

THE CHANGE FROM EGYPTIAN TO PHILISTINE HEGEMONY IN SOUTH-WESTERN PALESTINE DURING THE TIME OF RAMESSES III OR IV¹

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In the last years several interesting finds have been discovered, which provide new details about the changes in the southwestern area of Palestine during the early years of the 12th century BCE. The aim of this article is to present this collected information and to draw some historical conclusions.

I. Papyrus Harris

Papyrus Harris I is a summary of important events during the reign of Ramesses III (1187–1156 BCE), which was prepared by his son and successor Ramesses IV. In chapter 9,1–3 a temple of Amon situated in Djahi is mentioned (ANET, 260–261):²

I built for thee a mysterious house in the land of Djahi, like the horizon of heaven which is in the sky, (named) “the House of Ramesses-Ruler-of-Heliopolis—life, prosperity, health!—in *the Canaan*”, as the vested property of thy name. I fashioned the great cult image which rests in it, (named) “Amon of Ramesses-Ruler of Heliopolis—life, prosperity, health!”. The foreigners of Retenu come to it, bearing their tribute before it, according as it is divine.

Evidently *the Canaan* should be considered as another name for the town of Gaza, the southernmost Palestinian site.³ This text testifies that Ramesses III built up an Egyptian temple in this town, and that the inhabitants of the country had to present offerings to the main god of the New Kingdom Amun. There is no reason to doubt the historicity of this information.

¹ I thank D. Kahn for his comments on my paper.

² For the last scientific translation and commentary see M. Weippert, *Historisches Textbuch zum Alten Testament* (Göttingen, 2010), pp. 173–174 (this part of the *Textbuch* was written by B. U. Schipper).

³ Cf. Weippert, *ibid.*, p. 173, note 185.

II. Hieratic Inscriptions

In Tell esh-Sheri'a/Tel Sera', Lachish/Tell ed-Duwer, Tell eš-Šafi/Gath, Tell el-Far'ah South, Deir el-Balah, Ashkelon, Tell Abu Hurera and Beth Shean the excavators found several fragments of hieratic inscriptions.⁴ Except for Beth Shean, where an Egyptian military garrison was installed, all those texts are from a limited area in southwestern Palestine. Even more: Nearly all of those inscriptions mention taxes of harvest handed over to an official, who wrote a confirmation. The use of the hieratic writing system may be considered as a proof for an Egyptian tax delivery system. Based on paleographical and stratigraphical reasons all those texts should be dated in the 13th or early-12th century BCE.⁵ Not definitely but likely those harvest deliveries can be understood as the tributes presented to the temple in Gaza mentioned in Papyrus Harris I (or to a predecessor in that area). Since Egyptian temples were connected normally with an economic system, we have to assume that also the temple in Gaza was supported by the income of the surrounding farmsteads and villages, whose land was owned by the temple. The combination of the Papyrus Harris I and the hieratic inscriptions shows us the extension of the land owned by the temple of Gaza: the whole area in the southwestern part of Palestine up to Tell eš-Šafi/Gath and likely Ashkelon in the north and Lachish/Tell ed-Duwer and Tell esh-Sheri'a/Tel Sera' in the east. This is a territory with fertile landscape of approximately 500km². To own a specific territory is something new in the Egyptian way of dominating Palestine. During the 18th and 19th dynasties the Egyptians were only interested to control the country and to ensure trade activities. Just a small group of soldiers were installed in Palestine to guarantee free roads and to keep the stability in the country. The tax delivery is different from the former system of Egyptian control: Now a specific territory was owned by the Egyptians and most of the income of the agriculture activities had to be delivered to the temple, which was regarded as an Egyptian economic and religious centre.

Inscription I of Tel Sera'⁶ mentions the regnal year 22, likely the reign of Ramesses III (1187–1156 BCE). The regnal year 22 is in conformity with 1165 BCE. The bowl from Tel Sera' shows that at least in the last years of the 60's of the 12th century BCE the Egyptian temple in Gaza was still in use.

III. Seals of Egyptian Officials

Some years ago C. Uehlinger focused attention on three seals found in Tel Beth Shemesh and Tell el-Far'a South with the inscription "House of Ramesses-Ruler-of-Heliopolis".⁷ These seals were certainly official seals used by somebody, who was

⁴ For an updated list of all these inscriptions see S. J. Wimmer, "A New Hieratic Ostrakon from Ashkelon", *TA* 35 (2008), pp. 69–71.

⁵ See S. J. Wimmer in Weippert, *op. cit.* (note 2), pp. 175–178. A few of these inscriptions are dated by Wimmer to the reign of Ramesses III (*ibid.*, p. 176, note 206).

