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# Criosphinx Stela from Tell Heboua - North Sinai

BY

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## ABSTRACT

[AR]

لوحه من تل حبوة-شمال سيناء

لوحه مستطيلة الشكل عثر عليها مصادفة في أوائل عام 2020. وذلك على بعد 500 متر إلى الغرب من الجدران المحصنة لمدينة تارو - حبوة 1 ، واللوحه من الحجر الجيري الابيض تم العثور عليها مكسورة الى قطعتين من المنتصف ، وكانت في حالة سيئة وتم ترميمها مبدئيا في الموقع. ظهر اللوحه خشن به العديد من علامات الأرميل المحفورة. تم تزيين اللوحه بنقوش غائرة. تمثل زخرفة اللوحه أحد العناصر الرئيسية التي تشير إلى صورة أسد راقد برأس كبش "criosphinx" مع حامل قرايين في المقدمة. يمكن التعرف على الكبش على أنه *Ovis platyura aegyptiaca* بناءً على القرون المنحنية للأمام. كبش بلاتيورا ، المخلوق المقدس البارز لأمون ، أصبح أحد أكثر الحيوانات قداسة في مصر القديمة من خلال ارتباطه بالإله آمون ، الذي كان ، مثل آمون رع ، الإله البدائي والإله الأعلى للآلهة المصرية ، تاجه يرمز إلى السماء ، ويتكون من تاج يعلوه ريشتان مرتفعتان. لا يوجد نص على اللوحه ؛ يمكن تصنيفها على أنها لوحه نذرية ، وهي لا تحتوى على صورة الشخص الذي وهبها ولكن مثل علمها الإله فقط. ومن المرجح طبقا لما عثر عليه في منطقة تل حبوة 1 انها تؤرخ بعصر الدولة الحديثة.

[EN] A rectangular stela was found in the vicinity of Tell Heboua I by accident in early 2020. The stela was uncovered 500 m to the west of the fortification walls of Heboua I, during a land reclamation project which is going on in the western vicinity of Tell Heboua I. Our well-trained guard, Hassan al-Masody, recognized the limestone slab on top of the embankment of a small drainage canal. When turning this recognizable piece of stone, he found it to be a decorated limestone stela. Inscribed materials that were discovered in the Heboua area are still limited compared to the long history of the site and the extensive and continuous archaeological work done. This is obviously due to the scarcity of stone in this sandy remote area. In addition, every piece of stone in the North Sinai archeological sites was taken from its original place and reused throughout history until now.

**KEYWORDS:** Amun-Re, Criosphinx, Tell Heboua I, New Kingdom, votive Stela.

## I. INTRODUCTION

The Criosphinx stela of Tell Heboua is one of the unique discoveries in Sinai [Map N°.1]<sup>1</sup>. The decoration of the stela represents an image of Amun-Re as a recumbent ram-headed<sup>2</sup> lion «criosphinx» sniffing the lotus flower. Amun-Re can be depicted as a man<sup>3</sup>, ram<sup>4</sup>, goose<sup>5</sup>, criosphinx<sup>6</sup>, and bark<sup>7</sup>. The stela has no inscriptions, and it can be classified as a votive stela, which doesn't contain an image of the donor. Only a deity is represented on the stela.

## II. DESCRIPTION

The newly discovered stela is made of white limestone. The preserved shape is rectangular (47cm x 35cm x 4.5cm). It was found broken into two pieces from exactly the middle point, and it seems quite even and doesn't look recent. It had no inscriptions on its surface<sup>8</sup>.

The stela was discovered in a bad state of conservation, with a small crack on the left lower part of the stela; restoration was done at the site, and more work was done at the laboratory<sup>9</sup>. Due to the high percentage of salt in the soil of Heboua area, crystallized salt covered the surface of the stela, which takes lots of time to be treated. The back of the stela is cragged and rough with several chiseled marks. The stela is decorated in sunken relief, and the execution of the relief is very accurate, with lots of attention to detail. The stela was registered and delivered to al-Qantara store magazine – North Sinai (Inv. N°.557).

