Montuemhat
A Man of his Time
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Mayor Montuemhat is perhaps the most interesting Theban figure known to Egyptologists from the complex period of transition between the Kushite 25th and Saite 26th Dynasties. This was also, of course, the time of the invasions of Egypt by the Assyrian kings Esarhaddon and Ashurbanipal which included the sacking of Thebes in 664 BC.

His standing in the Theban community during this turbulent period of Egyptian history cannot simply be measured by the great number of titles and offices which he held. Montuemhat was certainly more influential than a mere ‘mayor’ or ‘Fourth Prophet of Amun’. Indeed, Ashurbanipal records him as ‘king of Thebes’ on the ‘Rassam Cylinder’ where his name appears in the Akkadian writing as ‘Mantimanhe’.

Montuemhat’s noble descent was certainly of help in his acquisition of the various offices of state, positions which had been handed down for generations from father to son. Already before him his great grandfather, Harsiše, and grandfather, Khaemhor, had been mayors of Thebes, viziers and prophets of Amun during the late 22nd Dynasty and also under the hegemony of the early Kushite pharaohs Shabaka and Shabataka.

From his father, Nesptah, he directly inherited the title of ‘Mayor of Thebes’ and, in addition, he was holder of the office of ‘Governor of Upper Egypt’. Besides these significant civil and administrative posts, Montuemhat also acted as a religious functionary for the cult of Amun. However, in spite of his dominant position as mayor of the great religious centre of Egypt, he only reached the rank of ‘Fourth Prophet of Amun’ within the great temple of Amun at Karnak itself. He did record the title of ‘Second Prophet’ on certain monuments, but unfortunately without mentioning the deity to whom the post obtained.

The position of ‘Prophet of Montu’, which also had been within the inheritance of this powerful Theban family, was transferred to his brother, Harsiše, who then handed the title down to his own son. Nevertheless, a son of Montuemhat named Paherienmut later rose to the rank of a ‘Third Prophet of Montu’.

While we possess a significant amount of information concerning Montuemhat’s father, Nesptah, very little is known about his mother, Istemkheb, a very common name of the time.

Montuemhat seems to have had three wives. His principal spouse was apparently the lady Neskhons, for her son, Nesptah, became Montuemhat’s heir and successor. In his father’s tomb in Asasif (Western Thebes) Nesptah is depicted

Mayor Montuemhat, in the prime of life, during the 25th Dynasty. Cat. Caire 935. [Photo: D. Rohl]
The famous bust of Montuemhat in old age. Cat. Caïre 893. [Photo: D. Rohl]

performing the funeral rites and making offerings to his deceased father (for the discovery of the burial of Nesptah see JACF 2, p. 82). His other wives were the lady Shepenmut and a Nubian princess named Udjiarenes. The latter appears in the tomb of Montuemhat in statue groups and reliefs accompanying her husband. It seems likely that the marriage of Montuemhat to this Nubian princess was undertaken as a gesture of loyalty towards the Kushite kings under whose rule he began his career.

The first time we come across Montuemhat in the texts is during the reign of pharaoh Taharka (690-664 BC). He continues in office, no doubt as a result of his undoubted political skills, throughout the trauma of the Assyrian sack of Thebes and is still attending to his duties when the Saite pharaoh, Psamtek I, sends his daughter, Nitocris, to Thebes to become the ‘God’s Wife of Amun’ at a special adoption ceremony in 655 BC. As was the tradition of the period, the incumbent God’s Wife, Shepenupet (daughter of the last Nubian king Tanutamun) formerly accepted the young Nitocris as her successor, thus handing over to the Saite princess much of the power and authority of the Amun cult and its estates. Since Montuemhat was the effective ruler of Thebes following the departure of the Assyrian forces in around 662, he was undoubtedly directly involved in the political manoeuvres which brought Nitocris to Upper Egypt and his long term experience of the machinations of Theban political life may have presented him with the opportunity to act as mediator in the negotiations between the Kushite faction still at Thebes and the new dynastic power of the Western Delta which was based at the new capital of Sais.

With the Thebaid as his residence, Montuemhat ruled a region stretching as far south as Elephantine at the First Cataract and up to Hermopolis in the north. At Abydos he was responsible for restoration work in the Osireion and at Karnak he constructed, or at least decorated, some of the chambers of the Temple of Mut, just to the south of the Amun temple complex at Karnak.

The political ups and downs of the time are also reflected in the contemporary art. By chance, numerous statues of Montuemhat have come down to us in remarkable condition - more than a dozen cut from dark hardstone. The early pieces, made during the 25th Dynasty, show the typical style of the Kushite rulers, in spite of the fact that Montuemhat was himself a native Egyptian. It is likely, therefore, that Kushite craftsmen were commissioned to undertake the work for the Theban mayor, or at least their influence was predominant at the local court. His later representations, on the other hand, are characteristic of early Saite art, with the typical archaising canon which was such a feature of the 26th Dynasty ‘renaissance’.

Even in his old age Montuemhat was responsible for an expedition to the quarries of the Wadi Gasus in the Eastern Desert. The rock-carved inscription left there by him is actually the last dated record of Montuemhat known to us. He died sometime around 648 BC. Thus his career continued on through the first 16 years of Psamtek I’s reign and in total spanned a full 30 years.

His tomb (Asasif no. TT. 34) is the most significant monument in the eastern area of the giant cliff bay of Deir el-Bahri. The impressive mudbrick pylon even today dominates the landscape of this part of the necropolis, marking the location of the largest private tomb in Western Thebes. Via a relatively steep ramp one reaches a subterranean ante-chamber supported by two columns. This first chamber leads on to a larger four-pillared hall. From this point access to two successive open courts, cut deep into the basin of Asasif, is reached.

From the first open court (19.5 metres long by 11.5 metres wide) five rooms are cut into the rock on both the north and south sides. In the eastern part of this great courtyard Montuemhat is represented in the form of two greater-than-life-size seated statues set into rock-cut niches. The niches are situated on either side of the main access to the court. Here the tomb owner is accompanied in one case by his wife, Udjiarenes, and in the other by his mother, Istenkeb. The opposite, west facade of the courtyard is endowed with a colonnade, unfortunately now destroyed. The way to the burial chamber leads through the second open court and into further rock-cut chambers, from where the subterranean funeral complex can be reached via a descending staircase.
The earliest examination of the tomb was made by Jean Vincent Scheil at the end of the last century. From the 1950s, excavation work continued under the direction of Zakaria Goneim (commissioned by the Egyptian Antiquities Service). Since 1984 the EAO have once again recommenced restoration work at this important site under the direction of Dr. Mohamed Nasr (see JACF 2, p. 89). However, work has been hampered by the fact that the numerous reliefs from this tomb are now scattered amongst the many collections of Egyptian artefacts of the world’s great museums.

Erratum

In my response to Aidan Dodson in JACF 3 (pp. 70-71) I referred to a quotation from Aidan to the source article written by him in JACF 2. In doing so I eliminated the reference number contained in the quote itself, which provided the location for material upon which his summary statement had been based. Aidan has asked me to point out that he had written two papers dealing with the evidence for the contemporaneity of Tjetkheperre Psusennes and Hedji-kheperre Shoshenq to which interested parties can refer (see RdE 38, pp. 49-54 & GM 106, pp. 15-19). However, he wishes to inform JACF readers that there is now some doubt as to the authenticity of the ushabti, purchased by the Fitzwilliam Museum, which was the focus of the first of the two articles. So, sincere apologies to Aidan are due from me for not giving sufficient weight to the source material on his point 13 of the JACF 2 article. - David Roht