

FRAGMENT OF A RAMESSIDE STELA
FROM TELL EL-RETABA*

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A fragment of a cream white limestone stela was found by accident at Tell el-Retaba during the season 2014. Its preserved shape is 22.5 cm x 25 cm. The frontal side of the stela is bordered by a rounded line framing the area decorated in sunk relief. The decoration features an almost completely preserved sun disc with the protruding head of a uraeus oriented rightwards, apparently the crown of a deity. An inscription identifies the figure as the god Re-Harakhty. Opposite the crown, there are remains of a cartouche whose right half is lost; the signs *wsr*, *stp* and *n* make it obvious that the name of a Ramesside ruler was written in the cartouche. The stela JE 72307, kept in the Egyptian Museum in Cairo, provides important parallels for interpretation of the Tell el-Retaba's fragment. The decoration and the workmanship show crucial similarities. It may be assumed that the stela from Tell el-Retaba also bore the representation of Ramesses II offering flowers to Re-Harakhty. Both stelae clearly belong to the corpus of so-called 'Horbeit stelae', which were probably exhibited in houses. They were most probably made at Qantir/Piramesse. It can only be assumed that the transfer to Tell el-Retaba took place in the Third Intermediate Period. A fragment of another 'Horbeit stela' was found at Tell el-Retaba in 1978 by Hans Goedicke's mission.

Key words: Tell el-Retaba, Horbeit stela, Re-Harakhty, Ramesses II, Piramesse

* The works at Tell el-Retaba have been supported by the Slovak Research and Development Agency (grant APVV-5970-12; Slovak Research of Ancient Egyptian civilization) and by the Scientific Grant Agency (grant VEGA 2/0139/14; History and culture of the civilization of Ancient Egypt: interdisciplinary research).

Tell el-Retaba, an important site¹ in the north-eastern Delta, has been repeatedly surveyed and subjected to excavations from the late 19th century onwards. Since 2007 it has been systematically investigated by a Polish-Slovak Archaeological Mission.² Decorated or inscribed materials discovered at tell is still rather sparse. Thus, it was all the more unexpected when a fragment of a stela was found during the season 2014, fairly by accident.³

The excavators working in Area 4 asked an Egyptian worker to set up an umbrella on the site. He, in the search of heavy objects to keep the umbrella in an upright position, collected some stones in the vicinity. One of them turned out to be a decorated and inscribed fragment of a limestone stela. It was found on the side of the asphalt road crossing the site in a north-south direction.⁴ Only later, the workers reported that a local woman allegedly used the piece to stabilise the construction of her seasonal market tent for selling *batikh* (water melons) beside the road.

Area 4 has been repeatedly surveyed since 2007 thus it is hard to imagine, that such a striking stone would escape the attention of archaeologists. Rather it is plausible, that it might have come from a near construction pit for a mosque on the western outskirts of the tell, down the hill of Migdol (map). The pit was dug out into cultural layers, mostly floated from higher positions on the tell, sometimes during the mission absence between the end of 2012 and the first half of 2014.

General description

The fragment (S1851) is the upper left part of a stela made of cream white limestone (Figs. 1a-f, 2). The preserved shape is more or less square, it is 22.5 cm tall, 25 cm wide and 10.5 cm thick. The original stela was apparently broken into smaller pieces, but there are no visible signs along the edges of the breaks that would indicate an intentional cutting. The breaks on the right and lower side are quite even and do not look recent, since they are worn and in some parts actually very smooth. The back of the fragment is cragged and rough,

¹ HUDEC, J., FULAJTÁR, E., STOPKOVÁ, E., Historical and Environmental Determinations of the Ancient Egyptian Fortresses in Tell el-Retaba. In *Asian and African Studies*, 2015, Vol. 24, No. 2, pp. 247–283.

² RZEPKA, S. et al. Tell el-Retaba 2007 – 2008. In *Egypt and the Levant*, 2009, Vol. 19, pp. 241–280.

