Amun-Ra, lord of the sky: A deity for travellers of the western desert

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The North Kharga Oasis Survey team (NKOS), headed by Dr. Salima Ikram (American University in Cairo) and Dr. Corinna Rossi (Collegio di Milano), has been discovering new sites and mapping a large area north of Kharga Oasis, including some western branches of the Darb el-Arba'in. This essay examines epigraphic material from two rock sites in the Darb Ain Amur, the northernmost of these branches, which since prehistory connected the Kharga and Dakhla oases: these are the sites of Amun Rock and Seth Rock. The enormous sandstone rocks at both locations saw numerous travellers in antiquity. Many of them found the time, and felt the need, to carve a textual message. This essay looks at five of the rock inscriptions that have been recorded by the NKOS team. These were carved in a mixture of normal hieroglyphs, cursive hieroglyphs and hieratic signs on rock surfaces that bear numerous other textual and pictorial carvings. What unites these five inscriptions is the fact that they all invoke Amun-Ra with just the epithet ‘lord of the sky’. The essay discusses this rare form of the god in the light of the historical information that one may extract from these inscriptions. Why was Amun-Ra invoked here in this particular way? What does this reveal about those who addressed themselves to him and, in general, about the travel practices of the ancient Egyptians who crossed the western desert?

Context of the inscriptions

Amun Rock stands in the heart of a wadi that is ideal for safe encampment, surrounded as it

1 For more information on the work of the NKOS in Kharga, visit the team's website at http://www1.aucegypt.edu/academic/northkhargaoasisurvey/home.htm. For the history of the Darb el-Arba'in, see Morkot 1996 and more recently Roe 2005/2006. Some of the results published here were presented at the 7th Dakhla Oasis Project conference in Leiden. I would like to thank Salima Ikram, Olaf Kaper and Marcel Marée for their valuable comments.

2 For the uses of Darb Ain Amur in antiquity, see Ikram 2013. For the most recent report on the work by the NKOS along this route, see Rossi and Ikram 2010.

3 As Mircea Eliade has put it in his famous study The Sacred and the Profane, a rock may show the human ‘something that transcends the precariousness of his humanity: an absolute mode of being’ (quoted in Murray 2011, 223).

4 The term ‘rock inscription’ is preferred here to ‘graffito’ or simply ‘inscription’, because it is often hard to determine whether texts carved along desert roads should be regarded as formal (like monumental inscriptions) or informal (like graffiti), and whether they were left by professional or non-professional carvers. For a discussion of these terms, see Mairs 2011, 157. Also compare the uses of the term ‘graffito’ in Peden 2001, xxi; and Darnell 2002.

5 This hybrid script is what Henry G. Fischer, following Alan Gardiner’s example, famously called ‘semi-cursive hieroglyphs’ (Fischer 1979, 40–42).

http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/publications/online_journals/bmsaes/issue_22/lazaridis.aspx
is by high outcrops (Fig. 1). This wadi lies probably on an offshoot of the main desert route, so the small number of visits estimated on the basis of the rock inscriptions may not reflect the number of ancient travellers who used this part of the desert road network. It is quite possible that many were unaware of this alternative route, and even if they knew it, they might not have had the chance to deviate from the main path and spend time at the site of Amun Rock.

Most of the archaeological remains in and around Amun Rock suggest that the site never hosted a permanent settlement, but it was probably a place for temporary stopovers. No signs of a local well or qanat have been discovered, so it stood little to no chance of sustaining any sort of long-term habitation. The only traces that possibly point towards longer usage of this site are a rectangular enclosure, probably to contain the visitors’ animals, and a man-made burial chamber (Figs 2–3). The latter was dug deep into the east face of the rock, and the mummified human remains that have been found outside suggest that the tomb may originally have been intended for a high-status traveller who died while passing through this area and had to be buried on the spot, or who was intentionally brought here to be buried at Amun Rock. Various inscriptions were carved around the tomb, but it is difficult to determine whether they were linked in any way to the owner or to the construction of this tomb. The same applies to one demotic and two hieratic ostraca that have been discovered in the immediate context of the tomb.

