
Toponymy on the Periphery: Placenames of the Eastern Desert, Red Sea, and South Sinai in Egyptian Documents from the Early Dynastic until the End of the New Kingdom. By JULIEN CHARLES COOPER. *Probleme der Ägyptologie*, vol. 39. Leiden: BRILL, 2020. Pp. xvii + 718. \$324.

“Egypt is the gift of the Nile,” states Herodotus in his famous, perhaps overused, but ever-so-true (and paraphrased) comment. Moreover, Egypt is the one country or region in the ancient Near East which is most easily geographically defined: the Nile Valley, from the Delta in the north to Elephantine in the south. Furthermore, it was the most topographically insulated: deserts to the east and west, the cataracts to the south of Aswan, and the Mediterranean Sea to the north. All of this provided Egypt with a relative stability, homogeneity, and even isolation unlike any other civilization in the region. All one has to do is to attempt to teach one’s students the boundaries of Canaan (how far north does it reach? does it include the Trans-Jordan?), or have them learn the names of all the peoples who populated Mesopotamia (Kassites anyone?), and the point is well taken.

For about two millennia, notwithstanding the transitions from one dynasty to another, or even the larger transitions from Old Kingdom to First Intermediate Period to Middle Kingdom to Second Intermediate Period, Egypt remained, well, Egypt. Not even the singular exception of the Hyksos invasion and their rule as the Fifteenth Dynasty (ca. 1650–1550 BCE) truly changes this picture, since even the Hyksos used Egyptian royal titulary, carved inscriptions in Egyptian hieroglyphics, and so on.

The Egyptians knew of peoples beyond their boundaries, but mainly they—or rather their lands—were to be exploited for precious commodities: gold, ebony, and ivory from Nubia, gold from the eastern desert, exotica from Punt, turquoise from western Sinai, and so on. Eventually, of course, the Egyptians established an empire, especially in the direction of Canaan during the New Kingdom period. This imperial venture has been well studied by scholars, especially since the archaeology of the land of Canaan has yielded important evidence, both Egyptian and Canaanite (I use this latter term in the broadest sense), both material culture and written remains.

But in general such studies (apart from some very specific ones) have not been forthcoming from Egyptologists regarding the peripheral areas mentioned above. And the reason is clear, of course: there simply is so little evidence. Serabit el-Khadem in the western Sinai is so special because it is, well, exceptional. One simply does not find much evidence for Egyptian activity in the Sinai peninsula (apart from its northern Mediterranean coast, well fortified by the Egyptian military). Similarly, the Kanais temple built by Seti I in the Eastern Desert attracts attention because, once again, it too is rather exceptional.

Into this picture steps Julien Charles Cooper with his new book, *Toponymy on the Periphery*, based on his Macquarie University doctoral dissertation of the same title (2015). The goal is to collect, analyze, and classify the toponyms of the three peripheral regions announced in the title, a goal which, I am happy to report, the author attains in excellent fashion.

All told, there are 153 individual toponyms, categorized as follows: eight generic terms (“hill country,” “eastern desert,” “land of the Shasu,” etc.); seventy-seven toponyms that occur in an array of Egyptian texts (funerary, expedition, administrative, etc.); forty-eight terms that occur only in execration texts and topographical lists; and twenty additional items that appear on the Turin Map (see further below). Of the seventy-seven toponyms that appear in the array of Egyptian texts, forty items (by my count) are attested only once (see further below).

The commonest term in Cooper’s databank, not surprisingly, is *pwnt* “Punt,” attested in ninety-nine different texts. And in one of these texts, the description of Hatshepsut’s Punt expedition inscribed on the middle colonnade of her funerary temple at Deir el-Bahari, the term *pwnt* appears thirty-two times. If I have counted correctly, then in truth there are 167 occurrences of this key toponym in the corpus.

Punt is an outlier, however, for the other commonest terms are *md3* (26x), *hw.t nbw* (20x), *wtn.t* (17x), *ht.w (m)fk3.t* (16x), *šzm.t* (15x), *ikyt* (13x), *bi3* (12x), *mw* (12x). (Again, the numbers refer to individual texts; a given term may at times appear more than once in the same text.) This list alone should give the reader of this review a good sense of how wide a net Cooper has cast in assembling his data.

