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BIFAO 85 (1985), p. 187-195

Farid El-Yahky

Clarifications on the Gerzean Boat Scenes [avec 2 planches].

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CLARIFICATIONS ON THE GERZEAN BOAT SCENES

Farid EL-YAHKY

Since the discovery of predynastic decorated pottery towards the end of the last century, its large variety of motifs and scenes have been subject to different interpretations, in particular those of the Gerzean period. One of the most popular themes represented on Gerzean pottery is known as the boat scenes. Although first recognized as boats [1], in early studies some archaeologists interpreted this theme as ostrich farms or fortified villages [2]. In following studies [3] these hypotheses were completely rejected especially by Edgerton [4] in 1923, who systematically refuted their arguments and re-established the identification as boats. Since then more materials and more studies [5] have come to light to further consolidate this identification.

It is surprising then to note the recent article published in the *BIFAO* 83 by Mrs. Janine Monnet Saleh [6], rechallenging the boats' identification and proposing a new interpretation as « representations of temples on elevated platforms ». We realize, therefore, the importance of clarifying many of the misinterpretations concerning this boat theme, hopefully once and for all.

[1] Cf. Petrie, *Naqada and Ballas*, p. 48, 64; *Diospolis Parva*, p. 14-6; de Morgan, *Recherches sur les origines de l'Egypte*, ethnographie ..., p. 90-4.

[2] Torr, *L'Anthropologie* 9 (1898), p. 32-5; Loret, *Revue Egyptologique* 10, 92-3; *Annales du Musée Guimet* 19, 173-5; Naville, *RT* 33, 196-8; Reed, *BIFAO* 13, 145-51.

[3] Budge, *Egypt in the Neolithic*, p. 72-8; Capart, *Les débuts de l'art en Egypte*, p. 201-3; de Morgan, *Revue Anthropologique*, 30e année, Nos. 11-12, 272-82; Boreux, *Les poteries décorées de l'Egypte prédynastique*, p. 4-16; Id., *Nautique* (*MIFAO* 50), p. 10; Edgerton, *AJSLL* 39, 109-35; Vandier, *Manuel* I, p. 336.

[4] Edgerton, *op. cit.*

[5] Cf. Kantor, *JNES* 3, 110-36; Giedion, *The Eternal Present* (London, 1964), p. 36; Arkell, *Antiquity* 33, 52-3; *The Prehistory of the Nile Valley* (Leiden/Köln, 1975), p. 44; El-Yahky, « Recherches sur les formes et les motifs décoratifs des poteries gerzéennes », unpublished thesis, Paris-Sorbonne (June 1978); *JSSEA* 11, n° 2, 77-83.

[6] *BIFAO* 83, 263-96.

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Mrs. Monnet Saleh's main arguments in rejecting the identification as boats are summarized as follows :

A — The ' oars ' [1] :

1) They are only attached to the lower line of the ' boat's ' body (corresponding to the keel) and never reached the upper line (corresponding to the gunwale), thus she saw them as simple stands supporting the platform.

2) These ' oars ' do not have any convincing elements (blades) on their lower extremities.

3) The number of ' oars ' per ' boat ' can reach up to fifty which is too many for the relatively small sized Gerzean boat.

4) The water sign symbolized by zigzag lines can be seen around the ' boats ' but never in direct contact with the ' oars '.

B — The ' anchor ' is seen as a simple ornament only to indicate the space between the raised platform and the ground [2].

C — The curved shape of these platforms probably resulted from the artist's attempt to depict them in two dimensions, as he had difficulty in representing three dimensions. The division of the stands into two groups was explained as another indication of this two dimensional perspective [3]. Two of the unidentified geometric motifs [4] were also suggested to be the probable representation of platforms seen from above.

D — The ' cabins ' [5] are seen as two identical constructions of a defined type that never changes. The occasional extra construction protecting some figures on the top of one of the ' cabins ' (fig. 9) was suggested as an indication of the central perpendicular axis of the platform, and thus a flagrant proof that they are not ' cabins ' but huts. Mrs. Monnet Saleh came to the conclusion that these huts are probably early representations of pylons of the Egyptian temples.

