

The vulture and the headless man: Scenes of violence on a Predynastic prestige object from Gebelein

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This article addresses the imagery of a hitherto only scarcely discussed prestige object from Gebelein based on new, high-quality photographs and drawings. The depicted scenes of sacralised violence provide an interesting glimpse into the “political” iconography of Gebelein at that time and most likely represents the medial staging of a claim to power by a local ruler. A comparison to the motifs of the Decorated Ware as well as recently discovered tattoos on contemporary mummies from Gebelein unveils a remarkably similar repertoire of motifs across all three types of images, firmly integrating the initially unique looking decoration of the Gebelein staff into the iconographic tradition of the Pre- and Protodynastic period.

Cet article s'intéresse à l'iconographie d'un objet de prestige de Gebelein, peu discuté jusqu'à présent, à partir de photographies et de dessins nouveaux et de haute qualité. Les scènes de violence sacralisée représentées offrent un intéressant aperçu de l'iconographie « politique » de Gebelein à cette époque et représentent très probablement la mise en scène d'une revendication du pouvoir par un dirigeant local. Une comparaison avec les motifs des objets décorés ainsi qu'avec les tatouages récemment découverts sur les momies contemporaines de Gebelein dévoile un répertoire de motifs remarquablement similaires dans les trois types d'images, intégrant fermement la décoration initialement unique du bâton de Gebelein dans la tradition iconographique de la période pré- et protodynastique.

A wooden object from Predynastic Gebelein, which is both puzzling and fascinating in its uniqueness, was published as a “*casse-tête*” in 1922 by Georges Daressy.¹ While the object was discovered during Maspero's excavations at Gebelein in 1894 and entered into the “*Livre d'entrée*” of the Musée de Boulaq in 1895 with the short description “*Gebeläin – bois – boomerang – long. o m. 74*”,² it remained virtually forgotten until Daressy's publication. The object is currently on display in the National Museum at Tahrir-square as part of the Pre- and Protodynastic section (Cairo JdE 26602; Fig. 1). It is 74 cm long, with one end being 6 cm wide and the other only 3.5 cm, with the narrowest part being only 3 cm wide to form a handle. The object is between 1.4 and 2 cm thick. Its profile is therefore not round, but oval, and becomes flatter towards the wider end.

¹ Daressy 1922: 17–32.

² Daressy 1922: 17.

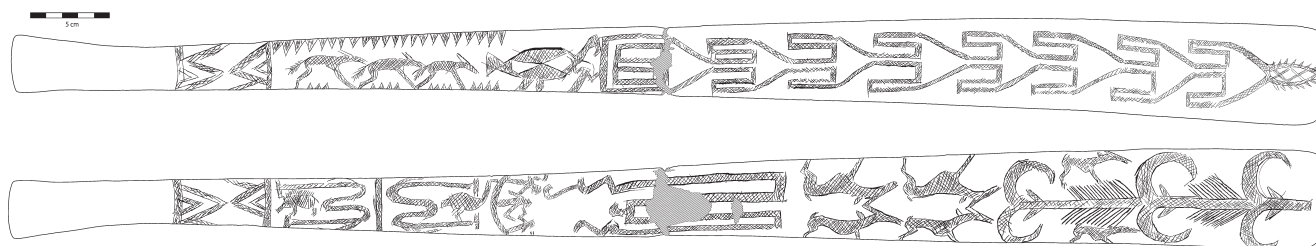


Fig. 1.

Gebelein staff (Photo David Sabel;
drawing Susanne Kroschel).

Fig. 2.

Gebelein staff, damage
(Photo David Sabel).



The edges are rounded and blunt. Daressy identified the material as acacia wood.³ The object is fractured into two pieces with the breaking point being almost exactly in the middle. The visible damage on one side suggests an aimed blow (Fig. 2) and an intentional destruction. Extremely detailed patterns are carved on the whole surface of the object, with the exception of the handle.

