

Personification of Seasons in the Ancient Egyptian Art

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Abstract

The Egyptian year was mainly divided into three seasons; Ahket (inundation), Pret (the emergence of crops), and Shemu (harvest). Such seasons were just like various human activities. Each one included agriculture, horticulture, hunting and fishing, building papyrus-boats, domestic and wild animals as well as plants that were represented in the Egyptian art. Accordingly, the significance of the study is to examine the personification of seasons in the Egyptian art through studying the representation of seasons' activities and their personifications. The current study was undertaken to investigate carefully the activities during the seasons of the Egyptian year as depicted on the walls of the "chamber of seasons" within the royal funerary complex, presenting personification of seasons in the Egyptian art. The study attempted to answer a number of questions. The major one was as follows: Are the three seasons depicted obviously in the ancient Egyptian art? This question was branched into three sub-questions. The first was as follows: what are the reasons for seasons' personification? The Second one was: Why are the scenes involved in tomb's owner? The third was represented in the following: Why do the private tombs contain personifications as well as the royal funerary complex?

Key words: Seasons, Personification, Calendar, Scenes, Egyptian Art.

Introduction

The Egyptian year was divided into three seasons according to the agricultural rhythm of the Nile Valley; Ahket (inundation), Pret (the emergence of crops), and Shemu (harvest). Each season consisted of four months. Hence, the Egyptian year had 360 day. Additional five days; so-called epagomenal (added days)¹ were added to the system to be complete 365 days².

In the ancient Egyptian language  Smw stands for the hot summer, or harvest³ that refers to the crop used for taxation purposes; it is derived from the word for the season in which the harvest and subsequent tax assessment took place⁴.  prt refers to winter⁵ in which the crops in the fields start to grow after the flood had inundated the land. It is the time of "coming forth" for new plants. Additionally,  Axt inundation⁶ indicates fields, pasture land, or the Nile floods the fields. Smith⁷ mentioned that Akhet (inundation) starts from July to December and Shemu lasts from January to June, or spring⁸. He neglected the months of prt. Smith⁹ admits that the personifications of seasons were represented merely in the Akhet and Shemu that are depicted in the Egyptian art. Therefore, he asserts that the two seasons include all the months of the year.

The scenes of personification represented the event which took place in the Nile Valley during a given time of the year. Such scenes of field work that are depicted on the walls of the private tombs were referred by analogy to the natural seasons; the periodicity of the natural phenomena as well as the cyclical aspect of time¹⁰. Those scenes started from the fifth dynasty as an innovation in art. Although such scenes were few, they indicated a lot of different activities in the Nile Valley. The nature cycle, time cycle as well as creation circuit were pointed out due to such scenes.

During the Old Kingdom the seasons were depicted by two ways. The first one depicted the activities that happened during each season. Such activities were displayed in the "chamber of season" or " *Weltenkammer*" in Sun temples Abu Ghurab. The scenes could be presented as follows:

Source 1: It was represented in the sun temple of Niuserra, 5th dynasty, on the East Wall of room of seasons, Abu Ghurab (Now in Berlin Museum No. 20038). It consisted of some blocks¹¹.

The blocks involved the onset of inundation in early summer. The Axt season was depicted.

Block 1: It represents fish-filled water of the covered the land represented by narrow strips painted pink in black dots. As it is done between July and October before the modern river High Dam at Aswan introduced totally controlled irrigation. The highest point of the land was dry above the floodwater. The uppermost register depicts such an island as an area of a rectangular shape. It shelters a nest of birds' eggs, from one of which a chick has emerged begging food from its parents (**Fig. 1**).

Block 2: In the middle of the scene, there are a calf and a cow, just behind them, the muzzle of another cow. These animals belong to a herd, because his name is written over them, they are roaming the savanna at the margins of the desert where there are rich vegetables during the inundation.

The rest of the scene is dedicated to the depiction of men catching birds, above two of them in the middle are "putting birds into cage". Both of them are fishermen with a boat-like shape above them. In the bottom six men are pulling a long rope attached to a bird trap (**Fig. 2**).

Block 3: It shows the arrival of mullets at elephantine in the course of their annual migration. Besides, two rows of antelope (some of them are giving birth) with plants and two dogs (**Fig. 3**).

Block 4: It displays two rows of animals giving birth in a place covered with trees and vegetation. The inscriptions indicated that the antelope of Mendes can traduce walking in desert giving birth¹². At the right of the scene, a man is holding a gazelle from a tree in front of him and two other are taking rest (**Fig. 4**).

