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## **Sesostris III and the Levant**

### **Abstract:**

The execration texts from the Middle Kingdom provide us with the military intelligence reports of those that Egypt considered hostile. While these reports are often used to elucidate the geography of the southern Levant, they also shed light on the northern Levant. Looking at the structure of the later execration texts and comparing them with roughly contemporary cuneiform texts can help identify several other locations mentioned.

**Keywords:** Execration texts, Geography, Levant, Middle Kingdom Egypt

There are five sets of execration texts from the Middle Kingdom<sup>1</sup>. The earliest were on vases found at Mirgissa in Nubia outside an Egyptian fortress,<sup>2</sup> and probably date to the end of the reign of Amenemhet I<sup>3</sup>. The second set, bowls acquired in the Theban area (now in Berlin),<sup>4</sup> date to the early part of the reign of Sesostri III<sup>5</sup>. Another set of execration texts, on statuettes now in Cairo, dates to sometime during the reign of Amenemhet II, but lacks a section on Asia<sup>6</sup>. The fourth set, a series of figurines in Brussels, dates to the reign of Sesostri III<sup>7</sup>. The final set, from Lisht, now resides in New York and is yet to be published; since it came from Lisht, which remained the capital from the reign of Amenemhet I to the reign of Sesostri I, they should probably be dated to this time period<sup>8</sup>.

Egyptian execration texts are valuable because they contain detailed information on Egypt's foreign enemies, including not only place names but also names of the ruler or rulers of a particular place. This potentially allows us to construct a map of Egyptian geographical knowledge at the time of the writing of the execration texts.

Unfortunately, the execration texts themselves have certain limitations. Their purpose was to curse the enemies of the Egyptian regime.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, Egyptian allies or docile vassals would be unlikely to be included in execration texts. While such execration texts may indicate

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<sup>1</sup> For an overview, see Posener, 1975; Ahrens, 2020, pp. 33-34.

<sup>2</sup> Posener, 1966.

<sup>3</sup> Since the Mirgissa texts are just a little earlier than the Berlin texts, which can be dated by reference to the discredited vizier Intefiqer to the beginning of the reign of Sesostri I, a date of the end of the reign of Amenemhet I seems reasonable.

<sup>4</sup> Sethe, 1926.

<sup>5</sup> The presence of the name 'Intefiqer', a vizier under Amenemhet I, dates these texts with some certainty to the beginning of the reign of Sesostri I. Ritner (1993, pp. 199-201) hypothesizes that Intefiqer, a vizier under Amenemhet I, was apparently involved in the assassination of that Pharaoh, and thus was execrated under Amenemhet's son, Sesostri I. Unfortunately, this hypothesis is untenable, since Intefiqer survived as a vizier until the eighteenth year of Sesostri I's reign. It seems more reasonable to date the Berlin execration texts to the middle of the reign of Sesostri I.

<sup>6</sup> Posener, 1987.

<sup>7</sup> Posener, 1940.

<sup>8</sup> The last mention of *it-t3wy* (Lisht) occurs in MMA 35.7.55. Hayes, 1953, 1:346. This stele is dated to the Second Intermediate Period.

<sup>9</sup> This can be seen with the cross-referencing of the mention of *skmm* in the execration texts of Sesostri III, with Khusobek's stele mentioning the conquest of the *skmm* under Sesostri III discussed below.

pockets of rebellion, they do not portray the entire state of Egyptian foreign relations. Archaeological finds can help round out the picture that appears in the execration texts.

Execration texts are compiled listings of the enemies of the king, which would then be smashed for ritual purposes. They provide information about cities and their rulers, but only of enemy cities. Thus, they provide a sort of military intelligence report. We have execration texts from both the Old and Middle Kingdom, with five sets of execration texts from the Middle Kingdom, as follows:

Bowls, in Berlin, dating to the reign of Sesostris I<sup>10</sup>.

Stone figurines, in Cairo, dating between the reign of Sesostris I and Amenemhet II<sup>11</sup>.

Figurines from Mergissa, dating to the middle of the Twelfth Dynasty<sup>12</sup>.

Clay figurines, in Brussels, dating to the reign of Sesostris III<sup>13</sup>.

Clay figurines, in New York (still unpublished).

The execration texts from Sesostris I and Sesostris III have sections dealing with both the Levant and Nubia. We are only concerned here with the section dedicated to the Levant. While the Sesostris I bowls only have a few names, the Sesostris III figurines have many more; D. B. Redford has argued that the increase in names reflects an increase in settlements between MB I and the MB II periods in the area<sup>14</sup>. I will argue that the Sesostris III figurines list Levantine cities in a specific order, and that this order can furthermore be used to help identify locations otherwise unidentified.

## General Methodological Considerations

In reviewing previous research carried out on execration texts, one is struck by a number of unstated assumptions:

1. We assume, since these names are on execration figurines and associated with execration rituals and curses, that this is a list of places inimical to Egypt. Indeed, friendly places would, presumably, not be listed. For example, it is claimed that Megiddo “did not revolt against Egypt” and thus is “not mentioned in

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<sup>10</sup> Sethe, 1926.

