

Original article

A NEW SAITE STATUE FROM TABLUHA - TALA – MINUFIEH

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Abstract:

This article discusses an unpublished granite votive bust of an unidentified individual, accidentally found by a resident in Kafr Tabluha, Tala City, located in the Minufiyeh Governorate in the south-central Nile Delta. Dating back to the 26th dynasty, the artifact is currently housed in the museum store at Tell Basta in the Sharqia Governorate. Regrettably, the lower portion of the statue, including part of the dorsal pillar, has been lost. Standing at just over 10 cm in height, this bust exemplifies the artistic hallmarks of the Saite period, especially during the reign of King Psamtik II. The finely sculpted torso and meticulously detailed facial features reflect the period's commitment to naturalism and precision in craftsmanship, offering a striking portrayal of the period's distinctive artistic style. This study explores three key questions: the identity of the figure, his social status, and his role or occupation. While these aspects remain inconclusive, stylistic analysis and the surviving fragment of the inscription suggest that the figure was likely a high-ranking member of the priestly class, possibly associated with the fourth nome of the Delta or a neighbouring region. The object's significance is further underscored by a rare "Saite formula"—a distinctive feature not commonly found on similar statues. Additionally, the bust exhibits an intriguing fusion of tripartite and bipartite design elements in the torso, a rare stylistic combination strongly linked to the artistic conventions of Psamtik II's period.

1. Introduction

The archaeological remains from the Saite dynasty are widely distributed across the Minufiyeh governorate, fig. (1). Key sites include Tell Mostai, 32 km west of Kafr Tabluha [1,2], Kom el-Ahmar (Minuf), 26 km south of Kafr Tabluha [3], El-Fara'unniyah, 69 km south of Kafr Tabluha [4], and Kom Manous, 40 km southwest of Kafr Tabluha [5]. Recent discoveries have also been reported from the village of Abu Al-Hassan, 28 km southeast of Kafr Tabluha.

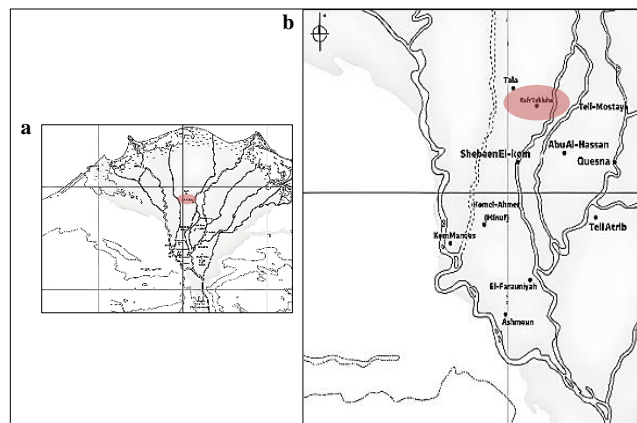


Figure (1) a. Kafr Tabluha village's location and the nearby archaeological sites, b. details from the previous map © authors.

Several significant archaeological sites have been identified in Tala City, including Bindariyyah, Kafr Hammam, Kom Ahmar (Saft Jidam), Takh Dalakah, and others. However, no monuments from the 26th dynasty have been recorded within the city's boundaries, except for Kafr Tabluha. Unlike the aforementioned sites, which have drawn interest from both Egyptian and foreign archaeological missions, Kafr Tabluha has received limited attention. To date, neither the Supreme Council of Antiquities (SCA) nor the EES Minufiyeh Archaeological Survey has conducted excavations or systematic archaeological investigations at the site [3,4,6-14]. Kafr Tabluha is located approximately 6 km from Tala, 15 km northeast of Shibin El-Kom, 32 km northeast of Quesna in Minufiyeh governorate, and 20 km southeast of Tanta in the Gharbia Governorate. In addition to this bust, two other unpublished objects were also accidentally discovered in the same Kafr, underscoring the region's historical significance. The bust itself is carved from granite and is currently housed in the museum store at Tell Basta in Zagazig, Sharqia governorate. It is registered in the west central delta register under inventory number 2513. Unfortunately, the west central delta register provides only limited information about the bust. It includes a brief description of the statue's dimensions and pose, along with some hieroglyphic signs on the back

pillar—some of which are inaccurately recorded. Additionally, it notes only the village where the statue was discovered. Consequently, the bust remains enigmatic due to the absence of an archaeological context, the unexplored lower half, and the challenges in interpreting the remaining inscriptions. Given these constraints, the statue's artistic features, the surviving inscription, and comparable models from the same period remain the primary sources for studying the bust at present.

