

# THE HIGH PRIEST OF AMUN AT THEBES BETWEEN THE LATE NEW KINGDOM AND THE END OF THE TWENTY-FIFTH DYNASTY

## EL CARGO DE SUMO SACERDOTE DE AMÓN EN TEBAS ENTRE EL FINAL DEL IMPERIO NUEVO Y EL FINAL DE LA DINASTÍA XXV

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Recibido el 29 de agosto de 2017.  
Evaluado el 5 de febrero de 2018.

### RESUMEN:

Este artículo pretende enfatizar la importancia del cargo de sumo sacerdote de Amón desde finales del Imperio Nuevo egipcio—1295-1069 a.C.— hasta el declive de la vigésimo quinta dinastía—656 a.C.—. Primeramente, se presentará la definición del cargo de “sumo sacerdote” de Amón, así como de sus inmediatos precedentes. Seguidamente, ejemplos de este cargo sustentado por figuras importantes en el antiguo Egipto, serán aportados en orden cronológico para el mencionado espacio de tiempo. En tercer lugar, se expondrán los rasgos del cargo. Finalmente se resumirán las conclusiones acerca de la relevancia de este cargo en Tebas, en este período.

### ABSTRACT:

This article will address the relevance of the office of ‘High Priest of Amun’ at Thebes from the Late New Kingdom —1295-1069 BC— until the end of the 25<sup>th</sup> Dynasty — 656 BC—. Firstly, in order to make a clear explanation of the topic, the definition of the office of ‘High Priest of Amun’ and its immediate precedents will be presented; secondly, examples of this religious charge will be provided for the chronological period mentioned. Thirdly, the main features of the charge will be summarised and finally, the conclusions about how important this office was will be made.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** sumo-sacerdote, Amón, Tebas, Imperio Nuevo, XXV Dinastía, Egipto.

**KEY-WORDS:** High priest, Amun, Thebes, New Kingdom, 25<sup>th</sup> Dynasty, Egypt.

### I. Introduction

The High Priest of Amun office existed prior to the Late New Kingdom<sup>2</sup>. In fact, as Redford points out<sup>3</sup> the priesthood as a ‘full-time’ profession at Thebes emerged in the New

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<sup>1</sup> This article has been possible thanks to the pre-doctoral scholarships scheme 2015 (2016) of the Xunta de Galicia and the ESF of the EU in order to support the pre-doctoral period of the Galician University System, the Public Institutions of Research of Galicia and other entities of the I+D+i Galician System, whose funding comes from the European Social Found in a 80 % and it comes from the Secertaría Xeral de Universidades of the Consellería de Cultura, Educación e Ordenación Universitaria de la Xunta de Galicia, in a 20%. Email: isouto@uvigo.es. Postal Adress: Iria Souto Castro, Office 11, 1st floor, Pabellón II. Facultad de Historia/History Faculty. Campus As Lagoas s/n 32004 Ourense, España. Universidad de Vigo.

<sup>2</sup> Redford 2002, 316.

<sup>3</sup> Redford 2002, 321.

Kingdom. Gradually, the title of *ḥm*-priest would be replaced by *ḥm-ntr-tpi*, 'First Prophet' initially was a member of the royal family, but later he was appointed by the king<sup>4</sup>. There were four prophets attested in Thebes, the First prophet or high priest was the higher office and the others helped with daily administration and rituals, especially in large temples<sup>5</sup>. When it comes to define the office of 'High Priest of Amun' there are some features that must be taken into account. Firstly, a 'priest' was a member of the clergy who acted as the religious delegate of the king. Although priests were not substitutes of the king, their function was maintaining 'the integrity of divine presence on earth' to ensure the religious basis of the pharaonic kingship<sup>6</sup>.

