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Two cases of aspect-perception from Egypt [1]

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The phenomenon of aspect-perception, i.e. the (sudden) perception of figurative shapes in natural or human-made configurations has long been discussed in the field of visual studies. Several examples of pebbles, rocks, etc. from Ancient Egypt that were partly re-worked to highlight certain figurative features, thus testifying to such experiences, are known. This paper presents two more cases of aspect-perception from Egypt that have so far not been recognised and discussed as such.

Aspect-perception – seeing *in* and seeing *as*

Most readers will have experienced the phenomenon that while looking around in nature, we sometimes recognise familiar figurative shapes, such as animals or human beings. We suddenly see a rabbit *in* the clouds or a face *in* the bark of a tree or otherwise said, we see (certain patterns in) the clouds or the tree bark *as* a rabbit / a face. The perception of images, however rudimentary, is based on similar mechanisms: a black line on a white sheet of paper can simply be seen as a black line on a white background. However, someone might also see it as the horizon or even – influenced by personal experiences and memories – as something much more concrete such as a fence standing out of a landscape covered in snow near a place well-known to the observer.[2]

This kind of experience, i.e. the (sudden) appearance / perception of new and unusual possibilities to see something is what Ludwig Wittgenstein refers to when he talks about "seeing-*as*" and the noticing of an aspect or the "change of aspect" (*Aspektwechsel*).[3] According to Wittgenstein, it would make no sense to say that we see a fork *as* a fork – because it simply *is* a fork,[4] just as we "cannot try to see a conventional picture of a lion *as* a lion, any more than an F as that letter"[5] or a chest *as* a chest. If, however, a child looks at a chest and sees it as – and subsequently uses it as – a house for a doll, then the child has noticed a new aspect: "He quite forgets that it is a chest; for him it actually is a house."[6] There has been a change of aspect in the perception of the same object. Finally, Wittgenstein distinguishes between the "continuous seeing" (*stetiges Sehen*) of an aspect – such as in the case of recognising things in

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[2] Davis 2017, 1.

[3] Wittgenstein 1958, 193–214.

[4] Wittgenstein 1958, 195.

[5] Wittgenstein 1958, 206 (italics in the original).

[6] Wittgenstein 1958, 206.

pictures or seeing the chest as a doll's house – and the "lighting up" (*Aufleuchten*) of an aspect.[7] The latter applies to the seeing of picture puzzles such as the notoriously famous duck-rabbit, a picture that has been created with the intention of causing this oscillating perception, and which is actually not a good example for Wittgenstein's concept of aspect-seeing in general. [8]

In a later addition (*Essay 5*) to his *Art and Its Objects*, in which he deals primarily with the visual perception of "pictorial representations", Richard Wollheim introduced the notion of "seeing-*in*" in place of "seeing-*as*".[9] He supposes that "seeing-as" more or less equals "straightforward perception", i.e. "perceiving things present to the senses".[10] In contrast, "seeing-in" better befitted the fact, that when looking at a pictorial representation we actually perceive two things, namely the object of the representation (what is seen) and the medium, i.e. the material representation (the painting, the statue, etc.).[11] According to Wollheim, seeing-in "derives from a special perceptual capacity, which […] allows us to have perceptual experiences of things that are not present to the senses: that is to say, both of things that are absent and also of things that are non-existent". Otherwise said, "visions of things not present now come about through looking at things present".[12] "Seeing-in" thus designates the "cultivated experience" of seeing things in pictures – or also in natural forms.[13] The latter might even be how the production of pictures took its beginning: someone sees something *in* an object (a piece of wood, the wall of a cave, etc.) and "modifies or adjusts" it in a way that other spectators will have the same visual experience.[14]

In his account of pictoriality Whitney Davis introduces the term "seeing-as-*as*" for Wittgenstein's "seeing-as" and Wollheim's "seeing-in".[15] For Davis, "seeing-as" equals usual everyday vision, "for *everything* must be seen as something in particular, even if the 'something' is not a recognizable object or state of affairs".[16] In contrast, "seeing-as-as" is understood to be a process of "reflexive imaging" in cases in which "objects that are already

