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Symbolic Blindness

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Comité de Patronage. Conseil d'Administration. Personnel. Nouveaux membres. Membres décédés	3
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ÉGYPTE PHARAONIQUE

Études

Lise MANNICHE, Symbolic Blindness	13
Anthony SPALINGER, The Foreign Policy of Egypt Preceding the Assyrian Conquest	22
Philippe DERCHAIN, « En l'an 363 de Sa Majesté le Roi de Haute et Basse Égypte Râ-Harakhty vivant par-delà le Temps et l'Espace »	48

Chronique

D. DEVAUCHELLE et M. PEZIN, Un papyrus médical démotique	57
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Livres

<i>Miscellanea in honorem Josephi Vergote</i> (E. A. E. Reymond)	67
Bertha PORTER and Rosalind L. B. Moss, assisted by Ethel W. BURNEY, <i>Topographical Bibliography of Ancient Egyptian Hieroglyphic Texts, Reliefs, and Paintings. III. Memphis. Part I. Abû Rawâsh to Abûşîr</i> . Second Edition revised and augmented by Jaromír MÁLEK (Christiane M. Zivie)	69
R. V. LANZONE, <i>Dizionario di mitologia egizia</i> . Vol. IV (A. Mekhitarian)	73
Jan ASSMANN, <i>Ägyptische Hymnen und Gebete</i> (B. van de Walle)	74
Siegfried MORENZ, <i>Religion und Geschichte des alten Ägypten. Gesam-melle Aufsätze</i> (Ph. Derchain)	77
Thomas George ALLEN, <i>The Book of the Dead or Going Forth by Day. Ideas of the Ancient Egyptians concerning the Hereafter as expressed in their own Terms</i> (Ph. Derchain)	79
Eva MARTIN-PARDEY, <i>Untersuchungen zur ägyptischen Provinzialver-waltung bis zum Ende des Alten Reiches</i> (Anthony Leahy)	80
Michel VALLOGGIA, <i>Recherche sur les « messagers » (wpwtjw) dans les sources égyptiennes</i> (H. De Meulenaere)	82
Erik IVERSEN, <i>Canon and Proportions in Egyptian Art</i> (Cl. Vander-sleyen)	84
Elmar EDEL - Steffen WENIG, <i>Die Jahreszeitenreliefs aus dem Sonnen-heiligtum des Königs Ne-user-Re</i> (B. van de Walle)	90
Peter KAPLONY, <i>Studien zum Grab des Methethi</i> (Nadine Cherpion)	94
J.-Ph. LAUER et J. LECLANT, <i>Le temple haut du complexe funéraire du roi Têti</i> (Cl. Vandersleyen)	95
H. M. STEWART, <i>Egyptian Stelae, Reliefs and Paintings from the Petrie Collection. Part One: The New Kingdom</i> (H. De Meulenaere)	97

Symbolic Blindness

AMONG the many unusual subjects depicted in Amarna art few are more interesting than the representations of blindfolded musicians. These appear for the first time on the *talatât* from Karnak, and occur again on the walls of tombs at el-Amarna and on blocks from Hermopolis, only to vanish completely with the close of the Amarna episode.

On present evidence it is a little difficult to determine with certainty in what context(s) the blindfolded musicians were shown on the Karnak *talatât*, but accompanying details of certain architectural elements (1), as well as the fact that the various combinations of instruments are derived from traditional XVIIIth dynasty banquet music would indicate that the players in question were palace musicians, and therefore not represented as performing in the chapels of the Aten (2). Three kinds of orchestra may be distinguished : a) male Egyptians, b) male foreigners,

(*) I am grateful to J. R. Harris for reading the manuscript of this article and suggesting sundry additions.

(1) Pending the publication of the Akhenaten Temple Project, any examination of context is necessarily limited to the study of individual blocks with fragments of scenes such as may be compared with complete scenes in the tombs at el-Amarna and on the published blocks from Hermopolis. On some of the Karnak *talatât* showing musicians, the representation includes a characteristic door with open lattice work (L. MANNICHE, 'Les scènes de musique sur les *talatât* du IX^e pylone de Karnak', *Kêmi*, XXI (1971), fig. 2, and cf. fig. 1 ; L. MANNICHE, *Ancient Egyptian Musical Instruments*, fig. 28 ; and another unpublished block). This door also appears on one block from Hermopolis, probably representing the palace (G. ROEDER, *Amarna-Reliefs aus Hermopolis*, pl. 65 (771-VIID), cf. pp. 133-4, 319). The complete pictures of the palace in the tombs at el-Amarna show that this is indeed where the door belongs (N. de G. DAVIES, *The Rock Tombs of El Amarna*, VI, pl. 28). On two of the *talatât* mentioned above, the lower part of a slender column is also visible, of which the capital was no doubt similar to that shown on another block with musicians (MANNICHE, *Anc. Eg. Musical Instruments*, fig. 26), and yet again in a simplified form (*ibid.*, fig. 23). These slender columns abound in the palace at el-Amarna, whereas in the temple they do not occur except in the little 'VIP rest room' immediately behind the first gate. The open-work door and the slender column may therefore be taken as features of palace architecture.