The significance of this office title stemmed from the fact that, progressively, it became hereditary at the end of the New Kingdom<sup>7</sup>. It can be considered a manner of securing the lineage. In fact, it was used by some kings such as Sheshonq I, who appointed one of his sons, Iuput, as High Priest of Amun<sup>8</sup>. In the 20<sup>th</sup> Dynasty, the First prophet of Amun was extremely powerful and that could be interpreted as a threat for the king. There is an example of this in High priest of Amun, Amenhotep, and Ramesses XI fight for the power: Amenhotep's autobiographical inscription is carved in the walls of Amun temple at Karnak—between the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> Pylons<sup>9</sup>. According to Wente<sup>10</sup>, he was suppressed from his office as a High Priest of Amun possibly during the reign of Ramesses XI<sup>11</sup>. Amenhotep is alluded in the text by the expression 'the war of the high priest'. This has been interpreted by historians as the reaction to the measure—suppression of Amenhotep as a high priest— taken by Ramesses XI against the influencing power of this high priest, who appears depicted at the temple of Karnak with the same height as the king—figure 1—<sup>12</sup>.

In the inscription of Amenhotep —his autobiography— the offices held by him are emphasised: '...I inform you of my nature while [I] was upon earth in every office which I held since my birth', as well as the loyalty to his 'lord' and the justification of the labours he did for his lord:

'... I [spent] an amount to five and a half years. May Amon-Re, King of the gods, my lord, give me life and health, a long lifetime and a good old age...through the many benefactions and many arduous tasks which I have performed for him in his estate...'<sup>13</sup>.

In addition, the 'suppression' of Amenhotep as 'High Priest of Amun' is also recorded:

'...I have accomplished for him [the king?] benefactions, (for) he has suppressed the one who had suppressed me quickly without his ever having permitted delay...[I have trained] recruits in his estate. I have instructed them regarding...'<sup>14</sup>.

It is not clear whether Amenhotep was restored in his office, and it is not clear who suppressed him<sup>15</sup>. It can be inferred from the text that the responsible of the suppression was the king at that moment, Ramesses XI. Other theory is that it could have been Paneshy, the 'High Priest of Amun' and 'Viceroy of Kush', the one who replaced Amenhotep in his office by

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<sup>4</sup> Redford 2002, 321.

<sup>5</sup> Redford 2002, 321.

<sup>6</sup> Sauneron 2000, 34-35.

<sup>7</sup> Redford 2002, 321.

<sup>8</sup> Kitchen 1973, 288-289.

<sup>9</sup> Palmer 2014, 7.

<sup>10</sup> 1966, 74.

<sup>11</sup> 1966, 74.

<sup>12</sup> 1966, 74.

<sup>13</sup> Wente 1966, 78.

<sup>14</sup> Wente 1966, 78-79.

<sup>15</sup> Morales 2001, 59-76.

force<sup>16</sup>. This is an example of the threat for the king that can imply holding this office. Thus, the significance of the 'High Priest of Amun' can be appreciated. Amenhotep's father is supposed to be Ramessesnakht and his brother was Nesiamun. This family would have accumulated titles and ascended in their *cursus honorum*. Bierbrier<sup>17</sup> established their family links and the hereditary feature of this office, as well as he argued the chronology for the issues that were taking place at Thebes at this moment.

At the same time this panorama was occurring, the succession of high priests shows Herihor and Piankh as the following ones in the list of successors in the later years of Ramesses XI<sup>18</sup>. Herihor is depicted in the Hypostyle Hall of Khonsu temple together with Ramesses XI—figure 2—, in spite of the fact that in the same temple, in the First Hypostyle Hall, he is depicted as king of Egypt—figure 3—<sup>19</sup>. It seems that this is not plausible according to Kitchen's point of view, as Herihor is depicted only at Karnak but Smendes (king at Tanis) is depicted at Karnak and at Gebelein, that leads Kitchen to the conclusion that Smendes must be considered, at this moment—possibly after Ramesses XI—, as king of all Egypt<sup>20</sup>.

## II. The High priests at Thebes from the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> dynasty until the 25<sup>th</sup> dynasty

In the transition from the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> Dynasty to the 21<sup>st</sup> Dynasty, there are some issues object of debate, such as the order of High priests of Amun, Herihor and Piankh<sup>21</sup>. Bierbrier provides a genealogy for the 21<sup>st</sup> Dynasty of the family of the High priests of Amun—figure 4—.

