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KEPER'S APPEAL BEFORE RAMESSES III – OR THE MOTIVATION BEHIND KILLING UNARMED ENEMIES

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Abstract
A passage in the Medinet Habu account of Ramesses III second Libyan war is analyzed and the crucial term tšk is investigated. It is argued that the killing of surrendering Libyans at the hand of Pharaoh is to be explained by their tšk-like behaviour.

On the north wing of the first pylon at Medinet Habu there is a textual composition known as the ‘Triumphal Poem of Year 11'. The text commemorates in highly rhetorical style the victory of Ramesses III during the second Libyan war. In the course of this campaign the Egyptians succeeded in capturing the Libyan chief, Mešer. His father, Keper, thereupon offers his own life in exchange for his son's. However, instead of showing mercy, Pharaoh Ramesses III not only slays Keper but also the disarmed Libyan army. The passage in question (KRI V, 70, 4-10) reads as follows:

Kpr jj.w r šrm m shr n tšk wšw=f hr=t t3 hn",

Keper came to make 'shalom' (i.e. to surrender) in the manner of a Tjak. He put his weapons to the ground together with:

mš=f jry=f q q r hr.t r dbh sì=f (j)b.t(w) rd.wj=f(j) dr.t=f ħr m s.t=f,

his army. He made a cry to heaven in order to beg for his son. (But) his feet and his hand(s) were ‘united', standing where he was.

1 Daniel Arpagaus, Ägyptologisches Seminar der Universität Basel, Petersgraben 51, 4051 Switzerland. E-mail: daniel.arpagaus@gmx.ch. Special thanks are due to Dominique Basler for correcting my English.
2 Cf. the plan given by Cifola (1991: 12).
5 At Medinet Habu, Mešer appears in a battle scene on his chariot (MH II, 1932: pls. 71f.), as well as captured and fettered in a scene showing Ramesses III examining prisoners (MH II, 1932: pl. 75).
6 For this Libyan name cf. Schneider (1992: 4 with n. 16) and Rössler (1952: 133 no. 25): The etymology of this personal name stems from the root kpr, meaning 'proud, energetic, audacious but also recalcitrant.'
Only God was the one who knew his innermost thoughts (and so) His Majesty descended upon their heads like a mountain of granite!

(They were) ground up, pulverized and cleaving to the ground; their blood, in the place where they were, was like floodwaters! Their corpses lay crushed in the (very) place they had walked (before). Keper was seized upon, brought away and slain was his army whose hearts had relied upon him to save them. (He was) slain, his arms bound, pinioned like a bird and (finally) he was made prostrate on the chariot under the tread of His Majesty.

The “Year 11” inscription has been regarded as the most reliable source among the three war accounts of Ramesses III that are recorded at Medinet Habu. Thus, despite

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7 Maybe this reflects the traditional pose of bound captives, who have their feet and arms tied together behind the back, as in the hieroglyph.

8 Cf. Spalinger (2005: 257): «The narrative of the year eleven campaign of Ramesses III against the Libyans is the most reliable of all three war accounts at Medinet Habu. This is overtly rendered by means of year,
its »flowery language« and a story element whose literary quality is reminiscent of the Iliad, the episode of the capture and killing/murder of Keper should be taken at face value. It goes without saying that its content is somewhat repellent to the modern reader; after all killing surrendering enemies constitutes a war crime according to modern legal standards. However, as no Geneva Convention was in place at that time, the murder of captured hostile leaders should not be interpreted as an act of (particular) cruelty – back then it was just common practice. Nevertheless, some scholars have felt uneasy about «cet épisode dramatique» and even dismissed the ferocity of Ramesses III as «unegyptian». One wonders what could have provoked such strong reactions. The key to a better understanding may be found in the rather obscure word תָּאכ, which describes Keper’s behavior towards Pharaoh. The expression תָּאכ was thought to be of Semitic origin – with good reason, as the text of the Triumphal Poem is replete with words that have Semitic roots. Unfortunately, this framework does not further elucidate תָּאכ. Different translations have been proposed, ranging from