E — Finally, she supported the evidence for this platform theory by two elements [6] :

1) Based on Myers' observation of the inselberg region of Gilf Kebir, this place was suggested as the original location for part of the Gerzean people who depicted these inselbergs as aligned triangles.

(1) *BIFAO* 83, 275-6.
(2) *Ibidem*, 276, 289.
(3) *Ibidem*, 276.
(4) *Ibidem*, 279 and fig. 8.
(5) *Ibidem*, 279-84.
(6) *Ibidem*, 294-6.

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2) From the description of the ram-headed god *Heryshef* as « he who is above his lake », Mrs. Monnet Saleh suggested that these Gerzean huts on elevated platforms were probably the traditional construction of *Heryshef*'s original habitat that might have been above a lake.

Before we discuss the preceding arguments it is important to point out the following considerations :

- The various motifs and scenes represented on predynastic pottery were made specifically for funerary purposes and found only in tombs arranged around the defunct according to a regular rite [1].
- Although these motifs or symbols were probably inspired from real elements in daily life (animals, birds, plants etc.), they do not necessarily contain all the details or all the motifs of daily life, and thus are selective according to their ritual beliefs.
- These symbols were subject to evolution and stylization according to the same religious beliefs. Their function can only be understood within this context by following the development, appearance, disappearance and frequency of every theme or symbol, and also by considering the correlation among the different symbols.
- Regarding the boat theme, there is no doubt that boats were already known in predynastic Egypt since the Amratian period, a fact easily attested to by the boat models as in fig. 1 and 2 [2], the boat shaped palettes [3], or some Amratian boat representations as in fig. 3, 4, and 5.

The arguments concerning the elevated platform theory can be refuted as follows, using the same numeration :

A — The oars :

1) Although most boats had oars attached to the keel, a theme that was also executed in the pharaonic periods on unmistakable boats [4], there are some examples

[1] Cf. Petrie, *The Making of Egypt*, p. 34-5; Murray, *JEA* 42, 86-96.

[2] For other examples cf. Winlock, *Models of Daily Life in Ancient Egypt*, pls. 33, 35-37, 40-43; Landstrom, *Ships of the Pharaohs*, p. 12.

[3] Cf. Petrie, *o.c.*, pl. 17 fig. 43-45 and 25 fig. 63-64; *Prehistoric Egypt*, pl. 44 and 45.

[4] Cf. de Morgan, *Fouilles à Dahchour en 1894-95*, pl. 19; Edgerton, *o.c.*, 110.

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as in fig. 11, 12 and 17, where the oars seem to be departing from the gunwale [1]. On the Gerzean tissue in Turino (fig. 11) they even seem to be held by rowers.

2) Some bladed oars can be observed from the Amratian period on a boat viewed from above (fig. 3) or as in fig. 5. In the Gerzean period oars usually were stylistically represented as simple lines but there were some examples of bladed oars [2] as in fig. 6 and 11. On other examples, blades were assigned only to denote the steering oars (fig. 4, 7 and 10). We should also mention that sometimes oars were completely eliminated from the boat scenes, especially towards the end of the Gerzean period (fig. 7, 10, 13-16, 20-22) but that does not deny the boat's identity.

3) The exaggerated number of oars for the relatively small predynastic boats can be explained within the context of the boats' magic or religious function, possibly indicating their imaginary speed in the afterlife journey [3]. This theme was also duplicated later in the pharaonic periods where an exaggerated number of oars were represented as simple lines without blades [4].

4) The zigzag lines were usually represented horizontally but also vertically [5], or diagonally [6], and in most cases used as a simple geometric motif to decorate all the surface of the pot [7] or just to fill in the spaces between other principal motifs [8]. Although traditionally interpreted as symbolizing water, as was the case in pharaonic periods [9], we should not generalize this interpretation for every representation on Gerzean pottery but the zigzag motif should be examined individually within the context of each pot's decoration. In some cases, however, these horizontal zigzag lines can be seen between [10] or underneath [11] some oared boats, and furthermore, in fig. 12, this zigzag line seems to be in direct contact with the boat and its oars.

