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## THE ROCK TOMBS OF THE PRINCES OF ELEPHANTINE

### Earliest references to interpretation in Pharaonic Egypt

On the west bank of the Nile cut into the hill called *Kubet el-Haua* (the “windy peak”), opposite the large island of Elephantine, can be found a necropolis containing about 40 tombs going back to the third millennium B. C. By means of a steep narrow stairway one can climb up to the various hypogea, small funerary chapels, many of which still have their terraces, colonnades, doors and windows.

It is here, in the inscription on the walls of the *tombs of the princes of Elephantine*, which tell us about the dealings of the Egyptians of the *Sixth Dynasty* with Nubia, that we find some of the earliest recorded references to the use of interpretation.

The Egyptians tended to regard other nations and their languages as “barbarian”. In spite of their ethnocentric cultural and linguistic prejudices, however, they could not ignore alien languages altogether and in their trade relations with other peoples, e.g., had to rely on the services of interpreters.

In this context one might note that, according to Egyptian beliefs in the New Kingdom, the distinction of languages was attributed either to Thoth<sup>1</sup>, ‘who made different the tongue of one country from another’, or, as is in Akhenaton’s hymn, to Aton: ‘tongues are distinguished in speaking, their character likewise; their skin is made different, [because] thou hast differentiated the peoples’.

The questions that interest us are: Why was it that the princes of Elephantine became ‘*overseers of dragomans*’, as they proudly called themselves, and what functions and responsibilities did they have under the Pharaohs of the Sixth Dynasty?

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<sup>1</sup> In Egyptian religion, god of wisdom and magic. A patron of learning and of the arts, he was credited with many inventions, including writing, geometry, and astronomy. Thoth was also a messenger and scribe for the gods. As early as the Fifth Dynasty, Thoth was ‘Lord of Iunut’ (inhabitants of the Sinai peninsula) and ‘Lord of foreign lands’. He was variously represented as an ibis, an ibis-headed man, or a baboon.

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The answer to the first question lies in the geographical location of Elephantine. The First Cataract, which consists of rapids caused by great or black granite masses barring the way, provided Pharaonic Egypt with its natural frontier, though ethnically as well as physically the Nubian land may well have begun near Silsila, some 55 miles north of Aswân. This means that the area around Aswân, where the princes of Elephantine lived, was a bilingual border region. From the now submerged island of Philae to the Second Cataract is the tract of country known as *Lower Nubia*. Its people and those of *Sudan* spoke a tongue that required the services of a *dragoman* for its interpretation.

Gardiner suspects that the princes of Elephantine were probably themselves half Nubian by race; at all events they were acquainted with the language or languages of the tribes which they were called upon to visit.

In the *Old Kingdom*, relations with Nubia were generally peaceful. The advantages to be gained from friendly intercourse were mutual. Nubia was the source of various prized commodities, among them incense, ebony, leopard-skin, and elephant tusks, while the items brought by the Egyptians for the purposes of barter included oil, honey, clothing, pottery, and similar goods.

It was not until much later that the thought of colonizing Lower Nubia entered the Egyptians' minds. Wisely they accepted Elephantine as their southern frontier, realizing that the country beyond the First Cataract was undesirable as possession and that requirements could best be satisfied by special expeditions.

It was the princes of Elephantine who were put in charge of these and other expeditions. Gardiner speculates that they seem also to have been "hardier and better adapted for foreign travel" than most Egyptian nobles, since their journeys, which took them to faraway lands, were long and strenuous. Punt and Byblos are mentioned as places to which one of the princes was repeatedly sent. His servant claims a total of eleven journeys to Byblos and Punt, from which he safely returned. (Urk. I 140/141)

Another of them was dispatched to the 'country of the Asiatics', probably somewhere on the Red Sea, to retrieve the body of an Egyptian official, slain together with all his company whilst building a ship for a journey to Punt. This shows that not all expeditions

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were peaceful.

The most famous and informative of the Aswân inscriptions are those on the walls of the tomb of prince Harkhuf, who under king Merenrē and his successor, Piopi II, made four journeys to Nubia and the Sudan. His first expedition to Yam took seven months; it was followed by a second, 8-month journey ‘on the Elephantine road’, and a third one ‘on the Oasis road’. Harkhuf claims that his deeds and achievements were unrivaled by ‘any friend and *overseer of dragomans*’.

