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Jac. J. Janssen

A Curious Error (O. IFAO. 1254) [avec 2 planches].

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A CURIOUS ERROR

(O. IFAO. 1254)

Jac. J. JANSSEN

The ostracon which is here published first came to my attention when I was looking through Černý's Notebooks in the Griffith Institute [1]. By kind permission of Prof. Paule Posener-Kriéger, who took considerable pains to locate the original in the French Institute at Cairo and also provided me with excellent photographs, I have been able to study the text in detail [2].

The ostracon, a sherd of 17 by 19 cm, is clearly a palimpsest, but nothing remains legible of the original text (whether the few legible signs on the verso belong to this remains uncertain and I am unable to suggest any explanation as regards their meaning). A square piece at the lower left hand side of the recto is broken-off. It may also be preserved in the French Institute, but this is as yet unknown. Furthermore, the end of lines 1 to 4 are missing, as well as the major part of line 8, and, possibly, the line or lines that followed. It seems unlikely, however, that the lost words would add substantially to the understanding of the text.

In itself the text is hardly interesting enough to warrant publication. It records the days on which an unknown necropolis workman, during a period of some months, was absent from work [3]. The only detail worth mentioning is the formula used in lines 1 and 2 : *iw·f m wsf*. Usually one finds either *wsf* only (written in various ways), or *ḫ·n/iw* N *wsf* [4], but other indications of the same event that occur occasionally are : *iw·f wsf* [5], *m wsf* [6],

[1] I would like to express my gratitude to Dr. Málek for the liberal way in which he allowed me to consult time and again this invaluable source for our knowledge of the workmen from Deir el-Medîna.

[2] My sincere thanks also go to Prof. Paule Posener-Kriéger for her permission to publish the text here.

[3] Ostraca listing days of absence of single workmen are rare.

[4] Cf. Helck, *Aktenkunde*, 99, with references.

[5] E.g., O. Louvre E 13160 (= *Hier. Ostr.* 65, 1), 4 and 5; O. Cairo 25533, 10 (*iw·w wsf*).

[6] E.g., O. Brit. Mus. 5672 + O. Cairo 25649 (= *Hier. Ostr.* 69, 1), 1 (*iw t3 ist m wsf;* so too in O. Cairo 25261, 2); O. DeM. 209, 3 and passim (*ḫ·n t3 ist m wsf*); O. Turin 57047, vs. 3 (*iryt m wsf*).

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or *iw·f ḥr wsf* [1]. Clearly the word *wsf* could be used as a verb as well as a noun, the latter being the case in the ostracon under discussion.

The really important detail of the text, however, is the mention of the regnal years. The list of absences from work starts in III *prt* of a year 26 (lines 1 and 2), reaching the month IV *prt* at the end of line 3. There follows, in line 4 :

IV *prt* 28 : idem (i.e., absent); Year 27, I *šmw* 13 : idem; day 15 : idem.

The following lines mention later days of absence, in I *šmw*, in III and IV *šmw*, and (in line 8) in II *ꜣḫt*. Possibly days in the months which are skipped (II *šmw* and I *ꜣḫt*) were recorded in the lost left hand corner. Reasons for the absence from work, which are frequently mentioned in other ostraca, are nowhere recorded.

Clearly the scribe noted the change in the year-date in line 4 intentionally. The regularity of the writing shows that the text was written at one time, the data probably being taken from earlier day-by-day records. It is certainly not a ' brouillon ', although the reason for the composition of the list is obscure.

The main question is : whose regnal year changed between IV *prt* 28 and I *šmw* 13 ? Because of the high numbers of the years, twenty-six and twenty-seven, it could only be either Ramesses II or Ramesses III, but the date suits neither of these Pharaohs!

As regards Ramesses III, no reasonable doubt exists that he ascended the throne on I *šmw* 26 [2]. The accession day of Ramesses II is slightly less certain. Helck has argued that it was III *šmw* 27 [3], in which he was recently followed by Kitchen [4]. Krauss, after rightly rejecting Larson's arguments [5], does not seem to be absolutely convinced that Helck's idea was correct [6], but that appears to me an over-cautious attitude. Helck's arguments are sufficiently varied, and there is as yet no indication known for any other day.

[1] E.g., O. Turin 57020, 4; O. IFAO. 1357 (= Allam, *Hier. Ostraka*, pl. 58), 6 (in line 9, however, *iw·f ⟨ḥr⟩ wsf*).

[2] Černý, *ZÄS* 72, 114, and, particularly, Helck, *Analecta biblica* 12, 124.

