

Surveyor-general and Registrar-general of Upper Egypt in the xviiiith Dynasty – Rekhmire (c.1470-1420 bc)

John F. Brock, Australia

SUMMARY

Ultimately what became of the high ranking civil official Rekhmire is still a mystery. However there is no doubt that during his life he rose to such a significant status during the reign of the Pharaoh Thutmose III (1479 to 1425 BC) and for the early years of his successor son Amenhotep II (1427-1400 BC) that he was actually second in the line of command only to his Regal Patriarchs. He has been referred to as the Mayor of Thebes which in fact was the equivalent of Governor of Upper Egypt but upon a more meticulous study of his duties from various sources attested by the very man himself, I now take the liberty of also calling him the Surveyor-General and Registrar-General of Upper Egypt ! He also bore control over the entirety of the King's Domain with his decision-making power assuming divine designation.

As there is no actual burial chamber in the tomb which he had constructed for himself in the cemetery of the nobles at Sheik Abd el Qurna known as TT100 there has been various speculation about a possible fall from grace of this well attested Vizier from Egypt. Nevertheless his tomb is one of the largest rock cut burial monuments in this elite graveyard bearing most ornate tomb art, but it is more specifically renowned for its hieroglyphic inscription of the most complete account of the Duties of the Vizier ever found in the corpus of ancient literature. Within this thorough declaration of the many responsibilities undertaken by this position of eminent importance were the many Registrations of Land Boundaries, resolution of the land disputes brought before him by various petitioners as well as the setting of the limits of the Landward Boundaries of the Nation. He also made it declared that he was the judge of criminal offences, Overseer of the Royal Estate and Building program in addition to ensuring the continuity of the water supply to the City and the maintenance of as many other services and needs of the territory over which his Governorship had direct control.

Evidence of the roles of Rekhmire as the Surveyor-General and Registrar-General from primary sources are compelling, providing an exciting insight into the man who was the divine authority over the Surveyor Scribes who carried out the many duties which made up the most essential element in the operation of the whole empire. Taxes collected from the many farms and landholders were one of the major contributors to the development of the civilisation, even more so during times of peace when the booty of foreign conquests was not available to swell the coffers of the Royal chambers. One of the primary tasks of the Scribe Surveyors was to measure and calculate the crop yields of the King's farms from which the commensurate amount of the tax component could be assessed. Another major responsibility of this group of elite officials was to reinstate the boundaries of any properties which may

have had their boundary stones washed away during the Nile inundation. The aim of this paper is to highlight the importance of Rekhmire with his roles as Surveyor-General and Registrar-General as well as the indispensable major importance of the two Departments operating under this dual auspices.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In modern times the Governor of Southern Egypt, Rekhmire, is more well renowned for what he left behind rather than what he actually achieved while occupying his position as the second most powerful individual in the ancient Egyptian New Kingdom (c.1550-1200 B.C.), subservient only to its lord and master, The Pharaoh of the time.

His burial monument is the most spectacular of the Cemetery of the Nobles known as Sheik Abd el Qurna situated in Thebes not too far distant from the Valleys of the Kings and the Queens in which his regal patriarchs and their many spouses are entombed. Upon one of the walls has been found the most complete testimony to the Duties of the Vizier ever discovered, but there is an unsolved shroud of mystery surrounding his later life because although his burial chapel was eminently impressive it contained no burial shafts, sarcophagus or mummies. To add further intrigue to the mystery no burial has yet been located for this Eighteenth Dynasty superstar.

What will be brought forward in this study of the available information of this prolific administrator are the innumerable duties undertaken for the Temple Administration attested by his hieroglyphic biography in his unoccupied burial monument further embellished by the magnificent wall art pictorially demonstrating his many activities during his lifetime. There will also be a summary of how the position occupied by Rekhmire rose from the very earliest origins of the ancient Egyptian Dynastic regimes, many hundreds of years before the construction of the Great Pyramids!

2. FIRST DYNASTY AND ONWARDS!



Figure One. The Palermo Stone (c 2350BC)

Is it any wonder that the Catholics of Gallileo's times espoused a flat earth policy! All of the preceding great civilizations referred back to the creation of the earth as a planar surveying task by their creator deities.

