THE CAMPAIGN OF RAMESSES III AGAINST PHILISTIA

Dan’el Kahn
University of Haifa

ABSTRACT

In this article I propose that Ramesses III campaigned in his eighth regnal year against the Philistines on the Northern borders of Canaan and prevented them from invading Egyptian controlled territory. Ramesses was victorious in a pitched battle, routed the Philistines to their home and destroyed their kingdom. This kingdom, named "the Land of Palestine", was possibly located in the Amuq plain in Southern Turkey, in the territory of the former Kingdom of Alalakh.

THE SOURCES

The main historical sources for the campaigns of Ramesses III against the land of Palestine are:

1. The mortuary temple of Ramesses III reliefs
2. The historical inscriptions at Medinet Habu
3. The historical paragraphs in Papyrus Harris I

The Medinet Habu Reliefs

These reliefs are the only visual evidence from the reign of Ramesses III for the arrival of the Philistines and their allies to the Levant and their confrontation with the Egyptian forces. The reliability of these reliefs is almost without dispute. The depictions of the naval battle of Ramesses III have no parallel in Ancient Egyptian depictions of battle.

The Medinet Habu Historical Texts

As for the Medinet Habu historical texts of the battles of Ramesses III against the Sea Peoples – several researchers, among them Barbara Cifola, have extensively analyzed the terminology used in these texts. Even though abundant terms used in the texts are hapax legomena and many of the rest of the phrases use standard and traditional military phraseology, while describing a single event (or more precisely an event dated to regnal year 5, and a naval battle and land battle dated to regnal year 8), Cifola arrived at the conclusion that it is not possible to accept the credibility of the texts. According to her, there could not have been one conclusive battle and the description hides a series of less dramatic recurring skirmishes. Although the present writer feels she did not really prove her claims, scholars, who opt for the wave theory, accept her assertions without serious criticism. However, many do accept the credibility of the Historical narrative of Ramesses III.

Papyrus Harris I

The historical paragraphs in Papyrus Harris I describe the wars of Ramesses III against the Sea Peoples, the wars against the Meshwesh and the Libyans, the campaign to 'Ce’ir against the Shasu Bedouin, the mining expedition to Ithaca (Timna?) to quarry copper, the mining expedition to Serabit el Khadem in Sinai and the journey to the fabulous land of Punt. These events can be corroborated by external sources.

THE ARRIVAL OF THE SEA PEOPLES TO THE LEVANT

According to the text of Ramesses III:

"As for the foreign countries, they made a conspiracy in their isles. Removed and scattered in battle, were the lands at one time. No land could stand up against (’before’) their arms, beginning from Hatti; - Qode,
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Carchemish, Arzawa and Alasia, cut of [all] at [once] in one [place].19

In recent years it has become clear that these words should be taken with caution. Hatussa, the capital of the Hittites did apparently not fall through actions of the Sea-Peoples.20 The separate kingdom of Arzawa did not exist anymore in the days of Ramesses III and late occurrences of Arzawa are mentioned either in a general geographical sense, referring to the Arzawa lands, or in an ethnic cultural manner.21 The royal line in Carchemish seems to have reigned uninterruptedly from the days of Hittite viceregal rule during the Hittite Empire until its destruction in the days of Sargon II.22 However, the destruction of towns in Cyprus,23 Cilicia and Antiochia,24 Ugarit, and Šumur in Amrurus25 can be clearly attributed to the Sea-Peoples. The reason for their immigration is not stated in the text of Ramesses III.26 According to the text, the Sea-Peoples set camp in Amrurus and started to move southward towards Egypt.27

THE LOCATION OF THE LAND BATTLE

Scholars disagree on the location of the land battle between the Egyptians and the Sea-Peoples. Stadelmann,28 Redford,29 Bietak,30 Sanders,31 Stager,32 to name just some, suggested that the land battle occurred in geographical proximity to the sea battle.33 Since, according to the text, the sea battle was held at the mouth of the Nile, it was assumed that the land battle was held either at the entrance to Egypt or in the Sinai. Hoffmeier even suggested that the land battle was held at the gate of Tell el-Borg, which shows signs of destruction, while the sea battle was held nearby in the palaeo-lagoon (several lectures and a personal communication).