Block 5: Some birds are traveling to Elephantine in the inundation season. The name of Elephantine (1st Nome of Upper Egypt) is inscribed Abw .Remains of mullet in water and louts plants are shown. The relevant text is read¹³: *ii Hsk tm HbA*; the priest of sacred fish Tm-t is entering in a divine Braque (**Fig 5**).

Source 2: It was shown in the sun temple of Niuserra, 5th dynasty, on the East Wall of the chamber of seasons, Abu Ghurab (Now in Berlin Museum No. 20036). It contained three blocks as follows¹⁴:

Such blocks displayed the late summer in the Nile Valley. They depicted the activities of the harvest season (Smw). That usually occurred in the late summer. Water of the annual flood began to recede from the agricultural lands; migratory creations started their journeys, birds travelling south and fish north.

Block 1: There can be viewed the lower side of a row of trees. At the bottom, birds are portrayed in the far right while the center is occupied by the northward journey of mullets .

The preserved part of the scene shows the creatures in their flight and at the top of papyrus thickets. On the left, there is a man pulling birds trap shut. The birds on the far left are, from left to right, duck, goose, tern, and pigeon. All these birds are wild migratory and usually visit Egypt from the north to the south. The tern comes to the Delta to catch fish from the cool water, the fisherman come to the Delta with aba and shesmenti (two kinds of pigeon). On the far right, the text mentions the kinds of duck, including xrt Kheret, mxAt mekhat, and ibis (xAt Khat and gmt gemet)¹⁵.

The middle part is divided into two parts. On the left, the harvest of honey is shown. Tubular jars stacked to house the bees. Two men are doing this operation. They put the honey into its jars. Three other men are shown; two of them are pouring water to wash less quality honey and the third is sealing the honey to store it (**Fig. 6**).

Block 2: To the right, a harvest scene (left of the previous block) in which a herd of copulating goats and sheep appear. Inscription above the animals, above the female goats in the center, was translated as "swelling"¹⁶ at whose hindquarters a male is sniffing indicating that it is in heat. On the far right, a man is shown picking fruits of either sycamore fig or Persa tree. Several billy goats are mounting receptive females. Below, some migratory birds are on the wing near the papyrus swamplands (**Fig. 7**).

Block 3: White or pink backed pelicans are depicted on a block of Niuserre temple in the chamber of seasons. In *Smw* season men who handle birds are identified in texts as priests wearing wig and short kilt. They touched the back of birds to guide them along these birds may be domestic brought to the temple or reared in it. At the bottom, fishermen are trying to strain the net from water (**Fig. 8**).

Source 3: It was depicted on the South Wall of the Cause way of the funerary complex of king Unis, 5th dynasty, Saqqara¹⁷:

Among the blocks of the causeway of Unis, many represent the theme of *Calendrier des saisons*. According to A. Labrousse and A. Moussa, three of the blocks¹⁸, having similar composition and scale, may belong to a copy of the scenes in the *Weltkammer* in the sun temple at Abu Ghurab. All the published blocks seem to record the activities of the summer (*Smw*). In the large-scale scenes represented are people harvesting grain, fishermen at channels filled with fish, and hunters with their hounds. Most of the other pieces bear representations of desert animals, including many species of antelopes, gazelles, giraffes, deers, felids, wild dogs, jerboas etc. The fragments obviously form a part of a scene of hunting in the desert. The game are lassoed, barehand caught and hunted with hounds, possibly to be delivered to the king, but he was not hunting himself (**Fig. 9**).

The second way of Personification of season is the human form. These scenes will be presented and explained in the following documents:

Source 1: It was shown in the temple of Niuserra, 5th dynasty, on the East Wall of the room of seasons, Abu Ghurab, 5th dynasty, (Now in Berlin Museum No. 20041). It consists of painted limestone block as follows¹⁹:

This block depicts Axt a woman with a pool with a lotus flower on her head (**Fig. 10**).

Source 2: It is shown in the temple of Niuserra, 5th dynasty, on the East Wall of the room of seasons, Abu Ghurab, 5th dynasty, (Now in Berlin Museum No. 20040). It consisted of painted limestone block as follows²⁰:

Smw Season is depicted as a man with a sheaf of grains on his head. All activities (Figs. 6-8) are depicted behind him (**Fig. 11**).

