

## ANCIENT EGYPTIAN WRITINGS OF IMAGINATION AND THOUGHT

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In this year of Don Quixote, as the great Knight-romancer is called in Britain, it seems not unsuitable to make some comments on the literary products of ancient Egypt, some of which might well have come from the fertile imagination of the hero of La Mancha.

Many of the non-religious texts which have survived in papyrus copies since antiquity are generally classified as 'The Literature of ancient Egyptians'. I should not wish to dispute this appellation, but I should like to raise some questions about this body of writings. The questions are very general, but may not be susceptible of simple answers. The idea of 'literature' assumes that there is a literate public, the members of which are not only capable of reading what is written, but also in the habit of reading for pleasure and instruction. The compositions to be considered are written in the cursive scripts of hieratic and demotic, and are usually composed in the forms of the Egyptians language contemporary with the time of writing, but not necessarily with the time of the events described in these compositions. In nearly all cases of surviving literary texts, the circumstances of discovery are unknown, the papyri having been excavated illicitly and made available through the antiquities trade. A kind of exception may be made of the fine and complete document containing the *Contendings of Horus and Seth* which certainly has a Theban provenance, and is now thought to have been found in the workmen's village at Deir el-Medina; and similarly the incomplete papyrus text of *Truth and Falsehood*, also part of the postulated Deir el-Medina 'library'<sup>1</sup>. To talk of libraries, however, is greatly to inflate the status of what may have been a small personal collection of copies of literary and other texts, and in no way to be compared with the deposits of religious texts held in the great temples, and the

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<sup>1</sup> For a useful assessment of possible 'libraries', see D. VALBELLE, *Les ouvriers de la Tombe. Deir el-Médineh à l'époque ramesside* (Cairo, 1985), 338f.

voluminous official archives held centrally under the control of the vizier, and in the case of Thebes held, in part at least, in the temple complex of Medinet Habu.

Why should any ancient Egyptian wish to possess a copy of a literary text or a moralistic composition of worthy thoughts?

Why indeed should any ancient Egyptian wish to make a copy of one of these texts? Probably not for the sake of preservation. The most obvious practical reason would seem to have available a reliable version of a story or a piece of wisdom literature which could be used for reference or for reading to a small audience.

Apart from the members of the Deir el-Medina community, who were unusually literate, most ancient Egyptians were unlettered -illiterate is too pejorative a word- and therefore not capable of reading a written text. But they would have been delighted to have a story read, or even just told, to them.

I SUPPOSE THAT MOST PEOPLE LIKE TO HEAR A GOOD STORY.

Listening is not a simple passive activity, even if, as so often happens, it may lead to falling asleep. A kind of cosy relationship develops between reader, or teller, and listener, which is a continuation of the pleasure young children derive from being told, or read, a story before they are tucked up for the night. Howard Carter, in one of the essays he wrote late in life, tells of his experiences in his early days in Egypt, of occasionally joining in the story-telling groups of rural Egyptians after dark around a blazing fire<sup>2</sup>. He may well have been romancing himself in retrospect. But story-telling has always been a popular form of entertaining in Near-Eastern societies -remember the life-perpetuating tales of Scheherazade in the *Thousand and One Nights* -and has always been enjoyed by those who cannot read, and by those who are too lazy to read, or like to hear a good story told by a good reader. And the pleasure is enhanced by being enjoyed along with others.

In ancient Egypt the telling of stories is well recorded, and some stories have been preserved in written form; but what has survived can represent only a small part of the range and quality of what was experienced by listeners and readers in the course of the country's long history in antiquity<sup>3</sup>. Themes tend to be religious, mythical, semi-historical, and almost without exception, imaginative and magical. A very good example of story-telling within the framework of a composition of wider extent is contained in the Papyrus Westcar dating from the Second Intermediate Period (c. 1600 BC); it is also a good example of the *mélange* of elements characteristic

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<sup>2</sup> This essay 'Summer Life at Thebes' and the tale of the «Rat and the Snake», is contained in Carter Notebook 16, 114ff, in the Griffith Institute, Oxford.

<sup>3</sup> The best collection of Egyptian literary texts in English is to be found in the three volumes of M. LICH- THEIM, *Ancient Egyptian Literature* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London, 1973-1980). An excellent, imaginative treatment of Middle Kingdom compositions is R.B. Parkinson. *The Tale of Sinuhe and other ancient Egyptian poems 1940-1640 BC* (Oxford, 1998); it contains good bibliographies for the texts translated.

of Egyptian tales<sup>4</sup>. As is often the case the papyrus lacks its beginning and its end, but it seem clear from the main content of the text that at a banquet or some other festivity during the reign of King Cheops (Khufu), the builder of the Great Pyramid, he called on his sons in turn to tell stories about the magicians and wise men who had lived in earlier times. Here then we have tales told within the framework of the whole written sequence of the Westcar Papyrus. Consider the story told by Prince Baufre about the wonderful doings of the chief lector-priest Djadjaemankh in the reign of Cheops' father Snofru. One day the king was depressed, and to cheer him up the priest suggested that he went sailing in a boat crewed by pretty girls scantily clad. And so the outing was arranged, and Snofru lay back in the boat enjoying the sight of the girls and the sound of their cheerful banter. Disaster struck! turquoise hair ornament of one of the lead rowers fell into the water and she refused to continue rowing until she got it back. No replacement would do. Again Djadjaemankh was summoned and he by magic folded back the waters of the lake and found the ornament lying on a fragment of pottery. With her little treasure restored, and the lake having been returned to its proper form, the lead rower took up her oar again, and Snofru was able to enjoy the rest of the day making merry in the company of his attractive crew. This story delighted Cheops, and he made a substantial offering to the memory of his father: one thousand loaves of bread, one hundred jars of beer, one ox and two packets of incense. Djadjaemankh was not forgotten: he was given one cake, one jar of beer, one large joint of meat and one packet of incense.