The unusual shape of the object has no known direct parallels. On the one hand, the flattened shape allows for a good recognisability of the carvings and provided a larger surface to apply them. On the other hand, it seems counterintuitive to propose that it was used as a baton, like Daressy assumed, especially with blunt edges, because it might unnecessarily impair the stability and use of the object. It is likely that a baton shape that could actually be used in practice was modified for better suitability as a semio-phor by creating a flatter surface to engrave images. Therefore, we will refer to it using the more neutral term “staff” in this article.

Iconographically and stylistically, we would provisionally date the Gebelein staff to the late Naqada II period, although a more precise determination is hardly possible because the exact provenance cannot be ascertained beyond the general site of Gebelein. The extensive and diverse archaeological material from the Pre-, Proto- and Early Dynastic periods suggest a high socio-political importance for this site.⁴ In this context, for example, the famous Turin linen from the Naqada II period shows an iconography closely related to the topics of rulership and domination.⁵ Early temple reliefs, like Turin p.12341⁶ from the 1st Dynasty, suggest that Gebelein may have also been a site of the Sed festival.⁷ Interestingly,

3 Daressy 1922: 17.

4 Ejsmond 2018: 387-405.

5 Discussed in e.g. Ciałowicz 2001: 155.

6 Morenz 2021: 138-141.

7 Already mentioned in Morenz 1994: 217-238 & pl. 1.

the closest iconographic and stylistic parallel to the staff's engravings – and especially to the scene discussed in this article – seems to be a potmark from a Naqada grave (grave number 1915) published by Petrie and Quibell (**Fig. 3**).⁸ Unfortunately, there is no further information given about the grave in their publication and even the entry in his notebook⁹ is extremely brief and offers no useful information to determine a precise date or chronological position for the grave, nor has the vessel with the mark ever been identified in any of the modern collections or been depicted on any other occasion.

Despite its unusual properties, the Gebelein staff has scarcely been discussed in research so far. Because of the shallow carving, the decoration is barely visible at first but becomes remarkably clear under good lighting conditions.¹⁰ While this article will be a case study focusing on only a few scenes, a full publication of the Gebelein staff containing new photos and detailed drawings of the whole object is currently in preparation.



Fig. 3.

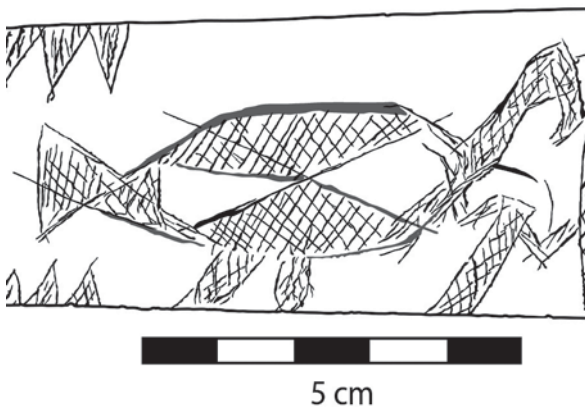
Potmark from Naqada grave number 1915, scale not provided by Quibell (Quibell 1896: pl. LI.7).

THE VULTURE AND THE HEADLESS PERSON

The depiction of a headless person (**Figs 4a & b**),¹¹ which is rarely represented throughout the history of Egyptian art, seems to be of particular iconographic and iconological interest and will be the main focus of this article. The respective scene shows a headless human figure with raised arms on the right. The diagonal body could suggest that the figure is either falling backwards or is even to be considered as lying down.¹² The absence of visible legs, which should curve around the edge of the staff and continue onto the other side of the object, suggest that the figure was intentionally represented without them. The figure itself is filled with a distinctive criss-cross pattern that is used to fill the outlines of all images

Fig. 4.

Vulture and headless man, detail of Fig. 1.



⁸ Petrie & Quibell 1896: pl. LI.7.

⁹ The Petrie Museum Archives: Tomb cards and notebooks of Sir William Matthew Flinders Petrie, notebook 140, page 34.

