

Once more the Nag el-Hamdulab early hieroglyphic annotation

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In the previous volume of *Archéo-Nil*, two authors turned their attentions to the early hieroglyphic annotation consisting of four signs that accompanies the important rock art tableau 7a from Nag el-Hamdulab (Fig. 1), immediately to the north of Aswan. The inscription (Fig. 2) dates to the very end of the Predynastic period or eventually to the beginning of the reign of Narmer.¹ Both authors question the reading of the four-sign inscription in tableau 7a as proposed by Darnell.² Matthieu Begon dedicates an entire article to the topic³ while Pascal Vernus discusses the inscription in the context of the origins of writing in Egypt.⁴ The aim of the present contribution is to discuss and question both of the proposed reidentifications of the signs and re-readings of the inscription.

Darnell transliterates the inscription as *šms <-Hr-> nḥb B3* and translates it as “Nautical Following <of Horus>; taxation of Panther-Skin-Town”.⁵ Mathieu Begon identifies three out of the four signs differently (Fig. 3), without actually arguing against the previous identifications. Even more problematic is that he does so without taking into account the palaeographic work of Ilona Regulski, despite the fact that this is the unanimously accepted reference work for the

1. Hendrickx, Darnell & Gatto 2012; Hendrickx, Darnell, Gatto & Eyckerman 2012.

2. Darnell 2015. This reading differs slightly from the one previously proposed by Darnell in Hendrickx et al. 2012: 308-310.

3. Begon 2016. Begon mentions in the title of his article the Nag el-Hamdulab tableau as a “bas-relief” but all of the Nag el-Hamdulab tableaux are made by pecking contour lines and can hardly be considered “bas-relief”.

4. Vernus 2016: 122-123.

5. Darnell 2015: 29.

earliest palaeography of Egypt.⁶ His attempted identifications also ignore the actual shapes of the Nag el-Hamdulab signs.

The starting point of Begon's interpretation is the third sign of the inscription and at the same time the only one he identifies as Darnell does. In surviving inscriptions known thus far, this hieroglyph  (Gardiner F9) occurs for the earliest dynasties only at the beginning of two words, one of which – *b3k3* –

