



ESSEX EGYPTOLOGY GROUP-REVIEW

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by Margaret Patterson

"Pharaonic Purification Scenes in the Graeco-Roman Period"

Konstantin Ivanov

At the beginning of September Konstantin Ivanov came to talk to us about scenes showing purification of the Pharaoh in Graeco-Roman period temples. He began by talking about why he was studying these scenes. Firstly because they are telling us something about an important part of Egyptian culture - purity was a requirement before someone could enter the temple, so the Pharaoh must also be purified when he comes to the temple. And secondly he thought this was a good area to investigate because not a lot of work has been done on these scenes. Gardiner published on the subject in 1950 and that's still the most cited text. It's even cited by people discussing Ptolemaic Period temples, despite Gardiner explicitly saying he's not covering that period! As well as that gap there is also new evidence available, so Ivanov did a large scale comprehensive study of purification scenes for his Masters thesis.

The decorative element he was discussing is a set of four scenes which are arranged in a sequence. First there is the Royal Exit - the Pharaoh leaving the palace to go to the temple. This is followed by the Purification scene where the gods pour water over the Pharaoh's head. Next comes a Coronation scene where the king is crowned or confirmed by two deities. And lastly the Pharaoh is presented to the patron deity of the temple by gods. Ivanov pointed out that the scenes aren't necessarily a straightforward representation of reality - they must also fit with temple "grammar". By this he means things like which crown a Pharaoh is shown as wearing will depend on which wall of the temple he is on - Red Crown on the north wall, White Crown on the south.

He then gave us a feel for the sheer quantity of evidence he has gathered on the subject - he wasn't going to show us every single example because it would be overwhelming, and he was going to concentrate on the areas of his research that are more complete. As part of this bit of the talk he listed his major sources, and showed us the geographical spread of the temples he's investigated.

Purification scenes first appear as part of temple decoration as early as the time of Hatshepsut (on the Red Shrine), and even this early elements of the later sequence are present. There are quite a lot of examples surviving from the Ramesside period so that is where Ivanov began his explanation of the historical context for the Graeco-Roman sequence. During the Ramesside period the scenes are mostly in the inner courts of temples - and pretty much every temple has these scenes. The Introduction scene tends to be further in or on door lintels. It doesn't seem to matter which register of the wall the scenes are placed on, and the sequence doesn't always have all the scenes nor are they necessarily in the same order each time. There are also variations in the composition. One trend that does carry across all the Ramesside scenes is that the Pharaoh has a wig on (except one example where he has the Blue Crown on). Later, during the 25th Dynasty there is a bit of a shift towards uniformity in composition.

In summary the pre-Ptolemaic Period purification scenes are a bit all over the place, both literally and figuratively. There is variation in placement, there is variation in composition and there is variation in sequence.



Coronation Scene at Philae Temple, Photo by John Patterson

Ivanov now moved on to an overview of Ptolemaic and Roman examples of purification scenes: which can be summed up as "everything is different to before". The scenes are placed in the outer areas of temples, and in corresponding places in different temples. They are often placed in a symmetrical fashion, and are often associated with doorways. Most of them are found on the screen wall of a temple's hypostyle hall, but he thinks this may be an artefact of survival and that if there were more intact pylons then we'd see more of these scenes on pylons. The sequence is confined to the first register on a wall, with a single example that's not. The scenes are always found in sequence with all present and no extra scenes. (Except that the Royal Exit scene also shows up in another context but it's clear that this is two distinct uses of a common motif.)

The composition is also restricted. The actors and props are always the same in each scene and even the position of the actors is the same. The Royal Exit scene shows the most variation, particularly in the number of standards, and it may contain more extra elements than other scenes. In the Purification scene the Pharaoh always wears a skull cap and has simple clothing (unlike in the preceding scene). The gods in this scene are always standing on podiums to pour the water over the Pharaoh. In the Coronation scene the Pharaoh wears the Double Crown. In the Introduction scene there may be some variation in the welcoming committee - for instance in Philae it's Isis, not a god (as she's the patron deity of the temple). In other temples the patron deity is often accompanied by a consort deity.

