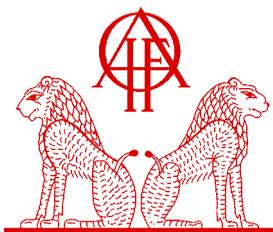


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The Red Sea in Pharaonic Times

Recent Discoveries along the Red Sea Coast

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Pierre Tallet

New Inscriptions from Ayn Soukhna 2002-2009

THE SITE at Ayn Soukhna was discovered thanks to a cliff face covered in rock inscriptions. Most of these pharaonic inscriptions date to Middle Kingdom, ranging from the late 11th dynasty to the end of the 12th dynasty. A smaller corpus may be traced to the beginning of the New Kingdom (under the reigns of Amenhotep I and Amenhotep III in the 18th dynasty). From the content of the texts, some of which are official campaign reports, it was immediately apparent that Ayn Soukhna was linked to the mining zones in south-west Sinai: turquoise, a specific resource of the area, was mentioned in an inscription dating to Montouhotep IV, and inscriptions dating to the reign of Amenemhat III listed officials whose names were already documented in material previously found in Sinai. This led to the conjecture that Ayn Soukhna might have been used as a starting point for expeditions to the other side of the Gulf of Suez during that period. The hypothesis was then confirmed by the discovery of two Middle Kingdom ships kept in storage galleries at Ayn Soukhna.¹

Since 2002, the successive excavating campaigns have uncovered copper workshops, administrative buildings, dwelling places and storage galleries, all of which firmly establish the extensive use of the site in the Middle Kingdom. New epigraphic material has also been found, pointing to an even earlier use of the site. Most of this material was discovered at the foot of the carved rock face, in a large complex of ten storage galleries dug into the rock to shelter the ships and equipment departing from Ayn Soukhna. This evidence is quite varied, including new rock inscriptions and smaller inscriptions on daily objects, most of which can be dated to the Old Kingdom.

1. See *supra*, P. POMÈY, “Ships Remains at Ayn Soukhna”, in this volume.

Rock Inscriptions

Most of the new rock inscriptions were found within a few meters of the thresholds of the storage galleries [fig. 1]. They are all clearly official accounts relating to mining expeditions. They include:

1. A heavily damaged inscription (originally about 115 × 30 cm) dating to year 2 of an unknown king, most probably from the Old Kingdom. Consisting of 16 columns, it was carved in soft stone on the left side wall in the entrance to gallery G5;
2. In the entrance to G6 gallery, a hieratic text (originally no less than 75 cm long and 40 cm high) inked in black ink on a coating of white plaster. Only a third has been preserved. It accounts for an expedition that took place during the reign of Djedkare-Isesi (5th dynasty) and mentions the large Byblos-type ships (*kebenet*), which were commonly used in seafaring expeditions;
- 3-4. Two inscriptions, one hieratic and one hieroglyphic, found side by side to the right of the ramp at the entrance to gallery G9.

The hieratic inscription (77,5 cm long, 14 cm high) consists of eight columns that were inked in black directly on the carefully smoothed sandstone wall. It lists the names of officials who took part in an expedition, presumably towards the end of the Old Kingdom.

The hieroglyphic inscription (4) on the same wall [fig 2, 3] probably dates from the same period. It was carved from right to left in very brittle sandstone set between two layers of mudstone. The layout of the partially preserved text (21 × 60 cm) bears some resemblance to the inscribed records of 5th and 6th dynasties mining expeditions at Wadi Maghara: these records often come in the shape of rectangular stelae featuring the royal titles on the right and the account of the expedition itself in the centre. Middle ranking officials are mentioned on the left, in two sets of columns, several different names often being listed under one title, as can be seen in a fine example of the layout that dates to the reign of Djedkare-Isesi.² In this particular case, at Ayn Soukhna, only the last part, the list of middle ranking officials, remains. Traces of another section can still be made out above the list, but it is impossible to tell whether this was another series of columns or a single line describing some aspect of the expedition. Finally, it should be noted that the first column of the preserved section, which is wider than the rest, is probably the end of an official formula.

2. GARDINER, PEET, ČERNÝ 1952, no. 13, pl. VII.

Inscription no. 4



[1] [...] r Htjw <m>fk3t [2] šḫd nfrw Pth-wr [3] Rw [4] Pr-jm [5] Jby [6] šḫd mdḫw Wsr [7] [...] n ḥ3w (?) [8] [...]

