

“THEIR LAND WAS DEVASTATED”

On the Ramesses III’s inscription of his 5th regnal year (relating to the Sea Peoples)

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ABSTRACT

In the Egyptian inscription of Ramesses III’s 5th regnal year, which is located in the second court of the temple of Medinet Habu, there is a text relating to the so-called Peleset and Tjeker, who were part of a coalition of five Sea Peoples. According to the last published translations, this text proves that the homelands of the Sea Peoples had been attacked or “devastated” by other different people and thus they were forced to migrate in search of new territories. The inscription of Year 5 complements the important information provided by the Great Inscription of Year 8, located in the second pylon of the temple, which has misled many scholars due to the ambiguity of its writing style.

Introduction

Twenty years ago, I published an article arguing that the main historical text of Medinet Habu is often misunderstood, due to the ambiguity of its writing style. More recently, the Egyptologist Shirly Ben-Dor Evian has proposed a “new paradigm” on the Sea Peoples that is quite similar to my view, although it does not totally coincide with it. This author has also studied the inscriptions and reliefs engraved in the mortuary temple of Ramesses III, and she has provided new translations of some relevant texts.

In 2003, I expounded the basic idea that the coalition of **five Sea Peoples who fought against the Egyptian army of Ramesses III (named Peleset, Tjeker, Denyen, Shekelesh and Weshesh)** were not the same peoples that had previously invaded several lands in Anatolia, Cyprus and Syria, which were part of the Hittite empire. They actually came, instead, from some of those invaded territories, located in the Anatolian coasts, and thus they were victims of the aggression. **The true invaders, simply called “northerners” or “foreigners” in the Great Inscription of Medinet Habu, were the Mycenaean Greeks** who lived in “islands” (i. e. the Aegean maritime lands) and the proto-Phrygian people named Muski in the Assyrian sources, who came from other Balkanic regions that extended to the north of the Aegean Sea. Therefore, the real event was a chain reaction. These European peoples entered Asia Minor and then the inhabitants of the invaded territories, who could not repel their aggression, fled to the Syrian land of Amurru, where they set up a camp of refugees, and later they continued their migration towards the south in search of new territories to settle with their families, finally having to confront the powerful Egyptians who dominated Canaan.

This logical interpretation of the Egyptian records explains that one of the wall-reliefs of Medinet Habu show the immigrants travelling in ox-carts with women and children, and not properly as an invading army. Moreover, it has been noticed that the appearance

of those women is rather similar to that of other Asiatic or Hittite women, a fact that perfectly fits an Anatolian origin of the immigrants. Even the warriors of the five allied peoples used clothes and weapons of Asiatic style. Their typical “feathered” and horned helmets, for example, are identical to those of some contemporary artistic representations that were found on Cyprus, and this island is very close to the southern coast of Anatolia.

At the time of my first published work on this topic, I consulted the Egyptologist Francisco Martín Valentín, director of the IEAE (*Instituto de Estudios del Antiguo Egipto*), and he confirmed to me that the main sentences of the Great Inscription of Medinet Habu, in its original hieroglyphic signs, could perfectly express the historical facts in the same way that I had read in the classic translation by James H. Breasted.

Apart from this ambiguous inscription of the Year 8 (located in the second pylon of Medinet Habu) there is another important inscription of Ramesses III relating to the Year 5 of his reign, which also mentions the Sea Peoples or, at least, two of them. The most recent translations of this text are the main subject of the following analysis.

The inscription of Year 5 in Medinet Habu

This revealing inscription is located in the second court of the temple. Although it is more related to the first campaign of Pharaoh Ramesses III against the Libyans, there is a fragment of the text that deals with the Peleset and the Tjeker, two of the five Sea Peoples who fought against the Egyptians.

According to the old translation by Breasted, this was the meaning of the Egyptian hieroglyphic inscription: “The northern countries are unquiet in their limbs, even the Peleset, the Thekel, who devastate their land. Their soul came in the last extremity. They were warriors upon land, also in the sea.”

