

Mammoth

Narrative and Event in Ancient Art

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SOME REFLECTIONS ON THE RHETORIC OF AEGEAN AND EGYPTIAN ART

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Although the present volume is dedicated to pictorial narrative, it is not narrative but rhetoric that I would like to explore in this essay.

First, a definition is necessary. According to *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary*, rhetoric is "skill in effective use of speech." Art, too, like language, employs devices that make artistic statements more effective, more graspable, and more immediate. These visual strategies will be explored here and, although this study is by no means *exhaustive*, it will at least introduce an approach that may be useful in analyzing images.

Some of the devices of artistic rhetoric are too banal to merit discussion here. I am referring to variables such as size and position in the visual field. For example, it is well known that if the artist wants to emphasize the importance of an object or a person, the figure is placed either in the center or on the edge of the composition. Manipulation of size also helps focus attention on the emphasized visual element. Finally, rhythmic repetition of figures or objects will help intensify the effect. I am thinking of processional scenes in particular, although the multitude of workers and offering bearers, so frequently depicted in Egyptian art, serve the same purpose.

Here, I am concerned with some less well-explored "rhetoric," which may involve juxtaposition of entire scenes as well as interlinking of images.

PICTORIAL SIMILES

A pictorial simile involves two dissimilar figures involved in a similar situation; the juxtaposition forces a comparison. Most common is the comparison between humans and animals. In such

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20 Two scenes on an inlaid dagger from Grave Circle A, Mycenae. After Morgan (1988, Fig. 34).

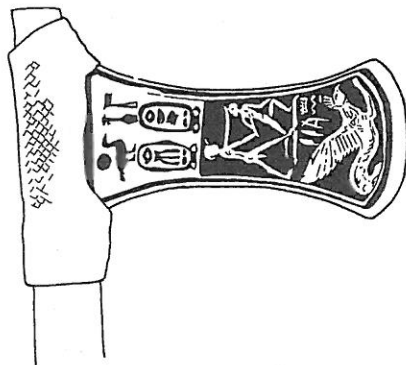


21 Dagger from Lasithi, Crete. Drawing: P. Rehak, after Evans (1939) (PM I, Fig. 541).

similes, the bravery or strength of the animal is compared and thus transferred to the human.

One of the inlaid daggers from Shaft Grave A at Mycenae has already been discussed by L. Morgan as a pictorial simile (Morgan 1988: 163). There, human hunters are engraved on one side, lions on the other (Fig. 20). Being on the same dagger, the scenes invite comparison, and by being compared, the human and lion hunters are implicitly equated with each other.

A similar man/animal comparison is suggested on a Minoan dagger from Lasithi, Crete (Fig. 21). On side A, a human hunter confronts a wild boar. On side B, two wild bulls confront each other frontally (Long 1978: 34–56). That the two scenes have a thematic unity can be argued on many grounds. They both appear on the same object. The same vegetation motifs, acting as signs of a landscape setting, appear in both. The pairs of contestants, man and boar on side A, bull and bull on side B, are depicted in a typical antithetical position denoting "combat." Most important: in both scenes, the visual language suggests a contest between champion and adversary. On side A, we suspect that the human



23 Axe of king Ahmose, Egypt. Drawing: P. Rehak, after William Stevenson Smith (1981, Fig. 216).



24 Stela from Grave Circle B, Mycenae, slightly simplified and restored. Drawing: N. Marinatos and L. Papageorgiou, after Mylonas (1972, Fig. 12b).



22 Stela from Grave Circle A, Mycenae. After Hood (1978, Fig. 81).

hunter (on the right) will win. On side B, it is made very clear that the right bull will be the eventual victor, because he exhibits more bodily control and has caused his opponent to slip. Thus, the figures to the right are the victors; the ones to the left are the defeated (Marinatos 1989: 20-1).

Let us now move to another medium: Mycenaean funerary stelai of the period of the Shaft Graves. Remembering that the function of such monuments should have been display of the prowess of the deceased, it is likely that the representations will have some "propaganda" value.

