

“Purify Yourselves!” Piye’s Victory Stele as Theological Statement

In the Cairo museum sits a large stele (JDE 48862 + 47086 – 47089), measuring 1.8 by 1.84 meters, discovered by Said Pasha in 1862, which is possibly one of the most intriguing pieces of Egyptian monumental literature to have been discovered. Carved onto a round-topped granite block, the text describes the military campaign of Piye into Egypt in order to quell Tefnakht, a northern ruler from Sais. This stele is not the first document of Piye’s forays into Egypt; the “Sandstone Stele” dating from regnal year 3 recounts a similar exercise. What makes his triumphal victory stele important, however, is the state of preservation, and the fact that there are very few monuments from this period of Egyptian history of such depth and literary scope.

Scholars have largely been in agreement for a long time over the combination of both historical narrative and literary work found within the text, and so drawing out definite conclusions with certainty has been difficult. Gardiner (1935) noted that the text, being upon a triumphal stele, should be viewed with a discerning eye, expectant of both historical and ideological narrative. However, we must remember that while we tend to separate these two, as well as religious and non-religious, the ancient Egyptians did not (Muhlestein, 2007), and so we must attempt to examine the stele in light of this interconnection between “mundane and ultra-mundane”, in order to allow any conclusions drawn to be within the Egyptian cultural context of this mixing of styles. Taking these factors into account will allow us to investigate the stele in a more useful manner and will inform our conclusions. This paper hopes to show that a large part of the evidence points to a king who truly believed himself to be a holy man doing the will of Amun by cleansing Egypt of its wickedness, not simply as religious justification for his political actions, but in order to return it to the “true” worship of Amun.

Upon reading the text, the first striking point is that while the stele gives a narration of events, it focuses not so much on the events themselves but the methods used, such as ritual cleansing, and mercy to those who had not “blasphemed God”. An unusual amount of emphasis is placed on Piye’s religious instruction to his army, such as to “Purify yourselves in the water!” While there is undoubtedly an element of propaganda here, in displaying his army as clean and pure in the fight against his opponents, it is also unusual in that, bar the opening speech (which still focuses on Amun while exclaiming his kingship), the boasts about the king’s individual power are conspicuous by their absence - particularly surprising on a victory stele set up in the capital. Instead, the glory is given to Amun, with special note being given to Piye’s religious conduct, such as his celebrating the Opet feast. If the campaign had been a purely political move justified by a religious motivation, then the usual declarations of the power of the ruler would be expected. This is replaced by a diversion of the reader’s attention away from the king’s own power towards that of Amun. He was certainly an important deity for the Kushites, and perhaps the arrival of Amun priests in Nubia, fleeing from Thebes, started the process of religious fervency for his cult within Kush, and also began an “Egyptianising” process there (Kendall, 1999), allowing the Kushites to later see themselves as the rightful heirs to Egypt. However, Kendall’s assertion that “The Kushite state was a deliberate creation of the Amun priesthood of Thebes” appears to be merely unsupported speculation that simplifies a gradual change with multifaceted factors. Although by far the most famous example, Piye certainly was not the first to attempt to “Amunize” a territory. Years before him, the mysterious Queen Katimala had written an inscription at Semna, in which she viewed the war that she had fought “as a struggle between the faithful servants of Amun against enemies of the deities” (Darnell 2006, p.63). He then makes an interesting point:

for Katimala only the most fervent devotion to Amun could bring victory. In the face of this intense personal reliance on faith in Amun, Piye's concern that his troops be ritually pure before entering the precinct of Karnak becomes *something more than good manners and political sagacity*. (Emphasis mine)

From this we can note that Piye's seemingly unrealistic dedication is not an isolated case, but a recurring trend among Kushite elite. Darnell is not the only scholar to have noted his predecessors' fervency: Ritner (2009, p.456) particularly also notices the seeming zealotry of Katimala. However, Török (2008, pp.297-298) disagrees with Darnell's assertions within his paper as purely hypothetical, questioning the validity of the conclusions that Darnell draws. Unfortunately Török appears to miss Darnell's main argument, that Katimala was a forerunner to the fervency of Piye, in an attempt to defend his own chronological hypothesis of the period. This chronology is a debate which does not concern us here, but from this we can at least assert that fervency for Amun was not especially uncommon in Kush, and so the possibility of Piye's seemingly exaggerated zeal being real personal devotion becomes more realistic than when studied purely from an insular Egyptian angle.

Now that we have seen that this level of religious fervency may not have been particularly uncommon for the Kushite rulers, we must examine the evidence for Piye's campaign being an outworking of this fervour, instead of simply a political masquerade. An interesting fact that is often neglected is the timing of his expedition northwards, to coincide with the inundation. Only Török (2002, p.18) makes note of it, saying that it

was consciously coordinated with the New Year and thus with the Nile flood. The King acted...as bringer of the inundation and was, indirectly, identified with it.

He also notes in the same place how this displays Piye's expedition as a religious pilgrimage instead of a mainly political expedition, as well as his presenting himself as a triumphal

warrior who destroyed the forces of chaos and restored order to a decaying Egypt at the same time. Thus Piye had deliberately timed his movements to be symbolic of a new start for Egypt, in that he was bringing new life in the same way as the silt from south brought new life to the land, which Egypt relied on to continue functioning properly. While all this may be passed off by some as purely religious propaganda to justify his actions, it cannot be escaped that if this was the case, his actions would have been motivated purely by the movements of Tefnakht in the north, and not with any meaningful parallel with the Nile flood, as seems clear from the timing of his campaign. It is interesting that none who argue for Piye's campaign as a primarily political one have confronted this evidence at all.

