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## A Predynastic chieftain?

The rock art context of the Mentuhotep II panel at Shatt el-Rigal

Nilsson, Maria; Ward, John

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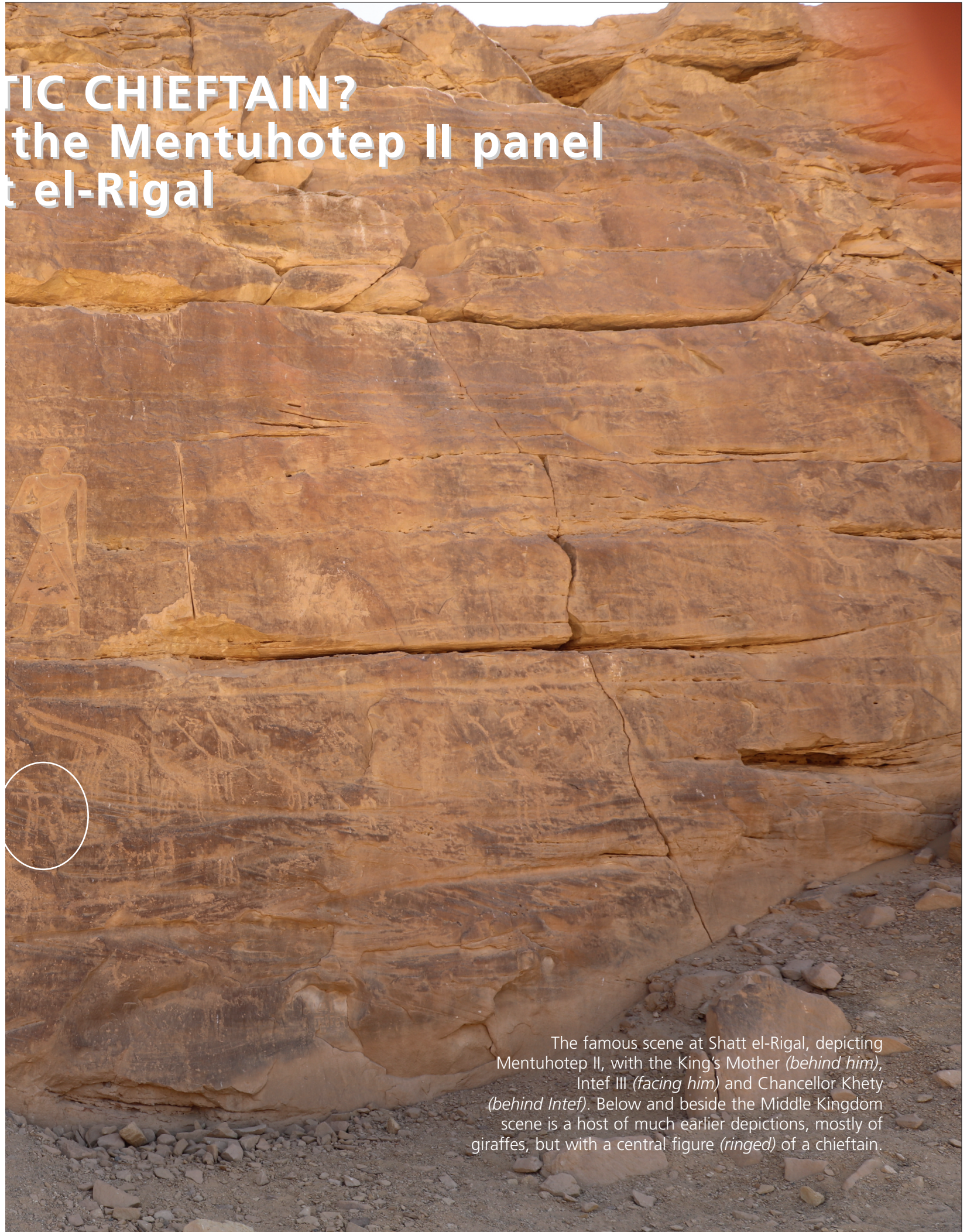


# A PREDYNASTIC The rock art context of t at Shatt

**Maria Nilsson and John Ward** return to Shatt el-Rigal, located to the north of Gebel el-Silsila, for a close-up of the famous colossal scene of Mentuhotep II, but with special focus on its extraordinary rock art context that has never before been published in its entirety. The lead role will be played by a chieftain – a possible predecessor to the early rulers of Upper Egypt.



