

Contextualising *bin* in the Medinet Habu Historical Inscriptions¹

Eve Guerry and Todd Gillen

Macquarie University

This article deals with three passages from the corpus of historical inscriptions at Medinet Habu in which the term *bin* (*Wb.* 1, 442.15-443.17) features prominently. The interpretation of the passages and the word can benefit from a reanalysis based on a comparison of phraseology and the (re)consideration of context. The relevant material is given below:

Year 11: 36 (KRI V, 63.14)

*pti bin im[=n] r k3i n p.t mi ʿw.t [...]*²*=sn s3 n m3i*

Year 5: 35 (KRI V, 23.9)

pti bin im=w r k3i n p.t

Year 5: 37 (KRI V, 23.13)

wr.w h3s.wt twt hr gmh bin=w

A closer look at these three sentences shows that they have been widely misunderstood and their commonality has gone unrecognised. We believe that the key to understanding lies in the proper comprehension of the term *bin* in this context. The following is an overview of the history of its translation:

[1] *Das Digitalisierte Zettelarchiv des Wörterbuches der ägyptischen Sprache*:³

Year 11: 36 “Siehe, die schlechten unter uns...wie Kleinvieh ihre Füße (?)”
[“Look, the bad (ones) among us...like small cattle, their feet (?)”].

Year 5: 35 “Sieh, es geht ihnen schlecht (?) zur Höhe des Himmels” ()
[“Look, it goes badly for them (?) to the height of heaven”]

Year 5: 37 “Die Fürsten aller Länder zusammen sehen ihr Elend”
[“The princes of all the lands together see their misery”].

[2] *Medinet Habu dictionary card archive compiled by the Epigraphic Survey of the Oriental Institute and housed at Chicago House in Luxor*:⁴

Year 11: 36 “Behold, it goes ill with [us] to the very height of the sky”

Year 5: 35 “Behold evil is among them to the height of the sky”

Year 5: 37 “The chiefs of the countries gathered, beholding their evil plight”

¹ This paper represents a point of intersection of the PhD research projects of the authors, Todd Gillen working on the Medinet Habu texts and Eve Guerry on the lexicography of words for ‘wrongdoing’.

² Verb of movement here; only the leg determinative (Gardiner D56) remains.

³ DZA 22.829.300, DZA 22.829.290 and DZA 22.829.480 respectively.

⁴ Translations are provisional and were preparatory for the Oriental Institute publication of the texts (see note 5 below). The translations given here are simply filed in the archive under the entry for *bin*. Thanks is due to the Chicago House director Dr Ray Johnson and his team for access to the archive.

[3] *Edgerton and Wilson, Historical Records of Ramses III:*⁵

- Year 11: 36 “Behold, it goes ill with [us] to the very height of heaven.”
Year 5: 35 “Behold, they were in evil case to the height of heaven”
Year 5: 37 “The chiefs of the foreign lands were assembled, beholding their misery”

[4] *Peden, Egyptian Historical Documents of the 20th Dynasty:*⁶

- Year 11: 36 “It goes badly with [us] to the height of heaven”
Year 5: 35 “See, evil was in them to the height of heaven”
Year 5: 37 “The chiefs of the foreign Hill Countries were brought together, (so) witnessing their misery”

[5] *Kitchen, RITA:*⁷

- Year 11: 36 “See, it goes badly for us, to the height of heaven”
Year 5: 35 “See, evil harried (“was with”) them to the height of heaven”
Year 5: 37 “The chiefs of foreign countries were assembled, beholding their ill-fortune”

There are several different senses offered for *bin* and a great inconsistency of translation can be observed. We can speculate that the compilers of the Chicago House Medinet Habu slips may have found inspiration for their translation of Year 11: 36 in the German “es geht ihnen schlecht” recorded in the *Zettelarchiv*, though they diverge from this interpretation in their consideration of the Year 5 attestations. The Medinet Habu slips form the basis of the Epigraphic Survey volume of translations made by Edgerton and Wilson and in this publication Year 11: 36 takes a similar form, though the two Year 5 attestations deviate significantly from the slips and from each other. Peden and Kitchen follow this tradition of translation, perpetuating the inconsistencies.

A recent translation has been offered by Jérôme Rizzo in the context of a concentrated study of the word *bin*, rather than a translation of the Medinet Habu texts. He looks only at the occurrence in Year 5: 35 and states that the term *bin* operates to express “the state of weakness of the conquered enemy”.⁸ This leads to his translation:

“Leur défaite est lourde (...) Voyez, la défaillance qui est en eux est plus haute que le ciel”.⁹

[“Their defeat is severe (...) See, the weakness¹⁰ which is in them is higher than the sky.”]