[1] [...] to (?) the Terraces of turquoise (?)^a; [2] the inspectors of the recruits^b: Pth-ur^c, [3] Ru^d, [4] Per-Im^e, [5] Iby^f; [6] the inspector of the carpenters^g User^h; [7] [...] ? of the weapons store (?)ⁱ[8] ...j.

- a. “Terraces of the turquoise” is a commonly used toponym to refer to Sinai, as can be seen in inscriptions IS 13 and IS 17 at Wadi Maghara for example. Though the spelling is unusual here, it seems logical to assume that it is the same toponym.
- b. “inspector of the recruits”. The title probably stretches over one line, above four columns each bearing the name of an incumbent, a common layout for Old Kingdom inscriptions. The title was not widely attested up to now (Jones 2000, p. 928, no. 3418; Eichler 1993, p. 181-184; Chevereau 1987, p. 34 and bibliographical references). Most of the occurrences related to an expeditionary context were found on rock inscriptions dating to the Old Kingdom at Wadi Hammamat. Thanks to the recent publication of the “Wasserberg des Djedefre” inscriptions, two more occurrences of the title can be added to the list, both clearly linked with census 12 and 13 of the reign of Cheops, which constitutes the earliest attestation to date of the title (Kuhlmann 2005, p. 244-251). Other titles including *nfrw* (Jones 2000, p. 483, no. 1808), and particularly the more widely attested *hrp nfrw* (Jones 2000, p. 722, no. 2631), date back to the 5th dynasty and became widespread during the 6th dynasty.
- c. *Pth-wr*: PN, 139,6, Old Kingdom / Middle Kingdom.
- d. *Rw* or *Rw(j)*: PN, 220, 12, 15, not previously attested with this particular spelling—Old or Middle Kingdom.

- e. *Pr-jm*: PN, 133, 19, only one other occurrence dated to the Middle Kingdom.
- f. *Jby*: PN, 20, 17, Old, Middle and New Kingdom, with a different spelling, however, which does not include the heart sign \heartsuit .
- g. *Shd mdhw*: “inspector of the carpenters” (Jones 2000, p. 928, no. 3415) with a more comprehensive version of this title (*shd mdhw n pr nswt*, inspector of the carpenters from the royal estate). Occurrences of this title all appear to be linked to the Old Kingdom, although *mdhw* can still occasionally be found in documents related to Middle Kingdom expeditions (see for example IS 114—reign of Amenemhat III).
- h. *Wsr*: PN, 85, 6, used throughout the Old, Middle and New Kingdoms. The spelling here seems to point to an early occurrence.
- i. [*Shd ?*] *n h3w*: The first part of the title has been erased. The slight remaining traces might be construed as a third occurrence of the title *shd*, which would be in keeping with the rest of the inscription. Nevertheless, the full title, “inspector of the weapons store” has apparently never been attested before. From the 5th dynasty onward, similar titles such as *jmy-r h3w* (overseer of the weapons store, cf. Jones, 2000, p. 81, no. 350) and *jry h3w* (keeper of the weapons store, cf. Jones, 2000, p. 312, no. 1144) are accounted for.
- j. Traces of three more columns can still be made out but the text is unreadable. At the bottom of the 8th column, there seems to be a boat sign.

In many aspects, this inscription bears the tradition of the Old Kingdom, as can be seen from the complex layout and the probable use of a toponym, *Htyw mfk3t*, that mostly occurs in that period. The title *shd nfrw* is also mainly attested in Old Kingdom documents.

Most of the entrances to the site’s storage galleries are likely to have featured such inscriptions originally. Traces of erased text can still be observed in galleries G5 and G6; a piece of plaster coating bearing a carved column of hieratic text was found in the ramp of gallery G3 and could well be a fragment of the same type of wall inscription as in the neighbouring gallery, G6.

Another inscription (5) was unearthed next to the storing galleries, at the foot of the inscribed wall overlooking the site. This large sandstone block was part of the masonry of a stone circle [fig. 4]. Three bread moulds typical of the late Old Kingdom were found within the circle but the exact function of the structure remains unknown. The irregular sandstone block was sanded and smoothed, before it was inscribed. Three to four different people, who probably took part in the same expedition, are mentioned in the text [fig. 5, 6]. Four lines are devoted to the first two or three, whereas the last name appears in a column on the left. The balanced layout suggests that the whole text was carved at the same time though probably not by one single scribe since different styles can be identified: the first line and the column on the left are carved deep into the stone, as opposed to the last three lines of the text, which are much lighter; the hieroglyphs in the first line and in the column differ somewhat in size (the signs in the column being much smaller) and style (see the difference between the two successive *s*-signs at the top of the document). Each scribe probably carved his own name into the stone.