⁶ O. Goldwasser, "Hieratic Inscriptions from Tel Sera' in Southern Canaan", *TA* 11 (1984), pp. 77–93.

⁷ C. Uehlinger, "Der Amun-Tempel Ramses' III. in p3-Kn'n, seine südpalästinischen Tempelgüter und der Übergang von der Ägypter- zur Philisterherrschaft: Ein Hinweis auf einige wenig beachtete Skarabäen", *ZDPV* 104 (1988), pp. 6–25 (enlarged edition in O. Keel, M. Shuval and C. Uehlinger, *Studien zu den Stempelsiegeln aus Palästina/Israel. Band III: Die*

responsible for the area belonging to the temple in Gaza.⁸ Tell el-Far‘a South lies in the same territory covered by the hieratic inscriptions. Beth Shemesh is located about 20km to the north. Naturally seals can be transported or lost by their owners in several places. But it seems probable that the territory owned by the Egyptians was enlarged up to Beth Shemesh in the north.

IV. The Settlement of the Sea Peoples

In the 8th year of Ramesses III several groups of the Sea Peoples were—according to Papyrus Harris—brought to Egypt by the Egyptians and settled in strongholds. Since the first sentence of this paragraph mentions that Ramesses III extended all the frontiers of Egypt, it can be assumed, but not be proved, that he settled the Sea Peoples along the Palestinian coast, which Ramesses III understood as part of Egypt. While the Tekker settled in the north with Dor as their capital, the Philistines lived in the southwestern part of Palestine. They established Gaza, Ashkelon, Ashdod, Gath and Ekron as their capitals. This is at least part of the landscape owned by the Egyptian temple of Gaza. Therefore, it seems credible that Ramesses III offered to the Philistine groups a landscape owned by him in which to settle in. Maybe he kept some areas at the eastern and southern borders to be still under Egyptian control.

Gaza was one of the Philistine capitals. Therefore we may have to assume that Ramesses III built his temple in Gaza during his early years, before the Philistines arrived. It seems understandable that the Egyptians settled the Sea Peoples as mercenaries in this territory, which could contribute to the Egyptian control over Palestine. Most likely, at least until 1165 BCE, the 22nd year of Ramesses III mentioned in the inscription I from Tel Sera‘, the Philistines cooperated in this way with the Egyptians, since probably the temple in Gaza received taxes from the area which was now also settled by the Philistine newcomers.

V. Inscription of Ramesses III from Lachish

In the early stages, Lachish was most likely not under Philistine control. In Level VI of Lachish, a bronze plaque with the cartouche of Ramesses III was discovered.⁹ Despite earlier suggestions, the writing of the name of Ramesses III cannot be considered as a proof for the early years of this pharaoh. Nevertheless, Lachish was conquered and destroyed by enemies not before the time of Ramesses III. It seems probable that the Philistines, who were the direct neighbors, destroyed Lachish, because they did not want to be simply mercenaries of the Egyptians but to be independent. If Lachish still belonged to the Egyptians during the reign of Ramesses III,

Frühe Eisenzeit. Ein Workshop [Fribourg – Göttingen, 1990], pp. 3–26).

⁸ But cf. the criticism by B. Brandl, “Scarabs and Plaques Bearing Royal Names of the Early 20th Egyptian Dynasty excavated in Canaan – from Sethnakht to Ramesses IV”, in M. Bietak and E. Czerny (eds.), *Scarabs of the Second Millennium BC from Egypt, Nubia, Crete and the Levant: Chronological and Historical Implications* (Vienna, 2004), p. 59. In his opinion the estate was situated in Egypt. But Brandl cannot explain why these scarabs were found in southern Palestine.

⁹ R. Giveon, D. Sweeney and N. Lalkin, “The Inscription of Ramesses III”, in D. Ussishkin, *The Renewed Archaeological Excavations at Lachish (1973–1994)*, III (Tel Aviv, 2004), pp. 1626–1628.

it was logical to destroy this town in order to demonstrate the Philistine independence. Later on the Philistines probably also destroyed the Egyptian temple in Gaza, which was still an existing symbol of the Egyptian domination. If all these suggestions are true, this deliberate attack of the Philistines did not take place before the 22nd regnal year of Ramesses III (1165 BCE).

