Egyptian Imperialism after the New Kingdom. The 26th Dynasty and the Southern Levant

Bernd U. Schipper
Humboldt University, Berlin.

Abstract

The article draws attention to the foreign policy of the first kings of the 26th Dynasty and argues that Psammetichus I and his successor Necho II practiced a form of imperialism by establishing a system of vassal states in the Southern Levant for the first time since the New Kingdom. In the second stage of this imperial expansion, this system included the Kingdom of Judah, under the rule of King Josiah. From the Egyptian point of view, this kingdom was only a small and marginal entity in the Southern Levantine region and of little interest.

The foreign policy of the 26th Dynasty is important not only in the history of Egypt after the New Kingdom but also in that of the Southern Levant. For the first time since the end of the so-called “New Empire” Egyptian Pharaohs like Psammetichus I or Necho II developed an extensive foreign policy, which is documented in extra-Egyptian sources including Herodotus and the Hebrew Bible. In Jeremiah 44:30 Apries, the penultimate ruler of the 26th Dynasty, is mentioned by the name “Hophra” (חוּפָר), while Jer 46:2 and four other biblical passages refer to the second ruler of that Dynasty, Necho II. It is striking to note that he is the pharaoh most frequently named in the Hebrew Bible. Apart from the statistical argument, Necho II’s particular significance is seen in a notable episode. According to 2 Kings 23 Josiah, King of Judah, was killed by Necho II near Megiddo. The new king Jehoahaz – who had just been enthroned by the Judean aristocracy (the “people of the land”) – was deposed by Necho II and held captive in his military camp in Riblah at the Orontes. Moreover, pharaoh Necho also controlled Judean succession, installing in his

1 I would like to express my gratitude to Michael Lesley for improving my English.


3 Five Egyptian pharaohs are mentioned in the Hebrew Bible: Shoshenq I (1 Kings 14:25; 2 Chr. 12:2,5,7; 1 Kings 11:40); Taharqa (2 Kings 19:9 = Isa 37:9), Necho II, Apries and probably Osorkon IV (2 Kings 17:4 – under the name אגי; for the problem of interpretation see Galpaz-Feller, “So,” 338-47, with further literature); see Pfeiffer, Ägypten, 61-63. Excluded from this list are references to Egyptian pharaohs that are difficult to interpret, particularly in the book of Ezekiel; cf. Freedy and Redford, “Dates,” 482 f., who perceived in Ez 30:10-22 an allusion to Apries’ Nebty name.
place Josiah’s older son, Eliakim, under the new name Jehoiakim. These events, described in matter-of-fact terms in 2 Kings, are quite astonishing. How could an Egyptian Pharaoh govern succession in a kingdom in the Southern Levant? And what were the circumstances under which Josiah, king of Judah, ended up getting killed by the pharaoh at Megiddo?²⁵

In what follows I would like to advance the thesis that the two first pharaohs of the 26th Dynasty, Psammetichus I and Necho II, practised a form of imperialism by establishing a system of vassal states in the Southern Levant for the first time since the New Kingdom – which, in a later stage, included the Kingdom of Judah.⁶ The first chapter offers a brief overview of the historical situation in the 7th century BCE, and is followed by an examination of the archaeological evidence. The final section is an evaluation of the significance of the Egyptian domination on the Kingdom of Judah and on its rulers, Josiah and Jehoiakim.⁷

I. The Southern Levant of the 7th Century BCE

The historical situation in the first decades of the 7th century is determined by the so-called “westward expansion” of the Neo-Assyrian Empire. From the 9th to 7th centuries the Assyrian kings gradually subordinated the entire Levant, first the Northern Syrian states, followed by the Phoenician cities, the Kingdom of Israel, and finally the Kingdom of Judah and the Philistine territory.⁸ The small city-states of Syria-Palestine, including the Phoenician cities on the Mediterranean, formed alliances in hopes of resisting Assyrian expansion. This particularly affected the Kingdom of Israel in the 9th and 8th century, which, having joined anti-Assyrian coalitions drew the attention, and finally the wrath, of the Neo-Assyrian Kings. There is an underlying geopolitical principle in the history of the Syro-Palestinian isthmus in the first part of the 1st millennium BCE: the empires of the Ancient Near East, whether Assyrian, Egyptian or, later, Neo-Babylonian, were not interested in running political entities, but in controlling over-

⁴ See Miller and Hayes, History (2nd edition), 460-62.
⁵ There are countless theories about Josiah’s death, from a battle at Megiddo to the idea that, as an Egyptian vassal, Josiah wanted to render an oath of loyalty to the new pharaoh. See Na’aman, “Kingdom,” 52 f. For an earlier view see Noth, History, 289 f.
⁷ The following chapters present the results from a more elaborated discussion of the material, Schipper, “Egypt.”
⁸ See Mayer, Politik, Chapters 8 and 9, and Lamprichs, Westexpansion, Ch. 4.1.2.