Inscription no. 5

[1] 

[2] 

[3] 

[4] 

[5] 

[1] *sš šnwt* ¹*nh-jrzs* [2] *jm3hw hr ntr* ² [3] *zš mšc* (?) *Mrw* [4] ³*nh-h3f* [5] *šd srw smntjw Htp*

[1] *The scribe of the granary*^a *Ankhires*; [2] *the revered with the great God*, [3] *the scribes of the army*:^b *Meru* [4] *and Ankhhaef*^c; [5] *the inspector of the dignitaries of the prospectors*^d *Hotep*.

- a. The title “scribe of the granary” (*sš šnwt*) is attested mainly in the Old Kingdom, cf. Jones 2000, p. 875.
- b. Following the word *sš* (scribe) the first of the three signs that make up the cadrat seems to be . In spite of the unusual spelling, a reading as “scribe of the army” seems most likely in the context.
- c. Those three lines could also be devoted to one single official: the scribe of the army, son of Merou, Ankhhaef.
- d. The title *šd srw* is commonly found in the Old Kingdom, cf. Jones, 2000, p. 967. In a mining context it is often developed as *šd srw smntjw*, supervisor of the dignitaries of the prospectors (Fischer 1985, p. 5-32; Jones 2000, p. 967), which seems to be the most likely reading here. The spelling is indeed very unusual: it looks as if the common sign for *smnty*—a sitting man holding a leather bag—has been carved over the end of the stick held by the standing figure, for lack of space. This seems to be corroborated by the  sign, one of the common determinatives of the word *smnty*,³ which appears immediately under the *sr*-sign.

The inscription can undoubtedly be dated to the Old Kingdom, the clues from the archaeological context being confirmed by the names and titles of the scribes who signed the document. A more accurate dating indication might be afforded by the () sign, which underwent a significant change between the 5th dynasty and the end of the Old Kingdom: the way it is written here, with two very short vertical lines isolated inside the building, seems to be typical of the second half of the 6th dynasty, as exemplified by well dated occurrences from the decorated tombs at Giza and Saqqara.⁴

3. YOYOTTE 1975, p. 45.

4. STRUDWICK 1985, p. 255-256.

2. Inscribed Material

Smaller but nonetheless valuable inscriptions were regularly discovered during the excavation campaigns, such as a notable collection of imprints on mud clay from the cylinder seals that were used to seal bags or boxes. Most of those sealings were excavated at Old Kingdom levels, on terraces lying to the west of the “lean-to structure” that enclosed galleries G4, G5 and G7, outside gallery G8. Other sealings were found in the gallery entrances themselves, especially in G1, G3 and G9, and one single item was excavated at Kom 14. The Horus names of kings Chephren (4th dynasty), Niuserre, Djedkare and Unas (5th dynasty) were identified on these documents, together with the names of various institutions (e.g., the royal estate—*pr nswt*) and the titles of a number of officials (e.g., *jmy-r tst*, *sš nswt*, *ḥry sštj*). One of the best preserved sealings features the following sequence [fig. 6]:



[1] *Hr: St-jb-t3wy*

[1] *Horus Set-ib-taui (Niuserre)*

[2] *Hry sš[tj...]*

[2] *[...] the master of the se[crets...]*

Many other significant objects were found in the storage galleries, among which: small offering stelae bearing hieroglyphic inscriptions or silhouettes of people, stone weights with carved units, and above all numerous ceramics bearing marks, signs or drawings, such as large storing jars featuring the names and titles of their owners (which were either engraved with a punch or inked in black hieratic signs). The material was found in both Middle Kingdom and Old Kingdom layers, the earlier period once again yielding a greater collection.

A genuine hieratic ostrakon was discovered on the ground in the entrance to gallery G2 [fig. 7,8]: the way the text is laid out shows that it cannot be the marking of a jar, but rather that someone used the potsherd to write out his name:



[1] *jmy-r pr šn'*

[1] *The overseer of the workshop^a*

[2] *Nfr ḥw-w(j)*

[2] *Nefer-khu-u(i)^b*

- a. For more information on that title, which is commonly attested in the Old Kingdom, and on the *pr šn'* (a storage place as well as a food processing facility), see Andrassy, 1993, p. 17-35.

