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The So-Called Predynastic Composition of Wadi Khamila: A Misleading Interpretation*

PIERRE TALLET

ABSTRACT

The so-called discovery at Wadi Khamila (South Sinai) of a predynastic scene supposed to illustrate Egypt's domination over the populations of Sinai more than 5,000 years ago has recently been the subject of extensive media coverage after the publication of an article in the last issue of *Blätter Abrahams* journal. While the presence of the Pharaonic Egyptians on the Peninsula at the very beginning of pharaonic history is well known for some fifteen years now, following the successive discoveries of pre- and proto-dynastic inscriptions at Faras Um al-Zueibin and Wadi Ameyra, a more objective examination of this new document reveals that it was artificially created by the authors of this study, who mixed different phases of carving on the same rock, and then selected only those elements that supported their *a priori* interpretation of the petroglyphs. Our study demonstrates that most of the scene, and the 'hieroglyphic' inscription above it, are in fact Nabataean inscriptions superimposed on a single older motif.

Keywords: South-Sinai, rock art, Nabatean inscriptions, Predynastic compositions, misleading interpretation.

* M. NUR EL-DIN, L.D. MORENZ, "Wadi Khamila, the God Min and the Beginning of "Pharaonic" Dominance in Sinai 5000 years ago," *Blätter Abrahams* 25, 2025, pp. 75–95 (www.freunde-abrahams.de/media/blaetter-abrahams/heft-25-2025/07.BAb.Nour-El-Din_Morenz.pdf).

I am grateful to Axelle Brémont for correcting my English in the present reevaluation of this rock scene.

RÉSUMÉ

La soi-disant découverte au Ouadi Khamila (Sud-Sinaï) d'une scène prédynastique supposée illustrer la domination de l'Égypte sur des populations du Sinaï il y a plus de 5000 ans a récemment beaucoup fait parler d'elle après la parution d'un article dans le dernier numéro des *Blätter Abrahams*. Si la présence égyptienne dans la Péninsule au tout début de l'histoire pharaonique est effectivement bien connue depuis maintenant une quinzaine d'années – après la découverte successive des inscriptions pré- et protodynastiques de Faras Um al-Zueibin et du Ouadi Ameyra – un examen plus objectif de ce nouveau document fait apparaître qu'il a été créé de toute pièce par les auteurs de cette étude, qui ont mélangé différentes périodes de gravure du rocher et n'ont retenu pour leur restitution que ce qui allait dans le sens de leur interprétation *a priori* des pétroglyphes. Le présent article démontre que la plus grande partie de la scène et l'inscription « hiéroglyphique » qui la surmonte, sont en fait des inscriptions nabatéennes qui se superposent à un unique motif plus ancien.

Mots-clés : Sud-Sinaï, art rupestre, inscriptions nabatéennes, scènes prédynastiques, interprétation trompeuse.



THE PRESENCE of the Egyptian civilization in the Sinai Peninsula as early as the Pre- and Proto-dynastic periods was demonstrated some fifteen years ago by two successive discoveries: that of three monumental bas-reliefs of King Den at a place called Faras Um al-Zueibin (identified in the 2000s by Mustafa Rezk Ibrahim,¹ then inspector of the Antiquities in South Sinai) and that of a sequence of inscribed panels, dating from the Nagada IIIA/B period to the 2nd Dynasty, in Wadi Ameyra in 2012, discovered by our team.² In both cases, although the details of the interpretation of these documents are open to debate,³ the rock inscriptions and drawings are perfectly clear, and their authenticity cannot be questioned.

¹ M. REZK IBRAHIM, P. TALLET, « Trois bas-reliefs de l'époque thinite au ouadi el-Humur: aux origines de l'exploitation du Sud-Sinaï par les Égyptiens », *RdE* 59, 2009, pp. 155–180 ; Id., « King Den in South Sinai—the Earliest Monumental Rock Inscriptions of the Pharaonic Period », *Archeo-Nil* 19, 2009, pp. 179–184.

² Preliminary study in P. TALLET, D. LAISNEY, « Iry-Hor et Narmer au Sud-Sinaï (ouadi 'Ameyra). Un complément à la chronologie des expéditions minières égyptienne », *BIFAO* 112, 2012, pp. 381–399; full publication in P. TALLET, *La zone minière du Sud-Sinaï II. Les inscriptions nagadéennes du ouadi Ameyra*, MIFAO 132, Cairo, 2015. In the article which is in question here, the date of 2012 given by L. Morenz to the photographs he took of this material, when he followed in our footsteps after our work, appears as a pitiful attempt to take credit for this discovery.

