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Temple building on the Egyptian margins: the geopolitical issues behind Seti II and Ramesses IX's activity at Amheida

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13 | Temple Building on the Egyptian Margins: The Geopolitical Issues behind Seti II and Ramesses IX's Activity at Amheida

OLAF E. KAPER

The excavations at Amheida have uncovered evidence for a town, called Trimithis in Greek, with a long history of habitation, seemingly continuous since ca. 3000 BC.¹ Trimithis was laid out around a temple to the god Thoth, which had been newly built in the reigns of Titus and Domitian, reusing building blocks of earlier temples at the site. From the study of these blocks and their relief decoration, a total of ten building phases have been distinguished, dating between ca. 1200 BC and the second century AD.² From the archaeological record a picture of a continuous and peaceful Egyptian domination of Dakhla Oasis emerges that can be followed throughout its history from the early Old Kingdom onwards. However, this picture can be challenged, and the present chapter intends to open the discussion on possible interruptions of Egyptian rule at several moments in its history. The royal building works at the temple of Amheida provide the anchor points for this investigation.

Interruptions in Egyptian Control between the New Kingdom and the Ptolemaic Period

In 2005 a date *ante quem* for the building of the Amheida temple was set in the reign of King Takeloth III of the 23rd Dynasty, because a stela was found in his name, which mentions the temple for Thoth and its priests in ca. 800 BC.³ Also of great interest on this stela was the mention of a governor of the oasis with the Egyptian name Esdhuty. This man is described as belonging to the Libyan tribe of the Shamain, which is known only from Dakhla Oasis and only from around this time.⁴ A stela in the Ashmolean Museum found in Dakhla at the temple ruins of Mut el-Kharab depicts the same man, Esdhuty, wearing an Egyptian costume, but with a feather upon his forehead.⁵ The feather is well known from depictions of Libyans in the New Kingdom and the Third Intermediate Period,⁶

¹ Bagnall *et al.* 2015: 40. ² Bagnall *et al.* 2015: 67–87, 167–9. ³ Kaper and Demarée 2005.

⁴ Sagrillo 2013: 4073. ⁵ Janssen 1968: 166. ⁶ Bates 1917: 130.

and the famous Victory Stela of King Piye describes the local rulers of Egypt as “the plume-wearing chiefs.”⁷ Esdhuty functioned in a Libyan cultural setting of independent chiefdoms, of which he also wore the appropriate headgear, but upon his monuments he acknowledged the rulers of Egypt, Takeloth III and Piye respectively. During the Third Intermediate Period, Dakhla Oasis had its own governor with a local tribal identity, but the ties with the Nile Valley were strong and unchallenged.⁸

This situation altered by the date of a subsequent phase of temple building at Amheida. By 522 BC the oasis was ruled by King Petubastis IV, who led an insurgency against Persian domination. His rebellion did not liberate the entire country, but Upper Egypt seems to have been under his control, including the capital, Memphis. The Persians under Darius I eventually managed to crush this rebellion and retake the territories in the south, including the oases, where Darius I subsequently invested heavily to rebuild its infrastructure, which included temples at Hibis and Amheida.⁹ Dakhla Oasis played a significant role in the rebellion of Petubastis, because this king ordered a temple to be built at Amheida, which is an undertaking not expected at a time of insurgency. The explanation for this remarkable building project, ordered after Petubastis IV had himself crowned in Memphis, probably lies in the special role played by the oasis in the preparations for the rebellion. It is likely that Dakhla was one of the power bases of Petubastis, and it is even possible that his rebellion started in the oasis, in the light of the famous story told by Herodotus about the army sent by Cambyses into the Western Desert.¹⁰ The temple building of Petubastis IV thus demonstrates that the oases could take part in rebellious activities, something that would be repeated at around 460 BC, during the rebellion of Inaros against Persian rule, which had started in Sais, and which was supported by the inhabitants of Kharga Oasis.¹¹ These are instances where the oases could show themselves independent of central control.

