

Archaeologists discover earliest monumental Egyptian hieroglyphs

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The newly discovered panel of signs features images of a bull's head on a short pole followed by two back-to-back saddlebill storks with a bald ibis bird above and between them. This arrangement of symbols is common in later Egyptian representations of the solar cycle and with the concept of luminosity.

A joint Yale and Royal Museums of Art and History (Brussels) expedition to explore the the ancient Egyptian city of Elkab has uncovered some previously unknown rock inscriptions, which include

the earliest monumental hieroglyphs dating back around 5,200 years.

These new inscriptions were not previously recorded by any expedition and are of great significance in the history of the ancient Egyptian writing systems, according to Egyptologist John Coleman Darnell, professor in Yale's Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations at Yale, who co-directs the Elkab Desert Survey Project.

"This newly discovered rock art site of El-Khawy preserves some of the earliest—and largest—signs from the formative stages of the hieroglyphic script and provides evidence for how the ancient Egyptians invented their unique writing system," says Darnell.

The researchers also discovered rock art depicting a herd of elephants that was carved between 4,000-3,500 B.C.E. One of the elephants has a little elephant inside of it, which, according to Darnell, "is an incredibly rare way of representing a pregnant female animal."

The archaeologists also identified a panel of four signs, created circa 3,250 B.C.E. and written right to left—the dominant writing direction in later Egyptian texts—portraying animal images of a bull's head on a short pole followed by two back-to-back saddlebill storks with a bald ibis bird above and between them. The arrangement of symbols is common in later Egyptian representations of the solar cycle and with the concept of luminosity. "These images may express the concept of royal authority over the ordered cosmos," says Darnell.



Yale Egyptologist John Darnell examines the hieroglyphs from atop a tall scaffold. Credit: Yale University

Darnell says that the team was "absolutely flabbergasted" by the find because of the immense size of not just the individual tableaux, but the individual elements as well.

"This discovery isn't new in the sense that this is the first time that anyone has seen these hieroglyphs; this is the first time that anyone has seen them on such a massive scale. These individual hieroglyphs each measure just over a half meter in height, and the entire tableau is about 70 centimeters (27.5 inches) in height. Previously found signs were only one or two centimeters in size," says Darnell.

He continues: "In the modern world this would be akin to seeing smaller text on your computer screen and then suddenly seeing very large ones made the same way only on a billboard."

The area where the researchers located the inscriptions is in the northern

desert hinterland of Elkab. This area, along with Hierakonpolis, located across the river and known as its twin city, were very important centers in ancient Egypt, says Darnell, and demonstrate that the communicative system in these areas is not limited to the more commonly found small tokens or labels.

Darnell explains that these discoveries reveal that there was not a slow development of writing primarily for bureaucratic use as previously believed, but that hieroglyphic writing was more geographically widespread and topically diverse at the time of or shortly after its development.



The site of the inscriptions is near two important cities in ancient Egypt. Credit: Yale University

"This also suggests that there is a much more expansive use of the early writing system than is indicated from other surviving archaeological material," says Darnell.

The team of archaeologists located these rock inscriptions by mapping out routes based on road networks in Egypt. Most rock inscriptions in Egypt that Darnell has seen, he says, are not randomly placed: Most inscriptions are located along major roads, either roads that parallel the Nile or roads that head out into the desert. They are usually at a juncture or crossroads. "Any place where someone might pause in their journey," says Darnell.

Using a new recording technique pioneered at Yale, Darnell and Alberto Urcia, a digital archaeologist and associate research scientist in the Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations, created a series of 3-D images of the inscriptions from photographs taken in the field.

"This new technology makes it possible to record sites at a level of accuracy and detail that was absolutely impossible before," says Darnell, adding, "It also means that we can record the site as a place, or a location, and not just as a series of inscriptions."

"This was not what I was expecting to find when I set out on this period of work on the expedition," says Darnell. "It was completely shocking to me."

Provided by Yale University

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