[7] In his translation of the *Philosophical Investigations* (Wittgenstein 1958), Anscombe renders "'Aufleuchten' eines Aspekts" as "'dawning' of an aspect". I follow Hagberg 2016, 133, who translates "Aufleuchten" as "lighting up", thus avoiding a possible misconception: the "dawning" of an aspect could also be understood in the sense of an aspect appearing – and then being continuously present, which would be the opposite case, i.e. the "continuous seeing" of an aspect.

[8] Wittgenstein 1958, 194; Glock 2016, 89; Heinrich 2016, 170; Davis 2017, 60f.

[9] Wollheim 2015, 137–151. For a critical evaluation of Wollheim's adaptation of Wittgenstein's ideas and further reflexions on the approaches developed by both, see the contributions in Kemp – Mras 2016.

[10] Wollheim 2015, 145.

[11] Wollheim 2015, 142f.

[12] Wollheim 2015, 145. For this fundamental quality of images, namely that they make it possible to see something (in them) that is not actually present, see also Boehm 2007, 34–53; Belting 2011, 84–124; Pichler – Ubl 2014, 20–25.

[13] Wollheim 2015, 146–150.

[14] Wollheim 2015, 146; see also Wollheim 1987, 19–22. 48. 101 and *passim*; Hagberg 2016, 136f.; Heinrich 2016, 178f.

[15] Davis 2017, 51–68.

[16] Davis 2017, 60 (italics in the original).

visible" are put "in a new light by actively assigning new visual aspects to them".[17] Because seeing-as-as in this sense is based on the perception of aspects, Davis also talks of "aspect-perception" or "aspective perception",[18] two terms which he usually reserves for the perception of (formal, stylistic or pictorial) "aspects" in artefacts of every kind in a much wider sense.[19] "Seeing-as-as" and "seeing-in" are sometimes used interchangeably. Nevertheless, Davis says that "seeing-in" is connected more closely to acts of depiction and pictorialisation. If I have seen something as-as, this perception might undergo an intentional process of pictorialisation, which can remain purely mental: I try to see the cloud as the same thing again or to explain to someone what I have seen the cloud as. Subsequently, I might potentially capture my visual experience in a depiction *in* which (hopefully) someone else will see the same configuration.[20] The proximity to Wollheim's ideas of "seeing-in" as a "cultivated experience" and the origin of picture production is apparent.

The standard perception of our environment as well as of pictures (Wollheim's and Davis's "seeing-as") will not be further discussed here. It is characterised by a strong habitualisation, conventionalisation and culturality, caused by "custom and upbringing".[21] Otherwise our daily survival as well as an effective pictorial communication would not be possible. Instead, the phenomenon of aspect-perception will be considered in the more narrow sense of recognising "new" aspects in configurations that were not made in order to trigger this experience (Wittgenstein's "seeing-as" / Wollheim's "seeing-in" / Davis's "seeing-as-as").

Seeing aspects in nature: cases from Ancient Egypt

When talking about *capturing* aspects that have been seen in natural forms (or in human-made artefacts that were not produced with the intention to convey the aspect perceived by someone), two cases need to be distinguished. First, an aspect can be perceived in a certain medium – e.g. a rabbit in a cloud – and then be captured in a painting, a statue, etc. The resulting artefact can then either try to render the observation quite directly – e.g. a painting of a cloud shaped like a rabbit – or it can just show the aspect that has been perceived – e.g. a painting of a rabbit.[22] Second, an aspect can be perceived in a certain medium – and then be captured by working out this aspect more clearly *in this same object*. Usually this is only done in the case of aspect-

[17] Davis 2017, 55–63; quote: 63.

