

Egypt as a Crossroad between Africa and Asia in the Old Bronze Age

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More than one century ago, in 1892, an Italian Egyptologist, Ernesto Schiaparelli visiting Aswan, participated in the discovery of some inscriptions engraved on the facade of the tomb of Harkhuf, high on the cliff of the Necropolis named Qubbet el-Hawa. Actually his discovery was double, for he soon realized the importance of the hieroglyphic inscriptions which showed the first available reports of several trips to Africa.

Prince Harkhuf lived in the second half of Sixth Dynasty, around 2250 BCE, and he spent some long period of his life travelling southwards along different routes, with hundreds of donkeys to carry the goods the Pharaoh had sent him for. The route must have been well known to an Egyptian, at least since the exploitation of quarries during the Fourth Dynasty at Toshkeh and beyond Dakhla. The geography of these expeditions is now somewhat better known thanks to various discoveries, which shed light on very early civilizations of Africa despite the lack of certitude about the localization of a number of relevant place names.³ However, Egypt can no longer be considered an isolated and self-sufficient power, as the ancient Egyptians could cover rather long distances and many well-to-do foreigners came to settle in their country.

The excavations carried out by Charles Bonnet, resuming those of George Reisner in the modern site of Kerma, have revealed an important capital city, upstream the Third Cataract, which was influential since the fourth millennium BCE, and after the Egyptian conquest around 1500 BCE took the name of Pnubs (the jujube tree), perhaps a translation of the term Yam used in Harkhuf's inscriptions.

Some graffiti recently recovered far away in the Arabian and Libyan deserts bear additional evidence of the passage of Egyptian expeditions like those related by Harkhuf in his tomb. A hieratic graffito was discovered on the way through Khashm el-Bab, near Bir Ungat, quoting a prince Sabeni, a well-known acquaintance in Aswan: may be the one who had a larger tomb than that of Harkhuf in the same Necropolis of Qubbet el-Hawa, and who also travelled southwards.