

I. AUTOBIOGRAPHY IN THE OLD KINGDOM : THE BASIC FORMS

Throughout its history, ancient Egyptian society distinguished two realms : the realm of the king and the realm of the non-royal, or "private" person. Though wholly interwoven, the two realms remained distinct in all manifestations of social and cultural life, so that all works of art reflected the one or the other realm.

The autobiography was a product of the private realm. Royal inscriptions, though often containing first-person royal speeches, did not assume the form of autobiography. For the king represented the nation as a whole, and in a manner so sacral, stylized, and surrounded by ceremonial as to preclude autobiographical self-presentation. This is not to say that a king's individual personality did not affect his administration; it clearly did. Nor have I forgotten the two texts of "royal instructions" (Instruction to Merikare, Instruction of Amenemhet) which contain autobiographical elements. But they were tracts of political propaganda composed by court writers in the form of royal testaments — a distinct genre which in Egypt did not have a sequel but reappeared in hellenistic and medieval times as *speculum regum*. One may view them as partial exceptions to the general rule here formulated : Egyptian kings did not have autobiographies; private persons did.

The Egyptian autobiography evolved in the inscriptional program of the private tomb. It was born in the desert cemeteries near the capital of Memphis, where rows of private tombs, erected by royal permission, surrounded the royal pyramids. From rudimentary beginnings in the Fourth Dynasty there evolved during the Fifth and Sixth Dynasties a distinct genre of self-presentation in which the tomb owner, by narration and declaration, recorded the essential aspects of his life and person which he wished to perpetuate. The self-presentation was built around two themes : his career with its high points, and his moral personality. Before the rise of this verbal self-presentation, the tomb had already contained the image of its owner carved in relief, and a prayer for offerings and a good burial. These were now joined to the autobiographical statements and rounded off by a "warning to visitors" not to desecrate the tomb.

During the Sixth Dynasty, the prayer for offerings ("offering formula"), the self-presentation, and the "warning to visitors" were expanded and closely interconnected, until they formed an integrated presentation of a person, his

career, and his needs in the hereafter. The "offering formula" kept growing, encompassing ever more wishes for an abundant afterlife; and as an offshoot it produced the "appeal to the living", an address by the tomb owner to the living generations who would "pass by his tomb", asking them to perform an offering for him, or, if they had nothing, to recite the offering prayer.

Though the two can be combined, the "appeal to the living" must not be confused with the "warning to visitors". The latter was a prohibition accompanied by fierce threats of punishment, while the former was a request for gifts, often enhanced by a promise of benefactions which the deceased, who is now a potent spirit in the necropolis, will bestow on those who offer to him.

The two main themes of the autobiography — a man's career and his moral personality — stemmed directly from the tomb owner's position in life. Only members of the royal administration could afford to build tombs, and their owners' standing with the king was the principal factor of their careers and their lives. If an official's life spanned the reigns of several kings, his autobiographical narration often showed a chronological scheme by which his progression from youth to old age, and from small beginnings to major rank, was correlated with the sequence of reigns. In any event, the effective and devoted performance of royal commissions, and the rewards obtained by the king's "favor" were the major topics of autobiographical narration.

The presentation of the moral personality, as befitted its nature, was declaratory rather than narrative. Moreover, newly coined phrases, narrative or declaratory, soon became stereotyped by repeated use :

I have come from my town,
I have descended from my nome,
having done justice (*maat*) for its lord,
having contented him with what he loves :
I spoke truly (*maa*), I did justice (*maat*),
I spoke the good, I repeated the good,
I held on to rightness so as to stand well with people;
I judged two parties so as to content them,
I rescued the weak from one stronger than he as much as I could;
I gave bread to the hungry, clothes <to the naked>,
I ferried the boatless;
I respected my father, I pleased my mother,
I brought up their children.

(Urk. I, 198f.)

When such assertions had become formulaic and were repeated with variations in tomb after tomb, the modern reader is likely to doubt their veracity. But such doubt is beside the point. What matters is that the inherent moral values had been recognized and formulated, and were respected not only by the officials who inscribed them in their tombs but by society at large. For these values were not remote ideals preached by saints, only to be

disregarded in the real world. They were practical, every-day values, arrived at by people who, living together, had understood the mutuality and interdependence of human relations.

There was evidently also a cosmic dimension to this sense of interdependence, a feeling that man lived in an ordered universe controlled by divine powers. A name had been given to this "order" — *maat* — but as yet little was said about it, beyond stating that "doing *maat*" pleased the god.

