

## Article

# Emotions and the Manifestation of Ancient Egyptian Royal Power: A Consideration of the Twin Stelae at Abu Simbel

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**Abstract:** Drawing on methods and theories from the history of emotions, this paper examines the Twin Stelae that flank the entrance into Ramses II's Great Temple at Abu Simbel in order to investigate the feelings associated with ancient Egyptian kingship from an ideological perspective. As the ruler, what was the king himself supposed to feel, and what feelings was he meant to elicit in his subjects? How did the feelings of the king differ from those of his subjects, and how did all these feelings reinforce and reify the institution of kingship and royal power? In order to propose some answers to these complex questions, I offer a close reading of key words and passages on the Stelae, considering the choice of hieroglyphic signs that the artists used to write them, the ways in which the artists depicted these signs, and the context of the words and passages within the inscriptions. I then use the Stelae's text to consider how ancient viewers were meant to see and experience the monumental façade of the Great Temple.

**Keywords:** kingship; Ramses II; emotions; feelings; senses; Abu Simbel; power; ancient Egypt

## 1. Introduction

Kings loom large in modern conceptions of ancient Egypt. Countless museum exhibitions, films, television shows, and novels have centered on Pharaoh. The names of particularly famous kings, such as Tutankhamun and Ramses the Great, are widely known. This fascination with Egyptian kingship is reflected in the scholarly literature as well. Kingship is a well-researched topic, and Egyptologists have long debated numerous issues related to it, including the nature of the king's divinity, his political relationships with high officials and the royal family, and his role in foreign affairs.<sup>1</sup> However, despite this considerable focus on kingship, the actual experience of kingship remains enigmatic. How did it feel to be a king in ancient Egypt? What feelings was the king meant to elicit in his subjects? How did the feelings of the king differ from those of his subjects, and how did all of these feelings reinforce and reify the institution of kingship and royal power?

These questions are complicated and multi-faceted, but it is possible to propose some answers using monumental art, which offers glimpses into how royal power was meant to be experienced, both by the king himself and by the people who surrounded him.<sup>2</sup> In this paper, I use the Twin Stelae that were carved on the façade of Ramses II's Great Temple at Abu Simbel as a case study. Art itself is incredibly powerful, having the capacity to produce intense emotional responses in those who view and interact with it. This is as true today with regard to contemporary viewers as it was for ancient viewers. However, although viewers across time might share the same optical faculties, emotional responses to what humans see are not consistent. Viewing is a subjective activity that is profoundly shaped by an individual's culture and society: "Viewing is not just a process of nature, directed by prestabilized laws of physiology. It is also an activity of culture, of culturally stamped behavior embedded in specific cultural practices. Different societies develop and adopt specific modes of viewing" (Hölscher 2018, p. 3). Similarly, the emotional impact of an artwork on a viewer is not universal, as Karen Sonik (2022) has discussed. "Ancient



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artworks, then, may well retain their affective powers in this modern age—even if the nature of the emotional effects they elicit in the contemporary viewer may differ greatly from those evoked in ancient beholders” (Sonik 2022, p. 314). As such, scholars need to be careful not to project the feelings that they experience when confronted with ancient artworks onto ancient viewers.

Sonik differentiated between the emotional intent imbued in an artwork, namely, the emotions that an artwork’s maker/s intended it to evoke, and the emotional effects that an artwork actually evoked in viewers (Sonik 2022, pp. 276–79, 305–12). In this article, my focus is on intent.<sup>3</sup> As Elisabeth Wagner-Durand (2020b, pp. 259–61) has discussed, people in power intentionally use images to provoke desired emotional responses. However, because such responses are not universal, the only way to begin to understand the emotional intent behind any given artwork is to situate the artwork within its ancient context. Doing so sheds light not only on emotional intent relevant to the specific artwork but also on the feelings that are more generally associated with power in that culture.

The Twin Stelae of Abu Simbel illustrate this and demonstrate some of the feelings associated with ancient Egyptian kingship.<sup>4</sup> Drawing on the work of Rob Boddice and Mark Smith (Boddice and Smith 2020), I understand experience to encompass both emotional and sensorial qualities, and I use the term “feelings” in a broad sense to indicate biocultural phenomena with mental and physical components.<sup>5</sup> Such a methodology acknowledges that humans may share biological traits across time and place but emphasizes that feelings and experiences, like viewing, are culturally specific because human brains are shaped by the culture and environment that surround them.

