

The Distribution and Dating of Egyptian False Doors and Funerary Stelae of the First Intermediate Period: A Preliminary Analysis

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Introduction

The false door, later replaced by the stele, can be continuously traced in the archaeological record from the end of the Old Kingdom to the beginning of the Middle Kingdom. It can be traced across sites in Upper and Lower Egypt and across each of the major phases of rule from the Memphites to the Herakleopolitans and the Thebans. Yet, studies to date have only considered the false door and stele within the parameters of individual sites or localised regions, for example: Dunham and Brovarski's studies at Naga ed-Deir (Dunham 1937 & Brovarski 1989), Daoud's study at Memphis (2005) and Fischer's studies at Dendera (1968). There has been little attempt to date false doors and stelae across both time and place. But what this can actually offer us is the potential to determine a benchmark for dating other events and material culture of the First Intermediate Period, as well as clearer patterns in artistic, administrative, and social changes. The purpose of this paper, therefore, is twofold: (1) to present the preliminary findings from a site distribution of 562 Egyptian false doors and funerary stelae currently known from the First Intermediate Period (reigns of King Pepy II – Mentuhotep II) and (2) to explore the results of a set of dating criteria applied to a representative group of 'well-dated' examples.

Background

The First Intermediate Period is unquestionably problematic. We remain relatively uninformed of the exact nature and order of particular historical events, the whereabouts of the Herakleopolitan capital and the identification of dynasties of kings. But, perhaps the pinnacle of all this ambiguity lies in its chronology. Just how long did the First Intermediate Period last?

While many of these larger questions are far from being answered, there is still much in the way that can be learned from a holistic study of false doors and stelae belonging to both royal and non-royal people, as this paper will show. Four groupings of false door and stelae types have been identified here for examination. They include (Figures 1-4): (1) the traditional false door type which emerged out of the palace-façade decoration of the Early Dynastic Period; (2) the *stèle maison* or 'house stele' (Jéquier 1983, 112-115 & Fischer 1954, 30), a rare type of small, squat stone edifice with miniature false door carved on at least one side; (3) the stele, a flat stone slab which, unlike the false door, lacks the presence of any alternating panels or niches and; (4) the hybrid false door-stele – very similar in many respects to our type 3 stele, but also incorporating composite elements of the false door rendered often, but not always, without any differentiation of planes. Examples of these composite elements include the

cavetto cornice and torus moulding, the central niche, drum, wedjat eyes and door bolts.

Arrangement of the material

The first step in the study was to try and arrange the data set of 562 false doors and stelae into some sort of manageable form, based on their existing dates. However, given there is no commonly agreed underlying chronology for the First Intermediate Period – for example, what one scholar calls the ‘late Old Kingdom’ or ‘Dynasty 8’ might be another scholar’s ‘early First Intermediate Period’ – it was a challenge trying to streamline everything without facing these types of conflicts. After experimenting with an approach of ‘well-dated’, ‘relatively dated’ and ‘undated’, which actually yielded very little in the way of useful information and provided little flexibility for analysis, it was decided to come up with some dynastic groupings reflective of the key political, social and cultural phases of the First Intermediate Period. These appear as follows:

- Category 1: To the end of Dynasty 6 (Pepy II’s reign)
- Category 2: Dynasties 7-8 (period of quick succession of rulers, according to Manetho (Waddell 1940, 57-65))
- Category 3: Dynasties 9-early 11 (Herakleopolitan period and pre-unification Thebes)
- Category 4: Dynasty 11 (unification) and thereafter (central rule of the country from Thebes)
- Category 5: Unknown (everything which does not fit into categories 1-4, including generalisations like ‘First Intermediate Period’ and Dynastic dates that straddle multiple categories, such as Dynasties 8-9).

It is recognised here that the above categories are not necessarily ideal, particularly given the extensive work done by Dunham (1937), among others, who may have only reached a conclusion of ‘Early, Middle or Late First Intermediate Period’ in date. However, this ordering of the material can provide us with a useful starting point to help try and identify any outstanding and representative trends and patterns nationally.

Frequency and distribution

Table 1 shows the spread of all 562 false doors and stelae by nome site. The quantity of material is denoted along the bottom, the nome site appears along the top left hand side and the date category is represented by the different shades of black and white.

