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BRIEF COMMUNICATIONS

An Early Dynastic *serekh* from the Kharga Oasis

Publication of an inscription and associated rock-art discovered during survey work in the Kharga Oasis. This includes a previously unattested Early Dynastic *serekh*, here dated to Dynasty 0 or the early First Dynasty. The discovery demands a re-assessment of Early Dynastic activity in the Western Desert.

DURING the 2003–4 season of the North Kharga Oasis Survey (NKOS), a hitherto unnoticed *serekh* of an Early Dynastic pharaoh was discovered.¹ The inscription was found on the north-eastern face of a sandstone massif that stands alone in isolated splendour in the area close to a part of the Darb Ain Amur, the ancient caravan route that connected the Kharga Oasis via the site of Umm el-Dabadib and Ain Amur to the Dakhla Oasis and points further west and south-west, into Africa proper.

This area of desert is criss-crossed by several tracks that have been used at different times. The Darb Ain Amur is the main east–west track in the area and is named after the small oasis that lies at the western edge of the Kharga depression. It provided the final water source before caravans mounted the escarpment on their way to Dakhla, a march of about three to four days.² This caravan route consisted of several branches that departed from different sites in the main part of the Kharga depression (e.g. from Ain Lebekha and from Hibis), and converged on the way to Ain Amur, and continued on from there across the plateau to Dakhla. One of the aims of NKOS is to explore this ancient route and to document its history. Thus far, the Lebekha–Dabadib section of the route has been examined,³ and the investigation of the Dabadib–Ain Amur portion has now commenced.⁴

The desert between Umm el-Dabadib and Ain Amur is sandy with some areas that show evidence of dried lake beds, accompanied by prehistoric sites in various degrees of preservation, that are edged with sandstone ‘cliffs’. The sandy desert is periodically interrupted by lone sandstone rocks, as well as larger cliff-like outcrops, some of which bear inscriptions. The rock in the oasis and its environs is a poor quality sandstone, easily eroded by sand and wind activity; thus, it would appear that many areas once rich in historic inscriptions and prehistoric rock-art have now been weathered into oblivion. Indeed, in some instances the sandstone has disintegrated, with large portions of the rock face separating from the massifs and falling to the ground, where they have crumbled and returned to their original state of loose sand. Nevertheless, NKOS has located several sites showing graffiti ranging from the Prehistoric to the Islamic Period, including some dynastic material, which will be published in a number of forthcoming articles.

One of the most interesting finds is certainly the Early Dynastic *serekh* that is the subject of this communication, which was found on the north-eastern side of a rock that hosts several

¹ The authors would like to thank Günter Dreyer, Barry Kemp, and Toby Wilkinson for their evaluations and remarks on the *serekh*.

² H. E. Winlock, *Ed Dakhleh Oasis: Journal of a Camel Trip Made in 1908* (New York, 1936), 4–5.

³ For a description of the Darb Ain Amur between Ain Lebekha and Umm el-Dabadib, see C. Rossi and S. Ikram, ‘Petroglyphs and Inscriptions along the Darb Ayn Amur, Kharga Oasis’, *ZÄS* 129 (2002), 142–51.

⁴ The 2003 season of the North Kharga Oasis Survey, a project of Cambridge University and the American

University in Cairo co-directed by the authors, was sponsored by National Geographic, The McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research (Cambridge), the American University in Cairo, the Thomas Mulvey Fund (Cambridge), the Seven Pillars of Wisdom, and Churchill College (Cambridge). The co-directors wish to thank Magdy Hussein, inspector, and Bahgat Ahmed, Director of Antiquities of the Wadi el-Gedeed. Thanks also go to Ahmed Moussa and PanArab Tours for providing vehicles and logistic support.

