ASPECTS OF SPACE AND COMPOSITION IN THE RELIEF REPRESENTATIONS OF THE GEBEL EL-ARAK KNIFE-HANDLE

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Résumé

COMPOSITION ET L’ESPACE DU RELIEF SUR LE MANCHE DU COUTEAU DE GEBEL EL-ARAK. Les représentations sur le manche de couteau du Gebel el-Aarak sont analysées selon la forme générale de la surface du relief, la disposition des frises et la structure de leur composition. Par conséquent, quatre sections différentes du relief ont été identifiées sur un plan formel. Finalement, des questions se posent de savoir dans quelle mesure ces sections reflètent aussi des unités thématiques et s’il existe une direction fixe de lecture des reliefs.

Abstract

The relief representations of the Gebel el-Aarak knife-handle are investigated according to the general shape of the relief surface, their frieze arrangement and their overall compositional structure. Hence, on formal reasons alone four different relief sections can be determined. Finally, questions are raised as to what degree the relief sections also form conceptual units and whether or not there is a rigidly fixed direction of reading the reliefs.

The Gebel el-Aarak knife has often been referred to in literature on ancient Egyptian art. In the present paper it was therefore not considered necessary to give another detailed description of its representations nor does the relevance of the object need to be debated regarding the relationship between Mesopotamia and Egypt at the end of the fourth millennium B.C. Instead, the reliefs were examined exclusively in the light of their frieze arrangements (Fig. 1) and the compositional patterns (Fig. 2). Certain compositional limitations resulting from the general shape of the knife-handle which certainly influenced the pictorial arrangement shall be discussed. A structural analysis of the present type is viewed by the authors as an essential precondition for more profound interpretation of the representations.

II. General remarks concerning the relationship between the shape of the knife-handle and the layout of the relief representations

The Gebel el-Aarak knife-handle is easily divided into two sides, one with a boss and one without. With a length of 9.5 cm and a maximum width measuring only 4.2 cm, its size is rather small. As the side with the boss probably faced outward when the knife was worn at the body this side may consequently be viewed as the obverse of the knife.

On both sides of the handle the reliefs are organized in five friezes of various height on invisible ground lines. The friezes are

1 We would like to thank Dr. P. Spanos for his kind offer to translate the manuscript into English. We also express our gratitude to Paul Larsen.
2 For an extended bibliography cf. RIDLEY, 1973 : 20 and WEEKS, 1985 : XIV.
3 Cf. in this connection SIEVERTSEN, 1992 : 1ff.
arranged laterally to the blade. Provided the knife was fixed to a belt the viewer saw the figures on the handle standing in upright position.

Due to the lack of space on the handle the relief representations are presented in close sequence. Vacant space is scanty, except for the lower and upper ends of the handle. Here and there the representations of different friezes extend slightly one into another though without necessarily suggesting any conceptual link. Direct overlapping of elements from different friezes, however, occurs only in the lower section of the side bearing the boss.

The grouping of the representations is to some degree also influenced by the tapering of the handle towards the end. For instance, it is noticeable that the combat scenes on the side without boss consist of four warriors in the first frieze while in the second there are five. Moreover, the representations in the upper part of the handle tend to spread vertically, those in the lower part, on the other hand, horizontally. This is true especially for the representations on the side without boss.

It should also be noticed that the boss reduces the surface of the obverse and that this side is much poorer in pictorial elements than the side without boss. Thus, there can still be counted 13 pictorial elements on the boss side (2 persons and 11 animals) whereas on the side without boss there are 19 (14 persons and 5 boats). This imbalance markedly contributes to the differing nature of each side.

III. The frieze arrangement

A. Boss side / Obverse

First frieze: Master of Animals

The first frieze is composed of three figures in a heraldic scheme generally labelled as Master of Animals. (Fig. 1) The central person is a bearded man wearing a skirt and a turban-like head-dress. With his bent arms he is grasping two lions.

Second frieze: The antithetical dogs

Two antithetically arranged dogs appear in the second frieze, each one resting a paw on the upper side of the boss of the handle.

Third frieze: The row of animals

The third frieze shows a gazelle and a small ibex on both sides next to the lower half of the boss. The animals face towards the left.

Fourth and fifth frieze: The hunting scenes

The fourth and the fifth frieze are connected by a poorly preserved human figure on the left. Dressed only with a penis sheath the figure holds a leash attached to the neck of a dog. In the other hand it carries a weapon, probably a spear, traces of which can still be made out on the tail and the right hind-leg of an ibex in the fourth frieze. A lioness appears on the right hand side of the ibex, her paws clutching the hindquarters of a bull whose forepart and head are lost, save some visible traces of a horn. The damaged animal in front of the dog of the fifth frieze is probably a capride to judge by the reduced size of the animal, the shape of its tail and the line of its back.