Analysis of the datable epigraphic remains and the large concentrations of ceramics suggests a tentative time span for ancient visits to Amun Rock. They probably began in the Middle Kingdom (from around 2100 BC) and lasted until the second or third century AD, with a marked concentration in the late New Kingdom and early Third Intermediate Period.

The site of Seth Rock consists of a single sandstone rock that lies on one strand of the Darb Ain Amur (Fig. 4). This site has been christened ‘Seth Rock’ because its surface bears many depictions of the Seth animal. The east side hosts a small grotto, perhaps initially natural and later enlarged. A set of crude and now tumbled sandstone steps leads up to this aperture, which may have served as a popular shrine, most likely dedicated to Seth.

Within a 2 km radius of this site, the NKOS has identified and recorded four other sites: Hula Rock, Sherd 1 Rock, Scribe Rock, and Rock 15. Hula Rock and Scribe Rock include ancient inscriptions, and surface surveys have yielded pottery remains of the late New Kingdom as well as the Roman Period, while Rock 15 and Sherd 1 Rock include only ceramics of the Roman Period and later.

The archaeological evidence from Seth Rock is limited to scattered potsherds, most of which have been dated preliminarily to the late New Kingdom. The number of potsherds found at this rock is small compared to the abundance of images and inscriptions carved

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6 For a preliminary report on these archaeological features, see Ikram 2008, 31.
7 Salima Ikram, personal communication.
8 For a full discussion of the Amun Rock inscriptions and their dates, see Lazaridis forthcoming.
9 This is a preliminary theory. Its validity will be tested against further outcomes of the study of this site by the NKOS. See also Ikram 2013, 15.
10 For the pottery of Rock 15, see, e.g., Ikram 2013, 12.
upon it. In fact, the strict New Kingdom dates thus far established by the NKOS for the pottery only partly overlap with the date range of these engravings; in addition to those of the New Kingdom, there are inscriptions that have been dated to the late pharaonic periods and to the Coptic era. Thus it seems that Seth Rock entertained ancient visitors over a time-span of at least 1800 years; some of them may have stayed for a day or overnight, while others rested only briefly in the rock’s precious shade. The amount of time these travellers spent at Seth Rock might be deduced from the quality of the inscriptions, because some of them seem to have been carved hastily, while others are more elegant and detailed.\(^{11}\)

**The Seth Rock inscriptions**

One rock inscription, called Seth Rock 3b (abbreviated SR3b; 10 cm long), was carved on the northern side of the aforementioned grotto (Fig. 5). This side bears several figural and textual carvings, some of which were etched deeply into the rock surface and have hence survived erosion, while shallower ones have eroded to varying degrees. This surface area contains two more legible inscriptions (SR3a and SR3c), which will be considered together with SR3b in the forthcoming publication of the site, because their styles of writing and carving suggest they were executed by the same person, or perhaps by different travellers of the same group. SR3b reads:

\[
\text{Jmn-Ra nb \[p.t\]}^{12} \text{dj=f anxw}^{13}
\]

Amun-Ra, lord of [the sky], may he grant lives.

This inscription is remarkable for the deep carving of the \(\text{०} \) and \(\text{१} \) signs, spelling \(\text{Ra} \). In fact, on this surface there are at least eight deep circles, three of which are of the same diameter,

\(^{11}\) Note that the distinction between a ‘hastily carved’ inscription and a ‘patiently carved’ one is tenuous, since one cannot be certain about a carver’s skills or the circumstances under which the carving was executed. Both factors may have considerably accelerated or decelerated the carving work. Based on our subjective appraisal of their quality, it could be supposed that ‘elegant’ inscriptions were connected to longer stays at the site – which may also account for some of the pottery deposits.

\(^{12}\) There are only faint traces of the \(\text{०} \) sign, as the surface on which it was carved is now broken.

\(^{13}\) The plural form of ‘\(\text{nb} \)’ is unusual. This can be explained either as the word for ‘life’, here involving an orthographic or dialectic idiosyncrasy of the carver, or as a reference to the group of travellers that the carver belonged to.
looking as if they were cut with a cylindrical drill or similar tool (some of these circles are visible in fig. 5). All these circles seem to have been first bored at random, perhaps to test different parts of the available surface. In the case of SR3b, one of these circles was cleverly integrated with the hieroglyphs to represent the sun disc.