(2) My previous statement to the contrary (MANNICHE, *Kêmi*, XXI (1971), p. 163) was made before I had thoroughly studied the context.

and c) female Egyptians. These seem to perform in similar circumstances, to the extent, at least, that all of them are in one case present on one and the same small block ⁽¹⁾. When performing, the male musicians, Egyptians and foreigners alike, are apparently blindfolded — that is to say, they are shown with a white band tied over their eyes ⁽²⁾. This is never the case with the women, nor with other men who may be present in the same scenes ⁽³⁾.

In the tombs at el-Amarna the foreign ⁽⁴⁾ male musicians who perform in the palace are represented as wearing a similar band ⁽⁵⁾. The context indicates that these orchestras were essentially secular and did not belong in the temple, and this would support the assumption that such was the case at Karnak also. It is, however, significant that, when not actually playing their instruments, the musicians are shown without the blindfold ⁽⁶⁾. This too seems to apply at Karnak: on two blocks the musicians carry their instruments on their shoulders, and there is no sign of their being blindfolded ⁽⁷⁾.

A blindfold as such has an unmistakable meaning, i.e. the temporary deprivation of sight. Its use is by nature intentional, and in that it cannot have served any practical purpose with the Amarna musicians,

(1) MANNICHE, *Anc. Eg. Musical Instruments*, fig. 23. This block is particularly interesting in that it actually links the three groups in one and the same context. In the tombs at el-Amarna, temple musicians are clearly distinguished from palace musicians (cf. below, p. 22), and one would therefore suppose that the same applies to the *talatât*, and that all stray musicians of like appearance belong to the palace.

(2) E.g., MANNICHE, *Kêmi*, XXI (1971), figs. 2, 8, 9; *Anc. Eg. Musical Instruments*, fig. 23 — as well as on several unpublished blocks.

(3) The musicians are often performing in close proximity to piles of food or jars on stands, and the other persons are shown waving huge fans at the jars.

(4) No Egyptian male musicians are shown in the palace.


(5) DAVIES, *El Amarna*, III, pl. 7.

(6) *Ibid.*, VI, pl. 6. Elsewhere (*ibid.*, III, pl. 5) an intermediate stage appears to be indicated, with the musicians, their bands still in place, bowing in the presence of the king, either before or after their performance. Cf. also one of the blocks from Hermopolis: J. D. COONEY, *Amarna Reliefs from Hermopolis*, pp. 70-2 (no. 45) = ROEDER, *Amarna-Reliefs*, pl. 71 (412-VII) (fig. 1 on p. 16).

(7) The relevant blocks have not yet been published: their Akhenaten Temple Project nos. appear to be 012064211 and 020208901. The sex of the musicians, who seem to be wearing either their natural hair or a wig, is not clear to me, and they may well be female, and therefore irrelevant here.

their wearing it must be symbolic, as emphasized by the fact that it is confined to men ⁽¹⁾.

The interpretation of parallel instances in which persons appear to be shown as actually blind is more problematic, and before discussing the temple musicians at el-Amarna, who seem indeed to provide a possible clue, it may be worth touching more generally on the question of blindness and how it was represented.

Translations tend not to distinguish between the two principal words referring to blindness, nor does the lexicographical problem appear to have been considered ⁽²⁾. It seems, however, that *šp*, the more usual term ⁽³⁾, had as its primary meaning the loss or impairment of vision ⁽⁴⁾, whereas the other, *kȝmn* ⁽⁵⁾, implied the removal or injury of the eyeball itself ⁽⁶⁾. Such mutilation will have been rare by comparison with the various more-or-less common conditions resulting in gradual loss of sight. Significantly, the word *šp* is often determined with an eye lacking the iris ⁽⁷⁾, while *kȝmn* has only the generic  — thus avoiding the problem of representing a non-existent object.

