

THE HISTORICAL INSCRIPTION ON QUEEN HATSHEPSUT'S *CHAPELLE ROUGE*:

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PART 1

bi3.yt ("WONDER") AND THE DIVINE ORACLE

On the second course of blocks on the north and south façades of the recently reconstructed *Chapelle Rouge* of Queen Hatshepsut at Karnak appears a text of historical importance.¹ The remains of this inscription, read in conjunction with a less well preserved copy at Deir el Bahari, record an account of the divine selection of Hatshepsut by the god Amun and the significance of this text lies therein. It is also the earliest of its kind attested and it plays a considerable role in the modern Egyptological discussion of Eighteenth Dynasty oracles. This article constitutes a reconsideration of one of the notions of this text, the term *bi3.yt* "wonder" and its role as an element in the divine oracle of the *Chapelle Rouge* inscription.

A particularly informative introduction to the subject of oracles in Ancient Egypt is given by Černý, in his now well-disseminated chapter in Parker's *A Saite Oracle Papyrus from Thebes*.² Articles found in the *Lexikon der Ägyptologie*³ and the *Oxford Encyclopedia of Ancient Egypt*⁴ give a good outline of the practice and trace its occurrence from the Eighteenth Dynasty onwards. It is noteworthy that in these standard reference works the main focus of the discussion is often dedicated to the physical functioning of oracles, for which the evidence originates from later Ramesside sources. There is a wealth of evidence from this later period in the form of administrative or private records, petitions on papyrus or ostraca and oracle-related statues and reliefs,⁵ which has received much attention from scholars such as Blackman,⁶ Barns,⁷ Lurje,⁸ and McDowell.⁹

Closer investigation into the early oracles reveals great contrast with later practices in both form and function and these distinctions have been made in more recent studies.¹⁰ Indeed, there is a division to be made between these later, predominantly *juridical* oracles and the Eighteenth Dynasty examples that were concerned with the affairs of royalty. A further distinction needs to

be made in this earlier group between oracles designated by different Egyptian terms. In the Eighteenth Dynasty, the most common oracles were denoted by the terms *bi3.yt* and *nd.wt-r3*. The latter was a divine consultation generally concerning matters of state: Hatshepsut requested advice regarding the expedition to Punt¹¹ and Thutmose IV did the same regarding a campaign into Nubia.¹² The *bi3.yt* of the god, on the other hand, is a more complicated issue.

In the Eighteenth Dynasty, the term *bi3.yt* was associated with a type of divine oracle that was often given spontaneously in conjunction with the selection of the king, i.e. either his/her appointment or coronation, and it was understood as a manifestation of divine will. Such a manifestation of the god Amun, associated with the term *bi3.yt*, appears as an essential element of the *Chapelle Rouge* text.

***bi3.yt* and the divine oracle**

The use of the term *bi3.yt* in oracular contexts has previously been discussed and has always remained a difficulty.¹³ This is reflected in the inconsistency with which Lacau translates *bi3.yt* in the only complete translation of the *Chapelle Rouge* inscription hitherto published: sometimes as "oracle" (Engl. "oracle"), sometimes as "prodige" (Engl. "wonder"). Lacau alternates his translations in order to accommodate the perceived difference in meaning of the term in its various occurrences.¹⁴

Römer likens the *bi3.yt* of the Eighteenth Dynasty¹⁵ to those of Papyrus d'Orbiney¹⁶ where the text describes two *bi3.yt* of supernatural character: the bringing to the king of a unique multi-coloured bull by Anubis and the rapid growth of two great trees overnight at the side of His Majesty's great gates. Graefe observes that for the Egyptians such an interference of the gods in daily life is at all times conceivable and altogether "natural".¹⁷ Hence, his translation of *bi3.yt* with the German term "Wunder"¹⁸ (Engl. "miracle"). "Wunder" carrying the definition "the happening of the impossible", is indeed unsuitable as it is not in accordance with the Egyptian concept.¹⁹ Although *bi3.yt* such as these appear to have been rare occurrences, their wondrous character did not reside in what happened as such, but only in the fact that they occurred for His/Her Majesty.²⁰ Hence, the performance of a *bi3.yt* can be seen as the *indication of personal favour* toward the (royal) recipient²¹ and an expression of the unique relationship between the king and the god.

Römer notes that in texts of this type, the *bi3.yt* possesses positive (favourable) connotations.²² In the *Chapelle Rouge* text, the most illustrative example for the *bi3.yt* with an intrinsically favourable quality occurs when Hatshepsut first

emerges from her palace and presents herself to the god Amun:²³

m-ht nn rdi.t=s s(y) hr h.t=s m-b3h-^c.w hm=f m dd
wr.wy nn r shr.w hm=k it=i pw k3i n.tyt nb.t i3st pw mri.tn=k hpr
iri.y=i is hft wd.tn=k
wn.in hm n.y ntr pn hr bi3.yt 3.t wr.t 33 sp 2 wr sp 2

After this, she placed herself upon her belly in the presence of His Majesty, saying: "How much greater is this than the (customary) conduct of Your Majesty! It is you, my father, who plans everything which exists. What is that which you wished to happen? I will truly do in accordance with that which you have commanded". Then the Majesty of this god performed very great and very many wonders.

