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AN ANCIENT EGYPTIAN BLOCK STATUE FROM THE GHAZALI MONASTERY (WADI ABU DOM)¹

INTRODUCTION

The block statue is a well-documented Egyptian type of statue from the Middle Kingdom until the Ptolemaic Period. Within the corpus of Egyptian-type statues found in Sudan, block statues are very rare and so far, only attested for the New Kingdom. However, in 2015, the Polish Mission of the Polish Centre of Mediterranean Archaeology under the direction of Artur Obłuski found a block statue at the Ghazali Monastery, which is located at the entrance of the Wadi Abu Dom, around 15 km north-east of the famous landmark Gebel Barkal. The monastery was built between AD 680 and AD 720 during the so-called Makurian Period and continued in use until the end of the thirteenth century.² At the time, Ghazali was a small regional centre consisting of the main monastery complex with two churches, surrounding settlement and industrial areas as well as a large graveyard.³ The block statue, however, derives from a much older era and was brought to the monastery at an as yet undetermined date. Currently, the block statue is stored at the Gebel Barkal Museum in Karema.

THE BLOCK STATUE FROM THE GHAZALI MONASTERY (FIG. 1–5)

The block statue from the Ghazali monastery is incomplete, with the head missing, but survives to a height of 25.6 cm. The original height of the complete object probably ranges between 33.0 and 40.0 cm. The depicted person squats on a small rectangular base (h. 5.5 × l. 18.8 × w. 11.8 cm). The bottom side

of the base is only roughly cut. A seat in the sense of a pillow or flat pedestal, common to other similar statues, does not exist. The contours of the body are weakly modelled. Both feet are aligned closely next to each other and are completely covered. Only the hands stick through the tight coat over the flat surface. Looking at the attachment of the thumbs, the arms must be crossed over the knees, even though it is not visible in the modelling. While the left hand is outstretched, the right hand, which is clenched into a fist, is holding an object, probably a folded cloth or lettuce. Although the head is broken off, it can be concluded from the shape of the break that the person wore a shoulder-length wig. A neck or beard was probably not depicted. The back of the statue is defined by a narrow back pillar (5.4 cm) with an illegible hieroglyphic inscription. The single column of the vertical inscription is bounded on all sides by lines, which are clearly visible. A few very shallow, irregular depressions have been preserved, indicating that an inscription was present, however, it is not decipherable. Individual signs are delimitable, but not identifiable. Aluminium foil squeezes of the inscribed area have been taken, but this did not prove to be a suitable technique in this case (fig. 6). It may be possible to achieve better outcomes with a grazing light scanner. The upper part of the back pillar is broken off, so that the original height of the inscription remains uncertain. Whether the pedestal contained further inscriptions cannot be said with certainty at the present time. The entire surface of the block statue is heavily abraded by sand and water. The base and upper edges are scuffed.

Cursory examination of the material used indicates that it is probably a variety of bright grey granite. Precise determination of the stone type would involve microscopic examination, which has so far not been carried out. However, this stone was most likely mined in the region south of Aswan. Unfortunately, it is not possible to determine the place of manufacture of the object.

1 We would like to thank all the kind people working at and around Ghazali who showed us around the site and gave us a great insight into the ongoing work. Especially, we would like to thank Artur Obłuski for giving us the opportunity to work with the block statue and for providing us with additional material. Many thanks also to Gareth Rees for linguistic comments.

2 Obłuski 2018.

3 See e.g. Shinnie / Chittick 1961; Obłuski 2014; Obłuski / Ciesielska et al. 2018; Obłuski 2018.



Fig. 1-5: Block statue from different angles; © Johannes Auenmüller.



Fig. 6: Aluminium foil squeeze of the inscription; Scan: Laura Haupt.

