



ESSEX EGYPTOLOGY GROUP - REVIEW

June 2021 Meeting

by Margaret Patterson

“Walking in Ancient Footsteps: The High Priest of Osiris Wennefer and Ancient Abydos.”

Dr Stephen Harvey

At the beginning of June Dr Stephen Harvey talked to us via Zoom about his work at Abydos. He has been working there since the late 1980s, and this talk covered aspects of his research since 1993 in particular.

Abydos is best known as the cult centre for the god Osiris and Harvey told us that today he was going to focus on a High Priest of Osiris called Wennefer. He explained that this individual provides us with a chance to walk in ancient footsteps and explore the site as it was in the late reign of Ramesses II, c. 1225 BCE. It will also cast some light on over 300 years of the cultic activity at this site. There is a lot of statuary and other monuments associated with Wennefer, and Harvey sees him as a kind of visionary who shaped what we can see at Abydos at this date.

Having given us this context Harvey started by showing some statue fragments which he has excavated from a courtyard of Temple C at the pyramid complex of Ahmose I (the first king of the 18th Dynasty). This is a temple to Ahmose-Nefertari (the wife of Ahmose I) and the fragments come from a statue erected by Wennefer – which shows that this temple was still in operation and there was still cult activity taking place for Ahmose-Nefertari around 300 years after her death. The pyramid complex of Ahmose I is quite extensive, as well as the pyramid itself (with surrounding structures including Temple C) on the edge of the cultivation there is also a pyramid out into the desert for his mother Tetisheri plus a temple at the desert cliffs. A head of a Ramesside statue was found in situ at the Ahmose I pyramid in 2006 which made Harvey interested in what the later activity was at this site, hence starting to look for evidence of it. And they have found many more fragments of Ramesside statuary mixed in with the pillars and wall reliefs of Ahmose I's time. It's all been pulverised into tiny fragments, so his main question is how it all fits back together!

Harvey now moved on to giving us some context for the role that Wennefer filled – the High Priest of Osiris. We often talk about the High Priests of Amun, but much less often about the High Priests of other gods like the High Priest of Osiris, or the High Priest of Ptah (at Memphis) or the High Priest of Re (at Heliopolis). These are all significant roles, held by local elite families – in particular the High Priest of Osiris title is known to have been passed down through generations of the same family around the time of Ramesses II. One of the best known of these other High Priests contemporary with Wennefer is the High Priest of Ptah Khaemwaset. He was not one of these local elites – he was the fourth son of Ramesses II. And what he's best known for today is his work restoring, renovating and studying the older monuments of Egypt. He worked on most of the monuments of the Old Kingdom and the Middle Kingdom – as archaeologists keep excavating, they keep finding the

inscriptions that Khaemwaset left to let future generations know of his work. An example is the now restored inscription he left on the pyramid at Saqqara of the 5th Dynasty king Unas telling how he restored it to its former glory (see my photo below).



Inscription of Khaemwaset on Pyramid of Unas

Harvey stressed that this was not just a unique example of a king's son following his own interests, he was part of a community of intellectuals – the other High Priests etc. Harvey told us to think of the High Priests of the various cults as a cross between the Pope (in their religious role) and the head of a university (in their role as the leading intellectuals of their day)! And in the Q&A session he drew other parallels to more familiar power structures – he suggested thinking of the High Priests as being like a college of Cardinals. As well as he suggested thinking of the local elite families as being like those of medieval Europe with their links by marriage and culture, and their desire to link themselves to the past via things like genealogy and ancient monuments (but he did say we need to be careful not to go too far with these parallels).

The discovery of evidence in the form of those statue fragments of the cult of Ahmose-Nefertari and Ahmose I continuing into the Ramesside period was not a surprise, more of a corroboration of other evidence. Harvey showed us a stela which was found by Mace in 1900 at Abydos – it shows Ahmose and Ahmose-Nefertari (with Ahmose as a deified dead king, which one can tell from his headdress). These two figures are led by a post-Amarna king (which one can tell by the style of depiction) and Harvey thinks this is probably Tutankhamun, and that this is commemorating the re-opening of the cult of Amun-Re (as that is who the three figures are processing towards). It also implies the restoration of the cult of Ahmose I and Ahmose-Nefertari by Tutankhamun as well. There are also other stelae that give evidence of cultic activity for Ahmose I and Ahmose-Nefertari during this period. There is also an oracle stela of Ahmose I dated to Year 14 of Ramesses II, which was bought in Abydos and is now in the Cairo Museum. It names a wab priest Paury, whose tomb has been found in the cemetery next to Ahmose I's pyramid and there is a shabti of his in the British Museum. The stela tells us that by the time of Ramesses II the cult of Ahmose I had developed into an oracle cult, meaning that

people would bring questions to it. There's also another stela now in Germany that shows people praying to Ahmose I, Ahmose-Nefertari and their son Amenhotep I, which dates to the time of Ramesses II.