Of interest here is the high proportion of ‘undated’ material (Category 5), especially from the Thinite nome (UE 8), the Memphite nome (LE 1) and those without any provenance. There is a high concentration of material in Upper Egypt from nomes 4-8 (that is, the cemetery sites of Thebes, Coptos, Dendera, Abydos and Naga ed-Deir), a conspicuously low representation of material from Middle Egypt, particularly around the important site in First Intermediate Period

history of Asyut (UE 13) (which can probably be attributed to the lack of comprehensive archaeological excavation work undertaken in this area), and a high concentration of material from Memphis (LE 1), especially during the Dynasty 9 – pre-unification Dynasty 11 period. Furthermore, there is a very low representation of material from Busiris (LE 9), which is significant given the frequency that Osiris is invoked at Busiris in the *Htp dj nswt* offering formula (Fischer 1976, 5-24).

Figure 5 utilises the same data illustrated in Table 1, but distinguishing the different type of object (that is, the false door, stèle maison, stele and hybrid false door-stele).

Of most interest here is that false doors (Figure 6) continue to appear in both Upper and Lower Egypt throughout all phases of the First Intermediate Period. However, we can see that they are much less populous in Upper Egypt and almost fade out altogether after the Herakleopolitan Period. Stèle maison (Figure 5) are only found in Memphis – specifically, in the Teti and Pepy II pyramid cemeteries. They are also very rare and only six examples are known here. Hybrid false door-stelae (Figure 5) are only found between Upper Egyptian nomes 4 and 8. They are also quite rare with only 28 examples (including 6 of unknown provenance) attested in this preliminary study (for a more recent study of this material, including Fischer's 'atrophied stele', see: Pitkin 2014). Not surprisingly, there is also a very low representation of stelae (Figure 7) in Lower and Middle Egypt. The majority is concentrated around Upper Egyptian nomes 4-8, especially in the Thinite nome.

It was anticipated that this particular distribution might help to prove the hypothesis that perhaps some sort of linear transition occurred from the false door form to the stèle maison, hybrid false door-stele and then the cheaper and simpler slab stele form. Even if not a linear transition, perhaps the quantity of the material from each nome site would highlight trends in their popularity to indicate when one form became more preferred to another.

As the map illustrates (Figure 5), it is quite clear that false doors were a Memphite phenomenon that found popularity amongst the Herakleopolitans in northern Upper Egypt. The stelae, and hybrid false door-stelae, on the other hand, were a phenomenon in Upper Egypt between Thebes and Akhmim, while stèle maison were a short-lived, site specific and experimental form from Memphis (a more recent study conducted on the hybrid false door-stelae by the present author would also show this to be an experimental form, perhaps originally derived from the Memphite stèle maison, which entered Upper Egypt via Abydos) (Pitkin 2014).

A study was then undertaken into the shape of the stele to see if this might assist in the dating process. Could it be that a vertically shaped stele retains an earlier date because it is closest in form to the Memphite style false doors? If that holds true, then maybe a square stele (which has been thought to have been influenced by the shape of the central panel) succeeded this, followed by the rectangular stele. As the rectangular stele is the furthest away in form to

the original false door, then maybe this would retain the latest date. The results, however, would suggest something quite different.

What the distribution of the data actually tells us is that there does not appear to be a preferred stele shape at any particular time during the First Intermediate Period which points to this suggested sequence of development (Figure 8). There is a fairly even spread of vertical, square and rectangular stelae and they can be found across all of the date categories. However, we can see that most variation in the shape of the stele occurs within the 8th Upper Egyptian Thinite nome. Vertical, square and rectangular shaped stelae are more populous here than at any other site. We can also see, that with the exception of our undated material, rectangular shaped stelae actually appear more frequently earlier on – to the end of Dynasty 8 – while vertical shaped stelae are more frequent later on – Dynasty 11 unification and thereafter, which is the complete reverse of the hypothesis under consideration here.

'Well-dated' group of false doors and stelae

When it comes to dating any type of object or inscription from the First Intermediate Period, we have to exercise a high degree of caution. This is because we do not have a commonly agreed underlying chronology, there are contradictions in the ancient literature and there is an overall lack of evidence in terms of monuments, royal inscriptions and objects found in situ in well-dated tombs.

