



Trabajos de Egiptología

The Tendrils of the Bat Emblem

Andrea RODRÍGUEZ VALLS

Workers in Perpetuity?

Notes about the *mrt* Workers of the Egyptian Middle Kingdom
Based on the Stela CG 20516

Pablo M. ROSELL

And Everything Began with Laughs and Tears...

The Creation of the Gods According to *Esna* II, 163, 16-17;
III 206, 8-9 (§13) and III, 272, 2-3:
Precedents, Interpretation
and Influences

Josué SANTOS SAAVEDRA, Roger FORTEA BASTART

Tabasety, the Temple Singer in Aarhus

Rogério SOUSA, Vinnie NØRSKOV

92018

Trabajos de Egiptología

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Papers on Ancient Egypt

**The High Priesthood of Memphis during the Old Kingdom
and the First Intermediate Period:
An Updated Study and Prosopography**

Josep CERVELLÓ AUTUORI

**Quelques observations sur l'écriture rétrograde
dans les tombes thébaines
de l'époque tardive**

Silvia EINAUDI

**Interpreting Three Gold Coins from Ancient Egypt
and the Ancient Near East at the Museo
Casa de la Moneda, Madrid**

Miguel JARAMAGO

**Egyptian Predynastic Lice Combs:
Analysis of an Ancestral Tool**

Candelaria MARTÍN DEL RÍO ÁLVAREZ

Who Painted the Tomb of Sennedjem?

Gema MENÉNDEZ



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The Tendrils of the Bat Emblem

Andrea RODRÍGUEZ VALLS

The written documents referring to the Bat emblem do not provide enough details to properly identify its features. In the study of this sacred element, it is convenient to undertake an iconographic analysis of its depictions in order to determine its spheres of influence. This paper focuses on the two spiral-shaped elements that are present in the upper part of this emblem, which displays a possible connection with plants, particularly those of the Cucurbitaceae family.


Los zarcillos del emblema Bat

Los documentos textuales asociados al emblema Bat no proporcionan información suficiente que permita entender sus características. Para desarrollar un estudio adecuado de este emblema religioso, es necesario realizar un análisis de sus representaciones iconográficas para, después, poder explicar los contextos a los que se asocia. Este artículo se centra en los dos componentes con forma de espiral que presenta el emblema en su parte superior y en un posible vínculo con elementos vegetales, específicamente con algunos pertenecientes a la familia de las cucurbitáceas.

Keywords: Bottle gourd (*Lagenaria siceraria*), circumnutation, cucurbits, kingship, melon (*Cucumis melo*), plant elements, Pyramid Texts, Red Crown, spirals, "stylized horns", Uadjet standards, White Crown.

Palabras clave: Calabaza de peregrino (*Lagenaria siceraria*), circumnutación, Corona blanca, Corona roja, cucurbitáceas, "cuernos estilizados", elementos vegetales, espirales, estandarte de Uadjet, melón (*Cucumis melo*), realeza, Textos de las Pirámides.

The standard reference work for the study of Bat as a goddess, which was published in the sixties, is that of H. G. Fischer.¹ He differentiated Bat from Hathor, with whom this religious element, described below, is usually associated. However, although decades have passed since his contribution, there remain many unresolved questions regarding Bat emblem's features, representations and spheres of influence, which have been overlooked in the most recent studies.²

The first written reference to the Bat emblem can be found in the Pyramid Texts (*Pyr.* 1096b, PT 506): P. 

N pi b3t hrwy=s snw "N is Bat, with her two faces".³ The information provided by this sentence is supported by later references pertaining to the Coffin Texts corpus (CT IV, 181 [334]; CT V, 237 [411]). These passages give concise information about the emblem: they refer to its face and, additionally, they place it in a creational context and point to an association with the goddess Isis.

In any case, although representations and textual attestations of the Bat emblem are infrequent, it is commonly used as a determinative and as a logogram until the Middle Kingdom,⁴ particularly in some titles of the elite

This article is dedicated to Covadonga Sevilla. Thanks to the Egyptology school that she founded at the *Universidad Autónoma de Madrid*, where I studied History, my eyes stopped looking to start seeing!

1 Mainly Fischer 1962.

2 Mainly Selve 2000; Rashed 2009a and 2009b.

3 See translation by Fischer 1962: 11; Allen 2005: 157, P460; Allen 2015: 162.

4 For a summary of the different writings of the word Bat, see Leitz 2002: 735.

during the Old Kingdom.⁵ Due to the preeminence of the emblem, it is essential to understand its features in greater depth, without assuming that these are superfluous or purely ornamental elements.

