

## Problems of ancient Egyptian literature: a concise introduction

### Preservation

From ancient Egyptian texts in general, including literary texts, only fragments have been preserved (estimates speak of units or even mere fractions of percent). This does not mean that we cannot theorize or generalize, but it does mean that we must be cautious and aware of this fact.

### Dating

Many Egyptian literary texts have survived in later copies. Since their authors are often not mentioned, or the texts are attributed to significant figures whose authorship is disputed, it is not always easy to determine the period from which a given text originates. Each text must be studied individually, and here are some examples:

- The **Instructions of Ptahhotep** is attributed in the text's introduction to the vizier of the 5<sup>th</sup> Dynasty, Djedkare Isesi's Ptahhotep. The instruction has been preserved in four copies, two from the New Kingdom and two from the Middle Kingdom (including a complete version, the Prisse Papyrus). Scholars today mostly agree on dating it to the Middle Kingdom, but valid opinions still exist that it comes from the Old Kingdom (Stauder 2013: 108 with references to relevant literature).
- The **Westcar Papyrus** is preserved in a single manuscript (pBerlin 3033). It is usually dated to the Second Intermediate Period, but according to some views, it may come from the New Kingdom (Stauder 2013: 110 with references to further literature). The events of the papyrus take place at the court of the 4<sup>th</sup> Dynasty king Khufu (Kheops), but the text is clearly much later. Dating ranges from the 13<sup>th</sup> Dynasty to the beginning of the New Kingdom.
- The **Prophecy of Neferti** is preserved in the oldest copy from the mid-18<sup>th</sup> Dynasty. Previously, it was automatically assumed to be a text legitimizing the rise of the 12<sup>th</sup> Dynasty and reflecting the confusion of the First Intermediate Period (see *Theoretical approaches to Egyptian literature* below). Today, opinions on its dating vary, often suggesting the beginning of the New Kingdom (Stauder 2013: 337-433).

### Performative Literature

Egyptian literature was perceived very differently from the way we are used to in modern society. Silent reading "for oneself" did not exist (or was very rare); literary texts were recited or read aloud, and each such "performance" of a literary text took place in a specific context of time and place, and was undoubtedly interpreted differently by various reciters. Even this seemingly banal fact should be kept in mind when studying ancient Egyptian literature.

### Theoretical Approaches to Ancient Egyptian Literature

The **early phase** (until the late 1970s) dealt with texts loosely, without attempting a clear-cut definition of literary texts. Literary texts were considered direct sources for the history of ancient Egypt - for example, Neferti and other "lamentations" were used to describe the situation in Egypt during the First Intermediate Period, and they were dated based on the era they were supposed to describe.

The **first definitions** came at the end of the 1970s from Jan Assmann (“Der literarische Text im alten Ägypten. Versuch einer Begriffsbestimmung”, in: OLZ 69, 1974, 118-126). According to Assmann, “cultural” texts served some social purpose, whereas “literary” texts were pure literature, having no direct practical use, no association with any ritual, magic, etc.

Of the **modern definitions**, the most interesting approach is by Antonio Loprieno (“Defining Egyptian Literature”, in: A. Loprieno (ed.) *Ancient Egyptian literature: history and forms*. Leiden: Brill, 1996, 39-58), which is based on three criteria: fictionality, intertextuality, and reception.

## **Genres**

The issue of genres in ancient Egyptian literature is complicated and closely related to the definition of literature as a whole and theoretical approaches to it. Here is a brief overview of the genres in ancient Egyptian literature:

- Stories and “novels” are generally included in literature, although they can also be “functional” and contain other genres.
- Didactic literature, instructions, and “lamentations” explain the functioning of Egyptian society and its norms (or the reversal of these norms).
- Poetry, love songs, and harpers’ songs are often cited as typical examples of Egyptian “entertainment” literature, although they may be cultic and either codify or question norms.

Genres on the edge of literature:

- Autobiographical texts are tied to the tomb or stela of their owner but were widely read, reflected upon, and handed down in quotations from later texts.
- Royal inscriptions represent a more official version of non-royal autobiographical texts.
- Religious texts, which can also be considered literary based on certain criteria:
- Pyramid Texts, Coffin Texts, and the Book of the Dead are extensive bodies of religious texts of various kinds. Most of them are of a ritual or magical nature and presuppose extensive knowledge of Egyptian religious beliefs, making them mostly practical in nature.

## **Recommended reading**

PARKINSON, R. B. *Poetry and Culture in Middle Kingdom Egypt: A Dark Side to Perfection*. London: Equinox, 2010.

PARKINSON, R. B. *Reading Ancient Egyptian Poetry: Among Other Histories*. Chichester, U.K.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009.

POSENER, Georges. *Littérature et Politique dans l'Égypte de la XIIe Dynastie*. Paris: Champion, 1956.