
Tomasz Podgórski
Kraków

TUTANKHAMUN'S FALCON CORSELET
AGAINST ICONOGRAPHICAL
AND TEXTUAL BACKGROUND

The feathered corselet from the tomb of Tutankhamun (KV 62) is one of the attire items discovered there, accentuating the pharaoh's identity with the falcon, a sacred bird of Horus, the sky and sun god and the patron of the royalty at the same time. This association is at least as ancient as the Egyptian state in its classical form and, constituting the foundation of the royal power on earth, is reflected in many domains of Egyptology. Any treatise concerning the Egyptian religion has to locate Horus in the foremost place and, similarly, the works on the kingship must take into account various links of the ruler with this god, being mirrored in sacred texts and influencing their mutual spatial relationship in the iconography. Among these writings, mainly the Pyramid Texts are to be mentioned here, alongside with the Coffin Texts, the Book of the Dead and several other netherworld books, further the historical and glorification texts. The archaeological and iconographical sources (principally reliefs, paintings, statuary sculpture, amulets and jewellery) can be regarded as a visual resultant of the written word, having respectively complementary character¹.

The problem of the primeval origin of Horus is a truly obscure and complicated matter. Did this god come from the Delta, Upper Egypt or was possibly imported from the east? The most eminent protagonists of his Delta provenance are H. Junker, K. Sethe and A. Gardiner, whereas H. Kees i W. Freiherr von Bissing are in favour of Upper Egypt. On the other hand, the foreign origin

¹ Cf. the present author's earlier works: *Royal Plume Dress of XVIII Dynasty*, MDAIK 40, 1984, p. 103–121; *The Plume Dress of Ramses III from the Tomb of Amenherkhopshuf*, Folia Orientalia XXIV, 1987, p. 15–21; *Some Remarks on the Evolution of Royal Triumphal Dress*, SAAC 2, 1992, p. 27–34.; *The Horus Dress as Represented in the Temple of Amenhotep III in Luxor*, SAAC 4, 1992, p. 27–31.

of Horus cannot be excluded in the opinion of S. Mercer and W. F. Petrie². In spite of all the controversy shrouding these views, it is certain that as early as in the times immediately preceding the unification of the Two Lands, Horus the Falcon enjoyed veneration in both capitals: Pe (Buto) in the Delta and Nechen (Hierakonpolis, *i.e.* the Town of the Sacred Falcon) in Upper Egypt. In the historical period, falcon cults flourished in the vast space from the Delta to Nubia in abundant local varieties. In Lower Egypt, the following locations can be listed: Letopolis in the 2nd nome (Haroeris), the 3rd nome (Libyan Horus), Athribis in the 10th nome (Horus Khentekhtay) or Heliopolis in the 13th nome (Harakhte, or Horus of the Horizon). In Upper Egypt, Horus was a chief deity in the 1st nome at Kom Ombo, in the 2nd one in Edfu (Horus Behdety), in the 3rd nome at Nechen, in the 10th one at Antaeopolis as a pair of falcons (Antwy, or *the Two Clawed Ones*), in the 12th nome at Hierakon (Anty, or *the Clawed One*) and in the 18th nome as Dwnawy (*the One with His Wings Spread*). The local forms of Horus were also worshipped in Nubia (Horus of Miam, Buhen and Abu Simbel). It seems plausible that plenty of local falcon deities existed in Egypt, which in the course of time were assimilated by Horus.

A highly absorbing problem is posed by the question of the identification of the falcon of Horus appearing in the iconography with a concrete bird thriving in nature in Egypt. To hear Col.R. Meinertzhagen and S. Mercer properly say that there is no evidence that the Egyptians exactly distinguished the falcons of alike appearance³. The falcon, as a bird, was generally termed as *bik*. Personally, I am inclined to put forward the opinion that the magnificent peregrine falcon (*Falco peregrinus*), appearing frequently from the Delta over Fayum, Assiut and Luxor to the *antemurale* of Nubia at Aswan, stands closest to the actual depictions in art, yet it must be borne in mind that a special stylistic and colours convention was obligatory in the mural painting and polychrome reliefs.

