

The King is a Steering Oar: Nautical Metaphor in Ancient Egyptian Royal Ideology

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[This paper explores the use of nautical metaphors in ancient Egyptian royal ideology, focusing on the symbolism of the steering oar, prow rope, and stern rope in royal texts and iconography. Particular attention is given to Hatshepsut, whose royal titulary appears to reinterpret earlier nautical expressions within the context of female kingship. By distinguishing between metaphors of guidance and those of stability and control, the study argues that nautical imagery functioned as an important means of expressing royal authority and cosmic order in ancient Egypt.]

Keywords: Nautical metaphor, Steering Oar, Hatshepsut, Royal ideology, Kingship, Royal titulary.

1. Introduction

Nautical metaphors appear frequently in ancient Egyptian literature, particularly the idea of “shipping” or “navigation” (*Schifffahrt*) as a metaphor for life.¹ Life is likened to a ship that must be steered: *jr nst rmt hmw n jmw nb n dr p3y=f jrj-h3t* “As for the tongue of a person: (it is) the

* I would like to thank Dr Filip Taterka (Polish Academy of Science) for inspiring the idea for this topic during our exchange of views at the conference of “Women’s Perspectives in the Nile Valley” in Warsaw, as well as for kindly providing references. I am also grateful to two anonymous reviewers for their insightful comments and suggestions, which have significantly improved this paper. I further acknowledge that the research for this study was supported by the “Ramón y Cajal” research program (RYC2022-035138-I) of the Spanish Ministry of Science, Innovation, and Universities.

** The abbreviations used in this paper are as follows: BD: The Book of the Dead; CT: Coffin Text; LGG: Leitz, Christian (ed.) 2002-2003. *Lexikon der ägyptischen Götter und Götterbezeichnungen*, 8 vols. Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta 110-116; 129. Leuven: Peeters; KRI I: Kitchen, Kenneth A. 1975. *Ramesside inscriptions, historical and biographical I*. Oxford: Blackwell. KRI II: Kitchen, Kenneth A. 1979. *Ramesside inscriptions, historical and biographical II*. Oxford: Blackwell; TLA: Thesaurus Linguae Aegyptiae (<https://thesaurus-linguae-aegyptiae.de/home>, accessed August 13, 2025); Urk. IV: Sethe, Kurt 1906–1909. *Urkunden der 18. Dynastie*. 4 volumes. *Urkunden des Ägyptischen Altertums IV*. 4 Vol. Leipzig: Hinrichs. Wb: Erman, Adolf and Hermann Grapow (eds) 1926–1955. *Wörterbuch der ägyptischen Sprache im Auftrage der Deutschen Akademien*. 7 Vols. Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs. All transliterations in this paper have been made by the author.

1. Hermann, Siegfried 1954. *Steuerruder, Waage, Herz und Zunge in ägyptischen Bildreden*. *Zeitschrift für ägyptische Sprache und Altertumskunde* 79, 106.

rudder of the ship, but the lord of all is his pilot”.² This metaphor not only “offers the possibility of depicting an individual’s life journey as a more or less successful voyage or ferry passage; rather, the metaphor of the great voyage becomes, beyond that, the actual and central framework of the Egyptian interpretation of the world order.”³ When the journey of life is compared at its end to a safe landing (where *mnj* “to land”,⁴ also euphemistically means “to die”),⁵ a distinctly positive outcome emerges: the voyage, through burial, leads into the afterlife and to the attainment of bliss. By contrast, failure is expressed through a storm that prevents a safe landing, or through an overloaded ship that likewise cannot dock safely. As stated in the Instruction of Amenemope, a true helmsman, therefore, must follow the instructions of the pilot or the god.⁶ According to Gerald Moers, sailors face dangers such as calm winds, shipwrecks, drowning, drifting, or missing their destination.⁷ For this reason, the journey of life is often compared to a sea voyage. Water itself is also regarded as a dangerous force that can harm the ship or, metaphorically, life itself.⁸

Among metaphors of shipping and seafaring, the symbol of “steering oar”⁹ is particularly significant. A steering oar is a large oar mounted at the rear (stern) or on the side of a boat or ship, used to control its direction and operated manually by a helmsman.¹⁰ In ancient Egypt, the steering oar was a large, elongated paddle fixed to the stern (rear) or quarter (the side near the stern) of a boat, guiding its course during navigation on the Nile and on the open sea. Metaphorically, the steering oar thus came to represent control over the course of life itself.

