



ARE AEGEANS DEPICTED ON RELIEF BLOCK 1985.328.13 IN THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART IN NEW YORK?

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ABSTRACT

This short discussion aims to show that, contrary to some earlier suggestions, there are no good arguments that Cretans or Aegeans are depicted on relief block 1985.328.13 in The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, also known as relief block nr. 254 from the Norbert Schimmel Collection. The chronologically closest representation of a bound prisoner from Keftiu, from the tomb of Kenamun (Amenhotep II), depicts him with a beard. Representations of Aegean emissaries earlier than the bound prisoner from Keftiu depicted in Kenamun's tomb show them with a spiral fringe on the forehead. Both the fringe and the beard are absent from the presumed Aegean figures on MMA 1985.328.13. The hairstyle of the figures in question is well known in Amarna period iconography and is often found worn by bowing Egyptian male attendants, but also others.

INTRODUCTION

The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York (MMA) houses a limestone *talatat* block (FIG. 1) with accession number 1985.328.13.¹ This block was a gift from Norbert Schimmel in 1985 and is also known as block nr. 254 from the Norbert Schimmel collection. It is probably from Hermopolis (Ashmunein) and originally from Amarna. The block is 24.1 x 53.5 cm and has vague traces of dark red paint. It depicts four figures of which one can recognize only heads, arms, and hands holding sticks. The two figures on the right can be safely identified as Nubians, based on the facial features and the fact that the one on the left wears a typical short Nubian hairstyle.² Traces of color are red and are found both on their skins and on their hair, which is not particularly helpful in their interpretation. It is much easier when the skin color is different from figure to figure. According to ancient Egyptian patterns of representation, brown-

and black-colored figures are Nubians, yellowish-colored figures are Syro-Palestinians, and reddish-colored figures are Egyptians, Puntites, and Aegeans.

The first two (left) figures on the relief block are more problematic. There is no scholarly agreement on their interpretation. Whereas most scholars refer to them as Asiatics,³ there are also those who consider them to be Libyans,⁴ Cretans, or Aegeans. Their identification is the main goal of this paper.

For the interpretation of these figures it is essential to first interpret the entire scene and its possible context. Cyril Aldred proposed that the figures are carrying great flabella that shaded the king and the queen and that the block belonged to a scene in which these men were depicted behind the couple, but in reality to the right of the couple.⁵ Arielle P. Kozloff suggested that the relief depicts foreign fan-bearers belonging to a scene in which they are placed



FIGURE 1: Relief block 1985.328.13 in The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (Metropolitan Museum of Art, n.d.; CC0 1.0 Universal (CC0 1.0)).

behind the chariot, for which he offers parallels from the painted box of Tutankhamun.⁶ If one looks closer at the painted box of Tutankhamun, each of the fan-bearers is holding his pole in front of himself so that the pole is never too far from his face.⁷ A survey of the scenes in which fan bearers are depicted behind the king in battle scenes shows that there are one to four fan-bearers, but usually two, depicted behind the king.⁸ In those cases when several fan-bearers are depicted, sometimes one can find them more distanced from each other, and in these cases the pole of the fan is also farther away from their faces,⁹ as on MMA 1985.328.13. If one looks more closely at the figures and poles and assigns individual poles to individual figures from left to right, then one can notice that the distance between each pole and the figure is more or less the same.

Also, one has to bear in mind the bright band depicted beneath, but actually on the side of, the heads of the figures and their arms. This is missing in the depictions of fan bearers behind the chariots,

but it is present in depictions of carriers of carrying chairs.¹⁰ However, the wooden pole carried by the porters is usually not depicted covering their necks. We find it on the other side so that the shoulder and the neck side opposite to the shoulder on which the pole is carried can be seen. Cyril Aldred suggested that the closest parallels can be found in the procession of Min.¹¹ If this means that these figures were also part of the transport of the statue of Min is another matter. I consider this to be unlikely considering the close association of Amun and Min in the 18th Dynasty and the focus on Aten in Amarna ideology. It is more probable that the figures on MMA 1985.328.13 are in fact not porters of the carrying chair but fan- or flabella-carriers depicted in the same scene to the right but actually behind the porters and the carrying chair. That the wooden pole covers their necks would indicate that they are placed between two wooden poles and their porters. Fan- or flabella-carriers depicted next to the porters carrying the chair are usually depicted away from

the porters.¹² However, the Brooklyn Oracle Papyrus (47.218.3) of the 26th Dynasty clearly shows that this is not always so, as the porters and fan-carriers are depicted next to each other and between the wooden poles of the carrying chair of the shrine of Amun-Re.¹³ This is why I am inclined to interpret MMA 1985.328.13 as belonging to a scene in which a carrying chair is depicted with porters and fan bearers. We can only presume that sitting in the chair was a royal figure or the royal couple.