2. General Description

2.1. Dimensions and material features

The bust represents the upper portion of an adult male figure, displaying remarkable craftsmanship and well-preserved details, fig. (2). The right side reaches a maximum height of 12 cm, while the left stands at 9.5 cm. The bust spans 8 cm in width and extends to a depth of 5.2 cm. The remaining dorsal pillar measures 4 cm in width and 7 cm in height, consisting of two vertical columns, each approximately 1.5 cm wide. A distinctive light-colored rock vein runs through the stone, beginning near the right ear and shoulder, extending across the elbow, and continuing along the back of the bust.

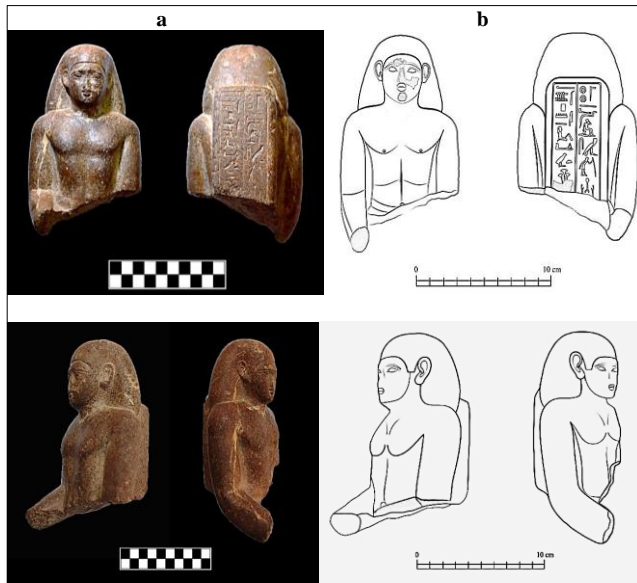


Figure (2) **a**, The frontal and back side of the bust of Kafr Tabluha, **b**, line drawing of the frontal side and the hieroglyphic text of the dorsal pillar, **c**, the left and right side of the bust of Kafr Tabluha, **d**, line drawing left and right side of the bust (*lines drawing by Hassan, A. & Al-Sharkawy, R.*)

2.2. Break and preservation

The bust is separated from the lower portion of the statue by a diagonal break line that starts at the left elbow, cuts through the upper right forearm, and extends across the waist just below the navel. The preserved section includes the head, adorned with a rounded, shoulder-length bag wig, as well as the upper torso, shoulders, left humerus, right humerus, and a portion of the right forearm. The missing lower half leaves the original posture uncertain, making it unclear whether the figure was standing, kneeling, or sitting cross-legged. However, the preserved portion of the right forearm, which extends slightly forward and downward, suggests several possibilities.

The figure may have been depicted holding a shrine or a deity's figure, as seen in comparable examples [15,16]. Alternatively, the statue may have represented a kneeling figure with hands resting on the knees, as seen in other works from the period [1,15-19]. A third possibility is that the figure was seated in the cross-legged position of a scribe, as evidenced by similar sculptures [15]. Given the statue's incomplete state, its precise pose remains speculative.

2.3. Facial and wig features

Despite minor damage, the bust is exceptionally well preserved, particularly in the facial features. Slight abrasions are present on the nose, chin, left cheek, forehead, and eyebrows, but these imperfections do not obscure the figure's distinct characteristics. The face is round and full, conveying a dignified yet serene expression. The almond-shaped eyes are wide open, with slightly protruding eyeballs outlined by raised rims, representing cosmetic lines that extend subtly backward. The eyebrows are bushy and sculpted in raised relief, positioned close to the eyes, and arch outward toward the temples. The large, well-defined ears remain exposed, while the small mouth has slightly full lips set in a neutral expression. The right nostril is partially visible due to damage, and the philtrum beneath the nose is absent. The figure wears a smooth, rounded wig that falls over the shoulders and extends down the back, framing the face like a cushion. Though partially obscured by the dorsal pillar at the top, the wig is distinctly outlined by a noticeable edge running from the forehead to the ears. Unlike other period sculptures, the wig lacks decorative embellishments or straight lines.