Certainly, the king was not among those individuals who actually made his monuments, and, in this way, I am expanding Sonik’s definition of emotional intent, which she primarily used to describe the intent of artists (Sonik 2022, pp. 276–79).<sup>6</sup> Ancient artists had the ability to improvise, adjust, and change royal monuments, but, at the same time, they were working within boundaries dictated by their patron, the king, and the state. Thus, such monuments should especially be understood as revealing the patron’s intents, rather than the artists’, though we should not excise the artists from the artistic process, and we must constantly interrogate how artists’ agency manifested in and corresponded with their final products. From this perspective, my approach primarily elucidates the ideology of kingship. Royal monuments and inscriptions reveal how the king was supposed to feel, from an idealized perspective, and how the Egyptian state, with the king at its apex, wanted his subjects to feel. In this way, I present an emotionology of kingship (Stearns and Stearns 1985). The mental and physical feelings that I identify are standards and norms; therefore, they are aspects of the king’s emotional style (Gammerl 2012); (Middleton 1989); (Reddy 2009, pp. 311–12). However, research has shown that there is no strict boundary between “real” emotions and emotional standards and norms, i.e., emotionology (Lewis and Stearns 1998, pp. 2, 11); (Boddice 2018, p. 62). Emotional standards and norms impact a person’s actual emotional experience, and one cannot divorce style from reality and practice. In other words, although the emotional landscape that each individual king inhabited would have been unique to him, the emotional style of the king and the feelings that were tied to kingship itself would have influenced and perhaps been central to how each king experienced his world and how those around him experienced kingship. I return to this idea in my conclusion.

The inscriptions on the Twin Stelae, the choice of hieroglyphic signs used to write them, and the depiction of these signs demonstrate that the king’s power had important emotional and sensorial components, including rage, sun-like brilliance, and raucousness. These attributes of kingship were meant to evoke particular emotional and bodily responses, such as debility, fear, and joy, in those with whom he interacted. Moreover, the broader setting of the Stelae demonstrates how the Egyptian state used art to help elicit these responses in ancient viewers. The messages conveyed via the monumental façade of Abu Simbel, into which the Stelae are set, complement, visualize, and reify the concepts articulated within the Stelae themselves. Indeed, the Stelae elucidate some of the emotional

impacts that the Great Temple's façade was meant to have on ancient viewers and, thus, help shed light on aspects of the façade's emotional intent.

## 2. The Twin Stelae

The Twin Stelae flank the entrance into Ramses II's Great Temple at Abu Simbel (Figure 1) (Kitchen 1999, p. 189). This was the largest rock-cut temple that the king had carved in Nubia (Wilkinson 2000, pp. 223–27). It was dedicated to Re-Horakhty, Ptah, Amun-Re, and the deified Ramses II, all of whom were provided with cult statues in the innermost shrine of the temple.<sup>7</sup> Four colossal statues of the king dominate the temple's monumental façade (Porter et al. 1952, pp. 100–1); (Ullmann 2011, pp. 305–6). The Twin Stelae were carved into the rock face on the outer sides of these statues. Both Stelae consist of an upper scene and a long inscription.<sup>8</sup>



**Figure 1.** The façade of Ramses II's Great Temple at Abu Simbel (Photograph: Tara Prakash).

The Stela to the south of the entrance (C.20) depicts the king making offerings to Amun-Re, Re-Horakhty, and the local god, Horus of Meha, followed by 23 lines of text (Figure 2) (El-Achirie and Jacquet 1984, pl. XXIX); (Curto 1965, pl. 197); (Gaballa and Maher Taha 2001, pls. LXII, LXIV, LXV); (Guieysse 1888); (Kitchen 1979, pp. 315–21); (Lepsius 1849–1859, 7: Bl. 195a); (Maspero 1911, 2: pl. CLXVII); (Porter et al. 1952, pp. 98–99); (Youssef 1979, pp. 183–91).<sup>9</sup> The first few lines of the text consist of the king's names and his common epithets. The remainder celebrates his military prowess, often with the use of metaphors and what Kitchen (1999, p. 189) described as “fresh and picturesque expressions”.



**Figure 2.** South stela (C.20) on the façade of the Great Temple at Abu Simbel (Griffith Institute Archives photo. 844, © Griffith Institute, University of Oxford).

The north Stela (C.22) has two offering scenes, which form a mirror image, at the top; in both scenes, Ramses offers to Re-Horakhty (Figure 3) (El-Achirie and Jacquet 1984, pl. XXX); (Gaballa and Maher Taha 2001, pls. LXVII, LXVIII); (Kitchen 1979, pp. 315–21); (Maspero 1911, 1: pp. 161–64, 2: pl. CLXVI); (Porter et al. 1952, p. 99); (Youssef 1979, pp. 183–94).<sup>10</sup> Moreover, the inscription of C.22 is longer than that of C.20. The first 24 lines on C.22 are nearly identical to the text on C.20, the main variation being in the spelling of particular words or in the depiction of certain signs. The subsequent 12 lines on C.22 remain consistent with regard to their subject matter, primarily continuing to boast of Ramses' martial abilities. However, the voice of the composition shifts, and the words of Ramses himself, addressed to "all people, upper officials, and the army in its entirety" (Line 25), are presented.



Figure 3. North stela (C.22) on the façade of the Great Temple at Abu Simbel (Maspero 1911, 2: pl. CLXVI).




The text on both Stelae is oriented toward each other and the entrance to the Great Temple, with the hieroglyphs of C.20 reading from right to left and those of C.22 reading from left to right. In this way, the inscription is directed toward the gods residing in the temple and the temple itself. This would also be true of Ramses II's speech on C.22. Despite his claim that it was directed toward a human audience, this speech could perhaps be better understood as a kind of performance meant to demonstrate to the gods the king's eloquence and oratory.