The performance of *bi3.yt* in this context seems clear: the god expresses favour at the complete submission of Hatshepsut to his will, though apparently withholds the particulars of his will at that moment. Römer's suggestions about the quality of the *bi3.yt* appear indeed to be supported by the *Chapelle Rouge* inscription. However, his conclusions remain somewhat vague and he does not suggest a translation or phrase that could be applied consistently to this context.²⁴

In the studies dedicated to the *bi3.yt*, one can observe some indecisiveness over its translation. On the one hand, there is "oracle", which can be defined as: 'the instrumentality, agency, or medium by which a god was supposed to speak or make known his will; the mouthpiece of the deity; a response, decision, or message, given usually ... at the shrine or seat where the deity was supposed to be thus accessible to inquirers.'²⁵ On the other hand, there is "wonder": 'something that causes astonishment; a marvellous object; a marvel, prodigy; marvellous character or quality; a marvellous act or achievement; an astonishing occurrence, event, or fact.'²⁶ Given these definitions, a *bi3.yt* of the type encountered above seems most aptly described according to the definition of "wonder": it comprised a mode of expression with only one kind of content. In isolation, *bi3.yt* does not appear to convey divine will. Moreover, there seems no reason to warrant its interpretation as a 'response, decision, or message' because the god is never presented with a question to which a *bi3.yt* is the response. In the example from the *Chapelle Rouge*, Hatshepsut's question is rhetorical: she submits to Amun's will and he reciprocates favourably, while the divine will is yet to be explained.

It must, however, be remembered that the actions of the god are not strictly limited to giving a *bi3.yt* in those instances where the translation "oracle" has

been suggested for this term. The *Chapelle Rouge* inscription reads:²⁷

*m-ḥt-nn rdī.t=f s(y) hr-ḥ3.t=f shn.t s(y) r ḥw.t-ʕ3.t m3ʕ.t šsp.n=s
ḥkr.w ḥm.t=s ʕpr.w=s n(.w) ḥm.t ntr wnn m-ḥnt ḥw.t-ntr=f
wn.in ḥm n.y nb r dr ḥr sʕš3 bi3.yt ḥr=s*

Then he placed her before him and advanced her to the mansion of Maat, she receiving the insignia of her servant(ship) and her jewellery of the wife of the god who is within his temple. Then the Majesty of the Lord to the limit multiplied wonders for her.

Similarly, another passage:²⁸

*wn.in=f ḥr dhn n ḥm.t=s r ʕḥʕ.w nb n(.y) nsw
ḥr sʕš3 bi3.yt ḥr=s ḥr rdī.t snd(.w)=s m-b3ḥ*

Then he appointed Her Majesty at the *Station of the Lord* of the King, multiplying wonders for her and placing fear of her at the front.

Finally, a *bi3.yt* of the uraeus-goddess is recounted by Hatshepsut in the first person:²⁹

*wn.in=s ḥr itī.t ḥm.t=i dī.w ḥmsi=i ḥr ts.t shm.ty Ḥr
wn.ḥr r=s nb.t B.wy ḥr bi3.yt ʕ3.t wr.t ʕš3 sp 2 wr sp 2 ḥr ḥm.t=i*

Then she (the goddess) took My Majesty, my sitting being caused upon the *Support of the Double Crown of Horus*. Then the Mistress of the Two Lands (the goddess) pronounced wonders magnificently for her (Hatshepsut), repeatedly and importantly regarding My Majesty.

In all three of the above cases, a significant action was undertaken which marked them as pivotal phases of the coronation procedure. Each action was immediately followed not merely by a single *bi3.yt*, but in the first two cases by *ḥr sʕš3 bi3.yt* '(he) multiplied wonders' and in the third by *ḥr bi3.(y)t ʕ3.t wr.t ʕš3 sp 2 wr sp 2* '(he) gave very great wonders, repeatedly and importantly'. In accordance with the interpretation of the *bi3.yt* being an expression of the god's favour towards the recipient, the great amount of *bi3.yt* given by the god was perhaps indicative of his great approval. It is unfortunate that the section immediately following Hatshepsut's receipt of the two crowns (H17, line 12ff.) is lost, for the *bi3.yt* that in all probability ensued would further this argument.

