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TAHARQA, VANQUISHER OF THE ASSYRIANS

Descriptions of the encounters between the Neo-Assyrian empire and the Sudan-based Kushite state are usually focused on the former state formation having the upper hand in relation to the latter.¹ With Egyptian and Kushite sources largely silent on the clashes between Assyria and Kush,² Assyrian royal inscriptions narrate of the defeat of Kush in the battle at Eltekeh in 701 BCE,³ and of the Assyrian (re) conquests of Egypt in 671, 667, and 664 BCE.⁴

Particularly Taharqa, king of Kush between 690 and 664 BCE, is associated with defeat and humiliation in texts regarding Assyrian-Kushite interactions.⁵ In the battle at Eltekeh in 701 BCE, when Taharqa (then as crown prince) appears to have taken part (Kahn 2014), it is concluded that “I (Sennacherib) fought with them (the Levantine-African coalition) and defeated them” and that “I captured alive the Egyptian charioteers (and) princes, together with the charioteers of the king of the land Meluhha (Kush).”⁶ Esarhaddon claims that “I (Esarhaddon) inflicted serious defeats on him (Taharqa) daily with-

out ceasing” and that “(with regard to) he himself, by means of arrows, I inflicted him five times with wounds from which there is no recovery”.⁷ Finally, Ashurbanipal, who initiated the last campaigns, narrates that “(as for) Taharqa, in the place where he had fled, the awesome terror of the weapon of (the god) Aššur, my (Ashurbanipal’s) lord, overwhelmed him and he passed away”.⁸

However, there is one (Egyptian-Kushite) source that gives a reversed picture of the balance of power.⁹ This source consists of (parts of) a small statue of Taharqa (Cairo CG 770 / JE 2096) from the temple of the goddess Mut in Karnak.¹⁰ Only the rectangular base, feet (with the left foot ahead), and (parts of) the back pillar of the statue have been preserved. The back pillar preserves the word “eternity” (*ḏt*), and the top of the base gives the names and some epithets of Taharqa and Mut, namely, “Taharqa, good god, lord of the two lands, *nb ir ḥt*, beloved of Mut, the great, mistress of Isheru”. On the front side of the base, there is a *sm3-bwy*-symbol (union of the two lands) in the centre, and two rows of 14 Nubian (left) and 14 Asiatic (right) pinioned figures that run around the sides of the base. The lower portions of the bodies of the captives consist of “name-rings” that contain the names of African or Asiatic places and peoples (Fig. 1).¹¹

The row of 14 Asiatic captives with their toponyms/ethnonyms is of special interest for the purpose of this study. The toponyms/ethnonyms include Babylon (*Sngr*), Mitanni (*Nhrn*), Hatti (*Ḫt*), Arzawa (*Irṭ*), Tunip (*Tnp*), Kadesh (*Kdšw*), and the Shasu-

1 The Assyrian conquest of Kush-dominated Egypt (see e.g. Onasch 1994) is a focal point in this context.

2 W. Helck (2005: 151-152) notes that “It is striking that there are no monuments from the time of Assyrian rule in Egypt, nor did those who fought against this control, such as Tanutamem and Montuemhat, the ruler of Thebes, mention their Assyrian overlords in texts. Only in later texts did the Assyrians emerge as sworn enemies. This suggests that Assyrian rule in Egypt was seen as an abnormal period and was therefore dealt with in a customary Egyptian fashion, by concealment.” For the representations of Asiatics in Kushite royal inscriptions, containing only veiled references to the Assyrians, see Karlsson 2021.

3 See RINAP 3, texts 4, 15-18, 21-23, 32, 46, 140, 142, and 165.

4 For the events of 671 BCE, see RINAP 4, texts 8, 15, 34, 38-39, 60, 98, and 103. For the events of 667 and 664 BCE, see RINAP 5/1, texts 2-4, 6, 8-9, 11, and 15.

5 Also his successor, Tanutamem, is consistently subjected to Assyrian might in Assyrian royal inscriptions (see RINAP 5/1, texts 3-4, 6, 9, and 11). With the Assyrian army approaching, he “abandoned the city Memphis and, in order to to save his (own) life, he fled inside the city Thebes”, and “saw the assault of my mighty battle array and abandoned the city Thebes; he fled to the city Kipkipi” (RINAP 5/1, text 11, ii 30-37). For the city Kipkipi as referring to Napata, the Kushite capital, see Karlsson 2019.

6 See e.g. RINAP 3, text 4, 44-45. Translation by A.K. Grayson and J. Novotny.

7 See e.g. RINAP 4, text 98, rev. 40-41. Translation by E. Leichty.

8 See e.g. RINAP 5/1, text 11, ii 20-21. Translation by J. Novotny and J. Jeffers.

9 The Babylonian chronicles, which contain the report, “The seventh year: On the fifth day of the month Adar the army of Assyria was defeated in Egypt” (see ABC, text 1, iv 16), referring to the events of 674 BCE when the Assyrian king Esarhaddon failed to conquer Kush-dominated Egypt, should also be mentioned.

