

The Stela of Irtisen

(Louvre Museum C 14)

"Daedalus, son of Eupalamus, who is said to have received the art of craftsmanship from Athena, threw down from the roof Perdix, son of his sister, envying his skill, because he first invented the saw. Because of this crime he went into exile from Athens to Crete to King Minos."

Fabulae by Hyginus,
translated by Mary Grant



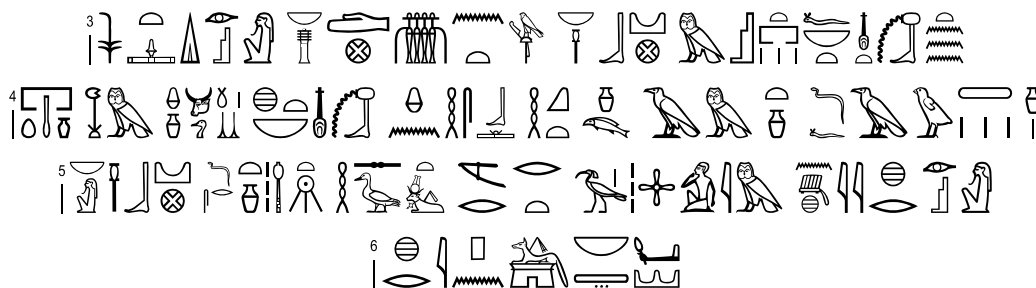
nh hrw zm3 t3wi nbt i zm3 t3wi (n)sw(t)-bit(i)

z3 r^c Mntw-htp nh(.w) dt



b3k.f m3^c n st-ib.f irr hzzt.f nbt m hrt-hrw nt r^c nb

im3hy hr ntr 3 Irtisen

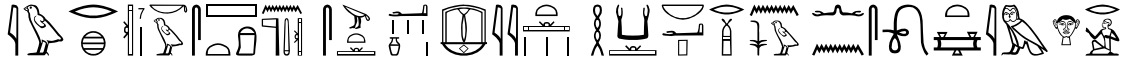


*htp-di-(n)swt wsir nb dd(w) hnt(i) imntiw nb 3bdw m swt.f nbt nfrt w^cbt (di.f) prt-hrw (m)
h3 m t hnkt k3w 3pdw šsr mnht ht nbt nfrt w^cbt t n hsb h(n)kt h3mt df3w nw nb 3bdw dsrt*

hdt h3t mrret 3hiw wnm im n im3hy hr wsir hr inpw nb t3-dsr



(i)m(i)-r hmwt(i)w zh3w gnwti Irtisen dd



iw(.i) rh.kw sšt3 n mdw-ntr sšmt- ʿw nw h3byt h3 nb

ʿpr.n(.i) sw nn sw3t im hr.i



ink grt hmww ikr m hmt.f pr hr-tp m rht.n.f



iw(.i) rh.kw r(3)w-b3gw f3t nt tp-hsb

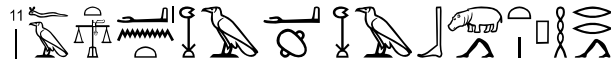
šdt sʿkt m pr(.f) ʿk.f r iiw hʿ r st.f



iw(.i) rh.kw šmt twt nmtt rpyt



ʿhʿw nw 3 11 ks 3t n skr wʿt(y) dgg irt n snwt.s ssnd hr n rst



f3t ʿ nt h3ʿ h3b nmtt phrr



iw(.i) rh.kw irt imywt hwt h33t.(s)n



nn rdt m3h.sn (in) ht n(i) iʿ.(s)n (i)n mw grt



nn pry hr.s n bw-nb wp(w) hr.i wʿ.kw hnʿ z3.i smsw n ht.i



wd.n ntr ir.f pr n.f hr.s



iw m3n(.i) prt ʿwi.f m irt (i)m(i)-r k3t m ʿ3t nbt špst

h3t-r hd hnʿ nbw phwi-r 3b(w) r hbn(i)



