



A DEVASTATED FOREIGN LANDSCAPE DEPICTED IN LUXOR TEMPLE

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ABSTRACT

A relief of Ramesses II located on the exterior western wall of the Processional Colonnade Hall of Luxor Temple portrays a devastated landscape surrounding an unnamed town. Analysis of the vegetation represented in this relief may indicate the general location of the unnamed town and is of interest to our understanding of Egyptian military interaction with the area—possibly indicating the time of year the town was destroyed.

THE DESTROYED UNNAMED TOWN AND ITS DEVASTATED LANDSCAPE RELIEF

The focus of this article is a relief located on the northern portion of the exterior western wall of the Processional Colonnade Hall of Luxor Temple.¹ Portrayed in low relief is a devastated landscape that surrounds an unnamed town (Figure 1).² The relief dates to the reign of Ramesses II, who placed a variety of minor war scenes from the general area of Syria/Palestine on the western wall of this temple.³ These scenes, however, are not dated and sometimes the name of the town that was attacked is omitted.⁴ There are no texts⁵ or any human or animal figures depicted in the relief. Furthermore, the vegetation does not resemble native Egyptian species, and thus might represent the actual landscape.⁶ The important elements of this relief are the representation of a crumbling town and the damaged vegetation in front of it; little attention was paid to the details of the actual structure of the town (Figure 2). The relief is located in the surviving top register of the western wall, though in antiquity, there would have been another register above the relief. Details of the vegetation, though stylized, show distinctions between the different plants. There are no hieroglyphs to identify the location of the town or any other descriptions. There are eight intrusive square holes that are vertically aligned and run straight through the upper part of the relief.⁷ Weathering damage has affected the conservation of the plaster and paint that would have been added to the reliefs. The loss of paint is truly detrimental since, during Ramesside times, reliefs were painted with extreme detail, with fewer details in the carving.⁸

ICONOGRAPHY

A two-tiered structure, which represents a fortress or fortified town, rests on a groundline that forms a steep hill in the

southern part of the relief. If the structure represented anything larger than a small town, it would doubtless have been named. Two gates are askew, indicating the town has been sacked.⁹ On the left gate, one of the posts appears to have been redrawn (Figure 3). It seems as though the original intention was not to have the gatepost skewed. The entrance between the two posts is much more narrow than the gate on the right. Falling onto the two gates is a series of bricks that appear to come from the upper tier. The very topmost part of the town is not preserved.

Damaged vegetation is shown to the left of the town. Some vegetation is on an undulating groundline representing the hilly terrain, while the rest of the vegetation is strewn in front of the town. Some scholars claim that a devastated orchard and fallen trees are depicted in this relief.¹⁰ However, these so-called trees are not represented in the hieroglyphic form, as in other reliefs,¹¹ but rather, have spiny and twisted forms. Scattered among the larger twisted remains is a variety of smaller vegetation.

PRIMARY MODEL OF COMPARISON FOR PLANT IDENTIFICATION

The identification of the plants in the relief is problematic, since the depictions are highly stylized and the more minute details of the plants would have been painted on the surface, which has since fallen off. Upon close examination, there appear to be at least eight different species of vegetation depicted. We can attempt, however, to identify some of the plant species represented in the relief of Ramesses II by comparing the depictions with those from Thutmose III's "botanical garden" at the *Akh menu* temple at Karnak.¹² The sanctuary was built between Year 24 and the fourth decade of his reign, after his co-regency with Hatshepsut and prior to the Battle of Megiddo.¹³ The reliefs on the preserved lower parts of the walls depict extraordi-

