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The Interaction of Visual Narration with Performance: Three Examples from New Kingdom Egypt

Introduction

The Egyptian language does not have a term for ‘religion’, ‘belief’, or ‘piety’. Yet, the multitude of architectural structures such as temples, shrines, or tombs, whose walls are covered with scenes involving rituals performed, as well as countless private monuments showing private cults performed in honour of transcendent entities are connected to what is usually defined as religion. They sometimes go along with partly very long texts whose hymns, prayers, rituals, and myths reflect theology and piety of a highly complex nature. Whilst Egyptologists’ main sources for the reconstruction of religious systems in Egypt are texts and material evidence, there is little doubt that written sources allow for a deeper insight into the religious beliefs and practices of both the funerary and the divine cult. These sources are generally preferred to visual evidence with respect to their capability of providing clues when the reconstruction of religious feelings and realities is aimed. As a matter of fact, images from official, state-controlled contexts such as state temples only visualised permitted realities, resulting from the conventions and traditions of a high-culture. These represented realities were idealised and thus did not necessarily reflect the actual reality.¹ Moreover, the iconographic language intended as form in which the visualisation of religious realities took place was entirely canonised² by a culturally codified system of visual signs,³ detectable in visual representations ascribable to all levels of society. This fact suggests that the monuments of the official religious discourse strongly influenced

¹ On the general concept of restricted freedom of representation known as ‘decorum’ in Egyptological terms, see Baines 1990 and 1998.

² Schäfer 1986.

³ To be understood in the sense of Hermeneutics, pointing at the manifold underlying levels of meaning, rather than pure Semiotics, as suggested by Angenot 2011.

those pertaining to personal non-state religion both in content and form. However, to limit the meaning of visual representations of religious realities to a decodable sign system would mean to significantly reduce their power, potential, and daily impact. In private monuments displaying religious realities,⁴ specific elements of individualisation of a generic religious event can be recognised. They aim to single out the event visually (and partly also textually) narrated on the monument, by means of non-conforming representational strategies and contents. As a result, the monument becomes personalised, reflecting a very specific reality that links an individual to a divine being. Three monuments dating to the New Kingdom (1550–1069 BC), stela Turin 50044, stela BM EA 1632 (**Fig. 2** and **3**) and stela Bologna MCABo EG 1917 (**Fig. 4**), originally probably set in local community-led shrines, will be used in the present paper to endorse the argumentation herewith suggested. Leading questions related to narrative strategies and their dialectical relation to context and performance will address the form of visualisation of what appears to have been religious experiences as reflected in two-dimensional representation from a private context.

Interacting with Religious Images

The representations analysed in the present paper were carved and painted on limestone stelae set in a sacred environment, whether a tomb or a shrine. Whilst they could be considered pieces of art and analysed as such,⁵ their prime function – to highlight the donor’s exceptionality in front of both the divine sphere and the close community through the display of piety and religious practice – was predominant. These stelae were set in a specific context for a specific purpose and did not function as artefacts independent from their immediate setting. Private letters from the Late Ramesside period (ca. 1189–1069 BC) provide Egyptologists with invaluable indirect confirmation of what is displayed on these stelae. People were asked to visit local shrines, make offerings to divine figures and say prayers also by means of intercession.⁶ As a matter of fact, private stelae always from accessible

⁴ Luiselli 2013.

⁵ The definition herewith taken in consideration is the one suggested by Tefnin 1991, who suggests that a genuine piece of art can be seen in those monuments that reflect an engagement of the ‘artist’ with the rules and conventions of art, resulting in unusual representations and effects. This understanding has been considered too narrow by Baines 2007, 301, who considers an Egyptian piece of art as being: “[...] products, created for any purpose, that exhibit a surplus of order and aesthetic organization which goes beyond the narrowly functional.”