Thus, for example, *bi3* is simply the Egyptian word for “mine”; *ht.w (m)fk3.t* means “terraces of turquoise,” with reference to the turquoise mines in western Sinai; and *hw.t nbw* connotes “mansion of gold,” perhaps with reference to workshops where talented goldsmiths plied their trade. Can these three items truly be considered toponyms? I would think not— notwithstanding the towns Zinc, Arkansas, and Antimony, Nevada (just to mention two U.S. locales whose names derive from the metals mined there)—though I for one am happy that Cooper has included them in his study. Clearly these are places in the Eastern Desert and south Sinai zones studied by Cooper. Better for the user of this volume to decide whether or not to consider such items as toponyms.

Moreover, Cooper is well aware of the issue raised here, as he writes, re *bi3*, “If such a meaning [viz., “mine”] is secure, it cannot be certain that in all cases *Bi3.w* is strictly a toponym rather than a general term for any mine” (p. 224). In fact, since one of his twelve registered texts is the Shipwrecked Sailor (where the word appears twice [see pp. 504–5]), clearly not every *bi3* can refer to the same place.

Notwithstanding my comment above, one must question the inclusion of the expression *iw pn n(.y) k3* “this island of the *ka*” (attested only in the Shipwrecked Sailor) (pp. 270–71). Again, Cooper writes: “it may be questioned whether this phrase had any geographical definiteness” (p. 270); and “the operative question concerning this island, given its fictitious content, is whether it was inspired by real-world geography” (p. 271).

The volume is very well organized. The first four chapters (pp. 5–112) set the stage: “1. Toponymy and Ancient History”; “2. Proper Nouns and Placenames in the Egyptian Script” (with special attention to classifiers); “3. The Historic, Geographic, and Archaeological Context” (with a survey of the three zones); and “4. Foreigners on the Periphery: The Language and Phonology of Foreign Names” (see further below).



Next comes the meat of the book, three chapters (pp. 113–386) that present the 153 individual toponyms in great detail: “5. Toponymic Databank” (with those terms that appear in the array of texts mentioned above); “6. Toponomastica: Toponyms from the Topographical Lists and Execration Texts” (that is, terms that appear only in these text types); and “7. The Toponyms and Labels of the Turin Map.”








Then follows three closing chapters (pp. 387–440): “8. Geographic Analysis”; “9. Linguistic Analysis” (again, see further below); and “10. Conclusion”; along with an eight-page postscript devoted to the newly discovered Puntite topographical list found in secondary use at the eighth-century Church of Archangel Raphael in Dongola.

The book is by no means completed at this point, however. Another substantial portion of the volume follows, the “Appendix of Texts” (pp. 449–617), in which every occurrence of every term appears, with its source text, transcription, transliteration, translation, date/dynasty, etc. Toponyms that occur multiple times are listed in chronological order, with date/dynasty indicated. Thus, for example, the twenty-six instances of *md3* are listed starting with Pepi I (Sixth Dynasty) and ending with Merenptah (Nineteenth Dynasty) (pp. 470–77).


A comprehensive bibliography (pp. 618–85) and ten separate indices (pp. 687–718) allow the reader to locate any item or topic that he or she may wish to research.

For every item listed in chapters 5–7, Cooper attempts to provide an etymology and a location. At times the task is exceedingly difficult, especially given how little is known about so many of these places, in particular those items that occur only once in the entirety of ancient Egyptian documentation. And then this statement, somewhat buried in the hefty volume and not quite sufficiently emphasized, though worthy of highlighting here: “Despite exhaustive analysis of maps and gazetteers, no pharaonic Egyptian toponym of the South Sinai or Eastern Desert was identified by the author” (p. 27). As Cooper observes, this situation stands in contrast to the situation in the Levant, where so many ancient place names have been preserved. In the zones covered by the present volume, “presumably, all [ancient names] were replaced by Arabic toponyms from c. 700 CE onwards” (ibid.).

