



Review

THE GUROB SHIP-CART MODEL AND ITS MEDITERRANEAN CONTEXT

Shelley Wachsmann

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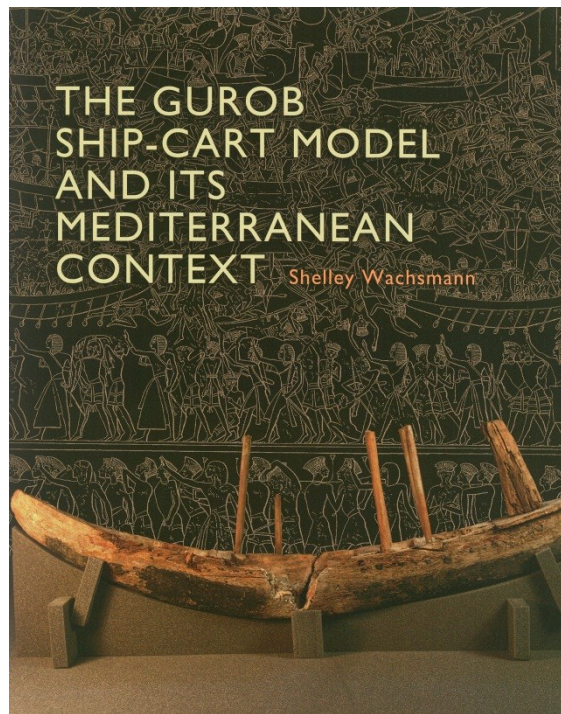
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Reviewed by *JA EI* Staff

In 1920, excavation of a grave (no. 611) at Gurob, an ancient Egyptian settlement site at the entrance to the Fayum, yielded a small wooden boat model with wheels. This was published with the site,¹ featured again decades later in a catalog of finds from the site (in the collection of the Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology in London),² and pointed out here and there in various discussions of Egyptian watercraft. Although its foreign (i.e., non-Egyptian) nature was evident from the beginning—Petrie even called it a “pirate ship”—it was never given a proper analysis or even a full description.

In *The Gurob Ship-Cart Model and Its Mediterranean Context*, Shelley Wachsmann seeks to rectify this nearly century-old oversight.

The book begins with a detailed description of this humble model, down to the loose fragments. Previous descriptions, including Petrie’s and remarks from the Petrie Museum’s unpublished records, are included. The model itself, deliberately broken in half, is of a ship set on a *pavois* (a kind of flat base used for processional boat models in pharaonic Egypt), and set upon two pairs of solid wheels. The hull has an appendage at its bow, a curiously shaped stempost, evidence of a forecastle, rowers’ thwarts, stanchions, and two rudders, plus fragments of rudder



stanchions, of oars, and of “awnings,” and “loose long pegs.” (The awnings are suggested to be elements of the missing chassis of the cart.)

Unfortunately, the printed photographs of this polychrome model are in black and white, but there is an online resource (<http://www.vizin.org/Gurob/Gurob.html>), which one can only hope will remain permanent. Here the reader will find, among other things, three-dimensional digital replicas of the model (original and reconstructed), which can be manipulated for viewing from any angle. (This gave the present reviewer reason to wish for a larger screen than that provided by a 13-inch laptop.) Readers should not neglect this website. It is regretted, but perhaps understandable, that a version of this

resource could not be provided with the book on a DVD.

Wachsmann emphasizes in Chapter 1 (and indeed throughout the book) that “*the model is itself a representation, not a ship*” (italics in the original). That this Egyptian model of a boat is not a model of an Egyptian boat becomes abundantly clear even through its description. As Wachsmann begins his discussion of the model’s colors he says outright, “the Gurob ship model replicates a Helladic galley type” (p. 26), and launches into the sort of detailed, discursive presentation of useful comparative

material that will appear throughout the rest of the book: the naval battle reliefs at Medinet Habu, Cypriot models, Homeric descriptions, the Miniature Frieze on Thera, and more.

Chapter 2 assembles the iconographic evidence for Wachsmann's conclusion. It opens with the contention that not only does the model represent "clearly a Helladic-style gallery of the Late Bronze-Age/Early Iron Ages," but it is also "the most detailed known representation" (emphasis in original; page 31). Those familiar with Wachsmann's *Seagoing Ships and Seamanship in the Bronze Age Levant* know the author's predilection for (and skill at) assembling extensive references of both period and ethnographic parallels. It is no different in the current volume. While both books cover overlapping ground—for example, discussion of the Sea People's ships and *vogelbarken* (boats with bird-headed stem and/or stern posts) will be familiar to readers of the earlier book—their aims are different, and the present book, while focusing on one small model rather than an enormous region-wide corpus of iconography, offers additional evidence and argument.

