

A Rediscovered Late Predynastic-Early Dynastic royal scene from Gharb Aswan (Upper Egypt)

Stan HENDRICKX*
Maria Carmela GATTO**

Cette publication préliminaire d'un tableau rupestre récemment retrouvé à Gharb Aswan a pour seul but de présenter ce document de grand importance pour le prédynastique tardif et le début de l'histoire égyptienne. La documentation définitive est prévue pour la campagne de 2009.

Introduction

A photograph of a rock drawing near Aswan (Fig. 1) was made available in the summer of 2008

Fig. 1. Photo made in the 1970's by Dieter Johannes, photographer at DAI Cairo (courtesy Nabil Swelim).



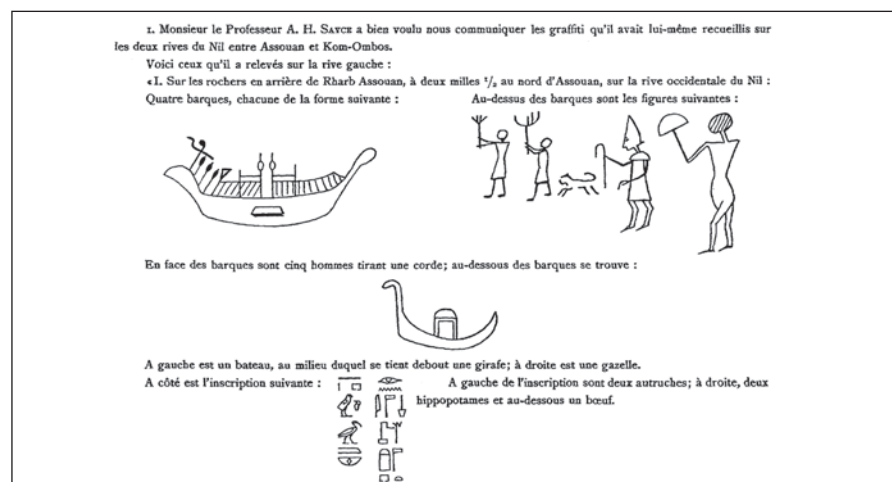
by Nabil Swelim from the documentation of the late Labib Habachi, allowing the publication of this interesting late Predynastic royal representation, which relates to famous documents such as the Scorpion and Narmer maceheads (Hendrickx *et al.*, 2009). Inquiries by a number of scholars working in the region meanwhile clarified that the photo was taken in the 1970's by Dieter Johannes, photographer of the *Deutsches Archäologisches Institut* (DAI), during a visit by members of the

DAI in company of Labib Habachi, then chief antiquities inspector at Aswan. The photos were made for Labib Habachi and unfortunately no copies were kept by the photographer or the DAI.

* PHL, Arts and Architecture
Elfde Liniestraat 25
B-3500 Hasselt (Belgium)

** Yale University
Department of NELC, PoBox 208236,
New Haven, CT 06520-8236 (USA)

Fig. 2. Sketch made by Sayce and published by de Morgan at the end of the 19th century (de Morgan *et al.*, 1894: 203).



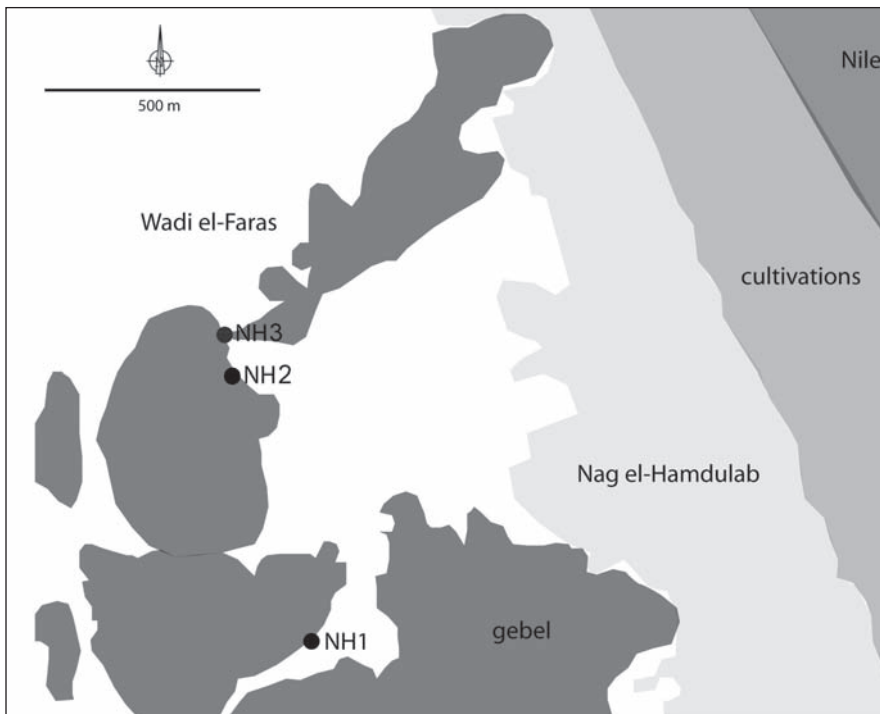


Fig. 3. Map with the location of the Nag el-Hamdulab rock art sites.

