

***ʿ3btet*  (The East) and *ʿmntet*  (The West) in the Ancient Egyptian
Civilization**

A Linguistic, Artistic and Religious Study

• Introduction

The Nile valley is the lifeline between two of the deserts (the eastern and the western deserts), The eastern desert was parched red land of which the name was applied to the whole Egyptian territory. The red land was never a void and the emergence of the Egyptian civilization in the Nile valley was based on both the human experience and the cultural roots of the diverse prehistoric adaptations to the desert.¹

Egypt was naturally bounded by desert regions from three points as there were the symmetrical eastern and western deserts in addition to the southern Nubian Desert. These regions had their own protective deities.

These gods and goddesses had a crucial role as desert regions were occupied by the mines, the workers who work in the desert so as to earn their living and needed to be protected, in addition to the great role in protecting the Egyptian cosmic order so as not to allow the infiltration of any of the chaotic elements. Therefore, these divinities were regarded in one of their aspects as the Protective gods and goddesses of the border regions.

Borders and desert regions were of great importance for the ancient Egyptians, they were a source of fear as they were not inhabited and simultaneously bordered the Egyptian territories to prevent naturally the foreign infiltration into the land of *M3ʿt* by the chaotic powers referred to as the powers of *isfet* represented in the foreign neighboring countries Hence, the importance of protecting these regions.

This protection was practiced through some appointed divinities whose role was to control, defend and protect these vast deserts. Their main domain was mainly concentrated in the Egyptian two vast eastern and western deserts; these divinities were sometimes distributed according to the Egyptian symmetry such as “Imntet and Iabtet”, “Ha” and his counterpart “Soped”.

Numerous gods and goddesses were associated with the east either for their role in protecting the eastern borders such as the god Soped (Guardian of the eastern mountains) and the goddess Iabtet (Goddess of the east) and other gods and goddesses or for their relation with the eastern foreign countries such as the god “Min” worshiped as a protective god of the tribes passing through the eastern desert. However, Tombs were usually scattered on the western desert edge of Egypt as the ancient Egyptians believed that the west is the realm of the dead on the opposite side of the east or the living world.

The Ancient Egyptian belief in resurrection and life after death led to the appearance of numerous gods and goddesses associated with the necropolis and the protection of the dead thus, they were associated with the west and they were called gods and goddesses of the necropolis such as Osiris who was referred to as the god of the afterlife, the king of the dead and the foremost of the westerners.

Anubis as well was a god of the west represented as a desert dwelling animal and worshiped to avoid his evil power. He was considered to be the guardian of the necropolis or the west.

¹ Butzer, K. A. “Desert Environment”, In Donald B. Redford, The Oxford encyclopedia of Ancient Egypt, Vol. 1, p.p. 385 – 386

Moreover, a number of the Egyptian famous and mysterious deities that appeared in the books of the afterlife were also associated with the west that will be discussed in details in the following pages.¹

The Four Cardinal Points in Ancient Egypt

The Ancient Egyptians differentiated between the four cardinal points in their texts and the adjectives derived from these cardinal points that should be mentioned so as to introduce for the study that deals with both the symbols of the east ( *ʿ3bet*) and the west ( *ʿimntt*).

The Ancient Egyptians used different terms to refer to the four cardinal points. Moreover, they indicated the people according to the geographical location of their countries on the map of the ancient world as follow:

-  *mḥtt* (The North) or  *mḥt* that referred to the Delta Marshes (as the northern part of the Egyptian territories)² of which the people who live in the northern parts of the world were referred to as  ,  *mḥtyw*³ that became later on  *mḥty* "The Northerner" and the plural form  ,  and  *mḥtyw* (The Northerners).⁴

-  *rsy* (The South) and The people living southwards the Egyptian borders were referred to as  ,  ,  *rsyw*⁵ or  *rstyw* indicating (The Southerners).⁶

-  , var.  *imntt* (The West)⁷ of which the westerners were usually referred to as  ,  ,  *imntyw*.⁸

-  *ʿ3bet*⁹ ,  , var.  *ʿ3btt* that referred to (The East) of which the inhabitants of the eastern regions bordering the Egyptian frontiers were called  *ʿ3btyw*.¹⁰

¹ عبد الحلیم نور الدین، *الديانة المصرية القديمة (المعبودات)*، ج. 1 ، الطبعة الأولى، القاهرة، 2009 ، ص. 18 – 19

