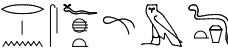


The Gesture Used in the Rite of Anointing

Mohamed Abdelrahiem

The  *r n sfht mdt* “Spell for wiping the *mdt*-ointment” shows the king with outstretched right arm with the little finger of the right hand extended in the context of the daily temple ritual.¹ The same gesture is used also in the spell of *jrt mdt* “performing the *mdt*-ointment”, *hnk mdt* “offering *mdt*-ointment”, *(r)djt mdt* “giving *mdt*-ointment”.² The scene of wiping the *mdt*-ointment depicted in the cult-chapel of Osiris in the temple of Sethos I at Abydos is entitled *r n jrt mdt* “spell of performing the *mdt*-ointment” (fig. 1).³ It is most probable that the scene represented both rites of making and removing the make-up.⁴

However, the action of wiping the *mdt*-ointment, depicted several times on the walls of the Egyptian temples, especially from the Ramesside Period,⁵ is always shown as being performed with the little finger. The king holds the jar of perfumed ointment in his left hand. With the little finger of the right hand, he anoints the brow, crown or Uraeus of the god who stands or sits in front of him (fig. 2). This gesture is never varied. The three middle

¹ “The most important sources for understanding the daily ritual are the images in the deity chapels of the temple of Seti I in Abydos, the depictions of the ritual of Amenhotpe I in Thebes, and the large number of depictions of the daily ritual in the ‘closed temple’ of Luxor. These cultic actions include the opening of the deity’s shrine, the enlivening of the cultic image so that the deity can ‘reside’ in it, cleaning and dressing the cultic image, textually fixed dialogue with the deity (which endows the king with the ruling power) and finally the closing of the shrine”, Gundlach 2001, 371. On the daily temple ritual as a whole, see for example Tacke 2013; Guglielmi and Buroh 1997; David 1981, 58–82A; Barta 1969; Alliot 1959; Fairman 1954; Nelson 1949, 201–232; Moret 1902, esp. 190–200.

² Wohlfarth 2007, 101. For general studies on the practice of anointing in Ancient Egypt, see Thompson 1998; Thompson 1992; Thompson 1994; Pardey 1984; Kutsch 1963, 34–35, 41–52; Cothenet 1960, 706–711; Bonnet 1953, 647–649; Moret 1902, 190–200.

³ Calverley and Gardiner 1933, pl. 6; Bartel 2002, 14.

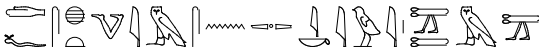
⁴ Cf. Abdel-Raziq 1984, 29, pl. 8a. In ancient Egypt, the gestures were highly significant in ritual and non-ritual contexts; they suggest a considerable nonverbal language for the different manifestations of life and culture. On analysis and interpretation of Ancient Egyptian gestures, see for example Wilkinson 2001, 20–24; Teeter 1997; Wilkinson 1994; Dominicus 1993; Wilkinson 1991–1992; Wilkinson 1991; Wilkinson 1988; Sourdiver 1984; Ogdon 1979; Brunner-Traut 1977; Grapow 1939–1942; Müller 1937.

⁵ Thompson, 224–241.

fingers are folded over against the palm of the hand and only the thumb and little finger project (fig. 3). But what is its origin? And why should always the little finger be used?

From certain passages in the Pyramid Texts one may argue that the fingers of the human hand had a certain specific significance, good or bad. For example, the left thumb seems to have had a harmful significance, at least to evil doings. In Pyr. 424a–b, directed against robbers, we read:⁶

Pyr. 424a 

Pyr. 424b 

ḏḏ mdw jkrr Wnjs ntꜣf tnj rꜣk jꜣbt

“To say: Truly Wenis wags his thumb, the left one against thee.

ḏjꜣf šꜣt jmꜣs n Mnw jk jw jꜣꜣw m jꜣtj

He gives a sign with it to Min (with his) thunderbolt, O robber, rob not.”⁷

But the little finger may have been used simply because of its small size, which makes it suitable for performing any delicate action. It implies that only a small quantity of ointment was to be used. Pyr. 118c says:⁸

118c 

ḏbꜣ Wnjs šrr wšd nw jmj šꜣꜣ Wsjr

“[To say]: The little finger of Wenis draws out that which is in the navel⁹ of Osiris.”

In Pyr. 475 a–c, the little finger is also related to some accurate doings:¹⁰

475a 

475b 

475c 

šwꜣ jwꜣ n wnt hrꜣf sš

“If the heir is poor because he has no testament,

sš Wnjs m ḏbꜣ wr

then shall Wenis write with his great finger,

n sšꜣf js m ḏbꜣ šrr

but he shall not write with his little finger.”¹¹

⁶ Sethe, 1908, 220.

