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A Stela from Ezbet Bashendi

Dakhla Oasis

Sayed YAMANI, Laure PANTALACCI

EZBET BASHENDI is a small village of the eastern part of Dakhla Oasis. Located 3,5 km East to Balat, it is close to the Sixth Dynasty / First Intermediate Period necropolis of Qila' al-Dabba. To the North of the modern village, a Roman monumental tomb covered by a dome has been reused as a tomb for Sheikh Bashendi. This monument, known as Qubbat Sheikh Bashendi, was first mentioned by Edmonstone in 1819. People used to tell that the village was named after Sheikh Bashendi, but it could rather derive from an ancient Egyptian toponym: *p3 snd.t*, «the acacia-tree».¹ In 1947, Ahmed Fakhry cleared the now famous tomb of *Qtjnnw*s which was covered by a modern mud-brick house. Osing dates it, according to palaeographical criteria, to the 1st or 2nd century A.D.² In 1985, cleaning and excavation of the site by the CSA (Dakhla Inspectorate) cleared the remains of three Roman tombs similar to Qubbat Sheikh Bashendi and built on the same line. An unknown tomb entirely covered by sand was cleared 2 m east of Qubbat Sheikh Bashendi and the stela published in this paper was found in loose rubbish of destruction, close to the SW corner of the tomb (fig. 1).

Kharga CSA Inspectorate no 403

Sandstone.

40.5 × 35 × 8 cm.

Lower corner left broken,
surface much weathered.

This stela, though found in debris of late context, is undoubtedly a tomb-stela. In its present state, it seems that it was originally round-topped; the right side is preserved in its original form, but to the left, both upper and lower parts are damaged. In spite of the poor-looking style, some craftsmanship can be detected in the careful dressing of the stone, and in the profile of its lower part, obviously designed to be plastered fast into the masonry of a funerary chapel.

¹ G. WAGNER, *Les oasis d'Égypte*, BdE 100, Le Caire, 1987, p. 194.

² J. OSING et al., *Denkmäler der Oase Dachla aus dem Nachlass von Ahmed Fakhry*, AVDAIK 28, Mayence, 1982 (hereafter quoted *Dachla*), p. 57-69.

The available surface is fully decorated, the lower part with an offering scene, the upper part with three neatly separated lines of offering formulae.

Below a deceased seated on a high chair is depicted. The man, whose hair seems cut short and looks like a cap, wears a skirt with a starchy apron. In front of him stands an offering table; the slices of bread are much stylised, most of them reduced to short lines in this ill-preserved area. Above the table, some hardly recognisable food offerings were piled up; they were numbered by the thousands, and some of these indications of number, the lotus stem reading *ḥ3*, «thousand», are still visible.

Facing the deceased across the table, another man is shown burning incense. The gesture of the left hand throwing incense on the flame is clearly visible, so in the lacuna the censer, held in the right hand, can be restored.

Both figures are tall and thin, the legs looking particularly elongated, as it often happens between Old and Middle Kingdom. The bodies as well as the gestures look rather stiff, but the tracing is firm and not entirely devoid of elegance.

The text engraved in the upper part of the stela reads as follows :

*ḥtp rdj nswt jnpw wsjr ḥnty-jmntyw [nb t3] dsr [qrs.tw.f] m js.f pr n.f ḥrw m s(my)t jmntyt mm
[3ḥw] jm3ḥww jm3ḥy ḥr ntr ʿ3 ḥsy ḥr nswt jm3ḥy sdb
sntr r? sdt
jm3ḥy [...]fr*

An offering which the King gave, and Anubis ^a, and Osiris Khentimentiu ^b [lord of the secluded land ^c: may he be buried in his grave, may the «voice come forth» for him in the western necropolis among the akh-spirits and the revered ones, the revered near the Great God, favoured near the King ^d, the revered Sedjeb ^e (?).

Incense on the flame ^f.

The revered ...fer ^g.

a. The recumbent dog as writing of the divine name is traditional, but may be replaced by the walking dog on later oasite monuments : G. Andreu, *BIFAO* 81, 1981, p. 4 n.(a). The form shown here is close to the stela found by Fakhry and dated to the MK by Osing³ (no 24), or to a stela found in a tomb near the mastaba II of Balat-Qila^ʿ al-Dabba : Y. Koenig, *BIFAO* 80, 1980, p. 41 et pl. XL.

b. This group is written with carefully-shaped, old-fashioned signs : the *nt* with four vases instead of three, a true zigzag , to be compared to the more sportive one on line 2. These archaizing features point to direct copy from an older model, presumably monuments still visible in the vicinity of the tomb.

