

Dancing or Fighting? A Recently Discovered Predynastic Scene from Abydos, Egypt

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A recently discovered painted pottery vessel from the Predynastic cemetery of Umm el-Qaab in Abydos, Egypt (early fourth millennium BC), bears one of the most sophisticated proto-historic scenes surviving from the ancient Near East. The excavators interpreted the scene as a depiction of warfare. A systematic analysis of its various components, however, as well as two similar contemporary scenes, suggests that the scene depicts dancing. It is even possible that the scene represents four stages in a sequence of movement. If so, it is one of the earliest movement notation documents preserved from antiquity.

The societies of Predynastic Egypt have attracted much scholarly attention. They are the precursors of the great Egyptian Pharaonic civilization. In the absence of written documents, however, very little is known of the cult and ritual practices in these societies. Scenes depicting interaction between people can shed light on this obscure phase, but are very rare. Thus a unique recent discovery from early Predynastic Egypt (Naqada I, early fourth millennium BC) — a painted scene on a pottery vessel depicting 17 human figures — is a most welcome contribution (Dreyer *et al.* 1998). The excavators, who published the find, took it for granted that the scene represents warfare. To my mind, however, it is a sophisticated dancing scene, involving such elements as body gestures, direction of movement, gender distinction, age, clothing, accompanying objects and hierarchical order. It is even possible that the scene represents four stages in a sequence of movement. If so, this is one of the earliest examples of movement notation to have survived.

The interesting methodological question in this case is how two such different interpretations could have been proposed. Decoding meaning from art objects is a basic problem in dealing with items from the past. Scholars from the discipline of art history have written volumes on this subject (see, for example, Panofsky 1955, 26–54; Gombrich 1972, 1–22; Bryson 1983). The main working tool at our disposal for this purpose is iconography, which has been defined as ‘that branch of the history of art which

concerns itself with the subject matter or meaning of works of art, as opposed to their form’ (Panofsky 1955, 26). As most of the works by art historians deal with items from historical periods, where religion and mythology are well known, this methodology is not very helpful when prehistoric material is considered. Nevertheless, the following warning is no doubt relevant to all:

One methodological rule, at any rate, should stand out in this game of unriddling the mysteries of the past. However daring we may be in our conjectures — and who would want to restrain the bold? — no such conjectures should ever be used as a stepping stone for yet another, still bolder hypothesis. We should always ask the iconologist to return to base from every one of his individual flights, and to tell us whether programs of the kind he has enjoyed reconstructing can be documented from primary sources or only from the works of his fellow iconologists. Otherwise we are in danger of building a mythical mode of symbolism, much as the Renaissance built up a fictitious science of hieroglyphics that was based on a fundamental misconception of the nature of the Egyptian script (Gombrich 1972, 21).

The data

Before analyzing the recently discovered scene, two other relevant items, both known for some 90 years, should be examined. They are stylistically close to

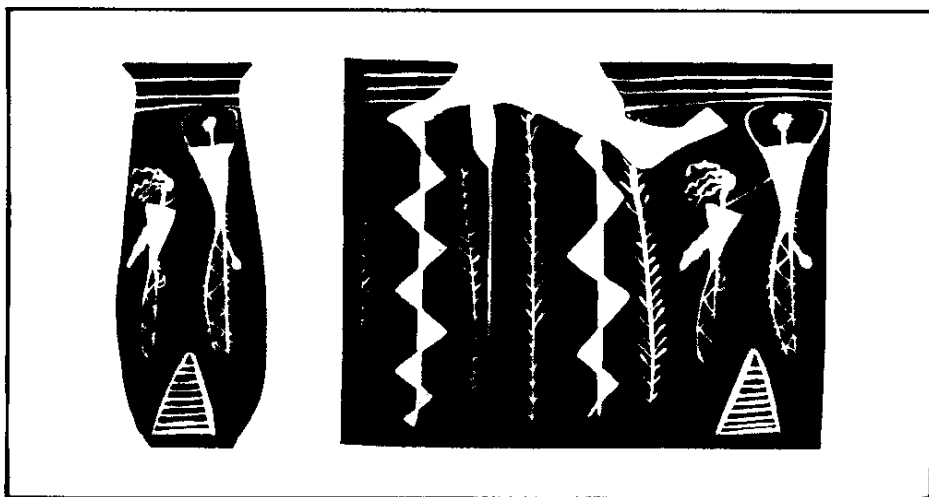


Figure 1. A tall beaker from the collections of University College, London (Petrie 1920, pl. XVII:74).

the item discussed here, but appear in a much more schematic form. The ideas raised in the past concerning these items clearly affect the interpretations of the new discovery. We will follow the relevant studies according to the year of their publication.

Tall beaker from the collections of University College London (Fig. 1)

The vessel was bought on the antiquities market and is dated to the Naqada I phase on the basis of its shape and style of decoration (white cross-lined ware). It was first mentioned briefly by Petrie (1909, 55, fig. 65): 'a very early prehistoric vase, painted with white slip on the red ground, shows the crude figure of two men fighting'. Later a more detailed description was given:

A combat of long- and short-haired men. The long-haired man is probably of the usual prehistoric people, wearing the sheath, and having the long hair as often actually found on the bodies. He is successfully attacking the short-haired man, who wears a hanging appendage, perhaps a dagger sheath. Neither figure seems to have any other clothing (Petrie 1920, 16).

Tall beaker from the collections of the Royal Museum of Art and History at Brussels (Fig. 2)

The vessel was bought at Luxor in Upper Egypt in the year 1909 (Hendrickx 1996), but was published only 20 years later (Scharff 1928). The shape and the style of decoration dated it to the Naqada I phase. In the first publication the scene was described as follows:

Below the seven yellowish bands which surround the neck is an eighth band, from which hangs a row of drops and two designs reaching down, the one to the middle of the vase and the other to the bottom, both of which are unintelligible to me. The main space is occupied by eight figures of men, two of whom surpass the others in height by more than a head. The two tall figures stretch their arms upwards: twigs are stuck in their curly hair and the male organ

— if this be not the phallus-sheath — is rendered exactly as in the larger figure on the vase of Fig. 1. Like the smaller figure on that vase the six on the Brussels vase have long flowing hair, and they further resemble that figure in having the phallus represented in the form of a curved handle. Four of these figures form two pairs, the hindmost figure in each of which lays his arm on the shoulder of the man in front of him; these two pairs are grouped symmetrically about the large figure in the middle. The two remaining smaller figures are not touching one another, but stand one behind the other turning to their right in the direction of the larger figure. That all the figures on this pot, as well as the two on the University College pot, are to be interpreted as male is beyond doubt, despite the fact that the position of the arms and the coiffure of the larger figures point in reality to female customs. I do not venture to give any explanation of the scene (Scharff 1928, 268–9, pl. XXVIII).