It is not possible to judge when a series of tales like those told to King Cheops was composed, or when it was first written down. In historical terms the events in the tales took place one thousand years before the writing of the Westcar Papyrus.

The language of the composition is not strictly that of the Middle Kingdom; it contains grammatical forms pointing towards the developed literary idiom of the New Kingdom. The tales of Cheops, his sons and the magicians had, probably, a long history of transmission starting possibly from as early as the high Old Kingdom; at first orally, but later written down. An early date of composition may be suggested by the content of the incomplete last story in the series, which is not attributed to a named son of Cheops. It is a mythical tale concerning the birth of three divine children destined to become the first three kings of the Fifth Dynasty. Such a tale therefore might be thought to have been composed with a political purpose in mind, to offer a magical justification for the change of dynasty and the succession of these three kings; and composed perhaps not later than the Sixth Dynasty. As a piece of state-inspired propaganda it would have lost its political significance by the Twelfth Dynasty or later; but as a good story it could remain a suitable subject for telling. In the form found in the Westcar Papyrus, the stories are in post-Middle-Kingdom Egyptian, and we shall probably never know whether they were written down on papyrus at an earlier date, and in an earlier form of Egyptian. But clearly, at some moment the text in a written form was 'edited' and rewritten in a style more comprehensible for an audience in about the sixteenth century BC.

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<sup>4</sup> In BERLIN, P. 3033; see LICHTHEIM, *op. cit.* I, 215ff; Parkinson, *op. cit.* xxiif bibliography), 102ff (translation).

Most of the surviving Egyptian stories exist in single copies written on papyrus. An exception is *the Story of Sinuhe*.

It is a composition of the Twelfth Dynasty, confirmed by its historical background. There are two near-contemporary copies, both in Berlin, one of the Twelfth-Dynasty date, the other probably of the Thirteenth Dynasty.<sup>5</sup> The text in both copies is essentially the same. There are in addition a great many *ostraca* of the New Kingdom bearing parts of the *Sinuhe* story, and also one very large *ostrakon* in Oxford with a substantial part of the whole text written in a partly garbled form. The *ostraca* versions are undoubtedly not copies to be read with pleasure, but kinds of school exercises in which a well-known text is copied out in part, possibly from memory or from dictation. They do not represent true transmission of a literary classic. Their existence, however, does suggest that the story was still known, perhaps even read to attentive audiences, seven or eight hundred years after its composition.

*Sinuhe* is a remarkable product of the early Twelfth Dynasty, a time when writers were, possibly for the first time in Egypt, able to express themselves in language which was rich in vocabulary and expressive in style and presentation. It is a text which at one time scholars were inclined to think was copied from the walls of the tomb of a real-life *Sinuhe*. It tells of a high official who, after the death of his lord King Ammenemes (Amenemhat) I, the founder of the Twelfth Dynasty, believed that he was in a danger because of his supposed involvement in some unexplained conspiracy. Fleeing to Syria, *Sinuhe* spent many years in exile, but achieving dignity and prosperity in his adopted country. To his great surprise he received a royal decree from King Sesostris (Senusret) I in which he was absolved of any improper action and summoned back in honour to the royal Court. Such a return was what *Sinuhe* had always hoped for, and he was not disappointed in his good fortune. After his return to Egypt he was favoured by the king in his daily life, and also in the preparations for his death and burial. The tale ends as a private tomb inscription might conclude: 'For no non-royal person was such ever done. I remained in the favour of the king until the day of mooring (i.e. death) came'.

No other ancient Egyptian story contains such a wealth of incident, of variations of language, with frequent inclusions of passages which are distinctly poetical; there are parts composed in a consciously grand or 'purple' manner, with high-placed phraseology, metaphor and simile. Even now, unlike so many ancient stories, it may be read with real pleasure, with no special regard for the detail of its content. It is highly likely that *Sinuhe* was composed as a written text, not just one for oral communication, and that from as early as the Twelfth Dynasty it achieved a superior status in literary terms; not quite a 'best-seller' but a story widely known and transmitted more in written form than by mouth. It is not surprising therefore that it retained such a standing in the schools, at least during the New Kingdom. It could even be characterized as the quintessential ancient Egyptian set-book for student scribes.

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<sup>5</sup> The main papyrus copies are P. Berlin 10499 and 3022. For translations and bibliography, see, Lichtheim, *op. cit.* I, 222 ff; Parkinson, *op. cit.* xviii, 21 ff.

One other Middle-Kingdom story requires special mention: the *Tale of the Shipwrecked Sailor* which may be associated in style and content with those of *The Thousand and One Nights*. It is a tale of travel, magic and mystery, and it has a happy ending. It is very much tale to be told to an eager audience gathered round a blazing fire after dark. The one surviving copy is in St. Petersburg<sup>6</sup>. The narrator tries to cheer up an associate who has just returned from a not very successful expedition, and is bothered by the prospect of a poor reception when he returns to the royal Residence. He tells of an earlier experience of his own when he took part in a well-organized expedition to the royal mines. Everything went wrong; the fleet was wrecked in a storm; all were lost apart himself who found that he had been cast on a remarkable island which had a touch of paradise in its bounty. But the lord of the island was a huge snake which, although terrifying in appearance, turned out to be very benevolent, treating the castaway with great courtesy and kindness. The snake reassures his unexpected guest by telling him his own sad story, and he encourages him that all will turn out well in the end. And so it happens. A rescue fleet arrives, and the ship-wrecked sailor returns home laden with the wonderful products of the magical island, which then disappears, never to be found again.