⁶ See, for instance, P.BM 10326, l. 3–4 and 15–17 (Wente 1967, 37–42; Luiselli 2011, 303–304), dating to the 20th Dynasty, where the scribe Butehamun is asked to visit the shrine of Amun-United-with-Eternity (i.e., a local manifestation of Amun in Thebes) to recite intercessory prayers for the sender of the letter.

settings in shrines, tombs, and private houses reflect this interaction with divine figures. While no agreement has been reached among scholars as to whether or not these stelae can be considered valuable sources for the reconstruction of religious experience,⁷ agency-related issues addressed in individual studies have highlighted their relevance for the social setting of the individuals represented on these monuments.⁸ Several hundreds of these monuments have been discovered in different locations in Egypt, although the vast majority comes from the Theban area.⁹ Chronologically, they are attested roughly from the Middle Kingdom (2055–1650 BC) onwards with a clear peak in the New Kingdom (1550–1069 BC) and particularly during the 19th and 20th Dynasties (1295–1069 BC).¹⁰ Despite variations in form and content, their basic structure sees one or more individuals making offerings to one or more deities. The donors can kneel or stand, be accompanied by family and/or community members; more rarely, the worshiped deity can also be represented alone in front of the offering table. An intercessor for offerings and prayers can occur, usually represented on a higher register and in front of the divine statue.¹¹ In some cases the donor can worship a specific divine statue or image, a deified king, a religious scene, the specific manifestation of a deity,¹² or a relief normally engraved on the outer side of pylons,¹³ thus reflecting the variety of elements filled with religious meaning that encountered individuals. When the original find spot is documented, these monuments' provenance appears to be the accessible area of either a shrine, where probably public religious ceremonies accompanied their donation and erection,¹⁴ a tomb or a house.¹⁵ Similarly to the deposition of private statues on causeways, temple courts, shrines, etc., once the stela was

⁷ For instance, Kessler 1998, 161–188; 1999, 173–221, and Adrom 2004, who, though with slight differences from each other, consider the stelae as being part of an institutionalised official ritual context that left little or no room for the display of personal religious experience and feelings. Furthermore, Exell 2009, esp. 131–138, considers the representation of religious acts as an indication of the social relevance of these stelae for the individual donor and his or her agency within the local community, rather than a genuine display of piety. While the display and affirmation of status within the community is certainly a crucial aspect of these artefacts (see also Weiss 2015, 163), the relevance of very individual personal religious beliefs might have influenced the choice of the topics represented (Luiselli 2011, 8 and 41, as well as in general 144–178 and 353–405).

⁸ See Weiss 2015, esp. 15–19.

⁹ Tosi and Roccati 1972.

¹⁰ Luiselli 2013.

¹¹ The basic patterns of representation of divine access are summarized by Exell 2009, 20–21.

¹² Stela Turin 50054 (Tosi and Roccati 1972, 89–90 and 284).

¹³ Devauchelle 1994.

¹⁴ As suggested by Kessler 1999, 182.

¹⁵ Only a few examples of these stelae have been recovered in house complexes, thus suggesting that these complexes were not the primary setting and context of function for these monuments.

erected and ritually given life,¹⁶ it was believed to let the donor take part in all the ceremonies celebrated in the area, also after his/her death – a very common desire explicitly expressed in prayers through the use, among others, of the expression “to see the beauty of a deity”.¹⁷ While many of the stelae are clearly standardised in both form and content, others are rich in details and provide insight into specific events that were commemorated for their religious relevance in one’s life.¹⁸ Once set in the area of a local shrine or temple, these stelae announced to the community and commemorated an event that connected the donor’s life to the local god, by ritually proclaiming his or her divine power. In these cases, the relevance given to life events was verbally expressed in the prayer and was publicly proclaimed.

