

Chapter 24

Reading Hekanakhte's Letters

The famous Hekanakhte Letters derive from Sesostris I's fifth regnal year in 2075 BCE and contain the names of several months associated with seasonal activities. They allow the opportunity to determine whether the calendar used in the early 12th Dynasty by Hekanakhte, a priest and landowner living at Thebes, was the calendar of Upper Egypt or Lower Egypt. The letters also provide a date for a Sothic rising cited in the previous chapter.

The Hekanakhte papyri were discovered at Thebes in 1921–1922 by an Egyptian expedition from the New York Metropolitan Museum of Art. The papers now form part of the gallery's permanent Egyptian collection. The Hekanakhte Letters were published by T.G.H. James in 1962.¹

The letters were found together, unopened, in an intact tomb belonging to a certain *Msh* (Meseh), consisting “of five complete letters, four complete accounts, and four or five fragments ... Each of the complete documents was found folded; two were tied with string and sealed with a lump of clay impressed with the same stamp. The papyri are dated to the early Middle Kingdom—i.e. to about 2000 B.C.”²

James thought the materials probably come from the end of the 11th Dynasty. Dorothea Arnold's more recent analysis based on the type of pottery jars found with the burial led her to conclude that Meseh should be dated to the early years of the reign of Sesostris I, because the fragile nature of the papyri, found in pristine condition, could not have lasted above ground from the time of the late 11th Dynasty, or the early years of the reign of Amenemhet I. They must have been deposited in the tomb soon after they were written.³

The letters were written by Hekanakhte and an associate, a lady called Sitnebsekhtu (otherwise spelled Zat-Neb-sekhtu), apparently in Memphis, and assigned to Hekanakhte's courier, Za-Hathor, to be taken to people in different locations south of Thebes. However, for reasons that can only be speculated (like robbery of other items the courier carried), the letters never reached their destination and were discarded in the tomb.⁴

¹ T.G.H. James, *The Hekanakhte Papers and other Early Middle Kingdom Documents* (New York: Publications of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Egyptian Expedition, Volume 19, 1962).

² M. Silver, “Review of James P. Allen, *The Heqanakht Papyri* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art: Yale University Press, 2002.” EH.Net Economic History Services (Nov. 9 2004); http://eh.net/book_reviews/heqanakht-papyri

³ D. Arnold, “Amenemhet I and the Early Twelfth Dynasty at Thebes,” *Metropolitan Museum Journal* 26 (1991): 36-37. Includes photo of a letter from Hekanakhte to Herunefer, overseer of Lower Egypt (fig. 55), and coffin of Meseh as found in his chamber; in 1921–1922 (fig. 56); A.J. Spalinger, “Calendrical Evidence and Hekanakhte,” *ZÄS* 123 (1996) 86.

⁴ H. Goedicke, *Studies in the Hekanakhte Papers*, Baltimore, MD: Halgo (1984) 3-7.

Household Instructions in an Agricultural Setting

Hekanakhte identifies himself as a funerary priest, but the letters concern his land-holding in the south.⁵ He describes his intention to stay in the north of Egypt during *šmw* (Letter II, line 29). He gives directions to his household in the south (presumed to be in the Theban area) for issuing rations during the time of scarcity before the harvest could be gathered. Two regnal years are mentioned, years five and eight,⁶ but not the name of the king concerned. The reference to year eight is about “advances due in the future.” The letters are all written at approximately the same time,⁷ and indicate a fifth regnal year.

Anthony Spalinger gives the following calendrical references from Hekanakte’s Letters.⁸

- (1) “Have him bring me 3 *h3r* [*khar*] of wheat together with whatever northern barley you are able but (only) what is in excess of four [*sic* your?] food requirements until you reach *šmw*” (Letter I, verso line 8).
- (2) The phrase of Hekanakhte referring to this sojourn in the north: “I will spend *šmw* here” (Letter II, line 29).
- (3) “One shall begin to issue these rations about which I have written you on the 1st of *Hnt-h₂ty-prty* for the 1st of the month for/of *m3wt*” (Letter II, lines 31–32).
- (4) “Regnal year 5, 2 *smw* day 9” (Letter V, line 1). This note occurs at the beginning [of the account].
- (5) “Regnal year 8” (Letter V, line 34).
- (6) “What is with Sitnebsekhtu being the balance of the yarn on the first day of *šf-bdt*” (Letter VII, lines 9–11).
- (7) “*Nfr-sb3w* begins with the rations in *Rkh-...*” (Letter VII, line 15).”

