



ALEXEY K. VINOGRADOV

THE MANY-EYED *THINKER* FROM MEROE<sup>1</sup>*To the memory of Sonya*

Among the funerary objects found in grave Beg. W 127 (datable to C1st C.E.)<sup>2</sup> during the Harvard University - Boston Museum of Fine Arts' excavations, directed by G.A. Reisner, in the West Cemetery at Meroe, was a set of artifacts, described in the final (D. Dunham's) publication as:

"Fragments of ivory panels from a box, with incised decoration. Representing at least 8 oblong panels in two groups of 4, each with 3 seated deities facing left. Fragments of a larger panel with part of a figure of a seated queen (?) facing left; and part of head of a large male figure facing right."<sup>3</sup>

To judge by the published photos and several tracings of the fragments, the scenes on most of the panels were produced, though somewhat coarsely, in the traditional Egyptian(ized) style and hardly differ much from the usual in such contexts scenes with numerous deities (squatting or enthroned, sometimes grouped in triads, as in the present cases)<sup>4</sup> of the Egypto-Kushite pantheon, attending Osiris' judgment of the dead or meeting the latter during his/her Netherworld journey.<sup>5</sup>

The largest of the ivory fragments, roughly of 3 × 5+... cm in size, stands out from the rest, for not only has it a different "format" (being a vertical rectangle, whereas the others are horizontal ones), but also because it has a very unusual incised composition (Fig. 1).<sup>6</sup>

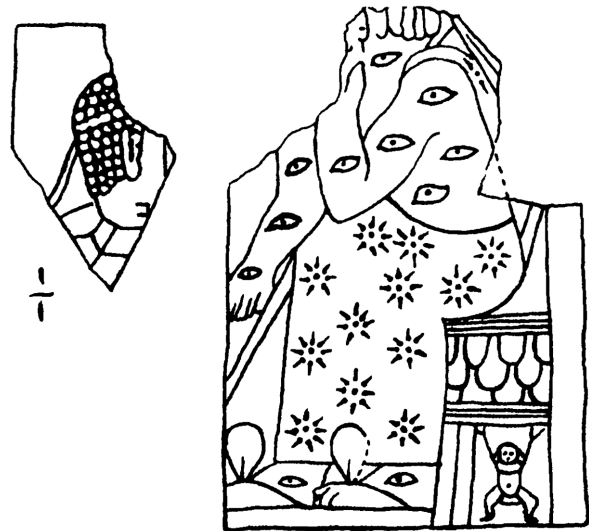


Fig. 1: Two fragments of ivory panels from a box. (After RCK V, p. 169, fig. 121. Enlarged)

By a most curious coincidence, the attitude of the person represented, with one arm on the lap and the other at the chin, is strikingly reminiscent of the (mirror image of the) famous *Thinker* (*Le Penseur*), one of the best known statues of the French sculptor Auguste Rodin (1840-1917), and so this appellation will be retained, of course conventionally, hereinafter with regard to the composition on the panel under discussion.

Dunham's description – in telegraphic style – quoted above seems to hint that the "figure of a seated queen (?) facing left" and "part of head of a large male figure facing right" belong to one and the same composition, most likely due to the fact that both figures are *facing each other*. Yet the very remark that the head belongs to the "large male figure" is noteworthy, for if one conventionally "restores" both representations it becomes clear that they are accomplished on somewhat *differing* scales. Besides, the left edge of the ivory fragment with the *Thinker* is suspiciously even – just like the right and the bottom edges, and in contrast with the upper, broken, edge of the panel, which probably means that only the upper part of the fragment is damaged, the other three remain more or less unharmed. All observations

1 I am most grateful to Dr. Timothy Kendall (Boston) for reading this text and making stylistical improvements.

2 The editor's approximate dating: 55-65 C.E. (D. Dunham, *The West and South Cemeteries at Meroe* (*The Royal Cemeteries of Kush*, Vol. V; Boston, 1963), p. 168).

3 Dunham, *The West and South Cemeteries*, p. 168, no. 223 (24.1025).

4 T.G. Allen, *Egyptian Book of the Dead in the Oriental Institute* (Oriental Institute Publications, Vol. 82; Chicago, 1960), pls. LXII, LXXV, LXXIX; R.O. Faulkner, C. Andrews, *The Ancient Egyptian Book of the Dead* (London, 1985), pp. 103, 106-107, 108-109, 135-135.

5 See e.g. LD III. 78 a-b, 232 a; IV. 16 a-b; Allen, *Egyptian Book of the Dead*, pls. XXXIV-XXXVI, LXXX-LXXXII, XC; cf. Faulkner, Andrews, *The Ancient Egyptian Book*, pp. 14, 27-29 (Spell 30b), 30-31, 34-35 (Spell 125), 63.

6 Dunham, *The West and South Cemeteries*, p. 169, fig. 121.



together make one doubt (though not yet to exclude firmly the possibility) that the two aforementioned fragments were parts of one and the same composition. At any event we seem to have enough reasons to take the representation of the *Thinker*, the largest of the figures once decorating the box from Beg. W 127, as a separate subject of discussion.

It is of course most unfortunate that the upper part of the panel has disappeared, hiding from us some important details, for – as it happens sometimes with the pieces of ancient Sudanese art – although the workmanship of the artifact hardly can be qualified as superb, the very composition on closer consideration turns out to be extremely interesting.

Obviously, the scene with the *Thinker* did not belong to those stereotyped pictures which can be easily restored once the certain key element has been ascertained. Analyzing today what has escaped the depredation of time, it will hardly be possible to understand the message of the ancient artist *completely*. Yet nothing can prevent us from an attempt to comprehend what has survived and to set forth a number of associations. At best they might eventually serve as prompts for a more lucky beholder, and at worst will remain a series of remarks of an inquisitive observer.

