

Ancient Egyptian Biographies and Biographies of the Objects Bearing Them

Wepwawetaa in Leiden and Munich

John Baines

Abstract: Two inscribed stelae from Abydos in Upper Egypt, belonging to the local dignitary Wepwawetaa of the 19th century BCE, have been in the Leiden and Munich collections since the early 19th century CE. These, which are among the largest of a couple of thousand examples, bear important biographical texts. At the same time, details of their physical treatment and partial mutilation after they were created document aspects of their protagonist's standing in his community and the character of that community. Thus, the stelae have a biography of their own, taking the destiny of a man who was very preoccupied with his ancestry and status forward in time past his death. This later history of the objects, which is not treated in modern discussions, exemplifies the value of studying monuments in the original and bringing together philological, art-historical, and archaeological approaches.

Two inscribed stelae from Abydos in Upper Egypt, belonging to the local dignitary Wepwawetaa of the 19th century BCE, have been in Leiden and Munich since the 1820s CE.¹ These well-preserved monuments bear important biographical texts that are known to many because Kurt Sethe included them in his *Aegyptische Lesestücke zum Gebrauch im akademischen Unterricht* (1924, and later editions), a book that is still in use and has had an influence far exceeding the aim stated in its title. Sethe was a giant among scholars who also worked prodigiously to edit ancient Egyptian texts and make them accessible, but he lived before cheap travel and widely available photography. Although he tried to see all the material he published, often this was impossible. This article is in part a homage to

Sethe, in which I seek to go a little beyond what was practicable for him.

Apart from the content of Wepwawetaa's texts, details of their physical treatment and partial mutilation after they were created provide evidence of their protagonist's standing in his community and of the character of that community. Thus, the stelae have a biography of their own, taking their owner's destiny forward in time past his death. This later history of the objects, which has not so far been discussed, exemplifies the value of attending to the materiality of monuments, studying them in the original, and bringing together philological, art-historical, and archaeological approaches. I was able to examine the Munich stela more than once during my tenure of the MZAW Gastprofessur, and I used images of it in my first public lecture, which was given in the

¹ Rijksmuseum van Oudheden, Leiden AP 69; Staatliches Museum Ägyptischer Kunst Gl. WAF 35. Simpson 1974, 18, chapel ANOC 20. Translations, with bibliography: Lichtheim 1988, 75–80;

Landgráfová 2011, 156–166; see also treatment in the *Thesaurus Linguae Aegyptiae*. Leiden stela: Giovetti – Picchi 2016, 156–157 (photographs), 514 (no. III.4). Recent mention: Olabarria 2020, 70.

museum. It is a great pleasure to present what I found in this final issue of *Distant Worlds Journal*.

The stelae belong within a practice in which large numbers of people attended the festival of Osiris, the god of the dead, whose temple was in the north-east of the site of Abydos, close to the desert edge (the orientation is expressed in terms of “river north”). From near the temple a wadi leads west toward a cleft in the rock escarpment two or three kilometres away. The festival included a procession, along the wadi to ancient burial grounds near the cleft, during which episodes of the myth of Osiris were enacted. People aspired to be able to be present at the festival in the next life, and their chapels, which were in an area termed the “Terrace of the Great God” west of the temple, would enable them to do this.² Abydos was a primarily religious centre, and many of its most important people must have been involved in the cult and festivals of Osiris.

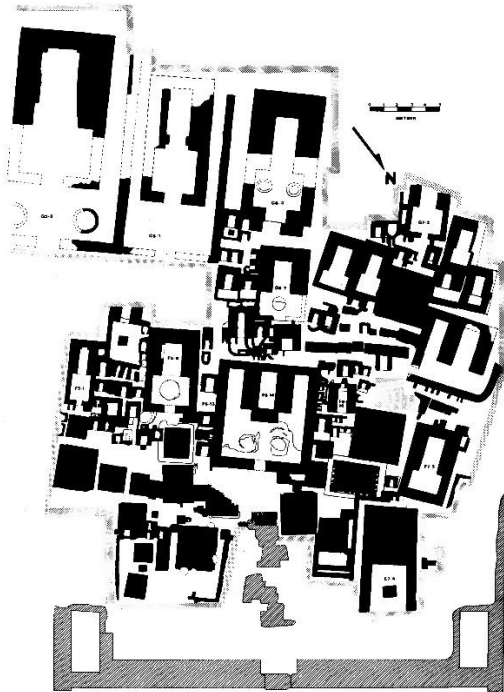


Fig. 1. Plan of an area of Middle Kingdom memorial chapels in Abydos north (ca. 19th century BCE), later built over by a temple of Ramesses II (ca. 1279–1213 BCE) (Courtesy of David O’Connor).