These monuments were media that used culturally encoded visual signs to generate a communication process at different levels. The gestures represented were well known by the community and being attested also at the level of state religion, they reflect the implicit link between non-official and state religious practice.¹⁹ The communication produced through the medium of the image was directed towards the divine world and the community, displaying piety and emphasizing social status at the same time. The ritual setting of these images provided them with generative power, becoming what Jan Assmann has defined as “Bildakte” (visual acts).²⁰ As actors in the etymological sense of the word, these images enacted and constructed religious realities, when set in a specific sacred context at the centre of ritual performances.²¹ Religious images from sacred areas used the tools and strategies of the culturally accepted and encoded iconic language to display a religious reality.²² This language was decodable by the audience, which, through the participation in community ritual life, gained the necessary knowledge to decode the images and interact with them. In some cases, as it will be shown below, they could narrate details that reflected lived religious experiences, taking distance from generalized situations and linking an individual experience to a shared belief system. Furthermore, even in those scenes that lacked any individualisation according

¹⁶ This ritual was possibly a simplified version of the Ritual of the Opening of the Mouth by a wab-priest. This possibility has been already suggested by Pinch–Waraksa 2009, 6 for miniature divine figurines deposited in temples and shrines as votives, and can be assumed also for these stelae. However, it is unlikely to have been the case for stelae originally set in houses.

¹⁷ See the explanation and the examples provided in Luiselli 2011, 145 with fn. 361.

¹⁸ The most famous examples are the two stela of the workman Neferabu (stela BM EA 589 and stela Turin 50058), on which the donor provides a detailed description of his misconduct, followed by divine punishment and mercy. See Luiselli 2011, esp. 168–179 and 358–363.

¹⁹ Luiselli 2007a.

²⁰ Assmann 2004, 99–120, discussed in Luiselli 2007a, esp. 96.

²¹ Luiselli 2007a.

²² Luiselli 2007a, 90.

to our understanding of it,²³ it is the lived religious experience, intended as the appropriation and imitation of movements, gestures, postures, beliefs, and concepts, set in a specific space²⁴ that is communicated and generated by these images. The donor is not simply represented adoring or offering to a deity because, in accordance with the Egyptian understanding of visual representation, he is performing the adoration and the offering in that very moment and every time the ritual renews the act.²⁵ Additionally, on several private stelae the divine capability of hearing the individual's prayers and watching one's actions is displayed through the depiction of ears and eyes around the divine figure²⁶ that goes along with the donor's imploration addressed to the worshiped divine entity to hear his/her prayers.²⁷ Because of the intrinsic power of Egyptian images, provided by the life-giving rituals performed on them, the appropriate addressing of the divine figure was believed to generate its reaction, thus highlighting the relevance of religious interaction. These stelae visualise only snapshots of far more complex rituals that involved processions, hymns, invocations, offerings, etc.²⁸ They accompanied the erection and public display of these monuments and, by providing a backdrop for the single individual to engage through his own experience with the shared belief system, they enhanced the donor's agency within his closest social groups (family and community) in terms of self-presentation and affirmation of authority.²⁹ In other words, by narrating and visually displaying for instance the participation in religious festivals,³⁰ the donor highlighted his/her own high status, gaining authority

²³ Such as Stela BM EA 289 (fig. 1).

²⁴ Bergman 2008, esp. 197–200.

²⁵ Crucial aspects of this function apply to the material used, as the figure of the god Ptah adored on a temple doorway in Medinet Habu demonstrates. The texts say it had an inlaid eye with lapis lazuli, marking his capability to see the people coming to pray for him. The material communicates a divine characteristic that generated social interaction.

²⁶ 3D shaped eyes and ears have been offered as votive offerings in divine shrines from the New Kingdom onwards to enhance the call for the listening and watchful deity, as explicitly stated through the divine epithet “who hears the prayers”, common during the New Kingdom. Under Thutmose III a so-called contra-temple, a typical structure added to state temples for the performance of popular cult practices (Guglielmi 1994, 55–68), bearing the name “the hearing ear”, had been built in Karnak, against the rear wall of the Akh-menu as chapel accessible by ordinary people to present prayers to Amun-Re. The focus of the cult here was the sole obelisk, now erected in Rome in Lateran Palace. Moreover, the first open court of the Ramesseum had wall a place officially dedicated to “prayers and the hearing of invocations” on its Eastern wall (*KRI*, II, 653.4–5; Luiselli 2011, 61).

²⁷ See, for instance, P. Anastasi II, 10.1–11.2 (Assmann 1999, 408–409). For a different interpretation of the ears depicted on votive stelae see Morgan 2004. I do not follow Morgan's interpretation. See Luiselli 2007b.

