

Literature and Politics in the Time of Ramesses II : the Kadesh Inscriptions

EGYPTOLOGISTS regard the Kadesh inscriptions mainly as a source shedding light on the history of Egypt - Hittite relations and on the military history of the countries of the ancient East. An exhaustive analysis of the Kadesh inscriptions, however, shows that the latter are also an exceptionally important document on the history and the domestic policy of Ramesses II and on the Egyptian ideology at the beginning of Dynasty XIX. Though they do offer an account of a single historical event (the Kadesh battle which was fought in year five in the reign of Ramesses II), from the point of view of the political ideas underlying them, the inscriptions are by no means homogeneous.

The so-called "Bulletin" emphasises the divine nature of royal power and in ideological aspect is closely related to the North. The "Bulletin" reveals the policy of contempt towards Amun and Thebes. In the first place this becomes evident from the names of the deities with which Ramesses II becomes closely associated: Atum, Mont, Re, Sakhmet, Sutekh.

The name of Amun remains unmentioned throughout the "Bulletin", the only exception being the name of the King (Ramesse - Miamun). There is not even a hint of any help being extended by Amun. In all likelihood the "Bulletin" reflects the state of political life in Egypt in the early years of the reign of Ramesses II.

Unlike the "Bulletin", the so-called "Poem" is imbued with Amunocratic spirit. The "Poem" expresses the hatred the Theban priesthood harboured towards the army - the warriors are portrayed as ungrateful cowards, while Amun, unfailingly mindful of the royal nobility, helps the King in the time of the battle:

I called to you, my father Amun, when I was in the midst of multitudes whom I knew not. All foreign countries were combined against me, I being alone by myself, none other with me, my numerous infantry having abandoned me, not one looking at me of my chariotry, I kept on shouting to them, but not one of them hearkened to me as I called. I found Amun more useful than millions of infantry, than hundreds of thousands of chariotry...

The meaning is clear: it is better to endow the temples than to support the ungrateful warriors.

The propriety "Poem" sounds resentful even to the Pharaoh's men. While addressing his retinue, Ramesses says:

Did not I arise as Lord when you were, and I caused you to be high officers by my Beneficence...

We prefer the literal *nmḥ.w* to the well known translation of "poor", since in this case the translation of "poor" is not precise and withholds information about the socio-political circumstances in Egypt during the reign of Ramesses II. From the Amarna epoch onwards, the term *nmḥ.w* has been used to indicate the stratum which used to back Akheniten in his struggle against the Theban priesthood and the old hereditary aristocracy, which was closely associated with him. It is from the ranks of the *nmḥ.w* that the so-called bureaucratic aristocracy emerged.

As becomes apparent from the example quoted above, the Pharaoh's men have been labelled quite unambiguously as *nmḥ.w*. They were men under royal protection, who, because they stood high in the Pharaoh's favour, have won high positions for themselves.

Therefore the propriety feelings as manifested in the "Poem" unmistakably point to the fact that in the time of Ramesses II, his efforts against the Theban priesthood and the old hereditary aristocracy, closely associated with him have had a role to play in the history of Egypt in the early days of Dynasty XIX. It must have been particularly powerful in the years preceding Ramesses II's coming to the throne and probably in the first years of his reign as well.

... and making to cease all evil that was in this land? And I released to you your servants and gave you others who had been taken from you...

Similar measures in defence of the *nmh.w* rights were taken by Pharaoh Haremhab and this is verified by his Decree, though these were mostly measures to restrict the scope of outrages committed by the victors of Amarna. Apparently the words ascribed to Ramesses II are not a mere invention, but they are inspired by genuine historical facts, which actually define the political content of the "Poem". These were the internal-political struggles, the echo of which resounds in the "Poem", which eventually brought about the removal of the political and administrative centre to the North. It is evident that like his predecessor Akheniten, Ramesses II had found it necessary to narrow the influence exerted by the old hereditary aristocracy and the temple Theban aristocracy. The two opposite forces never came to an open clash. The priesthood and the temples in Egypt kept on flourishing in every respect and this holds true for Thebes as well.

The sentiments in the "Poem", however, bear evidence to the fact that the Theban priesthood and the old hereditary aristocracy had their access to the political power greatly restricted.

Such is the political content of the Kadesh inscriptions. Though they narrate scenes of the Kadesh battle, as a whole they contain the characteristics of the epoch in development, which unmistakably proves that the creation of the Kadesh inscriptions has been a long process, influenced and marked by the events of the internal political life of the country.

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