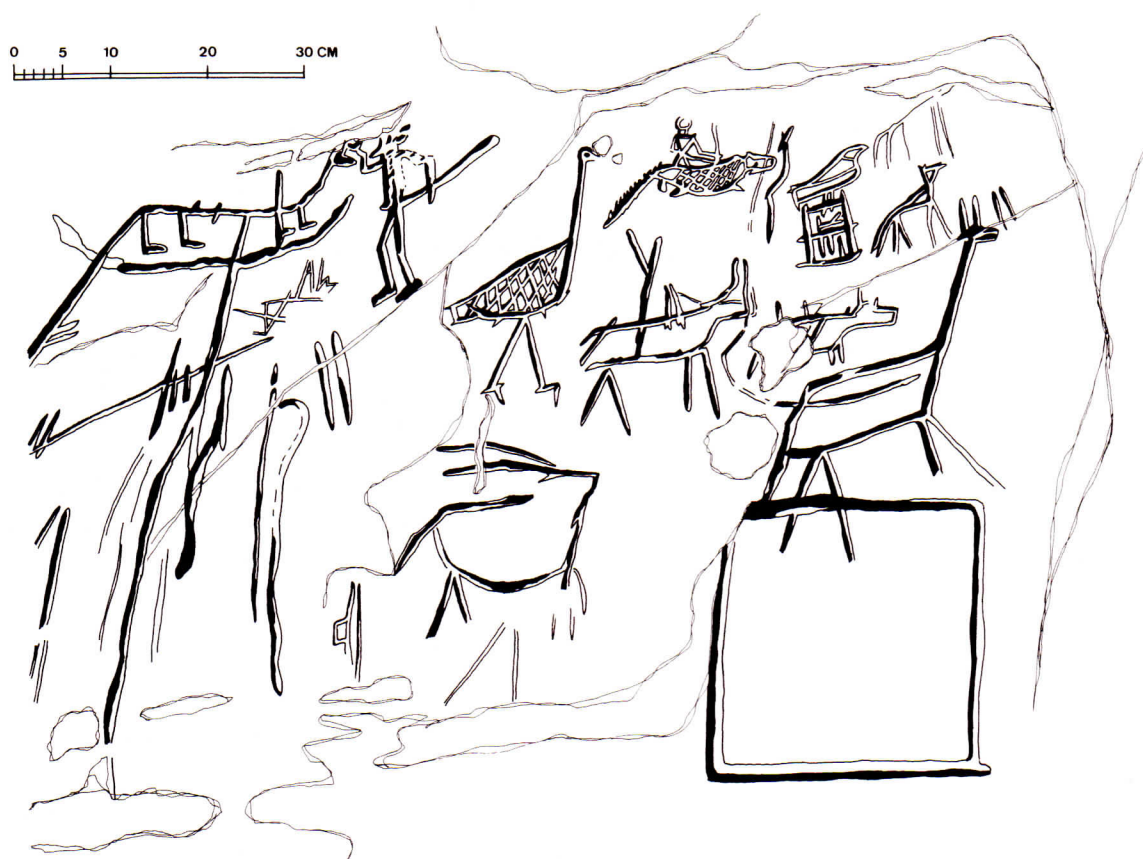


FIG. 1. A drawing of the entire scene, including the *serekh*, carved on an outcrop of rock near the Darb Ain Amur. Drawing by C. Rossi.

other groups of graffiti (fig. 1).⁵ It is not possible to be sure if the surrounding images form part of a larger composition that includes the *serekh*, or if the majority of these are of a prehistoric, or even a different dynastic, date. The other images represent a diversity of styles and depths of incisions, as well as varying erosion patterns and superpositioning. Thus, it is more probable that although a few of the images might be contemporary with the royal name, others were added at different times. There are faint, very eroded traces of earlier petroglyphs here as well.

The *serekh* (fig. 2) is conventionally surmounted by a falcon, and contains a single sign, that is likely to be an arm, simply 'a', the *ayin* (D36 in Gardiner's sign list). This sign does not correspond to the name of any known Early Dynastic ruler, neither among the kings whose existence has been attested by historical and archaeological evidence,⁶ nor among the mythical kings listed on the Palermo Stone.⁷

Among the known Early Dynastic kings, Aha and Qaa (respectively second and last king of the First Dynasty) possessed names that contained an arm-sign. Unless one wishes to support the idea of an unfinished inscription, Qaa is ruled out by the fact that there is no trace of the missing 'q'. In general, the style of the *serekh*, with its lines crossing over one another, as well as that of the falcon that surmounts the *serekh* and is tilted forward, bears a certain resemblance to examples of Aha's *serekh*.⁸ However, the name of Aha is invariably

⁵ Due to the increase in tourism, looting, vandalism, and non-scholarly traffic in the area the authors are not providing a GPS point for this rock. They hope that it is sufficient to say that it is some 12 km west of Umm el-Dabadib, en route to Ain Amur.