2. Amenemope 20:5–6.

3. Moers, Gerald 2001. *Fingierte Welten in der ägyptischen Literatur des 2. Jahrtausends v. Chr.: Grenzüberschreitung, Reisemotiv und Fiktionalität*. Probleme der Ägyptologie 19. Leiden: Brill, 225.

4. Wb II, 73:13–74:10; TLA Lemma ID 70060; Zandee, Jan 1960. *Death as an enemy according to ancient Egyptian conceptions*. Translated by W. F. Klasens. Studies in the History of Religions 5. Leiden: E. J. Brill, 53, A.2.2; Allam, Mourad 2001. Euphemismus beim Tod. *The Journal of the Faculty of Archaeology* 9 (1998), 59 n. 9.

5. See Hsu, Shih-Wei 2021. The Ancient Egyptian Idea of “Death” in Conceptual Metaphor Theory. *Aula Orientalis* 39/1, 105.

6. Brunner, Hellmut 1988. *Altägyptische Weisheit: Lehren für das Leben*. Die Bibliothek der Alten Welt, Reihe der Alte Orient. Zürich; München: Artemis, 17.

7. Moers, Gerald 2001. *Fingierte Welten in der ägyptischen Literatur des 2. Jahrtausends v. Chr.: Grenzüberschreitung, Reisemotiv und Fiktionalität*. Probleme der Ägyptologie 19. Leiden: Brill, 230–232.

8. Moers, Gerald 2001. *Fingierte Welten in der ägyptischen Literatur des 2. Jahrtausends v. Chr.: Grenzüberschreitung, Reisemotiv und Fiktionalität*. Probleme der Ägyptologie 19. Leiden: Brill, 192.

9. Schwarz, Sandro 2005. *Schiffe und Schiffsteile als Klassifikatoren in der ägyptischen Hieroglyphenschrift*. Master thesis, Berlin: Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, 48–49.

10. Definition from Online Cambridge Dictionary (<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/steering-oar>, accessed July 28, 2025).

2. The Metaphor of the Steering Oar: Visual and Textual Sources

a) Steering oar in images

Ancient Egypt had a long history of navigation along the Nile,¹¹ which was shaped by the practical constraints of riverine sailing, particularly the reliance on favorable winds.¹² Various types of ships, vessels and boats served as essential means of transportation and played economic, political, military, religious and ceremonial roles.¹³ Already in the Naqada IIc/d Period, scenes depicting steering oars appear. For example, in Hierakonpolis Tomb 100, a helmsman, probably at the stern side, can be seen steering at the back side of the ship (Fig. 1).¹⁴ A graffito of a sickle-shaped sailboat likewise shows a steering oar positioned on the right side (Fig. 2).¹⁵



Fig. 1. A paddle for steering operated by a human figure on the stern

11. Boreux, Charles 1925. *Études de nautique égyptienne: l'art de la navigation en Égypte jusqu'à la fin de l'Ancien Empire*. Mémoires publiés par les membres de l'Institut français d'archéologie orientale 50. Le Caire: Imprimerie de l'Institut français d'archéologie orientale.

12. Servajean, Frédéric 2023. *La Première supplique de l'Oasien ou comment bien naviguer sur le Nil*. Cahiers "Égypte Nilotique et Méditerranéenne" 37. Montpellier: CNRS - Université Paul-Valéry Montpellier 3.

