

Sehel and Suez: canal-cutting and periodisation in ancient and modern history

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ogni atto storico non può non essere compiuto dall "uomo collettivo"
Gramsci (Gerratana ed.) 1975: III,1331

In year 8 of the reign of Senusret III, about 1871 BC, sculptors inscribed on a granite boulder at Sehel Island, at the First Cataract, a scene with hieroglyphic inscription, immortalising the cutting of a channel along seventy-five metres of waterway. A range of other sources mark this reign as a turning-point in political history and development of material culture.

In AD 1869, the Khedive Ismail presided over the ceremonies inaugurating the Suez Canal, after a decade of construction work, a 'moment' inscribed into modern Egyptian history with critical ramifications, financial, geopolitical, military.

Despite their different scale, these two interventions by 'the State' may offer the possibility of a comparative historical study from within either of the separate university disciplines of History and Egyptology. Both events could be interpreted as opening new eras, in other words as structuring moments in the overarching historiographical task of periodisation. In this contribution, however, the two far-separated histories are juxtaposed to reveal a different structuring principle of an academic historiography focussed on rulers: the principle of indifference to loss of human life wherever the losses do not touch the dominant class, the class to which historians tend to belong or subscribe.

Sehel 1871 BC

At the start of the Middle Kingdom literary composition "spoken by the excellent Follower" (the 'Shipwrecked Sailor' in Anglophone Egyptology), the Follower exclaims:

ph.n.n phwy w3w3t we have reached the ends
of Wawat [Lower Nubia],
sn.n.n snmwt we have passed Senmut
[Sehel Island]"
(Golénischeff 1913; Quirke 2004: 71
for transliteration and translation).

This alliterative couplet defines, in a general manner, the island of Sehel as the southern boundary of the ancient Egyptian homeland, Kemet. On the granite cliffs along the south-eastern front of that island, an incised scene presents king Senusret III, "the younger god Khakaura", standing with mace and staff before the goddess "Satet lady of Abu" as she extends life to his nostrils (Gasse and Rondot 2007: 79-80, 456-457, no.147; map 3, square GG17). The hieroglyphic inscription before Satet performs her words "I have given you all life and power eternally", while that at the back of the king ensures "all protection of life behind him". To the left a smaller figure in long kilt is identified by two columns of hieroglyphic inscription as "king's sealer, sole companion, director of works in the entire land, treasurer Sen(?)-ankh" (reading uncertain, cf Grajetzki 2000: 51, sole source for this treasurer). Below the figures, six horizontal and two short vertical lines underpin this projection of kingship into eternity with chronologically fixed event, in the form of a summary of a decree from the ruler:

"(1) Regnal year 8 under the Person of the dual king Khakaura living forever.

Decree of His Person (2) to make the channel anew - name of this channel Fair-are-the-ways-of-Khakaura-eternally - (3) after the journey of His Person upstream to fell vile Kash.

- (4) Length of this channel 150 cubits
- (5) Breadth 20
- (6) Depth 15
- (7) in cu[ttin]g (?) ... (8) ..."

No archaeological expedition has located an ancient cutting that might correspond to these dimensions in the area it might be expected. A small island about fifty metres long does now, in higher water, lie parallel to the eastern side of Sehel island (Gasse and Rondot 2007: map 2, upper right "chenal antique?"). Without a secure identification, it is not clear how a cutting seventy-five metres long and ten metres wide could substantially ease the passage of river traffic. Landström notes the absence of Middle Kingdom images in two or three dimensions of cargo-ships, but finds evidence of the period to reconstruct rowing boats with sides manned by fifteen and twenty rowers each, indicating perhaps up to double the length of the preserved 9.74 to 10.2 m boats from the pyramid complex of Senusret III at Dahshur (Landström 1970: 75-93). The logistical impact of the Sehel channel requires more detailed study in relation to the scale of river boats on the Egyptian and Nubian Nile at the time of Senusret III (for more recent comments on cargo-ship size and tonnage at this period, see Marcus 2007: 155-157). Nevertheless, the scene stands out as one of the most prominent and finely executed on Sehel, and its very position at the homeland border indicates some exceptional reason for existing. On an ambitious interpretation, the expression "after" the "felling of vile Kash" might imply remedial work to solve operational difficulties encountered at the First Cataract by armed forces moving south. Egyptian military action in Nubia in year 8 is confirmed by a "southern boundary made in year 8" inscribed at Semna in the Second Cataract (Meurer 1996). More power was evidently required against a southern neighbour, presumably the rising might of Kerma, as further campaigns are attested for years 10, 16 and 19 (on these First and Second Cataract sources, see the summary in Tallet 2005: 40-52).

