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The Viceroy Merymose at Kanais

Abstract: Publication of a rock-stela at the site of Kanais in Egypt's Eastern Desert, identifying its owner as Merymose, the viceroy of Amenhotep III. Attention is also drawn to other inscriptions at the site, contemporary and later, and to the potential significance of the location, near to a water station.

Appropriately in a volume dedicated to a scholar who has made such important contributions to the recording and study of rock-inscriptions and their context, the subject treated here is a rock-stela, in this case at Kanais, the desert wadi-site east of Edfu, well known for the temple (*hemi-speos*) of Sety I (Plate 1), numerous other rock-inscriptions and drawings, and remains of a Ptolemaic-Roman fort.¹

The stela was first brought to attention by Weigall in 1909, his published copy (Fig. 1) showing the scene of an official offering to the god Horus, surmounted by an inscription identifying the owner as a viceroy ('King's son'), his name apparently lost.² Weigall's drawing has remained until now the major point of reference for the piece.³ During a brief visit to Kanais in 2014,⁴ I had the opportunity to examine the stela and determine that the official's name, if a little eroded, is still present and legible: the name can now be confirmed as that of Merymose, the celebrated viceroy of Amenhotep III.⁵ I present here an updated, if still somewhat provisional, record.⁶



Plate 1: Kanais, general view, Sety I temple and location (A) of Merymose stela.

¹ PM vii, 321–325; Schott 1961; Bernand 1972; KRI I, 65–71; Červiček 1974, 56–62; Aufrère et al. 1994, 203–208; Brand 2000, 279–282, 362–363; Rohl 2000, 15–23; Hikade 2001, 61–63, 216–219; Adams 2007; Eaton 2007; Rothe et al. 2008, 200–209; Sidebotham et al. 2008, 112, pls. 6.1, 6.2; Franzmeier 2010, 80, 192, BRT 11–13; Morales 2010; Mairs 2011; Garnett 2013; Masquelier-Loorius 2013, 70–72, 78, 234; Brown 2017, 178–180; Paprocki 2019, 170, 177–179, 181; Sidebotham et al. 2019, 219–227; Cooper 2020, 187–188 [37], 212, fig. 11, 432–433.

² Weigall 1909, pl. xxviii, 1.

³ PM vii, 325 (31); Červiček 1974, 58, no. 262, Abb. 262; Dewachter 1978, i, 419–421, Doc. VIII; Rohl 2000, 23, no. 4; Hikade 2001, 61, 216, no. 147; Mahfouz 2005, 69; Eaton 2007, 44; Espinel 2012, 100; Müller 2013, 151, no. 5, 380, 12.4.

⁴ The visit to Kanais was undertaken with the permission of the Egyptian Ministry of Antiquities, represented at the site by Ramadan Hassan and Mohamed Badawy of the Edfu Inspectorate. On the occasion, I was valuably assisted in recording the stela and its context by Xavier Droux, Joe Majer, Jim Rossiter and Renée Friedman, who has also helped in the preparation of this paper; I am grateful, additionally, to Wouter Claes for supplying bibliographic information and Gordon Dicks for useful supplementary images of the wadi.

⁵ For his numerous attestations, see Dewachter 1978, 97–138, Docs 83–115; Gasse/Rondot 2007, 162–163, SEH 268; Régen 2010; Davies 2012, 29–32; Müller 2013, 114–116, no. 11; Davies 2015, 95; Klotz/Brown 2016, 293–296; Brown 2017, 178–183; Kendall et al. 2017, 167–168.

⁶ A further visit to Kanais, to check and improve the initial record, was planned for 2020 but the event had to be called off owing to the global health emergency.



Fig. 1: Kanaïs, stela, copy, 1909.



Fig. 2: Kanaïs, stela of Merymose, recent record.

The stela is located about 2.4 metres above ground-level on the northern face of the main cliff, about 100 metres east of the Sety I temple (Plates 1 and 2, A),⁷ on a smoothed but still uneven surface, protected by an overhang (Plate 3).

