Bordering Power
Reinterpreting Three First Cataract Inscriptions of King Merenra

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Abstract: This paper reconsiders three royal inscriptions of King Merenra (Sixth Dynasty) in the region of the First Nile Cataract. They have long been known to scholars but have not received extensive treatment beyond translations. The inscriptions appear to be among the first explicit royal statements addressing the limits of Egyptian territory and the beginnings of foreign lands. The paper situates the inscriptions within more comprehensive scholarship related to border studies, the geographic setting of the First Cataract region, and the historical context of the late Old Kingdom. We argue these inscriptions provide key information about political border-making during this period.

Keywords: inscriptions, Merenra, Sixth Dynasty, Old Kingdom Egypt, bordering, power

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With the foundation of the First Dynasty of Egypt around 3085 BCE,[1] the earliest known territorial polity was established in the Lower Nile region. While ancient Egyptian borders of the Middle Kingdom and the New Kingdom are well documented, official sources

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[1] Dee *et al.* 2013; we wish to emphasise that this date is an estimate for a threshold event within the long process of state formation.

regarding political boundary-making are scarcer in earlier periods. This paper examines rare evidence related to boundary-making from the Old Kingdom in the form of three inscriptions from the reign of King Merenra (Sixth Dynasty),[2] all in the First Cataract region, which relates to the border between Egypt and the lands and peoples to the south. These three royal inscriptions of Merenra have long been known to scholars but have not been analysed through the lens of border construction and maintenance. This article, therefore, situates these inscriptions within wider scholarship related to border studies, the geographic setting of the First Cataract region, and the historical context of the late Old Kingdom.[3] This is particularly valuable for this particular time frame, given that such practices have been treated in greater detail during later periods like the Middle Kingdom and more extensively during the Early Dynastic period.[4] As a result of its focus on textual evidence, this paper favours an Egyptian, and indeed royal, perspective on the creation of a boundary near the First Cataract.[5] Our treatment of the inscriptions is arranged in chronological order based on the regnal year dates from these inscriptions rather than geographic position, and a discussion of the historical background of each text precedes each textual edition. This collaboration provides new textual editions and recontextualises these three rock inscriptions, which appear to be among the first explicit royal statements addressing the limits of Egyptian territory and the beginning of foreign lands. We argue that these inscriptions emphasise the importance of ritual visits of the king to the limits of Pharaonic territory and continuity with earlier efforts to control movement across the First Cataract region, as well as claim authority over the narrative and interpretation of the interplay between the Egyptian crown and foreign populations.[6]

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND AND NEW TRANSLATIONS OF THE MERENRA INSCRIPTIONS

The three inscriptions of Merenra discussed here were located at three distinct, carefully selected locations in the First Cataract region (**Fig. 1**). The earliest of the three (Inscription 1), dating to the first year of Merenra's reign, was located close to the southern terminus

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[2] The dates of Merenra's reign in absolute chronology are still a matter of debate, as it is more broadly the chronology of the late Old Kingdom. There are several chronological models available based on historical sources, natural and astronomical phenomena, and radiocarbon dating (for an overview see Gautschy *et al*. 2017: Table 4). The reign of King Merenra is dated either to the end of the twenty-third century or the beginning of the twenty-fourth century BCE; the latter date is supported by radiocarbon chronology.

[3] Authors' Contributions: Brendan Hainline contributed the inscriptions' new reading and commented on the first draft. Serena Nicolini contributed information about the history of research and geographical location and commented on the first draft. Oren Siegel contributed to the historical commentary and the border-making discussion, wrote the paper and made the final revision. Maria Carmela Gatto conceptualised, designed, and coordinated the research, secured funding, contributed to the drafting of the paper and made the final revision.

[4] For later periods, see: Siegel 2022; Smith 2005; Galán 1995; Kootz 2013 identifies the early establishment of a boundary at Elephantine and Ziermann 1993 and Seidlmayer 1996 explore these practices in detail.

[5] For perspectives centring on Nubia, see: Gatto 2019; Raue 2019.

[6] We thank an anonymous peer reviewer for this suggestion.
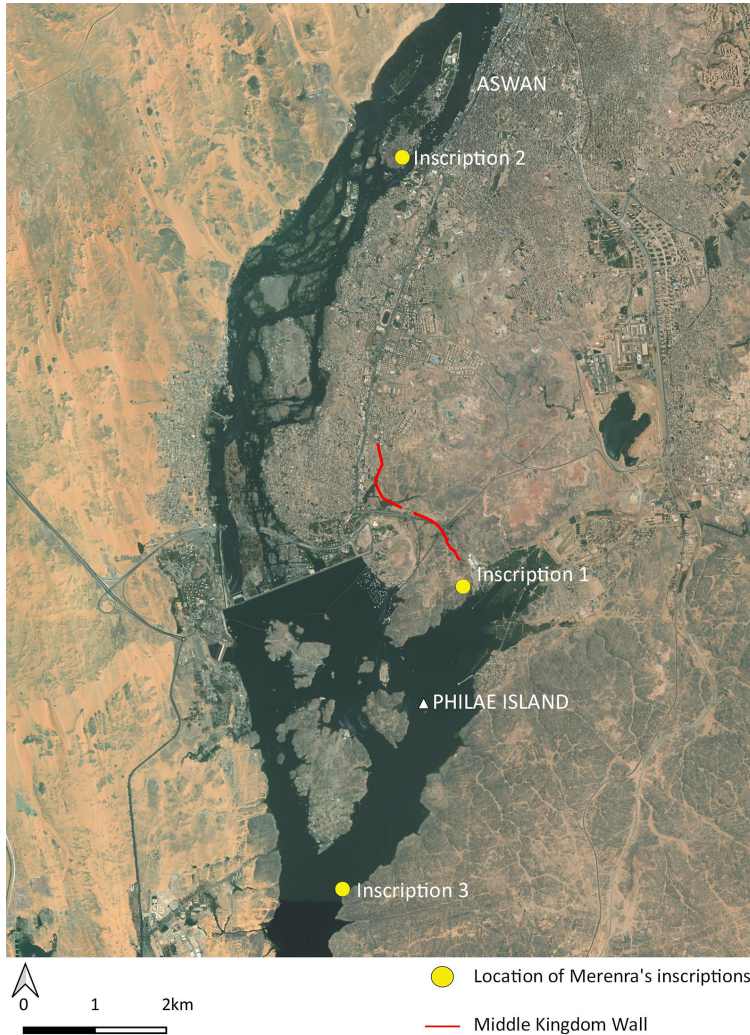
1. Map of the First Cataract region with the location of the three inscriptions
(Bing Satellite in QGIS; elaborated: S. Nicolini).

of the ancient road linking Aswan and Shellal, on the north side of the Shellal Bay in the Tabyat al-Sheikh area. Inscriptions 2 and 3 appear to be connected to the same royal visit during the year of the fifth occasion of the count during Merenra's reign. Inscription 2 was located within the cult centre of Satet within Elephantine itself, while Inscription 3's location is not entirely certain but seems to have been on the Nile's east bank, directly across the river from the south of el-Hesa Island.[7] The First Cataract inscriptions of Merenra are

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[7] There are (potentially) two other inscriptions of Merenra from the First Cataract region. However, they do not pertain directly to borders, so they will not be discussed in this article but will be mentioned here:

not grammatically difficult, and the preserved parts show that there are similarities and parallels between the three texts. They all document a visit by King Merenra himself, and all centre around a specific (compound?) verb, written ∽⌣ (for a tentative reading, see below). All three texts reference interactions with foreign lands, either through receiving the praise of Nubian rulers or, in the case of Inscription 2, more overtly hostile attacks against them by the Pharaoh.

