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DID MENEPHTAH INVADE SYRIA ?

By PROFESSOR EDOUARD NAVILLE, D.C.L., LL.D., F.S.A.

THE sentence on the stele discovered by Professor Petrie in which Israel is mentioned as well as other nations contains interesting historical facts. It is therefore well worth trying to discover its real significance, and to give it its right interpretation. Its text is the following:



Numerous translations have been proposed. I shall begin with those of the two editors of the stele.

Professor Spiegelberg¹: "Niemand (sic) unter den Neunbogenvölkern erhebt sein Haupt. Verwüstet ist *Thnu*, *Cheta* zur Ruhe gebracht, das *Kanaan* ist mit(?) allem Schlechten gefangen(?). Fortgeführt ist *Askalon*, *Gazer* genommen. *Jenoam* ist zu nichts gemacht, *Israel* ist verwüstet und seine Saaten vernichtet, *Hor* ist wie die Wittwen (sic) von Aegypten geworden."

Mr Griffith²: "No one raises his head among the Nine Bows. Devastated is Tehenu, Kheta is quieted. Seized is the Kanaan with every evil. Led away is Askelon. Taken is Gezer. Yenoam is brought to nought. The people of Israel is laid waste, their crops are not. Khor (Palestine) has become as a widow for Egypt."

Professor Breasted³: "Not one holds up his head among the Nine Bows. Wasted is Tehenu, Kheta is pacified. Plundered is Pekanaan with every evil. Carried off is Askelon. Seized upon is Gezer. Yenoam is made as a thing not existing. Israel is desolated, his seed is not; Palestine has become a widow for Egypt."

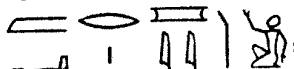
The last is that of Sir Gaston Maspero, in the newly published edition of the catalogue of the Cairo museum (p. 170):

¹ *Zeitschr.* 1896, p. 14.

² PETRIE, *Six Temples*, p. 28.

³ *Ancient Records*, III, p. 263. Professor Breasted puts in parenthesis the illegible readings of the names according to the Berlin system.

“Maintenant que les Libyens ont été battus, le pays de Khita est pacifique, le Canaan est pris avec tout ce qu’il y a de mauvais en lui, les gens d’Ascalon sont emmenés captifs, ceux de Guézer sont saisis, ceux d’Iounâmam n’existent plus, le peuple d’Israël est rasé et il n’y a plus de sa graine. La Syrie est devenue comme les veuves de l’Égypte.”


None of these translations gives the real significance of these sentences. They have been interpreted by Professor Breasted and others as meaning that Menephtah¹, like his father, had made a successful campaign in Syria and Palestine. This assumption does not seem justified by the character and the contents of the stele. This long inscription is an eulogy merely of the great victory of Menephtah over the Libyans, of the defeat of their chief , and this eulogy was written a short time after the victory. In the fifth year in the second month of the third season, the King was informed of the invasion of the Libyans², and the two great laudatory inscriptions are said to have been engraved or written in the following month, one in the Delta at Athribis³ and the other one at Thebes. This is something analogous to the hymns or festive songs which in antiquity as well as in modern times arise after a great victory, or a signal deliverance. There are several examples of such hymns in the Old Testament.

It seems most improbable that if before fighting the Libyans Menephtah had conquered Syria there should be no allusion to this great achievement except those few words at the end of the stele. The author would certainly have spoken of the great slaughter made by the King, of the heads of the chiefs cut off; he would have given the usual bombastic description of the triumphs of Menephtah. Besides, as Mr Max Müller very aptly says⁴, Menephtah, who lived in peace with the Hittites and who was threatened in his own kingdom by the Libyans, could not have made conquests in Syria in the first and second year of his reign.

Still less can we draw any inference as to such a campaign from the day-book of a frontier official which is found on the blank backs of a papyrus which is something like a schoolboy’s copybook⁵.

According to Professor Breasted, “it is of importance also as showing that Merneptah in his third year was in Syria, undoubtedly on the campaign during which he plundered Israël as related in his Hymn of Victory of the year 5⁶.” We shall see that this document does not speak anywhere of the presence of Menephtah in Syria.

This document is evidently written hastily and with some negligence; it is the memorandum of an agent. It is a record of letters which the official sent to various places, through different messengers. It is to be observed that most of them have

¹ The transcription *Merneptah* of the Berlin school is erroneous. The  is always dropped before a consonant, as we learn from transcriptions like *Usimares*. Therefore the right transcription is *Menephtah* or *Merenphtah*.

² MASPERO, *Zeitschr.* 1881, p. 118.


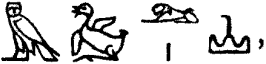
³ MASPERO, *Zeitschr.* 1883, p. 65.


⁴ *Asien und Europa*, p. 222.





⁵ *Anast.* III, pls. VI and V verso. This document was first translated in 1873 by Chabas (*Recherches pour servir à l’histoire de l’Exode*, p. 95, and ff.). Six years afterwards Professor Erman published the text and translation of it (*Zeitschr.* 1879, p. 29) with this observation: “Meines Wissens bislang noch ungeachtet geliebt.”

