

4 Letting the Ancients Speak

Contextualizing Ancient Egyptians through Their Inscribed Objects

Sarah M. Schellinger, Stacy Davidson, and Inês Torres

Henry George Fisher rightly affirms that Egyptian art and writing functioned as a unit that should be understood as two integral elements of Egyptian culture, where one could not be fully understood without the other (1986, 24–50). A multitude of articles discuss aspects of the decorative program found on ancient Egyptian temples, tombs, and monuments such as construction techniques, pigment variations, and quality of craftsmanship. The crucial bond between an object's inscribed text and its aesthetic form has been largely ignored. With this inextricable link between ancient Egyptian artifacts and their inscriptions, how can we incorporate the written treasure trove of information from objects in museum collections to create a more inclusive and informative experience for students and other visitors?

Today's museum professionals and educators have become increasingly attentive to concerns about making collections more accessible to non-specialists, whether students or members of the public, yet the inscriptions on many ancient objects are omitted on museum labels or simplified for official publications, preventing learners from gaining key information about the objects and their cultural significance. While some conventions exist that address the concerns of modern populations about ancestral remains and artifacts of cultural significance, these practices have typically not extended to cultures such as ancient Egypt and Nubia, where there are no living speakers of the ancient language. Utilizing our experiences in museum-based education for university and lay learners, we analyze three inscribed artifacts from three different institutions and suggest a framework for how museum professionals and educators can adopt an object-centered pedagogical approach which holistically integrates textual and visual information while also confronting and correcting modern biases about ancient Nile Valley literacy.

Framework and Approaches

Unsurprisingly, art museums tend to focus on the visual attributes of the objects in their care with little attention to text, particularly if that text is written in an ancient, non-alphabetic script. Associated museum labels translate few inscriptions on panels or public-facing documentation, causing museum

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visitors to remain in the dark about their meaning and significance. By ignoring the importance of the interplay between text and image on inscribed Nile Valley objects, these objects are presented to museum visitors in a way that conforms to the Western conception of aesthetics over contextualization, and these dynamic objects are stripped of purpose and function to fit artificial, constructed ideals. Recent studies in related fields have focused attention on the interplay between text and image in a variety of contexts, as well as the impact of such objects on ancient viewers (Mills and Walker 2008; Leatherbury 2016; Krauß, Leipziger, and Schücking-Jungblut 2020). However, little complementary work has been done to establish effective methodologies for contextualizing ancient Nile Valley inscribed objects for art museum visitors, including students.

Although more commonly known by the Greek term *hieroglyphs*, the ancient Egyptian phrase for their language was *medu netjeru*, meaning “divine words” or “words of the gods.” The ancient Egyptians believed that written words had long-lasting power and used them to imbue their names with divine protection and endurance (Leprohon 2013, 6; Hamilton 2019, 111–114). In order to ensure their names would never be forgotten, they included them on funerary monuments such as stelae. In addition to their names, ancient Egyptians frequently inscribed their monuments with texts and offering formulae (see below), which were essential to their survival in the afterlife. More than just words, these names and texts had a powerful role and meaning to the ancient Egyptians. This importance should be emphasized in both the classroom and museum environment.

Most Egyptology students learn the standardized grammar and vocabulary of Middle Egyptian, the classical phase of the language, through a textbook. Students later advance to more complex transcriptions that have been recorded by Egyptologists (Sethe 1959; De Buck 1948; Burns 2018). While present trends in Egyptology emphasize the importance of the materiality of texts, this approach has not yet been effectively applied to ancient language pedagogy (Parkinson 2009; Dieleman 2011; Hoogendijk and van Gompel 2018).

Traditional grammar-heavy textbooks with transcribed hieroglyphs (Hoch 1997; Allen 1999/2014) are not the only option. Mark Collier and Bill Manley (1998) published a Middle Egyptian textbook that privileged a culture-first approach to the study of ancient Egyptian, presenting learners with both typeset hieroglyphs along with photographs and epigraphic drawings of inscribed objects. By using this approach, students gain a more complete view of the original context of the inscriptions.

