

## BETWEEN A CHIEF BARBER AND AN OPERA SOLOIST: AN ANCIENT EGYPTIAN STELA IN THE COLLECTIONS OF THE NÁPRSTEK MUSEUM

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**ABSTRACT:** The paper deals with a small Egyptian stela (Accession No. NM 8/51; Inv. No. P 1637) kept in the Náprstek Museum acquired from the well-known 20<sup>th</sup> century Prague opera soloist Ivo Žídek. The stela is described in detail. It was commissioned by a man of an uncertain name who held the uncommon title of the ‘Chief Barber of the City’. Based on comparative study and analysis of the style and texts, the stela could be dated to the 19<sup>th</sup> Dynasty and identified as coming from the ancient Thebes.

**KEYWORDS:** Náprstek Museum – private collections – New Kingdom Egypt – stone stela – Chief Barber of the City – Ptah – Thebes

### Provenance

In 1951, the National Museum purchased a small Egyptian stela (Accession No. NM 8/51) which is currently kept in the collections of the Náprstek Museum of Asian, African and American Cultures (Inv. No. P 1637). The museum’s records have preserved the name of the original owner, being Ivo Žídek, who during the early 1950s, resided on Prague’s Národní třída. Based on the domicile, the original owner of the stela was identified as the famous Czech opera singer. Ivo Žídek (1926–2003) performed as a soloist for the National Theatre Opera from 1948 and later became Czechoslovakia’s most renowned post-war opera tenor. His signature role, which he performed more than 500 times during his life, was Jeník in Bedřich Smetana’s *Bartered Bride* (*Prodaná nevěsta*). Between 1989 and 1991, Žídek served as the director of the National Theatre. He passed away in 2003 at the age of 76. The history of the piece prior to it belonging to Ivo Žídek is not known.

### Description of the stela

The stela was included in several exhibitions organised by the Náprstek Museum on its premises and in museums across Czechoslovakia, later the Czech Republic. Short entries about the stela were published in catalogues accompanying these exhibitions;<sup>2</sup> however, the object was never published thoroughly.

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2 *Objevování země na Nilu*, Náprstek Museum, 2008 (Onderka et al. 2008, p. 56, Cat. No. 5); *Egypt a Nubie. Poklady starověkých civilizací* (Onderka 2011, p. 28, Cat. No. 40).

The Prague stela ranks amongst the type of votive stelae showing the commissioner worshipping a deity, in this particular case the god Ptah. The god is shown with the commissioner of the stela in the upper register, while the lower register shows the commissioner's family members joining him in an offering to the god. In terms of the arrangement of the registers and the scenes they contain, the Prague stela can be compared to the Ramesside stelae dedicated to Ptah from Deir el-Medina<sup>3</sup> and stelae dedicated to the animal form of Amun from Western Thebes of the same period.<sup>4</sup>

The limestone round-topped stela is relatively well preserved except for several chipped-off pieces at the edges and abraded areas on the stela's front. It is 21.2 cm tall, 15.0 cm wide, and 3.2 cm deep. The verso of the stela carries two registers with representations and texts in a sunk relief. The texts are written in hieroglyphic script. Many signs are executed carelessly and as a result, they are difficult to interpret.

In the left-hand upper register, the god Ptah stands inside of an open shrine, holding a *w3s*-sceptre. Ptah's dwelling takes the form of the Upper Egyptian shrine (*per-wer*, or *kar*, Gardiner's list sign O18),<sup>5</sup> characterised by a curved roof and is placed on a raised platform with a sloped front (in the form of the *m3c*-sign, Aa11). The platform refers to Ptah's divine epithet 'Lord of Maat' (cf. below) in which the word 'Maat' is written. The shrine is depicted with an open window, as indicated by two window leaves at the site of the shrine.

Ptah is shown in his mummy form. He wears a tight-fitting skullcap, but the line dividing the cap and the exposed part of the face is not carved. His ear and eye, including eyebrow, and mouth are clearly articulated in relief. Against the canon of representation, the god is shown beardless. Judging from the presence of the counterpoise, the god should have worn a wide *menit*-collar,<sup>6</sup> but it is not detectable over the god's shoulders (possibly due to the abrasion at this spot of the stela).