One of the most important and revered rituals of the Egyptians is called the *pedj shes* ceremony which has been translated to be The Stretching of the Cord ceremony. This ritual is mentioned three times on the Palermo Stone (dated to c. 2350 B.C.) the ancient stela which bears a king list for the first five hundred years of Pharaohic history together with some eminently significant regular events to which period dating has been adapted. One such scheduled activity was the numbering of the gold and lands described by Sir Henry Lyons in his 1927 paper as an inventory of riches and property held biannually and later annually by the Scribe Surveyors to assess the king's holdings for taxation purposes. The first time that the

numbering of gold and lands is cited on the rock chronicle is during the second year of the initial Second Dynasty Pharaoh Neterimu which is estimated to be c.2923 B.C. The "numbering" continues to be mentioned every two years for the 20 year reign of this Dynasty Two ruler then, after a section of the text which has been lost it also appears up to the eighth naming of the numbering for the sixteenth year of King "W", whose name was lost (c.2907 B.C.).

In addition to this more routinely allocated activity there were the irregular citations of the Stretching of the Cord Ceremony, known as the *pedj shes* ceremony, carried out when a new temple or palace was to be constructed. This sacred ritual is described in numerous hieroglyphic inscriptions and depicted in reliefs during various epochs of the ancient civilisation. Quoted for the first time on the Palermo Stone in year x + 7 years (c.3005 B.C.) of the fifth king of the First Dynasty, Meretneit (also called Den), for the dedication ritual of what was the House (called) “Thrones-of-the-Gods” (by) the priest of (the goddess) Seshat. Coming up on this stone of history another two times – for the 2nd Dynasty ruler Neterimu’s seventh year dedication



Figure Two. Goddess Seshat faces the King as they perform the Stretching of the Cord Ceremony at the Temple of Dendera (after R.W. Stoley 1931)



Figure Three. Pharaoh faces the Goddess Seshat in this relief carving on the wall of the Temple at Edfu

of the House (called) Hor-Ren, and the 4th year building ceremony (for) the House (called) “Shelter-of-the Gods” during the period of the last King of the Second Dynasty, known as King X (known to be Khasekhemwy) because his name was also missing (c.2687 B.C.). Upon the various images found in varying places from different eras the king is shown with the goddess Seshat, often referred to as the goddess of the Scribes of the Fields and wife of the ibis headed god Thoth,

hammering in stakes around which the sacred cord is tightly wrapped. Such stakes were placed by astronomical star observation to the Great Bear constellation (Ursa Major) and other fainter polar stars at the major corners of the proposed building. Such stretched measuring line around the perimeter of the stakes so placed was then dropped to the ground in the Loosening of the Cord to mark the lines of trenches to be dug out for the footings of the construction.

In the Mayan text *The Popul Vuh* the creating divinity is said to have surveyed the

world:

“Great is the recital, the history of the time when all the corners of the sky and earth were completed, and the quadrangulation, its measures, the four points, the measuring of the corners, the measuring of the lines, in heaven, in earth, **at the four corners.**”

During a very recent visit to an extraordinary exhibition of the ancient entombed warriors of the Qin Dynasty of China (about 200 B.C.) called “The First Emperor” at the Art Galery of NSW I saw another culture exhorting the earth as a rectilinear figure:

“Great is the virtue of our Emperor
who pacifies **all four corners of the earth**
who punishes traitors, roots out evil men
And who with profitable measures brings prosperity.”

And who can forget this gem out of the Christian Bible when God himself is chastising Job with rhetorical questions about his creation of the earth and his own surveying of what he had just materialized:

