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## The El Amarna Boundary Stelae Project

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Given the undying fascination which the “Amarna heresy” has both for scholars and the general public, it will seem odd that it must often be studied on the basis of incomplete or inadequate documentation. A case in point is the boundary stelae which were cut into the hills that enclose Akhenaten’s capital at El Amarna in Middle Egypt. More than mere frontier markers, these were elaborate monuments with lengthy inscriptions which tell us much of what we know about Akhenaten’s plans for his capital, its dimensions, and even the tensions that underlay the founding of the new cult. The stelae were published as a group in 1905, but this honorable pioneering effort still left many questions unanswered: the texts were not always clearly established, and the sequence in which the stelae were carved—and thus crucial information on the development of the city—was ill-defined because the monuments themselves were so summarily described.

The El Amarna Boundary Stelae Project was conceived to fill in these gaps in documentation. Funded by a generous grant by the Committee on Research of the American Philosophical Society, with additional funding from a private donor and with administrative support from the Oriental Institute and the American Research Center in Egypt, the expedi-

tion’s staff consisted of myself and Charles C. Van Siclen III.\*

During the approximately six weeks we spent in the field—from April 18 to May 25—we visited each of the sites, collating earlier copies of the texts, photographing each monument in detail, and making the notes and measured drawings from which an architectural study of all the stelae will be made. The results of this campaign are reflected not only in the improved documentation, but also in some of the preliminary conclusions that our survey now allows us to make.

The earliest group of boundary stelae at Amarna are three tablets which are inscribed with what is conventionally called the “Earlier Proclamation”. This is a lengthy and prolix composition, running to twenty-one vertical columns and about eighty hori-

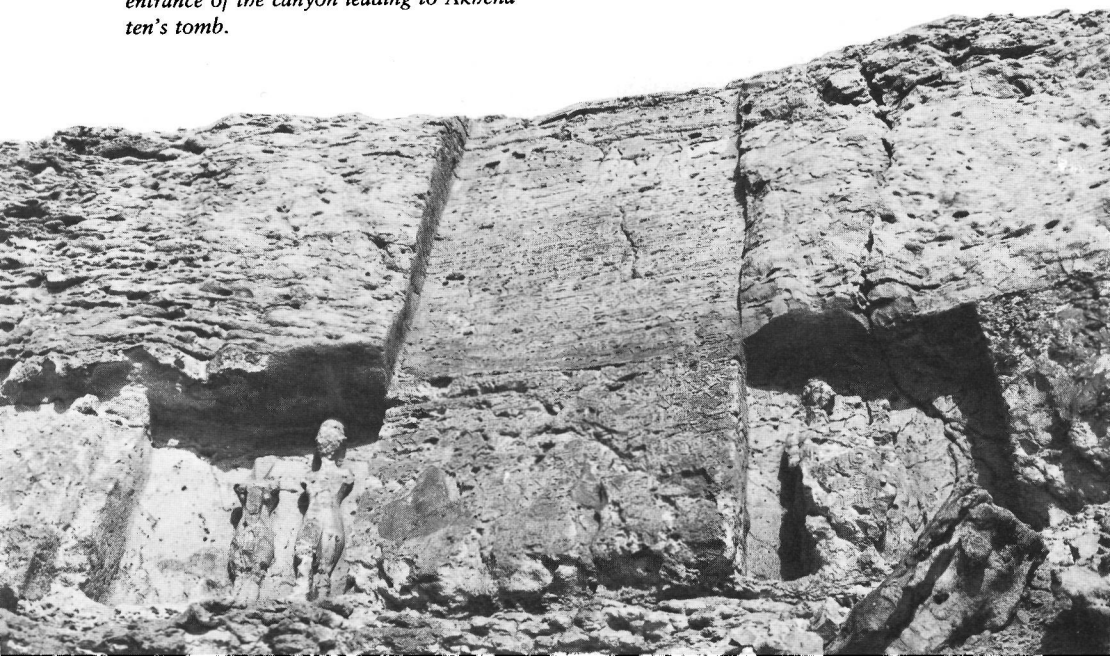
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zontal lines of text, in which Akhenaten announces to his court his decision to found the new city, describes its projected layout, and recalls some of the circumstances which led to his making his residence at a place which, as he says, belonged earlier to no god or goddess, or (for that matter) to anyone else. Unfortunately, this important document is in a sadly fragmentary condition: none of the three versions is complete, and the two “best” copies begin to deteriorate at just about the same spot! Our work at each of these sites not only yielded a clearer text at many points; it also enabled us to get our first solid evidence for the sequence of the stelae and for the chronology of their contents. Earlier copies had read the initial year-date, for instance, as being Akhenaten’s fourth or even his sixth regnal year. We were able to establish it beyond doubt as “regnal year 5”, thus confirming the speculation of a scholar who had written an article in occupied Holland during the Second World War, but had not been able to

check his conclusions against the original text. From our on-the-spot examination of these monuments, moreover, we noted that two of them—Stela X at the north end of the east bank, and Stela M at the south end on the same side—shared the same, very simple architecture and were both located at the corners of El Amarna’s two headlands, where the cliffs sweep down to the river’s edge at either end of the bay. Clearly these were the first boundary stelae carved at the site. Some time later, another copy of the “Earlier Proclamation” (Stela K) was made some distance to the south of Stela M: perhaps this reflects the poor quality of the stone from which the earlier stela was carved, since Stela M is in ruinous condition today. But Stela K is significant both in initiating a new style in the boundary stelae and in documenting an addition to the royal family. Only Meritaten, the first of Akhenaten’s daughters, is mentioned in the text of the “Earlier Proclamation”, and she duly appears with her parents in the scene at the top of Stela X and