# CHIEFTAIN? the Mentuhotep II panel at el-Rigal



The famous scene at Shatt el-Rigal, depicting Mentuhotep II, with the King's Mother (*behind him*), Intef III (*facing him*) and Chancellor Khety (*behind Intef*). Below and beside the Middle Kingdom scene is a host of much earlier depictions, mostly of giraffes, but with a central figure (*ringed*) of a chieftain.

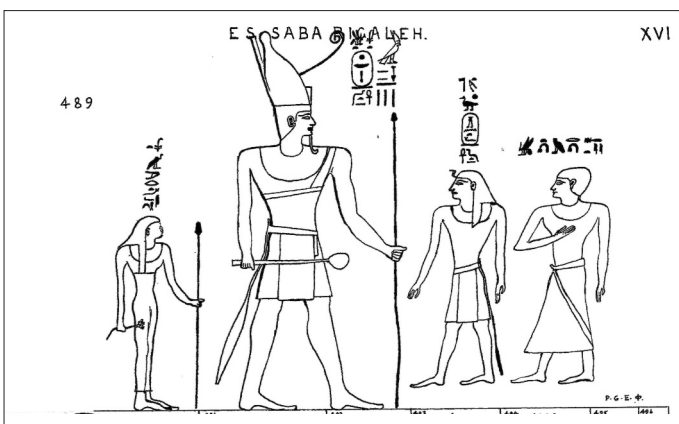




ABOVE: A new facsimile of the full Mentuhotep panel (with the chieftain again ringed).

In 1888, Sir William Matthew Flinders Petrie published some preliminary results of his research journey into Upper Egypt, including a summary of epigraphic documents recorded during a day's visit to Wadi Shatt el-Rigal. The valley was already known for its many rock inscriptions, as seen by Harris, Eisenlohr, Mariette, Sayce, and of course Lepsius. Strangely, Petrie arrived, and began his description of the wadi from its central part (not its upper end as stat-

ed), walking eastwards, and reaching the main, renowned Mentuhotep II panel at the mouth of Shatt el-Rigal as the final destination. In his words, the panel is described as "the principal object in the valley, occupying the most prominent place, on a flat face of rock just at the mouth, is the large tablet of Mentuhotep and Antef [now known as Intef] (No. 489), which is raised some distance from the ground (illustrated centre left in a plate from Petrie's report). It is cut in fine low relief, with well wrought details [...]". Further down the pages, he uses the panel as conclusive proof that "Antef succeeded Mentuhotep, and worshipped him, as did also the chancellor Khati [Khety] [...]".



ABOVE: The main Mentuhotep scene on the Shatt el-Rigal panel.

Petrie, W. M. F. (1888) *A Season in Egypt, 1887*, Plate XVI.

BELOW: The actual scene enhanced using DStretch software.



In addition to the records of dynastic iconography and rock inscriptions, Petrie mentions a "vast number of figures of animals", which "in most cases [are] wholly distinct, and of a different age. These figures have never received any attention hitherto, and their number deters one from copying or even cataloguing them". Since then, the panel has been documented in more detail by Legrain, and subsequently by Caminos and his students. Nevertheless, a comprehensive record of the entire panel (see a modern facsimile, above) remains unpublished.

Since 2016, Shatt el-Rigal and its neighbouring areas have been subject to a comprehensive rock art investigation

BELOW: Surveying Shatt el-Rigal, here with the invaluable help of our team member Ashur.





ABOVE LEFT: Looking out over the Western Desert from the back of Shatt el-Rigal.



ABOVE RIGHT: An inscription that mentions Sobek as 'Lord of Lake Khar[u].

by the Swedish mission (see *opposite, bottom right*). We have traversed not only the wadi and its neighbouring areas many times, but actually circumnavigated the entire West Bank. We set out from the mouth of Shatt el-Rigal in the early morning, followed the wadi westwards to reach the desert plain (*top left*) and returned southwards to connect with the modern tarmac road of Gebel el-Silsila late in the afternoon, after a walk of about 19 km! So far, we have documented and studied 34 rock art and inscription locales in the Shatt el-Rigal area, many of which are unique and previously unheard of. Some of our more intriguing discoveries include shaft burials, Predynastic shelters, and a now dried-up lake once guarded by Sobek as the 'Lord of Lake Khar(u)' (as described in an inscription [*top right*] published by Sayce in 1906).