I stress the pragmatic and common sense nature of ancient Egyptian morality, because in German egyptological parlance the moral self-presentation of the tomb owner is called "Idealbiographie", a term which seems to me misleading, for it conjures up the dichotomy of "ideal" versus "real". There is, fortunately, no equivalent English term, hence I call the thing in question "the moral self-presentation", or "the moral profile", or "the self-laudation". Self-laudation it certainly was, but observe that the values professed here, far from being remote ideals, were precepts that any well-intentioned person could fulfill.

The five tomb inscriptions that follow here, though a small sample, will suffice to illustrate the growth of the autobiography during the Old Kingdom.

(No. 1) The texts of **Hetep-her-akhet**, from his Fifth Dynasty Saqqara tomb, show the rudimentary autobiography and its place in the inscriptional program of the tomb. The visitor is faced by two inscriptions carved in vertical columns on the façade, to the right and left of the entrance, each accompanied by the standing relief figure of the tomb owner. The architrave above the entrance is inscribed in horizontal lines. The two vertical and symmetrical texts are the bipartite autobiography, and the horizontal architrave inscription is a version of the offering formula.

The inscription on the left side declares that the tomb was its owner's rightful possession, that the workmen who built it had been paid liberally, and that its owner was an honorable and honored royal functionary. His titles indicate that his tasks were judicial ones.

The inscription on the right elaborates. The tomb was built in a clean place where no other burial had been. Visitors who desecrate it would incur divine judgment. The tomb was built by royal permission, and its sarcophagus was a gift of the king.

This bare-bones self-presentation is surmounted by the offering formula on the architrave. In its commanding position, the offering formula is the effective ritual complement of the self-presentation.

In addition to the façade, the other focal point of tomb inscriptions was the false door in the rear of the tomb chapel. The false door of Hetep-her-akhet (not translated here) is inscribed with : the full list of his titles; the offering formula in two parallel versions; the prayer for offerings on specified feast days, also in two parallel versions; and the offering list.

All together, the façade texts and the false door texts constitute the main textual program of the tomb (the minor elements being the legends accompanying the relief scenes). Jointly, they convey the two interlocked aspects of autobiography : the presentation of the successful and honorable person, and the ritual utterances designed to maintain his existence in the hereafter.

(No. 2) The inscriptions from the Giza tomb of the architect **Nekhebu** are a good example of the full-fledged autobiography in the Sixth Dynasty. Inscribed vertically on the jambs of the doorway leading into the tomb chapel, the texts are two parts of unequal length. When found by Reisner, the door jambs were a pile of debris in a ruined chapel. Assembled, the longer right-hand text went to Cairo and the shorter left-hand one to Boston.

In the left-hand text, Nekhebu presents himself as an official of King Meryre Pepi I, by whose commission he carried out three building projects. The longer right-hand text elaborates. In a pleasing personal vein it describes the stages of his career from common mason to chief royal architect, and his previous training under, and service to, his elder brother. Thereafter, in a smooth transition, the concluding section outlines Nekhebu's "moral profile" and ends with an emphatic tripartite "appeal to the living" integrated with "warnings to visitors". Here then the career narrative has evolved and the moral and ritual parts are adeptly fitted in.

With regard to parallel and symmetrical inscriptions on false doors it has been observed that often a better sense is obtained if the left-hand texts are read before the right-hand ones. In his review of Moussa-Altenmüller, *The Tomb of Nefer and Ka-hay*, H.G. Fischer remarked : "The sequence followed on the false doors does not, however, follow the logical arrangement used by Gunn (*Teti Pyramid Cemeteries*) or Borchardt (*Denkmäler des AR, CG*) in which the left side takes precedence over the right"⁽¹⁾. When it comes to symmetrically arranged bipartite texts on façades or door jambs, as are those of Hetep-her-akhet and Nekhebu, the question which side to read first should also be considered. In *Urk. I*, Sethe placed left before right for Hetep- her-akhet but not for Nekhebu, though in the latter case the logical build-up from left-hand to right-hand text is very clear, and Dunham observed it. Elsewhere, for instance in our source no. 5 (*Pepiankh the Middle*) the bipartite autobiography on the tomb façade is more coherent when read from right to left. And the precedence of right over left has recently been advocated by Edel with regard to the Siut tomb inscriptions⁽²⁾. In sum, the textual layout should always be considered.

(1) *BiOr* 31 (1974) 66-69. The remark in the article "Scheintür" in *LÄ V*, 567, "sind die Titulaturen unterschiedlich, so tragen die rechten Pfosten die bedeutenderen", is inconclusive regarding their sequence. See now Strudwick in *GM* 77 (1984) 35-49.

(2) Edel, *Siut*, pp. 20, 157 & 164.

