

The king himself training his horses: two new perspectives on an unusual scene in Ramesses III's temple at Medinet Habu

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This paper presents a new interpretation of a scene in the first courtyard of Ramesses III's temple at Medinet Habu that has so far been described as showing the king "inspecting" his horses. A closer look at the messages communicated by both texts and pictorial elements in the relief reveals that it shows the actual training of the horses, i.e. their "habituation" in preparation for their use in battle, and that the focus of the composition lies on the king's claim to have played an active part in this training himself.

An unusual scene in the first courtyard of Medinet Habu

The composition discussed on the following pages is situated on the south wall of the first courtyard of Ramesses III's temple in Medinet Habu, to the right of the window of appearances. It shows an unusual motif, which – to the authors' knowledge – is so far singular among the preserved imagery from Ancient Egypt (fig. 1)³. On both sides, the image field is clearly delimited from the adjacent scenes by framing columns, containing part of the king's protocol (on the left) and a phrase confirming that the king's name shall be on his temple forever (on the right). Furthermore, the available space has been cropped by two doors in the left and the right third of the relief. Only the middle part of the scene, which shows Ramesses III himself, extends over the entire height of the composition.

As a result, the king is not only highlighted by his position (in the centre of the image field) but also by his sheer size, surpassing all other figures by far. He is shown standing, looking to the right, wearing an elaborate dress and the blue crown. Behind him follow two servants holding a long-handled sun-shade and a fan, respectively. The king himself is holding a long stick that almost equals him in height in his lowered left hand, whereas his raised right hand is grasping a shorter stick that reaches into the upper right of the composition.

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³ Epigraphic Survey 1932, pl. 109. It is likely that this composition, as many others, had a model in the Ramesseum. In the south-west corner of the first courtyard, and thus corresponding to the location of the Medinet Habu scene, the two bottom tiers of a wall are preserved that contain a relief which – as far as it is preserved – is identical in content and layout to the scene under discussion, except for the higher number of protagonists. The upper part, which might have shown the king and the horses, is however completely destroyed: Epigraphic Survey 1932, pl. 127 A.