month, and day. More importantly, the scenes that accompany the lengthy royal narrative are far more realistic with regard to the numbers of enemy slain or captured. [...] The location of the year eleven campaign is connected to the actual military clash, and thus the account sheds welcome light upon the system of border posts that were established earlier under Ramesses II. [...] Ramesses III’s success in this second Libyan war was different than in the first, with the battle depictions and accompanying captions more vivid. Furthermore, cf. Cifola (1991: 20): «All of this seems to confirm once more our assumption: the two Libyan war reports are more realistic than that of the Sea Peoples’ campaigns. For the historicity of the war accounts in general cf. Noort (1994: 104-112).

9 Thus the characterization of the text according to Gardiner (1961: 287). Regarding its style cf. also Wilson (1990: 24-33).


11 This leads to the somewhat paradoxical statement that the decapitation of dead enemies is a more severe act of cruelty than the beheading of living captured leaders (; cf. Müller (2002: 1223f.); id. (2009: 126): «While the beheading [of] rebel leaders cannot be classified as cruelty because it is the customary punishment for this type of people, the beheading of dead soldiers is a different matter and does constitute an act of cruelty. For Helek (1980: 780), the capture of enemies, to turn them into sor-ansx-prisoners-of-war in order to later kill them with relish, was an original motivation behind Egyptian warfare. For a recent re-examination of the term sor-ans cf. Fazekas (2006: 59-64).»


14 In our passage alone we encounter בָּשׁ, to beg for peace, to surrender (cf. Galán 1997: 37-44), דא, to cry out (for help) (cf. Hoch 1994: 381 nr. 570), יד, to cut off, to break; to grind (cf. Ids, op. cit., p. 312f. nr. 451), יבש, to crush, pulverize (cf. Hoch 1994: 361f. nr. 535; Sauneron 1988: 175). The impetus to search for Semitic loanwords in the text, however, has mislead scholars before: the word תָּאכ that was traced back to Akkadic kamas/šu, to bow, kneel and Ugaritic kaw, to throw oneself down (Görg 1975: 75-77) turned out to be just simply a misshapen writing for Egyptian gns, violence, outrage (Jasnow 1994: 201f.).
The solution to the problem lies in the well-known but often overlooked root \( \text{tek} \), which occurs several times in the Wilbour Papyrus, where it functions as an ethnonym for Libyans who possessed land in Middle Egypt at that time. It is likely that they were soldiers since one of the \( \text{Tk} \) was a standard bearer. In addition to this, Spiegelberg (1904: 30f.) argued some one hundred years ago that these \( \text{Tk} \)-people should be identified with the \( \text{Tkm} \) of Papyrus Anastasi IV, as well as on the famous Israel stela of Merenptah.

Shortly before and independently of Spiegelberg, Lefèbure had arrived at the ingenious conclusion that the \( \text{Tkm} \) of Papyrus Anastasi IV constitutes a Berber plural form of a word \( \text{tek} \) or \( \text{teka} \) (of whose existence, however, he had no idea whatsoever)

Another toponym \( \text{Tk} \), on the other hand, should be distinguished from the above mentioned Libyans. This toponym refers to a town or the district in which Tell er-Retaba and Tell el-Maskhuta lay and might be identified with the Biblical Sukkoth.

15 Edgerton / Wilson (1936: 91 with n. 27): «Ce qui est modernément le mieux communiqué est que les Égyptiens ont affixé au groupe complet les déterminatifs qui les désignent comme une unité 
16 Janssen (1948: 39): "en geblinddo".
17 Katary (1999: 69ff.).
19 Kitchen (2008: 54).
20 Cf. Galán (1997: 41 n. 27): »The term / is taken as a Semitic term of uncertain meaning«.
21 It is this translation based on the Semitic root \( \text{skr} \), with \( \text{tek} \) or \( \text{teka} \) as \( \text{tek} \) or \( \text{teka} \) to shut (up), to lock (up), to shut (up); in Egyptian texts we find \( \text{teka} \) or \( \text{teka} \) to lock (up), to shut (up).
22 Edgerton / Wilson (1936: 91 with n. 27): »The term / is taken as a Semitic term of uncertain meaning«.
23 See also Idrissi (2000: 101ff.).
24 Tallet (2003: 475) voted for a city at the entrance of the Wadi Tumilat.
25 Cf. Galán (1997: 41 n. 27): »The term / is taken as a Semitic term of uncertain meaning«.
26 Edgerton / Wilson (1936: 91 with n. 27): »The term / is taken as a Semitic term of uncertain meaning«.
27 Edgerton / Wilson (1936: 91 with n. 27): »The term / is taken as a Semitic term of uncertain meaning«.