⁶ T. A. H. Wilkinson, *Early Dynastic Egypt* (London, 1999), 52–8.

⁷ T. A. H. Wilkinson, *Royal Annals of Ancient Egypt. The Palermo Stone and its Associated Fragments* (London, 2000), 85–9, 183–6.

⁸ For instance, the *serekh* found in the Royal Tomb at Naqada and pictured in W. B. Emery, *Archaic Egypt* (Harmondsworth, 1961), 50, fig. 10.



FIG. 2. Photograph of the *serekh* (photograph by S. Ikram).

written with two arms, one holding a weapon and one holding a shield, and here only one empty-handed arm is visible. One of the legs of the falcon reaches into the *serekh*. It is possible that this is just a coincidence, or it might reflect the usual representation of other *serekhs* of Aha, where the falcon actually holds the weapons himself inside the *serekh*. However, thus far there is no attestation of Aha's name being written without the shield. It should be noted that both Bruce Williams and Alejandro Jimenez-Serrano⁹ have suggested that this name might be an unusual paleography of Narmer, although this is unlikely.

The straight top of the *serekh* would suggest a date not earlier than the reign of Aha, since earlier examples, especially rock-cut ones, are often shown with concave tops. However, the Horus in the crouching position is more typical of Dynasty 0 and early First Dynasty *serekhs*;¹⁰ Günter Dreyer also suggests such a dating.¹¹ Thus, based on stylistic analysis it would seem that the *serekh* may contain the Horus name 'Aa' of a previously unattested king belonging to Dynasty 0 or the First Dynasty. This might be a king known to us by another name, or be an entirely new one. Certainly, new royal names have been appearing as a result of Dreyer's excavations at Abydos, as well as on various ceramic finds, especially those from Helwan.¹²

Taken as a whole, the scene includes a number of figures, human and animal, all facing to the right (fig. 1). The *serekh* is preceded by a canid, or more likely two, as the faint lines above the more deeply cut animal indicate another similar creature. Immediately behind, a man,

⁹ Bruce Williams and Alejandro Jimenez-Serrano, personal communication.

¹⁰ Toby Wilkinson, personal communication.

¹¹ Günter Dreyer, personal communication.

¹² E. C. Köhler and E. C. M. van den Brink, 'Four Jars with Incised *Serekh*-signs from Helwan Recently Retrieved from the Cairo Museum', *GM* 187 (2002), 59–75. Unknown *serekhs* had previously been noted

elsewhere: W. M. F. Petrie, *Tarkhan*, II (BSAE; London, 1914), pl. 6 [1702] and pl. 20 [1]; J. Leclant and G. Clerc, 'Fouilles et travaux en Égypte et au Soudan, 1984–1985', *Orientalia* 55 (1986), 244, pl. 11 [7]. An extensive collection of *serekhs* has also been found on pottery vessels; see E. C. M. van den Brink, 'The Incised *Serekh*-signs of Dynasties 0–1, Part I: Complete Vessels', in A. J. Spencer (ed.), *Aspects of Early Egypt* (London, 1996), 140–74.

depicted schematically yet eloquently as a circle and a triangle, is apparently hunting or capturing a crocodile.¹³ The crocodile's body is filled with a criss-cross pattern, indicative of its resilient hide, and vertical marks designate the 'spines' of the tail. Below the *serekh*, from right to left, proceed a giraffe,¹⁴ a damaged animal that might be identified as a hippopotamus,¹⁵ a cow or bull, and an ostrich,¹⁶ whose body is decorated with the same criss-cross pattern that fills in the contours of the crocodile (suggesting that it was drawn by the same hand, and at the same time). A large, rather globular, oryx is drawn on a slightly lower level behind the giraffe. It is possible that the animal's rotundity indicates pregnancy. Vertical marks protrude from the backs of the putative hippopotamus and the cow/bull, perhaps indicating the weapons or arrows with which they were being hunted, or something they were carrying, or later additions or mutilations. All these animals are drawn in outline, with only the ostrich and the crocodile having any details shown within the body.