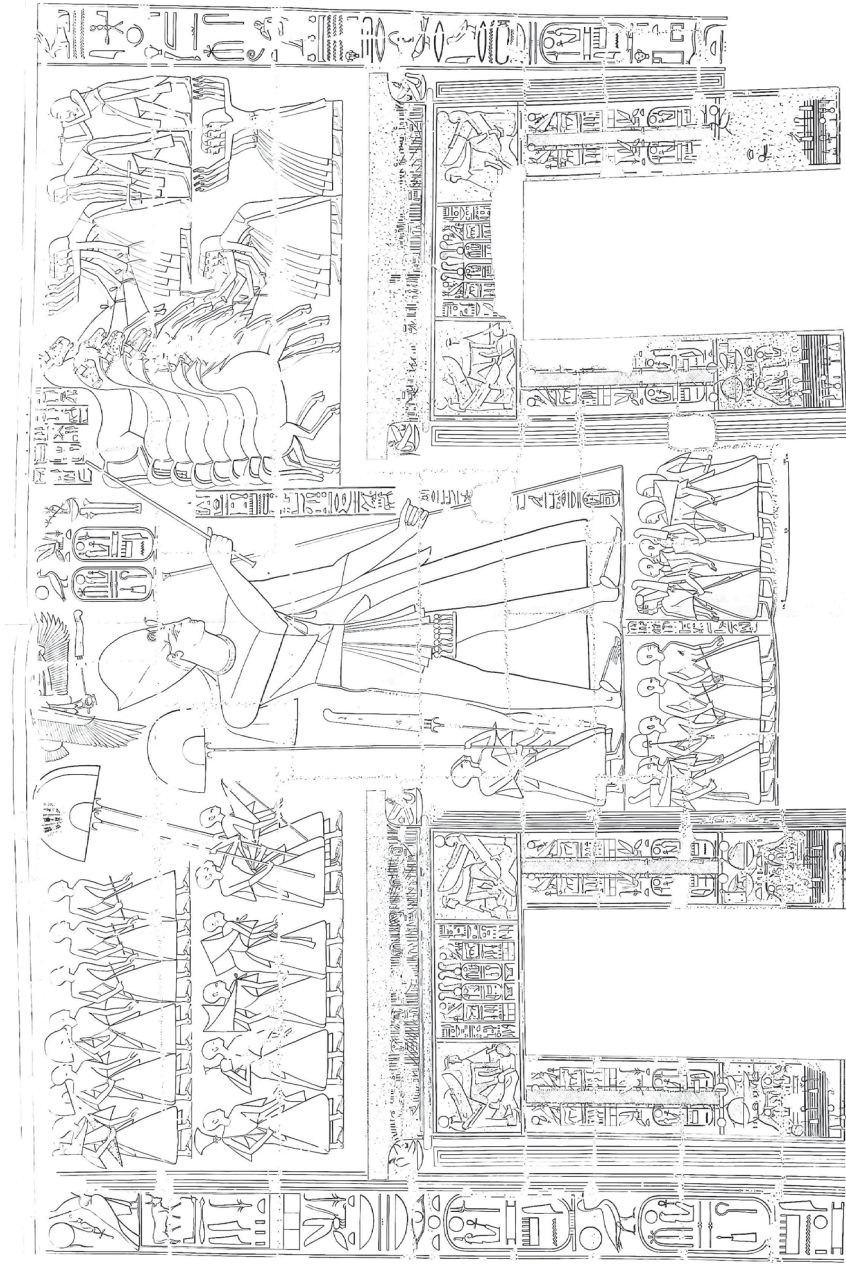


Fig. 1: Ramesses III is shown participating in the training of chariot horses.

Here we see a vertical row of eight pairs of horses. As was customary (e.g. in scenes showing a pair of horses pulling a chariot), the bodies of the two horses of every pair are largely overlapping and can only be distinguished in the area of the legs, tails and heads. In this scene, the horses' restless character is emphasised by showing one of their front legs lifted and in two cases the head turned, looking backwards, in the king's direction, and (frontally) out of the picture, respectively (see *infra*). The horses are being handled by two groups of four men in a slightly bent posture, holding the reins in one hand and lifting the other one in the direction of the horses (and the king behind them). The upper group is succeeded by two men in a similar posture, one of whom is holding a trumpet in his lowered left hand. Then follows another man blowing into the same instrument. Under his left arm he is claspings the wooden form which was protecting the instrument made from thin metal sheets from deformation while it was not being used⁴. Behind the lower group follow four more men with both arms upraised.

On the left, the king is followed by thirteen more servants. Two of them, closely behind the ruler, are carrying long-handled sun-shades. The others carry short sticks, smaller sun-shades and diverse other objects. Another group of twelve figures can be seen underneath the king, distributed in two groups of six turned towards the central axis of the composition. On the left are six more servants carrying diverse objects, whereas the right group consists of high dignitaries, including two royal princes. The column in front of them merely states that they are speaking (*dd-mdw jn*, followed by their titles), but no direct speech is given⁵.

“I did it myself!” – the visual highlighting of verbal messages

Besides the king's cartouches and the column in-between the two groups at the bottom, the scene contains two more texts. The first⁶ is written in five short columns above the horses; the second⁷ consists of one long column in front of the king extending from the height of his raised right hand to the base line on which the figure is standing⁸:

⁴ Edgerton – Wilson 1936, 136, note †. Such wooden forms were found inside the trumpets in Tutankhamun's tomb: Wiese – Brodbeck 2004, cat. no. 82.

⁵ The same is true for the parallel at the Ramesseum, which however gives the name and titles of a prince at this location: Epigraphic Survey 1932, pl. 127 A; Kitchen 1979, 871, 4.

⁶ Epigraphic Survey 1932, pl. 109, col. 1–5.

⁷ Epigraphic Survey 1932, pl. 109, col. 6.

⁸ Edition and translation of the texts: Kitchen 1983, 112 and Kitchen 2008, 87–88; see also Edgerton – Wilson 1936, 136–137.

Five columns on top (col. 1–5):



ptr n3 htr c3.y n p3 jh [3 n] (r^c-mss hq3 jwnw) n [hnw]⁹ jn nswt ds=f

“Viewing the great (chariot) teams of the great stable [of] (Ramesses Heqa Iunu) of the [residence] by the king himself.”