One should, however, disconnect the naval and the land battle against the Sea-Peoples for the following reasons:

1. There is no mention in the texts of Ramesses III or any artistic indication in the reliefs at Medinet Habu for the exact location of the land battle.
2. The two battle reliefs, naval and land battle, were intentionally physically separated by a lion hunt relief. Whether this relief represents a real event (as in the case of Thutmosis III’s elephant hunt at Nii)34 or as a symbolic war against the chaotic wild animals is not relevant.35
3. During all the recorded first millennium military campaigns to conquer Egypt from the North-East, where naval and land troops were intended to move in joint forces against Egypt, they hardly succeeded in coordinating their movements.36 It is even more difficult to imagine a perfect coordination between the naval and land forces, since the land forces consisted of civilians, including women and children, with heavy wagons drawn by slow moving oxen which had to cross the Sinai desert marching on the Ways of Horus and passing by or conquering the Egyptian strongholds controlling the water sources.

Ramesses III organized his border at Djahi (ḫn.i ḫtḥ.1 ḫr ḫdy),27 The Egyptian sphere of control in the days of Ramesses III encompassed Byblos,28 which bordered Amrurus. Nothing is known of a loss of this territory during the early years of Ramesses III.29 On the contrary, in Pap. Harris I it is clearly stated that he extended his boundaries (swnḫ ḫbš) in an exclamation not found after the reign of Ramesses III, when Egypt did not extend its boundaries.30

Ramesses III prepared the chiefs (wṛ. w), garrison commanders and Maryannu warriors for the battle (KRI V 40, 7). These foreign chiefs were Egyptian vassals, who must have controlled areas to the north of the direct Egyptian foothold in southern Canaan.31

Singer was clearly right in locating the land battle of Ramesses III against the Philistines on the Northern Border of the Egyptian Empire as the text indicates.32

Furthermore, based on Papyrus Harris I it is an almost uncontested assumption that the reliefs depict the arrival of the Philistines in Southern Canaan, and their settlement there. However, in the frequently cited papyrus, it is clearly stated that the prisoners of war were settled in Egypt proper.

"I extended all the boundaries of Egypt; I overthrew those who invaded them from their lands. I slew the Danuna in their isles.33 The Sekel and the Peleset were made ashes. The Sherden and the Weshesh of the sea, they were made as those that exist not, taken captive at one time, brought as captives to Egypt, like the sand of the shore. I settled them in strongholds, bound in my name. Numerous were their classes like hundreds-thousands. I taxed them all, in clothing and grain from the storehouses and granaries each year."34

While there is archaeological evidence that some Philistine mercenaries were stationed in key point fortresses in Canaan such as Beth Shean, Deir el Balah, etc.,35 the educated guess, first raised by Albright36 and later endorsed by Alt37 and subsequently by the majority of scholars, was that the Philistines were settled in great numbers in Egyptian fortresses in Canaan to halt the advance of their kin, although there is nothing to support this supposition.

Furthermore, while it is true that no Philistine archaeological evidence has been found in Egypt proper,38 several texts support the practice of settling POW’s as mercenaries on the far borders
of the empire. This occurred in the post-Amarna period with the deporting of Kushites and the settling in their stead of ‘Apiru from Northern Canaan in Kush; the settling of Libyans in the fortresses of Sinai and Shasu Bedouin on the Libyan borders in the days of Ramesses II and III. The presence of Sherden mercenaries in fortresses in Middle Egypt is attested in several non-literary sources, some of them centuries after their first appearance in the Egyptian service. It seems more than plausible that the Philistine mercenaries were indeed settled in fortresses in Egypt proper as is written in P. Harris I.

