

Hippopotamus hunting in Predynastic Egypt: Reassessing Archaeozoological evidence

SEBASTIAN F. MAYDANA

Hipólito Yrigoyen 1780, 1° B.
Ciudad Autónoma de Buenos Aires, Argentina.

C1089AAH
maydanasf@gmail.com

(Received 26 September 2017; Revised 30 October 2018; Accepted 4 July 2019)



ABSTRACT: Hippopotamus hunting as an iconographical motif is widely attested during most of Egyptian history. Both private and royal Egyptian tombs spanning from early Old Kingdom to Roman times show these images in their walls. The motif was often depicted in Predynastic iconography but, due to some of its particularities, some authors suggested that hippopotami were, in fact, not killed but rather captured alive. Decades have passed, and evidence both archaeological and archaeozoological has since grown significantly. We now have enough sources to reassess the corpus of evidence to debunk or ratify such hypotheses. Particularly relevant to confirm these was the finding at Hierakonpolis of a young hippopotamus' remains showing signs of having been kept captive in the village. Moreover, it is helpful to examine evidence not taken into account by the authors such as ethnohistorical research and the latest archaeozoological findings. The outcome of this research seems to suggest that the killing of hippopotami did, in fact, take place during hunting expeditions, due to the danger of transporting the beasts alive. Furthermore, the idea of iconographic evidence as a narrative of actual events should be challenged and understood instead as being one of symbolic nature.

KEYWORDS: HIPPOPOTAMUS HUNT, PREDYNASTIC, ARCHAEOZOOLOGY, SYMBOLISM, ICONOGRAPHY, CROSS-LINED WARE

RESUMEN: La cacería del hipopótamo en tanto motivo iconográfico se encuentra ampliamente atestiguada durante toda la historia egipcia. Tanto tumbas privadas como reales desde el Reino Antiguo a época romana suelen representarla en sus paredes. El motivo también era corrientemente representado en la iconografía predinástica, aunque debido a ciertas peculiaridades de tales representaciones, algunos autores han propuesto que el animal no habría sido muerto sino capturado vivo. Han pasado varias décadas desde estas propuestas, y la evidencia arqueológica y arqueozoológica ha crecido significativamente. Poseemos ahora suficiente evidencia como para poder evaluar el *corpus* de evidencia para discutir estas hipótesis. Particularmente relevante para ellas fue el hallazgo en Hieracópolis de los restos de un joven hipopótamo con marcas que sugieren su cautiverio en la aldea. Más útil aun, resulta valorar evidencias de orden etnohistórico y arqueozoológico que los autores no han tenido en cuenta hasta la fecha. El resultado de la presente investigación parece sugerir que se produjeron muertes de hipopótamos durante las expediciones de caza, debidas a la naturaleza peligrosa de estos animales y el riesgo del transporte de animales vivos. Además, deberíamos cuestionar la idea misma de la evidencia iconográfica como una narración de eventos reales, y entenderla en clave de naturaleza simbólica.

PALABRAS CLAVE: CACERÍA DEL HIPOPÓTAMO, PREDINÁSTICO, ARQUEOZOOLÓGÍA, SIMBOLISMO, ICONOGRAFÍA, CERÁMICA CROSS-LINED

INTRODUCTION

“And he thought, as he smoothed the cat’s black coat, that this contact was an illusion and that the two beings, man and cat, were as good as separated by a glass, for man lives in time, in succession, while the magical animal lives in the present, in the eternity of an instant”. Jorge Luis Borges, *The South*.

Such compelling words were used by Jorge Luis Borges to imply that the conquest of time by man is also the invention of its own mortality. This very thought lies in a reflection by director Werner Herzog regarding rock art in Chauvet cave, which was created 30,000 years before our time: “We are trapped in history. They [prehistoric men] were not” (Herzog, 2010). These ideas are tremendously relevant to the work of the Egyptologist (and possibly to historians in general), and we must accept that our (modern?) process of thought is historical in nature. We cannot think outside history, but ancient Egyptians could, and in fact did. Most problems regarding the interpretation of ancient Egyptian iconography and texts stem from this simple fact.

Egyptologists face such challenges constantly, aggravated by the scarcity of the available evidence, and thus must acknowledge the fact that we simply cannot reach a true understanding of every aspect of Egyptian civilization but only an approximate one. In this paper I would like to discuss the iconographic evidence regarding the hunting of hippopotami during the Predynastic period (Naqada I-IIc), in order to revise some interpretations proposed by scholars (Mond & Myers, 1937; Behrmann, 1996). These authors have speculated on the possibility of animals not being killed during the hunt but rather captured alive, then conducted to the villages and kept in pens or enclosures (Behrmann, 1996: 135), or even used for hunting other animals (Mond & Myers, 1937: 38).

Although at the time they formulated their hypotheses archaeological evidence was scarce, this aspect has been greatly dealt with in the past decades, improving our understanding of the period. To begin with, ethnography and ethnohistory have proven to be valuable tools for comparing societies, even when they are separated in time (Adler, 2007; Heusch, 2007). Secondly, Predynastic and Early Dynastic archaeology has shown an im-

pressive vitality in the past decades. In this sense we cannot but praise the meritorious work of recent expeditions to Egyptian sites such as Abydos (Dreyer *et al.*, 1998, 2003), Hierakonpolis (Friedman *et al.*, 1999; Friedman, 2004), Buto (Hartung *et al.*, 2012), and so on. Hence the multiplication of works and information on the crucial times surrounding the emergence of the State in the Nile Valley, motivating ever more historians (in which I should be counted) to study these processes and the new evidence.

As to hunting as a practice, only recently has it drawn the attention of scholars, and it is now being thoroughly studied both during the Predynastic (Linseele *et al.*, 2009; Hendrickx, 2011) and the Early Dynastic Periods (Gandonnière, 2014). This short summary accounts for the rise in studies on hunting and the Predynastic as well as in the evidence regarding hippopotamus hunting, as this renders the discussion (on the basis of the new evidence) of their interpretations possible.

NEW DISCOVERIES...

The Hierakonpolis expedition shook the academic world with an impressive announcement after excavation season of 2009 ended. Some animals they had unearthed showed fractures and pathologies that were compatible with a more or less prolonged captivity (Linseele *et al.*, 2007, 2008; Van Neer & Linseele, 2009). They had found the first zoo in history! The Archaeological Institute of America placed the finding among the “top 10 discoveries of 2009” and the news gained notoriety ultimately being reproduced in several newspapers and echoed by the media.

It is beyond the aim of this paper to discuss whether or not the name “zoo” is appropriate. To know that there had been at least one hippopotamus in captivity was groundbreaking in itself, because all Egyptologists with the exception of the ones cited above had assumed that the killing of the animal took place on site during the hunting expedition.

In the words of Van Neer & Linseele (2009: 12):

To our surprise we found a healed fracture on the lower part of the fibula (...) proving that this young hippo indeed spent a rather long time under human control. The location of this fracture

is typical of animals that are constrained by a rope tied around their lower hind leg and break their own bone while struggling to be free.