²⁸ Luiselli 2007a.

²⁹ In the sense suggested by Exell 2009, esp. 138.

³⁰ Such as in the case of stela Acc. No. Manchester 4588. See Bierbrier et al. 1984.

and credibility among his/her peers, and at the same time ritually connected with the deity worshiped. Hence, the interaction generated by these images both concerned the divine world and the community. As it will be shown in the present article, narration and performance on these monuments acted together to display personal religious experience and, therefore, to link the individual to a shared belief system and to enforce his or her authority by means of exceptionality. The level of individualisation, to be understood as rupture moments of standardised representations, is what is here suggested being *narrative visual elements*.

Visually Narrated Religious Experience

Compared to the textual descriptions of personal religious experiences in prayers, which can occasionally be very elaborate, visual representations admittedly show less variation. This is the case in the example of 19th Dynasty stela BM EA 289 (**Fig. 1**) of the workman Neferabu. While in the prayer carved on the stela he dramatically describes his morally wrong behaviour towards Ptah, by publicly admitting having sworn the god's name, declaring the punishment inflicted upon him and proclaiming the god's overwhelming power,³¹ the scenery on the stela bears no unusual elements. On the bottom right hand side, Neferabu is depicted facing left, kneeling and adoring Ptah who is represented enthroned in a naos in the upper register on the left, facing right. In front of him a rich offering table indicates the offering given to him by Neferabu on the occasion of this ritualistic performance that probably took place in the local sanctuary of Mertseger and Ptah in Deir el-Medina.³² The eyes and ears depicted above this upper scene reflect Ptah's watchful and caring nature and at the same time visualise the donor's wish to be heard by the god. Nonetheless, no element would suggest anything of the facts described in the prayer – which is the usual situation in prayer stelae.

However, some examples show that specific elements could be added to the standard scenery pattern, aiming to individualise the monument. In some of these cases, text and image clearly correlate: the scenery becomes narrative and, thus, individualised. In so doing, performance and narration, understood as two strategies of communication with both the divine world and the community, interacted on a religious monument: whilst the performance was guaranteed by the adoration gestures, the offering scene displayed,³³ the setting in the sacred environment of a shrine and the rituals performed around it, the visual (and textual) narrative

³¹ For an English translation of the text see Frood 2007, 223–225.

³² Bruyère 1930.

³³ Luiselli 2007a.



Fig. 1: Stela BM EA 289 © The Trustees of the British Museum.