Out of the 562 false doors and stelae being examined as part of this preliminary study, 81 have been identified here which can be dated with some certainty to one of four major cultural, stylistic and administrative phases or 'styles' of First Intermediate Period history. These major phases, and the rationale for assigning a 'well-dated' status to these, appear as follows:

The Memphite style (to the end of Dynasty 8)

This consists of any false door or funerary stele in the present corpus, bearing either:

- A cartouche of Pepy in the owner's name
- A funerary cult title of Pepy or Neferkare and,
- A secure archaeological context (specifically for Jéquier's excavated group of stèle maison from the Pepy II pyramid cemetery at South Saqqara) (1983, 112-115).

It is recognised here that this criteria is by no means absolute. For example, the presence of a cartouche of Pepy could refer to either Pepy I or Pepy II and, with regards to the funerary cult titles, it is possible that a funerary cult of the king was maintained long after that particular king was in power. What this grouping does tell us, however, is that these false doors and stelae cannot date any earlier than the reign of Pepy (either I or II). It is also the firmest ground we have to work on when trying to determine any apparent points of transition in false doors and stelae from the 'Old Kingdom' to the 'First Intermediate Period',

which may be manifested through the introduction, and phasing out of, particular iconographic and paleographic features.

The Herakleopolitan style (Dynasties 9-10)

This consists of any false door or funerary stele in the present corpus, bearing either:

- A funerary cult title of Merikare
- A reference to the 'House of Khety'
- Khety in the owner's name (a name more popular during Herakleopolitan rule, but which was by no means exclusive to this time)
- Genealogy and its relationship to the Gebel Tjauti inscriptions in the Theban Western Desert and,
- A reference to historical events.

The Pre-Unification Theban style (early Dynasty 11)

This consists of any false door or funerary stele in the present corpus, bearing either:

- A cartouche of Wahankh Intef II
- Intef in the owner's name (like Khety, this name was more popular during Theban rule, but also had a lifespan beyond this)

The Post-Unification Theban style (mid Dynasty 11 onwards)

This consists of any false door or funerary stele in the present corpus, bearing either:

- A cartouche of Nebhepetre Mentuhotep II
- A reference to the House of Montu
- Montu in the owner's name (again, more frequently associated with the Mentuhotep rulers, but not exclusively so).

To accommodate those false doors and stelae, which exhibit multiple criteria from the aforementioned dating phases, it was also deemed necessary to devise a fifth category called 'Contentious'. To illustrate this case in point is stele Turin 1278 (Figure 9). The owner is a man named Intef (a criterion for the pre-unification Theban phase), yet he also bears the cartouche of Pepy in the phrase *pr.t xr.w t Hnqt pAt Hwt-kA ppjj* 'May invocation offerings of the *ka*-chapel of Pepy go forth' and he holds a converted bow and sheaf of arrows, which might, in fact, point to a date closer in time to the Herakleopolitan Period.

The purpose of these groupings is to firstly provide us with a relative chronology, or starting point, for which an overall dating typology can be established. The intention here is to apply over 200 different types of iconographic and paleographic dating criteria to these 88 'well-dated' objects to see if a more precise chronological sequence can be determined. It is within this part of the study that the author also hopes to be able to identify regional variations and possibly the way they 'travelled' between nomes (or remained

entirely local). It is hoped this type of observation might even lend itself to determining a timeframe of Theban and Herakleopolitan interactions and, perhaps more ambitiously, if these ruling parties were ever entirely coeval.

Dating criteria

A sample of five dating criteria has been applied here to demonstrate how the abovementioned research methodology is an effective one.

1. *Writing of the 'revered one' as jmAx(t), jmAxw(t) or jmAxjj(t)*
 - The abbreviated writing of jmAx(t) (as just the spinal cord and placenta with or without the filling stroke occurs on false doors and stelae throughout all phases of the First Intermediate Period
 - The writing of jmAxw(t) with the quail bird ceases at the end of pre-unification Dynasty 11
 - While the sound change to jmAxjj(t) does not occur on false doors and stelae until the pre-unification Dynasty 11 period. It is also a trend that continues, although with less frequency in this sample, into the post-unification Dynasty 11 phase and thereafter. As noted by Brovarski and others (1989, 254), however, the writing of jmAxjj(t) does appear on coffins earlier and, according to Schenkel (1962, 51, 59), it also appears in tomb no.4 of Khety at Asyut during the time of Merikare.
2. *Writing of Anubis on a Htp sign, a stand and/or with phonetic complements*
 - Anubis on a Htp sign only appears early on during the Memphite style (to the end of Dynasty 8). It does not occur on false doors and stelae again after this.
 - Anubis on a stand appears throughout all phases of the First Intermediate Period.
 - Phonetic complements appear until the end of the pre-unification Theban style (early Dynasty 11), which is interesting considering that Fischer (1976, 7), among others (Brovarski 1989, 228; Daoud 2005, 180), have noted that this is typically a later feature.
3. *Determinative for jmy wt "who is in the embalming place"*

The city sign determinative was only in use during the Memphite and Herakleopolitan phases, with one exception, while the pustule determinative became the preferred form in the pre-unification and, to a lesser extent, post-unification Dynasty 11 period.

