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The Visual Perception of Fatigue and Sleep in Bas-relief from the Old Kingdom to the End of the New Kingdom

SLEEP is often viewed as one of the most intimate and private activities that we carry out. Therefore, it is not surprising that the motif of a fatigued¹ or sleeping person is not common in Egyptian artwork. Compared to the written sources, the number of visual representations is considerably reduced.²

It is a challenge to identify sleeping or fatigued persons in art and to distinguish between these stages. A person lying in a bed does not necessarily have to be asleep, but the bed as a place can hint at other aspects such as procreation, birth, or death.³

There are several sign codes in modern perception, which can help to recognise whether a person is asleep or tired. In Western culture, yawning, for example, is a typical visual marker of tiredness, but in ancient Egypt, this does not seem to exist.⁴ This paper briefly examines the primary markers that visually indicate sleep or fatigue in bas-relief in ancient Egypt.

I. FATIGUE AND SLEEP IN BAS-RELIEF IN THE OLD AND MIDDLE KINGDOM

In Old and Middle Kingdom tomb scenes, specific compositions within the shepherd scenes evoke an impression of tiredness in the modern viewer.

On the one hand, these scenes are found within the cycle of the shepherds returning home from the marshes with their cattle.⁵ In these scenes, the shepherd, most likely an overseer, is sitting

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1. For a definition, see: WESTCOMBE, HAZEL 2012, pp. 226–234.

2. For a comprehensive study on fatigue and sleep in ancient Egypt, see: GERHARDS 2021 with a detailed chapter on pictorial sources.

3. HENNING 1997, p. 12.

4. See GERHARDS 2021.

5. E.g. the shepherd rests under an arbour: tomb of Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep, Saqqara, 5th Dyn., see MOUSSA, ALTENMÜLLER 1977, fig. 78b. The shepherd rests under an arbour and is served a drink: tomb Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep, Saqqara, 5th Dyn., see MOUSSA, ALTENMÜLLER 1977, fig. 78a. Mastaba of Sekhemankhptah, Saqqara, 5th/6th Dyn., now in Boston, inv. no. 04.1760, see SIMPSON 1976, fig. 4. The shepherd is served a drink in the open air: Giza, mastaba of Iasen (G 2196), 5th/6th Dyn., see SMITH 1949, p. 316, fig. 183.

on a wicker cushion and holding a staff in his hands.⁶ His head rests on his arm or knees⁷—the backrest of the basket seat functions as wind and back protection.⁸ The seat with a backrest can also be understood as a characteristic of an overseer who was entitled to an elaborate seat.⁹ The shepherd may even be seated under an arbour that protects him from the sun.¹⁰ In other sources within this scene, the resting shepherd is given something to drink,¹¹ suggesting that he is a person of higher rank.¹² Drinking is an important measure to strengthen oneself during physical work and fight the arising feeling of tiredness.¹³

On the other hand, marshland scenes in the context of mat-making and harvesting include the image of a shepherd sitting on a (basket) cushion with a staff in his hand and his head resting on his knees or arms.¹⁴

One additional source represents a squatting man under a papyrus clump with his head resting on his knees.¹⁵ Since this motif is found close to the mat-making scene, Yvonne Harpur assumes that it should also be subsumed among the pastoral scenes.¹⁶ Thus, in the Old Kingdom, the concept of fatigue as a motif is found exclusively in the context of shepherds. These scenes show a break from work, which was primarily the preserve of higher-ranking persons.

When the crocodile passage has to be overcome, a man described as the shepherds' leader is sitting on a boat on the back of a wicker chair in the same squatted body position. In contrast to the resting shepherd, however, his face is raised and the scene characterises him among other things as watchful (*nh hr=k* "may your face live").¹⁷

In the Middle Kingdom tomb scenes, the posture is still to be found around the shepherds, whereby the shepherd can also squat on the ground without the characteristic seat and staff.¹⁸ In tomb B1 of Senbi I, it is clearly visible that the shepherd's eyes are closed. That is represented by a slit instead of the usual eye shape, with the eyeball under the closed song highlighted by a slight bulge.¹⁹ In this case, one can assume that the resting shepherd is asleep.

