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

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Household Instructions in an Agricultural Setting

Hekanakhte identifies himself as a funerary priest, but the letters concern his land-holding in the south. 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, 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, and indicate a fifth regnal year.

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

(1) “Have him bring me 3 ḥ3r [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 Ḥnt-hty-prty for the 1st of the month for/of m3wt” (Letter II, lines 31–32).

(4) “Regnal year 5, 2 šmw 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 Ṣf-bdt” (Letter VII, lines 9–11).

(7) “Nfr-sb3w begins with the rations in Rkḥ-…” (Letter VII, line 15).”

Which Months are Referred To?

What numerical month-position in the year do the references to Ḥnt-hty-prty (in Letter II), Ṣf-bdt, and ṭkh-... (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 Ḥnt-hty-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. (Goedicke means IV ḫrt 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.

On first analysis Spalinger assumes that Ḥnt-hty-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. Spalinger asks, “What month does Hekanakhte refer

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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.
9 Goedicke, Hekanakhte Papers, 30-31.
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 rntp, itself following on the first of Thoth in the next year (I šḥt 1), I would suspect that 3 šmw (the old ‘lpt-ḥnt) is the indication.” 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 Ḫnt-hṭy-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, ratios [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 Ḫnt-hṭy-prty being equated with III šmw and not II šmw is important for the identification of the calendar used. If Ḫnt-hṭy-prty is III šmw and the seventh month of the civil year, then wp rntp and not Ḥṣy (Thoth) was the first month. Our previous analysis led to the conclusion that wp rntp 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 rntp 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 rntp 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 rntp as the first month ṭḥ-wr and ṭḥ-nds appear as the seventh and eighth months of the year, or III and IV Ṝt.

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 ṭḥ-wr. The translation of Letter VII line 15 given by Spalinger reads, “Nfr-sbw [Nefer-sebau] begins with the rations in ṭḥ-…” 15 To this Goedicke adds, “when the head of the river had come down.” He interprets this to refer to the second ṭḥ- month, ṭḥ-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 ṭḥ-wr, when the inundation was expected. Spalinger understood the end of the submersion period to

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12 Ibid.
13 Ibid.
14 Ibid.
15 Ibid., 90.
16 Goedicke, Hekanakhte Papers, 104.
17 Spalinger, “Calendarical Evidence,” 94.
correspond to 10–30 October in the Gregorian calendar. In the Julian calendar it coincides with November.

Assuming that Hekanakhte based his comments on a calendar that began with ḫrę ṛḥt, ḫnt-hty-ḥrty would be III šmwt—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 ḫṛḥ 20, the calendar of Upper Egypt, assumed to begin with the month of ṛḥ ṛḥt.