[18] It goes without saying that "aspective perception" or "aspect-perception" in this sense are not related to the term "aspective", introduced into Egyptology by Emma Brunner-Traut. The latter notion is highly problematic not only due to Brunner-Traut's ambiguous definition but also – and mainly – because, based on biologistic and in part racist ideas, she postulates a different mode of perception or mindset of the ancient Egyptians (Schäfer 1963, 395–428; see the discussions in Stadler 2009, 19–22, Peuckert 2017 and Davis 2017, 142).

[19] Davis 2011, 36–42 and *passim*; Davis 2017, 67f.

[20] Davis 2017, 61–68; Davis 2011, 150–155.

[21] Davis 2011, 322–340; Wittgenstein 1958, 201.

[22] In this case the original perception merely supplies the inspiration for a certain figure captured in an artefact, the artefact would not refer to the aspect-perception in itself.

perception in objects of smaller dimensions such as stones, pieces of wood, etc. but we could also imagine a case where parts of a whole mountain are re-shaped in order to more clearly convey a certain aspect. All it needs is the necessary (power) structures to organise such an enterprise, as at least one Egyptian case proves (see below).

In the second case, one might speak less of "capturing" a certain aspect, than of "strengthening" or "highlighting" it, namely by elaborating the structures or shapes recognised by a certain beholder in order to make them clearly visible for other viewers as well. This kind of re-working of an object in order to make a certain aspect also stand out for others goes beyond simply *telling* them what one has seen and how they have to see it. The re-working of the object is a materialisation of Wittgenstein's statement: "You have to see it like *this*, this is how it is meant."[23] Such an elaboration of certain natural features might even be how the cultural technique of image production could have begun.[24]

Several examples of this second version of capturing perceived aspects, i.e. where the aspect "seen in" has been strengthened in the objects themselves, are known from Ancient Egypt. When flint pebbles that show a certain resemblance to human figures, animals, etc. are found in tombs or sanctuaries, it is already quite probable that they were deposited there because someone had perceived their figurative aspect. We can say for certain that it has been recognised in cases from Deir el-Medina, where in the case of flint pebbles shaped like a sitting figure, an ancestor bust, a hippopotamus, a flying duck and a scarab with spread wings amongst other cases these respective figurative aspects of the stones were highlighted by adding some lines, thus providing them with faces and limbs.[25]

While in most cases this might just be the result of a playful way of handling these pebbles, sometimes there seems to be more to it.[26] In the case of the hippopotamus-shaped stone which carries an inscription on its backside identifying it as "Seth, with great force, the raging one […]"[27] the religious connotation is just as clear as for several pebbles in the shape of ancestor busts. The latter might even have served as actual ancestor busts for people who couldn't afford the more elaborate version.[28] The exploitation of the natural shapes for religious purposes becomes even clearer in the case of a stela in the upper half of which sits a lump of silex that is shaped like the combination of full moon and crescent (⏾) and to which a uraeus has been

[23] "Du mußt es *so* sehen, so ist es gemeint.", Wittgenstein 1958, 202 (italics in the original).

[24] Wollheim 1987, 19–22. 48. 101 and *passim*; Wollheim 2015, 146; Davis 2017, 90–93; Bredekamp 2018, 11–18.

[25] Keimer 1940 for Deir el-Medina. See Francigny – de Voogt 2014 for more examples from Egypt and Nubia.

[26] Compare the diverging interpretations of a fossilised sea urchin to which a hieroglyphic inscription was added (Turin inv. Supp. 2761). Von Lieven 2013, 26f. suspects a religious motivation for the preservation and inscription of the piece, caused by someone seeing a sun disk in the natural shape of the urchin. Morenz 2010, 87–90 considers it primarily to be a case of early museum-like collecting of "curiosities" – which does of course not exclude that at the same time a certain shape had been recognised in the fossil.

[27] Keimer 1940, 11.

