Darius I and the Sabaeans: Ancient Partners in Red Sea Navigation

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Introduction: the mysterious land of Šb in the Tell el-Maskhuta Stela

Had they been discovered intact, the colossal (2–3 meters tall) Suez canal stelae of Darius I might have provided valuable information concerning the excavation project, local topography, and movement of cargo ships through the Red Sea to Persia. Unfortunately, only a fraction of the hieroglyphic inscriptions survive, and much of the remaining fragments preserve banal expressions typical of the Egyptian Königsnovelle genre: extended royal epithets of Darius, standard obsequies by courtiers, and highly formal discourse between the Great King and his advisers. Valuable historical and geographical details specific to the Suez canal endeavor, meanwhile, have mostly disappeared in the lacunae.

In the only critical edition of the available hieroglyphic texts, Georges Posener accomplished an exemplary job sorting out fragments, consulting earlier squeezes or archival copies, and suggesting conservative restorations wherever possible. Yet the bulk of his


4 G. Posener, La première domination perse en Egypte: recueil d’inscriptions hiéroglyphiques, BdE 11 (Cairo, 1936), 48–87, pl. IV–XV.
presentation was devoted, of necessity, to justifying his placement of fragments and emendations, and much less so to explaining the general historical import of the texts. Significant details are not apparent from his translations alone, and must be sought in the dense philological commentary.

One very important detail is a mysterious toponym mentioned several times in the Tell el-Maskhuta stela (lines 10, 17; possibly also 11, 13). It is partially damaged at times, but all attestations render it as follows: A literal transcription would render the phonetic elements *Šb, but in accordance with the standard Egyptian group-writing conventions used to render foreign toponyms, Posener correctly transliterated the toponym as Šb.

Early scholars had immediately compared this toponym with Saba’ (var. Sabaea or Sheba), a South Arabian kingdom in western Yemen which at that time would have controlled the Gulf of Aden, and thus affected all Red Sea traffic.5 Posener, more circumspect, proffered other suggestions and refrained from picking a single answer. He did remark, however, that:6

\[ \text{[La] présence de } \text{ dans deux passages de l'inscription, sinon dans quatre, serait difficile à expliquer s'il s'agissait d'une région éloignée de la zone du canal. Si le pays de Šb en était voisin, la fréquence de ces mentions pour-rait au contraire facilement se justifier.} \]

Furthermore, he referred to a similar “localité paléstinienne” from a geographic list of Ramesses III at Medinet Habu ( ),7 but that toponym, equally difficult to locate, was likely quite far from Suez as well.

In his cautious edition, Posener refrained from identifying this location, only referring to it as “Šb” in his translation, where it occurs in snippets of texts rendered impenetrable due to the surrounding lacunae:8

\begin{align*}
&\text{“ . . . . de (ou à) Šb. Il a fait . . . . . .”} \\
&\text{“ . . ordre au grand de Š[ ](?) . . . . . .”} \\
&\text{“ donner l'ordre . . . Š[ ](?) . . . là . . . . . .”} \\
&\text{“ . . . ne . . . . Šb. Sa Majesté a fait qu'[un](?) bateau aille connaître l'eau . . . . .”}
\end{align*}

It would seem that Posener buried, albeit unintentionally, this reasonable connection to Saba’ deep within the textual notes, where it has remained undisturbed ever since. In the most detailed analysis of the Red Sea question, Christopher Tuplin adduced other sources to demonstrate that Darius I would have had to negotiate with the Sabaeans to be able to command ships through the Red Sea.9 However, he did not cite the Egyptian stelae as further evidence. Indeed, Tuplin only referred twice to “the toponym Šb” [sic], noting that it was “probably somewhere near the canal zone”10 musing later on:11

No explicit statement of motivation survives in the canal stelae, though the complete text of Posener 1936, no. 8 may have contained one. One would particularly like to know the import of references to Cyrus and to the mysterious Šb [sic].

In another major study of Red Sea navigation, Jean-François Salles relegated this toponym to a footnote, reprising Posener’s argument that the toponym must be close to Suez.12 Disregarding the potential significance of this region in the Tell el-Maskhuta stela, Salles concluded:13

\[ \text{[E]n «mélangeant» les indications de Scylax et les rares renseignements sur cette expédition décrite dans les stèles du Suez, j'imagine qu'elle n'a pas dépassé le sud de la mer Rouge, les îles Kamaran par exemple.} \]

Since Saba’ lies south of the Kamaran islands, the toponym Šb in the Tell el-Maskhuta stela has the poten-

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7 Published subsequently by The Epigraphic Survey, Medinet Habu II: Later Historical Records of Ramesses III, OIP 9 (Chicago, 1932), Pl. 101, right side, eighth row; W. F. Edgerton and J. A. Wilson, Historical Records of Ramesses III, SAOC 12 (Chicago, 1936), 109, No. 35; J. Simons, Handbook for the Study of Egyptian Topographical Lists relating to Western Asia (Leiden, 1937), 165–66, No. 35; KRIV, 94, 10 (35).

