

Mercenaries or refugees? the evidence from the inscriptions of Merenptah on the ‘Sea Peoples’

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During the fifth regnal year of Merenptah (either 1208 BC¹ or 1219 BC²), king Merey of the Rebu/Lebu³ attacked Egypt, together with his archers and many northern warriors. These northerners were not affiliated with any of the existing minor or major kingdoms of the eastern Mediterranean, since they are only identified by obscure ethnonyms. Five inscriptions of Merenptah refer to these particular events, but they offer scarce historical information;⁴ a sixth one, inscribed on a wall of the Amun temple in Karnak, is the most elaborate one.⁵ Although the Karnak inscription has often been cited, most scholars usually focus on the parts referring to the ‘Sea Peoples’, which are often examined in isolation and out of their context. The aim of this paper is to re-examine the available evidence.

In the preamble of the Karnak inscription we find a useful summary of the events:

[1] [... Merey son of De]dy, **Akawasha, Terusha, Lukka, Sherden, Shekelesh**, the northerners who came from all lands.

[2–5] *Praise for the Egyptian king.*

[6] [...] in order to protect Heliopolis, the city of Atum, in order to guard Ineb-iti for Tatenen, in order to keep them safe from evil. [7] [...] tents before Perbarset which reached the Shakana Canal at the artificial lake of the Ati Canal. [8] [...] Egypt was as(?) that which was not defended. It being abandoned as pasture for cattle because of the Nine Bows.

[9–12] *Praise for the Egyptian king.*

[13] [...] One came in order to say to his Majesty in year 5, second month of] Shomu to the effect that: ‘The wretched chief of the enemies of Rebu, Merey, son of Dedy, has descended upon the foreign land of Tjehenu together with his bowmen. [14] [...] Sh]erden, Shekelesh, Akawasha, Lukka, and Tursha, consisting of the seizure of the best of every fighter and every runner of his foreign land; he bringing his wife, his children... [15] ... the great [chiefs?] of the tent. It is at the fields of Perire that he reached the western borders.’⁶

In the first five paragraphs (§1–5) the actors of the drama are presented: summarily the enemies of Egypt (§1) and more elaborately the Egyptian king (§2–5). It is implied that the ultimate target of

¹ Manassa 2003, 2. According to Breasted (1906, 239) and Cline (2009, 192) in 1207 BC.

² Baines and Málek 1980, 36–7: reign 1224–1214 BC.

³ The Libyans are called Tjehenu/Tjehemu in the Egyptian sources and are divided into various subgroups: Meshwesh and Rebu/Lebu lived in Cyrenaica, and the Tjehenu lived in Marmarica, i.e. between Cyrenaica and Egypt: O’Connor 1987, 35.

⁴ **1)** Stela from Kom el Ahmar (=Athribis): Breasted 1906, 253–6; Lefebvre 1927; Kitchen 1982, 20–2,

2) inscribed column in the Cairo Museum: (Breasted 1906, 252–3; Kitchen 1982, 23), **3)** inscribed column from Heliopolis: Bakry 1973; Kitchen 1982, 38, **4)** the so-called ‘Israel Stela’ (known also as ‘Victory Stela’), originally from the mortuary temple of Amenhotep III and with an inscription relating to him on one of its sides: Breasted 1906, 256–64; Kitchen 1982, 13–18, **5)** Stela from Amada: Youssef 1964; Kitchen 1982, 33. For parallel texts, see also nos. Kitchen 1982, 34–7.

⁵ Breasted 1906, 241–52; Kitchen 1982, 2–15; Manassa 2003.

⁶ Manassa 2003, 155.

the invasion was Memphis (§6–8).⁷ In the fifth regnal year of Merenptah, Merer, together with his bowmen, as well as people defined as Sherden, Shekelesh, Akawasha, Lukka and Tursha, arrived at the western border of Egypt in the as yet unidentified location called ‘*the fields of Perire*’ (§13–15). The actual battle against the invaders took place there, but it is also mentioned that some invaders pitched their tents in Perbarset, probably before the battle took place (§7).

It still remains disputed whether Perbarset was in the western Delta, by the cities of Bubastis and Bilbeis, or in the eastern Delta.⁸ If it was located in the western Delta, like Perire, then we can assume that the invasion forces came out of the Delta in these two particular locations. If, on the other hand, Perbarset was located in the eastern Delta, then it must be explained how the invaders got there. Bietak proposed that the forces in Perbarset were actually the ‘Sea Peoples’, who came from Canaan and attacked Egypt at the same time as the Libyans moved into Perire.⁹ Nevertheless, as Schulman had already argued, the Karnak inscription explicitly mentions that the northern warriors accompanied Merer and fought on his side at Perire.¹⁰ This is also repeated in three more sources: the Cairo, Heliopolis and Athribis inscriptions.¹¹ There is no reason to question such an unequivocal reference, which is corroborated in so many texts, especially given that the location of Perbarset is still disputed. Moreover, even if we take for granted that Perbarset was located in the eastern side of the Delta, a satisfactory reconstruction of the events is still possible. Manassa proposed that, when Merer reached Perire in the western Delta, he split his forces in two groups: ‘*one traveled from Bahariya and the northern Fayum, entering Egypt around the areas of the pyramid fields, while the other split off at Bahariya, crossed the Nile in Middle Egypt, and camped in the eastern Delta*’.¹² The aim of such a pincer move was the disruption of Egyptian communications and the confusion of the Egyptian army.

Recently, Iskander and Cline took up Bietak’s proposal and supplemented it with further arguments. They both start from the observation that the Israel Stela¹³ makes no reference to the northern warriors, and so they conclude that the ‘Sea Peoples’ did not attack Egypt together with the Libyans. Rather Merenptah, having fought them first at Perbarset, went on to arbitrarily combine these separate engagements, in order to make his victory seem even more glorious.¹⁴ The scholars then follow different paths in their arguments.

