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« A thousand breads, a thousand beers ... » for the Lady Henut



Fig. 1. False door stela for the Lady Henut. FGA-ARCH-EG-0254.

© Photographic credit: Fondation Gandur pour l'Art, Genève. Photographer: Thierry Ollivier.

This sophisticated work reveals the intriguing life of Henut, an Egyptian priestess of Hathor who lived during the 3rd Millennium B.C. Between artistic quality and hieroglyphic misspellings, this stela offers us a captivating window onto ancient Egyptian society, as well as precious clues that we can investigate to rediscover its long-lost original archaeological context.

False door stela for the Lady Henut

Egypt (Saqqara ?)
Old Kingdom, 6th dynasty
2nd half IIIrd Millennium BC
Limestone, polychrome
109.9 x 64.8 x 8.5 cm
FGA-ARCH-EG-0254

Provenance

Sotheby's, London, 10–11 December 1984, lot no. 178 ;
Charles Pankow, San Francisco, CA ;
Sotheby's, New York, 8 December 2004, lot no. 30.

A complex artwork

This beautiful Egyptian relief represents what is known in Egyptological jargon as a false door stela (fig. 1). Carved from a block of limestone more than a metre high, this fascinating work, dating from the 3rd millennium BC, has retained its brightness despite a few evident marks from the passing of time on its lower left-hand side. Luckily, its inscriptions are intact!

This stela has a complex configuration that is typical of its period (fig. 2)¹: it consists first of an outer frame formed by a lintel and two inscribed jambs; inside, a cavetto cornice is carved above a torus decorated with stripes that surrounds a middle frame, again formed by a lintel and two inscribed jambs. In the centre, the central T-shaped panel shows the deceased seated in front of an offering table, while the inner frame below, yet again composed of a lintel and two jambs, surrounds the detailed representation of a closed door: the frames and two bolts are reproduced. Finally, representations of the deceased standing and breathing in a lotus flower adorn the bottom of each outer and middle jambs².

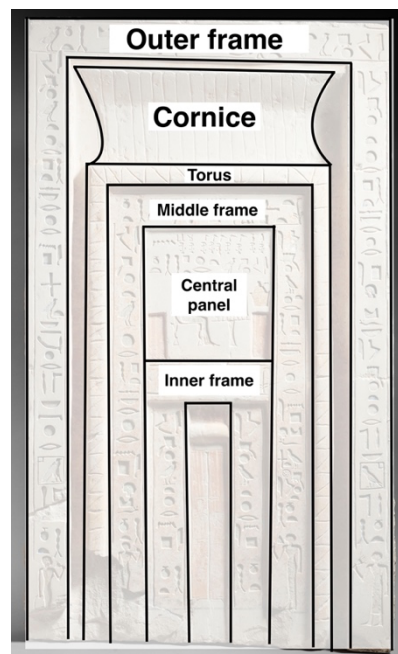


Fig. 2. Diagram of Henut's false door stela.

¹ On the shape and development of false door stelae, see: BOLSCHAKOV, A.O., *Man and his double*, p. 50–53.

² This is a common motif during the Old Kingdom: PIEKE, G. « Der Grabherr und die Lotosblume », p. 259–280.

The hieroglyphs, inscribed in sunken relief, are carefully detailed by fine inner incisions. Those of the outer frame still show traces of blue paint, while those of the middle and inner frames were bright green. Red ochre traces are visible on various parts of the stela: this pigment originally presented striking colour contrasts, like, for example of the false door stela found in the tomb of Mehu (fig. 3). This red paint was frequently used by high-officials to imitate the red granite of Aswan, a highly prized stone that could only be used for members of the royal family at that time³.



Fig. 3. False door stela in the tomb of Mehu (6th dynasty), located at Saqqara.
© Photographic credit: Aurélie Quirion.

The overall rendering of Henut's stela is quite meticulous, yet there are a few minor mishaps: the lintels are not quite parallel, and the dividing lines are a little irregular. These clumsy details are echoed by a few spelling mistakes scattered here and there in the hieroglyphic text.

³ BÁRTA, M., DULÍKOVÁ, V., "The afterlife existence captured in stone", p. 57.



False door, but a genuine gateway to eternity

Although the false door stelae feature all the architectural elements of a "real" Egyptian door (lintels, leaves, bolts, hinges, etc.), they are really just imitations. But what were they used for? The answer lies in the archaeological context of this type of object. They played a fundamental role, both religious and social, in the funerary world, and were an integral part of the architecture of Old Kingdom private tombs. They were erected within the chapels, which were the most important elements of these monuments, where the funerary cult was performed.