The decoration of the stela includes an image of a recumbent ram-headed lion «criosphinx»<sup>10</sup>, with an offering stand in front [FIGURES 1-2]. The ram can be identified as *Ovis platyura aegyptiaca*, based on the forward-bending horns. *The platyura ram*, the pre-eminent sacred creature of Amun, became one of the most sacred animals in ancient Egypt through its association with the god Amun<sup>11</sup>, who, as Amun-Re, was the primeval

<sup>1</sup> Tell Heboua (Heboua complex), the well-known and most important archeological site in the north western part of Sinai. The site has been repeatedly survived and objected to excavations by the Egyptian missions from 1980 onwards. Heboua is located at the eastern fringe of the Nile Delta on the mouth of the defunct Pelusiac Nile branch. The site is situated 5 km east of Suez Canal, and now, consists of three different important archeological sites: Tell Heboua I, Tell Heboua II, and Tell Heboua III. The archeological area of Heboua dated from the second intermediate period until the end of twenty-sixth dynasty.

<sup>2</sup> BIERBRIER 1993: PL.52-53

<sup>3</sup> NIGEL 2006: 200-201.

<sup>4</sup> MYSLIWIEC 1988: 33,40.

<sup>5</sup> JAMES 1974: 176, N°.432, PL.85

<sup>6</sup> JANINE 1991: 157-164 (162)

<sup>7</sup> HAYES 1959: 388–89, FIG.244.

<sup>8</sup> For more information about Tell Heboua: ABD EL- MAKSOU D & DOMINIQUE 2005: 1–43; ABD EL- MAKSOU D & DOMINIQUE 2011: 1–39

<sup>9</sup> Many thanks to Mr. Akram Ahmed director of al-Qantara Magazine-North Sinai and Mr. Ashraf Wesam, director of the Restoration Department at Qantara Magazine for their efforts and cooperation.

<sup>10</sup> Criosphinx: is an ancient Greek consists of κριός (kriós, «ram») and σφίγξ (sphínx, «Sphinx»), which refers to the sphinx with the head of a ram on the body of a lion.

<sup>11</sup> NEBBI 1986: 53; ARNOLD DOROTHEA 1995: 56; HART 2005:13.

deity and supreme god of the Egyptian pantheon. His crown symbolizes a sky God, consisting of a crown surmounted by two high plumes<sup>12</sup>.

The lion's body is depicted in a recumbent pose, lying straight with its paws resting flat and parallel to the axis of the carving. Its tail curls forward around the rump and rests on the back. The carving skillfully combines the stylized divine wig, a long headdress with front lappets, with a naturalistic treatment of the body and short beard. In addition to symbolizing divinity, this wig had the virtue of adaptability; it fills out the back of the head in a manner suggestive of a mane. The muzzle is represented realistically, with the almond-shaped eye, and short curling horns around the bending ears. The headdress of the deity, which identifies him as Amun-Re, is topped by two tall feathers «plumes» and a Solar Sun-disk at the center with a Uraeus rising on his forehead; this is symbolic of his assimilation with the sun god, Re, and as Amun-Re in the form of a ram-headed lion «Criosphinx»<sup>13</sup>.

Amun-Re can be depicted as a man, often enthroned, with deep blue skin and wearing double plumes, like a ram, a goose, a criosphinx, and bark<sup>14</sup>. The composite animal is integral to art and religion and was among the first of the Egyptian artists' creations and continued for four thousand years. By combining the ram and lion, the procreative energy of one and the strength of the other was emphasized in the god Amun-Re. On the right part of the scene and before the Criosphinx is a water-pot «*hs*-vase» cooled by lotus blossoms that rest on an altar. The Ram-headed god is sniffing the lotus-flower long stem. The water-pot «*hs*-vase» is frequently depicted on many offering stelae, because it was used to hold ritually purified water. The name «*hs*» means «favored», and these containers were frequently left as tomb offerings so the deceased could drink the water and thus maintain a pure state throughout eternity<sup>15</sup>.