⁵ W. F. Edgerton and J. A. Wilson, *Historical records of Ramses III : the texts in Medinet Habu* (Chicago, 1936), 82, 26 and 27 respectively.

⁶ A. J. Peden, *Egyptian historical inscriptions of the Twentieth Dynasty* (Jonsered, Sweden, 1994), 47, 15 and 15.

⁷ K.A. Kitchen, *Ramesside Inscriptions Translated and Annotated V* (Oxford, 2008), 50 and 21.

⁸ “l'état de faiblesse de l'ennemi vaincu.” J. Rizzo, « Bjn : de mal en pis » *BIFAO* 105 (2005), 309.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ This translation assumes that Rizzo used “défaillance” as a synonym for “faiblesse”.

This translation comes closer to our understanding of the phrase and its success lies in the recognition that the term *bin* need not be limited to the meaning “bad”. Instead, Rizzo argues that *bin* can sometimes operate to express a state of degradation¹¹ and it is this sense that underlies the meaning of the phrases in the Medinet Habu inscriptions.

An appreciation of the wider context of the Medinet Habu attestations of *bin* is fundamental for an understanding of their meaning. The co-text of Year 11: 36 describes a battle between the King (and his forces) and the rebelling enemies of the *Meshwesh* and their allies. The enemies are overwhelmingly defeated and, preceding their final destruction, survivors flee to their clans where they frantically relate the result of the battle, rhetorically describing the power and effectiveness of the Egyptian King in battle:

hr=w m n3 gmḥ s(w) n mhw.wt=w Mntw m ḥpr rmt p3 n.ty m-s3=n h3w [hr=n] [...]=f r b3gi [36] iw=f m-s3=n mi Sth ḥr m33 P3 Sbi pti=f ḥfn.w mi snmḥ.w...

They say, namely those who have seen him, to their clans: “Montu in the form of a human is the one who is after us, falling [upon us...] his [...] for weariness. He is after us like Seth when he sees The Rebel (Apopsis). He sees hundreds of thousands like locusts...”

We can now properly contextualise the attestation of *bin* in the sentence immediately following. It occurs as part of the enemy’s acknowledgement of their powerlessness before the king and the subsequent recognition of their imminent demise:

pti bin im[=n] r k3i n p.t mi ʿw.t [...]]=sn s3 n m3iw

“Look! *bin* is in us to the height of heaven, like small cattle when they [pass] the den of the lion.”

The simile of the naive small cattle about to be devoured by the lion serves to stress the most meaningful aspect of the section: the hopeless plight of the enemies.¹² Therefore, this excerpt clarifies the sense of *bin* where the other attestations may be slightly more obscure: it expresses the notion that death is certain. In their speech, the enemies are not reflecting on the morality of their actions, but merely describing their current situation, namely their imminent ruin. In this sense the term *bin* loses its moral overtone and need not be translated as “bad” or “evil” but instead denotes impending doom.

The study of the two closely associated attestations of *bin* in the Year 5 text can take us one step further in our understanding of the concept and its implications for the reading of the text. In a similar way to the attestation discussed above, Year 5: 35 describes the rebellion of the enemies and the subsequent reaction of the king. He takes immediate military action against them and they are thereby doomed.

¹¹ Rizzo, *BIFAO* 105 (2005), 207-310. Take for example the phrase *irt.t bin.t* ‘sour milk’ in Papyrus Ebers 93.17.

¹² This calls to mind the similar English phrase “like lambs to the slaughter”.

*ḥm=f pri r-r=sn mi.tt sḏ.t gmi.t [ḥ]n[r.t] m k3k3 wmt [dnḥ] mi 3pd.w [34] m-ḥnw i3d.t st
 ḥwi m ḳni.w iri.w m ssf.y pḥd m ḥdb.yt ḥr s[nf]=sn [t3]y=w ḥry.t wdn.ti [35] n r3-
 ʿ.w=sn pti bin im=w r k3i n p.t*

His majesty went forth against them, like a flame found [sca]tte[red] in thick brush wood [and they were trapped] [34] like fowl inside a net, they were threshed as sheaves, made into ashes, laid low, prostrate in their (own) blood. Their downfall was severe, without limit. Behold! *bin* is in them to the height of the sky.

The narration in this passage relates the defeat of the enemies with colourful literary imagery, while the last three clauses are concerned with evaluating the events and communicating to the audience the magnitude and extent of their destruction. Since the interpretation correlates closely with that of Year 11: 36 in terms of context (the enemy just before their demise) and phraseology, there is no cause to justify the divergent translations offered by scholars for two attestations of the same phrase.