Overall, the writing of C.22 is better. The engraving of the inscription is clearer, and the hieroglyphs are more clearly delineated and executed. The organization of the hieroglyphs is also superior and more balanced than that of C.20. On the other hand, the Stelae both share a number of unusual spellings and inconsistencies, some of which I discuss below. This suggests that one was copied from the other or both were transcribed around the same time from a single master copy, which is perhaps more likely.

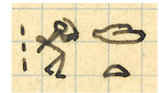
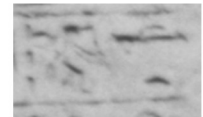
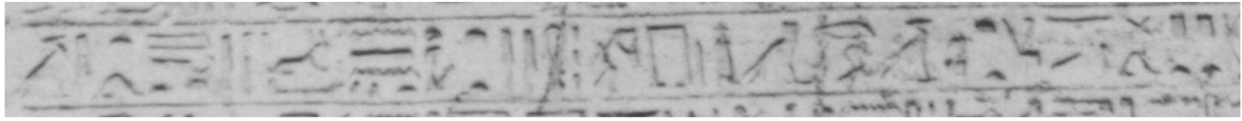
### 2.1. Rage and Disease

Rage was an important component of the pharaoh's emotional style (Prakash 2024, pp. 95–97); (Prakash 2025, pp. 142–44). The inscriptions on both Stelae reference this and also demonstrate that the king's rage was understood as having physical effects on those around him. In Lines 9–10, one reads that the king “tramples the land of Hatti, making them into heaps of corpses, like Sekhmet raging throughout a plague” (*ptpt t3 n ht3 jrwm jwnw mj shmt nšn.tj m-ht j3dt*) (Figure 4). The likening of the king to particular deities, including Sekhmet, is common in royal inscriptions; the king shares and takes on qualities associated with these deities (Hsu 2017a, pp. 191–92, 204–07, 371–72); (Grimal 1986, pp. 396–408); (Joseph 2018, pp. 36–41). In this case, the king and Sekhmet share the quality of rage or anger, with the word *nšnj* being used (TLA no. 88790).<sup>11</sup> *nšnj* often seems to have been used figuratively, with the king being described as a lion or deity raging against his enemies (Kitchen 1979, pp. 170:12, 198:10, 289:6).

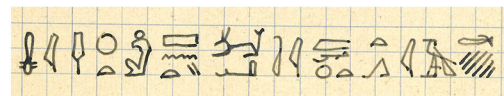
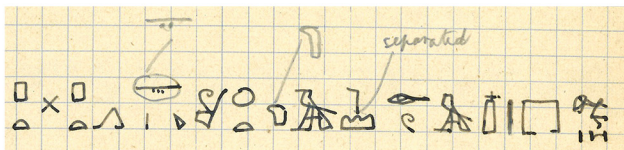
A comparison of the spellings of *nšn.tj* on C.20 and C.22 illustrates something that is typical of emotion words on these Stelae, namely, that they tend to be fully spelled out, often with one or more determinatives being written as well. These words generally take up a lot of space within the text. This contrasts with the writing of other words on the Stelae that are often extremely abbreviated or written as ideograms. For example, the spelling of *nšn.tj*, which is fully spelled out with two determinatives, can be compared to that of *jwnw*, “heaps of corpses”, which is written in a much more condensed way (Figure 4). It is possible that this pattern of extended spellings was meant to emphasize these emotion words in some way, assuming that the pattern was in fact deliberate and significant. However, this suggestion is highly tentative, and, certainly, other interpretations are conceivable. Indeed, multiple determinatives, as a means of categorization, are frequently found in Ramesside texts.

One of the determinatives that the artists used for *nšnj* on C.20 and C.22 was the recumbent Seth animal (Gardiner E21 — ). This spelling is typical, but it also illustrates another deity to whom the king was frequently likened because of his rage and violence: Seth (Hsu 2017a, pp. 191, 202, 204–06, 373–77); (Grimal 1986, pp. 83–91); (Joseph 2018, p. 45). With this phrase, the artists of the Twin Stelae explicitly linked the king and Sekhmet, but they also more subtly linked the king and Seth because of the choice of the word *nšnj* and its spelling. Moreover, the large size of the Seth determinative on C.22 may have been intended to reinforce this connection. Indeed, for the second determinative on this stela, the artists used Gardiner D36 (human forearm — ) , a very common and widely used sign, in places where one would expect to see Gardiner D40 (human forearm holding a stick — ) , which has a more limited semantic field associated with violence, aggression, and force. Perhaps this is because the artists preferred to make the Seth animal larger and more prominent; consequently, they ran out of room for the stick of D40.

## C.20




## C.22



**Figure 4.** Details from Lines 9–10 on C.20 and C.22 and their transcriptions (adapted from Griffith Institute Archives photo. 844 and Černý MSS 17.73.12 and 17.73.18, © Griffith Institute, University of Oxford and [Maspero 1911](#), 2: pl. CLXVI).

