

A Note on the Old Kingdom *wḏ-nsw* Heading

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Introduction

Our research aims at reviewing the graphic form of royal decree headings as they appeared in Old Kingdom documents to establish whether the different forms of *wḏ-nsw* writings had a grammatical or a rhetorical meaning, in addition to spatial and aesthetic values. For this purpose, we will take all the royal decrees evidenced for the Old Kingdom into consideration. We will also examine later New Kingdom documents to establish a posterior chronological term to support our conclusion.


The term *wḏ-nsw*, which we usually translate as ‘royal decree’, in ancient Egyptian defined every word proceeding from the king.¹ As an expression of the royal will, the words automatically became orders. More specifically, the term did not only mean the king’s orders in a modern sense but also included the letters coming from him or from his chancellery. Besides, the term *wḏ* followed by the determinative  also indicated the stela where the text was inscribed.

According to Goedicke,² *wḏ* and its derived words showed an absolute decision intended to endure in time, in contrast with *ḥw* expressing creative words, and with *ḥnt* that means ‘decision, instruction’.

The first evidence of a decree dates back to 4th dynasty King Shepseskaf and concerned the establishing of funerary offerings for Mykerinos pyramid in Giza. Decrees were generally written on papyrus rolls: one copy was sent to the person or the institution concerned, while another was kept in the archives of the royal palace. The text was then copied onto

a stela and published by being placed at the temple entrance. In most cases, the stelae are accurate copies of the originals on papyri. The latter, on the contrary, are very rare: examples of these are the papyri found in Reneferef’s temple at Abusir.³ These documents were studied by P. Posener-Krieger and include some fragmentary *wḏw-nsw* headings.

The *wḏ-nsw* Inversion

A feature of decree copies on stone which draws the attention of scholars is the inversion of the group *wḏ-nsw* in relation to the writing direction of the other signs. This inversion has been interpreted in several different ways: one of the first Egyptologists who concentrated on this aspect of the *wḏ-nsw* was Fischer. He devoted a number of works to the orientation of hieroglyphs and to the function of different orientations in the inscriptions.⁴ Fischer holds that the inversion may have been used to introduce a direct quotation (e.g. with the group  or a new discourse.⁵ The inversion would have been used to orientate the speaker/reader towards the direct quotation. In the case of *wḏ-nsw*, the target of the message was the recipient and the word *wḏ* was inverted towards him. The Old Kingdom *wḏw-nsw* were generally addressed to officials or to a category of personnel and so the group was written in the opposite direction of their titles and names. From the Middle Kingdom onwards, the reversal of the *wḏ-nsw* group disappeared and the dative preposition *n* was found to introduce the addressee’s titles and name. Fischer therefore thinks that the inversion in the Old

Kingdom documents conveyed the idea of dative which in later periods was given by the preposition *n*⁶. The sequence of the text is as follows: speaker (*nsw*, which is transposed for honorific distinction), discourse (*wḏ*), addressee (*sš nsw, mr*, etc.).

Goedicke on the contrary states⁷ that the *wḏ-nsw* form in Old Kingdom decrees was a verbal not a nominal group (*sḏm.f*) because the determinative of the abstract $\overline{\text{𓏏}}$ is missing. He backs his affirmation by making reference to the tomb inscriptions formulated as addresses to the visitors where the verb is reversed to face the person addressed.

Blumenthal, as Fischer, affirms that the reversal of the group *wḏ-nsw* was made to replace the preposition *n* according to the rebus principle⁸. The lack of a determinative in the word *wḏ* is explained because it is an abbreviated writing form appearing doubtlessly as a nominal form in the Old Kingdom⁹

Helck¹⁰ in his work on official Old Kingdom acts states that the irregular writing of the group *wḏ-nsw* linked the name of the addressee in the heading to the vertical column where the Horus name was inscribed, as they were written in the same direction. The word *wḏ* opposed to the direction of the rest of the inscription underlined that the order came from the Horus.

List of cases

Old Kingdom and First Intermediate Period

We have twenty-three complete royal decrees for this period. The heading is missing from eight of them, precisely:

- 1- Shepseskaf's decree from Giza (4th Dynasty) (SHEPSESKAF, according to Goedicke's abbreviations.¹¹)
- 2- Pepi I's decree from Coptos (6th Dynasty) (Coptos A);

- 3- Pepi II's second decree from the temple of Min at Coptos 13 (6th Dynasty, as the following ones) (Coptos C);
- 4- Pepi II's decree to set up a statue and the related foundation (Coptos G);
- 5- Decree by successor of Pepi II (6th Dynasty);
- 6- Neferkauhor's decree to the vizier Shemai (8th Dynasty as those below - Coptos I);
- 7- Neferkauhor's decree to Idy's brother (Coptos Q);
- 8- Neferkauhor's decree to Shemai's wife Nebet (Coptos J).