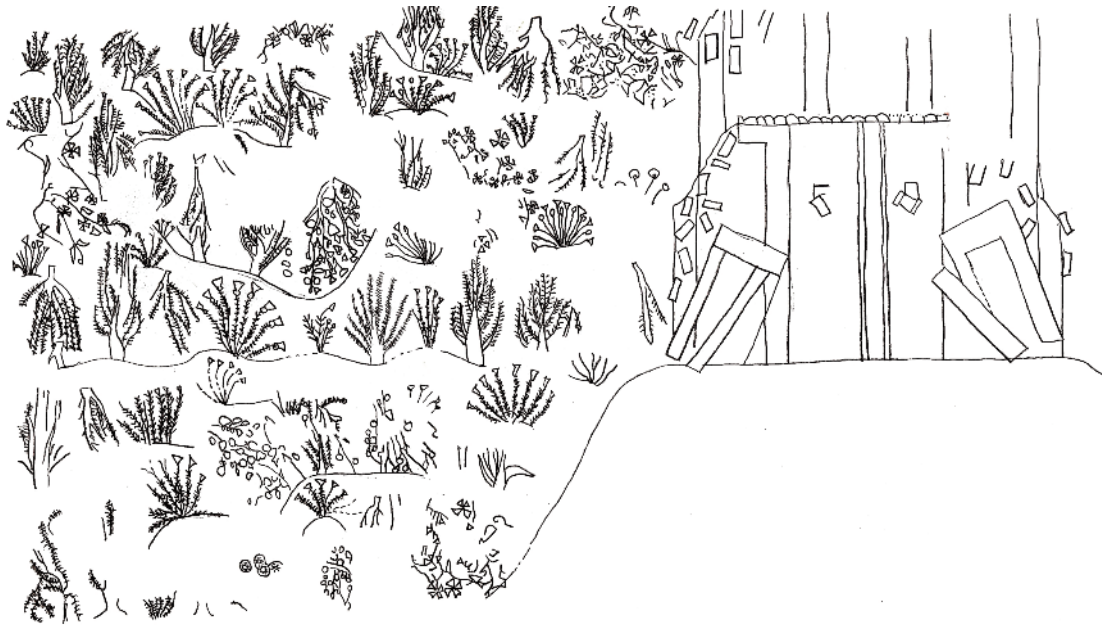


Figure 1. Devastated foreign landscape relief from Luxor Temple.

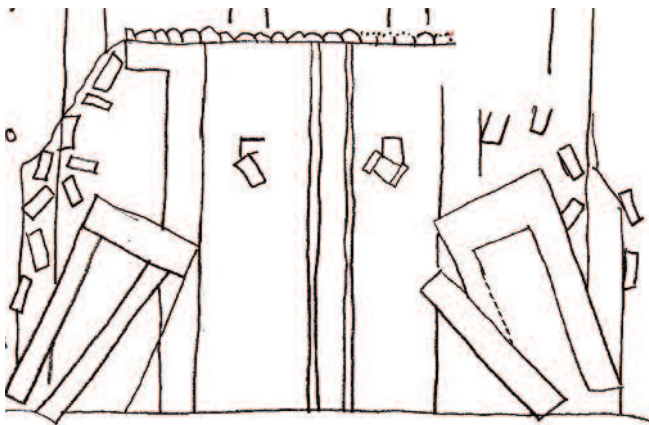


Figure 2. Detail of entrance area.

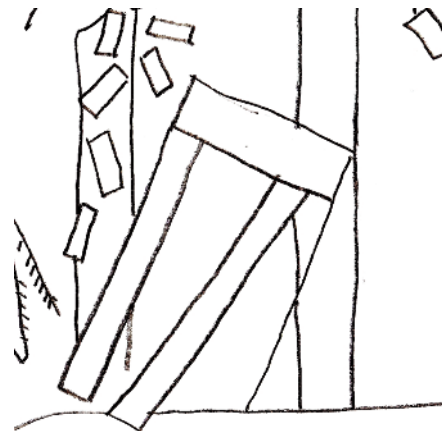


Figure 3. Detail of left gateway.

nary animals and plants Thutmose III found on his campaigns in Retjenu and in the “God’s Land,” ordering for them to be represented in relief.¹⁴ The depiction of vegetation in the botanical garden portrays both native Egyptian plants, such as the common lotus, *Nymphaea*, and foreign plants, especially those from the Near East that had not been depicted previously.¹⁵

Plant group A (Figure 4) in the Luxor scene might represent *Salix subserata*, which is a type of willow tree. The species depicted in the relief of Ramesses II has a wide trunk that tapers to a point. Small branches with tiny markings representing leaves spring from the sides of the trunk. A similar type of tree with wide trunk and small branches is also found in the botanical garden of Thutmose III,¹⁶ and is attested in the Ramesside tomb of Ipy.¹⁷ Many, though not all, of these trees in the Luxor scene appear upside down, with their trunks facing the upper

part of the relief. When trees are represented upside down in this manner, the ancient Egyptians were conveying the idea that the vegetation had been purposely cut down and left to rot.