Inscription 1: Tabyat al-Sheikh

This inscription was first noticed and reported by Karl R. Lepsius,[8] and his description has been used by later authors who mentioned this text as being close to Philae, even if this is somewhat imprecise. In Lepsius's words, the inscription was located 'an der nördlichen Wand des ersten Thales, das sich nach dem Flusse öffnet',[9] coming from Philae: this means that the inscription was carved in a side valley (*khor*) of the main wadi. The *khor* should have been located on the western side of the road,[10] as Jacques de Morgan[11] confirmed. William M.F. Petrie also recorded the inscription (drawn by Francis L. Griffith),[12] and though he did not clarify the side of the wadi, he indicated the presence of the text in a side *khor* and not along the main route. Ludwig Borchardt copied the text with no information about its location other than its proximity to the Middle Kingdom wall.[13] A transliteration of the text based on the drawings and some epigraphical notes was later published by Kurt H. Sethe.[14] None of these scholars provided details about the dimensions of the inscription, its precise location, or the techniques used to carve it.[15] Later contributions focused only briefly on the inscription and didn't report its precise location.[16] More recently, the text has been translated by Nigel Strudwick[17] and Kate Liszka,[18] who analysed it closely with our Inscription 3. Robert D. Delia's work documenting rock inscriptions from Aswan up to Shellal[19]

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(1) Merenra added his name to an inscribed red granite *naos* of Pepy I (Musée du Louvre E 12660) found in the cult centre of Satet on Elephantine Island (Ziegler 1990: 50–53); (2) a badly damaged inscription that opens with an offering formula and potentially names Merenra was copied by Petrie (Petrie 1888: Pl. III, no. 81), but even the reading of the cartouche is uncertain. To our knowledge, Petrie was the only scholar who had documented this text.

[8] L*D* IV: 121, no. 13/14 and drawing at L*D* II: Pl. 116b.

[9] Translation: 'on the northern wall of the first valley, which opens towards the river'; L*D* IV: 121, no. 13/14.

[10] The so-called 'wadi road' ran parallel to the river from Shellal Bay to Elephantine following desert valleys (wadis); in the Middle Kingdom, a wall was built for protection along the outer side of the road.

[11] De Morgan *et al*. 1894: 17, no. 78.

[12] Petrie 1888: Pl. XIII, no. 338.

[13] Von Pilgrim 2021: 148. Borchardt wrote in his diary that he copied the inscription, but there is no surviving drawing or hand-made copy of it.
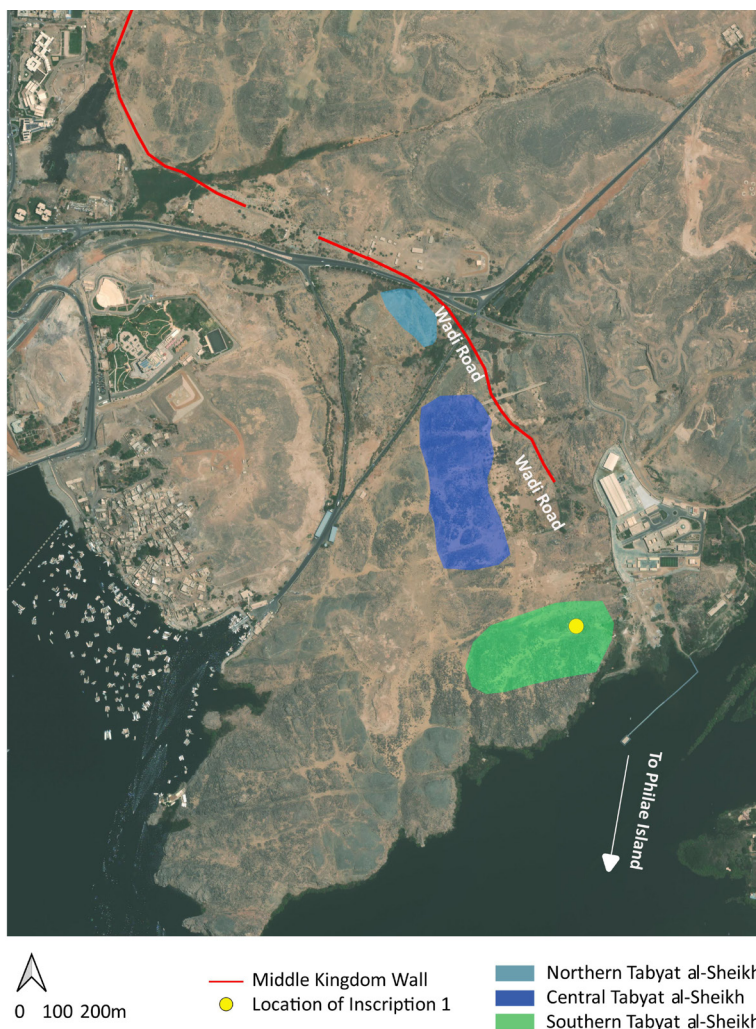
[14] *Urk*. I: 111, no. 19.

[15] It is plausible that the inscription was carved on a granite boulder since this is the most common stone type in the Tabyat al-Sheikh area, perhaps not too far above the bottom of the *khor*.

[16] PM V: 246.

[17] Strudwick 2005: 134, no. 51.

[18] Liszka 2012: 153.

[19] Delia 1993. The inscription is referred to on p. 81 under the number 78, which refers to de Morgan *et al*. 1894.

2. The approximate area where Inscription 1 is located (Bing Satellite in QGIS; elaborated: S. Nicolini).

seems to confirm a location near Tabyat al-Sheikh, though military restrictions made a personal visit impossible. A large factory has been recently built in that location, further complicating research in the area (**Fig. 2**).