8 Posener, La première domination perse, 59.


10 Ibid., 248.

11 Ibid., 255.


13 Ibid., 86.
tial to refute this assertion, and thus merits further consideration.

With the question apparently settled in modern scholarship, Saba’ is hardly mentioned in Pierre Briant’s comprehensive treatment of the Achaemenid Empire, or in more specialized analyses of Persian-Arabian relations. Similarly, the Tell el-Maskhuta stela, securely dated to the reign of Darius I, and thus potentially valuable for anchoring early Sabaean chronology, is absent from general histories of the South Arabian kingdom or Red Sea traffic. Only among Egyptologists—or rather those Egyptologists specializing in toponymy and geographic lists—has the proposed identification with Saba’ gained acceptance.

The following discussion will demonstrate that not only is the equation Šb = Saba’ phonetically plausible, but it makes excellent sense within the textual context of the Suez canal stelae, shedding new light on Persian-Arabian relations and Achaemenid strategy in the south seas.

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**Phonology**

As W. M. Müller had already noted in 1898, nearly identical spellings of this toponym occur in Ptolemaic and Roman temple inscriptions, namely in lists of captive foreign lands. Posener acknowledged their existence, but dismissed their potential relevance for the Tell el-Maskhuta locale:

Il n’est pas certain que le pays qu’elles [the temple inscriptions] mentionnent soit identique à Šb de notre texte et même s’il en était ainsi, ces documents n’aideraient pas à localiser ce dernier, car ils ne suivent aucun ordre géographique.

Although the last statement may be true for Kom Ombo, the variant spellings of this foreign toponym at Esna strongly support an identification with Saba’.

Müller and Posener both mentioned two examples, one from Kom Ombo and another from the now-destroyed temple of north Esna (Contra-Latopolis), A third example was subsequently discovered by Serge Sauneron, after clearing rubble from the main temple of Esna. All examples come from exterior walls of the temples, in series of enemy territories depicted as bound prisoners. None of these scenes are directly labeled with cartouches, so the proposed dates are based on royal names occurring in nearby offering scenes and inscriptions.

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1. Kom Ombo (KO I, 170; reign of Ptolemy XII)
2. Esna (Esna VII, 621, A, 9; reign of Trajan)
3. North Esna (Urk. II, 158, 7; date uncertain)

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18 Posener, La première domination perse, 62, n. 3.

19 Copied only by J.-F. Champollion, Monuments de l’Égypte et de la Nubie. Notices descriptives, 1 (Paris, 1844), 285, reproduced in Urk. II, 158; W. M. Müller incorrectly stated that this example came from Armant (“Die Sabäer in hieroglyphischen Inschriften,” 35), another temple from the same region, also destroyed during the nineteenth century.


22 Champollion had originally attributed this scene to Ptolemy III Euergetes (followed by Urk. II, 158; Giveon, Les bédouins Shouou, 183), but Sauneron thought a Roman date (reigns of
All three examples share the same basic phonetic elements (s-b-t-h) and the final foreign land determinative. A throw-stick (indicating foreign words, names, or toponyms23) occurs in the first pair of texts. The two š’s in the Esna examples correspond to Egyptian conventions whereby all countries are treated as feminine nouns, and do not reflect any phonetic reality.

Müller did not recognize the fourth sign at North Esna ( foyer), and thus emended that example ( foyer), transcribing it as “Ša-b-ti.”24 Givon, meanwhile, assumed this was a bull’s horn ( foyer), apparently proposing a standard phonetic value šb, noting: “la présence du ‘signe de la corne’ suggère ici simplement une vocalisation en śōbē.”25 Posener did not comment on the sign at all, transcribing examples 1 and 3 both as “Šēb.”26

However, the sign in question from North Esna requires no emendation, and the variant at Esna confirms Champollion’s reading. This hieroglyph is simply an elephant’s tusk ( foyer), and the related sign from Esna is the conceptually similar, and thus iconically interchangeable, sharp tooth ( foyer). In the Ptolemaic and Roman periods, both signs frequently represent the triliteral phonetic value bîš,27 as in words such as ‘esh, “iron” (Coptic: BE - , BA - ), bēš, “firmament” (Coptic: BA1 ), and bēš.t, “oracle; wonder” (Coptic: ĒBH , ĖB1 , ĖB1H ).28 The final two consonants of bēš are both weak, so theoretically the sign could reduce to a uniliteral š via the consonantal principle.29 However, such usage is never attested in Graeco-Roman texts, nor was either bēš-sign ever employed in the classic group-writing system of the New Kingdom.30

In short, one could transcribe the Esna examples as Šēbiš or Šēbiš, not just Šb. This transcription evidently corresponds closely to Saba’.