#### A. THE ICONOGRAPHY OF THE COMPOSITION

##### 1. The posture

The attitude of the person represented is very peculiar. Strictly speaking, most of the usual (Egyptian) artistic canons seem to have been ignored by the artist. The torso is visibly leaning forward (which gives the image particular resemblance with Rodin's *Le Penseur*) instead of being upright. Neither is the upper part of the body imagined frontally, as one would expect, nor is the lower part seen from the side. As a result, the figure seems to be in a three-quarter view, which effect is strengthened by the position of the rather widely spaced feet, whereas normally they would be shown overlapping or even merging.

The outline of laps, further, is purported rather than really marked, and only the rounding of the buttock and the presence of the throne indicate at least that the *Thinker* is *sitting*.

##### 2. The rendering of the body

In addition to the destruction of the figure's upper part the interpretation is complicated by the fact that neither chest, nor neck or back of the head can actually be recognized in the picture. This could probably make one hesitate to say whether the figure is anthropomorphic or animal-headed.

Four long and one short strap with rounded ends are discernible in the (expected) place of the nape of the *Thinker's* neck,<sup>7</sup> which it would be tempting to render as fingers of someone's left hand lying – as a sign of favour, protection or sympathy – on the former's nape. This could be perhaps the only argument worth consideration in favour of the aforementioned assumption of Dunham associating the representation of the *Thinker* with that of the “large male figure” on another ivory fragment belonging to the same box (see above). As an alternative it could be suggested that the above mentioned “fingers” might be interpreted as strands of hair, (lion's ?) mane,<sup>8</sup> etc.

The body of the *Thinker* looks rather shapeless. The outlines of laps and torso are undivided which makes the person seem rather corpulent. It was probably for this reason that Dunham once interpreted this image as representation of a queen, bearing in mind the fleshiness of some royal ladies of Kush well known from extant monuments of art.<sup>9</sup>

Yet in fact it is very difficult to ascertain the gender of the *Thinker*. It has to be taken into account that in Kush – and to a still greater extent in Egypt – it was not only females but males as well that could be represented corpulent.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, the very obesity in the instance under discussion may in fact be merely fictitious. The absence of lines clearly defining the parts of body of the *Thinker* might actually be due to the artist's reluctance to break or impede the unusual star pattern on the former's garment (see below).

##### 3. The dress and footgear

As far as can be made out, the *Thinker* is clothed in a long, ankle length, sleeveless garment with at least one strap. Of particular interest is the decorative design on the dress which consists of regularly arranged stars with clearly marked centre points and eight (in nine cases) or seven (three cases) pointed rays. Whether the latter slight divergence was deliberate or accidental remains unclear. In any event, in support of an interpretation of this pattern as *celestial bodies* one can point to the parallel in the Lion Temple in Naga where a “prince” is shown in a long garment patterned with crescent moons.<sup>11</sup>

7 Compare the view of the lion's paw lying on the nape of the captive tormented by him in a relief in the Lion Temple of Musawwarat (*Musawwarat es Sufra*, Bd. I, 2: *Der Löwentempel. Tafelband* unter Mitwirkung von U. Hintze, K-H. Priese, K. Stark (*Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin. Archäologische Forschungen im Sudan*; Berlin, 1971), Taf. 85 (Szene 313), 87 a, d).

8 *Musawwarat es Sufra*, Taf. 102 c (frgs. 261, 646, 1112).

9 LD V. 23 a-b; 27; 30; 32; 35; 40-41, etc.

10 LD V. 50 a.

11 LD V. 59.



The footwear of the *Thinker* appears to be sandals (no soles of which are indicated)<sup>12</sup> with Y-shaped toe-straps and very peculiar upright “tongues” or loops.<sup>13</sup> It is not excluded that these “tongues” are a curious variation on a decorative (?) loop which can be seen somehow attached to the toe-straps of sandals in some representations on Kushite monuments.<sup>14</sup>

It has to be admitted again that neither the clothes nor footwear enable us to state with certainty what the gender of the person is. Long garments can often be noticed in monuments of Egyptian(ized) art – particularly in scenes of rituals – as clothing of both males and females sometimes hard to distinguish, and even the difference in the wrap over in similarly dressed figures does not always help to ascertain their respective genders.<sup>15</sup>

Occasionally some minor details might appear to be markers of gender in scenes with large groups of identically or similarly clothed participants.<sup>16</sup> In our case such a prompt would seem to be the aforementioned iconographic peculiarity in rendering of the *Thinker's* legs, since the unusually *large space between the feet* – in accordance with the “ethico-aesthetical” rules of Egyptian art (at least in application to the *standing* figures) – would rather be a feature of a male than female representation.

On the other hand, the possibility cannot be excluded that the feet of the sitting person were shown widely spaced just in order to display the peculiar construction of the sandals.

#### 4. The royal attributes

*a) Sceptre (?)*. Under the coarsely drawn palm of the right hand we see a slanting pole-like object, or more likely a staff or a sceptre, which is evidently meant to be part of the *Thinker's* regalia. An alternative suggestion could be to suppose the object in question as a fragment of the ritual tail, also an element of royal paraphernalia. This would explain why the hand of the *Thinker* does not seem to be really *holding* the sceptre. But this brings about some new uncertainty, because the ritual tail normally would be shown parallel to the line of the shin of a sitting royalty whereas in the present instance we see an *oblique* object.<sup>17</sup>

12 LD V. 23 b; 40; cf. II. 79; 80 c.

13 Note the curious representation in Karnak, showing four couples of deities wearing very peculiar footgear in the form of jackal's (?) head with erect ears (LD IV. 29 b).


14 LD V. 19 a; 23 b; 43; cf. II. 79; 80 c.


15 See e.g. LD V. 21 (3rd register, right); 33 (4th register, left);

16 LD V. 31; 33.

17 *Musawwarat es Sufra*, Taf. 20-21, 34-35, 53-54 c.