The description of the channel as "made anew" points back to an earlier cutting. Evidence for the original creation of the channel has been sought in a similar but undated scene with inscriptions, showing king Senusret III before another goddess of the First Cataract region, Anuqet, over on the western side of

the same south-eastern outcrop (Gasse and Rondot 2007: 77-78, 455, no.146; map 3, square O28). In this case, Silke Grallert notes that the channel "Fair-are-the-ways-of-Khakaura" is dedicated to the goddess, with the regular formula "(the king) made as his monument for (the deity)", creating a religious word-frame in place of the more military one (Grallert 2001: 180). The undated Anuqet and year-8 Satet inscriptions might be exactly contemporary, differentiated not by date but by focus on religious procession versus military operational passage. That possibility forces us to leave unresolved whether any earlier cutting might date to earlier in the same reign, or be more ancient, back to early Middle or late Old Kingdom. Despite the uncertainty over dating, a new higher status for the channel from the reign of Senusret III seems implicit in the extraordinary inscriptional and pictorial programme to immortalise its cutting.

The Nubian connection in combination with the date in the reign of Senusret III places the channel at the heart of wide-ranging transformations in life along the lower Nile Valley and Delta. In material cultural terms, as visible in ceramic production and in burial customs, in art history and administrative history, the reign marks the break between two clearly distinct phases – early and late Middle Kingdom (Gestermann 1995; Bourriau 1991; Quirke 1990: 5-6 n.3 for the additional evidence of Berlev 1962). In the later phase Egypt has not so much different borders, as a different type of border. In the new series of Second Cataract fortresses and the related boundary stelae, the political unit of Egypt and Lower Nubia received sharper definition against the outside, specifically against Kerma-based Kush to the south. If the Sehel channel significantly eased, or was intended to ease, First Cataract communication, its cutting indicates a parallel effort at redefinition within the territory controlled by the Egyptian kingship, at the internal border between Egypt and occupied Lower Nubia. From a late Middle Kingdom burial at Thebes, the papyrus known as the Ramesseum Onomasticon includes a list of Egyptian fortresses in Lower Nubia, a documentary expression of the militarised province (Gardiner 1916; 1947). Its evidence is corroborated by the "Semna Despatches", a late Middle Kingdom papyrus from the same find, containing a string of fortress reports to the Southern City of Egypt, Thebes, and by fragments of similar reports on papyrus found in situ at fortress sites (Smither

1945; Smith 1976: 31-37, pl.LXIA-LXVIII). After the reign of Senusret III, the bureaux and titles at the national level of administration receive more precise and standardised expression, with a clearer image of two zones: Middle and Lower Egypt centred on the Residence at Itjtawy (Lisht, midway between Memphis and Fayum); and the administratively separate region called the "Head of the South", centred on the Southern City, Thebes. The fortress despatches demonstrate the role of Thebes in this regional system as the node linking Itjtawy not only to Upper Egyptian, but also to Nubian revenue. The massive storage capacity of the fortresses points to substantial cargo requiring passage between Egypt and Nubia (Kemp 1986). The historical significance of the canal will have to be assessed on the scale of its impact on that river traffic.

Some three and a half to four centuries later, more inscriptions on kingship and canal were added to the rock face looking across the same waters. Farthest south, and at some distance from the other writings on the south-eastern Sehel rocks, an inscription under the Horus name and cartouches of Thutmes I (about 1500 BC) reads:

"(1) Regnal year 3, month 1 summer, day 22: sailing of His Person on this channel in (2) strength, in might on his return from felling vile Kush. (3) The king's son Turi" (Gasse and Rondot 2007: 128-129, 478, no.233; map 3, square HH25).

