

King Den in South-Sinai: the Earliest Monumental Rock Inscriptions of the Pharaonic Period¹

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Rock inscriptions are a fundamental source for the study of mining expeditions, sent during the Pharaonic Period to prospect for raw materials in the deserts bordering the Nile Valley. Markings that line the routs taken by these mining teams, responsible mainly for bringing back minerals and stones suitable for construction, were noted as far back as the earliest part of Egyptian history: such as the *serekh* of Narmer that was identified in the Eastern Desert at Wadi El-Gash, on a track probably leading to copper mines². However, the first monumental bas-reliefs, showing an official image of the sovereign, do not seem to be attested prior the 3rd Dynasty. In fact, it is during the reigns of Djoser, Sekhemkhet and Sanakht at the Wadi Maghara (South-Sinai) that there appears for the first time the familiar image of the King killing the Asian Bedouin, thus permitting him to take symbolic possession of the mining areas³. This representation seems to have characterised a strategy taken in similar circumstances throughout the Old Kingdom⁴.

1. This paper exists within the framework of a research plan undertaken four years ago, between the University of Paris-IV Sorbonne and the French Institute of Oriental Archaeology, concerning the Pharaonic mining zone of South Sinai. The object of this programme is to collectively study the sites occupied during the Pharaonic era, and in particular, to analyse the remains of the mining camps and the furnaces used in the treatment of the minerals. It is our pleasure to particularly thank Mme Marjorie Deschaux for the translation of this text and also Yann Tristant and Michel Baud for their valued opinions concerning these documents.

2. Winkler 1938: 10 and pl. 11.1. Rock inscriptions of this very early period of Egyptian history are regularly indicated; cf. recently Regulski 2007: 254-258 on an inscription discovered in the south of Edfu and dating from the reign of Qaa, according to the palaeographic criteria.

3. Gardiner, Peet & Cerny 1952: pl. I, IV (IS 1-4); Givon 1974: 17-20.

4. This design is regularly found in Wadi Maghara on the official steles of the 4th, 5th and 6th Dynasties. It is also attested to, at the beginning of the 4th Dynasty on a mining site of the Western Desert, south of the Dakhla Oasis (cf. Kuper 2003: 12-34 ; Kuhlmann 2005: 243-289).

