

Herihor in art and iconography: kingship and the gods in the ritual landscape of Late New Kingdom Thebes

Introduction

For much of pharaonic history Herihor did not exist, then after a short span of life he existed only as a memory, perhaps only as a rarely noticed name on a wall. Yet strange as it may appear, it is not the brief period of Herihor's lifetime which informs much of the present study in that there is no attempt to present a biographical account. In the short period of Herihor's existence some, perhaps a relatively large percentage, was in infancy and maturation, and that was followed by the time during which he took an active role in shaping his world: the floruit of Herihor. Even for this time little can be said with certainty about Herihor the man. Of his interests and desires, his hopes and expectations, there is nothing to give any firm basis for opinion. He rose to high office, but whether as a consequence of his own will and actions or as a figurehead representing the will of others remains unknown, and perhaps unknowable. What does remain from the floruit of Herihor amounts to little more than a few artefacts and the relatively large amount of textual and iconographic inscription within the precincts of Karnak, a central location in the Theban ritual landscape. These inscriptions tell not so much of Herihor the man, but of the ideological influences which evolved during the preceding span of pharaonic history. These were the influences which created societal structure in the world of Herihor's experience, the cultural background informing his time in power and which now forms the primary focus of this exploration of Herihor's reign.

Also of interest is the long span of years after Herihor's death during which, from time to time, Herihor and his period in office have been considered, and opinions formed and transmitted through the medium of scholarly discourse. Here it is of note that in most modern accounts of the history of ancient Egypt Herihor is often a rather neglected figure, a circumstance which is to some extent a product of both the events he experienced and of present perceptions of Herihor's part in those events arising from the manner in which modern scholars have chosen to reconstruct the past. The difficulties presented by the first instance are unavoidable, and part of the fascination of historical enquiry. That Herihor lived at a time when circumstances were such that they no longer present a clear picture for posterity can hardly be held against either Herihor or his contemporaries – however much we may feel that they could have been a little more considerate in leaving a few more clues. However, with regard to the construction of history in more recent scholarship there does seem to be scope to address earlier misconceptions where they become apparent.

I suspect that many of the flaws in historical interpretation have arisen from an understandable desire to construct a narrative account of history in the form of a sequence of events. A desire reflecting that of the playwright whose characters act out their roles in accordance with the carefully considered plot of the author. However, it is questionable as to whether such clearly structured linear pathways exist in physical reality. Yet whether or not one might believe that sufficient factors may be identified so as to determine causality, or that some cosmic force guides the path of human action with fate or destiny guiding individual lives to predetermined ends, it must be accepted that historians are not privy to those plans and can only construct history retrospectively using the evidence left for them. Here it is an unfortunate truth that, particularly in the study of ancient history, it is often the case that insufficient evidence survives from which an accurate picture of past events may be developed. Therefore to complete a present image of the past much is left to interpretation. In this endeavour the historian must extrapolate from the known events, as s/he understands them, and in practising this art it is likely the intent of every historian to remain objective. However the extent to which one might dampen personal and cultural biases, and even prevailing methodological practices guiding historical enquiry, to allow primacy to the often poorly understood vagaries of past cultures and individual agency of historical characters is uncertain. Therefore the only assured point of reference within which enquiries may be framed is perhaps time itself. Yet even time, with respect to the study of ancient Egypt, presents some difficulty for modern historians.

As time appears to unfold with some constancy from the past, through the present, and into the future, it seems quite natural to view history in a linear fashion. Within that temporal progression occasional remarkable events or related sets of circumstances appear to allow some clear divisions to be established in the evolution of human experience. This was recognised in the earliest traditions of historical enquiry relating to ancient Egypt by Manetho. Working in the third century BC, Manetho mapped his country's history according to a sequential list of its rulers and formed temporal divisions by grouping sets of individual kings into dynasties: each of which spanned a measured period of time established by combining the recorded reign length of each constituent ruler (Redford 1986:203-30). While subsequently much revised, with the creation of further temporal boundaries by grouping dynasties into Kingdoms and Intermediate Periods, the resulting linear construction has provided an invaluable framework for much modern historical enquiry. Nevertheless, it should be borne in mind that such schema are entirely arbitrary constructions, and were introduced posterior to the events in question.