Could this new finding challenge the general academic consensus regarding hippopotamus hunt? The young specimen described by Linseele and Van Neer was found in Tomb 32 at the location so-called elite cemetery HK6, as part of a series of subsidiary tombs (which involve dog burials too) around a central burial of a man (Hendrickx & Eyckerman, 2015: 204). They have also found some very small fragments, the “shattered remnants of objects modeled in plaster and decorated with patterns in red, black and white paint” (Pieri & Friedman, 2009: 14) of what could have been a “model of hunting equipment”, although the pieces are too small to make a reasonable assumption. Based on this evidence, and taking into account that dogs were symbols for the hunt (Hendrickx, 2006, 2011), the excavators proposed that the tomb belonged to a hippopotamus hunter.

The dog was in fact the only domestic animal to be widely represented in Naqada I decorated pottery (Hendrickx, 2011: 110), because it was a symbol less connected to predynastic households than it was to hunting, that is, the struggle of the hunter against

the chaotic forces incarnated in wild animals. However, this holds true only for the hunt of wild animals in the desert. No dogs were used to hunt at the river Nile. Instead they are replaced in iconography by boats (Zajac, 2008; Hendrickx, 2013).

I know only of three occurrences (Graff, 2009) of the dog and the hippopotamus in the same representation on pottery: Dish CG 2076 in Cairo Museum (de Morgan, 1896: Pl. II, No. 5; Hartmann, 2008), and two tall vases, one found in Tomb U-415 (Dreyer *et al.*, 2003: 83, fig. 6a), and the other currently in the Oriental Institute of Chicago (Cat. No. OIM E 8923, Ayrton & Loat, 1911: Pl. 27.12). All three of them were found in the predynastic site of Abydos and are dated to Naqada I.

Regarding vase OIM E 8923 (Figure 1), Emily Teeter writes:

The position of the dogs is significant. In the two upper rows with desert animals, they clearly refer to hunting with dogs, but dogs have no part in hippopotamus hunting. In whatever order the rows are considered, the dog preceding the hippopotami will always follow a row ending with another dog, suggesting that the row with hippopotami is also a reference to hunting (Teeter, 2011: 154).

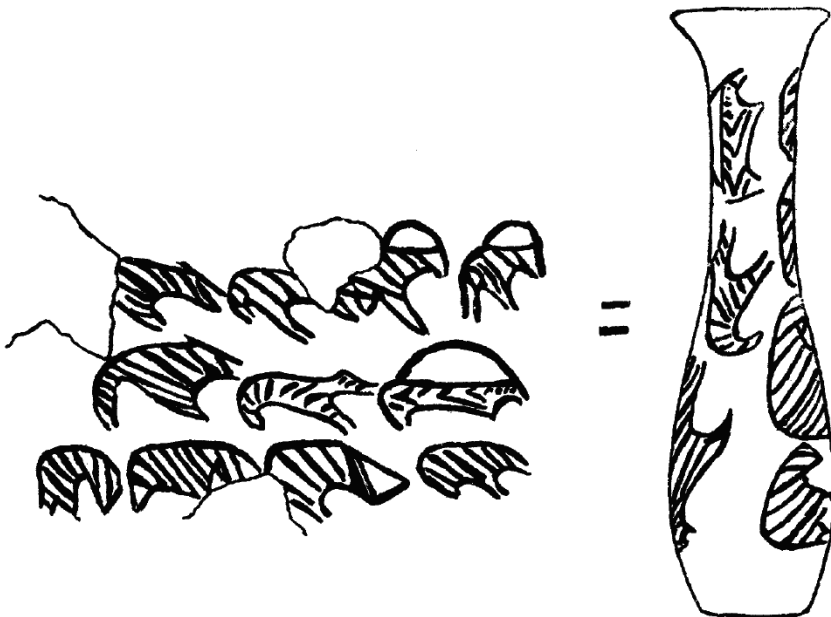


FIGURE 1

Oriental Institute vase OIM E 8923 (Ayrton & Loat, 1911: Pl. 27, 12).

Dogs and hippopotami are, as we can see, only loosely connected in relation to hunting activities. It is not unlikely, although, that those who controlled the wild animals both on the Nile and on the desert (where dogs would be employed) would possess great prestige within the community. The individual buried in Tomb 32 might have been such a bearer of status in predynastic Hierakonpolis. On the other hand, there are certain petroglyphs (Figure 2) found in the Western Desert (Hendrickx *et al.*, 2009: 217; Hendrickx, 2011: 120) that show human figures wearing ostrich feather headdresses, canid tails and garments complete with complicated drawings, two of them depicting hippopotami. One of such figures shows two hippopotami with harpoon lines coming out of their nostrils. These representations illustrate powerful hunters that condense in their dress the symbols of control over both riverine (hippopotami) and desert animals (ostriches, canids), thus “embodying the duality of their world” (Hendrickx *et al.*, 2009: 218). According to these authors, predynastic hunters understood their activity as the reconciliation of the Nile and the Sahara regions. Even though it is always bold to make such assumptions regarding



FIGURE 2

“Hunter” from Wadi Nag el-Birka (Hendrickx *et al.*, 2009: 216, fig. 23.1).

the predynastic peoples’ worldview, they were in a way “uniting” diverse biomes (Darnell, 2009: 88), a task that has profound symbolical implications.

Other burials found in the elite cemetery HK6 include 110 domestic animals and 38 wild animals belonging to 12 different species (Van Neer *et al.*, 2015: 1). According to archaeozoologists, at least twenty of them had been held captive for some time before their death, including some baboons, an elephant, a leopard, crocodiles, aurochs and of course hippopotami (Van Neer *et al.*, 2015: 18), judging by the pathologies observed in their bones (parry fractures and fractures produced when tied for a long time). Flores (2004) had already pointed out the uniqueness of the HK6 cemetery regarding the large number of animal burials, and according to Renée Friedman

*the wide range of animals may have symbolically provided protection against the natural chaos they represented, the captivity and eventual slaughter of these animals a way in which chaos was brought under control (...) The healed injuries observed on some of these animals indicate that they were held in captivity for a minimum of four to six weeks. The creation and maintenance of royal menageries is known to have been a means of legitimising the rule of New Kingdom pharaohs, and it may have served this purpose already at this early time (Friedman *et al.*, 2011: 186).*

As it is clear on this quote, the captivity of wild and dangerous animals took place in Hierakonpolis and probably served the purpose of legitimising the leaders of the community. Power was based on the ability to control chaos and maintain order in the community and controlling wild animals was one of the means to achieve order (Maydana, 2015, 2017), as is visible in some predynastic artifacts such as the Gebel el-Arak knife handle and several palettes (Köhler, 2002; Hartung, 2010; Hendrickx, 2013).

Predynastic leaders were associated in iconography to two specific traits: they were strongly linked to ritual, and to violence in all forms (Campagno, 2016: 19). They were represented along with weapons, in combat against human enemies or hunting wild animals (Gayubas, 2016: 35). Of course, we cannot overlook the economic aspect of leadership, pointed out by Hoffman (1989) but invisible in the iconography of the period. Hunting

of wild animals (or at least its depiction) was then an important part of maintaining hierarchies in the communities before the emergence of the State.