The rebellion of Petubastis IV had been preceded at Amheida by a period of intensive temple building by the kings of the 26th Dynasty.¹² There is speculation as to the reasons for the first king of the dynasty, Psamtek I, to involve himself actively in the Southern Oasis (including both Dakhla and Kharga). One of the possible scenarios is that Dakhla and Kharga had moved away from Nubian control during the 25th Dynasty, and that Psamtek I needed to conquer the oases anew.¹³ It is difficult to

⁷ Line 107; Ritner 2009: 487. ⁸ Kaper 2009a. ⁹ Kaper 2015b. ¹⁰ Kaper 2015b.
¹¹ Chauveau 2004. ¹² Kaper 2012a. ¹³ Kaper 2018: 274–5.

prove that the Southern Oasis had been independent from the Nubian dynasty, because this is based at this moment only on negative evidence, i.e., the lack of royal building works during this period, and a subsequent intensification of central control. A stronger case can be made for an earlier period of interrupted central control during the New Kingdom, because there is some additional argumentation.

A Stela of Seti II

A discovery in 2014 indicated that the origin of the temple at Amheida could be traced further back in time to the New Kingdom. A large stela of Seti II (ca. 1202–1198) was found (Fig. 13.1), with an inscription referring to the building of a temple enclosure wall. A full description will be published elsewhere, but in this chapter a brief description of its main features will suffice in order to draw some historical conclusions from the piece. The sandstone stela is carved in sunk relief, with two registers of offering scenes above a band with a painted inscription in the bottom section. Its measurements are 139 cm in remaining height and 112 cm in width; its thickness is 31 cm. Each register, as also the painted part at the bottom, measures one cubit (51 cm) in height. The top of the stela is broken off, but no further fragments were recovered in the excavations of the area. The stela and its plinth had been reused as building stones in the Roman period temple, and it was found covered in gypsum cement.¹⁴

The pictorial part of the stela carries the remains of four offering scenes. In the lower register, which has been completely preserved, Seti II is depicted on the left presenting two globular pots of wine before Thoth, “the lord of hieroglyphs” (*mdw-ntr*). The parallel scene on the right depicts the same king with wine jars before the god Horus, “the son of Osiris.”¹⁵ The upper register is preserved only in its lower part. On the left, the king was depicted facing a male deity, whose identity is lost. On the right, the king was offering to the goddess Seshat, recognizable by her dress covered with a panther skin.¹⁶ The style of carving is very good, as are the texts and the numerous iconographic embellishments, such as the four different

¹⁴ As is common for nearly all pre-Roman relief blocks at the temple. The stela was cleaned by the Dakhla Oasis Conservation Department.

¹⁵ The offering of wine jars is not to be taken as a reference to the local wine cultivation in Dakhla, because it is regularly found in other offering scenes of this king from outside Thebes, e.g., on the images in two Wadi Hammamat inscriptions, Kitchen 1982: 280, 281, as also on Buhen stela no. 1745, Smith 1976: 150–1, pl. 41 [3].

¹⁶ Cf. Budde 2000.



Fig. 13.1 Stela of Seti II found at Amheida, as found (Excavations at Amheida, photo O. E. Kaper).

types of offering stands in the four scenes. It suggests the work of an experienced sculptor, trained in the Nile Valley.

On the lower part of the stela was a painted inscription, containing a building text of four lines. Only faint traces of this inscription survive, but close examination of the stone has made clear that it started with the full titulary of Seti II, followed by a reference to building works of which only the word *sbtj*, “girdle wall,”¹⁷ remains. These traces are sufficient, however,

¹⁷ Lesko and Switalski Lesko 2002–4: 29–30.

to conclude that the stela was erected to commemorate building works at the temple of Thoth at Amheida, because of the mention of an enclosure wall and the central depiction of Thoth on the stela.

It is remarkable that the main inscription of the stela has been executed only in paint, whereas the pictorial component was carved in relief. The stela is apparently unfinished in this lower part, for whatever reason, even though the rest of the stela was completed.¹⁸

The stela must have stood in a publicly accessible location in the temple for a considerable amount of time, as is shown by the numerous grooves (*gouges/cupules*) carved in its surface. Such grooves are known already from Ramesside times, and they were made by people collecting sandstone powder from a blessed source as a magical ingredient.¹⁹

The inscription mentions the building of a *temenos* wall, and I would like to suggest that it originally also mentioned the foundation of a school. The presence of both Thoth “Lord of Hieroglyphs” and Seshat is a good indication for this. The god Horus-son-of-Osiris is a child-god, symbolically referring to the succession from father to son, which also fits this context. As further support for this supposition, I refer to the Ramesside ostrakon that was found at the site of the temple and contained a section from the school text *Kemyt*.²⁰ This ostrakon provides evidence for scribal training at the site with the use of the national curriculum. The book *Kemyt* was already known from many different sites from Memphis to Kuban in Nubia, and now also from the oases.²¹

It is of great interest, as this stela demonstrates, that the Egyptian state was involved in arranging building works in the Western Desert at this time. Seti II, whose reign lasted only six years, is known to have built temples for Amun at Thebes and for Thoth at Hermopolis,²² now supplemented by another temple for Thoth at Amheida.

