

OCCASIONAL PUBLICATIONS

8

STUDIES IN
PHARAONIC RELIGION AND SOCIETY
IN HONOUR OF
J. GWYN GRIFFITHS

EDITED BY
ALAN B. LLOYD

THE EGYPT EXPLORATION SOCIETY

3 DOUGHTY MEWS, LONDON WC1N 2PG

1992

RĒWER'S ACCIDENT

By JAMES P. ALLEN

AMONG the many valuable contributions that Professor Griffiths has made to our knowledge of ancient Egypt, several attest to his interest in early religion and the development of the concept of final judgement. This small study is offered both in tribute to his scholarship and in the hope that he may find interesting its import for both these aspects of Egyptian religion.

The short, eleven-line inscription of the priest Rēwer (Cairo JE 66682) is one of the more unusual biographical texts of the Old Kingdom.¹ It comes from Rēwer's tomb in the 'central field' of the Giza necropolis, south-east of Khafre's causeway, excavated and published by Selim Hassan.² The tomb can be dated to the first half of the Fifth Dynasty.³ Rēwer himself is attested in the reign of Neferirkarē and possibly also Sahurē.⁴ His functional titles include several of priestly rank (*sm*, *hri hbt*, *hri sst pr dwi*) and others associating him with the royal wardrobe (*hrp ch*, *hrp šndwt*, *iri nfr-hi*, *ir šny*)⁵—the latter often specific responsibilities of the *sm*-priest in the Old Kingdom.⁶

Despite his tomb and a dozen or so statues, Rēwer is remembered especially for the inscription mentioned above. It is a fragmentary stela with one horizontal line and ten vertical columns, discovered in the principal serdab of the tomb. The text mentions an incident in which Rēwer was touched by the king's staff during a ceremony. The king immediately proclaims his desire that Rēwer 'be very sound' and orders that the incident be recorded on a stela for Rēwer's tomb.

For the most part, this incident and its outcome have been seen as indicative of the divine persona of the Pharaoh in the Old Kingdom—so far removed from the royal sphere that even accidental contact with the divine power inherent in a royal object could prove injurious to mere mortals. Only the intervention of the king himself saves Rēwer from harm: as John Wilson put it, 'the blight of majesty was so terrible that it had to be exorcised by royal words'.⁷ Henri Frankfort took a more modified view of the inscription as royal 'indemnification' of Rēwer for the accident.⁸ And Wilson himself suggested that 'Possibly we overvalue this text, as . . . the king's assurances may be rather an apology than the exorcising of a royal blight'.⁹

The purpose of this short paper is to review Rēwer's inscription, in the light of these questions about its significance, to see if further light can be shed on the incident itself and its meaning for Rēwer. The text (see fig. 1), in transcription and translation, is as follows: ¹⁰

nswt-bt Nfr-ir-k-r hē m bitī) hrw n šzp h:t(t) dpt-ntr
sk sm Rē-wr tp rdwī hm.f m s'ch.f n sm r hr
hsf:ms wn m r hm.f r rd n sm Rē-wr
dd hm.f r.f wd: .tī hrw hm.f
sk dd.n hm.f mry n hm.(i) wd:f wrt
ny sq n.f