² For administration of the area with the chapels and stelae, see Leahy 1989.

The exact provenance of Wepwawetaa’s stelae is not known. They were almost certainly set up in a commemorative chapel in the northern sector of Abydos. The chapel might or might not have been associated with his tomb: both these arrangements are known. An area containing commemorative chapels that was first excavated in the 1960s and 1970s offers illuminating possibilities, although these stelae cannot have come from there (**Fig. 1**).³ The chapels – these ones were not associated with tombs – were mudbrick structures with courtyards, ranging from a tiny scale to an area of about 150 square metres. The stelae would generally be placed in the enclosed, vaulted structure at the back, or in niches in its thickness. Heather Kopleff (2017) has studied how they may have been arranged in chapels, but the case studies she treats are much smaller in scale than the stelae of Wepwawetaa. It is not known how very tall, rectangular stelae like the Leiden one fitted into their chapels.

The stelae must have been fairly well protected where they lay, because the Leiden one retains much painted decoration. Their reliefs and inscriptions are also in generally excellent condition. Both the survival of the paint on the Leiden stela and the relatively unweathered stone suggest that the piece was little exposed to the sun. The stone of the Munich stela is more difficult to interpret. The reddish colour of areas of its upper surface is very unusual but possibly intrinsic to the stone. The area below the red-stained part is almost undamaged. There are possible traces of red and yellow paint that would need to be investigated under a microscope. If the stela was not painted, this could suggest that Wepwawetaa died quite soon after it was carved.

³ See O’Connor 2009; Adams 2019, 59–67; Snape 2019.



Fig. 2. Stela of Wepwawetaa. Limestone (© Rijksmuseum van Oudheden, Leiden).

The Leiden stela (**Fig. 2**), which is dated to year 44 of Senwosret I corresponding to year 2 of Amenemhat II (around 1785 BCE), is flat-topped with a cavetto cornice. At the top of the main area is a long inscription with a laudatory characterization of its protagonist but with little narrative of specific events. As is normal, the text says nothing about the household members shown in the registers of relief below. Even Wepwawetaa's wife, who is seated next to him, is not named, and that is not normal. Thirty further people are crammed into the rest of the space, one at a tiny scale. Their number is not in itself exceptional: stelae can show even more people. On the present stela, however, most of them are doing something for Wepwawetaa, rather than being depicted for any value they might derive from being present in the group. Unusually, no one is captioned. It is as if what mattered to the owner was the size of his

entourage, not who they were, and the lack of captions facilitated the inclusion of many figures. Thus, although the relief design and images are separate from the main text, both display a very strong focus on the stela's owner. Moreover, the text expresses a preoccupation with ancestry and inherited status, both as a value and as a tradition that Wepwawetaa claimed to surpass, that is hard to match from the same period. The stela offers a strong contrast with another in Leiden, of Intefiqer, dated eleven years earlier. This, which is 144 cm high – slightly smaller than that of Wepwawetaa – shows 37 people in addition to those receiving offerings, and all but one of them are captioned.⁴