The stela of Seti II raises a number of questions, specifically about the nature of the state’s involvement in the oases during the New Kingdom. This emerges especially because the reign of Seti II is situated between two periods of war between Egypt and Libyan ethnic groups during the 19th and the early 20th Dynasty. In what way was Seti II confronted with this Libyan problem? It is known that in the course of the Ramesside period the

¹⁸ There is not much Egyptological literature about unfinished sculptures, even though this is of common occurrence in all periods. A comparable stela in relief with its lowest register only done in paint is the Middle Kingdom stela of Sehetepibreankh in Leiden, Rijksmuseum van Oudheden no. AP 21.

¹⁹ Traunecker 1987; Dijkstra 2012: 27–8. ²⁰ Kaper 2010. ²¹ Kaper 2010: 125–6.

²² Dodson 2010: 31–46, 69–82; Servajean 2014: 55–94, 282–300.

presence of Libyans in the Nile Valley increased steadily, ultimately leading to the Libyan supremacy of the Third Intermediate Period.²³ But what happened in the *inter bellum* period at the end of the 19th Dynasty, and especially what was the role of the oases of the Western Desert in the Libyan wars?

The 18th Dynasty

Answers to the questions raised by the stela of Seti II can only be expected when we consider the piece in its wider context. There was another temple of the New Kingdom at the capital of Dakhla Oasis, Mut el-Kharab, which provides useful material for comparison with Amheida.²⁴ It has been established that a temple to the god Igai functioned at Mut at least since the start of the Middle Kingdom,²⁵ which was complemented by a temple cult to Seth and Amun-Re, presumably in the first half of the 18th Dynasty. The earliest evidence for this temple dates to the time of Thutmose III, in the form of several relief fragments found reused in later buildings at Mut el-Kharab,²⁶ but its dedication to Seth has not yet been proved. Dakhla Oasis formed part of the domain of Amun-Re at Karnak at this time, as appears from the paintings in five different Theban tombs from the reign of Thutmose III in Thebes, among which is the tomb of the vizier Rekhmire.²⁷ These tombs depict the produce of the Southern Oasis being brought to Thebes, including wine, sacks of various goods, basketry, and mats. The earliest archaeological finds of oasis amphoras in Luxor also date from this time.²⁸

Other relief fragments at Mut el-Kharab attest to building works under Horemheb, who commissioned a decorated temple gateway.²⁹ In general, the 18th Dynasty is well represented in the archaeological record of the oases, and there is also much material from the oases found in the Nile Valley. Inscriptions provide evidence for trade and for wine cultivation in Dakhla and Kharga at this period, because wine amphoras from Ghueita (*pr-wsh*) in Kharga were found in the palace of Amenhotep III at Malqata,³⁰ and at Amarna amphoras from the “Back of the Oasis” (*sz-wḥ3t*) in Dakhla have

²³ Snape 2012.

²⁴ Excavation of this temple has been underway since 2000, by C. A. Hope, of Monash University, as part of the Dakhleh Oasis Project.

²⁵ Hope and Kaper 2010. ²⁶ Hope 2002a: 91, pl. 12; Hope and Kaper 2011: 224.

²⁷ Giddy 1987: 68–74. ²⁸ Hope 2002b: 104. ²⁹ Hope 2005: 43, pls. 6–7. ³⁰ Leahy 1978.

been found.³¹ The latter placename refers to the region around Amheida.³² In Amarna, wine dockets also mention wine and grapes from Bahariya.³³ The tomb reliefs of the governor Amenhotep at Bahariya depict the filling and storing of wine jars,³⁴ and Amenhotep held office in the later years of the 18th or the early years of the 19th Dynasty.³⁵