All the animals of the fourth and the fifth frieze as well as the hunter are moving to the right.

The arrangement of the hunting scenes diverges from one of the three upper friezes as for the first time the composition actually does not comply with the rigid single-frieze disposition observed so far. This is stressed by the leash combining hunter and dog.

Owing to the damages on the relief, however, it is less clear in which manner the hunter was related to the representations in the fourth frieze. An interesting clue, though, is provided by the posture of the ibexes head. The viewer gets the impression that the animal is looking toward the hunter whose head has to be reconstructed just below the eye-level of the capride. Furthermore, the fact that the weapon in the hunters hand crosses the hind-leg of the ibex in its full length could point to a conceptual relationship between the two.
B. Side without boss / Reverse

First and second frieze: Combat scenes

The two upper friezes on the side without boss exclusively yield combat scenes. Nine warriors disposed in three groups of two and one group of three oppose one another in battle. As in the case of the hunter on the boss side they are only wearing penis sheaths.

The combatant parties are distinguished by their hair styles. The heads of five warriors are cropped, whereas the other four show either long open hair or pigtail plaits. Usually the short haired figures, being the better equipped, appear on the left side and those with long hair are located on the right side of the groups.

The left group of the first frieze displays two warriors striding towards the right. A short haired figure abducts another figure with long hair, its head turned backwards and arms tied behind the back.

In the right group of the first frieze the two combatants are facing each other. In accordance with the following two scenes the battle is still in full progress.

The left group of the second frieze also depicts two figures directly confronting each other. While the short haired warrior seizes his opponent by his hair, the latter is making an attempt to lift up the leg of the former.

The second frieze ends with a group of three consisting of a pigtailed person in the center, and two short haired figures on the left and right. The short haired warrior to the left and the one with pigtails move to the right, while the second short haired warrior strides towards the left. Although the relief is severely damaged in that area it seems as though the person in the center has its head turned backwards.

Third to fifth frieze: The boat scenes and the chaos of corpses

The representations of the third, fourth, and fifth frieze have been affected by numerous damages to the surface of the relief which partly obscure the context.

In the third frieze two square-boats appear in backward echelon oriented to the right. Below, in the fourth frieze one recognizes four corpses which, in contrast to the usual manner of representation, are still clothed with their penis sheaths. The heads of the corpses point inwards. While the two corpses at the left can clearly be identified as having short hair, the heads of the other two have been destroyed to a large extent. The fifth frieze consists of three sickle-boats in forward echelon oriented to the left. The position of the bows here as well as in the third frieze is easily determined by the animal protomes in the front part of the boats.

Up till now a short haired person with a penis sheath standing leftward next to the boats of the third frieze has remained unmentioned. The figure holds a leash or cable in its hand. While its head touches the upper border of the third frieze, its destroyed lower legs and feet formerly extended into the fourth frieze. Since the reconstruction of the broken surface offers some problems, the relation between the man with the rope and the surrounding representations is not wholly clear.

IV. The compositional structures

Both, on the side with boss and that without interesting differences can be fixed with regard to the compositions of the upper two friezes on one hand, and the three lower ones on the other. (Fig. 2) At the same time there are marked compositional similarities between the upper and lower friezes on either side of the handle.

Whereas the upper friezes are characterized by antithetical or directly opposed groups, the lower ones mainly consist of rows and echelons.

This reflects an essential formal division in the relief decoration. The dividing lines between the respective sections correspond

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Figure 1. The Gebel el-Arak knife-handle. Boss side (left hand side) and side without boss (right hand side). Scale 3 : 2. (Drawings by R. M. Czichon after SIEVERTSEN, 1992 : Pl. 2)
more or less exactly to the middle of the
boss, i.e. the border between the upper and
the lower half of the hilt.
In order to elaborate on this we will
recapitulate in short the complex interrelation
of the composition schemes on both sides of
the handle.
The two upper friezes on the obverse are
composed of two heraldic, thus static
composition schemes, the Master of Animals
and the antithetical dogs. The triangular
arrangement of the first frieze is almost
completely symmetrical. Only the lower
body, legs, feet and head of the human figure
in the centre are turned to the left. In the
second frieze the boss itself is part of the
antithetical composition. The raised forelegs
of the dogs allude in some way to the lion

6 There do exist similar compositional schemes in
connection with the saucers of the predynastic
cosmetic palettes. Cf. for example CIALOWICZ,
1991: Fig. 13.
paws on the waist of the bearded man in the
first frieze.
In contrast, in the lower relief section of
the obverse the leftward orientation of the
animal row in the third frieze is outbalanced
by the animals of the fourth and fifth frieze
which move to the right. Nevertheless, the
antithetical composition of the two upper
friezes is referred to once more in the fourth
frieze, as the reverted head of the ibex
counteracts the front ward orientation of the
lioness.
The two upper friezes of the side without
boss are characterized by a complex
interchange of view- and moving directions,
thereby maintaining a balanced composition
not only on the internal level for each
individual group but also on the level of the
relief section as a whole. Virtually every
action is counterbalanced by another as for
example vividly demonstrated by the
struggling arms of the figures in the second
and fourth group, displaying almost perfect symmetry. Indeed, the dynamic character of the representations differs at first glance from the static motives in the upper section of the obverse. With regard to the consequent use of the principle of thesis and antithesis the compositions on both sides of the handle nevertheless remain comparable.