DATING THE BLOCK STATUE⁴

Due to the poor or rather weathered state of preservation of the block statue, the dating can only be discussed based on a few characteristics. The complete wrapping of the body with the exception of the head and the hands as well as the light modelling of the body are possible indications for a dating to the early New Kingdom. The isolated hands in the combination “closed fist with an object (right) and outstretched (left)” could also indicate an origin from the New Kingdom. The absence of a seat or jewellery and the complete abandonment of two- or three-dimensional elements such as a naos, an image of a deity or a stela points further in this direction. Even the shoulder-length wig without indication of a neck or beard points to the New Kingdom. However, some arguments speak against such a dating. For instance, holding an object in the right fist is also often documented for the 3rd Intermediate

Period and the Late Period. The ankles of the statue are narrowed and widen to a pronounced knee and arm section, which are very typical elements of the Late Period, especially the 25th and 26th dynasties. The narrow back pillar also points to an origin from the Late Period. Furthermore, the bright grey stone is rarely used during the beginning of the New Kingdom, but more frequently used during the Late Period.⁵ Even though some elements point to the early New Kingdom, the stylistic details and the stone type tend to suggest that the statue dates to the Late Period. The New Kingdom elements, however, can be described as archaisms, which are often taken up again during the 3rd Intermediate Period and Late Period, especially during the 25th and 26th dynasties. The archaisms of this time are not only limited to art, but also appear, for example, in royal titles.⁶ The absence of inscriptions on the shroud, which is a common characteristic of block statues in general, is atypical of this type of statue, especially during the Late Period.⁷ However, it cannot be ruled out completely that there were originally inscriptions on the shroud.

In order to be able to classify the block statue of Ghazali, it was compared with the more than 350 block statues that were found in the Karnak Cachette. In general, over 700 statues of various types were discovered in the Karnak Cachette, which date from the New Kingdom to the Ptolemaic Period. In total, 36 of the over 350 block statues resemble the simple style and modelling (e.g. covered feet) as well as a similar stone type – granite, if not mentioned otherwise – as the block statue from Ghazali. 10 of which date from the 3rd Intermediate Period⁸, 24 from the Late Period⁹ (25th and 26th dynasty) and

⁵ Schulz, personal communication.

⁶ Morkot 2003, p. 79 with further readings; Török 1997 p. 189ff.

⁷ El-Damaty 1990, p. 9.

⁸ JE 36742 (22nd dyn., limestone), CG 42230 (22nd dyn.), JE 37401 (22nd/23rd dyn., limestone), JE 37374 (22nd dyn., limestone), JE 37348 (22nd dyn., limestone), JE 373184 (22nd dyn., limestone), JE CG 42218, CG 42216 (22nd dyn., limestone), CG 42224 (22nd/23rd dyn., limestone), JE 48614 (23rd dyn.).

⁹ JE 36664 (26th dyn.), CG 36732 (26th dyn.), CG 36733 (25th/26th dyn.), CG 36735 (LP), CG 36739 (25th dyn.), CG 36963 (26th dyn.), CG 36964 (26th dyn.), CG 36978 (LP), JE 36980 (26th dyn.), JE 36989 (30th dyn./PP, basalt), JE 37181bis (LP/26th dyn., limestone), JE 37132 (LP), JE 37148 (25th/26th dyn.), JE 37862 (26th dyn.), JE 37886 (LP/PP), CG 42196 (25th/26th dyn.), CG 42217 (25th/26th dyn.), CG 42234 (25th dyn.), CG 42246 (25th dyn., breccia), CG 42249 (25th/26th dyn.), CG 42250 (25th/26th dyn.), CG 48622 (26th dyn., greywacke), CG 48626 (26th dyn., diorite), CG 48646 (26th dyn., greywacke).

⁴ We are very grateful to Regine Schulz for providing us with remarks on dating criteria.



two from the Ptolemaic Period¹⁰. The back pillars of the 3rd Intermediate and Late Period block statues are all of a wider type with two or more columns whereas the one of the Ghazali block statue only shows one column on a narrow back pillar. Only three block statues dating to the Late and Ptolemaic Period¹¹ have a similar layout with just one column. However, all block statues from the 3rd Intermediate until the Ptolemaic Period display inscriptions and/or depictions across the body. Though, as already mentioned, it cannot be ruled out that there was a short text or shallow depiction on the shroud, such as for JE 27181bis.