³ Several authors have provided useful additions or corrections to these readings: e.g., J. CERVELLO AUTUORI on the reading of a sequence including Djer's birth name ("Menes, Teti, Iti, Ita: An Update," in N. Buchez, Y. Tristant (eds.), *Égypte antérieure. Mélanges de Préhistoire et d'archéologie offerts à Béatrix Midant-Reynes*, Louvain, 2021, pp. 161–117 with reference to the original publication of the documents. This ethical approach is not generally adopted by L. Morenz in his various publications, except when he believes he can cast a doubt on the work carried out by others (see, symptomatically, M. NOUR EL-DIN, L. MORENZ, *art. cit.*, n. 30).

The iconography—whether in the presentation of the figures or the numerous representations of boats—clearly aligns with known parallels in Nagadian sources, and several names of kings from this period (notably Iry-Hor, Narmer, Djer, Den and Neb-re) are legible in this documentation.⁴ This early presence was already hinted at in previous documentation, as two inscriptions probably dating from the Early dynastic period were identified at the Wadi Maghara in the 1980s.⁵

In any case, these recent discoveries clearly pushed back the earliest representations of Egyptian expeditions to Sinai by nearly 500 years earlier than previously thought (i.e. the Third Dynasty, c. 2700 BC), with the oldest inscription from Wadi Ameyra showing stylistic similarities to the material discovered in the tomb of the so-called ‘King Scorpion I’ in tomb U-j at Abydos, c. 3200–3100 BC).⁶ Although these expeditions appear to have been commercially motivated,⁷ it cannot be ruled out that they may have involved some violence—at least in commemorations with ideological significance: the rock panel bearing the name of Iry-Hor depicts a scene of domination (fig. 1),⁸ which has been convincingly interpreted as a scene of sexual



Photo D. Laisney; drawing P. Tallet

FIG. 1a-b. Panel of Iry-Hor in Wadi Ameyra, showing a scene of domination (sexual humiliation?), which appears below a boat, the king’s name, and a caption that may either read “the White Walls” (Memphis) or “smiting Asia”).

⁴ *Sud-Sinai II*, passim.

⁵ R. GIVEON, “Two Officials of the Old Kingdom at Maghara (Southern Sinai),” *Tel Aviv* 10/1, 1983, pp. 49–51. On the other hand, Morenz’s proposal for redating the reliefs of Sekhemkhet in Wadi Maghara (NOUR EL-DIN, MORENZ, *art. cit.*, p. 79) to King Semerkhet of the 1st Dynasty—an option already discarded by J. Černý in 1955 (*The Inscriptions of Sinai*, Part II, London, 1955, p. 53) seem highly unlikely to us based on a stylistic comparison with the aforementioned reliefs of Den and the development of the script used in this later case. M. BAUD, *Djoser et la III^e dynastie*, Paris, 2002, pp. 260–265 has also shown the connections existing between the reliefs of three successive kings of the 3rd Dynasty on this site.

⁶ *Sud-Sinai II*, pp. 5–10; on this so-called ‘Scorpion King I’, see P. TALLET, A. BRÉMONT, “Le cône et le scorpion,” in this volume.

⁷ Map by D. LAISNEY in *Sud-Sinai II*, fig. 67, p. 76.

⁸ *Sud-Sinai II*, pp. 15, 128.

humiliation in a recent study by Frank Förster, Stan Hendrickx and Uroš Matić⁹. Moreover, it appears to me that the main caption of the engraving, which I had initially interpreted as the first mention of the city of Memphis (𓏏𓏏 *jnb-hd*), could just as easily be read as an affirmation of victory over ‘Asiatic’ peoples, where the slightly inclined club above the royal boat (𓏏) could represent the action of ‘smiting’ (*sqr*) and the rectangular sign that follows it to the left, open at its base, could be an ancient version of the sign 𓏏 *Stt* (Asia).¹⁰ However, it is far from certain that we should speak of ‘colonization’ or even of a permanent presence of Egyptian troops in these places at that time.¹¹

It is therefore very possible, even likely, that other inscriptions from the same very ancient period of Egyptian history will be discovered within the South Sinai mining area, which saw repeated Pharaonic expeditions over more than two millennia. However, since Pharaonic epigraphy (a few hundred documents¹² mainly concentrated on the sites of Serabit el-Khadim and Wadi Maghara) is still extremely rare compared with the tens or even hundreds of thousands of other petroglyphs left by numerous travelers from various cultures on Sinai’s wadi rock faces and boulders, it is advisable to exercise caution and to conduct a thorough examination before ascribing a new document to it, and above all to refrain from premature, generalized, or sensationalist interpretation.

