

Re-reading a Statue of King Ramesses II Text or Iconography?

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Abstract: This article is dedicated to the study and comparison of the inscriptions and iconography of the red granite colossal statue in the British Museum, inv. no. AES 61. The idea behind this paper was to demonstrate how the rigorous application of iconographical analysis of facial features can contribute to the precise dating of the classical pharaonic sculptures. This procedure when applied to the above-mentioned statue allows to conclude that it was originally conceived for Amenhotep II and usurped, later on, by Ramesses II and his successor Merenptah – not by modifying or changing its original facial features, but only by adding their own cartouches.

Keywords: iconography, royal statuary, New Kingdom Egypt, Amenhotep II, Ramesses II, Merenptah

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Ramesses II may have indeed been the one king to leave the greatest number of sculptural works in Ancient Egypt. His statues are found on many archaeological sites in Egypt as well as in numerous museums and private collections all around the world. Of the many statues that are attributed to Ramesses II, some were made during his reign, while others were usurped from sculptures of earlier date.

A colossal striding statue of red granite first usurped by Ramesses II and subsequently by Merenptah, now in the British Museum (**Fig. 1a**),¹ is said to come from the Karnak Temple, although its exact provenience is unknown. The identification of the king for whom it was originally made creates a problem.²

¹ *British Museum 1909*: 160, no. 577; *British Museum 1930*: 366.

² Yorke, Leake 1826: 10–11, Pl. I; Arundale, Bonomi, Birch 1842: 107, Pl. 42, Fig. 160; Smith 1939: 145–147, Pl. XVII; Vandier 1958: 616; Vandersleyen 2012: 216–217; PM II.2: 288.



1a-b. Ramesses II statue, British Museum, inv. no. AES 61 (a. *British Museum*, © The British Museum; b. Vandersleyen 2012: 217, Fig. 6.2–3).

ICONOGRAPHY AND STYLISTIC FEATURES OF THE STATUE

The king wears the White Crown on his head, with an *uraeus* attached to the forehead. The prominent almond eyes are placed horizontally, gazing slightly downward, as if looking at something near in front (**Fig. 1b**). The eyebrows are depicted in raised relief, forming two symmetrical arches on each of the protruding brows. The cheeks are fleshy and smooth over a bony structure. The pharaoh's nose is long and straight. The mouth is small and curved in a characteristic faint smile. The details of the mouth, when observed at an acute angle from below the figure, reveal deep furrows running down from the ends of the mouth on either side of the chin. The well-formed lips are punctuated by deep shadows at the corners, emphasizing the almost disapproving tightness of the faint smile. The small

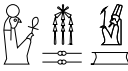
and round chin bears the remains of a royal ceremonial beard. The ears are large and highly placed.

The king's chest is sculpted schematically and the shoulders are broad. The position of the arms and hands, which is far from common, strongly recalls similar royal figures of the Twelfth Dynasty. The pharaoh wears a fluted triangular tunic (*šndyt*), having a fringe in front with a kind of lappet bordered with two *uraei*. The tunic is held by a belt, decorated with a wavy pattern.³ The *šndyt* is an exact copy of typical Twelfth Dynasty models, except for the wavy lines on the belt.⁴

The king advances his left leg and places both hands on the frontal part of the *šndyt*, his palms being posed flat and turned inward. It is worth mentioning that the statue has a slight, but perceptible, thrust forward of the shoulders, neck and chin.


The lower part including legs from the knees down, as well as the left arm and the forearm are missing, the beard is broken off (**Fig. 1a-b**). The height of the preserved part of the statue is 263cm.⁵


ROYAL TEXTS

1. In the centre of the belt, the nomen of king Ramesses II is inscribed with lightly cut signs, apparently in a cartouche:  *R^c-msj-sw mrj-Jmn*.⁶

The inscribed area is rough and damaged, and its level is lower than that of the belt on either side. There are no traces to suggest that the name replaced one cut earlier for another king, although it is probable that the oval or rectangular buckle of the belt, as originally carved, was inscribed with other cartouches. It is clear, however, that the belt originally continued over this area and was subsequently cut back to carve the name there.⁷

2. The same names of Ramesses II are cut in deep, well-formed and elegant signs on the shoulders:⁸

A. On the right shoulder, the prenomen  *Wsr-M^{3c}.t-R^c stp-n-R^c*.

B. On the left shoulder, the nomen  *R^c-msj-sw mrj-Jmn*.

³ Smith 1939: 145–147, Pl. XVII.

⁴ Miller 1939: 7, Pl. I.

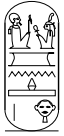
⁵ James 1970: 10–11, Pl. VI [a 2]. See, however, C. Vandersleyen (Vandersleyen 2012: 216), who gives 241cm.

⁶ *KRI* II: 591, no. 15; Magen 2011: 526–527.

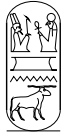
⁷ James 1970: 11.

⁸ *KRI* II: 591; James 1970: 11, Pl. VI [a 2].

3. On the chest of the statue, immediately under the level where the beard originally ended, there are large cartouches with deep cut signs; they contain the names of king Merenptah:⁹



Mrj-n-Pth ḥtp-ḥr-Mꜣ.t



Bꜣ-n-Rꜥ mrj-Jmn

4. Most of the back pillar is lost and there is no trace of any inscription.

5. Between the back pillar and the left leg a part of the titulary of Ramesses II is preserved. Only the beginnings of two lines survived.

