New Symbols of Hierarchy: On the Origins of the Cartouche and Encircling Symbolism in Old Kingdom Pyramids

By David Ian Lightbody

Long before the internet, television, or newspapers were invented, people in the Ancient Near East used architectural symbols to communicate messages of power. Workers quarried and raised huge stone blocks to construct temples, palaces, ziggurats, and pyramids. In this way they elevated the status of their rulers and their gods. The building were symbols; monumental façades serving as propaganda for the hierarchies. The decoration of the buildings was iconographic and incorporated writing and pictorial scenes into ever more complex and sophisticated designs.

The earliest symbol representing the pharaoh in ancient Egypt was a stylized rectangle depicting the typical façade of a palace during that era. The symbol was known as a ‘serekh’, meaning façade in ancient Egyptian. Such motifs were used to decorate the exterior walls of palaces for the living and also monumental tombs for the dead known as ‘mastabas’. Each pharaoh would place his own name within the serekh symbol for the duration of his reign and it was no longer used to refer to him after his death.

Reconstruction of an early dynastic mastaba tomb from the Memphite Region (©Franck Monnier and Dave Lightbody, from the Haynes Manual of the Great Pyramid 2019).
During the third dynasty, however, a new symbol now known as the cartouche quite suddenly emerged and claimed a central position within the symbolic repertoire of the Old Kingdom. The cartouche remained the principal sign of the pharaoh for more than 2000 years and it was retained by him into the afterlife.

Symbols representing the pharaoh: the encircling ‘cartouche’, left, and the older palace-façade styled ‘serekh’, right, containing names of the 4th dynasty ruler Snefru (Dave Lightbody).

My new treatise entitled ‘On the Origins of the Cartouche and Encircling Symbolism in Old Kingdom Pyramids’ describes a special type of encircling symbolism that was also incorporated into the architecture of the pharaonic monuments at that time. It manifested a ritualized form of protection placed around the buildings and tomb chambers and became influential during the third dynasty. Old Kingdom texts and artworks attest to ‘circumambulation’ rituals carried out by the pharaoh and the priests.

The cartouche was directly related to the monumental encircling symbolism incorporated into the architectural designs of the Old Kingdom pyramids. After comprehensively cataloguing and studying a dataset covering the era, it was seen that an existing circular hieroglyph known as the shen-ring was brought into the artwork at the heart of Djoser’s new tomb complex, at the start of the third dynasty. The shen-ring took a prominent place in the main blue-green tiled relief panels installed in passages deep underground, which show the pharaoh running a ritual circuit around his monument. Shortly after Djoser’s reign, the first elongated form of the shen-ring incorporating the pharaoh’s name appeared. This is now known as the cartouche. To draw the cartouche, the loops of rope
forming the shen-ring were stretched out into a new ovoid form more appropriate for encircling the pharaoh's name in hieroglyphs.

The shen-ring was the symbol underlying the design of the cartouche. Its older meaning was 'to encircle', but this developed until it messaged 'unending encircling protection' for the pharaoh (Dave Lightbody).

But why did these changes occur at that time? As my research into this subject developed, an intriguing hypothesis began to emerge from the data. The reason seems to have been that by employing a new architectural motif, the pyramid, and a new iconographic symbol, the cartouche, the pharaoh sought to elevate his own status above the members of his own powerful court. Up to the start of the third dynasty, the power of the court officials had grown rapidly. These high-status individuals built prominent tombs overlooking the capital city, Memphis, from the west, and they were adorned with the palace-façade motif.

It seems that the pharaoh Djoser then sought to add an additional layer of symbolism over the existing traditions; one that was only applicable to his own family lineage, his own monuments, and his own high office. The incorporation of encircling symbolism into the principal dimensions of the new architectural form tied the pyramid and new cartouche symbols together as one. Djoser’s new monument, the Step Pyramid, was built overlooking the tombs of the officials. It was encircled with a massive palace-façade decorated wall incorporating special encircling proportions.
Depiction of a phrase from Pyramid Text PT 534 found in the entrance passage of the pyramid of Pepi I Meryre at South Saqqara saying that 'the pyramid and temple are encircled'. The text formed part of a spell or prayer of protection for the monument and represented, in textual form, what the rituals and architecture already expressed (courtesy of Dave Lightbody, Franck Monnier, and Steve Brabin).

These new encircling symbols were also associated with a third symbol, the falcon Horus. Horus was the pharaoh's own ancestral god who hailed from his family's ancient hometown of Nekhen in Upper Egypt. The pharaoh was the son of Horus, and so combining the three concepts ensured that the pyramid and cartouche were only associated with the pharaoh directly. The falcon could carry his status symbols even higher, towards the divine world in the heavens above.
A ‘cosmic panel’ containing symbols asserting the hierarchical position of the pharaoh Pepi I Meryre. Two cartouches are included; one incorporated into the name of his pyramid on the right. Horus sits on top of the older serekh symbol. The strip at the top represents the sky; the scepters on either side represent the extents of his dominion; the line at the bottom represents the earth. The text in the lower register commemorates the occasion of his first ‘sed’ jubilee festival, when the pharaoh would complete a ritual circumambulation (Dave Lightbody).

In my book I describe how the gyring flight patterns of falcons, frequently seen circling in the skies above the Nile valley’s necropolises, may have imbued or amplified this sophisticated message via a kind of natural iconic synergy. Scenes showing Horus carrying the shen-ring over the pharaoh were retained for much of pharaonic history and alluded to all of these concepts simultaneously, forging them together into one multivalent and enduring political and sacred message.
Horus carrying the shen-ring above the serekh of the pharaoh Senwosret I. From the Middle Kingdom White Chapel at Karnak (Dave Lightbody).

The new monograph is available as a printed book or as an Open Access document from Archaeopress (Dave Lightbody).
Symbolism in ancient Egyptian architecture is most conventionally considered to fall within the realm of art and art-history. Egyptologist John Baines considers that symbolism in Old Kingdom material culture is most meaningfully interpreted using concepts from the theoretical study of art and architecture. He stated that the funerary monuments in Old Kingdom Egypt were comprehensively planned as works of art, and that architecture was the core genre of artistic expression for the emerging state. This was particularly the case in the dynasties before writing became the predominant mode of communication. Egyptologist Richard Wilkinson, on the other hand, considers that little of Egyptian artwork can be considered as “art for art’s sake”, and that most artworks were conceived within a matrix of symbolism and magic. For him, ancient Egyptian artworks cannot be fully comprehended without knowledge of the underlying concepts intrinsic in their composition.

Research into ancient Egyptian monuments must, therefore, include approaches that can deal with concepts from the study of geometric art as well as magical ritual symbolism manifested in architecture. My approach to symbolic meanings suggests how this graphical repertoire functioned in harmony with the ancient Egyptian culture and its environment.

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Further reading:
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