The emblem usually shows a frontal human face with rounded features,⁶ as seen in figures 1, 2 and 4. It also has bovine ears,⁷ without being able to specifically identify the species that they could represent.⁸ In its lower part, the emblem includes the lower half of the *tit*-knot,⁹ and, in its upper part over the human face, a sort of “curled or stylized horns” that are analysed below.

1 | The Tendrils (“Stylized Horns”) of the Bat Emblem

The referred two elements of the emblem are usually in a spiral form, coiled inwards (fig. 2). But they do not appear this way in the older representations that are associable with the Bat emblem, in which it clearly displays horns (fig. 3);¹⁰ these are previous to the con-



Figure 1. Detail of the Bat pendant of Khenu. Drawing: A. Rodríguez Valls after Mariette 1889: fig. 59.

- 5 See Jones 2000: 304 (n° 1108), 647 (n° 2371), 665 (n° 2436). Hannig 2003: 407 {9251} and 1552 {41329}.
- 6 The identification of Bat’s face as bucranium is frequent (Volokhine 2000: 47–48; Yoyotte 2005a, 2005b) but incorrect; it is not a mere head or skull of the bovidae family.
- 7 As Lefébure has already pointed out about the sistrum, “fait d’une tête à demi féminine et à demi bovine” (Lefébure 1906: 106).
- 8 It is often interpreted that the emblem incorporates cow ears and horns (Fischer 1962: 12; Allam 1963: 128; Fischer 1975: 630; Favard-Meeks 1992: 17; Wilkinson 2003: 172). However, there are scholars who argue that those features can be related to the African buffalo, *Synceus caffer* (Fairservis 1991: 7; Rashed 2009a: 410, pl. VIA), mainly based on its oldest representations. There are also zoologists who have linked these images to the aurochs, *Bos primigenius opisthonomus* (as Ch. Favard-Meeks remarks from Epstein, H. *The origin of the domestic animals of Africa I*. New York, London, Munich: Africana Publishing Corporation, 1971: 233ff. [Favard-Meeks 1992: 20]).
- 9 The systematic appearance of this type of knot under the face in the emblem has been noted earlier (Fischer 1975: 631). Fischer also noticed a similar occurrence in the statue of Repit (Kofler-Truniger collection, K 9643 R) and associated it with the *tit*-knot and *ankh*-sign (Fischer 1962: 12; Fischer 1973: 15).
- 10 As in the case of the Gerza palette (JE 34173; Petrie 1953: pl. B.5), the cylinder seal impression found in the tomb U–210 from Abydos (see Hartung 1998: fig. 8, n° 22) or the Narmer Palette (JE 14716, CGC 32169; Quibell 1900: pl. XXIX), among others.

figuration of the emblem that occurred during the Old Kingdom. It has been suggested that these coiled elements could have been the result of a stylization of the horns, which are attested in the oldest representations related to the Bat emblem,¹¹ perhaps motivated by the disappearance of the buffalo,¹² one of the animals to whom these first representations have been attributed. However, it seems unlikely that the ancient Egyptians failed to recognize the depiction of bovine horns in the ancient representations and gradually made distorted depictions of them; they were profoundly familiar with cattle nature. Instead, it is possible that two symbolic spirals replaced the horns, adding a new significance to the Bat emblem.

On the other hand, it has been suggested that these elements share parallels with twisted vegetal fibers,¹³ especially related to the pendant of Khaefkhufu (fig. 4).¹⁴ However, this concerns the material from which the real emblems could be manufactured, not necessarily their cultural meaning. It is important to pay attention to the purpose of these spirals before considering the materials in which the actual Bat emblems—as part of an outfit—could be made, if they existed.¹⁵

Neither the textual nor the iconographic sources give more information about these spirals. However, it is possible to examine their identification and meaning by looking at other sources, which are not directly linked to the Bat emblem.

2 | Parallel spiral-shaped elements

The formal similarity of these elements with the spiral that comes up from the Red Crown has been noted.¹⁶ Considering that these fea-



Figure 2. Detail of the personified Bat standard included in Menkaure sculptural group JE 46499. Photograph: A. Rodríguez Valls.