A deeply incised square which cuts the giraffe's legs is clearly a later addition. It might be interpreted as an enclosure of some sort. Another such square was noted elsewhere on the rock. Behind the ostrich, standing slightly apart from the main group of animals and with his back to them, a man is shown together with a very long quadruped. The man faces left toward the animal and is drawn in a different style than the man with the crocodile; he is rendered with a few straight, deeply incised lines, and an attempt has been made to flesh out his torso, head, and arms with additional horizontal lines. The creature he faces also consists of deeply incised lines, unlike the other animals, which are drawn in outline.

Leaving aside the enclosure, the man and the mysterious quadruped, and the hatched animals, one could suggest that the *serekh* and the other animals were part of a single composition. They could show a hunting expedition that was carried out under royal auspices. However, due to the notorious difficulty in dating rock art¹⁷ there is no way of proving this suggestion; in fact, it might be argued that there would be no reason for an official hunting expedition this far from the Nile Valley unless some extremely unusual animal was sought. Thus, it is more probable that the *serekh* is independent of all of these other images, or that it is associated with only a few, and might attest to mineral or other exploration of the area, rather than hunting.

Conclusion

Recent exploration in the desert areas on either side of the Nile Valley shows that they were part of a transportation network from the earliest times¹⁸ and most especially in the Old

¹³ Other representations of crocodiles in the area have been found between Ain Lebekha and Umm el-Dabadi (Rossi and Ikram, *ZAS* 129, 149 and pl. 25b) and in north-eastern Dakhla: H. A. Winkler, *Rock-Drawings of Southern Upper Egypt*, II (EES ASE; London, 1939), pl. 4.2.

¹⁴ One of the most common animals to appear in the Prehistoric and Early Dynastic petroglyphs of this area and generally in the Western Desert; see, for instance, Winkler, *Rock-Drawings* II, pls. 14, 31–2, 51, 53–4.

¹⁵ The square profile of the head and the short legs resemble another representation of a hippopotamus from the Eastern Desert; see H. A. Winkler, *Rock-Drawings of Southern Upper Egypt*, I (EES ASE; London, 1938), pl. 14.

¹⁶ It may be interesting to compare the completely different style of representation displayed by this ostrich with that found along the Nile south of Edfu and one found at Uweinat (Winkler, *Rock-Drawings* I, pl. 20, and II, pl. 38).

¹⁷ For an up-to-date bibliography and discussion of rock art and dating, see D. Coulson and A. Campbell, *African Rock Art* (New York, 2001).

¹⁸ For a summary of the archaeological finds in the desert west of the Theban region, see J. C. Darnell,

'Opening the Narrow Doors of the Desert', in R. Friedman (ed.), *Egypt and Nubia: Gifts of the Desert* (London, 2002), 132–55. For the Farshut Road, see, in particular, J. C. Darnell, *Theban Desert Road Survey in the Egyptian Western Desert*, I. *Gebel Tjahuti Rock Inscriptions 1–45 and Wadi el-Hôl Rock Inscriptions 1–45* (OIP 119; Chicago, 2002). For roads in the desert leading to Kharga and elsewhere, see D. Darnell, 'Gravel of the Desert and Broken Pots in the Road: Ceramic Evidence from the Routes between the Nile and Kharga Oasis', in Friedman (ed.), *Egypt and Nubia*, 156–77. For a summary of the archaeological activities in the Dakhla area, see O. E. Kaper and H. Willems, 'Policing the Desert: Old Kingdom Activity around the Dakhleh Oasis', in Friedman (ed.), *Egypt and Nubia*, 79–94. For activities further west, see R. Kuper, 'Routes and Roots in Egypt's Western Desert: The Early Holocene Resettlement of the Eastern Sahara', in Friedman (ed.), *Egypt and Nubia*, 1–12; R. Kuper and F. Förster, 'Khufu's "Mefat" Expeditions into the Libyan Desert', *EA* 23 (2003), 25–8; and K. P. Kuhlmann, 'The "Oasis Bypass" or the Issue of Desert Trade in Pharaonic Times', in *Tides of the Desert. Contributions to the Archaeology and Environmental*