Let us now consider our word’s unusual determinatives. First of all, it is interesting to note that the word $Tk$ did neither in the Wilbour Papyrus nor in the Medinet Habu inscription retain any of the common determinatives to designate foreign peoples (e.g. $\text{sA}$ or the like). Instead, we find $\text{dgj}$ – in the case of the Wilbour Papyrus – and only the $\text{dgj}$-determinative in our Medinet Habu passage. While Lefèbure reckoned that the former were added by the Egyptians because the word stem of $Tk$ reminded them of $\text{dgj}$, $\text{dgj}$, $\text{ntj hr smt}$. While Kitchen interpreted the $Tk$ as some kind of Libyan auxiliaries (mercenaries?), Müller took them to be some sort of (secret?) border police. Spiegelberg, on the other hand, perceived them as spies working for the Egyptian secret service. Whatever the expression under discussion might have once referred to, the word $Tk$ as mentioned in the Ramesside documents appears to have undergone a semantic transformation starting as a reference to a distinct ethnic group and ending

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28 To identify $Tk$ with *Sukkheli is virtually a communitas opinio which can be found in Brugsch (1875: 8), Helck (1965: 35f.) and Spalinger (2008: 147f.). This does not answer the question, however, if the *Sukkheli mentioned in 2 Chron. 12:3 as forming part of Shoshenq’s army had something to do with the $Tk$-Libyans; cf. Spiegelberg (1904: 30f.); Kitchen (1986: 295 n. 291); Wilson (2005: 84) and Winnicki (2009: 72).  
29 Zibelius-Chen (1972: 188 s.v. *Tk, *Tktn): »Es ist aber auch möglich, dass $\text{sic}$ sowie die Determinative $\text{A}$ und $\text{A}$ mit der Verwendung der *Tktn als Kundschafter und Wächter zusammenhängen.« For the combination of $\text{A}$ and $\text{A}$ in the case of the Papyrus Wilbour spelling ($\text{A}$; cf. the comments of David (2006: 29; 2007: 8-10). Instructive is the use of the classifier couplet $\text{A}$ in Middle Kingdom literary context. In *Simul, the Dialogue of a Man with his Ba and the Elloquent Peasant, the pairing occurs in only a handful of words; but in all three stories is, thj, to transgress, one of them (David 2007: 9). Thus, in the eyes of the Egyptians, the determination of the ethnonym of the *Tktn, who were scouting along the desert edge, might have already been regarded as being close to the metaphor ‘CRIME IS MOTION’ (David 2007: 10). This much can be inferred from the classifier couplet $\text{A}$ in the dichotomy between righteousness and transgressions, the *Tktn belonged to the latter category only because of their habitat at the periphery of the Egyptian world and the classifiers of their ethnonym, or, to say the same thing in linguistic phrasing (David 2007: 10): »the righteous proceeds on a straight path from which the transgressor strays, crossing the limits between right and wrong territories. The offender tramples the rule. His criminal action is a movement towards a criminal goal that escapes (at least for a short time) the constraints imposed by the law. The prototypical members of the [MOTION] category such as ‘to walk’ and ‘to go’ are present at its core, whereas abstract members such as ‘to transgress’ appear at the periphery.«  
30 Pap. Anastasi IV, 10,11; cf. Gardner (1937: 46); for translations e.g. Caminos (1954: 175; 178 n. to 10,11): »the Tjukten that scouts; Wente (1990: 35 nr. 32): »the Tjukten who are engaged in reconnoitring and Ermann (1927: 203): »the Tekten that can spy.«  
31 Kitchen (1966: 159); id. (1986: 295 n. 291). Recently, Rosmorduc (2009: 143-146) convincingly demonstrated that the word $\text{A}$, $\text{A}$, $\text{A}$, $\text{A}$, in line 22 of the Israel stela is a collective term (barbarian mercenary) for the different groups of barbarian auxiliary troops mentioned afterwards, the $\text{Mdl} \text{w}, \text{Tktn}$ and $\text{Nhw}$ (cf. here n. 33).  
32 Müller (1896: 31).  
33 Spiegelberg (1896: 22): »Die $\text{Nhw}$ und $\text{Tktn}$ sind uns aus Pap. Anastasi 10/8 ff. als Bewohner der libyschen Oasengegend bekannt, welche, wenn ich recht verstehe, den Ägyptern Spionendienste leisteten.«
as a term used to describe an occupation. This is corroborated by the phraseology of the Medinet Habu passage, which informs us that Keper came along in the manner of a Ṯk (m šhr n Ṯk). Further comparative phraseology can be found in other texts which also support the view that such m-šhr-n-characterizations of hostile (and even friendly) elements were either employed in a pejorative and mocking fashion, or to relate to unseemly behavior:

- In the Karnak account of Merenptah’s Libyan war of year 5 we find the enemy leader compared to a dog:

\[
\text{p̱y=sn wr m šhr n jw̱jw s tw̱j jwty ẖjit} = f,
\]

their chief is in the manner of a dog – a beggar and a fool. On the famous Pije stela, the king requests his own army to fight a clean war in Egypt without resorting to dirty tricks:

- In the famous Pije stela, the king requests his own army to fight a clean war in Egypt without resorting to dirty tricks:

\[
\text{Akhhenaten’s Libyan war of year 5 we find the enemy leader compared to a dog:}
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\text{p̱y=sn wr m šhr n jw̱jw s tw̱j jwty ẖjit} = f,
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their chief is in the manner of a dog – a beggar and a fool. On the famous Pije stela, the king requests his own army to fight a clean war in Egypt without resorting to dirty tricks:

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\]

\[
\text{p̱y=sn wr m šhr n jw̱jw s tw̱j jwty ẖjit} = f,
\]

their chief is in the manner of a dog – a beggar and a fool. On the famous Pije stela, the king requests his own army to fight a clean war in Egypt without resorting to dirty tricks:
do not attack during the night in the way of a ‘trickster’\textsuperscript{38}, (but rather) fight when you can be seen.\textsuperscript{39}

A passage in the Nauri decree of Sethy I featuring legalistic content prohibits any fort commander to misuse belongings of the fort for himself in an arbitrary manner (\textit{m shr n wṣḥn}):

Summing up, I would like to suggest translating the key phrase \textit{m shr n ṯk} as in the manner of a (Libyan) spy or with the intention of a (Libyan) spy. The determinative of \textit{Ṭk} is therefore highly suggestive insofar as it points to the activity of spying rather than focusing on Keper’s Libyan descent.\textsuperscript{41}

\textsuperscript{38} For the word ḥb, to play a game, cf. the comments by Grimal (1981: 30 n. b).


