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A road to the Arabian Peninsula in the reign of Ramesses III*

Abstract

The recent discovery of a rock inscription belonging to Ramesses III near the oasis of Tayma in Saudi Arabia sheds new light on the development of trade routes at the beginning of the 20th dynasty. This inscription is similar to two other markings of the same king found in Sinai and South-Negev. They can be considered as landmarks placed on the same desert road linking ancient Egypt to the Arabian Peninsula.

Keywords: rock inscription, trade route, expedition, Saudi Arabia, Tayma Oasis, New Kingdom, 20th dynasty

1. Introduction

In November 2010, Dr. Ali Ibrahim al-Ghabban, the vice-president of the Saudi Commission for Tourism and Antiquities (SCTA), and his team announced the discovery of a rock inscription of Ramesses III (1183/82–1152/51 BC) in Saudi Arabia near the oasis of Tayma (cf. Estimo Jr. 2010). This find casts a new light on the development of trade routes during the 20th dynasty, i.e. in the late 2nd millennium BC. We propose in this paper to consider the inscription in its historical context, by examining the logistics and goals of the long-distance expeditions sent by Ramesses III towards the east.

2. Long-distance expeditions in the reign of Ramesses III

The address of Ramesses III to his human subjects in the last section of the Papyrus Harris I (Grandet 1994) gives precious information about the expeditions that this king had sent:

- A maritime expedition to the land of Punt (§77,8–78,1). The menesh and ber-boats belonging to this mission must have landed on the Red Sea coast at the latitude of Koptos according to a modus operandi well established for such expeditions in the Middle Kingdom (Grandet 1994; cf. Bard & Fattovich, eds., 2007; see also Bard et al., this volume).
- An expedition, both by land and by sea, to the copper mines of Timna, named Gebel Âtak in Egyptian, in the South-Negev. The historical reality of this mission is confirmed by a rock stela of Ramesses III, carved above the New Kingdom sanctuary of Hathor, built there (Grandet 1994; Schultman 1976; Rothenberg 1988).
- An expedition to turquoise mines datable to year 23 of Ramesses III, thanks to a stela found in the temple of Serabit el-Khadim (Grandet 1994; Gardiner et al. 1952).

Although P. Harris I does not give any dates for these expeditions, there is little doubt that the first two also took place during the second part of the reign, i.e. during the peaceful period that followed the military campaigns against the Libyans and the Sea Peoples.

* This article was first published in French in the Bulletin de l’Institut français d’archéologie orientale 111 (2011), pp. 361–369 with the title “Une mystérieuse route sud-orientale sous le règne de Ramsès III”. It is our pleasure to thank Chloé Ragazzoli, Adrian Travis and Alexander Murray for re-reading and improving this slightly modified English version of it.

A road to the Arabian Peninsula
3. A new rock inscription of Ramesses III at Tayma

According to press photographs from which our facsimile is drawn [Fig. 1], the inscription found in 2010 by the SCTA shows two cartouches of the king facing each other – a layout attested elsewhere (Rothenberg 1988: pl. 119.3; Couyat & Montet 1912: no. 22) –, with a line of text below. The cartouches are about 60 cm long (personal communication of Dr. Ali Ibrahim al-Ghabban). The inscription can be considered as a landmark of a type and size attested elsewhere during the reign of Ramesses III (see below). The text can be read as follows:

![Facsimile of the Tayma inscription]

[1] nswt bity nb tawy Wsr-M3t-Rc mry Tmn
[2] s3 Rc nb l3w R-c ms-s(w) hkk3 Twnw
[3] mry hkk3 s3 (n) t3 nb


The expression hkk3 s3 (n) t3 nb at the end of the inscription is fairly equivocal. From the known parallels it should apply to the king of Egypt. Pharaoh was named with the same formula in a few texts dating to Ramesses III and Ramesses IV (O. OIC 169991, 9: Wente 1961; Kitchen 1983: 559f.; P. Louvre N3136, X, 9: Spalinger 2000), or with the slightly different formula hkk3 n t3 nb (P. Harris I, §§75,7 and 56b,3: Erichsen 1933). It nevertheless remains fairly rare, and seems characteristic of the first part of the 20th dynasty.