In the South Arabian dialect of Sabāic, the emic term for the region ( ināḥ) can be transcribed: š, b’ (šaba’). The initial sibilant (s’) corresponds fairly consistently to Hebrew shin,31 just like Egyptian: ĒBH . Considering the later dates for the two Esna examples, the final bēš-element could plausibly render the diphthong attested in both Greek or Latin transcriptions32—wherein the kingdom (Saba’) was rendered Šāba and Sabaca—whereas the ethnonym (Sabaean) was transcribed as Šābānos and Sabaei, respectively. During the New Kingdom, however, the Egyptian group š3 (usually ) very regularly corresponds to Semitic /š/33 suggesting that the Esna spellings (Ši-bi-t) accurately notate the terminal aleph in the properly Semitic toponym (Sabāic: š,b’; Arabic: , Hebrew: ḥōw). The absence of this sign on this group on the earlier examples (Medinet Habu, Tell Maskhuta, Kom Ombo), need not be significant, since Semitic alephs would often disappear in Auslaut.34

Hadrian, or of Marc Antony and Lucas Verus) more likely based on the surrounding inscriptions (AXAE 52 (1954): 33, n. 2).


24 Müller, “Die Sabäer in hieroglyphischen Inschriften,” 35, who called the sign “ein ungeschickt geformtes (nicht ganz richtig ge- drehtes) š.”

25 Givon., Les bédouins Sounou, 186–87, n. 7; nonetheless he transliterated this toponym as Šib (ibid., 186).

26 Posener, La première domination perse, 62, n. 3; J. Vercouter followed Posener, and transcribed the Kom Ombo example as “Chaba (pays asiatique)” (L’Égypte et le monde égin préhellénique. Étude critique des sources égyptiennes (Du début de la XVIIe à la fin de la XIXe Dynastie), Bibliothèque d’étude 22 (Caio, 1956), 104, No. 8).

27 D. Kurth, Einführung ins Ptolemäische, 1 (Hützl, 2008), 224, No. 39; Wb. 1, 436–42. Note especially the use of these signs in abbreviated spellings for bēš, “firmament” (Wb. 1, 439, 9).


30 In traditional syllabic orthography of the New Kingdom, the tusk always rendered Semitic /š/, from its alternate Egyptian biliteral value hws: T. Schneider, Asiatische Personennamen in ägyptischen Quellen des Neuen Reiches, OBO 114 (Fribourg, 1992), 384.

31 A. F. L. Beeston, Sabastic Grammar, JSS Monograph 6 (Manchester, 1984), 8–9; P. Stein, Untersuchungen zur Phonologie und Morphologie des Sabäischen (Rahden, 2003), 17–26, 27–

32 Cf. the Egyptian name th-hw-bēš.t = ḫēbō (E. Lüddeckens, Demotisches Namenbuch (1996), 1081), and the term bēš,t, “oracle; wonder” > Coptic: ĖB1 , ĖB1H .


34 Hoch, Semitic Words in Egyptian Texts, 413, 431; Schneider, Asiatische Personennamen, 364.
The Medinet Habu relief

As mentioned above, a very similar toponym, Šḥbāy (šb < šbāy), occurs alongside hundreds of enemy territories represented on the First Pylon of Medinet Habu, from the reign of Ramesses III. Since the associated captive appears more Asiatic than Nubian, and because Posener assumed distant Saba’ would be a non sequitur in a text related to the Suez region, he assigned the toponym to Palestine. This was not an unreasonable proposal, considering New Kingdom imperial interests in the Levant, but the context does not justify such a precise localization. Posener tacitly assumed that Egyptian expeditions would not yet have ventured as far as Saba’ under Ramesses III (c. 1188–1156 BC), but a recent discovery challenges that preconception.

In 2010, a new rock inscription with cartouches of the very same king, Ramesses III, was discovered just north of Tayma Oasis in Saudi Arabia. Pierre Tallet has recently compared this graffito to contemporaneous inscriptions found throughout Sinai, suggesting they might all relate to an expedition to Punt under a recent predecessor; a second suggestion (šb < Šb < Šbτ, “enemy”) relies on the rarely-attested interchange sequence; a second suggestion (šb < Šb < Šbτ, “enemy”) relies on the rarely-attested interchange between š and b. Neither explanation accounts for the foreign land determinative.

Rather, the foreign land determinative would favor interpreting the word as an ethnonym, derived from the toponym Šḥb. The hilly determinative might have attracted the otiose šb phr < xpr p(y)=f rd.wy=f(y)

bn iw=f nfr
šb mtw=k i.ir šm hr-š.t<šb < šbτ, “enemy”) relies on the rarely-attested interchange between š and b. Neither explanation accounts for the foreign land determinative.

