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*Published in:*  
Journal of Intercultural and Interdisciplinary Archaeology

2015

*Document Version:*  
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication](#)

*Citation for published version (APA):*  
Nilsson, M. (2015). Anguiform graffiti in the Roman quarries at Gebel el Silsila. *Journal of Intercultural and Interdisciplinary Archaeology*, (2), 85-96.

*Total number of authors:*  
1

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## ANGUIFORM GRAFFITI IN THE ROMAN QUARRIES AT GEBEL EL SILSILA

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**Abstract**

*The current issue of Journal of Intercultural and Interdisciplinary Archaeology is mainly dedicated to the various aspects of Renenutet/Isis Thermouthis, but also snake-like deities, their iconography and associated apotropaia. This paper will explore three main topics associated with this topic within the sandstone quarry of Gebel el Silsila: 1) Graeco-Roman anguiform pictorial representations, 2) various deities defined (or associated) with the demotic snake-determinative pA-Si (Shai/Psais, also known as Agathodaimon), and 3) a unique textual reference to the Greek/Hellenistic goddess (Agatha) Tyche (Fate), who occasionally was regarded an ally of Isis Thermouthis and a Greek female form of the more frequently listed Egyptian Shai.1*

**Introduction**

In their 1915 publication Preisigke and Spiegelberg included a list of Egyptian deities attested in Greek and demotic inscriptions and recorded by Legrain in the sandstone quarries of Gebel el Silsila (Upper Egypt).<sup>2</sup> Included in the list are the Pan-Egyptian gods Amun, Horus, Hathor, Isis, Khnum and Montu; the genius loci (protective god) Pachimesen, as well as the less distinguished divinity Shaï. <sup>3</sup> Since its start in 2012 the ongoing Swedish-run archaeological project has added several new inscriptions and some divine names to these previous records.<sup>4</sup> The aim here is to present a selection of new deities to the list, focusing on anguiform pictorial representations, divinities depicted with snake attributes, and textual references to the protective snake-god Shaï or his female counterpart. The documents discussed here were all found on the eastern side of the Nile during the ongoing mission's 2012 concession. The 'new' gods to be added to the already documented list of (Roman period) deities in Gebel el Silsila include Thoth, the sphinx-god Tutu/Tothoes, and – exceptionally – the Greek goddess Tyche.

**Graeco-Roman anguiform pictorial representations**

Within the rich variety of pictorial graffiti/quarry marks – engraved and painted (simplified/stylized) motifs – are a few that depict anguiform creatures individually or as part of a larger composition. All examples mentioned here belong to the early Roman period, i.e. Augustus and Tiberius, and have a textual context that include proskynēmata, give life-formulae, 'NN standing before [god]', and simple name signatures with or without patronym and profession.

There is no uniformity in the style and form of serpents depicted within the Roman quarries. Instead, it is rare to find a motif mass-produced. The examples given here include 1) an anguiform

1 Acknowledgements go to the Permanent Committee of foreign missions for giving the team permission to work at Gebel el Silsila, and to the Inspectorates of Kom Ombo with their Director, A. Moniem Said, and equally to the General Director of Aswan N. Salama. The archaeological work has been made possible by the generous financial support of the following institutions: the Swedish Royal Academy of Sciences, the Royal Swedish Academy of Letters, History and Antiquities (Enboms stiftelse), Helge Ax:son Johsons Stiftelse, Magnus Bergvalls Stiftelse, Stiftelsen Lars Hiertas Minne, Birgit and Gad Rausing's Stiftelse, Anérstiftelsen, Crafoordska Stiftelsen, and the Swedish Research Council (VR). Naturally, the author expresses her deepest gratitude towards the entire scientific team engaged at Gebel el Silsila, especially assistant director John Ward without whom none of this work would be possible.

2 Preisigke and Spiegelberg 1915.

3 Quaegebeur 1975, 94.

4 See for example Nilsson and Almásy 2015; Nilsson forthcoming a; forthcoming b.

figurehead, 2) a risen serpent adorned with a lotus crown, 3) a horned viper surmounted by an ibis, 4) a stylised serpent surmounted by the sphinx-god Tutu, 5) double uraei as complement to the solar disk, 6) a crowned risen serpent in association with a falcon, and 7) an anguipede (tentative hypothesis).

*No. 1*

The first image depicts a risen serpent – facing right/east – with a partially coiled tail. An eye is clearly visible within the snake’s face, a solar disk is placed upon its head, and the figure surmounts a standard-like item as a figurehead attached to a high curved bow of a large barque. The terminus of the barque’s stern is shaped as an antelope’s head, and a large, single steering oar is levered to the hull, navigated from a cabin.<sup>5</sup> A series of oars are illustrated below the stern. The barque itself is moored to a quay by means of rope. Adjacent, but disconnected, iconography includes a harpoon located immediately to the figure’s left.