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They are no more than aids to the understanding of history, not part of history itself, and can themselves distort historical perspective.

The imposition of a structured linear framework has the potential to create illusory barriers. Moreover, the presentation of clear lines of demarcation marking the end of one period and the beginning of another has not been without consequence for the present reception of Herihor, whose floruit appears to bridge the divide between the New Kingdom and the following Third Intermediate Period. That the extant evidence as to both relative and absolute dating of Herihor's floruit is both uncertain and somewhat controversial only serves to exacerbate this difficulty, with result that in many general historical works Herihor almost becomes an afterthought in the consideration of the earlier period or is given a brief mention in the preamble to the following epoch. In some works Herihor is ignored completely. The manner of dividing history into discrete parcels of time also presents the illusion that each may be considered to some degree as culturally distinct. Each period beginning with a time of formative activities which establish a range of cultural norms – including those relating to political, economic, religious, and even artistic standards – which persist until that system begins to break down in a terminal phase: one often leading to a time of political disunity. This certainly seems to be the case in respect of modern interpretation of the New Kingdom.

Born out of a period of strife in the mid Sixteenth Century BC – during which Thebes, under the successive rules of Seqenenre Taa, Kamose, and Ahmose I, fought to wrest power from their northern overlords – the New Kingdom began around 1550, the point at which Ahmose finally drove the Hyksos from Egypt and the country was once again united under one ruler. The ensuing period of apparent political and cultural unity lasted for some 480 years before crumbling under the pressure of both political and economic forces during the reigns of the last Ramesside kings. Bács (2011: 2) described the terminal phase as a time when, following the reign of Ramesses III, Egypt stagnated under 'titanic bureaucracy and, above all, priesthoods' until its final political and economic collapse under Ramesses XI. At this point general historical accounts tend to draw a neat line marking the end of the New Kingdom.

While this certainly presents a very generalized view, it nevertheless seems to be the case that for many commentators Herihor falls into one of the 'cracks' of history: he occupies a liminal zone between two clearly defined periods. Yet such perceptions are illusory in that there was no clear temporal demarcation in any real sense. History did not stop at the end of the New Kingdom to begin a new chapter. Nor does history evolve in the carefully structured form suggested by the neatly drawn Dynasties and Periods tabulated in text books. History is rather a more chaotic series of memorable events occurring along the intertwining paths followed by the agents of historical interest. The world as it was experienced by Herihor and his contemporaries was the same vibrant present as that of all lived experience: a world of social, political, commercial, and economic interaction within a cultural milieu bounded by ideologies grounded in a distant past and striving towards an unknown future.

That modern commentators feel able to draw a line through history around the time in question does however suggest that some degree of change has been noted – a recognition that a new order had evolved which perhaps exhibited some notable differences from what had gone before. Here the inference may be drawn that the period in question was rather dynamic, one in which the notable characters were doing more than maintaining the status quo, they were engendering change. Therefore rather than be discarded to the sidelines of history, such characters might provide a focus for study: and this approach has indeed been adopted by a number of scholars. Yet even where Herihor is allowed a more extensive role in history that role, as interpreted in modern historiographical accounts, is often contrary to the surviving evidence.

Most commentators suggest that following the end of the New Kingdom Period, and with the general decline in the political and economic fortunes of Egypt, the traditional pattern of pharaonic kingship was maintained by the kings of the Twenty-first Dynasty based in their new residence city of Tanis. As successors to the preceding Ramesside Dynasty, the northern kings held dominion over the Theban region which was under the *de facto* control of a line of high priests who ruled by a new and distinctly theocratic style of government. Herihor, as the first of these Theban rulers, is often presented as a usurper of kingship and variously afforded such epithets as 'priest-king' or 'pontiff': titles used pejoratively to both disallow kingship and reinforce the theocratic nature of his rule. In support of such claims much reliance is placed on the manner of Herihor's portrayal on the walls of the Temple of Khonsu at Karnak, the principal source of documentary evidence for his reign. Here, Herihor is depicted in a style of dress which has been deemed 'ecclesiastical'. Further evidence used in deprecation of Herihor's status is the fact that the aforementioned history as recorded by Manetho makes no mention of Herihor, giving rise to claims that he appeared out of nowhere, and that his reign marked a complete break from earlier pharaonic tradition in the Thebaid.

