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Some remarks on two very early but enduring symbols in ancient Egypt

After a very great number of excellent scientific papers dealing with the prehistoric remains of the Nile valley and its neighbouring deserts, it may interest some of us to look at a few examples of the representational art from the protohistoric and early dynastic periods in the Nile valley in which we see some faces and racial types representing the enemies of Egypt. We believe them to have lived in the mountains along the valley and in the delta of the Nile. It is certain that some of the faces we see on the ancient Egyptian reliefs are those of the descendants of the people who left their artifacts and their bones, as well as those of their domesticated animals, in the regions we have been discussing at this symposium (Fig. 1).



FIG. 1. An ancient Egyptian relief showing human types characteristic for different areas neighbouring Egypt. From one of the chariots from the tomb of Tutankhamun, the decorative elements is a group of foreigners (Photo from collection of Howard Carter's photographs of the tomb; courtesy Griffith Institute, Ashmolean Museum, Oxford)

It is fitting that we should begin by looking at some objects from Hierakonpolis, the prehistory of which has been studied in recent years by Michael Hoffman (1982) with regard to its historical sequence by means of a series of carbon dates and a close study of some of the finds (Hassan 1984). Our interest here centers on two objects which we usually consider to be of "protodynastic" date, namely the Hierakonpolis macehead and the decorated vase from the same site, both objects now in the Ashmolean Museum. It is striking that the symbols found on these two objects recur with apparently the same significance during the three thousand years of the pharaonic period.

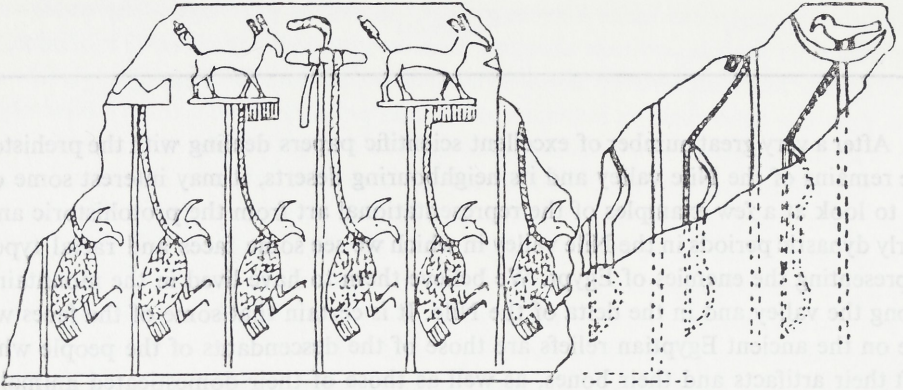


FIG. 2. A detail from the top of the Hierakonpolis macehead (now in the Ashmolean Museum) showing one of the earliest associations of bows and lapwings, hanging by ropes from standards (see Quibell 1900: Pl. XXV and XXVIc)

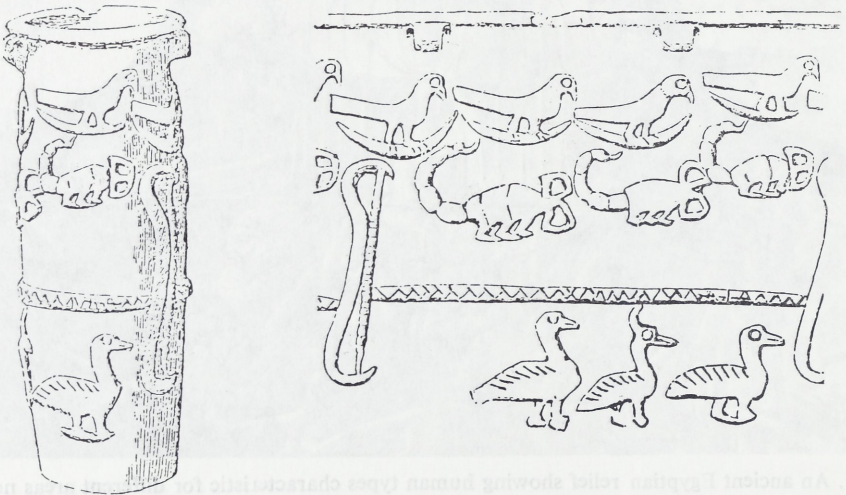


FIG. 3. The figures on the Hierakonpolis vase (Ashmolean Museum). The bow weapon, which remained a symbol of the enemies of Egypt throughout the pharaonic period, is present together with lapwings (crested plover) as well as the same bird without the crest

On the Hierakonpolis macehead we find a row of lapwings hanging by the neck with a row of bow weapons hanging in the same way alongside them (Fig. 2). Clearly these must be symbols for two groups of people, who in this way are shown publicly to be punished. From this same context we have the vase showing not only the lapwing and the bow weapon, which are used as symbols on the macehead, but also other birds and the scorpion which probably represented other groups of people (Fig. 3).

