

Newly discovered officials of Sahura's retinue

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ABSTRACT

In 1994, the Egyptian mission discovered four limestone blocks with first class relief decoration in the area to the north side of the upper part of the causeway of the pyramid complex of King Sahura at Abusir. These blocks were published and briefly described by Zahi Hawass and Miroslav Verner in 1996. Afterwards, they were fully published in 2009 by Tarek El Awady. One of the blocks of the 1994 season designated as SC/north/1994/02 was discovered and published; however, its lower part was completely missing and was not found.

In 2019, the work under the direction of the author focused on the north-east part of the already discovered blocks from 1994. A number of fine white limestone fragments were unearthed. Among those recently discovered blocks, there was the lower edge of block SC/north/1994/02.

The present paper deals with new information about the discovered group of officials of Sahura's royal court, as well as opens a new discussion and analysis of those non-royal individuals who served the king during his lifetime.

KEYWORDS

Old Kingdom – Fifth Dynasty – Sahura – Abusir – causeway – officials

الكشف عن موظفين جدد من حاشية ساحورع

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ملخص

كشفت البعثة المصرية في عام 1994 عن أربع كتل من الحجر الجيري تحمل مناظر بارزة ذات جودة عالية، وذلك في المنطقة الواقعة بالجانب الشمالي من الجزء العلوي للطريق الصاعد للمجموعة الهرمية للملك ساحورع في أبوصير. في عام 1996 تم نشر تلك الكتل ووصفها بإيجاز عن طريق زاهي حواس وميروسلاف فيرنر. بعد ذلك النشر، وفي عام 2009 تم نشرها مرة أخرى ولكن تلك المرة بشكل مفصل من قبل طارق العوضى. إحدى الكتل المنشورة من موسم 1994 والتي تحمل رقم SC/north/1994/02 كانت تفقد الجزء السفلي تمامًا ولم يتم العثور عليه وقتها.

في عام 2019 تركزت أعمال حفائر المؤلف بالطريق الصاعد للملك ساحورع بالجزء الشمالي الشرقي من الكتل المكتشفة بالفعل عام 1994. حيث تم الكشف عن عدد من بقايا كتل الحجر الجيري الأبيض الناعم المصور عليها مناظر بارزة. من بين تلك الكتل المكتشفة حديثاً، تم العثور على الجزء السفلي للكتلة SC/north/1994/02.

يتناول هذا المقال معلومات جديدة حول مجموعة الموظفين المكتشفة من البلاط الملكي للملك ساحورع، كما تفتح لنا مجالاً جديداً لمناقشة ودراسة هؤلاء الأفراد من خارج العائلة الملكية الذين خدموا الملك خلال فترة حياته.

الكلمات الدالة

الدولة القديمة – الأسرة الخامسة – ساحورع – أبوصير – الطريق الصاعد – موظفين



Fig. 1 General view of the excavation site of the northern part of the causeway (photo Abusir Project, M. I. Khaled)

In 1994, the Egyptian mission discovered four limestone blocks with first class relief decoration in the area to the north side of the western part of the causeway of the pyramid complex of King Sahura at Abusir. The new blocks were located directly under the excavation debris from Ludwig Borchardt's excavation of the pyramid temple (Borchardt 1910: Abb. 2, 3). These blocks were published and briefly described by Zahi Hawass and Miroslav Verner (1996).

In 2002, the Egyptian mission continued the excavation and unearthed more than 18 huge blocks from both sides of the causeway of Sahura. This is considered the largest number of polychrome reliefs discovered to date in any pyramid complex in the Old Kingdom (Khaled 2017; El Awady 2010; El Awady 2009: 122–128; Khaled 2008: 20–22). The discovery established an argument that Borchardt never fully excavated the causeway, perhaps not realising that the blocks that had been standing on the causeway could have fallen down.

In 2009, Tarek El Awady (2009: 124) published ten of the newly discovered blocks from the causeway together with the blocks discovered in 1994. One of the blocks of the 1994 season, labelled Sc.2 in the report by Hawass and Verner (1996: 182) and labelled as SC/north/1994/02 by El Awady (2009: 124, pl. 10) in his updated numbering system, comprises scenes representing the continuation of block SC/north/1994/03 (El Awady 2009: 124, pl. 9). The block depicts themes such as food and drink, female dancers preceding the procession dragging the pyramidion, followed by men holding the first part of the rope that is attached to the sledge which carries the pyramidion, as well as scenes showing funerary

furniture and a depiction of men singing and clapping. Additionally, there are scenes representing male offering bearers as well as butchers slaughtering oxen. The fifth and last bottom register, which is the subject of this paper, depicts a row of walking officials who are bent over; however, the right half of the register is broken off and had not been found.

