

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE SIGN OF THE ANCIENT EGYPTIAN GODDESS SESHAT DOWN TO THE END OF THE OLD KINGDOM: ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION*

– Part Three –

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*Die Identifizierung dieses Attributs bzw. Symbols der Seschat, mit
dem auch ihr Name geschrieben wird, ist bis heute nicht gelungen.*

(Dagmar Budde, Die Göttin Seschat, 2000)

Two parts of this study published in the previous volumes of this journal contain a corpus of the signs of the goddess Seshat consisting of the basic description and characteristics of this sign. More than eighty references were found in the iconographic and epigraphic records dated to the Archaic and Old Kingdom Periods. Part Three published in this volume encloses this study, and presents the results of the investigation including an attempt to interpret the sign of the goddess Seshat.

Key words: iconography, Seshat's emblem, analysis, symmetry, lotus.

1

This investigation of the sign of Seshat is based on the published records. The whole corpus of references consists of eighty one signs¹ dated to the third millennium B.C. They are divided into two categories: first, the signs attested in the relief scenes of the royal monuments, and second, the signs found in the hiero-

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¹ The documents published in two previous volumes of the AAS journal will be cited in this part of the study according to their numbers.

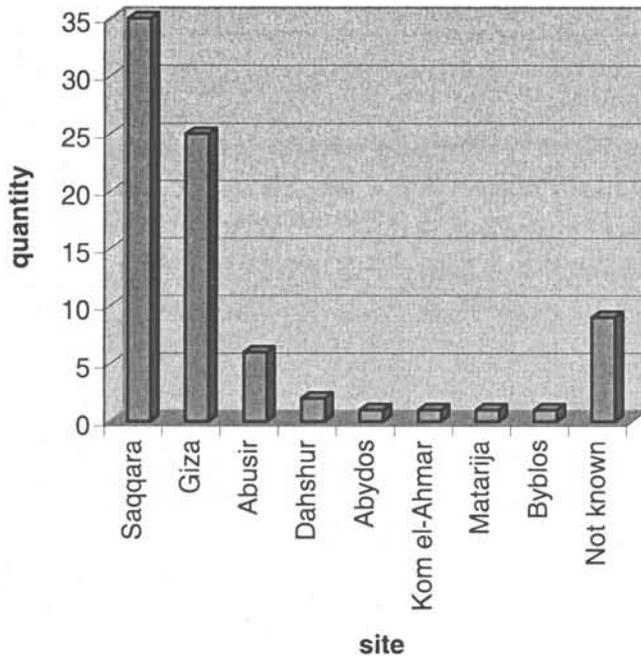


Figure 1. The provenance of the sign.

glyphic inscriptions. The former (iconographic) category is represented by the signs depicted as the headdress of the goddess Seshat in seven cases,² and in two references³ the sign occurs in the form of a divine standard. The latter (epigraphic) category is formed by the signs found in royal and non-royal inscriptions of various contents, such as the name of the goddess Seshat herself and her male counterpart Seshau, further the name of Seshat in theomorphic names of the officials and in the priest titles.⁴ The statistical evaluation of the provenance and occurrence of the sign at the archaeological sites and on the various monuments respectively are expressed in figures one and two.

In general, the study of the sign of Seshat comprises several approaches including various methods applied during the research in the past. In this study, the detailed descriptive analysis of the sign presented in the first two parts of this study provides important data about its basic characteristics. The results of this approach can be further complemented and extended by a comparative method to identify the changes, similarities and differences between the signs. They can be useful for establishing a more detailed typology of the sign for the period. In the interpretation part, the role and function of the goddess Seshat from the religious

² Nos. 1.1., 1.2, 1.3., 1.4., 1.5., 1.6., 1.8.

³ Nos. 1.7.1., 1.7.2.

⁴ Majority of the signs in this category comes from the non-royal inscriptions.

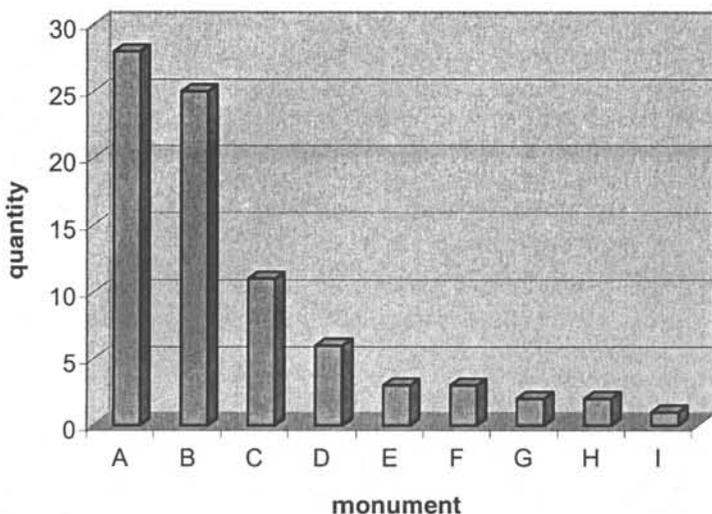


Figure 2. The occurrence of the sign on the monuments.

A = tomb inscriptions, temple reliefs; B = offering niches, false doors, tables; C = seal impressions; D = stone vessels; E = stelae; F = wooden tablet; G = Palermo Stone; H = statues; I = obelisk

viewpoint as we know her on the basis of the religious texts and scenes are taken into consideration in order to discuss the form and meaning of her symbol.

This study in context of the examination of the sign is focused primarily on its iconography and palaeography preserved in the Archaic and Old Kingdom records. Although the whole material of this study is dated to the first six dynasties, in certain cases some examples of signs and other records from later periods will be cited as well. The later evolutionary forms of the sign will be mentioned to clarify and better understand some partial problems connected with the interpretation of the sign.

