

Ancient Egyptian Literature: Volume III: The Late Period  
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STATUE INSCRIPTION OF NEBNETERU

From Karnak

Cairo Museum 42225

A handsome block statue of grey granite, 1.10 m high. The cartouches of King Osorkon II are inscribed on Nebneteru's shoulders. In addition, his right shoulder bears the inscription "First Prophet of Amun, Harsiese." In this way Nebneteru pays homage to the chief pontiff of Thebes. Incised on the front of the body are the standing figures of Amun, Re, Ptah, and Osiris, with each god addressing a blessing to Nebneteru.

Below the scene is the beginning of the biographical inscription. The texts are distributed over the surfaces in the following order. On the front is an introductory autobiographical statement in the first person, which ends with an appeal to the priests of the temple. On the right side is a list of titles and epithets cast in the third person followed by a prayer on behalf of Nebneteru, such as might be spoken by his son. On the left side is the principal autobiographical inscription, ending in another appeal to the priests to safeguard and supply his statue. On the back plinth is a summary of his offices and titles. On the base two vertical and two horizontal lines repeat the titles of Nebneteru and add those of his son Hor, who dedicated the statue of his father.

Like Djedkhonsefankh before him, Nebneteru belonged to a leading Theban family whose members held important positions in the Theban priesthood and at court, and were related to the ruling dynasty through marriages with princesses of the royal house. Nebneteru's principal courtly office was that of "royal secretary," an office which entailed extensive administrative duties.

Of special interest in his autobiography is Nebneteru's expression of satisfaction with his exceptionally long life, and his emphatic exhortation to the reader to enjoy life, to eschew worries, and to shun the thought of death.

Publication: Legrain, *Statues*, III, 58–62 and pl. 32.

Partial text, translation, and study: H. Kees, *ZÄS*, 74 (1938), 73–87, and *idem*, *ZÄS*, 88 (1962/3), 24–26.

Translation: Otto, *Inschriften*, pp. 136–139.

Comments: Legrain, *RT*, 30 (1908), 73–74, 160, and 165 f. Kees, *Priestertum*, pp. 223 ff., and *idem*, *Priester*, p. 108. Kitchen, *Third Intermediate*, pp. 211–213.

*On the front of the body in eight columns*

(1) The prince, count, royal seal-bearer, prophet of Amun in Ipet-sut, royal secretary,<sup>1</sup> Nebneteru, son of the mayor, vizier, mouth of Nekhen, Neseramun, born of Muthetepti, says:

I was one unique and excellent,  
 Great in his town,  
 Much esteemed in the temple.  
 Amun appointed me door-opener of heaven,<sup>2</sup>  
 So that I saw his form (3) in lightland.  
 He introduced me to the palace in private,  
 So that I saw Horus in his image.<sup>3</sup>  
 I sought what was useful for my town in my time,  
 My concern<sup>4</sup> was for the house of god.  
 He gave me rewards in blessings,  
 He requited (me) as he wished.

He provided me with a son to take office,  
 On my entering the land of my permanence.  
 (5) I saw his worth as he circled the shrine,  
 As one honored by the King in the palace,  
 The prophet of Amun, fan-bearer at the King's right,  
 Royal secretary of the Lord of the Two Lands, Hor.  
 I saw my sons as great priests,  
 Son after son who issued from me.  
 I attained the age of ninety-six,  
 Being healthy, without illness.  
 If one desires (7) the length of my life,  
 One must praise god for another in my name.<sup>5</sup>

O priests, divine fathers of Amun!  
 You shall be on earth without want  
 Through the favor of Amun,  
 If you give water to my statue,  
 For whose worship (my) *ba* rises early!  
 For the *ka* of the priest and royal secretary, Tery,<sup>6</sup>  
 Every day unendingly.

*On the right side in thirteen horizontal lines*

(1) Long live the prince, count royal seal-bearer,  
 Prophet who opens the doors of heaven in Ipet-sut;  
 Chief seer who contents the heart of Re-Atum in Thebes,

Who enters the palace in private;  
 The eyes of the King throughout the land,  
 Who comes praised from the palace;  
 A mouth skilled in confidential speech,  
 Provider of Upper Egypt in his time;  
 Whose coming is awaited in the palace,  
 Whose wisdom has advanced his *ka*;  
 The royal (3) secretary for Upper Egypt, Nebneteru,  
 Son of the prince, count, royal seal-bearer,  
 Prophet of Amun in Ipet-sut,  
 Mayor, vizier, mouth of Nekhen,  
 Guide of the whole land, *setem*-priest,  
 Leader of all kilts, prophet of Maat, Neseramun;  
 Son of the prophet and door-opener of heaven in Ipet-sut,  
 First prophet of Mont, Lord of Thebes,  
 Intimate of the King in the palace,  
 Fan-bearer at the King's right,  
 Royal secretary of (5) Pharaoh, Nebneteru.<sup>7</sup>

May your city-god act for you,  
 Amen-Re, Lord of Thrones-of-the-Two-Lands,  
 Sole god, truly benign, whose glory endures,  
 Lord of all in heaven, on earth,  
 The lightlander who rises in lightland,  
 By whom everyone lives,  
 Exalted of form, lord of joy,  
 Presiding over Thrones-of-the-Two-Lands!

