

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE SIGN OF THE ANCIENT EGYPTIAN GODDESS SESHAT DOWN TO THE END OF THE OLD KINGDOM: ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION¹

– Part One –

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In general, the ancient Egyptian deities are distinguished by their names and symbols. In spite of the decipherment of hieroglyphs by J.-F. Champollion in the 1820s and the number of published studies, some of the hieroglyphs and symbols still remain an enigma. The sign of the goddess named Seshat can undoubtedly be included in this category. This paper based on the study of the preserved records presents an attempt to understand the meaning of the hieroglyphic sign and symbol of Seshat, the ancient Egyptian goddess of writing, reckoning and building. The study is divided into three parts. Part One consists of the iconographic records coming approximately from the beginning of the 3rd millennium B.C. down to the end of the Old Kingdom in the 22nd century B.C. This part contains the main information about the sign of Seshat known from the wall reliefs, such as provenance, date, and basic description of each sign etc. Part Two of the study, which will follow in the next volume of the AAS journal, will contain the epigraphic records from the same period including the sign of Seshat with the same characteristics as mentioned above. Part Three intended to be published next year in the first volume of this journal is going to be the final part of the study and will bring the analysis and interpretation of the sign of the goddess Seshat in the context of its development in the Old Kingdom Period.

The word Seshat is a transcription of the name used for a female deity worshipped by the ancient Egyptians as the goddess of writing, reckoning and build-

¹ I would like to express my thanks to my colleagues for their help and support during the preparation of this study. I am grateful to Dr. Robert Anderson and The Robert Anderson Research Charitable Trust for scholarly and financial support and one month of research and study in the library of the Egypt Exploration Society in London. I also wish to thank the library and colleagues at the Czech Institute of Egyptology in Prague. Dr. Miroslav Bárta turned my attention to Dr. Dagmar Budde's study on the goddess Seshat and Dr. Jaromír Krejčí helped me many times with literature and documentation.

ing. She was the patroness of the scribes, the elite rank in the social structure of ancient Egyptian society throughout history. A few studies dedicated to this goddess in the past shows that the sign of Seshat itself was subject of several attempts made by Egyptologists focused on its interpretation from different points of view.² One of the questions discussed in this context deals with the true understanding of the enigmatic symbol of Seshat. In the reliefs or paintings it was used mostly as the decoration of the head of the goddess in the form of the headdress but the sign occurs in the hieroglyphic inscriptions too. After more than one hundred years of scientific research the question of how to understand the symbol of Seshat is still undetermined.

The precise etymology of the name of this goddess is not known,³ but the word transliterated as *Ššt* or *Šhšt*⁴ is generally translated as “the female scribe.”⁵ Her name can be phonetically or ideographically written by hieroglyphic signs. The former example is attested in the Pyramid Texts.⁶ The name of Seshat in the phonetic form is carved on the wall inside the sixth dynasty pyramid of Teti at Saqqara. The latter example is earlier in date and larger in number. The earliest evidence of the ideographic form of writing of Seshat’s name may go to the Archaic period.⁷

The wall reliefs show Seshat depicted in an anthropomorphic form as a woman. She can often be dressed in a leopard skin and/or in a female dress with straps on the shoulders. Her hands and her barefooted legs can be decorated by bracelets. The long hairs of Seshat are usually tied by the headband. As mentioned above the head of this goddess is decorated by her sign, which is uninterchangeable with those of other deities of ancient Egypt. Seshat also had her male counterpart. His name, transliterated as *Ššw*, can be found carved on the walls of the pyramids of Unas, Teti and very likely that of Pepi I.⁸

In the period following the Old Kingdom two significant changes related to the goddess occurred, one in epigraphy and one in palaeography. The change in epigraphy refers to the writing of the name of the goddess. From the Middle Kingdom on, the new names of the goddess appear in the texts. So far the earliest attested evidence of this change comes from the reign of the twelfth dynasty king known as Amenemhat III.⁹ In one inscription from the temple in Medinet Madi the goddess is named as *Šfht* *‘bwj*. The later texts mention an alternative variant of this name in the form of *Šfht* *‘bw*. The translation of both these forms is not clear.¹⁰

² They are going to be discussed in Part Three of this study in the fifteenth volume (No. 1) of the AAS journal.

