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The King Sitting Backward in His Chariot: A Ramesside Icon of Victory

LISA SABBABY

Abstract

Ramesside Period kings covered temple walls with decorative relief detailing their military expeditions and subsequent victories. Included in these reliefs were new types of scenes with new details, including one scene in which the king sits backward in his chariot, receiving live captives and cut off body parts as proof of his victory. This article presents the evidence for this particular chariot scene, and discusses the meaning and use of it as an icon of victory.

Extensive narratives of ancient Egyptian military expeditions and victories decorated temple walls in the Ramesside Period. The entire story of a military expedition unfolded in carved and painted relief portraying the march, the battle itself, the resulting slaughter of the enemy, the victorious king, and the return home with booty. The evolution towards this type of narrative seems to have begun as early as the reign of King Ahmose in the early Eighteenth Dynasty, based on the fragmentary scenes found at his pyramid temple in South Abydos.¹ Later in the Amarna Period, scenes set in specific time and place, displayed the activities of the royal family. In a study of the reused blocks at Karnak with scenes from an Asiatic battle of Tutankhamun, Johnson states that with this emphasis on time and place, “it was inevitable that the Amarna period would influence pictorial commemorations of subsequent battle scenes.”² He further concludes that the Ramesside narratives were “the culmination and final flowering of a much longer tradition, which was in full flower by the end of the Eighteenth Dynasty.”³

In these Ramesside narratives, new types of scenes, and new details within the scenes, appear.⁴ One of these new scenes is that of the king watching the submission of live enemy soldiers along with the counting of the hands, and also phalli, to establish the number killed. The king can stand before his officials, leaning on a large pillow in what seems to be an outdoor window of appearances, while the counting of the captured and dead is carried out. Another, more unusual way the king can be depicted in such a victory scene, is sitting backward in his chariot. A well-preserved depiction of this is the scene of Ramses III on the interior south wall of the second court of the Temple of Medinet Habu after his defeat of the Libyans in year 5 (fig. 1).

The king sits backward in his chariot, level with the top of the chariot bar. Possibly he sits on the bar going around the front of the chariot body, but it is also possible that some type of cushion was put

¹ S. Harvey, *The Cults of King Ahmose at Abydos*, PhD diss., University of Pennsylvania, 1998, 308–15. See comments by A. Spalinger, *Icons of Power: A Strategy of Reinterpretation* (Prague, 2011), 217–18.

² W. Johnson, *An Asiatic Battle Scene of Tutankhamun from Thebes: A Late Amarna Antecedent of the Ramesside Battle-Narrative Tradition*, PhD diss., University of Chicago, 1992, 110–11.

³ W. Johnson, “Tutankhamun-Period Battle Narratives at Luxor,” *KMT* 20, 4 (2009–10), 31.

⁴ See L. Sabbahy, “Depictional Study of Chariot Use in New Kingdom Egypt,” in A. Veldmeijer and S. Ikram, eds., *Chasing Chariots-Proceedings of the 1st International Chariot Conference (Cairo 2012)* (Leiden, 2013), 199–200.



Fig 1. Ramses III seated backwards in his chariot, receiving trophies. Drawing by L. D. Hackley after the Epigraphic Survey, Medinet Habu I, pl. 23.

into the chariot for the king to sit upon.⁵ His feet are on the back bottom edge of the chariot, slanting down; the foot on the side of the viewer can be seen in the space between the spokes of the wheel. In fact, several examples of this exact scene, to be discussed below, are not completely preserved and are only recognizable by the downward pointing foot in the space between the wheel spokes. The king's garment flares out from the waist and drapes over his legs; the garment's hem can be seen just above his foot. The king holds the reins of the horses, as well as what looks like a stringless (?) bow in his left hand, which rests on the side bar of the chariot. His right hand gestures down to the cut off hands and phalli being piled in front of him, depicted in four registers on a much smaller scale than the king in his chariot. Three attendants, seen

under the chariot horses, hold long-handled sunshades over the king, while other attendants stand in front of the chariot horses, holding their bridles and calming them.