The serpent figurehead together with all the other details on the barque, reveal a far more detailed composition than the drawing produced by Legrain as published by Preisigke and Spiegelberg.<sup>6</sup>

A rich variation of barques and other vessels decorate the corridor (Partition A) in the Main Quarry – the section in which this illustration is located – particularly in the western entry that leads down to a Nile-side quay. This is not the place to initiate a deeper discussion on the significance of such vessels within the quarry, but their presence may be divided into two main categories: 1) practical function, i.e. transportation of extracted blocks, and 2) religious/ceremonial (or 3) the combination of both).<sup>7</sup> The currently discussed barque, with its antelope horns in the stern and serpent figurehead in its bow, is more likely to fall within the second category, and allude to the workers’ wish for divine protection during the work process. It may be hypothesised that the solar disk-adorned uraeus signified the local tutelary, but abstract anguiform deity (Shai-) Pachimesen (see below), whose name is recorded in two (unpublished) dedication texts within the immediate adjacency.<sup>8</sup> The adjacently placed harpoon, which is a symbol for Pachimesen as mentioned below, supports the hypothesised identity of the anguiform figurehead.

*No. 2*

The second anguiform is illustrated three times within a small quarry dating from the reign of Claudius (AD 41-54). All three images represent a risen, but slightly arched, stylized serpent that is crowned with a bloomed lotus flower. All three are located within a pictorial context that includes a palm frond. The third example was carved adjacently to a Greek signature.<sup>9</sup> The signature itself reveals little information as to the significance of the crowned serpents, but other text graffiti within the quarry cast some light on a plausible identity: at least two Greek inscriptions mention the goddess Isis; one identifies Isis as the local protecting goddess of the quarry<sup>10</sup>, and a second gives the name of an architect/engineer (mḫxaikḥw) of Isis.<sup>11</sup> Further inscriptions placed within the immediate surrounding describe the quarry as “Protected by Min” (see no. 9 below), which combined with the chronological details (Claudius) may indicate Coptos as the intended temple destination for the extracted stone.<sup>12</sup> Based on these combined facts, it may be hypothesised that the lotus-crowned anguiform in this particular context defines Isis as the Lady of Coptos.

5 For the terminology of ‘steering oar’ see Doyle 1998, 80.

6 Preisigke and Spiegelberg 1915, no. 159.

7 The variations are summarised in Vinson 2013.

8 Inventory numbers Q34.AS.In.11, Q34.AN.In.13.

9 Nilsson and Almásy 2015, 93-94 (no. 5) with figs. 7a-b: “Harbeschinis son of Petephibis | year 6 of Claudius”.

10 Nilsson and Almásy 2015, 94-95 (no. 6) with figs. 8a-b: Adoration | of Pakoibis son of Paweris | for the greatest god among the gods of | the quarry of Isis (?) | year 8 of Claudius, Thoth 19.

11 Unpublished inscription, inv. no. Q35.C.In.5.

12 Nilsson and Almásy 2015, 97.

*No. 3*

The third category of serpent illustration is depicted twice within the Main Quarry (Q34). It is a form of a symbolic enigma or rebus that includes three main iconographic elements: 1) a bird (symbolical ibis), 2) a horned viper, and 3) an ankh. The composition shows the bird in a victorious position surmounting the horned viper, and with the life-sign located immediately to their right. As suggested previously<sup>13</sup>, the hypothesis is that the scene demonstrates a natural event in that the ibis bird was believed to feed on vipers<sup>14</sup>, and through its association with Thoth simultaneously had a symbolic and superstitious value in communicating the workers' prayer to the god for safekeeping during their work, alternatively their thankfulness after surviving the daily hazard that lurked in their environment every day.

*No. 4*

Very different iconographically, the fourth depiction links back with the third in the respect that a predator surmounts a snake as a sign of tutelary force. Situated approximately 15 m above the current ground level it is a depiction of the sphinx-god Tutu shown in profile and a laying position facing right/south. The creature's facial features are enlarged, with an accentuated eye, pointed nose and lunar-shaped mouth. Moreover, the figure wears a crown (atef?) and holds a sword-like object in his front paw. More importantly for the present paper, the sphinx surmounts a stylized, stretched serpent, known to characterise other representations of the god.<sup>15</sup> Although considered a dangerous demon, feared more than loved, the representations of Tutu in the quarry were likely to address the deity as a benevolent protector.<sup>16</sup>