...AND OLD THEORIES

No animals, except for the wild ass, were depicted when dead (Hendrickx & Eyckerman, 2015: 200), and few of them when hunted (Hendrickx, 2011: 121, 2013: 249). This led many scholars to embrace the idea of animals not being killed during the hunting expedition but rather captured alive (see for instance Graff *et al.*, 2011: 457). It was first proposed by Robert Mond and Oliver Myers in the 1930s in what strikes us today as a rather farfetched theory. They were puzzled by the nature of some examples of decorated pottery that showed hippopotami along with human figures. In particular, a bowl (Metropolitan Museum No. 12.182.15) first published by Myers (1933), showed two hippopotami and a man (Figure 3). Both animals display white wavy lines projecting out of their nostrils, in one case ascending to the bowl rim, in the other case ending in the hands of the man. This bowl is particular because it clearly is a piece of elite ware (decorated pots tend to be so), despite

coming from Naga ed-Deir, a small cemetery near Armant. As Kathryn Bard explains “an elite class of society would have emerged at large centres like Naqada, not in small farming villages such as Armant” (Bard, 1988: 54, *contra* Griswold, 1992). In a fine display of imagination Myers proposes that

The impression given is that of vapour rising from the nostrils of the animal and being caught by the man, but, even allowing for a magical interpretation, this seems to be an unlikely hypothesis. It might represent a man feeding the hippopotami, but in that case there is no purpose in the wavy lines ascending from the second beast. There is another possible explanation; that the ovals projecting from the animals’ noses may not be nostrils (...) but rings, and that the wavy lines are ropes by which the hippopotami are being led (Myers, 1933: 55).

Of the three possibilities described in that opportunity, the latter seemed to Myers the most plausible, as it is proposed again some years after (Mond & Myers, 1937: 38-42). In this opportunity the authors pose a more elaborate hypothesis regarding the “leading” of hippopotami. They believed that the “wavy lines” stood for a sort of bridles that allowed predynastic Egyptians to use domesticat-

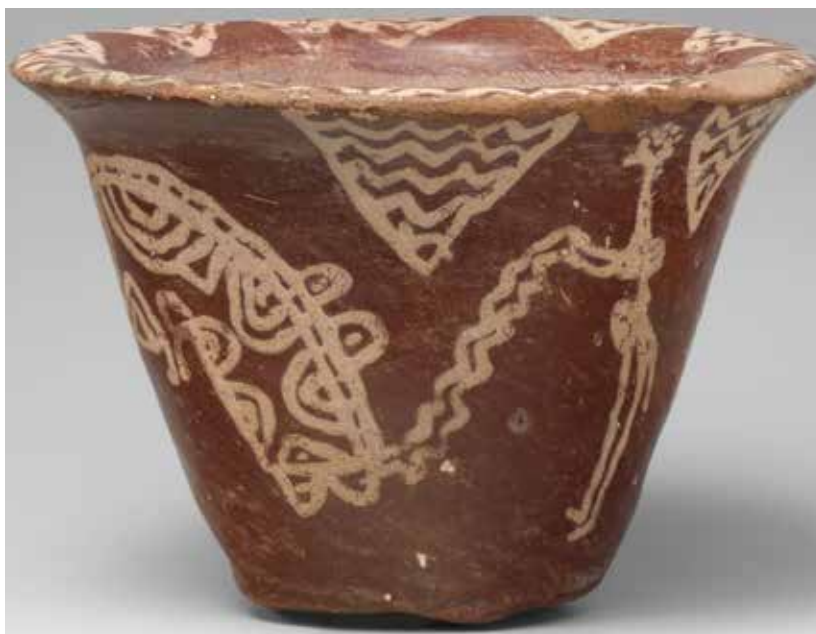


FIGURE 3

Metropolitan Museum pot, No. 12.182.15 (www.metmuseum.org).

ed hippos to fend off crocodiles from their fishing grounds. Of course, there is the question of these devices never having been found in the archaeological record, but there is also a much stronger argument against Mond and Myers' theory and that is the aggressive nature of the hippopotamus, which renders the beast virtually impossible to domesticate (Manlius, 2000; Kingdon & Hoffman, 2013).

The theory did not meet recognition, nor was echoed by other Egyptologists due to it being too unrealistic. However, a German Egyptologist realised several decades later that it might not have been entirely wrong. An important part of Almuth Behrmann's work is dedicated to proposing a new reading of iconographic evidence. In her view many representations of the hippopotamus hunt showed in fact the seizure of the animal, and the arguments for this interpretation are more than appealing.

To begin with, the author focuses on the "wavy lines" that appear on many representations of hippopotami coming out of their bodies and most times ending in the hands of hunters. She is suspicious of this behaviour, as the men holding the hippopotami seem not to be struggling in effort, as a tense rope would show. This is in her view the representation of a captive, tame animal. Next, she turns to some elements of decorated pottery that could be interpreted in the same sense. Zig-zag lines commonly understood as water or a mark of a watery environment could account for hunting nets (Behrmann, 1996: 135). Also, rectangular and geometrical markings like the ones in bowl MMA 12.182.15 might be seen as "ponds" or "enclosures" where the animal was kept (Behrmann, 1996: 135). Also, the bodies of several hippopotami are filled with crossed lines, that in the view of Behrmann resemble nets, and some hippopotamus pendants show marks in the neck that could be collars (Behrmann, 1996: 138).

She concludes that hippos were captured instead of killed on the hunting grounds, and that is what the representations show. Of course, as with Mond and Myers' theory, there is the fact that the iconographic evidence did not match the archaeological record. That is, until very recently. Surely Dr. Behrmann would be satisfied to read the report on the 2009 excavations at Hierakonpolis. It is so far the strongest evidence there is to support her thesis.

There is some evidence to support this hypothesis, but it is from a later time, and that is the funerary enclosure of Pepy II (and here I would like to

thank one anonymous reviewer on the suggestion of this source), where we can see the king with an arm raised spearing a hippopotamus in the marshes (Figure 4), and just behind him another hippopotamus that has been captured and is tied to a barge or sledge (Jéquier, 1940: Pl. 32-34). It can be argued that this second hippopotamus was captured alive due to their mouth being tied up. To our (again, modern?) understanding, it would be pointless to muzzle a dead animal, but Egyptians believed even the image of such a powerful and destructive animal was dangerous, and so they usually broke the legs of hippopotamus figurines to prevent them from damaging anyone (Evans, 2010: 137). The posture in which they depicted the hippopotami is also revealing of this, and as Evans points out, "some postures, such as yawning by hippopotamuses while seated, may have been a deliberate, apotropaic attempt by artists to prevent the figures of the aggressive, and thus potentially dangerous, creatures from magically causing harm" (Evans, 2010: 150). Still, the muzzled hippopotamus shows that the possibility existed for hippopotami to have been captured, at least during the Old Kingdom.