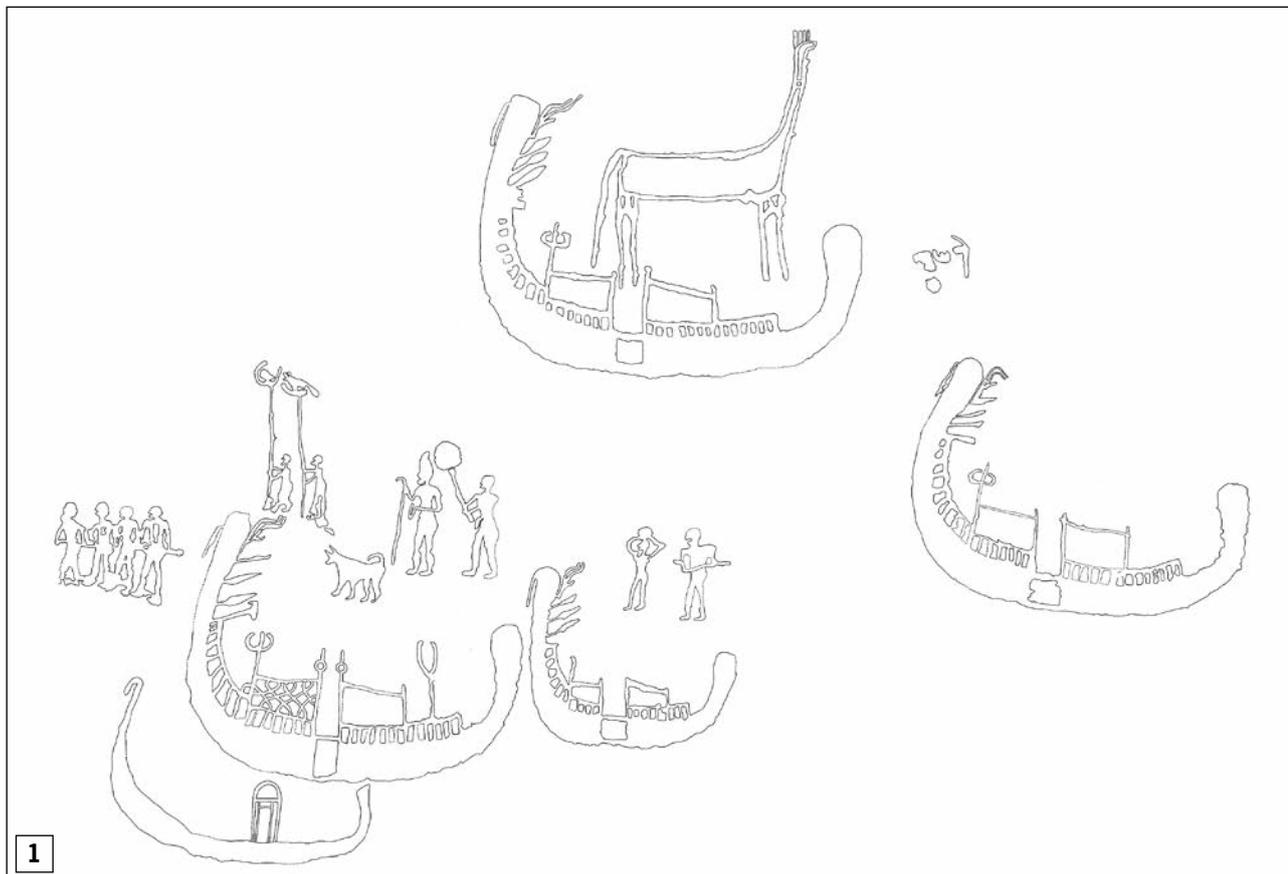
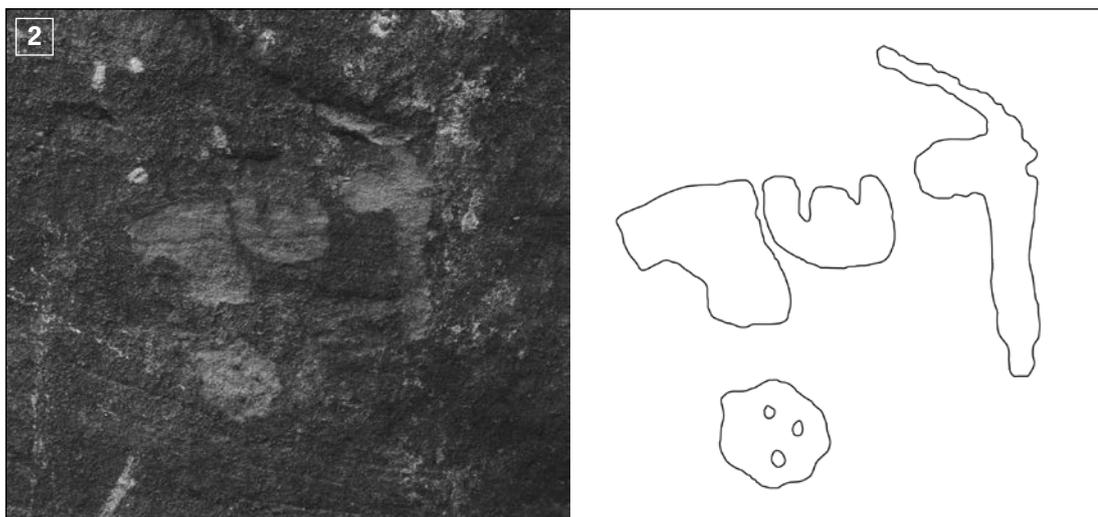


Fig. 1
Nag el-Hamdulab
tableau 7a.