One column in front of the king (col. 6):



nswt h^c(j.w) mjt.t mntw ph^tj=f mj s3 nw.t r m33 ssm.wt sh^{pr}.n c.wj=f(j) n p3 [jh]¹⁰ c3 n c^h.t jr(j).n nb t3.wj (wsr-m^c.t-r^c mr(j) jmn)

“The king has appeared like Montu, his strength being like that of Nut’s son, to see the horses that his (own) hands have trained, of¹¹ the great [stable] of the palace, which the lord of the Two Lands (Usermaatre Meriamun) has made.”

These two texts speak about the king’s actions, including the common formal variation in their interchanging use of *ptr* – *m33*, *htr* – *ssm.wt* and *hnw* – *c^h.t*, all pairs obviously designating the same referents. Looking at their correlation with the pictorial elements, we see that the king is in direct spatial contact with both of them: He touches the fringe of the upper text (col. 1–5) with the stick in his raised right hand, and the longer stick in his left hand crosses the text in front of him (col. 6). Actually, the hand itself slightly reaches into the column and it looks as if as a result the position of some of the signs (*shpr*) had to be adapted by reducing the space between them and slightly moving them to the right. (It might also be due to this close correlation of text and figure that only the upper half of the column is framed

⁹ Only the sign is still visible; the rest has been amended following Kitchen 1983, 112, 5.

¹⁰ Unlike Kitchen 1983, 112, 7 a writing of *jh* without ⁹ is assumed, based on the parallel in col. 3.

¹¹ It is assumed that the meaning of *n p3 jh* corresponds to that of the same phrase in the inscription on top (col. 3), whereas Kitchen 2008, 87 and Edgerton – Wilson 1936, 137 translate “for”. With regard to the questions under discussion, this does not change the meaning of the inscription.

by thin vertical lines.) In fact, an even closer look shows that this direct spatial correlation of the pictorial elements (sticks / hand) with the texts does not just happen at any location. As for the upper text, the stick touches the lower end of columns 4 and 5, thus highlighting the king's name as well as the expression *ds=f* ("himself"). And in the longer column, the phrase *shpr.n* *ḥ.wj=f(j)* ("that his (own) hands have trained") is positioned directly next to the king's *hand* (!). In both cases, the spatial correlation of the king's figure with the text has thus been used to make the ruler literally *point out* his role in the training of the horses.

In fact, such meaningful *text-image-interferences*, which serve to highlight certain contents or even to create additional layers of meaning, can be found in multimodal compositions from most periods of the ancient Egyptian history¹². (The term "multimodal" is used instead of the frequently found "multimedial", because ancient Egyptian text-image-compositions are not the result of a secondary combination of two distinct media but manifestations of one historically stabilised medium uniting two semiotic or communicative "modes", i.e. pictorial elements and writing signs¹³.) To start with two more cases from Medinet Habu, a scene on the northern exterior wall shows Ramesses III leading prisoners of war before the Theban triad, with his direct speech, addressing Amun-Re, rendered in five columns in front of his figure¹⁴. The king's hand reaches into the first column, which contains his title and name: "Words spoken by the King of Upper and Lower Egypt, the lord of the Two Lands [HAND] (Usermaatre Meriamun) [...]". As a result of the (literally) *deictic* marking of this sequence, the king's figure is "pointing out" his identity, thereby confirming his presence in both modes, pictorial representation and writing. The same mechanism can be found in a relief in room 12 that shows again the king speaking to Amun-Re¹⁵. While the actual speech is rendered in three columns above the king's head and two more behind his back, the introductory phrase "Words spoken by the lord of the Two Lands (Usermaatre Meriamun)" has been put in a separate column between the king and the god. As a result, via his right hand that is rendered in the gesture of "addressing", the king is again visually connected to his name and title. The same phenomenon can also be found in the private domain, e.g. in the tomb chapel of Neferenpet from the 19th dynasty, where at the end of a long praise of Osiris, following the phrase *n k3 n*

¹² These *interferences* and similar phenomena related to the layout of multimodal compositions from ancient Egypt are at the centre of Frederik Rogner's current research project, supported by the Swiss National Science Foundation.

¹³ For the distinction medium / mode see Bateman – Wildfeuer – Hiippala 2017, 123–128.

¹⁴ Epigraphic Survey 1930, pl. 43.

¹⁵ Epigraphic Survey 1957, pl. 328.

the title and the name of the tomb owner are mentioned – highlighted once again by the tomb owner’s hand reaching into the text precisely at this spot¹⁶.