However, one does not need to be a student of ancient Egyptian to learn how to read some of the texts that are displayed in museums. Arguably the most commonly encountered Egyptian text is the offering formula, which guaranteed the deceased’s continued prosperity in the afterlife. Because of its ubiquitous and formulaic nature, the offering formula is the most useful set of hieroglyphic phrases for a museum visitor or student to be able to recognize. The offering formula can easily be broken up into four sections, each one

varying in the specific words used, but the general framework of the sections remains the same:

1. The opening phrase is “an offering which the king gives.” The king was the intermediary between humans and deities and was invoked in the texts of royals and non-royals alike (see Figure 4.1, Line 1).
2. The opening phrase is followed by the name and epithets of a god or gods (typically, *Wsir/Osiris* and *Inpu/Anubis*) to whom the offering is made (see Figure 4.1, Lines 1–2).
3. The third section is marked by the hieroglyphs for “invocation offerings”—material goods the deceased requested for the afterlife, such as bread, beer, and clothing (see Figure 4.1, Line 3).
4. Finally, the names and titles of the deceased are presented, usually preceded by the expression “for the *ka* of.” The *ka* was the “vital force” of the deceased that needed the offerings to survive (see Figure 4.1, Lines 3–4).

Since many museum objects come from funerary contexts, students and the public can use visual identification to recognize the formula. Most of the people we have engaged with are excited to be able to understand something written by the ancient Egyptians; this recognition enhances their appreciation



Figure 4.1 Stele of Se-ankhy and Ankhu, Egyptian (ca.1970–1950 BCE). Limestone, 27 × 16½ × 3½ in. (68.58 × 41.91 × 8.89 cm). The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, Missouri. Purchase: William Rockhill Nelson Trust, 33–16.

Source: Photo © The Nelson Gallery Foundation.

of the objects and allows them to relate more effectively with unfamiliar historical and cultural information.

Through exposure to the inscriptions on Egyptian and Nubian objects and monuments, and by contextualizing these objects with culturally specific details, museum visitors and students appreciate the complexities and longstanding traditions of indigenous ancient writing systems in the Nile Valley. Throughout their exploration of the continent, Europeans often viewed Africa as a “site of lack” (Smith 2021), and Egypt, long considered an exception, was removed from its African context and sometimes identified with the Levant as a civilization closer to those in Europe. In point of fact, “writing, it was long believed, was something that Africans simply couldn’t do” (Smith 2021). However, the evidence disproving this can be found in museums throughout the world; it is standing in silent witness, waiting to be acknowledged.

Case Studies

Stelae “are arguably some of the most ubiquitous objects in ancient Egyptian museum collections worldwide” (Olabarria 2020, 117). For this reason, we each chose a stela we have used in teaching or public programming to demonstrate how our proposed framework can be applied.

Stela of Sankhy and Ankefankhu (with Nakhti), Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, 33–16 (Stacy Davidson)

Throughout my career I have focused on developing non-credit, Continuing Education Egyptology coursework and presenting Egyptological topics to the general public. I am a regular presenter at the Johnson County Community College (JCCC) annual joint collaboration with the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art (NAMA), Night at the Nelson, which brings object-centered presentations to audiences of all ages. I emphasize the necessity of learning what we can about Egypt from the perspective of the ancient Egyptians—or as close to it as we can understand.

As an educator, I make no prior assumption of familiarity with ancient Egyptian language, scripts, or culture among the learners I work with. Two driving factors guide my instruction: first, I want my audience to realize that they have points of reference with people who lived long ago and far away—that they reflect a shared sense of what it is to be human, and second, I want them to think critically and creatively about the way ancient Egypt is presented to them in a museum or textbook setting, and how we can improve on that approach.

I use NAMA 33–16, titled by the museum as the “Stele of Se-ankhy and Ankhu,” as an object of study for both JCCC non-credit courses and public presentations. Dikran Garabed Kelekian sold this curved-topped stela to NAMA in 1933, and it is on display in the Egyptian galleries. The stela dates to the Middle Kingdom (ca. 1700–1550 BCE) and contains six lines of text with a vignette of a right-facing woman and man standing before a packed

offering table. The four lines at the top of the stela contain the offering formula along with the names and titles of the stela owners. The bottom two lines, seen underneath the vignette, contain the name and titles of the commissioner of the stela. When presenting this object to a group, I generally start with a period of observation during which the participants look at the stela and share their experiences of what they see; some note the “tombstone” shape of the stela, the colors, or the table piled high with food. In some instances, participants look at the museum label for additional information. This object, although tucked away to the side of the gallery and often overlooked, is an excellent example to highlight the following concepts: the offering formula, the relationship of text to image, family relationships, status, gender, literacy, and the nature of Middle Kingdom artistic conventions.

A crucial consideration is whose object is being viewed. The ancient Egyptians believed an individual’s name needed to survive after death and be spoken aloud. In the case of NAMA 33–16, the names of the stela owner Sankhy, his wife Ankefankhu, and his brother Nakhti, as well as their titles, are very important—yet both the museum label and publicly available information do not emphasize these cultural values. In fact, the name “Ankhu” is inaccurate on the label. Her name can clearly be read as “Ankefankhu.” Additionally, the label text only describes the couple as “a deceased husband and his wife,” giving no indication of her high status as a priestess of Hathor or the fact that two of the six lines of text are about Nakhti, his positions, and the fact that he dedicated this stela on his brother’s behalf. Specific family relationships, social status, and class are obscured in favor of a more generic description of what the viewer sees.

