Egypt as crossroad between Africa and Asia in the Old Bronze Age

مصر كنقطة التقاء بين إفريقيا وآسيا في العصر البرونزي القديم

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ملخص

يقدم هذا المقال رؤية متعمقة لعلاقات مصر بالعالم الخارجي خلال عصري الدولة القديمة والوسطى؛ حيث يمكن تصنيف هذا المقال ضمن المقالات العلمية المرجعية التي تعتمد على تجميع معلومات مستقاة من مصادر نصية نُشرت من قبل في مقالات متخصصة، وقمت بمحاولة بناء تصوري اعتمادًا على هذه المصادر لطرح رؤية جديدة حول علاقات مصر بالمناطق المحيطة بها سواء في آسيا أو إفريقيا خلال فترة عصر الدراسة.

More than one century ago, in 1892, an Italian Egyptologist, Ernesto Schiaparelli visiting Aswan, participated in the discovery of some inscriptions engraved on the facade of the tomb of Harkhuf, high on the cliff of the Necropolis named Qubbet el-Hawa. Actually his discovery was double, for he soon realized the importance of the hieroglyphic inscriptions which showed the first available reports of several trips to Africa.[1]

Prince Harkhuf lived in the second half of Sixth Dynasty, around 2250 BCE, and he spent some long period of his life travelling southwards along different routes, with hundreds of donkeys to carry the goods the Pharaoh had sent him for. The route must have been well known to an Egyptian, at least since the exploitation of quarries during the 4th Dynasty at Toshkeh and beyond Dakhla.[2] The geography of these expeditions is now somewhat better known thanks to various discoveries, which shed light on very early civilizations of Africa despite the lack of certitude about the localization of a number of relevant place names.[3] However, Egypt can no longer be considered an isolated and self-sufficient power, as the ancient Egyptians could cover rather long distances and many well-to-do foreigners came to settle in their country.

The excavations carried out by Charles Bonnet, resuming those of George Reisner in the modern site of Kerma, have revealed an important capital city, upstream the Third Cataract, which was influential since the 4th millennium BCE, and after the Egyptian conquest around 1500 BCE took the name of Pnubs (the jujube tree), perhaps a translation of the term Yam used in Harkhuf's inscriptions.[4]

Some graffiti recently recovered far away in the Arabian and Libyan deserts bear additional evidence of the passage of Egyptian expeditions like those related by Harkhuf in his tomb. A hieratic graffito was discovered on the way through Khashm el-Bab, near Bir Ungat, quoting a prince Sabeni, a well-known acquaintance in Aswan: may be the one who had a larger tomb than that of Harkhuf in the same Necropolis of Qubbet el-Hawa, and who also travelled southwards.[5]

This graffito is located on a track where also one of Harkhuf's itineraries may be supposed, namely in the ancient land of Irtjet. When Harkhuf came back from Yam/Kerma, with his carriages laden with precious goods, the King of Yam granted him troops to escort him in the dangerous hills of Irtjet. Those desert roads were unsafe in Antiquity as is confirmed by another passage in Harkhuf's wanderings, where he stated to have accompanied in his turn the King of Yam who went to smite the Tjemeh, and that his help ensured the success.

The land of Tjemeh is likely to lie in the area of Jebel Uweinat,[6] which was rich in water springs, and where again a hieroglyphic graffito shows Pharaoh Mentuhotep II, the unifier of Egypt *ca*. 2000 BCE, receiving the homage of the envoys of Yam and Tekhbeten, another hitherto unrecorded country. The same people of Tjemeh are mentioned in the famous biography of Weni at Abydos, and again in the tale of Sinuhe. In this novel, King Amenemhet I, founder of Twelfth Dynasty, is said to have sent the hereditary prince Sesostris to smite the Tjemeh and to foray their cattle.[7] Amenemhet I became king after having been a vizier under the last kings of Eleventh Dynasty, and he probably wanted to pursue the policy of his great predecessor Mentuhotep II and of the Memphite kings during the Old Kingdom, since Sahurê. His action was completed by Sesostris once he became King, according to a huge stela erected in his 18th regnal year, which stood in the fortress of Buhen and is

now the pride of the Egyptian Museum at Florence.[8] On this stela Sesostris I is shown subduing the Southern countries.