The location of the scene could be defined rather precisely because it had already been observed by A.H. Sayce in the late 19th century. A note by Sayce was included in the catalogue of inscriptions between Aswan and Kom Ombo published by de Morgan *et al.* (1894: 203), mentioning that it can be found on the rocks behind Gharb Aswan, two and a half miles north of Aswan, on the western bank of the Nile. Sayce also made a sketch drawing (Fig. 2), but at that time, documents such as the Narmer palette or the Scorpion mace head had not yet been excavated. Consequently, Sayce had no documentation at his disposal that would have allowed him to recognise the early date of the scene and may not even have been aware that it concerns a royal representation. He mentions four boats below the five humans but only one of the boats is drawn, and this separately, not in relation to the rest of the scene. This tantalising information was somewhat confirmed by the 1970's photo, at the extremities of which is a glimpse of additional decoration besides the royal scene (Fig. 1). Unfortunately, the available information did not allow a reconstruction of the whole scene (Hendrickx *et al.*, 2009).

Hendrickx *et al.* (2009) considered the scene most likely to be lost, but during the first days

of November 2008, Maria Gatto was able to relocate it right to the south of Wadi el-Faras, in the valley behind the modern village of Nag el-Hamdulab (Fig. 3). Regrettably, it has been heavily damaged since it was seen in the 1970's (Fig. 4-6). All over the scene are deep cuts that must have been made by chisels. The damage is clearly intentional and can hardly have been made by children. The parts with human figures and the cabins of the boats particularly attracted the attention of the destroyers. In some cases, a rather broad chisel was used for removing entire elements of the scene.

Description

The tableau is located in a narrow gulch, leading from the wadi to the desert plateau (Fig. 4). It is difficult to see from the wadi itself, which may explain why it has not been observed in recent years, despite ongoing surveys in the region (Gatto *et al.*, 2009a; Storemyr, 2008). On the other hand, it cannot be considered in a "hidden" position, and for those in antiquity who were acquainted with the area and knew of the existence of the scene, it would have been easy to locate. Despite the damage, the general layout of the scene can easily be recognised. Besides the

already known royal group, there are five boats and a few other elements (Fig. 5). The humans and the boats are oriented to the left, meaning that the human representations are looking towards the wadi (and thus Aswan). The whole group of drawings is to be considered a single entity, and judging from the details such as the branches attached to the boats, everything must have been made by the same artist.

The section with the royal scene can still be identified as such because the layout of the figures remains visible, but nearly all of the details are now gone (Fig. 5). The combination of the old photo with the presently visible remains should, however, allow an accurate reconstruction of this part of the scene.

Four of the five boats are nearly identical in shape and details. They all have high, rounded prows and sterns, with two cabins and a chequered band on the upper side of the hull. The fifth boat is placed rather awkwardly at the bottom of the tableau, beneath the boat above which the royal group figures. Although the prow and stern are as high as those on the other boats, they are not broad and rounded but narrow and almost pointed. This boat has only one cabin and the chequered band is missing. Because of the "subordinate" position of this boat and the fact that it is the first boat encountered when coming from the wadi, it seems to represent an "introduction" to the tableau as a whole.

Three boats are placed in a row, and the one associated with the royal group occurs first. In respect to content, this allows it not only to be considered the most important element of the tableau, but also immediately directs the attention of somebody coming up from the wadi to the essential part of the tableau. The position of the dog centrally above the boat must be the reason for the relatively low position of the animal compared to the king behind him. Although this obviously links the dog to the boat, it must also be considered as part of the royal scene in a strict sense (cf. Hendrickx *et al.*, 2009). Above the second boat were two human representations which unfortunately are now chiselled away. The last boat seems to have nothing represented above



Fig. 4. Overview of the royal tableau.