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in pre-Aksumite Eritrea, notably with the kingdom of D'MT (Da'amat), already by the mid-first millennium BC. Indeed, local South Arabian inscriptions from Eritrea already mention Saba' by this point.44 Clashes between these groups and the Napatans are easy to imagine, since it was the Aksumites who ultimately brought down Meroe (c. AD 350). Even if this term refers to an eponymous Sabaean settlement in Eritrea or Ethiopia,45 it nonetheless presents yet another comparable hieroglyphic rendering of Saba'.

A new interpretation

The preceding discussion aimed to establish that Saba' is a phonetically acceptable interpretation of the toponym Șabh, specifically as it occurs on the Tell el-Maskhuta stela of Darius I, but possibly also in other inscriptions (Medinet Habu, Harsiotef Stela, Esna, Kom Ombo). Posener objected that a South Arabian locale would hardly fit the context of digging a canal near Suez, but it actually makes excellent sense within the greater narrative. On the three hieroglyphic stelae of Darius, the only other places mentioned are the Suez canal itself (ḥrm)46 and Persia, the final destination of the ships.47 The Old Persian text, meanwhile, states quite clearly that “ships went from Egypt through this canal to Persia.”48 Since the texts mention the launching point (Suez) and the destination (Persia), the Tell Maskhuta stela quite naturally mentions a location midway between the two (Saba').

Even if one assumes Darius was ignorant of southern Arabia, he nominally controlled Oman (Maka) and was active in the Persian Gulf.49 The multiple references to Saba' in connection to maritime routes between Suez and Persia suggests the Great King had planned from the very beginning to rely on the South Arabian kingdom, precisely for assistance navigating around the coast.

What precisely occurs in the Tell el-Maskhuta stela? To answer this question, one must propose reasonable emendations to the lacunae, based on standard Egyptian phraseology and similar expressions on the three stelae—to a greater extent than Posener did in his very conservative edition (see Appendix, below). For while Posener compared all three stelae quite frequently in his textual notes and commentary, he did not usually restore passages in the actual translations, the sections most often consulted by non-Egyptologists.

After an initial series of laudatory royal epithets, repeated almost verbatim on the famous statue of Darius I from Susa, the text mentions something about various foreigners bringing tribute to Prš niwt.46 “Persia the City” (Prš niwt), most likely Persepolis (line 6),50 recalling the famous tribute reliefs from the Apadana. A lacuna follows (line 7), then the end of a toponym (Prš niwt), which one could plausibly restore as Prš jm, “Elam.”51 This locale is further described as “the palace (ḥnw) that Cyrus built for him,”52 suggesting a specific allusion to the royal residence in Susa. On the statue of Udjahorresnet, the

45 E.g., K. A. Kitchen, On the Reliability of the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI, 2003), 594, n. 34; and compare Berenike kata Sabas mentioned above (n. 40). A connection with the medieval city of Soba, also in the Sudan, is doubtful; although Meroe and Soba were geographically quite close, proper settlements are not attested at Soba until almost a millennium later.
46 Wb. III, 330, 2; Posener, La première domination perse en Égypte, 77, n. e; for additional references of this canal in the Arabic name of Pithom, see also D. Meeks, Le grand texte des donations au temple d'Édfou, BdE 59 (Cairo, 1972), 97–98, n. 151; C. Leitz, Geographisch-osirianische Prozessionen aus Philae, Dendara und Assiout, Studien zur spätägyptischen Religion 8 (Wiesbaden, 2012), 349, §30b; J. Tattko, “Quellenübersicht zu den mr-Kanälen, wW- und prw-Gebieten,” in Alägyptische Enzyklopäden, ed. Rickert and Ventker, 1, 188–89.
48 DZc, 11–12; Schmitt, Die altpersischen Inschriften der Achaimeniden, 150.
50 Posener similarly obfuscated this toponym, emending the phrase “en Perse, (dans) la ville,” noting only in his commentary: “Apposition!” (La première domination perse, 59–60, n. g) While the latter group might theoretically be an overwrought determinative, in the typically minimalist orthography of the Late Period, this more likely corresponds to “Persepolis” (Greek, Latin); for the mountain determinative, compare the Babylonian spelling of the city: 52a Par-su-a.
51 Posener only noted the bird in his epigraphic notes (La première domination perse, 58, n. i, 60, n. 1); the owl is much clearer in the epigraphic copy (ibid., Pl. IV), and confirmed by collation in visu. For other hieroglyphic spellings of Elam, see Posener, La première domination perse, 183–84; Yoyotte, “The Egyptian Statue of Darius,” 274–75; Enez VII, 621, 7. This restoration was already suggested by A. V. Edakov, “A comparative study of the sources [in Russian],” VfI 152 (1980): 109–10, with n. 42; and apparently Yoyotte, “The Egyptian Statue of Darius,” 275.
Egyptian officials claim Darius consulted with him “while his Majesty was in Elam ([Read: Elam])” (i.e., Susa).\textsuperscript{53}

