Study about King Semerkhet of the 1st Dynasty

Noha Mohamed Hafez
Faculty of Tourism and Hotels, Suez Canal University

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smr-Xt is the Horus name of an early Egyptian king. He was the 7th king of the 1st Dynasty (2930-2920 BC). He was the first Egyptian ruler with a fully developed Nebty name. Manetho called Semerkhet “Semempses” and credited him with a reign continued for 18 years. On the other hand, Turin Canon credited him with a long reign of 72 years. Nowadays, Egyptologists consider both opinions as kind of exaggerations and credited Semerkhet with a reign of 8 ½ years. The last opinion is based on the Cairo Stone Inscription, where the complete reign of Semerkhet has been recorded. Semerkhet is well documented in archeological records. His name was found on vessels made of schist, alabaster, marble and breccia. His name also appeared on ivory tags and jar seals. These various objects that bear Semerkhet’s name and titles came from Abydos and Saqqara. This research aims to study and analyze the reigning period of the king Semerkhet, to collect the representations of the king in order to understand his titles, and to spot the light on the king’s monuments and works. The research framework is an historical, artistic study for tracking the monumental works of king Semerkhet. The research is a combined study between both descriptive and analytical sides.

Introduction

Egypt’s Early Dynastic period (3050-2686 BC), also called the Archaic, was a short era in the long ancient Egyptian history. Before 1895, the information about the history of Ancient Egypt during the period before the 4th dynasty was very few. After few years, the discoveries by Petrie at Abydos, de Morgan at Naqada, and Quibell at Hierakonpolis uncovered monuments and objects of early kings. The Abydos king list and Manetho agree that there were eight kings during the 1st Dynasty. The number of those kings is attested by the new discovered necropolis sealing of Qaa. Manetho called the first two dynasties as “Thinite”. This name derives from a place near Abydos AbDw called Trj “This”. The tombs of all the kings of the 1st Dynasty along with some of the 2nd Dynasty’s kings were found at Abydos. Most of the Thinite kings had a second tomb at Memphis. The first two dynasties formed an
independent entity. The main source for this period is the funerary equipment from Abydos and Saqqara’s mastabas.

King Semerkhet smr-Xt
Smerkhet was the 7th king of the 1st dynasty who ruled around 2925-2916 BC. He was the son of king Anedjib a(n)D-jb and queen BetrestbAtj-irj.s. Semerkhet’s reign was probably the shortest of the 1st Dynasty’s kings. Unfortunately, the events recorded on the Cairo Palermo Stone of the annals are regular religious ceremonies of kingship such as ‘following of Horus’, ‘the ritual appearances of the king’, and the dedication of divine image. Some scholars (Emery, Lauer, and Helck) suggested that Semerkhet was an usurper and not the rightful heir to the throne. They indicate that no high official or priest was associated with Semerkhet was found at Saqqara but this might be explained by the short reign of Semerkhet. The only known official of Semerkhet Hnw-QA had survived his king. He served both Semerkhet and his successor Qaa. His name appeared on ivory tags from Semerkhet and Qaa’s tombs. Indeed, he erased the name of his predecessor on stone vase and his name himself was omitted from Saqqara List but there is no certain evidence of this. However, the stone vessels discovered at the Step Pyramid at Saqqara which bear four royal names (Den, Anedjib, Semerkhet, and Qaa) were against this claim. Recently, the necropolis sealing of Qaa proved Semerkhet’s rightness.

The Titles of king smr-Xt
From the reign of Semerkhet, the dead king was identified with his nswt-bitj name in addition to his nbty name. Later the nbty name was declined and the nswt-bitj formed an independent title.

Smerkhet’s kA name was mr-sxA Mersekha. He was depicted in Abydos list much like a statue of Ptah. It read sm-n-pTH but it was doubtful in view of the original form of the figure. It seemed to be a follower smsw or possibly a priest of Ptah.

