

COLOSSAL STELE OF PTOLEMY VIII



Over **six metres** tall, this monumental stele, which stood near the temple of Thonis-Heracleion, has unfortunately been subject to the indignities of time. Broken into numerous fragments, its surface, inscribed with hieroglyphic and Greek texts, could not resist the seawater. A quarter of the document may be considered preserved.

Nevertheless, significant elements of its contents may still be gleaned. It is laid out in traditional style complete with a royal protocol and eulogy and contains information about the local affairs of the priests of Heracleion.

Depiction of three Euergetes gods

The stele was erected under the joint reign of Ptolemy VIII Euergetes II and his two wives, Cleopatra II and III, i.e. during the period 141/140–131 or 124–116 BC; the exact date of the inscription is lost. The three Euergetes gods are depicted in the left part of the corner that is still preserved, officiating before Amun, Mut and a line of divinized Lagids beginning with the Adelphoi gods.



Royal praise and a statue of Amun-Re

The text is presented in the traditional manner: royal titularies (l. 1), royal praise highlighting the king's gifts to the temples as well as his prowess in war (l. 2–11), topoi of royal phraseology. Line twelve marks the end of the royal eulogy and the beginning of the narrative.

Line thirteen informs us that the Lagid brought “the statue of Amun-Re, king of the gods, toward the Thebes of the North”, a toponym that describes Diospolis Kato/Tell el-Balamun rather than Tanis, the two cities considered to be the northern counterparts of Thebes. No text regarding the reasons for this processional outing has been preserved.



Euergetes II's interest in Egyptian temples

The interest of Euergetes II in Egyptian temples continues with mention of the annual gift of wheat to the gods in general and in particular to the “god, master of the water”, i.e. Amun (l. 13–14). Line fifteen mentions the carrying out of an act attributed to the king's ancestors, one which is localized by means of a series of topographical indications on the coastal edges of the Delta, “in the confines of the country, on the [edge] of the sea,” i.e. Heracleion.

Royal deeds in honour of a goddess

In line sixteen, Khonsu is connected with the islands of the sea, in a passage constructed to make alliterative play on the attributions of the god: he is the one who “has travelled throughout the islands of the sea in his name of Khonsu.” In line seventeen, the text continues with a reference to royal deeds in honour of a goddess (Mut?), who has been restored to her residence. This refers probably to the restoration of a cult or the construction of a sanctuary dedicated to this goddess.



Meanwhile, the king has gone to Heracleion, which is a short distance from the Alexandrian capital.

Gift of land and royal visit to Heracleion

Line eighteen begins with the mention of a gift of land and refers to a visit made by “the king of Upper and Lower Egypt Ptolemy, the god Philopator”, the fourth Ptolemy (221–205 BC), in “the furthest agricultural territory/territories (?) of the confines of the country, known as the temple of the acacia, to offer the tax.”



Conflicts in Upper Egypt or in the Delta

Line nineteen seems to echo a conflict prior to the reign of Euergetes I. Rebels had “contravened an order/decreed” promulgated by his father, i.e. Ptolemy Epiphanes (204–180 BC), a possible allusion to the troubles that broke out in Upper Egypt or in the Delta and which were suppressed by the general Aristonikos in the countryside of Balamun, according to the two decrees of year 23 of Epiphanes.

Assembling of the dignitaries

The text (l. 20) then relates the assembling of the dignitaries of the country by the king. This is not, however, a meeting of a synod of priests but of administrative and bureaucratic personnel. We learn that the delegation goes to Alexandria but the details of the meetings with Euergetes II are not preserved.

Line twenty-one mentions a recourse to ancient writings, probably in order to

justify ownership of a piece of land until year 44 of the Pharaoh Amasis, i.e. just before the first Persian domination of Egypt.

Violation of right of asylum in Heracleion

In a passage of line twenty-two, the priests seem to refer to the violation of a right of asylum. The king places the words of the complainants “in the presence of the master of Gereb” and appeals to his “scribe of the [royal] palette,” most likely in order to make everyone aware of the decisions that he has made in the form of a decree.

Line twenty-three is almost entirely lost. The following line lists the divinized Lagids and specifies that the king has had the decree delivered to the priests of Heracleion. It emerges from this reading that the text essentially includes only data relating to the local concerns of the priests of Heracleion, in this case the recuperation of priestly revenues and of a right to asylum.



Object: Heracleion. 2nd c. BC. Gneiss. H. 610 cm | W. 310 cm | D. 40 cm
Wt. 15.7 t. Maritime Museum Alexandria (SCA 529)

Source: Original description by Christophe Thiers in exhibition catalogue Egypt's Sunken Treasures, Berlin, 2006, exh. Egypt's Sunken Treasures, Martin-Gropius-Bau, Berlin, May - September 2006

Further reading: La stèle de Ptolémée VIII Évergète II à Héracléion, Oxford Centre for Maritime Archaeology, University of Oxford, 2009

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