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Gaza in the Egyptian Texts of the New Kingdom

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*Gaza in the Egyptian Texts of the New Kingdom*

Gaza is mentioned for the first time in Egyptian annals in the record of the first campaign of Thutmose III in Asia. There it is called "That-Which-the-Ruler-Seized" although it was apparently already under Egyptian control. In later documents of the XVIIIth Dynasty it is called simply Gaza. In the XIXth Dynasty it is referred to as "*The Canaan*", in documents from the time of Seti I, Ramses II, Merneptah, and Ramses III. In the "Onomasticon of Amenope" Gaza appears as apparently one of the Philistine cities, and thereafter it disappears for a long time from Egyptian sources.

The town of Gaza is mentioned for the first time in Egyptian texts in the war-annals of Pharaoh Thut-mose III. Within a twenty-year period, he undertook seventeen campaigns into Asia,<sup>1</sup> extending the Egyptian sphere of influence as far as the Euphrates. But Gaza is mentioned only in the first military campaign. In the "Annals" carved on the wall of the temple of Amon-Re in Karnak we read:<sup>2</sup>

"Year 22, 4th month of the second season, day 25. [*His majesty passed the fortress of*] Sile, on the first campaign of victory [*which his majesty made to extend*] the frontiers of Egypt, in valor, [in victory, in power, and in justification]. . . . Year 23, 1st month of the third season, day 4, the day of the feast of the king's coronation, arriving at the town "That-Which-the Ruler-Seized" Gaza (*is its Syrian name*). [Year 23], 1st month of the third season, day 5: departure from this place in valor, [in victory], in power, and in justification, in order to overthrow that wretched enemy, and to extend the frontiers of Egypt. . . . Year 23, 1st month of the third season, day 16—as far as the town of Yehem [His majesty] ordered a conference with his victorious army. . . ."

In Yehem (= Khirbet Yemma in the Sharon)<sup>3</sup> the king and his commanders planned future advances, after learning that the king of Kadesh, the leader of the rebellious Asian princes, had arrived in Megiddo.

There can be no doubt that speed played a very important part in this first campaign. This fact can be learned not only

from the very short stay of the Egyptian army in Gaza (the troops entered Gaza on one day, and left on the next), but also from the choice of the shortest direct way to Megiddo, *via* Wadi 'Ara, despite the many topographical obstacles of this narrow pass. The Egyptian army covered the distance of about 240 kms<sup>4</sup> from its eastern frontier-town Sile (in the vicinity of Kantarah of today) to Gaza in ten days, that is they had marched about 24 kms daily. On the other hand, the Egyptians arrived in Yehem, about 120 kms from Gaza after eleven days, that is, they advanced about 10 kms daily. That the Egyptian army was able to proceed much quicker in a desert, where they had no water supply, no shade and no pathway,—only sand and sun—than on a much easier path, a beaten track in the coastal land of Palestine, raises a number of questions: Were the troops so eager to reach Gaza, just in time to celebrate the feast of coronation of Pharaoh? Is it really true that Thut-mose III had to conquer the town of Gaza? Could he have consolidated the conquest of such a big town so quickly that he was able to leave it on the very next day?

We strongly believe that the "new" name for Gaza; "That-Which-the Ruler-Seized" [*of which the Syrian name is*] Gaza," which appears here and is never repeated, can be explained by recognizing the *genre* in which the official Egyptian scribe describes the historical events of this first campaign. No doubt this part belongs to a laudatory description. The scribe aims to glorify the mighty power of Pharaoh. The scribe therefore, connects the feast of coronation of the king with the first great success of Pharaoh, namely the entrance into a green city, full of water, after the toil of a long march in the desert. It is certain that, at this time, Gaza was already an Egyptian strongpoint, and had been so since

<sup>1</sup> Cf. the conspectus of the campaigns in J. H. Breasted, *Ancient Records of Egypt*, II, § 406.

<sup>2</sup> *ANET*<sup>2</sup>, 235.

<sup>3</sup> Y. Aharoni, *The Land of the Bible*<sup>3</sup> (1974), 44.