While in these three cases the main effect of the correlation was the highlighting and, as a result, the reinforcement of the speaker’s identity, such interferences have also been used to highlight the main idea communicated by a composition, just as in the Medinet Habu relief. In another composition in the same temple, which shows the ruler leading captured Meshwesh before Amun-Re and Mut, his hand – once more performing the “address-gesture” – is pointing at the phrase *pꜣ mšwš* in the text in front of him that renders his direct speech¹⁷. Similarly, the central content of a scene in the courtyard of Tjanefer’s tomb (TT 158) that revolves around the crossing of the water in the Neshmet-barque is foregrounded by the end of the oar held by the tomb owner, as it reaches exactly into the column which contains the term *dꜣj* – “crossing (the water)”¹⁸. Such parallels support the assumption that the main message of the scene under discussion, i.e. the claim that the king himself was involved in the training of the horses, has been deliberately highlighted by the meaningful correlation of pictorial elements and writing signs, namely by having the ruler’s figure *point out* this fact with his right hand and the stick in his left hand – the latter at the same time playing an important role with regard to the pictorial communication of the message.

Training horses – the pictorial hints

Regarding the term *shpr*, the question might be asked, why the translation “train” has been chosen, instead of a more general “bring up” / “raise”, etc. The Egyptological dictionaries offer both possibilities. We find (amongst other meanings of the lemma *shpr*): “Tiere aufziehen: Pferde; Hunde; Geflügel”¹⁹, “bring up child; educate; breed horses”²⁰, “to train, to rear, to bring up”²¹, “erziehen, aufziehen, trainieren”²². If we look at more detailed analyses of the word’s meaning with regard to horses, the dichotomy in the suggested meaning – “bring up” vs. “train” – remains the same. Two often-mentioned examples are the relief under

¹⁶ Hofmann 1995, pl. 37.

¹⁷ Epigraphic Survey 1932, pl. 78.

¹⁸ Seele 1959, pl. 4.

¹⁹ Erman – Grapow 1982, 241, references specific to horses: note 29.

²⁰ Faulkner 1962, 240.

²¹ Lesko 1987, 84–85.

²² Hannig 2006, 806.

discussion and a phrase in the great Sphinx stela of Amenhotep II²³. The text on the latter contains i.a. a description of how, as a prince, Amenhotep II took care of horses, culminating in a passage that is introduced by the phrase *shpr.n=f ssm.wt nn mjt.t=sn*²⁴. Decker understands *shpr* as “train” and translates: “Er trainierte Pferde, derengleichen es nicht gab.”, based on the cotext as well as other mentions of *shpr*, including the passage in Medinet Habu and its translation by Edgerton and Wilson (see *infra*)²⁵. In his analysis of the passage, Beylage translates *shpr* as “bring up” / “breed”: “Er züchtete Pferde ohne ihresgleichen [...]”, adding that in none of the cases mentioned by Decker a translation as “training” was a better fit than “bringing up”²⁶. In his analysis of the label in the scene under discussion (col. 6), Decker chooses the translation “train” once again: “um die Pferde zu sehen, die seine eigenen Hände trainiert haben für den großen (Stall) des Palastes”²⁷. As mentioned above, in his analysis of this passage as well as the aforementioned phrase on the great Sphinx stela, he refers to Edgerton and Wilson who choose the same term in their treatment of the Medinet Habu scene: “to see the horses which his (own) hands have trained [...]”²⁸.

Obviously, it needs to be stressed that the question if the verb *shpr* in these passages should be understood as “train” or as “bring up” is rather a matter of the target language (in this case English) and not of the source language, where the semantic field of *shpr* evidently comprises *both* notions – and many more, including ideas of (divine) “creation” etc. To this conclusion we can add from a practical point of view that the bringing up of chariot horses obviously *included* their training (*as* chariot horses), meaning that not only in the source language but also in the historical practice the two notions coincide. In this particular case from Medinet Habu, the synergy of the two modes, text and image, speaks in favour of assuming the more particular meaning “training”: A closer look at the pictorial parts of the composition makes clear that the king is most likely shown overseeing (or even taking part in) the *training* of horses belonging to the Egyptian chariotry, or, more accurately, their *habitation*. This becomes evident from the horses’ depicted behaviour, the posture of the grooms as well as trumpets being blown in the horses’ vicinity, and, finally, the fact that this scene is part of a

²³ Decker 1975, 53–61; Beylage 2002, 43–63; Helck 1955, 1276–1283.