Furthermore, if one excludes the right figure of the fourth group, a chiastic arrangement in the compositional relationship between the four groups becomes perceptible. Under that condition the warriors in groups two and three directly oppose each other in a duel, while in groups one and four the moving direction of the warriors would be the same, the immediate relationship between the figures being accentuated by a backward turn of the heads of the figures situated on the right hand side.

Moreover, in the lower relief section of the reverse the echelons of the two different boat types directed to the right and left respectively find their counterpart in the animal sequences of the third and fifth frieze on the obverse which in their own turn move in opposite directions.

A similar phenomenon can be observed in the representations of the fourth friezes, where the inward facing heads of the corpses on the reverse heed the outward facing heads of the ibex and lioness on the obverse.

Finally, in the lower section of the reverse a human figure with a leash or rope is once more used to combine two friezes in the same manner as in the case of the hunter on the obverse. Here again, the orientation of both figures is inverted. But in contrast to the hunting scenes it is not established whether the figure in front of the square-boats unites the two friezes on an other than a formal level.

V. Conclusion

In conclusion the question has to be raised to which degree the four relief sections of the Gebel el-Arak knife-hilt not only exhibit formal but also conceptual units, even though at the present stage it must be stressed that the problems can only partly be solved.

Certainly we can affirm the conceptual unity of the combat scenes in the upper relief section of the reverse. The hunting scenes and the animal row in the lower relief section of the obverse probably as well ought to be perceived as one conceptual unit. Formal and conceptual integration hence seem to converge in both cases.

On the other hand it is less certain whether the Master of Animals and the antithetical dogs - i.e. the friezes of the upper relief section of the obverse - form a conceptual unit too. Since both motives usually appear independently from one another in predynastic Egyptian art, a direct conceptual relation cannot be fully ascertained to say the least.

Concerning the comparatively poorly preserved lower relief section of the reverse as well, it remains open how the boats, the corpses and the left figure were related to each other. For the moment we cannot state clearly whether the three friezes form a coherent scene. At any rate, the sole fact that the boats frame the corpses from above and below does not necessarily reflect the carvers intention of depicting dead bodies drifting on water.

As to the conceptual relationship between the different relief sections, certain thematical similarities repeatedly led to the assumption that the topics located on one side are more closely linked to each other rather than to the ones on the other side of the handle. But as long as this view remains on a conjectural level, caution should be applied in putting too much weight on that assumption.

All we can say for the moment is that the structural analysis of the relief representations on a whole does not support the idea that the entire series of friezes necessarily connotes a logical sequence of

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7 Probably the fact that more space was available to the artist in the second frieze than in the first had some influence on his choice to represent a group of three instead of two.

8 In this context, however, cf. also WILLIAMS and LOGAN, 1987 : 249 and Fig. 1 for the reliefs of the Metropolitan Museum knife-handle, on which water is in fact delineated in a comparable representation by means of zigzagging lines.
events. Instead, it seems likely that the arrangement of the thematic units on the relief surface in many respects is an outcome of the specific characteristics of the hilt itself as well as a predetermined compositional pattern imposed on the carvings.

Thus, the conventional reading of the reliefs from top to bottom also recurred to in the present description of the individual friezes and their compositional structures should by no means be viewed as fixed. Even though the definition of obverse and reverse is principally justified by the location of the boss, there is indeed some reason to doubt whether at all a rigidly fixed direction of reading the representations was intended by the carver. Then again, to date no arguments have been forwarded which exclude the possibility that the friezes were read from the bottom to the top.

The Gebel el-Arak knife-handle on its own certainly does not furnish enough evidence to substantiate such considerations. We feel that a better understanding of the conceptual relationship between the topics of the reliefs on the hilt can only develop on the basis of a more thorough understanding of the general ideas underlying the imagery of predynastic Egyptian art. Progress on this matter will be dependent on a comprehensive investigation of the archaeological evidence also including monuments of later periods as well as the written record.

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9 In this connection let us just point to the curious fact that among the chaos of corpses in the lower section of the reverse at least two figures apparently have shaven heads, whereas in the combat scenes of the upper two friezes the cropped warriors still seem to be clearly dominant.