

Shoshenq I and Biblical Shishak: Alternate Chronologies vs. Radiocarbon Dates

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Shoshenq I was the first pharaoh of Egypt's Twenty-Second Dynasty. Conventional scholarship identifies him with the biblical Shishak who, according to the biblical account, raided Jerusalem during the reign of Judah's king Rehoboam (1 Kgs 14:25–26; 2 Chr. 12:1–9). The conventional chronology of Egypt places the reign of Shoshenq I in 943–923 BC.¹ However, in the most recent three decades, numerous scholars have rejected this chronology and have instead advocated an alternate chronology that places the reign of Shoshenq I in the late 9th century BC.² According to alternate interpretations, the biblical Shishak is not Shoshenq I but is Ramesses II,³ Ramesses III,⁴ or Ramesses VI.⁵ Recent evidence from radiocarbon dating has bearing on when Shoshenq I reigned and whether he is plausibly identified as the biblical Shishak, but to date it has not yet been applied to these questions. Here, I show that the radiocarbon evidence, when applied to these questions, answers them.

Background

To understand the significance of these questions, it would be helpful to review their biblical and archaeological context. The biblical timeline places the reign of Rehoboam in

¹ Rolf Krauss and David A. Warburton, "Conclusions," in *Ancient Egyptian Chronology*, ed. Erik Hornung, Rolf Krauss, and David A. Warburton (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 473–489.

² Peter James, et al., *Centuries of Darkness. A Challenge to the Conventional Chronology of Old World Archaeology* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1993), 257; David M. Rohl, *Pharaohs and Kings: A Biblical Quest* (New York: Crown, 1995), 370–377; Peter James and Peter van der Veen, "When Did Shoshenq I Campaign in Palestine?" in *Solomon and Shishak: Current Perspectives from Archaeology, Epigraphy, History and Chronology*, ed. Peter James and Peter G. van der Veen (Oxford: British Archaeological Reports, 2015), 127–136; Robert Morkot and Peter James, "Dead-Reckoning the Start of the 22nd Dynasty: from Shoshenq V back to Shoshenq I," in James and van der Veen, *Solomon and Shishak*, 20–41; Ad Thijs, "From the Lunar Eclipse of Takeloth II back to Shoshenq I and Shishak," in James and van der Veen, *Solomon and Shishak*, 42–60.

³ Rohl, *Pharaohs and Kings*.

⁴ James et al, *Centuries of Darkness*; John J. Bimson, "Ramesses III as Biblical Shishak? Some Notes on the Archaeological Evidence," in James and van der Veen, *Solomon and Shishak*, 98–116.

⁵ Thijs, "Lunar Eclipse."

931–914 BC.⁶ Modern scholarship generally supports this chronology to within a few years.⁷ According to the biblical account in 1 Kgs 12–14, the Israelite kingdom split into two during the reign of Rehoboam. The northern tribes seceded and became the northern kingdom of Israel under the leadership of Jeroboam, the northern kingdom's first king. The southern tribes of Judah and Benjamin became the kingdom of Judah, which retained Jerusalem as its capital and retained the line of David as its ruling dynasty. Jeroboam established Shechem as a capital for the northern kingdom and had cultic sites set up at Bethel and Dan. In the fifth year of Rehoboam's reign, a king of Egypt whom the biblical text calls Shishak raided Jerusalem and looted the temple and the royal palace.

The archaeological record confirms that in the late 10th century BC, a fortified city was built at the site of Shechem on the ruins of a city that had recently been destroyed.⁸ It also confirms that a major cultic center was built at Dan. The cultic center included a large, open-air platform that appears to have been either a *bamah* (an outdoor shrine) or the foundation of a temple.⁹ The platform was built in the late 10th or early 9th century BC.¹⁰ Archaeological excavation to confirm the presence of Jeroboam's cultic center at Bethel is prevented by the presence of the modern city of Beitin atop the site.¹¹

An inscription of Shoshenq I from the temple of Karnak includes a long list of locations over which he claimed authority. Because several of these locations were within the northern kingdom of Israel, some scholars view the inscription as evidence that Shoshenq undertook a military campaign against Israel.¹² Among the recognizable

⁶ Gershon Galil, *The Chronology of the Kings of Israel and Judah* (Leiden: Brill, 1996).

