THE CAREER OF THE EGYPTIAN HIGH PRIEST BAKENKHONS

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The well-known block statue of the high priest Bakenkhons in Munich (GL.WAF 38) contains a passage in which he addresses future generations and gives a detailed account of the offices he held “since he was born,” with exact indications of how long he held each office. This passage has always been one of the favorite subjects of Egyptologists and has often been discussed. It is one of the rare cases which gives us solid information about the career of an Egyptian priest. But it has been used for chronological calculations as well, especially for determining the exact duration of the reign of Sethos I. My view differs from what is generally believed concerning the career of Bakenkhons in one point, but one which is important in several respects.

The precise information which Bakenkhons provides has already caused numerous calculations of his age at the time the statue was made and the text composed. From the inscription on the base, in which he asks for a “beautiful lifetime” after 110 years (of life), scholars have generally concluded that Bakenkhons was still alive when the statue was erected or at least when its text was drafted. This is not necessarily the case: asking for a “beautiful lifetime” after 110 years, the speaker can only be Bakenkhons as the statue, who wishes to endure after death. But a statue could hardly say “after my lifetime” or something similar. “After 110 years” might therefore simply mean “after the death of the owner of the statue,” no matter whether he was dead or alive at the time when it was written.

4 See n. 2 above.
There is some disagreement about the time when Bakenkhons went to school, the first period of his life mentioned in the biography. G. Lefebvre and most other commentators quite rightly assume that Bakenkhons was at least five years old when he entered school, but recently S. Schoske has taken up the old idea of F. J. Chabas and R. Engelbach that the phrase $n\ddot{s}jqr$ did not refer to Bakenkhons’s school days but, rather, to his early childhood, i.e., the years from birth to the age of four. This is substantiated by the immediately preceding passage: “I will let you know my character when I was upon the earth in every office I held since I was born.” But mentioning all the offices he held after his birth, of course, does not mean that he held any immediately after his birth—as Schoske seems to believe. It simply means that he indicated every post he held no matter how long ago this may have been. The idea that he attended school during his first four years, i.e., as a baby, is absurd. One has to add at least five or six years to the early childhood years enumerated by Bakenkhons.

The subsequent enumeration of the steps of Bakenkhons’s career, eleven years as $hrj$-j$h$ $n$ $shpr$ $n$ $njswt$ $Mn$-$m^{[5c-t-]}$-$R^c$ and seventy years as priest in different functions has been used by scholars to arrive at chronological conclusions. M. L. Bierbrier, for example, has pointed out the following: the statue bears the cartouches of Ramses II. Since Bakenkhons served in the stables of Sethos I at the beginning of his career, the statue can only have been erected towards the end of the reign of Ramses II, presumably in the last year or the year before (sixty-six). In that case, he would have been a priest under Ramses II for sixty-six years and for four additional years under Sethos I. Having served as $hrj$-j$h$ under Sethos I for eleven years before he became a priest, Bakenkhons’s career would indicate a minimal reign of fifteen years for Sethos I (although only eleven years are actually attested).

The objections raised by W. Murnane against Bierbrier’s calculation have been convincingly rejected by K. A. Kitchen. As a result, the fifteen years given for Sethos I should, in fact, be the minimum: Bakenkhons’s career would fit into the reigns of Sethos and Ramses II by a narrow margin.

Examined more closely, this conclusion is not convincing, however. As for Bakenkhons’s priestly career, it is clear that these years ($w^c:b$: four; $jtj$-$ntr$: twelve; third


9 See Bierbrier, Late New Kingdom, p. 3; Seele, Tomb of Tjanefer, p. 7, n. 54.


16 Murnane, Ancient Egyptian Coregencies, pp. 86–87.

17 Kitchen, review of Murnane, Ancient Egyptian Coregencies, p. 170.
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prophet: fifteen; second prophet: twelve; first prophet: twenty-seven) can only be added up (= seventy). But this does not necessarily hold true for the eleven years he spent as a hrj-jh. On the contrary, it seems to me much more probable that the first years of his priestly career are parallel to the period when he was a "cadet." To support this, we have the following information.

1. On his second statue, Cairo CG 42155, Bakenkhons says:18 prj.n.j m jz n zḥ3w m nds jqr m ḫwt-ntr n nbt pt (corresponding to jrrj.j jfdt rntp m nds jqr on the Munich statue),19 immediately followed by sb3:j r w3:b m pr Jmn n z3: hr drt jttj.j. It thus seems that his career as a w3:b-priest started directly after he had finished his education in the jz n zḥ3w or at least without a major interruption. Of course, it is possible that there was a little break, perhaps one to two years, between the end of his schooling and his introduction to office, during which he was especially instructed in his priestly duties (sb3:j r w3:b).

2. There are also some other indications (from different periods) that it was usual—or at least possible—to become a w3:b-priest when one was very young.

(a) Leiden V4 (MK):20 jrr.n.j j3:wt jw:j m nh(n)t w3:b.n.j r tr.j n s32, "I was (already) in office when I was a child, I became priest at my time of discernment." Cf. Sethe's comment on the passage. In connection with jw:j m nh(n)t, the phrase r tr.j n s32 can only mean immediately following his schooling.

(b) The high priest Rm-raj, Bakenkhons's successor, says of himself:21 ḥpr.n.j m ḫwn m pr-Jmn jw:j m ṣ3:b jqr, "I became a ḫwn in the house of Amun while I was a capable w3:b-priest." That goes with Bakenkhons's Munich inscription where the transition to the state of ḫwn immediately follows his education. He was a schoolboy for four years as nds jqr, thereafter a "cadet" for eleven years as ḫwn. Bakenkhons could thus, like Rm-raj, have been w3:b-priest while he was a ḫwn.

