“Put Off Thy Shoes from Off Thy Feet”: Sandals and Sacred Space

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Abstract: While many have written on ancient temples looking at the big picture, John Gee discusses one small detail on a single Egyptian temple from the New Kingdom. He focuses on depictions of Ramses III in and out of the temple of Medinet Habu. Outside the temple and when entering and leaving there are depictions of him wearing sandals. Inside the temple proper the king is always shown barefoot. Ramses III built Medinet Habu only slightly after the time of Moses and as Gee further notes, while not wearing footwear was a clear practice among the Egyptians it is far more explicit in Moses’ encounter with Deity when he is told to remove his “shoes from off they feet, for the place whereon thou standest is holy ground.” Gee observes that contemporary Egyptian temple practice “reflects the commands of God recorded in the Pentateuch,” as well as reflects Moses’ Egyptian background.

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Problem

Many studies of ancient temples look at the big picture, but it can also be worthwhile to look at small details. In this study, I want to look at one small detail from a single temple.

In looking at an Egyptian temple, particularly one from the New Kingdom, we notice a dazzling variety of clothing. The clothing depicted demonstrates a complicated dress code that signified status to the people of the day, just as modern fashions signal the same thing to modern individuals. As an example, consider the wrapping of the kilt. In Old Kingdom Egypt, wrapping the kilt left over right (clockwise) was an indication of royalty, while wrapping it right over left (counterclockwise) was an indication of non-royal status. Beginning in the First Intermediate Period, however, private individuals were able to adopt royal status.

Footwear could also mark status. Most ancient Egyptians went barefoot, especially in the presence of a superior. Just as giving clothing to the naked was an act of charity, so was giving sandals to the barefoot. In New Kingdom temples, however, some individuals are shown wearing sandals and some are not.

Categories

Our concern is determining when sandals were worn and when they were not. We face a number of problems. Many of the reliefs are so damaged that we cannot see either the king’s feet or what exactly he is doing. Sometimes these details are in accompanying inscriptions, but the further back in the temple the relief goes, the more likely the upper portion of the relief including the inscription will be missing. Sometimes the sandals were included by mistake and were erased. Because there are so many examples and numerous counterexamples, we are looking at general trends. We are interested in humans, and we will concentrate primarily on the king, who is the most visible human in the temple.

The pharaoh’s sandals would have been gilded. This raises a question: is there a reason why the king might wear sandals in one scene and not another? At first glance, there seems to be no rhyme or reason to the choice.

Let us first consider location. We might think that perhaps the king is shown wearing sandals outside the temple and not inside, but there are numerous examples of him shown wearing sandals inside the temple proper. So location does not seem to be a good explanation. Instead, we will concentrate on activity.
After analyzing 734 scenes in the temple of Ramses III at Medinet Habu, we can classify them into five categories by the percentage of the scenes in which the pharaoh is shown wearing sandals:

- Scenes where the king always wears sandals
- Scenes where the king usually wears sandals (> 60%)
- Scenes where the king may or may not wear sandals (60% > x > 40%)
- Scenes where the king usually has bare feet (< 40%)
- Scenes where the king never wears sandals

Each of these categories deserves a closer look.

**Scenes where the king always wears sandals**

A number of scenes show the king always wearing sandals. These scenes, for the most part, show the king doing non-sacral activities. These activities include tending horses, walking around under sunshades, and receiving offerings. They also include potentially unexpected activities. For example, when riding around in a sedan chair where he does not need to use his feet, Ramses is still shown wearing sandals. He is also shown wearing sandals during his coronation and when he is entering and leaving the temple.

Most of the activities where the king does not wear sandals have to do with the conduct of war and military operations. Thus, Ramses III is shown wearing sandals when riding a chariot, shooting a bow and arrow, taking prisoners, binding captives, viewing booty, and rewarding his army.

The activities depicted where the king is always shown wearing sandals are activities that take place outside of sacred space. They also tend to be depicted in the public areas of the temple, in places where the general populace could go.

