THE MEDINET HABU BOAT DEPICTIONS: CAN WE TRUST RAMSES III?

One of the most cited pieces of art in our world of the ancient Near Eastern Mediterranean, is the depiction of the naval battle between Ramses III and the "Sea Peoples," which is dated to the first part of the 12th century BCE. It has become the basis of the data used by historians, archaeologists, those interested in the Biblical narrative who concentrate on the problems associated with the Philistines whose first appearance in the local scene is in this context. This seems to be the earliest depiction of a maritime battle scene and nautical archaeologists and boat specialists have diagnosed the details of the vessels in quantitative manner as if the engravers presented realistic and minute details of this work of art. The question as to the authenticity of the ship iconography in this scene is the topic of this paper. Instead of analyzing the details of the ships themselves, data from Papyrus Harris I was used for the analysis, as is data from newly discovered ship representations which can be dated to the period.

Among other sources on Ramses III we have the naval scene depicted on the walls of Medinet Habu and Papyrus Harris I which is the written account of the event, dated to the end of Ramses III's reign or shortly thereafter. The written data is often quoted when discussions concerning the enigmatic "Sea Peoples" arise. These are the people to whom all the worries of the end of the 13th century BC and the first years of the 12th seem to be attributed. If we believe these exaggerated and obviously sensational reports we have to admit that the group called by us the "Sea Peoples" certainly got "bad press" from Ramses III and his scribes.

But can we trust this report? How much of the report was the boasting of a king who had had his share of problems (Sandars 1978)? Enough is known about Ramses III and his 30 or so years of reign to perceive that he was beset with serious problems, both externally and internally (Lesko 1992). Not surprisingly, scholars working on the sections dealing with his northern campaign suggest that parts of the reliefs are probably copies of earlier materials and earlier Pharaohs (Lesko 1992: 152-153). Well before Ramses III's reign, Egyptian Pharaohs faced problems caused by peoples from the north and west, including ones who came via the sea. In one account, dated almost 100 hundred years earlier, Ramses II confronted the Shardan, as he recounts it, on their warboats (Artzy 1987: 28). Merneptah met a massive attack of the Libyans and their allies (Lesko 1992). Even

Ramses III, according to his own account, faced several attacks of which the most famous is the one commemorated in the naval battle scene.

Close inspection of the Harris Papyrus reveals that the written account does not necessarily agree with the scene depicted at Medinet Habu. While the scene introduces a battle in which the multiple Egyptian boats are all of one type, the account acquaints the reader with three types of boats said to have surprised the enemy. The three were the *br*, the *mns* and the *aha*. The boat depicted in the scene is probably the aha, the war boat, a term already used by Ramses II in his description of the naval attack by the Shardan which he so valiantly repelled (Artzy 1988: 184). Likewise, the artist describes diverse groups of surprised adversaries with their different attributes, but only one type of a boat, a strange occurrence considering the supposed dissimilar origins of these invaders. One possible explanation is that different boats participated in the battle, but only one was chosen to be represented in the scene. This fact had little to do with the reality of the battle, but more with an artistic expediency. Could it have been that these same Shardan, vanquished by the forces of Ramses II (see above), became the shipwrights who instructed the Egyptian in the art of building the small, fast and maneuverable aha depicted almost a century later in the Medinet Habu Naval Scene of Ramses III. Thus the "state of the art" boat, the aha, the war boat, was the one chosen to represent the mighty Egyptian navy in the scene. Yet another example of the problem associated with using this account as an historical record is the mention of the fall of the Hittites, of which, unfortunately, this is the sole report. We are informed that those who attacked Egypt had already sacked various other important states, among them the Hittites and Carchemish (Sandars 1978: 119). Of course Ramses boasts that these same enemies who had been so successful with the Hittites were trounced by his own troops. The destruction of Hattusha, the Hittite capital situated well in the Anatolian plateau, we must remember, is unlikely to have been carried out by ships. To the Egyptians, the destruction of a site in coastal Cilicia (a Hittite province) could have meant the whole of Hatti. Possible signs of Cilicia reverting to its natural maritime associates, which included Cyprus and the Dodecanese, appear just at that time or a bit earlier, at the later part of the 13th century BC.[2] The "Sea Peoples" did not have to exchange their boats for pack animals in order to attack and destroy it. A much better choice for the final destruction were the semi-nomadic Kashka (Bittel 1983) who had already caused havoc, time and again, in Hattusha and its countryside. The reliability of the Ramesside account has also come into serious question as revealed in its report of the fall of Carchemish, which has been shown to have continued to exist under the

