

*The Victory Stela of Nebmaatre Amenhotep III found at Kom el Hettan by Flinders Petrie & today in the Cairo Egyptian Museum. Graphic adapted from Petrie, *Six Temples at Thebes* (1897), pl. xx*



THE VICTORY STELA OF AMENHOTEP III, HISTORY OR SYMBOLISM?

by Patrick van Gils

During the excavation season of 1896, British archaeologist and Egyptologist Sir William Matthew Flinders Petrie was working in the Luxor west bank region. He focused mainly on six New Kingdom funerary temples.¹ During the excavations in the remains of the funerary temple of the Nineteenth Dynasty pharaoh Merneptah, Petrie found a large amount of material originating from the Kom el Hettan mortuary temple of Eighteenth Dynasty pharaoh Amenhotep III. One of the larger pieces was a two-meter-tall limestone stela, which is currently in the Cairo Egyptian Museum (JE 31409). Broken into two pieces, it had been reused as the foundation of a pillar in the Temple of Merenptah.

The stela contains unique depictions of Amenhotep III as a warlike pharaoh. Since his reign was a largely peaceful period, the question is whether these scenes commemorate actual military victories of Amenhotep III or that they should be regarded as depicting purely symbolical victories.

The Scenes and Text on the Stela

The upper register of the stela shows Amenhotep III twice, offering Maät and wine to the god Amen-RE. During the subsequent reign of Akhenaten, the pictures and names of that deity were completely obliterated. The damages were restored during the reign of Seti I. The second register of the stela consists of two parallel scenes on which Amenhotep III is depicted in his chariot while defeating Syrian (Northern) and Nubians (Southern) enemies. Above the king the goddess Nekhbet spreads her protective wings and offers him the hieroglyphic signs of life, stability and dominion. The left scene shows the king charging a fleeing crowd of Syrians. On the back of one of the king's horses two bound enemies have been depicted.

The caption above the left scene reads: *“The Good*

nihilating the heir of the wretched Kush, bringing their princes as living prisoners.”

While lacking direct and obvious references to a northern campaign, there are several sources which provide information about two Nubian campaigns conducted during the reign of Amenhotep III.

The First Nubian Campaign

A stela, carved in the rocks along the road between Aswan and Philae, near the First Cataract, provides insight into the reason for conducting the first Nubian campaign in Year 5 of Amenhotep III. The upper scene of the stela shows Amenhotep III trampling down an Asiatic and smiting two Nubians. Before the king are the deities Amen and Khnum. Behind him stands the god Ptah. After the dating (the fifth year of reign, third month of the season *Akhet*, second day)

“His Majesty led on unto his victory, he completed it on his first victorious campaign....”

God, Golden [Horus], Shining in the chariot, like the rising of the sun; great in strength, strong in might, mighty-hearted like him who dwells in Waset [Montu]; smiting Naharin with his mighty sword.”

It is noteworthy that the text mentions Naharin (the Egyptian name for the state of Mitanni) as a defeated enemy. During the reign of Amenhotep III Egypt and Mitanni were not at war with each other. During this period even a friendly relationship existed between the two states. To date there aren't any references available which provide us information about a Northern campaign conducted by Amenhotep III. Only a biographical text on a statue of the prominent courtier Amenhotep son of Hapu provides a rather vague reference to the presence of the king during a campaign in the North: *“I was the chief at the head of the mighty men, to smite the Nubians and the Asiatics, the plans of my lord were a refuge behind me; when I wandered his command surrounded me; his plans embraced all lands and all foreigners who were by his side.”*

The right scene of the second register depicts Amenhotep III charging into fleeing Nubians. On the back of one of the king's horses, three tied Nubian leaders are portrayed. It is striking that the heads and upper bodies of three Nubians are shown, while four pairs of legs and four head plumes are shown. A Nubian is strapped to the back of one of the horses of Amenhotep III, while a fifth Nubian is tied under the king's chariot.

The caption above the scene reads: *“The Good God lord of the sword, mighty in dragging them [at his chariot], an-*

and the royal titles the remaining, partly fragmented, text refers to the Nubian campaign: *“One came to tell his Majesty: ‘The foe of Kush the wretched, has planned rebellion in his heart. His Majesty led on unto his victory, he completed it on his first victorious campaign....’* The text identifies an individual named Ikheny, *“the boastful midst of his army,”* as the leader of the rebellion. A fragment originating from Sais, describes the revolt as being led by *“...the overthrown of Ta-Sety”* (Nubia).

