

Article

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Why did Akhenaten forsake the use of pink granite ?

CH. KARLSHAUSEN and TH. DE PUTTER¹.

In his "Heretic king", D.B. Redford wonders why Akhenaten favoured round-topped stelae over slender obelisks in carving his *benben* symbols². The same scholar subsequently mentions what is, in our opinion, a key fact in our interpretation of Akhenaten's preference for round-topped stelae, namely: that at the very place where tomb-scenes indicate the presence of the *benben* stone in Akhetaten, fragments of silicified sandstone (or the so-called *quartzite*) have been excavated³.

*

We would like to emphasize that the change in shape of the *benben* symbol from obelisks to stelae in the Amarna Period coincides with the fact that pink granite was forsaken as a material for sculpture and architecture. It is known in this latter field that the obelisk is one of the most common elements to be carved in pink granite. The beginning of the 18th dynasty has yielded many such granite needles that were erected in the Amun Enclosure at Karnak by the Touthmoside kings and Queen Hatshepsut, for example.

From our current researches which focus on the use of stone in ancient egyptian art⁴, we favour the idea that pink granite had probably gained, in the beginning of the 18th dynasty, a strong "royal" connotation, as indicated by the abundance of royal statues in pink granite and the lack of private sculpture in this material⁵. Furthermore, the use of pink

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² D.B. REDFORD, *Akhenaten, the heretic king*, Princeton, 1984, p. 147.

³ *Ibidem*.

⁴ TH. DE PUTTER, CH. KARLSHAUSEN, *Les pierres utilisées dans la sculpture et l'architecture de l'Égypte pharaonique; guide pratique*, Brussels, in press.

⁵ If one excepts the squatting statue of Senenmout (Cairo CG 42115), whose prominent social status probably accounts for this unique treatment.

granite for sphinxes and obelisks adds a solar association to the afore mentioned "royal connotation".

At first glance, it is not obvious why these two connotations should have incited Akhenaten to forsake the use of pink granite. Nevertheless, he did so, at least after his installation in Akhetaten⁶, where silicified sandstone fragments of a *benben* stone have been found. This stone is believed to have been a round-topped stela similar to the one found in Heliopolis (Cairo, CG 34175)⁷. Thus the change in material appears to coincide with the change in form of the *benben* symbol.

Was pink granite forsaken in preference for silicified sandstone due to a desire to find an easier material to work in order to achieve more quickly the building of Akhetaten ? We do not support this explanation for two reasons. The first being that silicified sandstone is not easier to carve than pink granite and the second being that it is not even easier to obtain, the quarries being located either nearly at the same place than those for pink granite (on the west bank of the Nile, south of Aswan) or at the Gebel Ahmar (east of Cairo). Moreover, the concomitant change in shape of the *benben* symbol suggests that the change in material was not just for practical reasons, since one can hardly accept that an important religious decision would be subordinated to practical considerations.

Are these changes then subsequent to a deliberate will to one returns to an ancient tradition of solar cult, as suggested by Kemp⁸? This suggestion has some merit since silicified sandstone had already been of paramount importance twelve hundred years before in Heliopolis, during

⁶ Akhenaten's buildings in Karnak do still use pink granite sporadically: a piece of a granite obelisk of Akhenaten has been recovered near the 10th pylon at Karnak while another fragment comes from the 1st court of the same temple. See C. ALDRED, *Akhenaten, king of Egypt*, London, 1988, p. 89. Moreover, the determinative of the name of the *Hwt-bnbn* in Karnak is still a "traditional" obelisk (maybe the one of Thouthmosis IV, see D.B. REDFORD, *op. cit.*, pp.74-75).

⁷ See P. LACAU, *Catalogue général des antiquités du Musée du Caire*. XLV. *Stèles du Nouvel Empire*, I, Le Caire, 1909, pp. 214-216 and pl. LXV and L. HABACHI, *Akhenaten in Heliopolis* in *Beiträge zur Ägyptischen Bauforschung und Altertumskunde*, 12, 1971, pp. 41-45, fig. 20.

⁸ See B.J. KEMP, *Ancient Egypt, anatomy of a civilization*, London-New York, 1989, p. 283.

Djedefre's reign (4th dynasty), another king who seemingly favoured the solar cult⁹.

Or finally do these changes originate from the symbolic connection that linked Amun, the obelisk and pink granite since the Middle Kingdom? Granite obelisks are known from this period onwards. Initially they were dedicated to Re in Heliopolis (*cf.* the one of Sesostri I in this place), but they appear to have been quickly adopted by the theban god (whose influence increased markedly in the same time) by means of a "syncretic combination" with its northern "challenger".

*

We propose that there is a close connection between the change in shape of the *benben* stone (from the obelisk to the round-topped stela) and the fact that pink granite was forsaken in art and architecture during the Amarna Period. Whether these changes are due to a will to rely upon a more ancient solar tradition or to the fact that both obelisks and pink granite bore strong Amonian connotations remains doubtful; however, as the two aspects are linked to each other, they should not be considered separately. Finally, to come back to our initial question, it seems clear that the abandonment of pink granite by Akhenaten, far from being incidental, is undoubtedly due to religious considerations.

⁹ See A.M. LOYRETTE, *Le règne de Didoufri in Un siècle de fouilles françaises en Egypte*, Paris, 1981, pp. 44-45. On the solar connotation of silicified sandstone, see S. AUFRERE, *L'univers minéral dans la pensée égyptienne* (IFAO. Bibliothèque d'Etude, CV/2), vol. 2, Le Caire, 1991, pp.698-699.