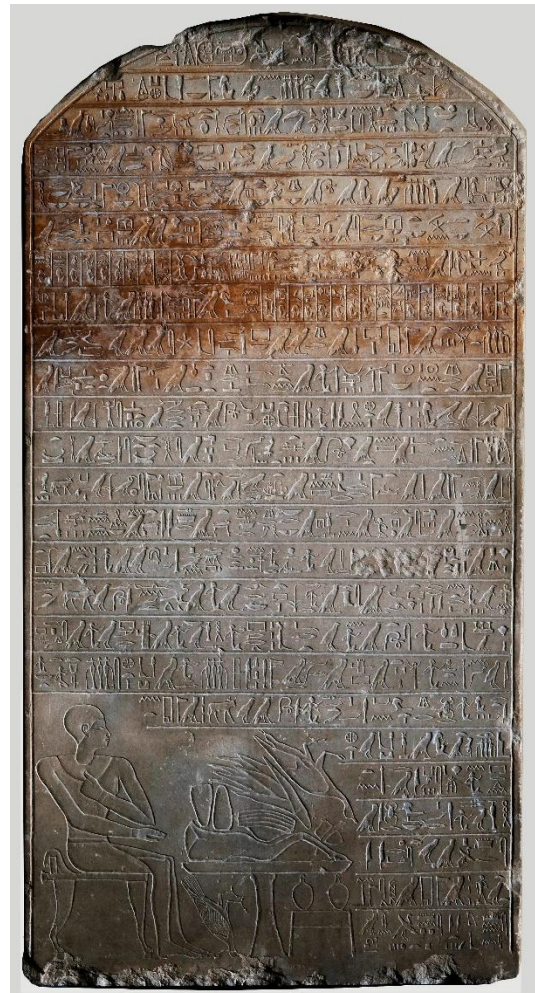


Fig. 3. Stela of Wepwawetaa. Limestone (© Staatliches Museum Ägyptischer Kunst, Munich).

⁴ Rijksmuseum van Oudheden, Leiden AP 7: Giovetti – Picchi 2016, 154–155 (photographs), 514 (no. III.3).

The Munich stela (**Fig. 3**) is of the more frequent round-topped type. It bears a damaged date of Amenemhat II in the curve at the top. Examination of the detail and a new photograph show that this should be restored as 23 ([10+]10 / 3: see **Fig. 4**).⁵ This stela was thus created more than twenty years after the other one. Dates are rare on Abydos stelae, and their presence on both of Wepwawetaa's may signal something of his social aspirations. I know of no other case where two stelae of the same nonroyal individual that were almost certainly set up in the same place can be dated so far apart. The inscription continues over the rest of the surface area, leaving the bottom left corner for a figure of the owner seated before a table of offerings. The style of this figure is unlike that on the Leiden stela, suggesting that the later monument was produced in a different workshop, so that the datings were not retrospective. The Munich stela has one of the biggest inscribed areas known, although the text is not especially long. Its first part is broadly religious in content, while containing much detail about Wepwawetaa's personal status. The large scale of the hieroglyphs made it possible to include a miniaturized table of 29 deities, a religious composition of great prestige, within two lines (**Fig. 5**; Végh 2020, 119–120, with references; on its character as a list, see Hoffmann 2015, 91 with fig. 3). Strikingly, the owner's titles and name, which come both before and after the list, are bolder and easier to read than the names of the deities. The last part of the text treats an episode in which Wepwawetaa went to the royal residence, hundreds of kilometres to the north, to receive a promotion and be welcomed at court.



Fig. 4. Stela of Wepwawetaa (Munich): detail of damaged date in the top line (© Staatliches Museum Ägyptischer Kunst, Munich. Photo Marianne Franke).

Wepwawetaa must have been a person of wealth and standing, because his stelae are among the very largest of the couple of thousand of their period found at Abydos. The Leiden stela is 160 × 105 cm and the Munich stela 143 × 80 cm. When set up above ground, as they must have been because their decoration goes almost to the bottom, they would have been around the average height of a person of their period. The still larger stela of Mentuhotep (180 cm high), from a generation earlier than Wepwawetaa, is inscribed on both sides and on its thickness and must have been set up freestanding, so that its context would have been different from that of almost all other stelae (Lange – Schäfer 1902–25, II, 150–158, IV, pls xli–xlii). Mentuhotep was a vizier, the holder of the highest official of state (see Simpson 1991), and one can imagine Wepwawetaa wishing to emulate his very public display as far as he could.

