

## Iconographic motifs of orientation on the columns of the second court at Medinet Habu

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[The present article describes the “complementary elements” which are depicted above Ramesses III’s figure in the scenes that decorate the columns and the osiride pillars of the second court of the Temple of Millions of Years at Medinet Habu. Among these “complementary elements” the most relevant are the solar discs with *uraei* wearing the crowns of Upper and Lower Egypt. We concluded that those solar discs were acting as orientation iconographic motifs whose aim was to lead the king on his route from East to West to meet the gods that came out of the inner shrine to greet him. So, the solar discs position on the walls varies depending on the route Ramesses III followed in his East-West itinerary]

**Keywords:** Temple of Millions of Years, iconographic motifs, complementary elements, sun discs.

### 1. Introduction: Location rules of sun discs with *uraei* wearing the crowns of Upper and Lower Egypt

The Temple of Millions of Years of king Ramesses III at Medinet Habu, the best preserved of all the temples that stand on the west bank of ancient Thebes, presents a rich iconography whose formal and structural significance remains still obscure<sup>1</sup>.

On most of the scenes that embellished the walls of Ramesses III’s temple we can discern, beside the king and the gods, the principal actors, some iconographic motifs, known as “complementary elements”. Among the elements located above the king figures a sun disc, image which stands for “He of Behdet” ( ☰ ), flanked by rising *uraei* ( ☱ - cobras in characteristic dilated hood). Frequently there is also an *ankh* sign (fig. 1), or rather, less commonly, a *shenu* sign (fig. 2), pending on each fold of the *uraeus*. Some *uraei* are crowned and others are not.

1. The “Instituto del Próximo Oriente Antiguo (IPOA-UB)” is currently undertaking the study of the iconographical programme of Medinet Habu (Project URE-P003). Concerning the grammar of the images see Salvador Costa, *La gramática de las imágenes de Medinet Habu: Discos solares como indicadores de orientación, Estudios sobre la antigua Tebas. Suplemento I*, Barcelona, 2012.

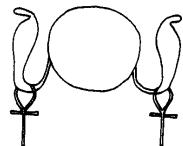


Fig. 1.

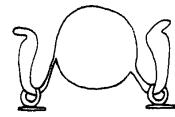


Fig. 2.

There are three types of sun discs with crowned *uraei*:

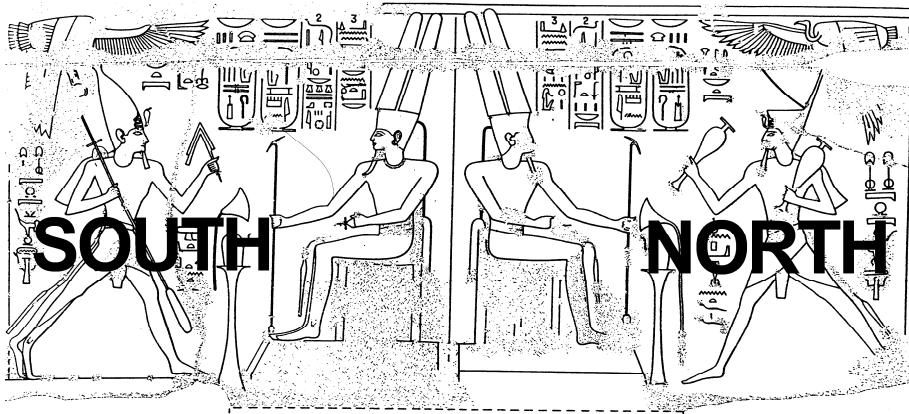
- 1) Sun disc with *uraei* wearing white crowns.
- 2) Sun disc with *uraei* wearing *atef* crowns.
- 3) Sun disc with *uraei* wearing the crowns of Upper<sup>2</sup> and Lower Egypt.

Of these, the most common type is the third one which, as we will see, aimed to point the king's location on his way from outside to inside the shrine.

The main axis of Ramesses III's temple at Medinet Habu – oriented East-West – was perpendicular to the Nile –oriented South-North. That means that geographical South is located at the left of the temple and the North at the right.

Ancient Egyptians possessed a range of ritual and symbolic orientations in which the South-North axis belonged to an Osirian context, while the East-West axis was included in a solar dogma<sup>3</sup>.

In an East-West axis, the North is located at the right of the temple, and the south at the left. Otherwise, in a South-North axis, the North is symbolically represented at the right (East) and the South at the left (West). We can confirm this orientation of both cardinal points (North and South) looking at the south face of the lintel above the door opening in the south wall of the second court at Medinet Habu (*MHA* 47; fig. 3). Here, we can see that on the left side (West) Ramesses III is wearing the white crown of Upper Egypt (South), while on the right (East) Ramesses is wearing the red crown of Lower Egypt (North).

Fig. 3. Scene *MHA* 47.