Admittedly, in spite of the number of the collected signs we must consider the fact that our corpus is far from being complete. On the other hand, more than eighty examples provides statistically sufficient amount for discussion of the problems examined in this study. More than 75% of all signs are those preserved completely or with irrelevant traces of damage from the viewpoint of the basic characteristics and preservation of all important parts of the sign. The signs with a high degree of damage or the ones with relevant parts missing form the rest. As can be seen in figure one, a majority of the signs come from the royal cemeteries of the Memphite area with the strong concentration of non-royal tombs. A very small number of signs are attested from other localities in Egypt.⁵ The data presented in figure two complement those in previous diagram and show clearly that almost all

⁵ One sign (No. 2.11.) comes from the locality out of Egypt, i.e. Byblos.

sources belong to the funerary context. The attested evidences show that the sign of Seshat can be found imprinted on mud, further engraved on the surface of stone or wood in the form of the raised or sunken relief or painted on the same materials. The quality of the preserved sign is variable. Only one example provides a notion about the coloured decoration of the sign. It is the sign preserved on the well-known polychrome slab stela belonging to the official named Wepemnefret.⁶ This is the only sign of Seshat preserved with colours from the investigated period that we know of so far. The calligraphic forms of the sign with detailed decoration of some of its parts are rare, however, they are also attested.⁷

2

At this place it will be useful to present some theories focused on the interpretation of the sign of the goddess Seshat published so far. It should be noticed that the opinions of the scholars mentioned here concern both the early and the later evolutionary forms of the sign known in two fundamental hieroglyphic forms  and  respectively. The most frequent and important theories are mentioned here according to the year of their appearance in the published form.⁸

1905. In her publication focused on the Saqqara mastabas, Margaret Murray⁹ turns her attention to the sign of the goddess Seshat. Her interpretation is presented in the context of the sign preserved on the limestone panels coming from the offering niche of the tomb of Khabausokar.¹⁰ Murray says that: “Seshat must therefore be the deity of hut-building, and this is, I think, shown by the hieroglyph of her name.” Further she continues: “The central pillar is of reeds firmly lashed together and ending in the well-known *kheker*-ornament. On this central pillar are laid three cross-beams, also made of lashed papyrus reeds, which span the hut from side to side; the combination of beams and pillar give the effect of an open flower owing to the peculiar method used by the Egyptian artist of representing a building partly in plan and partly in elevation. A domed roof of thatch rests on the ends of the beams and on the top of the central pillar. This is then the aspect of a hut before the lattice side-screens are put in position; it represents the essential parts of the building; the screens being non-essential. The ornament at the top may be the feathers of divinity, but are more probably the representation in highly stylized form of the bunches of straw with which the topmost layer of thatch is finished.”

1909. In this year the German Günther Roeder¹¹ published an entry about Seshat in Roscher’s Lexikon. In his essay he writes about the headdress of Seshat:

⁶ No. 2.14.

⁷ Nos. 1.2., 2.12., 2.14.

⁸ Cf. D. Budde, *Die Göttin Seschat*, Leipzig 2000, 37–39.

⁹ M. A. Murray, *Saqqara Mastabas*, Volume 2, London 1905, 10–11.

¹⁰ Nos. 2.12.1., 2.12.2., 2.12.3., 2.12.4.

¹¹ G. Roeder, *Seschat*, In: W. H. Roscher, *Ausführliches Lexikon der griechischen und römischen Mythologie*, Lieferung 59, Leipzig 1909, 714–724.

“Das Zeichen auf dem Kopf der S. [Seschat] verändert sich allmählich. Im mittleren Reich ist die Rosette auf eine längere Stange gesetzt, so daß sie hoch über dem Kopf der Göttin schwebt; so bleibt es durch allen späteren Zeiten hindurch. Gelegentlich ist die Gruppierung der Strahlen eine andere als sonst; zuweilen scheint die Rosette fünf statt sieben Strahlen zu haben, sowohl im Neuen Reich wie in ptolemäischer Zeit. Die beiden Aufsätze auf dem Halbkreisbogen sind in älterer Zeit noch ziemlich hoch, werden in der 19. Dynastie wesentlich niedriger und stehen sogar im spitzen Winkel zueinander. Der Bogen nähert sich im neuen Reich mehr und mehr der Form von abwärts gebogenen Rinderhörnern, der sie in später Zeit ziemlich nahe kommen.”

1940. The paper published by Gerald A. Wainwright¹² was primarily focused on the relation between Seshat and the pharaoh. Wainwright notices the decoration of the stem and the petals observed on the sign from the tomb of Khabausokar¹³ and the pyramid complex of Sahura.¹⁴ In this context he writes about the “spirals on the stem.” Further he continues that “the ‘petals’ show a midrib and veining which seem to represent feathers, or it may be perhaps leaves.” Wainwright focuses on the two vertical feathers and the arc. On the basis of the illustration of the sign from the pyramid complex of Pepy II published by G. Jéquier he postulates that the upper part of the sign can be considered as the predecessor of its later form with two horns turned up side down.¹⁵ Wainwright says that: “He [i.e. Pepy II] thus prepares the way for the division of this sign into two separate horns with the meaningless uprights at their butt ends.”

1952. Jaromír Černý¹⁶ describes the sign by the following words: “A star carried on a pole and surmounted by a curved rib with two upward projections was originally the embodiment of the goddess Seshat.”

1952. Hans Bonnet¹⁷ describes the sign of Seshat as follows: “Es gleicht einem siebenstrahligen Stern und wird oben von einem Bügel umspannt, den ein kleines Federpaar krönt. Man hat ihn später zu einem nach unten gerichteten Hörnerpaar umgebildet.”

1965. Alexander Badawy¹⁸ emphasises the number seven in connection mainly with the later form of the name/epithet of Seshat *Šfht bw*, or *Šfht bwj*.

1966. Peter Kaplony¹⁹ interprets the sign of Seshat as a palm in combination together with the moon sign (N 11 in the sign-list). The former constituent of the

¹² G. A. Wainwright, Seshat and the Pharaoh, JEA 26, 1941, 30–40.

¹³ Nos. 2.12.1., 2.12.2., 2.12.4.

¹⁴ No. 1.5.

¹⁵ However cf. D. Magdolen, The Development of the Sign of the Ancient Egyptian Goddess Seshat down to the End of the Old Kingdom: analysis and interpretation. Part One, AAS 14/1, 2005, 53.

¹⁶ J. Černý, Ancient Egyptian Religion, London 1952, 27.