Plant group B (Figure 5) is hard to identify accurately. It appears to be a bush, as there is no trunk to suggest a tree. Inverted triangular buds grow on the ends of the thin branches. Though this plant is represented many times in the relief, not every image has markings for leaves. The images that do suggest that this group may be *Sinapis alba*, a flowering plant found in the Syro-Palestine area.¹⁸

Plant group C (Figure 6) seems to depict the common grape vine, *Vitis vinifera*. It can be represented as a tree, as a group of vines, as leaves, or as individual fruits in various representations found in many tombs.¹⁹ The leaves of this plant are triangular and clustered together in sets of four. Their form is similar to four-

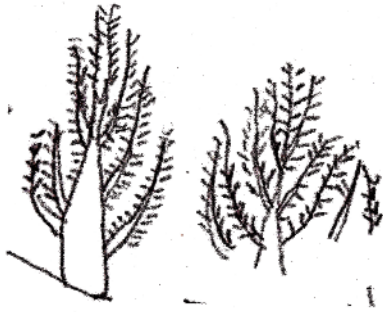


Figure 4. Plant group A.



Figure 5. Plant group B.



Figure 6. Plant group C.



Figure 7. Plant group D.

armed stars. The small oval objects among the vines may represent the fruit. There are two images of this group, both located next to the town. In reality, the grape vineyard would have been close to the town for easy access to the fruit, since it would be a vital crop for its inhabitants. However, though this group may represent *Vitis vinifera*, it does not necessarily represent a vineyard. Depictions of vineyards are known from ancient Egyptian tomb reliefs.²⁰ However, they have not been recorded on temple walls.²¹ The plant group on the relief of Ramesses II appears to be upside down and in total disarray. This may also be an indication of the destruction of the city's crops. Michael Hasel comments that destroyed vegetation is often indicative of the mighty pharaoh's army being able to take action against a food supply, thus harming the foreign people's economy and their very lives.²²

Plant group D (Figure 7) could be a representation of *Zygophyllum dumosum*, which is a desert shrub.²³ Although there are not many depictions of this group of plants, the ones that are shown have what appear to be both flowers and buds represented by an inverted triangle and a small oval shape. On two of the representations there are markings of what appear to be leaves, while others do not have any type of marking for leaves. *Zygophyllum dumosum* is rare in Egypt, but would have been encountered in the deserts of the Syro-Palestinian area.²⁴ The depictions of the plant group D from the unnamed town relief do not exactly match those of this species found in the reliefs of the botanical garden of Thutmose III, but there are similarities in the shape of the bud and the differences may be explained by stylistic differences between the artists.

There are two other groupings of plants found in the Luxor relief, but they are not similar to any of the plants known from the botanical garden of Thutmose III. The depictions of the plants in group E (Figure 8) may be images of *Papaver rhoeas*, the red poppy, which is a subspecies of *Papaver somniferum* (better known as the opium poppy). *Papaver rhoeas* has bright red flowers, which the Egyptians frequently depicted in representations of ornamental flowers. The flowers of plant group E found in the relief are in the shape of inverted keyholes. A similar depiction of this flower is known from the temple of the Aten at Tell el-Amarna (Figure 9). In that relief, a woman pulls a rope before a bouquet of a variety of flowers, including an inverted keyhole shape flower identified as *Papaver rhoeas*.²⁵ Seeds of *Papaver rhoeas* have been identified from Meidum as early as the Fourth Dynasty,²⁶ though this plant was not a species native to Egypt. It has been brought to the author's attention that the inverted keyhole shape may also represent the flowering heads of a *Centaurea depressa* thistle. This type of flower has also been referred to as a cornflower. Cornflower representations are found throughout Egyptian art in forms usually portrayed as inverted keyholes.²⁷