[1] Cf. also two other boats in Brunton, *ASAE* 34, 150, fig. 3.

[2] One in Petrie, *o.c.*, pl. 21, fig. 46 K; another published in Edgerton, *o.c.*, 111-2, fig. 1 and 2; cf. also a scene on a boat model where men seem to be holding bladed oars in Landstrom, *o.c.*, p. 15, fig. 25.

[3] Petrie, *Ancient Egypt*, p. 1; Cotteveille-Giraudet, *BIFAO* 33, 111; Boreux, *o.c.*, p. 19.

[4] Cf. Caulfield, *The Temple of the Kings at Abydos* (London, 1902), p. 15-6, pl. 6.

[5] As in Petrie, *Diospolis Parva*, pl. 15, fig. 3 b; George, *Medelhavsmuseet Bulletin* 10, 58, No. 90.

[6] Petrie, *Prehistoric Egypt*, pl. 20, fig. 43 G; pl. 21, fig. 46 K.

[7] George, *o.c.*, 45, No. 63; 50, No. 73; 64, No. 101.

[8] Petrie, *o.c.*, pl. 20, fig. 43 G.

[9] Vandier, *o.c.*, p. 344.

[10] As in George, *o.c.*, 98, No. 152.

[11] As in Petrie, *o.c.*, pl. 23, fig. 2; pl. 19, fig. 40 M.

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B — The anchors :

The idea and original function of this object suspended from the prow already existed in the Amratian period as on fig. 3 and 5. Their representation became frequent on Gerzean boats particularly those called the classic type. They also took various stylistic forms of which Boreux [1] distinguished two types — one circular with short lines, and the second as an upside down U-shape as in fig. 10 [2]. We can also add a third type, the oblong shape, which contrary to the two previous types, is relatively bigger and completely painted as if to indicate a heavy massive object [3], and thus their identity cannot be mistaken.

C — The curved shape of the boats (alleged platforms) can be classified into four main types :

1) Classical boats are the most frequent type, depicted usually by two concave parallel lines indicating the body. This type is generally represented with two identical cabins in the middle, a plant-like construction on the prow and several oars. This type of boat was also represented on some rock drawings that Winkler called ' sickle boats ' [4].

2) High prowed boats are derived from the classical type and represented with redressed prows with diverse configurations (fig. 7, 8, 13, 14 and 15). Both the number and shape of the cabins varies and these boats were often depicted without oars, with rare exceptions as in fig. 8. This type of boat was also represented on rock drawings [5] and Winkler named them ' square boats ' [6].

3) Spiral prowed boats are also derived from the classical type but the prow ends in a centrifugal spiral (fig. 17 and 19), and is shown with or without oars. Here the structure of the boat underwent different modifications where the classical cabin type took various forms or even disappeared completely [7]. This evolution of the boat's structure was further marked by the appearance of armless figures [8] located beside or inside the cabins.

[1] Boreux, *o.c.*, p. 24.

[2] Cf. also George, *o.c.*, 94, No. 150; Petrie, *Diospolis Parva*, pl. 16, fig. 41 b.

[3] As in Petrie, *Naqada and Ballas*, pl. 66, fig. 3 and 6; *Prehistoric Egypt*, pl. 22, fig. 47 F.

[4] Cf. Winkler, *Rock Drawings of Southern Upper Egypt* I, p. 36, pl. 33.

[5] Cf. Weigall, *Travels in the Upper Egyptian Desert* (London, 1909), pl. 29 fig. 1, 4, 5 and pl. 30 fig. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5; Winkler, *o.c.*, pl. 34 fig. 19-21, 35 fig. 25-8, 30, 33, 34 and 36 fig. 35, 39, 41, 42, 46.