- b. *PN*, 199, 6-7: a name attested in the Old Kingdom. The same name was found on an inscription at Wadi Maghara, following the title “overseer of ten” (*jmy-r mḏ*). The inscription dates to the 18th census report of Pepy I st (IS 16b). This could well be the same person as another official bearing the same name and a similar kind of title, *wr mḏ šm'w*, (“Great one of the Ten of Upper Egypt”) who has a mastaba dating to the 6th dynasty in the necropolis of Giza (PM III, 1994, p.248-249). The *wr mḏ šm'w* title befits someone who has a supervising function; according to Baud (1999, p. 277), it “could refer to a subaltern supervising position within a general work structure based on groups of ten”. It is very tempting to conclude that the overseer mentioned at Ayn Soukhna and the supervisor who appears in Wadi Maghara sources are one and the same person, given the attested connections between Ayn Soukhna and the Sinai peninsula in the Old, Middle and New Kingdoms.

The textual material that is excavated year after year at Ayn Soukhna has led to a serious reappraisal of the site. In particular, it highlights the massive use of the site during the Old Kingdom—especially the 5th dynasty—, which was not readily apparent in the first inscriptions that were found. It also shows that the place was used as a Red Sea harbour long before the Middle Kingdom, mainly to cross over to the mining area in South-Sinai, which appears to be mentioned in some of the sources. The recently uncovered mention of seafaring ships taking to sea at the site suggests that Ayn Soukhna might have been used at the time for longer expeditions to farther regions. The noted story of an official from the 6th dynasty by the name of Pepynakht, which was found carved in his tomb at Assuan, implies that towards the end of the Old Kingdom there must have been in the northern part of the Suez Gulf a starting point where *kebenet* boats were assembled to sail to Punt. The latest finds at Ayn Soukhna, including several references to such *kebenet* boats, are further evidence towards the highly plausible identification of the site with this very harbour.