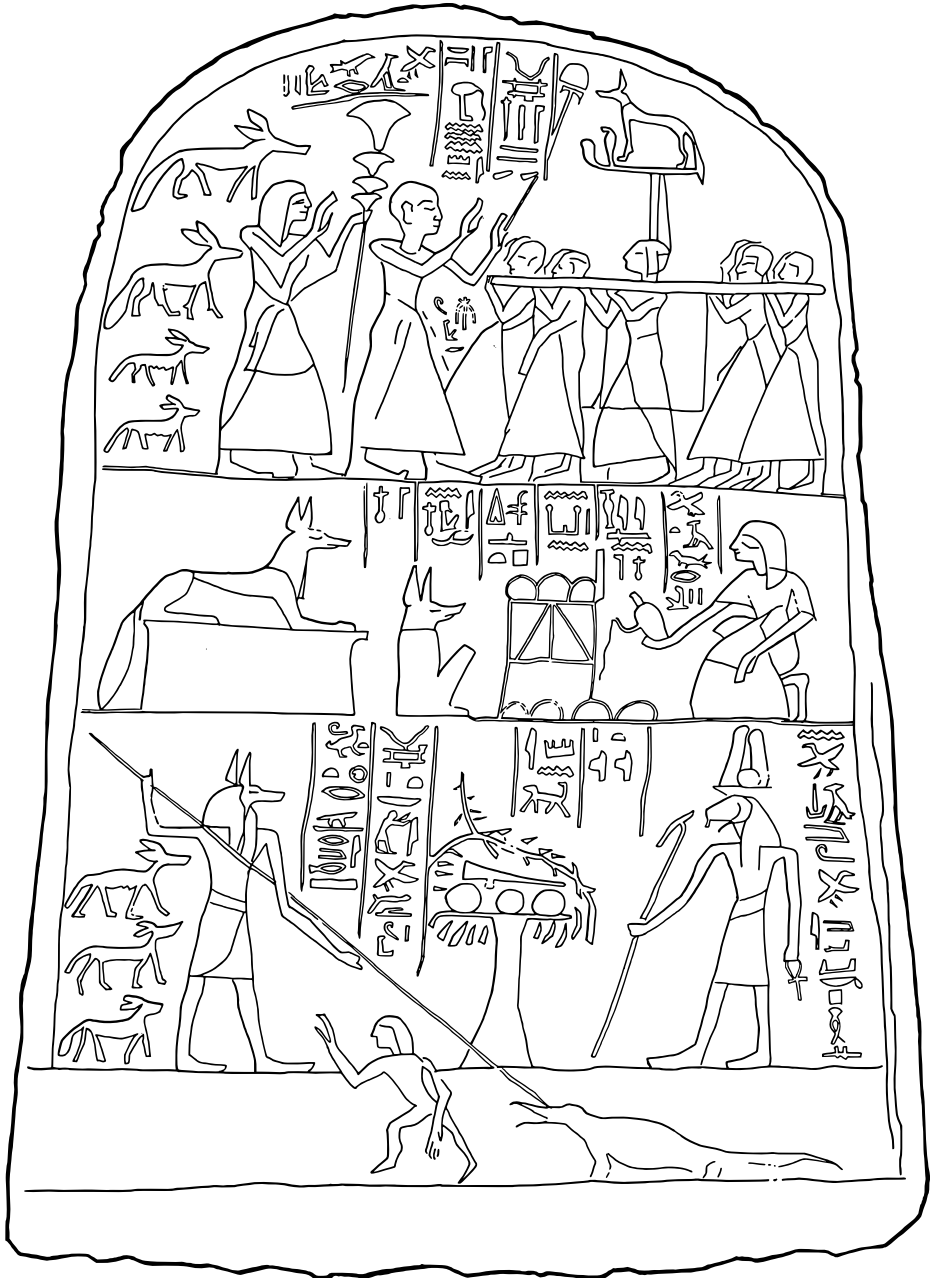


Fig. 2: Stela BM EA 1632, drawing © The Trustees of the British Museum.

elements³⁴ provided reality and individuality. Three monuments shall be discussed more in detail to illustrate this argument.

The first evidence is provided by stela Turin 50044, dating to the reign of Ramesses II (i.e., the 19th Dynasty) from the workmen's village Deir el-Medina, West Thebes.³⁵ In his prayer, the servant of the god Jah(-Thot)-Huj briefly presents himself as the man who had lied with respect to a poorly defined event involving what appears to be the pedestal probably of the divine statue of the moon god Jah, to whom the stela is dedicated. The text does not provide any further detail about this event, probably because it was well known to the community of Deir el-Medina and did not need further details. A reference to this event surprisingly enters the visual level: whilst the standard iconographical pattern of these stelae is repeated³⁶ to ensure the performative character of the votive stela, the donor carries on his shoulder the item involved in the event addressed. This single element breaks these monuments' conventions. While not altering the performative significance and function of the stela, it rather functions as a narrative window into actual life events interpreted as religious.³⁷ In so doing, it breaks a standard iconographical pattern to adapt it to individual necessities and experiences.

The second case is stela BM EA 1632 (**Fig. 2**),³⁸ dating to the Ramesside period (1295–1069 BC) and originally coming from Asyut in Middle Egypt.³⁹ It is divided into three registers, addressing different topics related to each other. In the upper register the donor Pataweret, dressed in festive clothes, is represented standing, facing right and adoring the standard of the jackal god Wepwawet, carried by several priests in procession. In his left hand he holds a long bunch and in front of him a wab-priest is showing facing the procession and holding a small fan directed to the god's standard. Four jackals are depicted behind the donor. In the middle register, Pataweret is displayed performing water offerings for two jackal figures, one depicted crouching, the other lying on a pedestal. The inscription does not clarify whether or not this god is Anubis or Wepwawet.