⁷ Israel Finkelstein and Neil A. Silberman, *The Bible Unearthed: Archaeology's New Vision of Ancient Israel and the Origin of Its Sacred Texts* (New York: Touchstone, 2001); Anson F. Rainey and R. Steven Notley, *The Sacred Bridge: Carta's Atlas of the Biblical World* (Jerusalem: Carta, 2006); Israel Finkelstein, "The Two Kingdoms: Israel and Judah," in *The Quest for the Historical Israel*, ed. Israel Finkelstein, Amihai Mazar, and Brian B. Schmidt (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2007), 147 – 157; Amihai Mazar, "The Divided Monarchy: Comments on Some Archaeological Issues," in Finkelstein, Mazar and Schmidt, *Quest for the Historical Israel*, 159–179; William G. Dever, *Beyond the Texts: An Archaeological Portrait of Ancient Israel and Judah* (Atlanta: SBL, 2017).

⁸ Edward E. Campbell, "Shechem. Tell Balâtah," *NEAEHL* 4:1345 – 1354.

⁹ John C. H. Laughlin, "The Remarkable Discoveries at Tel Dan," *BAR* 7.5 (1981): 20–37; Amihai Mazar, *Archaeology of the Land of the Bible, 10,000 – 586 B.C.E.* (New York: Doubleday, 1990), 492–493.

¹⁰ Lisbeth S. Fried, "The High Places (Bāmôt) and the Reforms of Hezekiah and Josiah: an Archaeological Investigation," *JAOS* 122 (2002): 437–465.

¹¹ *ibid.*

¹² e.g. Rainey and Notley, *Sacred Bridge*, 185–189; Shirley Ben-Dor Evian, "Shishak's Karnak Relief—More than Just Name-Rings," in *Egypt, Canaan and Israel: History, Imperialism, Ideology and Literature*, ed. S. Bar, D. Kahn, and J. J. Shirley (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 11–22; Shirley Ben-Dor Evian, "Shoshenq I and the Levant: Synchronizing Chronologies," in James and van

locations on the list, Jerusalem is conspicuously missing.¹³ Although this could be viewed as evidence that the biblical account of Shoshenq's raid on Jerusalem is fictional and that Shoshenq's campaign was restricted to the northern kingdom, there are two lines of evidence that should be considered before accepting such a conclusion. Firstly, some of the locations' listings in the inscription are partly or completely obscured by damage, and it is possible that Jerusalem is among them.¹⁴ Secondly, the inscription is not a record of military action. Instead, it is a general statement of Shoshenq's dominion over the lands within Egypt's reach.¹⁵ As such, it resembles similar inscriptions of previous pharaohs, which include locations that they never attacked.¹⁶ Some scholars have interpreted a stele of Shoshenq I at Megiddo as evidence of a military victory by Shoshenq, but reexamination has shown that interpretation of the stele to be dubious.¹⁷ The stele expresses an assertion of Shoshenq's authority there but without any indication of military action.¹⁸

Support for the conclusion that Shoshenq did not attack the northern kingdom comes both from archaeological sources and the biblical account. The biblical account portrays Jeroboam as under Shoshenq's protection (1 Kgs 11:40), and a dearth of destruction layers in northern kingdom sites from the time of Shoshenq's reign (according to the conventional chronology) suggests a lack of military incursions there.¹⁹ It is therefore plausible that Shoshenq did not attack Israel, that he allowed Jeroboam to rule Israel as a vassal, and that he attacked Jerusalem as a warning to Rehoboam—who had been planning to retake Israel by military action (1 Kgs 12:21)—to abandon that plan and leave his vassal alone.

der Veen, *Solomon and Shishak*, 17–19; Yigal Levin, "Did Pharaoh Sheshonq Attack Jerusalem?" *BAR* 38.4 (2012): 43–52.

¹³ Rainey and Notley, *Sacred Bridge*, 185–189.

¹⁴ Rainey and Notley, *Sacred Bridge*, 185–189.

¹⁵ Kevin A. Wilson, *The Campaign of Pharaoh Shoshenq I into Palestine* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005), 34–65.

¹⁶ *ibid.*, 42.

¹⁷ *ibid.*, 66–74.

¹⁸ *ibid.*, 96–99.

¹⁹ Alexander Fantalkin and Israel Finkelstein, "The Sheshonq I Campaign and the 8th-Century-BCE Earthquake—More on the Archaeology and History of the South in Iron I–IIA," *TA* 33 (2006): 18–42; Israel Finkelstein and Eli Piasetzky, "Radiocarbon-Dated Destruction Layers: A Skeleton for Iron Age Chronology in the Levant," *OJA* 28 (2009): 255–274; Eisabetta Boaretto, Israel Finkelstein, and Ruth Shahack-Gross, "Radiocarbon Results from the Iron IIA Site of Atar Haroa in the Negev Highlands and Their Archaeological and Historical Implications," *Radiocarbon* 52 (2010): 1–12; Amihai Mazar and Israel Carmi, "Radiocarbon Dates from Iron Age Strata at Tel Beth Shean and Tel Rehov," *Radiocarbon* 43 (2021): 1333–1342.

