THE PUZZLING STELA OF USERPEHTYNESU AND PANETJER

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Introduction

The stela of Userpehtynesu and his wife Panetjer (Brooklyn Museum 37.1353E) presents a number of problems in epigraphy and art history, making it a worthwhile subject for examination. Richard Fazzini brought the stela to my attention while I was searching for a representation of an ancient Egyptian family in Brooklyn’s collection. I am happy to pay tribute to my dear friend’s distinguished career at the Brooklyn Museum and his contributions to Egyptology by adding this short study to this volume honoring him.

History of the Stela

Henry Abbott first collected this stela in Egypt during the 1820’s or 1830’s. It came to New York in 1849, part of Abbott’s Egyptian Museum in Manhattan. The New–York Historical Society purchased it with Abbott’s collection in 1860. Thus the earliest published comments on the stela are found in the Catalogue of the New-York Historical Society. Here the author calls it a votive tablet and says it comes from Saqqara.1 In 1937, the entire N-YHS Egyptian collection was loaned to the Brooklyn Museum. The museum then purchased the collection in 1948. In 1974, T.G.H. James reproduced the inscription in the corpus of texts that he had copied.2 He accurately dated it to the early 18th Dynasty, but his reading of the names of the individuals represented on the stela points to the epigraphic difficulties in the text (see below).

Description of the Stela

The stela is round topped and the lunette is carved in low, raised relief with a central shen sign flanked by eyes of Horus (see fig. 1). Starting from the left, a female and a male figure sit together on chairs before an offering table. Above the male figure is the name Userpehtynesu. Above the female figure, the artist carved a name that is perhaps to be read Panetjer. Both names are carved in crude, sunk relief. A standing male figure on the right side of the stela pours a libation on the offering table with his right hand and holds a sistrum with his left hand. Behind the standing male at the far right of the lunette, a female figure sits on a chair. Her legs overlap the rear leg of the standing male figure. Neither of these figures is labeled.

Finally, three lines of text at the bottom of the stela, in sunk relief on a surface slightly higher than the lunette surface, represent a nearly standard hetep-di-nesu formula. The translation of the inscription is as follows:

1. A gift which Osiris, ruler of eternity, and the king give. May he give invocation offerings (consisting of) bread, beer,
2. beef, fowl, alabaster, linen, incense, and every good and pure thing to the ka(s) of
3. Iyadjru and his wife Panetjer, by her/his(?) son that his name might be caused to live.

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Discussion

The individuals honored in the text are a certain Iyadjru and his wife Panetjer, not the same male individual named in the lunette. Thus the first epigraphic problem concerns both the proper readings of the names and the identities of the individuals honored by the stela. It is clear that the male figure named in the lunette is not the same individual named in the inscription below. Moreover, the female figure’s name is written in the lunette with the netjer sign first, while in the inscription below the female name is written with the pa sign first and the netjer sign second. This confusion adds to the difficulty of reading the woman’s name. Moreover, there are distinct difficulties with the female name in the lunette and in the third line of text. The female name written in the lunette also is most likely written in honorific transposition. One possible suggestion for the discrepancy between the lunette and the text of the inscription is that his name might be caused to live.” 3 The following discussion considers these epigraphic difficulties.

The male name written in the lunette is more likely read Userpehtynesu than James’ reading, Suuserpeh. As James noted, the name Userpehtynesu is recorded by Ranke, found in the Theban tomb of Userhat. 4 Thus Userpehtynesu would be nearly a parallel. The only difficulty in reading the name is the presence of two “r’s” following the ankhes, which are nearly straight cuts. It is also poorly spaced, too close to the feet of the bird. Thus its form of the “f” snake under the “s” also differs considerably from the form of the “f” snake that follows both the word “sa” and the word “sa” in the same line. The “f” under the “s” widens in the middle, unlike the other two “f” signs, which are nearly straight cuts. It is also poorly spaced, too close to the feet of the sa bird. Thus it seems possible that this sign is a later addition and that the original text read “sa.s,” “her son.” The “s” could then be read a second time to yield the causative of “to live,” the expected formula.

The arrangement of the signs does not conform with expectations (see above). Some signs are out of the expected order while others seem superfluous. First, it seems somewhat surprising that the “f” needed to yield “his son” follows the “s,” presumably the causative particle in the word “cause to live.” Moreover, it is difficult to explain why a scribe would write the pa bird first in the inscription if it were not read in that order. Thus the reading “Netjerpay” must be rejected. I am no closer to explaining how a woman received a name meaning “the (masculine) god” than James was.

The final formula in the text also requires discussion. It reads:

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The second difficulty is the arrangement of the two “r” signs after the ankhe sign. The second “r” is smaller than the first “r” and is poorly spaced. It adds nothing to the meaning of the text and perhaps was an error later covered with plaster.

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3 James, Corpus, 71.
5 Edward Bleiberg, Jewish Life in Ancient Egypt (Brooklyn: Brooklyn Museum, 2002), 14, fig. 5.