(1) This argument will apply whether the blindfold was actually worn or is merely a symbol employed in representations.

(2) In his brief discussion of *šp*, Grapow (*loc. cit.* below, n. 16) does not refer to *kȝmn*, nor does he clearly define what he means by 'wirkliche Blindheit' as opposed to 'eine starke Schwächung der Sehkraft'. It seems likely, in any case, that *špt*, as used in the medical texts, was a technical term for a quite specific condition.

The blinding of Horus is an anomaly, since it was clearly conceived as a mutilation, and yet was eventually healed, albeit by magical means. For Horus *mȝnty-n-irty* as protector of the blind, and his connection with music, cf. H. Junker, *Der sehende und blinde Gott*, pp. 34-7.

(3) Wb. IV.443. 1-11, and 12-13 (*špt*).

(4) This may have nothing to do with either disease or injury, and may even be temporary, as in the case of being unable to see in the dark (Wb. IV.443. 6-7), or when 'blinded' by fear (P. Sallier II, 9, 1). That the eyes of the dead could be opened (Wb. IV.443.3) would seem to imply that they were not thought to be damaged, but merely sightless — though in that the context is magical one cannot be certain.

(5) Wb. V. 107. 1-5.

(6) It is clear that the blinding of Truth (P. Ch. B. II, 2,2 et seq. — and especially 11.3) was an act of violence, involving the damaging of the eyes, and the context of P. Bibl. Nat. 198, II, 9 et seq. (= *LRL*, no. 46) suggests that the disability of the woman *kȝmn* in one eye was something absurdly obvious.

(7) Cf. H. GRAPOW, *Kranker, Krankheiten und Arzt (Grundriss der Medizin)*, III pp. 54-5.



FIG. 1



FIG. 2



FIG. 3



FIG. 4

In monumental representations there are various ways of rendering an abnormal eye, which may reflect an attempt to differentiate between *šp* and *k3mn*. These are : a) a narrow slit with iris (1), b) a single line following the upper curve of the eye (2), and c) a narrow slit without iris (3). In the case of the narrow slit with iris (a) there is no proof that the persons were actually blind : theoretically they might be *šp*, but it could also be that they are portrayed as doing no more than half close their eyes. The single line (b) may represent either a closed eye, or the eye of a *k3mn*. The eyes of the third type (c) may once have had a painted iris, but the actual shape of the lids would seem rather to indicate a shrunken or missing eye, i.e. that the persons in question were *k3mn*.

In this connection it is worth mentioning that those who are said to 'see darkness by day', etc. are all represented as having a perfectly normal eye (4).

The musicians who played in the temple of the Aten at el-Amarna are not shown with the compromise blindfold of their colleagues in the palace, but are apparently represented as blind, in the sense of *k3mn*. Their function is not without interest, for they are present in the temple only when the king is not there, and when it is otherwise deserted (5) — which may indeed point to a different interpretation of their supposed

(1) TT 106 : author's sketch, 1970. The scene is unpublished ; cf. PORTER & MOSS, *Top. Bibl.*, I², 1, p. 222.

TT 181 : N. de G. DAVIES, *The Tomb of Two Sculptors at Thebes*, pl. 27.

TT 359 : B. BRUYÈRE, *Deir el Médineh* (1930), pl. 23 (fig. 2 on p. 16).

(2) TT 52 : A. MEKHITARIAN, *Egyptian Painting*, pl. on p. 70 ; cf. N. de G. DAVIES, *The Tomb of Nakht at Thebes*, pl. 17 (fig. 3 on p. 16).

(3) TT 78 (painting) : MEKHITARIAN, *Eg. Painting*, pl. on p. 102.

Leiden = tomb of Paatenemheb (relief) : H. HICKMANN, *Musikgeschichte in Bildern. Ägypten*, Abb. 51 (harpist and lutist).

el-Amarna, tomb of Meryrē I : DAVIES, *El Amarna*, I, pls. 21, 23 (fig. 4 on p. 16). The remaining representations of blind singers in TT 49 and TT 181 are damaged.

(4) Wb. II.9.16. For further discussion cf. B. GUNN, *JEA*, III (1916), pp. 88-9, and for references to the relevant stelae H. BRUNNER, *Lexikon der Ägyptologie*, I, col. 828, with nn. 7-10. It is possible that the expression is figurative ; cf. the many biblical passages (e.g., *Isaiah* 44, 18 ; *John* 12,40 ; *Ephesians* 4,18) alluding in somewhat similar terms to the infliction of spiritual blindness.