In the single copy of this story that has survived, the simple account of the shipwrecked sailor is related within the framework of what is presented as the historical account of the expedition into Nubia which had not been a success. It may not be unreasonable to suggest that the simple story, originally composed for *telling* to a listening audience, has been formalized and given a literary structure for *reading* to a similar audience.

Why should this have happened? For whom was it turned into literature and set down on papyrus? It was surely seen to be a very good story, and therefore worthy of being recorded. Perhaps nothing more need be said. But so much more about the composition and transmission in writing of this and other Egyptian tales is unknown.

The stories of the Middle Kingdom which have survived are generally less religio/mythically based than those which have survived from the New Kingdom.<sup>7</sup> A characteristic example, written on a papyrus of Nineteenth-Dynasty date, is ostensibly a straightforward story of rivalry and jealousy between two brothers, named Anpu and Bata. These names at once invoke Anubis, the Egyptian god of the necropolis and embalming; Bata was a lesser-known deity whose shrine at Sako in Middle Egypt lay across the river from Hardai where there was a shrine of Anubis. *The Tale of the Two Brothers* is very episodic, as if it had been composed to be read section by section over a period of successive tellings. Just as it seems to come to an end, a twist in the tale moves it forward once more. It contains divine interventions, and starts with an episode which is reminiscent of the biblical story of Joseph and Potiphar's wife: the seduction of the innocent was no doubt a popular theme in the ancient world, and very familiar to those who listened the tale. Bata, the younger brother, lived with his married brother, Anpu, and did everything for him at home

<sup>6</sup> P. St. Petersburg 1115; see LICHTHEIM, op. cit. I, 211ff; Parkinson, op. cit. xxif, 89ff.

<sup>7</sup> Papyrus d'Orbiney, P. BM 10183; see LICHTHEIM, op. cit. II, 203ff.

and in the fields. One day, returning home during the day to get more seed for sowing, Bata was propositioned by Anpu's wife but he rejected her advances. In the evening she accused Bata of assaulting her, and Anpu waited for Bata to return to kill him. Warned by a sagacious cow, Bata fled, pursued by Anpu; he was saved by the great god Re-Herakhty who laid down a pool teeming with crocodiles between the two brothers. The following day Bata told Anpu what had happened, and Anpu in fury killed his wife. Bata departed to the Valley of the Cedars. In subsequent adventures Bata was provided with a most beautiful wife by Re-Herakhty, but she caught the attention of Pharaoh, who with great difficulty had her abducted; he made her his special favourite. She advised Pharaoh to have Bata's cedar tree cut down, and Bata fell dead as a result. Meanwhile Anpu, knowing from special signs that Bata was dead, travelled to the Valley of the Cedar and after lengthy searches found a berry that had fallen from the cedar when it was cut down. When it had absorbed water it became Bata's heart.

A new episode finds Bata transformed into a great bull, which Anpu rides to Pharaoh's palace. His Majesty is delighted, and richly rewards Anpu when he returned home. Bata makes himself known to his former wife, revealing that he knows how she has betrayed him. In panic she begs Pharaoh to sacrifice the bull so that she might eat some of its liver. With great reluctance His Majesty agrees, but two drops of blood from the bull fall by the Great Gateway of Pharaoh, and quickly develop into two fine persea trees. Inevitably, one of the perseas lets the Royal Favourite know that it is in fact Bata. Again in panic she asks Pharaoh to have the trees cut down and made into fine furniture. While she watches the carpenters at work, a chip of wood flies into her mouth and she become pregnant. In due course she gives birth to a son who is the reincarnated Bata. Much loved by Pharaoh, he is eventually made Crown Prince, and after many years becomes king. Bata then calls his great officials together and tells them the story of his extraordinary adventures. His former wife, the old Pharaoh's Favourite, is then judged and, presumably, punished; no details are given. Bata reigned for thirty years, and was succeeded by his brother Anpu, whom he had Crown Prince. The papyrus text is completed by a note stating that it had been written by the scribe Ennana, who describes himself as the owner of this 'book'. Its authenticity is confirmed by the statement: 'Whoever disputes the book, the god Thoth will oppose him'.

*The Tale of the Two Brothers* is exceptionally episodic, and fantastical in its invention. It is written in a form of Late Egyptian which is more flexible than the classic Egyptian of the Middle-Kingdom, but yet more stylized than the Egyptian used in non-literary documents such as the Abbott Papyrus and other texts relating to the robberies of the royal tombs. Literary Late Egyptian was commonly used for compositions of a fictional character. Its greatest exemplar is a series of tales concerned with the traditional struggle between Horus and Seth, as to which of them should succeed to Osiris' throne. The one surviving copy is written in a very fine hand on a papyrus in Dublin which is thought to have been written within the workmen's village at Deir el-Medina<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup> Chester Beatty Papyrus I, now in the library established by Sir Alfred Chester Beatty in Dublin. For translation, see Lichtheim, *op. cit.* II, 214ff.

