

ANNOUNCEMENT OF THE PASSING OF RAMESSES II

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*Otto Schaden
in memoriam*

During clearance work in the Valley of Kings in front of the tomb of Amenmesse (KV 10) the then University of Memphis Expedition, led by Dr. Otto Schaden, discovered some workmen's huts dating to the second half of or the late 19th dynasty. On this site and within the huts a great number of ostraca were found. One of these is a limestone ostrakon, O. University of Memphis Expedition prov. no. 97, measuring ca. 9.5 x 13 cm. It is inscribed on both sides. The recto contains 5 lines and the verso three small columns of respectively 6, 4 and 5 lines in black ink. Top recto = top verso. The surface on the right half of the recto is damaged and effaced resulting in the loss of the beginnings of all five lines. A small damage on the verso has caused the loss of part of the last line in the third column. The text on the recto is clearly palimpsest – traces of an earlier writing are visible at several places. In spite of the loss of writing on the recto, enough remains of the text on both sides to allow a translation and interpretation.

Translation

recto

- (1) [... II 3*h.t* day] 16. This day of coming by the chief of Medjay [...]
- (2) [...the] Falcon, our (Lord (?)) [...]
- (3) [...] King of Lower and Upper Egypt Usimare'- Setepenre', l.p.h. [...]
- (4) [...going up to] to the Field (i.e. the Valley of Kings) on II 3*h.t* day 21. We stood still [...]
- (5) [...until?] II 3*h.t* day 26.

verso

col. I

- (1) day 21
- (2) day 22
- (3) day 23
- (4) day 24
- (5) day 25
- (6) day 26. Not (working)

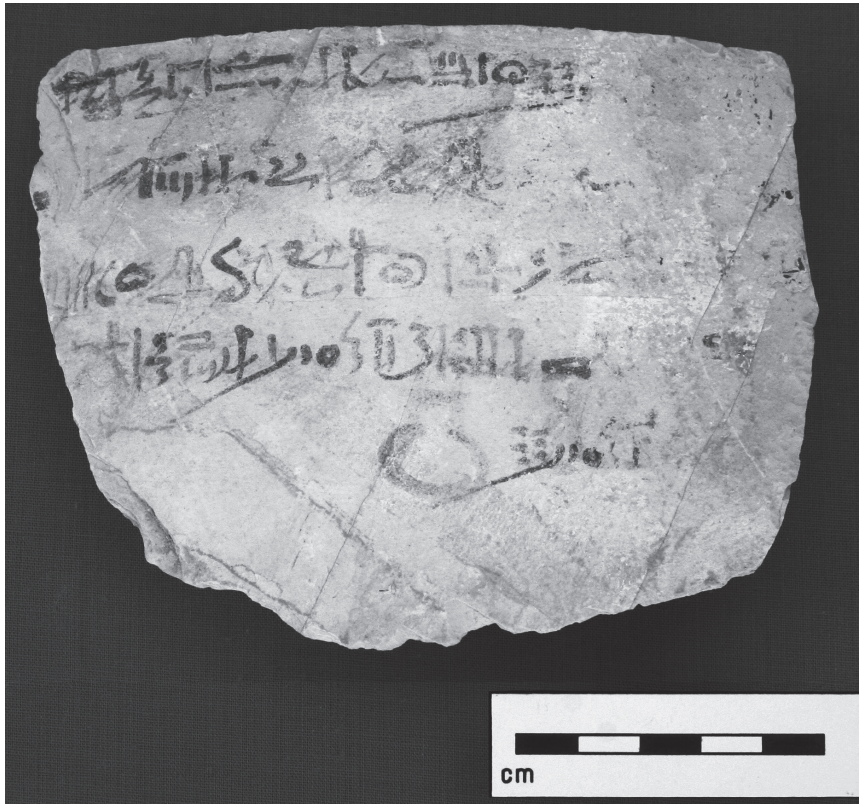


Fig. 1 O. University of Memphis Expedition prov.no. 97 recto.

