

PIYE SON OF RA, LOVING HORSES, DETESTING FISH

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In his monumental studies on the post-pyramidal period of Meroitic culture, Patrice investigated into the role of animals in the semantics of dominion of late Meroitic rulers. Several species of prestige: canides, bovines, horses, camels and – last but not least – men, have been slaughtered during funerary pompous of late Meroitic rulers, being part of an encyclopaedic celebration of power.¹

Having shared a couple of triggering discussions with Patrice (but sadly not enough), always oscillating between hard facts and venturing interpretation, I want to offer to his memory a little celebration of chanced exegesis of two famous episodes in the as famous text of king Piye, episodes, which maybe point to slightly more than just a character trait of this king.²

PIYE'S JOURNEY TO INITIATION

It has been worked out by Nicolas Grimal in his seminal study on the Piye stela, that behind or better over the bare facts of a military campaign there is a second layer of narration.³ This second layer structures the whole adventure and describes what has been the central outcome of a maybe accidental campaign to

- 1 P. Lenoble, "Chiens de païens. Une tombe postpyramidale à double descenderie hors de Méroé", *ANM* 5, 1991, p. 167-188; *id.*, "Une monture pour mon royaume. Sacrifices triomphaux de chevaux et de méhara, d'el Kurru à Ballana", *ANM* 6, 1994, p. 107-130; *id.*, *Du Méroïtique au Postméroïtique dans la région méridionale du Royaume de Méroé*; *id.*, "Le sacrifice funéraire de bovinés, de Méroé à Qustul et Ballana", in *Hommages à Jean Leclant, BiEtud* 106, Cairo, 1994, p. 269-283; *id.*, "Les 'sacrifices humains' de Méroé, Qustul et Ballana. I, Le massacre de nombreux prisonniers", *BzS* 6, 1996, p. 59-87.
- 2 The translation used here is the one by Richard Holton Pierce in *FHN* I, p. 55-113, commented by László Török in *ibid.*, p. 113-118. See also L. Török, *The Image of the Ordered World*, p. 368-398. To the monographs cited should be added H. Goedicke, *Pi(ankh)y in Egypt. A study of the Pankhy stela*, Baltimore, 1998.
- 3 N. Grimal, *La stèle triomphale de Pi(ankh)y au Musée du Caire JE 48862 et 47086-47089, Études sur la propagande royale égyptienne* I, *MIFAO* 105, 1981, p. 261 and *passim*. On narration in the stela see now also J. Assmann, in H. Roeder (ed.), *Das Erzählen in frühen Hochkulturen. I. Der Fall Ägypten*, München, 2009, p. 221-236; A. El Hawary, in H. Roeder (ed.), *Das Erzählen in frühen Hochkulturen, op. cit.*, p. 346-349.

crush a danger for Kush's hegemony in the South: the mystic initiation of Piye into a new divine being – a Pharaoh – in Heliopolis and thus the attainment of a new status of the Kushite king vis-à-vis the other rulers of Egypt.

262 Already during or maybe shortly after the events have happened, the scribes in charge to retell the story ventured into the classical mission of historiography: explanation. An enormous work of conceptualisation, of finding sense in the incidents had to be done, resulting in the creation of one of the most impressive pieces of pharaonic historiographic literature and thus resulting in the creation of an impressive piece of history. It is not the place to venture in detail into this topic, but it is necessary to state, that the military action not only resulted in a new situation of political power, but that by its very conceptualisation in a narrative, its commemoralisation on a stela (and on the walls of the Amun temple at Gebel Barkal)⁴ and its communication by ceremony, script and picture, a new concept of kingship has been brought into being. It was the concept of a *pharaonic* Kushite kingship, incorporating the spirituality of pharaohship into the frame of Kushite rule and cementing at least a symbolic claim for power over the “two lands”, even still, when Egypt was ruled by Rome already for a long time.