The cartouches of Ramesses II are cut less deeply, but they are inscribed more neatly than those of Merenptah, which are deeply cut, but executed rather clumsily.¹⁰

DISCUSSION OF THE ARGUMENTS AND CONCLUSION

Most scholars agree that the facial features of the sculpture allow to attribute this statue either to Tuthmose III or to Hatshepsut.¹¹ Sidney Smith, however, followed by Jacques Vandier, argued that the statue should be dated to the reign of Ramesses II, since the name carved on the belt is not cut over an earlier one. Although the effigy reveals stylistic features typical of the earlier period, they suggest that such traits can be found also in case of other statues of Ramesses II.¹² It is nevertheless equally probable that the statue – while representing Thutmose III – remained un-inscribed until the reign of Ramesses II. The name on the belt, although not apparently being in surcharge, does not seem to have formed part of the original design; it is clearly a later addition.¹³

Had the back pillar originally been inscribed, had the text on it should have contained the titles of the king for whom the piece was made, which is the case of a text of this kind identifying the statue of Thutmose III from Medamoud in the Metropolitan Museum, almost in all respects similar to our piece.¹⁴

On the other hand, the stylistic features of the statue seem untypical for representations of Ramesses II:¹⁵ there is nothing in common between the known faces of this king¹⁶ (**Fig. 2a-c**) and the face of the statue discussed here. Moreover, this statue does not reveal any

⁹ Sourouzian 1989: 152–153, no. 88; *KRI* II: 591 [15]; Magen 2011: 527.

¹⁰ James 1970: 11, Pl. VI [a 2]; Smith 1939: 145; Yorke, Leake 1826: 10–11, Pl. I.

¹¹ Aldred 1961: 49; James 1970: 11.

¹² Smith 1939: 145–147; Vandier 1958: 616; James 1970: 11; Miller 1939: 3.

¹³ Magen 2011: 526–527; James 1970: 11; *KRI* II: 591 [15].

¹⁴ James 1970: 11.

¹⁵ Vandersleyen 2012: 216–217.

¹⁶ Scamuzzi 1966: Pl. VII; Baines, Malek 1995: 39; Malek 2003: 225; *Torino Museo* 2006: 69.



a



b



c

2. Ramesses II statues: a. British Museum, inv. no. EA 19; b. Luxor Temple; c. Turin Museum, inv. no. C. 1380 (a. *British Museum*, © The British Museum; b. Phot. M. Kassem; c. Scamuzzi 1966: Pl. VII).



3. Amenhotep II statue, Egyptian Museum in Cairo, inv. no. CG 42073 (Legrain 1906: Pl. XLIII).

specific features characterizing kings of the post-Amarna Period and those of Ramesses II in particular.¹⁷

On the contrary: the face of the statue in question strongly resembles images of king Amenhotep II.¹⁸ The proportions of the face are very close to the average proportions in statues of Amenhotep II, for example a specimen from the Cairo Museum (**Fig. 3**), or to the colossal head no. 15 in the British Museum, often attributed to king Thutmose III.¹⁹ Faces of the colossi of Ramesses II are usually more triangular; sometimes, however, they have a rather compact round shape, particularly in the case of statues representing the king in the round *ibes*-wig. They are never long and rectangular.

The eyes are almost almond-shaped, with softer inner canthi that dip downwards slightly. The upper eyelids are lowered here as if the king were looking downward (not only in case of statues of a colossal scale) – this feature being common since Amenhotep III and the Amarna Period.²⁰

The mouth on the Ramesses colossi is usually curved, the corners often drawn upwards in a faint smile. On Ramesses II's portraits lower lip is accentuated, mouth corners drilled, and chin marked by side furrows. Finally, the ears of Ramesses statues are comparatively small and are always pierced.²¹ Altogether the general expression of the face is serene and lacks the sternness of the Memphis colossus (**Fig. 4**).

¹⁷ Sourouzian 1988: 229–254, Pls 62–75; Miller 1939: 3.

¹⁸ Vandersleyen 2012: 216–217.

¹⁹ Legrain 1906: 42, Pl. XLIII; Vandersleyen 2012: 216–217; Smith 1939: 146.

²⁰ Sourouzian 1988: 229–254, Pls 62–75.

²¹ Vandersleyen 2012: 216–217; Sourouzian 1988: 229–254, Pls 62–75. For the importance of facial features in iconography and style, cf. Myśliwiec 1976: 105–116, Pl. CLI, Figs 224–261; Vandersleyen 2012: 216–217.



4. Ramesses II statue, Memphis Museum (Phot. M. Kassem).

Sidney Smith suggests to see in the slight, but perceptible thrust forward of the shoulders, neck and chin, an influence of the Amarna age artistic tradition.²² In fact, the curvature of the back seems a personal trait and was strongly accentuated in the statues of Amenhotep II. The fact that it is noticeable in images of his father Thutmose III as well, may point that this was either a family physical trait or a special manner of representing these kings.

Therefore the statue, though inscribed with Ramesses II names, cannot be unconditionally attributed to this king, not only because the king's face is represented here in a different way than in other statues of Ramesses II, but also on account of other iconographical and stylistic features which have been pointed above.²³ And these seem to point rather to the reign of Amenhotep II.

Acknowledgments

The author would like to express his deepest gratitude to Professor Karol Myśliwiec for discussion and suggestions.

²² Smith 1939: 145–147; Vandersleyen 2012: 216–217.

²³ Legrain 1906: Pl. XLIII; Vandersleyen 2012: 217; Magen 2011: 527.

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