³ RZEPKA, S. et al. From Hyksos Settlers to Ottoman Pipe Smokers. Tell el-Retaba 2014. In *Egypt and the Levant*, 2015, Vol. 25, p. 120, fig. 34a/b.

⁴ For a plan of the site with the modern road indicated see: RZEPKA, S. et al. Tell el-Retaba 2007 – 2008. In *Egypt and the Levant*, 2009, Vol. 19, p. 241, fig. 1.

featuring several chiselled marks. These may be related to the original sculpting of the stela in antiquity.

The front side of the monument displays a rounded bordering line framing the decorated area. The width of the stela's frame, i.e. the distance between the bordering line and outer curve of the stone, varies from 1.4 to 3.2 cm. The surface of the stela, including the frame, was smoothed and the image area was decorated in sunk relief. The execution of the relief is not very accurate; especially the hieroglyphic signs are roughly carved, without giving any attention to details. The decoration features an almost completely preserved sun disc (Ø ca. 11.2–12.7 cm) with the protruding head of a uraeus, apparently the crown of a deity that was oriented rightwards. An inscription written above the sun disc identifies the figure as the god Re-Harakhty (*rꜥw-hr.w-ꜣh.tj*⁵).⁶

Opposite to this inscription and the sun disc, there are remains of a cartouche whose right half is now lost; its preserved height is 12.5 cm. Careful examination revealed traces of at least three hieroglyphic signs. In the upper area the sign *wsr* can be clearly recognised (F12, head and neck of a canine animal⁷) and further down, the left part of the sign *stp* is preserved (U21, adze at work on a block of wood⁸). Underneath the *stp* sign, the leftmost ripple of water belonging to the sign *n* (N35⁹) is still discernible. The combination of the signs *wsr*, *stp* and *n* makes it obvious that the name of a Ramesside ruler was with outmost probability written in the cartouche. Nothing remained of the king's figure, but he must have been represented vis-à-vis the deity. The state of preservation does not, however, allow for any conclusions concerning the postures or actions of the figures.

An interesting feature of the fragment is an almost triangular recessed projection of the stone in the left upper corner, which is about 1.6 to 2.0 cm lower than the decorated surface. Its surface was treated very roughly; it was neither smoothed nor decorated. Numerous chisel marks along the curve of the stela's frame and on the smoothed surface of the frame itself indicate that the projection was made secondarily. A possible scenario is that the original rectangular limestone block was smoothed and only then the rounded shape of the stela's upper part was sculptured. During this work step, the left (and probably also the right) corner of the original block was not chiselled off

⁵ Thesaurus Linguae Aegyptiae, lemma-no. 70002. Available from <http://aew.bbaw.de/tla/> [cit. 4 December 2015].

⁶ For the god Re-Harakhty see: BARTA, W., Re. In *Lexikon der Ägyptologie* V, pp. 156–180 (esp. pp. 171–172); ASSMANN, J. Harachte. In *Lexikon der Ägyptologie* II, pp. 956–961; WILKINSON, R. H., The Complete Gods and Goddesses, pp. 205–209.

⁷ GARDINER, A. *Egyptian Grammar*, p. 462.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 518.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 490.

completely, producing a recessed projection on each side. In a third step, the stela was decorated in relief.

Ramesside cartouche

The signs *wsr*, *stp* and *n* reappear in several throne names of Ramesside kings ruling in the 19th and 20th Dynasty. The first of them is Ramesses II, followed by Sethos II, Sethnakht, Ramesses IV and Ramesses VII. All of these have to be taken into consideration when trying to determine the identity of the king who was once represented on the stela.

The three latter kings may be excluded as possible candidates, mainly because their whole throne names are too long to fit into the cartouche. This is especially the case with Ramesses VII whose throne name was *wsr-m3^c.t-r^cw-stp-n-r^cw-mr-jmn*.¹⁰ Sethnakht's throne name *wsr-h^c.w-r^cw-stp-n-r^cw*¹¹ is usually combined with the epitheton *mr-jmn* and thus unfitting as well.