*b) Streamers (?)*. The wedge-shaped cleft thing in the area of the (expected) occiput of the *Thinker* looks very much like a couple of bands often accompanying the crowns, diadems of the monarchs of Egypt and Kush. The presence of *two* bands could be a further argument against Dunham's association of the *Thinker* with the fragment of the “large male figure” (see above), because only *one* band - besides, conveyed in a different manner - is seen in the latter case, and one would have to assume that the artist had been stylistically inconsistent.

Alternatively, it is probably worth noting that the wedge of the (supposed) streamers begins at about the same point where the upper end of the aforementioned staff would have been if we conventionally extend the latter upwards. Shall we conclude then, of course with much reserve, that the object in/about the *Thinker's* hand is something like the royal “flagellum” (cf. the hieroglyph S 45 )<sup>18</sup> with a rather long handle?

*c) The Throne*. Judging by general outlines and the squamous<sup>19</sup> pattern of decoration, this object doubtless renders the cubic throne  (Q 12 in hieroglyphics), the seat of a rather archaic type, in representations usually occupied by the god Osiris<sup>20</sup> or, more rarely, by some other deities<sup>21</sup> or spirits.<sup>22</sup> This could suggest that the *Thinker* is not a living ruler as Dunham once assumed, but rather a deity or, as a variant, the “double” (*ka*) of the deceased.<sup>23</sup>

18 Note the rendering of S 45 in A.H. Gardiner's Sign-List: «flagellum; perhaps originally an instrument used by goat-herds for collecting ladanum” (*Egyptian Grammar* (3rd ed.; London, 1957), p. 510, with reference to the interpretative article of P.E. Newberry in *JEA*, Vol. XV (1929), pp. 84 ff.).

19 Compare the rendering of the crocodile's skin and bird's feathers in some reliefs at Musawwarat (*Musawwarat es Sufra*, Taf. 101 b-c, and 39, 65). Some relevant examples suggest that in the cases like the pattern of the throne decoration the Egyptian(ized) artists were often playing on the similarity in squamous arrangement of the reptile's scales and the bird's (shoulder) feathers, as if allegorically alluding to (the protection from ?) the guardian-goddesses Nekhbet (vulture) and Edjo (cobra) at the same time.

20 LD III. 4 e; 78 b; 232 a; IV. 16 a, b; V. 44; 51 b; A. M. Calverley, M.F. Broome, A.H. Gardiner, *The Temple of King Sethos I at Abydos*, Vol. IV (*The Second Hypostyle Hall*) (London-Chicago, 1958), pl. 7, 16, 19, 22; E. Naville, *Le Papyrus hiéroglyphique de Kamara <...> au Musée du Caire (Papyrus funéraires de la XXIe Dynastie. I; Paris, 1912), pl. IX.*

21 LD V. 1 a (Amen-Re, Nekhbet, Ptah, Hathor), 5 (Amen-Re); Calverley, Broome, Gardiner, *The Temple of King Sethos I*, Vol. IV, pl. 32 (Horus), IV, pl. 6 (Thoth), 9 (Isis and Horus), 23 (Isis and Nekhbet).

22 LD III. 10 a; cf. IV. 30 a.

23 Note the images of the dead kings in the form of Osiris: LD V. 15 n, o (Amtalqa); 25 a (Natakamani); cf. III. 2 a,

Interestingly, although, as noticed above, the feet of the personage appear to be rendered in a three-quarter view, the throne is seen from the side. On the side face of it we see a panel with a most peculiar frontal image of an anthropomorphous grotesque creature apparently wearing a loincloth, with its upper limbs uplifted. This could be taken as a representation of Bes, a most popular icon in both Egypt and Kush, and a rather comic protective deity of folk religion, which perhaps would not seem to be quite in place in a formal composition on a funerary object made for a ruler. Still more curious is the fact that the strange posture of this creature is resembling, however remotely, the curls of the very intricate decorative or/and magic knot, often seen *in about this very place* of the throne of Osiris.<sup>24</sup> Whether this is merely coincidence is only to be guessed.

d) *Mat under the feet* (?). Interestingly, the feet of the *Thinker* are not resting immediately on the ground/floor, but are separated from the line of the floor by a narrow stripe abutting the throne but *not going underneath it*. It would seem that the artist wanted to show a special “mat” under the feet of the sitting person, parallels to which may be seen in many, but by no means every, representations of the enthroned persons.<sup>25</sup> It is not excluded that such a “mat” had some ritual or magic meaning, perhaps symbolizing the person’s being isolated from the (unclean/mundane ?) ground. The reason may have been the same, for which rulers and aristocracy in many societies were carried in sedans, palanquins, etc.

### 5. Other decorative/magic (?) attributes

Yet, the most striking feature of the *Thinker* as represented on the ivory fragment from grave Beg. W 127, is that *all open parts of the person’s body, from neck to sandals, are covered with small images of eyes*.


Bearing in mind the extant ethnographical data on some centuries-old practices in the societies of the Nile valley, it would be possible to assume that the skin of the *Thinker* is covered by some sort of a decorative or ritual paint, tattooing or cicatrization. However, the eye-like pattern of scars does not seem to have been attested in the Kushite iconography, just as no semantic parallels may be pointed out by the present writer in the practices of the Sudanese peoples attested by ethnographic studies of modern times.<sup>26</sup>

d; 19, 1 a, c, 2 a, c; 173 b, c.

24 LD V. 15. See also references in notes 20–23.

25 LD III. 69; 76 b; 77 c; IV. 23 a; 27; 30. Noteworthy is the example with the god Seth (S. Hodjash, O. Berlev, *The Egyptian Reliefs and Stelae in the Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts, Moscow* (Leningrad, 1982), p. 142, no. 84).

