

Famine Stela: A piece of Pharaonic diary

By Samar Samir



CAIRO – 15 June 2018: In the era of King Djoser, King of Upper and Lower Egypt: Neterkhet and founder of the Third Dynasty in the Old Kingdom, a shortage of the Nile flood in 2,700 BC led to a seven-year famine, leaving Egypt in a state of extreme distress. The king was perplexed as grains were insufficient, seeds dried up, people robbed each other, and temples and shrines closed. Looking for an end to his people's suffering, the king consulted his architect and prime minister, Imhotep, commanding him to dig for a solution in the old sacred texts. Obeying the king's order, Imhotep headed to a temple in the ancient city of Ain Shams (Old Heliopolis), where he discovered that the solution could be found in the city of Yebu (Aswan or Elephantine), the source of the Nile.

Imhotep, the architect of the Djoser pyramid in Saqqara, traveled to Yebu, where he visited the Temple of Khnum and saw the granite, precious stones, minerals, and building stones. Khnum, the god of fertility, was believed to have created mankind from clay.

After his state visit to Yebu, Imhotep updated king Djoser on his journey. On the day following his meeting with Imhotep, Khnum, came to the king in his dream, promising to end the famine and to allow the Nile to flow again if Djoser restores the temple of Khnum. Consequently, Djoser

executed Khnum's wishes, allocating the revenue of the area from Elephantine to Khnum temple. Shortly afterwards, the famine and people's suffering came to an end.

The famine story had been engraved on a granite stone in 250 BC during the era of Ptolemy V on the Sehel Island, Aswan. The Stela, which is 2.5 meters in height and 3 meters in width, includes 42 columns of hieroglyphic texts read from right to left. The Stela had a natural horizontal fissure when the Ptolemies engraved the story on it. Above the inscriptions, there were drawings depicting King Djsoer's offerings to the triad of the Elephantine deities (Khnum, Anuket, and Satis), which were worshipped in Aswan during the Old Kingdom.

The stone was discovered in 1889 by American Egyptologist Charles Edwin Wilbour, according to his notes preserved in Brooklyn Museum Archives. Wilbour tried to translate the inscriptions on the Stela, but he only managed to recognize when the story was engraved on the stone. The engravings were deciphered for the first time by German Egyptologist Heinrich Brugsch in 1891 and it took 62 years for the mission to be completed. The texts had to be translated and revised by four other Egyptologists. The complete translation was later published in a book penned by Miriam Lichtheim, titled "Ancient Egyptian Literature: A Book of Readings".

Perhaps, the story was previously documented on papyrus and reformulated on stone in the Ptolemy era, General Director of Aswan Antiquities Ahmed Saleh told Egypt Today.,

Religious conflict

Some Egyptologists, including Saleh, think that the story of the Khnum famine is a fictional story invented during the era of Ptolemy V to consolidate Khnum's priesthood and perpetuate the idea that Khnum has the upper hand, thereby, ensuring his control over Egypt. The same theory is backed by Lichtheim in her book "Foundations of Atlantis, Ancient Astronauts and Other Alternatives."

"The Stela demonstrates a religious conflict between Khnum priests and goddess Isis' clergymen," Saleh explains, adding that another story on a famine engraved in the Philae temple states that Isis, a goddess of ancient Egypt, is the source of the Nile water. During the Ptolemaic era, Isis was worshipped all over Egypt. With the revenues from land plots extending from Aswan Dam to the city of Mahraqqa, southern Aswan, were allocated for Isis' Philae Temple priests. Khnum's clergymen were angry for not having the upper hand in Egypt; thus, it is believed that the story of the famine is just a fictional tale invented by the jealous priests, according to Saleh.

"Such conflict could be the reason behind the creation of the famine story engraved on the Stela as it would empower them to religiously take control of Egypt," he said.

At Isis' Temple of Philae, another story on a famine was engraved on granite. Isis' story was

engraved in the era of Ptolemy VI (186–145 BC), Saleh explained. “Each party (Khnum priests and Isis’ clergymen) wanted to bestow their favors on Egypt,” and to have the revenues of the 12-mile-long area between Aswan dam and Elephantine, Saleh confirmed.

At the end of the story, according to the inscription of the Famine Stela in Sehel Island, the Khnum priests were honored by the revenues.

Egypt depended on the Nile flood water, and was exposed to several famines. However, in Minya, Upper Egypt, another inscription was engraved in the tomb of Amenemhat, from the 12th Dynasty during the era of Senusret I, in Beni Hasan Cemetery; it talks about a just king, whose era had never seen a famine, Head of Minya Antiquities, Gamal Samastawy, told Egypt Today.

‘Is Imhotep and Prophet Joseph the same person?’

Many people believe that this story is related to Prophet Joseph's story of the seven-year starvation in Quran and the Old Testament. However, Saleh said that the two stories are not necessarily connected.

“There are no historical facts that prove the famine story is related to the divine one,” Saleh said, continuing that that number seven in Sehel’s Famine Stela does not necessarily mean “seven years” but could merely be a symbol of perfection and completion.

Stela of Famine engravings have been affected by erosion. “Some inscriptions were scratched due to erosion, rains and winds,” Saleh pointed out. “These inscriptions were restored in 2015 by the Egyptian archeological mission,” he added, noting that the Ministry of Antiquities plans to build a tent over the Stela to protect it from the rains.

‘Book of Memories’

Sehel Island, where the Stela exists, is considered by the Egyptologists as a piece of Pharaonic diary of 550 stones engraved by ancient Egyptian kings, rulers, pilgrims, travellers, and patients. “The Sehel Island is a book of memories. Whenever a king or priest passed by the island, he wrote his memory like ‘I am...son of...my mother is...’. The area has 550 engraved memories dating from the prehistoric period to Roman Greek era,” Saleh said.

The engraved stories also served as a way of documenting tasks. “Any state official who was sent to get gold from the South used to engrave his mission on the stone,” Saleh continues.

Sehel was a place of worshipping the Goddess Anuket, one of the Elephantine triad; the stones could be classified into two categories: royal engravings and inscriptions by individuals. Most engravings include the depiction of the triad, where travelers or patients asked for success in life or treatment from an illness.

The stones also include one of the most important engravings that prove that Senusret III (1878 BC to 1839 BC) decreed to dig and expand a canal in the western side of the Sehel Island, for his warships and to serve as a maritime trade pass

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