The lapwing (*Vanellus cristatus* or crested plover or peewit, because of its call) has as its physical characteristics its crest, its rounded wings and squared-off tail and a short beak which slightly curves downwards. Its colouring is mainly black and white with some dark green. The lapwing is a migratory bird which inhabits open mud flats and lays its eggs on nests made of reeds and marshland plants in damp ground.



FIG. 4. Three seals from the palace of Amenophis III portraying the most common position of the ancient Egyptian iconography of lapwings: crouching, usually over a nest with human arms raised, over a clump or swamp of papyrus. Knowing as we do that papyrus will only thrive in still water, it is clear also from the textual material that this bird is to be associated with the delta (seals from Hayes 1951: Fig. 25h, 28vv, and 28ww)

In the ancient Egyptian iconography, the lapwing is most often associated with papyrus and is frequently shown hovering over it (Fig. 4, and Hayes 1951: 168f). This means that the Egyptians themselves associated it with swamplands, because, as we all know, papyrus will only grow in water which does not change its level (Nibbi 1975: 12, 52), and therefore not along a river with an annual flood. The natural habitat for the lapwing could best be provided in Egypt by those areas of the ancient delta which retained the Nile water in its depressions throughout the year because the banks of the Nile proper, further upstream, would soon drain after the inundation each year, leaving them too dry to attract this bird. Yet we have to remember that the Egyptian delta not only contained hundreds of mounds up to the end of last century (Nibbi 1983: 71), but was also probably quite heavily wooded in certain areas (Fig. 5, and Nibbi 1981a, and 1981b).

An early palette fragment shows this bird hovering over a boat, again connecting it with water (Fig. 6). It is therefore not surprising that the early Egyptologists understood it to symbolize the people of the delta, which has remained substantially acceptable today. But that is not to say that the lapwing people were the ordinary

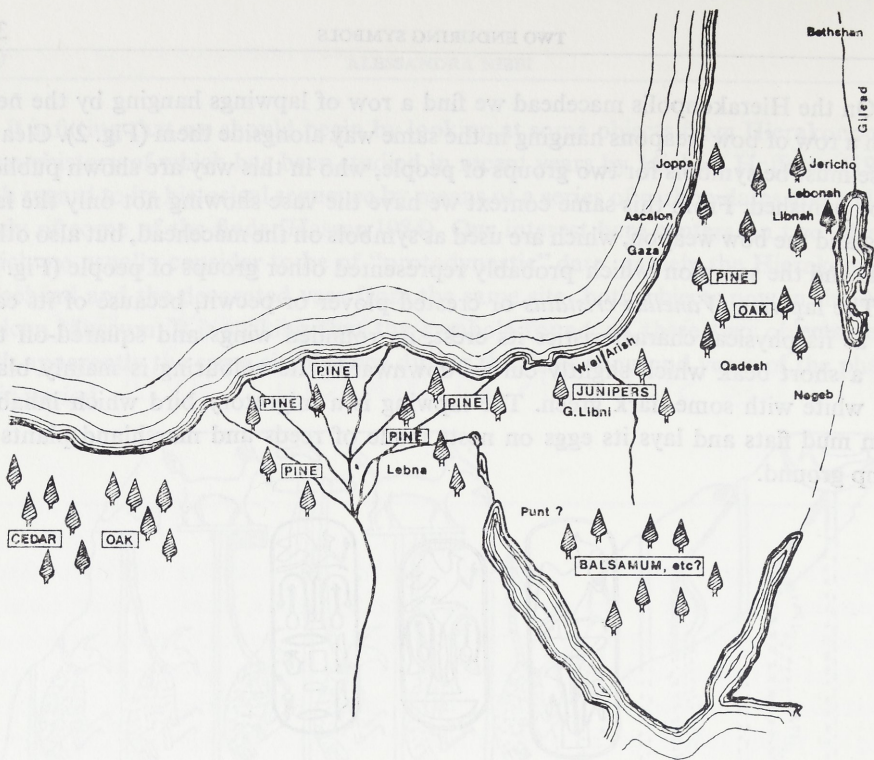


FIG. 5. Map showing the sources of timber in the north of Egypt and along its borders (see Nibbi 1981: Chapter 1 and 1985: *passim*)

