Introduction

Vivian Davies

The Society's two major events of the year, the results of which are published here - the Kirwan Memorial Lecture delivered in October, 2002, and the colloquium on recent fieldwork held in May, 2003 - were extremely well attended. The colloquium incorporated a special session, led by Dr. Salah Mohamed Ahmed, NCAM Director of Excavations, on the Merowe Dam salvage project. The response has been encouraging. Since the colloquium, several organisations have applied for concessions, joining the existing four missions of Gdańsk, NCAM, the French Unit and SARS. Many more are still needed. Interested parties should contact Dr. Salah at NCAM tel./fax. 249 11 786784 or the International Society for Nubian Studies c/o dwelsby@thebritishmuseum.ac.uk.
Kush in Egypt: a new historical inscription

Vivian Davies

In addition to participating in the project at Kurgus in the Sudan (this volume), the British Museum has been carrying out an epigraphic and conservation survey of decorated tombs in the region of Edfu in Upper Egypt (Figure 1), a project carried out in collaboration with the Supreme Council of Antiquities of Egypt. Our current focus is the tomb of the Governor Sobeknakht at Elkab (no. 10). This is a key monument, being a rare example of a well-preserved, finished tomb of the 17th Dynasty, but despite its importance only parts of it have ever been published and these rather inadequately.2

The tomb is rock-cut, its superstructure consisting of two internal chambers. The innermost serves to give access to the burial shaft and substructure. The outermost, the cult-chapel, is richly decorated throughout with scenes and inscriptions done in paint and sunk relief, many of them now obscured by soot accumulated over the centuries. In advance of recording the decoration in detail, we have begun a programme of cleaning the walls. This is still in progress but it has already produced (in February 2003) an important result — the uncovering of a new biographical inscription, containing an account of an attack on Egypt by the Kingdom of Kush and a group of allies. It would be premature to attempt a full publication and commentary of the text at this point, as details remain to be clarified, but in view of its great interest and relevance to the subject matter of Sudan & Nubia, I give here a preliminary account, with emphasis on the opening lines, which contain a number of significant toponyms.

The inscription is located in an area that was previously covered by a layer of soot—the right thickness of the doorways leading from the outer to the inner chamber of the tomb (Colour plate XXXII). It is a substantial text consisting of 22 horizontal lines of hieroglyphs, inscribed in red paint, reading from right to left. The indications are that it was a late addition to the tomb's decorative programme. Full study of the text, parts of which are missing, has just begun and much is still to be understood, but the sequence of events described is reasonably clear. It takes the form of an address to the living by Sobeknakht, 'Listen you, who are alive upon earth', which begins with a report of the invasion: 'Why? Kush came, aroused3 along his length, he having stirred up4 the tribes of Wawat (Lower Nubia), the island-dwellers5 of Khenthennefer6 (Upper Nubia), Punt and the Medjay7... (Figure 2). The territory affected appears to have been substantial, extending even 'into the neighbourhood of the Asians' (possibly a reference to the Hyksos). In scale, we are told, the event is 'unprecedented since the time of the god.' The narrative continues with an account of Sobeknakht's role in the crisis. It appears that Elkab was threatened, the 'enclosure-wall of Nekheb being destroyed'. There follows a muster of arms 'to fight the Nubians', and then a punish-

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1 For permission to carry out the project, we are indebted to Dr Zahi Hawass, Secretary-General of the Supreme Council of Antiquities of Egypt, and his colleagues on the Permanent Committee of the SCA. Much assistance has been provided by the SCA staff in the Edfu Inspectorate, under the direction of Fathy Abou Zeid. Our inspector during the last season (Feb. 2003) was Zanaa Noubi Abdel Salaam, who did a great deal to facilitate our work. We are also grateful for the co-operation of Dr Luc Limme, Director of the Belgian Archaeological Expedition to Elkab. A brief notice of the new discovery with a full list of team-members and acknowledgements is published in Davies 2003a. A version, in French, of the present paper will appear in Davies 2003c. For preliminary reports of the work on the tomb of Sobeknakht, see Davies 2003b and a future issue of Annales du Service.


3 fj3 here is probably the same verb as fjH:fj3 (Hannig 1995, 307).

4 For subp, see Wp. 4, 167-8 (1), and Hannig 1995, 721.

5 A compound expression ending in nwH, the latter meaning here perhaps 'islands'. It is tempting to restore a variant of hH:nwH (Wp.l, 11; Vandersleyen, 1971, 154ff; Hannig 1995, 502). This would be a rare case of the term referring to peoples located to the south of Egypt, as opposed to the north. It is worth noting that numerous and often substantial inhabited islands are a feature of the riverine geography of Nubia/Sudan (Sai, Tombos, Tabo, Mograt, to name only a few).

6 This example is now possibly the earliest certain attestation of this toponym (see Vandersleyen 1971, 64; Habachi 1972, 39-40, n. o; Redford 1997, 9 and 28, n. 77).
The might of the Great One, Nekhbet; the goddess of Nekhbet, is prominent. She is 'strong of heart against the Nubians, they being burnt through fire', while the 'chief(s) (?) of the nomads fall(s) through the blast (?) of her flame.' The Egyptian king (who is unidentified) then causes Sobeknakht much joy 'on account of the coming of his Person...to repel the looters' following which 'bodies become swollen.' There is a gathering together of the population including all the dignitaries, an occasion when 'love of [the goddess] coursed through his (the king's) body'. As a consequence a command is issued 'to make a monument in the temple of his [mother] Nekhbet, to make for her a sacred barque anew, worked in electrum' (Colour plate XXXIII). The text ends with the statement that Sobeknakht was in charge of this work, since the king recognized his qualities.

