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Relief with the epithets and names of Alexander the Great

Egypt, Hermopolis Magna, Temple of Thoth

Macedonian Period, reign of Alexander the Great

Limestone, painted

41.5 x 70.4 x 5.5 cm

FGA-ARCH-0162

Provenance

Galerie François Antonovich, Paris, 21.05.1999

RELIEF WITH THE EPITHETS AND NAMES OF ALEXANDER THE GREAT

Alexander the Great assumed the reins of government immediately upon the assassination of his father, Philip II, king of Macedonia. Shortly, thereafter, according to the Roman historian Arrian, Alexander declared war upon Persia by stating that he wished to avenge the Greeks for the devastation wrought upon them by the Persians, who initiated the Peloponnesian Wars without any prior provocation from the Greeks. Alexander began his campaign by leading his forces across the Aegean Sea and marching eastward across Turkey, easily beating back the Persian host, as he turned southward along the Syrian-Palestinian coast where he laid siege to the city of Tyre. Having captured that city, Alexander resolved to take Egypt in order to deprive the Persians of its agricultural bounty and wealth. He gained possession of Egypt in the Fall of 332 BC without a pitched battle because of his skillful, diplomatic negotiations with Mazaces, the Persian satrap, or governor, of Egypt. Thereupon Alexander did not immediately resume his campaign against Darius III, but remained for a time in Egypt in order to accomplish a number of objectives, one of which was to travel to the remote reaches of the Western Desert near the Libyan border in order to consult there the famous oracle of the god Ammon.

Among the ancient Greeks the oracle of Ammon in the Siwa Oasis rivaled that of Apollo at Delphi. Its remote location added weight to the pronouncements delivered to those who consulted it. Alexander was aware of the fact that Cambyses, king of Persia, had tried to consult the oracle of Ammon in 525 BC with his army but abandoned the attempt when a sandstorm engulfed and killed most of his troops. Alexander's desire to reach Siwa may very well have been an act of bravura, demonstrating that he was bound to succeed where the Persians failed. The route, never clearly marked, was perilous. Tradition maintains that Alexander may never have reached Siwa if it had not been either for the flight of two crows or a pair of speaking, slithering serpents who served as guides.

The events surrounding the pronouncement of the oracle are shrouded in mystery. One account maintains that Alexander would share what happened there with others, but only after he informed Olympias, his mother. That did not happen because, after departing on his campaigns against the Persians, he died in Babylon before he could return home to see his mother. A parallel tradition suggests that the chief priest of Ammon, whose native tongue was not Greek, attempted to greet Alexander by exclaiming something like, hail, my son, which was mispronounced and mistakenly understood as, hail, son of the god of the oasis.

The parallel tradition gained traction so that very soon thereafter the rumor spread that Ammon himself had recognized Alexander as his son. For a long time, therefore, one assumed that the pronouncement at Siwa was for the benefit of the Alexander's Greek speaking entourage. There was no pharaonic Egyptian evidence to corroborate the pronouncement that the god of Siwa had recognized Alexander as his son.

That long-held assumption is now challenged, in part, because of the inscriptions found on this remarkable relief in the collections of the Fondation Gandur pour l'Art. If one examines this relief very carefully, one sees a pronounced shadow on the left-hand side just before the two columns in inscription. That shadow indicates that there is a change in plane, the two columns

of inscription on the left-hand side are raised above the two columns on the right-hand side. That subtle change in elevation suggests that this relief originally came from a jamb of a door within the temple from which this relief came.¹