2. Sometimes the white crown of Upper Egypt was replaced by the double crown.

3. L. Baqué & S. Costa, "El sistema de orientación en las tumbas reales de la dinastía XVIII en el Valle de los Reyes", *Actas del Segundo Congreso Ibérico de Egiptología. Bellaterra, 12-15 de Marzo de 2001* (Edited by Josep Cervelló Autori; Montserrat Díaz de Cerio Juan, David Rull Ribó), *AVLA AEGYPTIACA – STVDIA* 5, Bellaterra, 2005, 39.

The temples of the West Bank of Thebes, the symbolic axis South-North, which follows the long axis of the temple (East-West), represented the Nile path.

The Nile was called “the scent of Osiris”, creating a special relationship between the life-giving water (which flooded annually from the south) and the god Osiris (which symbolized regeneration and fertility). As Plutarch, the Greek writer, notes in his retelling of the Osiris myth: «*But the wiser of the priests call not only the Nile Osiris and the sea Typhon, but they simply give the name of Osiris to the whole source and faculty creative of moisture, believing this to be the cause of generation and the substance of life-producing seeds*»<sup>4</sup>.

There are two types of sun discs with crowned *uraei*, each one with different crowns:

- The *ureus* on the left is wearing the white crown of Upper Egypt, and the *ureus* on the right is wearing the red crown of Lower Egypt (fig. 4)

- The *ureus* on the right is wearing the white crown of Upper Egypt, and the *ureus* on the left is wearing the red crown of Lower Egypt (fig. 5)

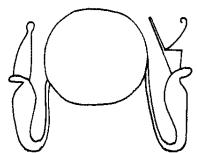


Fig. 4.

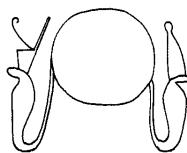


Fig. 5.

As one looks at the scenes that embellished Ramesses III’s temple, one can see the sun discs with crowned *uraei* depicted in the location that convey his geographical position:

In the solar East-West axis (fig. 6):

- South wall: ☀ = To South from North.

Orientation of the King in the scene: East → West.

Sun disc: *ureus* wearing red crown of Lower Egypt to the left (East) and *ureus* wearing white crown of Upper Egypt to the right (West).

- North wall: ☀ = To North from South.

Orientation of the King in the scene: West ← East.

Sun disc: *ureus* wearing red crown of Lower Egypt to the right (East) and *ureus* wearing white crown of Upper Egypt to the right (West).

In the fluvial South-North axis (fig. 7):

- West wall: ☀ = To West from East.

Orientation of the King in the scene: South ← North.