²⁴ Helck 1955, 1282, 16.

²⁵ Decker 1971, 130; see also Decker 1975, 61.

²⁶ Beylage 2002, 61. Similarly Klug 2002, 230: “Er hat Pferde aufgezogen. Nicht gab es derengleichen, [...]”.

²⁷ Decker 1971, 132; see also Decker 1975, 84–85.

²⁸ Even if we agree with this translation based on the pictorial parts of the composition (see *infra*), it is rather doubtful that the examples mentioned by Edgerton – Wilson 1936, 137, note 6b and 33, note 68b as parallels support such a reading. In those cases a translation with the basic meaning “to create”, “to bring into being” seems actually more adequate.

larger “military discourse” informing the decoration of the first courtyard. The following closer look at those elements as well as at a modern parallel will demonstrate what the new interpretation of this scene is based on (fig. 2).

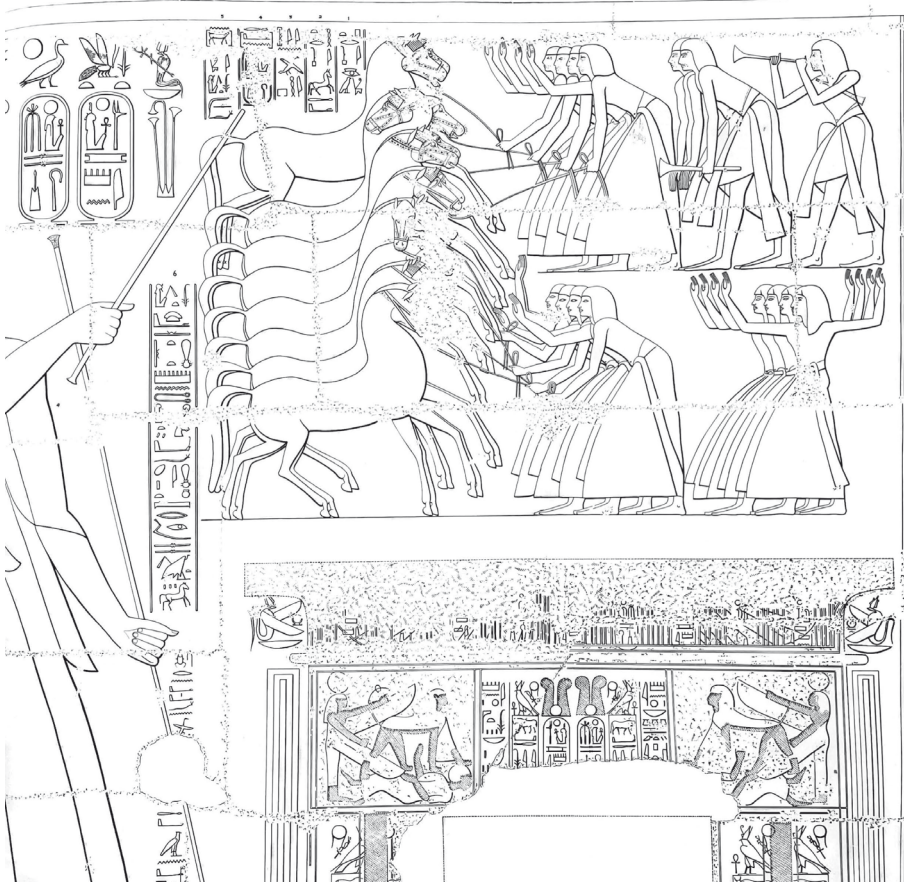


Fig. 2: Detail of fig. 1.

The horses' depicted behaviour is in itself a strong indicator that the creators of the scene wanted to convey more than the mere fact that the king is “inspecting” the horses. From the late Eighteenth dynasty onwards, the Egyptians often chose to convey some of the horses'

“restless” character in two dimensional images, indicated by their posture²⁹. In the Medinet Habu scene, the horses’ restlessness becomes particularly clear from the fact that all of them are depicted with one of their front legs raised. In addition, depicting the legs in this way contributes to the visual attractiveness of the scene, and makes it easier for observers to distinguish the different pairs of horses. In other scenes, this posture of the legs might suggest actual movement, e.g. in the elite tomb chapels of Ahmes in Amarna³⁰ and of Sennedjem in Akhmin³¹, as well as in contemporary royal scenes, showing Seti I³² or Ramesses II³³ returning from a campaign on their chariot. In those cases however, the horses’ direct setting as well as the larger context of the scenes (transportation, war campaigns) support a notion of actual movement, whereas in the scene under discussion the horses are clearly shown to be restless, but only moving on the spot, being held in place by their grooms.