To illustrate Cooper’s process, let us use the example (or rather three examples) of the collocation *b3t snh hzt*, three *hapax* toponyms appearing on a relief block in the funerary temple of Djedkare Isesi (Fifth Dynasty). How does one begin to identify these three places? Since they appear immediately after the expression *t3 nbw dꜥm* “the land of gold and electrum,” Cooper confidently places the trio in the Eastern Desert region. The picture is complicated, however, by the atypical use of the  classifier with each of these three toponyms, as opposed to the expected  classifier. The latter, naturally, is ubiquitous in the vast majority of the 153 terms (see pp. 35–37). In light of the classifier, Cooper considers the possibility that the three places may be situated somewhere on the Nile north of Aswan, indicating sites where gold was processed (p. 156). But since the three names do not reflect productive Egyptian roots, in the end Cooper writes, “their non-Egyptian names suggest a non-Egyptian location, and thus somewhere in the Eastern Desert is most likely for this group of placenames” (p. 157).

As indicated above, chapter 4 is devoted to the languages that may underlie the scores of toponyms and their phonologies. Cooper relies on the work of earlier scholars who claimed to have uncovered ancient Beja (Blemmye) words transcribed into Egyptian hieroglyphics in Eastern Desert contexts, e.g.,  *ib* = Beja *ʔabba* ‘wadi’ (pp. 91, 125). Fine, perhaps, but what does one do with the longer term  *ibh(3)t* (pp. 125–26)? What might the second element reflect? Moreover, while the  /3/ occurs in the Old Kingdom biography of Weni (2x) (see the hieroglyphs just presented), in the Middle Kingdom Semna Dispatch no. 4 (pBM 10752 recto), this grapheme is replaced by  /y/; and then in New Kingdom texts such as the Soleb topographical list, nothing appears between the  /h/ and  /t/ symbols. Do these shifts in the writing reflect an Egyptian phonological process spanning two millennia? Or perhaps the  /3/ in the biography of Weni attestations is supposed to represent a vowel (as occurs, for example, in the Execration Texts). Multiply this single example many times, and one begins to see the problems at hand in recovering the meanings and etymologies of the toponyms within Cooper’s corpus.

At times, the toponyms included in the present volume find a latter-day echo in classical texts. A good example is the commonly attested term *md3*, occurring in twenty-six different texts (as noted above); only on two occasions does the term appear twice in a particular text, so that altogether there are twenty-eight attestations. To Cooper’s mind, “almost certainly” the Egyptian term finds an echo in the *Midioe* or *Midioe*, which Pliny the Elder locates in the Eastern Desert and along the shore of the Red Sea. However, Cooper is less confident about understanding the contemporary word *Beja* as an even further latter-day reflex of *md3* (pp. 159–61), as some have suggested.

Notwithstanding the yeoman work accomplished by Christopher Ehret and others in the domain of the historical reconstruction of Cushitic, the difficulties in establishing modern-day Cushitic (especially Beja, but also Agaw, Saho-Afar, Somali, etc.) lexemes as the etyma of toponyms from the Eastern Desert and the Horn of Africa recorded in ancient Egyptian texts are self-evident. To take one example: the term  *id3ht*, attested only once, in an expedition text of Montuhotep III (Eleventh Dynasty), ca. 2000 BCE. The word is patient of multiple interpretations based on contemporary Beja, including *adar* ‘red’, *dela/dera* ‘spring’, *dar* ‘khor bank’, or if the /3/ is vocalic, *dihit* ‘narrow valley’. Cooper records all of these options (some proposed by earlier scholars, others apparently deduced by Cooper himself), and then reaches the conclusion that “given the ubiquitous nature of *adar* ‘red’ in Beja toponymy, this should be treated as the most likely etymology” (p. 136). Well, maybe, but at a distance of 4,000 years, with only a single attestation of the term in ancient Egyptian, and with so much uncertainty, can one seriously posit any connection? Mind you, I do not criticize Cooper here for recording all the various options, collated from a combing of the relevant Cushitic dictionaries; I merely question whether any real conclusions may be reached.