- The Horus name: , , , reads as smr-Xt

Among the Horus names of the 1st Dynasty, only Semerkhet’s makes a theological statement that expresses the relationship between Horus and the other deities. Semerkhet’s Horus name inside the serekh means “companion of the corporation” (Wilkinson 1999) or “thoughtful friend” (Grimal 1992). However, the hieroglyphic Xt normally means “the body” or “the divine community”.

- The Nebty name: , , , reads as irj-nbty

It means “the Guardian of the two Mistresses”. These two mistresses refer to Nekhbet, the vulture goddess of Nekheb and Wadjet, the serpent goddess of Pe and Dep. His Nebty-name was mentioned in many documents from his tomb at Abydos.
and some stone vessel inscriptions from the Step Pyramid at Saqqara and was also found on Palermo Stone.  

The Nebty-name was written in all writings as  that depict a walking priest wearing a long skirt, a nemes headdress and holding a staff. This symbol has no phonetic indicator. Because of this, Gardiner when he referred to the king list in his song “Egypt of the Pharaohs”, he wrote “priestly figure”. When some scholars found the priestly figure in documents from the reign of Semerkhet, they read it as irj-nTr or irj that means “the guardian”. The phonetic indicator s + m fit with sm in the New Kingdom king-lists sustaining the equation sm = sm. This was one of the most important offices in the Memphite cult of god Ptah.  

Later Cartouche name  reads smsw or smsm means “the Eldest”. The Royal Canon of Turin mentioned his name as smsw, while the Abydos king list gave the spelling smsm.  

His Graeco name  reads Semempses; this name was given to Semerkhet by Manetho.  

The Monuments of King smr-Xt  

I-1 Ivory Label of king smr-Xt  

The events that were inscribed on the 1st dynasty year labels could be divided into three subjects in order to their frequency: religious ceremonies, royal visits and scenes of the military activity.  

An Ivory Label now exhibited in the British Museum. This label was originally from an oil container. It was found in the doorway of his tomb. It is deeply cut and colored with black and red. Its formula is like that was on the Palermo Stone. The right part of the label is introduced by the rnpt symbol. The word Horus “Hr” reads as “Hrw” and written with three hawks. The figure of Thoth seated on the throne according with the early worship of the baboon. This baboon deity called HD-wr ‘the Great White’ was first appeared unquestionably on this ivory label. The figure that is placed for Semerkhet’s name cannot be related to Ptah. It might be a Sm sw and also give the Greek form Semempses or a priest of Ptah. It reports from the top to the bottom a feast of the Sokar-bark, the regular ‘following of Horus Sms-Hr’. There is also a visit to the temple of the deity wADt, and the travelling in a royal boat. The left part of the label is inscribed with the throne name of Semerkhet irj-nbtj with blessings wish below. On the upper left corner is described the content of the jar, to which the label was once adjusted. The name of the High Official Hnw-QA who was responsible for the jar’s delivery is preserved. The label had a hanging hole in its top left corner (Fig.1).
2 - Ivory Label of smr-Xt
A year label of Semerkhet was recently discovered during the re-excavation of the tomb of king Qaa. It records the planning of a building called hrw-ib-n/rw. It might be Semerkhet’s funerary enclosure at Abydos. The right part of this label is introduced by the rnpt symbol like the previous label. Also on the right part at the top the serekh of king Qaa is inscribed. Below it, there is a figure of the king standing and wearing the White Crown. On the left part, the Horus name of Semerkhet in the serekh is inscribed. Below the serekh there are the wAs and the xrp symbols. The baboon appeared again kneeling on his hands (Fig.2)33.

II-Variou jars of smr-Xt
1- Two fragments of two vases made of white marble. It bears the serekh of Semerkhet. At the left of the serekh is written pr bjA which means "the copper house" or "house of ore". It was discovered originally from Abydos, Umm el Qaab, U tomb (Fig.3a). The last sign on the other vase (Fig.3b) looks like khA more like a fish. It could be noticeable that the s sign always has the short side forward in this name on these two vases and on all of his seals. Only these two names of Semerkhet were found of vases34.

2- No objects of any sort related to king Semerkhet have been found at north Saqqara except a single fragment of pottery inscribed with the name of Semerkhet35. This form of the serekh shows oval wavy line border usually found on the potmarks. This might mean to signify an enclosure around the king’s tomb (Fig.4)36.