² Faulkner, R. O. Faulkner, R. O. *A Concise Dictionary of Middle Egyptian*, Oxford, 1964, p. 114

³ Faulkner, R. O. *Ibid*, p. 114

⁴ Lesko, L. *A Dictionary of Late Egyptian*, Vol. I, USA, 1982, p. 200 ; Wb. II, 126

⁵ Faulkner, R. O. *Op Cit*, p. 153

⁶ Lesko, L. *Op Cit*, P.p. 277 – 278; Wb. II, 452

⁷ Faulkner, R. O. *Op Cit*, p. 21

⁸ Lesko, L. *Op Cit*, P. 30; Wb. I, 85 – 87

⁹ Faulkner, R. O. *Op Cit*, p. 8

¹⁰ Lesko. L. *Op cit*, p. 14; Wb. I, 31

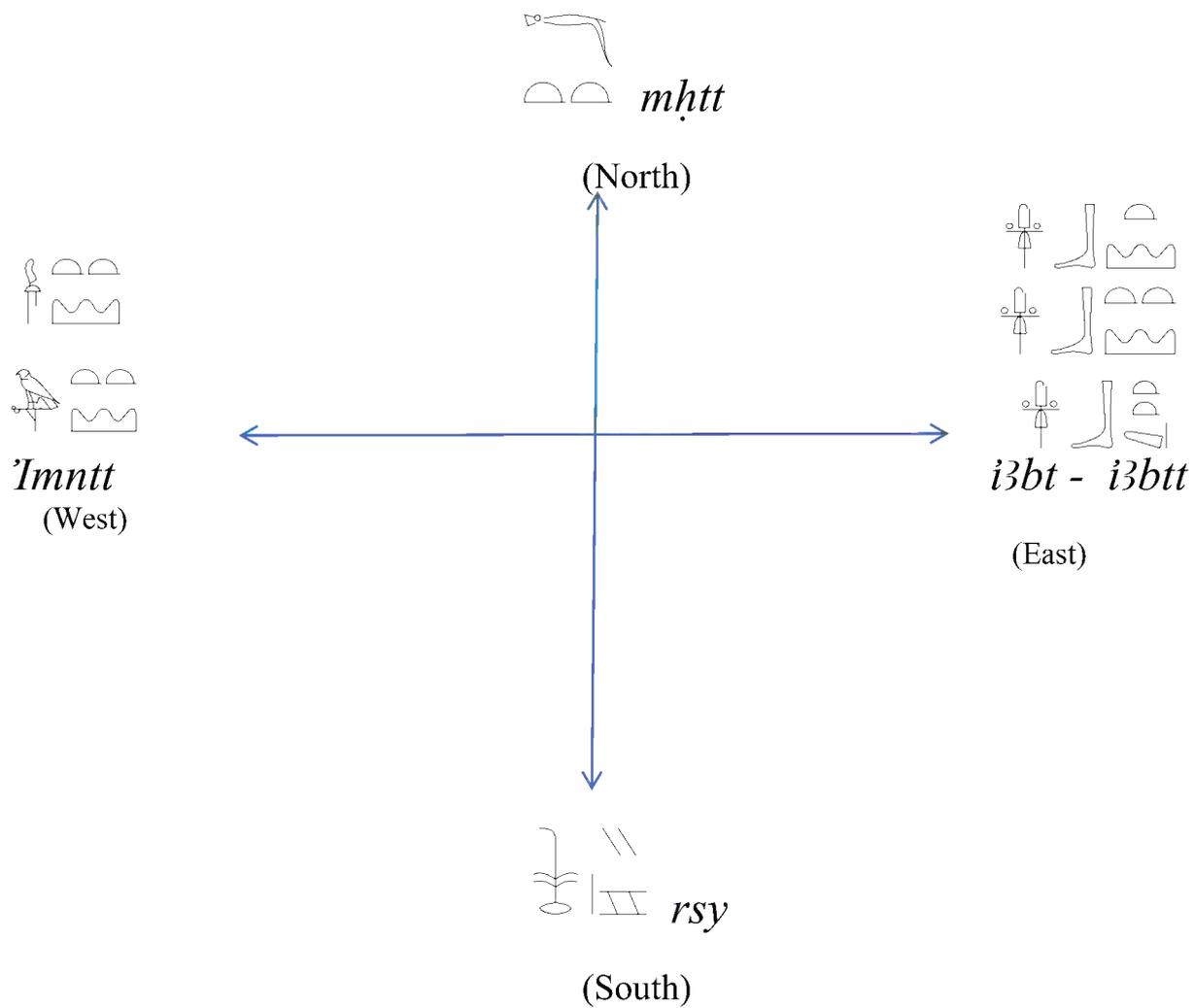


Fig. 1

The Four Cardinal Points in the Ancient Egyptian Language

After,

mḥtt, Wb. II, 126

rsy, Wb. II, 452

i3btet, Wb. I, 31 – *Imntet*, Wb. I, 85 – 87

Some scholars stated that the eastern and the western borders of the River Nile represented the two lands that were previously referred to as the north and the south and that both the eastern and the western boundaries of the Nile can be referred to as the red and the black land according to the nature of their soil, as the red land is most likely to have been the physically red land of Heliopolis area which must have been considered as unique by the ancient people to merit such an absolute term. In fact there is no other area of red soil in any way comparable to this. This red land is geographically situated in the east. ¹

The black land however corresponds to the area of Memphis on the lower - lying west bank where the black silt of the Nile mingled profusely with the mud brick structures of the ancient city.

It was also suggested that the two banks of the Nile were at times hostile territories because they hosted foreigners who needed to be brought into submission and to be kept in check by constant effort on the part of the Egyptian ruler.

