THE SO-CALLED RAMESSES GIRDLE

BY T. ERIC PEET

The object familiarly known as the Ramesses Girdle has lain in the Liverpool Free Public Museums since 1867, under the number M. 11156. Some time ago the Director of the Museums, Dr. D. A. Allan, told me he felt it to be a pity that the origin of one of the rarest objects in the Museums' collections and one of the most remarkable that ancient Egypt has bequeathed to us should remain wrapped in obscurity and uncertainty, and he begged me to put together and place on record what could be learned about its early history before the slender evidence still available for this purpose should have disappeared. This task I accepted the more readily because I had just read an article in Deutsche Frauenkultur for 1931, pp. 157–63, by Prof. Dr. Fritz Krause in which the following passage occurs (p. 157): "... a hieroglyphic group. ... The English scholar P. E. Newberry thought in 1911 that he could recognize in it a trace of the name of Rameses III.¹ On the ground of this opinion the scarf has since been known as the 'Ramesses Girdle'.” Now it seems clear from Professor Krause’s illustration to this text that the hieroglyphic group to which he refers is the roughly written 𓊕𓊕𓊕 clear in our Fig. 1, bottom, right, and that he is unaware of the existence of the much longer and more carefully written inscription which is the real ground for the name “Ramesses Girdle”. Professor Krause goes on to say that documentary evidence shows that the girdle was in the Museum as early as 1867 and came from Memphis, and he therefore assigns it not to the Ramesside age but to the Old Kingdom, adding that it is in consequence 4,500 years old, and the earliest piece of weaving of this kind known to us from Egypt.

This, I believe, the most recently published account of the object, and it is so incorrect that it does indeed seem time that some one should put on record what is known about the matter.

The Egyptologists who have seen the “girdle” can probably be numbered on the fingers of one hand. And yet among all the treasures from the tombs of Yuia and Tuyu and of Tutankhamun there is not one that is more living than this. Here is a scarf which was worn by an ancient Egyptian, perhaps a king, certainly a person of royal rank. It is in such perfect condition that it might be worn to-day without damaging it. It is solid and firm to the touch, and yet perfectly flexible; it retains its colours in all their brightness; it is perhaps the one piece of ancient Egyptian woven linen of which the phrase “it might have been made yesterday” can legitimately be used. Of its technical perfection I do not intend to speak here. When no two of the experts on ancient weaving who have examined it can agree as to the method by which it was produced² the layman may well be content to admire the neat perfection of the design and execution, and the mathematical ingenuity with which a single decorative scheme is evenly tapered from a breadth of 5 inches to that of 1 3⁄4 in a length of 17 feet.

The literature of the scarf begins, so far as I can determine, with a book of which very few copies seem to be known. It bears the title Egyptian Antiquities | collected | on a voyage

¹ The statement contained in this sentence is probably based on Liverpool Annals, v, 84, second paragraph.
made in Upper Egypt in the years 1854 & 1855 and published by Revd. H. Stobart M.A. Queen's College Oxford. It bears the date 1855, and the publishers are Benj. Duprat of Paris and F. Schneider & Co. of Berlin.¹ There is no letterpress and the work consists of five plates, at the bottom of each of which we read “Berlin, Värsch & Happe, lithogr. fac-sim. under the direction of Dr. H. Brugsch”.

On Plate i of this work appear two illustrations which are of importance to us here. The first comprises two lines of hieroglyphic inscription ² (reproduced here in Fig. 1) and labelled “Portion of a linen Belt, found at Thebes, with the date of the 2nd year of Rameses III”. The second shows a mummified hand, now in the Liverpool collection under the number M. 11488; it is labelled “Mummy hand of a female with 4 rings”.

The linen belt is the object known as the Ramesses Girdle. Although the inscriptions have deteriorated since 1855 enough remains to place the identification beyond all doubt. It would therefore seem that in 1855 Dr. H. Brugsch, who directed the making of these plates, believed that the girdle had been found, or at any rate bought, in Thebes. Where did Brugsch get this idea? Surely from Stobart himself, for it must have been he who asked Brugsch to direct the making of the plates for his book. There seems, therefore, a considerable probability that the provenance here assigned to the belt, namely Thebes, rests on the authority of Stobart himself. It is disappointing that on the plate no provenance is given to the mummified hand, which from this point onward, as we shall see, is to be closely associated with the belt.