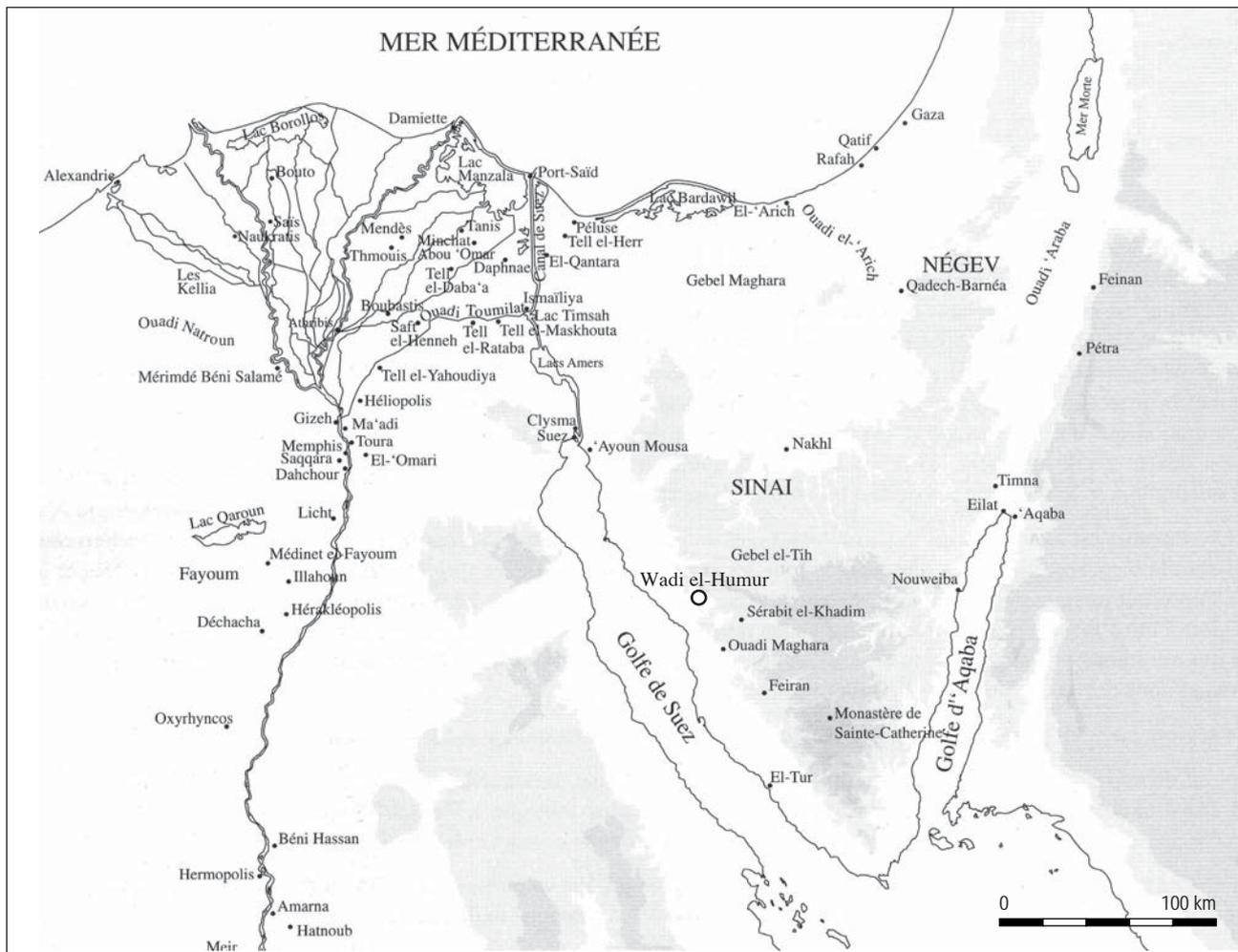


Fig. 1
Location of the pharaonic site at Wadi el-Humur, South Sinai.

The discovery of three new bas-relief representations in the Wadi El-Humur (South-Sinai) now confirms that this manner of expressing royal power in Egypt actually goes back to the origins of Pharaonic civilization⁵. The wadi El-Humur (or El-Homr) is in the mining region of South Sinai, approximately 25km north of the Wadi Maghara (**fig. 1**). Here, a huge rock has been carved, doubtless in close proximity to mining exploitation. The three bas-relief representations appear on the same surface, superimposed upon one another; the pictures and texts having been left by the workmen in slight relief (**fig. 2**). Unfortunately, all of the representations were destroyed during 2004, although a series of good quality photographs, that had been taken a short time before, allow us to study these documents⁶.

Inscription n°1 (60cm length; 35cm height; **fig. 3**), engraved at the top of the rock face shows the King, wearing a white crown and clothed in a loin cloth, ready to attack a Bedouin with his mace, while holding him by the hair with his left hand. The *serekh* placed in front of the sovereign's face reveals the name of King Den, 5th king of the 1st Dynasty. In front of the king is a standard showing the canid Wepwawet, a rearing cobra and a *shedshed*-device⁷. Behind him stands a member of the royal en-

5. For a more detailed study of the present documents, cf. Resk Ibrahim & Tallet 2008.

6. Photographs of these documents have already been published in Noaman 2006, in Arabic.

7. This sign also appears on the McGregor tablette also showing King Den attacking an Asian (cf. e.g. Godron 1990: pl. 21-22.).