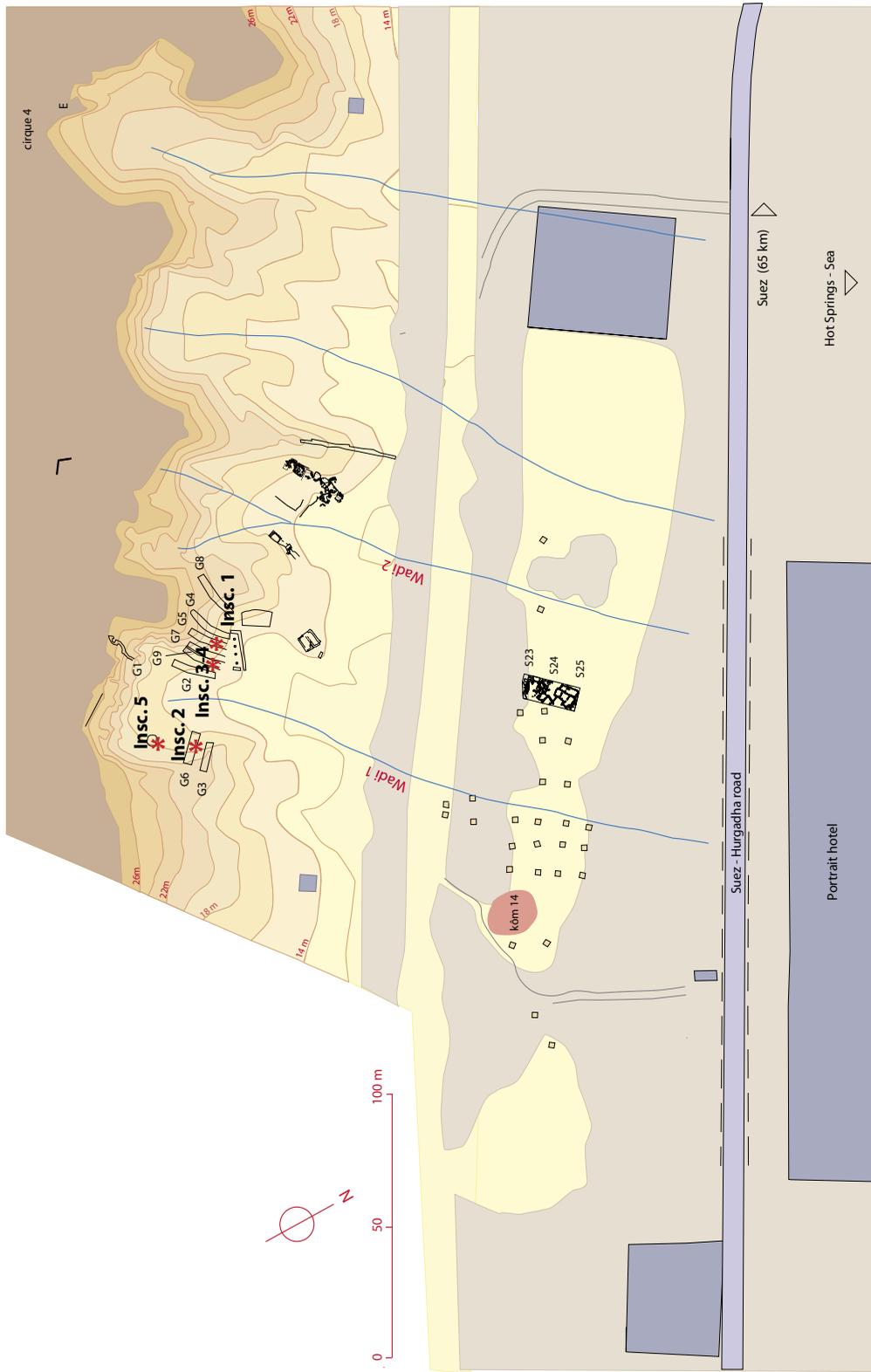


FIG. 1. Map of the site with location of inscriptions 1-5.



FIG. 2. Hieroglyphic inscription at the entrance to gallery G9, photograph.

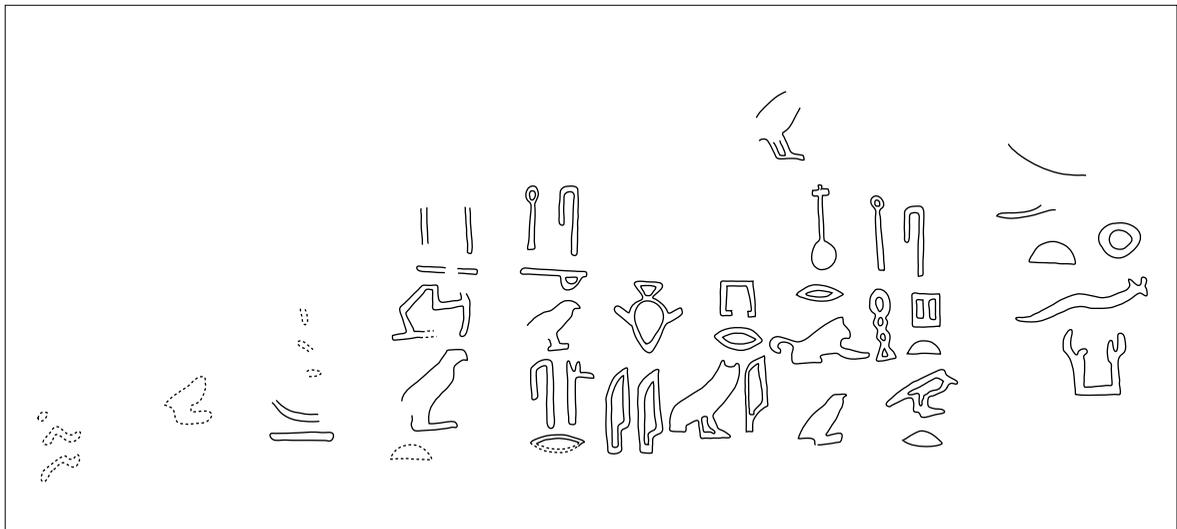


FIG. 3. Hieroglyphic inscription at the entrance to gallery G9, drawing, scale 1/4.



FIG. 4. Hieroglyphic inscription on a sandstone block: photograph.



FIG. 5. Hieroglyphic inscription on a sandstone block: drawing, scale 1/4.



FIG. 6. Cylinder-seal imprint on mud clay.



FIG. 7. Hieratic ostrakon from gallery G2, photograph.



FIG. 8. Hieratic ostrakon from gallery G2, drawing, scale 1/1.