*The Contendings of Horus and Seth* is also very episodic, involving the discussions and debates entered into by the great god Re-Herakhty, the company of nine gods (the great Ennead), with the intervention of other deities, major and minor with various 'walk-on' roles. It is an extraordinary account of a series of events during which the gods consider the various merits of Horus and Seth, and including accounts of the trials the two claimants are subjected to, and with revelations of the surprisingly duplicitous behaviour of many of the divine participants. The gods are shown to be almost less than human because they can, when necessary, employ magic and devious means to outwit their opponents. Lying and trickery are seen to represent cleverness rather than underhand tactics. In a typical episode Isis tricks Seth. She, the mother and strong supporter of Horus, had been forbidden to join the company of the gods on an island. She deceives the ferryman, the minor god Anty, reaches the island and assumes the guise of a very beautiful woman. Seth is smitten with desire, and steals up on her and accosts her. Isis coyly answers:

«My great lord, do me no wrong. I am in great distress. I was the wife of a cowherd and bore him a son. While the boy was still young his father died, and, as was proper, he went to take control of his father's herd. At that moment a stranger turned up, and sitting at ease in the byre casually told my son that he would beat him, and turn him out of his house, and take control of the herd. That is now the position. My son is disinherited. Will you act for me on his behalf?»

Seth, of course, offers to help: 'Shall the cattle be given to a stranger, while the father's son is still alive?' As soon as he said this, Isis flew up into a tree in the form of a kite, screaming: 'Your own sense has judged yourself'. Seth realised he had been tricked, for the son was Horus and he was being disinherited by Seth himself. In fury he rushed and complained to Re-Herakhty, and Anty was punished for having ferried Isis, under bribe, to the island. Without much delay the company of gods left the island and proceeded to continue their general discussion. Then Seth said to Horus: 'Let us become two hippopotami and fight in the water. He who survives three months shall receive the throne'. Time seems to have been no object.

And so, in incident after incident, the struggles between Horus and Seth continued -eighty years is mentioned as the extent of the divine deliberations. In the end, Thoth, the god's scribe suggested sending a letter to Osiris himself, presumably in the underworld, to seek his opinion. His answer is without equivocation: he is furious that Horus, his son, has been denied his throne for so long. The company of gods immediately concur, and Horus is installed as Osiris' successor. As a consolation prize for Seth, Re-Herakhty says: 'Let him come to me, and he can thunder in the heavens and terrify men'.

Modern readers of *The Contendings of Horus and Seth* may be surprised at the casual way in which the great Egyptian gods, from the highest, Re-Herakhty, to the most modest, Anty, are portrayed. Today such treatment of a deity would surely be considered blasphemous. The ancient Egyptians, however, with their polytheistic approach to divinity -the divine may be found in every aspect or thing in life, differently manifested and lacking exclusivity -could view their deities in a much more

relaxed way that seems possible for a monotheist. Such apparent irreverence was not unusual in antiquity, as is well evident in the attitude of the Greeks and the Romans to their pantheons. Gods might be all-powerful, but they need not necessarily be blessed with the moral virtues required in mortal life. It is most probable that ancient Egyptians who read, or had read to them, stories about the scandalous and unworthy activities of the great gods, were delighted to find their divine controllers full of 'human' weaknesses, even perhaps thinking that their devotions would be better received by the morally flawed than by the ethically-charged tyrant.

One may picture the scene of story-telling: a group of men and women sitting around the reader, after a meal, comfortable and ready to be entertained. In the case of *Horus and Seth*, it might be supposed that the reader would issue a warning, as is done for films and television these days, that what he is about to read contains some material of a sexual nature, a great deal of violence, and that some episodes might offend the religious feelings of those who were inclined to be pious. However, I very much doubt that warnings would have been given. The reader would certainly know his audience and understand that among educated people (whatever that might have meant in ancient Egypt), in contrast with labourers and peasants, a degree of broad-mindedness would allow a few indecencies and impieties. From what is known about the ancient Egyptians it is evident that they were not generally prudish or strictly pious. But it is hard to generalize in matters of this kind, where the evidence is slight and capable of wide interpretation.

A composition now generally considered to be a work of fiction dates from the late Twentieth Dynasty (c. 1075 BC) when Egypt's rule was divided between the hereditary king Ramesses XI in the Delta capital Piramesse, Herihor in Thebes and Smendes in Tanis. *The Report of Wenamun* exists in a single copy, now in Moscow<sup>9</sup>.

It is written out on its papyrus, not in 'pages' as was usual for literary compositions, but down the length of the papyrus, line after line for the whole length of the roll. This, it is thought, is how an official document would have been written in the late New Kingdom, and consequently some scholars used to be believed that it represented the actual report of an historical event. The text of *Wenamun* is certainly presented by its format as being an actual report of a mission undertaken by a high official of Herihor, called Wenamun, to purchase timber in Lebanon for the construction of a sacred barque in Thebes. Although it is presented as a real report, there is doubt about its historical authenticity, just as there is about Sinuhe's account of his exile and travels. Yet there is some reason to believe that Wenamun's story was based on some real mission led by a real, historical, Wenamun to Syria. Misfortune and near-disaster spice the account of his exploits. After leaving the court of Smendes and his wife Tentamun in Tanis in the north of the Delta, Wenamun sailed to Byblos, was robbed of the funds he carried, and was badly received by the local prince who raised many objections to Wenamun's staying in Byblos, and his expectation that the timber he needed would be supplied without payment. Wenamun

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<sup>9</sup> P. MOSCOW 120; see LICHTHEIM, op. cit. II, 224ff; also especially A.H. Gardiner, *Egypt of the Pharaohs* (Oxford, 1961), 306ff.



appealed by letter to Smendes and Tentamun, who sent substantial goods and gifts to the Prince of Byblos, hoping for subsequent reimbursement from Herihor in Thebes. Eventually the required timber was provided, and Wenamun set off on his return journey. As ever in Egyptian stories, the matter did not end there. Adverse winds drove his ships to Alasiya, possibly Cyprus, where again he met considerable hostility. No doubt he again survived the difficulties there, and eventually returned with the timber to Thebes, by way of Tanis; but the end of the report is missing, and the modern reader is left in suspense with Wenamun languishing in Alasiya.