Iskander finds additional support for his approach in the fact that though the plunder list of the Karnak inscription refers to the ‘Sea Peoples’, it yet seems to mention only the weapons of the Libyans: after the battle the Egyptians collected a total of 9111 ‘*copper swords of Meshwesh*’.¹⁵ The Heliopolis inscription mentions a similar number, i.e. 9268 swords, but without any further designation, while the Athribis text makes no reference to swords whatsoever. The Heliopolis inscription mentions that the total number of Rebu casualties (both dead and taken captive) were 9376,¹⁶ a number which almost coincides with the 9111 ‘*copper swords of Meshwesh*’ and the 9268 swords of the Heliopolis inscription. This assumption leads to a rather awkward conclusion; in Iskander’s words: ‘*The absence of their weapons [i.e. of the ‘Sea Peoples’] indicates that they were unarmed or lightly armed squatters overtaken by Merenptah in the earlier campaign in the Delta.*’¹⁷

⁷ ‘Ineb-iti for Tatenen’ was a shrine of the god Tatenen in Memphis: Manassa 2003, 12–13.

⁸ For references, see Schulman 1987, 31 n. 52; Manassa 2003, 14.

⁹ Bietak 1985.

¹⁰ Schulman 1987, 31 n. 52.

¹¹ See n. 4.

¹² Manassa 2003, 99.

¹³ See above n. 4 no. 4.

¹⁴ Cline 2009; Iskander 2010, 190–3.

¹⁵ Manassa 2003, 56 § 57.

¹⁶ Kitchen 1982, 38.4.

¹⁷ Iskander 2010, 193.

Iskander's argumentation is not convincing. Although the Israel Stela makes no mention of the 'Sea Peoples', four inscriptions (Karnak, Cairo, Heliopolis and Athribis) clearly connect them with Meresy's campaign against Egypt. Moreover, there is no textual evidence for an attack against Egypt from the east (at Perbarset or anywhere else), while a suicidal invasion of unarmed or lightly-armed people from various parts of the eastern Mediterranean against Egypt is highly unlikely.

A closer look at the Karnak inscription shows that the weapons of the northern warriors are indeed mentioned in the plunder lists of Merenptah (Table 1):

Karnak ¹	Heliopolis ²	Athribis ³
copper swords of the Meshwesh: 9111	swords: 9268	
[... arrows of the Rebu(?): 120.214	quivers and arrows: 128.660	
bows: <>	bows: 6860	bows: 2000
spans which carried the enemy of Rebu and the chiefs of Rebu: 12	horses: 44	
mixed cattle: 1307	oxen, asses, goats and rams: 11594	
goats: <>		
various [...]: 64		
silver drinking vessels: [.....]	gold and silver (worked) in the form of <i>hnw</i> -vessels and jewellery: 531	gold:<>
<i>t3pr</i> -vessels, <i>rh</i> d-vessels, swords, <i>kt</i> -vessels, weapons(?), razors, and various vessels: 3174	bronze in the shape of vessels: 3174	
apart from [...]		
	[pieces (?) of] royal linen: 4	

¹ Manassa 2003, 3, 81 §59.

² Bakry 1973, 9.

³ Breasted 1906, 255.

In the Karnak inscription we read of a total of 120,214 arrows (§59), while in the Heliopolis inscription the arrows together with the retrieved quivers were 128,660. The number of bows is not preserved in the Karnak inscription and there is a discrepancy between the numbers mentioned in the Athribis (2000) and the Heliopolis (6860) inscriptions. The correct number of bows must have been the one on the Heliopolis text, because it is precise and also because the number in the Athribis text seems to be too low. The number of the arrows seems at first exaggerated, but, if we divide it by the number of the bows, then we have a total of 60 (Athribis) or 17.5 (Heliopolis) arrows per archer. Both numbers are quite reasonable, although the second one appears to be closer to reality.

Furthermore, the Karnak inscription mentions that Meresy '*descended upon the foreign land of Tjehenu together with his bowmen*' (§13), while the northern warriors are described as *fighters* and *runners* (§14), terms which Manassa interprets as a reference to heavily-armed infantry.¹⁸ If we thus conclude that (at least) 2000 out of the 9376 Libyans were bowmen¹⁹, then we can also assume that (at least) 2000 out of the 3123 northern warriors from the Athribis text were equipped with swords.²⁰ The actual number of the northern warriors must have been higher, since the size of the

¹⁸ Manassa 2003, 80.

¹⁹ Spalinger 2005, 237: '*It has also been observed that the Tjemhu Libyans are rarely shown with both swords and bows.*'

²⁰ The Karnak inscription mentions 222 Shekelesh, 742 Tursha, an unknown number of Akawasha, Lukka and Sherden (Manassa 2003, 56). The Athribis Stela mentions 2201 Akawasha, 722 Tursha (Teresh) and 200 Shekelesh (Breasted 1906, 253–6).

Lukka and Sherden contingents is unknown, and we can safely assume that not all of the weapons were retrieved from the battlefield.