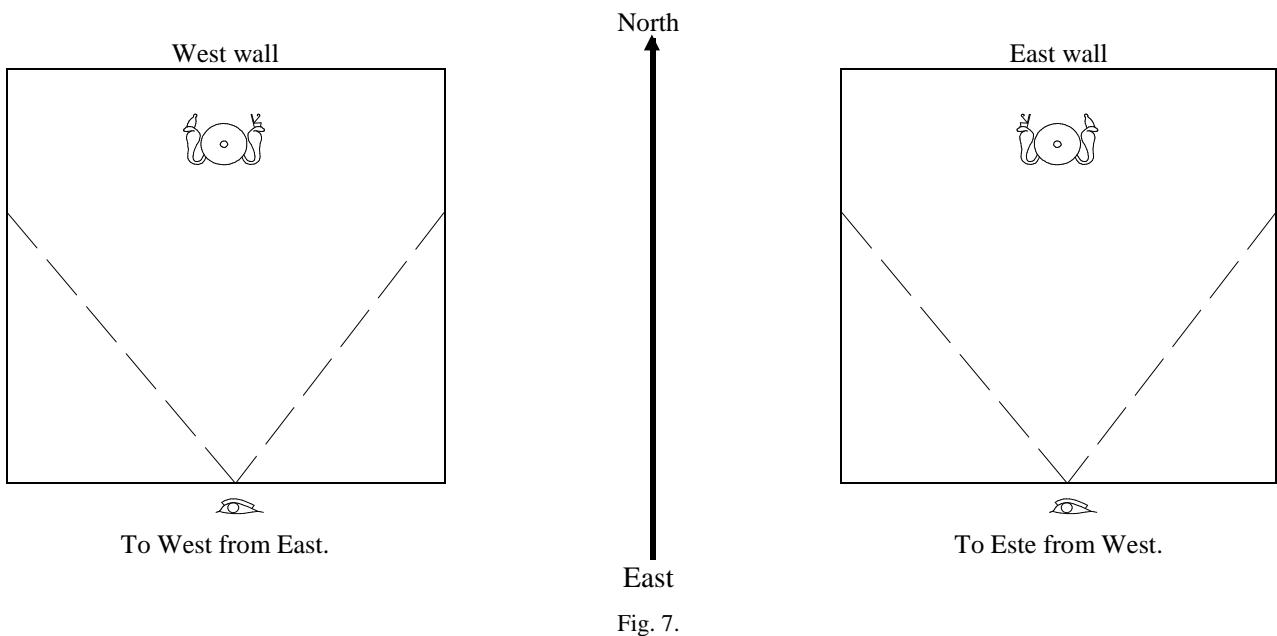
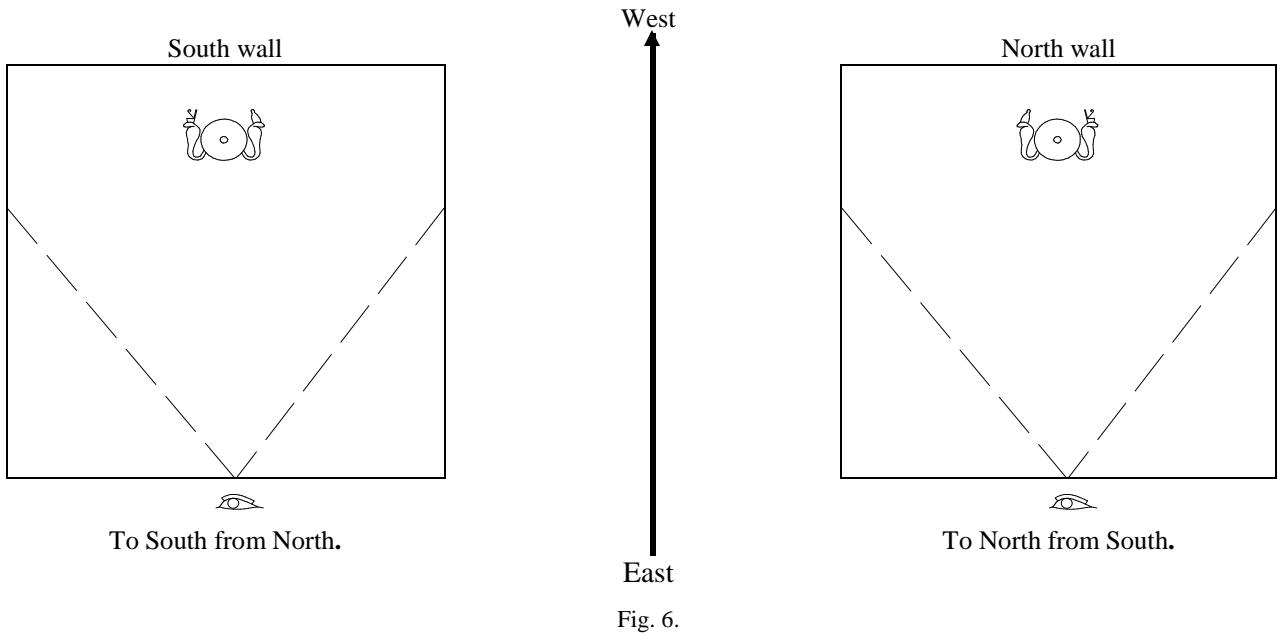
Sun disc: *ureus* wearing red crown of Lower Egypt to the right (North) and *ureus* wearing white crown of Upper Egypt to the left (South).

- East wall: ☀ = To East from West.

Orientation of the King in the scene: North → South.

4. Cf. Plutarch, *Isis and Osiris*, §33.

Sun disc: *uraeus* wearing red crown of Lower Egypt to the left (North) and *uraeus* wearing white crown of Upper Egypt to the right (South).



Let us see now how this iconographic rule works on the columns of the second court of Medinet Habu, following the long axis from outside to the inside (East → West)

## 2. Complementary elements on the columns of the second court

1) Columns located on both sides of the long axis.

- North colonnade (fig. 8)

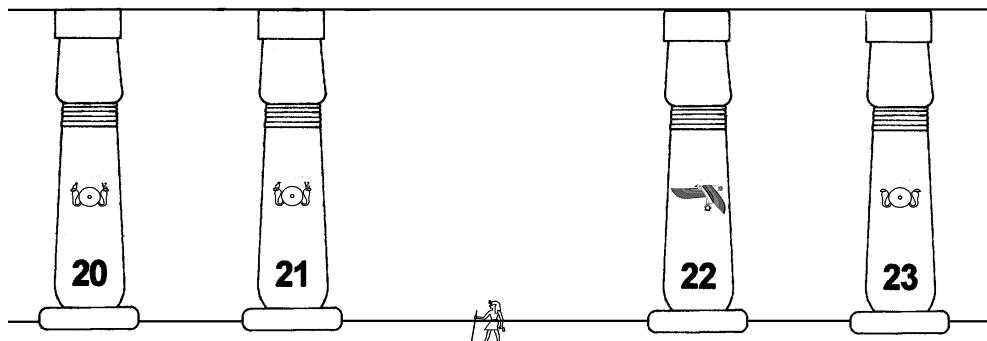


Fig. 8. West ← East (North path).