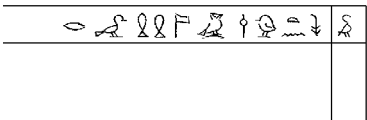

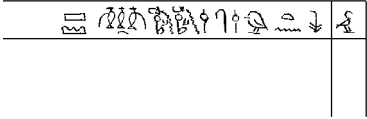
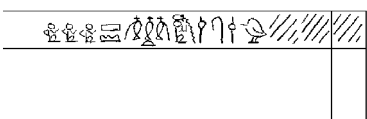
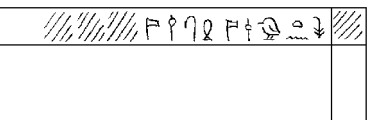
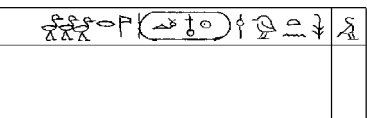
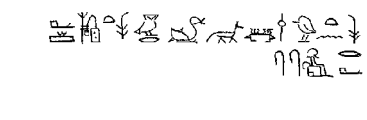
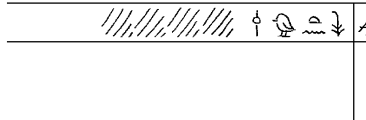
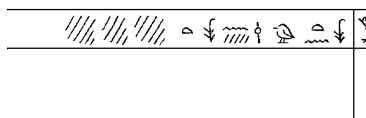
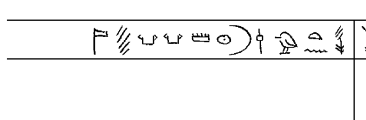
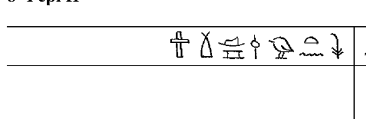

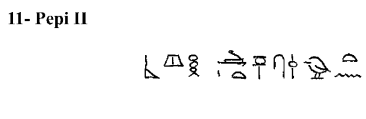

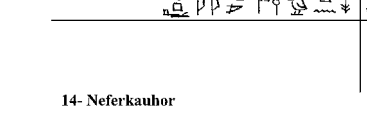
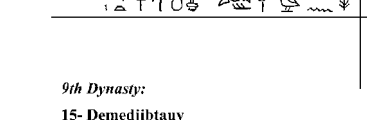
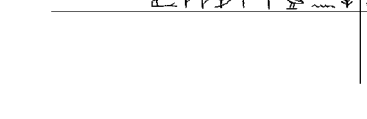
Most of these documents come from Coptos where they were found in the foundations of Min temple. They were initially put out on the external walls of the temple and were not destroyed but buried in the foundations of the building when they became useless and outdated.

The heading is missing from above mentioned decrees because of gaps in the first lines of the text, except for Pepi I's decree where the text is intact but there is no *wḏ-nsw* form.



Old Kingdom documents which presents the fixed *wḏ-nsw* form mentioned in the following tables are:

- 1- Neferirkare's decree from Abydos (5th Dynasty - NEFERIRKARE)
- 2- Isesi's decree to the vizier Senedjemib (5th Dynasty)
- 3- Isesi's decrees from Raneferef's temple at Abusir (A-B-C)
- 4- Isesi's decree to the vizier Rashepses from Saqqara
- 5- Teti's decree (6th Dynasty - TETI);
- 6- Pepi I's decree from Dahshur (6th Dynasty)
- 7- Pepi I's decree from Giza (6th Dynasty)
- 8- Pepi II's decree from the Dakhla oasis

- 9- Pepi II's first decree from the temple of Min at Coptos (Coptos B);
- 10- Pepi II's decree for the 'Min strenghtens Neferkare' foundation (Coptos D)
- 11- Pepi II's decree to the chief-caravan Herkhuf
- 12- Neferkauhor's decree to Idy (8th Dynasty Coptos O)
- 13- Neferkauhor's decree for the funerary cult of the vizier Shemai and his wife Nebet (Coptos K);
- 14- Neferkauhor's decree for the land-property of his foundation (Coptos L);
- 15- Demedjibtauy's decree (9th Dynasty - R Coptos).