[28] Keimer 1940, 20.

added.[29] The use of these pieces as means of interacting with the divine could have been favoured precisely because they were found like this in nature and were thus understood as fashioned by the gods themselves. Similar examples of seeing-as (and venerating-as) include the "stone in the shape of a divine falcon"[30] found by Thutmosis IV and the (once more) hippopotamus-shaped nodules of jasper in the temple of Tôd.[31] The latter are only known from the wall reliefs in the crypts of the temple listing divine statues in the possession of the temple. Finally, the same mechanisms could apply to (parts of) entire mountains and rock formations, such as in the case of the "uraeus" of Gebel Barkal – and maybe also the great Sphinx of Giza.[32]

When the medium inspires the content: the case of ostracon Turin C. 7052

The case of the ostracon Turin C. 7052 (fig. 1) differs from the aforementioned examples in that the figure is not constituted by patterns on the surface of the stone that were then highlighted by adding some lines as in the case of the flint pebbles. Rather, the person who painted the famous figure of the dancer was probably inspired by the outer contours of the ostracon – the creator of this composition saw the figure in the shape of the ostracon. That the shape of figurative ostraca is sometimes included in the composition, or even inspired the composition in the first place, has been recognised before. One of the most famous cases is the ostracon EGA 4324–1943 (recto) in the Fitzwilliam-Museum, Cambridge.[33] It shows a stonemason at work, holding a chisel and a wooden mallet in his hands. He seems to be digging a corridor into the rock, and the curved right-hand fringe of the ostracon has been used to show the shape of the rock as hewn out so far. Similarly, in the tomb of Sobeknakht in Elkab (17th dynasty) one of the stonemasons in the wall painting is shown "cutting the vault" of the tomb chamber into the mountain.[34]

The ostracon Turin C. 7052 dates to the New Kingdom and was found in Deir el-Medina.[35] It shows a female dancer or acrobat who is wearing a short apron. From the tips of her toes that barely touch the ground, her legs, upper body and arms almost form a circle which ends at her

[29] Keimer 1940, 16f. with pl. 10.

[30] *jnr pn m sḫr bjk nt[rj]*, von Lieven 2016, 256.

[31] von Lieven 2013; von Lieven 2016.

[32] von Lieven 2013; Francigny – de Voogt 2014.

[33] Brunner-Traut 1979, 40f. with pl. 12.

[34] Three other men are shown "carving" a base line above them, the place where their own base line would be – but there is none (yet!?) – and the background of the scene (i.e. the tomb wall), respectively. A figure represented as carving the tomb wall itself also appears in the tomb of Horemkhawef in Hierakonpolis, which dates to the same period. Both tombs also show the draughtsman (*sš-qḏw*) Sedjemnetjer who probably executed (parts of) the decoration and the metaleptic figures of the masons transgressing the boundary between image space and real space (of the tomb chapel) could have been an invention of this man. Davies 2001, 116–121, Colour pl. 41.3 and 45.1; already observed by Wreszinski 1927, 78–82, pl. 35 and 42.

[35] The online catalogue of the Museo Egizio provides an extensive bibliography of the piece: https://collezioni.museoegizio.it/eMP/eMuseumPlus?service=ExternalInterface&module=collection&objectId=103632&viewType=detailView

hands. These do not touch the ground as is made clear by the mass of hair that extends downwards beyond her fingers. The woman's head is bent far back, so that she is looking to the right, through her arms. Altogether, the representation creates a strong effect of movement. The acrobatic figure that she executes, known to the Egyptians as *ḫbj*, was apparently performed at divine festivals and private banquets. Representations of the *ḫbj*-dance, the majority of which date to the New Kingdom, include seals, ostraca, small statuettes, tomb paintings and temple reliefs.[36] The latter, monumental versions usually show several stages of the movement performed by the dancers / acrobats.[37] Apparently their (rapid) movement was a decisive feature that the authors of these compositions wanted to convey as clearly as possible by the kinetic elaboration of the figures and by juxtaposing several stages of the motion sequence.[38]