<sup>4</sup> Or 150 miles from Sile to Gaza, about 75 miles from Gaza to Yehem (*ibid.*, 141).

the time of the first Pharaohs of the XVIIIth Egyptian Dynasty.<sup>5</sup> According to I. Grumach-Shirun, the date of the feast of coronation and the new name for Gaza suggest that actually the Egyptian Asiatic campaign started in Gaza.<sup>6</sup> In order to glorify Pharaoh, therefore, the scribe altered the date of the entry into Gaza, invented a great victory, and gave Gaza a new name, which was quickly forgotten. An argument in favor of this hypothesis is the fact that the scribe added the old name to the new name. On the other hand, if this reasoning, especially concerning the new name, is rejected, another possibility is to translate the Egyptian text, as follows: "as far as a town of the holding of the Ruler, [of which the name is] Gaza. . ."<sup>7</sup> This translation would also show that Gaza was at that time already under the domination of Egypt.

In the days of Thut-mose's III successors, Amen-hotep II, Thut-mose IV, Amen-hotep III and Akh-en-Aton, the tablets of Taanach and the Amarna letters inform us that Gaza played an important role as the capital of the Egyptian Asiatic province "Southern Canaan."<sup>8</sup> There we find that the Egyptian governor—the *rabisu* of the Amarna letters—is also the commander of the Egyptian garrison.<sup>9</sup>

Gaza appears again in the Egyptian records from the beginning of the Egyptian XIXth Dynasty. In addition to "Gaza" we find another name which describes the position of Gaza in the land of Canaan as seen by Egyptian authorities. This new appellation appears for the first time in a relief of Seti,<sup>10</sup> where next to a town on a lofty mound, a fortress, is an inscription which says "the town of *the Canaan*." In 1920, A. Gardiner suggested identifying that town with Gaza.<sup>11</sup> Albright believed that the name stresses the importance, for "it was the capital of Canaan."<sup>12</sup> This name, *the Canaan*,

also appears in an inscription from the days of Ramses II, the son and successor of Seti. Papyrus Anastasi I reads: ". . . (let me relate to) thee the [foreign countries] of the end of the land of *the Canaan*. . ." The scribe continues to boast by speaking about the Fortress of the Ways (of Horus), probably Sile, near modern Kantarah.<sup>13</sup> He enumerates several stations between Sile and Palestine, mentions Raphia, and once more, asks his colleague: "How many *iters*<sup>14</sup> march is it as far as Gaza? Answer quickly!" In this section both Gaza and *the Canaan* are mentioned. Certainly there is no doubt about the identity of Gaza; but the expression *phwy*  $p^3 K^2 n-n^c$ , "of the end of *the Canaan*," raises questions. The Egyptian word *phwy*<sup>15</sup> is equivalent to the most distant end from the point of view of the Egyptian, or, in our case, the most remote north. We believe that *phwy* refers to the northern end of the "Ways of Horus," which was the main road from Sile in Egypt to Gaza in Canaan. The scribe is simply playing with the different names of the same town: Gaza and *the Canaan*. This double naming of the town fits well the style of Papyrus Anastasi I, in which the scribe boasts about his great geographical knowledge.

We find *the Canaan* once more in the "Israel Stela" of Mer-ne-Ptah, the son and successor of Ramses II, where we read:

Desolation is for Tehenu; Hatti is pacified;  
Plundered is *the Canaan* of every evil;  
Carried off is Ashkelon; seized is Gezer;  
Yanoam is turned into that which does not exist;  
Israel is laid waste; his seed is not;  
Hurru has become a widow for Egypt! . . .<sup>16</sup>

If we accept the identification of *the Canaan* with the town of Gaza, then we have before us a list of countries and towns, always beginning with the south and ending with the north: Tehenu and Hatti; Gaza and Yanoam; Israel (still in the south) and Hurru (= Greater Syria).

From the third year of Mer-ne-Ptah, Papyrus Anastasi (III), better known as the "Journal of a Frontier Official,"<sup>17</sup> speaks of four officials who reside in Gaza. They are given their personal names and patronymics. One has Semitic

<sup>5</sup> Cf. W.H. Müller, *Europa und Asien* (1893), 159. Alt demonstrated that Gaza is not mentioned among those towns, which rebelled against Pharaoh. (A. Alt, *ZDPV* 67 (1945), 10 note 2.)

<sup>6</sup> I. Grumach-Shirun, forthcoming in *Sefer-Yovel le-Professor Seeligmann*. I thank Dr. Grumach-Shirun for her courtesy in letting me read her article.