¹⁰ We enjoyed working in the museum and are especially grateful to M. Sabah Abdelrazik for her kind support; photographic documentation under excellent lighting conditions by David Sabel, detailed drawing by Susanne Kroschel.

¹¹ Morenz 2014a: 189; Morenz & Büma 2017: 64-68; Hardtke et al. 2022.

¹² Compare e.g. the depiction of the fallen enemies on the Battlefield Palette.

on the object.¹³ The figure's left arm crosses the chest of an overly large bird depicted to the left of it, that is looking to the right. The bird has a long neck and crooked beak and its head would be above the human figure's head, had the latter been depicted. While the bird's legs are shown, its feet and claws – like the legs of the human figure – are also not depicted and there are also no visible traces of them. The head, neck, legs and tail are filled with the same criss-cross-pattern used for the human figure, while the bird's body is separated into four triangles with x-shaped lines, two of which are left blank while the other two are filled with the same pattern. The crooked beak suggests a bird of prey and the pronounced long neck indicates that a vulture¹⁴ is the most likely candidate.

On the Gebelein staff, the simplified representation of the headless man seems to be a stylistic choice, while the headlessness can be considered iconographic and it is strongly marked semantically. In the Protodynastic period, this kind of depiction of the enemy was apparently quite important¹⁵ but the motif soon disappeared, probably for reasons of decorum, only to return after one and a half millennia¹⁶ in the “hell punishments” of the New Kingdom funerary texts.¹⁷ Motifs such as headlessness are potentially polysemous and only the context can help to clarify the intended meaning. In a very different context, for example, the Akephalos played an interesting role in ancient and late antique magic.¹⁸ The headless man of the Gebelein staff is also characterised by raised arms. This posture/gesture is also polysemous at first, although we can think of a gesture of surrender, submission, and greeting in this specific context.

Interestingly, the combination of vulture/ bird of prey and a headless man is not unique, appearing in other cultures as early as the 10th or 9th millennium BCE: The world's possibly earliest known representation of a headless man was carved on the Upper Mesopotamian Early Neolithic pillar P 43 from Göbekli Tepe.¹⁹ Temporally and spatially in between Göbekli and our Gebelein example, we know of other comparable representations including a Neolithic mural from the Anatolian site, Çatal Hüyük.²⁰ Nevertheless, we may assume a different context of meaning for each one of them. While we can think of mythology connected to the afterlife, shamanism or the like for the representations from Göbekli or Çatal Hüyük, we most likely see a brutally staged claim to power on the staff from Gebelein.

13 On the use of patterns to fill representations of animals in rock art, potmarks, palettes and pottery, see Hardtke 2013.

14 The vulture as a hieroglyph appears on the Gebelein temple relief of the 1st Dynasty and on a ceramic pot from the Naqada III period with the hieroglyph-like signs VULTURE/FALCON and an image similar to the hieroglyph “shelter in reeds” (Ejsmond 2018). A local connection of the vulture to Gebelein can therefore not be excluded.

15 See e.g. Droux 2005-2007 and Müller 2008.

16 Vinci 2004: 9-22. The question of later “renaissances” of Proto- and Early dynastic imagery is rarely addressed, e.g. the recycled palette with a depiction of Teje (see Bothmer 1969-1970) or the reuse of pre- and early dynastic imagery on clappers discussed in Morris 2017.

17 Hornung 1997, more recently: Darnell 2004: 111-117; Ritner 2008: 168-171; Roberson 2012: 212-213 & 340.

18 Preisendanz 1927; Darnell 2004: 111-117.

19 Schmidt 2012; discussion of the motif in Morenz 2014b, 2021a.

20 Mellaart 1973; Hodder 2006; the vulture is depicted here with human knee joints, possibly a hint to shamanistic ideas? see also Morenz 2014b: 239.