Kingdom, during which time the Dakhla Oasis was clearly an important site, as indicated by the finds at Balat and Ain Asil.¹⁹ The discovery of a Unification/Early Dynastic *serekh* in the area between Kharga and Dakhla is a valuable piece of information in itself as, to the authors' knowledge, no Early Dynastic royal name has ever been found in any of the Western Desert oases so far, and at such a distance from the Nile Valley. The presence of this *serekh* in the Kharga Oasis certainly adds new evidence to the extent of royally sponsored travels in the Early Dynastic Period. It also ties in neatly to contemporary activities in the Nile Valley at Abydos. The importance of Abydos during the First Dynasty is well attested by the presence of the major cemetery of Umm el-Qaab.²⁰ Abydos is also the starting point of one of the best tracks leading to Kharga Oasis, and was, indeed, the one favoured by Gertrude Caton-Thompson when she made her first foray into the oasis.²¹ Other early royal graffiti have been found in the cliffs behind Armant, including the names of Narmer, Raneb, and the so-called King B;²² this area is an obvious starting point for another relatively short route to Kharga.²³

The presence of this Horus name poses intriguing questions as to when the Egyptians first exploited these trails west of the Nile Valley, the climate at the time, where or what the routes led to, and who used them. Clearly this Early Dynastic exploration paved the way for the later expeditions in the time of Khufu and Djedefre. More research will be necessary to clarify these points, but it is important to have established that an Early Dynastic king seems already to have been involved in the exploration of the Western Desert, possibly six or seven centuries before Harkhuf and his memorable travels.²⁴

SALIMA IKRAM and CORINNA ROSSI

Hieratic varia

Publication of O. Ashmolean Museum HO 219 (belonging with O. BM EA 25289); discussion of O. Hasany Abdel-Galil (which appears to be the same text as O. Brunner); interpretation of the toponym in P. BM EA 10335 recto 2; and discussion of P. Turin Cat. 2034.

WORK at The Deir el-Medina Database¹ and the ongoing Deir el-Medina research group at Leiden University often yield little discoveries that do not make substantial articles, but which seem useful enough to appear in print. The present communication is a collection of such discoveries: (1) the joining of two ostraca that form one single document; (2) the identification of two separately published texts as one and the same; (3) the solution to an old lexical problem; (4) the correction of an iconographic misunderstanding.

History of Africa in Honour of Rudolph Kuper (Africa Praehistorica 14; Cologne, 2002), 125–70.

¹⁹ The work of the French Institute in Cairo provides a vast body of information concerning these areas. See, for example, G. Soukiasian et al., *Le palais des gouverneurs de l'époque de Pepy II* (FIFAO 46; Cairo, 2002); M. Vallogia, *Le monument funéraire d'Ima-Pepy, Ima-Meryrê* (FIFAO 38; Cairo, 1998); and M. Vallogia and N. Henein, *Le mastaba de Medou-Nefer* (FIFAO 31; Cairo, 1986).

²⁰ See, for instance, W. Kaiser and G. Dreyer, 'Umm el-Qaab. Nachuntersuchungen im frühzeitlichen Königsfriedhof. 2. Vorbericht', *MDAIK* 38 (1982), 211–69; G. Dreyer, 'Umm el-Qaab. Nachuntersuchungen im frühzeitlichen Königsfriedhof. 3/4 Vorbericht', *MDAIK* 46 (1990), 93–104; and G. Dreyer, 'Umm el-Qaab.

Nachuntersuchungen im frühzeitlichen Königsfriedhof. 5/6 Vorbericht', *MDAIK* 49 (1993), 23–62.

²¹ *Kharga Oasis in Prehistory* (London, 1952), ix–xiii.

²² T. A. H. Wilkinson, 'A New King in the Western Desert', *JEA* 81 (1995), 205–10.

²³ See, for instance, L. L. Giddy, *Egyptian Oases* (Warminster, 1987), map 2.

²⁴ M. Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature: A Book of Reading*, I. *The Old and Middle Kingdoms* (Berkeley, CA, 1973), 23–8.

¹ Carried out since 1997 by R. J. Demarée, K. Donker van Heel, B. J. J. Haring and J. Toivari-Viitala, with the support of the Netherlands Foundation for Scientific Research (NWO) and the Faculty of Arts of Leiden University. URL: <http://www.leidenuniv.nl/nino/dmd/dmd.html>.