¹⁷ H. Bonnet, Reallexikon der ägyptischen Religionsgeschichte, Berlin 1952, 701.

¹⁸ A. Badawy, Ancient Egyptian Architectural Design. A Study of the Harmonic System, Berkeley and Los Angeles 1965, 58–60.

¹⁹ P. Kaplony, Kleine Beiträge zu den Inschriften der ägyptischen Frühzeit, ÄA 15, Wiesbaden 1966, 254–255 and 259–260. See also Z. Y. Saad, Royal Excavations at Helwan (1945–1947), Le Caire 1951, 33–34.

sign would have been later transformed into a form of the star and the latter into the horns depicted up side down.

1966. In this year Wolfhart Westendorf²⁰ published his study focused on the iconography of the solar journey, in which he supposes that the arc above the rosette in the sign of Seshat might represent "... Himmlesbogen mit einer Doppelfeder."

1982. In the sign-list of the third edition of the Egyptian Grammar its author Alan H. Gardiner²¹ writes about the sign (R 20) that it is "conventionalized flower (?) surmounted by horns". The sign R 20 is the later variant of the Old Kingdom one (R 21).

1984. The author of the entry "Seschat" in *Lexikon der Ägyptologie*, Wolfgang Helck,²² writes about the sign that: "Das Zeichen besteht aus einer Rosette mit sieben Blättern; anstelle des achten, untersten Blattes ist immer der Befestigungsstab angebracht, an dem das Zeichen getragen bzw. mit dem es am Kopf der Göttin befestigt ist. Dabei soll es anscheinend an einem Band am Hinterkopf befestigt und nach vorn blickend vorgestellt werden. Über der "Rosette" ist ein mondformiges Gebilde angebracht, auf dessen Scheitelpunkt zwei Falkenfedern stehen. Dies dürfte in irgendeiner Weise das eigentlichen Zeichen (die "Rosette") vergöttlichen, Auf welches Gerät jedoch die "Rosette" zurückzuführen ist, bleibt unklar, wenn auch zu erwarten ist, daß es in vordynastischer Zeit mit "Schreiben" oder vielleicht auch "astronomischen Beobachtungen" zu tun gehabt haben muß."

1997. Thomas Schneider's study²³ is focused rather on the etymology of the name of Seshat than the interpretation of the sign itself. He develops his theory on the basis of the floral nature of the sign.

2000. In this year Dagmar Budde²⁴ published her dissertation under the title *Die Göttin Seschat*. It is the most comprehensive study focused on this goddess and her role in the ancient Egyptian religion. The study is based on the epigraphic and iconographic records coming from the earliest dynasties to the Ptolemaic and Roman Periods. The study contains the chapter, in which the author deals with the symbol of Seshat and its iconographic analysis.²⁵ Discussing individual parts of the sign in her study, Budde writes: "Ob die Rosette eine Palme symbolieren soll, ist aber nicht zu beweisen und bleibt trotz der soeben angeführten Grabdarstellung zweifelhaft. Zum einen gibt es in den schriftlichen Quellen keinerlei Hinweise darauf, in Seschat eine Art Baumgöttin zu sehen." Further she continues: "Eine gesicherte Identifizierung des oberen Teils des Symbols der Seschat scheint beim

²⁰ W. Westendorf, *Altägyptische Darstellungen des Sonnenlaufes auf der abschüssigen Himmelsbahn*, MÄS 10, Berlin 1966, 22.

²¹ A. H. Gardiner, *Egyptian Grammar*, Oxford 1982³, 503.

²² W. Helck, *Seschat*, In: W. Helck, W. Westendorf (eds.), *Lexikon der Ägyptologie*, Band 5, Wiesbaden 1984, 884.

²³ T. Schneider, *Das Schriftzeichen "Rosette" und die Göttin Seschat*, SAK 24, 1997, 241–267.

²⁴ See note 8.

²⁵ D. Budde (2000), 37–49.



Figure 3



Figure 4

heutigen Quellenstand nicht möglich zu sein. Von Bedeutung ist nicht zuletzt aber, daß die Betrachtung des Symbols ergeben hat, daß neben motivischen auch stilistische und topographische Unterschiede bei der Gestaltung feststellbar sind. Denn es war zu sehen, daß beispielweise die Form der Rosetten mit nur fünf Blättern, welche die beiden Enden des Oberteils berühren, nur in Theben zu finden ist, und selbst innerhalb des thebanischen Raumes ließen sich Unterschiede zwischen Karnak und Medinet Habu beobachten. Weiterhin ist die Gestaltung des Oberteils in Schlangen oder Hörnerform erst ab der 20. Dyn. nachzuweisen, wohingegen die hohen Aufsätze nur im Alten Reich und in der Spätzeit,²⁶ die die alten Formen zitiert, anzutreffen sind. Für etwaige Fragen nach einer Datierung oder Herkunft der Quellen ist eine Betrachtung des Symbols durchaus lohnenswert.”

3

The stem of the sign forms its lowermost part. The preserved signs show that the length of the stem is variable. The stem of the sign used in the relief scenes as the headdress of Seshat is always shorter compared with that used as the hieroglyphic sign in the epigraphic inscriptions. Two references from the Archaic period show very peculiar shape of the stem depicted in a bifurcated form.²⁷ The inscription comprising this sign is incomplete, but it is believed that this sign represents the archaic form of the sign of Seshat.²⁸ The examples of the decorated stem are very rare. From the Archaic and Old Kingdom Periods, there are only four such references.²⁹ The decoration of the stem consists of the oblique lines. While in the sign from the pyramid complex of Sahure these lines run from the upper left to lower right side (figure 3), the lines in the sign from the tomb of Khabausokar run from the upper right side to the lower left (figure 4). The sign preserved on the slab stela of Wepemnefret³⁰ represents the only evidence about the colour of the stem which was in this case painted in yellow colour.

²⁶ However, cf. F. B. de la Roque, *Tôd* 1934–36, *FIFAO* 17, Le Caire 1937, Pl. XXV,2 (inv. 1521).

²⁷ Nos. 2.1. and 2.2.

²⁸ According to D. Budde the sign was used in theomorphic personal name. D. Budde (2000), 328.