### Column 23

Scene: Ramesses III offering incense and libation to Amon-Re in the presence of Mut and Khonsu<sup>5</sup>.

Orientation of the king: West ← East.

Above the sovereign: sun disc with *uraei* wearing no crowns.



### Column 22

Scene: Ramesses III offering Maat to Amon-Re-Harakhti in the presence of Maat and Thoth<sup>6</sup>.

Orientation of the king: West ← East.

Above the sovereign: Uto.



### Column 21

Scene: Ramesses III offering incense and libation to Sokar-Osiris in the presence of Isis and Thoth<sup>7</sup>.

5. The Epigraphic Survey, *Medinet Habu*, VI: *The Temple Proper*, 2: *The Re Chapel, the Royal Mortuary Complex, and Adjacent Rooms with Miscellaneous Material from the Pylons, the Forecourts, and the First Hypostyle Hall*, OIP, 84, Chicago, 1963, 369.

6. Epigraphic Survey, *Medinet Habu*, VI, 370.

7. Epigraphic Survey, *Medinet Habu*, VI, 371.

Orientation of the king: West ← East.

Above the sovereign: sun disc (to North from South).

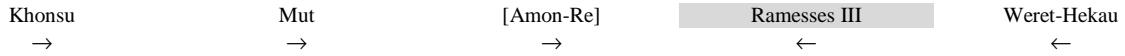


**Column 20**

Scene: Ramesses III offering to [Amon-Re] in the presence of Mut, Khonsu and Weret-Hekau<sup>8</sup>.

Orientation of the king: West ← East.

Above the sovereign: sun disc (to North from South).



- South colonnade (Fig. 9)

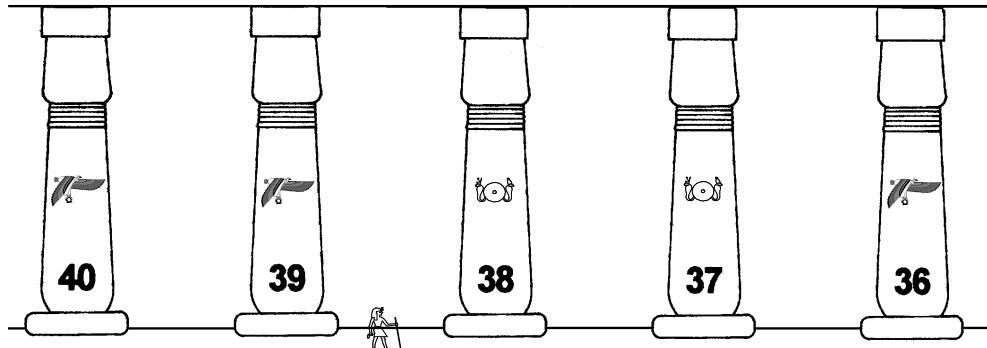


Fig. 9. East → West (South path).

**Column 40**

Scene: Ramesses III offering Maat to Amon-Re in the presence of Mut and Khonsu<sup>9</sup>.

Orientation of the king: East → West.

Above the sovereign: Nekhbet.



8. Epigraphic Survey, *Medinet Habu*, VI, 372.

9. Epigraphic Survey, *Medinet Habu*, VI, 364.

### Column 39

Scene: Ramesses III offering incense to Nefertem in the presence of Hathor and Seshat<sup>10</sup>.

Orientation of the king: East → West.

Above the sovereign: Nekhbet.



### Column 38

Scene: Ramesses III offering lettuce to Amon-Re-Kamutef in the presence of Amonet and Thoth<sup>11</sup>.

Orientation of the king: East → West.

Above the sovereign: sun disc (to South from North).



### Column 37

Scene: Ramesses III offering ointment to Ptah-Sokar-Osiris in the presence of Sekhmet and Thoth<sup>12</sup>.

Orientation of the king: East → West.

Above the sovereign: sun disc (to South from North).

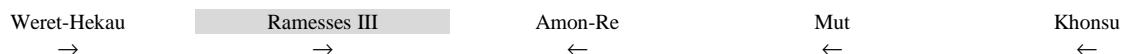


### Column 36

Scene: Ramesses III offering wine to Amon-Re in the presence of Mut, Khonsu and Weret-Hekau<sup>13</sup>.

Orientation of the king: East → West.

Above the sovereign: Nekhbet.



## 2) Columns located on the West Porch of the second court

Unlike the columns of both North and South Porches, the West Porch columns depict two scenes, separated by a vertical groove. This vertical groove is very important as it marks the figures' orientation. We should not forget that in temple decoration the king and the gods are not randomly located. The king and the gods path follows a strict pattern: the gods are represented leaving the shrine, coming out (West→East path), while the king, who is coming from outside, meets them (West←East path).