In 1857 Mr. Stobart offered his collection to the British Museum³ but, becoming impatient at the Trustees’ delay in deciding,⁴ he sold it to Mr. Joseph Mayer, a goldsmith who was in business at 68–70 Lord St., Liverpool, and had got together a collection of valuable antiquities of various kinds, which he housed in rooms in Colquitt St. On February 4, 1858, the belt and the mummified hand were exhibited at a meeting of the Archaeological Section of the Historic Society of Lancashire and Cheshire, and we find the following account of the matter in the Society’s Transactions, x (1857–8), 343–4.

“The following objects of interest were exhibited: By Joseph Mayer, F.S.A. The hand of a female mummy, remarkable from having four rings on the fingers; one of plain gold, with a trumpet-shaped head, on the little finger; a scarabœus of lapis-lazuli, with a gold shank, on the third; and on the middle and fore fingers two very large obelisks, the shafts formed of lapis lazuli, the apex of each being of plain gold, and the bases of the same, but delicately worked with filagree. These are the only specimens of obelisk-rings hitherto discovered. Also, a waistband which was wrapped round the body of the mummy seven times; it is about six inches broad at one end, tapering gradually to about two inches wide at the other, and is finished by the ends of the threads being tied into an ornamental plait. The material is cotton, and the pattern of the weaving extremely beautiful, being formed of the flower of the full-blown lotus, with a stem and leaves composing the edge, within which are a sort of egg and dart, with portions of circles.⁵ These ornaments run on the outer edges of both sides, and down the centre is a plain piece, of the graduating form of the whole, with plain lines of red colour on each side, the other ornaments being coloured blue and yellow. Altogether it is a most beautiful piece of work, and displays well the extraordinary perfection at which the art of weaving had arrived in Egypt at that time. Both specimens were found at Mem-

¹ Mr. W. R. Dawson tells me of a copy with the imprint “Berlin, 1855” alone.
² They lie one on each face of the “belt” in the plain central strip, and near the broad end; each begins about 4 cm. from the end.
³ See the letter from Birch to Stobart quoted below.
⁴ The evidence for this is a note by C. T. Gatty attached to the same letter.
⁵ A wholly incorrect description of the design.
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Memphis, and brought to this country by the Rev. H. Stobart. They now form part of Mr. Mayer’s Museum.

In this passage the first sentence referring to the “waistband”, with its reference to “the body of the mummy”, would lead the reader to suppose that the “waistband” belonged to the same mummy as the hand. That the writer, however, did not intend to give that impression seems clear from a later sentence “Both specimens were found at Memphis”. And indeed, if the belt really belongs to the time of Ramesses III, as we shall see later that it does, the two objects cannot possibly come from the same mummy, for it needs only a glance at the hand to see that it is of much later date than that.

Much more disturbing than the false association of the hand with the belt is the provenance assigned to both, namely Memphis, which is a direct contradiction of that given in the plate of Stobart’s book. The account given in the Transactions was presumably written by the Historic Society’s Secretary, but it must surely have been based on information provided by the exhibitor, Mr. Mayer, and we should expect that he in his turn obtained what information he had from Mr. Stobart, from whom he bought the objects.

Let us, however, follow the story a little farther. In 1867 the Mayer Collections came to the Free Public Museums of Liverpool as part of the Mayer Bequest, and the Museums were faced with the task of cataloguing them from such information as was available. Mr. Mayer had indeed published a catalogue of his Museum in Colquitt St., but as it was printed in 1852 it did not help with the Egyptian objects bought from Stobart in 1857. Nevertheless a good deal of information, correct or incorrect, seems to have been available, for here is a copy of the card drawn up by C. T. Gatty for the Stock Catalogue of the Museums.