prt-hrw (m) ḥ3 m t ḥnkt 3pdw k3w šsr mnḥt ḥt nbt nfrt w^cbt n im3hy 'Irtisn ikr m3^ct ḥrw

ms.n 'Idt m3^ct ḥrw

The Stela of Irtisen

Vocabulary

nh hrw living Horus

zm3 unite

b3k servant

st-ib favorite, wish, affection

hzi bless, praise

hsb kind of bread

hsbw reckoning, account, measure

h(n)kt h3mt kind of beer

df3w provisions

dsrt strong ale

hdt h3zt milk (lit. whiteness) of Hezat (cow goddess)

inpw Anubis

t3-dsr Sacred Land (necropolis)

hmwti craftsman

zh3w scribe

gnwti sculptor

s3t3 make secret, mysterious; (noun) secret

mdw-ntr hieroglyphs

s3mi guide, lead

h3byt festival offerings

hk3 magic (often plural)

pr equip, provide

sw3i pass

hmww craftsman

r(3)w-b3gw proportions of thickness (in liquid)

f3i raise, lift up, carry, support, weigh

hsb count

3mi go, walk

twt image, figure, statue

nmtt stride, movements, journeys

rpyt female statue

h3w positions, posture

3 bird (generic)

ksi bend/bow down, prostrate

3t moment (of attack), instant

s3r smite, strike down

w3t(y) captive, prisoner

dgi look, glance, see, behold


rst (sacrificial) victim

h3c throw, thrust, harpoon

h3b hippopotamus


phrr run, (noun) runner


imyt pigment

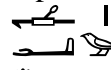
 *h33t* incrustation, enamel


 *m3h/m3h*


burn


 *pri* go up, go forth, come out,
come forth, ascend, emerge, renowned


 *wpw hr* except, but (lit.
separated from)

 *w3i* be alone


 *ht* body, belly

 *wd* command, assign, bestow, ordain,
decree

 *(i)m(i)-r k3t* overseer of work

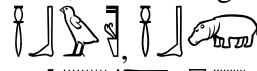
 *h3t-r...phwi-r* beginning...to the

end

 *3t* precious stone

 *hd* silver

 *nbw* gold

 *3bw* ivory

 *hbni* ebony

Grammar Points

"So, Minos, moved to cover his disgrace, resolved to hide the monster in a prison, and he built with intricate design, by Daedalus contrived, an architect of wonderful ability, and famous. This he planned of mazy wanderings that deceived the eyes, and labyrinthic passages involved. so sports the clear Maeander, in the fields of Phrygia winding doubtful; back and forth it meets itself, until the wandering stream fatigued, impedes its wearied waters' flow; from source to sea, from sea to source involved. So Daedalus contrived innumerable paths, and windings vague, so intricate that he, the architect, hardly could retrace his steps."

Metamorphoses: Book 8; Minos & Scylla by Ovid,
translated by Brooke Moore



ᵑnh ḥrw zm3 t3wi nbt i zm3 t3wi (n)sw(t)-bit(i) z3 rᵑ MNTW-ḤTP ᵑnh(.w) dt

The stela starts with the royal titulary¹ of Mentuhotep II (11th Dynasty, 2055-2004 BC).



b3k.f m3ᵑ n st-ib.f irr ḥzzt.f nbt m ḥrt-ḥrw nt rᵑ nb im3ḥy ḥr ntr 3 Irtisen

Irtisen, the owner of this stela introduces himself as *b3k m3ᵑ* “humble servant” (lit. true servant) of the King with transparent grammar. *st-ib* is a phrase for “favorite,” *irr* “who does” is the imperfective active participle of the 3ae-inf. verb *iri* “do, make,” and *ḥzzt.f* “what he holds worthy (of praise)” is a feminine imperfective relative form of the 3-ae-inf. verb *ḥzi* “bless.” The imperfectives are used here to emphasize that devotion to the

¹ See Gardiner, Excursus A, pp. 71-76, and Allen, Essay 6. For the royal titularies of Senwosret III and Amenhotep III see also Chapters 8 and 20 in this web site.