The vulture, which is huge in comparison to the human being, most likely stands for a supernatural power, ruler or a god, while the depicted behavior could be inspired by the vulture as a scavenger, which pecks at corpses on the battlefield. This is supported if we look at the already mentioned potmark²¹ from Naqada (Fig. 3) again. The iconography and style is strikingly similar to the scene on the Gebelein staff down to the position of the arms of the headless man and the left arm touching the animal's chest. The main difference is that the potmark has a feline (probably a lion) attacking the headless person instead of a vulture. The combination "(Unnaturally) large predator + headless man" is therefore not as unique as it may have appeared at first. Interestingly, the chronologically probably slightly later battlefield palette (Inv. Nr. British Museum EA20791) has the same combination of animals – lion and vulture – attacking and eating the corpses of fallen enemies on the battlefield. While the lion has often been interpreted as representing the king/ruler destroying his enemies, the vultures have so far only been seen as scavengers. The image on the Gebelein staff in comparison with the potmark however suggests that the vulture may also have been a representation of the ruler (or a god) as a destroyer of his enemies, maybe even one that had their origin in the Gebelein area.

At the transition from the neck to the body of the vulture there are two more prominent incised lines, which could even be interpreted as a kind of execution knife (cf. *šms* device)²² (Figs 5 & 6). However, in this case we would expect the bird to hold the object in its claws.²³ Perhaps we can rather interpret the incisions as traces of an intentionally repeated "execution" of the man by manipulation of the image. He is thus decapitated, destroyed and subjected "for eternity" not only by the representation of the headlessness, but also ritually by the repeated incisions with a symbolic force. Name or scene inscriptions are completely missing at this Naqada II level of pictoriality and we do not know whether a reference is made here to a specific event or rather to a pattern of domination in general.²⁴

Interestingly, Petrie also draws horizontal lines on the chest of the feline in his drawings of the Naqada potmark (Fig. 3). Though the lines are slightly different in both of the existing drawings and obviously no real determination can be made without looking at the original vessel, they might be similar traces of intentional incisions. Their purpose could have been to either repeat the "execution" of the depicted man as stated above and discussed below or – as we know from other depictions of dangerous animals²⁵ – to render the animal unable to do further harm. This may also

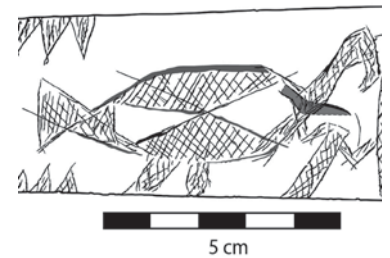


Fig. 5.

Possible execution knife in the scene of the vulture and the headless man, detail of Fig. 1 (incisions marked for emphasis).



Fig. 6.

Mafdet climbing the *šms* device; vessel from the tomb of De(we)n (Cairo JE 34904; Petrie 1901: pl. VII).

21 The complexity of the image could suggest that the depiction may not be a potmark in the traditional sense at all, but more likely a symbol like early *Serekhs* engraved into vessels in a similar fashion. However, without identifying the original object (and the size, position etc. of the mark on it) this question must also remain unanswered.

22 Regarding the identification of the *šms* device see Capart 1898: 125-126.

23 This is shown, for example, with the falcon on the Nar-meher palette which is anthropomorphized by the addition of a human arm.

24 Regarding the problem of historical "events", sources and chance of transmission: Fitzenreiter 2009.

25 Hardtke 2013: 8-9 notes lines protruding from the heads of hippopotami and donkeys in rock art probably indicating harpoons or arrows acting as symbols for the presence of a hunter. Hendrickx 2011: 244 mentions a hippopotamus figurine with a deliberate incision on the neck, suggesting it was ritually killed.



Fig. 7.
Incision marks, Nar-meher palette
(Photo David Sabel).



Fig. 8.
Beheaded and castrated dead on
the Nar-meher palette
(Photo David Sabel).

match the intentional destruction of the Gebelein staff: “killing” the dangerous vulture with the incisions first and then breaking the staff itself to destroy the object’s power.