[6] Winkler, *o.c.*, p. 36.

[7] As in Brunton, *o.c.*, 149-56, fig. 3.

[8] El-Yahky, *o.c.*

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4) Late boats, as in fig. 18, 20, 21 and 22, were also derived from the previous types but the boat's structure has been simplified by the occasional disappearance of the oars, the plant-like construction and the classic ensigns. The cabins, as well, also evolved into a simple outline (fig. 16, and 22). This evolution was further marked by the appearance of animal headed prows, as in fig. 20, 21 and 22, an aspect that also survived throughout the dynastic periods for funerary boats [1].

It is interesting then to notice that the ' platform ' theory was based only on examples of the first type while ignoring the above mentioned three other boat types. As for the suggestion that the division of the oars (seen as ' stands ') indicates a two dimensional representation of the so called ' elevated platforms ', it appears to have little foundation if we consider examples with oars occupying the entire length of the boat (fig. 12, 17, and 18). Furthermore, what about those without oars, as in fig. 10, 13-16, and 19-22, especially the one with a sail (fig. 13)?

Concerning the unidentified geometric object seen as the possible representation of ' platforms ' viewed from above, this notion seems unsubstantial considering its pleated shape [2] for a supposedly flat ' platform '.

D — The cabins :

These constructions were already represented on some Amratian boats, as in fig. 3, 4, and 5. Their frequency increased on boats of the Gerzean period and they can be classified into five main types [3] :

— Symmetrical : the most frequent and classical type consisting of two identical rectangular cabins [4] located in the middle of the boat.

[1] Cf. Fakhry, *Baharia Oasis* I, p. 140, fig. 111; Gardiner, *ZÄS* 48, 48; Jéquier, *BIFAO* 19, 50-4; Vikentiev, *ASAE* 33, 220-1; Vandier, *o.c.*, p. 831, fig. 557.

[2] Especially example No. 2 in Monnet Saleh, *o.c.*, 278.

[3] Badawi in an architectural study on archaic cabins in general classified them in four types according to the form of their roofs. Cf. *A History of Egyptian Architecture* I, p. 5-8. We preferred a classification based on the character and number of cabins per boat, as we noticed that they could vary from one boat to another and sometimes different types of cabins were represented on the same boat.

[4] The space between the posts was usually filled in with horizontal lines, but sometimes with crossed lines as in Bissing, *Tongefässe* I, (*CGC*), p. 32-3, pl. 5; Petrie, *Diospolis Parva*, pl. 16, fig. 41 b; George, *o.c.*, 88, No. 145; or completely painted as in Galassi, *Tehenu*, p. 171, fig. 149 and 150.

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- Asymmetrical : consists of two cabins of different shapes and structures on the same boat, as in fig. 7, 14, and 20 [1].
- Multiple cabins : are usually the same as the symmetrical ones only the two main cabins appear to be flanked by smaller cabins [2].
- Single : the form takes various shapes as in fig. 13, 15-17.
- Cabins sheltering figures : this type probably appeared toward the end of the Gerzean period and was exclusively reserved to shelter armless figures [3]. They can be single (fig. 11, 12, and 22), double (fig. 18 and 19), or multiple [4].

Consequently, the description of cabins in the ' platform ' theory as « two identical constructions of a defined unchanging type » ignores the four other types discussed above. Subsequently, their interpretation as ' huts ' or the « probable early representation of pylons of egyptian temples » seems to be incomplete.

By tracing the development of these types of constructions within the context of the boat scenes, we realize that these simple cabins went through an uninterrupted ideological evolution to become a magic or religious symbol designating sacred places [5], or sanctuaries sheltering important figures or idols as seen in fig. 9-12, 18, 19, and 22. This concept becomes clearer when noticing that the ensigns, usually attached to one of the symmetrical cabins and believed to be divine symbols [6], also evolved into a form similar to the *Ntr* sign [7], as in fig. 13 [8]. Some cabin structures, especially those with hump roofs such as fig. 12, 17, and 18, can be seen on a sanctuary carved on the Hunting Palette [9]. This structure can also be observed on some early dynastic sanctuaries such as those carved on King *Aha*'s tablette [10], and two other sanctuaries carved on two tablettes contemporary

[1] For other examples cf. Petrie, *o.c.*, pl. 20, fig. 10; *Prehistoric Egypt*, pl. 19, fig. 41 C; Junker, *El Kubanieh-Sud 1910-11*, p. 53, fig. 19.