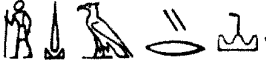

⁶ *Ancient Records*, III, p. 271.


Semitic, I may even say Palestinian names. They are going back to their countries, and it seems probable that they had come for some commercial purpose. These messages may be considered as the origin of the post, the interchange of communications between foreign countries.

Where is the official posted? It seems probable that he is at the , , "the fort of Djar," the present Kantarah, which may be considered as the key of Egypt on that side, and the starting-point of the armies marching into Palestine; he might be also in the "town of Menephtah," of which we shall speak further, but that seems less likely.

The first batch of messengers goes in the third year, on the fifteenth day of the ninth month. The first postman, whose name begins with *Baar...* the son of *Zippor* native of Gaza, is to go to Kharu. He is the bearer of two  letters of different contents.

On the same day goes , "the head or the chief of the peasants, Khai." He does not go very far, since a few days afterwards, on a day which Chabas reads 18 and Erman considers as doubtful, he is back and brings a letter  lit. "things brought, one letter." Whether his journey lasted three days or more, it could not be very long and the place to which he was sent not very far distant. I should say it was the  the royal estate or farm, which as we shall see we can locate approximately. The peasants are often mentioned in connection with the  the agricultural estates¹.

The same day goes a messenger called . I can hardly think that it is the "chief of Tyre," "der Fürst von Tyrus." It would be rather extraordinary that a man of such a high position should be a mere messenger of a land agent, sent by him to carry a letter; even admitting that Tyre was not the great and powerful Phoenician city, but that described in the Tel el-Amarna letters. The hieratic sign seems to me to correspond better to  *aau*, "the old man or the veteran soldier"².

As for  we shall see further that it cannot be so far as Tyre. In the same year and the same month arrive "the head of the auxiliaries of the Well of Menephtah," which is probably in the neighbourhood of the estate, "with all the officers³ who are to be witnesses in the fortress of Djar²."


On the 18th day, according to Chabas, go three messengers, all of them natives of Gaza; they are sent to the place where the king is. The chief of the peasants Khai brings a letter probably with other things, showing that he is back.

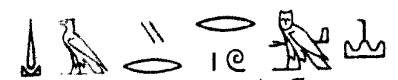
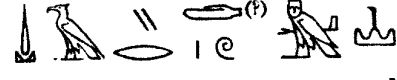
¹ BRUGSCH, *Dict. Suppl.* p. 505.


² BRUGSCH, *Dict. Suppl.* p. 32.

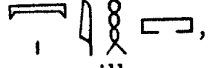
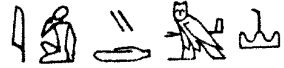
³ I read .

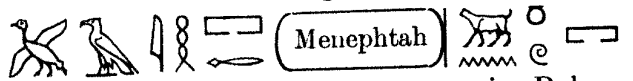
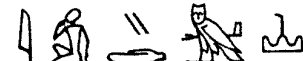

On the same day goes "Nekhtuamon, the son of Djair from the castle of Menephtah"

 Menephtah, who is to reach the place Djair-ruma, and who has to go to Kharu. He bears two different letters, one probably to the place he is to reach first, and the second to the goal of his voyage, Kharu. The intermediate station

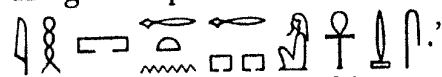
is written  according to Erman, 


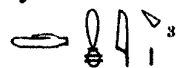
according to Max Müller.  has been mentioned before, and this second name seems to show that it was a city or district divided into two parts; since it is reached before Kharu, it cannot be Tyre. The other messengers of that day are a head of the peasants, and a steward, said to be "from this town," whatever it is. I believe it to be the fortress of Djar where the official resides.

The next messenger is , "the head of the estate and chief of the fort Ani(?) from the town or village of Menephtah which is in the district of  Adima." He has to bring two letters to the place where the king is.

The last messenger who goes on the 25th is "a coachman or an equerry from  the great royal estate of Menephtah." This estate we know from a papyrus in Bologna from a letter concerning horses¹. Another text which will give us a clear indication of the site where we are to look for the village, or castle of Menephtah, is the following². "We have allowed the tribes of the Shasu of the land of Adima  to pass the stronghold or fort 

of King Menephtah which is in Succoth towards the lakes and ponds of Pithom of King Menephtah in Succoth in order to feed their cattle in the great estate of Pharaoh

.

If we compare this text with the various entries of the day-book we have to conclude that what is called  of Menephtah is or belongs to the same construction. It is, as Max Müller says, a stronghold on the limit of the desert. It has to protect a great estate of the king and its ponds necessary for the cattle. We see a stronghold of that kind in the time of Seti I, called  which guarded a well and a pond. Near the fortification, which consisted of one or several towers, were habitations for the people of the estate; that is why it is called a town or a village. Judging from the sculptures of the campaign of Seti I, I should say that the "Well of Menephtah" was in the neighbourhood of this village.


