

‘I GAVE GRAIN TO ALL OF DENDERA IN ITS ENTIRETY’: MENTIONS OF LARGE-SCALE FOOD DONATIONS IN THE VITH UPPER EGYPTIAN NOME IN THE FIRST INTERMEDIATE PERIOD

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Abstract: The paper scrutinizes written sources on large-scale food donations in the Denderite nome during the First Intermediate Period, paying special attention to their contexts – the official statuses of the owners of these inscriptions, the peculiarities of their monuments, etc. Such data cast a new light on incentives for boasting about lavish food donations in Denderite autobiographies. While the owners of the inscriptions in question have relatively humble official positions, their funerary monuments appear to be very expensive by the Dendera cemetery standards of the time. The author argues that these Denderites emphasized their generous food donations primarily to justify their moral entitlement to their monuments, which would otherwise have appeared far too sumptuous for the persons not belonging to the administrative elite.

Keywords: Ancient Egypt, First Intermediate Period, Dendera, famine, food donations.

Even though the almsgiving formulas “I gave bread to the hungry, beer to the thirsty (and so on)” appear from time to time in Old Kingdom autobiographies, they never describe large-scale food donations to large numbers of people – an entire town, city, or nome.¹ The latter statements appear only in the First Intermediate Period, at roughly the same time as references to low Nile floods, famines, etc. In a few inscriptions, such events are mentioned in conjunction: food donations are viewed as salvation for the residents of a

city or nome in a famine year. As a result, all the related texts are widely regarded as sources on the issue of food shortages in the First Intermediate Period, and it is assumed that they all appeared in autobiographies for essentially the same reasons. These reasons, however, are a source of contention among scholars.

Following the fundamental ‘La famine dans l’Égypte ancienne’ by J. Vandier (1936),² it appeared certain that, during the First Intermediate Period, Egypt was plagued by multiple disastrous famines caused by a series of deficient Nile floods and perhaps the destruction of the Old Kingdom centralized systems of food production and distribution.³ Since the 1970s, this has also been linked to climate change and aridification, which is said to have engulfed the Middle East at the end of the third millennium B.C.E.⁴ It would have been natural for the Egyptians, who effectively prevented and overcame mass starvation in difficult times, to brag about it in their funerary inscriptions.

Nevertheless, a quarter of a century ago, J. C. Moreno Garcia suggested a radically different explanation for the references to food shortages in the First Intermediate Period. Famines, in his opinion, were no more frequent or disastrous at the time than in other epochs of Egyptian history, and this topic appeared in autobiographies mainly due to the special ideological needs of a period of state fragmentation and turmoil.⁵ Moreno Garcia saw the mentions of the famines and large-scale

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¹ For formulas attested from the VIth Dynasty onward, see FRANKE 2006a; 2006b. For lines 5–6 of the autobiography of *k3r / ppi-nfr*, see SCHENKEL [1978], 38; FRANKE 2006a, 115–116.

² VANDIER 1936.

³ E.g., SCHENKEL [1978]; now see BÁRTA 2019, 175–196.

⁴ E.g., BELL 1971; HASSAN 1997. For the criticism of this hypothesis, see MOELLER 2006. On this discussion, now

see CREASMAN 2020a, 15–16, 19–27; 2020b, 181–182 (I am most grateful to Thomas Schneider for providing me with this volume), BURN 2021 (which was added by Reviewer 2, to whom I owe my thanks), MORRIS 2023, 269–272.