The structure of the Tayma inscription indicates that the king was given the protection of a divine entity, “the great prince of every land”, which is obviously no-one but himself. The expression is fairly similar to the programmatic name of some of Ramesses II’s royal colossi, which was similarly inscribed under the cartouches of the king (Habachi 1969). In this inscription hkk3 s3 (n) t3 nb aims at recalling the domination of Pharaoh over the very region where the inscription was carved. The use of hkk3 is just what we would expect, since it is often used in similar formulae to express the Pharaonic domination over territories beyond Egyptian borders (cf. Grimal 1986).

4. Similar rock inscriptions in the Wadi Abu Gada (Sinai) and Themilat Radadi (South-Negev)

The outstanding presence of an Egyptian rock inscription in the Arabian Peninsula far away from the Red Sea coast must be linked with two other similar inscriptions of Ramesses III, which also display the cartouches of the king.

The first one is located in the central part of Sinai, in the upstream section of the Wadi Abu Gada [Fig. 2] (Tallet 2003; forthcoming). Two cartouches of the king measuring 40 cm high by 30 cm width were carved on a limestone block on the edge of the trail leading to the Tih plateau near a water point. The survey carried out there in 2004 by a joint team of the Institut français d’archéologie orientale (IFAO) and the Institut de recherche pour le développement (IRD) discovered no Pharaonic structures nor any signs of mining activities with a possible link to this inscription.
A second landmark of the same type (60 cm high by 40 cm width) was reported in 1970 at Themilat Radadi on the Israeli-Egyptian border to the north of Eilat [Fig. 3] (Avner 1972). It is also located near a water point. U. Avner told us that he found some Timna-type pottery dated from the late 2nd millennium BC on a site located some 400 m west of Themilat Radadi. He and B. Rothenberg also collected the same kind of pottery on the island of Geziret al-Faraoun in front of Taba. The location of this island was ideal for a stopover on a possible maritime route, and the whole set of data fits very well within the journey to Timna described in P. Harris I, a journey both by land and by sea:

“I sent my messengers to the Gebel Âtak, to the great copper mines which are in this place; they embarked on their menesh-boats, and others travelled by land on their donkeys.” (§78,1–2)

The inscriptions of Wadi Abu Gada and Themilat Radadi might have marked out the land route leading to Timna, but not the trail to Serabit el-Khadim, for Abu Gada is located some 40 km north of the mining area of South-Sinai. This itinerary is still followed nowadays, and a detailed survey of this particular road would surely lead to the locating of other markings of this type. In any case the discovery of a new landmark near Tayma makes very clear that the same route led up to the Arabian Peninsula during the reign of Ramesses III.

5. The beginning of the road

This renewed interest for the south-eastern road during the reign of Ramesses III is confirmed by the renovation and building work carried out on sites located on the Egyptian north-eastern border, that is to say on the first part of these long-distance desert and/or maritime expeditions.

The most important settlement in this regard is the khetem of Tjeku, the present Tell el-Retaba (Rzepka et al. 2009a; 2009b; 2010), located in the strategic Wadi Tumilat, which constitutes one of the two main ways in and out of the eastern Delta (cf. Hoffmeier & Moshier, this volume). This important border-post was put into use during the 18th dynasty and reinforced at the beginning of the 19th dynasty, just like many other border-posts and at the same time as shrines and stelae were erected between the western mouth of the Wadi Tumilat and the Suez gulf (Schmitt 2005). The border-post of Tjeku was enlarged during the reign of Ramesses III, with the building of a larger and thicker enclosure wall, named “wall 2” by Petrie (c. 410 x 188.8 m by 9.5 m thick contra 366 x 183 m by 3.15 and then 5 m thick for the more ancient “wall 1”; Petrie 1906b; Rzepka et al. 2009; 2010). The foundation deposit found by Petrie under the south-eastern corner of this “wall 2” provides a basis for this dating (Petrie 1906b).