26 For the bibliography see A.K. Vinogradov, ‘A New Glance

This pattern probably could be rendered as merely *decorative*, since almost any geometrical figure – be it circle, oval, rectangle or even triangle – with a marked centre in certain circumstances might be associated with the image of eye, as many appellatives of fishes, birds and particularly of butterflies show. Yet it seems noticeable that as far as the published photo and tracing of the composition under discussion allow us to discern, the pattern on the body of the *Thinker* in all of the cases represents the (left) eye of a *human*, very much like the Egyptian hieroglyphic sign  (D 4) with blackened “pupil”.

Worth noting is also the probable – though difficult to explain at this stage – parallelism of the eyes on the body of the *Thinker* and the images of stars on his garment. The stars are twelve in number, while the eyes are eleven, but one more is very likely once to have been on the presently damaged place on the right shoulder, so that the number of both figures may well have been even in the original composition.

Incidentally, even the strange iconographic peculiarity noticed above when the strange position of the *Thinker’s* feet (*also bearing eyes*) was considered, could find a more or less convenient explanation if we assume that they were shown rather wide apart due to the artist’s wish to mark a *certain number* of eyes on the body of the personage, or, alternatively, to stress that the *whole space of it* was covered with eyes.

Here we come up to the point at which we should try to ascertain the role of this latter attribute in the scene under discussion.

### B. THE SEMANTICS OF THE COMPOSITION

The observation that the *Thinker* has eyes (or *representations of eyes* ?) all over his body, naturally brings about many associations, whether one recalls the apocalyptic “four creatures full of eyes” (τέσσερα ζῶα γέμοντα ὀφθαλμῶν *Apoc.* IV. 1, 6–8), the “Messengers/Angels of Death” in some religions of the Near East, or some many-eyed deities in the religions of India (Indra,<sup>27</sup> Avalokiteśvara), etc.

At closer study the notion of the many-eyed (*i.e.* all-seeing, in most cases) creature(s) turns out to be very widely, if not universally, attested, and yet, the present writer is unable to point out any other Kushite example (apart from the present one) or any Egyptian references so far. In such circumstances it would seem that some *foreign* allusions, somehow

at the Portrait of the «Elephant-Bearer» in Meroe’, *Der Antike Sudan. MittSAG 24* (2013), S. 138, Anm. 19.

27 T. Panofka, *Argos Panoptes* (Berlin, 1838), SS. 37–39, Taf. II 5–7, III 4.



relating to the spiritual world of the inhabitants of the Nile valley, could be involved and should not be ignored, for not only are they more or less relevant to our study thematically but also suggest that some similar reflections might one day be recognized in the native sources as well. Of particular interest appear to be the following two motifs that can be traced in the accounts of some Classical writers.

#### a) The Many-Eyed Argos

References to this personage are to be found in the Greek myth about the sufferings of Io,<sup>28</sup> a priestess of Hera (the spouse of Zeus, “heaven’s master”), who – after long and tormenting wanderings – came to Egypt and was eventually identified with “a goddess of the Egyptians, who is called Isis”.<sup>29</sup> The story is attested in many variations and may be conventionally summarized as follows:

When Hera discovered Zeus and Io, seduced by him, the god touched the priestess and turned her into a white heifer, swearing that he had had no consorting with her. Hera was not deceived and demanded the heifer for a gift, setting her servant, the “all-seeing” Argos, a giant creature with many eyes (only few of which would sleep at a time), as its watcher.

After Argos had tethered the heifer to an olive tree in a grove, Zeus dispatched the god Hermes, his son, to set Io free. Unable to steal her, Hermes disguised himself as a shepherd and, playing his pipes of reed, put all eyes of Argos asleep and slaughtered him. The death of the cowherd liberated Io, but Hera sent a maddening gadfly tormenting the heifer and forcing her to wander the earth. Having passed many lands, Io reached Scythia, where she met Prometheus chained (by order of Zeus) on Mount Caucasus, who prophesied that she would recover her human form and become the ancestress of Herakles, the greatest of heroes.

Io went on roaming and eventually reached Egypt where she bore Epaphus, her son from Zeus. When the latter realized how much Io had been suffering, he restored her to her human form. Later she married Egyptian king Telegonus and, as some authors allege, was identified with the goddess (Demeter/Isis.

The watchful herder Argos (lat. Argus), of particular interest to us here, has different appellatives in different writers. Among these are both general epithets like the “all-seeing” (πανόπτης)<sup>30</sup> or “many-eyed”

(πολύφθαλμος),<sup>31</sup> and more detailed, descriptive as “all-seeing guard” (ὁ πάνθ’ ὄρων φύλαξ),<sup>32</sup> “all-seeing herder (of one cow)” (πανόπτης οιοβουκόλος),<sup>33</sup> “myriad-eyed herdsman” (ὁ μυριοπός βούτης),<sup>34</sup> “the herder, sparkling with eyes from his feet to the hair (of his head)” (ὄμμασιν ἀστράπτων ποδῶν ἄπο μέγρι κομάων // βουκόλος),<sup>35</sup> “who had gleaming eyes all around” (cui undique oculi refulgebant),<sup>36</sup> etc.

“Physically” Argos is also portrayed differently by different Greek and Roman writers. Opinions diverge as to his stature (sometimes he is described as a giant), his having one or two heads – or rather faces – but most of all differ the reports about the amount and position of his eyes. Three,<sup>37</sup> four,<sup>38</sup> one hundred,<sup>39</sup> one thousand<sup>40</sup> or ten thousand (myriad)<sup>41</sup> eyes are mentioned, which, according to some writers, were either on his face and back of the head, or, according to others, or were scattered all over his head<sup>42</sup> or the whole body.<sup>43</sup> The latter version seems to have been prevailing and is of particular relevance to our case.