Among the intriguing rock art is the Mentuhotep panel, which for Petrie contained too many figures to catalogue. Although we have included updated facsimiles of the entire panel, we have not attempted here to reinvestigate the Middle Kingdom scene, nor the dynastic texts that are scattered in its periphery. Instead, we will study the various layers of Prehistoric records, placed below and to the sides of the dynastic scene. In what follows, we will present a summary of the various images depicted on this unique panel. The main objective is to describe the images' variety and their potential correlation, and for the individual motifs to finally receive recognition. As indicated by the title, though, the object in focus is an anthropomorphic figure (hereafter simplified as 'human figure'), whose details and position indicate superiority over his surroundings: a hunter by context, a chieftain by iconography, but perhaps even a precursor to the early rulers of Upper Egypt (*right*). The current text is structured as a summary – an appetiser – to a detailed academic paper dealing with the rock art of Shatt el-Rigal.

### The Rock Art Panel: an Overview

In all, at least 119 illustrations were carved into this vertical rock surface. The vast majority were produced with a pecked (hammered) technique, generally without an outline, and filled with percussion marks. By far, the most fre-

quent motifs are giraffes and human figures, followed by dogs, quadrupeds with or without horns and a few boats. The main theme of these images is hunting. These primary motifs generally appear to have been created during the Predynastic era, following early cultural expansion from the Nile Valley, such as noted in the el-Kab area by the late Dirk Huyge. However, the uniqueness of the Gebel el-Silsila area, including Shatt el-Rigal, is the amalgamation of stylistic themes and techniques from two larger areas: Nubia and the Western Desert (primarily Kharga and Dakhla Oases), in addition to the Nile Valley's sandstone sites. The Eastern Desert appears to have had less of an impact in this region, although exceptions occur. Perhaps this can be explained by the strategic position of the site, situated at the narrowest part of the Egyptian Nile, forming a natural border with Nubia (as discussed in AE114), while providing a doorway to the Eastern and Western Deserts respectively. For this, establishing chronology can be complex, and is largely established by comparison with petroglyphs within confirmed timeframes elsewhere, on spatial proximity of other archaeological remains, and by an evaluation of their state of preservation, including levels of superimpositions and the (dis)colouration of the incision/percussion (in contrast with the surrounding stone surface).

BELOW: The chieftain figure.





ABOVE: A facsimile of the chieftain figure.

BELOW: A facsimile of the chieftain scene showing him surrounded by giraffes and other animals.

Later additions, *i.e.* secondary epigraphy, include drawn or scratched figures, mostly quadrupeds, but also dynastic images such as a Horus-falcon, a Tutu-lion (?), water lilies, dogs, birds and humans. A sun disk in relief with drawn rays

protruding downwards, reminiscent of the Aten-images, was noted too. Contemporaneous drawn or scratched hieratic and hieroglyphic inscriptions also belong to the secondary epigraphy of the panel. Below will follow a summary of the various pictorial groups represented, with special focus on the centrally placed human figure.

In general, there is a spatial harmony in the panel, although four human figures appear almost merged with their pray (two giraffes, one horned quadruped) or boat. Levels of superimpositions are noted especially in the case of the tails of the giraffes, primarily those ending in a 'bushy' style. However, it is mainly modern Arabic graffiti that have been scratched above the ancient motifs.

### The Chieftain

The Mentuhotep panel is the largest at Shatt el-Rigal, and evidently of primary importance. Although the Middle Kingdom pharaoh may appear as the focal point, the original scene was organised around another human figure (*see left*), situated below the dynastic chancellor, approximately one metre above the current ground level, and in the dead centre of the main rock art panel. This individual dwarfs all other human figures. In front of the figure is a series of six giraffes, moving in the opposite direction (*below*). A hunting theme is indicated by three dogs, and two (or possibly three) human figures of smaller scale, portrayed with a rope/lasso (or a bow for the third). The centrally placed scene follows a slightly u-shaped line, likely to represent the earliest phase of the original ground level. Still today, the sand still builds up in the Eastern and Western corners to the panel, and explains why the central surface remained





ABOVE: The chieftain figure. The upper part of the headgear, the beard, and the left arm are all obscured by a series of scratch marks. The original features of the figure are clarified when inverting the image in Adobe Photoshop, enabling the facsimile shown opposite top to be created.

untouched until the engraving of Mentuhotep and his family was made.

The motif in question was carefully produced in detail, created using a pecked technique, and filled with percussion marks. The figure is orientated towards the right (West), in a direction opposite to the animals represented in this smaller scene (and in the larger panel). Positioned standing, the character is depicted wearing slightly curved coned headgear, with indications of a beard. The arms are placed symmetrically, stretched out horizontally, with indicated hands – perhaps even individual fingers. The torso is rectangular and with such sparsely made percussion marks it appears almost in outline only. The legs are relatively symmetrical with indicated feet, and as the figure stands in an ithyphallic position, the pendant object between the legs was likely intended as a bull's tail. To the right and connected to the figure, is an oval-shaped object. This is shown held in his left hand (but seen on our right as the figure is facing away). The object is perhaps a lasso (an ongoing debate, however, includes the possibility of this object representing a bovid, or even a captured enemy based on the appearance of a circular feature above the oval). His right hand (seen on our left) holds a very shallowly drawn rope, leading left downwards.