[2] As in Landstrom, *o.c.*, p. 12-3, fig. 12 and 14.

[3] El-Yahky, *o.c.*, 78, fig. A, Nos. 3, 8, 10, 11 and 13.

[4] Cf. Petrie, *o.c.*, pl. 21, fig. 46 K.

[5] Cf. also Boreux, *o.c.*, p. 20; Galassi, *o.c.*, p. 81-8; Badawi, *o.c.*, p. 5; Giedion, *o.c.*, p. 360; El-Yahky, *o.c.*, 79.

[6] Cf. Hayes, *Scepter* I, p. 26; Baumgartel, *The Cultures of Prehistoric Egypt*, p. 11, 149-54. Their role as divine symbols can also be seen in the structure of the primitive sanctuaries, cf. Jequier, *BIFAO* 6, 25-6; Vandier, *o.c.*, p. 604.

[7] Discussed also by Loret, *Revue Egyptologique* 10, 101; 11, 81-7; Bénédite, *JEA* 5, 239.

[8] Cf. another example in Petrie, *o.c.*, pl. 21, fig. 46 K.

[9] Cf. Frankfort, *The Birth of Civilization in the Near East*, p. 104 and pl. 14.

[10] Cf. Petrie, *Royal Tombs* II, pl. 3 fig. A and X; Emery, *Excavations at Saqqarah 1937-38; Ḥor Aḥa*, p. 100, fig. 48. One sanctuary is dedicated to *Neith* and the other, on the second register, is probably dedicated to *Thoth*.

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to King Ouadjimou [1]. Furthermore, the cabin structure of fig. 18 is remarkably similar to the dynastic sanctuary of Lower Egypt, the *Pr-nsr* [2], a structure that was later dedicated to the funerary divinities [3].

E — Concerning the last two elements given for this ' platform ' theory :

1) We do agree that some geomorphic elements influenced the Gerzean artist, for example, the series of triangles symbolizing the surrounding inselbergs or hills. However, we should be careful in considering all Gerzean scenes and motifs as direct representations of daily life elements or landscapes. These motifs were only selective symbols for ideological beliefs, and represented on funerary pottery found in different geomorphic regions of Egypt.

2) The suggestion that these ' huts on elevated platforms ' were probably the traditional construction model of god *Heryshef*'s original habitat seems to be farfetched especially when there is no material evidence of such ' platforms ', while we do possess a number of Gerzean boat models. On the other hand, it is possible that the origin of god *Heryshef*'s myth might date back to the Gerzean period as suggested by a representation on an ivory tablette fragment [4] of a ram head mounting a hump roofed sanctuary (similar to the cabin of our fig. 17), and another ram in front of the sanctuary. If this is the case, then what better place to be « above a lake » than a boat?

Finally, after considering the concept, character and development of these boats, it is difficult to deny their identity as boat themes evolved into religious symbols, that served as the prototype of the dynastic boat cult [5]. The same is also valid for the cabins which served as the prototype for the dynastic sanctuaries.

[1] One in Petrie, *o.c.*, pl. 11, fig. 2; the other in pl. 7 fig. 8.

[2] Cf. Gardiner, *Eg. Gr., Sign-list*, O 20.

[3] Cf. Jéquier, *o.c.*, 30-1.

[4] In Petrie, *o.c.*, pl. 7, fig. 8.