This deliverance of the Philistines from the Egyptians had severe consequences. The international trade through Palestine broke down immediately, because the Philistines did not want to cooperate with the Egyptians anymore. On the other hand, the Egyptians were not strong enough anymore to reestablish their dominion in Palestine. We have no single information of a campaign to Palestine of any pharaoh of the 20th or 21st dynasties after Ramesses III down to Siamun¹⁰ or Shishak in the 10th century BCE, and even Ramesses III was not able to establish his domination again. Likely the might of the Philistine military power was too strong for the Egyptians. The breakdown of the international trade, caused by the settlement of the Philistines and their succeeding liberation from Egyptian domination, was the final stroke for Late Bronze Age society in Palestine. Since most of the city states were connected with trade activities and were situated on major trade routes, they lost their income. Therefore the inhabitants left the towns and settled in the Negev or in the Hill country.

VI. Scarabs of Ramesses IV in Lachish

Some years ago R. Krauss emphasized that a scarab with the name of Ramesses IV (1156–1150 BCE) has been found in the 1930s in a Late Bronze Age context outside the city of Lachish in Area 7000. Therefore, the destruction of Lachish, Stratum VI did not take place before the reign of this pharaoh.¹¹ Unfortunately the stratigraphy, as well as the identification of this scarab is not completely clear. There is another scarab that was found in Tomb 570, which most likely can also be attributed to Ramesses IV, although this reading is not definite.¹² The finds from this tomb belong to the final days of Late Bronze Age Lachish. If the analysis of the writing on the seals is correct, we have a proof for a destruction of the city of Lachish not before the early years of Ramesses IV.

Generally Egyptian royal seals are not to be considered as a proof for Egyptian hegemony at this site. They may have come to a specific site by Egyptian officials or traders even when the Egyptian hegemony had finished. But if they are well stratified they can be used for an absolute chronology of the site.

¹⁰ An expedition of Siamun to Palestine is based on 1 Kgs 9:16. In addition, a relief from Tanis, presenting this pharaoh triumphant over an enemy with a double-axe in his hand, may be also connected with this campaign; see K. A. Kitchen, *On the Reliability of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids – Cambridge, 2003), pl. xvi.

¹¹ R. Krauss, "Ein wahrscheinlicher Terminus post quem für das Ende von Lachisch VI", *MDOG* 126 (1994), pp. 123–130. For a possible attribution of this seal to Osorkon II, cf. Brandl, *op. cit.* (note 8), p. 60.

¹² N. Lalkin, "A Ramesses IV Scarab from Lachish", *TA* 31 (2004), pp. 17–21.

VII. Finds from Later Pharaohs of the Ramesside Period in Palestine

The main category of finds from the 19th and 20th dynasties is seals. According to Keel and Brandl¹³ seals with the name of a Ramesside pharaoh have been found in official digs according to the following distribution:

Seti I	10
Ramesses II	about 110
(Nefertari	1)
Merenptah	3
Sethos II	1
Siptah	1
Tausret	1 ¹⁴
Sethnakht	1
Ramesses III	15
Ramesses IV	5 + x ¹⁵

No seals of later kings of the Ramesside period have been found.¹⁶ The presence or absence of seals from later pharaohs can be interpreted as proof for the end of the Egyptian hegemony on southern Palestine during the reign of Ramesses IV. Egyptian annalistic texts do not mention any further military activity of a Ramesside king after Ramesses III. Only campaigns into the Sinai and to Timna, conducted by the Pharaohs Ramesses IV, Ramesses V and Ramesses VI, are reported. There are no inscriptions in Timna that are later than Ramesses V, and evidently during his reign the Egyptian interest in the eastern part of the Sinai peninsula came to an end. The last architectural elements in Serabit el-Khadim were built up by Ramesses VI's reign. His reign was definitely the end of Egyptian hegemony in the Sinai area.

VIII. A Socket of Ramesses VI in Megiddo

A socket for a bronze statuette has been found in Megiddo, which mentions the name of Ramesses VI (1145–1137 BCE), but this cannot be considered as a proof for Egyptian military presence in Megiddo during that late period. It may be regarded as a gift of that pharaoh or even as a booty. It was found “under a wall in

¹³ O. Keel, *Corpus der Stempelsiegel-Amulette aus Palästina/Israel. Von den Anfängen bis zur Perserzeit. Einleitung* (Fribourg – Göttingen 1995), p. 235, § 643; Brandl, *op. cit.* (note 8), p. 61–63.

¹⁴ For Tausret cf. also the vases with inscriptions from Tell Der Alla and Sidon (H. J. Franken, *Excavations at Tell Deir 'Alla. The Late Bronze Age Sanctuary* [Louvain 1992], p. 187, pl. 4b; C. Doumet-Serhal, “Sidon during the Bronze Age: Burials, Rituals and Feasting Grounds at the “College Site”, *NEA* 73 [2010], p. 125).