The following line continues the comparison between the king and Sekhmet: “who sends his arrows against them and has power over their limbs” (*jh3b šsrw.f r r.sn šlm m ʿtw.sn*). On one level, the first phrase describes the king’s own expected actions, as he would have shot arrows at his enemies in battle. Indeed, he is regularly depicted in this way. However, magic spells and other texts frequently refer to Sekhmet’s arrows, which inflict plague, disease, and destruction on humanity ([Borghouts 1978](#), pp. 2, 12); ([Pinch 1994](#), pp. 37–38).<sup>12</sup> Therefore, this line further emphasizes the association between the king and Sekhmet; the king rages and sends his arrows of destruction, just as Sekhmet does. Moreover, disease has power over one’s body, just as the king has power over the bodies of his enemies. Both phrases not only describe the aggressive king in battle but also reinforce the previous analogy; the king is a manifestation of the raging Sekhmet, who rains down arrows of plague onto Earth.

It is possible that the artists of C.20 further emphasized the relationship between all these phrases in another way. The determinative for *j3dt*, “plague”, seems to be a variant of Gardiner A14a () which is normally a squatting man with both arms holding an ax to his head and wearing a belt, the tassel/s of which extend (Figure 4).<sup>13</sup> Usually, the belt tassel/s are quite short, and this is the case in other instances on the stela where A14a is used, such as in *jwnw*, found a few words before *j3dt* (Figure 4). But in *j3dt*, the belt tassel, if this identification is correct, would be extremely long.<sup>14</sup> Instead, given the subsequent phrase and the link between plague and arrows, this extension may represent an arrow penetrating the back of the man, rather than a belt. Regardless, this series of phrases clearly demonstrates one of the emotive, sensorial natures of the king: he is supposed to feel rage against his enemies, and this rage is comparable to a disease, one that is capable of engulfing them and taking over their bodies.

## 2.2. The Loud King

The king’s rage was also meant to be loud, and the volume of the king was a facet of his violence. On the Twin Stelae, this idea is expressed metaphorically in Lines 14–15, through a comparison between the king and a lion: “Victorious lion, sharp of claws with shrieking cry when his voice goes forth in the valley of desert game” (*m3j nht nšm ʿnwt n ʿš djwt wd mdw.f m jnt nt ʿwt h3st*). Just as the warring king is often compared with violent gods like Sekhmet and Seth, he is frequently compared to aggressive animals, such as lions, in royal inscriptions (Hsu 2017a, pp. 193–97, 202–10, 445–49). However, this line demonstrates that it was not simply the power or ferociousness of the lion that was relevant. The sound of the lion was also important, and the king was understood to share the lion’s loud roar. Indeed, a better translation of *m jnt* within the context of this sentence may be “echoes”, which would further emphasize the importance of the king’s high volume.

Similarly, in Lines 20–21, the king is compared to a “terrible storm shrieking in the sea” (*dʿ nh3 djnwt m w3d-wr*) when destroying those ignorant of him.<sup>15</sup> *djnwt* can also be used to describe the screaming or roaring of people and animals, in addition to the noise of a storm (TLA no. 179860), and the king was understood to be similarly clamorous and deafening when necessary. In this regard, previous scholars have noted the significance of the king’s war cry (*hmhm*), which could be compared to thunder and a lion’s roar as well (Matić 2018, pp. 110–112); (Manassa 2011, pp. 156–57); (Grimal 1986, pp. 89 n. 201, 394 n. 1354, 692). His war cry, and his loudness in general, was meant to invoke fear in those who heard it. This is clearly articulated in the speech of Amun that is associated with the Festival of the Valley scene in the Great Hypostyle Hall at Karnak (Kitchen 1979, p. 574). In Lines 15–17, one reads: “I cause your war cry to circulate all of the foreign lands, your fearsomeness in their hearts” (*dj(.j) phr hmh(m)t.k h3stw nbw hryt.k m jbw.sn*). The king’s fearsomeness is also mentioned several times in the Twin Stelae, and I discuss this attribute, and my translation of the words used to express it, in more detail in the next section. However, the lines from Karnak clearly illustrate how the king’s sound was meant to elicit responses in those around him.

The use of the word *kh3* in Line 19 of the Twin Stelae further demonstrates the connection between the king’s aggression and his sound, which is implied in the comparison between the king and a lion. In Line 19, the king is likened to a fire “raging furiously, everything in it turning to ash” (*kh3 nty nb jm.f hpr m ssf*). The verb *kh3* generally indicates the making of a loud noise, such as shouting or bellowing (TLA no. 854569); (Blackman and Fairman 1944, p. 19 n. 40). In this case, the loud noise is the uncontrollable roaring sound of a fiercely burning fire. In all these examples on the Twin Stelae, the figurative language emphasizes the volume of the king.



