

Recording the Graffiti of Western Thebes

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One of the great attractions of working on the Epigraphic Survey is the ample opportunity thus provided to explore the West Bank, the necropolis of ancient Thebes.

Despite the many people who come to Luxor in order to visit its famous sites, one can still walk for long stretches through the valleys and hills without encountering either tourist or native. As the student-epigrapher of the

1981–82 season, I hoped also to do some personal research which would utilize my particular specialty, Demotic Egyptian. When Lanny Bell suggested that I study the Demotic graffiti in the necropolis, I immediately decided to spend as much of my free time as possible locating and copying these ancient texts.

It is the magnificent temples and tombs, of course, which most strikingly demonstrate the great religious importance of the Theban necropolis. However, the Egyptians also expressed their devotion to the gods in more humble ways. The most ubiquitous remains of this personal piety are the thousands of graffiti cut into the rock faces of the limestone cliffs. Many texts are quite short, often being variations on a common votive formula in which the writer declares that his “good name remains in the presence of” some god or goddess for all eternity. Other graffiti are considerably longer and more involved. In any case, the motive for their composition is the same: a desire to associate oneself with a sacred place or to appeal directly to

the deities who inhabit it.

The Demotic texts, of Graeco-Roman date, form only a small part of the total number of graffiti. Most are in the hieroglyphic or hieratic scripts, and are from earlier periods of Egyptian history. Greek, Coptic, and, of course, Arabic inscriptions are also abundant.

Several famous Egyptologists have dedicated themselves to the recording of Theban graffiti. Howard Carter, for example, copied many texts, carving “H.C. 1916” above them to let future scholars know that the graffito in question had already been “done.” More recently, the great Czech Egyptologist, Jaroslav Czerny, deciphered and published many graffiti. Under his guidance the Egyptian Centre de Documentation initiated an ambitious series of volumes in which all the ancient graffiti are to be published in facsimile. In view of the Centre de Documentation publications, one may wonder why it is still worthwhile to study the Demotic graffiti in the field. The reasons for this have to do both with their state of preservation and the

nature of the Demotic script itself. Usually the graffiti are lightly incised on the rock face, though sometimes earth pigments were used. Due to erosion and the often poor quality of the limestone, it is now sometimes very difficult to distinguish between what is a mere crack and what a true stroke. Many of the inscriptions have also suffered deliberate defacement; innumerable scratches have obliterated the original signs. Moreover, on the oft-traveled paths from Deir el-Medina to the Valley of the Kings, modern graffiti have almost totally covered the ancient, which are now only faintly discernible. When one adds to the problems of preservation those inherent in the reading of the Demotic script because of its cursiveness and complexity, it becomes apparent why further study can recover more of an inscription than is visible in a previously published facsimile.

Out of the roughly thirty Demotic texts in the Centre de Documentation volumes, I selected eight for study with a view towards publication.

The graffiti on which I worked are good examples of the kinds of texts one finds

on the West Bank. The simplest is a man's name "Horus son of Eponkh."

This individual evidently felt dissatisfied with his first effort and so wrote his name again a few feet away. The man was schooled in both Demotic and Greek; in each case he wrote out his name in Greek letters as well. It is interesting to observe that when he uses Greek he gives himself the good Greek name Didymos in place of the Egyptian Horus. This phenomenon of double names is not uncommon in Graeco-Roman Egypt. I collected two other graffiti from the same place (not far from Deir el-Medina). One is a votive formula mentioning the deified official Amenhotep son of Hapu, who was reputed to be buried in the area. The other is a rather impressive text carved on a large boulder in which the writer expresses the wish that, when he dies, he be buried in the necropolis along with his father and brothers.

There were many graffiti from different periods in a natural bay to the north of Hatshepsut's temple at Deir el-Bahri. The three which I copied there may be the work

of one man, sharing as they do similarities in format and phraseology. The graffito shown is divided into two sections, of which I translate here the upper. This is an invocation to Isis, composed after the writer's return home from a perilous journey:

So-and-so calls out to Isis, the Great Goddess. She listens all the time. She never abandons in the road the one who calls out to her. I called out to Isis. She heard my voice and (the voice of) my companions. She brought me back to our great house, we being safe at the behest of Isis and the Gods of Djeme (the name of the ancient town on the West Bank).