Fig. 2
Nag el-Hamdulab
tableau 7a, detail
of inscription
(photo & drawing).



6. Regulski 2010.

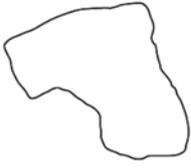
Nag el-Hamdulab	Darnell 2015 (after Regulski 2010)	Gardiner	Begon 2016 (after Regulski 2010 and Begon 2016)	Gardiner
		 F9		 F9
		 M9		 D28
		 T18		 U25
		 O49  O50		 W24

Fig. 3
Hamdulab
inscription/
Darnell
identification/
Begon
identification
(after Regulski
2010 and
Begon 2016).

refers to an (unidentified) type of stone used for the production of stone vessels. Convinced of a link with the production of stone vessels, Begon reads the inscription as *hm(.t) b3k3 (t3.t)*, “producing (globular) vessels in *b3k3* stone”. However, simple glances at the manner in which the signs are written during late Predynastic and Early Dynastic times⁷ show already that the identifications by Begon tend to force the evidence, (Fig. 3), as the following comments will demonstrate.

1) Regarding the identification of the second sign of the inscription, the double arm sign (D28) never occurs with a raised central element and never without an indication of fingers or at least broadening for the indication of the hands. In no example does any representation of the shoulders in the lower middle portion of the sign ever rise to the height of the hands in D28. The identification by Begon must be considered as impossible. As examples, he only gives a few ink inscriptions⁸ and omits the far more obvious examples.⁹ Darnell’s identification of the sign as Gardiner M9 finds essentially identical parallels.¹⁰

2) Regarding the interpretation of the final sign of the inscription, the vase sign (W24) never occurs without the (exaggerated) indication of the rim.¹¹ The Nag el-Hamdulab example would be unique, seldom a marker of correct palaeographic identification. Begon considers the “dots” inside the sign as possible renderings of the schematic representation of the natural appearance of stone.¹² His comparison with detailed representations of stone vessels on labels from Helwan¹³ does not make much sense because it would imply that the less relevant aspect, the appearance of the stone, would have been depicted at Nag el-Hamdulab while the most characteristic element, the rim of the vessel, would have been omitted. This makes Begon’s identification most unlikely, while on the other hand the round outline of the Nag el-Hamdulab sign is entirely consistent – along with the internal marks – with O49/50 as proposed by Darnell.

3) The stone drill sign (U25) is not attested before the end of the 2nd dynasty¹⁴ and the Nag el-Hamdulab sign would bear little actual resemblance to U25, as both the drill itself and the second ballast bag / weight are lacking. The Nag el-Hamdulab sign is, however, as Darnell indicated, virtually identical to examples of T18 from the reign of Djer and Den,¹⁵ with the tall angled portion, and the protuberance to one side.

In sum, Begon’s readings ignore the actual shapes of most of the signs in the Nag el-Hamdulab inscription, and do not take into account the more plausible parallels in Darnell’s suggested reading. A failure to consult earlier palaeographic resources, especially the important work of Regulski, is another aspect of the serious shortcomings of Begon’s suggested reading.

The reading of Begon seems heavily influenced by the presence of quarries of granite and other stones in the Aswan region. However, thus far, only four quarries with evidence of Predynastic or Early Dynastic stone vessel produc-