### III. CLASSIFICATION

The current stela has no text. It can be classified as a votive stela that doesn't include an image of the donor, and which only represents the deity. Missing the image or at least the name of the owner, these kinds of stelae would have been purposeless in a temple or as a «door plate» that would have been installed next to the entrance into the houses<sup>16</sup>. There are some examples of votive stelae which contain no reference to their donor in either text or image<sup>17</sup>, but, when a donor is depicted in either text or image or both, it is a conscious choice on the part of the donor to transform a stela from a solely religious votive object into a social object of self-presentation<sup>18</sup>.

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<sup>12</sup> OTTO 1975: 248.

<sup>13</sup> This assimilation, in which neither God lost his identity.

<sup>14</sup> HART 1986: 4.

<sup>15</sup> HÖLZL 2015:73

<sup>16</sup> BIETAK 1975: 42; JÓZEF HUDEC 2016: 170

<sup>17</sup> As regards social display, such stelae may have been set-up in homes. The donors may also have donated them in a community setting, but it is impossible to know if this is the case.

<sup>18</sup> RYAN 2014: 17

The stelae could not all have had the same purpose; instead, temples, chapels, private houses, as well as tombs, must be considered as potential destinations<sup>19</sup>. There is remarkably little evidence regarding the actual creation of a votive stela; while a royal stela often includes a message describing the circumstance under which a stela was created, a votive stela does not<sup>20</sup>. Monuments and votive offerings representing only royal statues, or deities would have been rather exhibited in private houses, for instance as house altars such as those discovered at Amarna, Karnak, or Dair al-Medina. Such a destination can be supposed for Tell Heboua votive stela.

### The Role of Amun Regarding the Eastern Frontier

Amun was a very important god to the New Kingdom kings, as he played a significant military role regarding the campaigns beyond the Egyptian frontier; the gift of Amun to the kings has been nothing less than world dominion<sup>21</sup>. In the Book of the Dead, Amun provides a potent spell for preserving the corpse and for preventing injury from a scorpion bite. The Egyptians at all levels of society, forced to undertake long journeys from home, put a certain amount of trust in the Amun as a protector of travelers<sup>22</sup>.

King Sety I's triumphal return from campaigning in Levant is depicted at the north exterior wall, great hypostyle hall, at Karnak temples<sup>23</sup>, on the opposite (western) side of the canal; the third unit shows the king at the end of the triumphal procession, presenting prisoners and booty to Amun- Re as a gift for his support and protection<sup>24</sup>. The excavation finds from Tell el Borg-North Sinai proved that the company that was part of the army division of *Amun* (perhaps 200-250 men) was based in the Eastern Delta, at Tell al-Borg<sup>25</sup>.

## IV. CONCLUSION

The recumbent criosphinx appears in statuary under Tutankhamun's reign<sup>26</sup>. Comparing it to other stelae, which depicted the criosphinx as the main figure<sup>27</sup>, and also regarding the dating of the architecture elements discovered at Tell Heboua<sup>28</sup>, the relevant criosphinx stela is believed to be dated to the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> dynasty.

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<sup>19</sup> MARTIN 2003: 255-263.

<sup>20</sup> RYAN 2014: 11

<sup>21</sup> In his military relief at Karnak, king Sety I was depicted presenting prisoners and booty to Amun- Re at the end of the triumphal procession.

<sup>22</sup> HART 2005: 22

<sup>23</sup> Epigraphic Survey, Battle Reliefs of king Sety I. FIG.1.

<sup>24</sup> HUSSEIN 2020:158.

<sup>25</sup> Hoffmeier 2014: 109-110, FIG. 124.

<sup>26</sup> TRAUNECKER 2018: 175-192.