**Scenes where the king usually wears sandals**

The scenes where the king is shown wearing sandals appear infrequently. In more frequent scenes, the king is usually, but not always, shown wearing sandals. These cases appear more than 60 percent of the time but less than 100 percent of the time.

The scenes where the king usually wears sandals depict him sitting on the throne (87%) and presenting captives to the god (72%).
These scenes share characteristics of scenes where the king is shown wearing sandals all the time. They tend to be more associated with the non-sacral duties of the king or dealing with warfare and its consequences.

**Scenes where the king may or may not wear sandals**

Scenes where the king may or may not wear sandals are those that fall within ten percentage points of the halfway mark—that is, within the 40 to 60 percent range. These include processions (60%) and smiting captives (40%). Processions usually started in the temple and went outside the temple. Smiting captives seems to have taken place inside the temple, but in the outer courts.

**Scenes where the king is usually barefoot**

For scenes where the king is shown wearing sandals less than 40 percent of the time, we look at them according to the progressively smaller percentage of the time when the king is shown wearing sandals. These scenes all appear to depict actions occurring inside the temple proper, including the following occasions:

- presenting the full altar to a god or the gods (35%)
- offering silver, gold, or precious stones (27%)
- receiving salvation (\(di \cdot \text{nḫ}\) from the gods (25%)
- initiation into the temple (24%)
- offering four oxen (20%)
- offering both incense and libations (17%)
- admonishing that everything that enters the temple must be pure (12%)
- offering flowers (10%)
- offering Maat (10%)
- offering incense (7%)
- giving adoration to the gods (7%)
- offering offerings (6%)
- offering ointment (3%)
- offering wine (1%)
The king is more likely to be depicted as wearing sandals when offering both incense and libations than when he is shown offering either separately.

**Scenes where the king is always barefoot**

In a number of scenes, the king is always shown barefoot. These actions always take place inside the temple proper and include purification, performing the daily temple ritual, the reversion of offerings afterwards, and entering into a ritual embrace with the gods. They also include the majority of the offerings of the temple, including offering bags, bread, clepsydra, four chests, cult standards, eyepaint, grain, lettuce, libations, linen, milk, oryxes, pectorals, and utensils. They also include when the king oversees the construction of the temple and when he dedicates it and offers it to its lord upon completion. They include when the king is shown uniting the two lands (Egypt) and driving the four calves. When the king is given long life—when his name is written on the leaves of the tree of life—he is also barefoot. The king is also shown barefoot when entering the underworld and in spell 110 of the Book of the Dead, in a depiction of the afterlife. He is shown barefoot when offering invitations to the gods and invocation offerings to the dead.

In scenes that take place inside the temple proper, the king is usually or always shown barefoot. Thus, being barefoot is normal for sacred space, and wearing sandals is normal for being outside sacred space.

This gives us a snapshot from a specific time: the late New Kingdom, the early Twentieth Dynasty, the reign of Ramses III. It may not be generalizable. For example, a passage from a Middle Kingdom autobiography says that this unnamed official was “one who entered before the god alone wearing sandals in the holy place.”

**Comparison with Moses**

Ramses III began building his temple at Medinet Habu less than twenty years after Merneptah, the son of Ramses II, mentioned Israel for the first time. This timeline puts Medinet Habu only slightly after Moses. If not wearing footwear in the sacred space of the temple is clear among the Egyptians, it is not nearly as explicit as in the account of Moses, where he hears the following from the burning bush:

And he said, Draw not nigh hither: put off thy shoes from off thy feet, for the place whereon thou standest is holy ground.
Moreover he said, I am the God of thy father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. And Moses hid his face; for he was afraid to look upon God.73

When Ramses III is depicted encountering god face to face, he, like Moses, is depicted without sandals.74 In fact, there are many parallels between Moses and his near contemporary Ramses III in their wearing of sandals. Ramses III wears sandals while tending horses, but he removes them to enter holy ground. Thus, his sandals are off in the presence of the god and when the god talks to Pharaoh. Moses wears sandals tending sheep, but he is told to remove them to enter holy ground and keep his sandals off in the presence of God when God talks to Moses.