A parallel for the harming of enemies by incisions on the monument after the completion of the image might be the cosmetic palette of king Nar-meher, which is only a few generations younger. Here, slain enemies are depicted in the lower register on both sides of the palette and one of those enemies has no penis. Shallow incision marks in the genital area, which can be interpreted as a pictorially repeated ritual of castration (Fig. 7),²⁶ seem similar to the possibility of a repeated ritual beheading of the man on the Gebelein staff. This interpretation of the lower register of Nar-meher’s ceremonial palette is supported by the fact that in the scene with the royal battlefield parade two rows of five bound, slain enemies are shown. Nine of the ten men not only have their heads cut off and placed between their legs but are also shown castrated and the severed phalli are lying on top of their heads (Fig. 8).²⁷

THE EXECUTION IN THE BOAT AND THE SACRAL(?) BUILDING

The scene of the vulture and the headless man corresponds with an execution scene and other symbols of domination on the opposite side of the staff (Figs 9a, b & c). Here, three humans are depicted in the boat, which may be considered a ruler’s boat. The figure on the left is shown with one arm raised, smiting the enemy²⁸ who stands in the middle of the boat. This typical pose of domination is attested since the Naqada I period.²⁹

²⁶ Morenz 2021: 134-135.

²⁷ Davies & Friedman 2002: 243-246.

²⁸ Schoske 1982.

²⁹ Hartmann 2016.

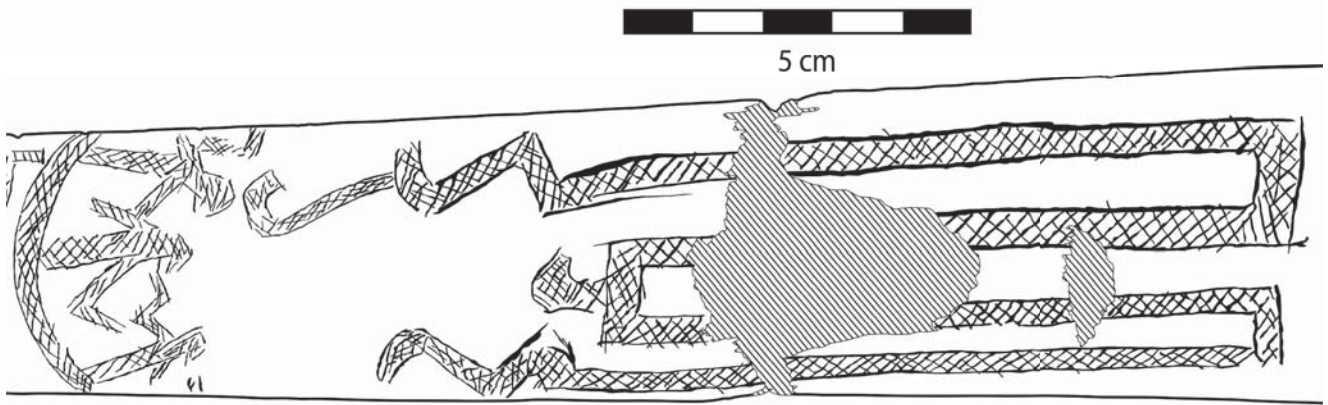


Fig. 9.

Execution scene in front of a very large sacral building, Gebelein staff, detail of Fig. 1.

The figure on the right seems to be more of a bystander, accompanying the ruler. One hand of the bystander touches the victim. Maybe he holds the person by the neck using a rope or stabs him – as Daressy proposed –, a motif known from early dynastic tablets (Fig. 11).³⁰

We know the motif of rulers' boats in connection with subjugation scenes, for example, from the palette of Nar-meher (Fig. 10) or the rock art of Gebel Sheikh Suleiman or the "Wadi of Horus Qaa".³¹ What seems remarkable about the depiction from Gebel Sheikh Suleiman is that the ruler himself is not shown in human form but is represented figuratively by the anthropomorphized *Serekh* with a falcon on top and by the boat to which the man penetrated by an arrow is tied.³²

This execution scene takes place in front of a large building (Fig. 12) which we suggest to interpret as a temple/sacral space or a palace. Such scenes of executions in front of sacral buildings are also known from Mesopotamia and Proto-Elam in the 4th millennium BCE (e.g. a cylinder seal from Susa (Louvre Sb 2125),³³ though the method of execution is different.