In this respect, one could propose that we do have evidence of this from Predynastic times. I am referring to the young hippopotamus from Hierakonpolis that we have discussed earlier in this work and that, in part, motivated the revisiting of those theories. But of course, a young hippopotamus is not the same as a grown adult, and I would like to go over this subject later in this paper.

I would like to present yet another type of evidence, of symbolic nature, that could make us think not of the death of the hippopotamus. Säve-Söderbergh (1953: 15-17) points out the fact that the earliest dynastic representations showed the king as hunter of the hippopotamus, playing the role of the youthful and vigorous hero, keeper of the sacred cosmic order and vanquisher of the chaos which emerges from water. "*The struggle of the King against the hippopotamus symbolized the struggle with and victory over the powers of chaos (...) which victory implied the creation of a new world*" (Säve-Söderbergh, 1953: 15). This victory is symbolic, and it is reprised in countless paintings, carvings and texts throughout all Egyptian history.

For example, in *De Iside et Osiride* Plutarch states about Seth/Typhon that

For this reason they [Egyptians] assign to him the most stupid of the domesticated ani-

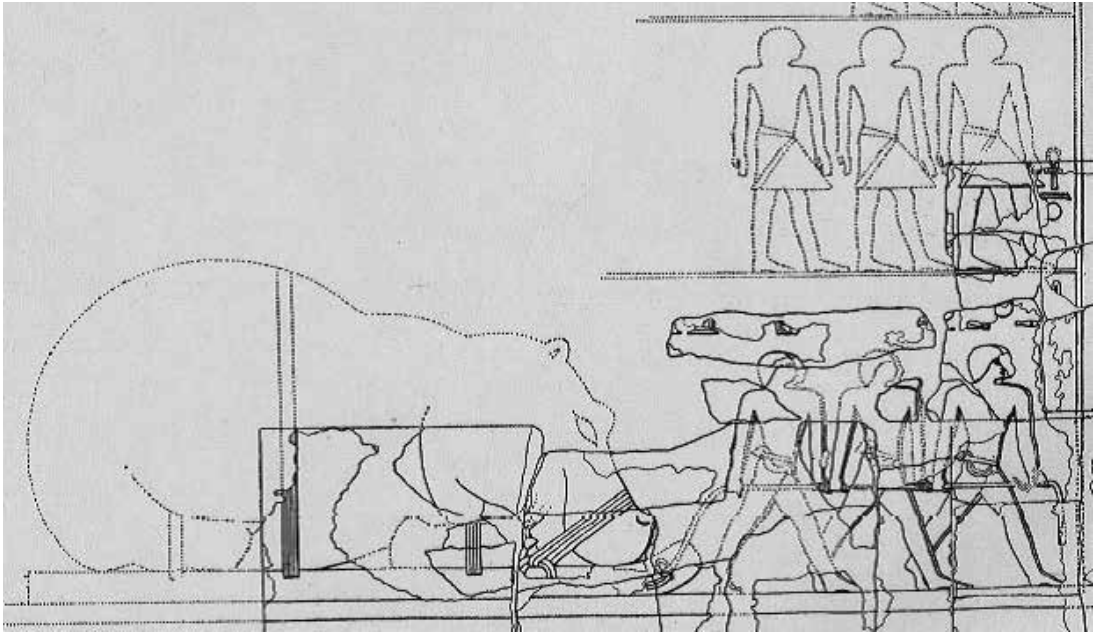


FIGURE 4

Detail of engraving from the Pepy II funerary enclosure (Jéquier, 1940: Pl. 32).

mals, the ass, and of the wild animals, the most savage, the crocodile and the hippopotamus (Plutarch, 1936: 50, taken from the Frank Cole Babbitt English translation).

Identification between Seth and the hippopotamus is well attested since the Old Kingdom (Behrmann, 1996: 67-77). Seth was the murderer of Osiris, enemy of pharaoh, god of confusion (Te Velde, 1967) and eternal contender of Horus, the falcon god. But when Horus, the son of Osiris, was finally able to capture his father's killer

Typhon was vanquished but not annihilated; for the goddess who holds sway over the Earth [Isis, mother of Horus] would not permit the complete annihilation of the nature opposed to moisture, but relaxed and moderated it, being desirous that its tempering potency should persist, because it was not possible for a complete world to exist, if the fiery element left it and disappeared. (40).

It would be irresponsible to transpose this tale of obvious pythagoric influences to the Predynastic times, but it is an example of an interesting principle that could support the thesis of the capturing of hippopotami: order is only maintained as long as

Archaeofauna 29 (2020): 137-150



FIGURE 5

Horus over Seth in hippopotamus form, from the Temple of Horus in Edfu (Photograph under Creative Commons license).

there is a threat to that order, so chaos must be kept at bay but never destroyed entirely lest the cosmic balance of order and chaos is broken. It was, as we have seen, prerogative of the leader to protect this cosmic balance.

I have elsewhere discussed (Maydana, 2015: 49-50) the reliefs in the inner walls of the Temple of Horus in Edfu (Figure 5) in which Horus is depicted as standing on top of a hippopotamus (Blackman & Fairman, 1944: 6). This illustrates the cosmic narrative of the struggle between Horus and Seth (here in animal form), but in a more symbolic way it stands for the untimely struggle between order and chaos.

In the following paragraphs I would like to participate in the discussion from another angle, reassessing the available evidence and finally proposing a different view.

REASSESSING THE FACTS

Now I will present a different set of sources. We know that hippos were already hunted for food since 2 million years BP (Hill, 1983), and in the Nile Valley since Upper Pleistocene to early Holocene (45,000–15,000 BC) (Marks, 1968: 315). After the development of agriculture the percentage of wild animal protein dropped significantly in predynastic diet (Abd el Kareem, 2013). However, hippopotami continued to be hunted until their extinction from Egypt in 19th Century (Manlius, 2000, 2006: 105).

After the neolithisation of the people in the Nile Valley, then, wild animal protein was clearly marginal to their diet (Linseele *et al.*, 2009: 124), but this is contradictory to the profusion of hunting scenes in the corpus of predynastic representations (Altenmüller, 1980: 224). In effect, hunting scenes (along with boat processions) are absolutely dominant in the Naqada iconographic record (Graff, 2009; Hendrickx, 2013), which is in clear contrast with the negligible place the actual hunt had among predynastic folk.

To support this, there is archaeozoological evidence. As Linseele *et al.* (2009) state, the number of wild animal bones found in Hierakonpolis is unusually high for a predynastic settlement, and that can be explained by the nature of this settlement, a “temple-workshop complex” as some authors

called it (Holmes, 1992: 37). Hierakonpolis was indeed an important religious centre, which accounts for its considerable growth during Naqada II (Adams, 1995: 58). The high concentration of wild animal remains in Hierakonpolis is an anomaly, explained in part by the ceremonial nature of the site, and as such *exceptio probat regulam*.