It is interesting to note that all the monumental inscriptions of later Napatan and most probably also Meroitic kings are repeating a number of patterns, which originated out of a specific historical situation and its conceptualisation in this very text under Piye: that the assumption of final spiritual power is a *journey* and a *battle* and the *initiation* into intimacy to the god, which takes place only *after* the formal ascend to (profane) rule has been done.⁵ Howsoever this concept has been adjusted to the actual political situation – as a reconquest under Tanwetamani or a “coronation journey” under the Napatan kings with the more or less ceremonial fighting against pastoral groups at the fringes of the Meroitic domain – its main features are clearly expressed in Piye's stela, which has been an inspiration of those to come.⁶ His monument also provided the formal pattern of all those texts: the idiosyncratic interpretation of the Egyptian “Königsnovelle”, setting a literal archetype to the later narratives.⁷

Among the “ceremonial journey” of Piye we can distinguish four major steps, beginning after a substantial prelude, sketching the confuse situation before Piye arrives personally on the scenery. Step one of the “ceremonial journey” is

4 T. Kendall, *Gebel Barkal Epigraphic Survey, 1986 Preliminary Report*, Boston, 1986, fig. 8; L. Török, *The Image of the Ordered World*, p. 65-69.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 16-18.

6 A second major impetus in the creation of Kushite pharaonic ideology of kingship happened under Taharqo, a topic not discussed here.

7 *Ibid.*, p. 342-367.

the departure after (or better: with) the celebration of New Year. It sets all the following events into the frame of a “sacred time”, celebrating the beginning of a new era.⁸ Included into this first step – still setting the point of departure – is the visit of Karnak, obviously not so important in the frame of the narrative, since Amun has accepted Piye the rightful king already at an earlier date, as it is expressed in his sandstone stela from Gebel Barkal.⁹ Step two is the siege of Hermopolis, its surrender and the confiscation of the possessions of king Nimlot, including the famous episode of the inspection of the stables. The climax is reached after the capture of Memphis with step three at the sun-temple of Heliopolis, where Piye is introduced into the mysteries of Ra and receives a new status.¹⁰ Final negotiations result in a last step into the formal submission of the rulers of Egypt. This act is followed by the strange episode of granting access to the palace only to Nimlot of Hermopolis whereas the others have to remain outside, since “they were uncircumcised and fish-eaters”.

László Török’s meticulous analysis of the text reveals its composition out of a number of “books” with a somehow similar internal structure.¹¹ Typically for each of these books or chapters is the combination of military/political action and ceremonial conclusion. During the political incidents as well as during the ceremonies specific aspects of Piye’s divine nature and mission for kingship are explained, so to say along a dramatically composed ascending line. Within this skilful pattern, two episodes already mentioned – the inspection of stables and the prohibition of the fish-eaters to enter the palace – are especially famous, but still hardly explained.

HERMOPOLIS AND THE SUFFERING HORSES

At Hermopolis the siege of the city is followed by surrender. The three stages of this ceremonial surrender are described in remarkable detail. First, “the crown which had been on his (Nimlot’s) head” is brought out of the city in order to “beseech his (Piye’s) diadem”. Then the wife of Nimlot emerges to negotiate with the king’s female entourage. And finally Nimlot himself, after a unfortunately much damaged address of reconciliation, appears, shaking a sistrum and carrying with him a noble horse, to subdue to Piye. After this Piye enters the city, he visits the temple of Thot and the Ogdoad, than confiscates

8 N. Grimal, *La stèle triomphale de Pi(ankh)y*, *op. cit.*, p. 260.

9 *FHN I*, No. 8, p. 55-62. Probably also *FHN I*, No. 10, p. 118-119 describes an earlier approach to Thebes.

10 See the discussion of the changing of royal titulary in *FHN I*, p. 47-52.

11 L. Török, *The Image of the Ordered World*, p. 377-382, my own division differs slightly from that of Török.

Nimlots possessions and inspects the stables. In the famous episode he bawls Nimlot since he let the horses suffer hunger during the siege – in his screed he reveals his divine nature to the daunted Nimlot.

What is interesting in this story (beside its political background) are the strong allusions made to myth or, better: the creative use of mythemes.¹² The whole process of reconciliation is shaped along motives inspired by the myth of the distant goddess and the eye of the sun. This myth is to become one of the most important components of Kushite pharaonic kingship.¹³ It seems that in the Hermopolis episode elements of this myth are activated for the first time in the context of a legitimately narrative. At several occasions the wreath of Piye is described and all action of Nimlots “crown”, wife and the sistrum rattling Nimlot himself are directed to pacify the angry divine entity, coming from the south.¹⁴ The apparent importance of feminity and the female component of kingship – never again referred to in the long inscription – interplays with the role of female actors in the myth.¹⁵ And it is not by chance, that these things are happen at Hermopolis, town of Thot, incorporating the aspect of a trickster-god, who in the myth manages to pacify the angry goddess.

