

THEIR MEMORY LIVES ON



Domestic Funerary Commemoration at Wab-sut

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A fragment of a Middle Kingdom offering table was recovered at South Abydos.

to the ancient Egyptian mind, the worlds of the living and the dead were inextricably intertwined. The speech of one man to his wife recorded on a stela encapsulates both this belief, and the mechanism through which it was enacted:

How are you? Is the West taking care of you [according to] your desire? Now since I am your beloved upon earth, fight on my behalf and intercede on behalf of my name. I did not garble [a spell] in your presence when I perpetuated your name upon earth. Remove the infirmity of my body! Please become a spirit for me [before] my eyes so that I may see you in a dream fighting on my behalf. I will then deposit offerings for you [as soon as] the sun has risen and outfit your offering slab for you. (Translation by E. Wente)

Merirtyfy's poignant address to his deceased wife Nebetietef demonstrates the perceived link between the living and the dead, and the responsibilities of entities on either side of mortality. Spiritual elements employed false doors, statues, and stelae to temporarily inhabit the earthly realm in order to receive food and offerings from the living before returning to the underworld.

Recent discoveries within the Middle Kingdom town of *Wab-sut* point to commemorative activity within the town. Excavations in domestic contexts have uncovered a significant corpus of inscribed funerary stelae, offering tables, and statues. Since no tombs have yet been discovered near *Wab-sut*, the Late Middle Kingdom citizens of this town seem to have commemorated their departed loved ones within the homes of the living, rather than the tombs of the dead.

Three stela fragments (12631, 101-14-2, and 12639, 101-20-1) originated in the mayor's house (Building A). Though badly broken in antiquity, the reconstructed offering formula on the left side reads:

A royal offering [of Ptah-So]kar-Osirs, Lord of the Ankh-[tawy, that he might give every good and pure thing] to the ka of the Hall-keeper of the Chamber of Linen, Khuinutef.

Auguste Mariette, a 19th century Egyptologist, discovered a contemporary stela (Cairo CG 20134) at North Abydos belonging to the same family which names Khuinutef's mother, Petyt, and his uncle, a Domestic Servant of the Chamber of Linen, Senebef. Though the Cairo stela's specific archaeological context is unknown, it was probably part of a family chapel in the extensive North Abydos



Votive Zone (an area with evidence of ritual activity). The actual tombs of these individuals are currently unknown. Despite this, Khuinutef was commemorated on stelae at both North Abydos (connected with the Osiris Temple), and within a domestic context at *Wab-sut*, where he probably lived and worked.

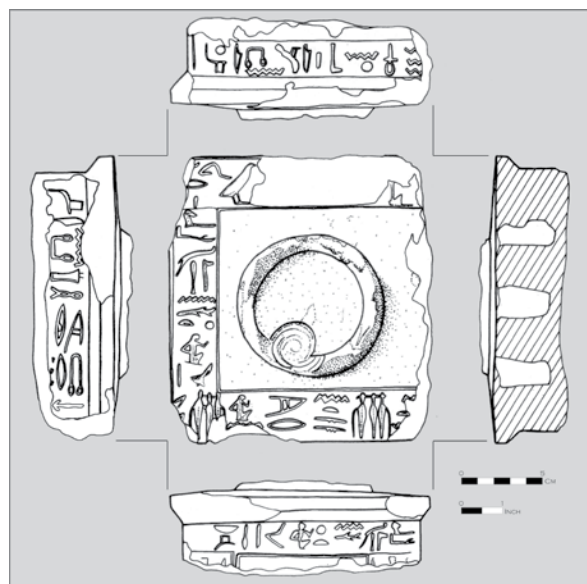
Evidence exists from *Wab-sut* that domestic funerary commemoration was widespread, seemingly across all levels of non-royal society. An offering table (SA.15472, 67-7) belonging to one of the early high status mayors of *Wab-sut*—a man by the name of Nakht—was found in the vicinity of Building B in 1999. It had been reused as a door pivot, but still retained the name and title of the deceased.

Another beautiful limestone offering table (SA.11002, 92-4-6) is divided into two distinct sections, with what appears to be twin catch basins. The piece was not inscribed, but through comparison with other similar tables, it was probably dedicated to two or more individuals.

Along with stelae and offering tables, portions of numerous statues have been discovered in and around *Wab-sut*. Fragments of a beautifully carved quartzite statue were recovered during the winter of 2012 within a Middle Kingdom pottery dump directly south of the town. Given the difficulty of carving quartzite, coupled with the artistry of the piece and its large size, it probably derives from a high status commemorative emplacement. More typical of the size of statuary for the town's population are smaller limestone statuettes, such as a pair figure (two individuals carved on the same statue) discovered in 2012 of a man named Renefiker and his wife Iru. Other similar uninscribed statues (both single and pair figures) have been found in a number of areas throughout *Wab-sut*.



