The eyes have it? Visuo-verbal networks of meaning on a Ramessid stela

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Fig. 1 The stela of Nebre, Berlin 20377 (photo courtesy of the Ägyptisches Museum und Papyrussammlung, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin)
The 19th dynasty stela of Nebre, excavated in the Ramesseum area in Thebes between 1911-13, is now in the Berlin Museum. Today, it exists only as a collection of damaged fragments, a casualty of wartime destruction, but we have photographs showing its original condition (Fig. 1). The stela is in two parts. The first, and upper part, is contained within the lunette (Fig. 2) and comprises image and text in two parts, arranged around the figures of the god Amun (cols. 1-4: read from centre to left) and Nebre (cols. 5-10: read from centre to right). The second part comprises the main body of the stela, which is mostly taken up with 16 columns of text (read from left to right), with a small set of overlapping pairs of men crouching in the lower right corner (Fig. 1). The men are uncaptioned, but it is likely that they include Nebre, his two sons Nakhtamun.

1 Berlin 20377; PM I. 22.683. For a translation of the text, see Frood 2007, 219-22; for bibliography, discussion of the text and similar examples, see Baines and Frood 2011.
and Khay, and perhaps Nebre’s father Pay, all of whom are mentioned on the stela. However, visually, and in the absence of text, they are presented to us as a collective group.

In the lunette the large image of Amun sits enthroned in front of the pylon gateway of Karnak temple. A sun-disc rises between the columns of the pylon, and – unusually – it is partly obscured by Amun’s feathered headdress. Overlapping is used several times on the stela; Amun’s feathered crown as well as the flag poles rising from the pylon pierce through the boundary line that defines the carved surface of the stela (noted in Frood 2007, 220), and the platform upon which the temple rests and the edge of Nebre’s garment impinge on the offering table between them. In the case of Amun and the sun-disc, the overlapping may be a playful visual way of reinforcing the fact that the Theban god is syncretised with the sun-god Re, in the form of Amun-Re. There are many other such visuo-verbal plays on the stela; for example, Amun is called hnty ipt-swt ‘Foremost of Karnak’ (lunette, cols. 3, 6), a common epithet of his. This is reinforced by the way the god is depicted in the lunette: he is shown literally hnty ‘in front of’ Karnak. The placement of his figure enacts a graphically realised syllepsis relying on two readings of hnty.

Amun faces right, acknowledging Nebre who kneels in front of an offering stand, his arms raised in adoration before the god. The main text on the stela, arranged in columns beneath the lunette, echoes this interaction: the whole work – the stela, its text, and its art – is given the title ‘Giving praise to Amun’ (main text, col. 1), and the scene above might be seen as acting in the capacity of a determinative. Nebre describes giving praises again to the god three times in the main text (cols. 1, 7, 13). Each of these instances seems to use a form that recalls the dual, incorporating a double ‘w’.

If a dual reading is correct, we can see many other pairings to parallel it in the main text:

- The height of heaven and the breadth of the earth (col. 1) – describing the extent of Nebre’s praise (and perhaps showing that its boundlessness is reflected in the god’s crown extending beyond the boundary lines of the stela?)
- Those to whom the god’s name should be proclaimed:
  - Those going north and going south (col. 2) – the same boat determinative is used for each motion
  - Sons and daughters (col. 2) – masculine and feminine forms echo each other

Throughout the main text linking threads call attention back to the scene in the lunette. Amun is described in the main text by the epithets ascribed to him in the lunette:

- the one who comes at the call of a supplicant (iy ḫr ḫrw n nnkh): lunette cols. 3-4, main text col. 4
- the one who gives breath to the wretched man (dd ḫw (n)-nty gAdvice): lunette col. 4, main text col. 5

We might read the word in each instance as dwAwyy. In col. 1, it has a papyrus roll determinative; in cols. 7 and 13 it has the document determinative, which highlights the written form of the praises being given. However, this is not straightforward grammatically, as the dual and the plural tend to be mutually exclusive forms, and plural strokes are clearly present in each writing. One explanation for the co-occurring forms ties in with the twin pairs of overlapping figures at the bottom right of the stela who are giving praises (plural) to the god, but in pairs (hence the dual). This would be a very idiosyncratic writing, but would be in keeping with the heightened expressivity evident throughout the stela.