Thekel is an alternative transcription, used by Breasted, of the ethnonym Tjeker (or Tjekeker) that may refer to the Teukrians from the Troad, who were recorded in later Hellenic sources as Teukroi. Other authors have transcribed it as Sikil or Sikila because there is no scholarly consensus among the Egyptologists. On the other hand, the so-called Peleset are generally identified as the biblical *Pelishtim* or Philistines.

When I briefly referred to this inscription in my article of 2003, I believed that its translation by Breasted was correct and, therefore, I supposed that “the northern countries” cited at the beginning of the text were the inhabitants of Amurru, in Syria, and perhaps other regions of northern Canaan that probably were devastated by the Sea Peoples (including the Peleset and Tjeker) during their migration. The “northern countries” or peoples could not have been, according to this translation, the Peleset and Tjeker “who devastated their land”, seeing that it would be absurd if these peoples had devastated their own lands.

However, two new transcriptions and translations of this Egyptian text have been published in 2015 and 2023 by Shirly Ben-Dor and by Annik Wüthrich & Uroš Matić, and both show some important differences from the old translation by Breasted, which make clearer the true meaning of the inscription. The first one, translated by Ben-Dor, reads as follows:

“The northern foreign countries quivered in their bodies, namely the Philistines and the Sikila []. Their land was devastated. Their broken souls came. They were *thr* on land, others at sea.”

We can see that, according to this translation, the Peleset/Philistines and the Tjeker/Sikila are just the same peoples whose land had been devastated, and thus their souls were broken because they were homeless people. The sentence relating to the devastation of the land is now written in the passive voice. Therefore, it tells the same story that we can read in the inscription of Year 8, where we also find the sentence “they were wasted” in the passive voice (according to Breasted himself), just before mentioning the camp of refugees in Amurru and clearly referring to the lands of Anatolia, Cyprus and Syria that were previously cited in the text.

Ben-Dor provides other information in her study that is very helpful, explaining the Egyptian term *thr*, which was simply translated as “warriors” by Breasted. Actually, it was applied by the Egyptians to foreign auxiliary troops who served in the Hittite and Syrian armies, for example in the battle of Kadesh that took place some 100 years before the age of Ramesses III. In this famous battle, the vassals of the Hittites who lived in the coasts of Anatolia joined the great army of Hatti as auxiliary troops (or *thr* warriors), including the so-called **Derdeny who are identified by most scholars as Dardanoi, another classic name of the Trojans (like their alternative ethnonym Tjeker or Teukroi)**. In fact, the city of Troy was burned down, or “devastated”, at the archaeological level VIIa, and the settlement of some Trojan refugees in the Philistine cities is proven by the cremation burials in pithoi and jars that have been found in the cemeteries of Azor and Ashkelon, seeing that this funerary practice was usual in the Troad around 1300 BC. According to the Egyptian sources of the 11th century BC, another group of Tjeker had settled in the harbour town of Tel Dor, located in northern Canaan, but the archaeological data of this site indicate that their material culture became more similar to that of the Cypriots and Canaanites, after their migration. In the reliefs of Medinet Habu, the Tjeker, Peleset and **Denyen (identifiable with the so-called Danuna from Cilicia)** are very similar, because they used the typical “feathered helmets” or “feathered crowns” of the Sea Peoples, as well as the swords and daggers with triangled blade, and the characteristic skirts divided in four or six areas by crossed ribbons. Also their battle-chariots, depicted in the land battle’s relief at Medinet Habu, were of Asiatic or Hittite style, like those used by the “Maryanu Derdeny” (Dardanian charioteers) in Kadesh.

The second translation of this inscription, by Wüthrich & Matić, reads as follows: “The northern lands shivered in their bodies, namely the Peleset and the Tjekeker since they were cut off <from> their land (...) They were *teher*-warriors on land and others from the sea.” For unknown reasons, these authors omitted the dramatic sentence on the “broken souls” of the Sea Peoples.