Then again, why does the Karnak inscription refer only to ‘copper swords of the Meshwesh’? This phrase led O’Connor to conclude that the ‘Sea Peoples’ arrived in Libya without weapons, to be equipped there by Merey.²¹ This is quite improbable, because each weapon type required different fighting techniques and skills, which the warriors acquired through long and arduous training. Again, the answer to this question lies within the Karnak inscription. As Manassa mentioned: ‘*The object denoted by sf.t can range from a sword (i.e. a long, double-edged weapon) to a butcher’s knife (i.e. single-edged tool).*’²² This particular term was apparently not well-defined; the scribe had to clarify it, and so he mentioned that the *sf.t* are like those of the Meshwesh.²³ Further, if the scribe really had meant to say that these swords belonged only to the soldiers of Merey, then he would have designated them as swords of the Rebu, not of the Meshwesh!²⁴

Cline arrived at a similar conclusion as Iskander, albeit from a different direction.²⁵ He observed that the Israel Stela and the rest of the inscriptions of this group are all dated to Merenptah’s fifth regnal year, so he assumed that the events in Canaan (which are indirectly mentioned in the Israel Stela) must have been contemporary with the Libyan invasion.²⁶ Referring to the Medinet Habu inscription of Ramesses III (which is dated 20–30 years later), he concluded that, as in the case of the later Pharaoh, the ‘Sea Peoples’ had been responsible for the destructions in Canaan, acting in coordination with the Libyans.²⁷

Nevertheless, as already mentioned, neither the Israel Stela nor any other text from the reign of Merenptah connects these northern warriors in any way with Canaan. Furthermore, we should also consider the fact that the Israel Stela is a very different kind of text, compared to the other ones in this group. It is poetical praise of Merenptah, who is constantly compared with Merey, thus constructing an antithesis: on the one hand the righteous king of Egypt and on the other hand the vicious king of the Libyans. The only reference to the actual battle in this text is extremely brief and so generic that it could apply to any victory of any Pharaoh.²⁸ The concluding stanza is the most famous part of the stela:

The kings are overthrown, saying: ‘Salam!’ Not one holds his head among the Nine Bows. Wasted is Tehenu, Kheta (=Hatti) is pacified, plundered is Canaan with every evil, carried off is Ashkelon, seized upon is Gezer, Yanoam is made as a thing not existing. Israel is desolated, his seed is not; Palestine has become a widow for Egypt. All lands are united, they are pacified; everyone that is turbulent is bound by King Merenptah, given life like Re, every day.²⁹

²¹ O’Connor 1990, 56–7.

²² Manassa 2003, 59.

²³ If they were similar to the swords of the Lebu in the Medinet Habu reliefs, then they must have been long ones: Manassa 2003, 60 n. 327.

²⁴ In Libya there are no ore deposits, so all metals for the production of tools and weapons needed to be imported. The main source appears to have been Cyprus, as shown by the finds on Bates island (White 2002, 47–53, 168–74). The Libyans exchanged them for ivory, ostrich eggs and other products, which they imported from the south. Also the Ramessid fortress in Zawiyet Umm el-Rakham was apparently a place of trade activity (Snape 2010). The objects plundered from the Libyans (weapons, armour, chariots) do not conform with the image of poor nomads, but show that they must have been incorporated in the international trade network of the time (García 2014, 10).

²⁵ Cline 2009.

²⁶ See n. 4.

²⁷ Cline 2009, 196: ‘*The Sea Peoples, in connection with their alliance with the Libyans and their invasion of the Eastern Mediterranean regions, destroyed much of Canaan and numerous Canaanite cities (with Merneptah perhaps adding in additional blows against the region and specific cities before this date). However, the Israelites, whether fairly recent arrivals or inhabitants of longer standing – but still very much semi-nomads in the hill country – were able to survive, even if they had been temporarily ‘desolated’ by the Sea Peoples (or Merneptah) as the Israel Stela claims.*’

²⁸ Breasted 1906, 260: ‘*Their advanced columns they left behind them, their feet made no stand, but fled. Their archers threw down their bows, and the heart of their fleet ones was weary with marching. They loosed their water skins and threw them to the ground, their [] were taken and thrown out.*’

²⁹ Breasted 1906, 256–64.

Clearly, this stanza does not only refer to the Libyans, but also to all the unruly enemies of the Egyptian king, who eventually were made subject to him: *'everyone that is turbulent is bound by King Merenptah'*. The reference to Canaan, Ashkelon, Gezer, Yanoam, Israel³⁰ and Palestine probably alludes to an earlier campaign of Merenptah, which took place either in the second, third or the fifth year of his reign.³¹ No text explicitly mentions an Egyptian campaign in Canaan, but there are two indications that this was indeed the case: a reference in the diary of an Egyptian official in Canaan, which hints at the presence of the Egyptian king there,³² as well as Merenptah's title *'conqueror of Gezer'*.³³ It is also possible that the reliefs depicting Asiatic prisoners on the western wall of the Cour de la Cachette in Karnak belonged to Merenptah, not to Ramesses II.³⁴ There is another indication that Merenptah was involved in a fight before the battle of Perire: in the Karnak inscription we read the following phrase about his army before the battle of Perire: *'...Having returned bearing plunder, his army proceeded...'*³⁵ This could refer to a battle or skirmishes in Perbarset or further east, in Canaan.

