

Gebel Sheikh Suleiman: a First dynasty relief after all...¹

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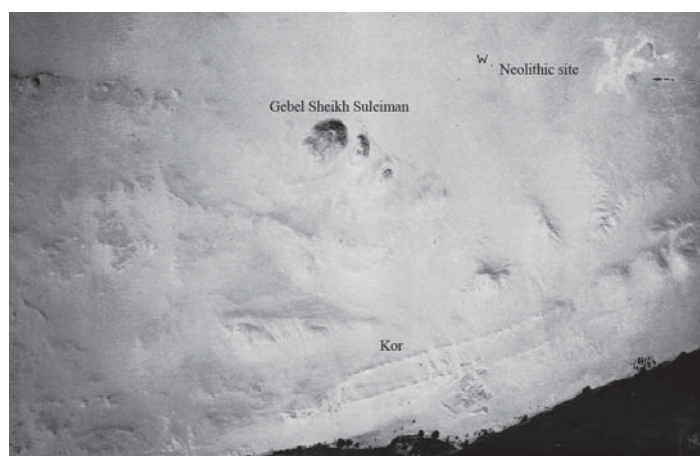
Cet article propose de réexaminer le relief bien connu mais étonnamment peu étudié du Gebel Sheikh Suleiman en Nubie, à l'extrémité nord de la Deuxième Cataracte, près des sites du Moyen Empire de Kor et Buhen. L'article se compose d'une étude approfondie des représentations et inscriptions les plus anciennes gravées sur le bloc. Les auteurs suggèrent que la scène principale pourrait être datée du règne du roi Djer de la I^{re} dynastie, mais d'après des critères différents de ceux utilisés par Arkell, qui a le premier publié le relief en 1950. Il apparaît également que l'iconographie de la scène a été soigneusement choisie et est extrêmement proche de celle des principaux monuments connus pour les débuts de la royauté égyptienne, dans une tentative d'exprimer la domination égyptienne sur une zone déjà contrôlée par le Groupe A.

This paper aims to re-examine the well-known but surprisingly little studied relief of Gebel Sheikh Suleiman in Nubia, at the North end of the Second Cataract, near the Middle Kingdom sites of Kor and Buhen. The article consists of a comprehensive study of the earliest representations and inscriptions written on the block. The authors suggests that the main scene could be dated to the

reign of king Djer of the First Dynasty, but on different premises from those given by Arkell, who first published the relief in 1950. It also appears that the iconography of the scene was carefully chosen and is extremely close to that displayed on the main monuments of early Egyptian kingship, in an attempt to express Egyptian domination over an area previously ruled by the A-Group.

Located on a rocky hill on the Second Cataract of the Nile (**fig. 1-3**), near by the latter pharaonic settlement of Kor and Buhen, the Gebel Sheikh Suleiman relief was first

Fig. 2
Aerial
photography of
Gebel Sheikh
Suleiman region
(after Smith
1966: pl. XXVII).



1. This paper summarises our more lengthy analysis of the relief (Somaglino & Tallet 2014).

Fig. 3

Photo montage of Hinkel's photographs (after Bonnet 1997: 37).



Fig. 4

The Gebel Sheikh Suleiman relief
 a) Arkell 1950: 28, fig. 1 ;
 b) Murnane 1987: 285, fig. 1A,B.



reported by A.H. Sayce in 1910 and fully published by A.J. Arkell in 1950 (Sayce 1910: 261-263, who attributed the relief to the Eleventh Dynasty; Arkell 1950: 24-40, sp. 28-31)². This large block of sandstone (2,75m x 0,80m) was carved with a very ancient scene showing the victory of an Egyptian king, embodied by his *serekh*, upon Nubian groups (fig. 4). In 1963, shortly before the drowning of the area by the water of the Lake Nasser and as part as the salvage campaign of Lower Nubia, it was transferred to the Khartoum Museum where it can still be seen nowadays (Hinkel 1965: 97).

