



April 2009

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Joshua J. Bodine

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Bodine, Joshua J. "The Shabaka Stone: An Introduction." *Studia Antiqua* 7, no. 1 (2009).
<https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/studiaantiqua/vol7/iss1/3>

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THE SHABAKA STONE: AN INTRODUCTION

JOSHUA J. BODINE

Introduction¹

Tucked away in the north end of room 4, among the collections in the British Museum's Department of Ancient Egypt and Sudan, is a little known antiquity of Egypt from the 25th Dynasty: a stela known as the Shabaka Stone.² This obscure stone and its contents were a mystery for nearly one hun-

1. The aim of this paper is to provide an easily-accessible, introductory treatment of the Shabaka Stone in the English language, one which deals with many of the important aspects of the stone together in one article. Excepting a couple articles written by Wim van den Dungen and posted to his internet site, such a publication does not really exist (at least that I could find in the process of my own research). Many of the earlier and important treatments (and even recent ones) are in German or French, or are old and not easy to come by for the average interested reader. Even then, some of these treatments do not deal with all aspects of the stela. As for the few English translations that have been offered over the years, these generally contain very short introductions and editorial remarks along with the translated text or simply portions of it, but are generally lacking in matters pertaining to the physical aspects of the stone and other areas. As well, some treatments are focused on specific topics—thus omitting others—such as dating the stone and its ideas, discrediting it as a “dramatic” text, or focusing on an exposition and interpretation of the myth of creation recorded on the stone. Even the most recent treatment, though important, is only a short article that highlights some new findings. For these reasons, and others, it is my hope that this paper will fill a gap for interested readers, understanding that it is far from comprehensive in its approach (a soon-to-be-published dissertation by Amr El Hawary should fulfill that responsibility). This in mind, at the outset, thanks should be given to Mr. Wim van den Dungen, whose articles offered helpful points of reference (see <http://www.maat.sofiatopia.org/shabaka.htm> and <http://www.maat.sofiatopia.org/memphis.htm>), and who was kind enough to give of his time in locating some otherwise difficult-to-obtain sources, as well as for providing invaluable, high-resolution photographs for individual analysis. Appreciation is also due to Dr. Amr El Hawary who provided a reprint of his own important article (copy in my possession) on the subject.

2. “Little known” is perhaps an understatement as it seems that even a number of British Museum personnel were not familiar with it. While visiting the museum in 2006, upon asking some of the staff members where she could find it, my wife was led on a hunt that took her through two different floors and five museum employees before someone was

dred years after its arrival to the museum, before being deciphered in 1901 by the first American Egyptologist, James Henry Breasted. After examining the stone thoroughly and painstakingly copying the inscription by hand, Breasted subsequently offered the first translation and interpretation of the text.³ It took many years though—and several scholars—to work through details of various aspects of the stone, a process Breasted merely set in motion.⁴ Yet, even though a good understanding of this relic has been established, according to the most recent researcher, work on the stone is far from being completed.⁵ What follows is intended as an introductory treatment of this fascinating stela—both the stone itself and its contents—with remarks about its origin and history, its composition, physical measurements and surface layout, and an interpretation of the inscription it bears along with a brief explication of its importance and significance both then and now.

Origin and History of the Stone

The Kingdom of Kush and the 25th Dynasty (747–656 BCE).⁶ Long after the demise of the dynasties of Egypt's New Kingdom period (dynasties 18–20: 1550–1069 BCE), in the turmoil of what Egyptologists refer to as the Third Intermediate period⁷ (dynasties 21–25; 1069–664 BCE), a new political power to the south of Egypt began to look northward from their center at Napata (modern-day Sudan). This was the ancient kingdom of Kush/Nubia⁸ and a stela of the period

able to direct her to it (perhaps due to the title “Black Basalt Mythological Text”).

3. See James H. Breasted, “The Philosophy of a Memphite Priest,” *Zeitschrift für ägyptische Sprache und Altertumskunde* 39 (1901): 39–54.

4. The studies of Adolf Erman, Kurt Sethe (his was the definitive work on the subject), and Hermann Junker were influential in establishing a good understanding of the text and opening up the field for later researchers. See Adolf Erman, “Ein Denkmal memphitischer Theologie,” *Sitzungsberichte der Königlich preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften* 42 (1911): 916–50; Kurt Sethe, “Das ‘Denkmal memphitischer Theologie’, der Schabakostein des Britischen Museums,” *Untersuchungen zur Geschichte und Altertumskunde Ägyptens* 10 (1928); Hermann Junker, *Die Götterlehre von Memphis (Schabaka-Inschrift)*, *Abhandlungen der Preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, Philosophisch-historische Klasse*, 1939 no. 23 (Berlin: Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1940); Hermann Junker, *Die politische Lehre von Memphis, Abhandlungen der Preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, Philosophisch-historische Klasse* 1941 no. 6 (Berlin: Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1941).

5. Amr El Hawary, “New Findings about the Memphite Theology,” in *Proceedings of the Ninth International Congress of Egyptologists* (ed. Jean-Claude Goyon and Christine Cardin; Leuven: Peeters, 2007), 1:574. Due to be published very soon (personal communication), El Hawary promises a comprehensive examination of the Shabaka Stone in his dissertation—expected to become the new authority—on the subject.

6. All ancient dates follow the chronology set forth in the list provided in Ian Shaw, ed., *The Oxford History of Ancient Egypt* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 479–83.

7. The summary of events to follow for this period leans upon the survey by John Taylor, “The Third Intermediate Period (1069–664 bce),” in *The Oxford History of Ancient Egypt*, 324–63.

8. For a treatment of the kingdom and civilization of Kush see William Y. Adams, “The Kingdom and Civilization of Kush in Northeast Africa,” in *Civilizations of the*

confirms the Kushite kingdom as a “full-fledged power” by the time they invaded Egypt.⁹ Though they were not Egyptian in origin, the Kushite kingdom and its peoples had long been entrenched in Egyptian culture and customs—and dominated by Egypt—since Early Dynastic times (ca. 3000–2686 BCE). With Egypt weakened and divided, the rulers of Kush, as “strong contenders for power over Egypt,”¹⁰ wanted their turn at ruling one of the great civilizations of the ancient Near East.

Around 750 BCE, the Kushite ruler Kashta seems to have asserted his influence towards Egypt, but it was left to his son Piye (747–716 BCE) to follow through with military expeditions that eventually gained him temporary control over Upper (southern) and Lower (northern) Egypt, and the obeisance of various local rulers who were the remnants of the declining Libyan dynasts. Content to leave his new vassals in control of their local territories, shortly after his conquests Piye returned to his homeland for the remainder of his reign. Under such circumstances, it wasn’t long before one of the provincial rulers claimed the status of king and so began the 24th Dynasty (what was to be the last of the Libyan period). However, Piye’s successor and brother,¹¹ Shabaka (716–702 BCE¹²), wasn’t about to allow such ambitions to continue under his rule. Not long after his ascension to the throne, sometime in 716 BCE, Shabaka launched a new invasion of Egypt, reconquered the Delta area, and took up permanent residence there, thus inaugurating the rule of the 25th Dynasty over a united Egypt.¹³ With such a feat accomplished Egypt now had a dynasty of Ethiopian-born, black African kings.

