

# Golden Mummies of Egypt

## Audio guide

### 1. Stela of Pawerem

00:00:00 Dr Campbell Price

This is a roughly rectangular block of basalt, a fine dark grey stone. It's around 40 cm tall and 30 cm wide, and it's been carved with a scene showing a human figure making an offering in front of three gods. Those are Osiris, the goddess Isis and her sister Nephthys, who are each named in captions in hieroglyphs. Below the scene are 5 horizontal rows containing text. Four of the lines are in Egyptian hieroglyphs, and the top line is in demotic, a more shorthand, or cursive script, than the formal hieroglyphs below.

00:00:42 Greg Jenner

Well, it's lovely, isn't it? But first question is, what's a stela?

00:00:46 Campbell

What's a stela?

Well, we throw it around, Greg in Egyptology, but it's a really important word.

00:00:51 Greg

We don't throw the stela around though, do we? If you throw a stela around it breaks so we don't do that.

00:00:55 Campbell

We don't physically throw any objects around it.

00:00:58 Greg

OK, good, just checking.

00:00:59 Campbell

We throw the term around. A stela, you are right to ask, is a commemorative slab. They can be... What's funny?

00:01:09 Greg

What a lovely phrase, a commemorative slab. It's, OK. All right. Sorry I'm being silly. A commemorative slab of basalt rock?

00:02:53 Campbell

Yes. So yeah, rock, really hard stone, you wouldn't want to drop it on your foot. But you get a stela, plural for stela is stelae, from Greek.

00:01:28 Greg

OK. Yeah.

00:01:29 Campbell

You get these in different kinds of material. The most common is stone, like the one we're looking at, but you can also get them in wood, you can even get them in metal.

00:01:39 Greg

So, we've got gods here, which is exciting. Osiris. He's sort of a king god. He's kind of a human man who becomes a god. Is that right?

00:01:48 Campbell

So, he's on the right-hand side as you look at the stela, so he's in the middle. He's right in front of the person doing the offering. And you can always tell Osiris, because he's got a fancy hat. Do you see? The kind of silhouette? You can only see the silhouette on this example. And you can see he's also holding two things, and that's a crook and a flail. They are signs of kingship. So, you are right, he was once the king of Egypt, the Egyptians believed, but he died. He was murdered and brought back to life by the ladies behind him, Isis and Nephthys.

00:02:23 Greg

So, Isis is his wife, and then Nephthys is Isis's sister. So, the three of them are linked in a family, and they're receiving gifts on this stela. And then underneath that lovely bit of art, is two different types of writing. So, you said hieroglyphs and then you said the other one was demotic.

00:02:42 Campbell

Yes.

00:02:43 Greg

Now, I've heard of hieroglyphs because they're famous. Demotic, I know the word, but I don't really know what it means. So, what's the difference?

00:02:51 Campbell

Good question. Because they look so different, people assume they're a different language and they're not. They both write ancient Egyptian, but hieroglyphs, which most people know is ancient Egyptian, but most regular people, Greg, did not sit down and write hieroglyphs. Hieroglyphs are just for temples, for objects like this, for coffins, for Books of the Dead on papyrus. The language of the people; if you were selling your cow to someone, you would draw up a contract, and you wouldn't write in hieroglyphs, you'd write it in demotic, which comes from the Greek, 'the language of the people'. So, it's like most people who could read and write would write in demotic. And so that's why it's included.

00:03:36 Greg

Because *Demos* means 'people', which is where the word democracy comes from. Right?

00:03:40 Campbell

Exactly.

00:03:41 Greg

OK, so it's the people's script. But hieroglyphs, they're really old. I mean, I know this exhibition is about the kind of Graeco-Roman Egyptian world, but hieroglyphs go way back. So Demotic, does that go way back, or is that a more modern language and script?

00:03:57 Campbell

It's a more modern language, it's a more modern script, indeed, writing the Egyptian language. But it's more up to date in a way with how people actually spoke. So, from maybe around 600 BC, people are using demotic as a way of writing. Before that, there's another script called hieratic, and that is also derived from hieroglyphs. But if you were a regular person who could read and write, chances are coming up to this stela, you would be reading the top line, and the other lines would be a bit more of a mystery. And I think that's actually intentional, because hieroglyphic text, we know the ancient Egyptians call that the words of the gods. If you write something in hieroglyphs, it is magically eternal, it's available, it's legible, it's readable by the gods. But if you want actual people, your friends, to read about you, you put your name in demotic.

00:04:55 Greg

We've got a stela here which has got the same thing written twice. Is that what's happening? Yeah?

00:05:02 Campbell

Yeah. So, the information is the guy's name. So, the guy on the right doing the offering to the gods is a guy called Pa-wer-em, son of a guy called Djed-hor. And that's the information that's given on the top line. And I wonder, Greg, whether, when the stela was made, when it was first carved, so the artist did the outline of the scene and wrote the carved the lines, and then someone put in the top line and then someone later on, read the top line and translated that in hieroglyphs and made it more fancy.

00:05:35 Greg

Oh, so you think it's done in stages, so it's not all done. So, it's someone hasn't gone to the shop and gone, "I want the same thing written in two different languages, please, two different scripts, sort that out." You think this has been adjusted later on?

00:05:47 Campbell

I think so, yes.

00:05:49 Greg

So, hieroglyphs is the sacred writing. That's what it means, right? *Hiero* means sacred in Greek. *Glyph* means writing, in Greek. But the Egyptians don't speak Greek. What do they call hieroglyphs?

00:06:01 Campbell

Well, they in ancient Egyptian, they call this script the *medu-netjer*. And *medu* means 'words' or 'speech' and *netjer* means 'gods'. So literally, 'words of the gods'. So, if you're writing words of the gods, the gods are instantly able to understand it, even if you bury that text underground or you wall it up or plaster it up, the gods can still perceive the message. That's very important in Egyptian ideas.

00:06:31 Greg

Because they're like Superman, they can see through walls.

00:06:33 Campbell

Yeah, like Superman. That's absolutely correct.

00:06:37 Greg

So, this stela, you know, how come it's in the museum? How come you've got it?

00:06:42 Campbell

Well, bit of a long and complicated story. It is something which was collected. We don't know exactly where, because there are no records. For most of the collection in Manchester Museum, we can say definitely, you know, which archaeologists worked on a site, which part of Egypt it's from. This was a piece which eventually ended up in the possession of a collector. A guy called Max Robinow, who was a German émigré who moved to Manchester in the mid nineteenth century. And he collected it from Egypt at the end of the nineteenth century. So, that's why it is here today.

00:07:21 Greg

Right. OK. So, this is a stela that says, I've given some gifts to the gods; here's my name, and I want it written in the sacred language, so the gods can know who's given them the gift, because I want to get thanks from the gods, and also I want all my friends to know. But actually, this isn't for the ordinary people of Egypt, this is a posh person showing off to other posh people and gods.

00:07:40 Campbell

Precisely. And honestly, when it was set up inside a temple, if we imagine it was originally put inside, you know, the temple walls, the only people who would see it were priests and priestesses, and that was only a small part of society. So actually, yes, it is a beautiful object. We could admire it in a museum, but in reality, very few ancient Egyptians would have been able to see or read it.

00:08:05 Greg

There we go. What a waste! But now we can all see it. So, you know, it's fine. It's taken a little while, 2000 years, but we can all see it.

00:08:13 Campbell

But we can admire it. And we can say Pa-wer-em's name out loud, and that's what he would have wanted.