

A Stela and an Ostrakon:

TWO ACQUISITIONS FROM DEIR EL MEDĪNEH

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The two antiquities discussed below come from the same place and were made at about the same time, by artists with the same training. But although the expert can tell at a glance that both are of the “Deir el Medīneh school,” in style they may seem as dissimilar to the layman as they actually are in purpose, the stela being a formal grave monument and the ostrakon a quick sketch made purely for entertainment.

The stela in Figure 1 was made for a man named Ḳen; his tomb has been identified by the Egyptian Antiquities Service as number 4 at Thebes or, to be more precise, Deir el Medīneh, the special section of the great necropolis of the New Kingdom—“The Place of Truth”—in which the officials and workers attached to the necropolis had their own burying ground and near which, in a little town, they lived with their families. This community lies just south of the great bay in the desert cliffs that frame the temple of Deir el Baḥri and in which the nobles of the time were buried. It was founded early in the XVIII Dynasty (1567-1320 B.C.), and the great patron saints always remained the deified king Amun-ḥotpe I (1546-1526 B.C.) and his mother Aḥ-mosē Nefret-iry, but it became inactive when Akh-en-Aten moved to el ‘Amārneh in about 1375 B.C. Sometime later, after the court had returned to Thebes at the downfall of the “‘Amārneh heresy,” the town and its cemetery were reorganized, and Deir el Medīneh once more became a thriving community.

Ḳen lived during the XIX Dynasty, in the reign of Ramesses II (1304-1237 B.C.). He, like many of his relations, bore the title “Servitor in the Place of Truth”; his profession was that of a sculptor: “Sculptor of Amūn in the Place of

Truth,” and “Sculptor of Amūn at Karnak,” and he was also a priest in the cult service of the deified Amun-ḥotpe I. As a sculptor he specialized in the carving of reliefs. To judge by his comparatively elaborate tomb Ḳen was a man of substance, and since he had experience with the stone of the necropolis and lived soon after the refounding of Deir-el Medīneh, he was able to select one of the best sites on the hill where the new cemetery was located for his own tomb. The tomb lies high up, where the limestone rock is of fairly good quality; lower down it became more and more necessary to patch the stone with mud brick, while the tombs at the bottom of the hill had to be completely shored up with bricks.

The location of this cemetery was well known by the middle of the last century, and soon the hillside became a paradise for enterprising local diggers. In 1886 Karl Wiedemann, the German Egyptologist, felt it advisable to publish some notes he had made four years earlier, as the tombs and their decorations had deteriorated so much in the intervening time. He wrote that as these tombs “are not . . . near the large temples they are often overlooked by the ordinary traveller. [Therefore] the colours have not been destroyed by the smoke of candles and fewer pieces have been broken out of the walls by people anxious to bring home relics of their trip to Egypt. A few years ago this necropolis must have been in a nearly undisturbed state. Unhappily, this condition of things has changed.” In 1917 the Institut Français d’Archéologie Orientale began the systematic excavation of both town and cemetery, and among the tombs that were further cleared was that of Ḳen. Its



original appearance, characteristic of tombs of this date at Thebes, is shown by one of ẖen's own funerary stelae, now in Copenhagen (Figure 2). It had a rectangular façade with a molding and cornice at the top, above which rose a tall, narrow pyramid. A stela was set into the pyramid and another into the façade above the door. The entrance was from an open court, in which the funeral service represented on the stela took place.

The façade has now disappeared and all that remains is a small, cubical chapel cut into the hillside, with a pit at the back and at least two subterranean rooms with plain mud-brick walls. The chapel was decorated with paintings, one of which showed the reigning monarch, Ramesses II, with his vizier Pa-ser, and another Amun-hotpe I and A'ḥ-mosé Nefret-iry. Others illustrated subjects popular at the time for tomb decoration, most of them ceremonial in character, such as ẖen's funeral and the worship of the gods. In the middle of the rear wall a niche contained a figure of the cow goddess Ḥat-Ḥor in high relief being worshiped by two figures of ẖen, and at the entrance another scene in relief apparently showed the deceased and his wife worshipping the rising sun. All these decorations are much deteriorated.