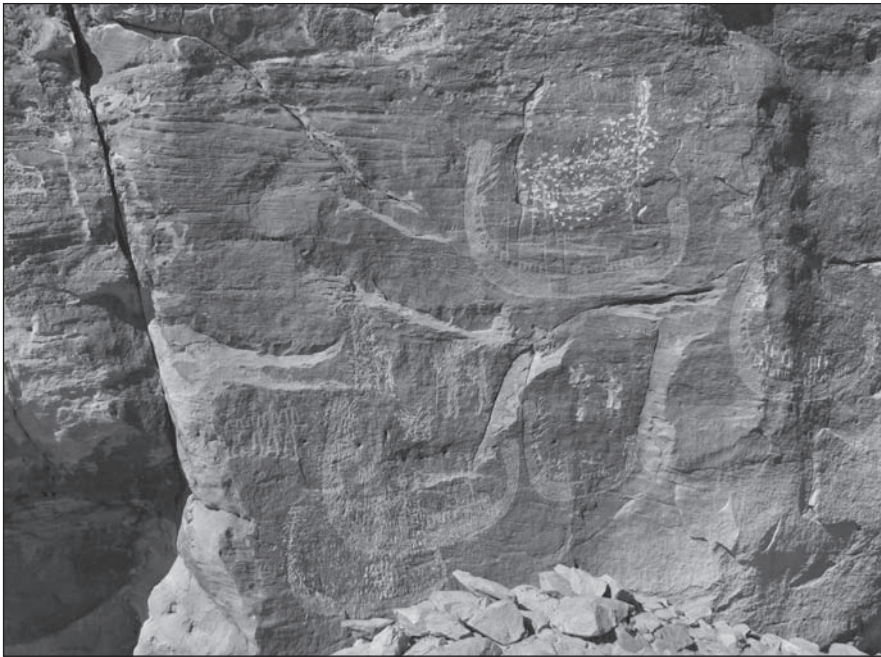


Fig. 5. Detailed view of the tableau.

Parallels with the Scorpion macehead iconography, as far as the standard bearers, the fan bearer and the position of the white crown are concerned, has also already been mentioned (Hendrickx *et al.*, 2009). However, two more arguments can now be added. The first concerns the chequered band on top of the boats, which does not occur for Naqada II boats as they can be seen on Decorated pottery and in rock art, but which is regularly shown in late Predynastic and Early Dynastic boat representations (cf. Hendrickx *et al.*, 2008: 373-374). The second and more important element relates to the style in which the four boat pullers are depicted. First, they are shown in the formal Egyptian style with the chest in frontal view and the head in profile. Second they are bearded as is the case for most of the males figuring on late Predynastic palettes, but on the Narmer palette the most important persons besides the king, including his sandal bearer, are no longer bearded.

In addition to the links that can be made with Early Dynastic monuments in formal style, the tableau from Nag el-Hamdulab also shows important thematic connections with the rock art of Upper Egypt. Examples of this are the combination between boats and animals or the presence of boat pullers. In this respect, there is a most interesting “transition” from rock art to formal art, which should however be further investigated in the context of the totality of the rock art from Nag el-Hamdulab. Indeed, the tableau discussed is to be placed in the context of other rock art scenes from the same valley involving boats, recently published by Per

it. The large boat above the three just discussed has probably been drawn in a higher position in order to incorporate a previously existing drawing of a giraffe. Although no difference in patina can be observed between the giraffe and the boat, the animal is drawn in a far more sketchy style compared to all the other elements of the tableau and is clearly made by a different hand.¹

A final but most important element of the tableau is the row of four males in front of the first boat. They are placed at the very edge of the rock wall, which is heavily eroded in this spot, and it is therefore possible that the

row originally consisted of more persons. They are holding a rope and are obviously in the position of towing the boat behind them, although the “rope” they are holding is not connected to the boat itself. Similar scenes occur rather frequently in rock art (e.g., Gatto *et al.*, 2009b). Although they have been interpreted in different ways they are, in our opinion, related to boat processions (cf. Gatto *et al.*, 2009b), which seem corroborated by the scene under discussion.

The chronological position contemporary with or immediately before the Scorpion macehead has already been argued for the royal group (Hendrickx *et al.*, 2009).

¹ The integration of earlier rock art drawings into new ones occurs occasionally although not very frequently for Predynastic Egypt. For another clear example, see Gatto *et al.*, 2009b: fig. 14, where an older animal representation has been turned into a hunting scene by the addition of dogs.

