

Petamenophis

An Egyptian Priest in Italy?

Patrizia Heindl

Abstract: Petamenophis is probably the best known lector priest (*hr.j-ḥꜣb.t-ḥr.j-tp*) of the Egyptian Late Period. So far, three partially preserved statues of him have come to light in Italy. One of them had long been in private hands and was not available for detailed study. Thanks to a travel grant from the Graduate School Distant Worlds, I went in June 2018 on a research trip to Italy where I happened upon this statue in the Museo Correale di Terranova. By chance, the museum had received it as a gift only a few days before my visit. This article describes my search for and recovery of this statue during the work on my PhD thesis. It also gives an overview of the story of all three statues of Petamenophis found in Italy, whose complex research histories are intriguing in their own right. They show the complex web of ancient engagement with Egyptian statues, early modern interpretation, and recent archaeological work.

Petamenophis in Italy

We may access distant worlds in many surprising ways, for instance, by finding three statues of the ancient Egyptian priest Petamenophis in today's Italy, to which they were taken already in antiquity. They illustrate the often very rich transmission history of ancient Egyptian statues, from antiquity through later times to the present day.

The chief lector priest Petamenophis was a legendary figure in ancient Egypt. Today, he is regarded as an outstanding intellectual of the Egyptian Late Period (700–600 BCE) who had unique connections to the royal family. Where he came from and who his father was is unclear; the filiations mention only his mother, a certain Menekhaset.¹ It is also uncertain which king(s) he served. Although many objects and inscriptions refer to Petamenophis himself, none of them includes the name of a king. On the basis

of the location and architecture of his monumental tomb (TT 33), he was a contemporary of Monthemhat, the famous mayor of Thebes. That is to say, he seems to have been active in the transitional from the 25th, Kushite Dynasty, and the 26th Dynasty under the reigns of Taharqa to Psammetik I.²

In order to understand the history of the three statues of Petamenophis, we need to take a closer look at the ways in which scholarship and wider audiences have perceived Tomb TT 33. This monumental complex, which comprises up to twenty-two underground rooms, was by no means hidden or unknown. On the contrary, sources dating from antiquity through the Middle Ages to the early modern period attest to fact that at least the front rooms have been known and studied for centuries.³ In the past, locals and strangers went into them simply to see the branching underground passages that

¹ Traunecker 2014, 209–211.

² The dates of Padiamenope's life are uncertain. To my mind, the date 710–640 BCE that Traunecker (2014, 227) has proposed seems to be most persuasive, as it

fits both archaeological and cultural-historical evidence.

³ In 1900, Gaston Maspero ordered the tomb to be closed to control a plague of bats. See Traunecker 2014, 207.

were shrouded in legend with their own eyes. Desolate descriptions, stories and fantasies from the early modern period survive in European travel literature. In the imagination of the general public, TT 33 assumed the form of an endless labyrinth that not only ran through the entire Theban necropolis, the so-called Asasif (Arabic العساسيف, underground passages that lead into each other) but stretched across almost unfathomable dimensions. Supposedly, the passages reached as far as the tombs in the Valley of the Kings, or even the pyramids of Giza, 600 km to the north.⁴ In Europe, the tomb became particularly well known through the *Description del'Égypte*, which pictured it as “syringes”, alluding to ancient authors such as Diodorus Siculus, Strabo, and Ammianus Marcellinus.⁵ In the 19th century, too, captivating accounts of the monument and its impressive dimensions abounded. Famous examples are Johannes Dümichen’s vivid descriptions of the acrid stench inside the tomb and stories of explorers who held half oranges under their noses as improvised face masks to withstand the high ammonia levels in the air that stemmed from the faeces of millions of bats.⁶ To this day, due to the high accident rate in the shaft of Room XII, parts of the tomb are believed to be cursed. In short, awareness of Petamenophis’ tomb has fuelled adventurous stories that have even crossed over to popular forms of media outlets such as documentaries.⁷

Fascination with Petamenophis is, however, much older and certainly not limited to the architecture of his tomb. To judge by a lintel that bears his name and titles in the “Small Temple of Medinet Habu,” the Ptolemies

already paid special attention to his person in the 2nd and 1st centuries BCE.⁸ The temple itself was considered to be the “Sacred Place of the First Time” and the “Holy Duat of the Ogdoad” (a group of pre-primeval deities).⁹ In addition to this extraordinary reference to Petamenophis in one of the most significant temples of the Theban West Bank, his tomb in the Asasif was also known and probably at least partly, accessible until Roman times.¹⁰ Neither his person nor his burial place seem to have been forgotten by then.