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Many of the claims denigrating Herihor's kingship have become embedded in modern historical narrative, and have thus acquired their own legitimacy: the received wisdom often accepted without further recourse to the primary evidence. Yet in the present study those claims provide a point of departure in a reconsideration of the source material, such as it is. Here it is not the intent to present a narrative history, although it will of course be necessary to remain broadly within the chronological framework to the extent that it defines the cultural background for Herihor's reign. It was from this social milieu, not from nowhere, that that Herihor appeared. Moreover, that he rose to high office surely permits the inference that he was both astute and able in character, one well aware of the political and economic concerns of the day. It might also be allowed that Herihor's actions, as those of his contemporaries, were motivated to some degree by ideology: the beliefs, values, and opinions that govern the thoughts and actions of both the individual and the wider social group. Here it is fortunate that the extant monuments of Thebes provide a wealth of texts and images created throughout the New Kingdom, each vignette replete with symbolic meaning, each text confirming the nature of the universe from the ancient Egyptian perspective. Herein lay Herihor's ideological roots, the stimuli which drove his actions; and from their extant remains one may determine the extent to which this ideology inspired and informed the inscriptions of Herihor's own artistic repertoire.

Thus there is no great need to rely on mere speculation, but rather by careful consideration of the monumental inscriptions with appropriate attention to temporal, geographical, and ideological contexts one might reassess the character of Herihor's reign both in relation to the nature of his kingship and style of governance. Furthermore, the inscribed texts and images provide some insight into more pragmatic, quotidian concerns, the origins or rationale for which were perhaps no longer remembered yet which might be said, in a sociological context, to constitute the habitus of a group or individual and which supplement motivation derived from the more formal, rational ideology of the state (Dobres and Robb 2000: 5). An example of such a notion might be the idea of being 'Theban' – a concept which may be a distinct factor when considering the political fragmentation of Egypt during the period of interest.

Political division based upon geographical boundaries is common to many societies during all periods of recorded history, and was a regular feature in ancient Egypt. Even during the lengthy periods of apparent unity there seems a strong likelihood that regional cultural differences remained, within both the general populace and ruling elite. This seems more likely when considering that the present temporally-bounded unity designated as the New Kingdom is a modern construct wherein, the primary evidence suggests, political and economic stability and continuity is rather more illusory: the much stated 'unity of the Two Lands' proclaimed in royal texts was always the ideal, not so often the reality.

From this perspective it seems pertinent to consider whether the apparent Theban disaffection at the end of the New Kingdom was brought about by Herihor, or whether there had been some desire for a degree of autonomy within the Theban region over a much longer period. Perceived political and economic isolation, perhaps coupled with some sense of subservience to rulers increasingly remote, as evinced by the paucity of royal building works in Thebes during the later Ramesside Period, offers a climate in which perceived cultural differences may come to the fore and play their part in fomenting political unrest, particularly so in the minds of an elite group with a strong tradition of kingship seeing themselves both as oppressed and deprived of their birthright as the legitimate ruling line. In such circumstances it seems likely that in the Theban mind of the later New Kingdom Period the Ramesside Dynasty was perceived as 'the other', and not held in great affection in the southern regions of Upper Egypt.

When Herihor's reign is viewed within the described temporal, geographical, and ideological contexts one may wonder whether the long-held view that the northern rulers should be seen as the sole continuation of the pharaonic line in the post-Ramesside era may be upheld. In fact when examined in detail, much of the evidence which has hitherto been presented in support of that idea is found to be either inconclusive or non-existent. With the removal of such preconceptions, notions regarding the posited Theban Theocracy, high priests usurping royal status, modes of dress denoting priestly status, and similar ideas regarding the both physical and ideological structures of the ancient Egyptian society become questionable. And such questions inform the themes considered in the following chapters where primary focus will be on the one element of pharaonic society originally put in place to address such topics: the ritual landscape. The architecture and artistic themes used in the decoration of the monuments of Thebes encoded the ideology of the pharaonic state. The ritual landscape defined, preserved, and promulgated the elite's construction of ideology; it presented their justification for power differential within society, and is therefore ideal as a source which may be mined for information which, when examined in relation to the cultural settings of its originators, may be productive in determining both the nature of Herihor's kingship and the political nature of Thebes at the advent of the post-Ramesside era.

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