While either Persepolis or Susa would be appropriate places to consult Egyptian advisors, neither locale is necessarily the setting for the main narrative. The next phrase claims the king arrived at another place, lost in the lacuna, which “[he loved] more than anything else ([Read: mtn])”\textsuperscript{54} At this point (line 7), “his Majesty caused that all the inspectors and all the officials of this town come ([Read: wr nb m[nw t nb wr nb n niw.t tn]).”\textsuperscript{55} Since the following lines mention Egypt, Egyptian ships and inspectors, it seems likely that these officials were local administrators of an Egyptian town, perhaps Pithom or Memphis.\textsuperscript{56}

Darius then asked the assembly (line 8): “Does a pa[t]h [. . .?] (in-wm m[t]) [. . .:].”\textsuperscript{57} One can only speculate on the precise wording, but presumably he inquired whether it was possible to reach Persia via the Red Sea. The courtiers initially responded negatively (line 8: “We have not seen, [we have not heard] ([ni mš3=][n ni edm=m=n]),”\textsuperscript{58} but then a distinguished one in their midst spoke up (dd.in tni hri-lb=sn)” (line 9). This courtier reminded Darius about some past interaction between Cyrus and “the Chief of Saba’ ([Read: Šb])” (\textsuperscript{59} This section is also fragmentary, but the surviving verbs (rdi, “to give”; wD, “to command”) may suggest formal diplomatic relations between the two leaders.

After a large break, Darius (line 15) asked his courtiers something which they again denied (lines 16–17): dd=sn hft hm=f nn [. . .] Šb, “they said before his Majesty: “[We] do not [. . .] Saba’.” Based on this lacunose reply, one may postulate that the Great King inquired whether they knew how to reach the land of Saba’. As they did not, Darius then ordered “that [one?] cargo ship should go forth to reconnoiter the waters ([sM [w.t?] kbn.t r rh nwy]).”\textsuperscript{60} In the other two canal stelae, the mention of the waters (nwy) is followed by statements that “one acted just like [all] that [his Majesty] decreed ([ir.n.tw mi wD.t [nb n hri=sn])],” with the result that “they reached Persia ([spr=sn r Peks]).”\textsuperscript{61}

Nonetheless, this advance party also found a large stretch of land, eight iteru (~84 km), between the “[river] of Egypt ([lirw =sn Km.t])” (i.e., the Nile)\textsuperscript{62} and the hrm-canal of Pithom, which was completely impassable (“there is no water in [it] ([nn mnr nb im=sn])” (line 18). At this point, Darius summoned Egyptian agents (rwd.w nw Km.t) to the site (line 19);\textsuperscript{63} based on the other stelae, these officials took charge of excavating the new canal.\textsuperscript{64} This major feat accomplished, the Great King ordered more cargo ships to set forth to Persia bearing Egyptian tribute (lines 20–21), perhaps passing by Saba’ (line 21: \textsuperscript{65} after which there was much rejoicing (line 22: b\textsuperscript{h}).

Although all three stelae repeat certain phrases, the Tell el-Maskhuta reduction focuses most heavily on the background for the Suez canal project, including the plans involving the Chief of Saba’. The other two inscriptions (Kabrit and Shaluf) devote more attention to the excavation itself and the ensuing celebrations,

\textsuperscript{53} Ibid., 21–22, with n. d.

\textsuperscript{54} One might alternatively restore: “[and his Majesty’s heart was gladder about this] than anything else [wn lb n hm=f for hr=sn] r hri nb,” based on a similar passage in the royal stela from Defenna (Dynasty 26 or 27): W. M. Pl. Petrie, Nechebs (Am) and Defenneh (Tubpanhes), EEF 4 (London, 1888), Pl. XLI.1, line 11.

\textsuperscript{55} This fragmentary section is composed from the three different stelae: Posener, \textit{La première domination perse}, 60–61, n. i.


\textsuperscript{57} This emendation fits the traces: Posener, \textit{La première domination perse}, 61, n. i, 74; pls. IV, line 8; V, line 8. For various spellings of \textit{mtn}, “road; path,” see G. Vittmann, \textit{Altpersische Wortmetaphern}, Beiträge zur Assyriologie 15 (Vienna, 1999), 152–83.

\textsuperscript{58} For the restoration, see Posener, \textit{La première domination perse}, 84, line 7, 85, n. c.

\textsuperscript{59} The Chief of Saba’ is mentioned on both lines 10 and 11, but only the second example is noted in Posener’s transcription and translation (ibid., 55–56, 58, n. q, 59). Nonetheless, the characteristic determinative of the standing official can be discerned in the traces preceding n Šb “of Saba’” on line 10 (ibid., Pl. IV).