The richness of the language of *The Report of Wenamun*, which is written in the flexible, non-formal, Egyptian of the late New Kingdom, with the inclusion of much incidental colour and inventive description, suggest strongly that the composition, as it survives, is not a straightforward report, but an embellished, edited version of a genuine report of a mission to Syria. It is very different in style and content from *Horus and Seth* and *The Tale of the Two Brothers*, and the other surviving stories of the New Kingdom. Yet it does have a slight religious element in that the mission is conducted on behalf of that great god Amon-Re of Thebes, and indeed Wenamun carried an image of Amun with him. But the tone of the story is historical, and it is presented in a matter-of-fact manner, but spiced with imaginative detail.

The method of presentation used for *The Report of Wenamun* is very much more developed than that used for earlier Egyptian tales; you might say that it was written for a more cultivated audience. To some extent that might be a reasonable view, although it is a view that could be taken concerning any other Egyptian tale written down on papyrus. Once a tale is committed to writing it become fixed, established, less capable of the variation it might enjoy while it remained an orally presented piece. So, the versions which have been preserved for us on papyrus represent stages of presentation considerably removed from the supposed original spoken tales, which could be varied in the telling.

There was a marked change in the nature of the literary products dating from the last centuries of Pharaonic rule and from the Graeco-Roman Period. Texts on papyrus were then written in the demotic script, a very cursive development from the hieratic employed in earlier periods. The form of Egyptian used is also called demotic, and it represents the last stage in the writing of ancient Egyptian before the fundamental change to the adoption of an alphabetic script, now known as Coptic. Demotic is the most flexible form of the Egyptian language, and the stories written in demotic reflect this flexibility; they are further characterized by narrative influences absorbed from Greek literature.

One of main sequences of tales which has survived concerns adventures enjoyed, or suffered, by an historical personage, Khaemwese, son of Ramesses II, and for a time the crown-prince of Egypt. In his lifetime he engaged mostly in religious and administrative matters, particularly concerning the cult of the god Ptah of Memphis, and the governance of Memphis as the principal city of Egypt. Subsequently he was revered as one of the great wise men of Egypt, and his reputation was inflated in the last centuries of Pharaonic and Ptolemaic rule, generating a series of magical tales in

which he is the protagonist. In these tales he is called Setne Khamwas, the Setne deriving from one of his lifetime religious titles, *sem*-priest of Ptah. Khamwas is the form in which his name is written in demotic. The tales are highly imaginative and dramatic, and Khamwas is by no means always the hero.

In one tale, full of imagination and suspense, Khamwas went to the tomb of Naneferkaptah in the Saqqara necropolis, and by trickery made off with a precious book of magic held in the custody of Naneferkaptah and his wife Ahwere<sup>10</sup>. His father, Ramesses, knew there would be trouble, and advised him to return the book. But Khamwas refused and spent many hours studying its contents. Inevitably trouble followed. One day, walking in the court of the temple of Ptah, he spied a very beautiful lady who turned out to be a priestess of the goddess Bastet; her name was Tabubu. Through intermediaries Khamwas propositioned her, and after some negotiation she invited him to visit her in her house in Bubastis, the cult-centre of Bastet. Khamwas felt that he was close to achieving his purpose with her, but she repeatedly delayed any consummation: she proposed that their union should be legalized by his drawing up a will in her favour; then she required his children to witness the will; and then -horror of horrors- she persuaded Khamwas to kill his children. Then, when all seemed settled and they retired to her bed chamber, he woke up, finding himself in the countryside, naked and in a state of high excitement. At that very moment his embarrassment was intensified by the arrival of Ramesses II in his chariot. The king, highly amused at the discomfiture of his son, the influential priest of Ptah, advised him to return to Memphis where he would find his children alive and well. Khamwas was duly grateful, but complained: 'How can I go to Memphis with no clothes on?' Clothes were provided, he went back to Memphis where he found all was well, and, finally, advised by Ramesses he returned the magic book to Naneferkaptah and Ahwere in their tomb. He was then released from the spell that had brought him so much trouble.

The stories that have survived from ancient Egypt must represent a tiny sample only of what was written down on papyrus, and an equally tiny part of what was told orally from age to age by professional story-tellers, and in the domestic comfort of private homes. What has survived in writing also represents but a small part of the whole corpus of writing on papyrus, without including the great number of religious texts such as *The Book of the Dead*. Among the many other literary compositions that were committed to papyrus are those sometimes described as wisdom texts. Unlike the Greeks, the ancient Egyptians were not intellectually curious beyond the relatively simple consideration of human behaviour and the ways in which certain sorts of problem to be faced in life might be dealt with. They were not philosophers, and there is no indication that in the education of the young, matters which were considered to be part of a good education in the Greece of Plato and Aristotle, were ever taught. It seems just possible that the nature of the hieroglyphic script had a restrictive influence on the ways in which Egyptians thought, inhibiting the development of a reasoning capacity in the Greek sense. It is surprising that there seems

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<sup>10</sup> This story is part of the text known as Setne I, preserved in P. Cairo 30646; see Lichtheim, *op. cit.* III, 125ff.

to have been no philosophical exchange between Greek and Egyptian learned people in the years when Greeks ruled Egypt, and when Alexandria became the intellectual centre for the whole of the Greek world.