According to this genealogy, Herihor preceded Piankh. It is not clear that Herihor would have become king, as he is mentioned only in Khonsu temple. However, the absence of king Ramesses XI in the forecourt of this temple is intriguing<sup>22</sup>. Herihor is depicted in the forecourt, according to James and Morkot<sup>23</sup>, wearing the *uraeus* and he is depicted with the cartouches for prenomen and nomen, as well as with the Horus name. According to the *Report of Wenamun*, a text dated in the 21<sup>st</sup> or early 22<sup>nd</sup> Dynasty found at El-Hibah and written in Late Egyptian, there is a reference to Herihor and it provides the first reference to Tanis—important capital during the Libyan period—<sup>24</sup>. This can allow to distinguish between two different parts in Egypt at this moment: the North with Tanis and the king Smendes, and the South with the capital in Thebes and the office of High Priest of Amun. Piankh, possible son of Herihor<sup>25</sup>, was succeeded by Pinudjem I, succeeded by Masaharta and this latter by Menkheperre, with Pinudjem II being the last one of the High priests of Amun for the 21<sup>st</sup> Dynasty.

Sheshonq I was the founder of the 22<sup>nd</sup> Dynasty. He appointed one of his sons, Iuput as 'High priest of Amun' at Thebes and 'Army commander', and other one, Nimlot, as 'Army Commander' at Hermopolis. His successor as king was Osorkon I<sup>26</sup>. There is also evidence of a Sheshonq as High priest of Amun: some statues, possibly, dedicated to him with his name in a cartouche and the names of his parents named Osorkon and Maatkare<sup>27</sup>. The second statue was usurped from the Late 18<sup>th</sup> Dynasty, and used for Maatkare, the

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<sup>16</sup> Wente 1966, 85.

<sup>17</sup> 1975, 10-13.

<sup>18</sup> Kitchen 1973, 5.

<sup>19</sup> Palmer 2014, 3.

<sup>20</sup> Palmer 2014, 3.

<sup>21</sup> James and Morkot 2010, 231.

<sup>22</sup> James and Morkot 2010, 232.

<sup>23</sup> James and Morkot 2010, 232.

<sup>24</sup> Breasted 1905, 100-109.

<sup>25</sup> James and Morkot 2010, 233.

<sup>26</sup> Kitchen 1973, 289.

<sup>27</sup> Dodson 2009, 60-61.

daughter of Psusennes II, possibly<sup>28</sup>, and the third one does not mention Sheshonq's mother—figure 5—. There are also evidences for more prophets of Amun during this dynasty. The 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> prophet of Amun, Djed-Ptah-ef-Ankh, called the 'king's son of Ramesses' and the 'king's son of the Lord of the Two Lands' was buried near Deir el-Bahari, in regnal year 11 of Sheshonq I<sup>29</sup>. Similarly, a chief of the Mahasun, a Libyan tribe, named Nesy, appears as the 4<sup>th</sup> Prophet of Amun<sup>30</sup>. It is believed that Iuput married his daughter with Djed-Ptah-ef-Ankh<sup>31</sup>. Whether this happened, it could be interpreted as other step more in the marriage-alliance of the Libyan kings to secure this lineage throughout time in Egypt. According to Kitchen<sup>32</sup>, once Osorkon acceded the throne, his brother, Iuput may have continued as High Priest of Amun in his office. However, there is evidence that after Iuput retired or died, Osorkon I did not allow dynastic succession in the offices on high priest of Amun nor in the office of military ruler of Upper Egypt<sup>33</sup>. He appointed his son Sheshonq instead.

During the reign of Osorkon II, Harsiese claimed his office as 'High Priest of Amun' in Thebes. He was the son of Sheshonq II who had been previously a High Priest of Amun. This broke the principle established by Osorkon I and implied that Harsiese was linked to Thebes, as he commemorated his high-priestly ancestry there<sup>34</sup>. Osorkon II took this measure, probably, without being aware of the fact that it could be a dangerous precedent for the 'independent sub-dynasties' at Thebes. The ambition of Harsiese did not end. He wanted to be a co-ruler with Osorkon II. Kitchen points out that possibly in the practice, he did not enjoy more royal power, but the fact of acquiring royal titles contributed to create 'a sense of independence in the Thebaid'<sup>35</sup>. In addition, during the reign of Osorkon II, the institution of God's Wife of Amun became relevant in relation to the power accumulated around the office of high priest of Amun. In fact, in Thebes there is a stela that makes this institution contemporary of Harsiese<sup>36</sup>.