\textsuperscript{60} For the emendation, see ibid., 57–58, with n. y, noting the alternate reading: “that [they] go in [a cargo ship ([sm=sn m] kbn.t]).”

\textsuperscript{61} Ibid., 86, n. i.

\textsuperscript{62} For the restoration (line 18), compare line 13 of the Kabret stela, where traces of “[lirw =sn]” are visible between hrm and Km.t (ibid., 76 [not included in his translation], Pl. V). In Egyptian texts, lirw, “the River,” was a standard designation for both the Nile and its branches (Wk. 1, 146, 10–11). The present formulation corresponds to the Old Persian text of the Shaluft (Kabrit) stela (DZs., 9): “[from a river, Pirāvā (< p-lirw>) its name, which flows in Egypt (hac Pirāvā nāma raṣa taṣa Mėtrāyān dānuʾati)’” see Schmitt, \textit{Die altpersischen Inschriften der Achaimeniden}, 150.

\textsuperscript{63} Posener, \textit{La première domination perse}, 58, n. ad, 77, n. g, 86, n. h.

\textsuperscript{64} For the emendation, see ibid., 76–77, with n. i, Pl. V, line 14.


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\textsuperscript{68} The Chief of Saba’ is mentioned on both lines 10 and 11, but only the second example is noted in Posener’s transcription and translation (ibid., 55–56, 58, n. q, 59). Nonetheless, the characteristic determinative of the standing official can be discerned in the traces preceding n Šb “of Saba’” on line 10 (ibid., Pl. IV).
both of which are only summarily mentioned on the Tell el-Maskhuta stela (lines 19–22). 65

What can one conclude from this heavily damaged text? Possibly in Susa—but more likely in Egypt—Darius summoned together various advisers and inquired whether there really existed a maritime passage between Egypt and Persia (“Does a path . . . ?”).66 While the courtiers professed ignorance, a certain distinguished advisor—perhaps even the famed Udjahorresnet—told the Great King that Cyrus once maintained contact with the Chief of Saba’, a personage mentioned several more times in the text. This fact can only have been relevant if the speaker and his audience knew that Saba’ lay midway between the two countries.

Darius wished to reach Saba’, but since the Egyptians did not yet know the route, he sent a single sailing vessel (kbn.t) to explore the Red Sea;66 since this action occurred before the canal excavations, the departure point is uncertain. This first expedition successfully reached Persia, apparently with the help of the Sabaens, but the crew realized it was impossible to travel between the Nile and Pithom. After digging a partial canal, cargo ships could more efficiently carry Egyptian tribute to Persia.

Although the Suez canal stelae of Darius I and Herodotus (Hist. IV, 44) both record that Achaemenid ships circumnavigated Arabia, some scholars doubt whether this nautical feat would have been possible at that time.67 Among various objections, Salles emphasized that neither source mentions geographical details along the southern coast of Arabia, from the Strait of Hormuz to Bab el-Mandeb. Persian ships would have hardly risked, Salles argued, sailing into the then-uncharted Arabian Sea, merely in order to ship Egyptian goods to Persia.

Certainly, Darius I would have been foolhardy to initiate a costly “Big Dig” in the Northeast Delta, before establishing whether Red Sea transport was even feasible between Egypt and Persia. Excavating around eighty-four kilometers would have consumed vast resources, time, and even lives,68 at a time when Darius had higher priorities, such as building palaces and monuments in Persia, campaigning in Scythia and Greece, suppressing local rebellions, and reorganizing the Persian empire. Indeed, the Tell el-Maskhuta stela makes it clear that a single ship explored the itinerary before any excavations began. Moreover, the previously uncharted territory, namely the southern coast of Arabia, was recognized as a problem from the project’s inception.

Even if the Egyptians had forgotten the route, they were already acquainted with the Sabaeans in South Arabia, perhaps on account of recent expeditions to Punt in the southern Red Sea.69 A private statue from Dynasty 26 mentions an expedition to Punt, apparently via Coptos and the Wadi Hammamat.70 The fragmentary Tell Defenna stela, of similar date, recounts a distressed Egyptian expedition to Punt which was saved by miraculous rains falling out of season.71 It is precisely within this context of Red Sea engagement that the Saite king Necho II (c. 610–595 BCE) first attempted to build a canal near Suez.72 As previously noted, Darius I or his advisors may have already known of the nascent Sabaeans through

66 For estimates of the scale of the project and the high number of human casualties in comparable excavations, see recently Cooper, “Egypt’s Nile-Red Sea Canals,” 204.

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Achaemenid activities in Maka (Oman) and the Persian Gulf region.

**Partners with Saba’**

Besides the Tell el-Maskhuta stela, little is known about Achaemenid interaction with Saba’. Scholars have long debated the precise chronology of the South Arabian kingdom, but since a certain Karibilu, King of Saba’ (perhaps the renowned Karib’il Watar I) is mentioned already by Sennacherib (c. 683 BC), the Sabaeans had clearly attained international recognition by the time of Darius I (late sixth century BC).

