

A FRAGMENTARY STELA IN THE ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO

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It is a delight to present this brief offering in honour of Emily Teeter, who has tirelessly researched and cared for all three of Chicago's Egyptology collections for decades, and who has a particular interest in identifying early collectors and donors of Egyptological material within the city. Collaborating with Emily in researching the Art Institute of Chicago's collection of ancient Egyptian art has been a true privilege, and I am grateful to be able to call her a mentor and colleague.

In 1927, the Art Institute of Chicago acquired a limestone relief (AIC 1927.447) bearing an inscription and the image of a kneeling man with his arms lifted in praise (figs 1–2). The fragment preserves the lower portion of a late Eighteenth Dynasty votive stela, which has not previously been published.¹ After reconstructing what little is known about the relief's modern history, this article will look at its decoration and text, placing it within the corpus of New Kingdom private stelae honouring kings.

BACKGROUND

Carolyn Wicker (1865–1945) gifted the fragmentary stela to the Art Institute of Chicago in April 1927. An avid traveller and collector, Miss Wicker spent much of her adult life abroad but maintained strong ties to the cultural institutions

* I would like to thank Betsy Bryan, Karen (Maggie) Bryson, Katherine Davis, and Meredith Fraser for their helpful comments and suggestions during the preparation of this article.

1 It is one of only two New Kingdom votive stelae in the Art Institute's collection. For the fragmentary Nineteenth Dynasty stela of Neferhotep (AIC 1924.579), see: Hoffmeier 1988.



FIG. 1: Stela of Mersumaat, late Eighteenth Dynasty. (The Art Institute of Chicago.)

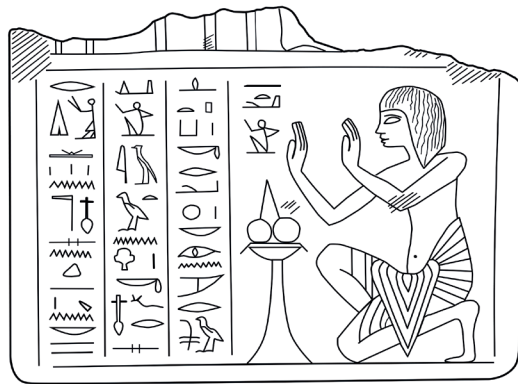


FIG. 2: Line drawing of the Stela of Mersumaat. (Drawing by M. Arico.)

of Chicago, the city of her birth.² Through her travels, she contributed to many of the museum's collections over the years – particularly in the area of textiles – but made only one gift of Egyptian antiquities: a group of six

² An obituary notes that she either visited or resided in 'India, Siam, parts of Africa, France, Belgium, Sweden, Italy, Greece and Tibet' before settling in Battle Creek, Michigan later in life (Battle Creek Enquirer 1945). As the daughter of one-time grocer, land developer, and Chicago city alderman Charles G. Wicker and his second wife Elizabeth, Carolyn (Carrie) Wicker's investment in the city carried on a family tradition. Chicago's Wicker Park is named for her father and uncle Joel H. Wicker, who donated the land as a public park in 1870.

objects, including the stela fragment currently under discussion.³ The relief was an important addition to the Art Institute's ancient Egyptian collection, which started to take shape in 1890 with Amelia B. Edwards' gift of a ushabti of Horudja (AIC 1890.30)⁴ and had subsequently grown exponentially under the guidance of the museum's first president Charles L. Hutchinson, who himself travelled to Egypt on three occasions and was an active supporter of the Egypt Exploration Fund and its mission.⁵

Relatively little information remains about the stela's history after its arrival in Chicago. Museum records indicate that it was incorporated into a series of ever smaller Egyptian art displays from the late 1920s through to the 1940s, when interest in presenting Egyptological material within the galleries waned.⁶ In the lengthy period that followed during which ancient Egyptian art was not prominently displayed at the Art Institute, information about the stela



FIG. 3: Archival photograph of the Stela of Mersumaat. (The Art Institute of Chicago.)