Based on participant feedback collected during the Night at the Nelson event, visitors felt that a handout I designed, which included the proper names, offering formula, and gods’ names, provided additional context that was missing in the object label. At the very least, it is clear from this feedback that the object label must be rewritten to reflect the proper name of Ankefankhu. At that time, the names of Sankhy, Ankefankhu, and Nakhti could also be added in their hieroglyphic form accompanied by an audio file of a scholar vocalizing their names using conventional reconstructed pronunciation parameters. Bringing offerings and voicing invocations were part of the original function of the object type, and the opportunity to see or hear the three ancient names and the offering formula would “activate” the stela.

Stela of Senwosret-senbu, British Museum, EA557 (Inês Torres)

Senwosret-senbu was a True Royal Acquaintance and an Estate Overseer and Accountant of People (Ward 1982, 25, no. 167; Quirke 2004, 62) during the reign of Amenemhat III (12th Dynasty, ca. 1831–1786 BCE). Two of his stelae are known, both probably from Abydos: one in the collection of the British Museum (EA557), and the other in the Cairo Museum (CG 20558). The British Museum stela has not received much scholarly attention, and the only published drawing dates to 1912 (see Figure 4.2; Scott-Moncrieff 1912, pl. III;



Figure 4.2 *Stele of Se-ankhy and Ankhu*, Egyptian (ca.1970–1950 BCE). Limestone, 27 × 16½ × 3½ in. (68.58 × 41.91 × 8.89 cm). The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, Missouri. Purchase: William Rockhill Nelson Trust, 33–16.

Source: Photo © The Trustees of the British Museum.

Porter and Moss V 1962, 96). The British Museum purchased the stela from Giovanni Anastasi in 1839; it is not on display and has not been exhibited since 2010, according to information provided on the museum's website.

I taught a year-long introductory course in Middle Egyptian at Harvard University for three consecutive years (2017–2020). The main textbook I used in my classes was James Hoch's *Middle Egyptian Grammar*, in which excerpts of the text from the British Museum stela are transcribed as examples of offering formulae (Hoch 1997, 225–226). Despite using a textbook to teach Middle Egyptian, in my classes I strove to show the original texts whenever possible, either in person or through digital collection databases with photographs and/or 3D models. There are several reasons why I insist on showing my students the original objects and encourage them to read from the original texts. First, transcriptions are interpretations, even if copied faithfully. Even the most skilled artist or epigrapher has to perform a certain degree of interpretation when copying a text, as there are often unclear, unusual, or damaged signs. Transcriptions are also problematic in that they remove texts from their contexts, disconnecting them from their materiality. Further problems arise in hieroglyphic transcriptions of hieratic (cursive hieroglyphic) texts on materials such as papyrus. This is something most students are not aware of, and they often think that transcriptions are as reliable as the originals. For instance, in

my Middle Egyptian introductory course, we read the *Tale of the Shipwrecked Sailor*, as typed in hieroglyphs in Hoch. However, the only surviving copy of the *Shipwrecked Sailor* is in hieratic. The hieroglyphs Hoch selected in his transliteration from the original hieratic reflect his own interpretative choices.

Thus, I have made a point of stressing to students that typed hieroglyphs, and transcriptions in general, are not “real” hieroglyphs, because they were not written by ancient Egyptians. Most transcriptions, when not a faithful drawing of the original, are also standardized, and especially so in the case of typed hieroglyphs. Thus, students who only read from typed hieroglyphic texts do not encounter the variety and diversity of hieroglyphic writing, finding it very difficult to transition from typed to “real” hieroglyphs. I learned that the later in the semester I showed students different hieroglyphic styles, the more of a challenge it was for students to read them. Thus, I changed my approach and introduced students to different styles of hieroglyphic scripts earlier in the semester, pulling up photographs of the original texts typed in Hoch’s examples and exercises whenever possible.

