



Grisly Trophies

Severed Hands and the Egyptian Military Reward System

Danielle Candelora

Cache of severed hands from Area F/II at Tell el-Dab'a. Photograph courtesy of Manfred Bietak.

All visitors to the massive New Kingdom (ca. 1550–1069 BCE)¹ temples in Thebes (modern Luxor; see fig. 1) are bombarded with images of the king smiting foreign enemies, expanding his imperial borders, and overseeing the spoils of war. The texts and reliefs tell us that this booty generally includes livestock, goods, weapons, and prisoners of war, but the grisliest element by far is the enormous mounds of severed hands being piled and counted before the seated king (fig. 2). Eighteenth Dynasty (ca. 1450 BCE) private tomb autobiographies of soldiers indicate that warriors would have presented these trophies as a record of their kills and were rewarded with the so-called gold of valor in a public ceremony (fig. 3).² Indeed, we even have tomb reliefs and statues of individuals commemorating their receipt of this award. Yet this military custom seems to have appeared fully realized in Egypt during Ahmose's war with the Hyksos, with few clues as to its origin (Candelora 2019c; Matić 2019: 41–42; Abdalla 2005; Stefanović 2003; Lorton 1974: 57–68). Beyond that, no archaeological evidence of this practice had been found—that is, until 2011 when the excavations at Tell el-Dab'a uncovered four pits containing the remains of sixteen severed right hands just outside a Hyksos palace.

The Tell el-Dab'a Contexts

The archaeological context of these hand-filled pits was rather unceremonious, located just outside of a Hyksos palace. Area F/II at Tell el-Dab'a was dominated in the Second Intermediate

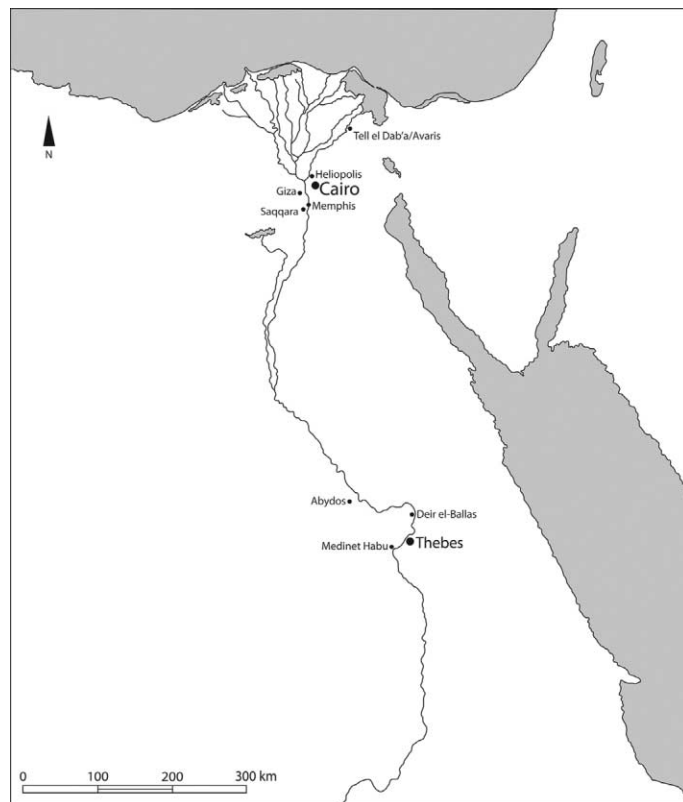


Figure 1. Map by Danielle Candelora.

period (Strata c-2 and c-1; dated by the excavators to ca. 1620–1590 BCE and 1590–1560 BCE respectively) by a sprawling palatial structure, composed of alternating buildings and courtyards.



Figure 2. Recording severed hands from a Libyan campaign at Medinet Habu Temple. Photograph by Danielle Candelora.



Figure 3. Ramose bedecked in his Gold of Valor. Photograph by Danielle Candelora.