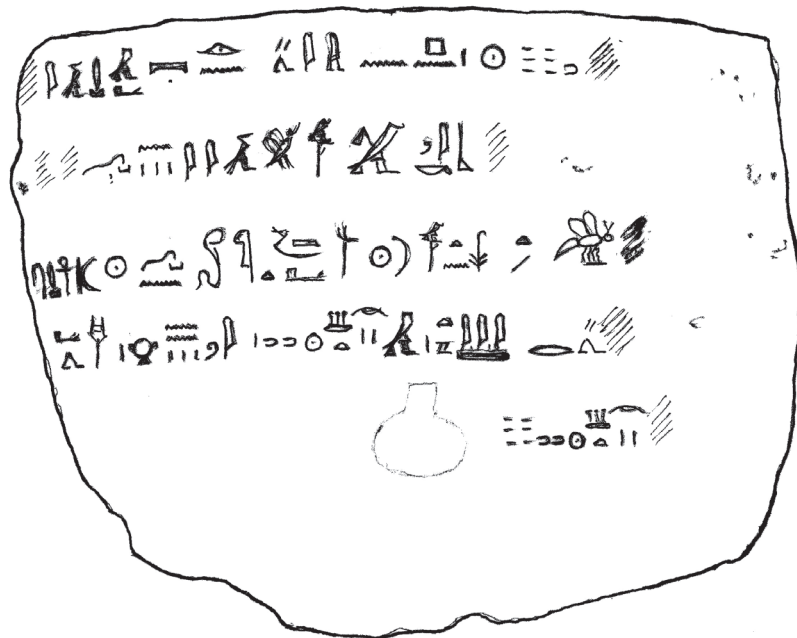


Fig. 2 O. University of Memphis Expedition prov.no. 97 recto-transcription.

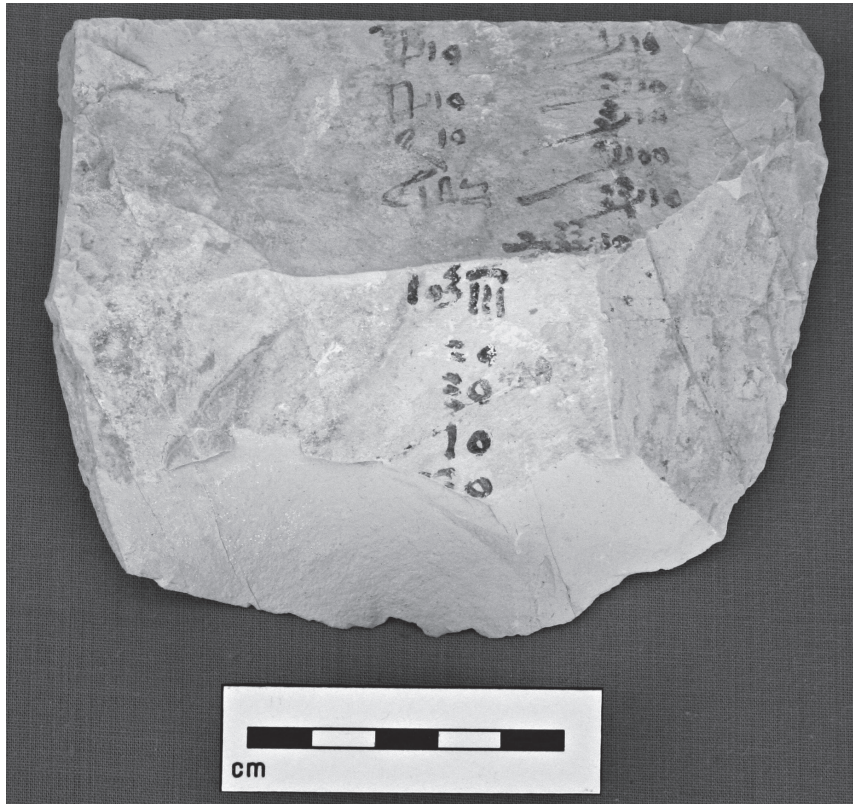


Fig. 3 O. University of Memphis Expedition prov.no. 97 verso.