These pitfalls were unfortunately not avoided in the recent publication presenting, without any caution, a rock art composition which, as we shall show, is entirely artificial, while being subsequently elevated it to the status of a document allowing to rewrite the history of Egypt. Announcements of the sort, widely reproduced online through thousands of web posts and several magazines aimed at a wider audience, are in fact particularly dangerous for our scientific discipline. They mislead those interested in the history of ancient Egypt and create fictitious references that may unfortunately be taken into account by researchers acting in good faith. The desire to attract attention has led here to the promotion of theories that are largely disconnected from the realities of the field.

⁹ F. FÖRSTER, S. HENDRICKX, U. MATIĆ, “Violence, Sex and Humiliation in a Unique Dynasty o Rock-Art Scene at Wadi Ameyra, SW-Sinai,” in G. Sperveslage (ed.), *Early Egyptian Miscellanies. Discussions and Essays on Predynastic and Early Dynastic Egypt*, IBÄS 26, London, 2022, pp. 89–105; see also S. HENDRICKX, F. FÖRSTER, *The Vase Bally: Captives on a Late Predynastic Decorated Stone Vessel. A Study of the “Bound Prisoner” and Related Motifs in Early Egypt*, Egyptian Artefacts 1, Leuven, 2024, pp. 72–73.

¹⁰ *Sud-Sinai II*, pp. 13–15, 126–127.

¹¹ This word of ‘colonization’, which is regularly proposed by L. Morenz concerning the Egyptian predynastic period in Sinai (e.g., in this article, p. 90) should definitely be avoided in regard to the weakness of the evidence available to demonstrate this concept. The discovery of pre-protodynastic pottery in local inhabitants’ settlements in the vicinity of Wadi Feiran rather suggests a kind of trade with Egypt than conflictuous relations even if violent episodes cannot be excluded.

¹² Attempt to estimate this number by periods in P. TALLET, “From Stelae to Rock Inscriptions”, in Chl. Ragazzoli, Kh. Hassan, Ch. Salvador, *Graffiti and Rock Inscriptions from Ancient Egypt*, BiEtud 182, Cairo, 2023, p. 121. The whole number of rock inscriptions so far known in Sinai from all the periods of the Pharaonic history would be only slightly above three hundreds.

Without commenting in detail on the entire proposed reconstruction, let us focus on the presentation of the left side of the rock, which is at the heart of the demonstration (fig. 2). A standing figure with raised arms, clearly visible, stands at the center of the so-called ‘composition’. For unclear reasons—may be because of its gesture?—this figure is believed to be the god Min. It is said to dominate another, smaller figure to its left, with hands supposedly tied behind its back and an arrow in its belly—reminiscent of the well-known Protodynastic relief at Gebel Sheikh Suleiman in Nubia. A boat (said to represent Egypt) is thought to stand on the right. Above this sequence, the authors propose to see a hieroglyphic inscription. After a lengthy demonstration, and even the full reconstruction of a paleography of the signs,¹³ a surprisingly detailed translation is offered for what is considered to caption the scene: “considering the paleography and the phraseology as well as the socio-cultural context,” it is rendered as *Mnw ḥqꜣ bjꜣw*, “Min, ruler of the copper ore/the mining region.”¹⁴



FIG. 2. The so-called Predynastic scenes of Wadi Khamila (drawing after M. Nour el-Din, L. Morenz, *art. cit.*, fig. 7).

At first glance, however, it is clear that we are dealing with numerous items which are not all of the same period, while the authors do not seem to acknowledge or recognize this in any way, which is evident both in the variation in the patina of the various elements and in their frequent superimposition (fig. 3). Even with only minimal knowledge of Sinaitic rock art, one can readily identify here one of the many occurrences of the type of petroglyphs most commonly found in the Sinai Peninsula: inscriptions in the Nabataean Aramaic alphabet. In this case, it

¹³ Ibid., p. 86.