Source 3: This scene is drawn on the Right thickness of the entrance of the chapel, Tomb of Mrr.w(i) - kA.(i), Saqqara, Sixth dynasty²¹:

The tomb's owner is shown in a large scale. He is sitting on a stool without a back. The three seasons are shown in front of him on the upper register. In front of an easel he paints three seated figures, two females and a male who is facing away from him. They are depicted in a shape of personified forms sitting upon chairs, holding oval shapes that contain four crescents referring to the four months of each of the three Egyptian seasons. The figures are identified, from right to left, Axt; the inundation season that is shown in the form of goddess accompanied with nfr sign, then prt; the growing season which is depicted in the form of goddess accompanied with Htp sign, and Smw; the harvest season, that is in the form of a god accompanied with anx sign. All such signs appear below each other to qualify seasons (**Fig. 12**).

Source 3: This scene is pictured on the South Wall of room 1, Tomb of xntykA called ixxi, Saqqara, Six dynasty²²:

The smaller mastaba of Khentika was also located north of the enclosure wall of Teti's pyramid complex, and although it was started during his reign, it was completed slightly later during the reign of Pepy I.

This scene represents the tomb's owner seated on a stool without a back. On the upper register in front of him, the three seasons of the year are depicted. Three gods are depicted in a kneeling position holding in their hands an oval shape that includes a crescent of the months of each season. These figures are in the female forms except Smw who is male.

It is obvious that the personified figures of the seasons are kneeling on the ground, not seated, and there are no hieroglyphs *nfr*, *Htp*, and *anx* (**Fig. 13**).

The Personification of seasons in the Middle Kingdom is displayed as human form. These scenes are presented and explained in the following documents:

Source 1: This scene is represented on some Blocks from the chapel of the Tomb of Queen *nfrw*, 11th dynasty, Deir El-Bhari, TT 319, (Now in Cairo Museum, JE 49926)²³:

The fragment of relief from the tomb of *nfrw* consists of four horizontal lines of inscription over a personification who is characterized as the season *Axt* by a version of the sign used in writing *Axt* on his head. Before him, he holds two sheaves. Since the figure seems to be the first of a procession, and since he is almost certainly characterized as *Axt* by the headdress, the season is shown here as a man not a woman as Niuserra reliefs.

Simpson²⁴ asserted that "It is not unreasonable to suggest that the scene represented originally consisted of a procession of the three seasons of the Egyptian year in their natural order: *Axt*, *prt*, and *Smw*" (**Fig. 14**).

Source 2: This scene is depicted on a fragment from the pyramid temple of *imn m HAt I* at El-Lisht, (Now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art (No. 09.180.121)²⁵:

The relief represents two figures of which merely the tops of the heads are preserved. The first carries a field with stalks of grain on his head, probably a rendering of two rowed barley. The second one wears an uraeus and is the princess to whom the text written above refers: "the king's daughter of his own body, Kayet, possessor of honor." The first figure is to be interpreted as a personification of a season since the field is bordered on the right by the year suffix pronoun sign, *f*. According to the headdress of the season, it is *Smw* that is the harvest season (**Fig. 15**).

Source 3: This scene is shown on the West wall, Lintel of the statue recess, north end, Tomb of *wx Htp* and *Hny Hry ib*, 12th dynasty, Meir, tomb No. C1²⁶:

Ukhhotep is seated facing south with traces of his titles above him. A female figure is depicted in front of him. In addition, a sign for four months are shown in an oval shape beyond her. Beyond that again is that a small male figure seated on a thorn placed up on a standard.

Below the female figure and the representation of the four months is *ka* (?) emblem placed upon a standard. The two seated figures with the months between them suggest that there is here a representation of the three seasons of the Egyptian year, the third personification and the two additional ovals containing the months have disappeared (**Fig. 16**).

During the New Kingdom, seasons were displayed in the decoration of the vestibule of the south wall of the chapel of Tuthmosis I at Deir el- Bahari²⁷. In this case, the S wall of the room was divided into three registers, each containing a personification of a particular season (lower- *^mw*, middle – *prt*, top – *Axt*).

They are followed by eight personifications in two sub register grouped in pair of male and female figure, each pair apparently personifies a month of the particular season.²⁸

Discussion

The present study managed to answer the first inquiry that was related to the representation of seasons' number. It was basically discussed by Smith²⁹, Edel and Wenig³⁰ who admitted that only *Smw* and *Axt* were actually represented. The obvious example in the royal complex during the Old and Middle Kingdom displayed *Smw* and *Axt* seasons together merely, on one hand. On the other hand, von Bissing³¹ defended an older concept that all the three seasons were presented. However, all other complete representations showed the three Seasons. This refers to such significant scenes in the mastabas of Mereruka and Khentika, and the decoration of the vestibule of the chapel of Tuthmosis I at Deir el- Bahari. In the latter case, the Southern wall of the room was divided into three registers that show the three seasons.