Wepwawetaa and his character give a paradoxical impression. It is risky to interpret ancient works subjectively, but some aspects of his texts and images offer a basis for doing so. The lofty titles and epithets are generic and honorific. Wepwawetaa's most substantive title, “overseer of priests” – freely rendered “chief priest” – was probably the highest

⁵ The date line is omitted in Sethe 1924, 73, the edition from which most people read the Egyptian text. What follows is grammatically self-sufficient, so nothing was lost for teaching. Perhaps Sethe thought that since

the date could not be read with certainty, it was simplest to leave it aside. He also omitted the dates on the Leiden stela, which are at the sides of the cavetto cornice, not in the main inscribed area.

position that someone who was neither a provincial governor nor active in higher state administration could achieve locally. The title occurs on the Leiden stela as well as the Munich one and so must have been acquired relatively early in his career. The Leiden stela emphasizes his descent from people who had been leaders since the beginning of time, but he did not name his parents, although that was commonly done. He might have been a parvenu who claimed a lineage despite a relatively undistinguished background. Another oddity is that the Leiden stela states that after he had acquired in youth the basic priestly status of “pure one (*w’b*)” the king advanced his position further. A little later he says that Senwosret I placed him among the “companions”, that is, probably people with honorific positions at court. The whole passage mentions nothing specific, so that, to the suspicious, elements such as an assertion that he travelled north and south look like clichés. He used the perspective of his Abydos home rather than the royal residence in the north.

The narrative of the Munich stela is somewhat more tangible, but it tells of things that could have happened at any time. There are also seeming contradictions. Wepwawetaa says that he went north to the palace, where the office of “overseer of priests” was given to him, constituting an advance on his ancestors’ status. Yet that office is already claimed on the Leiden stela, over twenty years earlier. He also says, with details, that he was treated with particular favour and privilege; the way this is done is new, but the treatment may not be. With one exception, this narrative reads rather like a reworking of the Leiden one. The exception, and probably the most significant benefit that he acquired, comes at the end: statues of him were to be placed in the temple in the “following of the great god” (presumably Osiris), and they were endowed with offerings.

Later parallels show that this was a privilege granted by the king (Verbovsek 2004, esp. 20–21). Was the entitlement to these the only award that he received on a much later visit, if that really happened? Would it have been made to an old man with a view to his receiving offerings in the next life?

A striking absence from Wepwawetaa’s texts is any mention of a royal commission to carry out works on the temple of Osiris, where he held his title of chief priest. A couple of later stelae narrate such commissions (Lichtheim 1988, 98–100; Baines 2009). Perhaps his role was a more routine one.

One can reconstruct the monumental activity of Wepwawetaa tentatively as follows. During the overlap between the reigns of Senwosret I and Amenemhat II he commissioned the Leiden stela, as well as probably a chapel in which it was set up. The text of the stela – more likely commissioned than composed by him – terms the location an *js*, which is normally rendered “tomb” but can also cover a chapel. Much later, perhaps after he was awarded the right to have statues of himself in the temple of Osiris, he commissioned the Munich stela, which was set up in the same place (it would not have survived if it had been in the temple area). The chapel could have been laid out from the beginning with a view to adding more stelae later. Wepwawetaa was not alone in possessing more than one stela (e.g. Baines 2009).

The narrative of Wepwawetaa’s stelae in antiquity does not end there. Probably within a decade or two of his death, both stelae were mutilated in minor but significant ways. On the Leiden stela the owner’s name was erased, although not so thoroughly as to make it indecipherable. The faces of Wepwawetaa and his wife were damaged (especially his), as well as that of his dog (but not her dog), and the same was done to some other human figures.

The damage to the faces is significant because it would render the figures unable to breathe and therefore receive the benefit of offerings in the next world. The lower pair of registers is little damaged, perhaps not at all, which is striking because they include a captioned image of a statue of Wepwawetaa that would receive offerings like his upper image. The damage on the Munich stela is a little different, but as with the Leiden one, it does not extend to the lowest part, where the figure of the owner is located. It also seems inconsistent: one occurrence of the owner's name before the list of deities is erased, two after it are not, and the last one, rather further down, is again erased. Either the briefly formulated middle instances were close to the list of deities and left standing, perhaps partly because the majority of the signs write the name of the god Wepwawet, or they were simply overlooked. The patterning of damage on the stelae suggests that at the time when it was done the chapel was not maintained and their bottom areas were covered, most probably by wind-blown sand, which can very quickly fill spaces that are not swept. Even after the cult finished, people actively wished harm in the next world upon Wepwawetaa, his wife, and some members of his family.