Ramesses IV used a shorter throne name *wsr-m3^c.t-r^cw-stp-n-jmn*.¹² But even in this case, it would fit into the cartouche only in combination with a short version of Amun's name, using the sign of the sitting Amun as an ideogram, without further phonetic complements. In such versions of the throne name, however, the sign used for *n* is the red crown of Lower Egypt (S3¹³) and not the ripple of water preserved on the stela (N35). Furthermore, this name is only attested in Ramesses IV's first regnal year.

The only candidates left are thus the 19th Dynasty rulers Ramesses II using the throne name *wsr-m3^c.t-r^cw-stp-n-r^cw*,¹⁴ and Sethos II, for whom the throne name *wsr-hpr.w-r^cw-stp-n-r^cw*¹⁵ is attested. Both versions are well in accordance with the size of the cartouche as well as with the hieroglyphic signs discernible on the stela (Figs. 3a-b).

¹⁰ BECKERATH, J. von. *Handbuch der ägyptischen Königsnamen*, pp. 170–173; *Thesaurus Linguae Aegyptiae*, lemma-no. 859330. Available from <http://aew.bbaw.de/tla/> [cit. 7 December 2015].

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 164–165; *Thesaurus Linguae Aegyptiae*, lemma-no. 600241. Available from <http://aew.bbaw.de/tla/> [cit. 7 December 2015].

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 166–169; *Thesaurus Linguae Aegyptiae*, lemma-no. 859120. Available from <http://aew.bbaw.de/tla/> [cit. 7 December 2015].

¹³ GARDINER, A. *Egyptian Grammar*, p. 504.

¹⁴ BECKERATH, J. von. *Handbuch der ägyptischen Königsnamen*, pp. 152–157; *Thesaurus Linguae Aegyptiae*, lemma-no. 600505. Available from <http://aew.bbaw.de/tla/> [cit. 7 December 2015].

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 158–161; *Thesaurus Linguae Aegyptiae*, lemma-no. 600086. Available from <http://aew.bbaw.de/tla/> [cit. 7 December 2015].

It should also be mentioned that the throne name *wsr-mꜥ.t-rꜥw-stp-n-rꜥw* has been “reused” in the 22nd Dynasty (so-called Bubastide) by the kings Osorkon II,¹⁶ Sheshonq III¹⁷ and Pemu.¹⁸

Origin of the stela

At first sight, stela naming a Ramesside king of the 19th Dynasty corresponds with one of the main occupation phases of Tell el-Retaba and could easily be linked to the fortress built at the site during the reign of Ramesses II (phases E3–E2¹⁹).²⁰ As the object was found out of context, however, its origin and even its place of installation cannot be so easily determined.

An important hint in clarifying these issues provides the stela JE 72307 kept in the Egyptian Museum in Cairo that was discovered by Labib Habachi at Qantir in 1938 (Figs. 4a-b).²¹ In fact, the limestone stela is nearly an exact parallel of the piece found at Tell el-Retaba, concerning its form, size, decoration, material as well as execution. It is almost entirely preserved, being 58 cm high and 45 cm wide, and thus a bit smaller than its counterpart from Tell el-Retaba.

The decoration shows the standing figure of the god Re-Harakhty with a falcon head and a sun disc upon his head, holding an *ꜥnkh*-sign in his right and a *wꜥs*-sceptre in his left hand. The god faces the standing figure of the king Ramesses II who holds two bunches of three lotus flowers in front of Re-Harakhty’s face. The offering king is adorned with the blue khepresh-crown. The two cartouches and additional epithets above the king’s head identify him as ¹*nb ꜥ.wjwsr-mꜥ.t-rꜥw-stp-n-rꜥw* ²*nb ꜥ.w rꜥw-mss-mr-jmn* ³*mrj jtmw* (“Lord of the Two Lands

¹⁶ BECKERATH, J. von. Handbuch der ägyptischen Königsnamen, pp. 186–189.