The walls of the funerary chapel were often covered with numerous scenes depicting food offerings for the deceased, such as meat, poultry, and bread. Additionally, real food offerings were placed on an offering table, onto which libations were also poured. These tables were usually strategically placed at the foot of the false door stela, which played a key role in the funeral cult, acting as a real point of contact between the living and the world of the dead who, in the beliefs of that time, were supposed to live forever in the afterlife, sustained by the offerings made in their names⁴.

Ostentation in life and *ad aeternam*

In addition to their religious and funerary functions, false door stelae also offered their owners a space for self-presentation. Tomb chapels were frequently visited, and it was important for Egypt's elites to showcase their success within their social class to their contemporaries, by listing their titles and inscribing their names for posterity⁵.

These stelae were therefore given a highly elaborate structure, designed to emphasise the life of their owners. The inscribed texts and images are thus located in key places, of which the Henut stela is a good example. Each line and column end with the mention of her name, which is also illustrated at the end of four of the columns by the figure of the Lady Henut herself, shown standing and breathing in the scent of a lotus flower that she holds in her

⁴ ROETEN, L., *Doors, entrances and beyond*, p. 6–9.

⁵ H. Altenmüller summarises the role of tombs in four main functions: a place for preserving the body, a place for the cult and offerings, a place for resurrection, and a place for self-representation.: ALTENMÜLLER, H., "Aspekte des Grabgedankens", p. 19–36.

hand. She can therefore be identified at first glance, even by someone unable to read hieroglyphics or only partly so (fig. 4).

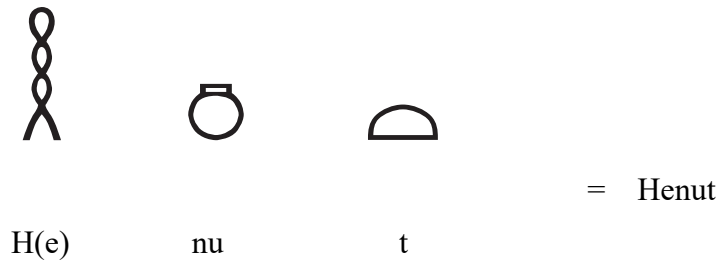



Fig. 4. The name of the Lady Henut, as written on the right jamb of the outer frame of the stela. © Photographic credit: Fondation Gandur pour l'Art, Genève. Photographie : Thierry Ollivier.

When hieroglyphs are misspelled!

The inscribed text is typical for a false door stela. It consists of the traditional offering formulae, which mention:

- The name of the stela owner: *Henut*;
- Her title: *priestess of Hathor*;
- The gods that are revered: *Ptah-Sokar and Anubis*;
- The offerings given to her: *a thousand breads, a thousand beers, five thousand poultry, a thousand calcite vessels, a thousand linen cloths*.

Despite the great care taken over the structure of the stele and the graphic details of the hieroglyphs, readers able to read the original text may be amused by the few spelling mistakes made by the scribe. But what constitutes a mistake in hieroglyphics and are they really mistakes? In the case of our stele, several hieroglyphic signs are written backwards. For example, within the name of the god Ptah-Sokar, the sign for the sound *k* , is mistakenly drawn with the little loop to the left of the basket instead of its right⁶.

⁶ Right jamb of the outer frame.

This type of error is quite common, as hieroglyphs could be equally written from right to left and left to right, although always with the same orientation within a column. But on occasion the scribes could clearly get confused! The name of the god Ptah is also inscribed in the opposite direction to the text on the outer left-hand column. However, this inversion is fairly common on contemporaneous monuments, so much so that one wonders whether there was any intention behind this apparently incorrect spelling⁷.




In addition, several hieroglyphs are missing. The most glaring omission is the  *n* sign in the name of the god Anubis (fig. 5), on the outer right-hand column; the name of the god is easily deduced, however, as it is mentioned, symmetrically, on the outer left-hand column.



Fig. 5. left: erroneous writing of Anubis. Right: correct writing of Anubis.

Another type of spelling error is the confusion between two visually similar hieroglyphic signs. This occurs at the bottom of the outer right-hand column, where the scribe has written the  *aa* sign instead of the  *hem* sign in the priestly title held by Henut.