The sizeable lacunae on the Tell el-Maskhuta stela makes it impossible to determine the relationship between Darius and the Chief of Saba’, namely whether he intended to invade South Arabia or form an alliance. In the latter case, Darius would have followed a precedent set by his predecessor, Cambyses. Prior to invading Egypt, Cambyses dispatched envoys to the king of the Arabians, requesting a pledge (πίστις) of safe conduct through Northern Sinai; the king agreed, and collaborating as friends (ξεῖνοι), his men installed water depots along the treacherous road to assist the advancing Persian army. Since Maka (Oman) and Hagar (Northwest Arabia) both occur in contemporaneous Achaemenid lists of tribute-bearing nations, while Saba’ is conspicuously absent, an alliance seems more likely than conquest.

Remarkably, a Qedarite shrine was discovered near Tell el-Maskhuta, dating to the Persian period, that contained silver bowls inscribed in Aramaic, one even mentioning “the king of Qedar.” In other words, elite Northwestern Arabs spent considerable time in precisely the region of Darius’s Suez canal. Although such prestige objects did not belong to southern Sabaeans, they nonetheless testify that allies from the Arabian Peninsula were somehow involved in Achaemenid traffic in the Red Sea.

Based on the few hieroglyphs surrounding mentions of the Chief of Saba’ on the Tell el-Maskhuta stela, as well as the earlier alliance between Cambyses and Qedarite Arabs, it seems most likely that Darius sought the assistance of the Sabaeans in sailing along the southern coast of Arabia. This scenario neatly resolves the difficulty of Persians circumnavigating the Arabian Peninsula, and credits Darius I with greater foresight in his Red Sea strategy.

**Motivations for the canal enterprise**

Tuplin doubted Persians would have desired to encourage maritime trade, particularly of incense, in the Red Sea. He concluded instead that the Suez canal project was primarily an idealizing political statement, asserting Achaemenid domination over distant realms.

Yet these are hardly the only possible motivations, as the canal stelae themselves suggest. After Darius secured a passageway, dozens of cargo ships left Egypt to Persia specifically to carry tribute (imw). Referring only to the “official” list of tribute which Herodotus (Hist. III, 91) reported the Persians having exacted from the Egyptian satrapy, Salles remarked:

> On ne trouve rien qui justifierait l’armement d’une flotille nombreuse sauf à inclure une escorte militaire – embarquée pour une longue et périlleuse aventure, alors que les routes terrestres sont tellement mieux équipées et plus sûres.

This negative assessment disregards the large amounts of heavy stone quarried in the Wadi Hammamat, which along with the famous statue of Darius I

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73 Cf. K. A. Kitchen, *Documentation for Ancient Arabia, I: Chronological Framework and Historical Sources* (Liverpool, 1994); Schippmann, *Ancient South Arabia*, 35–48, who noted also: “The seventh and sixth centuries B.C. can be seen as the zenith of the Sabean kingdom’s power” (ibid., 55–56).


75 Strabo (XVI, 4.22) observed that when, five centuries later, Augustus dispatched Aelius Gallus towards Sabaea, he was open to either forming an alliance with the Arabsians, or conquering them if necessary; cf. G. W. Bowersock, *Roman Arabia*, 1983, 47.


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discovered at Susa were almost certainly destined for Persia.\textsuperscript{81} That the Achaemenids attached great importance to this material is clear from the graffiti of the Persian official Athiyavahiya, who led numerous expeditions in the region over a career spanning decades.\textsuperscript{82} Can we really imagine that such heavy cargo was hauled back to Coptos, shipped up the Nile to Memphis, and then carried along a harsh land route to Persepolis or Susa—not to mention the thousands of Egyptian workmen shipped to Iran, as recorded in the Persepolis Fortification Tablets?\textsuperscript{83} Such heavy materials must have been shipped, as was the practice since the Middle Kingdom, through the Red Sea via coastal harbors like Mersa Gawasis or Quseir. Excavating the Suez canal was not necessary to move these particular materials, but it would have facilitated the shipment of additional tribute from the Delta.

A land route from the Delta to Persia already existed, but one must be careful not to minimize its own unique difficulties.\textsuperscript{84} Cambyses was only able to pass through Northern Sinai with the assistance of Arabian tribes. Over one hundred Saite-Persian stations have been found along this route,\textsuperscript{85} testifying both to its great importance and necessity, but also to the considerable labor and resources required for its continual maintenance. Overland traffic was in constant threat of disruption by any rebellions that might (and often did) occur anywhere between Egypt and Persia. Establishing a maritime route provided an alternate means of reaching Egypt, both for cargo ships as well as for the military, one that was less contingent on political stability in Mesopotamia and the Levant.