Measuring about 52 cm in height and 53 cm in width, it partly occupies a space already bearing a large predynastic drawing of a sacred boat,⁸ fitting neatly within the frame of the boat's deck, prow and stern, at an angle concordant with that of the boat (sloping downwards from right to left), a notably sympathetic appropriation of the older icon by the later.⁹ The stela (Fig. 2), quite deeply incised and painted, depicts the viceroy on the right, standing, facing left, offering incense with one hand and performing a libation with the other, before a figure of the falcon-god Horus, facing right, and standing on a pedestal.¹⁰ On the basis of the details as they survive, the viceroy is shown wearing a shoulder-length wig, a collar,¹¹ a short-sleeved shirt, arm and wrist accoutrements, a belt with sash, and a double skirt (long over short). The paint, a considerable amount of which survives, was applied on to a thin white base, the palette limited largely to red of different hues (the viceroy's skin) and yellow (his dress; the falcon's body and pedestal). Areas of white (the viceroy's wig, collar, sections of his arms; the falcon's wing and legs) would also, at least in part, have borne pigment (for example, probably black on the wig and blue on the collar) now entirely faded away. There is sporadic damage to the scene, most seriously to the viceroy's eye, nose and mouth, but his figure is otherwise in fairly good condition, while that of Horus, save for the possible loss of some pigment, is almost entirely intact.

Located above and in front of the figures, and similarly incised, is a hieroglyphic inscription, some of the signs now weathered and incomplete, arranged in three framed columns, originally drafted and painted in red. It is a routine offering-text, slightly abbreviated, invoking benefits for the owner, ending with the all-important name (Fig. 2, Plates 3–4):

⁷ Cf. Rohl 2000, 15 and 20, area RH-1.

⁸ A second similar boat, to the left of the first, is that figured in Weigall 1909, pl. xxx, 1, and Rohl 2000, 22–23, no. 5, where, in the latter case, the location given is inaccurate. The scene and the boats are also noted in Eaton 2007, 44, where the boats are mistakenly described as pharaonic copies.

⁹ Cf. also inscription C below.

¹⁰ The form of the rear of the pedestal, which partly coincides with a crack in the surface, is unclear.

¹¹ Its lower border possibly formed originally of a row of drop-beads, now unclear.

