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## A NEW GLANCE AT THE PORTRAIT OF THE «ELEPHANT-BEARER» IN MEROE<sup>1</sup>

In 1978 an aquarelle showing a man carrying (or lifting?)<sup>2</sup> two miniature elephants by means of a carrying pole was published in the catalogue of the Brooklyn Museum exhibition dedicated to arts of the Ancient Sudan (Fig. 1).<sup>3</sup>

The short description of this drawing by Steffen Wenig stated that it had been found in the archives of the archaeological expedition of the University of Liverpool, which had carried out pioneering excavations at Meroe between 1909 and 1914, under the directorship of John Garstang (1874-1956). The rendering was evidently a copy of a wall painting found in the so-called Royal City, one of the major districts of the site, where the expedition had focused its operations.

Addressing the subject of the drawing, Wenig observed that while the “motif is unknown in Egyptian or Meroitic art”, there was a possible parallel to it in a bas-relief on a stone window grill in the temple of Qasr Ibrim, showing a man with a small elephant on his shoulders.<sup>4</sup> Due to the seeming semantic similarity of these compositions, he proposed that both of them might have illustrated a scene from some ancient folk tale,<sup>5</sup> for which no other evidence presently survives.

In 1998 the Liverpool aquarelle was re-interpreted by Eugenio Fantusati,<sup>6</sup> who pointed out the similarity of the scene to a popular composition in Graeco-Roman art, known in many variations, which shows Herakles carrying two *kerkopes*, twin brothers captured by the hero when they attempted to steal his weapons while he was asleep (and who, one of the versions of the myth maintains, were later turned into monkeys by Zeus). Typically they appear bound and suspended head-downwards from opposite ends of the carrying pole which Herakles carries on his shoulder.<sup>7</sup>

According to Fantusati, it is only the presence of the elephants on the Meroe painting that might complicate the otherwise plausible identification of its main personage as Herakles (whose worship did indeed exist at Meroe, as some classical writers report).<sup>8</sup> Elephants, after all, do not figure in any of the “standard” Graeco-Roman descriptions of this hero’s deeds.<sup>9</sup> From this, it might be surmised that a local version of the myth of Herakles had developed in Kush, or alternatively, that the Greek epic hero and demigod was here identified with one of the native deities, such as Apedemak who seems to have been associated with elephants in Kushite mythology and iconography.<sup>10</sup>

Such an interpretation of the Meroe fresco (the precise location and state of preservation of which is

1 I am very much indebted to Dr Vincent Razanajao, Keeper of the Archive in the Griffith Institute, Oxford, and to his predecessor Dr Jaromír Málek, for the permission to make use of the unpublished material from the archive of Charles Seligman and for providing me with excellent photographs of the artwork under discussion. I am, further, very thankful to Dr Timothy Kendall for stylistic amendments of the present text.

2 It might seem from the position of the man’s feet that he is *standing*, rather than walking. Because the context of the drawing is unknown we may only make guesses as to what action is represented. It might even seem to have been some sort of «weight-lifting».

3 *Africa in Antiquity. The Arts of Ancient Nubia and the Sudan* (New York, 1978), Vol. I: *The Essays*, p. 104, Fig. 75 (colour reproduction accompanying the chapter ‘The Meroitic Period’ by Fritz Hintze; no allusions in the text); Vol. II: S. Wenig, *The Catalogue*, p. 210, no. 132 (reduced black-and-white reproduction with a comment).

4 Published by J. M. Plumley, ‘Qasr Ibrim 1969’, *JEA*, Vol. 56 (1970), p. 16, pl. XXIII, 4.

5 Wenig, *The Catalogue*, p. 210.

6 E. Fantusati, ‘Remarks on a Meroitic Painting’ in: T. Kendall (ed.), *Nubian Studies 1998. Proceedings of the 9th Conference of the International Society of Nubian Studies* (Aug. 21-26, 1998, Boston / Mas.), (Boston, 2004), pp. 250-255.

7 The scene illustrates one comic episode of the Epic Cycle, the most complete version of which has survived among the comments of certain Pseudo-Nonnus on one of the sermons of the IVth century Christian preacher Gregory of Nazianzus (*Comm. in Or. IV, Hist. 39* (J. Nimmo Smith (ed.), *Pseudo-Nonniani in IV orationes Gregorii Nazianzeni commentarii* (Brepols, 1992), p. 106; J. Nimmo Smith (ed.), *A Christian’s guide to Greek culture: the Pseudo-Nonnus Commentaries on Sermons 4, 5, 39 and 43 by Gregory of Nazianzus* (Liverpool, 2001), p. 29).

