



MYTHOPOUCH

RETELLING

THE SHABAKA STONE *and the Memphite Theology*

British Museum EA 498

A modern educational version for readers aged 15 and up

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THE SHABAKA STONE AND THE MEMPHITE THEOLOGY

The Shabaka Stone is one of the most important surviving documents of ancient Egyptian religious thought. It is now held in the British Museum as EA 498. The Museum currently catalogues it as a rectangular conglomerate stela about 95 centimetres high and 137 centimetres wide. Two horizontal registers run across the top, with sixty vertical registers below. Older publications differ slightly: James Henry Breasted described the object in 1903 as black granite, about 92 by 137.5 centimetres, with sixty-one vertical lines. A large central area is badly damaged. The British Museum catalogues the damage as the result of later reuse as a lower millstone, although the exact history of that reuse has been debated.

The inscription dates to the reign of Shabaka, a Kushite pharaoh of Egypt's Twenty-Fifth Dynasty in the late eighth century BCE. Chronologies vary slightly, but the British Museum commonly places his reign at about 716 to 702 BCE and dates the stone itself to about 710 BCE. Piye had already forced a number of Egyptian rulers to submit, but full Kushite control over Egypt was consolidated under Shabaka. Kushite kings ruled largely from the traditional Egyptian capital of Memphis, and the stone was set up in the temple of the city's patron god, Ptah.

The inscription presents itself as the rescue of an older text. It says that Shabaka found a work of the ancestors in the temple of Ptah that had been eaten by worms and could no longer be read from beginning to end. He therefore ordered it to be copied anew so that the text and his monument might endure. Whether this records the copying of a genuinely ancient document or uses a traditional discovery story to lend authority to a new or reworked composition remains a major scholarly question.

The best-known section of the text is the Memphite account of creation. Ptah is presented as the divine source of thought and effective speech. The heart is the place in which intention and understanding are formed, while the tongue gives those intentions expression. Breasted's historical translation describes the tongue as repeating the thought of the heart and connects divine words with the coming into being of gods, towns, shrines, offerings, crafts and other ordered aspects of existence.

The text also links perception, thought and action. Sight belongs to the eyes, hearing to the ears and smell to the nose; these senses report to the heart. Action then proceeds according to what the heart devises and the tongue expresses. The text extends this principle to human work, including the actions of the hands, the movement of the feet and the operation of the limbs. It also says that life is given to the peaceful or innocent, while death is given to the guilty.

Ptah is not described through only one form. The text presents a series of divine forms or aspects associated with Ptah, including Ptah-Nun and Ptah-Naunet in relation to Atum, and it later identifies Ptah with Tatenen, the primeval land that emerges at creation. It is therefore better to say that the theology gathers primordial and creative powers into Ptah than simply to identify Ptah with the primordial waters alone.

Another major section concerns the dispute between Horus and Seth. Geb first assigns Seth to Upper Egypt and Horus to Lower Egypt, then judges that Horus should receive the inheritance of his father. Horus becomes the unifier and king of the Two Lands, and the text also describes Horus

and Seth as pacified and joined in the House of Ptah. This should not be contrasted with a simple alternative story in which Horus kills Seth. Other Egyptian traditions make their conflict far more violent, but Seth commonly survives as a divine figure even after Horus gains the kingship.

The political meaning of this material should be stated cautiously. Modern scholars have proposed that the monument could have helped Shabaka secure support in recently conquered Memphis by elevating Ptah and Memphite tradition. On that reading, the theology had political value for a Kushite ruler consolidating control over Egypt. This is a scholarly interpretation rather than something the inscription directly says about Shabaka's motive.

The text also relocates important parts of the Osiris tradition within a Memphite setting. Osiris is associated with the House of Sokar and with the land around the royal fortress at Memphis, while Horus appears as king in the presence of his father. This gives Memphis a major place in the Osirian story. Abydos remained one of Egypt's most important traditional centres of Osiris worship, so the Shabaka Stone is best understood as a specifically Memphite localisation rather than as proof that one tradition simply replaced the other.

The date of the underlying composition has been debated for more than a century. Breasted's first major publication of the inscription appeared in 1901, and his 1903 essay argued that the copied text was at least as old as the beginning of the New Kingdom, perhaps earlier. Kurt Sethe and other early scholars argued for still greater antiquity. Friedrich Junge's 1973 study challenged this view and argued that the text was a Twenty-Fifth Dynasty composition written in deliberately archaic language. The British Museum now treats composition in Shabaka's own time as a major modern position, while noting that scholars still debate how much genuinely older religious tradition lies behind the surviving text.

Breasted famously called the monument the oldest known formulation of a philosophical worldview. That judgement belongs to the history of Egyptology and should not be presented as an uncontested modern conclusion. His interpretation remains important because he drew attention to the unusual emphasis on thought, speech and ordered creation. Comparisons have also been made with later creation-by-speech traditions, including Genesis and later ideas about divine word or logos, but similarity alone does not demonstrate direct borrowing or historical dependence.

The stone's archaeological provenance is Memphis, but it was not discovered there in 1805. Rather, it entered the British Museum in 1805 as a gift from George Spencer, 2nd Earl Spencer. By that time it had already travelled out of Egypt. The surface also preserves deliberate ancient or later defacement. Breasted counted Shabaka's royal name as erased in three places and Seth's name as erased at least thirteen times. Later scholarship associates some of these erasures with subsequent hostility to Kushite rulers and to Seth, but the precise sequence and motive of every erasure are not certain.

The Shabaka Stone therefore remains important for several different reasons at once: it is a Twenty-Fifth Dynasty royal monument, a major witness to Memphite theology, a damaged repository of older and possibly reworked religious traditions, and a document through which modern Egyptology has debated the relationship between myth, theology, philosophy and

kingship. Its most secure lesson is not that one simple creation story replaced all others, but that Egyptian theologians could reinterpret older divine traditions in sophisticated new ways around Ptah, Memphis, kingship and the ordered world.

SOURCES AND REFERENCES

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SOURCE NOTE

This account is original Mythopouch educational wording. It is not the hieroglyphic inscription and not a translation of the Shabaka Stone. Checked against James Henry Breasted, *The Open Court*, August 1903, and the British Museum record for EA 498. Written for readers aged 15 and up. © 2026 Mythopouch. www.mythopouch.com