Immediately after this pacifying process, the visit of the stables takes place.¹⁶ What could be seen just as one more entertaining piece of literature, telling us something of Piye’s special quirks, gives an opportunity to the king, to declare in an outstanding speech his divine origin as one, “that the shadow of a god is upon”, being born by a women but “coming into existence in a divine egg”, acting with the *ka* of a god etc. It is for this strong relation to one of the most

¹² Principally on this approach to the use of mythological allusions in the process of conceptualisation see Cl. Lévi-Strauss, *La pensée sauvage*, Paris, 1962; in Egyptology this approach has been discussed in K. Goebis, *JANE* 2, 2002, p. 27-59.

¹³ The myth in its extended version is known from demotic sources and greek translation of the roman period and thus only in a kind of later elaboration or even travesty; cf. M. J. Smith, *LÄ V*, 1984, col. 1082-1087, s. v. “Sonnenauge, demotischer Mythos vom”. For the use of mythemes from this mythological complex in Kushite royal ideology, cf. Chr. Robisek, *Das Bildprogramm des Mut-Tempels, Veröffentlichungen der Institute für Afrikanistik und Ägyptologie der Universität Wien* 52, *BeitrÄg* 8, 1989, p. 77-78; T. Kendall, in W. Godlewski and A. Łaitar (ed.), *Between the Cataracts*, p. 126-127.

¹⁴ It is explicitly stressed, that the camp of Piye has been situated to the south of Hermopolis.

¹⁵ To designate the diadem of Piye a feminine word is used in the text, Nimlot’s wife beseeches the female entourage and the sistrum rattling Nimlot cites iconographic patterns of pacification of lion goddesses from the TIP (e. g. Berlin 23733, J. Settgast, *Ägyptisches Museum Berlin*, Mainz, 1983, p. 116). For the female component of kushite kingship and its relation to the myth, cf. A. Lohwasser, *Die königlichen Frauen, Meroitica* 19, 2001, p. 313-319.

¹⁶ Cf. the discussion in N. Grimal, *La stèle triomphale de Pi(ankh)y*, *op. cit.*, p. 281-282; L. Török, *Meroe. Six studies on the cultural identity of an ancient African State*, *StudAeg* XVI, 1995, p. 195-201.

obvious expressions of Piye's special status, that I am not inclined to see in the horses-episode a mere trifle. To the contrary, its direct parallelisation to the myth of the distant goddess/eye of the sun, so important for the sacral legitimation of taking power over Egypt, makes the episode of the horses quite special. Following the sacral explanation of "coming from the south in wreath" and of ritual pacification, the horses-episode is the introduction into a central statement about Piye's nature. It gives the background to a legitimacy explanation, why it is exactly Piye, who is the divine ruler.

Since our knowledge of Kushite mythology is near to zero, we can only guess that behind the episode with the suffering horses something similar like the Egyptian myth of the distant goddess/eye of the sun is concealed. The diligent parallelism of literary motives in these texts is a strong indicator for the special meaning of this episode. And since the whole matter is quite non-Egyptian,¹⁷ it seems possible that it is directed to a Kushite concept, linking kingship and horses in a special, still only poorly comprehended way.¹⁸ Has there been a Kushite myth, making the care for one horse/horses a specific trait of a king to come?¹⁹

THE ROYAL PALACE AND UNCLEAN FISH-EATERS

The text of Piye's stela ends with a final submission of the "two rulers of the South and the two rulers of the North" together with the "kings and counts of North-land". Immediately after the description of these rulers kissing the ground, it is stated, that three out of the four rulers are not allowed to enter the palace, "because they were uncircumcised and fish-eaters" and that is an "taboo of the palace" (*bwt pw nt pr-nsu*), except Nimlot, who was allowed to enter. This weird episode is repeated in a near to classical *parallelismus membrorum*, making the whole thing into nine stanzas in Pierce's translation. The elaborate formulation of the fact stresses the importance laid on it by the authors. Again, it seems, not just an eccentricity is described, but something important and – to some degree – remarkable, at least to Egyptians.