So taken altogether these various strands of evidence suggested to Harvey that there was something interesting to explore in southern Abydos in the time of Ramesses II.

Next Harvey moved on to what we know about Wenennefer himself. He was a very prolific builder and statues and monuments of his have been found from most parts of Abydos – this is what lets us follow in his footsteps round the site looking at these monuments. His statuary is amazingly innovative and uses imagery and texts to promote his identity. His family held the role of High Priest of Osiris for 5 -6 generations (or perhaps more). Harvey showed us a pair statue of Wenennefer and his father Mery, sitting next to each other and both dressed in their High Priest of Osiris outfits looking identically (and eternally) youthful. The inscriptions on this statue and others of the family tell us a lot about them and their family. It's been possible for Egyptologists to reconstruct a several generation family tree from all this data, which Harvey showed us on a slide. Wenennefer is in the third generation of the known family, and he is succeeded in his role by two different sons (Hori and Yuyu) and then by a grandson who was also called Wenennefer.

Wenennefer also refers to other notables in Egypt as his “brother” – these include the High Priest of Onuris (at a city near Abydos called This) who was called Minmose. And he also refers to the Vizier Prehotep in this fashion. Harvey would return to these men and the use of the term “brother” later in the talk, but for now he wanted to point out that in Wenennefer's time this was a courtesy title – we can tell from the genealogies that they were not actually related. However later on the families do become connected by marriage – they were so connected already by status and by interactions that it's not surprising that they also started marrying each other.

Harvey showed us some statues of some of these other people in Wenennefer's family and beyond. One of his themes throughout the talk was the innovative nature of the statuary of these High Priests. For instance, Wenennefer's son, and successor as High Priest of Osiris, Hori was depicted in a statue holding a statue of Horus. This is a reflection of his role's connection to Horus as High Priest of that god's father, and is also a clever pun on his own name which is a form of Horus. Harvey pointed out how this gives us a sense of the combination of creativity, innovation and personal identity that these statues demonstrate – rather than falling into the trap of thinking of the whole of Egyptian civilisation as some unchanging monolith. Other example statues he showed us included a small statue of the High Priest of Onuris Minmose that is now in the museum at Brighton – he had been trying to find some relevant objects close to us in Essex, but there aren't any in the county itself so this was one of the closest he could find.

The monuments of Wenennefer and objects relating to him have been found in different parts of Abydos, and Harvey now showed us a map of northern Abydos with the key sites where some of these items have been found. The map was based on work by two scholars, Andreas Effland and Ute Effland, who are interested in the Osiris cult at Abydos throughout all periods. At the bottom of the map was the Osiris Temple, and the relevant sites were along a processional route that leads out to Umm el-Qaab, the Predynastic and Early Dynastic cemetery where later generations thought the grave of Osiris himself was located. The pair statue of Wenennefer and Mery was found at the Osiris Temple. Next along the route is Shunet es-Zebib, which is best known as the Dynasty 2 funerary enclosure of Khasekhemwy (the immediate predecessor of Djoser who built the Step Pyramid at Saqqara). In this enclosure was a shrine that Wenennefer erected. Moving further along there is a temple called the Small Western Temple where a stela of

Wennefer was found. And next is Heqareshu Hill, where pots inscribed with Wennefer's name were found. Finally in Umm el-Qaab itself there are also objects related to Wennefer. This all suggests that Wennefer (and others) are participating in some sort of ritual landscape that ties together the whole site in geography and time.

Wennefer's name means "existing beautifully" or "continually perfect", and this is actually one of Osiris's epithets. It's used for an aspect of Osiris as the night sun as well as the underworld god, and it's part of the relationship between Re (the sun) and Osiris. Wennefer having this name is likely not a coincidence – the High Priesthood of Osiris was in the family, so he was given the name by his father in expectation that he would one day be the High Priest of Osiris himself.

