

# ANCIENT EGYPT – Cultural History

## OVERVIEW

**Historical isolation of Egyptian culture** Religion, art, and science converged, in ancient Egypt from the third through the first millennium B.C.E., to create a coherent culture capable of leaving its distinctive mark on future civilizations. While that mark is distinctive and forceful, the Egyptian contribution to the West was only indirectly transmitted to our contemporary world; unlike the Greco-Roman tradition. That tradition undergirds our systems of law, political organization, artistic and philosophy, while the Egyptian tradition had no direct channel (like the western Middle Ages and Renaissance) through which to pass to the major cultures of the Europeanized, and now Americanized, West.

**Art** Distinctive in appearance, spiritual in intent, and overwhelming as masterpieces of ancient technology, the major works of Egyptian Art are the culture's eternal demand on our attention. The Great Pyramids of Gizeh, constructed around 2500 B.C.E. in the middle of the desert, were homes for three great Pharaohs, places from which their souls could begin their journeys to the Other World. Around the coffins of those pharaohs the Egyptian architect constructed imperishable monuments, on which the world could gaze while contemplating its own preparations for passage upwards. Pyramids became, in fact, living museums in which interior and exterior relief carvings, often brilliantly painted, elaborate sculptures (often of the deceased monarch), and depictions of dancers and musicians all conspired to create a kind of showplace for the greatness of the Egyptian aesthetic sense.

**Religion** As the above on pyramids would suggest, religion and art were intimately intertwined in the Egyptian experience. The art museum of the Great Pyramid was at the same time the treasured home of the body of the deceased Emperor, in whose honor the pyramid was constructed—though only after lengthy planning, which involved not only architectural genius but the immense labor of preparing and transporting/dragging the gigantic limestone and marble building blocks for the temple. Nothing short of deep religious faith can have provided the primal spark for this blaze of effort—or rather nothing short of the whip, for slave labor was the essential ingredient in the greatest of the pyramids.

**Science** The Pyramids, *mastabas*, step-pyramids—all these works of architectural genius, that dot the sands of Upper Egypt til today—are evidence of prodigious scientific understanding—precise, massive, dramatic. Students of ancient Egypt are to this day unsure of the skills employed to transfer heavy materials, to relief-carve in limestone, to master arches and lintels which bear immense weight, and above all to raise and place the slabs, staircases, and interior chambers of the pyramids. The required knowledges of math, physics, and even astronomy—for the cardinal points positioning of the temples—were stupendously refined. Why hesitate, in view of this diversity of skills—to include the Egyptians' advanced achievements in dentistry, paper manufacture, and the ability to brew a good strong beer?

## Readings

Bierbrier, Morris, *The Tomb Builders of the Pharaohs*, New York, 1984.

Nicholson, Paul T., et. al., *Ancient Egyptian Materials and Technology*, Cambridge, 2000.

## Discussion questions

What does it say about the technological skills of the ancient Egyptians, that they both mastered the construction of the pyramid, and invented the first effective toothpaste and toothbrush?

Would it be correct to say that Egyptian culture influenced the modern West chiefly through its effect on Judaism, and the Judaeo-Christian tradition? How would that influence have taken place? Along what channels?

Who brought the stone materials into the desert, to serve as construction materials for the great pyramids of Gizeh? Were these hired manual laborers? Where did they come from? Were they paid, or were some of them unpaid slaves?

## SCIENCE

**Ancient and modern in science** The great discoveries of Western science, in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, followed by the technology revolutions of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, rapidly established the impression that science and even the scientific attitude were products of fairly recent western society. The fact is, of course, that both in Asia and the West studies of the natural world, and of the uses to which we can put it, were widespread, and of value and interest to their people. In some instances—say in mathematics and astronomy—the discoveries made in antiquity were to be influential in shaping western scientific skills.

**The Egyptian achievement** The scientific discoveries of the ancient Egyptians have on the whole remained part of what we greatly admire about those people, and about their ability to build a classical civilization. For historical reasons—the channels by which historical know how passed from the classic civilizations to our modernity—the achievements of the Egyptians remain to us as a source of awe and inspiration, rather than as a functioning element in post 17<sup>th</sup> century Western scientific thinking. That awe and inspiration, however, sustain and stimulate us.

**Engineering** We marvel today at the magnitude of the Pharaonic pyramids, and the brilliant engineering of them after a long haul of stone blocks for hundreds of miles. Even more daunting, than the materials transportation issue, has to have been that of elevating the heavy materials, for the pyramid construction, from ground level to the upper levels of the completed structure. The stepped pyramid of Zoser, 2600 B.C.E., consisted of six levels, and rose to over 200 feet; ‘the oldest sizable stone structure in the world.’ The Great Pyramids of Gizeh were initially cut from the cliffs on the eastern bank of the Nile, then floated across the river during the annual floods, and dragged up temporary ramps to their pre-arranged positions. ‘The oldest and largest of the pyramids, that of Cheops, consisted of 2.3 million blocks, each averaging 2.5 tons in weight.’

**Medicine** Egyptian achievements in medicine are amply documented for us by a large number of medical papyri, which record the Egyptians’ considerable knowledge of the human body and of its ailments. The first Medical School was in operation in the early third millennium B.C.E., headed by a woman doctor; the first successful surgeries—2700 B.C.E.—were carried out not much later. Reading the papyrus literature we are startled by the list of ailments—the whole catalogue—for which medicines and treatments are prescribed.

**Mining** The Egyptians developed effective mining operations along the Nile, in copper and gold, and even, in the late period, iron. (The working conditions in the mines were dreadful, a one-way ticket to death.)

**Agriculture** In agriculture, the Nile itself was permitted to be the great regulative planter, guaranteeing, from its alluvial flood plains, an abundance of fruits and vegetables. Skillful arrangements of irrigation channels, and of shaduf-like devices for water transfer, from one level or basin to another, combined to assure the most precise possible control over the river—which did its part by flooding on the same day every year.

**Astronomy** Egyptian astronomers were, from the First Dynasty on, close observers of the positions and movements of the stars. Their observations enabled them to align the greatest Pyramids to the cardinal

points of the compass; while the great Pyramid of Cheops was aligned to the pole star, a distant but precisely chosen point of reference. (The identification of the planets with specific deities provided an extra impetus, a religious one, for mapping the heavens.) The risings and settings of the planets were carefully calculated—Eratosthenes (276-195.B.C.E.) measured the size and circumference of the earth—and at the Great Library in Alexandria (3<sup>rd</sup> century B.C.E.-30 B.C.E.) many of the most renowned astronomers of the ancient western world carried out their studies.

**Domestic sciences** Engineering and medicine take their place with a rich diversity of techno-practical domestic skills—paper-technology, book-roll creations, cosmetics, pharmaceuticals—to create for ancient Egyptian culture a dynamic profile, three millennia long, which is easily belied by the static image left behind to us by a culture of massive pyramids. Pharmaceuticals were usefully available, preserving and practicing ancient curative recipes, which relied on discoveries made as early as the third millennium B.C.E. Both men and women wore make-up created by crushed galena and malachite, mixed with animal fats; a product intended both to promote beauty—female beauty was literally viewed as holy—and for skin protection in the desert heat. Paper was made by soaking strips of papyrus, soaking them, and gluing them together until they formed rolls (scrolls when unfolded) which could be shelved in library book niches.

### Readings

Clagett, Marshall, *Ancient Egyptian Science*, vol. 2, *Calendars*,

*Clocks, and Astronomy*, Philadelphia, 1995.

Nunn, John, *Ancient Egyptian Medicine*, Norman, 1996

### Discussion questions

Did the ancient Egyptians distinguish between science and technology? If so, did they recognize some queen of the sciences, that stood out above all?

The ancient Egyptians viewed beauty, as in female beauty, as a form of the holy. For that reason, they put more than ordinary emphasis on the importance of make-up. We too stress the importance of make-up. Does that emphasis retain, for us, any of the 'holy' implications of female self-beautification?

In the West, during our 19th century industrialization of science, manufacturing became one of the potent expressions of the power of the scientist—working in steel, working in concrete, working with electric power. Did Egyptian science lead to new ways of promoting industrial production?

### PHILOSOPHY

**Overview** Although the ancient Greeks—that is, Thales, Pythagoras and Plato—referred to Egyptian philosophy as the origin of their own, and as the original wisdom, we have little philosophy, strictly speaking, remaining from the three millennia of Egyptian imperial power. We do have, though, plenty of evidence of practical philosophy, popular philosophy on the ground, which greatly enriches our sense of the ancient Egyptian mind.