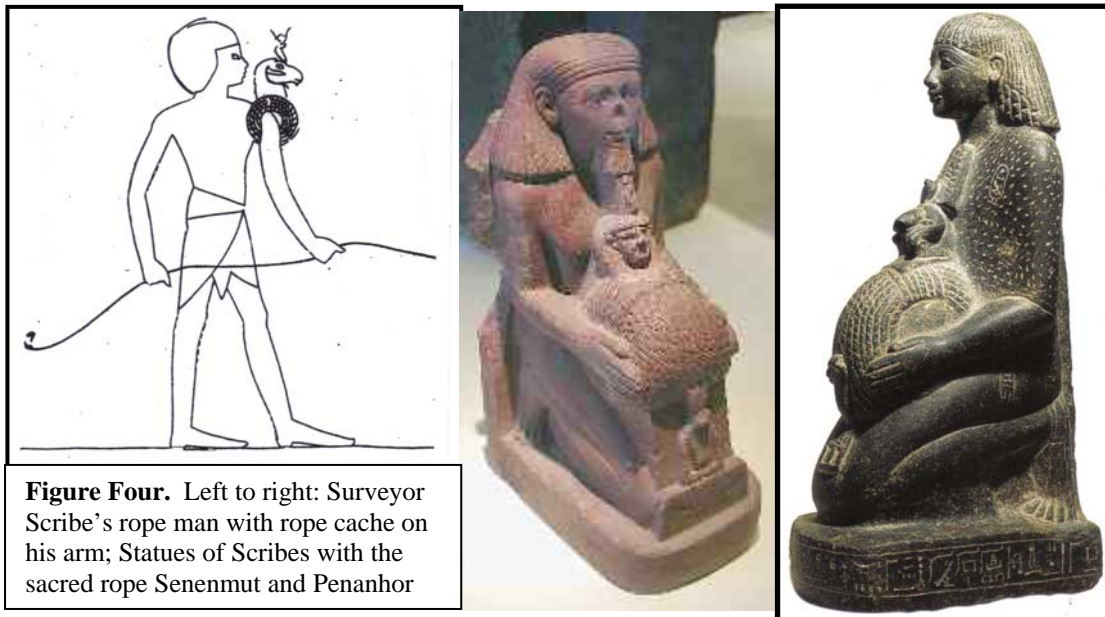
“Where wast thou when I laid the foundations of the earth? Declare, if thou hast understanding. Who hath laid the measures thereof, if thou knowest? Or who hath stretched the measuring line upon it? Whereupon are the foundations thereof fastened? Or who laid the corner stone thereof ...”

Now at least there is some basis for the metaphorical paradox which anomalously describes the limit of the spherically shaped earth as “reaching the four corners of the globe!”

Thus the setting in of the four corners of the temple or palace during The Stretching of the Cord ceremony was the symbolic micro re-enactment of the creation of the earth with the God’s representative on earth, The Pharaoh, playing the part of the deity with the goddess joining with him in spirit in the form of a High Priest Scribe to set the four corners of the construction. The measuring rope was a sacred item being known as the rod of cord and typically consisting of one hundred cubits of rope length knotted at given intervals to allow incremental mensuration. At various times of Egyptian history this divine measuring device was housed in a cache bearing the Ram’s Head of Amun (statues of Penanhor and Amenemhet-Surer) shown clearly in the two statues of these Scribes in the kneeling position with the sacred cord resting in their laps. The same holy encasement can be seen in the line drawings from the tomb of Scribe Amenhotpe-si-se on the upper arms of the survey assistants in the depiction of measuring the fields from around 1400 B.C. Another statue of the Scribe Semenmut shows the sacred rope with a cache sculpted in the shape of the head of Thutmose II’s daughter Nefrura for whom the scribe was a tutor. Two excellent

depictions of the Stretching of the Cord Ceremony are found in the Ptolemaic-Roman Temples at Dendera and Edfu erected during a period of a noticeable re-emphasis on this most significant ritual for the sanctification and glorification of the magnificent structures which were to be employed in the adoration of the deities and temple activity. In the hieroglyphic inscription accompanying the image at Edfu the king himself states:

“I hold the peg. I grasp the handle of the club and grip the measuring cord with Seshat. I turn my eyes to the movements of the stars. I send forth my glance to Ursa Major. I make firm the four corners of thy temple.”