²⁹ Nos. 1.5., 2.12.1., 2.12.2. and 2.12.4.

³⁰ No. 2.14.

Figure 5



Figure 6



The central part of the sign of Seshat is formed by the rosette. The rosette is the most characteristic and important part of the symbol of the goddess. It consists of two segments: first, the central disc and second, the petals radiating from the centre. In the preserved records, the rosette can vary in form, in size and in number of its segments as well. The segments themselves are also variable in form and size, and apart from the disc in number as well. The disc in the centre of the rosette may be depicted or missing. When it is depicted, it can be variable in form and size. Two types of the central disc can be distinguished: first, the simple disc (figure 5) and second, the disc with the concentric ring (figure 6). The records from the Archaic period show persuasively that the disc is quite dominant.³¹ In all these examples we can observe that the disc contains the concentric ring within. This form of the disc can also be observed in the signs coming from the later periods of the Old Kingdom.³² The disc is usually missing when the petals radiate from the centre mostly in the form of sunken relief lines.

In such cases, the palaeography of some signs evidently reveals that the stem and the vertical petal of the rosette are created by single line engraved into the surface.³³ The petals give the rosette its characteristic flower-like form. The preserved records show the various shape of petals and their layout around the centre from which they radiate. According to the number of petals depicted in the rosette and their distribution around the centre we can typologically distinguish two fundamental sorts of rosette. First, the rosette consisting of seven petals and second, the rosette consisting of five petals. The schematic depiction of both can be seen in figures 7 and 8 (on the alternative shape of the rosette shown in figure 8 see below). The former represents the most dominant form of the sign in the preserved Old Kingdom records, whereas the latter is less frequent. There are more than sixty signs with the rosette consisting of seven petals, and about ten examples with five petals in the rosette. The rest are records with the rosette damaged or not preserved. The examples with other number of petals in the rosette of the sign are rare anomalies. There are only two such references known from the autographic texts.³⁴

They attest that both mentioned signs were depicted by lines without any traces of more complex decoration. As mentioned above, the petals of the rosette in the signs vary not only in number but also in shape. In addition, some of the petals

³¹ Nos. 2.1., 2.2., 2.3., 2.4, 2.6.1., 2.6.3. On the basis of analogy and compared with other evidences of the same period, the similar characteristics may be expected in the case of signs nos. 2.5. and 2.6.2. with damaged central part.

³² Nos. 1.4., 1.6., 1.8.

³³ See for example nos. 2.20.2 and 2.36.

³⁴ Nos. 2.8. and 2.24.

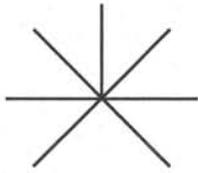


Figure 7



Figure 8

reflect certain decorative patterns. When the sign is depicted schematically, which is usually the case in the sunken reliefs, the petals have got mostly a form of the simple lines. However, some examples of the sign depicted in the sunken relief attest that the petals and other parts of the sign reflect more elaborated shape.³⁵ Some of the earliest examples of the sign show that the petals in the rosette are not of the same length and, moreover, their layout around the centre is not quite regular.³⁶ The petals radiating from the centre are usually of approximately elliptic-like shape but pointed at their outer ends and with the widest part mostly in the middle. There are, however, some examples attested in both iconographic and epigraphic records in which the widest part of the petal is shifted to the outer³⁷ or to the inner end.³⁸ As mentioned above, in some examples we can observe that the petals contain certain decorative patterns. They occur in the signs depicted in raised relief. The decoration is of two types. One category consists of the signs with the petals of the rosette decorated with oblong lines running through the petal along its longest axis.³⁹ These lines are likely to imitate the main vein of the petal. The other category has more complex decoration, and only one example of this kind is known in the Old Kingdom records so far.⁴⁰ In this case, another lateral shorter veins go out of the central line running in the middle of the petal imitating the main vein. Unfortunately, this sign is damaged and incompletely preserved, but these fine lines are still recognizable. In general, the petals can be joined with the central disc directly or by the tiny stalks. The sign on the slab stela of Wepemnefret shows that the colour of the central disc is black and the petals of the rosette are yellow.⁴¹

The arc placed above the rosette belongs to the upper part of the sign of Seshat. There are three epigraphic references dated to the Archaic Period showing the sign without the arc.⁴² The absence of the arc in the transcriptions of the sign may be caused by the damage to the original inscription which is preserved incompletely. It means that originally the arc could have been preserved. The place

³⁵ Such examples can be observed on the false door of the official Neferseshemseshat (no. 2.35.).

³⁶ Nos. 2.1., 2.2., 2.4., 2.5.

³⁷ Nos. 1.2., 1.3., 2.3., 2.5.

³⁸ Nos. 1.6., 1.8., 2.22., 2.35.10., 2.35.12.

³⁹ Nos. 1.2., 2.12.1, 2.12.2., 2.12.3., 2.12.4., 2.22.

⁴⁰ No. 1.5.

⁴¹ No. 2.14.

⁴² Nos. 2.1., 2.2., 2.5.

Figure 9



Figure 10



above the rosette in those inscriptions is sufficient enough to contain the arc. In general, the arc is stretched above the rosette and its size depends actually on its length. The length of the arc can be various and it is determined by certain petals of the rosette on both sides. It means that the symmetry of the arc is respected. We do not observe in principle any significant deviations from this rule in the preserved records showing that one side of the arc would be longer than the other. The arc may touch the outer ends of the petals or can be placed above without any contact with the rosette. The most frequent depictions show the arc stretched from one horizontal petal to the other, or from the level in between the horizontal and upper petals on both sides. In such cases, the arc has got approximately the form of a semicircle (figure 9). It is rare to find records with the arc much shorter, but such cases occur (figure 10). Such an arc is stretched between the upper petals of the rosette.⁴³ In the later periods, there are numerous signs, the upper part of which can be situated not only above the horizontal petals but under the horizontal and lower ones too. The arc in the sign depicted on the slab stela of Wepemnefret represents the most decorative example of its kind. Its surface is covered by short transverse lines symmetrically arranged on both halves and in the middle. The colour of the arc in this sign is yellow and the lines on it are black.

