The rock inscriptions at el-Hôsh

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The site of el-Hôsh is situated on the west bank of the Nile, about 30km south of Edfu and 6km north of Gebel Silsila (fig. 1–2). The area is rich in prehistoric rock drawings, pharaonic rock inscriptions and later graffiti. Only 2km to the south of el-Hôsh is the Wadi Shatt el-Rigâl, an area subjected to intensive scholarly attention due to its pharaonic rock inscriptions.1 Given its close proximity to el-Hôsh, it is surprising that inscriptions at the latter site have received so little attention.

Only parts of the site have been referred to in publications. The main features at el-Hôsh, which attracted visitors as early as the second half of the 19th century, are the stone quarries in the northern part of the site.2 Eisenlohr, for example, describes how he ended up at the stone quarries of el-Hôsh in 1885, although he had intended to visit the Wadi Shatt el-Rigâl.3 Greeks inscriptions connected to these quarries were subsequently published by Eisenlohr, many of which had already been noted by Harris in 1857.4 The most comprehensive study of the Greek inscriptions in the stone quarries comes from Legrain, who collected around hundred inscriptions in 1906.5

With regard to the pharaonic inscriptions, Petrie is the first to copy some of them when he visited the area in 1887:

After reaching the mouth of the Seba Rigaleh valley, a straggling succession of graffiti are to be seen on the sandstone rocks, which border the west side of the Nile for some three or four miles northwards.6

In 1938, Winkler visited the site and indicated that el-Hôsh and the area to the south was ‘an important site with regard to rock drawings and rock inscriptions’.7 Focusing on the rock

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1 Full bibliography up to 1937: PM V, 206–8. The most significant additions are Winlock, Reprint from the American Journal of Semitic Languages and Literatures LVII, 2, 137–61; Winlock, Excavations at Deir el-Bahri 1911-1913, 87ff, 117ff, pl. 22; Winlock, The Rise and Fall of the Middle Kingdom, 58–75, pls. 9–12, 35–9; Cervicek, Felsbilder des Nord-Ethbi, Oberägyptens und Unternubiens, 25, fig. 6. The epigraphic work carried out by Caminos from 1955 until 1982 at Gebel Silsila and Wadi Shatt el-Rigâl is presented in Caminos, JEA 41, 51–5; Caminos, JEA 69, 3–4; Caminos in Assmann, Burkhard & Davies, Problems and Priorities in EA, 57–67. The most recent work in the Wadi Shatt el-Rigâl has been carried out by Osing but this has not yet been published.

2 Baedeker, Egypt and the Sudan, 359; Winlock, Reprint from the American Journal of Semitic Languages and Literatures LVII, 2 (1940), 158.

3 Eisenlohr, ZÄS 23, 56.


5 Legrain, PA 4 28, 17–26, pls. 1–3.

6 Petrie, A Season in Egypt, 15.

7 Winkler, Rock Drawings of Southern Upper Egypt I, 9; see especially the map in his second volume; Rock
inscriptions, he published only one hieroglyphic inscription, which obviously escaped Petrie’s attention (our ATQQ-T32).8

My first acquaintance with the site was through the prehistoric rock drawings. In 1998, I participated in the Belgian Archaeological Mission to el-Hôsh under the direction of Dr. Dirk Huyge of the Royal Museums of Art and History, Brussels.9 This expedition yielded interesting results since el-Hôsh contains some of the oldest rock drawings in the Nile valley. The pharaonic inscriptions were not studied at this time, as the project focused on prehistoric rock art and salvage excavation. Since the entire area is threatened by various construction projects and quarrying activities, it was recognised that a record of the pharaonic rock inscriptions and graffiti of pharaonic date would also be necessary. In March 2006, a preliminary survey including recording and photography of the rock inscriptions at el-Hôsh was therefore started by the author, under the auspices of the Netherlands-Flemish Institute in Cairo.10 A complete understanding of the texts within their geographic context requires more detailed research, and more seasons of fieldwork. Nevertheless, the preliminary surveys have already yielded interesting results, and a better estimation of the potential of the site for future work. In what follows, I will present some of the clearest examples by way of introducing the pharaonic aspect of the site. A further season will take place during 2008.