*No. 5*

The fifth example depicts uraei in a very traditional style as decorating and complementing pictorial elements to the solar disk. The serpent-adorned disk appears in a carefully sculptured raised relief in Quarry 37 with adjacent inscriptions dating to the reigns of Augustus and Tiberius respectively. The same quarry contains this pictorial design as a white-painted element that crown two unpublished round-topped stelae from the end of Augustus' rule. Dating from the same period or slightly before, Partition A and 'Entry above B' equally in the Main Quarry display the composition in a stylized form. The symbolism communicated in these images refers to the mythological 'Eye of Ra', applied for protection.<sup>17</sup>

*No. 6*

Image number six is a rough sketch of a risen serpent with a coiled tail, adorned with a non-defined crown (red or white?), and placed on a low plinth. The serpent faces left (west), and immediately opposite the anguiform – standing on an individual plinth – is an image of a falcon in full avian form. The falcon too wears a crown, although equally unrecognisable due to an eradicating (later) rope hole. Two more falcons are depicted nearby, one of which is accompanied with an unpublished hieroglyphic signature. Without any further iconographic details, accompanying or descriptive texts or titles, it is difficult to identify the serpent with definiteness.

*No. 7*

The final pictorial example to be discussed here is an anthropomorphic figure, which, as

<sup>13</sup> Nilsson forthcoming a, 22.

<sup>14</sup> Although the Egyptian mythology habitually depicts and describes the ibis as a snake-eater, it was clarified already by Savigny (1805) that they merely ate snake eggs. Instead, it is more likely that the true *aves depicted was a shoebill stork*.

<sup>15</sup> Kaper 2003, 83.

<sup>16</sup> Pinch 1994, 36; Kaper 2003, 201-204.

<sup>17</sup> E.g. Ikram 2013, 5741.

suggested previously<sup>18</sup>, may represent an anguipede (cock-headed deity with serpent legs). The figure is depicted as a simplified Roman soldier holding a spear and shield, but the face reveals a beak, and the feet may be taken as simplified examples of snakes. In this manner the figure may possibly characterise an anguipede, identified later as Abraxas or Abrasax.<sup>19</sup> Traditionally, the anguipede has been interpreted as a solar deity connected with shielding apotropaia at large.<sup>20</sup>

### Shai the snake-god and deities defined with pA-Si

Already, Preisigke and Spiegelberg have established that the somewhat abstract anguiform deity Shai/Shay (also Psais) held a role within the Roman quarries at Gebel el Silsila as a protective divine force, and generally associated with the Alexandrian Agathos Daimon ‘good fate’.<sup>21</sup> In accordance with said publication, the name of this Egyptian serpent-god was foremost used as an epithet or rather determinative to express the vigilant character of another, more prevalent god, such as Montu.<sup>22</sup> However, above all, ‘Shai’ was used to define the personality of a local form of Horus the elder – Pachimesen – who thereby combined the spirit of ‘good fate’ (Shai) and ‘vanquisher of evil’ (Horus) into one. ‘Shai’ and ‘Pachimesen’ only appear in demotic texts.

The name ‘Pachimesen’ has previously been translated as ‘He of the uplifting of the harpoon’<sup>23</sup>, and its semiotic structure suggests an association or possibly assimilation of this local ‘daemon’ with Horus as the Lord of Mesen (‘Harpoon City’).<sup>24</sup> Within the Main Quarry, several texts are dedicated to Pachimesen as the “Shai of the quarry/mountain”<sup>25</sup>, and recent research on site has revealed that the workers expressed their devotion to this god also by means of iconography/a quarry mark, with a toggle harpoon symbolising the deity.<sup>26</sup> Reading the quarry mark as an identity mark of “Pachimesen, Shai of the Quarry”, there are literary hundreds of attestations of how important the god’s protection was for the workers.

The tutelary epithet ‘Shai’ was recently documented as defining Min too, described as “Min, the Great God, Shai of the Mountain” in a small quarry dating to Claudius (no. 8).<sup>27</sup> But ‘Shai’ was also used, albeit occasionally, as an alone-standing definition of “good fate of the quarry”.<sup>28</sup>

Preisigke and Spiegelberg suggest that ‘Shai’ always signifies Pachimesen in these texts<sup>29</sup>, but as more examples have been documented by the current archaeological team, including the formula “may the beautiful name remain here before Shai” (no. 9)<sup>30</sup>, it may be astute and more reasonable to read it literally as the snake-god’s name instead of a definition of an unnamed deity.