We know that three statues or statue fragments of the lector priest Petamenophis were brought to the region of today’s Italy at some point. However, given the available data, it remains unclear whether the statues were once removed from their original position because people were aware of Petamenophis’s status, or they were taken indiscriminately from prominent places in the temple of Karnak. Nonetheless, the fact that the statues were brought to Italy at all seems to indicate that someone attributed great importance to them, either because of their inherent qualities or because of where they came from. Regardless of whichever reason may have caused their relocation to Italy, their journeys are highly instructive of the ways Petamenophis has been perceived.

Rome

The earliest evidence of the presence of one of the three statues in Europe comes from drawings by the Italian painter and architect Pirro Ligorio (1514–1583). They suggest that the so-called cuboid or block statue was already in

⁴ E.g., Anton Kreil propounded that idea in a lodge lecture on “Scientific Freemasonry” in April 1785 that was probably attended by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart; see Assmann 2010, 383–384.

⁵ Jomard 1809, 309–310.

⁶ Dümichen 1884–1894, vii–x; Traunecker 2014, 207.

⁷ E.g., Weidenbach 2007.

⁸ See Demuß 2010, 32.

⁹ The rebuilding of the temple complex is documented in particular under Ptolemy IX Soter II. On the

temple’s function as a primordial mound and Duat of the Ogdoad, see Demuß 2010, 96–118.

¹⁰ For overviews of the continued use and cult in the Asasif in Ptolemaic and Roman periods, see Riggs 2003; Strudwick 2003; Budka 2016, 171–172. On the connection between tomb TT 33 and the temple of Medinet Habu, see Traunecker 2014, 226, who latter mentions an inscription in the tomb that seems to be addressed to an external cult location site and to all the deceased.

Rome in the early modern period.¹¹ From then on, it became one of the most frequently cited pieces of *Aegyptiaca* in Europe, partly because it is almost completely preserved: it is missing only its base and parts of the feet. Since the statue's sale to the Marcellus Delfinus Collection end of the 16th century, it has also been given the additional epithet *Delfini*.¹² Although Jean-Jacques Boissard misunderstood its form as a Canopic vessel, his identification as *Canopus Delfini* is now famous.¹³ Moreover, under these monikers it entered the standard works of the European *Thesauri Aegyptiaci*. Apparently, the name Canopus Delfini has also inspired Atanasius Kircher the miraculous "translation" of the sacrificial formula in his *Oedipus Aegyptiacus*:

Thaustus or Osiris will, by providence (and virtue, fill the subterranean temple chamber of the sacred Nilotic vessel with abundance (of all) necessary things, and the fourfold world will be overthrown by the prostrate owl Bebonia [...] ¹⁴

Today, the cuboid statue is in the Louvre collection in Paris and designated simply A.92 in the museum's inventory.

Syracuse

In 1864, a team led by Francesco Di Giovanni discovered the second statue during the excavations of the Apollonium in Syracuse, Sicily.¹⁵ They found the lower body of a "scribe statue" whose base had been chipped off. How exactly it made its way to Sicily remains unclear. For Egyptologists, this object initially seemed to be

of little importance due to its having been taken to Italy and its fragmentary state of preservation.¹⁶ It took the publication of a 1901 letter from Alfred Wiedemann to the English entrepreneur, philanthropist, and collector John Rylands¹⁷ to introduce the statue's inscription to a wider audience, but details of the statue itself were not published until 1978.¹⁸ Today, the statue belongs to the collection of the Museo Archeologico Regionale Paolo Orsi di Siracusa and is listed under inventory number 288.¹⁹

Sorrento

At the city centre of Sorrento, in front of the famous Sedil Dominova, a headless sculpture of Sesostris I (ca. 1975–1965 BCE) towered on top of a column close to the findspot of Petamenophis's third statue.²⁰ The Sedil Dominova has a prominent position in Sorrento's townscape, as it is the former seat of noble families and was most likely built on the ancient structures that once contained the Egyptian statues. In 1866, the statue of Sesostris I was transferred to the Museo Correale di Terranova. Although the statue no longer stood prominently in the town square, it did not disappear from people's memory in the town but continued to be associated with the building. In 1877, the building was taken over by the Società Operaia per il Mutuo Soccorso, an organization dedicated to peace and mutual aid. Once again, the significance of an ancient Egyptian statue was riddled with misunderstandings. These began with the misidentification of Sesostris I's sculpture as a "sfinge", and the notion of a lost sphinx was perpetuated over time.²¹ In the 1960s, construction work around

¹¹ See in detail Grimm – Schoske 2005, 70–71.

