Hunting at the time of the emergence of the Ancient Egyptian state

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Abstract

A brief excursus on hunting scenes dated to the Predynastic Period in Egypt shows to what extent this elite activity has acted as driving force towards the creation of a ruler ideology at the time of the emergence of the Ancient Egyptian State. Far from being only a way to ensure food provisioning, hunting dangerous animals in the desert assumed, at that time, huge social and political value for a small group of people, whose desire was to distinguish themselves and acquire control over the territory and their peers. In the development of this ideology of power, it is possible to foresee the most important characteristics of the pharaohs of historical period, such as the representation of the ruler figure, the lack of realism in the depictions of hunting scenes, the need to establish order over chaos and the connection between defeating natural elements and prevailing over human opponents.

Keywords

Hunting, Predynastic Egypt, dogs, ruler, order vs chaos
The hunting scenes dated to the Predynastic Period in Egypt (especially those dated to the Naqada I-II periods 4000-3800 BC) are one of the most unusual White Cross-lined pottery decoration themes. They document the importance of this activity, not only for food provisioning, but also and foremost for its social and political implications. In fact, the archaeological data collected from excavations in Predynastic sites (Hierakonpolis in particular) underlines the paucity of wild animal remains, indicating the lesser economic importance of hunting during this period, if compared to its more likely hierarchical meaning.

Even if the number of occurrences of this theme on pottery is quite small, we can also find it in some rock art representations and above some ‘cosmetic’ palettes connected to Predynastic burials or cultic places, as to stress that this peculiar elite activity belonged to a symbolic or religious environment.

According to many studies carried out in the last decades, the hunting scenes are therefore to be read in the context of an emerging Egyptian State as strictly linked to the rising of a group of individuals over their peers, in the process of shaping a leader figure which would eventually developed in the pharaoh ideology of historical period.

**Figure 1** – White Cross-lined oval plate, Moscow, Museum of Fine Arts 2947
This aspect seems particularly evident because of the connection between the scenes representing a hunter who is always victorious over dangerous animals (or human enemies) and the concept of taking control over the hostile desert environment, securing order over chaos.

The latter element corresponds to one of the fundamental tasks of the later Egyptian ruler, who must guarantee the rule of ‘Maat’ (the idea of cosmic order and justice embodied by the feather goddess bearing the same name) over the evil forces of chaos, which constantly endanger the world.

The clear symbolic intent of those hunting scenes is also expressed through an absolute lack of realism in the rendering of the action, which should include the capture and killing of the dangerous animal, which are actually never shown. In a rock drawing from the Thebes region, for instance, a single hunter lassos a desert animal with one hand while harpooning an hippopotamus with the other. In the meantime he is also holding a mace and has his arms raised in a gesture of victory (Fig. 2).

The actual act of slaughtering is never depicted: no blood or strokes are present in the rendering, nor the defeat of the antagonist. Significantly, often not even the hunter is present on the scene, generally replaced by a dog.

![Figure 2 – Rock drawing at Was-ha-Waset](image)

**Figure 2 – Rock drawing at Was-ha-Waset**
Figure 3 – White Cross-lined bowl (Princeton, Art Museum 30-493)

Figure 4 – Gamepiece in form of a dog from Hierakonpolis (Petrie Museum UC14872, London)
The relevance of dogs in Predynastic representations has often been object of study and seems to be very likely related to the idea of control and power, at first exclusive prerogative of the ruling elite. Some evidence of the possible breeding of two or three species of dogs during the entire Dynastic Period in Egypt suggests that this activity might have been an upper class status symbol. The number and position of dog burials in some of the most important elite necropolis of Predynastic Upper Egypt (Hierakonpolis site HK6 for example) hint at the importance dogs might have had in the first phases of the Egyptian ruler.

Even in the most common representations of (wild) animal theories, usually carved on ivory items (knife handles or combs), dogs or other symbolic animals are to be found at the end of the row leading and controlling the group (Fig. 5).

Significantly, at the beginning of the Dynastic period in Egypt, after the unification of the territory under the rule of only one king, dogs were completely replaced by lions or bulls to represent the monarch.

So the role of dogs as animal rulers is strictly connected with the emergence of an elite class, rather than a ruling individual. Therefore their absence in kings’ representations could be explained by their change in social status.

In other words, dogs are depicted as long as they represent a group context of social elevation, wherein they play a role even in burials. But when a family, tribe or dynasty rose above the others, more powerful animals were chosen to represent the individual ruler.

Figure 5 – Knife handle made of ivory from Brooklyn Museum
Another element that can be added to the evidence of the high emblematic value of the hunting scenes is their frequent association with warfare and victory representations, which contributes to the creation of the Egyptian ruler ideology.