Surveying the el-Hôsh area led to the discovery of 169 inscriptions at five different locations (from north to south, see fig. 2):

- stone quarries near the village of el-Hôsh: 9 inscriptions
- Gebelet Yussef (GYU): 6 inscriptions
- Abu Tanqura Bahari (ATB): 92 inscriptions
- Abu Tanqura Qebli (ATQ): 31 inscriptions
- Abu Tanqura Qebli Qebli (ATQQ): 31 inscriptions

All of these areas were surveyed, and the rock inscriptions were documented by photography and, in some cases, by epigraphic recording on acetate sheets. In addition, consideration was given to pottery fragments, which could be found in great quantities at some of the sites.

Most of the inscriptions feature strings of titles followed by a personal name; longer texts are almost completely absent. Many of the inscriptions cannot yet be properly read and consequently, their date remains to be more accurately determined. However, the minority of well datable inscriptions encompass a broad chronological range, from the Early Dynastic period through until the Byzantine era. The earliest inscription can be dated to the end of the First Dynasty, on the basis of palaeography and the existence of an exact parallel from

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8 Winkler, Rock Drawings of Southern Upper Egypt II, pl. 9 [1].
10 The fieldwork at el-Hôsh took place from March 4-20, 2006. The Supreme Council of Antiquities of Egypt was represented by Mr. Hossam el-Dien Mostafa Soghier of the Antiquities Inspectorate at Kom Ombo (Upper Egypt). This expedition was followed by a short second visit in the beginning of November 2007 by the author in the company of Willy Clarysse (KU Leuven) and Annie Cottry (photographer).
another well-dated context. The most recent text has been dated to the 6th or 7th century AD by Willy Clarysse. All major periods in between are represented, though Middle Kingdom inscriptions are most frequent.

A mixture of hieroglyphic and hieratic scripts were employed, sometimes even in the same inscription. In addition, there appears to be a correlation between the age of an inscription, its size, and the writing technique used. Texts from the Old, Middle, and New Kingdom generally show large signs, hammered out in the rock whereas most of the later ones are faintly engraved or carved. The latter is particularly true for the demotic inscriptions, hampering their reading and interpretation.

**Gebelet Yussef (GYU)**

On the east side of an isolated boulder, facing the Nile, six pharaonic rock inscriptions were found. The best preserved and longest inscription mentions the scribe Pashed (GYU-T1, fig. 4), and can be dated to the late Nineteenth Dynasty on onomastic evidence. The other inscriptions, which appear to be associated with the previous one, probably follow a similar date, though their reading is still doubtful.

**Abu Tanqura Bahari (ATB)**

A total of 92 inscriptions have been identified on Abu Tanqura Bahari, which is located to the north of the Wadi Abu Tanqura. The majority (83 out of 92) appear on two large boulders on the northeast side of the site (fig. 5). The north sides of both boulders are completely covered by inscriptions, often superimposed on each other as well as upon older rock drawings.

The easternmost boulder contains 63 inscriptions. Only half of them can be dated more precisely to a period between the end of the Old Kingdom and the early New Kingdom on the basis of onomastic and/or palaeographic evidence. The appearance of well-known names such as Rn-snb (ATB-Teb19-20), Hk3-lb (ATB-Teb 1, ATB-Teb40, ATB-Teb50-51), Sbk-Hip (ATB-Teb23), and Sbk-m-Hi.t (ATB-Teb5) was already noticed by Petrie and reflects the concentration of Middle Kingdom material. Most of the individuals are not accompanied by a title, but those who are mostly appear to be scribes. In addition to hieroglyphic and hieratic inscriptions, a few demotic and Greek texts are attested as well.

The westernmost boulder bears fifteen inscriptions, but most of them are difficult to

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13 Called Khor Tangura by the few people who live in the area; Baedeker, *Egypt and the Sudan*, 359.
14 The stroke behind the $ib$-sign could be interpreted as an $aA$-sign, which would point to a date in the Middle Kingdom; Ranke, *PN* I, 256 (4).
15 A few of the most readable ones have been copied by Petrie, *A Season in Egypt*, pl. 16 (nos. 534–5, 538, 540–1, 543, 551–2, 554–5).
16 Ranke, *PN* I, 222.26; 256.3; 259.12; 304.4 respectively.
date. Apart from one drawing of a Coptic cross, only pharaonic inscriptions appear on this boulder.