direct rule of a Hittitle family well after 1200 BC (Hawkins 1988: 102-103). It is a curious statement, after all, as Carchemish is situated in inland Syria well beyond the coast and pirates were not its natural enemies. It is also possible that the report of the fall of Ugarit prior to the naval battle is not to be completely trusted. Although there is no doubt that Ugarit did fall in the first part of the 12th century BC and was not re-settled (Yon 1992: 111), the fate of contemporary coastal sites, such as Byblos, Tyre and Sidon, was completely different (Caubet 1992: 128-130). Thus a complete destruction of the coastal sites, as is often presented, was not necessarily the case; on the contrary, it is probably not the case at all (Caubet 1992: 128-130). Whatever the date of Ugarit's fall, which is now being debated again, the trade continued with changes of patterns well into the 12th century BC.

The Ramesside information, a long term counterintelligence, has misled scholars for many years. Naturally, a written account of such a contemporary narrator could not be completely discounted, but one has to consider the circumstances of the period, Ramses' position and his scribe's or his scribes' ability to accurately relay the news. Thus, in the same way as we use other boastful scenes and reports of the Egyptian Pharaohs with caution, we should view Ramses' report in the same manner. As an historical record, it is problematic.

We will not dwell on the exact date of the battle, its locale or the events immediately preceding or following it, as this is a separate study. The thrust of this paper concerns mainly the period which preceded the events described by the Egyptian scribes by scores of years, and which, we feel, contributed greatly to the "Crisis Years". The balance of power at the Levantine coast towards the end of the 14th and most of the 13th centuries BC was dominated by two main entities, namely the Egyptians and the Hittites in Anatolia. There were also other centers, such as Ugarit or Cyprus (or parts of it) for that matter, which might not have been equal to the two super powers in military ability, but certainly were economic powers to be reckoned with. The competition for the markets necessitated management such as in the construction and maintenance of the sea-going vessels, the upkeep of open routes and anchorages and the availability of required merchandise. It also demanded enough manpower, inhabitants of the economic entities or emissaries procurable at all times for all tasks and assignments. The upkeep of maritime routes and their outlets was an arduous chore. It kept the mariners and merchants away from their homes for very long periods of time (sometimes years), not to mention the grave dangers associated with maritime travel, even in the few navigable months

of the year. Even the task of the building of sea-going vessels, which we think of as being of foremost importance was, at times, consigned to others (Lambrou-Phillipson 1993: 170). Yon mentions the estimates of population as being between 6,000 and 8,000 urban inhabitants (Yon 1992: n. 2) and mentions an estimate of Liverani of 10,000 at the end of the Late Bronze Age. Heltzer (1976) estimates the rural population as being no more than 25,000. We have to bear these numbers in mind when we consider the trade networks in which Ugarit was active. Ugarit either paid for or hired others to fulfil tasks which they did not wish to carry out. These included military mercenaries for guard duties (Heltzer 1983: 13) as well as most probably hirelings who partook in their flourishing trade. We meet such maritime mercenaries already in the el-Amarna letters in a group named: Mi-Shi.[3] These people of whom Rib Addi of Byblos complains to the Pharaoh in the letters, were actually hired mariners from the general area who acted in the sea around Byblos and Amurru, modern Lebanon, as a form of coast guards for the Egyptian overlords. It is hard to imagine that Egyptians carried out the task. It is more likely that as a local, Syrian fringe group the Mi-Shi people were hired to keep the interests of the Egyptians. But, when the pay was greater elsewhere, even when offered by the enemies of the Egyptians or their allies, it was not hard for the Mi-Shi to play the market for all its worth and take another side. The Egyptians overlords were, after all, far away, physically and mentally. Interestingly, a boat model found in Byblos looks much like a Medinet Habu "Sea Peoples" boat without the birds' heads (Basch 1987: 67). Who were the people who produced this model and for what use? We obviously do not know. But the general type of boat seems to have been known in the area of coastal Syria.

But returning to the Ramses III maritime battle record: In the past I have mentioned incised boats which were found in the Carmel Ridge, in close proximity to the site of Tel Nami. The site was settled in the 13th century and possibly the first years of the 12th century BC. The natural setting, of the crevice-like opening of the Me'arot River in the ridge, ca. 3.5km from Nami and the coast, might have been used as a benchmark for the mariners. That area was also quite conducive for a road inland to Megiddo and eventually the modern state of Jordan (Artzy 1994 and 1997). Nami was found to be rich in material goods, luxuries and much bronze, which was right for a spot connecting sea to desert.