¹⁴ M. NOUR EL-DIN, L.D. MORENZ, “Wadi Khamila,” *op. cit.*, p. 87.

appears to be two graffiti in this script and language carved one above the other, which can be interpreted as simple signatures—an extremely widespread practice among Nabataeans. Even if, unfortunately, the surface of the rock suffered damages and was partly covered by more recent drawings, these inscriptions, which have nothing to do with hieroglyphs, could both be partially deciphered by Laïla Nehmé, a widely recognized specialist of this script, who also provided a short commentary. The first line thus reads:

ʾn[...] br whbnw

ʾn[...] son of *Whbn*.

This man's father bore the Nabataean name *Whbn*, known from a small number of inscriptions (e.g., BNab 25,¹⁵ ArNabNab 101¹⁶) and comparable to Arabic Wabhān. Surprisingly however, in this Sinai example, a *w* was added at the end of the name to fit with the wawation practice for Nabataean triptotic names.



Photo S. Marchi

FIG. 3. Left side of the rock panel in Wadi Khamila.

15 L. NEHMÉ, “ArNab 101,” in L. Nehmé (ed.), *DiCoNab*, 2025, <https://diconab.huma-num.fr/inscriptions/798>

16 BNab 25: Nehmé, Laïla, “BNab 25,” in L. Nehmé (ed.), *DiCoNab*, 2025, <https://diconab.huma-num.fr/inscriptions/1063>

Following the Nabataean inscription is one last motif, which is not part of the inscription and is identified in Mustafa Nour El-Din and Ludwig Morenz's publication as the name of Min. It is in fact in all likelihood a very crude representation of an ibex (or similar small bovid), whose head and horns are clearly visible even though they were not rendered by the authors in their drawing. Motifs of the sort number in the thousands, with the same stylized form, and are ubiquitous in South-Sinai and elsewhere. It should also be noted that, according to the same study, the (imaginary) hieroglyphs would have been written horizontally and from left to right, which is not the most common direction of writing in Egyptian, while signs would most commonly be arranged as vertical columns in the earliest periods, as shown by most examples from Faras Um al-Zueibin and Wadi Ameyra.

Let us now turn to the so-called domination scene. As stated above, a second Nabataean signature is inscribed below the first. The line begins to the far right of the standing figure, and extends over it and slightly to its left. This in turn means that the supposed captive figure drawn by the authors does not exist, but, as can clearly be seen from the patina, is in fact merely the last three signs of this inscription. The complete sequence reads, again according to Laïla Nehmé's translation:

šlm t[...] br ʿmyw

May be in peace T[...] son of ʿmyw.

As in the first inscription, the end of the author's name is illegible. The name ʿmyw, for which no Arabic parallel was found, is well attested, among other regions, in Sinai.¹⁷

In this case, it is clear that the inscription has been superimposed on the central figure, which is certainly much more ancient, without however presenting any of the distinctive features of a Pharaonic drawing. The reality of the 'boat' (on the right of the standing figure) is also questionable to say the least: it is a relatively confused superimposition of several markings, more recent than even this second line of Nabataean inscription since it has partially damaged it. Furthermore, the basis to compare this motif with the undeniable boat from the Gebel Sheikh Suleiman panel is very thin if not plainly dishonest. While fig. 8b of M. Nour El-Din and L. Morenz's article does reproduce (without however quoting or crediting it) our drawing of this panel,¹⁸ the authors have inexplicably modified it to add a vertical line to the rear of the boat, interpreted as a mast. Upon our direct examination of the monument in the garden of Khartoum Museum (something the authors likely did not carry out themselves), we had been able to assess that while this line does exist, it is actually a later addition, made well after the first composition.¹⁹ But this biased modification is what allows the authors to propose a (completely artificial) link with the supposed Sinai 'boat', even though Predynastic boats almost never have masts (the twenty or so that appear in the Wadi Ameyra engravings, all of which can be dated to the Pre/Proto-dynastic period, are in themselves an

¹⁷ J. CANTINEAU, *Le Nabatéen*, Paris, 1930-1932, vol. 2, p. 132.

¹⁸ M. NUR EL-DIN, L.D. MORENZ, op. cit., fig. 8b, p. 82.

