Papyrus Harris
A Funerary Endowment?

ERIC P. UPHILL

Until the present time there have been two views explaining the purpose of this great document listing gifts of Ramesses III to various temples in Egypt. The older one is simply that it represents all lands, serfs and possessions owned and held by the entire body of Egyptian temples at the end of the reign of this king. The second suggestion modifies this and limits the totals to all gifts of land and staff to the said totality of shrines by Ramesses himself. Typical of those who held the former view were J. A. Wilson¹ and A. H. Gardiner,² while besides R. O. Faulkner³ the more limited view was held by W. B. Emery.⁴

It is worth quoting then the position held by Wilson at the time he wrote his survey of Egyptian history.

We have a long testamentary enactment, confirming the temples in their property and their annual dues despite the pharaoh’s death.⁵

While such provisions were made for the afterlife at least as far back as the 6th if not 4th Dynasties, in this case they are of exceptional grandeur, and the vast scale cannot as yet be paralleled earlier even under the New Kingdom.

Wilson also commented on the economic burdens of such bequests which are perhaps best equated in the modern world with giant charitable trust funds or foundations.

This amazing record of royal generosity (i.e. in the great papyrus) shows how the great shrines of Egypt, particularly the temple of Amon-Re at Karnak, were squeezing the pharaoh to a point dangerous to the economy of the land.

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This paper forms the basis of the lecture ‘Papyrus Harris: Donations to the Gods or Funerary Endowments?’ given for the 1990 Egyptology seminar series, University College London, on the 15th of May 1990.
Here then is the conventional view of ancient Egypt oppressed by hieratic rule, analogous to England at the end of the Middle Ages when approximately one third of the agricultural and farm land was said to have been owned by the monasteries. Or again:

Finally, the summary of past ownings and recent gifts shows the temple estates as they stood at the time of Ramses III’s death, in buildings, land, people owned as serfs, cattle, ships, and so on.6

That this is a totally unhistorical view derived from an incorrect analysis of the evidence will be shown later.

In his view that this immense total of gifts represented an eighth of all arable land available, and that by multiplying up the number of wives and children of serfs a figure of 450,000 temple personnel is reached, Wilson was on much safer ground.7 As he estimated, a tenth of the population is probably correct given the total of land listed as a little over 700,000 acres or 1,100 square miles, which would be around a tenth of the likely total of fertile ground. Based on one wife and two or three children and old people per individual serf, a minimum figure of 300,000 and a maximum (and more probable) one of 500,000 people is obtained.

Gardiner also, although not going into details, stated ‘and we see that the estate of Amen-Re’ at Karnak was by far the greatest beneficiary’.8 Although he pointed out the important fact that the list of gifts to lesser deities mentions no place south of Coptos, he apparently did not see the significance of this omission if this is really an inventory of all the holdings of the Egyptian deities.

It was, however, J. Cerný’s analysis that long ago demonstrated that out of the 86,486 heads listed under the Theban or Amun-Re section, no fewer than 62,626 belonged to the great temple of Medinet Habu the king’s own funerary complex.9 Bearing this in mind it is therefore important to see what the actual text of Papyrus Harris states before an accurate assessment can be made of its intentions or ultimate provisions, as well as ascertaining whether or not the traditional views cited above are in any way correct.10

In regard to workers of twenty temples that appear to have been built as well as named for Ramesses III, eighteen in Egypt and two abroad, the following figures are obtained for those listed in the Theban or Amun-Re estate.

1. The Noble House (ḥwt) of Millions of Years. The House (ḥwt) of king Usermaatre meri-Amun l.p.h. in the House (pr) of Amun. Fortified enclosure wall with lower rampart, wall (šby) etc. 62,626 heads. Location. Medinet Habu.

2. The House (pr) of Usermaatre meri-Amun etc. in the House of Amun in the City. The House (pr) of Usermaatre etc. in the House (pr) of Amun. 970 heads. Location. Mut temple complex.

