

A Note on The Reversed Hand in Ancient Egypt

DR.Abd El-Moneem Megahed

It is known that the ancient Egyptian art has lots of examples that depict the right hand identical to the left one. So, some human figures appeared as if they have two left hands.¹ My note tries to explain this feature which I hold that it intended to banish expected and imagined evils. For this purpose, my explanation stands for the connection between the concept of reversing and that of banishing, evils or goods, in ancient Egyptian thoughts as well as the left side symbolism that often linked to negative notions.

One of the prominent pictographic evidences is *Int-rd* rite which was a part of the temple service and the ceremonies accompanying the meal for the dead². The priest was usually depicted in the act of doing this rite with his face turned backward while dragging a bundle of *hdn*-plant behind him. His face, in such manner, symbolize to the concept of banishing evils.

Either this priest banishes malign demons in the form of the *hdn*-bundle as a symbol of the demon's foot, or he used this bundle to obliterate his own footsteps to render less accessible to evil spirits, he kept his face looking behind him as he withdraws to impersonate, as Nelson suggested, demon during his withdraw in a cringing posture such as defeated spirit before the power of the magical *hdn*-plant.³

It is none the less worth mentioning in this context that some reversed offerings lists, dated to the twelfth dynasty, such as that of *Imn-m-h3t*, *Hnmw-h3p* and *Ntr-nht*,⁴ may offer the concept of banishing evils. Given the right order of these lists, each of them must be read from left to right in spite of their signs take the right to left text direction. This reversed direction can be seen as a way of banishing evils that impact negatively on these lists.

This point of view approaches more closely by another additional textual evidence, it is known that the strong belief in the negative influence of reversing the name meaning on a person, caused such banishing. One of these examples was reversing the name of one of the accused court officials, who involved in a conspiracy against Ramesses the third, from *mr-sw R* "the god Re loves him" to *msd-sw R* "the god Re hates him",⁵ that was most likely for driving away any benefits that his original name may give it him such as a good memory.

Therefore, all the former examples urge reviewing Schafer's view that: "the artist's sole intention was to produce the impression that 'both hands are in the same

¹ See for examples those stelae dated to early dynasty 12: Florence 6378, stela of *Mn-nxt*; Oxford, Ashmolean 1954.25, stela of *Ddw-sbk*; Los Angeles County Museum of Art 50.37.13, stela of *IAmw* = Freed, R.E., 'Stela Workshops of Early Dynasty 12', in: *Studies in Honor of William Kelly Simpson*, I, ed.P. Der Manuelian, Boston, 1996, p. 305, figs (2a, 2c, 2d)

² Nelson, H., "The Rite of Bringing the Foot as Portrayed in the Tempe Reliefs", in: *JEA*, 35, 1949, p.82.

³ Nelson, H., "The Rite of Bringing the Foot as Portrayed in the Tempe Reliefs", pp.84-86.

Some of the reliefs depicting the scene under discussion Show the doer of this rite does not look behind him.

⁴ Newberry, P., E., *Beni Hassan*, Part I, London, 1893, Pls. XVII, XVIII, XX, XXIV, XXVI, XXXV.

⁵ Lorton, D., "The Treatment of Criminals in Ancient Egypt: Through the New Kingdom", in: *JESHO* 20, No. 1, 1977, p. 30.

posture'. As well that reviewing the ideas that 'the hands are in complementary positions' or 'the thumbs (or palms) of both hands are on the side towards the body'.⁶

I hold that the former examples assert the relation between the concept of reversing and that of banishing evils. Hence, it is logically possible that the reversed hand offers the same relation.

As for why was this mentioned reverse restricted to the right hand not to the left one? As far as I understand, the artist wanted intently to represent a figure has two left hands to threaten , magically, those who have negative attitudes towards the represented figures with a bundle of trouble that the left orientation offers, i.e., left hand, left side and the east,⁷ such as 'bad,⁸ death,⁹ sinners' regions,¹⁰ tough and narrow roads in the afterworld.¹¹ Consequently, the reversed right hand, as an identical to the left one, considered a symbol for future evils. For this reason, it had, in the Egyptian thoughts, a symbolic pictographic threat against those had bad intentions towards the scenes' owners.

As a result, if anyone acted thus in a negative way towards the scenes' owners, the reversed right hand would prevent their evils (according to the concept of the reversed magic). This goal is supported by the left-handedness negative connotations mentioned above. In other words, the left hand considered a symbolic pictographic threat acts not only in an opposite direction to any bad future intentions, but also helps in reflecting it on its owners as a form of protection, so we can name this artistic expression: 'the reversed magic'.

It is outstanding that the modern Egyptians name the magic which aims to reverse the bad intentions of its doer on himself: "the reverses = عكوسات". They also use the same term to describe this magic which is responsible of reversing, i.e., disabling one's normal life, so they believe in stopping these "reverses" through a reversed magic, such as wearing one's clothes in a reversed way. That was based on: the reverse encounters the reverse to banish it. I believe that the same concept controlled the ancient Egyptian thoughts that created such reversed hand depictions which intently put in a closer side to the viewer not far away of his sight.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, the ancient Egyptian adopted the reversed hand depictions, as a reversed magic hidden in an artistic expression, to banish any form of negativity.

⁶ Schafer, H., Schafer, H., *Principles of Egyptian Art*, Edited, with an epilogue, by Emma Brunner-Traut, Translated and edited, with an introduction, by John Bains, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1974, pp. 297-298.

⁷ *Wb* I, 30, (5-15)

⁸ It is noticeable that *ib* = 'bad' was derived from *ibt*. See: *Pyr*, § 1790 b; *Wb* I, 29 (19).

⁹ Westendorf, W., *Leben und Tod*, in: *LÄ* III, Wiesbaden, 1980, col. 951; Störk, L., *Ohr*, in: *LÄ* IV, Wiesbaden, 1982, col. 560.

¹⁰ *Pyr*, § 1531 [a-b]; Budge, E., *The Book of the Dead "The Chapters of Coming forth by day"*, The Egyptian text According to the Theban recension in hieroglyphic edited from Numerous Papyri, London, 1898, p. 460, (Chapter CLXXVI); Allen, G., *The Book of the Dead or Going Forth by Day Ideas of the Ancient*, *SAOC* 37, 1974, p. 76 (Spell 93); p. 185 (Spell 176).

¹¹ *CT* II, 150 [g-i]; *FCT* I, p. 129 [II, 150], p. 113.