A head can be seen on top of the building's inner side, although it is not completely clear if it is a human head or the head of a bird. Considering the proximity with the victory scenes discussed above, it is possible that the severed head is displayed here as a sign of victory and triumph. As more or less contemporary parallels for this, the already mentioned row of headless enemies on the Nar-meher palette with their heads between their legs can be recalled, while the mounting of the head on a building may be similar to the attachment of bovine skulls to temple facades. Moreover, from later periods of Egyptian history practices of exposing the body (also specifically the head of slain enemies) can be recalled.³⁴



³⁰ Baud & Étienne 2005: 96-121.

³¹ Darnell 2011: fig. 4, 8, 13, 17 & 18.

³² The ruler himself seems to be intentionally not depicted here and that might be a question of decorum. In one scene he is represented by the *serekh* and in the other by the boat. For boat symbolism and especially the aspect of royal power cf. Vanhulle 2021.

³³ Legrain 1921: fig. 226

³⁴ Capart 1898: 125-126; Grimm 1987: 202-206; 1988: 207-214; 1989: 113-119.

Fig. 10.

Ruler's boat on the palette of Nar-meher (Photo David Sabel).

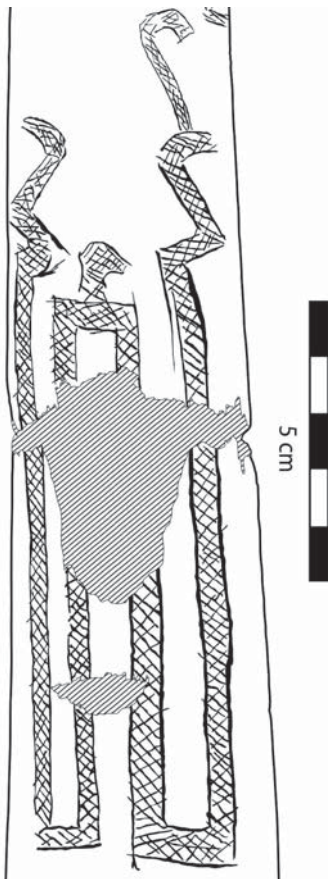


Fig. 12.

Sacral building, detail of Fig. 1.



Fig. 13.


"Crooked staff" on the sacral building, detail of Fig. 1.




Fig. 11.

Ebony tablet from the time of Djer, 1st Dynasty (Cairo JE 70114; photo David Sabel).

Between the boat scene and the building, the viewer's gaze is initially confused by a rotation in the composition, perhaps in order to use the

symbol  on top of the building to mark the executioner in the boat as a ruler. The building itself is marked as sacralised by stylized bovine

horns.³⁵ Above the horns, the other symbol  (Fig. 13) is only depicted on one side of the building. In view of the overall decoration, the corresponding blank space on the other side seems strange but it also indicates a special significance.

35 On the symbolism of bovines in Pre- and Early Dynastic iconography see Hendrickx 2002.

Although the form is very simple here, at first it seems rather reminiscent of early *ḥkꜣ* scepters³⁶ than of a *wꜣs*. A possible early *wꜣs* scepter is shown, for example, in a rock art scene in Wadi Abu Subeira in the area of Aswan (Fig. 14) and is clearly different.³⁷ The most likely solution is, however, that the symbol shown on the Gebelein staff is the same type of crooked staff that is depicted in the rituals shown on the Decorated Ware (a more detailed discussion of this interpretation follows below).

