

ANALYSIS OF TRACES OF COLOUR ON ROCK INSCRIPTIONS

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METADATEN



Projektverantwortlicher Elisabeth Wegner

Adresse

Email Elisabeth.Wegner@dainst.de

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OVERVIEW

With its striking rock formations predominantly consisting of granite (particularly the distinctive pink granite of Aswan) and Nubian sandstone, the region of the First Cataract served as the backdrop for thousands of rock images and inscriptions, dating as early as prehistoric times and continuing throughout all subsequent periods of Ancient Egypt. The texts of the rock inscriptions commonly address topics reflecting the region's significance as political border to adjacent Nubia since the Early Dynastic Period and, thus, its military and economic importance, as well as the distinct cult of the local gods. As these inscriptions are largely to be found as clusters at focal sites, placed in visible positions, they aim towards an outwardly orientated, public form of communication. The textual content of the inscriptions is frequently illustrated by images of single figures or scenes of cultic acts. Both text and figures alike could be highlighted by means of colour application which most likely not only served to enhance visibility; rather, a profound symbolism was assigned to colours and their context of usage in Ancient Egypt. Hence, colours played an essential role in the accomplishment of the specific function of depictions, objects, and texts. Therefore, a multi-layered meaning can likewise be

assumed for the colour applications on rock inscriptions. This subproject, which is part of the project “Aswan – a Universe of Media”, is aimed at examining this hypothesis. As a pilot scheme, the investigation has been initially restricted in scope regarding time, space and context, focusing on the New Kingdom rock inscription corpus on Sehel, an island in the Nile not far from Elephantine Island where the cult of the goddess Anukis was located.

RAUM & ZEIT

Covering only some two square kilometres in area, the small island of Sehel lies roughly two kilometres south of Elephantine Island, and is home to more than 600 rock images and inscriptions dating from the Predynastic and Early Dynastic Periods to the Greco-Roman era. The island's landscape is characterised by undulating clusters of spherical and pillow-shaped boulders formed by geomorphologic processes. The rock images and inscriptions are all located at the south-eastern tip of the island. The majority was carved into the opposing hillsides of the two highest elevations, Hussein Tagug and Bibi Tagug. The smaller rock formations Maltineg, Moussein Tagug, and Siou Debba, situated further north of Hussein Tagug and Bibi Tagug, also feature some rock carvings. However, only a few inscriptions were left on Ras Sehel, the southernmost hill.



The sanctuary of the local goddess Anukis, the “Lady of Sehel”, supposedly once stood on a plateau with a natural rock niche on the eastern hillside of Hussein Tagug, though archaeological remains of it are scarce. Nevertheless, Middle Kingdom inscriptions mentioning Anukis and her sanctuary, as well as decorated fragments of a naos inscribed with the cartouches of Sobekhotep III point to the existence of a sanctuary since the Middle Kingdom at the very latest. Some inscriptions, however, further imply that processions to Sehel Island already took place during the early Old Kingdom. Perhaps a simple sanctuary structure had been already constructed at that time. This assumption is based on its comparability to the early sanctuary of the goddess Satet on Elephantine Island which was likewise built around a natural niche within the bedrock. Nonetheless, location, content, and orientation of most of the rock images and inscriptions seem to be predominantly connected to Sehel's importance as a border control and observation post. Over the course of the New Kingdom, the cult of Anukis ultimately reached its zenith when the duration of her festival procession was extended from originally three to four days during the reign of Amenhotep II. On account of this extension and a restoration of the sanctuary likely accomplished by the same king, it attained superregional popularity and increased attention from the state. Around the same time the harbour was probably also relocated from the southern bay to the eastern bank of the river

north of Bibi Tagug. In the latter stages of the Ramesside Period, however, the popularity of the festival procession gradually declined. This can be deduced from a distinct decrease in the carving of inscriptions at that time which were now mostly made or commissioned by local officials, and might be the consequence of the loss of economic and political authority over the Nubian province. This situation may well have caused that the sanctuary could no longer be maintained by the end of the 20th Dynasty, which possibly led to the usage of a kind of mobile shrine during the procession. In the Ptolemaic Period, the cult of Anukis appears to have experienced a revival. A small temple of Ptolemy IV made of sandstone is presumed to have stood west of the northern rock formation known as Moussein Tagug, but no remains of it are preserved in situ.

Though Sehel Island also consists of some outcrops of the rough-grained pink granite, a construction material especially popular in the New Kingdom, there were no quarrying activities at this site during pharaonic times. It was only in the Greco-Roman Period that some quarrying was undertaken in the north-western part of the island, as well as on a larger scale on the eastern and southern hillsides of Hussein Tagug.