Thus, contemporary Egyptian temple practice reflects the commands of God recorded in the Pentateuch. It might be worth noticing that later temples, like the temples at Edfu, and Tod,75 tend to show the king only barefoot, providing less of an indication of the usage of sandals. The account of Moses thus reflects his Egyptian background.

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Notes


4 E.g., the offering of wine in Medinet Habu VII 542, or Medinet Habu VIII 634.

5 E.g., the offering of Maat in Medinet Habu VII 555.
6 Medinet Habu II 205; IV 218; V 331; VII 513.


9 Medinet Habu II 109.

10 Medinet Habu IV 237 (2x), 238 (2x), 239 (2x).

11 Medinet Habu IV 240.

12 Medinet Habu IV 197.

13 Medinet Habu VIII 612.

14 Medinet Habu II 123 (2x), 124 (2x); IV 247 (2x); VIII 656.

15 Medinet Habu I 14, 23; IV 240.

16 Medinet Habu I 16; II 117.

17 Medinet Habu I 38; II 90, 94.

18 Medinet Habu II 68, 73.

19 Medinet Habu VIII 628, 629.

20 Medinet Habu II 74, 96.

21 Medinet Habu I 29, 42, II 75.


23 With: Medinet Habu I 11, 78; II 99; V 317; VIII 604, 606, 621, 625 (2x), 626 (2x), 627 (2x). Without: Medinet Habu I 26, 43, 44; II 93; III 174.


25 With: Medinet Habu II 111 (4x), 113, 114 (2x); VIII 598, 599, 622. Without: Medinet Habu II 85, 101, 102, 105, 120 (3x), 121 (4x), 122 (4x).


27 Alan R. Schulman, *Ceremonial Execution and Public Rewards: Some Historical Scenes on New Kingdom Private Stelae* (Freiburg,


29 With: Medinet Habu III 136, 144, 179; IV 200, 207, 229. Without: Medinet Habu III 172; IV 227, 242 (4x); V 279, 297, 315; VI 446; VIII 592.


33 With: Medinet Habu IV 235; V 313; VI 409; VIII 614. Without: Medinet Habu I 13; IV 244 (2x), 246; V 251 (2x), 257 (2x), 283, 290; VI 413, 457; VII 489.


35 With: Medinet Habu VI 454, 456, 465; VII 512, 515, 516, 529, 530; VIII 605, 607, 618, 619. Without: Medinet Habu III 175, 180, 245 (2x); IV 247; V 265, 266, 268, 270, 271, 277, 278, 282, 288, 289, 298, 335, 337; VI 369, 371, 387, 427, 429, 432, 434, 435, 436, 480, 481; VII 513 (erased), 521, 537, 538, 539, 541, 544, 549, 553, 554, 556, 558, 559, 563, 565, 568, 571 (2x), 572, 575, 577, 579, 580, 581 (3x), 582 (2x), 583, 585, 586; VIII 619.

36 With: Medinet Habu V 310 (2x). Without: Medinet Habu V 272, 303 (2x); VI 383 (2x), 450 (2x), 471 (2x); VII 485 (2x), 490, 496, 588 (2x).

37 With: Medinet Habu III 178; V 309; VIII 595, 610, 618. Without: Medinet Habu III 172, 176; IV 246, 247 (2x); V 260, 261, 262, 264 (3x), 265, 266, 267, 268, 269, 270, 272, 275, 281, 286; VI 376, 416,

38 With: Medinet Habu VIII 603, 608; 617 (2x), 618 (2x). Without: Medinet Habu II 107; IV 227 (2x), 244 (2x), 246; V 258, 260, 261 (2x), 262, 263, 264, 266, 269, 270, 271, 272, 276, 279, 281, 283, 290, 306, 308, 315, 336, 341, 344; VI 364, 370, 374, 375, 376, 387, 397, 428, 434, 460, 464, 480; VII 499, 522, 524, 534, 547, 551, 555, 569, 574, 576 (2x), 584; VIII 596, 623.