The earliest known scene of the king backward in a chariot is that of Seti I on the exterior north wall of the Hypostyle Hall at Karnak (fig. 2).⁶ While the king is in his chariot looking backward, the chieftains of Lebanon prostrate themselves before him. The king holds the reins, a bow and a sickle-shaped sword in his left hand, held out over the horses. The fact that the king is sitting, not standing, is evident from the fact that his foot can be seen below the platform of the chariot, at the level of the axle. The Lepsius drawing of this scene clearly shows a flared out garment, its hemline, and the king's foot, although the foot is more horizontal than slanted.⁷ In the more recent Oriental Institute drawing (fig. 2), the garment is damaged, the foot seems to come from the axle itself, and the wheel spoke below the foot is gone.

Heavy recutting in ancient times changed not only the "limbs and costume of the king," but the changes to this specific scene "effected both its form and content"; for example, the chariot wheel was enlarged, the lines of the chariot body were adjusted, and the head and crown of the king made higher.⁸ It is almost as if it was being changed to have the king appear to be standing, not sitting, thus changing the context of the scene. All the other known examples of the sitting backward scene in temple relief decoration are similar to the Ramses III scene just described above. The Seti I scene, the first example of this backward position, does not fit the pattern of the later sitting backward scenes. The king's hand with the reins does not rest relaxed on the chariot bar, and he has a quiver hanging on his back. There are no attendants holding sunshades over him, or holding his horses. Submission with gifts is being shown, but there are no tied captives or piles of body parts. Also, a point to be discussed further below, is that this scene is set near Egyptian forts along the Way of Horus.⁹ All the other sitting backward scenes are set in territory that is not Egyptian, and not near an Egyptian outpost. This Seti I scene may have been an early form of this type of scene, and perhaps with the later re-cutting under Ramses II, it was changed to fit his post-battle scenes. There are at least four sitting backward in chariot scenes known from the reign of Ramses II, and all are identical in the scene details.

⁵ A. Calvert, "Vehicle of the Sun: The Royal Chariot in the New Kingdom, in Veldmeijer and Ikram, *Chasing Chariots. Proceedings of the 1st International Chariot Conference (Cairo 2012)*, 62.

⁶ Epigraphic Survey, *The Battle Reliefs of King Sety I* (Chicago, 1986), pl. 4.

⁷ C. Lepsius, *Denkmaeler aus Aegypten und Aethiopien*, vol. 3 (Genève, 1972), pl. 126.

⁸ Epigraphic Survey, *The Battle Reliefs*, xviii and 9–10. P. Brand, *Monuments of Seti I: Epigraphic, Historical and Art Historical Analysis* (Leiden, 2000), 23ff.

⁹ A. Gardiner, "The Ancient Military Road between Egypt and Palestine," *JEA* 6 (1920), pl. 12.

