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Boats or fortified villages?

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BOATS OR FORTIFIED VILLAGES?

BY

F. W. READ.

The controversy as to the significance of the paintings on the pre-dynastic pottery and in the painted tomb at Hierakonpolis has been recently revived by Professor Naville[1]; and it may therefore be of interest to glance once again at the theories to which these paintings have given rise and the arguments which can be urged on either side. In the first place we may quote some of the descriptions given of them by those who believe that boats are depicted. In 1896, before any dispute had arisen, Professor Petrie wrote as follows :

« The boats or galleys which are shown on so many of these paintings are of one type, with very slight variations; there is a high rise fore and aft; a bough is placed at the stem to shade the look-out man; two cabins stand amidships; an ensign on a tall pole stands either between the cabins or — more generally — at the hinder cabin; and in the most complete examples there is a tying-up rope in front, and three large steering-oars at the stern. These last effectually show that this object is a boat, and not any sort of palisade or enclosure, as might be supposed[2]. »

In view of the arguments to be examined later, it is interesting to note that at the very beginning the possibility of a « palisade or enclosure » was present to the mind of the discoverer, and that he decisively rejected this explanation. De Morgan, about the same time, in a passage quoted by Professor Naville, said :

« Une grande urne, découverte à Abydos et exposée dans la salle de la Céramique au Musée de Guizeh, présente des représentations très compliquées.

[1] Naville, *Les dessins des vases préhistoriques égyptiens*, in *Archives suisses d'Anthropologie générale*, II (1916-1917), 77.

[2] Petrie, *Naqada and Ballas*, 48; pl. LXVI, LXVII.

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Deux barques se suivent, séparées entre elles par des autruches et de petits triangles, des antilopes courent çà et là dans le champ des tableaux. Les barques sont munies de leurs avirons et portent à la proue des palmes; en leur milieu s'élèvent deux pavillons carrés sur lesquels se tiennent des hommes et des femmes dansant [1]. »

Scenes of the same general character as those on the pottery have been also found painted on the walls of a pre-dynastic tomb at Hierakonpolis [2]. It has been claimed that in one of the boats there shown the steersman is holding the steering-oar; but this, though probable, cannot be regarded as quite certain.

In 1898 Mr. Cecil Torr brought forward reasons for rejecting the views set out above, which may be summarised thus : Although human beings, gazelles, and ostriches are figured there are no fish. No rowers are shown, and the supposed oars proceed from the lower part of the boat. On a terra-cotta model of a boat published by Professor Petrie [3] the sides are decorated with vertical bands, between which are men holding oars with great round blades; but the painted vases do not show bands or blades. There is always a lacuna in the supposed line of oars corresponding to the open space between the « cabins », which is inexplicable if they are really oars. Mr. Torr concluded his article with his own explanation of the designs in these words :

« Pour ma part, je crois que les longues lignes courbes qui ont été considérées comme représentant des navires, sont, en réalité, l'indication d'un rempart; que les lignes droites plus courtes, qualifiées de rames, indiquent une sorte de glacis; que la lacune qui s'observe dans cette rangée marque le sentier par lequel on accédait au rempart; enfin, que les objets qualifiés de cabines ne sont pas autre chose que de petites tourelles de part et d'autre de l'entrée du rempart [4]. »

A few years later M. Loret adopted the arguments of Mr. Cecil Torr and added these two others. It would be impossible for the oars at either end of the boat to reach the water, or, if they did, a large part of the boat would be

[1] De Morgan, *Recherches sur les origines de l'Égypte*, I, p. 161; pl. VIII, X.

[2] Quibell and Green, *Hierakonpolis*, Part II (1902), pl. LXXV-LXXVIII, p. 21.

[3] *Naqada and Ballas*, pl. XXXVI, 80; pl. LXVI, 1.

[4] Cecil Torr, *L'Anthropologie*, IX (1898), 32.

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submerged. A boat carrying the number of oars shown would be 30 metres long, and no boat of this length is known even in times of high civilisation [1].

Professor Naville in his recent article has adduced some new considerations. He contends that the animals figured prove that the people who made the vases were hunters and therefore passed most of their time upon land. Why, he asks, do we never find representations of their dwellings upon land? Why always and solely boats in which are antelopes and trees? This will imply boats of considerable size, and the necessary knowledge of naval construction can hardly be attributed to these hunters. The water can only be represented



Fig. 1.

by the zigzag lines, but the boats are never in the water and the supposed oars are always some distance from it. The water is shown above the boats, and it is difficult to explain the blank spaces which interrupt the zigzag lines. Professor Naville gives two interesting photographs showing the desert at Abydos and in Tunis, where we see that the surface «est toute en petites vagues semblables à celles que produirait sur un bassin d'eau une très faible brise». These, then, are the zigzag lines of the painted vases, and the interruptions in the design are tracks hardened by use.