⁵ MORENO GARCIA 1997 3, 70–92, and he has frequently repeated this hypothesis since, see e.g. MORENO GARCIA 2015; cf. already LUFT 1994, 259–260. I am happy to express my gratitude to Juan Carlos Moreno García for providing me with a pdf-file of a draft of his article ‘Famine et affamés en période de crise: réalités agraires et représentations idéologiques en Égypte entre la fin du IIIe

food donations “as an ideologically motivated literary topos”⁶ widely used by the local powers, nomarchs and others, in the quest for legitimacy that emerged when the unitary Memphite monarchy disappeared. In Moreno García’s words, “the themes in question refer to the efficiency and flourishing of the local administration, with the specific purpose to detach a territory from the surrounding chaos and to extoll the activities of local governors in order to legitimize their power and social position”, and he even claims that these themes are “restricted to the spheres of the provincial governors”⁷. This hypothesis by J. C. Moreno García has been widely embraced.⁸

However, the inscriptional evidence from the Denderite (i.e., the VIth Upper Egyptian) nome suggests that there might also have been another significant incentive for bragging about large-scale food donations, which has not yet been properly examined.

Sources

The inscribed material from the Dendrite nome “covers the period concerned more continuously and completely than that of any other one of the Upper Egyptian provinces with the exception of the Thinite nome”,⁹ and it includes at least three direct mentions of large-scale food donations.

1. On the right jamb of his false door stela, the ‘royal seal-bearer, sole companion’ Neferyu (*nfr-iw*) boasts that he “nourished (even) the great in the year of famine” and was praised by his “entire town”.¹⁰
2. On the inscribed architrave¹¹ of the ‘sole companion’ Hornakht (*hrw-nht(i)*), the latter states “I gave grain¹² to all of Dendera in its entirety,¹³ (even) in (my) year 56¹⁴, and 400 measures each year as assistance (?)¹⁵ during the hostility with the *t3-wr* (i.e. the VIIIth Upper Egyptian nome). I acquired¹⁶ boats [...], every boat-*mḥ3w* with 46 oars. I acquired 12 large boats and 8 small boats”.¹⁷
3. With the plausible reconstructions by W. Shenkel and L. Morenz,¹⁸ a frieze inscription of the ‘royal seal-bearer, lector-priest and overseer of soldiery’ Shensetji (*šn-sti*)¹⁹ reads: “I procured [food] for 100+ [...] heads of adults and children, [when there was no food] in all of Dendera. I supplied Dendera with this, and I gave to him who was loved as well as to him who was hated (even) in the year of a low flood. I acquired a boat-(*m*)*n* of 26 cubits and a boat-*mḥ3* of 26 cubits. I acquired 150 people, 42 bulls, [...]”.²⁰ Shensetji, like Neferiu, boasts of large food donations in a lean year, and, like Hornakht, he boasts of acquiring ships that could have been used to transport grain.²¹

et le début du II^e millénaire’, in: BOUDON-MILLOT, NOTARIO (ed.), in press. I have not yet seen MORENO GARCÍA, J. C., Climate, state-building and political change in Egypt during the Early Bronze Age: a direct relation? in: ERDKAMP, MANNING, VERBOVEN (eds.), 2021, 201–213.

⁶ Abstract of MORENO GARCÍA 1997 in: *Online Egyptological Bibliography*: OEB 42154 (1997.0940): http://proxy.library.spbu.ru:3829/oeb_entry.aspx?item=42154. Cf. MORENO GARCÍA 2015, 6.

⁷ Abstract of MORENO GARCÍA 1997 in: *Online Egyptological Bibliography*: OEB 42154 (1997.0940): http://proxy.library.spbu.ru:3829/oeb_entry.aspx?item=42154.

⁸ See e.g., COULON 2008; CONTARDI 2015; SCHNEIDER 2017: 214. For the critic of this hypothesis, see e.g., FRANKE 2006b, 160, n. 3; DEMIDCHIK 2019, 561–564; MORRIS 2019, 78–83; 2023.

⁹ FISCHER 1968, VII; MUSACCHIO 2006, 70.

¹⁰ *iw smn(=i) 3w r rnpt nt htm rḥs*. Stela Metropolitan Museum of Art 12.183.8: FISCHER 1968, 206–209, pl. XXV; online: <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/543863>; cf. MORENO GARCÍA 1997, 39, n. 112; on the *rnpt nt htm rḥs* “the year of belt-tightening”, see FISCHER 1968: 207–208. On this stela, now see DEMIDCHIK 2020.