Scholars have come to recognize the 25th Dynasty as a period of renewal, where the Kushite kings intentionally sought to establish an “ideological link with the great eras of Egypt’s past . . . leading to a revival of artistic, literary,

Ancient Near East (ed. Jack M. Sasson; Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2006), 2:775–89, and László Török, *The Kingdom of Kush: Handbook of the Napatan-Meriotic Civilization* (Handbook of Oriental Societies: The Near and Middle East 31; Leiden: Brill, 1998).

9. James H. Breasted, ed., *Ancient Records of Egypt* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2001), 4:406–07.

10. Taylor, “The Third Intermediate Period (1069–664 bce),” 331.

11. Determining the relationships of the Kushite kings is not exactly an easy task; however, many scholars believe Shabaka to have been Piye’s brother. For an easily-accessible overview of the royal family of Kush, see Aidan Dodson and Dyan Hilton, *The Complete Royal Families of Ancient Egypt* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2004), 235–37.

12. This date has recently been questioned since new evidence, deriving from an official Assyrian inscription dated to 706 BCE and accepted by some Egyptologists, states that Shabaka died that year or the year before.

13. Though Piye was in a sense the first ruler of the 25th Dynasty, he never really exercised complete control over lower Egypt as its sole ruler; after his military ventures from his homeland as far as Memphis, he was content to leave things in the hands of local overlords while he went back to his native Kush for the remainder of his reign. Under these circumstances, what scholars now recognize as the 24th Dynasty was allowed to emerge during his absence, thus overlapping dynasties somewhat. It was not until Shabaka deposed the 24th Dynasty, however, and set himself up in Memphis—where he resided at least some of the time—that a 25th Dynasty that ruled over a united Egypt can be talked about.

and religious trends drawing inspiration from earlier ages.”¹⁴ The Kushite kings went to great lengths to restore the glory of Egypt in their own reigns with monumental construction projects reminiscent of earlier times. Moreover, at least some of the Kushite kings seemed to possess a genuine reverence and sincere respect for Egyptian customs and traditions—especially religious ones—and sought to support its ancient practices.¹⁵ They did not see themselves as foreign invaders and conquerors, but as Egyptians in culture and religion, who would restore the greatness that was Egypt. For almost a hundred years, before being conquered by an invading Assyria, the black African kings from Kush, in their attempts to renew the splendor and glory of Egypt’s former days, thus ruled in the likeness of the kings of old, and can be remembered as great kings of their own time.

The Kushite kings’ sincerity, respect, and good intentions, were surely not simply an expression of supreme piety or reverence for Egyptian customs though; there were of course political reasons for their actions. “The Kushite rulers,” explains historian John Taylor, “sought to strengthen their legitimacy by posing as champions of ancient tradition.” In order to legitimize their rule and seek acceptance as authentic Egyptian rulers, they intentionally cast themselves and their reigns in the mold of those of the Old Kingdom (2686–2125 BCE). Such deliberate acts overtly connected the Kushite kings with an archaic period of Egypt and helped them sustain an image of greatness. A sometimes common feature of Egyptian culture, scholars refer to efforts of this kind as “archaism[s],” and these endeavors seemed to escalate in the eighth and seventh centuries B.C.E., precisely the period of Shabaka and his stone.¹⁶

Memphis, the Temple of Ptah, and Shabaka’s Stone. Lying about 12 miles south of modern-day Cairo, on the west bank of the Nile, is the ancient city of Memphis (now only in ruins).¹⁷ Memphis, located between Lower and Upper Egypt at the tip of the Nile Delta (no doubt a factor in its choice as capital of a unified Egypt, having been known anciently by the epithet “That which binds the Two Lands”) was the site of the first royal administrative headquarters of Egypt and long served as an important religious center. It was the residence of the kings of the Early Dynastic and Old Kingdom periods as well as many succeeding kings. It was a city that rivaled any other (in Egypt only Thebes was comparable), renowned throughout the ancient world, until it was overshadowed in significance with the establishment of Alexandria by Alexander the Great. Its importance can be seen in the tradition—believed by many scholars—that the

14. Taylor, “The Third Intermediate Period (1069–664 bce),” 331–32.

15. Piye was a model of such piety, evident in his stop-over in Thebes to celebrate the Egyptian religious festival of Opet on his way to conquering the Delta, as well as his care in not desecrating the temples and sacred precincts during his military campaigns.

16. Taylor, “The Third Intermediate Period (1069–664 bce),” 349–52.

17. On the importance of Memphis as an ancient Egyptian city, see John Baines and Jaromír Málek, *Atlas of Ancient Egypt* (New York: Facts on File, 1980), 134.

chief Memphite deity, Ptah, and his temple gave rise to the name of Egypt itself by way of a Greek corruption of the Egyptian word “Hut-ka-Ptah,” meaning “the temple of the ka¹⁸ of Ptah.” Important here is that Memphis is the location where the story of Shabaka and his stone begins, and is a city that plays a significant role in understanding the historical context and contents of the stone itself.

No doubt, Shabaka’s move to take up residence in Memphis as Egypt’s sole ruler was a calculated one. Furthermore, once settled in, his activities as the new king were no less calculated in their aims. As might be expected, at some point Shabaka took to attending to the temple of the chief deity of Memphis. In the process of renovating and restoring the Temple of Ptah, Shabaka is said to have discovered a worm-eaten “work of the ancestors” (presumably a papyrus scroll). The text described, among other things, a story of the Memphite god Ptah as the creator of all things and, in his manifestation as the god Horus (patron god of the Egyptian kings), the great unifier and sole ruler of a divided Egypt at the very beginning of history. Shabaka was certainly not ignorant of the historical and religious importance of Memphis and its traditions, and the overtones that such a text held for Shabaka’s reign were undeniable: having earlier succeeded in bringing an end to the 24th Dynasty, successfully uniting Egypt and Kush under one ruler, and setting up his royal residence in Memphis, this was just the kind of propaganda Shabaka needed!

After this unsuspected discovery (so the text goes), Shabaka ordered the ancient document to be copied onto stone, presumably to serve as a concrete image—suggestive both politically and religiously—of his newly-established rule in Egypt’s first royal capital. Shabaka’s residence at Memphis was proof that Egypt had been reunited; the prominent display of his newly-commissioned stone in the House of Ptah, along with an introduction of Shabaka as Ptah’s beloved, was all the more evidence affirming that, once again, Egypt was united under a divinely-approved-of ruler—King Shabaka. Shabaka’s Stone is thus arguably the most important literary monument from his reign.