The main object of interest for the present study is represented by the bottom register (**Fig. 3**). At the very bottom of the scene, a man is shown running to the left, wading in water (i.e., the Nile), trying to flee from a menacing crocodile.

³⁴ Braun 2015.

³⁵ Tosi and Roccati 1972, 78; Luiselli 2011, 366–368, pl. 9; dimensions: 27,5 x 20 cm.

³⁶ Huj is represented half-kneeling on the left part of the lower register of the stela, raising one hand in adoration and addressing the divine figure of Jah, represented in the upper register as full moon and crescent in the divine barque.

³⁷ See also Braun 2015, 348 who states “[w]hat really counts is that the idea of the specific historical, fictional, religious, or mythical event is brought to mind, so the illustration of a single moment or a few scenes can convey the whole narration”.

³⁸ Dimensions: 47,5 x 37 cm; material: limestone.

³⁹ For a discussion of this stela see Brunner 1958; DuQuesne 2003 and Meyrat 2008.



Fig. 3: Stela BM EA 1632, detail © The Trustees of the British Museum.

A jackal-headed god, identified by the text as Wepwawet-Re, the saviour,⁴⁰ and followed by three more jackals, pierces the crocodile on the head with an extremely long lance, thus presumably saving the man's life. A ram-headed god, standing in front of an offering table, is depicted on the right and facing Wepwawet. It is in this bottom register that the reason for Pataweret's donation of the stela to Wepwawet as a votive offering is clearly explained.⁴¹ Having escaped this terrible danger in the waters close to Asyut, the donor regards himself as having been saved by Wepwawet, to whom he might have prayed in his desperation.⁴²

The scene in the upper register might refer to the official gratitude given to the god during his procession⁴³ and thus display his declared devotion – testified to by the erection of this stela in Asyut's shrine dedicated to Wepwawet in a re-used Middle

⁴⁰ See Brunner 1958, 7.

⁴¹ Brunner 1958, 8.

⁴² Brunner 1958, 8.

⁴³ Brunner 1958, 8.

Kingdom tomb of Djefaihapi III, known as the Salakhana-Trove.⁴⁴ Contrary to the previous case herewith illustrated, the narration of the personal religious experience is solely confined to the visual level, the rescuing aspect of the deity being suggested by its epithet. The extraordinary relevance given to this very personal moment is reflected in the way it is represented: the scene appears dynamic and clearly represents the visual focus of the stela.

Asyut stelae tend to display less respect to standard iconographic patterns and thus more freedom of visual expression, possibly due to their origin from a provincial town during the New Kingdom, where negotiations with iconographic conventions were more possible than in Thebes. As a matter of fact, on this monument the visual narration of a personal life experience that is interpreted as a divine intervention is explicitly set as the reason for personal participation to religious ceremonies.

The third example herewith discussed is provided by Stela Bologna MCABO EG 1917 (**Fig. 4**), of unknown provenance.⁴⁵ Divided into two registers and dating to the 18th Dynasty (1550–1295 BC), the stela shows in the upper register an adoration scene involving the stela's donor, Nekenuamunerhatef and his mother Kai, facing left towards Osiris, enthroned in a naos and sitting in front of a rich offering table. In the lower register, a procession unusually led by a child – iconographically marked in Egypt by the nakedness and the hair lock – in which he turns around towards his mother.⁴⁶ The group is facing a deceased couple, sitting behind an offering table, in the standard way for this scenery. Children in Egypt experienced religion among others through the participation in public religious festivals⁴⁷ and, though not frequently, are depicted on private stelae together with their closest family members.⁴⁸ They are usually depicted mimicking their parents gestures of adoration and occasionally carrying an item (a twig, a duck, or a lotus flower), probably by means of offering.⁴⁹ However, similarly to the examples presented above, the child turning around looking at his mother provides insight into real happenings during similar processions. The donor expressly added this element to the scene that otherwise does not show anything unusual. The child turning towards his mother is a purely narrative strategy. The narration is set at the level of the interaction displayed between the cult participants, rather than in the description of the actual religious event experienced by the donor. It adds dynam-

⁴⁴ The main studies on the private votive stelae from Asyut are by Terence DuQuesne, among which especially DuQuesne 2007 and DuQuesne 2009 are mentioned here. See also Wells 2014.