In 1947 the scene was drawn and systematically analyzed by Baumgartel (Fig. 2:1), who gave the following analysis:

Eight figures are represented. Two of them, larger than the others, are men. They are drawn in full front view, both legs showing. Their arms are raised in what is probably an attitude of dancing. It is the same pose as that of the man on the white painted vase with the dancing couple, now in University College, London . . . The men on the Brussels vase have short, curly hair shown as dots around the heads; twigs are stuck into it. Along their legs are rows of dots which may indicate the roughness or hairiness of the skin in contrast to that of the women; to show this outside the body is a primitive expedient which the artist uses also when paint-

ing the distinctive organs of the sexes (Scharff throughout takes the women for men, and therefore cannot explain the differences in the representation of the figures). The women dance between the men in a sort of file. They are arranged in pairs. Two of these surround one of the large male figures. The women nearest to it raise one arm which they lay on its shoulder, while the one farther away lays hers on the shoulder of the woman in front of her. The other man seems to be performing by himself. The remaining pair of women are not joined to him nor to each other. The one is drawn without arms, the other, farther away from the male, seems to point with her arms away from him. This last woman is drawn smaller than the rest in order to leave enough space for the symbolical object suspended above her. Next to it is suspended another large object reaching to the bottom of the vase. Their meaning is unknown to us, and it is not obvious from the picture what they have to do with the ceremony performed (Baumgartel 1947, 64–5).

In 1988 Williams gave a long description of the items (too long to be fully included here) and considered the two scenes in detail (1988, 47–51, 93). He also proposed another way of looking at the scenes on the Brussels vessel (Fig. 2:2). He suggested that the tall figures have branches or feathers in a fan-like arrangement on their heads.

Behind the waists of the figures hang objects that consist of a shaft and a round knob. Although these objects have been identified as phalloi, they protrude from the backs of the figures; it is more likely that a mace is depicted than a phallus (1988, 47–8).

Williams understood the tall figures as rulers or deities, and the small figures as prisoners of war attached to the tall figures by cords at their necks. Thus, the scenes 'depict the victory or the victorious sacrifice' and 'the sacrifice before the palace facade or serekh' (Williams 1988, 47–9). This interpretation has been adopted by Hendrickx, who dealt with the Brussels vessel in detail (1994; 1996) and published the first technical drawing of the item (1998, figs. 5–6).

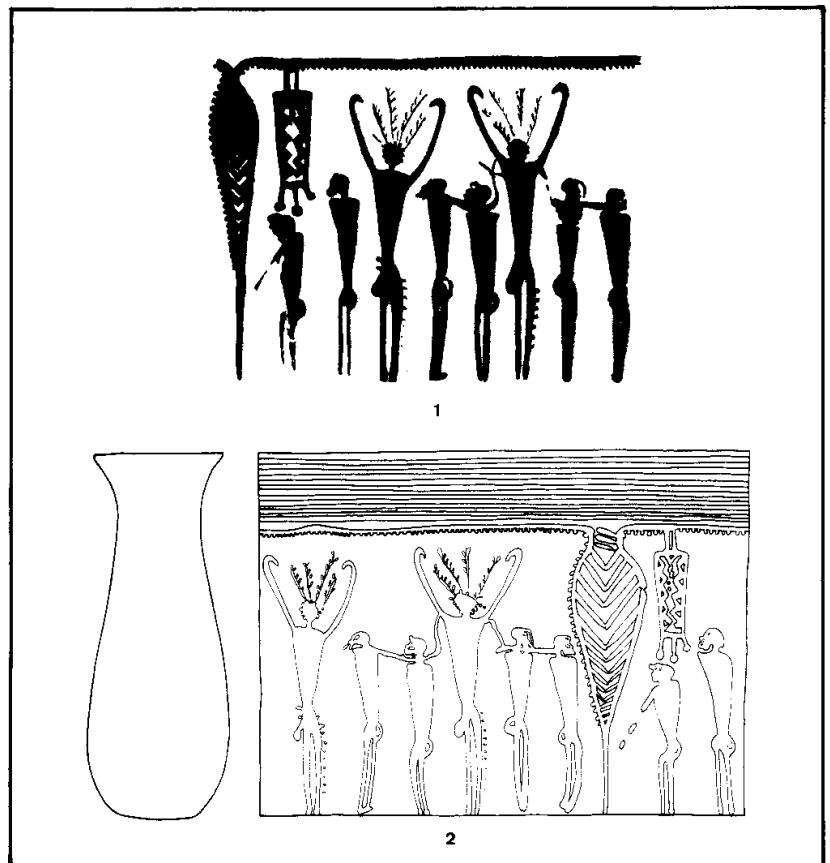


Figure 2. A tall beaker from the collections of the Royal Museum of Art and History at Brussels: 1) as first drawn (Baumgartel 1947, fig. 14); 2) Williams presentation (1988, 93, fig. 35).

In 1989 Petrie's original interpretation of the scene on the vessel from London was further applied to the vessel from Brussels: 'the artist evidently wished to distinguish two tribes or classes of people — one a tall, perhaps hairy-legged, short-haired figure, naked except for a dagger in sheath, the other a shorter, long-haired figure, wearing a penis sheath and carrying a spear' (Davis 1989, 122–3).

To summarize, scholars dealing with these two scenes usually adopted one of the two interpretations: association with warfare (Petrie 1909; 1920; Galassi 1955, 45; Williams 1988, 47–51; Davis 1989, 122; Hendrickx 1994, 23; 1996; 1998) or dancing (Baumgartel 1947, 64–5; Vandier 1952, 287–8; Murray 1956, 92; Asselberghs 1961, 303, no. 9; Vermeersch & Duvosquel 1988, 11–12; Garfinkel 1998, 220). The gender division suggested by Baumgartel has not always been accepted and sometimes the entire group has been understood as composed of male figures only (Petrie 1909; 1920; Scharff 1928; Williams 1988, 49; Davis 1989, 122; Hendrickx 1994; 1996) or only

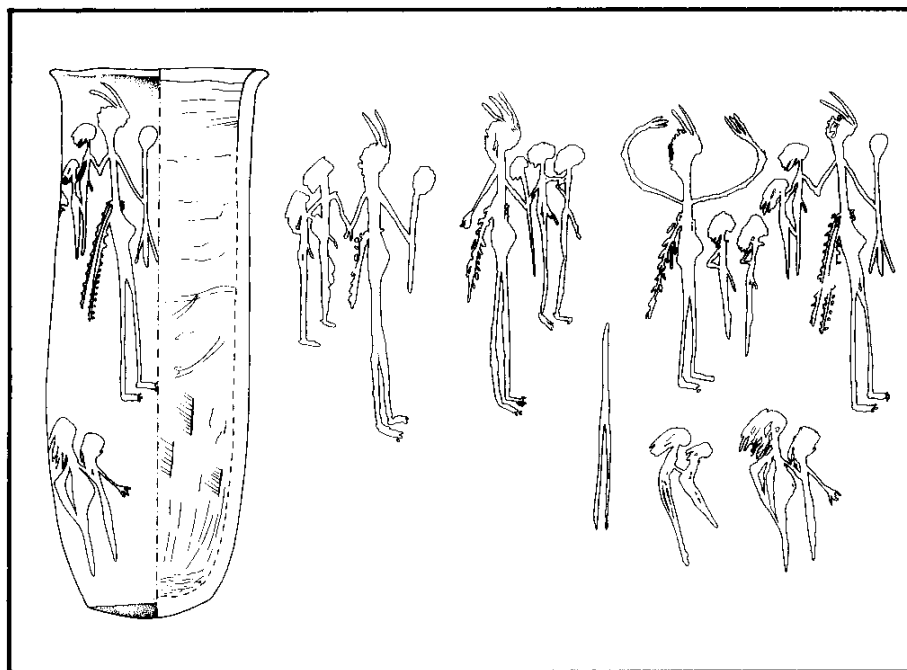


Figure 3. The recently discovered beaker from the Predynastic cemetery of Abydos (Dreyer et al. 1998, figs. 12:1 & 13).

female figures (Murray 1956, 92; Vermeersch & Duvosquel 1988, 11–12).