**Ptahhotep** Living in the late 25<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E., Ptahhotep was vizier to the Pharaoh, influential and respected; when he reached the age of 110 his wisdom so recommended him, as a perceptive student of the human condition, that he was prevailed upon to write down his understanding of life, especially for the benefit of his son. There followed a collection of 37 maxims, largely preserved, in which he wrote out his philosophy of life, putting special stress on how to deal with personal issues and protocols at the

Pharaoh's court, how to praise one's wife, and how to use silence prudently and to your advantage. Truthfulness and timing are given particular attention, as means to social skill.

**Practical philosophy** Though the ancient Egyptians were brilliant astronomers and architects, innovated in technologies, and developed a rich theology, they were not at their most inventive in dealing with philosophical issues such as those of metaphysics, logic, or epistemology—where the Greeks excelled. The man on the street was likely to appreciate such points as Ptahhotep's—wise and practical life lessons—and to have his own repertoire of spells, religious practices, and moral strictures. For such folks *The Book of the Dead*, under compilation from 1550 B.C.E. to 50 B.C.E., provided a helpful cautionary road map to the next world, and held out cautions for those concerned about salvation. (Spell 125 in *The Book of the Dead*, concerns the 'weighing of the heart,' a fearsome balance in which the soul of the deceased is weighed against a feather—symbol of the Goddess of Justice, Maat, to determine the weight of the sins of the deceased.) Such abundant Egyptian literature as *The Story of Sinuhe* or *Instructions for Merikare* deploy lessons in caution and sobriety, which appear to have been everyday goals in Egyptian ethic.

**Akhenaten** (d. 1336 B.C.E.) The Pharaoh Akhenaten, the creator of a unique version of monotheism, stands out for the brilliance (and transience) with which he imposed a new 'philosophy' on the Egyptian people. Perhaps we should say, 'a new way of seeing,' in which the supreme god, the sun god, mastered all the other phenomena of the sky, 'the moon among stars' by another image. Akhenaten gave the people a short-lived vision of an alternate to their age old polytheism. After his death his brilliant vision was harshly dismantled.

## Readings

Assman, Jan, *Death and Salvation in Ancient Egypt*, Ithaca, 2001.

Hoffmeier, James, *Akhenaten and the Origins of Monotheism*, Oxford, 2015.

## Discussion questions

What was the role of the great Library of Alexandria, in inviting foreign philosophers, and enriching Egyptian philosophical culture?

Religion, magic, and philosophy tended to merge in the mind of the ancient Egyptian on the street. Does the guy or gal on the street in New York City carry an 'organized philosophy within him or her'?

What kind of social/political culture is required to foster the birth of technical philosophy—Plato, Aristotle—as distinct from the practical philosophy of the everyday?

## RELIGION

**Animal gods of ancient Egypt** Egyptian religion was almost consistently polytheistic—it sponsored many gods—for three millennia, from 3000 B.C.E. to the beginning of the common era. ('Almost,' because for a brief period during the rule of Akhnaten, who reigned 1353-1336 B.C.E., the state sponsored a form of monotheism.) As a polytheism, Egyptian religion invested multiple-deities concept in a wide diversity of animals: royal cemeteries, where innumerable god-representing animals are to be found, are in fact dedicated to crocodiles, falcons, ibises, snakes, cats, rams, and many other regional fauna. The tie-in of this animal set, to actual worshipped gods, is loose—we know that the most influential animal-based gods rooted in animals like the jackal, the ibis, the bull, the cat, but the range is wide; for reasons we don't understand, the animals which became sacred to the Egyptians received their own cults, and assumed natural force powers which were regionally worshipped. We have reason to think this

synthesis, of animal cults with deified natural forces, derives from Egyptian religious practices which go back centuries before 3000 B.C.E.

**Creation** For the most part Egyptian religion recognizes divine power in nature, and in the animal symbols which intersect in order to undergird the god world. (The god world is also the person-world, because the line dividing animals from individuals is shaky.) That divine power does not lodge in a single creator, but is a world force in a continual state of generation. Even during the brief period of monotheism, under Akhnaten, there was no room for a single Creative Power to stand forth as World Maker. Only in one instance, during a period of what we call the Memphite Theology, generated around the capital of Memphis, and documented by writing on the Shabaka Stone (730 B.C.E.), was there an evolved and official formulation of a Birth of the Universe in Spirit, in the power of a single spiritual creator, the god Ptah, whom we might compare to the creator god of the Abrahamic religion.

**Sin** Though the man on the street seems, from much papyrus documentation, to have worried constantly about how the afterworld would treat him, and about the terrors of death, there was no countervailing internal struggle over whether one had led a good life, or would stand up well before the interrogation at the portals of the next world. It seems as though there was a decisive encounter with fate after death, and one's heart was weighed on a scale by the god Osiris. The weight balance was between the individual's soul and that of a feather of the goddess Ma'at, goddess of truth and righteousness; if the soul weighed more than the feather it was adjudged to be the soul of a sinner, part of an inferior life, and unqualified to enter into the afterlife world.

**Death** The ancient Egyptians were preoccupied with death, but over the long course of their cultural vitality they never wavered in their sense that there is life after death. The pyramid and coffin texts, from various 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium B.C.E. temples, as well as *The Book of the Dead*—in use from 1550-50 B.C.E.—were popular level records of itineraries of the soul as it made its way from the House of Death to the blessed homes of the gods. The body, whose *ba* (or soul) would leave it for the long journey to the heavens, was thought to continue to live in the tomb, and from there, most thought, it was able to communicate with loved ones and relatives, even to the extent of settling disputes among them.

**Afterlife** The Egyptians had no doubt about the existence of the afterlife, though they had widely various opinions about what it was. As said, there was agreement that the dead were able to communicate with the living, from their tombs. There was no belief in a land of the dead, where the dead congregated, but there was a conception of select dead as transfigured spirits, *akhu*, circulating 'above,' and involved in the dramas of overcoming obstacles, like bodies of water which lay between themselves and the land of the blessed. This degree of vitality and movement was possible to the posthumous individual, because the soul or *ba* of the person was 'the whole of the person as he appears after death,' and was if nothing else a renewal of the person who had died. In the later periods of Egyptian religious development, at a time when the Eastern Mediterranean was nearing the Christian era and salvation cults were running wild, the Egyptian god Osiris assumed a huge worshipful following for his leadership in finding the right way to rebirth.

**Prayers and spells.** The Egyptian *Book of the Dead* contains many spells, designed to assure the safety of the ascending soul. Mixed with that body of spells and prayers—to all one's favorite deities—is a vast popular network of prayers and supportive incantations, tried and true recipes for self-defence and self-release.

*My mouth has been given to me that I may speak into it in the presence of the Great God.*

*My mouth is opened, my mouth is split open by Shu with that iron harpoon of his with which he split open the mouths of the gods.*

**Readings**

Breasted, Charles, *Pioneer to the Past: the Story of James Henry Breasted*, Chicago, 1943.

Frankfort, Henri, *Ancient Egyptian Religion*, New York, 1961.

### Discussion questions

Vast ancient Egyptian cemeteries were devoted to sacred animals, the symbol-aspects of the Gods of the Egyptians. Are you surprised by this hard evidence of animal worship? Did you suppose that the animal worship of the Egyptians was symbolical? If not why not?

What kind of clerisy or clergy ran the Egyptian religious system? Where were there priests, imams, rabbis? How was worship organized, on a social level?

What provisions did Egyptian theology make for the end of the world? Was there an apocalyptic element in this religion?

### ART

**The arts in Egypt** A wide range of arts—architecture, sculpture, music, painting, and literature—mark the ancient Egyptian achievement, which survived from the third millennium B.C.E. to the end of the classical period. While Egypt's stupendous architectural achievements, and the sculptures representing their Pharaohs, continue to seize world attention, those master arts were only part of a vibrant social culture rivaling the brilliant bequests of Mesopotamian and Greek culture.

**Architecture** While we still have some remains of ordinary dwellings, and of commonplace urban environments, the great majority of ancient Egyptian structures remaining are either intact massive tombs or temples devoted to the gods. (Thus they are, like Roman public structures and temples, massive and conspicuous, and acquire outsized attention as trademark indicators of their cultures.) One should, in this category, before all mention the Great Pyramids of Gizeh, limestone and granite pyramidal tombs built square in the Central Desert, and intended to guarantee the immortality (and encoffined and mummified remains, of the Pharaohs Cheops, Chefnun, and Mycerinus, the last of whom died in the mid third millennium B.C.E. Smaller royal or noble tombs co-existed with these grand Pharaonic warders off of death. The smallest of the monumental desert-tombs were called *mastabas*, and were rectangular flat-topped one storied burial places. The Pharaoh Zoser (2600 B.C.E.) was honored with a Stepped Pyramid in the desert at Saqqara, built by Imhotep, the first architect in history to be memorialized in writing. This Stepped Pyramid, much smaller than the Great Pyramids, was essentially a stack, but a large one, of *mastabas* super-imposed on one another.