If Merenptah really did conduct a military campaign in Canaan, he would have presented his successes in a separate stela.³⁶ We would have expected the same with his successful suppression of the Nubian attack (or revolt) in Wawat,³⁷ which took place only two days before the battle in Perire.³⁸ Nevertheless, this was not the case. His victories in Nubia were not even summarily mentioned in the Israel Stela. Thus, it is more likely that his military interventions in Canaan and Nubia were no more than minor punitive actions, overshadowed by his success against the Libyans.³⁹ The fact that the Israel Stela is dated to the fifth regnal year of Merenptah does not necessarily mean that his military actions in Canaan took place during that particular year. Yurco showed convincingly that its concluding stanza was in fact a summary of the most significant events from the first five years of his reign.⁴⁰ Even if we accept Cline's assumption that the destructions in Canaan should not be attributed to Merenptah, there is still no indication whatsoever that the 'Sea Peoples' should be blamed for them either. As already mentioned, none of the existing texts connects the 'Sea Peoples' with an attack either in Perbarset or Canaan during Merenptah's reign. In addition, even in the Medinet Habu inscription, concerning events that took place 20–30 years later, we find no explicit reference that the 'Sea Peoples' were responsible for any destruction in Canaan. The fact that the northern warriors attacked Egypt together with Merey from the west is explicitly mentioned in four sources (Karnak, Cairo, Athribis, Heliopolis), and there is no hard evidence that forces us to question the validity of their information. Instead of constructing complicated and hypothetical arguments, all based on the precarious assumption that Perbarset was located in the eastern side of the Delta, it is much simpler to just accept at face value the unambiguous evidence of the texts: the northern warriors attacked Egypt from the west, together with the Libyan army.

³⁰ The determinative for the term Israel is 'foreign people', not 'foreign land', as in the other cases (Killebrew 2005, 155). For further discussion and references, see Faust 2008; Hawkins 2013; Rata 2013.

³¹ Breasted 1906, 258–9; Singer 1988; Vandersleyen 1995, 561; Yurco 1997b; Hasel 1998, 199–201; Manassa 2003, 22; Kahn 2012, 259.

³² Papyrus Anastasi III. Dated to the third regnal year of Merenptah: Higginbotham 2000, 48–50; Manassa 2003, 22 n. 114.

³³ Amada Stela: Youssef 1964, 275 §2; Kitchen 1982, 33.9. This was noted already by Breasted 1906, 258–9.

³⁴ Yurco 1997a; Stager 1985, 56–64; Singer 1988, 3; Manassa 2003, 22 n. 116; Brand 2011, 53–72; Janzen 2013, 193–4. *contra* Redford 1986.

³⁵ Manassa 2003, 22.

³⁶ Cline 2009, 195.

³⁷ Grandet 1994, 215–8.

³⁸ Amada Stela: Kitchen 1982, 34.5–7: *'One came to say to his Majesty: 'The enemies of Wawat are mobilizing in the South', which happened in year 5, 3rd month of Shomu, day 1, when the valiant army of his majesty came and the wretched chief of the Rebu was overthrown.'* According to Kitchen (1990, 19–20), Vandersleyen (1995, 559) and Manassa (2003, 96 and n. 120) the Nubian attack was possibly coordinated with the Libyan invasion.

³⁹ Redford 1986, 199; Higginbotham 2000, 47.

⁴⁰ Yurco 1997b, 497–503.

The Reason for the Libyan attack

At first glance, the reason that led the Libyans to invade Egypt seems obvious: being desert nomads, they tried to capture pasture lands, which they lacked. This is explicitly mentioned in the Karnak inscription:

[21]...as crawling things, without giving more than their bellies. As for those who love death and hate life, their hearts are different from those of the people (of Egypt) [22] ...their chief. To fill their bellies daily do they spend the day wandering and fighting. To seek the necessities of their mouths do they come to the land of Egypt. Their hearts... [23] my... It is as fish upon their bellies that they were brought, their chief being in the manner of a dog, a wretched man, without his heart. He did not occupy it until(?)... [24] put an end to the Pedjuti-shu. It is in order to vivify this Hittite land that I have caused grain to be sent in ships. Behold, I am the one [to whom] the gods gave all nourishment.⁴¹

Apparently, a contest was already taking place also inside Egypt's realm between the pastoralists and the farmers.⁴² This situation became dramatic, especially in the later part of the reign of Ramesses II, when the enormous capital Pi-Ramesses was founded in the Nile Delta, with an estimated size of 18 km² and a huge number of inhabitants, which increased competition for the available resources.⁴³ The threat posed by the pastoralists is also implied in the following part of the text:

[8] [... Egypt was as(?)] that which was not defended. It being abandoned as pasture for cattle because of the Nine Bows.

If the Libyans really were just poor and hungry desert nomads, how did they manage to convince the northern warriors to join them in their attack against Egypt, one of the most formidable military forces of the time? Were these northern warriors even more desperate than the Libyans, so that they joined them in an attempt to cross the desert to simply seek food? If one digs a little deeper in the text, past the typical pharaonic propaganda, a different picture emerges.

First of all, let us examine the assumption that the Libyans and the northern warriors were forced to leave their lands, either because of famine or because they have been forced to do so by other enemies, and they thought that they had no other alternative than to migrate *en masse* first to Libya and then to Egypt, bringing along with them their wives and children. The texts of Merenptah never made such a claim. It is stated that only king Merey brought with him his wives and children (§14). In the plunder list of the same inscription those twelve women are mentioned as the wives of the king of the Rebu.⁴⁴ In the fragmentary Cairo text there is a general allusion to Libyan men and women with no further details.⁴⁵ But in the plunder list of Athribis we read again only about the twelve wives of the king, while no other Libyan women or children are mentioned.⁴⁶ In addition, no inscription mentions women or children in connection with the northern warriors.⁴⁷ The Egyptian scribes carefully noted the number of the prisoners, their weapons and all the items they captured. They even painstakingly counted the collected arrowheads. Thus, the fact that no

⁴¹ Manassa 2003, 34. An alternative translation of the phrase 'it is in order to vivify this Hittite land' is 'Hatti is at peace' (Higginbotham 2000, 47). Nevertheless, in both cases the meaning is the same.

⁴² García 2014, 10.

⁴³ García 2014, 11.

⁴⁴ Manassa 2003, 56: 57. 'Women of the fallen chief of Libya, whom he brought with him, being alive 12 Libyan women.'