³ D. Budde, *Die Göttin Seschat*, Leipzig 2000, pp. 8–13.

⁴ W. Helck, *Seschat*, 884 and 886 fn. 1, In: W. Helck, W. Westendorf (eds.), *Lexikon der Ägyptologie*, Band 5, Wiesbaden 1984.

⁵ In this study the name of the goddess is transliterated as *Ššt*.

⁶ K. Sethe, *Die altaegyptischen Pyramidentexte*, Bd. 1, Leipzig 1908, p. 331.

⁷ See the category of epigraphic sources below in this study.


⁸ K. Sethe, *PT* 1, p. 222.

⁹ D. Budde, *Seschat*, p. 13.

¹⁰ Beside these new names, the name *Ššt* written ideographically with her sign often accompanied by the feminine ending *t* was still in use. In addition, there were other alternative ways

The palaeography of the sign reflects the considerable change in the shape of its upper part. In place of the arc and two vertical feathers, a new element appears in a calligraphic version of the sign having the form of cow horns turned up side down or two snakes facing each other above the rosette. According to Budde the earliest evidence of these forms comes from the New Kingdom.¹¹ However, the Old Kingdom variant of the sign did not entirely disappear from the Egyptian texts. It can be found in the inscriptions of the New Kingdom and the Late Period.¹²

The picture on this page shows the schematic version of the sign of Seshat. This is the standard and most frequent shape of the sign of this goddess used during the Old Kingdom Period. At this place it will be useful to describe the relevant parts of the sign and to present the basic terminology used in this study. It is derived from the calligraphic forms of the sign.

1. stem	4	
2. rosette	3	
2.1. central disc	2.2.	
2.2. petals ¹³	2.1.	
3. arc	1	
4. two vertical feathers		

The following pages consist of a catalogue of the collected signs of Seshat accessible in the issued publications. According to the sources, the signs are divided into two categories, iconographic and epigraphic. The former category consists of the following files: number (it gives the catalogue number of the source. One source may contain one or more signs), function (it explains the function of the sign on the relief), provenance (it gives the name of the locality, where the sign comes from), date (it is expressed by dynasties or kings), bibliography (it includes the source edition and relevant studies), illustration (it says what kind of source was accessible and used during the study. It could be photo or/and autography) and description (it provides the description of the sign itself). The latter category of epigraphic sources includes almost identical files: number (it gives the catalogue number of the source. One source may contain one or more signs), text (it gives the textual context, in which the sign was used), provenance (it gives the name of the locality, where the sign comes from), date (it is expressed by dynasties or kings), bibliography (it includes the source edition and relevant studies), illustration (it says what kind of source was accessible and used during the study. It could be photo or/and autography) and description (it gives the description of

of writing the name of the goddess. Sometimes other epithets such as *wrt* "the great" or *ndst* "the small" accompany the name of the goddess (such examples are most frequent in the Ptolemaic and Roman Periods).

¹¹ D. Budde, *Seschat*, p. 44f.

¹² D. Budde, *Seschat*, p. 25.

¹³ The number of petals is variable. In description of the rosette, the petals are enumerated in a clockwise direction.

the sign itself). According to their date the collected signs are arranged in chronological order from the earliest to the latest source. In the first part we shall be dealing with the iconographic records.

1. ICONOGRAPHIC SOURCES (THE SIGN OF SESHAT IN THE TEMPLE RELIEFS OF ROYAL PROVENANCE)

No. 1.1.