We have seen how his devoutness may not be unusual, and that it is probable that his campaign was timed to give a message of revival to the people of Egypt: but now we will turn to the inscription itself. On it Piye consciously uses Classic Middle Egyptian phrases and language to give a theme of cultural revival – Piye is returning Egypt to the glorious past (Ritner, 2009, pp.466-467). The stele itself almost quotes a number of well-known Middle Kingdom texts, most notably “rest the bow and loosen the arrow”, which is almost directly taken from the tale of Sinuhe (Gardiner, 1935, p.220 n3). This deliberate evoking of classical literary styles is surely a subtle way of denoting a renewal in fortunes, and strengthens further the image of a return to the days of cultural wealth, presumably when Amun was worshipped truly, before Egypt descended into the “chaos” caused by the Libyans. With this, it is interesting to note how the stele is very careful to “slip” into the vernacular when Piye's enemies speak (Ritner, 2009, p.466), further implying that only Piye is capable of the revival he intends, for only he understands the cultural heritage of Egypt, and his mastery of the classic language gives a stark juxtaposition between himself and his enemies. Further to this, Gozzoli (2006, p.57) notes that “In Piye's text, the defeated rulers bow themselves down to the Nubian King, give him their symbols of power, but more importantly, they recognize the

supremacy of Piye from a religious point of view”. He also notes the intriguing iconography of the lunette, where Piye is not facing the gods, as is usual, but is ahead of them, facing outward from them, as the defeated rulers bow down. He takes this as implying Piye’s self-perceived role as intermediary between Amun and the other rulers, chosen to be king by Amun (this is made very clear from the victory stele and his sandstone stele), and has the power to attack those opposed to him on Amun’s behalf, in this case Tefnakht. While Tefnakht moves in the north, Piye does nothing. But when He moves against the power of Amun, in the form of Piye, action is taken. It can be seen then, that Piye displayed himself as Amun’s representative on earth, with power to actively defend the deity’s interests, in bringing about a restoration in his name.

The text on the stele is not the only indication as to his belief in his god-given role. Török (2008, p.324) notes that “Piankhi also adopted the throne name Wsr-M3't-R’, “Re is one whose order is strong”, suggesting a program of the restoration of traditional order”. He also notes in the same place that Piye imitated the Nebty and Horus names of Thutmose III, strengthening this assertion and clarifying his at least official desire to restore order to Egypt. The evidence above points, therefore, to a ruler not simply conquering for political motives – there seems to simply be too much emphasis on his religious piety and desire to return Egypt to true worship, far more than that necessary for a mere justification for political action.

Piye was certainly remembered not as a conquering overlord, but as a just and great ancestor: He was later deified, with examples such as “Piankhi-yerike-qa” – “Begotten of the deified Piankhi” (Macadam, 1949, p.73). Posterity remembered him well as a holy king who ruled by the will of Amun. He commenced extensive building work at the temple of Amun at Gebel Barkal, and Grimal (1995, p.340) theorizes that to the Kushites, “The Gebel Barkal temple was therefore a replica of the temple of Amun in Karnak” and notes how each king after Piye enlarged upon it, in much the same way had been done at Karnak. Perhaps his work

there was a deliberate attempt to start this trend, or was simply an expression of the power and resources that had been given to him by his god. Piye's stele is certainly not an isolated example of Amun "fundamentalism", but is a part of a wider context in which Piye can be seen to be attempting to recreate a time of prosperity and devotion to the god that he worshipped. Myśliwiec (2000, p.84) notes "the perfection with which stress is apportioned and appropriate proportions are maintained with regard to its political and religious aspects", in a "carefully thought-out and didactic manner". This should demonstrate to us how the stele was a carefully planned way to present Piye in the way that he wanted to be remembered – not as a master political lord, but primarily as a worshipper of Amun.

As can be seen from even this short discussion of the various sources concerning the nature of Piye's victory, no definite answers can be found as to the true motivations behind his expedition north. However, it is hoped that the arguments put forward here are persuasive. Piye focused on the religious aspect of the expedition far more than the militaristic on his stele, which would be expected on the self-flattering inscriptions of a conquering overlord, and he gives a seemingly unusual amount of devotion to Amun. However, when we view the history of the Kushites, such as queen Katimala, this fervency becomes more normal for the culture, and thus should not surprise us. The style of the stele also has been carefully thought out to give an indication of Piye's return to classic Egyptian power – when Amun was truly worshipped – and displays a theme of cultural revitalization by citing major classic works and Egyptian poetical styles. The imitating of specific throne names of Thutmose III, a great pharaoh of the past, and the presentation of the Libyans as those who do not understand the glory of Egypt are also no coincidence either, and show us Piye's view of himself as the restorer of Egypt under the worship of Amun. However we interpret the monument, perhaps the stele's most useful function for the Egyptologist is the snapshot it gives us of the political map in the time of Piye, an incredible monument considering its isolated position in Egyptian

and Kushite history, an inscription with remarkable literary qualities rising monolithically out of the relative darkness of the Third Intermediate Period. Perhaps the motivations behind the actions narrated upon it could be better examined if more evidence survived from contemporaneous sources, such as from Nimlot, or Pediese. Until then, however, the argument that Piye viewed his campaign as primarily a religious cleansing is put forward tentatively until further evidence supporting or contradicting this comes to light.

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