A pictorial simile of the type we found on the dagger from Grave Circle A is to be found on a stela from the same Circle (Fig. 22). In what appears to be a unified scene, there are actually two different representations, distributed in two zones. On the upper zone, a warrior in a chariot is riding over his fallen enemy (only his eight-shield and feet are visible). On the lower, a lion is chasing a horned animal (a deer?) (Mylonas 1955: 142-7; Sakelariou 1985: 307). At first glance, the two scenes seem to be unrelated and yet coherence is guaranteed by the unified space. In fact, they constitute a pictorial simile: A warrior and his fallen enemy are compared to a lion and his victim. The warrior is thus implicitly equated with the lion.

Compare with Egyptian representations of Ramses III at his mortuary temple at Medinet Habu. In one scene, the king is shown at war, his prowess being stressed by a visual intensifier: a lion that, next to him, also hunts the enemy (Keel 1978: 86, 103).

On the exterior walls of the first pylon, the king hunts wild bulls. Below, soldiers with bows and shields march in an orderly fashion: Hunting and war modes are blended in unified imagery (W. S. Smith 1981: 372, fig. 366).

On a ceremonial battle axe from Egypt belonging to king Ahmose (Fig. 23), the pharaoh is depicted as smiting an enemy. Below, in a different zone, is a griffin. The latter acts as an "intensifier," a symbol of power and aggression and the two scenes function as a pictorial simile (W. S. Smith 1981: 221; for additional examples, see also L. Morgan 1988: pl. 63; Davis 1989: 79, fig. 4.12).

We now consider the device of the "double attack." On a

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Mycenaean stela from Grave Circle B, human and lion hunters are combined in a single scene in what seems to be a double attack (Fig. 24). Lions attack bulls, and humans attack the lions. Here we have more than a pictorial simile. What is presented is a "pecking order" with the human hunter on top, the lion below him, and the bull further below. What more appropriate way to glorify the dead than by showing his prowess in hunting?

Paintings from Egyptian tombs use the exact same visual rhetoric of the double attack, bull, lion, man. In the Old Kingdom tombs of Mereruka (Fig. 25) (Duell et al. 1938) and Prahhotep, there are hunting scenes in which a bull is attacked by a lion, whereas the lion is itself hunted by humans. This can be clearly inferred by the presence of a net that frames the scenes on the right and left (Davis 1989: 75-6). The reason for the pictorial rhetoric here, as on the Shaft Grave stela from Mycenae, is to make the human hunter look superior. In general, the main purpose of the hunting scenes either in Egyptian tombs or on temple walls is to represent the human hunter (tomb owner or pharaoh) as dominant over the animal kingdom. It is interesting that both the Egyptians and the Aegeans used the same subtle devices. I wouldn't exclude the possibility of transmission, although it is also possible that these visual modes were invented independently.

25 Scene of hunt from the mastaba of Mereruka. After Duell et al. (1938, Fig. 25).



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was explored by Egyptian artists in their tomb paintings. In the Old Kingdom tomb of Prahhotep, two registers with hunting scenes are depicted (Fig. 26) (Davis 1989: 75, fig. 4.9b). What is interesting is that whereas the bottom register depicts hunted animals (I might add that there is emphasis on the death of the victims), the top register includes two mating scenes. The hunting thus takes on a new meaning. Death is contrasted with the beginning of life implied by copulation shown on the upper register. The concept underlying the polarity is probably not unrelated to the Egyptian preoccupation with the cycle of life and death.

FUNCTION AND DECORATION

Each spatial unit has a specific function, and the ancient viewer bore that function very much in mind when looking at its decoration. The study of the interplay between the image(s) and the function of the object could yield interesting results.

We have already discussed Aegean daggers, which are instruments of aggression, but also status symbols of the male aristocrats. The predominant figures are animals whose main characteristics are aggression or speed. Thus, we find birds, horses, and dolphins, all notable for their speed, together with the most powerful of predators, such as lions and griffins (Laffneur 1984: 134-6). Similar motifs appear on the pommels of the daggers or swords: lions, griffins, and scenes of predation. In one case, drowning enemies are depicted on the dagger blade (see Fig. 31) (Hood 1978: 176-86 with figs. 174-83).