Most of the arguments advanced by those who have opposed the view that boats are represented imply that the artists of pre-dynastic Egypt drew their designs to scale and were acquainted with modern conventions. It is difficult, for instance, to see the force of the remark that «l'eau est au-dessus des barques, ce qui ne se comprend pas». Is it not notorious that in an Egyptian drawing objects in the background are *always* represented at the top of the

[1] Loret, *Revue égyptologique*, X (1902), 92.

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picture? Even in a modern drawing water on the further side of a boat is shown above it, for the simple reason that on a flat surface it cannot be shown anywhere else. The only difference is that the modern artist knows, and the Egyptian artist did not know, how to create the illusion that it is *not* above. Similarly, why say that the antelopes and trees are *in* the boats? Some are *between* the boats and therefore cannot be in them on any theory, and the rest are certainly to be understood as being on the further side. Nor is it necessary to believe that the blank spaces which frequently break the wavy lines (not by any means always, as Professor Naville says) correspond to any real break. They are much more probably introduced for decorative effect. This at any rate must be the intention on the vases figured by De Morgan (*loc. cit.*, I, pl. IV, 1, 2; pl. IX, 4) where exactly similar lines and spaces appear, which certainly form no part of any picture. It is also interesting to note on pl. IV, 3, again clearly for decorative purposes, curved wavy lines below the horizontal wavy lines, exactly as on the vase in pl. X (our fig. 1), where they are not easy to explain as part of the picture.

A very strong argument in favour of the drawings representing boats is furnished by the occurrence at Hierakonpolis of a form of boat which reappears on a vase and is there furnished with a sail. But the more recent evidence published by Professor Petrie should conclude the controversy[1]. The vase here reproduced (fig. 2) is described as follows :

« On this is a structure from which four men are poling; with the shoulder against the pole end, and the weight of the body resting upon it, exactly as Nile boatmen pole a boat along at present. To suppose them fighting from a town in that attitude would be absurd; the action is precisely that of boatmen. This is a unique example of a great state boat with a row of passenger cabins on it; these are raised to a higher level, so as to be clear of the men working the boat. »

So far as this particular vase is concerned the meaning of the design can hardly be other than that which Professor Petrie has stated; and it seems equally difficult to separate it from the other vases on which boats have been recognised. At the top are the usual rows of zigzag lines; there are the ca-

[1] *Ancient Egypt*, 1914, Part I, p. 34.

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bins, only more numerous than in other specimens; the poles rise at the sides of the cabins; the ostriches are there also, a portion of one being visible at the left of the picture; the oars are replaced by punting poles, and we have the men working them.