**Sculpture** The Egyptian taste for massive structures and representations achieves immortal expression in the Great Sphinx of Gizeh, constructed around 2500 B.C. This 65 feet tall pyramid sculpture, its face the sculpted head of the Pharaoh Chefnun, sports a lion's lower half, to assert the blend of humanity with ferocity in the deceased Emperor, whose great pyramid is nearby. Free standing sculptured couples—say King Mycerinus and his Queen, from Gizeh—bear the distinctive stamp of Egyptian sculptural genius; the figures stiff and straight, one foot forward, the faces impassive and withdrawn. Massive seated sculptures of King Ramses II (1260 B.C.E.) proclaim the traditional moves of massive carving, which remained essentially static for more than a millennium.

**Painting** Paintings regularly decorated the interiors of tombs, providing an opportunity to memorialize the deceased in scenes which were characteristic of him, as was the case of a certain noble Ti (Saqqara, 2500 B.C.E.), on the walls of whose tomb there is a painted relief showing him watching his retainers attacking a river hippopotamus. Painted reliefs, common in and out of tombs, aimed for a startling synthesis of brilliant color with tactile presence. Worth adding that dance and musical instrumentation often joined genre scenes as the main narrative of such wall painting.

## Readings

James, T.G.H., *Howard Carter, The Path to Tutankhamun*, London, 1992.

Smith, W. Stevenson, and Kelly, William, *The Art and Architecture of Ancient Egypt*, New Haven, 1998.

## Discussion questions

Do you think the desert is an important element in the expressiveness of Egyptian art? Where, in that art, does the desert become a formative ingredient?

What was the theology of the ancient Egyptians that led them to associate immortality with the great pyramids? What role did the coffins of the Pharaohs play in preserving the personality of the individual Pharaohs?

We have traditionally associated the ancient Greeks with a breakthrough Humanism, a rare innovative sense of the richness and significance of the human personality. The Egyptians have often been looked down on as stiff, ritualized, and formalized in their representations of human beings. What do you think of that contrast between the Greek and Egyptian civilizations?

## LITERATURE

### Introduction

The oldest Egyptian texts before us date from the last quarter of the third millennium, still early in the development of Egypt as an Empire, and in the growth of mankind toward counteracting death in language. The Pyramid and Coffin Texts, in question, were generally spells or prayers, written on papyrus in vertical columns, and in tone—for the most part—adorational. The whole universe, in these texts, is pervaded by the benign presence of god, and by reverence for the hallowed world, in which one's dying may be a beneficiary of meaning. These extraordinary texts, which represent the true voice of the people, are echoed again a thousand years later in an equally popular expressions of meaning-quest on the popular level. That same voice of the people is sharply audible in the texts from *The Book of the Dead*, a cult text we begin to encounter by 1250 B.C. That itinerary, of the dead person's voyage to a final blessed resting place, was copied and recopied by a new 'middle class' consuming public, for whom the text itself served as a kind of security blanket in the uncertainty of life.

Intimacy of tone, and insight into individual lives mark a number of ancient Egyptian texts, and display themselves both early and late, in the long history of ancient Egyptian culture. From the 21<sup>st</sup> century B.C., nearly as old as the Pyramid and Coffin texts, date *The Instructions for Merikare*, father-son advice emphasizing patience, self-control, and at the same sturdy readiness to act, in case of threat. The tradition of Egyptian love poems, often tender and romantic, always intimate, takes us to a period as recent as the 13<sup>th</sup> century B.C., and startles us, even at that, with its 'modernity,' which translates easily into the language of our time. Perhaps the most remarkable study of the individual, in Egyptian literature, is 'The Story of Sinuhe,' 1995-1965 B.C. in composition. This tale, of a government official who flees a threatening conflict, while on mission, and gradually rebuilds his life, until he is a prosperous and powerful elder, takes us into many intimate corners of personality, especially into Sinuhe's anxiety, and into his later wily tricks to win favor for his own political advancement.

Both the theological and the humbly human join in the amazing *Hymn to the Sun* (1380 B.C.), by the monotheistic Pharaoh Akhnaten. As himself the Sun-God, the Pharaoh can be said to be worshipping himself, as representative of us all, in his worshipping of the central planet in our solar system.

## Reading

Assman, Jan, *Of God and Gods: Egypt, Israel and the Rise of Monotheism* (Madison, 2008). Budge, E.A. Wallis, *The Literature of the Ancient Egyptians* (London, 1914).

Translator and editor of *The Egyptian Book of the Dead* (Mineola, 1967).

Erman, Adolf, *Ancient Egyptian Literature: A collection of Poems, Narratives and Manuals of Instruction from the Third and Second Millennia BC* (London, 2005).

Foster, John, *Ancient Egyptian Literature* (Austin, 2001).

Frankfurt, Henri, *Ancient Egyptian Religion* (New York, 1948).

Hornung, Erik, *The Ancient Egyptian Books of the Afterlife* (Ithaca, 1999).

Lichtheim, Miriam, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, vol. II, *The New Kingdom* (Berkeley, 1975).

Parkinson, R.B., *Poetry and Culture in Middle Kingdom Egypt: A Dark Side to Perfection* (London, 2002)

*Reading Ancient Egyptian Poetry* (Chichester, 2009.)

*The Tale of Sinuhe and other ancient Egyptian Poems 1940-1640 B.C.* (Oxford, 1997).

### Discussion questions

On the basis of our introduction, how would you expect to characterize the overall nature of ancient Egyptian literature? The period of highest achievement, in this literature, was at least a full millennium—from the Pyramid and Coffin Texts (2350-2150 B.C.) to the flowering of love poetry (13<sup>th</sup> century B.C.). Has it some distinctive trademark character?

Does the theme of a 'descent into hell,' such as it plays out in 'The Descent of Inanna,' remind you of other texts in which a protagonist—Orpheus, Dante, Jesus Christ—makes such a journey.

In terms of today's literary values, which texts from ancient Egyptian literature would be most likely to win readers in the contemporary West?

Which texts, of ancient Egyptian literature, seem to you most inaccessible from a contemporary western standpoint? What about those texts would make them unavailable or uninteresting for a present day reader? What makes a text either attractive or unavailable to a later audience?

In certain texts of ancient Egyptian literature—*The Tale of Sinuhe*, *The Instructions for Merikare*, the love poems—we come up against an intimacy of tone which may well surprise us. That is, we may have been led to think of the ancient Egyptians, with their pyramids, rigid mummies, and hieroglyphics, as a 'rigid and formal people.' Why have we gone wrong on this? Why do we have trouble seeing the humanity of the ancient Egyptians?

### POETRY

#### Egyptian Lyric

Ancient Egypt equals its Ancient Greek counterpart, in artistic achievement. From the pyramids and temples that meet us in the third millennium B.C.E., to the love poetry that seems astonishingly contemporary to us—though dating from the still ancient aesthetic revolution of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> dynasties—1290-1078 B.C.E.—the Egyptian mark on literature, visual art, and religious thought is strong and distinctive. Thanks to the privileging of historical context, and cultural familiarity, ancient Greece got the ear of later centuries, while the Egyptians world got buried in the sand. But this imbalance yields, on a closer look, to the sense that our attention should fall on Ancient Eastern Mediterranean cultures, if we want to understand the true achievements of either Greeks or Egyptians.

The background to the explosion of verbal art, in Egyptian love poetry, looms over the lyric's sensuous outbreak in the innovative theological poetry of the first 'nearly Monotheistic,' sun worshipping Pharaoh



Akhnaten (d. 1336 B.C.E.) The passionate sense of nature's course, in Akhnaten's *Hymn to Aten*, readies us for the marshes, hunting scenes, fleeing gazelles which stud the natural backdrop of the love lyric we discover in the 'aesthetic revolution,' above, the lyric created not so remote in time from the brilliant creations of the Greek Sappho and Archilochus, in the seventh century B.C.E.

What most stuns us, in this accessible Egyptian love poetry, is the ease of reading it today—that despite the frequent lacunae in the papyrus texts, which make the basic interpretation of many lines difficult. The overall play of this poetry, however, is never difficult to grasp: from the 'red fish in the water,' Norton I, pp. 119-20, to the 'milk shot through water' (p. 122) to the 'Moringa oils/ in her diaphanous garments...' (p. 124). It is in fact the Greek Sappho who most comes to mind, as a parallel to the directness, simplicity, and passion of this lyric outburst.