During the reign of Takeloth II, Nimlot, his half-brother was the high priest at Thebes. He married his daughter with a Royal Secretary of the south, establishing links with this land<sup>37</sup>. Takeloth II appointed prince Osorkon as 'High Priest of Amun, general of the whole land, army leader and Governor of the South'<sup>38</sup>. In the *Chronicle of Prince Osorkon*<sup>39</sup>, there are some problems recorded at Thebes: the priesthood demanded attention to prince Osorkon. In year 15, in this chronicle, it is mentioned a '[great] convulsion broke out in this land'. Several rebellions at Thebes are recorded. The interpretation could be that a 'civil war', term used by Kitchen<sup>40</sup>, took place in Egypt.

In the reign of Sheshonq III, his contemporaries, Pedubast I, Iuput I and Sheshonq IV established a succession in the office of High Priest of Amun. At the same time, in Memphis, the High Priests of Ptah were 'close cousins of the 22<sup>nd</sup> Dynasty'<sup>41</sup>. The Libyan successor of Sheshonq III was Sheshonq V, and after him, Osorkon III became pharaoh. He appointed his son Takeloth as high priest at Thebes. Later, Osorkon III made his daughter God's Wife of Amun, and his son, Takeloth III, a co-regent, in Leontopolis<sup>42</sup>. In this context,

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<sup>28</sup> Baer 1973, 12

<sup>29</sup> Kitchen 1973, 289.

<sup>30</sup> Kitchen 1973, 289.

<sup>31</sup> Kitchen 1973, 289.

<sup>32</sup> Kitchen 1973, 305.

<sup>33</sup> Kitchen 1973, 306.

<sup>34</sup> Kitchen 1973, 314-315.

<sup>35</sup> Kitchen 1973, 315.

<sup>36</sup> Kitchen 1973, 323.

<sup>37</sup> Kitchen 1973, 328.

<sup>38</sup> Kitchen 1973, 330.

<sup>39</sup> Caminos 1958, 151-172.

<sup>40</sup> Kitchen 1973, 331.

<sup>41</sup> Kitchen 1973, 340.

<sup>42</sup> Kitchen 1973, 317.

Napata, in the South (Kush or Nubia), started to emerge. In 747 B.C, a new king from Nubia, Piankhy or Piye, extended his influence to the North. At the same time, in the North of Egypt, the Libyan resistance against Piankhy was formed by: Tefnakht, Osorkon, Iuput, Nimlot and Pef-tjau-awy-Bast. The *Stela of Piye*<sup>43</sup> provides information about the political situation of Egypt in this moment. It is clear that there was a division in Egypt, where the Libyans, Kushites, Bubastites and Saites, all of whom were trying to secure their power. Piankhy was succeeded by Shabako and Shabako's sister, Amenirdis I, continued as God's Wife of Amun, and he put his son Haremakhet as High priest<sup>44</sup>. The institution of God's Wife of Amun was a good manner of solving the burden of 'Theban secessionism'<sup>45</sup> and the emergence of sub-dynasties because of her celibacy (they adopted successors). This would explain why during the 25<sup>th</sup> Dynasty the office of High Priest of Amun lost its military and royal attributes<sup>46</sup> until it disappeared<sup>47</sup>. Other successors for the 25<sup>th</sup> Dynasty were: Shabito, Taharqa and Tantamani.

### III. Sociopolitical, economic and religious significance of the office of 'High Priest of Amun'

The name of the office of 'High Priest of Amun' or 'First Priest of Amun' or even 'First Prophet of Amun' is translated from the Egyptian term *Hem Netcher* (*Hm ntr*) which means 'God's Servant' and is often translated as 'priest'<sup>48</sup>. This type of priest looked after the materials used for offering rituals in daily life and had access to the inner areas of the temple<sup>49</sup>. This clergy administered the vast lands of the god Amun that were located all over the country and managed the huge farms, the livestock enterprises and the non-priestly staff who produce these goods<sup>50</sup>. The High Priest of Amun was selected by the king, even though in practice, the priest designated had to be accepted by his colleagues<sup>51</sup>.