3. The House (pr) of Ramesses heka-Ienu in the House (pr) of Amun. The Secret Sanctuary (lit. Horizon) in the City of Thebes in front of (lit. facing) thy Court, Lord of Gods, House (pr) of Ramesses etc. in the House (pr) of Amun. 2,623 heads. Location. Identified by inscriptions on the architraves as the small temple in the Karnak forecourt.

4. The House (ḥwt) of Ramesses etc. United with Joy in the House (pr) of Amun. 49 heads. Location. Small structure possibly at the north end of the court between the third and fourth pylons.

The ‘Migdo Gateway’ which forms the eastern entrance to the great precinct of the Medinet Habu mortuary temple. [Photo: D. Rohl].

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5. The House \((pr)\) of Ramesses etc. Great of Victories the City which Pharaoh \(I.p.h.\) made for thee in the north in (i.e. under) the estate of the House \((pr)\) of Amun-Re King of Gods. 7,872 heads.

Location. Per-Ramesses. Delta residence city temple.

6. The House \((pr)\) of Ramesses etc. in the House \((pr)\) of Khonsu. 294 heads.

Location. Khonsu temple at Karnak.

As set out in the list of temple staff, that is the serfs working for the estates, the order is a logical one in being arranged with the largest temple first, and following a geographical location sequence as well as a division by god dedication. Hence numbers 1-5 are all Amun centred, although each is named after the king, and follow the progression west bank funerary, east bank city or Karnak proper, then the Delta residence. Number 6 is of course for Khonsu but also named after the king. This was also given 247 additional heads for the temple in general. It may also be relevant that those temples built outside older existing complexes and thus perhaps considered self contained, seem to be named with the prenomen, while those within existing complexes like that of Amun at Karnak are linked with the nomen. This rule may also be applied to other temples elsewhere throughout Egypt. Apart from the two named funerary temples or Houses of Millions of Years at Thebes and Heliopolis the whole list may also be directly linked with and intended to serve the king's ultimate mortuary cult.

This would be supported by the fact that the king's ka-statues were certainly placed in many if not all of them in addition to those of the gods. As will be seen this mortuary cult may have been universal throughout the Egyptian empire.

The Heliopolitan section is much shorter consisting of two main entries.

7. The House \((hwt)\) of Ramesses heka-Iunu etc. in the House \((pr)\) of Re. 1,485 heads.

Location. Heliopolis. Metropolitan temple area.

8. The Noble House \((hwt)\) of Millions of Years of Ramesses etc. in the House \((pr)\) of Re on the north of Iunu. 2,177 heads. The great 'Viewing House' \((pr \text{ m3} '3')\) there. 1,779. The New Land of Ramesses etc. 247. Apiru and other foreign labour there. 2,093. Total 6,296 heads.

Location. Tell el-Yehudiya temple.

With a Viewing House (perhaps a Migidol gate tower or something similar to that at Medinet

Fig. 1: Plan of the great mortuary temple precinct of Ramesses III at Medinet Habu in Western Thebes. [After U. Höltscher: The Mortuary Temple of Ramesses III, Part II (1951), fig. 1]

Habu) the second foundation of the Heliopolitan group numbers the second largest temple staff, that of the residence temple being probably more than just the staff of the actual temple and including those attached to the settlement itself. The Heliopolis temple complex was given an additional 4,583 heads in similar fashion to a number of other existing foundations. This last figure would thus represent the true figure of Ramesses III's additions to the existing Re-Atum temple as opposed to his own new temples.

The Memphite section is given smaller as regards the number of people donated.

9. The new House \((hwt)\) in your (broad) court ... the House \((hwt)\) of Ramesses heka-Iunu etc. in the House \((pr)\) of Ptah. 609 heads.

Location. In the court of the Memphite metropolitan temple, perhaps in a similar position to that in front of pylon 2 at Karnak, i.e. no.3.

10. The House \((pr)\) of Usermaatre meri-Amun etc. the town on the western road and western canal. 40 heads.

Location. Uncertain but on the western branch of the Nile in a new town.
11. The House (pr) of Ramesses heka-Iunu etc. in the House (pr) of Ptah. 16 heads.