## 2.3. The Glittering King

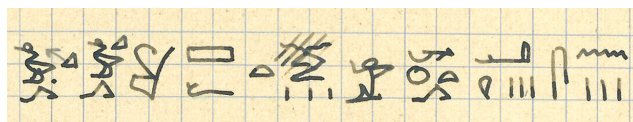
Another quality of the king that relates to senses concerns his appearance. In royal inscriptions, the king is regularly likened to the sun and is described as bright, shining, or glittering (Hsu 2017a, pp. 222–23, 398–404); (Grimal 1986, pp. 359–75, 424–28). As the son



of the sun god, an idea that is articulated in the king's *s3 r* name, he is a manifestation of the sun god on Earth (Quirke 2001, pp. 17–22); (O'Connor and Silverman 1995, p. xxv). For example, in Lines 6–7 of the Twin Stelae, the king is said to be “the likeness of Re, he shines on the circumference of the earth” (*mjt r psd.f hr snw n t3*). The verb *psd* is often used in reference to the sun itself (TLA no. 62420). In Line 22, the king is described as “appearing in the white crown” (*h<sup>c</sup> m hdt*). Indeed, the verb *h<sup>c</sup>j* is often used to describe the rising sun (TLA no. 114740). In this way, it directly associates the king with solar imagery (Quirke 1990, p. 11). Thus, a better translation of this phrase may be “shining in the white crown”. From an idealized perspective, the king looks like the sun and looking at the king is akin to looking at the sun.

Scholars have long recognized this sun-like aspect of the king and how it reflects the ideology and nature of kingship in ancient Egypt. However, it would also have impacted the experience of kingship. The king himself was supposed to feel luminous, as though he were radiating dazzling light, just like the sun. Conversely, seeing this bright and shining king was meant to elicit particular emotions in people, depending on their identity. For his enemies, the blinding sight of the sun-like king was meant to elicit their fear. As I noted above, words related to fear and terror are used several times on the Stelae, and, as is typical in royal inscriptions, it is the king's own fearsomeness that is most commonly referenced (Prakash 2024, pp. 97–100). For example, in Lines 8–9, we read that “his fearsomeness pervaded their bodies, their flesh trembling at all times because of his dreadfulness” (*phr.n snd.f m htw.sn h<sup>c</sup>w.sn m sd3 r trwj n hryt.f*). I translate *snd.f* and *hryt.f* as subjective genitives, following a number of scholars, including Jan Assmann, Rune Nyord, and Siegfried Morenz, who have discussed constructions like this and the conception of fear in ancient Egypt at length (Assmann 1977); (Nyord 2009, pp. 75, 404–17); (Morenz 1969, pp. 113–22); (Frandsen 2008, pp. 48–58); (Verbovsek 2009); (Bickel 1988); (Beaux 2017, p. 233); (Hsu 2017a, pp. 200–4).<sup>16</sup> According to their findings, fear is most frequently an attribute or power that one possesses. This is perhaps most easily translated into English as his fearsomeness or dreadfulness, as I have done here, even though in Egyptian, it literally reads “his fear”. With this attribute of fearsomeness, the possessor can produce fear in others, causing them to feel afraid and suffer associated physical effects, such as trembling.

Thus, fearsomeness, like rage, is an emotion of the king, and there is a sensorial quality to it as well. Just as the king's rage overcomes the bodies of his enemies like a disease, his fear pervades and enters into his enemies' bodies. It is not only emotional but also physical. In Line 33 of the king's speech on C.22, one finds another similar statement that utilizes a different word for fear, namely, *šfy*: “My dreadfulness has penetrated throughout their bodies” (*š<sup>c</sup>k.n šf(y)t.j ht h<sup>c</sup>w.sn*) (Figure 5). The artists dedicated a lot of space to the writing of *šfy* and gave it a large Gardiner F8 (forepart of ram — ) determinative. The surrounding words also include several Gardiner D54 (walking legs — ) determinatives, thus emphasizing motion and, perhaps, the penetration of the king's *šfy*, or dreadfulness, into the enemies' bodies.

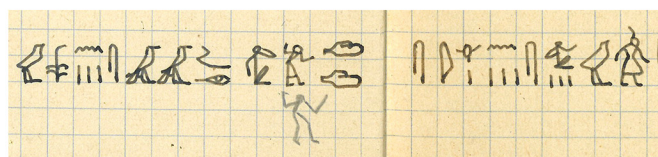
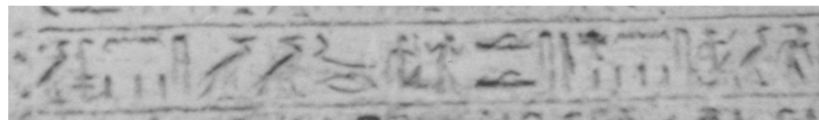


**Figure 5.** Detail from Line 33 on C.22 (adapted from Černý MSS 17.73.16, © Griffith Institute, University of Oxford).

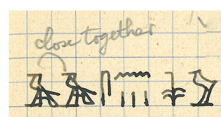
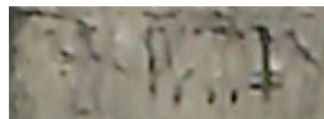
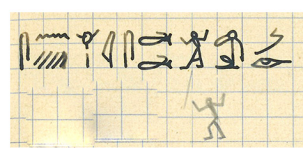
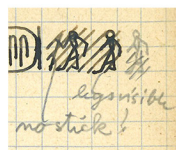
The king's fearsomeness can be transferred through sight, as Nyord (2009, pp. 405, 414) and Assmann (1977, p. 364) have previously discussed, and the Twin Stelae exemplify this. Line 12 reads: “Their chiefs tremble when they see him” (*wrw.sn hr jsdd m33.sn sw*) (Figure 6). Therefore, the sight of the blinding, sun-like king served to transfer the king's own dreadfulness into the bodies of his enemies, so that they became afraid and trembled. The determinative for *jsdd*, “tremble”, on C.20 seems to further emphasize this. This word