¹¹ See MUSACCHIO 2006, 74–75.

¹² Lit. “barley and emmer”.

¹³ *iwnt r 3w = s mi kd = s*.

¹⁴ The common translation is “for / during 56 years” (e.g., MUSACCHIO 2006, 78; FRANKE 2006b, 168), but see BORGHOUTS 2010, 95, no. 21.c.2, 98 no. 21.d.4. The Egyptians loved to brag about their ‘active longevity’, see e.g., Hammamat inscriptions no.1 col. 8, no. 3042, lines 9–11, etc.

¹⁵ FRANKE 2006b, 168 and n. 42: “Unterhaltslieferung”; cf., however, MUSACCHIO 2006, 78.

¹⁶ See HANNIG 2006, 367 [3295].

¹⁷ Cairo Museum JdÉ 46048: ABDALLA 1993, 249–253, pl. XXIV: 1); FRANKE 2006b, 167–172, pl. 4; MUSACCHIO 2006.

¹⁸ SCHENKEL 1965, 150, n. f; MORENZ 2010, 572.

¹⁹ In MORENZ 1998, 83, n.9; 2010, 563, 568, 572, this name is read as *šn-stnw*.

²⁰ PETRIE 1900, pl. XI B; SCHENKEL 1965, 150–151, no. 140; MORENZ 2010, 572–573.

²¹ Cf. MÜLLER-WOLLERMANN 1998, 234–237; MORRIS 2023, 273, 278, n. 4.

4. Perhaps this list should be supplemented with Manchester University Museum fragments 2897+2869 that were originally parts of a stela of the unknown owner of mastaba 326. The fragments are published only as a cursory sketch, and some of the readings are uncertain.²² However, according to W. Schenkel, O. Berlev, and J. C. Moreno García, the text reads, “I acquired people. I acquired 5000 cubits of field, I acquired 20 asses, (I acquired) 200 goats, I acquired copper... I acquired clothes. I gave barley and emmer (?) to my city. I acted with my own arm (*hps*)”.²³ Similarly, statements about the acquisition of wealth (people, livestock, fields, and suchlike) are juxtaposed with boasting about large-scale food donations in the inscriptions of the Denderite Shensetji (see above), on the Gebelein stelae of the ‘god’s treasurer’ Iti (CG 20001), ‘sole companion’ Heqaib (BM EA1671), ‘overseer of butchers’ Merer (Krakow National Museum MNK-XI-999), on the stela of Rehuy (?), the ‘overseer of priests’ (Manchester University Museum 5052) from Thebes, etc.²⁴

At the same time, however, it should be noted that while “miserable years of famine (*rnpwt ksnt nt snb-ib*)” appear on the architrave of the steward Sennedjesui (*šn-ndsw=i*), no reference to large-scale food donations is attested in his inscriptions. As an important city official, he appears to have combatted famine primarily by building irrigation facilities (*dn(i)n=i*).²⁵ The inscription on stela Edinburgh 1910.96, which is occasionally mentioned by scholars in relation to the famine,²⁶ refers not to private large-scale food donations, but only to the impeccable payment of rations to his *hwtjw*-workers by the ‘overseer of a *hwt*-estate’ Seneni (*imy-r3 hwt snni*).²⁷ What is more, the columns in question are partly destroyed, and the very words “[I gave Upper Egyptian grain (or the like)]” are nothing but a conjecture by H. G. Fischer, which cannot be a

solid basis for conclusions. As to the stela Cairo Museum JdE 88876,²⁸ it is most probably a fake.²⁹

Thus, it is the inscriptions of Neferiu, Hornakht, Shensetji, and, tentatively, the Manchester fragments that at the moment should be scrutinized as written sources on large-scale food donations in the Denderite nome in the First Intermediate Period. Even though these texts have already been treated in connection with the issue of food shortages, scholars have paid little attention to their contexts, such as the official statuses of their owners, the peculiarities of the latter’s monuments, etc. Meanwhile, such data cast new light on the incentives for boasting about lavish food donations in Denderite autobiographies.