The excavators uncovered a large entrance gate flanked by two towers, with a smaller gate or doorway into a large interior courtyard (Courtyard C) leading to the rest of the palace (Bietak, Math, and Müller 2012, 26–29; Bietak et al. 2009). According to the excavators, this particular arrangement of building elements and construction style is more in keeping with Near Eastern architectural practices, and similar palaces adorned other Middle Bronze Age capital cities

like Mari and Ebla (Bietak, Math, and Müller 2012, 28). Just inside the gateway, adjoining Courtyard C on its northwest side, is a poorly preserved broad room with a mud-brick platform constructed along the center of the back wall; the excavators have identified this area as a possible throne room (Bietak, Math, and Müller 2012: 29). To the northeast of the gate stood an open space that served as siloed grain storage and a broad room building with four central columns (fig. 4). While excavators' plans place the four-columned building in the later phase (Stratum c-1), its stratigraphic relationship with the silos is unclear. The excavators' reports stated that the first two "pits," each containing a single severed hand, were found in this forecourt "under [an annex of] the four-columned building" (Bietak, Math, and Müller 2012: 31–32). However, based on field photographs and unpublished field plans, Matic's recent publication argues that at least one of these "pits" was not a pit at all, but a layer abutting a wall of the four-columned building; he proposes these first two hands should be interpreted as deposits related to and contemporary with this building, dating them after the palace itself was abandoned (Matic 2019: 128). To the north of this structure, two further pits were uncovered in Stratum c-1 (post-dating the silos) containing fourteen more severed hands (Bietak, Math, and Müller 2012: 30–32; Bietak 2012: 42–43).

The hand contexts have been dated according to the nearby palace. The palatial complex itself, especially Stratum c-1, has been dated by the excavators to the mid-Fifteenth Dynasty, and linked to the reign of Khyan after the discovery of seal impressions bearing his name (Bietak et al. 2009, 93; Bietak, Math, and Müller 2012; for an alternative hypothesis, see Matic 2019: 127–28). However, due to environmental degradation and modern agricultural activity, the upper levels of the palace are not preserved (Bietak, Math, and Müller 2012, 19), and therefore it is impossible to know at what point the hand-pits were actually cut, making it possible that they date later, in the New Kingdom (Matic 2019: 130).

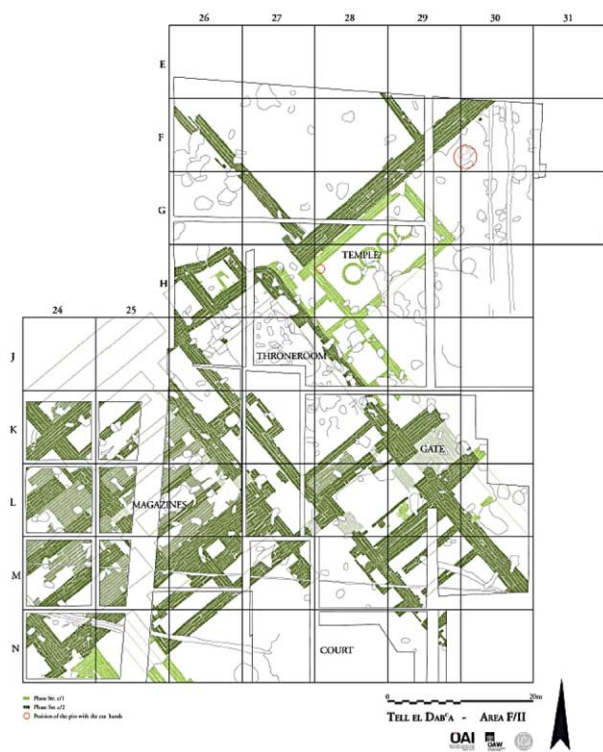


Figure 4. Hyksos Palace in Area F/II at Tell el-Dab'a; hand contexts marked. Courtesy of Manfred Bietak.