Several objects related to Wennefer have been found at the Osiris Temple, and Harvey showed us some examples. Some fragments were discovered by Petrie when he first discovered the temple during his excavations at Abydos. There is also a panel stela of Wennefer, which is now in the Louvre, which is particularly interesting so Harvey spent some time discussing it. There are two lines of figures modelled in sunk relief on this stela. The top row consists for four gods, from left to right these are: Hathor, Horus, Osiris and Isis. So this is two couples, the wife then the husband of the younger generation next to the husband then the wife of the older generation. It also links the site of Abydos (the place of Osiris) to the site of Dendera (the place of Hathor) and Edfu (Horus) in a wider ritual landscape. The bottom panel has also got four figures – this time it is Tiye, Wennefer, Mery and Maiany. And that is the wife then the husband of the younger generation, followed by the husband then the wife of the older generation. So this is rather shockingly comparing the four humans to the gods. And not even comparing them as servants, but establishing a one-to-one direct parallel between each god and each person! And as Harvey pointed out, this isn't even happening at the royal level – this is a High Priest and his family portraying themselves as the equivalents of gods.

This processional route for Osiris only takes in a portion of the site of Abydos, and Harvey next showed us another map of a much wider landscape showing how he thinks the Ahmose I oracle might have travelled in its sacred barque around Abydos. Obviously the pyramid of Ahmose I is part of this processional route, and from there the oracle would've been carried to the temples of Ramesses II and Seti I (that are the main parts of the site that you see a tourist nowadays). Very recent research has found that the barque is represented on the walls of these two temples, so there is evidence for a connection. From there the barque would travel to the Ahmose I/Amenhotep I chapel at the Temple of Osiris and join the main processional way out to Umm el-Qaab. And then the return to the pyramid of Ahmose I would follow another 2 sides of the rectangle with the corner at the temple on the desert cliffs, and from there via the pyramid of Tetisheri back to the pyramid of Ahmose I. And this route would of course not have been through bare desert between the various stopping points – everywhere there would have been the tombs and monuments of many different levels of society.

Harvey now returned to the enclosure called Shunet es-Zebib and Wennefer's connection with that structure. Petrie found wooden inlays when he was excavating at the site, and Harvey now thinks that these were part of a great shrine that Wennefer erected inside the enclosure. This is Wennefer connecting himself to this great old place of Abydos, in much the same way that Khaemwaset does in a grander scale across Egypt. The inlays were probably Isis knots, which were gilded and then put together in a structure like the shrine of Tutankhamun (see my photo below), so really quite a spectacular structure. So once again this is Wennefer acting in an almost royal way, just as with the panel stela that directly associates him and his family with the gods.



Outer Shrine of Tutankhamun

At this point Harvey mentioned how similar this ritual and processional landscape is to what we know happened at Luxor. The great temples of Karnak, Luxor and the memorial temples for the New Kingdom Pharaohs on the West Bank were all linked together by processional routes – followed by Amun and the Theban Triad during the Beautiful Festival of the Valley, the Opet Festival etc. So Harvey sees these routes at Abydos as fulfilling the same sort of role – linking the sacred sites together into a cohesive ritual space.

Harvey next showed us a drawing of a circular monument of Wenennefer, which was carved in relief, and might be an innovative way of representing a processional circuit in an object. The figures on it represent the family of Wenennefer, including his father Mery (and wife) and his son and successor Hori (and wife). It also has a very unusual motif of a mummiform Wenennefer surrounded by 3 jackals, the protectors of the necropolis. Once again this piece fits into Harvey's theme of innovation and creativity in the surviving monuments of this visionary (and his family).

The next object belonging to Wenennefer that Harvey showed us was a stela which was found at the Small Temple of the West (which lies on the processional route between the Osiris Temple and Umm el-Qaab). The text on the stela talks about Wenennefer's career and how he worshipped the god in his role as the High Priest of Osiris. The text (as translated by Elizabeth Frood) talks about Wenennefer "following the god on his journey" and references the "south side". It also talks about oracles, and about "judging matters". And once again it names other members of the elite – Prehotep the Vizier and Minmose the High Priest of Onuris – as his "brothers". This is very reminiscent of the Amarna letters, and the kings of the various nations referring to each other as "brother".

So Wenennefer and his fellow members of the elite are linking themselves together using terms that imply relationships, and that also mimic the way that royalty interact with their own peers.

