

I, WENENNEFER

Elizabeth Froid – The stories ancient Egyptian people told about themselves have been my career, ranging from tiny micro-stories to complex, poetic autobiographies integrated into tombs and incised on statue bodies. I focus in the age of Ramses the Great and his successors. Autobiography is different to how we conceive it in modern Western storytelling. So, for ancient Egyptian elites, it was a way to present their perfect self and the story of their good life to an educated public that might hear it performed at their funeral perhaps or when the statue was dedicated and it tells of their ideal actions in the world.

This statue of a man named Wennefer, now in the Louvre, is important for thinking about how statue bodies stage performances. He was a high priest of Osiris at the site of Abydos in Upper Egypt, where the statue comes from. Its exceptional pillar-form relates closely to the content of the autobiography inscribed on its rear surface.

In the first stanza, the first column, Wennefer greets the god, bringing him in into the architectural space his whole body upholds: “welcome, welcome victorious king who cleaves the sky with his plumes”. The whole autobiography is staged as a recitation before Osiris. Each following stanza describes his role in adorning the god, and his actions to defend him from harm: “I brought the wreath of triumph and transfigured the god with it... Firm of fingers when binding the diadem... And overthrowing the one who rebelled “.

The final stanza instead describes his own body, turning Osiris’s transfiguration into his own. He speaks of being wrapped in bright red cloth, a substance of sunrise and rebirth. The emphasis on regalia and wrapping resonates with the treatment of the statue’s body, bound in text, and items of adornment: the bracelet, the Panther skin. These elements combine with the density and large scale of the texts to effect an intensely elaborate and adorned bodily surface.

So, there is an imagining of your life as something very exceptional where you engaged in performances and actions and events that raised you above everybody else. And it's not so different from how we might understand obituaries or epitaphs in churchyards. Nowadays it maybe resonates a bit with that type of context. I feel I might begin to understand who and how this ‘I’ of statue and self was and is present in the world. Maybe my storytelling can bring him a little to life.

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