STELA OF MENEKH RECENTLY UNCOVERED AT THE TEMPLE OF KOM OMBO

By

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ABSTRACT

This research is a detailed study of a private stela; discovered during the proceeds of the local excavations carried out at the temple of Kom Ombo. Parallel to a recent project for lowering the groundwater level within the temple enclosure in 2018. The archaeological works were conducted by the Egyptian Supreme Council of Antiquity team to prevent the capillary rise of water and salt attack on the temple foundations. Many archaeological finds have been uncovered; they are helpful to put in order the dating of the site. The uncovered objects are divided into three groups; according to the location where they were uncovered in the temple. This paper deals with a funerary private stela; uncovered underneath the paving slabs of the Ptolemaic birth house (Mammisi). It is of small size, made of limestone, bearing both figures and inscriptions, which suggests the existence of a private cemetery nearby the temple. The inscriptions style and calligraphy suggest that this stela could date back to the New Kingdom.

KEYWORDS: Birth house, stela, groundwater project, archaeological team, private cemetery, chronology, New Kingdom.

I. INTRODUCTION

This private stela was discovered by the Egyptian team of inspectors of Kom Ombo Antiquities area. It was uncovered under the pavement of the birth house (Mammisi) of the Ptolemaic Temple of Kom Ombo during the proceeds of the local excavations carried out in 2018. Parallel to a recent project for lowering the groundwater level within the temple enclosure, this excavation was conducted to prevent the capillary rise of water and salt attack on the temple foundations.

II. DESCRIPTION

Material: fine limestone [Figure 1]

Height: 40 cm. (through Centre)
Width: 27 cm.
Depth: 6 cm.
Patina: Medium.
Back: Roughly hammered, some vertical chisel marks.

State of Preservation: quite good, somewhat eroded by natural processes, the upper left quarter missing.

[FIGURE 1]: Funeral Stele of Menekh © Photographed by Mostafa Badawi
The study focuses on a fine limestone round-topped stela, whose left upper corner is missing. Due to its shape and content, it appears to be a funeral stela. The Upper right portion has survived and bears incisions of human figures and hieroglyphs. It is divided into three sections: the lunette is occupied by a raised relief showing a pair of wdt – eyes (One is missing now). It is supposed to be one of two symmetrical mirrored wdt - eyes¹, a typical sign of protection for the deceased, usually depicted on the top of such funeral stelae².

The upper register of the rectangular part is occupied by a gentlyraised relief representing a standing man functioning as a soul servant «hm-kt³». His name is recorded above his head. It reads: (Nb) tawy. He is pouring libation liquid from a rounded bottom vessel with his right hand on a low offering table, while his left hand elevates an offering of both a fowl and a round bread loaf. He is also followed by a lady named: Hdt, she also carries the title: nbt pr «mistress of the house», who is supposed to be his wife,⁴ holding a triangular loaf with her right hand, which reads: di, meaning give or offer⁵. They are reduced to a smaller scale than the human figure seated in front of them. They are performing the rites mentioned above to him. The upper part of his body is missing. It is supposed to be the deceased, owner of this stela. He is seated on a lion-legged chair, used by high-rank people and wearing a long tight cloak. His name is mentioned in the context of the offerings formula below, called Mnḥ.

Text [FIGURE 2]

The upper part is occupied by a survived one of a pair of Wdšt eyes AGED, which reads ptr nfrw and which means: seeing the splendor⁶. The standing masculine figure is surmounted by a hieroglyphic line bearing his name AGED reading Nb tawy. The space before tawy tends to the missing nb sign; which is mentioned in the context below. The feminine figure is surmounted by her name AGED reading nbt pr Hdt. The lower part of the stela contains three horizontal lines of hieroglyphic text, running as follows:

¹ Depending on parallel examples that occurred on private stela. BUDGE 1912: Pl. 32; BUDGE 1912: Pl. 19-29; BUDGE 1914: PL. 46-48, 60.
⁴ The Title nbt pr was attributed only to the married ladies since the Middle Kingdom. ERMAN, & GRAPOW, (EDS.): Wb. 2: 232; WARD 1986: 8; FEUCHT 2001: 503; AL-KAYEDI 2006: 285-286.
⁶ The word ptr was written with the two eyes during the Middle Kingdom, and appeared again during the Ramesside period. KRI, 5, 51, LIRK 1794: vol.4, 14; FAULKNER 1991: 96; LESKO 2002: 159.
1- An offering (which) the King gives, (to) Osiris (who) administrates eternity, lord of perpetuity, (who is) in the middle of Abydos.