The inscription begins in the usual way with this titles and epithets of the prince and overseer of dragomans Karkhuf and then continues as follows: (Urk. I 124-127)

### *Right of the entrance*

#### A. First journey to Yam

The Majesty of Merenrē my lord sent me together with my father the unique friend and lector-priest Iri to Yam to open up the way to this country. I did it in seven months, and brought back from it all manner of goodly and rare presents, and was praised greatly on account of it.

#### B. Second journey to Yam

His majesty sent me a second time alone. I set forth upon the Elephantine road and returned from Irtje, Mekher, Tereros, and Irtjetj in the space of eight months. I returned and brought presents from this country in very great quantity, nor had ever the like been brought to this land before. I returned through the neighbourhood of the house of the chieftain of Zatu and Irtje. I had opened up these countries. Never had it been found done by any friend and *overseer of dragomans* who had gone forth to Yam before.

#### C. Third journey to Yam

His Majesty sent me a third time to Yam. I set forth from the Thinite nome

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upon the Oasis road...

### *Left of the entrance*

... and I returned with three hundred asses laden with incense, ebony, hknw-oil, leopard-skins, elephant tusks, and boomerangs and all goodly products. Now when the chieftain of Irtje, Zatu and Wawaē saw how strong and numerous was the troop of Yam that had returned with me to the Residence together with the soldiers who had been sent with me, then did this chieftain dispatch me and gave me oxen and goats and conducted me over the heights of Irtje by virtue of the vigilance which I had exercised beyond any friend and *overseer of dragomans* who had been sent to Yam before.

Now when this humble servant fared downstream to the Residence, there was caused to come to me the unique friend and overseer of the double bathroom Khuni, meeting me with ships laden with date-wine, cake, bread, and beer. the prince, seal-bearer of the King of Lower Egypt, unique friend, lector-priest, god's seal-bearer, confidant of (royal) commands, Harkhuf.

From his fourth journey, Harkhuf brought back a dancing pygmy (called 'Deng' in the inscription) for the youthful (probably 8-year old) king Piopi II, who had succeeded Merenrē by that time. On his tomb-wall he quotes a letter written by the king, in which Piopi II thanks and praises him and instructs him to take good care of the pygmy. (Urk. I 128-131) This is one of the most delightful documents from the Old Kingdom.

### D. Letter written by king Piopi II

Thou hast said in this thy letter that thou hast brought a Deng of the god's dances from the land of the Horizon-dwellers... and thou has said to My Majesty that never had the like of him been brought back by any other who has visited Yam previously. Truly I know that thou doest what thy Lord loves and praises. Truly thou passest day and night taking thought for me... My Majesty

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will perform thy many excellent requests so as to benefit the son of thy son eternally, and so that all people shall say when they hear what My Majesty did for thee: 'Is there the like of those things which were done for the Sole Companion Harkhuf, when he returned from Yam, on account of the vigilance which he showed to do what his Lord loves and praises and commands?' Come north to the Residence at once. Hurry and bring with thee this Deng... If he goes down with thee into the ship, get stalwart men who shall be around him on the deck, beware lest he fall into the water. Also get stalwart men to pass the night around him in his tent, and make inspection ten times in the night. My Majesty desires to see this Deng more than all the tribute of the Mine-land and of Punt...

In spite of the usual good relations, however, serious troubles could also break out in Nubia, as can be learned from the inscription of the tomb of Pepinakht (No. 35), which reads as follows:

The Majesty of my lord sent me to harry the lands of Wawaē and Irtje. I acted to the approval of my lord and slew a great number there, the children of the chieftain and doughty army-captains. And I brought thence to the Residence a large number of prisoners, I being at the head of many strong and bold soldiers.

The fact that these expeditions were often dangerous is also witnessed by the inscription of the tomb of Sabni I (No. 26). Having learned that his father had lost his life on an expedition to Nubia, Sabni set out with 100 donkeys to fetch his father's corpse and brought it back to Aswân where Mechu was buried with all due honors. (Tomb No. 25).

It might be argued that with the exception of the title 'overseer of dragomans' there is no reference to interpreting in any of these inscriptions. This is not surprising since, after all, the princes of Elephantine were foreign affaires experts who were entrusted with highly

important and often difficult political, economic and occasionally military missions. It is only natural, therefore, that the tomb-wall inscriptions should relate the tomb-owner's economic and diplomatic achievements. In view of what has been said about the Egyptians' lack of interest in alien languages it is quite remarkable that the princes' interpretation skills in dealings with peoples speaking a foreign tongue were deemed sufficiently important to merit special mention and inclusion in the enumeration of their many other titles and epithets (such as seal-bearer, unique friend, lector-priest, confidant or royal commands, etc.).

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