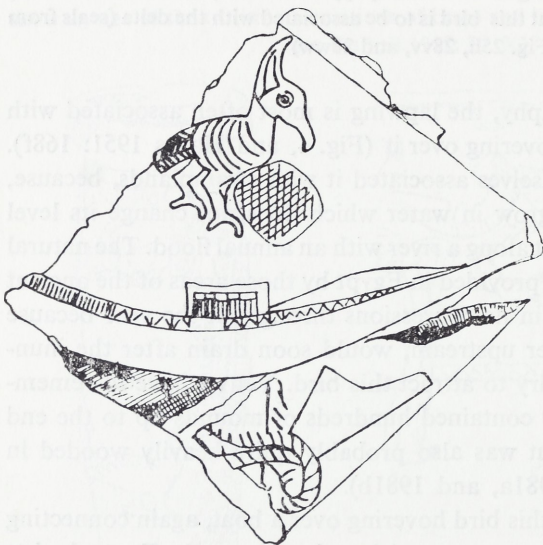


FIG. 6. Fragment of an early palette showing one of the earliest portayals of lapwings hovering over a boat (see early dynastic material in Asselberghs 1961: Pl. XC, no. 159, and bibliographical notes on pp. 336-337)

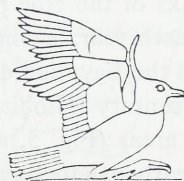


FIG. 7. A stylized drawing of the overlapped wings of the crested plover as a means of immobilizing it (see Gardiner 1947: 101)

citizens of Egypt, as has become the general acceptance for this bird, called *rḥj.t* in the texts. The iconography shows this bird at all times as being held in submission, either by having its wings crossed over each other thus obliging it to squat down and preventing it from walking or flying away (Fig. 7) or by having its tail feathers tied together (Fig. 8). Sometimes both these impediments are shown to have been imposed upon it. Furthermore, I believe that both the textual and the archaeological evidence shows that the delta was not a part of Egypt proper during the pharaonic period, but a hostile territory inhabited by a number of foreign peoples (Nibbi 1975: 7 - 34; 1982a: 27 - 32; 1982b: 51 - 60).

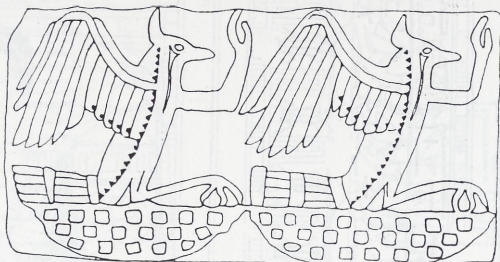


FIG. 8. A group found at Medinet Habu, among which we find the foreign enemies of Egypt (including scene in our Fig. 18). It is clear from the tightly-bound tail, overlapped wings and marked edging down its side, as though representing the "Libyan" tunic, that this bird represents the foreign western delta settlers in subjection (Daressy 1911: 49 - 63)

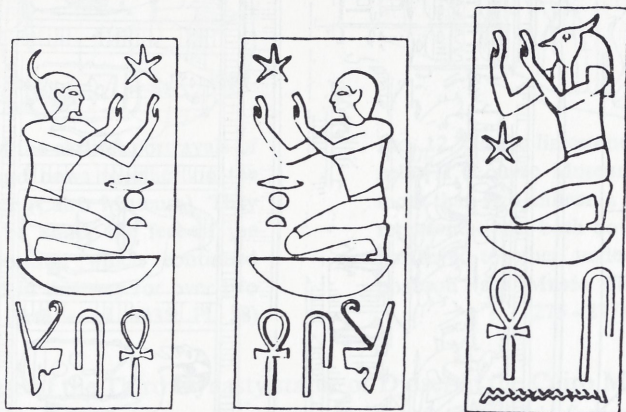


FIG. 9. Details from reliefs from Abydos in which the laping or *rḥj.t*-bird is shown as a human being, labelled as such, similarly squatting over a basket, with arms raised in the usual way (see Abd el Hamid Zayed 1962: 115f)

Where it is important that the *rḥj.t* or laping people be identified, they are portrayed with a crest on their head and often with a beard as well (Fig. 9) (Zayed 1962: 115f and 8; Wallis Budge 1899: I). This makes it certain that they should never be considered as the ordinary citizens of Egypt. Only foreigners are ever shown bearded in the ancient Egyptian reliefs and paintings.

