

## 1.25 False-door stela of Ankhef

Limestone.

First Intermediate Period, (c. 2150 – 2040 BC).

From Ehnasya el-Medina.

H. 92 cm, W. 56 cm, D. 8 cm.

The false door is one of the most characteristic elements of an Ancient Egyptian tomb, particularly in the Old Kingdom.<sup>1</sup> It was originally part of the north exterior wall of the mastaba, but in the course of time was moved inside the tomb to the west wall of the offering chapel. Many tombs have more than one false door, however, and some have them both inside and outside. The false door is an imitation in stone of a real door made of wood and reed matting. It can be hewn directly out of the rock face in the case of a rock-cut tomb, or constructed of separate building blocks in free-standing mastabas. Often they are made of a single slab of stone, and in this case the term false-door stela is often used. The material is usually limestone; pink granite is very occasionally used as well, but only by the highest echelons of society with close connections to the king. Sometimes pink granite was imitated by painting a limestone false-door stela a mottled pink.

The false door marks the transition between the world of the living and the realm of the dead. Through it the deceased's *ka* (spirit) can step forward and receive the food-offerings which his relatives or the professional *ka*-priest bring him every day. For this purpose an offering slab is usually put in front of the false door.

Over the course of the years many typological changes affected the false door, but the most important elements were nearly always present: the actual door in the centre, with a drum, imitating a rolled-up reed mat, above the opening; a panel above the door with a depiction of the deceased seated at a well-supplied offering table, and a single or several sets of doorjambs inscribed with offering formulae and the name and titles of the deceased. Below these inscriptions there is usually a representation of the tomb owner standing, often holding a staff and a sceptre and dressed in clothes that express his status in life. On many false-door stelae a so-called torus moulding, a rounded edge imitating a bundle of reeds tied together with ropes, is added around the frame of the door. Above it is the hollow cavetto cornice decorated with stylized palm leaves.

Most of these elements can still be seen on the magnificent false-door stela of Ankhef, which dates from the period after the Old Kingdom. It is made of limestone,



but colour traces indicate that in this case too the stela was painted pink to imitate the precious granite from Aswan. In the centre is the door proper, with a rudimentary drum above the opening. On the innermost jambs six alabaster vessels are depicted, an innovation not yet found in the Old Kingdom; they contain six of the so-called “seven sacred oils”. The second set of doorjambs show the deceased seated on a chair on the right, and his wife standing and smelling a lotus on the left. Inscriptions above the figures identify them as “the revered one Ankhef” and “his beloved wife Tekh”. Wives of tomb owners rarely have false doors of their own; they are more often depicted on their husband’s false door. The name Tekh is unusual; it means “drunk”, but this does not mean that this lady was an alcoholic, but rather that she was named after the goddess Hathor, “lady of drunkenness”. On the door lintel two large *udjat*-eyes are depicted, eyes through which the deceased can symbolically look out into the world of the living.

The panel above the lintel shows Ankhef seated at a particularly richly endowed offering table. The table itself contains a row of tall loaves of bread, shaped like the hieroglyph for “field” and symbolizing the “Field of Offerings” in the hereafter, where the deceased is fed. Above and to the right of it are a great many offerings including the heads and forelegs of a bull and an antelope, a duck, various vegetables, a series of beer jars and a basket with fruit or grain. On the floor is a row of jars containing water and perhaps even wine, two ritual libation vessels and a large ewer in a bowl for washing.

All of the elements described so far are surrounded by a torus moulding. The ropes with which the reeds are tied together have been rendered in red paint. On top of the torus moulding is the cavetto cornice consisting of a row of exceptionally tall palm leaves painted red, yellow, blue and white. The whole of the false door is framed by a band of inscription which starts in the centre at the top and then divides into two symmetrically arranged texts, each containing an offering formula. Underneath it are the traditional standing figures of the tomb owner with staff and sceptre. The inscriptions read:

“An offering which the King gives and Osiris, lord of Busiris, namely invocation offerings consisting of bread and beer, beef and poultry for the commander of the contingent of harvest workers, the revered one Ankhef” (left); and “An offering which the King gives and Anubis, who is on his mound, who is in bandages, lord of the Sacred Land, namely the goodly burial of the revered one Ankhef” (right).