Shortly after its publication, scholars became aware of the relief being one of the most important sources for the history of the relationship between Egypt and Nubia at the dawn of the pharaonic era. Its dating remains very controversial though. It was first attributed by Arkell to the reign of Djer (I.3), because of the presence of a very crude carving over the upper part of the *serekh* that could be mistaken for the hieroglyphic sign (𓆎) used to write the name of this king. This dating has been repeatedly challenged mainly because this engraving is without doubt the

2. A Neolithic site had been located too some 400 m north of the Gebel Sheikh Suleiman: Smith 1966: 243.

representation of a gazelle from a much later period (Helck 1970: 85; Hofmann 1971: 308). In the last important study devoted to this monument and after a new examination of the relief in 1982, Murnane supported a dating to the late predynastic period, largely because the *serekh* gives no royal name (Murnane 1987: 283-284). This dating appears to be supported by the presence on the rocky hill of another and more crude relief with a scorpion, dated by stylistic criteria to Naqada IIIA or B (Needler 1967: 87-91; Wilkinson 1999: 51; Breyer 2002: 53-6). This precedent seemed to make even more plausible an early armed intervention of one of the kings of Dynasty 0 on the Second Cataract. This early dating is now most often agreed with³. However, a close re-examination of the monument in the Khartoum Museum allowed us to observe many significant new elements that could cast some doubt on it (fig. 5)⁴.

The original scene covers almost completely a surface of 2.70m – 0.50m – 0.80m, and was carved using two different techniques: the main figures (the human beings and the low part of the *serekh* mainly) are in raised relief while the other elements are just incised in the sandstone. Nonetheless, it constitutes a unique and coherent composition⁵ that could be divided in two main pictures roughly of the same length (fig. 6). To the right, the scene is organised around a boat of large size, whose prow is turned toward the left, giving the orientation of the whole group. Its upright stern gives it a well known profile for the Naqadian period, but some features, especially the bulge of the prow and the small low cabin nearby, have their closest parallels at the very beginning of the Dynastic Period, for example in the boat represented on the Narmer Palette, on the Plover Palette and on newly found reliefs



Fig. 5

New drawing of the Gebel Sheikh Suleiman relief: the original scene (1/10e).

0 50 cm

3. E.g. Wilkinson 1999: 177-179 and more recently Knoblauch 2012: 338-339 (with the complete bibliography).

4. Many thanks to Claude Rilly, director of the SFDAS then, for his help in the Museum of Khartoum in January 2014. This examination of the relief and the many photos we took on this occasion, allows us to study too all the secondary epigraphy, in particular an important series of Middle Kingdom graffiti (Somaglino & Tallet 2014): 31-39. Our paper in *Nehet* was nearly finished, when we became aware of another study dedicated to this monument by X. Droux and R. Friedman, which was presented at the conference *Origins 5* in Cairo in April 2014, under the title "Gebel Sheikh Suleiman revisited". Their conclusions are very different from ours though.

5. As already stated by Murnane 1987: 283, *contra* Helck 1970: 85, for whom all the engraved elements are from a later date. Both techniques are used for the same motifs: for instance the first *njw* sign (from the left) is incised, while the bird above it is on raised relief; as for the royal boat on the right half of the composition, it is incised, but the rope attached to its prow is on raised relief.

