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Sidetic in Egypt

<https://doi.org/10.1515/kadmos-2025-0011>

Abstract: The independent identification of two graffiti in Abydos (Egypt) as Sidetic by two research teams in the same year represents a remarkable scholarly coincidence. This article describes the circumstances of that coincidence and presents a different edition of the first graffiti.

Keywords: Sidetic epigraphy. Sidetic language. Graffiti in Abydos (Egypt).

1 Introduction

In November 2024, while gathering documentation on the Carian graffiti from Abydos, we came across two inscriptions, published by Zotenberg (1868) among several Phoenician and Aramaic graffiti, which could be clearly interpreted as Sidetic. This attribution, as far as we could ascertain after a careful review of previous scholarship, had not been proposed before. Of the two graffiti, the first was the more legible, as it contained a personal name previously attested in Sidetic as *payaw*. However, its final sign was surprising: instead of the expected *w*, the form corresponded to a sign usually interpreted as a variant of *e*. This anomaly led to a focused investigation by Gem Ferrer, resulting in the identification and decipherment of a previously undocumented Sidetic letter (see Ferrer, this journal).

The results of our research were submitted to *Kadmos* in May 2025 for possible publication. The manuscript we sent included three sections: (1) a history of the publication of the two inscriptions in the corpora of Phoenician and Aramaic graffiti from Abydos, (2) a new edition and commentary of the two graffiti, and (3) a historical contextualization of these Sidetic graffiti, proposing several hypotheses concerning their dating and function. Although both Susana Soler and Igna-

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si-Xavier Adiego had visited Abydos twice in recent years and taken photographs, the graffiti had not been found on site (but cf. *infra*).

On 23 May 2025, the authors presented the two inscriptions and the newly identified Sidetic letter at the workshop *The Gods of Anatolia and their Names*, held in Santiago de Compostela, within a section devoted to recent epigraphic discoveries.¹

Following the circulation on social media of a photograph of our presentation, Ian Rutherford contacted us with the information that he and Fiona Phillips had independently found, photographed, and identified as Sidetic the same two graffiti, and that they had submitted an article to *Kadmos* some months earlier with their edition. Thanks to their generosity, we were able to consult the original version of their article.

This constitutes a truly remarkable coincidence: 157 years after Zotenberg's first publication of the two graffiti, *Kadmos* received, in the same year, two independent submissions identifying the inscriptions as Sidetic. A further unexpected development has since occurred in recent days. Upon reviewing over a thousand photographs taken at Abydos by Susana Soler and Ignasi-Xavier Adiego, we have been able to find two images of the first graffito.

The article by Phillips and Rutherford, and our submission to *Kadmos*, overlap in part and complement each other. One of the strengths of Phillips and Rutherford's work lies in the fact that their edition was based on direct photographic evidence. They also provide a reliable edition of the second graffito. In contrast, in our case, due to the imprecision and ambiguities present in the 19th- and early 20th-century copies, we were unable to achieve a satisfactory reading of this graffito. By contrast, our article included a detailed history of the publication and editorial transmission of the two graffiti, a topic which Phillips and Rutherford – though they correctly cited the earlier editions – addressed only briefly.

The sections dealing with the historical context are likewise mutually complementary: although both articles point toward similar interpretive scenarios, they approach them from different perspectives. The contribution by Phillips and Rutherford places greater emphasis on onomastic evidence, while ours offered a more detailed account of the relevant historical circumstances.

However, there is one central point of divergence where we believe our article provides a significantly more accurate result: the edition of the first graffito, and in particular, the correct reading of its final sign. As previously mentioned, this

¹ The proceedings will be published in the collection *Barcino Monographica Orientalia, Series Anatolica et Indogermanica* (Edicions de la Universitat de Barcelona).

reading has led to the identification of a new Sidetic letter, with significant implications for the decipherment of the Sidetic alphabet.