– including its accession number – was lost, with the result that for many years it was known only by the temporary number M-1.⁷ Through archival research – and the rediscovery of a labelled photographic negative (fig. 3) – the object was re-associated with its original accession number in 2019, and by extension reunited with the meagre information known about its provenance presented above.⁸

- 3 Most of her gift was destined for the Art Institute's Children's Museum, which aimed to give young visitors access to art through a 'collection of objects of particular interest to children, gathered together either for their artistic or educational merit' ('Youth and Art' 1918: 85). Wicker's gift consisted of six Egyptian objects in total, including an object described as a Predynastic monkey [figurine?] acquired from Nicolas Tano and two ushabtis. Only the stela fragment remains in the collection today.
- 4 Allen 1923: 7, 71.
- 5 For a time, Hutchinson served as the Vice President for the American branch of the Egypt Exploration Fund, and, together with James Henry Breasted, he was actively involved in the organization of the Chicago Society of Egyptian Research (a recognised branch of the Egypt Exploration Fund). As time went on, the Art Institute increasingly relied on Breasted's expertise in the formation and presentation of its collection of Egyptian antiquities; he was named 'Honorary Curator of Egyptian Antiquities' in 1920 ('Notes' 1920: 86). For more on the Art Institute's collection of ancient Egyptian art, see: Allen 1923; Teeter 1994. For the early history of the Art Institute's collection in relation to Chicago's other Egyptology collections, see, for example: Teeter 2010; Teeter 2015; Arico and Teeter 2018–19.
- 6 The stela was also in the 'Space in Sculpture' exhibition at the University Gallery of the University of Minnesota, Minneapolis from 11 November – 31 December 1948. A significant portion of the Art Institute's Egyptian art collection was transferred to the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago as an indefinite loan between 1941 and 1950. It appears that 1927.447 was among the group of Egyptian objects that remained at the Art Institute during this time. The next major installation of Egyptian material at the Art Institute of Chicago opened in 1994, but did not include the stela in question.
- 7 The meaning behind the 'M' classification is unknown, as is the date when the number was assigned.
- 8 The image (AIC negative C19247) probably dates to the late 1940s. I would like to thank Shelby Silvernell, photograph archivist, for her help in locating this source and information about its probable date.

DESCRIPTION AND TRANSLATION

In its present state, the stela is roughly rectangular in shape, measuring 19.5 cm wide and 14.6 cm high, with a depth of 4.8 cm. Fashioned from cream-coloured limestone, the back of the stela remains undecorated while the front is carved in sunk relief, the execution of which is quite plastic.⁹ The stela was originally divided horizontally into at least two registers: the lower containing an inscription and depiction of the stela's dedicator and the upper the recipient of his praise, a standard format for Egyptian votive stelae.¹⁰ Today the lower register is preserved in its entirety, while only minute traces of the upper register's decoration remain.¹¹

In the lower right corner of the stela, a man is shown kneeling facing left, his left knee braced on the ground as his corresponding foot flexes to support the weight of his body. He raises both hands in a prayerful gesture. His face, with its pert nose and large, obliquely set eye, is framed by a wig that tapers to a point at his clavicle. The hairstyle covers his ear, its wavy tresses indicated by finely incised lines. The man wears a pleated kilt that rises up to the small of his back and curves down around his belly, accentuating its fleshiness. His garment's pointed central panel folds seamlessly over his thighs, its tip hovering just above the ground in front of his left calf.

A small brazier or offering stand sits on the ground before the dedicator. Consisting of a hemispherical top with an elongated base that widens towards the bottom, the stand is surmounted by a conical object rising behind two circular offerings.¹² The interpretation of these offerings remains somewhat enigmatic. While both shapes figure prominently in offering scenes, the question of whether the items are meant to be understood as bread loaves or scented offerings remains unclear – and perhaps varied depending on context.¹³ In either case, the brazier-like shape of the stand depicted on the Art Institute stela suggests that these gifts to the king were intended to be set alight, although no flames are visible.