The boat with its sails down is a common determinative for both words, but hnty ‘to go south’ may take a more specific form of the sign, with its sails up (since boats travelling south needed the wind to sail against the current).
There are two more sophisticated pairings:

- The god comes (iy.ti) and Nebre is saved (d₃kw) (col. 5). The parallelism here is expressed by using the stative form twice.
- Two phrases are paralleled (col. 7) describing the typical behaviour of a servant (hr wn mty b₃k r ṭrt ṣt3) and the typical behaviour of the god (hr mty nb r htp). The frame is the same – the subjects and their behaviours are contrasted.

In addition to pairings, there are meaningful repetitions of determinatives. The document determinative recurs at various points:

- Col. 7 dw₃wyw ‘praises’
- Col. 13 dw₃wyw ‘praises’
- Col. 13 m šhw ‘in writing’

Neither of these words would not necessarily receive a document determinative, although it is not a strange choice with the word for ‘writing’. However, the assignment of the same determinative to dw₃wyw is more unusual, and serves to create a thread of association between them. Perhaps, also, we are supposed to understand that at the moment of Nakhtamun’s affliction, the prayers to Amun were written down, a draft perhaps for which the stela’s inscription stands as a more permanent record.⁵

Repetition is not confined to signs. Certain words resonate through the text: nₐₕ ‘the humble man’/nmḥw ‘petitions’, šₐ ‘to rescue’, iy ‘to come’, t₃w ‘breath/wind’, rn ‘(Amun’s divine) name’.⁶

There is, therefore, demonstrable care taken over the ways words and signs are chosen, particularly with regards to creating linking threads of meaning across the stela. A particularly intricate example of these linking threads can be pointed to in the lunette. In this upper part of the stela, there are two short texts arranged in columns. One, reading from right to left, relates to Amun and is arranged around him so that his name is placed in front of his face, and the rest of his epithets are placed behind him. The second, reading from left to right, is arranged around the kneeling figure of Nebre and describes his adoration of the god, which could also be read as a petition to the god (in the main text, these two actions – praising and petitioning – are placed in parallel, cols. 7-8). It is Nebre’s text in the lunette that is now in focus.

It reads as follows:

(5) rdt t₃w n imn-r̄  (6) nb nswt t₃wy hnty ipt-iswt

⁵ One could imagine that the initial written prayer was on an ostraca, and then, as described in col. 13, it was formally rendered on the stela.
⁶ In every instance, rn is written with a divine determinative.
sn t³ n imn n (7) niwt ntr '³ p³ nb n p³ y w'b³ (8) '³ n
di=f n=i irty=i hr ptr (9) n nfrw=f
n k³ n sh-kdwt (10) n imn nb-r' m³ hrw

‘Giving praise to Amun-Re, Lord of the Thrones of the Two Lands, foremost of Karnak;
kissing the ground to Amun-of-the-city, great god, the lord of this open court, great of
beauty.

May he give to me my two eyes for the seeing of his perfection,
for the ka of the draughtsman of Amun, Nebre, justified.’

The main text, carved below the lunette, gives much more detail on the interaction between
Nebre and his god, who is described several times as ‘rescuing’ both Nebre himself and his
intimates. But the lunette focuses Nebre’s request for a simple act of contact with the god.
It is important to note that Nebre does not use as purpose clause for what he wants (that is,
he does not say: di=f n=i irty=i r ptr). He instead uses a hr + infinitive construction, implying a
more perpetual type of seeing – neverending contact with his god.

Five eye hieroglyphs appear in the short caption around Nebre (listed in Fig. 4 along with
eye signs elsewhere on the stela).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Placement</th>
<th>Lunette col. 7</th>
<th>Lunette, col. 8</th>
<th>Lunette, between cols. 7-8</th>
<th>Lunette, between cols. 7-8</th>
<th>Main text, cols. 1, 6, 7 (twice), 10 (twice), 13, 15, 16</th>
<th>Main text, col. 15</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Form</td>
<td>underlined, eyelashed, corner to left</td>
<td>underlined, eyelashed, corner to left</td>
<td>embellished</td>
<td>unembellished</td>
<td>unembellished</td>
<td>underlined, eyelashed, corner to right (?)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing (Function)</td>
<td>wbn (determinative)</td>
<td>'n (determinative)</td>
<td>irty (logograms)</td>
<td>ptr (logogram)</td>
<td>ir(r) (phonogram)</td>
<td>ptr (determinative)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Fig. 4 The eye hieroglyphs on Nebre’s stela