The other two legible inscriptions around SR3b include SR3a (7 cm long), which refers to a regnal year 6 of an unspecified pharaoh, and SR3c (5 cm long), which solely comprises the ntr sign for ‘god’ (not visible in Fig. 5).

The opposite side of the grotto bears another hieroglyphic invocation of Amun-Ra (SR13; 16 cm long), this time without the epithet ‘lord of the sky’. However, directly below that short inscription the surface has broken away, so originally it could have included an epithet.

At the south-eastern corner of the mouth of the grotto lies a detached rock of sandstone that probably fell off the eroded southern wall of the grotto (Fig. 6). It bears a number of pictorial carvings, including a lotus flower, an nh sign, another ntr sign, and a long reed sign. Some of these carvings appear to have been truncated when the rock became detached from the wall, which means that they would predate its collapse. A group of three vertical rock inscriptions, labelled SR5a, SR5b and SR5c, fits almost perfectly inside the space provided by the broken surface, but it seems unlikely that the carvers would have left their mementos on a small stray fragment, which lies, moreover, upside down. Of these three inscriptions, SR5a (18 cm long) includes the same invocation of Amun-Ra:

\[
\text{Jmn-R}^\circ \text{ nb p.t}
\]

Amun-Ra, lord of the sky

The other two rock inscriptions to the left of SR5a read jr n Pj-nht, ‘made by Panakht’ (SR5b) and Mn-hpr-R, ‘Menkheperra’, the prenomen of Thutmose III, contained in a cartouche (SR5c).\(^\text{14}\) Several stylistic features of the SR5 group recall the SR3 group discussed above. In particular, the hieroglyphs and in SR5c closely resemble those in SR3a and SR5a. It therefore seems likely that the SR3 and SR5 inscriptions were carved by the same group of travellers at one or more visits to the site.

‘Amun-Ra, lord of the sky’ appears in one more rock inscription at Seth Rock: SR9 (24 cm long; Fig. 7). Parts of it reproduce verbatim SR3a and SR3b. Its preliminary reading is:

\[^{14}\text{For a full discussion of SR5c, see Ikram et al. forthcoming.}\]
Regnal year 6, fourth month of akhet, day 16. Made (for) Amun-Ra, lord of the sky, that he may give lives, (by) the god's scribe Rahotep…

Onomastics date this inscription to the Middle or New Kingdom. If it was carved by the same group of travellers as SR3 and SR5, then its date would complement the elliptic year 6 reference in SR3a, and all may refer to Thutmose III’s sixth regnal year, ca. 1473 BC. This would have been just one year before Hatshepsut assumed the full titulary of a king and elbowed young Thutmose out of most official records. Hence, these inscriptions confirm the common practice of including only Thutmose III’s name in records dating up to year 7 of his reign.

In addition, one should also note the fine quality of the hieroglyphs in SR9 compared to all the other hieroglyphic inscriptions of this site, which are cruder and more irregular. In this case it is particularly interesting to observe that, although the surface is rather uneven at this spot, Rahotep tried hard to keep his inscription in a straight line, even when he had to rearrange the positioning of the signs spelling Amun-Ra’s name and epithet (as the sun disc is stacked tightly over nb p.t). All these unique features of SR9 suggest that Rahotep was probably a scribe who had worked before on monumental inscriptions.

15 Observe the perfectly rounded, hollow carving of the sun disc here, which much resembles the sun discs carved on the north side of the grotto of Seth Rock, discussed above.

16 The top of sign is very faint.

17 The last two signs of Rahotep’s name are very faint.

18 There are at least four more signs after the male determinative of Rahotep’s name. The surface curves at this point and is much eroded, which makes it impossible to discern the end of this inscription. We may speculate that it included Rahotep’s patronym, since the formula ‘X son of Y’ was common in rock inscriptions.