Tall beaker recently discovered at the Predynastic cemetery of Umm el-Qaab in Abydos, Egypt (Fig. 3)

The findspot is Grave U-239, which is dated to the Naqada I phase (Dreyer et al. 1998, 112–14, figs. 12:1, 13, pl. 6:d–f; Görsdorf et al. 1998). It is covered with black slip on which a scene is depicted in white paint. Unlike the previous two items, which showed up on the antiquities market, this vessel has been unearthed in systematic excavations and thus has a clear context, date, and location.

The scene was described as follows:

Die Interpretation dieses Bildfeldes fällt schwer, mangelt es doch an zeitgleichen aussagekräftigeren Parallelen. Sicher ist, daß wir es hier mit Szenen zu tun haben, in denen eine Personengruppe, nämlich die der großen Zentralfigur, die andere Gruppe der kleineren, nackten Gefangenen dominiert. Möglicherweise ist dies der gewünschte Ausgang eines Konfliktes zwischen zwei Gruppen, ganz im Sinne der späteren pharaonischen Idee des 'Erschlagens der Feinde', die bisher im Grab 100 in Hierakonpolis bis zur Auffindung dieses Gefäßes ihren frühesten Beleg fand; mit dem Neufund aus Grab U-239 können wir diesen Gedanken nun bis in frühe Naqada-Zeit zurückverfolgen (Dreyer et al. 1998, 112).¹

This scene has thus been interpreted as presenting conflict between two groups, although this is not supported by a systematic analysis of the depiction itself. The main argument is the comparison with the later wall painting from Hierakonpolis (Fig. 13). It seems to me that the ideas developed concerning the decorated vessels of London and Brussels were accepted for the Abydos scene without taking into account the implications of the new discovery.

The structure and iconography of the Abydos scene

The vessel from Abydos is presented in Figure 3 in conventional technical drawings, taken from the original publication. On the jar, 17 anthropomorphic figures were arranged in two rows: 12 in the upper row below the rim, and five in the lower row near the base. The figures in the upper row occupy the entire perimeter of the vessel, creating a circle. The figures are presented in a standing position, in profile, facing right. This creates a counter-clockwise circular movement around the vessel. The figures in the upper row are bigger, and are portrayed in a more realistic way, while those in the lower row are smaller and depicted more schematically.

Technically, in order to reproduce the three-dimensional item in two dimensions on paper, we need to break the circle, and to make a decision about where to start the scene. This decision, however, is not merely a technical convention, but has direct bearing upon our understanding and interpretation of the scene. This is not a unique problem, since, in the ancient Near East, decoration of round objects such as pottery vessels and cylinder seals was common. I suggest breaking the row differently from the original publication (Fig. 4). The figures in my new arrangement are numbered in order to facilitate analysis.

As the figures in the upper row were portrayed with relatively greater realism than those in the lower row, I will start the analysis from the upper row. This will help clarify some of the aspects depicted

schematically in the lower row. The 12 figures in the upper row are arranged in four groups, each composed of one tall and two small figures. It seems that two, somewhat similar groups, can be recognized in the lower row (Fig. 5). The tall figures are presented separately in Figure 6, while the small figures are presented in Figure 7. Various differences can be seen between the tall and the small anthropomorphic figures. These are presented here according to their location on the vessel, from top downwards:

1. Only the four tall figures in the upper row have horn-like elements protruding from their heads (Fig. 8). These can be understood as horns or a hairdo. On the Brussels vessel, the heads of the tall figures are portrayed more realistically, and this element there seems to represent twigs or feathers. Figures with similar heads appear on a cult stele from Early Bronze Age Arad, and have been interpreted as twigs or ears of wheat sprouting from their heads or stuck in their hair (Amiran 1972).
2. Each one of the four tall figures in the upper row is presented with both its hands, while the hands of the small figures were not always depicted. The hands of the tall figures are always occupied: the first (no. 1) appears with both hands raised; the second, third and fourth (nos. 4, 7 & 10) are holding an elongated object, as well as the hand of one of the small figures. The three objects have a rounded top and an elongated body (Fig. 6). The item held by figure 10 has a tripod base. The nature and function of these elongated objects is not clear to me.
3. The four tall figures in the upper row are dressed in a belt-like element with additions falling behind. It appears to be a flat strip

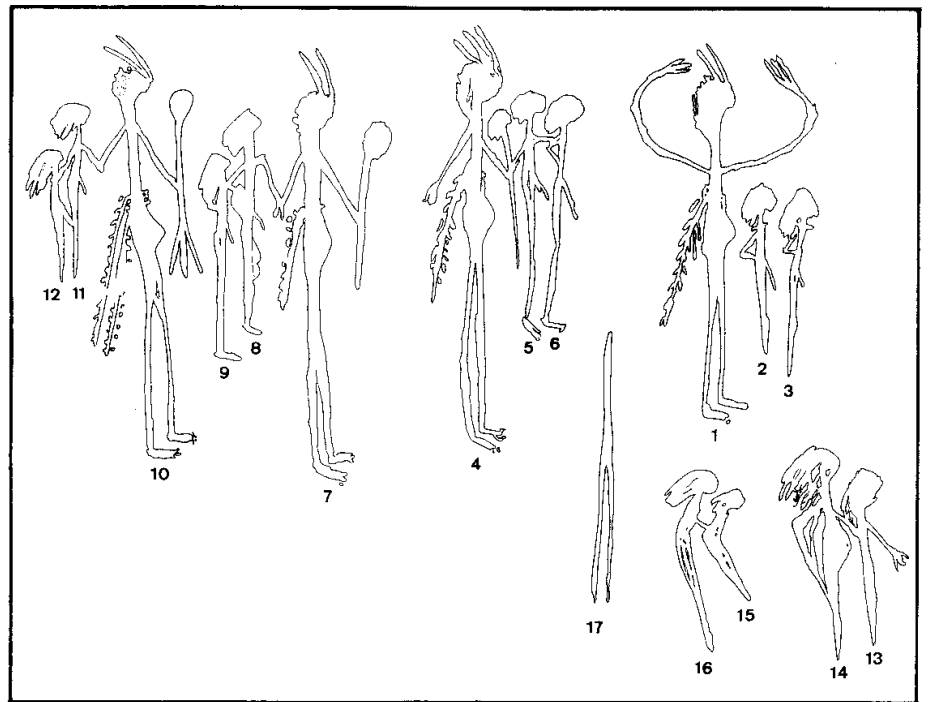
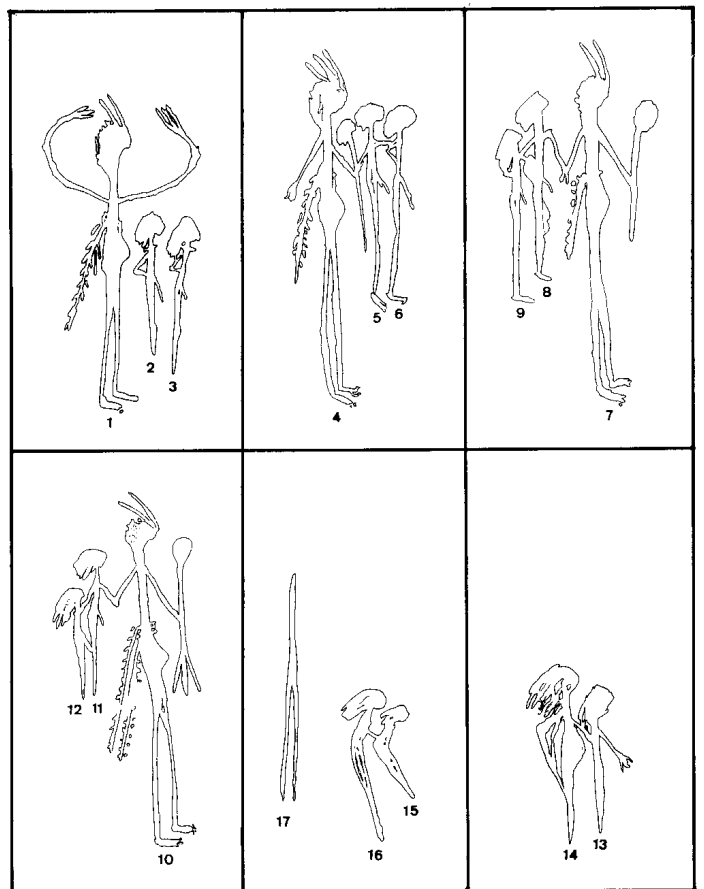