Plant group F (Figure 10) appears to be a type of fruiting tree. There are five representations of it in the relief; however, only one is standing upright, the others apparently having fallen to the axe. There are oval shapes on the branches that may be a type of fruit. Dispersed between the oval shapes are small inverted triangles that may represent the flowers associated with the fruiting, although the fruit would normally be

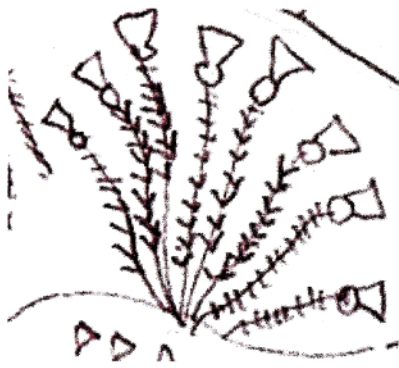


Figure 8. Plant group E.



Figure 9. Woman with bouquet in Tell el-Amarna relief, featuring keyhole-shaped flowers (possibly poppies) similar to plant group E.

expected to appear at a later time after the flowers. The triangles may also represent the leaves found along with fruit. It is difficult to determine what type of plant this group depicts, but it is highly probable that this is the group of plants Egyptian texts speak about when mentioning the Egyptian military laying waste to orchards. Two small groups of individual flowers are also depicted in the Luxor scene; however, they are not identifiable at this time.

HUMAN AND ANIMAL REPRESENTATION

There are no human or animal figures to distract the viewer from the stillness and despair that seems to engulf the Luxor scene. Its inhabitants have deserted their home. The plants have been trampled and/or cut down. Typical Egyptian representations of landscapes depict some type of figure, as seen in the many hundreds of desert hunting scenes found in tombs



Figure 10. Plant group F.

throughout Egyptian history. Artificial landscapes, such as gardens, depict structures that were necessary to grow exotic vegetation in the harsh desert environment and thus would not need to portray any human figure.²⁸ The closest examples of scenes similar to the Luxor relief are from the Green Room of the North Palace at Akhetaten.²⁹ The variety of vegetation depicted in the Amarna scene is similar to that of the Luxor relief. However, flocks of birds interspersed among the greens distract the viewer from the representation of the Amarna landscape. O'Connor has noted that because of their place in the hierarchy of Egyptian cosmology, foreigners could be portrayed as vegetation,³⁰ and one could argue that the devastated vegetation in the Luxor scene represents the broken and trampled foreigners from the unnamed town. But while the Egyptians did sometimes depict their enemies without giving them human form, the Luxor scene does not fit this pattern as the rest of the war scenes surrounding it portray fallen and defeated enemy soldiers.

The Luxor relief of the destroyed unnamed town and its devastated landscape is unique to Egyptian art. Almost all of the vegetation that is depicted in the scene—provided it is identified correctly here—represents desert growth foreign to the ancient Egyptians, except for *Salix subserrata* and *Vitis vinifera*, which are found throughout the Near East, and especially in the area of Syria/Palestine. It is clear, therefore, that the Luxor scene, although not textually identified, does represent a foreign scene and most likely one in the greater area of Syria/Palestine. If the plants depicted are the species suggested here, this may also help in identifying the time of year the Egyptians actually engaged in battle with this unnamed town.³¹ Many of the species appear to be in full bloom; given that these species bloom from May to October, this would mean that the city was attacked during the summer months.³²

The location of the unnamed town in the Luxor scene is probably somewhere in the area of Syria/Palestine, as indicated by the tentative plant identifications given here as well as by the surrounding scenes, which are known to have represented towns located in Syria and Palestine.