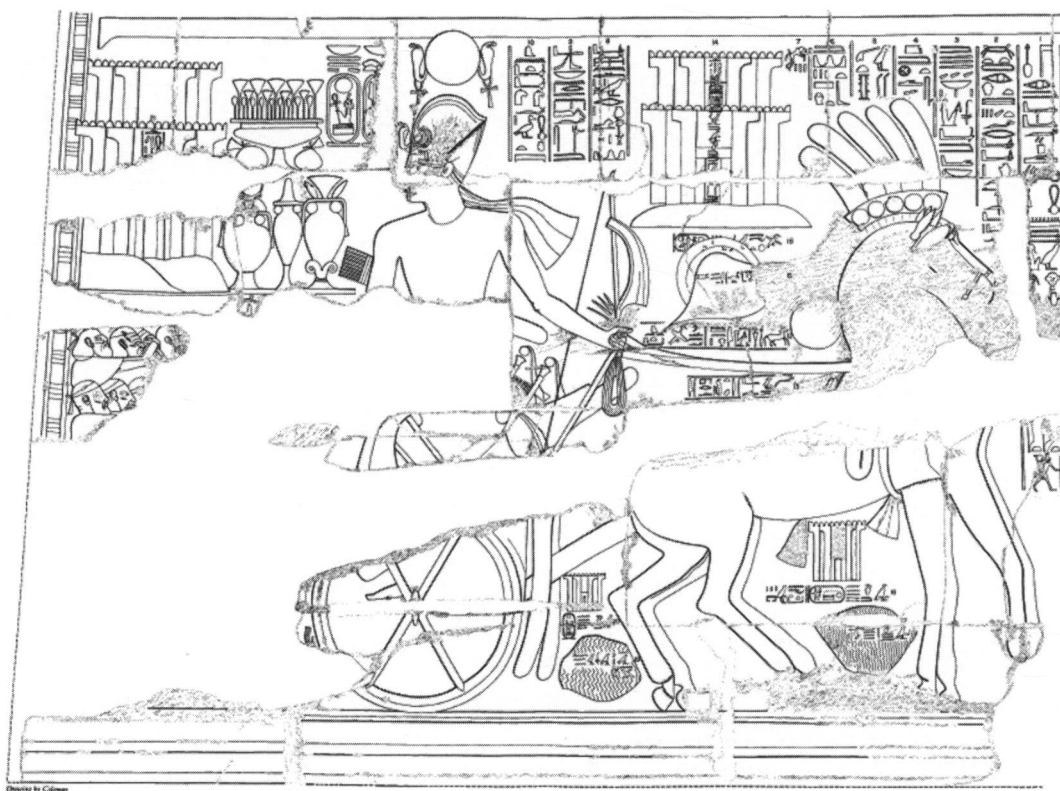


Fig. 2. Seti I seated backwards in his chariot, exterior north wall of Hypostyle Hall. Drawing courtesy of the Epigraphic Survey, Reliefs and Inscriptions at Karnak, Volume IV: The Battle Reliefs of King Sety I (Chicago 1986), pl. 4.

In fact, the closest parallel to the foot position of Seti I is the foot of Ramses II in his sitting backward scene at Abu Simbel.¹⁰ On the upper northeast wall of the large, first hall inside Abu Simbel Temple, Ramses II is shown sitting backward in his chariot, left hand holding reins and bow while resting on the top bar of the chariot. His right hand gestures down to the hands being piled before him, in three small registers. Two attendants with sunshades stand on the far side of his chariot team, while two other attendants stand in front of the horses, controlling them. The line of the king's long garment and his foot below, are clear. The bottom of the king's foot is horizontal with the wheel spoke just below it.¹¹

Three more scenes like this belonging to Ramses II are preserved, one at Karnak and two at Abydos, but unfortunately they are not complete. The Karnak scene is part of the Battle of Kadesh depicted on the outside west wall of the court between the Eighth and Ninth Pylons.¹² The very bottom register shows a piling of the hands. The register above it just has a fragment of the bottom of another pile of hands, and to the left, the bottom of a chariot wheel, and horse hooves with human feet in front. The piled hands and partial chariot wheel clearly mark this scene as one of the king backward in his chariot.

On the interior south wall of the second court of the temple of Seti I at Abydos, decorated in the time of Ramses II,¹³ the preserved relief breaks along the top of a chariot wheel, before which a pile of

¹⁰ C. Desroches Noblecourt, S. Donadoni and E. Edel, *Grand temple d'Abou Simbel: la bataille de Qadech* (Cairo, 1971), pl. 3, d.

¹¹ Desroches Noblecourt, et al., *Grand temple d'Abou Simbel*, pl. 36.

¹² S. Heinz, *Die Feldzugsdarstellungen des Neues Reichs: Eine Bildanalyse* (Vienna, 2001), 286; W. Wreszinski, *Atlas zur altägyptischen Kulturgeschichte*, vol. 2 (Leipzig, 1923–38), pl. 70.