Going forth from the point that from the very beginning of the Egyptian history on the mace head of king scorpion hung lapwings and bows (afterwards, the Nine Bows) representing two different types of defeated enemies were stylized under standards portraying Seth and Horus, the motifs that were repeated along the Ancient Egyptian history on the monuments as a symbol of the victory of the king over his enemies till the Greco – Roman period.

It can be assumed that the bird was used in some interpretation as a symbol of the west as the rekhyt bird might have represented a group of settled foreigners who did not lose their identity and have not been absorbed into the population of Egypt through the ages of the Pharaonic civilization (since the Pre-dynastic Period on the Hierakonpolis mace head till at least the time of Nectanebo of the Thirtieth Dynasty) as their symbolism lasted exactly in the same way throughout all this period, our evidence for this idea about the symbolism of the Rekhyt bird comes from the scene depicted on the walls of the temple of Amun at Karnak representing the King Thutmose III smiting his enemies while, the goddess (Imntet) of the west leading some rows of prisoners to the pharaoh, she is holding in her hands the cords that tie these prisoners to each other and an ankh sign, it is clear that the Rekhyt bird is tied to the end of one of these cords in a squatting position on his nest or the basket sign for "all". ²

¹ Nibbi, A. "The Two Lands: The Black and the Red", *DE*, 22, 1992, p.p. 39 – 44

² عماد أحمد إبراهيم الصياد، تصوير فنات الطبقة الدنيا في المجتمع المصري القديم من خلال النصوص الأدبية، رسالة ماجستير غير منشورة، كلية الآداب، جامعة الإسكندرية، 2007، ص. 5

The accompanying text reads:



In .n (.i) n .k h3st nb t3š t3w nb fnhw dm3 dr hr tbwy .k

I brought you the borders of all the foreign countries, all the lands of the Fenkhu to be bound together under your sandals. ¹

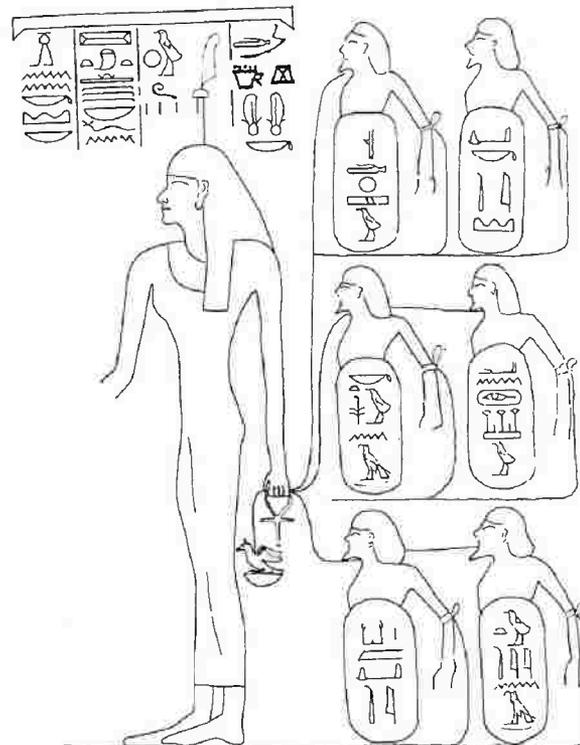


Fig. 2

(Imntet) The Goddess of the west presenting the foreign captives to the king and holding the Rekhyt bird as a symbol of the commoners, the west and the foreigners