## Reading

Foster, John L., *Love Songs of the New Kingdom*, Austin, 1992.

Wilson, Penelope, *Sacred signs: Hieroglyphics in Ancient Egypt*, Oxford, 2003.

## Discussion questions

Historically speaking, we in the West seem to inherit our cultural and artistic values more from the Greco-Roman than from the ancient Egyptian tradition. How do you explain this state of affairs? What is responsible for it?

It is easy to say, and has some truth, that ancient Egyptian love poems are very modern. But is it true? Are the translations you look at, of Egyptian love poetry, characteristic of the way an English language poet would express his or her love today?

Does the *Hymn to Aten* use sensuous language, like the love poems we have just discussed? Does it bring the god directly into the world of sensuous experience?

## **Egyptian Love Poems** 13<sup>th</sup> Century B.C. (Egypt)

**Emotion in language.** Egyptian love poems, from the thirteenth century B.C., open our way to what seems a direct expression of emotion, and a verbal field on which we can read without endless footnotes, cautions, and uncertainties. (And without that awesome sense of strangeness that the *Pyramid Texts* or *Book of the Dead* enforce in style and narrative technique.) We should no doubt keep some guard up, for where ready feeling offers itself there is always room for delusion and even deception. The comparison of alternate translations is one way to remind ourselves that the original is never of a single meaning, but in literary work flays out into multiple meanings. And that reflection will remind us that the quest for selfhood, and for ways for formulate it, is (in literary art) a byproduct of language. The language of poetry is inherently ambiguous, and thrives on a margin of half clarity, and is in that different from the languages of, say, the *Code of Hammurabi*, which *proscribes* and lays down, or the language of *The Instruction for Merikare*, which *prescribes*. We will start with a juxtaposition of two translations of a single text, whose language neither proscribes nor prescribes, but *suggests*.

**The languages of translation.** The distinguished pioneer Egyptologist, Adolf Erman, published his *Ancient Egyptian Literature* in 1923, and in it we read (itself a translation from German into English) the following:

\_\_\_my god. My brother, it is pleasant to go to the (pond) in order to bathe me in thy presence, that I may let thee see my beauty in my tunic of finest royal linen, when it is wet\_\_\_I go down with thee into the water, and come forth again to thee with a red fish, which (lieth?) beautiful on my fingers\_\_\_Come and look at me.

(Erman, p. 248; trans. Blackman, 1927).

The language is an archaized English—itself a kind of translation, of seventeenth century English/ King James Bible translation language—and simulates a difficulty of disengaging meaning from material (papyrus) not easily read, and syntax not easily converted into the languages of English poetry. This is the kind of anti-English English translation which we will find generative in Week 14, when we turn to lived verbal creations of our time, in which Ancient Near Eastern Literature becomes part of English language newspeak. Erman's translation work contrasts sharply with our second example (in a volume translated 2001), also by a talented Egyptologist:

Love, how I'd love to slip down to the pond,

Bathe with you close by on the bank.

Just for you I'd wear my new Memphis swimsuit,

Made of sheer linen, fit for a queen—

Come see how it looks in the water!

Couldn't I coax you to wade in with me?

Let the cool creep slowly around us?

Then I'd dive deep down

And come up for you dripping,

Let you fill your eyes

With the little red fish that I'd catch.

(John Foster, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, 2001; p. 23.)

Foster's translation not only smooths and charms, where Erman/Blackman scrape rough meanings straight off the papyrus, but Foster also attempts to simulate the meter and rhythm of Egyptian poetry, an effort Erman (p. xxxi in his Introduction) speculates on, but makes no effort at.

**Reaching the past through language.** Translation is the hidden issue below that 'distance' of Ancient Near Eastern literature, which we discussed in our first paragraph this week. (As a student of literatures not native to you, you may want to reflect on the enormous importance of translation as a whole, is establishing our senses of the creative traditions of our world.) That being said, however, it remains true that Ancient Egyptian Love Poetry, of the Ramasside Period (13<sup>th</sup> century. B.C.), does what it can to touch broadly human registers, and thus to overcome its birth passage to us through language and artifact barriers—papyrus quickly dries and cracks, and is rarely intact; stelae are often hard to read—not to mention the pure hazards of location and discovery. In this week's readings you will find poems by women as well as men, sensuous as well as longing poems, and lustful poems.

**Selfhood and the love lyric.** It is from this small collection that we now pay our weekly homage to the issue of selfhood and the person. The language before us, in whatever translation, is clearly one of suggestion and implication, as distinct from the languages of law, manners, or religious adulation. (We can see that suggestive trait of this language, even through the mist of translation.) The expression of longing, passion, nostalgia, which drives Egyptian love lyrics, is at bottom just a distinctive kind of language, the language of feeling yes but in a deeper sense the language of implication and suggestion. Is this language of poetry different from the language of prose, say from that of *The Tale of Sinuhe*? It is difficult to answer, given our distance in time and language from the texts in question. *The Tale of Sinuhe*,

we might want to say, is as allusive/suggestive as the love-poems we are reading, but the language of the tale is more causatively sequential, and narrative. In either case, *Sinuhe* or the love-poem, it is the self-identity of the narrator that provides the driving *eros* of the piece, and that keeps us under a spell that at the same time involves ourselves.

## Reading

John Foster, *Ancient Egyptian Literature* pp. 17-31.

Adolf Erman, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, pp. 254-310.

## Discussion Questions

1 Is there any norm for good translation? Should it be as literal as possible, and try to replicate (in the case of poetry) the meter and even sound of the original? Or should the translation of poetry strive for a new version entirely in the new language? This is a classic conundrum in translation theory, and there have been as many responses as translators. Do you have a position on this issue? Do you prefer Foster or Erman, from our own brief survey above? What is your impression of the translations we have been reading in this course? Is there any text that seemed to you to fare especially badly in its English version, and if so what do you surmise was the problem?

2 Do *The Tale of Sinuhe*, *Gilgamesh*, and the love poems we have read seem to you have in common that they all spring from the imagination? We have implied that point repeatedly here, in an effort to consider the width of the range of the texts that go into this class. But are we to think there is not imagination in the *Enuma Elish* or that there is nothing but imagination in the kinds of love poetry we are reading? If imagination means what is created from within special wholeness-establishing powers of the person, might we not say that the pond-poem we sampled above is rather a literal descriptive statement of an emotional condition, while, say, the *Enuma Elish* employs the imagination of huge cosmic conflicts—rather like Milton?—even while purporting to account for the actuality of events in heavenly time? What, finally, do you think of our tripartite division of three kinds of language? Is it proving a useful guide for you as you move through these archaic texts?

3 As you peruse the love lyrics in Erman or Foster, do you accept Foster's view, that when it comes to 'love lyrics' the universal kicks in; we all understand what is going on here, in a way we do not with, say, a creation hymn or a hymn to the sun. Erman's translation segment, above, seems to suggest that at least the flowing syntax of Foster's translation must have cost something in the course of 'smoothing out' the original. Nevertheless, though, do you buy into the idea that the way the 'romantic' is expressed in widely different cultures will be fairly consistent and similar—as distinct, say, from the way the languages of high theology are expressed?

## FICTION

**Egyptian and Mesopotamian Literatures** Ancient Egyptian literature (and that of its counterpart in Mesopotamia) is the oldest in the world, dating from the third millennium B.C.E. Both of these literatures continued to flourish until the end of the classical era.

**The range of Egyptian literature** Ancient Egyptian literature is of several kinds: early coffin and pyramid inscriptions; post death maps for the soul, like the *Book of the Dead*, which helps to guide the pilgrim soul to the Blessed Regions; instruction type letters and texts designed to guide the living in their passage through life; and love songs, many of them outbursts of lyricism collected in the last millennium before the Christian era. Among these diverse genres there is a body of fiction—we might say tales, adventure recountings, stories—of which *The Story of Sinuhe* (composed shortly after 2000 B.C.E.) is the best preserved, and perhaps best imagined, of the lot.

**What fiction means here** *The Story of Sinuhe* is *thought* to be fiction, evidence in itself that this tale resembles an historical account as well as a work of imagination. Certainly the text depends on a firm

historical placing, and gives us a sense of the world, of courts, of exiles, of end of life tomb plannings, in which a noble like Sinuhe could plausibly have spent his life. But there is an exciting personal dimension to the story, a touching interiority in the grasping of Sinuhe's dread, hope, and final easing into old age; the fictive imagination appears to have penetrated the mind of its principal character.

