Once More Netjerikhet and His Family
- A Limestone Stela from Sakkara -

Identifying members of the immediate family of king Netjerikhet (Djoser) has been a continuing difficulty. Now, a stela recently discovered at Sakkara may provide the name of Djoser’s queen and clarify his claim to kingship by marriage to the daughter of the last king of the 2nd Dynasty, Khasekhemwy.

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Among the monuments that came to light in 1985 during restoration work in the step-pyramid complex of Djoser at Sakkara was a limestone stela. It had been reused as a filling block in the eastern side of the pyramid itself, about 15 metres north of the south-east corner, near ground level, and just inside the casing blocks. Several fragments of stelae had already been found by Firth in 1924/25, during excavations led by the Department of Antiquities, but this is the first complete example of its type.

The stela is rectangular with a rounded top, measuring 50 cm in height by 27 cm in width and 17.3 cm in thickness. Almost the entire lower half is uninscribed, undoubtedly because it was used to provide a firm base to fix the stela in place.

The inscription begins at the top right, with a horizontal line of roughly carved hieroglyphs:

\[ inpw \ hnty \ ts \]

To the left, and below, there is another line:

\[ m33 \ hr \ dsr \]

Apparently, the restricted space in the rounded top has caused the sign \( \text{š} \) (dsr) to be carved here, although it belongs in the upper line, which ought to be read:

\[ inpw \ hnty \ ts \ dsr \]

‘Anubis, he who is foremost in the sacred land’

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The much worn and damaged stela of king Djoser found on the eastern side of the Step Pyramid.
[Photo: M. Ibrahim Aly]
On the right, below the jackal (Anubis), is the standard of Anubis, the imy wt. This faces the serekh, surmounted by Horus wearing the double crown, enclosing the name ntr-hjt (i.e. Djoser).

To the left of the serekh there are two vertical columns of hieroglyphic text:

(1) m33(t) hr š3t-ns w htp-hr-ntby
(2) š3t-ns w [in]-t-k3.s

(1) 'She who looks upon Horus, the king's daughter Hotephornebyt'
(2) 'The king's daughter Inetkaes.'

These two women are also shown with the king on limestone fragments found at Heliopolis by Schiaparelli. The known fragments include:

1. Two curved blocks in the Cairo Museum (Cat. 52508-9).
3. A block in Neuchâtel Mus. Eg. (No. 324).

The inscription recorded here is essentially the same as that found on fragments by Firth. However, those he uncovered were of two kinds: deriving from round-topped flat stelae, like the one described here; or deriving from drum-like stones. According to Firth:

These stelae had been used as building material or as filling behind walls and even as blocks on which to try the flint boring tools. They are probably the remains of the boundary stelae used to mark out the royal cemetery.

Nevertheless, they are not 'boundary stelae' in the sense intended by Firth, but rather funerary stelae, since they are all surmounted by Anubis of the cemetery (inpw hnty t3 δsr). Furthermore, all the known stelae were found within the eastern side of the pyramid itself, and it is difficult to understand why they would have been reused if they marked the whole cemetery? In my opinion there were several of these stelae erected along the east face of the mastabas which had been the original focus of the complex, and they were then removed and reused as filling blocks when the tomb design was altered to become a pyramid with a funerary temple on its north side.

The King's Daughters

The two names which occur beside that of Djoser are already known. Both women are identified as a 'king's daughter', but one (Hotephornebyt) is accorded a further title m33(t) hr: 'She who looks upon Horus'. The earliest occurrence of a woman with this title is Seshmetka (s3mt-k3), a wife of the 1st Dynasty king Djer (dr). There were other women during the 1st and 2nd Dynasties who bore this title, and, in each case, it identified them as the wife of a king. It is illogical to assume that the king's wife was never mentioned on monuments of this early period, so we can, therefore, suggest that this title preceded the form m33(t) hr sth: 'She who looks upon Horus and Seth', held by kings' wives throughout the Old Kingdom. Thus Hotephornebyt may well have been the royal wife of Djoser, and therefore the daughter of king Khasekhemwy, the last ruler of the 2nd Dynasty. Her mother would have been the royal lady Nimaathab (ni-m3-t-h3b). Djoser presumably married her to affirm his claim upon the throne.

It is hardly credible that Zoser should have associated the names of those women with his own and that of a god, unless it was to them he owed his title to the throne.

The group of statues whose remains are at the north end of the festival hall complex may represent Djoser, his wife Hotephornebyt, his mother-in-law Nimaathab, and his sister (?) Inetkaes.

Notes and References

7. Ibid. pl. 87(5).
10. For comparison: (a) Round-topped stelae are found to the east of the archeis mastabas at Saqqara; (b) There are two uninscribed stelae positioned in the chapel against the east face of the Meidum pyramid; (c) Stelae occur in the same position in the mastaba of τ'-Ap at Meidum; cf. also Reimer: 'The position of early grave stelae' in Studies Presented to F. Griffith, (London, 1932), p. 528. For further examples, and the same explanation of their function, cf. A. Badawy: 'Le Site Funéraire sous l'Ancien Empire: son Origine et son Fonctionnement' in ASAE 48 (1948), p. 216.
12. Ibid. p. 318.