2.4. Torso and anatomical detailing

The torso is skillfully modeled, with the arms positioned closely to the sides, creating a small space between them and the torso. Every aspect of the torso is meticulously rendered, from the broad shoulders and ribcage structure to the midline of the abdomen and muscular arms, all symmetrical and robust. These features reflect the artistic precision of an idealized workshop. Even the navel is delicately carved as a subtle, rounded depression. The blend of strength, elegance, and minimal ornamentation conveys a clear expression of masculinity—strong bones, taut muscles, and a well-defined physique. This stylistic approach harmonizes idealism with balance and refinement. Just above the break line, a small portion of the waistband is visible, marked by a diagonal notch on the right side of the abdomen, near the right elbow. This suggests that the figure was likely wearing a short kilt, providing further context about the statue's original appearance. The surface of the sculpture exhibits a beautifully smooth, velvety texture.

2.5. Artistic and stylistic interpretation

The bust reflects the artistic ideals of masculine strength, youth, and elegance, portraying a robust yet refined figure likely aged between 18 and 25 years. Its meticulous execution—seen in the symmetrical musculature, serene facial expression, and smooth finish—suggests it was produced in a high-quality workshop. The simplicity and sophistication of the rounded wig, the precise rendering of anatomical details, and the minimal ornamentation align closely with Site dynasty stylistic conventions, emphasizing a harmonious blend of idealism and technical mastery.



reflect Saite dynasty ideals of masculine strength and refinement. **3)** The hieroglyphic inscription follows the "Saite formula" typical of the 26th dynasty. **4)** Linguistically, it displays hallmark Saite features such as omitted signs, word divisions across lines, and occasional reversals—traits consistent with 26th dynasty inscriptional conventions. **5)** The combined evidence of inscription and artistry points to the subject's non-royal elite status, reinforcing how textual formulae and artistic expression were deeply intertwined with personal identity and religious representation in Late Period statuary.

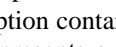












5. Discussion

5.1. The identity, status, and position of the statue's owner

The identification of the statue's owner, along with his status and position, remains a challenging task due to the incomplete nature of the inscription on the statue's dorsal pillar and the scarcity of comparable examples. The inscription appears to be a unique and rare occurrence, further complicating its interpretation. Typically, one would expect the title, name, and often the filiation of the statue's owner to follow the opening formula *ntr niwty* [23]. However, deciphering this particular inscription is difficult. It begins with the word *ꜥdd*, a term that first appears in the New Kingdom and continues thereafter [26,36-42]. The term *ꜥdd* serves as a synonym for various expressions denoting youth, including "young man," "adolescent," "young boy," "child," and "lad." It can also refer to a "newborn" [43], "infants," or "very young children still under the care of nurses" [44]. Additionally, it is used to describe "little children" or those of a "dependent age" [36,37, 45-48]. Beyond its connection to youth, *ꜥdd* has also been employed in contexts referring to disciples [26]. In some cases, it denotes a "servant of someone" [26,39, 49-51]. Similarly, the feminine form *ꜥddt* referred to a "suckling child," "girl," "daughter," or "young woman" [29,36,37,43,52]. Girls worked alongside adolescents, with *tꜥ* *ꜥdd* meaning "young female worker" [48,53-55]. Although the term *ꜥdd*/*ꜥddw* commonly referred to "young children," inscriptions indicate it also denoted an age group characterized by youth, eligibility for marriage, military service, and employment across various professions [43,47,49,56-59]. It was also associated with priestly duties [56-58] and temple settlements [36,37]. Like other social groups, it included individuals of lower economic status, often receiving minimal compensation for their labor [48,56, 57]. Some *ꜥddw* enjoyed wealth and prosperity [43,60-62]. The community's support made education accessible to all [36,37,43,48,56,57,60,62]. Some *ꜥddw* asserted their right to independent thought, displaying persuasive argumentation and eloquence [47,60]. Their instructors held them in high esteem [56,57]. In summary, across the numerous inscriptions examined, the term *ꜥdd* is never used as a proper name, priestly title, or administrative title. This sets it apart from the well-known "Saite formulae," where a title typically follows the introductory phrase (*ntr niwty*). While the statue's owner—likely between eighteen and twenty-five—shares characteristics with younger *ꜥddw*, indicating that some within this group

were mature enough to assume significant responsibilities, the term *ꜥdd* remains too broad and lacks specificity regarding status or role. The latter portion of the inscription remains as challenging to decipher and interpret as the first. However, several plausible readings can still be proposed:

-  *ꜥdd(d) ḥtp m swr ḥkꜣ(w) [...]* – "the young boy who takes pleasure in increasing the magic power [...]" (Suggested by Karl Jansen-Winkel, Email to Tamer Mohamed, 7 June 2023).
-  *ꜥdd smsw ḥkꜣ* – "the adolescent, eldest of Heka [...]" (Suggested by David Koltz, Email to Tamer Mohamed, 19 September 2023).