Much closer to the great scene of Senusret III before Satet, another hieroglyphic inscription of Thutmes I adds information on restoration, dated to the same day:

"(1) Regnal year 3, month 1 summer, day 22 under the Person of (2) the dual king Aakheperkara, given life. Decree of His Person to cut (3) this channel after he found it [block](4)-ed with stones, so that no [ship] could sail [on it]. (5) He [sail]ed [north] on it, his heart [elated ...] (6) The king's son [...]" (Gasse and Rondot 2007: 130, 478, no.234; map 3, square HH18).

The lacunae in these lines can be filled thanks to an extended version from the reign of Thutmes III, inscribed between the Thutmes I inscriptions, from

the same day of the same month in the "civil", that is 365-day, year:

"(1) Regnal year 50, month 1 summer, day 22 under the Person of the dual king Menkheperra, given life. (2) Decree of His Person to cut this channel after he found it (3) blocked with stones, so that no ship could sail on it. (4) He sailed north on it, his heart elated, after he had slain his enemies. (5) The name of this canal is "Opener of the way as the fair one of (6) Menkheperra, living eternally". It is the fishermen of (7) Abu who are to clear this canal every year." (Gasse and Rondot 2007: 137, 483, no.242; map 3, square HH21).

Inclusion of local fishermen for maintenance introduces the crucial factor previously never more than implicit in the inscriptions on digging these Cataract waterways, the labour that kingship needed to make transport work. The decree of Thutmes III imposes the task of clearance on a local workforce, though leaving blank the calculation of labour costs either for the year 50 dredging or for the original cutting. None of these Sehel canal inscriptions refer to the possibility of casualties. Without documented parallels from the same period, the human cost of these local operations cannot easily be estimated. At least the question of that cost does surface in Middle Kingdom inscriptions from quarrying and mining expeditions, where expedition leaders claim to complete their task without loss. In their edition of inscriptions in the quarries of Wadi Hammamat, Couyat and Montet noted the link of narrative genre, across accountancy and appeal for divine intervention, between inscriptions celebrating expeditionary heroism, and the literary composition on the Follower ("Shipwrecked Sailor"):

"dans les cas difficiles, ils s'adressaient aux divinités du désert, à Min en particulier qui savait remettre dans le bon chemin les caravanes égarées, indiquer une citerne favorablement placée, accorder un bon retour. Quand le but du voyage était atteint, ils se comptaient et s'ils apercevaient que tout le monde était présent, que pas même un âne ne manquait à l'appel, ils poussaient des acclamations en l'honneur de Montou. Il est impossible de ne pas rapprocher de ces divers épisodes le début bien connu de

l'histoire du Naufragé: "Voici, nous avons atteint la résidence, on a pris le maillet et enfoncé le pieu, le câble a été posé sur le sol. On prie et on remercie Dieu; tout le monde s'embrasse. Notre troupe est revenue en bonne santé. Aucune perte ne se produisit parmi nos soldats". "

(Couyat and Montet 1912: 10-11)

Three Wadi Hammamat inscriptions provide the evidence for this summary. The earliest records an expedition by vizier Amenemhat in year 2 of king Nebtawyra Mentuhotep, with the assertion:

h3.n mšc nn nhw.f The army went down
without loss,
n 3k s n htjt tst not a man had perished,
no troop had strayed (?),
n mwt 3 nn gb hmww not (even) a donkey died,
no craftsmen were missing.

(Couyat and Montet 1912: 80, no.113,
line 14).

In an inscription from the following reign, of king Amenemhat I, the mayor and overseer of god's servants of Min, the king's envoy Sobeknakht's son Intef, states baldly that no-one had died, rich or poor (the only use of this expression noted by Seyfried 1981: 279):

h3.kwi r kmt I went down to Kemet
mšc r dr.f nn ht sšm the entire army without
straying from the march,
n mwt wr nds neither greater nor lesser
had died.
ph kmt m htj Reaching Kemet in peace
hr spd m prt n st by sharpness in going out
from (?) the place.