Other conspicuous events listed on the Palermo Stone are various activities which would have required the well established temple bureaucracy overseeing the duties of the Scribe Surveyors , with particular note to the selection of the sites for the proposed pyramids clearly including the horizontal set out and vertical alignment of the structures, places which have been demonstrated by the well known Egyptologist John Romer to still bear evidence of the physical markings made by these field parties. Keeping in mind that this ancient stone hieroglyphic is a narrative of the first five hundred years spanning the first five dynasties of the Great Civilisation the skilled ancient Egyptian Surveyors clearly date right back to the very earliest beginnings of this amazing culture.

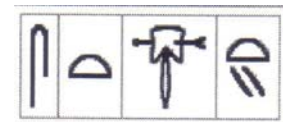
3. THE OLDEST RECORDED LAND CONVEYANCES

The oldest known biography of an individual from ancient Egypt is attributed to Methen, a man from the earlier part of the Third Dynasty with his tomb lying buried in the terraces alongside the stepped Pyramid of Djoser, having died during the reign of Snefru (First ruler of 4th Dynasty from c 2613 BC).

Rising in status from a relatively middle of the road scribe and overseer, his life story tells of his advancement to the level of the Governor of many northern towns in the Delta with one of his many offices described as “Field-judge”, a clear reference to the fact that he was a Cadastral Surveyor Scribe. His importance is no more emphasized than when he describes that his house is “200 cubits (105 metres) long and 200 cubits (105 metres) wide, built and equipped; fine trees were set out, a very large lake was made therein, figs and vines were set out.” This means that his home was a staggering 11,025 square metres (nearly 1187 squares !!!) which would be considered exceptional in any epoch of history. As well as this palatial mansion it is also said that a vineyard of 2,000 stat (over 550 hectares) of land was “made for him.” So not only was his own residence of royal proportions there was even a vineyard and man-made lake constructed for him within the domain of his private domicile of this most substantial holding of prime land !

It is the section which lists the “*Gifts of Land*” of 200 stat of land as reward by the numerous royal, 50 stat of land inherited from his Mother, Nebsent, and 12 stat of land given to him by the Ruler of the Sekhemite nome that specifically states that the first two parcels of land were “conveyed” to him. For such advanced terminology used on such an early hieroglyphic life tale it is patently clear that the bureaucratic department of Land Administration and Surveying was functioning at a very developed state even during the earliest Dynasties of the ancient kingdom.

The unit of area measurement quoted in this biography is the *stat*, also spelt *setat* and *setjat* in its transliterated forms, with its Egyptian hieroglyphic spelling as shown adjacent herewith:



It is equivalent to one square khet or 10,000 square cubits (2756 m²). Therefore the 200 stat of land gifted to Methen was equal to a tidy 2,000,000 square cubits or 55.1 hectares (551,250 square metres or nearly 136 acres). Such a substantial grant of land to an individual is demonstrative of the status enjoyed by this early senior bureaucrat. Along with the other two bequests of property his total land holdings mentioned in his biography were 72.22 hectares (178.5 acres).

There are various other units of area used in ancient Egypt including the *kha-ta* (100,000 sq. cubits – 27,565 sq. metres), the *kha* (1,000 sq. cubits – 275.65 sq. metres) and the *ta* (100 sq. cubits – 27.565 sq. metres) right down to the *sa* (12.5 sq. cubits – 3.4 sq. cubits).

4. EIGHTEENTH DYNASTY SCRIBE SURVEYORS

As highlighted by me in my most recent paper “Five Surveyors of the Gods: Eighteenth Dynasty New Kingdom Egypt – c. 1400 B.C.” the most prolific period of ancient Egypt in which imagery and biographical texts appear is the XVIIIth Dynasty just before the legendary characters Akhenaten (c.1352-1336 B.C.), Nefertiti and Tutankhamun (c.1336-1327 B.C.) had immortalized themselves for future modern generations to revere in awe! Not coincidentally, this is the exact period during which our main focus Rekhmire left us his remarkable testimonial to the Duties of the Vizier in his unoccupied rock-cut tomb in the very same upper class cemetery as the one in which four of the five Scribe Surveyors I have studied rest together. The Scribe Surveyors Menna (TT 69), Khaemhet (TT 57), Amenhotpe-si-se (TT 75), Djoserkareseneb (TT 38) and Nebamun (tomb unknown – artwork from fragments in the British Museum) each left us brilliant artwork of their work as surveyors for the King upon the walls of their tombs. (Note: TT means Theban Tomb)



Figure Five. Famous artwork from the rock-cut tomb biography of Cadastral Scribe Surveyor Menna which is the only recovered scene showing the sacred measuring cord pulled tightly and displaying the knots of division along the length.