### Female Good Fortune

In total 487 text graffiti were recorded in the Main Quarry during the 2012 concession. Among the more important inscriptions is an unpublished Greek adoration (no. 10) written by a “Saouas, son of Agathinos”, dated to “15 Phaophi in year 41 of the ruling Caesar”, i.e. Augustus. The text designates this particular part of the quarry as ‘the quarry of Amun’. What makes the adoration

18 Nilsson 2014a, 136-137 with figure 10.17.

19 E.g. Bonner 1950, 123-139.

20 Bonner 1950, 127-130.

21 Preisigke and Spiegelberg 1915, 6; cf. Martin 2013, 172; Quaegebeur 1975, 160-161.

22 For Montu see Preisigke and Spiegelberg 1915, no. 285 (bis).

23 Smith 1999, 396; e.g. Preisigke and Spiegelberg 1915, nos. 228, 230–231, 248.

24 Gwyn Griffiths 1958, 76.

25 Twenty-three texts (documented so far) mention ‘Pachimesen’ within the Main Quarry, of which fifteen contain ‘Shai’ as a determinative.

26 Nilsson 2014a, 129-130.

27 Nilsson and Almásy 2015, 89-90.

28 So far, eleven documented demotic texts contain the name ‘Shai’ without additional divine name.

29 Preisigke and Spiegelberg 1915, 23 sv. Psais.

30 Nilsson 2014a, 160 (translation by A. Almásy).

unique is its aspiration to the female form of Shaï, but choosing the Greek Tyche ('Fate') instead of Isis-Renenutet.<sup>31</sup> Not only is it exceptional to find reference to Greek deities in graffiti in Upper Egypt in general<sup>32</sup>, but this is the first recorded mentioning of a Greek goddess at Gebel el Silsila.

### Brief comments

It has become evident that there are no direct mentions of the current theme's main goddess (Renenutet/Isis Thermouthis) within the Roman quarries at Gebel el Silsila. However, there are various pictorial and textual references to anguiform deities. These range a wide array of religious applications and beliefs, but first and foremost they express the workers' collective need for divine protection in their daily journey through a harsh and dangerous quarryscape. Each day the workers faced fatal risks related with the extraction and transportation of the sandstone blocks that were earmarked for one or another of the sacred edifices of Upper Egypt. But also, they were constantly threatened by the forces of Mother Nature: from the natural fauna snakes, crocodiles and hippopotami constantly lurked nearby, and the men were close to defenceless to nature's forces such as sandstorms, extreme heat, and the yearly flooding. The latter may have caused the collapse of the entire quarry operations towards the end of Claudius' reign as all epigraphic material comes to an end and without any indications of any later activity on the East Bank whatsoever.

The serpents were addressed in metaphorical formulae as either tutelary *genii loci*, or as the object to be defeated. Without a doubt, the favoured *genus loci* was Pachimesen in his serpent-form and association with Shaï. Representations of this local deity are habitually far more elaborated compared to serpents suppressed. Instead, when defeated serpents are depicted, they appear in a most simplified form, with no other details than the occasional horns to identify them as horned vipers.

However, while Pachimesen and Shaï – or rather Pachimesen-Shaï – is the preferential male anguiform, Gebel el Silsila preserves images of female serpent divinities too. Isis appears with a lotus crown as the Lady of Coptos, and a unique text reveals a female equal to Pachimesen-Shaï in the Greek goddess Tyche, equally symbolising fate.

The examples given above indicate a complex religious or superstitious system at Gebel el Silsila, which reflects the fundamental life prerequisites of a regular worker – to stay alive. For this they expressed their faith in the supernatural, asked for divine protection and uttered their gratefulness for safe keeping towards the end of the season. With horned vipers being a constant feature of Gebel el Silsila, and seen as demons of their time, it is easy to understand the workers' choice in praying that the treacherous ally – the powerful local serpent – would remain munificent. As the saying goes, "(keep your friends close, but) keep your enemies ['demons'] closer..."

31 For a brief summary of Renenutet's role as the spouse of Shaï, see Gillam 2013 with further bibliography. For Tyche's association with Renenutet-Isis, see Martin 2013, 172; Vanderlip 1972, 18-19; Zayadin 1991, 300-306.