The inscription, which includes both hieroglyphic text and iconographic figural representations of the mentioned actors, can be divided into three parts (**Fig. 3**):

(1) At the right, above and behind an image of Merenra are the king's titles. All three available drawings of the inscription agree on this part of the text.[20] The hieroglyphic signs

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[20] L*D* II: Pl. 116b; Petrie 1888: Pl. XIII, no. 338; de Morgan *et al*. 1894: 17, no. 78.
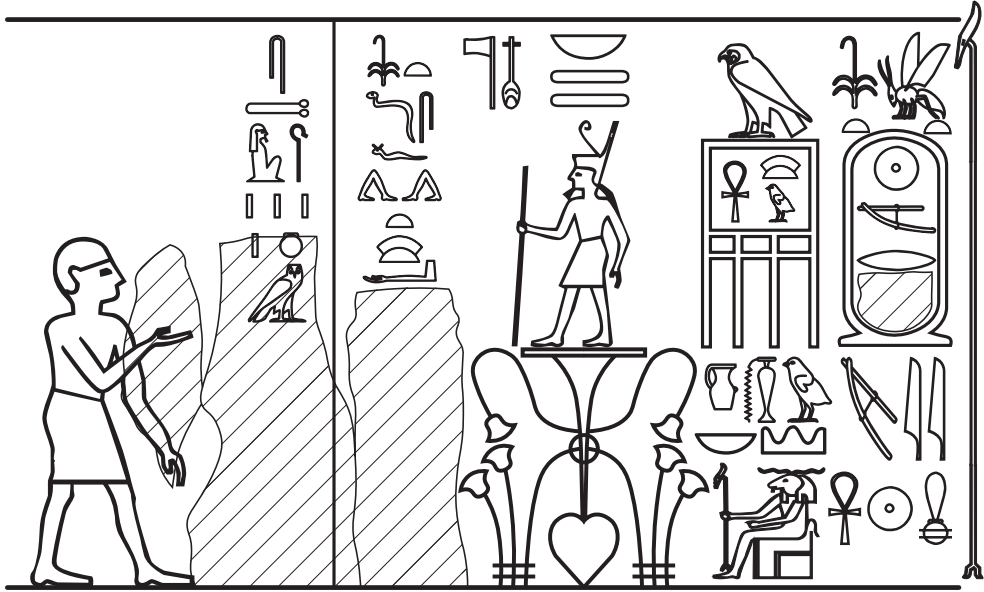
3. Inscription 1 (Drawing: B. Hainline; based on: L*D* II: Pl. 116b; Petrie 1888: Pl. XIII, no. 338; de Morgan *et al*. 1894: 17, no. 78).

of the titles and the vertical line of text in front of the king (part 2, below) are oriented to be read left-to-right, aligning with the direction of the king's image. As for the image of the king, he wears the Red Crown of Lower Egypt and holds a staff. In the drawing by Lepsius, the king also holds a mace or sceptre of some kind. The king stands on a large *zmꜣ-tꜣwj* 'uniting the two lands' motif. At the right, behind the titles of the king, is a tall *wꜣs*-sign, framing the scene.

(2) In front of the king is a line of vertical text. The lower half of this line is damaged after the ⬭ sign (N28), for the verb *ḫꜥj* 'appear'. Only the Griffith/Petrie drawing records any signs in the damaged section. While this reading was followed by Sethe, the proposed glyphs present some problems for translation (see notes), and only the reading of the line up to *ḫꜥ(.w)* is secure.

(3) At the left of the inscription is a second standing figure, facing right (towards the king). The figure is large – surprisingly larger than the king, although smaller than the total height of the king and *zmꜣ-tꜣwj* motif. He holds his arm across his body in a gesture of defer-ence. In front of this figure is another line of vertical text, also damaged. While seemingly continuing the sentence of the opposite vertical line of text (with *sṯ* introducing a subordi-nate clause), this line of text is oriented to be read right-to-left, aligning with the direction of the left standing figure. None of the hand copies attempt to read much into the break. Sethe's restoration[21] is based on the text of Inscription 3, which will be dealt with below.

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[21] *Urk.* I: 111, 10–11.

Due to the disagreements between the Lepsius, de Morgan, and Griffith/Petrie drawings, it is necessary then to put forth a rough reconstruction of what the entire rock carving (both iconography and text) might have looked like.

Reconstruction of Inscription 1 (Fig. 3)

(1) *nṯr nfr nb tꜣwj Ḥr(w) ʿnḫ-ḫʿ.w nj-swt bjtj Mr.n-Rʿ mrjj Ḫnm nb Qbḥw*[(a)] *ʿnḫ(.w) mj Rʿ*

(2) *ḥmj-jwt(?)*[(b)] *(nj-)swt ḏs≠f*[(c)] *ḫ ʿ(.w)* [...[(d)]]

(3) *sṯ ḥqꜣw* [*nw M...*][(e)]

(1) The Good God, the Lord of the Two Lands, Horus 'Living of Appearances',[22] the King of Upper and Lower Egypt Merenra, beloved of Khnum, Lord of *Qbḥw*, alive like Ra.

(2) The 'coming-and-leaving'(?) of the King (of Upper Egypt) himself, having appeared [...]

(3) while the rulers [of M...].

Notes on Inscription 1

As commented on by Sethe,[23] this inscription likely dates to the first year of Merenra's reign, as indicated by the *zmꜣ-tꜣwj* motif. For the use of the *zmꜣ-tꜣwj* motif to indicate the first year of a king's reign, see the Palermo Stone (r.II.3, r.V.8, v.I.2, v.IV.2). It is likely that the *zmꜣ-tꜣwj* year of Merenra is also recorded on the lowest register of the recto (register F) of the South Saqqara Stone.[24]

[a)] *Qbḥw.* Literally the 'Cool Waters Place'; this was a toponym for the cataract region.[25]

[b)] *ḥm(t)-jwt(?).* The exact reading of ⌒⌒ is unclear, due to the logographic writing. The two pairs of legs, set facing each other, suggest motion in two directions – coming to the area and then leaving again. Günther Dreyer takes this as a compound *ʿq prt* 'entering and going out'.[26] However, the verbs *ʿq* and *pr(j)* are not frequently paired until the New Kingdom, and further, in the Old Kingdom, neither verb is written with the backwards legs ⌒ sign (D55). One verb that is written with the backwards legs ⌒ as a classifier in the Old Kingdom is *ḥmj* 'to leave, to go away'.[27] The reading proposed here, a compound of *ḥmj* and *jw* 'to come', is tentative, but may be the best reading for this period.[28]

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[22] While some might translate this name as 'Living of Crowns' the word *ḫʿw* does not have a secure meaning of 'crowns' until Nineteenth Dynasty, when it first appears with crowns as classifiers (*Wb* III: 241); therefore, 'appearances' is the translation used here.

[23] *Urk*. I: 111, 12–14: 'Das Datum, das man vermißt, ist vielleicht in dem Zeichen 𓊃 gegeben, das die Inschrift aus dem „Jahre der Vereinigung der beiden Länder" d.i. aus dem 1sten Jahre des Königs datieren könnte'.

[24] Baud, Dobrev 1995: 48–49.

[25] Zibelius 1978: 240–241.

[26] Kaiser *et al.* 1976: 79.

[27] *ÄgWört* I: 830–831.

[28] For a contemporaneous use of *ḥmj* and *jw* together (though not as a compound), see *PT* 340, § 554b-c.

[c] (*nj-*)*swt ḏs≠f*. The king's title is, of course, placed before the verb in honorific transposition. Here *ḏs≠f* 'himself' is also written before the verb, following a different convention than what appears later in Inscription 2 and Inscription 3.

[d] As mentioned above, Griffith and Petrie attempted to read some of the glyphs in the broken line in front of the king.[29] Here, they read 𓏞𓂝𓎟�%𓅡𓏴𓊖𓈐𓎡 *ḥr s³ ḫ³st m³t nty m ḫ³st*, which was translated by Strudwick as 'at the far end of the foreign lands to see that which is in the foreign lands'.[30] There are, however, several reasons that this is unlikely to be what was written in the break.