⁴⁵ Breasted 1906, 252-3: 'Year 5, second month of the third season (tenth month). One came to say to his majesty: 'The wretched [chief] of Libya has invaded [with]..., being men and women, Shekelesh...' Also the Heliopolis text mentions women: 'The vile chief of the Libyans and the flat-land of Libya together with males and females and (also) the Sheklesh and every foreign land which is with him are penetrating to transgress the boundaries of Egypt.' (Bakry 1973, 7).

⁴⁶ Breasted 1906, 256.

⁴⁷ Manassa 2003, 25 n. 127.

women or children are mentioned in any of the inscriptions and plunder lists surely means that only the wives and children of Meroy were brought along on the campaign.

The Libyans also brought along with them 11594 oxen, goats and rams, of which 1307 were mixed cattle (Table 1). This high number of cattle shows that the Libyan attackers were not on the verge of starvation. They also cannot have been a group of migrating pastoralists, because then the cattle/people ratio would have been too low.⁴⁸ It seems more probable that these animals were brought along to feed the marching army with their dairy products and meat. These logistic preparations, as well as the numerous silver and other metal vessels (Table 1: 531 gold/silver and 3174 bronze vessels), which eventually fell into the hands of the Egyptians, shows that Meroy did not lead a band of hungry refugees, but an organized invasion force. This is evident also in the fact that during the 13th and 12th centuries the Lebu and the Meshwesh had an organized central government and a relatively wealthy upper class.⁴⁹ Their aim was to acquire land and thus enhance their political and social status. In order to achieve that they have somehow managed to secure the help of a significant number of northern warriors.

The involvement of the northern warriors

The reasons for the participation of the northern warriors in Meroy's campaign are not obvious. The Karnak inscription offers the same motive for both the Libyans and the northern warriors (esp. §21–2). The text puts an emphasis on their warlike character, since they are described as people who '*spend the day wandering and fighting*', not just as hungry migrants, who wanted to just obtain the '*necessities of their mouths*'. It is implied that they were professional soldiers, who earned their living '*wandering and fighting*'. As Manassa noted, they must have been mercenaries.⁵⁰ An indication in favor of this interpretation comes from another part of the Karnak inscription, namely the list of Meroy's plundered belongings:⁵¹

[34] ...of the desert land. Meanwhile, when they were engaged in fighting, the wretched chief of Rebu was terrified, his heart weak, finding himself stretched out... [35] [...He left] sandals, his bow, his quiver in haste behind [him]...together with him, through his limbs' desire to flee, great terror having encompassed his limbs. [36] Meanwhile, ...killing... **consisting of his possessions, his tribute, his silver, his gold, his vessels of bronze, his wife's jewelry, his thrones, his bows, his weapons, and all the supplies which he brought from his land with oxen, goats, donkeys...** to the palace in order to present them together with the captives.'

We can imagine that he brought along his thrones, his bronze vessels, the jewels of his wives in order to denote his status even during the campaign. But why did he need to bring along with him gold and silver? He hoped to loot the Egyptian territories, so why did he bring along riches of his own, risking their loss, as indeed was the case in the end? The obvious answer is that the gold and silver was intended as payment for the northern warriors, who served him as mercenaries and needed to be paid regularly during the campaign.⁵² Ramesses II also accused the Hittite king of paying silver to the mercenaries who fought on his side during the battle of Qadesh.⁵³ Then the text continues with a remark, which at first seems out of context:

⁴⁸ In a pastoralist community the cattle/human ratio can vary from 2–14:1, while the small livestock/cattle ratio varies from 3–6:1 (Bollig *et al.* 2013, 304–5).

⁴⁹ O'Connor 1987, 37.

⁵⁰ Manassa 2003, 3.

⁵¹ Manassa 2003, 43.

⁵² Manassa 2003, 61: '*The vast quantities of metal vessels, many made of precious materials, mentioned in the Karnak Inscription provide evidence for the wealth of the Libyan state and their ability to pay for mercenary troops... Essentially, the plunder list suggests that the Libyans were a wealthy culture that used their wealth to pay mercenaries in their attempt to take over more fertile agricultural land - the Egyptian Delta.*'

⁵³ Manassa 2003, 81 n. 21.

[24] It is in order to vivify this Hittite land that I have caused grain to be sent in ships. Behold, I am the one [to whom] the gods gave all nourishment.

It is mentioned that ships with grain have been sent to Hatti, in order to ‘vivify’ the land.⁵⁴ Interestingly, Hatti is included in the ‘Nine Bows’ (i.e. the enemies of Egypt) in the Israel Stela⁵⁵ and in the Amada Stela we read that Merenptah ‘*caused those who came from the lands of the Hittites to kneel as the dogs walk*.’⁵⁶ Breasted and Youssef assumed that the Hittites had hostile relations with Egypt by then,⁵⁷ but there are no other sources to corroborate such a claim. The hostile attitude towards the Hittites was caused by the inability of the Hittite king to control his territory, thus allowing the northern warriors to invade Egypt. The shipments of grain were designed to reinforce his rule, so that no further invaders would threaten Egypt.⁵⁸

The origin of the northern warriors

The Karnak inscription offers no information about the origin of the foreign warriors who took part in Merer’s campaign. They are generally mentioned as ‘*northerners who came from all lands*’ (§1) and the Akawasha in particular from the ‘*foreign lands of the sea*’ (§52).⁵⁹ Despite the many attempts to connect these ethnonyms with people or lands known to us from other sources, this remains a highly disputed subject. The only exception are the Lukka, who are connected to the Land of Lukka in the Hittite sources and Lycia in the later Greek ones. We know that the Sherden and the Shekelesh were active as raiders in the eastern Mediterranean,⁶⁰ but, as in the case also of the Tursha, we know nothing of their place of origin. The term Akawasha (also transcribed as Ekwesh) probably refers to the Hittite term Ahhiyawa and the Greek term Ἀχαιοί.⁶¹