The incised boats are of different types. The most usual shape is the kind we refer to as the Akko/Kition type with a "fan" (fig. 1). The best representative of the type are the ones from the Akko altar (fig. 2). The Akko

altar is dated to the end of the 13th, beginning of the 12th century BC stratigraphically. The most impressive boat in the area (fig. 3), as far as size, depth of incision and the positioning on the rocks which we know so far, is no doubt, the boat of an Aegean type, well documented from Gazi, Tragana and Dramesi in Beotia (Basch 1987: 142-147; 1994: 20-21). This type of boat has also recently been found in records from Teneida, in the Dakhla Oasis in the Western Delta of Egypt and published recently (Basch 1994). The Teneida example has more details, which include men holding small ships (Fig. 4). Basch has already shown that the people standing in it are now, we know from the Egyptian records, considered to be Libyans. The appearance of this type of boat in the Western Delta, dating more or less to the Ramses II and III period, 13th - beginning of the 12th century BC, comes at a time when fortresses were constructed to keep the coasts and western borders of Egypt safe (Habachi 1980). The concurrent appearance of this type of vessel on the Carmel Ridge should not simply be taken as a coincidence. The small boat models[4] held by the mariners on the Teneida boat is of a familiar type, an outward inclined stem with an animal, probably a bird's head on it.

There might be some jest in the presentation of these men. Their emphasized nakedness combines with a most elaborate headdress, which must have been very cumbersome, if indeed they wore one while active. There may be some exaggeration a little "artistic freedom" in the rendering of the scenes carried out by the artists involved with the production of this monument and the one depicted at Medinet Habu. The geographical position of the scene should be considered. One of the possibilities is that it was found so far inland because these people were settled quite a distance from the sea by Ramses II in order to keep them away from mischief and this would be their tribute to their former glory. This would obviously be much like the settlement of the "Cilician" pirates by Pompey to keep them out of harm's way in the first century BC. A completely different explanation is one proposed by Basch (1994).

A third type of boats appearing on the cliffs of the Carmel Ridge are similar to the boat models, if that is what they are, held by the men in the Teneida boat. These are boats with an animal head on their prow, facing outward (fig. 5).[1] Curiously, all the examples of these boats we have noticed thus far, at least the ones in which both protomes are discernable, never appear with two animal heads. In one case the "head" could be interpreted as that of a bird, possibly a duck. In the Medinet Habu record the adversary boats are all represented with two duck protomes. We feel that the artist of the scene in Medinet Habu may have taken a fancy to such decorations and

decided, with poetic license, to use it in his composition. We can not disregard the possibility that such boats may have been sighted or reported by a contemporary and the artist thought it a good eye catcher for the glorious account of the battle.

Thus, in reconsidering the Medinet Habu Naval Scene, the boats of the Egyptian adversaries, the ones referred to as "Sea Peoples" join some other erroneous data which we, until recently, have accepted at face value. The proportions of the boats, the mariners and their attire should also be used with discretion.[5] The artistic representation thus joins the written record which is not necessarily correct. We should remember that propaganda, especially that dished out by the State, or in our case, a besieged Pharaoh of the 2nd millennium, should be read with great care before being used as a historical record.

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NOTES

1. Sandars' book on the Sea Peoples is still a good source for laymen and scholars. Although we do not agree on several crucial points presented in the study, its usefulness cannot be overestimated. She says: "The language has been called "poetical" but is more justly described as "bombastic". It is a murky substitute for straightforward historical narrative, but that is something the ancient world never set out to give" (Sandars 1978: 117). It probably could not have been expressed in a clearer way.
2. Indeed, ceramics which have been identified as Mycenaean IIIC1, or Late Helladic IIIC1, (associated with the "Sea Peoples" destruction) have been found on the Cilician coast of Southern Anatolia, but not surprisingly, not in the central part. Although there is little imported Mycenaean ware associated with the Hittile Imperial levels at Kazanli, Mersin and Tarsus, the appearance of an Aegean type of pottery in a LBIIb level is not necessarily due to invasion. (Sherratt and Crouwell 1987). Mycenaean-type pottery could well have been produced in Cyprus or in Eastern Greece, both of which have been natural trade counterparts being situated on similar maritime networks. When Hittite control weakened, the reversion was a natural development.
3. Lambdin pointed out that already in the Ebeling glossary of Knudson's edition of the Amarna letters (Knutdzon 1915: 1550) the identity is questionable. Lambdin proposed the name Mi-Shi which is to be equated with the Egyptian word *msh'* "army, troops". They are mentioned in at least 5 texts: EA 101:4,33; 105:27; 108:38; 110:48, 52 and 126:63). Säve-Söderbergh (1946:60) still called them Mi-Lim. It is very likely that these people were hired for their task as a form of coast guard. It is hard to believe that any real Egyptians carried out that chore along the Byblos and Amurru coast, south of Ugarit. Altman has already shown the good relations between the family of Abdi-Ashirta and the Mi-Shi people (Altman 1977:9). He proposes that their relations with the avowed enemy of Rib-Addi of Byblos, who was, according to his protestations, a devoted servant of the Egyptian king (for another view on the letters of Rib Addi see: Liverani 1973), were understandable in view of the corruption