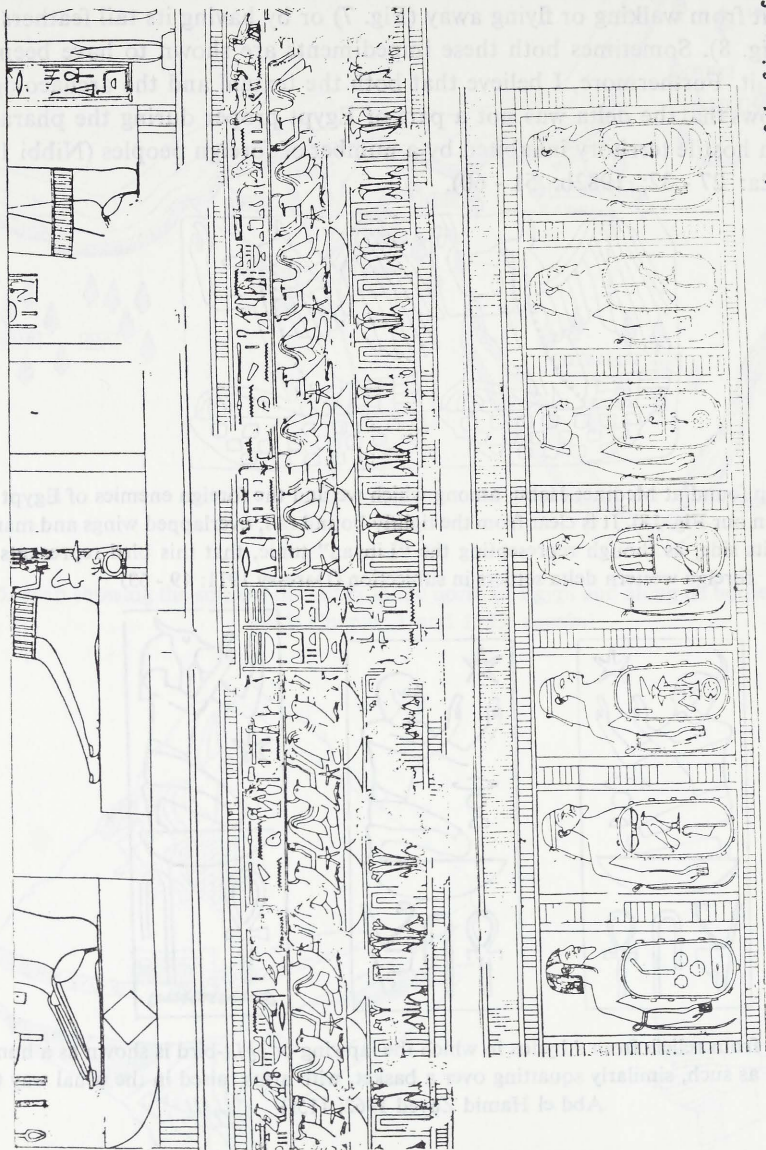


FIG. 10. The tomb of Kheruef is an excellent example from the time of Amenophis III of the alternation of the frieze of Nine Bows and the rows of *rbj.t*-birds, though communicating the same idea of subjection of the foreign people (after Oriental Institute, University of Chicago 1980: Pls 24 - 26, 48, 49)

However, the most common representation of this bird in the ancient Egyptian iconography is as a frieze at the base of a statue or a scene, at the feet of the Pharaoh or below them (Fig. 10, Oriental Institute 1980, Pl. 25). The lapwing is always shown in a squatting position over his basket, perhaps intended to signify a nest and the settling down of a migrant foreigner. A Middle Kingdom text which we call the Prophecy of Neferti (Helck 1970: 25f) speaks poetically of a foreign bird "which will breed in the delta marshland, having made its nest beside the *rrm.t.w*", the latter meaning *men* in general.