13. Vinson, Steve 2013. Boats (Use of). Edited by Willeke Wendrich. *UCLA Encyclopedia of Egyptology* 2013 (April), 1.

14. Ciałowicz, Krzysztof M. 1993. *Symbolika przedstawień władcy egipskiego w okresie predynastycznym*. Uniwersytet Jagielloński, rozprawy habilitacyjne 258. Kraków: Nakładem Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, 21–27 Fig. 2.

15. Mark, Samuel 2013. The earliest sailboats in Egypt and their influence on the development of trade, seafaring in the Red Sea, and state development. *Journal of Ancient Egyptian Interconnections* 5 (1), 28 Fig. 3.

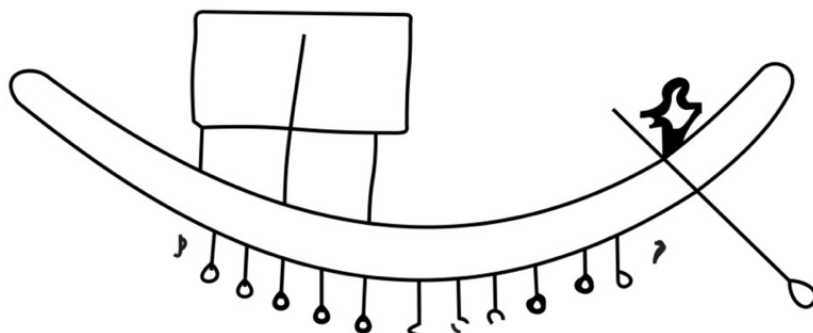


Fig. 2. Graffito of sickle-shaped sailboat

Furthermore, in the funerary temple of Sahure at Abusir, the king is depicted standing at the stern side of the royal boat and manoeuvring its sail.¹⁶ This scene illustrates the king's role in controlling the process of navigation, although it does not exactly depict a steering-oar scene.

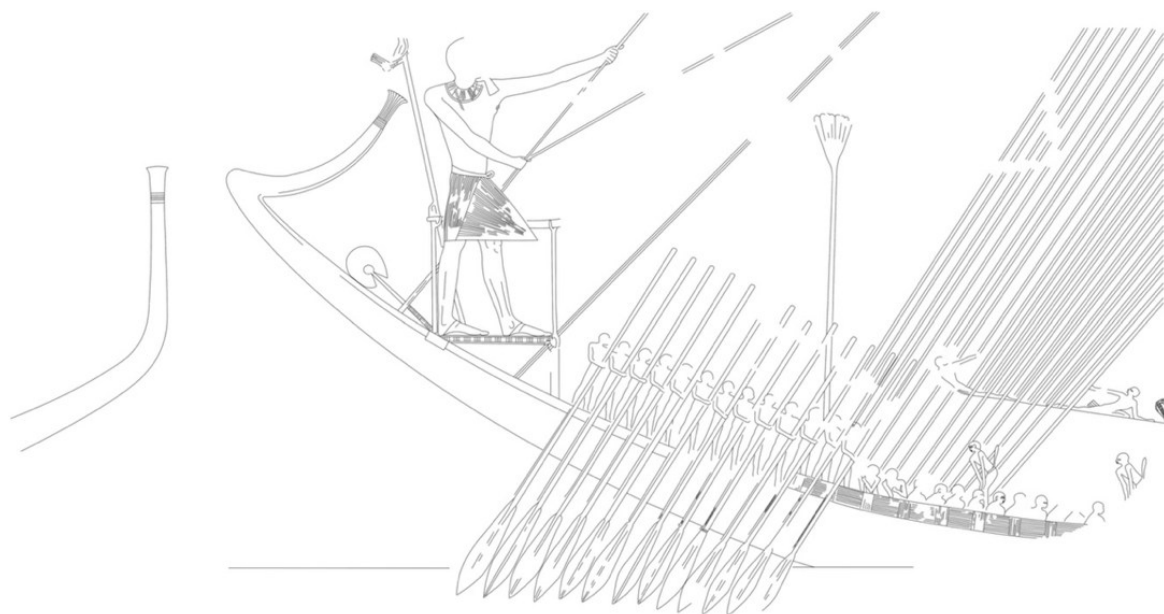
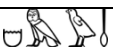
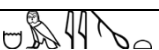