These minor errors offer us a glimpse into the way this type of object was produced. It seems that the scribe may have worked a tad hastily, and that he probably used a template inscribed on another medium, perhaps written in lines rather than columns. It is also possible the artists responsible for producing these artefacts were not all fully literate! Whatever the case, these small imperfections add a human touch to these ancient artistic representations, which bear testimony to the craftsmanship of the period.

⁷ GOURDON, Y., "Ptah face à ses adorateurs dans les noms de particuliers à l'Ancien Empire", p. 241–244.



In search of the lost tomb

Much like many objects acquired in the art market, the archaeological context of the false door stela of Henut is now lost. However, we do know that it must have once been part of the chapel of an Egyptian tomb. But which one? There are over 400 documented private tombs from the Old Kingdom era in the Memphis region alone⁸! Fortunately, embarking on the quest for Henut's lost tomb does not require donning a hat and whip; a simple detour to the library can already provide us with a wealth of information.

Just like detective investigations, Egyptological documentary research relies on concrete clues left at our disposal: style, material, owner's name, titles, mentioned gods, and toponyms, etc.

It's a matter of style

To begin with, the overall style of an object is always a good indicator of its origin or dating. A reliable method is to compare an object to other similar works discovered *in situ*. In our case, it turns out that two false door stelae, also belonging to priestesses of Hathor, were discovered in Saqqara in a private necropolis from the Old Kingdom (map 1). They probably date from the late sixth Dynasty or a little later⁹. They exhibit numerous similarities with Henut's stela: the same cavetto cornice, a torus decorated with stripes, and a T-shaped panel depicting the deceased seated in front of an offering table (fig. 6). The owners of these stelae are also depicted inhaling a lotus flower on the lower parts of the stela jambs. Given these numerous similarities, it is highly likely that Henut's stela is contemporary with these two stelae and originates from a nearby geographical area, i.e., a necropolis in the Memphite region, the capital of Egypt at that time.

⁸ WALSEM, R. van, *MastaBase*.

⁹ MYSLIWIEC, K., KURASZKIEWICZ, K., "Two more Old Kingdom priestesses of Hathor in Saqqara", p. 153.

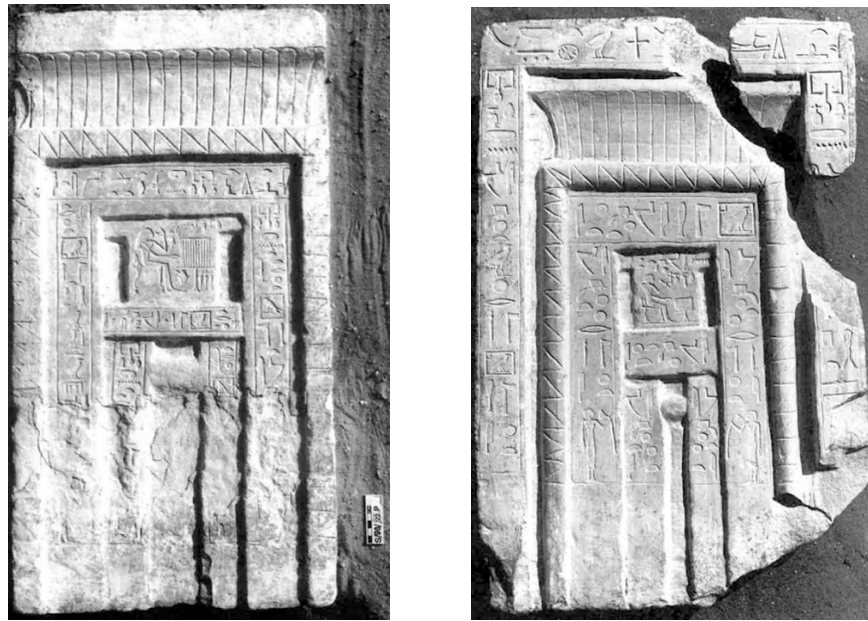


Fig. 6: stelae of Djesti (left) and Kheti (right), after MYSLIWIEC, K., KURASZKIEWICZ, K., "Two more Old Kingdom Priestesses of Hathor in Saqqara", figs 2, 4.