Which Months are Referred To?

What numerical month-position in the year do the references to *hnt-h₂ty-prty* (in Letter II), *šf-bdt*, and *rkh-...* (in Letter VII) refer to, and what is the month-name for the date of “2 *šmw* day 9” (in Letter V)?

Spalinger’s analysis indicates to him that the household has to rely on rations while waiting for the recently planted seed to produce their crops. According to (3) above, a letter was written about the rations of the first day of *hnt-h₂ty-prty* and they were to be issued on the first of the month for/of *m3wt*. Unfortunately, no month of this name is so far known, and the word *m3wt* occurs nowhere else; thus, its meaning is obscure. According to Goedicke, it has some connection to agriculture, and he suggests it may be the old name of the month Renenutet (later Pharmouthi), the eighth month of the year.⁹ (Goedicke means IV *p₂rt* in the civil calendar as in the Greco–Roman calendar; that is, the calendar of Lower Egypt). Spalinger is undecided about the interpretation of *m3wt*.¹⁰

On first analysis Spalinger assumes that *hnt-h₂ty-prty* is the month of II *šmw* when Hekanakhte wrote his letter, and that rations were to be distributed on the first day of the next month, the month apparently named *m3wt*—taking up Goedicke’s suggestion that *m3wt* was the name of a month.¹¹ Spalinger asks, “What month does Hekanakhte refer

⁵ Ibid., 11–12.

⁶ Goedicke notes that the hieratic writing could be 8, but prefers to read the number as 6 because it does away with the disjunction between 5 and 8, and makes for an interrelated group of accounts (*Hekanakhte Papers*, 8, 93).

⁷ Ibid., 8.

⁸ Spalinger, “Calendrical Evidence,” 89–90.

⁹ Goedicke, *Hekanakhte Papers*, 30–31.

¹⁰ Spalinger, “Calendrical Evidence,” 92–93.

¹¹ Ibid., 93.

to? Given that there are only two remaining, 3 and 4 *šmw*, and that the last month was overtly named after the festival of *wp rnpt*, itself following on the first of Thoth in the next year (I *3ht* 1), I would suspect that 3 *šmw* (the old *'Ipt-ḥmt*) is the indication."¹² On this understanding Spalinger tables a scenario in which II *šmw*, III *šmw* and IV *šmw* equate to the Julian calendar months of 17 September to 28th November in the year 1939 BCE.¹³

But he is not happy with it. He writes:

I think that the reference to *Ḥnt-ḥty-prty* fits better with the next month of 3 *šmw* than the following, since the 29th of October virtually concludes the basin drying-out phase as well as the commencement of sowing. Further support for this can be seen in lines 4–5 of the same letter (No. II) where Hekanakhte informs his mother Ipi as well as Hetepet that, owing to the inundation, rations [*sic* rations] were established for his household. In addition, if we take to heart the comment in line 29 of the same letter, then Hekanakhte himself would plan to return to the south around the end of November or the beginning of December ... planning to be back at his homestead in mid-December, at a time when the crops were growing into their maturity but still were quite short from being ripe for reaping.¹⁴

Upper Egypt Calendar?

Spalinger's preference for *Ḥnt-ḥty-prty* being equated with III *šmw* and not II *šmw* is important for the identification of the calendar used. If *Ḥnt-ḥty-prty* is III *šmw* and the seventh month of the civil year, then *wp rnpt* and not *thy* (Thoth) was the first month. Our previous analysis led to the conclusion that *wp rnpt* was the first month of the calendar of Upper Egypt and only became the last month along with the name Re Horakhty after the merging of the calendars of Upper and Lower Egypt evident in the 18th–20th Dynasties.