Speed is necessary for the dagger to inflict a wound; it is therefore evident why animals that are both swift and aggressive are chosen as appropriate emblems. But it should also be remembered that there is an underlying presupposition at work here: The animal kingdom has certain qualities envied by humans. The owner of the dagger admires the speed of the dol-

26 Scene of hunt from the mastaba of Prahhotep. Drawing: P. Rehak, after Schäfer (1974, Fig. 150).



plain or the power of the lion and griffin; he wishes to be identified with these animals, or at least partake of their abilities. By depicting them on the dagger, the function of the object is enhanced.

Egyptian daggers have similar iconography of aggression. A dagger found at the tomb of Tutankhamun, for example, depicts scenes of predation (Seton-Williams 1980: 138.) Axes also are instruments of war and we have already discussed the battle axe of Ahmose (Fig. 23) showing the pharaoh with an enemy as well as a griffin. Another axe dating to the eighteenth dynasty represents a lion attacking an antelope (W. S. Smith 1981: 242, pl. 237).

From Tutankhamun's tomb come several objects with iconography relevant to our discussion. On the back of one of his thrones, the king is shown seated, anointed by his young wife. The scene on the throne presents the king, not in a heroic mode, but in a quiet, more private moment. Yet, we should not see it only as an idyllic scene of blissful home life, for in the interaction of the couple is implicit the superior ceremonial status of the enthroned king. Once more there is a projection of an ideal image, but it is well chosen as decoration for a throne (Seton-Williams 1980: 128).

On smaller personal items, Tutankhamun is depicted as "heroic." On a ceremonial shield, which, of course, is a war implement, he is depicted as a sphinx treading over a fallen enemy; on another shield, he is shown as being about to kill a lion. Here the warrior and the hunter are clearly associated on the same medium, which itself is a hunting and war implement.

A wooden footstool is decorated with captive enemy peoples (Seton-Williams 1980: 135). Thus, when the king rested his feet on it, he symbolically stepped on the subjugated enemies. This pictorial formula of "enemies trampled underfoot" is a very common one in Egyptian art since the Old Kingdom (Davis 1989: 77-82). It is worth noting that the objects chosen to be decorated with this theme have one feature in common: they are stepped upon. Thus, we find the iconography of defeated enemies on statue bases (Davis 1989: 168, fig. 6.19) as well as door sockets in addition to footstools (Davis 1989: 175, fig. 6.26).

On Tutankhamun's fan, there is a representation of the king on an ostrich hunt. (Seton-Williams 1980: 131.) Because fans are often made of feathers, a relationship between object and representation is suggested once more. More than that: The fan becomes symbolically a trophy of the hunt celebrating the triumph of its owner.

We have seen that the function of an object can be enhanced by its decoration. In the majority of cases, the enhancement is achieved by imagery appropriate to the gender. Mycenaean mirrors with ivory handles, which are articles of female toilette, are decorated with elaborately dressed women holding flowers (Pour-Chat 1977: 94, 105-6, pls. XXXII and XXXV). On the other hand, thrones of Egyptian kings normally have appropriate "male" imagery of aggression or of political power.

In this section, we explore the opposite case in which an object associated with a woman appropriates "male" imagery to enhance her status.

I will not discuss the best known example of Egyptian history, Hat-shepsut, who actually appears as a male. Rather, I will concentrate on two less obvious examples in which visual rhetoric is employed in order to add the prestige of male status to the public persona of a woman.

