

Peculiar Punishments from the Tomb of Baqet III At Beni Hassan

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Abstract

The rock-cut tombs at Beni Hasan, which belong to the Nomarch of the Oryx- Nome in the Middle Kingdom, contain many traditional scenes representing everyday life in Ancient Egypt. Many of them can be considered as an extension of what was depicted within the private tombs from the Old Kingdom, such as: hunting, fowling and fishing scenes. Meanwhile, other scenes appear for the first time, such as: The uncommon and unprecedented iconographies of punishment,

which depict the roughly way in which workers and employees were treated. They include a woman being punished while nursing an infant, a man stripped of his clothes, being mercilessly beaten with sticks; as well as, a child being horribly scolded. This paper discusses those peculiar punishment iconographies in the tomb of Baqet III at Beni Hasan, in order to reveal the administrative reasons, and their effects.

Introduction

Art-works are created for certain motive, including religious and magical purposes, while the main aim of studying them is to learn more about the idea of the Ancient Egyptians concerning their lives and the afterlife; iconographies depicted on the walls of private tombs usually conceal a message for a certain category of audience. In the concerned

examples, the deceased desired to show off on a very large scale, being depicted while surveying his works and various activities in his Nome. He wanted to demonstrate his enormous power and his skill in governing his region; so the scenes, in which he is presented, were carefully arranged and sorted in order to stress his impressive status.¹

Consequently, each period had its own artistic style, which was influenced by contemporary life and incidents, as well as the lifestyle, the artworks reflect the mentality and thinking of the people of each period. So these, Artworks needed to be studied within the context of each period, as they closely reflect contemporary life and incidents.²

Actually, the period following the End of the Old Kingdom is a notably confused part of

Egyptian history. The Nomarchs enjoyed remarkable level of independence, which meant that they acted as autonomous rulers, surrounding themselves with the strapping of a powerful ruler.³ This includes certain gestures only performed prior to that by the Kings, as witnessed the scenes of the governor`s courtier smiting their enemies. Such scenes were transformed in the tombs of private individuals, who are depicted punishing the misdemeanors of the agricultural and industrial workers.⁴ The period in which Baqet III lived was of high confusion, it was suggested that this tomb had been achieved during the conflict between the theban governors and the Heracleopolitan Kings; therefore, it required mighty governors, ready to defend their nome against any kind of attack.⁵

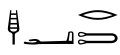
Descriptions and Comments

Paintings of the tomb of Baqet III are of the finest and very well preserved in the cemetery, iconography details could be seen clearly,⁶ their good condition due to their elevated location, out of the hands of the later vandals.⁷

Scene 1: Punishing a woman while nursing an infant⁸

This iconography (fig. 1, 2) is located at the western end of the southern wall, in the main chamber of tomb no. 15 at Beni Hassan,⁹ which belongs to Baqet III, Governor of Oryx-nome in the Eleventh Dynasty. The device is unusual in Egyptian art. It is included in the main scene which represents the punishment being meted out to defaulting workmen in the

region. A woman is depicted seated and holding an infant to her breast, in front of her is a man standing up, who appears to be pulling her head with his left hand, while he looks as if about to strike her with the stick in his right hand. This clearly indicates an unprecedentedly rough attitude towards the women.

The accompanying hieroglyphic words are addressed to the lady and read:  "ḥ r t", "make accusation against you",¹⁰ as if the man bothering the lady; and preventing her from breastfeeding the baby. Such behavior towards a woman at that moment was unusual and highly unapproved of. Whatever her profession might have been, and whatever fault the lady may have been guilty of, the scene, indeed demonstrates very rough behavior, something uncommon in Ancient Egyptian art.

Comment

In Ancient Egypt, there is clear evidence that beating with sticks was an approved method of punishment,¹¹ as private tombs contain abundant scenes demonstrating this method,¹² according to which men who were suspected of wrong doing were cruelly beaten with short sticks, in order to extract as much information as possible from them. Women were treated in the same way during interrogations, as they were also beaten with sticks.¹³ Although, such iconographies are rarely depicted in the private tombs.

In contrast, a neighboring tomb in the same cemetery of Beni Hasan, contains a woman is depicted while nursing safely the baby, which denies the prevalence of punishing the women in such moment.¹⁴ Whilst, the

current iconography expresses that Baqet III, Governor of the region wanted to be seen flexing his muscles, in order to stress his dominance in the affairs of the province. The scene depicting military exercises within the same tomb might also support this suggestion, as the governor would want to show off his might and the power of his troops, who are capable of defending his Nome and ensuring internal stability, throughout punishing defaulters.¹⁵

The above suggestion could also be supported by the many exaggerated titles carried by the governors of this region, which show their tendency to demonstrate their strength and their full sovereignty over the region. The owner of the tomb, for example, carried the title: *hry tp ʿ3 .¹⁶ n m3 ḥd*, which means “The

great one at the head of the province of the Oryx”. Along with the more common titles such as: *h3ty-3*, which highlight the firm control they exercise over the region`s affairs.