6. GUTH 2018, pp. 49–50.

7. MOUSSA, ALTENMÜLLER 1977, fig. 78b.

8. BORCHARDT 1907, pp. 77–78; GUTH 2018, p. 50, n. 369.

9. GUTH 2018, pp. 49–50.

10. MOUSSA, ALTENMÜLLER 1977, fig. 78b.

11. MOUSSA, ALTENMÜLLER 1977, fig. 78a.

12. GUTH 2018, p. 50, n. 372.

13. MERZEBAN 2007, p. 228. Cf. inscription in Kanais, rock temple of Seti I, text b, where the water of a newly built well lifts a tired one, see KITCHEN 1975, p. 66.9–10.

14. E.g. resting person in the context of mat-making: (eventually) tomb of Ti, Saqqara, now in the Egyptian Museum in Cairo, CG 1562, see SMITH 1949, p. 315, fig. 181; WRZSZINKSI 1923, p. 397. E.g. resting person in the context of harvest: tomb (unknown), 5th Dyn., now in the Egyptian Museum in Cairo, CG 60072, see WRZSZINKSI 1923, p. 400.

15. Saqqara, tomb FS 3080, see HARPUR 1987, pp. 179–180, 277, no. 543; SMITH 1949, p. 315, fig. 181.

16. HARPUR 1987, pp. 179–180.

17. See e.g. DOMINICUS 1994, pp. 132–133; GUTH 2018, pp. 164–168.

18. E.g. tomb A1, Pepiankh, Meir, 12th Dyn., see BLACKMAN 1924, p. 37, pl. 14. Meir, tomb B1, Senbi I, 12th Dyn., see for a facsimile BLACKMAN 1914, pl. 10. See GERHARDS 2021 for a recent photography.

19. Concerning the eye slits, see GERHARDS 2021 with further references.

From a purely visual point, the viewer can hardly distinguish the squatted body posture from the gesture of mourning documented since the Old Kingdom.²⁰

2. FATIGUE AND SLEEP IN BAS-RELIEF IN THE NEW KINGDOM

In the New Kingdom, the crouching posture and dozing were no longer reserved exclusively for the shepherds but could also be adopted by other occupational groups. Since the 18th Dynasty, a new characteristic element in the evidence, which can be interpreted as a continuation of the scenes from the Old and Middle Kingdoms, has been the tree under whose shade a work break is taken.²¹ The tree is probably a sycamore, in which drinks and food for the breaks can be hung.²² The exhausted men take their seats either on the floor, a small portable stool, or a cushion. The context of the scene is quite different. For example, in Userhat's tomb, two men are waiting under a shady tree until it is their turn next to see the barber.²³ Their heads are propped up on their knees and partially hidden under their arms, giving the viewer the impression that they are asleep. According to Erika Meyer-Dietrich, the "sleeping" man's image represents the ideal harvest, rewrites Egypt as a land of plenty, and depicts the tiring work of a rich harvest.²⁴

Since Amenhotep III, the "exhausted charioteer" has been added as a new motif.²⁵ In a bas-relief of the tomb of Nebamun, two charioteers are shown in diverse postures. Nigel Strudwick believes that the chariots were deliberately placed one above the other to create a contrast.²⁶ On the one hand, the animals depicted differ: the upper register shows an "average" horse, whereas the lower register shows a mule.²⁷ This discrepancy is also to be seen in the depiction of the vital man controlling the