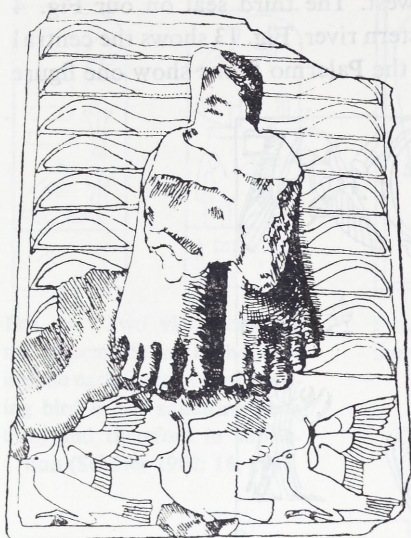


FIG. 11. One of the earliest portrayals of the lapwings and bows together on the statue of Djoser (Cairo Museum). They are shown to be under the feet of the pharaoh, a position which continued to be portrayed in this way for over two millennia (see Firth *et al.* 1935: Pl. 58)

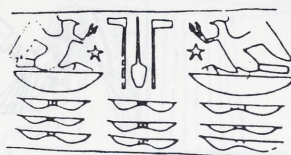


FIG. 12. On the limestone base of Nectanebo II (Louvre Museum) we still find, more than two millennia after the earliest representations, both bows and lapwings portrayed together, under the feet of the pharaoh (see Musée du Louvre 1981: 275 - 277)

On the base of the Third Dynasty statue of Djoser in the Cairo Museum (Fig. 11) we find three lapwings in an abject position in front of his feet while nine bows are painted under them, an iconographic pattern which recurs many times in statues of pharaohs throughout the dynasties and may be found again on the base of a statue of Nectanebo II in the Louvre Museum, dating to nearly three thousand years later (Fig. 12). Occasionally, as in the wooden statuette of Amenophis III in the Berlin (West) Museum, we find nine men as enemy types with bound arms placed in the same traditional position of the bows on the stand under the feet of the Pharaoh. When the nine prisoners are portrayed under the feet of the Pharaoh instead of the nine bows, we are shown both bearded and non-bearded types suggesting that the

Nine Bows comprised all the enemies of Egypt, including the people of the delta. This is confirmed in fact when the names of the nine traditional enemies are listed in the texts from the Eighteenth Dynasty onwards (Vercoutter 1947; 1949).

The recurring pattern of lapwings and Nine Bows in the iconography suggests a close and fundamental relationship between the two. It may be that the lapwings, in representing the foreign immigrants in the delta, constituted the largest and most important of the nine enemy groups, demanding individual and special attention.

There are many clues in the iconography and the texts that suggest that we must associate the *rhj.t* or lapwing people with the west. The third seal on our Fig. 4 shows them to symbolize good wine from the western river, Fig. 13 shows the central figure to symbolize the west, the inscriptions on the Palermo Stone show one figure



FIG. 13. Lapwings shown on the top register, bearded and crested, squatting low on the ground and associated with the large figure of the west at the centre (from Wallis Budge 1899: Colour Plate I)

with a knife across the neck of this bird, while another speaks of the western nomes in conjunction with this bird (Fig. 14) and a Turin Papyrus also portrays him in conjunction with a western nome (Fig. 15).

It is a well-known fact that the Graeco-Roman world referred to the regions they knew west of the Nile as Libya. All scholars will agree that in late times textual references to Libya either referred exclusively to the western delta or included it (Yoyotte 1961: 142f).

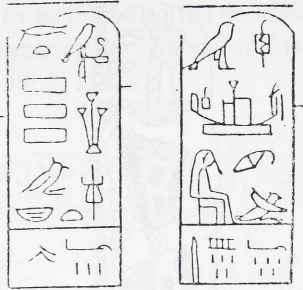


FIG. 14. Two vignettes from the Palermo Stone both showing the early portrayal of lapwing bird in the squatting position, and therefore in subjection (Schäfer 1902: 16, 19)

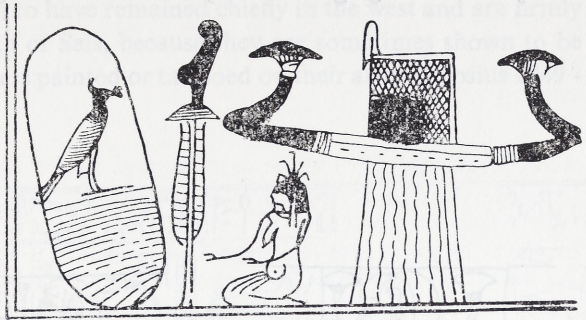


FIG. 15. Vignette showing the lapwing in association with the west (from the Book of the Dead on a Turin papyrus cat. no. 1837)