9 The plasticity is particularly noticeable in the treatment of the man's arms and the suppleness of his torso.

10 This corresponds to Exell's Type C, which presents the dedicator in the lower register, separated from the object of his or her worship (Exell 2009: 20). See also: Pinch 1993: 83.

11 A long gouge in the upper surface of the break indicates that an attempt to repair the stela (or perhaps to replace its upper section) may have been made, although a lack of surface wear in this area suggests that this occurred in modern times.

12 The brazier offerings on an uninscribed stela fragment of the *3h ikr n R^c* type, dated stylistically to the late Eighteenth Dynasty, provides a strong parallel for this symmetrical arrangement (Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology UC14431; Stewart 1983: 12 no. 36, pl. 18). I am grateful to Anna Garnett for providing me with a photograph of this stela. Compare also the offering of Tasennofret on the Nineteenth Dynasty stela of Roma (British Museum EA146; James 1970: 61–62, pl. XLVII).

13 The originally painted surfaces of these scenes may have helped clarify the nature of these items. The conical offering can be identified as bread or cake (e.g. Schneider 2012: 85), or scented fats or gums (Davies 1917: 52–53 n.2). Circular offerings similar to those presented on the Art Institute stela are sometimes shown aflame. Compare the stela of Nehemya before Re-Horakhty (Michael C. Carlos Museum 2018.010.129), which dates to the reign of Thutmose IV, or the late Eighteenth Dynasty stela of Hor before Osiris (Kunsthistorisches Museum Vienna 183).

A votive inscription appears in front of the kneeling figure in three columns of hieroglyphs that continue onto a partial fourth column which intrudes into the figural tableau. The text reads:

rdj(t) j3w n ntr nfr sn t3 n nb t3wy dj=j j3wt n hr=k nfr shtp k3=k r^c nb jr n mr-sw-m3^rt Giving adoration to the Good God, kissing the earth for the Lord of the Two Lands. I give praise to your beautiful face so that your *ka* might be satisfied daily. Made by Mersumaat.

The prayer contained in the formulaic inscription is of a type found on numerous votive stelae that vocalizes the act of worship simultaneously depicted on the stela and commemorated by its dedication. The pairing of ‘giving adoration’ (*rdj(t) j3w*) and ‘kissing the earth’ (*sn t3*), followed by a second pairing of praising (*dj=j j3wt*) and satisfying (*shtp*) is a well attested one, as has been frequently remarked upon.¹⁴

COMMENTARY

The prayer’s address to the ‘Good God’ and ‘Lord of the Two Lands’ indicates that the act of veneration represented on and by the stela is directed towards a king, who would have been depicted in the now lost upper portion. Kings frequently appear on private votive stelae of the New Kingdom, often as intermediaries between the stela’s dedicator and a divine element or as the outright recipients of his or her praise, as was certainly the case here. In either scenario, both living and deceased kings can be shown, with the result that even when the king’s name appears his presence cannot be used as a firm dating criterion.¹⁵

The identity of the king on AIC 1927.447 remains a mystery since no cartouches or images of the monarch are present.¹⁶ This lack of specificity – in which only the king’s epithets, and not his name, are provided in the main inscription – is unusual, although not unparalleled. The stela of Menu in the Museum August Kestner (1935.200.179) provides an almost exact copy of the content of the Art Institute stela’s prayer, also beginning with ‘Giving adoration to the Good God, kissing the earth for the Lord of the Two Lands’ without any indication of which king is being invoked.¹⁷ That stela has been dated to the late Eighteenth Dynasty, likely early in the reign of Amenhotep IV/Akhenaten, based upon its owner’s title Chief Brewer of the House of Re–Horakhty in his Name of Shu, which has clear ties to Aten worship.¹⁸

