

2.42 Stela for Prahotept

Limestone.

New Kingdom, reign of Ramesses II,
c. 1279–1213 BC.

H. 56 cm, W. 39.5 cm, D. 13 cm.

This interesting stela depicts six men who are shown worshipping the god Osiris. It is a votive stela dedicated to the vizier Prahotept who lived during the long reign of Ramesses II. The vizier, or chief minister, was the highest state official in Ancient Egypt, subordinate only to the King himself. During the New Kingdom there were two viziers, one for Upper and one for Lower Egypt. It is somewhat unusual that Prahotept himself is not depicted on the stela, but he is mentioned twice in the inscriptions. Presumably the stela was erected in or near the vizier's tomb-chapel. It is a relatively simple affair and not all the lines of its shallow sunk relief have been carved completely. The missing details would have been supplied by painting, but only minute traces of red colour now remain on some of the human figures.

The monument is divided down the middle by a single column of text reading: "An offering which the king gives (to) Osiris, Lord of Eternity, in order that he (i.e. Osiris) may grant the pleasant breeze of the northwind to the Osiris, the governor of the city and vizier Prahotept, justified". This text is a version of the standard offering formula. The god who is invoked in it is depicted twice in the upper register of the stela. He is shown in his usual form of a mummy standing on a so-called *ma'at*-shaped pedestal with a sloping front edge. On his head he wears the *atef*-crown, a tall conical headdress resembling the white crown of Upper Egypt flanked by two feathers, and his hands hold the crook and flail, the symbols of his kingship. Above the god's head is his name, "Osiris, Lord of Eternity".

Before each of the two representations of the god stands a man with both hands raised in adoration. Between the god and his worshipper is a simple offering-stand with two loaves of bread and a lotus flower. The man on the right is dressed in a costume typical of the Egyptian military of the New Kingdom, with a tapering front piece attached at the waist and a skirt which is longer at the back than at the front. The man wears the pointed wig fashionable at the time. The text inscribed above him reads: "Adoration to Osiris, Lord of the Two Lands, by the retainer of the governor of the city and vizier Rahotept, justified, Werhay". This man is obviously the main dedicator of the stela; not only is he the only one

with a full adoration text inscribed above him, but as the vizier's "retainer" or personal attendant he is also clearly senior in rank to the other persons depicted.

The man on the left is dressed in a simple sleeveless shirt and a skirt which ends just below the knees. Unlike the man on the right, he is not wearing a wig but is shaven-headed. The text inscribed above him reads: "(Adoration of Osiris) by the servant Merty-Ramessu, justified, possessor of reverence". Although a simple "servant", he was important enough to have himself depicted in the top register of the stela alongside his superior Werhay. The name Merty-Ramessu means "Beloved (of the gods) is Ramesses (II)", a type of name usually found with people working in court circles.

Four further men join in the adoration of Osiris in the lower register of the stela. They are all dressed in the same simple costume as Merty-Ramessu and like him they are "servants". On the right stand "the servant Prahesy" and "the servant Nebi-hetepni", on the left "the servant Paptahhesy, justified" and "the servant Weserherptah". With one possible exception none of these persons is known from other sources and some of the names have rather unusual forms. The epithets "justified" and "possessor of reverence" added to the name in some cases theoretically imply that the person in question is deceased, but this need not be the case here. By setting up this votive stela in the tomb of the vizier his servants hoped to participate in the latter's funerary cult and benefit from it once they had died themselves.

The vizier mentioned on the stela is called Prahotept in one instance and Rahotept in another. These are merely variant forms of one and the same name, "Rahotept" being the more formal, old-fashioned form, while "Prahotept", with the definite article *p(a)* added at the front, is the vernacular New Kingdom form. There were in fact two viziers called (P)rahotept who both lived during the reign of Ramesses II, one at the beginning and a different one towards the end of the reign.¹ The first came from an elite family at Abydos and was vizier in Memphis, the capital city and the seat of government. He was responsible for large building projects in Memphis, particularly the extension of the already vast temple complex of the god Ptah; it has also been suggested that he initiated the project of building Ramesses II's new residence Piramesse in the Eastern Delta. He was remembered as a famous man from the past even as late as the Persian period. His tomb, as yet undiscovered, is in the New Kingdom necropolis of Memphis at Saqqâra.² The other (P)rahotept came from Herakleopolis, not far from the Fayyum, and was buried in the necropolis



belonging to that city, at present-day Sedment. He was vizier in Piramesse, the city built by his predecessor. Unfortunately his tomb has been thoroughly destroyed and its excavation by Petrie and Brunton in 1921 yielded only a number of dispersed fragments.³

In addition to the monuments associated with the tombs at Saqqara and Sedment there are several pieces in various museum collections mentioning a vizier (P)rahotep and it is not always easy or even possible to determine to which of the two (P)rahoteps they belong; in one case the later (P)rahotep appears to have added to our confusion by dedicating a statue to his famous namesake without making a clear distinction between the two.⁴ Unfortunately, the provenance of the stela discussed here is unknown, and it must for the time being remain uncertain to which of the two viziers it is to be assigned. Certain epigraphic details might favour the first (P)rahotep, but on the other hand it cannot entirely be ruled out that the servant Nebi-hetepni mentioned in the lower register is to be identified with a “servant,

wab-priest and lector-priest Nebu-hetep (or Nebi-hetep)” who dedicated a stela to the second vizier (P)rahotep in the cemetery of Herakleopolis and who mentioned the vizier on the doorposts of his own tomb in the same necropolis.⁵ If so, he must have been promoted after he had participated in the dedication of our stela to the responsible job of organizing the funerary cult of the vizier.

JvD

¹ H. De Meulenaere, “Deux vizirs de Ramses II”, *CdE* 41 (1966), 223–232; H. Altenmüller, “Zur Frage der Vergöttlichung des Vezirs (Pa-) Rahotep”, *JEA* 61 (1975), 154–160.

² H. Altenmüller, “Eine wiederentdeckte Statue des Veziers Rahotep”, *MDAIK* 30 (1974), 1–14; J. van Dijk, *The New Kingdom Necropolis of Memphis* (Groningen 1993), 119 n. 20 (relief block from the tomb).

³ W.M.F. Petrie and G. Brunton, *Sedment II* (London 1924), 28–31.

⁴ Altenmüller, *JEA* 61, 158.

⁵ Petrie/Brunton, *Sedment II*, Pls. 76: 4 (stela) and 72: 3 (door-jamb).