

The “God’s Palace”: A Shrine Sign for šps, “August”

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Function
 Logogram
Value
 šps
 [August, Noble]

The Wadi Hammamat quarries (Eastern Desert, Egypt) preserve a rich corpus of rock art and inscriptions that reflect the Pharaonic perception of the site as a place imbued with numinous character—a landscape where one could engage directly with the divine (Lloyd 2013; Olette-Pelletier 2023; Morel in press).

During the Middle Kingdom, several expedition texts expand on this religious conceptualization, describing the quarries in overtly mythological terms. A royal decree issued under Mentuhotep IV, for instance, refers to the place as: “this august, primordial mountain, first-ranking in the land of the horizon-dwellers, the god’s palace that grants life, the divine nest of Horus in which this god rejoices, his pure place of joy, presiding over the deserts of the God’s Land” (Couyat & Montet 1912: 98–100, no. 192).

Other inscriptions, however, place greater emphasis on the self-presentation of expedition leaders, while still incorporating—whether subtly or overtly—allusions to the sacred nature of the site. A particularly illustrative example is provided by the inscription of the Director of Works Mery, dated to the reign of Amenemhat III (Couyat & Montet 1912: 41–42, no. 19), where the divine quality of the location is signalled through a striking graphic variation.

In this inscription, the site is described as *dw pn šps*, “this august mountain,” a relatively standard designation for the quarries. Yet, the adjective *šps*, “august, noble,” is written in an unconventional manner. Rather than employing the usual seated-man-of-rank sign (A50), the scribe substitutes the sign for the façade of a shrine (O21)—contra Couyat & Montet 1912: 41, n. 1, who interpret it merely as the seat of the *šps*-sign. This departure from conventional orthography suggests a deeper semantic intention.

Such a substitution can be understood through the lens of *conceptual association*, one of the key mechanisms underlying enigmatic writing (e.g., Werning 2020: 232–233). Here, the shrine sign functions as a paragon-based substitute, operating through iconicity and associative logic: the glyph evokes the conceptual field of *sacredness* by referencing its exemplary



material form, the shrine itself. Notably, the substitution remains partial. The shrine sign is accompanied by the standard phonetic complement and determinatives for šps (col. 3), thus securing the intended reading while simultaneously enriching the word with an additional semantic layer.

This graphic elaboration is further underscored by internal contrast. Later in the inscription, the expected seated-man sign  (A50) is used without substitution—once as a classifier in Mery's own name (col. 8), and again in the word šps when referring to the blocks of stone brought back to the Nile Valley (col. 13). The initial variation in column 2, therefore, appears to be a deliberate graphic strategy, reframing the mountain itself as a sacralized architectural space—as though the quarries were conceived as the “god's palace,” the true dwelling place of the deity.

References:

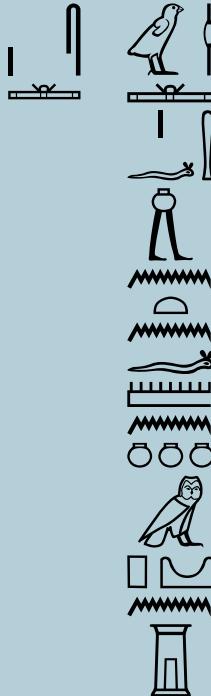
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Document: Commemorative Inscription of the Director of Works Mery

Date: Middle Kingdom, late Dynasty 12, reign of Amenemhat III (ca. 1838–1794 BCE)

Provenance: Wadi Hammamat quarries (Eastern Desert, Egypt)

Current location: *In situ*

Object type: Rock inscription

Material: Rock face (greywacke)

Hieroglyphic source

MdC: V24*G43:Y1:U36*(Z1:I9):W25:N35:X1:N35:I9:Y5:N35:(W24*W24*W24):G17:N26*Q3:N35:O21_-!(S29*Z1:Y1)

Transliteration: *wd hm=f int n=f mnw m dw pn šps (...)*

Translation: His Majesty commanded to bring him back monuments from this august mountain (...)

Location: Columns 2–3 of the inscription