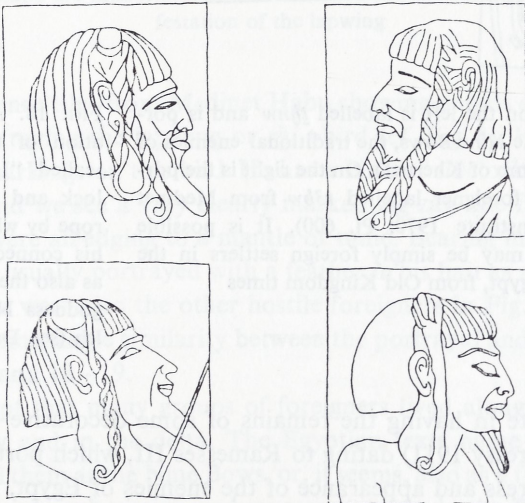


FIG. 16. Details of "Libyan" heads, with their sidelock and all bearded, which may simply be the portrayal of the non-Egyptian inhabitants of the western delta, symbolized in the iconography by the lapwing (from Oriental Institute, University of Chicago 1970: Pl. 129)

The ancient Egyptian texts identify the Libyans by the name of *ḥnw* in the Old and Middle Kingdoms and by *r3bw* in the New Kingdom. Both of these names are associated with some very distinctive characteristics, namely a hair style with a short fringe in front, a sidelock which was either curled or plaited and short hair at the back (Fig. 16). They are bearded and are shown in all periods to be wearing wide bands which cross over each other in front of their torsos (Fig. 17). Their formal dress seems to be a mantle or tunic revealing an all-over pattern on it, always with a very marked edging which may have been a fringe (Fig. 18).

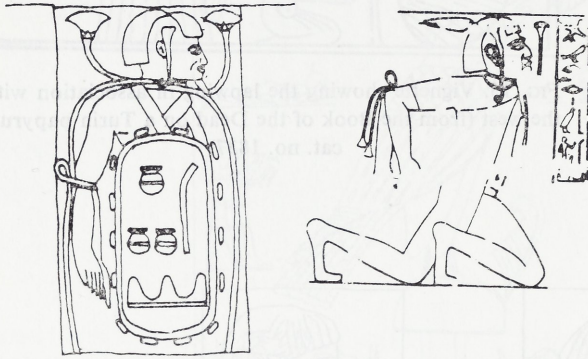


FIG. 17. A figure on the left is labelled *ḥnw* and is portrayed as one of the Nine Bows, the traditional enemies of Egypt (from the tomb of Kheruef). On the right is the portrayal of the same foreigner labelled *r3bw* from Medinet Habu (Oriental Institute 1970: Pl. 600). It is possible that these people may be simply foreign settlers in the western delta of Egypt, from Old Kingdom times



FIG. 18. A typical representation of the figure with so-called "Libyan" tunic, sidelock and beard. The papyrus rope by which he is tied shows his connection with the delta as also the tattooed sign of the goddess Neith of Sais on his leg (see Daressy 1911: 49 - 63)

We are fortunate in having the remains of some decorative faience tiles from Medinet Habu (Daressy 1911) dating to Ramesses III, which portray in colour and careful detail the dress and appearance of the enemies of Egypt. Among these it is easy to recognize the *ḥnw* or *r3bw*, that is, those Libyans who were wearers of the sidelock. We know for certain that another group of Libyans, the *Meshwesh*, did not have this hair style (Oriental Institute 1970: Pl. 600 A). Our Fig. 19 here shows

each of these groups portrayed separately, each bound with papyrus, among other prisoners bound with the so-called plant of Upper Egypt. In this scene from Medinet Habu, we see our western Libyan with the sidelock wearing a tunic, whereas the *Meshwesh* Libyan is wearing the crossed bands in his torso. The *Meshwesh* Libyan is wearing the long hair which seems to be traditional in the representation of *thnw* Libyans in the Old Kingdom. The *Meshwesh* in late times were associated with the whole of the delta (Yoyotte 1961: 122 - 141), whereas the western Libyans or wearers of the sidelock, our *r3bw*, seemed to have remained chiefly in the west and are firmly to be linked to the goddess Neith of Sais, because they are sometimes shown to be wearing the symbol for this goddess painted or tattooed on their arms (Lepsius 1849 - 59: 3, 136a).