This Small Temple of the West hasn't been re-excavated in modern times and is situated just behind the Yale dighouse right on the ancient processional route. There seems to have been a proscription in earlier times about building monuments on that route, but clearly by the time of Wenennefer it was lifted and he (and others) beginning leaving their personal monuments here. Harvey showed us some pillar statues that have been found at this site - which had jackals on them, like the circular monument. Again these are more innovative monuments, and Harvey re-iterated his view that Wenennefer is a visionary - a man who had a vision of the sacred landscape and of the symbols he wanted to leave in it.

The next object of Wenennefer's that Harvey showed us was a heart shaped ceramic vase, inscribed with Wenennefer's name. (One of the examples of this type of vessel that Harvey also showed us is in a museum in Kent - closer still to Essex, even if not quite local!) These vessels were put in the niches in the tomb of Djer. This tomb in Umm el-Qaab, which is actually that of a 1st Dynasty king, was though from at least the Middle Kingdom onward to be the tomb of the god Osiris. In the Middle Kingdom a representation of Osiris on his bier was carved and put in this tomb.



Middle Kingdom Osiris Bed from Tomb of Djer

The placing of these vessels with Wenennefer's name on in the tomb of Djer is another example of one of the themes that Harvey was emphasising throughout the talk - this is audacious behaviour, more like what a king would do than a "mere" High Priest. And Harvey drew comparisons here with the later transition into the Third Intermediate Period when the High Priests of Amun do begin to style themselves as king, and rule over the southern part of Egypt. This sort of self-promotion and taking on of what might previously have been royal prerogatives by Wenennefer and his peers at this point may prefigure the later power of those High Priests of Amun. Harvey also suggested that Akhenaten's earlier attempt to reduce the power and status of the Amun priesthood in particular and the temples in general by funnelling all worship of the Aten through himself alone may've had a point - the High Priests shortly after the Amarna Period do have this very high opinion of themselves! (If, as Harvey noted, this was actually what Akhenaten was doing.)

The heart-shaped vessels and the attention to the Tomb of Djer by Wenennefer also illustrated one of Harvey's other themes – if you look in the temple of Seti I at Abydos you also see these motifs. There is a relief with depictions of heart shaped vessels on stands in the temple, and the design of the Osirion at the back of the temple is modelled on the tomb of Djer (which they thought of as the tomb of Osiris). This is clearly not the responsibility of Wenennefer himself (as he's active later than the period when the Seti I temple was designed). However Harvey said that it does demonstrate how the antiquarian work and interests of this High Priestly elite was feeding back into the design of the contemporary monuments that the kings were erecting at these sites.

Harvey now returned to the Ahmose-Nefertari temple at the Ahmose Pyramid, and those fragments of Ramesside era statuary that he had found. He's built up from the evidence an idea of what this statue once represented. First he showed us a fragment of part of a head from this statue and pointed out the detail that the ears aren't visible – in the conventions of the period this would be a female head. But there are also fragments which have priestly robes – so this suggests two figures, a pair statue of a man and a woman. Many fragments have bits of hieroglyphic text on them. Some of these have the cartouche of Ramesses II, which gives us a (broad range) of a date for the statue. Several (including some of those with Ramesses II's name on) have the title of High Priest of Osiris on them – one even says “son of the High Priest of Osiris”, which suggests that Wenennefer is a possibility for the subject of the statue. And Harvey said that they did eventually find they had a fragment with the name Wenennefer on it – at first he'd thought this was the epithet of Osiris rather than the name, but has since come to the conclusion that it is the name. There are also fragments which have the name Tiye, along with her title of Mistress of the House. As well as this the inscription originally named other people that are known to be in the family of Wenennefer – for instance one fragment says “his son, Overseer of Cattle”, and it's known from other inscriptions that this was the title of Wenennefer's son Ramose. So taken all together these various fragments suggest that this was a pair statue of Wenennefer and his wife Tiye, erected in the cult temple for Ahmose-Nefertari.

The information that can be gleaned from the pieces of this statue didn't stop there. Harvey said that the fragments also include parts of the text of a royal decree which talks about Ramesses II commanding something to be done in the Ahmose-Nefertari cult. There are other examples of royal decrees being carved on the statues of people who received them – Harvey showed us an example from the reign of Tutankhamun of this sort of thing. So what could this be a decree for? Harvey's speculation is that it was for the making of a statue of Ahmose-Nefertari for her cult (and he's even found a fragment of what might be a Ramesside period statue of this deified queen in his excavations). There are parallels for this – in particular on a stela from Tutankhamun's reign (now in the Louvre Abu Dhabi) which has a similar decree requiring a High Priest of Osiris Penmehyt to have a statue made.

