FURTHER EVIDENCE FOR THE COREGENCY OF AMENHOTEP III AND IV?
Three Views on a Graffito Found at Dahshur

In volume 140 (1994) of Göttinger Miszellen, James P. Allen, associate curator of ancient Egyptian art at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, published his transcription of a graffito discovered at Dahshur during the Museum’s 1992 season excavating at the site. Amarna Letters is pleased to be able to republish this brief article by Dr. Allen and to append to it the reactions to his interpretation by two other leading authorities who have in the past expressed scholarly opinions about whether Amenhotep III and Amenhotep IV/Akhenaten did or did not rule jointly for a period of a few to several years: Dr. William J. Murnane of the University of Memphis and Dr. Jacobus van Dijk of Rijksuniversiteit Groningen in the Netherlands.

During its 1992 season at the Pyramid of Senwosret III at Dahshur, the expedition of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, under the direction of Dieter Arnold, uncovered part of a papyrus-bundle column from the complex south of the pyramid enclosure. Like many of the columns from this complex, the block bears the remains of several graffiti penned by New Kingdom visitors to the building. Among these is the fragmentary inscription reproduced at left.

The inscription was first transcribed by Felix Arnold, as part of a study of the graffito to be included in the Museum’s final publication of its work at Dahshur. I was able to examine the text firsthand in 1993 and confirm both the extant traces and their transcription. The inscription is apparently to be transcribed as follows:

1 ḫsb [t] 32 b[t] [x... sw y] ḫ[r] h[m n (n)sw-ḥbj nb-m3t-r]
2 ḫ[t] ḫsb [t] z ḫ[yr h[m n (n)sw-bḥjt nfr-hprw-r [w-n-r]]
3 [jw t pw jr n 3b3] r-[...]

Year 32, month [x of ..., day y], under the reign of the King of Upper and Lower Egypt [Nebmaatre], [corresponding to Year 2 under the reign of the King of Upper and Lower Egypt] Neferkeperure [Waenre].
[There came the scribe] Ra-[...]

This reconstruction implies a joint rule of the two Amenhoteps by Year 32 of Amenhotep III — a minimal coregency of seven years. The recent work of W.R. Johnson has suggested a coregency beginning in Year 28, prior to Amenhotep III’s first Sed Festival, on iconographic and religious grounds.
As with all other evidence for this most problematic of Egyptian coregencies, however, the text is far from unequivocal. Its fragmentary state, and the partial preservation of both the year date in line 1 and the name in line 2 require a firm note of caution to any historical conclusions drawn from it. Nonetheless, it offers yet one more — tantalizing — piece to the Amarna coregency puzzle.

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1. Cf. J. de Morgan, Fouilles à Dahchour, mars-juin 1894 (Vienna, 1895), figs. 193 and 195, both graffiti from the same area as the fragment under discussion here.
2. See A. Gardner, Journal of Egyptian Archaeology 24 (1938), 124. Discoveries of the MMA expedition show that graffiti at the site begin in the mid-Eighteenth Dynasty.

Every so often there surfaces a fresh document so startling yet so ambiguous that one cannot help wondering at the fates which conspire to keep us guessing. The new graffiti from Dahshur recently published by James Allen opens with a dateline which, if the signs are correctly interpreted, fell in regnal Year 32 of a king whose name is broken away, but who is plausibly to be identified as Amenhotep III because the name “Nefertkheperure” — the throne name of Amenhotep IV/Akhenaten — appears in the remnant of the second line. If these readings are accepted, it must follow that the reigns of Amenhotep III and his son overlapped for at least seven years, from some point in the father’s thirty-second year to the end of his thirty-eighth, which is the highest year-date attested for him. Only the minimum duration possible for this overlapping of the two reigns is supplied by the new graffiti: Amenhotep III could have reigned somewhat longer, after all, even though we have no evidence he did; and his son might have received his royal titulary before Year 32. In any case, the recently collated text of the “Earlier Proclamation” on the El Amarna boundary stelae tell us that the younger ruler had already changed his personal name to “Akhenaten” and founded his new cult-center of Akhetaten by his fifth regnal year1 — shortly after completing four full years on the throne — which means that these events had happened well before the period of joint rule with his father (seven-plus years) had come to an end.