The uppermost part of the sign is formed by two vertical feathers. The position of the feathers is always fixed in the middle of the arc. They can vary in length, in size and in shape. The feathers usually taper to the top. Most of them are connected with the arc directly, but some examples show that the feathers are joined to the arc by tiny stalks.⁴⁴ There are signs in which the feathers are not depicted. Their absence can be caused by damage to the sign/text,⁴⁵ or the reason might be that they probably had not been depicted at all.⁴⁶ The feathers can touch each other but to be separated by a line,⁴⁷ or by a gap.⁴⁸ No calligraphic example of them is preserved. On the slab stela of Wepemnefret both feathers are painted in black colour.⁴⁹ The upper parts of the sign, namely the arc and two vertical feath-

ers, have been transformed into the form of horns depicted up side down 

⁴³ See for example no. 2.3.

⁴⁴ Nos. 2.12.1., 2.12.2., 2.12.3., 2.12.4., 2.35.1, 2.35.4., 2.35.10., 2.35.13.

⁴⁵ Nos. 2.1., 2.2., 2.5.

⁴⁶ Nos. 2.3., 2.4., 2.36.

⁴⁷ Nos. 2.12.1., 2.12.2., 2.12.3., 2.12.4.

⁴⁸ Nos. 1.4., 1.5., 2.6.1., 2.6.2., 2.6.3., 2.14., 2.20.1., 2.20.2., 2.27., 2.30.

⁴⁹ No. 2.14.

above the rosette, and they represent the later developed form of this part of the sign of the goddess Seshat.

In their basic characteristics, the forms of the sign remain the same regardless of the provenance, the sort of the monument or the context in which the signs appear. On the other hand, from the point of view of the detailed shape of the individual constituents of the sign, one can find certain differences between the sign at the same site or even monument. For example, the signs of Seshat preserved from the pyramid complex of Sneferu at Dahshur differ in the decoration of the petals in the rosette.⁵⁰ The same can be said about the signs attested from the pyramid complex of Sahura at Abusir.⁵¹ Other references attest the detailed differences between the signs at the same locality as well as at the same time.

4

The sign of Seshat is a composite emblem consisting of several parts and this is the source of the problems regarding the symbolic interpretation of this sign. How to explain its individual parts, and the sign as a whole? What seems unquestionable, in my opinion, is the floral nature of its central part, the rosette, as indicated by the artistic depiction of this part of the sign. I come to the conclusion that this part of the sign might represent a certain botanical species of a plant. It definitely, I think, does not represent a star as some scholars have suggested (see above). The iconographic and epigraphic records attest that in the early dynastic (and even predynastic) period the shape of the star in the reliefs and hieroglyphic writing is fully developed in the form of the sign with five arms radiating from the centre (✳).⁵² Moreover, not only the number of petals in the rosette would speak against the star, but their distribution around the centre too. One example shows five petals in the rosette, however, without both lower ones.⁵³ From the later sources we know that the lower petals are missing in the rosette with an even bigger number of the petals in it.⁵⁴ The variable number of the petals, their distribution around the central disc and their inner decoration preserved in some rosettes clearly show that this part of Seshat's sign cannot be interpreted as a star in this period of the sign's evolution.

Other scholars argue in favour of a palm tree (see above). During my research I also briefly paid attention to this idea. In this connection, I focused my attention on the shape of the palm crown, the upper part of the palm tree (*Phoenix dactylifera*), with its leaves. The name for this species of the palm tree in ancient Egypt was

⁵⁰ Cf. nos. 1.2. and 1.3.

⁵¹ Cf. nos. 1.4, 1.5 and 1.6.

⁵² Of course, some exceptions may appear, but statistically the occurrence of such anomalies in the records is so rare that they are irrelevant in the above mentioned context. K. O. Kuraszkiewicz, *Inscribed Objects from the Old Kingdom Necropolis West of the Step Pyramid (with remarks on their coating)*, *ArOr* 70/3, 2002, 375 (fig. 8), Pl. 20.

⁵³ No. 2.3.

⁵⁴ See, for example, D. Budde (2000), 344, 345, 350, 353, 355.

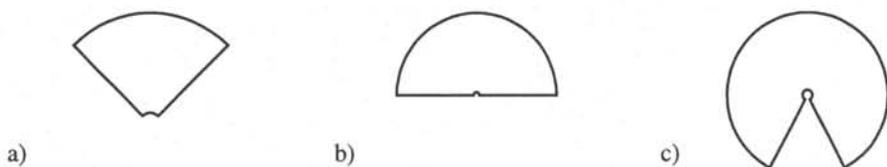


Figure 11. The schematic silhouettes of the crown of the palm tree.


⁵⁵ Archaeology provides the evidence that this tree has been known in Egypt for thousands of years before the appearance of the ancient Egyptian state. Looking at this tree one can see various silhouettes of its upper part with the number of leaves growing from the centre. The more detailed observation of these growing trees can reveal certain similarities between the various shapes of the crown of these trees on the one hand and the schematic silhouette of the sign of Seshat on the other hand. When the leaves in the crown of the tree are old and sear, they gradually hang down. The people use to cut off these sear leaves leaving the fresh green ones to grow further. In this case, the silhouette of the cut palm crown usually obtain the shape of the letter "V". As the leaves grow and become older, they start to hang down. First, however, the lowermost leaves reach a new position at the horizontal level. So, the silhouette of the crown of the palm tree can reach roughly three basic forms as schematically shown in figures 11. Some real pictures can be seen in figure 12 for better illustration of the problem. Compared with the silhouette of the rosette in the sign of Seshat, the palm crown reflects some similarities in this context. There is another feature that would support the idea that the sign might represent the palm tree. The feature concerns the detailed decoration of the petals in the rosette and it reflects roughly the shape of the palm leaf. One depiction of the sign of Seshat from the pyramid complex of Sahura at Abusir contains the calligraphic inner decoration of petals with the central and the lateral veins on both sides of each petal.⁵⁶ This decoration may evoke similarity with the palm leaf and its needlelike leaflets. In this connection, somebody could notice that the decoration of the stem in some signs as shown in figures 3 and 4 may reflects the shape of the patterns on the trunk of the palm tree produced by cutting, and support the idea that the sign is a sort of the artistic depiction of the palm tree. The artistic decoration attests, however, that the palm leaves and the tree itself are in fact depicted in ancient Egyptian reliefs and paintings in a different way.⁵⁷

Moreover, it should be pointed out that the petals in the rosette also have other decoration.⁵⁸ Among the signs of Seshat coming from the Archaic and Old King-

⁵⁵ R. Hannig, *Lexica 1*, Mainz 1995, 254–255.