A further fourteen isolated inscriptions have been catalogued, scattered around ATB. One panel shows large, beautifully carved, hieroglyphs mentioning the *rh-nswt imy-r3 kd Im3-mdhw nb im3h.w*, ‘royal acquaintance, overseer of builders, Ima-Medehu,’17 possessor of reverence’ (ATB-T1) and the *rh-nswt (m3i mry=f) imy-r3 mSbk-htp nb im3h.w*, ‘royal acquaintance, overseer of troops, Sobekhotep, possessor of reverence’ (ATB-T2, see fig. 6). Both show a very similar palaeography suggesting that they are contemporary and even written by the same scribe. On the basis of palaeographical and onomastic evidence, they can be dated to the 12th dynasty:

1. The addition of *m3i mry=f*, as can be seen in the second inscription (fig. 6), occurs in autobiographical contexts of the early Middle Kingdom as a qualification to *rh-nswt*.18

2. The unique hieroglyph followed by three dots in the personal name *Im3-mdhw* can be identified as sign S10 from the Gardiner list, probably representing a fillet.19 The el-Hôsh version shows a more cursive writing style, which is to be expected since we are dealing with a rock inscription. Its function as an ideogram is confirmed by the phonetic spelling on an offering table kept at Kyoto and published by Petrie.20 The Kyoto offering table can be dated to the reign of Amenemhat III.21 The name recurs on an offering table from Abydos, dated to the late Twelfth Dynasty (probably reign of Senwosret III).22

3. A *Sbk-htp* as holder of the title *imy-r3 mSbk* is known from a papyrus dated to the Twelfth Dynasty (reign of Senwosret III or Amenemhat III).23

4. The spelling of *imy-r3* with the owl-sign over ir before the mouth sign recalls older writings and/or spellings in hieratic script.24 This inscription shows that the site was visited by important people. The overseer of the army Sobekhotep was probably a national general rather than a local leader, as the prefix *rh-nswt* indicates.25

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17 I am grateful to Marcel Marée for the help in reading this name and for drawing my attention to two parallels mentioned further down in the main text.
18 Quirke, in Der Manuelian and Freed (eds.), Studies Simpson, 672.
19 ‘Band of cloth as fillet’; Gardiner, Egyptian Grammar, 505.
20 Petrie, Tombs of the Courtiers, 10, pls. 23 [2], 25 [bottom].
21 Marcel Marée, personal communication.
22 Egyptian Museum CG 23045; Kamal, Tables d’Offrandes, 39 [23045(L)]; Ranke, PN I, 25 (13).
23 Papyrus Berlin 10264E; Ägyptische Handschriften I, 342; Chevereau, RdE 42, 53 [73]; Stefanovic, The Holders of Regular Military Titles, 196 [1046].
24 Jones, An Index of Ancient Egyptian Titles I, 258 [935]. The Middle Kingdom examples listed by Ward, Index, 51 (397), for example, are all written with the tongue-sign (F20).
25 Ward, Index, 29 (205); Jones, An Index of Ancient Egyptian Titles I, 142 [551]; Quirke, Titles and Bureaucracy, 60.
Abu Tanqura Qebli (ATQ)

The east side of Abu Tanqura Qebli is extremely steep and numerous rock drawings and inscriptions are located on a high level, about 8m above present ground level (fig. 7). The reachable areas yielded 31 inscriptions, of all periods.

Among others, Petrie noted two instances of a $shm$-$shd$-$ib$($? ) (probably our ATQ-T12, fig. 3, and ATQ-T13). The reading of the personal name is not certain and the $ib$-sign is absent in ATQ-T13. The title $shm$-$s$ is considered to be an innovation of the Thirteenth Dynasty by Quirke. Parallels confirm such a date: a spelling similar to the el-Hôsh panel, without the seated man and with the owl-sign, is attested on a stela from Buhen. On the basis of iconography and various peculiarities of epigraphy this stela has been dated to the late Thirteenth Dynasty. A similar writing of the title, although with the seated man, is furthermore attested in an inscription in the Wadi Shatt el-Rigal, which Winlock dated to ‘between the Thirteenth and the Eighteenth dynasties’. The writing of the title with only the $shm$-sceptre and the arm is more common. One example of the latter spelling is attested in P.Boulaq 18, which is also dated to the Thirteenth Dynasty. The individuals bearing the title $shm$-$s$ in the above mentioned parallels have, however, different names. In addition, $shd$-$ib$ is not listed as such by Ranke. Nevertheless, the fact that all parallels for the title come from more or less the same time allows us to date the inscription to the Thirteenth Dynasty.

