
Anna Zajac
Kraków

SOME REMARKS ON THE REPRESENTATION
OF SO CALLED BOAT PROCESSION
FROM WADI EL-BARRAMIYA
(EASTERN DESERT OF EGYPT)

The representation of the so called “procession of boats” engraved on the rock surface in the Wadi el-Barramiya, a valley in the southern part of the Eastern Desert of Egypt, which connects Nile Valley and the Red Sea coast (site ET-A/WB-4, 25°02’ N, 33°39,5’ E) is one of the most impressing and sophisticated examples of the predynastic art¹. Gerald Fuchs examined and described the petroglyph in 1989². Since that time no systematic fieldwork has been done. The site extends over 100 m on the southeastern side of the wadi, but the central part of the engraving faces northwest. The surface of the rock face is partially damaged. That is why some parts of the drawing remain unclear.

The main part of the rock art image from Wadi el-Barramiya site is dedicated to the procession of the boats. The vessels are accompanied by the men and the animals. The march begins with the depiction of two vessels: the sickle shaped one in the foreground and square boat in the background. It continues with the next square boat and a sickle one on the right. Then goes further – to the right part of the scene where the square boat with the cabin on the deck and incurved square vessel with a chieftain are represented. The boats are towed from the right to the left and almost all depicted animals proceed in the same direction. All figures are shown on different levels and

¹ The discussed site must have played very important role for many years of the Egyptian history. Some pictures were added much later – they have lighter patination and their style is different. Among them are: horses with or without raiders, camel and Arabic inscription نعيم (n`aīm).

² G.Fuchs, *Rock Engravings in the Wadi el-Barramiya*, *The African Archaeological Review* 7 (1989), 136.

boats have different sizes, what may suggest that a pseudo-perspective was used.

The composition of the described work of art is very complicated. To make it clearer to the reader, we can divide the whole scene in six sections. The narration in section one begins in the upper left corner of the rock face with representation of two boats, which are situated one above the other. The line of the hull of the bigger one (boat 1) is straight and the bow and the stern are bended. About 70 vertical marks engraved within the hull of the vessel can be interpreted as a crew³. There is also a standard. G. Fuchs interprets the ornament that superimposes it as a bull. The boat is being towed by seven person represented by means of seven vertical strokes similar to those inside the hull of the boat. The smaller boat was engraved above the bigger one (boat 2). Not only has it a straight hull but also the line of the bow and the stern. Tassels that are hanging down decorate its prow. One of the silhouettes that are standing on the deck raises her both hands above the head. In the left one the man holds a tool, probably a boomerang or a flint knife. The only one element of the clothing that was marked is the tail attached to his back. There is the second person on the right. The man is kneeling with hands tied. There are also nineteen crew members represented as the small vertical strokes inside the hull of the vessel. Three animals were depicted above: a jackal and two bovines (an ibex and a bull). Under the vessels we can see a representation of a man surrounded by many animals of different species.

The second section begins with the representation of the two bovines towing a boat (boat 3) which has straight hull and high endings. Its prow is ornamented with two tassels.

There is also a vessel (boat 4) in the third part of the engraving. An animal with horns tows it. The bovine is supervised by a man who is holding it on the lasso.

Next section begins in the upper right corner of the rock face. There are two people standing one next to each other. Both have specific big oval faces (masks?) and plumed hair-dresses. The steatopygia is also indicated. Two small dogs proceed the men. The human figure can be also seen in the latter part of the engraving. The man is holding a bow and is wearing a mask decorated on the top with a single feather.

The narration continues further on few levels. The whole cycle begins with two bovines held by a man by means of the rope. Next five horizontal lines link those figures with an ibex that is connected with a rope to a boat (boat 5). The boat has a typical construction (high endings) and its shape is

³ G.Fuchs, *Rock Engravings...*, 136.

similar to boat 2, 3 and 4. The prow of the vessel is decorated with an ornament, which looks like a head of the bird. The additional decorations to the stern are two tassels. A man is standing on the deck of the vessel, inside the construction looking like a cabin. The steatopygy is indicated. There are also 24 crew members on his both sides (14 on the right and ten on the left). The animals of different species surround the boat. Under the group we see a man with plumed hairdress holding a small lamb. From his left hand starts a line, which ends near the head of a crocodile. The scene can be explained as a crocodile-hunt with harpoon.