The victory scenes portrayed on White Crossed-lined pottery usually entail the typical pharaoh’s ‘regalia’, such as maces, feather hairstyles and smiting gestures, in addition to the fact that the ‘hunter/victorious leader’ is usually bigger in size if compared to the other subjects represented.

All these characteristics will be constantly repeated in the first ruler’s images and subsequently become part of the king’s representation during the historical period.

In the same way, many elements in the rendering of the captive enemies will become indicative of the defeated during the pharaonic era: wild hair, arms tied behind the shoulders, kneeling pose, and smaller size if compared to the victorious ones.

The finding of this kind of pottery among the burial equipment in the elite necropolis of Abydos or Hierakonpolis clearly links this figurative repertoire to the rising of a new social and political power.

Figure 6 – White Crossed-lined jar from Abydos tomb U-415
By the end of the Predynastic period, the scenes portraying victories, hunting and smiting of enemies had significantly increased, proving the development of a canon of representation through which the ruler’s ideology had finally reached its last stage of development.

One of the most indicative examples is the so-called ‘Battlefield’ Palette, a possibly ritual item which shows a big lion at the centre of the representation, just under the hole for grinding cosmetics, smiting many human enemies.

Even if the historical value of this document has often been questioned, since it is not certain it portrays an actual battle, it is nevertheless very likely that the scene was intended to represent a ruler’s victory over the forces of evil/chaos.

Another clear example of ruler’s ideology representation is the painted decoration of the Tomb 100 in Hierakonpolis, in which all the previously mentioned elements appear one next to the other: desert hunting scenes where a ruler or his animal form (bull), smites human enemies, etc.

Moreover, in the same painting we also find other important symbols of power gained control over territories and men, such as boat processions, frequently painted as vessels decorations.

Figure 7 – Battlefield Palette (Abydos ?, British Museum YCA63631)
In this context we can also place another peculiar type of hunting scene: the hippopotamus hunt, seldom used to decorate seals and vessels shaped like hippopotamus. These representations are clearly related to the acquisition of power by the ruler.

As in an example from Den’s reign (4th or 5th king of the I Dynasty 2930-2910 BC ca.), the king is depicted holding a spear/harpoon and some ropes, flanked by beheaded enemies.

In another example from Badari, the scene is painted on a vessel shaped like an hippopotamus and shows a group of hunters with their harpoons, arranged in at least five rows.

Many scholars believe that all the hippopotamus hunting scenes convey the idea that the enemy in the natural environment is the enemy in the socio-political environment.

During historical times, the hippopotamus hunt was still present in many decoration scenes from elite burials. It was a royal court amusement activity still linked with its most ancient meaning of keeping order over chaos, since these animals constituted an actual danger for the cultivations.
Recent excavations in Hierakonpolis have contributed to the hypothesis that, at least during the final phases of the Predynastic Period in Egypt, desert hunting was related to the idea of capturing a number of wild animals to be transferred inside the town’s sacred space and killed during a ritual ceremony.

In fact, a great number of wild animals’ bones has been discovered at the site HK29A. Since they represent almost 14.5% of the overall findings of Hierakonpolis, the site could have been destined to those rituals.

**Figure 10** – Hippopotamus vessels with painted decorations of hunters, Badari

**Figure 11** – Site HK29A at Hierakonpolis
The same interpretation could be given to other representations of ‘hunting’ scenes, like, for example, one carved on the so called ‘Hunters’ Palette’, in which a great number of hunters holding ropes forms a circle surrounding wild animals.

This hypothesis seems most likely because of the presence of a religious building at one end of the palette, and because of the hunters’ attitude. They are simply standing, holding their weapons by their sides, not being involved in any kind of action.

A similar scene has been found on a rock art panel in the Thebes regions, showing a gathering of fully equipped hunters ready to go on a desert hunt. Nevertheless, the activities represented on this panel are probably to be considered slightly different from the previous ones: the panel does not show a ritual and collective killing of animals inside the town borders, but more likely an actual hunting expedition.

This interpretation seems corroborated by the position of the rock reliefs, which are to be found far in the deserts region, proving that the actual organization of such events was carried out by a ruling elite group.

During the Predynastic period, a hunting expedition was probably perceived as a bonding moment between the members of the Egyptian elite, useful to consolidate their mutual social relationships and to remind the rest of the community of their social status. It’s easy to imagine what kind of reaction the long procession of hunters entering town with their preys must have provoked in the population at the time, reinforcing the legitimacy of their social and political power.

In Dynastic times, the pharaohs’ iconography, once fully developed in a canon of representation, will be vehicle exactly in the same way for legitimating the pharaohs’ power over a huge territory, politically unified in a single state.
Figure 13 – Hunters’ rock reliefs at 14 km far from the Nile in the Thebes region, Western Desert
BIBLIOGRAPHY