Although Shoshenq I claimed authority over Israel, he did not reestablish the Egyptian Empire that had once included the southern Levant, and the known archaeological record does not indicate that he established a military presence in the highlands of Israel or Judah. However, it does show that during his reign, an Egyptian military presence was established in the lowlands west of Israel, the Beersheba Valley, and the Negev, and that this military presence persisted for decades.²⁰ Its purpose appears to have been related to an Egyptian takeover of copper mining in Edom.²¹ Israel had previously been in control of copper mining locations in Edom.²² The new Egyptian presence appears to have broken Israel's hegemony in Edom and to have replaced it with Egyptian hegemony there.²³ This is archaeologically attested by an interruption of copper production in the late 10th century (plausibly related to Israelite abandonment of the copper mining region under Shoshenq), which was followed by a resumption of copper production that was accompanied by a material culture that attests to an Egyptian presence.²⁴

When put together, the clues from archaeology and the biblical account yield a consistent picture. The archaeological record does not contradict the biblical account of the raid on Jerusalem, nor does it record a military campaign by Shoshenq I against Israel that the biblical account omits. Instead, the known archaeological record accords with the biblical account in 1 Kgs 12–14, although it provides no explicit confirmation of Shoshenq's raid on Jerusalem.

Relevant radiocarbon dates

A supporter of the alternate chronology that places the reign of Shoshenq I in the late 9th century BC has pointed out that the stele of Shoshenq I from Megiddo appears to pertain to Megiddo Stratum VA, which was thought to date to the 9th century BC.²⁵ However,

²⁰ Ben-Dor Evian, "Shishak's Karnak Relief."

²¹ Fantalkin and Finkelstein, "Sheshonq I Campaign;" Boaretto et al., "Radiocarbon Results."

²² Thomas E. Levy, Mohammad Najjar, and Erez Ben-Yosef, "Conclusion," in *New Insights into the Iron Age Archaeology of Edom, Southern Jordan: Surveys, Excavations, and Research from the University of California, San Diego—Department of Antiquities of Jordan, Edom Lowlands Regional Archaeology Project (ELRAP)*, ed. Thomas E. Levy, Mohammad Najjar, and Erez Ben-Yosef (Los Angeles: The Cotsen Institute of Archaeology Press, 2014), 977–1001; Avraham Faust, "A Social Archaeology of the Kingdom of Judah: Tenth–Sixth Centuries BCE," in *The Social Archaeology of the Levant. From Prehistory to the Present*, ed. Assaf Yasur-Landau, Eric C. Cline, and Yorke M. Rowan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 337–353.

²³ Levy et al., "Conclusion."

²⁴ Levy et al., "Conclusion."

²⁵ Rupert L. Chapman III, "Putting Sheshonq I in His Place," *PEQ* 141 (2009): 4–17.

subsequent radiocarbon dating now shows that Megiddo Stratum VA is from the 10th century BC.²⁶ Furthermore, radiocarbon dating of material from the 14-year reign of Psusennes II, the pharaoh whom Shoshenq I succeeded, shows that the reign of Psusennes II occurred in the mid-10th century BC.²⁷ These radiocarbon dates are consistent with the conventional chronology that places the reign of Shoshenq I in 943–923 BC and are inconsistent with the alternate hypothesis that he reigned in the late 9th century BC.

To be identified as the biblical Shishak, an Egyptian king must have reigned in the second half of the 10th century BC, in accordance with the biblical timeline of the kings of Israel and Judah. Radiocarbon dates of material that pertain to the reigns of Ramesses II, III, and VI are available to address this question. These radiocarbon dates place their reigns far too early for Ramesses II, III, or VI to be identified as the biblical Shishak. Material from the reign of Ramesses II is dated with radiocarbon to the early 13th century BC.²⁸ Material from the reign of Ramesses III is dated with radiocarbon to the early 12th century BC.²⁹ Additionally, material from the beginning of Philistine settlement in southwestern Canaan, which occurred during and immediately after the reign of Ramesses III, is dated with radiocarbon to the late 12th century BC.³⁰ A statue of Ramesses VI, found in Megiddo stratum VIIIB, is thought to have been buried during stratum VIIA.³¹ Both layers are dated with radiocarbon to the 12th century BC.³² Additionally, the destruction of a gate in Jaffa, connected to the withdrawal of Egyptian forces from Canaan under Ramesses VI, left remains dated with radiocarbon to the late 12th century BC.³³ All of this is in accordance with the conventional chronology of Egypt, which places the reigns of Ramesses II, III, and VI respectively in 1279–1213, 1187–1157, and 1129–1111 BC.³⁴