At this point, a few words on the exact nature of the *ḫbj*-dance seem to be necessary. Previous studies usually describe it as *forward* "handspring" or "somersault".[39] However, the position of the body and especially of the head in this and other examples clearly point to a *backward* movement. While it is possible to perform a backward handspring or walkover from this position by using the force of the legs to push the lower body over the head and hands,[40] a forward movement is impossible. In the equivalent phase of a forward handspring, with the feet already on the ground again, the upper body would be situated much higher, in an almost upright position. So, while the exact nature of the figure (handspring, walkover, etc.) cannot be determined, it is sure that a *backward movement* should be conveyed.[41] This becomes even clearer considering the Egyptian tendency to convey movement by showing a characteristic moment or posture.[42] In scenes showing a *forward* handspring, walkover, etc. we might rather expect dancers forming an arch with their back in the air and their front oriented towards the ground, similar to representations of the goddess Nut bridging the cosmos.

A closer look shows that the person who drew the dancer most probably saw this figure in the contours of the ostracon. The contours of the drawing, i.e. the body, from the lower legs via thighs, abdomen, chest and arms up to the hands clearly correspond to the shape of the material

[36] Decker – Herb 1994, 708–719; Lythgoe – de Garis Davies 1928; Brunner-Traut 1992, 48–52; Meyer-Dietrich 2018, 610–615.

[37] Decker – Herb 1994, Cat. R 3.14–3.18, R 3.23, R 3.24, R 3.28.

[38] While the "kinetic" quality of the figures is always quite high clearly illustrating their movement, the scenes are not "cinematographic" stricto sensu. To convey a cinematographic effect, there needs to be a stronger morphological consistency of a large part of several figures, Rogner 2019, 79–84.

[39] Lythgoe – de Garis Davies 1928; Keel 1974, 38–41; Brunner-Traut 1992, 48f.; Decker – Herb 1994, 691. Decker and Herb add: "Dennoch ist es nicht auszuschließen, daß bisweilen ein Überschlag rückwärts gemeint sein könnte.", Decker – Herb 1994, 691.

[40] This corresponds to the motion sequence compiled by Keel 1974, fig. 11 using figures from different representations if read *from left to right*, it corresponds exactly to the sequence of a back handspring.

[41] This observation has been confirmed to me by the gymnast Jessie Kissum who I thank for her advice on this matter.

[42] Rogner 2019, 79–81; Morenz 2014, 197–202.

support, i.e. the ostracon. This correlation transgresses an approximate similarity of "roundish" ostracon and an equally "roundish" body posture. There are direct correspondences between specific features of the fringe of the ostracon and the dancer's body, such as the two distinct angles on the left correlating to knees and hip, the rounded protrusion on the right following the contour of the breast(s) and, just next to it, the marked recess in the contour of the stone, corresponding to the woman's armpits. Finally, the same is true for the shallow arch at the lower right side of the ostracon, which exactly mirrors, or rather is mirrored by, the shape of the hands, through to the slightly more strongly bent fingertips.