Wp rnpt was still in *first* position as late as the early 18th Dynasty as shown in the Ebers calendar papyrus from the reign of Amenhotep I. The use of a calendar beginning with *wp rnpt* in the 12th Dynasty is demonstrated previously in the Illahun papyri 10069, and in many other sources adduced in chapter 8 and tabled in Tables 8.2 and 8.3. In a calendar having *wp rnpt* as the first month *rkh-wr* and *rkh-nds* appear as the seventh and eighth months of the year, or III and IV *prt*.

Since Hekanakhte was writing to his relatives and tenants in Upper Egypt, it is not surprising that he would use the calendar of Upper Egypt. The calendar, of course, was also used to date the heliacal rising of Sothis, the appearance of which after 70 days of invisibility, heralded the new solar/agricultural year.

The first month of the solar/agricultural year appears to be the month of *rkh wr*. The translation of Letter VII line 15 given by Spalinger reads, "*Nfr-sbw* [Nefer-sebau] begins with the rations in *rkh-...*"¹⁵ To this Goedicke adds, "when the head of the river had come down." He interprets this to refer to the second *rkh-* month, *rkh-nds*, when the water was "prevailing,"¹⁶ but Spalinger disagrees and understands the words to mean, "a time during the lowest ebb of the river,"¹⁷ that is, the month of *rkh-wr*, when the inundation was expected. Spalinger understood the end of the submersion period to

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid., 90.

¹⁶ Goedicke, *Hekanakhte Papers*, 104.

¹⁷ Spalinger, "Calendrical Evidence," 94.

correspond to 10–30 October in the Gregorian calendar.¹⁸ In the Julian calendar it coincides with November.

Assuming that Hekanakhte based his comments on a calendar that began with *wp rnpt*, *hnt-hty-prty* would be III *šmw*—see column three of Table 24.1—when the letter directing the distribution of rations was written. Column three relates the solar/agricultural year to the heliacal rising of Sothis on III *prt* 20, the calendar of Upper Egypt, assumed to begin with the month of *wp rnpt*.

Table 24.1: The Calendar Used by Hekanakhte

Months of civil year	Corresponding to agricultural seasons	Months of solar/agricultural year beginning with heliacal rising of Sothis on III <i>prt</i> 20 at Thebes corresponding to Julian months
<i>wp rnpt</i>	3 <i>h</i> t = inundation	III <i>prt</i> 20 (<i>rkh wr</i>) = July 13 to August 12
<i>thy</i>	3 <i>h</i> t = inundation	IV <i>prt</i> 20 (<i>rkh nds</i>) = August/Sept.
<i>mnht</i>	3 <i>h</i> t = inundation	I <i>šmw</i> 20 (<i>rnwt</i>) = Sept./Oct.
<i>hwt hr</i>	3 <i>h</i> t = inundation	II <i>šmw</i> 20 (<i>hns</i> w) = Oct./Nov.
<i>k3 hr k3</i>	<i>Prt</i> = sowing and planting	III <i>šmw</i> 20 (<i>hnt-hty-prty</i>) = Nov./Dec.
<i>šf-bdt</i>	<i>Prt</i> = sowing and planting	IV <i>šmw</i> 20 (<i>ipt-hmt</i>) = Dec./Jan.
<i>rkh wr</i>	<i>Prt</i> = sowing and planting	I 3 <i>h</i> t 20 (<i>wp rnpt</i>) = Jan./Feb.
<i>rkh nds</i>	<i>Prt</i> = sowing and planting	II 3 <i>h</i> t 20 (<i>thy</i>) = Feb./March
<i>Rnwt</i>	<i>šmw</i> = harvesting	III 3 <i>h</i> t 20 (<i>mnht</i>) = March/April
<i>hns</i> w	<i>šmw</i> = harvesting	IV 3 <i>h</i> t 20 (<i>hwt hr</i>) = April/May
<i>hnt-hty-prty</i>	<i>šmw</i> = harvesting	I <i>prt</i> 20 (<i>k3 hr k3</i>) = May/June
<i>ipt-hmt</i>	<i>šmw</i> = harvesting	II <i>prt</i> 20 (<i>šf-bdt</i>) = June/July