5. REKHMIRE'S FAMILY TIES WITH POWER

Rekhmire's pedigree to power is long and illustrious. His grandfather Ahmose held the position of vizier during the early regnal years of the female ruler Hatshepsut while his uncle User (or Useramun as well as Woser) occupied this same office for the latter years of her reign and into the initial period of the new pharaoh Thutmose III. The status of his father Neferuben within the temple bureaucracy is not known nor is the position held by his mother Beta amongst the same temple hierarchy. Bearing twelve children with his wife Meryt three of Rekhmire's sons were appointees in the administration of the domain of Amun probably the three male

children named in his biography – Menkeperreseneb, Amenophis and Senusert. His wife Meryt is given the title of a “royal ornament” which is a reference to her position in the court of ladies closest to the king. His name has the literal meaning “learned like Re” so his parents naming of their son must have pre-ordained the fame that their child was to attain during his life.

The total wall coverage of his impressive tomb decoration equates to around 300 square metres but the impressiveness of this rock-cut tomb is not confined to its artistic wall area. At its entry the floor to ceiling height is already a distinguished 3 metres but this separation distance increases to a very substantial 9 metres at the end of the longitudinal hall at the point which formally held a stela which is now in the Louvre or Cairo Museum (?). Amongst his life story there is a most distinguished group of important individuals listed as presenting Rekhmire with a vast pot pourri of valuable and exotic tributes which appear to have formed a major portion of the taxes paid by the officials of Upper Egypt to the Court of the Pharaoh through Rekhmire.

In his role as the Governor of Southern Egypt he fulfilled a comprehensive array of various offices of essential importance to the functioning of the administration including control of the Navy, the fortresses of the Army in his districts, as well as management of the Police force and the security bodyguard for the king. Under his direct control were the various artisans such as cabinet-makers, brick makers and layers, builders, coppersmiths, silversmiths, goldsmiths, bakers, sculptors and so on. He also had jurisdiction over legal proceedings and revenue collecting on behalf of the King’s Estate as well as control of the harvesting of trees and water supply through the canal system. Titularies bestowed upon Rekhmire were *Administrator of the Domain of Amun, Treasurer of the Two Lands, Overseer of Works at Iper-sut (Karnak) and Overseer of Works in the Domain of Amun*. Amongst these designations he was responsible for the major construction projects of the king’s reign with particular credit attributed to him for supervising the erection of the funerary temple of Thutmose III at Deir el-Bahri, the Djeset-Akhet.

Clearly he had extensive control over the scribes of the fields engaged in the setting out of these major capital works in addition to those carrying out the re-surveying of the farmland boundaries along with the determination of the volumes of agricultural production for the purposes of calculating taxation. However, although it would appear to be a natural presumption of such surveying supervision, there are no precise descriptions or images of this work amongst his tomb biography. To my great delight there are various quotations which refer directly to Rekhmire’s personal involvement in the registration of land boundaries in addition to the resolution of disputed boundaries in a totally fair and unbiased appraisal.

6. REKHMIRE'S RECITAL OF THE "DUTIES OF THE VIZIER"

The inscriptions of the "Installation of the Vizier" and "Duties of the Vizier" upon the walls of the tomb of Rekhmire in the Cemetery of the Nobles known as Sheik Abd el Qurna has been described as the "most important private monument of the Empire" by James Breasted, who translated the hieroglyphic text from this tomb memorial. This tomb bears the most comprehensive example of such recitals which are also found in a more limited version at two other grave memorials.

The testimonial goes to great length to record the multitude of tasks which were the responsibility of the Vizier. As the translation of this lengthy life history is quite extensive I shall focus my citations on those pieces which are readily identifiable to his functions relating to the creation and maintenance of the cadastral boundaries and land title registration.



Figure Six. The tall figure of Rekhmire stands with the staff of authority in his hand within his tomb art life story in TT100.