**Fiction in Egyptian literature** The present text seems a rarity, a brilliant inside job, in which Sinuhe is brought to life. Under a wider perspective, we should say that in Egyptian, as in Mesopotamian, literature, fictions in anything like the modern sense, in which imagination transforms the world, are rare. But that should hardly surprise us. Even in Greek and Roman literatures there is very little prose fiction—examples would be Hellenistic Greek tales or Petronius' *Satyricon*—and the western world would have to await the Mediaeval Romance or the Renaissance novel, before it could indulge wholeheartedly in that revel of social curiosity, the novel.

## Reading

Barta, M. , *Sinuhe, the Bible, and the Patriarchs*, David Brown Book Co., 2003.

Erman, Adolf, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, New York, 2012.

## Discussion questions

Here is a research project. Check out the Ancient Egyptian term, or manner of saying, for *fiction*. Did the Egyptians, who were clearly able to *write* fiction, also *discuss* fiction?

What would you, today, feel about calling some of the Egyptian religious texts—coffin and pyramid inscriptions, *The Book of the Dead*—fiction? Would you prefer to call them *fictions*? Or would you leave them alone, in a non-literary category?

If you consider *The Story of Sinuhe* fiction, would you also call it autobiography? Is Sinuhe himself in some sense the writer of the story?

## ***The Tale of Sinuhe*** 1995-1965 B.C. (Egypt)

**Amenemhatep.** The *Tale of Sinuhe* is a brief fiction, set in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century B.C., in the reign of Amenemhatep III, at a time of High Renaissance for Egyptian culture; the so called Golden Age of the Middle Kingdom. (*The Instruction for Merikare* is only slightly older than *The Tale of Sinuhe*.) The reigning Pharaoh Amenemhatep's grandeur of position is reflected in his name, which meant 'Belonging to the Justice of Re,' the Father God, and the cult of monarchical divinity is here at its apex. Like all Egyptian Pharaohs Amenemhatep's attention turned early not only to the exercise of administrative control over his rapidly growing domains, but to the construction of a pyramid worthy of his divine kingdom; his first pyramid, the 'Black Pyramid,' was built at Dashur, but was later superseded by a new pyramid at Hawara. The intricate architectural work embodied there reflects engineering skills befitting the monarch of Egypt at a high point in its culture, and the themes of divinity, monarchy, and tomb-building will clearly be seen to penetrate the following tale.

**Who was Sinuhe?** The *Tale of Sinuhe* was composed at just this renascent moment, and yet the always difficult explanatory bridge, between background and text to be explained, is difficult in a case like that presented by the story before us. The story is thin on local details, and though that very thinness is part of the mystery and fascination of the tale, it compounds the problems of lodging our text historically. Who wrote it? Who was the Sinuhe he wrote about? What is he trying to say about the nature of the human person?

**Sinuhe's Anxiety.** As it is, we confront a simple but subtle plot. Sinuhe, a government official, presents a tale which opens with the announcement from his tombstone of the tale of his life, which is what follows.

Sinuhe accompanies a certain Prince on assignment to Libya. Then Sinuhe becomes aware (by the miracle of fiction), through an overheard conversation, that there was a problem (*a coup d'état*) in the Royal Palace; and 'then was mine heart distraught, mine arms sank, and trembling fell on all my limbs.' Consequently Sinuhe flees to Canaan. (Within the simple narration, that leads Sinuhe's way, there are moments of sharply felt anxiety: 'I bowed me down in the thicket lest the watcher for the day on the wall should espy me.' His flight is punctuated by his and the narrator's comments on his flight and on himself as the flier. 'I set out southward yet did I not purpose to reach the Residence (his home city), for I thought that strife would arise, and I was not minded to live after him (the ruler under attack).' With these few words Sinuhe affirmed his fear, his timidity, and his 'love for his master.' And at the same time we hear his muttering self-presence, which these directional plans emerge from. We are jolted by the selfhood presence of Sinuhe, here in his text, more living than any access to self we get in earlier Egyptian or Babylonian literature.

**Sinuhe's Flight.** The ongoing progress of Sinuhe's journey is furthered by the flier's report to the Prince of Upper Retenu, to whose lands he eventually comes, explaining who he is and where he came from. We hear Sinuhe's account from his own voice, enclosed of course in the narration of the whole text, and are left wondering whether we are to take the report at face value—'I know not what brought me to this land; it was like the dispensation of God'; 'and I said again, dissembling'-- Sinuhe has traversed so many events, without really seeming to belong to them, that he comes across as a shadow figure, when he gives an account of himself to another person. (The construction of selfhood is being ingeniously insinuated here, where it leaves its carbon footprint in the minima of Sinuhe's expressive life.)

**Sinuhe the con man.** Frightened, carefully managing his image lest he fall into dangerous hands, Sinuhe addresses the Prince of Upper Retenu with effusive praise of the new king at the Residence, successor to Amenemhat, whose power and mercy are already legendary. (It is hard—from the 21<sup>st</sup> century Western readerpoint—not to take Sinuhe, addressing the Prince of Upper Retenu, as a blend of con man, keeping everybody happy while keeping himself safe, with a genuine admirer of his new king/savior.) At this point Sinuhe accepts the invitation of Nenshi, son of Amu, the Prince of Upper Retenu, who has been sheltering him, and settles down with the Prince, to pass an idyllic life as pampered guest, husband of the Prince's daughter, and darling of the Prince's court. The self-reflexive dimension of the character construction seduces us into seeing the world from 'his' standpoint.

**End of Sinuhe's Life.** Sinuhe becomes a powerful and merciful king in his own right, though telling us about it—first person narration—with a modesty, almost uncertainty, which marks his whole tale. Finally Sinuhe appeals to the royal court from which he first fled, and begs for the right to 'return home.' (His view of himself, as he lodges this petition, is self-critical, confessional: 'Once a fugitive, fled in his season—now the report of me is in the Residence. Once a laggard lagged because of hunger—now give I bread to my neighbor.') The decree permitting him to return to Egypt arrives, and Sinuhe is invited, as an old man now, to return to his roots, where the gods are preparing a funeral in high honors for him. (Please note that what we recount here, for you the student, is in the text recounted by Sinuhe about himself, and thus participates in his narration of a fiction which will settle and enoble his life. The artfulness of the narrator of this tale, who embeds so much self-reflection in his own narration, embodies the kind of move toward the sense of selfhood which this course concerns.)

**Sinuhe's own pyramid.** Sinuhe is overjoyed by the new king's invitation, for which he feels a gratitude indicative of a sense of guilt, or at least of unworthiness. (The way he expresses his joy indicates his insecurity.) Having taken careful leave of his life home with Nenshi, Sinuhe travels back to the home city from which he set out, whence he came, and where the new monarch welcomes him—in a ceremony indicating (but all half-said) how deeply traumatic Sinuhe's absence from home has been, and how deep a fault/error/mistake divides him in old age from the mind that filled him when first he heard bad news from his post in the bull rushes. (Like the narrating king in the *Instruction for Merikare*, Sinuhe lives over the depths of a shameful secret, his impulsive flight.) The rest is history. Back with the royal family Sinuhe is given his own sumptuous quarters, golden raiment, four meals a day, and has nothing left but to live out his life in patronal splendor, awaiting the blessedness of his own beautifully appointed pyramid. He has told us himself into just the overall point the narrator of him wished.

**The identity of Sinuhe.** We are not going to find a subtler or more irresolvable case of the search for personal identity than in the tale of Sinuhe. The way he presents life situations to himself, while himself being a life situation presented by a narrator, is the key to 'his' three dimensionality.

## Reading

Parkinson, R.B., *The Tale of Sinuhe and other ancient Egyptian Poems 1940-1640 B.C.*

## Discussion Questions

1 In the introductory material, above, we referred to *The Tale of Sinuhe* as a 'brief fiction.' No one knows whether the word 'fiction' applies here. It is possible, but hard to verify, that Sinuhe was a real historical figure. Does the text before us seem to you to bear the marks of a fiction. Is fiction an appropriate vehicle for self-discovery?

2 If anyone is trying to track and define self-identity, in the *Tale of Sinuhe*, it must be the author or narrator of the tale. Does that narrator seem to you to be identical with Sinuhe himself? At what points does the narrator separate from Sinuhe and talk about 'him' as another person, or perhaps as a 'fiction?' Do these layers of personal address and reference qualify this ancient text as what we would call postmodern today?