3- A serekh of Semerkhet incised into wet clay on a piece of a large vase. The s sign is almost angular and the mr sign seems like a triangle, the Xt sign is completely missing (Fig.5)37.

4- Another example was scratched on the surface of the pot after it was fired. It consists of a falcon on the serekh of Semerkhet. The signs within the serekh are more traditional; the s and mr signs are easy to recognize. The Xt sign is changed to an oval filled with lines slanting to the right. This serekh came from different type of pot. It is a fragment from the body below the shoulder. There is cloth on the two edges of the piece from previous re-use as thieves’ digging tool (Fig.6)38.

5- Many alabaster cylinder jars that were found in the tomb of Semerkhet had some traces of sign nearly erased. The first of three jars found there had traces of door frame and the heart ib symbol (Fig.7a). On the second one traces of a large hawk could be seen (Fig.7b). On the third jar, the whole kA name could be seen (Fig.7c)39.

6- This part of stone vase has a drawing of a group of three birds which are similar to those of king Aha. The birds of Aha’s vases look most like ostriches while those of Semerkhet look like plovers. They are not related to the bA bird of later times and probably were intended for the rekhyt bird (Fig.8)40.
7- A fine piece of crystal cup that was gathered from two scattered fragments. The lower part of it is the Ht sign, as the line to left is too close to the middle to be the side of the square. It should be the corner fence of the Ht sign. So it reads nb Ht anx. There is also a trace of a hieroglyphic sign above the animal that could be a hunting dog (Fig.9).41

8- A part of a large alabaster cylinder jar. It has the Hb-sd sign on it, which means the Sed festival. This sign that is placed on a platform that has some steps at its end (Fig.10).42

9- A fragment of crystal bowl. It has traces of earlier inscription that remain in spite of the re-polishing of it. The later inscription reads Hb-sd (Fig.11).

10- A piece of black pottery. The signs kA, mr, and a door could clearly be seen. The mysterious sign looks like but this from ink-written inscription on slate from Abydos (Fig.12).

11- A coarse piece of an alabaster cylinder jar. It has the name of king Anedjib’s town or palace Hr dwA xb. (Fig.13).

12- Two inscriptions (Fig.14a, b), one of them (Fig.14b) has the sign of double-headed axe after the royal palace.

III-A funerary stela of smr-Xt
A great stela made of black quartzite inscribed with the Horus name of Semerkhet was found in the eastern side of his tomb. It is 65 cm height and now in the Egyptian Museum JE14633. It was one of a pair that stood in front of Semerkhet’s tomb (Fig.15).43

IV- The sealing of king smr-Xt
The richest source of inscribed material is represented in the seal impressions that mark the lumps of clay, which cover the wine and food jars. They were made by engraved cylinders of wood or stone. Those seals contain names and titles and their signs were well formed and detailed. The impressions on the sealing told a lot about the early administration. Because most of the sealing was found in necropolis, they intended to focus on the mortuary cults. There were a numerous number of seal impressions at Umm-el-Qa’ab with the exception of Semerkhet’s tomb. Peter Kalpony was able to identify only 17 sealing from this tomb. Only one seal mentions a domain and the domain name was only known from this sealing.45

1- The first sealing shows the serekh of Semerkhet and a xrp sign.47 The oval contains the domain name as the following; the upper sign is a falcon and the lower sign is a broad flat sign. It is probably the Xt sign. The sign in the middle might be a hand holding something. Though Kalpony reads Semerkhet’s domain as Hr.w-Dsr-X.t(?). Helck and Wilkinson later omit the question mark (Fig.16).48

2- During the excavations of King Qaa’s tomb a complete bag sealing of Semerkhet was discovered in the sand under a layer of mud. It was found to the south of chamber Q-S1. The sealing’s base shows the usual impressions of fibers and
strings left by the bag to which the sealing was applied. On the upper parts are many impressions from the same seal (Fig.17) 49.