The casualties of Merer’s force are mentioned in the Karnak, Athribis and Heliopolis inscriptions. In total, the Libyans lost 9376 men, of which 3265 were the captives.⁶² In the Karnak inscription we also read of 222 Shekelesh (Athribis: 200), 742 Tursha (Athribis: 722) and an unknown number of Lukka and Sherden;⁶³ the total number of the Akawasha is not preserved in the Karnak inscription, but the Athribis Stela states that they lost 2201 men.⁶⁴ Accordingly, the total number of the casualties of the northerners are 3123 men, excluding the Lukka and the Sherden, for whom the numbers are not preserved. The figures mentioned in the Athribis plunder list correspond with those of the Karnak plunder list, albeit slightly rounded up. There is no poetical phraseology in the plunder lists and the figures of the casualties and the captured items seem precise.⁶⁵ As Spalinger noted, the plunder lists ‘*provide unrounded integers, owing to which we may argue that these numbers are accurate*’.⁶⁶ After the battle, each Egyptian soldier submitted to the king’s scribes the severed hands of the enemies he killed in battle and received an appropriate reward. The biography of Ahmose, son of Abana, shows that the Egyptian soldiers themselves collected the enemy hands during battle:

⁵⁴ Texts from Hattusha and Ugarit seem to indicate the existence of a famine in Anatolia, but they are inconclusive (Singer 1999, 707, 717–9; Bryce 2010, 47–8; Cline 2014), despite the fact that recent archaeometric analyses seem to support them (Kaniewski *et al.* 2015). For a critical overview, see Knapp and Manning 2016, 102–12.

⁵⁵ See above p. 5.

⁵⁶ Youssef 1964, 276–7.

⁵⁷ Breasted 1906, 244 n. d; Youssef 1964, 278–9.

⁵⁸ Higginbotham 2000, 47; Manassa 2003, 101.

⁵⁹ Breasted 1906, 249 n. a: ‘It is noticeable that this designation, both here and in the Athribis Stela (1. 13), is inserted only after the Ekwesh. In the Athribis Stela Ekwesh is cut off by a numeral from the preceding, showing that the designation there belongs only to them.’

⁶⁰ Kopanias (forthcoming); against the identification of the Shekelesh with Sicily, see Redford 2006

⁶¹ e.g. Jung 2009, 79; Adams and Cohen 2013, 652; Cline 2014, 8.

⁶² Manassa 2003, 58–9.

⁶³ Manassa 2003, 56.

⁶⁴ Breasted 1906, 253–6.

⁶⁵ An example of such poetical phraseology can be found e.g. in the Amada Stela: ‘None survived of the people of the Libyans... all in their land ... in hundreds of thousands, tens of thousands; the rest were crucified [lit. placed] on the tops of trees at the south of the city of Memphis persecuted.’ (Youssef 1964, 276)

⁶⁶ Spalinger 2005, 237.

Then they fought again in this place; I again made a seizure there and **carried off a hand**. Then I was given the **gold of valor** once again... Now when his Majesty had slain the nomads of Asia, he sailed south of Khent-hen-nefer, to destroy the Nubian Bowmen. His Majesty made a great slaughter among them, and I brought spoil from there: two living men and **three hands**. Then I was **rewarded with gold** once again, and two female slaves were given to me.⁶⁷

After the battle, the scribes needed to record the precise figures of the enemy casualties, and probably kept the hands as a kind of receipt for the dispensed awards.⁶⁸

The Karnak and Athribis inscriptions also attest the mutilation of the phalli of the Libyans. The Karnak inscription explicitly mentions that this was not done to the Akawasha because they did not have foreskins.⁶⁹ It is probable that circumcision was not practised in the Late Bronze Age Aegean;⁷⁰ therefore, either the Akawasha did not have an Aegean origin or the inscription contains an intentional or unintentional error. It is evident from Merenptah's inscriptions that only the dead Libyans suffered such a fate, which means that all the northern warriors were treated as if they were circumcised:

[... donkeys] before them loaded with uncircumcised phalli of the foreign land of Rebu together with the severed hands of [all] the foreign lands which were with them in containers and baskets.⁷¹

The casual reference in the inscriptions that only the phalli of the uncircumcised enemies were cut, implies that this was an established practice in Egypt, but actually this was not the case. There is no textual or visual attestation of such a practice in Egypt from the Old Kingdom onwards, with the sole exception of the reigns of Merenptah and Ramesses III.⁷² Interestingly, both Egyptian kings subjected only the dead Libyans to this postmortem treatment. The cutting of the phalli did not serve any practical purpose. If the awards of the Egyptian soldiers were not only calculated according to the number of the enemy right hands, then they could have collected two awards: one for the phallus of a Libyan opponent and one for his right hand, if they claimed that it belonged to a northern warrior. The cutting of the phalli must have served as a postmortem punishment and it probably took place after the battle was over. Matić suggests that this was done to the Libyans because they were extremely feminized within the framework of Egyptian propaganda.⁷³ An alternative explanation is that the Egyptians considered the Libyans to be responsible for the invasions, so they deemed this treatment as apt punishment for their transgressions. No matter what their true motives were, the Egyptians used the practice of circumcision by the northern warriors as an excuse to single out the Libyans.

The voyage to Libya

Despite his defeat, Merey survived and managed to return to Libya;⁷⁴ some of the Libyans and the northern warriors must have escaped along with him. This means that their initial number

⁶⁷ Lichtheim 2006, 12–3.