³ *Dakhla*, p. 35 and pl. 7, 61.

The determinative of the mummified god wearing the white crown and holding a sceptre does not seem to replace the ancient seated divinity before well into the FIP and is found, at Balat necropolis, only in the funerary chamber of the governor Betju.⁴

c. This epithet of Osiris has only late parallels from Balat: *Dachla*, no 32, p. 35 and pl. 7, 61; Andreu, *BIFAO* 81, pl. III, 1.2.

d. Here is also felt, particularly in the shape of the , , or , the graphic influence of an ancient original, such as the texts of Ima-Pepy or Khentika from Balat: *Dachla*, pl. 1, 4.

e. The reading of the name is far from certain, and it is otherwise unattested in this area.

f. The caption seems to be complete, but the orientation of the text is awkward, as one should expect the hieroglyphs to be oriented, as the offering gesture itself, towards the deceased. Here again, the graphic appearance of the word *sntr* is archaic, reminding one for instance of the great stela of Khentika, where the word, spelled exactly this way, occurs several times (*Dachla*, no 21, pl. 58).

g. The last two signs are clear, the first two reduced to bars. The reading *Mdw-nfr*, a name very popular at Balat in the upper class from the Old Kingdom onwards, is a tantalizing hypothesis.

As can be realised from the preceding remarks, the monument is very close to the corpus from the Balat-Qila' al-Dabba necropolis. Particularly, its style and general features look very similar to a stela belonging to the lady Satamon, found in the French excavations in 1978 and published in 1981 by G. Andreu (*BIFAO* 81, p. 1-7 with pl. I-IV): the excavator dated it to the XIth dynasty. Here are to be found the same proportions of the bodies, and a perfectly similar text, the disposition of which is also identical. Furthermore, a striking feature recurs on both monuments: the strange underlining of the word *jmshw* in the last line.⁵ This feature is not attested on any other document from Balat necropolis; so it seems obvious that the Bashendi stela is contemporary to the Balat stela. It might even have been executed by the same craftsman.

No remains of the Old and Middle Kingdom having been found so far at Bashendi, and Bashendi being only 2 km distant from the Balat-Qila' al-Dabba necropolis, it seems not too unreasonable to assign Balat as the provenance of the Bashendi stela. But the quality of the Bashendi stela is obviously higher than Satamon's stela: an important graphic effort has been made. This suggests that Sedjeb, if his name must be read so, was an important person, presumably quite close to the governing family of that time. His monument confirms that the Old Kingdom necropolis was still in use towards the end of the First Intermediate Period.

⁴ Excavations of the Ifao, unpublished as yet. A picture can be seen in J. LECLANT, G. CLERC, *Orientalia* 63/2, 1993, pl. XLII, fig. 49.

⁵ On the Balat stela, the word *shw* is also underlined, but here the Bashendi stela has a lacuna.

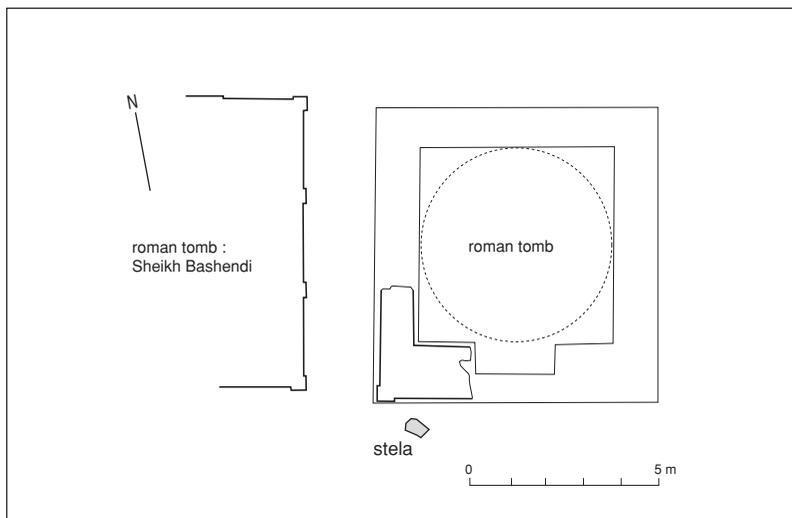


Fig. 1.