Fig. 3. King Sahure standing at the stern and operating the sail

16. Awady, Tarek el- 2009. *Abusir XVI: Sahure - the pyramid causeway: history and decoration program in the Old Kingdom*. Excavations of the Czech Institute of Egyptology. Prague: Czech Institute of Egyptology, Faculty of Arts, Charles University in Prague, 136–137 pl. 1.

b) *Steering oar in texts*

There are various nautical terms in Ancient Egyptian related to rope and oar.

Hieroglyphic	transliteration	translation	references
	<i>wsr</i>	Prow rope	Wb I, 364:5 TLA Lemma ID 49700
	<i>nfr.t</i>	Prow-rope (?)	Wb II, 262:8 TLA Lemma ID 83730
	<i>h3.t</i>	Prow (ship)	Wb III, 19:13 TLA Lemma ID 873176
	<i>h3.tjt</i>	Prow rope	Wb III, 28:5–7 TLA Lemma ID 100450
	<i>ph.wtjt</i>	Rear rope; stern rope	Wb I, 538:2–3 TLA Lemma ID 61480
	<i>hmw</i>	Steering oar	Wb III, 80:16–81:10 TLA Lemma ID 105300
	<i>hm.yt</i>	Steering oar	Wb III, 81:11–13 TLA Lemma ID 105240
	<i>dp.w</i>	Steering oar?	Wb V, 447:3 TLA Lemma ID 179070

The term *hmw* is already attested in Old Kingdom titles, for example *jmj-hmww* “chief helmsman”.¹⁷ Some gods also bear nautical epithets, such as *nb hmw* “lord of steering oar”¹⁸ and *hmn nfr* “beautiful rudder”.¹⁹ Additional nautical titles, such as *wtz-h3t* “uplifted of prow (of a sacred bark)”²⁰ and *h3jt* “prow rope”,²¹ are likewise attested in biographies. Nevertheless, the term *hmn* is already used metaphorically in the religious texts, describing the king as a “steering oar”. For example, in Pyramid Text 470 §917b: *n Ppy Nfr-k3-Rc.w hmn.w 3 hnj ht3.wy pt n Ppy Nfr-k3-Rc.w js wr tb(w) wsh nmt.t* “... because Pepi Neferkare is the great steering oar that pilots the two *ht3* of the sky, for Pepi Neferkare is one with a great sole and a wide stride.” This alludes to Pepi’s power to navigate the cosmos or to maintain order. A further example occurs in Pyramid Text 505 §1902b: *twt m hmn* “... you (Merenre Nemtyemsaf I) act as rudder”.²²

17. Jones, Dilwyn 1988. *A glossary of ancient Egyptian nautical titles and terms*. Studies in Egyptology. London; New York: Kegan Paul International; id. 2000. *An index of ancient Egyptian titles, epithets and phrases of the Old Kingdom*, 2 vols. BAR International Series 866 (1-2). Oxford: Archaeopress, no. 1013; TLA Lemma ID 850604.

18. LGG III, 698; TLA Lemma ID 878993.

19. LGG V, 142; TLA Lemma ID 885161.

20. Jones, Dilwyn 1988. *A glossary of ancient Egyptian nautical titles and terms*. Studies in Egyptology. London; New York: Kegan Paul International, 244 §32; TLA Lemma ID 51450.

21. Jones, Dilwyn 1988. *A glossary of ancient Egyptian nautical titles and terms*. Studies in Egyptology. London; New York: Kegan Paul International, 174 §98; TLA Lemma ID 100450.

