for a new practice are based on an argument of silence that very well may stem from a lack of evidence instead of a lack of the practice in earlier periods.

I do not mean to imply that these, or other, obstacles are insurmountable, nor that as Egyptologists we have not been successful in tracing innovation and reinterpretation. Notable examples of success in this area from scholars involved with the conference from which this volume is derived include John Gee’s work on innovation and reinterpretation in the role of gate keepers in funerary literature5 and Antonio Loprieno’s work on reinterpreting the concept of sacredness in Egyptian culture.6 These two works stand as examples of different ways to amass and analyze evidence for innovation. To further this, we will now examine three phenomena that might be classified as innovation in an attempt to illustrate possibilities and pitfalls in identifying innovation, and in a move towards a methodology. Because the early Ramesside era was a period of intense innovation, our examples will come from this time period.

**Binding with Heraldic Plants**

While the motif of binding prisoners is ubiquitous throughout Egyptian history, during the Ramesside era it became common to depict prisoners as being bound with the papyrus and lotus plants.8 Seti I employed the motif prodigiously at Karnak (see Figure 1). The practice increased in frequency under Ramesses II, who made special use of this at Abu Simbel (see Figure 2), his great pylon at Karnak,10 some Bubastite blocks,11 Luxor,12 and the Ramesseum.13 The motif reached its apex under Ramesses III. The most common artistic method for depicting bound prisoners under his reign was with the heraldic plants. Medinet Habu represents the employment of this motif at its very height.14 The practice began to quickly die out thereafter, and is rare after Ramesses VI.

Such new, prolific uses under the early Ramessides would tempt one to classify this as innovation. However, a careful review of the evidence reveals that while the motif was used more abundantly in this realm, it was not the beginning of

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9 See H. H. Nelson, *Reliefs and Inscriptions at Karnak*, vol. 4, pls. 2, 6, 15a, 17a, 32, and 35 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1936) for some examples.


Fig. 1. Seti I reliefs at Karnak.

Fig. 2. Reliefs from the entrance to the large temple of Abu Simbel.
its use. It is attested under Thutmose IV and its absence before then, and thus its terminus incepti
suspect, since it is based on argumentum ex silentio. It was also
used numerous times by Amenhotep III, Akhenaten, and Tutankhamun. Furthermore, the examples from Tutankhamun come from his tomb goods, a likely place to find the images during the reign of other kings, if only they had not been plundered.

In light of these small scale, yet extant, examples, I would not identify the use of the heraldic plant binding motif under the Ramessides as true innovation, but rather as proliferation of an existing phenomenon. Such a sharp proliferation is certainly worth both noting and investigating as to its interrelated causes and effects, but this research will be best accomplished with a clear understanding that the phenomenon is one unique part of a larger trend.

### Impalement as Punishment

It is under Seti I that we first encounter a royal inscription listing impalement (xwr=f divine hpr tp xj), as the designated punishment for a particular crime. Impalement thereafter seems to have become the punishment of choice under the Ramessides. Merneptah also noted that he subjected subdued enemies to impalement: “the remainder were put on the top of stakes, to the south of Memphis” (nA spwy divine hpr tp xj hr rswt-mn-nfr). The phrase “were put on top of stakes” (dive hpr tp xj) is followed by a determinative which shows a pointed stake with a person stuck on top, legs hanging to one side, arms to the other, apparently face down (see Figure 3), clearly depicting impalement. In connection with the interrogations stemming from the Great Tomb Robberies, many oaths were administered that cast some light on the issue of impalement. Most of these were oaths to tell the truth during the questioning, and thus contained penalties for perjury within the oath. Nine times impalement is the described potential punishment, although four of these are in informal oaths that were uttered in the process of testimony. While we cannot know if impalement ever was enacted as the result of perjury, it is significant that those who uttered the oaths most frequently thought of impalement as the potential punishment. The testators may have instead been referring to what would happen to them were they found guilty of tomb robbery, a presumption that would accompany perjury. As for those who were found guilty, at least seven were impaled.

![Fig. 3. Impaling determinative from the Merneptah Amada inscription.](image)

Yet, while it is in the Ramesside era that we encounter our first evidence for impalement as punishment for crimes, it is not the first attestation of impalement. The first known evidence comes from the Tod inscription of Senusret I. As part of many punishments Senusret inflicted, “the hills [filled] with the impaled.”