(c) On the stela Louvre C 219, we have ḫ3:n.f ṭmn ntr pn (= service as w3:b-priest) jwf m ḫwn sbq srwd(w) ṭḥ3ḥ(w) m-mnt mj ḫḥy m ḫḥw. . .22 Here the comparison of the young priest with the divine child ḫḥy is noteworthy.

(d) Stela Cairo JE 71902, l. 4:23 jrrj.j w3:b ḫr drt jttj.j . . .

(e) Statue Cairo CG 42230, right, l. 2:24 ḥq.kwj ḫr ntr m ḫwn jqr . . .

3. The possibility that Bakenkhons was at the same time w3:b-priest and hrj-jh is further strengthened by the fact that lower priests, at least the classes of w3:b and jjt-ntr (thereafter Bakenkhons immediately became, as third prophet, one of the highest priests of the "house of Amun"), did not have a "full-time job."25

19 KRI, vol. 3, p. 298, l. 3.
21 Cairo CG 42186, right, l. 1 = KRI, vol. 4, p. 209, l. 3.
22 KRI, vol. 4, p. 297, ll. 6–7.
25 Helck even wants to classify only the function of the high priest as "full-time" and not that of the third or the second prophet. The career of Bakenkhons, who insists on having named all his offices, indicates that at least the second and third prophets were "professionals" too. See idem, Grammata De motica (Festschrift Lüdeckens) (Würzburg, 1984), pp. 71–72.
4. The fact that Bakenkhons, who seems to have been descended from a family of priests, was trained as a "stablemaster" does not allow us to call him a "former soldier" as did Kees.26 Being acquainted with horsemanship and chariotry may have been a general social necessity of the time,27 and high-level priests belonged to the social élite. It is therefore more likely to have been an additional training.

If the period during which Bakenkhons was a cadet coincided with his earliest priestly years, it must be assumed that he entered school at six years of age and was later in the stables of Sethos I as a "cadet" for ten years (until the age of twenty-one); yet, at the same time, between the ages of ten and thirteen or fourteen, he was a w²b-priest and afterwards a jjt-ntr for eleven years. If one admits the possibility that he began school later and that (perhaps) there was a certain interval between school and his priestly duties,28 his education would have ended when he was between twelve and sixteen years of age. The early age for his becoming a priest would not be surprising: apart from the examples from the earlier periods cited above, one may also note the usual practice in Hellenistic Egypt.29 S. Sauneron has pointed out30 that, according to a papyrus from Tebtunis, anyone wanting to become a priest had to meet three requirements: he had to be descended from a priestly family, had to be circumcised, and had to be able to read Hieratic. The circumcision should have taken place most probably at the beginning of puberty,31 but there are cases where the sons of priests were already registered for circumcision at seven or eleven years of age respectively.32 Furthermore, W. Otto cites a fifteen-year-old priest,33 and a certain P³-šrj-n-Pth ("III") became high priest of Memphis at the early age of fourteen34 after he had spent thirteen years "under the supervision of his father." Before he was appointed high priest, he had doubtless already been initiated as w²b-priest. Otto considers whether members of privileged families were perhaps admitted earlier than others to priestly offices.35 The same could possibly have been true for the distinguished Bakenkhons family at Thebes.

The career of Bakenkhons thus may have been as follows: he attended school between the ages of six and ten (at most ten to fourteen). Then, extended over a period of seventy years, his service in different priestly offices follows,36 and parallel to its beginning (years ten to twenty-one or—at most—fourteen to twenty-five), the period as cadet, i.e., his training in horsemanship and chariotry.

26 Kees, Priesterturn, p. 118.
28 See n. 36 below.
31 Lexikon der Ägyptologie, vol. 1, p. 728. See also Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Griechische Urkunden, vol. 5 (Berlin, 1934), §91: "Da die Pubertät, die in Ägypten mit 13 oder 14 Jahren anzusetzen ist, das Alter darstellt, in welchem einer Priester wird . . . ."

I thank W. Brashear for this reference.
33 Ibid., vol. 2, p. 327.
35 Otto, Priester und Tempel, vol. 1, p. 211, n. 5.
36 The formal "ordination," of course, need not necessarily have taken place immediately after his education. On his statue in Cairo Bakenkhons says (KRI, vol. 3, p. 296, l. 2) that after his education he was trained as a w²b-priest "under the hand of his father"; thus there should have been a certain interval between these periods.
On the basis of the above discussion, the biography of Bakenkhons can no longer be used for the calculation of the minimal length of the reign of Sethos I,\textsuperscript{37} and the basis for the computation of priestly careers in general (as well as the resulting genealogical connections) must be re-evaluated.\textsuperscript{38} We can assume that the age of a priest at the time of his appointment to the different ranks might have been substantially lower than was assumed before.

\textsuperscript{37} There is now a larger margin for the transition from Bakenkhons to \textit{Rm-rj} at the end of the reign of Ramses II.

\textsuperscript{38} See Bierbrier, \textit{Late New Kingdom}, p. 3: "... it will be henceforth presumed that it was highly unlikely for anyone at this time to hold a major priesthood under the age of 35, and this conclusion will be of great importance in any attempt to analyse the ages of the holders of major priesthoods in Rameside times."