It is difficult for us to understand what was the nature of Egyptian intellectual life, and to separate the religious from the secular in the matters which concerned the clever men of ancient Egypt. It is taken for granted that the priests of the great cult centres were concerned with the study, explication and preservation of the divine traditions, and that ideas were probably never static, but ever evolving. The cult of Ptah, the great god of Memphis, is commonly cited as being more intellectually based than the other great religious traditions; but the absence of good systematic statements of the nature of the great religious traditions makes it hard to establish the depth of thinking that gave rise to these traditions, and led to their development over the centuries.

The clever religious thinkers of ancient Egypt are not known to us by name; but there did exist from at least the Old Kingdom a tradition of remembering and honouring the learned men of the past whose thoughts and sayings made up the collected wisdom of ancient Egypt. Some are known, historical, figures whose reputations lasted throughout antiquity. The most notable of these was Imhotep, the great official of King Djoser of the Third Dynasty, remembered by us today particularly as the architect, or at least prime mover behind the building of the Step Pyramid at Saqqara; but for the ancient Egyptians he was a great sage, a learned man, a physician, who in late times became deified with a minor cult of his own. Another sage by tradition, and probably also in fact, was Khaemwese, son of Ramesses II, whom we have recently met in less meritorious circumstances as Khamwas of the cycle of demotic stories.

One of the earliest collections on sayings by a sage is ascribed to Ptahhotep, entitled, Mayor of the City (probably Memphis) -and vizier, in the reign of King Djedkare Isesi of the late Fifth Dynasty (c. 2300 BC). There are several surviving partial copies of the collection, in Paris and London, dating from the Twelfth Dynasty, but some scholars believe that the text was actually composed in the Old Kingdom<sup>11</sup>. The language, however, is essentially of the Middle Kingdom, and the text as it has survived is of the Twelfth Dynasty. The composition is introduced as a presentation to the king, but it is also addressed to Ptahhotep's son as an instruction to those who are ignorant in wisdom and in the proper ways to behave suitably and profitably. The thirty-seven sections or maxims, as they are often called, cover many aspects of life, mostly those concerning relationships with others. The advice is to our present understanding remarkably reasonable, generous, sympathetic, much emphasis being placed on justice, self-control and truth. They, as is generally the case with collections of sayings (many are called 'Instructions') provide advice for a life of tranquillity and equanimity; the warrior virtues, particularly appropriate for royalty, receive no mention. The flavour of the collection may be tasted in a few excerpts:

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<sup>11</sup> The most complete text is found in Papyrus Prisse in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris. For a full translation and useful notes, see Parkinson, *op. cit.*, 246ff; for bibliography, *id.* xxviii.

«If you are a messenger between two important people, behave according to the way of him who sent you, and deliver his message precisely as he gave it. Don't provoke, making trouble between two important people by perverting the truth.»

and:

«If you are a leader listen carefully to one who pleads his case. Allow him the chance to unburden himself of what he wants to say. A man who is unhappy wants to open his heart -it is more important for him than winning his case. If a complaint is stifled, they might say, 'Why does the judge not listen?' Not everything that one wants can be allowed, but the heart is soothed at least if one is listened to.»

The overall content of an *Instruction* like that of Ptahhotep is didactic; it is in a sense a manual for good behaviour in the conduct of one's everyday life. It is not a systematic statement of ancient Egyptians morals, but there is much in it that is moralistic, and from it one can extract a fair idea of how it was seen that people should behave, even if they would rarely expect to reach the high standards recommended. Some of the *Instructions* are rather less didactic in character, but still provide fascinating insights into the ways in which problems were approached, and solution sought. It is not possible here to consider each composition closely, but some idea can be given of the range of themes found in them. *The Instruction of King Ammenemes I to his son Sesostris I* is essentially a reflection on kingship and the ingratitude which a ruler of integrity might expect to experience. Although only known from a New-Kingdom version and numerous partial copies, it is undoubtedly of the Twelfth Dynasty, although scarcely composed by the king himself<sup>12</sup>. Ammenemes I was almost certainly assassinated, and it is thought by some scholars that the text was composed at the order of Sesostris I as a condemnation of treachery.

Another Middle-Kingdom composition known only from later copies is *The Prophecies of Neferty*, in which a priest Neferty tells King Snofru of the Fourth Dynasty about terrible calamities which will befall Egypt in the centuries to come; but that in the end salvation will come through a king called Ameni, who was, of course, to be Ammenemes the founder of the glorious Twelfth Dynasty<sup>13</sup>.

A pessimistic tone of gloom and doom distinguished many ancient compositions, some of which are presented as if they were stories. Of these the most elaborate is generally known as *The Tale of the Eloquent Peasant*<sup>14</sup>. A wretched field-worker from the Wadi Natrun to the north-west of the Delta sets out to sell some of his produce in the Nile Valley south of Memphis. By trickery his donkeys and produce are confiscated by a crooked landowner, and he is obliged to appeal to the local high

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<sup>12</sup> Papyrus Millingen, now lost, contained the most complete copy of this composition; a second less complete copy forms part of P. BM 10182. There are numerous extracts preserved on writing boards and ostraca, all of New Kingdom date; see Lichtheim, op. cit. I, 135ff; Parkinson, op. cit. xxvf, 203ff.