Understandably his administration clearly comprised a vast bureaucracy under the ultimate control of the King administered by his most trusted two men, the Governors of Lower and Upper Egypt. Thus his most senior deputies handled the everyday requirements of the many different strands of the administration while he assumed the ultimate oversight of the operations. Should a petitioner be dissatisfied with the rulings of the lesser civil servants there was a mechanism in place through which direct representation could be made to the Vizier who would then pass his judgment over the matter. The following quotation comes under the heading "*Real Estate Cases*":

"Now, as for every petitioner to the vizier concerning lands, he shall dispatch him (the messenger) to him, in addition to a hearing of the land-overseer and the local Council of the district. He shall decree a stay for him of two months for his lands in the South or North. As for his lands, however, which are near to the Southern City and to the court, he shall decree a stay for him of three days, being that which is according to law; (for) he shall hear every petitioner according to this law which is in his hand."

The next section I would like to bring to your attention refers to cadastral tenure and is named "*Settlement of Registered Boundaries*":

"It is he who administers the gift lands in all regions. As for every petitioner who shall say: 'Our boundary is unsettled,' one shall examine whether it is under the

seal of the official thereof; then he shall seize the seizures of the local council who unsettled it.”

While the attitude to any land which is unregistered the edict is patently clear under the Section called “*Treatment of Unregistered Boundaries*”:

“Now, as for every remarkable case, and everything pertaining thereto; do not look at anything therein.”

So there you have it! Unless your land holding was duly registered with the Land Registry Office you would have no right to seek formal settlement of any of your claimed boundaries through the determinations of the land court. Sounds eminently reasonable to we Registered Surveyors I would gesture to say.

His overall investiture over the limits of the boundaries fixed to define each nome (or district) is stated in the Clause under the heading “*Nome Administration, Boundaries Etc.*”:

“It is he who makes the [] of every nome; it is he who “hears” it. It is he who dispatches the district soldiers and scribes to carry out the administration of the king. The records of the nome are in his hall. It is he who hears concerning all lands. It is he who makes the boundary of every nome, the field [], all divine offerings and every contract.”

In one major scene of his tomb painting Rekhmire is depicted sitting in a throne at the end of the hall of justice with Magnates of the South and the Scribes of the Vizier before him with the forty (40) rolls of the law in front of him for consultation when required. The inscription accompanying this court scene goes like this:

“Sitting, in order to hear the petitioners, in the hall of the vizier; by the hereditary prince, count, wearer of the royal seal, sole companion, (*mr t-ntr*) priest, chief of the six courts of justice, a mouth giving satisfaction in the whole land; (*sm-*) priest, master of every wardrobe, judging justly, not showing partiality, sending two men forth satisfied, judging the weak and the powerful, not bringing sorrow to the one who petitioned him; satisfying the heart of the king before the Two Lands, prince before the people, companion approaching the sovereign, favourite of him who is in the palace.”

7. CONCLUSION

Thus if he composed such verses himself his self assessment gives a golden account of his judicial prowess but if written by others it is certainly a glowing testimonial to the most powerful individual associated directly with the ancient Egyptian surveyors, the Scribes of the Fields, the issuance and maintenance of registered land boundaries with the Titles so describing them, Rekhmire – Surveyor-General and Registrar-General of Upper Egypt during the 14th Century before Christ !!! Please allow me to

conclude this story in the real words of Rekhmire himself contained upon a stela found within TT100 now either in The Louvre or Cairo Museum (depending on what source you consult ?) which illustrates what he considered to be one of his principal daily duties being that it is:

“he it is who divides all the land into fields. When a petitioner comes and says ‘Our boundary stelae have been removed’, he must see what is recorded under the seal of the responsible official, and so cause to be given back what has been taken away by the committee which has had the stelae removed.”

DEDICATION

It would be my distinguished honour to dedicate this paper to the King of Morocco and my new friends and fellow surveyors from Morocco with sincere appreciation for allowing me to attend this FIG Conference in such a mystical place steeped with history and colour.

APPRECIATION

May I also express my warm thanks to Jacques Livet who has helped me with the material contained within this paper.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

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