The cause and the precise location of the rebellion is unclear. Kush was situated in the south of present-day Egypt and Northern Sudan. During the New Kingdom, it was an area controlled by Egypt, which was ruled by the *“Viceroy of Kush.”* The name Kush may refer to this Egyptian controlled area, but it can also refer to a larger area consisting of the Egyptian territory and the adjacent regions. The concept of Ta-Sety includes an even larger and less designatable area. The rebellion mentioned in the text could be a reference to a revolt within the Egyptian controlled territory. However, it is also possible that it is referring to an attempt to attack Egyptian territory or to defy an Egyptian demand for submission by a leader from outside the Egyptian territory.

According to the text, 30,000 enemies were captured. On this basis, it can be assumed that this operation was carried out with a substantial Egyptian military force. The

Detail of Nebmaatre Amenhotep III on his chariot, from the right-hand vignette of the Victory stela, celebrating the king's submission of the southern enemies (Nubians). Photo: Kmt/Forbes





*The Stela of Amenhotep III along the road between Aswan and Philae. Graphic adapted from Lepsius, *Denkmäler* iii, vol. v (1897), pl. 81g*

fact that the stela mentions the rebel leader by his name is unusual and is an indication that this person was a formidable foe. The phrase “...His Majesty led unto victory” is an indication that the campaign was led by Amenhotep III personally.

A stela on the now-submerged island of Konosso, located near Philae island, also reports about the outcome of this first Nubian campaign of Amenhotep III. The upper register shows Amenhotep III with the god Khnum standing behind him. The king stands before Amen-Re. Behind the deity four oval name-rings, or toponyms, are applied. The edge of a toponym represents a city wall; the upper part consists of a bound Nubian enemy, indicating that this location is defeated or is under Egyptian control. The four toponyms are being offered by Amen-Re to the king. The locations list-

ed in the toponyms are the Nubian regions Kush, Irem, Weresh and Tarek.

The main text describes the return of Amenhotep III at the end of his first Nubian campaign: “...Year 5; His Majesty returned, having triumphed on his victorious campaign in the land of Kush the wretched; having made his boundary as far as he desired, as far as the four pillars which bear the heaven. He set up a tablet of victory as far as ‘Pool of Horus’ (Kbhw-Hr); there was no king of Egypt who did the like beside his Majesty, the mighty, satisfied with victory, Nebmaâtre Amenhotep....”

The text is very general and provides little information about the exact location of the campaign. If assumed that the toponyms offered by Amen-Re provide a reference to the location of the defeated regions, then this campaign could be partially geographical located. However, of the four

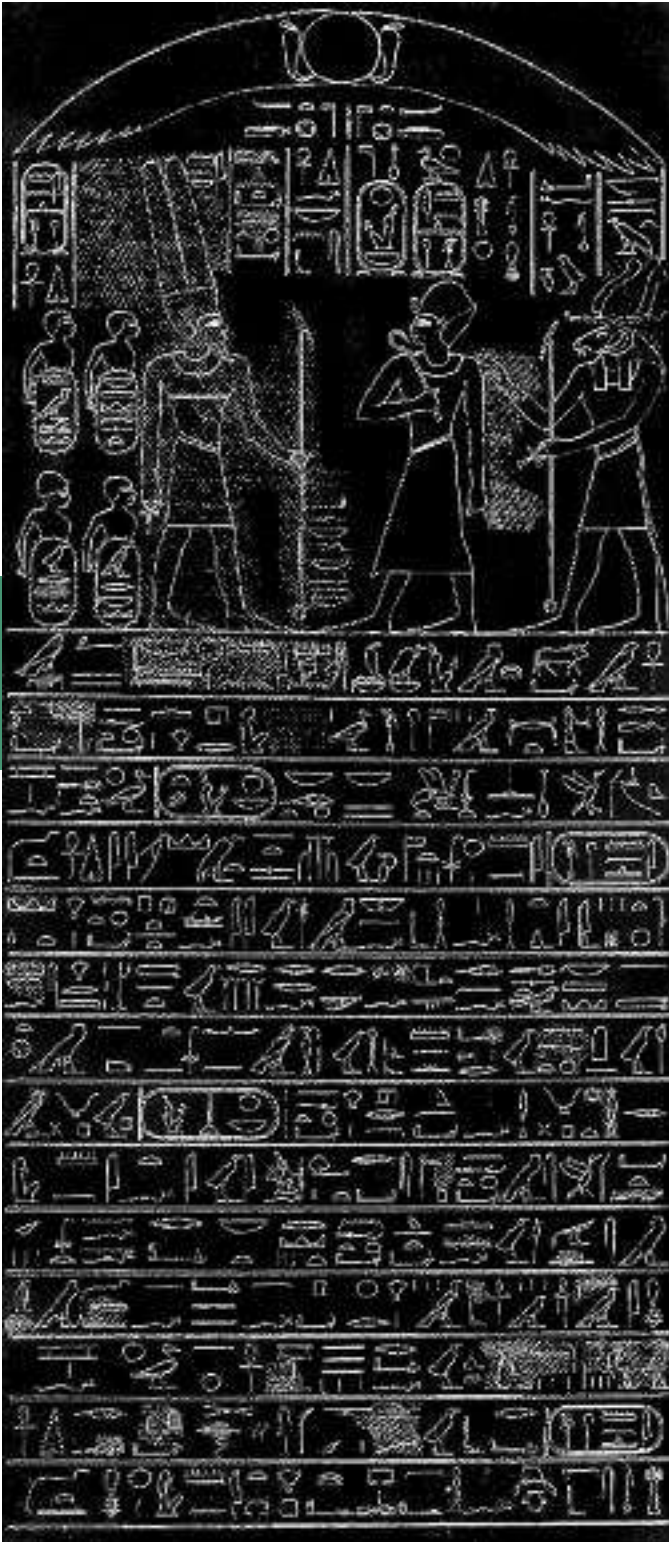
“...there was no king of Egypt who did the like beside his Majesty, the mighty, satisfied with victory, Nebmaatre Amenhotep....”