This post became the most powerful one among the clergy in the New Kingdom and the Third Intermediate Period<sup>52</sup>, because of the power of Thebes, where the main cult to the god Amun was extremely important. After the Amarna period and the increase of the devotion to the god Atum, the 'restoration' to the traditional cult to Amun was established, mainly under the reign of Tutankhamun, as the *Restoration stela* confirms<sup>53</sup>. Religious order was very important to maintain *Ma'at*, the Egyptian concept of cosmic order<sup>54</sup>, and the god Amun was traditionally —according to the Theban Cosmogony— considered as the creator. In addition, after some moments of turmoil, such as the movement from Thebes to Tell el-Amarna by the king Akhenaten, the Theban clergy was benefited from the situation. This could have been in part because the society did not share Akhenaten's fervour to the cult to the Aten.

Thebes was a very rich area in ancient Egypt since the Middle Kingdom, and in the New Kingdom its economic status was consolidated with the increase of the religious solar worship —for instance with Amenhotep III, but before with Hatshepsut, who was supported by the Oracle of Amun as pharaoh—. As stated before, Egyptian priests had a very specific role to play by substituting the king, in title only, 'to maintain the universe in the form in which the

<sup>43</sup> Lichtheim 2006, 66.

<sup>44</sup> Kitchen 1973, 382.

<sup>45</sup> Taylor 2000, 354-357.

<sup>46</sup> Kitchen 1973, 382.

<sup>47</sup> Redford 2002, 322.

<sup>48</sup> Teeter 2011, 25.

<sup>49</sup> Teeter 2011, 25-26.

<sup>50</sup> Teeter 2011, 26.

<sup>51</sup> Teeter 2011, 27.

<sup>52</sup> Teeter 2011, 26.

<sup>53</sup> Selee 1955, 176.

<sup>54</sup> Sanmartín and Serrano 2006, 355.

gods have created it<sup>55</sup>. From the New Kingdom, the performance of the temple ritual was no longer the sole prerogative of the king<sup>56</sup>. It was during the New Kingdom that the priestly office acquired an hereditary character, but the culmination of this trend was during the 21<sup>st</sup> and 23<sup>rd</sup> Dynasties<sup>57</sup>. In addition, there were also female offices such as the God's Wife of Amun, mentioned above and very popular in the Third Intermediate Period as a measure to avoid the 'sub-dynasties'. She was supposed to be celibate —possibly to fight against the hereditary feature of the office—, this could explain why its use was increased at the same time that the office of High priest of Amun suffered a decline<sup>58</sup>.

The importance of the office has become known to us through the sepulchres and burials of these individuals as an important source of knowledge. The tombs were very simple during the Third Intermediate Period, in comparison with those from the early New Kingdom, because the tradition of complex superstructures and rock-cut sepulchres was interrupted<sup>59</sup>. The new trend of being buried in the enclosure precinct of a cult temple was adopted not only by the kings but by the high rank individuals<sup>60</sup>, specifically at Tanis, Memphis and Thebes, in the South: the high priests of Memphis were buried on the edge of the precinct of the temple of Ptah, and this trend was soon imitated at Thebes, in Medinet Habu and the Ramesseum<sup>61</sup>. As an example of these burials in the South of Egypt (Lower Egypt), at Dira Abu el-Naga, located in the Theban Necropolis at Qurna, current Luxor, there is evidence of three men who held the office of High Priest of Amun during the reign of Ramesses II (67 years of reign)<sup>62</sup>. These were Nebwenenet, Bekenkhons I, and Roma-Roy. From their autobiographies in their tombs, the power of the Theban priesthood can be inferred: they were buried near the Noble tombs. In addition, in the case of Nebwenenet (TT 157), he had his own mortuary temple below his tomb and near the temple of Seti I<sup>63</sup>. As stated before, their autobiographies give experts an idea about the career of these individuals and the importance of their offices. For instance, the High priest of Amun Nebwenenet was so great, that he recorded in his tomb a story of his audience with the king and Queen Nefertari at the palace for his official installation<sup>64</sup>. Other evidence of the political and religious significance of the office, is the example of Bekenkhons I (TT35), who was the son of a 'renowned Second Prophet of Amun named Roma'<sup>65</sup>. He served under Ramesses II and Seti I acquiring numerous titles such as 'the overseer of the training stable'<sup>66</sup>, and his successor is believed to have been his son Roma-Roy, even though there is no evidence that link them directly<sup>67</sup>. In spite of this, it seems that as the chief prophets or interpreters, in other words, the High priests, had a strong influence 'in the course of affairs of state'<sup>68</sup> because of the fact that 'priestly dynasties were established as a father's offices were passed down to his sons'<sup>69</sup>. This is why, due to the 'hereditary factor' at the end of the Twentieth Dynasty, a 'semi-autonomous state emerged in the Theban area, ruled over by these priests'<sup>70</sup>. They had a strong rivalry with the kings, mainly because of their disputes about who held the power.