In order to comprehend profoundly the significance of the falcon elements in the royal iconography, the mythic perspective should be concisely considered of the king-Horus relationship and its reflection in the religious texts. The pharaoh constituted the focal point of the earthly statehood overlapping with the cosmic

² Cf. H. Junker, *Der Auszug der Hathor-Tefnut*, Berlin 1911; K. Sethe, *Urgeschichte und älteste Religion der Ägypter*, Leipzig 1930; A. Gardiner, *Horus the Behdetite*, JEA 30, 1944, p. 23–60; H. Kees, *Der Götterglaube im alten Ägypten*, Berlin 1977; W. von Bissing, H. Kees, *Das Re-Heiligtum des Königs Ne-woser-re (Rathures), Band II. Die kleine Festdarstellung*, Leipzig 1923; S.A.B. Mercer, *Horus, Royal God of Egypt*, Grafton 1942; W.M.F. Petrie, *Making of Egypt*, London 1939.

³ R. Meinertzhagen, *Nicholl's Birds of Egypt I*, London 1930, table IV, 7; Mercer, *op. cit.*, p.96.

sphere of the gods⁴, and the power of the primeval mythical divine dynasties was endowed upon their earthly embodiment in the person of the king. The Turin Papyrus 1874 states that the two dynasties of gods ruled before the historical kings. The preserved list begins with the earth god Geb, further enumerating Osiris, the god of the desert Seth, Horus, the patron of wisdom Thoth, the goddess of order and truth Maat and another form of Horus. The second dynasty of gods is implicitly defined as *the Spirits, Followers of Horus*. The kingship dogma is founded, on the one hand, on the Horus myths cycle (the living king ruling on earth), and on the other hand on the Osiris cycle (the deceased king ruling in the netherworld). Each and every ascension to the throne by a new king as Horus was the repeated enactment of of the time-honoured, archaic event, the mythical *sp tpy*-the first time⁵. As the emanation of divinity, in the perspective of the state and legal function, the pharaoh was determined as *nsw*.

Not a single being from the divine sphere can be comprehended by human mind without the intermediary role of a symbol, be it verbal or literary (hymns, prayers, spells or myths) or visual (material objects or iconographical depictions). Any symbol is true and genuine insofar it renders a divine being comprehensible in the human categories of reasoning and is at the same time accepted by human faith. Through symbols, *the world becomes transparent and is able to reveal the transcendent being*⁶.

The first expression of such perspective in the Egyptian literature are the Pyramid Texts, constituting a collection of rituals descriptions, incantations, magical spells and utterances, invocations and hymns, describing the pharaoh's transition to the netherworld and his various transformations, many a time into Horus. As early as the 1st Dynasty, the king of Egypt was identified with this god by the so-called Horus name. In the Pyramid Texts 1258 a-b the deceased king is compared to Horus of the East (*Hr i3btj*), Horus of the Netherworld (*Hr D3ty*) and to Horus, Lord of Two Lands (*Hr nb t3wy*). Curiously enough, Horus appears in these Texts also as Sirius (*Hr imy Spdt*, PT 632d) and the late pharaoh is indirectly related to him⁷.

It seems right and proper now to to examine some iconographical phenomena, which had been preceding, from the early historical period, the appearance of peculiar falcon motifs in the tomb of Tutankhamun. Of course the most eminent example here is the famous Narmer Palette, where the falcon patronizes the king slaying his enemies, but in due course the review of these facts will focus

⁴ H. Goedicke, *Die Stellung des Königs im alten Reich*, Wiesbaden 1960.

⁵ L. Troy, *Patterns of Queenship in Ancient Egyptian Myth and History*, Uppsala 1986.

⁶ M. Eliade, *Cosmos and History. The Myth of the Eternal Return*, New York 1959, p. 130.

⁷ R. Anthes, *Horus als Sirius in den Pyramidentexten*, ZÄS 102, 1975, p. 1–10.

upon the moments where the divine bird physically protects the king. This is particularly emphasized in the statuary sculpture of the 4th Dynasty, as in the case of the renowned diorite statue of Khephren from the Cairo Museum. The falcon dramatically clings to the king's neck, which coincides with the epithet *Horus is behind as Protector* (*Hr h3 s3*). Suchlike arrangement of the falcon appears on the pink limestone statuette of Neferefre, coming from the funerary temple of this king. Apart from these, from the Hathor temple at Serabit el-Khadim (Sinai) comes the fragment of the falcon's body, provided with the inscription *The Good God, Lord of the Two Lands, Snofru* (British Museum inv. nr 41745), thus representing this king as a pure embodiment of Horus.