The last vessel (boat 6) is placed in the right upper side of the scene. It has almost straight hull and high endings. The theriomorph ornament superimposes the prow. There is also a single tassel hanging down under the stylized horns. The S-shaped stern is decorated with 4 short horizontal lines. A man stands inside the hull. He raises his arms above the head in a specific gesture. He wears a plumed hairdress. There is a small square construction on his right hand. 24 crew members are standing on his both sides. Under the boat we can see two men surrounded by animals that hunt bovines by throwing lasso round their horns. The animals of different species proceed the boat.

Gerald Fuchs dates the scene on Late Prehistoric/Early Dynastic period⁴ using chronology based on the typology of the boats created by P.Červiček⁵. There are three different types of the vessels represented on ET-A/WB-4 site according to Fuchs. Boats 1 and 4 belong to the type VII⁶. In Winkler's typology they are known as "sickle boats"⁷. The vessels no. 2, 3 and 5 can be classified into the IIInd type⁸ (Winkler's square boats⁹) which can be dated on period between Naqada I and the First Dynasty¹⁰. Only one (boat 6) represents the Vth type¹¹, which in Winkler's terminology is known as incurved square type¹².

⁴ G.Fuchs, *Felsbilder.*, 148.

⁵ P.Červiček, *Chronology and Chronology of Upper Egyptian and Nubian Rock Art up to 1400 B.C.*, Sahara 5 (1992-3), 41-48; Červiček, *Felsbilder des Nord – Etbai Oberägyptens und Unternubiens*, Wiesbaden 1974.

⁶ P.Červiček, *Felsbilder.*, 126.

⁷ H.A.Winkler, *Rock Drawings of Southern Upper Egypt I*, [Sir Robert Mond Desert Expedition 1936-1937], London 1938, 35.







⁸ P.Červiček, *Felsbilder.*, 109.

⁹ H.A.Winkler, *Rock Drawings.*, 36.

¹⁰ P.Červiček, *Felsbilder.*, 109.

¹¹ P.Červiček, *Felsbilder.*, 122.

¹² H.A.Winkler, *Rock Drawings.*, 36.

						
	Boat 1	Boat 2	Boat 3	Boat 4	Boat 5	Boat 6
central figure	-	+	-	-	+	+
crew	+	+	-	+	+	+
cabin	-	-	-	-	+	+
standard	+	-	-	+	-	-
bow/stern decoration	-	+	+	+	+	+
Winkler's type	sickle	square	square	sickle	square	incurved square
Červiček's type	VII	II	II	VII	II	V

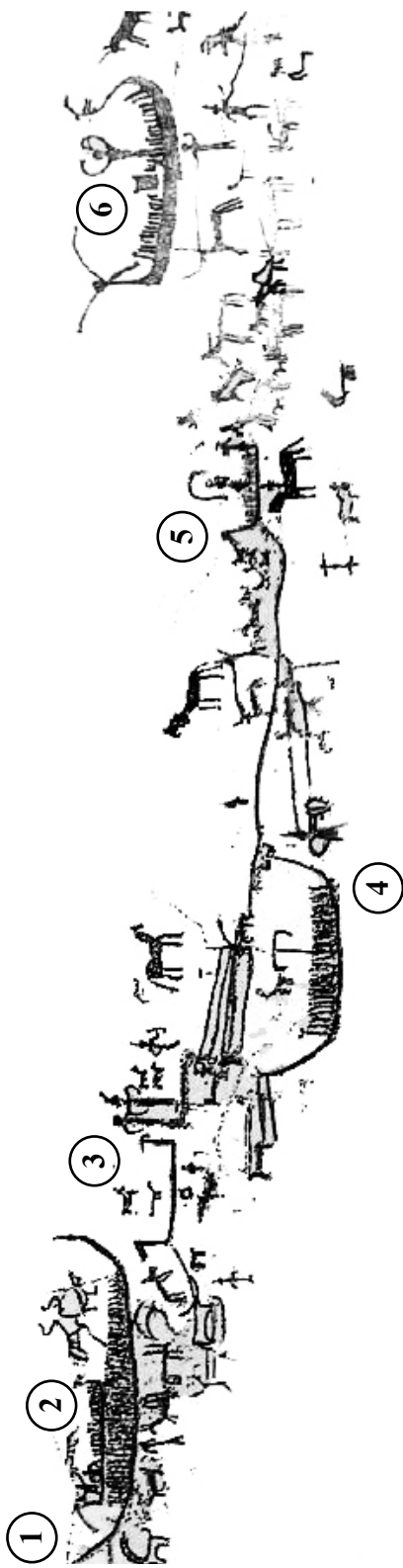
Fuchs is of the opinion that the described sections of the engraving should not be considered separately¹³. The individual images described above are, thus, incorporated into scene where a clear relationship exists between the different components.