¹³ R. David, *A Guide to the Religious Ritual at Abydos* (Warminster, 1981), 11–12.



Fig. 3. Chariot wheel of Ramses II depicted in first forecourt of Seti I Abydos Temple. Photograph by Taylor Bryanne Woodcock.

hands is being counted. A sandaled left foot, slanting down from above, can be seen through the spokes of the wheel (fig. 3). Just under the king's foot, is the head of a foreigner, seemingly attached under the chariot. An earlier detail similar to this can be found in the scene of Seti I's return from a Libyan campaign on the north exterior wall of the Hypostyle Hall at Karnak.¹⁴ A rectangular section is marked off on the bottom of the chariot body, and from it two heads can be seen between the spokes, and a third head stretches up above the wheel. A later parallel is found in the captives tied under the chariot of Ramses III when he is shown returning from his Libyan campaign.¹⁵ Not just the heads, but entire figures of captives, are shown under the chariot.

Ramses II's chariot wheel in the Seti I Abydos temple scene is depicted with an axle whose linchpin top is carved with the head of a lion biting the head of a foreigner (fig. 3). This same motif decorates the linchpin of his chariot in the same scene at his own Abydos Temple, discussed in the paragraph just below, as well as in the chariot of Ramses III at Medinet Habu, when he is shown setting out on his Libyan campaign, following the chariot bearing the standard of Amun.¹⁶

¹⁴ Epigraphic Survey, *The Battle Reliefs*, pl. 27, and close-up pl. 31.

¹⁵ Epigraphic Survey, *Earlier Historical Records of Ramses III* (Chicago, 1930), pl. 24.

¹⁶ Epigraphic Survey, *Earlier Historical Records*, pl. 17.

The Battle of Kadesh is depicted on the outside north wall of the Ramses II temple at Abydos, although only the bottommost register remains on the wall. In the victory scene, the complete wheel and bottom half of the chariot is preserved.¹⁷ The bottom edge of the king's garment, and his feet, can be seen through the spokes of the wheel. Behind the chariot are remains of four much smaller registers of men counting and piling up hands.

There is one scene of Merenptah sitting backward in his chariot in a rock-carving on the road between Aswan and Sehel, dedicated by the king's Viceroy of Kush, Messuy.¹⁸ Messuy, slightly bent over and holding a fan, stands before the king. The king sits completely on the top of the chariot, while his garment covers the entire chariot body, ending in a horizontal line at the level of the axle. The king's foot does not seem to be shown. The king gestures to Messuy with his right hand, while his left hand is down behind him, and seems to hold the reins. The name and titles of Messuy are in a band below the scene, and in a vertical register behind him. The king's cartouches are placed in front of him, and the chariot team is named in a vertical register above the horses.

A similar scene with an official facing a king backwards in his chariot is partially preserved on a fragment of the bottom of a stela found at Giza.¹⁹ Hassan discovered the limestone fragment, along with other stelae, in the sand fill of a depression by the Great Sphinx.²⁰ The fragment preserves the bottom part of a chariot with wheel, and the lower part of the chariot team. Two figures with the horses are preserved from the waist down; one figure is in front of the horses, and must be holding their bridles, while the second figure is alongside the horses, bowing with hands on his knees in the direction of the king. Behind the chariot stands a larger figure, holding something long in his left hand. There are two damaged lines of vertical inscription right in front of the figure, which give the title "overseer" and the name "Pashed."²¹ A pleated skirt can be seen coming down the back of the chariot, and a slanted diagonal line seen in the space between the wheel spokes, in this context, should be a foot. This stela fragment and the Messuy rock-carving are only two examples, but point to sitting backward in a chariot as a way of the king's honoring an official, probably in the context of an expedition outside of Egypt proper. The stela fragment found at Giza must have been placed there by the official Pashed to memorialize his having been honored while on an expedition.