First, there is the issue of spacing. Although this is circumstantial evidence since the inscription itself could not be collated, both drawings of the composition, by de Morgan and Lepsius, have the preserved text occupying about half of the total line. On the other hand, the drawing by Griffith and Petrie, which only records the text and not the imagery of the inscription, has the preserved part of the text being only about one-third of the total line. In other words, based on the drawings of the total composition we have, without there having been a significant change in the size of the signs, it is unlikely that Griffith and Petrie's restoration could have fitted into the broken area.

The reconstructed text also poses problems. The first phrase, *ḥr s³ ḫ³st* 'upon the back of the hill (foreign) country' is the least problematic – after all, this phrase also occurs in Inscription 3 (see below). However, then we have �%𓅡𓏴 *m³t*, seemingly a form of the verb *m³* 'see', although which form is questionable. While Strudwick translates it 'to see',[31] seemingly as an infinitive, the infinitive *m³³* does not have a *-t*, as the form here has. A further complication is the classifier 𓏴 sign (Y2), which is not used for the verb *m³* 'see' in the Old Kingdom – although this sign is used in the writing of the near homophone *m³t* 'new'.[32]

The final problem comes in the relative adjective *nty*. The transcription of Griffith and Petrie uses the 𓏭 sign (Z4); however, the relative adjective is not written using this sign in the Old Kingdom.[33] In fact, the 𓏭 sign in this period was used to mark the dual, not as a phonogram ⟨y⟩. The use of this sign as a phonogram is not attested until the Middle Kingdom.[34] It is, therefore, highly unlikely that the word *nty* with this spelling was used in this inscription.

Given these reasons, it seems imprudent to use Griffith and Petrie's reconstruction of this line in the translation or interpretation of this inscription.

[e] *ḥq³w* [*nw M...*]. Based on where this inscription is geographically, at Philae, and the similar phrasing of Inscription 3, it is probably safe to assume that the ⟨m⟩ here begins the toponym *Mḏ³*.

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[29] Petrie 1888: Pl. XIII, no. 338.
[30] Strudwick 2005: 134.
[31] Strudwick 2005: 134.
[32] *ÄgWört* I: 504.
[33] See Edel 1955: 546, § 1055; *ÄgWört* I: 65.
[34] Gardiner 1957: 536–537.

Inscription 2: Elephantine

The clearest inscription of the three, Inscription 2 (**Fig. 4**), was found at Elephantine in a niche of the Old Kingdom Temple of Satet.[35] The inscription was discovered in the 1970s during the excavations in the temple area conducted by the German/Swiss Project and was published soon after.[36] The location of the text, close to one belonging to Pepy II,[37] is significant: the Temple of Satet was one of the most important monuments and, presumably during the Old Kingdom, the outstanding cultic building of the island. Most likely, the audience for this inscription was both divine and the limited number of priests and high officials with access to the temple sanctuary.

The inscription consists of three lines of text, read right-to-left. Line 1 gives a date, line 2 describes what happened, and line 3 gives the name of King Merenra:

(1) *rnpt zp 5*[(a)] *ꜣbd 2 šmw sw 24*
(2) *ḥmj-jwt*(?) (*nj-*)*swt ḏs≠f jr≠f sqr*[(b)] *ḥqꜣw*[(c)] *ḫꜣst*
(3) *nj-swt bjtj Mr.n-Rꜥ ꜥnḫ*(.w) *ḏt*

(1) Year of the 5th occasion (of the count), month 2 of *Shemu*, day 24,
(2) 'Coming-and-leaving'(?) of the King (of Upper Egypt) himself, so that he might make a strike (against) the rulers of the foreign/hill country.
(3) The King of Upper and Lower Egypt Merenra, alive forever.

Notes on Inscription 2

[a)] *rnpt zp 5*. Under a strict biennial cattle count system, this would be the eleventh year of the reign of Merenra. Note, however, that there is little evidence for a regular, biennial cattle count in the reign of Merenra,[38] and so this could really be any year from year 5 to year 11 of his reign.

[b)] *jr≠f sqr*. At first glance, this might appear to be an example *jrj* 'do, make' acting as an auxiliary verb, which would then make *sqr* an infinitive. However, while this construction is especially common in Late Egyptian, it is rare in Middle Egyptian[39] and essentially unheard of in Old Egyptian. This would make *sqr* here a noun, 'strike', or even 'wound, injury'.[40] For a somewhat-near-contemporary (First Intermediate period) use of the construction *jrj* + *sqr*, see the Letter to the Dead on the Berlin Bowl.[41]

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[35] Dreyer 1986; Bussmann 2013 with previous bibliography.
[36] Dreyer in Kaiser *et al*. 1976.
[37] Strudwick 2005: 134, no. 50/A for Merenra's inscription and 50/B for Pepy II's inscription.
[38] Spalinger 1994: 306–307. For the issue of the frequency of the cattle count in the Old Kingdom, see also: Ciavatti 2022; Nolan 2008; 2015.
[39] Gardiner 1957: 395, § 485.
[40] *ÄgWört* I: 1247.
[41] Berlin Bowl (Berlin 22573), l.1: *jr wnn jrr.t*(*j*) *nn sqrw m* {*dj*} *rḫ≠t* 'If these injuries are done with your knowledge…' (Gardiner, Sethe 1928: 7, Pl. V–Va).

4. Inscription 2 (Drawing: B. Hainline; based on: Seidlmayer 2005: Pl. 6b).

^{c)} *sqr ḥqꜣw*. Syntactically, this seems to have to be a direct genitive, literally 'a strike of the leaders'. The preposition 'against' has been added (in parentheses) to translate this phrase more smoothly into English. As a less likely option, one could read this as *sq(r) r ḥqꜣw*. While it is the case that the final -*r* of *sqr* is rarely written explicitly in the Old Kingdom, we could find no cases where the object of *sqr* is indicated with a prepositional phrase using *r* 'to, at, against'.

Inscription 3: el-Hesa

Inscription 3 is closely connected with Inscription 1 from a geographic and epigraphic perspective. The text was first documented by Archibald H. Sayce, who left the best description of its original location and a complete drawing.[42] Reading his brief report, it seems that he saw the inscription in person and checked nearby areas for further rock carvings without success. Sethe[43] and James H. Breasted[44] report the existence of a drawing of Inscription 3 made by Borchardt in 1896 during his time working at the Philae temple. It seems that Sayce and Borchardt were the only other scholars who saw and copied this

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[42] Sayce 1893: 147.
[43] *Urk*. I: 110, no. 18.
[44] Breasted 1906: 145–146. Breasted numbered Inscription 3 as no. 317 and Inscription 1 as no. 318. Unexpectedly, he stated that Inscription 3 is located north of the other rock text, a mistake whose source cannot be identified. However, reading the descriptions and the translations, the two inscriptions can be correctly replaced in their geographical spot.