3 What kind of narrative is the *Tale of Sinuhe*? Do you flow from one stage to another, or is the flow interrupted by major hieratic passages and by jumps in narrative strategy? Do you see any parallel between the formal presentation technique here and that in hieratic Egyptian sculpture, in which the frontally depicted human figure is to us anti-naturalistically juxtaposed to the other images in its painted panel.

## 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?

## RELIGIOUS TEXTS

**Egyptian Pyramid and Coffin Texts** 2350-2150 B.C. (Egypt)

**Coffin spells.** The oldest religious texts from Egypt, and arguably the oldest recorded texts, were the Egyptian Pyramid and Coffin texts, the former from the end of the Old Kingdom (2686-2160 B.C.), the latter from the early Middle Kingdom (2055-1650). The former of these texts, the oldest, were inscribed as hieroglyphs on the walls of the tombs of Old Kingdom Pharaohs, to provide encouragement and instructions for the journey into the next world. The latter, in many ways maintaining the texts and attitudes of the prayer makers of the Old Kingdom texts, differ primarily in their use by the 'general educated public,' those who wanted to inscribe *their* spells too on their permanent resting place. The coffin spells were painted in vertical columns—thus were much less costly and time consuming to set down than the carved inscriptions of the Old Kingdom.

**A Pyramid text.** From a Pyramid text addressed to Nut, the sky-goddess:

Make this Pepi a spirit-soul in thee, let him not die.

O Great Lady, who didst come into being in the sky, who are mighty.

Who dost make happy, and dost fill every place (or being), with thy beauty,

The whole earth is under thee, thou hast taken possession of it.

Thou hast encompassed the earth, everything is in thy two hands,

Grant thou that this Pepi may be in thee like an imperishable star...

(Budge, *The Literature of the Ancient Egyptians*, p. 19).

**Profusion of pyramid texts.** There are several thousand of these Pyramid texts and coffin spells, and you are asked to read a representative sampling. (The examples in Foster, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*,

pp. 70-93, will give you a 'modernized' reading, some of it very moving, some fierce, like the text for King Unis of the 5<sup>th</sup> Dynasty in the Old Kingdom—a text celebrating the King's power to cannibalize his lesser rivals, during his passage into the next world; some, like the Coffin Text from the Middle Kingdom on p. 91, in which the departed is given power to rise by the Four Winds, deceptively translatable into the 'poetry of the afterlife,' as in

These winds have been offered me by the Maidens:

The East Wind is she who raises the lashes of seeing;

Discloses dawn,

Makes glittering way for the footstep of God

When he strides over eastern horizon.

Oh, let Re hold fast to my arm,

Place me there in his field,

At peace among rushes

There leave me eating and drinking forever,

Blessed by Osiris and Seth.

She is the breath of life, the East Wind,

Offered to me

And through her I live.

**Translation issues.** You only need to look at the two translations offered above—by Budge and Foster respectively—to see that translation is a key factor in the kind of access we have to these archaic spells, and that the kind of language on which we are carried here is as genre-specific when it comes to religious texts as it is in texts conveying 'the law,' like those with which we started. The texts concerning law and manners led us to terms like 'prescriptive' or 'proscriptive,' but what kind of language will we call that of the Pyramid and Coffin texts? An effective answer to this question could help us organize the readings that lie ahead for us--the language of 'religion,' and finally that of the 'creative imagination.'

**Adorational language of pyramid texts.** The 'language' of the Pyramid texts is 'adorational' or 'imprecatory,' drawing attention to the awesomeness of the human condition and to the aligning of the self to that condition. (In this latter function, obviously, there will be a fine line between religious and some poetic language—though not the kind of poetic language we find below in Week Six, under 'love poetry.')

The character of the search for selfhood, in diverse forms of language, will accordingly differ. In the languages of law and manners, with which we began, the self is treated as embedded in the realized settings of social protocol, and as requiring direct address in that setting. In the languages of religion—to make a massive general step—the self is sought in the arc of its aspirations, the trajectories it performs in prayer, spell, or royal itinerary. The self sought in this performative language exists as a permanent condition of discovery.

## Reading

Foster, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, pp. 64-91.

Budge, *The Literature of the Ancient Egyptians*, pp. 9-24.

Erman, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, pp. 1-18.



Van de Mieroop, *A History of Ancient Egypt*, pp. 81-83.

### Discussion Questions

1 We opened with an introduction to the distance of Ancient Near Eastern Literature from the sensibility of the literatures of the Greco-Roman and Hebraic traditions. Yet in the discussion of the different kinds of language, with which the archaic texts address their subject matters, are we not assuming some similarity between that archaic language process and that of our own time; some continuity of relation between subject and the kind of language we address to it? Are we thereby undermining the thesis of the gap between archaic and Greco-Roman Hebraic traditions?

2 What kind of view of the self is implicit in the notion of establishing a coffin text or spell to guide you in the next world? Does such a practice bespeak confidence in the rightness and harmony of the universe? We have mentioned the affiliation of religious Man/God language with adoration posture, which relies on God's benign intentions and aid. Is there some contradiction between the precautionary attitude of the spell maker and the trusting attitude of the believer with his/her faith? Or is the notion of 'faith' not appropriate, so far as you can tell, to the texts you are reading?

3 What is the importance of the difference between hieroglyphs carved into stone pyramid walls, and texts written onto papyrus and intended for inclusion in the deceased's coffin? (The physical difference itself is evident; though skilled scribes are required for both kinds of memorial—and the scribe occupied a high and respected role in Egyptian society—one act was almost sculptural, while the other was scriptural.) Is the importance of the difference that in one case the scribe promotes a lasting eternity of soul-mapping, while in the other the script writer/painter creates a move in an ongoing narrative?

***Egyptian Book of the Dead*** 1550 B.C.-30 B.C. (Egypt)

**Democratization of the holy.** We are already familiar with some of the magic and heaven-mappings of Pyramid spells, Week Four, but with the Book of the Dead we come to a far vaster assemblage, a long text dating back to the first dynasties (thus including the Pyramid texts and the Coffin texts) but enlarged and enriched right through to the 26<sup>th</sup> dynasty (664-525 B.C.), and in fact ultimately to the end of the Ptolemaic period (30 B.C.). In its most recent versions, this long text of 192 spells was a prized tomb or coffin ornament for the upper classes as well as the rulers, and in the later period—Middle Kingdom through to the Ptolemaic period—many well to do citizens attended to hiring professional papyrus scribes who could paint them their own copies and even their own versions of this guide to the next world. (With the 18<sup>th</sup> dynasty--1550-1295--it became the custom to write the *Book of the Dead* on rolls of papyrus, which were included in private tombs, with the corpse, and not inscribed either on temple walls or on sarcophagi. Thus the portability of these texts was enhanced, and their use made easier. We move into an era of what has been called the 'democratization of the holy.')

We will see that the text of the Book itself, of which there are four extant versions, is built up from textual accretions of two millennia, going back at least to the 6<sup>th</sup> dynasty (2345-2181 B.C.), and perhaps to pre-dynastic Egypt, a mysterious world about which we have limited (and no written) testimony. But throughout, whether in hieroglyphic or papyrus form, whether relevant only to the Pharaoh, who was surrounded by the Book inscribed onto his tomb walls, or democratized into a text the prominent could have tailor-copied for themselves, and laid on their corpses, the text was a community-constructive textbook of life on the edge, a guide book to passing through the Underworld, and over the edge into the geographies, hazards, and judgments of the next world.

**Spells and exorcisms.** The spells collected in the *Book of the Dead* are word itineraries to be repeated (like the Catholic rosary, the komboloia of Greek Orthodox tradition, the Islamic *misbaha*) in a particular physical setting—frequently in the process of 'telling the beads' of some mantra-promoting prayer object. A typical papyrus written prayer, for instance, segues into the command that the prayer should be 'said over a green stone scarab set in a band of *tchamu* metal (i.e. silver-gold) which is to be hung from the neck of the deceased.' (Budge, *The Literature of the Ancient Egyptians*, p. 50). Instructions for an early word-itinerary can be most specific. Here, for example, is the instruction for activating spell I34:

To be spoken over a falcon standing with the White Crown on his head; Atum, Shu and Tefnut, Geb and Nut, Osiris and Isis, Seth and Nephthys being drawn in ochre on a new bowl placed in the sacred barque, together with an image of this spirit (*ba*) whom you wish to be made worthy, it being anointed with oil. Offer to them incense on the fire and roasted ducks, and worship Ra. It means that he for whom this is done will voyage and be with Ra every day in every place he desires to travel, and it means that the enemies of Ra will be driven off in very deed. A matter a million times true.