And Re-Harakhti, the radiant,  
 Whose serpent shines,  
 Who is bright in (7) the eyes of all;  
 And great Ptah, South-of-his-Wall,  
 Lord of Memphis, Lord of Maat,  
 Who created all there is;  
 And Osiris, Lord of eternity,  
 Ruler of everlastingness:

May they love you as you come in peace,  
 May they renew your *ka* in the sanctuary.  
 May your seat be spacious as when you were on earth,<sup>8</sup>  
 May all the living love you.  
 May you inhale myrrh and sweet ointment,  
 And receive (9) the cleansing of the Two Lords.<sup>9</sup>  
 May the two jars give you their content,  
 May you receive the loaf in the hall.

May your *ba* be brought to the altar daily,  
 May the arm be bent at your tomb.  
 May the water of the revered be given you  
 From the hands of the servants of god.  
 May all kinds of food be poured out  
 In the sanctuary by the great priests.  
 (11) May your limbs be fashioned anew,  
 May your body be blessed afresh,  
 In reward for your having entered before god,  
 And having seen Amun in the hall of columns.  
 You have opened the doors of the portal of lightland,  
 You have brought sunlight from the eastern mountain.<sup>10</sup>  
 You have entered pure with words of cleansing,  
 You have made great your monthly cleansing.  
 Your hand was sound, your tongue exact,  
 (13) Your mouth shut against speaking falsely.  
 Your tongue was guarded --- . . . ,<sup>11</sup>  
 Your speech was free of evil.  
 All good things shall be given you,  
 An offering befitting one like you.

*On the left side in thirteen horizontal lines*

(1) Long live the prince, count, royal seal-bearer,  
 Prophet, door-opener of heaven in Ipet-sut,  
 Who enters into the secret of the portal of this land,  
 Palace councillor who guides the land with his counsel  
 Great dignitary in Upper Egypt,  
 Royal secretary of Upper Egypt, Nebneteru, justified;  
 Son of the mayor, vizier, mouth of Nekhen,  
 Prophet of Maat, Neseramun, justified; he says:

I lived on earth as intimate of the God,<sup>12</sup>  
 As eyes of the King in Ipet-sut,  
 One who gave direction in all work (3) to the ignorant  
 Who guided the craftsmen by the rule.  
 Who knew his speech when speaking in the palace,  
 Who removed the wrong in every matter,  
 Who contented all the gods with their purifications.  
 I addressed the people in a manner they liked,  
 I judged everyone according to his nature,  
 I gave attention to what he wished.  
 I spent my lifetime in heart's delight,  
 Without worry, without illness.  
 I made my days festive with wine and myrrh,

I banished languor (5) from my heart.<sup>13</sup>  
 I knew it is dark in the desert vale,<sup>14</sup>  
 It is not foolish to do the heart's wish.

The prophet of Amun, the royal secretary, Tery, he says:  
 Happy is he<sup>15</sup> who spends his life  
 In following his heart with the blessings of Amun!<sup>16</sup>  
 He granted my office of door-opener of heaven,  
 He appointed me intimate of the palace.  
 Having surpassed the lifespan of any man (7) in my time,  
 I reached the desert vale with his blessings.  
 How the land mourned when I passed away,  
 My kin not differing from the people!<sup>17</sup>  
 Do not fret because the like will happen,<sup>18</sup>  
 It is sad to live with head on knee!<sup>19</sup>  
 Do not be tightfisted with what you own,  
 Do not act empty-handed with (9) your wealth!  
 Do not sit in the hall of heart's concern,<sup>20</sup>  
 Foretelling the morrow before it has come!  
 Do not deny<sup>21</sup> the eye its water,  
 Lest it come unawares!  
 Do not sleep with the disk in the east,  
 Do not thirst at the side of beer!<sup>22</sup>  
 The west seeks to hide<sup>23</sup> (11) from him who follows his heart,  
 The heart is a god,  
 The stomach is its shrine,  
 It rejoices when the limbs are festive!

O priests, divine fathers of Amun,  
 Who enter the heaven upon earth,  
 Very pure at the monthly feast,  
 Who bring the Eye at the two strides of the moon:<sup>24</sup>  
 Do not remove my statue from its place,  
 Beware of Amun's reproach!  
 (13) Perform the royal offering for my *ka* every day,  
 With every leftover from Amun,  
 Bread, beer, wine, and oil  
 From the table of the Lord of Thebes,  
 For the *ka* of this excellent noble!