“Impaled” (ptHw) is a word that typically means to build, or perhaps is a cognate of the Semitic word pH, to open.

24 See lines X:28-30, as in D. B. Redford, “The Tod Inscriptions of Senosret I and Early 12th Dynasty Involvement in Nubia and the South,” JSSEA XVII, no. 1/2 (1987), 42 and Fig. 2. See also W. Schenkel, Mitteilungen des deutschen Orientgesellschaft 31, pl. 33 (1975). See also C. Barbotin and J. J. Clère, “L’Inscription de Sésostris Ier à Tod,” BIFAO 91 (1991), 10, lines 116-121.
25 Reconstructions according to Redford, 42.
26 Wb, 1:565; or R. Hannig, Großes Handwörterbuch Ägyptisch-Deutsch: (2800-950 v. Chr): die Sprache der Pharaonen, Kulturgeschichte der antiken Welt; Bd. 64, 298 (Mainz: P. von Zabern, 1995).
Neither of these meanings applies in the semantic context. However, as Redford\textsuperscript{27} noted, the determinative used in this text is four upright stakes, bound together. He correctly argued that given the context, the determinative, and a Semitic cognate \textit{pt} or \textit{paxātu}—the arrangement of signs could easily be read \textit{ptHW}—which means to impale, that here \textit{ptHW} likely means to be impaled or transfixed.\textsuperscript{28}

Buchberger questioned the dating of the inscription due to some grammatical and orthographic peculiarities that he believed are difficult to explain in classical Middle Egyptian.\textsuperscript{29} He postulated a New Kingdom dating, or maybe a restoration of an older text in that time period, perhaps under Seti I.\textsuperscript{30} However, some of his supposed anomalies are actually present in Middle Kingdom texts, and he did not adequately account for the presence of the name “Senusret” in the text.\textsuperscript{31} Obsomer\textsuperscript{32} felt that the inscription fit with the political actions of that monarch, and the name certainly suggests an original Middle Kingdom context, even if it was recopied later. Buchberger’s questions open avenues of investigation into the history of the text, but cast little doubt on its historicity or its original Middle Kingdom context. The Tod inscription is strong evidence for impalement in the Middle Kingdom.

Furthermore, we know of another example of impalement before the Ramessides. After crushing a Kushite rebellion, Akhenaten reported that 145 were taken to Buhen as living captives, and 225 more were “those who were impaled” (\textit{ntyw Hr xt}).\textsuperscript{33} Thus, we see that the practice of impaling existed at least in the era just before the Ramessides ruled in Egypt, although this example is close enough that Ramesside progenitors may have been involved.

So we must ask ourselves if the scale of impalement in Ramesside Egypt is innovation. If we approach the issue clumsily, the answer may seem easy, but a nuanced examination will yield a better understanding. The temptation is to say that because others impaled prisoners before the 19th Dynasty, it was not true innovation; in regards to the practice, this is true. The Ramessides proliferated the practice, they did not create it. Yet if we look at the context of what types of actions called for impalement as an appropriate punishment, then we see innovation on the part of the Ramessides. It was only in the 19th and 20th dynasties that we see impalement enacted for such a wide variety of crimes, and decreed ahead of time as a possible punishment. For example, nowhere else do we see impalement threatened for confiscation of temple goods. Here we see proliferation as far as the physical act, but innovation in regards to social context.

### Architectural-Textual Combinations

The last topic we will examine is unique architectural contexts for texts. Undoubtedly, the Ramessides innovated in regards to funerary literature in general, and I believe that the paragon of this type of innovation is showcased in the Osireion. Not only is this structure somewhat unique, with its long sloping entrance passage, rectangular chambers surrounding a pillared hall, and the topography of its central hall, but the combination of texts transposed with the location of their placement is unparalleled. Iconography will not be discussed here, whether it was presented in conjunction with a text or alone. Neither will the singular historical, building, or other types of royal inscriptions.

Note the textual innovations present in the architecture. As one enters the Osireion via a long passageway, one walks through large versions of the Book of Caverns on the left and the Book of Gates on the right\textsuperscript{34} (see Figure 4). Approaching the entry chamber on either side of the threshold, portions of the 146th chapter of the Book of the Dead are inscribed. Within the entry chamber one finds portions of Book of the Dead chapters 141, 142, and 173.\textsuperscript{35} At the southern end of the chamber stands a small alcove, in which portions of the Spell of the 12 Caves are inscribed. Entering the alcove, one finds portions of chapter 180 on the left, and chapter 43 on the right of the threshold.