The stronghold of Menephtah was according to the two texts either in Succoth or in Adima. These two regions were both borderlands, and they were contiguous; their limits were not well marked, it could not be said exactly where they finished. Therefore the stronghold could be attributed to the one or to the other.

¹ LINCKE, *Correspondenzen*, pl. II, 10, III, 1.

² *Anast.* VI, pl. 4.

³ LEPS. *Denkm.* III, 126 b.


Adima from which the Bedouins come has always been considered as being Edom. This identification seems to me quite erroneous. Edom and Succoth were separated by a great waterless desert. At the time of Menephtah, the time of the Exodus, Edom was Mount Seir¹ on the South of Palestine, and the region around it, the land of the Horites which is called here Kharu; and to suppose that starting from that region the Bedouins made the long journey across the desert in order to water their animals near Pithom is really absurd. It is a case of common sense versus philology. The narrative of the Exodus gives us the true transcription of the Egyptian word. It is *Etham*², which is the first station of the Israelites after they had left Succoth: "and they took their journey from Succoth and encamped in Etham in the edge of the wilderness" (Ex. xiii, 20, Numbers xxxiii, 6). We know that the wilderness of Etham was waterless, and it is natural that the Bedouins of that desert should have asked permission to drive their cattle towards the ponds of Pithom.

The name which corresponds to Edom of the Bible at the time of Menephtah is , Kharu, the land of the Horites. This country is the remotest point to which the messengers of the official are sent, the southern part of Palestine.

The correct interpretation of the day-book does not give the slightest indication of a victorious campaign of Menephtah in Palestine, nor even of the presence of the king in Syria, since the messengers who are to find out where he is are precisely those who are not sent abroad to Kharu, which is often interpreted as being Syria and which is the land of the Horites. The king was probably somewhere not very far away, in the village or stronghold bearing his name or in his estate in Succoth.

Let us now revert to the stele: "Nobody dares to raise his head among the Nine Bows or the barbarians. The land of the Tehennu is wasted." This we have heard at great length in the stele.


If Menephtah is safe on the West, it is the same on the East. "Kheta is at peace." The king's father had made a treaty of peace for ever with the Hittites. This treaty had been confirmed by the marriage of Rameses with a daughter of the King of Kheta who seems himself to have brought his daughter to Egypt. We know from the Tel el-Amarna tablets that such marriages were the guarantees of treaties and alliances. Therefore we have every reason to think that the intercourse between the two nations was of the most friendly character.

Then the writer goes on to the coast of Palestine: "The land of Kanaan is prisoner of all bad things": we should now say, of all kinds of bad things. There is no doubt that  means "make prisoner" and not plunder. Besides we cannot find much sense in the translation of Professor Breasted: "plundered is Pekanaan with every evil." Evil things are not generally objects of plunder.

We have here figurative language, or a metaphor like many found in Egyptian, and the ignorance of which has often led to absurd translations. In French we use

¹ Deut. ii, 5, 8.

² Cf. *The Store City of Pithom and the Route of the Exodus*, 4th ed. p. 28. It will be objected that this transcription does not quite agree with the laws of philology. But when do we see that the transcription of a proper name into a foreign language follows those laws? The ruling element is the ear. A name is transcribed from its sound, or from popular etymology. What does the official of Menephtah know of philology? He writes in his day-book the names as he hears them.

a popular etymology. The Horites, Kharu, "have become like a widow  of Egypt." We have a curious commentary on that sentence in the great Elephantine papyrus. Describing their distress after the destruction of their temple, the Jews say: "Until the present day, we wear mourning clothes, we fast, and our wives are like widows." We do not know the cause of the distress of the Horites: they might have suffered also from the wars which had been raging in the land, or perhaps Kharu was the country which the Israelites were said to occupy, and their destruction would leave it quite desolated. The Israelites had left Egypt under peculiar circumstances; none of them had remained in the land, and therefore for the people of Egypt that meant their annihilation.

Thus the last lines of the stele' show that the safety of the king is complete. On the African side his victory was brilliant and decisive; on the other side Kheta was at peace with him since his father's reign, and the other nations, which eventually might have become his foes, were reduced to a state of utter helplessness.

There is no indication whatever that this state of things was due to the victories of the king. He is not mentioned as conqueror; it is not said that personally he did anything in the destruction of Ashkelon or Inuamma. It would be quite contrary to Egyptian inscriptions such as we know them, to forget in that way the great deeds of their king. Every victory, every contest is due to the king himself. In Egypt a historical narrative bears still the character which history has at its origin. History began with biographies, and historical inscriptions in Egypt, or even in the books of Kings or Chronicles in the Old Testament, are nothing but biographies of the king, or events connected with his person.

No more than the day-book of the official does this inscription record a conquest of Menephtah in Palestine. The successful campaign attributed to him is a mere hypothesis resting on two texts neither of which gives any indication whatever of this war, and still less a positive proof. It must therefore be entirely struck out of the annals of Menephtah.