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<sup>55</sup> Sauneron 2000, 34.

<sup>56</sup> Taylor 2000, 354.

<sup>57</sup> Taylor 2000, 354.

<sup>58</sup> Taylor 2000, 355.

<sup>59</sup> Taylor 2000, 356.

<sup>60</sup> Taylor 2000, 357.

<sup>61</sup> Taylor 2000, 357.

<sup>62</sup> Bell 1973, 17.

<sup>63</sup> Bell 1973, 18.

<sup>64</sup> Bell 1973, 18.

<sup>65</sup> Bell 1973, 18.

<sup>66</sup> Bell 1973, 18.

<sup>67</sup> Bell 1973, 18.

<sup>68</sup> Bell 1973, 17.

<sup>69</sup> Bell 1973, 17.

<sup>70</sup> Bell 1973, 17.

#### IV. Conclusions

In conclusion, the importance of the office of 'High Priest of Amun' can be understood as a way of securing different lineages in the context of the political division of Egypt. The inter-marriages were also a political strategy that contributed to this purpose. However, it implied the emergence of new sub-dynasties. Egypt was divided into four main areas in the Third Intermediate Period: the Delta, Middle Egypt, Upper Egypt and Kush as an emerging kingdom, and every of these ethnic groups fought for preserving their respective dynasties. As a result, in spite of the problems with genealogies and chronologies, it seems clear that the office of 'High Priest of Amun' was involved in the Third Intermediate Period rulers' political plans to maintain their power and legitimate themselves and their successors. It was also a way of controlling several areas of Egypt by appointing relatives in this office. Similarly, new sub-dynasties were created as a consequence, and their members will try to claim royal, religious and military titles to perpetuate their lineages in the power. This derived in a sense of Thebaid independence, a key factor in the context of division experienced by Egypt at the end of the 25<sup>th</sup> Dynasty. This situation could be an advantage for the Assyrian enemies and a challenge for the rulers of the 26<sup>th</sup> Dynasty.

On the other hand, from the religious point of view, the office of 'High priest of Amun' was considered an important post because of the fact that it could be designated by the king directly. The High Priest could act, and in practice, he acted as a delegated of the ruler in the temple ritual performance that took place on a daily basis. At the same time, as the pharaoh could not attend to every single temple in Egypt, it seems logical that he chose a delegate to care for the daily offerings and rituals.

To summarise, it can be said that the office of High Priest of Amun had many advantages from the political and religious perspective for securing dynasties in the throne by controlling both the royal and religious realms. It was also an excellent way of centralising the administrative power of the ancient Egyptian state. However, with the rise of new dynasties and sub-dynasties this structure seemed to fail, as it implied new problems in the royal and religious administration: different simultaneous kings that claim the throne, for example.

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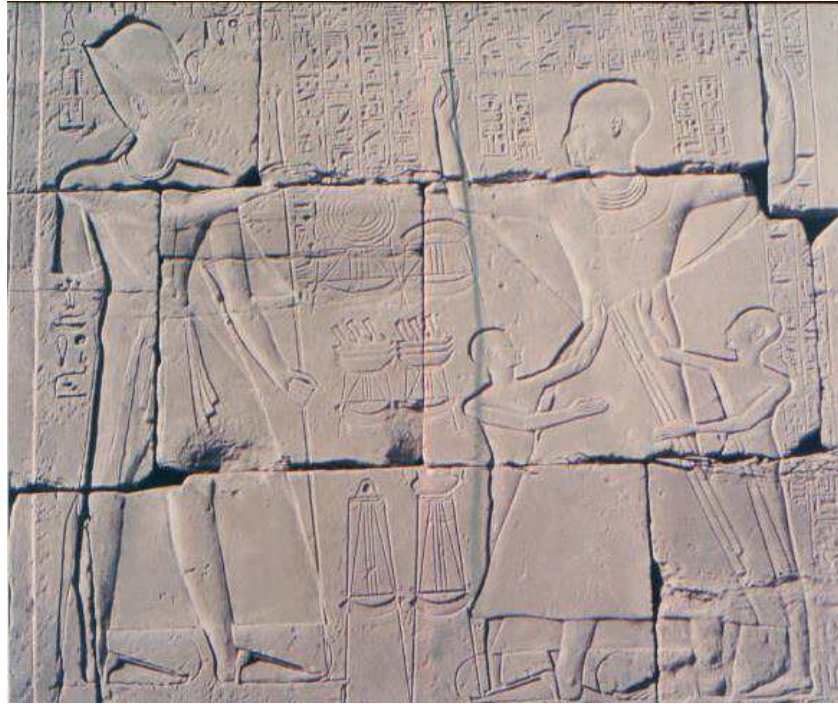