The depicted building seems to be a stylized and, considering the bovine horns, strongly symbolic pictorial form in which we can maybe recognize an early variation of the so-called *Serekh* palace façade.³⁸ Next to its sacral connotation, it also functions as a semographic element to designate the

ruler who is marked in particular by the possible “crooked staff” sign (𓏏) placed on it. It presents an elaborate semography, however, still without any specific phonographic connotation.³⁹

The symbol 𓏏 finds an interesting parallel with a tattoo⁴⁰ of an approximately contemporary mummy from Gebelein.⁴¹ A very similar sign is tattooed on the right upper arm of a mummy of an adult woman (“Gebelein Woman” British Museum EA32752) (Fig. 15), while another tattoo consisting of four s-shaped elements is on her right shoulder. Both images – the “crooked staff” and the s-shaped elements – find interesting counterparts in ritual scenes shown on the slightly earlier Decorated Ware. The s-shaped ornaments and the “crooked staff” appear regularly there and the latter also seems to have played a special role in the course of the depicted ritual. There, it is mostly men who hold such a staff (14 of the 16 known examples show men; only two women hold a staff of this shape)⁴² and/or touch a cultic emblem or a female figure who seems to be the central focus of the ritual action with it on the arm or shoulder. This would also correspond with the position of the tattoo on the upper arm of the Gebelein mummy. The “Gebelein Woman” may have been a participant in a similar ritual, or at least the tattoo might have been intended to reference comparable practices. While this may well have contributed to an increase in the status and prestige of the buried woman, there is another possibility.

According to Budge’s excavation report,⁴³ the tomb of the “Gebelein Woman” contained only a single vessel filled with porridge, and her mummy – unlike the male mummies in neighbouring tombs – was not wrapped in cloth or mats. This comparatively modest equipment of the tomb would cast at least some doubt on an elevated status of the buried woman marked by the tattoos. Perhaps, the marking with the cult or ruler symbol “crooked staff” was also an expression of a dependency relationship

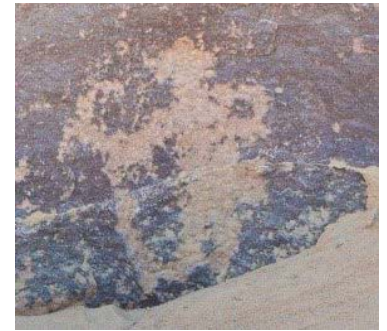


Fig. 14.

Man with possible *wꜣs*-scepter, rock art scene in Wadi Abu Subeira (Morenz et al. 2020: fig. 61).



Fig. 15.

“Crooked staff” tattoo on the right upper arm of the “Gebelein Woman” (British Museum EA32752; drawing based on photo by Miriam Bakker).

36 Regarding the shape and its hypothetical development from a lasso: Hendrickx et al. 2020: 33-73.

37 Morenz et al. 2020: fig. 61.

38 Hendrickx 2001: 85-110, also Jimenez-Serrano 2001: 71-81.

39 Most recent discussion in Morenz 2021.

40 On Predynastic tattoos see Darnell 2015.

41 Friedman et al. 2018: 116-125.

42 See the analysis of human representations on the Decorated Ware in Büma (in preparation) and more generally Graff 2009.

43 Budge 1920: 359-361.

with a local ruler or cult. A final decision can hardly be made, but the appearance of the staff on an object addressing violence by ruler like the Gebelein staff at least extends its context of meaning beyond its role in the ritual shown on the Decorated Ware.

In fact, other motifs from the Decorated Ware pottery also find parallels in the iconography of the Gebelein staff: in addition to the crooked staff already mentioned, comparisons can also be drawn between the cult standards with bovine horns shown on the pottery and the sacralized building with bovine horns on the staff. Crooked staff and bovine horns combined in the same pictorial scene thus appear on both object types. The *s*-shaped lines shown in the tattoo of the “Gebelein Woman” and on the Decorated Ware could remind us of the triangular ornaments on the handle of the Gebelein staff. It seems evident that the staff, mummy tattoos, and Decorated Ware draw from the same repertoire of images and motifs in the context of cult and domination. Thus, the style and decoration of the Gebelein staff are certainly not as unique as they may appear at first sight.