Personification of Seasons in the Ancient Egyptian Art

As a matter of fact all the scenes of the seasons' activities show that most of the activities were done in Smw and Axt seasons, whereas the third one which was prt (the stage of growing crops) had fewer activities. The three seasons were shown generally in the Royal complex as well as the private tombs due to three reasons. Edel and Wenig³² pointed out that the corridor is narrow to accommodate all seasons' activities. Additionally, Simpson³³ suggested that the example of Amenemhat I shall show the Axt at least depicted, even if the three besides the private tombs depicted the representation of the three seasons clearly.

A number of previous studies presented some opinions that helped the researcher find the answer to the second question of the study that was about determining the reasons of the seasons' representation in the Egyptian art. Bochi³⁴ proposed that Abu Gurob's scenes illustrated the typical activities of each season. According to the religious perceptive, he stated that such scenes occurred in the royal context and were dedicated to the glorification of Re.

Additionally, Duell³⁵ suggested that Mereruka's scene represented an invocation to the seasonal gods designed to protect the official's crops , on one hand .On the other hand, Altenmüller³⁶ asserted that Mereruka drew the representation of the three seasons as an indirect association between the tomb's owner and the sun god. Barta admitted that such scenes showed the tomb's owner selecting decorative motifs from the natural world, out of a book of patterns.

Blackman³⁷ suggested that the deceased depicted three seasons because he desired having all the products of the year, considering himself a pharaoh.

It was normal for the king to depict such scenes, whether he had daily or religious reasons. In the private tombs, the scenes' scope on the natural cycle in testimony of the sun-god is of good creation in order to have a concise, sober, and formulaic version of the nature's cycle as depicted by the official.

The personifications of seasons were displayed in the private tombs as royal monuments with no innovation. The tomb owner's direct participation in the activity of painting was also unusual. The question was answered in a number of points. Firstly, the deceased was shown in a painting to repeat the process of creation, contributing directly to cosmic mat. Secondly, he desired to participate in the creative process generally and creating the natural cycle particularly. Thirdly, each season was surrounded by cartouche like shapes; hieroglyphic symbols. In other words, the official created Dt and nHH ; the two aspects of eternal time. He did that because he wished to align himself as the creator; god Re whose cult was prominent at that time. Fourthly, an easel was a portable object that afforded the official some degree of self-reliance as well as the creative ability for which he searched through his act of painting such seasons.

The last inquiry was related to the private tombs that contain the personification of seasons as well as the royal funerary complex. It was done because the officials held the title of vizier a highly respected office in the state's administrations and the similarly prestigious title of lector-priest as well. It was closely associated with members of the royal family and both were buried in close proximity to the king.

Conclusion

The scenes of the seasons were often interpreted as an allusion of the Fifth Dynasty's scenes found in the so-called "Universe Chamber" of the sun temple of King Ni-User- Re near Abu Gurob. Such scenes of animals and nature were also identified as representing the three seasons of the year. Additionally, they were depicted in the Causeway of Unis within the tomb of Mereruka and Khentyka during the Old Kingdom. During the Middle Kingdom the seasons were shown in the tomb of Queen Nfru, the pyramid temple of Amunemhat I at El Lisht and the tomb of Ukhhotp and Heny Hery Ib. The New Kingdom had a scene from the chapel of Thutmosis I at Deir Elbhrari.

The ancient Egyptians shed more light on the activities of seasons that reflected their mods of life. They selected the migration of animals, catching birds, making honey etc. All these activities differed from time to time according to their imagination. The scenes of activities displayed two seasons (Axt , Smw) merely, but the human form managed to present the three seasons to be depicted in Egyptian art. Smw was depicted as a man and the other two were shown as females according to the terminating female alphabet of their names (t).

Accordingly, the purpose of such images that made the king drew the scenes in his complex is to dedicate them to the glorification of sun-god; Re. The high officials placed these scenes in their tombs to depict the natural cycle, or in another word, the scenes evoke divine time rather than linear time. The tomb's owner was involved in the scenes of the seasons in order to confirm the creation process. Then; he could live forever in the afterlife. The oval shapes resembled Sn the sign of eternity. Consequently, the seasons were repeating themselves incessantly, guaranteeing the rebirth of the tomb's owner in the afterlife. Additionally, the officials determined to represent the unending supply of time to which they aspired in terms of increments of months and seasons rather than years.