While it is beyond the scope of this article to attempt to review all the arguments involved, pro and con, a summary of the literature dealing with the numerous conflicting views (with respected scholars in each camp) regarding the proposed date of the settlement of the Philistines in Southern Canaan is instructive. From the many suggestions, mostly basing themselves on the same archeological evidence (with additional data surfacing over the years, but not changing the initial theories!), it becomes clear that archeological tools did not solve the question of the exact date of the settling of the Philistines in Canaan.

There is, then, no compelling archeological or textual evidence of settling the Philistines en-masse in Canaan as the result of Ramesses III’s 8th year campaign. Thus, the chronological anchor date for the settlement of the Philistines in the Southern Levant in Ramesses III’s 6th regnal year cannot be unquestioningly accepted.

On the other hand, note especially: 1. The Egyptian hieratic ostraca from ‘Tell Seri’ mentioning regnal year 22, likely in the reign of Ramses III, as well as additional hieratic ostraca from Southern Canaan, which strengthen the notion that Egypt did not lose control over Philistia before the last decade of Ramesses III. 2. The last years of Ramesses III are known to have been turbulent, culminating in the famous necropolis strikes, harem conspiracy and eventual murder of Ramesses III, and thus are a more likely time frame for the Philistine settlement in Philistia.

In addition, while the conquests of the Sea Peoples in the Eastern Mediterranean and their advance towards Egypt are cited extensively, the rest of the great inscription of the Sea-Peoples battle of year eight at Medinet Habu I is not treated in the literature. At this point of the text there appears no further scholarly interest. Scholars, who interpreted the reliefs of Ramesses III as evidence for the invasion of the Philistines by land, assumed that after his victory over them, Ramesses settled them in Southern Canaan. Finkelstein, on the other hand, who thinks that the Philistines arrived half a century later to the Southern Levant, was interested in the Philistine archaeological remains in Canaan. He did not consider the immediate consequences of the Philistine defeat.

In the battle reliefs the defeat of the Sea-Peoples is depicted, but in the land battle, in contrast to the sea-battle and any other Egyptian war relief (?), the Philistines maintained a structured format in some of their ranks, and their retreat was clearly an organized one.

THE AFTERMATH OF THE LAND BATTLE

What happened at the aftermath of the land battle on the border of the Egyptian Empire, and where did the defeated Sea-Peoples retreat to?

During the preparations for battle, while the king issued weapons to the army the officials addressed the king. And said among other exaltations that: “The heart of the land of the Libyans (Tjemehu) is removed, and the Philistines are in suspense, hidden in their towns (dmt.w).”

In the great inscription of the Sea-Peoples battle of year 8 at Medinet Habu the text describes the aftermath of the battles against the Sea-Peoples:

“(24) I made the lands turn back from (even) mentioning Nile-Land; when they pronounce my name in their lands, then (25) they are burned up. Since I have sat on the throne of Horakhty and Great-of-Magic has been firm on my head like Re, I have not allowed the foreign countries to (even) look at Egypt’s frontier, to boast of them to the Nine Bows. I have taken away their land, their frontier(s) being added to my (own). (26) Their chiefs and their clans are mine in praise... (28) I have overthrown the Asiatics (‘sm.w) [x, y] in their lands; they fall ill (?), even as they recall my name daily.... (29) I have shielded Egypt, I have sheltered it with my valiant arm, since I began to rule [as] king of S. and N. Egypt, on the seat of Atum; [... I came back [...] from the loot of my hands, from what the dread has brought off from the Nine Bows. No land could stand firm at hearing my name; (30) they abandoned their settlements, deserting their place(s), scattered ... (?) looking] (straight) ahead of them... (34) The foreign lands [...] [... (? my sword that brought) ruin to their cities, devastated at one time, their trees and their peoples having become ashes. (35) They take counsel with themselves, (saying): “Where can we go?” [Their] chiefs come [(? in humility], [with their tribute and their children] on their backs to Nile-Land”.

THE EXISTENCE OF A CONCRETE LAND OF THE PHILISTINES - PELESET

In the first open court of Medinet Habu on the base of one of the colossal Osiride statues the following is inscribed: “The foreign lands of Peleset which His Majesty slew.” This inscription bears evidence to the existence of a territory, or more precisely territories (foreign countries and plural determinative)
of Peleset, and a claim by Ramesses III that he afflicted damage on them.