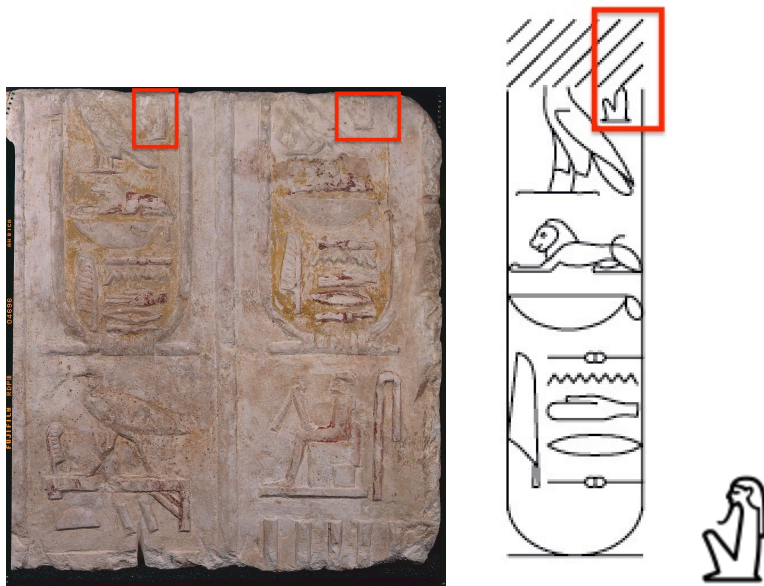


But that is not the only subtle detail exhibited by this relief. The four columns of hieroglyphs contain two pairs cartouches, or royal rings, which enclose the prenomen (left) and the nomen (right) of Alexander the Great. Once again, look even more closely at the top, right hand corner of each of the two cartouches, on the right-hand side:

¹CHAPPAZ 2001, p. 52.



There you will see the damaged remains of the hieroglyph representing a seated deity². The damaged area on the top and to the left of this hieroglyph can be restored on the basis of parallels. The two cartouches on the right hand side of this relief, which contain the nomen of Alexander, can then be translated, beginning with the leftmost, "...the son of the god Amun, whose name is Alexander, the one who is beloved of the god Thoth, the Lord of [Hermopolis Magna]..." and continuing with the one on the right, "...the son of the god Amun, whose name is Alexander, the one who is beloved of the god Shepsi³ who is in Hermopolis Magna..." The two columns of inscription on the left-hand side are identical and contain the titles and prenomen of Alexander, "... The King of Upper and Lower Egypt, the Lord of the Two Lands, the one who is chosen by the god Re and the one who is beloved of the god Amun..." The inscription identifies the temple to which this door jamb belonged as that located at Hermopolis Magna, which was dedicated to its principal deity, Thoth, god of wisdom and patron of scribes, and his temple sharing partner, Shepsi, an ancient solar god.



One can no longer maintain that the pronouncement of Alexander the Great at Siwa was solely intended for his Greek speaking entourage. This relief demonstrates that the pronouncement was embraced as well by the Egyptian priesthood who immediately incorporated that epithet into the nomen of Alexander in a major temple in Middle Egypt.⁴ There is another dimension to this incorporation. Ancient Egyptian pharaohs habitually styled themselves as the sons of Re, the sun god. Alexander tweaks that tradition by consciously aligning himself with Amun, the chief deity of the Egyptian pantheon. That alignment is in keeping with Alexander's intentional policy of promoting himself as the legitimate ruler of Egypt and bona fide successor of the pharaohs. That posturing and self-promotion is perhaps nowhere more admirably demonstrated than by his appropriation of one of the chapels of the Akhmenu, or Festival Hall,

²BOSCH 2013, p. 131-154; et idem 2014, p. 89-109.

³ HOVESTREYDT 2017, p. 41.

⁴ BIANCHI 2018, p. 86-97.

within the sanctuary at Karnak in which he consciously associates himself with Tuthmosis III, the warrior pharaoh of Dynasty XVIII:

begins at 0:50 and concludes at 1:15 in that clip.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PYVBqWPwKS4e>

There are only six known examples of the titles and names of Alexander the Great in hieroglyphs which contain the epithet, son of Amun. We are privileged to have this relief, the only one which is not in Egypt, in collections of the Fondation Gandur pour l'Art because of its importance for a fuller understanding of the career of Alexander the Great.

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