Now, instead of “their land was devastated” this translation expresses that the Peleset and the Tjeker “were cut off from their land”, a sentence that again is written in the passive voice. The term “cut off” was also used in the translations of the 8th year’s great inscription by W. Edgerton & J. Wilson and by K. A. Kitchen. In both cases, the translators wrote that the lands of Hatti, Kode, Karkemis, Arzawa and Alasiya were “cut off”. Some scholars have argued that the Syrian city of Karkemis was not destroyed at

that time and, consequently, the Egyptian records of Medinet Habu are not reliable. However, the inscription may refer to the kingdom of Karkemis, rather than its capital city. Although the king of Karkemis was vassal of the great king of Hatti, he ruled over most regions in Syria, and the coast of Syria was really invaded in the early 12th century BC by the enemies who destroyed Ugarit and other cities. We can say the same about **Arzawa, which was western Anatolia in the most general sense of this term, including Wilusa (or Troy) that undoubtedly was burned down, and Sardis in Lydia,** probably destroyed around the same date. Kode was Cilicia, the land of the Denyen who migrated to Canaan (at least a group of them) after the verified destructions of Tarsus, Mersin and Kilise Tepe. And **Alasiya was Cyprus,** where the cities of Enkomi, Sinda and Hala Sultan Tekke were also attacked, although the Cypriots may have been rather similar to the Denyen from Cilicia, seeing that Cyprus was called **Ia or Iadnana by the Assyrians (probably meaning Ia-Danana, or island of the Danuna).** Finally, various cities in the Hittite lands were destroyed or abandoned, but it is very likely, in this case, that the Hittite army was vanquished by the Mycenaean Greeks and by the proto-Phrygians Muski, who may have coordinated their attacks, and consequently **the north of Hattusa (Büyükkaya) was occupied by the Kaska, the old enemies of the Hittites.** However, refugees of Hatti also moved to the Levant, where the so-called Neo-Hittite kingdoms allowed them to survive during the Iron Age, and it is noteworthy that some Hittite and Amorite prisoners are also depicted in the reliefs of Medinet Habu, probably captured during the Syrian campaign of Ramesses III, which is unjustifiably considered a fictional event by some scholars.

Final remarks

There are two more issues, relating to the Sea Peoples, that must be addressed in this article. The first one is the fact that the Peleset must have occupied two or more cities in the Levant before the Year 8 of Ramesses III, seeing that another inscription at the outside north wall of the temple tells us that the Peleset were “in suspense, hidden in their towns” when the Egyptian troops were preparing their campaign against the Sea Peoples. It is possible that those unnamed towns were located in northern Canaan and that a group of Peleset, perhaps mixed with Tjeker and Denyen, had managed to settle there, while the rest of migrants continued their journey towards southern Canaan travelling in ox-carts with women and children. The cities imprecisely mentioned in this inscription may have been Tell Keisan, Tel Akko or even Tel Dor. This explanation is more plausible than the hypothetical existence of a Syrian land of the Peleset, during the first regnal years of Ramesses III, which originated the so-called kingdom of Walasatini or Palasatini, related to the archaeological site of Tell Ta'yinat. This kingdom must have been founded in the 11th century BC by a group of Neo-Hittites who had taken refuge in the plain of Antioch, after the fall of the Hittite empire, but the possible connection between the names Palasatini and Peleset may be due to the fact that the Peleset were originally an Anatolian people, and thus their language (... Luwian?) could be rather similar to that of the Neo-Hittites.

