

Article

“Like Wringing Water from a Stone!” Information Extraction from Two Rock Graffiti in North Kharga, Egypt

Nikolaos Lazaridis

Department of History, California State University Sacramento, Sacramento, CA 95819, USA; lazaridi@csus.edu

Abstract: In the course of the last ten years, the North Kharga Oasis–Darb Ain Amur Survey team, led by Salima Ikram (American University in Cairo), has been exploring a network of interconnected desert paths in Egypt’s Western Desert, known as *Darb Ain Amur*. These marked paths run between Kharga Oasis and Dakhla Oasis, linking them to *Darb el-Arbain*, a notorious caravan route facilitating contacts between Egypt and sub-Saharan Africa since prehistoric times. Ancient travelers using the *Darb Ain Amur* spent several days in the midst of the Western Desert and were thus forced to use areas around sandstone rock outcrops as makeshift stopovers or camping sites. During these much-needed breaks, ancient travelers identified accessible, inscribable surfaces on the towering sandstone massifs and left on them their personalized markings. In this essay, I examine two short rock graffiti carved by such travelers in a site north of Kharga Oasis, focusing on the types of information one may extract from such ancient epigraphic materials.

Keywords: graffiti; epigraphy; desert travel; Kharga Oasis; ancient Egypt



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1. Introduction

Daring to cross the sea of sand that filled the space between Kharga Oasis and Dakhla Oasis in Egypt’s Western Desert, ancient travelers had to stay on desert routes that were marked by a number of visible testimonies to earlier travelers’ usage. One of these testimonies was graffiti carved on sandstone massifs’ smooth surfaces. In this essay, I use a case study out of the rich corpus of ancient Egyptian rock graffiti carved by travelers who crossed these parts of the Western Desert as an opportunity to discuss the different types of information one may extract from such epigraphic materials. The selected two ancient rock graffiti come from the site of a sandstone massif that the North Kharga Oasis–Darb Ain Amur Survey team (henceforth NKODAAS) has christened “Hula Rock”. NKODAAS has been exploring this area since 2005, documenting and recording different monumental and non-monumental sites on the Darb Ain Amur, a network of paths connecting Kharga Oasis to Dakhla Oasis and beyond [1,2].

Hula Rock lies approximately 34 km northwest of Kharga town and its sandstone massif runs 365 m long (Figure 1). It is situated on the Darb Ain Amur, a network of marked desert paths that begin at Ain Lebekha and end at Ain Amur, sites in which temples were built during the fourth century CE and were abandoned about a century afterwards [3]. The site was first discovered by NKODAAS in 2007 and was revisited on 22 December 2012. During the second visit, the team was able to photograph and hand-copy the two rock graffiti discussed here.

Hula Rock includes several accessible wide surfaces inviting graffiti carving on both its northwest and east faces. In addition, on the east face there is a large break in the rock, which could serve as a shelter and thus, perhaps attracted travelers’ attention (Figure 2). Very close to the “shelter”, NKODAAS has discovered two sets of carved one-meter-long cascading lines, which are somewhat visible at the center of Figure 2. These enigmatic carvings, which look like hula skirts (hence the name *Hula Rock*), are unique and cannot be linked with any certainty to a specific function or message [4].

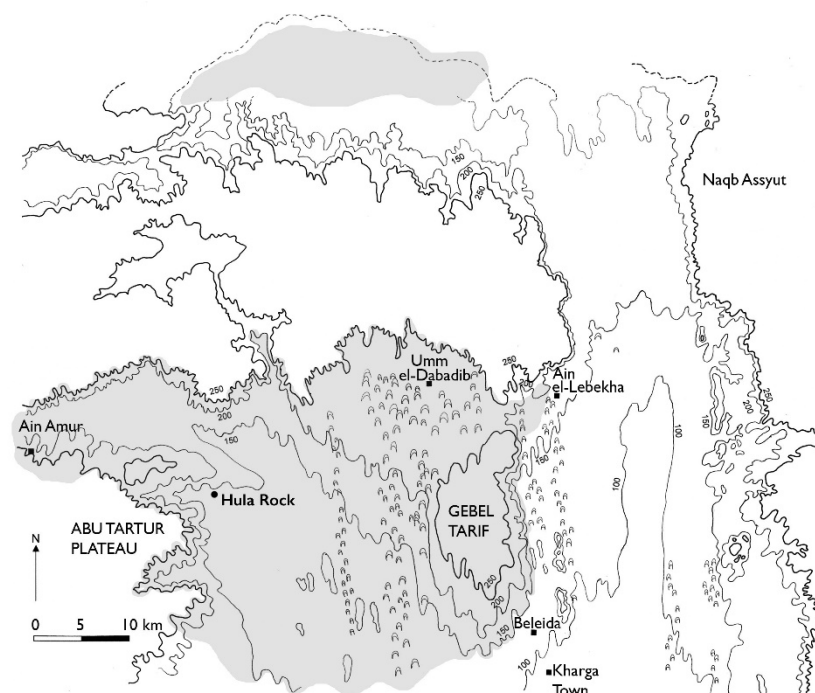


Figure 1. Map showing the location of Hula Rock (map courtesy of Nicholas Warner/NKODAAS).