Since the discussed block statue was found in the Bayuda region, it is essential to take a look on the other block statues from Nubia, which are generally scarce and therefore of particular interest. In the area of Lower Nubia, only seven block statues have been found to this day¹². The entire group can be dated to the New Kingdom, more specifically to the 18th and 19th dynasties. Their function can be determined mainly as temple statue, only the case in Aniba is special, because of its grave context. The identification of the ancient owners or donors of the statues is possible through the presence of names and titles on the statues. They were all high-ranking Egyptian officials who served at least for a time in Nubia. The block statue of the official Ruju is particularly interesting.¹³ The style of his statue deviates significantly from the usual canon of proportions, which is why it

is assumed that this is a local production.¹⁴ Interestingly, limestone quarries have been attested mainly in the Egyptian Nile Valley, which suggests that the material was imported.¹⁵ Whether the other Lower Nubian block statues were made in Egypt or locally cannot be determined at this point. Even if they were created on site, it is unclear whether the sculptors were skilled Egyptians or local sculptors trained by Egyptian craftsmen. The block statues of Ruju and Amenemhet are the only two that have remained complete, the others having lost their heads. However, it cannot be assumed that it is a matter of ritual destruction or that it is due to secondary use. Block statues often lose their head because it protrudes from the block-like body and is therefore more likely to break off.

In Sudan, the block statue type seems to have gone out of fashion after the New Kingdom. It was not until the Meroitic Period, about 1300 years after the New Kingdom's block statue appeared in Sudan, that the block statue seemed to come into use again, albeit in a modified style and for a different purpose. At Naga six block statues were found within the temple of Amun, which was erected during the 1st century AD.¹⁶ These statues seem to be a local Nubian imitation or special type of the Egyptian block statue from the Meroitic Period. They are all made from red sandstone, are smaller in size, and show indigenous Nubian or inner African influenced stylistics. The purpose of this peculiar type of block statue is undetermined, even though a function as *door stopper*¹⁷ or grinding stone for offerings¹⁸ has been suggested due to noticeable scrub marks on the sides of the statues. A fragmented statue of a similar style was found in the temple of Amun in El Hassa.¹⁹

To sum up, a dating of the Ghazali cube statue to the Late Period is likely, although there are also similarities with statues from the 3rd Intermediate Period. However, the bright rock, the narrow back pillar, and the retracted leg section that opens in a wide, but balanced arm section as well as the weakly modelled bodily features underneath the shroud rather indicate a dating to the Late Period, more precisely to the 25th or 26th dynasty. With the exception of the non-Egyptian block statues from Naga and El Hassa, the block statue from Ghazali is currently not only the southernmost found, but is also

10 JE 38038, JE 38603 (limestone).

11 JE 36989, JE 37181bis, 38603.

12 Ruju (Ägyptisches Museum - Georg Steindorff - der Universität Leipzig, inv. no. 6020, Aniba, 18th dyn., limestone, tomb context, see Schulz 1992, p. 357f. with further literature); Amenemhet (National Museum Khartoum, inv. no. 92, Buhen, 18th dyn., serpentinite, temple context, see Schulz 1992, p. 337f. with further literature; Welsby, Derek A. / Anderson, Julie R. (eds.), *Sudan: ancient treasures. An exhibition of recent discoveries from the Sudan National Museum*, London 2004, cat. 77); Setau (*in situ*, Wadi es Sebu, 19th dyn., sandstone, temple context, see Schulz 1992, p. 530 with further literature); Heka-Nakht (Egyptian Museum Cairo, inv. no. JE 35674, Quban, 19th dyn., silicified sandstone, see Schulz 1992, p. 283 with further literature); Setau (Ägyptisches Museum Berlin, inv. no. ÄM 2283, Gerf Hussein, 19th dyn., sandstone, temple context, see Schulz 1992, p. 75f. with further literature; Kuckertz, Josefine, "Die Würfelstatue des Vizekönigs von Kusch Setau, Berlin ÄM 2283", in: *Isched 1/2012*, 5–19); Nehy (Sai storage, inv. no. S.734, Sai, reused in *mur turc*, 18th dyn., grey-black granite, temple context, Auenmüller 2018, tab. 2 (2.3) with further literature); Amenemhet (Brooklyn Museum, inv. no. 39.426, Amara West, 19th dyn., sandstone, temple context, see Auenmüller 2018, tab. 7 (7.7) with further literature).