Perhaps the most interesting of the graffiti was also the most difficult to copy. It was located in a desolate wadi not far from the Valley of the Queens. The inscription was very lightly cut and awkwardly close to ground level. Situated beneath a ledge, the light was adequate for study purposes for only about two and a half hours a day. Furthermore, the limestone was in such poor condition that it could not be touched.

The graffito, obviously the work of a practised scribe, is a hymn to Isis. Much of it is cast in the form of a direct address to the goddess, who is repeatedly called upon to appear to the speaker. I quote a few lines to give an idea of this section:

Come to me, O Isis, Mistress of Awe!

Come to me, O Isis, Mistress of Love!

Come to me, O Isis, Mistress of the Uraeus!

In the middle of the text is a narrative passage in which the writer appears to speak of some unhappy experience which befell him. It may well be that, as was the case with the graffito translated above, the scribe wrote this hymn as an expression of gratitude to Isis for delivering him from some evil fate. After this narrative section, the hymn continues:

Are you not in the sky?

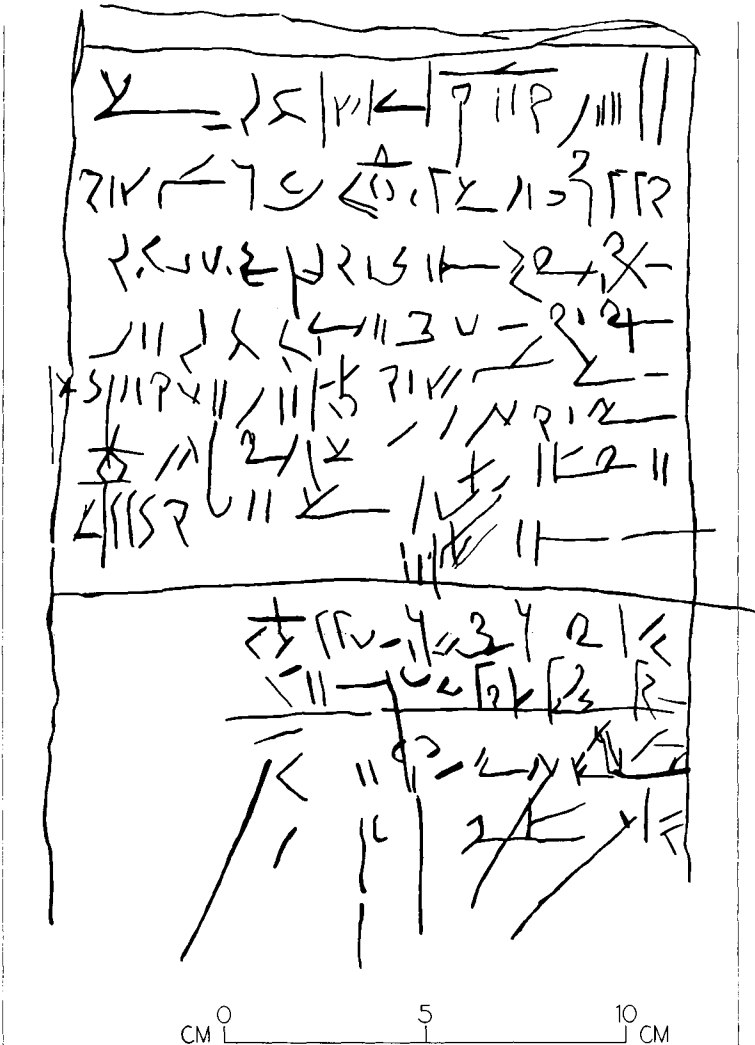
Are you not in the earth?

Are you not in the sea? . . .

Are you not in the ground?

Are you not in the wood?

. . . Are you not in the horizon? . . . Are you not in the underworld before Osiris?



Demotic graffito containing invocations to Isis and Amenhotep, son of Hapu.

Even from the little that has been translated here it should be clear that this is no banal, formulaic text, but, on the contrary, a spirited and not

unoriginal composition. I hope that further study over the summer will remove some of its remaining obscurities, particularly with

regard to the misfortunes of the writer.

As modest as my project was, it could not have been successfully completed without the help of Mr. Thad Rasche, senior artist of the Epigraphic Survey, and Ms. Diana Olson, the Survey's photographer. To them, and to other members of the

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