In order to analyze the petroglyph few relevant items should be mentioned. The above described scene has very wide analogies in Predynastic art finds from the Nile Valley. Its composition is similar to the wall painting from Hierakonpolis and linen painting from Gebelein. In the both cases the motif of boat procession, hunting, and people with raised hands are common. The combination of vessels of different types can be also seen in decoration of the Gebel el-Arak and Metropolitan Museum knife handles. In decorations of the C-ware and Gerzean ceramics we can point three particular motifs which form a useful point of reference to described engraving: human figures raising their arms above the heads surrounded by animals, plumed figures and scenes of boat towing. Similar ideas also appear on another rock art sites, such as Kanais, Wadi Abbad, Wadi Atwani and Hierakonpolis.

The silhouette of the kneeling man was represented on the painted linen from Gebelein, and on the Qustul incense burner¹⁴. The only difference is that in those cases the man is depicted in profile, while in the Wadi el-Barramiya engraving he is visible *en face*.

¹³ G.Fuchs, *Felsbilder...*, 136 ff.

¹⁴ K.Ciałowicz, *Symbolika przedstawień władcy egipskiego w okresie predynastycznym*, [Rozprawy habilitacyjne UJ nr 258], Kraków 1993, 32.



1. Redrawing of the petroglyph from WB-4 site, after: G.Fuchs, Rock Engravings in the Wadi el-Barramiya, Eastern Desert of Egypt, The African Archaeological Review 7 (1989), 127-153.

All mentioned analogies show that discussed representation fits into common artistic style in Egyptian predynastic art. The discussed engraving from the Wadi el-Barramiya site was made under impulse from the Nile Valley and depicted issues reflect the most important ideas that had a clue meaning for the inception of the state of the pharaohs. The Wadi el-Barramiya glyph, considered as a part of artistic style, is not unique but it reflects a great deal of the individuality.

On the petroglyph from the Wadi el-Barramiya site three main themes are represented. They refer to hunting, triumph and procession of boats, which must have played important role during religious ceremonies. The part of the scene devoted to hunting begins in the middle section of the engraving and it continues till the end of it. It consists of: representation of man standing between the animals under the boats 1 and 2, man with bow surrounded by dogs over the boat 4, hunter catching crocodile by means of the harpoon from the fifth section, and two men throwing lassoes over the heads of the bovids in the right edge of the work of art.

A very important feature manifested on ET-A/WB-4 site is the motif of gaining mastery over people and animals. In the first case men are mostly reduced to rudimentary stick-like figures. However, the most sophisticated scene of the triumph is depicted in the first section of the engraving where the man raises a weapon above the head of kneeling person. The mentioned theme refers not only to the mastery over human but also to the mastery over animals. There are thus many figures, which hunt bovines by throwing lasso round their horns. It has to be emphasize that human beings depicted on ET-A/WB-4 glyph not only lord the calm animals like ibex or antelope but also a dangerous beasts. That is why the most pointed example that stresses the role of the man and creates impression of his majesty is the representation of the crocodile-hunter (section 5).

There is no doubt that the main role in the described petroglyph plays representation of the boat procession. All vessels seem to be connected by means of the complicated system of lines running between them and animals. G. Fuchs is of the opinion that ropes connecting vessels to the animals may symbolize abstract mental links between them¹⁵.