This khetem of Tjeku, like other structures of the same type, monitored the entrance and exit of the...
Egyptian territory, secured the border area and was a landmark that symbolized the power of the Egyptian Pharaohs at the door of Egypt. Moreover, it assumed a logistical role as a platform for trade and mining expeditions (cf. Somaglino 2010a; 2010b). Located at a convenient distance from both Memphis and Pi-Ramesses (see P. Anastasi V, 19,2–6) and equipped with storage facilities, the *khøtem* of Tjeku also controlled furthermore the water points of the central part of the Wadi Tumilat, the last abundant water sources before travellers left Egypt. Thus it was an important staging post. The staff positioned at the *khøtem* could even have participated in these expeditions. For instance, three members of the administration of the border-post of Tjeku led expeditions to Serabit el-Khadim and Bir Nasib (Tallet 2003). Another dignitary, “Usermaatrenakht of Tjeku”, whose doorjamb was found by Petrie at Tell el-Relataba (Petrie 1906a), might also have been involved in these expeditions to the “far south-east”. He was “overseer of troops, overseer of foreign countries, overseer of a domain” (*hry-pdt, imy-r³ ḫīswt, imy-r³ hwrt*) and “overseer of the foreign countries of Ta-netjer” (*imy-r³ ḫīswt t³-nṯr*). This string of titles indicates that he probably ran the *khøtem* of Tjeku and was commissioned to countries at the east of Egypt, as is indicated by the very general place-name “Ta-netjer”. In the context of Tjeku, it was more probably the south-east than the north-east that *Ta-netjer* was meant to designate. Unfortunately, it is difficult to date with certainty this Usermaatrenakht, but it is very tempting to link him with Ramesses III (cf. Petrie 1906a) and the expedition to the Arabian Peninsula. In any case, the identification suggested by Edel (1976, followed, amongst others, by Morris 2005) between this dignitary and the Wasmu’ti’a-nakhta of two letters exchanged between the Hittite and Egyptian courts during the reign of Ramesses II cannot be proved, since Usermaatrenakht is too common a name during the Ramesside Period (cf. Abd el-Gelil et al. 1996).

It is no wonder that Ramesses III chose to reinforce and enlarge this *khøtem* border-post of Tjeku, when he decided to significantly revive the trade and mining activities during the second part of his reign. Such building works have often been considered as an answer to regional insecurity. But the minor campaign of the king against the Shosu Bedouins, attested by P.Harris I (§76,9–11; Grandet 1994), was probably enough to make a security enhancement of the area. It seems more logical to explain them by the new interest for far-going expeditions during this reign and therefore an increasing need for logistic support.

Other building works might have been done in the Wadi Tumilat or the Suez area during this period. In P.Harris I again, the section dedicated to the “works of peace”, which followed the “war works” in the discourse addressed to the human subjects, begins with the account of the building of a very large fortified *ḥnmt*-well in ḫīst ‘yn, “the desert region of Ayn” (§77,6–8; Grandet 1994). The report of the expeditions to Punt, Timna and Serabit el-Khadim immediately follows this account. The place-name Ayn is only attested in this text; it was often connected with the “cistern of Aynen” (‘-y-n-n), which appears in P. Anastasi I, written during the reign of Ramesses II, amongst the posts of the North-Sinai route from Egypt to Palestine (P. Anastasi I, 27,6; cf. Gardiner 1911; Grandet 1994). Nevertheless, Ayn is a common semitic word meaning “well” that could have been employed to designate different places. The structure of the section dedicated to the “works of peace” in P.Harris I prompts the notion that this fortified “great cistern of the desert region of Ayn” was not on the via maris, but in the Wadi Tumilat or the Suez region, for it had been built during the preparation of the opening of the south-eastern road. Perhaps this “cistern” was another designation of the *khøtem* of Tjeku, or the name of the fortified settlement built by Ramesses III at Tell Qolzum (Morris 2005; see below for this settlement), even though the surroundings of Suez are not famed for their abundance in fresh water.