However, we cannot argue that Egyptian art at the time was predominantly violent, as many of the depictions on the walls of private tombs depict the birth of an animal. In the case of the mother with the infant, suffering is etched on her face; as she nurses her baby, she sows her compassion by raising her leg in order to avoid her baby being harmed.¹⁷

Women too are portrayed in a favorable light, as they nurse their children, in both this world and the world of the gods.¹⁸ Some of the women depicted worked as professional breast-feeders or *mn3t* which means a wet nurse.¹⁹ They include several women connected by

names or professions with the kings, for example: the breastfeeding women of King Senefru, whose job titles *mn^ct snfru* was carried by her provenience regions,²⁰ as well as, the wet nurse of Khufu, *mn^ct ḥufu* which had been carried by another region.²¹

This profession was even practiced by important women, such as the mother of Ken-Amun, who was proudly portrayed in the tomb of her son while nursing the king; she carried the title of *mn^ct wrt*, given to the great breastfeeding women of king Amenhotep II.²² This profession belonged to a big organization, where the women were instructed and educated,²³ the nurse enjoyed an intimate position inside the master`s family, she was portrayed having meals together with her lady,²⁴ kings didn`t hesitated to get married to nurse`s

daughters,²⁵ This confirms that Ancient Egyptians appreciated and respected the ladies who practiced this job, as well as, the habit of breastfeeding.

Scene 2: A roughly scolded boy (fig. 3)

This scene found on the same wall in the tomb of Baqet III,²⁶ is part of a bigger scene representing the punishment of certain people, the little boy is naked, and his hands are raised pathetically in front of him, as if begging the man before him for mercy. The man is clutching a stick in his left hand, which is raised, while he is gesticulating with his right hand in a way that suggests that he is angrily scolding the boy, and ordering him to stop doing something; perhaps he is trying to find out exactly what he has been doing. There is another man standing behind the

boy; he has his arms crossed, as if he is waiting for an explanation from the boy.

Comment

It is actually unusual to see a young boy being punished in this cruel way, he wears nothing, which suggests that he is a child.²⁷ The reason for this is unclear, but the fact that this is included in one of the main scenes suggests that he must be guilty of something he done at work or perhaps at studying, as being beaten with the stick was common punishment for boys,²⁸ although, as said above, depicting boys being punished like this is unusual in Egyptian art.

It might serve the same purpose as the previous scene, namely demonstrating the tendency of the governors of the Oryx region to display as much power as they could, and to

show their independence and their ability to dominate the region.²⁹ The young boy shows that anyone could be punished, even the very young.


Scene 3: A cruelly punished man (fig.4)

This iconography is depicted on the same wall,³⁰ together with the previous devices, in fact it is found right above the scene of the woman who suckling her baby. The scene depicts a man lying flatly on the ground with his clothes completely stripped off; His arms are being pinned down by two men, while a stout straight stick has been forced between his shoulders and his chin to stop him moving, and to raise his face.

One of the two men spinning him down has turned round and is talking to another

standing man behind him, while a fourth kneeling man is holding his feet, to prevent him from moving. A fifth standing man is beating him with a short stick, while on the far left stands another man leaning on a long stick, apparently the chief who is closely observing the proceedings.

Comment

The scene is again unusual, as it depicts someone being severely punished, while the accompanying text reads:  *di.k sw r t3 n.ib*, which means “put him, on the ground up on his heart”, if someone were found guilty of a misdemeanor, beating with a stick was approved of; such beating could also be used for interrogation,³¹ such severe treatment is not commonly depicted as wall paintings nor

reliefs in the private tombs, rare parallel examples at our disposal, but they don't include the same roughness.³² Perhaps the purpose was to scare the beholder. It was suggested that, the offenders could be considered from herdsmen, because the punishment scenes were included in the same register, together with the cattle scenes and scribes.³³

Scene 4: A severely tormented man (fig. 5)

This scene again is located on the same wall,³⁴ as the previous scenes, it depicts a kneeling man begging to be freed, two ropes held by two men are tied around his neck, while three men in front of him are fastening the ropes. A sixth man, on the far right is holding a long stick and supervising the punishment, while turning and talking to the man behind

him. A seventh man, is about to knee him in the throat.

Comment

Only enemies were treated like this. When Pharaoh was victorious, he was portrayed smiting foreigners in this manner.³⁵ However, in this case, the severely tormented man cannot have been a foreigner, because his features and dress are those of an Egyptian. I think that he was an Egyptian soldier who committed a very serious military infraction deserved this punishment.