This specimen makes several things clear. It shows that no conclusion can

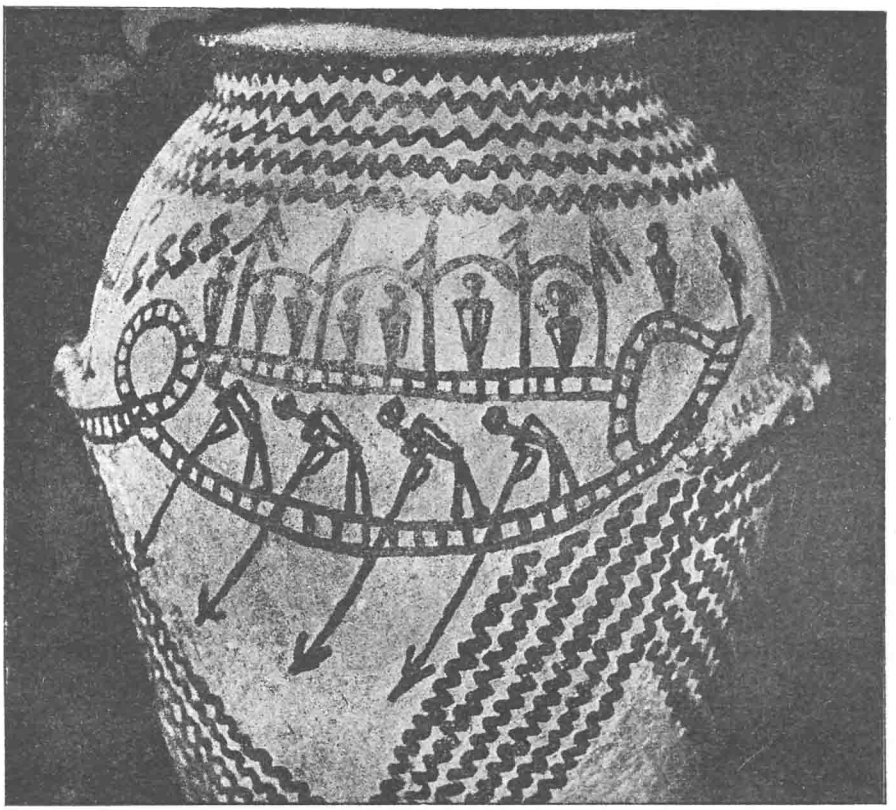


Fig. 2.

be drawn from the position of the oars as to the danger of the boat being submerged. The same argument would apply to the level of the water as here shown, but all that the artist meant was that the boat was surrounded by water on all sides. Also we see that the boat can be in the water without water being shown in actual contact with it, since a space is kept free to bring out the punting poles clearly. This vase gives the key to the Z or S-shaped marks which Professor Naville thinks are perhaps bushes or tufts of herbs. The four

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marks between the ostrich and the boat are only portions cut off from such lines as are shown below the boat, and are therefore a more summary way of indicating water. This view is strongly supported by a terra-cotta box in the British Museum [1], where such marks, instead of being irregularly scattered about, are arranged in rows on a level with the wavy lines (here almost straight, like the cursive form of the hieroglyph).

In addition to the main controversy, there has been a difference of opinion among those who hold the theory of boats being represented, as to the lines proceeding from the lower part of the boat. If the object is a boat, these lines are of course most obviously explained as the oars, which was the view taken at the time of the discovery by Professor Petrie. But De Morgan soon after proposed to regard them as fishing tackle, and thought that the only oars were the « large steering-oars » of Petrie [2]. Dr. Budge expressed the opinion that « some other explanation of the lines must clearly be sought; for there is no evidence in support of the theory that they represent oars [3] ». Subsequently he came to the conclusion that water was probably intended [4].

The main reasons for rejecting the theory of oars are the gigantic size implied for the boats, the fact that the lines are found below the boat only, and the lacuna in the succession of lines. As it is quite impossible to believe that the pre-dynastic artists had any idea of drawing to scale, the first point is of no weight. The second may be met by a comparison with the steering-oars. These, by their shape and position, are clearly identified, and yet they appear only below the boat. But the most convincing evidence is to be found in the picture of a boat at Abydos, thus described by Professor Petrie :

« The structure of this barque is mysterious, and has evidently come down from so early an age that the sense of the details was forgotten. The long row of oars projecting from the bows is a reminiscence of the long bank of oars shown along both the bows and stern sides in the prehistoric paintings; the triple steering oars seem to have driven out the rowing oars from the stern half [5]. »

[1] *Guide to the First and Second Egyptian Rooms* (1904), 30; Capart, *Primitive Art in Egypt*, 132.

[2] De Morgan, *Recherches sur les origines de l'Égypte*, II (1897), 91.

[3] Budge, *History of Egypt* (1902), I, 74.

[4] *Guide to the First and Second Egyptian Rooms*, 31.

[5] Petrie, in Caulfeild, *Temple of the Kings at Abydos* (1902), p. 15, 16; pl. VI.

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The lines here cannot represent water because the boat is on a stand, and they are best explained as the oars of the pre-dynastic drawings, which had become unintelligible in the XIXth Dynasty. If any doubt remained, it would be removed by the barque at Denderah, to which Petrie refers[1]. There the diminution of the number of oars has proceeded still further; the three steering-oars have become two, and of the twenty-four rowing-oars only two remain; moreover, the hawks at Abydos have become meaningless triangles at Denderah. Notwithstanding this, the oars have preserved their primitive form much more closely than those at Abydos and can be clearly recognised as the direct descendants of the oars represented on the pre-dynastic pottery.

It must be admitted that the strongest part of the case put forward by the advocates of the fortified village theory is their explanation of the lacuna in the line of oars. According to them, this is the road leading to the village; and no other suggestion is so far forthcoming. We can hardly, however, allow this one aspect of the case to determine our opinion in opposition to the other considerations which on the whole point so strongly towards what was originally recognised as the natural explanation of the pictures.

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[1] Mariette, *Dendérah*, IV, pl. 64.

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