¹² Grimm – Schoske 2005, 71.

¹³ Boissard – de Bry 1681, 27–28.

¹⁴ Kircher 1652, 441.

¹⁵ Di Giovanni 1864, 18.

¹⁶ Koldewey – Puchstein 1899, 62.

¹⁷ Wiedemann 1901.

¹⁸ Sist 1978.

¹⁹ I am grateful to the staff of the Museo Archeologico Regionale Paolo Orsi di Siracusa for the opportunity

to take new working photos of the object.

²⁰ On the discovery of the third statue of Petamenophis in the 1960s, see D'Este 1975. Giulio Cesare Capaccio's descriptions of the statue of Sesostris I indicates that fragments of Egyptian statues were found in front of the Sedil Dominova no later than the 17th century. See d'Este – Russo 2018, 11 / 18. The first drawing of their placement was made by Ercole Gigante in 1860.

²¹ For the history of the statues, see D'Este – Russo 2018, 11–19.

the Sedil Dominova revealed that the statue of Sesostris I was not the only ancient Egyptian object in Sorrento as a fragmentary statue of Petamenophis in the pose of a seated scribe appeared in the construction pits. As with the statue in Syracuse, it is obvious that this piece had been intentionally mutilated. This time, only the right knee remained, together with Petamenophis's right hand that rested on top of it and part of the base. Immediately after the excavation took place, the private collector Aldo Bellone acquired the find. Thirty years later, Margherita D'Este (who also used the name Di Savoia-Aosta-Habsburg) was the first scholar to undertake an extensive study.²² Unfortunately, Sorrento's densely developed old town with its numerous historic buildings renders large-scale excavations impossible. Consequently, the exact find context of the statue will continue to elude us for a long time. Yet, some scholars have speculated that both statues may have belonged in the villa of a Roman aristocrat or in a temple of Isis.²³

So far, available images of the statue's hieroglyphic inscription are rather blurred. I therefore attempted to locate the object in order to take better photos and hopefully to gain deeper knowledge of the contents of the inscription. Since I was unable to contact either the excavators or Margherita D'Este I decided to visit the Museo Correale di Terranova in Sorrento, which is the current home of the statue of Sesostris I. I hoped to find out if there was any further documentation relating to the

Petamenophis statue or its location. Thanks to a Distant Worlds travel grant, I was indeed able to make the trip to Italy and visit the museum. Imagine my surprise when I entered the exhibition room only to find the fragment I was looking for sitting on the floor below the statue of Sesostris I! Prof. Mario Russo, director of the Museo Correale di Terranova, was no less surprised when I asked him to work on the object because he told me that it had been donated to the museum only a few days before.²⁴ Thanks to the permission of Prof. Mario Russo to work on the object, I was able to eliminate ambiguities regarding the inscriptions.²⁵

At this point, there is no clear answer as to exactly why statues of Petamenophis were brought to Italy and by whom. It also remains uncertain whether these objects were regarded as statues in their own right or ended up being used as mere building materials in local architecture. Only further research may help to shed more light on the dark chapter of their journeys to Italy.

Acknowledgments

I am grateful to many people for help and support during the trip and for advice for this article: John Baines, Julia Budka, Bastian Obrecht, Mario Russo, Armin Selbitschka, the staff of the Museo Archeologico Regionale Paolo Orsi di Siracusa and the Graduate School Distant Worlds.

²² D'Este 1998.

²³ D'Este – Russo 2018, 18–19.

²⁴ On the donation, see D'Este – Russo 2018, 19. I would like to thank Mario Russo for the permission to work on the object.

²⁵ Results of this will be presented as part of my dissertation, Heindl (in preparation).

Bibliography

Assmann 2010

J. Assmann, Ägypten und der Ursprung der Esoterik. Zur Geschichte und Genese eines Mythos, in: A. B. Kilcher (ed.), *Constructing Tradition. Means and Myths of Transmission in Western Esotericism* (Leiden 2010) 373–393.

Boissard – de Bry 1681

J.-J. Boissard, – D. de Bry, *Topographia urbis Romæ. Das ist: Eigentliche Beschreibung der Stadt Rom / Sampt Allen Antiquitäten / Pallästen / Amphitheatris oder Schauplätzen, Obeliscis, Pyramiden, Lustgärten, Bildern, Begräbnüssen, Oberschriften und dergleichen, so in und umb der Stadt Rom gefunden / und in vier Tagen ordentlich beschauet und gesehen werden können* (Frankfurt 1681).