Currently, the bioarchaeological report on these human remains has yet to be published, but a few provisional observations can be made from the excavation photographs. The hands are all right hands that were removed at the wrist joint between the distal ulna and radius, and are generally poorly preserved. From the photographs, it appears that little evidence of the long bones of the arm are preserved, but the small bones of the hand—the metacarpals and phalanges—are present and remain articulated (fig. 5). In a place with environmental conditions so detrimental to the preservation of organic materials as the Egyptian Delta, the full articulation of these small bones indicates that the hands were buried while some flesh was preserved, and that little or none of the long bones were attached at the time of deposition. Strikingly absent from the photographs is any sign of visible cut marks, crushed bone, or the clear trauma expected if the hands were severed in one or a few blows of a sharp, heavy weapon. Indeed, the method of severing employed here is difficult to ascertain without a closer examination of the remains (Candelora 2019c: 97; Matić 2019: 129 esp. n. 77).

Manfred Bietak has suggested that these severed hands represent the only archaeological evidence of the New Kingdom military practice of taking corporeal trophies as proof of kills on the battlefield. He argues that the site of the first two pits would fit a ceremony in front of the throne room in which Hyksos soldiers presented hands to the king, and buried the hands on the spot. In the next phase, after the construction of the four-columned



Figure 5. Detail of a severed hand from Tell el-Dab'a cache. Courtesy of Manfred Bietak.



Figure 6. Relief fragment showing a pile of severed hands from the temple of Ahmose at Abydos. ATP 7098. Copyright Stephen Harvey, Ahmose and Tetisheri Project, Abydos.

building, he proposes that they relocated the ceremony slightly to the north, explaining the slight shift in the location of the latter two pits (Bietak 2012; for a strong counterargument, see Matić 2019).

Severed Hands in Ancient Egypt

The Tell el-Dab'a hand cache does not match the New Kingdom evidence in several respects. The earliest preserved visual record of the practice, a temple relief showing a pile of red (i.e., freshly severed) hands, was uncovered at the funerary complex of Ahmose at Abydos (fig. 6; Harvey 2004, 2003: 8). The earliest textual evidence comes from private tomb autobiographies of soldiers who fought in the war to expel the Hyksos and begin Egypt's imperial expansion into the Levant (during the reigns of Ahmose through Thutmose III, though most of the texts were composed under Thutmose III, ca. 1450 BCE; see Matić 2019: 40–41). In his tomb in Elkab, the Crew Commander Ahmose, son of Ibana, reported, “When the town of Avaris was besieged, I fought bravely on foot in his majesty’s (Ahmose) presence ... I made a seizure and carried off a hand. When it was reported to the royal herald the gold of valor was given to me” (Lichtheim 2006: 12, lines 7–10). His autobiography even notes how central this practice was to the establishment of wealth and personal reputation: “I have been rewarded with gold seven times in the sight of the whole land, with male and female



Figure 7. Ramesses III, seated backwards on his chariot, being presented with severed hands at Medinet Habu. Photograph by Danielle Candelora.



Figure 8. Egyptian soldiers carrying severed hands on loops from the Qadesh scenes at Karnak Temple. Line drawing by Danielle Candelora, after Wreszinski 1924, tf. 70.

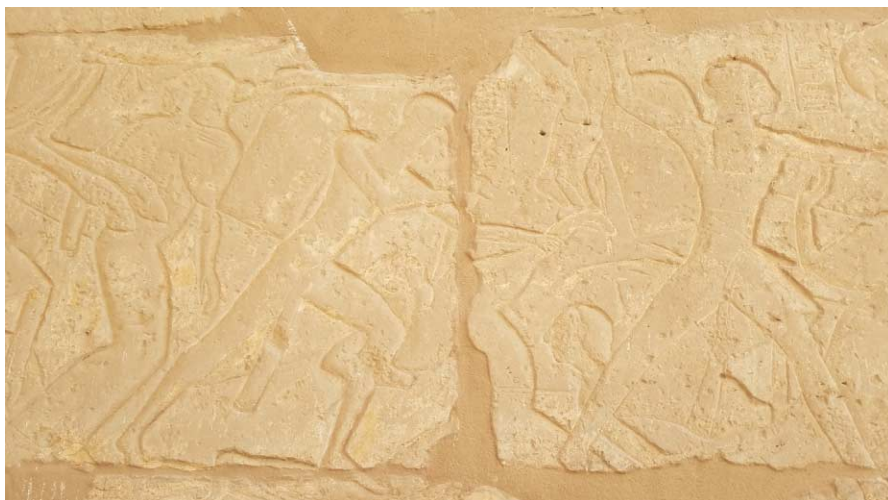


Figure 9. Qadesh Battle scenes from the Ramesseum, featuring an enemy missing a hand and an Egyptian prince in the act of severing another. Photograph by Danielle Candelora.

slaves as well. I have been endowed with very many fields. The name of the brave man is in that which he has done; it will not perish in the land forever” (Lichtheim 2006: 12, lines 2–3).

