

UMM EL-QAAB VII

Private Stelae of the Early Dynastic Period
from the Royal Cemetery at Abydos

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Introduction

The publication of this corpus realizes the fulfilment of a longstanding ambition: to make available an extensive group of stelae, until recently rather neglected, which are of fundamental importance for the study of the emergence and development of the hieroglyphic script as well as for tracing the beginnings of the Egyptian state and royal court in the Early Dynastic period, from c. 3100 BC.

In 1963, after graduating in Ancient History, I was encouraged by my revered teacher at University College London, Professor ARNALDO MOMIGLIANO, to undertake post-graduate research. I rather think he expected me to choose a subject in Greek or Roman history, his own principal specialities, but, conscious of the fact that for any serious undertaking in those much-researched areas far more than a 'reading knowledge' of Greek and Latin would be necessary, I proposed instead a dissertation on an Egyptological theme, subsequently undertaken at Cambridge University. During my undergraduate years at University College I had become increasingly interested in the ancient cultures and history of the Nile Valley, largely as a result of the lectures of MARGARET S. (PEGGY) DROWER. My first thought was to tackle the problem of the primary inscribed sources for the first two Egyptian dynasties. On approaching Professor JAROSLAV ČERNÝ (Oxford) I learnt that the publication of a massive piece of research on these matters was imminent. Shortly afterwards, in 1963, appeared P. KAPLONY'S magisterial study, *Die Inschriften der Ägyptischen Frühzeit*. It included a comprehensive list and discussion of the Early Dynastic stelae from Abydos, by and large based on the photographs and sketches published by É. AMÉLINEAU and W.M. FLINDERS PETRIE, as well as basic bibliographical references. My proposed research subject was shelved, and for almost four decades other projects took over.

Over the years, however, it became increasingly clear to me that the early stelae from Abydos have had a somewhat chequered history: a lack of accurate facsimile copies of the texts, reproduced at a convenient scale, has hampered research into these intriguing documents. Likewise, many basic archaeological, museological, bibliographical and other details are not available in the various monographs and articles. Hence the publication of the present corpus. In it I attempt to study, wherever possible in front of the originals, all the excavated stelae, a large number of which are extant in the museum collections. Some stelae are irretrievably lost, having disintegrated after discovery or hav-

ing been destroyed by sudden inclement weather (PETRIE, *Royal Tombs* II, 33; he does not specify which stelae were involved, but they were probably nos. 97, 98, 102, 105, 109, 114, 116). Others were mere fragments and were not allocated to museums, and a few were destroyed in the Second World War. All the material falling into the latter categories has been incorporated into the present work on the basis of published photographs, drawings and sketches. Through the generosity of Professor Dr. GÜNTER DREYER I am able to include the stelae excavated in the past two decades at Abydos by the German Archaeological Institute. A number of these stelae are inscribed, although the majority are uninscribed 'blanks' or are totally abraded. It is highly probable that many, if not all, of the latter were discovered and cast aside by the earlier excavators.

Most of the surviving Early Dynastic private stelae are in a weatherworn or fragmentary condition, having been exposed to the elements or smashed once the royal tombs, with which they were associated, were robbed and abandoned over five thousand years ago. The artisans who carved them seem on the whole to have used rather poor quality limestone, pieces of which must have been readily to hand on the high desert to the west of the cemeteries or on the flood plain below. The flakes thus recovered needed the minimum of rough shaping or 'dressing' to convert them into stelae, mostly oval-topped, and in this way the craftsmen 'invented' a completely new type of tomb or grave marker. The often lamentable condition of the surviving stelae is in contrast to that of other categories of Early Dynastic material, such as royal stelae, vase and jar inscriptions and docketts, labels and seals (as well as to some extent seal impressions). The recording and analysis of the private stelae, scattered in various museums in Egypt, Europe and the United States of America, has been a rewarding task, but in some ways difficult. I have no wish to tire the reader with a disquisition on the tribulations of an itinerant epigrapher, but it is the case that the physical conditions for recording the stelae in facsimile in the various institutions were not always ideal. Time, too, was usually of the essence, and it was often necessary to work at speed without, I trust, prejudicing the accuracy of the resultant copies and catalogue details. As regards the present monograph, curators of collections were invariably helpful, and I am immensely grateful to them for the privilege of working on the precious early inscribed material in their care.