(5) DAVIES, *El Amarna*, I, pl. 33 ; III, pl. 30. In I, pl. 11 the eyes are now destroyed. The context in which the blind musicians in I, pl. 22 are performing is ambiguous (cf. *ibid.*, p. 30) ; they are clearly not in the temple itself, and the entire scene seems in any case to be a summary.

blindness. The meaning of blindness, or being blindfolded, is not merely that one is not able to see; it can signify also that one is not permitted to see ⁽¹⁾, and even that one is not supposed to *be seen* ⁽²⁾, just as the ostrich buries its head in the sand. The 'blind' musicians may therefore have been unseen and anonymous substitutes for the king in the temple, functioning only when he was absent, and not when he personally consecrated the ritual offerings ⁽³⁾, and this would perhaps explain why the harp is shown with a portrait-head of the king.

The Egyptians' concept of offering was that, through mediation, the immaterial substance of food and other things was absorbed by the deity, who 'ate' it ⁽⁴⁾ — in other words that the reality turned into something intangible. This would have been exemplified beautifully in the impalpable sound that emerged from a tangible object, i.e. the musical instrument, or (in the case of singers and clappers) the human body. In view of the king's predominant role in the cult, it is hardly surprising that others should fade into anonymity, which in the temple sanctuary will have had deeper significance than to be merely nameless ⁽⁵⁾. Here the musicians were face to face with the deity, the sight of whom was sufficient to blind an ordinary mortal ⁽⁶⁾. If men could

(1) Cf. the myth of Tiresias, who was blinded when he had seen what he was not permitted to see: L. BRISSEAU, *Le mythe de Tirésias* (Leiden 1976), esp. pp. 51-2.

(2) Cf. the Old Kingdom expression *m šp tp* (Wb. IV.443.8-9), translated as 'ungesehen, unsichtbar' by BRUNNER, *Lexikon der Ägyptologie*, I, col. 828. In the Japanese marionette theatre those who operate the strings are dressed and hooded in black to make them 'invisible', and in Bunraku the assistants are similarly shrouded so that only the leading puppeteer is 'seen'; cf. A. C. SCOTT, *The Puppet Theatre of Japan* (Rutland, Vermont & Tokyo 1963), pp. 33-4.

(3) DAVIES, *El Amarna*, II, pl. 19. In I, pl. 25 the royal family has not yet penetrated the temple proper.

(4) The Egyptians presumably did not distinguish between the consumption of food and the assimilation of other offerings. The verb *wnm* (Wb. I.320.1ff.) was used not only of eating, but of living off revenues and the enjoyment of usufruct.

(5) Of the non-royal persons represented on the *talatât* none is named, and few even have titles.

(6) Cf. Juvenal, *Sat.* XIII, 93: *Isis et irato feriat mea lumina sistro*, and the passage in Ovid, *Ep. ex Ponto*, I, 51-4 — with, as a parallel, the story of Paul of Tarsus (*Acts* 9, 3-9). Other classical references to Egyptians being blinded are conveniently noted, together with a few African instances, by G. A. WAINWRIGHT, *The Sky-Religion in Egypt*, pp. 76-7.

be rendered *šp* by the *bšw* of the king ⁽¹⁾, the sun god himself might utterly blast the eyes, making them *kšmn* ⁽²⁾.

The question is whether the 'blindness' of the musicians, so carefully shown, in fact corresponds to reality ⁽³⁾. Were they actually blind or blinded ⁽⁴⁾, or were they symbolically represented as such, to show that they were anonymous and/or not able to look on the sun in his glory? In the light of what has been said above, and bearing in mind the substitution of blindfolds in other contexts, there is indeed much to be said for the blindness being symbolic ⁽⁵⁾.

The scenes from the palace are in many ways parallel to those in the temple, but with the important difference that it is the king himself who is the recipient ⁽⁶⁾. The traditional banquet musicians perform as they used to do, but the blindfold indicates that they are now functioning

(1) *Urk.* IV,85,6. Cf. A. M. HOCART, *Kingship* (Oxford 1927), pp. 19, 42, with reference to the description of the Indian king as burning the eyes like the sun.

(2) The characteristic stance of the Egyptian votary, with the hands raised in front of the face, may represent the conventional gesture of shielding the eyes from the glare of the deity's radiance; cf. HOCART, *Kingship*, p. 19.