With the start of the full-scale imperial expansion under the coregents Hatshepsut and Thutmose III (ca. 1475 BCE), the records of this practice are found only in royal inscriptions and temple reliefs. New Kingdom temple reliefs preserve four distinct scene types featuring severed hands. The first and best-known type shows military scribes tallying huge piles of severed hands, along with booty and captives, in the presence of the seated king. These scenes are generally captioned with the amounts and varieties of booty, and at Medinet Habu under Ramesses III (ca. 1175 BCE), the final count of severed hands from a single campaign in Libya totals 12,500 (northern exterior wall), with a second campaign reporting 3,000 hands (east end of southern wall of the Second Court; Edgerton and Wilson 1936: 14–15). This ceremonial tallying apparently takes place while the army is still out on campaign, likely just after the conclusion of a battle (Matić 2019: 43–44). In these Medinet Habu scenes, Ramesses III is shown presiding over the counting from portable rostra erected in front of an Egyptian border fort and, even less formally, from a lounging position on what one might call the “tailgate” of his chariot (fig. 7; Candelora 2019c).

The second scene type features the macabre display of severed hands as battle trophies. A written example from the reign of Amenhotep II (ca. 1427–1400 BCE) records that he hung “twenty hands at the foreheads of his horses” after one victory (Hoffmeier 2003: 21). Several relief fragments of Akhenaten, recarved for Tutankhamun, shows soldiers brandishing spears decorated with impaled hands (Matić 2019: 260–61; Helck 1975). In another relief from Karnak Temple, in this case depicting the battle of Qadesh under Ramesses II (ca. 1274 BCE), Egyptian soldiers march while carrying loops strung with severed hands (fig. 8). The final two scene types come mainly from Ramesside temples and show either living enemies missing a hand, or a soldier in the act of severing an enemy hand mid-battle (fig. 9; Abdalla 2005: 28–34). Beyond these records, there is little additional evidence for severing hands in Egypt, either in battle or as a form



Figure 10. Qadesh Battle scenes from the Abydos temple of Ramesses II showing the capture of a live *maryannu*, his chariot, and his horses. Photograph and line drawing by Danielle Candelora.

of criminal punishment. In Egypt, hand cutting can only be securely identified as a criminal punishment in Papyrus Salt 124, dating to the Ramesside period several centuries after the contexts discussed here (see Matić 2019: 46–47; Müller-Wollermann 2004; Candelora 2019c: 99; Lorton 1977).

The severed hands from Tell el-Dab'a diverge from these patterns in two crucial aspects: context and number.³ The New Kingdom military scenes above feature thousands of hands being counted at a time,⁴ unless they are being displayed. Only sixteen hands were uncovered at the site, and technically fewer when we consider they would have to have been divided over two to four hypothetical ceremonies (evidenced by the number and stratigraphic location of the pits). It is possible they were exhibited or paraded before burial, but the articulation of the small phalanges suggest that it would only have been for a brief interlude. The other major difference is the location of the hand cache(s). Nothing in the New Kingdom sources indicates that these scenes occurred in Egypt; Matić has argued that these ceremonies likely happened on foreign battlefields, or at the very least outside of Egypt, and that few corporeal trophies were brought back to Egypt (Matić 2019). Therefore, the location of the Tell el-Dab'a hand pits, in close proximity to a possible throne room within a palatial structure, goes strongly against later Egyptian evidence (Candelora 2019a: 99).