AEGEANS OR NOT?

Peter W. Haider suggested that the first two figures on the left on MMA 1985.328.13 are Cretans or Aegeans.¹⁴ He based this on the comparison of their depicted physiognomy with that of the one of the figures on the Chieftain Cup from Hagia Triada and that of a boxer depicted on a steatite vessel from the Knossos palace. According to Haider, the fact that they have their hair depicted behind and not covering their ears indicates that they could be only either Aegeans or from west Asia Minor. He also interprets the two figures on the right as a Nubian and a “negro” but does not explain why he makes such a difference and does distance himself from a very problematic terminology.¹⁵ Jorrit M. Kelder, referring to the work of Haider, interprets the figures as two Minoan fan-bearers.¹⁶

The chronologically closest identified depiction of a bound prisoner from Keftiu comes from the tomb of Kenamun (FIG. 2), dated to the reign of Amenhotep II.¹⁷ The figure in question has reddish skin color as do earlier representations of Aegeans in Egyptian art.¹⁸ What differs is the presence of a pointy beard. The representations of figures supposedly wearing boar-tusk helmets on a papyrus from Amarna are not particularly helpful, as their hair is not visible and they wear white kilts.¹⁹ Their depiction and supposed presence in Egypt, as part of the Egyptian military forces, together with numerous fragmentary and complete Mycenaean pottery vessels, some of which were definitely used for olive oil, indicates close connection between the Egyptian and Mycenaean courts.²⁰ The supposed depiction of Aegeans in the Memphite tomb of Horemheb is highly questionable. Geoffrey Thorndike Martin argued that they are depicted on the left in the second register of the Window of Appearance scene. He recognized an Aegean upright curl on the head, other curls on the head



FIGURE 2: Bound prisoners from Keftiu (left) and Menenus (right), tomb of Kenamun TT 93 (Davies 1930, pl. XI, A).

represented by dots, the long curl or plait falling down in front of the ear, and a pendant on the back of one figure.²¹ However, none of these elements is recognizable, and none of the figures looks remotely like the Aegeans depicted in scenes showing processions of foreigners from the reigns of Hatshepsut, Thutmose III, and Amenhotep II.

One should also bear in mind the slightly earlier Aegean itinerary attested at Kom el-Hetan during the reign of Amenhotep III²² and finds of faience plaques with the name of Amenhotep III in Mycenae itself.²³ Textual references to Aegeans from the reign of Akhenaten are really scarce and not particularly historical. Namely, the text accompanying the scene of the procession of foreigners from the tomb of high official Huya of the Amarna period states that among lands that delivered *jn.w* to Akhenaten's court were “islands in the middle of Great Green” (*jn.w hrj-jb n w3d wr*). The islands in the middle of “Great Green” are listed after Syria, Kush, west and east, and all foreign countries together.²⁴ This indicates that the aim was to express that the entire known world from north to south and from west to east delivers *jn.w*, even the lands as far as the islands

in the middle of “Great Green.” There is a debate on the meaning of *w³d wr* “Great Green” and its location and thus consequently on the location of the islands in the middle of *w³d wr* “Great Green.” One group of authors interpret it as a reference to eastern Mediterranean or Aegean world,²⁵ Minoan colonial empire,²⁶ the Cyclades,²⁷ a part of the Keftiu territory or neighboring region,²⁸ or a network of smaller Aegean communities not bound to a single territory.²⁹ The other group interprets it as a general term for all larger water surfaces (Mediterranean, Red Sea, and the Delta). They insist that the islands are in the Delta.³⁰ Clearly, the meaning has to be understood in relation to the context. When the Aegean emissaries depicted in the 18th Dynasty Theban tombs are referred to as coming from islands in the middle of “Great Green,” they cannot be interpreted as coming from the Red Sea and the Delta.³¹ Based on their dress and the objects they bring, they have to be interpreted as coming from the Aegean or more precisely from Crete.³² When later in the Amarna period we find islands in the middle of “Great Green” attested again in the context of a scene showing a procession of foreigners, now without the Aegean emissaries depicted, the context of the attestation allows us to interpret this as a reference to the Aegean.