After,

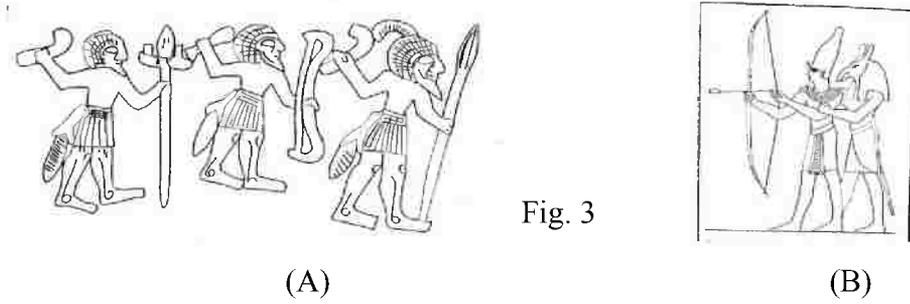
Othman, A. ***Symbols of the foreign countries in the Ancient Egyptian civilization A linguistic, archaeological and tourist study***, Unpublished Master Thesis, Faculty of Tourism and Hotel Management, Alexandria University, Alexandria, 2010. p.p. 175 – 176;
 Nibbi, A. ***Lapwing and Libyans in Ancient Egypt***, DE publications, oxford, 1986, p. 28, fig. 18

¹ Othman, A. ***Symbols of the foreign countries in the Ancient Egyptian civilization A linguistic, archaeological and tourist study***, Unpublished Master Thesis, Faculty of Tourism and Hotel Management, Alexandria University, Alexandria, 2010. p.p. 175 – 176

Moreover, it was stated that the bow was used as a symbol of the east analyzing the existence of the (Nehsyw) people in the Ancient Egyptian depictions as they were hunters and they appeared carrying their bows. This group of people is associated with the regions located to the east of the Nile. They were associated with the mountains and deserts hence, the places that produced the copper referred to in the Semitic sources as (*nhs*) of which their name (Nehsyw) was derived referring to the color of their skin.

They were hunters or expert warriors in using the bow that accompanied them and became their symbol. Inhabiting the east side of the Nile, they formed a part of the Egyptian army (The Medjay). In the Old Kingdom story of Weni, the king had given Weni an army composed of Nehseyw to attack the rebellion (sand dwellers) who were the nomads living in the desert extending between Cairo and Suez.¹

Thus, the bow was associated with the “Nehsyw” people who must be associated with the area east of the Nile as one of the representations of the god Seth, god of the red lands of the east, represented him teaching Thutmose III how to shoot the bow.² That was also indicated on the archaic slate palette preserved in the Louvre museum (E. 11254) of the group of hunters holding some symbols of which both the spear, the throw stick, the bow and the sign Iabtet for the east.³



A. Archaic hunters holding both the bow and the sign iabtt of the east

After,

محمد عبد الحليم، الاتجاهات واستخداماتها في مصر القديمة حتى نهاية عصر الدولة الحديثة، رسالة دكتوراة غير منشورة، كلية الآثار، جامعة القاهرة، القاهرة، 2009، ص. 3، شكل 4

B. The god Seth of the eastern desert while teaching Thutmose III how to use the bow

After, Nibbi, A. “Lapwings and Bow Weapons as alternative symbols of west and east in Ancient Egypt”, in Nibbi, A. **Some Geographical Notes on Ancient Egypt: A Selection of Published Papers, 1975 – 1997**, DE, 3, 1997, p. 418, fig. 3

¹ Nibbi, A. “Lapwings and Bow Weapons as alternative symbols of west and east in Ancient Egypt”, in **DE**, 3, 1997, p.p. 412 – 414
² Nibbi, A. *Ibid*, p. 415
³ Fischer, H. G. **Egyptian Studies**, Vol. III, Varia Nova, New York, 1996, fig. 17