**Table 24.1: The Calendar Used by Hekanakhte**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Months of civil year</th>
<th>Corresponding to agricultural seasons</th>
<th>Months of solar/agricultural year beginning with heliacal rising of Sothis on III ḫṛḥ 20 at Thebes corresponding to Julian months</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>wp ṛḥt</td>
<td>3ḥṛt = inundation</td>
<td>III ḫṛḥ 20 (ṛḥḫ ṛḥt) = July 13 to August 12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ṛḥt</td>
<td>3ḥṛt = inundation</td>
<td>IV ḫṛḥ 20 (ṛḥḫ ṛḥt nḥs) = August/Sept.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ṭḥw ṛḥt</td>
<td>3ḥṛt = inundation</td>
<td>II șmwt 20 (ḥnt Ṛḥs) = Oct./Nov.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ṣḥ ṛḥt ṣḥ ṛḥt</td>
<td>ṛḥḥ = sowing and planting</td>
<td>III șmwt 20 (ḥnt hḥy ṛḥt ṣḥ ṛḥt) = Nov./Dec.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ṭḥw ṛḥt</td>
<td>ṛḥḥ = sowing and planting</td>
<td>IV șmwt 20 (ḥnt ṛḥḥ ṛḥḥ) = Dec./Jan.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ṭḥw ṛḥt</td>
<td>ṛḥḥ = sowing and planting</td>
<td>I 3ḥṛt 20 (wp ṛḥt) = Jan./Feb.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ṭḥw ṛḥt</td>
<td>ṛḥḥ = sowing and planting</td>
<td>II 3ḥṛt 20 (ṭḥw ṛḥt) = Feb./March</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ṣḥ ṛḥt ṣḥ ṛḥt</td>
<td>ṛḥḥ = sowing and planting</td>
<td>III 3ḥṛt 20 (mnḥḥ) = March/April</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ṭḥw ṛḥt</td>
<td>ṛḥḥ = sowing and planting</td>
<td>IV 3ḥṛt 20 (ḥnt ṛḥt ṛḥt) = April/May</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ṭḥw ṛḥt</td>
<td>ṛḥḥ = sowing and planting</td>
<td>I ḫṛḥ 20 (kṛḥ ṛḥt ṣḥ ṛḥt) = May/June</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ṭḥw ṛḥt</td>
<td>ṛḥḥ = sowing and planting</td>
<td>II ḫṛḥ 20 (ṣḥ ṛḥt ṛḥt ṣḥ ṛḥt) = June/July</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Letter VII refers to the preceding Letter V, headed “Year 5, 2nd month of ṭḥw ṛḥt, day 9,” which would then refer to II șmwt, 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-nęb-niḥt, and feed for the bulls to be distributed to his tenants, Za-Hathor, Merisu, and Za-nęb-niḥt. In the calendar in Table 24.1 ḫnt-hty-ḥrty is the month of III șmwt (see column three), and corresponds to the beginning of the season of sowing, that is ḫṛḥ, when the floods have receded, and when food was scarce before the next harvest could be gathered. Goedicke indicates that the word ṣḥ ṛḥt “seems connected with ‘the new fields’, i.e. the next agricultural year.”

On that scenario, ṣḥ ṛḥt would be the last month (if that is its correct interpretation) of the civil year and the second month of ḫṛḥ; that is, of the sowing and planting season. If ḫnt-hty-ḥrty is III șmwt, the month of ṣḥ ṛḥt referred to in Letter VII lines 9–11 must refer to II ḫṛḥ. And ṭḥw ṛḥt—... in Letter VII line 15 must refer to ṭḥw ṛḥt; that is, III ḫṛḥ, the first month of the solar/agricultural year. It was the month of the heliacal rising.

**Fifth Year of Sesostris I**

The date for the heliacal rising of Sothis in the seventh year of Sesostris III has earlier been shown to fall on IV ḫṛḥ 17 in 1980 BCE as observed at Illahun. A count can be made backwards from the seventh year of Sesostris III in 1980 BCE, to the fifth year of Sesostris 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 ḫṛḥ; that is, ṭḥw ṛḥt.

Sesostris 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.

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18 Ibid., 90.
19 Goedicke, Hekanakhte Papers, 91.
20 Ibid., 30.
The time-span from the fifth year of Sesostris I in 2075 BCE to the seventh year of Sesostris III in 1980 BCE amounts to 95 years, which is to 23¾ 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 Sesostris I’s fifth year.

### Table 24.2: Sesostris I’s fifth year −2074 (new moon listing from −2074)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Julian</th>
<th>Gregorian</th>
<th>Egyptian</th>
<th>DoW</th>
<th>ToD</th>
<th>Morning visibility</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yr Mo D</td>
<td>Yr Mo D</td>
<td>Yr Mo D</td>
<td>−2</td>
<td>−1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>−2074 6 30</td>
<td>−2074 6 13</td>
<td>707 6 8</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>11:15</td>
<td>5:12 204</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>−2074 7 30</td>
<td>−2074 7 13</td>
<td>707 7 8</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3:42</td>
<td>5:13 179</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>−2074 8 30</td>
<td>−2074 8 11</td>
<td>707 8 7</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>20:42</td>
<td>5:27 253</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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 Sesostris 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 Sesostris II (the grandson of Sesostris 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 ḫnt-hy-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 ḫkh 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, which may have been a significant time for him either as a funerary priest or land owner. By wp rnt, corresponding to III prt, the crops

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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 ṛkh 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 ṛkh 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.