The sloping passageway leading from the entry chamber to the transverse room contains chapters 17 and 1 of the Book of the Dead on the southern wall, and portions of chapters 99, 136b, 145, 147, and 125 on the northern. The threshold to the transverse room is inscribed with chapter 183 on either side. In the room, portions of the Book of the Earth are inscribed, and traces of the Book of Night are visible on the ceiling.

Once the transverse room is left and the great hall is gained, the openness and pillars leave less room for inscriptions. Immediately on the right, upon entering, part of Book of the Dead chapter 148 comes into view. Elsewhere in the hall various pictures and short inscriptions make it clear that both Seti I and Merneptah were responsible for much of the artistic work done in the cenotaph. Included within

\textsuperscript{27} Redford, n. 68.
\textsuperscript{28} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{30} Ibid., 21.
\textsuperscript{31} Line X + 25.
the great hall are images from the Litany of Re. The last great inscriptions were created in the long hall at the far east of the edifice, reached after traveling through the great hall, and generally referred to as the sarcophagus chamber. Today, this chamber is swampy, but you can find remains of the Book of the Night and the Book of Nut (both on the ceiling), and the Book of the Twelve Caves. The Book of Caverns, the Book of the Earth, the Book of Nut, and the Book of the Night all make their first known appearances here, demonstrating what is probably a spate of textual innovation, although there may have been earlier copies that have not survived.

These texts are not unique by themselves, and several are not unique in their architectural placement. For example, Book of the Dead 146 is placed on the threshold of the false door of the tomb of Senenmut, and the tomb of Ramesses IV had a copy of the Book of Nut juxtaposed with the Book of the Night on the ceiling, although this was created after the Osireion.

However, this particular combination of texts is original, and the architectural arrangement is unparalleled. This is not just because they are found in a unique edifice, but the way these texts interact with each other in their physical sequential arrangement is singular. A full analysis of this must be left for another venue. For now, as an example, consider the dense clustering of texts having to do with passing through caverns and gates connected with Osiris as one enters the Osireion. The initial approach is covered by the Book of Caverns, with its concentration on the union of Osiris and Re, and Re’s protection of Osiris. On the other side is the Book of Gates giving unusually prominent space to the 5th gateway, wherein Osiris’ judgment hall immediately precedes the union with the sun’s corpse. Protection and judgment are juxtaposed here in a unique manner.

The innovation continues. To gain entrance to the antechamber, one has to pass through a doorway girded by Spell 146 of the Book of the Dead, which outlines 21 gates that protected the presence of Osiris. Immediately thereafter, Spell 173 contains cavern deities and Horus proclaiming that he has protected Osiris. Next in line is Spell 43 on one side, with its emphasis on Osiris not being dismembered, and Spell 180 on the other, with its emphasis on Re and the transfiguration of Osiris. All of these are encountered as one descends further into a

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cavern and approaches the recreated burial place of Osiris. The scheme presents a meaningful combination of the transmutation of Osiris juxtaposed with efforts to protect his presence and followed again by both transfiguration and protection themes presented simultaneously. Each of these texts interacts with the geography of the path, elongating transfiguration and recreating protections. Nothing like it had been done before.

The sequential and architectural arrangement of these texts adds to their meaning and enhances their numinosity. The effect of the architecture on the texts, and vice-versa, is not just dramatic, but amplifies the efficaciousness of the spells and enhances the functionality of the edifice. This textual sequence and physical placement is unique. Clearly, not only is the architecture uncommon, but the architectural-textual combination is pure innovation. On a number of levels, the Osireion may represent the innovative paradigm of the Ramesside era. In a period of innovation, it is even innovative in the way that it combines its innovations.

Conclusion

These three examples of possible Ramesside innovations have hopefully cast light on the various aspects of innovation and the potential avenues of analysis we must consider as we engage in research. While we must not be blind towards innovation, we must also not be blinded by anything seemingly new and thus classify it as innovation. Historical, social, political, geographic, architectural, and many more contexts must be taken into account lest we either miss innovation where it exists or find innovation where it is not. We must distinguish between sharp turns in trends, different settings for ongoing practices, and true innovation. Though these tasks may be arduous, if done properly as we set about identifying innovation, appropriation, and reinterpretation in ancient Egypt, we will inevitably approach better understandings of that complex and rich culture.