In many ways the stelae have been treated in a summary manner since their discovery a century ago. AMÉLINEAU's published photographs are mostly unusable, while PETRIE's drawings and photographs, the latter usually 'cropped' to save space in his crowded plates, although a valuable record do not tell the whole story. Yet the stelae are fundamental in the context of the emergence of the embryonic Egyptian state in its formative period, c. 3100 to 3000 BC. From these documents we also begin to glimpse the appearance of an articulated bureaucratic structure, which in later epochs was to become markedly complex at the national, and to some extent the local, level. The stelae recorded in the present monograph are inscribed with the names, and in many cases the titles, of persons very close to the king in life and in death, and are thus a unique source for studying the organisation of the royal court of the recently unified Egyptian state. Some of the officials were administrators (scribes, sealers, controllers and the like), others sacerdotal, and some were concerned with the royal commissariat. A few seem to have been Nubians (if their titles have been correctly read), hinting at a royal guard or a military presence. A surprising number of stela-owners bore the enigmatic title *shn-3h*. There were also dwarfs, involved no doubt in court entertainments. Some pet animals were also assigned stelae. The majority of the stelae, to judge from their name determinatives, commemorate females, some with titles clearly associating them with the Horus King. It cannot automatically be assumed that those lacking titles were all women of the royal harim. Most of the personal names are short, which may be significant for the reading of onomastica on other Early Dynastic material, not least seals and seal impressions. The titles are listed and translated below (p. 212ff.), but no attempt is made here to study them in detail, a major project that would involve investigating all, rather than a selection, of the titles in Early Dynastic sources. There is a marked discrepancy between the tally of subsidiary graves associated with the royal tombs at Abydos (G. A. REISNER, *The Development of the Egyptian Tomb down to the Accession of Cheops* [Oxford/London, 1936], 116–7) compared with the number of surviving stelae. Several possibilities account for this circumstance: for example, many stelae doubtless have been destroyed, while others remain to be excavated. It cannot be certain that all the subsidiary burials were marked by stelae, or indeed that all the graves were actually occupied. In the recent past there has been a resurgence of interest in the early stages of the formation of the Egyptian state, and numerous archaeological and philological studies have been published on that theme. I hope that the present work will give an additional spur to future endeavours.

My primary concern throughout has been to establish an accurate epigraphic record of the hieroglyphic texts, insofar as this is possible in view of the physical condition of the stelae, supplemented by photographic illustrations that afford a measure of control over the copies. Many new readings have emerged. Few of these important inscriptions have been published in 'true' facsimile in the past, and this may be one of the reasons why they have been largely neglected in the valuable studies on Early Dynastic culture alluded

to above. There is no substitute, in my opinion, for a facsimile copy of an inscription, and I would go so far as to say that texts or scenes are not fully published unless a facsimile record is provided. To be sure, there are instances where this is impossible or impractical, but the principle remains. For some stelae the only sources are the sketches of PETRIE. In the present monograph these are signalled by an asterisk (*).

One stela (Louvre E. 21710) recently published by the present writer does not feature in the Catalogue (see MARTIN, in: QUIRKE (ed.), *Discovering Egypt from the Nerva*, 79–84). It is probably royal rather than private.

In the existing publications featuring Early Dynastic stelae only a minimum of archaeological, contextual and museological detail is revealed. The precise findspots of the documents are almost entirely lacking in the publications of AMÉLINEAU, PETRIE and later workers, although not, of course, in the recent work of the German Archaeological Institute and of the American Expedition. Even here, however, it is certain that not one of the stelae found over the past two decades was in its original position. It is to the question of context that we must now turn.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL CONTEXT OF THE STELAE

Although researchers look in vain for precise information on the findspots of the stelae by their two principal discoverers, this is not entirely the fault of those pioneer fieldworkers at Abydos. AMÉLINEAU is often maligned in Egyptological literature, with some justification perhaps, but the truth is hard to come by. PETRIE's subsequent work was essentially a rescue operation in much disturbed terrain, and he made an attempt to assign many of the stelae to individual royal tombs. These locations should, however, be viewed with caution. Likewise, some stelae were found inside a few subsidiary graves associated with the royal monuments, but for obvious reasons even here it cannot be sure that the context is secure. Some stelae numbers are marked on PETRIE's plans of subsidiary tombs, but the locations were not indicated on his line drawings of such stelae. It is highly likely that the Umm el-Qa'ab area in which AMÉLINEAU opened excavations in 1897 was already in a ruined or otherwise greatly disturbed condition when he set his labourers to work, and it is worth remembering that the structures he uncovered were at that period almost without precedent. Doubtless the royal tombs and their subsidiary burials had been tunnelled into in the remote past and their contents ransacked and scattered hither and yon. Rich burials, at least in respect of the royal tombs proper, would have attracted the attention of plunderers again and again, rendering the 'context' of any surviving artefact very problematic. The private stelae were particularly vulnerable, being positioned perhaps on top of the superstructures of the subsidiary graves and thus bearing the full brunt of weather, windblown sand and human depredation. The royal cemetery, too, was in the

area in which the cult and mysteries of Osiris were enacted, with consequent disturbance of the terrain. The monument (O) of King Djer was selected in antiquity as the site of the 'tomb' of that deity. Additional disturbance undoubtedly took place over the millennia.

