

THE DATE OF THE GEBEL BARKAL STELA OF SETI I

Jacobus VAN DIJK

Writing something in honour of one of the world's leading experts on Ancient Egyptian pottery is a somewhat daunting undertaking if one is no more than superficially at home in that subject oneself. Luckily, however, the interests and expertise of the great scholar whom we are honouring with this Festschrift are by no means limited to Egyptian pottery. Moreover, although my subject concerns a chronological problem of the early years of the Nineteenth Dynasty, I take comfort in the fact that, ever since the days of Flinders Petrie, pottery has been one of the linchpins of the Egyptian dating system — which is not to say, I hasten to add, that it should not be studied for its own sake.¹ I am therefore delighted to dedicate the following brief remarks to Janine Bourriau, in fond memory of many happy seasons at Saqqara and a memorable train journey to Luxor back in the early 1980s.

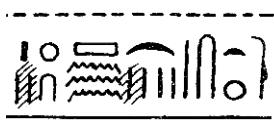
The stela of Seti I from the great temple of Amun at Gebel Barkal is generally considered to provide the highest known year date of that king, Year 11. The badly fragmented sandstone stela, now kept in the Khartoum Museum (No. 1856), was found reused in the Meroitic pavement between the southern row of columns of the post-Amarna columned hall B 503 and the doorway leading into chapel B 504c on its south side by George Andrew Reisner in April 1916 and January 1919 and was published by him and his wife in 1933.² It consists of three parts, two of which have been assembled from a great many fragments. The lowermost part, containing what is left of the last six lines of text, is relatively well preserved. The top of the stela, consisting of the lunette and the beginning of the inscription, was found "in a crumbling condition" and "had to be picked up piece by piece and set together face up on a board". In between these two parts there are five joining fragments which, however, do not join directly onto either the top or the bottom of the stela.

¹ J. BOURRIAU, *Umm el-Ga'ab. Pottery from the Nile Valley before the Arab Conquest* (Cambridge, 1981), 8.

² G.A. REISNER and M.B. REISNER, 'Inscribed Monuments from Gebel Barkal. Part 3: The Stela of Sety I', *Zeitschrift für Ägyptische Sprache* 69 (1933), 73-78, pl. VIII.

The date of the inscription is found at the beginning of line 1, as usual, and is therefore part of the very badly damaged top fragment. Reisner renders it as *ḥ3t sp 11 ibd 4 (?) šmw sw 13*, commenting that “the date, year 11, is certain, the highest known date of Sety I, seven years later than the great inscription at Nauri”.³ This statement may be the main reason why the date of this stela has, to the best of my knowledge, never been called into question. In Kitchen’s *Ramesside Inscriptions*⁴ Reisner’s rendering of the year date is faithfully copied, but not questioned, nor is any doubt about the date expressed by Peter Brand in his study of the reign of Seti I.⁵ In chronological studies Year 11 is invariably considered as a given, although estimates of the length of the reign of Seti I still vary between ten years and “a fraction more” and 11-15 years.⁶ Unfortunately, Year 11 is not attested anywhere else,⁷ and nor is Year 10, and the date of the Gebel Barkal stela is therefore of crucial importance in the chronological discussion of this period.

Close scrutiny of the photograph published by Reisner (Pl. VIIia) reveals that the Year 11 date is not nearly as secure as has so far been assumed; in fact, I believe the traces are far more likely to favour the reading “Year 3”. In his hand copy of the text Reisner rendered the date as follows (a):



(a)

The curious way the very tall and narrow numeral sign ‘10’ is written here should raise suspicions about the accuracy of Reisner’s reading. In hieroglyphic writings of the year date the numerals between 11 and 19 are usually written with the single units immediately below the sign for ‘10’, as can easily be ascertained by leafing through the pages of

³ G.A. REISNER and M.B. REISNER, ‘Inscribed Monuments’, 76.

⁴ K.A. KITCHEN, *Ramesside Inscriptions I* (Oxford, 1975), 75: 8; cf. also K.A. KITCHEN, *Ramesside Inscriptions Translated and Annotated: Translations I* (Oxford, 1993), 64-65 and K.A. KITCHEN, *Ramesside Inscriptions Translated and Annotated: Notes and Comments I* (Oxford, 1993), 65-66.

⁵ P.J. BRAND, *The Monuments of Seti I. Epigraphic, Historical and Art Historical Analysis*, Probleme der Ägyptologie 16 (Leiden/Boston/Köln, 2000), 296.

⁶ Cf. the survey by HORNUNG in E. HORNUNG, R. KRAUSS and D.A. WARBURTON (eds.), *Ancient Egyptian Chronology*, Handbuch der Orientalistik I.83 (Leiden/Boston, 2006), 210-211.