is usually written with a bird determinative, especially Gardiner G40 (𐀀) or Gardiner G41 (𐀁) (TLA no. 149680). However, here, a foreign man, marked as such by the feather on his head, appears to be actually trembling, with his knees slightly bent and his arms raised in fear. This sign is similarly written on C.22. In this case, he does not have a feather, but he does look more clearly like a trembling man. His knees are together, with bent legs and feet apart; his arms are open and out by his sides; and his body is bent forward a little at the waist. Thus, the artists visually emphasized the emotion that the text describes through the way in which they wrote the hieroglyphs.

## C.20



## C.22



**Figure 6.** Details from Line 12 on C.20 and Lines 12–13 on C.22 and their transcriptions (adapted from Griffith Institute Archives photo. 844 and Černý MSS 17.73.13 and 17.73.18, © Griffith Institute, University of Oxford and [Maspero 1911](#), 2: pl. CLXVI).

Fear is not the only emotion that the king was meant to elicit with his appearance. For the good people of Egypt who were not rebellious, the sight of the king, which was understood to be glittering and shining, as I mentioned above, was supposed to bring about their joy. In Lines 28–29 of the king's speech on C.22, one reads: "one flourishes for seeing me, one rejoices in me, like Horus, son of Isis" (*zhzh.tw n mzz.j hcc.tw jm.j mj hr zc jst*). Therefore, the sight of the king could bring prosperity and happiness, just as it could cause fear. These Stelae demonstrate that the king was meant to feel that his appearance was brilliant and shining and that this appearance was meant to cause different emotions in viewers, depending on who they were and their relation to the king.

### 3. The Façade

The façade of Abu Simbel ([Gaballa and Maher Taha 2001](#)) visualizes the feelings associated with kingship that are articulated on the Twin Stelae in a number of different ways

(Figure 1). For example, the emotional and sensorial qualities of kingship that I identified above all relate to the king's power and the ways in which his power was experienced.<sup>17</sup> Similarly, the façade of Abu Simbel manifested royal power. One way that this is visible is through the scale of the four colossi. Their size alone, at over 20 m high (Wilkinson 2000, p. 224), evinces massive strength and power that is congruous with the idea of the king's loudness and the tremendous presence that it implies, as expressed on the Stelae.

Moreover, the outer sides of the bases of the statues are decorated with images of kneeling bound foreigners carved in sunk relief (Figure 7) (Gaballa and Maher Taha 2001, pls. LXXIX, XCII, XCIII). On each surface, these foreigners are placed in a row, with their backs toward the temple. Their arms are pulled far behind their backs, with their chests sharply jutting forward, thus emphasizing the painful nature of the binding (Prakash, forthcoming). Their bodies also overlap with each other, which may be another cue that Egyptian artists would use to represent pain in certain contexts (Prakash 2021), with the lower leg of each foreigner's rearmost leg crossing in front of the lower front leg of the foreigner directly behind him. Their facial features and hairstyles are consistent with the stereotypical features that the Egyptians assigned to different foreign ethnic groups (Roth 2014, pp. 162–70), and they are arranged to align with the geography of the temple. The foreigners depicted on the bases of the two southern colossi are Nubians, who lived to the south of Egypt, while those on the bases of the two northern colossi represent different types of northerners. This geographical distinction is further reinforced by the plants that loop around the foreigners' necks; the Nubians are strangled by lilies, which were traditionally associated with Upper Egypt, while the northerners are strangled by papyrus, which was characteristic of Lower Egypt.

The king's placement above their bodies makes visible the power that he has over them, which is described in the Stelae.<sup>18</sup> This idea is also communicated by the size disparity between the massive king and the disproportionately small foreigners. At the same time, the foreigners themselves are life-size, which draws even greater attention to the colossal size of the king and, by extension, his power. The directionality of the foreigners, facing away from the temple, serves to direct this message, namely, the insurmountable and deafening existence of the pharaoh, outward, toward both the king's subjects and his enemies, rather than inward toward the gods inhabiting the temple. The plants that strangle the foreigners can also be interpreted as physical extensions of the king himself and of his grasp (Prakash, forthcoming). Just as the Twin Stelae describe the rage-filled king controlling the bodies of his enemies, the reliefs represent the king's utter power over these foreigners.

The colossi also visualize the king's sun-like, glittering appearance. They represent the king's inherently solar nature as the son of the sun god through the crowns that he wears. Each statue has a double crown set on top of a nemes. The double crown could reference the king's relationship to Re as ruler of the sky (Goebis 2008, pp. 121–40). Moreover, the nemes had particularly strong solar associations; together, the set of crowns expressed the pharaoh's divine aspects and role as the earthly ruler (Goebis 1995); (Ullmann 2011, pp. 310–11); (Collier 1996, pp. 76–78).

