



SELF PRESENTATION IN ANCIENT EGYPT, NUBIA, AND NEAR EAST

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Self-presentation, the most ancient, common, and crucial component of ancient high culture, existed in ancient Egypt and Nubia, and throughout the ancient Near East. Elite members of these cultures presented their selves through language and through art and other material expressions (e.g., Figures 1, 2). Study of this phenomenon seeks to visualize how and why these individuals represented themselves in art and literature, as well as how they depicted their positions in the history of the period and their relationships with the crown. A more thorough understanding of their motivations will yield information about politics and various changes in society.

The starting point of inquiry into this subject is the premise that in ancient Egypt, Nubia, and Near East there were “selves” and also a sense that creations of “selves” could be presented both textually and artistically to other members of society: the media of visual arts and literature served as important tools through which the individual could be shown interacting with the self, deities, and society. The defining focus of such studies should be an examination of how and why the individual presented himself or herself in art and literature, as well as how these presentations have survived and been interpreted in the archaeological contexts. Different disciplines offer the potential for a wide array of foci for the examination of self-presentation, with topics and themes covering cultures from many geographical areas and time periods.

An interdisciplinary and holistic approach to the topic is the ideal means by which to examine these ancient expressions of “selves.” Various aspects of texts and monuments of the individuals in question invite a diversity of inquiries: philological, historical, and archaeological issues; artistic, linguistic, and literary notions; religious and moral values; and features of self-presentation. Philological treatment will shed light on the main aspects of the texts, such as translation, as well as lexicographical and orthographical features. Examination of the primary aspects of the texts and monuments will explore elements such as dating, history, issues of cultural memory, the role of the individual (both within and relative to the royal sphere), and the relationship between the individual and deities. Facets of this field all concentrate on the meanings of “self” in the tellings of the life stories of ancient Egyptian, Nubian, and Near Eastern protagonists who vary in title, reign, profession, and background.



Figure 1: Hermitage 2962 statue of Neshor named Psamtikmenkhib, Saite Egypt (The State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg)

Such studies will uncover the close links among monumentality, identity, and ideology.

Ultimately, this new field will undertake its explorations through interdisciplinary analyses and cross-cultural comparisons of literature, art, archaeology, and history. Study of the textual and visual corpora of individuals will facilitate the analysis of the emergence and rise of “self” and “individualism” as a historical phenomenon. Open to examination are, moreover, cultural and political practices of a variety of cultures and periods, including but not limited to patronage and representations of authority, nobility, and royalty. The power of texts and visual representations to shape as well as to reflect history can be seen through these analyses. Art, text, and material culture represent major components that crystallize the overall self-presentations of individuals in these cultures and periods; our improved understanding of self-presentation of them can thus also advance similar studies for other cultures and periods in the ancient world.

Figure 2 (left): BM EA 83 statue of Paycftjaucmawyncith, Saitc Egypt (© the Trustees of the British Museum)