\textsuperscript{41} Another, although somewhat far-fetched interpretation proposed that the Egyptian scribe of the Medinet Habu text did no longer associate the word \textit{ṭk} with a Libyan tribe and its spying role at all. Rather he may have connected the term with a word he knew, quite in the same fashion as modern translators tried to look for a possible Semitic origin to make sense of the word. Here an Egyptian candidate is the word \textit{Tk}, predecessor of Demotic \textit{tk} and Coptic \textit{tk}, \textit{tk}, \textit{tk}, which means knife, razor (cf. Andreau 1979: 166). So far, this word is attested three times in Ramessid documents, i.e. on O. Nash 1, v° 9 (as \textit{tk}, cf. Cerny/Gardiner 1957: pl.46; Menu 2002: 43), Weight IFAO 5110 (as \textit{tk}, cf. Andreau 1979: 166); O. Varille 19, III 6 (as \textit{tk}, cf. Janssen 2009: 96) – not including the enigmatic \textit{tk} of O. DeM 347 (cf. Janssen 1975: 325). In later Demotic sources a term \textit{dq} denotes a sword blade (cf. Hoffmann 1996: 191 n. 211; in addition, Lippert/Schemelke 2006: 169). What if the scribe of the Medinet Habu text mistakenly took the \textit{Libyan} \textit{ṭk} with determinative to be an Egyptian metaphor razor-eyed?
The circumstance that the Libyan surrender was not to be trusted becomes clear from the text itself; almost immediately after Keper’s characterization as a §Ak, we read only God knew his (=Keper’s) innermost thoughts. The text alludes to God’s omniscience, i.e. his ability to look into man’s heart and detect potential wrongdoing (which by extension also applies to the king as God’s intermediary).42 What these innermost thoughts (jmj.w-h.wt) consisted of in our particular case is made explicit in the introductory statement in KRI V, 69, 14: »They deliberated to plot rebellion yet again.« In the present author’s view, the insistence on the Libyans plotting yet again (m-whm sp) is to be understood as referring to Keper’s initiative and not to the prior Libyan attack under Mešer.

Overall we may say that these words imply that the Egyptians sensed that something was fishy about the Libyan surrender. At least that is what the text wants us to believe. Whether or not the threat was real, we will probably never know. Pharaoh’s actions, however, are presented as a pre-emptive strike that came about only through his god-like insight into those treacherous §Ak-Libyans. Thus, the killing of surrendering and defenceless enemies was not meant to display an act of indiscriminate brutality; it merely followed as a natural reaction to information that has been hitherto hidden to modern readers.43

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42 Cf. the beginning of the Loyalist Teaching, where, after a request to be loyal to the king, the ruler is described as follows: a33 pw jmj hbtj.w jw jr.t-m=f(j) qF=r=sn h.t nh.t, he is the (divine) Sia-Knowledge inside the hearts, his eyes can scan every body (i.e. discern the thoughts): (after the version of the Loyalist Teaching on Stela Cairo CG 20358 1.11f; cf. Kamal 1940: 214; Posener 1976: 19; Schipper 1998: 164 – for the Loyalist Teaching in general now Verhoeven 2009). The same phraseology is also applied to gods, e.g. a gate keeper in BoD 125 is called jA pw jmj HAtj.w jw jr.t-f(j) Dar=sn X.t, he perceives the hearts-who-scans-the-bodies (cf. LGG VI, 166) and in the tomb of the High Priest of Amun Nebwenenef (TT 157), the god Amun is described as Dar n X.wt wbA(.w) HAtj.w jA rx(.w) Xnw X.t, who scans bodies, who reveals hearts, (he is) Sia-Knowledge, who knows what is in bodies (KRI III, 284, 1-2; cf. Frood 2007: 37). For more examples cf. the references given in Toye (2009: 262 n. 23). Thus, regarding our particular passage, we may say that his attempts at trying to hide his true thoughts from the king make Keper the epitome of disloyalty. As such he is inevitably doomed, just like somebody who cannot pass the above-mentioned gate-keeper of BoD 125, or somebody who ventures to be disloyal to the king and who, according to the Loyalist Teaching, would be denied a burial and thrown into the river (nn js n sbj Hr Hm=f jw XA.t=f omA(.w) n mw; cf. Schipper 1998: 164).

43 This should be taken into account when meditating on the Egyptian ideology of war (cf. Liverani 1990: 126ff.; Hased 1998: 17ff). While the battle scenes on temple walls present for the most part a homogeneous picture of the rebellious or resistant foreigner as the witless opponent and doomed victim of Egypt’s superiority (O’Connor 2003: 169), accompanying texts allow for more subtleties than the stereotypical phrases that focus on the so-called Todesbefallenheit of the enemies (von der Way 1992: 61; cf. furthermore Guerry/Gillen 2010: 59-63) and the Tötungsentschlossenheit of the Pharaoh (Assmann 1995: 82).
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