Thus, as a first approximation, it should be stated that hunting during the Naqada period was mostly a representational matter. The hunting did take place, but not nearly as often as the iconography seems to imply. The reason of this might have to do with the symbolical effectiveness of such motif, which illustrated the control of hunting leaders over the tumultuous forces of the wild animal, and the role of these hunters as links between diverse spaces. Showing images of elite members hunting hippopotami was but a way of acquiring a differential status inside their community, regardless of the hunt being actually practiced or the hunted animal being paraded (either alive or dead). As Axelle Brémont puts it,

l'association à l'hippopotame n'était pas directement conditionnée au fait d'en avoir effectivement chassé, mais faisait peut-être partie d'une identité de l'élite locale, pour ainsi dire, de naissance et non acquise (Brémont, 2018: 88).

This idea is quite interesting, because it links the hunting of hippopotami, as an elite practice, to a more “permanent” form of leadership than that which would have existed in Egypt before the emergence of the State (that we, following Campagno, 2011: 1233, would call respectively “power” and “prestige”). But regarding the possible display of the captured beast, Diego Espinel (2015: 121) sheds some light in the matter when he dismisses Behrmann’s posture as being too literal, while Egyptian thought and iconography was mostly metaphorical. Taking these authors’ ideas into account, one should admit that the lack of sight of the animals would not hinder the symbolic efficacy (and, if anything, could actually explain the abundance of hunting iconography) of the idea of their chase.

Notwithstanding, the lack of depictions of the death of animals, along with evidence of hunting playing an insignificant role in the economy of predynastic villages led some scholars in the last years to revise old theses about wild animal depictions. The idea of animals being captured rather than

killed reappeared. According to Hendrickx (2011: 121-123) capturing wild animals posed an advantage over their killing: it made transportation back to the village easier. The frequency in which lassoes, ropes and traps appeared in the iconographic record certainly seems to suggest this. Nevertheless, the author hurries to point out that there are two exceptions to this rule: hippopotamus and wild ass (Huyge, 2009). In the case of hippopotami there could be a continuity between the predynastic hunting scenes and those of dynastic times where the king is shown harpooning a hippopotamus. Müller (2008) has studied certain scenes in which the hunting of hippopotami is shown side by side with images of decapitated enemies, thus unifying them in meaning. Hendrickx and Eyckerman also point out an interesting continuity: “*La synchronisation entre la violence de la chasse et de la guerre s’observe dès le début de la culture nagadienne*” (Hendrickx & Eyckerman, 2015: 199; cf. Gayubas, 2006, 2016). We have plenty of predynastic iconography that shows enemies being led by powerful figures, and also smiting them, so this line of thinking is inconclusive. In effect, the practical criteria is very useful when dealing with such problems. Ethnography can also provide more information in this sense.

In his groundbreaking essay on the hippopotamus hunt, Swedish Egyptologist Torgny Säve-Söderbergh accurately points out that harpoons represented in New Kingdom tombs are very similar

to those used by modern shalluk of Sudan and the Wandamba of Tanzania (1953: 8). The method they use to hunt hippopotamuses is to stir the water around their boats with a long stick until the beast emerges, then strike the sides with the harpoon, so that the blade pierces the thick skin of the animal and into the flesh. They try to reach the most vulnerable parts of the animal, the nostrils, the sides or the interior of the mouth (which in turn prevents the animal from submerging again). The barb prevents the head of the harpoon from detaching from the animal. The harpoon is tied to a long rope that has a wooden floating device attached to the other end, and that allows men to know exactly where the animal is so they can continue to strike it with spears until it is killed (Gregorius, 1964: 204).

There is also video footage of the hunting of the hippopotamus in the marshes (Rouch, 1950). In Rouch’s documentary one is amazed to watch the fierce struggle of the hunters against the beast, immediately followed by a cut to a young man playfully swimming with a hippopotamus calf that is tied to a tree by its hind leg, in the same exact way that the captive hippopotamus from Hierakonpolis was tied (Figure 6). I am not aware of any ethnography where hunted animals are brought back alive to the community.

Another ethnographer provides a diagram of the harpoon (Culwick, 1932: 277), and when comparing this drawing to the weapons shown in predynastic pottery such as we can see in the fragments from a

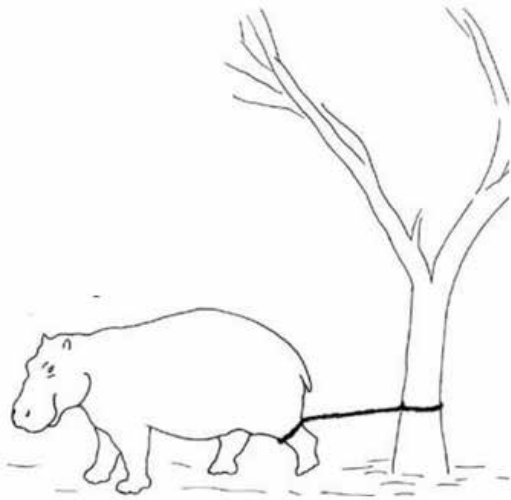


FIGURE 4

Comparison between Van Neer & Linseele’s (2009: 12) reconstruction of a young hippopotamus calf that was held captive at Hierakonpolis (left) and a screen capture of Jean Rouch’s documentary film *Bataille sur le Grand Fleuve* (1950, right).

theriomorphic jar (AM 1924.326: Brunton & Caton-Thompson, 1928: Pl. XLVIII.3) the similarity is clear. Another (intact) theriomorphic jar from the Ashmolean Museum (E 2802: Petrie, 1901: Pl. XIV f. 67) contains depictions of the same harpoon, and again a similar weapon is displayed in the side of a tall decorated vase from Abydos (from Tomb U-637/3: Hartmann, 2003: 83) in connection to a hippopotamus in clear reference to the hunting of this animal.

Circular devices that appear to be “floats” can be seen in petroglyphs located in Wadi Abu Mu Awwad (Morrow & Morrow, 2002: 109) and in Wadi Hammamat (Winkler, 1938: fig. 8). Pottery examples include a plate in the Hearst Museum (Cat. No. 6-3559, see Lythgoe & Dunham, 1965), a dish from Mostagedda (Cairo Museum, JE 52835, see Brunton, 1937: Pl. XXXIV), a decorated vase probably from Gebelein (Berlin Museum Cat. No. 23222, see Scharff, 1931: 117), plate CG 2071 from Cairo Museum (De Morgan, 1896: Pl. II), a decorated bowl found in Tomb U-637 in Abydos (Hartmann, 2003: 85), and a decorated dish in the Ashmolean Museum (AM 1909.1026, see Petrie, 1921: Pl. LXI). Needless to say, the lines that Myers mistook for “vapour” or reins are clearly the ropes attached to the head of the harpoon which is fixed to the animal flesh. It is only logical that they come out through the nostrils, since that is the softest part of the animal were hunters preferred to strike. Also, hunters tended (and still do) to aim for the snout to hinder the animal’s capacity to breath. An inscription on a relief in the Temple of Horus at Edfu states regarding the king’s harpoon during the hunting of the hippopotamus: “[65, 4] The first of the weapons which rushed after him who assailed him (Horus), and took the breath from the snout of the Hippopotamus” (Blackman & Fairman, 1944: 7).