The cited inscription of Medinet Habu has misled some scholars, who believe that the Peleset could not be immigrants if they were already living in several towns located in southern Canaan during the Year 8 of Ramesses III, according to their own interpretation of the inscription. Robert Drews is the main supporter of this theory. Notwithstanding, those towns may have been perfectly located in the northwest of Canaan, instead of the southern coast, as I have already explained. Furthermore, the

Biblical texts clearly indicate that the Sea Peoples were foreign immigrants who occupied the region of Gaza in southern Canaan, which formerly was the territory of the Avvim, who appear to be a Canaanite tribe (see Deuteronomy 2:23)

The second question that must be answered, relating to the settlement of the Sea Peoples in Canaan, is the origin of the Philistine pottery, which is so similar to the Aegean ceramic style, especially to the Mycenaean IIIC pottery of Cyprus.

With regard to the findings of Mycenaean pottery that was locally made in Cyprus, Cilicia and Syria in the 12th century BC, the historical reconstruction that I expounded in 2003 directly explain these findings, because I have pointed out that the Mycenaean Greeks invaded those lands, instead of the coalition of five Anatolian peoples who actually were their victims. But how can we explain that the Mycenaean IIIC pottery style was also locally made and used in the coasts of southern Canaan, about the same time? I proposed two possible solutions in my published work: the first one was the probable existence of Anatolian potters who imitated the Mycenaean style and joined the migration of the Sea Peoples to Canaan, and the second solution was the more likely idea that **the manufacturing of Mycenaean wheelmade pottery had been introduced in Canaan before the age of Ramesses III by an earlier wave of Sea Peoples that included the so-called Ekwesh, who were the Achaeans or Mycenaeans, and thus they were named Kaphtorim in the Bible (a people coming from Kaphtor or Crete).** The latter is the hypothesis that I follow at present, based on other ideas expounded by Moshe and Trude Dothan more than thirty years ago. Therefore, I have finally rejected the first hypothesis.

According to this view, **an early migratory wave of Sea Peoples, dated to the age of Pharaoh Merneptah (late 13th century BC), settled in the new Cypriot harbours of Maa-Palaeokastro and Pyla-Kokkinokremos, and also in Tel Nami and Tel Zeror, located in northern Canaan.** They were the same peoples who joined the Libyans in order to fight against the Egyptians in Year 5 of Merneptah, according to the Egyptian sources. These peoples were of Aegean origin, but **only the Ekwesh were Hellenic, because the other Sea Peoples (Teresh, Shekelesh, Sherden and Lukka) came from the western coasts of Asia Minor.** At least the Anatolian origin of the Lukka, or Lycians, is generally accepted at present.

