

## Signs in Ancient Egypt: Another Look at the Relation of Figure to Hieroglyph

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*This article presents another attempt to solve the enigma of the peculiar manner employed by the ancient Egyptians to depict the human figure; it looks at the figure as a sign rather than as the result of a naïve or pre-Greek method of representation. The figure functions as a part of the inscription. It has a scriptorial role as a determinative to specify a grammatical function. The conventions which shaped the formation of the figure as a hieroglyph also influenced the way figures which were not parts of inscriptions were drawn. The figure first appears either in a pictorial text or as part of a hieroglyphic text rather than as a vehicle for depicting human activities only.*

THERE ARE almost as many explanations of the Egyptian convention for depicting the human figure as there are writers on Egyptian art.<sup>1</sup> The current consensus is that the Egyptian artist delineated what he knew to be present rather than only those parts of the figure he would actually see. Egyptian art dispensed with foreshortening and perspective; there was never any attempt to create pictorial space—that is, the representation of three-dimensional space on the two-dimensional surface of the picture plane we expect to see in realistic painting.<sup>2</sup> But perhaps we have been asking the wrong questions when we seek the reasons for the Egyptian figural convention in the context and terms of pictorial space. What if the Egyptian figure style is not the product of an attempt to represent reality which has taken an idiosyncratic form but a sign? Is there a connection between these peculiar depictions of the human figure and the hieroglyphs that appear with them?<sup>3</sup> Is Egyptian art an early and concrete example of the theories of semiotics, the study of signs?

Hieroglyphs comprise ideograms and phonograms. Ideograms are of two basic types, logograms and determinatives. Determinatives, with which this paper is concerned, are placed at the end of phonetically spelled out words and are either generic, categorizing

groups of words, or they are specific, depicting a particular action. Determinatives indicate the meaning of the signs, the hieroglyphs, they accompany. Some determinatives are pictures of the human figure.<sup>4</sup>

Pictures antedate hieroglyphs as message bearers or signifiers representing a meaning, the signified. The function of any sign is to convey meaning as clearly as possible. The requirements of communication through the medium of visible signs surely must have shaped the Egyptian figure style. The designs on Gerzean pottery (ca. 3400 BC) might well be picture writing (pictographs) rather than figural decoration. Hieroglyphs appear in the archaic period (ca. 3200 BC) in combination with what are certainly pictorial texts. The predynastic tomb painting from Hierakonpolis (ca. 3200 BC), the earliest example of wall painting in Egypt known to date, might well be a pictorial text, disorganized though it may appear. Hieroglyphs are absent and the many figures, some of them in boats, are scattered across the surface singly or in groups. This painting does not make much sense as a picture but it might make sense as a text if we knew how to read it.

As pointed out by Whitney Davis in his article on register composition, the artist in predynastic Egypt had to solve the problem of representing events which had taken place in time and space, four dimensions, on a two dimensional surface.<sup>5</sup> One could also say that the artist must retell a story using visual signs. The initial solution was to employ the bird's-eye view which appears on Gerzean pots and on the Hierakonpolis painting as well. There we see a group of figures standing around a circle and laid out like the spokes on a wheel, the circle being the hub. Another solution was to use a groundline, and groundlines may have formed the basis for writing.<sup>6</sup> These two methods are combined on the somewhat later slate palettes to present the subject in an orderly way. The arrangement of the figures has been rationalized and we have legible pictorial texts. There is no difference semiotically between pictorial texts and scriptorial texts; both are groups of signs arranged in a logical way.

The Battle palette (Figure 1) does not use groundlines on the side shown here. Several separate events are shown, as was also the case in the Hierakonpolis painting, but there is a sense of order in the arrangement of the figural groups on this palette which is lacking in the painting. What is obvious is that the figures with the curly hair have lost. Two have their arms held behind their backs by signs for nome standards which symbolize the units of the victorious forces from several districts, or nomes. Another loser is being gutted by a lion, symbol of the victorious ruler. Others lie dead and are pecked

