

HERB, MICHAEL. *Der Wettkampf in den Marschen*. Hildesheim: Weidmann, 2001. Pp. 504. \$110.00 cb.

Among Egyptologists, Michael Herb is known as one of the authors of the *Bildatlas zum Sport in Alten Aegypten* (1994). The other author, Wolfgang Decker, is, professionally, the person most highly qualified to review *Der Wettkampf in den Marschen* and to render a sound critical assessment of Herb's achievement, but Decker is not in a position, ethically, to act as a reviewer. He is not only Herb's quondam collaborator but also his *Doktorvater* (and an editor of the *Nikephoros Beiheft* series in which Herb's book appears). Other specialists have felt themselves too overburdened with other obligations to accept the reviewer's role. My nonspecialist's comments on *Der Wettkampf in den Marschen* are very much *faute de mieux*.

The "competition in the marshes" occurred over a period of some 650 years, from c.2600 to c.1850 B.C., i.e., from the fourth dynasty of the Old Kingdom to the twelfth dynasty of the Middle Kingdom. The marshlands in which the competition took place were mostly in the delta of the Nile, not far from Memphis. These paintings depict papyrus rafts upon which men with poles or paddles confront each other in what seems clearly to be a kind of jousting. The competition, which is conventionally referred to as a *Fischerstechen* ("fishermen's jousting"), appears in forty-nine tomb paintings, most of them found on the walls of the royal tombs (*Residenznekropole*) in the vicinity of Memphis. The depictions of the *Fischerstechen* are part of a larger set of pictures that Herb refers to as the *Heimkehr der Marschenarbeiter* ("Homeward Journey of the Marsh Workers"). The *Heimkehr* set also includes images of herders and their cattle and images of papyrus rafts loaded with cargo, mainly papyrus and lotus plants.

Demonstrating that all these *Heimkehr* images are highly conventionalized, indeed "almost identical" (p. 35), Herb argues persuasively that the artists, whom he calls "decorators," worked from prototypes in handbooks rather than from direct observation. A major part of Herb's book is devoted to the categorization of these highly conventionalized images. The 268 known figures involved in the forty-nine *Fischerstechen* scenes are divided into a number of categories: those who propel the rafts with poles or paddles; those who fight with poles or paddles; those who wrestle with their bare hands; those who have fallen or are falling into the water, etc.

Egyptologists have agreed that the *Fischerstechen* scenes are a competition of some sort, but they have offered widely divergent accounts of the phenomenon. Champollion, writing in 1844, referred to "a nautical diversion, an innocent aquatic battle" (p. 2). Others suggest that the scenes show an impromptu brawl that might have begun, in Decker's words, in "harmless teasing" (p. 3). Still others, ignoring the obvious fact that the rafts move toward each other and meet bow-to-bow, argue that the scenes depict a boat race. The main purpose of Herb's very long, very detailed book is to provide a plausible interpretation of *Fischerstechen* within the larger context of Egyptian culture.

In order to accomplish this, Herb embarked on an exhaustive analysis of all the *Heimkehr* images (not just the images of *Fischerstechen*). He also examined the scanty textual evidence, which, more often than not, he quotes in Egyptian. Although Herb has transliterated the original hieroglyphics into romanized text with diacritical marking, it is still impossible for a nonspecialist to understand this part of the analysis.

On the basis of the extensive visual and the scanty textual evidence, Herb concludes that the competition was a regularly occurring sports event that took place in midwinter or in the spring when cattle, fish, birds, and agricultural goods—mostly papyrus and lotus plants—were transported from the marshlands to royal or aristocratic domains. The journey began on foot, but rafts were used when the water was deep enough for them to be practical. The jousting probably took place before the rafts were loaded or after they were unloaded at journey's end. The jousts were probably agricultural workers or raftsmen, not fishermen. The competition was probably part of a much larger event. The workers of the marshlands competed among themselves in a "spirit of festival" (p. 424). Unfortunately, the paucity of written evidence and the highly conventionalized and unrealistic nature of the art make it impossible to know very much about the nature of the competition beyond the fact that the contestants sought to push or throw their opponents into the shallow marshland water. Herb admits, "The course of the competition and the rules and regulations that governed it remain mostly in the dark" (p. 429).

Herb concludes that the sport of *Fischerstechen* "deserves attention" (p. 431). Clearly, it does, but it is doubtful that many sports historians are ready for four hundred pages (in small print) of closely argued analysis. A 25-page summary of *Der Wettkampf in den Marschen* in English would be an excellent way for Herb to communicate his findings to nonspecialist readers.

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