The first is the determinative of wbn ‘open court’ and takes the form of an embellished eye,
underlined and eyelashed. The Wb. (II.291) acknowledges this as a common writing in the
New Kingdom and especially the Ramessid Period. It describes the open area in front of the
temple, where obelisks and colossal statues might stand – exactly the space in which Amun
is depicted on the stela.7 The same embellished eye determinative is used for ‘n ‘beauty’,
creating a link between Amun’s open temple space and his own physical beauty, available to

7 We might have another instance of syllepsis here in the function of the determinative. It could be read as a
prototypical agent of opening, but in this instance it can also be read as indicating the open court is a place for seeing the god.
the eye both in Karnak, and on the stela. Another embellished eye appears in the main text below the lunette near the end (col. 15), where Nebre states:

\[ i\text{n}=i \ n=k \ iw=k \ (hr) \ sdm \ n=i \]

\[ hr \ ptr \ iry=i \ p:\ddy=i \]

‘I spoke to you, and you listened to me. Now see that I have done what I said.’

The god does not simply \( m\f\) (which would usually be written with an unembellished eye determinative). Instead, he is invited to \( ptr \) – perhaps a more engaged type of looking, and one that creates another linking thread with Nebre, who hopes in the lunette to see \( (ptr) \) the god’s perfection. This latter verb can written in a number of ways: logographically with a matching pair of \textit{wedjat-eyes}, or phonetically with either the unembellished eye sign as its determinative or a more detailed form of the eye with its eyelid rendered. In Nebre’s text, a particularly elaborate eye with eyelashes and a line drawn beneath it is used, looking identical to the eye signs used in connection with the god \((wbi, ‘n)\) in the lunette, discussed below.

Part of Nebre’s caption text sits between and below the register lines of columns 7 and 8. In the line drawing above (Fig. 3), it is normalised into a freestanding column. However, a large part of its significance is in its positioning between Nebre’s hands. It is at once what he is asking for with his entreating hands, and, since it appears in concrete form between his hands, it seems to be what he has received. In this short section, we see three more eye signs. Two of them are a matching pair. They are logograms, unembellished eyes, representing exactly what they show us. They are what Nebre is seeking from the god: his two eyes, and the ability to see. We might also read them logographically as \( ptr \) ‘seeing’. They are human eyes, quite distinct iconically and semantically from those associated with the god. But the sight that they will enable is somehow more than human. Rather than using the standard writing of \( m\f\) (which would normally involve another unembellished eye sign), the text employs a cryptic logographic writing with the falcon’s eye. Perhaps the underlying intention is that the sight gifted to human eyes by a god should be distinguished from ordinary seeing. The devotee gifted with sight by a god will see in a divine manner, albeit still distinct from the god himself, but lifted beyond the ordinary human realm.

The arrangement of the text also contributes to its meaning. Isolating the phrase ‘my two eyes for seeing’ from the columnar structure of the rest of the text, and its placement alongside Nebre himself gives it more of a presence, reifying it almost as something that could be held in the hand. The text on the stela evokes sensory experience in several ways – through sound (the petitioner praying or calling out, the god hearing), touch \( (t\text{bw} \ ‘breath/wind’) \) is mentioned several times as a mode of communication between the god and his devotees), and in the lunette through sight. The main text describes in some detail the way that Nebre has given his devotion to the god a physical form through the act of creating the stela. Again, there is a sensory play in the use of the preposition \( hr \) (‘upon’) and the noun \( hr \) (‘face/surface’) alongside each other in this part of the text:

\[ iw=i \ r \ irt \ wd \ pn \ hr \ rn=k \]
‘I will make this stela in your name,  
And I will establish a hymn upon its (sur)face for you.’

The stela has a ‘face’ of sorts that looks back on the god’s intervention in Nebre’s life, and now it stands as a sensory monument to their relationship.

The expressive potential of this short inscription plays out in several ways, through the creation of networks of meaning resonating throughout the text. These networks are supported by the iconicity of the hieroglyphic script, which is manipulated for semantic effect both in its choice of determinatives and logograms, and particularly in the resonance between their physical forms. In order to appreciate the semantic effects, it is less important to separate signs into the categories of their function (i.e. whether they are determinatives or logograms, or even phonetic signs). With the eye signs of the inscription, the key linking thread is a commonality of form, the manipulation of which creates layers of meaning.

The way iconicity is manipulated in this text argues for a context-specific interpretation of the creation of meaning. The choice of particular forms (and especially the embellished, eyelashed eye sign) is unique to this text, and uniquely realise its expressive potential.

References:
