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Amun-nakht Fighting Against an Enemy in Dakhla Oasis: a Rock Drawing in Wadi al-Gemal.

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His paper is an attempt to study a rock drawing featuring a falcon-headed god fighting against an enemy which is carved in a rocky area located at the eastern end of Dakhla Oasis, some 5 kms south of the modern village of Tenida. The site is huge, extending on both sides of the Kharga-Dakhla road, the ancient Darb al-Ghubari, but mostly towards the north. The traditional name of the overall area is al-Aqula. In 2009, the Dakhla CSA Prehistoric unit, of which the author is in charge, registered the area of the petroglyphs under the name of Wadi al-Gemal, widely used nowadays in Dakhla in reference to a famous hill shaped like a camel due to erosion. Registration and caretaking are intended to protect the petroglyphs against the threats of land reclamation, some flat areas around the sandstone hills being now under cultivation. Indeed, the site holds water resources and shows remains of ancient wells. We even noticed deep square pits, sunk in the sandstone rock, along a line. These should be part of a qanat, an underground rock-cut gallery draining water trapped in the sandstone bedrock, an irrigation system documented in Kharga, where it was used from the Persian to the Roman Period. The presence of water explains that the site was always frequented, although not inhabited.

The rock drawings scattered on a lot of hills and outcrops consist of human or animal figures, different designs, and footprints, dating from the prehistoric to Ottoman periods, and of hieroglyphic to Arabic inscriptions. As early as the 1930s, Winkler pinpointed the site on a

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map and published some related petroglyphs. Then, from 1985 onwards, the Dakhleh Oasis Project surveyed the area. During this work, the late Lech Krzyżaniak recorded the graffito that we intend to study and published a drawing with a simple caption. However, thinking that it deserves more than a mention, we would like to put forward the following comments, based on an original examination and another drawing of the stone.

The rock drawing is engraved on a big sandstone block fallen from a hill (fig. 1). It is carved in the middle of the stone, on an area left untouched by many other previous drawings, especially a row of caprines (fig. 2). The sandstone being very soft, it was easy to carve with any pointed tool, so that the outlines are continuous.

A striding falcon-headed god (H. 30.5 cm) points a spear at a smaller human figure (H. 21 cm) holding weapons (fig. 3, 4). The god wears a clumsily designed crown. In fact, its rear part fits in with the shape of the red crown. The vertical line on the front part and, maybe, a very faint horizontal line at the top could be understood as an attempt to complete it as a double crown. The wig is awkward too, but recognizable. Short vertical strokes indicate the feathers of the neck. Two curved wings are shown at shoulder height. The gesture of the arms holding the spear is standard. The god wears a kilt, a belt, and a kind of corselet, featuring oblique strokes, leaving the right shoulder bare. The strokes on the kilt suggest feathers or scales of armour and remind us of gods featured in roman military attire. Behind the front (left) leg of the god, an

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5 L. Krzyżaniak, “Dakhleh Oasis, Research on Petroglyphs, 1998”, in M. Gawlikowski, W.A. Daszewski (eds.), Reports 1998, PAM 10, 1998, front cover and p. 133, fig. 3. We are grateful to Anthony Mills, director of the D.O.P., for the reference and for granting his kind agreement to our study.
animal is pouncing on the enemy. Its head and ears clearly belong to a dog, while its tail ends like a lion’s. According to the models, the animal attacking with the god should be a lion. The opponent of the god holds a short sword in his upraised right hand, ready to strike, and an oval shield in his left hand. He is shaggy-haired. He wears a short-sleeved pleated tunic, a belt and shoes. His mouth is comparatively large and seems wide open, as if he was shouting at the moment of the attack. Overall, he does not look like the usual pharaonic foreigner and enemy, but fits well into the Roman image of the barbarian. This feature gives a sound argument for dating the graffito to the Roman period. Although naïve and awkward in some respects, overall the drawing matches the Egyptian graphic rules while using features of its time as well. Thus, it must have been carved by somebody having a minimum knowledge of the models.