<sup>7</sup> J. Wilson *apud ANET*<sup>2</sup>, 235 note 16.

<sup>8</sup> W. Helck, *Die Beziehungen Ägyptens zu Vorderasien* (1962), 258-259.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. *EA* 287 and 289.

<sup>10</sup> *ANEP* no. 329.

<sup>11</sup> A. Gardiner, *JEA* 6 (1920), 104. In his book *Egypt of the Pharaohs* (1961), 189, he is sure of this identification. (But Gardiner's characterisation of Gaza as "the Philistine city" [certainly at that time] has to be corrected.)

<sup>12</sup> W.F. Albright, *JPOS* IV (1924), 139ff.; he was followed by Alt, (*PJB* X (1914), 67; *ZDPV* 67 (1945), 4; Helck,

(*Beziehungen*, 258); Aharoni, (*The Land of the Bible*<sup>3</sup> (1974) 166); Wilson; (*ANET*<sup>2</sup>, 478b.)

<sup>13</sup> *ANET*<sup>2</sup>, 478, note 47.

<sup>14</sup> An Egyptian measure of length; one *itr* = ca. 10 1/2 km (A. Gardiner, *Egyptian Grammar*<sup>3</sup> (1957), 556).

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 565.

<sup>16</sup> *ANET*<sup>2</sup>, 378a; cf. also Gardiner's translation of these lines in *Egypt of the Pharaohs*, 273.

<sup>17</sup> *ANET*<sup>2</sup>, 258-259.

names only; the personal names of two other are Egyptian, while their patronymics are Semitic; both elements of the fourth official are Egyptian. No doubt that all these four officials (the title of two of these is given as "guardsman,"<sup>18</sup>) belonged to the Egyptian administration/garrison in Gaza.

The last time in which Gaza appears in the official records of the New Kingdom is from the time of Ramses III, and here again it is called only *the Canaan*. Thus we read: "I built for thee (= Amon) a mysterious house in the land of Djahi . . . (named) 'the House of Ramses-Ruler-of-Heliopolis —L.P.H.—in *the Canaan*', . . . The foreigners of **Retenu (= Palestine and Southern Syria)** come to it, bearing their tribute . . ." <sup>19</sup> This temple was certainly not in Ashkelon, where there was a temple of the Egyptian god Ptah.<sup>20</sup> From the Bible we learn that there were two temples of Dagon in the coastal cities, one in Ashdod (1 Sam 5:2f) and one in Gaza (Judg. 16:22f). Because **in the XIXth Dynasty the Canaan is equivalent to Gaza**, we may suppose that this temple of Ramses III was built in Gaza.<sup>21</sup>

The town of Gaza is also mentioned by its name in the so-called "Onomasticon of Amenope."<sup>22</sup> Here Gaza (= no. 264)

is named after the towns of Ashkelon (no.262) and Ashdod (no.263). In this text we find also the Peoples of the Sea: Sherden (no.268), Tjeker (no.269) and the Philistines (no.270). Scholars are not certain about the date of this text. Some see in it no more than an "encyclopaedia of the past."<sup>23</sup> Still, in this onomasticon the name *the Canaan* has disappeared. Does this imply that Gaza (and with it southern Canaan) no longer belonged to the Egyptian kingdom and was already the main town of the Philistine pentapolis?

From that point on, Gaza disappears for a long time from the Egyptian sources, but the town of Gaza continued to play an important role in the history of this corner of the world during the whole Iron Age.

*Note:*

An additional "The Canaan" is found in an inscription of a Middle Kingdom statuette, which was apparently re-inscribed in the days of the XXIIInd Dynasty. It reads that Petrisi son of 'Apy is the king's messenger (commissioner) to P<sub>3</sub> Kn<sup>c</sup>n (The Canaan) (and) Philistia.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 158 note 2.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 260b-261a.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 263b.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. also A. Alt, *Kleine Schriften* I, 218-219.

<sup>22</sup> A. H. Gardiner, *Ancient Egyptian Onomastica* (1947), I,24\*ff.

<sup>23</sup> E.g., A. Alt, *Kleine Schriften* 1, 232.

<sup>24</sup> G. Steindorff, *JEA* 25 (1939), 30-35. Another 'Canaan' (but without the article "The") appears in the Soleb-list next to Raphiah and Sharuhēn (R. Giveon, *VT* XIV [1964], 247).