An additional text, which describes the defeat of the Sea Peoples, is the South Rhetorical Stela from Medinet Habu, erected in front of the Southern wing of the first Pylon. It is dated to Ramesses III’s 12th regnal year. On the stela (II. 7-8) he claims:

"I laid low (dib) the Tjekkeru, the land of the Philistines (T3 Plst), the Danuna, the Weshesh, and the Shakkusha...".53

While the allies are mentioned only by name, followed by the determinative of a sitting man A1, plural strokes and the throw stick determinative (sign for foreigners), Peleset is the only ally preceded with the noun B’s country/ flat land. The mentioning of a country called Peleset in the 12th regnal year of Ramesses III is surprisingly early, especially if it was to designate the later known Philistia in Southern Canaan. Furthermore, Ramesses III routed the Philistines and their allies after the land battle at the northern borders of the Egyptian Empire to their country, which must have been located to the North of the Egyptian territory.

THE LOCATION OF THE LAND OF PELESET AND ITS EXTENT

1. The Neo-Hittite sources

Recently, excavations have been resumed at the Plain of Antioch near the northern bend of the Orontes River. This Kingdom was called Mukish or Alalakh in the Late Bronze Age. In the transition to the Iron Age there was a change in its name so that in Neo-Assyrian times its name was Unqi/Pattina.54 Its capital, Kinalua, Biblical Calneh (Amos 6:2; Isaiah 10:9), is identified with Tell Ta‘yinat.

Inscriptions in the Luwian language55 mention Halparunda, King of Wadastini, who may be Qalparunda, King of Pattina mentioned in the Neo-Assyrian inscriptions in the ninth century B.C. In the Temple of Adad, the storm-god of Aleppo, another Luwian-Hieroglyphic inscription was found, mentioning Taita, King of Padastin. In the vicinity of ancient Hamath two additional inscriptions were found mentioning Taita,56 whose title was formerly read: “Hero, King of Padastini” and “King of Wallistin”. It is now accepted that the name of his kingdom should be read “Palastin” or in other words: a Northern Kingdom named “Philistia”.57 The kingdom incorporated in his days the territories of the short-aged confederacy of Mukiš–Nuhittsya during the Amarna age,58 and the combined area of the separate future kingdoms of Unqi, Arpad and Hamath.

2. The Archaeological Finds

Archaeologically, The Aegaeum loom weights and abundant locally produced Mycenaean IIIC: lb pottery (Philistine monochrome), which are characteristic of the first stage of Philistine settlement in the Southern Levant, enjoyed widespread distribution in Tell Ta‘yinat and the North Orontes Valley.59 These finds indicate an influx of new populations from the Aegaeum and point to a common origin with the Philistines in the Southern Levant.

3. The Egyptian Sources

A correlation can be found between the Kingdom of Palistin, in the area of Antioch mentioned in the Neo-Hittite sources and toponyms from a topographical list of Ramesses III.

On the southern wing of the first pylon of Medinet Habu, a standard triumphal scene of the king smiting his enemies is depicted. Under it is a topographical list of places subdued by the king.60 According to the superscriptions in the scene: “All plains and all hill countries are in the grasp of Amen-Re, King of the Gods.”61

In the superscription below the king and captives:

“All plains and all hill-countries, the (outer) Ocean, the Great Circuit, the Great Green (Sea), the Southern foreign countries of the land of Nubia, and as far as the (distant) marshlands, to the limits of the enveloping (‘united’) darkness, and to the bounds of the pillars of heaven, are under the feet of this good god, the Lord of Both Lands, Usimara-Meriamun, son of Re, Ramesses III. The chiefs of the foreign countries being slain at his name, and the rebellions against him belong to his sword.”62

It seems that it is no accident that the topographical list was situated under the feet of the Pharaoh. This was a visual expression of the superscription.