7. Regulski 2010.

8. Begon 2016: tabl. 3; cf. Regulski 2010: D28/32.

9. Regulski 2010: D28.

10. Regulski 2010: 138, 483.

11. Regulski 2010: W24.

12. Begon 2016: 179.

13. Begon 2016: fig. 7.

14. Regulski 2010: 197.

15. Regulski 2010: 642.

tion are known in Egypt and none of them is in Aswan. Specifically, they are: the gypsum quarry of Umm el-Sawan in the Fayum desert (Early Dynastic to Old Kingdom); the anorthosite gneiss quarry at the Gebel el-Asr in the Nubian Western Desert, also known as Chephren's Quarry (Late Predynastic to Middle Kingdom); the volcanic tuff and tuffaceous limestone at Gebel Manzal el-Seyl (Early Dynastic); and the diorite quarry at Gebel Umm Naqqat (Late Predynastic to Roman times), both in the central Eastern Egyptian Desert.¹⁶ Quarrying of granite nevertheless already took place during Early Dynastic times although quarries of that period have not been located.¹⁷ Nevertheless, ample evidence exists for the early use of granite – compare for example the presence of a granite floor in the tomb of Den,¹⁸ and granite building elements dating to the time of Khasekhem at Hierakonpolis¹⁹ and Elkab.²⁰ Granite vessels on the other hand are rather exceptional among the huge number of stone vessels from the royal tombs of the first and second dynasties at Umm el-Qaab.²¹ Furthermore, granite occurs only south of Aswan, not to the north where Nag el-Hamdulab is located. In that area are numerous quarries of indurated sandstone but these served mainly for the production of grinding stones, and vessels in this type of stone are most exceptional.²² This is confirmed by the work of the Aswan-Kom Ombo Archaeological Project (AKAP), which has extensively surveyed the area around Nag el-Hamdulab, and more generally, the Aswan West Bank from Qubbet el-Hawa to the north of Wadi Kubaniya, without finding any evidence of stone vessel workshops in the area.²³

Nevertheless, according to Begon, it is the production of stone vessels that would be mentioned in the Nag el-Hamdulab inscription. He realises that an inscription referring to stone vessel production can hardly be considered as referring to the entire rock art tableau, let alone the concept behind all of the Nag el-Hamdulab rock art sites. Therefore, he searches for a link between the inscription and the two persons following the king and his fan bearer at a short distance (Fig. 4). Begon considers the inscription to be subordinate within the tableau and reduced in size compared to the images.²⁴ This would imply that it only refers to the two mentioned persons and not to the entire tableau. However, this is most unlikely, if only because the inscription is rather far away from the two persons and shows no direct relationship at all with them (cf. Fig. 1). Also, the size of the hieroglyphs can hardly be considered small because the tallest hieroglyph has almost half the size of the king who is the central element in the tableau. Because all persons and boats of the tableau are oriented to the right, the tableau is to be “read” from the left to the right, implying that the inscription comes at the end, together with the boat on the far right. The inscription is not in subordinate or secondary position as Begon

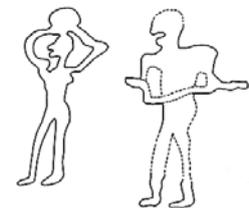


Fig. 4
Nag el-Hamdulab, detail of tableau 7a.

16. Harrell 2004.

17. Klemm & Klemm 2008: 233-267.

18. Dreyer et al. 1998: 141-145.

19. Alexanian 1998.

20. Bussmann 2010: 41.

21. The Egyptian collection of the Royal Museums for Art and History in Brussels holds a collection of several tens of thousands stone vessel sherds from Umm el-Qaab (cf. De Putter et al. 2000). Among them, the number of granite sherds is very limited (personal observation SH).

22. Bloxham et al. 2007.

23. Gatto et al. 2009; 2011; Gatto & Curci 2010.

24. Begon 2016: 181.

Fig. 5

Fragment of knife handle (Abydos, Umm el-Qaab, tomb U-127, Dreyer 1999: fig. 10).