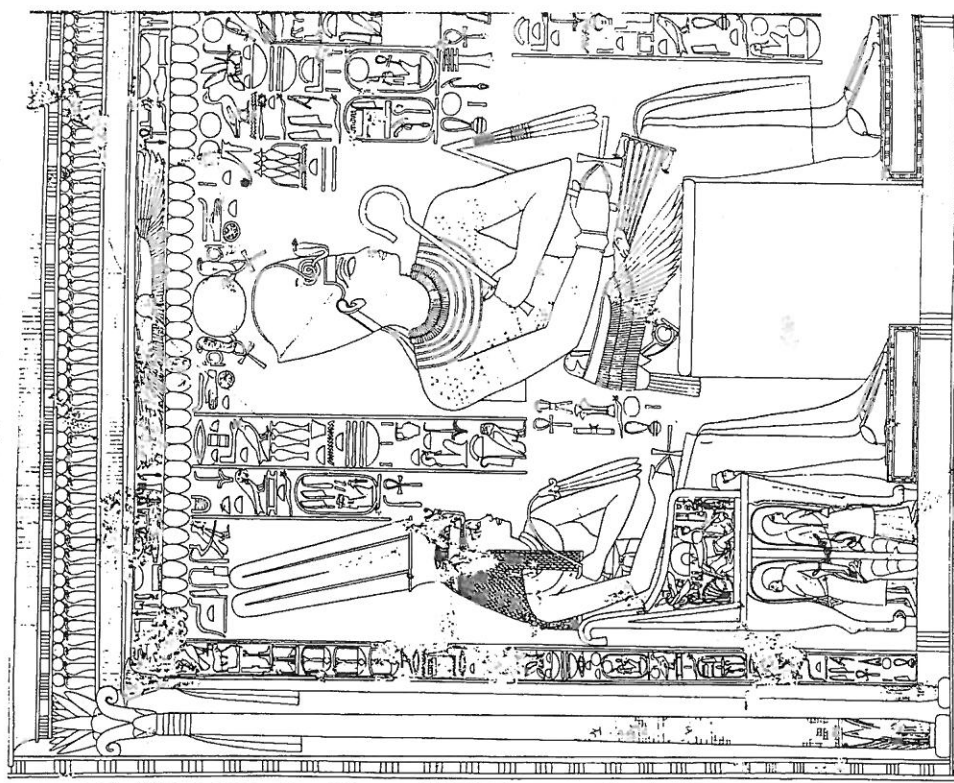
From the eighteenth-dynasty tomb of Khertef comes a scene in which the queen Tiye is seated on an elaborate chair (Fig. 27). Its decoration is derived from a distinctively male domain as it depicts a sphinx trampling enemies as well as bound captives. The captives seem to be women to judge from the pendulous breasts (Nims et al. 1978: pl. 47).

Another example comes from the Amarna period. On a *talatat*, there is a representation of the ship of Queen Nefertiti. Painted on the cabin of the ship is the queen, represented as a king, clothing enemies (Aldred 1973: 136, no. 57). Here again, however, the queen's enemies are women. Thus, although Tiye and Nefertiti appear in the role of a man, the assimilation with the male gender is not absolute.

In both the foregoing cases, the decoration of the object would probably shock the viewer with imagery of obvious norm inversion (the effectiveness of the rhetoric would partly be due to the shock). The latter is deliberate because it challenges the viewer's expectations as regards gender role. The result would be that something like a reevaluation of roles was achieved. It is as though the queen stated: "I am a woman but my political power is of such a nature that I could well have been a man."

Nothing like this exists in the Aegean. Although females with swords are known (see, for example, a Minoan seal CMS II. 3. 16), these have been generally interpreted as goddesses or priest-

27 Seated king
Anenhotep III and Queen
Tive, from the tomb of
Kheruef. After Nims et al.
(1978, pl. 47).



esses. Their role seems to be cultic rather than political. The ostensible gender appropriations with political overtones remain distinctive to Egypt.

THE ICONOGRAPHY OF CHAOS VS. THE ICONOGRAPHY OF ORDER

Already in Predynastic times, the Egyptians developed an iconography of battle scenes in which the enemy is shown as fallen bodies in utter disorder (Schäfer 1957: 168–76). Characteristic of their posture is the chaotic arrangement in the field and the lack of body control of the individual figures. Thus, on an ivory knife from Gebel-el-Arak (?), slips are depicted and, below them, drowning enemies (Fig. 28) (Williams and Logan 1987, 245–84; Davis 1989: 128, fig. 6.6). It is worth noting that the medium bearing this decoration is the handle of a knife, an instrument of aggression (see the third section). This iconography of defeat is carried on through early dynastic times (on the Narmer palette, for example) and finds novel expressions during the New Kingdom (for the development, see Davis 1989: 73ff.). A good example is a painted stucco relief from the chariot of Tutmosis IV. The pharaoh is riding his chariot triumphant; the enemy in total disorder is trampled underneath (Fig. 29).