Location. Memphis. Possibly identical with number 9 or else very small.

In addition to the above mentioned serfs there are listed 841 more people for the Ptah temple needs in general (including 205 Syrians).

The section devoted to the foundations for the lesser gods is longer but has far fewer people in all. Proceeding in general from south to north these are.

12. The House (hwt) of Ramesses heka-Iunu etc. Judge in the House (pr) of Onuris. Fortified enclosure wall of 30 cubits with lower rampart (sby) etc. 457 heads.

Location. Thinis. Not yet identified.

In addition 160 heads were given to the temple in general.

13. The House (hwt) of Ramesses heka-Iunu etc. in the House (pr) of Osiris, Lord of Abydos. 682 heads. Fortified enclosure wall (sby) of 30 cubits etc.

Location. Abydos. On the site of the traditional city temple.

In addition 162 heads were given to the temple in general.

14. The House (pr) of Ramesses heka-Iunu etc. in the House (pr) of Seth of Ombos. 106 heads.

Location. Nubti, probably Naqada.

15. The House (hwt) of Ramesses heka-Iunu etc. in the House (pr) of Min, Lord of Ipu (Panopolis). 203 heads.

Location. Akhmim.

16. The House (hwt) of Ramesses heka-Iunu etc. appearing in the Sed-festival in the House (pr) of Wepwawet. Fortified enclosure wall (sby) of 30 cubits with lower rampart etc. 157 heads.

Location. Asyut.

In addition 122 heads were given to the temple in general.

17. The House (hwt) of Ramesses heka-Iunu etc. in the House (pr) of Thoth, Lord of Hermopolis. 89 heads.
enclosure of the Medinet Habu temple, and thus almost certainly contained settlements of people and officials. The Khatanah temple or settlement may be connected with the walls located on the site by M. Bietak.

Two further temples are even listed abroad in Palestine and Nubia.

19. The Noble House (pr) in Ta-Seti (Nubia?) ... House (pr) of Ramesses heka-Iunu etc. Great of Victories. No serfs specified.

*Location.* Possibly situated in the Aniba-Ibrim area - both sites where Ramesside building elements have been located.

20. The Secret House (hwr) in the land of Djahi (Palestine-Syria). The House (hwr) of Ramesses heka-Iunu etc. in Pa-Kanana (Canaan). No serfs specified.

*Location.* Beth-shan.

As a matter of interest, geographically both these foundations are listed under Amun's domain presumably as being king of gods and empire *par excellence.* There seems little doubt that Beth-shan is the Canaanite temple since the site has produced not only two stone statues of the king but also many other archaeological remains of the reign of Ramesses III, including houses and a governor's residence. This goes very much against the identification by Rowe of the 20th Dynasty complex as containing the remains of two temples belonging to Dagon and Ashtaroth. It is now well established that these adapted structures belong to later levels, if they really existed as cult places, and that the temple of Ramesses must belong to the earlier level VI period. The fact that statues of the king were placed in it suggests that not only was the single, more solidly built, north temple of Ramesses dedicated to Amun but also had *Ka*-statues for the royal cult as well. This fits in exactly with the Harris evidence referring to it in general as the temple of Ramesses in Canaan.

With regard to the above selected list, it should be pointed out that the extracts here only cover temples named after Ramesses III himself. Elsewhere in the papyrus the *spat*-district of Per-Ramesses heka-Iunu is given a city determinative and there is further a reference to the 'garden enclosed with a fortified (?) wall (shby)', described as, 'by (or like) the *itrw*'. This suggests an estate

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A column of the temple endowment list from the Great Papyrus Harris. [Reproduced by courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum]

The House (pr) of Ramesses heka-Iunu etc. here. 66 heads. Fortified enclosure wall (shby) of 30 cubits with lower rampart etc.

*Location.* Hermopolis. Note the second House in this case might be a palace attached to the temple if not a smaller shrine.

In addition 484 heads were given to the temple in general.

18. The House (pr) of Ramesses heka-Iunu etc. in the House (pr) of Sutekh in the House (pr) of Ramesses meri-Amun etc. 106 heads.

