The position of god’s wife of Amun was one of extreme power, prestige, and significance in Thebes during the 25th Dynasty. These women were not only priestesses of the highest order, but also politically powerful women in their own right who virtually ruled the southern part of the country and were closely related to its Nubian rulers. As such, they erected a significant number of monuments during their time in office, especially in the Theban area, often using royal iconography. Indeed, Amenirdis I (active ca. 740–700 BCE, with many depictions continuing until 670 BCE) and her successor, Shepenepet II (ca. 695–655 BCE) amongst the best known of these women, have left behind significant funerary monuments located within the temple enclosure wall of Medinet Habu. Given their relationship with the god Amun, one might expect a density of buildings at Karnak temple, and elsewhere in Upper Egypt in particular (see below). However, many of the monuments erected or commissioned by them were dismantled, usurped, or destroyed by subsequent rulers, as was frequently the case throughout Egyptian history. Thus, sometimes tantalizing fragments of unprovenanced reliefs appear in museum collections.

One such piece (fig. 1) is in the collection of the Gayer-Anderson Museum in Cairo, and has recently been conserved and prepared for display in the “Pharaonic Room.” This unprovenanced fragment of sandstone relief (GA 3308) is broken at the bottom, and either side has been cut off, leaving the scene incomplete, with the figure of Amenirdis vertically severed in half. A relatively fresh break (now restored) mars the top right-hand corner of the relief. As it exists today, the piece measures 54.7 cm × 47.3 cm × 3.2 cm. It is carved in sunk relief, with a minimum of interior modeling; most likely, details were added in paint.

The panel depicts Amenirdis and the god Amun-Re, facing each other in an embrace, with two vertical columns of text to the viewer’s left. The scene, on the right side of the panel, shows Amun with his back support, crowned by the double feathers, and wearing a broad collar. The feathers extend beyond the frame. His torso is covered by an upper garment typical for the period, and knotted at the shoulders; below he wears a kilt. Part of Amun’s tail and thighs are preserved. He embraces the partially preserved figure of Amenirdis. She wears a dress with straps that are also knotted at the shoulder, from which her right breast protrudes. A vulture headdress,
surmounted by a modius from which emerge double feathers, crowns her long wig, and her brow is marked by a uraeus. There is no interior detailing of the feathers of the headdress or on the wig. Her jewelry consists of a broad collar and a wide bracelet. The god, facing to his left, embraces the adoratrice with his left arm. As her figure is only partially preserved, his hand is not visible on her left shoulder. The god’s left arm is summarily carved, giving the impression that it is too thin. With his right arm he clasps the adoratrice’s right arm above at the elbow. Amenirdis’s right arm crosses over the god’s body, clasping a ritual object. This is probably a nehet wand or a hetes scepter. Each figure is identified by a hieroglyphic legend: “Amun-Re”; “Amenirdis, god’s hand, may she live.”

Both figures show the slightly elongated limbs and slender proportions often found in the art of this period. The faces are very different from one another. Amenirdis has a sloping forehead, slightly puffy face with a snub nose with the typical “Kushite” fold of the period, plump lips, a rounded jaw line, and a fleshy neck. Her eyes are narrow, with a pronounced droop to the inner canthus and an extended (slightly damaged) cosmetic line. The ears are placed high on her head and show little detailing save for a hint of a depression, indicative of pierced ears. Amun’s profile is slightly different from the more Nubian face of the god’s wife. The god’s head and crown are more deeply carved than that of Amenirdis (perhaps due to corrections made by the sculptor?). He has a straight, almost vertical forehead going down to a nose that projects very definitely (or). He has a straight, almost vertical forehead going down to a nose that projects very definitely (or). His ear seems to be slightly lower on his head than that of Amenirdis, and has a different, less curving shape. This could be a male/female difference, or due to the nature of the crown, but might also imply that the god is listening.

The two columns of hieroglyphs behind the figure of Amun-Re, oriented in opposite directions, suggest that this scene was balanced, to the left, by another similar scene. The first column of text is straightforward and reads: ‘emin ntr ḫn m nbwḥw’ and is fairly standard, “May the divine adoratrice live, Amenirdis, foremost of the kas.” The second column is, however, more obscure, and thus far this author has found neither a parallel, nor a satisfactory translation for it. Given the composition of the block, it is probably an utterance spoken by Amun-Re. It possibly reads as: ‘iwt nwn n¯tr kn lw (or kewn lw) shkh wd n ¯t sl (sic), and might be translated as: “Utterance, my heart it is pleased/propitiated when my daughter is steadfast for me.” An alternative might be (ignoring the final bird glyph): “Utterance: My heart. It appeases the great one” (or) “Utterance: My heart that appeases the great one. I have sworn.” The appearance of the lw in this context is definitely unusual. No doubt there are other possible interpretations of this line, which the author is glad to leave to more philologically minded colleagues.

The verso of the piece is also interesting, as it is covered with pairs of incised lines in the form of two rectangles, one inside the other, acting as a frame, with the interior marked by an X. The reasons for this are unknown. Perhaps these marks were made to key in plaster, or this side was used later for some other building purpose, or the marks have something to do with the dealer.

Although the provenance is unknown, it is quite possible that this piece originally came from Karnak temple. Most of the known sandstone buildings depicting Amenirdis I, either by herself or in conjunction with others, come from a number of areas of Karnak. Her images

6 The wand is D 45 in Gardiner’s sign list (Sir Alan H. Gardiner, Egyptian Grammar, Being an Introduction to the Study of Hieroglyphs, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Griffith Institute, 1957)), and the scepter is Wb. 3, 202. See the discussion in Henry G. Fischer, “Notes on Sticks and Staves in Ancient Egypt,” Ancient Egypt in the Metropolitan Museum Journal, supp. vol. 12–13, 1977–1978, (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1980), 5–32. There is a remote possibility that this is a stylized lettuce, but this interpretation is fairly unlikely.

7 In all respects this piece seems legitimate, save for this one line of text that does not translate elegantly. Some scholars have questioned its authenticity on the basis of this text.