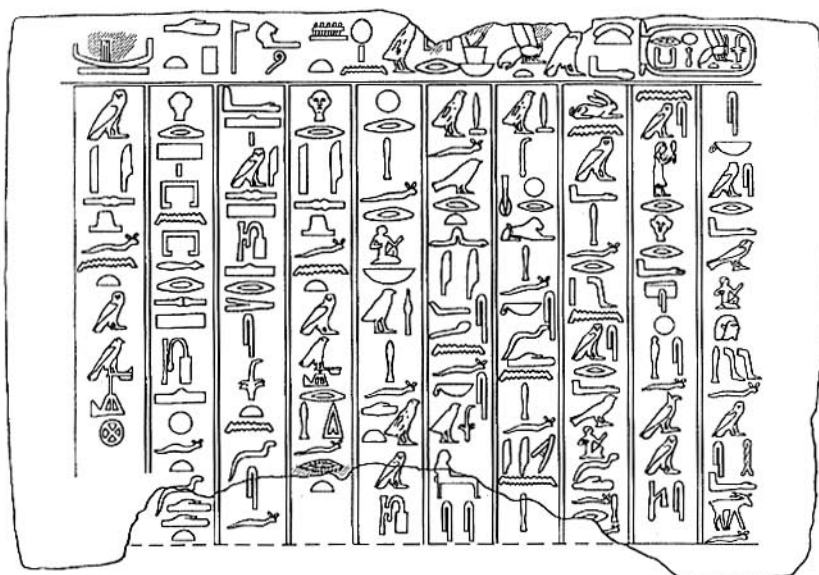


Fig. 1

sk sw šp[ss] hr hm.f r zì nb
wđ hm.f wdt m zš hr iz.f nt(i) m hrt-ntr
rd hm.f[irt] ʿim
zš r gs nswt ds.[f] hr inrì (?) n pr-ε
r zš hft d[ddt] m iz.f nt(i) m hrt-ntr (Urk. I, 232, 5–16)

The King of Upper and Lower Egypt Neferirkarē was apparent as King of Lower Egypt on the day of taking the prow-rope of the god's boat.

While the *sm*-priest Rēwer was at His Incarnation's feet, in his office of *sm*-priest and keeper of accoutrements, a royal staff, which was in His Incarnation's hand, made a barrier to the foot of the *sm*-priest Rēwer.

His Incarnation addressed him : 'Be sound !'—so voiced His Incarnation—

once His Incarnation had said 'What is desirable for My Incarnation is that he be very sound, without a blow for him', because he was more precious to His Incarnation than any man.

His Incarnation ordered it to be put in writing on his tomb that is in the necropolis.

His Incarnation caused a document to be made of it, written beside the king himself, at the stoneworks of Pharaoh,

in order to be written in his tomb that is in the necropolis in accordance with what is said.

The first line of Rēwer's inscription sets the scene of the incident that follows. This is reflected epigraphically in its position as a horizontal line over the ten vertical columns of inscription that describe the incident itself. Grammatically, in its subject-stative construction, it describes a situation rather than an action¹¹—one of the better illustrations of Wenté's observation that 'An initial clause of a narrative sequence containing an Old Perfective of an intransitive or passive-transitive verb may well have been considered by the Egyptian as expressing an achieved situation from which the rest of the narrative continues dynamically'.¹²