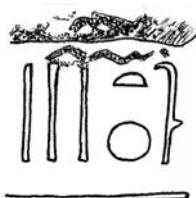
⁷ Hornung would seem to overstate the facts somewhat when he says that “the abundance of sources for years 1-11 suggests that Sety I died in year 11”.

Urkunden IV and Kitchen's *Ramesside Inscriptions*, and "Year 11" would therefore normally have been written as .⁸ Exceptions are rare, and when they do occur,⁹ the numerical signs usually have virtually the same height, i.e. the '10' is not taller than the '1' following it, as is the case in Reisner's copy. Moreover, the top of the numerical signs tends to be slightly below the level of the curved top of the *rnp/h3t* sign, not slightly above it, as in Reisner's copy. In other words, the height of the '10' sign should be the same as that of the rest of the date, in this case *3bd 4 Šmw sw 12*.

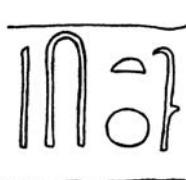
A close look at an enlarged detail of Reisner's published photograph (b) shows that there is a wavy line of damage running above and partly interfering with the top of the signs forming the year date (c); part of this line was obviously interpreted by Reisner as the top of the sign for '10', causing it to stand out well above the level of the other signs, including the *rnp/h3t* sign at the beginning, so as to make it almost touch the bordering line above it (d). When this interfering wavy line is discarded, the traces following *h3t sp* are a simple group of three tall vertical strokes, i.e. the numeral '3' (e).



(b)



(c)



(d)



(e)

⁸ Cf., e.g. W. HELCK, *Urkunden der 18. Dynastie*, Band IV.20, *Historische Inschriften Amenophis' III* (Berlin, 1957), 1737: 8; K.A. KITCHEN, *Ramesside Inscriptions V* (Oxford, 1983) 68: 1 and 383: 1 (both Ramesses III).

⁹ Examples of both writings juxtaposed can be found on the two large stelae with inscriptions of Year 12 of Ramesses III on the First Pylon at Medinet Habu (THE EPIGRAPHIC SURVEY, *Medinet Habu II* (Chicago, 1932), pls. 107-108, 123).

Examples of tall vertical lines for the numeral can be found on two stelae from Buhen and now in London¹⁰ (f) and Philadelphia¹¹ (g), both of Year 1 of Seti I; in both instances the vertical stroke for ‘1’ is at virtually the same level as the rest of the inscription:



(f)



(g)

An example of a Year 3 can be found on a rock stela of Ramesses IV in the Wadi Hammamat (h):¹²



(h)

Additional support for assigning the Gebel Barkal stela to Year 3 of Seti I rather than Year 11 comes from the way the king is depicted in the lunette of the stela. Peter Brand has shown that representations of Seti I standing in front of a deity often show him slightly bending forward in scenes where this is not necessitated by the ritual act he is performing,¹³ but where he is “intentionally humbling himself before the gods”. Brand notes that “the earliest definite attestation of this iconography is found on a stela from the region of Kurkur oasis of year four. The bowing posture is most common in vignettes on stela[e] datable from year four or later”, although he adds that “it is not universal even then”, citing two examples of depictions of Seti I standing fully upright rather than leaning forward, to wit, a stela from Sinai dating to Year 8 and the Gebel Barkal

¹⁰ BM EA 1189: M.L. BIERBRIER, *Hieroglyphic Texts from Egyptian Stelae* 10 (London, 1982), pl. 10.

¹¹ Pennsylvania University E10988: H.S. SMITH, *The Fortress of Buhen. The Inscriptions* (London, 1976), pl. 80.7.

¹² L. CHRISTOPHE, “La stèle de l’an III de Ramsès IV au Ouâdi Hammâmât (No. 12)”, *Bulletin de l’Institut Français Orientale du Caire* 48 (1949), 1–38, pl. 1.

¹³ P.J. BRAND, *The Monuments of Seti I*, 8–16.

stela, purportedly dated to Year 11.¹⁴ The Sinai stela¹⁵ is essentially a private monument, erected by the royal messenger and troop commander Ashahebused, and may not be typical of the art of Seti I at this period. This would leave the Gebel Barkal stela as the only example of a royal



monument showing Seti I in fully upright position in front of a deity dating from the very end of the reign. Surely it is much more likely that the stela dates from before the introduction of the inclined posture in the representations of Seti I sometime around his Year 4, and this would be in perfect agreement with the Year 3 date assigned to it above on epigraphical grounds.

¹⁴ P.J. BRAND, *The Monuments of Seti I*, 14 with n. 63.

¹⁵ A.H. GARDINER, T.E. PEET and J. ČERNÝ, *The Inscriptions of Sinai*, 2nd edition (London, 1955), pl. 68 (No. 247).