¹⁷ Ibid., pp. 188–189.

¹⁸ Ibid., pp. 190–191.

¹⁹ For the phasing see: RZEPKA, S. et al. From Hyksos Settlers to Ottoman Pipe Smokers. Tell el-Retaba 2014. In *Egypt and the Levant*, 2015, Vol. 25, p. 101.

²⁰ For the fortress see: RZEPKA, S. et al. New Kingdom and Third Intermediate Period in Tell el-Retaba. In *Egypt and the Levant*, 2011, Vol. 21, pp. 142–152; RZEPKA, S. et al. Egyptian Mission Rescue Excavations in Tell el-Retaba. Part 1: New Kingdom Remains. In *Egypt and the Levant*, 2012/2013, Vol. 22/23, p. 273; RZEPKA, S. et al. Tell el-Retaba from the Second Intermediate Period till the Late Period. Results of the Polish-Slovak Archaeological Mission, Seasons 2011–2012. In *Egypt and the Levant*, 2014, Vol. 24, pp. 64–65; RZEPKA, S. et al. From Hyksos Settlers to Ottoman Pipe Smokers. Tell el-Retaba 2014. In *Egypt and the Levant*, 2015, Vol. 25, pp. 117–118.

²¹ HABACHI, L. Tell el Dab’a I: Tell el Dab’a and Qantir, p. 222 (Kat. 127), Fig. 51, pl. 42A. Cf. also Ibid., pp. 36, 62.

Wesermaatre-setepenre, Lord of Diadems Ramesses-meriamun, beloved of Atum”). The name of the god is written opposite to the left cartouche, above the sun disc, and it actually marks the beginning of a caption that continues under Re-Harakhty’s left arm: ¹*r* ⁶*w*-*hr.w-3h.tj* ²*dj.n<=>j> n=k* ⁵*nh w3 snb*.

Analogous composition was most probably once depicted on the stela from Tell el-Retaba as well; only minor differences in iconography and epigraphy can be observed. The god on the stela from Qantir does not feature a uraeus and the hieroglyphs of his name are grouped in a different manner. The diameter of the sun disc is about 12 cm, i.e. quite the same as on the Tell el-Retaba fragment. In contrast, the cartouche with the throne name is only ca. 11 cm high and thus a little smaller than that from Tell el-Retaba, but otherwise comparable. The latter piece lacks, however, the epithet *nb t3.wj* written above it.

Even the workmanship shows crucial similarities. Both stelae are made of limestone and were decorated and inscribed in sunk relief, the profile of which is v-shaped (“*v-förmig eingetieft*”²²). Moreover, the stela from Qantir also features recessed projections in the upper part like the one preserved on the Tell el-Retaba fragment – “*rechts und links oben zwei an Relieffläche anfügende, leicht von dieser zurückversetzte halbkreisförmige Vorsprünge*”.²³ Based on all these details it can be assumed that both objects were made in the same workshop or by the same sculptor (or group of sculptors respectively). The purpose of the projections can be related to the place of installation – the stelae were most probably embedded in a wall and the projections helped to keep them in position. Their rough backs also corroborate this assumption.

Based on these observations, despite the variances described, it may be assumed that the stela from Tell el-Retaba also bore the representation of Ramesses II offering flowers to Re-Harakhty and the remains of the cartouche can be with outmost probability attributed to this king.

‘Horbeit stelae’

Both stelae clearly belong to the corpus of so-called ‘Horbeit stelae’, of which about 100 pieces are known so far.²⁴ They are of Ramesside age and all were

²² HABACHI, L. Tell el Dab‘a I: Tell el Dab‘a and Qantir, p. 222 (Kat. 127).

²³ Ibid., (Kat. 127), n. 210.