text.[45] According to Sayce's description, the inscription was located on the East Bank of the Nile, in front of the southern end of el-Hesa Island and *c*. 1 mile south of the nearby minaret, where he found a Coptic inscription re-used in a foundation wall.[46] By analysing the ancient river course,[47] the morphology of el-Hesa Island,[48] and correlating the presence of two ruined villages and one still-standing minaret with Sayce's notes,[49] it is possible to roughly identify where Inscription 3 was incised. This area was quite isolated from other inscriptions, especially during the Old Kingdom, when only a few cemeteries were present nearby.[50] We speculate that Inscription 3 was located close to the riverbank on a boulder or shelf of granite that was below the water level after the construction of the Aswan Low Dam between 1898–1902. The text's visibility and dimensions cannot be reconstructed, but it probably represented a landmark if both Sayce and Borchardt noticed it. Furthermore, although many scholars have discussed this text,[51] none have located it since Borchardt, including our informal efforts in October 2022.[52]

Thus, this inscription is only preserved in a drawing made by Sayce, which, unfortunately, does not reliably record many of the hieroglyphs. Sethe produced a textual edition, in part relying on the collation of the inscription done by Borchardt. Structurally, this inscription shares many features with Inscription 1, although the direction of the text and image is flipped. The inscription can be divided into four parts:

(1) The left part of the inscription consists of an image of the king surrounded by his titles and epithets. The king faces the right and seemingly does not have a crown (!) but does hold a staff and wears a bull's tail. Behind the standing king is a tall *wꜣs* sign. Above

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[45] The available documentation has been published by von Pilgrim 2021: one handcopy of the inscription can be found on p. 199, reproduced from Borchardt's diary, while a second version is on p. 206, Pl. 64b. The latter accompanied a letter from Borchartd to Erman. No photo of the inscription is attested in the archive. We would like to thank Cornelius von Pilgrim for the information he provided. Regarding the efforts of other scholars to locate Inscription 3, Petrie published rock inscriptions that are said to be found around Philae Island and to the south of Shellal, but none of them correspond to Inscription 3 (Petrie 1888). On the other hand, de Morgan did not analyse the Shellal area but was certainly in contact with Sayce, who gave him notes and descriptions of some unpublished materials included at the end of the publication (de Morgan *et al.* 1894). It remains unclear if Arthur Weigall saw the inscription since his description is quite ambiguous (Weigall 1907: 34). Only Delia clearly stated that he could not relocate it (Delia 1993: 81, n. 80).

[46] The complete texts were published by Lefebvre 1907: 113. A reference to this inscription can be found in al-Hawwari 1934: 151–152, pointing towards the identification of the minaret with the southernmost one. This minaret collapsed at some point during the second half of the twentieth century and is not visible anymore.

[47] The analysis and reconstruction of riverbanks were conducted in Nicolini 2023 in QGIS using maps published by the Survey of Egypt during the 1910s and topographical maps published by Reisner 1910, showing the location of archaeological sites in the area.

[48] As described in Reisner 1910 and Weigall 1907.

[49] See Bloom 1984.

[50] A large cemetery, labelled Cemetery 7 in Reisner 1910, had been in use in Shellal since the Predynastic period, but data belonging to the Old Kingdom are scarce and unclear.

[51] Weigall 1907: 34; PM V: 248; Delia 1993: 81, n. 80; Strudwick 2005: 133–134, no. 50; Liszka 2012: 153.

[52] No archaeological or epigraphic evidence was identified by boat or from limited observances ashore. Though unlikely, there remains a possibility that the inscription was destroyed, or removed, or that the findspot was not properly identified.

the king is his *nj-swt-bjtj* title and name, and behind him is the same 'beloved of Khnum, Lord of *Qbḥw*' epithet from Inscription 1 (although here written differently). Both title and epithet are oriented to be read right-to-left, in alignment with the king.

(2) Below the king is a date, to be read left to right.

(3) A vertical line of text in front of the king, oriented to be read right-to-left.

(4) Opposite the above-mentioned vertical line is a block of text. It is oriented to be read left-to-right and consists of a single clause written in eight very short horizontal 'lines'. Unlike Inscription 1, there is no associated standing figure here.

Reconstruction of Inscription 3 (**Fig. 5**)

(1) *nj-swt bjtj Mr.n-Rˁ mrjj Ḫnm nb [Qbḥ]*

(2) *rnpt zp 5 ꜣbd 2 šmw sw 28*[(a)]

(3) *ḥmj-jwt*(?) *(nj-)swt ds≠f ˁḥˁ(.w) ḥr sꜣ ḫꜣst*[(b)]

(4) *sṯ ḥqꜣw nw Mḏꜣ Jrṯt Wꜣwꜣt ḥr sn tꜣ djt jꜣ ˁꜣ wrt*

(1) The King of Upper and Lower Egypt Merenra, beloved of Khnum, lord of *Qbḥw.*

(2) Year of the 5th occasion (of the count), month 2 of *Shemu*, day 28.

(3) 'Coming-and-leaving'(?) of the King (of Upper Egypt) himself, standing upon the back of the foreign/hill country,

(4) while the rulers of Medja, Irtjet, and Wawat were kissing the ground and giving very great praise.

Notes on Inscription 3

[a)] *ꜣbd 2 šmw sw 28.* This was originally read by Sayce as *ꜣbd 2 ꜣḫt sw 24*, but this was changed by Sethe, based on a collation done by Borchardt, to the season and day used here.

[b)] *ḥr sꜣ ḫꜣst.* Literally 'upon the back of the hill (i.e. foreign) country'. It is unclear why Strudwick translates *ḥr sꜣ* as 'at the far end of…',[53] or what exactly he was trying to convey with this interpretation.

For a similar and contemporary metaphor using a body part in an expression of geographical location, we can compare the phrase *m pḥw qꜣww n ṯzt* 'on the back of the heights of the ridge' from the tomb biography of Weni.[54]

Another text that might shed light on the nuance of this phrase is the also contemporary *PT* 580 § 1544d, which reads: *wnw≠k ḥr sꜣ≠f m ḥrj-sꜣ* 'The one whose back you were upon is an 'upon-the-back'-bull'. Faulkner interprets the *ḥrj-sꜣ*-bull as 'a subjected animal on whose back the king stands'.[55] This interpretation might suggest an extended meaning to the phrase *ˁḥˁ(.w) ḥr sꜣ ḫꜣst*, with the king 'standing upon the back of the foreign land' in a pose of subjugation.

[53] Strudwick 2005: 133.

[54] *Urk.* I: 104, 16.

[55] Faulkner 1969: 235, no. 1.

5. Inscription 3 (Drawing: B. Hainline; based on: Sayce 1893: 147; von Pilgrim 2021: 199, 206, Pl. 64b).

BOUNDARIES AND BORDERING IN THE MERENRA INSCRIPTIONS

These three inscriptions in the First Cataract region from Merenra's reign have myriad implications for our understanding of Pharaonic political and ideological boundaries, especially during the Old Kingdom, where textual references to 𓏏𓈙𓅱 *tꜣšw* or 𓂦𓂋𓅱 *ḏrw*, the Egyptian words translated as 'boundaries', are conspicuously rare and occur in more abstract contexts compared to the Middle Kingdom and subsequent periods.[56] Based on their uses in later sources, *tꜣšw* have traditionally been interpreted as actively founded spheres of influence or frontier zones, while *ḏrw* corresponded to unalterable natural or ideological boundaries.[57] Our intent here is not to apply these terms anachronistically but to place the border-making policies detailed in these texts in dialogue with later, better-attested practices: in particular, we will explore two implications these inscriptions have for Pharaonic boundary-making policies. First, the inscriptions emphasise the importance of the ruler's presence in borderlands, both physically and in the form of visual representations. Second, these inscriptions and the activities they document (seemingly involving the meeting of

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[56] Galán 1995: 156–157. For example, in the context of noting boundary markers in the *Pyramid Texts* rather than explicit political boundaries: Allen 2005: 137, 153, 163.