In the domain of the statuary of the 6th Dynasty, a greatly interesting object is the alabaster statue of Pepi I (Brooklyn Museum, Charles Edwin Wilbour Fund nr 39120), showing this king enthroned in a ceremonial attire of the jubilee Sed festival and white crown of Upper Egypt. The falcon reposing behind the king is clearly separated from his head, contrary to the above mentioned earlier instances, which was acknowledged by S. Morenz as a stage in the process resulting in the phenomenon defined by him as *Heraufkunft des transzendenten Gottes*. It needs to be stressed, however, that the falcon here crowns the royal Horus name at the back of the throne and the overall composition is governed by this fact. In stark contrast to these Old Kingdom statues stands the enormous statuary group of grey granite (height 2.31 m) from the Cairo Museum, discovered by P. Montet at Tanis in the Delta (but originating from Memphis or Bubastis), depicting Ramzes II as Harpocrates, protected by a giant falcon. Here, we have reached the immensely remote point, not only in the perspective of time, from the statue of Khephren, since the proportions are completely reversed. The king appears here as a helpless infant, completely confiding in his divine protector. Could it have been the dramatic experiences and his spells of despondency in the battle of Kadesh which influenced such rendering of Ramses II in this group?

From the New Kingdom, still one more variation of the falcon's location with regard to the king is known. This is testified to by the scene of Amenhotep III being protected by this bird from the rear at the waist, coming from the tomb of Kheruef (nr 192 in Khokha necropolis in Thebes West). In spite of considerable degree of natural deterioration, this is one of the most beautiful limestone reliefs known to me in the entire Egyptian art, of immensely noble proportions and exquisite workmanship, displaying great affinity in style to the acclaimed representations of vizier Ramose in his nearby tomb in the necropolis of Sheikh Abd el- Gurna

In the times of the 18th Dynasty, numerous plume motifs commence to appear in the pharaonic ceremonial attire. These perform specific magical

and symbolical functions, intended to ensure the conveyance of the divine bird's powerful properties on the king, both by means of the form and colouring scheme. One of suchlike elements is a peculiar feathered vest, designed by L. Borchardt as *Falkenjackete*⁸, in vogue from the Middle Kingdom onwards, as testified by the 11th Dynasty temple relief from Tod, featuring king Mentuhotep- Sankhkare, additionally wearing the *šwtj* crown of two falcon feathers. Fine examples of the *Falkenjackete* from the New Kingdom come from the temples of Deir el- Bahari⁹ and Abydos.

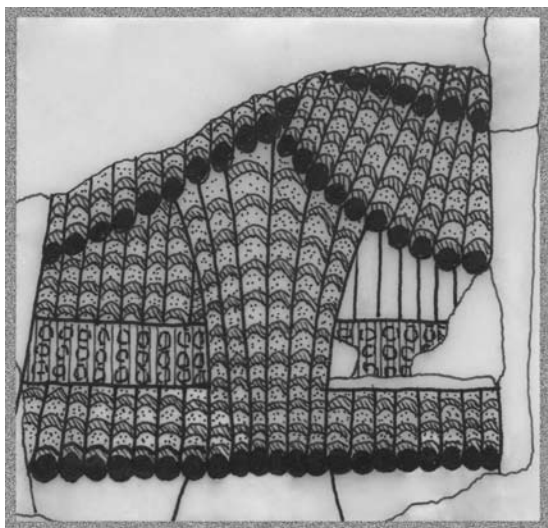


Fig. 1. Lower part of Horus dress of king Thotmes III from his temple at Deir el-Bahari, block F 8033. Painted limestone relief.
Author's drawing from original

Apart from the *Falkenjackete*, in the 18th Dynasty, a unique falcon garment became widespread evidently equalling the king with this holy bird. As far as I know, this Horus dress appears for the first time in the alabaster sanctuary of Amun-Min in Karnak, where it is donned by Thotmes I. Its convincing identification with the colours of the falcon in the painting of the period proved possible owing to the superbly preserved polychrome reliefs from the temple of Thotmes III at Deir el-Bahari, rendering all the details of the colours palette both in the royal attire iconography and in the sacred animals. A squatting falcon on the block nr 6639 from this temple has, according to the epithet *s3b šwt*, *He of the Dappled Plumage*, the bichrome wings with blue speckles against the greenish background. Moreover, the tips of the short wing feathers and tail feathers are red. The feathers of the Horus dress on the block fragment nr F 8033 have identical colours.