DISCUSSION

What we have to bear in mind in comparisons such as the one made by Haider is that we are comparing two different iconographic traditions, Egyptian of the Amarna period and Aegean of the Late Helladic or Late Minoan period. Although there are certain iconographic parallels in manners and patterns of representations, both of these iconographies are products of different social needs and ideological backgrounds. One thing is clear: however realistic both might seem, they are not photographs, and they are governed by the rules of decorum.³³ One therefore has to be careful in arguing for physiognomic similarities between figures in these different iconographic traditions. That slightly earlier and slightly later representations of Aegeans actually wear beards can be explained as a consequence of visual hybridism fusing Aegean and Syrian elements in scenes depicting processions of foreigners. Both regions are to the north of Egypt and were perceived as culturally close or at least as part of the north-south dichotomy in Egyptian cultural geography.³⁴ Furthermore, maybe by

comparing the two figures on the left on MMA 1985.328.13 with earlier Egyptian representation of Aegeans, we are making a mistake also because these earlier Aegeans are emissaries. Presumably such men were high-ranking and of definitely higher rank than fan-bearers or other servants of the king.

It seems that the most methodologically correct way for interpreting these figures is searching for parallels in the Amarna iconography. We do not have many elements for comparison. Namely, we ought to look for figures of red or reddish skin color, longer wavy hair with vertical hair stripes, and hair depicted behind the ear and not covering the ear. Longer hair with vertical hair stripes is a well-known hairstyle of this period. That such hair can be sometimes depicted behind the ear is clear on relief block MMA 1985.328.10, also from the collection Norbert Schimmel.³⁵ The block depicts the attendants of the royal family. A group of six women divided in two groups of three are preceded by two male sunshade-bearers. Two figures are depicted on the very left, one above the other. Of the upper figure only a hand is preserved. The lower figure is bent and is depicted with typical Amarna period facial features and long hair behind the ear. One more block from the collection of Norbert Schimmel depicts a figure with the same hairstyle, namely longer hair depicted behind the ear. The only difference here is that the individual strands of hair are not depicted. This is the middle figure of the three figures of male attendants. All of them are in the same bowing posture.³⁶ Another attendant depiction of the same type is known from the collection of Ernest Erickson.³⁷ In all of these cases the figures in question are Egyptians. Very similar haircut is worn both by Syrian women and Egyptian men on the reliefs from the Memphite tomb of Horemheb.³⁸ The main difference is, next to the fact that these are women, also the fact that their hair is covering their ears. Sometimes these women have fringes.³⁹

The closest parallel for the figures on the MMA 1985.328.13 is found on a relief block Brooklyn 47.120.1 (FIG. 3), from Memphis.⁴⁰ On this relief block we see a figure of an aged man before or under a kiosk, making a gesture of greeting or introduction. His hairstyle is identical to the hairstyle of the second figure from the left MMA 1985.328.13. This is especially indicated by the strings of hair depicted protruding in front of the ear. There is therefore no reason to assume that similar figures depicted on the



FIGURE 3: Relief block 47.120.1 from the Brooklyn Museum, New York (Brooklyn Museum, n.d.; Creative Commons-BY 2.0).

MMA 1985.328.13 are foreigners, and even less to argue that they are Libyans or Aegeans.

Amarna royal ideology, together with religion centered on Aten, seems to be “ecumenical.” Already during the reign of Amenhotep III, his great royal wife Tiye is depicted trampling over female enemies in form of a sphinx or smiting female enemies herself.⁴¹ The queen is indeed a female counterpart to the king. The same is found under the reign of Akhenaten, when Nefertiti is depicted trampling over female enemies or smiting them.⁴² These scenes in which queens are depicted smiting or trampling female enemies are surely related to the title *hm.wt nb.wt* “mistress of all women.”⁴³ The Great Hymn to Aten, found in the tomb of the courtier (later king) Ay, is particularly important, as it provides us with Egyptian view on creation of the world within Atenist theology and the division of mankind. The hymn states that Aten created the world and all the foreign lands, from Syria to Nubia and the land of Egypt and that their tongues are separated in speech, also that their “natures” and their skins are distinguished.⁴⁴ The whole known world is included