King is an ongoing, continual action. This devotion is further underlined by the attached adverbial phrase *hrt-hrw nt r^c nb* “in the course of every day” (with *hrt*, a feminine nisbe).

Finally, *A im3hy hr B* is a frequently occurring phrase: “A is worthy of respect of B.”²



h̄tp-di-(n)swt wsir nb dd(w) h̄nt(i) imntiw nb 3bdw m swt.f nbt nfrt w^cbt (di.f) prt-hrw (m) h̄3 m t h̄nkt k3w 3pdw šsr mnht ht nbt nfrt w^cbt t n h̄sb h̄(n)kt h̄3mt df3w nw nb 3bdw dsrt h̄dt h̄z3t mrrt 3h̄iw wnm im n im3hy hr wsir hr i(n)pw nb t3-dsr

The stela continues with the well-known *h̄tp-di-nswt* dedicatory formula.³ One only needs to mention the missing imperfective *di.f* or *di.sn*, and the missing *m* “consisting of” in front of *h̄3*.

The indirect genitive *t n h̄sb* probably refers to a kind of bread (alternatively, *h̄sb(w)* may refer to “measure, ration” so that this noun phrase could mean “bread of measure,” while *h̄(n)kt h̄3mt* is a kind of beer. The list continues with *df3w* “provisions” (general), *dsrt* “strong ale,” and *h̄dt h̄z3t* “milk of the cow-goddess Hezat” (lit. “whiteness of Hezat”).

Once again *mrrt X* “what X like(s)” (with X here being the akhs, the deceased who made a successful transition to afterlife) is a frequently used construction employing the feminine imperfective relative form of the 3ae-inf. verb *mri* “like, love.” The resumptive pronoun is missing here, actually replaced by *im* “of which” or “whereof,” a fairly common practice.

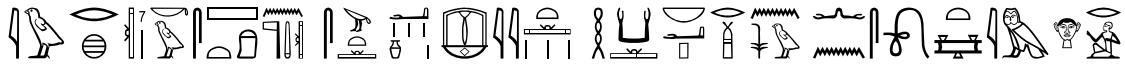


(i)m(i)-r h̄mwt(i)w zh3w gnwti Irtisn dd

Before he speaks, Irtysen introduces himself as the overseer of *h̄mwt* “craftsmen, artisans” (collective noun) and as *zh3w* “scribe” and *gnwti* “sculptor.” (The last two are singular, so they refer only to Irtysen himself.)

² See Allen, Essay 21.

³ See Gardiner, Excursus B, pp. 170-173, and Allen, (24.10).



iw(.i) rh.kw sst3 n mdw-ntr sšmt- ʿw nw h3byt hk3 nb ʿpr.n(.i) sw

nn sw3t im hr.i

Irtysen’s speech starts with the subject-stative construction *iw(.i) rh.kw* “I know” using the stative of the 2-lit. verb *rh* with (exceptional) active meaning. This self-laudatory approach is an essential feature of this kind of stela (and tomb inscriptions), in fact, *iw(.i) rh.kw* is repeated in the text three more times. The long list of Irtysen’s know-how’s begins with the most important scribal skill, the knowledge of *mdw-ntr* “hieroglyphs.” Next in the list, the starting phrase *sšmt- ʿw* lit. “guiding the arms” may mean “accomplish, make happen,” containing the infinitive of the caus. 3ae-inf. verb *sšmi* “lead, guide” and having *h3byt* “festival offerings” as its object. The object *hk3 nb* “all magic” of the 3-lit. verb *ʿpr* “acquire, equip” (in circumstantial *sdm.n.f*/perfect with omitted subject) is topicalized (and is referenced by the resumptive pronoun *sw*). As a final emphasis, the *nn* + infinitive construction applied to *sw3i hr* “pass by” claims Irtysen’s thoroughness and attention to detail. Note also that according to Gardiner⁴ *sw3t* is a participle occurring in a “negative universal proposition” with literal meaning “there is none thereof that passes by me.”