[5] Cf. Jéquier, *Considérations sur les religions égyptiennes*, p. 28-38. Also suggested by de Morgan, *Revue Anthropologique*, 30e année, Nos. 11-12; *La Préhistoire orientale* II, p. 123; Vandier, *o.c.*, p. 529; Giedion, *o.c.*, p. 36; Arkell, *Antiquity* 33, 52 and 53; *The Prehistory of the Nile Valley*, p. 44.

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SOURCES OF FIGURES

Plate XXXIII

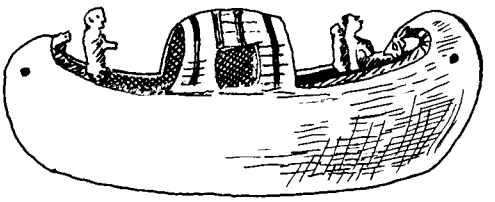
1. Randall-Maciver, *El Amrah and Abydos,* p. 41, pl. 9, fig. 8.
2. Petrie, *Prehistoric Egypt,* p. 8, pl. 7, fig. 17.
3. Landstrom, *Ships of the Pharaohs,* p. 12, fig. 14.
4. *Ibidem,* p. 12, fig. 6.
5. Petrie, *o.c.,* pl. 33, fig. 2.
6. Petrie, *Naqada and Ballas,* pl. 67, fig. 14; Scharff, *JEA* 14, 263-4, fig. 2; Murray, *JEA* 42, 86, pl. 6, fig. 1.
7. Quibell, *Hierakonpolis* II, pl. 77.
8. Petrie, *Diospolis Parva,* pl. 16, fig. 42; *Corpus of Prehistoric Pottery,* pl. 33, fig. D 42.
9. Edgerton, *AJSSL* 39, 121-4, fig. 5-8; Hornblower, *JEA* 15, 36, No. 2; Baumgartel, *The Cultures of Prehistoric Egypt* II, p. 145-6, pl. 13, fig. 1-3.
10. Quibell, *o.c.,* pl. 76.

Plate XXXIV

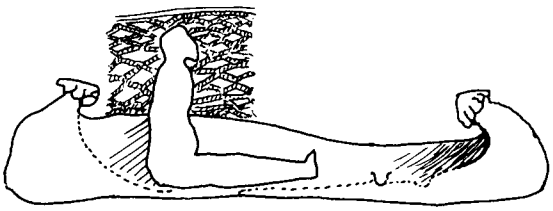
11. Scamuzzi, *Museo Egizio di Torino,* pl. 1-5; Westendorf, *Das Alte Aegypten,* p. 15.
12. Brunton, *ASAE* 34, 149-56, fig. 4.
13. Petrie, *Prehistoric Egypt,* pl. 23, fig. 3; Kantor, *JNES* 3, 116, fig. 4 F; Weill, *Recherches sur la I^re^ dynastie et les temps prépharaoniques,* p. 331, fig. E; Landstrom, *o.c.,* p. 13, fig. 15.
14. Bissing, *RT* 25, 180-1, fig. 3; Quibell, *Archaic Objects* (*CGC*), pl. 22, No. 11557; Brunton, *ASAE* 34, 150-6, fig. 5; Landstrom, *o.c.,* fig. 12 and 13.
15. *Ibidem.*
16. Bissing, *Tongefässe* (*CGC*) I, p. 28-9, pl. 5; Legrain, *ASAE* 4, 219, fig. 5 and 6; Smith, *HESPOK,* p. 126, fig. 45, No. 2; Kantor, *o.c.,* fig. 5 E.
17. de Rustafjaell, *The Light of Egypt,* p. 29, pl. 16, fig. 3; Payne, *JEA* 63, 8, fig. 5.
18. *Catalogue of the R. de Rustafjaell Collection of Egyptian Antiquities,* sold by Sotheby on Jan. 1913 (London, 1913), p. 26, pl. 26, fig. 314.
19. George, *Medelhavsmuseet Bulletin* 10, p. 98, No. 152.
20. Bénédite, *Mon. Piot* 22, 1-34; Kantor, *o.c.,* fig. 5 C; Vandier, *Manuel* I, p. 538-9, fig. 360.
21. Boeser et al., « Die Denkmaler des Alten Reiches », *Beschr. Leiden,* p. 8, pl. I, fig. 18; Kantor, *o.c.,* p. 124, fig. 5 F.
22. *Beschr. Leiden, o.c.,* pl. 2, fig. 3; Kantor, *o.c.,* fig. 5 G.