⁵⁶ No. 1.5.

⁵⁷ See for example A. J. Spencer, *Early Egypt. The Rise of Civilisation in the Nile Valley*, London 1993, 55 (fig. 35).

⁵⁸ Nos. 1.2., 2.12.1., 2.12.2., 2.12.3., 2.12.4., 2.22.

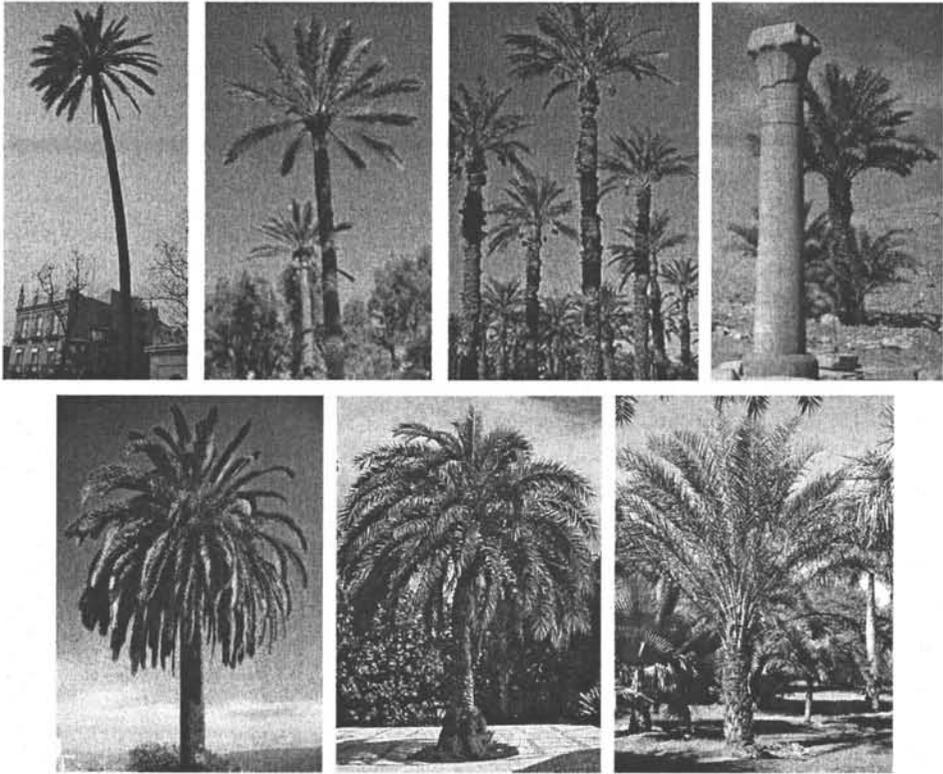


Figure 12. Various shapes of the palm tree crowns.

dom Periods, no variant of sign in the shape depicted in figure 11a is attested so far. It is a fact of matter that the later relief depictions show the goddess Seshat holding a notched palm leaf rib in one hand and writing on it the regnal years of the king with the other hand (the hieroglyphic sign in this form { means “the year”). Although the goddess is very closely linked with the king in context of her religious role and function,⁵⁹ as far as I know, the above mentioned scene is not attested in the reliefs scenes dated to the Old Kingdom Period or before. In this period, Seshat is depicted in the relief scenes carved on the walls of the temples as a member of the foundation ceremony, further she is recording the booty of a different sort, or she is a member of a procession of the gods. During his excavations at Helwan, Z. Y. Saad found an emblem made of faience in the form of a ring with the stem, central disc and seven petals with the inner decoration of veins

⁵⁹ Cf. G. A. Wainwright (1941), pp. 30–40.



Figure 13. The shapes of potmarks on the predynastic and early dynastic vessels.

surrounded around the disc within. According to Saad, the emblem represents the palm, the icon of the goddess Seshat.⁶⁰

Let us come back to the rosette emblem. In ancient Egyptian iconography, the rosette has been attested since the predynastic period. It appears as a decorative motif on artefacts of various types,⁶¹ such as ivory knife handles,⁶² ceremonial stone palettes,⁶³ stone mace-heads,⁶⁴ or some other. Admittedly, in the dynastic period its use in decoration is much wider. The rosettes can have various forms

like , but in the predynastic and early dynastic periods the shape of the rosette was not so regular and symmetrical as those presented hieroglyphic examples. These examples come from the later periods of the dynastic Egypt, but it is not certain at all, what botanical species of flowers these rosettes represent precisely.

It is also questionable whether the predynastic and early dynastic rosettes could be understood as predecessors in the symbolic sense, with the meaning, or the phonetic value of the rosette used later in the sign of the goddess Seshat. In this connection, the specific category of the potmarks engraved on the surface of the predynastic and early dynastic vessels should be examined in more detail in the future research.⁶⁵ These potmarks are the rosette-like signs irregular in shape surrounded by a curve (figure 13). The investigation of these enigmatic signs and, purely theoretically, their relation to the sign of Seshat in this study is, however, beyond the subject of this research.

From the ancient Egyptian flora, the lotus flower was the most important plant significant for ancient Egyptians from many points of view.⁶⁶ Its numerous depictions can be found everywhere in ancient Egyptian art.

⁶⁰ Z. Y. Saad (1951), 33–34. Cf. P. Kaplony (1966), 254–255 and 259–260, and D. Budde (2000), 38 and n. 208.

⁶¹ Cf. T. Schneider (1997), 245–247; E. Winter, *Wer steht hinter Narmer?*, 279–290, In: M. Bietak, J. Halaubek, H. Mukarovsky, H. Satzinger (eds.), *Zwischen den beiden Ewigkeiten. Festschrift Gertrud Thausing*, Wien 1994.