Other evidence of the 18th Dynasty comes in the form of extensive mining in Dakhla for alum, which was used in the manufacturing of the luxury blue-painted pottery in the second half of the dynasty,³⁶ as also in glass manufacture³⁷ and in the manufacture (tawing) and dying of leather.³⁸ The ceramic evidence from Dakhla shows that the 18th Dynasty was a period of prosperity and intensive contacts with the Nile Valley, with many different kinds of vessels abundantly represented at Ain Aseel and elsewhere in the oasis, especially amphoras and gourds of the late 18th Dynasty.³⁹ Likewise, the Abu Ballas Road between Dakhla and the Gilf Kebir has yielded ceramics from the oasis of the second half of the 18th Dynasty.⁴⁰ In Memphis, at the site of Kom Rabi'a, oasis amphoras were found in New Kingdom contexts, with the majority dating to the late 18th and the early 19th Dynasty.⁴¹

The 19th Dynasty

It is remarkable that there is a notable decline in evidence for contacts between the oases and the Nile Valley from the 19th Dynasty as compared with the immediately preceding period. There is only a single dated relief block from the temple at Mut el-Kharab, found in 2011, which carries part of a meat offering scene with a cartouche of Menmaatre, Seti I.⁴² The cutting of the block is shallow and more casual than we would expect from artists at this time. This may point to the work of a local sculptor from the oasis, for whom the artistic standards were less stringent than they would have been in the Nile Valley. The possibility that this cartouche refers to Ramesses XI, as

³¹ Marchand and Tallet 1999; Tallet 1999; P. Rose remarks that the number of such amphoras at Amarna remains relatively small, but that they were distributed fairly evenly across the city, in Hope 2002b: 111–12.

³² Kaper 1992: 124–9; Bagnall *et al.* 2015: 21–3.

³³ Fairman 1933: 106, pl. 58 [37]; Fairman 1951: 166. ³⁴ Kampp-Seyfried 2000: 59, fig. 26.

³⁵ Van Siclen 1981. ³⁶ Hope *et al.* 2009. ³⁷ Shortland *et al.* 2006.

³⁸ Elnaggar *et al.* 2017; Veldmeijer and Ikram 2018: 91–2.

³⁹ Marchand and Tallet 1999: 319–21. ⁴⁰ Förster 2015: 138–41.

⁴¹ Bourriau in Hope 2002b: 113–15. ⁴² Hope 2012: 6, 15.

mentioned by Hope,⁴³ is valid, but normally this cartouche would contain an additional epithet – Setepenptah – that is missing in the present case.⁴⁴

The stela of Seti II is the only other explicitly dated item from the 19th Dynasty, and there is a notable absence of the major kings, Ramesses II and Merenptah. However, there was no complete break in communication with the oases, as can be shown from the evidence in papyrus Turin N.1874. This is a tax register from the time of Ramesses II, on the verso of which the famous Royal Canon of Turin was written.⁴⁵ This tax register encompasses all regions of Egypt outside the Nile Valley,⁴⁶ ending with the Northern and Southern Oasis. Unfortunately it is not clear in which part of the reign of Ramesses II this document was compiled, but it cannot have been at the very beginning of his reign. Immediately before the oasis regions, a series of desert stations is listed, which are probably situated along the northern coast of Sinai,⁴⁷ with wells that are named after Ramesses II. This kind of infrastructure could have been set up and named in the first years of the king's reign. Unfortunately, the specific kind of document involved is without parallel, and it is difficult to draw historical conclusions from this highly fragmentary papyrus, apart from the fact that taxes could be levied in the oases during some part of the reign of Ramesses II.⁴⁸ Elsewhere, royal ideology required the continued subservience of the oasis regions in formal inscriptions. In a row of fecundity figures from the time of Ramesses II in the Luxor temple, the Southern Oasis, Farafra, and the Northern Oasis are included as would be expected,⁴⁹ but these types of inscriptions are highly conventional and would not reflect problematic circumstances or a temporary break of communications with this region.

The only other evidence for continuing contact and exchange of goods between the Nile Valley and the oasis has been found in the form of ceramics from Dakhla at sites in the valley. At Qantir, at the palace site of the early 19th Dynasty, amphoras made in Dakhla were present among find contexts dating to between the reigns of Ramesses I and Merenptah, albeit in very small numbers.⁵⁰ Another interesting dated assembly from the oasis was found inside the tomb of the sons of Ramesses II, KV5, as identified by the excavators.⁵¹ Elsewhere in the Valley of the Kings, a few sherds in oasis fabric were found discarded in the well shaft of the tomb of Merenptah.⁵² A jar label from Deir el-Medina, estimated to be from the

⁴³ Hope 2012: 6. ⁴⁴ Beckerath 1999: 174–5. ⁴⁵ Gardiner 1959: 17, pls. IV–V.