(Couyat and Montet 1912: 102, no.199,
lines 9-10).

Several decades later, in year 38 of the next king, Senusret I, an inscription in the name of a high official Amenemhat claims a similarly deathless success:

h3.n.i m htj m 3bd 4 3ht sw 6 I went down in
peace on month 4
of Flood day 6
m-s3 inr 80 m itjw after eighty blocks
in hauling

n s 2000 n 1500 n 1000 by 2000 men, by
1500, by 1000,
ph mryt m 3bd 4 3ht sw 20 Reaching the
shore on month 4

ir.n.i wdt.n nb c.w.s I had done what
the Lord l.p.h.
had commanded,
nn gb s nn ib hr w3t without loss of a
man, without
thirst on the way,
nn ir 3t nftt without spending
an erring moment,
mšc tm ii m cd the whole army
returned in safety.

(Couyat and Montet 1912: 65, no.87,
lines 6-10).

Among the recorded extant Middle Kingdom inscriptions from Sinai expeditions, such narratives are still rarer. The most famous, that of Horwerra for king Amenemhat III, recounts an expedition in a particularly unfavourable season for sighting turquoise or copper ore, with the insistent note:

ii.n mšc.i mh r-dr.f my army returned
entirely filled,
n sp hpr nhw im not once had any
loss befallen it

(Gardiner and Peet 1917: pl.25A,
no.90, West Face, line 15; Gardiner
et al. 1955: 97, and cf p.119 no.115
"when he arrived (home) in safety
with his expedition", and p.139,
no.140 "my craftsmen arrived quite
complete, there was never a case of
loss among them").

Despite such acknowledgements of hardship escaped, actual fatality counts are absent from the meticulous project budget calculations and staff listings among the dozens of inscriptions left in Wadi Hammamat, Wadi al-Hudi and Sinai by Middle Kingdom quarrying and mining expeditions. The immortalisation of an expedition projected its benefits, with no cause to mention any negative point other than in the double negative "no loss". A hint of casualties emerges, then, only indirectly from

the relative rarity of its admission, by that motif in the inscriptions.

Here it should be noted that one remarkable hymn to labour has survived from the same period, judging by its language and by one source for the first part of the composition: the Loyalist Teaching (Posener 1976). The first seven sections out of the total fourteen constitute a hymn to the reigning king, before the high official delivering the Teaching advises his hearers to educate their children in restraint and then, on *ky sp* "another theme", prospering the people who create the wealth on which officials live:

<i>hn m rmt s3k wndwt.tn</i>	Be well-supplied with people, collect up your staff,
<i>Br.tn hr hm n iryw</i>	Fasten on the motor of the doers.
<i>in rmt shpr nty</i>	For it is people who create what is,
<i>nh.tw imy m wy.sn</i>	and we live as the "haves" by their arms.
<i>g3y.tw r.f shm m sw3w</i>	Lack it, and poverty takes over.

(Posener 1976; transliteration and English translation Quirke 2004: 110, section 9).

This passage from written literature, that is, from the leisure of a dominant class, expresses a conscious sense of reliance on labour, albeit in the language of self-preservation for the dominating (cf de Ste Croix 1981: 438 on the ideology of charity). On this evidence, the impact of labour conditions is an ancient as well as a modern question in writing and thought as well as in practice.

Port Said AD 1869

For all its possible influence on the major changes in the nineteenth century BC, the 75-metre Sehel channel is clearly in a league remote from the 173 km long canal from Suez to Port Said, a waterway that changed communication patterns across and around Africa, Asia and Europe. Only the width and depth, originally at 52 and 44 metres respectively, seem in the sphere of the comparable. Yet the dense documentation on Suez Canal construction seems to

leave questions of human cost just as open as the Sehel channel inscriptions 3,750 years earlier.