²⁴ ROEDER, G. Die Denkmäler des Pelizaeus-Museums zu Hildesheim, pp. 93–97; HABACHI, L. Khata‘na – Qantir: Importance. In *Annales du Service des Antiquités de l’Égypte*, 1954, Vol. 52, pp. 514–559, pls. XXVIII – XXXVIII; HABACHI, L. Features of the Deification of Ramesses II, pp. 27–39; HABACHI, L. Tell el Dab‘a I: Tell el Dab‘a and Qantir, pp. 218–219; MARTIN, K. Waren die sog. “Horbeitstelen” Türschilder oder waren sie Votivtafeln?. In KLOTH, N. (ed.). *Es werde niedergelegt als*

with outmost probability made and exhibited at Qantir, the ancient Piramesse that became the capital under the reign of Ramesses II and bore the name *p3-k3-ʕ3-n-p3-rʕw-hr.w-3h.tj* (“*The Great Ka of Re-Harakhty*”).²⁵ Their size is usually up to 70 cm and quality varies between good to rather low. The stelae are decorated with an image of one or two deities or statues/colossi of Ramesses II (most often) worshipped by one or two persons that stand with the arms raised in adoration, sometimes offering lotus flowers. An altar with a vessel also appears on several of them. Most of the stelae were engraved for or donated by low-ranking officials whose titles are related to the palace or army, but generally the group of the owners is much diverse. Among the deities mostly depicted are, for instance, Ptah, Amun and Seth who would have had temples in the city.²⁶ According to Uphill and Dorner, the major temple of Piramesse was that of the multiple god Amun-Re-Harakhty-Atum.²⁷

Stela JE 72307 as well as the one from Retaba can be linked to this cult as well as to the cult of Ramesses II. Their original place of installation is, however, difficult to establish since none of the ‘Horbeit stelae’ were ever found *in situ*. They have been described as votive objects as well as “door plates” (*Türschilder*) that would have been installed next to the entrance into the houses.²⁸ Karl Martin, pinpointing its heterogeneity, analysed the corpus and was able to demonstrate that all the stelae could not have had the same purpose; instead temples, private houses as well as tombs must be considered as potential

Schriftstück: Festschrift für Hartwig Altenmüller zum 65. Geburtstag, pp. 255–262; EXEL, K. Soldiers, Sailors and Sandalmakers. A Social Reading of Ramesside Period Votive Stelae, pp. 119–123, 125–127. See also: BUDKA, J. Der König an der Haustür. Die Rolle des ägyptischen Herrschers an dekorierten Türgewänden von Beamten im Neuen Reich, pp. 95–98.

²⁵ *Thesaurus Linguae Aegyptiae*, lemma-no. 860627. Available from <http://aew.bbaw.de/tla/>, [cit. 22 December 2015].

²⁶ Cf. UPHILL, E. P. The Temples of Per Ramesses, *passim*; BIETAK, M. Ramsesstadt. In *Lexikon der Ägyptologie* V, pp. 128–146 (esp. pp. 135–136); HABACHI, L. Tell el Dab‘a I: Tell el Dab‘a and Qantir, pp. 59–65. For a most recent overview see: EXEL, K. Soldiers, Sailors and Sandalmakers. A Social Reading of Ramesside Period Votive Stelae, pp. 102–103.

²⁷ UPHILL, E. P. The Temples of Per Ramesses, pp. 206–211; DOMER, J. Zur Lage des Palastes und des Haupttempels der Ramsesstadt. In BIETAK, M. (ed.). *Haus und Palast im alten Ägypten: Internationales Symposium, 8. bis 11. April 1992 in Kairo*, pp. 69–71.