¹⁵ I will not discuss the problematic readings of the names of Ramesses IV on scarabs, but some may be definitely connected with this pharaoh. Brandl attributes 10 pieces to Ramesses IV, others like Krauss or Lalkin even more. According to O. Keel (personal communication) seals with the name of Ramesses IV were found in Ashdod, Bet Shean, Tell el-Far'a South (1 or perhaps 2 examples), Gezer, Khirbet Ni'ana and perhaps Megiddo (the list will be published in the next volume of his *Corpus*, s.v. Gezer 10).

¹⁶ Cf. Uehlinger, *op. cit.* (note 7, 1990), p. 21–24.

Stratum VIIB Room 1832 as if deliberately buried there and therefore intrusive”.¹⁷ There are many problems with this stratigraphic attribution. Stratum VIIB is dated to about 1350 BCE—definitely too early for Ramesses VI. But if it has to be attributed to Stratum VIIA, as most scholars proposed and which does not correspond to the archaeological description, this item is definitely out of any archaeological context. The socket has been found in Area CC, the residential area (Square R9). Such an official object would rather be expected in an administrative area. We may only speculate why this socket was hidden in that area. Perhaps it was stolen or considered as a memory of former times, buried there in later periods than even Stratum VIIA. Since there definitely exists a stratigraphic problem, no secure attribution to any layer seems reliable. Taking into consideration these problems, the interpretation of this item remains problematic and should not be considered as an anchor for the absolute chronology of this site.

IX. The “overseer of the northern foreign countries”

Beginning with Thutmosis III, an Egyptian title “overseer of the northern foreign countries” is attested for the responsible commissioner.¹⁸ The last overseer who definitely had this title, was Usermaatrenacht, who was governor under Ramesses III. Perhaps, also Userchau, who was responsible likely at the early years of Ramesses IV, had the same function. Nobody had this title in a later period. This demonstrates that at least during the time of Ramesses IV, Egypt lost its control over Palestine.

X. Summary

All the discussions about the history of southwestern Palestine at the end of the Late Bronze Age were based until now mainly on scarabs. The discussion about the end of Egyptian influence in Palestine was concentrated on a single and very problematic socket of Ramesses VI found in Megiddo. Our historical reconstruction is based on historical texts, archaeological data, scarabs and inscriptions.

Within a few years, the situation in southwestern Palestine changed dramatically. In his first regnal years, Ramesses III (1187–1156 BCE) established a temple in Gaza and become the personal land owner of this region, parallel to the estate ownership of Egyptian temples in Egypt itself. With the appearance of the Sea Peoples in ca. 1179 BCE, the Philistines were settled by the Egyptians in this area as mercenaries. Some areas outside the Philistine territory, to which Lachish belonged, may still have been under Egyptian influence, but likely this area was not an Egyptian estate. Lachish seems to have still been a Canaanite city state with rather close connections to the Egyptians. In the early years, Philistine and Canaanite people likely lived side by side together with nearly no cultural exchange.

¹⁷ J. H. Breasted, “Bronze Base of a Statue of Ramesses VI Discovered at Megiddo”, in G. Loud, *Megiddo II. Seasons of 1935–1939. Text* (Chicago, 1948), p. 135, note 1.

¹⁸ Cf. E. Hirsch, “Die Beziehungen der ägyptischen Residenz im Neuen Reich zu den vorderasiatischen Vasallen. Die Vorsteher der nördlichen Fremdländer und ihre Stellung bei Hofe”, in R. Gundlach – A. Klug (eds.), *Der ägyptische Hof des Neuen Reiches – Seine Gesellschaft und Kultur im Spannungsfeld zwischen Innen- und Außenpolitik* (Königtum, Staat und Gesellschaft früher Hochkulturen 2; Wiesbaden, 2006), pp. 120–200.

Only some years later, definitely not before regnal year 22 of Ramesses III (1165 BCE), and perhaps even not before the reign of Ramesses IV (1156–1150 BCE), the Philistines freed themselves from the Egyptian dominion and destroyed Lachish and perhaps also some other sites, which were still under Egyptian influence. This was the final stroke for the Late Bronze Age society in that region, which could not survive anymore, because the trade activities, which were very important for the Late Bronze Age economic system, came to a sudden end. If this hypothesis is correct, the Late Bronze Age city state society in southwestern Palestine lasted until about 1160/1150 BCE, although some of the other city states further to the north may have been abandoned already before that date.