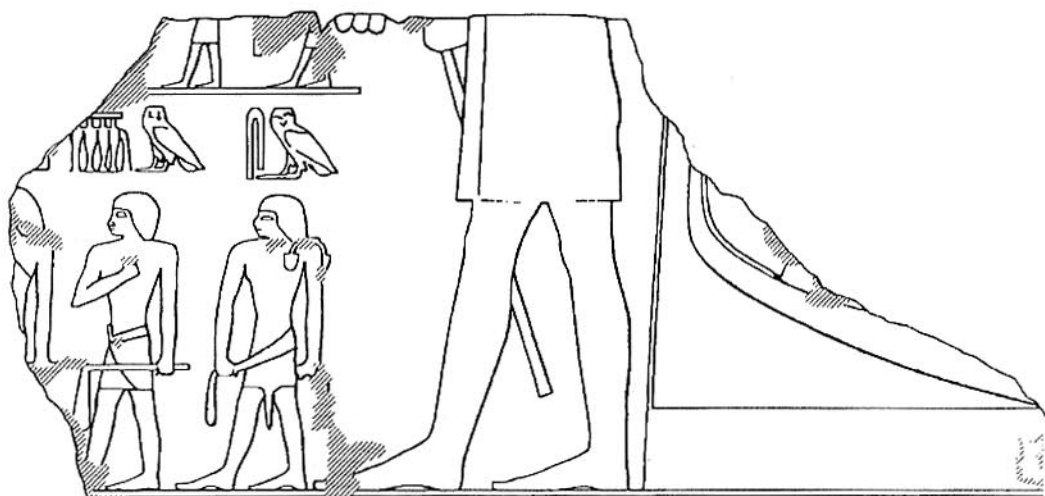


Fig. 2

The nature of the ceremony itself is not immediately evident from Rēwer's description. 'Taking the prow-rope' is an action associated elsewhere with the bark of the sun in funerary texts.¹³ An Old Kingdom (Dynasty III ?) relief found at Ehnasya shows an unidentified king with a flail and white crown in the act of [šzp] ḥtt dpt-ntr 'taking the prow-rope of the god's boat'.¹⁴ The fragmentary reliefs of Niuserrē contain two further references to what may be the same ritual : in one (see fig. 2), the king in festival robe, with flail and staff, is preceded by a *sm*-priest (*tp rdw.f* at his feet) and followed by a boat; in the other, the *rhw-nswt* (?) hold a rope under the remains of what may be the same caption.¹⁵ The latter act appears again in Kheruef's reliefs of the Sed-festival rites of Amenhotpe III, which were conducted 'in likeness to writings of old'.¹⁶ There the celebrants, including *rhw-nswt*, 'take the tow-ropes of the night-bark and the prow-rope of the day-bark, and pull the barks', while the king himself is directed to 'take the prow-rope of the night-bark and the tow-line of the day-bark: row the gods of the Sed-festival'.¹⁷ The king's participation is echoed once more in the el-Kab tomb of Setau, first priest of Nekhbet under Ramesses III. This contains a partially preserved account of the king's commission to vizier Ta to bring what was probably the portable shrine of Nekhbet from El-Kab for the performance of its rituals in the Sed-festival enclosures :

*Arrival at the House of Ramesses Mer-Amūn . . . in
Regnal Year 29 . . .
Taking the prow-rope of the god's bark by the king
himself.¹⁸*

The presence of a *sm*-priest is appropriate to both funerary and Sed-festival rites.¹⁹ Since it is unlikely that Neferirkarē celebrated a Sed-festival,²⁰ Rēwer's inscription may reflect either a funerary ceremony (for Saḥurē ?) or, more likely, part of the coronation rites of Neferirkarē.²¹ In any case, it is evident that the occasion was a solemn one of some religious significance.

The inscription's opening line is followed by a *sk*-clause linking Rēwer's attendance²² on the king, in his office of *sm*-priest and keeper of the royal ceremonial paraphernalia,²³ either with the action that follows (as translated here) or perhaps with the situation described in line 1.²⁴ The incident itself is described with the verbal phrase *ḥsf r rd*. Though usually translated 'touch' or 'strike' in this passage, *ḥsf* basically means 'bar'.²⁵ Construed with *r*, it means to 'bar' someone from a place or action:²⁶ in the *Eloquent Peasant*, officials are said to be *ir.n.tw r ḥsf r iyt*, 'appointed to be a barrier against wrongdoing' (Peas. BI. 296), and Spell 30B of the *Book of the Dead* is designed *n tm rdt ḥsf ib n NN r f m hrt-ntr*, 'for not letting the heart of NN be a barrier against him in the necropolis'. In Rēwer's inscription, the staff that the king was holding²⁷ 'made a barrier against the foot' of Rēwer. In other words, Rēwer was not merely 'touched' by the royal staff; more likely he tripped over it.

This accident must have disrupted the solemn proceedings. Perhaps Rēwer stumbled against the king, or fell and scattered the royal accoutrements he was presumably carrying. The king's reaction is detailed in the complex sentence in cols. 4–7 of the inscription, which records two of his utterances. The first (in the sentence) is the single word *wd.ti* addressed to Rēwer.²⁸ This probably expresses a wish for Rēwer's well-being, as it is usually translated.²⁹ It is followed by a *sk sdm.n.f* clause containing another direct quotation of the king.³⁰ In the three other Old Kingdom examples of this construction known to me, *sk sdm.n.f* conveys a (restrictive) circumstance to a preceding clause :

*sk sw rh . . . ir is pry ht nb m r n hm.f
hpr hr cw*

sk rd.n n.f ntr s(i) ht m ht (Urk. I, 39, 12–15)

because he knew . . . that if anything would emerge from
the mouth of His Incarnation,
it would immediately be a reality
precisely because the god had given him, (already) in
the womb, perception of reality.

*ir.n.(i) iz pn hr t h(n)qt rd.n.(i) n hmwt nbt irt iz pn
sk lgr rd.n.(i) n.sn dbi r cwt wrt³¹*

I made this tomb from bread and beer, which I gave to
every crew of craftsmen who made this tomb
even though I also gave them payment to a very great
degree.

sdj.n.(i) sn r imntt nfrt
*sk šd.n.(i) n.sn qrstt m hnw m htp-dī-(n)swt*³²

I caused them to cross to the perfect West
 once I requested for them from the Residence
 burial equipment as a royal offering.

In Rēwer's inscription, the quotation introduced by *sk dd.n hm.f* therefore supplies the background to the king's one-word address to Rēwer, as both circumstance and rationale. The content of this previous utterance expresses the king's desire³³ that Rēwer not only 'be very sound' but also that he not be struck³⁴—presumably in retaliation for the incident. Having made his desire known in the matter, the king then assures Rēwer '(You shall) be sound'. The final *sk*-clause of this complex sentence (*sk sw špss*) supplies the reason for the king's decision. As a whole, the sentence contains a simple declarative statement ('His Incarnation addressed him'), which is predicated on a preceding action ('once His Incarnation had said') that, in turn, is predicated on a pre-existing situation: 'because he (Rēwer) was more precious to His Incarnation than any man.'