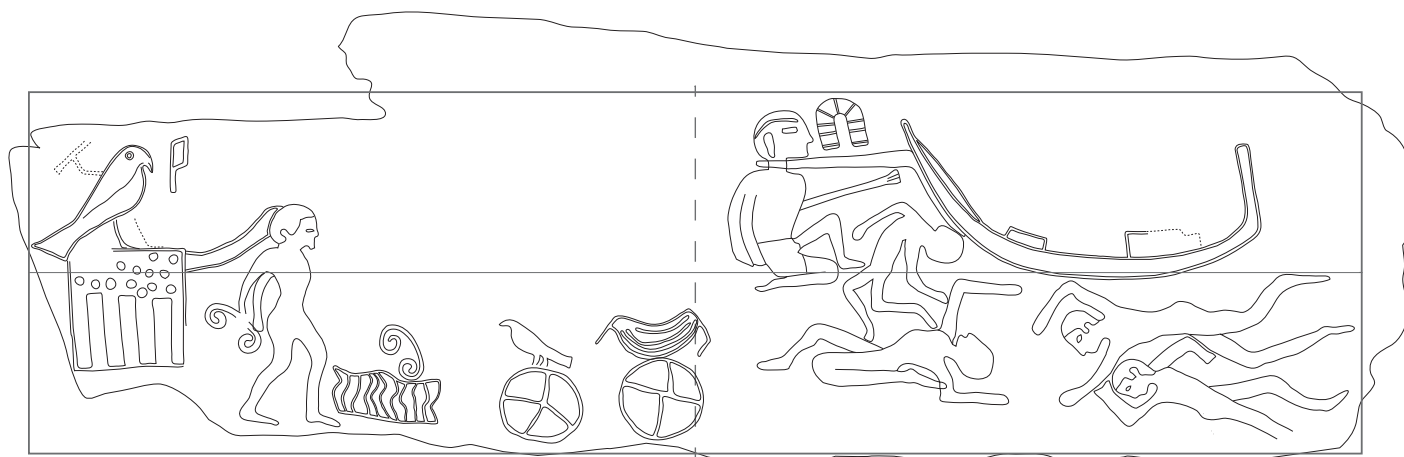


Fig. 6
 Division of the figurative space in the Gebel Sheikh Suleiman relief (1/10e).

0 50 cm

in Wadi ‘Ameyra (South Sinai) (fig. 7)⁶. This boat, which is obviously an embodiment of the king, dominates defeated Nubians. In front of the boat, a kneeling prisoner, hands attached on his back and an arrow piercing his chest, is tied to the prow of the boat by a rope around his neck⁷. In our opinion, the horse-shoe shaped element carved before his face is not the representation of any kind of building (hut or chapel)⁸, but a hieroglyphic caption – maybe a *md* sign (𓄿)⁹ – which gives its name to the vanquished Nubian group. This practice is once again well attested on the Narmer Palette¹⁰. Below the boat hull, two pairs of dislocated foes are shown as if they were floating on the river. This is a well-known iconography for the whole Naqadian Period, with close

parallels on the Vulture’s Palette, the Gebel el-Arak knife, the Narmer Palette and on the base of Khasekhemwy’s two statues at the end of the Second Dynasty¹¹. The left scene is probably to be read from left to right: the most important element is logically the *serekh* in raised relief. Our examination of this feature confirms that there is no royal name inside. It doesn’t belong however to the category of the “anonymous *serekh*”, but to the one of the “plain *serekh*”¹², and more particularly of the “plain dotted *serekh*”: a space to include a royal name was never planned. Instead, three irregular rows of dots are carved probably to represent an architectural element, like the beams often included in light or mud brick architecture. A few examples of this rare iconogra-

6. Narmer Palette (Cairo CG 32169): bibliography in Fr. Raffaele, *Late Predynastic and Early Dynastic Egypt* [online], URL: <http://xoomer.virgilio.it/francescoraf/hesyra/palettes/narmerp.htm> (page seen the 02/03/2014); Plover palette (Cairo CG 14238 bis; Quibell 1905: 233); Wadi ‘Ameyra (Tallet & Laisney 2012; Tallet forthcoming, doc. 273 and 276).

7. This kind of iconography, where an “acting boat” captures an animal or a man is known elsewhere (Hendrickx et al. 2009: 174-176; Hendrickx 2011: 119-121.): cf. Qustul incense burner for instance.

8. As stated in Arkell 1950: 29; Murnane 1987: 283.

9. Gardiner V19 or V20. This sign is to our knowledge only used to write the numeral 10 in the corpus of inscription of the protodynastic period (Kahl 1994: 772-773, Regulski 2010: 676-677).

10. Mention of 𓄿 *wr* or 𓄿 *wr Hr* in front of the royal boat on the first register of the front (perhaps a designation of Buto: Midant-Reynes 1992: 228); caption behind the head of the captive on the main scene of the back, as well as in front of the face of the two foes on the low register.

11. BM EA 20791 (Spencer 1980: n°576, pl. 64); Louvre E11517 (Midant-Reynes 2003: 314-325); statues of Khasekhemwy Cairo JE 32161 and Oxford, Ashmolean Museum E 517 (Adams 1990: 161-163).

12. For this terminology of the « plain *serekh* », cf. E. van den Brink, in his study dedicated to *serekh* incised on jars (2001: 25).

