THE LIBYAN PERIOD IN EGYPT

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THE INUNDATION INSCRIPTION IN LUXOR TEMPLE

Susanne Bickel

A long inscription engraved in hieratic script is situated in the southeast corner of the peristyle court of Amenhotep III in the Luxor Temple. It was inscribed in the reign of Osorkon III, son of Isis, beloved of Amun and is divided into 21 lines located on the base of the wall facing west towards the hypostyle hall and 30 lines on the wall facing north towards the court. Daressy published this text in 1896 and Jansen-Winkeln most recently gave a revised edition.[1] Apart from some brief references to individual passages, the inscription has never been studied as a whole.[2]
The text begins with a date in year 3 of Osorkon III. It thus refers roughly to the beginning of the eighth century and the establishment of Osorkon's sole rule over Upper Egypt, after several decades of harsh struggles for power between rival lineages. The "Chronicle of the Prince" engraved on the Bubastide Gate at Karnak gives an account of the conflicts and intestine wars in the form of annals mainly from the perspective of the High Priest of Amun Osorkon, son of Takeloth II. We can now be fairly sure that this High Priest (Osorkon B) later became king Osorkon III and that this man had an exceptionally long career with 32 years in the service of the god and another 28 years as pharaoh of the 23rd dynasty.[3]
The inscription in Luxor Temple, however, does not deal with political events, but centres entirely on a catastrophically high Nile flood. This major natural phenomenon is also documented in the Nile level records on the quay of Karnak. There, the inundation of year 3 of Osorkon III is by far the highest of the entire Third Intermediate Period. It is surpassed only by the slightly higher flood that took place under Taharqa, over a century later.[4] Geomorphologic investigations are still at their beginning in Egypt, and it remains difficult to reconstruct the exact position and height of the Nile for any given period. But the Karnak Nile level marks indicate that this particular flood in year 3 of Osorkon III was about 70 cm higher than an abundant flood that was considered ideal for agriculture. These 70 cm were catastrophic for the mud brick houses of a city like Thebes, which was not built on higher desert ground but on old riverbanks.

The Luxor Inscription contains much more than the mere information that this exceptional flood occurred in year 3 of Osorkon. In an exceptional way, it conveys the popular reaction to the calamity as well as the ritual actions undertaken to ward off the rising waters from the city and the temple.

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[1] G. Daressy, Une inondation à Thèbes sous le règne d'Osorkon II, *RecTrav* 18 (1896), 181-186; K. Jansen-Winkeln, *Inschriften der Spätzeit, Teil II: Die 22.-24. Dynastie*, Wiesbaden 2007, 298-301.

[2] The author of these lines is preparing a philological and cultural analysis of this text to appear in 2009 in the series Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis.

[3] M. Ohshiro, The Identity of Osorkon III, *Bulletin of the Ancient Orient Museum, Tokyo (BAOM)* 20 (1999), 33-50. On this chronology, cf. K. Jansen-Winkeln, The Chronology of the Third Intermediate Period: Dyns.22-24, in E. Hornung, R. Krauss, D.A. Warburton (eds), *Ancient Egyptian Chronology*, Leiden and Boston 2006, 242-258.

[4] G.P.F. Broekman, The Nile Level Records of the twenty-second and twenty-third Dynasties in Karnak: a Reconsideration of their Chronological Order, *JEA* 88 (2002), 163-178; S. J. Seidlmayer, *Historische und moderne Nilstände, Untersuchungen zu den Pegelablesungen des Nils von der Frühzeit bis in die Gegenwart*, Achet A.1, Berlin 2001, 63-73.

One of the major points of interest of this inscription is that it relates to several textual genres, and that it verges on the borders of temple decorum, including sections that appear much less formal than others. Its form of script is also noticeable. Despite being situated inside a temple, it is written in Hieratic and it is arguably the longest text in this script engraved in stone. Hieratic was regularly used for much shorter graffiti, which raises the question whether it should be classified as a graffito, as often said, or rather as a temple inscription with some degree of official status.
Moreover, it is located exactly on the border between two distinct parts of the temple, on the interface between the great open court and the hypostyle hall. The court was probably granted some form of public access through the gate in its northeast corner opening towards the town, whereas the hypostyle hall is the first part of the sanctuary with highly restricted access.
The text could be generally characterized as a negotiation between the population of Thebes and its protector Amun, in which the priests served as mediators. The natural disaster gave rise to several types of conventional and some rather unconventional religious actions.
Immediately after the date and the royal names, which normally introduce an official inscription, follows a highly vivid description of the extraordinary event:

"The flood swells over the dikes of the entire land,
as in the First Time it rose over the riverbanks,
like the sea it /// this land through its power,
no man-made dam can hold off its ravage,
all people are like ducks/flea (?).
Over its city it rages...
...
The inhabitants of his city are like swimmers in a wave."

This is one of the most explicit narratives of a devastating Nile flood; a phenomenon, which is otherwise mostly referred to with euphemisms.
The description insists on the fact that the inhabitants of Thebes are badly distressed and endangered by the disaster. In the subsequent passage, it is stated that not only the city was affected by the flood waters but even the god's own temple, in particular the pillared hall in front of the bark sanctuary, exactly the location where the inscription is situated. It also indicates that the event coincided with the end of a procession, the moment when Amun of Luxor returned, probably after its decade procession to Djeme.