*Stela U, the largest of all the boundary stelae (over twenty-five feet tall) near the entrance of the canyon leading to Akhenaten’s tomb.*





(originally) Stela K. Shortly after the figures were carved onto Stela K, however, the sculptors squeezed in a figure of the second daughter, Meketaten, between that of her elder sister and the margin line to the right. Probably at the same time, the emplacement of the stela was made more elaborate: the tablet was now flanked with statues of Akhenaten and Nefertiti; and beside their parents were carved statues of the two daughters. These were to become invariable features of all the other boundary stelae which would be carved in the next few years, first on the east and then on the west banks of the Nile.

Of the remaining twelve boundary stelae, all but one are inscribed with the so-called "Later Proclamation". This decree, which was issued in year six, defines the dimensions of the city's territory, measuring from the stelae on the east bank to those on the west, while a codicil dated at the beginning of Akhenaten's eighth year records a royal visit made to the stelae at the southeastern end of El Amarna. This

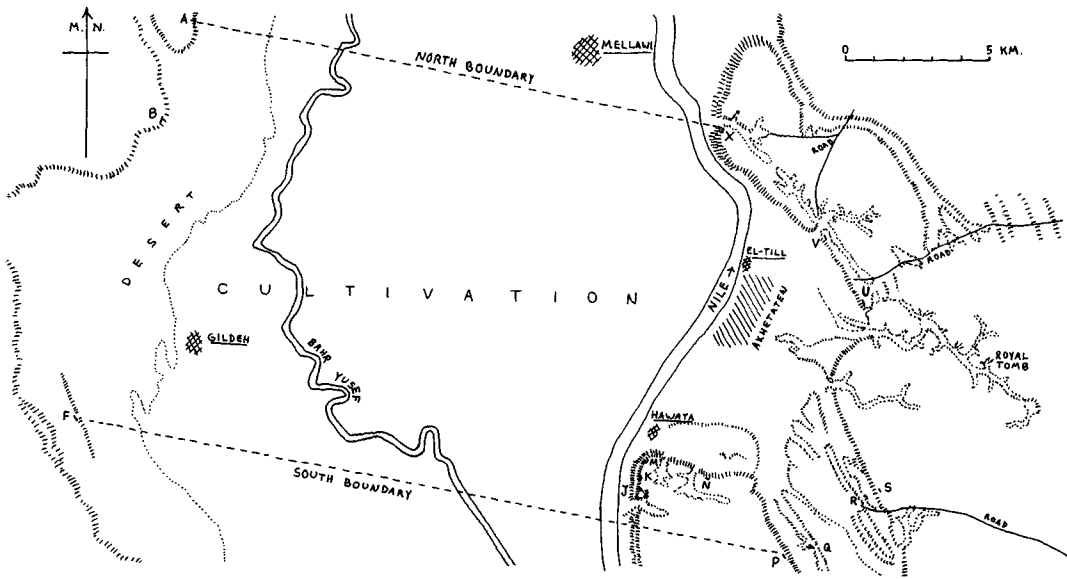
*Stela S, virtually intact at the turn of the Twentieth Century, severely damaged today.*

visit may also be commemorated in Stela L, a small and badly weathered tablet that adjoins Stela M, which was given its first close examination by our expedition. It would seem that the carving of boundary stelae lagged once the first two monuments had been finished, but that it was resumed in earnest only after that royal tour of inspection in year eight. All of these later stelae (Stela L excepted) follow, with some variation, the style of Stela K. Consistently, moreover, only two daughters are shown beside their parents—but in a few cases on the east bank a hole was cut in the pavement beside the daughters' statues to allow a third statue to be put in—undoubtedly belonging to Ankhesenpaaten, Akhenaten's third daughter and the future bride of Tutankhamun. These arrangements are especially noteworthy on the western stelae (A and B), where the figure of the third daughter

was added not as a statue, but in relief on the side of one of the altars held by her parents' statues. Stela A, moreover, is unusual because the tablet was made longer on the bottom to allow for the addition of more text, a "colophon" dated to the end of year 8: to do this, the entire floor of the monument was lowered, leaving the statues raised on pedestals above the new pavement. Given the "colophon's" date, at the end of year 8, this alteration to the monument must have taken place later—as early as the first part of year 9. Since all the statues beside the tablet had already been carved before this change was made, with statues of only two daughters in evidence, it follows that the third daughter could not have

come onto the scene before the start of Akhenaten's ninth year on the throne.

On the west bank, the expedition succeeded in locating the site of the southernmost tablet, Stela F, the position of which had been last noted some seventy years ago. Since there was insufficient time to clear away the windblown sand that has entirely covered this monument in the meantime, we decided to defer any work at this site until our next season (which we hope will be in the spring of 1985). At that time, also, we will check selected passages of the other stelae which we believe require additional study, so that we will be able to give Akhenaten's boundary stelae the accurate and comprehensive publication they deserve.



*The territory of Akhenaten's city, showing the positions of the boundary stelae on both sides of the Nile.*