*On the back plinth in four columns*

(1) The prince, count, royal seal-bearer,  
 Prophet of Amun in Thebes,  
 Supervisor of the prophets of all the gods,

Special one to the King,  
 Intimate of the King,  
 Favorite in the palace,  
 Whom the King gave riches and praises  
 Because of the greatness of his knowledge.  
 A great one in his office,  
 Outstanding in his rank,  
 Who removed the wrong in every matter.  
 Chief seer<sup>25</sup> (3) who contents the heart of Re-Atum in Thebes,  
 Chief of works on all monuments of the house of Amun,  
 Royal secretary for Upper Egypt, Nebneteru, justified;  
 Son of the prince, count, royal seal-bearer,  
 Prophet of Amun in Ipet-sut,  
 Mayor, vizier, overseer of the companions of the palace,  
*Setem*-priest, leader of all kilt-wearers,  
 Judge, mouth of Nekhen, intimate of Horus in the palace,  
 Prophet of Maat, Neseramun, justified,

## NOTES

1. Lit., "King's scribe of letters" (or, "documents"). This is Nebneteru's principal courtly office.

2. Nebneteru's particular function as a priest of Amun of Ipet-sut (Karnak) was to open the doors of the sanctuary during the daily ritual. "Heaven" and "lightland" (horizon) are words for the temple.

3. Just as Nebneteru could approach the god in his shrine, so also did he have access to the king at the palace, the king as Horus being the earthly image of Amun.

4. The verb *h3m*, "to catch fish," here has a metaphorical sense which is not quite clear. As to the spelling with feminine *t* and four strokes, Kees read it as the collective *h3m.t* and rendered "so dass es gesammelt ist." I propose to take the fourth stroke as the suffix of the first person. As to the meaning, I see it in the light of the expression *h3m-ib*, which occurs in line 9 of the left-side inscription, where the context suggests "worry," "anxiety," or "concern." Hence I render "my concern," but some doubt remains.

5. So following Kees, but the writing of *ky*, "another," is odd, and the sense is not clear.

6. Nickname of Nebneteru.

7. In addition to giving his father's name and offices, Nebneteru records the ranks and titles of his grandfather Nebneteru after whom he was named.

8. To have a "spacious seat" means "to be at ease."

9. It seems that *km.k* stands for *gm.k*. The "Two Lords" are Horus and Seth.

10. I.e., the morning sun enters the temple when the doors are opened.

11. The missing sign obscures the meaning.
12. Lit., "one who enters upon the god"; the "god" here is the king.
13. *Wrd-ib* is "lassitude" in the sense of "languor" and "passivity," and *fk3.n.i wrd.i n ib.i* must convey the idea of overcoming the heart's lassitude. This sense is obtained from the root *fk3*, "uproot, expel," not from *fk3*, "reward, bribe." Kees's rendering, "Ich gewährte meinem Herzen Aufschub," does not suit.
14. This is the only remark about the land of the dead: it is dark there. All other alleged references to the gloom of the afterlife, which Kees had read into lines 8–10 in his rendering in *ZÄS*, 74 (1938), 79, were due to mistranslations which Kees subsequently corrected in *ZÄS*, 88 (1962/3), 24–26.
15. *W3d wy* appears to be an idiom for "happy is," or, "blessed is." In *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, I, 197, n. 4, I noted its use in the laments for the dead.
16. This sentence sums up the Egyptian concept of the good and blessed life. "Following the heart" (*šms-ib*) is to make the best and fullest use of what life holds; it is being active, generous, and joyful. Beneath the exhortation to enjoy life lay the continuous conflict between valuing life in all its transitoriness and the vision of an eternal afterlife, a vision that oscillated between hope and doubt. The debates stirred by this conflict are studied anew in J. Assmann's excellent article, "Fest des Augenblicks—Verheissung der Dauer" in *Otto Gedenkschrift*, pp. 55–84.
17. I.e., the grief of the people at large was as great as that of Nebneteru's relatives.
18. Lit., "Do not fret lest its like may happen." The meaning is, "Do not think about your death."
19. Lit., "Sadness is for him who lives with head-on-knee." "Head-on-knee" was the posture of mourning.
20. On *h3m-ib* see note 4.
21. Assuming the verb to be either *hni* of *Wb.*, 5,44.1, or *hn* of *Wb.*, 5,50.6.
22. I.e., "Be up when the sun is up, and when beer is available drink it."
23. A word play on *imn.t*, "the west," and *imn.t*, "concealment." Again the meaning is that to enjoy life is to forget death.
24. The Horus Eye, the symbol of offerings, offered at the feasts of the waxing moon.
25. Title of the high priest of the sun-god.