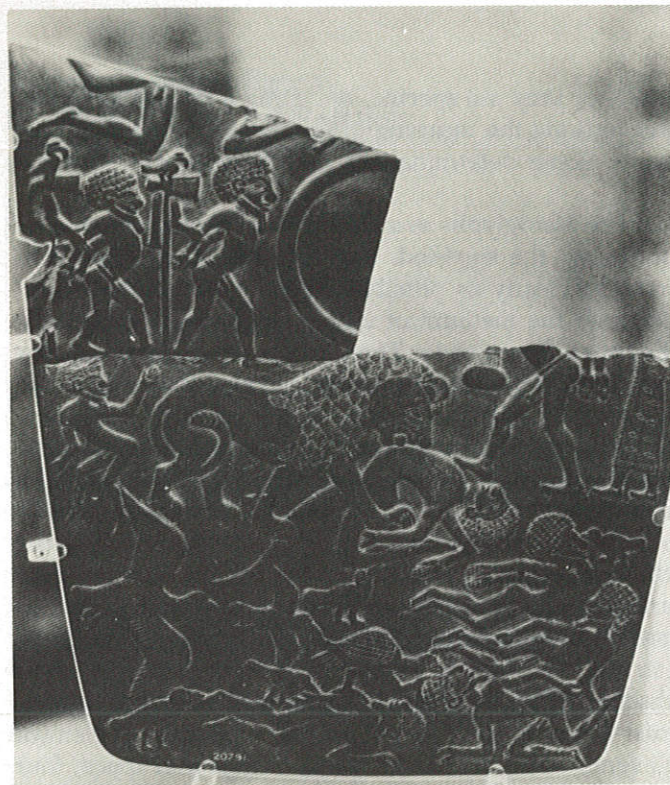
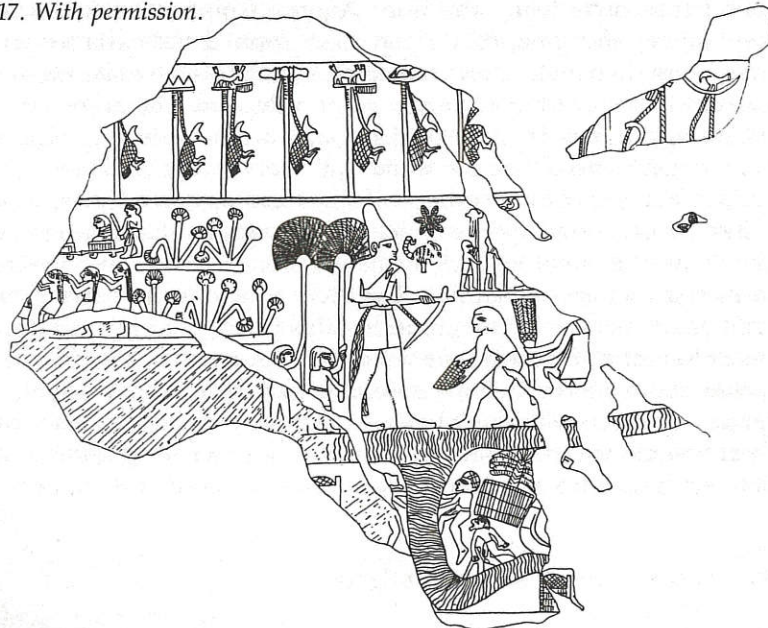


Figure 1 Battle palette, London, British Museum. R. Alexander photo. With permission.

Figure 2 King Scorpion macehead. Line drawing from W. S. Smith, *The Art and Architecture of Ancient Egypt* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1958), fig. 4 p. 17. With permission.



at by vultures. One more, perhaps a leader, has his arms held behind his back by a man wearing a long skirt who clearly is one of the conquerors. Those who have been taken captive are placed above those who have fallen; the living are being taken away, the dead are left to the vultures. The lion is the symbol of the king but might also, like the vultures, represent observed fact. Can we be sure that lions did not feed on dead warriors in predynastic times?

The King Scorpion macehead (ca. 3200 BC, Figure 2), shows how quickly this process of organization and rationalization of a pictorial text advanced. This carved ceremonial macehead was deposited along with other maceheads and the Narmer palette in a temple at Hierakonpolis. We see on it both the use of groundlines and the bird's-eye view which is used to depict a small landscape. Each figural group has a groundline. The nome standards form a border along the top. A procession in two files is shown on the left. A landscape is placed below the figure of the king. King Scorpion—identified by two hieroglyphs, a rosette combined with a scorpion, and by his large size and his attributes (crown, special kilt, and tail)—stands holding a digging instrument, prepared to cut the first irrigation ditch of the flood season.<sup>7</sup> A worker is ready with a basket to carry away the dirt. The river is shown and doubles as a groundline. A large ditch and two workmen are shown below.