17 I can not see a similar attitude of the kings of the New Kingdom to horses as prestigious animals in the frame of a new warrior code, as L. Török, *The Image of the Ordered World*, p. 393 and in *FHN I*, p. 116 proposes. Török rightly rejects the more traditional view that Piye's care for horses is caused by their military importance.

18 For the special relation between kingship and horses, cf. the horse burials of early Kushite kings at el-Kurru (D. Dunham, *El-Kurru*, p. 201-224, pl. IV.a, XXVIII, XXIX). Further evidence of horse burials/offerings are discussed in detail in P. Lenoble, *ANM 6*, 1994, p. 107-130.

19 A person's special care for some animal which results in an unexpected elevation of status is a common mytheme, leading to special veneration of specific animals (a veneration, which includes sacrificing). Cf. the "Puss in Boots"-tale.

Circumcision, if it is really the condition described in the passage,²⁰ in Pharaonic Egypt has been a matter of social progress, a kind of initiation into adulthood. Here the situation described is much stronger, since in the characterisation of Nimlot by a parallelism the word *w'ḥ* “clean” is used, thus making the others “unclean”. It is their “uncleanness” that makes them unfit to enter a very special place: the royal palace (*pr-nsu*). This status of uncleanness is further stressed by their consumption of fish, which is an abomination to the palace. This may relate to the Egyptian tradition not to offer fish to sacred entities (gods and in most cases also to the deceased).²¹ But to the very contrary in Pharaonic Egypt fish has been normal food, delivered also to temples as nutrition for the staff. A general prescind from eating fish is never attested in Egypt, also not for priest or palace attendencies.²² Thus, the whole episode describes a situation quite surprising to Egyptians: that the palace of the Kushite king is a sacred place of a higher, uncommon order.

266

PICTORIAL AND TEXTUAL EMBLEMATICS – THE COMMUNICATION OF “OTHERNESS”

The story of final submission once again is depicted in the lunette of the stela, showing on its right side in the lower register the three unfortunate fish-eaters lying on their bellies, whereas Nimlot is standing in the upper register, following his wife and driving a horse (**Fig. 1**). Thus, not only the quite different status of Nimlot among the other rulers is stressed, but the whole scenery also recalls the episode at Hermopolis.

“Reading” the narrative of the lunette, we again find this delicate web of allusions already mentioned. The picture is kind of a aggregation of the main episodes of the enterprise: Amun of Gebel Barkal and Karnak is the point of departure, from where Piye, facing right, goes out to crush his enemies in Egypt (“chapter one”). At Hermopolis the sistrum rattling Nimlot with his wife and the horse pacifies the angry king (“chapter two”) and in the Memphite area the

20 See the discussion of *m'(w)* in N. Grimal, *La stèle triomphale de Pi(ankh)y*, *op. cit.*, p. 178, n. 529. The word is a mere *hapax*, in the *Thesaurus Linguae Aegyptiae* <<http://aaewz.bbaw.de/tla/>> only attested by one occasion in the Pyramid Texts (TLA Lemma no. 37680), there also tentatively brought into relation of circumcision and describing the very young state of the king. For circumcision in Egypt see W. Westendorf, *LÄ I*, 1975, col. 727-729, s. v. “Beschneidung”.

21 The matter of the taboo on fish has often been discussed, regularly referring to Piye’s text, see e. g. I. Gamer-Wallert, *Fische und Fischkulte im Alten Ägypten*, *ÄgAbh* 21, 1970, p. 60-85; W. J. Darby, P. Ghalioungui and L. Grivetti, *Food: The Gift of Osiris*, London/New York/San Francisco, 1977, p. 337-404; D. J. Brewer, R. F. Friedman, *Fish and Fishing in Ancient Egypt, The Natural History of Egypt*, II, Warminster, 1989, p. 17-19.

22 I. Gamer-Wallert, *Fische und Fischkulte*, *op. cit.*, p. 68; R. Schlichting, *LÄ V*, 1984, col. 1126-1128, s. v. “Speisege- und -verbote”.