This interpretation holds even when the phraseology differs. Only two lines later, the term occurs again when it is said that the chiefs of foreign countries *ḥr gmḥ.w bin=w* “glimpse their demise”. At this point in the narrative the forces of the enemy have been defeated and the survivors are taken captive:

*s[p nb] ini m ḥ3ḳ r Km.t k3p.w [37] ḳrn.wt n r3-ʿ.w=sn msi m ḥ3ḳ.w dnḥ ḥr p3 sḥd.w
 wr.w ḥ3s.wt twt ḥr gmḥ.w bin=w mʿb3y.t [38] sšm.w n(.y) nsw ʿ.wy=sn pḏi nḥm.w=sn r
 ḥr.t m ib mri.w iw=w (ḥr ḏd) Imn.w-Rʿ.w p3 ntr i-wḏ s(t) [p3] nḥ n p3 ḥḳ3 [r t3] nb*
 Every remaining (person) has been brought as plunder to Egypt, hands and phalli without limit, and brought as captives, bound below the Window of Appearances. The chiefs of the foreign countries are gathered together and (now) glimpse their *bin*. As for the council of 30 and the entourage of the king, their arms are outstretched. They rejoice to the sky with loving heart(s) saying: "Amun-Ra is the god who assigns it: [the] protection for the ruler [over] every [land]."

The recurrence of the term *bin* here is not redundant repetition. Year 5: 35 describes the doomed situation of the enemies at the king's first strike, yet the enemies fall victim to a literary technique akin to dramatic irony: they do not recognise their own certain doom until they have been taken to Egypt and are “bound below the Window of Appearances” in Year 5: 37. This ignorance of the true situation also forms part of the metaphor in Year 11: 36, in which the small cattle are unaware that they are passing a lion's den. The enemies' recognition of their certain doom is a separate and noteworthy occurrence and the repetition of this motif in Year 11: 36, Year 5: 37 and Kamose line 2 (see below) indicates that it is an important ideological aspect of the texts.

The enemies' sense of dread involved in this realization is illustrated in a clear juxtaposition between the captured enemies and the jubilant Egyptians. The image of the bound hands of the captives contrasts with the outstretched arms of the rejoicing Egyptians. A more explicit comparison of emotions is made in the description of the state of dread experienced by the

conquered enemies as they “glimpse” their impending demise and the Egyptians’ state of joy described with the phrase *ib mri.w*.

This interpretation of the word *bin* can be applied outside the Medinet Habu corpus, though keeping within the “genre” of royal military inscriptions. The second stela of Kamose utilises the word *bin* in line 2, where Kamose describes the condition of the Hyksos ruler when he approaches with his army:

m33 s3=k bin mšc=i m-s3=k

Your back sees *bin* (as) my army is after you (lit. at your back)

Habachi has translated “your back sees misfortune since my army is after you”¹³ and in the explanatory notes offers two other possibilities for interpretation: “Your evil back is seen with my army after you” and “Your back is seen dangerous...as my army chasing you”.¹⁴ Elsewhere, Redford translates “Look behind you! My troops are a threat behind you” and in a footnote attached to the word “threat”, he supplements “Literally, ‘evil’.”¹⁵

The interpretation of *bin* offered for the Medinet Habu attestations above can now shed light on this difficult sentence. Though the Hyksos leader is retreating, his back, which is facing the army of Kamose, can see (i.e. ‘understand’, in the same sense as *gmḥ* in Year 5: 37) his certain demise. This shows that this particular meaning of the word *bin* is not new to the 20th dynasty context and is especially appropriate for the military context.

This discussion has shown that the three attestations of *bin* in the Medinet Habu texts share a semantic unity and thus that consistency of translation should be preserved across the attestations. Rizzo’s consideration of the term *bin* in a wider context suggests that it can convey a state of degradation and our findings confirm that this underlies the usage of *bin* in the Medinet Habu texts. Where the expression *bin im=w* occurs, it indicates that this state has taken effect and where the enemy “see” their *bin* it indicates their recognition of this state. In each case, the word *bin* indicates certain doom where the object is helpless to prevent it. These conclusions not only enhance our understanding of the sense and implications of the term *bin*, but also serve to clarify critical sections of some important historical inscriptions. We hope that they may also shed light on further attestations not discussed here.

¹³ L. Habachi, *The second stela of Kamose and his struggle against the Hyksos ruler and his capital* (Glückstadt, 1972), 32.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 33, note j.

¹⁵ D.B. Redford, “Textual Sources for the Hyksos Period”, in Oren, E. (ed.), *The Hyksos: New Historical and Archaeological Perspectives* (Philadelphia, 1997), 14 and 30, note 134.