sites mentioned only the location of Kush is known. The Irem region was probably located just outside of Kush. The location of Weresh and Tarek are unknown.

The stela along the road from Aswan to Philae (described above) mentions one Ikheny as the leader or chief of the rebellious element in Kush. The other three regions mentioned on the Konosso stela could be potential supporters of Ikheny. But these could also been regions which Amenhotep III passed through to defeat Ikheny. A third possibility is that the toponyms were used to indicate the extent of the southern region, which Amenhotep III had acquired through the hegemony of Amen-Re.

A fragment on a granite block originating from Bubastis, the modern Tell Basta in the Delta, contains an inscription describing a march to Nubia and the subsequent fighting. Since a king’s name is lacking on the fragment, it is not possible to assign it with any certainty to a particular ruler. The writing style of the text however makes clear that it is a text from the New Kingdom.² The fragment from Bubastis is dated on “...the third month of Akhet....” This date matches that on the stela along the road between Aswan and Philae: “...third month of Akhet day two.” Based on the similarities between these two dates and the writing style used on the fragment, it can be assumed that the fragment from Bubastis most likely comes from the reign of Amenhotep III.

The text describes two skirmishes between the Egyptians and Nubians, which took place in the vicinity of “...the Tjesu Huwa behind western Khekheset.” The fragment ends with the statement that in “...Weneshek, south of Tjesu



The Konosso Stela of Amenhotep III. Graphic adapted from Lepsius Denkmäler iii vol. v (1897) pl.82a

and Huwa” the Egyptian army set camp.

Thutmose III fitted the Sixth and Seventh pylons of the Temple of Amen-Re at Karnak with detailed topographical lists. The lists, divided into two northern and two southern lists contain a total of 628 place names. According to the

captions of the lists, these places were conquered by him. On the first southern topographical list, both Huwa and Khekheset are mentioned. In contrast to a large number of Northern locations, the vast majority of the southern locations, including Huwa and Khekheset are to date, not localized.

The Second Nubian Campaign

A stela found at East Semna (currently in the British Museum, BM 657) reports on a second military action in Nubia. Viceroy of Kush Merymose describes how a rebellion in the Nubian region Ibhet was suppressed. The upper part of the stela is missing. This section most likely contained the date and the announcement of the military action described. Merymose held the position of Viceroy of Kush in the period following Year 30 of Amenhotep III. Based on this the action

“The might of Nebmaatre took them in one day, in one hour, making a great slaughter their cattle, not one of them escaped....”

described on the stele can be dated in the period following the thirtieth year of reign of that king. The thirteen surviving lines of the stele describe the action. For a reason unknown, a rebellion broke out in the Nubian region Ibhet. Merymose gathered an army, by which the rebellion was suppressed. The men of this army were summoned from the various settlements in Egyptian Nubia.

The text of the stela reads: “Every man reported and one mustered an army of Pharaoh, L.P. H., which was under command of this king's son. He made troops, commanded by commanders, each man with his village; from the fortress of Beki to the fortress of Talroy making 52 iters of sailing. The might of Nebmaatre took them in one day, in one hour, making a great slaughter their cattle; not one of them escaped; each one of them was brought...fear. The might of Amenhotep took them; the barbarians among them, male as well as female, were not separated; by the plan of Horus, Lord of the Two Lands, King Nebmaatre, mighty bull, strong in might. Ibhet had been haughty, great things were in their hearts, the fierce-eyed lion, this ruler: he slew them by command of Amen-Atum, his august father; it was he who led him in might and victory. List of the captivity which his majesty took in the land of Ibhet, the wretched: Living... 150 heads, Archers 110 heads, [females] 250 heads, servants...55 heads, their children 175 heads. Total 740 living heads. Hands thereof-312 United with the living heads 1,052.