<sup>11</sup> Posener, 1987.

<sup>12</sup> Posener, 1966.

<sup>13</sup> Posener, 1940.

<sup>14</sup> Redford, 1992, pp. 87-93.

Execration Texts”.<sup>15</sup> Scholars have argued that “the list does not include major cities such as Gaza and Megiddo, either because they were not considered hostile to Egypt or because the inscriptions are not complete”.<sup>16</sup> So, then, since Byblos is not listed but the “tribes of Byblos” (*whyt Kbny* [E63]) are, this is assumed to indicate that while Byblos itself was friendly to Egypt, the tribesmen in the area were not.

2. Generally, we have assumed that if we can find a name in another source that is close to the name in the execration text, then that must be the place mentioned in the execration list. This has produced a situation where we have concentrated our search for names to those areas for which we have the best attestations of names, i.e., the place names from southern Canaan mentioned in the Bible.
3. It has generally been deemed sufficient that the names be close phonetically. This has produced certain identifications of dubious quality, leading to the observation, in one particular case, that “if the reconstruction is correct, the writing is defective”<sup>17</sup>.
4. The general tendency to find anything that might be phonetically close within the general area of southern Canaan has led to a situation where, if the known places are plotted on a map, there is no order to the resultant list.

One can, of course, make other assumptions, ones which might yield entirely different results:

1. Since we know that the Egyptians were involved militarily in Byblos and Ullaza in the north during the reign of either Sesostris II or Sesostris III, there is no reason to assume that the places mentioned in the execration list are confined to southern Canaan. Our focus on that area has been a result of the limitations of available sources. Each locality, at a given time, has a specific geographical horizon, which will comprise all places with which a given locality interacts. These places do appear in texts; and the greater number of texts available, the greater the probability that the places mentioned will approximate the locality’s geographic horizon. If we are looking for mentions of places that occur in other texts as well as in execration texts, we will be limited by those places mentioned in the Bible, that is, within the geographic horizon of the Bible.

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<sup>15</sup> Aharoni, Avi-Yonah, Rainey, and Safrai, 1993, p. 23.

<sup>16</sup> Mazar, 1990, p. 186.

<sup>17</sup> Hoch, 1994, p. 493.

2. North- and eastward of biblical territory, there are relatively few archives that can provide much information about places in the environs: Ebla, Alalakh, Ugarit, and Qatna. These may also have limited geographic horizons, while accidents of preservation may limit the information that they provide.
3. Archives from Kanesh, Mari, and Emar are likely to be too far afield to provide much overlap between their own geographic horizons and the geographic horizon of the execration texts.
4. Most importantly, we assume that there is a general order to the execration texts of Sesostris III, though we cannot exclude that there are exceptions to that order, or that we might not be able to correctly identify the order.

With these considerations in mind, let us examine the execration texts themselves for signs of order.

### Patterns in the List

Whenever pairs of places are mentioned, the southern site precedes the northern site (e.g. E 24-25: *Mrđḥky-rsy*, *Mrđḥky-mḥt*; E 33-34: *Ipwm-rst*, *Ipwm-mḥt*; E 39-40: *Qhr3mw-rst*, *Qhr3mw-mḥt*). Identifiable sites are also listed in a general pattern travelling from south to north. That same pattern can be seen when considering already-identified places in the lists. Ashkelon (E 2), Migdol (E 5), and Shechem (E 6) are at the beginning of the list, and in the south; Tyre (E 35), and Byblos (E 63) are toward the end of the list, and more northward. So, the execration texts of Sesostris III demonstrate a clear pattern moving from south to north.

Conversely, the earlier cities trace a definable route: starting at Ashkelon (E 2) in the south, moving inland to Shechem (E 6), then back out to the coastal area for Aphen (E 9), then up north to Hazor (E 15).

Tyre and Sidon come later in the list. In association with these two places, a number of other places are listed that are mentioned in records from Ugarit and Alalakh:

*Bq'tm* (E 20) = Baq'atu<sup>18</sup>

*I3iy* (E 21) = Aru<sup>19</sup>

*Š3mry* (E 22) = Šimeru<sup>20</sup>

*Bwd3nw* (E 27) = Bašīru<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Theis, 2012, p. 124; Belmonte Martin, 2001, pp. 51-52.

<sup>19</sup> Theis, 2012, 123-24; Belmonte Martin, 2001, pp. 37-38.

<sup>20</sup> Belmonte Martin, 2001, p. 272.

<sup>21</sup> Belmonte Martin, 2001, p. 53.

*Š3ynw* (E 30) = Šallun<sup>22</sup>

*Ipwm-rst* (E 33) = Appu<sup>23</sup>

*Ipwm-mḥt* (E 34) = Appu<sup>24</sup>

The exact location of these places is not known. Their general region, however, is, because they will be nearer to Ugarit and Alalakh.

