

Open palms*

Representations of open hands in Egyptian art normally show the divisions of the four fingers and not the lines of the palm, and can thus be described as representing the “back” of the hand. The fingernails are often indicated, while the thumb is mostly in profile. This last detail demonstrates that the form in which the hand is rendered is in any case schematic: a full rendering of the thumb including the thumbnail would be equally possible. Alternatively, the hand can be shown in profile and slightly cupped. This form is common in scenes of adoration. It indicates clearly an “open” hand, but without displaying the palm.

What is seldom shown is the “interior” of the hand, and thus the palm. Diagnostic features for this alternative are the absence of fingernails — but only where a sufficient amount of detail is present — and the presence of lines delimiting or characterizing the palm; in strongly carved relief, the hollow of the palm can be rendered. Both these treatments occur, the lines being more characteristic of relief styles with much surface detail.

The rendering of palms is appropriate for relatively few poses in Egyptian art. Use of them depended also on orientation: for poses with the right hand held forward, only left-facing figures can show the detail. In most cases, the openness of the hand has iconographic as well as representational significance. Riefstahl (1951) collected cases of open palms. Most of those she cited date to the late 18th-19th dynasties. Many additional examples exist, however (see already Schäfer 1986:298), a number in material that has become accessible since she wrote. These transform the evidence and pose additional questions of interpretation. (For cases on sculpture in the round, which I do not treat, see the valuable study of Franke, 1988, p. 65-7. Sourdivé, 1984, is not concerned with two-dimensional material.)

Instances concentrate among works of art of the highest status and quality. They occur in all periods, except possibly the Old Kingdom. It is desirable to explore why this rendering of the hand should have appeared and whether it correlates with other variations in anatomical representation. As with the rendering of the near foot studied by Russmann (1980), the phenomenon may have wider implications.

Historical summary

Late predynastic palette reliefs include examples of open hands with palm lines on figures of defeated, mainly dead, enemies. Dating from the period of for-

mation of "Egyptian" conventions, these demonstrate that the form was available in the repertory, but perhaps only for specialized figures.

From the Old Kingdom, the only instances of palms so far identified are hieroglyphs. On these, the palm may be indicated both by a line at the base of the fingers and by lines within the palm area.

In the Middle Kingdom, hieroglyphs are joined by relief figures, especially on the White Chapel of Senwosret I at Karnak. As on the Old Kingdom signs, the palm can be indicated on figures either by lines at the finger base or additionally by ones within the hand. The style of the White Chapel is unusually detailed, and its relief relatively thick and plastic. The palms are mainly on right-facing figures of the ithyphallic Amon-Re', but there are also left-facing cases on Thoth and *jwn-mwt.f*.

Among easily accessible material, open palms seem not to occur in the New Kingdom before the reign of Amenhotpe III. From then on, they are found sporadically in all periods down to Graeco-Roman times. Most instances are on royal and divine figures, but any figure could in principle be treated in this way.

The two most significant groups of material are reliefs from the Memphite tomb of Haremhab and from the reign of Sety I. In the tomb, the very wide range of figure types is evidently influenced by Amarna, and includes some rare gestures. There happens to be little closely comparable material from Amarna itself, so that it is not possible to know how many of the types in the tomb were innovations.

The case of Sety I is clearer. His reliefs include traditional poses that were given a distinctive new realization showing the palm. One instance is where an empty hand with open palm is held forward in a censuring scene: it is rare for the palm to be open on one of a pair of active hands. In a second case, a figure of the king adoring has the palm of the raised hand indicated (the other hand hangs by his side). Both these cases are innovative, since they take common forms and adapt them unconventionally to show a palm. The intent seems to be more representational than iconographic, because there is no evident difference between the meaning of these figures and of others from the same reign that use the traditional "cupped" rendering of the hand. Also under Sety I, a very rare instance of an enemy in a smiting scene with raised hand and open palm shows that such innovation could occur on minor figures.

Ramessid examples include a number in battle scenes where left-facing figures of the king hold out an open hand in a gesture of speech or welcome. In these, the pose is more iconographic than representational, and does not have widespread earlier parallels.

Except for some innovations of Sety I, the repertory of poses with open palms survived into Graeco-Roman times. A pair of Ptolemaic examples at Edfu illustrates this continuity. The two hands of a figure of the king presenting a naos are shown open, one from the "back" and the other with palm and palm lines. This treatment can be compared with two cases in the temple of Sety I at Abydos where the king manipulates a goddess's garment. While I know no comparable figures dating between these two, this may be due to chance; there is no reason to suppose that the Edfu cases were a complete innovation. Both in non-royal reliefs and in the temple of Hathor at Dendara, cases where harpists' hands are

shown with open palms through the strings appear to add a new element, but these too may have had antecedents.

Interpretation

The disappearance of the open palm from fully representational figures at the beginning of the dynastic period may relate to more than just artistic style, and could be connected with an avoidance of depicting the strongly charged gesture of baring the hand in something as permanent as relief.

A basic principle in rendering the human form, that a figure is composed of an assembly of parts, will have favoured a schematic hand type indifferent to context and orientation. The palm was also not easily compatible with Old Kingdom artistic styles and modes of representation, which favoured very low relief with slight plasticity, tending — in an accentuation of general Egyptian characteristics — to concentrate meaning around the outline, as against filling internal surfaces. In contrast, the late New Kingdom and Graeco-Roman examples are in styles with considerable plasticity and internal detail. In this respect, they are comparable both with the late predynastic palettes and with the White Chapel.

Possible underlying reasons for rendering open palms may be either that they show a figure as relating strongly to an adjacent figure or object and hence emphasize the spatial context, or that they relate to the wider environment, as when the king addresses those who enter a temple. Many open palms are in compositions where such considerations apply.

Only a few poses with open palms remained in the repertory in the long term and hardly any were added after the 19th dynasty. The reign of Sety I marks the high point of development. This peak can be related to other features of the time, such as the rendering of folds of skin in the neck and above the eyelids, the use of drapery, and some elements of iconography. In temple relief, these variations negotiate basic symbolic concerns of the boundary between the sacred and the secular, and of the tension between the abstract or schematic and the corporeal. These contrasts can be compared in turn to religious and other change in the central New Kingdom. Although these spheres are not directly connected, they all fit into a general pattern of development. Many of these changes did not endure, but later times retained individual elements from them; in art, one of these was a slightly increased use of the open palm in temple relief.

* This paper is a summary of my research on open hands and palms. It is intended only to replace the abstract printed for the Congress, composed before detailed work, not to give a proper treatment with references to examples; I hope to publish that elsewhere.

I am grateful to Marianne Eaton-Krauss, Rolf Krauss, and Ann Roth for help, and particularly to Gay Robins, who added greatly to my material and saved me from many errors.

Franke, Detlef 1988, Die Hockerstatue des Sonbso-mei in Leiden und Statuen mit nach oben gerichteten Handflächen. OMRO 69:59-76.

Riefstahl, Elizabeth 1951. An Egyptian portrait of an old man. JNES 10:65-73.

Russmann, Edna R. 1980. The anatomy of an artistic convention: representation of the near foot through the New Kingdom. BES 2:57-81.

Schäfer, Heinrich 1986, Principles of Egyptian art. Ed. Emma Brunner-Traut, trans. and ed. John Baines. Revised reprint. Oxford: Griffith Institute.

Sourdive, Claude 1984, La main dans l'Égypte pharaonique: Recherches de morphologie structurale sur les objets égyptiens comportant une main. Bern, etc.: Peter Lang.

SESTO CONGRESSO INTERNAZIONALE DI EGITTOLOGIA

Atti

VOLUME I

1992