On another hand, the coeval long inscription of Weni, carved on two limestone slabs now on display in Cairo Egyptian Museum, relates several mighty military campaigns against peoples living to the north, in the area of the Near East, where archaeology is disclosing an unexpected literate culture for those old times.[9] Here again, the precise knowledge of the extent of the outreach of the Egyptian power is largely open to debate, unless the place names can be compared with the information of external sources, what was indisputable almost only for Byblos, due to the lack of cross data in the growing number of available materials. One example is provided by the enormous archives found in 1977 at Tell Mardikh, ancient Ebla, contemporary with pharaoh Pepi I: over ten-thousand clay tablets, concerning a commercial network with important partners, among which Egypt must remain a keen conjecture of the Assyriologist Maria Giovanna Biga.[10]

Additional data has recently arrived from Japan, where an outstanding hieroglyphic inscription belonging to the tomb of Iny, illicitly dismantled in the necropolis of Memphis, has been rediscovered by another Italian scholar, Michele Marcolin. The text is not very long, but exceedingly rich in information, and among more topographical terms that were still unrecorded or not well localized, it provides a unique quotation of a town, which was to become a trade node some centuries later in the activity of the Assyrian merchants, whose archives were discovered at Kültepe, ancient Kanesh. Therein a commercial center for silver is quoted, Burrus-handa, that corresponds (with the omission of 'handa') to the place where Iny went to purchase silver for his Pharaoh four times.[11] That means that the Egyptians around mid-third millennium BCE used to travel as far as central Anatolia, and this result eventually enlarges the area where most unidentified localities have to be sited.

It is not surprising therefore that the Annals of Amenemhet II found at Memphis speak of military expeditions towards the southern coast of Anatolia, mentioning the town of Ura, which was linked to the copper trade from Cyprus.[12] Unfortunately, neither towns (Burrus-handa nor Ura) have been located, in order to check any complementary evidence. All in all, it is however a confirmation of what was already stated in the literary level: 'None indeed sail north to Byblos today. What shall we do for pine trees for our mummies? Free men are buried with their produce, nobles are embalmed with their bitumen as far as *Kft3w* (Kaphtor/Crete) …'.[13]

It is also interesting to observe the ways the distinguished officials of Pharaoh were rewarded after their painstaking achievements. Unlike Weni, who undertook an honorable political career, as he became the head of Upper Egypt, others received special food products as privileges. When Harkhuf returned from his last trip to Nubia during the reign of Mernerê, some ships were sent from the capital city to meet him, laden with 'date wine, cake, bread, and beer'. In turn, Iny received higher appointments by Pepi II (Unique Friend, Lector Priest, and God's Chancellor), besides being a guest at the King's table 'because the Pharaoh wished to see him eating more than any other peer of his'. Among the many gifts of value that Sinuhe, at the end of his life, was granted by Sesostris I, were meals from the Palace even three or four times a day, regardless of what was brought to him by the King's children. Unfortunately, in the known

Egyptian data of the period, nothing is mentioned about envoys from foreign countries, who certainly arrived in Egypt and were even mentioned in the Ebla tablets. Otherwise, no Egyptian official is referred to in the same sources, although there are several accounts for goods exchange. On another hand, it is probably no hazard if jubilee vessels of Pepi I, sent as gifts to foreign rulers, have been found in Byblos, Crete, Ebla and Kerma, confirming thereby the wide economic–political horizon of Egypt under that great sovereign. We can conclude that the Egyptians already had a deep knowledge of the surrounding countries long before they conquered some of them in the New Kingdom.[14] Owing to the millenary span of time covered by the data, the political–cultural scenery must have differed accordingly, despite some featuring trends due to the geographical setting.