Having excused Rēwer publicly for the incident, the king then grants him the special favour of having the decision drawn up in a precise legal document, put into writing in the king's official presence 'in order to be written . . . in accordance with what was said', and then transferred to stone³⁵—apparently the stela that has survived to us. The fact that this final act was undertaken on behalf of Rēwer both underscores the importance of the incident and, perhaps, offers a clue as to its significance.

In view of the translation suggested above, it seems unlikely that what happened to Rēwer was a royal intervention to 'exorcise' his accidental contact with 'the blight of majesty'. It is worth noting that throughout the description of the incident the king is referred to as 'His/My Incarnation,' using the term (*hm*) that denotes the Pharaoh as a human being.³⁶ Only in the description of the ceremony that opens Rēwer's account (line 1) and in reference to the official dictation of the decree (cols. 8–9) is the king referred to in terms of his divine office (*nswt* and *biti*).

The crucial phrase 'without a blow for him' (col. 6) suggests that the king's intervention was rather to prevent Rēwer from being punished for disrupting the ceremony, 'because he was more precious to His Incarnation than any man' (cols. 6–7). The danger of punishment was therefore real, but it is not likely to have involved merely human retribution. The function of *sm*-priest, which Rēwer was performing in the ceremony, was one of the more priestly offices. Apart from its intimate association with the King—through responsibility for the royal ceremonial wardrobe—it had originally been exercised by the king's son, and remained the ritual equivalent of son and heir, particularly in funeral rites.³⁷ Retribution was more to be feared from another sphere—the divine.

This not only explains the king's immediate intervention on Rēwer's behalf, as intermediary between man and the divine; it also accounts for the extraordinary care that was taken to preserve the king's action in Rēwer's tomb. The stela recording the king's official favour and intercession was deposited in Rēwer's tomb to ensure that divine retribution for his error would also be avoided in the afterlife. As such,

Rēwer's inscription is an early witness to the anticipation of final judgement—later reflected in the 'Negative Confession' of the *Book of the Dead*: *nī ḥsf.ī ntr m prw.f*, 'I have not got in the way of the god in his procession'.³⁸