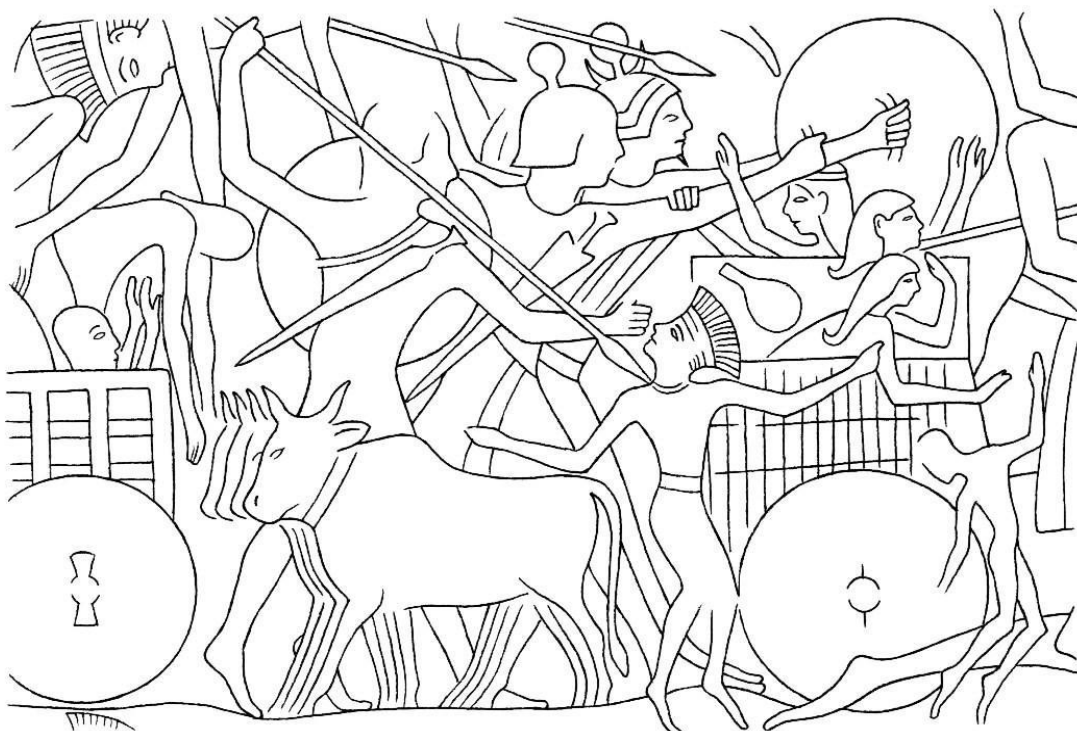
This coalition of Sea Peoples used Mycenaean IIIB pottery, locally made in Cyprus and northern Canaan. But according to Moshe Dothan, they also inhabited the cities of Ashdod (stratum XIIIb) and Ekron (stratum VII) where they began to make the Mycenaean IIIC monochrome pottery in a period dated before the reign of Ramesses III. Therefore, the Peleset who finally occupied those cities in the following strata XIIIa and VI (as well as other Philistine cities) imitated the Mycenaean IIIC pottery and created their own style of bichrome Philistine pottery, based on the same models that were initially developed in Cyprus by the Mycenaean Greeks.

The archaeologist Susan Sherratt also has followed the hypothesis by Moshe and Trude Dothan, together with her own analysis of the Mycenaean pottery from the late 13th century BC found in Cyprus, Ugarit and Ashdod. Her conclusion is that Ashdod XIIIb was founded before the end of the period LC IIC in Cyprus, at an earlier date than the Year 8 of Ramesses III and the destruction of Ugarit. However, **I consider very plausible that the settlement of the first wave of Sea Peoples in southern Canaan took**

place during the reign of Seti II, with the presence of Mycenaeans in Tell el-Far'ah South, where they probably served the Egyptian pharaoh as mercenaries (as was suggested by Jane Waldbaum in 1966). Seti II died a few years later and then Egypt was ruled by Pharaoh Siptah, a sick child, under the regency of his stepmother Twosret. This was a period of weakness in the Egyptian empire and the Sea Peoples belonging to the first migratory wave could have taken advantage of this weakness to conquer some Canaanite cities, or perhaps the Egyptians allowed them to occupy these cities. Fifteen years later, the second wave of Sea Peoples that included the Peleset arrived in the same geographic area and finally inhabited the Philistine Pentapolis (Ashdod, Ekron, Gath, Ashkelon and Gaza), mixing with the Sea Peoples of the first migratory wave.

This historical reconstruction also explains that there were Anatolian warriors of the Sea Peoples recruited by Ramesses III in Canaan, who fought against the Nubians and the Libyans before the Year 8 of his reign. These auxiliary troops, including the Sherden who belonged to the first migratory wave, also confronted the second wave of Sea Peoples, according to the reliefs of Medinet Habu. Finally, all the foreign immigrants (either called Kaphtorim or Pelishtim by the Hebrews) lived together in the Philistine cities at the beginning of the Iron Age, making and using the bichrome pottery that was a stylistic derivation of the Mycenaean IIC monochrome pottery.

The first wave of Sea Peoples is furtherly studied in another paper that I wrote three years ago and it is accessible online.



Detail of the land-battle's relief at the outside north wall of Medinet Habu, depicting the Sea Peoples, who travelled in ox-carts with women and children, when they were attacked by the Sherden warriors that served in the Egyptian army of Ramesses III (Drawing by the author)

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