10. Epigraphic Survey, *Medinet Habu*, VI, 365.

11. Epigraphic Survey, *Medinet Habu*, VI, 366.

12. Epigraphic Survey, *Medinet Habu*, VI, 367.

13. Epigraphic Survey, *Medinet Habu*, VI, 368.

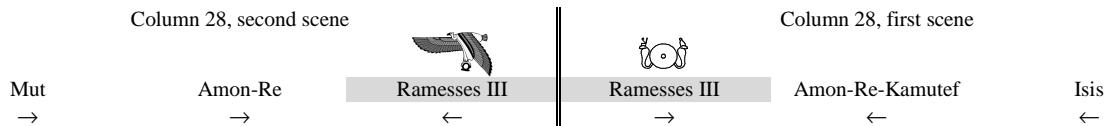
The two columns flanking the long axis of the temple (28 on the north half, and 45 on the south half) show the same iconography.

Column 28, second scene

Scene: Ramesses III offering Maat to Amon-Re in the presence of Mut<sup>14</sup>.

Orientation of the king: West ← East (= North path).

Above the sovereign: Uto.



Column 28, first scene

Scene: Ramesses III offering wine to Amon-Re-Kamutef in the presence of Isis<sup>15</sup>.

Orientation of the king: East → West (= South path).

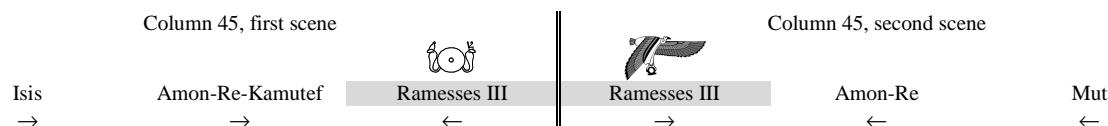
Above the sovereign: sun disc (to South from North).

Column 45, first scene

Scene: Ramesses III offering wine to Amon-Re-Kamutef in the presence of Isis<sup>16</sup>.

Orientation of the king: West ← East (= North path).

Above the sovereign: sun disc (to North from South).



Column 45, second scene

Scene: Ramesses III offering Maat to Amon-Re in the presence of Mut<sup>17</sup>.

Orientation of the king: East → West (= South path).

Above the sovereign: unnamed vulture-headed goddess (Nekhbet?).

As we can see, on each column, Ramesses III is standing back to back. The groove that sets apart both figures points to the east, where the king is coming from (fig. 10). In fact, the artists depicted on the long axis of the temple a set of two permanent offers to two pairs of divinities (Amon-Re-Kamutef and Isis, and Amon-Re and Mut)

14. Epigraphic Survey, *Medinet Habu*, VI, 375 A1-A2.

15. Epigraphic Survey, *Medinet Habu*, VI, 375 B1-B3.

16. Epigraphic Survey, *Medinet Habu*, VI, 374 C1-C3.

17. Epigraphic Survey, *Medinet Habu*, VI, 374 D1-D2.

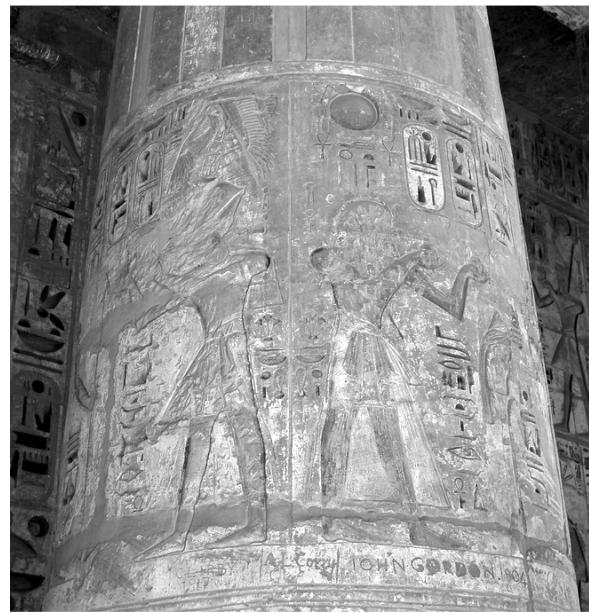
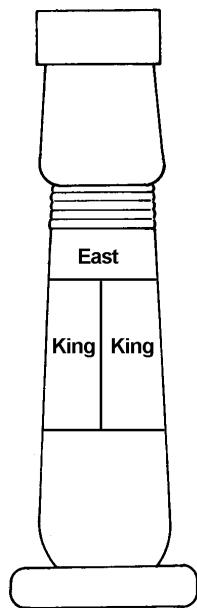


Fig. 10. Column 28.

The other columns of the West Porch (29-31 on the north half and 46-48 on the south half), also depict two scenes. Nevertheless, unlike the columns flanking the long axis of the temple, the vertical groove here sets apart the gods that are coming out to the outside of the temple, pointing therefore to the West (fig. 11). We should note that in the first scene of each column Ramesses is accompanied by a divinity as well.