39 With: Medinet Habu VII 512; VIII 619. Without: Medinet Habu IV 218 (sandals erased), 221, 244, 247; V 263, 265, 267, 268, 272, 273, 276 (2x), 279, 280, 281, 288; VI 365, 373, 376, 434, 439; VII 492, 496, 504, 583.

40 With: Medinet Habu VI 433; Without: Medinet Habu V 272; VI 422, 430 (4x), 431 (2x), 462, 470, 473, 482 (2x); VII 491.

41 With: Medinet Habu IV 218; VII 513. Without: Medinet Habu V 261, 262, 268, 274, 275, 285, 293, 304, 315, 347; VI 418 (2x), 420 (2x); 423 (2x); 424 (2x), 434 (2x), 454, 481; VII 523, 541, 542, 552, 569, 571 (2x), 573, 579, 585, 586.

42 With: Medinet Habu V 318. Without: Medinet Habu IV 227, 244 (2x); V 258, 260, 265, 268, 269 (2x), 270, 271, 273, 274 (2x), 276, 281 (2x), 308, 312, 324, 326; VI 367, 434, 435, 463; VII 535, 560, 572, 574, 582, 583, 585 (2x); VIII 623.

43 With: Medinet Habu VIII 609. Without: Medinet Habu IV 207, 227, 244 (2x), 245 (2x); V 260, 261, 262, 263, 264, 265 (2x), 267 (3x), 269, 270, 271, 274 (2x), 275 (2x), 279, 280 (2x), 282, 283, 292, 294, 305, 311, 312; VI 368, 373 (2x), 375, 376, 426, 428, 435, 439, 442 (2x), 450 (2x), 468 (2x), 472 (2x); VII 520, 534, 536, 540, 544, 547, 549, 555, 571 (2x), 572 (3x), 573, 575 (3x), 576 (3x), 577, 578, 579, 580 (2x), 581 (2x), 582 (3x), 583, 584 (2x), 585 (2x), 586; VIII 619.

44 Medinet Habu IV 234; V 296, 309; VI 414, 449; VII 527.

45 Medinet Habu IV 241 (5x).

46 Medinet Habu VI 467.

47 Medinet Habu III 177 (4x); V 282, 338 (2x), 347; VI 425 (4x), 455; VII 495.

48 Medinet Habu VII 536.
49 Medinet Habu V 266, 274, 278, 281, 283; VI 434; VII 546, 583; VIII 623.
50 Medinet Habu V 287.
51 Medinet Habu V 287.
52 Medinet Habu V 330 (3x); VII 487 (2x).
53 Medinet Habu V 272.
54 Medinet Habu II 205 (sandals erased).
55 Medinet Habu V 275, 279, 284, 310, 311; VI 366, 444.
56 Medinet Habu IV 242, 244, 245; V 258 (2x), 264, 267, 269, 273 (2x), 280, 282 (2x), 292, 293, 308, 310, 313, 338 (2x); VI 373, 375, 435; VII 492, 526, 561, 573 (2x), 588.
57 Medinet Habu V 261; VI 443, 444; VII 564, 577.
58 Medinet Habu V 268, 270, 273, 280 (2x), 294; VI 375; VII 579, 583.
59 Medinet Habu VI 437, 480.
60 Medinet Habu VI 444.
61 Medinet Habu VII 537, 578.
62 Medinet Habu VI 451.
63 Medinet Habu V 271.
64 Medinet Habu V 284.
65 Medinet Habu V 286.
66 Medinet Habu II 119 (2x); VI 448.
67 Medinet Habu VI 467.
68 Medinet Habu VI 469, 470, 473.
69 Medinet Habu V 277.
70 Medinet Habu V 266, 275.
71 CG 20318 (JdE 29233) line 7, in Lange and Schäfer, Grab- und Denksteine des Mittleren Reichs, 1:331.
72 Merneptah Stele 27, in W. M. Flinders Petrie, Six Temples at Thebes 1896 (London: Bernard Quaritch, 1897), pl. XIV.
73 Exod. 3:5–6
74 Medinet Habu III 177 (4x); V 282, 338 (2x), 347; VI 425 (4x), 455; VII 495.