In general, the descriptions shortly reported in the concise private accounts refer to interesting goods and to the pharaohs' satisfaction. The tale of Sinuhe is more abundant in details about the country itself: 'a good land ... Figs were in it and grapes. It had more wine than water. Abundant was its honey, plentiful its oil. All kinds of fruit were on its trees. Barley was there and emmer, and no end of cattle of all kinds'.[15] Some cliché-like information is already found in the biography of Weni ('this army ... sacked ... strongholds, ... cut down ... figs, vines').[16] We can surmise that at least some ancient readers were aware of the place names and their settings, and did not need any additional data in their image of the world.

On another hand, the location of the Egyptian inscriptions might have some bearing on the information delivered to us. Therefore, it is not surprising that the news about inner Africa is from the princes' tombs as far south as Aswan, also a departure point for some expeditions along with Abydos and possibly Asyut. The life account of Weni was entrusted to his tomb in Abydos, in line with his last position as Chief of Upper Egypt. Concerning Iny, nothing is indeed ascertained, but the nature of the recovered inscribed slabs makes its burial likely in the Memphite necropolis, rather than some other locality in Lower Egypt.[17] That means that the officials who reported about their northern journeys had their seats in the North of Egypt, and that would be in agreement with Iny's reward in the King's palace. The tale of Sinuhe is also sited in its happy end at the royal court in Memphis; nevertheless Sinuhe travelled from the Western Desert eastwards as far as Syria, joining Africa and Asia (Near East); however, the story is included in papyrus manuscripts of uncertain origin, even if most copies were found in Luxor/Thebes, and from the Theban necropolis exists the record of another 'much-travelled official', who lived in the Twelfth Dynasty, and was perhaps a reader of Sinuhe's adventures.[18] A Memphite location is also proven for the Annals of Pharaoh Amenemhet II, which were concerned with the Near East, and a somewhat later biographical inscription related to navigation on the Phoenician coast was discovered at Dahshur.[19] At any rate, Byblos was mentioned in a Sixth Dynasty tomb at the Qubbet el-Hawa necropolis in Aswan, and the biography of Weni is quite explicit about the fact that soldiers from Yam and the Land of the Tjemeh, also from the same countries visited by Harkhuf, fought under his control in his Near Eastern wars. Likewise, both Iny's report and the Annals of Amenemhet II mention natives from the northern countries having been brought to Egypt, probably not as captives but because of their craftsmanship, perhaps of seamen, as we suppose that crafts were also considered

a good commodity for trading. Therefore, no neat difference is likely to have been made between Africa and Asia, and various people already met and intermingled. The foreign 'natives' in Egypt became so numerous in the Middle Kingdom, that they were labelled as a special component of the working population.[20]

The biographical inscriptions bequeathed by Sixth dynasty tombs, as those of Weni, Iny and Harkhuf, tackle the same subjects and reflect a background not much different from the Middle Kingdom literature. The main difference lies in the nature of sources, which in the Twelfth Dynasty are no longer private biographies, but rather learned works, following the 'invention of text' and the beginning of the written redaction of novels on papyrus scrolls. Under such an insight, the tale of Sinuhe tallies with some situations of the preceding period, and even maintains a number of similar stylistic features. Disregarding the question to what extent such a literary piece may be fictional, no doubt it is a trustworthy witness of the times when it was created, and people were not yet fully aware of literature as something which can be handed over to different periods and milieus; unlike the epigraphical records, which remain in a fixed place and time. Likewise, despite a temporary interruption of relations during the First Intermediate Period, the links of Egypt with the same foreign countries were soon recovered, of course under different circumstances, but probably maintaining a historical memory of previous contacts and itineraries.

Unlike an old opinion of scholars, the quoted Egyptian sources witness an everlasting interaction between Egypt and other surrounding countries, regardless of distance in space and time. The Old Kingdom is scarcely separated from the Middle Kingdom by a half century civil war, which opposed the Southern Nubian culture to the Northern Memphite culture and resulted in a reinforced influence of Africa over the Mediterranean side of Egypt, which was nourished by its Near Eastern neighborhood. It is important to stress the debt that the high culture of ancient Egypt owes to the multifarious nature of its inhabitants.

Endnotes

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1 M. Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature: The Old and Middle Kingdoms*, vol. I (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1975), 25–27.

2 A. Roccati, 'Una miniera di turchese di epoca faraonica nel deserto occidentale egiziano', *Atti dell'Accademia delle Scienze di Torino* 146 (2012), 43-55.