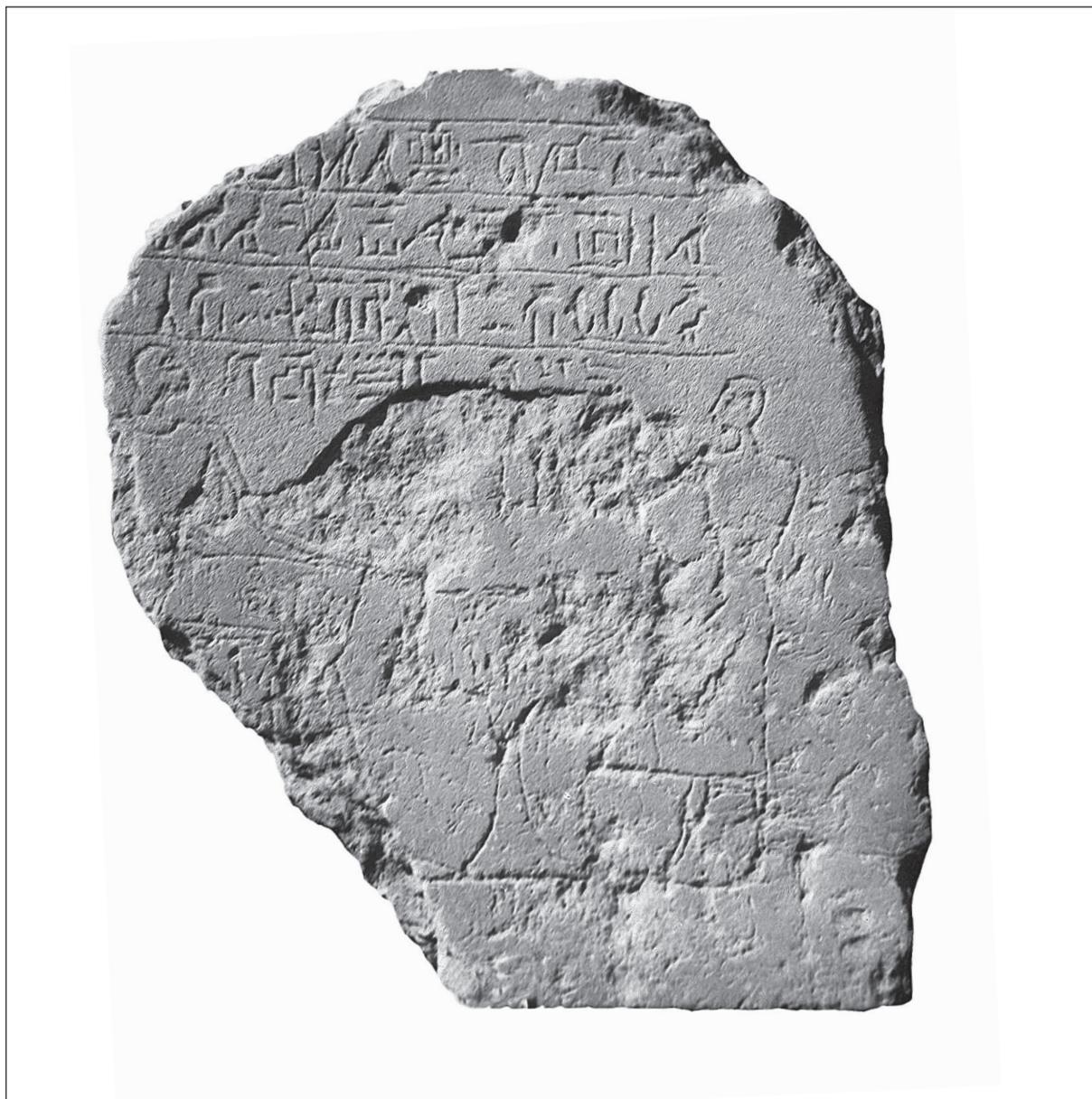


Fig. 2.

Fig. 3.