To conclude, the personification of season in the Egyptian art was not to present a pictorial narrative of the natural seasons, but to juxtapose tableaux depicting activities that were occurring regularly. Moreover, it was done to convey the notion of periodicity of nature as cyclical time on the earth and then insure everlasting life in the netherworld.

تمثيل الفصول في الفن المصري القديم

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الملخص العربي

من المعلوم أن السنة المصرية القديمة تتكون من ثلاثة فصول: فصل الآخت وهو فصل الفيضان، فصل البرت وهو فصل نمو الزرع أو الشتاء ثم فصل الشمو وهو فصل الحصاد أو الصيف.

وكل فصل من فصول السنة له الأنشطة الخاصة التي تتم فيه والتي صورها المصري القديم ومنها جاءت فكرة البحثوى التركيز على الأنشطة التي تم تصويرها في غرفة الفصول حسبما سماها العلماء وتحديدًا في المجموعات الجنائزية الملكية وعلى التمثيل البشرى للفصول.

وتهدف الدراسة إلى تجميع وتحليل مناظر مثلت فيها الفصول وأنشطتها. طرحت الدراسة بمجموعة من الأسئلة لتحقيق هدفها. كان السؤال الأول هل تم تمثيل الشهور الثلاثة في الفن المصري القديم أم لا، كما تساءلت أيضاً عن أسباب تمثيل مثل هذا النوع من المناظر وعن سبب تصويره في مقابر الأفراد سواء بسواء مع المجموعات الجنائزية الملكية.

وخلصت الدراسة إلى أنه تم تمثيل الشهور الثلاثة في الفن المصري القديم. كما اوضحت أن أنشطة فصلى الفيضان والحصاد كانت من أكثر الأنشطة وأن كبار رجال الدولة مثلوا هذه المناظر في مقابرهم كنوع لضمان الحياة في العالم الآخر وأنهم كانوا على علاقة وطيدة بالملوك وذوى نفوذ كبير في الدولة، وهذا ما جعلهم يضعون هذه المناظر مثل الملوك. وعلى الرغم من أن مناظر الشهور جاءت قليلة إلا أنها أعطتنا فكرة واضحة عن الأنشطة المختلفة التي كانت تتم في العصور القديمة مثل هجرة الطيور والحيوانات والصيد وقطف العسل وأنواع مختلفة من الطيور والحيوانات ومواسم وضع الحيوانات والطيور لصغارها إلخ.



Fig. 1: Axt activities from Niuserra at Abu Ghurab (Arnold, D., "Early Summer in the Nile valley" In: Arnold, D., Grzymiski, K., Ziegler C. (eds.), *Egyptian Art in the Age of the Pyramids*, New York 2000, pp. 354- 55, No. 119).

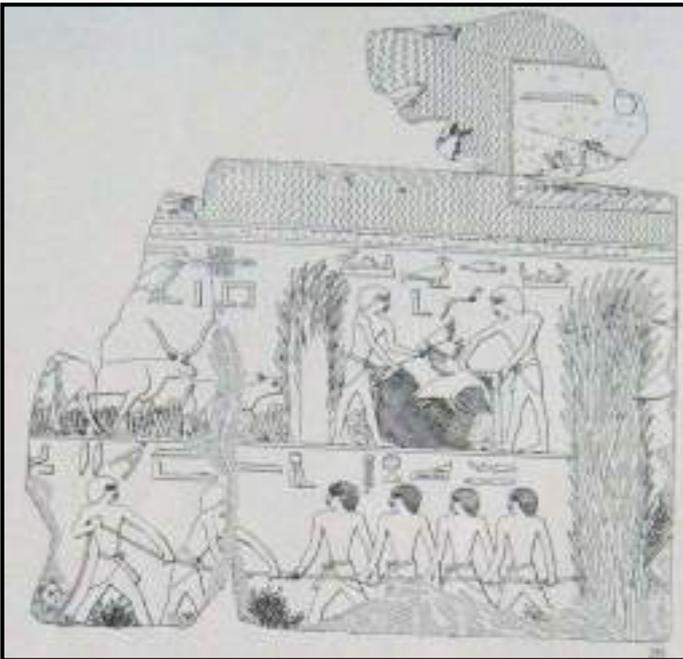


Fig. 2: Axt activities from Niuserra at Abu Ghurab (Edel E., Wenig S., *Die Jahreszeitenreliefs aus dem Sonnenheiligtum des Königs Neuser-Re*, Band VII, Berlin 1974, Taf. 12).

