

# Shasu

The **Shasu** (from Egyptian *š3sw*, probably pronounced *Shasu*<sup>[1]</sup>) were Semitic-speaking cattle nomads in the Levant from the late Bronze Age to the Early Iron Age or the Third Intermediate Period of Egypt. They were organized in clans under a tribal chieftain, and were described as brigands active from the Jezeel Valley to Ashkelon and the Sinai.<sup>[2]</sup>

Some scholars link the Israelites and YHWH with the Shasu.



Shasu prisoner as depicted in Ramesses III's reliefs at Madinat Habu

## Contents

**Etymology**

**History**

**Shasu of Yhw**

**See also**

**References**

Inline citations

Sources referenced

## Etymology

The name's etymon may be Egyptian *š3sw*, which originally meant "those who move on foot". Levy, Adams, and Muniz report similar possibilities: an Egyptian word that means "to wander", and an alternative Semitic one with the meaning "to plunder".<sup>[3]</sup>

## History

The earliest known reference to the Shasu occurs in a 15th-century BCE list of peoples in the Transjordan region. The name appears in a list of Egypt's enemies inscribed on column bases at the temple of Soleb built by Amenhotep III. Copied later in the 13th century BCE either by Seti I or by Ramesses II at Amarah-West, the list mentions six groups of Shasu: the Shasu of *S'rr*, the Shasu of *Rbn*, the Shasu of *Sm't*, the Shasu of *Wrbr*, the Shasu of *Yhw*, and the Shasu of *Pysps*.<sup>[4][5]</sup>

## Shasu of Yhw

Two Egyptian texts, one dated to the period of Amenhotep III (14th century BCE), the other to the age of Ramesses II (13th century BCE), refer to 'Yahu in the land of the Šosū-nomads' (*t3 š3św yhw*<sup>[6]</sup>), in which *yhw*<sup>[3]</sup>/*Yahu* is a toponym.



Hieroglyph	Name	Pronunciation
	<u>N16</u>	ta ("land")
	<u>M8</u>	ša
	<u>M23</u>	sw
	<u>w</u>	w
	<u>y</u>	y
	<u>h</u>	h
	<u>V4</u>	wa
	<u>w</u>	w



Egyptians beating Shasu spies (detail from the Battle of Kadesh wall-carving)

Regarding the name *yhw*<sup>3</sup>, Michael Astour observed that the "hieroglyphic rendering corresponds very precisely to the Hebrew tetragrammaton YHWH, or Yahweh, and antedates the hitherto oldest occurrence of that divine name – on the Moabite Stone – by over five hundred years."<sup>[7]</sup> K. Van Der Toorn concludes: "By the 14th century BC, before the cult of Yahweh had reached Israel, groups of Edomites and Midianites worshipped Yahweh as their god."<sup>[8]</sup>

Donald B. Redford has argued that the earliest Israelites, semi-nomadic highlanders in central Palestine mentioned on the Merneptah Stele at the end of the 13th century BCE, are to be identified as a Shasu enclave. Since later Biblical tradition portrays Yahweh "coming forth from Se'ir",<sup>[9]</sup> the Shasu, originally from Moab and northern Edom/Se'ir, went on to form one major element in the amalgam that would constitute the "Israel" which later established the Kingdom of Israel.<sup>[10]</sup> Anson Rainey came to a similar conclusion in his analysis of the el-Amarna letters.<sup>[11]</sup> If this identification is correct, these Israelites/Shasu would have settled in the uplands in small villages with buildings similar to contemporary Canaanite structures towards the end of the 13th century BCE.<sup>[12]</sup>

Objections exist to this proposed link between the Israelites and the Shasu, given that the group in the Merneptah reliefs identified with the Israelites are not described or depicted as Shasu (see Merneptah Stele § Karnak reliefs). The Shasu are usually depicted hieroglyphically with a determinative indicating a land, not a people;<sup>[13]</sup> the most frequent designation for the "foes of Shasu" is the hill-country determinative.<sup>[14]</sup> Thus they are differentiated from the Canaanites, who are defending the fortified cities of Ashkelon, Gezer, and Yenoam; and from Israel, which is determined as a people, though not necessarily as a socio-ethnic group.<sup>[15][16]</sup> (Scholars point out that Egyptian scribes tended to bundle up "rather disparate groups of people within a single artificially unifying rubric."<sup>[17][18]</sup>

Frank J. Yurco and Michael G. Hasel would distinguish the Shasu in Merneptah's Karnak reliefs from the people of Israel since they wear different clothing and hairstyles, and are determined differently by Egyptian scribes.<sup>[19]</sup> Lawrence Stager also objected to identifying Merneptah's Shasu with Israelites, since the Shasu are shown dressed differently from the Israelites, who are dressed and hairstyled like the Canaanites.<sup>[20][21]</sup>

The usefulness of the determinatives has been called into question, though; it has been pointed out that in Egyptian writings, including the Merneptah Stele, determinatives are used arbitrarily.<sup>[22]</sup> Moreover, the hill-country determinative is not always used for Shasu, as is the case in the "Shasu of Yhw" name rings from Soleb and Amarah-West. Gösta Werner

Ahlström countered Stager's objection by arguing that the contrasting depictions are because the Shasu were the nomads, while the Israelites were sedentary, and added: "The Shasu that later settled in the hills became known as Israelites because they settled in the territory of Israel".<sup>[23]</sup>

## See also

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- Habiru
- Shutu
- Midianites

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- Sparks, Kenton L., *Ethnicity and Identity in Ancient Israel: Prolegomena to the Study of Ethnic Sentiments and Their Expression in the Hebrew Bible*, Eisenbrauns, 1998, p. 108: 'If the Egyptian scribe was not clear on the nature of the entity he called "Israel," knowing only that it was "different" from the surrounding modalities, then we can imagine something other than a sociocultural Israel. It is possible that Israel represented a confederation of united, but sociologically distinct, modalities that were joined either culturally or politically via treaties and the like. This interpretation of the evidence would allow for the unity implied by the endonymic evidence and also give our scribe some latitude in his use of the determinative'.
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