FAR LEFT: Renefiker and Iru from *Wab-sut* are depicted on this Middle Kingdom pair statue. Height as preserved 15 cm. LEFT: A twin offering table from *Wab-sut* is illustrated in this drawing. Width as preserved approximately 23 cm. BELOW: This fragment of an offering table indicates it belonged to Nakht, the mayor of *Wab-sut*.



THE PRACTICE OF DOMESTIC CULT AT WAH-SUT

The existence of commemorative artifacts within the town context is tantalizing evidence of domestic funerary cult. Yet none of the objects found to date were in their original positions inside the houses, due either to their destruction or reuse. Therefore, any reconstruction of the original positions of these funerary objects must be based upon comparable sites. Thankfully scraps of information from two roughly contemporary towns aid in elucidation: Lahun and Kom el-Fakhry. William Matthew Flinders Petrie found funerary cult objects within the Middle Kingdom town of Lahun including stela fragments, and small statues. He also found limestone offering columns or pillars, one of which is very similar to an example from *Wab-sut* (SA.15023, 67-1-7).

At Kom el-Fakhry—a Late Middle Kingdom neighborhood of Memphis—one of the best preserved contemporary domestic cult emplacements was found recently. In a ground-floor room of a house, excavators discovered a stela with *cavetto* (concave) cornice and frame, offering

table, and seated double statue of N(y)ka and Sat-Hathor. Archaeologists believe that the stela was set into the wall and the offering table was on the floor against the bottom of the stela, with the statue placed nearby. The layout is very similar to that of a tomb chapel, with the stela taking the place of the false door. On this point it is interesting to note that both the Kom el-Fakhry stela and the stela of Khuinutef from *Wah-sut* have the same cavetto cornice and frame—a form common to false doors from the Old Kingdom on.

We can conclude that a standard commemorative emplacement at *Wah-sut* would also have consisted of a small stela set against the wall, with an offering table at its base. The space around these two integral objects would have contained statues of ancestors, freestanding offering apparatus such as dwarf statues or fluted columns, as well as other small items of a votive nature.

Given that *Wah-sut* existed for many generations, domestic cult emplacements would have required periodic replacement and renewal. Statues and stelae of distant ancestors were removed in favor of newer ones commemorating the recently deceased. This cycle of use and obsoles-

cence helps explain the reuse or discarding of objects such as the Nakht offering table or the quartzite statue.

WAH-SUT AND NORTH ABYDOS

The discovery of these funerary objects at South Abydos highlights a number of questions bearing upon an understanding of the Middle Kingdom community here. Most important are the locations of the tombs of numerous people commemorated within the town. From the reign of Senwosret III well into the Second Intermediate Period—a period of 250 years—*Wah-sut* was home to a significant number of people. Yet only broken traces of their burial goods have been identified to date.

One possible explanation is that due to the sanctity of North Abydos and its proximity to the Osiris Cult, the residents of *Wah-sut* buried their dead there. At more than three kilometers (two miles) distance, however, the probability that every citizen of *Wah-sut* was interred there is somewhat unlikely. Though a modern field lays atop the desert directly behind the ancient town, remote sensing and exploratory excavation may eventually uncover undiscovered tombs closer to *Wah-sut* itself. ●

Quartzite Statue: One of the Mayors of *Wah-sut*?

More often than not in archaeology, the most beautiful objects appear in the most unlikely places. While excavating a Middle Kingdom pottery dump near the south wall of the town of *Wah-sut*, we unearthed 27 fragments of worked purple quartzite. In the lab, we reassembled the pieces into a beautiful, albeit headless, Middle Kingdom statue, 35 cm tall, as preserved.

A short distance from our lab, Flinders Petrie made a similar discovery while excavating at the Kom el-Sultan 110 years earlier. His workers brought him a small ivory statue of a seated figure, with the name of Khufu inscribed on its throne. The tiny statue was missing its head, but Petrie's experienced eyes realized that



the break was fresh. Knowing that it was imperative to find the head of the only known statue of the builder of the Great Pyramid, Petrie ordered his diggers to screen the entire spoil mound again. After three weeks of labor they eventually found the missing head. This statue, now in Cairo, is still the only named statue of Khufu known.

Hoping to invoke the ghost of Petrie as well as his luck, we rescreened our entire spoil mound in search of the statue's missing head. For three days the entire team sat on the ground picking through broken pottery sherds by hand. Despite our best efforts, no further statue fragments came to light. Although incomplete, the artistry of this statue is of the highest quality.