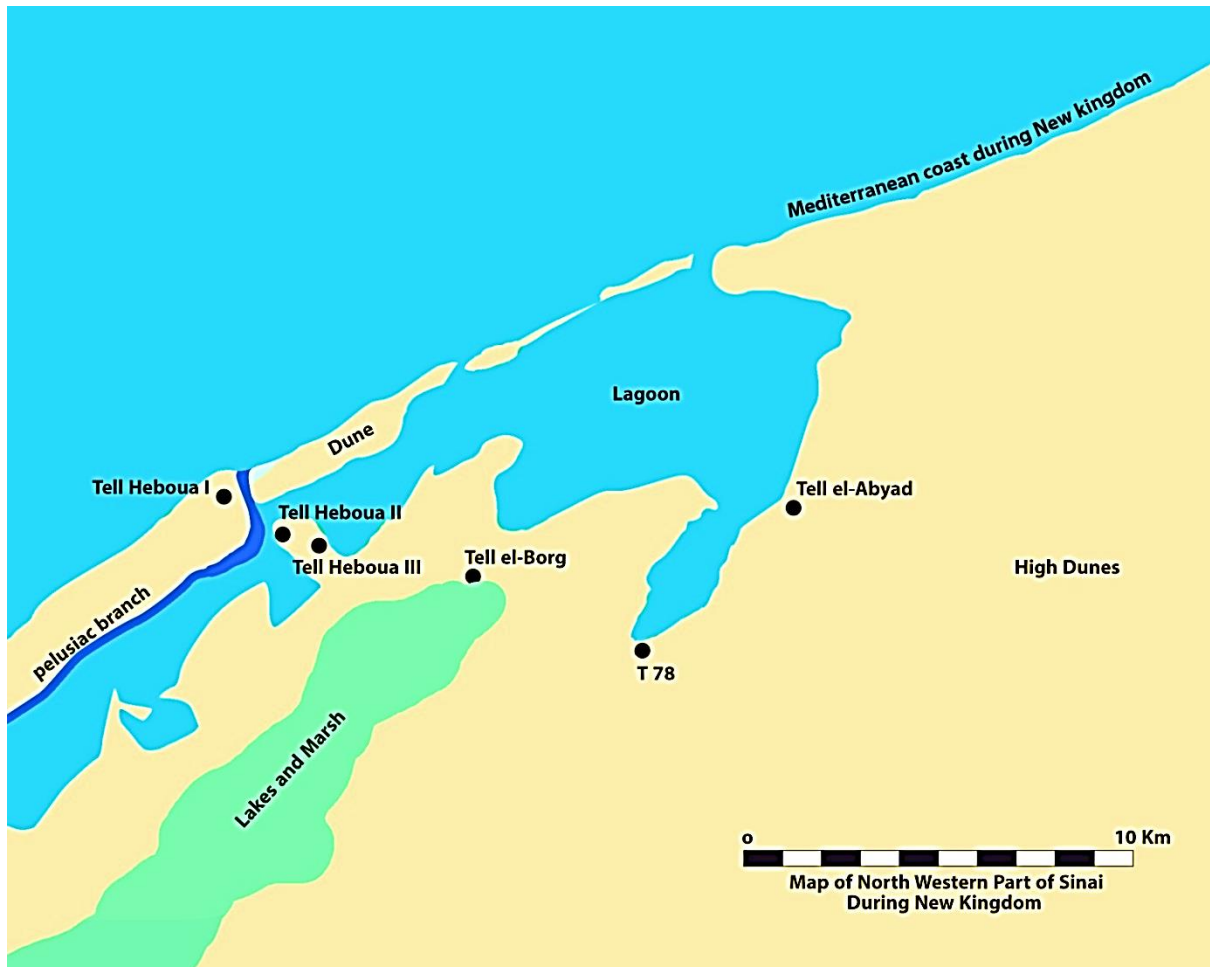
<sup>27</sup> EDWARDS 1987: vol.8, 36, PL.XXXI, N<sup>o</sup>.1571; VERNUS 1998: 170; HODJASH & BERLEV1943: FIG.81.