Local Preferences

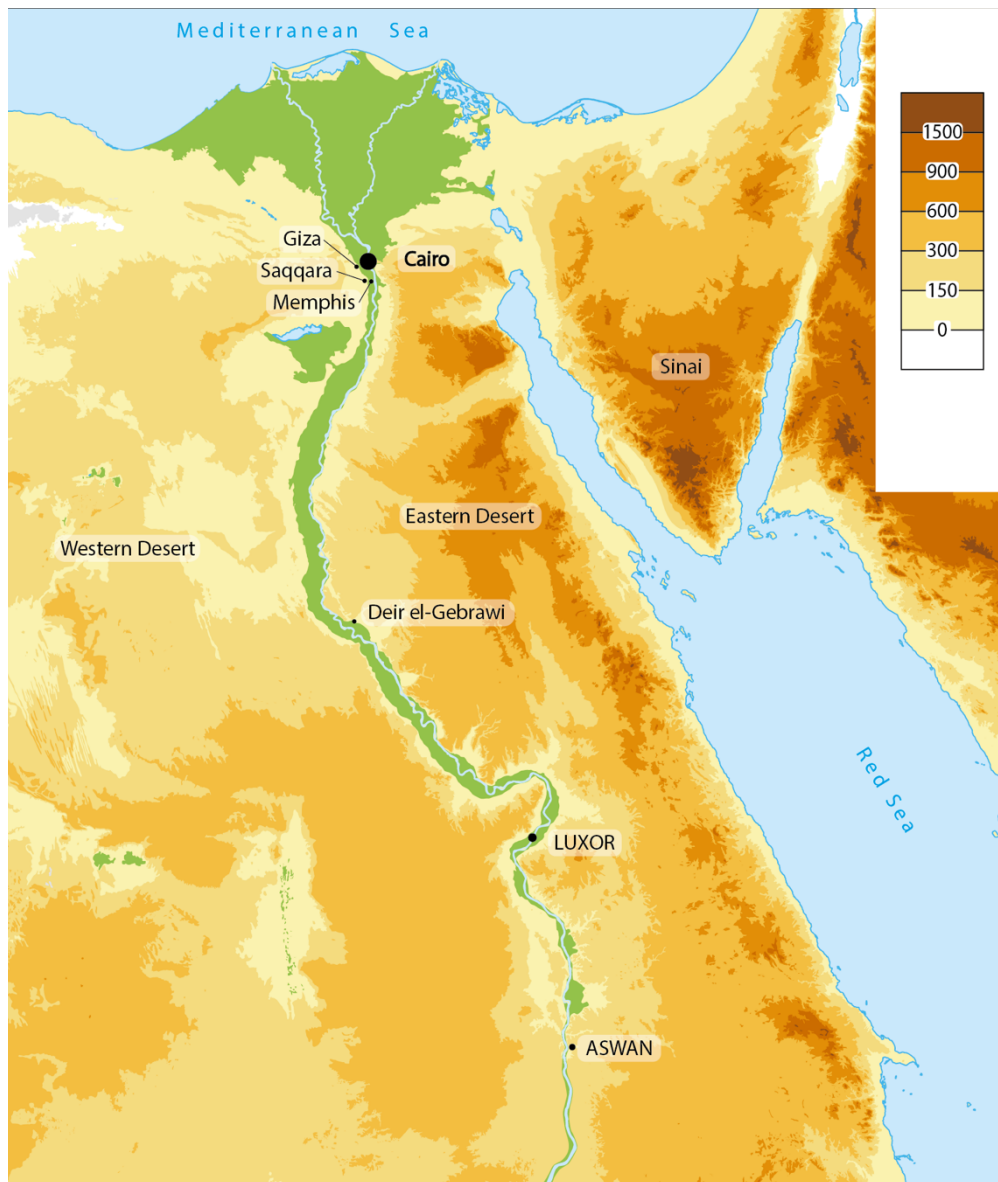
Other indicators point towards the capital as the place of origin of Henut's stela, starting with its materiality: it is carved from a block of fine limestone, and the inscriptions are incised in raised relief. This suggests a necropolis in the Memphite region rather than a provincial cemetery, where stelae are usually either painted or carved directly into the bedrock into which the tombs are excavated.

Mentions of the god Ptah-Sokar, a deity closely associated with the Memphite region¹⁰, further support this hypothesis, as does the title of priestess of Hathor held by Lady Henut¹¹. Indeed, this title is more commonly documented in the region of Memphis than in the provinces¹².

¹⁰ LÄ IV, 1179.

¹¹ About this title, see GALVIN, M., *The priestesses of Hathor*; LEPROHON, R. J., "The sixth Dynasty false door of the priestess of Hathor Irti", p. 45–46; GILLAM, R. A., "Priestesses of Hathor", p. 211–237.