One of the later cities (E 43) is *Yb3y* which would equate with Ebla,<sup>25</sup> a city where Egyptian artifacts have been excavated.<sup>26</sup> Several of the cities mentioned near Ebla in the list are also mentioned in the Ebla archives:

*Yb3y* (E 43) = Ebla<sup>27</sup>

*Ryti* (E 44) = Ridu<sup>28</sup>

*Ibw3m* (E 47) = Abulium<sup>29</sup>

*Isnnws* (E 48) = Išananu<sup>30</sup>

*'ky* (E 49) = Uga'u<sup>31</sup>

For most of these sites, except Ebla itself, their exact location is unknown. They should presumably all have been major cities (to warrant their inclusion), and thus large sites. One assumes that the size of the site should have an influence on whether it is mentioned or not. We do have information on the sizes of the following identified sites on the list:

Ashkelon 61 hectares<sup>32</sup>

Shechem 2.5 hectares<sup>33</sup>

Aphek 12 hectares<sup>34</sup>

Hazor 88 hectares<sup>35</sup>

Tyre 16 hectares<sup>36</sup>

Ebla 60 hectares<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Belmonte Martin, 2001, p. 260.

<sup>23</sup> Belmonte Martin, 2001, p. 27.

<sup>24</sup> Belmonte Martine, 2001, p. 27.

<sup>25</sup> Gee, 2004, p. 30.

<sup>26</sup> Gee, 2004, p. 28, n. 65.

<sup>27</sup> Archi, Piacentini, and Pomponio, 1993, pp. 299-302; Bonechi, 1993, pp. 191-193.

<sup>28</sup> Archi, Piacentini, and Pomponio, 1993, p. 416; Bonechi, 1993, p. 276.

<sup>29</sup> Archi, Piacentini, and Pomponio, 1993, p. 92; Bonechi, 1993, p. 14.

<sup>30</sup> Archi, Piacentini, and Pomponio, 1993, p. 312; Bonechi, 1993, p. 212.

<sup>31</sup> Archi, Piacentini, and Pomponio, 1993, p. 463; Bonechi, 1993, p. 304.

<sup>32</sup> Schloen, 1997, p. 220.

<sup>33</sup> Seger, 1997, p. 19.

<sup>34</sup> Kachavi, 1997, p. 147.

<sup>35</sup> Ben-Tor, 1997, p. 1.

<sup>36</sup> Ward, 1997, p. 247.

<sup>37</sup> Matthiae, 1997, p. 180.

The information on site size is, unfortunately, a reflection of the size of the site at its maximum extent, whenever that may have been, and not necessarily during the Middle Bronze II period. With the exception of Shechem (which has been claimed as a case of mistaken identification),<sup>38</sup> most of these sites are larger, of at least 15 hectares and having populations of at least 3500 people,<sup>39</sup> –clearly cities, therefore,<sup>40</sup> Since smaller locations would not have made the list. As such, another assumption can be made, namely that:

5. Proposed locations for execration texts should be major settlements from the appropriate time period (in this case, the Middle Bronze Age).

One other place mentioned in the execration texts can be tentatively identified:

*Ḫssm* (F6) = Ḫaššum

This is one of the last places on the list, and perhaps the furthest north. Its location is well-attested in cuneiform documents, but the city's exact location is unknown<sup>41</sup>. It has been closely associated with the city of Uršum, which does not appear to be on the list. One cuneiform text clearly states that Ḫaššum is in the mountains, while Uršum is not<sup>42</sup>. This information excludes a number of proposed locations,<sup>43</sup> and would indicate that Ḫaššum is located north of Uršum. This in turn, however, raises the further issue of why Uršum itself is not listed. Ḫalab (Aleppo) is also not listed; but a sphinx of Amenemhet III was found in the territory of Aleppo,<sup>44</sup> which may mean that Ḫalab was on friendly terms with Egypt at the time and, thus, not included in a list of enemies. Uršum itself may similarly have also been on friendly terms with Egypt.

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<sup>38</sup> Ben-Tor, 2006, pp. 70-72.

<sup>39</sup> Dever, 2012, p. 72, p. 105.

<sup>40</sup> Dever, 2012, pp. 72-73.

<sup>41</sup> Nashef, 1991, p. 56; del Monte and Tischler, 1978, pp. 61-62.

<sup>42</sup> Beckman, 1995.

<sup>43</sup> Ünal, 2015.

<sup>44</sup> Fay, 1996, p. 86, plate 88; Ahrens, 2020, p. 177.

## **Conclusions**

Execration texts of the Middle Kingdom list the names and rulers of various places seen as inimical to Egypt. Of the execration texts recovered from the Egyptian Middle Kingdom, the execration texts that have been dated to Sesostri III contain the longest list of places in the Levant. It has been argued in the past that the execration texts of Sesostri I have fewer places mentioned than those of Sesostri III, because the Middle Bronze Age I settlements were fewer than those from the Middle Bronze Age II period at the time of Sesostri III. That may be true, but it might also indicate an increased Egyptian interest in the Levant. The places mentioned in Sesostri III's execration texts seemed to be organized from south to north, running along established itinerary routes. The list extends across all of Canaan and, probably, into modern Turkey. The execration texts thus provide a better understanding of the Egyptian view of the Levant in the period, and exemplify a greater range of interest in the area during the time of Sesostri III which closely corresponds to the archaeological attestations of Sesostri III and Amenemhet III in the region.

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