In addition to the posture of the legs, the heads of two of the horses, being depicted frontally and looking backwards, respectively, as if turning their heads away from what is going on in front of them, further stress the animals’ restlessness. In his study on frontality in Egyptian iconography Volokhine mentions the frontal depiction of horses’ heads as a sign of movement: “Cette attitude serait à justifier par l’idée de mouvement, de vivacité, que le thème peut impliquer.”³⁴ Mentioning the Medinet Habu scene, he describes the same artistic device as stressing the horses’ “impétuosité”³⁵. Furthermore, with regard to the depiction of enemies, Volokhine links frontality with the depiction of fear: “[...] la frontalité du visage de l’ennemi exprime [...] la terreur qu’il ressent et, par là, sa vulnérabilité”³⁶. It seems very well possible that the artistic device of frontal depiction to convey fear has also been transferred to other protagonists, such as in this case horses. A perfect parallel for the expression of distress can be seen on the exterior north wall of Ramesses III’s temple in Medinet Habu, where a pair of horses, probably belonging to the enemy, is depicted in the middle of a battle scene³⁷. The

²⁹ For example in the famous painting from the tomb of Nebamun in the British Museum (BM EA 37982), in the Theban tomb chapel of Menna (Hartwig 2013, fig. 2.3) or in the tomb chapel of Huya in Tell el-Amarna (de Garis-Davies 1905, pl. 14).

³⁰ de Garis-Davies 1905, pl. 32.

³¹ Ockinga 1997, pl. 38.

³² Epigraphic Survey 1986, pl. 6.

³³ Wreszinski 1935, pl. 181.

³⁴ Volokhine 2000, 53.

³⁵ Volokhine 2000, 54.

³⁶ Volokhine 2000, 41.

³⁷ Epigraphic Survey 1932, pl. 70.

head of one of them is depicted frontally, and the other one looks backwards. Such a close parallel in the same temple, and in the context of a battle scene, clearly confirms that this posture has been chosen to convey distress. There are many more examples of horses with their head turned backwards or depicted frontally, all of them showing horses belonging to the enemy and clearly being in distress³⁸.

Furthermore, the grooms' posture and the trumpets being blown in the horses' vicinity are an indication of the activity that the scene is supposed to convey. So far, in the original publication as well as in several interpretations, the scene has been described as the king "inspecting" his horses³⁹. In this context, the gestures and activities of the grooms and the other people close to the horses, including the blowing of a trumpet, have been interpreted as gestures and actions of "saluting" (the king)⁴⁰. No one in their right mind would however blow a trumpet near a horse. In addition to the trumpets, the group of men in the lower register have their arms raised. As an individual element, this could indeed be interpreted as grooms saluting the king; but when looking at the scene as a whole, it is much more likely that they are waving their arms in order to scare the horses. The horses' reaction as depicted in the scene makes perfect sense: they are clearly responding to the sounds and the activities being conducted near them. In contrary to the protagonists mentioned so far, the four grooms holding the reins are comforting the horses, their right hands being raised in front of the animals' heads. What we see here is thus a controlled environment, where the horses are at the same time purposely being scared by diverse means as well as comforted by their grooms. This unites all characteristics of the training of horses used in battles or other situations that are stressful for the animals, known as *habituation* (see *infra*). And if the king actually wanted to show that he has been personally involved in his horses' training, it makes sense that we see him overseeing the training being conducted – and not just being saluted by his grooms. If we assume that the short stick lifted by the king in the direction of the horses does not just serve as a token of power (and to visually highlight parts of the inscription, see *supra*), it is even possible that he is represented taking part in the training in the scene itself.