Following battle the Egyptians would generally cut off the right hand of killed enemies, as a method of counting enemy casualties. The entry “hands there of 312” can be con-

sidered as the number of killed enemies. The text also mentions how 740 Nubians were taken prisoner. Based upon the rather small amount of killed-and-captured enemies, it can be assumed that this was a relatively small Egyptian action.

However, it is also possible that the population of the region Ibhet was relatively small, which caused the number of dead and prisoners to be so modest. A third option is that the Egyptians mounted a successful surprise attack against a population which, because of bringing in the harvest, was scattered throughout the region which led to the relative limited amount of Nubian casualties and prisoners.

The Egyptians regularly conducted raids into Nubia with the aim to take prisoners who could serve as a workforce in Egypt. If the described action had this goal, then the largest quantity of prisoners should have been men. But during the action in Ibhet, a mere thirty-five percent of the pris-

side of the stela shows Amenhotep III defeating Syrian (or northern) enemies. However, there is no evidence that Amenhotep III has conducted a campaign in the north; overcoming the northern enemies on the left scene must therefore be regarded as symbolic. Assuming this, the depicted Nubian victory should also be regarded as a symbolic victory.

It was the duty of every Egyptian king to maintain the cosmic order, Maät, and to restrain chaos, Isfet. Foreign countries, and especially the northern and southern countries, were considered as the human personification of chaos and therefore had to be subdued. On many temple walls, but also on many stelae, the king is depicted as victorious, smiting foreign enemies. These scenes should be regarded as a reference to this role of the pharaoh. Variations of these “suppression of the foreign enemies” scenes are images of

“The might of Amenhotep took them; the barbarians among them, male as well as female...”

oners were male, while thirty-three percent were female and twenty-four percent children. The composition of the Nubians imprisoned during the second Nubian campaign suggests that it does not relate to a raid to acquire a workforce.

It has also been suggested by several scholars that the inhabitants of Ibhet had interfered with Egyptian gold-mining activities in the nearby mining area in the Wadi Al-laqi. During the reign of Amenhotep III, Egypt required large quantities of gold for decorating temples and palaces, and as well to export it to foreign countries as diplomatic gifts or as bridewealth. The interference of the flow of Nubian gold to Egypt could have been a reason to mount a military expedition against Ibhet. Several decades earlier Thutmose IV launched a campaign to probably the same Nubian region for possibly reasons similar to the second Nubian campaign of Amenhotep III.

Historical or Symbolical?

The scene on the right side of the stela of Amenhotep III found by Petrie in Merneptah's mortuary temple shows the king defeating Nubian enemies. Several sources provide information about two Nubian campaigns undertaken during the reign of Amenhotep III. Theoretically, the scene could refer to one of these actions. Since Amenhotep III was present at the first campaign and multiple sources describe this expedition, while only one commemorates the second campaign, the most obvious action to be commemorated on the stela would be the first Nubian campaign. However, it is very questionable whether this is the case. The scene on the left

bound enemies on the bases of royal thrones or on accompanying footstools. Each time the king sat on his throne, his feet on the footstool rested on enemies and, thus, chaos was symbolically overcome. A pair of sandals from the tomb of Tutankhamen (Egyptian Museum in Cairo, JE 62685) contains images of bound northern and southern enemies; at every step that the king took, chaos was symbolically defeated. Faience tiles bearing the images of the enemies from the palace of Rameses III at Medinet Habu had a similar purpose.

Thus, the stela of Amenhotep III found by Petrie was probably a variation to the “suppression of the foreign enemies” theme, a symbolic representation of controlling the north and south by the king. The text in the lower register of the stela endorses this: “... (Each) country, all people, all nations, Naharin, the despicable Kush, Upper and Lower Retjenu,³ are under the feet of this great god, like Re forever.” By depicting Amenhotep III defeating Egypt's northern and southern enemies, chaos was defeated or controlled. The stela shows Amenhotep III in his role as enforcer of the cosmic order, Maät, and should be regarded as symbolical and not historical.

Notes

1. The excavation season 1896 was published in W.M. Flinders Petrie, *Six temples at Thebes* (London, 1897).
2. The text contains the flat letter m, this sign became in use during the 18th dynasty.
3. Retjenu was the Egyptian name for Syro-Palestine.

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