²⁸ BIETAK, M. Tell el-Dab‘a II: Der Fundort im Rahmen einer archäologisch-geographischen Untersuchung über das ägyptische Ostdelta, p. 42.

destinations.²⁹ For a few monuments he managed to narrow the range of possibilities to a single place of installation, among others to stela JE 72307.³⁰ Missing the image or at least the name of the owner/dedicator, the stela would have been purposeless in a temple or as a “door plate”. Monuments representing only royal statues, kings or deities would have been rather exhibited in the houses, for instance as house altars such as those discovered at Amarna, Karnak or Deir el-Medina. Such destination can be assumed for the stela found at Tell el-Retaba as well.

Conclusion

The parallel object from Qantir (JE 72307) indicates that the fragment of a stela found at Tell el-Retaba belongs to the corpus of the so-called ‘Horbeit stelae’ and originally depicted the king Ramesses II bringing lotus flowers to the god Re-Harakhty. It was thus most probably made at Qantir/Piramesse and at some point was carried over a distance of ca. 30 km to Tell el-Retaba. At the present state of research it cannot be, however, decided when and why this happened. It can only be assumed that the transfer took place in the Third Intermediate Period when Piramesse was abandoned and used as a quarry for the new capital Tanis. A fragment of a ‘Horbeit stela’ was already found at Tell el-Retaba in 1978 by the mission of the John Hopkins University under the conduct of Hans Goedicke; it was discovered in the Third Intermediate Period level (level IV) of the so-called Central pit, reused as a door socket.³¹

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²⁹ MARTIN, K. Waren die sog. “Horbeitstelen” Türschilder oder waren sie Votivtafeln? In KLOTH N. (ed.). *Es werde niedergelegt als Schriftstück: Festschrift für Hartwig Altenmüller zum 65. Geburtstag*, pp. 255–262.

³⁰ MARTIN, K. Waren die sog. “Horbeitstelen” Türschilder oder waren sie Votivtafeln?. In KLOTH N. (ed.). *Es werde niedergelegt als Schriftstück: Festschrift für Hartwig Altenmüller zum 65. Geburtstag*, 258–259.

³¹ Cf. FULLER, M. J., available from <http://users.stlcc.edu/mfuller/Retaba/Retaba1978.html> [cit. 22 December 2015]; HUDÁKOVÁ, Ľ. Report on the excavations, in preparation.

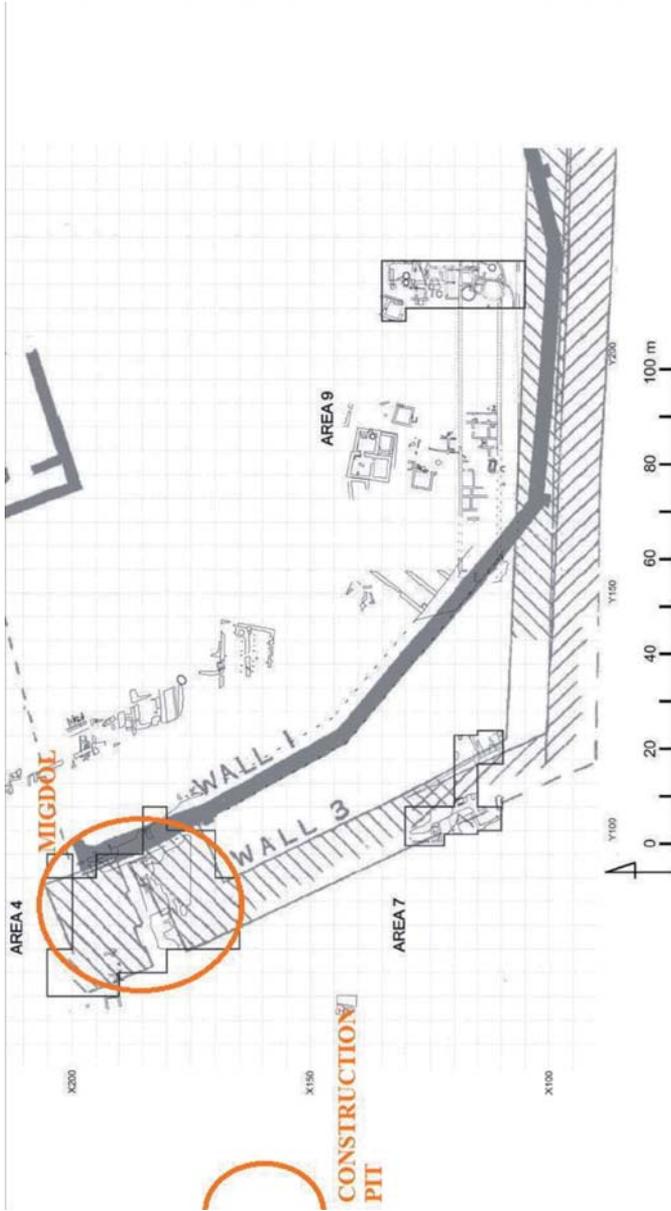
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PLATES