However, neither phrase has direct parallels in the existing corpus, leaving room for further hypotheses. Could the inscription contain a proper noun? Is it feasible that  represents a compound name, such as *ꜥdd+msi(w)*? Alternatively, could  be an instance of alphabetic writing characteristic of the Egyptian language during the Saite period [29], possibly representing the sign  (*F31*)? Another possibility is that its structure resembles names such as  *ḥrd-msi(w)* [34]. The varied forms of *ms* found in inscriptions—such as  [63] and  [64]—lend some support to this hypothesis. Additionally, during the New Kingdom, a name similar to this emerged:  *ꜥdd-ꜣ*, an alternate name for *Nfr-ḥtp* [34,65]. *ꜥdd* also appeared as part of several other proper names, including  *pꜣ ꜥdd* [34],  *Ḥr-n-ꜥdd* [34,66]: *Ḥr(w)-m-ꜥdd*, and  *pꜣy-nb-n-ꜥdd (?)* [34,66]: *pꜣy-nb-m-ꜥdd*. Some similar forms continued into the Late period, such as  *pꜣ-(n-?) wis-n-ꜥdd(?)* [66]. The prevalence of names like *Alsaqhir*, *Alkabir*, and *Aleajuz* in contemporary Egyptian society supports the idea that *ꜥdd-msi(w)* could function as a proper name. Additionally, *ꜥdd* may correspond to the Arabic name *al-Jadaa* [67], which is given to strong, virtuous boys. If so, *ꜥdd-msi(w)* might be translated as "the birth of the youth" or "the birth of al-Jadaa." However, unless this statue represents an exceptional case, none of these suggestions can be considered definitive, given that no known "Saite formula" includes a proper name directly following *ntr niwty*. Another possibility is that *ꜥdd* should be understood as "young servant." In this context, "servant" does not imply subjugation or menial labor but rather a role of dignity, authority, and pride. The sculptor of the statue seems to have imbued it with a sense of strength and privilege associated with youth. This interpretation aligns with the possible reading  *smsw ḥkꜣ(w)*, meaning "the god Eldest Magician" (*ḥkꜣ smsw*), a figure embodying the creative force of the divine [32,68]. If so, could  *ꜥdd (n) smsw ḥkꜣ(w)* be translated as "young servant (of) the (god) Eldest Magician"? This reading would suggest that the individual had a unique personality, even though the term *ꜥdd* itself does not explicitly convey this distinction. As we have seen, youths were often recruited as *wab*-priests in temple service. Numerous inscriptions attest to their involvement in religious institutions. In his autobiography, Bakenkhons

recounts graduating from the scribal school at the Temple of the Lady of Heaven as a promising youth before being trained as a *wab*-priest in the House of Amun under his father's guidance [69,70]. A stela in the Louvre describes a man who began serving a deity in his youth and took pride in his daily progress [48]. Roma-Roy similarly states: "*I grew up as a youth in the House of Amun, being an excellent wab-priest, possessing an intelligent mind and good character, and with my steps always in their proper place*" [71,72]. Pasherentpah became High Priest of Ptah at the age of fourteen, and upon his death, the position was passed to his son, who was only seven [48,73]. Other sources from different periods also indicate that it was common—if not expected—for youths to enter the priesthood at an early age [74]. Furthermore, magic was closely associated with youth in ancient Egypt. To bridge the gap between the human and divine, priests and magicians often employed children as mediums [75]. The *Vandier Papyrus* from the Ramesside period describes the magical scribe Meryre, whose exceptional powers, despite his youth, provoked jealousy among royal magicians [76]. Interestingly, the *Report of Wenamun* uses the term *ḥd* 𓆎 and its plural *ḥdw* 𓆎w [43]. The translation of this term has been debated: **a)** "Page" [26,58,77-80]. **b)** "Youth" [81]. **c)** "Noble youth" [58,82]. **d)** "Older noble youth" [83]. **e)** "Old man" or "priest" [84,85]. **f)** "Young man" [60,86]. Some scholars propose a Semitic origin for the term, linking it to religious functions, particularly oracular practices. Ebach suggests it derives from the Aramaic *ḥd* ("priest") [87], while Görg interprets it as "ecstatic" [88]. Cody argues that the *ḥd*/*ḥdw* in *Wenamun* is not the Late Egyptian term for "young person" but a North-West Semitic word (*ḥdd*) denoting a professional oracle medium [89]. Hoch similarly suggests a Semitic term meaning "seer" [90]. In this case, *ḥd* did not mean 'child', but was written similarly through visual and phonetic associations [44]. One observes that although the Egyptian and Semitic terms have distinct origins, both are deeply intertwined with religion and magic. If this interpretation is correct, we may be dealing with a young priest holding a regional priestly title linked to the nome where the statue was found. While this hypothesis is compelling, it remains speculative until a parallel inscription is discovered or the missing lower portion of the statue is recovered. Ultimately, given the "Saite formula," the extraordinary title, and the potential presence of a proper name, it is clear that we are dealing with an exceptional case.

