



REVIEW

THE MEDINET HABU RECORDS OF THE FOREIGN WARS OF RAMESSES III

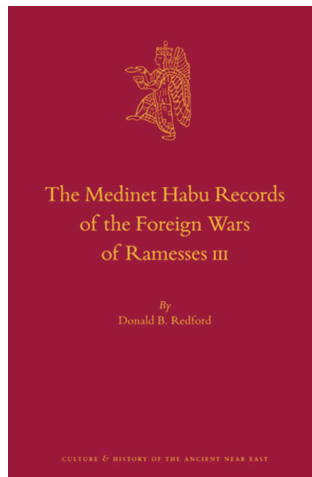
by Donald B. Redford

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The volume under review was in preparation for nearly twenty years, and provides—if not a fresh look at Ramesses III’s “mansion of a million years” at Medinet Habu (MH)—then a comprehensive collection of one prolific scholar’s research into this pharaoh’s visual and textual records. The study’s organization is roughly tripartite, consisting of the description and translation of the MH inscriptions (pp. 1–71), commentary on the texts, including their prospective historicity (pp. 72–112), and, finally, further observations and theories regarding their subject matter (pp. 113–160). At almost exactly 200 pages, this is a relatively brief work, but its contents are dense and focused, and therefore the study feels neither overly brief nor underdone.

Redford seems to bring, if not *sola scriptura*, then certainly a *prima scriptura* approach to Ramesses III’s MH records as a source of information about the events of the Late Bronze–Early Iron Age transition. With other extant accounts, from Hattuša, Ugarit, Emar, and elsewhere, providing a much narrower view than the MH records, and archaeological evidence too “dependent upon tenuous and contentious interpretation” (p. xi), Ramesses III’s record is the sole primary source from this chaotic



period to provide a broad view of events.

Strong cases have been made against the temple’s visual and textual records as historical accounts, not least by the temple’s scribes and artists themselves, who, Redford admits, at times sacrificed accuracy on the altar of style. This has only been compounded in the modern era by “continued misuse of the texts and reliefs at MH as a sort of ‘grab-bag’ of proof texts, or as rhetoric to be dismissed out of hand” (p. vii). Despite these challenges, though, Redford argues that historical truth

can in fact be found in the MH records—if one knows precisely where to look. The most promising source is “four pericopes in which the king doffs his mask, abandons the lyrical form, and looks at us directly” (p. 111). The texts in question have primarily to do with the activities of, and battles against, the “Sea Peoples” (SPs), and their visual complements (which, due to the lack of corroborating evidence found elsewhere in Egypt, are critical to gauging the historicity of the year 5 and 8 campaigns) were afforded significant pride of place among the temple’s reliefs. Covering 420 m<sup>2</sup>, these scenes comprise (in combination with the first Libyan campaign) half of the visual material at MH

and are conspicuous for their visual detail.

The SP invasion is presented as a highly coordinated affair: while the term *šdt(t)* in the year 8 inscription has been rendered as “conspiracy” (“The foreign countries made a conspiracy in their islands...”), Redford connects it to Akkadian *šudūtu* “edict, proclamation, manifesto.” Therefore, “the coalition had...issued a formal statement, probably of union and intent, and decided upon a plan,” likely from a shared “staging area” near Troy, in the Lukka lands, or on Rhodes, which “alert[ed] the polities of the Levant to what was imminent” (pp. 125–126, 128).

Redford strongly argues for an understanding of the SPs as an immigrant movement. In particular, he counters the “red herring” that is Ramesses III’s references to the “lands” and “towns” of the Philistines, pointing out that the nomadic Meshwesh and Tjemehu are also said to have “lands” (pp. 119–120). In other words, whether or not they actually had lands or towns to speak of, convention requires that they be portrayed as having such in order to be able either to cower within or to abandon them in the face of Ramesses’ might. He also notes, in the context of the SPs’ “camp in Amurru,” that *ihw* “always refers to a temporary accommodation in open country,” and not to a settlement (pp. 106, 119).

The author counters common criticisms against the accuracy of the MH records by arguing that much of the content should be seen as forward-looking. An example of this is his situating both the lengthy toponym list on the First Pylon and Ramesses III’s Asiatic campaigns in the post-collapse Eastern Mediterranean world. He also suggests that Ramesses’ references to the borders of Egypt as his own, rather than as belonging to the nation itself, reflect a reality in which polities and administrative boundaries were shifting toward their Early Iron Age disposition. Of particular interest in this section is the author’s re-reading of *ʾm-r*, which has generally been identified as Amor/Amurru, despite that land and its people already (by year 8) having been made “as though they had never existed.” He argues that the toponym should instead be read as *Emar*, whose destruction has previously been attributed alternatively to Aramaeans and to Sea Peoples,<sup>1</sup> and suggests that Egyptian campaign against this polity (and against Tunip) may have been a response to their attempts to fill the geopolitical void left by the Late Bronze Age collapse. In making this case at the expense of Aramaean culpability, though, the author sends a

contradictory message, declaring that “it is hard to understand how transhumants can have carried such a stoutly fortified city” only five pages after he acknowledged “the role which has emerged of late of the marauding Aramaeans as a factor in the destruction of the palatine states of the Late Bronze” (pp. 144, 149).