[3] *O.c.*, 119.

[4] *Pharaoh Triumphant*, p. 43.

[5] *Serapis* 3 ,17-21. Larson's point of departure, O. Brit. Mus. 5634 (= *Hier. Ostr.* 83-83), is irrelevant for the problem. Listing absences from work during nearly a full year (see *SAK* 8, 127 sq.), it bears only one date (year 40) on top, but that does not mean that all days recorded belong to that regnal year. One cannot expect the scribe to have noted the change of the year-date in every single entry, to each of the 38 workmen, while a double date (« year 39 to 40 », for instance) never occurs in any ostracon.

[6] *Das Ende der Amarnazeit*, p. 257-9. See also Barta, *SAK* 8, 40.

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This leads us to pose the question as to whether the ostracon published here provides any evidence for dating it to the reign of the earlier king, so that his date of accession would have to be reconsidered. It seems to me that this is not the case; on the contrary, all the evidence from O. IFAO. 1254 points to the XXth Dynasty.

Firstly, the sherd was found in the « Grand Puits » [1], from where very few, if any, ostraca have been brought to light which could be ascribed to the XIXth Dynasty. Not a single clear instance is known to me, whereas numerous ostraca from the Well obviously date from the reign of Ramesses III and those of his successors.

Since, unfortunately, no name occurs in the text as it is preserved, the only internal evidence for dating may be sought in the spelling and/or the writing. The former does not offer much in this respect, *wsf* being the only word that may vary in spelling. It occurs abbreviated in several ways [2], but also, frequently, with its full phonetic complement. Usually the first sign is written as , but there are also instances with , as in our text; e.g., O. Louvre E 13160 (= *Hier. Ostr.* 65, 4), 4 and 5, and O. Turin 57020, 2-4 [3]. Both these instances date from the reign of Ramesses III, but I would hesitate to use this as a proof for a later date.

As regards the writing, I am afraid that I am sceptical concerning the possibilities of dating an ostracon, other than very roughly, on account of the form of individual signs. Prof. Georges Posener, who very kindly took the trouble to have a look at the photographs, suggested the XIXth rather than the XXth Dynasty, pointing out to me the shapes of the in *wsf* and the group  in line 8. However, a quick survey of ostraca of which photographs or facsimiles have been published, showed me that the same forms of these signs do occur frequently in texts which undoubtedly date from the XXth Dynasty. Even more important : in the same year, in some instances in one and the same ostracon, the ligature of may display completely different forms [4]. The sun-disk, for instance, can be written under or after it. Therefore, this too appears to be no indication as to the date of the text.

[1] See the photograph of the verso. In Černý's notation : $\left.\begin{matrix}14.3\\16.3\end{matrix}\right\}$ 49 (GP), which indicates the date and the location of the discovery.

[2] See *SAK* 8, 145.

[3] The signs and may even alternate in the writings of the same word in one text, as, for example, in the word *w'w*, « soldier », in Pap. Brit. Mus. 10333 (unpubl.).

[4] Cf., e.g., O. Petrie 9 + O. IFAO. 424 (= *Hier. Ostr.* 42, 3), 1, and O. Ashm. Mus. 1933.810 (= *Hier. Ostr.* 71, 1). 1. The first lines of these two texts are almost completely identical. On the other hand, see O. Turin 57304, 4-14, where the scribe rendered the signs increasingly cursive in the course of noting the dates.

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Thus we are left with only one criterion, namely the general impression of the writing. I am well aware that this is a dangerous method of dating. Černý, with his extensive experience of the material, may have been able to rely on it, though even he usually seems to have preferably followed the indications of the names. Yet, I have the strong impression that the writing definitely belongs to the XXth Dynasty. The elongated signs and quick strokes are typical for that period. It seems that the scribes during the reigns of the later Ramessides had less time to devote on each record, possibly because their output of texts had considerably increased. Rapid writing was necessary in order to cope with the growing demands on their skills, which, though on the one hand it improved the quality of their skilfulness, made, on the other hand, their signs less detailed.

A combination of the arguments — admittedly, none really decisive — suggests the reign of Ramesses III rather than that of Ramesses II as the date of the ostracon. However, this does not solve our problems. Very probably the scribe composed the list in the year 27, or, slightly less likely, shortly afterwards; at any rate, during the reign of Ramesses III. He must have been very well aware on which day the number of the regnal-year changed, as the accession day was an important date. Yet, instead of noting it at the (now lost) end of line 5, after the 25th of I *šmw*, he erroneously placed it a fortnight too early. Did he, in a fit of absent-mindedness, think it was the 6th instead of the 26th?