22. The metaphorical use of *hmn* is also attested in non-royal funerary literature. In the Coffin Texts, the deceased is identified with *hmn jpw-nw Rc* “the steering oar of Re” (CT V 14c–j § Spell 360, 15a–16c § Spell 361). Later, in the

Furthermore, in the *Tale of Eloquent Peasant*, when Rensi acted as the representative of the king, he was praised by the peasant as *ḥmw n pt z3w n t3* “steering oar of heaven and beam of earth”²³ and *ḥmw n t3 r-dr=f* “steering oar of the entire land”.²⁴ This shows that the “steering oar of heaven” functioned as the upholder of cosmic order. The image of the rudder implicitly represents the steadfast judge;²⁵ in other words, Rensi is portrayed as one who controls a natural force, namely, the law.²⁶ This significance corresponds to the explanation of *ḥmw* in the Book of the Dead, which states: *mtr ʿq3 rn n ḥmw* “precise and correct is the name of a steering oar”²⁷ or *smtr ʿq3 rn n ḥmw* “precise examiner is the name of a steering oar”.²⁸

In royal inscriptions, Ahmose retained the metaphor of “steering oar”, describing himself as *z3w n pt ḥmw (n t3)* “beam of the heaven, steering oar of the earth”.²⁹ The term *ḥmw* was later employed by Ramesses II, who declared *nn-sp jrj.t mjtt dr nswt jmj [...] rmw m qʿḥ nw ḥ3.t n jdḥw ḥr swd3 ḥr=f m qm3 [ḥpš]=fmj ḥmw ḥr m3ʿ* “never was the like done since the time (or reign) of the kings who were before ... fish in the fish-rich waters of the lagoons of the Delta marshes, while delighting his face in creating ... his arm is like an oar in steering (the ship).”³⁰ In both cases, the use of *ḥmw* clearly emphasizes the king’s power of control and his skilful leadership.

c) *A special case of Hatshepsut*

However, Hatshepsut adopted a similar nautical metaphor but employed other terms instead of *ḥmw*: *ḥ3tjt mnḥ(t) n T3-šmʿ.w pḥwt mnḥ(t) nt T3-mḥw* “the excellent prow-rope of Upper Egypt and excellent stern-rope of Lower Egypt.”³¹ Instead of *ḥmw*, she deliberately chose *ḥ3tjt* and *pḥwt*. Both terms also appear in the biography of Ineni, a high-ranking official of the time.³²

b3k.tw=s Kmt m w3ḥ-tp prt ntr 3ḥt prt ḥnt=f
ḥ3t(j)t nt šmʿ.w mnjt rsw pḥwyṯ pw mnḥt nt T3-mḥw
Nbt wd-mdw mnḥ šḥr shrrt jdbwj ḥft mdw=s

Book of the Dead, this concept continues to appear: the deceased is metaphorized as *jmn.tj pt ḥmw j3b.tj* “the Westerner of the sky and the eastern rudder”, emphasizing his figurative ability to steer, guide, and orient himself (BD 064).

23. pBerlin P 3023 B1 121–122.

24. pBerlin P 3023 B1 298.

25. Parkinson, R. B. 2012. *The Tale of the Eloquent Peasant: a reader's commentary*. *Lingua Aegyptia, Studia Monographica* 10. Hamburg: Widmaier, 98.

26. Van Blerk, N. J. 2010. The Manifestation of Justice in Ancient Egyptian Law, with Specific Reference to *The Tale of the Eloquent Peasant*. *Journal for Semitics* 19 (2), 594.

27. BD 122.

28. BD 058.

29. Urk. IV, 16:5–6.

30. KRI II, 358:13–359:1.

31. Habachi, Labib 1957. Two graffiti at Sehēl from the reign of Queen Hatshepsut. *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 16 (2), 101–104.

32. Urk. IV, 60: 6–8; Dziobek, Eberhard 1992. *Das Grab des Ineni: Theben Nr. 81*. Archäologische Veröffentlichungen, Deutsches Archäologisches Institut, Abteilung Kairo 68. Mainz: Zabern, 52; 54.