⁴⁶ Helck 1992: 194–215. ⁴⁷ Kitchen 1999: 530. ⁴⁸ Giddy 1987: 85.

⁴⁹ Kitchen 1999: 619–20. ⁵⁰ Aston 1998: 536–9; Hope 2002b: 100–1; Aston *et al.* 2007: 538.

⁵¹ Hope 2002b: 103. ⁵² Hope 2002b: 103.

reign of Ramesses II, mentions wine from “the Back of the Oasis” – Amheida.⁵³ But apart from these finds, which show that wine production in Dakhla continued, the decrease in material imported from the oases during the 19th Dynasty is notable, while the evidence only mounts again during the 20th Dynasty.

The 20th Dynasty

A small relief fragment in sandstone found at the temple of Amheida preserves the throne name Neferkare Setepenre of Ramesses IX (ca. 1129–1111) in a cartouche (Fig. 13.2). The piece is broken on all sides, and its surviving measurements are 22 x 12 cm for the original surface, with a preserved thickness of 25 cm. The fragment is carved in sunk relief, and it



Fig. 13.2 Fragment of relief in the name of Ramesses IX from the temple at Amheida (Excavations at Amheida, photo B. Bazzani).

⁵³ Marchand and Tallet 1999: 312.

depicts the body of a king facing left, with his arms raised in an offering gesture. The name of Ramesses IX is written in front of him, but in an unusual position, because normally the name would be placed above the head of the king. The king wears a long kilt, and upon his chest is a priestly stola, while a long double streamer is suspended from his crown in the neck. The relief is carelessly drawn, and it seems prepared without the use of a grid, because the conventional proportions are not adhered to. These low standards of artistic work show that for this work no artists from the Nile Valley were brought in, as we already observed for the relief from Seti I's reign, which stands in contrast to the stela of Seti II at Amheida.

The small scale of the scene indicates that the relief may well have decorated the jamb or lintel of a temple doorway. No other fragments of this part of the temple have as yet come to light. The fragment is a surprising find, because the time of Ramesses IX and X is known for the incursions of Libyans in the community of workmen at Deir el-Medina. The invaders are referred to as Meshwesh, Libu, or "foreigners" (*ḥꜣstꜣw*). Several papyri describe how the work at the royal tombs had to be halted because of their arrival in the area.⁵⁴ Some people are described as trading with these Libyans, however, so it does not seem to have been a war-like situation.⁵⁵ The incursions must have entered the Nile Valley from Kharga,⁵⁶ so it is surprising to see that the state was still in control of Amheida at this same time, and that temple building was undertaken in the name of the Egyptian king, albeit at a limited scale.

When we examine the evidence from the earlier years of the 20th Dynasty, the dated materials in Dakhla show that under Ramesses IV new building works were carried out at Mut el-Kharab.⁵⁷ Also in this reign, trade between the Nile Valley and Dakhla seems to have resumed as during the 18th Dynasty. In fact, many late Ramesside vessels are known from excavations in Dakhla, mostly amphoras, and Dakhla amphoras were also traded with the Nile Valley.⁵⁸ Ceramics from this time found along the Abu Ballas route seem to date from a single instance of use, even though the amount of material left behind is rather large. All material seems to belong together, and it was evidently made at the same workshop.⁵⁹ The best parallels for the particular shape of the vessels involved were found in the tomb of Ramesses IV.⁶⁰

⁵⁴ Haring 1992. ⁵⁵ Winnicki 2009: 33. ⁵⁶ Winnicki 2009: 33; Kitchen 2012: 7–8, 11.

⁵⁷ Hope and Kaper 2011: 225 n. 32. ⁵⁸ Marchand and Tallet 1999: 319–20.

⁵⁹ Förster 2015: 141.