⁷ Mercer 1952, 96.

⁸ Sethe 1908, 68.

⁹ Read also *hrꜣ*; cf. Erman and Grapow 1926–1931, 3: 365.14.

¹⁰ Sethe 1908, 245; Mercer 1952, 78.

¹¹ Mercer 1952, 55.

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Fig. 1: Chapel of Osiris, North Wall, Temple of Sethos I at Abydos (Calverley and Gardiner 1933, pl. 6)

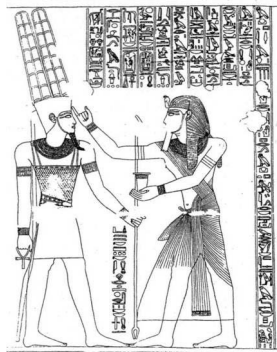


Fig. 2: Chapel of Amen-Re, North Wall, Temple of Sethos I at Abydos (Calverley and Gardiner 1933, pl. 5)

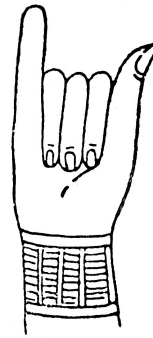
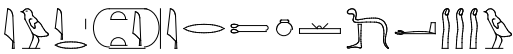


Fig. 3: Gesture of wiping the ointment (drawing by author)



Fig. 4: Amulet of the two fingers. Brooklyn Museum, Charles Edwin Wilbour Fund, 74.158. <https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/opencollection/objects/100852>

There is also an obscure text that says:¹²

601a 

jw jr Ttj jr tnw db:w

“Tety is on the way to the numbering of fingers.”¹³

Neither the preceding nor the following lines give clues on what the “numbering of the fingers” may have been, but it is clear that the Egyptians placed certain special significance on the fingers. There are numerous references. For example, the little finger was used in the precise process of drawing out that which is in the navel of Osiris because of its small size. Accordingly, it might be suitable for wiping the god’s *mdt*-ointment of the previous day. Certain gods extend their fingers (or two fingers) to help the dead king to ascend to heaven, or to help a certain goddess to board the solar boat. There is also the amulet of the two fingers depicting the outstretched index and middle fingers of the right or left hand (fig. 4), the significance of which is not properly understood,¹⁴ but has to do with where it was placed on the mummy. It is a pure funerary amulet and never occurs with a loop for suspension. The amulet is most often found near the incision in the belly, which was made to extract the intestines. Maybe this amulet was intended to close the incision and thus

¹² Sethe 1908, 321.

¹³ Mercer 1952, 122.

¹⁴ Andrews 1994, 70 ff., fig. 73.

emphasize the new wholeness of the body.¹⁵ It may also represent the two fingers that the sun god stretched out to help the king to ascend to heaven.¹⁶

The main point is that the middle and index fingers are always represented. Again, this stresses the fact that certain fingers had a special significance. A similar emphasis on individual fingers can be observed in other religious contexts, for example the Christian church, where the middle and index fingers are always used to give the benediction.¹⁷ Still more significant is the fact that when anointing a person with holy oil, the Coptic priests often use the same gesture exactly as their ancestors had done and use the little finger to anoint the brow of the worshipper.¹⁸

The use of a certain special finger in ritual gestures was also known in Ancient Assyria. On some reliefs, we see worshippers standing or kneeling and holding up their right hands closed, but with the index finger pointing at the object of their devotions. The scene on a pedestal dedicated by the king Tukulti-Ninurta I (13th century BC), which is now in the Museum of the Ancient Near East, Berlin (VA 8146), shows the king twice in bas relief. He adores the goddess Nusku, who is not represented. In one representation he stands, holding a mace in his left hand and raising the right hand with the index finger pointing towards an altar. In the second representation, the king kneels in front of the altar, but his hands are in the same direction as in the first representation.¹⁹ A stela from Nimrud (Kalakh), now in the British Museum (No. 118805), shows king Ashurnasirpal II (9th century BC) standing in adoration in front of a deity, who is not shown. Here, the king holds a mace or scepter in his left hand and rises the right hand pointing slightly upwards with the

¹⁵ <https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/opencollection/objects/100852> (last accessed: 2023).

¹⁶ Cf. Hornung 2013, 404, 438.

¹⁷ “A common form of benediction in Roman Catholic and liturgical Protestant churches is for the worship leader to raise his hands and recite the words of the biblical Priestly Blessing (Numbers 6:23–27 KJV). This addition to the mass was made by Martin Luther in his *Deutsche Messe* and remains traditional in Lutheran Churches.” <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Benediction> (last accessed: 12.01.2023). Cf. Also Precht 1993, 434. Gombrich 1966, 393–401.