⁶² K. M. Ciałowicz, *Początki cywilizacji egipskiej*, Warszawa, Kraków, 1999, 317 (fig. 172), 319 (fig. 174). B. Midant-Reynes, *The Prehistory of Egypt*, Oxford 2000, 239 (fig. 17).

⁶³ K. A. Bard, *The Emergence of the Egyptian State*, 79–80, In: I. Shaw (ed.), *The Oxford History of Ancient Egypt*, Oxford 2000.

⁶⁴ K. A. Bard (2000), 65.

⁶⁵ E. C. M. van den Brick, *Corpus and Numerical Evaluation of the “Thinite” Potmarks*, In: R. Friedman, B. Adams (eds.), *The Followers of Horus: Studies dedicated to Michael Allen Hoffman*, Oxbow Monograph 20, 1992, 265–296.

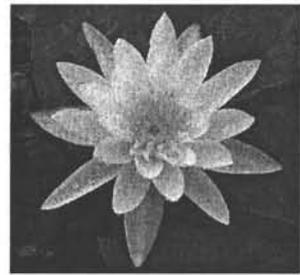
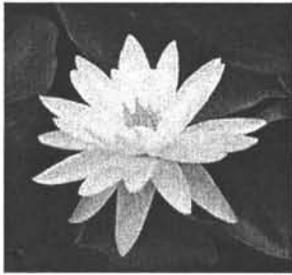


Figure 14. Egyptian White Water-lily (*Nymphaea lotus*).

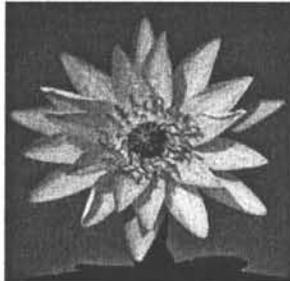
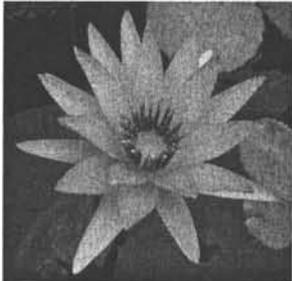
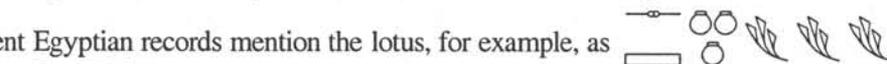
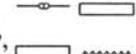
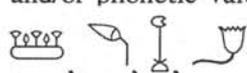


Figure 15. Egyptian Blue Water-lily (*Nymphaea caerulea*).

The most known and important were two species of lotus, the Egyptian White Water-lily (*Nymphaea lotus*) and Egyptian Blue Water-lily (*Nymphaea caerulea*). The real pictures of both species of flowers can be seen in figures 14 and 15. The

ancient Egyptian records mention the lotus, for example, as  *sšnw*,  *sššn*, or  *sššn*.⁶⁷ A set of other hieroglyphic signs

with different shapes and/or phonetic values includes the various forms of the lotus flower, such as  etc. The lotus flower was considered extremely significant in ancient Egyptian symbolism, cosmology, especially cosmogony, since it opened its calyx in the morning and closed in the evening with the rising and setting sun respectively. It was related to the god Nefertem. In the Pyramid Texts coming from the Pyramid of Unas, the hieroglyphic inscriptions

⁶⁶ E. Brunner-Traut, Lotos, 1091–1096, In: W. Helck, W. Westendorf (eds.), *Lexikon der Ägyptologie*, Bd. III, Wiesbaden 1980; R. Germer, *Flora des pharaonischen Ägypten*, Mainz 1985, 37–39.

⁶⁷ R. Hannig, *Lexica 4*, Mainz 2003, 1239; R. Hannig (1995), 766.

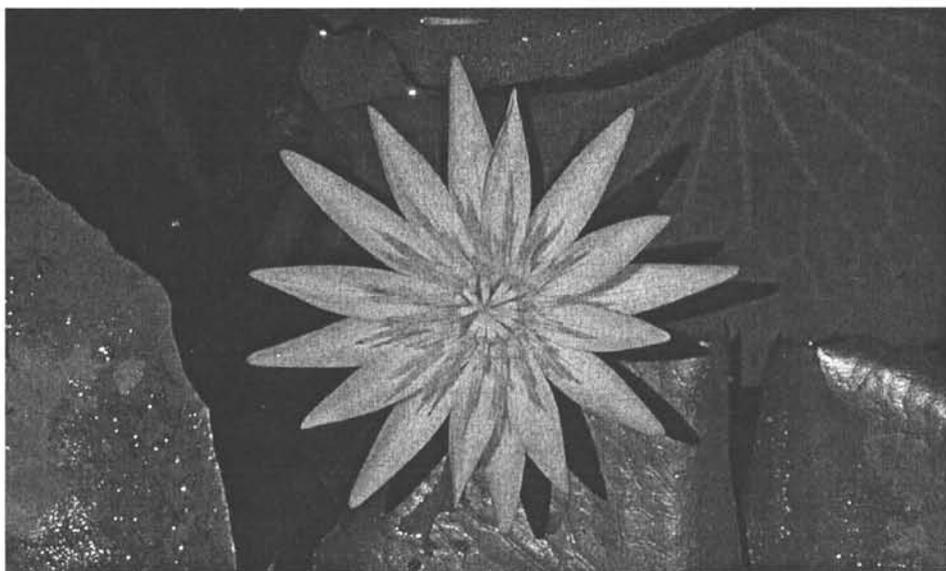
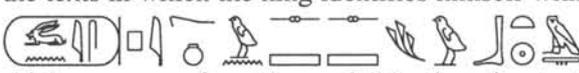
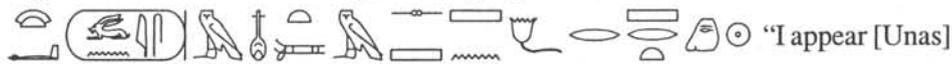


Figure 16. The lotus flower in the garden of the Egyptian Museum in Cairo

preserved on the west wall in the antechamber above the entrance leading to the sarcophagus chamber contains the texts in which the king identifies himself with a flower. One of them reads:⁶⁸  "I am [Unas] this sss flower which sprang up from the earth." In the other text engraved in the column nearby, the king says:⁶⁹

 "I appear [Unas] as Nefertem, as the lotus bloom which is at the nose of Re." As mentioned above, the lotus was the flower of the god Nefertem. He was recognized as a man with the lotus flower on his head sometimes with two tall feathers above. In this case, the lotus flower is depicted from the side projection and, as far as I know, its silhouette in the funnelled form of the letter "V" is always the same.