It is clear that, upon becoming aware of the prior submission to *Kadmos* by Fiona Phillips and Ian Rutherford, we can no longer publish our work in its initial form in full. We consider it more appropriate to publish it in the proceedings of the Santiago de Compostela workshop, where it was presented. In contrast, our reading of the first graffito – and the significant implications for the decipherment of Sidetic that follow from it – should, in our view, be published in *Kadmos*.

Accordingly, and in response to the journal's editor's generous invitation, we are submitting a revised version of our original manuscript, now focused exclusively on the edition of the first graffito. This edition is now enriched with the incorporation of the two aforementioned photographs, which, in our opinion, serve to support our reading.

2 Epigraphic and linguistic analysis

We first reproduce Devéria's copy of the graffito, which served as the basis for the epigraphic reading reached in the earliest stage of this study:



Fig. 1: Graffito according to Devéria [= V] (CIS 1-1, *Tabulae*, pl. XVI)

At first sight, Devéria's copy apparently offered a highly reliable reproduction of the graffito, particularly regarding the beginning $\text{X} \text{L} \text{D} \text{C}$ *poja-*, which is strongly reminiscent of the already known Sidetic PN *Pojaw* from the Name List Inscription (S9). By contrast, the final letter closely resembled H , a character traditionally interpreted as a variant of sign no. 2 X *e* due to their great formal proximity. Devéria's additional lowest right stroke was initially considered intrusive by us based on the rest of the epigraphic attestations of this letter in the Sidetic corpus (but cf. *infra*). The challenge posed by this graffito led to the remarkable decipherment of the letter H as a *u*-like vowel, which not only resolved old problems in previous examples but also the unsatisfactory reading †Pojae resulting from the traditional interpretation (see Ferrer, this journal). The revised spelling

𐤀𐤁𐤁𐤁𐤁 *Pojau* could then be explained as a simple case of graphic alternation between 𐤁 *w* and 𐤀 *u*.²

Below, we present the two photographs of the graffito taken by Susana Soler on 4 December 2022:



Fig. 2: Photograph 1 of the graffito (Susana Soler)



Fig. 3: Photograph 2 of the graffito (Susana Soler)

The available photographs seem to confirm our initial identification of the final sign as the new Sidetic letter 𐤀 *u*. This contradicts the alternative reading 𐤁 *w* proposed by Phillips – Rutherford (this journal). Their reading is difficult to uphold in light of the vertical strokes that characterise the letter 𐤀: they are remarkably deep and can hardly be considered intrusive.

However, given that some traces could certainly invite us to recognise the shape of a 𐤁 *w*, we cannot rule out absolutely a possible compromise solution: it

² For the transcription <u> proposed for this letter – generally assigned to sign no. 5 𐤀 –, see Ferrer, this journal, § 4.

might be that the author of the graffito wrote one letter over the other, confused by their phonetic proximity, although it remains unclear which of the two was incised first.

From a palaeographic point of view, some letters appear to feature a *ductus* closer to the coin alphabet (400–333 BC)³ than to later inscriptions (late 4th/early 3rd–2nd centuries BC). The letter **𐤀** is the clearest example, as its left vertical stroke is short and straight rather than long and oblique, as seen in inscriptions.⁴ The letter **𐤁** also presents a more angular right stroke, as seen in coins, though this difference is less pronounced. Finally, it is interesting to note that the letter **𐤂** takes on a distinctly rectangular shape.

To conclude, it should also be pointed out that this simplest onomastic formula, consisting solely of the individual's name in the nominative, is documented for the first time in the Sidetic corpus, where the idionym has always been accompanied by the patronym, generally the papponym, and even occasionally by a propapponym, ethnic or appellative.⁵

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³ Atlan 1967: 138, 151–152; 1968: 67.

⁴ See, for instance, Berlin, Münzkabinett der Staatlichen Museen, obj. no. 18216584 (Atlan 1967: pl. VI, no. 146).

⁵ For close parallels to this basic onomastic formula among Pamphylian and Carian mercenaries in Egypt, see Brixhe 1976: 291–293; Adiego 2007: 264–265.