(There are ethical concerns around the use of this particular stela as evidence of anything, which Harvey was keen to bring to our attention, and which we discussed more in the Q&A section at the end. The object has no secure provenance, and it is highly likely that it was removed illegally from Egypt in the recent past (if it's not simply a fake). It's thought that it was dug up, possibly even at Harvey's site at Abydos, during the Arab Spring and then sold on the art market. Which means that Harvey and other Egyptologists are uncomfortable with using the stela in their work – it is, in a sense, rewarding and encouraging illegal activity.)

One of the things referenced in this royal decree is a place or structure called the “Mansion of Gold” – this can be interpreted in various ways, it may be a funerary chamber, or a workshop in a temple where the statues of the deities are made, or a

place in the temple where the statue of the deity is put. In this case I think Harvey was interpreting it as being where the new statue of Ahmose-Nefertari should be placed. And there is an interesting depiction in the tomb of Rekhmire (at Thebes) of a priest who seems to be meditating in the Mansion of Gold and receiving a vision in the form of a statue. Harvey ties this to the great innovation of statues of the period – he thinks that perhaps when Wenennefer talks about “following the god on his journey” he is not just talking about a literal procession but is also referencing a meditative practice giving him visions of the monuments that he should create. So Harvey’s use of “visionary” as a description of Wenennefer during the talk is not just because he sees Wenennefer as a man who had new ideas but as a man whose religious practices generated visions.

The Mansion of Gold is also referenced in an inscription in the Seti I temple at Abydos in the context of Ramesses II finishing the temple after his father Seti I’s death. Harvey sees this as tying together Ramesses II’s completion of building works for his literal father with his work on the Ahmose and Ahmose-Nefertari who are his metaphorical ancestors. This is not the only way in which the temples of both Seti I and Ramesses II reference the wider ritual landscape in which they are placed. Both are oriented towards an important point on the processional way, the Heqareshu Hill (as suggested by the Efflands). In one of the barque shrines in the Hall of Ancestors at the Ramesses II temple there is an inscription of the Litany of Re which includes cryptographic representations of the names of Ahmose and Ahmose-Nefertari. So this is probably the place where the barques of the cult statues of the deified king and queen rested as they moved in procession around the site of Abydos. Harvey said that this demonstrates that we shouldn’t think of these structures as just “the Seti I temple” etc – the king was not solely responsible for the design and features of these structures, he made the decisions involving the advice of the High Priests. And these advisors were the people who had both the local and esoteric knowledge of the sacred landscape and how best to fit the temples into it both practically and ritually.

Harvey concluded by reminding us that this picture he’s built up of Wenennefer the High Priest of Osiris and the ritual (and political) landscape his life took place within is not an isolated thing divorced from all connections. It’s an integral part of the wider ritual and political landscape at the time (for instance in the Q&A session Harvey suggested that one reason Seti I and Ramesses II and their successors had so much activity at Abydos and in the cult of Osiris was as a way of balancing their activity at Pi-Ramesses and in the cult of Seth). And it’s an integral part of the way that the ritual landscape and site of Abydos evolves over time – like the way that the cemetery of the Early Dynastic kings becomes an integral part of a procession involving the oracular cult of the first 18th Dynasty king which is restored after the end of the Amarna Period and operates in the time of the 19th Dynasty and beyond.

And it’s not the final picture even of that one moment of Wenennefer’s life and times – for instance in the southern temple cemetery, near the site of the temple of Ahmose-Nefertari, a shabti of Ramose Overseer of Cattle and son of Wenennefer and thus Harvey thinks we’ll learn more from that cemetery about the family and colleagues of Wenennefer. So every year archaeologists are finding out more about this landscape and the people who lived, worked and worshipped within it.

This was an absolutely fascinating talk – I’m not sure I’ve done it justice in my write-up here as every object Harvey showed us seemed to illustrate several different themes which were running through the talk and I’m not sure I’ve quite conveyed the interconnectedness of the whole thing. It was really interesting to hear so much of the nuts and bolts of how you get from the objects and fragments of objects that are dug up in excavations to the big picture of a living breathing place at a particular moment in time.