The locations of the SP groups’ “land in the islands in the midst of the sea” are addressed with similarly characteristic certainty. Of particular note are the placement of the Peleset in the Troad, with a possible later connection to Crete, and the equation of the Teresh (*Taruisha*) with Troy itself. The Ekwesh (*Ak(i)ōwasha*) of Merneptah’s 5th year are assigned a specifically Koan origin, with the Weshesh being placed at *Wassos* in Caria and the Shekelesh at nearby Pisidia (later traveling to Sicily), while the *Ši-ka-la* of RS 34.129 are “a sea-roving, piratical offshoot” of the land-dwelling Shekelesh (pp. 115–121). Regarding their later disposition, the appearance of the SPs in late first millennium texts such as the Onomasticon of Amenope and the Tale of Wen-Amon mitigates against the significant taking of prisoners or forcible settlement by the pharaoh.

In a departure from the traditional belief that Ramesses III either forcibly settled the Philistines on the southern coastal plain of Canaan or sought to hem them in with a *cordon sanitaire*,<sup>2</sup> Redford suggests that this most famous of SP groups maintained “continued strength and independence tolerated by Egypt only in the context of mutual trust” (p. 110). The Deir el-Medineh stela, on the other hand, “yields a glimpse of the Peleset, *Taruisha*, and presumably the Tjekker on the morrow of the military standoff, ostensibly settled in camps, but sufficiently unrestrained to be able to make nuisances of themselves among the loyal settlements of Canaan” (pp. 157–158). Just how the Peleset could be “unrestrained ... nuisances” who were “settled in camps” while simultaneously maintaining “strength and independence [in a] context of mutual trust” with Egypt is unclear to the reviewer. This situation might be disambiguated by evidence from Philistia itself; however, in keeping with the author’s aforementioned mistrust of archaeological evidence, publications by the excavators of the Philistine “pentapolis” cities are unfortunately almost entirely omitted from the study. Aside from a popularizing book that is listed in the works cited but apparently left uncited in the text,<sup>3</sup> Moshe Dothan, excavator of Ashdod, is completely absent, as are Stager and

Master (Ashkelon) and the incredibly prolific Maier and Hitchcock, whose excavation of Tell es-Safi-Gath in particular has done a great deal to update scholarly understanding of the transcultural origins and development of Philistine material culture.<sup>4</sup>

A lack of attention to more recent research is a common thread in the volume. The author's note in the preface that some portions of the present study were composed several years earlier and included without revision in the final publication is largely borne out by the bibliography, wherein fewer than 7 percent of the nearly 800 entries were published between 2009 and the present. The reviewer is as guilty as any other scholar of inadvertently omitting relevant literature in his own work, and therefore he recognizes how easy—and how unconstructive—it can be to pick through a bibliography in search of missing citations. However, while there was no dearth of important publications on MH, Ramesses III, and the SPs prior to the late 2000s, the years since the turn of the millennium (and the past decade in particular) have witnessed a significant shift in scholarly understanding of this time period and its events. In particular, the view of the SPs as a marauding movement that was almost singlehandedly responsible for the destruction of cities and empires alike, from the Aegean to the doorstep of Egypt, has largely been left behind. While there is no question that Ramesses III portrayed the SPs as a true coalition whose aims and reach were both coordinated, communicated, and impactful, current scholarship views the SPs less as organized catalysts of the LBA collapse and more as fragmented (if agglutinative) participants in a far wider and more complex phenomenon.<sup>5</sup> Catastrophic change—with the Sea Peoples as its executors—has instead been largely supplanted by a more nuanced, evidence-based approach that recognizes significant continuity into the Iron Age in many areas.<sup>6</sup> One is left to wonder, then, how the author's interpretive calculus might have been altered had more recent scholarship, and evidence from outside Medinet Habu itself, been more thoroughly considered.

As always, these critiques should not be seen as outweighing the book's usefulness. Even absent further contributions to the conversation, *Medinet Habu Records* holds significant value simply for the fact that it combines the author's decades of scholarly research and commentary on the subject into a single volume. That it goes beyond this makes it a worthy addition to the reading lists of scholars

who are focused on Ramesses III and MH specifically, and Ramesside literature in general, as well as on the transition from the Late Bronze to the Early Iron Age from the Egyptian perspective.

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## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Singer 2000.
- <sup>2</sup> *Inter alia*, Dothan 1982, 3; Stager 1995, 344.
- <sup>3</sup> Dothan and Dothan 1992; a “Dothan 1992” is cited on p. 117 of the work under review, it seems more likely that this refers to a 1992 paper by T. Dothan (in this present review, Dothan 1992), which is also in the bibliography.
- <sup>4</sup> E.g. Maeir et al. 2011; Maeir and Hitchcock 2017.
- <sup>5</sup> See now (*inter alia*) the essays in Karageorghis and Kouka 2011, Maran and Stockhammer 2012, and Fischer and Bürge 2017.
- <sup>6</sup> *Inter alia*, Yasur-Landau 2010, 168–171; Killebrew and Lehmann 2013, 6–7; Sharon and Gilboa 2013, 463–467; Nuñez 2017.