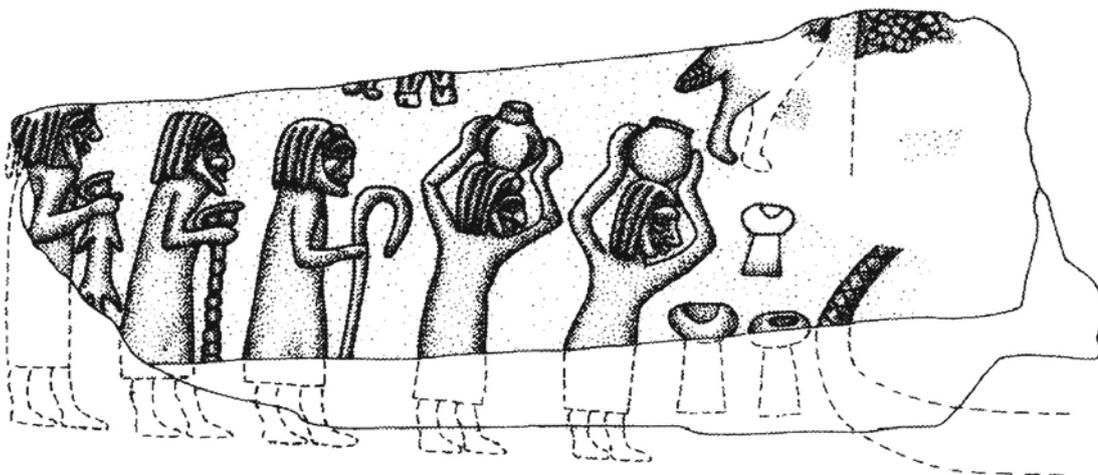
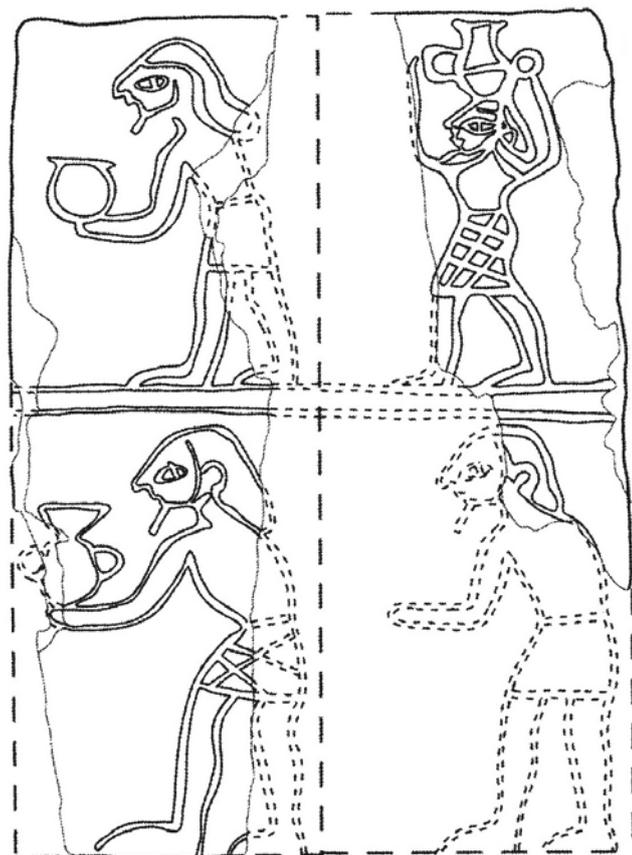


Fig. 6

Fragment of decorated box (Abydos, Umm el-Qaab, tomb B17-18, detail from Dreyer 2014-2015: Abb. 8).



thinks, but rather marks and annotates the culmination of the scene.

Returning to the two persons following the king, Begon considers the first one as holding a stone vessel above his head, referring to local stone vessel production. However, identical representations are known on a fragment of an ivory knife handle from Umm el-Qaab²⁵ (Fig. 5) where it is just an object that is part of the gifts or tribute carried by a row of men. This is also the case on fragments from a decorated box from the tomb of Narmer (Fig. 6).²⁶ Furthermore, a faience figurine found among the large number of votive gifts from the early temple site at Abydos (Fig. 7) provides an additional parallel.²⁷ A female official holds a large vessel on her head in an Early Dynastic ritual scene on a fragment from Gebelein.²⁸ Obviously, this iconographic element is not limited to the region of Aswan and there is no reason at all to consider the vessel as having been produced in the Aswan area – it may have been made from pottery equally well as from any kind of stone or even metal.