Other than the depiction of Ramesses III, backward in his chariot after his first Libyan battle, discussed above (see fig. 1),²² there is only one other scene that must have shown this king sitting backward. The badly damaged exterior west wall of the temple of Ramses III at the Mut Temple Complex, South Karnak, preserves the two bottommost registers of a scene of victory over Syrians, with captives being brought, and two piles of hands being counted.²³ The very bottom half of the chariot wheel can be seen to the right of the upper pile of hands. The wheel is not preserved high enough to show the king's foot. The horses' legs are preserved, along with two small fan bearers, and attendants holding the horses. It is clear, however, that what is probably shown is a victory scene with the king sitting backward in his chariot.²⁴

There are two other victory scenes of Ramses III having hands and phalli piled in front of him, however, in these scenes the king is not backward in his chariot, but standing in an outdoor window

¹⁷ S. Iskander and O. Goelt, *The Temple of Ramesses II in Abydos*, vol. 1, part 1 (Atlanta, 2015), pl. 2.2.23; A. Mekhitarian, M. Kunnen and R. Wullemans, *Abydos: Sacred Precinct of Osiris* (Knokke, 1998), pl. 89; Heinz, *Feldzugdarstellungen*, 284.

¹⁸ J. de Morgan, U. Bouriant, G. Legrain, G. Jéquier, and A. Barsanti, *Catalogue des monuments et inscriptions de l'Égypte antique*, vol. 1 (Vienna, 1894), fig. 87. For the inscriptions, see also L. Habachi, "The Graffiti and Work of the Viceroys of Kush," *Kush* 5 (1957), 33, no. 34.

¹⁹ A. Schulman, *Ceremonial Execution and Public Rewards* (Freiburg, 1988), 127–28, and fig. 25. Also see idem, "A Memphite Stela, the Bark of Ptah, and Some Iconographic Comments," *BES* 2 (1980), 101, n. 48.

²⁰ S. Hassan, *The Great Sphinx and Its Secrets* (Cairo, 1953), 61, fig. 52. Also mentioned in *PM* 3,1, 46.

²¹ C. Zivie, *Giza au deuxième millénaire* (Cairo, 1976), 254, no. 6.

²² Epigraphic Survey, *Earlier Historical Records*, pl. 23.

²³ Epigraphic Survey, *Ramses III's Temple within the Great Enclosure of Amon, Part II, and Ramses III's Temple in the Precinct of Mut* (Chicago, 1936), pl. 115.

²⁴ Pointed out by R. Anthes, "Die Vorführung der gefangenen Feinde vor den König," *ZÄS* 65 (1930), 26.

of appearances. The king stands on a podium, with his left arm resting on a large pillow atop a short wall on his left side. The window of appearance is used in a scene on the exterior north wall of Medinet Habu showing Ramses III's defeat of the Libyans, and also when he has defeated the Sea Peoples. In both scenes, the location is set near an Egyptian building that is named; the victory over the Libyans is celebrated near the fortress "Usermare-Mariamun is the Repealer of the Temeh," and the victory over the Sea Peoples is celebrated near the "Migdol of Ramses III."²⁵ It is possible that this window of appearance is portable, and set up after the battle, but also possible that it is meant to represent the actual window of appearance located in a nearly structure.²⁶ The "Migdol of Ramses III" shown in the relief has a shuttered window over the entranceway.²⁷ The eastern gateway, or migdol, into Ramses III's Medinet Habu Temple also has a window above the entrance passageway that originally functioned as a window of appearance.²⁸

Out on a battlefield in foreign territory, the king celebrated victory sitting up on his chariot, but close to an Egyptian outpost, he made use of a window set in the structure for that purpose. Scholars have pointed out the symbolic relationship between the royal chariot, the throne and the window of appearance, as staging places for the king. Schulman pointed out that when the king sits in or on the chariot, "it serves as the throne."²⁹ It is interesting that the king sits up on the bar of the chariot, or on something placed in the chariot body that puts him up that high. What the king might sit on other than the bar is never shown, but he never sits down on the floor of the chariot.³⁰ Kuhlmann has discussed the Egyptian name for throne, *st wrwt*, which means "high place" or "tall place,"³¹ just where the king would be if he was perched on his chariot bar or standing in a window of appearance. What seems to be the point in these three places is the physical elevation of the king over others.