8 Strabo XVII, II, 3, cf. Diod. III, 9.

9 Fantusati, ‘Remarks’, p. 252.

10 Fantusati, ‘Remarks’, p. 251.



Fig. 1: The “Elephant-Bearer”; the Liverpool copy (after *Africa in Antiquity. The Arts of Ancient Nubia and the Sudan*, Vol. I, p. 104, Fig. 75).

at present unknown) appears to have become generally accepted, and it was but late in 2011 that a new reason to continue the discussion came to light. In the Archive of the Griffith Institute at Oxford, the present writer found a second copy of the same fresco among several drawings presented to the Archive in 1941 by the widow of Charles Seligman (1874-1940), the distinguished British anthropologist.

The newly recovered Oxford copy of the painting differs from the Liverpool copy in some points. For instance, the former does not show the bent left hand of the personage, holding some long object (Fantusati interpreted this object as a club, which, of course, would be an important iconographical

attribute of Herakles).<sup>11</sup> It also lacks the strange little creature, perhaps a monkey, who sits on the carrying pole. These and several other “blanks” suggest that the drawing from Seligman’s collection was made *earlier* than the published Liverpool copy, when some essential details of the original wall painting had not yet been properly perceived.

Paradoxically, the Oxford copy, in spite of its omitting several rather important details, has some advantages in comparison with the Liverpool. Being a *line* drawing of a slightly smaller size than the latter, made by a fine brush with a black pigment (perhaps,

<sup>11</sup> Fantusati, ‘Remarks’, p. 252.





Fig. 2: The “Elephant-Bearer”; the Oxford copy, fragment (courtesy of the Griffith Institute).

drawing ink), it shows much more clearly some particulars of the original wall painting which are difficult to discern in the reproduction of the watercolour.

The newly-found second copy of the Meroe fresco will be discussed by the writer in some detail in a forthcoming paper devoted to the graphical material from Seligman’s archive now kept in the Griffith Institute. The focus of the present article is on one aspect of the theme, the *portrait* features of the central figure of the composition (Fig. 2).<sup>12</sup>

First, we should note that the person shown in the Oxford line drawing does not seem to be a “thickset youth”, as Wenig described him in his comment on the Liverpool copy,<sup>13</sup> nor a “young man”, as Fantusati later stated,<sup>14</sup> but rather an adult man with a *beard* marked with several curls (which are, again, difficult to make out in the published coloured reproduction). Such a feature is rather rare<sup>15</sup> in representations of men or gods<sup>16</sup> in the Egypto-Kushite

12 Fragment of the photograph by Jennifer Navratil. Published by courtesy of the Griffith Institute.

13 Wenig, *The Catalogue*, p. 210, no. 132.

14 Fantusati, ‘Remarks’, p. 250.

15 I do not mean the ritual, *artificial* beard, often seen on the representations of kings and certain gods in Egypt and Kush, neither the accurately trimmed hair on the chin shown on some Egyptian paintings, particularly of Old Kingdom (LD II, 58 a; 59 b; 64 a; 69; 71 e; 74 e).

16 Beard of “*natural*” shape appears on some representations of gods deviating from Egyptian traditions, perhaps displaying some foreign influence (e.g. LD V, 64 a, b). The

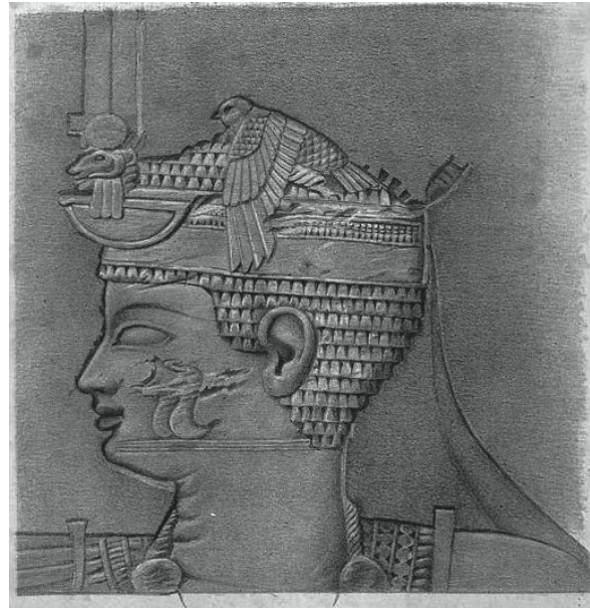


Fig. 3: Portrait of Queen Amanishakheto (from LD III, Bl. 303, no. 95).