14 See, for example, Wente 1963: 32; Munro 1981: 362–63; Sadek 1987: 202–3.

15 Exell 2009: 4. For several examples of votive stelae depicting deceased kings, see: El Shazly 2015.

16 The king’s cartouches likely would have appeared in the upper portion of the stela accompanying his image.

17 Munro 1981; Murnane 1995: 52. The prayer continues ‘I gave praise to your beautiful face so that your *ka* might be satisfied daily.’ The only grammatical difference between the two inscriptions is the use of the *sdm.n=f* form on the stela of Menu, which Munro notes is unusual (1981: 362–63).

18 Munro 1981: 363.

Its upper register depicts an enthroned king before a table of offerings.¹⁹ A version of this arrangement – with the deified monarch seated on his throne in the presence of offerings – is the standard approach to representing the king on private stelae where he is the recipient of the act of worship.²⁰

The decorative traces on the Art Institute stela's upper register are incredibly limited. Nonetheless – based on comparative examples – a tentative suggestion for a partial reconstruction of the content can be made. Most of what remains consists of incised vertical lines. At the left end of the field, two narrow lines rise from the groundline. Nearer the centre, three more lines – parallel, yet double the width – are carved. An undulating line to the right of them completes the traces. An image of a right-facing king seated on a traditional block throne would account for the traces near the centre of the stela, with the undulating line representing the back of his ankle and a portion of his arched foot, although this reconstruction is by no means certain. The traces at the left side of the stela – which would then appear behind the enthroned monarch – are more difficult to interpret. One possibility is that these spindly lines once formed the legs of a wooden offering stand.²¹

In contrast to the king, who is identified on the lower portion of the stela by epithets only and not by name, the stela's owner is given a name – Mersumaat, 'Maat-loves-him' – but no title. Here *mꜣꜥt*, the final element of the name, is written with a flat horizontal sign (read here as Gardiner Aa11) followed by a transposed *ꜥ* (Gardiner D36) and *t* (Gardiner X1), an orthography which is also known from other sources. Although the author is not currently aware of other attestations of this moniker, its construction finds parallels in a number of private names incorporating the *mr-sw* element.²²

While Mersumaat is not afforded a title in the inscription, his attire gives an indication of his role within society. As already described, he wears a wrapped kilt made of pleated fabric with a tapering apron in the centre. This garment's association with members of the military is well established, so much so that it is generally referred to as the military or soldier's kilt.²³ The kilt's central panel can be decorated with pleats – as on the Art Institute example – or remain

19 Although cartouches are no longer extant, traces of the epithet 'given life like Re forever' in the damaged upper portion of the stela indicate that the king's name was once provided. Munro (1981) identified the king as either Amenhotep III or Amenhotep IV.

20 Oftentimes, a royal statue is the focus (Exell 2009). In some instances, more than one king is shown, for example the Eighteenth Dynasty Stela of Qenamun, on which the owner presents offerings to both Amenhotep I and Senwosret I (Metropolitan Museum of Art 28.9.6).

21 Compare, for example, the stands with beer jars behind Akhenaten in a stela (Berlin ÄM 14145) depicting the royal family or the offering stand behind Amenhotep III and Queen Tiye on a stela (British Museum EA57399) celebrating that royal couple (Freed et. al. 1999: 220, 254).

22 For other examples of *mr-sw* names, see: Ranke 1935: I, 157.

23 For a description of the garment, see: Davies 1903: 10–11, figs. 2–3. Although lower-ranking individuals such as Mersumaat wear it by itself, the diagnostic pointed apron can also be worn by more elite men (including the king) in combination with other attire (e.g. Hoffmann's *Militärschurz Typ 1* and *Typ 2* [2004: 168–69, 174]).

plain.²⁴ Often, the apron is depicted quite rigid, as on the Ramesside stelae of Anya (Louvre E 27222), Khons (British Museum EA1430),²⁵ and Mosi (Cairo JE 72266),²⁶ all of which similarly depict kneeling men wearing the military kilt.