The title given to Ankhef presents a problem. It is written in such a way that it might also be translated as “commander of the Asiatics”.<sup>2</sup> The Egyptian word for “Asiatics” (*a’amu*) is usually written with the same hieroglyphs as that for “winnowers” (*qemau*), seasonal harvest-workers, and although the spelling on Ankhef’s stela strictly speaking favours the reading “Asiatics”, this is probably a scribal error. This interpretation is further strengthened by the fact that on another stela of Ankhef he bears the titles “commander and overseer of the fields”, clearly indicating the agricultural nature of his profession.

The present stela bears a striking resemblance to a group of false-door stelae that have been excavated over the past decades in the necropolis of Ehnasya el-Medina, at the entrance of the Fayyum.<sup>3</sup> This town, known in Ancient Egypt as Nennesut and in Graeco-Roman times as Heracleopolis Magna, was one of the capital cities of Egypt during the First Intermediate Period, when the unified state of the Old Kingdom had disintegrated and the country was divided in three major sectors. Nennesut was the seat of the Heracleopolitan rulers of the 9th and 10th Dynasties. In 1968 a Spanish archaeological team uncovered part of the cemetery of this period and recent years have seen a considerable extension of the site. The tombs, which consist of stone or mud-brick chambers, are orientated north-south, with the entrance on the north, and are arranged in streets. All of these tombs had false-door stelae, although many of them were not found in their original locations, but had been dispersed due to later disturbance and even deliberate destruction. Among the tombs discovered in 1968 is also one owned by the commander Ankhef and a false-door stela belonging to him was found in the narrow “street” running outside his tomb.<sup>4</sup> Obviously Ankhef’s tomb had more than one false door. The present stela must have been found in this area many years before the Spanish excavations began, however, since it entered an American private collection in the 1930s.<sup>5</sup>

The stelae from the cemetery at Ehnasya el-Medina all share the same design and distinctive stylistic features such as the two *udjat*-eyes on the lintel and the unusually tall palm leaves on top of the torus moulding. Some even have depictions of the alabaster jars with sacred oils on the inner jambs.<sup>6</sup> Most of them also have an inscribed architrave on top, either made separately or as an integral part of the stela. The architrave belonging to our Ankhef stela may one day turn up in the Spanish excavations.



- <sup>1</sup> S. Wiebach, *Die ägyptische Scheintür. Morphologische Studien zur Entwicklung und Bedeutung der Hauptkultstelle in den Privat-Gräbern des Alten Reiches* (Hamburg 1981); id., “False Door”, in D.B. Redford (ed.), *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Ancient Egypt I* (Oxford 2001), 498 – 501.
- <sup>2</sup> On this problem see S. Quirke, *The Administration of Egypt in the Late Middle Kingdom: The Hieratic Documents* (New Malden 1990), 176 and 186 n. 68.
- <sup>3</sup> J. López, “Rapport préliminaire sur les fouilles d’Hérakléopolis (1968)”, *OrAnt* 14 (1975), 57 – 78; M. del Carmen Pérez Die,

“Discoveries at Heracleopolis Magna (Ehnasya el-Medina)”, *EA* 6 (1995), 23 – 25; id., “The Ancient Necropolis at Ehnasya el-Medina”, *EA* 24 (2004), 21 – 24.

<sup>4</sup> López, *OrAnt* 14, 61 and 72 Fig. 11. The stela is now in the Egyptian Museum, Cairo (JE 91099).

<sup>5</sup> See Appendix A for recent collectors history.

<sup>6</sup> M. del C. Pérez Die and P. Vernus, *Excavaciones en Ehnasya el Medina (Herakleópolis Magna): Introducción General, Inscripciones* (Madrid 1992), 30, 151, Pl. 9 a and Fig. 5; Pérez Die, *EA* 24 (2004), 22 (bottom right).