The Stone’s Provenance, Ancient and Modern. Originally erected as a lasting monument in the Temple of Ptah at Memphis in the late eighth century BCE, the stone was at some point removed, though it is not known how, when, or why. Its history of ownership picks back up in modern times as a donation to the British Museum in 1805 by George John, 2nd Earl of Spencer (1758–1834)—“trustee of the museum” since 1794—where it has sat for nearly two hundred years as one artifact among many. One lingering question is the stone’s provenance before 1805. Recently, an examination of the museum’s archives by Amr El Hawary has revealed that the stone was transported to England, along with five other objects with which it was registered, as ballast aboard a ship leaving the port of

18. The Egyptian word ka is an obscure concept that relates to the interaction of the mind and the body as a person.

Alexandria. There is no mention of the stone being specially transported from Memphis to Alexandria before its journey to England. So, for now, one can only conjecture on its whereabouts between the intervening centuries, when it disappears from the pages of history in Memphis, resurfaces in Alexandria, only then to be moved to England.¹⁹

Details and Descriptions of the Stone

Material Composition. Back in 1901, in his preliminary publication, Breasted identified the Shabaka Stone as a rectangular block of black granite.²⁰ Since then, some scholars have agreed with Breasted, while others have postulated that the monument was a slab of basalt²¹ or a conglomerate stone.²² Recently analyzed by a scientist at the British Museum, the stone was found to have a density of 2.7g/cm³ and determined to be a composition of “Green breccia,’ originating from the Wadi Hammamat,” a detail that correlates nicely with the report of an expedition for materials in this area during Shabaka’s reign.²³

General Condition. Even a quick glance at the stone easily reveals its poor condition. Not only have parts of the stone’s inscriptions been intentionally defaced—such as the erasure of Shabaka’s name in three places (lines 1 and 2)²⁴ and the name of the god Seth being chiseled out in many others (at least lines 7, 8 and 9)²⁵—perhaps the most disappointing aspect of its condition is its obvious use as something other than the monument Shabaka intended it to be. Cut right into the center of the stone is a rectangular hole with eleven deeply-scored lines radiating from it. The long-held explanation for this destruction was that the stela was used in later times as a millstone,²⁶ though such a theory has

19. El Hawary, “New Findings about the Memphite Theology,” 1:567–68.

20. See Breasted, “The Philosophy of a Memphite Priest,” 40.

21. Beginning with Kurt Sethe, “Das ‘Denkmal memphitischer Theologie’, der Schabakostein des Britischen Museums,” 55.

22. So Rolf Krauss, “Wie jung ist die memphitische Philosophie auf dem Shabako-Stein?” in *Gold of Praise: Studies on Ancient Egypt in Honor of Edward F. Wente* (ed. John A. Larson, Emily Teeter, and Edward F. Wente; Studies in Ancient Oriental Civilization 58; Chicago: Oriental Institute, 1999), 239.

23. El Hawary, “New Findings about the Memphite Theology,” 1:568–69.

24. Although the destruction of Shabaka’s name was originally thought to be the work of a Psammetik II, El Hawary has recently argued that the culprit was Psammetik III. See El Hawary, “New Findings about the Memphite Theology,” 1:570–72.

25. This particular detail has been explained in the literature as a demonstration of the hostility to this god in the late periods of Egypt’s history; see, for example, Breasted, “The Philosophy of a Memphite Priest,” 40, note 6, and El Hawary, “New Findings about the Memphite Theology,” 1:570.

26. Beginning with Breasted, “The Philosophy of a Memphite Priest,” 40. A perusal of the British Museum’s website shows that this is still the explanation offered; see “The Shabako Stone,” n.p. [cited 25 May, 2008]. Online: http://www.britishmuseum.org/explore/highlights/highlight_objects/aes/t/the_shabako_stone.aspx.

recently come under criticism. El Hawary, examining the back of the stone for the first time, has drawn attention to the fact that the damages do not correspond with its suggested use as a millstone, and proposes that it was used as a foundation of “something round,” possibly a column or pillar.²⁷ Whatever the case, such secondary use of the stone is extremely unfortunate as it has destroyed a sizeable portion of the text and thus fragmented its story.

Matters of Measurement. The stela itself is roughly 137 cm wide with the left-side height estimated at 91 cm and the right side about 95 cm. As for the written surface, the width is only slightly smaller than that of the stone itself, measured at 132 cm, while the height of the inscription averages 66 cm (reaching a maximum of 68.8 cm on the left-hand side), thus leaving an unused strip across the bottom quarter of the stone. The aforementioned rectangular hole in the center is 12 x 14 cm, with the eleven radiating lines ranging in length from 25 to 38 cm, amounting to a completely worn-out surface of 78 cm across, except for a few readable hieroglyphs near the center of the hole.

Lines and Layouts. Scholars today owe a debt to Breasted who discovered the hidden clue that led to the stone’s decipherment: although the individual hieroglyphs were written as expected, he found that the columns (lines) of the inscription were to be read not from right to left, as is usually the case, but numbered in the reverse order while still being read from top to bottom.²⁸ The stone’s inscriptions are laid out in three horizontal rows and 61 vertical columns, making a total of 64 “lines” of carved characters with a good amount of lacunae (gaps or empty spaces) interspersed throughout. The first two horizontal rows (lines 1 and 2)²⁹ are at the very top of the stone and comprise its “introduction,” while the other horizontal line (line 48) is a very short row near the top of the stone on the right-hand side amidst the vertical columns. The remaining 61 columns (lines 3–64; excluding 48) all contained some text at one point, except for line 5 which appears to have always been blank. A considerable amount of the surface inscription consists of partially-preserved columns (lines 16–24 and 45–55) and many columns that are totally worn away (lines 25–44 excepting a few readable characters).

27. El Hawary, “New Findings about the Memphite Theology,” 1:569-570.

28. See James H. Breasted, *Development of Religion and Thought in Ancient Egypt* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1912; repr., Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1972), 46, note 1; see also James H. Breasted, *The Dawn of Conscience: The Sources of Our Moral Heritage in the Ancient World* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1933; repr., 1961), 30-31.

29. Line 1 is the largest line on the stone and reads both left and right extending out from the center, in a “mirrored-manner” so to speak, while line 2 is the second largest line and reads from the left to the right instead of the expected reverse order; noted in Dungen, “On the Shabaka Stone,” n.p. [cited 10 May 2008]. Online: <http://www.maat.sofiatopia.org/shabaka.htm>.

Inscriptions and Transcriptions. Though Breasted was the first to offer a thorough transcription of the stone, no less important is the most recent work of El Hawary who has demonstrated several inconsistencies and errors in Breasted's copy. One of the more glaring ones is Breasted's miscount of the radiating lines (there are not ten as he transcribed but rather eleven). Also noticeable are the missing lacunae at the very beginning of lines 25a, 26a, and 27a. In addition to these, El Hawary's work has illuminated several other minor discrepancies between the stone itself and Breasted's transcription.³⁰

The Contents of the Stone³¹

In order to make some sense of the fragmentary contents of the stone, most translations or treatments divide the text into various logical units or sections, although differences of opinion certainly allow for (and have produced) varying interpretations as to how many sections and what is included in each. For introductory purposes, the inscription will be segregated into four general divisions to be discussed in turn: (1) The introduction and titulary of the king (lines 1–2); (2) a story of the gods that recounts the unification of Upper and Lower Egypt under the god Horus at Memphis (lines 3–47); (3) a creation myth known as the Memphite Theology (lines 48–64); and (4) a summary of the text as a whole (lines 61 [beginning after the lacunae] through 64).³² It must be kept in mind though, that to whatever degree the text may be divided, it nonetheless evinces an internal cohesion—the unifying element being the Memphite god Ptah—that should not be overlooked or forgotten.³³

30. See El Hawary, "New Findings about the Memphite Theology," 1:572–74.

31. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are from Miriam Lichtheim, ed., *Ancient Egyptian Literature* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971–1980; repr., Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 1:51–56. Interested readers should consult this volume for a full translation of the text.