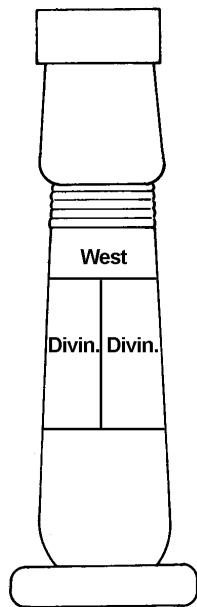


Fig. 11. Column 29.

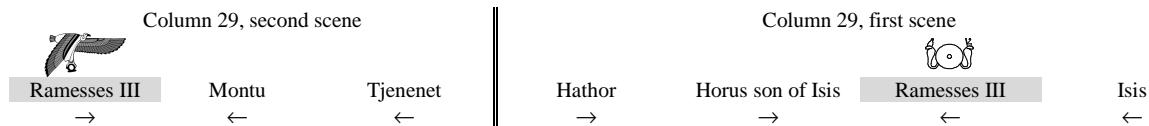
- Columns of the North half

Column 29, second scene

Scene: Ramesses III offering libation to Montu in the presence of Tjeneret<sup>18</sup>.

Orientation of the king: West ← East (= North path).

Above the sovereign: sun disc (to North from South).



Column 29, first scene

Scene: Ramesses III offering milk to Horus son of Isis in the presence of Hathor and Isis<sup>19</sup>.

Orientation of the king: East → West (= South path).

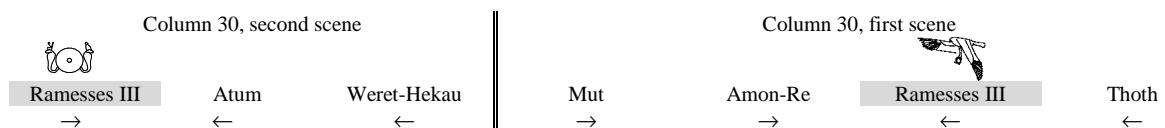
Above the sovereign: unnamed vulture-headed goddess (Nekhbet?).

Column 30, second scene

Scene: Ramesses III offering wine to Atum in the presence of Weret-Hekau<sup>20</sup>.

Orientation of the king: East → West (= South path).

Above the sovereign: sun disc (to South from North).



Column 30, first scene

Scene: Ramesses III offering Maat to Amon-Re in the presence of Mut and Thoth<sup>21</sup>.

Orientation of the king: West ← East (= North path).

Above the sovereign: falcon-headed Horus of Damanhour (Lower Egypt)?

Column 31, second scene

Scene: Ramesses III offering flowers to Khonsu<sup>22</sup>.

Orientation of the king: East → West (= South path).

Above the sovereign: sun disc (to South from North).

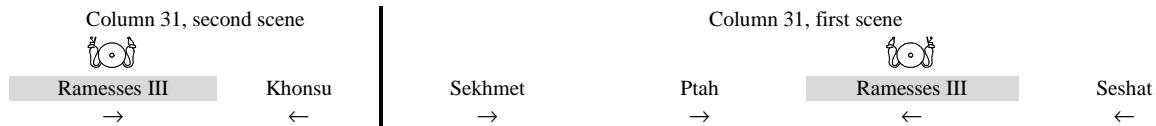
18. Epigraphic Survey, *Medinet Habu*, VI, 375 C1-C2.

19. Epigraphic Survey, *Medinet Habu*, VI, 375 D1-D3.

20. Epigraphic Survey, *Medinet Habu*, VI, 376 A1-A2.

21. Epigraphic Survey, *Medinet Habu*, VI, 376 B1-B3.

22. Epigraphic Survey, *Medinet Habu*, VI, 376 C1-C2.



**Column 31, first scene**

Scene: Ramesses III purifying and offering to Ptah in the presence of Sekhmet and Seshat<sup>23</sup>.

Orientation of the king: West ← East (= North path).

Above the sovereign: sun disc (to North from South).

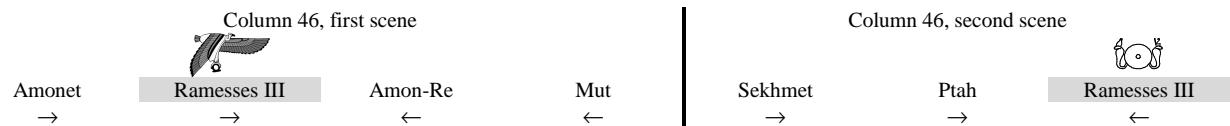
- Columns of the South half

**Column 46, first scene**

Scene: Ramesses III offering libation to Amon-Re in the presence of Mut and Amonet<sup>24</sup>.

Orientation of the king: East → West (= South path).

Above the sovereign: Nekhbet



**Column 46, second scene**

Scene: Ramesses III offering Maat to Ptah in the presence of Sekhmet<sup>25</sup>.