5.2. Stylistic elements and the dating of the bust

The 26th dynasty is confirmed as the date of this bust, not only through the "Saite formula" but also through various artistic elements.

5.2.1. The bag wig

The bag wig, distinguished by its bag-like shape that protrudes behind the ears without horizontal or vertical striations or divisions, became a prominent feature during the Saite dynasty [15,91]. This wig style is particularly notable for its smooth, compact form, which contrasts with earlier, more striated wig types. Several examples from the reign of Psamtik I offer clear evidence of the bag wig's use: **a)** The asymmetric

squatting figure of Bes (Fundações Calouste Gulbenkian, Lisbon, no. 158 [15, 92-94]. **b)** The anonymous scribe (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; no. 15.2.1 [15]. **c)** The statue of Bes, Prince of Mendes (Museo Nazionale, Palermo, no. 145 [15]. Some argued that the asymmetric squatting figure of Bes represents the first securely dated example of the bag wig in the Late Period [15]. Following the decline of the vertically striated wig in Egyptian sculpture, the bag wig became a defining feature of Saite private sculpture, particularly during the reign of Necho II [92]. Though the bag wig underwent some minor modifications over time, it remained a prominent style throughout the Late Period [15]. It is significant to note that while the bag wig was a distinctive feature of Saite sculpture, all other wig types seen in 26th dynasty art have earlier origins in ancient Egyptian traditions, with the possible exception of the bag wig itself [92].

5.2.2. The eyes and eyebrows

The small, naturalistic depiction of the eyes and eyebrows is a notable feature of this bust, reflecting the early Saite artistic conventions. The eyes are long and oval-shaped, framed by thick, rounded lines that converge at the outer corners to form an extended cosmetic line. The eyebrows are rendered as prominent, bold bands that descend over the outer corners of the eyes, almost meeting the cosmetic lines [15,91,95].

5.2.3. The height of the dorsal pillar

One of the most striking features of this bust is the dorsal pillar, which conceals the lower quarter of the bag wig. This characteristic is found in only a small number of sculptures. A prominent example is the upper portion of the theophoric statue of Ipy "Beautiful Name" Psamtik-ankh, dated to the reign of Psamtik II. However, the dorsal pillar in Ipy's statue is notably wide and shallow (New York, former Michel Abemayor collection [96,97]. Another example is the naophorous statue of Pay-ef-tjauemawyneit, who lived during the late Saite period, primarily under the reign of Amasis (Louvre 93A [1,98]. Several 26th dynasty statues also display this feature. For instance, the naophorous statue of Djedmontuiufankh, son of Pediamunnebnutaw, likely created during the reign of Necho II, features a dorsal pillar that extends well below the bottom of the wig CGC 48649 [95]. Additionally, the naophorous statue of Wahibre, probably from the end of the same dynasty, demonstrates a similar feature (Bologna Museo Archeologico KS 1840 + Cairo Egyptian Museum JE 42880) [99]. This characteristic is particularly significant as the height of the dorsal pillar in relation to the wig varies across statues. In some instances, the dorsal pillar reaches the top of the wig [95,100,101], while in others, it reaches the center of the wig [102,104]. Often, the dorsal pillar either covers or terminates just below the underside of the wig (CGC 48601, 48602, 48604, 48607, 48616, 48617, 48619, 48621, 48625, 48628, 48629, 48631, 48635, 48636, 48637, 48639, 48640, 48641, 48642, 48643, 48644, 48646, 48647, 48648). In conclusion, while there is considerable variation in the positioning of the dorsal pillar relative to the wig in Late Period statues, especially in 26th dynasty sculptures, covering the lower quarter of the wig is an unusual feature. This characteristic was nearly exclusive to the Saite dynasty and may have been limited to specific periods within that dynasty.