Chariots, thrones, windows of appearance, as well as royal ships, were also similarly decorated to symbolically protect the king from harm.³² Defeated and tied up enemies were one form of this apotropaic decoration, but such decoration only occurs on two chariots with a king sitting backward: on the linchpin of the chariot wheel of Ramses II, Abydos Temple of Ramses II,³³ and on the linchpin and an enemy trussed up and tied under the chariot body of Ramses II, Abydos Temple of Seti I.³⁴ None of the other chariots, or the two windows of appearances in the Ramses III temple reliefs have any apotropaic decoration.

There is a limestone ostrakon in the Medelhavsmuseet in Sweden that belongs to a fairly large number of decorated ostraca with scenes of animals acting as humans. In this case, the ostrakon is depicting "the war of cats and mice,"³⁵ and the scene is that of a mouse sitting backward in his chariot (fig. 4).³⁶

²⁵ W. Edgerton and J. Wilson, *Historical Records of Ramses III: The Texts of Medinet Habu*, vol. 1 and 2 (Chicago, 1936), 13–14, and 42. See E. Morris, *Architecture of Imperialism: Military Bases and the Evolution of Foreign Policy in Egypt's New Kingdom* (Leiden, 2004), 715 and 775.

²⁶ Discussed briefly by B. Fjeersted, *The "Window of Appearance" Re-opened: New Perspectives on a New Kingdom Royal Venue*, MA thesis, University of Memphis, 2011, 73.

²⁷ See discussion by Morris, *Architecture of Imperialism*, 715–18.

²⁸ See A. Badawy, *A History of Egyptian Architecture; The Empire* (Berkeley, 1968), 468, who suggests the window had wooden shutters; and drawing of the elevation, Hölscher, *Medinet Habu* 1, pl. 28.

²⁹ A. Schulman, "Chariots, Chariotry and the Hyksos," *JSEA* 10, 2 (1980), 151.

³⁰ An unusual sitting position even with a non-royal chariot, see R. Parkinson, *The Painted Tomb-Chapel of Nebamun* (Cairo, 2008), 110.

³¹ K. Kuhlmann, *Der Thron im alten Ägypten* (Glückstadt, 1977), 28–29, and idem, "Throne," in W. Wendrich, ed., *UCLA Encyclopedia of Egyptology* (2011), 4, <http://escholarship.org/uc/item/8xc7k559>

³² A. Calvert, "A Vehicle of the Sun: The Royal Chariot in the New Kingdom," in Veldmeijer and Ikram, *Chasing Chariots*, 61–64.

³³ See n. 17 above.

³⁴ See fig. 3.

³⁵ See the discussion by E. Brunner-Traut, *Egyptian Artists' Sketches* (Leiden, 1979), esp. 11–15.

³⁶ B. Peterson, *Zeichnungen aus einer Totenstadt* (Stockholm, 1973), pl. 65, MM 14 049, 101. The similarity to Ramses II backward in his chariot at Abu Simbel was pointed out early on by H. Schäfer, "Ägyptische Zeichnungen aus Scherben," *Jahrbuch der Königlich Preussischen Kunstsammlungen* 37 (1916), 30–31.