The British Museum stela of Senwosret-senbu is a favorite among students. Apart from the fact that it exposes them to “real” hieroglyphic writing, presenting some signs that students struggle to immediately recognize (for instance, the = *mr* sign), it also demonstrates how transcriptions may fail to provide the whole picture. As mentioned, Hoch did not include all the text carved in this stela, and students marveled at how much more information could be obtained directly from the object itself. But the main reason why this became such a popular object among students has to do with Senwosret-Senbu’s daughters: Neferu, Nebet-Iunet, Sat-Hathor, and Sat-Amun. The first three are referred to as *sAt=f mrt=f*, “his beloved daughter,” while Sat-Amun is only referred to as *sAt=f*, “his daughter.” Why was this distinction made? What does it say, if anything, about the relationship between father and daughter(s)? The discussion of the possible types of relationships between fathers and daughters, and family dynamics overall, is a powerful example of the ways in which one can humanize the ancient Egyptians and the texts read in a language class (as also discussed by Thum 2023).

Stela of Kariben, Art Museum of the University of Memphis, 1981.1.42
(Sarah Schellinger)

Using museum collections for teaching is an ideal way to introduce broad audiences to the material culture of ancient Egypt and Nubia, Egypt’s southern neighbor. During my time working in museums, I have found that visitors and staff are drawn to the texts on the pieces despite most not being able to read them. This has prompted me to introduce them to elements of ancient Egyptian texts that can be easily identifiable, even if the entire text cannot be understood.

The Stela of Kariben (Figure 4.3) is housed in the Egyptian collection at the Art Museum of the University of Memphis (AMUM) which serves as a teaching collection for the Institute of Egyptian Art and Archaeology (IEAA).



Figure 4.3 *Stela of Kariben*, Napatan (ca. 800–300 BCE). Granite, 21 7/8 × 16 1/3 × 6 in. (55.5 × 41.5 × 15 cm). Purchase: Edward H. and Suzanne Trezevant Little Fund, 1981.1.42.

Source Courtesy of the Institute of Egyptian Art & Archaeology of The University of Memphis, Memphis, TN, USA.

The stela is currently on view and is an ideal piece to use when highlighting different scribal techniques, investigating the transmission of languages and cultures, and engaging in broader discussions of ancient Nile Valley literacy. The ancient Nubians did not have an indigenous written language prior to the advent of Meroitic in the 2nd century BCE. However, with the Egyptian colonization of Nubia in the New Kingdom (ca. 1550–1070 BCE), Egyptian scribes and priests brought their language from Egypt to Nubia when they relocated further south.

The Harvard University-Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (HU-MFA) Nubian expedition discovered the Stela of Kariben in tomb S500 in the South Cemetery at Meroe, Sudan, during the 1922 field season. It was created by native Nubian artisans who were familiar with traditional Egyptian funerary monuments and religious beliefs. The stela has been dated to the reigns of Si'aspiqo or Nasakhma during the first half of the 5th century BCE. Following the system of *partage* (whereby finds were legally exported by foreign archaeological missions), the stela was given to the MFA, where it was housed until 1975. The University of Memphis Art Department acquired the stela through a donation by the local philanthropist Edward H. Little in memory of his late wife Suzanne Trezevant Little.

The center of the curved upper portion of the stela, called the lunette, contains five columns of text that include the name of the god *Wsir/Osiris* along with his epithets and the name of the deceased, Kariben, who is listed as the “king’s brother.” The inclusion of this title may indicate that he was of royal descent but could instead suggest that he was someone very close to the king but not a blood relative. The lunette also displays the classic Egyptian iconography of a winged sun disc arched across the top of the stela and an offering table in the center piled with food offerings, with beverage offerings below. To the left of the offering table is the god *Wsir/Osiris*, seated and facing right, with the goddess *Aset/Isis* behind him. To the right of the offering table is the deceased, Kariben, facing left wearing traditional Nubian attire, such as the Kushite skull cap and fringed robe, with his hands raised in adoration to the god. Behind him is the goddess *Ma’at/Maat*. The first atypical hieroglyphs are located in the lunette.¹ Each goddess is identified in the inscriptions as *Aset/Isis*, yet if we look at their individual iconography, only the goddess on the left has the typical throne hieroglyph atop her head, indicating she is indeed *Aset/Isis*. The goddess on the right has the feather of *Ma’at/Maat* atop her head, indicating that she has been misidentified in the text. Even though viewers may not be able to read the hieroglyphs, they are able to see the difference in iconography, allowing them to understand the error made by the scribe.

When the stela was first published by Dows Dunham, he described it as having “six lines of incised corrupt Egyptian hieroglyphs” (Dunham 1963, 380) and it was subsequently left unstudied. The main inscription consists of six lines of shallowly carved hieroglyphs, some of which are ambiguous and appear to be the work of a non-Egyptian artisan. When comparing the hieroglyphs on the Kariben stela versus some Nubian ushabtis (funerary figurines) in the museum’s collection, viewers can easily recognize the differences in craftsmanship and technique even though all of these objects were presumably made by local artisans. Although many of the hieroglyphs proved challenging to decipher, the text itself does contain classic Egyptian phrases found on comparable funerary monuments. Although the inscription does not include the classic offering formula it does begin with another standard Egyptian phrase that translates to “words spoken by,” indicating that the words were intended to be spoken aloud.