Behrmann’s hypothesis rested heavily on iconographic interpretations. I would like to propose alternative explanations to those readings. First of all, the relaxed nature of people effortless carrying the ropes attached to the animals is but a display of power, calculated to “give a touch of superb calm to the scene, and stress the absolute superiority of the unperturbed power over the fierce and dangerous animal” (Säve-Söderbegh, 1953: 10). It is a well-known procedure in Egyptian representations, consisting in minimising the elements of danger and emphasising instead the enormous strength of the leaders which allowed them to effortlessly control the situation. These representations illustrate

that the hunter was so mighty he could hold the animal (who could weigh up to 3,000 kg) with his bare hands and without any help.

As to the crossed lines that fill the body of hippopotami in some representations, they are nothing else than the characteristic traits of the so-called “White cross-lined pottery”, named this way by Petrie precisely because the figures were commonly filled with crossed lines. The rectangles and zig-zag lines could very well resemble a number of things, and this includes the “ponds”, “enclosures” and “water” that Behrmann saw, but her inference is as good as any other.

David Wengrow deals with this problem:

Many authors have tried to associate non figurative patterns (...) to certain elements of landscape, such as mountains, water or plants (...) but although a generic association to landscape is possible, one must proceed with a certain caution in this kind of readings. Franz Boas has long ago demonstrated that association between visual motifs and natural features is not universally recognized but is mediated by a culturally acquired knowledge of the non-human world (Wengrow, 2006: 132).

There are two distinct sets of hypotheses about representations of the hunting during the Predynastic period: one that could be labelled as “consensualist” due to the fact that it tends to interpret the relations between human and animal in terms of a peaceful coexistence between both worlds (for example, animals being led to the village to “cohabit” the same space as man); but there is yet another group of scholars (fewer in number) that emphasise conflict and the violent relation between hunter and prey, and in the case of hippopotamus hunt identifies the hunting of this animal with its death.

The first set is well exemplified in the *Bestiaire Égyptien* written by Germond & Livet (2001), and understands the animal world as complementary to the human world, practically two halves of a sphere that contains the whole cosmos. In this way, man and animal are mutually codependent and respect each other thus keeping the cosmic balance. This image of parity is in my opinion contested by representations of the hunting of wild animals.

On the other side, Australian Egyptologist Linda Evans has devoted part of her doctoral thesis to criticise this idealistic posture. In particular, and after an extensive and thorough analysis of Old

Kingdom scenes, she demonstrates that Egyptians in fact “did not experience a kinship with the animal kingdom, but instead perceived them as distinctly ‘other’” (Evans, 2010: 124). In her view, much to the like of what I intend to state in this article, the relation between human and animal would be far from peaceful and brotherly.

In conclusion, it is clear that the killing of the hippopotamus is implicit in representations of its hunt, despite not being explicitly shown. With all probability, African peoples today hunt the hippopotamus the exact same way ancient Egyptians did, and Palaeolithic men before them (Hill, 1983). All the ethnographers coincide in that they killed the animals in the field. It is nonetheless probable that they occasionally kept the young orphan calves, like they did in Hierakonpolis.

This revision and discussion of old theses regarding the hunting of the hippopotamus, albeit disproving it, is a useful reminder that the Egyptologist should not take anything for granted. Instead, they must at all times challenge both sources and interpretations, tackling problems from all possible angles.

REFERENCES

- ABD EL KAREM, M. 2013: *Die Nutzung tierischer Ressourcen während des 5. und 4. Jahrtausends v. Chr. in Ägypten*. Unpublished Master's Thesis. Universität Wien.
- ADAMS, B. 1995: *Ancient Nekhen: Garstang in the city of Hierakonpolis*. Egypt Studies Association Publication, n° 3. SIA Publishing.
- ADLER, A. 2007: La guerra y el Estado primitivo. In: Abensour, M. (comp.): *El espíritu de las leyes salvajes. Una nueva antropología política*: 163-188. Del Sol, Buenos Aires.
- ALTENMÜLLER, H. 1980: Jagdritual. In: Helck, W. & Westendorf, W. (eds.): *Lexikon der Ägyptologie*, Band III: 231-233. Otto Harrassowitz, Wiesbaden.
- AYRTON, E.R. & LOAT, W.L.S. 1911: *The Pre-Dynastic Cemetery at El Mahasna*. MEEF 31, London.
- BARD, K. 1988: A Quantitative Analysis of the Predynastic Burials in Armant Cemetery 1400-1500. *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 74: 39-55.
- BEHRMANN, A. 1996: *Das Nilpferd in der Vorstellungswelt der Alten Ägypter. Teil II, Textband*. Reihe XXXVIII, Archäologie, Vol. 62. Europäische Hochschulschriften, Frankfurt.
- BLACKMAN, A.M. & FAIRMAN, H.W. 1944: The Myth of Horus at Edfu III. *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 30: 5-22.
- BRÉMONT, A. 2018: Des éléphants, des hippopotames et des mouflons. Trois hypothèses de marqueurs animaux d'identités regionales pendant les périodes de Naqada I-II. *Archéo-Nil* 28: 69-98.
- BRUNTON, G. 1937: *Mostagedda and the Tasian Culture: British Museum Expedition to Middle Egypt, First and Second Years, 1928, 1929*, London.
- BRUNTON, G. & CATON-THOMPSON, G. 1928: *The Badarian Civilization*. BSAE & ERA 46, London.
- CAMPAGNO, M. 2011: Kinship, concentration of population and the emergence of the State in the Nile Valley. In: Friedman, R.F. & Fiske, P.N. (eds.): *Egypt at its Origins 3. Proceedings of the International Conference "Origin of the State. Predynastic and Early Dynastic Egypt"*. London, 27th July – 1st August 2008: 1229-1242. *Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta* 205. Peeters, Leuven.
- 2016: Surgimiento de lo estatal y liderazgo local en el valle del Nilo (IV-III milenios a.C.). In: Campagno, M.; Gallego, J. & García MacGaw, C. (comps.): *Regímenes Políticos en el Mediterráneo Antiguo. Estudios del Mediterráneo Antiguo*: 15-30. PEFSCA N° 11. Miño y Dávila, Buenos Aires.
- CULWICK, A.T. 1932: Hippo hunting amongst the Wandamba of Tanganyika Territory. *Man* 32: 276-278.
- DARNELL, J.C. 2009: Iconographic Attraction, Iconographic Syntax, and Tableaux of Royal Ritual Power in the Pre- and Proto-Dynastic Rock Inscriptions of the Theban West Desert. *Archéo-Nil* 19: 83-107.
- DE MORGAN, J. 1896: *Recherches sur les Origines de l'Égypte. I: L'Age de la Pierre et des Métaux. 2: Ethnographie Préhistorique et Tombeau Royal de Naqada*. Paris.
- DIEGO ESPINEL, A. 2015: Angry hippos and resurrecting butterflies. Two Ancient Egyptian ethological observations?. In: Massiera, M.; Mathieu, B. & Rouffet, F. (eds.): *Apprivoiser le sauvage / Taming the Wild*: 119-128. *Cahiers de l'ENiM* 11, Université Paul Valéry Montpellier 3 - CNRS.
- DREYER, G. et al. 1998: Umm el-Qaab, Nachuntersuchungen im frühzeitlichen Königsfriedhof, 9./10. Vorbericht. *Mitteilungen des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts Abteilung Kairo* 54: 77-167.
- 2003: Umm el-Qaab, Nachuntersuchungen im frühzeitlichen Königsfriedhof, 13./14./15. Vorbericht. *Mitteilungen des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts Abteilung Kairo* 65: 43-129.
- EVANS, L. 2010: *Animal Behavior in Egyptian Art. Representations of the Natural World in Memphite Tomb Scenes*. Aris & Phillips, Oxford.