*Location.* Per-Ramesses. Residence temple, possibly at Tell ed-Daba.

It should be noted that a number of these foundations include walls of the type built for the great
wall of vast length given that the iter measure was a distance of 10.5 kms. Such a gigantic undertaking was probably built to enclose the enormous royal estate called Ka-en-Kemet previously mentioned under Ramesses II. This suggests that all these listed temples were built within the confines of major fortified settlements.

Table 1 gives a summary breakdown of the distribution of serf labour in the many settlements donated by Ramesses III towards his religious foundation.

Of all this immense total 84,868 heads are listed under Ramesses III’s personal temples as against only 16,665 for the remaining temples dedicated to the gods. Thus 84% of the staff belong to those temples dedicated by, and to a great extent for the use of, the king. Respectful form caused them all to be placed under the three great national deities of Egypt, and, indeed, in administrative terms they formed geographical units corresponding to those parts of Egypt presided over by Amun, Re-Harakhti and Ptah, - in other words the capital cities of Thebes, Heliopolis and Memphis.

It might therefore be argued from this that even if the main part of the endowments was intended for Ramesses III’s own temples and, by extension, his funerary cult after death, because of this the administrative control would still have been vested in the High Priests and priesthood of Karnak and the other temples throughout Egypt. In fact, nothing could be further from the truth. The gigantic grant of people and land awarded to Medinet Habu, constituting over half the total benefactions, was actually placed under the control of the great officials of north and south, as also were the temples numbered two and three above. The small structure numbered ‘four’ was under the High Priest of Amun, but this of course was a minor gift as such. Similarly while the gifts to the great metropolitan temple of Heliopolis (number seven) were placed under the High Priest, those belonging to the Yehudiya funerary temple (number eight) were under the control of the scribe, the chief inspector Parahotep, and the house (or palace?) there under the chief inspector Thutmose and the officials. With regard to Memphis the new temple (number nine) was under the officials.

From this it can be seen that while many bodies of workers and herdsmen have no specified overseers, the ratio for these would probably have been similar as regards those who were placed under the temple priesthood or royal officials instead. This hardly constitutes a vast increase in the priestly power wherever whatever level it may have been before, and indeed it is the contention of this paper that, far from doing as Wilson suggested and weakening the royal authority, Ramesses III’s gifts were kept under strict royal control.

Papyrus Harris vignette of Ramesses III before Ptah, Sekhmet and Nefertem. [Reproduced by courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum]
One final question must be asked. Did Papyrus Harris represent a new departure or was this only the culmination of centuries of previous custom? At present there is no body of evidence to help decide this point, it seems though that Ramesses II and his father Seti I may at least have done likewise. The enormous number of new foundations of Seti such as Abydos, and the great emphasis on new forts and fortified towns built during his reign, do suggest that Ramesses III was not innovating. On the other hand Harris is to date the only surviving document of this type, while the much more massive scale of the individual settlements as shown by archaeological evidence, does indicate something new in Egyptian history.

When it is remembered that sites such as Tell er-Retabi cover an area of c. 420m x 185m or somewhat more than Medinet Habu, and that Yehudiya under Ramesses III occupied an area of around 16 hectares, it can be seen that if even only a part of the 160 settlements in Egypt were new ones, this would still constitute a stupendous building programme. Some idea of just how vast this would be can be seen from the fact that Medinet Habu alone has an outer wall and circuit measuring 315m x 210m square, with a rampart over 17m high standing on a foundation platform averaging 2.5m high and just over 30m wide, fronted by a lower rampart wall. In addition there is the substantial inner rampart with towers, the whole system comprising at least 234,000 cubic metres of material.

Retabi because of its longer circuit wall of similar design, is about equal in bulk at around 231,500 cubic metres, even within an inner wall. Yehudiya as rebuilt by Ramesses, was probably nearly double this figure, while Heliopolis following Petrie may have been much greater still.