culture area in pre-*Hellenic* period. The fact that the person represented in the Meroe wall painting is bearded would thus seem to support Fantusati’s identification of him as Herakles, since a beard is one of the commonest iconographical attributes of the latter.<sup>17</sup>

Second, the two oblique strokes on the man’s cheek are worth observing. The lower of these lines could be understood as the nasolabial fold (although such anatomical particulars were rarely reproduced in *flat* representations of people in Egypt and Kush)<sup>18</sup> or for the upper line of the man’s moustache, but what then could the higher stroke, almost parallel to the previous one, mean? It is doubtful that the draughtsman would have attempted, by it, to depict the man as *hollow-cheeked*, because such anatomical

same probably holds true with the iconography of the god Bes (cf. LD V, 68) whose provenance is rather difficult to establish.

17 See e.g. the illustrations in Fantusati, ‘Remarks’, p. 253, Figs. 5, 7, 8, 9.

18 In Egyptian drawings (there is no relevant material from Kush that I know of), a very short stroke, or sometimes a dot, can occasionally be seen at the corner of the represented person’s mouth (e.g. W. Forman, H. Kischkewitz, *Die Altägyptische Zeichnung* (Prague, 1971), nos. 21, 22, 25, 30, 32, 33; cf. dot in 27, 37, 47). In most cases it abuts the person’s *lower* lip, which means that it was not the nasolabial fold but simply the person’s *cheek* that the draughtsman wanted to mark. The only example of the opposite I can refer to is LD, *Ergänzungsband* (Leipzig, 1901), Taf. XLVIII, b: third figure from right), but since the plate reproduces a drawing made by the XIXth century artist, there are some doubts as to the adequacy of this copy (cf. the other figures in Taf. XLVIII, b and c).

nuances are highly irregular in the art of the Nile Valley kingdoms in antiquity. Besides, it is fatness rather than thinness that would have been stressed by the artist (when it was appropriate), apparently due to certain socio-cultural implications of such corporal particulars. It is much more likely that the strokes on the man's face are *cheek scars*, which are well known from African anthropology. The practice of ritual scarification, connected with the rites of initiation, has been well attested (from ancient times until the present) in many societies of the Sudanese part of the Nile Valley<sup>19</sup> (Fig. 3),<sup>20</sup> some similar (as e.g. tattooing) or related practices (circumcision, excision, extraction of teeth, etc.) having been attested in many other parts of African continent as well.

A third peculiar detail on the portrait of the "Elephant-Bearer" is the inverted curve, broken in two places (obviously due to the lacunae on the wall-painting), on the upper part of his chest. This semi-circle, hardly traceable in the aquarelle copy because of the low contrast of the colours used,

is very distinct in the Oxford line drawing. There seems a strong likelihood that it marked a *necklace*. Moreover, the (convention) radius of this semi-circle suggests that the artist probably meant the so-called *Wesekh*-collar (from eg. *wšh*)<sup>21</sup> rather than a simple necklace, a decoration which is very well known from numerous representations in Egypt and Kush,<sup>22</sup> from archaeological finds,<sup>23</sup> and even from *hieroglyphica* (e.g. ☉).<sup>24</sup> The upper edge of this (supposed) collar may have disappeared in the lacuna which is indicated by two short strokes across the man's neck in the Oxford line drawing and by the horizontal white strip in the Liverpool aquarelle.

To sum up, the portrait of the «Elephant-Carrier», as reproduced in the Oxford copy of the wall painting at Meroe, gives a somewhat strange impression, for pictured is a person who appears to have:

- a) features of face which do not seem to be negroid;
- b) relatively light skin («red», according to the description in the Brooklyn Museum catalogue);<sup>25</sup>
- c) a beard;
- d) possible cheek scars;
- e) an Egyptian/Egyptianized type of necklace.

If these observations are correct,<sup>26</sup> we may conclude that the subject of the painting reflects a mixture of different cultural and ethnic traditions. The painting may represent a fictionalized *foreigner* at Meroe, perhaps a Mediterranean type, with some particulars making him look like a local. In other words, what we see here is probably an "Africanized European".