The iconography of chaos is also transferred to the hunt, however. Hunted animals, like the human enemy, are shown fleeing in all directions under the threat of the triumphant hunter. In such cases, the artists of the New Kingdom were even willing to abandon the organizations in registers. I believe that this type of composition was chosen to emphasize chaos rather than merely unity of space. The best example is furnished by the tomb of Rhekmire (Fig. 30) (Davies 1943: pl. XLIII). There, the registers have been supplanted by undulating lines denoting hillocks. Leaping animals, overlaps, and multidirectional motion all contribute to a sense of confusion.

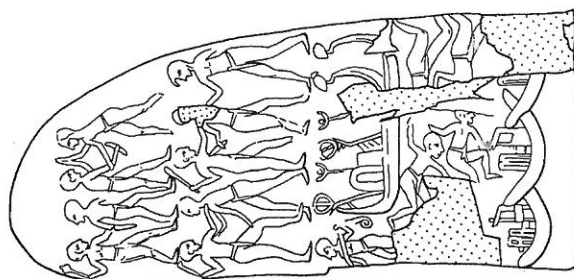
In Aegean art, the same type of iconography is used to denote chaos, especially defeat. I will confine myself to two examples only, which are quite characteristic.

The first is an inlaid dagger from Vaphio (Fig. 31). There, human figures are depicted that have been identified as swimmers (Evans 1930: 127, fig. 81). In fact, they must be drowning enemies because they have a lifeless posture that indicates lack of bodily control (L. Morgan 1988: 150–4). Although the victor is seemingly missing, he is implicitly there as the owner of the dagger.

The second example is a miniature wall painting from Akrotiri,

Thera found in room 5 of the West House (Sp. Marinatos 1974: 40-1). On the North frieze, the composition is divided into two halves (Fig. 32). On the upper section, we see a file of marching warriors and the people of a town settlement going about their daily business (N. Marinatos 1984: 38-40). This is a composition with an "iconography of order" accomplished by the paratactic arrangement of the marching troops. Below, in the sea, we see naked figures. Their bodies are in disarray, but they also display a conspicuous lack of bodily control. For this reason, I have argued that they are not swimmers but drowning enemies (N. Marinatos 1984: 40). Compare with the bodies of drowning enemies on the predynastic ivory handle, Fig. 28. The conventions of "defeat" apparently persisted for a very long time.

To return to the Thera fresco: The contrast between order and chaos in the upper and lower sections of the scene would have alerted

