

The Egyptian Tempest Stele: an Example of Ancient Natural Disaster

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Some Ancient Egyptian texts tell us about violent storms and rains. One of the most impressive ancient accounts of natural disasters is the so-called Tempest stele (1550 BC), which describes a very destructive storm happened under Ahmose I, the king of Egypt's 18 dynasty. The upper portion of the stele describes the catastrophe. Many essential details are given, such as the specific noise, overall darkness etc. Numerous houses were washed into the river; temples, tombs and pyramids were badly damaged. The main features of the storm can be highlighted: torrential rain; darkness; and loud noise, probably caused by a thunder or a wind, or both. It evidently occasioned large-scale flooding, property damage, and loss of life. After describing the events, the stele gives account of the restoration works made by the king to repair the damages made by this great disaster. There are Egyptologists who believe the stele to be propaganda put out by the pharaoh, the "tempest" being the depredations of officials of the embattled seventeenth dynasty of Egypt drawing upon the financial resources of the temples during the escalating conflict with the Hyksos. To my opinion, we don't have sufficient grounds to deny that the storm took place in reality. Nevertheless, the Tempest Stele actually is a political propaganda, because the main purpose of the erection of the stele was to draw attention to the role of the king in coping with the disaster. Traditionally, the king was responsible for maintaining maat (a cosmic order as opposed to chaos), and this responsibility included protection from natural disasters. The main point of the specific political context of the Ahmose I's times was the struggle of what would become the 18th Dynasty to establish its rule in opposition to the Hyksos. This effort required success on two levels: the human and the divine, which meant what would be classified as the natural world today. To simply liberate the land from Hyksos rule was a necessary but not sufficient step to legitimate one's rule. The king also needed to demonstrate divine blessing meaning that the cosmic order of the natural world had been restored as well as the political world had been. The storm commemorated by the Tempest stele is not the only example of heavy storms in Egypt. It seems that hazards of that kind were more common than we now believe. What makes the Ahmose stele unique is the description of the details of such a severe catastrophe, which go beyond what is usually experienced by a regular storm and therefore might be the oldest description of a natural hazard. The catastrophe described in the Ahmose I's Tempest Stele can be considered one of the most ancient examples of natural disasters, which caused a huge impact on the society. This is also a significant example of a political propaganda, reflecting the situation when government uses a catastrophe and its consequences to its own benefit.

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