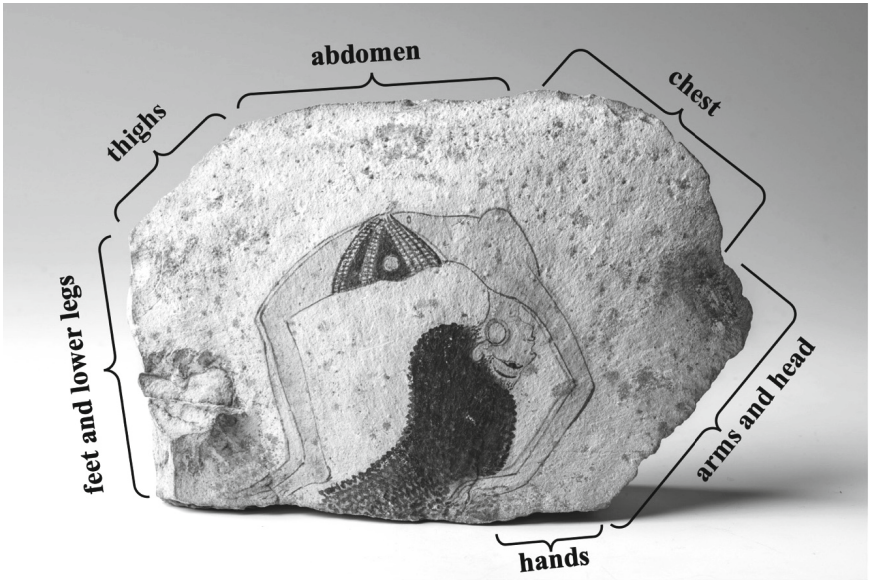

Fig. 1: Ostracon Turin C. 7052.

As in the cases mentioned before, the shape of the ostracon (i.e. the medium), more precisely its outer contours, served as inspiration for the figure of the dancer. The ostracon stands thus in-between the two possibilities of fixing perceived aspects that have been mentioned above, but is clearly closer to the second: the perceived aspect has been fixed on the object itself, though the (material) contours of the object, i.e. the fringes of the ostracon, are not included in the figure as is the case with many of the flint pebbles from Deir el-Medina. Strictly speaking, the author of this drawing probably did not see this figure in "natural" forms. As has been discovered in recent years, the majority of ostraca was not of natural origin but the result of a specialised production of this writing and drawing material.[43] We can thus assume that the

[43] Pelegrin – Andreu-Lanoë – Pariselle 2015; Andreu-Lanoë – Pelegrin 2018.

author of the drawing saw the figure in an ostracon that was ready to be used by scribes and draughtsmen.

Obviously, in order to be able to see a woman executing this acrobatic figure in the ostracon, the author of the drawing must have seen the *ḫbj*-dance actually performed by dancers and / or in pictorial representations. Actually, the great proximity of the drawing to other pictorial versions suggests that its creator had at least *also* seen paintings / reliefs showing the dance. But even if these dancers were known to the producer of the drawing from (representations of) religious actions and contexts, this does not mean that the purpose or "*Sitz im Leben*" of the piece itself is to be found there. Rather, the drawing is the result of a spontaneous observation of a skilled artisan[44] who took pleasure in fixing the figure that he had *seen in* the stone. Of course, the community of Deir el-Medina was home to an above average number of highly skilled draughtsmen who might have made a game out of training their artistic gaze by looking for figures and shapes in the world around them and sometimes in their newly received writing and drawing material. The remnants of this "cultivated experience" (Wollheim) are pieces like the ostraca Turin C. 7052 and Fitzwilliam EGA 4324–1943 and the figurative pebbles mentioned above.

A smiling *Ankh* in Karnak

Another case of aspect-perception can be found on the outer north wall of the great hypostyle hall in Karnak showing the battle reliefs of Seti I. Next to the figure of the king smiting the enemies to the right of the entrance to the hypostyle hall, a smiling face in the form of three dots for eyes and nose and a bent line for the mouth has been added to an *Ankh*-hieroglyph (fig. 2).[45] This case clearly differs from other personified or anthropomorphic *Ankh*-signs provided with limbs and thus given the possibility to act.[46] Some of those also show a "face", but in those cases this consists in fact only of an

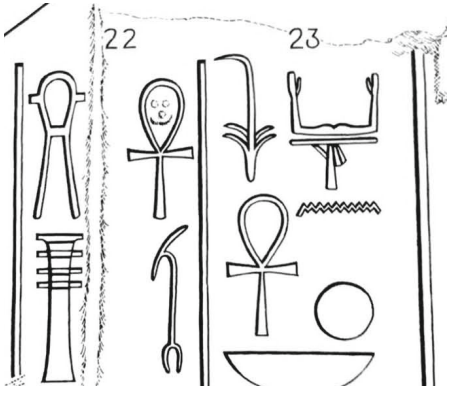

Fig. 2: An *Ankh*-sign with a smiling face on the outer north wall of the great hypostyle hall in Karnak.