10 For a general study of the Mut temple in Karnak, see Fazzini and Bryan 2021.

11 For publications and/or descriptions of this statue base, see Mariette 1875: pl. 45a; Borchardt 1930: 81-82; Simons 1937: 103; Leclant 1965: 116, 349; PM II, p. 269; Russmann 1974: 48; and Dallabon 2005: 189.

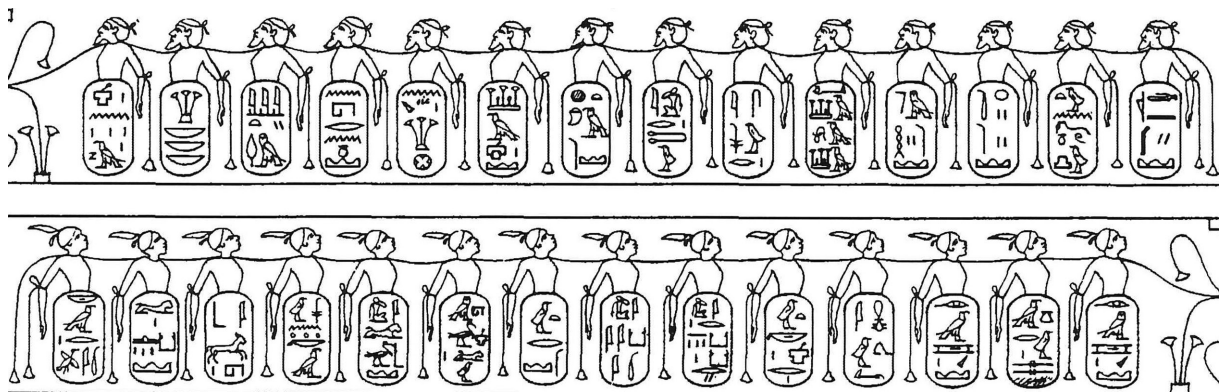


Fig. 1: Asiatics and Nubians on Cairo CG 770 / JE 2096 (from Mariette 1875: pl. 45a)

nomads (*ššw*).¹² Above all, the list of place names includes Assyria (*Isur*).¹³ In other words, Taharqa claims to have pacified Assyria. The question is, how should this extraordinary claim be understood?

Since the statue base in question was excavated as early as in 1858, its toponym list has long been discussed in Egyptology. In the early days of the discipline, E. De Rougé (1872: 13) concluded that “[i]l n’est pas dans l’habitude des Égyptiens de consigner sur leurs monuments des victoires imaginaires; ils se contentent de taire leurs défaites. On a donc ici la preuve certaine des victoires de Taharka contre les Assyriens”. In other words, the claim by Taharqa is taken as proof of a Kushite victory over Assyria. Since then, several scholars (see e.g. Simons 1937: 103; Dallibor 2005: 189; Pope 2014: 121-122) have pointed out that Taharqa’s toponym list is, more or less, a copy of the toponym list inscribed by the New Kingdom ruler Horemheb at the tenth pylon in Karnak.¹⁴ Especially J. Pope (2014: 121-122) has relativized the claim of Taharqa, arguing that “a

toponym list was not tantamount to a record of victorious campaigns” and that this toponym list “appears to have been shaped more by a desire for symmetry and comprehensiveness than by ambitions of event reportage”. Before him, G. Goossens (1947) interpreted the toponym list “avant tout comme une garantie divine de la victoire à remporter sur les ennemies et non comme une affirmation d’une victoire réelle”. In other words, the historicity of the claim of Taharqa is dismissed and seen in the light of royal ideology.

Pope and Goossens are certainly right in viewing Taharqa’s claim critically and pointing to the theme of world dominion in royal inscriptions, but I can not help but wondering if the relativism in this case has gone a bit too far. After all, there must have been a deliberate, measured decision as to which toponym list to copy. Just because the grounds behind the copying can not be understood, it does not mean that the grounds are inexplicable. Even if Taharqa’s claim of having subjugated the 28 places and peoples should not be interpreted literally, there has to be a middle ground between believing in Taharqa’s claim outright and dismissing it as empty words telling of a mere desire to convey the impression of world dominion. Both history and ideology can be mapped from Kushite royal inscriptions.¹⁵

Attempting to strike that middle ground, it is fully possible that Taharqa was inspired by the achievement of his troops in stopping the Assyrian army from conquering Egypt in 674 BCE, and then decided to present himself as a vanquisher of the Assyrians (besides associating himself with Horemheb and the past as a way of gaining legitimacy). In other words,

12 As identified by J. Simons (1937: 135-136, 187) and J. Pope (2014: 121), among others. The toponym list in question is not all Asiatic, however. The north-western oasis Siwa (*Šwt-išm*) seems to be included in the list of supposedly Asiatic place names, as toponym 3. Simons (1937: 135-136, 187) fails to identify toponyms 2-3 and 5 on the list (he merely labels these as “Nine Bows”) and classifies toponyms 10-12 as African.

13 The term Assyria is written *i-s-sw-w-r* and appears on ninth place in the list of Asiatic places and peoples on three sides of the base. Notably, the term Babylon holds the first place and is the closest to the *sm3-tšwy*-symbol.