19 The absence of a reference to a specific pharaoh is not uncommon in non-monumental inscriptions, both in the deserts and in the Nile Valley. See, e.g., Mery’s inscription, southwest of Dakhla, discussed by Förster 2007, 9, with fig. 41; also the inscription of a group of Ramesside scribes at Djoser’s step pyramid in Saqqara, presented in Negm 1998, 118. In fact, this is one of the most common and obvious deviations from the norms of formal, monumental inscriptions.

20 The sixteenth day of Khoiak must have fallen around December 22. For the date, see Daumas 1975, 958.

21 For a probable version of the title in the Old Kingdom, see Jones 2000, II: 862, no. 3150. For the use of this title in the Middle Kingdom, see Ward 1982, 161, no. 1396. No other New Kingdom attestations have been identified so far. Finally, note that Erman and Grapow 1971, 480, no. 11, interpret a similar group of signs as an abbreviation of ss medi.t ntr, ‘scribe of the divine scroll’; however, that group includes the book roll hieroglyph, which is absent in SR9.

22 According to Ranke 1935, 219, no. 15, this name was common throughout the pharaonic era, with the majority of instances dating to the New Kingdom.

23 Dorman 2009, 41–43.

24 In addition to acting as a ss-ntr, a job that probably involved mostly writing texts on papyri and other
The Amun Rock inscriptions

Apart from the three examples at Seth Rock, references to Amun-Ra as ‘lord of the sky’ are also made in two hieroglyphic inscriptions at Amun Rock, approximately 10 km to the south-east, closer to Kharga.\(^{25}\) AR5 (33 cm long) and AR6 (31 cm long), which appear to have been carved by different people, have the same content, but written differently (Figs 8–9).\(^{26}\)

\[ \text{Jmn-Ra nb p.t} \]
Amun-Ra, lord of the sky

These two inscriptions are tentatively dated to the New Kingdom, a period during which there was considerable activity at Amun Rock, attested by the aforementioned hieratic ostraca and by generous samples of New Kingdom pottery.

Interpretive attempts

The overlapping dates and the similarities between the studied rock inscriptions, persistently invoking Amun-Ra, suggest that they possibly mark two points along the desert route visited by the same travellers. However, since no dates are mentioned at Amun Rock that could potentially be associated with the carving of AR5 and AR6, it is impossible to tell whether the travellers first passed Amun Rock or Seth Rock, i.e. whether they were heading towards Dakhla or Kharga Oasis.

Perhaps these people travelled and camped together at Seth Rock and Amun Rock in Thutmose III’s sixth regnal year, covering both rocks with their inscriptions. Unfortunately, this cannot be proven given the limited available evidence. However, it is clear that there were at least two different travellers (Rahotep of SR9 and Panakht of SR3) who chose to carve a number of invocations to ‘Amun-Ra, lord of the sky’ on rocks along the route. The quality of the rock inscriptions attests to their carvers’ hieroglyphic skills and, as was the case, for non-monumental media, it seems possible that he was also a professional draughtsman (sšt-kd): for this type of scribes, see Erman and Grapow 1971, 480, no. 11; Dorman 2008, 78; and a New Kingdom example in Eichler 2000, 158–59.

\(^{25}\) For more details about these two rock inscriptions, see Lazaridis forthcoming.

\(^{26}\) Note that AR6 is incomplete: the rock face on which it was carved collapsed at some later point, resulting in the loss of the \(\text{, , \, (p)}\) and \(\square\) signs.

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instance, with SR9 earlier, suggests that they might have doubled as draughtsmen (ṣšw-kd).27

None of the Egyptian travellers who left behind these rock inscriptions ever mention the purpose of their travels, unlike official records referring to state employees sent out on specific missions.28 The carvers do not even mention what they were doing at Seth Rock or Amun Rock, different from visitor inscriptions such as found in Saqqara, where the authors mention that they were visiting the sites to look at the monuments or to have a pleasant stroll.29 In fact, the only activity mentioned in the rock inscriptions of the two North Kharga is their very creation (jr, e.g. in SR5b or SR9). What seems to have mattered most to the literate travellers who passed these lonely desert rocks was the very act of carving texts upon them, transforming the rocks into quasi-monumental landmarks.30 These people commemorated their visits by leaving their names and titles and paying homage to Amun-Ra, whom they associated with the area and with whom they felt connected, thus turning these hostile surroundings into a safer, more familiar locale.