Were the texts under discussion intended “to extoll the activities of local governors”?

It is easy to see that the texts in question were not intended “to detach” Dendera “from the surrounding chaos and to extoll the activities of local governors in order to legitimize their power and social position”, and they were clearly not “restricted to the spheres of the provincial governors”.³⁰

First, Neferiu, Hornakht, Shensetji, and the owner of the Manchester fragments say nothing about “chaos” or “famine” beyond their city, and they make no comparisons between Dendera and the rest of the country—that is just not their concern. Second, despite boasting about their food donations, the owners of the inscriptions in question never claim that Dendera is prospering, or at the very least, well-fed.³¹ Third, it is unlikely that Shensetji, Neferiu, and Hornakht belonged to the Dendrite administrative elite.³²

Shensetji’s titles are a knotty problem. H. G. Fischer did not recognize them in the inscriptions published by W. M. F. Petrie, but attributed to him the lintel inscribed with the words *htmtj-bity šn-sti* from older Dendera material in the Pennsylvania University Museum

²² PETRIE 1900, 51, no. 54, Pl. XIII.

²³ SCHENKEL 1965, 153, no. 152; BERLEV 1978, 40, no. 7.

²⁴ On these inscriptions, see most recently MORENO GARCÍA 2016, 501; KÓTHAY 2020, 278–280; DEMIDCHIK 2017, 2022a.

²⁵ PETRIE 1900, pl. X; FISCHER 1968, fig.31. In H.G. Fischer’s drawing, *t* of the indirect genitive *nt* is omitted by mistake.

²⁶ MORENO GARCÍA 1997, 90–91, no. 17; MORENZ 2010, 570.

²⁷ FISCHER 1968, 195, 209–213, Pl. XXVI.

²⁸ FISCHER 1973; 1987, 104, Fig.1. Cf. MORENO GARCÍA 1997, 90, no. 15.

²⁹ FISHER 1987, 94–95; MUSACCHIO 2006, 77, n. 27; 2008, 56.

³⁰ Cf. n. 5–8 above.

³¹ Contrary to MORENO GARCÍA 1997, 67–68.

³² The destroyed title string of the owner of the Manchester fragments appears to have included the words *imy-r3* and *smr*, which is, of course, insufficient to determine his status.

(E 17744).³³ Petrie and Fischer also considered it possible to identify Shensetji with the *htmty-bity imy-r3 rwt* of the same name.³⁴ Nonetheless, W. Shenkel and H. G. Fischer translated and discussed the latter's stela separately from the inscriptions of our Shensetji.³⁵ Strangely, it has gone unnoticed that in Petrie's book F. L. Griffith confidently attributed a fragment with the titles *hry-hb(t) imy-r3 mšc* to our Shensetji.³⁶ Taking this into account, our Shensetji most probably was *htmty-bity (?) hry-hb(t) imy-r3 mšc* 'royal seal-bearer (?), lector-priest and overseer of soldiery'.

At that time, the title 'royal seal-bearer' had become a title devalued of rank (see below). Shensetji's functional titles, i.e., his official positions, are 'lector-priest' and 'overseer of soldiery', which appear relatively modest at Dendera and do not imply a position at the highest level of administration.³⁷

Because there are no functional titles in Neferiu and Hornakht's inscriptions, they are unlikely to hold any important official posts.³⁸ Their ranking titles ('royal seal bearer, sole companion' and 'sole companion' respectively) are not very high by the standards of the time. Whereas in the Old Kingdom such designations "announced a very high social position in the hierarchy of the country", in the First Intermediate Period they lost their exclusivity, thus "there is the impression that almost everybody could bear these high ranking titles".³⁹ According to T. Musacchio, the designa-

tion *smr w^cty* "is almost ubiquitous at Dendera during the entire First Intermediate Period".⁴⁰

Egyptian (auto)biographies displayed in cemeteries were primarily intended to justify their owners' moral rights to funerary cults and monuments.⁴¹ So why would Neferiu, Hornakht, and Shensetji, who did not belong to the administrative elite, devote their inscriptions to glorifying local governors?