14 For example, J. Simons (1937: 103) argues that Taharqa’s list is “nothing more than a copy of nn. 1-14 of the list of Horemheb on the east side of his western colossus before pylon X at Karnak”. It should be noted, though, that parts of Horemheb’s list are lost and that this ruler’s list contains 15 (not 14) supposedly Asiatic toponyms/ethnonyms, with the last one (no. 15) mentioning the Syrian city Qatna (*Ḳdn*). K. Dallibor (2005: 189) erroneously claims that Assyria is a newcomer in Taharqa’s list, in comparison with Horemheb’s list.

15 For this conclusion, see e.g. Karlsson 2021. Turning to the neighbouring discipline Assyriology, note the approach of the “Italian school”, exemplified e.g. in Liverani 1973 and Fales 1981, which stresses the interconnection of history and ideology in the context of evaluating Assyrian royal inscriptions.



there may be a grain of truth in Taharqa's assertion that he pushed back the Assyrians. This means that the application of Horemheb's list on Taharqa's statue was not just a random and mindless copy-paste activity but signified something ideologically significant – the successful defence against the Assyrians. Thus, there was a reason other than linking to antiquity for Taharqa to dust off an old toponym list. It seems too much of a coincidence that Taharqa only happened to copy-paste the toponym list of Horemheb (which gives a rare mention of Assyria)¹⁶ among all others, while he himself too was involved in clashes with Assyria, successful in 674 BCE.¹⁷

In sum, this study has focused on a rare example of a text that presents Kush and Taharqa as having the upper hand in relation to the Neo-Assyrian empire and its rulers. The text, preserved on a statue base of Taharqa, brings up and portrays Assyria as subjugated by Taharqa and the Kushite state. Previous interpretations tend to either believe in the historicity of this claim outright or dismiss the text as a copy from New Kingdom Egypt and as a component in signifying totality and world domination. This study has proposed that there has to be a middle ground, with the copy-paste of the text that mentions Assyria being meaningful and carrying a statement on the Kushite repulsion of the Assyrian forces in 674 BCE.¹⁸ Taharqa's claim of triumph was propagandistic but rooted in reality.¹⁹ Although the repute of Taharqa in Graeco-Roman times as a great conqueror clearly is exaggerated (Dallibor 2005: 166–

167),²⁰ he once was in a position to present himself as vanquisher of the Assyrians.

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- 16 As noted by Simons (1937: 199), Ashur is also part of Asiatic toponym lists of Thutmose III (list IV), Amenhotep III (list IX), Sethos I (list XV), and Ramesses II (lists XX, XXII).
- 17 The distance between the entrance of the Mut temple and the tenth pylon is around 300 meters, i.e. quite a distance. Horemheb's Asiatic toponym list (Simons 1937: 50–52, 135–136 (list XIIc)) is on the east side of the king's western colossus before the pylon. The Asiatic toponym list on the pylon walls (Simons 1937: 50–52, 134 (list XI)) is just as far away. Simons (1937: 109–187) identifies 36 Asiatic toponym lists in his study, half of them inscribed at Karnak (see map in Simons 1937: Appendix II). The other kings behind these lists are Thutmose III–IV, Amenhotep II–III, Horemheb, Sethos I, Ramesses II–III, and Shoshenq I. All of these rulers are associated with close (often violent) interaction with western Asia, reducing the possibility that the toponym lists in question are mere bombast and empty rhetoric.
- 18 As a consequence of this conclusion, Taharqa's statue base can be dated to the period 674–671 BCE. K. Dallibor (2005: 167), discussing from the analysis of Goossens (1947), arrives at the same conclusion.
- 19 Compare the representation by Ramesses II of the battle at Kadesh, which clearly is distorted and propagandistic. For this representation and evaluation, see e.g. Lichtheim 1976: 57–72.
- 20 For this repute, see e.g. the work *Geographica* by the Roman writer Strabo (I, 3: 21; XV, 1:6).

- PM II = Porter, B. and Moss, R.L.B. *Topographical Bibliography of Ancient Egyptian Hieroglyphic Texts, Reliefs, and Paintings II. Theban Temples*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1972.
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ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

In diesem Artikel wird ein seltenes Beispiel eines Textes vorgestellt, in dem Kusch und Taharqa gegenüber dem neuassyrischen Reich und seinen Herrschern die Oberhand behalten. Der Text, der auf einem Statuensockel von Taharqa eingraviert ist, stellt Assyrien als von Taharqa und dem kuschitischen Staat unterworfen dar. Bisherige Interpretationen neigen dazu, entweder ganz an die Historizität dieser Behauptung zu glauben oder den Text als Kopie aus dem *ägyptischen* Neuen Reich und als Bestandteil der Darstellung von Weltherrschaft abzutun. Dieser Artikel schlägt vor, dass es einen Mittelweg geben muss, bei dem die Kopie eines Textes, der Assyrien erwähnt, sinnvoll ist und eine Aussage über die kuschitische Zurückdrängung der assyrischen Truppen im Jahr 674 v. Chr. enthält.