20. E.g. BADAWY 1978, fig. 56; see DOMINICUS 1994, pp. 68, 71, 75.

21. The following sources can be seen as development of the previous convention: TT 56, tomb of Userhat, 18th Dyn., Amenhotep II to Thutmose III, see BEINLICH-SEEBER, SHEDID 1987, pl. 5. TT 69, tomb of Menna, 18th Dyn., Amenhotep III, see SCHULZ, SEIDEL 2001, p. 427. Here, a second person plays the flute, as in tomb A1, Pepiankh, Meir, 12th Dyn., see BLACKMAN 1924, p. 37, pl. 14. Tomb of an unknown owner, Thebes, late 18th Dyn., now in Berlin, ÄM 18539, see WRESZINKSI 1923, p. 385. TT 57, Khaemhat, 18th Dyn., Amenhotep III, see WRESZINKSI 1923, p. 192. In TT 81 a man is crouching in an arbour, similar to the scenes from the Old Kingdom, which is why it is assumed that this person is a shepherd, see WRESZINKSI 1923, p. 58. A relief fragment, New York, MMA 68.16 from the 18th Dyn./Amarna period shows probably a sleeping shepherd. The man is crouching on the ground and next to him are remains of the typical arbour, see JOHNSON 2017. The shepherd's eyes are closed in a similar way as in Meir, tomb B1, Senbi I (see *supra*, n. 19). Cf. MEYER-DIETRICH 2018, p. 377, who assumes that the man is a tired doorkeeper.

22. E.g. tomb of an unknown person, Thebes, late 18th Dyn., now in Berlin, ÄM 18539, see WRESZINKSI 1923, p. 385.

23. BEINLICH-SEEBER, SHEDID 1987, pl. 5; WRESZINKSI 1923, p. 44.

24. MEYER-DIETRICH 2018, p. 377.

25. To be more precise: chariot officer, charioteer or an attendant, which are hard to distinguish—hereafter referred to collectively as "charioteer". E.g. tomb of Nebamun (BM EA 37982), 18th Dyn., Amenhotep III, see STRUDWICK 2006, pp. 176–177. Tomb of Kenamun, TT 162, 18th Dyn., Amenhotep III, see DAVIES 1963, pl. 18. Tomb of Horemheb, Saqqara, 18th Dyn., Tutankhamun, Berlin ÄM 20363, see WRESZINKSI 1923, p. 386. Tomb of Khaemhat, TT 57, 18th Dyn., Amenhotep III, see WRESZINKSI 1923, p. 192. Tomb of Paraemheb, TT 302, Ramesside period, see PORTER, MOSS 1970, p. 381 (I), II. Unknown tomb, probably from the Late Period, Florence, Museo Archeologico Nazionale/Museo Egizio, inventory no. 2606, see WRESZINKSI 1923, p. 36.

26. STRUDWICK 2003, p. 56.

27. STRUDWICK 2003, p. 55.

horse in contrast to the fatigued man surrendering to the situation.²⁸ Stephen Harvey assumes that the image of sleep or fatigue could be interpreted as an allusion to a kind of impotence or weakness.²⁹ In contrast, the horses are often depicted with highlighted sexual characteristics³⁰ and thus appear powerful and potent.³¹ In the Memphite tomb of Horemheb in Saqqara e.g., a charioteer is dozing on the back of the vehicle, leaning on his elbow.³² The topic of the “tired charioteer” is generally present in both—bas-relief and textual sources in the New Kingdom. In the satirical letter of Hori from the Ramesside period, a chariot officer, tired from work, is so deeply asleep that he does not notice that all his equipment is stolen during the night.³³

During the Amarna period, two additional visual contexts of dozing and even sleeping men appear regularly in the tomb context and on talatat blocks.

Firstly, door guards are dozing in front of their portals in the palace.³⁴ Emad el-Sayyad assumes that the motif of a tired or blind doorkeeper in the New Kingdom is not to be understood as a cynical or humorous depiction. It could have a symbolical or metaphorical meaning to enable the god Re and the deceased to easily pass through the gates of the underworld.³⁵ Erika Meyer-Dietrich sees in the tired doorkeepers somewhat the symbolic calm in the palace chambers when the royal family is not present.³⁶

A hitherto unique scene can be compared with the doorkeeper scenes from the Amarna period. It is attested in the tomb of Intef (TT 155) from the time of Hatshepsut/Thutmose III and shows a man squatting on the floor next to the door in a wine store, resting his drooping head on the palm of his hand.³⁷ The fragmentary inscription may have read that he was accused of being sleeping and drunk by the workers who joined the scene, to which he replied that he was not asleep.³⁸ His body position is very reminiscent of the sleeping doorkeepers in the palace context. That may be a deliberate analogy between drunkenness and sleep, which is also found in the term *sḏr.t*³⁹ as a sleeping or intoxicating potion.