Budka 2016

J. Budka, Kontinuität und Adaption. Zur Einbindung von Ritualhandlungen in die Architektur spätzeitlicher Tempelgräber in Theben (25. Dynastie bis Ptolemäerzeit), in: A. H. Pries (ed.), *Die Variation der Tradition. Modalitäten der Ritualadaption im Alten Ägypten; Akten des internationalen Symposiums vom 25.–28. November 2012 in Heidelberg* (Leuven 2016) 171–200.

Demuß 2010

K. Demuß, *Dsr s.t. Studien zum Kleinen Tempel von Medinet Habu*, Dissertation (Georg-August-Universität Göttingen 2010) (<https://ediss.uni-goettingen.de/handle/11858/00-1735-0000-0006-B4B4-3>).

D’Este 1975

M. Di Savoia-Aosta-Habsburg (= D’Este), I monumenti faraonici di Sorrento. La statua di Seti Io e la recentemente ritrovata statua di Padimenemipet, *Studi Classici e Orientali* 24, 1975, 211–215.

D’Este 1998

M. D’Este, Petamenofi a Sorrento, *Egitto e Vicino Oriente* 20–21, 1998, 119–124.

D’Este – Russo 2018

M. D’Este – M. Russo, I monumenti egizi di Sorrento. Le statue frammentarie del faraone Seti I (XIX dinastia 1303–1290 a.C.) e dello scriba Petamenofi, sacerdote di Tebe (VII sec. a.C.) (Sorrento 2018).

Di Giovanni 1864

F. Di Giovanni, Scoperte nel Tempio creduto di Diana in Siracusa, *Bull. Comm. Ant. Sic.* 1, 1864, 17.

Dümichen 1884–1894

J. Dümichen, *Der Grabpalast des Patuamenap in der thebanischen Nekropolis* (Leipzig 1884–1894).

Grimm – Schoske 2005

A. Grimm – S. Schoske (eds.), *Winckelmann und Ägypten. Die Wiederentdeckung der ägyptischen Kunst im 18. Jahrhundert* (München 2005).

Heindl (in preparation)

P. Heindl, *Monthemhat und Padiamenope. Die Statuen zweier thebanischer Elitebeamter zur Spätzeit* (Dissertation in preparation).

Jomard 1809

E. F. Jomard, *Description de l’Égypte : ou recueil des observations et des recherches qui ont été faites en Égypte pendant l’expédition de l’armée française, publié par les ordres de Sa Majesté l’Empereur Napoléon le Grand.* 2,1,1: Texte 1 (Paris 1809).

Kircher 1652

A. Kircher, *Athanasii Kircheri; E Soc. Iesv, Oedipvs Aegyptiacvs. Hoc Est Vniuersalis Hieroglyphicæ Veterum Doctrinæ temporum iniuria abolitæ Instauratio; Opus ex omni Orientalium doctrina & sapientia conditum, nec non viginti diuersarum linguarum autoritate stabilitum* (Roma 1652).

Koldewey – Puchstein 1899

R. Koldewey – O. Puchstein, *Die griechischen Tempel in Unteritalien und Sicilien* (Berlin 1899).

Riggs 2003

C. Riggs, The Egyptian Funerary Tradition at Thebes in the Roman Period, in: N. Strudwick – J. H. Taylor (eds.), *The Theban Necropolis. Past, Present and Future* (London 2003) 189–201.

Sist 1978

L. Sist, Una statua di scriba nel Museo Archeologico di Siracusa, *Vicino Oriente* 1, 1978, 133–140.

Strudwick 2003

N. Strudwick, Some Aspects of the Archaeology of the Theban Necropolis in the Ptolemaic and Roman Periods, in: N. Strudwick – J. H. Taylor (eds.), *The Theban Necropolis. Past, Present and Future* (London 2003) 167–188.

Traunecker 2014

C. Traunecker, The "Funeral Palace" of Padiamenope (TT 33): Tomb, Palace of Pilgrimage, and Library. Current Research, in: E. Pischikova – J. Budka – K. Griffin (eds.), *Thebes in the First Millennium BC* (Cambridge 2014) 205–234.

Wiedemann 1901

A. Wiedemann, *Egyptian Notes*, *Proceedings of the Society of Biblical Archaeology* 23, 1901, 248–251.

Webpages

Weidenbach 2007

T. Weidenbach, Ägypten – Das Rätsel um Grab 33, Südwestrundfunk, Redaktion Länder-Menschen-Abenteuer, 2007 (<https://www.swr.de/lma/lma-aegypten-luxor-petamenophis/-/id=100886/did=4866446/nid=100886/17jmhx/index.html>, 29.01.2021).