Figure 4. A new graphic arrangement of the recently discovered scene from Abydos.

Figure 5. Structural analysis of the Abydos scene: the basic composite units.



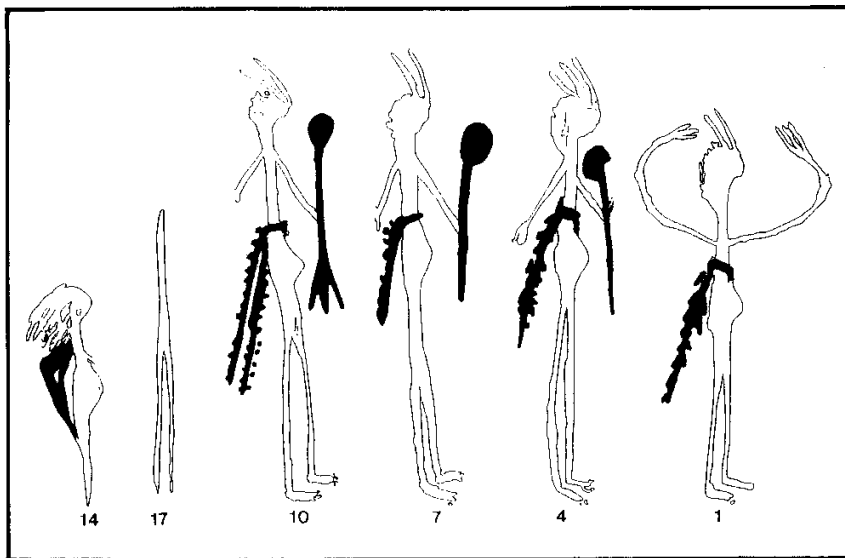


Figure 6. The tall figures in the Abydos scene.

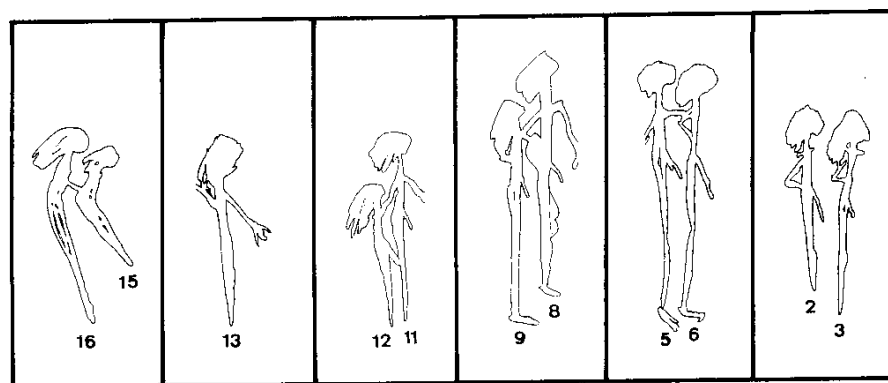


Figure 7. The small figures in the Abydos scene.

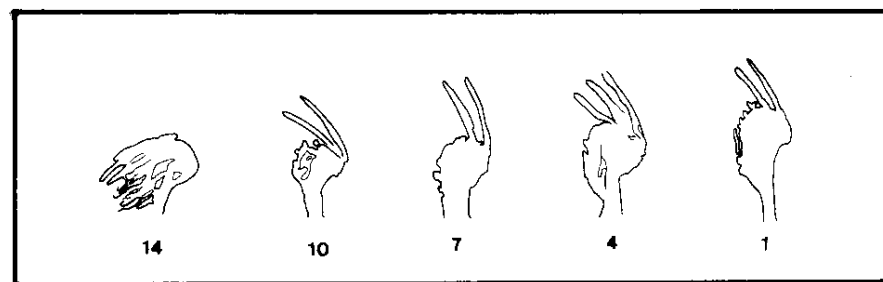


Figure 8. The heads of the tall figures in the Abydos scene.

of leather or cloth encircling the waist, like a loincloth. Figure no. 14, in the lower row, also seems to be wearing the same type of cloth. The small figures are presented without any indication of

clothing.

4. The four tall figures in the upper row have an emphasized belly, as does figure no. 14 in the lower row. It is possible to understand this element as a female gender characteristic (perhaps pregnancy?). The small figures, on the other hand, do not have emphasized bellies, but some of them show a penis (figures 2, 3, 5, 6, 8, 9, 11 & 12).

5. The four tall figures in the upper row are presented with their legs apart. Since the figures are shown in profile (as indicated by the contours of the heads, chests, and feet), this point can be taken as indication of movement, as opposed to a fixed, standing posture. Figure no. 17, which was drawn very schematically, without any of the previous characteristics, is also presented with legs apart.

6. The four tall figures in the upper row display their feet. The feet are facing right, indicating the direction of movement. The faces, the elongated objects and the cloth, also indicate that the individuals are facing right.

7. The four tall figures in the upper row, and figure no. 17 in the lower row, are at least twice as high as the small figures. Figure no. 14 is only slightly higher than the nearby figure.