32 E.g. Vleeming 2001, 82-3; Bernand 1977, 241-3, no. 83; Mairs 2010.



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**Appendix**

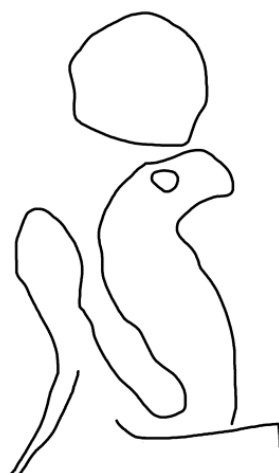
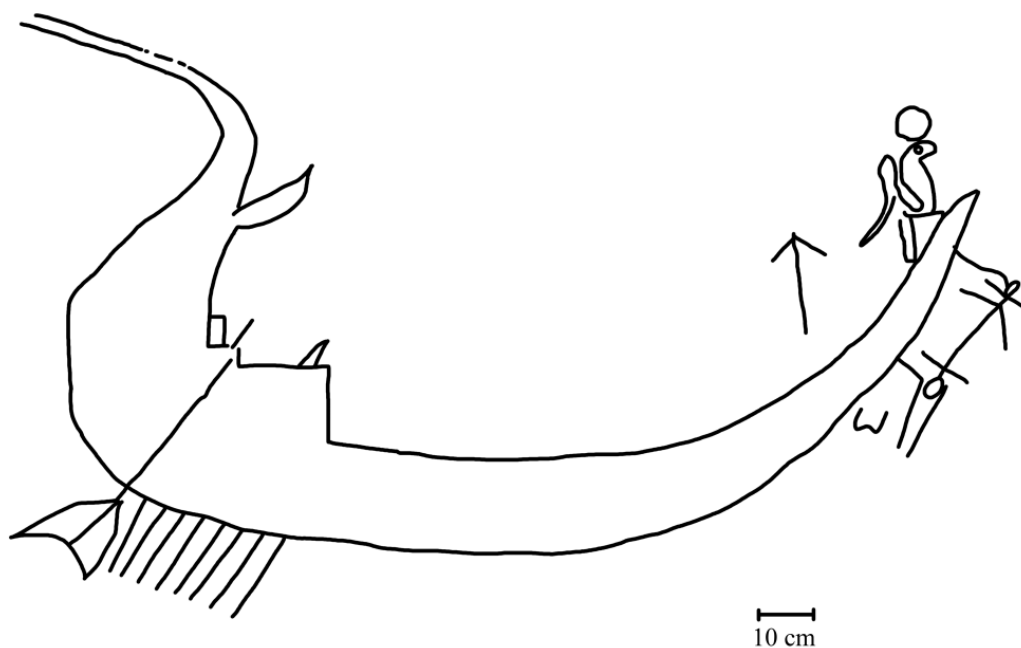
Key: Title of object; inventory number; previous publication (if any); measurements; facsimile

**1. Anguiform figurehead**

Inv. no. Q34.AN.P56

Preisigke and Spiegelberg 1915, no. 159

180 x 80 cm (anguipede: 16 x 30 cm), located c. 1 m above the current ground level



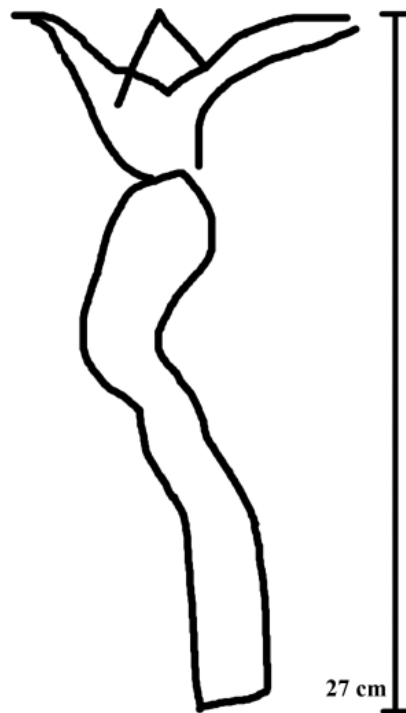
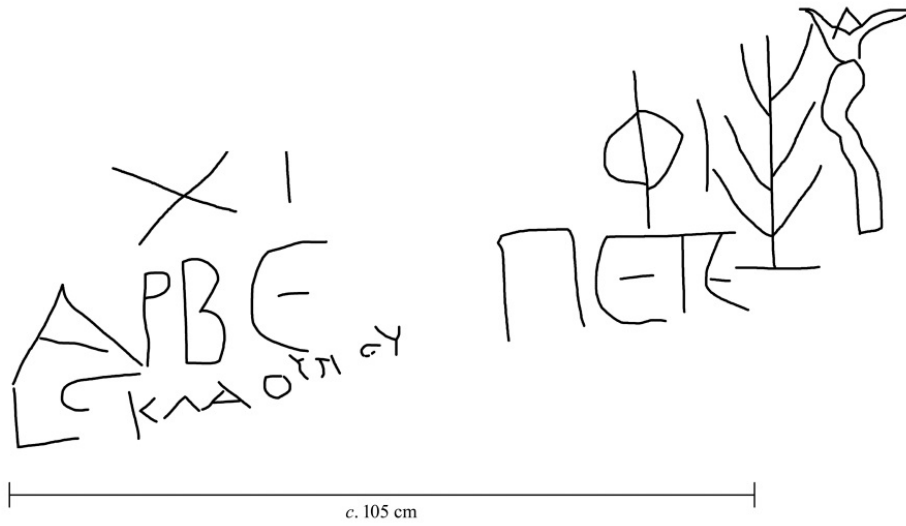