The composition of this piece is arranged in a logical and legible way. Word signs (hieroglyphs) are added as captions. We already know from his attributes and size that we see the figure of a king; the rosette and scorpion tell us which king. In addition what we call the Egyptian figural convention is used but only for the king. It will be noted that the walking captives on the upper left of the Battle palette are shown in what we would call realistic profile. The distortions of the figures of the dead are intended to make it quite clear that they are dead. The same conventional distortion appears on the bottom of the Narmer palette (Figure 3) which is somewhat later than the Battle and Scorpion works.

We find on the Narmer palette a pictorial text with written commentary organized to read from top to bottom. Groundlines are used but the depiction of landscape, as seen on the Scorpion macehead, has been dropped. The back of the palette is shown here and can be read as follows, beginning at the top. "King Narmer [his name is written in two hieroglyphs placed inside the pictograph of a palace facade, a combination replacing the earlier rosette and pictograph, at top center] under the protection of the goddess Hathor [symbolized by the cow's heads to left and right], slays his foes [shown in the central portion of the palette]." As the god Horus he

takes possession of the papyrus land (this is the statement made by the composite hieroglyph to the right).<sup>8</sup> Narmer's vizier stands behind him in attendance and has his title sign just as the vanquished enemy chieftan has his. Furthermore, the king has taken possession of a city of his enemies (as shown at the bottom by the sign for a city wall and another sign placed above figures representing dead enemies).

Here the two texts, pictorial and scriptorial, combine and the figural convention is used for Narmer, his vizier, and his captive. It would appear that as the text increases in importance, so the figure decreases in realism and becomes more sign-like than life-like. The convention for the figure of the king has become a formula. The formulaic figure is not used on the Battle palette. On the Scorpion macehead it is used only for the king who has his name written next to him. In the Narmer palette the formulaic figure has become standardized. It is used just as consistently on the front side (not shown here) as well.

An interesting exception to the figural formula is shown on a stone slab which was found by Walter B. Emery when excavating at Saqqara (Figure 4). This carved slab was used in the casing of a Third Dynasty shaft tomb which had been cut through the superstructure of the First Dynasty tomb 3507.<sup>9</sup> It is Emery's belief that this slab, obviously reused, may have belonged to the First Dynasty tomb, thought to be that of Queen Her-nit, consort of Zer, who died early in the reign of King Udimu (ca. 3000 BC).<sup>10</sup>

This slab is probably nothing more than a sculptor's trial piece. What is worth notice is the use of a non-formulaic, realistic, profile. The two kings are shown as they would actually appear. They wear the Red Crown of Lower Egypt and the short robe used for the Heb-Sed festival of rejuvenation. The same presentation can be seen in a relief from the Fourth Dynasty sun temple of Niussere at Abu Gorub. Perhaps this is the conventional way to depict the Pharaoh when he is performing this particular ritual. This trial piece and the Abu Gorub relief offer some scanty evidence for believing that the Egyptian artist was not hindered by a "pre-Greek" method of drawing.<sup>11</sup> He could draw and carve realistically rather than pictographically when the situation allowed him to do so.

We have seen how the figure was turned into a formula as hieroglyphs enter into and become more important in predynastic and early dynastic carvings on stone. During the First Dynasty the figure is subordinated to the inscription and becomes a determinative, another hieroglyph. The stele of Sabef, reported by Petrie, is the most