Of course this combination of colours had special magical meaning, which will be discussed below.

To the best of my knowledge, 34 instances of the Horus dress in the 18th Dynasty were found until 1984, which is obviously a small fraction of all what

⁸ King Mentuhotep – Sankhkare in *Falkenjackete*. Limestone relief from temple at Tod, 11th Dynasty, c. 2010. Cairo Museum J 66333.

⁹ A. Ćwiek, *Fate of Seth in the Temple of Hatshepsut at Deir el-Bahari*, *Études et Travaux XXII*, 2008, Figs 1, 3–7.

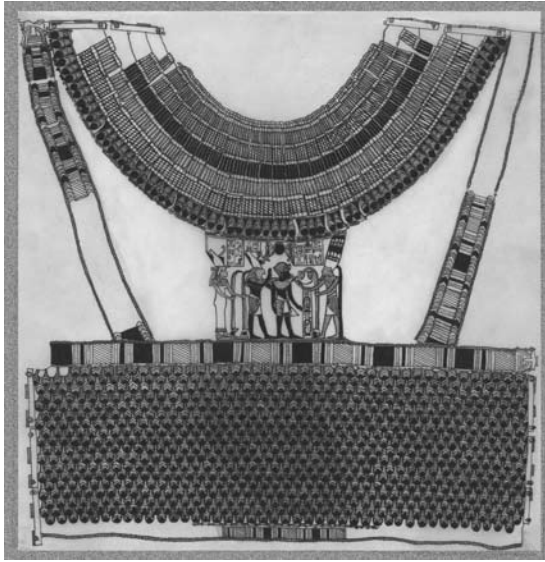


Fig. 2. Front part of Tutankhamun's falcon corselet. Carnelian, turquoise, lapis-lazuli, ivory, gold, coloured glass, 18th Dynasty, c. 1323. Cairo Museum JE 62627.

Author's drawing after Saleh, Sourouzian, *Katalog*, 191

tutankhamun had behind it a sacred and time-honoured tradition. It is, anyway, the sole known material equivalent of the Horus dress depicted in painting and reliefs, although executed in artificial feathers. Their materials are carnelian, glass paste, ivory and gold¹¹. The corselet consists of two rectangular pieces, of which the front one is shown here. Stylized feathers are arranged alternatively in rows of glass, coloured lapis-lazuli and turquoise, and are adorned with tiny golden arrowheads, whereas their tips are red. The feathers are strung on a golden wire and fixed by tiny hinges. The uppermost row consists of the feathers mounted in golden cells, connected by means of loops with the upper bordering of the corselet. The said bordering is composed of the platelets coloured lapis-lazuli and turquoise, mounted in rectangular elements of gold and glass lapis-lazuli and red in colour. In the upper part of the bordering there are tiny pearls. A similar bordering is to be found at the bottom of the corselet, but the elements are smaller here compared with its upper counterpart.

The corselet has two shoulder straps and a necklace, also consisting of the front and rear part, containing five rows of rectangular golden cells, inlaid with

must have existed. The two main ceremonies in which this dress was employed were the *bs n nsw* (conducting the king by the god) and *hwt bhsu* (driving the four calves by the king in the presence of a god). The first of these rites belongs to the coronation cycle, where the king appears as a *newly risen Horus*, whereas the other, known from the Old Kingdom temples of Wenis and Sahure of the 5th Dynasty, has the agricultural background. It resembles threshing, being meant to ensure prosperous crops and domestic animals fertility in a magical way¹⁰.

It ensues from the above, much too concise review, that the feathered corselet from the tomb of Tu-

¹⁰ A. M. Blackman, *Significance of the Ceremony hwt bhsu in the Temple of Horus at Edfu*, JEA 36, 1950, p. 76 ff.

¹¹ M. Saleh, H. Sourouzian, *Das Ägyptische Museum Kairo. Offizieller Katalog*, Mainz 1986, 191.

multi-coloured glass. It is limited by two rows of minor beads from above and from below by floral beads, executed in the technique of inlaid cells. With the feathered part of the corselet, the necklace is connected on the front by means of a pectoral, which represents the king conducted by Atum of Heliopolis, to be received by Amun of Karnak. The scene is assisted by goddess Iwsaas, who presents Tutankhamun with the sticks of the millions of years.