The inscription shows that the stela was not a corrupted version of Egyptian hieroglyphs or a failed attempt to produce an Egyptian-style stela by a “barbaric” Nubian—the result of racist ideologies at the time of its discovery and belief that Egyptian culture was superior to Nubian (Reisner 1923, 14–16). Instead, it was the product of an artisan who was not a native Egyptian speaker yet understood enough to create a legible and poetic funerary monument for the Nubian king’s brother, Kariben. Having these bigger discussions with museum visitors allows them to connect on a deeper level with the ancient objects and develop a greater appreciation for the complexities surrounding ancient literacy and the transmission of language and culture between Egypt and Nubia following centuries of contact between them.

Concluding Remarks

Through the above case studies, we have shown how a learner's appreciation for the intricacies of Egyptian and Nubian written accounts increases when interacting directly with inscribed artifacts. However, the issue remains that museums need to integrate these texts into their labels so that visitors can understand what is being written, and classrooms need to have access to the original texts, so that students do not become reliant on typed, potentially modified, hieroglyphs.

Museums were at the forefront of institutions that adopted a digital presence when the internet became widely available in 1993 (Bearman and Trant 2018, 3222). The internet has enabled museums to expand their reach and connect with broader audiences around the world. Today, museum visitors can better understand collections using readily-available equipment, such as cell phones and low-cost or no-cost software programs, to create 3D models and other useful visual resources (Griffin, Powell, and Hussein, this volume; Minor, Oliver, and Fleming, this volume). In turn, these crowdsourced materials are often uploaded and shared with host institutions through social media as well as with the general public. Since many museums do not have their entire collection available online, both museums and their visitors can benefit from this sort of collaboration.

Many cost-effective solutions are available for museums to provide additional access to their collections:

- A QR code on the label to provide interested visitors with additional information, such as sound files of the text being spoken in Egyptian and the visitor's own language.
- Augmented reality to highlight portions of the hieroglyphic text while the words are being spoken.
- Sensory input, such as hearing or smell, to honor the original environment and interactive nature of inscribed objects.

The importance of digital collections is clear, since otherwise many students would not have access to physical objects. Showing students ancient inscribed objects is invariably beneficial to them (Pollais et al., 2018), as it reinforced the relationship between text and image, which was an important element in ancient Nile Valley cultures.

The omission of textual information that would enhance viewers' understanding of the function of the object (critical for the ancient Egyptians) and the form of the object (central to museums) could be addressed with little financial expenditure or use of resources. Our case studies stress this point. From the perspective of the ancient workmen who inscribed roughly half of the stela of Sankhy and Ankefankhu (with Nakhti) with text, the image of the couple and offering table could not stand alone. Only a general accounting of the theme of the stela—and no translation—is presented on the artifact label

and website. With respect to the Stela of Senwosret-senbu, even a published translation by Hoch only includes the first four columns of text on the bottom left side and the bottom four rows of text in the lunette at the top of the stela. Thirteen columns, one of the rows, and all of the captions are excluded from Hoch's transcription (1997, 225–226). From the Stela of Kariben, one can explore the transmission of language and culture between two regions. This stela highlights the blending of two cultures which can be found on other Nubian funerary objects and monuments: Egyptian deities depicted in the lunette, Kariben's appearance in native Nubian attire, and a non-traditional inscription written in Egyptian hieroglyphs by a presumably non-native Egyptian scribe.

By learning about the society and culture of the ancient Nile Valley using their inscribed objects, students and the public will be able to more effectively understand the importance of language as a cultural element of people who lived and died thousands of years before us. Additionally, this approach:

- Contextualizes the people of the ancient Nile Valley using their own written records.
- Highlights ancient cross-cultural communication.
- Emphasizes shared humanity with cultures other than the viewer's own.
- Counters incorrect portrayals in film and TV.
- Analyzes primary source material and its context.
- Offers an appreciation for ancient craftsmanship and the sourcing and preparation of raw materials.
- Increases accessibility for learners of various backgrounds and abilities.

Culturally centered discussions of the ancient Egyptian language, whether in the classroom or museum environment, in tandem with historically-relevant contextualization, can elevate the voices of these ancient people and humanize them, increasing audience engagement and relatability.

Note

- 1 Special thanks to Edmund S. Meltzer who assisted me with the decipherment and translation of this stela.

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