With the elimination of the Year 11 of the Gebel Barkal stela, and in the absence of a Year 10, the highest certain regnal year of Seti I is his Year 9, which is attested by the great inscriptions from Kanaïs (*3bd 3 šmw sw 20*)¹⁶ and two stelae from the Aswan quarries.¹⁷ As Peter Brand has shown, work started by Seti I in these quarries probably did not produce more than one more-or-less finished monument, the Flaminian obelisk, now in the Piazza del Popolo in Rome, while the remaining obelisks and colossal statues were almost certainly finished by his son Ramesses II and inscribed in the latter's name, which would imply that Seti I died not long after work in Aswan had commenced.¹⁸ A further indication may come from the two stelae erected by Ashahebused in Sinai, which are probably not far apart in date. The first, already mentioned, is dated to Year 8 (*I prt sw 2*), and the second, which shows Seti in the company of Ramesses II (with early throne name Usermaatre without epithets), most probably dates from the very end of the reign or possibly even from shortly after Seti's death,¹⁹ suggesting that Seti died in his Year 9. Finally, research on the wine amphorae from the tomb of Seti I by Nicolas Sartori²⁰ has revealed that these all mention Year 8, strongly suggesting that the tomb was stocked with wine before the vintage of Year 9 became available. Since the sealing of the wine amphorae in this period appears to have taken place around the 3rd month of *Akhet*²¹ and Seti's Year 9 most likely began sometime in the 3rd month

¹⁶ K.A. KITCHEN, *Ramesside Inscriptions I*, 65: 14.

¹⁷ K.A. KITCHEN, *Ramesside Inscriptions I*, I 73: 11 and 74: 7.

¹⁸ P.J. BRAND, 'The "Lost" Obelisks and Colossi of Seti I', *Journal of the American Research Center in Egypt* 34 (1997), 101-114. Even the obelisk in Rome was finished by Ramesses II. On the unfinished obelisk fragment from Gebel Gulab see now M.R. JENKINS, 'The "Other" Unfinished Obelisk', *KMT* 21, no. 2 (Summer 2010), 54-61. It is interesting to observe that this broken and abandoned fragment was inscribed for Seti I on three faces only, as is the case with the Flaminian obelisk; presumably its fourth face, too, would have been completed by Ramesses II, had it left the quarry.

¹⁹ P.J. BRAND, *The Monuments of Seti I*, 316-317 (§4.6.3.1).

²⁰ N. SARTORI, *Jarres inscrites de la Vallée des Rois* (forthcoming in the Aegyptiaca Helvetica series); cf. also D.A. ASTON, 'In vino veritas. A Docketed History of the New Kingdom between Year 1 of Tuthmosis III and Year 1 of Ramesses II' (forthcoming). I am very grateful to Nicolas Sartori for sharing the results of his study with me prior to publication (personal communication), and to Dave Aston for sending me a draft version of his article.

²¹ The month is rarely specified on wine dockets, but the 3rd month of *Akhet* is mentioned on an example from Amarna (T.E. PEET and C.L. WOOLLEY, *City of Akhenaten I* (London, 1923), pl. 64.3) as well as on the docket of Year 13 of Horemheb from his Memphite tomb (C.J. EYRE, in: H.D. SCHNEIDER, *The Memphite Tomb of Horemheb II*, pls. 2, 4, 50, no. 22). There are, however, also examples of the 1st and 4th month of *Akhet* from Deir el-Medina (Y. KOENIG, *Catalogue des étiquettes de jarres hiératiques de Deir el-Médineh II*, pl. 38, no. 6322; pl. 44, no. 6357).

of *Shemu*,²² this would mean that the wine sealed in 3 *Akhet* of Year 9 was not yet available when the king was buried. His death, therefore, may well have occurred in the days between Day 20 of the 3rd month of *Shemu* of his Year 9 (the date of the Kanais inscriptions²³) and Day 27 of the 3rd month of *Shemu* of that same year, being the most likely accession date of Ramesses II.²⁴ In other words, Seti I died very early in his Year 9, i.e. he reigned for a full eight years and a fraction.

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²² The accession date of Seti I is usually placed within the 3rd or 4th month of *Shemu*, cf. E. HORNUNG, *Ancient Egyptian Chronology*, 210-211.

²³ This date does not refer to the events recorded in the text, but probably to the inauguration of the temple of Kanais, even though it then has to be assumed that the date was either left open and filled in later, or inscribed on the wall in advance of the king’s imminent arrival; see on this problem S. SCHOTT, *Kanais. Der Tempel Sethos I. im Wadi Mia*, Nachrichten der Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Göttingen 1961: 6 (Göttingen, 1961), 163-164.

²⁴ Cf. E. HORNUNG, in *Ancient Egyptian Chronology*, 211; P.J. BRAND, *The Monuments of Seti I*, 302-305.

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