Whatever the case, we can safely conclude that it is very dangerous to rely on the text of a single ostracon for matters such as the accession day of a Pharaoh. For that the scribes of Deir el-Medîna were far too careless [1]. If, as is the case with the accession day of Ramesses III, several indications from various sources point to the same moment, we may safely call it a certainty, but a single mention from a record like that cited here presents no more than an indication of a possibility.

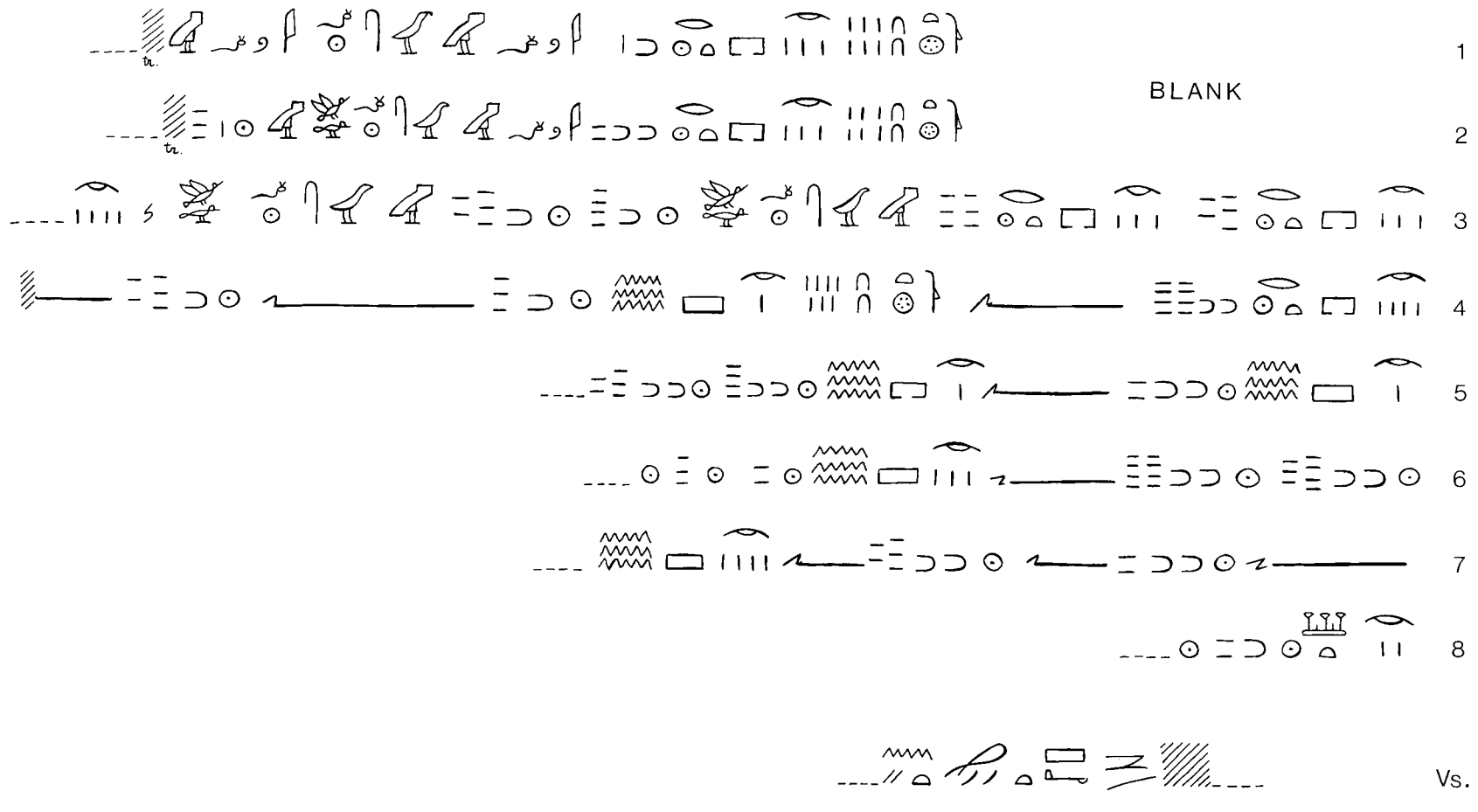
[1] On several occasions Černý has pointed out this carelessness; e.g., *ZÄS* 72, 114 and *Valley of the Kings*, 21 (a wrong multiplication).

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