- FLORES, D.V. 2004: Funerary sacrifice of animals in the Egyptian Predynastic period. In: Hendrickx, S.; Friedman, R.; Cialowicz, K. & Chlodnicki, M. (eds.): *Egypt at its Origins. Studies in memory of Barbara Adams. Proceedings of the International Conference 'Origin of the State. Predynastic and Early Dynastic Egypt', Krakow, 28th August – 1st September 2002*: 731-763. Leuven.
- FRIEDMAN, R.F. 2004: Elephants at Hierakonpolis. In: Hendrickx, S.; Friedman, R.; Cialowicz, K. & Chlodnicki, M. (eds.): *Egypt at its Origins. Studies in memory of Barbara Adams. Proceedings of the International Conference 'Origin of the State. Predynastic and Early Dynastic Egypt', Krakow, 28th August – 1st September 2002*: 131-168. Leuven.
- FRIEDMAN, R.F. *et al.* 1999: Preliminary Report on Field Work at Hierakonpolis: 1996-1998. *Journal of the American Research Center in Egypt* 36: 1-35.
- 2011: The elite predynastic cemetery at Hierakonpolis: 2009-2010 update. In: Friedman, R.F. & Fiske, P.N. (eds.): *Egypt at its Origins 3. Proceedings of the International Conference "Origin of the State. Predynastic and Early Dynastic Egypt". London, 27th July – 1st August 2008*: 157-191. *Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta* 205. Peeters, Leuven.
- GANDONNIÈRE, C. 2014: Chasseurs et équipes de chasseurs de l'Ancien au Nouvel Empire. *Nehet* 1: 47-69.
- GAYUBAS, A. 2006: Guerra, parentesco y cambio social en las sociedades sin Estado del valle del Nilo prehistórico. In: Campagno, M. (coord.): *Estudios sobre parentesco y Estado en el antiguo Egipto*: 51-74. Del Signo, Buenos Aires.
- 2016: Guerra, territorio y cambio social en el valle del Nilo preestatal. In: Campagno, M.; Gallego, J. & García MacGaw, C. (comps.): *Regímenes Políticos en el Mediterráneo Antiguo. Estudios del Mediterráneo Antiguo*: 31-44. PEFSCA N° 11. Miño y Dávila, Buenos Aires.
- GERMOND, Ph. & LIVET, J. 2001: *Bestiaire Égyptien*. Citedes & Mazenod, Paris.
- GRAFF, G. 2009: *Les peintures sur vases de Naqada I – Naqada II. Nouvelle approche sémiologique de l'icographie prédynastique*. Leuven University Press, Leuven.
- GRAFF, G.; EYCKERMAN, M. & HENDRICKX, S. 2011: Architectural elements in decorated pottery and the ritual presentation of desert animals. In: Friedman, R.F. & Fiske, R.N. (eds.): *Egypt at its origins 3. Proceedings third international colloquium "Origin of the State. Predynastic and Early Dynastic Egypt"*: 437-465. *Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta* 205. Peeters, Leuven.
- GREGORIUS, P. 1964: Die Wandamba (Tanganyika): Ein Forschungsbericht. *Anthropos* 59(1/2): 165-217.
- GRISWOLD, W.A. 1992: Measuring Social Inequality at Armant. In: Adams, B. & Friedman, R.F. (eds.): *The Followers of Horus. Studies dedicated to Michael Allen Hoffman 1944-1990*: 193-198. ESA 2. Oxbow Monograph 20, Oxford.
- HARTMANN, R. 2003: Keramik. In: Dreyer, G. *et al.* (eds.): *Umm el-Qaab. Nachuntersuchungen im frühzeitlichen Königsfriedhof 13/14/15. Vorbericht. Mitteilungen des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts Abteilung Kairo* 59: 80-85.
- 2008: Zwei Fragmente der White Cross-lined Ware aus dem Friedhof U in Abydos zu Gefäßen aus dem Ägyptischen Museum Kairo. In: Engel, E.-M.; Müller, V. & Hartung, U. (eds.): *Zeichen aus dem Sand. Streiflichter aus Ägyptens Geschichte zu Ehren von Günther Dreyer*: 163-182. Menes 5. Otto-Harrassowitz, Wiesbaden.
- HARTUNG, U. 2010: Hippopotamus hunters and bureaucrats: Elite Burials at Cemetery U at Abydos. In: Raffaele, F. *et al.* (eds.): *Recent Discoveries and Latest Researches in Egyptology: Proceedings of the First Neapolitan Congress of Egyptology, Naples, June 18th – 20th, 2008*: 107-120. Otto Harrassowitz, Wiesbaden.
- HARTUNG, U.; ENGEL, E.-M. & HARTMANN, R. 2012: Tell el-Fara'in – Buto 11. Vorbericht. *Mitteilungen des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts Abteilung Kairo* 68: 83-114.
- HENDRICKX, S. 2006: The dog, the *Lycaon pictus* and order over chaos. In: Kroeper, K.; Chlodnicki, M. & Kobusiewicz, M. (eds.): *Archaeology of Early Northeastern Africa. In Memory of Lech Krzyżaniak*: 723-749. *Studies in African Archaeology* 9, Poznan.
- 2011: L'Iconographie de la chasse dans le contexte social prédynastique. *Archéo-Nil* 20: 108-136.
- 2013: Hunting and social complexity in Predynastic Egypt. *Academie Royale des Sciences d'Outre-mer, Bulletin des Séances / Koninklijke Academie voor Overzeese Wetenschappen, Mededelingen der Zittingen* 57(2-4): 237-263.
- HENDRICKX, S. & EYCKERMAN, M. 2015: Les animaux sauvages dans l'Égypte prédynastique. In: Massiera, M.; Mathieu, B. & Rouffet, F. (eds.): *Apprivoiser le sauvage/Taming the Wild*: 197-210. Cahiers de l'EN-İM 11, Université Paul Valéry Montpellier 3 - CNRS.
- HENDRICKX, S. *et al.* 2009: Late Predynastic/Early Dynastic rock art scenes of Barbary sheep hunting in Egypt's Western Desert. From capturing wild animals to the women of the 'Acacia House'. In: Riemer, H.; Förster, F.; Herb, M. & Pöllath, N. (eds.): *Desert animals in*