Indeed, at first sight, the scene looks familiar as it displays a picture fitting into the well known pattern of the triumphant king or god. The image of the king smiting an enemy or a group of enemies and securing by this act the permanently renewed victory of order over chaos is so archetypal of the assertion of Egyptian monarchy that it hardly needs to be mentioned. It occurs already on the Narmer palette and remains one of the main royal motifs till the Roman period.9

7 Z. Kiss, “Représentations de barbares dans l'iconographie romaine impériale en Égypte”, in Die Antike und Europa, Zentrum und Peripherie in der antiken Welt. Beiträge vom 17. Internationalen Eirenekongress, Berlin, 11.-15. 8. 1986, Klio 71/1, 1989, p. 127-137; R.M. Schneider, Barbar II (ikonographie), RLAC Suppl. I, 1992, p. 895-962. During the Hellenistic period, the main sculptural pattern is the “Gaulish type” derived from Attalid models in which the shaggy hair is a typical feature. See, for instance, the marble head Cairo CG 27475 found in Egypt, C.C. Edgcar, CG, Greek Sculpture, Cairo, 1903, p. 20, pl. X. In this type, the warrior is naked or bare-chested. Later on, the barbarian, still hirsute, but wearing clothes and shoes, an image mostly derived from Northern European peoples, but also from Parthians, is typical of the Roman period and becomes a generic type. See, for instance, the famous group Liverpool National (World) Museum Inv. 1971.180, Septimius Severus slaying a barbarian: C. Vermeule, D. von Bothmer, “Notes on a New Edition of Michaelis: Ancient Marbles in Great Britain”, AFA 63, 1959, p. 163, no. 29, pl. 36, fig. 10. It has often been reproduced and discussed; see the up to date comment by C. Maderna (“Statuengruppe eines römischen Kaisers mit besiegtem Feind”, in Ägypten Griechenland Rom, Abwehr und Berührung, p. 386-387, no. 159). One finds the same scene in a coarser style, due to the material, on the terracotta Berlin Staatliche Museen Inv. 22737 (end of the 3rd cent. A.D.) displaying a kneeling barbarian, hirsute, with a large face, holding a roundish shield and a short sword: L. Castiglione, “Dio- cletianus und die Blemmyes”, ZÄS 96, 1970, p. 90-91, fig. 1.


In the Royal Netherworld Books of the New Kingdom, gods overcome Ra’s foe Apopis, as, for instance, in the Seventh Hour of the Amduat. Then, papyri, reliefs and statues feature the fighting god, mainly Seth, empowered to play such a part thanks to his strength and fierceness, striking the evil being with a spear.

In the Ptolemaic and Roman temples, the same image of a god featured as a lancer is used, mainly within the framework of the Osirian myth. One finds its most fully developed display in the Triumph of Horus carved on the inner face of the western enclosure wall of Edfu temple. In this composition, the variations show how much the triumph over evil beings in both the mythic and the human world is not only equivalent but connected: Horus in the barge hits a very small hippopotamus embodying Seth while the king standing on shore strikes it too, Horus hits a hippopotamus while the king smites a human enemy (fig. 5), Horus Behedety spears a hippopotamus while Harsiesis, playing the part of the king, kills a prisoner, and both Horus Behedety and Harsiesis strike a captive foreigner.

Considering such a background, our relief fits into a classical pattern. However, it is not perfectly in accordance with it, as a major discrepancy appears clearly. Indeed, as far as we know, the enemy is always depicted as already defeated. Even in the complex New Kingdom representations of wars, featuring a great number of individuals, all the foreigners, without any exception, are shown pierced by arrows, fallen, fleeing or, at least, begging for mercy. Here, on the contrary, the opponent of the god, although one third smaller and obviously fated to die, is still standing in an aggressive posture. As noticeable as it is, this flaw may be well understood if we consider that the scene is a graffito drawn in a remote area.
From which model has the author of our winged god borrowed his inspiration? A famous relief from the hypostyle hall (reign of Darius I) of Hibis temple in Kharga Oasis shows a falcon-headed winged Seth, accompanied by a lion, trampling a big snake and striking it with a spear (fig. 6). Even closer, only 9 km from our spot, at Ayn Birbiya temple, a 2.80 m high relief carved in the central recess of the southern jamb of the gate shows the falcon-headed winged god Amun-nakht, wearing the double crown, spearing an enemy (fig. 7). A lion accompanies the god and bites the enemy. Moreover, the foreigner seems to emerge from a pedestal on which are drawn eight other captives, so that the god tramples on the Nine Bows, like the king usually does. This relief dates back to Octavian / Augustus. The scene has been published by Olaf Kaper, who thoroughly studied the cults of ancient Dakhla and on whose work we rely. Amun-nakht is first named in Edfu around 100 B.C. His personality combines features of Amun and Horus. He is Lord of Jmrt, Ayn Birbiya, in Dakhla, his unique temple. There, a short text says: “Amun-nakht who runs fast over the desert, while he makes an end of the enemy. He has overthrown the enemy in the wadi / the gang in (this) town”. He appears mainly as Horus avenger of his father Osiris.