32. This four-fold division is concededly arbitrary and admittedly imposes a modern point of view on the text that may run counter to the intentions of the original author(s). It is also acknowledged that it overlooks the complex nature of the inscription, and runs the risk of misleading readers into artificial groupings that certainly could be split into more sections than the present segmenting allows for (e.g. on the left-hand side of the stone, lines 3 and 4 could be a section in themselves in that they appear to be somewhat of a preface to the larger story of Egypt's historical creation and the divine dialogue that follows). Be this as it may, this introduction is only to facilitate a general understanding of the contents for those not familiar with the text, and to simply highlight some of its more important features and not all of its intricacies.

33. Such is essentially Junker's argument—echoed and affirmed by Erik Iversen—who saw the Shabaka text as an expository treatise with an implied internal unity. See Junker, *Die Götterlehre von Memphis (Schabaka-Inschrift)*; cf. Erik Iversen, "The Cosmogony of the Shabaka Text," in *Studies in Egyptology: Presented to Miriam Lichtheim* (ed. Sarah Israelit-Groll; Jerusalem: Magnes Press, The Hebrew University, 1990), 1:490. Similar sentiments are expressed by James Allen in James P. Allen, *Genesis in Egypt: The Philosophy of Ancient Egyptian Creation Accounts* (Yale Egyptological Studies 2; New Haven, Conn.: Yale Egyptological Seminar, 1988), 38–43.

Dedications, Doubts, and Dating. A general heading carved on the two horizontal rows across the top of the stone introduces the text. Line 1 commences with the so-called fivefold royal titulary of the king: “The living Horus: Who prospers the Two Lands; the Two Ladies: Who prospers the Two Lands; the King of Upper and Lower Egypt: Neferkare; the Son of Re: [Shabaka],³⁴ beloved of Ptah-South-of-His-Wall, who lives like Re forever.” This sequence of five epithets, a common standard since the Middle Kingdom period, seeks to personify particular aspects of kingship: the first three stress the king’s manifestation of deity, while the last two make reference to Egypt’s division and unification, and include the king’s throne name and birth name.³⁵ The king’s Horus name is of consequence here as it highlights the king as a manifestation of the falcon-headed god Horus, an important deity and patron god to the Egyptian kings.

After the above declaration the inscription continues on line 2 with a dedicatory introduction:

This writing was copied out anew by his majesty in the House of his father Ptah-South-of-his-Wall,³⁶ for his majesty found it to be a work of the ancestors which was worm-eaten, so that it could not be understood from the beginning to end. His majesty copied it anew so that it became better than it had been before, in order that his name might endure and his monument last in the House of his father Ptah-South-of-his-Wall throughout eternity, as a work done by the Son of Re [Shabaka] for his father Ptah-Tatenen, so that he might live forever.

Thus, according to the story, the composition had been copied onto stone from an older deteriorated “work of the ancestors” in order to preserve and memorialize it³⁷—and it is the introduction’s claim that has long entertained inquiries from scholars. What is to be made of it? Is it to be trusted? If so, how ancient was the source? Was it really a direct copy of an earlier original, or only partially reliant on an earlier source? Were there multiple sources involved? When “copied,” were there not literary embellishments added so as to make it, as the text indicates, “better than it had been before”? To this point, which parts, then, were authentic and which were creations of Shabaka—could such even be determined? Or was it all simply an attempt at archaizing a new composition that served Shabaka’s interest in reuniting Egypt and establishing himself as king? In this regard, was it then a complete fabrication by Shabaka and/or his scribes, or just an innovative rewriting of an

34. As previously mentioned, the name Shabaka was erased from the stone in later history and is not found anywhere on it; what does appear in the introduction that positively associates it with Shabaka is his throne name Neferkare.

35. On this see Baines and Málek, *Atlas of Ancient Egypt*, 36.

36. The term “South-of-his-Wall” is an epithet of Ptah and probably refers to the sacred wall that enclosed his precinct in the temple.

37. It is ironic, then, that Shabaka’s rescue of the “worm-eaten” text, and its transfer to stone as a lasting monument, didn’t end up preserving the composition in its entirety as he (and scholars too for that matter!) may have hoped.

earlier source (or sources) in a sort of classicist way? Needless to say, all these questions testify to the complexity of scholarly investigation surrounding the date of the text and its putative source(s).

Breasted, the first observer of the text, exercised caution in his original, “rapid sketch” of some of these answers, first stating that the contents were at least as old as the 18th Dynasty with “strong indications . . . that the inscription is to be dated in or before the beginning of the New Kingdom.” Over time, however, easing up on his judgments, he reasoned that the text dated to the “Pyramid Age” or that it contained “the oldest thoughts of men that have anywhere come down to us in written form.”³⁸ Subsequent to Breasted’s pioneering work, Adolf Erman, Kurt Sethe (these two having influenced Breasted’s later views³⁹), and Hermann Junker, all dated the text to the Old Kingdom. Largely based on the archaic nature of the text—both linguistically (e.g. its language is reminiscent of the Pyramid Texts⁴⁰ of the Old Kingdom) and politically (e.g. its allusions to the importance of Memphis as the first royal city)—the views of many that followed held its ancient origin: Henri Frankfort maintained that its ideas must have been “part of the great movement at the dawn of history,”⁴¹ John Wilson was confident in assigning it an early date based on “linguistic, philological, and geopolitical evidence,”⁴² and Miriam Lichtheim agreed that it was “a work of the Old Kingdom.”⁴³

The tide of opinion changed, however, in 1973 with the important study of Friedrich Junge.⁴⁴ Junge argued that the text was a production of the 25th Dynasty—possibly relying on New Kingdom source material—as an attempt to archaize a new composition in a fresh and creative way. Subsequent research theorized of the possibility—based on the text’s fusing of the gods Ptah and Ta-Tenen and a description of their roles—of an earlier original(s) from the Ramesside period of the New Kingdom (1295–1069 BCE).⁴⁵ More recently,

38. Breasted, “The Philosophy of a Memphite Priest,” 43; Breasted, *Development of Religion and Thought in Ancient Egypt*, 46, note 1; Breasted, *The Dawn of Conscience*, 31–32, emphasis in original.

39. Breasted admitted as much in his own writings (see above note for sources).

40. Pyramid Texts refer to a collection of Egyptian religious texts—some eight hundred separate spells in all—carved upon the walls of royal pyramids of the late Old Kingdom and early First Intermediate periods. Concerned with the afterlife of the king, these texts were primarily funerary in nature, though at times some passages may have been used in temple settings.

41. Henri Frankfort, *Kingship and the Gods: A Study of Ancient Near Eastern Religion as the Integration of Society and Nature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 24.

42. John A. Wilson, “The Memphite Theology of Creation,” in *The Ancient Near East: An Anthology of Texts and Pictures* (ed. James B. Pritchard; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1958), 1:1.

43. Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, 1:51.

44. Friedrich Junge, “Zur Fehldatierung des sog. Denkmals memphitischer Theologie oder Der Beitrag der ägyptischen Theologie zur Geistesgeschichte der Spätzeit,” *Mitteilungen des Deutschen archäologischen Instituts*, Abteilung Kairo 29 (1973): 195–204.