Orientation of the king: West ← East (= North path).

Above the sovereign: sun disc (to North from South).

**Column 47, first scene**

Scene: Ramesses III offering incense to Re-Harakhti in the presence of Iusaas and Maat<sup>26</sup>.

Orientation of the king: East → West (= South path).

Above the sovereign: sun dics with uraei wearing each one the white crown.



23. Epigraphic Survey, *Medinet Habu*, VI, 376 D1-D3.

24. Epigraphic Survey, *Medinet Habu*, VI, 374 A1-A3.

25. Epigraphic Survey, *Medinet Habu*, VI, 374 A1-A3.

26. Epigraphic Survey, *Medinet Habu*, VI, 373 C1-C3.

## Column 47, second scene

Scene: Ramesses III offering wine to Nefertem in the presence of Sekhmet<sup>27</sup>.

Orientation of the king: West ← East (= North path).

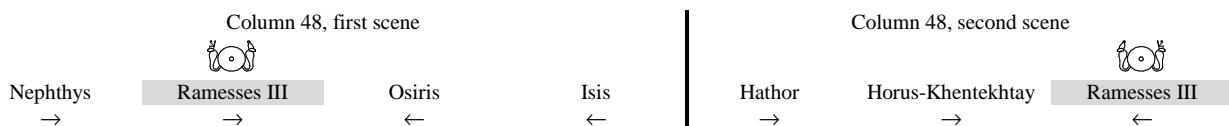
Above the sovereign: unnamed vulture-headed goddess (Uto?).

## Column 48, first scene

Scene: Ramesses III offering libation to Osiris in the presence of Isis and Nephthys<sup>28</sup>.

Orientation of the king: East → West (= South path).

Above the sovereign: sun disc (to South from North).



## Column 48, second scene

Scene: Ramesses III offering wine to Horus-Khentekhtay in the presence of Hathor<sup>29</sup>.

Orientation of the king: West ← East (= South path).

Above the sovereign: sun disc (to North from South).

## 3. Conclusions

The sun discs with crowned *uraei* (the red one of Lower Egypt and the white one of the Upper Egypt) convey the symbolic path which the king ought to follow along the long axis of the temple. Two inscriptions preserved on the outside walls of Medinet Habu state that the Temple of Millions of Years of Ramesses III occupied all the known terrestrial space between East and West, between the “Mountain of Bakhu” (𓁃 𓁄 𓁅 - *B3hw*)<sup>30</sup> and the “Mountain of Manu” (𓁃 𓁆 𓁇 - *M3nw*)<sup>31</sup>. According to this geography of the sacred, the sun rose in the morning above the Mountain of Bakhu and set in the evening behind the Mountain of Manu, summarizing the daily path of the sun. This solar path was the very same path that the King traced coming into the shrine following the main long axis of the temple, and the secondary axis, East-West, as well. The location of this iconographic motif in the scenes depicted varied according to the different paths Ramesses III followed when meeting the gods that were leaving the darkness of the inner parts of the temple, the real abode of the gods. As the King was moving from East to West, the gods were moving from West to East (fig. 12).

27. Epigraphic Survey, *Medinet Habu*, VI, 373 D1-D2.

28. Epigraphic Survey, *Medinet Habu*, VI, 373 A1-A3.

29. Epigraphic Survey, *Medinet Habu*, VI, 373 B1-B2.

30. Epigraphic Survey. *Medinet Habu*, I, 17:17.

31. Epigraphic Survey. *Medinet Habu*, I, 16:18.

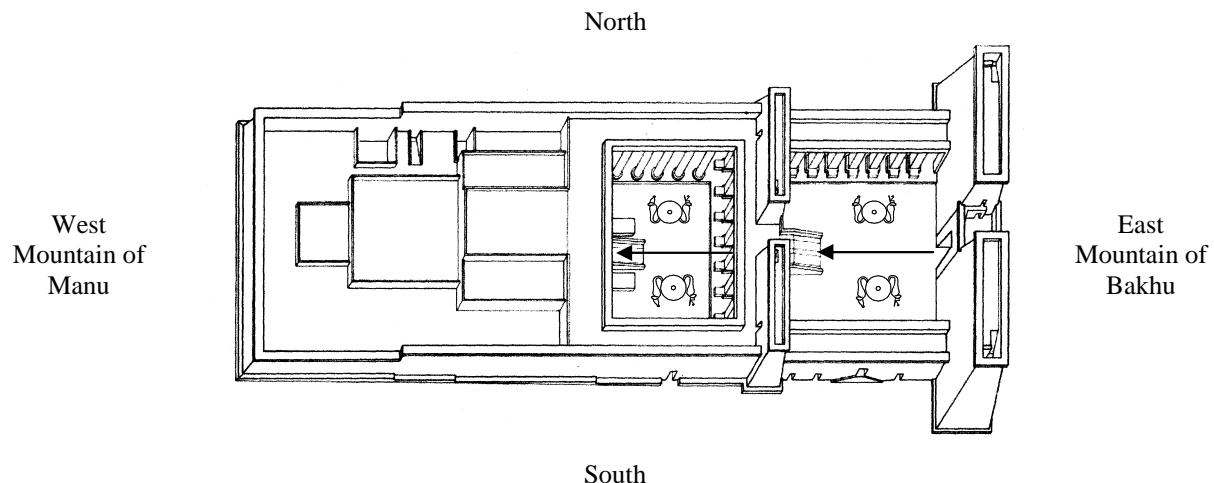


Fig. 12. Ramesses III route from East to West (←).

