

SPARC Project Report

Project Name: Turning the Landscape into a Stela: The Mechanics of Egyptian Royal Rock Inscriptions

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I. Summary of work undertaken in collaboration with SPARC

With the support of a SPARC Fieldwork Award, I visited three research sites in Sudan during February-March and October 2017 with CAST specialist Katie Simon. Each of the sites—Gebel Barkal, Tombos, and Nauri—is the location of one or more ancient Egyptian royal stelae that are carved directly into living-rock outcrops. This research was conducted in the service of my PhD dissertation, which was the first study of this type of monument as a cohesive group. Previously these monuments had been studied mainly for their texts, with little regard for their material and contextual aspects, including the landscapes in which they are embedded. As these were royal works, in the case of each monument the choice of living rock as a medium was deliberate and meaningful.

Our work in Sudan, which consisted mainly of imaging the landscapes of these stelae using drone and conventional photography, was aimed at better understanding the placement of these monuments on the surfaces of their respective geological features and within their respective local landscapes. For some of the monuments, the drone data was used to create 3D models to aid in illustrating the spatial situations of the stelae.

In February-March 2017 and October 2017, we worked at the site of Gebel Barkal, a large sandstone plateau near the Fourth Cataract of the Nile. This feature was believed to be the seat of the god Amun-Re and was inscribed with at least one royal living-rock stela (possibly of the king Tuthmosis I, now mostly eroded) and an inscription of the king Taharqa, which adorned the exterior of the plateau's pinnacle (a feature imagined in ancient times to take the symbolic shape of the god Osiris, a uraeus, or the White Crown of Upper Egypt). We were able to photograph Taharqa's pinnacle monument—which is nearly 100 meters above the ground—in great detail, as well as to produce a 3D model of it. We were also able to obtain point clouds from the drone for the entire plateau.

In October 2017, we worked at the site of Nauri, near the Third Cataract of the Nile. This is the location of the Abydos Decree Stela of the king Seti I, which lays out instructions and penalties related to the procurement of materials for the temple of Osiris at Abydos to the north (located in Egypt itself). Another monument studied almost entirely for its text, the reason for the stela's location at Nauri—which has no known relationship to Abydos and is also quite far away from the places where goods were obtained for the temple—had never been investigated before. At Nauri we used drones to image two large sandstone buttes—300 and 400 meters high—which dominate the landscape. The stela is inscribed into the eastern butte, which is the closest one to Egypt and would therefore have been encountered second during a downstream journey back from the activities regulated in the stela's text. The stela itself is located on the

western side of the butte, facing the direction of river traffic back to Egypt. Our investigation demonstrated that the stela would have been readily visible to passers-by on boats carrying goods obtained in Nubia. More importantly, its location at Nauri appears to have been chosen because of the striking landforms and unusual river course at this site. Just west of Nauri, the Nile—which ordinarily flows south-north and whose direction was central to Egyptian daily life—suddenly turns right at a near-ninety-degree angle. It flows west-east past Nauri, and I argue in a forthcoming publication on sensory experiences with the stela that this distinct change in the river’s course was a spatial, bodily cue to look up at the buttes in the distance. I contend that the stela was inscribed on the face of the “second” butte because the first one also served as a cue for those passing by to anticipate a monument worth noticing.

Also in October 2017, we worked at the site of Tombos, south of Nauri. At Tombos we successfully imaged a series of royal monuments commissioned by the king Tuthmosis I, which are usually studied for their contents alone. Drone photography, videography, and visits to the site in various types of lighting demonstrated that the monuments likely served as pictographic signals of the king’s authority in the area, with each monument successively spelling out his various names in a series of visual cues over the course of roughly 500 meters of Nile coastline. Previous to our visit, the placement of these monuments in relation to each other had not been described in detail and the relationships of their contents to their contexts had not yet been made.

II. Presentations and Publications Completed

American Schools of Oriental Research Annual Meeting, San Diego, California / November 2019

Paper: “Ancient Egyptian Geologies Through the Lens of Living-Rock Stelae”

Thum, J. 2019. *Words in the Landscape: The Mechanics of Egyptian Royal Living-Rock Stelae*. Ph.D. Dissertation. Joukowsky Institute, Brown University.

Inaugural Theodore N. Romanoff Lecture, Institute for the Study of the Ancient World, NYU / February 2019

Lecture: “‘The Medium is the Message’: The Mechanics of Egyptian Royal Living-Rock Stelae,” given in my capacity as the recipient of the Theodore N. Romanoff Prize from ARCE

Thum, J. 2018. “In Between and Beyond: Working in the borderlands of ARCE and the Egyptian empire.” *Journal of Eastern Mediterranean Archaeology & Heritage Studies*, 6 (3), 230-246. <http://doi.org/10.5325/jeasmedarcherstu.6.3.0230>

American Research Center in Egypt Annual Meeting, Tucson, Arizona / April 2018

Paper: “More (!) Adventures in Living-Rock Stelae”

AUC Center for Learning and Teaching Annual Symposium, Cairo / February 2018

Lightening Talk: “The Interactive Dissertation: Teaching and Learning with Living-Rock Monuments”

American Schools of Oriental Research Annual Meeting, Boston, Massachusetts / November 2017

Paper: “In Between and Beyond: Working in the Borderlands of ARCE and the Egyptian Empire”

Department of Egyptology and Assyriology Weekly Seminar Series, Brown University / April 2017

Lecture: “Adventures in Living-Rock Stelae”

ARCE-NY Lecture Series, New York City / September 2017

Lecture: “Words in the Landscape: Exploring Egyptian Royal Living-Rock Stelae”

American Research Center in Egypt Annual Meeting, Kansas City, Missouri / April 2017

Paper: “Adventures in Living-Rock Stelae”

Second-Place Winner of the Best Student Paper Contest

American Research Center in Egypt Cairo Center Lecture Series, Cairo / April 2017

Lecture: “Words in the Landscape: Exploring Egyptian Royal Living-Rock Stelae”

Carvings in and out of Time, Brown University / February 2017

Paper: “Three Short Stories about Egyptian Rock Reliefs”

III. Presentations and Publications In Press / Planned

Thum, J. Forthcoming 2021. “Sensing Saliency in the Landscapes of Egyptian Royal Living-Rock Stelae.” In K. Neumann and A. Thomason (eds.), *Handbook of the Senses in the Ancient Near East*. Routledge/Taylor & Francis.