rampant in the Egyptian camp. We would like to propose that the answer lies in the nature of the employment of this group. As a local, Syrian fringe group the Mi-Shi people were hired to keep the interests of the Egyptians. But, when the pay was greater elsewhere, even when offered by the enemies of the Egyptians or their allies, it was not hard for the Mi-Shi to play the market for all its worth and take another side. This explains their ambivalent relationship with Rib-Addi and eventually the treatment of Abdi-Ashirta himself.

4. We are not sure that they are models. If the mariners serving as coast guards are pirates, these vessels might signify their pride in the booty captured by them. The appearance of these men suggests prowess and strength.
5. C. Lambrou-Phillipson (1996) has shown quite convincingly that the Thera Ships are likely not accurate representations of vessels and that it is problematic to use them in a quantitative and diagnostic manner.

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Fig. 5 «Bird» type boat from Carmel Ridge.

Fig. 1: Akko/Kition Fan type boat from Carmel Ridge

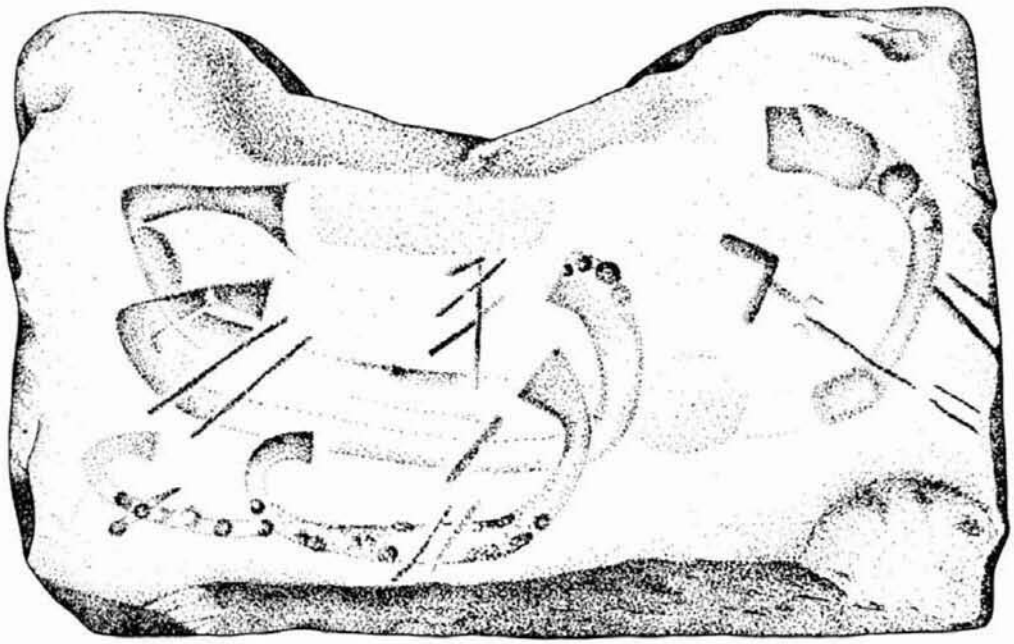
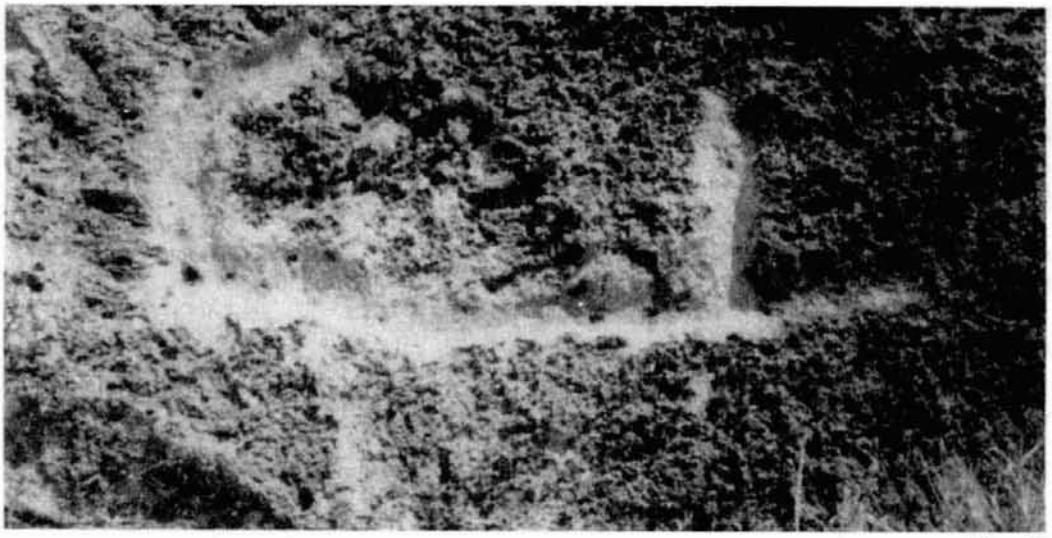