[44] In contrast, the ostracon IFAO 3779 (Decker – Herb 1994, Cat. R 3.27) shows two drawings of dancers performing the *ḫbj*-dance that might have been drawn by an individual who was not or not yet fully trained in the Egyptian pictorial tradition.

[45] In the publication of the reliefs it is described as "smiling face (eyes, nose, mouth)", The Epigraphic Survey 1986, 60 and 138 (Graffito No. 16).

[46] Baines 1985, 41–63; Hamden 2018. The phenomenon is currently being investigated in detail by Ghada Mohamed in her PhD thesis "Die anthropomorphisierten Zeichen im Alten Ägypten bis zum Ende der Spätzeit" (University of Bonn).

eye with an eyebrow ().[47] The biggest difference between the case presented here and other personified or anthropomorphic *Ankh*-signs is however that the latter are not writing signs in a hieroglyphic text but protagonists in pictorial compositions, either acting on their own or serving as "extension" of a human figure holding them. We can thus almost be sure that in the case of fig. 2 the face was not "planned" to be there but was put there by someone who perceived the writing sign  as a "little figure", standing there with legs together and arms wide apart, and hence provided it with a face.

As the hieroglyph is situated in over 4 meters height, the face must have been put there at a time when the sign could be reached, i.e. either while the reliefs were made or (much) later, when the temple was partly covered in sand. A stonemason working on the inscription in the time of Seti I would have known that once he was done with his work, the walls would be painted and as a result the face obliterated. But this could have made it possible to put it there as a little joke during work in the first place: it didn't matter as it would be covered later. However, several figurative Coptic graffiti in the immediate environment suggest a later date, in late antique or Byzantine Egypt or even in Islamic times.[48] Also, the chance of someone perceiving an *Ankh*-hieroglyph *as* a little figure might be much bigger in case of beholders who are not aware of the meaning and usage of a sign (see Postscript). If the creator of this little visual pun was inspired by one of the various personified or anthropomorphic *Ankh*-signs in scenes in the Karnak area or if the shape of the writing sign was enough to suggest a small figure must remain open.[49]

Postscript

When I discussed this article with a colleague who regularly gives tours for visitors in an Egyptological collection, she told me about a phenomenon which clearly belongs in the domain of aspect-perception. Looking at inscriptions containing the words *nw.t*  and *ḥ.t nb* , non-Egyptological visitors sometimes ask her why there is a "face" – or even a "happy face" – in the text. Might it be possible that such a perception of hieroglyphic signs, seeing them as pictorial rather than as textual unities is much more probable in the case of observers who do not know the phonographic and semantic value of the signs and do not automatically start to read them? And moreover, how many of the readers of this text will have trouble *not to see* a "happy face" the next time they encounter the sign combination ?

[47] This is also true for a personified *Ankh* in the hypostyle hall at Karnak which was rendered with a face in Nelson 1981, pl. 65. In this case Nelson was probably deceived by minor damages of the surface (Brand – Feleg – Murnane 2018, 126), or otherwise said: Nelson saw a face *in* the surface. It is thus a case of Egyptological aspect-perception that was certainly favoured by the fact that the *Ankh* is also provided with arms.

[48] The Epigraphic Survey 1986, 60 and 138 (Graffiti No. 14 and 15).

[49] E.g. Hamden 2018, Cat. A.3, A.4, A.5, B.5, B.6, C.4, F and Nelson 1981, pl. 65. All of these cases are later than the reign of Seti I.

Figures

Fig. 1: Ostracon Turin C. 7052. Photo by Nicola Dell'Aquila and Federico Taverni / Museo Egizio. Legends by Frederik Rogner.

Fig. 2: The Epigraphic Survey 1986, pl. 17 C (detail). Courtesy of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago.

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