- 11 Favard-Meeks 1992: 20.
- 12 Due to climate change, around 7000–6000 B.P. (Sweydan 1992: 588–589).
- 13 Volokhine 2000: 58.
- 14 This pendant is depicted on one of the reliefs within Giza mastaba G 7140, on the chest of its owner. See Junker 1955: fig. 11; Simpson 1978: 11, pl. XVc, pl. XVIa, fig. 26.
- 15 Some items of jewelry containing the Bat emblem have been documented. However, none resemble those depictions that appear in Old and Middle Kingdom reliefs in which they appear as part of clothing on the chest of elite officials.
- 16 Lefébure 1906: 118.



Figure 3. Bat representation in the upper right part of the Narmer palette's verso (JE 14716, CGC 32169). Drawing: A. Rodríguez Valls.

tures have a similar form, the question is whether they could have been inspired by the same element or a shared origin. Indeed, it has been proposed that the Red Crown spiral was made of rope, with a rolled-up end that would have to be a metal wire¹⁷ in order to keep it upright. Aside from the possible way of manufacturing the spiral, it has been suggested that it reproduces the actual shape of an ostrich feather.¹⁸ Again, these observations relate to the manufacturing materials of this part of the crown and not the understanding of its cultural significance. In the case of the Bat emblem, it seems unlikely that the spirals were feathers, particularly since a few representations of the emblem include the image of an actual feather between the spirals, which clearly show a different shape (see fig. 2).

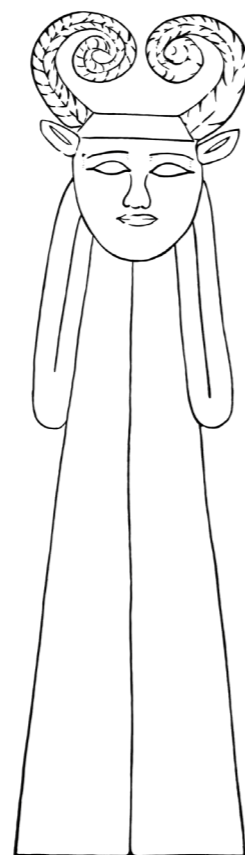


Figure 4. Detail of the Bat pendant of Khaefkhufu, from Giza mastaba G 7140. Drawing: A. Rodríguez Valls after Simpson 1978: fig. 26.

Different names have been documented for the spiral of the Red Crown, all translated as “wire of the Red Crown”: $\text{𓂏} \text{𓂏} \text{𓂏}$ *šbt*;¹⁹ $\text{𓂏} \text{𓂏} \text{𓂏}$ *h3bt*;²⁰ $\text{𓂏} \text{𓂏} \text{𓂏}$ *hm3tt* (also “rope”);²¹ $\text{𓂏} \text{𓂏} \text{𓂏}$

¹⁷ Borchardt 1928: 46–47; Abubakr 1937: 51.

¹⁸ Abubakr 1937: 51.

¹⁹ Erman and Grapow 1930: 438; Hannig 2009: 878 {32516}. See PT 570, *Pyr.* 1459a. Meeks includes in his entry 78.4077 a substance *šbw*, which was linked with the Red Crown. Although this word has some variations in the script, it could have had some association with the term *šbt* for the wire (see Meeks 1998b: 372).

²⁰ Erman and Grapow 1929: 362 (4); Hannig 2009: 681 {24786}. This word could be related to the adjective *h3b* “be bend” (Hannig 2009: 680 {24780}).

²¹ Erman and Grapow 1929: 95 (6); Hannig 2009: 571 {20664}. See PT 268, *Pyr.* 373c.

$\text{𓂏} \text{𓂏} \text{𓂏}$ *nwdt*.²² Yet none of these words alone provide much information about what the spiral evokes. Whatever the case, the presence of the spiral on the Red Crown is relevant: in the text relating to the placement of the Red Crown on the head of Hatshepsut in the Red Chapel, the spiral *h3bt* is specifically mentioned, as well as the rear part of the crown, the *mst*.²³ Both elements cannot be superfluous. This is evident in the use of the word *h3btyt*—a nisbe of *h3bt*—to refer to the whole crown during the Nineteenth Dynasty.²⁴

3 | The cucurbits and its tendrils related to the White and Red Crowns

At this point, it may be useful to highlight the suggestion by A. Niwiński concerning the White Crown,²⁵ especially since it is complementary to the Red Crown. The author raises the possibility that the shape of the king's White Crown was modeled on the bottle gourd, a fruit of the *Lagenaria siceraria*, which relates to the cucurbits family (fig. 5). This plant comes from Africa²⁶ and was domesticated for human consumption and everyday use.²⁷ The husk of the bottle gourd is easy to manipulate and decorate, and its appearance resembling the White Crown is noticeable.