Fig. 2: Akko/Kition Fan type boats on alte from Akko



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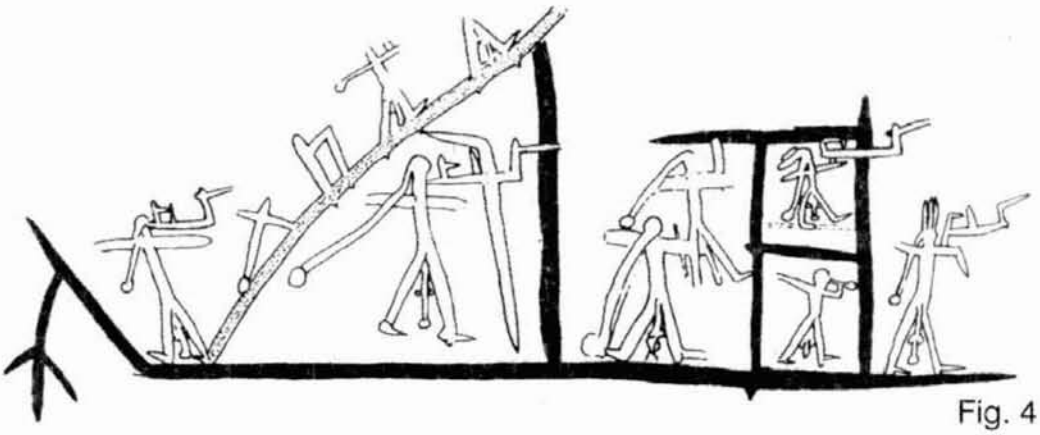

Fig. 4

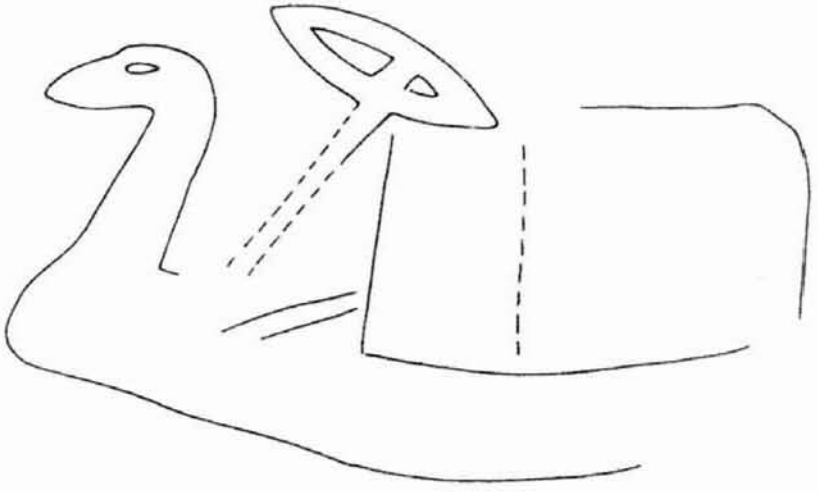

Fig. 5