What we seem to have here, in other words, is nothing less than the most persuasive evidence to date for a substantial coregency of Amenhotep III with Akhenaten. Moreover, the overlap to which it attests is far longer than the short coregency of less than two
years which was proposed (by this writer, among others) as an alternative to no coregency at all. Instead, the graffito from Dahshur appears to give renewed credibility to the theory of a long coregency, which has fallen out of most scholars’ favor. The maximum (eleven years) is based on another vexed dateline in hieratic, written on the side of a cuneiform tablet, EA 272 — vexed because here, too, the signs are damaged: either “[year of] the reckoning 2” or “[year of the reckoning] 10 + 2” (i.e., regnal Year 2 or Year 12, depending on how the broken first sign is interpreted). A recent study by Volkmar Fritz7 opts for the lower date. My own first-hand examination of the docket in East Berlin, back in 1984, was less conclusive: the signs indicated by the traces are shaped somewhat eccentrically, no matter which readings are adopted, so neither option can be excluded and a coregency of up to eleven years is still possible.

With at least seven years already accounted for by the new Dahshur graffito, it now seems beyond dispute that Amenhotep III and Akhenaten shared the throne for a substantial part of the latter’s reign. If so, then I alone with everyone else who has argued against a coregency have been wrong, although I will continue to insist that we were wrong for the right reasons — for the fact is that there were (and still are) facts, such as the decoration of the Tomb of Kheruef at Thebes, which cannot be fitted into any long coregency without special pleading; and, besides, up to now, no theory was supported by the sort of evidence needed to make it more than an attractive possibility.

But is it really any more now? Before accepting all the implications I have outlined above, I would like answers to the following questions. First, is the reading of the year-date as “32” inescapable? As drawn, the top of the alleged “30” has the irregularity one might expect in a plausible example of this sign — but is this deliberate, or is this effect due to the scribe’s maladroitness (a blob of ink) or to wear? Instead of “30” could the sign be a “10” — i.e. “regnal Year 12” of Akhenaten? Second, if all of Allen’s readings are valid, does it follow that this is a double date, as he reconstructs it: “regnal Year 32, [month X, day Y] under the Person of the [Dual] King [Nebmaatre, corresponding to regnal year Z under the Person of the Dual King] Neferkheperure”? A comparable text which is plausibly assigned to the coregency of Seti I with Rameses II mentions “the Son of Re Seti-Merenptah together with his royal son, Usermaatre...”5 Could not the much-restored graffito from Dahshur be similar? If so, can we be certain in a single-dated monument that the junior partner had already begun numbering his regnal years independently? A comparandum, again, might be the coregency of Rameses II with Seti I: although a case for two overlapping dating systems can be made,6 it rests for the most part on analogy and most scholars have remained unconvinced — some even speaking of an
indeterminate period during which Rameses, as
"prince regent," assumed significant elements of the
royal style before he actually became king.7 If such a
model can be considered seriously for Rameses II, why
not also for Amenhotep IV/Akhenaten? To do so
would not violate the evidence, such as it is, nor would
it involve the serious interpretative problems which
would arise if events dated to the first years of the
heretic king are forced into alignment with the last
years of Amenhotep III.

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1. W.J. Murnane and C.C. Van Siclen, The Boundary Stela of Akhenat-
2. Now available in a modern translation by William L. Moran in The
Amarna Letters (Baltimore, 1992), 86-90.
1887-1987 (Winona Lake).
5. See A.H. Gardiner, T.E. Peet and J. Černý, The Inscriptions of Sinai I,
pl. lviii (no. 250); vol. II, 176-177.
7. For example, K.A. Kitchen, Pharaoh Triumphant (Warminster,
1982), 27-41.

A

t first sight the highly interesting graffito ins-
scribed on a column fragment found at
Dahshur and published by J.P. Allen in GM
140 seems to provide the much needed con-
firmation of the hotly debated coregency of Amenhotep
III and IV. By bringing this graffito to our attention,
Allen has done us a great service, even though, in
the end, he had to admit that the evidence provided by
this new text is, again, inconclusive.

It is a great shame that Allen was apparently
unable to supplement his short article with a photo-
graph or photographs of the graffito. This means that,
for the time being, we have no means of judging
whether he is right in confirming "both the extant
traces and their transcription." I would like to stress
that, unlike Allen, I have not myself been able to see
the graffito in question and the reservations concerning
its reading that I somewhat reluctantly express here
are, therefore, not based on a first-hand examination of
the text. Experience at Sakkarra has taught me, how-
ever, that ink-written texts on rough and damaged lime-
stone surfaces can be extremely tricky, and a note of
caution is thus in order.