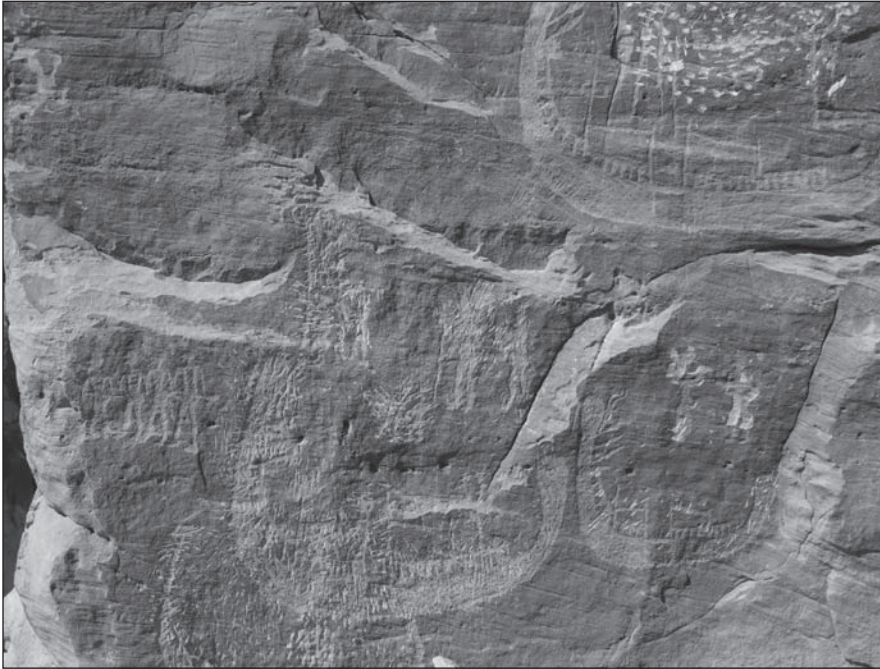


Fig. 6. The scene with the king in a closer look.

Storemyr (2009: figs. 8, 11). The boats are identical in shape and size to the ones discussed above. Several of them also have the floral decoration at the inner side of the top of the prow. On one of the boats, a king can be recognised (Storemyr, 2009: fig. 11). He is wearing the white crown in similar upright manner as the king on the tableau presented here. Clearly the Nag el-Hamdulab boat scenes should be considered in connection with each other.

Conclusions

Although the royal context of all the aforementioned scenes is beyond doubt, and reference to boat processions, hunting and probably also military victory seems

certain, a more detailed recording is needed before a full interpretation of the whole rock art site can be attempted. Such a recording is planned for the spring of 2009, and although some details may be lost forever, it should be possible to reconstruct the totality of the scenes in the Nag el-Hamdulab.

Acknowledgments

We thank Nabil Swelim for making the photo from the Labib Habachi documentation available and Dietrich Raue for inquiring after additional photos. Thanks also to Per Storemyr for information about the sites discovered by him. Elizabeth Hart (University of Virginia) edited the article. The work has been funded by the William K. and

Marilyn M. Simpson Egyptology Endowment Fund at Yale University. The participation of Stan Hendrickx was made possible by a grant of the Fonds Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek-Vlaanderen.

References

- DE MORGAN J., U. BOURIANT, G. LEGRAN, G. JÉQUIER, AND A. BARSANTI, 1894. *Catalogue des monuments et inscriptions de l'Égypte antique. Première série. Haute Égypte. Tome premier. De la frontière de Nubie à Kom Ombo*. Vienne: Adolphe Holzhausen.
- GATTO M.C., M. DE DAPPER, R. GERISCH, E. HART, S. HENDRICKX, T. HERBICH, H. JORIS, H.-Å. NORDSTRÖM, M. PITRE, S. ROMA, D. SWIECH AND D. USAI, 2009a. Predynastic settlement and cemeteries at Nag el-Qarmila, Kubbaniya. *Archéo-Nil*, 19: 184-204.
- GATTO M.C., S. HENDRICKX, S. ROMA, AND D. ZAMPETTI, 2009b. Rock art from West Bank Aswan and Wadi Abu Subeira. *Archéo-Nil*, 19: 149-166.
- HENDRICKX S., M. EYCKERMAN AND F. FÖSTER, 2008. Late Predynastic falcons on a boat (Brussels E.7067). *Journal of the Serbian Archaeological Society*, 24: 371-384.
- HENDRICKX S., N. SWELIM, F. RAFFAELE, M. EYCKERMAN, AND R.F. FRIEDMAN, 2009. A lost Late Predynastic-Early Dynastic royal scene from Gharb Aswan. *Archéo-Nil*, 19: 167-176.
- STOREMYR P., 2008. Prehistoric geometric rock art at Gharb Aswan, Upper Egypt. *Sahara*, 19: 61-76.
- STOREMYR P., 2009. A Prehistoric geometric rock art landscape by the First Nile Cataract. *Archéo-Nil*, 19 (in press).