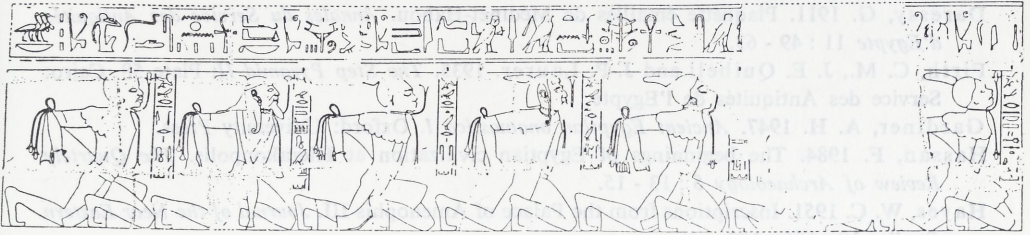


FIG. 19. The traditional ethnic groups, their names in front of them, among the attackers of Egypt during the Ramesside period, the so-called Sea Peoples (from Medinet Habu; Oriental Institute, University of Chicago 1970: Pl. 600; see also Nibbi 1985: 310 - 317). Two of these peoples, the Meshwesh and the Rabu are inhabitants of the western delta, the Rabu being the human manifestation of the lapwing

Among the faience tiles from Medinet Habu showing details of enemy foreigners, we find some portraying the lapwing or *rhj.t*-bird (cf. Fig. 8). Here remarkably we find some extra markings on this bird. He has a kind of sidelock portrayed from his eye downwards and we see a very clearly marked zig-zag line from his crest to his tail as though it were an edging to a mantle or tunic. Bearing in mind that the *thnw* or *r3bw* Libyan is usually portrayed with a feather in his hair as a symbol of hostility to the Pharaoh (as were also the other hostile foreigners in Fig. 19), we cannot but be struck by the remarkable similarity between the portrayal and the western Libyan type, our Figs. 8 and 18 - 19.

We must accept that many groups of foreigners lived along the bordering hills of the Nile valley and in the delta. The Egyptian texts name many enemies, but chiefly symbolized them as the Nine Bows, or, it seems, also as a frieze of immobilized lapwings, pacified into submission and reverence towards the Pharaoh. Among the best representations of these enemies is our Fig. 1, which is a decorative scene on a chariot from the tomb of Tutankhamun, in which we find a very great number of enemy foreigners portrayed in defeat.

It is therefore necessary to emphasize that while the lapwing or *rḥj.t*-bird was accepted by Jacques Pirenne (1934) to signify the ordinary people of Egypt and has maintained that meaning as the result of the indifference of scholars to this problem, we must carefully look at the facts as they are. The identity of this bird is an important key to the interpretation of many documents (Nibbi 1987) and scenes from ancient Egypt.

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In a paper presented in 1989 at the Dymaczewo Symposium we attempted to evaluate what we thought was known about the Quaternary mammal and archaeozoology of Egypt and Sudan (Gautier 1984a). The data for the Nile region in the Central Sudan were then still very scanty and far from precise. The present paper read at the second Dymaczewo conference gives a summary of the faunal data obtained since then and their general significance.

Detailed research on the faunal assemblages of Central Sudanese sites was started in 1977, when the author was invited by L. Krzyżaniak to study the faunal remains from Kadere. The research program now includes:

Early Khartoum:

- Khartoum Hospital (cf. Artell 1948); preliminary faunal analysis (Gaut 1992); re-analysis of the fauna (Peters 1984);
- Segal (cf. Gagny 1983); detailed faunal analysis (Gautier 1983);
- Umm Marrabi (not published excavations by the Department of Archaeology, University of Khartoum); preliminary faunal analysis by the author.

Khartoum Neolithic:

- Elshelab (cf. Artell 1952); preliminary faunal analysis (Gaut 1963); re-analysis (Peters 1986); new excavations (Hassand 1981); preliminary faunal analysis (Tigani el Mahi 1982); re-analyzed by the present author;
- Kadere (cf. Krzyżaniak 1984); preliminary faunal analysis (Sobocinski 1977; Gautier 1984b); detailed faunal analysis (Gautier in preparation);
- Guli (cf. Gagny 1984); preliminary faunal report (Gautier 1983). More faunal material from the earlier excavation remains has now become available and has been included;
- Nofalat, Umm Duwwa, Zafad (Hasland 1981); preliminary faunal analysis (Tigani el Mahi 1982) re-analyzed by the present author.