FORSCHUNG

Rock inscriptions and images are not only media conveying one or more messages in a textual or visual way, but at the same time participate themselves as agents in processes of communication and interaction with their surrounding environment and their recipients. These processes are influenced by various factors beyond the mere content of the text or depiction; the factors relate, on the one hand, to the formal characteristics of an inscription, such as its dimension and composition, and, on the other, to its location and orientation.



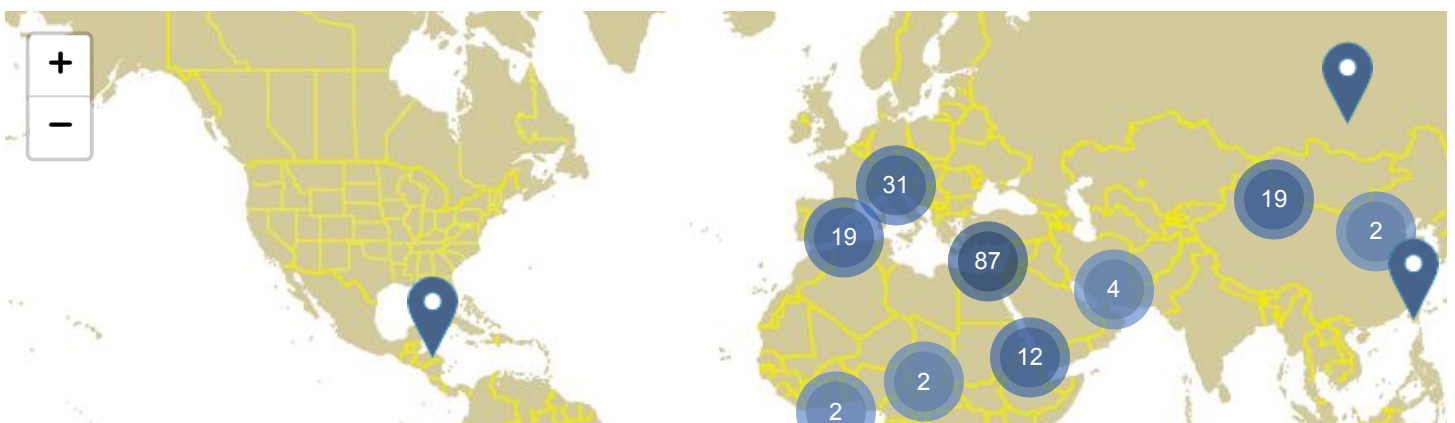
In order to analyse the several hundred rock inscriptions on Sehel Island for possible remains of pigment (some of which are still visible to the naked eye) a portable, handheld X-Ray Fluorescence Spectrometer (*pXRF*) can be used on site. This device permits the non-invasive and contactless investigation of the inscriptions. Additionally, the D-Stretch method can be applied to digital photographs, by means of which possible colouration can be rendered more visible by intensifying colours within the RGB colour space.

While parts of the corpus of rock inscriptions on Sehel Island had already been recorded and published during the second half of the 19th century, a complete documentation of all inscriptions was carried out only around a century later. Over the course of four field seasons during the years 1990–1992 and 2002, a Franco-Egyptian team under the direction of Annie Gasse and Vincent Rondot recorded and documented the inscriptions with transcriptions, translations, facsimiles, and photographs. The team also collated the inscriptions, as far as possible, with those published, and compiled them within a comprehensive catalogue (issued in 2007 by the *Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale* as the 126th volume of its MIFAO series). In the course of two field seasons in autumn 2014 and spring 2015, the German Archaeological Institute Cairo was able to identify another 89 previously unpublished rock images and inscriptions within the project “Rock Inscriptions and Rock Art in the Area of Aswan”.

In addition to the almost completed epigraphic and topographic documentation of the rock images and inscriptions of the First Cataract area, the analysis of the colour remains contributes to the reconstruction of the ancient landscape. Moreover, research on communication processes within sacred spaces is a current interest of the Cairo Department; its complex questions may be answered in part by means of this study. Depending on the results from the material from Sehel Island, this study could be further expanded chronologically and spatially in order to understand potential chronological and contextual developments within the entire region of Aswan.

KULTURERHALT

VERNETZUNG





ERGEBNISSE



E. Wegner, Projekt "Analyse der Farbigkeit von Felsinschriften", e-Jahresbericht des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts 2021, 144 f.

PARTNER & FÖRDERER

FÖRDERER

Cairo Department

TEAM