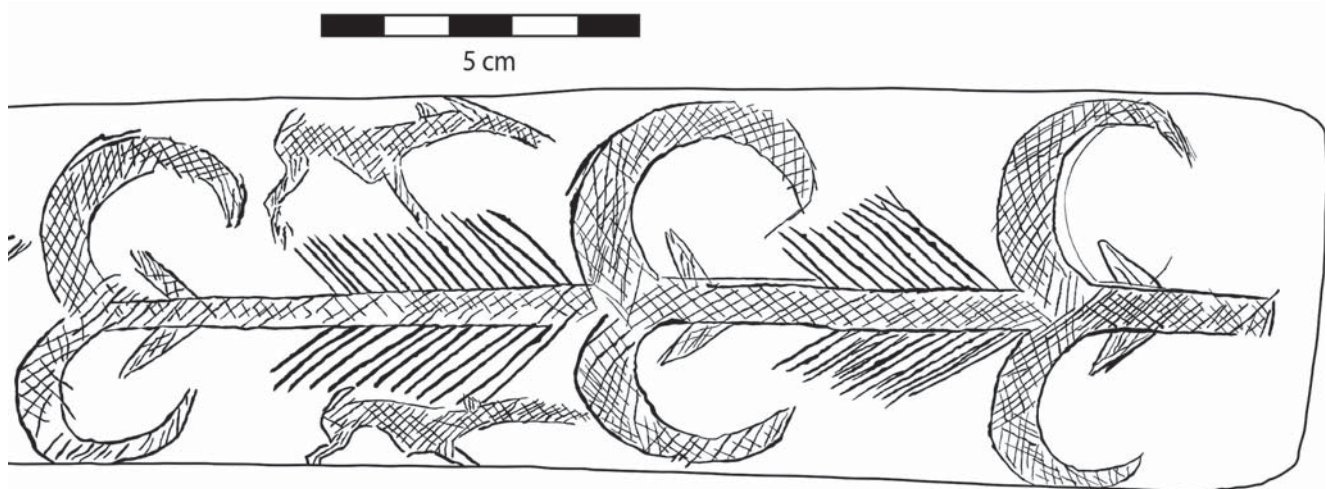
In fact, another parallel to the imagery of the Gebelein staff can be found in the tattoos of another contemporary Gebelein mummy: on the right upper arm of the mummy of a young man (“Gebelein Man A”, British Museum EA32751) there is the depiction of a barbary sheep.⁴⁴ Possible representations of the heads of barbary sheep could also be found on the Gebelein staff but the identification remains problematic (Fig. 16). An alternative would be the representation of palm trees.⁴⁵

The violent death of “Gebelein Man A” at a young age by a stab in the back⁴⁶ also suggests conflict in the context of power disputes which remains difficult to prove more conclusively. We just see glimpses of a potentially complex story, but even so it extends our knowledge substantially.

Despite all the remaining problems in the specific interpretations, the correspondences in the repertoire of motifs between Gebelein Staff, Gebelein Mummy Tattoos and Decorated Ware seem remarkable.

Fig. 16.

Heads of barbary sheep/palm trees(?) on the Gebelein staff, detail of Fig. 1.



⁴⁴ On the meaning of barbary sheep in Predynastic iconography see Hendrickx 2011: 255.

⁴⁵ Due to the lack of convincing parallels, a decision either way seems hard to justify.

⁴⁶ As observed by Antoine & Ambers 2014: 20-30.

CONCLUSION

The Gebelein staff from the late Naqada II period can – with some probability – be attributed to a local ruler who, however, remains anonymous to us. The depiction stages a claim to power by showing the highly sacralized potential for violence in a combination of several motifs, culminating in the image of the oversized vulture in front of the headless human.

In the interplay of the two sides of this ceremonial object, the head belonging to the body can perhaps even be recognized in the head placed on the *serekh*-like sacral building on the other side.

With this prestige weapon – exalted to the status of a semiophor – an extraordinary imagery becomes tangible to us, which is nevertheless also to be understood in the contemporary pictorial language – the “political” iconography – as a claim to power that takes violence into its service. Thus, we get access to a facet of the Naqada-era Gebelein as a place of domination in its medial staging.

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