As a counterpoise, in the rear part of the necklace a kind of medallion is mounted, in the form of a trapezoid framework in which a solar scarab appears with the falcon's wings and tail. On both sides it is flanked by the royal cobras in the crowns of the North and the South. Chains made of tiny multi-coloured beads hang from this medallion, ending with pendants in the shape of papyrus whorls of turquoise, poppies of carnelian and blue lilies of lapis-lazuli.

In due course, the colour scheme of this feathered corselet should be considered in comparison with the convention of the falcon's depictions in painted reliefs. The combination of colours is somewhat different here, but this is due to the materials used and the technique of their mounting. The rows of feathers are alternately turquoise or lapis-lazuli (the former can be the equivalent to the green colour in painted reliefs), so in the case of the corselet no combination of blue and green in a single feather is to be observed, there are however the golden arrowheads, absent in the case of the Horus dress. On the other hand, red feather tips appear in both cases. It is worth mentioning that identical palette of colours as the corselet has the magnificent falcon pectoral¹², also found in the tomb of Tutankhamun

The selection of the colours was definitely deliberate since, non-existent in any falcon species in the wild, they had magical meaning, thus enhancing the properties of the plumed attire¹³.

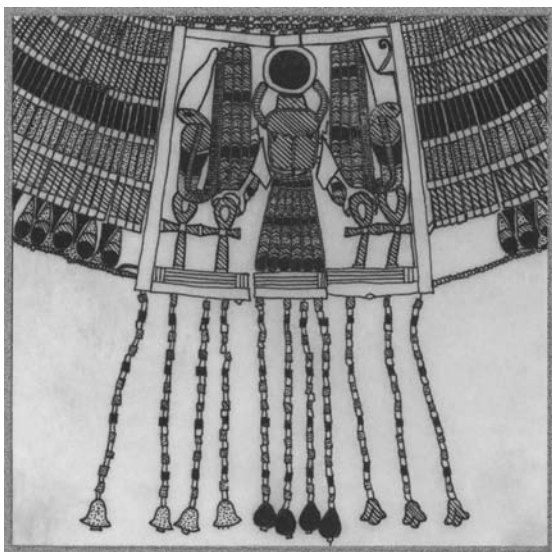


Fig. 3. Medallion in rear part of necklace of Tutankhamun's feathered corselet. Materials as above. Cairo Museum. Author's drawing after Saleh, Sourouzian, *Katalog*, 191

¹² H. Carter, A. Mace, *The Tomb of Tut-Ankh-Amon I, II, III* (London 1923, 1927, 1933), Cat. Nr 267 M/1.

¹³ P. Reuterswärd, *Studien zur Polychromie der Plastik, I. Ägypten*, Stockholm 1958, p. 23 ff.;

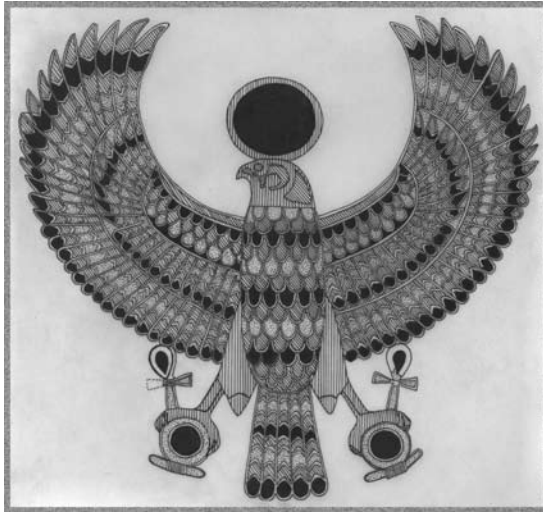


Fig. 4. Tutankhamun's falcon pectoral.
Materials as above. Cairo Museum. Author's
drawing after M. Vilimkova, M.H. Abdul –
Rahman, *Altägyptische Goldschmiedekunst*,
Prague 1969, table 50

Horus had the same colour. Many green amulets had healing and protective properties, and green could also acquire the shade of malachite *šsmt* i turquoise *mfk3t*.

The colour red in its beneficent aspect denoted life (blood) and also the rising and setting sun. In the shade of ochre it was used for the king's body in painting. However, red was also the malevolent colour of the hostile desert and its god Seth, and also of the enraged Eye of Horus.