3- The inscription of this seal is similar to the one discovered by Petrie. It shows the sequence of Semerkhet’s serekh, the xrp sign and the oval frame containing the domain’s name. The façade of the palace of Petrie’s sealing is more elaborate than this seal. The middle sign inside the oval here is clearer. It resembles this of Gardiner which reads wp. Therefore the complete inscription of the seal read: Hr.w-smr-X.t xrp Hr.w-wp-X.t (Fig.18) 50.

4- The third sealing of Semerkhet is an important one because it fixes the identity of the king. It exists on two small lumps of clay. Each one bears very few prints on it. They were used to join the knot of two cords. The inscriptions of it may be related to some materials used in purifying the mouth. It also has the inscription of an estate called Hwt p-Hr [msn] irj-nbtj (Petrie 1900). It is possible that the estate during the reign of Anedjib and Semerkhet which represents the entirely of the palace, its land and income named after the king (Fig.19) 51.

5- The next two sealings are difficult to read because of their bad condition. They are the same as the previous sealing as they bear the niswt bitj title on black mud. There nothing else related to Semerkhet. They are probably the titles of the king “the Golden Bull”. An estate called Hwt iHw-nbw niswt-bitj Mr-p-biA (Petrie 1900) appeared on this seal along with the serekh containing the king’s Horus name (Fig.20a, b) 52.

6- This sealing is interesting as there is exactly the same sealing in the king Qaa’s tomb except that the king’s name has been cut out. Therefore, there was just a chunk in the king name’s place. This indicates that after the king’s death, his seals could not be used again (Fig.21) 53. The names of estates connected with providing the royal tombs were inscribed of the seal impression of the Early Dynastic period. The estate’s name shown on this seal called Hwt-iptj (Petrie 1900). This estate was probably related to the queen’s household as ipt means ‘the Harem palace’ 54.

V-The royal tomb of smr-Xt
Until the last part of the 4th millennium BC, Egyptian burial places were simple graves cut into the desert and marked by low mounds of sand. Graves of the Badarian and Naqada I cultures were generally oval or circular. During Naqada II, the design of the grave became more rectangular with more funerary equipment. By Naqada III, the rectangular form became standard. 55
Abydos was the burial place for the royal families since early Pre-dynastic period. It also served the kings of the Thinite region from Naqada I period. The site has an impressive natural setting.\textsuperscript{56}

The tomb of Semerkhet (U) was excavated in 1899 by Sir William Matthew Flinder Petrie. While excavating Petrie did not find any stairways as at the tombs of Den and Adjib. He found a ramp 4 meters wide and leading directly to the main chamber. This ramp starts about 10 meters east outside the tomb. The tomb was simpler than the monuments of the middle of the 1\textsuperscript{st} dynasty. Archaeologists have not discovered a mastaba tomb from his reign at north Saqqara, though his predecessors have mostly built tombs there. His tomb has a single room, accessed by a slope ending on a wood and brick blocking. There is a sub-wall in the eastern side may suggest storage niches. The attached graves were erected against the exterior of the burial chamber.\textsuperscript{57}

Semerkhet’s tomb shows a new development; the supplementary graves are built adjoining the burial chamber. This forms a single unified structure that the superstructure might covered not only the burial chamber but also the supplementary graves. The tomb of Semerkhet represents the first certain example retainer sacrifice\textsuperscript{58}.

This tomb measures 29.2 by 20.8 meters. It is considered larger than that of his predecessor. It is surrounded by a wall 5 feet thick. It consisted of a brick-lined subterranean burial chamber entered from the east by a sloping passage.\textsuperscript{59} There are small surrounding chambers which are 3 to 4 feet deep. Few of these chambers still include anything. Seven stela were found along with other stela were also found. However they were dispersed so it is difficult to identify them with the tombs. There were two interesting stela of dwarfs. They show the dwarf type clearly.\textsuperscript{60}

In the corner of the entrance, there was a wooden flooring still preserved. Many beams and broken wood were found in the rubbish. The floor was made from beams 8 inches wide and 10 high which form the frame on which the planks of the floor rest on recessed edges. The entrance is 9 feet and was blocked by large bricks. The tomb was burnt and the floor was carbonized. Traces of fire still could be seen on the walls (Fig.22)\textsuperscript{61}.