<sup>28</sup> ABD EL- MAKSoud 1998.

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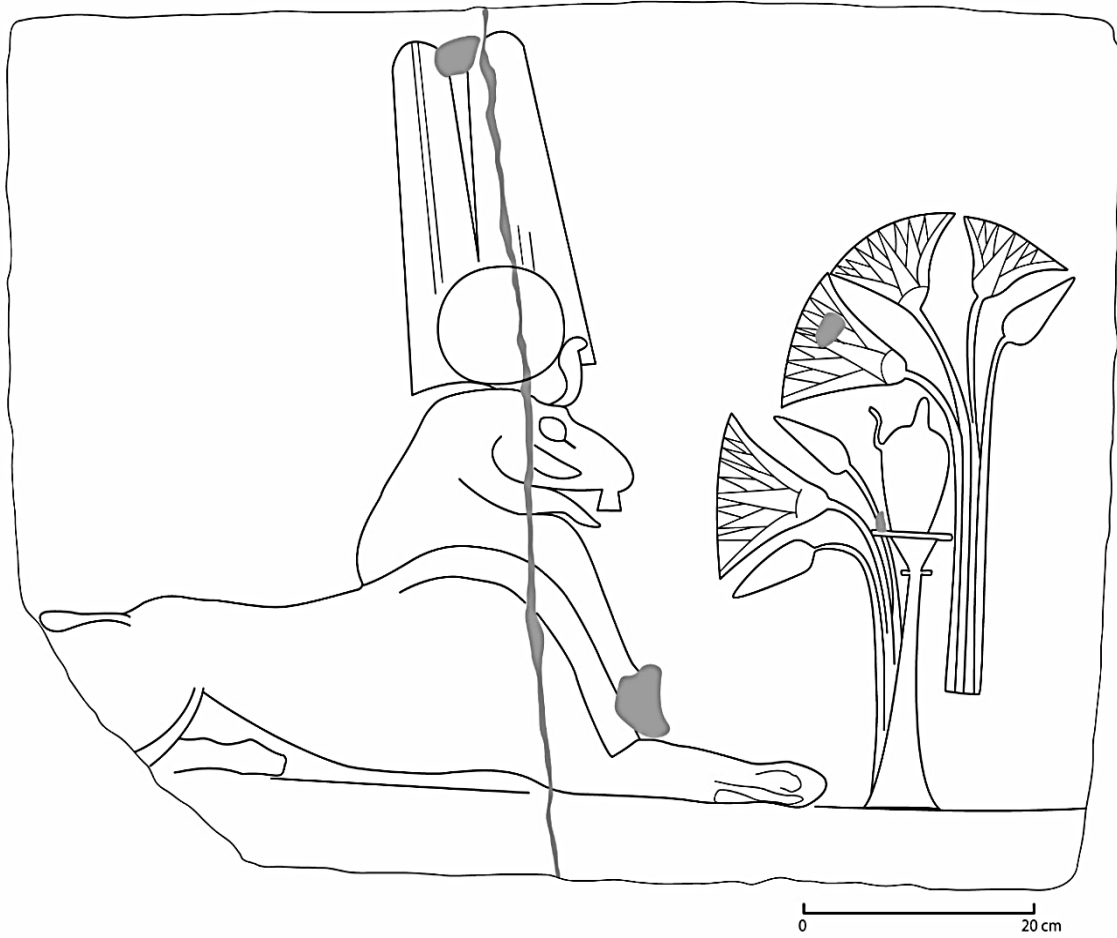


[MAP 1]: The North-western part of Sinai during the New Kingdom  
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[FIGURE 1]: Amun-Ra stela © Photo taken by Hesham M. Hussein



**[FIGURE 2]: Lion drawing of Amun-Ra stela**  
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