The colour of gold belonged to the sun rays of god Re and to the goddesses Hathor and Isis. Among the royal titulary was the name of *the Golden Horus*, testifying to the divine descent of the king.

All these colours endowed the plume dress with significant symbolical values, and other elements magnifying this effect were a leopard skin band and bull's tail, which combination is fully reflected in the component of the royal titulary of Thotmes III: *Hr k3 nḥt*, i.e. *Horus, the Mighty Bull*.

It can be mentioned here that from the tomb of Tutankhamun comes also a long glove adorned with the motif of feathers, which are short and scale-shaped here¹⁵. Suchlike motifs are to be also encountered among the regalia such as sceptres, ceremonial weaponry, model boats and chariots.

H. Kees, *Farbensymbolik in altägyptischen religiösen Texten*, NAWG, 1943.

¹⁴ T. G. Allen, *Horus in the Pyramid Texts*, Chicago 1915.

¹⁵ R. Hall, *Egyptian Textiles*, Princes Risborough, 1986, Fig.33.

Blue or lapis-lazuli was particularly connected with Amun as the sky god and with the Nile deities. Of great importance was green, as the colour of vegetation and life, associated with the primeval ocean Nun and Osiris. As early as the Pyramid Texts (628), it is designated as *the Great Green*, and also Horus is linked with this colour, being named *the One Who Emerged from the Nile* (PT 2047c), which can project on the symolical colouring of the falcon, blending green with blue. The Pyramid Texts overtly determine Horus as *the Green Falcon* (457c)¹⁴, and the sound Eye of

The Horus dress, which appeared, to the author's present knowledge, exclusively in the temples, vanished from the royal attire repertoire with the decline of the 18th Dynasty and other types of plume apparel came into vogue. And so in the tomb of Amenherkhepshef in the Valley of the Queens (QV 55) we find a very solemn and rich feathered garment, worn by his father Ramses III in the scene of his being received by Isis. It consists in its upper part of the *Falkenjackete*, put on a short-sleeved shirt, whereas in its lower part of a kilt made of the feathers coloured blue, green and red. It is rather striking that Ramses III should wear such a dress here, since nothing alike appears in his own tomb in the Valley of the Kings.

The Pyramid Texts (877) cite Horus of the Netherworld (*Dw3at*)¹⁶, who in another place (1207a) as the morning star belongs to the fixed stars and rules over the underworld Fields of the Reed (*I3rw*). He is also mentioned by the Spell 74 of the Coffin Texts, when descending into the Netherworld to revive Osiris: *...How fair are you that rise today! Like Horus of the Underworld rising today, emerging from the great flood...*¹⁷ Furthermore, the Spell 312 of these Texts describes the journey undertaken by the divine falcon to the *Dw3t*, the falcon being determined by the text as *the Dweller in the Beams of Light*. Maybe the above described dress of Ramses III is intended to emphasize the king's appearance in the form of the Horus of the Netherworld, being complementary to the aspect of the living Horus, ruling the world in the pharaoh's capacity.

Among numerous religious concepts of ancient Egypt, the connection of the royalty with Horus the falcon had been existing practically over the entire history of the Land on the Nile, so as long as almost three millennia. It found a



Fig. 5. Ramses III in plume attire received by Isis. Painted relief, 19th Dynasty, c. 1170. Tomb of Amenherkhepshef (QV 55). Phot. by the author

¹⁶ E. Hornung, *Horus der Dat*, LÄ III, 1980, col. 33.

¹⁷ A. de Buck, *The Egyptian Coffin Texts, I. Texts of Spells 1-75*, Chicago 1935, Spell 74. Chronology after J. Baines, J. Malek, *Atlas of Ancient Egypt*, Oxford 1985.

multi-faceted reflection in the iconography, expressed by means of sublime and semantically rich symbolics. Even as insignificant and prematurely deceased pharaoh as Tutankhamun, buried in great haste, was provided with artistically superb magnificent attributes of royal power, identifying him with Horus. How, then, must have been equipped for their road to eternity such weighty and powerful pharaohs as Thotmes III, Amenhotep II, Amenhotep III, Sethos I or Ramses II? It only remains to be regretted that we will rather never know.

Tomasz Podgórski
lord_tp@interia.pl