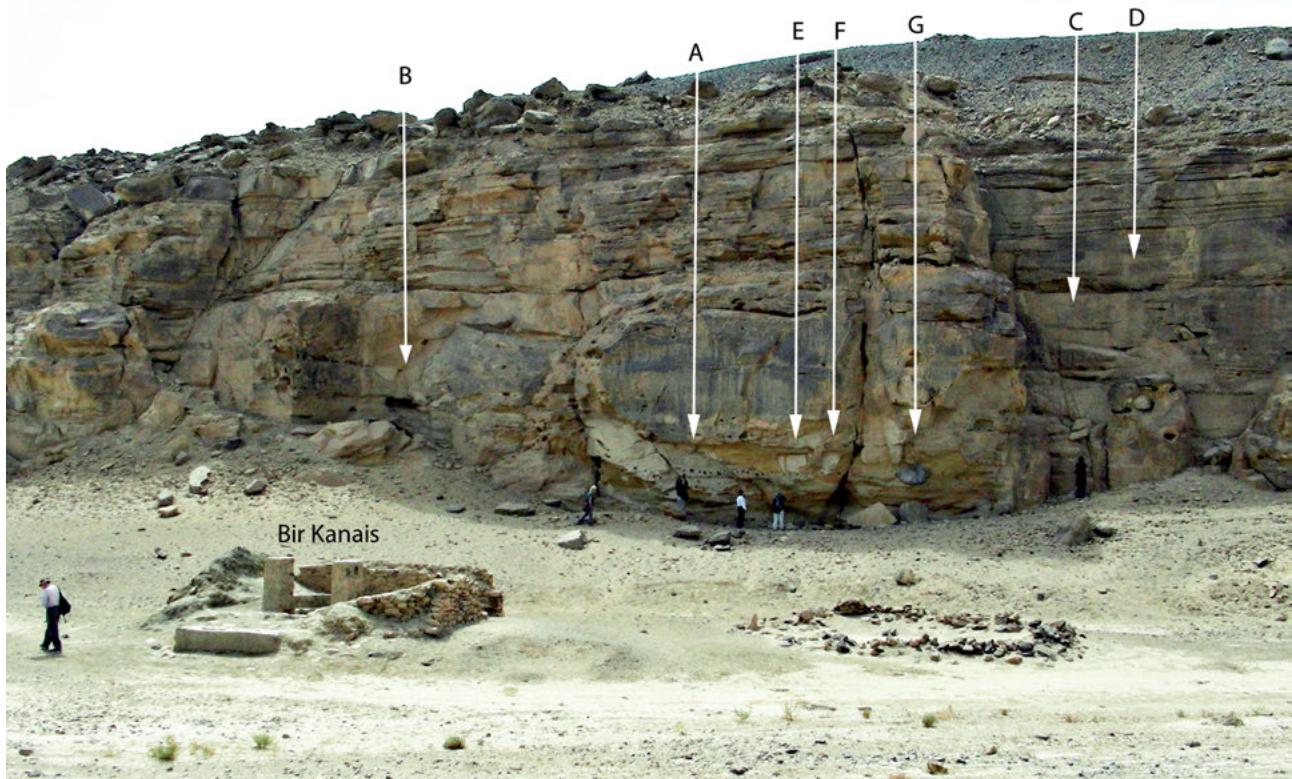


Plate 2: Kanais, location of Merymose stela (A), other inscriptions (B–G), and well.



Plate 3: Kanais, Merymose stela.



Plate. 4: Kanais, Merymose stela, inscription, detail, titles and name.

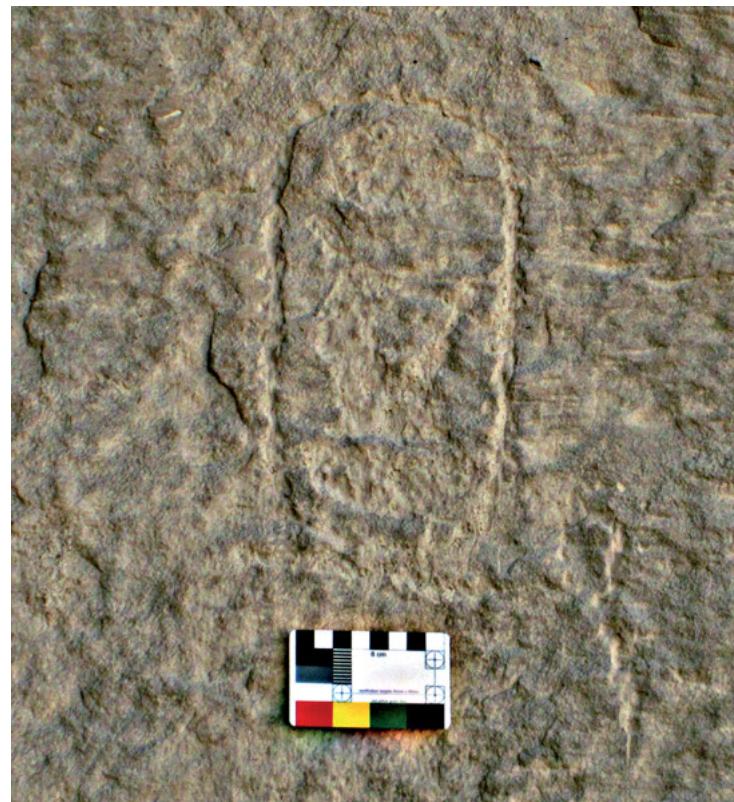


Plate. 5: Kanais, Inscription B.