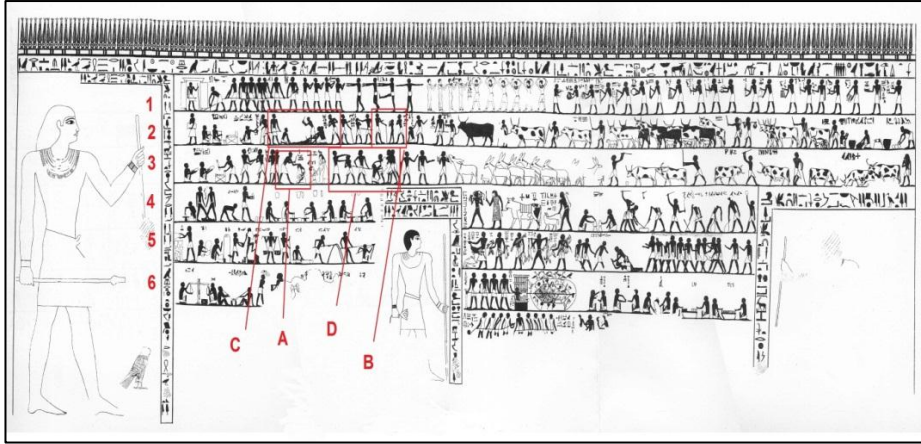
Concluding Remarks

The above iconographies make the tomb of Baqet III unique, and the main reason for their depiction is to highlight the power of the owner of the tomb. The Nomarch, who wants to

show that he is capable to control and manage the region, this is reflected in merciless punishment of guilty, which he disciplines in public, for all to see. This could serve as a warning for the people of his Nome! Indeed the ruthless nature of Baqet III is manifested in the inscriptions in his tomb, which states: *Hr ḥw rhyt*, Horus, “Smiter of the commoners”.³⁶

The relevant scenes are reflecting the demands of the period in which Baqet III lived, a time of serious conflicts, which required high attention. Only powerful and tough governors were able to protect, manage, control and defend their regions against outer attacks, as well as inner confusion

Figures



(Fig. 1) The western end of the southern wall, Tomb no. 15 –
Baqet III

After, P. Newberry, *Beni Hasan II*, pl. VII



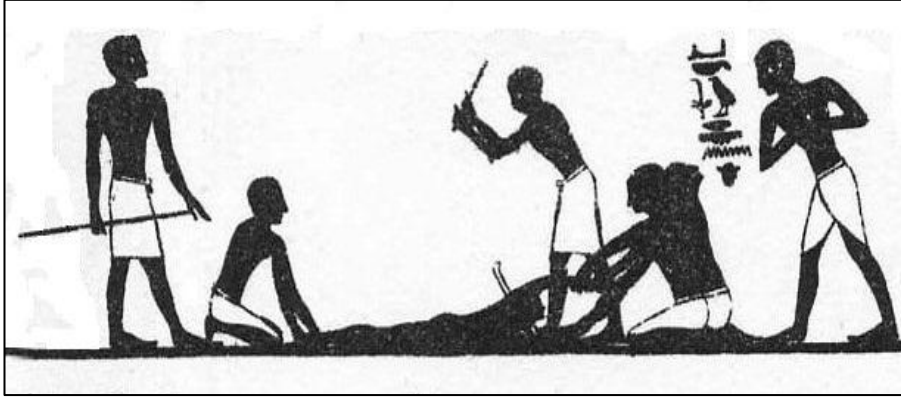
(Fig. 2) A - Rig. 3: Punishing a women while nursing an infant

After N. Kanawati, and A. Woods, *Beni Hassan*, fig. 89



(Fig. 3) B - Rig. 2- A roughly scolded boy

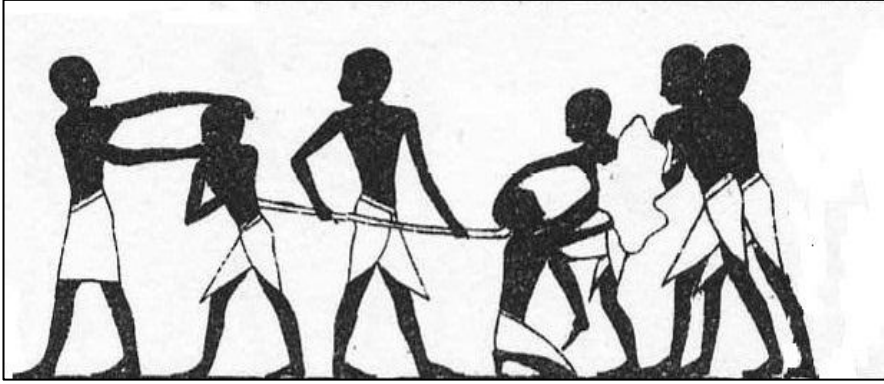
After N. Kanawati, and A. Woods, *Beni Hassan*, fig. 85



(Fig. 4) C - Rig. 2: A cruelly punished man
Detail from the main scene
After P. Newberry, *Beni Hasan II*, pl. VII



(Fig. 5) Detail of the previous scene
N. Kanawati and A. Woods, *Beni Hassan*, fig. 87



(Fig. 6) D - Rig. 3: Detail from the main scene

A severely tormented man

After P. Newberry, *Beni Hasan II*, pl. VII

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