*Book of the Dead, spell 134*

Two of the actual spell itineraries may give the flavor of this distinctive language of going-beyond:

*Words spoken by Ani: 'O you Soul [ba], greatly majestic, behold, I have come that I may see you; I open the Netherworld that I may see my father Osiris and drive away darkness, for I am beloved of him. I have come that I may see my father Osiris and that I may cut out the heart of Seth who has harmed my father Osiris. I have opened up every path which is in the sky and on earth, for I am the well-beloved son of my father Osiris. I am noble, I am a spirit [akh], I am equipped; O all you gods and all you spirits [akhu], prepare a path for me.*

*Book of the Dead, spell 9.*

The spell will be repeated regularly throughout the individual's life on earth, as a static insurance policy against the unknown, specifically against the much dreaded dissolution of the body, which all efforts—different versions of mummification—are devoted to preventing.

*May I have power in my heart, may I have power in my arms, may I have power in my legs, may I have power in my mouth, may I have power in all my members may I have power over invocation-offerings, may I have power over water ... air ... the waters ... streams ... riparian lands ... men who would harm me ... women who would harm me in the realm of the dead ... those who would give orders to harm me upon earth.*

*Book of the Dead, spell 68.*

**Itineraries of the Soul.** The itinerary of the soul (*ba*—free ranging spirit of the dead person; *ka*—life-force of the individual) through the *Duat* (Underworld) is fraught with obstacles, monsters, evil demons, deadly toxins, and leads eventually to a meeting with the supreme judge (Osiris, Ra). No care can be too great in view of the judgments studding the way, and particularly the ultimate *Weighing of the Heart*, by which the Supreme Judge evaluates the moral purity of the candidate for immortality.

**Spells and mind-mapping.** The word 'spell' suggests the ritual language which drives the Egyptian texts for survival. A central premise of ancient Egyptian practice is that language is identical with what it names, and thus can affect, even change, what it names. (This is an assumption deep in verbal prayer, despite the admonitions, of the modern monotheisms, to consider prayer a *vehicle*.) Noting this, we note the special turn we are now able to give, to our perspective onto the language of the Man-God relationship in the Ancient Near East. The spells of the *Book of the Dead* are practices in mind-mapping, and, like the data generated by a good GPS device, are only as good as the spatial diagrams they represent. For the ancient Egyptian the 'next world' is in no sense a metaphor, but is a 'realm' in which no apologies are made for the physicality of the décor. Telling it like it is is the only way to make 'it' perform for you as you wish.

## Readings

Budge, *The Literature of the Ancient Egyptians*, pp. 37-66.

Budge, *The Egyptian Book of the Dead* (Read enough—30 pages?-- to see the syntactical patterns, and to appreciate the kind of narrative flow that reigns here.)

Frankfort, Henri, *Ancient Egyptian Religion*.

### Discussion Questions

1 Is the kind of future-realm mapping language of *The Book of the Dead* like the prayer languages of 'modern' monotheisms? *The Book of the Dead* exists as language of which we might want to say, today, that it enables the self to discover the itinerary set out for it. Do Christian or Muslim orthodoxy, for example, propose prayer systems which create or which discover reality? Are their prayer systems parts of ways to discover ultimate reality, or are they creators of that reality?

2 Please reflect on our considerations of language in this syllabus. We have proceeded on the assumption that the ways we use language are the ways we *are*; a useful but certainly arguable description of what being human in the world involves. (Would you yourself argue with that conception?) Are you comfortable with the distinction between the language of manners/social rules and the language of 'religion.' Can you look ahead in thought, and consider the plausibility of a language peculiar to creations of the imagination?

3 We opened with an introduction indicating a more or less sharp break between the cultural traditions of the Ancient Near East and those of the Biblical/Greco-Roman cultures. Does that indication hold up, in the case of Ancient Egyptian religious practice? Do you see that practice as continuous, in important ways, with the subsequent monotheistic religions of the Near East?

*Hymn to the Sun* 1380 B.C. (Egypt)

**Akhnaten's Monotheism.** The most intriguing and culture-influential of the Pharaohs, Akhnaten (1352-1336), is associated before all with the introduction into Egyptian religious thought of monotheism. Virtually overnight he intruded into the dense polytheism, indeed the native polymorphism (animal-god fusions), which had defined Egyptian religious experience. How remote we are from the inner narratives of Egyptian social/political development is proven by how unprepared we are for Akhnaten's reversal of national theology. Whatever the well-springs of Akhnaten's monotheism, what he imposed on his people, especially in the new royal city of Amarna, a vast complex he had built in haste as an administrative capital and a site for his huge Amen temple, the power of his vision was compelling, his courage was unstoppable, and the narrative of Egyptian faith forever enriched. That he created for the ages will be evident in the persistent fascination he exercises over modern scholars, readers, and musicians—cf. Philip Glass's minimalist opera, *Akhnaton*—and by the creative place he continues to occupy in cultural history. Sigmund Freud's last work, *Moses and Monotheism* (1937), turned on the assumption that Moses was an associate of Akhnaten in Amarna, and that Moses drew his monotheistic vision for the Jews from the milieu of Akhnaten's court.

**Pharaoh as embodiment of God.** It was the lasting assumption of Egyptian theology that the Pharaoh is an embodiment of God—or of the God of the region where the Pharaoh ruled; Atem, or later Ra, at Heliopolis; Ptah for the citizens of Memphis; Amen for the Thebans and their ruler. Thus when the Pharaoh Akhnaten creates his *Hymn to the Sun*, which we have reason to think he himself wrote, he adores the sky-passage of a holy sun, his God, which is also himself. Perhaps he needed so high a self-concept to create at the level he achieves here; and at the same to create for his awe-inspired citizenry, worshipping with him, probably in festal recitations of this hymn, the force that makes the world. It will have been for the whole people that Akhnaten created this musical poem which celebrates 'going forth into the light,' the phrase-thought that sprang from the real name of *The Book of the Dead*. We seem to have, here, a piece of religious literature which can be read like a piece of imaginative literature. Can we believe that is true, when we look back on the stubborn otherness, in style, viewpoint, and world frame, which marks the Ancient Near Eastern material we have been reading, and which Frankfurt, in the *Before Philosophy* we read in Week One, thought the first thing to understand about the archaic world?

**Translation issues.** We need to go back to our translations, to our discussions of kinds of language, and to the problem posed by language for recovering the past. Let's start by juxtaposing three samples of translation into English of the *Hymn to the Sun*. (Our translation dates are 1923, 2001, and 2011. ) The selection is from the description of the world as the sun is setting.

*When thou goest down in the western horizon, then earth is in darkness, as if it were dead. They sleep in the chamber, their heads wrapped up, and no eye seeth the other. Though all their things were taken, while they were under their heads, yet would they know it not. Every lion cometh forth from his den, and all worms that bite. Darkness is....the earth is silent for he who created it resteth in his horizon.*

(Erman, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, p. 289.)

When you sink to rest below western horizon

Earth lies in darkness like death,

Sleepers are still in bedchambers, heads veiled,

Eye cannot spy a companion,

All their goods could be stolen away,

Heads heavy there, and they never knowing!

Lions come out from the deeps of their caves,

Snakes bite and sting;

Darkness muffles, and earth is silent;

He who created all things lies low in his tomb.

(John Foster, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, p. 2).

When you set in the western horizon,

Earth is in darkness as if in death;

One sleeps in chambers, heads covered,

One eye does not see another.

Were they robbed of their goods

That were under their heads,

People would not notice it.

Every lion comes out from its den.

All the snakes bite:

Darkness hovers, and earth is silent;

As the one who created all things rests in the horizon.

(Van de Mieroop, *A History of Ancient Egypt*, p. 204).

**Alternate versions of texts.** A translation, a carrying-over, is there to make clear to us what was written in a language unfamiliar to us. Is that what these three texts do? (Hard to say, unless we can 'read' the

original, in which case we don't 'need' the translation?) Does each of the above versions give you a sense of what the original means—the first version employing Biblical diction and a concrete thingliness; the second version a 'felicitously anglicized smoothness,' and a poem-like layout that cozens the modern ear; the third version contemporary but blunt, and, for example, sticking to what is probably 'original' -- 'horizon' in the final line, rather than 'lies low in his tomb?' Now try this. Take a copy of Erman, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, and turn to pp. xxxviii-xxxix. You will find there both a hieratic and a hieroglyphic facsimile of a passage from the 'Dispute with his Soul of one who is tired of Life,' a wisdom tale like *Sinuhe*, from 2500 B.C. Now think: vast spaces seemingly separate the script-things visible from Egypt from the script-thing 'in English' at the bottom of Erman, xxxix. Do we think those spaces are easy to cross. Let's try another experiment. Order a copy of Budge, *Egyptian Language*, Dover reprint from the New York, 1910 version. That's an approach. It will be a long train ride from the hieratic manuscript on xxxviii to the English on the bottom of xxxix. Do you feel sure that we can cross the border separating these different language acts? Or do we drift back toward Frankfurt's (and our own, in the Introductory week) view that Ancient means Archaic, when it comes to the Ancient Near East? (I drift that way.) Oh yes, and by the way, what about the physical moment of directing your eyes (mind) from Erman xxxviii to xxxix? What kind of distance is involved there? How many milimeters?