Of the original contents of the tomb nothing remains in place but a fragment of an offering table and a little limestone shawabty coffin, also fragmentary. However, in the early years of the last century, monuments of ẖen began to appear in the private collections and subsequently the museums of Europe. These included a number of other stelae, one in the British Museum apparently having been among the antiquities collected by Henry Salt in 1817-1820; the Copenhagen stela was acquired by the Danish consul in Alexandria in 1824. An interesting painted limestone slab with nine geese in the round squatting on it, inscribed with the name of ẖen, has recently come into the possession of the Pelizaesus Museum in Hildesheim. It, like our stela, left the tomb in 1862 during excavations

1. *Stela of the sculptor ẖen, from Thebes, about 1250 B.C. (XIX Dynasty, reign of Ramesses II). Painted limestone. Height 15 inches. Fletcher Fund, 59.93*

conducted by the German consul at Alexandria, B. W. König, and remained in his family until recently. But these monuments were not necessarily all found inside ẖen's tomb. The Copenhagen stela was quite possibly one of the two set into the façade, in which case it would have fallen into the open court. Others could have been dedicated by ẖen in local cult chapels, or even at Karnak, and found there. Again, it is possible that the tomb had already been opened before its investigation by König.

ẖen seems to have been a family man, like most of his contemporaries who have left us their monuments. His two wives, Ḥenwet-mehyet and Nefret-iry, each appear six or seven times in the chapel, but only Nefret-iry is otherwise



2. *Detail of stela of ẖen: Funeral ceremonies. At the left, the mourning Nefret-iry and Ḥuy embrace the coffin of ẖen as it stands in front of the tomb. Further to the right, while Ḥuy once more embraces his father, Mery-mery performs the "Opening of the Mouth" ceremony (so that the deceased may speak again in the hereafter). National Museum, Copenhagen*

mentioned or shown: we see her on all the stelae known to the writer and her name is given on the offering table. Of his numerous children, one called Ḥuy appears most frequently. He seems to have been the son of Nefret-iry, as was Mery-mery, who appears several times. Ḥenwet-mehyet's son Tjaw-en-Ḥuy is shown a number of times in the tomb but apparently nowhere else. We cannot know the reason for this favoritism now. ẖen must have arranged for the decoration of his own tomb and was evidently willing at that time to give both his wives equal status in the hereafter. The stelae may have been

carved before K̄en embarked on the tomb or took H̄enwet-meh̄yet as a second wife—or perhaps she died or fell from favor before the stelae were dedicated.

Our stela is a characteristic example of a type associated with Deir el Medīneh, but more finely designed and executed than most from this cemetery, and outstanding because of the almost miraculous preservation of the color. The scene represented is the worship of Amun-hotpe I and Queen Aḥ-mose Nefret-iry by K̄en, his wife Nefret-iry, and his sons Mery-mery and Huy. It is painted in *relief en creux*, in two registers, the upper showing the two gods enthroned behind a table of offerings, and the lower, K̄en and his family; the entire scene, however, is to be imagined as taking place at a single level, with K̄en and Nefret-iry kneeling before the king and queen, and making further gifts of incense and wine, the latter in a golden flask shaped like a *nefer* (“good”) sign. The two sons are represented as young boys, Huy as a naked child, though his adult title is written above him: he was a “Servitor in the Place of Truth” like his father. Mery-mery was evidently the elder of the two, as is shown by his wearing a kilt, but his title is not given here (he followed his father’s profession of relief sculptor). The sons bring flowers and a duck, hoping that these offerings, like those of their parents, will be given substance by some magic process and will be enjoyed by Amun-hotpe and Aḥ-mose Nefret-iry in the underworld.

Amun-hotpe and his mother are seated side by side on thrones. According to the convention when deities are being represented, the queen is dressed in the old-fashioned plain slip of the Old Kingdom, painted bright red. Her crown — the vulture with protective, outspread wings—and other jewelry are painted buff to represent gold, with red details. Her wig is ultramarine blue, and her flesh black, probably because of some well-known cult statue of a black color. Amun-hotpe, like K̄en and his family, has red flesh—pink where his legs show through the diaphanous kilt. His insignia are also for the most part buff with red, but there are some touches of blue; the horns of his crown are bright green. For the rest, the color scheme is chiefly red, white, blue, and black, with a little green in the leaves and offer-

ings. The edges of the throne and the baskets on the offering stand are buff. Among the offerings on the stand are bread, grapes, a cucumber, and what we should expect to be ribs of beef, but which are painted in stripes of blue, white, and green. Under the stand is a sealed jar of beer and a stone bowl with a scalloped edge holding a blue goblet-shaped jar—all magical substitutes for the objects they represent.