My comments thus far have focused mainly on the Eastern Desert and Red Sea regions, though at this point I turn to the Edom and South Sinai areas—regions where my own scholarly expertise intersects in more sustained fashion with the contents of this book. One is grateful to find detailed treatments of the well-known terms *t3 š3s.w yhw3* “the land of the Shasu of Yahweh,” and *t3 š3s.w sʿr* “the land of the Shasu of Seʿir” (pp. 217–20, 245–48, respectively), both crucial to the reconstruction of earliest Israel (see my recent contribution, “Israelite Origins,” in *An Excellent Fortress for His Armies, a Refuge for the People*: *Egyptological, Archaeological, and Biblical Studies in Honor of James K. Hoffmeier*, ed. R. E. Averbeck and K. L. Younger [University Park, PA, 2020], 327–39). Cooper further reminds the reader that the latter toponym also occurs in the combination *ḡw n(.y) sʿr* “mountain of Seʿir” (2x in texts dated to the reign of Rameses II), with its echo in Biblical Hebrew הַר שַׁעִיר (Gen. 36:8–9, Deut. 1:2, 2:1, 2:5, etc.) (p. 247). Naturally, he also treats the sole mention of *idm* ‘Edom’ in ancient Egyptian documentation, to wit, P. Anastasi VI, ll. 54–55, in the phrase *š3s.w n(.y) idm* “Shasu of Edom” (pp. 216–17).

The sole attestation of *hrb* ‘dry place’ (based on the Semitic etymology) in the Leiden Magical Papyrus is treated within the “South Sinai and Edom” section (pp. 237–40), with comparison to Hebrew הַרְבַּ (Exod. 3:1, 17:6, Deut. 1:2, etc.) duly noted. Cooper justifies including the term in his corpus since “many scholars have frequently proposed a southern Edomite location” (p. 238), even though he himself prefers a location in northern Syria for this toponym—in which case, to my mind, the term should not have been included in his Toponymic Databank (chap. 5).

On the other hand, Cooper decides not to include additional toponyms that appear in the Soleb and Amara topographical lists, even though they are associated with the Shasu, due to uncertainty over their specific locations (p. 386). I would have reached the opposite judgment, since the concentration of Shasu in Egyptian texts points to the general region of Seʿir / Edom (notwithstanding an occasional exception, such as P. Anastasi I 23:7, with Shasu in the land of Canaan; see p. 75). In fact, one of the terms that Cooper specifically excludes, namely *t3 š3s.w rbn* “the land of the Shasu of Reben” in the Amara West Topographical List (included between “the land of the Shasu of Seʿir” and “the land of the Shasu of Yahweh”—see p. 501), most likely represents the toponym לָבָן ‘Laban’ mentioned in Deut. 1:1 (see Sh. Ahituv, *Canaanite Toponyms in Ancient Egyptian Documents* [Jerusalem: Magnes, 1984], 129). Both the linguistics and the geography fit well.

The etymology of the word *ʿ3m*, a general term for Asiatics, is not directly related to Cooper’s enterprise, but since he discusses the word, its meaning, and its etymology (pp. 93–95, *inter alia*), I add here my own view. Is not the most straightforward approach simply to derive the word from Hebrew עַם (with cognates) ‘people’? This would require treating the /3/ in *ʿ3m* as a vowel marker, but we have seen that such occurs occasionally in Egyptian orthography (see above).

In sum, Cooper has written an excellent (and now standard) work on the subject of toponyms on Egypt’s eastern and southern periphery. The compilation and classification of the data are superb, while the analyses cover the material from every angle possible. There truly is something to learn on every

page. Barring any new discoveries that could expand the database in some significant manner, Cooper's volume will serve scholars for decades to come.

(I here express gratitude to my student Hyeon Woo Kim [Rutgers University] for his assistance in the production of the hieroglyphs utilized herein, via the JSesh software program.)

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