These considerations do not negate Fantusati's suggestion that the subject is Herakles. As he reasonably remarked, "we know that Herakles, the warrior fighting against death to secure immortality, from the fourth century BC changes into a benefactor

19 LD V, 40, 60; S. Nur, "Two Meroitic Pottery Coffins from Argin in Halfa District", *Kush*, Vol. IV (1956), pp. 86-87, pl. XIII; P.L. Shinnie, *Meroe: A Civilization of the Sudan* (London, 1967), p. 155, Fig. 54, Pl. 46; J.G. Kennedy, *Nubian Ceremonial Life* (Berkeley, 1978), pp. 151-170; U. Hintze, "The Graffiti from the Great Enclosure at Musawwarat es Sufra", in: F.Hintze (ed.), *Africa in Antiquity. The Arts of Ancient Nubia and the Sudan (Meroitica 5)*; Berlin, 1979), pp. 137, 139 (Figs. 5, 8, 9), 142 (Fig. 21); P.L. Shinnie, R.J. Bradley, *The Capital of Kush. Meroe Excavations 1965-1972*, <Vol.> 1 (*Meroitica 4*; Berlin, 1980), pp. 180-81, 205 (Fig. 70, nos. 620, 662, cf. 893), 206 (Fig. 71, no. 1258), 207 (Fig. 72, nos. 1660, 2016, 2039), cf. 214 (Fig. 79, no. 876); A.K. Vinogradov, *Politicheskaya Organizatsiya Obschestva Kusha v VIII-III vekakh do n.e.*, Ph. D. Thesis (Moscow, 1984), pp. 129-32. For a detailed discussion of the problem see T. Kendall, 'Ethnoarchaeology in Meroitic studies', *Studia Meroitica 1984. Proceedings of the Fifth International Conference for Meroitic Studies. Rome 1984 (Meroitica 10)*; Berlin, 1989), pp. 672-680, 737-739 (Figs. 5-8), cf. A. Lohwasser, 'Haut als Medium im antiken Nordostafrika. Temporäre und permanente Modifikationen der Körperoberfläche', in: A.Berlejung, J. Dietrich, J.F. Quack (Hg.), *Menschenbilder und Körperkonzepte im Alten Israel, in Ägypten und im Alten Orient, ORA 9* (2012), SS. 527-559 (esp. 543-549).

20 Portrait of Queen Amanishakheto, after her representation in the cemetery of Begrawiya (LD III, 303, no. 95; cf. V, 40). For the attribution cf. F.L. Griffith, *Meroitic Inscriptions*, Pt. I: *Sôba to Dangêl (Archaeological Survey of Egypt, 19th Memoir*; London, 1911), p. 77; F. Hintze, *Studien zur meroitischen Chronologie und zu den Opfer Tafeln aus den Pyramiden von Meroe* (Berlin, 1959), S. 33, no. 46; St. Wenig, 'Bemerkungen zur Chronologie des Reiches von Meroe', *MIO*, Bd. XIII (1967), S. 16; I. Hofmann, *Beiträge zur meroitischen Chronologie (Studia Instituti Anthropos, Vol. 31; St Augustin bei Bonn, 1978)*, S. 104.

21 *Wb.* I, 365, 16.

22 LD II, 2c; 3; 8a, b; III, 1, 2b, c, d; 4e; IV, 1 a, b, c; 2a, b, c1-2; V, 1a, c; 2a, b; 4b, c; 5.

23 M. Saleh, H. Sourouzian, *The Egyptian Museum, Cairo. Official Catalogue* (Mainz am Rhein, 1987), nos. 107, 114; S. Hojash, *Ancient Egyptian Jewellery. Catalogue. Pushkine State Museum of Fine Arts* (Moscow, 2001), p. 19, no. 14; ill. 2.

24 See Gardiner's Sign-List: S11 (A.H. Gardiner, *Egyptian Grammar* (3rd ed.; London, 1957), p. 505). Cf. the Winglyph signs - ☉ (S11A), ☉ (S11B), ☉ (S11C), ☉ (S11D). Also note ☉ (S12) and ☉ (S12A) for *nb.jt*-collar (*Wb.* II, 237, 10) and ☉ (S 188), ☉ (S 188A), ☉ (S189), etc.

25 Wenig, *The Catalogue*, p. 210.

26 It should be taken into account that the considerations brought forward above are based on the divergences between the two copies of the wall painting in Meroe City, made about a century ago. Which of the two is more precise is difficult to establish today due to the inaccessibility of the original, if it still survives.



becoming a civilizing hero. During his pilgrimages he founded new towns and, most of all, became their protector <...>.<sup>27</sup> It is thus tempting to suppose that the two elephants on the carrying-pole were meant by the artist as a curious “transformation” (or maybe as a somewhat *ironical*<sup>28</sup> replacement?) of the two brigands of whom Herakles, according to the Greek myth, once relieved the kingdom of Lydia’s Queen Omphale. The hero-demigod, thus would perhaps also have been represented as a benefactor of Meroe (rescuing it from rogue elephants ?).