The givers' funerary monuments

At the same time, however, the owners of the inscriptions under discussion boast of their wealth, and their funerary monuments appear very expensive and sumptuous by Dendera cemetery standards.

Neferiu's garishly colored false door, more than a meter high, must have looked very prestigious compared to the simple slab stelae typical of the south of Egypt in the First Intermediate Period. Moreover, at the time, a false door stela was the kind of luxury reserved for top officials and their closest relatives.⁴² To the best of my knowledge, the other false doors from Dendera at that time are those of:

- *mn-cⁿh-ppi / mni*, who is likely to have been much earlier and probably started his career in the capital. He has one of the longest title strings in Dendera and bears the very high-ranking title *h3ty-c*, which is usually held by nomarchs and overseers of priests;⁴³

³³ FISCHER 1968, 178, Pl. XVIII: b.

³⁴ PETRIE 1900, 68 'Beba-sheer', 73 'Shensecha P'; FISHER 1968, 169, 177, 231.

³⁵ FISCHER, Dendera 168, 169; SCHENKEL 1965, 127, no. 123.

³⁶ PETRIE 1900, 51, pl. XXV B; PEREPKIN 1960, 163, n. 18. For an unknown reason, in SHENKEL 1965, 155, no. 157 this piece is ascribed to *šn-stj-j* "T" (?). In MUSACCHIO 2010, 8, 11–12, n. 52 this fragment is omitted.

³⁷ On the title 'lector-priest', see GRAJETZKI 2001, 162; 2020, 158; on 'overseers of soldiery' at Dendera, see MUSACCHIO 2010, 8, 11–12, n. 52. Bragging about military prowess is comparatively rare at Dendera, see FISCHER, 1968, 132; MUSACCHIO 2006, 81–85; SILVERMAN 2008. The 'overseer of soldiery' *nwi* reduces his autobiography to listing the acquired wealth (MUSACCHIO 2010).

³⁸ There is no good reason to believe that mentions of their titles have simply not survived. Whereas Dendera officials usually mention all their important titles on their false doors (cf. below n. 43–50; as to other sites, see TAKENOSHITA 2011, 69–71, 88, 94), Neferiu's false door has no functional titles, and no title at all is ascribed to his wife. Even

though Hornakht's inscription has some parallels with that of the 'steward' Sennedjsui (cf. FRANKE 2006b, 167–168), his ranking title is lower and he says nothing about his *official* activities. W. Grajetzki's recent observations and hypotheses about people represented on Middle Kingdom monuments without titles are not applicable here, because he surveys examples of *complete* absence of titles (which is not the case with Neferiu and Hornakht), and only from the early Middle Kingdom onward (GRAJETZKI 2021). Grajetzki admits that in the First Intermediate Period officials preferred "long title strings" on their monuments (GRAJETZKI 2021, 234–235).

³⁹ GRAJETZKI 2020, 158; 2001; 2013, 219–220; cf. BROVARSKI 2018, 223, n. 123–124, 254, n. 12

⁴⁰ MUSACCHIO 2010, 8.

⁴¹ STAUDER-PORCHET 2020, 103–105; DEMIDCHIK 2022b, 74–76.

⁴² The prestigiousness and high cost of false doors even led to the appearance of cheap imitations – 'hybrid false doors', also attested at Dendera (cf. PITKIN 2015, 265–267).