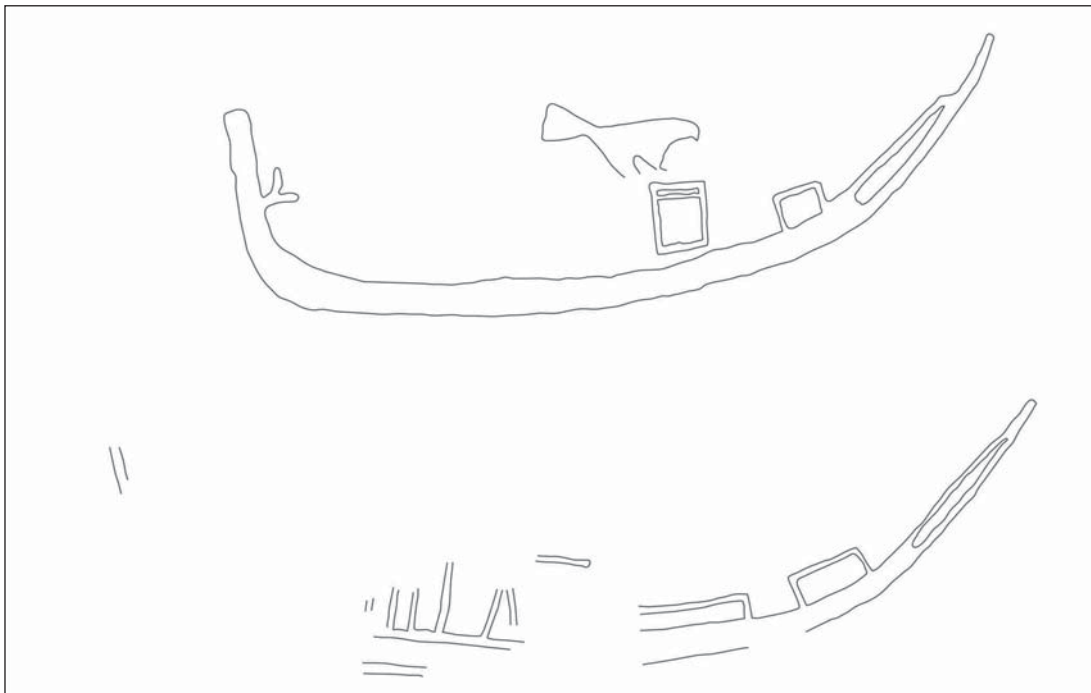


Fig. 7
Parallels to the royal boat:
a) Wadi 'Ameyra (panel I);
b) Narmer palette;
c) Plover palette (Cairo CG 14238bis).



b.



c.

phy occur from the Naqadian Period to the Middle Kingdom (Whitehouse 2004: 1115-1128), but the closest parallels are definitely to be found on a series of beads from Djer's tomb in Umm el-Ga'ab (**fig. 8**)¹³.

As for the falcon, previous scholars only have identified its head so far, which gave a very unexpected shape to the bird. Our

close examination of the relief allows us to complete its drawing: it seems quite clear that a standing falcon was carved here, whose tail lies on the upper left corner of the *serekh*. Hence the bird has the classical shape that could be observed on official inscriptions and monuments from the reign of Djer onward¹⁴.

13. From one bracelet in gold and turquoise (CGC 52008: Petrie 1901: 17-18, pl. I.1) and another in lapis-lazuli and ivory (BM EA 35527 and 35528: Petrie 1901: 17, pl. XXXV.81, Spencer 1980: 572 B, 573, pl. 62; new beads in lapis-lazuli have been recently found in Abydos by the DAI team: Dreyer et al. 2003: 86-87, pl. XVI B.)

14. For the "uprighting" of the falcon upon the *serekh* from the reigns of Aha and Djer, see Hendrickx, Friedman & Eyckerman 2011: 142-143; Regulski 2010: 752-762.



a.

Fig. 8

Beads in the form of a dotted serekh topped with a falcon found in the tomb of Djer in Abydos:

- a) Gold and turquoise (Caire CG 52008; after Vernier 1927: pl. V);
- b) Ivory (BM EA 35528);
- c) Lapis-lazuli (Dreyer *et al.* 2003: 86-87, pl. XVI B).



b.