1. Lunette of Stela Cairo JE 48862 (after: N. Grimal, *La stèle triomphale de Pi(ankh)y*, pl. V)

other rulers submit to Piye (“chapter four”). The central episode of initiation to Ra (“chapter three”) is expressed by the difference in the designation of Piye vis-à-vis those other rulers: Piye is using a complete titulary of a Pharaoh: “king of Upper and Lower Egypt” and – most important! – “son of Ra”, whereas the other rulers are only “kings” or less.²³ The pictorial elements of the royal protocol, *sn*-ring, *sw.t*-plant vs. the *nsw.t-bj.tj*-composition, the sun-of-Ra-emblem etc., are easy to grasp even for people not reading hieroglyphs.

It seems obvious, that the two episodes discussed here are directly related to two of the most important incidents during Piye’s warlike journey to initiation into pharaohship. They have been even commemorated in the lunette and thus emphasized for the majority of addressed people, who probably have been unable to read hieroglyphs but able to “read” the iconographic subtleties (or have been introduced to them). Both episodes appear in a context and in a literary form excluding that they could be judged just as incidental additions. Therefore, I suppose that they have been incorporated into the narrative to give a special emphasis to one fact: their un-Egyptianess, i.e. the unusual character of the new type of kingship. Whereas the “Kushite element” in the episode of Hermopolis seems to be the care for horses, it is the two-times mentioned abomination of unclean fish-eaters, which is especially emphasized in the palace episode.

It is not by chance that Egyptologists always have been triggered by these two episodes and it has already at several times been proposed, to see them as specific traits of the Kushite mind or the piety of Kushite rulers.²⁴ I would not venture into Kushite psychology but would rather propose to see these two episodes

²³ Already in his earlier stela Piye presents a full Pharaonic titulary. Nevertheless the initiation into the sun-temple at Heliopolis marked a change in status which has most probably been reflected in the re-formulation of the royal protocol; cf. *FHN* I, 51.

²⁴ Cf. for the horses-episode L. Török, *Meroe. Six Studies*, op. cit., p. 196-197 with an overview on earlier interpretation. For the reference to cleanness see J. Assmann, in H. Roeder (ed.), *Das Erzählen in frühen Hochkulturen*, München, 2009, p. 230-231.

as a means of incorporation into two decisive moments of Piye's accession to pharaohship a specific Kushite element. The care for horses introduces the revelation of Piye's divine origin to the daunted Nimlot and the rejection of fish-eaters from his palace stresses the extraordinary purity around the sacred king of Kush. Both episodes are there to emphasize the different nature of the Kushite king. They have been strange to Egyptians – Nimlot is obviously astonished by Piye's care for horses and the Egyptian authors of the text repeat the matter with the unclean fish-eaters two times – but most probably have been a definite allusion to the Kushite character of Piye's kingship for the people at Gebel Barkal.

268

“Otherness” of the Kushite king is also expressed in the emblematic version of “chapter three” in the lunette: Piye holds a traditional pharaonic titulary, but he is dressed in the Kushite garment, wearing the cap-crown.²⁵ So in all of the four “chapters” the Egyptian tradition is in each case confronted with a kushite one: in “chapter one” Amun is represented as Amun of Thebes *and* of Gebel Barkal; in “chapter two” legitimation is celebrated by reference to the myth of the distant goddess/eye of the sun *and* the special relation between horse and king in Kush(ite mythology?); in “chapter three” coronation/initiation is realised by pharaonic titular *and* Kushite regalia; and finally in “chapter four” political submission and hierarchical distinction is expressed by egyptian ground kissing *and* Kushite exaltation of the palaces purity.²⁶ To include these traits into an apparent Egyptian narrative – especially its emblematic presentation – communicates the story to local elites. It was, in the words of Patrice, a means to “barbariser”²⁷ the otherwise much to egyptianised story.

25 Piye's picture has been erased, but the traces definitely show a Kushite outfit.

26 “Otherness” is also a topic of the military/political narrative of the text, where at several instances the difference between Kushite warfare and politics and that of the enemy is stressed. The problem, why Nimlot was allowed to enter the palace and the special position of Nimlot in the whole narrative can not be discussed here.

27 P. Lenoble, *ANM* 6, 1994, p. 121-123.