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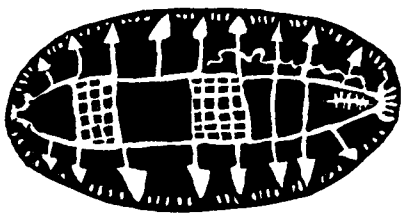
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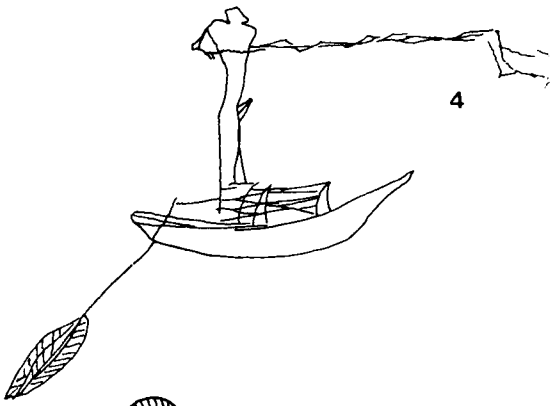
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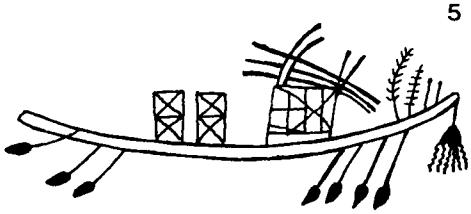
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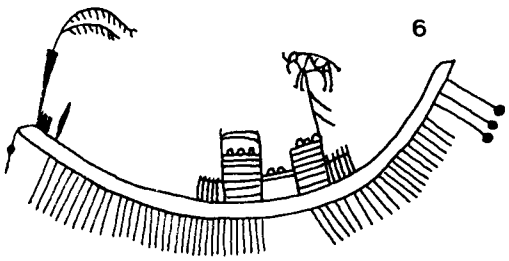
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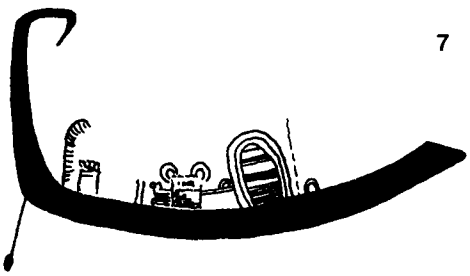
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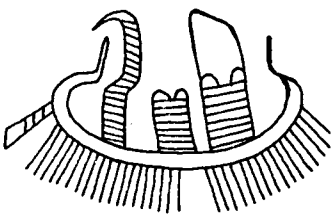
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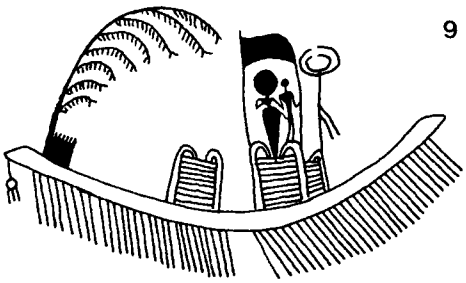
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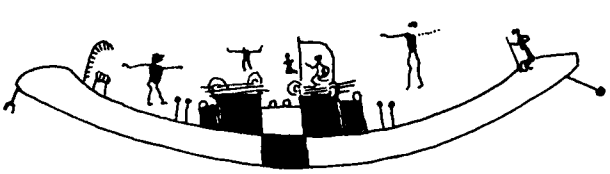
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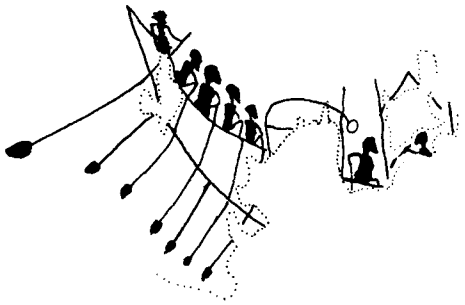
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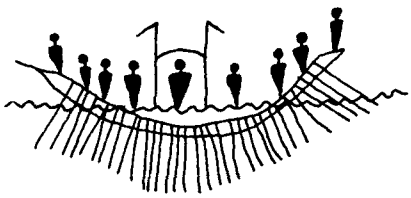