Fig. 1: High priest of Amun Amenhotep in front of the pharaoh —possibly Ramesses XI, according to Wente 1966: 86—, depicted with the same size as the king. Source: Gregory Mumford 2014, lectures at UAB, College of Arts and Sciences, Department of Anthropology

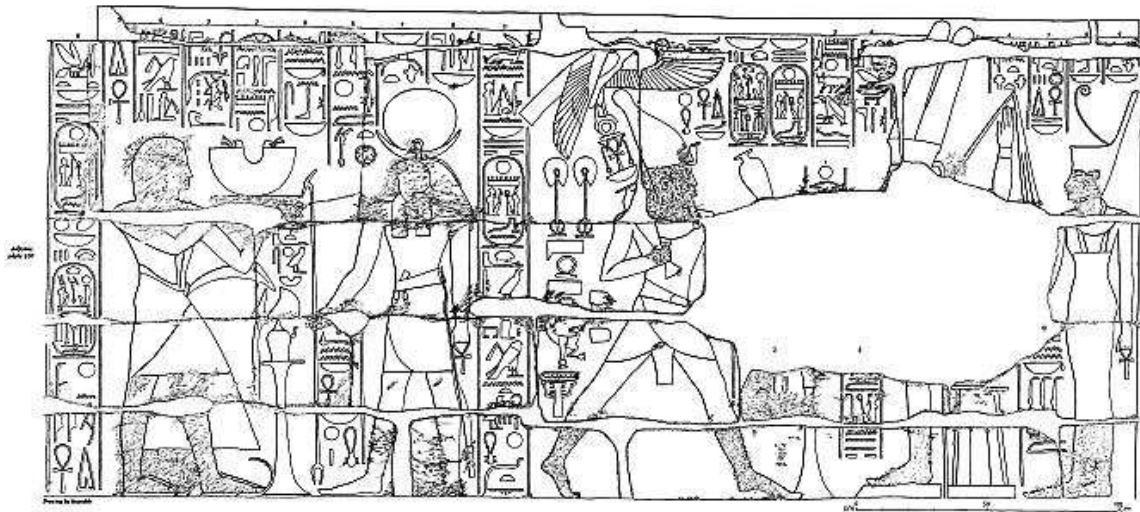


Fig. 2: (Left) High Priest Herihor giving a broad collar to Khonsu. (Right) Ramesses XI running before Amun-Re-Kamutef and Amonet. First Hypostyle Hall, North Wall, West Half, Middle register. Source: *The Epigraphic Survey. Temple of Khonsu. Volume 2. Plate 188, 252*