On the other hand, based on the above observations of the newly-recovered Oxford copy of the wall-painting, we probably should assume that the author of the fresco meant that in the course of the (apocryphal) “pilgrimage” of Herakles to *Aithiopia*, his deeds were not confined to getting some new “hunting game”, represented by two elephants, but were supplemented by receiving some “acquisitions” of more general cultural value. The artist probably implied that here one of the most popular heroes of Graeco-Roman mythology was *adopted into indigenous milieu* (by passing the rites of initiation?) and thus, in a sense, happened to be a “Kulturrezipient” and not only the “Kulturträger”.

#### ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

1978 wurde im Katalog einer Ausstellung im Brooklyn Museum, die die Kunst des antiken Sudan zum Thema hatte, ein Aquarell publiziert, das einen Mann, der zwei Miniaturelefanten auf einem Tragjoch trägt, zeigt. Die Zeichnung ist eine Kopie einer Wandmalerei, die im königlichen Bezirk in Meroe während der Ausgrabung der University of Liverpool (1909-1914) entdeckt wurde. Im Begleittext zur Abbildung bemerkt Steffen Wenig, dass das Motiv in der ägyptischer bzw. meroitischen Kunst unbekannt ist, jedoch verweist er auf eine mögliche Parallele im Tempel von Qasr Ibrim.

1998 wurde das Aquarell von Eugenio Fantusati neu interpretiert, der die Ähnlichkeit dieser Szene zu einer populären Komposition in der griechisch-römischen Kunst unterstrich: Herakles, der *kerkopes* - zwei Räuber (oft als Zwerge dargestellt), gefesselt und kopfüber an den gegenüberliegenden Enden eines Tragejochs aufgehängt - über seiner Schulter trägt. Es wurde angenommen, dass eine lokale Version des Mythos von Herakles in Kusch entstanden

ist, oder dass der griechische Heroe hier mit einem der einheimischen Götter identifiziert wurde, wie Apedemak, der in der kuschitischen Mythologie und Ikonographie mit Elefanten assoziiert wurde.

2011 konnte durch den Autor eine zweite Kopie des gleichen Freskos im Archiv des Griffith Institute in Oxford entdeckt werden. Sie befand sich unter mehreren Zeichnungen, die dem britischen Anthropologen Charles Seligman (1874-1940) gehörten.

Die Oxforder Kopie ist eine Strichzeichnung und zeigt viel deutlicher einige wichtige Einzelheiten der originalen Wandmalerei, die in der Reproduktion des Liverpools Aquarells schwierig wahrzunehmen sind. Es scheint so zu sein, dass ein erwachsener Mann mit einem Bart (und nicht ein Jüngling, wie zuvor angenommen) auf dem Fresko in Meroe dargestellt wurde. Ebenso sind zwei schräge Striche auf der Wange des Mannes zu erkennen, die als rituelle Backennarben - gut bekannt aus der afrikanischen Anthropologie - zu interpretieren sind. Im oberen Teil der Brust des Mannes ist eine halbrunde Linie zu sehen, die möglicherweise einen Wesech-Kragen zeigt - eine Zierde, die gut von vielen Darstellungen aus Ägypten und Kusch bekannt ist.

Das Porträt des „Elefantenträgers“, so wie es in der Oxforder Kopie der Wandmalerei aus Meroe wiedergegeben ist, scheint eine Mischung aus verschiedenen kulturellen und ethnischen Traditionen zu sein. Die Malerei kann einen als Fiktion dargestellten Fremden in Meroe zeigen, vielleicht einen Bewohner des Mittelmeerraumes mit einigen Eigenheiten, die ihm ein lokales Aussehen verleihen. Diese Überlegungen widersprechen nicht der Ansicht, dass das Subjekt des Freskos Herakles ist, einer der bekanntesten Helden der griechisch-römischen Mythologie. Der Künstler unterstellte vielleicht, dass Herakles in seiner zweifelhaften Wallfahrt nach *Aithiopia* in ein indigenes Milieu aufgenommen wurde (und dabei vielleicht Initiationsriten durchlief?) und daher in einem gewissen Sinne ein “Kulturrezipient” und nicht nur eine “Kulturträger” war, als welcher er üblicherweise von den Mythographen behandelt wird.

27 Fantusati, ‘Remarks’, p. 254.

28 This aspect of the composition will be developed in the writer’s forthcoming study of Seligman’s archive in the Griffith Institute.