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Funerary Stela of Heni

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I'm Antoine Revoy. I'm an instructor in the illustration department and I'm also a RISD alumnus.

We're looking at the funerary stela of Heny which is a gravestone made in Egypt around 1250-1234 B.C. This is a beautiful piece carved in limestone. It's painted in brown, yellow, and blue pigments, and it's carved both in relief concave and convex.

These funerary stelas typically mark the location of a burial ground, and they also provide information regarding the identity and nature of the deceased. In this case, we are looking at stela which pertains to a deceased official named Heny. We can tell by looking at him, represented to the left, that he's in a composite perspective typical of the two-dimensional representation in Ancient Egypt, with both the head and the legs in profile, and then the chest and arms seen from a front view.

As an illustrator, I've worked in a variety of media, including animation and comics. I'm also a designer and as such, a lot of my work has to do with the juxtaposition of image with type or text. An initial reaction of mine in seeing a beautiful item such as this one is somewhat of an emotional connection of seeing someone who had to work with similar constraints; to see that this artist separated from me by 4,000 years just so beautifully crafted this item. He had to deal with all of these pictorial challenges, and arrange them in a medium which is both lasting and difficult to work with.

As an artist, I feel as though one thing that resonates with me the most is being able to see the things which we are not necessarily supposed to be able to see, like the marks from the carving. I feel that this is something which I can relate to the person who created this piece, in that I am seeing these individual marks. I'm getting a sense for the hands that moved across the stone that patiently and expertly carved it, and that just refines this form. This is something which is both an intellectually artistic and emotional connection, as well.

My name is James Allen. I'm a professor of Egyptology at Brown University. I'm going to be talking about the funerary stela of a man named Heny –our pronunciation of his name, as we don't exactly know how it was pronounced. Heny is standing on the left. He has a tall staff in his left hand and a baton in his right hand, which is a symbol of his office.

Heny is standing in front of a pile of offerings on the bottom of the stela. The first thing you see in front of his staff is an offering table with tall life-like objects on it. Believe it or not, those are stylized loaves of bread.

Above the offerings facing Heny, and facing in the same direction that he does because they refer to him, are several rows of hieroglyphs.

It starts out on the top line saying “a royal offering of Anubis.” Royal offerings were given to the gods of the cemetery; either Anubis or Osiris in most cases in order for part of the cemetery to be turned over for a person's tomb. So this is a royal offering of Anubis. Anubis is actually the little jackal-like figure about the fifth sign in from the right. We are reading from right to left: “Royal offering of Anubis on top of his hill; in the bandages, lord of Acropolis.” Then going to the second line: “In all his good places; an invocation offering.”

An invocation offering was when a visitor would come to the tomb and would summon the spirit of the deceased out of the tomb, to receive offerings that were laid on an offering table. “A good invocation offering for...” –then on the third line we get Heny's titles – “...the high official, courtier and honored one, Heny.”

Then in the smaller line of hieroglyphs – the fourth one down – we have actually what most Egyptians hoped to receive: “1,000 of bread, 1,000 of beer, 1,000 of fowl, 1,000 of beef, 1,000 of every good thing for the high official, royal sealer” – which is another honorary title – “the honored one, Heny.”

Finally, below that in a slightly larger line of hieroglyphs, Heny is described as, “beloved by his father, blessed by his mother, and ruler of their house.” This is a unique feature of this stela. As far as I know, it doesn't occur anywhere else, and we don't exactly know what it means to call him ruler of their house.

Stela like these were meant to be read by visitors to the tomb. Very often, stela like these have an appeal to visitors and ask for offerings for the spirit of the deceased. Oftentimes, they say if you don't have anything with you, then say, “1,000 of bread, 1,000 of beer, 1,000 of poultry, 1,000 of beef, 1,000 of everything for the spirit of the deceased.” As you're standing before this stela, then maybe you can do the same thing.

It's kind of interesting to stand here and, in a way, interact with somebody who lived 4,000 years ago. Heny had this stela carved because he wanted to be remembered primarily by the people he knew. He would be amazed, I think, to know that he was standing here in Rhode Island – a place

he had no idea existed – with a visitor 4,000 years in his future, looking at his stela, and wondering about what his life might have been like. Heny's stela, standing here in the museum before you, is probably the best possible afterlife that Heny could've imagined for himself.