Given the impact such inscriptions had on the character of these desert sites, one might ask why this group of New Kingdom travellers chose to invoke here ‘Amun-Ra, lord of the sky’. The invocation of Amun-Ra was undoubtedly connected with the popularity of his cult and the intensive state sponsorship it enjoyed in the Nile Valley and beyond. In this part of the western desert Amun-Ra features in numerous official as well as private invocations and dedications. During the New Kingdom, Amun-Ra was present at several sites around Kharga and Dakhla, either having an entire temple dedicated to him or being worshipped at the cult places of other deities.31

Our rock inscriptions display the natural wish to invoke a powerful deity, but it is much less obvious why Amun-Ra should always be labelled exclusively as ‘lord of the sky’, without his other common epithets, such as ‘king of the gods’ or ‘lord of the Two Lands’.32 Few other texts name Amun-Re solely as ‘lord of the sky’, such as a New Kingdom scarab in the Hashimoto Collection33 and the small stela of Peniumitru from Gebelein (Manchester

27 Note that another rock inscription of equally high quality and probably also carved by someone skilled in monumental writing exists at Split Rock, some 11.5 km northwest of Seth Rock. This consists of a fragment inscribed with the hieroglyphic ṣš sign, which was evidently part of a larger inscription.
28 As in the case of biographical tomb inscriptions such as Weni the Elder’s Old Kingdom text from Abydos, which mentions the mission of a god’s treasurer sent out to Tura to bring back a sarcophagus (see the translation in Simpson (ed.) 2003, 403). See also royal stelae such as Nefertetep’s I’s stela from Abydos, which includes a reference to a high-status official sent out to Abydos to construct monuments on behalf of this Dynasty 13 pharaoh (translated in ibid., 341–42).
29 Navrátilová 2007.
30 Therefore, in order to maximise the effect of inscription AR6, its carver drew a line underneath, separating it from an earlier footprint. For a discussion of this feature, see Lazaridis forthcoming.
31 For a list of such sites, see Guermeur 2005, 442-49.
32 For the standard way of invoking Amun-Ra with a combination of ‘lord of the sky’ and other epithets, see for example the monumental hymns presented in Klotz 2006, or the magical papyrus published by Sauneron 1970, ll. 1.2–3. For the alternative choice of invoking Amun-Ra through other, seemingly more popular, epithets within similar archaeological contexts, see for instance the alternative epithet nsw nTrw, ‘king of the gods’, in inscription no. 7 from Wadi Meniah, published in Rothe et al. 2008, 55.
33 This is presented in Scarisbrick 2004, 6, no. 9.
Museum, TN R4571/1937), but further research may yield more examples. Spatial limitations may at times have been one contributing factor, but this hardly explains the persistent choice of one specific epithet in the rock inscriptions of North Kharga, where ‘Amun-Ra, lord of the sky’ is invoked at least five times.

A more plausible explanation of this feature should consider the travellers’ personal status and background, combined with the cult topography of North Kharga. It is, thus, very possible that this epithet was used to invoke some of the deity’s well-attested cosmic powers. As ‘lord of the sky’, Amun-Ra was perhaps considered to be in control of weather conditions and the sky – natural elements essential for the success and safety of desert travel. The sky was important for multiple reasons, including the fact that ancient desert travellers probably navigated themselves by observing the stars.

Alternatively, this epithet may have been chosen in reference to a local version of the god’s cult, with which these pious travellers were somehow associated. However, no evidence for a cult specifically of ‘Amun-Ra, lord of the sky’ cult have so far been discovered in Egypt, thus this scenario is rather implausible.