- the eastern Sahara: Status, economic significance and cultural reflection in antiquity. Proceedings of an interdisciplinary ACACIA workshop held at the University of Cologne December 14-15, 2007:* 189-244. Colloquium Africanum 4. Heinrich-Barth-Institut, Cologne.
- HERZOG, W. 2010: *The Cave of Forgotten Dreams*. Documentary film.
- HEUSCH, L. de 2007[1987]: La inversión de la deuda (proposiciones acerca de las realidades sagradas africanas). In: Abensour, M. (comp.): *El espíritu de las leyes salvajes. Pierre Clastres o una nueva antropología política:* 95-120. Del Sol, Buenos Aires.
- HILL, A. 1983: Hippopotamus butchery by homo erectus at Olduvai. *Journal of Archaeological Science* 10: 135-137.
- HOFFMANN, M.A. 1989: Packaged funerals and the rise of Egypt. *Archaeology* 42: 48-51.
- HOLMES, D. 1992: Chipped Stone-Working craftsmen, Hierakonpolis and the Rise of Civilization in Egypt. In: Adams, B. & Friedman, R.F. (eds.): *The Followers of Horus. Studies dedicated to Michael Allen Hoffman 1944-1990:* 37-44. ESA 2. Oxbow Monograph 20, Oxford.
- HUYGE, D. 2009: Detecting magic in rock art: The case of the ancient Egyptian 'malignant ass'. In: Riemer, H.; Förster, F.; Herb, M. & Pöllath, N. (eds.): *Desert animals in the eastern Sahara: Status, economic significance and cultural reflection in antiquity. Proceedings of an interdisciplinary ACACIA workshop held at the University of Cologne December 14-15, 2007:* 293-307. Colloquium Africanum 4. Heinrich-Barth-Institut, Cologne.
- JÉQUIER, G. 1940: *Le monument funéraire de Pépi II. Tome III. Les approches du temple*. Cairo.
- KINGDON, J. & HOFFMAN, M. (eds.) 2013: *Mammals of Africa. Volume VI: Pigs, Hippopotamuses, Chevrotain, Giraffes, Deer and Bovids*. Bloomsbury, London.
- KÖHLER, Ch. 2002: History or Ideology?: New Reflections on the Narmer Palette and the Nature of Foreign Relations in Predynastic Egypt. In: Levy, E.T. & Van den Brink, E.C.M. (eds.): *Egypt and the Levant:* 499-513. London.
- LINSEELE, V.; VAN NEER, W. & HENDRICKX, S. 2007: Evidence for early cat taming in Egypt. *Journal of Archaeological Science* 34: 2081-2090.
- .— 2008: Early cat taming in Egypt: A correction. *Journal of Archaeological Science* 35: 2672-2673.
- LINSEELE, V.; VAN NEER, W. & FRIEDMAN, R. 2009: Special animals from a special place? The Fauna of HK29A at Predynastic Hierakonpolis. *Journal of the American Research Center in Egypt* 45: 105-136.
- LYTHGOE, A.M. & DUNHAM, D. 1965: *The Predynastic cemetery N7000. Naqa-ed-Der*. Part IV. University of California Publications in Egyptian Archaeology, Berkeley.
- MANLIUS, N. 2000: Biogéographie et écologie historique de l'hippopotame en Égypte. *Belgian Journal of Zoology* 130: 59-66.
- .— 2006: Des millénaires de grands mammifères terrestres et sauvages en Égypte. *Ankh* 14/15(2005/2006): 101-113.
- MARKS, A.E. 1968: The Khormusan: an Upper Pleistocene industry in Sudanese Nubia. In: Wendorf, F. (ed.): *The Prehistory of Nubia*, vol. I: 315-391. Fort Burgwin Research Center and Southern Methodist University Press, Dallas.
- MAYDANA, S. 2015: Of Hippopotami and Hawks. Some remarks on an Egyptianian Egyptian primeval rivalry. *Cahiers Caribéens d'Égyptologie* 19-20: 49-60.
- .— 2017: Implicancias simbólicas y sociopolíticas de las representaciones de la cacería del hipopótamo en Egipto predinástico. *Bibliotheca Augustiniana* Vol. VIII.
- MOND, R. & MYERS, O.H. 1937: *Cemeteries of Armant I*. Egypt Exploration Society, London.
- MORROW, M. & MORROW, M. (eds.) 2002: *Desert RATS. Rock Art Topographical Survey in Egypt's Eastern Desert*. Bloomsbury Summer School. University College London, London.
- MÜLLER, V. 2008: Nilferdjagd und geköpfte Feinde - zu zwei Ikonen des Feindvernichtungsrituals. In: Engel, E.M.; Müller, V. & Hartung, U. (eds.): *Zeichen aus dem Sand. Streiflichter aus Ägyptens Geschichte zu Ehren von Günter Dreyer:* 477-493. Menes 5. Otto-Harrassowitz, Wiesbaden.
- MYERS, O.H. 1933: Two Prehistoric Objects. *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 19: 55.
- PETRIE, W.M.F. 1901: *Diospolis Parva. The Cemeteries of Abadiyeh and Hu 1898-9*. Special extra publication of The Egypt Exploration Fund, London.
- .— 1921: *Corpus of Prehistoric Pottery and Palettes*. ERA y BSAE 32. Repr. Warminster, London.
- PIERI, A. & FRIEDMAN, R. 2009: Two new tombs at HK6: The hippo hunters of Hierakonpolis. *Nekhen News* 21: 13-14.
- PLUTARCH 1936: *Moralia. with an English Translation by Frank Cole Babbitt*. Harvard University Press. William Heinemann Ltd., Cambridge, MA.
- ROUCH, J. 1950: *La chasse à l'hippopotame*. Documentary film.
- SÄVE-SÖDERBERGH, T. 1953: *On Egyptian representations of hippopotamus hunting as a religious motive*. C.W.K. Gleerup, Lund.

- SCHARFF, A. 1931: *Die Altertümer der Vor-und Frühzeit Ägyptens I*. Mitteilungen aus der Ägyptischen Sammlung, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin 5, Berlin.
- TEETER, E. (ed.) 2011: *Before the Pyramids. The Origins of Egyptian Civilization*. Oriental Institute Museum Publications 33. The Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, Chicago.
- TE VELDE, H. 1967: *Seth, God of Confusion*. E.J. Brill, Leiden.
- VAN NEER, W. & LINSEELE, V. 2009: Animal Hospital: Healed Animal Bones from HK6. *Nekhen News* 21: 11-12.
- VAN NEER, W.; UDRESCU, M.; LINSEELE, V.; DE CUPERE, B. & FRIEDMAN, R. 2015: Traumatism in the Wild Animals kept and offered at Predynastic Hierakonpolis, Upper Egypt. *International Journal of Osteoarchaeology*: 1-20.
- WENGROW, D. 2006: *The Archaeology of Early Egypt. Social Transformations in North-East Africa, c. 10.000 to 2.650 BC*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- WINKLER, H.A. 1938: *Rock-Drawings of Southern Upper Egypt I*. Egypt Exploration Society, London.
- ZAJAC, A. 2008: Some remarks on the representation of so called boat procession from Wadi el-Barramiya (Eastern Desert of Egypt). *Studies in Ancient Art and Civilization* 12: 13-20.