The second new creation during the Amarna period concerns two kinds of representations of sleeping men who are depicted in a reclining body position in contrast to the previous ones. These motifs are found exclusively on the palace’s talatat blocks, but not on the reliefs of the tombs. According to E. Meyer-Dietrich, they represent night scenes.⁴⁰ The men are either lying on a mat

28. STRUDWICK 2003, p. 56, n. 65.

29. These ideas were brought to the attention of the author in a personal conversation with S. Harvey after the lecture held at the ICE XII. He already presented his thought in a lecture on “The Sleeping Charioteer: Observations on Equine Representations in Egyptian Art” in 2001.

30. SABBAYH 2018, p. 141, fig. V.II.

31. See *supra*, n. 29.

32. MARTIN 1989, p. 38, pl. 28–29; SABBAYH 2018, p. 140.

33. pAnastasi I, pBM EA 10247, 19.7–20.5, see FISCHER-ELFERT 1992, pp. 126–130.

34. They can squat on the ground or a cushion, or lean against the door. See GERHARDS 2021 for references and literature.

35. EL-SAYYAD 2014, p. 127.

36. MEYER-DIETRICH 2018, pp. 374–375.

37. SÄVE-SÖDERBERGH 1957, pp. 17–18, pl. 15. See for a recent image GERHARDS 2021.


38. See *supra*, n. 37.

39. ERMAN, GRAPOW 1955, p. 393.6. See GERHARDS 2021 for that topic.

40. MEYER-DIETRICH 2018, p. 378.

or a bed. Some are further sleeping on a headrest, a pillow, or their hands as a substitute pillow. In all of the images, the men lying asleep are wrapped in a thick, transparent bedspread, allowing the legs to be seen. The legs may be drawn up towards the body, giving the impression of a more lateral sleeping position. There are two documented contexts in which this motif appears: 1. soldiers sleeping in the open air by a blazing fireplace⁴¹, and 2. guards sleeping in the palace⁴².

SUMMARY

Fatigue can be represented in the tomb scenes and on talatat blocks by a squatting body position and the head resting on the knees during a rest. The characteristic of squatting is the folded posture of the arms and the head lowered downwards. That is an apparent discrepancy between the prototypical classifier for the domain [Fatigue] (Gardiner sign A7 ) , which shows a man squatting on the ground but stretching his arms away from his body. Another discrepancy is evident between inscription and depiction: even though an inscription identifies a worker as exhausted from his work, he is shown upright.⁴³ On the other hand, the men's condition crouching on the ground is not mentioned or explained in the inscriptions.⁴⁴

The squatting body position is the typical representation of a nap during the day. Soldiers and guards who are sleeping in a reclining position at the fireplace or the palace represent night scenes. Here, a transparent blanket serves as a characteristic feature. Also, one can assume that a slit in the eye indicates a closed eye while asleep.

Professions associated with fatigue or sleep are therefore shepherds, chariot officers/charioteers/attendants, doorkeepers, soldiers, and palace guards.

41. Boston, MFA 67.921; New York, MMA 1991.240.11; New York, Brooklyn Museum 64.148.3. MEYER-DIETRICH 2018, pp. 310–311 assumes that the soldiers were of Nubian origin. Cf. KITCHEN 1982, p. 18.9 (Medjai sleep peacefully until awakened by sunlight).

42. Berlin, ÄM 20488; see SCHÄFER 1963, p. 130, figs. 89, 215, 253 (It could also be a campfire scene, cf. New York, Brooklyn Museum 64.148.3). Egyptian Museum in Cairo, JE 65950, see PENDLEBURY 1951, p. 67, no. 35/228. For an object possibly located in Cairo, see ROEDER 1969 pl. 208 (PC 270). See in general, ROEDER 1969, p. 302 (chap. VI O 7h).

43. E.g. KANAWATI, ABDER-RAZIQ 2000, p. 49, pl. 31, 61.

44. An exception is the above-mentioned scene in the tomb of Intef TT 155.

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