“(1) A gift that the king gives and Horus of Behdet, great god, lord of the sky, (2) that he might give all good and pure things, bread, beer, beef and fowl, for the *ka* of (3) King’s son, overseer of foreign lands,¹² Mer(y)mose”.¹³ A second, related, inscription, a single framed column behind the viceroy, reads: ‘Made by Pay’, the same man, it has been suggested, as the ‘Deputy of the viceroy, Py’, known from the Wadi Allaki.¹⁴ No year-date is included and the loss of the facial features reduces the criteria available for possible dating on stylistic grounds, though the figural proportions are not inconsistent with those of the figures decorating the desert temple of Amenhotep III at Elkab, which is regarded as one of the king’s earlier monuments,¹⁵ Elkab, of course, being one of two departure points, the other, Edfu, for the ‘primary pharaonic route’ to Wadi Kanais and beyond.¹⁶ Depictions of the god Horus (in his

¹² Probably an abbreviated writing of ‘overseer of southern foreign lands’; for Merymose’s titles, see Müller 2013, 114, 2.1. A, no. 11.

¹³ The mr-sign in the name is near-intact; the ms-sign is slightly damaged and its right end eroded. There is room for a determinative (hardly necessary with the figure directly below), but the marks underneath are not the remnants of a sign (which, if once present, has eroded away) but represent superficial damage.

¹⁴ Piotrovskij 1983, 52, 73, no. 85, located on an area of rock bearing several other inscriptions relating to Merymose and his staff (Piotrovskij 1983, 51–52, nos. 82–84; Klotz/Brown 2016, 293–295); for the suggested connection, see Mahfouz 2005, 69, 76; for the variant writings of the name cf. *PN* i, 129, nos. 4, 27, etc.; for such ‘signatures’, Brown/Darnell 2013, 135; Brown 2017, 180; Davies 2020, 208–209, fig. 15.24. In this case, Pay would probably not have been the stela’s actual artist, but rather the agent in charge of the process.

¹⁵ Bryan 1992, 82; cf. Johnson 1998, 78 and 82; Kozloff 2012, 67–69.

¹⁶ Rothe et al. 2008, 4, fig. 1–2, 94, 200, 399; cf. Weigall 1909, 158. Officials from Elkab (Nekheb) are among the earliest New Kingdom personnel documented in the Eastern Desert; see Hikade 2001, 58, 213, no. 136; Rothe et al. 2008, 231, SL12; 244, SMO1, and 205, KN06, for inscriptions of the well-known Governor of Nekheb, Reneny (*temp. Amenhotep I*), and an inscription of the Scribe Her-iry of Nekheb (corrected reading in Brown/Darnell 2013, 129, with n. 35, linking him to the scribe of the same name figured in the tomb of Pahery at Elkab, *temp. Thutmose III*). Her-iry, a half-brother of Pahery, is also attested in the neighbouring tomb of Ahmose-Son-of-Ibana (Davies 2009, 152, no. 13, 164, fig. 5 B, 171, fig. 12).



Plate 6: Kanais, Inscription C.

various aspects) and scenes of offering and adoration involving the deity are not uncommon in Eastern Desert mining contexts of the New Kingdom, in both Egypt and Nubia.¹⁷ This Kanais example is now one of the earliest and finest known.¹⁸

The stela is complemented by three other inscriptions, of which new images are published here. A little to the east, again above head-height, is a vertical cartouche, a little roughly done and now eroded, containing the prenomen “Nebmaatre” of Amenhotep III (Plates 2, B, and 5).¹⁹

Not far to the west,²⁰ on a vertical face, at a considerable height above the wadi floor, the cartouche and a ‘signature’ are combined in a single composition (located, like stela A, within a predynastic boat-drawing), very finely done in sunk relief: “Nebmaatre, made by King’s son Mer(y)mose” (Plates 2, C, and 6).²¹

¹⁷ See Espinel 2012, 98–102; Davies 2020, 193–194, pl. 15.21, 208–210, pls. 15.56–57, figs. 15.24–25.