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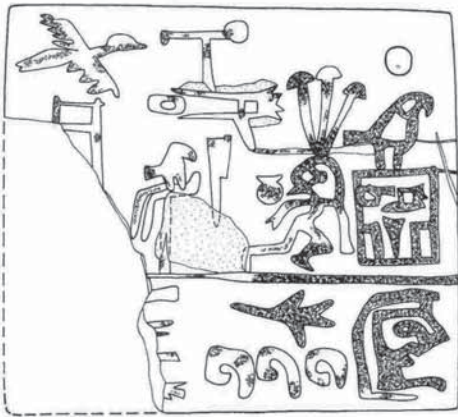
c.

To the right of the *serekh*, another Nubian, this time standing, has his hands tied behind his back by mean of a sort of handcuff, whose shape recalls the bow sign *stj* (𓆎 Aa32) which usually designates Nubia. It seems possible to distinguish also on the sandstone the drawing of a kind of arm spouting out the upper left corner of the *serekh* and holding this prisoner by the neck. This kind of smiting *serekh* or smiting king's name is only known in Egypt from the reign of Narmer to the reign of Djet through six occurrences— three of them very recently discovered in the Abydos Necropolis and South-Sinai (**fig. 9**)¹⁵. Looking back carefully to the falcon, it is perhaps possible to distinguish also, as on these other documents, a right raised arm, holding a mace to smite the Nubian enemy.

As in the right scene of the relief, the prisoner symbolising the vanquished tribe is identified by means of a hieroglyphic caption. Here two signs are readable: the lowest one, which appears on all the previous drawings of the scene, is clearly the sign of the pool (𓆎 N39; Arkell 1950: 29; Murnane 1987: 282. For N39: Kahl 1994: 616-619, Regulski 2010: 152-153, 532-533). Above it, a second sign is very faint but decipherable: it is no doubt a second occurrence of the *stj* sign. The orientation of this last sign clearly links this group to the Nubian foe. The best parallel is again to be found on the Narmer Palette where a comparable group (a harpoon sign above N39), is written on the right of the foe held by the king¹⁶. In both cases it stands as the name of the defeated country, and could possibly be read “region /domain of the Nubian” in the Gebel Sheikh Suleiman relief.

15. A commemorative label of Narmer from Umm el-Qa'ab (Dreyer *et al.* 1998: 139; Dreyer & Poltz 2007: 215); an ivory cylinder-seal of the same king from Hierakonpolis (Quibell 1900: pl. 15,7; Kaplony 1963: fig. 5; Whitehouse 2002: 425-446.); Aha label from Abydos (Petrie 1901: pl. 3.2, 11.2; Jimenez-Serrano 2002: 87; Wilkinson 1999: 178, fig. 5.3 (3); Kahl 2003a: 132, fig. 12.); a rock inscription of the reign of Djer, recently discovered in South-Sinai, in the Wadi 'Ameyra; two labels from Umm el-Qa'ab, of the reign of Djet (Dreyer *et al.* 1998: 162-163, pl. 12a; complemented by a fragment discovered after (Dreyer *et al.* 2003: 93-94, pl. 18f; Fr. Raffaele: <http://xoomer.virgilio.it/francescoraf/hesyra/labels/xxdjet16.htm> (seen the 10/03/2014).

16. On the interpretation of this group, summary in Kaplony 1958: 76-77.



a.



b.



c.




e.




d.

Fig. 9
The smiting serekh or king's name:
a) Narmer label;
b) Narmer cylinder seal (drawing Mathieu Begon);
c) Aha label (drawing Mathieu Begon);
d) Djer rock inscription in Wadi Ameyra;
e) Djet label (photo from Dreyer et al. 2003: pl. XVIII f).

The last group belonging to the right scene is constituted by two complex signs associating what could only be a *njwt*-sign with a bird in one case and a so far unidentified element on the other¹⁷. The *njwt*-sign indicates that it is the writing of two toponyms or more probably the symbolization of two cities. Given the orientation of the bird toward the prisoner, these two cities seem to help the king to dominate the Nubian. This bird looks like a falcon¹⁸ and we propose to identify the first group as a designation of the falcon city of Hierakonpolis. As for the second group, we think that the upper element is a golden collar *nbw*-sign () whose fasteners are fairly distinguishable on both sides of the object (that is particularly clear on old photographs of the scene: see **fig. 3**; Keating 1962: fig. 2; Hinkel 1978: 56; Bonnet 1997: 37). Why not consider it as an evocation of the town of Naqada, whose name *Nbwt* could have been known at least since the reign of Den and on more firm grounds since the Second Dynasty onward¹⁹. It's tantalizing to see here the two main Naqadian cities helping the Abydene king to subdue the Nubian enemy.