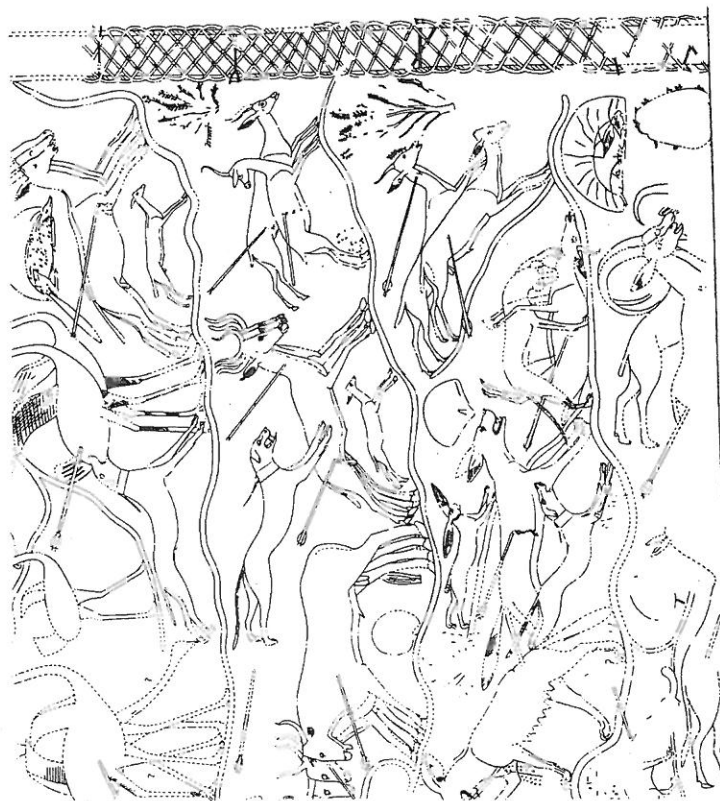


28 Predynastic ivory knife handle from Gebel-el-Arak. Louvre. Drawing: P. Rehak, after Davis 1989, fig. 6.6)



29 Scene on the chariot of Thutmose IV. After Davis (1989, Fig. 4.7).

30 Scene of hunt from the tomb of Rêkneire. After de Gans Davies (1943, pl. XLIII).



for heraldic compositions in Mycenaean art, and that such arrangements are scarce in Minoan compositions. This is hardly true. Both cultures used heraldic arrangements to create emblematic images: Flanking griffins and lions are most common (the naturalism that often characterizes Minoan art is reserved for nonemblematic subjects). Thus, the formulas or rhetorical devices can be multiple and diverse within the one and same culture.

Still, it is worth asking some questions. What does the use of similar visual rhetoric imply for the *mentalities* of the Aegeans and Egyptians? (I am more concerned with this question than with diffusion because a culture borrows only that which fits its own cognitive or visual schemata.) By the same token, what do the differences — such as the absence of gender inversion in the Aegean — imply?

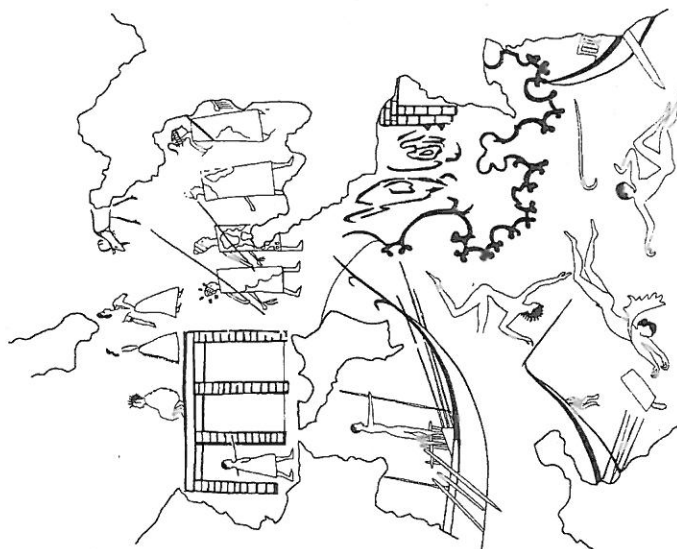
These issues are better left for a more extensive study. In this essay, I have only scratched the surface by investigating strategies that I have termed visual rhetoric. Two aspects have been discussed. One is the variety of pictorial formulas that are used to express ideas, either singly, or by way of contrast and comparison. The second type has been the implied three-way conversation between the viewer, the object viewed, and its decoration. Although this is not narrative per se it comes close to telling a story. But it is a story of cultures and norms, and in this respect, Egypt and the Aegean seem to have been close.

NOTE

I wish to thank my colleague P. Rehak for reading various drafts of this paper.



31 Dagger from Vaphio.
Drawing: P. Rehak, after
Evans (1930, Fig. 81).



32 North Wall frieze
from Room 5, West House,
Thera. Drawing: P. Rehak,
after Marinatos (1974).

the ancient viewer to the meaning of the iconography: The pictorial rhetoric would have been automatically recognized.

Apart from the paratactic arrangement, there exist other devices also that result in an iconography of order. Antithetical and flanking groups come to mind and it is obvious that such compositions are emblematic and useful for the expression of state ideology. This cannot be pursued further here. Suffice it to say that we need to revise our criteria for distinguishing between Mycenaean and Minoan artworks. It is commonly held that there is a predilection