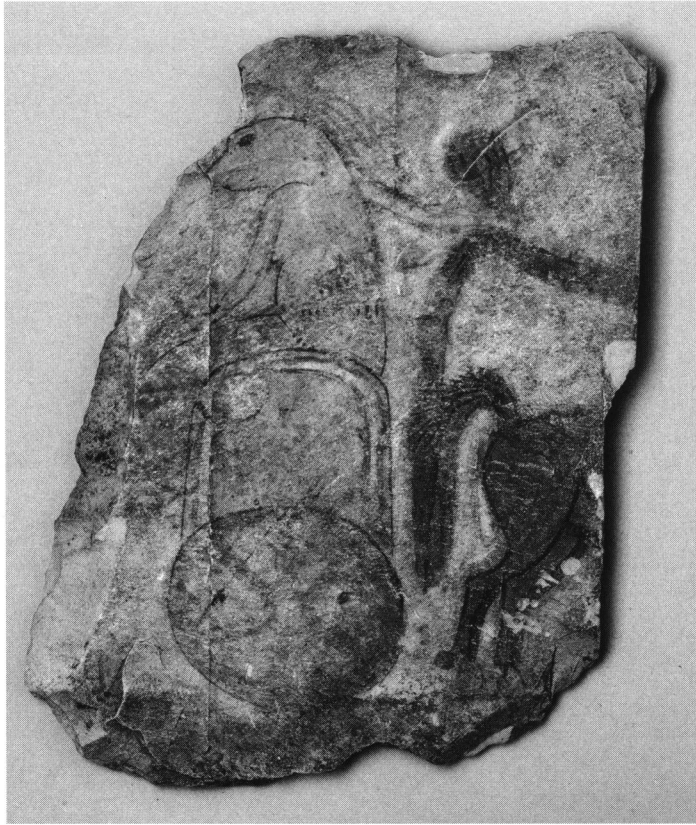


Fig. 4. Ostrakon with sketch of a mouse seated backwards in a chariot. Museum of Mediterranean and Near Eastern Antiquities, Stockholm, Sweden, MM 14049. Photograph courtesy of the Medelhavsmuseet.

The mouse sits up high on the chariot bar, right arm behind him holding the reins of the horses, heavy skirt billowing out behind the chariot. The ostracon is broken so what the mouse looks backward at is gone, but one wonders if it could have been a pile of cat paws. There is another similar, also fragmentary, ostrakon in the Berlin Museum,³⁷ which were discovered at Deir el-Medineh; the Medelhavsmuseet ostrakon probably came from there as well.³⁸ Berlin ostrakon no. 97 shows the mouse sitting backward on the top of the chariot, but with both arms in front of him; the mouse does not hold reins. The snout of a cat and a cat's paw reaching for the mouse is preserved; the rest of the scene behind the chariot is broken away. Part of a similar scene is on the backside of the ostrakon, but it is very unclear.³⁹ It is interesting that sitting backward in a chariot was such an understood icon of victory, that the artists of these ostraca used this scene in a "cartoon" to indicate a mouse victorious over cats.

There are seven depictions in temple reliefs of Ramesside kings sitting backwards in their chariots in the context of celebrating victory over a foreign enemy. The earliest depiction is of Seti I on the exterior north wall of the Hypostyle Hall, and the latest is Ramses III on the interior south wall, second court at Medinet Habu. There are two stelae, one only fragmentary, that show the king backward in his chariot, when he is being honored by, or honoring an official related to a military expedition. It appears, from both the temple reliefs and the stelae, that the chariot served as a substitute for, or was the equivalent of, the throne and the window of appearances. The battle scenes of Ramses III reveal that when the king celebrated his victory close to an Egyptian outpost, he did so from a window of appearances, and

³⁷ E. Brunner-Traut, *Die altägyptischen Scherbenbilder der Deutschen Museen und Sammlungen* (Wiesbaden, 1956), 96–97, pl. 34, no. 97; also referred to by idem, *Altägyptische Tiergeschichte und Fabel* (Darmstadt, 1984), 7; and idem, "Ägyptische Tiermärchen," *ZÄS* 80 (1955), 20.

³⁸ The ostrakon was part of the Gayer-Anderson Theban collection, Peterson, *Zeichnungen*, 67.

³⁹ Brunner-Traut, *Die altägyptischen Scherbenbilder*, pl. 34, no. 98.

not from his chariot. Therefore, the chariot seems to have been a substitute for both the throne and the window of appearances when the king needed to make a victorious appearance “out in the field.”

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