⁴³ PETRIE 1900, pl. I; FISCHER 1968: 85–91, 170–175.

- *ḥb-iḥw*, ‘overseer of Upper Egypt’ and triple nomarch (*ḥry-tp ḥ3*) of the VIth to VIIIth Upper Egyptian nomes;⁴⁴
- the ‘overseer of priests’ *mrry(-iḳr)*;⁴⁵
- the ‘overseer of priests’ *idw=i/wḥ3i*;⁴⁶
- the ‘steward’ (*imy-r3 pr*) *sn-nḏsw=i*,⁴⁷ who, in H. G. Fischer’s opinion, might have been ‘the steward of the entire city of Dendera’ or suchlike.⁴⁸ Moreover, he is a son of the overseer of priests, *Mrry(-iḳr)*;⁴⁹
- the ‘sole companion’ and ‘scribe of the archive (*s3 sm3yt*)’ *rḥwi*⁵⁰, whose monument is far inferior in design and craftsmanship to those listed above.

The impressive false door of Neferiu, with no functional titles, appears to be a striking exception to this list.⁵¹

Even more striking, however, is that Hornakht and Shensetji owned mastabas, and since the Manchester inscription was found in mastaba 326, its protagonist is likely to have owned a mastaba too.⁵² In J. E. Jay’s words, “at Dendera the mastabas of the late Old Kingdom and early First Intermediate Period devolved into much smaller structures, with many tombs having no super-structure at all”,⁵³ and T. Musacchio emphasized that in the First Intermediate Period “mastabas at Dendera were few in number and were an indicator of wealth and elite status”.⁵⁴ Meanwhile, Shensetji’s mastaba is not much smaller than that of nomarch *wḥ3i*.⁵⁵

A special incentive to brag about large-scale food donations

There appears to be a striking discrepancy between Neferiu, Hornakht, and Shensetji’s relatively humble official status and the comparative sumptuousness and luxury of their burial monuments. Could this be a clue as to why it is these

people who brag about their large-scale food donations in the midst of Dendera’s food shortages?

In traditional societies, there usually exist certain stereotypes of wealth and consumption norms befitting each social stratum. In such bureaucratically dominant societies, functionaries, officials, military personnel, etc. are often thought to be the most deserving of prosperity and honors, based on the level of their rank. And, on the contrary, the accumulation and especially the display of ‘undue’ wealth by persons who did not perform important official duties were condemned or even punished in some way.

Even without turning to innumerable cross-cultural parallels, let us recall that the tenth maxim of the ‘Teaching of Ptahhotep’ specifically warns at length against widespread contempt for ‘parvenus’—those who have only recently “gathered” their “plenty” after being “lesser men before” (P. Prisse 7.7–7.9). Despite this, Neferty laments the country where “the powerless is now powerful, the one who should greet receives the greeting... the humble will acquire great wealth” (P. Hermitage 1116B recto 54–56).⁵⁶ Ipuwer is indignant because, while “[every] noble (lit. son of a man)” is not afforded appropriate social honors, “the poor have become the owner of riches, he who could not make for himself sandals is the owner of wealth... he who had no ox-span is the owner of a herd; he who could not find for himself plough-oxen is the owner of cattle...he who had no seed is the owner of granaries, he who took out for himself a grain-loan is one who loans it out... he who had no dependents is the possessor of subordinates.” (P. Leiden I recto 2.14, 2.4–5, 9.3–9.5).⁵⁷ Tutankhamun believed that only “the children of the officials of their cities, each one being the son of a man of rank (*s3 s*) whose name was known” are acceptable in the positions of priests *wḥbw* and *ḥmw-nṯr*.⁵⁸ Udjahorresnet proudly wrote that he

⁴⁴ FISCHER, 1968, 203–206, Pl. XXIV.