Figure 2. A view of Hula Rock's east side showing the "shelter" and the figural graffiti with the cascading lines (image courtesy of NKODAAS).

The site's scattered surface ceramic evidence has been dated to the Roman era (specifically to the fourth and fifth centuries CE), while there are also a few traces of New Kingdom shards [4]. The presence of the latter supports the assumed New Kingdom dates for both rock graffiti presented here, which have been based on paleographic parallels with papyrological hieratic sources (see notes 7 and 8 below).

It is, finally, worth noting that Hula Rock was visited on 1 June 1916 by A. Keatc and E. Graham, a visit that was recorded by two graffiti on the rock's east face. This visit took place two months before one or more Australian mounted units (probably belonging to the Egyptian Expeditionary Force) passed by Ain Amur. Given the troublesome times of World War I, it is doubtful that these two men were simply having a pleasant stroll in these desolate parts of the Western Desert. Instead, like their camel-riding colleagues, they

too were probably members of military units using these alternative desert highways to travel northwards, where the British-led Egypt Expeditionary Force would be engaged in significant battles later that year [5] (pp. 15–32).

2. The Rock Graffiti

Hula Rock 1 (Figures 3 and 4) was carved on the rock's northwest face, 1.81 m above current ground level. It consists of a single horizontal line in cursive hieroglyphs [6], which measures 23 cm in length and 17 in maximum height. Hula Rock 1 reads:

rwḏw ḥrj
Agent Hori.



Figure 3. Hula Rock 1 (image courtesy of NKODAAS).

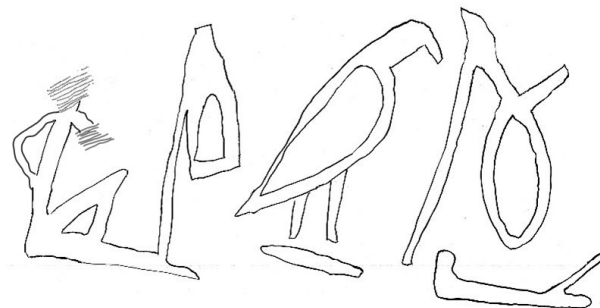




Figure 4. Hula Rock 1's traced copy produced by NKODAAS.

Hori's title was spelled with signs T12 and D40 [7] (p. 43). Sign T12 () included a remarkably elongated string, resembling its hieratic papyrological version attested in Papyrus Ebers, thus perhaps suggesting a Dynasty 18 date for the graffiti (i.e., 1550–1292 BCE) [8] (volume 2, p. 7, sign no. 83). Hori's name was spelled with signs G5, M17, and A1. The

upper part of sign A1 () is not visible, because the rock surface there is broken.

Hula Rock 2 (Figures 5 and 6) was carved on the rock's northwest face, 170 cm east of Hula Rock 1 and 1.92 m above current ground level. It consists of a single horizontal line in hieratic and measures 58 cm in length and 17 in maximum height. Hula Rock 2 reads:

zhꜣw ꜥn-sꜥh
Scribe An-Seth



Figure 5. Hula Rock 2 (image courtesy of NKODAAS).

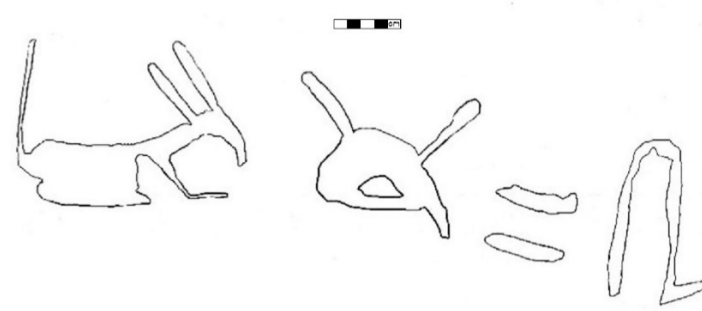


Figure 6. Hula Rock 2's traced copy produced by NKODAAS.