Function: headdress

Provenance: Kom el-Ahmar

Date: Dynasty 2 (Khasekhemwy)

Bibliography: J. E. Quibell, *Hierakonpolis, Part 1*, London 1900, Pl. II; R. Engelbach, *A Foundation Scene of the Second Dynasty*, JEA 20, London 1934, pp. 183–184, Pl. XXIV

Illustration: Photo

Description: The sign of Seshat occurs on a pink granite block of the gate jamb.¹⁴ It is placed above the head of the goddess as her headdress. The scene depiction shows the goddess standing and oriented to the right taking part in the “stretching of the cord” ceremony. Unfortunately, the whole scene carved on the larger face of the re-used granite block is badly damaged.¹⁵ The position of the sign close to the head indicates that the vertical stem was very short. Originally the rosette probably consisted of seven petals as indicated by the inaccurate contours of the central part of the sign. They also indicate the upper arc over the rosette. Two vertical feathers were tall and placed along the vertical axis of the sign. No another sign of the goddess can be identified on this block. Although some other traces indicate a kind of text originally engraved on the surface of the block nothing of this is legible.

No. 1.2.

Function: headdress

Provenance: Dahshur

Date: Dynasty 4 (Sneferu)

Bibliography: A. Fakhry, *The Monuments of Sneferu at Dahshur, Volume II (The Valley Temple)*, Part 1 (The Temple Reliefs), Cairo 1961, pp. 91, 94, 95, figs. 84, 85, Pl. XXXB

Illustration: Photo + Autography

Description: Side no. 2 of the limestone pillar E, which originally stood in the valley temple of the Bent pyramid, bears a part of Seshat’s sign. Only the left part

¹⁴ Egyptian Museum Cairo, JdE 33896.

¹⁵ R. Engelbach, JEA 20, 1934, Pl. XXIV.

of the sign is preserved in a form of raised relief. On the left of Seshat's sign the fragments of two hieroglyphs reconstructed as ☉ and ☾ occur. The fragmentary sign of Seshat consists of the left part of the arc and three petals of the rosette (lower left, horizontal left and upper left). The central disc of the rosette is not preserved. On the lower right part of the block under the rosette a very short part of the stem can be visible. There are no traces of the pair of vertical feathers. The three petals are pointed on their outer sides and they narrow towards the central disc. There is a line inside each petal stretching from one end to other and dividing it alongside on two similar parts. This line is probably to represent the main vein of the plant petal. The central and upper left petals touch the bottom part of the arc. Compared with the fragments of the two above-mentioned hieroglyphs one can say that the size of Seshat's sign is larger than those two. It indicates that the sign was not a part of some inscription, but included in a relief scene. This scene was reconstructed in the form of the goddess Seshat embracing the king Sneferu.

No. 1.3.

Function: headdress

Source: a limestone block from the valley temple of the Bent pyramid (another side of the same pillar E)

Provenance: Dahshur

Date: Dynasty 4 (Sneferu)

Bibliography: A. Fakhry, *The Monuments of Sneferu at Dahshur, Volume II (The Valley Temple), Part I (The Temple Reliefs)*, Cairo 1961, pp. 94, 97, figs. 91, 94, Pl. XXXB

Illustration: Photo + Autography

Description: On another side of the same limestone pillar another sign is preserved. The left and upper parts of the sign are missing. Apart from the incomplete sign the upper part of the head of the goddess is shown too. It is oriented to the left. The scene is carved in raised relief again. The stem is short and its lower end is connected with the headband of Seshat. Its upper end is joined with the central disc of the rosette. The disc is quite large. The rosette consists of seven petals. Three of them on the left part are not complete and their outer ends are missing. The outer ends of the four preserved petals are not equally pointed and some are curved. The vertical and upper right petals touch the bottom part of the arc. The right end of the arc is not connected with the outer end of the horizontal right petal, however, it is very close to it. It seems that the widest part of each petal is shifted to its outer half. The autographic copy of the sign on fig. 94 in Fakhry's publication also contains three pieces of limestone blocks showing upper part of the arc and parts of vertical pair of feathers. All of them complete the sign, however, its uppermost part is still missing. These three pieces with missing parts of the sign, however, cannot be found among the plates of the above-mentioned publication.