When we find a sun disc provided with *uraei* wearing the red crown of Lower Egypt on the left (East) and the white crown of Upper Egypt on the right (West), the king is moving to the West following the south path (fig. 13). Yet, when the *uraei* are wearing the red crown of Lower Egypt on the right (East) and the white crown of Upper Egypt on the left (West), the king is moving to the West following the north path (fig. 14).

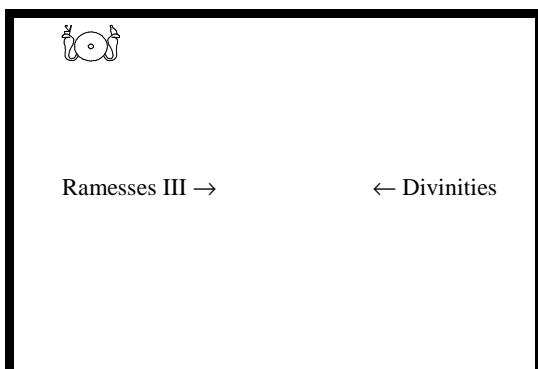


Fig. 13.

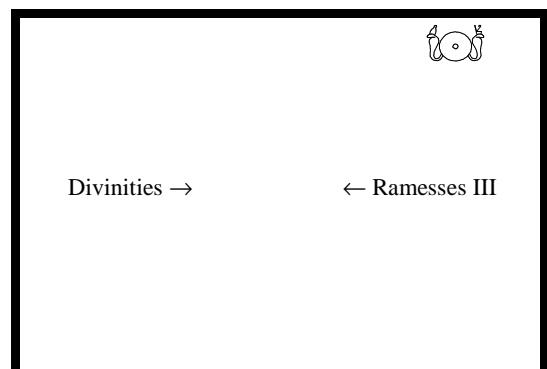


Fig. 14.

Coming outside, Ramesses III, moving then from West to East, follows the same route as the gods. So, the king is moving from the inner parts of the temple to the outside. A good example of this can be found on the upper register of the south wall and on the east wall, on its south half. Here we find three scenes, oriented to the east, depicting the great procession of the Sokar Festival that was held on the 6<sup>th</sup> day of the festival (day 26<sup>th</sup> of the fourth month of the flooding season). In the *MHA* 157 scene (fig. 15), Ramses III

follows the *henu* boat of the Sokar festival carried on the shoulders of 16 priests<sup>32</sup>. A sun disc provided with *uraei* wearing the red crown of Lower Egypt on the left (East) and the white crown of the Upper Egypt on the right (West) is depicted above the king.

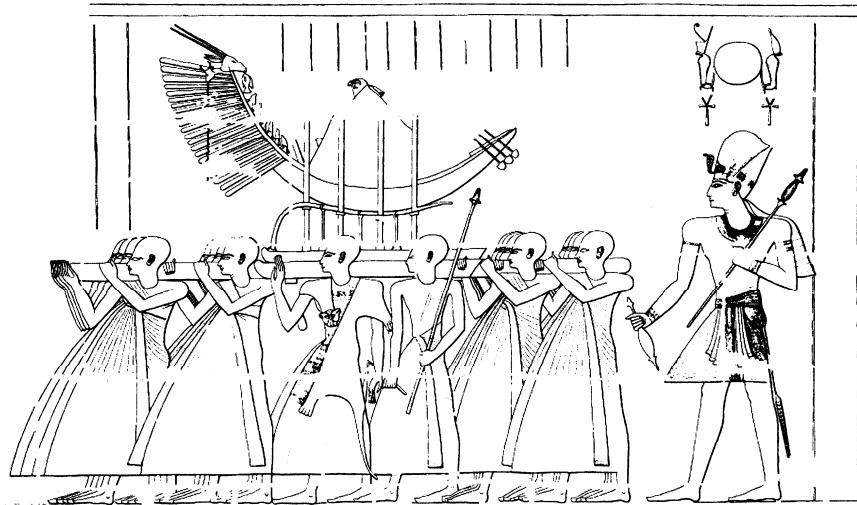


Fig. 15. Scene MHA 157.

32. The Epigraphic Survey. *Medinet Habu, IV: Festival Scenes of Ramses III*, OIP, 51, Chicago, 1940, 223.