¹⁹ Cl. SOMAGLINO, P. TALLET, « Une campagne en Nubie sous la I^{re} dynastie. La scène nagadienne du Gebel Sheikh Suleiman comme prototype et modèle », *Nebet* 1, 2014, fig. 9, p. 11.

excellent demonstration of this fact).²⁰ If we gather all the aforementioned items, we obtain the following reconstruction of (at least) three phases for the layout of the different drawings and writing that appear on this section of the rock (fig. 4).



Drawing from photographs: P. Tallet/L. Nehmé

FIG. 4. New identification of the successive engravings on the rock panel: 1. Standing men (black); 2. Nabataean signatures (red); 3. Later additions, including a small ibex at the end of the upper line of Nabataean script (green).

Finally, a word should be said about another boat, this time perfectly clear at the right extremity of the rock panel, and which is interpreted in the article as a way of ‘duplicating’ the first scene.²¹ It cannot be entirely excluded that it might, this time, date to the Pharaonic period,²² but it would in any case be much later than the Predynastic. However, one should keep in mind that many representations of boats, especially when fit with a mast and this kind of square sail, are also known from the Nabataean period, whose inscriptions and drawings, as has been made clear, are abundantly present all over this rock panel and its surroundings.²³ It

²⁰ Ibid., fig. 23, p. 32. To my knowledge, the only Nagadian boat that would clearly have a mast and a sail (and which is by the way completely different from what is restituted here) would be drawn on a vase kept at the British Museum (EA 35324)—https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/Y_EA35324. The raised poles that can be regularly seen on Nagadian drawings of boats are standards supporting an emblema on their upper part. More generally, for Predynastic boats, see the PhD of D. VANHULLE, *Le bateau pré- et protodynastique dans l’iconographie et l’archéologie égyptiennes*, Bruxelles, 2016.

²¹ M. NUR EL-DIN, L.D. MORENZ, op. cit., pp. 88–89 and figs. 13–14.

²² On the typology of pharaonic boats from the Middle and New Kingdom so far known in Sinai, see P. POMEY, “Les graffiti navals de la zone manière du Sud-Sinaï,” *Sud-Sinai I*, MIFAO 130/1, Cairo, 2012, p. 279–296.

²³ See, e.g., J. NORRIS, “Chars et bateaux au pays des dromadaires,” *DossArch* 407, 2021, p. 21, for a drawing relatively similar to this one, and more generally D. GIBSON, “Early Dhows in Pre-Islamic Petroglyphs” (Nabatea.net, 2023) about petroglyphs showing boats in Arabian Peninsula. https://nabatea.net/explore/navigation_and_sailing/early-dhows-in-pre-islamic-petroglyphs/

must in any case be stressed once again that we are not dealing here with a coherent composition made in a single event, but with several individual motifs engraved at different periods.²⁴ The so-called *hqs* sign (which is suspiciously similar to the last *-w* sign in both Nabataean inscriptions) and the horizontal mark above it have, once more, clearly been engraved later than the boat, over which the first item is superimposed²⁵ (fig. 5).

Anyone can make mistakes in deciphering and interpreting rock inscriptions, which are often a delicate material to work with.²⁶ It is rare however to reach such a level of over-interpretation as is at play here, to the point of creating a completely artificial document. Challenging the history of pharaonic presence in Sinai is no casual venture, and should at least be built upon straightforward, rigorously examined documents and carefully weighed interpretations, rather than based upon careless assumptions that mischaracterize the material and getting immediately inflated as a major discovery by unspecialized media. The numerous petroglyphs of Wadi Khamila, of which our colleague Mustafa Nour El-Din has courageously undertaken a survey and inventory, are of great interest due to their number and originality for the study of different periods in the history of Sinai. It would be a shame if they were not taken into account for their true meaning and dating in future publications.



FIG. 5. Right side of the rock panel.

Photo S. Marchi

²⁴ M. NUR EL-DIN, L.D. MORENZ, op. cit., fig. 13.

²⁵ It seems to me that what is here once more interpreted as the name of Min would be in fact the drawing of a small quadrupede whose forepart would be much eroded—it would need anyway a closer examination.

²⁶ I do not absolve myself of such mistakes—for instance I was partial to ascribing a figurative scene at Wadi Kharig to the Predynastic period, and I am no longer so certain about this (*Sud-Sinai II*, pp. 85–86, 167–168). But a dramatic change in the history of Egypt was not at stakes in that case.