It seems to me that the scene presents a hierarchical order of three levels (Fig. 9):

1. The leading person. This figure is presented with its two arms raised, the hands folded inwards, with a clear indication of the fingers. This body posture is well-known in Predynastic Egypt, and appears on a number of clay figurines, decorated jars,

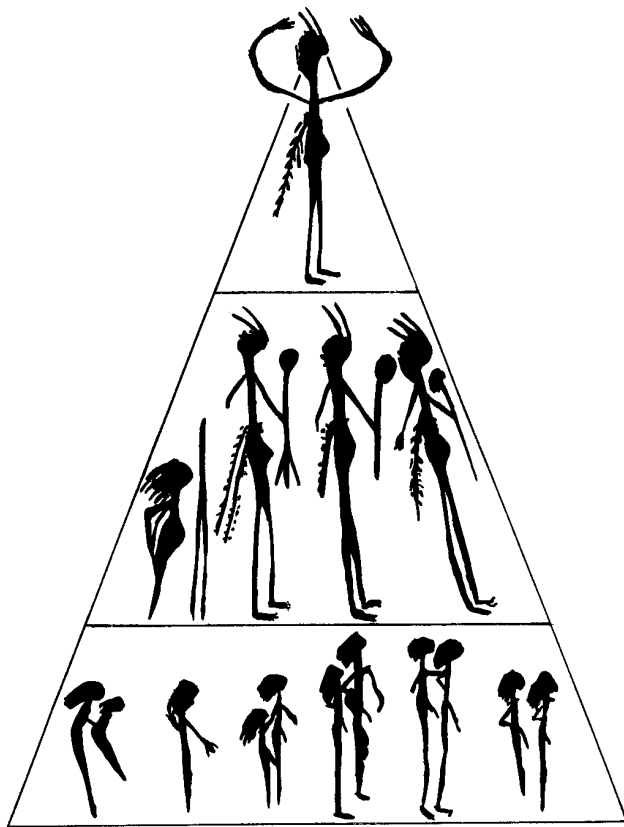


Figure 9. *The hierarchical order in the Abydos scene.*

rock carvings and on fragments of a painted linen shroud (Kantor 1944, fig. 6; Murray 1956, 92; Ucko 1968, Egyptian figurines 72–3, figs. 47–8; Needler 1984, 205–6, 336–41; Crowfoot Payne 1993, fig. 7; Weigall 1909, figs. xxix–xxx; Winkler 1938; Galassi 1955, fig. 2). This body posture is further discussed below (Figs. 10–12).

2. The other five tall individuals (figures 4, 7, 10, 14 & 17). These, especially the more realistic ones from the upper row, have an impressive appearance, with elaborate head decoration, an elongated object, and clothing.
3. Eleven small figures: these are usually located in pairs around a tall figure. In many cases they are holding hands with each other, as well as with a tall figure.

How should we explain the outstanding differences in the height of the various figures in the scene from Abydos? I can offer two possibilities:

1. Presenting a real difference in height. Such a difference must represent age.
2. The difference represents scale of importance. The larger figures are more important, and are thus

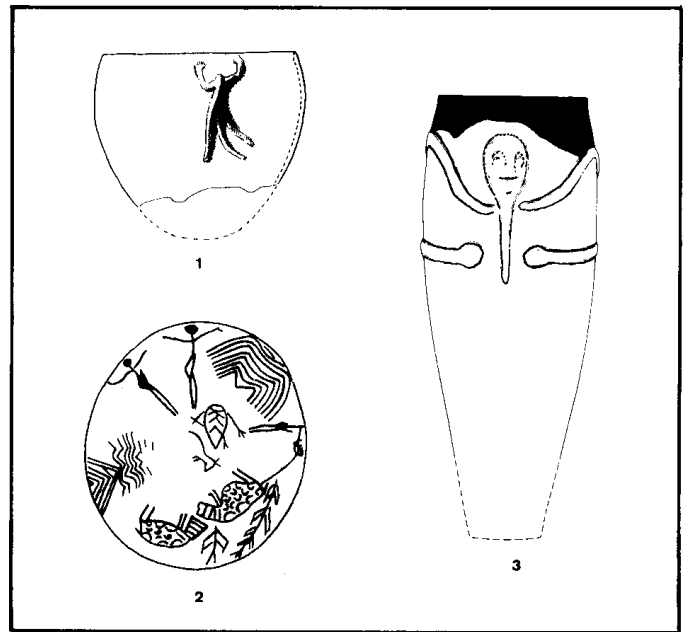


Figure 10. *Anthropomorphic figures with raised arms on pottery vessels: 1) Mostagedda (Brunton 1937, pl. XVIII:41, Scale 1:4); 2) Mahasna (Petrie 1920, pl. XXIII:1, Scale 1:3); 3) Naqada (Crowfoot Payne 1993, fig. 22:105, Scale 1:4).*

depicted bigger, while the other figures are less important, and are thus represented smaller in size.

It seems to me that the difference in the depiction of the figures in our case is best explained in terms both of age and importance. When gender is introduced into this hierarchy, it is interesting to note that the tall, elaborately-dressed figures are females, while the small, naked figures are male. Thus we have a scene involving adult women and young boys.

Discussion

The three scenes present a stylistically and iconographically coherent theme of the Naqada I period. In this phase, human representations in general, and particularly in scenes, are rare. In exploring their significance I would like to arrange my comments under six headings.

1. Duration of the motif

The scenes are different from each other in various details: one is very schematic with only two figures depicted, another shows eight figures, and the third, seventeen figures. One basic motif, however, is common to all: a tall person with raised arms accompa-