This new examination of the relief shows many new data – smiting *serekh*, falcon, toponyms and hieroglyphic captions – that may be used to propose a new dating. All the criteria are summarized in the **table 1**. It becomes clear from this table that the most likely dating of the Gebel Sheikh Suleiman relief would be of the reigns of Djer or Djet, the third and fourth kings of the First

Dynasty. Moreover, given the new sources found in Umm el-Ga'ab, the first half of this dynasty is characterised by Egyptian military expeditions in Nubia, especially during the reigns of Aha and Djet²⁰, leading to the annihilation of the Nubian Terminal A-Group²¹.

Another clue may help to identify the king who had this relief carved on the very heart of the A-Group territory. Immediately on the right of the falcon's head, a large *yod*-sign () is deeply incised. So far, it has been considered as part of the later epigraphy – mostly from the Middle Kingdom – added on every empty space of the block. But on one hand, it seemed pretty isolated compared to the other Middle Kingdom graffiti. On the other hand, the size, orientation and position of this sign seem to link it to the falcon²². The newly discovered inscriptions in the Wadi 'Ameyra could provide the solution: this may be the first sign of king Djer's birth name, *jt*, which had been used on official monuments by this ruler, the sign *t* being perhaps erased just below (**fig. 10 & 11**; Tallet 2013).

From all the elements discussed so far, we think we can propose on firm grounds a dating of the Gebel Sheikh Suleiman relief under the reign of Djer. The impressive development of the hieroglyphic captions – not only are the Nubian tribes identified, but also the Egyptian allies and probably the king himself – is a good clue pointing to the first half of the First Dynasty and not before.

However, it seems not so surprising that several scholars attributed it to earlier periods,

17. It had been so far tentatively identified to a “Khons-sign” or “placenta-sign” (Williams & Logan 1987: 264).

18. It could be a swallow too, the two signs being very much alike. But the falcon seems more probable (compare Regulski 2010, 419-420 and 450).

19. A seal impression recently discovered in Umm el-Ga'ab was produced by V. Müller during the conference *Origins5* in Cairo, April 2014. It seems to refer to Hierakonpolis, Naqada and their patron gods Horus and Seth as king's assistants during monarchic celebrations; the first undoubted occurrence of the toponym *Nbw.t* is from the reign of Peribsen (Kahl 2003b: 230 = Kaplony 1963: 750).

20. We know of four documents of the First Dynasty about Egyptian military campaigns in Nubia: two labels of Aha (see *supra* and Petrie 1901: 20, pl. 3.3) and two of Djet (see *supra*). Many more documents seemed to mention *Ta-seti*, but without certainty for the representation of a bow or a bowman is not proof enough.

21. For the most recent research on the A-Group, cf. Gatto 2006: 61-76; 2011: 81-100.

22. The *yod* sign during the Early Dynastic period show the indication of strias (Regulski 2010: 490-494). Clearly, there are not such details here, but the general form of the sign could find some parallels in the corpus of the private stele from Abydos: see in particular stele 114 and 115 (Martin 2011: 93).

Table 1 • Dating criteria

	Predyn.	Narmer	Aha	Djer	Djet	Den	end of I st -II nd dyn.
Royal boat	X	X					
« Floating » dead enemies	X	X					X
« Representative » enemies		X	X	X	X	X	X
Tie strangling the enemy	X	X					
<i>md</i> -sign			X	X	X	X	X
<i>Njw.t</i> -sign associated to a toponym				X	X	X	X
Toponym <i>Nbw.t</i> (Ombos)						X	X
Toponyms including <i>š</i>		X					
<i>Stj</i> -sign	X		X		X	X	X
“Standing” falcon				X	X	X	X
<i>Serekh</i> without name (a)	X	X	X	X		X	X
Dotted <i>Serekh</i> (b)				X			X
Smiting name of the king (c)		X	X	X	X		
Nubian campaign	X		X		X		X

NB: the sequences in light grey indicate the chronological milestones of a dating criterion.

a) Anonymous *serekh* and plain *serekh* are gathered here.

b) One of the occurrences of this motive could only be dated in a chronological range from dynasty 0 to the reign of Djet. It has not been taking into account here¹.

c) Under the reign of Narmer, it is the catfish in the writing of the king's name that smites the enemy. From the reign of Aha, either the *serekh* itself or the falcon upon it are shown in the same action.