⁶⁸ The counting of the hands after the battle was depicted e.g. in one of the reliefs of the Battle of Kadesh in the Temple of Ramesses II at Abydos: Spalinger 2005, 219 fig. 13.2. Fourteen cut off right hands have recently been unearthed in Avaris. As Bietak *et al* (2012–3, 31–2) stated 'one may think of a 'gold of valour' ceremony for successful soldiers in front of the palace.'

⁶⁹ Manassa 2003, 56: '[...Aka]washa who did not have foreskins who were slain and their hands carried off, because they did not have [foreskins].'

⁷⁰ Salimbeti and D'Amato 2015, 23. According to Faust (2015, 273): '...the Philistines started to circumcise in Iron II, the time when they ceased to manufacture their Aegean-inspired decorated pottery, adopted the local script, changed their foodways, and so on.'

⁷¹ Manassa 2003, 161 §46.

⁷² Matić (*forthcoming A*). Matić found an exception only in the case of Narmer's palette from the Predynastic Period. I would like to thank Uroš Matić for discussing with me his two forthcoming papers.

⁷³ Matić (*forthcoming B*).

⁷⁴ Manassa 2003, 48.

was higher, but it is not possible to determine it.⁷⁵ Since it is impossible to reconstruct the initial number of warriors, we'll use for our calculations the recorded number of 3100 men, namely the recorded number. The northern warriors, who came from '*foreign lands of the sea*' obviously arrived in Libya by ship. Surprisingly, this aspect has escaped the attention of most scholars. Is it maybe possible to calculate the number of their ships?

The largest warship during the Late Bronze Age was probably the penteconter, with a crew of 50 marines, who served as warriors and rowers.⁷⁶ There existed also smaller ships (triaconters), with a crew of 30 men or less. This means that the 3100 northern warriors needed a total of **62** penteconters or **103** triaconters. This is quite a significant number of ships during that period. The sudden appearance of 20 enemy ships (of unknown size) was considered reason enough for the Great Commissioner of Alashia to urgently send a letter and warn the king of Ugarit.⁷⁷ Even seven enemy ships were enough to cause the king of Ugarit a lot of anxiety.⁷⁸ For a comparison, in the Pylos tablets the recruiting of 600 rowers is mentioned, enough to man a fleet of 20 triaconters or 12 penteconters;⁷⁹ but the texts do not reveal if this was the entire fleet of Pylos. There are also several references to fleets in texts from Ugarit:⁸⁰ a fleet of 30 ships⁸¹ and a catalogue of ships of Carchemish which needed repairs⁸². There is a possible reference to 100 ships, which belonged to a Hittite vassal and carried wheat⁸³, but it is more probable that this tablet refers only to a single ship.⁸⁴ In the well known letter RS 18.148 a Hittite military official ordered the king of Ugarit to prepare a fleet of 150 ships⁸⁵. Considering its population size, it is very improbable that Ugarit had such a big war fleet; many (if not most) of these vessels must have been merchant ships, used for the transport of troops and war material.⁸⁶ This particular reference to the 150 ships was interpreted as an indication of an Ugaritic 'Thalassocracy',⁸⁷ but Lambrou-Phillipson has argued convincingly against it.⁸⁸

It is obvious that a fleet of 62–103 ships full of warriors would have been a very significant force at the time, and it would have been something worth mentioning in the Egyptian texts. Nevertheless, in Merenptah's inscriptions there is no reference to ships or a sea battle, contrary to the case of the texts of Ramesses III. Thus we can safely assume that the northern warriors did not arrive in Egypt by ship. This should mean that they came by ship to Libya and then joined the Libyans in their invasion on land. The reason for such an unexpected decision was probably the fact that since the middle of the 13th century a series of Egyptian fortresses had been built along the coast, from the Nile Delta up to Zawiyet Umm el Rakham, a site which is located 300 km west of Alexandria;⁸⁹ these fortresses controlled the coastal marine route, so an invasion force would face significant difficulties. Thanks to them, any Egyptian king was warned very early on about an invasion, and so would have more time to gather his forces and to better organize his defences. This is why the

⁷⁵ According to Spalinger (2005, 237), the total number of the enemy was probably over 16000.

⁷⁶ Wachsmann 1998, 157; Barako 2001, 134; Yasur-Landau 2003, 64; 2010, 106.

⁷⁷ RS 20.18. Nougayrol *et al.* 1968, 83–5 no. 22; Hoftijzer and van Soldt 1998, 343; Lehmann 1996, 27; Halayqa 2010, 321.

⁷⁸ RS 20.238. Nougayrol *et al.* 1968, 85–9 no. 24; Hoftijzer and van Soldt 1998, 344; Huehnergard 1999, 376–7; Gander 2010, 47; Halayqa 2010, 321–2. Piracy was apparently a serious problem in the Eastern Mediterranean throughout the 14th and 13th c. BC: Kopanias (forthcoming).

⁷⁹ PY An 1, An 610, An 724. Wachsmann 1998, 123; Yasur-Landau 2010, 46. The tablet PY An 1 mentions a group of 30 rowers (e-re-ta), which means that at least some of the ships must have been triaconters (Palaima 1991, 285). About the size of the ship crews in general, see Barako 2001, 135–9.

⁸⁰ Linder 1970, 99; Barako 2001, 139–42; Routledge and McGeough 2009, 25.

⁸¹ RS 20.14 1B = Ug 5, 108, no. 34.

⁸² RS 34.147, RSO 7, no. 5.

⁸³ KBo 2810: Klengel 1974, 171–4.

⁸⁴ Singer 1999, 718, n. 385.