The sentence "no man-made dam can hold off its ravage" indicates that human possibilities to dam up the flood had been exhausted and that another register of actions had to be employed, in the form of a direct address to the god. The vivid description of the calamity is rendered not just in a narrative form, but rather as a direct complaint of the inhabitants of Thebes put to their god:

"This is their cry in the sky towards Ra
as this great god reaches the beautiful island
and goes to rest in the holy shrine."

At the very moment of the passing of the god's statue, the Thebans expressed their despair. Direct addresses to Amun-Ra were very common in the Third Intermediate Period, and to a lesser extent even long before. Various forms of oracular petitioning took place both in official contexts and at an individual level. However, a collective cry (*sbḥ*), or a shared public expression of grievance is quite exceptional.
As in the case of many oracular situations, this collective invocation took place in the open court of the temple on the occasion of a procession. The "beautiful island" might be a reference either specifically to the great court of Luxor or else to the entire temple.

Such a collective outburst of emotions, even though conditioned by utmost desperation, was not appropriate inside a god's sanctuary. Neither was the temple a place to express lamentation, nor were its walls, according to general conventions, intended to receive a written complaint. Therefore, the situation was immediately canalised and turned into a more acceptable form of behaviour:

"Then the *sa-meref*-priest put forward
what was composed by the priest of Amun-Ra, king of the gods, and royal scribe in the house of [Amun] Nakht-tayf-mut,[son of the priest] of Amun Bakenkhonsu."

Official and ritual action is now pursued, and the god will be praised with a lengthy hymn. The rather rare priestly title *sa-meref* clearly refers to the king. This priest, who is not called by name, fulfils the role of "the son whom he (the god) loves", i.e. the king. His action is also royal, for he utters a *wḏ*, he pronounces words of authority. He does not give an order, however, but he recites a beautiful hymn, which runs over the next 12 lines, almost a quarter of the entire text.[5] This is, by the way, one of the earliest known hymns to be inscribed on a temple wall, long before the famous examples in Hibis, and it is also one of the very few instances in which we know the author of the hymn, namely the priest Nakht-tayf-mut, son of Bakenkhonsu. The inscription seems to imply that the hymn was composed specifically for this occasion, though this can not be deduced from the very general wording of the god's praise. The god, who is not named, is addressed as a solar deity, creator and life giving benefactor. He is praised for all his creative actions and beneficent deeds, as for instance, rather incongruously in the given context: "who comes as Hapy to flood the Two Lands, to give life to every body through his precision." The hymn centres explicitly on the nome and the city of Thebes, which is presented as the actual purpose of creation. The final section is a poetic depiction of the city of Thebes: "it smells of all kinds of myrrh, perfumes and spices, it is the most cherished favourite place of the gods". This part of the hymn is a fine example of the rather small group of texts called 'praise of the city'.

The inscription could have ended here, as this was probably about as much as could be done ritually in the desperate situation. First to attract the god's attention to the people's distress and secondly to implore him by praising him intensely.

However, an over-abundant flood confronted the ancient Egyptians with a great dilemma. The flood water was perceived to be entirely positive, it was divine and beneficent. How then was one to react to such a devastating excess of beneficence? No normative or ritual action was available with which to react to such a paradoxical situation. Royal texts referring to over-abundant inundations always remain silent as to their destructive aspects or they treat these in understatements or euphemisms. The royal texts interpret the phenomenon as an extraordinary divine sign, as a miracle through which a god expressed particular favour to the king.[6] As the pharaoh was held responsible for the fertility of nature and the well-being of society, and –at least in the New Kingdom– in particular for the ideal height of the flood, the strategy of putting a positive spin on a destructive flood and ascribing it to the god's will was the only possible reaction within the framework of royal ideology.
The Luxor Inscription, however, does not use any embellishing rhetoric at all. Despite its official-sounding beginning, it is not a royal inscription, because the king is conspicuously absent except for the dating formula and for an isolated mention at its very lacunary end. Was Osorkon III absent when the catastrophe reached Thebes? Or was it for ideological reasons that he had to send a representative, the *sa-meref*-priest? The desperate population might not have accepted any

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[5] Partly translated in C. Knigge, *Das Lob der Schöpfung*, OBO 219, Freiburg and Göttingen 2006, 182-184.

[6] S. Bickel, Creative and Destructive Waters in: A. Amenta, M.M. Luiselli, M.N. Sordi (eds) *L'acqua nell'Antico Egitto*, Rome 2005, 191-200.

euphemistic and conventional language and might even have blamed the king for the disaster, a risk he could not take in times of potential political instability. However, the situation may also reflect a change in royal ideology: the kings were perhaps no longer considered powerful enough to assume responsibility for the Nile flood. The phenomenon had come to be considered to depend entirely on the god's will.