It is interesting to note that the nb p.t epithet was used occasionally alone with reference to other deities of the Egyptian pantheon, most notably Seth, Mut (Amun’s consort) and Horus (especially in his Behdetite version). These three deities were particularly present in the Kharga and Dakhla oases. Possibly the use of this epithet for Amun-Ra was influenced by his geographical association with the other three deities, ranking him among a cluster of

34 This is discussed by Cambell Price in Manchester Museum’s online blog at http://egyptmanchester.wordpress.com/2012/06/24/texts-in-translation-6-a-stela-of-peniwemiteru-acc-no-r4571-1937. One may contrast this feature to the much higher frequency of cases where although this epithet stands alone in a sentence (with or without the name of Amun-Ra), its immediate context includes references to additional epithets: e.g. 11 such instances from Karnak’s hypostyle hall (Christophe 1955, 50 and 62) or an instance from Intef II’s well-known column from Karnak (Ullmann 2007, 4).

35 For the study of star movements and star charts in ancient Egypt, see, e.g., the texts published by Leitz 1995, and the general discussion by Franci 2010, 83–91. Interestingly, in Aswan several pharaonic stelae refer to Amun as Jmn nb mtnw, ‘Amun, lord of the roads’ (Guermuer 2005, 488-89).

36 Any possible connection between this epithet and a geographically specific cult of Amun could have related to the carver’s personality and background. Cf. Muir 2011, noting that ancient Greek and Roman gods were invoked en route not only for divine protection but also to affirm a person’s identity.

37 For several instances of the epithet used for Mut and Horus, see http://aaew.bbaw.de/tla/servlet/servlet?seff=0&df=0&dhy=0&dhy=1=58710&d1=0&c1=0&d2=81650&d2=0&c2=0&d1=10&d1=1&d3=1 &d4=10. For Seth, see Hope and Kaper 2011, 219–36.

38 For Mut and Seth’s presence, see, e.g., their cults in the Roman temples of Dakhla (Kaper 1997, 51). Mut was prominent at several sites in Dakhla and Kharga, such as Mut el-Kharab, el-Hibis, and later Nadura. Finally, references to Horus occur at several sites in Kharga, e.g. at Horus Rock, a site discovered by the NKOS with a high-quality depiction of Horus, probably in his Behdetite form. For additional attestations of Horus in Kharga, see, e.g., Ikram 2013, 15, or Wadi el-Hol rock inscriptions 5 and 6 (Darnell 2002, 99 and 102, respectively).

39 For the close relationship between Seth’s cult and Amun-Ra’s cult in the western desert, see Hope and Kaper 2011, 226–29 and 234. In this article the authors point out, among other things, that the use of the epithet ‘lord of the sky’ for Seth attests to connections between his cult and those of Amun, Ra, or Amun-Ra. For the syncretistic tendencies of Amun-Ra, see Leitz 2002, 320–32, and the comments in Assmann 2008, 58 and 63–64.
deities concerned with the protection of travellers.\textsuperscript{40}

In sum, the invocations of ‘Amun-Ra, lord of the sky’ at Seth Rock and Amun Rock may be best explained as a pragmatic choice by a group of New Kingdom travellers, who sought divine protection in these desolate surroundings. They picked one of the period’s most powerful deities, interweaving his profile with those of other deities of local significance, all of whom were thought to watch over vulnerable desert travellers.

\textbf{Bibliography}


\textsuperscript{40} Compare the exclusive use of the same epithet for the god Min, who was the primary deity of the eastern desert (e.g. in inscription no. 2 from Wadi Bueib, published in Rothe et al. 2008, 27). The general lack of safety that characterised travel in ancient Egypt is noted by Baines 2007, 22–3, and Darnell 2002, 3.


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Fig. 1: Amun Rock and its wadi (photo: N. Lazaridis).

Fig. 2: Enclosure at Amun Rock (photo: N. Lazaridis).
Fig. 3: Tomb at Amun Rock (photo: N. Lazaridis).

Fig. 4: View of Seth Rock (photo: N. Lazaridis).
Fig. 5: Inscriptions SR3a (right) and SR3b (middle) (photo: N. Lazaridis).

Fig. 6: Detached block with SR5 inscriptions (photo: N. Lazaridis).
Fig. 7: Part of inscription SR9 with invocation of Amun-Ra (photo: N. Lazaridis).
Fig. 8: Inscription AR5 (photo: N. Lazaridis).
Fig. 9: Inscription AR6 (photo: N. Lazaridis).