In May 2012, the mission continued the excavation at the northern uppermost part of the causeway and managed to discover two more blocks located under the excavation debris left by Borchardt. The first block was found broken into two pieces (SC/north/2012/11), measuring 1.20 m in width and 2 m in height. The other block was completely buried about 3 m deep under Borchardt's excavation debris. The mission could not uncover the second block due to the logistical difficulty of clearing the deep excavation debris, which began to slide down on the workers. Therefore, the mission had to pause for the safety of the workers, bury the second block back in the sand, and seek financial support in order to clear the immense mound of excavation debris above the block and to excavate the area around it properly.

In March 2017, the mission continued the excavation along the causeway of Sahura. The work focused on removing the pyramid temple excavation debris left by Borchardt at the western end of the causeway in order to reach the level of the above-mentioned new block. Within three weeks, the mission revealed a small settlement with four houses, dated to the First Millennium BC, for people who bore the title "priests of Sekhmet-Sahura".

THE SPRING SEASON 2019

In the spring season of 2019, the mission resumed the excavation work. The site of the area of the westernmost part of the causeway was divided into a square grid (turned to a rectangle), 15 m wide north-south by 25 m long east-west; the 15 m grid was divided into three squares, with each square measuring 5 × 5 m. The grid begins from the northern borders of the entrance hall (*pr-wr.w*), in which the level of the grid is on the same level as the surface of the causeway (fig. 1). The following squares extend to the east and descend gradually by levels, with the height of each level being 1 m.

On Saturday, 2nd February 2019, the excavation work resumed from the same area as the March 2017 season at the westernmost end of the northern part of the causeway, which was filled with the excavation debris left by Borchardt from the funerary temple. It took more than two weeks to clean the excavation debris or – in other words – to re-excavate the excavation debris, consisting of discarded pottery sherds mostly dated to the New Kingdom and later, as well as small number of Old Kingdom decorated limestone fragments with reliefs had broken from the blocks. The excavation focused on the area in front of the afore-mentioned houses, especially in square no. 5, level 1. The mission discovered the street that led up to the houses from the valley. The foundation of this street was made of reused New Kingdom limestone fragments and discarded vessels. This street descends 10 m further to the east.

THE DISCOVERY OF SC/NORTH/1994/02B

On Sunday, 10th February 2019, in order to allow space for the documentation work of the street east of the settlement, the workers were moved to the area north of the discovered blocks from 1994. These blocks had been reburied in the sand right after their discovery and had not been explored since. Therefore, the idea behind re-excavating this area was to check whether there were still new blocks around them or at least to find the missing fragments of those blocks that had already been discovered. In less than three days of work, the mission was able to find a large limestone fragment, the missing lower part of block SC/north/1994/02.

The fragment measures 0.80 m in height, 1.46 m in width, and 0.40 m in thickness. The mission gave it the number SC/north/1994/02b (see fig. 4b). This fragment was found about 1.5 m northeast of SC/north/1994/02. It was buried half a meter lower than the level of the four 1994 blocks (fig. 2), with its decorated surface facing down in the sand. With some exceptions, the fragment is in a poor state of preservation. Nonetheless, traces of scenes do appear. It contains two registers of reliefs in addition to the 0.20 m baseline of the block. Traces of a butchery scene can be reconstructed on the first register. It was clear that this is the continuation of the butchery scene depicted on the fourth register of block SC/north/1994/02.

The second register contains the depiction of a row of ten walking, bent-forward officials.