The second person holds a long object horizontally in front of him which Begon considers as possibly the stone vessel drill relieved of its ballast. However, this would imply that the most characteristic elements of the object would not be shown.

25. Dreyer 1999: fig. 10.

26. Dreyer 2014-2015: Abb. 8.

27. Bussmann 2010: 589, A3001.

28. Bussmann 2010: 59, fig. 4.85; Leblanc 2011: 293, 611.



Fig. 7
Votive figurine
(Abydos,
temple, votive
deposit M69,
Bussmann 2010:
Abb. 5.685).

Persons holding long objects horizontally in front of them occur also in another tableau at Nag el-Hamdulab in which there is no element that could be related to stone vessel production.²⁹

An interesting comparison is to be made with the tribute bearers on the three fragmentary chests from the tomb of Narmer recently published by Günter Dreyer.³⁰ Two chests (*Kiste I* and *II*) have on their long sides bowing tribute bearers holding two types of long, irregular objects vertically in front of them (Fig. 8).³¹ The identification of these objects is not self-evident but Dreyer's identification as respectively branches and plant shoots is certainly very plausible.³² On a third chest (*Kiste III*) figure at least three tribute bearers, each presenting a vessel, among them the already mentioned person with a vessel on his head. The combination of these tribute bearers easily allows comparison with the two Nag el-Hamdulab persons under discussion, bearing very similar objects. The Narmer boxes refer most probably to the same victory as mentioned on the Narmer palette and several other objects,³³ or on a more general level to military victory and control. Royal power and control are also fundamental aspects of the Nag el-Hamdulab cyclus, confirming that the two persons carrying objects have no relation whatsoever with the production of stone vessels.

29. Hendrickx, Darnell & Gatto 2012: figs. 7, 9.

30. Dreyer 2014-2015.

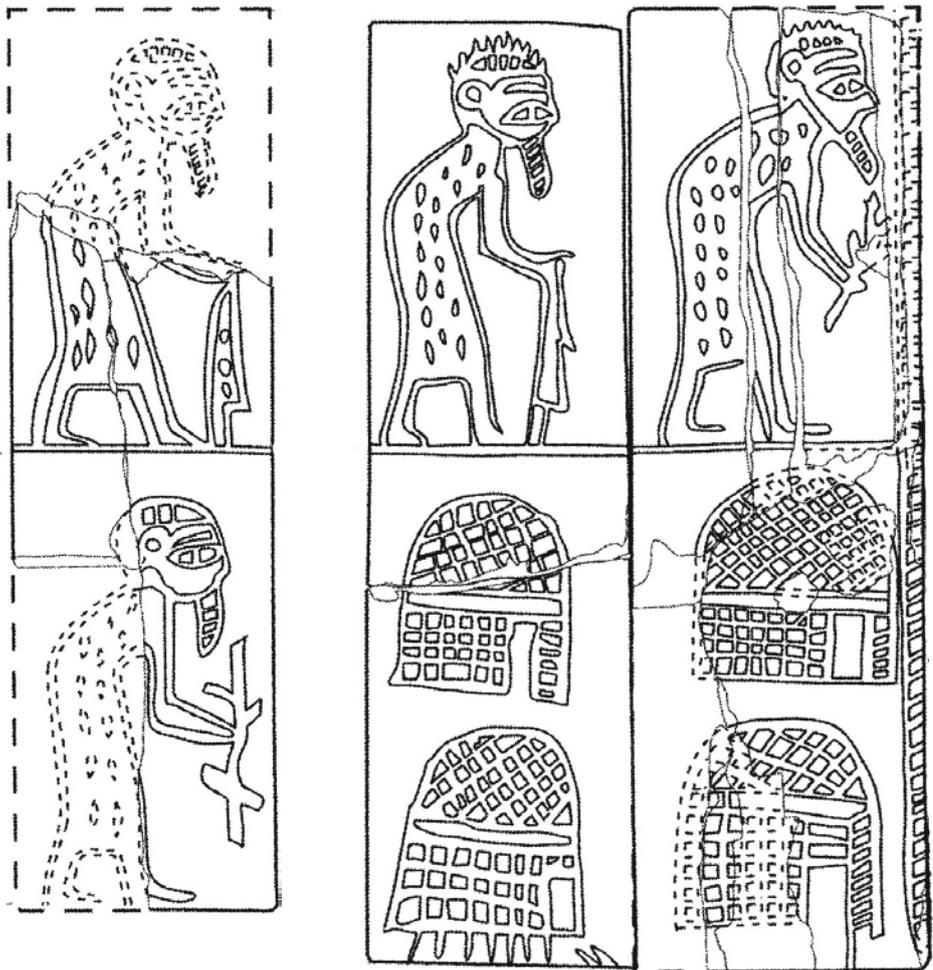
31. Dreyer 2014-2014: Abb. 4b, 7b.