A series of shallowly drawn lines protrude from the right [his left] arm, one of which connects with the neck of the largest giraffe of the scene, situated above the human figure. No confirmed examples of led or 'controlled' giraffes are known from the Nile Valley, although they appear in the Kharga and Dakhla rock art repertoires. Another drawn line terminates in a stylistic tree or branch placed in front of the same giraffe. Images of trees placed in front of giraffes are very rare in the Nile Valley, although they have been noted in Nubian rock art. The combination of a 'led' giraffe and tree clearly demonstrates the amalgamation of styles and cultural horizons in the Gebel el-Silsila area. The contemporaneity of the shallowly drawn ropes and the pecked images may be questioned. However, the giraffe is illustrated as a so-called 'bushy tailed giraffe', in which the animal's tail terminates in a series of shallowly drawn horizontal and diag-

onal lines (the 'bushy tail'). The incision of the lines of the tail are compatible with the lines used to draw the ropes and tree, for which reason we consider them concurrent. Similarly, the compatible density, depth, and technique used to produce the percussion marks of at least the two closest giraffes and the human, combined with their corresponding discolouration in comparison with the surrounding rock surface, indicate that they belong to the same period.

While giraffes very occasionally appear in dynastic iconography (see one possible example below), the current style and technique suggest a Predynastic age, likely Naqada I or II based on comparable examples elsewhere. The human figure follows a similar chronological table, although more likely Naqada II based on similar depictions in the Nile Valley. The importance of establishing a relative chronology for this figure may appear trivial at first. However, the conical headgear, beard, and what is possibly a bull's tail, together with the figure's emphasised size and position, indicate prominence. Although the headgear is highly stylised, it is reminiscent of the white crown, and may represent an early version thereof. If accepted, this individual may characterise one of the earliest images of a chieftain or ruler (human or divine) of the area or even of Upper Egypt, predating the (obviously far more elaborate) scene of an early King of Upper Egypt as represented in Nag el-Hamdulab [a Prehistoric rock-art site near Aswan].

### Other Anthropoid Figures

Twenty-three anthropoid figures, including the above mentioned 'chieftain' were documented in this panel, with four debatable additions. Not one is identical with another; instead they vary greatly in their style: from highly stylised, cross-like figures, to more elaborated examples with feathered (or perhaps floral) headgear, weapons, and an appendage between the legs that may be a penis-sheath or the tail of a killed animal (see *three examples below*). Except for



ABOVE: Facsimiles of anthropoid figures appearing elsewhere on the larger panel. From left to right:

- A stick figure with a round, but irregular, head crowned with four feathers, an elongated torso; symmetrical arms, (his) left hand holding a rope, separated legs and a penis sheath or tail.
- A figure with a round head, round torso, horizontal arms, separated legs and possibly marked feet; holding a rope/lasso and superimposed over a square-hulled boat.
- A figure with a round head, linear torso and separated legs; arms placed on waist/hips or alternatively holding a bow.

four drawn figures from a later period, all anthropoids were produced with the pecked, non-outlined technique, with parallels in Predynastic contexts elsewhere. The stylised, linear figures, for example, are known from Naqada I, while 'feathered' headgear decorate the heads of anthropoid figures, from Naqada I-II on white cross-lined vessels, through to Naqada III on the so called 'Hunters' palette'. At least 15 figures can be described as actively 'hunting', in that they are situated next to primarily giraffes, but also quadrupeds, and often supported by dogs. Four can be associated with stylised, square boats, generally accredited with a Naqada II date. Among the Predynastic representations, all figures, except the chieftain, are depicted in frontal view. Five individuals wear some form of headgear.

### Summary of Animal Illustrations

#### Giraffes

At least 28 giraffes were illustrated in this panel (see four examples below), and participate in all cluster-scenes of the panel, from left to right, and on all levels. All, but one are depicted in an orientation towards the left and the Nile, away from the wadi. The sole exception is a dubious quadruped, which may instead have been intended to represent a gerenuk [giraffe gazelle] or another long-necked quadruped. Ten giraffes are placed with their necks held horizontally, while the remaining majority have necks held high. At least 11 giraffes can be labelled as 'bushy tailed'. Among the six giraffes that appear associated with the chieftain, four superimpose another animal, while their bodies, legs, necks and heads are carefully and spatially organised. If produced contemporaneously, it is possible that the tails were added to the animals as the final element. As already mentioned, some (at least ten) of the giraffes are illustrated with a rope hanging from their necks, with the more prominent example being the largest animal, placed centrally, and held by the chieftain. Also the smaller giraffe in front of the largest is also attached to a rope held by the chieftain. A few giraffes appear to be held with ropes round their legs, which is most clearly demonstrated in one of the giraffes of the chieftain group. There, a stylistic, 'stick-figure' is depicted as standing between the legs of



ABOVE: Examples of giraffes depicted on the panel. All the giraffes are oriented towards the left (East) apart from the one on the top left, which may actually represent a gerenuk rather than a giraffe.