Links to the Near East

While there is no evidence of such a military reward system in Egypt before the late Second Intermediate period, there is such a protocol in the Middle Bronze Age Near East.⁵ Analysis of the Mari letters suggests that in the event of battle, legal ownership of all booty and captives automatically reverted to the king. The ruler would then redistribute these winnings on the basis of meritorious service (Lorton 1974: 57 n. 16). There are a few iconographic examples of Middle Bronze Age rulers severing enemy

hands (though higher up the arm than the wrist joint itself), as well as skeletal evidence from Jericho (Matić 2019: 47; Candelora 2019c: 100). However, within this corpus, there is no record of severing hands or of battlefield trophies used as proof of kills within this martial system—although the head of one particularly troublesome enemy ruler is severed.⁶

Yet severed hands can be found within Middle Bronze cultural traditions, specifically in law and criminal punishment. In Mesopotamia, the Old Babylonian law code of Hammurabi includes three laws that result in the amputation of a hand in the case of a guilty verdict. Two of these, 218 and 226, deal with incredibly specific circumstances relating to medical malpractice and the abetting of a slave's escape attempt. The third, however, is more applicable here. Law 195 states: "If a child should strike his father, they shall cut off his hand" (Roth 1997: 120–24). In the Middle Bronze Age politics centered at cities such as Babylon and Mari, the most basic social organization was based on kinship ties, whether real or imagined. Kinship affiliation undergirded all aspects of society, from local politics to long distance trade, and even the diplomatic relationship between kings. Within and between such societies, patrimonial language was common; peers would refer to one another as brothers, while a superior was graced with the honorific title of father (Fleming 2004). In this social context, Law 195 could have applied to a range of misdeeds, from insubordination to treason or even full-blown rebellion against the king himself—the father of the entire land.

Within those same legal traditions, the king is clearly marked as the main judge or the ideal figure to render judgement. Preserved fragments of a Middle Bronze Age legal case from the city of Hazor further indicate that the king heard cases in an official setting, into which the concerned parties had to formally enter (Horowitz and Oshima 2006: 69–72, Hazor 5). This is strikingly at odds with Egyptian legal traditions, in which cases are heard by a judicial body rather than the king, and only one



Figure 11. Qadesh Battle scenes from the Abydos temple of Ramesses II showing a Sherden mercenary and an Egyptian soldier severing enemy hands. Photograph by Danielle Candelora.

secure example exists for hand severing as a criminal punishment (though facial mutilation is common; Lorton 1977; Matić 2019: 46–47).

Certainly, there are many possible explanations for the Tell el-Dab'a hands; the disruption of the archaeological strata above these contexts make a full understanding of their original deposition and date difficult. They could have been battle trophies taken by Hyksos soldiers (Stefanović 2003; Bietak, Math, and Müller 2012), or by Egyptian soldiers after Ahmose's conquest of Tell el Dab'a (although the dating is less likely for this scenario; Petty 2014: 95). Matić rightly notes that some of the hand deposits abutted palace-room walls, indicating that these amputated hands should be linked with the West Asian tradition of a king, rather than soldiers, severing enemy hands (and parts of the forearm) as seen in the Mari letters (Matić 2019: 131). To this I would add the possibility that these amputated hands may be the grisly remains of criminal punishment according to Middle Bronze Age traditions. The limited number of hands, and the location of the deposits in a forecourt just outside the palace walls, suggest that the Hyksos king publicly issued legal judgement(s) here—either in the forecourt itself or in the potential nearby “throne room”—and the rulings were carried out on the spot (Candelora 2019c).

From a Legal to a Military Practice

So how then did a legal tradition transform into a military reward system? The answer can be found in the hybrid military communities that fought under the Hyksos and the New Kingdom Egyptian Empire. In both cases, the military comprised a mixture of local Egyptians, southwest Asian immigrants or captives, and foreign mercenaries (at least in the latter case). The employment of foreign mercenaries in the Egyptian military is evidenced as early as the Old Kingdom, and continued throughout pharaonic history (Bietak 2010). Indeed, the capture of live charioteers, or *maryannu*, is specifically highlighted in numerous New Kingdom booty lists, and these specialist troops were likely incorporated into the Egyptian fighting force (see fig. 10; Shaw 2012: 199–22, 2001; Moorey 2001; Morris 2014). The tomb autobiography of Ahmose, son of Ibana even mentions this practice in association with receiving the gold of valor: “I brought a chariot, its horse, and him who was on it as a *living* captive. When they were presented to his majesty, I was rewarded with gold once again” (Lichtheim 2006: 14, emphasis added). There is also strong evidence for the immigration of southwest Asian military craftsmen, such as metalsmiths (Philip 2006: 204), or the allocation of foreign prisoners of war as fletchers, bow

makers, and chariot builders to temple workshops (Morris 2014: 368; Moorey 2001).