⁶⁰ Förster 2015: 143; cf. Hope 2002b: 103, even though a radiocarbon date seems to point at a slightly earlier dating. This ¹⁴C date was taken from a basketry sample found underneath

There are a few papyri from the 20th Dynasty that mention contacts between the Nile Valley and the oasis. Papyrus Harris I mentions vineyards that were planted in the Southern Oasis under Ramesses III,⁶¹ and Papyrus Turin 2074 contains on its verso a long list of people of Deir el-Medina, four of whom are said to come from Hibis (Kharga) and two from “the Back of the Oasis” – Amheida.⁶² The papyrus mentions the foreman Nekhemmut (vi), who was active in the later part of the 20th Dynasty.⁶³

In the light of the numerous archaeological and textual remains from Dakhla Oasis and from sites in the Nile Valley, it is remarkable that there are so very few remains from the early Ramesside period in the oasis. The stela of Seti II appears to be a singular piece in this period, because of its quality and because of its reference to direct state control in local building works. What is especially striking is to have building works attested in the oasis under Seti I, Seti II, and Ramesses IV and IX, but no evidence at all of Ramesses II, who built temples at literally every town site in Egypt, in Nubia, and along the Mediterranean coast. There is a chance, of course, that the temple building remains of Ramesses II simply have not yet been found in the ongoing excavations in Dakhla, but to my mind the current state of our knowledge is sufficient for commencing historical research. The occurrence of several minor kings in the record raises questions that should be answered.

There are a few more items from the early Ramesside period that should be mentioned here for the sake of completeness. A Ramesside stela found at Mut el-Kharab is a private devotional piece with a hymn to the god Seth,⁶⁴ but it can unfortunately not be dated precisely. It was recut from a block of the 11th Dynasty,⁶⁵ and it has parallels in the time of Ramesses II, but it may also date from earlier or later in the dynasty.

There is also a series of shabtis of Neb-Mehyt, governor of the Southern Oasis, which were found by Amélineau in Abydos.⁶⁶ These can be dated to the early 19th Dynasty, because of the inlaid eyes of one of them, which seem a feature particularly of that period,⁶⁷ but no secure dating is possible at this moment.

amphoras at site 99/33, which dates to 1230 BC ± 70 cal BC, UtC-8868, pointing at the 19th or early 20th Dynasty; Förster 2015: 143.

⁶¹ Grandet 1994. ⁶² Černý 1955: 29. ⁶³ Davies 1999: 50. ⁶⁴ Hope and Kaper 2011.

⁶⁵ The stone and dimensions are identical to those of the 11th Dynasty stela in Hope and Kaper 2010.

⁶⁶ Giddy 1987: 81–2, 121. ⁶⁷ Kaper 2014b: 137.

The Libyan Campaigns

The varying trade relations between Egypt and the oases can be understood when seen in the context of the political situation of the times. In the late 18th Dynasty, the listing of the enemies of Egypt only rarely included Libyans,⁶⁸ but in the time of Seti I, a threat had emerged, and four military campaigns were undertaken against the Libyans. This is depicted on the walls of the Karnak temple, where specifically the Libu and Tjehenu groups are named,⁶⁹ although the dress and physiognomy of the Libyans depicted are those of the Meshwesh.⁷⁰ It is possible that these troubles amounted to no more than skirmishes. Murnane saw the significance of these battles largely in relation to what would follow: “Sety I’s war reliefs help chart the early stages of a problem that would end by overwhelming New Kingdom Egypt,”⁷¹ but perhaps they should be seen as “major battles,” as in Sagrillo’s view.⁷²

The problems increased under Ramesses II, who fought several battles with Libyans,⁷³ and he also built a series of seven defensive fortresses in the western Delta and along the Mediterranean coast.⁷⁴ These fortresses seem to have fallen out of use already under Merenptah and Ramesses III, which probably indicates that they were taken over by Libyans during that time.⁷⁵

Merenptah waged war against the Libu and a coalition of Sea Peoples in his year 5, and the inscriptions in the *Cour de la cachette* at Karnak indicate their route into Egypt: “They reached the mountains of the Oasis, and the desert passes (*shadu*) of the district of Farafra.”⁷⁶ This inscription shows that the Libyan groups had reached the oases of the south, blocking the road from Thebes to Farafra.⁷⁷ According to the Israel Stela, the battle in year 5 lasted only six hours, which is surprisingly short. This stela, in spite of its name, is mainly concerned with the war against Libyans. The battle took place near the town of Perire, which is not located with certainty, but it is assumed to be near the southern part of the western Delta,⁷⁸ or south of Memphis.⁷⁹ The Libyans had come with their women, children, and cattle from the west, perhaps because there was a famine at this time. Following their defeat, there seems to have been a thirty-year period of relative quiet; at least we do not hear of further battles until Ramesses III’s year 5.