In Graeco-Roman visual arts, particularly in paintings on vases, Argos is sometimes represented naked, most likely because this revealed the numerous eyes more or less densely spread over his body. Examples may also be pointed out in which he is clothed in an animal skin, sometimes interpreted as that of a bull, but perhaps erroneously.<sup>44</sup> A most remarkable example is the drawing on a Greek red-figured vase from Ruvo, formerly at Naples (Fig. 2),<sup>45</sup>

31 Pollux IV. 141..

32 Aesch. *Supp.* 303.

33 Aesch. *Supp.* 304.

34 Aesch. *Pr.* 568.

35 Nonnus, *Dionysiaca* XIII. 26-27.

36 Hyg. *Fab.* CXLV.

37 Cf. K. Blondel, ‘Argus (Ἄργος)’, in Ch. Daremberg, E. Saglio (eds.), *Dictionnaire des antiquités grecques et romaines* <...>, T. I, 1 (Paris, 1877), p. 418; A.B. Cook, ‘The European Sky-god’, *Folklore. A Quarterly Review of Myth* <...>, Vol. XV (1904), p. 287.

38 Hes. *Aigimios*, fr. 5.

39 Ov. *Met.* I. 625, 721.

40 Statius, *Silvae* V. IV. 11

41 Aesch. *Pr.* 568.

42 Macrobian. *Sat.* I. XIX. 9.

43 (Ps-)Apollod. II. I. 3; Statius, *Silvae* V. IV. 13.

44 According to the *Mythological Library* of (Pseudo-)Apollodorus, “the bull that ravaged Arcadia” was killed by another (but also “many-eyed”) Argos, who was an ancestor (father ?) of Argos mentioned in the myth about Io/Isis ((Ps-)Apollod. II. I. 2). Thus, the bull-skin wrap must have been an attribute of the former person. The skin worn by the latter, younger Argos is often represented as dappled with small spots of the same size (see notes 44 and 45 below) which is most unlikely to be a coloration of a bovine.

45 Red figure oxybaphon (E. Vinet, ‘Argus Bifrons’, *RA*, T. 1

28 (Ps-)Apollod. II. I. 3.

29 Cf. Hyg. *Fab.* CXLV: “<...> Iovis cum sciret suapte propter opera tot eam aerumnas tulisse, formam suam ei propriam restituit deamque Aegyptiorum eam fecit, quae Isis nuncupatur.”

30 Eur. *Phoen.* 1115; Ar. *Eccl.* 80, (Ps-)Apollod. II. I. 3.



(Fig. 2: Hermes slaughtering Argos and liberating Io. Scene on the Ruvo vase. After Blondel (in Daremberg & Saglio, *Dictionnaire des antiquités*, T. IV, 1, fig. 508.)

and two drawings on a vase in Boston,<sup>46</sup> in which Argos is clad in an animal's skin evenly dotted with small dark spots. The parallelism of the eyes on the body and the spots on the skin is very likely here, a possible implication of which for the rendering of this scene will be shown below.

It is noteworthy that classical writers speaking of the numerous all-seeing and sleepless eyes of Argos *scattered all over his body* often characterise them as “gleaming” (*cui undique oculi refulgebant*),<sup>47</sup> compare them with stars and call him “sparkling with eyes” (*ὄμμασιν ἀστράπτων*),<sup>48</sup> “stellate” (*stellatus*),<sup>49</sup> etc. It was evidently due to such associations that at a certain point of time the image of Argos (as well as some other personages of the myth about Io's ordeal) received a cosmological rendering. The all-seeing cow-herder was interpreted as a personification of the stellar sky,<sup>50</sup> and Io/Isis as the persecuted Moon<sup>51</sup> (or maybe rather the crescent with its horns, symbolising the celestial cow ?),<sup>52</sup> which takes us to an interesting “semantic overlap” with the second motif in classical tradition pertinent to the subject under discussion.

(1846), p. 309; Blondel, ‘Argus (Ἄργος)’, p. 419, fig. 508).

46 Attic red figure hydria (CVIth B.C.E.); Cat. no. 08.417 (See photo - <http://www.theoi.com/Gallery/L11.3.html>).

47 Hyg. *Fab.* CXLV.

48 Nonnus, *Dionysiaca* XIII. 26.

49 Ov, *Met.* I, 664.

50 Aesch. *Pr.* 569-679; Eurip. *Phoen.* 1115.

51 Macrobian. *Sat.* I. XIX. 9; cf. Panofka, *Argos Panoptes*, SS. 37-38; Blondel, ‘Argus (Ἄργος)’, p. 419, n. 41.

52 Cf. Plut. *De Iside*, 52.

## b) The Many-Eyed Osiris

A most important detail for consideration in discussion of the *Thinker* from Meroe is raised in some Graeco-Roman references to the Egyptian myth about Osiris and – once again – Isis, two major gods of the pantheon venerated in both kingdoms of the Nile Valley.

Paradoxically, the essay *On Isis and Osiris* by Plutarch (C1st C.E.), which is considered among the most important sources for the Osirian cycle of myths (and for Egyptian religion in general), is not particularly helpful, for we find only one, and very brief a statement relevant to our present study. Mentioning the Egyptians' dis-

position to allegory (and noting their influence on the world view and some practices of the Pythagoreans in Greece), Plutarch remarks:

“<...> (For) they represent/write (the name of) their king and lord Osiris by means of (the signs of) an eye and a sceptre. And some render the name as ‘many-eyed’, as (if) *os* in the language of Egypt meant ‘many’ (and) *iri* ‘eye’; <...>” (Plut. *De Iside*, 10).<sup>53</sup>

The author does not go into detail and gives no reasons for or against the rendering “many-eyed” (*πολύφθαλμος*), considering it, seemingly, from the perspective of “popular etymology”, and further on touches upon two or three other interpretations as well, eventually alleges that the name of Osiris is actually Greek and is composed by the words *ὅσιον* “holy” and *ἱερόν* “sacred”,<sup>54</sup> his curious but rather obscure reasoning being of little relevance to our present subject.