The longest inscription at Abu Tanqura Qebli (ATQ-T15, fig. 8) mentions the commander of hosts/troops, Nes-Amon. The name is common in the New Kingdom and the Late Period. The best parallel for the ligature $pr.w \, k35 nh \, w3d \, snb$, at the beginning of the third line, comes from the reign of Merneptah (P. Sallier I) although the palaeography is closer to the examples from the reign of Ramses IV. Only the $s$-sign, which is clearly apparent in the el-Hôsh inscription, is absent from the latter. Since no royal name is following, this entry can be considered a reference to the palace.

Certainly one of the most important persons attested at el-Hôsh is the $hi.ty$-$s$ $n\, Nh$
**Hr-mnwy**, 'The mayor of Nekhen (Hierakonpolis), Hormeni' (ATQ-T26, fig. 9). The spelling of his name in his tomb also explains the vertical sign before the seated man in the el-Hôsh inscription as a mooring post (sign P11).

Further to the south, even more clusters of inscriptions can be spotted on an extremely high level, but unfortunately, they could not (yet) be reached. Their position indicates that large quantities of stone at the lower levels must have been quarried away after the inscriptions were applied and that the alluvial plain must have been extremely small here.

### Abu Tanqura Qebli Qebli (ATQQ)

Examination of the east side of Abu Tanqura Qebli Qebli has yielded 31 inscriptions. In particular, there is a density of Greek and Coptic texts on the southeastern side of ATQQ. The depiction of an ithyphallic Min figure inside a shrine, located at the north-east side of a small wadi (fig. 10), is evidently earlier in date. The Middle and New Kingdoms are again well represented with names such as ‘nh-ib (ATQQ-T15), Rs-snb(.w) (ATQQ-T7-8) and Imnnht (ATQQ-T3). In 1936, Winkler published a remarkable scene showing a man kneeling in front of a shrine, which contains an image of Hr Bhdj, ‘Horus of Edfu’ (ATQQ-T32). We relocated it in November 2007 on the top of ATQQ (fig. 12). The god’s depiction does double duty as the hieroglyph that spells his name, and unusually the falcon is here crowned with a sun-disc and curled ram horns. Behind the kneeling man is a vertical column identifying him as hw Msh, ‘the shepherd/warrior Meseh’. The name Msh ‘crocodile’ is followed by a determinative of a crocodile, apparently without feet. One attestation, from the Middle Kingdom, is listed by Ranke, but our composition could be later. To the right are some traces of hammering but it is not clear whether these should be associated with the text.

The earliest attestation of writing at the site was found opposite Abu Tanqura Qebli, on the other side of the road: a First Dynasty inscription, mentioned above (ATQQ-T21).

### The stone quarries

Near the village of el-Hôsh, to the north of the concession area and beside the Gebel Abu Shega, are a number of roofless quarries (fig. 11). Four quarries were distinguished by Legrain, in which he recorded nearly one hundred Greek inscriptions, many of which had been noted by Harris in 1857. Legrain numbered the quarries, starting from the North, by the letters

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37 For the title, see el-Ayedi, *Index*, 323.1091.
38 Friedman, in *Colour and Painting in Ancient Egypt*, 110. See Ranke, *PN* I, 248.21 for the name.
40 Winkler, *Rock Drawings of Southern Upper Egypt*, I, 9, pl. IX.1. He also mentions a disturbed tomb on top of the hill.
41 *Wb* III, 49 [I-II] for the title. The reading was inspired by Marcel Marée.
43 Regulski, *JEA* 93, 254–8.
ABCD. Being situated close to the river, carving the rock surface was an easy matter, further helped by the quality of the stone. Today, this clear distinction between the individual quarries is less clearly defined, due to ongoing modern quarrying.