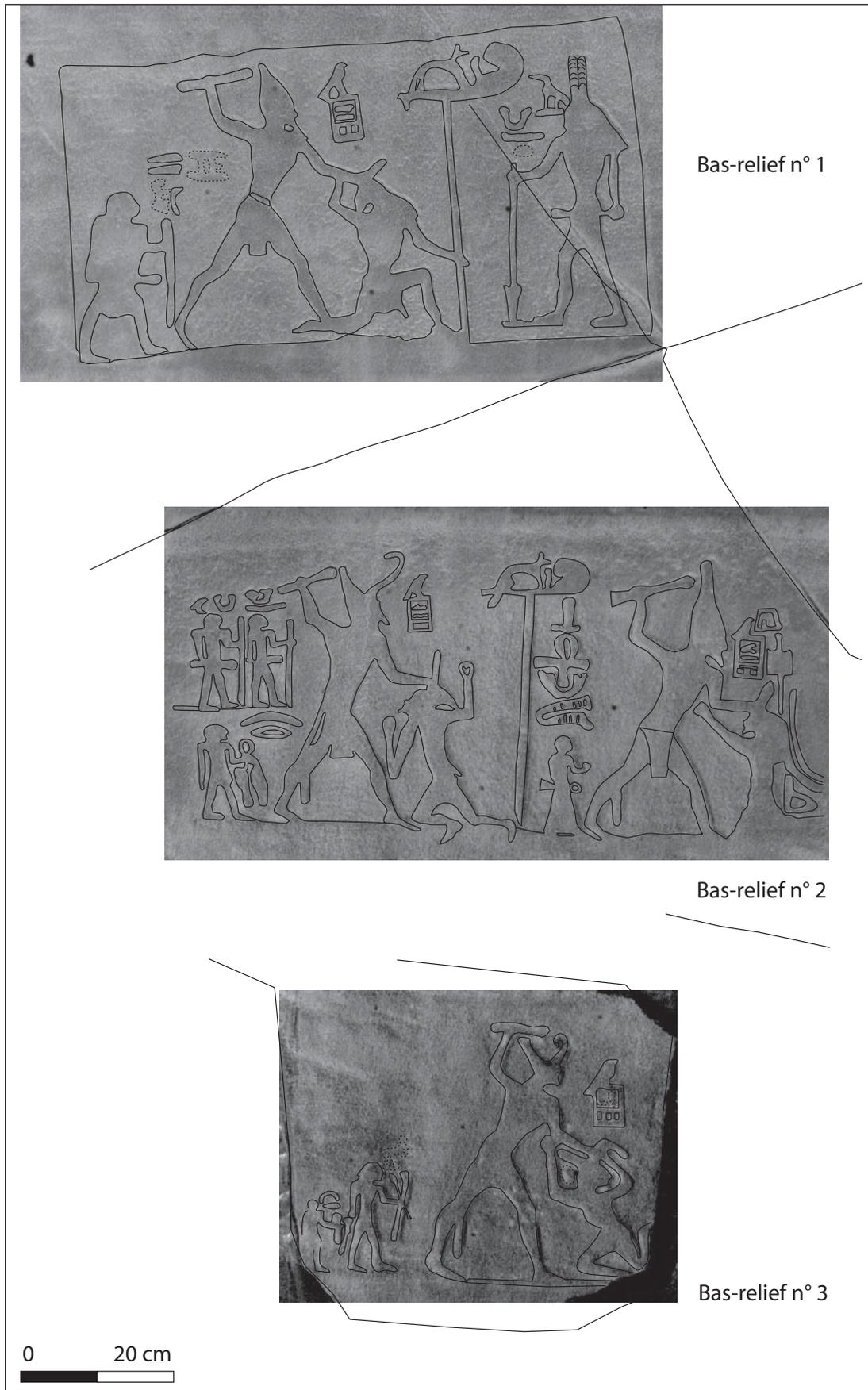




Fig. 3
Bas-Relief n° 1.



Fig. 4
Bas-Relief n° 2.

tourage carrying a mace and a long staff, who is accompanied by his titles, probably including that of governor (*hk3*). On the right hand side, there is a divinity wearing a long-haired wig, crowned with long feathers. This figure is holding a mace in his right hand and in the left a harpoon the point of which is driven into the ground, in front of his feet. The iconography is that of the god Soped, whose connections with Sinai seem close, although the hieroglyphs that appear in front of this figure give the name of *38*, a divinity who is also well known in the documentation since the reign of Den, and who seems to appear with the same features on two labels of this king⁸. It is not impossible that the word *mfk3t* (turquoise), which seems to be engraved above the hand of the character, could be alluding to the product that they came to find there.