⁴⁵ Bresciani 1985, 56; no 19; dimensions: 48 x 27 cm.

⁴⁶ See Luiselli 2015, 647 as well as Luiselli forthcoming.

⁴⁷ See fn. 43.

⁴⁸ See, for instance, Stela Turin 50040 (Tosi and Roccati 1972, 277; Luiselli 2015, 648; fig. 4).

⁴⁹ Luiselli forthcoming.



Fig. 4: Stela Bologna MCABo EG 1917 © Museo Civico Archeologico di Bologna, Archivio Fotografico.

ics, reality, and individualisation, whilst not compromising the effectiveness of the ritual displayed and performed.

Conclusions

In the examples herewith presented, non-standard iconographical details have been added to a standard pattern, allowing narration to interact with convention and performance, by breaking the boundaries of generalized representation of rituals,⁵⁰

⁵⁰ Such as described in Braun 2015, 351, who stresses upon the fact that these even when specific kings can be recognised in the representation of rituals, they still remain standardized scenes

in order to focalise on a precise religious experience or event. These details can be understood as Roland Barthes' *effet de réel*.⁵¹ Although in Barthes' terms such details did not add anything to the narrative, the reference to reality is crucial in terms of ancient Egyptian visual language in a primarily religious setting. This reality was the equivalent of narration. Because of the main purpose of these monuments, it could not be granted too much room. Yet, they can be regarded as the desire to tailor the ritual to one's own experience and to induce the god's attention towards one's individual case. The choice of the iconographical pattern and of the text added depended on the wealth of the donor who commissioned the monument. The wealthier the donor, the more elaborate was the monument. Exceptional cases such as those briefly seen before are likely to have had an immense impact on the community – and were certainly believed to have it on the deity addressed. Some longer texts thematise the proclamation of the divine power to all the generations in the community (as seen above), a fact that is visualised on these stelae through the representation of family and community members. In all these cases, the scenes show an individual's engagement with official religious beliefs and his or her own adaptation of them, aiming at enhancing self-presentation highlighting his or her exceptionality that, as a result, marked social identity.

While this reconstruction works for religious images set in a sacred context and intended for a precise purpose, caution is imperative when considering images that also contain religious content, but conveyed by different supports, such as ostraca used for school practice or graffiti. Unlike many studies on images (in the sense of the German "Bildwissenschaft") that do not deal with artefacts from antiquity, the original setting, function, support, and purpose is crucial in order to define what was an image in ancient Egypt. The concept herewith illustrated based on this proposed analysis was also similar for comparable scenes on other artefacts. The multitude and complexity of the Egyptian figurative system, however, requests a comprehensive study of it before drawing any general conclusions.

rather than visual narrations, because they were meant to be perpetual. However, the explicit narrative nature of the examples herewith analysed are to be considered on a different level than the specific king depicted on a private stela. It is to be noted that Braun does not refer to the examples herewith proposed in her article, considering examples of visual narrative in Egyptian illustrations of myths (Braun 2015, 252–253), some scenes from private tombs (Braun 2015, 252), and New Kingdom figured ostraca or papyri (Braun 2015, 253). Nonetheless, she does consider visual narrative elements in single aspects of a scene, even if it is not possible to reconstruct the entire story (Braun 2015, 254).

⁵¹ The Oxford Reference: <http://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.201108-03100407783>: "The small details of person, place, and action that while contributing little or nothing to the narrative, give the story its atmosphere, making it feel real." For this interpretation of the child on stela Bologna MCABo EG 1917 see also Luiselli forthcoming.

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