On the right-hand side of the upper register stands the commissioner of the stela in an adoration pose. The man is dressed in a calf-length kilt which seems to have consisted of pleated and plain cloth pieces. He is depicted barefoot. His head is not adorned by any elaborate hairstyle or wig.

Between Ptah's shrine and the commissioner of the stela are three offering stands that are supporting trays heavily laden with a variety of food.<sup>7</sup> On each side of the offering assemblage is a lettuce plant. Three columns of text are inscribed above the altar. The left column is separated from the other two by a divider in the form of an incised line segment. The left column (Tx. 1) represents the caption to the depiction of Ptah, while the two columns to the right (Tx. 2) represent a caption accompanying the male figure.

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3 The stela of Neferabu (British Museum, Inv. No. EA589) dated to the reign of Ramesses II (*Egypt's Golden Age: The Art of the Living in the New Kingdom 1558–1085 BC*, 1982, Cat. No. 414; James 1970, Pl. 31), and that of Penbuy (British Museum, Inv. No. EA1466) dated to the 19<sup>th</sup> Dynasty (KRI III, pp. 496–497; KRI VII, p. 205).

4 The stela of Amenhotep from Medinet Habu (Egyptian Museum in Cairo, CGC 34152; Lacau 1926, pp. 198–199, Pl. LXI) and the stela of another Amenemhet (Egyptian Museum in Cairo, CGC 34153; Lacau 1926, pp. 199–200, Pl. LXI).

5 Wilkinson 1992, pp. 140–141.

6 Wilkinson 1992, pp. 172–173.

7 Cauville 2012, p. 64.

In the caption (Tx. 1), the name of Ptah is followed by two divine epithets, namely those of ‘Lord of Maat’ / ‘Lord of Truth’,<sup>8</sup> and ‘King of Two Lands’.<sup>9</sup> The two epithets are the most frequently attested epithets of Osiris, not only in the New Kingdom.

Tx. 1:



*ptḥ nb mꜣ.t nswt t3.wy*

Ptah, Lord of Maat, King of Two Lands

The caption accompanying the depiction of the owner of the stela begins with the phrase *jr:n*, i.e. ‘made (by)’, which relates to the production of the stela. The introductory phrase is followed by a title and the name of the commissioner. His title is interpreted as ‘Chief Barber of the City’ (*ḥry ḥꜣḳw n njw.t*), in which the term ‘City’ in all probability stands for Thebes in Upper Egypt. The title thus serves as an indicator of the likely provenience of the stela.

Several titles built on the term ‘barber’ (*ḥꜣḳw*),<sup>10</sup> an ancient Egyptian occupation discussed in the *Teaching of Dua-Khetjy/ Satire of Trades* (§7),<sup>11</sup> are attested from the New Kingdom, namely ‘Barber’ (*ḥꜣḳw*),<sup>12</sup> ‘Royal Barber’ (*ḥꜣḳw n nsw*),<sup>13</sup> ‘Barber [of the Temple] of Bastet, Mistress of Bubastis’,<sup>14</sup> ‘Chief Barber’ (*ḥry ḥꜣḳw*),<sup>15</sup> and ‘Chief Barber of Amun’ (*ḥry ḥꜣḳw n jmn*).<sup>16</sup> The titles are usually attested on a single occasion. Similarly, the present author is unaware of another attestation of the title ‘Chief Barber of the City’.

The most complicated part of the caption is its end which represents the name of the owner. It consists of four signs – a large bird sign (e.g., G5, G17, G21, G35, G36, etc.), a low broad sign (most likely an arm: D36 and following), another large bird or crocodile sign (I3), and a determinative representing a seated man (A1). The first three signs may simply have a phonetic value, e.g. Mau (*mꜣw*)<sup>17</sup> attested from the New Kingdom. However, the name can be of a more elaborate grammar structure; the names such as Werensebek (The great one of Sebek; *wr-n-sbk*),<sup>18</sup> and Harwerra (Horus, the great one of Ra; *ḥrw-wr-rꜣ*)<sup>19</sup> may serve as an example, despite being attested from the Middle Kingdom only. As far as these names are concerned, graphical transpositions have to be taken into account.