45. See Hermann Alexander Schlögl, *Der Gott Tatenen* (Freiburg, Schwiez: Universitätsverlag, 1980), 110–17.

Egyptologist James Allen, in a study of Egyptian creation accounts two decades ago, drew attention to the fact that the text has several internal features that suggest it was not a wholesale fabrication without any basis in an earlier source(s) (e.g. it has similarities in formatting and layout with some Middle Kingdom [2055–1650 BCE] texts, and its descriptions of the god Ptah and his creative role have a likeness with certain passages in the Coffin Texts⁴⁶). Ultimately, however, Allen seems to agree with a New Kingdom date of Ramesseid origin for the text, for it is during this period that the creative role of Ptah (akin to that described in the Shabaka text) is “most fully developed.”⁴⁷ A dissenter of this recent trend, however, is Erik Iversen who agrees with Junker’s original Old Kingdom dating, contending that the text still gives the impression that “it is old with a limited number of mostly orthographic innovations, rather than late with an abundance of archaisms.”⁴⁸

Clearly, determining the exact nature of the truth claims of the stone’s introduction will likely forever elude scholars. Admittedly, the inscription’s intertextual relationship with earlier literary pieces, though intriguing, is not enough to argue with certainty for a reliance on any purported original source(s). Yet, surely some of the ideas inscribed on the stone, “at least the core of which [are] ancient,”⁴⁹ were not total fabrications, for if they were the theological/political dynamics of the stone would have been entirely missed by the Egyptian peoples, and likely served no interest as a monument for Shabaka to erect. Could not, then, at least some archaic passages derive from earlier material, or its ideas hark back to much older times—just written anew for Shabaka’s stone? To be sure, ideas are difficult to date if they even can be. About all that can be said with confidence is that the composition as a whole (i.e. its extant form) belongs to the 25th Dynasty;. Anything more is speculation. Nevertheless, as Iversen wisely observes, such a debate may be to a certain extent immaterial from the point of view of hermeneutics, since the text “deals exclusively with genuine Egyptian concepts and notions, most of which can be traced in other sources to the earliest periods of Egyptian history, and the date of this particular version of them is therefore irrelevant to their interpretation.”⁵⁰ At the very least, if the inscription is indeed a completely new creation with no foundation in a “worm-eaten” original, then it is certainly a testament to the author(s) brilliant use of archaic wording, spelling, grammar, and format.⁵¹

46. Primarily inscribed upon non-royal coffins in the First Intermediate and Middle Kingdom periods, the Coffin Texts are a collection of funerary texts which expand upon, and are in part derived from, the Pyramid Texts of the Old Kingdom.

47. Allen, *Genesis in Egypt*, 38–43.

48. Iversen, “The Cosmogony of the Shabaka Text,” 1:490.

49. So Siegfried Morenz, *Egyptian Religion* (trans. Ann E. Keep; Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1996), 116.

50. Iversen, “The Cosmogony of the Shabaka Text,” 1:490, emphasis added.

51. The lacunae—previously thought to be the result of a damaged (i.e. “worm-eaten”) original—is now usually explained as evidence of an archaizing effort at simulating an old and ruined original. See El Hawary, “New Findings about the Memphite Theology,” 1:569.

Ptah, Menes, and the Unification of the “Two Lands” in Myth and History

In most ancient accounts of origins, history and myth were woven together into a single storyline. Ancient peoples—Egypt included—were not particularly concerned with history-writing as carried out under the prescriptions of the modern science of historiography. Rather, “history” was an interpretation told through many elements of narrative art as a means of recalling memories of the past in a way that provided context for meaningful action in the present. Not only was history meant to draw from the past in order to shape the present, the circumstances of the present often affected the way the past was remembered and interpreted. Not surprisingly, then, historical writing was often an amalgamation of historical and mythological elements. And, what is true of most ancient accounts of historical events is also true for Egyptian origins as well.

Growing out of the prehistoric cultures in Upper Egypt known as the Naqada, Egyptian civilization can be traced back historically to the late fourth millennium B.C.E. (ca. 3200–3000 BCE) when it was unified as a distinctively new creation under the rule of a king that later Egyptians referred to as Menes.⁵² The legendary Menes, at least from the 18th Dynasty (1550–1295 BCE) onward, was viewed as the great “founder of the Egyptian realm” who “drained the original marshes; founded Memphis, the first city; and acquainted humankind with culture and civilization which they had not previously known.”⁵³ The unification of Egypt, the founding of Memphis, and the establishment of an Egyptian state—all historical events despite whatever mythical characteristics the story may have included—long served as important elements in the story of Egyptian origins. These elements are also essential components of the myth of Egypt’s origins inscribed on the left-hand side of the Shabaka Stone.

Linked with the historical events above, another important element in Egypt’s genesis is the ideology of kingship.⁵⁴ For the ancient Near East, the ideology of kingship was extremely important, and Egypt is perhaps a prime example of a civilization with a fully developed ideology of it. Kingship in Egypt

52. The identity of Menes remains an issue of speculation amongst scholars, with some designating various kings as the “historical” Menes, such as Scorpion, Narmer, or Aha. Perhaps the most realistic view is that which recognizes Menes as a mythical creation of the Egyptians in an attempt to attribute the unification of Egypt to one ruler, even though his acts and achievements were likely characteristics of several late Predynastic/First Dynasty kings combined into one legendary person in Egypt’s collective memory. It is interesting that in Egyptian the name Menes may mean “So-and-so,” lending credence to the notion that Menes was “another of those constructs through which the Egyptians mythologized their past.” For this view see William J. Murnane, “The History of Ancient Egypt: An Overview,” in *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East*, 2:693-694.

53. Erik Hornung, *History of Ancient Egypt: An Introduction* (trans. David Lorton; Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1999), 3.

54. On the origins of kingship in Egypt see John Baines, “Origins of Egyptian Kingship,” in *Ancient Egyptian Kingship* (ed., David O’Connor and David P. Silverman; Leiden: Brill, 1995), 95–156.

was not simply a political institution but something intricately bound to religion and the gods.⁵⁵ In ancient Egypt, the king served as a bridge between the divine and the mortal realm. “Ancient Egyptian civilization,” comments Barry Kemp, “was maintained by an intellectual system that linked society at large to . . . the king, the living human representative of a hereditary monarchy” and also to “hidden forces (divinities)” whose “identities and forms,” though “revealed by the scholarly work of priests, . . . were engaged through the person of the king.”⁵⁶ Inasmuch as the Egyptian cosmos was “composed not of things, but of beings”⁵⁷—meaning these hidden forces were viewed as distinct individuals or personalities—kingship, then, was the interplay and interrelationship between the king and these “beings,” the gods.

Against this background, then, a brief look at the text itself is now in order. Right from the start (excluding, of course, the general heading already discussed), in the two short vertical columns inscribed in the middle of the left-hand side, the text declares the supremacy of the Memphite god Ptah both politically and theologically (see lines 3–6). His preeminence is clear: not only is he the great “uniter who arose as king of Upper Egypt and . . . king of Lower Egypt,”⁵⁸ it was he who created the Ennead (the gods).⁵⁹

After the short preface asserting Ptah’s supremacy, the text jumps right into the fragmented narrative and dialogic speech of the gods that recounts the unification of Egypt.⁶⁰ At the beginning, the narrative tells of a divided Egypt by recalling the story of the quarrel between the gods Horus and Seth.⁶¹ Geb, the

55. See the influential, book-length discussion of this by Frankfort, *Kingship and the Gods*. It should be noted that some scholars have retreated somewhat from Frankfort’s assertions of the importance of divinity and kingship in Egyptian history. David P. Silverman sees Frankfort’s stressing of divinity as an “important element of kingship” largely due to his reliance on religious texts and rituals in his research, at the neglect of other types of literature and information on the subject. On this see David P. Silverman, “The Nature of Egyptian Kingship,” in *Ancient Egyptian Kingship*, 50. This aside, the ideology of kingship was nonetheless extremely important for ancient Egyptian society—though it was viewed differently during different periods—and its association with the divine was a part of that importance.