5.2.4. The tripartition and bipartition of the torso

The tripartition of the torso is a distinctive feature of this bust, highlighting individuality and contributing to its unique style. The torso is divided into three horizontal sections: the abdomen, rib cage, and chest [15,92,104]. This contrasts with the bipartition, which divides the torso vertically along the median line, extending from the navel to the collarbones or sternal notch. In bipartite depictions, the median line divides the torso into two equal halves, a feature that is less pronounced or absent in the tripartition model [104]. In this bust, however, the bipartition's median line is retained, although the collarbones are absent, replaced by a fleshy chest and a compressed neck. Furthermore, the bust emphasizes the torso's triangular form, with the shoulders, nipples, and navel marking the base and apex of the triangle [92]. The evolution of bipartition and tripartition in torso modeling occurred separately throughout the 26th dynasty. Initially, bipartition was the dominant style, followed by a combination of both, and eventually, tripartition replaced bipartition. The transition between these two styles can be observed in several statues from the reign of Psamtik II, which incorporate both bipartition and tripartition [15]. One of the earliest known examples of tripartite torso modeling is the kneeling statue of Nakht-hor-hab (Louvre A 94), dating to the reign of Psamtik II [16,92,104]. However, Nakht-hor-hab's statue retains the bipartition's median line, a feature also found in the Kafr Tabluha bust. While the bipartition divide continued to appear in sculptures under Psamtik II's successors, it gradually faded over time. Bothmer et al. noted that the bust of Ipy, also from the reign of Psamtik II, notably lacks the median line, signaling a shift toward a new approach to representing the human body in the round—a shift that would become more pronounced in later works [15]. This oscillation persisted until the reign of Amasis, when the tripartite torso division achieved its full development. The statue of Inhumet (Neferibra-nakht), dating from the reigns of Psamtik II and his successor Apries, marks the end of the bipartition style. The torso is characterized by a marked median line, the latest example of pure bipartition, which begins to be superseded by tripartition in the time of Psamtik II (Mr. Albert Gallatin, New York, N.Y. + CGC 895: [15]. The fully developed tripartite division is personified by the kneeling statue of Psamtik-seneb (BM 1604), dating to the reign of Amasis. In this statue, the median line is absent, and there is no vertical division. The torso is fully modeled, with three rounded horizontal sections—chest, rib cage, and abdomen—giving the sculpture a soft, naturalistic appearance [92]. In conclusion, the date of the Kafr Tabluha bust is influenced by its rare combination of bipartition and tripartition in a single statue, a feature characteristic of the transitional period during the reign of Psamtik II. This bust, along with the statues of Nakht-hor-hab and Ipy, exemplifies this shift in torso construction. These works, associated with individuals from Psamtik II's circle and his successor Apries, share distinctive characteristics that highlight the evolving representation of the human body in the 26th dynasty. Although the bust of Ipy lacks the median line found in earlier bipartite works, like Ipy's chest, the Kafr Tabluha bust features a fully modeled, fleshy, naturalistic appearance—an emerging convention during Psamtik II's

reign [15]. This shift toward greater naturalism in torso modeling represents the growing sophistication of Late period Egyptian art. Furthermore, the full integration of bipartition and tripartition in torso modeling was fully realized only in the 4th century BCE [105].

6. Conclusion

The Kafr Tabluha bust stands as a testament to the artistic innovations and evolving sculptural traditions of the 26th dynasty. Its distinctive Saite formula, rare stylistic combination, and unique provincial provenance highlight its critical role in understanding Saite art's complexities. The bust's youthful depiction and inscription suggest a religious function, while its sculptural features reflect the transitional artistic phase during Psamtik II's reign. Moreover, its discovery broadens the known geographical scope of artistic and religious activity beyond major Saite centers, pointing to the importance of lesser-known sites in Minufiyeh Governorate. Although the missing portion of the dorsal pillar leaves some questions unresolved, future discoveries may clarify the statue's original context and the identity of the depicted individual. Ultimately, continued research and archaeological exploration remain essential to fully reveal the historical significance of this remarkable artifact.

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