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NOTES

1. Bertha Porter and Rosalind Moss, *Topographical Bibliography of Ancient Egyptian Hieroglyphic Texts, Reliefs, and Paintings* (Oxford: Ashmolean Museum, 1981), 334.
2. See Walter Wreszinski, *Atlas zur altägyptischen Kulturgeschichte II* (Leipzig: J.C. Hinrichs'sche Buchhandlung, 1935), pl. 65, and Susanna Constanze Heinz, *Die Feldzugsdarstellungen des Neuen Reiches* (Vienna: Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2001), pl. 18. The unnamed town is presumably in Syria because some of the surrounding war scenes at Luxor from the reign of Ramesses II (ca. 1279–1213 BCE) actually mention known named Syrian towns.
3. Peter Brand, "Veils, Votives, and Marginalia: The Use of Sacred Space at Karnak and Luxor," in Peter F. Dorman and Betsey M. Bryan (eds.), *Sacred Space and Sacred Function in Ancient Thebes* (Chicago: The Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, 2007), 57. Brand notes that much of the eastern exterior side of Luxor temple from the Processional Colonnade Hall to the inner Hypostyle Hall is blank. Karnak temple also has a similar lack of reliefs on the eastern exterior side of the southern axis. Why would only the western exterior walls be embellished with reliefs of military campaigns? Perhaps the placement of the reliefs had to do with the physical location of the actual battle, similar to how the reliefs of Hatshepsut's expedition to Punt correlate with Punt in the southern part of the wall at Deir el-Bahri, while the presenting of offerings to Hatshepsut in Egypt occur in the northern half. This idea cannot be fruitfully investigated, however, since the town is unnamed. The only indication of its location is that it is in Syria, since the fortresses and towns in the reliefs surrounding the unnamed town do have names and they are known to be in Syria.
4. G. A. Gaballa, *Narrative in Egyptian Art* (Mainz: Philipp von Zabern, 1976), 108.
5. Other Egyptian monuments are known to have detailed texts describing foreign lands, such as the Merenptah Stela, which states, "Israel lies waste, its seed no longer exists." See K. A. Kitchen, *Ramesseid Inscriptions: Historical and Biographical IV* (Oxford: B.H. Blackwell, Ltd., 1982), 19; Miriam Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature. The New Kingdom II* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2006), 77. The idea of the total destruction of a city or culture is one that is found throughout the ancient Near East civilizations. Including all of the textual evidence of references to foreign lands and their destruction goes outside the scope of this paper.
6. Michael Hasel, *Domination and Resistance: Egyptian Military Activity in the Southern Levant, 1500–1185 B.C.* (Leiden: Brill, 1998), 83. Hasel believes the trees that were cut down are actually fruit-producing trees that may have been a crop used by the people of the deserted town.
7. Personal communication with W. Raymond Johnson, February 19, 2009, in which he stated that the intrusive holes came from the roof beams of a medieval structure.
8. Peter J. Brand, *The Monuments of Seti I: Epigraphic, Historical and Art Historical Analysis* (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 28–29.
9. Heinz, 125, Fig. Abb. 197.
10. Hasel, 83.
11. See Wreszinski, pls. 66–67. This depicts the battle for Satuna, another scene represented on the exterior wall of the Processional Colonnade at Luxor Temple. Depicted to the left of the fort of Satuna is a group of trees. The hieroglyphic sign, (Gardiner's sign list M1) is depicted about twenty-five times. Over that are tall and thin stalks. This is a famous scene since in the middle is a bear eating a man's leg. These depictions must represent a wooded area next to the town of Satuna.
12. It must be noted that a span of about 200 years (1479–1279 BCE) separates the two monarchs. There were also different influences on the art of each pharaoh. The art of the time of Ramesses II still shows residual influences from Amarna art, when a more naturalistic form had been adapted. However, the botanical garden of Thutmose III represents the foreign species he observed on his many campaigns, which he then reproduced in stone.
13. Dimitri Laboury, "Archaeological and Textual Evidence for the Function of the 'Botanical Garden' of Karnak in the Initiation Ritual," in Peter F. Dorman and Betsey M. Bryan (eds.), *Sacred Space and Sacred Function in Ancient Thebes* (Chicago: The Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, 2007), 27.
14. Nathalie Beaux, *Le Cabinet de curiosités de Thoutmosis III* (Leuven: Peeters Press, 1990), 38–46. There are two dedication texts carved in the antechamber that disclose this information. Also see Laboury, 28.
15. Beaux, 1. The plants represented in the reliefs in Hatshepsut's expedition to Punt would have been more familiar than the extraordinary plants found in the Near East.
16. Beaux, 161–162, pls. VII–VIII.
17. Norman de G. Davies, *Two Ramesside Tombs at Thebes* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art Egyptian Expedition, 1927), pl. 29.
18. Beaux, 112–113, pls. XI–XII, where similar representations are found at the *Akh menu*.
19. Beaux, 192–195, pls. I–II, V–VIII, XXXI–XXXII, LIX–LX.
20. Bertha Porter and Rosalind Moss, *Topographical, Bibliography of Ancient Egyptian Hieroglyphic Texts, Reliefs, and Paintings*. (Oxford: the Clarendon Press, 1927), 111–113. See also Arpag Mekhitarian, *Egyptian Painting*, trans. Stuart Gilbert (Geneva: Editions d'art Albert Skira, 1954), 60, pl. on page 61. The tomb