56. Barry J. Kemp, “Unification and Urbanization of Ancient Egypt,” in *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East*, 2:679.

57. As explicated by Allen, *Genesis in Egypt*, 8.

58. This statement is perhaps an example of a mythical allusion to the historical event of the ascendancy and domination of his native city of Memphis under Menes.

59. Ennead is a Greek word meaning “the nine,” and signified the nine most important gods and goddesses—Atum and his descendants Shu, Tefnut, Geb, Nut, Osiris, Isis, Seth, and Nephthys—although this term is sometimes synonymous with the generic term “gods,” without reference to a number. On this see Allen, *Genesis in Egypt*, 8.

60. Starting in line 7, the divine drama continues to at least line 35b, and then, due to highly damaged sections, the text doesn’t pick up again until line 48. Since line 48 represents the natural break in content for a discussion of the right-hand segment of the stone, the current segment must have ended somewhere in between lines 36–47 though where exactly is anybody’s guess. This is noted in Dungen, “On the Shabaka Stone.”

61. As noted by Lichtheim, this is perhaps a recollection of different traditions ascribing the rule of Upper and Lower Egypt to originally separate rulers; see Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, 1:56, note 3.

god of the earth, calls the other gods before him and judges between Horus and Seth and forbids them to quarrel (lines 7–8). Each is then given his portion—Horus is assigned Lower Egypt and Seth Upper Egypt—which brings “peace over the Two Lands” (line 9). Then, for reason of a familial relationship, Geb decides to give the whole of Egypt to Horus, the “son of his [Geb’s] firstborn son [Osiris]” (lines 10c–12c). Following this, Geb announces to the Ennead that he has chosen Horus—and Horus alone—as his heir (lines 13a–18b). Given this inheritance, Horus becomes the sole ruler of the land, king of Upper and Lower Egypt (lines 13c–14c).

Continuing the story, however, after reporting how Horus received the crown of Upper and Lower Egypt, the text recites a statement that basically equates Horus with Ptah (see line 13c which makes reference to Ptah’s epithet “South-of-His-Wall”; cf. line 54 for Horus as Ptah as well). Since the text had already identified Ptah and not Horus as the king of Upper and Lower Egypt in the preface (see lines 3–4), such a designation here was key for the text (and altogether typical of a religion with syncretistic tendencies).⁶² Read through the eyes of an Egyptian, then, and interpreted within their paradigm of myth and reality, the text was saying that the earthly king who historically united Upper and Lower Egypt, personified in his divine counterpart and patron deity, Horus, who is but a manifestation of Ptah, had a divine right to rule in Memphis, the capital of a unified Egypt and home to Ptah the supreme god. The earthly king, in his various manifestations of and interactions with the gods, was the great unifier of Egypt, having “united the Two Lands in the Nome of the Wall [i.e. the White Wall or Memphis].” The great city of Memphis was the “place in which the Two Lands were united” and, “being united in the House of Ptah, the ‘Balance of the Two Lands’” was achieved (lines 14c–16c).

To the extent that cultural traditions and memories of the past—whether historical or mythological—gave Egyptians a sense of identity, imparted meaning to the present, and also shaped its reality, in a sense, history became ritual. For Egypt, the coronation of each Egyptian king was to a certain degree a ceremonial commemoration of the unification of Egypt and the founding of Memphis at the beginning of Egyptian history—in other words “a re-enactment of the original event, participating in its virtue and reaffirming its purpose.”⁶³ To take the analogy even further though, history was not just earthly ritual but, inasmuch as historical reality was not separated from the divine world in Egyptian tradition (nor was it on the Shabaka Stone) history was “ritual in the cosmos.”⁶⁴ The historical unification of Egypt under its new leader at Memphis and the establishment of a royal administration was, therefore, a story with cos-

62. This kind of syncretism was not a creation of the Shabaka Stone; this was just another instance of proclivities that were quite common of an Egyptian religion that conflated and restructured the gods and their roles into a “mindless variety.” On this see Richard H. Wilkinson, *The Complete Gods and Goddesses of Ancient Egypt* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2003), 26–35.

63. Frankfort, *Kingship and the Gods*, 23.

64. Baines and Málek, *Atlas of Ancient Egypt*, 209–11.

mological importance—order in the state meant order in the universe and order in the divine realm. Civilization, as conceived by the Egyptians, with an earthly king who interacted with both the mortal and divine realms, was the realization of a divine plan, “a god-given” right that was “established when the world was created” and which formed “part of the universal order.”⁶⁵

The above in mind, it was pointed out long ago by Sethe that the text on the left-hand side of the Shabaka Stone read like a “dramatic” text. By this it was meant that the text is formed as a drama or a play to be performed as part of a ritual. The text on much of the left-hand side of the stone is divided into short sections where, accompanied by brief explanatory narration, various gods have responsive dialogue with each other. The text would thus have a priestly narrator who delivered its prose sections and, at appropriate times, each “god” would participate in the presentation in dialogue form. The text thus served as a liturgical composition for a drama of succession involving the new king. A kind of “mystery play of succession,” such a reenactment was not just a mere representation of the past, but rather an act that had power, an act which changed the present actuality in an important way; it was a ceremony which established the bond between the Egyptian state and the divine realm in the person of the king, affirming his right to rule and maintain the established order of things as a bridge between the two.⁶⁶

The view of the text as a “dramatic” text, however, has not gone unchallenged. Iversen, in some brief remarks a few decades ago, opposed such an interpretation. In his opinion, the explanation that certain passages were stage directions and components of a ritual was based on a faulty “conception of the sequence of columns” and, when rearranged according to Iversen’s layout, the text’s dramatic character could no longer be supported. For Iversen, the text was not so much a dramatic play as it was what he called “mythical historiography.”⁶⁷ Iversen’s own words are instructive:

[T]he mythical events chronicled in the text were obviously considered factual historical events, and against this background the relations between the narrative passages and those in direct speech acquire a very special significance. Throughout the text the speeches were intimately connected with the narratives in so far as they always referred to a specific episode recorded in them, with the obvious purpose to confirm and verify them by the higher authority of the personal utterances...of the mythical figures involved.⁶⁸

Iversen’s explanation, then, accounts for the dialogic or dramatic nature of the text by highlighting the fact that the god’s interactive speech is merely confirmatory of the narrative passages.

65. Henri Frankfort, *Ancient Egyptian Religion: An Interpretation* (Mineola, N.Y.: Dover Publications, 2000), 50.

66. Frankfort, *Kingship and the Gods*, 123–25.

67. Erik Iversen, “Remarks on Some Passages from the Shabaka Stone,” in *Festschrift Elmar Edel* (ed. Manfred Görg and Edgar B. Pusch; Ägypten und Altes Testament 1; Bamberg, 1979), 253–62.