*“And I have filled him with the spirit of God,
in wisdom, and in understanding, and in knowledge,
and in all manner of workmanship,
To devise cunning works, to work in gold, and in silver, and in brass,
And in cutting of stones, to set them, and in carving of timber,
to work in all manner of workmanship.”*

Exodus 31:3-5 Bible, King James Version

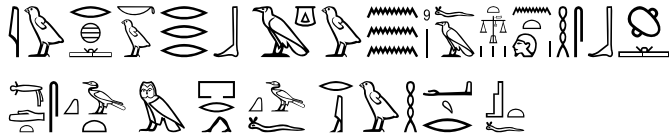


ink grt hmww ikr m hmt.f pr hr-tp m rht.n.f

The new passage here starts with an A B nominal sentence: *ink grt* ... (using the enclitic particle *grt* “moreover, now”). The singular *hmww* of the collective noun *hmwt* (both derived from *hmt* “craft, skill”) used previously identifies Irtysen’s profession. The

⁴ Gardiner (§394).

perfective active participle *pr* “who became” of the verb *pri* (again) and the perfect relative form *rht.n.f* “what he learned” of the 2-lit. verb *rh* “learn” are used to state his superior status in the profession.







iw(.i) rh.kw r(3)w-b3gw f3t nt tp-ḥsb

šdt sḥkt m pr(.f) ḥk.f r iiw ḥr r st.f

The text describing the actual skills of Irtysen becomes here technical. We first discuss the grammar and then the possible interpretations. The noun *r3w-b3gw* means “proportions of thickness” (in liquids) with *b3gw* “weariness, languidness, sluggish,” probably meaning “sinking” and being descriptively related to the 4ae-inf adjective-verb *b3gi* “lazy, weary;” the infinitive *f3t* of the 3ae-inf. verb *f3i* (used as a noun) means “to weigh,” and *tp-ḥsb* can be translated as “correct way” (that is, by calculation, since *ḥsb* means “count, calculate”). This is clearly a description of mixing/dissolving certain substance(s) in water with exact proportions.

The next line is vague and difficult to interpret. The 3ae-inf verb *šdi* “pull out, take, remove,” and the caus. 2-lit. verb *sḥk* “fit in” (lit. “cause to enter”) are in infinitives: *šdt* and *sḥkt*. The preposition *m* “(according) as” has object *pr(.f) ḥk.f*. The latter contains the nonattributive perfective relative forms of the verbs *pri* and *ḥk* whose subject, the suffixed pronoun *.f* applies to both. The literal meaning is “according as it emerges and



enters.” (The pairing of *pri* and *ḥk* is well attested: ⁵ and ⁶.) The next clause (which can be introduced using “so that”)

starts with *r iiw*.  could be a rare writing of the infinitive  *iwt*, but most likely it is the emphatic prospective *sdmw.f*/prospective of *ii* as at the time this verb form evolved partly into the *r* + infinitive pseudoverbal construction (and partly into prospective/subjunctive). The noun *ḥr* not only means “body” (in which case it is mostly

⁵ [Urk. 498, 7].

⁶ [Urk. 433, 11-12].

plural) but also “part, member.” (One should note that sometimes the body (in plural) and its members are distinguished:

 ¹⁶  iw.f n nsrt tk3.s h'w(f) n 3ht wnm.s 'wt.f “He is (destined) to fire

that will torch his body, and to flame that will consume his limbs.”⁷) Thus the phrase in question can be translated as: “so that (each) member will come in its place.” Putting everything together, the literal translation of the whole passage is: “taking/removing and fitting in as it comes out/emerges and goes in/enters so that (each) member will come to its place.” Badawy⁸ interprets the whole passage as a description of mixing some sort of cement and making relief sculpture not by carving but by hollow casting. The last obscure part would fit into this as a complex relief would require molding and demolding multiple parts.