¹⁸ For a non-desert, partial parallel, cf. Merymose’s free-standing stela, said to be from Aswan (Lacau 1909, 1190, pl. lviii, CG 34.140; PM v, 242; Dewachter 1978, I, 109–110, Doc. 98, and 420; Müller 2013, 114, 2.1. A, no. 11, 386, 15.1.4), its decoration in poor condition but clearly showing the viceroy offering to Horus of Behdet, in this case partly anthropomorphic, hawk-headed, standing holding was-sceptre and ankh.

¹⁹ Cf. Rothe et al. 2008, 209, KN10; Brown 2017, 179.

²⁰ Rohl 2000, 15, lower image, area PL-1.

²¹ Cf. Weigall 1909, pl. xxviii, 6; PM vii, 325 (30); Dewachter 1978, i, 111, Doc. 100; Rohl, 2000, 19–20, no. 14; Rothe et al. 2008, 204, KN05; Hikade 2001, 216, no. 145; Müller 2013, 380, 12.1; Brown 2017, 179–180, fig. 1, lower.



Plate 7: Kanais, Inscription D.

A couple of metres above to the right (west) is a single horizontal line: “Made by King’s son, Merymose” (Plates 2, D, and 7).²²

It is likely that all three inscriptions were originally finished in paint, long disappeared.

It is known that during the reign of Amenhotep III, probably in advance of his first jubilee, the exploitation of the Eastern Desert gold-production wadis was intensified,²³ a programme directed by Merymose, its energetic prosecution “confirmed by the proliferation of professional inscriptions belonging to viceregal personnel throughout this network of interconnected wadis”.²⁴ Strategically located at a major gateway to the desert gold-mines, the Kanais stela and associated inscriptions (commemorating perhaps official tours of inspection)²⁵ served to affirm the viceroy’s jurisdiction over the territory, his authority exercised, as the monuments make clear, under the aegis of the king and protection of the presiding deity.²⁶

A final observation: the Merymose stela was to influence a later generation of supplicants, providing a partial template for the important group of three rock-stelae with cultic-scenes (two of them including Horus in various guises), belonging to officials (one a viceroy) of Sety I, arranged in a line close-by, a little to the west (Plate 2, E, F, G).²⁷ The three stelae – save for the temple, the only such monuments of Sety I’s reign at Kanais – mark a highly visible, focal point in the wadi landscape,²⁸ directly overlooking the Bir Kanais, which is situated in the wadi not far below the stelae (Plate 2, left),²⁹ an association offering support for the view that the present Bir occupies the site, if not necessarily the exact spot, of the famous well of Sety I.³⁰ As has long been known, one of the stelae (G) actually

²² Cf. Weigall 1909, pl. xxviii, 7; Dewachter 1978, i, 112, Doc. 101; Rothe et al. 2008, 203, KN04; Müller 2013, 380, 12.2; Brown 2017, 179, fig. 1, upper. The photograph (Plate 7) lacks a scale, as it had to be taken from a distance. The inscription, occupying a sheer face, inaccessible without supportive equipment, is neatly incised, the individual hieroglyphs smaller than those of C.

²³ Mahfouz 2005, 75–77; Brown 2017, 178–195; also in Nubia, Zibellius-Chen 2013, 148; Davies 2020, 214, with n. 142.

²⁴ Brown 2017, 183.

²⁵ Cf. Dewachter 1978, 208 (f).

²⁶ Cf. Brown 2017, 187.

²⁷ PM vii, 325, (27)–(29), and 322 (for sketch of approximate location); and from right to left (west to east): KRI I, 72, no. 34; KRITA I, 61; KRITANC I, 62–63 (Anena and colleague; stela G); KRI I, 303–304, 118, II.2; KRITA I, 247–248; KRITANC I, 200–201 (Iuny; stela F); and KRI I, 72–73, no. 35; KRITA I, 61–62; KRITANC I, 62–63 (Panub; stela E); cf., variously, Leclant 1960, 31–35, fig. 11, pls. II, A–B (stela E); Dewachter 1978, i, 207–209, Doc. 148 (stela F); Brand 2000, 281–282, 363; Rohl 2000, 20, RH-1, 22–23, nos. 1–3; Hikade 2001, 61, 216–218, nos. 148–150; Franzmeier 2010, 192, BRT 13 (stela G); Masquelier-Loorius 2013, 78, pl. 10 (stela E); Müller 2013, 380–381, 12.3, 9, and 12.