68. Iversen, “Remarks on Some Passages from the Shabaka Stone,” 260–61.

Whatever one's inclination, all told, the Shabaka inscription contains a story that reflects the interplay of gods and king in Egyptian historical events, and is a story that does not distinguish between myth and reality. Inasmuch as "historical deeds were supposed to repeat mythical events,"⁶⁹ the text is, among other things, a mythical reflection of an historical reality. On the left-hand segment in question, Egyptian historical events are intertwined with the doings of the gods at the "beginning" of history, and such affairs carried meaning for Egyptians in their present in the bridge between the divine and mortal realm—the office of the king, who, though mortal, engaged divinity in his very person.

Reflecting on the above, then, the question of a context for Shabaka's reign is perhaps appropriate. What meaning, if any, did this text have for Shabaka that he went through the trouble of having this story inscribed upon stone? Was this a mystery play, as Sethe and others saw it, narrated by a priestly-lector and acted out by various "gods" in the Temple of Ptah, culminating in Shabaka's coronation as the great unifier of the land and the divinely-approved-of representative on earth—in other words, a liturgy of royal affirmation? Or, was it simply pious propaganda in an attempt to demonstrate Shabaka's right to rule? Regardless, commemorating on stone a mythical story of the unification of Egypt that was familiar to his subject peoples—whether created wholesale from earlier ideas and themes and made anew in an archaizing fashion, or copied and edited directly from earlier text(s) in a classicist way—Shabaka's erection of such a monument was a brilliant move full of significance. Shabaka had conquered Memphis and declared himself a "beloved son of Ptah"; looked at in context, what could be a more potent symbol of power and divine authority than erecting such a stone?

The Theology of the Memphite Priests and the Preeminence of Ptah

In addition to the historical themes in the inscription on the Shabaka Stone, the theological subject matter is perhaps the stela's leitmotif. The element that combines the two is the god Ptah⁷⁰ who is both historically and theologically the centerpiece and focus of the Shabaka Stone.

Ptah appears to be one of Egypt's oldest gods, known from the First Dynasty (ca. 3000–2890 BCE) onward and represented in most major Egyptian archaeological sites. Indeed, as already mentioned, Ptah's importance may be attested in the name of Egypt itself. He was the patron god of the craftsmen, metalworkers, artisans, architects, and such, and was closely associated with Memphis where he had a large temple complex. The unification of Upper and Lower Egypt by one ruler, and the establishment of a new royal center at Memphis at the beginning of Egyptian history, as Wilkinson notes, "doubtless had

69. Hornung, *History of Ancient Egypt*, 3.

70. For a brief overview of Ptah see Wilkinson, *The Complete Gods and Goddesses of Ancient Egypt*, 123–26.

a profound effect on the development of Ptah's importance.⁷¹ While he may have started out only as a local deity of little significance, he quickly rose to a prominent position. As Breasted noted long ago, when Memphis took front and center as the administrative capital of a newly created Egyptian state, in the minds of ancient Egyptians "it was but a step to see in Ptah the master craftsman who had created the world."⁷² So Ptah came to be viewed as a creator-god, the great craftsman of the universe who was the primary source of existence.

Traditionally, the most widespread creation myth of ancient Egypt—among the many versions and representations—was that of the sun-cult at Heliopolis which viewed Atum as Egypt's creator-god. Rising from Nun (the waters of chaos) upon Ta-tenen (the primordial mound) he created the rest of the gods: "Hail Atum," the Egyptian Book of the Dead reads, "who made the sky, who created all that exists . . . Lord of all that is, who gave birth to the gods!"⁷³ The Memphite Theology on the right-hand segment of the Shabaka Stone, however, has a different story to tell.

Beginning with the short horizontal line (line 48) inscribed on the right-hand side of the stone among the vertical columns, what has become known to scholars as the Memphite Theology⁷⁴ begins with the declaration of "the gods who came into being in Ptah." The text then continues for another thirteen lines explicating the theology of Ptah as the supreme creator of the gods and all that exists (lines 48–61). Yet, interestingly, Atum still has a prominent—though subservient—role in creation.

Various theological/political explanations have been offered over the years by scholars to explain the dynamics at work in the Memphite Theology with regard to Ptah and Atum. The most common has been the interpretation of the text as a polemic against a competing theology—a political maneuver by the priests of Memphis who wished to discredit the traditional solar theology. A slight modification of this view (though still somewhat political in nature) is that the Memphite priests did not simply wish to completely "conquer and annihilate" the beliefs of the sun-cult; its aim was to "subsume them into a higher philosophy, to take advantage of them by pointing out that they belong to a higher system."⁷⁵

In contrast to views that incorporate political elements to explain the relation between Ptah and Atum, are the more recent explanations from scholars who argue for theological elements in their interpretations. The descriptions of

71. Wilkinson, *The Complete Gods and Goddesses of Ancient Egypt*, 124.

72. Breasted, *The Dawn of Conscience*, 34.

73. Book of the Dead, Spell 79, as quoted in Wilkinson, *The Complete Gods and Goddesses of Ancient Egypt*, 10.

74. The terms "Memphite" and "Theology" were first put together and used in reference to the contents of the Shabaka Stone by Adolf Erman who studied it shortly after Breasted; incidentally, the term has become somewhat synonymous with the Shabaka Stone itself.

75. Henri Frankfort et al., eds., *The Intellectual Adventure of Ancient Man: An Essay on Speculative Thought in the Ancient Near East* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), 56, 59.

the “relations between Ptah and Atum,” opines Iversen, “were not attempts to elevate one at the expense of the other, but purely theological attempts to define the difference between creator and demiurge.” If the text had been polemical, he says, its rival deity would have been Heliopolitan’s true counterpart to Ptah as creator: the sun god Re. For Iversen its discussion was “purely theological”—Ptah was creator while Atum was demiurge (second god) who was a Memphite deity and “not his Heliopolitan counterpart and namesake.” Looked at in context with other Egyptian conceptions of creation—where there was an “immaterial creator responsible for creation as such,” who is “projected . . . into a second, sensible god” who carries out material creation—the Shabaka text was simply a treatise explicating the local Memphite version of creation.⁷⁶ Another view representative of a theological explanation is that of Allen who sees these matters not as “relics of competing theological systems”—and so not polemical in nature—but rather a “persistent syncretism of Egyptian thought” in which religious conceptions continually evolve and progresses into more advanced forms.⁷⁷ Whatever the case, what is important is that, for the Memphite Theology, Ptah was the great and central figure who preceded and superseded and all other gods.

There is much more to the Memphite Theology, however, beyond a discussion of the relation of Ptah and Atum. A brief look at the text illuminates some of its important features. After some initial introductions about Ptah (lines 48–52b), the Memphite Theology starts by declaring that “through the heart and through the tongue something developed into Atum’s image.” This something that took shape in the form of Atum was the result of none other than the “great and important . . . Ptah, who gave life to all the gods . . . through this heart and this tongue.” True, the text admits, it was through the seed and hands of Atum that the Ennead came forth. But, “the Ennead is teeth and lips in [Ptah’s] mouth that pronounced the identity of everything . . . and gave birth to the Ennead.” It is through Ptah that all the gods were born, “Atum and his Ennead as well,” and that all things came into existence (lines 53–56, 58):⁷⁸

Thus it is said of Ptah: “He who made all and created the gods.” And he is Ta-tenen, who gave birth to the gods, and from whom every thing came forth, foods, provisions, divine offerings, and all good things. Thus it is recognized and understood that he is the mightiest of the gods. Thus Ptah was satisfied after he had made all things and all divine word. . . . Indeed, Ptah is the fountain of life for the gods and all material realities.