<sup>13</sup> P. St Petersburg 116B is the principal surviving source; see Lichtheim, op. cit. I, 139ff; Parkinson, op.cit. xxiii, 131ff.

<sup>14</sup> Four Middle Kingdom papyri in Berlin (3023, 3025, 10499) and the British Museum (10274) contain between them the whole text; see Lichtheim, op. cit. I, 169ff; Parkinson, op. cit. xxff, 64ff.

steward. In nine petitions couched in high-flow language, the field-worker present his case. Gradually the high steward begins to appreciate the eloquence of the petitions, and he has them read out to King Nebkaure, who is mightily impressed. The high steward then judges in favour of the field-worker. The language of the petitions provides an excellent insight into the possibilities of the Egyptian language for rhetorical expression, and indicates the extent to which eloquent presentation was appreciated in literate society in the Egypt of the Middle Kingdom. An example from the sixth petition:

«The man who reduces falsehood promotes truth,  
 He who promotes good reduces evil;  
 Just as fullness comes, ending hunger,  
 So clothing ends nakedness.  
 As the sky is serene after a tempest.  
 Warming all who are cold,  
 As fire cooks what is raw,  
 And water slakes the thirst.  
 See then with your own eye;  
 He who arbitrates is a thief,  
 The pacifier makes sorrow.  
 He who smoothes difficulties, makes soreness,  
 He who cheats reduces justice,  
 But justice fairly offered does not reduce or exceed.»

In the end through his eloquence the field-worker triumphs. The future, however, did not seem so encouraging to the protagonist of *The Dialogue of a man with his ba (soul)*, in which a troubled man debates with his soul death and suicide. The text is preserved almost complete on a Twelfth-Dynasty papyrus in Berlin<sup>15</sup>. It is a most unusual work, a contemplation on death by someone who has found little joy in living and longs for the end to come, although probably not by suicide as has often been maintained. The task facing his soul is to persuade him of the importance and advantages of living as opposed to those of a welcome and premature death. It takes what might be considered the good standard ancient Egyptian view of death. It argues:

«If you think about being buried, it is a miserable affair. It is the inducer of tears by making a man upset. It is the taking of a man from his house and being thrown on high ground. No more will you go up and see the sun. Those who built in granite and constructed halls in fine pyramids of splendid work, when the builders become gods [i.e. after death], their stelae were neglected, just like those who died by the river for the lack of a survivor [to bury him]. The inundation has taken its toll, and so too the sun. The fish at the river's edge talk to them. Listen to me: See, it is good for men to hear. Pursue the happy day and put care aside.»

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<sup>15</sup> P. Berlin 3024; see Lichtheim, op. cit I, 163ff; Parkinson, op.cit xxv, 151ff.

The whole composition is written in elevated language, which is particularly evident in a long series of verses arranged in triplets, in which the man expresses his misery. There are three distinct sections in each of which strong repetition adds great emphasis to the poetic effect. From the first section:

«See! My name stinks,  
See! More than the stink of vultures  
On a summer day when the sky flames.»

and:

«See! My name stinks  
See! More than that of a woman (wife?)  
About whom scandal is told to a man (husband?).»

From the second section:

«To whom shall I speak today?  
The evil-doer is a close friend,  
and the brother with whom one worked is become an enemy.»

From the third section:

«Death is in my eyes today,  
Like the fragrance of the lotus,  
Like sitting on the shores of drunkenness.»

and:

«Death is in my eyes today,  
As when a man wishes to see home,  
After spending many years in captivity.»

The soul (*ba*) has the last word, pointing out that after a 'proper' death and burial they may be together forever: 'When it is the right time for you to reach the West [the land of burial], and your body returns to earth, I shall fly down [the *ba* is mostly depicted as a human-headed bird], after you have become weary, and we shall make a dwelling-place together.'

The longest and most completely composition preserved of the ancient Egyptian didactic compositions is known as *The Instruction of Amenemope, son of Kanakht*. The whole text is to be found on a papyrus in the British Museum, dated to the late New Kingdom (c. 1000 BC), but composed some centuries earlier in the Ramesside Period (Nineteenth-Twentieth Dynasties)<sup>16</sup>. It describes itself at the outset as 'The beginning of the instruction on how to live', and there are thirty chapters or sections, numbered accordingly - an unusual feature of the piece - which provide advice for his son, Hor-em-maa-kheru. Father and son were officials and devotees of the cult of

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<sup>16</sup> P. BM 10474; see Lichtheim, op.cit.II, 146ff.

Min, centred in Akhmim in Middle Egypt. The areas of life dealt with in these thirty chapters are, generally speaking, similar to those covered in earlier wisdom books, but in the case of *Amenemope* a greater degree of spirituality and piety is incorporated. Some examples of general advice:

«Desire not the dependent's goods,  
Nor hunger after his bread.  
Truly a dependent's goods are a blocking in the throat,  
They make the gullet vomit.»

and:

«Do not covet a noble's property,  
or be provident with a great mouthful of bread;  
If he places you to look after his affairs  
Hold back from what is his, so that yours will prosper.»

and:

«Do not mock a blind man, or make fun of a dwarf,  
Or make things difficult for the lame.  
Do not tease a man who is in the land of God [i.e. insane],  
Or be angry with him for his frailties.  
Truly man is clay and straw:  
God is his maker.»