As for the epithet “many-eyed” with reference to Osiris, it may be considerably clarified thanks to some indications in the *Historical Library* of Diodorus Siculus (C1st B.C.E.), who was writing about a century earlier than Plutarch (and whose version the latter must have been aware of but somehow refrained from a thorough account).<sup>55</sup>

53 τὸν γὰρ βασιλέα καὶ κύριον Ὅσιριν ὀφθαλμῶν αἰσκήπτρον γράφουσιν· ἔνιοι δὲ καὶ τοῦνομα διερμηνεύουσι πολυφθαλμον, ὡς τοῦ μὲν <ος> τὸ πολὺ, τοῦ δ' <ρι> τὸν ὀφθαλμὸν Αἰγυπτία γλῶττι φράζοντος (Plut. *De Iside*, 10).

54 Plut. *De Iside*, 61.

55 Plut. *De Iside*, 52.



Diodorus, beginning his work with an account of the Egyptians (since many ancient mythographers believed them to be the first men to have come into existence), gives in Book 1 a record of their customs, world view and religion, paying a special attention to their view on the nature, origin and development of the universe.

According to this record, the Egyptians – apparently, at a certain point of intellectual development – as they “observed the heavens” (ἀναβλέψαντας εἰς τὸν κόσμον) assumed that two phenomena were both eternal and primordial, the Sun and the Moon, which they worshiped as gods and called respectively “Osiris” and “Isis”.

Diodorus gives a rather detailed account of Osiris and Isis, whom, the Egyptians allegedly perceived as if existing in several hypostases – as planets, as gods impersonating the planets and as some sort of cultural heroes, who had taught men many goods of civilization. Of particular interest for our study is how the Egyptians imagined and called their benefactors.

According to Diodorus (or rather to his informants, unknown to us now), “‘Isis’ is to be translated ‘ancient’, the sobriquet having been given (to her) because of her origin from everlasting and ancient.” The goddess was imagined as having horns due to her association with the young (*i.e.* crescent-shaped – A.V.) moon and because cow was considered by the Egyptians to be her sacred animal (Diod. I. XI. 4). Thus, confusing cause and effect in the last statement, the writer is partly repeating what has already been touched upon above when the episode with Io/Isis and her another companion, the “all-seeing” cow-herd Argos was discussed.

More interesting for us is the statement regarding Osiris. “For (when) <...> translated into the Hellenic language, – writes Diodorus, – (the word) ‘Osiris’ means ‘many-eyed’ (πολυόφθαλμος), and (it is) true; for, scattering rays in all directions, he surveys, as if (watching) with numerous eyes, all the earth and the sea” (Diod. I. XI. 2).

Significantly, the writer when explaining the epithet “many-eyed” as a metaphor referring to the radiance of the *sun* rays, associates Osiris not with the god Helios, who was believed by the Greeks to be the personification of the Sun, but, following the tradition of “some ancient Greek mythographers”, with Dionysus, – the god of fertility, wine-making, ecstasy, *etc.*, – who in his turn was somehow connected with the planet Sirius.<sup>56</sup>

<sup>56</sup> Diod. I. XI. 3; Plut. *De Iside*, 52.

Very interesting is the short statement that, similarly to Dionysus of the Greeks, Osiris of the Egyptians was imagined as “clad in a wrap of fawn-skin patterned with stars”.<sup>57</sup> This is most important an indication for it obviously refers to the *juvenile* coloration of deers (which stays only for several months and disappears with the first moult in most strains except for the Asian breed of the so-called “dappled deers”). This coloration consists of the yellowish-brown backdrop with small white spots, which greatly resemble celestial stars and constellations, and which are naturally referred to by Diodorus as “pattern of stars” (ἡ τῶν ἄστρων ποιικιλία).

Curiously, this description of the “many-eyed” Osiris makes one recollect some representations of the aforementioned “all-seeing” Argos, which show the herder of the celestial heifer Io/Isis clad in a wrap dappled with many small spots. The only difference is that the spots are marked as *dark* dots, instead of white ones on a light background (or yellowish-brown in two scenes on the vase in Boston),<sup>58</sup> but this can hardly be of principal significance.<sup>59</sup> In any event, in many Graeco-Roman representations (and the much later works of European painters)<sup>60</sup> the legendary νεβρίς which was the characteristic garment of Argos, Dionysus/Bacchus and the Maenads/Bacchantes in the latter’s suite, very often looks like a *panther*-skin despite its etymology “*fawn*-skin”.<sup>61</sup> It is almost certain that the author of the rather small drawing on the vase felt it much more important (and perhaps technically easier) to stress the *dappled pattern* on the garment of Argos, associable with the stellar sky. It was this feature, and the reference to stars in the description of the wrap of Osiris, that enabled the artist and the writer respectively to convey allegorically the *celestial nature* of the character in question.

<sup>57</sup> Φασι δὲ τινες καὶ τὸ ἔναμμα αὐτῷ τὸ τῆς νεβρίδος ἀπὸ τῆς τῶν ἄστρων ποιικιλίας περιήφθαι (Diod. I. XI. 4).

<sup>58</sup> See note 46 above.

<sup>59</sup> Noteworthy, figures very similar in shape to those on the *Thinker*’s dress, but conveyed by a light paint on the dark backdrop, may be seen on the garments of two *Maenads* (Dionysus’ followers) as represented on an Attic black-figure amphora by a certain Amasis (!), dated to CVIth B.C.E. (see photo - <http://greekroman.ru/img/gallery/large/dionysos/dionysos02.htm>).

<sup>60</sup> Compare the paintings by Frederick Leighton (*Bacchante*), Carle van Loo (*Bacchus and Ariadne*), Élisabeth Vigée-Lebrun (*Bacchante*); cf. Leonardo da Vinci (*Bacchus* (?)).

<sup>61</sup> A. Legrand, ‘Nebri’, in Ch. Daremberg, E. Saglio (eds.), *Dictionnaire des antiquités grecques et romaines* <...>, T. IV, 1 (Paris, s.a.), pp. 40-41; H.G. Liddell, R. Scott, H.S. Jones, *A Greek-English Lexicon* (9th ed.; Oxford, 1958), p. 1164, cf. νεβρός “young of the deer, fawn”, νεβρίας “dappled like a fawn”.