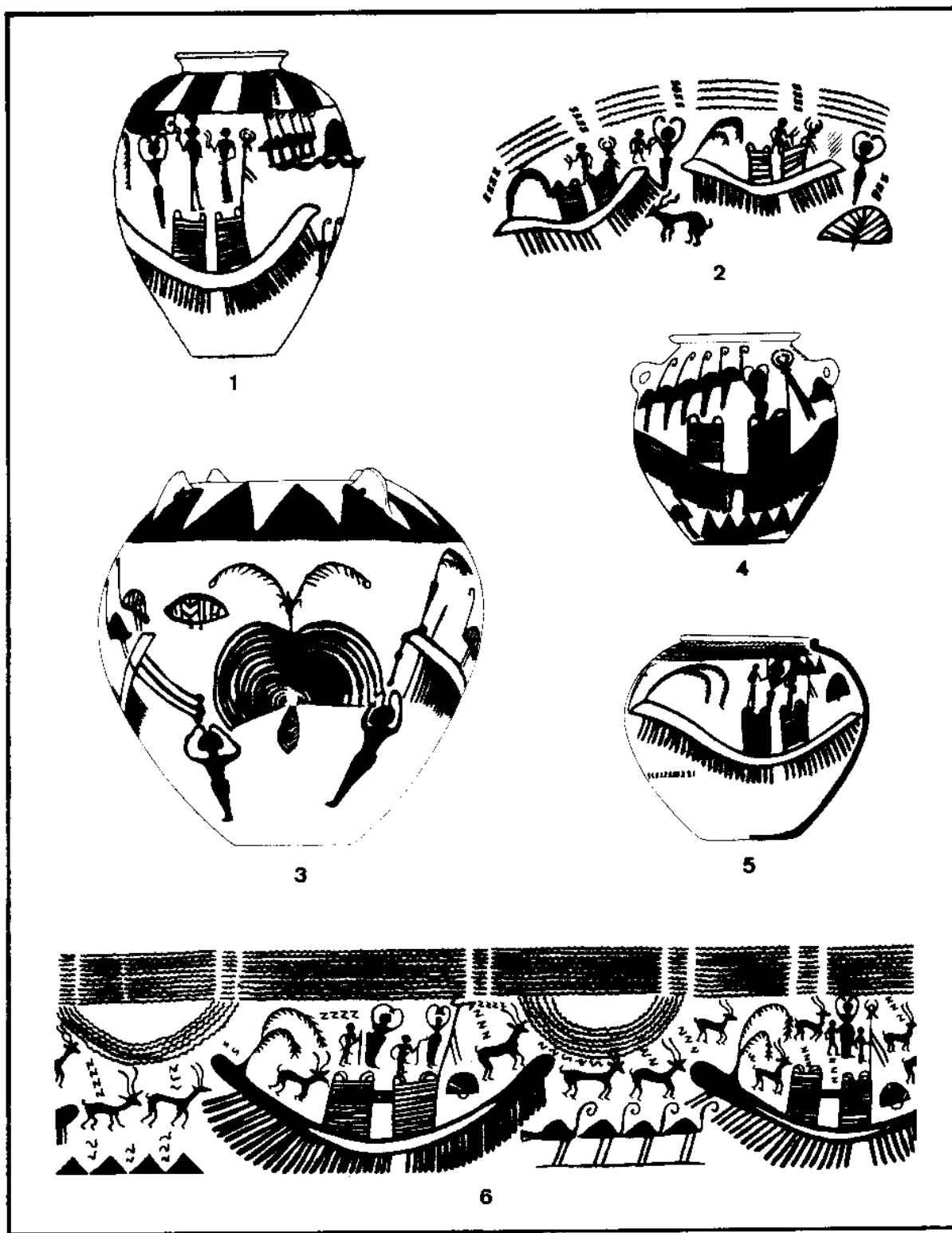


Figure 11. Various boat scenes from Predynastic Egypt, Naqada II phase: 1) El Amrah (Randall-Maclver & Mace 1902, pl. XIV:D46); 2) unknown origin (Scharff 1931, fig. 55); 3–4) Naqada (Crowfoot Payne 1993, figs. 22:105, 40:861); 5) El 'Adaima (Needler 1984, fig. 1:21); 6) Abydos (de Morgan 1896, pl. X). The items range from 10–30 cm in height.

nied by a short long-haired figure. The activity of these two figures is the core of the depicted event. Of these two figures the tall one is more important. It is interesting to note that anthropomorphic figures with similar body gestures appear in the archaeological record of Egypt also before and after the Naqada I phase. An earlier example was found at the site of Mostagedda and is of the Badarian culture, dated to the fifth millennium BC (Brunton 1937, pls. XVIII:41 & XIV:802). It is an open bowl with an anthropomorphic figure applied to the interior wall of the vessel (Fig. 10:1). The figure is depicted *en face*, with the arms turned upwards, first horizontally at shoulder level and then vertically. The lower part of the body is composed of what look like three legs. From comparison with other such figures, it has been suggested that this represents a human figure wearing an animal skin (Kaplan 1969, 18). All four tall figures in the Abydos scene are dressed in a loin-cloth, probably like the figure from Mostagedda.

From the Naqada I phase, contemporary with the three scenes presented above, two other pottery vessels bear anthropomorphic figures with upraised arms. The first was found in Grave 1449 at Naqada (Crowfoot Payne 1993, 34, no. 105). This is a tall beaker with burnished red slip on the body, burnished black slip near the rim (Black-topped ware), and an applied human figure (Fig. 10:3). Only the upper part of the human body has been depicted, with breasts that clearly indicate a female figure. She is represented with upraised arms. The second item was excavated in Grave 209, Cemetery L in Mahasna (Garstang 1903, 5, pl. III). This is a four-legged bowl covered with dark slip, on which humans, animals and various geometric patterns were depicted in white paint. Among the various motifs there are two figures, standing near each other, with raised arms (Fig. 10:2).

The depiction of a tall person with raised arms accompanied by a short figure is a well-known motif in the Naqada II phase, dated to the middle of the fourth millennium BC. The decorated pottery of that phase often shows boat scenes that sometimes include a tall female figure with raised arms accompanied by shorter, smaller figures (Fig. 11). These depictions have long been recognized as dancing scenes (Randall MacIver & Mace 1902, 42; Capart 1905, 119; Vandier 1952, 349–55; Baumgartel 1960, 144–7). One of the best examples was discovered at El 'Adaima, and is now in the collection of the Brooklyn Museum (Fig. 11:5). The human figures there were described as follows:

A female figure with raised arms and fingers touch-

ing her voluminous hair dominates each boat. Twice she is accompanied by two smaller male figures who touch her arm or shoulder. On the poorly preserved side, where her figure is partly lost, she was perhaps shown with a single male figure. This lady appears frequently, in the same stance, on other examples of the ware, usually in association with boats and often with subsidiary male figures. The pose suggests a dancer, and the usually dominant scale suggests the supernatural, but one may only conclude from her repeated and distinctive appearance on these vessels that she belonged to a common folk tradition, probably related to the enigmatic terra-cotta figures. (Needler 1984, 205–6)

The boat scenes of Naqada II are beyond the scope of this discussion, but it is clear that the basic motif of Naqada I was integrated into them. This similarity did not escape the eyes of Petrie as early as 1909 when he first published the vessel from University College London; the scene was placed side-by-side with a boat scene depicting a tall woman with upraised arms accompanied by a short figure, and the boat with dancing figures from the Hierakonpolis wall painting (Petrie 1909, 57, figs. 65–7). Other scholars also have noted these similarities (Kantor 1944, figs. 5–6; Needler 1984, 337).

Another group of Predynastic objects that depict female figures with upraised arms and incurved hands are clay figurines (Petrie & Quibell 1896, pl. LIX:6; Kantor 1944, fig. 6:J–O; Ucko 1968, Egyptian figurines 72–3, figs. 47–8; Needler 1984, 336–41; Crowfoot Payne 1993, 17, no. 28). Three such items are illustrated in Figure 12.

Dancing female figures with upraised arms also appear as one of the subjects on the famous Hierakonpolis wall painting of Grave 100 (Quibell & Green 1902, pl. LXXVI; Case & Crowfoot Payne 1962; Crowfoot Payne 1973). Various subjects are depicted on this wall, including five boats, animal hunting, fighting and dancing. Since the Hierakonpolis painting was taken as a parallel for the interpretation of the Abydos scene (Dreyer *et al.* 1998, 112), it merits a closer examination. The fighting and dancing are of particular relevance to our discussion, and only this part of the wall is presented in Figure 13. The fighting can be seen in the lower part, where the same pair of figures, one with a black torso and the other with a spotted torso, appears twice. On the left they are depicted in the middle of a duel: the black figure holding a shield in his hand (Fig. 13, figure 1), and the spotted torso figure is in aggressive posture holding elongated objects in both hands (Fig. 13, figure 2). On the right the black torso figure is presented upside down, helpless in a defeated posture (Fig. 13,

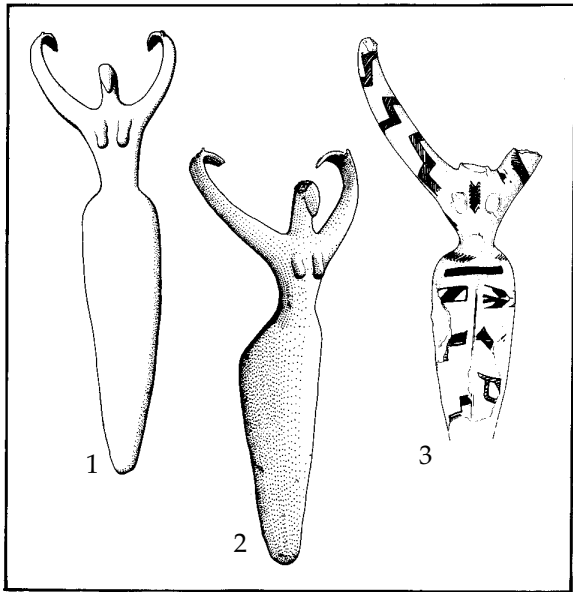


Figure 12. Predynastic Egyptian female clay figurines with upraised arms: 1–2) El Ma'mariya (Ucko 1968, figs. 47–8); 3) Naqada (Crowfoot Payne 1993, fig. 7:28) (approximately $\frac{2}{5}$ full size).

figure 3), while the spotted torso figure stabs him (Fig. 13, figures 1–4). The dancing is on the upper part of the wall. Above a boat, which is a typical decorative motif on the painted pottery of the Naqada II period (Fig. 11), three figures are presented with their arms raised horizontally to shoulder level, and hands bent upward (Fig. 13, figures 5–7). Unlike the boat scenes of Naqada II, which emphasized dancing, the dancing here is by no means the centre of the representation. This seems to be a faint echo of the earlier importance of dancing scenes, and suggest that this painting should be dated to the Naqada III period.