From the time when this composition was first published, scholars have recognized strong resemblances between parts of *Amenemope* and passages in the Biblical *Book of Proverbs*. The very first words of *Amenemope*'s first chapter are closely paralleled in *Proverbs* xxii, 17:

A: «Give your eyes, hear what is said,  
Give your heart to understand them.»  
P: «Bow down thine ear, and hear the words of the wise,  
And apply thine heart unto my knowledge.»

Many of the ideas contained in both compositions are very similar and are expressed in similar terms, although not, generally speaking, word for word. So in *Amenemope*, chapter 23:

«Do not eat bread in the presence of a noble,  
Or use your mouth before him.  
If you have had enough, pretend the chew,  
Satisfy yourself with your saliva.»

*Proverbs* xxiii, 1:

«When thou sittest to eat with a ruler,  
Consider diligently what is before thee;  
And put a knife to thy throat, if you be a man  
Given to appetite.»

*Amenemope*, chapter 6:

«Better is poverty at the hand of God  
Than riches in the storehouse;  
Better is bread with joyful heart,  
Than riches with trouble.»

*Proverbs* xv, 16:

«Better is little with the fear of the Lord,  
Than great treasure and trouble therewith.  
Better is a dinner of herbs where love is,  
Than a stalled ox and hatred therewith.»

The parallels between *Amenemope* and *Proverbs* are not exact, or in the same sequence, and the view that the Biblical book is in part based on an Egyptian original is difficult to maintain. It is, however, reasonably evident that both texts come out of similar intellectual backgrounds, with common ideas circulating in Egypt and the Near East<sup>17</sup>. *Amenemope* may have priority in the writing down of a coherent text, but many of its maxims were current, and subsequently were included in the Biblical composition. It should be noted that large sections of *Proverbs* contain no parallels to parts of the *Instruction of Amenemope*, which in itself is a more coherent work with a distinct purpose; it is set out in its thirtieth chapter, at the end:

«Consider these thirty chapters:  
They please, they educate;  
They are first among all books;  
They inform the ignorant.  
If they are read out to the ignorant,  
He will be purged because of them.  
Satisfy yourself with them; place them in your heart,  
And become one who can explain them,  
Who explain as a teacher.»

The tradition of didacticism in Egyptian literature persisted even when the land of Egypt was exposed to the far more intellectually challenging influence of Greek philosophy. An example surviving best in a late Ptolemaic papyrus in the British

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<sup>17</sup> The debate concerning the claims for priority between *Amenemope* and *Proverbs* will no doubt be resumed from time without any finality being achieved. A useful study on certain details in both the Egyptian and Hebrew texts is R.J. Williams, 'The alleged Semitic original of the *Wisdom of Amenemope*' in *JEA* 47 (1961), 100ff.



Museum, but probably composed some centuries earlier is *The Instruction of Ankhsheshonqy*<sup>18</sup>. The text is long and starts, characteristically, with an account of the supposed historical background to the series of aphorisms written down by Ankhsheshonqy for his son while he languished in prison for his inadvertent association with a plot to assassinate Pharaoh. Ankhsheshonqy states that he wrote down his precepts on potsherds from the jars of diluted wine he was served. There seems to be no real organization in the arrangement of the contents, each aphorism occupying one line in most cases. The consequent effect is that of his having jotted down his words of wisdom as they occurred to him:

«Do not send a poor woman on some business of yours; she will pursue her own.

Do not long to be at home so that you can drink beer there at noon.

Do not fail to serve your god.

Do not take up with a woman whose husband lives, lest he become your enemy.

You may fall over your foot in the house of an important man, but don't fall over your tongue.

Every person obtains property, but it is a clever man who knows how to look after it.

If you find your wife with her lover, take a bride (mistress?) who will suit you.

Do not turn to your brother if you are in difficulties; turn to your friend.

No one who deceives is not himself deceived.

A cat that loves fruits hates him who eats it.

Do not take up a matter if you cannot take up its conclusion.

Do not make friends with a merchant; he exists by taking his cut.»

The *Instruction* contains a great deal of practical advice for the management of life generally. It is less strictly didactic than earlier compositions, and it is so long -24 pages (i.e. panels of writing) each of 23-25 lines -that it may be questioned whether anyone put to read it would ever have the patience to get to the end. Such helpful manuals seem to have taken the place of earlier *Instructions*; another long example is contained in Papyrus Insinger in Leiden, a text written down in the first century AD<sup>19</sup>.

It and *Ankhsheshonqy* represent the last stage of the expounding of ancient Egyptian wisdom.

This brief survey of what I have called writings of imagination and thought does not, of course, cover the whole range of ancient Egyptian writings which were not distinctly religious or funerary, or composed for administrative, business or social purposes. There is a small body of love poetry which should never be neglected; the-

<sup>18</sup> P. BM 10508; see Lichtheim, op. cit. III, 159ff.

<sup>19</sup> See Lichtheim, op. cit. III, 184ff.

re are letters and scribal exercises (some of which are composed in high-flown language); there are monumental texts which, like the accounts of the Battle of Qadesh, have been carefully written. It seems clear that the scribe, the *literato* of ancient Egypt, could rarely resist improving or embellishing what he was required to write, by varying his grammatical constructions, and the use of unusual vocabulary. Whether one should characterize what has survived in the form of stories and moralistic writings as great literature is difficult to maintain; but it is what has survived from a culture that lasted for three millennia; it is the best we have by which we can judge. Yet it is a matter of great satisfaction that some small remnant of what must have been a huge literary output has survived. May the illicit diggers who were responsible for the discovery and survival of this small remnant, have further successes in future times.