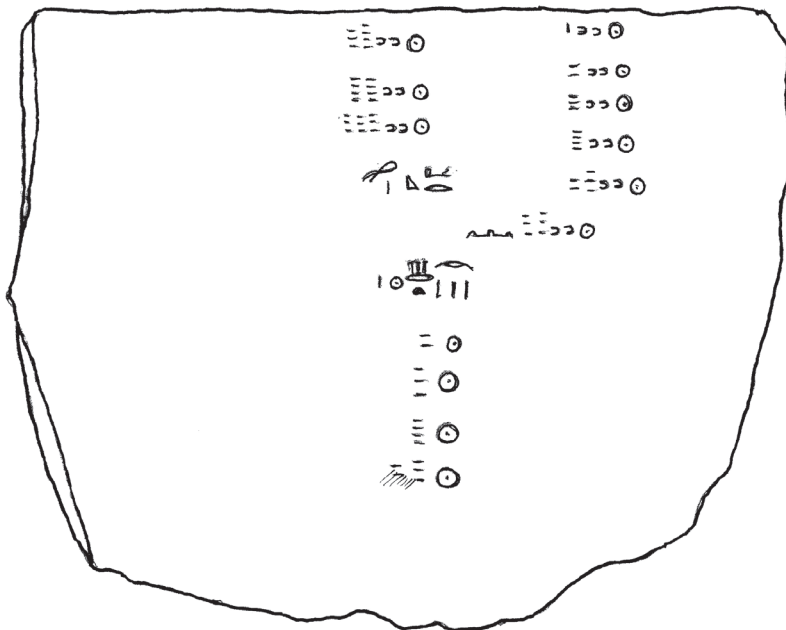


Fig. 4 O. University of Memphis Expedition prov.no. 97 verso-transcription.

Col. II

- (1) day 26
- (2) day 27
- (3) day 28
- (4) day 29
- (5) day 30

Col. III

- (1) III *ḥ.t* day 1
- (2) day 2
- (3) day 3
- (4) day 4
- (5) day 5

Notes

Recto

- (2) One would expect here *p3y=n nb*, ‘our Lord’, but the last legible sign is clearly not *nb* but *stp* (Gardiner Sign List U21, Möller 481).
- (3) The sequence *bity-nswt* in the royal title is noteworthy.
- (4) The verb at the beginning is almost certainly *tsy*, ‘to go up’.
- (5) Traces of the earlier text probably show an identity marker followed by the still clearly visible vase sketch.

Commentary

Although incomplete, the dated note on the recto tells us that on a certain day 16 – almost certainly of II *ḥ.t* – a chief of police came, most probably with a message, reporting that something was the matter with the Falcon, i.e. King Ramesses II. Next, they (i.e. the gang of workmen) went to the Valley of Kings and on day 21 of II *ḥ.t* they were inactive, at least as it seems until II *ḥ.t* 26, but in view of the text on the verso probably continuously until day 5 of the next month.

Such a notice about the arrival of a chief of police at the workmen’s community with a message concerning a king denoted as the *bik* Falcon, followed by a period of not working by the crew, strongly reminds one of similar notes.¹

In O. Cairo 25515 verso col. II, 21-28 and col. IV, 1-3 it is recorded that on the 19th day of the 1st month of *pr.t* of year 6 the chief of police Nakhtmin arrives with the news that the *bik* Falcon, namely pharaoh Seti II, has flown to heaven. The same message is also recorded in col. IV, 1-3, where the news is brought by the two chiefs of police Nakhtmin and Khonsuemhab (the date is then already year 1, I *pr.t*, day 19 of Siptah).