After the very decorum-related intervention of the *sa-meref*-priest and the extensive praise of the god and his city, the text changes radically in character and it seems to come back to more spontaneous manifestations of the inhabitants of Thebes, or to invocations presented by the priests in the name of the inhabitants. Following the lyric description of Thebes as the "most cherished favourite place of the gods", the text continues: "Who can protect it (Thebes) except you?" and later we read, with an imperative: "Come to the south... to your great temple". Subsequently, the text reports on all the construction work that had been undertaken previously to embellish the temple. This passage implicitly stresses the people's righteous conduct and thereby rejects the possibility that the calamity could be their own fault.
The entire second half of the text, which is badly damaged in its end, seems to consist of an intense debate with Amun, in the form of a monologue by the Thebans. Direct summons phrased as imperatives alternate with questions addressed to the god.

"Pay attention and listen to the inhabitants of the nome,
who are calling upon you every day
to drive out all the misery from this city!
...
What can humans understand?
Hapy enters as you have ordered,
why then is he filling your temple to its depth?
Rise and appear in Thebes!"

These passages express the people's perplexity regarding the evident contradiction between the benevolent divine will and their disastrous situation. The vocabulary partly recalls Late New Kingdom expressions of individual religiosity (implore, call upon, misery). But the text is far more than a prayer or a call for help. It raises essential questions relating to the significance of the god's action. Full of doubt and with a tone of clearly perceptible reproach it calls directly upon the deity. This passage is probably one of the longest and most immediate and explicit attestations of Egyptian theodicy in the first millennium BCE. It questions the god's passivity and non-intervention in a situation of utmost affliction, where the people's range of action had been insufficient, but where the deity could have intervened effectively. As in the older, mainly literary sources relating to this topic, the creator is "judged by the standards of human ethics".[7]

The expression of the Thebans' despair is seemingly unprompted and highly emotional. But is it really so spontaneous and outside of every conventionality? To find the delicate topic of theodicy inscribed on a temple wall seems indeed very far from what we expect based on what we know about temple decorum.
The fact that a roughly contemporary text known as "die Worte von Heliopolis"[8] offers not only a structurally close parallel but certain literally identical passages opens an interesting field of investigation into this little known type of writing and its intertextuality. The text is preserved on

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[7] R.B. Parkinson, *Poetry and Culture in Middle Kingdom Egypt*, London and New York 2002, 131-132. A. Loprieno, Theodicy in Ancient Egyptian Texts, in A. Laato, J.C. de Moor (eds), *Theodicy in the World of the Bible*, Leiden 2003, 27-56.

[8] J. Osing, Die Worte von Heliopolis, in M. Görg (ed.), *Fontes atque pontes*, Fs. Hellmut Brunner, ÄAT 5, Wiesbaden 1983, 347-361; id. Die Worte von Heliopolis (II), *MDAIK* 47 (1991), 267-279.

papyrus Berlin 3056 which originates from Thebes and probably dates to the reign of Takeloth III, the son and successor of Osorkon III.[9]
The "Words of Heliopolis" also refers to a calamity, namely an invasion of foreigners. It contains a hymn to Amun, and a collective invocation, which asks the god to explain and justify the disastrous situation. Furthermore, the "Words of Heliopolis", written on papyrus, claims to be copied from a temple wall next to the image of Amun.

The Luxor Inundation Inscription is of a highly complex structure. As is confirmed by its date and the Karnak Nile level records, the text refers to a historical event, which in all probability was dramatic for the inhabitants of Thebes. It starts with a vivid description of the circumstances, which is formulated as a collective "cry" to Amun-Ra and it is located in time and place at the favourable moment of a procession's return to Luxor Temple. Then follows the long hymn delivered by the king's substitute, which takes the text back into an official setting and to the level of ritual discourse. The second part is the series of demands, questions and reproaches addressed to the god, which is rather unexpected in a temple setting.
Does the text merely conceal a sequence of expressions and actions, both popular and priestly, performed within the framework of a historic event? Or is it, despite its spontaneous appearance, a deliberately structured composition belonging to a hitherto little-known text genre with both literary and religious aspects? The succession of complaint, praise and contention, as found in this inscription, is typical of several literary compositions, which address the theme of theodicy.[10]
The Luxor Inundation Inscription and the "Words of Heliopolis", –if we assume this text was originally also engraved on a Theban temple wall–, seem to attest to the fact that the temples of the Third Intermediate Period had acquired a new dimension. They had become a place of intense communication between men and the gods. Oracular consultations were regularly organised not only as basis for political decisions, but also for matters of law and justice. Within this framework of communication, it seems possible that in difficult situations even a form of contention could be staged within the temple courtyards as a means of creating a dialogue with the deity aimed at persuading the god to intervene in favour of the distressed population. In the Luxor Inundation Inscription, this very delicate matter of *increpatio* or reproof was approached within a well thought-out composition, which was ritually enacted as well as engraved in front of the god.

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[9] F. Payraudeau, *GöttMisc* 198 (2004), 82-85; K. Jansen-Winkeln, in E. Hornung et al. (eds), *Ancient Egyptian Chronology*, 253.

[10] E. Blumenthal, Der Vorwurf an Rensi, *ZÄS* 131 (2004), 1-22.