**2. Risen serpent adorned with a lotus crown**

Inv. no. Q35.E.P35 (the drawing also includes Q35.E.P34 and Q35.E.In.5)

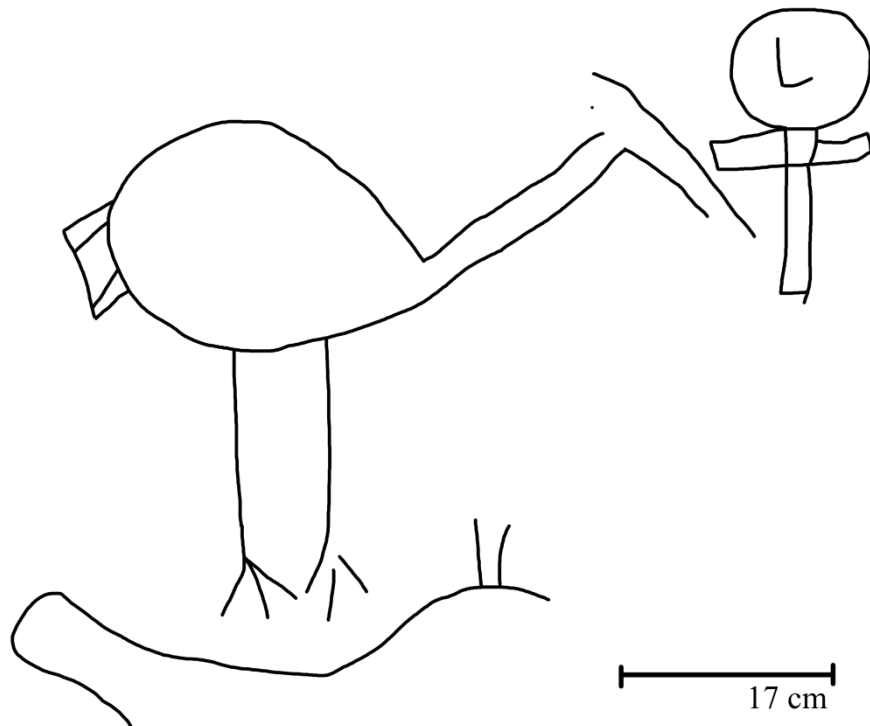
Unpublished (cf. Preisigke and Spiegelberg 1915, no. 299)

Uraeus c. 11 x 27 cm



### 3. Horned viper surmounted by ibis

Inv. nos. Q34.C16.P65; Q34.GS.P2  
 Presigke and Spiegelberg 1915, no. 86  
 54 x 55 cm; 68 x 57 cm



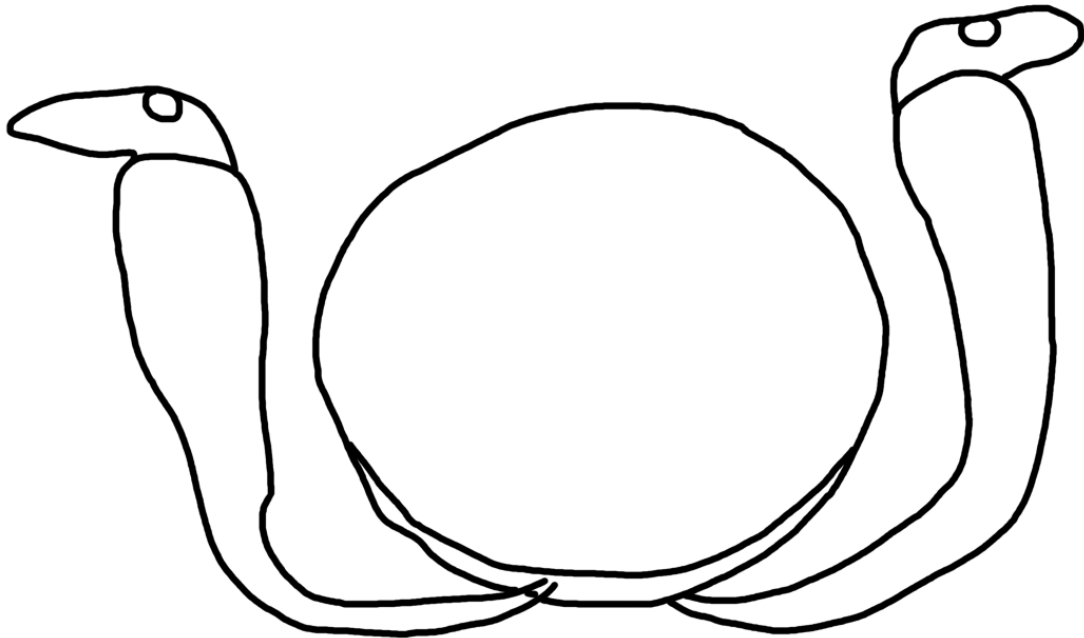
### 4. Stylised serpent surmounted by the sphinx-god Tutu