The physical shape of the lotus, in general, can be the source of various imaginations, inspirations and feelings. Undoubtedly, one of the most noticeable characteristics of this flower is the radial distribution of the petals around the centre. In general, such a radiation implies a tendency to regularity, repetition, uniformity and beauty. In fact, all these characteristics are characteristics of symmetry, one of the most fundamental principles observed in nature. The symmetry of the lotus

⁶⁸ R. O. Faulkner, *The Ancient Egyptian Pyramid Texts*, Oxford 1969, 60.

⁶⁹ R. O. Faulkner (1969), 61.

flower can be seen as in the number, as in distribution of the petals in the calyx (figure 16). As mentioned above, the calyx opens and closes with the sunlight. Compared with the sign of Seshat, the texture of the lotus petals corresponds to some patterns attested in the rosettes of this sign.⁷⁰ Of course, the lotus flower is not the only source of symmetry observed in nature. For example, the physical shape of the human body provides another example of symmetry. Variability in the distribution of the petals in the rosette of the sign indicates a certain degree of freedom in the imagination of the people responsible for the artistic depiction of the sign.

The characteristics mentioned above lead me to the conclusion that in the shape of the sign of the goddess Seshat the geometrical principle of symmetry might be recognized and firmly embedded in this emblem. Dividing the sign along the vertical axis, one gets the identical parts of the same shape. The uppermost parts of the sign, namely the arc and two feathers, complementary respect this principle. The position of the arc above the rosette and its length on both sides conform to the vertical axis. We do not observe the rule that the arc is to be randomly long on either of the sides of the sign. The arc emphasizes the symmetry of the sign, and it provides a kind of base for the two vertical feathers.⁷¹ When its left end touches the upper/horizontal/lower left petal, so the same can be expected on the right side. Or, when the left end of the arc is laid in between the specific petals on the left side, its right end must reflect the same position on the right side of the sign as much as possible. In other words, the position of the left half of the arc above the rosette corresponds to the position of the right half of the arc above the rosette and *vice versa*. The same can be said about the two feathers. Each of them is fixed according to the vertical axis on both halves of the arc. The symmetry of the feathers is expressed in number (two), in their position (at the topmost part of the arc as close to the vertical axis as possible) and the shape (characteristics of both feathers in the sign are in principle always the same). The anomalies which occur in this connection can be explained by the formative period in the development of the sign when the fundamental rules of the sign depiction have just been formed. However, the symmetry which might be observed in the sign of Seshat, paradoxically, is not perfect. As one can easily recognize in each sign, the stem can be found on the place of the lowermost petal in the rosette. The absence of this petal violates the perfect symmetry of the rosette. It seems, however, that the ancient Egyptian sense for the symmetry is not perfect either. In the connection with the violation of the perfect symmetry Erik Hornung says that "... die Vermeidung strenger Symmetrie ist Teil eines umfassenderen Grundprinzipes, das wir in den verschiedensten Bereichen der altägyptischen Kultur am Werke sehen."⁷² Therefore, the discovery uncovered by this investigation of the sign of Seshat and the conclusions resulting from this study do not contradict the observations made on

⁷⁰ Nos. 1.2., 2.12.1., 2.12.2., 2.12.3., 2.12.4., 2.22.

⁷¹ It should be noticed that the feathers may directly rise from the flower as some artistic depictions of the crown of the god Nefertem attest.

⁷² E. Hornung, *Geist der Pharaonenzeit*, München 1993, 81.

the ancient Egyptian monuments. In this connection it would be perhaps better to speak about the weak principle of symmetry.

The explanation of the sign in the sense of the symmetry, and the identification of the sign with the opened lotus flower calyx could be understood in the wider context. One of the dominant roles of the goddess Seshat was her participation on the ceremony known as the "stretching of the cord." It is the religious ritual related to the foundation of the sacral buildings and attested in the iconographic and written records. The text preserved on the Palermo Stone provides the evidence that this ceremony was known and carried out at least from the first dynasty.⁷³ The principles of symmetry seen in nature and followed in art can be observed in architecture too. It is without any doubts that the people responsible for the plans of the temples and tombs (especially the royal ones) were well aware of them. These people belonged to the literate rank of the society with the knowledge of writing etc. The inscriptions describing the goddess Seshat as *nbt kdw* "Lady of Builders"⁷⁴ and *hntt pr-md3t iry(w) ht nzwt* "the pre-eminent one in the archiv of those concerned with the affairs of the king"⁷⁵ emphasize her close relationship with or her patronage over those people. She was considered their patroness *par excellence*. In this context, it seems reasonable to assume and expect that the symbol of such a goddess may express and reflect more or less the characteristics related to her activities, function and role.

The petals in the rosette may vary in number, in size or in shape, but the result is always the same, they respect the principle of symmetry regardless of these variations (the weak principle of symmetry as mentioned above is meant here). This principle is also respected by the arc and two feathers. It can be said that this is a rule, a principle or a kind of lawfulness discovered in the iconography of the sign of Seshat. The exceptions are rare and can be consistently explained in context of the development of the sign and by damage to it. In some wider sense the sign of the goddess Seshat as it had developed in the Archaic and Old Kingdom Periods can be regarded as an icon used to represent symmetry. The creation of this icon manifested in the sign might have been inspired by the shape of the lotus flower with the opened calyx.

⁷³ H. Schäfer, Ein Bruchstück altägyptischen Annalen, Berlin 1902, 20.

⁷⁴ R. O. Faulkner (1969), 119.

⁷⁵ D. Jones, An Index of Ancient Egyptian Titles, Epithets and Phrases of the Old Kingdom, Volume 2, Oxford 2000, 578.