Darius I was not interested in encouraging trade in the Red Sea, benefitting Egypt, or engaging in abstract, politico-theological posturing. Rather, he sought to ensure a steady flow of tribute and other precious materials from Egypt to Persia, by all routes possible.\textsuperscript{86}

Appendix: synoptic edition of the Tell el-Maskhuta Stela, with continuous translation of the introduction (lines 1–5)

As mentioned earlier, the Tell el-Maskhuta stela, the best-preserved hieroglyphic text from the Suez canal, begins with a typically Pharaonic encomium of royal epithets.\textsuperscript{87} In fact, the epithets are essentially identical to those found on the statue of Darius I from Susa, except that the latter monument privileges the king’s association with Atum, whereas Neith predominates on the Tell el-Maskhuta stela. Using a synoptic edition, one may venture a continuous translation of the first five lines. Although the near-parallelism of the texts has been noted before,\textsuperscript{88} most notably by A. V. Edakov in a rarely cited article,\textsuperscript{89} the most recent discussions of the Tell el-Maskhuta stela do not yet take advantage of such restorations.\textsuperscript{90} A new translation of the introduction will follow the synoptic text below (see Figs. 1 and 2). For the rest of the fragmentary Tell el-Maskhuta stela, see the discussion above (“A new interpretation”).

\textsuperscript{81} For confirmation that the Susa statue was quarried in the Wadi Hammamat, see J. Trichet and F. Vallat, “L’origine égyptienne de la statue de Darius,” in \textit{Contributions à l’histoire de l’Iran. Mélanges offerts à Jean Perrot}, ed. F. Vallat (Paris, 1990), 205–208.


\textsuperscript{84} For different challenges invading armies faced along this route in antiquity, see D. Kahn and O. Tammuz, “Egypt is Difficult to Enter: Invading Egypt - a game plan (seventh–fourth centuries BCE),” \textit{JSSEA 25} (2008): 42; for the two proposed routes from Egypt to Persia, see Yoyotte, “Egyptian Statue of Darius,” 259, fig. 276. When Ptolemy II Philadelphus re-excavated the Suez canal centuries later, he also added a great wall, in effect creating an enormous moat blocking the land route: Thiers, \textit{La première domination perse}, 117–30; Vittmann, “Ägypten zur Zeit der Perserherrschaft,” 383–84.


\textsuperscript{89} Edakov, “Egyptian Canal of Darius I,” 108–10, who already used the Susa statue to restore passages in the Tell el-Maskhuta stela.

Figure 1—Transcription of the Tell el-Maskhuta stela. For both Figs. 1 and 2, the following abbreviations will be used: M: Tell el-Maskhuta stela (Posener, La première domination perse, 55–57, pl. IV); K: Kabrit stela (ibid., pl. V); Sz: Suez stela (ibid., 84–85); S: Susa statue, 1–4 (Yoyotte, “Egyptian Statue of Darius,” 261).
Transliteration and Translation

1 [pr prs] [The good god...]
ms.n N.t nb.t S$w
born of Neith, Lady of Sais,
twi n R$e
image of Re,
rdi.n=f hr ns.f=f
whom he placed upon his throne,
$r smnh S$w.n=f=f [hr-tp t8]
to perfect what he began [on earth].

[npr nfr hr.w hr m$t.A]
[chosen by Neith, Lady of Sais]

[stp.n N.t nb t S$w]
[to be lord] of the whole circuit of the sun,
[r nb] n šnw nb n ita
while he was still in the womb,
$w=f m h.t
and had not come forth on earth.
$w=f m h.t

[rh.n=s ntt z3=s pw
Knowing that he was her son,
wd=s n=f if $ [t3.wy nb]
she ordered him to seize [all lands],
[rdl]=s n=f n=$
she [gave] to him her hand,
$hr smr.t. tp=f=s
bearing the bow before her,
$r slpr ltdy.w=f t=f-nb
in order to fell his enemies daily,
$m i hr n=s n z3=s R$e
just as she did for her son, Re.

wys=f $ [m=s]
He has become mighty [thereby,]
[r lgr $by.w=f]
[in order to repel his rebels,]
$r s=t$ $sp=; w=f m t3.w nb
[and to annihilate] his enemies in all lands.

nyw-bity nb-t3w
The King of Upper and Lower Egypt,
(lntrw$) nny.w d.t
Darius (I), may he live eternally,
p3 $t $pt wr n n3 wr.w
The Great one, the King of Kings,
$p3 $t npt t8 r-tf=;$
the [Chief of the entire earth]
[zt u-nfr]
[son of the God’s Father],
[W]šnsyš ʔlmns $p3-3$ [Hy]stasps, the Achaemenid, the Great.

Figure 2—Transliteration and Translation of the Tell el-Maskhuta stela.