The various examples presented above clearly demonstrate that anthropomorphic figures, usually female, with upraised arms and incurved hands, have a special significance in the iconography of Predynastic Egypt. This is indicated both by the long duration of the motif, from the fifth until the end of the fourth millennium BC, as well as the wide variety of decorated objects and techniques involved: pottery (applied relief and painting), clay figurines, rock carving and linen. This body posture must bear a

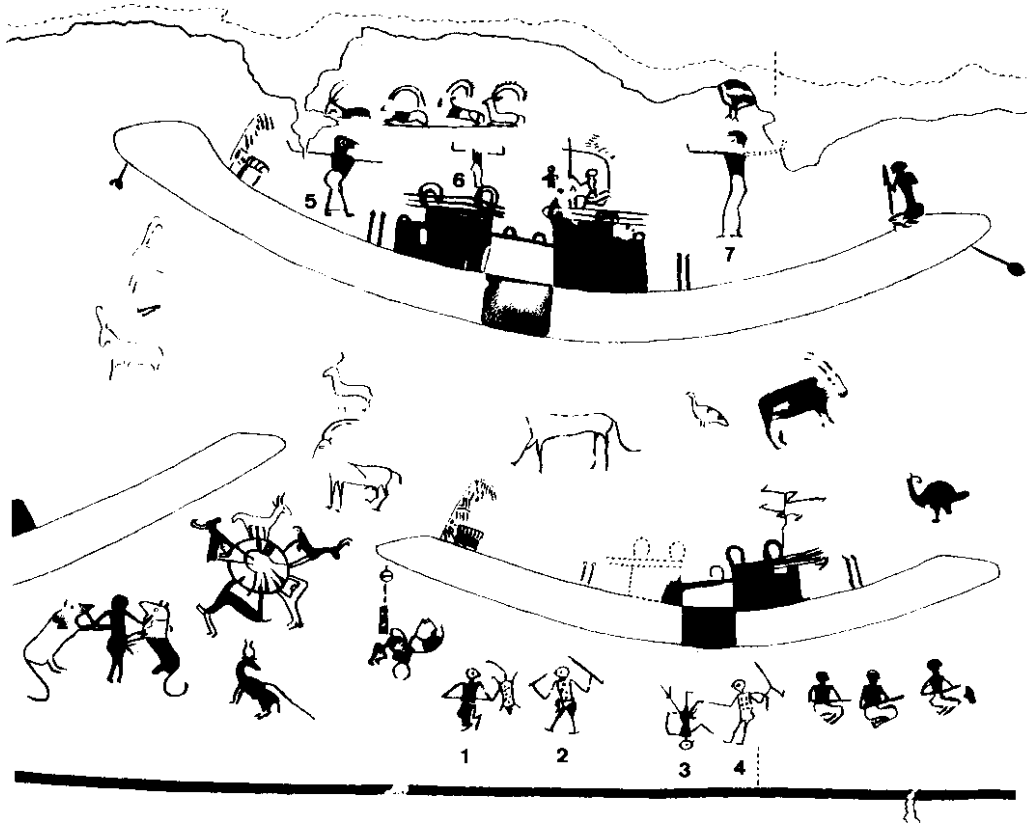


Figure 13. A segment of the painted plastered wall from Grave 100 at Hierakonpolis (Quibell & Green 1902, pl. LXXVI; Scale 1:6).

ritual or ceremonial message. It has been suggested that the position of the arms imitates bovid horns, and that the female figure represents the goddess Hathor (Murray 1956, 92; Baumgartel 1960, 144–6; Crowfoot Payne 1993, 34). Discussing the Predynastic clay figurine, Arkell remarked that ‘the position [is] still used in the Dinka “cow dance”’ (1955, 96; for such a performance see Coote 1992, fig. 10.5).

2. Reanalysis of the Brussels scene

As we have seen above, two different graphic renditions have been proposed for the scene from Brussels: by Baumgartel (Fig. 2:1) and by Williams (Fig. 2:2). In order to draw the three-dimensional jar on paper, it must be decided where to break the circle. It seems to me that the structural analysis employed for the Abydos vessel (Fig. 5) should be applied to this item as well. Thus the scene is composed of two basic groups: a tall figure accompanied by two short figures, and another tall figure accompanied by four short figures. The drawings provided by Baumgartel and Williams (Fig. 2) distort the first group by splitting its components into two. In Fig. 14 the scene is presented as we propose it was intended:

1. The components of each group are placed together.
2. A tall figure with upraised arms appears at right, leading the group. Like the first figure in the Abydos scene, it is not holding on to the small figures near it.
3. In the previous renditions it was not clear if the figures are in movement, or their direction. The new presentation clarifies an anti-clockwise movement around the vessel.
4. The two additional items in the scene — the tree and the object hanging from above (whose significance I fail to comprehend) — are located between the two groups and serve as a divider.

3. Gender analysis

Few items from the proto-historic Near East have prompted so many different opinions concerning the gender of the figures depicted. The elongated element in the pelvic area of the tall figures has been variously interpreted as male organ or phallus-sheath (Petrie 1920; Scharff 1928; Baumgartel 1947); a mace

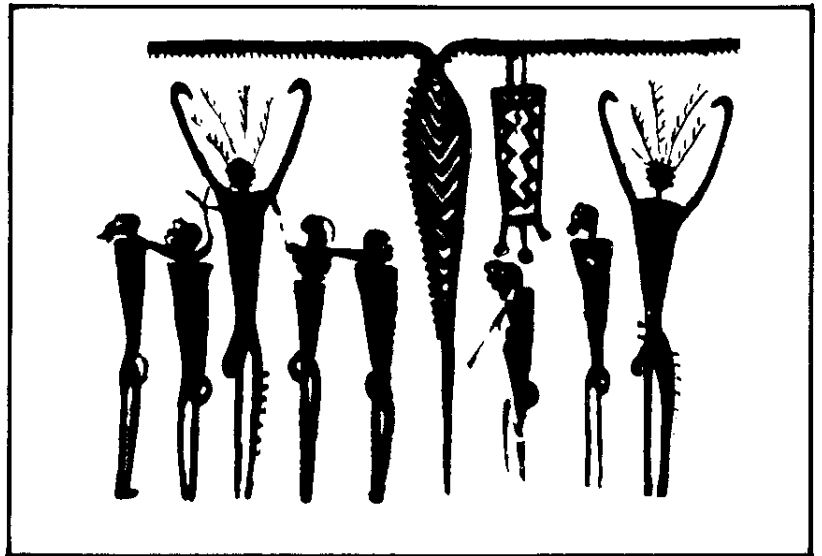


Figure 14. A new graphic arrangement of the Brussels scene.

hanging behind the waist (Williams 1988); or it is ignored when the figure is regarded as a female. Now, based on the new scene from Abydos, it would appear to represent a loin-cloth. The same feature on the small figures has usually been understood as the male sex organ, but sometimes as that of a female (Baumgartel 1947, 64–5). Thus, four different possibilities have been raised regarding the gender of the figures in our scenes: all the figures are males (Petrie 1909; 1920; Scharff 1928; Williams 1988, 49; Davis 1989, 122; Hendrickx 1994; 1996); all the figures are females (Murray 1956, 92; Vermeersch & Duvoisquell 1988, 11–12); the tall figures are males and the short figures are females (Baumgartel 1947, 64–5); the tall figures are females and the short figures are males. This last interpretation appears most probable.