Some terms have been recently linked with the bottle gourd: P.P. Koemoth considers that $\text{𓂏} \text{𓂏} \text{𓂏}$ *qbw*, documented from New King-



Figure 5. *Lagenaria siceraria* depicted in the work of Leonhard Fuchs, 1543: *New Kreüterbuch*. Basilea, Michel Isingrin. Wikimedia Commons.

dom onwards, made reference to this plant. Thus, this gourd should have been used in magical-medical remedies for burns, skin lesions and snake bites, as well as in laxative and

²² Suggested by Mercer 1952: 297. Hannig 2009: 423 {15208}. See PT 674; *Pyr.* 1999b.

²³ See Lacau and Chevrier 1977: 243–245. See Scene 07.0 (block 145) – (KIU 1310) from *Projet Karnak* (<http://sith.huma-num.fr/karnak>).

²⁴ Abubakr 1937: 57.

²⁵ Niwiński 2000.

²⁶ Heiser 1979: 84–85; Kistler *et alii* 2014: 2937.

²⁷ Decker-Walters *et alii* 2004: 501–502; Langlie *et alii* 2014: 1605–1606. Apparently, the earliest African evidence (2000 B.C.) come from Egypt and Zambia. A. Niwiński also mentions that gourds were used as elements of ritual dressing in Africa (Niwiński 2000: 159).

purgative preparations, among others, linked to the refreshing and cleaning concept implicit in its name.²⁸ On the contrary, the study of transmission of Greek texts leded T. Pommerening to translate 𓆎𓅓𓏏𓏏 *bddw-k3* as *Lagenaria siceraria*.²⁹

As part of the Cucurbitaceae family, the bottle gourd is a climbing plant that uses its tendrils to support its structure. Tendrils attach themselves to any element by movements known as circumnutations,³⁰ acquiring a helicoidal shape. Whenever tendrils do not attach to anything, they show a remarkable spiral shape (fig. 6).

As M. Stolarz argues, circumnutation is a complex phenomenon, a motor activity that may serve as a marker of plant behavior.³¹ This particular movement would not have gone unnoticed by the ancient Egyptians, who were great observers of nature.

Returning to Ancient Egyptian imagery, it is important to highlight that sometimes the Red Crown was named 𓆎𓅓𓏏 *w3dt* (i.e. *Pyr.* 1374, PT 555), which can be translated “the fresh/green crown”.³² Furthermore, it is worth highlighting the passage found in *Pyr.* 1459a, PT 570, where the *shebet*-spiral appears clearly linked with the *uadjyt*-crown. This may indi-

cate that the crown spiral is a plant element.³³ Additionally, the rear element of the crown, called *mist*, could be related with a plant element, translated as “stem” (French “tige”, Deutsch “Stengel”).³⁴

Although the aforementioned names of the spiral of the Red Crown do not relate to its cultural meaning, some of them could share etymology with plant elements: the word *hm3tt* could be linked to plants such as *hm3yt* “orach” (*Atriplex halimus*) or “almond” (*Prunus amygdalus*),³⁵ or as *hm3w* “plant” (Fenugreek?).³⁶ The word *šbt* could be related to *šbt* “watermelon” (*Cucumis melo*)³⁷ or to the word *šbt* “tree, shrub”.³⁸ Additionally, the word *h3bt* could be linked to *h3bw* “plants”.³⁹

Furthermore, in *Pyr.* 702a, PT 404, the standards of the goddess Uadjet are mentioned. In the spell relating to the king Teti, they used the hieroglyph 𓆎 ⁴⁰ to refer to the standards, whose similar form with the Red Crown spiral was already pointed out by B. Mathieu.⁴¹ These Uadjet standards, which occur less frequently than other spiral elements mentioned, must surely be made of perishable material and refer again to the relationship of this kind of spiral with vegetal elements.

28 Koemoth 2004. Hannig translated *qbw* as an undefined “plant” (2009: 921 {34116}).

29 Pommerening 2010. Hannig included *bddw-k3* as “plant / watermelon, *Citrus vulgaris* (2009: 283 {10271}).

30 See Stolarz 2009. For a general view of the tendrils movement, see Jaffe and Galston 1968.

31 Stolarz 2009: 386.

32 See Goebis 2008: 155–164; Mathieu 2009: 42–43 and 45–47.

33 Goebis 2008: 166.

34 Meeks 1998a: 154 {77.1657}; Hannig 2009: 345 {12503}. This word could be related to *miswt* “plants” (see Hannig 2009: 345 {12505}).