²⁶ Michael B. Toffolo, et al., “Absolute Chronology of Megiddo, Israel, in the Late Bronze and Iron Ages: High-Resolution Radiocarbon Dating,” *Radiocarbon* 56 (2014): 221–244.

²⁷ Michael W. Dee, “A Radiocarbon-Based Chronology for the New Kingdom,” in *Radiocarbon and the Chronologies of Ancient Egypt*, ed. Andrew J. Shortland and Christopher Bronk Ramsey (Oxford: Oxbow, 2013), 65–75.

²⁸ Christopher Bronk Ramsey, et al., “Radiocarbon-Based Chronology for Dynastic Egypt,” *Science* 328 (2010): 1554–1557.

²⁹ *ibid.*

³⁰ Lyndelle C. Webster, et al., “Preliminary Radiocarbon Results for Late Bronze Age Strata at Tel Azekah and Their Implications,” *Radiocarbon* 60 (2017): 309–331; Israel Finkelstein, “Philistine Chronology: An Update,” *IEJ* 68 (2018): 221–321; Eythan Levy, et al., “The Date of Appearance of Philistine Pottery at Megiddo: A Computational Approach,” *BASOR* 387 (2022): 1 – 30.

³¹ Aaron A. Burke, et al., “Excavations of the New Kingdom Fortress at Jaffa, 2011–2014: Traces of Resistance to Egyptian Rule in Canaan,” *AJA* 121 (2017): 85–133.

³² Toffolo et al., “Absolute Chronology.”

³³ *ibid.*

³⁴ Krauss and Warburton, “Conclusions.”

Concluding Thoughts

In 2015, supporters of alternate chronologies published a review article on radiocarbon dating, in an attempt to highlight its flaws and to cast doubt upon radiocarbon dates that support the conventional chronology of Egypt.³⁵ However, their paper also reviews the methods that current radiocarbon researchers use to overcome those flaws, including statistical measures that clarify ambiguous results, in addition to procedures that are used to prevent misinterpretations and to correct dates that are offset by technical difficulties. The authors thus did not undermine confidence in radiocarbon methodology but instead inadvertently created a publication that makes a strong case in favor of it. Another supporter of an alternate chronology pointed out that a radiocarbon calibration curve can be thrown off if its dendrochronological underpinnings include errors.³⁶ However, this is not much of a problem in the long run, because radiocarbon calibration curves are periodically replaced with updated versions that include error removals and updated dendrochronological data.³⁷ These attempts to invalidate radiocarbon dating therefore fail.

Available radiocarbon dates show that Shoshenq I reigned in the late 10th century BC and is the most likely candidate for the biblical Shishak. These data contradict the alternate chronologies of Shoshenq and the alternate identities of Shishak, revealing that the conventional view is most likely correct. Other information sources supply additional support. Astronomical data confirm the beginning of the reign of Shoshenq I in 943 BC,³⁸ and philological data confirm that an alleged etymological connection between the names Ramesses and Shishak does not survive scrutiny.³⁹ It is therefore safe to accept the conventional chronology of the reign of Shoshenq I, to accept the conventional identity of Shoshenq I as the biblical Shishak, and to abandon the alternate hypotheses and treat them as falsified hypotheses instead of giving them any further credence or consideration.

³⁵ Uwe Zerbst and Peter van der Veen, "Does Radiocarbon Provide the Answer?" in James and van der Veen, *Solomon and Shishak*, 199–224.

³⁶ Robert W. Porter, "Recent Problems with Dendrochronology," in James and van der Veen, *Solomon and Shishak*, 225–233.

³⁷ Paula J. Reimer, et al., "The IntCal20 Northern Hemisphere Radiocarbon Age Calibration Curve (0–55 cal kBP)," *Radiocarbon* 62 (2020): 725–757.

³⁸ Krauss, op. cit.; Krauss and Warburton, "Conclusions."

³⁹ Troy Sagrillo, "Shoshenq I and Šišaq: A Philological Defense of their Traditional Equation," in James and van der Veen, *Solomon and Shishak*, 61–81.