²⁸ Cf. Seidlmayer 2013, 208, 209 (on rock-inscriptions in the Aswan region), stressing the importance placed on location and visibility, with inscriptions “aligned like billboards along a highway, directly addressing the passers-by” and clustering “at focal points on the processional routes”.

²⁹ For other recent views of the well, see Rohl 2000, 22, centre left, 24, upper right; Franzmeier 2010, 80, Abb. 36; and Garnett 2013, 233–234, fig. 11.9.

³⁰ The location of the latter has long been a matter of uncertainty and varied opinion; see KRITANC I, 61, commenting that “the well is now probably lost under the encumbering remains of fort-settlements of Ptolemaic, Roman and later date”; cf. Murray 1925, 145, pl. xvi, 3; Schott 1961, 135; Aufrère et al. 1994, 203, 207–208; Rothe et al. 2008, 6–8, fig. 1–4, 200; Franzmeier 2010, 80; Klemm/Klemm 2013, 193; Sidebotham et al. 2019, 224–225; Cooper 2020, 188.

records that its co-owner had been charged with the digging of the well, further supporting the locational link.³¹ If this link is indeed valid, it raises the question as to whether the choice of location of the neighbouring Merymose stela might also in its day have been influenced by its proximity to a watering station,³² a predecessor of the Sety I well, which must have existed at Kanais in one form or another.³³ Future archaeological investigation (long overdue) of the wadi area surrounding the current Bir and adjacent to the stelae,³⁴ disturbed as the context is likely to be, could yet prove to be informative.

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³¹ See KRI I, 72, no. 34; KRITA I, 61; KRITANC I, 62–63; and appropriate references in n. 27.

³² Cf. Espinel 2012, 100, noting the association of Horus-images with desert watering-places, citing, among other locations, Kanais, its “well-digging activities” and our stelae A and G. For a Horus-“shrine”, of the Ramesside period, at an important water-source, Murrat Wells, in the pharaonic gold-mining area of the Sudanese-Nubian Eastern Desert, see Davies 2020, 208–210, KRP2.

³³ Cf. Franzmeier 2010, 80.

³⁴ The circle of stones situated just to the west of the present Bir (Plate 2) is suggestive, but currently of uncertain significance.

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Abbreviated literature

KRI I = Kitchen 1969–1975.

KRITA I = Kitchen 1993a.

KR/TANC I = Kitchen 1993b.

PM v = Porter/Moss 1937.

PM vii = Porter/Moss 1951.

PN i = Ranke 1935.

List of figures

Figure 1: Kanais, stela, copy.

after Weigall 1909, pl. xviii

Figure 2: Kanais, stela of Merymose, recent record.

Drawing: W. V. Davies, X. Droux. © W. V. Davies, X. Droux

Plate 1: Kanais, general view, Sety I temple and location (A) of Merymose stela.

Photo: J. Majer. © R. Friedman

Plate 2: Kanais, location of Merymose stela (A), other inscriptions (B–G), and well.

Photo: R. Friedman. © R. Friedman

Plate 3: Kanais, Merymose stela.

Photo: J. Rossiter. © J. Rossiter

Plate 4: Kanais, Merymose stela, inscription, detail, titles and name.

Photo: J. Rossiter. © J. Rossiter

Plate 5: Kanais, Inscription B.

Photo: J. Rossiter. © J. Rossiter

Plate 6: Kanais, Inscription C.

Photo: W. V. Davies. © W. V. Davies

Plate 7: Kanais, Inscription D.

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