All later Ptolemaic Period and Roman Period temples follow this format. Earlier Ptolemaic temples, such as parts of Philae don't entirely match the convention. Using this, Ivanov has been able to narrow down the period when the format was defined to after the Hypostyle Hall at Philae was built, and before the temple at Edfu was built. There were also other changes in temple decoration around this time, so possibly the standardisation of Purification sequences was part of a wider change. Decisions about this sort of thing would be taken at a Synod of priests, and Ivanov has narrowed it down to a specific one that took place in 238BCE.

Despite this uniform format there are still some divergences in different temples. Ivanov divided these into two types, sanctioned variations and true deviations. The first of these are variations that he saw as "confirming the rule" - he gave an example of the number of standards present in the Royal Exit scene. This varies, but in a rule-bound fashion and dependent on where in the temple the scene is placed.

True deviations are forced by circumstance, and Ivanov gave us several examples of different types of these. For instance at Esna there are two sequences in the Hypostyle Hall which have missing scenes. The actors (gods) from the missing scene show up in another scene in each case, which means that the whole sequence is represented even if not present. The two sequences can also be joined up across the hall to form a single continuous sequence. Other examples include a missing scene in the sequence replaced with a doorway that offers a view of the sanctuary that fits the point of the scene. One sequence in Philae has Osiris as the deity the Pharaoh is introduced to (rather than the patron Isis) - but if you follow the line of the sequence it points towards a temple of Osiris and thus he is the appropriate deity to be honoured. In temples dedicated to Thoth, the placement of Thoth in any scene always reflects his greater importance in this context rather than slavishly following the conventional arrangement.

After our break for coffee and cake (and a brief recap: Ramesside Period = chaos; Graeco-Roman Period = sudden decisive shift to uniformity) Ivanov moved on to another more subtle way that the sequence can vary between temples. In larger temples with more than one sequence it's possible to discern common subtle differences that are down to style. He went through three examples: Edfu, Kom Ombo and Dendera. In Edfu the stylistic differences accentuate Horus as the patron deity of the temple. For instance in the Introduction scene the gods leading the Pharaoh are normally Montu and Atum but in this case they are both Horus. This means that this final scene in the sequence has several instances of Horus - there is Horus on his throne welcoming the Pharaoh, there are two Horuses leading the Pharaoh in and the Pharaoh himself is an incarnation of Horus.



Coronation Scene at Kom Ombo Temple, Photo by John Patterson

In Kom Ombo there are unusual details in the scenes. For instance the clothing is more complicated - e.g. 5 uraeae on the skirt of the Pharaoh rather than plain as is standard in the Graeco-Roman Period. There are other things like vultures added to the Purification scene or four deities in the Coronation scene. These sorts of details are extremely unusual in the Graeco-Roman Period but show up in older examples, so it looks like the style at Kom Ombo was to incorporate archaic features into the format (or to "keep it Old School" as Ivanov put it!).

At Dendera the differences are also in the details but in a different style to those at Kom Ombo. Here the details are innovations rather than looking back to the past. For instance one of the standards in the Royal Exit scene is a specifically local symbol. In the Purification scene the gesture the pourers are making is different, plus there is an addition of a hand hieroglyph at the mouth of the jar (and he returned to this later in the talk).

Having established that there was a standard Graeco-Roman format and told us about the sorts of variation seen Ivanov now moved out to a more meta-level to talk about how to interpret the sequence as a whole. So far throughout the talk he'd used the standard interpretation - the sequence shows the Pharaoh coming from the palace into the temple and then into the inner sanctuary where the god is. But there is another way to look at it, and in order to explain this he had to go through the common features of the format in more detail. He first reminded us that even though the sequence isn't isolated from the rest of the decoration it does form its own unit. There is never any scene behind the Royal Exit scene, but the Introduction scene can be followed by a variety of different scenes with no common theme to them. The scenes always appear together and in the same order.