An-Seth's title was spelled with the hieratic version of sign Y4. His name was spelled with the hieratic versions of signs D36, N35, D6, and E21. Note that the hieratic version of sign D6 (𐀀), which commonly replaced the hieroglyphic spelling of ꜥn with signs D7 or D8, included an X sign inside the eye. The vertical line over this sign's eyebrow resembles hieratic papyrological versions dated to Dynasty 18 or Dynasty 22 [8] (volume 2, p. 7, sign no. 83 and volume 3, p. 7, sign no. 83).

As somewhat visible in Figure 5, Hula Rock 2 is preceded by a 29 cm long carving of the Seth animal (sign E21: 𐀀), which, based on its carving style and depth, does not seem to have been produced by An-Seth himself.

3. Discussion

At first glance, the two pharaonic rock graffiti examined here might seem too brief to contribute to NKODAAS's investigation of the desert routes in North Kharga: they, essentially, record the fleeting presence of two male Egyptian travelers of notable social status, with no reference to particular travel circumstances or to the graffiti's *Sitz im Leben*. Thus, what information can one possibly deduce from such laconic travel records?

NKODAAS's approach to interpreting ancient Egyptian rock graffiti revolves around the idea that the graffiti were carved at a specific time and on a specific rock surface in order to communicate one or more messages that given their unrestrained exposure to the eyes of passers-by, transcended the sociocultural context of meaning in which their carver operated, generating multiple interpretations. In other words, although an epigrapher's undying wish is to lay hands on the originally intended message of such a communication effort, NKODAAS's publication of such epigraphic materials attempts to offer various interpretive options whose variability depends on the ancient audience's potential reception of them. In the case of the two Hula Rock graffiti, this means that they could have potentially been considered as texts, as pictorial symbols, and/or as travel markers.

As texts, these rock graffiti publicized the two carvers' position/occupation and personal names. Hori's title is conventionally translated as "agent" or "emissary". Its translation is debatable and the attestations of this term point toward a generic meaning, used for positions in a variety of administrative contexts, such as the royal palace or the royal harem [7] (p. 43), [9] (p. 464), [10] (p. 114). In the case of Egypt's Western Desert, this title might have had specific connotations: apart from being a standard member of pharaonic expeditionary teams, such an agent was probably responsible for supervising frontier lands and maintaining the borders or managing temple estates that were far from the temples themselves [11] (p. 337), [12] (p. 107). If one contrasts the example from Parrenefer's New Kingdom stela from Abydos, in which his comparable title read *rwḏw m pr wsjr m whꜣt rsyt* "agent of the domain of Osiris in the Southern Oasis" [13] (p. 4), one may notice how Hori's reference is much vaguer and more succinct.

Why did Hori, following the example of many other pharaonic carvers who also omitted details such as their positions' institutional or geographical affiliations, not specify his occupational affiliations? One can only speculate that such details were not required in informal texts such as these rock graffiti, that their carvers did not have the luxury of time and space to carve longer texts that included more information, or that their carvers assumed their intended immediate audiences would have been able to guess or would have not cared about such information. Hori's decision to imitate the example of previous travelers who carved textual messages on these desert routes was an important testimony to his wish to be part of desert travelers' micro-culture, a membership that to some extent facilitated the communication of his graffiti's message.

In any case, Hori's title was usually connected to an institution and thus, his visit was probably part of an official mission, a piece of historical information that suggests local or national institutions, such as the temple of Seth in nearby Dakhla Oasis or State authorities, were active in this region of the Western Desert. If NKODAAS's assumptions that Hori probably visited Hula Rock during New Kingdom's Dynasty 18 are correct, then one may correlate his presence with other evidence from Kharga Oasis attesting to especially Theban interest in this area [14], [12] (p. 107). This proves how crucial the dating of such rock graffiti is for historically contextualizing and understanding their messages, as well as for allowing NKODAAS to identify the historical usage of Darb Ain Amur's network of desert routes [15].

Like Hori, An-Seth, too, omitted any details about his occupation as a scribe. His title was extremely common in desert graffiti, since scribes were usually members of traveling teams and as teams' literati, were the best candidates for writing out (and reading out for everyone) [16] (p. 7) such textual messages. In fact, our team, along with other scholars who have examined Egyptian scribes' status, have toyed with the idea that this was perhaps not an actual title, referring to a specific official position, but an informal indication of the carver's literacy, which in the context of a society with low literacy rates, probably marked a high status [17,18].

In addition to occupational titles, both pharaonic travelers, as was the case with approximately 90% of the textual rock graffiti from North Kharga, publicized their personal names: in the case of the Hula Rock graffiti, "Hori", which meant "s/he who belongs to Horus", and "An-Seth", which can be translated "Seth is beautiful". Hori's name has been attested for both women and men in sources dating from the Middle Kingdom (i.e., roughly 2030–1650 BCE) onwards, being especially common during the New Kingdom (i.e., 1550–1077 BCE) [19] (p. 251.8). An-Seth's name, on the other hand, has not been attested so far elsewhere. There were, however, similar New Kingdom and Late Period compound names referring to female deities, such as Bastet and Mut [19] (p. 61,11 and p. 61.8), but none mentioning male deities, such as Seth.