Still more strikingly, the literary portrait of the “many-eyed” Osiris made by Diodorus (and to some extent the images of the “all-seeing” Argos on Graeco-Roman vases) seem to reveal to us a clue to better understanding the subject of the present study, the representation of the *Thinker* on the ivory fragment from the grave Beg. W 127 at Meroe.

It should be recalled that the drawing in question is on the largest ivory panel of a box, once placed in a grave as a funeral gift. Taking into account that the other surviving panels of the box bear rather usual, stereotyped representations of some Egyptian (and Kushite) seated deities in groups of three, not uncommon in scenes of underworld life (see above),<sup>62</sup> it may be assumed with reasonable probability that the theme of the whole ensemble of the ivories was the Last Judgment of the deceased and/or the latter’s life after death. An image of Osiris would no doubt be most appropriate in one – and most likely the central – scene in such a composition, because he is the god *presiding* in the Hall of Judgment over forty two judges.<sup>63</sup>

Of course it is somewhat strange that the representation of the many-eyed *Thinker* – the supposed Osiris in the case under discussion – turns out to be matching the Graeco-Roman images (literary and visual) of the many-eyed creature(s) endowed with the power of omnividence, but does not seem to have parallels in the monuments of Kush or Egypt.<sup>64</sup>

Different reasons might be suggested in explanation for this paradox. On the one hand, we must consider the possibility that this artifact from Meroe is *the only surviving proof* of Diodorus’ words on how the inhabitants of the Nile valley (roughly contemporary to the author of the *Historical Library*) themselves imagined Osiris.

More plausible, however, would seem to be an alternative explanation. As stated in the beginning of this paper, the fragment with the *Thinker* differs

from the other panels in that it is the largest one; it has a different format (being a vertical rectangle, while the rest are horizontal ones); and it bears a representation stylistically different from the others (in some deviations from the usual norms of Egyptian iconography). From this it might be assumed that the drawing in question could have been made by a *different* carver.

Do we deal with an imported object? In support of this view are the great number of objects imported from the Mediterranean world, which have been recovered by excavation on the territory of Ancient Sudan.<sup>65</sup> It is especially fascinating that the very grave, Beg. W 127, that contained the ivories under discussion, also produced a gold finger ring with a Greek inscription HXA<P>IC (“grace”, “glory”, “favour”, *etc.*),<sup>66</sup> as well as many other valuables, which survived despite the grave’s having been anciently plundered. This would seem to indicate that the owner of this grave did have an interest in – or at least exposure to – Greek culture.

At the same time it must be admitted that some “ethnographic” details of the drawing under discussion (as e.g. the form of the archaic throne with its specific decoration, including the grotesque figure of the supposed Bes, the mat under the feet of the *Thinker*, his supposed streamers, and even the peculiar form of his sandals’ straps) seem to indicate that the artist was more or less familiar with the material life in the Nile Valley (be it Kush or Egypt).

Combining all the above observations one could conclude that the representation of the many-eyed *Thinker*/Osiris may have been produced by a *foreign* artisan (Greek or highly Hellenized Egyptian?) resident in Kush, who accomplished his work in accordance with that conception of Osiris which existed in Graeco-Roman world in C1st C.E., but adapted it to local conditions.<sup>67</sup>

Or may be the artist was a Kushite “avant-gardist” familiar with the new Hellenizing style which gradually developed along with several other styles in Ancient Sudan as some examples in different parts of the Kingdom seem to suggest?<sup>68</sup>

62 E. Naville, *Le Papyrus hiéroglyphique de Kamara <...> au Musée du Caire (Papyrus funéraires de la XXIe Dynastie. I; Paris, 1912)*, pls. XXI, XXII, XXIII, XXV, XXX; id., *Le Papyrus hiéroglyphique de Katseshni au Musée du Caire (Papyrus funéraires de la XXIe Dynastie. II; Paris, 1914)*, pls. XXVIII, XXIX. See also note 4 above.

63 LD III. 78 a-b, 232 a; IV. 16 a-b; V. 44; E. Naville, *Das Aegyptische Tottenbuch der XVIII. bis XX. Dynastie aus verschiedenen Urkunden*, Bd. I: *Text und Vignetten* (Berlin, 1886), Taf. XLIII (A.a.; A.[e.]; P. d.); CXXXVI (A.g.; P.b.; P.c.; P.e.).

64 The only analogy I can point out is one of the representations in a private person’s tomb at Aniba, showing enthroned Osiris, whose shoulders and arms seem to be covered with a star pattern (LD III. 232 a). Because the outer parts of the god’s fists are not ornamented, it is clear that the artist meant some pattern on the *clothing*.

65 See e.g., P.L. Shinnie, *Meroe. A civilization of the Sudan* (London, 1967), pp. 128-131, pls. 68-83.

66 RCK V, pp. 168, no. 22-2- 500 (24.528); 170, Fig. 122, f.

67 Cf. Shinnie, *Meroe*, p. 124; L. Török, ‘Kush and the external world’, *Studia Meroitica 1984 (Meroitica 10; Berlin, 1989)*, p. 100; cf. D.A. Welsby, *The Kingdom of Kush* (London, 2002), pp. 186.

68 LD V. 64 a, b; cf. Török, ‘Kush and the external world’, pp. 93-195; id., *Meroe City. An Ancient African Capital. John Garstang’s Excavations in the Sudan*, Pt. I: *Text* (London, 1997), pp. 63-92, § 23; Pt. II: *Plates* (London, 1997), pls. 8, 27-51; D.A. Welsby, J.R. Anderson (eds.), *Sudan. Ancient*





## ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Unter den Objekten, die im Grab Beg. W 127 (1. Jh. n. Chr.) während der Ausgrabung von G.A. Reisner im Westfriedhof von Meroe gefunden wurden, war ein Set von Fragmenten von Elfenbeinplättchen einer Kiste mit eingeritzter Dekoration. Das größte dieser Fragmente, ca. 3 x 5 cm, ist herausragend: Es hat ein anderes Format (es ist hochrechteckig, während die anderen querrrechteckig sind) und es hat eine sehr ungewöhnliche Dekoration. Die Pose der dargestellten Person erinnert stark an den berühmten „Denker“ (Le Penseur), eine der berühmtesten Statuen des französischen Bildhauers Auguste Rodin, und diese Bezeichnung wird in dieser Diskussion beibehalten.