[57] Galán 1995: 131.

foreign leaders) reflect a nuanced, if still nebulous, approach towards territoriality that in many respects continues boundary-making practices begun during the Predynastic or Early Dynastic periods.

The Visible King

The three inscriptions document at least two instances of the king visiting the Sixth Dynasty's southern frontier: an initial visit in the first year of his reign when the inscription on the wadi road between Aswan and Philae (Inscription 1) was dedicated, and a further episode near the end of the second month of *Shemu* in the year of the fifth counting as documented by the inscriptions within Elephantine's Satet temple (Inscription 2) and across from el-Hesa Island (Inscription 3). During his first regnal year, Merenra's presence alone was enough to warrant commemoration. Whether this was part of a ritual circuiting of the outer reaches of his realm[58] or anticipating this king's active foreign policy[59] cannot be determined with certainty, but clearly, the king's presence in the First Cataract region was both deliberate and noteworthy.[60] A few more details are given relating to the later visit, where the Elephantine inscription describes the visit of the king to 'make a strike (against?) the rulers of the foreign/hill country' in the year of the fifth counting, second month of *Shemu*, day 24. Dated only four days later, the inscription across from el-Hesa records the king receiving 'great praise' from the rulers of Medja, Irtjet, and Wawat as they 'kissed the ground before him'.

It is interesting to note the differing verbiage between the three inscriptions. Inscription 2 was the only one to be carved inside the confines of a 'sacred' space, within the limits of a rock niche at the island's Satet temple at Elephantine. Located near a later cartouche of Pepy II, this inscription portrays the king's actions in a more bellicose fashion, as he seemingly readies a 'strike' against foreign peoples. By contrast, Inscriptions 1 and 3, carved in the *khor* north of Philae and across from el-Hesa, respectively, make no mention of attacks on foreign rulers, instead describing these rulers as making obeisance and lavishing praise upon Merenra. In the rock-carved depictions of the king, he is not smiting enemies but simply striding forward with staff in hand.[61] No visual representations accompanying the Satet temple inscription could be gleaned by excavators, but it is plausible that a cult statue of Merenra was dedicated here.[62] The implications of the tonal differences between Inscription 2 at Elephantine and the events described only four days later on Inscription 3 across

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[58] On the importance of ritual circuits and enclosure, see Ritner 2008: 57–67; see also Lightbody 2020.

[59] Harkhuf led expeditions to the south during the reign of Merenra, while Weni interacted with the peoples of Wawat, Irtjet, Yam, and Medja while he was the governor of Upper Egypt during this king's reign. For Harkhuf, see: Strudwick 2005: 330–331; *Urk*. I: 124–127; for Weni, see: Strudwick 2005: 356–357; *Urk* I: 105–109.

[60] Researchers' appraisals of Merenra's presence in Elephantine have varied. Bussman 2021: 112 suggests he was merely passing through Elephantine on a military campaign, while Jiménez-Serrano 2023: 27–28 emphasises this was a diplomatic meeting, following Seidlmayer 2005: 291.

[61] See above reconstructions of Inscription 1 and Inscription 3.

[62] Dreyer in Kaiser *et al*. 1976: 79. We thank an anonymous peer reviewer for the suggestion that a cult statue might have been the visual component accompanying this inscription.

from el-Hesa will be treated in greater detail below, but a military campaign against all three of these regions in such a short timeframe is completely implausible. Rather, the inscriptions likely document a highly ritualised meeting where (at least from an Egyptian perspective) the supremacy of the king was acknowledged. Indeed, the figure opposite the king in Inscription 1 is almost certainly one of the foreign chiefs, given his placement next to toponyms indicating regions of Lower Nubia or the nearby deserts. Remarkably, the individual notably lacks any feathers, clothing, or regalia that explicitly mark him as foreign.

All three inscriptions emphasise the presence of the king and highlight the power of display for Egyptian rulers at the margins of the Pharaonic state. At both the location on the route from Aswan to Philae (Inscription 1) and across the river from el-Hesa (Inscription 3), a representation of the king was carved into the living rock, thus marking his presence in the region for posterity both textually and visually. As early as the Naqada IIIB period (*c*. 3150 BCE) royal figures were deployed in the rock art of the First Cataract region at sites like Nag el-Hamdulab;[63] the representations of Merenra, though less elaborate, similarly spectacularised royal power. In the case of Nag el-Hamdulab, these scenes marked caravan roads into the Western Desert and a symbolic place for desert nomadic groups,[64] while Merenra's inscriptions were situated near the southern entrance to the First Cataract rapids and the portage road circumventing these falls. In the line drawings documented by late nineteenth and early twentieth century scholars, Merenra appears stately and authoritative, but not threatening; these do not appear to have been scenes designed to instil fear in either enemies or Pharaonic subjects, in sharp contrast with the slightly earlier smiting scenes depicting Fourth-Sixth Dynasty kings at Wadi Maghara in the Sinai.[65] Significantly, earlier royal rock art is known north and south of the cataract (at Nag el-Hamdulab and Gebel Sheikh Suleiman in the Second Cataract region, respectively),[66] while Merenra's two inscriptions describing events in year 5 potentially mark the southernmost (across from el-Hesa) and northernmost (Elephantine) margins of the First Cataract. The emphasis on boundary-making south of the cataract rapids reflects a shift in perspective and meaning related to the southern political border that coincides with an apparent increase in activity south of the First Cataract during the Sixth Dynasty.

These three royal inscriptions are seemingly tailored to different audiences. In the confines of the Satet temple, Merenra's actions are portrayed in a more aggressive, belligerent fashion, but the king is not depicted visually. By contrast, the inscriptions in the wider landscape show the king but do not describe attacking foes – on the contrary, foreign leaders are seemingly used to legitimise Merenra's kingship.[67] Undoubtedly, such

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[63] Hendrickx, Darnell, Gatto 2012.

[64] Bourgeois, Crépy, Gatto 2024.

[65] Bestock 2018: 179–197.

[66] For Nag el-Hamdulab, see Hendrickx, Darnell, Gatto 2012; for Gebel Sheikh Suleiman, see Somaglino, Tallet 2015.