(No. 3) The autobiography of **Pepinakht** with the "good name" **Heqaib** takes us to Egypt's southern border at Elephantine, where a succession of royal officials had carved their tombs into the hillside on the westbank, opposite Elephantine island, at a spot now called Qubbet el-Hawa. The titulary of these nobles consists, on the one hand, of courtly titles derived from their being in attendance at the Memphite royal residence, and on the other, of titles and epithets indicating their role as guardians of the southern border and leaders of expeditions into Nubia. The principal title designating an expedition leader was *mr-ʿww*, "overseer of scouts", the term *ʿww* being variously rendered as "interpreters, foreigners, scouts", etc.⁽¹⁾

The tomb of Pepinakht-Heqaib is flanked on the north by that of his son Sabni, and on the south by the tomb of Harkhuf, the most famous of the Elephantine nobles, owing to his detailed autobiographical reports of expeditions into Nubia. These took place prior to the time of Pepinakht, when relations between Egypt and the Nubian chiefs were still peaceful. In Pepinakht's day relations had soured, and he was sent on a punitive expedition and a subsequent pacification. These campaigns along with a foray against Asiatic nomads are the principal topics of his narration. There is nothing in his brief autobiography that accounts for his posthumous fame : his being deified and worshipped in a sanctuary on Elephantine island during the Middle Kingdom. It was the discovery of the tomb of his son Sabni that established the identity of Pepinakht-Heqaib with the sanctified Heqaib of Elephantine island; and it looks as if his magnified worship was inaugurated by his sons⁽²⁾.

(No. 4) The tomb of **Sabni**, discovered in 1947/48⁽³⁾, is linked to that of his father Pepinakht-Heqaib by a hall with relief scenes showing the worship of the deceased Pepinakht-Heqaib. The main interest of Sabni's own brief autobiography lies in his report of having built two barges on Nubian soil (in Wawat) in order to transport two big obelisks north to Heliopolis. To accomplish the building project he took with him two companies of soldiers and had them guided by "scouts" (*ʿww*) who were evidently Nubians.

(No. 5) The autobiography of **Pepiankh the Middle** takes us to Qus, the metropolis of the 14th nome of Upper Egypt, where the finely decorated rock tombs of Meir memorialized a sequence of high officials of the Old and Middle Kingdoms. Following after a lengthy titulary, Pepiankh's autobiography singles out his two principal titles : he was high priest of Hathor of Qus and a magistrate (*sr*). Declaring that he had reached the age of

(1) See now Ward, Index, nos. 59-59a & 591.

(2) See now the sumptuous publication : L. Habachi (†), The Sanctuary of Heqaib (DAI Abt. Kairo, Archäolog. Veröff. 33 = Elephantine IV) 2v. Mainz 1985.

(3) The tomb has not yet been published, and it must not be confused with the long-known tomb of another Sabni, which is Qubbet el-Hawa No. 26. The new Sabni's brief autobiography, discussed here, is available in preliminary publications.

one hundred years, he looks back with pride on a good life filled with many years of honorable public service. His account combines declarations of righteousness with the narration of specific incidents of his career. And the formulaic declarations are the particular ones in use to characterize the fair-minded and successful magistrate ("I judged between two parties so as to content them", etc.). Thus his moral profile is fully integrated with the narration of his actual career.

1. Tomb inscriptions of Hetep-her-akhet

Leiden Museum, from Saqqara
Fifth Dynasty

Boeser, Beschreibung I, 11 ff. & pl. v; Urk. I, 49-51; Mohr, Hetep-her-akhti, 33-35.

The three texts are inscribed on the façade of the tomb : on the architrave above the entrance, and on the two sides of the entrance, where each accompanies the standing relief figure of the tomb owner.

On the Architrave

3 lines & 3 short cols.

(1) An offering-that-the-king-gives (and) an offering-that-Anubis-gives, he who is before the divine booth, the lord of the sacred land : be he buried in the necropolis, in good old age, near the great god.

(2) An offering-that-Osiris-gives, the foremost of Busiris, the lord of Tawer : may he walk on the good ways on which the honored ones walk.

(3) A voice-offering for him on the New Year's feast, the Thoth feast, the First-of-the-year feast, the *Wag* feast, the Sokar feast, the Great feast, the Flame feast, and the Procession-of-Min feast.

(cols.) The Senior Elder of the Portal (*s3b smsw h3yt*), the Priest of Maat (*ḥm-ntr M3't*) Hetep-her-akhet (*Htp-ḥr-3ḥt*).

Left of Entrance

4 long & 6 short cols.

(1) The Senior Keeper of Nekhen (*s3b iry Nḥn*) Hetep-her-akhet, he says :

I made this tomb by my very own means,
I never took the property of anyone.

(2) All persons who worked at it for me,
they worked praising god for me greatly for it.
They worked this for me (3) for bread, for beer,
for clothes, for ointment, for much barley and emmer,
I never did anything (4) by force against anyone.