13 Seyfried 2002.

14 Krauspe 1997, p. 83.

15 The same holds true for the material for the statue of Amenemhet.

16 Wildung 2020, S. 211ff.

17 Wildung/Riedel 2011, p. 147f.; Rondot 2011.

18 Wildung 2018, S. 223.

19 Rondot 2011, p. 146f.



the youngest of this Egyptian statue type in Sudan. Evidently, there is a significant time gap between the proposed dating to the 25th/26th dynasties and the last appearance of block statues in Sudan during the New Kingdom. By dating the Ghazali block statue to the 3rd Intermediate Period, such a hiatus could be resolved. The stylistic evidence is not conclusive enough to completely rule this possibility out.

ORIGINAL LOCATION OF DISPLAY

The original location for the display of the Ghazali block statue can no longer be reconstructed. However, it can be assumed that it was initially set up in a temple or a comparable private sacred place, since during the Late Period the use of block statues as tomb figures shifts to the solitary use as temple figures. The Ghazali block statue is not particularly heavy (less than 10 kg) and could be easily transported with a donkey. So, there is a possibility that it was also located in distant temples, e.g. Kawa or Kerma/Pnubs, or even more remote areas and was transported from there to Ghazali. But it would also be possible for the statue to be set up in closer centres such as Sanam or in one of the numerous temples around the Gebel Barkal, although no further block statues are known from these sites. Nevertheless, several statues in a typical Egyptian style of royals²⁰ and high-ranking officials from the New Kingdom²¹ and several undated fragments²² were detected at Gebel Barkal.

Since, after the end of the New Kingdom, the control over Egypt was divided between the rulers of the north and the high priests of Amun at Thebes in the south, Egypt's influence over Nubia diminished, but did not disappear entirely. The high priests of Amun were able to partly hold control over the Amun cult at Gebel Barkal. When the close ties lessened over time, the power over Nubia shifted to local Nubian chiefs. Around 780 BC, the local rulers started to

restore the temples at Jebel Barkal as well as other temples in Nubia, and established Napata as the center of an independent Kushite kingdom. As in other times, extensive contact between Egypt and Nubia is also evident during the 25th and 26th dynasties. The 25th dynasty is of course marked by the ruling of the Kushite kings over Egypt, mainly Upper Egypt. Unlike the Libyan kings of the 3rd Intermediate Period (21st/22nd dynasty), the Kushite kings and elite adopted Egyptian culture and built temples as well as works of art in an Egyptian manner in Egypt and Nubia. During the 25th (and 26th) dynasty, the office of the God's Wife of Amun was held by the daughter of the respective ruling king. Thus, Thebes and Napata were closely linked. The contact between the Theban and Napatan temples of Amun did not break off during the reign of Psametik I and Necho II (26th dynasty).²³ Both, Psametik I and Necho II encouraged the relations between Egypt and Nubia also on an international trading level. Psametik II, however, launched an armed campaign against the Nubians, which is evidenced by several stelaes, and probably by the Dokki Gel statue Cachette.²⁴ With regard to the political arrangements during the 3rd Intermediate and Late Period, a block statue could be erected in a Nubian temple or similar religious space in both periods, as the Egyptian influence on the cult events in Nubia was also present in the 3rd Intermediate Period. During the 25th dynasty, the Kushite kings are well-known for their adaption of the Egyptian style in statues. However, no private statues in the Egyptian style are known from this period. Although there is less evidence of a peaceful exchange in the 26th dynasty, the occurrence of an Egyptian block statue from the 26th dynasty is also conceivable. However, as shown, it could also derive from the 25th dynasty or even the 3rd Intermediate Period as the stylistic evidence is not conclusive enough.

SECONDARY USE

The block statue was found within the monastery inside a room lying on its left side with its back to the wall in front of which it was placed (fig. 7–8). The room functioned as a storage room within the food preparation area. An oil press and an installation for a grinding or mill stone were found in the immediate vicinity of the block statue. In addition, at the same room the Polish team excavated ceramic vessels that

20 Thutmose III, Amenophis III, Taharqa, Tanwetamani, Senkamanisken, Queen Amanimalel, Anlamani, Aspelta, Akhratan (after Reisner 1931, p. 81f and Dunham 1970).