There is only scanty evidence that the ancient Egyptians were familiar with making this type of relief sculpture. (Using copper and bronze, lost-wax casting was, however, in practice since the Early Dynastic period. Casting objects in metal such as gold and to guild statues is well-attested; see for example king Sety I’s Al-Kanais inscriptions [Kanais C, 9] in this web site.) On the other hand, J. Davidovits used this passage of the Irtysen Stela as contributing evidence to his theory that the blocks of the pyramids in the Giza plateau were made of a type of concrete from a mixture of limestone, clay, lime, and water. But the vagueness of the technical description allows several other interpretations. For example, the first passage may as well refer to mixing paints and the second to the mortise-and-tenon joints of basic carpentry. (The Abydos ships near the temple of Khentyamentiu clearly show that these types of joints were well-employed long before Irtysen’s time.)

*“But Hera was very angry and quarreled with her mate.
And because of this strife she bare without union with
Zeus who holds the aegis a glorious son, Hephaestus,
who excelled all the sons of Heaven in crafts”*

Hesiod, The Theogony, translated by H.G. Evelyn-White

⁷ See [Kanais C, 15-16] in this web site.

⁸ The Stela of Irtysen, Chronique d’Egypte, Bruxelles, Tome XXXVI, pp. 269-276, (1961).





iw(.i) rh.kw šmt twt nmтт rpyt

As the walking legs determinative suggests the infinitive *šmt* (of the 3ae-lit. verb *šmi*) should be “gait” (manner of walking, stepping, or running) instead of “stance” although the latter would better fit with *twt* “male statue/figure.” In a nice balance, on the female counterpart, the meaning of the noun *nmтт* “step, walk” is similar to *šmt* (and it is clearly related to the 3ae-verb *nmi* “travel, traverse”). The standing woman is the ideogram for *rpyt* “female statue.”






ḥw nw 3 11 ks 3t n skr wʿt(y) dgg irt n snwt.s ssnd ḥr n rst


The next few passages are beautiful but difficult. First, in the stela we have 

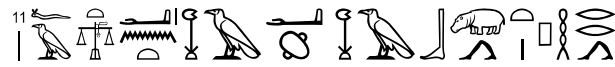
instead of  *ḥw* “positions, posture,” and the latter is clearly being the case as it is related to the 3-lit. verb *ḥ* “stand up.” The Egyptian vulture *3* carries the meaning of a generic “bird” here. The number 11 (proposed by Gardiner) (or even 10) is a bit of curiosity here as the number of birds in the Manuel de Codage under G is at least the double of this. The noun *ks* “bent position” is once again related to the 3ae-inf. verb *ksi* “bend down” (although it may not be the infinitive as the *t* ending is missing and this ending has been regularly supplied in other cases). *3t* “instant action, moment, sudden attack” (with the sun determinative missing) is represented here only with the hippopotamus head and fits in the situation well. The second part of the indirect genitive contains the infinitive of the verb *skr* “smite, strike down,” and the noun *wʿty* “captive, prisoner.” The whole situation depicts the well-known “smiting the enemy” composition





. As the Narmer Palette and many other artifacts depict, the one who strikes the captive is in standing position, so that *ks* should refer to *w3ty* and consequently *skr* cannot be an active participle “the bent position of one who strikes,” but rather “the bent position, (at) the moment of strike, of the captive.” Next, one needs to distinguish between  and , the first being a determinative of the verb *dgi* “look” (with the preposition *n* “at” governing the object), and the second the biliteral and ideogram for *irt* “eye.”