⁴⁵ CG 1664; PETRIE 1900, 16–17, 47–48, pl. VIII A; BORCHARDT 1964, 122–123; SCHENKEL 1965, 132, No. 110.

⁴⁶ PETRIE 1900, pl. XI B; FISCHER, 1968, 153–154.

⁴⁷ PETRIE 1900, pl. IX.

⁴⁸ FISCHER 1968, 154.

⁴⁹ FISCHER 1968, 154, 158.

⁵⁰ PETRIE 1900, 18, pl. XI C.

⁵¹ On the Manchester Museum website, fragments no. 2896+2900, 2899 (PETRIE 1900, pl. XIII), 2903 are also termed “false door”. However, they are too small to judge

with certainty; see <http://harbour.man.ac.uk/mmcustom/NSContactSheet.php>; accessed 23.05. 2022.

⁵² On the high probability of Hornakht’s being the owner of a mastaba, see MUSACCHIO 2006, 74–75; cf. FISCHER 1964, 8–9; 1994, 182.

⁵³ JAY 2010, 65; cf. MUSACCHIO 2010, 9, n. 13.

⁵⁴ MUSACCHIO 2006, 74.

⁵⁵ FISCHER, 1968, 179.

⁵⁶ QUIRKE 2004, 138.

⁵⁷ ENMARCH 2008, 83–84, 74, 148–149.

⁵⁸ CG 34.183, line 17; LACAU 1909, 228, pl. 70.

had provided the departments of the House of Life⁵⁹ “with all the students who were the sons of men of rank (*s3 s*), not a poor man’s son (*s3 hwrw*)”.⁶⁰ W. Schenkel concludes, “Die Privilegien der Bürokratie bestanden. Sie wurden als selbstverständlich beansprucht, da sie mit der Weltordnung durch den Schöpfer gesetzt sind”.⁶¹

For a few centuries in Old Kingdom Egypt, only top officials and their relatives owned prestigious funerary monuments. Hence, during the First Intermediate Period, the appearance of expensive monuments belonging to individuals with a certain level of wealth but little or no official functions could be perceived as inappropriate and even shocking. It might have caused even more irritation given that the fortunes of these newcomers were made in times of distress and famine, when others were losing their properties and starving, with some former official elite families reduced to a state of misery.⁶² A boast of noble descent was not uncommon in First Intermediate Period autobiographies,⁶³ but many would have found it outrageous that when “officials are hungry and homeless”, “the son of a man of rank (*s3 s*) cannot be distinguished from a have-not”, and that nobles’ corpses “are repelled onto high ground” compared to “he who could not make for himself a coffin is owner of a tomb... he who could not make for himself a burial is <lord> of the (tomb)-treasury(?)” (P. Leiden I recto 5.2–3, 4.1, 6.14, 7.8).⁶⁴

Neferiu, Hornakht, and Shensetji, therefore, had to be inventive to explain and justify their moral right to their prestigious monuments. The

gist of all their narratives is that their wealth was acquired faultlessly,⁶⁵ and—more importantly—generously spent to support the local community. Shensetji describes the lavish payment to the builders of his tomb at least twice, and the ‘almsgiving formula’ “I gave bread to the hungry...” appears in his inscriptions three times.⁶⁶ Four of Hornakht’s six long lines of inscription extoll his enormous generosity to all of Dendera in almost unparalleled detail. Neferiu, Hornakht, and Shensetji must have been well aware that greed was generally considered “a levy of all evils” and, as Ptahhotep warned, “there is no tomb for the greedy hearted” (pPrisse 9.13–10.5).⁶⁷ The inscriptions in question are completely consistent with E. Morris’ recent assertion that “rather than exaggerating routine food crises in order to emulate royalty, men who constructed monuments during the First Intermediate Period were likely invested in making sure they were remembered as heroes (rather than villains).”⁶⁸