**Conclusion**

- Semerkhet was the first Egyptian king with a fully developed Nbt\textsuperscript{y} name. From his reign, the dead king was identified with his nswt-bitj name in addition to his Nb\textsuperscript{ty} name. The component Nb\textsuperscript{ty} first appeared as a regular component of the royal title in the reign of Semerkhet.
- The baboon that called HD-wr ‘the Great White’ first attested in the Ivory Label of Semerkhet. Later this deity was conflated with god DH\textsuperscript{wty}.
- Only 17 seals of king Semerkhet were found by Petrie during the discovery of his tomb. This was a small number of clay seals comparing to other kings.
- The xrp scepter of authority appeared on a seal of Semerkhet between the serekh containing his Horus name and an oval containing his domain name.
Archaeologists have not discovered a mastaba tomb for Semerkhet at north Saqqara, as he was the only king of the First Dynasty that was not represented in the tombs at north Saqqara.

Smerkhet’s tomb shows a new development; the supplementary graves were built adjoining the burial chamber. The tomb of Semerkhet represents the first certain example of retainer sacrifice.

Smerkhet’s reign was probably the shortest of the 1st Dynasty’s kings.

**Table of Semerkhet’s Monuments**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The monument</th>
<th>The Inscription</th>
<th>The Location</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ivory Label</td>
<td>It was a part of oil container. It depicted the feast of 'following of Horus' Sms-Hr, a royal visit and travelling in the royal boat.</td>
<td>Semerkhet’s tomb.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ivory Label</td>
<td>It recorded the planning of a building called hrw-ib-n/rw.</td>
<td>king Qaa’s tomb.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two fragments of two vases of white marble</td>
<td>It bears the serekh of king Semerkhet.</td>
<td>Semerkhet’s tomb.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A fragment of Pottery</td>
<td>It is inscribed with Semerkhet’s name.</td>
<td>North Saqqara.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A vase</td>
<td>It has the serekh of Semerkhet incised in wet clay.</td>
<td>Semerkhet’s tomb.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A fragment from the body below the shoulder of a pot</td>
<td>It has the serekh of Semerkhet.</td>
<td>Semerkhet’s tomb.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Three cylinder jars</td>
<td>They inscribed with a door frame, the ib symbol, a hawk and the whole kA name.</td>
<td>Semerkhet’s tomb.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A piece of stone vase</td>
<td>It is inscribed with a drawing of three birds look like the plovers.</td>
<td>Semerkhet’s tomb.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A piece of crystal cup</td>
<td>It is inscribed with nb Ht anx and a drawing of probably a hunting dog.</td>
<td>Semerkhet’s tomb.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A piece of alabaster cylinder jar</td>
<td>It is inscribed with the Hb-sd sign above a platform.</td>
<td>Semerkhet’s tomb.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A fragment of crystal bowl</td>
<td>It is inscribed with the Hb-sd sign.</td>
<td>Semerkhet’s tomb.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A piece of black pottery</td>
<td>It is inscribed with kA, mr and a door signs.</td>
<td>Semerkhet’s tomb.</td>
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<td>Details</td>
<td>Location</td>
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<td>------------------------------------------------</td>
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</tr>
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<td>Two inscriptions</td>
<td>One of them has the sign of double-headed axe after the royal palace.</td>
<td>Semerkhet’s tomb</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A funerary stela of black quartzite</td>
<td>It is inscribed with the Horus name of Semerkhet.</td>
<td>Semerkhet’s tomb</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A sealing</td>
<td>It is inscribed with the serekh of Semerkhet and a xrp sign.</td>
<td>Semerkhet’s tomb</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A bag sealing</td>
<td>It is inscribed with Semerkhet’s serekh, the xrp sign and the oval frame containing the domain’s name</td>
<td>King Qaa’s tomb</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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Fig. 1. An ivory label of king Semerkhet