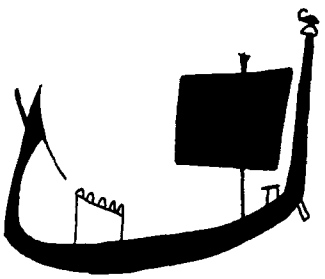
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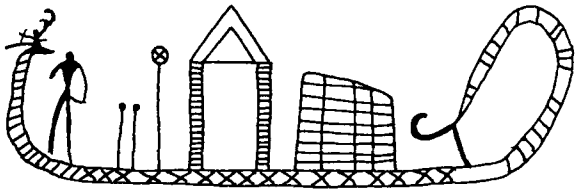


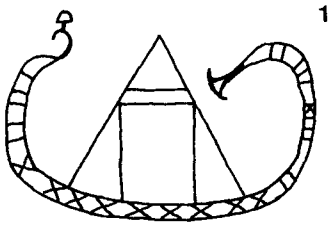
BIFAO 85 (1985), p. 187-195 Farid El-Yahky
Clarifications on the Gerzean Boat Scenes [avec 2 planches].
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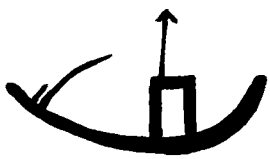

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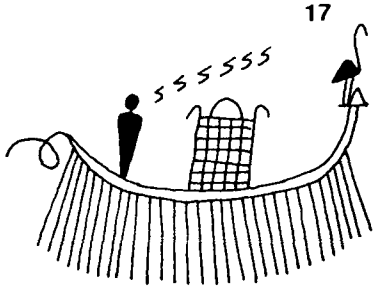

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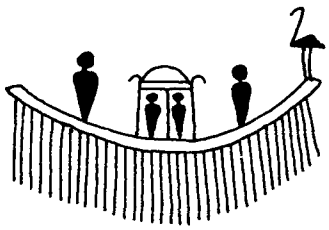

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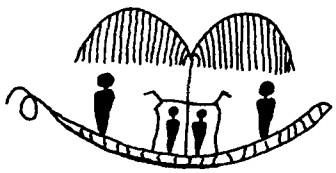

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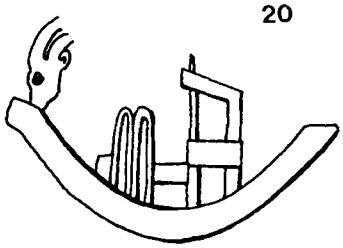

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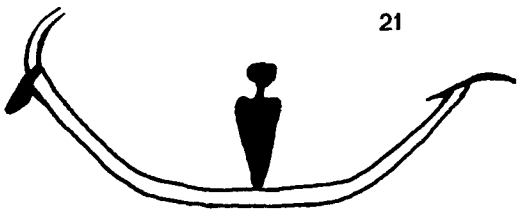

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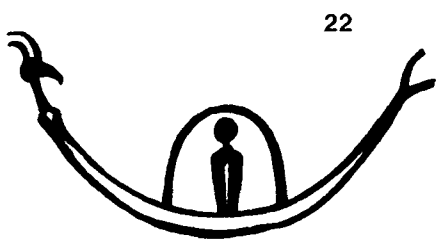

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