Inv. no. Q34.F2.P69  
 Unpublished  
 Located too high for measurement



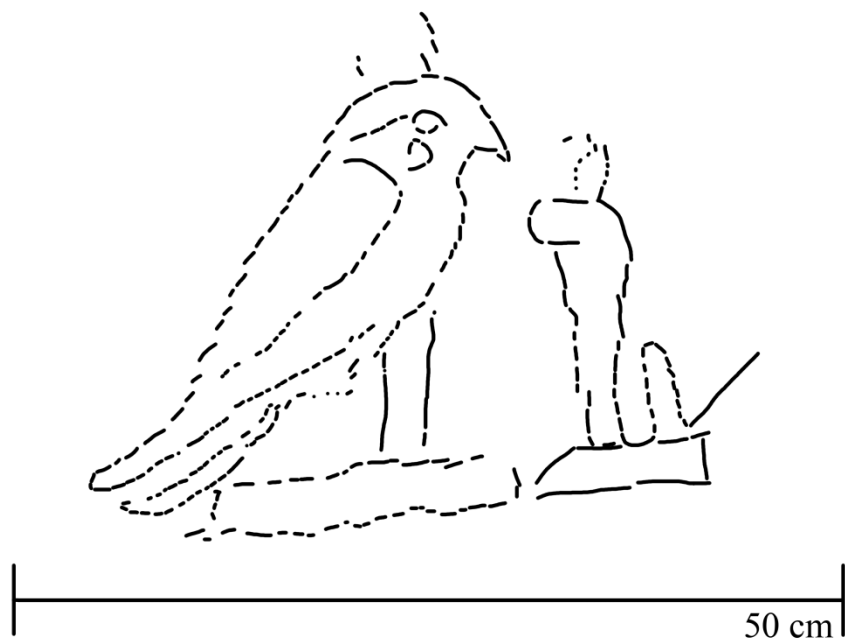
**5. Double uraei and solar disk**

Inv. no. Q37N.H.P2  
 Unpublished  
 Located too high for measurements



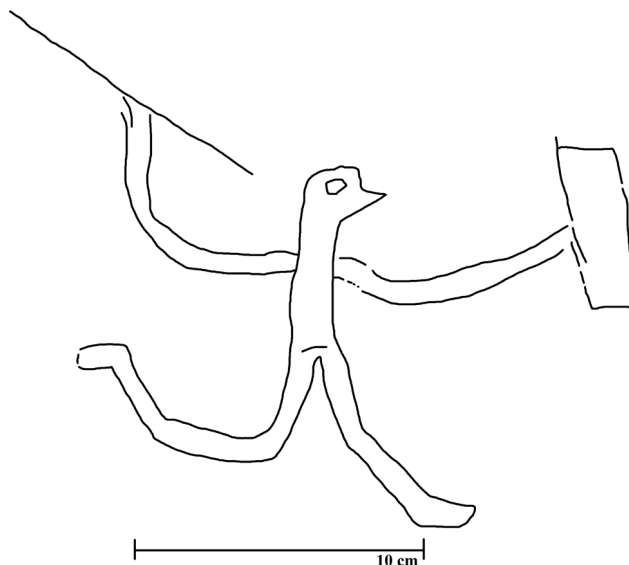
**6. Risen serpent and falcon deity**

Inv. no. Q46.P3-4  
 Unpublished  
 42 x c. 32 cm



7. Anguipede (?)

Inv. no. Q34.C12.P50  
 Unpublished  
 19 x 18 cm

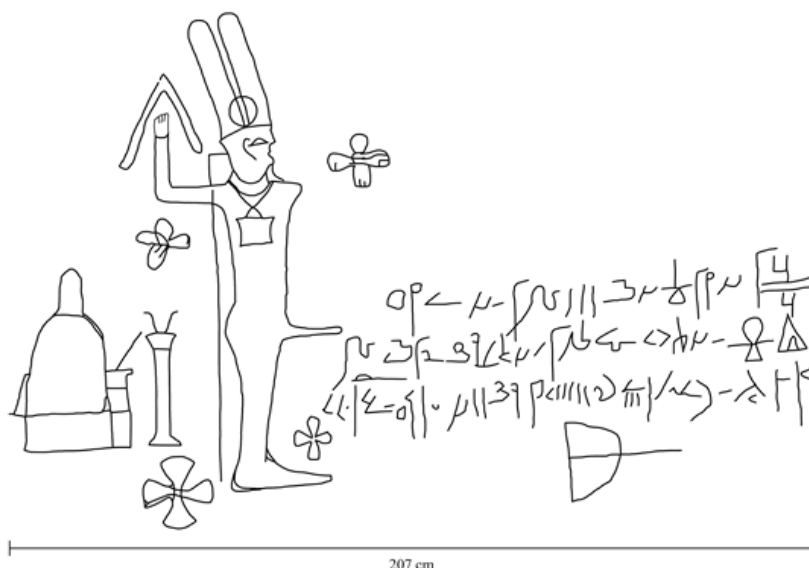


8. Di ankh dedication to Min

Inv. no. Q35.C.In.2.  
 Nilsson and Almásy 2015, no. 1  
 41 x 125 cm

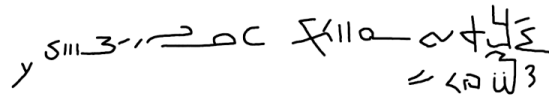
1. *Min p3 ntr ʿ3 p3 Š3y n p3 tw*
2. *DI ʿNH n P3-šr-ʿ3-phṯ s3 P3-šr-hnm šʿ d.t*
3. *sh (n) ḥ3.t-sp 10.t n Glwty3ys ibd I 3ḥ.t sw I ḥ3.t n rnp.t*

1. Min, the great god, the Shaï of the Mountain
2. gives life to Psenapathes, son of Psenchnoumis forever
3. written in year 10 of Claudius, Thoth 1, beginning of the year.



**9. Inscription to Shaï**

Inv. no. Q34.B13.In1  
 Nilsson 2014b, 160 (translation A. Almásy).  