Letter VII refers to the preceding Letter V, headed “Year 5, 2nd month of *šmw*, day 9,” which would then refer to II *šmw*, the last month of the inundation season (compare column three with column two). It lists quantities of grains turned over to Merisu, cattle to be transferred to Za-neb-niut, and feed for the bulls to be distributed to his tenants, Za-Hathor, Merisu, and Za-neb-niut.¹⁹ In the calendar in Table 24.1 *hnt-hty-prty* is the month of III *šmw* (see column three), and corresponds to the beginning of the season of sowing, that is *prt*, when the floods have receded, and when food was scarce before the next harvest could be gathered. Goedicke indicates that the word *m3wt* “seems connected with ‘the new fields’, i.e. the next agricultural year.”²⁰

On that scenario, *m3wt* would be the last month (if that is its correct interpretation) of the civil year and the second month of *prt*; that is, of the sowing and planting season. If *hnt-hty-prty* is III *šmw*, the month of *šf-bdt* referred to in Letter VII lines 9–11 must refer to II *prt*. And *rkh*-... in Letter VII line 15 must refer to *rkh wr*; that is, III *prt*, the first month of the solar/agricultural year. It was the month of the heliacal rising.

Fifth Year of Sesostri I

The date for the heliacal rising of Sothis in the seventh year of Sesostri III has earlier been shown to fall on IV *prt* 17 in 1980 BCE as observed at Illahun. A count can be made backwards from the seventh year of Sesostri III in 1980 BCE, to the fifth year of Sesostri I, to identify the month in the calendar of Upper Egypt that coincided with the heliacal rising of Sothis, which month it applied to, and specifically whether the year begins with III *prt*; that is, *rkh wr*.

Sesostri I reigned 42 years (plus nearly four as co-regent) from the years 2079–2037 BCE making his fifth year, when the Hekanakhte Letters were written, fall in 2075 BCE.

¹⁸ Ibid., 90.

¹⁹ Goedicke, *Hekanakhte Papers*, 91.

²⁰ Ibid., 30.

The time-span from the fifth year of Sesostri I in 2075 BCE to the seventh year of Sesostri III in 1980 BCE amounts to 95 years, which is to $23\frac{3}{4}$ days in the Sothic cycle (because Sothis takes four years to move one day). Reckoning 24 days before IV *prt* 17 will yield III *prt* 23 when Sothis rose heliacally at *Illahun*.

Sothic Rising at Thebes

However, Hekanakhte, whose land holdings and relatives were located in the *south* would have used the calendar relevant to the seasonal cycle of Upper Egypt. The heliacal rising of Sothis is seen about three and a half days earlier at Thebes than at *Illahun* in any given year. Therefore, in 2075 the Sothic rising at *Thebes* fell on III *prt* 20 or 21. According to the HELIAC program, Sothis rose heliacally on 11, 12, or 13 July (jul.) in 2075 BCE (using an altitude of 3°). The chronology can be checked using Casperson's lunar table for the year -2074 (2075 BCE) assumed here to be Sesostri I's fifth year.

Table 24.2: Sesostri I's fifth year -2074 (new moon listing from -2074)

Thebes; Lat. 25.7, Long. 32.6; visibility coefficients: c1 = 11.5, c2 = 0.008																
Julian			Gregorian			Egyptian			DoW	ToD	Morning visibility					
Yr	Mo	D	Yr	Mo	D	Yr	Mo	D			-2	-1	0			
-2074	6	30	-2074	6	13	707	6	8	1	11:15	5:12	204	5:12	100	5:12	21
-2074	7	30	-2074	7	13	707	7	8	3	3:42	5:13	179	5:13	89	5:14	3
-2074	8	30	-2074	8	11	707	8	7	4	20:42	5:27	253	5:27	160	5:28	67

DoW = day of week; ToD = time of day.