The bas-relief n°2, in the middle register, is the most developed (**fig 4**). It measures about 80cm long and 35cm high, and shows a double representation of the King attacking the Bedouin. To the right is King

Den, who can be identified as previously by his *serekh* engraved in front of his face, wearing the high crown of Upper Egypt. Leaning slightly forward, he is holding the enemy by the hair with one hand and ready to strike with the white mace with the other. Perhaps a caption was placed there, as the sign *j3btt* (east) seems to appear to the right of the victim. Behind the king and right in front of a sign comparable to that which appears on the bas-relief n°1, an official clad in a long robe can be seen walking. This character is clearly identified by the inscription placed just above his head, which distinctly says *htmw ʿnh-k3, tt* : “the chancellor Ankh-Ka, vizier”. The chancellor Ankh-Ka is frequently referred to in 1st Dynasty sources⁹. He seems to have held an important post of great responsibility during the beginning of the reign of Den, where he managed an important estate of the crown (that of *hr shntj dw*)¹⁰. Nevertheless, it is worth noting the repetition of the title vizier after the name of the character, which had only previously been attested during the 1st Dynasty on the Narmer Palette and the Narmer Mace Head¹¹. Behind the standard supporting the canid Wepwawet, the king is shown for the second time attacking a Bedouin. His torso this time is a little straighter and he is wearing the red crown of Lower Egypt. A *serekh* placed in front of him, identifies him. Behind him the members of his

8. Found on two labels (BM 32.650 and Louvre E 25.268) with a systematic presentation of all the commentaries proposed *cf.* Godron 1990: 27-87 and pl. I-VII.

9. Kaplony 1963: 455, Abb. 180, 220A and B, 221 A and B, 276 A, 234, 235, 298, 731; Kaplony 1964: Abb. 1072; Kaplony 1966: 90-91, Abb. 1132. See also Fischer 1972: 5-23.

10. Wilkinson 1999: 121 ; Kaplony 1963: 111-118 for the succession of administration in this domaine.

11. Wilkinson 1999: 137-139.

court appear in two registers. On the upper register two warriors can be seen with a commander's long staff and a mace; on the lower register, there is certainly somebody carrying sandals, a character also familiar in the monuments of Narmer. This character is accompanied by the title in hieroglyphics *spr* (follower of the king?) indicating no doubt, his function.

The bas-relief n°3 is situated at the foot of the rock and is the least complicated of the whole (height 35cm, width 50cm; **fig. 5**).

We think it is possible that it is contemporary with a different reign, as what few traces there are to be observed in the *serekh* do not seem to correspond to the name Den. It is possible that the first sign may be an -s, which could correspond with the

name of Horus of Semerket (a close successor to Den), or it maybe that of Sened, a king of the 2nd Dynasty about whom little is known. As before, a royal representation is to be found, a sovereign wearing the red crown and brandishing a mace above the head of a Bedouin while holding him by the hair. Behind the king, two characters of lesser height are still visible: one clearly carries a bow and arrows (a familiar iconography for the leader of the expedition in later rock inscriptions) and might be accompanied by the caption *t3t* (vizier). The second sign seems, as before, to be a bearer of sandals identified by the title *spr*.

This inscribed rock face provides important information about the beginning of Pharaonic history. It indicates firstly that the Egyptian state, as early as the middle of the 1st Dynasty had organised mining expeditions to regions far from the Nile Valley; a point that has been questioned¹². The presence of a great number of turquoise pieces in the tomb of King Djer is, no doubt, a sign that even prior the reign of Den, this region was explored and exploited by the Egyptians¹³. However, the monumental character of these bas-reliefs must also be interpreted as an indication of important developments in Pharaonic administration during the reign of Den. The visual model used by Narmer, founder of the dynasty, has been faithfully followed here. There has been a clear choice made with regard to the iconographic theme, firstly that of massacring the enemy and secondly in the placing of the royal followers, where the vizier (*tt*) and the bearer of sandals (*spr*) evidently play a fundamental role¹⁴. At the same time however, this model is becoming outdated. The monumental inscriptions of the Wadi El-Humur, closely linking the king and his administration are no longer content with simply defining royal function. Here they perform a totally different role, on a different scale, that of ownership of the regions worked by the Egyptians.



Fig. 5
Bas-Relief n°3.

12. Beit-Arieh 1998: 33-36.

13. Petrie 1901: 17-18

14. Probably the desire of King Den to present himself as a new Narmer *cf.* Kaplony 2002: 464-486.

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