21 Hepzefa (Merowe Mus. 39, seated statue, brought from Kerma or Argo), viceroy Mery-mes (Khartoum Museum (?), seated statuette), viceroy Thutmose (Boston Museum (unregistered), standing statue), Heqa-m-sasen (Khartoum Mus. 1848, seated statuette), unnamed viceroy (16-3-337/19-1-240 location not known, seated statuette), Bekenwer (Khartoum Mus. 1847, Merowe Mus. No. 9, fragments of a seated statuette) (after Reisner 1931, p. 81f and Dunham 1970).

22 Dunham 1970, p. 69, 16-3-232 seated sandstone statuette, loc. unknown.

23 Török 2009, p. 359.

24 Török 2009, p. 361.



Fig. 7: Findspot of the block statue within the Ghazali monastery; © Artur Obluski.



Fig. 8: Block statue *in situ*; © Artur Obluski.

are currently being analyzed by Malgorzata Korzeniowska. It is imaginable that the statue functioned as a kind of pedestal, stand or weight given that, apart from the lack of the head, no damage can be recognized that could have been caused by constant hitting or other tool marks. A function as a supporting structure is most likely. Beneath the statue a flat unworked slab of stone was found. The position of this flat stone seems to be intentional, but that cannot be verified. Considering all circumstances, the block statue was probably brought to Ghazali by one of its residents or a visitor. What we must keep in mind, even though the block statue is relatively small in size and weight, a certain amount of effort had

to be made to bring the statue at least 15 km from the Nile shore into the wadi. This can but does not have to be an indicator for the recognition of the statue's value. The block statue is not the only object from ancient Egypt that was found in the monastery, although the second object consists of an easily transportable scarab. Unfortunately, the scarab is too fragmented to estimate a proper dating. It is currently not possible to identify the reason for the transport of the statue to the monastery nor the time. It is also not possible to determine whether the head of the statue was still attached at the time of transport and broken due to secondary use or at a different point in time.

SUMMARY

Unfortunately, due to the block statue's poor state of preservation, only a few definitive statements about this object can be made. According to the stylistic characteristics, we tend to date the statue to the Late Period (25th or 26th dynasty). However, a suggested dating to the 3rd Intermediate Period cannot be ruled out completely. Since the inscription on the back pillar is indecipherable, both, the founder of the statue and the primary site of origin, remain unknown. Although, it is likely that the statue was originally set up in a temple or private religious space. Inside the monastery, the statue was used secondarily as a stand or weight. However, this block statue



is of particular interest due to its probable singular appearance in the Late Period (25th or 26th dynasty) in the Bayuda region. With the publication of the Ghazali block statue, a first discussion was initiated, which is sure to be followed by many more.

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ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Im Jahr 2015 fand das Team um Artur Obluski (Polish Center of Mediterranean Archaeology) im Kloster von Ghazali, das sich im Mündungsgebiet des Wadi Abu Dom befindet, einen altägyptischen Würfelhocker. Der Würfelhocker weist aufgrund seines schlechten Erhaltungszustandes leider nur wenige Merkmale auf, die eine zeitliche Verortung des Objektes erlauben. Durch stilistische Vergleiche mit weiteren Würfelhockern u.a. aus der Cachette von Karnak kann der Würfelhocker aus Ghazali in die 3. Zwischenzeit bis in die Spätzeit datiert werden, wobei eine Datierung in die 25. bzw. 26. Dyn. bevorzugt wird. Da dieser ägyptische Statuentyp im Sudan äußerst selten vertreten ist, werden alle Belege Würfelhocker aus diesem Raum aufgeführt. Auffällig ist dabei, dass es sich bei dem Objekt aus Ghazali nicht nur um den am südlichsten gefundenen Würfelhocker ägyptischen Typs handelt, sondern auch um den jüngsten seiner Art im Sudan. Bei der Klosteranlage von Ghazali handelt es sich um den sekundären Aufstellungsort. Wo die Statue ursprünglich aufgestellt war oder wem sie gehörte, kann heute nicht mehr rekonstruiert werden. Wahrscheinlich war er in einem Tempel, z. B. am Gebel Barkal, aufgestellt. Im Kloster könnte der Würfelhocker als eine Art Podest, Tritt oder Gewicht fungiert haben.