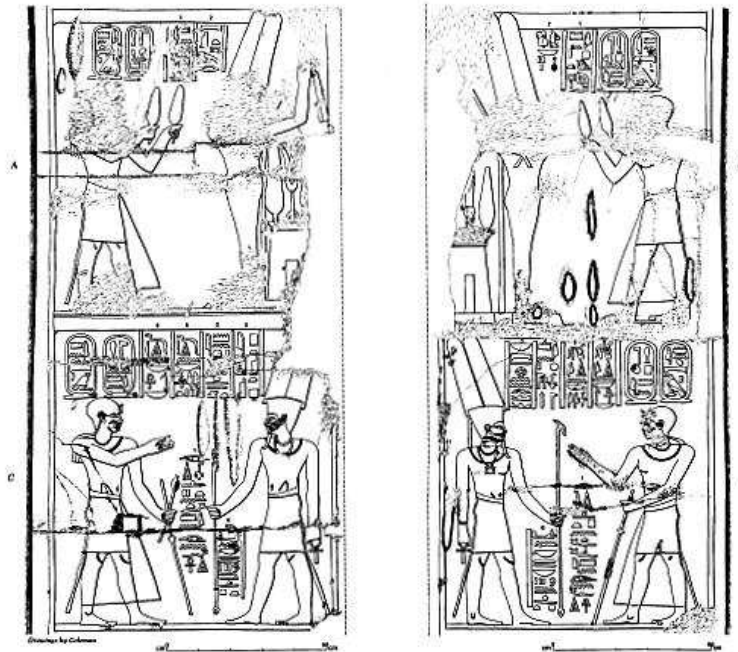


Fig. 3: King Herihor presenting lettuce to Ithyphallic Amun (upper registers, A,B) and king Herihor presenting a royal offering to Amun-Re (C,D). First Hypostyle Hall, North wall, doorway, West (A,C) and East (B, D) jambs, third and second registers. Source: *The Epigraphic Survey. Temple of Khonsu. Vol. 2. Plate 192, 258*

THE FAMILY OF THE HIGH PRIESTS OF AMUN (CHART XI)

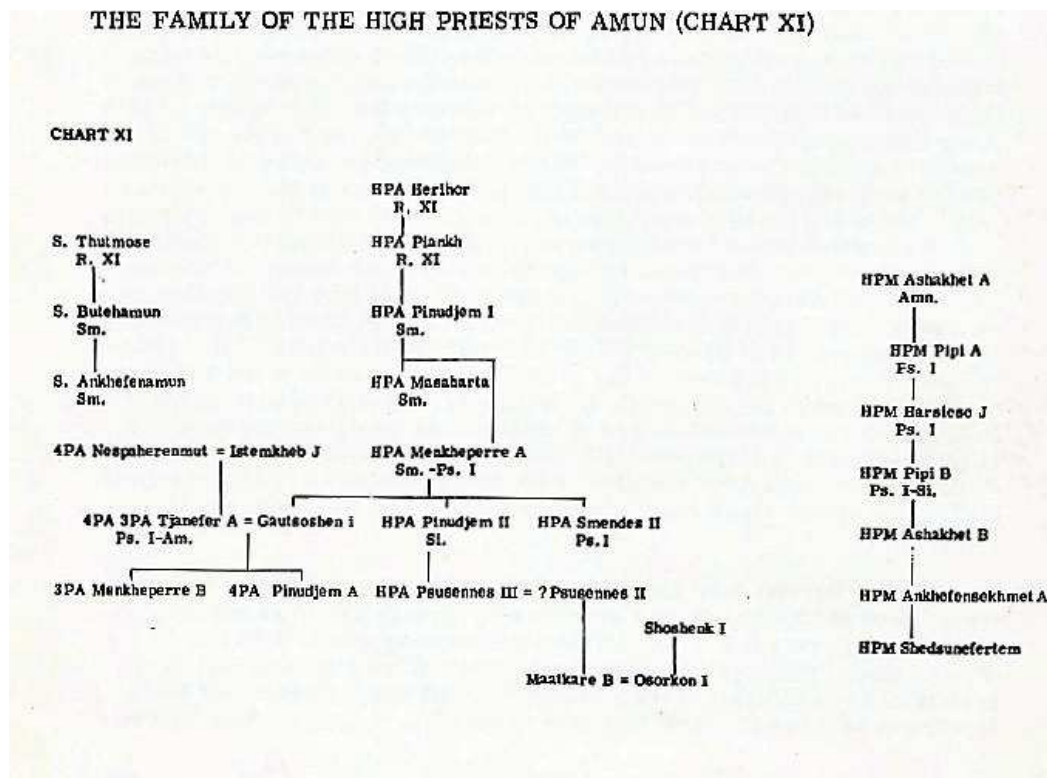


Fig. 4: The family of the High priests of Amun (HPA). Chart XI. Source: Bierbrier 1975: 46



Fig. 5: Statues dedicated to High Priest of Amun, Sheshonq, figures 10a, 10b and 10c. Source: Dodson 2009: 61