- ¹ *Urk.* I, 232; Selim Hassan, *Excavations at Giza* (Cairo, 1932–60), I, 18–19 and fig. 13, pl. 18.
- ² *Giza*, I, 1–61, pls. 1–41; *Ancient Egypt* (1930), 23–4; *CdE* 6 (1931), 271–2. See also PM III², 1, 265–9.
- ³ K. Baer, *Rank and Title in the Old Kingdom* (Chicago, 1960), 98 and 292 (no. 300).
- ⁴ *Urk.* I, 232, 5; L. Borchardt, *Das Grabdenkmal des Königs Sahure* (Wissenschaftliche Veröffentlichungen der Deutschen Orient-Gesellschaft, 26) (Leipzig, 1913), II, 119.
- ⁵ *CG* 197–200, 216–17, 280, 287, 318, 350, 365–7, 815, 1675.
- ⁶ B. Schmitz, *LÄ* V, 834.
- ⁷ J. A. Wilson, in H. Frankfort (ed.), *The Intellectual Adventure of Ancient Man* (Chicago, 1946), 75.
- ⁸ Frankfort, *Kingship and the Gods* (Chicago, 1948), 360 n. 21.
- ⁹ *Intellectual Adventure*, 75.
- ¹⁰ For translation and grammatical commentary, see Selim Hassan, *Giza*, I, 18–19; E. F. Wente, *The Syntax of Verbs of Motion in Egyptian* (PhD dissertation, University of Chicago, 1959), 19; B. Gunn, *JEA* 34 (1948), 28; H. Goedicke, in *Ägyptologische Studien, Festschrift H. Grapow* (VIO 29) (Berlin, 1955), 96; H. Brunner, *Universitas* 11 (1956), 800; A. Roccati, *La Littérature historique sous l'Ancien Empire Égyptien* (Paris, 1982), 102; E. Doret, *The Narrative Verbal System of Old and Middle Egyptian* (Cahiers d'Orientalisme 12) (Geneva, 1986), 61 (Ex. 95), 105 (Ex. 188), 92–3 n. 1135; and E. Edel, *Altägyptische Grammatik* (Analecta Orientalia 34/39) (Rome, 1955/1964), §§ 468, 540, 549, 592, 687, 748.1 and *Nachtrag*, 765, 789, 1014.
- ¹¹ See Wente, *Verbs of Motion*, 19; J. P. Allen, *The Inflection of the Verb in the Pyramid Texts* (Bibliotheca Aegyptia 2) (Malibu, 1984), §§ 569A, 580A.
- ¹² *Verbs of Motion*, 12.
- ¹³ E. A. W. Budge, *The Book of the Dead* (New York, 1960), 345 (Papyrus of Ani 1, 16–17). Cf. also *PT* 1347b.
- ¹⁴ W. M. F. Petrie, *Ehnasya* (EEF Memoir 26) (London, 1905), pl. 11. I owe this reference and the suggested date to E. Brovarski.
- ¹⁵ H. Kees, *Die Grosse Festdarstellung*, vol. III of F. W. von Bissing, *Das Re-Heiligtum des Königs Ne-woser-re (Rathures)* (Leipzig, 1928), pl. 9, no. 193; pl. 10, no. 202.
- ¹⁶ The Epigraphic Survey, *The Tomb of Kheruef* (OIP 102) (Chicago, 1980), pl. 24.
- ¹⁷ Kheruef, pls. 24, 28, 45. The king is shown in this ritual in the Upper Egyptian crown, appropriate to the scene's location (south half of Kheruef's west portico).
- ¹⁸ A. Gardiner, *ZÄS* 48 (1910), 47–51.
- ¹⁹ See Schmitz, *LÄ* V, 833–4; H. Jacobsohn, *Die dogmatische Stellung des Königs in der Theologie der alten Ägypter* (ÄF 8) (Glückstadt, 1939), 47; W. Helck, *Untersuchungen zu den Beamtentiteln des ägyptischen Alten Reiches* (ÄF 18) (Glückstadt, 1954), 16–18.
- ²⁰ See E. Hornung and E. Staehelin, *Studien zum Sed-fest* (Aegyptiaca Helvetica 1) (Basel and Geneva, 1974), 80–5; E. F. Wente and C. Van Siclen, in *Studies in Honor of George R. Hughes* (SAOC 39) (Chicago, 1976), 220–3.
- ²¹ For the possible equivalence of some coronation and Sed-festival rites, see W. Barta, *SAK* 4 (1976), 31–43. A boat figures prominently in the coronation ritual of Senwosret I preserved in the Ramesseum 'Dramatic Papyrus': K. Sethe, *Dramatische Texte zu den altägyptischen Mysterienspielen* (UGAÄ 10) (Leipzig, 1928 = Hildesheim, 1964), scenes 1–2, 7, 10–11, 16. This also involves the *rhwt-nswt* (P. Ram 5).
- ²² Cf. *PT* 477b, where *tp rdwt* is used of 'magic' accompanying the deceased king during his ascent to the sky.
- ²³ For *iri hr* see P. Kaplony, *Die Rollsiegel des Alten Reiches* (Monumenta Aegyptiaca) (Brussels, 1977), I, 281. These are presumably the materials needed during the ceremony in question.
- ²⁴ For the meaning of *sk* in (restrictive) adverb-clauses, see J. P. Allen, in G. Englund and P. J. Frandsen (eds.), *Crossroad* (Carsten Niebuhr Institute Publications 1) (Copenhagen, 1987), 23–4; and Doret, *Narrative Verbal System*, 25 n. 105. For *sk* introducing an adverb-clause at the beginning of a sentence, see Edel, *Altägyptische Grammatik*, § 1030aa.
- ²⁵ *Wb.* III, 335. Cf. the phrase *rwī ḥsfw(i) rhwt* 'door that bars the commoners', and similar, in the Pyramid Texts (*PT* 876a, 1726b, *1916a, N 1055 + 33).

²⁶ PT 1436a, 1437c, 1438c, 1439a-c, 1440a/d; *Peas.* BI, 296; BD 30B (Naviile, *Totenbuch* I, pl. 43, 1-2); P. Smith xi, 18 and xvi, 5; J. H. Breasted, *The Edwin Smith Surgical Papyrus* (OIP 3-4) (Chicago, 1930) I, 343-4, 409-10; II, pls. 11, 18 and 16, 5. In P. Smith xi, 18, where dislocated collarbones are described as *hsfr* the face, the meaning seems to be 'turn aside' rather than 'bar'.