Very important features that help us to understand the meaning of the whole scene are: standards (boats 1 and 4) and cabin like constructions (boats 5 and 6). The standard on the first boat is superimposed by silhouette of the bull. Such iconographical element can also be seen on petroglyphic representation

¹⁵ G.Fuchs, *Rock Engravings...*, 151.

from Hierakonpolis (site Hk 61)¹⁶. We have to remember that this animal was probably a symbol of royalty¹⁷ during the late Predynastic period – the best example of its significance are representations on palettes: the Bull Palette¹⁸ and Narmer Palette.

The cabin-like structures at mid-deck between stem and stern are represented in two forms: domed (boat 5) and square with two vertical lines (boat 6). The human figure inside the first one provides us very important information about meaning of the whole scene. The pose (standing) and the silhouette (indication of the steatopygy) of the person may suggest that this is not the funerary procession and it is rather linked with ceremonies devoted to the living.

The interpretations of the scenes where the main role play representations of the boats vary from religious to military ones. D. Rohl is of the opinion that the number of the crew members depicted on the deck of the vessels proves their military significance¹⁹. But his theory seems to be highly disputable because it does not explain why, in many cases, the boats are shown as being dragged by men and animals. J. Vercoutter interprets the scene from Hierakonpolis painting, which is similar to described one, as representation of hunting. He suggests that the boats were used only in order to transport hunters and sees no prove for their possible ideological or religious meaning²⁰.

As far as some specialists are concerned, motif of the procession of the vessels should be explained mainly in religious context²¹. Such representations are considered as the very early beginning of the conception of solar barques that were used in the pharaonic times in *heb sed* rituals. We cannot exclude the theory about the existence of such ceremonies, organized in order to honor the chiefs heading local communities, in the discussed period.

All agree on the extraordinary significance of the large scale figures raising their hands in specific gesture²² standing on the deck of the boats that are being

¹⁶ M.A.Berger, *Predynastic Animal-headed Boats from Hierakonpolis and Southern Egypt*, in: R. Friedman, B. Adams (eds.), *The Followers of Horus* [Oxbow Monograph 20], Oxford, fig. 1, 108 ff.

¹⁷ K.Ciałowicz, *Symbolika...*, 40, 109.

¹⁸ G.Steindorff, *Eine neue Art ägyptischer Kunst*, [in:] *Aegyptiaca: Festschrift für G.Ebers* 1897, 131; W.M.F.Petrie, *Ceremonial Slate Palettes*, London 1953, 15.

¹⁹ D.Rohl (ed.), *The Followers of Horus. Eastern Desert Survey Report 1.*, Institute for the Studies of Interdisciplinary Sciences 2000, 5.

²⁰ J.Vercoutter, *L'Égypte et la vallée du Nil. I: Des origines à la fin de l'Ancien Empire*, Paris 1992, 168.

²¹ G.Fuchs, *Rock Engravings...*, 136-141; G.Fuchs, *Petroglyphs in the Eastern Desert of Egypt: New Finds in the Wadi el-Barramiya*, Sahara 4 (1991), 68; P.Červíček, *Felsbilder...*, 139-143.

²² Winkler interprets such gesture as a pose of dancing or of mourning, compare: H.A. Winkler, *Rock drawings...*, 25.

dragged by the animals. Such factors as: their size, plumed hairdresses and the fact that they are holding tools considered as the symbols of social status are the prove of their meaning in the hierarchy and possibly their role in the religious rituals. The context of the described engraving and certain analogies to the decorated works of art found in the Nile valley let us draw a conclusion that the big figures cannot be interpreted just as deities. Of course we cannot exclude the theory that represented activities were a part of the ceremony linked with religious beliefs and among them belief in the supernatural world. It has to be stressed that the motif of boat was for many years of Egyptian civilization most frequently connected with afterlife travel and *sed* ceremonies dedicated to the eternal rejuvenation of the living king.

After deep considering of all the details of the engraving and comparing them to works of art found in the Nile valley we can conclude that described motifs represented on the Wadi el-Barramiya rock art site have links with idea of the ruler. There is almost no doubt that discussed work of art was made in order to preserve specific knowledge about the world of its creator. Especially it seems to stress the extraordinary role and social position of the chieftain heading local community. Depicted actions, such as hunting, triumph and ceremonies on boats stress his role in the society as the lord of the human and animals. The Wadi el-Barramiya petroglyph may also be considered as a reflection of some religious rituals similar to *sed* ceremony.

Anna Zając
annak.zajac@uj.edu.pl