The relevance of the graffito for the coregency
problem rests on two assumptions, viz., that Amen-
hotep III is implied by the Year 32 date in line 1 and
that line 2 provides the prenomen of Amenhotep
IV/Akhenaten. It would seem to me that, in both in-
stances, the reading of the relevant signs is open to de-
bate. In line 2, I am reluctant to accept Allen's tran-
scription of the group \(\text{t}^{\text{t}}\), as \(\text{t}^{\text{t}} \text{hprw}\), as it occurs
in hieratic cartouches of the relevant period written
as \(\text{t}^{\text{t}} \text{hprw}\) or \(\text{hprw}\); a further possibility is \(\text{t}^{\text{t}} \text{hprw}\) (e.g.
in Mn-hprw-Rt). All of these writings are, in my opin-
ion, ruled out by the traces shown in Allen's repro-
duction. The only way to "rescue" the reading of Akhen-
aten's prenomen would be to read \(\text{t}^{\text{t}} \text{hprw}\),
which agrees fairly well with the traces reproduced in
the facsimile, but is, as far as I know, unparalleled, at
least in hieratic. But then, how certain is the \(\text{hprw}\) at the beginning?

I also remain unconvinced of the necessity to
read the year-date sign in line 1 as "30." I don't find the
"ears" all that characteristic, taking into considera-
tion that nothing more than the very top of the sign
survives; again, experience in the field shows that
traces like this can be very misleading. Allen refers to
two graffiti of Year 34 of Amenhotep III published by
De Morgan (drawn by Jéquier); but these are both writ-
ten in a neat, graceful Eighteenth Dynasty hand which
has very little resemblance to the handwriting dis-
played in this new text, at least in the published fac-
simile. In fact, what is perhaps the most disconcerting
about the reproduction published by Allen is the al-
most total absence of the distinction between thick and
thin lines so characteristic of a skilled hieratic hand. Of
course this kind of writing does occur from time to
time, especially on rough surfaces; but I cannot help
wondering whether this particular scribe's pen really
was that blunt. But if it was, can one exclude the read-
ing of the sign in question as "10," resulting in the date
"Year 12?"

Finally, the reconstruction of the text depends
to a large extent on the original length of the four frag-
mentary lines in the facsimile. Without a photograph
or a drawing showing the exact position of the graffito
in relation to the papyrus-column fragment on which it
has been transcribed, it is impossible to judge the pos-
sibilities and impossibilities of any restoration of the
original text.

In short, it would seem wise to reserve judg-
ment on the reading of this tantalizing text until at
least good photographs have been published.

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Opposite, Early relief-depiction in the Tomb of Ramose at Thebes (TT55)
of Akhenaten and Neferiti in the new art-style of their reign, with the
Aten in its rayed-disk form. Ramose was vizier of Upper Egypt during both
the last years of Amenhotep III and the first years of Amenhotep IV/Akhen-
aten (also depicted in Ramose's tomb in the style of his father's reign), lead-
ing some to argue this as circumstantial evidence for a coregency.
Even as this volume of Amarna Letters went to press, Metropolitan Museum of Art Associate Curator James P. Allen returned from a brief fall, 1994, season at the Museum’s Egyptian Department concession at Dahshur, where he had the opportunity to re-examine and photograph the problematic graffito discussed in the “Round Table” on pp. 26-31. Above is his photograph of the graffito and at right his reconsideration of its reading.

Addendum

New graffito discovered at Dahshur by the Metropolitan Museum Egyptian Expedition during the fall 1994 season are dated in at least one instance to Thutmose III as dhwtj-ms nfr-lprw, and in another to what is probably the early 30s of Thutmose III. In this light, I now think that the graffito I published in Göttinger Miszellen is more likely to be dated to Year 32 of Thutmose III nfr-lprw than to Year 32 of Amenhotep III = Year X of nfr-lprw-r Amenhotep IV.

I must admit, however, that the trace at the beginning of the name — which I originally read as the left side of the r sign — does seem to be more compatible with that reading (i.e., r nfr lprw = nfr-lprw-r) than with the s or a determinative of [dhwtj-m]s nfr-lprw. Van Dijk’s suggestion about the traces at the end of the name is certainly correct; I had read them as plural strokes and he as the righthand side of the second of three hpr beetles (= lprw); the original supports his reading.

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