No. 1.4.**Function:** headdress**Provenance:** Abusir**Date:** Dynasty 5 (Sahura)**Bibliography:** L. Borchardt, *Das Grabdenkmal des Königs Saḥu-re^c*, Band II (Wandbilder), Text, Osnabrück 1981, pp. 10–15; L. Borchardt, *Das Grabdenkmal des Königs Saḥu-re^c*, Band II (Wandbilder), *Abbildungsblätter*, Osnabrück 1981, Bl. 1**Illustration:** Photo + Autography

Description: On a large piece of limestone block from the mortuary temple of the pyramid complex of Sahura a very fine raised relief shows the complete sign of Seshat. It forms the headdress of the goddess shown as seated on the throne. The scene is oriented to the left. She is a part of a larger relief scene preserved in front of and below her. The goddess is dressed in her typical leopard skin and records on the tablet the booty gained in a war with the Libyans. A column of hieroglyphic text carved in front of Seshat states her activity. Short columns of hieroglyphic inscriptions above the goddess represent her titles *ḥntt pr-mdḥt ntr*, *ḥntt pr-mdḥt iry(w) ḥt nzwt* and *[ḥntt] ḥwt rwtw(?)*. The stem of Seshat's sign is short and its lower end is connected with the headband of the goddess. The central disc is carved with a smaller concentric ring within. The number of petals of the rosette is seven. They are arranged symmetrically around the disc as follows: lower left, horizontal left, upper left, vertical, upper right, horizontal right and lower right. They are all pointed at their outer ends, widest in the middle part and they are without any decoration within. The arc is carved above the rosette touching the petals from the horizontal left to the horizontal right one. Two tall vertical feathers are connected to the uppermost part of the arc. They are carved symmetrically along the vertical axis of the arc. Both feathers are tapering to the top and are curved at their outer ends. They are depicted as separated from each other by a very tiny gap.

No. 1.5.**Function:** headdress**Provenance:** Abusir**Date:** Dynasty 5 (Sahura)**Bibliography:** L. Borchardt, *Das Grabdenkmal des Königs Saḥu-re^c*, Band II (Wandbilder), Text, Osnabrück 1981, pp. 36–37; L. Borchardt, *Das Grabdenkmal des Königs Saḥu-re^c*, Band II (Wandbilder), *Abbildungsblätter*, Osnabrück 1981, Bl. 19**Illustration:** Autography

Description: Other limestone blocks from the mortuary temple of Sahura's pyramid complex show the sign of the goddess depicted, but divided on two damaged limestone blocks containing several registers with the relief scenes. In one of them Seshat is shown together with other deities. One column of hieroglyphic inscription occurring in front of the standing goddess above her shrine reads as *ḥntt pr-mdḥt iry(w) ḥt nzwt di.ḥ ḥnh*. The goddess dressed in the leopard skin is oriented to the left. In her right hand she holds the *wḥḥ* scepter and in the left the *ḥnh* sign. Because of the breaking line of the block running through the sign, this one is not

preserved completely. The stem of the sign is short and connected with the headband on the head of Seshat. In this case the stem is remarkably decorated by oblique lines running from upper left side to the lower right described by Wainwright¹⁶ as “the spirals on the stem”. The central disk is missing. The rosette very likely consisted of seven petals. Because of the mentioned breakage the horizontal left, horizontal right and lower right petals are missing completely. The remaining preserved petals have very detailed fine decoration of their inner parts. This decoration shows the veining of the plant petals, but not only the main and longest vein, but also the lateral veins on both sides going out of the main one. The widest parts of the petals are approximately in the middle of their length. The petals are slightly pointed on their outer sides. The arc is clearly preserved, but both its ends are missing. Both upper petals together with vertical one touch the bottom part of the arc. From its uppermost part the two tall vertical feathers rise tapering to the top.

No. 1.6.

