



Figure 5.10. Throne base of Senusret I (c. 1971–1928 BC). The ideological context is the Egyptian idea of the source of political order and stability. The gods Horus (on the left) and Seth (right) are expressing the unity of the two lands by tying together the heraldic plants of Lower and Upper Egypt (the lotus and the papyrus). The stylized trachea (windpipe) connects to the lungs to form the hieroglyph for the term “to unite.” On top of this is the oval cartouche that includes one of the king’s names. The hieroglyphs above the gods refer to localities with which they were associated. *Source:* After Kemp 1989, fig. 6. Reproduced by permission of Barry J. Kemp. Kemp says --- “drawings by B. Garfi.”

A good set of examples which summarizes the basic ideology of the Egyptian state is carved in low relief on the sides of ten limestone statues of King Senusret I of the early 12th Dynasty (*c.* 1956–1911 BC) from his mortuary temple at El-Lisht (Figure 20).<sup>22</sup> Down the centre runs a segmented vertical sign that is actually a stylized picture of a windpipe and lungs, but which was used to write not only the word for ‘lungs’ but also the verb ‘to unite’, which possessed the same sequence of consonants: *s*, *m*, and a strongly aspirated *a*. The word and its hieroglyph were the key components whenever the theme of the unification of the kingdom was presented. On top of this emblematic sign for ‘unity’ rests the oval cartouche containing one of the names of the king. Around the sign two plants are being tied in a reef-knot: on the left a clump of papyrus stalks, the heraldic plant of Lower Egypt; on the right a clump of reeds similarly characteristic of Upper Egypt. The act of tying is being performed by two gods: on the left the hawk-headed Horus, and on the right Seth, whose animal was a mythological creature.<sup>23</sup> The hieroglyphs above each god refer to two localities. Seth is ‘The Ombite’, that is, from the city of Ombos (Nubt, near the modern village of Nagada) in Upper Egypt. Horus is ‘Lord of Mesen’, a town name used for places in both Upper and Lower Egypt (for reasons explained shortly), but here meaning one in Lower Egypt. On some of the throne bases Seth is called ‘Lord of Su’, a place lying just within the northern border of Upper Egypt, whilst Horus is several times called ‘The Behdetite’, that is, the one from Behdet, another toponym used for more than one place, but here clearly referring to somewhere in the north.

The artists who carved these statue bases were masters of elegant variation. Other dualistic themes were also woven into the same basic design. On five of the bases Horus and Seth were replaced by figures of plump Nile gods identified by symbols as Upper and Lower Egypt, whilst the hieroglyphic captions at the top refer to the ‘Greater’ and ‘Lesser Ennead’ (Company of Nine Gods), ‘offerings’ and ideas of fertility using paired synonyms in both cases. There is also another variation of the Horus–Seth theme. In this case the pairing is between, on the one side, ‘The united portion of the two lords’, with a little picture of Horus and Seth to identify who the two lords were, and on the other, ‘The thrones of Geb’, an earth-god who, in longer texts on the theme, presided over the reconciliation of Horus and Seth. The dualism could thus be extended beyond the pairing of two contrasting entities to the pairing of synonyms, each one of which contained a reference to some aspect of the balanced pairs.

Within this rearrangement of entities to illustrate the concept of harmony through the balancing of pairs we can glimpse a simple example of one form of the Egyptians’ thought processes: the manipulation of words, especially names, as if they were discrete units of knowledge (which in a way they were). Ancient knowledge, when not of a practical nature (of the kind: how to build a pyramid and how to behave at table), was essentially the accumulation of names of things, beings and places, together with their associations. ‘Research’ lay in extending the range of associations in areas which we would now term ‘theology’. Meaning or significance was left in the mind and remained largely unformulated. Mythological scenes such as this one provided a kind of cross-tabulation of concepts.