 Located too high for measurements



Transliteration and translation:

- 1) <p> <sup>3</sup> rn nfr mn dy m-b3h p3 Š3y
- 2) b̄ h.t

- 1) May the beautiful name remain here before Shaï (“the good fate”)
- 2) of the quarry.

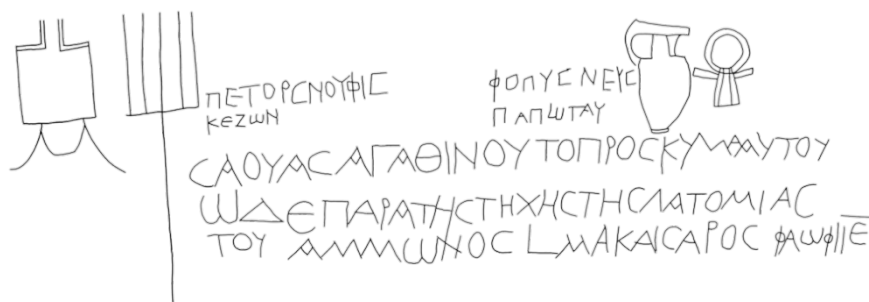
**10. Dedication to Tyche<sup>33</sup>**

Inv. no. Q34.F5.In4  
 Unpublished  
 320 x 60 cm

- 1) ΣΑΟΥΑΣ ΑΓΑΘΙΝΟΥ ΤΟ ΠΡΟΣΚΥΝΗΜΑ ΑΥΤΟΥ
- 2) ΩΔΕ ΠΑΡΑ ΤΗΣ Τ{η} <v>χης τῆς λατομίας
- 3) ΤΟΥ ΑΜΜΩΝΟΣ ΛΜΑΚΑΙΣΑΡΟΣ ΦΑΩΦΙΕ

- 1) Σαουας Ἀγαθίνου τὸ προσκύνημα αὐτοῦ
- 2) ὧδε παρα τῆς τ{η} <v>χης τῆς λατομίας
- 3) τοῦ Ἀμμώνος (ἐτοῦς) μα Καίσαρος φαωφί ιε

- 1) Saouas (son of) Agathinos, his own act of adoration (adoration made by himself)
- 2) here for the Tyche<sup>34</sup> (Fate) of the quarry
- 3) of Ammon. Year 41 of Caesar, Phaophi 15



33 Translation in cooperation with A. Almásy. Two additional Greek graffiti are included in the drawing, although will not be discussed here.  
 34 τήχης for τύχης see Gignac 1976, 262-263. The final omicron mistakenly replaces the lunar sigma in λατομίας.