Although one would expect here an infinitive, the verb form *dgg* is clearly a nonattributive imperfective relative form and can be translated as: “(I know) how an eye looks at.” Another example to this is the title of Spell 221 in the Coffin Texts: 

 *irr z(i) mrrt.f* “How a man does what he wants...”⁹ The object is *snnwt.s*, lit. “its second” (the feminine suffix pronoun refers to another eye) and can be translated as “someone else, another.” The caus. 3-lit. verb *ssnd* “cause/make fearful, frighten, terrify” is again a nonattributive relative form with subject *hr* “face:” “(I know) how a face frightens..” and with object (introduced by the preposition *n*) the collective feminine noun *rst* “(sacrificial) victim.”



f3t ˆ nt h3ˆ h3b nmtt phrr

The infinitive of the 3ae-lit. verb *f3i* “raise, lift up” starts the passage (with the wrong determinative  for “weigh” that occurred earlier). The right determinative  clearly conveys the meaning. This infinitive (used as a noun) is the first part of a direct genitive formed with ˆ “arm.” This direct genitive construction, treated as feminine, is imbedded into an indirect genitive A *nt* B in which the genitival adjective *nt* borrows its gender from *f3t ˆ*. The second noun B in this construction is the perfective active participle “one who harpoons” of the 3-lit. verb *h3ˆ* “thrust, harpoon.”



iw(i) rh.kw irt imywt hwt h33t.(s)n




nn rdt m3h.sn (in) ht n(i) iˆ.(s)n (i)n mw grt

The objects of the infinitive of *iri* are the plurals of the nouns (in apposition): *imyt* “pigment” and *ht* “thing.” In addition, referring to the process of making crusts, inlays and types of enamel, the noun *h33t* “incrustation, enamel” is doubtless related to the 3ae-inf. verb *h3i* “descend” while the 3PL suffix pronoun *.sn* refers back to *imywt hwt*.

The negative particle *nn* negates the infinitive of *rdi*. The latter starts a *rdi* + prospective /subjunctive construction with *m3h* “burn” in prospective/subjunctive, lit. “without

⁹ Allen (25.3.6).

causing that they burn (by) fire.” (The absence of the preposition *in* is probably for graphical reasons; the reed leaf is not written even in the next clause and the duplication of  is avoided.) Finally, the negated passive expresses negation of ability in *n(i) i^c.(s)n* “they cannot be washed away (by water).”



nn pry hr.s n bw-nb wp(w) hr.i w^c.kw hn^c z3.i smsw n ht.i





wd.n ntr ir.f pr n.f hr.s

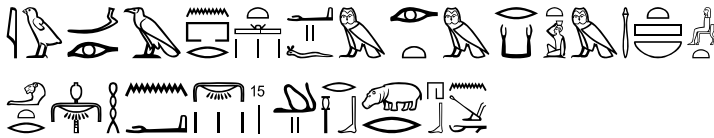
The governing verb appearing twice in this passage is the 3ae-inf. verb *pri* followed by *hr.s*. The verb itself has many meanings: “go up, go forth, come out, come forth, ascend, emerge,” and also “renowned.” The preposition *hr* “under” indicates possession and the feminine suffix pronoun *.s* collectively refers to the (professional) knowledge and skills detailed previously. *nn* signifies general negation of existence, and here, in a *nn A* construction, it should be followed by a noun (A) or a phrase that acts as a noun. In fact, the entire phrase *nn pry hr.s* should act as a (masculine) noun, being the first part of an indirect genitive ending with *n bw-nb* “of all the people.” Due to its ending *pry* cannot be infinitive; in other parts of the stela the *t* endings for infinitives have been meticulously spelled out. Following Gardiner *pry* is most possibly a (masculine singular) perfective active participle of *pri* written with the rare ending *y*.¹⁰ One can think of *pry* as a “participial noun” derived from *pri* and also interpret the *y* ending as the scribe’s wish to emphasize this. As Gardiner states:¹¹ “The more nominal in character the participle is, the greater the tendency to write the participial ending.” The negation *nn pry* forms what he calls a “negative universal proposition¹²” and the entire phrase *nn pry hr.s n bw-nb* can then be translated as “of all the people there was none who came forth having the (professional) knowledge.” Emphasizing the nominal character of *pry* we may translate it as being “distinguished, renowned or outstanding.” With this, the translation can read as “...there was none distinguished of...”