The blue paint consists of ultramarine-colored frit, ground up in an organic binder that unfortunately has turned dark in places (though the particles of blue themselves remain bright when seen under a glass). This gives a brownish appearance to certain blue-painted areas, for instance the border that runs around the stela and the greater part of the two thrones.

K̄en possessed an unusual number of stelae. In ours we may see the work of his own hand, or certainly work carried out under his supervision. It would be too much to hope, however, that he has left us portraits of himself and his family. Like the king and queen, K̄en has been painstakingly drawn with the features we expect in representations of the time. Nefret-iry and her sons, however, all have unusually long noses and protruding chins that have been extended by the painter beyond the original sculptured outlines, but we cannot know now whether this was by accident or design.

The ostrakon came to us as an anonymous gift shortly after the Museum had acquired the stela. It is also to be associated with Deir el Medīneh, a community largely composed of artists who spent all their professional lives executing traditionally conceived scenes on the walls of the tombs of the Theban necropolis. But they felt the same need as their modern colleagues to “express themselves.” They would collect suitable flakes of limestone—to be found around any building or excavation—and, instead of using them to jot down a note or figure an account, as did the scribes working in the area, they took them home to use as drawing paper in their leisure hours and to entertain themselves and their families.

Our ostrakon bears two sketches in front (Figure 3), and on the back a few lines of another. The lower of the sketches on the obverse is a conventional, profile study of a young girl—prob-

ably a princess, to judge by the manner in which she is drawn, which recalls other royal children, and the amount of jewelry that she wears, though we should have expected this to include a royal uraeus. She is evidently sitting crouched on a cushion (now broken away) with one hand on her knee and the other at her lips in the gesture that indicates childhood. Her hair is dressed in the youthful sidelock, and her jewelry consists of a diadem, bracelets, and an ornamental belt. The drawing was laid out in red and gone over, with corrections, in black. This quick sketch may have been a study for, or a copy of, a larger picture in one of the great tombs of the necropolis, to which it is more closely allied in style than to the other two drawings on the ostrakon.

The upper sketch is of a type well known but not heretofore represented in our collection, and characteristic of the artists of Deir el Medīneh. In this group of ostraca animals behave like human beings—play musical instruments, drink beer in the shade of a reed pavilion, act as shepherds or nursemaids—or behave in some other humorous or incredible way. The capabilities of the animals represented are usually reversed, as when a hippopotamus high in the branches of a fig tree eats the fruit that a ravenlike bird must climb a ladder to reach. Some of these sketches are caricatures of daily life, while others evidently illustrate ancient fables, now lost, “peopled” with animals who are the ancestors of Aesop’s, Br’er Rabbit, and Donald Duck.

Our sketch closely resembles one on an ostrakon in Berlin in which a cat, seated on some sort of wooden stool, is whipping a monkey that squats in front of it, eating fruit and holding what appears to be a cucumber in its left hand. The relative positions of the two animals of our sketch are the same, but the cat is probably crouching on a red cushion and wearing a linen skirt. It stretches out its hand to the monkey, which this time is offering the cucumber and clutching the bundle of reeds safely in its own hand.

The sketch on the reverse may well have represented the same scene—we see the outstretched feline paw and what seems to be part of a linen costume. This fragmentary drawing is in black line. That on the obverse is in black line and wash and red wash.

The Egyptians always enjoyed portraying animals, to whom the rigid conventions that had to be observed when the subjects were human did not apply. But it is the human qualities of animals, or rather the animal-like qualities of human beings, that the artists who entertained themselves by drawing this group of sketches wished to satirize. Our cat and monkey, therefore, are shown in conventional human attitudes but with a liveliness and humor lacking in the drawing of the girl below.



3. *Ostrakon, from Thebes, about 1300-1200 B.C. Limestone with sketches in black and red. Height 6¼ inches. Anonymous gift, 60.158*