in the Aten’s creation and is therefore to be ruled by the king of Egypt. If one looks closer at the New Kingdom Egyptian iconography, especially of the Amarna period, the domination over the world is often expressed using the north-south axis. The king is depicted defeating Asiatics as representatives of the north and Nubians as representatives of the south; he is receiving tribute and gifts from northern and southern countries. This north-south axis is also found in the scenes of processions of foreigners of the Amarna period, where the north is represented by the Asiatics and the south by the Nubians. Although, as we have seen, islands in the middle of “Great Green” are mentioned in the accompanying text, the Aegeans are not depicted in the Amarna period procession scenes. The north is represented by the Asiatics. It is therefore highly unlikely that northerners and Nubians would find themselves grouped together. If we look closer at representations of foreigners’ procession scenes of the Amarna period⁴⁵ and the representations of Windows of Appearance,⁴⁶ we notice that north and south are usually divided.⁴⁷

CONCLUSION

In the absence of parallel elements in depictions of Aegeans in Egyptian iconography before the Amarna period, and given the presence of parallel elements in depictions of Egyptian attendants and officials in the Amarna iconography, it is unlikely that the first two figures in relief block MMA 1985.328.13 are Aegean fan-bearers. Furthermore, both Egyptian kings and rulers of Ugarit preferred very specific foreigners as their fan-bearers. Amarna letter EA 49 expresses the wish of Niqmaddu, king of Ugarit, for two youths, palace personnel of the land of Kush.⁴⁸ Papyrus Anastasi III-A (Papyrus British Museum EA 10246/6) informs us about the Egyptian king's wish to have beautiful Nubians from Kush who are suitable for fan-bearers, dressed in white leather sandals and wearing *seferet* dresses and *keremet* bracelets.⁴⁹ We can only assume that the youths wanted by the king of Ugarit are also fan-bearers, but it is clear that Nubians were wanted as palace personnel at different Late Bronze Age courts.

Parallels for the two figures depicted on left on the Amarna period relief block MMA 1985.328.13 are found on other contemporary Amarna period relief blocks. The closest parallels for their hairstyle and the depiction of hair behind the ear are found in depictions of Egyptian attendants and officials. Considering the often-applied north-south axis in New Kingdom iconography, and that northerners and southerners are usually depicted separated, it is unlikely that Aegeans and Nubians would be grouped together. The depictions of Aegeans from the Amarna period are scarce, namely only in the case of warriors wearing boar-tusk helmets on the Amarna papyrus. This means that we can compare the figures on relief block MMA 1985.328.13 only with either pre- or post-Amarna depictions of Aegeans. Whereas those before the Amarna period are abundant, those after the Amarna period are scarce. The supposedly enigmatic first two figures from the left on relief block 1985.328.13 from The Metropolitan Museum of Art are, based on the parallels in Amarna iconography, Egyptians and not Aegeans.

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NOTES

- ¹ Cooney 1965, Fig. 21, 39–40.
- ² Aldred 1957, 141–147.
- ³ Cooney 1965, 39; Aldred 1973, 202.
- ⁴ Roeder 1969, 314; Aldred 1973, 202.
- ⁵ Aldred 1973, 202.
- ⁶ Kozloff 1977, 101–103.
- ⁷ Davies 1962, pls. I, II.
- ⁸ Heinz 2001.
- ⁹ Aftermath of the 1st Libyan war of Ramesses III depicted on the south wall of the second court of the temple in Medinet Habu, Heinz 2001, 304.
- ¹⁰ Carrying chairs are attested since the 4th Dynasty. They were high-class objects owned by a small number of elites. The number of depicted porters does not necessarily reflect the reality of the act of carrying but the status of the carrying-chair owner expressed through the number of porters he had at his disposal (Vasiljević 2015, 509–535).
- ¹¹ Moens 1985, 66.
- ¹² On the south end of the west wall of the hall in the temple of Horemheb in Gebel es-Silsile the king is depicted in a carrying chair. The frontal porters are also carrying a fan or flagellum, but the back porters not. A different person is assigned to this duty (Thiem 2000, pl. 57).
- ¹³ Parker 1962, pl. I.
- ¹⁴ Haider 1996, 146.
- ¹⁵ In fact, such differentiation is embedded in the long history of colonialism in Egyptology and inherited scientific racism that initially made racial distinctions between the population of Lower and Upper Nubia, and a distinction