The Wadi Tumilat was the main road, but it was not the only one to reach the Suez gulf (cf. Hoffmeier & Moshier, this volume). Some of the troops of Ramesses III might have left from Memphis and gone along the more direct route leading to Suez from Heliopolis through the desert. A prophylactic statue of the king, represented alongside the goddess Hathor, was unearthed in the 1930s near Almaza in the vicinity of Heliopolis (Cairo JE 69771: Drioton 1939; Grandet 1994). According to the formulae inscribed on the statue, the latter was intended to protect the travellers against snakebites and scorpion stings. The presence of such a monument at the entrance of a desert trail is not surpris-
ing, for we know that a “remover of scorpions” had sometimes accompanied that kind of expedition (see for instance a rock inscription of year 6 of Amenemhat III at Ayn Soukhna: Abd el-Raziq et al. 2002), and that Hathor protected mining expeditions to the deserts in general and in Sinai in particular. No other traces of use of this trail during antiquity are attested although caravans and pilgrims going to Mecca via Suez went through it later on (cf. Raue 1999).

Whether the starting point of these expeditions was Memphis or Pi-Ramesses, whether they went through the Wadi Tumilat or along the desert route from Heliopolis, they had to pass through the region of Suez. Besides, a fortified settlement dating to Ramesses III and surrounded by a mud-brick enclosure wall of 7 m thick was unearthed at Tell Qolzum, the ancient Klysma, by the Supreme Council of Antiquities at the beginning of the 1960s (cf. Leclant 1964). Little information is available about this settlement, but it doubtless played the role of a logistic centre for both the maritime and the land expeditions dispatched to Sinai, Arabia, and Punt. It is the most likely starting point for the boats of the expedition to Punt known from the P.Harris I.

6. Tayma and the “incense route”

The members of the Egyptian expedition who carved the cartouches of Ramesses III on a rock near the oasis of Tayma may have tried to join the caravan route that linked the South-Arabian Peninsula to the northern coastal cities, a route which was dedicated to the trade of spices and incense from the Indian world (De Maigret 2003).

This incense route is attested since the 8th century BC, from a cuneiform text which recounts in detail the capture of a caravan from Tayma by a governor of Suhu and Mari. However, ongoing research tends to demonstrate that this route is more ancient, maybe contemporary with the domestication of the dromedary, at the cusp of the 13th and 12th centuries BC (Potts 2010; Demange 2010) [cf. Fig. 4]. The excavations led since 2004 at Tayma by
a joint mission of the SCTA and the German Archaeological Institute have shown that this oasis had in fact been occupied since the 3rd millennium BC. The Egyptian material – a Ramesside scaraboid and a series of figurines of Egyptian gods – found in the archaeological layers dated to the end of the Late Bronze Age (“occupational period 4”) might indicate the existence of regular contacts with Egypt (Hausleiter 2010). The location of Tayma along the “caravan route of incense”, and the important role it played as stopover and trade-post, seemed to have been critical in its development.

One can imagine that the expedition to the Arabian Peninsula under Ramesses III was an early endeavour by the Egyptians to adapt to the major changes in the new configuration of regional trade, which began in this period. By taking the initiative in establishing the southern stretch of this route under their own control, they could have avoided the proliferation of middlemen in a region undergoing massive changes.

In the current state of our knowledge, we can only recount very hypothetically the course of this south-eastern road of Ramesses III [Fig. 5], as well as the duration of its use. Sources from Timna and Serabit el-Khadim indicate that these mines were exploited till the reigns of Ramesses V for the former (Rothenberg 1988) and Ramesses VI for the latter (Gardiner et al. 1952; Hikade 2001). Even so, it remains impossible to say whether Egyptian expeditions to the Arabian Peninsula constituted a short-lived initiative restricted to the reign of Ramesses III, or whether more of them were dispatched after his death. Let us hope that more research in this field will one day bring further answers.
Addendum

This paper was already submitted when a fourth rock inscription showing the two cartouches of Ramesses III — very similar in size and shape to the three others (55 x 35 cm) — was found in Sinai on the track going from the Red Sea shore to the Abu Gada area. This seems to confirm that each leg of this road was systematically marked, and we can expect several other inscriptions of this kind to be found, if carefully looked for, in the following years. The Tayma inscription has most recently also been dealt with by Sperveslage & Eichmann (2012).

References