Finally, this interpretation also matches the bigger context in which this scene is found. The walls of the first courtyard are decorated with scenes and inscriptions that celebrate the kings' achievements in war, the sole exception to this being the reliefs surrounding the window of

³⁸ Karnak, Seti I (Epigraphic Survey 1986, pl. 23); Ramesseum, Ramesses II (Wreszinski 1935, pl. 109); Luxor temple, Ramesses II (Wreszinski 1935, pl. 71); Karnak, Merenptah (Wreszinski 1935, pl. 58 [still attributed to Ramesses II]).

³⁹ The original title of the plate (Epigraphic Survey 1932, pl. 109) is: "Ramses III inspecting his horses".

⁴⁰ Edgerton – Wilson 1936, 136; Decker – Herb 1994, 257.

appearances, which nevertheless highlight the ruler's physical and political power via the icon of "smiting the enemies". It is thus no surprise that also the scene under discussion does not just show any inspection of horses by the king, but, much more specifically, the action of preparing these animals for their function in war, i.e. as chariot horses.

Horses do not generally like war-like environments; they are easily spooked and are a huge liability since as a result they can cause a lot of unintentional damage. It is therefore likely that horses were chosen, if not bred, for warfare, depending on certain qualities. In addition to this, the Egyptians developed many ways of controlling their horses, ranging from bodily modifications, such as nose slitting, to whips as well as different types of harnesses, such as halters and bridles⁴¹. It makes only sense that, in addition to these precautions, the horses also underwent a special habituation training before they went into war. Habituation training helps the horse get used to unfamiliar sounds and environments, and is largely based on the trust between horse and trainer. It is however not supposed to suppress the horses' natural instincts as would be implied by other terms frequently employed, such as "desensitising". The use of trumpets in this context might be related to the use of trumpets in battle as well as in ceremonies conducted before the start of a campaign⁴².

Up to this day, such training is necessary for horses that enter situations with a lot of people and noise, or even potentially dangerous situations, such as animals ridden by mounted police. Additionally, horses used in processions that include musicians need to be habituated in view of these particular sounds. Such a situation, which also in view of training methods comes quite close to this ancient Egyptian example, is the annual event of *Prinsjesdag* which takes place every year on the third Tuesday of September in the Netherlands. On this day, the king (or queen) gives a speech called *Troonrede*, thereby announcing the government budget for the next year and opening the working year of the First and Second chamber. This event takes place in The Hague, the seat of the Dutch government. The king rides from his palace to his final destination in a carriage, accompanied by the Dutch cavalry honorary escort, which consists of members of the Dutch cavalry who ride borrowed horses, volunteered by their (private) owners. In preparation for this event, the honorary escort conducts intense trainings in advance, including a special public training day called *gewenningstraining* (lit. "habituation training") or *schriktraining* (lit. "shock training") one day before *Prinsjesdag*. On this day, they train on the beach of Scheveningen, where the horses get to endure gunshots and waving flags (fig. 3), tanks and smoke (fig. 4). In addition, the public that this training day usually

⁴¹ Turner 2021, 245–251.

⁴² Matič 2018, 103–115.

attracts is invited to make noises to intentionally “scare” the horses with the aim to further habituate them in view of possible incidents on the day of the procession. Also, up to this day, trumpets and trombones are still involved in the actual event as well as in the training (fig. 5). All together, these modern-day parallels as well as the multimodal highlighting of certain contents mentioned above leaves no doubt that the relief is supposed to show the chariot horses’ (habituation) training in which – at least so he claims – the king himself took an active role.



Fig. 3: The training for *Prinsjesdag* at the beach of Scheveningen in 2022: The horses are scared using gunshots and waving flags.



Fig. 4: The training for *Prinsjesdag* at the beach of Scheveningen in 2008: The horses are trained to walk through clouds of smoke.



Fig. 5: The training for *Prinsjesdag* at the beach of Scheveningen in 2022: The horses are being accustomed to the marching music that will accompany the procession.

Figures

Fig. 1: Epigraphic Survey 1932, pl. 109. Courtesy of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago.

Fig. 2: Epigraphic Survey 1932, pl. 109, detail. Courtesy of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago.

Fig. 3: © Anneke Ruys.

Fig. 4: Wikimedia Commons (accessed 14 October 2022): FaceMePLS from The Hague, The Netherlands. (CC BY 2.0) [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:The_Horse_That_Came_In_From_The_Smoke_\(2859914520\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:The_Horse_That_Came_In_From_The_Smoke_(2859914520).jpg)

Fig. 5: © Anneke Ruys.

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