These southwest Asian immigrants, simply through interacting on a daily basis, training, and fighting with their Egyptian counterparts, had a massive impact on Egyptian military traditions—they influenced everything from jargon and military technology to kingship and martial values (for a full discussion, see Candelora 2019b: 6–19). In the turbulence and constant battles of the end of the Second Intermediate period, the martial reward system introduced by these immigrants was conflated with a particular criminal punishment. This may have been done purposefully, as the defeated enemies were seen as having rebelled against the rightful king, or because it was discovered that severed hands were an expedient and accurate means of recording kills. Alternatively, precisely this kind of practical misunderstanding is common in contexts of extended cultural interaction (White 2006; Candelora 2019b). In a much more well-known case of corporeal trophy taking, a variety of Native American scalping traditions were conflated in Colonial America with European practices of criminal punishment and rewards for the extermination of livestock predators, resulting in the scalp bounties that are still notorious today (Harrison 2012; Ball 2013).

Certainly, the integration of these southwest Asian immigrants into the Egyptian military expanded what was considered to be “normative behavior” for soldiers. Over time these two related practices, severing hands as criminal punishment and a military reward system, lost their ethnic association and were fully integrated into the new, hybrid cultural repertoire of the New Kingdom (Alba and Nee 1997; Candelora 2019b, 16–17). It became crucial for Egyptian elites to express their bravery by eternalizing their gold of valor awards, either in their tomb reliefs or in statue form. As seen in examples like the tomb of Horemheb at Saqqara or the tomb of Ramose in Thebes (fig. 3), the social significance of this advertisement continued well after the practice of rewarding soldiers for battlefield valor ended, likely under Thutmose III (Matić 2019: 45–46). In fact, the tradition of severing hands became so central to standard Egyptian military operating procedure that foreign mercenaries also followed this protocol when fighting for Egypt. A detail from Ramesses II’s Abydos temple displays both a Sherden mercenary (identifiable by the horned helmet and round shield) and an Egyptian soldier in the act of removing enemy hands in the midst of the Battle of Qadesh (fig. 11). The reliefs showing massive piles of hands that bedeck temples like Medinet Habu are therefore not only a statement about the military might of the Egyptian Empire, but also a record of the influence of immigrants on that society.

Notes

1. The dating of the Second Intermediate period and the transition into the New Kingdom is complex and subject to ongoing debates (for recent arguments, see Forstner-Müller and Moeller 2018). Here I use the dates from Shaw 2000, a standard middle chronology.
2. It is important to note a few points here. First, the private tomb autobiographies of Ahmose, son of Ibana; Amenemhab (Mahu); and Ahmose Pennekhbet were likely composed during the reign of Thut-

mose III (ca. 1450 BCE), though the texts place the hand-cutting acts in campaigns dating from the reigns of Ahmose through Thutmose III (ca. 1550–1425 BCE). The later temple scenes showing massive piles of hands and phalli date more specifically to the Ramesside period (ca. 1295–1175 BCE), around three hundred years later. For a more detailed discussion, see Matić 2019: 40–46.

3. The dating may also diverge, in that Matić’s reanalysis of the stratigraphy may date the severed hands (at least the second group of fourteen) to later, rather than contemporary with the mid-Fifteenth Dynasty.
4. Though these Ramesside numbers are likely to be inflated or exaggerated; see the discussion in Matić 2019, 45–46.
5. This chronology is subject to its own debates, but is generally placed ca. 2200/1900–1640/1540 BCE (Sharon 2014).
6. Matić (2019, 82) notes that decapitated heads are displayed as trophies on the Ebla Victory Standard from the mid-third millennium.

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