ACCEPTABLE BEHAVIOUR IN THE PRESENCE OF THE KING DURING THE NEW KINGDOM

1. INTRODUCTION

This topic explains one of the aspects of my actual PhD project, which is entitled ‘Social protocol in ancient Egypt: the system of rules and acceptable behaviour between classes of society during the New Kingdom (ca. 1550 to 1070 BC)’. The PhD project aims at understanding social dynamics and hierarchy among the elites and at the court of the ancient Egyptian New Kingdom. The objective of this poster is to discuss the social protocol between the king and his high-ranking officials in different contexts during the New Kingdom. There are many individuals of different social categories participating in the events in which the king appears. Certain standards had to be followed for these events and each individual had his own task, place, attire, and attitude.

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For this research sources are essentially textual and iconographical. Textual sources can be literary or non-literary.

“His Majesty said to the seal bearer who was by his side: “Now, summon the grandees of the court so that his Majesty may deliberate with them about this country. It is I who shall put the needed arrangements into effect”. (They were immediately ushered in before the good god, their arms raised) in praise of his spirit jubilation and paying homage to his fair countenance”. (Translation after Kitchen, A. Ramesside inscriptions translated and annotated. Oxford, 1996, p. 191.)

Another example can be mentioned from the Edict of King Horemheb, in which measures are taken to reorganize practices of the protocol for the court ceremonies as follows:

“[...] They [the dignitaries] enter through the gates of the palace, speedily, by chariot, up to the sublime place, with a greyhound as a companion following each of them. [...] throne hall, clothed in [...] shod with sandals, with a staff in his right hand like the one of shepherds [...] in its right place as before, I have painted out the protocol for the inner palace and given instruction for the house of the princes. I have [...] the heralds of the court according to their function, opening the way through the whole palace; the courtiers of the palace are in their right place and the members of the counsel [...]” (Improved translation based on Pöppel, K., “The Edict of Horemhab”, Journal of Near Eastern Studies 5, 1946, p. 266–7).

As for the iconographical sources, they are found in tombs and temples, where scenes show different social groups interacting with the king. Thus, one of the scenes on the exterior wall of Medinet Habu Temple (Fig. 1) shows King Ramesses III being addressed by a group of high-ranking officials as well as addressing them. The officials are arranged in four rows according to their ranks. The king and the first official of the first row are extending their right hands toward each other, a conventional gesture indicating that they are taking together. All officials are bare footed and bowing respectfully. The first three officials in the first row have shaven heads and appear in attire different from the other officials behind them.

3. DISCUSSION

A correlation between textual and iconographical sources leads to understand and imagine the sequence of rules that were followed to enter the palace and meet the king as follows:

1. Summoning the officials by the seal bearer who stands by the side of the king.
2. Ushering the officials by the door keepers to enter for the meeting of the king.
3. Arranging of the officials according to their ranks in front of the king.
4. Certain gestures and postures were made by the officials when they approach toward the king, whether to express respect such as bowing, kneeling, kissing the feet, or stretching on the belly, the belly. The opposite shoulder, or to express different actions according to the nature of their meeting with the king such as addressing, praising, adoring, and rejoicing.
5. There are some rules that organise the spatial and temporal sequence of officials around the king in the formal events. Fan bearers walk by the right side of the king. High ranking officials such as visitors always stand in front of him, whilst the lesser officials and servants stand behind the king or on his left.

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