HUDÁKOVÁ, HUDEC, Map. Tell el-Retaba, with marked positions of the Migdol and the construction pit of mosque (Drawing by Ľ. Jarmuzsek and J. Hudec)



HUDÁKOVÁ, HUDEC, Figs. 1. a-b. Tell el-Retaba's fragment of stela, S1851; Left (a): Front side; Right (b): Left side (Photo by R. Rábeková)



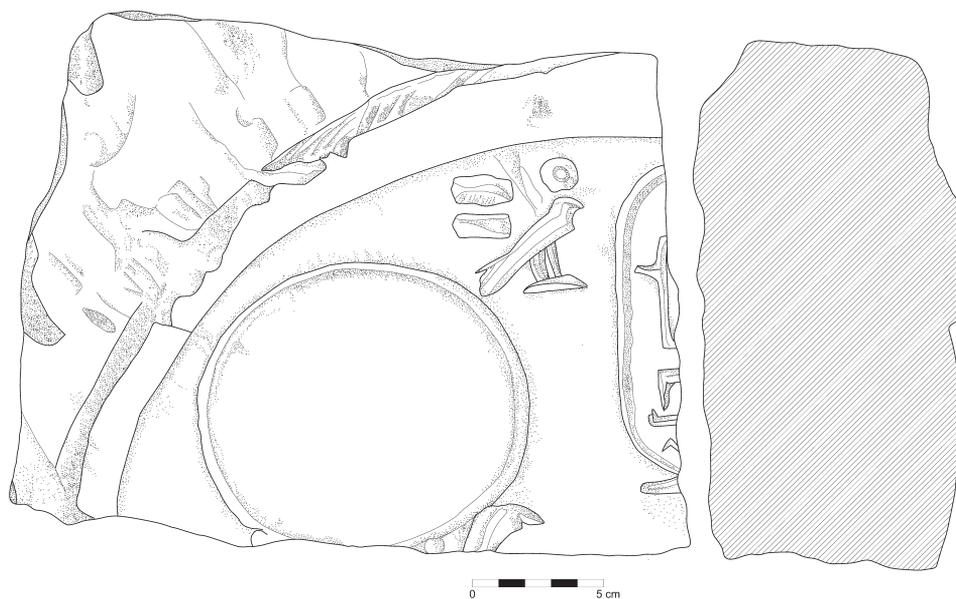
HUDÁKOVÁ, HUDEC, Figs. 1. c-d. Tell el-Retaba's fragment of stela, S1851; Left (c): Back side; Right (d): Right side (Photo by R. Rábeková)