A somewhat similar motivation can be discerned behind bragging about large-scale food donations in the inscriptions of the ‘butler, (namely) overseer of the butchers of the entire House of Khuu’, Merer,⁶⁹ and ‘the sole companion Heqaib’,⁷⁰ both the stelae belonging to the so-called ‘Gebelein group’.⁷¹ Obviously, Merer, with his “relatively modest rank”,⁷² and Heqaib, devoid of any functional titles⁷³ could not have actually intended to “emulate royalty”. Merer and Heqaib’s monuments, however, stand out among the entire ‘Gebelein group’ for their craftsmanship, long inscriptions, and, hence, high cost.⁷⁴ Merer is also known

⁵⁹ Actually, ‘the House of the Living One’, see BERLEV, HODJASH 1998, 8, n. k.

⁶⁰ Udjahorresnet’s *Naoforo Vaticano*, Gregorian Egyptian Museum, Vatican City, inv. no. 22690; POSENER 1936, 21.

⁶¹ SCHENKEL 1983, 36.

⁶² Cf. MORENO GARCÍA 2016, 497–499; MORRIS 2023, 273.

⁶³ See MORENO GARCÍA 1997, 45; FRANKE 2007, 164, n. 56.

⁶⁴ ENMARCH 2008, 104, 94, 122, 133.

⁶⁵ The owner of the Manchester fragments states that he acted “(with his) own arm ((*m*) *hps(=i) ds(=i)*)”, and Neferiu even expands this formula: “I acted greatly (*wr*) with my (own) arm”.

⁶⁶ FRANKE 2006b, 180, n. 15.

⁶⁷ QUIRKE 2004, 95.

⁶⁸ MORRIS 2023, 272.

⁶⁹ *wdpw imy-r3 zftww nw pr hw(=i)-wi mi kd=f mrr*. The National Museum in Krakow, inv.-no. MNK-XI-999; ČERNÝ 1961, pl. I; WIDMAIER 2017, Tf. 2.1. The relevant bibliography now see in DEMIDCHIK 2022a.

⁷⁰ *smr w^cty hk3-ib*. British Museum Stela 1671; POLOTSKY 1930, pl. XX. On the parallels with the inscriptions of Neferiu now see KÓTHAY 2020, 279–280.

⁷¹ Now see BROVARSKI 2018, 468–471.

⁷² WILLEMS 2013, 350.

⁷³ L. Morenz’s hypothesis that the stela of Heqaib was plastered onto the wall of his tomb (MORENZ 2010, 271) implies that Heqaib’s titles were listed in some other inscriptions. However, this is unlikely. The biography of Heqaib does not contain a word on his official career or activities, and no titles of his sons are mentioned; see also DEMIDCHIK 2017, 184–185. MORENO GARCÍA 2016, 501 describes Heqaib as a person “whose means of living were independent from service to the state and administration” and who “was not member of the elite”; cf. KÓTHAY 2020, 279.

⁷⁴ See, e.g., MORENZ 2010, 271, 588; BROVARSKI 2018, 468. On the hypothesis of the same workshop see KLOTH 2018, 144–145.

to have owned at least one other stela,⁷⁵ and Heqaib is likely to have had a mudbrick tomb.⁷⁶

Reminders of large-scale food donations during times of distress and famine must have been extremely important in justifying the right to a prestigious monument. First, it was about saving the very lives of the townsfolk. Second, the fact that there was distress or famine where a mass of people, including “the great”, needed private

donations implies that local officials had for some time failed to ensure the population’s food security. And thus, at such crucial moments, *private* benefactors, despite not being members of the administrative elite, proved to be more helpful to their community than even its top officials. But if such was the case, did they not, like the highest functionaries, also deserve prestigious monuments?

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⁷⁵ CGC 1651; BORCHARDT 1964, 111–112; KUBISH 2000, 256–260, Tf. 33; MORENZ 2010, 295–301. Cf. BERLEV 1978, 39, 288.

⁷⁶ MORENZ 2010, 271.

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