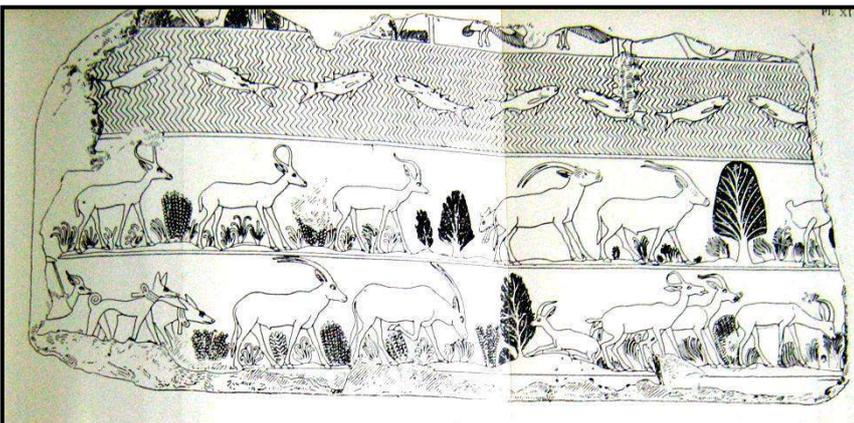


Fig. 3: Axt activities from Niuserra at Abu Ghurab (von Bissing, "La chambre des trois saisons du sanctuaire solaire du roi Rathourès (Ve dynastie) à Abousir", *ASAE* 53, Pl. XI).

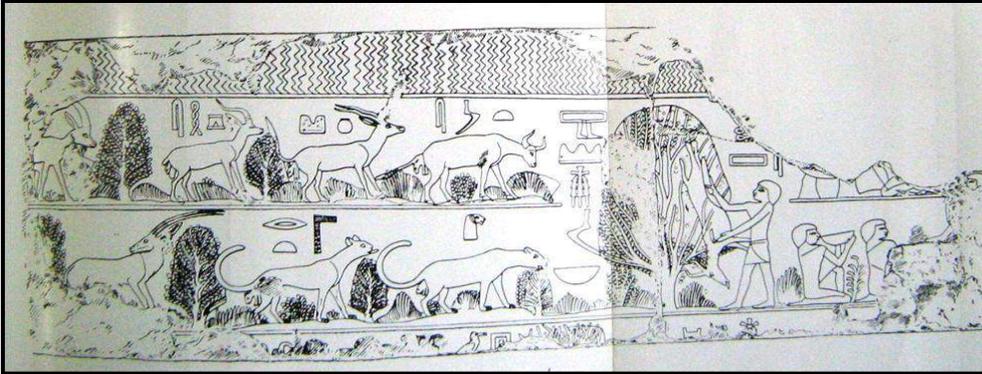


Fig. 4: Axt activities from Niuserra at Abu Ghurab (von Bissing, *Op. Cit*, Taf.

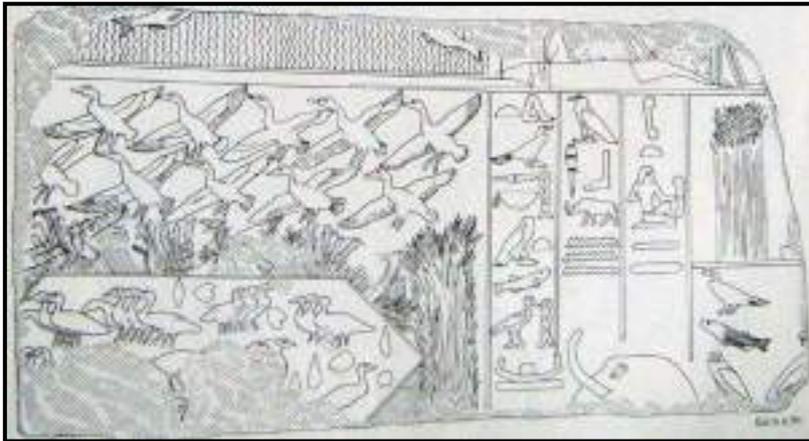


Fig. 5: Axt activities from Niuserra at Abu Ghurab (Edel E., Wenig S., *Die Jahreszeitenreliefs*, 1974, Taf. 12).



Fig. 6: Smw activities from Niuserra at Abu Ghurab (von Bissing, *Op. Cit*, Taf. XIII).