On November 17 1869 Eugénie de Palafox, the wife of Louis Napoleon (still then Emperor Napoleon III for a year to come), joined the governor of Egypt Khedive Ismail at Port Said for the formal inauguration of the Suez Canal. Budget expenditure on the canal and the associated European financing arrangements are considered primary causes of the financial ruin of the ruling dynasty in Egypt, leading to the 1876 bankruptcy over which England deposed Ismail in 1879 (cf Owen 1993). Three years into the rule by his successor Tawfik, London sent a fleet to bombard Alexandria and an army to occupy the country, to protect the military interests of the British Empire and the shareholders of the Canal Company. The last occupying soldiers left only after the Suez Crisis at the English-French-Israeli invasion and its American-imposed withdrawal in 1956. The late nineteenth- to mid-twentieth-century history of Egypt is in this sense an era of Suez, followed or developed by the era of the Aswan High Dam.

Repeatedly, in political and diplomatic histories of the Suez Canal, no attempt is made to calculate the human cost (Marlowe 1964; Burchell 1966; Schwanitz 1998). Conditions of work did, though, form a central plank in English media campaigns against French control of the construction project during its first phase, in the early 1860s. The nationalist self-interest and hypocrisy of this accurate British attack has been documented on several fronts; the London press did not consider the human cost when it came to celebrating the opening of the canal, nor did the commentators attacking the French company address the forced unpaid labour used for the British-financed Stephenson project for a Cairo-Suez railroad, or the deplorable conditions in English mines or factories (Karabell 2003: 172). In his own self-defence, the project initiator Ferdinand de Lesseps complained that his Westminster political enemies made no attack on Russia for its serfdom or Washington for its slave economy. These attacks and counter-attacks among Western colonial powers illustrate the educational principle that central historical issues emerge most clearly from the histories each tells of the other:

"Give them [university professors] themes that will objectively force them to take our point of view. For example, make them teach the history of

the colonial world: there, after all, even bourgeois writers can only “expose” each other in all kinds of dastardly behaviour: the English expose the French, the French the English, and the Germans both at once. “The literature of the subject” will oblige your professors to recount the atrocities of capitalism in general.”

(Lenin to Pokrovsky, cited from Fitzpatrick 1992: 42-43).

The 1860s Anglo-French dispute turned on the use of forced labour. The cutting of the canal spanned the transition from a neo-feudal system of forced labour, built on previous seasonal universal labour obligations (the *corvée*) to more dependable methods of labour exploitation (Toth 1999: 103 citing al-Shinawi 1958). On the debate, Farnie notes that “The Company published no full statistics of mortality and thus could not check the spread of rumours of high mortality” (Farnie 1969: 65). According to an information brochure of the nationalised Canal Authority, an estimated 120,000 people died during the decade of cutting (Younes 1964, without evidence). A more recent historian of the canal, Hubert Bonin, cites this source to refute it, though without evidence (Bonin 1987: 21). Bonin suggests that the decade-long cutting of the Canal killed hundreds of workers, rather than the thousands of victims on the construction of the Panama Canal and railroad (another project of de Lesseps):

“Certes les maladies, les accidents du travail et les conditions de vie difficiles expliquent que, sur une telle masse d’ouvriers, quelques centaines de décès soient survenues en dix ans.”

This passage deploys the criterion of scale, a point it shares with majority Western denials of massive loss of life under European colonial Empires, or minority but vocal Western denials of Nazi or Stalinist death-counts. Numbers here enable us to achieve what Stanley Cohen has termed “interpretive denial”; “by changing words, by euphemism, by technical jargon, the observer disputes the cognitive meaning given to an event and re-allocates it to another class of event” (Cohen 2001: 8, on “interpretive denial”). With the Suez construction fatalities, the decimal point need only be moved one direction or another, for a loss of life to become excusable or inexcusable, here

implanting an unwritten “only” before the “some hundreds”. The Bonin acceptance of lower high casualties makes explicit an underlying attitude of Western society to construction workers, transferred to other cultures by Karabell in his comparison between the Suez Canal construction and earlier parallels of comparable scale (Karabell 2003: 169):

“The Great Pyramids at Giza, the Great Wall of China, the temple of Angkor Wat in Cambodia – all were the products of hundreds of thousands of peasants who were corralled by armies of the state, taken to the sites, and put to work. Whether they survived was not a primary concern.”