- between Nubians considered to be Hamites (belonging to “great white race”) and population of Upper Nubia considered to be “negroes” (Matić 2018, 19–44).
- ¹⁶ Kelder 2010, 128.
- ¹⁷ Davies 1930, pl. XI, A.
- ¹⁸ Wachsmann 1987; Matić 2014, 277–294.
- ¹⁹ Schofield and Parkinson 1994, 162, fig. 2.
- ²⁰ Schiller 2018.
- ²¹ Martin 1989, 27, pl. 15.
- ²² Cline and Stannish. 2011, 6–16.
- ²³ Phillips 2007, 479–493.
- ²⁴ Davies 1905, 9, pl. 13.
- ²⁵ Strange 1979, 606.
- ²⁶ Strøm 1984, 193.
- ²⁷ Sakelleraki and Sakellarakis 1984, 202.
- ²⁸ Wachsmann 1987, 98–99.
- ²⁹ Sherratt and Sherratt 1998, 339.
- ³⁰ Nibbi 1975, 9–49; Vandersleyen 1988, 75–79; Vandersleyen 1999; Vandersleyen 2002, 109–112; Vandersleyen 2003, 209–221; Duhoux 2003, 211–228; Vandersleyen 2008; MacGillivray 2009, 165.
- ³¹ It was suggested that these emissaries are coming from Aegean settlements on the Delta turtlebacks and that one of these is in Tell el-Dab’a (ancient Avaris) because of the presence of Minoan frescoes in Egyptian palaces at the site (MacGillivray 2009, 165). However, nothing else indicates an Aegean presence at the site to allow such an interpretation. The frescoes were painted for a member of highest Egyptian elite, possibly even the king himself (Matić 2015, 145–156).
- ³² Wachsmann 1987.
- ³³ Decorum is “a set of rules and practices defining what may be represented pictorially with captions, displayed, and possibly written down, in which context and in what form” (Baines 1990, 20). It is indeed an interesting question if something of this nature can be observed in Aegean iconography.
- ³⁴ Matić 2012, 235–253; Matić 2014, 277–294.
- ³⁵ Cooney 1965, figs. 19, 37
- ³⁶ Cooney 1965, figs. 55, 92–93.
- ³⁷ Cooney 1965, figs. 55a, 94.
- ³⁸ Martin 1989, pls. 104, 105, 115, 117.
- ³⁹ Martin 1989, pl. 105.
- ⁴⁰ Riefstahl 1951, pls. I–II.
- ⁴¹ Bayer 2014, 400.
- ⁴² Matić 2017, 103–121.
- ⁴³ Roth 2002, 13.
- ⁴⁴ Lichtheim 1976, 98.
- ⁴⁵ In the tomb of Meryra II, the southerners are depicted on the right and the northerners on the left (Davies 1904, pl. XXXVII).
- ⁴⁶ For the window of appearance in Amarna period, see Vomberg 2004. For the one from the Memphite tomb of Horemheb see, Martin 1989, pl. 19. Two block fragments (99M2, 99AB) found in the village of Menawat, between Saqqara and Giza, 10 km north of Mit Rahina, show Tutankhamun smiting a Nubian and an Asiatic. A third fragment, 39MP, completes the left portion of the scene on 99M2. On this last fragment the king is depicted seated and shooting an arrow towards the right. The arrow is depicted piercing an ox-hide ingot on the left of the block 99M2. The queen is depicted on the king’s right looking at him (Hawass 2015, 364, figs. 1–4); One year later, W. Raymond Johnson and Zahi Hawass published a study dealing with the original context of these blocks. They suggest a raised-relief Window of Appearance scene recognizable by surviving details such as the right side of a cushion on top of a small cornice-topped windowsill, the inscribed jamb flanking the right side of the window, and part of a large pylon decorated with the king in smiting of enemies scene. After comparing these blocks with the examples of Window of Appearance scenes from the Memphite tomb of Horemheb, they concluded that the Window of Appearance scene from the first columned hall of the tomb of Horemheb completes the scene formed by three fragments from Menawat. To these they join a relief fragment from the Oriental Institute Museum Chicago 10591

(Johnson and Hawass 2016, 328–333).

⁴⁷ Of course, there are exceptions to this, such as the case of the Window of Appearance depicted in the tomb of Parennefer (Davies 1908, pl. IV).

⁴⁸ EA 49: 18-21 (Schniedewind and Cochavi-Rainey 2015, 380–381).

⁴⁹ Papyrus Anastasi III-A (Papyrus British Museum EA 10246/6), lines 6–7 (Gardiner 1937, 33. 7–10).