Fig. 2. An ivory label of king Semerkhet

Fig. 3. A fragment of a white marble vessel of Semerkhet
W. M. Petrie, *the Royal Tombs of the First Dynasty*, part 1, London (1900), pl. VII 2, 3.
Fig. 4. A fragment of pottery bearing Semerkhet’s name

Fig. 5. A Serekh of Semerkhet

Fig. 6. A Serekh of Semerkhet

Fig. 7. Alabaster cylinder jars
W. M. Petrie, *The Royal Tombs of the First Dynasty*, part 1, London (1900), pl. VI 9, 10, 11.
**Fig. 8.** Alabaster vase

**Fig. 9.** A fragment of a crystal vase

**Fig. 10.** A part of an alabaster jar
Fig. 11. A fragment of crystal bowl

Fig. 12. A piece of black pottery

Fig. 13. A coarse piece of an alabaster cylinder jar

Fig. 14. Two inscriptions of volcanic ash and crystal
Fig.15. Stela of Semerkhet

Fig.16. the Domain of Semerkhet

Fig.17. bag sealing of Semerkhet
Fig. 18. Sealing of Semerkhet

Fig. 19. Jar sealing with the name of Semerkhet
W. M. Petrie, The Royal Tombs of the First Dynasty, part 1, London (1900), pl. XXVIII72

Fig. 20. Jar sealing of Semerkhet
W. M. Petrie, The Royal Tombs of the First Dynasty, part 1, London (1900), pl. XXVIII73, 74.
Fig. 21. Jar sealing of Semerkhet

Fig. 22. The plan of Semerkhet tomb

Bibliography


22. Ibid.
26. Ibid.
27. Ibid.
31. The event of ‘following of horus’ was the most common event during the reign of the Early Dynastic period on the Palermo Stone. It looked like a journey of the king or his officials at regular periods for tax collections; Toby A. H. Wilkinson, *Early Dynastic Egypt*, London (1999), p.189.
37 - Ibid.
38 - Ibid.
40 - Ibid.
41 - Ibid.
42 - Ibid.
44 - Ibid, p.197, 198.
45 - During the 1st dynasty, some institutions that were responsible for supplying tomb goods were mortuary foundations. Their names were written in an oval frame. They were usually translated as “domains”. From king Djer, every king has founded his own domain, which delivered goods to his tomb at Abydos and also to some of the high officials at Saqqara; Eva-Maria Engel, “The Domain of Semerkhet” in *OLA* 138, Paris (2004), p. 705.
47 - Scepter of authority abA scepter, sxm scepter and also named as xrp which means “be at head” or “control”. In the titles † is possibly to be read xrp; A. Gardiner, *Egyptian Grammar*, Oxford (1935), p.509.
49 - Ibid.
50 - Ibid.
52 - Ibid, pl.XXVIII 73, 74.
53 - Ibid, pl.XXVIII 77.

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دراسة عن الملك سمرخت من الأسرة الأولى

نهي محمد حافظ
قسم الإرشاد السياحي، كلية السياحة والفنادق، جماعة قناة السويس

المملحص

سمرخت هو الاسم الحوري لفرعون مصري من عصر الأسرات المبكر. هو الملك السابع من ملوك الأسرة الأولى (2930-2920 ق.م). هو الملك المصري الأول الذي استخدم اللقب النبتي بصورة كاملة. وقد أطلق مانيثون على الملك اسم خت "سممبسيس" ونسب إليه فترة حكم مدتها 18 عام.

على الجانب الآخر، بردية تورين أسندت الية فترة حكم مدتها 72 عام حديثا، تبين بعض الدراسات وجود أثر في هذه الفترة، ولم يتم التحقق من هذه النتائج بشكل دقيق.

وقد وثق سمرخت على السجلات الأثرية، وقد ظهر اسمه بالنقوش على الأواني المصنوعة من السيراميك، الرخام، البرشيا والرخام. وقد ظهر اسمه كذلك على بطاقات عاجية وأناقش.

ويهدف هذا البحث إلى إلقاء الضوء على فترة حكم الملك سمرخت ودراسة أهم أعماله وأثاره.