

Usurtasen II. and his conquests

Usurtasen II. reigned for nineteen years. He does not seem to have associated a son, but was succeeded by another Usurtasen, most probably a nephew. The third Usurtasen was a conquering monarch, and advanced the power and glory of Egypt far more than any other ruler belonging to the Old Empire.

He began his military operations in his eighth year, and starting from Elephantine in the month Epiphi, or May, moved southward, like another Lord Wolseley, with a fixed intention, which he expressed in writing upon the rocks of the Elephantine island, of permanently reducing to subjection "the miserable land of Cush." His expedition was so far successful that in the same year he established two forts, one on either side of the Nile, and set up two pillars with inscriptions warning the black races that they were not to proceed further northward, except with the object of importing into Egypt cattle, oxen, goats, or asses.

The forts are still visible on either bank of the river a little above the Second Cataract, and bear the names of Koommeh and Semneh. They are massive constructions, built of numerous squared blocks of granite and sandstone, and perched upon two steep rocks which rise up perpendicularly from the river. Usurtasen, having made this beginning, proceeded, from his eighth to his sixteenth year, to carry on the war with perseverance and ferocity in the district between the Nile and the Red Sea "to kill the men, fire the crops, and carry off the women and children, much as recently did the Arab traders whom Baker and Gordon strove to crush.

The memory of his razzias was perpetuated upon stone columns set up to record his successes. Later on, in his nineteenth year he made a last expedition, to complete the conquest of "the miserable Kashi," and recorded his victory at Abydos. The effect of these inroads was to advance the Egyptian frontier one hundred and fifty miles to the south, to carry it, in fact, from the First to above the Second Cataract. Usurtasen drew the line between Egypt and Ethiopia at this period, very much where the British Government drew it between Egypt and the Soudan in 1885.

The boundary is a somewhat artificial one, as any boundary must be on the course of a great river; but it is probably as convenient a point as can be found between Assouan (Syene) and Khartoum. The conquest was regarded as redounding greatly to Usurtasen's glory, and made him the hero of the Old Empire. Myths gathered about his name, which, softened into Sesostris, became a favourite One in the mouths of Egyptian minstrels and minnesingers. Usurtasen grew to be a giant more than seven feet high, who conquered, not only all Ethiopia, but also Europe and Asia; his columns were said to be found in Palestine, Asia Minor, Scythia, and Thrace; he left a colony at Colchis, the city of the golden fleece; he dug all the canals by which Egypt was intersected; he invented geometry; he set up colossi above fifty feet high; he was the greatest monarch that had ruled Egypt since the days of Osiris! No doubt these tales were, in the main, imaginary; but they marked the fact that in Usurtasen III. the military glories of the Old Empire culminated.