D. Dunham, der Herausgeber des Grabungsmaterials, interpretierte die Darstellung als „figure of a seated queen (?) facing left“. Jedoch ist diese Ansicht bei genauerer Untersuchung problematisch. Weder Kleidung noch Schuhwerk erlauben mit einiger Sicherheit Aussagen über das Geschlecht der Person, gerade der unübliche große Zwischenraum zwischen den Füßen deutet eher auf eine männliche als eine weibliche Darstellung.

Das ungewöhnlichste Element des „Denkers“ auf dem Elfenbeinfragment ist, dass alle unbedeckten Körperstellen, vom Hals bis zu den Sandalen, mit kleinen Darstellungen von Augen bedeckt sind. Betonen muss man auch den möglichen Parallelismus der Augen auf dem Körper des „Denkers“ und die Darstellungen der Sterne auf der Kleidung.

Eine genauere Untersuchung des Auftretens der vieläugigen (oder allessehenden) Kreaturen hat sich als sehr umfassend, wenn nicht universell erwiesen. Doch es ist schwierig, eine weitere kuschitische oder ägyptische Parallele vorzuweisen. Unter solchen Umständen sollten fremde Anspielungen, die auf die spirituelle Welt der Bewohner des Niltals hinweisen, nicht ignoriert werden.

Besonders interessant sind zwei mythologische Motive, die in Berichten von griechisch-römischen Schriftstellern zu finden sind: der vieläugige Argos, der aufmerksame Hüter von Io/Isis und der vieläugige Gott Osiris, wie er von Plutarch und besonders von Diodorus Siculus beschrieben wurde.

*Treasures. An Exhibition of Recent Discoveries from the Sudan National Museum* (London, 2004), pp. 162, no. 145 (Rondel [with a representation of Dionysus (?)]; Jebel Barkal); 171, no. 153 (Column Capital; Meroe); 259, no. 236 (Aquamanile; Wad ban Naqa). Some relevant aspects are discussed in Vinogradov, ‘A New Glance’, SS. 138-39; id., ‘On Herakles with Elephants, Kerkopes and Pygmies (Towards a Prototype of the Elephant-Bearer Fresco in Meroe’, *Der Antike Sudan. MittSAG* 25 (2014), SS. 231-32.

Letzterer beschreibt die ägyptischen Sitten und die Religion und hebt dabei besonders hervor, dass die Ägypter vor allem Sonne und Mond als die Götter Osiris und Isis verehrten. Dies sei aus besonderen Bedeutungen der Bezeichnungen zu erkennen. „Denn wenn sie in das Griechische übersetzt werden (so schreibt Diodor), bedeutet das Wort ‘Osiris’ nämlich ‘vieläugig’ (πολύφθαλμος), und es ist richtig, denn während er Strahlen in alle Richtungen sendet, überprüft er, als ob er mit unzähligen Augen schaut, sowohl das Land als auch das Meer.“ (Diod. I. XI. 2).

Indem Diodor das Epitheton „vieläugig“ als Metapher mit Hinweis auf die Strahlung der Sonne erklärt, assoziiert Diodor den Gott Osiris mit Dionysos. Der Gott Osiris der Ägypter wäre so wie Dionysos der Griechen vorgestellt als „gekleidet in einen Umhang aus Rehkitzfell, mit Sternen gemustert.“ Dieses Porträt stellt einen möglichen Schlüssel für ein besseres Verständnis der Darstellung des „Denkers“ dar.

Es muss noch erwähnt werden, dass die anderen erhaltenen Elfenbeinfragmente der Kiste eher stereotype Darstellungen von ägyptischen Göttern, jeweils in Dreiergruppen sitzend, zeigen. Diese sind übliche Szenen der Unterwelt. Daher kann mit einiger Wahrscheinlichkeit angenommen werden, dass das Thema des gesamten Ensembles der Elfenbeinplättchen das Totengericht oder das Leben nach dem Tod war. Ein Bild des Osiris wäre sehr passend in einer solchen Komposition, da er der Gott ist, der dem Totengericht vorsteht.

Natürlich ist es seltsam, dass die Darstellung des vieläugigen Denkers – in diesem Fall als Osiris vermutet – den griechisch-römischen Bildern (literarisch und visuell) der vieläugigen Kreatur(en), die mit der Macht der Allsicht ausgestattet sind, entsprechen, jedoch keine Parallelen in den Denkmälern von Kusch oder Ägypten haben. Das lässt annehmen, dass wir hier ein aus dem Mittelmeerraum importiertes Objekt vor uns haben.

Zugleich weisen einige „ethnographische“ Details der Zeichnung darauf hin, dass der Künstler mit der materiellen Kultur des Niltals vertraut war. So kann geschlossen werden, dass die Darstellung des vieläugigen Denkers/Osiris ein Produkt eines ausländischen Künstlers (griechisch oder stark hellenisierter Ägypter) war, der in Kusch lebte und der sein Werk in Übereinstimmung mit dem Konzept von Osiris, das in der griechisch-römischen Welt des 1. Jt. n. Chr. herrschte, ausführte, es jedoch lokalen Verhältnissen anpasste. Oder der Künstler war ein kuschitischer „Avantgardist“, der mit dem neuen hellenisierenden Stil, der sich neben anderen Stilen im antiken Sudan entwickelte, vertraut war.