In O. Deir el-Medina 39, recto 16 it is noted that on the 16th day of III *šmw* of (year 32) “One came to say that the *bik* Falcon has flown to heaven” – i.e. pharaoh Ramesses III had passed away. This news item is also recorded in P. Turin 1949+1946, recto col. I, 10-16,

¹ Cf. Jac.J. Janssen, *Village Varia* (Leiden, 1997), 153 and 160.

where it is the chief of police Montumose who came on this day with the message that the *bik* Falcon, namely pharaoh Ramesses III, has flown to heaven and another, Ramesses IV, has taken his place.

On the basis of this evidence it seems not too far-fetched to interpret the lines on the ‘new’ ostrakon as yet another instance of the announcement of the death of a king, in this case Ramesses II.

Thus far our knowledge concerning the date of the reign change between king Ramesses II and his son Merneptah is based on few sources.

In the Gurob Fragments, fragment L, a date in 2,1 of year 67, I *3h.t* day 18 is followed in 2,5 by a date year 1, II *3h.t* day 19.²

Based on O. Cairo 25504 (verso 1) the change of the regnal year of Merneptah (and thus his accession) has been supposed to have taken place before II *3h.t* day 13, but this note in verso 1 is the only date in a year 8 after several dates in III and possibly IV *šmw* of year 7 on the recto of this ostrakon.

An inscription at Medinet Habu³ seems to point to an accession date of Merneptah after I *3h.t* 29.

A. Peden has tried to show⁴ that on the basis of Theban graffito 854+855 (year 1, II *3h.t* day 2) the period wherein the year change of this king fell, can be narrowed down to the interval II *3h.t* day 3 and day 13.

All evidence taken together, most probably the death of Ramesses II and thus the accession of Merneptah occurred between I *3h.t* 29 and II *3h.t* 19.

And precisely in this short period falls the first date of our “new” ostrakon if we accept as a most plausible reading for the date in the first line: II *3h.t* 16. Then also we understand that life in the Deir el-Medina community came to a standstill as the text continues to tell us. No one must have had a living memory of the death of a pharaoh after the 67 year reign of Ramesses II. One could imagine that it took them some days to realize the impact of what had happened.

Now, if correct, this only proves that the news about the death of Ramesses II arrived at Deir el-Medina on that date. Obviously in case the king was residing in the north his death could well have taken place some 15 days earlier (just like the death of Seti II on probably I *pr.t* 2 was announced in Thebes on I *pr.t* 19, as we know from O. Cairo 25515). It is noteworthy in this respect that in a fragment of a necropolis journal from the mid-20th dynasty (P. Turin prov.nr. 8538 recto I, 5; unpublished) a note on II *3h.t* 6 reads: *wsf hnw Wsr-m3'.t-R' Stp-n-R' '.w.s* – “Free. Sailing of UsimaRe’-SetepenRe’”.

In conclusion we may say that the feast called *hnw* – ‘Sailing’ - was clearly observed in Thebes or at Deir el-Medina during the Ramesside Period in remembrance of the passing of deified royals. The ‘Sailing’ of Ahmose-Nefertari was celebrated on II *šmw* 15; the ‘Sailing’ of Seti I on III *šmw* 24; and the ‘Sailing’ of Ramesses II on II *3h.t* 6.⁵

² Cf. A.H. Gardiner, *Ramesside Administrative Documents* (Oxford, 1948), 30, 10 and 14; clearly so, and **not II *3h.t* day 13** as Von Beckerath says in his *Chronologie* (Mainz, 1997), 104!

³ KRI IV, 26.

⁴ *GM* 140 (1994), 69.

⁵ For the *hnw* of Ahmose-Nefertari see O. DM 38, 12; O. Ashmolean Museum HO 11, rt. 3-4; *Giornale Year 3*, rt. III,6.; in an unpublished fragment of a necropolis journal in the Turin museum this feast on II *šmw* 15 is called *hb Nfr-tri*. For the *hnw* of Seti I see O. Ashmolean Museum HO 11, vs. 7; O. Cairo CG 25503, vs. 4. Cf. also H. Jauhainen, “Do not celebrate your feast without your neighbours” (Helsinki, 2009), 172, 179 and 223.