It is already well known that during the Hyksos Period, when Egypt was divided, the Kingdom of Kush, based at Kerma in Upper Nubia just south of the 3rd Cataract (now part of northern Sudan) (Figure 1), had extended its power northwards, controlling the Nubian Nile Valley up to Egypt's southern border at Aswan, a state of affairs reflected in the Kamose stela and other sources of the period. It is now evident, from the new text, that Kush's power and reach were much greater than has previously been realized: that it was capable of organizing a substantial military force, with allies drawn from a wide geographical area (including, it would seem, the land of Punt), a force that did not simply threaten Aswan but actually penetrated deep into Upper Egypt (perhaps sweeping in through desert routes), possibly right up to the limits of Hyksos control.

The full implications of this new information remain of course to be worked out and it is certainly far too soon for detailed conclusions. However, one interesting question on which the text appears to have obvious bearing concerns the origin of the Egyptian material deposited in the royal tumuli and associated funerary chapels at Kerma. These great tumuli, the burial-places of the kings of Kush, date to the Classic Kerma Period, more or less contemporary with the Second Intermediate Period/17th Dynasty/very early 18th Dynasty in Egypt. As is well known, they contained a large number of Egyptian objects, including statues and stele, many of which can be linked by inscription to sites in Egypt. The reason for their presence at Kerma has been a matter of long debate. In an excellent, recent review of the subject, Dominique Valbelle assessed the various hypotheses and noted that one scenario 'would imply a series of direct incursions of Kushite troops into all the sites mentioned in the text. It is argued that Punt is unlikely to have been hugely distant from Kush. On the close relationship between Punt and the Medjay, see, for example, Giuliani 1998, i, 'The Medjay were traditionally the ones who crossed this territory [Eastern Desert to the Red Sea]...and provided a link between the Nile Valley and the country of Punt'.

Reisner 1923, 505-31; Porter and Moss 1952, 175-80; see now Valbelle 1998. It may be possible to link the 'Governor, Hereditary Prince, of Nekhen, Sobeknakht' mentioned on a vessel found in Tumulus XIII (Khartoum 1987; Reisner 1923, 523, fig. 344, no. 46, 524, no. 46; Porter and Moss 1952, 178; Hinzte and Hinzte 1967, 12, no. 46; Edel 1980, 42, no. 4) [my thanks to Dr Derfel Franke for this reference]; Rhoyht 1997, 162, n. 591], with one of the similarly titled Sobeknakhts of our tomb no. 10 at Elkab, especially as Nekhen and Nekheb were twin-towns and officials from Nekhen figure prominently in the tomb. However, the case remains to be made and will need to wait on a fresh study of the vessel's inscription and a complete prosopographical record of Sobeknakht's tomb.
inscriptions preserved on the Kerma statues: i.e. as far north as Choteb and Assit in Middle Egypt, if not Memphis. Such an epic vision is not completely impossible, but remains to be demonstrated.12

In Sobeknakht’s inscription we now have direct testimony that one such Kushite ‘incursion’ did actually take place and on a substantial, if not epic, scale; moreover, the invading troops are referred to in one part of the text as ‘looters’ (urdjy).13 It thus becomes all the more possible that the Egyptian objects at Kerma, or at least a significant proportion of them, are indeed to be understood as trophies of (periodic?) invasion, secured by force of arms directly from tombs and temples at sites throughout Egypt.14 Buried with the Kushite kings, they would have served perhaps as symbols of the Kushites’ eternal domination over the traditional enemy—an unfamiliar world-view, directly the reverse of that of the Egyptians to which we are more accustomed, but one which may actually reflect something of the political and military reality of a period when, in the words of Charles Bonnet, ‘The kingdom of Kerma is without doubt the prominent civilisation of the Valley of the Nile’.15

Bibliography


14 With consequent disruption of cultic activity, as possibly witnessed, for example, in the case of the cult of Hepale in Elephantine, which appears to have been discontinued during the early part of the 17th Dynasty (Franke 1994, 86). Objects originally from Elephantine have been found at Kerma; see, for example, parts of a figure of King Khahetepre Sobekhotep in Tumulus XX: Wildung 1997, 116, no. 128; Ryholt 1997, 77; Ryholt 1998, 31ff; Eder 2000, 23, n. 49; cf. Franke 1994, 61, with n. 196, 71, n. 243, 75 and 117, with n. 254. If Ryholt’s contention is correct that the ‘all-wrecking storm’ of Ahmoses’s Unwarterstele is a metaphor for foreign invasion and its aftermath (Ryholt 1997, 144-47), then it is worth considering whether the ruinous state of Egyptian tombs and temples there described may have been as much the result of Kushite as Hyksos intervention. For a discussion of the Hyksos looting and transportation of Egyptian monuments, see Ryholt 1997, 133-4, n. 471, 139-40, n. 500, and 143-48.


Abbreviation

Conservation and recording in progress in the tomb of Sobeknakht: from left to right, Lamia El-Hadidy, Iain Ralston, and Marcel Marée. The new inscription is located on the right thickness of the central doorway, shown here being examined by Iain Ralston.

A passage from Sobeknakht’s biographical inscription recounting the king’s granting of a new sacred barque for the temple of the goddess Nekhbet.