From his general review of the evidence, more humanely expressed than that in Bonin, Karabell concludes that the early Canal Company regime was not especially harsh, and that several hundred Europeans and “more than fifteen hundred Arabs and Egyptians” died in the 1865 cholera epidemic, the “single largest cause of fatalities” during the decade of construction (Karabell 2003: 172, 216-217). The gap between the Younes 120,000 and the Bonin hundreds or Karabell low thousands could be taken to reveal a fundamental structuring principle in historiography and social perception of humanity. The conceptual force needed to keep open that gap can be seen in the phrasing deployed by Bonin. In the following summary, he first acknowledges absolute dependency on labour, as had the ancient Egyptian Loyalist Instruction, but then he installs as Hero the Canal Company (Bonin 1987: 21):

“La force musculaire est la clé du succès des travaux qui gardent un aspect archaïque, sinon “antique”. La Compagnie a dû batailler contre la maladie, les démissions massives, le désert.”

Finally, the heroic individual is acclaimed as enthusiastically as any self-presentation among the Middle Kingdom expeditionary inscriptions, here as beneficiary of providence:

“Lesseps a eu la chance de ne pas se heurter à des obstacle exceptionnels: l’épidémie de choléra s’est vite dissipée. Les fellahs ne se sont pas révoltés et ont été maintenus sur les chantiers par les autorités égyptiennes.”

A Euroamerican publication constructs a similar self-contradiction of labouring reality and heroic status (Burchell 1966). The author notes that “without Egyptian labourers de Lesseps could do nothing” (p.120), but evidently considers local opposition illegitimate, when the statue of de Lesseps at Port Said is reported as having been blown up by dynamite “placed by a member of an Egyptian mob” (p.148).

In 1860s Egypt, as elsewhere throughout colonial and rural histories, an external domination co-opted a regional elite, revealing a conflict that is more class-based than a nationalist reading might allow (cf Gran 2004). Egyptian nationalists need only read histories of nineteenth-century French and English labour, to appreciate how easily certain lives are sacrificed anywhere. In London and Paris, Health and Safety legislation for labour made slow progress across the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Wilkinson 2001: 25-49; Buzzi et al. 2006: 10-23; for a twenty-first century account, Jounin 2008). Early in that struggle, at the age of twenty-four, Friedrich Engels described industrial life at Manchester, in his *The Condition of the Working Class in England*; the digging of the Suez Canal came midway between the original German edition of 1845 and the second English version of 1892. For the latter, the author wrote a new preface where he noted how, despite notable local changes, the increased scale of social problems was simply disguised by relocation onto another place or people; “the bourgeoisie have made further progress in the art of hiding the distress of the working-class” (Engels 1987 [1892]: 37). Ever since, the offending spectacles of suffering have continued to undergo relocation to other, bounded and policed landscapes of poverty.

The twenty-first century reader might also consider the monumental landscapes created by their own society, and look for any consciousness or tangible memorial marking the lives lost in construction. The intrusive state projects of Senusret III and Khedive Ismail ask to be placed in a balance with national prestigious construction projects from the Channel Tunnel and Aswan High Dam to redevelopments such as Potsdamer Platz. Here we find the flesh and blood of the warning from Walter Benjamin that “every document of civilization is at the same time one of barbarism” (from Benjamin 2009 [1940], VII: “Es ist niemals ein Dokument der Kultur, ohne zugleich ein

solches der Barbarei zu sein”). Modern histories and their readers share with ancient inscription the same regular nonchalance over lives of manual labour. Given the relatively little that the modern and ancient societies share, this phenomenon of ideological self-blinding may operate as constitutive element of social stratification. False consciousness seems too elegant a term for this lethally effective manoeuvre. Ancient and modern historians alike still play their part in policing it.

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