In contrast, the panel of Mersumaat's kilt appears more pliable as it falls over the side of his thigh rather than projecting forwards. This more closely aligns with earlier depictions of the kilt, notably its numerous appearances on Amarna wall reliefs.²⁷ Indeed, a fragmentary Amarna relief from Hermopolis provides a strong parallel for the representation of a kneeling man dressed in the soldiers' kilt exhibited on the Art Institute stela (fig. 4).²⁸ Here the figure is only partially preserved, but the most important elements – namely the fold of the pleated apron over the side of the thigh – remain.²⁹

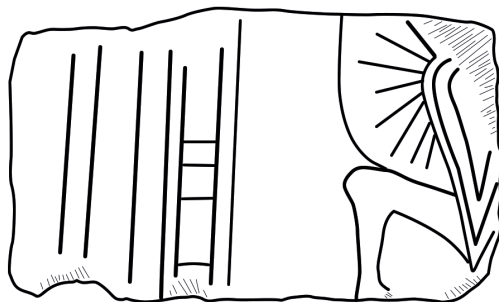


FIG. 4: Relief from Hermopolis depicting a kneeling soldier, after Roeder 1969: pl. 107. (Drawing by M. Arico.)

24 The pleats often follow the shape of the panel in a concentric fashion, as here, but can also be depicted as vertical or radiating lines, as on the Nineteenth Dynasty stelae of Djehutyemheb (Roemer- und Pelizaeus-Museum 0408) or Meriamunnakht (Roemer- und Pelizaeus-Museum 1077) respectively. For plain, unpleated examples, compare the Amarna Period stela of an unnamed individual (Allard Pierson Museum 8537; Borghouts 1971: 105–8), the Nineteenth Dynasty stela of Hesi (Roemer- und Pelizaeus-Museum 0397), or the Ramesside *3h ikr n R^c* stela honouring Nakht (Oriental Institute Museum 14287; Teeter 2009).

25 Bierbrier 1993: 23, pls 80–81.

26 For the Ramesside, rather than Eighteenth Dynasty, date of Mosi's stela, see: Bryan 1991: 153.

27 As Schulman observes, 'scenes of soldiers and military activity abound in both the private and the royal art of Amarna' (1964: 52). For representations of men clad in the military kilt in which the pointed apron is depicted with some degree of movement, compare, for example, talatat blocks P.C. 46 and P.C. 236 from Hermopolis (Roeder 1969: 197–98, pls 178, 203), a scene from the tomb of Panehesy at Amarna (Davies 1905: pls XIII, XV), or the slightly later relief from the Memphite tomb of Horemheb (Bologna MCA-EGI-EG_1889; Martin 2016: pl. 104). I thank Betsy Bryan for bringing these Hermopolis reliefs to my attention.

28 Roeder 1969: 67 no. 162/VIII A, pl. 107. More rigid representations of this apron worn by kneeling men appear in Amarna art as well (e.g. Davies 1903: pl. XIV).

29 When complete the figure would have occupied two blocks horizontally and three vertically (Roeder 1969: 67).

Following the proliferation of men shown wearing the military kilt during the Amarna period, the popularity of this costume continued into the post-Amarna period and beyond. A figure on the stela of the Commander of the Troops of the Lord of the Two Lands Horemheb, dated by Kawai to the reign of Tutankhamun, provides a particularly close parallel for Mersumaat.³⁰ Here the stela owner's son Taemheb (depicted standing in the second register) also wears the military kilt with concentric pleating in combination with a shoulder-length wig with pointed lappet incised with wavy striations.