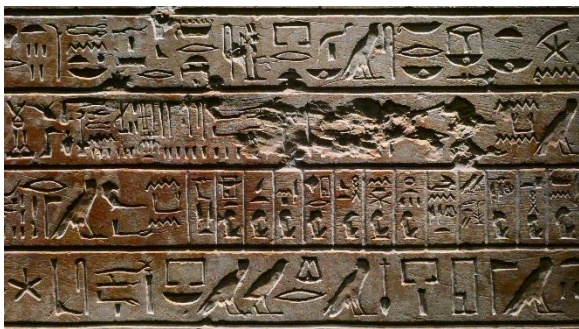


Fig. 5. Stela of Wepwawetaa (Munich): detail of the owner's erased name, the alterations to the titles of personnel, and part of the table of deities in the line beneath (Staatliches Museum Ägyptischer Kunst, Munich; Photo John Baines).

For both stelae, Sethe deciphered the erased traces of signs brilliantly, but in his copy he did not indicate the damage. It was a surprise to me, first to find the erasures on photographs, and then to see what had happened in more detail

on the Munich stela itself. What is more, inspection of the original shows that not only were Wepwawetaa's most important titles and name erased at a crucial point, but the groups following after it were recarved (**Fig. 5**). Sethe's readings here are a little problematic, but it would be difficult to improve on them. The erasure of the titles "Count, Overseer of Priests" (*ḥ3tj- 'j jmj-r3 ḥmw-ntr*) and the name was done rather crudely (the end of the group is not quite clear to me). By contrast, the inscribed area immediately to the left was deepened in order to remove completely what was there, and then a set of priestly offices was squeezed into the space: "Counts, Supervisors of Priests, Foremost Ones" (*ḥ3tjw- 'j, šḥdw ḥmw-ntr, jmjw-ḥnt*). All these groups are enjoined to say an offering formula of the many gods in the list that follows, "for the *ka* (vital spirit) of the Count and Overseer of Priests Wepwawetaa" (followed by a long string of additional titles and a repetition of the name). In these two later occurrences his name was not erased. Could that be in part because of a complex institution through which offerings made to the gods to and thence him would subsequently be recycled to the priestly personnel?

The altered inscription includes three categories of upper-level priestly officials, rather than whatever smaller group had been inscribed there before, as recipients of offerings recycled – as was normal – from Wepwawetaa's endowment. The endowment income was probably no longer being used for his mortuary cult and therefore open to appropriation by others. If both the damage and the reinscription were done at the same time, which is the simplest possibility, this would suggest that these priestly groups wished not only to redirect the offerings but also to neutralize Wepwawetaa's capacity to benefit from them in the next world. Since that benefit was material, whereas he and his wife would be sustained by its consecrated metaphysical element, there would be little conflict of interest

between him and them and hence no need for them to mutilate his images. It would follow that they had further motives, most likely that they were taking revenge on him. Mutilations of this sort are otherwise hardly known from Abydos (Leire Olabarria, pers. comm.), and this scarcity suggests that such vengeance was rare, much rarer than in the Memphite and Theban necropolis of the third and later second millennia. It was thus a very significant step to enact it in one of the largest chapels. One cannot know what had offended Wepwawetaa's colleagues, but contrast between the aspirational character of his texts and the lack of specific achievements claimed in them would fit someone who was not an easy companion. His evident wealth could also have aroused envy.

If an approach to the erasure and reinscription along these lines is thought reasonable, two further points should be made. First, the mutilation was discreetly done: the stelae were not significantly damaged, and people would have had to look at them to see what had been done. They might have been unlikely to do this in a chapel that was no longer in operation. Those commanding the mutilation may have

been discreet because of the chapel's location among others of its type, no doubt including ones that they would aspire to construct for themselves. Although the Terrace of the Great God was not a temple, the area was sacred. Second, the details of the mutilation, including both the attack on the protagonists' faces and the alteration to the inscription, show that the stelae were not only "monuments" to someone's memory: they possessed agency that affected the destinies of Wepwawetaa in the afterlife and his attackers on earth. By adding one or two categories to the list of recipients of offerings, they caused a change in provisions, and that change was documented, both for this world and for the next. These were serious matters in a world in which the living and the dead were actively connected, not merely rejections of a symbol.

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