(3) The point has been raised in connection with the 'blind harpist', who first appears in the Middle Kingdom, and later becomes a feature of Theban tomb decoration; cf. M. LICHTHEIM, *JNES*, IV (1954), p. 188. Owing to the unfortunate tendency of the ancient Egyptians and Copts to damage the faces, and in particular the eyes of persons in tomb scenes, the statistical value of the existing documentation is somewhat dubious. However, the majority of the individual harpists whose eyes remain (cf. S. SCHOTT, *Mélanges Maspero*, I, 2, pp. 457-8) seem to have been represented as having ordinary sight.

In ancient Greece the 'blind' musician belonged to the realm of mythology rather than ordinary life; cf. M. WEGNER, *Musikgeschichte in Bildern. Griechenland*, p. 15. Throughout the Islamic world, on the other hand, blind chanters of the Quran are common, as are blind singers and drummers in folk and classical music: this information I owe to Jean Jenkins, who also tells me that she has never come across any blindfolded musicians.

(4) For the custom of blinding harpists among certain African tribes cf. J. ROSCOE, *The Baganda* (London 1911), p. 35.

(5) If the representations do not correspond to reality but are purely symbolic, this raises the question of whether in fact the musicians were 'blinded' in some other way, such as could not be conveniently shown — e.g. by wearing a hood. Alternatively, the temple musicians may have been blindfolded like the palace performers, the distinction between them being a formal convention.

(6) This is also the case on the *talatât*; cf. *Kêmi*, XXI (1971), p. 157, fig. 3, and another, unpublished block: Akhenaten Temple Project no. 020803706.

as for the sun god (whose disc and cartouches are present in any case). They are in effect the mediators transferring the essence of food to the king who is god. This will explain why they are allowed to remove the blindfold afterwards: when the ceremony is over their function has come to an end.

That the artist chose to depict a blindfold rather than blind(ed) eyes in these particular scenes may simply mean that it corresponded to what he actually knew ⁽¹⁾; but there may also have been a purely practical reason. The representations on the *talatât*, and in the tombs at el-Amarna, are at such a reduced scale, and the quality of the stone is generally so poor, that an empty eye-socket would not have been sufficiently evident. The few exceptions are, as it happens, found in the representations of the temple of the Aten in the tombs at el-Amarna, where the figures of the musicians are at a larger scale, and could therefore be rendered as blind or blinded without any difficulty.

Whatever the meaning of the musicians' 'blindness' or the use of the blindfold, the fact that neither applied to women remains significant, and may be explained by the part they traditionally played in the cult. They were more often in closer intimacy with the deity, for example as *ḥmwṯ nṯr* or (later) 'divines adoratrices', and were able to pacify the dynamic and potentially dangerous force of the god ⁽²⁾. The female musicians were therefore allowed to see what the men were not — whether the sun god himself, or the king as his representative ⁽³⁾.

(1) The blindfold was evidently an innovation of the Amarna period, and may have been introduced as a compromise when customs applicable to the cult were extended to other contexts, in this case the palace. The use of the blindfold in Egypt (as well as in Italy) is mentioned by Aelian, *De natura animalium*, XI, 17.

(2) Cf. J. Yoyotte, *BSFE*, no. 64 (1972), p. 34, and n. 12 on p. 51. Yoyotte refers specifically to *Edjou*, I, 338, 7, in which the sistrum appears as the instrument of pacification; cf. J. G. Griffiths, *Plutarch's De Iside et Osiride*, p. 526, nn. 7-8. For the mediating role of the sistrum cf. also A. M. Blackman, *JEA*, VII (1921), pp. 21-2, with reference to contexts in which it is apotropaic, and the passage of Juvenal (cited above, n. 27), where it is used to execute punishment.

(3) This may be the underlying significance of the ancient title *mṯ ḥr stḥ* (Wb. II.7.13), as applied to the queen, who, in her role as the consort of Horus-Seth/Kamutef (cf. W. Barta, *Untersuchungen zur Göttlichkeit des regierenden Königs*, pp. 40-1) was permitted to see the king in his dynamic sexual aspect. Cf. the reference to the queen as *ḥtṯi m mṯ nfrw.f*, when the god who has manifested himself as the king to beget a successor reveals to her his true nature (*Urk.* IV, 1714, 14).

The symbolic significance of many traditional representations of daily life is gradually being acknowledged ⁽¹⁾, and often it is the anomalies of the Amarna period that can provide the essential clue towards their interpretation.

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(1) Cf., most recently, P. Derchain, 'Symbols and Metaphors in Literature and Representations of Private Life', *Royal Anthropological Institute News*, no. 15 (August 1976), pp. 7-10.