Altogether, the evidence clearly supports a late Eighteenth Dynasty date for the stela of Mersumaat. This is reflected stylistically, noticeably in the depiction of Mersumaat himself, from the shape of his narrow-wristed arms, to his elongated fingers, and the swell of his belly. Furthermore, the style of rendering the pointed apron of his military kilt – a garment that experienced an exponential rise in popularity in relief representations of the Amarna period – finds a parallel in Amarna talatat, but differs distinctly from the standard Nineteenth Dynasty approach to representing this attire on a kneeling figure. A late Eighteenth Dynasty date also accords well with the closest known parallel for the inscription – with the invocation of a king's epithets, but not his names – found on the stela of Meru. Pinpointing the date precisely within this period is more difficult, although a later date, during the post-Amarna period, would perhaps best fit the style and content of the stela.³¹

Having established a late Eighteenth Dynasty date for the stela, it can be inferred that the now nameless king was, in all likelihood, a monarch of the Eighteenth Dynasty. While it is impossible to concretely identify him without additional textual or iconographic evidence, the deified Amenhotep I is a strong candidate. Votive stelae depicting worship of Amenhotep I (often alongside his mother Ahmose-Nefertari) abound in the Ramesside period, building upon a pattern already begun during the Eighteenth Dynasty.³² Indeed, a number of such stelae can be dated stylistically to the post-Amarna period, such as that belonging to the foreman Nebnefer, which shows the stela's dedicator twice with his arms raised in worship of Amenhotep I and Ahmose-Nefertari.³³

30 Leiden F 1926/1.1 (Kawai 2005: 543–44; Schneider 1997: 70).


31 This would make it roughly contemporary with another relief in Art Institute's collection, the lintel from the Memphite tomb of Iniuia, who served under Tutankhamun (AIC 1894.246; Allen 1923: 41–42; Schneider 2012: 79).

32 For the cult of Amenhotep I, see: Černý 1927; Exell 2009: 42–48; El Shazly 2015: 210–14.

33 National Museum of Denmark AAd 9. Although the stela was usurped during the reign of Ramesses II, the style of carving clearly indicates that it was originally a work of the late Eighteenth Dynasty (El Shazly 2005: 133–35, with further references). British Museum EA1347, a stela depicting Parennefer before Amenhotep I and Ahmose-Nefertari, has also been dated to the post-Amarna period on stylistic grounds (El Shazly 2005: 92–94, with further references). See also the Deir el-Medina stela of Mahu dedicated to Ahmose-Nefertari, which was reworked in the post-Amarna period from an earlier Eighteenth Dynasty stela (El Shazly 2005: 80).

Still, the appearance of another king of this era as the focus of Mersumaat's devotion – such as Amenhotep III – cannot be ruled out.³⁴

CONCLUSION

A limestone relief fragment in the Art Institute of Chicago (AIC 1927.447) comes from a votive stela depicting a man named Mersumaat, who wears a soldier's kilt. The prayer inscribed on the stela is directed towards an unnamed king, who would have been depicted in the upper portion of the stela when it was still complete. Dated to the late Eighteenth Dynasty stylistically, the stela provides yet another example of the private worship of New Kingdom monarchs memorialized through the dedication of votive stelae. 

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³⁴ See for example British Museum EA834, which shows the worship of Amenhotep III (Hall 1925: 9, pl. XXI). During the Amarna Period, it is more typical for the king and royal family to appear alone on stelae, such as the examples referenced in note 21 above, although examples in the more traditional format with the worshipper depicted in a lower register do exist (e.g. Davies 1906: 12–13, pls XVI, XXIII). For private stelae honouring the post-Amarna kings, see the fragmentary Giza stela of an official before Tutankhamun and Ankhnesenamun (van Dijk and Eaton–Krauss 1986: 36–38; Kawai 2005: 133–34, 680, fig. 31) and the Saqqara stela of Ptahpatener depicting Horemheb (Bologna 1906; Bresciani 1985: 68–69; Bryson 2018: 201–2).

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