1. A palette from Abydos: Caire TR 13/9/32/6; Arkell 1950: 29; Petrie 1903: pl. 9 (205).

for many features are undoubtedly archaizing. As we have seen before, the closest parallels to the boat do appear during the period from Naqada III-A to Narmer, as is the case for the motif of the “floating” foes. Moreover, their combination here evokes once again the Narmer palette. Such a voluntarily use of archaism as a way of quoting older monuments from prestigious periods of Egyptian history is a well known phenomenon as soon as the First Dynasty, in order to legitimize the ruling king (Kaplony 2002: 464-486). For instance, king Den's reliefs in Sinai, associating the king with the vizier and a sandal-bearer, seem to be a reminder, about one century after, of Narmer's monuments (Ibrahim & Tallet 2008; Tallet 2010). At the end of the Second Dynasty, the base of the two statues of Khasekhemwy also displayed archaizing motifs: the floating foes and the representation of the northern enemy with the marshland sign, recall the Narmer label and palette. The conscious use of these representational codes allows a ruler

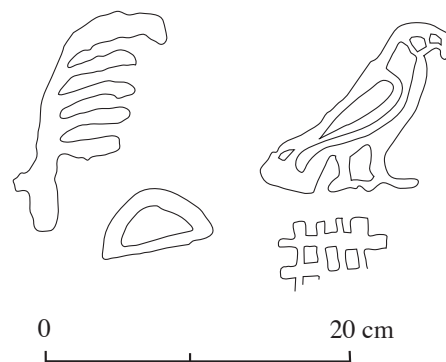


Fig. 10
Wadi 'Ameyra
rock inscription:
Djer's birth name.

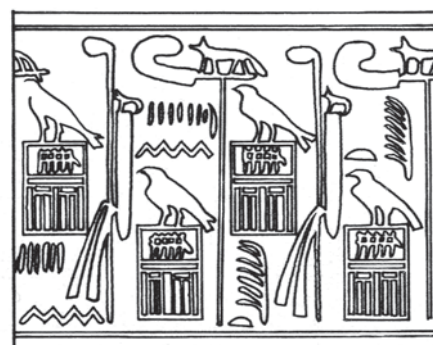


Fig. 11
Seal impression
linking Djer's
birth-name and
Horus name
(Kaplony 1963:
fig. 175).

who reunified Egypt under his authority after a period of division, to embody more clearly his model, the king whom the tradition considers as the first unifier of the country, Narmer.

In the case of the Gebel Sheikh Suleiman, these archaising iconographical references should have been meant to demonstrate the antiquity of the Egyptian conquest of the whole region. The absence of a royal name in the *serekh*, put forward by some scholars as a clue for the predynastic dating of the scene, could rather be used to stress the original principle of the Egyptian control over the region. This monument could have had a twofold purpose: to commemorate a military campaign and more broadly to be a strong sign of the permanence of the Egyptian power over the region, in the very heart of the territory of an A-Group at last defeated. The Gebel Sheikh Suleiman relief is undoubtedly a masterpiece of the definition of the Egyptian royal power. It could only be compared, in term of complexity and conception, to the more elaborate of the monuments of this period, such as the Scorpion mace, the Narmer Palette or the Den

reliefs recently discovered in South-Sinai. Our re-examination of this monument had provided us some precise historical information: it must have been carved to commemorate a military campaign driven during the first half of the First Dynasty, more precisely during the reign of Djer whose birth name *Jt* seems to be linked to the representation of the falcon upon the *serekh*. This victory was won against a population or tribe named *Md* – is it an old name for the A-Group or at least one of its component? – in a region designated by the toponym *Stj* or *š Stj* : “the Nubians’ region”. In the frame of this military campaign, the Abydene king would have benefited from the support of the historical cities of Hierakonpolis and Naqada, unless their symbolization here is a sophisticated means to suggest the intangible unity of Egypt in its action. In the end, what should be kept in mind is the strong ideological content of this monument: even if the king is not designated by his throne-name or even its Horus name, he displayed his power by all the means available at the time, in order to claim his conquest over the Nubian territory.

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