

## Egyptian non-fiction

**Religion** Religion permeates the texts of non-fiction remaining to us from ancient Egyptian writing. The losses of these texts greatly outweigh the survivals, for the heavy reliance on papyrus, for text preservation, inevitably led to great loss of material—although what was left inscribed onto marble was there to stay; and yet from the mid third millennium B.C.E., to the end of the classical era, there remains a steady stream of surviving religious texts.

**Pyramid and Coffin Texts** The earliest (2350-2150 B. C. E.) of these texts (or inscriptions) are the pyramid and coffin texts which are customarily found on pyramid hallways or coffin chambers at the Temple Complex of Saqqara, and which preserve for us a rich variety of hymns and praise songs. The thrust of many of these texts is the same: the texts appear in the tombs of Pharaohs, and provide exhortation, to the deceased monarch, to take his highly commended soul-path upward to the gods. The texts themselves are rhythmic and incantatory, and in many cases dictate steps in ritual practices carried out by the monarch-worshipping priests.

**The Book of the Dead** *The Book of the Dead* (1550-50 B.C.) , like the early pyramid texts though at a substantially later time in language and cultural attitude, is also a map for the soul en route to god. Unlike the three step itineraries prescribed for the Pharaoh on his way to god, the *Book of the Dead* serves as a kind of GPM for the ordinary man or woman, providing an itinerary for reaching ever higher stages of the ascent to Elysium. By the first millennium B.C.E., *The Book of the Dead* was in many 'middle class' homes, part of the religious buzz of the culture. (One might compare the rampant popularity of John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*, pub. 1678, which was also a map for getting to the right hand of God, and greatly popular.)

**Hymns** A number of priestly hymns are preserved, dating from a wide span of years: during some eight hundred years from the start of the second millennium B.C.E., we have sizeable portions of the hymn devoted to the annihilation of the serpent of chaos, who inhabits the underworld, of the hymn celebrating the cosmic passages of the god Osiris, 'the lordly noble at the table of the nobles,' the God of life itself, and of the monotheistic hymn to the Sun, *The Hymn to Aten*, attributed to the daring monotheist Akhnaten. These hymns are eloquent praises of the Gods as powers of nature, sun, reproductive energy, air and sky.

**Instruction for Merikare** A final text, in this thumbnail summary, is *The Instruction for Merikare* (2025-1700 B.C.E.), a paternal guide to his son, concerning the successful administration of peoples, whether foreign or of your own stock. Decent treatment of subordinates is of high importance here, as are giving and receiving loyalty, and personal self-discipline. This set of instructions can remind us of Lord Chesterfield's dignified and canny letters to his son in the 18th century.

## Readings

Schulz, R; Seidel, M., *Egypt: The World of the Pharaohs*, Cologne, 1998.  
Hart, George, *Egyptian Myths, Legendary Past*, Austin, 1997.

## Discussion questions

Scribes played an important role in supporting written communication in Ancient Egypt. What was the professional status of the scribe, at different periods in the development of Egyptian culture? Was there, at any point in this development, something like a 'book publishing industry'?

We have called the texts considered above 'non-fiction.' With us, today, 'non fiction' is usually taken to mean 'documentary,' 'information-based.' Is that at all the sense of non-fiction, as we apply it here to ancient Egyptian literature?

Does the ancient Egyptian hymn resemble the hymn of modern religious traditions? What religions or cults have particularly relied on hymns as part of their worship?