2- He (may) causes (giving) a voice (of) offerings (in) bread, beer, ox, fowl (and) every good (and) pure things, for the KA of Menekh.

3- (Offered) by his son, (the) sculptor\textsuperscript{7}, his name (is) Nebtawy, (and the) lady of the house Hedet.

\textsuperscript{7} \textsc{Ware} 1927: 200; \textsc{Miller} 1937: 5, Pl. 3; \textsc{Erm\ae{n}, & Grapow}, (eds.): \textsc{Wb. IV}: 47; \textsc{Ward} 1982: 149:1278; \textsc{Faulkner} 1991: 214; \textsc{Lesko} 2002: 14; \textsc{Al-Cayedi} 2006: 482:1630.
III. COMMENTARY

The date and the function of this stela could be determined by through following criteria: the location and the depth where it was found suggest a date for the site, prior to where the actual birth house had been erected.

The hieroglyphic text reproduced on this stela is a common formula, which suggests the existence of a private funeral cult-center within the neighboring plot, in which cults had been performed by the deceased’s eldest son, or a soul servant priest, called ḥm ḫw; where a lot of funeral stelae were scattered and reused as part of the foundations of the actual temple.

The above suggestion is supported by finding the epithe of some New Kingdom sovereigns, like Thutmose III, Ramsses II and Ramsses III. Travellers attest them to the temple. They were found incised on sandstone blocks reused later in the building of the Ptolemaic birth house and the front quay. This supports the view that the present temple emerges on the ruins of a precedent building of the Eighteenth and Nineteenth dynasties.

The writing arrangement of the htp-di-nsw formula is typical to the Eighteenth Dynasty onward. ḥkḏ qḏ, nb nhḥ and nb ỉbdw are among the common epithets distinguishing Osiris. The sacred name of Osiris is written in a later form with the portable chair, which appeared since the End of the Middle Kingdom onward.

The text is reproduced in a precise cursive hieroglyphic calligraphy, manifested in many cursive signs, such as n, f and wḏb, the ripples have entirely disappeared and it could be identified throughout the context, typical of the New Kingdom.

The personal names suggest a date to this stela, which lies within the Middle, or the New Kingdoms. According to the arrangement of the scenes with regard to the texts, it is supposed to date this stela to the first half of the eighteenth Dynasty, New Kingdom. It confirms a preceding New Kingdom necropolis at Kom Ombo, before the present Ptolemaic temple was erected on the same spot.
IV. CONCLUSION

Throughout this stela, together with the adjacent findings, it could be assumed that it has been part of the adjustment to the birth house foundations, as the Nile inundation affected harmfully the temple bases. Along with the other findings, uncovered during excavation works, it could be concluded that precedent structures had been dismantled, and reused as part of the foundations of the actual temple.

Utilizing the artistic criteria of the stela discussed above, along with the depth of the spot in which it was uncovered, the existence of an intensive New Kingdom cult center could be confirmed, attached to the local god Sobek, appended with a necropolis in the neighboring area. It also indicates the existence of New Kingdom precedent buildings prior to the standing Ptolemaic temple, which fell in pieces in antiquity. The remains of such temple had been reused in the foundations of the actual temple complex.

The writer and the archaeological team recommend doing a comprehensive excavation in the temple enclosure and the neighboring areas to bring further discoveries, which could reveal a very significant chapter on the chronological history of the Ancient city of Kom Ombo and its temple.
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