The topographical list records 125 place names. 69 of these place names appear on the northern end of the scene. These names are unique and do not appear in any other Egyptian topographical list. Atsour tried to locate many of these places in Mesopotamia.63 The places which Atsour locates in different parts of Mesopotamia are insignificant. Well known locations are not listed together. They encompass diverse ends in the vast territory between the Euphrates and the Zagros. Their etymology or identification64 is far from certain,65 and is intermingled with place names in Northern Syria.66 Some of the names appear in the topographical lists of Thutmose III from Northern Syria.67
At least 19 of the place names which occur in the list of Ramesses III have possible counterparts in Akkadian texts from northern Syria. These places are mostly located in the Kingdom of Alalakh and are mentioned in the archives of Alalakh/Mukish from level IV, dating to the fifteenth century B.C.68 There is no mention of known cities of Ammurru or main cities in the Kingdom of Ugarit.69 Several more place names may be identified in central North Syria70 based on a phonetic resemblance augmented by Carchemish,71 Pitru (Biblical Pteru) and Emar on the Euphrates. In the beginning of the text of Ramesses III it is explicitly said that the Sea Peoples reached the Kingdom of Carchemish. It thus may be that Ramesses’ description was not that far from the truth.

IN CONCLUSION

Most scholars have:

1. Dated the battle between Ramesses III against the Sea Peoples to Ramesses III’s eighth year.
2. Assumed that the land and sea battle occurred in geographical proximity to the Nile Delta.
3. Assumed that in the aftermath of the battle, the Philistines settled in Southern Canaan, either as a consequence of their victory or through Egyptian initiative as described in P. Harris I.

However, in my opinion, the Historical picture is different.

A. The Battle of Ramesses III against the Sea Peoples

1. According to the inscriptions of Ramesses III and archaeological finds, large groups of people immigrated from the Aegean during the transition from the 13th – 12th centuries B.C. and settled in Cilicia, in Antioch and even reached Carchemish on the Euphrates. They advanced southwards and conquered Ugarit, settled at its port – Ras ibn-Hani, reached Ammurru and devastated it.
2. A naval battle occurred between the Egyptian navy and the Sea Peoples at the mouths of the Nile.
3. A land battle was conducted on the border of the Egyptian Empire in Northern Canaan.
4. The defeated Sea Peoples fled to their territory.
5. Ramesses III routed thePhilistines to their land, destroyed their towns, cut down their orchards and killed their peoples. The remnant was brought to Egypt as prisoners of war.
6. The prisoners were settled in camps within Egypt proper.
7. There is no evidence of Ramesses III settling Philistines in Southern Canaan after their defeat in battle.

B. The location of the land of the Philistines

The recent researches of Hawkins72 Harrison73 and others prove that:

1. In the valley of Antioch a new kingdom emerged. Its material culture showed Aegean traits, which resemble the material culture found at sites in Southern Canaan of the 12th century B.C.
2. It was called by its immigrating inhabitants “Palistin”.
3. This new kingdom covered the territories of the former Kingdom of Alalakh, which abruptly came to an end.
4. In Neo-Assyrian sources (9 – 8 centuries B.C.) it was called Unqi (Valley) or Pattina.
5. The capital city was located at Tell Tayinat, identified as Kunulua/Kulani, Biblical Calneh.
6. The borders of the Kingdom of Palistin reached Hamath during the reign of King Taita in the 11th – 10th Century B.C. at the latest.

C. Neo-Hittite Palistin and Egyptian Land of Peleset

1. Then in the inscriptions of Ramesses III can be equated with the Neo-Hittite Palistin.
2. According to the topographical list of Ramesses III, the Egyptian king acted extensively in the territories of the former Kingdom of Alalakh and in the vicinity of the Euphrates.
3. There is a correlation between the territorial expansion of the Philistines in the beginning of the 12th Century B.C. according to the text of Ramesses III, archaeological finds, and the Neo-Hittite texts (above B 6).
4. The Egyptian designation of Antioch as Peleset is the earliest evidence of this kingdom in the Northern Levant.
Notes


7 *KRI V*, 18-30.