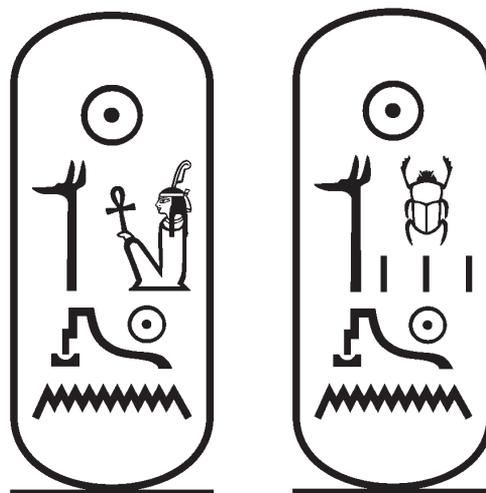
HUDÁKOVÁ, HUDEC, Fig. 1. e. Tell el-Retaba's fragment of stela, S1851, top side (Photo by R. Rábeková)



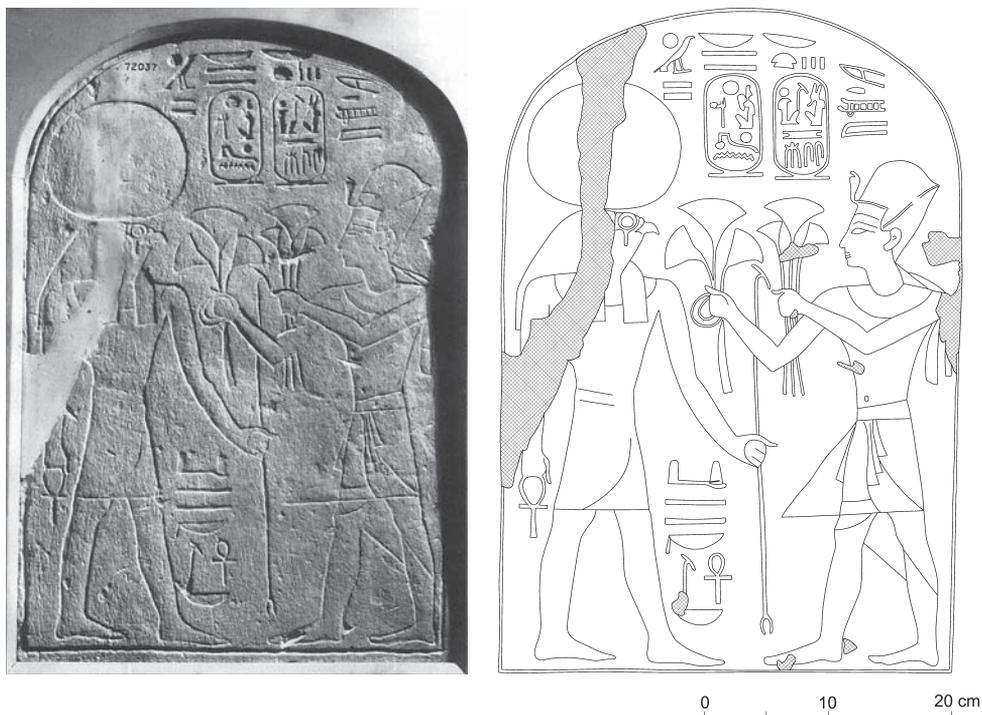
HUDÁKOVÁ, HUDEC, Fig. 1. f. Tell el-Retaba's fragment of stela, S1851, bottom side (Photo by R. Rábeková)



HUDÁKOVÁ, HUDEC, Fig. 2. Tell el-Retaba's fragment of stela, S1851
(Drawing by L. Kováčik and V. Dubcová)



HUDÁKOVÁ, HUDEC, Figs. 3. a-b. Possible reconstructions of the cartouche preserved on the stela from Tell el-Retaba. Left (a): Throne name of Ramesses II; Right (b): Throne name of Sethos II.



HUDÁKOVÁ, HUDEC, Figs. 4. a-b. Stela JE 72307 (The Egyptian Museum in Cairo); Left (a): Photo according to HABACHI, L. *Tell el Dab'a I: Tell el Dab'a and Qantir*, p. 222 (Kat. 127), pl. 42A; Right (b): Drawing by V. Dubcová, according to Habachi, *op. cit.*, Fig. 51.