Wachsmann's primary aim—solving the puzzle of the Gurob ship-cart, its origin, why it was made, what it was doing in a grave in Egypt—requires delving into eclectic topics at some length, as one might expect from a book this size about an object so small. Among them is a discussion of graffiti at the Dakhla Oasis in Egypt representing (according to the interpretation) Helladic ships. Analysis of an oblique line that rises at an angle from one graffito boat's hull takes the reader through a tour of unstepped masts (which, by Wachsmann's analysis, the line is not) and symbols carried in religious processions: specifically the "Nefertem symbol" of Egypt and giant wooden phalli of Greece. The present reviewer has some difficulty quite accepting the conclusion that the line on the graffito must represent something like that, and there are additional lines associated with its lower portion that (unlike the abstract human figures that appear to be walking along its upper portion) Wachsmann does not specifically discuss (unless he considers them, too, to be persons). Furthermore, the large wooden symbols—Egyptian Nefertem and Greek phalli—do not appear (in the iconography) aboard boats. (The Nefertem symbol does appear in processions with portable barques, but these are objects carried separately. There is also a Dionysian connection with watercraft, but this iconography does not, to the reviewer's knowledge, involve giant phalli.) Nonetheless, he may be right. The stick figures aboard the stick boat do carry what seem to be stick boat models, which reasonably indicate a religious context of some kind for the graffito. Whatever weaknesses might be present, dismantling Wachsmann's argument and proposing an alternative (which is beyond the scope of this review) would surely be a work unto itself, because Wachsmann's arguments are very well made. His

ultimate conclusion regarding this graffito, which takes into account a number of factors, points to the Tjemhu, a Libyan group, as the people who carved it. Helladic ship representations appear elsewhere in the region: Syria, Israel, Cyprus, and, of course, the Aegean. These representations, even when fragmentary, are less controversial than the Dakhla Oasis graffito.

Chapter 3 treats the "cart" aspect of the ship-cart model by drawing from Egyptian boat-shrines (through Roman times and featuring a good discussion of the Muslim *moulid* of Abu el Haggag at Luxor, perhaps a holdover from the pharaonic Festival of Opet), later Greek parallels, such as Dionysian ship-carts, the Athenian Panathanaic ship, and a few others. Cypriote and Mesopotamian examples (as well as the overland transport of secular working vessels) are also treated. And, of course, Wachsmann does not neglect the most famous of Egyptian boat-carts, the wheeled boat models from the tomb of Queen Ahhotep. One of these is gold; the other, of silver, Wachsmann demonstrates to be a model of a Minoan vessel, although its purpose remains something of a mystery.

Chapter 4 returns directly to the question of "Foreigners at Gurob": how and why did a model of a foreign watercraft come to be included in a burial in Egypt? Wachsmann begins this chapter with the (logical) presumption that "the model reflects aspects of that person's religious beliefs," which were "foreign to Egypt." This last is perhaps the weakest point of his argument: no artifacts other than the model were recorded from grave 611, so the conclusion rests upon this little broken model. But foreign burial customs are amply attested at the site. Wachsmann does concede that, regarding the ethnic identity of the grave-owner, "the best answer... can be little more than an educated guess" (italics in original, page 163).

As Wachsmann observes, foreigners resident in Egypt tended to acculturate, presenting challenges for the interpretation of archaeological evidence. Iconography makes up for some of this lack, with the Egyptian predilection for portraying visiting (or visited) foreigners of the Aegean, the Levant, Nubia, Punt, and other lands. Egyptian texts preserve evidence of foreigners, for example, tagging some as marauders of international ill-repute. Private foreign names appear, at least before acculturation, and he discusses the problems of identifying an individual's ethnicity by their name.

Wachsmann assembles and analyzes the evidence for foreigners resident in Egypt during the New Kingdom, the period during which Gurob was occupied: Syro-Canaanites, Libyans (Tjemhu), Mycenaean and Cypriotes, Teresh, Sherden, and Weshesh (these last three being groups associated with the Sea Peoples). The evidence is largely, but not entirely, textual. Artifactual evidence from Gurob itself includes foreign balance-pan weights, a spindle, Z-spun threads, and decidedly un-

Egyptian burial customs (including “burnt groups,” caches of personal objects, but no human remains, that had been put into a hole in a house floor, burned, and covered by new flooring). Each is discussed not only in its Egyptian context but with non-Egyptian parallels.

The last proper chapter, the fifth, is in effect a lengthy (six-page) summary of the arguments directly related to the ship-cart model; the present reviewer leaves Wachsmann’s ultimate conclusion, which draws upon many lines of argument, for the reader to discover.

What then follow are seven appendices, five treating the object itself (e.g., line drawings, radiocarbon dating, pigment analysis, etc.). Another looks more extensively at “Ship Colors in the Homeric Poems.” For the reader of the present journal, the most interesting is likely to be Appendix 4, “Sherden and Tjuk-People in the Wilbour Papyrus,” which presents Alan H. Gardiner’s translation of the relevant passages.

Throughout the book Wachsmann takes pains to point out—to quote from page 204—that

it is important to realize the limitations under which we labor. Generally, we have at our disposal three types of evidence: archaeology,

iconography, and texts. Each of these forms of information comes with its own inherent limitations.

A study such as Wachsmann has performed of an object such as this demonstrates that it is not the conclusion that matters as much as the process by which that conclusion is achieved. Great analysis can transcend its object. One need not have any interest at all in the ship-cart itself, or indeed in watercraft, to need *The Gurob Ship-Cart Model and Its Mediterranean Context*. An interest in virtually any aspect of the Late Bronze Age Eastern Mediterranean or Egypt will do.

Notes

- ¹ G. Brunton and R. Englebach, *Gurob* (London: British School of Archaeology in Egypt and Bernard Quaritch), pl. 52.
- ² A. P. Thomas, *Gurob: A New Kingdom Town* (Warminster: Aris and Phillips, 1981), vol. 1: 21, 86: 747; vol. 2 pl. 56:747.