Function: headdress

Provenance: Abusir

Date: Dynasty 5 (Sahura)

Bibliography: L. Borchardt, *Das Grabdenkmal des Königs Saḥu-re^c*, Band II (Wandbilder), Text, Osnabrück 1981, pp. 18–21; L. Borchardt, *Das Grabdenkmal des Königs Saḥu-re^c*, Band II (Wandbilder), *Abbildungsblätter*, Osnabrück 1981, Bl. 5

Illustration: Autography

Description: One limestone block from the easternmost end of the causeway of the pyramid complex of Sahura contains another sign of Seshat used as her headdress. The goddess with her sign is carved at the uppermost right corner of the large block with a similar scene as described above (No. 1.4.) showing her seated on a throne and probably writing on a tablet. Seshat is oriented to the left in the scene. Unfortunately the goddess and her sign are not preserved completely. Only the back side of the throne, of her body and the right part of the sign are preserved. The sign itself seems to be identical in its characteristics with that described in source No. 1.4. The stem is short and connected with the headband of Seshat. The central disk probably contains a concentric ring. From seven only four petals of the rosette are visible on the relief (vertical, upper right, horizontal right, lower right). The remaining three petals on the left side are missing. Petals without traces of inner decoration reflect symmetrical arrangement around the disc. Their widest part seems to be slightly shifted to the central disc. Their ends are pointed. Only the right half of the arc is preserved. Its bottom part is joined with the vertical right, upper right and horizontal right petals of the rosette. One can deduce the same situation on the missing left part of the sign. On the uppermost part of the arc the two tall vertical feathers are depicted. The partly damaged feathers are tapering to the top. The picture shows that they are separated from each other by a very tiny gap between them.

¹⁶ G. A. Wainwright, *Seshat and the Pharaoh*, *JEA* 26, London 1941, p. 31.

No. 1.7.

Function: standard

Provenance: Abu Ghurob/Abusir

Date: Dynasty 5 (Niuserra)

Bibliography: F. W. von Bissing, H. Kees, *Das Re-Heiligtum des Königs Ne-woser-Re (Rathures)*, Band II (Die kleine Festdarstellung), Leipzig 1923, Bl. 7

Illustration: Autography

Description: The sign of Seshat occurs in two registers arranged one above the other. They form a large incomplete relief scene broken into several damaged blocks coming from the sun temple of Niuserra.

1) In the upper register the sign is divided into two parts because of the breakage of the block. The sign of the goddess has here the form of the standard of Seshat held by a man acting as a priest. No inscriptions accompany this scene. The stem of the sign is replaced here by a long tall shaft. From the central disc originally seven petals of the rosette came out. Both lower petals are missing in the sign and only very short small parts of them can be recognized close to the disc. The symmetrically arranged petals are widest in the middle and at the outer ends they are pointed. The arc is placed above the rosette and it seems that it does not touch the petals. From its uppermost part two vertical feathers rise. They appear to be of the same width and slightly pointed at their outer ends. It seems that there is no upper bordering line between the arc and the two feathers showing separation of these two parts of the sign, in other words the feathers appear to be an integral part of the arc.

2) In the lower register the sign of Seshat is preserved completely. It has again the form of a standard standing in front of the shrine placed on the sledge. Above the shrine the word *nš* occurs written by hieroglyphs. The sign consists again of the long shaft. The rosette of the sign contains seven symmetrically arranged petals radiating from the central disk. As in the previous case the petals are without any decoration. The arc touches both upper petals and the vertical one, but not both horizontal petals on the opposite sides of the rosette. A pair of vertical feathers bears the same characteristics as mentioned above. The autographic depiction, however, does not fully correspond with one photograph of the sign, where on the one hand the upper bordering line separating the feathers and the arc is visible and on the other hand, it seems, that the vertical line dividing the arc into two parts is missing.

No. 1.8.