[67] This provides a marked contrast with, for example, the First Dynasty rock art at Gebel Sheikh Suleiman detailed in Somaglino, Tallet 2015: Fig. 4, or the inscriptions recording the capture of 17,000 Nubians at Khor el Aqiba (Raue 2019: 294). For the publication of the inscriptions, see López 1967.

diplomatic encounters were freighted with symbolic meaning and subsequently recorded in an overtly propagandistic register to emphasise Pharaonic authority. Descriptions from the autobiographies of Harkhuf and Weni[68] suggest Pharaonic officials had a nuanced if perhaps incomplete understanding of the various groups and changing political landscapes in Lower Nubia – indeed, one that scholars to this day have some difficulty reconstructing.[69] One wonders if the multiple instances when the leaders of these regions paid their respects to the king were perhaps a kind of antecedent to the later *jnw* ceremony[70] or if the leaders of these groups were named as a kind of trope to emphasise the breadth of Pharaonic power across the region. Certainly, Wawat in later imperial periods was an important administrative region encompassing much of the Lower Nubian Nile Valley,[71] while the term Medja seems to have been (or became) an Egyptian bureaucratic categorisation that flattened numerous nomadic pastoralists operating within and beyond the confines of the river valley into a single ethnonym.[72] There is no reason to suspect that interactions with non-Egyptian groups south of the First Cataract were diminishing during this period, and the selection of these specific groups by Merenra should probably be related to how the king wished to express Pharaonic hegemony in Lower Nubia during a period when the emergence of the early C-Group in the Nubian Nile Valley and the growing power of the Kerman polity presented new challenges to Pharaonic economic and diplomatic interests in the region.[73] These choices likely reflect Pharaonic perceptions of a complex political environment in Lower Nubia, and can be contrasted with stereotypical depictions of Libyans during the later Old Kingdom in scenes at royal mortuary complexes.[74] Indeed, the Merenra inscriptions likely represent a range of interests beyond simply defining a political or ethnic frontier: they reflect efforts by the king to claim the authority to interpret the diplomatic interactions between the crown and Nubian groups to the south during this period.

Political Border-making in the Old Kingdom

Merenra's three First Cataract inscriptions provide crucial information related to Egypt's southern boundary and build upon long-standing efforts to assert Pharaonic control over the Nile's First Cataract. The mention of the king standing upon the 'back of the foreign land' suggests that a political and ideological division between Egypt and other lands beyond the Nile Valley and south of the First Cataract was firmly in place by the Sixth Dynasty.

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[68] For Harkhuf, see: Strudwick 2005: 330–331; *Urk*. I: 124–127; for Weni, see: Strudwick 2005: 356–357; *Urk*. I: 105–109.

[69] Cf. Dixon 1958; O'Connor 1986; Babacar 1995–1996; Williams 2014.

[70] Bleiberg 1984; Smith 2003: 70–71. It is tempting to draw a connection here with the wood supplied by the leaders of Iam, Irtjet, Wawat, and Medja for Weni's barges and transport ships charged with bringing granite to Merenra's pyramid complex.

[71] See Morkot 2013: 925.

[72] Liszka 2023.

[73] Raue 2019.

[74] A standard formulation of a subjugated Libyan royal family (the so-called Libyan Family scene) with identical names persists in Egyptian royal reliefs across centuries: Ritner 2009: 44.

Merenra's rock inscriptions in many respects continue royal border-making projects in the First Cataract region that began as early as the Naqada IIIB period, when Predynastic kings were depicted on the *gebel* cliffs at Nag el-Hamdulab just upriver from Elephantine island.[75] Recent research on settlement patterns and landscape usage suggests that a political and economic boundary was established at Elephantine towards the very beginning of the Dynastic period.[76] By the end of the First Dynasty, Pharaonic rulers had established a walled fortress at Elephantine,[77] and whether through coercive measures or incentives, the local population had become concentrated in provincial centres like Elephantine or Kom Ombo while evidence for smaller villages disappears.[78] Furthermore, elite material culture traditions sharply diverged as access to prestige goods became increasingly restricted north of the First Cataract in regions administered by the Pharaonic kingdom.[79] Backed by the force of the Egyptian state, the Early Dynastic period was the period in which monumental architecture was first deployed to control movement across the cataract. In that sense, the placement of the fortress at Elephantine rather than at el-Hesa Island was instructive for both economic and political reasons – it was not control of the entire cataract that mattered, but rather the precise location from which one could sail northward to the Mediterranean Sea relatively unobstructed.

If something resembling a political boundary was founded near Elephantine during the Early Dynastic period, events during the Old Kingdom contributed to the consolidation of this division. Indeed, the presence of fortifications and substantial military campaigns during the Fourth Dynasty[80] contributed to the hardening of this boundary into what can be termed an ideological border demarcating the limits of *kmt*, the 'black land' of the Nile Valley and Delta that formed the core of the Pharaonic state.[81] Elephantine emerged as an important nome capital with key links to the central bureaucracy as demonstrated by sealing evidence from the later Old Kingdom and tombs from Elephantine and Qubbet el-Hawa.[82] Efforts by the Pharaonic elite to restrict access to certain prestige goods and emphasise quarrying or other procurement activities in the First Cataract region contributed to changing lifeways for those groups firmly controlled by the Pharaonic polity – in explicit contrast to those

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[75] Hendrickx, Darnell, Gatto 2012.

[76] Kootz 2013: 40–45; Kootz's analysis dovetails nicely with archaeological results from the Borderscape Project (Gatto, M.C. in preparation: BORDERSCAPE – Egyptian State Formation and the Changing Socio-Spatial Landscape of the Nile First Cataract Region (3800–2300 BCE), *Travaux de l'Institut des Cultures Méditerranéennes et Orientales de l'Académie Polonaise des Sciences*, Warsaw-Wiesbaden).

[77] Ziermann 1993.

[78] On settlement nucleation at the start of the Early Dynastic period, see Moeller 2016: 83–84, 109. See also the model proposed in Hoffman, Hamroush, Allen 1986: 182, Fig. 3. For the First Cataract, see Gatto in preparation (see footnote 76, above).

[79] Wengrow 2006: 265–267.

[80] The inscriptions at Khor el-Aqiba discussed in López 1967 detail the capture of a large numbers of Nubians by a Pharaonic army. This is potentially the same episode detailed on the Palermo Stone from the fifth count of Sneferu, though Raue 2018: 117–119 rightly problematises this dating.

[81] Kootz 2013: 34–36.

