APPENDIX 20

THE RENDERING OF LANDSCAPE AND SPATIAL DEPTH IN GREEK ART (Ch. VII, n. 17)¹

It was the traditional view that landscape painting, and by association the rendering of spatial depth, were alien to Greek art². This view was undoubtedly influenced by the limited role which landscape and depth naturally played in vase painting and sculpture, the two forms of Greek art which are best preserved. However, in the course of time more evidence has come to light to suggest that the spatial rendering of landscape was not as alien to Greek art as was believed formerly³. Ancient descriptions of famous 5th century paintings mention various landscape elements like rocks, trees, and shores and the use of different levels for human figures to indicate fore- and background⁴. An impression of such paintings may be gained from the famous Niobid crater in the Louvre⁵. In the following period artists mastered the perspective rendering of buildings like naiskoi and temples. Less than a century after the Niobid painter, we may find on an Apulian crater at Naples with a scene of Orestes and Iphigeneia in the land of the Tauri, a convincing depiction of a hilly landscape with Orestes sitting on an altar in the foreground, and the temple of Artemis rising behind a hill in the background⁶. A further

¹ A good summary of the various opinions concerning the problem of the existence of Greek landscape painting and the possible relation with Roman landscape painting is still that by Von Blankenhagen 1963, 135 ff.
² See e.g. E. Pfuhl, Malerei und Zeichnung bei den Griechen (1923) II, 703, 853; G.M. Dawson, Romano-Campanian Mythological Landscape Painting (1944) 1 ff., 48 f.
³ For landscape see Carroll-Spillecke, and for perspective in relation with it, Childs 85 ff., and Borchardt (o.c. in Ch. VII, n. 11).
⁴ See Carroll-Spillecke 150 ff.; Childs 86 f.; cf. e.g. Pausanias I 16,1, describing the battle of Marathon in the Stoa Poikile; and X 25–31, describing the paintings by Polygnotos in the Lesche of the Cnidians at Delphi, cf. EAA, Atlante dei complessi figurati e degli ordini architettonici, pls. 235–238; and AJA 93 (1989) 203 ff., figs. 1–5; AJA 94 (1990) 213 ff, figs. 1–5).
⁶ See in general Richter 1970, 45 ff., e.g. figs. 159, 194–199, and for the Orestes crater, Richter 43, 46, figs. 176, 197.
stage in the development is formed by the Vergina frieze dating to the 3rd quarter of the 4th century. The frieze which measures 5.35 – 1.16 m, depicts a hunting party in a landscape consisting of rocky outcrops, single trees and a grove. Spatial depth is created by the overlapping of figures and by their placement at different levels. The ground is depicted as if sloping slightly upwards to the rear, where the scene is closed by a range of mountains.

The next comprehensive landscape picture to have survived is the Nile Mosaic. If we compare its upper part to the Vergina frieze, we cannot fail to notice that the landscape elements, the rocks and the trees, are essentially the same. But a major difference is that the ground in the mosaic slopes much more steeply, and continues to do so right up to the horizon near the top. In addition, the hunters and animals in the mosaic are much smaller in scale compared to the landscape. It is these two features which are chiefly responsible for the effect of a bird’s eye view in the upper part of the Nile Mosaic. In the lower part the perspective is achieved by the oblique setting of the major buildings which recede in the distance towards the upper right, and by the difference in size between the figures and objects in the foreground and those in the background.

The conception of a large landscape rendered in bird’s eye view with many small human figures is not known to have existed in Greek art. Such pictures were, by contrast, characteristic for the arts of the Near East, like those of Assyria and Egypt. Still, it must be observed that the treatment in these examples is essentially different from that in the Nile Mosaic. The Eastern and Egyptian examples depict the earth as seen directly from above, forming a background for buildings and figures depicted from a normal horizontal viewpoint. Also different in conception are

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7 See Andronicos, figs. 58–59; Carroll-Spillecke 152 ff.; for the interpretation L.E. Baumer, K. Weber, Zum Fries des ‘Phillipgrabes’ von Vergina, HASB 14 (1991) 27 ff.; compare also the hunt mosaic from Palermo, see Ch. VI, n. 9.
8 This manner of rendering the landscape is strikingly similar to that of some Pompeian hunting scenes, see Ch. VII, n. 26.
9 See Ch. VII, n. 11.
10 See Richter 1970, 5 ff., e.g. figs. 6, 7, 17, 19; Childs 88 f., pls. 26, 27; LÄ I, 477 ff., s.v. Aspektive (E. Brunner-Traut); Beyen I, 169 ff., II, 306 ff. cf. Ch. VII, n. 5.
11 See e.g. Richter 1970, figs. 6, 7, and 19.