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Cultural Geography of the New Kingdom in the Amarna Age*

A lecture by Dr. Richard Hess of the Denver Seminary, March 2002

Reviewed by Charles Cook

What's in a name?" brings to mind the simple response, "A rose by any other name smells as sweet". In Dr. Hess' lecture, however, we find that looking into personal names found on clay tablets is more like splitting a geode to display its crystals.

Dr. Hess displayed two maps: one of Canaan-Palestine and the other showing Egypt to the Persian Gulf. In addition, he displayed a half-dozen transparencies like pages from a telephone book, with 132 entries for 31 geographical locations and 101 personal names that he considered in his presentation. The maps displayed 10 separate cultures with overlapping tensions and intentions: the Indo-Europeans and Indo-Aryans bearing down on the Hittites, Hurrians, Mitanni, Assyrians, Babylonians and Kassites. They, in turn, were pressing down on the Canaanites, while the Egyptian New Kingdom empire was pushing up into Canaan. These 10 realms intermingled and infringed upon one another in Canaan. A significant grouping of 3 kinds of names are found in the Amarna Letters: Egyptian names for a couple of administrators, West Semitic names for the indigenous people, and Northern names for the Indo-Europeans and Aryans coming down from Asia Minor.

The Amarna Letters were written in the Late Bronze Age during the reigns of Amenhotep III and IV (Akhenaten). These famous tablets came from the royal diplomatic archives in Akhenaten's Amarna Period capital of Akhetaten (c. 1350 BC). The correspondents included Pharaohs and Kings, bureaucrats of various empires, governors, administrators and leaders of local cities and towns. Dr. Hess' data are gleaned from lists of personal names, such as those found on the 12 tablets from Taanach that name some 70 kings' servants, army draftees, corvée laborers and the like. The primary records were royal and international letters relating to problems in local situations and how to handle them. Akkadian was the lingua franca of the time and all correspondence was written in cuneiform. Each of the records included personal names.

Dr. Hess presented the personal names as evidence of cultural influence in Canaan brought in from afar. Each name was analyzed to reveal its historical and cultural origins. The citations that follow are specific examples of

the personal name data; each one lists where the name was found, an English transliteration from the Akkadian cuneiform, and the linguistic grouping. Each also includes observations and conclusions by Dr. Hess.

From Hazor: PU-RA-AT-PUR-TA; Northern Semitic; perhaps Kassite. Circa 1595 BC, Hittite troops marched down to Babylon, destroyed it, and returned home. Thereafter, tribes from the Zagros mountains moved in and established the Kassite Kingdom. They replaced the ruins with new buildings but they preserved the Babylonian culture and language. Some members of these tribes moved on down into Canaan.

From the Acco Plain: SA-TA-AT-NA; Indo-Aryan; Sanskrit. Around 2000 BC, people from northern and eastern Asia moved into India, provided the basis for the Sanskrit culture, and moved into Mitanni, bringing horses and chariots for military purposes. Some of these people moved down into Canaan.

From Tushulto: A-MA-AN-HA-AT-PA; Egyptian. This man was an Egyptian administrator tending to local affairs. Relatively few Egyptian names are found in the records. Evidently, Egyptians did not generally live in Canaan.

From an uncertain location: ZI-BI-LU; West Semitic; Canaanite. This man was probably a local resident entrusted with Egyptian interests. The name has the Semitic root for "prince" and relates to the god Baal in Ugaritic myth. The root word is found in the name of Queen Jezebel and in the name of Zebulun, a tribe of ancient Israel.

From Taanach: TAL-WI-SHAR; Northern; Hurrian. The many Hurrian names in the area suggest that Hurrian influence permeated the region. Even the indigenous West Semitic people of the region adopted Hurrian names, as found elsewhere.

Also from Taanach: K-K-B; West Semitic; Ugaritic. The reader will note that in the other names as transliterated above, the name is rendered in syllabic, consonant-vowel

combinations. Here there are only consonants, as in Hebrew, Aramaic and Arabic. This is because a cuneiform alphabet of 30 consonants came into use in Ugarit at about this time.

The names listed above give only 6 personal names from among the 101 Dr. Hess examined. But these are representative of the groups discussed in the lecture and are evidence of cultural influences that are found in these personal names. Many of the personal names examined by Dr. Hess include references to their homeland deities: “Upheld by Indra”, “Servant of Hebat”, “Son of El”, “Servant of Sharu”, “Offspring of Baal”, and “Baal is my judge”. Religious impact on the existing culture was certainly among the most significant influences of the invaders and intruders.

In addition to the cultural diversity of personal names, the Amarna Letters give amazing insight into the political formalities and the people of that time. The recognition of variables in social status was discreetly practiced in the use of “brother” for equals, and of “father” for superiors.

A typical letter from an inferior to the Pharaoh opened with the honorific, an extended reference to the greatness of the one addressed, the humility of the sender (with his 7 forward and backward bows), and his loyalty and support for whatever cause might be most important to the Pharaoh at that time. Then the sender stated the actual problem, which was usually trouble with neighboring enemies, and a request for immediate help. Such letters to the Pharaoh often went unanswered. Traditionally this was explained as a

Pharaoh being too busy with his ruling and personal priorities to worry about other things. Akhenaten was a good example of a Pharaoh who used that excuse. However, some Egyptologists have proposed that it was the official policy to let the locals wrangle among themselves. Sending help was costly. Letting them fight among themselves would keep them busy and exhaust their military strength so they would be no threat to the Egyptian empire.

Dr. Hess called attention to the archaeological treasures of burials, such as pottery, ceramics, shards, and the like, from which so much is learned of the history, culture and daily activities of people. He then pointed out that a careful examination of personal names provides remarkable parallels to the same information. A political map of the extension of the Egyptian New Kingdom empire in Canaan, with attention to details of this study, would show the Egyptian stability in Canaan, with indigenous West Semitic control at key points and along the Mediterranean coast, and relatively limited control by Egypt of the Northerners in upper Canaan.

Dr. Hess’ lecture provided intriguing information that the audience might use to further study and research this fascinating aspect of Egyptology.

** This review was inadvertently left out of the Summer 2002 issue of The Ostrakon. The editor and staff of The Ostrakon apologize to Charles Cook and Dr. Hess for that oversight.*