

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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EGYPTIAN 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?