If then an average of about 233,000 cubic metres is taken as a basis for calculation, bearing in mind that this does not include all the interior buildings of these foundations, whose bulk must therefore have added at least twenty five per cent or more to the total mass, then the aggregate of buildings constructed during this reign is truly formidable. At the minimum there are five places listed as having fortifications of the Medinet Habu class, not including Heliopolis or Yehudiya which as shown would between them have added the equivalent of five more such constructions. This alone would equal the Great Pyramid in volume of materials. But in addition to the eighteen sites listed with temples there are major constructions such as Retaba which do not appear in the inventory, suggesting that the real total would at least equal if not surpass in volume and materials the combined mass of all the constructions of previous pharaohs.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Estates</th>
<th>Heads</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Amun Estate</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Named Ramesses III temples</td>
<td>74,434</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General to Amun, Mut, Khonsu</td>
<td>8,988</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Herdsmen</td>
<td>3,064</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>86,468</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Towns in Egypt = 56</strong></td>
<td><strong>Towns in Syria/Kush = 9</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ships = 83</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
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| **Re-Harakhti Estate** |                |
| Named Ramesses III temples | 7,781 |
| General to Atum, Re | 4,583 |
| Missing people (Herdsmen?) | 599 |
| **Total - actual** | **12,364** |
| **- given** | **12,963** |
| **Towns in Egypt = 103** | **Ships = 3** |

| **Ptah Estate** |                |
| Named Ramesses III temples | 665 |
| General to Ptah | 1,053 |
| Herdsmen | 1,361 |
| **Total** | **3,079** |
| **Towns in Egypt = 1** | **Ships = 2** |

| **Smaller Temple Estates** |                |
| Named Ramesses III temples | 1,988 |
| General to temples | 2,041 |
| Herdsmen | 1,657 |
| Missing people | 125 |
| **Total - actual** | **5,686** |
| **- given** | **5,811** |

**Grand Totals:** Heads: actual = 107,635, given = 113,433 (the latter figure might allow for boat crews). Towns: actual = 157 in Egypt, given = 160 (possibly 3 were omitted in section four) and actual/given = 9 in Syria/Kush.

**Table 1: Statistics from the Great Papyrus Harris.**

In addition sites such as Beth-shan rebuilt by Ramesses III as a fortress covering about 2.5 hectares and standing on a very tall mound that rises from 40 to 60m above its surroundings, give an indication of what type of foreign establishments were comprised in the Harris inventory.

Largest of all in constructional terms among those listed in Egypt itself may have been the settlement and great estate wall at Per-Ramesses.

That these enormous undertakings were not just intended for defence or use in the king's
lifetime, can be seen by the fact that statues for
the royal cult were established in temples, even in
the Levant, for example, at Beth-shan.

A rough calculation of the 113,000 heads
divided into 160 towns gives an average settle-
ment of about 760 serfs each, or with families say
up to 3,800 people. The sites quoted above would
be more than large enough to have contained such
a number bearing in mind that some inhabitants
may have lived outside the settlement enclosures.
The purpose of these towns would then have been
to sustain the temples and to work in perpetuity
to keep the cult and memory of Pharaoh alive.

If correct then we have in Papyrus Harris
evidence of a funerary endowment so vast that it
makes anything previously undertaken in Egypt,
such as building the Great Pyramid and endowing
its temples, pale into insignificance.

Notes and References

3. R.O. Faulkner: ‘Egypt: From the Inception of the Nineteenth Dynasty
to the Death of Ramesses III’ in CAG II (1966), chapter 23, p. 247,
where the papyri is referred to as a detailed record of the possessions
of the Egyptian temples and of the donations made to them during the
entire reign of Ramesses III.

Ramesses III - Cairo Museum. [Photo: D.Rohl]

9. See also, however, CAG I (1962), vol. II, chapter 35, p. 23, for a modified
view expressed by the same author.
10. W. Enchschen: Papyri Harris I, Hieroglyphische Transkription,
Bibliotheca Aegyptiaca V., (FERE Bruxelles, 1933). References to the
various head totals can be found on pages 12-14, 36-7, 57-8, 71-3.