⁶⁸ Kaper 1993; but cf. Parkinson and Schofield 1993; 1997. ⁶⁹ Murnane 1990: 99–100.

⁷⁰ Winnicki 2009: 28. ⁷¹ Murnane 1990: 100. ⁷² Sagrillo 2013: 4072.

⁷³ Morris 2005: 614–15. ⁷⁴ Morris 2005: 624–45; Thomas 2011. ⁷⁵ Snape 2003: 104–5.

⁷⁶ Kitchen 1982: 4; translation following Manassa 2003: 28, 33. ⁷⁷ Winnicki 2009: 29.

⁷⁸ Manassa 2003: 25–7. ⁷⁹ Winnicki 2009: 29.

Ramesses III fought with Tjehenu, Libu, and Meshwesh Libyans in his years 5 and 11. The records indicate that thousands of Libyans were killed and even larger numbers were made captive.⁸⁰ Papyrus Harris I records that Ramesses III fortified five Upper Egyptian temples at Hermopolis, Assiut, Abydos, Thinis, and Ombos,⁸¹ and two of these, Hermopolis and Thinis, are said to be specifically intended to repel the Libyans (Tjehenu). It is interesting that these locations are at the entry points of roads leading to Kharga Oasis.⁸² The Libyans may well have arrived from the Southern Oasis. That would also explain why Ramesses III settled many of the defeated Libyans in Middle Egypt. A single source refers to Libyan adversaries (Tjemehu) living in the desert west of Lower Nubia during the reign of Ramesses II.⁸³

There were also some smaller ethnic groups among the invaders, but the Meshwesh and Libu were the most sizable. Meshwesh first appear in Egyptian records during the reign of Amenhotep III. They are depicted with tresses of hair on the right side of their heads, while the left side is clean-shaven. In the Medinet Habu reliefs, they wear long cloaks and penis sheaths and often feathers in their hair.⁸⁴ The Libu are mentioned only from the time of Ramesses II. In the Medinet Habu reliefs they are shown wearing short kilts with a cloak and sometimes with tattoos on their arms and legs.⁸⁵ There may again have been a drought in the Libyan territories at the time of Ramesses III, because the reliefs at Medinet Habu depict the Libyans arriving together with their families and their animals.

Not much is known of their lands of origin, because they were nomadic peoples who did not leave traces in the archaeological record. It is difficult too, for this reason, to identify their presence in the oases of the Western Desert,⁸⁶ including those to the west of Lower Nubia.

Conclusions

After a period of intensive involvement of the oases in the economic activities of the Nile Valley in the 18th Dynasty, coinciding with building works in Mut el-Kharab under Thutmose III and Horemheb, a marked decline ensued. During the 19th Dynasty, there is only limited evidence for temple building in the reign of Seti I (Mut el-Kharab) and Seti II (Amheida), while decline is visible in the evidence for the trade in wine

⁸⁰ Vittmann 2003: 3. ⁸¹ P. Harris I, lvii 11–12; lviii 1–8; lix 4–5; Kitchen 2012: 19.

⁸² Winnicki 2009: 31. ⁸³ Kitchen 1980: 95; Yoyotte 1951. ⁸⁴ Hölscher 1937: 42–3.

⁸⁵ Hölscher 1937: 41–2. ⁸⁶ Hubschmann 2010: 186.

amphoras present in the Nile Valley, and likewise the ceramic remains from that period become scarce in the oasis.⁸⁷ In the 20th Dynasty, the evidence increases again to become close to former levels. Temple building is attested under Ramesses IV (Mut el-Kharab) and Ramesses IX (Amheida), coinciding with textual references to contacts with the oases.

What happened in the early 19th Dynasty? Colleen Manassa has assumed that the Egyptian army retained control of the oases during the Libyan wars and that they used these outposts for monitoring the movements of Libyan troops.⁸⁸ However, there is no evidence from the oases to support this supposition, and it is my contention that there are more indications for the opposite: that the Egyptians lost control of the desert regions temporarily during the Ramesside period.

The continuing wine deliveries to Piramesse (Qantir) from the Southern Oasis, albeit at a modest scale, suggest a continuation of trade activities. But there are only a few Egyptian building works attested in the oases from this time, which is remarkable considering the dominant presence of Ramesses II at other sites in Egypt and Nubia. The dip in Egyptian material culture in Dakhla Oasis may well suggest a Libyan takeover at this time. This argumentation is largely based upon negative evidence: the absence of Egyptian material at this time, which suggests that the region was no longer in Egyptian hands.