Furthermore, the statues themselves would have shone in the sunlight, just as the king himself was said to shine, at each sunrise; the temple was constructed facing eastward to ensure this illumination. Similarly, the sunlight would have shone on the cryptographic writing of Ramses' name, which featured the sun god Re-Horakhty, carved into the center of the façade directly above the doorway into the temple (Gaballa and Maher Taha 2001, pl. LXXI). Indeed, the Great Temple had especially strong solar properties that its designers emphasized in multiple ways (Wilkinson 2000, pp. 236–37); (Maravelia and Shaltout 2003); (Meza 2009); (Kitchen 1999, p. 481). Twice a year, the sun penetrates all the way to the innermost sanctuary, illuminating the cult statues. Within the temple, reliefs of the divine Ramses II often have a falcon head and sun disc, mimicking the iconography of Re-Horakhty (Ullmann 2011, p. 312).



**Figure 7.** Detail of the bound Nubians carved in sunk relief on the north side of the base of Ramses II's colossal statue, immediately south of the entrance into the Great Temple at Abu Simbel (Photograph: Tara Prakash).

The solar focus of the temple is also highlighted through a frieze of baboons that runs along the top of the façade (Gaballa and Maher Taha 2001, pl. LXIX). Each baboon is in the same position, squatting with his arms bent at the elbows and raised in front of him, with palms facing outward. Baboons were solar symbols because of their propensity to shriek during the sunrise (Te Velde 1988); (Manassa 2011, p. 163). In this way, they were interpreted as welcoming and praising the sun god himself. The baboons carved along the top of the façade have their arms raised in praise. They face outward and toward the rising sun. However, they are also positioned behind the colossi of the pharaoh (Figure 1). In this way, their gesture is directed not only toward the sun itself but also toward the manifestation of the sun in the form of the pharaoh's image. The colossi, and the entire façade, were designed to dazzle and blind those outside the temple. The Stelae indicate the emotional responses that this visual spectacle of the king was meant to elicit, namely, joy and fear. Thus, the monument served to reify the concepts expressed in the Stelae.

#### 4. Conclusions

Rage, fear, and joy were important emotions associated with kingship during the Ramesside period, and they were understood as having physical effects. Conceptual understandings of emotions and senses seem to have overlapped in ancient Egypt.<sup>19</sup> The sight and sound of the king were intended to evoke feelings. Conversely, we should recognize that the king was meant to feel that his appearance had power and was emotive. Ancient Egyptian monumental art, such as the Twin Stelae at Abu Simbel, sheds light on the ide-

ological experience of kingship. At the same time, the Egyptian state used this art to reinforce and reify the institution of kingship. The Twin Stelae describe the booming volume of the king as a feature of his aggressive rage and fearsomeness, which paralyzes and takes control of his enemies' bodies, while the colossal scale of the Abu Simbel façade statues, set atop the bound bodies of foreign enemies, visualizes the king's utter command over those who oppose him. The façade displays the feelings of power that the king was supposed to feel, but it was also intentionally designed to elicit particular emotional responses in those around him. The inscriptions on the Twin Stelae describe the blinding appearance of the king and the fear and joy that different individuals, depending on their identity, were meant to feel when confronted with this view. Likewise, the façade of Abu Simbel was intended to manifest this view, particularly with the king's colossi, which would have dazzled at sunrise, causing those who saw them to experience trembling and awe. More broadly, a close reading of the Stelae helps to elucidate some of the experiential power that such ancient Egyptian artworks held in their original context, namely, for ancient Egyptian viewers.

In this way, artists were tools of the state, producing and reproducing the emotional styles of kingship. Moreover, the inscriptions on the Twin Stelae demonstrate how broad the category of "art" was in ancient Egypt and highlight some of the issues with the term "artist" in this cultural context. Hieroglyphic texts are themselves works of art, and the various manipulations and reinterpretations of hieroglyphs that I discussed above emphasize this. Artists were responsible for carving monumental works, such as the Twin Stelae, and although they may not have always been the ones who originally composed the texts themselves, they were responsible for adapting the texts to fit the thematic, aesthetic, and spatial contexts (Laboury 2020). This required a high degree of creativity and adaptability. Indeed, the variations between the inscriptions on C.20 and C.22 could largely be due to different artistic hands transcribing from (and transforming) a single master text. While I have referred to the carvers of the Stelae as "artists" throughout this article, their interdisciplinary skill set, which included the abilities to craft both text and imagery, distinguishes them from "artists" in the modern context, whose expertise is generally understood as being purely figurative.

How did the king's bright and shining quality impact his actual appearance, both within ritual settings and also in more mundane ones? Similarly, how did the expectation of the king's loudness manifest in reality, and how did the king's sounds contribute to and interact with the broader aural atmosphere?<sup>20</sup> As I mentioned in my introduction, emotional style relates to standards and norms, namely, what the king, and those around him, were supposed to feel, according to the state ideology. These individuals did not necessarily always feel as they were supposed to. For example, high officials likely did not always exult and feel joyful when they saw the king. However, standards and norms impact how a person actually feels in any given situation. If high officials were supposed to feel joyful at the sight of the king or his image, that expectation inevitably would have impacted their feelings, as well as their actions. Scholars cannot divorce the study of emotionology from the study of emotions. In examining one, we are naturally contributing to our knowledge of the other. While my focus has been to investigate emotional style based on monumental royal art, future studies might employ other documents, such as private tomb inscriptions, administrative documents, or letters, to question how the emotional styles I have identified here were negotiated and contested.