The Memphite Theology was clearly setting forth the idea of creation as a combination of both immaterial and material principles, with Ptah serving as the connection between the two. Creation, according to the Shabaka Stone, was both a spiritual or intellectual creation as well as a physical one. It was

76. Iversen, “The Cosmogony of the Shabaka Text,” 1:489–90; emphasis added.

77. Allen, *Genesis in Egypt*, 62.

78. As translated by Allen, *Genesis in Egypt*, 43–44.

through the divine heart (thought)⁷⁹ and tongue (speech/word) of Ptah as the great causer of something to take shape in the form of the physical agent of creation Atum, through which everything came forth. Importantly, creation was first and foremost an intellectual activity and only then a physical one. The intellectual principles of creative thought and commanding speech were realized in Ptah and could be said to be embodied in him. He is that which “causes every conclusion to emerge” (line 56).⁸⁰ Just as important though, at several points earlier in the text, as well as within the Memphite Theology, Ptah is identified as Ta-tenen, the primeval mound that Atum sat upon arising from the waters of Nun as he created the gods (see lines 2, 3, 13c, 58, 61, and 64). So, while Ptah is the intellectual and creative principle that “in-forms” and precedes all matter, he is also “a physical principle that is the font of all matter, conceptualized in his identification with Ta-tenen,” and in his imparting of life to Atum who, standing on Ta-tenen, carried out physical creation. Thus, in keeping with the notion that the things of the universe are for the Egyptians beings with distinct wills and personalities, it is through both spiritual and physical principles and actions—personified in and derived from Ptah—that the world becomes a reality.⁸¹

It did not take scholars long to recognize that in the ideas of the Memphite Theology there was an approach similar to the Greek notion of logos.⁸² The so-called “Logos” doctrine is that in which the world is formed through a god’s creative thought and speech—Logos meaning, literally, “Word.” The parallels with the creation account in the book of Genesis in the Hebrew Bible, or with the opening chapter of the Gospel of John in the Christian New Testament, are obvious, as with other ancient texts and philosophies.

Naturally, many scholars have tied the bulk of the stone’s significance to the portion of the text containing the Memphite Theology—in fact, the major purpose of Breasted producing his “rapid sketch” was to draw attention to the important philosophical ideas set forth in it.⁸³ Indicative of this position is a statement of Louis Žabkar more than fifty years ago:

One of the most important documents of the entire Egyptian literature . . . is the document of the Memphite Theology. . . . The impact of the Memphite Theology was so fundamental that its effect and influence on Egyptian religious thought remained constant until the end of the Egyptian religion. Unparalleled in the history of the ancient Orient as far as its cosmogonic signification is concerned it traveled from century to century,

79. The Egyptians had no word for mind and here expressed the idea of thought as occurring in the heart.

80. As translated by Allen, *Genesis in Egypt*, 43–44.

81. For a discussion of the Memphite Theology along these lines, and an interpretation of it, see Allen, *Genesis in Egypt*, 43–47.

82. Noticed first by Breasted, “The Philosophy of a Memphite Priest,” 39.

83. See Breasted, “The Philosophy of a Memphite Priest,” 40.

from one theological system to another . . . becoming a universal theological theme.⁸⁴

Whether it was the most important document of Egyptian literature, as Žabkar maintains, is no doubt overstating the case. Still, Žabkar's assessment highlights the obvious philosophical and theological implications of the Memphite Theology.

In his first analysis of the stone it was Breasted's opinion that it contained the "oldest known formulation of a philosophical Weltanschauung."⁸⁵ Though its philosophical ideas are certainly old, as Allen demonstrates, the Shabaka Stone's theme of an intellectual creation was not the first (it has earlier antecedents in the Coffin Texts of the Middle Kingdom).⁸⁶ A lingering question, then, is the Memphite Theology's influence, if any, on later philosophical and theological systems. Unfortunately, similar to inquires into the ideas/source(s) that may have shaped the Shabaka text itself, the question of the Shabaka Stone's influence on later texts is extremely difficult to answer. What is perhaps more important is what can be known: the Shabaka inscription is a reliable witness that serious philosophy did not begin with the Greeks. The stela is excellent evidence that ancient Egyptian cosmologies and cosmogonies were not simply primitive notions or crude attempts to understand the world and the place of humans within it. Rather, such things were a "continual fascination" for Egyptians and their philosophical conceptions were not as undeveloped as was once thought.⁸⁷ In spite of the ambiguities of dating the text of the Shabaka Stone, or of its influence on other documents, the extant inscription demonstrates that a philosophical/theological formulation similar to later Greek conceptions is, at the very least, as old as the eighth-century B.C.E. It is very likely, then, as Breasted recognized over a century ago, and as subsequent scholarship has demonstrated, that the Greek's tradition that it received its first philosophical "impulse" from Egypt may be a somewhat truthful statement after all.⁸⁸

Summaries and Celebrations

Marking the end of the Memphite Theology and its philosophy of creation and cosmos, is a celebration of the supremacy of Ptah and his creative role in poetic fashion that concludes with the following: "Thus were gathered to him all the gods and their kas / Content, united with the Lord of the Two Lands" (line 61). In a befitting manner, the text declares Ptah's preeminence among the gods and also connects his role in creation with his prominent place in the preceding story of unification: Ptah is creator of all and "Lord of the Two

84. Louis V. Žabkar, "The Theocracy of Amarna and the Doctrine of the Ba," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 13.2 (1954): 87.

85. See Breasted, "The Philosophy of a Memphite Priest," 39.

86. Allen, *Genesis in Egypt*, 46.

87. Allen, *Genesis in Egypt*, 9.

88. Breasted, "The Philosophy of a Memphite Priest," 54.

Lands.” Having signaled a theme that links creation in the cosmos with order in the Two Lands, the last few columns of the inscription offer a suitable summary to the whole of the text: Memphis is the royal city, the “Great Throne” in the House of Ptah creator of all, which gives joy to the gods and sustains the Two Lands. Memphis is also the site where the Horus-king “entered the hidden portals in the glory of the lords of eternity, in the steps of him who rises in the horizon, on the ways of Re at the Great Throne . . . and joined the gods of Ta-tenen Ptah, lord of years” (lines 61–64).

Conclusion

A brief introduction to the Shabaka Stone—one which reviews its origin and the context of its creation, its scanty-known history, and the complicated story inscribed upon it, with its accompanying importance and significance—perhaps ironically illustrates that an outline of this sort may, in a certain sense, leave more questions unanswered than it has sought to answer. Unfortunately, there are several reasons for this, not the least of which are deficiencies in historical knowledge in certain areas, the formidable task of dating the text and more importantly dating its ideas, as well as the difficulty in reading and translating a text that is not only archaic in its nature but one which has been severely damaged. Nonetheless, if a better understanding of what its latest inquisitor has called “one of the most exciting monuments and up to now one of the unanswered mysteries of the Ancient Egypt” is obtained, in the hopes that in the process the stone and its contents have become a little less mysterious for more than just its close observers, then the purpose of this paper will have been realized.⁸⁹ At the very least, the Shabaka Stone is indeed a remarkable monument with a fascinating story to tell—and it is a story that deserves to be known as much as any other associated with ancient Egypt.

89. El Hawary, “New Findings about the Memphite Theology,” 1:567.