Tanis and the New Chronology
A Further Reply to Brissaud

ROBERT PORTER

In an article entitled ‘Nessie on the Lake of Time’,1 the current excavator at Tanis in the eastern Egyptian delta – Philippe Brissaud – has attacked David Roeb’s response2 to his criticism3 on the Tanis tombs section of Roeb’s book A Test of Time.4 By abbreviating the title of Roeb’s article, Brissaud is able to refer to Roeb as ‘Monster’ throughout – notwithstanding the fact that other abusive terms are sometimes also used!

For new readers, this debate hinges on which of two adjacent tombs came first – that of the 21st Dynasty King Akheperre Psusennes or that of the 22nd Dynasty ruler Osorkon II. For the orthodox chronology the answer is obvious, except for the small problem that the ‘earlier’ tomb appears to cut into the ‘later’ tomb. The original excavator, Montet, proposed that Osorkon had usurped an earlier tomb built by Smendes – a close predecessor of Psusennes. Brissaud has decided that this does not work and has come up with a more complicated explanation involving at least two previous tombs. Sketches of his proposed phases of Tomb I (the Osorkon tomb) are shown in his article Figures 3-6. Brissaud’s phases are:

I-A: the original phase which is ‘very hypothetical in its entirety’ (p. 47), probably built by Smendes, founder of the 21st Dynasty, and apparently demolished before the next phase;

I-B: ‘a working hypothesis’ (p. 49), perhaps built by Siamun (p. 51), and the one which Osorkon later took over;

I-B2: not numbered in Brissaud’s sequence but required by his Figure 4, it covers the addition of structure VII on the south side;

I-C: ‘this structure has numerous points that are unclear’ (p. 52) and is Brissaud’s Osorkon phase with rooms added on the south side, causing the demolition of VII;

I-D: a later internal modification which is not relevant to the discussion here and not in the right sequence[3];

I-E: a modification at the west end to include extra space for the burial of Osorkon’s young son Harnakht.

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At a later date Tomb II was added on the south side. At a time which is in dispute, Tomb III (Psusennes) was added on the north side. This tomb’s southern chambers are the ones which cut into Tomb I. Brissaud has the following sequence (p. 51):

1. Tomb I-A (Smendes)
2. Tomb III (Psusennes)
3. Tomb I-B (Siamun?)
4. Tomb I-C (Osorkon)

Thus Tomb III’s southern extension originally cut into I-A. Brissaud’s sketches wrongly show the subsequent phases of Tomb I with a straight north wall but he seems to envisage that from I-B onwards the north wall was built against and around the southern rooms of III.

As evidence for the existence of the I-A phase, Brissaud points to the unusual projection of the foundations of Tomb I at the eastern end, as if some earlier larger structure had existed there. However, in the absence of evidence for this preceding tomb, the projecting foundations are more easily explained by the builders laying out a slightly generous base (it is unlikely that they had detailed drawings to work from – this was an Intermediate Period, not the peak of civilisation). Brissaud also notes the jagged projecting northeast corner of Tomb I (pp. 47-8; also shown in JACF 8, p. 53, item C on the photographs), damaged by the addition of Psusennes’ Tomb III. Presumably he regards this as part of the I-A phase since he claims I-B was built later than Psusennes’ tomb. But if this wall is I-A, then what about his projecting foundations argument? Was the jagged east wall part of a further phase I-A2? Furthermore, are we to believe that Psusennes destroyed the tomb of his close predecessor, the dynasty’s founder? Why was Psusennes so short of space? He had just built a giant enclosure for his temple – perhaps he wanted to leave room for the nearby Osorkon pylon which was to be constructed 150 years later!

Brissaud takes up again the disturbance to the bricks of Psusennes’ casement wall. This brick wall at the west end of Psusennes’ tomb appears to have been damaged by building work on Tomb I, thus apparently making Osorkon later than Psusennes. Rohl’s article offered two possible explanations: (a) either the loose bricks were not from the Psusennes wall, or (b) the disturbance was the result of dismantling (i.e. opening up) the western part of Osorkon’s tomb to accept the burial of his son Harnakht. Brissaud is adamant that the bricks are from the casement wall, as his previous section drawings would appear to show, although he does not clearly state that any of them carried the Psusennes cartouche stamp (pp. 50-51). His argument against the work to install Harnakht’s sarcophagus being the cause of the disturbance (p. 51) is puzzling. He seems to claim that item r on a previous drawing was positioned by the Harnakht workmen whereas it overlies a sand bed labelled m which indicates work by Montet!

Brissaud develops further his arguments concerning structure VII, on the south side of Tomb I, the remains of which consist of two low walls (see eg. JACF 8, p. 54 – but where, as Brissaud is not slow to point out, VII is shown slightly too low down). Structure VII includes a reused block of Psusennes and was built into a wall at a lower level than the southern part of the antechamber of Osorkon’s tomb. Due to a misunderstanding, it had been assumed by Kenneth Kitchen (and argued in a series of public lectures) that Brissaud was claiming that the wall of VII extended over the antechamber of Tomb I thus proving that Tomb I was later than Psusennes. Brissaud now emphasises that he did not state this but rather that a layer of sand which passes over the reused Psusennes block, continues under Tomb I’s antechamber – thus there is a stratigraphic sequence putting Psusennes before Osorkon’s Tomb I. Brissaud’s Figure 7 – a newly published section looking south – shows this sand layer passing over the wall with the Psusennes block and continuing under the antechamber. However, before rethinking our sequence in this area, we would need to know, (a) why this layer does not appear on his previously published section looking east? (b) where the Figure 7 section would appear in a plan view (there appears to be very limited scope for the necessary sand layer in the previously published section unless the new section drawing was originally made before cutting back as far as the Psusennes inscription), and (c) why the brickwork on Figure 7 does not extend right down to VII’s wall whereas it had previously appeared to do so (labelled F on the previously published section)?

Brissaud criticises the New Chronology on the basis that, prior to the royal burials, this area at Tanis was unoccupied except by a rather poor burial ground (p. 46). If Osorkon came before Psusennes, then why would he build his royal tomb in this poor district? This may be a further reason for the New Chronology to continue to regard Osorkon and Psusennes as contemporaries and allies. But Brissaud does not seem to understand his own dilemma – he would have us believe that Smendes built Tomb I-A at a time when the site was just a poor burial ground with no temple or enclosing wall! His argument cannot apply in one case but not in the other.

The bottom line is that orthodox chronologists will continue to search for complicated explanations as to why the tomb sequence appears to be back to front. The evidence of the Tanis royal necropolis strongly supports the New Chronology but if for other reasons the NC proves to be untenable, then some such convoluted explanation for the tomb sequence must exist. We are confident that Brissaud will keep searching.

Notes and References

6. BSFFT 10 (1996), p. 27 (reproduced from Cahiers de Tanis, p. 31, fig. 8).