“M. 11156. Woven band from a mummy, found at Memphis, and brought to England by the Rev. H. Stobart—

“The label attached to this says ‘A sevenfold band worn by the High Priestess, taken from the mummy to which the hand belonged’—I believe this to be mistaken for two reasons—1, because the acct given in the Trans: of the His: Soc: does not warrant it; and 2, because from Dr. Birch’s letter on p. 4 of the Mayer Coll. guard book I judge that Mr. Stobart offered the British Museum the hand, and no mention is made of this band—is it likely that Dr. Birch would have separated them if they were found on one body (?)—Certainly the acct: in the His: Soc:’s Pro:1 is ambiguous. (Charles T Gatty)—I believe the label to be Mr Clarke’s writing—

“The hand referred to is No. 11488—

“Dr. Birch described this as a woven linen belt, edged with pattern of symbols of life—at one end the name of Ramases III, and date of the 2nd year of his reign.”

In compiling this card Mr. Gatty clearly had before him (1) a label attached to the belt, which he believed to be in the handwriting of a Mr. Clarke,2 (2) the account quoted above from the Transactions of the Historic Society, the reference to which is quoted in the margin of the catalogue card, (3) a letter from Dr. Birch preserved on p. 4 of the guard book, and (4) a description of the belt by Dr. Birch the origin of which I have been unable to trace.

The curious point about the history of the belt is that the older it grows the more circumstantial the information about it seems to become. Mr. Clarke’s label tells us that it was “a sevenfold band worn by the High Priestess, taken from the mummy to which the hand belonged”. It is, however, not difficult to see how these details were arrived at. A belt

1 Sic: read Transactions.

2 Mr. Clarke was apparently a caretaker and assistant to Mr. Mayer. Only a few days ago a boy called Clarke brought to the Museums some objects which he said had belonged to his grandfather, Mr. Mayer’s caretaker.
seventeen feet long would enwrap a female body about seven times. The hand bears two rings with obelisk bezels, which, in view of the connexion of the obelisk with sun-worship, might reasonably have been worn by a priestess of the sun-cult; and since the belt and hand came, for Mr. Clarke, from a single body, the belt is also that of a High Priestess.

Gatty was critical enough to doubt this. He rightly saw that the account of the Transactions does not warrant the close association of hand and belt. He further quotes in support of his doubts a letter from Dr. Birch, which he says makes no mention of the band (belt). This, however, is not true, for the letter, which is from Dr. Birch at the British Museum to Mr. Stobart, dated 30 September, 1857, gives a list of objects in the Stobart Collection which Bireh had proposed to buy for the Museum. No. 5 in the list is “Mummy hand with obelisk rings”, and No. 8 is “Belt with name of Rameses III”. Thus the belt is mentioned, and Gatty was wrong, though the conclusion he drew from his incorrect premisses was probably right.

Gatty’s card for the hand (M. 11438) is also instructive. It contains the following statement:

“The hand is labelled ‘The hand of a Royal Priestess of Temple at On. Found at Thebes’—(This label must be incorrect for the hand was found at Memphis)—”

The label referred to will be that which was found on the hand when it reached the Museums, doubtless in Mr. Clarke’s handwriting. It goes even farther than that on the belt. The High Priestess has now become a Royal Priestess of the Temple at On. Here again we are accumulating fresh detail, but this time the original label at least gives a provenance, and it is not Memphis but Thebes.

The information contained in these two card-catalogue cards is repeated in Charles T. Gatty’s Catalogue of the Mayer Collection, Part I, 1879, p. 39, where, under the number 192, the “woven linen belt” is described, and we find the words “said to have been found on a mummy at Saqqara”. This is at first sight an advance on the Memphis of the Transactions, but in reality it is probably nothing but another version of the same story, for if we look at the description of the hand in this same catalogue, pp. 29–30, we read that it was found “at Saqqara, the Necropolis of Memphis”, and references are given to “Dr. Brugsch’s account of Stobart’s antiquities”, Pl. i, fig. 4, and to the passage in the Transactions (here wrongly called Proceedings) of the Historic Society for 1857–8. As the former gives no provenance for the hand, the authority for Memphis, and hence Saqqara, is still solely the account in the Transactions.

What are we to make of all these contradictions? On the question of the provenance the position is fairly clear. Stobart’s publication in 1855 gives no provenance for the hand, but assigns the belt to Thebes; it gives no hint that the two came from the same body or were even bought in the same place. The labels which came to the Public Museums on the objects from the Mayer Collection in Colquitt St. associate the hand and belt as coming from the same body and give the provenance of the hand as Thebes.