Fig. 2 The newly discovered fragment. Photo taken from the northern side of the causeway (photo Abusir Project, M. I. Khaled)

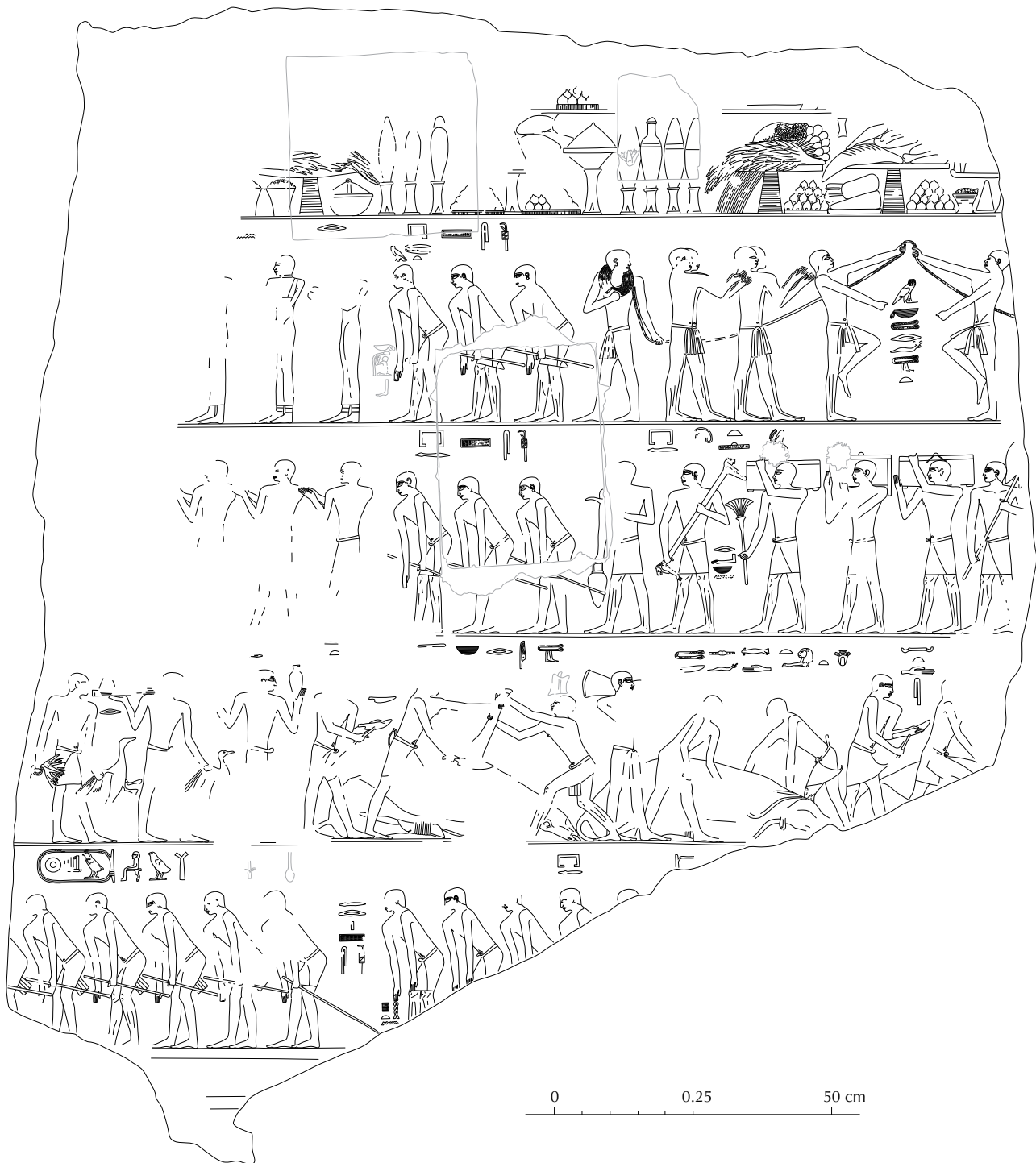


Fig. 3a Block SC/north/1994/02 (drawing J. Malátková)

They are clad in short, tight wigs and short, tight kilts; their arms hang in front of their bodies. Only the feet of the first three officials from the left are depicted together with traces of their names (see below). The depiction of the following three officials is in a bad state of preservation; only the remains of their legs are visible. The depiction of the fifth official is completely destroyed; however, the remains of his head can be traced on the published block SC/north/1994/02 (El Awady 2009: pl. 10). It appears that the bad section of SC/north/

1944/02b (fig.4a, b) is badly deteriorated, mostly in the depression of the area where the head of this fifth official would have been. Thus, the left leg of the sixth official is the only remaining body part on the fragment of the following figure. The subsequent three officials are depicted complete, while with the last official, only his arms and shoulders are still visible.




The whole group of ten officials completes the published group of officials in the fifth register of block SC/north/1994/02.