4. *Round-topped shape of the stele*

The round-topped form of the stele is, typically, a well and long established Middle Kingdom characteristic and does not appear any earlier than the reign of Mentuhotep II.

5. *Offerings on top of the bread loaves*

The appearance of floating offerings, such as a foreleg of beef, gourd-like vegetables, a calf's head and trussed duck above the traditional bread loaves occurs, most commonly, from the Herakleopolitan Period through to post-unification Thebes. There is also one example of this occurring in our Memphite grouping: that of ppj-snb.j from Naga ed-Deir.

Dating the Pushkin Museum stele

The stele of Hnjj (Figure 10) from the Pushkin Museum in Moscow dates to at least the pre-unification Dynasty 11 phase since it bears the cartouche of King Wahankh Intef II. The stele also bears a number of the aforementioned dating criteria, which can help to confirm the types of characteristics we need to be looking for when trying to identify other stelae, which date close in time to the reign of Intef II. By applying these criteria to Hnjj, we can see how this type of an analysis can benefit us in the dating of individual false doors and stelae.

First and foremost, the stele of Hnjj is rectangular (not round-topped), a characteristic which pre-dates the reign of Mentuhotep II. Above the offering table, containing the traditional bread loaves, is a floating trussed duck, ribs, a gazelle, calf's head and a foreleg of beef – a feature that was not commonly introduced until the Herakleopolitan Period. The writing of the 'revered one' or the 'honoured one' appears as jmAx and jmAxw, which might indicate it is the earliest of all the stelae in this group containing the cartouche of Intef II, since the writing of jmAxjj does not appear any earlier than this king's reign. While, the writing of jmy wt occurs with a pustule determinative – the preferred form from the pre-unification phase onwards.

Conclusion

It is hoped that by applying more iconographic and paleographic criteria, like this, it will be possible to continue refining the dating properties of the abovementioned 'well-dated' groupings of false doors and stelae – thereby arriving at a reliable benchmark for which all other false doors, stelae and other types of material culture from the First Intermediate Period can also be examined and dated. Even if the results do not prove quite as conclusive as this, the author hopes to have opened up a new way of looking at the First Intermediate Period through its false doors and stelae and generated new opportunities for further scholarly research.

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Captions

Figure 1. False door of *gmnj-m-hAt* from Saqqara, 1616, image courtesy of the Carlsberg Glyptotek, Copenhagen.

Figure 2. Stèle maison of *Xnw* from South Saqqara, E6303, image courtesy of the Cinquantenaire Museum, Brussels.

Figure 3. Stele of *Hqr-jb* from Gebelein, 5633(=1), State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg.

Figure 4. Hybrid false door-stele of *jdj* from Dendera, 11420, image courtesy of the Medelhavsmuseet, Stockholm.

Table 1. Chart showing the quantity of false doors and stelae by nome site and existing date.

Figure 5. Map showing the entire distribution of the corpus by nome site.

Figure 6. Map showing the entire distribution of false doors by nome site.

Figure 7. Map showing the entire distribution of stelae by nome site.

Figure 8. Map showing the entire distribution of vertical, square and horizontal stelae by nome site.

Figure 9. Stele fragment of *jntf* from Naqada, 1278, image courtesy of the Museo Egizio Torino.

Table 2. Table showing the distribution (by date) and frequency of the writing of *jmAx(t)*, *jmAxw(t)* and *jmAxjj(t)*.

Table 3. Table showing the distribution (by date) and frequency of the writing of Anubis on a *Htp* sign, a stand or with phonetic complements.

Table 4. Table showing the distribution (by date) and frequency of the writing of *jmy wt* with a city sign or pustule determinative.

Table 5. Table showing the distribution (by date) and frequency of the representation of offerings above the traditional bread loaves.

Figure 10. Stele of *Hnjj* from Thebes, I.1.a1137 a,b, image courtesy of The State Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts, Moscow.