“She is served, while Egypt is humble, beneficent seed of the god, which came from him, prow rope of Upper Egypt, mooring post of the southerners, she is excellent stern rope of Lower Egypt, a mistress of command, with excellent plans, who satisfies the Two Banks when she speaks.”

While nautical metaphors are already attested in the inscriptions of Ahmose, the original formulation has been adjusted. Rather than introducing *ḥmw*, which is associated with directing and guiding the movement of a vessel, Hatshepsut appears to have reinterpreted expressions such as *ḥ3tjt* “prow rope” and *phwt* “stern rope” within her royal titulary. These terms, together with the mooring post, emphasize stability, control, and the securing of the ship, particularly in the context of docking or anchoring. It is possible that her usage reflects a deliberate adaptation of earlier, predominantly male-associated formulations, reshaped to suit her own royal self-presentation. The same expressions reappear in the later reigns of Amenhotep III³³ and Sethos I,³⁴ for example in *ḥ3tjt m-dj=s nt T3-šmꜥ.w phwyt nt {n} T3-mḥw* “the prow rope of Upper Egypt was with him, and the stern rope of Lower Egypt”.

Vincent Rondot argues that these *nec plus ultra* expressions draw on comparisons with the prows and sterns of sacred barques, which are adorned with identical aegises.³⁵ In this context, the prow and stern ropes, essential for stabilizing and securing the vessel, metaphorically represent the king as a force of cohesion and control over Upper and Lower Egypt. Although Luc Gabolde contends that such expressions describe the role of a pharaoh rather than that of a queen,³⁶ it appears that Hatshepsut made a particularly deliberate use of these nautical metaphors to assert her participation in royal symbolism and authority. Her royal names, titularies and epithets emphasize her femininity, even as her visual representations conform to a traditionally male image.³⁷ The consistent use of feminine pronouns further indicates that her royal function was expressed without concealing her gender. The reappearance of *ḥ3tjt* and *phwyt* in later inscriptions is best understood as part of the continued use of a shared metaphorical repertoire, rather than the direct adoption of a specifically “feminine” formulation.

3. Concluding remarks

The metaphor of the king as a steering oar, deeply rooted in both visual and textual traditions, illustrates the pharaoh’s central role as navigator and guarantor of cosmic and political order. From the Pyramid Texts to the inscriptions of Ahmose and Ramesses II, the steering oar

33. Urk. IV, 1649: 16–17.

34. KRI I, 201:6; Rondot, Vincent 1997. *La Grande Salle Hypostyle de Karnak: Les architraves. Tome 1: Texte*, 2 vols. Paris: Ministère des Affaires Étrangères. Éditions Recherche sur les Civilisations, 28.

35. Rondot, Vincent 1997. *La Grande Salle Hypostyle de Karnak: Les architraves. Tome 1: Texte*, 2 vols. Paris: Ministère des Affaires Étrangères. Éditions Recherche sur les Civilisations, 29 n. e.

36. Gabolde, Luc 2005. *Monuments décorés en bas relief aux noms de Thoutmosis II et Hatchepsout à Karnak*, 2 vols. Mémoires publiés par les membres de l’Institut français d’archéologie orientale 123. Le Caire: Institut français d’archéologie orientale, 144 n. e.

37. This idea was presented by the author at the Eleventh European Conference of Egyptologists, and the paper will soon be published in the proceedings.

symbolized mastery, direction, and the ability to guide Egypt through both earthly and divine realms. Hatshepsut's deliberate adoption of alternative nautical expressions (*ḥ3tjt* and *pḥwyt*) reveals both her innovative approach to royal ideology and her assertion of authority within a traditionally male-coded framework. By reworking the metaphor into a form consistent with her gender, she simultaneously affirmed continuity with pharaonic symbolism and expanded its expressive potential. Ultimately, the image of the steering oar, and its variations, underscores the ideological necessity of the king (or queen) as the stabilizing force who ensures Egypt's safe passage through the uncertainties of life, death, and cosmic order.