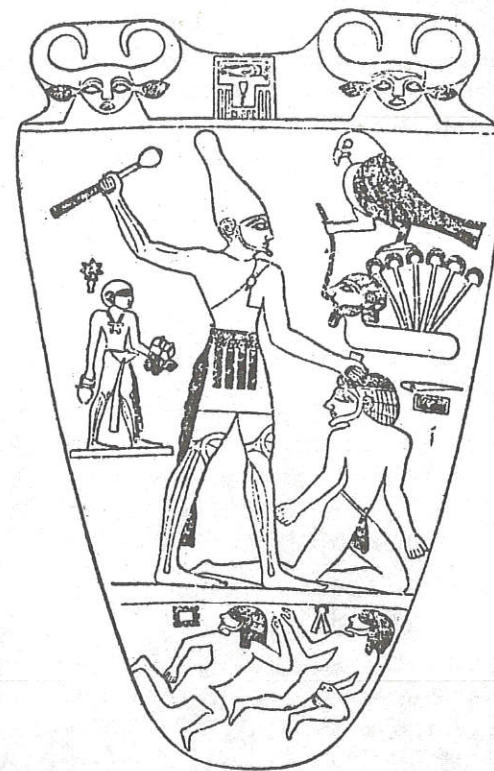


Figure 3 Narmer palette, backside. Line drawing from Kurt Sethe, *Das Hieroglyphische Schriftsystem* (Gluckstadt and Hamburg: J. J. Augustin Verlag, 1935), p. 11.

Figure 4 Carved slab. From W. B. Emery, *Great Tombs of the First Dynasty, III* (London; Egypt Exploration Society, 1958), p1 97a. With permission.



Figure 5 Wooden panel of Hesy-ra. From Edward L. B. Terrace and Henry G. Fischer, *Treasures of Egyptian Art from the Cairo Museum* (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 1970), p. 35. With permission.

Figure 6 Detail from Figure 5.



highly developed of the First Dynasty stelae found at Abydos.<sup>12</sup> Sabef is shown holding his staff and a short rod. The inscription gives his various titles but is not a caption. The inscription is the message and the figure is there to tell the reader what the message is about. This combination of figure with inscription is called a complemented writing. That is, as defined by Battiscombe Gunn, the written name is accompanied by a picture, or a statue, of the person named and so no other determinative is needed.<sup>13</sup> The picture or statue makes a written determinative redundant because the image itself is the determinative.<sup>14</sup> Gunn goes on to say, "In all such cases writing and picture are but differentiations of a single impulse to presentation."<sup>15</sup> This use of complemented writing continues in use throughout Egyptian history and may well be the real reason why the figural formula remained unchanged.

The formula for the seated figure takes shape in the Second Dynasty (2980-2780 BC) and continued in use from then on. The deceased is shown seated at an offering table placed below and to the left of an inscription giving the name and titles of the dead and a list of foodstuffs provided for the sustenance of the soul in the after-life. The pose is always the same: the face is in profile, the shoulders are frontal, the torso is twisted, and the legs are in profile. The left arm is crossed over the chest, the right arm extends towards the table. This same pose, when used in Eighteenth Dynasty banquet scenes, is an example of the carry-over of the scriptorial figure into a pictorial context. It was not easy for the Egyptian artist to break out of the figural convention used in scriptorial contexts.

The Third Dynasty (2780-2680 BC) wooden panel from the tomb of Hesy-ra (Figure 5) is often cited as the prototype for the figural canon used from then on. "Canon" when used to describe the figure in Egyptian art refers to the system of proportions which standardized the drawing of the figure. But no notice has been taken of the relation of the figure of Hesy-ra to the inscription above him. This figure of Hesy-ra, like that of Sabef in the First Dynasty, is also a determinative and so we have here another complemented writing in which the figure is an integral part of the inscription.

There is another figure in this inscription (Figure 6). It is an old man, the hieroglyph for old age. Except for their size and the greater detail in the larger figure of Hesy-ra, the two figures are almost the same; the figural formula is identical, the poses are similar, the heads are carefully carved. Large or small, both figures are hieroglyphs.

Egyptian pictures, which are signs, were texts before they were art whether they were painted, or carved in low relief.<sup>16</sup> Messages, in-

formation, statements about events were first set down in pictorial, or pictographic, texts like the Hierakonpolis wall painting. Later, in predynastic and early dynastic carvings on palettes and maceheads, hieroglyphs were added to supplement the pictures by identifying certain persons and places. In the First Dynasty, however, an important change takes place. Pictures of men and women suddenly become part of hieroglyphic inscriptions and the manner in which the figure is drawn is frozen in the formula originally used to show the king. Another formula based on that for the standing figure is invented for the seated figure; it is simply a standing figure bent to fit on a chair with the arms rearranged to show the act of reaching towards a table.