Fig. 4a Fragment SC/north/1994/02b (Abusir Project, drawing by S. Dirksen)




Fig. 4b Night photo of fragment SC/north/1994/02b (Abusir Project, photo P. Košárek)

The first man's name, as we mentioned above, is  *Nj-Pth-nh* which ends in a tall and narrow sign, but only its tip survived on the edge of the newly discovered fragment.³ The second name is damaged as well, but the reading of  is still clear.⁴ In front of the legs of the third man, the name  *K3(=j)-nh* appears to be complete.⁵ Unfortunately, the fourth man bearing the remains of a palace title above his head can only be discerned by his feet on the new fragment (fig. 4a, b). The fifth figure has disappeared entirely; as mentioned above, its existence is ascertained only through the vertex of a head on SC/north/1994/02. Vice versa, the sixth man can only be seen by his left foot on SC/north/1994/02b. Still, on the upper block, there are traces of another title above the area where his head would have been. El Awady's publication (2009: 204–205, pl. 10) suggests that this title began with a cartouche.

It can be speculated that this is a title which extends over the head of the seventh official; this bowing man suffered severe damage from the moisture and salt. His hands and name are lost, but the outline of his body is clear. The eighth official had a similar fate. In his case, however, the sharp artificial light during nocturnal photography brought forth traces of his name. There is a tall and narrow vertical sign followed by a low broad sign. It reads  *Nfr*.⁶ Above this eighth official, one can spot where his title was written. Due to the poor condition of the stone, reconstructing the title has been unsuccessful so far. Most probably, this inscription would have extended over the latter three figures and connected with the edge of the enigmatic cartouche in El Awady's publication. In this case, the inscription would either give the profession of at least these three men or show the name of their crew. Another possibility would be that instead of the edge of the cartouche, there would be a depiction or repetition of the title  *pr-3*, "... of the Great House". Above the ninth official, however, no traces of hieroglyphs can be found, and the name in front of his legs is lost. Only the outline of his head and upper body remains. The tenth and last man is only preserved by the outline of his upper body (fig. 4a, b).

Thanks to the new fragment that was discovered in 2019, we are able to measure the height of the last register, which is 0.40 m not 0.31 m as was stated by El Awady. It moreover fits accurately in size with the published line drawing in pl. 10. Therefore, the correct height of the block based on the new calculation will be 0.40 m × 4 registers + 0.17 m for the remaining scenes of the first register + 0.20 m for the baseline. Then the total height will be 2.10 m considering the first register to have 0.40 m if it was complete.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the newly discovered officials on the new fragment who are represented bowing together with the rest of the line of officials does not easily reveal their rank; especially, a high rank within the administration. However, the inscription in front of the first official of  *Nj-Pth-nh*, as well as the partly preserved title of the fourth official indicates the significant role that they played as the retinue of the royal palace. Mentioning the names of such officials in the pyramid complex of Sahura shows how important those officials were. Even though they did not belong to the close circle of the officials who were depicted in the presence of the king, they had, however, done a service worthy enough that their names would not be forgotten.


The recent excavation of the mission also unearthed another new block further to the east of block SC/north/1994/02. In the bottom register, it contains a long procession of officials, among them, the doctors of Sahura. This discovery is very important because it sheds light on the royal decorative program and the criteria for arranging the scenes and the depiction of such an important event. Most of the discovered blocks from the causeway of Sahura contain a long procession of officials depicted on the bottom register. Sometimes they are shown witnessing the event in the presence of the king, facing him or behind him. Of course, future discoveries from the causeway will reveal more evidence regarding Sahura's royal court as well as widen our knowledge of the ideology of kingship in the Old Kingdom.


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³ This name can be reconstructed as  *Nj-Pth-nh* (see Scheele-Schweitzer 2014: 418 [1538]). For the reading of *Nj* + theonym + substantive, see Gundacker (2015: 640).

⁴ This name can be reconstructed as  *Nht-z3=s*.

⁵ The only other known attestations of a *K3(=j)-nh* come from the tombs of Nefer and Ka/Hay (see Moussa – Altmüller 1971: 10; Scheele-Schweitzer 2014: 500 [2119]); see also a fragment from Sahura's pyramid temple for an official whose name can be reconstructed as our official's name (see Borchardt 1913: Bl. 51).

⁶ A similar name has been attested three times in the reliefs of Sahura's causeway, see El Awady (2009: 164, 173, 226, pls. 5, 6, 13).

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