Masons’ marks and Greek inscriptions attest to the quarrying of sandstone blocks here, for a temple of Apollo in year 11 year of Antoninus Pius (AD 149). Petrie identified the temple of Apollo (or Horus) as that at Esna, as work was executed there under Antoninus. However, it may well have been a reference to the temple of Edfu where Horus is the main god and which is closer to the actual site. Most of the Greek inscriptions have disappeared during the last century, with only a small number being relocated during our surveys. For example, Petrie mentions the inscriptions of the engineer Apollonios, and the chief engineer Apollos Petesos (Petrie’s nos. 575–6), who were apparently the leading persons. One of the workers is eager to record his feet in extracting stones of eleven cubits for the pylon of this temple (Petrie no. 571). Three of these inscriptions (nos. 570, 572, 578) also mention the mooring place where vessels came to be loaded with blocks; and we read of the Nile rising to the mooring place or quay on the 25th day of the month Mesore, i.e. July 8, 149 AD. Although these inscriptions have not (yet?) been relocated, the existence of a mooring place in this area is suggested by some blocks, which are now below the water level but which seem to be ancient (fig. 13). On the basis of these Greek inscriptions, the stone quarries have always been dated to the Graeco-Roman period. However, a few much damaged and faint hieroglyphic inscriptions were found in association with the quarries (fig. 14). They are very difficult to read and some of them seem to be deliberately destroyed, but they suggest that the quarries could have been exploited prior to the Graeco-Roman period.

Quarry marks are also found alongside the inscriptions upon the unworked walls. In some cases, these marks are carefully carved in bas-relief, occasionally with a double outline. They could be the insignia of the quarry, to indicate its name or that of its owner. The most beautiful example (fig. 15) is found in the centre of the west wall in the northernmost quarry (Legrain’s quarry A). The mark is composed of two signs only: a harpoon and a circle crossed by a horizontal bar.

Conclusion

The site of el-Hosh was clearly being visited throughout the pharaonic period, with evidence of more activity in the Middle Kingdom and slightly before and after, and again in the Graeco-Roman period. A variety of scripts are attested, with hieroglyphic, hieratic, demotic, and Greek texts appearing next to each other, whether hammered out or engraved.

Most inscriptions appear on the east sides of the sites, close to the Nile, and many actually face the river. In contrast, many surfaces suitable for carving further into the desert

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46 Petrie, *A Season in Egypt*, 16.

47 As perhaps already suggested by Winlock, *Reprint from the American Journal of Semitic Languages and Literatures* LVII, 2 (1940), 158: ‘If visitors to the Shatt el-Rigal in the Intermediate Period were not numerous, there were even less in the Eighteenth Dynasty, in spite of the fact that sandstone quarries were then extremely active only a short way up the river at Gebel Silsila and down the river at el-Hosh’.
do not feature any inscriptions. The location of the inscriptions is thus related to the river. This may explain the low number of inscriptions at Gebelet Yussef, being further from the Nile than the other localities.

The orientation towards the river is significant. Unlike many other rock art sites, the site of el-Hôsh is not a passageway on a desert route. Of course, the landscape has changed considerably but it is likely that these rock formations were close to the water in antiquity, and perhaps even closer than today. The fact that many rock inscriptions are positioned on a very high level suggests that the part below it was quarried. At most localities, it must have been easy to reach the river banks (fig.13).

A more extensive investigation of the quarries could give us additional information about their date, and therefore the motive why people visited el-Hôsh. Were these quarries the main reason for a visit to el-Hôsh? Or was el-Hôsh just a temporary resting place for expedition members on their way to more southern destinations? The extremely narrow alluvial plain and the proximity of high quality rock formations are perfect conditions for both usages.

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Fig. 1: General view of el-Hôsh.

Fig. 2: Google Earth satellite image, indicating the concession area.

Fig. 3: Inscription ATQ-T12, mentioning a $shm^{-}\cdot}\,shd^{-}\,ib\, (?)$. 

Fig. 4: Inscription GYU-T1, mentioning the scribe Pashed.

Fig. 5: General view towards the two boulders at Abu Tanqura Bahari.
Fig. 6: Inscription ATB-T2, mentioning the ‘royal acquaintance and overseer of troops, Sobekhotep, possessor of reverence’.

Fig. 7: View from Abu Tanqura Qebli.
Fig. 8: Inscription ATQ-T15, mentioning the commander of hosts/troops, Nes-Amon.

Fig. 9: Inscription ATQ-T26, of the ‘mayor of Nekhen, Hormeni’.
Fig. 10: Ithyphallic Min-figure inside a shrine at Abu Tanqura Qebli Qebli.

Fig. 11: Roofless stone quarries near the village of el-Hôsh.

Fig. 12: Inscription ATQQ-T32, showing a man kneeling in front of a shrine, which contains an image of Horus of Edfu.
Fig. 13: View towards a possible ancient harbour.

Fig. 14: Damaged hieroglyphic inscriptions near the quarries.

Fig. 15: Quarry mark in the northernmost quarry.
Fig. 16: General view from the site towards the Nile.