4. Geographical location

A stylistic analysis of the white cross-lined decorated ware of the Naqada I phase demonstrated regional variations within Upper Egypt (Finkenstaedt 1980a,b). The main conclusion was that:

in contrast to the essentially peaceful, pastoral mood of designs from Naqada, the pottery from the Abydos region suggests a magical or magical-religious bias which may adumbrate the function of Abydos itself. It is possible that some historical clues are to be found in the painted wares. Was Abydos already a cultic center of sorts in predynastic times? (Finkenstaedt 1980b, 120).

The recently excavated vessel from the Umm el-Qaab cemetery at Abydos clearly supports these observa-

tions. Is it possible that the other two jars, now at London and Brussels, also originated from Abydos? Since they were purchased on the antiquities market nothing is known about their provenience. Many items have been looted from Egyptian sites over the years, but it is intriguing that both vessels were bought more or less at the same time, around 1909. It was at that time that the cemeteries of Abydos were being excavated by British archaeologists, who reported that 'it has also been the prey of many plunderers' (Naville 1914, xi) and 'They have for years been the happy hunting-ground of the native dealer' (Peet 1914, xiii).

5. *The subject depicted — dance or fight?*

As we have seen above, the scene from Abydos has been interpreted as depicting warfare. This is based upon the earlier interpretations of the vessels from London and Brussels. Warfare is a cross-cultural phenomenon, reported from all over the world, but it is not clear when it first occurs (Ferrill 1997; Taçon & Chippindale 1994, 211–13). In the symbolic expression of hunters and gatherers, it is extremely rare, but a few examples have been reported from Australia (the earliest so far known: Taçon & Chippindale 1994), the Spanish Levant (Sandars 1968, figs. 29, 32, pls. 87, 89; Beltrán 1982, 48–51) and South Africa (Woodhouse 1993). In the art of the ancient Near East, war scenes became important components only from the end of the fourth millennium BC. They appear in both Egypt (Quibell & Green 1902, pl. lxxvi; Yadin 1963, 116, 124) and Mesopotamia (Amiet 1980, figs. 659–61). Warfare scenes have been reported from the New World as well (see, for example, Marcus 1974). It seems that this subject has a special significance in various parts of the world in the context of the emergence of state societies and the rise of strong, centralized government (Flannery 1999, fig. 12).

Warfare scenes are usually characterized by three basic iconographic elements: weapons (bows, spears, daggers, maces, etc.); aggressive body postures, usually with the hand holding a weapon; and a defeated group (usually the enemy is depicted in a helpless situation: dead, bound, or begging for mercy). In the iconography of the Naqada I scenes there is nothing that can be clearly related to any of these three elements:

1. There are no weapons. What Williams has described as a mace (1988, 48) has been understood by other scholars as either a phallus, a phallus-sheath or a loin-cloth.
2. There are no aggressive body gestures, but the tall figures have their hands lifted upwards in a

non-threatening gesture, which in Egyptian late prehistory is typical of ritual.

3. There are no figures in a helpless situation. What Williams has interpreted as bound figures with cords at their necks (1988, 48) are the pairs of small figures which touch the tall figure and each other.

Unlike standard depictions of dance in the ancient Near East (Garfinkel 1998), the three scenes under discussion have several distinct features: the figures are not identical in size; the figures are not identical in their body postures; the figures are not identical in the arrangement of their hair, or their clothing; and only some of the figures hold an object in their hands. On the other hand, some aspects do correspond. The round vessel creates a circle; the tall figures are basically identical to each other and all the small figures are identical to each other; the figures are at fixed distances from each other. When all the data are combined, the three scenes appear to depict dancing involving the participation of adult women and young boys (maybe mothers and sons). Why are there no girls among the small figures? The ceremonial, dramatic character of the scene is emphasized by hairstyle, objects, loin-cloth, a composition including one tall and two small figures, and hand-holding. When the differences in age and gender are taken into account, this scene may be regarded as a representation of an initiation rite involving adult women and young boys.

Initiation is one of the life-cycle rituals (*rites de passage*) that have been observed in all human societies (van Gennep 1960, 65–115; Young 1965). A rich body of data on initiation rites is available from the tribal societies of the Sudanese section of the Nile valley: the Nuer (Evans-Pritchard 1940, 249–52), the Azande (Baxter & Butt 1953, 73–4) and the Meidob (Arkel 1947). Based upon analysis of initiation rites in 51 societies, Young concluded:

the ceremonies for boys are more elaborate. The greater elaboration for males is further indicated by the association of a number of complex customs with a high degree of dramatization. Similarly related are other aspects that reinforce the notion of initiation as a social drama: the duration of the ceremony; the number of candidates; and the size of the audience (Young 1965, 23).

There are features here reminiscent of the Egyptian scenes:

1. The young figures are boys and not girls.
2. A few such figures appear together.
3. The dramatic atmosphere of the events is clearly indicated by elaborate body decoration: coiffure and loin-cloth.

4. Further dramatization is achieved by the elongated objects that are held by the tall figures.
5. The religious character of the events is emphasized by the upraised arms of the leading figure.

6. *The sequence of movement*

The composition of the same group (one tall and two small figures), repeated six times, may represent a sequence of events which were all performed by the same three figures:

1. The woman lifts her arms upwards. The two boys stand nearby, each by himself.
2. The woman holds an elongated object in her left hand, and in the same hand she holds the right hand of a boy. That boy holds the other boy by his right hand. Here the three figures are standing in a row, with the woman at the right-hand edge.
3. The woman holds an elongated object in her right hand, and in her left hand she holds the right hand of a boy. That boy holds the other boy by the hand. Here the three figures are standing in a row, with the woman at the left-hand side.
4. The woman holds an elongated object with a tripod base in her right hand. In her left hand she is holding the right hand of a boy, who holds the other boy by the hand. As in the previous situation, the three figures are standing in a row, with the woman at the left-hand side.

If the interpretation proposed here is correct, this is an unusually early attempt to represent choreography in the archaeological record.

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Note

1. The interpretation of this composition is made difficult by the lack of contemporary relevant parallels. It is certain that we are dealing here with a scene in which one group of people, namely the large central figures, dominate the other group of smaller naked captives. This may perhaps be the wished-for outcome of a conflict between two groups, in the same sense as the later pharaonic idea of the 'Smiting of the Enemy', of which the earliest example before the discovery of this vessel was in Grave 100 at Hierakonpolis. With the new find from Grave U-239, we are able to retrace this concept back to the early Naqada period.

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