For these reasons it is necessary to be circumspect in assigning stelae to individual tombs. Many of the attributions, of PETRIE in particular, may be correct, but there are hardly any means of proving them. Stylistic criteria, workmanship, and even the use of a particular type of stone (e.g. nummulitic limestone) may ultimately be helpful in this regard.

The interior south walls of some of the subsidiary graves surrounding the tomb of Djet (Z) were inscribed in ink with the names of their owners (PETRIE, *Royal Tombs* I, Pl. LXIII, cf. p. 8). In one case the title *shn-3h* is mentioned. Three of the texts were successfully removed by PETRIE, but their present location, if they survive, is unknown. They are not in the collections of the British Museum, the Petrie Museum, University College London, or the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford. PETRIE's drawings are reproduced in the present monograph (p. 14). His no. W42 is cited in KAHL, *Frühägyptisches Wörterbuch*, 219; for nos. W44, W45 and W61 cf. stelae 233, 5 and 17 in the present catalogue.

NUMERATION OF THE STELAE

W.M. FLINDERS PETRIE established a numerical sequence for the stelae (1–168; stela 50 is a duplicate of 49) excavated in his campaigns in 1900 and 1901 (*Royal Tombs* I and II; *Abydos* I). For material found by É. AMÉLINEAU in his pioneer explorations between 1897 and 1900 P. KAPLONY (*In-schriften der Ägyptischen Frühzeit*) continued the sequence of numbers (169–239), utilizing the plates illustrating the stelae published in *Nouvelles fouilles d'Abydos*. He also assigned numbers (240–250; stela 245 is a duplicate of 161, 247 that of 100) to include stelae or fragments presumably excavated but not published by AMÉLINEAU and PETRIE, but abandoned the sequence of Roman numerals after 250 in favour of a different numbering system (I.1–III.1). In the present corpus it seems logical to adhere to the PETRIE-KAPLONY system rather than impose yet another series of numbers. However, for consistency, I have assigned Roman numerals to the series I.1–III.1, which now become 251–266. I have continued the sequence to include some problematic material (267–272). A long series of numbers (273–358) are assigned to the stelae found in recent campaigns at Abydos by the German Archaeological Institute. At the last moment a stela fragment excavated by the Pennsylvania-Yale-Institute of Fine Arts, New York University Abydos Project was added to the corpus and allotted the number 359.

THE SIGNARY

Individual Early Dynastic hieroglyphs and their values are discussed in J. KAHL, *Das System der ägyptischen Hieroglyphenschrift* (1994), *passim*. For an earlier corpus of facsimiles of certain signs see HILDA (Lady) PETRIE, *Egyptian Hieroglyphs of the First and Second Dynasties* (1927). The unpublished thesis of M. GERMON RILEY, *Paléographie des signes hiéroglyphiques* (1985), covers the whole range of Early Dynastic inscriptions and seal impressions.

At the outset of my study of the Abydene stelae I had the intention of extending my enquiry to an analysis and commentary on the individual signs. However, much new work is currently being carried out and published on such matters, and it would be presumptuous to venture into other scholars' areas of expertise. The section on the signary in the present work has, therefore, a more restricted focus, namely, the provision of a sign-list derived from the Early Dynastic Abydene stelae without detailed comment. Many of the hieroglyphs are unique to the First Dynasty. The fragmentary condition of the stelae and other factors militate against the secure interpretation of some of the texts, inscribed five millennia ago when, for the first time in Egyptian history, a decision was taken to record historical events, religious, administrative and economic activities, titles and personal names of royalty and commoners, in the form of a new and elaborate hieroglyphic script. Many of the signs are crudely carved, as is perhaps to be expected: the hieroglyphs were still in their experimental stage. I have attempted to transliterate and translate wherever possible the names and titles on the stelae but do not expect unanimous acceptance of these difficult matters. In a few instances honorific and graphic transposition of hieroglyphic signs and the employment of phonetic complements seems evident. The absence of the interrogative or question mark against certain of my transliterations does not mean that the interpretation is wholly secure. More will hopefully be coaxed out of this intransigent material in the future.

The method of transliteration advocated by Sir ALAN GARDINER has a simplicity and elegance that appeals to me, and I have used it in the present monograph, rather than adopting the form advocated by the Tübingen School, currently in vogue. Almost without exception the hieroglyphic signs on the stelae face to the right. Individual hieroglyphic signs mentioned in the catalogue entries refer to Sir ALAN GARDINER, *Egyptian Grammar*. 3rd ed. (Oxford/London 1957), 442–548. For the early material this classic source is now much extended by J. KAHL, *Das System der ägyptischen Hieroglyphenschrift in der 0.–3. Dynastie* (Wiesbaden 1994), 421–958. The Early Dynastic stela sign list, arranged by category, is set out below.