Thus, there are grounds for identifying the winged god of our graffito with Amun-nakht. First the argument of proximity is obvious. Then the relief of the Ayn Birbiya gate, being early Augustan, may predate the graffito. Finally, following a remark of Kaper’s dealing with the distinctive traits of Seth and Amun-nakht, Seth is specialized in fighting against Apopis, the cosmic enemy of Ra, as he does in Hibis temple, while Amun-nakht, as featured in Ayn Birbiya, strikes a human enemy. In the latter occurrence, the image unites fully the heir of Osiris and the triumphant king, as Amun-nakht, mythical avenger of Osiris, tramples on the generic enemies of Egypt. Indeed, it is a trend of the Roman period that Horus could assume the appearance of the emperor.

Thus, it seems likely that Amun-nakht was chosen, as he was a local god and moreover the graffito might be a transposition of the Ayn Birbiya relief. The meaning of the graffito is obvious. Drawn in an area close to the desert, the image of the victorious god is intended to guard people from dangers. The warrior god acts as a protective deity, a typical feature of Egyptian religion during the Roman period, whose last metamorphosis is the Christian
horseman saint. As a matter of fact, other graffiti, within the very area of the Oases, display a lancer god and were probably carved for the same purpose.

Furthermore, one may surmise that our scene is more significant than a mere votive graffito along a track. The numerous rock drawings of all periods and the evidence of ancient wells around show that the area, although situated at the fringe of the desert, was frequented. According to this location and to the comparative quality of our graffito, we would suggest that the scene was intended to be used in the area, as a permanent apotropaic feature at least, or even as a kind of small popular cultic relief borrowed from the great official image of the temple. If so, it might as well have marked the hill as a spot in the mythical landscape of Amun-nakht’s triumph.

26 A. Fakhry, “The Rock Inscriptions of Gabal el-Teir at Kharga Oasis”, ASAE 51, 1951, p. 412, fig. 21, a ram-headed winged god identified by Kaper as Amun-nakht himself (O.E. Kaper, Temples and Gods in Roman Dakhleh, p. 75), and p. 414, fig. 22, a falcon-headed god facing Amun or Min. In the cliffs of western Thebes, there are also graffiti showing a falcon-headed god holding a spear or striking an enemy with it, A.F. Sadek, Graffiti de la montagne thébaine, III/4, Fac-similés, CollSc 16, 1972, pl. CXCIV, no. 3082; M. Shmy, Graffiti de la montagne thébaine, III/7, CollSc 19, 1977, pl. CCXCIII, nos. 3839, 3846.
fig. 1. Dakhla, al-Aqula/Wadi al-Gemal, the hill, view W/E.

fig. 2. Dakhla, al-Aqula/Wadi al-Gemal, the rock, view NW/SE.
fig. 3-4. Amun-nakht fighting against an enemy, scale 1:3. Drawing S. Youssef, A. Hussein © S. Youssef

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FIG. 5. Edfu temple, inner face of the western enclosure wall, "Triumph of Horus": Horus hits a hippopotamus while the king smites a human enemy, after Edfou XIII, pl. DXIII.

FIG. 6. Seth of Hibis spearing Apopis, scale 1:20, after N. de G. Davies, The Temple of Hibis in el Khargeh, Oasis III, pl. 42.