Thus the first reference to Memphis occurs in the account in the Transactions of the exhibition of the belt and hand in 1857, and this is undoubtedly the source of Gatty’s assignment of both to Memphis or Saqqara in the printed Catalogue of 1879. It is hard to see why he here rejected in complete silence the evidence of Stobart’s publication, which assigned the belt to Thebes, and that of the Clarke labels, which assigned the hand, and by implication the belt also, to the same place.

1 Note, however, that on the Stock Catalogue cards made in 1867 he gives no reference to Stobart’s plate, and so probably he had not seen it. Moreover, in the printed Catalogue of 1879 he mentions the plate in connexion with the hand (to which it gives no provenance) but not in connexion with the belt (which it
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The evidence as a whole is thus distinctly in favour of Thebes rather than of Memphis as the provenance of the belt and even as that of the hand. Mr. Warren R. Dawson, who has been working on the private papers of some of these early collectors in Egypt, tells me that, so far as he knows, all Stobart's antiquities were bought from a dealer in Thebes. This evidence is to my mind supported by the fact that Stobart calls his book *Egyptian Antiquities collected on a voyage made in Upper Egypt*. I am well aware that Memphis is, strictly speaking, in Upper Egypt; but objects found at Memphis, at any rate those of such value as the hand, would certainly have been bought from dealers in Cairo, and had Stobart intended his book to include things bought there we should have expected him to speak of a voyage made in Egypt rather than in Upper Egypt alone.

So much for the question of provenance. The question of the archaeological detail which we have seen gradually gathering round the objects is even simpler. The results may be summed up as follows:

1. There is no reason for believing that belt and hand belong to a single body, for the former dates from the reign of Ramesses III, and the latter is probably as late as the Ptolemaic Period.\(^1\) This unhappy association of the two has been responsible for many of the later errors.

2. The belt has, since the publication of Brugsch's plates to Stobart's book in 1855, been known to bear a date in the reign of Ramesses III.

3. The connexion of the hand with a High Priestess of the Temple at On is probably a pure figment. The hand was first said to be that of a woman because it bore rings. Since two of the rings had obelisk bezels a connexion with sun-worship was suggested, and from this the transition to Heliopolis and a High Priestess was simple. It is most unlikely that any authentic information about the body from which the hand came can ever have been forthcoming. Stobart bought a hand alone, not a mummy, and the native robbers who found the mummy and broke it up were in no position to determine from the inscriptions on it, if there were any, the status of its owner.

Let us now return to the inscription on the belt (Fig. 1). It is clear that since these copies, presumably by Brugsch, were made the condition of the inscriptions has badly deteriorated. In fact they have almost completely disappeared. What remains of the inscribed area is now stained a dark brown, and is more friable than the rest of the girdle, which is in remarkably sound condition; what is worse, most of this inscribed area has crumbled away to dust. It is no longer possible to apportion the blame for this disaster. It may be that the ink used was of a kind which, while remaining comparatively harmless in the dark, underwent some rapid change when exposed to the light—as it was at one time during its museum history—which rendered it destructive to the linen. Yet the suspicion that the damage was due to assigns to Thebes). It is probable that he did not recognize the inscriptions figured in the plate as being part of the Ramesses Girdle, and so missed the earliest and best evidence for the Theban provenance of the belt.

\(^1\) This is Professor P. E. Newberry's opinion as recorded on the relevant card of the modern Catalogue.
some substance used by a decipherer to enhance the contrasts will not be stilled. In either case eighty years of life in museums have destroyed what had survived three thousand years of life in the tomb.

The miserable traces which remain of these ink inscriptions are:

A. Of the inscription running from right to left (Fig. 1, lower line):

The sign ⌣ and a small trace of the cartouche and the sign ⌹ immediately to the left of the nb-sign. Part of the top line of the second cartouche and small traces of the tops of two or three signs within it.