⁸⁵ RS 18.148 (= KTU 2.47 = PRU 5, 88–89 no. 62): Astour 1965, 256; Singer 1999, 718–9; Halayqa 2010, 303.

⁸⁶ Vita 1999, 497.

⁸⁷ Sasson 1966, 127–8; Linder 1970, 125 ff.; 1981, 31 ff.

⁸⁸ Lambrou-Phillipson 1993.

⁸⁹ O'Connor 1987, 36. The fortress Zawiyet Umm el Rakham was probably deserted by the end of the 13th century (Snape 2003; Snape and Wilson 2007; Kahn 2012, 261), but it is uncertain whether this happened during the reign of Merenptah or during the subsequent turbulent period.

Libyan king chose to conduct a surprise attack, following a southern route through a trail of oases and finally reaching central Egypt at Perire;⁹⁰ he hoped to catch the Egyptians off guard, leaving them little time to react. In this way the Egyptian king would only have his standing army at his disposal.

This was a pleasing plan and, apparently, the northern warriors were convinced to follow the Libyan king over land and attack Egypt. But what did they do with their ships? Did they just leave them in Libya waiting for their return? Or were these warriors ferried across the sea using merchant and transport ships? No matter what the answer to this question may be, Crete is the nearest departure point for a sea voyage to Libya from the north. From later sources we know that it was possible to travel by ship from Crete to Egypt in only four days, thanks to a favourable NW-SE wind,⁹¹ so the trip to Libya must have been shorter. An alternative departure point could have been Cyprus, but then the mariners would have to stay longer in the open sea, while the wind would drive them towards Egypt, not Libya.⁹² The best available option was to depart from Crete and maybe this is why the majority of these northern warriors (2201 according to the Athribis Stela) were Akawasha, i.e. of Aegean origin.⁹³

This operation reminds us of a similar campaign of the 6th century described by Herodotus. The oracle of Delphi advised the Therans to establish a colony in Libya. They refused to obey the oracle, but, after seven years of drought, they were forced to comply. The Therans sought information about Libya in Crete and a local merchant escorted them to the island Platea, which was located near the Libyan coast.⁹⁴ They settled there for a while, but eventually they moved their settlement to the land opposite the island.⁹⁵ Six years later the Libyans convinced them to move their settlement to the west, to a place called *Fountain of Apollo*, where they established Cyrene.⁹⁶ In the following decades, the number of Greek settlers increased significantly and, subsequently, they seized land from the Libyans. The Libyan king asked for the assistance of the Egyptian king Apries.⁹⁷ The Egyptians conducted a campaign in Libya but, according to Herodotus, they suffered a crushing defeat:

[5] *Apries mustered a great force of Egyptians and sent it against Cyrene; the Cyrenaeans marched out to Irasa and the Thestes spring, and there fought with the Egyptians and beat them; [6] for the Egyptians had as yet had no experience of Greeks, and despised their enemy; as a result of which, they were so utterly destroyed that few of them returned to Egypt. Because of this misfortune, and because they blamed him for it, the Egyptians revolted from Apries.*⁹⁸

It is tempting to think that this historical account contained a distorted memory of much earlier events, but there is no archaeological or textual evidence to support such a claim. Nevertheless, Herodotus' account of events in the 6th century offers a useful historical parallel for those that occurred during the reign of Merenptah.

As always in the official Egyptian texts, the outcome of the battle is described as an Egyptian triumph, attributed personally to the king. The fact that the Egyptians captured Meroy's wives and his valuables indeed shows that Meroy suffered a humiliating defeat. Nevertheless, the Libyan king,

⁹⁰ For a map, see Manassa 2003, pl. 1.

⁹¹ Hom., *Od.* 14.257; Strabo 10.4.5; Barako 2003, 167; Emanuel 2012, 5 n. 16.

⁹² The finds on Bates island confirm trade contacts with Cyprus: White 2002, 47–53, 168–174.

⁹³ The Egyptian term Akawasha refers to an 'ethnically' defined group, not a homogeneous 'national' group in the modern sense. The Akawasha were people from various parts of the Aegean, but not necessarily Mycenaean. For a general discussion, see Killebrew and Lehmann 2013, 6; Killebrew 2014.

⁹⁴ Hdt. 4.151.

⁹⁵ Hdt. 4.157.

⁹⁶ Hdt. 4.158.

⁹⁷ Apries, Wahibre Haaibre, 589–570 BC: Bard 2007, 270–1.

⁹⁸ Hdt. 4.159.5–6. Translation: Godley 1920. The end of Apries, as described by Herodotus, is not confirmed by the available Near Eastern sources: Redford 2001, 98–9.

and probably many of his followers, managed to escape back to Libya. So it was not a devastating defeat. In the long run, the Egyptians were not able to keep the Libyans away from the Nile Delta: the Papyrus Harris I states that some groups of the Rebu and Meshwesh remained in various parts of Egypt for a long time, driving out the Egyptians.⁹⁹ It is possible that this process had started already during the later part of Merenptah's reign, and surely the situation worsened during the following turbulent period.¹⁰⁰ Ramesses III fought against the Libyans, but in the long run they managed to control parts of the Nile Delta: the kings of the 22nd Dynasty openly admitted that they were descendants of the Meshwesh, who initially came to live in the eastern part of the Delta as prisoners of war of the Egyptians.¹⁰¹

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⁹⁹ Breasted 1906, 4:92ff.; Manassa 2003, 27. Papyrus Harris I 76.11–77.1: 'The Rebu and the Meshwesh were inhabiting Egypt. They seized the towns of the western bank, from Memphis to Qerben.'

¹⁰⁰ Kahn 2012, 262–5.

¹⁰¹ O'Connor 1987, 37.

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