Theophoric names such as Hori and An-Seth's could have hinted at a family's religious orientations or geographical affiliations, although one cannot be certain about such direct correlations [20]. After all, An-Seth decided to associate his textual graffiti with a pictorial

version of the Seth animal, a further hint at his effort to invoke his deity of preference, who was a well-known protector of Egypt's oases and desert areas [21] (pp. 105–106).

As images, such rock graffiti could also appeal to audiences who were illiterate or semi-literate in the hieroglyphic and hieratic scripts. Such travelers could have recognized specific signs, especially those whose cursive version was not very far from the hieroglyphic rendering—e.g., the falcon sign (G5) in Hula Rock 1 or the eye sign (D6) in Hula Rock 2. Such signs were sometimes targeted by image-focused visitors, either positively, as they attempted to replicate them in their own hands or negatively, as they tried to destroy them. In fact, NKODAAS has discovered at the site of Amun Rock a conspicuous example of the latter type of treatment: in the case of the rock graffiti Amun Rock 9, subsequent visitors tried to destroy its eye hieroglyph [22].

Interestingly, as noted above, An-Seth's graffiti was carved right next to a figural graffiti depicting the hybrid animal that represented the god Seth, although there were plenty of other free spots on that rock surface to choose from. One cannot be sure which of the graffiti were carved first at Hula Rock. If An-Seth carved Hula Rock 2 after that figural graffiti, then one may presume that An-Seth deliberately tried to notionally connect his message to Seth's invocation, suggesting that he, too, wanted to contribute to the figural graffiti's effort to communicate with that desert deity, or that An-Seth tried to make his graffiti more visible or attractive by positioning it next to a conspicuous and perhaps appealing picture. After all, Hula Rock is located relatively close to Seth Rock, a site that included several invocations of the god Seth, possibly serving as his vernacular shrine [21]. Alternatively, if the figural graffiti was carved after Hula Rock 2, then one could assume that the figural graffiti's carver wanted to make his graffiti more visible and attractive, associating it with a well-executed text that incidentally included the picture of a Seth animal [23].

Finally, ancient or more recent travelers, regardless of their levels of literacy in the Egyptian language or of their understanding of such rock graffiti's textual meaning or pictorial symbolism, could have interpreted them as sheer markers of other travelers' fleeting presence. As such, these rock graffiti assured those who spotted them on the massifs that they were on a path that has been trodden earlier. They functioned, in other words, as desert *alamat* "signposts" [24], helping future travelers navigate these parts of Egypt's Western Desert.

The manners in which such rock graffiti have probably been received and preserved in the course of time are also delicately connected to issues of political power or cultural heritage. In the context of Darb Ain Amur's network of paths that have been used in the past by both Egyptian and non-Egyptian travelers, such graffiti indirectly propagated and confirmed Egyptian State's presence and control over these desert regions, as much as Roman authorities advertised their local presence through the establishment of forts and other monumental sites [25]. Later audiences possibly have also perceived such ancient graffiti as artifacts of ancient Egyptian heritage and thus, their treatment depended on these audiences' views of Egypt's earlier history and culture. In that respect, it is very possible that Mr. Graham and Mr. Keatc added their own graffiti on Hula Rock, at least 3100 years after Hori's visit, because they were attracted by the very presence of ancient Egyptian graffiti there and wished to associate themselves with an ancient heritage they knew about and appreciated.

4. Conclusions

Overall, communicating as texts, images, or signposts, rock graffiti like Hula Rock 1 and 2 added their voices to the muted interactions of all desert travelers who chose to carve messages on such rocks. In this way, they much resemble modern graffiti that, as defined by the art historian Franco Speroni, can be considered as expressions of connected individualities [26]. By imitating earlier desert travelers' textual and pictorial conventions, Hori and An-Seth participated in a "public forum" in which one traveler's personal identity and status was compared to, and associated with, another member of this travelers' micro-

culture. The sustained flow of information between carved messages probably created a safety net that eased desert travelers' discomfort by making them feel as important contributors to the ongoing efforts to make Western Desert's terrain more hospitable and more navigable.

The NKODAAS team continues its work toward publishing the rock graffiti discovered north of Kharga Oasis, expanding, thus, the corpus of recorded ancient travelers' graffiti. Among other things, NKODAAS's forthcoming publication will include discussions about rock graffiti's relationships with informal and formal inscriptions from Egypt and about the manners in which the ancient carvers of these graffiti constructed their public identities.

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