

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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The Instruction for Merikare 21st 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 (3rd 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?