<p>5th Dynasty:</p> <p>1- Neferirkare</p> <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 2px; margin-bottom: 10px;">  </div> <p>2- Isesi</p> <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 2px; margin-bottom: 10px;">  </div> <p>3- Isesi (from Abusir)</p> <p>A.</p> <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 2px; margin-bottom: 10px;">  </div> <p>B.</p> <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 2px; margin-bottom: 10px;">  </div> <p>C.</p> <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 2px; margin-bottom: 10px;">  </div> <p>D.</p> <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 2px; margin-bottom: 10px;">  </div> <p>4- Isesi</p> <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 2px;">  </div>	<p>6th Dynasty:</p> <p>5- Teti</p> <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 2px; margin-bottom: 10px;">  </div> <p>6- Pepi I</p> <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 2px; margin-bottom: 10px;">  </div> <p>7- Pepi II</p> <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 2px; margin-bottom: 10px;">  </div> <p>8- Pepi II</p> <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 2px; margin-bottom: 10px;">  </div> <p>9- Pepi II</p> <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 2px; margin-bottom: 10px;">  </div> <p>10- Pepi II</p> <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 2px; margin-bottom: 10px;">  </div> <p>11- Pepi II</p> <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 2px;">  </div>	<p>8th Dynasty:</p> <p>12- Neferkauhor</p> <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 2px; margin-bottom: 10px;">  </div> <p>13- Neferkauhor</p> <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 2px; margin-bottom: 10px;">  </div> <p>14- Neferkauhor</p> <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 2px; margin-bottom: 10px;">  </div> <p>9th Dynasty:</p> <p>15- Demedjibtauy</p> <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 2px;">  </div>
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The papyri from Gebelein, recently published by Demichelis¹² on the basis of the work of P. Posener-Krièger, are dated to the 4th Dynasty by Posener-Krièger and do not contain royal decrees.

In most cases the expression *wḏ-nsw* is written all in the same direction, i.e.  following an orientation opposing to that of the whole text. The only exceptions are Pepi I's act from Dahshur and Pepi II's two decrees, the first decree from the temple of Min at Coptos and the letter to Herkhuf, respectively. Probably also Pepi II's decree from Giza, his second decree from the temple of Min at Coptos and his decree for the 'Min strengthens Neferkare' foundation must have presented the same form, i.e. , but we cannot be certain since the first line is partly lost.

The feminine form *wḏ.t* appears in Old Kingdom private texts to mean an order or a decision proceeding from an official, especially concerning his funerary cult.¹³

Middle Kingdom and Second Intermediate Period

Royal decrees during the Middle Kingdom and the Second Intermediate Period bear the *wḏ-nsw* heading like the Old Kingdom edicts, but the writing in some cases differs from the earlier form. We have eight acts dating to this time: in one - Neferhotep's decree (12th Dynasty) - the heading has not been preserved, while it is definitely missing from another, i.e. Sobekhotep IV's edict (13th Dynasty).

In the other documents, the  group always follows the orientation of the remainder of the text but in three cases the word *nsw* is followed by the determinative of royalty, i.e.,

- a. Sesostris I's decree from the Story of Sinuhe (11th Dynasty);
- b. Two decrees by an unknown king to the vizier Ankhu (12th Dynasty);
- c. Nubkheperra Antef V's decree (17th Dynasty).

As for the other texts (the previously mentioned two decrees by Sesostri III), the term *wḏ-nsw* is written in the same way as in the Old Kingdom but with regular orientation.


New Kingdom

With regard to the New Kingdom, we have sixteen decrees, eight of which dating back to the 18th Dynasty, four to the 19th and four to the 20th Dynasties.

For the 18th Dynasty, the heading is present only in the queen Ahhotep's decree, in Thutmose III's for the public welfare and in Thutmose I's to the viceroy of Kush. In other decrees - namely Thutmose IV's from a Theban tomb, Amenhotep III's, Tutankhamon's to the Chief-treasurer Maya and Horemheb's - the *wḏ-nsw* heading is no longer used and in one case only is replaced by the expression 'decree issued in the majesty of the Palace'.

We stress that in these edicts the word for decree is *wḏ.t*, feminine, and not *wḏ*, masculine, as presumed to be in the preceding periods.

In the 19th dynasty decrees, the heading *wḏ-nsw* appears only once and precisely in the text of Sethi II's act to an official in the oasis. In all the other cases, the heading is missing and only in Sethi I's decree from Nauri is replaced by the same expression as above.