ABOVE: A detail of the 'chieftain scene', showing a stick figure standing between the legs of a giraffe while holding in [his] left hand a lasso that has trapped the hind legs of the animal.

BELOW: Another detail of the same scene showing a dog attacking the neck of a giraffe.



the giraffe, while holding a lasso that has caught the giraffe's hind legs (*top right*). Three dogs aid the humans in corralling the giraffes of this 'chieftain scene'.

#### Canids

As with the panel at large, the attacking dog is often placed as attached to the neck or back of the long-legged creatures (*above*). All images were produced with a pecking technique, non-outlined, and stylised. Similar to other panels of a comparable style and date, the dogs may follow the same orientation as the prey (as when placed behind their necks/legs), or the opposite (when situated in front or between the legs of the hunted animal). Overall, an eastern direction, in line with the animals facing towards the Nile, is preferred, represented with 11 of a total of 13 dogs. The dogs are, overall, highly stylised with less attention to their details in comparison with the larger animals. Often, however, they are depicted with a longer snout, standing ears, short legs and tail, and generally as if moving. A few examples show an open mouth, ready to bite. The canids appear in almost every hunting cluster of the larger panel.

#### Quadrupeds

In addition to the giraffes and dogs, 12 quadrupeds (7 with horns) are illustrated in the panel. With the exception of an elephant and a drawn bovid (?), all quadrupeds are situated in the left part of the panel, and all but one are directed towards the Nile, out of the wadi. The only exception is a





ABOVE: A facsimile of a lyre-horned bovid on the lower left part of the panel, facing away from the Nile towards an anthropoid figure holding a lasso or spear, and wearing a feathered headdress. In front of the man is a tree or branch.

lyre-horned bovid, which is situated at the lower, left part of the panel, and faces an anthropoid figure (*opposite, top left*). The figure holds a lasso or spear, wears feathered headgear and is accompanied, like the chieftain, by a tree or branch. The horned quadrupeds tend to follow a more outlined style, with bodies partially filled with sparsely placed percussion marks. Their style and technique appear slightly later and more developed than the central chieftain scene, which is also supported by their lighter discolouration to their incision. Their pictorial context, primarily associated with anthropoid figures, indicates a later Predynastic date. At least one of the horned quadrupeds (*see below*) may be of a dynastic (Middle Kingdom) age based on its developed,

BELOW: An owl, a horned quadruped (below the owl) and a giraffe (to the left of the owl) all of which may be of Middle Kingdom date.



outlined style, but also as it is situated next to a large owl and a hieroglyphic inscription produced in a similar, pecked technique, perhaps with the same implement. A giraffe is placed slightly to the left, and since this too is produced in a compatible style and technique, equally outlined, it may be considered a Middle Kingdom representation. In addition to the quadrupeds, a single crocodile can be added to the animals (*see bottom right*). It is situated at the lower level, below the largest giraffe, and appears to be crawling upwards.

### Concluding Words

This paper presents a very brief, but updated and clarified, record of the unique rock art scene below the more famous colossal royal scene of Mentuhotep II. Since this was meant merely as a teaser, no detailed analysis was provided, although a glimpse into the importance of the chieftain was mentioned. Perhaps there are details to this panel, along with the two side panels to the East and West respectively, that can provide us with the background of why this particular space was inscribed as part of the Mentuhotep II lineage claim. The careful and precise placement of the dynastic scene reveals a respect for, and awareness of, the older rock art, into which context the latter was engraved as an intentional claim for power and landscape appropriation. We promise there is more to come!

### Acknowledgements

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### Maria Nilsson and John Ward

Currently Maria is a Curie Researcher at Lund University, Sweden. Dr. Nilsson leads the Gebel el Silsila Project with John Ward (also Lund University). Together with their team they have been responsible for documenting New Kingdom epigraphy since 2013 and have been excavating the site since 2015.

All photographs and images by Maria Nilsson

BELOW: A crocodile apparently crawling upwards towards the animals in the main scene.