8 LÄGG III, pp. 639–642.

9 LÄGG IV, pp. 342–343.

10 Erman and Grapow 1926–1930, III, no. 365.3–4; Helck et al. 1972–1975, I, pp. 619–620; *Thesaurus Linguae Aegyptiae*, 2014, lemma-no. 122810.

11 Cf. Helck 1970.

12 Al-Ayedi 2006, p. 474, no.1567.

13 Al-Ayedi 2006, p. 474, no. 1568.

14 de Linage 1939, pp. 219–221; the title is not given explicitly, its existence is assumed based on the context of family relations, [...] *n.t b3st.jt nb.t b3s.t m st jt=j ḥꜣḳw nb-s...*; Sethe and Helck 1906, IV, no. 1369.13.

15 Al-Ayedi 2006, p. 418., no. 1355.

16 Al-Ayedi 2006, p. 418., no. 1356.

17 Ranke 1935, I, no. 146.23.

18 Ranke 1935, I, no. 81.11.

19 Ranke 1935, I, no. 246.20.

Tx. 2:



*jr.n hry h<sup>c</sup>k(w) n njw.t NN*

Made by the Chief Barber of the City, NN

The whole scene rests on a stylised and elongated representation of a mat which serves as a divider between the two registers. The horizontal mat is decorated with three vertical bands which are located at both ends and in the middle.

#### *Lower register*

In the lower register, two family members of the owner of the stela kneel with their arms raised in a gesture of adoration, worshipping Ptah in front of three offering stands with trays laden with food offerings. The first figure is that of a woman who is dressed in a long garment. She has a perfume cone and a lotus flower on her head. A caption placed in front of her raised arms (Tx. 3) gives her name Baketeset ('Servant of Isis'; *b3k.t-3s.t*).<sup>20</sup>

Tx. 3:



*b3k(.t)-3s.t*

Baketeset

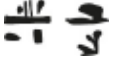
The second figure belongs to a man, who was likely dressed in a long kilt. Akin to the figure of the stela commissioner, he is represented without an elaborate wig. His name, written above his head (Tx. 4), is hard to make out due to the illegibility of the hieroglyphic signs of which it is composed. It consists of two square groups of signs. The first sign possibly represents a stylised barque. It is followed by two small signs, either the sign depicting a *t*-bread (X1) and the stroke sign (Z1). Another possible combination is that of a *t*-bread sign and an egg-sign (H8) suggesting the name of a goddess being written in the first half of the name. The second group consists of two signs placed one above the other. The upper sign likely represents the forepart of a lion (F4), while the lower sign is most likely a determinative in the form of a seated man (A1). It would then appear that the name has the form of *NOMEN+(m)+h3.t*. A name with a term that describes a sacred barque in such a form is attested from the Middle Kingdom, namely Neshemetemhat ('The *neshemet*-sacred barque is at the lead'; *nšm.t-(m)-h3.t*).<sup>21</sup> One may suggest that the sacred barque may in fact represent a deity standing in the midst of its shrine, e.g. Amun or Ptah, and that name could read e.g. Amenemhat or Ptahemhat.

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20 Ranke 1935, I, no. 92.6.

21 Ranke 1935, I, no. 213.12.

Tx. 4:



[...]-(*m*)-*h3.t* (?)

[...]emhat (?)

In front of the two figures, who are likely family members of the deceased, lies a tray placed on three offering stands and laden heavily with various foodstuffs, an arrangement known from the upper register. On each side of the offering assemblage is a lettuce plant.

Remnants of paint may be detectable on the surface of the stela, namely on the left side of the lunette: red paint is detectable in the roof of the shrine and the upper part of the *w3s*-sceptre. It is not certain if these traces represent the original colouring of the stela.

## Conclusion

The Prague stela is dated to the New Kingdom, or more precisely to the 19<sup>th</sup> Dynasty (ca. 1292–1189 BCE). Its dating is dependent on dated analogies and stylistics of the decoration. The stela attests to the Ramesside Personal piety, as the commissioner of the stela, the Chief Barber of the City, with an unknown name, directly approaches the god Ptah. Judging from the title of the stela's commissioner, the stela was produced in Thebes.

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Pl. 1. The stela of the Chief Barber of the City worshipping Ptah (Photo: Jiří Vaněk).