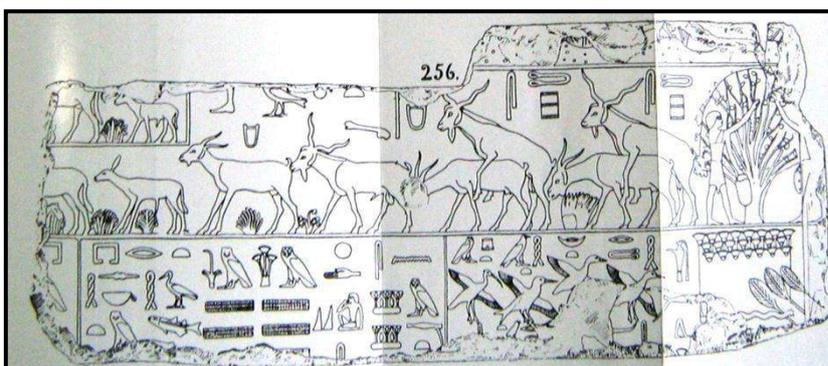


Fig. 7: Smw activities from Niuserra at Abu Ghurab (von Bissing, *Op. Cit*, Taf. XIII).

Personification of Seasons in the Ancient Egyptian Art



Fig. 8: Smw activities from Niuserra at Abu Ghurab (Edel E., Wenig S., *Die Jahreszeitenreliefs*, 1974, Taf. 11).

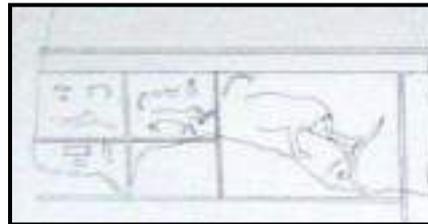
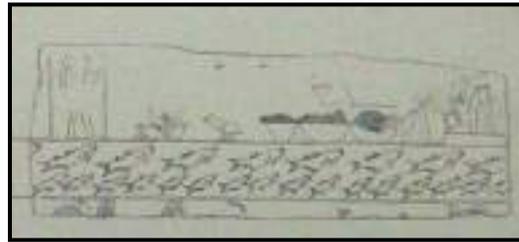
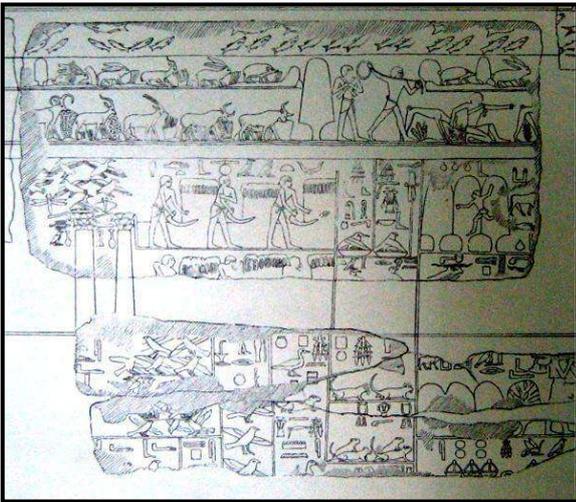


Fig. 9: Smw activities from Causeway of king Unis at Saqqara (Smith, W., *Interconnection*, Fig. 179).

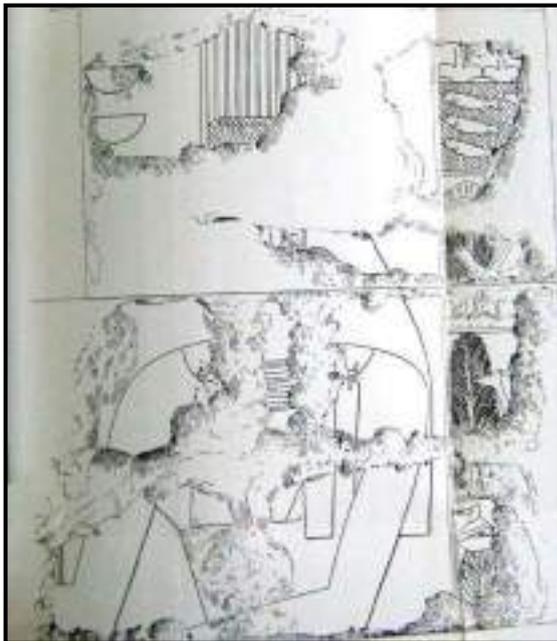


Fig. 10: Axt Depicted as a woman from Niuserra at Abu Ghurab (von Bissing, *Op. Cit*, Taf. IX).