In reality, the experience of kingship was far more complicated than what the ideology presents. There was room for subjective interpretation and individual mediation. This mimics the production and consumption of royal art itself. While the state used art as a tool for its power, how ancient people understood the expressions of power in that art, and the art itself, was undoubtedly tangled and ambiguous.


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## Notes

- 1 Key publications on kingship include O'Connor and Silverman (1995), Frankfort (1948), Posener (1960), and Winnerman (2018), all with further bibliography.
- 2 Concerning power and the study of emotions in ancient Egypt, see Prakash (2025).
- 3 However, this distinction parallels that found between emotional style and reality, which I discuss further in this section, and I would argue that it is a similarly slippery distinction. Just as emotional style impacts how a person actually feels in any given situation, the expected impact of an artwork and the emotions that an artwork are supposed to elicit inevitably impact how a person responds to that artwork.
- 4 This study is part of a larger project that I am currently undertaking on the feelings associated with ancient Egyptian kingship.
- 5 "By experience we mean, simply, to capture the lived, meaningful reality of historical actors, whether as subjective or collective reality, and incorporating all the features of past perception in their own terms, be they sensory, emotional, cognitive, supernatural or whatever" (Boddice and Smith 2020, p. 17). See also Boddice (2019, pp. 7–19); Boddice (2018); Wagner-Durand (2020a); and Engelen et al. (2008).
- 6 However, she did emphasize the collaborative nature of authorship with regard to ancient Near Eastern art, with numerous individuals, including the ruler himself, potentially having been involved in the design of royal artworks (Sonik 2022, pp. 277–79).
- 7 Concerning the chronology and design process associated with the temple's dedication to the deified Ramses II, see Ullmann (2011); Habachi (1969, pp. 1–10); and Kitchen (1999, pp. 480–89).
- 8 Translations of the texts can be found in Erman (1923, pp. 322–25); Erman (1966, pp. 258–60); Kitchen (1996, pp. 155–60); and Youssef (1979, pp. 195–202).
- 9 In addition to the unpublished archival sources listed by Porter et al. (1952, pp. 98–99), unpublished transcriptions of the main text of C.20 can be found in the  erny (MSS 17.73.18–19) and Gardiner (MSS 23.62.35) archives at the Griffith Institute, University of Oxford.
- 10 An unpublished transcription of the main text of C.22 can be found in the  erny (MSS 17.73.11–17) archive at the Griffith Institute, University of Oxford.
- 11 One needs to remain alert to the various issues surrounding the translation of emotion words from one language to another (Boddice 2018, pp. 41–58). There were almost certainly nuances and overlapping meanings to these words that are much harder for Egyptologists to recognize today and that can be lost in translation. Similarly, translations may layer new, modern implications or connotations onto ancient words. My larger project includes a detailed study of how and when the Egyptians used emotion words in royal inscriptions to try and better reconstruct their original meanings and broader semantic fields.
- 12 The concept of arrows from a celestial divine realm bringing plague, illness, and other negative things down upon humanity occurs across numerous time periods and cultures (Marshall 1994); (Marshall 2016, pp. 184–86).
- 13 Gardiner A14a is itself a variant of Gardiner A14 (man with blood streaming from his head — , in which the blood is reinterpreted as an axe.
- 14 Compare the transcriptions, where the sign is rendered as A14a with a very long belt (Kitchen 1979, p. 318:6), ( erny MSS 17.73.18, Griffith Institute, University of Oxford), (Youssef 1979, p. 187).
- 15 Concerning figurative language in which the king is likened to natural phenomena, see Hsu (2017a, pp. 200–4, 422–28).
- 16 For *snq*, see TLA no. 138740, and for *hryt*, see TLA no. 108390.
- 17 In this way, they also relate to the king's *bꜣw*, which can be understood as the manifestation of the king's power and something that is given by and shared with the gods ( abkar 1968, pp. 51–73); (Grimal 1986, pp. 692–99). This naturally leads to the question of whether the king's feelings were given to him by the gods and shared with them as well, and the degree to which

this might have been the case. These are central issues that my larger project on the feelings of kingship, which I mentioned above, investigates.

<sup>18</sup> Concerning the king's placement above his enemies more generally, see [Hsu \(2017b\)](#), p. 284).

<sup>19</sup> In this regard, see also [Di Biase-Dyson and Chantrain \(2022\)](#); however, note that their psychological approach to emotion differs from my historical one, which I outline in this article's introduction.

<sup>20</sup> Studies on sound and the soundscapes of ancient Egyptian settings are relevant here and may help in answering these questions ([Elwart and Emerit 2019](#), pp. 316–18); ([Emerit 2015](#)).

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