

An unusual inscribed amulet

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1 figure

Abstract

Amulets in the shape of an obelisk are surprisingly rare; one which is inscribed with the names and titles of its owner may well be unique. Even the titles themselves, firmly dated by the amulet's form, are otherwise unknown.

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1. Introduction

Among the lots in a recent London sale¹ was an extremely unusual steatite amulet in the form of an obelisk inscribed with the name and titles of its owner. It measures 3.8 cm in height and is greater in its breadth (1.4 cm) than its depth (0.7 cm) and so presents a flattened, rectangularly-sectioned shaft rather than the squarely-sectioned shaft of a true obelisk. It is pierced from front to back for suspension through the pointed summit.



Figure 1. The obelisk shaped amulet. Photograph by the author.

2. History

Although the obelisk with its solar symbolism had played an integral role in religious architecture since the Old Kingdom (Redford, 2001a: 561-564), amulets in the form of an obelisk do not occur before the Late Period (Müller-Winkler, 1987: 319). Its appearance then may well be connected with the contemporary revival of the Old Kingdom practice of flanking the doors to private tombs with small soft stone obelisks: the vignettes of Late Period funerary papyri depicting the last rites at the tomb show a pair of small obelisks as the goal of the funeral procession (*cf.* Faulkner, 1985: illustration 24-25).

The range of funerary amulets increased greatly during the Late Period usually as a result of contemporary archaising trends which led to the revival of forms not in use for hundreds of years or else as a result of democratisation of funerary practices which made available to all amulets which earlier had been made exclusively for royal burials. However, the obelisk as amulet belongs to small category of funerary amulet invented during the Late Period to supply a perceived lack; the “two-fingers” amulet belongs to the same group. An obelisk amulet would allow assimilation with the sun and its daily renewal, a state greatly desired by the dead. Nevertheless, amulets in this form are surprisingly few² and no other, so far as can be ascertained, bears the name and titles of its owner.

3. Texts

The inscription carved down the front of the shaft reads *imy-r š3 imy-r k3mw* (or *k3nw*) *n R^c Try*. The ideogram read as *š3*, representing a pool with lotus flowers (Gardiner’s M8), appears in its Late form (Daumas, 1988: 401, no. 146). The word has a number of related meanings: “land”, “vegetation”, “pasture”, “marshland” and (with a specific determinative) “tree”, “plant” and “edible fruit” (Hannig, 1995: 800) However, in the Late Period the meaning appears to be more precisely “vines” or “vineyard” (Wilson, 1997: 985) suggesting the first

¹ Christie’s South Kensington, *Antiquities Wednesday 29 October 2003*, p.92, lot 173 (with others).

² Müller-Winkler (1987: 318) cites only seven examples.

title is to be translated “Overseer of the vines” or “Overseer of the vineyard”. Unfortunately, the office seems to be thus far otherwise unattested. On the other hand, the second title “Overseer of Vintners” is known since the Old Kingdom (Jones, 2000: 261, no. 943) The ideogram *k3mw* (earlier *k3nw*) is Gardiner’s M43 and actually represents a vine on props. Although the vintners or vineyards of Re are not specifically recorded, vine-producing areas were frequently numbered among the possessions of temples (Redford, 2001b: 508). Contemporary evidence for the appending of the appropriate deity’s name to such a possession is recorded at Esna with the vineyard of Amun (*33 Imm*) which lay in the western delta (Darby *et al.*, 1976: 602).

The name Iry, with varied writings but always incorporating the eye hieroglyph (Gardiner’s D4), is attested for both men and women especially during the Old and Middle Kingdoms but also in the Late Period (Ranke, 1935: 41, nos. 4-8). That the only identically-written examples of the name dated to the Late Period were held by women is surely only an accident of survival or publication.

Without further evidence the site of Iry’s burial, the source of this funerary amulet, can only be surmised but it was surely somewhere near the area for whose vineyards and vintners he had special responsibility.

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