The excerpts above reveal that the god communicated his will according to a distinct protocol involving the combination of an action with an implied

tangible consequence followed by the *bi3.yt*, which constituted a confirmation of the preceding action or approval of the new situation. This protocol was the "oracle". The occurrence of a benedictory action *together with* a "wonder" (*bi3.yt*) ensured that the will of the god was unmistakable: the action and its consequence (for example, Hatsehsut's appointment at the *Station* and the ensuing conferral of kingship) were both emphasised and legitimated by the *bi3.yt*.

This understanding of the divine "oracle" harmonizes well with Thutmosis III's *Texte de la Jeunesse*.³⁰

di.in=f wi hr-h3.t hm=f s^ch^c.kwi r ^ch^c.w [n] nb
wn.in=f hr bi3.yt hr=l

Then he placed me before His Majesty, I standing at the *Station of the Lord*. Then he performed a great wonder before me.

As also with in the Luxor oracle of Hatshepsut in the *Chapelle Rouge*.³¹

wn.in=f hr itt hm.t=i [r ^ch^c].w n(.w) nsw mn^h
s^cš3.n=f bi3.yt hr=i hft-hr n(.y) t3 r dr=f

Then he turned my Majesty to the *Station of the effective King* and he multiplied wonders for me in the presence of the land to its limit.

As in the previous examples, the god performed a "wonder" to confirm and approve the consequence of the action, thus explicating his divine will. Hence, the account of the entire proceedings can rightly receive the designation "oracle", wherein the *bi3.yt* constitutes only a part. It seems to have been a conventional method of communication between the god and the king, considering that spoken oracles did not appear in Egypt until much later.³²

The translation of *bi3.yt* as "wonder" with a favourable connotation can be applied to a number of contexts outside the oracular one. Indeed, there are many occurrences of *bi3.yt* in the *Chapelle Rouge* inscription unconnected to an oracle that may serve to modify and further our understanding of the term, although thorough analyses of these occurrences would require greater space than is available here.

The physical reality of the *bi3.yt*

The specific actions of the god by which he performed a *bi3.yt* have been interpreted as some sort of "omen" brought about in a mysterious manner³³ and any number of natural phenomena have viably?? been explained as the

manifestation of the *bi3.yt*. However, such an interpretation is unnecessary. Given that in the oracular texts the god gave his *bi3.yt* during procession, he most likely appeared in his usual form: his statue was paraded in a portable barque which was covered so as to conceal the statue from public view.³⁴ Mention is made of the barque (*wi3*) of the god in the extant though fragmentary parts at the beginning of the Deir el Bahari version of the *Chapelle Rouge* text. It is thus inferred that the god appeared in his usual processional form during Hatshepsut's coronation.

This being the case, any physical actions that could be attributed to the god must have been limited. The functioning of the later processional juridical oracles, whose protocols were diverse and often involved various movements, serves as a loose parallel. Černý contends that the binary juridical oracle constituted a forward movement of the barque of the god for an affirmative answer and a backward one for a negative.³⁵ It is likely that a similar method was used in the events of the *Chapelle Rouge* text.

Despite such theories, it is not important that the specifics of the *bi3.yt* be ascertained, whether they were intentionally suppressed or simply unimportant. It must be remembered that the processional *bi3.yt* constituted something "wonder-ful" only inasmuch as its extraordinary character lay in its accomplishment for the king; hence extraordinary movements were not necessary. Any simple yet unmistakable movement or set thereof would have sufficed.

Conclusion

The consideration of the evidence for *bi3.yt* undertaken here facilitates a better understanding of the term as it is used in the *Chapelle Rouge* text and the Eighteenth Dynasty. It has been argued here that the divine "oracle" comprises both an observable action with a tangible consequence as well as a confirmatory and unmistakable expression of divine favour: one or more *bi3.yt*. Inasmuch as the performance of the *bi3.yt* comprises only one element of the procedure and does not in itself bear oracular content or value, it appears appropriate to restrict its translation to "wonder".

¹ Hieroglyphic text and translation: P. Lacau / H. Chevrier, *Une Chapelle d'Hatshepsout à Karnak*, I, (Paris, 1977), 92–153; hieroglyphic text: W. Helck, *Historisch-biographische Texte der 2. Zwischenzeit und neue Texte der 18. Dynastie, Nachträge*, (Wiesbaden, 1995), 7–33.