9 *KRI V* 39,14-40,2; V, 34; RITA 34.


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16 See, however, Alexander V. Safronov “One Unusual Example of the Sentence with Impersonal Subject in Ramses’ III 5th Year Inscription”, *Ling Aeg* 16 (2008): 311-318.

17 *KRI* 40.1-40.4.


23 Israel Finkelson, “The Date of the Philistine Settlement in Canaan”, *Tel Aviv* 22 (1995): 228.


26 Dan’el Kahn and Oded Tammuz, “Egypt is Difficult to Enter: Invading Egypt - A Game Plan (seventh–fourth centuries BCE)”, *JSSEA* 36 (2009): 46, 53, and 59–66 for a description of all the recorded invasions of Egypt in the first millennium BC.

27 *KRI* V 7; Jose M. Galán, *Victory and Border: Terminology Related to Egyptian Imperialism in the XVIIIth Dynasty* (Hildesheim: Egyptologische Beiträge 40; Hildesheim 1995): 112: “The purpose of creating a tš‘. . . is to prevent outsiders from entering into and acting freely inside that area...”. One can define tš‘ as border or border-zone. On p. 113, n. 589 Galán deals with the term tš‘ in the text under discussion, but does not elaborate on the meaning of the unique combination.


29 *KRI* 39.14–40.2


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P. Harris I 76.6–76.9; Pierre Grandet, Le Papyrus Harris I (BM 9999), (Le Caire: Institut français d’archéologie orientale du Caire, 1994): 326-327.


43 For the Ostracon, see: Orly Goldwasser, “Hieratic Inscriptions from Tel Sera‘ in Southern Canaan”, Tel Arad 11 (1984),77-93.


47 O’Connor, 2000,95.

48 KRI 28:4; RITAV, Translations, 24
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49 mht.wt. w KRIV 41.6


51 MH I, pls. 49, 46; KR IV, 41.3–42.10; RITA V Translations, 35.

52 Basc 118c – right: Basc 118c – right: KR IV 102.8; RITA V 79. It seems that the plural strokes do not denote several "Philistine" countries per se, since Libya and Kush are designated in the same fashion to convey total destruction.

53 KR IV 73, 10; RITA V 57.


57 Actually there probably existed three states baring the name Pleshet: 1. The place of origin of the Philistines, whatever that may be, 2. Palistin in the Amuq valley and Pleshet, in Southern Canaan. See Yasur-Landau, 2010, p. 163.


60 KR IV 94; RITA V 73.


62 KR IV 95, 4-5; RITA V 73.


66 Astour, 1968, 736. List XXVII nos. 6, 16, 26, 27, 30, 31, 32, 39, 42, 62 may be in Syria. Nos. 3, 6, 24, 26, 29, 47, 62, 45, 43 are definitely in Syria and some appear in the list of Thutmose III. Cf. Helck, 1962, 249–252; See: Dan’el Kahn, “Who is Meddling in Egypt’s Affairs?: The Identity of the Asians in the Elephantine Stela of Setnakht and the Historicity of the Medinet Habu


In the following lines the Egyptian names (in Egyptian transliteration font), are mentioned first, and followed by a number – the place name in the topographical list as can be found in Simons, 1937, list XXVII, 167–173. These places may be equated with the Alalakhian place names. The number following the Akkadian name is the relevant p. in *RGTC* 12/2. Cf. also the list in Casana, 2009, 20.


69 Except for border zone settlements such as *askbr* (see note above) and *îrpsmn* 60, Apsuna (?) P. 27–28, which was formerly in Mukish, but was probably transferred to Ugirat by the Hittites. See: Itamar Singer, “New Evidence on the End of the Hittite Empire”, in: Eliyzer D. Oren, (ed.), *The Sea Peoples and Their World: A Reassessment* (University Museum Monograph 108, University Museum Symposium Series 11; Philadelphia: The University Museum, University of Pennsylvania, 2000): 22.