Function: headdress

Provenance: Saqqara

Date: Dynasty 6 (Pepi II)

Bibliography: G. Jéquier, *Le monument funéraire de Pepi II*, Tome II (Le Temple), Le Caire 1938, p. 29, Pls. 36, 38

Illustration: Photo + Autography

Description: In this case it is highly likely that the sign forms the headdress of the goddess. It occurs on a limestone block coming from the mortuary temple of the

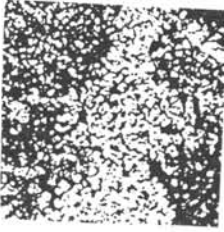
pyramid complex of Pepi II at Saqqara. The context of the reliefs surrounding the sign indicates very strong similarity with the scene known from the mortuary temple of the pyramid complex of Sahura at Abusir. On the block the sign depicted under the starry sky is preserved completely. Immediately below the hieroglyphic inscription *hntt* occurs the traces of another incomplete sign, probably *pr* or *hwt* indicating the presence one of the titles of the goddess.¹⁷ Her depiction in the relief scene can be expected behind the text.¹⁸ The stem of the sign is short. In the central disc the circular ring is shown. The rosette consists of seven symmetrically arranged petals. Their outer ends are curved and tapered and the widest parts are on the opposite side close to the central disc. Each of the petals is joined with the disc by a very thin stalk. The petals touch the bottom part of the arc from the horizontal left to the horizontal right one. The autography of the sign shows the arc and the vertical feathers depicted in an unusual way. Feathers are joined to the arc in such a way as described in the case of the signs from the sun temple of Niuserra mentioned above. Moreover, the vertical line divides the whole arc into two symmetrical parts. Each of them together with one feather is identical, so both halves are of the same shape on the left and right sides. The autographic depiction, however, does not fully correspond with the photography of the sign, where on the one hand the upper bordering line separating the feathers and the arc is visible and on the other hand, it seems, that the vertical line dividing the arc into two parts is missing. The whole sign reflects the perfection of symmetry and elegance.

¹⁷ Cf. No. 1.4. above.

¹⁸ The reconstruction of the scene shows the goddess seated on the throne writing on a tablet. See G. Jéquier, Pepi II, Tome II, p. 29 and Pl. 36.

A list of the signs

No. 1.1.



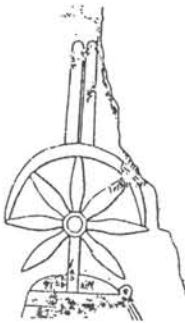
No. 1.2.



No. 1.3.



No. 1.4.



No. 1.5.



No. 1.6.



No. 1.7.2.



No. 1.7.2.



No. 1.8.



REFERENCES TO THE ILLUSTRATIONS

- (No. 1.1.): R. Engelbach, A Foundation Scene of the Second Dynasty, JEA 20, London 1934, Pl. XXIV
- (No. 1.2.): A. Fakhry, The Monuments of Sneferu at Dahshur, Volume II (The Valley Temple), Part 1 (The Temple Reliefs), Cairo 1961, fig. 85
- (No. 1.3.): A. Fakhry, The Monuments of Sneferu at Dahshur, Volume II (The Valley Temple), Part 1 (The Temple Reliefs), Cairo 1961, fig. 94
- (No. 1.4.): L. Borchardt, Das Grabdenkmal des Königs Saḥu-re^c, Band II (Wandbilder), Ab- bildungsblätter, Osnabrück 1981, Bl. 1
- (No. 1.5.): L. Borchardt, Das Grabdenkmal des Königs Saḥu-re^c, Band II (Wandbilder), Ab- bildungsblätter, Osnabrück 1981, Bl. 19
- (No. 1.6.): L. Borchardt, Das Grabdenkmal des Königs Saḥu-re^c, Band II (Wandbilder), Ab- bildungsblätter, Osnabrück 1981, Bl. 5
- (No. 1.7.1.): F. W. von Bissing, H. Kees, Das Re-Heiligtum des Königs Ne-woser-Re (Rathures), Band II (Die kleine Festdarstellung), Leipzig 1923, Bl. 7
- (No. 1.7.2.): F. W. von Bissing, H. Kees, Das Re-Heiligtum des Königs Ne-woser-Re (Rathures), Band II (Die kleine Festdarstellung), Leipzig 1923, Bl. 7
- (No. 1.8.): Photo by Jaromír Krejčí