The table uses the calendar of Lower Egypt, but converted to the table of Upper Egypt *numbered* one month earlier, it shows that IV *prt* 8 (otherwise 7 8) corresponds to 30 July. III *prt* 20 would fall 18 days before IV *prt* 8, which corresponds to 13 July in 2075 BCE. Thus, the date assigned to Sesostri I's fifth year concurs with the proposed date for the heliacal rising of Sothis seen at Thebes in 2075 BCE.

Important Deductions

Several important deductions result from this discussion. Firstly, Hekanakhte used the calendar of Upper Egypt giving further evidence for its existence.

Secondly, it supports the proposal that Sesostri II (the grandson of Sesostri I) reigned 19 years (plus 7 months and 4 days) as given by the Turin King-list, and concurs with the Sothic rising on 13 July in 2075 BCE as given independently by the HELIAC program.

Thirdly, Spalinger's conclusion that the Hekanakhte Letters appear to infer that the month of *hnt-hty-prty* was III *šmw* and not II *šmw* as in the calendar of Lower Egypt, is borne out by the above analysis, but for the year 2075 BCE not 1939 BCE.

Fourthly, a calendar having the rising of Sothis on III *prt* 20 corresponds to the beginning of a new solar or agricultural year in the month of *rkh wr*, when the inundation of the Nile was soon to occur and already food had been harvested and rationed out before the harvest would come in again in a further eight months' time (see Table 24.1). Hekanakhte said in his letter that he would stay in the north during *šmw* (Letter II, line 29). If he meant the four months of *šmw*, then according to the calendar this period corresponds to the third to sixth months of the agricultural/solar year, being the last two months of inundation and the first two months of sowing/planting. This indicates that Hekanakhte is intending to be back at his estate in the south of Egypt in the month of *wp rnpt*, the first month of the *civil* year, which may have been a significant time for him either as a funerary priest²¹ or land owner. By *wp rnpt*, corresponding to III *prt*, the crops

²¹ Ibid., 8.

should have been about two months from the beginning of the harvest. The first month of seasonal *šmw* or harvest coincided with the civil month of III *3ḥt*, and four months later harvesting would have finished in *‘ipt-ḥmt* (Epiphi) or IV *šmw*, the last month of the solar/agricultural year, (but equated with the month of II *prt* in the civil calendar, known as the month of *šf-bdt*).

Fifthly, the reference to the lady Sitnebsekhtu concerning the payment for the balance of the yarn on the first day of the month of *šf-bdt* (Letter VII, lines 9–11) apparently refers, according to Goedicke, to the date when the account was established.²² Spalinger notes that the balance was drawn up on day 1 of *šf-bdt*.²³ That account left one month remaining before the next year began in *rkḥ wr*.

The analysis of the dated citations in the Hekanakhte Letters proposes that Hekanakhte used the calendar of Upper Egypt with *wp rnpt* as its first month, but due to the lag between the solar and civil calendar, the “first” month at the time of Sesostris I in 2075 BCE was *rkḥ wr*.

Likeness to the Ebers Calendar

The calendar derived from the Hekanakhte Letters has the same function as proposed for the Ebers calendar. Both show a calendar beginning with the month of *wp rnpt* and ending with *‘ipt-ḥmt*. The remaining columns equate the months of the solar year based on the date for the rising of Sothis with the civil calendar giving the designations for the corresponding Egyptian seasons. Knowing when the seasons of inundation, sowing, and harvest occurred in the year that was no longer in accord with the months of the civil calendar would have been useful to the ancient Egyptians when making domestic and agricultural transactions like those portrayed in these letters.

The discussion about the Hekanakhte Letters concludes the 12th Dynasty chronology. It lasted approximately 192 years, from 2099 to 1907 BCE. The latter date commences the Second Intermediate Period.

²² Ibid., 109.

²³ Spalinger, “Calendrical Evidence,” 94.