¹⁰ Gardiner (§359).

¹¹ Op. cit.

¹² Gardiner (§394).


As noted above, the expression *bw-nb* (the second part of an indirect genitive) emphasizes the uniqueness of the knowledge by comparing it to all the people. Exception is made to Irtysen himself (*wp(w) hr.i* “except me,” lit. “separated from”) and to the eldest son with an easy stative construction involving the 3ae-inf. adjective-verb *w^ci* “alone.” Fatherly affection is emphasized using an indirect genitive using *smsw* “eldest (one)” combined with *ht.i* “my body.” Divine (royal) command (the stela has  *hd* not  *wd*) for the son to follow his father’s footsteps uses circumstantial *s_{dm}.n.f/perfect*, and the following noun clause (expressing subsequent action) is governed by the prospective /subjunctive of *iri*: “The god has commanded that he act as.” This time the verb form of *pri* is less ambiguous, most probably a perfective passive participle *pr* “one who is brought forward.” The dative refers to the king, and once again *hr.s* indicates possession: “having the knowledge.” Alternatively, if there is a missing suffix pronoun *.i* after *pr*: *pr(.i) n.f hr.s* then the sentence becomes active, with the meaning that the King has ordained the father to handle down his professional knowledge to his son, an equally reasonable circumstance.



*iw m3n(.i) prt ^cwi.f m irt (i)m(i)-r k3t m ^c3t nb(t) špst
 ḥ3t-r ḥd ḥn^c nbw pḥwi-r 3b(w) r hbn(i)*

The particle *iw* introduces the main clause in which the governing verb *m33* is most likely in the circumstantial/imperfective *s_{dm}.f* with the special form *m3n*. It fits well in the context as this verb form expresses an action that is generally true (in this case Irtysen’s son’s efficiency). The circumstantial *dm.n.f/perfect* *m3.n(.i)* is also possible. As such it would point to a completed action, that is, Irtysen’s conviction that his son is worthy to be considered as his successor. In either case the suffixed subject is omitted. The object is the noun phrase *prt ^cwi* that uses the (feminie plural) active participle of *pri*, lit. “what comes out of his hands.” It carries the meaning of efficiency, ability, as well as results of work. The *m* + infinitive construction applied to the verb *iri* expresses concomitant action (to *m3n(.i)*). *imi-r k3t* “overseer of work” is a well-know phrase as well as *^c3t nbt špst* “all kinds of precious stones/minerals.” *ḥ3t-r ... pḥwi-r* is the Middle Egyptian way of writing

“starting...to the end.” One can compare this with the last passage in the Story of the

Shipwrecked Sailor  . The apposition of *ʒb(w)* “ivory” and *hbn(i)* “ebony” is given inserting the preposition *r* “to” between them.



*pṛt-ḥrw (m) ḥʒ m t ḥnkt ʒpdw kʒw šsr mnḥt ḥt nbt nfrt wʿbt n imʒhy ʾirtisn ikr mʒt ḥrw
ms.n ʾidt mʒt ḥrw*

The stela ends with the (second part of the) well-known funerary formula of invocation offering.

Bibliography

Text: http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/2/21/Louvre_stele_chef_artisans.JPG
(high resolution photograph).

Commentaries/Grammar: A. Badawy, *The Stela of Irtysen*, *Chronique d’Egypte*, Bruxelles, Tome XXXVI, pp. 269-276, (1961); W. Barta, *Das Selbstzeugnis eines altägyptischen Künstlers* (Stele Louvre C 14), *Münchener Ägyptologische Studien*, Verlag Bruno Hessling, Berlin, (1970); M. Baud, *Le métier d’Irtysen*, *Chronique d’Egypte*, Bruxelles, Tome XXV, pp. 21-34, (1938).

Translations: <http://www.iut.univ-paris8.fr/~rosmord/hieroglyphes/C14tra.html> (French); G. Maspero, *TSBA* 5, pp. 559-560, (1877)