The immutability of the hieroglyph has been remarked on by N.M. Davies who noted that the forms of the hieroglyphs of the Third Dynasty were handed down through the centuries without deviation.<sup>17</sup> We should not be amazed that the figural convention, or formula, was just as unchanging. Why should this consistency be regarded as amazing or inexplicable? It is truly inexplicable only if one insists on thinking about the Egyptian figure style in terms of artistic development on the European model wherein representational forms show a progression from primitive to more advanced, that is realistic illusionistic, states that can be traced and analyzed as stylistic sequences. But as soon as Egyptian figures are looked at not as representational signs, that is as art forms, but as linguistic signs which by their very nature must remain true to type in order to be legible, the puzzle can be solved. While a naive vision may well have shaped the Egyptian figure in its inception, it was the use to which that figure style was put in scriptorial contexts that kept the figure style essentially unaltered.

But what about the scenes of daily life we know from tombs of all periods from the Fourth Dynasty on? What about the huge sunken reliefs on temple walls and pylons? They, too, are texts but they are usually narratives and are a good deal less formal than the inscriptions which employ the standing and seated figure as determinatives. Painting as decoration of domestic interiors is in another category altogether and does not concern us here. It is not unfair to the ancient Egyptians to say that the first purpose of their pictorial art, an art of the human figure, was to convey information. The specific purpose of funerary art was to assist the dead and to provide by means of pictures for the support and sustenance of the soul in the after-life. In public art, the reliefs on temple pylons for instance, glorification of a victorious Pharaoh is often its purpose.

The hieroglyphic sign seems to have shaped the conventions of Egyptian figural art. Egyptian art, an art primarily of figural signs, should be thought of as pictographic language and the use of pictographic figures (signs) as communicators was practiced by the ancient Egyptians long before the mid-nineteenth century when Charles Saunders Pierce began to work out his theory of signs.

1. My thanks to Professor Robert L. Alexander of the University of Iowa for his perceptive and useful comments.

2. See Heinrich Schaefer, *Principles of Egyptian Art*, ed. Emma Brunner-Traut, tr. John Baines (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), *passim*; E. L. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion* (New York: Pantheon, 1956), p. 18; E. B. Smith, *Egyptian Architecture as Cultural Expression* (New York, London: D. Appleton-Century Co., 1938), p. 45, p. 241; Irmgard Woldering, *The Art of Egypt* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1965), p. 32.

3. See K. Michalowski, *The Art of Ancient Egypt*, tr. Norbert Guterman (New York: Henry Abrams, n.d.), p. 124; W. S. Smith, *The Art and Architecture of Ancient Egypt* (Hammondsworth: Penguin Books, 1958), p. 4; Alan Gardiner, "The Nature and Development of Egyptian Hieroglyphic Writing," *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology*, 2 (1915), p. 17; W. C. Hayes, *Sceptre of Egypt*, part I (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1953), p. 43; Cyril Aldred, *The Development of Egyptian Art from 3000 to 1315 BC* (London: Alec Tiranti Ltd., 1952), p. 6; Schaefer, p. 256.

4. I am grateful to the referee enlisted by *Visible Language* for comment and information on these points.

5. Whitney M. Davis, "The Origins of Register Composition in Predynastic Egyptian Art," *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 96 #3 (July-Sept. 1976), 404-418, *passim*.

6. Humphrey Case and Joan Crowfoot-Payne, "Tomb 100: the Decorated Tomb at Hierakonpolis," *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology*, 48 (1961), p. 17.

7. A. J. Arkell, "Was King Scorpion Menes?," *Antiquity* No. 145, 37 (1963), p. 33. I am indebted to the *Visible Language* referee for calling this article to my attention.

8. Gardiner, p. 73-74.

9. Walter B. Emery, *Great Tombs of the First Dynasty III* (London: Egypt Exploration Society, 1958), p. 84.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 73.

11. Schaefer, p. 44.

12. W. M. F. Petrie, *The Royal Tombs of the First Dynasty*, I and II (London: Egypt Exploration Society, 1900-2), p1. XXI and XXXVI, and p. 44-45.

13. Cecil M. Firth and Battiscombe Gunn, *Teti Pyramid Cemeteries*, 2v. (Cairo, 1926), v. 2, p. 171, note 2.

14. Henry Fischer, "Redundant Determinatives in the Old Kingdom," *Metropolitan Museum Journal* (New York), 8 (1973), p. 7.

15. Firth and Gunn, v. 2, p. 171, note 2.

16. I. J. Gelb, *A Study of Writing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), *passim*.

17. Nina M. Davies, *Picture Writing in Ancient Egypt* (London: Oxford University Press, 1958), p. 11.