The sentence 'decree issued in the majesty of the Palace' is also found in Ramses III's edict. The *wḏ-nsw* heading is missing from the decrees mentioned in the Harris Papyrus no. 1, while in the two last documents, Ramses IX's decree to the high priest of Amon Ramsesnakht and Ramses XI's to the viceroy of Kush Panhesy, the expression *wḏ-nsw* occurs like in Old Kingdom documents but in both cases the word *nsw* is completed by the determinative of Horus on perch .

Conclusions

In conclusion, the term *wḏ-nsw* is open to many definitions, all relating to king's will, whether expressed in a letter or in another kind of text. The Horus name is not found in Old Kingdom king's letters to private persons and therefore the text does not show the opposition between the two signs *Hr* and *nsw*, the first one written leftwards and the latter rightwards; this on the contrary occurs in most official documents addressed to temple staff or in texts which do not have the letter form. This fact can stand for a distinction between the two kinds of royal documents, the letter and the decree. One word *wḏ* was used by ancient Egyptians for both that in our modern mentality belong to two different spheres. While a king's letter is called a *wḏ*, 'command', a private person's letter is said *mḏḏ.t*, 'document', or *sš*, 'writing'.

'The social difference between the king and his officials is thus encoded in the very terms used to name their communication to one another. When the king writes them, it is a command. When they write him, it is a letter.'¹⁴

But what is the main difference between the terms *Hr* and *nsw*, both meaning the king? Is there a specific reason why they are put near each other but written in opposite directions?

The Horus name identifies the king with the hawk god Horus, the mythic model for every Egyptian king, son and heir of the god *R^c*. It was generally inscribed in the façade of a building forming a whole, called *serekh*, that symbolized the royal palace seen simultaneously in plan and in elevation.¹⁵ From the early periods, the *serekh* was the visualization of the pharaoh's authority over the land.¹⁶

The root *srh* was firstly attested in the New Kingdom but is certainly older. It cannot be said if the term *Hr* in the palace (*ḥ*) should be read as *Hr-ḥ*, 'Horus of the Palace' or if the building was

only a frame for the royal name, like the cartouche in later inscriptions. The hawk often wore different crowns as early as the Old Kingdom: the first attested Protodynastic kings were named after dangerous animals (scorpion, cobra, silurus) or particular fighting king qualities (protecting, warrior, stretching the bow).¹⁷ *Srh* means 'glory, celebrity', 'throne', 'monument', and, as a verb, is the causative of *rh*, 'let to know, inform'. Therefore, the Horus name applies to the king as the official embodiment of power and focuses on his institutional and physical location within the royal palace. On the contrary, from the Old Kingdom, *nsw* was the usual designation of the king and was originally combined in union with the term *bity* as one of the five royal names. The title *nsw bity* reflects the duality pervading the Egyptian way of conceiving world and order in nature. The divine world was also submitted to this dualistic order in which either member of a couple was essential to complete the whole. During the Predynastic age, the first reading of the group must have been *swty* $\left\{ \begin{array}{c} \text{Ⲡ} \\ \text{Ⲛ} \end{array} \right.$, meaning 'who belongs to *swt*-plant'. The writing, already evidenced since the beginning of the Old Kingdom, was interpreted by Sethe¹⁸ as *n(y)-swt*, 'belonging to the *swt*-plant', i.e. as a synonym of the older form *swty*.¹⁹ The traditional etymology *ny-sw.t*, as 'the one who belongs to the *swt*-plant', has been put in question,²⁰ and its origin has recently been connected with a Berber root *n-z*, *n-z-j*, meaning 'the first, the elder'.²¹

The term *nsw* (usually written without the king's name) occurs for the most abstract designation of the office.

'It was the *nswt* that was active in legal situations, official documents, certain decrees, specific events, and endowments'²².

In our documents, the word *wḏ* links the two royal definitions: *nsw* (as a part of the fixed expression *wḏ-nsw*) and *Hr* (as an action coming from man

embodying the official power). The sign *nsw* generally follows the inversion of the whole group *wḏ* marking the beginning of the addressees' titles and names and replacing the dative *n*; however it can sometimes follow the same direction as the Horus-sign exactly because the relation between the two concepts *nsw* and *Hr* indicates the same entity.

We suggest that *t* can be related to the group *wḏ-nsw* (to be read *wḏ.t nsw*) and can refer to a relative form of the verb *wḏ*, whose subjects are both *nsw* and *Hr*. In this case, it should be translated 'what is commanded by the king, the Horus N.' This may be true also for the form *wḏ.t* found in Old Kingdom private documents and in the previously mentioned New Kingdom royal decrees.