[82] For a catalogue of provincial nobles and their titles from Elephantine, see Martinet 2019: 706–761; on the sealing evidence from Elephantine in the Old Kingdom, see Pätznick 2005.

nomads or pastoralists that merely interacted with it regularly throughout the Early Dynastic and Old Kingdom.[83] During the Fourth–Sixth Dynasties, trading expeditions and military razzias were occasionally sponsored by the Pharaonic state as part of broader efforts to secure prestige goods like animal hides, gold, or spices in tandem with furthering Egyptian political objectives in Lower Nubia.[84] At Elephantine, infrastructure was developed to support these expeditions and others travelling along caravan routes to the west or mining efforts in the Eastern Desert.[85] Compared to much of Upper Egypt, Elephantine received significant royal patronage during the Early Dynastic and Old Kingdom – and many of these activities can be correlated with border-making. The Early Dynastic fortress,[86] the step pyramid of Huni on the western island,[87] and Pepy I's renovations at the Satet temple reflect the degrees of royal investment in the most prominent urban centre of the First Cataract region.[88] As with modern political and ideological boundaries, one can view these efforts as attempts by the core of the Pharaonic state to instantiate itself at the margins of the lands under its control to firmly distinguish these from surrounding territory through spectacular architecture and ceremonial visits.[89] Indeed, such a view comports well with royal ideology that situated the king as a defender of order (*mꜣꜥt*) in the face of the chaos beyond his suzerainty.[90]

Finally, Merenra's royal inscriptions in the First Cataract region must also be viewed in tandem with other royally sponsored activities documented in the tomb autobiographies of his officials. Harkhuf records participating in three expeditions departing from Elephantine during the reign of Merenra that passed through Irtjet and Wawat and even suggests that a single ruler may have united these lands.[91] In any case, Harkhuf's value as an expedition leader was in part due to his ability to navigate the complex local politics of Yam, Irtjet, Wawat, and Zatju. As overseer of Upper Egypt, the official Weni was also dispatched to the First Cataract region to obtain granite for Merenra's pyramid complex. In this capacity, Weni supervised the dredging of five canals and the construction of numerous boats built from acacia wood purportedly given by the rulers of Yam, Irtjet, Wawat, and Medja – a key synchronism with the foreign leaders mentioned in Inscription 1 and Inscription 3.[92] Here we have an explicit link between an official sent by Merenra and the Nubian rulers who praised him during the king's visits to the region, as Weni and these four rulers collaborate to procure and transport materials for Merenra's pyramid.

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[83] Wengrow 2006: 154–175. For new evidence of pastoral nomadic people in the First Cataract, see Gatto in preparation (see footnote 76, above).

[84] See for example the goods brought back by Harkhuf: Strudwick 2005: 331; *Urk.* I: 126–127.

[85] On caravan and trading routes more generally, see Osman Abdollah 2022.

[86] Ziermann 1993.

[87] Seidlmayer 1996: 119–124.

[88] Kopp 2013; Bussmann 2013.

[89] Longo 2018: 66–71 discusses this in relation to modern political borders as the centre being 'displaced' to the periphery at the location of the border. See also Sahlins 1989: 27.

[90] Smith 1994; in the context of the margins of the Pharaonic state, see: Vogel 2011: 331; Kootz 2013: 45–47.

[91] Strudwick 2005: 330–331; *Urk.* I: 124, 9–127, 17.

[92] Strudwick 2005: 356–357; *Urk.* I: 107, 1–109, 11. See also Baines 2009: 31–34 on the connection between the Merenra inscriptions and Weni's narrative.

CONCLUSION

These three royal inscriptions dating to the reign of Merenra detail significant information about political boundary-making during the late Old Kingdom in the First Cataract region. In addition to new editions of these three texts, our research highlights the importance of the king's visual presence in marginal regions of the Egyptian state – both in terms of rock art and physical visits to these lands. By the reign of Merenra, the boundary near Aswan in many respects anticipated the kinds of border-making practices of the Middle Kingdom and New Kingdom. The inscriptions formed part of broader efforts by the king to stage sovereignty in liminal spaces, and their focus was on actions performed by or for the ruler rather than specific territorial divisions.[93] Additionally, as in later periods, there appears to be an emphasis on managing people as much as territory.[94] Nonetheless, there are several key differences between the boundary established at Elephantine and those *tꜣšw* founded by Middle Kingdom and New Kingdom sovereigns. First, the expeditions and military campaigns of the late Old Kingdom seem to have served as trading voyages or raids rather than efforts to seize or colonize territory.[95] While outposts were established at strategic locations like Buhen, there is no evidence of any intent to manage or tax extensive regions south of the cataract.[96] Nor was there the kind of expansionist ethos that animated Pharaonic colonial efforts and military campaigns during the Middle Kingdom or New Kingdom. Staging the king's power remained a critical aspect of border definition, but there was less of an emphasis on the ruler's role as a war leader.[97] It is largely in the autobiographies of officials like Weni,[98] Heqaib-Pepinakht,[99] Harkhuf,[100] Kaemheset,[101] or Inti[102] that we get descriptions or depictions of warfare, and leadership of military campaigns seems to have been delegated to high-ranking subordinates of the king. In the case of the boundary near Aswan, the extension of the system of nomes and royal estates like the *ḥwwt* upriver to Elephantine integrated these lands more completely within the administrative, economic, and political sphere of Pharaonic Egypt than those later *tꜣšw* claimed at the Nile's Second or Third Cataracts.[103]

Indeed, these enduring economic, administrative, and political ties lent the boundary at the First Cataract a kind of permanence that distinguishes it from later *tꜣšw*. References

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[93] Siegel 2022: 21–25.

[94] Siegel 2022: 25; see also Morris 2005: 804–809 on the emphasis the Pharaonic state placed on managing the movement of peoples and Scott 2009: 64–97 on the importance of managing the movement of people to ancient states more generally.

[95] Spalinger 2013, generally and especially 460–471.

[96] On Buhen in the Old Kingdom, see O'Connor 2014.

[97] Compare the role of the king as a war leader in the New Kingdom as detailed in Spalinger 2020.

[98] Strudwick 2005: 352–357; *Urk.* I: 98–110.

[99] For the text, see *Urk.* I: 131–135, in particular 133, 8–135, 2 (lines 4–15 of the main inscription). For the famous sanctuary that was likely dedicated to the memory of this individual, see Franke 1994.

[100] Strudwick 2005: 328–333; *Urk.* I: 120–131.

[101] For Kaemheset's siege scene, see McFarlane 2003: Pl. 48.

[102] For Inti's siege scene, see Kanawati, McFarlane 1993: Pl. 27.

[103] On the role of *ḥwwt*, see Moreno Garcia 1999.

to Elephantine as a boundary occur in wisdom texts in addition to royal inscriptions during subsequent periods, and by the time of their writing, it had acquired a kind of ideological character as the southernmost point of the Pharaonic polity.[104] To use anachronistic, later Pharaonic terminology, active border policy turned Elephantine from what originally would likely have been described as a contested *tꜣš* during the Predynastic and early First Dynasty into what is essentially a *ḏr* – an enduring, constant boundary that was so engrained as part of the Pharaonic polity that it could no longer be changed or modified by royal action.[105] Unlike with Senwosret III's boundary stelae at Semna Gorge, there is no concern that garrisons at Elephantine would turn and flee or that subsequent pharaohs would abandon the region – the first nome of Upper Egypt was an inextricable part of the Egyptian polity.[106] The inscriptions of Merenra intimate that this view was likely already present in the latter Old Kingdom, to the extent that the king can describe himself as standing upon the back of a foreign/hill country in Inscription 3, in obvious contrast to Inscription 2 at the Satet temple of Elephantine.

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[104] See for example in 'The Teaching of Amenemhat'; Kootz 2013: 39, translating from papyrus Millingen, II, 10–11; the papyrus is published in Helck 1969: 68–69; see also Geoga 2021 on the history of the papyrus.

[105] Galán 1995: 130–131. See also Siegel 2022: 7–8.

[106] Berlin 1157. Eyre 1990; Obsomer 2017: 10–11 provides a host of additional references for translations of this stela.

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