¹⁸ “Multiple early Christian documents discuss the ‘ordinance’ or ‘several ceremonies...explained in the Apostolically Constitutions’ of ‘chrism’ [...]. The most detailed version of the practice is by Cyril of Jerusalem, who details how ointment or oil was ‘symbolically applied to the forehead, and the other organs of sense’ and that the ‘ears, nostrils, and breast were each to be anointed.’ Cyril states that the ‘ointment is the seal of the covenants’ of baptism and God’s promises to the Christian who is anointed. Cyril taught that being ‘anointed with the Holy anointing oil [Chrism] of God’ was the sign of a Christian, and a physical representation of having the Gift of the Holy Spirit, and it retains this meaning in Catholicism and Orthodoxy today. He says, ‘Having been counted worthy of this Holy Chrism, ye are called Christians, verifying the name also by your new birth. For before you were deemed worthy of this grace, ye had properly no right to this title, but were advancing on your way towards being Christians.’ (On the Mysteries 3.5)”, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chrism> (last accessed: 12.01.2023). Cf. Also Segelberg 1964.

¹⁹ Harper et. al. 1995, 112–113, pl. 14 (Cat. no. 75); Stein 1994, fig. 2; Ornan 2005, 136, 238, fig. 51; Parrot 1961, fig. 8.

index finger.²⁰ A glazed orthostat decorated with a colored scene, showing the king standing before a god, was found at Ashur (8th century BC), and is exhibited now in the Museum of the Ancient Near East, Berlin. The god raises his right hand with all the fingers extended side by side. He holds with his left hand a mace-headed scepter, which he appears to be presenting to the king. The king, who stands facing the god, holds up his right hand, pointing at the deity with his index finger. He extends his left hand, palm upwards, to receive the mace from the god.²¹ The same theme is repeated on a stela from Ashur with only one difference: the god holds a bow instead of the mace-headed scepter.²² Noteworthy, the position of the god's right hand is exactly the same as that used in Egyptian art to show a god, king or private person in the act of making a speech or declaration.²³ If the same is true of Assyrian art, then this clearly defines the difference between the two gestures and shows that the closed hand with pointing index finger has some ritual significance and is not merely a gesture of declamation. In his list of the Assyrian gestures, Bernard Goldman has classified the gesture of "Fist with raised thumb, forefinger pointing, arm partially extended by king in relation to divine symbols" into the group of the so-called speaking gestures that may have to do with modes of address.²⁴

Finally, in some Mediterranean countries, amulets in the form of a hand with the thumb and little finger extended, and the three middle fingers closed (exactly as in the Ancient Egyptian gesture of anointing) are used as charms to protect the wearer against the Evil Eye.²⁵

Summary

The scenes accompanying the "spell for wiping of the *mdt*-ointment" in the daily temple ritual show the king anointing a statue of the god. This action is always shown as being performed with the little finger. The three middle fingers are folded over against the palm of the hand and only the thumb and little finger project. In Pyr 118c, the little finger was used in the precise process of drawing out that which is in the navel of Osiris because of

²⁰ Hall 1928, 34, pl. 13; Layard 1867, pl. on p. 178. For similar stelae with the same gesture of the king Shalmaneser III (Kuruh) and of the king Adad-Nirari II (Tell Rimah and Saba'a), see Börker-Klähn 1982, stelae (nos. 148, 164 and 163), and cf. Ornan 2005, 272–273, figs. 174–176.

²¹ Ornan 2005, 249, fig. 93; Madhloom 1970, pl. 67.2.

²² Ornan 2005 249, fig. 92; Madhloom 1970, pl. 60.5.

²³ Goldman 1990, 46 (No. 19), 48, fig. 2 (No. 19), cf. Millard and Tadmor 1973, pl. 29 (a).

²⁴ Goldman 1990, 46–49. Cf. the ancient Egyptian divine/royal usage of gesture, especially the gesture of speaking used in the address, oration or recitation, Wilkinson 2001, 21–23.

²⁵ A good example of such an amulet is the *Mano cornuta*, or "horned hand" amulet, exhibited in the Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford under No. 5996. It was found in Ajaccio, Corsica in France, but is thought to be of ancient Italian origin. The amulet was worn as protection against the harmful glance of the Evil Eye. It is one of two hand gestures that are commonly used for this purpose, the second being the *manofica*, or "fig hand", which is made by placing the thumb between the index and second finger. Hand amulets of this type were especially popular in the Mediterranean, see <http://web.prm.ox.ac.uk/amulets/index.php/protection-2/> (last accessed: 12.01.2023).

its small size. Accordingly, it might be suitable for wiping the god's *mdt*-ointment of the previous day.

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