The signs *t* and *n* could be part both of verb *wḏ.t* and of word *nsw* and this would explain the writing of sign *sw* in the same directions as *Hr*.²³

Endnotes

- 1- P. Vernus, 'Les décrets royaux (*wḏ-nsw*), *l'énoncé d'auctoritas comme genre*.' in S. Schoske (ed.) *Akten des Vierten Internationalen Ägyptologen Kongresses München*, IV (Hamburg, 1991), 245-246.
- 2- H. Goedicke, 'Befehl' *LÄ I* (Wiesbaden, 1975), 678.
- 3- Posener-Kriéger, 'Décrets envoyés au temple funéraire de Rêneferet', in *Mélanges Gamal ed-Din Mokhtar*, *BdE 97/1-2* (1985), 'Old Kingdom Papyri: External Features. in M.L. Posener-Kriéger Bierbrier (ed.) *Papyrus: Structure and Usage*, *BM Occasional Papers 60* (1986), pl. 9,
- 4- H. G. Fischer, 'L'orientation des textes: Textes et langages de l'Égypte pharaonique' in S. Sauneron (ed.) *Cent cinquante années de recherches 1822-1972*, *BdE 64/1* (Cairo, 1972), 21-23 Fischer, *Egyptian Studies II: The Orientation of Hieroglyphs*, (New York, 1977), Fischer, *L'écriture et l'art de l'Égypte ancienne*, (Paris, 1986), 51-93, pls. 5-16
- 5- Instructions for the funerary cult in Nikaankh's (5th dynasty) and Upemneferet's (6th dynasty) tombs at Giza, Fischer, *Egyptian Studies II*, 49.
- 6- Fischer, *Egyptian Studies II*, 58
- 7- Goedicke, 'Diplomatical Studies in the Old Kingdom.' *JARCE 3* (1964), 31-4, Goedicke, 'Die Stellung des Königs im Alten Reich.', *ÄgAbb 2* (1960)10-1.
- 8- E. Blumenthal, 'Befehl des Königs, in den königlichen Rechtsurkunden des Alten Reiches,' *ZÄS 100* (1974), 72-76.
- 9- K. Sethe. 'Das Wort für König von Oberägypten.', *ZÄS 49* (1911), 15-34. Sethe. *Urkunden des Alten Reiches. Urkunden des ägyptischen Altertums*, 1, (Leipzig, 1933) 171:1,5-10; 208:4; 278:12; 281:6; 284:12).
- 10- W. Heck, 'Altägyptische Aktenkunde des 3. und 2. Jahrtausends vor Chr', *MÄS 31* (1974), 14
- 11- Goedicke, *Königliche Dokumente aus dem Alten Reich.*, *ÄgAbb 14* (1967).
- 12- Posener-Kriéger, 'I papiri di Gebelein – Scavi di G. Farina 1935', (ed.) S. Demichelis, *Studi del Museo Egizio di Torino – Gebelein I*, (Torino 2004)
- 13- cf. e.g. Nikaankh's *wḏ.t-mdw* to establish his *k3* chapel and to appoint his *k3*-priests
- 14- H.H. Hays, *wḏ: the Context of Command in the Old Kingdom.*, *GM 176* (2000), 63-76.
- 15- For a different opinion, see Wignall 1997, who considers the *srx* as the representation of 'a generic large enclosure used to perform royal ritual'(p. 103) and as 'misleading' to call it a palace. This remark does not really affect our research. In effect, Wignall draws the conclusion that the *serekh*-building, as a place for royal ritual, was 'an appropriate symbol for royal power'(p. 101).
- 16- D. P. Silverman, in D. O'Connor and D. P. Silverman (eds.) 'The Nature of Egyptian Kingship' in *Ancient Egyptian Kingship*, *PdÄ 9* (Leiden, 1995), 9-94.
- 17- J.von Beckerath, 'Handbuch der ägyptischen Königsnamen.', *MÄS 49* (1999), 7-10
- 18- Sethe. 'Das Wort für König', *ZÄS 49* (1911), 15-34.
- 19- Beckerath, 'Handbuch der ägyptischen' (1999), 15-16.
- 20- cf. discussion in T. Schneider, 'Zur Etymologie der Bezeichnung: König von Ober- und Unterägypten.' *ZÄS 120* (1993), 166-181.
- 21- Schneider, 'Zur Etymologie', (1993), 167-174.
- 22- Silverman, 'The Nature of Egyptian Kingship' (1995), 64
- 23- This idea was a subject of fruitful discussions with Prof. R. Pirelli from the University of Naples 'L'Orientale' at times of my degree thesis, alas almost seventeen years ago! I wish to mention and to thank her on this occasion.