¹² According to R.A. Gillam ("Priestesses of Hathor", p. 219–220), there are 81 priestesses known at Giza and 65 at Saqqara during the Old Kingdom.



Map 1: Egypt and Nubia, after © IFAO, M. Gaber - D. Laisney.

A rare name

Finally, we know that this false door stela belongs to a lady named Henut. While this name, meaning "the mistress," is very common during the Middle Kingdom, there are only two other older attestations dating back to the Old Kingdom¹³, a period unquestionably associated with

¹³ RANKE, H., *Die ägyptischen Personennamen*, vol. 1, p. 242, no. 18. Several longer names that include the word Henut are known, but the short version is rare.

the style of the stela. The first comes from the provincial necropolis of Deir el-Gebrawi South (map 1)¹⁴ and belongs to Ibi, who was the mother of a woman called Henut¹⁵. However, we have already determined that our false door stela is unlikely to come from a provincial necropolis.

The second attestation was found at Saqqara, in a cemetery for private individuals located north of the pyramid of Pepi II. In a small tomb plundered by looters, archaeologists discovered a calcite-alabaster perfume plaque belonging to a woman named Henut (fig. 7), along with a vase lid bearing the name of King Pepi I (3rd king of the sixth Dynasty, ca. 2289–2250 BC), a calcite-alabaster bowl, and several miniature vessels¹⁶. On the plaque, Henut holds the title of "royal ornament", a title not mentioned on the false door stela. Yet, this does not exclude the possibility that these two objects belonged to the same individual, since the style of the false door closely resembles that of similar monuments contemporaneous with the plaque and of those found near the tomb that plaque came from¹⁷.

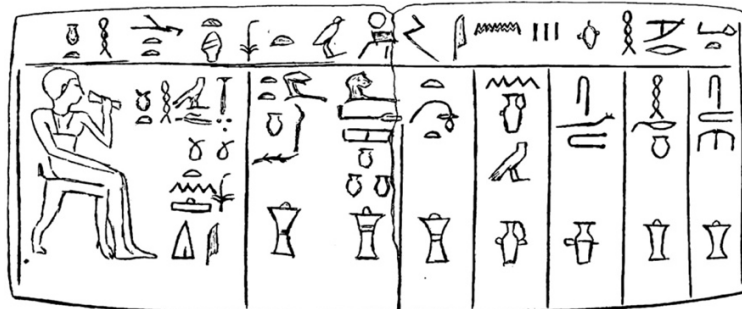


Fig. 7: calcite-alabaster plaque with the name Henut, found at Saqqara (JÉQUIER, G., *Fouilles à Saqqarah*, fig. 102).

Who was Henut?

While we cannot formally prove the origin of this stela, the investigation into its provenance transports us into the life of Henut, a priestess of Hathor from the middle class of the elite¹⁸.

¹⁴ Located in the 12th province of Upper Egypt.

¹⁵ KANAWATI, N., *Deir el-Gebrawi*, vol. II, pl. 68.

¹⁶ JÉQUIER, G., *Fouilles à Saqqarah*, p. 91, fig. 102–103.

¹⁷ For example, the false door stela of Isti shows the deceased wearing a similar dress and hairdo and holding a lotus flower in her hand (JÉQUIER, G., *Fouilles à Saqqarah*, fig. 98); the stela of Herhetep shows a similar structure and style (JÉQUIER, G., *Fouilles à Saqqarah*, fig. 107).

¹⁸ At that time, most of these priestesses belonged to the middle-class of the elite. See GILLAM, R. A., "Priestesses of Hathor", p. 227.



She likely lived in Memphis, the capital of Egypt during the reign of Pepi II (last king of the sixth dynasty, ca. 2246–2452 BC) and was probably provided with a small mastaba tomb, typical of individuals of this status during that era¹⁹.

Women tend to be less visible in archaeological and textual sources than their male counterparts, and their role in Egyptian society is still relatively unknown. Most large mastabas belonged to men, and women were often buried in their husband's monument. They certainly played an essential role within the family and were responsible for the education of children and the management of domestic affairs. However, some women from the nobility, like Henut, did hold religious and administrative positions.

Henut's false door stela, just like sometimes more modest works, is a gateway through which we can learn a bit more about the lives of women during that remote time.

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January 2024

¹⁹ JÉQUIER, G., *Fouilles à Saqqarah*, p. 1, 8 (n. 2), 16.



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