Pharaoh Sheshonq I (c. 943-923 BCE) is traditionally viewed as the founder of the 22nd Dynasty, which, due to the king’s Libyan origins and main residence, is also referred to as Libyan or Bubastite Dynasty. What makes this king a corner stone for Egyptian-Levantine interrelations as well as Biblical Studies and archaeology alike is his report about campaigning in the southern Levant. According to 1 Kings 14:25-28 and 2 Chronicles 12:2-9, Pharaoh Shishak looted the temple in Jerusalem in the 5th year of Rehoboam taking with him plentiful bounty: “and he took away the treasures of the house of the LORD, and the treasures of the king’s house; he even took away all; and he took away all the shields of gold which Solomon had made”.

Sheshonq (Shishak) in Palestine: Old Paradigms and New Vistas
By Felix Höflmayer and Roman Gundacker
When the inscription and great list of Sheshonq I on the south wall of the Bubastite Portal in Karnak were discovered, scholars immediately connected them with the narrative of the Hebrew Bible. Seemingly a perfect corroboration of the Biblical narrative, the royal inscription in Egypt offered one of the earliest external synchronisms for Biblical chronology.
The link between the Egyptian inscription and the verses in the Hebrew Bible was perceived as even stronger and more reliable, after a fragment of a stela bearing the name of Sheshonq I was found in the excavations of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago at Megiddo. Although this piece was found out of context and its overall nature was (and remains) unclear due to its extremely fragmentary condition, it was soon accepted as a victory stela of Sheshonq I that was set up by him on the ruins of Megiddo’s Stratum IV (or, according to other scholars, Stratum V).
In due course, Sheshonq I’s campaign became an unavoidable peg in the chronological system of Iron Age Israel and seemed only too useful for dating destruction layers in archaeological sites. Soon, not only Megiddo V/IV, but also Rehov V, Taanach IIB and Gezer Stratum VIII were linked with the military campaign, as it was assumed that the early Iron Age IIA Level XII at Arad is referred to in Sheshonq I’s list, which in turn could be correlated with several other stratigraphic phases of sites near and far all over the region.

In the light of the importance and wide-ranging implications of the Egyptian inscription, it is therefore important to review what we actually know and try to disentangle the grown factoid that this inscription, its topographical list and the Biblical narrative refer to the single same event. When James Henry Breasted discussed the Karnak inscription in 1906 in his Ancient Records of Egypt, he was well aware of the limited information that could be gained from it: “Had we not the brief reference in the Old Testament to his sack of Jerusalem, we should hardly have been able to surmise that the relief was the memorial of a specific campaign.”

Here we face the crux of the entire debate: often enough, the narrative from the Hebrew Bible is taken at face value and the Egyptian text, apparently well-fitting, is perceived as a welcome confirmation despite the fact that eulogistic phrases and historical references cannot be distinguished with certainty. A closer look reveals that the narrative of the Bible is, beyond a merely historical report, an etiological explanation for the demise of Solomon’s Golden Age and Jerusalem as its splendid capital. The pomp and glory of Solomon’s reign were superelevated to form a reference point of identity and unity in retrospective. This need not imply that the entire episode is fictitious, but the historical core is hidden under layers of redaction and rewriting.

Similar difficulties concern the inscription and great list of Sheshonq I, which dates itself to the 21st year of this king and depicts him slaying prisoners in front of Amun. Above the kneeling captives, the text states “Smiting of the chiefs of the tribesman of Nubia, all inaccessible foreign lands, all the lands of Fenkhu and the hinterlands of Asia.”

Inscription of Sheshonq I. (Photo by Olaf Tausch, CC BY 3.0, https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/deed.de)
Instead of a military report, we find a speech by Amun himself that relates how he has conferred power and victory to Sheshonq I. What follows is a substantial list of originally about 175 place names of which c. 127 can be read but much less identified with reasonable certainty. The superscription of the list explains: “List of these southern and northern foreign lands which His Majesty has smitten, with a big slaughter executed among them, the number unknown. Their inhabitants have been dragged off as living captives to fill the store house of Amun-Ra in the temple of Karnak on his first victorious expedition.”

Even though some kind of military interaction forms the starting point for this inscription, the true content is a proclamation of power, Amun’s grace towards the king, and the king’s success which results in supreme sovereignty and abundant booty presented to Amun in return. Again we face a genuinely ideological and theological text, not a precise historical account. It is also paramount to stress that the actual nature of the topographical list is entirely indeterminate as topographical lists of this kind have a long tradition. Even though it is to be expected that targets of a military campaign that served as the starting point for the entire inscription are included, kings regularly drew from previous lists.

But, then, how should we understand the depiction of captives in this royal inscription? It would be naive to assume that depictions such as these actually indicate warfare and annihilation. Instead we have to understand in which way the Egyptians were used to depict foreign entities in their own set of communication. The well-known foreign toponyms inscribed on the statue bases of the mortuary temple of Amenhotep III (c. 1391-1353 BCE) in Kom el-Hettan serve as a case in point. This list contains, besides the obvious Nubian and Asiatic toponyms, a list of Aegean sites. Many scholars interpreted this list as an itinerary of a royal diplomatic and/or commercial expedition that took place during the times of Amenhotep III.
But if we have no reason to interpret the list from Kom el-Hettan as a military itinerary, why should we adhere to a strictly military interpretation of the entire topographical list in the case of Sheshonq I? In this list, we may therefore find toponyms only known from traditional lists in archives at the time, toponyms included for ideological purposes (to imply dominion far beyond actual spheres of influence), toponyms mentioned for the sake of completeness, and, last but not least, toponyms with actual relevance for commercial relations or a military campaign. It is thus a pity that parallels from that period are rare and insufficient to elucidate the composition of Sheshonq I’s list.

Finally, the “victory stela” from Megiddo is ambiguous and not necessarily connected to a military campaign of Sheshonq I in the Levant. Above all, there is no evidence whatsoever that this stela recorded the conquest of Megiddo. The stela may equally well have been a symbol for commercial relations or a gift to celebrate political relations. In fact, it is not unheard of that cities begged for and erected monuments in honor of foreign rulers. A statue of Sheshonq I has been found in Byblos and the New Kingdom expedition to the Aegean allegedly left behind faience plaques with the king’s name in Mycenae.

Furthermore, military limitations speak against reading too much into the inscription of Sheshonq I at Karnak. For logistic reasons alone, it can be ruled out that 175 major cities were violently conquered by the Egyptian army. At the beginning of the New Kingdom, we learn from the autobiography of Ahmose, son of I bona that the siege of Sharuhen alone lasted for three years. But if we cannot locate, identify, and judge the importance and size of a great number of those cities, if we cannot determine their actual relevance for a supposed military campaign, and if not all the recorded cities were destroyed in the course thereof, how may we identify those that were (if they were at all)?

Although we know that the Biblical narrative and Sheshonq I’s inscription require in-depth source criticism, it would be unfounded to ignore them altogether as they contain important traces of history.
Nevertheless, the fact that so many uncertainties remain with the interpretation of those texts (from a philological point of view) should be a warning to archaeologists not to read too much into these texts. It is therefore also necessary to question the attribution of any destruction horizons to Sheshonq I and his military campaign and even more so its usage as a peg in the Iron Age chronology. A fresh, critical, and dispassionate view of Sheshonq I in Palestine is definitely needed.

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