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of Userhet (no. 56) in Thebes represents a vineyard where six men are collecting grapes from the vines above their heads. See Charles Wilkinson, *Egyptian Wall Paintings: The Metropolitan Museum of Art's Collection of Facsimiles* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1979), 49, Fig. 47. Another vineyard scene is found on a relief fragment that comes from the tomb of Ipy and shows men making wine (30.4.118).

21. Patrick Salland, personal communication, March 8, 2009.
22. Hasel, 83.
23. Y. Waisel, Nili Liphshitz, and A. Fahn, "Cambial Activity in *Zygophyllum dumosum* Boiss," *Annals of Botany* 34 (1970): 409.
24. Beaux, 97–98, pls. XI–XII.
25. Lise Manniche, *An Ancient Egyptian Herbal* (Austin: University of Texas Press, in co-operation with British Museum Publications, 1989), 131.
26. Margaret Serpico and Raymond White, "Oil, Fat and Wax," in Paul T. Nicholson and Ian Shaw (eds.), *Ancient Egyptian Materials and Technology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 404–405.
27. For more information, see Renate Germer, *Flora des pharaonischen Ägypten* (Mainz am Rhein: Philipp von Zabern, 1985), 173.
28. This can be seen quite clearly in the rock-tombs from the Amarna period (1353–1324 BCE). The Royal Garden from Akhenaten is shown in Norman de G. Davies, *The Rock Tombs of El Amarna I* (London: The Egypt Exploration Fund, 1903), 42, pl. XXXII.
29. Fran Weatherhead, *Amarna Palace Paintings* (London: Egypt Exploration Society, 2007), Fig. 83. The painted plaster fragments are now located in museums around the world. West Wall: Cairo Museum JdE 50769; Ny Carlsberg Glyptothek, Copenhagen AE.I.N.1665. East Wall: British Museum, 1927.10–11.80; Ny Carlsberg Glyptothek, Copenhagen AE.I.N.1665; Liverpool Museum 1978.291.261; Ashmolean Museum, Oxford 1927.4048; Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge 16–1927. A fragment from an unspecified wall: Leiden Museum F1927/8.1.
30. David O'Connor, "Egypt's View of 'Others,'" in John Tait (ed.), *"Never Had the Like Occurred": Egypt's View of its Past* (London: Institute of Archaeology, University College of London Press, 2003), 176. See also Robert Bianchi, "The Theban Landscape of Ramesses II," in Jackie Phillips (ed.), *Ancient Egypt, the Aegean, and the Near East* (San Antonio: Van Siclen Books, 1997), 92.
31. Gaballa, 108 explains that apart from the Ramesseum scenes, the minor war scenes are not dated.
32. A similar representation indicating a specific time of year is found in the tomb of Tehutihetep from the Eleventh Dynasty at El Bersheh, which portrays Tehutihetep wrapped in a long coat that Newberry believed represented the winter season. See Percy E. Newberry, *El Bersheh I: The Tomb of Tehuti-hetep* (London: The Egypt Exploration Fund, 1892), 13–14, pl. VII.