B. Of the inscription running from left to right (Fig. 1, upper line):

Part of the top line of the first cartouche. Parts of the right half of the second cartouche and some signs within it: ⌣ ⌵ ⌹ ⌻ seem quite clear, and I do not believe that the ⌽ shown by Stobart after ⌹ was ever there; for left of ⌹ (reversed by Stobart) are the bottom ends of three vertical strokes needed for ⌹, and left of these are horizontal traces at the bottom which can only fit ⌶. After the cartouche ⌹ is still to be read, and under the ⌹ are two small traces, which are, however, too extensive for the three dots of ⌹. To the right of this ⌽ group, at the top, and about 10 mm. distant from the tail of the ⌽, is a clear trace of black. Although this is probably ink, I believe it to be an accident, for the space beneath and to the left of it, though stained, shows no trace of ink whatever.

The remains then, so far as they go, confirm, except in one insignificant detail, the copy in Stobart’s plate. But they do not go very far, and some puzzles are left. In both lines of inscription the date ⌹ ⌹ “Year 2” is clear. In the lower line in Fig. 1 this year date is followed by ⌹—which must surely be an error of copying for ⌹—and the word for the season sht, correctly written. This would give us “first month of the inundation”, a month date with no day, such as is common enough at this period (cf. Gauthier, Livre des rois, iii, fasc. 1, p. 157). This month date is correctly followed by nb trvei “Lord of the Two Lands”, and the king’s first cartouche name. A date followed by a king name without any preposition or prepositional phrase between is also not unusual (e.g. Gauthier, op. cit., p. 161).

In the other line of inscription the Year 2 is followed by ⌹ where we should expect ⌹ or at least ⌹. The horizontal line may have been meant for, or miscopied from, a ⌹. The ⌹ which follows can hardly be right; we expect nb trvei, and perhaps this is what stood here. Even then, the length of the gap which follows is puzzling.

The inscriptions on the two faces of the linen thus give a date, Year 2 in the reign of Ramesses III. They were probably identical, except that on the one face a month as well as a year was given. Of the larger and more roughly written ⌹ ⌹ to the right of the lower inscription in Fig. 1 I can give no explanation. It is not likely to be a modern imitation, for the two signs did not occur in this order in the original, and in fact the combination did not occur at all, if in the lost line, as in that which has survived, the writer used ⌶ for ⌹.

The nature of the object remains uncertain. It has been called a scarf, a band, a belt, a girdle. Van Gennep and Jéquier identified it with the scarf which they thought they could discern wrapped round the upper part of the body of the king in his war chariot in representations such as that of Ramesses III on the walls of Medinet Habu. Borchardt has, however, recently made it clear that this is no scarf but a very short

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1 The bearded man with the sun’s disk on his head in Stobart’s copy is clearly an error for this.
2 Le Tissage aux cartons, 95.
3 Medinet Habu (Or. Inst. Univ. Chicago), vol. 1, Pl. 25.
4 Allerhand Kleinigkeiten (Privatdruck, 1933), 13–18.
jacket with long ribbon-like points in front, which are passed round the back and tied again in front. I have no suggestion to make.

How did so rare an object, and in such perfect condition, come to be in the hands of a dealer or robber in Thebes in 1854 or 1855? Its condition shows that it came from a tomb, and probably from a coffin which was not only tightly sealed but contained a body so well mummified as to remain perfectly preserved, and therefore probably the body of a personage of very considerable importance.

Further, this scarf is a very remarkable and rare specimen of the weaver's art, and however much skill one may attribute to the Egyptians in the art of weaving it seems hardly likely that the private individual had such rare specimens as this at his command. In fact everything goes to indicate that it came from a royal burial.

We think at once of the body of Ramesses III himself, in whose second year it is dated. But there are difficulties. The mummy of Ramesses III was found in the cache at Dér el-Bahri,¹ and though the 'Abd er-Rasûl family appear to have been looting the cache at intervals for some years before their exposure in 1881 it has never been suggested that they had known it as early as 1854; in fact Maspero, who took part in the judicial inquiry, suggests that 1871 was probably the date of their first visit to the cache.²

What is more, the Twenty-first Dynasty re-wrappings of the mummy were found quite intact, and if the scarf was ever with the body it must have been placed outside these wrappings, which is not very probable. On the whole the probability that the scarf came from the cache is not very high.

But we are now in the realm of conjecture, and the avowed purpose of this article was to attempt to ascertain facts. This would therefore seem to be a suitable point at which to end it.

¹ Les Momies royales, 563 ff.