32. Dreyer 2014-2015: 97-102.

33. Dreyer 2005.

Fig. 8

Fragment of decorated box
 (Abydos, Umm el-Qaab, tomb B17-18,
 details from Dreyer 2014-2015:
 Abb. 4b and 7b).



Finally, if the inscription and by consequence the entire tableau 7a would be related to stone vessel production, one would expect the early hieroglyphic text to be located in a quarry or its immediate vicinity or near a stone vessel workshop, which as previously stated is not the case.

On a more general level, an important argument against linking the representation with stone vessel production is that tableau 7a is not an isolated scene but part of a much vaster complex of tableaux found dispersed over several rock art sites at Nag el-Hamdulab. These can, in our opinion convincingly, be related to each other and focus on the importance of the king. Isolating a single tableau and relating it to stone vessel production hardly makes sense in this context. The king as an essential aspect of state formation and incarnation of the Egyptian state is fundamental – for example, the Early Dynastic fragments of relief decoration from Gebelein appear to depict the royal entourage, the Following of Horus,³⁴ the same entourage appearing in the Nag el-Hamdulab tableaux, and the entourage to which the early hieroglyphic annotation at Nag el-Hamdulab should most likely refer.

34. Bussmann 2010: 174-175.

Let us now turn to the reading by Pascal Vernus.³⁵ He bases his discussion of the annotation solely on a preliminary publication (cf. note 1), not on the most recent one.³⁶ Similar to Begon, Vernus suggests that the round sign (O49/50 according to Darnell) might be the *nw*-pot. As already mentioned, this re-reading is palaeographically untenable due to the internal details of the sign, and the lack of an upper lip. Vernus' speculation regarding the animal head as a *pars pro toto* writing³⁷ does not find any support in early hieroglyphic orthography. But Vernus' reading of the inscription, "suivre la barque de  " is closely related to the reading by Darnell.

Reading the earliest Egyptian inscriptions is far from obvious and specific readings are indeed open for discussion. But this does not apply in the same way to the identification of signs for which an extensive palaeographic evidence is available.

All in all, the interpretation by Begon must be considered as most unlikely, as well from the palaeographic point of view as from the iconographic and archaeological. He seems to view early palaeography as something very free-form in which the absence of a feature or the presence of one not desired are both facts that one may overlook. This is to a far lesser extent also the case for Vernus.³⁸ In fact, the palaeography of Regulski demonstrates that we have every reason to treat with care a true system of standardized palaeography for Early Dynastic inscriptions, just as we expect for the pharaonic period.

35. Vernus 2016: 122-123.

36. Darnell 2015.

37. Vernus 2016: 123, n.75.

38. Vernus is however correct in pointing out that the rejected Nby/t toponym should not be located in the Delta but in the Fayum as is indeed already mentioned by Habachi 1963 [17] (cited in Hendrickx et al. 2012: 309).

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