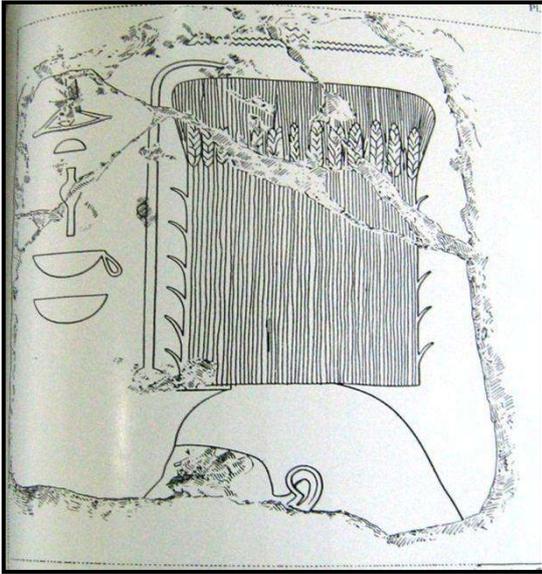


Fig. 11: Smw Depicted as a man from Niuserra at Abu Ghurab (von Bissing, *Op. Cit*, Taf. VIII).



Fig. 12: Three seasons depicted as a human being From the tomb of Mrr.w(i) kA.(i) (Bochi , P., The Enigmatic Activity of Painting the Seasons at an Easel: Contemplative Leisure or Preemptive Measure?, *JARCE* 40, 2003, Fig. 2).



Fig. 13: Three seasons depicted as a human being from the tomb of xnty kA (Bochi , P., *Op. Cit*, Fig. 3).



Fig. 14: Axt season depicted in the Tomb of Queen Nfrw, 11th dynasty, Deir elbhari (Simpson, W., "Two Middle Kingdom Personifications of Seasons", *JNES* 13 No 4, 1954, Fig. 1).

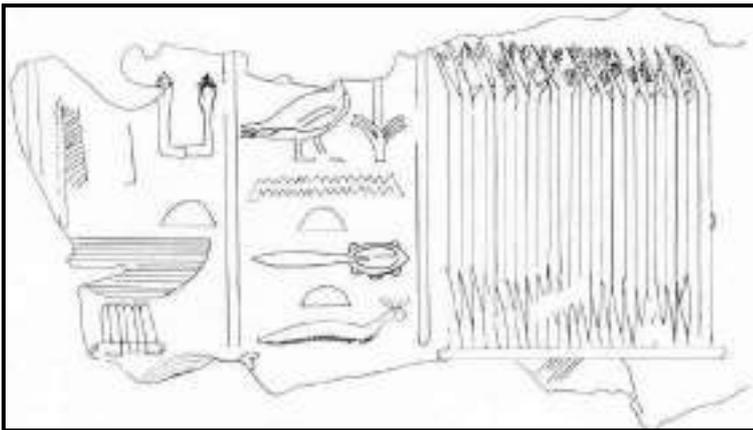


Fig. 15: Smw season depicted from the pyramid temple of Amunemh.t I at el Lisht (Simpson, W., *Op. Cit* , Fig. 2b).

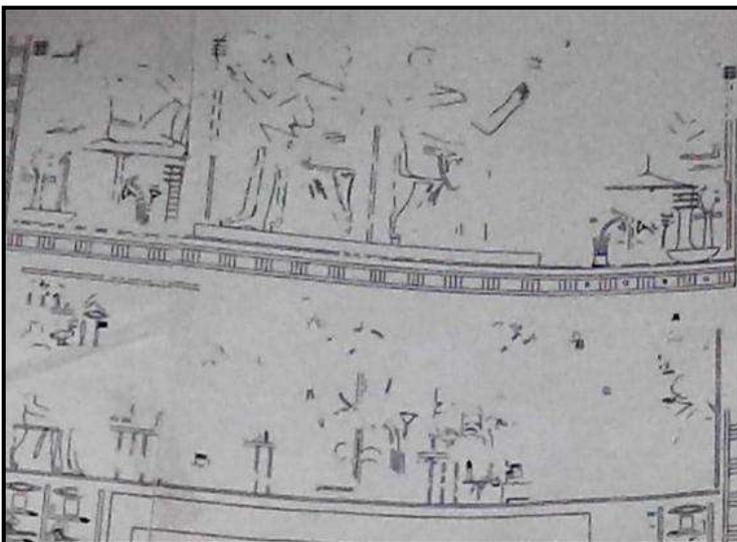


Fig. 16: Remains of the three seasons in the Tomb of ux Htp and Hny Hry ib, Meir (Blackman, A. M., *The Rock Tombs of Meir VI*, London, 1953, Pl. XIII).

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