3 J. Cooper, 'Reconsidering the Location of Yam', *JARCE* 48 (2012), 1–21.

4 Ch. Bonnet et D. Valbelle, *La ville de Kerma : Une capitale nubienne au sud de l'Egypte (Mission archéologique de l'Université de Genève au Soudan)*, (Lausanne, 2014).

5 A. Roccati, 'Arpenter le désert autrefois et aujourd'hui', *BSFE* 169–170 (2007), 51–58.

6 A. Roccati, 'In Quest of the Land of the Tjemeh', *Sahara* 23 (2012), 125–126.

7 R. Gundlach, 'Der Status Sesostris' I. auf dem Feldzug nach Libyen', *GM Beiheft* 14 (2013), 109–115.

8 S. Bosticco, *Museo Archeologico di Firenze. Le stele egiziane*, parte I (Roma 1959), n. 29, p. 31–33.

9 Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature: The Old and Middle Kingdoms*, vol. I, 19–20.

10 A. Roccati, 'Dugurasu = *rw-ḫ3wt*', in A. Archi (ed.) *Tradition and Innovation in the Ancient Near East, Proceedings of the 57th Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale à Rome, 4–8 July 2011* (Winona Lake, 2015), 155–159; Cf. Ch. Fontinoy, 'Les noms de l'Egypte en hébreu et leur étymologie', *CdE* 64 (1984), 90–97.

11 A. Roccati, 'Iny's Travels', *Isimu* 13 (2011), 225-229.

12 H. Altenmüller, A.M. Moussa, 'Die Inschrift Amenemhets II. aus dem Ptah–Tempel von Memphis. Vorbericht', *SAK* 18 (1991), 1–48; E.S. Marcus, 'Amenemhet II and the Sea: Maritime Aspects of the Mit Rahina (Memphis) Inscriptions', *Ägypten und Levante* XVII (2007), 137–190.

13 A.H. Gardiner, *The Admonitions of an Egyptian Sage* (Leipzig, 1909), 32; Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature: The Old and Middle Kingdoms*, vol. I, 152.

14 See f.i. G. Posener, *Princes et pays d'Asie et de Nubie* (Brussels, 1940), for the protection rituals of the Middle Kingdom.

15 Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature: The Old and Middle Kingdoms*, vol. I, 226.

16 Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature: The Old and Middle Kingdoms*, vol. I, 20. However, these plants belong also to the Egyptian landscape, see P. Montet, *Les scènes de la vie privée dans les tombeaux égyptiens de l'Ancien Empire*, (Strasbourg, 1925), 257. 'Figs and vines were planted ... and wine was produced there in great quantity' (tomb of Metjen from Saqqara, Third Dynasty). Figs and vines are also quoted in the Pyramid Texts of Pepy I (Spell 440: Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature: The Old and Middle Kingdoms*, vol. I, 45). See P. de Miroschedji, 'Egypt and Southern Canaan in the Third Millennium BCE: Uni's Asiatic Campaigns Revisited', in M. Gruber, Sh. Ahituv, G. Lehmann, and Z. Talshir (eds.), *All the Wisdom of the East: Studies in Near Eastern Archaeology and History in Honor of Eliezer D. Oren, OBO* 255 (Fribourg, 2012), 265-292.

17 Actually a monumental tomb with a (fragmentary) copy of Weni's famous inscription has been recovered close to the pyramid of Pepi I. See Ph. Collombert, 'Une nouvelle version de l'autobiographie d'Ouni', in R. Legros (ed.), *50 ans d'éternité. Jubilé de la Mission archéologique française de Saqqâra (1963-2013)* (BdE 162), (Cairo 2015), 145-157.

18 A.H. Gardiner, 'The Tomb of a Much–Travelled Theban Official', *JEA* 4 (1918), 28–38.

19 J.P. Allen, 'L'inscription historique de Khnumhotep à Dahchour', *BSFE* 173 (2009), 13–31.

20 O.D. Berlev, *Трудовое населене Египта в епоху Среднего Царства* (Moscow, 1972), chap. IV.