The stela of Seti II is therefore a key piece of evidence for the history of New Kingdom Dakhla: the king built an enclosure wall around the temple of Thoth at a time when Egypt re-established its authority over the oasis. The stela of Seti II was erected after a lull of some eighty years, in which no building activity is attested and material culture production and trade with the Nile Valley were at their lowest level. We know that Egypt also tried to impose control by appointing a new chief of the Tjemehu, and according to a letter of Seti II employed as a school text (P. Anastasi IV, x 8 – xi 8), the king had also settled people of the Tjeku ethnic group, possibly originating from Nubia, in the oasis region.⁸⁹ This may have been a part of the new policy of control. These activities certainly contradict the claim by Ramesses III in P. Harris I that previous kings had done nothing to stop the infiltration of Libyans into the country.⁹⁰ Following the reign of Seti II, the Libyan wars of Ramesses III may have brought a second, shorter period of rupture of relations. The first building activity attested after Seti II is found at Mut el-Kharab under Ramesses IV. At the same time, the oases

⁸⁷ Marchand and Tallet 1999. ⁸⁸ Manassa 2013: 119. ⁸⁹ Winnicki 2009: 70–1.

⁹⁰ Redford 1992: 249; Vittmann 2003: 2.

appear again in the texts in his reign, notably with reference to the trade in wine from the Southern Oasis.⁹¹

In the Third Intermediate Period, the sources from Dakhla state that the Shamain tribe was in control of the oasis.⁹² It is possible that the same tribe was settled in Dakhla already during the New Kingdom, but there is no earlier evidence for this or any other Libyan name in the oasis. The onomastics of Ramesside Dakhla are purely Egyptian, even though a Libyan population can be assumed to be present, but their names were never recorded in hieroglyphic or hieratic inscriptions. Libyan names come to be written down later, as in the Greater Dakhla Stela from the Third Intermediate Period,⁹³ but the context remains that of an Egyptianized administration. Governmental control may well have been partly in the hands of local families, but they assumed the tasks and roles required by the Egyptian administration.

The present chapter confirms that the Egyptian contacts with the oases were largely maintained throughout the New Kingdom,⁹⁴ but there seem to have been temporary lapses of authority, during the periods when Libyan groups advanced on Egypt. The first period seems to start in the reign of Seti I or Ramesses II, who did not manage to include the oases in his building projects, and continued during the reign of Merenptah. Under Seti II Egyptian control was re-established, partly confirmed by building works in the Dakhla Oasis. A second period of rupture, which is less clear in the sources, may have coincided with the Libyan wars in the reign of Ramesses III, after which Ramesses IV re-established control.

The Western Desert oases were always vulnerable to invasion, as they have been many times in subsequent eras,⁹⁵ and given that the texts already mention Farafrā as being involved in the time of Merenptah, but especially that they mention the entry points of Libyans to the south of the Theban area,⁹⁶ and in Hermopolis and Thinis (fortifications mentioned in P. Harris I), this indicates that the Southern Oasis was their place of origin.

During the Libyan wars, there is no doubt that a major threat to Egypt came along the northern coast, but the routes through the oases were another approach into Egypt, which were naturally employed by the nomadic Libyans. There is no evidence for increased military occupation

⁹¹ P.Harris I, 7; Grandet 1994. ⁹² Kaper and Demarée 2005: 35. ⁹³ Gardiner 1933.

⁹⁴ As argued by Hope in Hope and Kaper 2011.

⁹⁵ E.g., in late antiquity the Blemmyes and Nobadae attacked Kharga Oasis, and extensive fortifications were built. In late Ottoman times, the villages of Dakhla and Kharga possessed high surrounding walls owing to the likelihood of attacks.

⁹⁶ Haring 1992: 74.

of the oases under Ramesside rule; on the contrary, it looks as if the oases were temporarily lost to Egyptian control. It is unlikely that the archaeological record in the oases would preserve any traces of these conflicts, especially because the regions were soon retaken after the wars had ended, and Egyptian control was re-established as if nothing had happened. The same may be observed later, after the rebellion of Petubastis IV, and perhaps also after the 25th Dynasty. Egyptian control over the oases was long-standing and solid, but it was easily reversed when new populations managed to attain a foothold there.