²⁷ For the *ms* see Ali Hassan, *Stöcke und Stäbe im pharaonischen Ägypten bis zum Ende des Neuen Reiches* (MÄS 33) (Berlin, 1976), 179-83. The use of the temporal participle *wn*, rather than the relative *nī*, suggests that the staff referred to is not specific ('the royal staff that (was) in the hand') but rather one that the king happened to be holding at the time: cf. Allen, in *Crossroad*, 18-22.

²⁸ The construction *ddr* normally means 'say about' or 'say against' someone or something—e.g. PT 179a, 282c r, 1646a, 1871b, 2047a ('about'); 227b-c, 434e, 1324a-b, N 216 + 51 = Nt 60, N 1055 + 46 = Nt 695 ('against'). The construction *ddn* is normally used when a person (or place: PT 222c) is spoken to, but *ddr* can also be used in this context (e.g. PT 273c, 1565c, 1964d, 1975a).

²⁹ For the sense of *wdi*, see *Wb.* I, 399, 14-17; *Wb. med.* I, 238. It is less likely that the utterance is a question ('Are you alright?'). With the stative these are usually introduced by *in iw* and pronominal subject: Edel, *Altägyptische Grammatik*, §§ 1004-5; D. P. Silverman, *Interrogative Constructions with jn and jn-jw in Old and Middle Egyptian* (Bibliotheca Aegyptia 1) (Malibu, 1980), 35-43. The independent second singular stative is often a wish or command: Edel, *Altägyptische Grammatik*, § 592; Allen, *Inflection*, § 591.

³⁰ The parenthetic expression *hrw hm.f* (Edel, *Altägyptische Grammatik*, § 748, 1 and *Nachtrag*; Allen, *Inflection*, § 205) serves to 'isolate' the direct quotation *wdi.ti* from the continuation of the sentence, which follows. It is possible that *hm.f* stood in the break at the end of col. 5, but in that case we should have expected an introductory *wnt* or *nti* before the indirect quotation *mry n hm.f*, etc.: see Edel, *Altägyptische Grammatik*, §§ 1015-18.

³¹ Hassan, *Giza*, II, 173, fig. 206; pl. 61, 2.

³² P. Kaplony, *Studien zum Grab des Methethi* (Monographien der Abegg Stiftung 8) (Bern, 1976), 32.

³³ For the adjectival construction *mry n*, cf. *Urk.* I, 70, 8-9 *mry n.sn irt, nī šn.n.sn is irt* *wt*, 'The work was desirable to them; they did not suffer too greatly from the work'. See Edel, *Altägyptische Grammatik*, § 951.

³⁴ *sqi* (for the root see Allen, *Inflection*, p. 563) is normally used of 'smiting' enemies (*Wb.* IV, 307, 1-3), but it also expresses the action of 'striking' an object (*Wb.* IV, 306, 14-16). The noun *sqr(w)* is used of wounds resulting from a blow (*Wb. med.* II, 805; *CTI*, 142a). For the (adverbial) construction *nyNOUN n.f*, see Edel, *Altägyptische Grammatik*, § 1099; H. Satzinger, *Die negativen Konstruktionen im Alt- und Mittelägyptischen* (MÄS 12) (Berlin, 1968), §§ 102-3; Allen *Inflection*, § 719c. For the passage, see Goedicke, in *Ägyptologische Studien*, 96; Brunner, *Universitas* 11 (1956), 800; Roccati, *La Littérature historique*, 102; Doret, *Narrative Verbal System*, 92 n. 1135.

³⁵ For the phrase *inri (?) n pr* see Doret, *Narrative Verbal System*, 105 n. 1350. The sequence of prepositional phrases in the final sentence of the inscription suggests that the 'document' was dictated at the royal stoneworks. This may indicate that the decree was transferred onto stone (presumably first in ink-drawn hieroglyphs as a guide for the sculptor) also under royal supervision.

³⁶ See J. von Beckerath, *Handbuch der ägyptischen Königsnamen* (MÄS 20) (Munich, 1984), 39; E. Blumenthal, *Untersuchungen zum ägyptischen Königtum des Mittleren Reiches* (ASAW 61) (Berlin, 1970), I, 23.

³⁷ Schmitz, *LÄ* V, 833-4.

³⁸ BD 125 Introduction (Naviile, *Totenbuch* I, pl. 133, 20).