**Selfhood and language.** What, finally do you make of our effort to divide Ancient Near Eastern texts in terms of their distinctive language address, and, within that division, into the further issue of kind of quest for selfhood? Do the three kinds of language in question here—so far as we can reach back into them—comfortably unpackage into the addresses of behavioral description, ascension and praise, and imaginative expression? I hope you will say yes, and expect you will, thanks to the broad sense in which each of our text translations above is an address to the transcendent—and sharply different from a proclamation of behaviors or an expression of creative imagination, even though this wonderful Hymn, probably the composition of Akhnaten himself, expresses awe in a language of poetry. But what of the issue of selfhood, and its presentation, which is the title giving action of our course? Is that quest implicit in the language practices tracked in this week's work?

**High Writing.** Language—whether in the *Instruction for Merikare*, in the *Tale of Sinuhe*, or in the Akhnaten Hymn—is the human self actualizing, trying out its contours, and—so to speak—carving its own map of the world in the face of time. High writing, disciplined by time and life, testifies to the self that is it, and is the quest we are.

### Reading

Freud, Sigmund, *Moses and Monotheism*.

Lichtheim, Miriam, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, Vol. II, p. 90.

Pritchard and Fleming, *The Ancient Near East*, Vol. I, pp.227-230.

Van de Mieroop, *A History of Ancient Egypt*, pp. 202-207.

Waltari, Mika, *The Egyptian*.

### Discussion Questions

1 What do you think of the power of language to bridge the temporal gap of three and a half millennia which separates us from the creator of the *Hymn to the Sun*? Is it not true that in a sense the gap is immediately closed by, say, the act of a translation of that *Hymn*, which is thus vaulted into our mind's midst? Is it not equally true that that 'vaulting' is a dangerous sleight of hand, misleading us to bypass the reality of the temporal?

2 What is the source of the remarkable interest our time has paid to Akhnaten? Freud's *Moses and Monotheism*? Phillip Glass' *Akhnaten* opera? Mika Waltari's *The Egyptian*? Plays? Operas? Films? Is it the Sun-King's monotheism, which may in fact have influenced theological developments in Hebrew culture? Is it his mysteriously beautiful wife, Nefertiti, whom Akhnaten came increasingly to resemble in

visual depictions? Is it his sense of individuality, distinctive selfhood, which has led thinkers to consider him the first modern man, the first individual?

3 In our introduction we stressed the break between the archaic world of the Ancient Near East, and the Greco-Roman Hebraic cultural world we inherit. But we have been admitting the exaggeration of that view, even by our language practice, our confidence that we can penetrate the archaic world whose unreachability we are asserting. Does the case of Akhnaten seem to you an example of the point where a connection, with the Hebrews through Moses, breaks a channel right through the wall dividing us from the archaic? What do you think of the thesis of Freud's *Moses and Monotheism*?

### ***The Instruction for Merikare*** 21<sup>st</sup> cent. B.C. (Egypt)

We turn to a small example of poetry from the Early Middle Kingdom in Egypt, instructions of a war-and-experience-tested King of Herakleopolis-- to his son, Merikare. We are in the twenty-first century B.C. The papyrus from which we work has many lacunae, especially at the crucial beginning. We have to guess at the identity of the writer, the precise events to which he is directing the younger man (his son), and the larger geopolitical situation in question here; we grasp little except that there was incessant border fighting to the east of the Kingdom of Egypt, and tension amounting to Civil War between the North and South of Egypt. We know too that the neighboring kingdom of Thebes was to defeat and swallow up Herakleopolis not long after the writing of the present text. The vague broader outlines of this entire situation are that the Monarchies of the Old Kingdom (2664-2155 B.C.) were at the time of *Merikare* giving way to a decentralization which was diminishing their power, and that they were coping with a serious separation between the Kingdom of the North and that of the South. Many small scale conflicts were breaking out throughout Egypt, and both war and peace had become necessary survival skills. The elites, rulers and writers and scribes, were under pressure to take charge of their lives.

The set of instructions before us could in some sense be from any age—the age of Pliny, of Lord Chesterfield. Merikare's father urges him, in the beginning, to crack down on dissenters and rabble rousers—'a quarrelsome man, one that createth two factions among the youth'; and to wipe out their names, but at the same time, a few characters later, the son is told that 'a good disposition is a man's heaven.' 'A man should do that which profiteth his soul.' In essence, these two essential points—be on your guard against the enemy, but keep your soul as pure as you can—are the core of the entire set of instructions. Were our assignment to summarize the contents of early Egyptian literature, we would have moved on rapidly to the next week's assignment. Our assignment, however, is to penetrate the sense and pursuit of selfhood in this first text of our course. It will be appropriate, while doing this, to look into the nature of literary production and inscription that brought the present fragmentary piece to our attention, after millennia of hazards.

Observations on life, anecdotes from the narrator's past, universal wisdoms about the importance of goodness and the damage done by cruelty to neighbors and the weak: all these moves in language establish here a kind of Kingly paternal atmosphere. Father offers advice of various kinds: watch for traitors, be merciful, hone your skills with the word, for therein lies your strength, keep your mind on the eternal realm in which you will one day be a participant, treat high officials with respect but don't underestimate the value of the ordinary man in sustaining the state. The selves of the king and of his son are blended together in this hortatory discourse, which comes 'from on high' except for cunningly hidden mention—p. 202, Foster—of the 'monumental evil' the father had caused. His destruction of the nome of Thisis serves the narrator as a reminder of how dreadful it is to destroy what has been laboriously built up. This reference gives the whole exhortation a sizzling dimension, and (we have to imagine) builds the narrator into the thrilled attention of his son. The self of the father is unfolded into a dramatic self-presentation, to which his son is urged to direct his attention.

This exhortation to discipline and game plan makes much of the *word*, and the importance of using the *word* well. The readings in Erman's introduction, below, will help you appreciate the nature of writing at this time in Egyptian history, the importance of the scribe, and the kinds of documents of the word remaining to us on papyrus, stelae, and monuments. At the very beginning of writing, the *word* is being distinguished as a source of power and precision, while in our age, as we near the 'end of writing,' we begin to lose our faith in the word.

## Readings

Erman, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, pp. xxiii-lxi.

*The Instruction for King Merikare*, pp. 75-84

*The Instruction for Merikare* in Foster, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, pp. 191-203.

Parkinson, R.B., *Poetry and Culture in Middle Kingdom Egypt*, pp. 248-57.

Van de Mieroop, *A History of Ancient Egypt*. pp. 1-26, Introductory Concerns. (This text by van de Mieroop, and his *History of the Ancient Near East*, are easily available and essential background resources for this whole course.)

## Discussion and Reflection Questions

1 Does the father-son relationship assume an intimate familiar tone in the *Instruction for Merikare*? May I guess that the answer is something like: yes, though the tone is military behavioral and not intimate, still it seems to be paternal. May I think back then to the point of our introduction, which was that there is a major cleavage in meaning and cultural assumptions between the literatures of the Ancient Near East and those that melt into the Greco-Roman Tradition.? If that point is valid—is it?—are you suspicious of the seeming closeness we feel toward the voice speaker of the *Instructions*?

2 There is debate about whether the Egyptians, as early as the Middle Kingdom, had a sense of historical self-awareness. They seem not to have had 'historians' in any sense of erudite and informed students of their national past. It was not until the time of Manetho ( 3<sup>rd</sup> cent. B.C.) that a 'History of Egypt' was written. Do you note the historical references made by the narrator from within *The Instruction for Merikare*? Do you think that historical self-consciousness is related to the personal self-awareness we are tracking through archaic literatures? What do you think of the idea that what we have in this week's reading is wisdom literature rather than an historical perspective?

3 Does the language in which the present text works strike you as behavior-descriptive, to continue with the tripartite language distinction we started with? Is it evident that we are not dealing with religious or imaginal language? Is it, by the way, acceptable to you that we use the hermeneutical principle of three different self-presenting languages as our working principle in this course?