35 Hannig 2009: 571 {20653}.

36 Hannig 2009: 571 {20658}.

37 Hannig 2009: 878 {32509}.

38 Hannig 2009: 878 {32511}.

39 Hannig 2009: 681 {50412}.

40 JSesh sign O44c. See *Pyr.* 702a in Allen 2013.

41 Mathieu 2009: 43.



Figure 6. Actual cucurbit tendril. Wikimedia Commons.

With the available information, it is not possible to know what the ancient Egyptians thought about the plants with tendrils. However, it seems likely that their behavior would not have gone unnoticed; in contrast to other plant elements, the tendril has an autonomous movement and possesses the ability to attach itself to the things around it as if it had its own

will. This must be striking or, at least, rather special. The depiction of tendrils as part of the Bat emblem could perhaps be used by the Egyptians to imply the growing energy of the plants or a sort of vegetal will or spirit.

Apart from the bottle gourd referred by A. Niwiński, other species of cucurbits have been documented in ancient Egypt, such as the colocynth (*Citrullus colocynthis*), the watermelon (*Citrullus vulgaris*), the cucumber (*Cucumis sativus*) or the melon (*Cucumis melo*).⁴² All these plants should have been significant in the diet of the Egyptians, and all of them have tendrils, although its representations are infrequent.⁴³ As mentioned above, among the words documented for the spiral of the Red Crown, one of them, *šbt*, could be related to the word *šbt* “melon” (*Cucumis melo*).⁴⁴

In conclusion, the spiral of the Red Crown could have been inspired by cucurbit tendrils. Considering A. Niwiński’s theory concerning the White Crown,⁴⁵ the tendrils could pertain to the bottle gourd (*Lagenaria siceraria*)—or to the melon (*Cucumis melo*)—if we consider that the shebet-spiral is related to this plant.

Since, during the development of my PhD, I noticed the close connection between the Bat emblem and the pharaoh, as well as with the elite members around him—especially during the Old and Middle Kingdom—it seems reasonable to consider that the cucurbit tendrils are also elements represented on the top of this emblem.

42 See Loret 1975: 73–75; Darby, Ghalioungi and Grivetti 1977: 693–695, 717–718; Manniche 1989: 91 (*Citrullus colocynthis*), 92–93 (*Citrullus lanatus*), 95 (*Cucumis melo*), 96 (*Cucumis sativus*); Murray 2000: table 24.3, 633–636 (watermelon, melon and cucumber); de Vartavan *et alii* 2010: 78–80 (*Citrullus* genus), 89–90 (*Cucumis* genus), 139–140 (*Lagenaria* genus).

43 For a summary of ancient Egyptian representations of cucurbits, see Janick *et alii* 2007: 1448–1449. Hudáková 2016 studied the gardening scenes concerning cucurbits and identified a rare depiction of *Cucumis melo* grown on a trellis from Deir el-Bersha. Hannig 2009: 878 {32509}.

44 Hannig 2009: 878 {32509}.

45 See Niwiński 2000.

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Índice | Contents

The High Priesthood of Memphis during the Old Kingdom and the First Intermediate Period: An Updated Study and Prosopography	7
Josep CERVELLÓ AUTUORI	
Quelques observations sur l'écriture rétrograde dans les tombes thébaines de l'époque tardive	65
Silvia EINAUDI	
Interpreting Three Gold Coins from Ancient Egypt and the Ancient Near East at the Museo Casa de la Moneda, Madrid	81
Miguel JARAMAGO	
Egyptian Predynastic Lice Combs: Analysis of an Ancestral Tool	123
Candelaria MARTÍN DEL RÍO ÁLVAREZ	
Who Painted The Tomb of Sennedjem?	145
Gema MENÉNDEZ	
The Tendrils of the Bat Emblem	161
Andrea RODRÍGUEZ VALLS	
Workers in Perpetuity? Notes about the <i>mrt</i> Workers of the Egyptian Middle Kingdom Based on the Stela CG 20516	171
Pablo M. ROSELL	
<i>And Everything Began with Laughs and Tears...</i> The Creation of the Gods According to <i>Esna</i> II, 163, 16-17; III 206, 8-9 (§13) and III, 272, 2-3: Precedents, Interpretation and Influences	187
Josué SANTOS SAAVEDRA, Roger FORTEA BASTART	
Tabasety, the Temple Singer in Aarhus	207
Rogério SOUSA, Vinnie NØRSKOV	
Submission Guidelines	225

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Diseño de arte y maquetación
Amparo Errandonea
aeamparo@gmail.com

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