- 2 J. Černý, "Egyptian Oracles" in: R.A. Parker, *A Saite Oracle Papyrus from Thebes* (Providence, 1962), 35–48.
- 3 L. Kákosy, "Orakel" in: *Lexikon der Ägyptologie* IV (Wiesbaden, 1982), 602.
- 4 J.-M. Kruchten, "Oracles", in: D.B. Redford (ed.), *Oxford Encyclopedia of Ancient Egypt* (Oxford, 2001), 609–612.
- 5 See Kruchten, in: *Oxford Encyclopedia of Ancient Egypt*, p. 609.
- 6 A.M. Blackman, "Oracles in Ancient Egypt I" in: *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 11 (1925), 249–255; "Oracles in Ancient Egypt II" in: *JEA* 12 (1926), 176–185.
- 7 J. Barns, "The Neville Papyrus: A Later Ramesside Letter to an Oracle" in: *JEA* 35 (1949), 69–71.
- 8 I.M. Lurje, *Studien zum altägyptischen Recht des 16. bis 10. Jahrhunderts v. u. Z* (Forschungen zum Römischen Recht 30: Weimar, 1971), 97–125.
- 9 A.G. McDowell, *Jurisdiction in the Workmen's Community of Deir el-Medineh* (Leiden, 1990), 107–142.
- 10 Especially M. Trapani, "The Royal Decree and the Divine Oracle from the Old to the New Kingdom: A Compared Research" in: *Sesto Congresso Internazionale di Egitologia, Atti*, vol. 2 (1993), 537–545.
- 11 K. Sethe, *Urkunden der 18. Dynastie*, IV (Leipzig, 1909), 341–348; J.H. Breasted, *Ancient Records of Egypt*, vol. II (1906), §§ 284–289. *Urk.* IV, 1545ff.; *BAR* II, §§ 823–829.
- 12 Cp. the varying translations given for *bi3yt* in line 7 of Tuthmosis' *Texte de la Jeunesse* (*Urk.* IV, 159, 2): 'He was astonished at me': *BAR* II, §140; 'Da wunderte er sich über mich': K. Sethe, *Urkunden der 18. Dynastie. Übersetzung* (Leipzig, 1914), 76; 'He began a great marvel': J.B. Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts* (Princeton, ³1969), 446; 'Il rendit un oracle à mon sujet': G. Posener, "Amenemope 21, 13 et *bj3t* au sense d'«oracle»" in: *ZÄS* 90 (1963), 102; 'Da tat er "Zeichen" für mich': E. Graefe, *Untersuchung zur Wortfamilie bj3-* (Köln, 1971), 137.
- 14 For example: "oracle" – Block 148, H9; "prodige" – Block 222, H8.
- 15 M. Römer, *Gottes- und Priesterherrschaft in Ägypten am Ende des Neuen Reiches* (Wiesbaden, 1994), 146.
- 16 See A. H. Gardiner, *Late Egyptian Stories* (Bruxelles, 1932), 24–26.
- 17 Graefe, *Wortfamilie bj3-*, 133.
- 18 R. Hannig, *Großes Handwörterbuch Ägyptisch – Deutsch* (Mainz, ²1997), 246.
- 19 Graefe, *Wortfamilie bj3-*, 133–134. The translation proposed here avoids the extreme of the "impossible" to which Graefe objects and is not used as a synonym or translation of "Wunder".
- 20 Graefe, *Wortfamilie bj3-*, 117.
- 21 Römer, *Gottes- und Priesterherrschaft*, 149; cp. C.J. Eyre, "Is Egyptian historical literature "historical" or "literary"?" in: A. Loprieno (ed.), *Ancient*

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- 22 *Egyptian Literature. History and Forms* (Leiden / New York / Köln, 1996), 419.
- 23 Römer, *Gottes- und Priesterherrschaft*, 150; on the same page, however, will also be found evidence from later periods that indicate a negative sense of *bi3.yt*.
- 24 Block 184 = H9
- 25 His conclusion that 'es ist hier und bei den "Orakeln" **das** *bj3j.t* die Manifestation der göttlichen Gnade für die Herrschaft' (*Gottes- und Priesterherrschaft*, 146) is uncommittal and leaves the translation of *bi3.yt* in this context open. Römer also wants to put *bi3.yt* in close association with the promise (*sr*) of dominion and the submission of the circle of the earth and its handing over to the king, hence giving it an oracular quality. (*Gottes- und Priesterherrschaft*, 146–147). It should be noted that while the context is undeniably an oracular one, it is the particulars of the *bi3.yt* that are under scrutiny.
- 26 *The Oxford English Dictionary*, vol. X (Oxford, 1989), 884.
- 27 *OED* XX, 492.
- 28 Block 184 = H9
- 29 Block 72 = H24
- 30 Block 54 = H30
- 31 *Urk.* IV, 158.17–159.2.
- 32 Block 287 = H26
- 33 See Lurje, *Studien zum altägyptischen Recht*, 97–125.
- 34 Posener, in: *ZÄS* 90 (1963), 102; also, very recently, Kruchten, in: *Oxford Encyclopedia of Ancient Egypt*, 609, who claims that the *bi3.yt* is, 'strictly speaking, "omen"'.
35 Cairo relief **JE 43591** of Amun-Re in procession: see Černý, in: *A Saite Oracle Papyrus from Thebes*, fig. 8.
- 36 Černý, in: *A Saite Oracle Papyrus from Thebes*, 44.