The Royal Exit scene always has the palace at the back of the Pharaoh and standards in front of him. At the front of the scene leading the Pharaoh is the priest Imutef, shown at a much smaller scale than the Pharaoh. The Pharaoh is largest in the scene and wears a large crown and fancy clothes, there may also be Osirian imagery. This scene shows the most variation between and within temples.

The Purification scene is next and is the most austere of the sequence. The Pharaoh wears simple clothes and a skull cap. He doesn't seem to be the tallest in the scene as not only is he not wearing a tall crown but also the two gods are standing on podiums. These gods are always Thoth and Horus, and the scene as a whole is reminiscent of the birth of the sun. Pharaoh seems to be partway between moving from Thoth (night associated) to Horus (day associated). So this scene is a birth.

Next is the Coronation scene which is a bit more complex than the Purification scene. Pharaoh is now standing on a level with the deities. The two goddesses are always the goddesses of the Two Lands (Nekhbet for Upper Egypt and Wadjet for Lower Egypt). They sometimes are shown with naked breasts, and the scene is intimate in a mother/son sort of way - the breasts are for breastfeeding rather than with sexual connotations.

The final scene, the Introduction, moves to a higher level of complexity again. The Pharaoh is now both on a level with the deities and is wearing a fancy crown that makes him appear taller still. He is holding the hands of two male deities rather than being within the embrace of two female deities. These old deities (Montu and Atum) are being presented as in a paternal relationship with the Pharaoh. And the Pharaoh is being led to the patron deity in the symbolic West of the scene.

So the alternative reading doesn't start with the Royal Exit scene, instead it begins at the simplest point. The Purification scene is the morning, and the birth of the Pharaoh. He moves from there to the Coronation which is more complicated, and he is like a child with his wet-nurses. Next he is an adult and being guided by his fathers the gods in the Introduction scene. After he passes to the West he moves to the Royal Exit scene where he is in the afterlife and a deity himself with no need for guidance. Now instead of ending, the sequence loops and the Pharaoh is being led into the Purification scene to be reborn once more. This provides the temple an ever present Pharaoh being eternally reborn. The theme of rejuvenation is not new to the Graeco-Roman temples - for instance in Seti I's temple at Abydos there is a sequence of scenes that show the Pharaoh being progressively rejuvenated. But there is a difference in accent - in Graeco-Roman times the rejuvenation is cyclical, before that it is linear.

Ivanov finished up his talk by giving a couple of examples where knowing how this sequence functions in temple spaces can help give answers to other questions in Egyptology. His first example was about trying to reconstruct plan of the temple of Osiris at Bigeh. This is one of the temples that was not saved from flooding when the Aswan Dam was built so these days it's a bit submerged and also overgrown. The reliefs were published in 1915 so there is some record of what is now inaccessible. In 2015 someone identified part of the published decoration as a Coronation scene. The relief isn't complete, but he has been able to re-identify it as a Purification scene because the feet of the deities are on podiums. All that's left of the temple is two bits of wall with a Royal Exit scene and this Purification scene but by comparing the placement to what he knows about the conventions of the sequence he's been able to propose a plan for the temple walls.

His other example he referred to as "weighing in on linguistics". There is a phrase, per-duat, which is often translated as House of Adoration. It has however been recently proposed that it should instead be House of Morning. I'm not sure I entirely followed Ivanov's explanation but I think the key point was that the hand gestures of the deities pouring water in the Purification scene (which is morning associated) go together with the vase to indicate that the gods are worshipping or adoring the Pharaoh. In the Dendera scenes the

hand gestures are different - they are offering instead of adoring - but the little extra hands at the mouths of the vase are doing the adoring gesture. So Ivanov thinks that the Egyptians saw the adoration aspect of this scene as crucial - it needed to be represented even when the hands of the deities were modified. And so he thinks that the phrase per-duat shouldn't been seen as having to be one or other of the two meanings, but instead it means both House of Morning and House of Adoration.

This was a really fascinating talk, and I have added purification sequences to my mental list of "things to look out for in Egyptian temples". I found it particularly interesting how the sequence can be read in two different ways - a linear description of a journey or an eternal cycle of birth and re-birth.