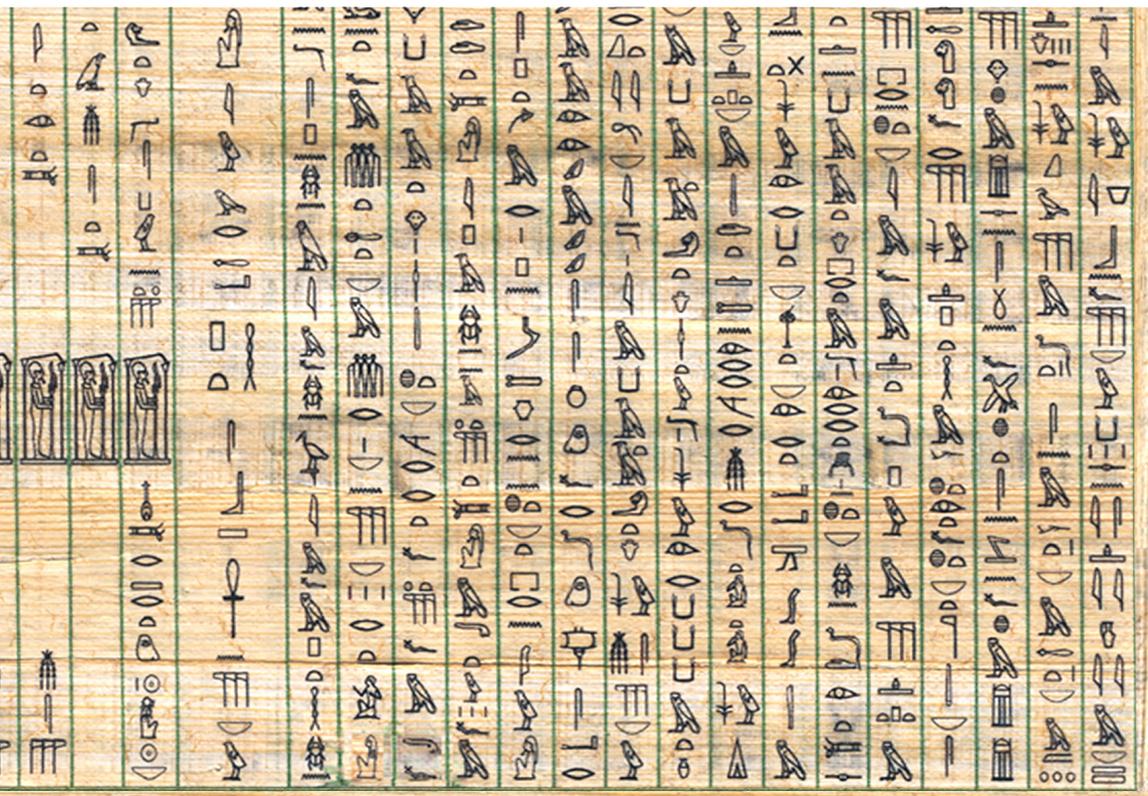




ANCIENT EGYPTIAN READINGS

WIM VAN DEN DUNGEN



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READINGS

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no one is born wise

Ptahhotep

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Preface

In 1983, studying Middle Egyptian in the Department of Oriental Philology at Ghent University, professor Herman De Meulenaere tried to inculcate in us students the value of drawing our hieroglyphs elegantly.

As a student of philosophy, my main interest lay in the language and its literature. Moreover, unable to draw, I quickly moved to transliterations. With a deep sigh, had my teacher not told me my version of the letter ‘f’ (so crucial in grammar), and representing a horned viper (*Cerastes cornulus*), looked like a small worm ? Likewise with the birds, with eagles looking like chickens ...

Years later, discovering the roots of polytheism, henotheism, and monotheism in the many teachings of Ancient Kemet, I was prompted to invest time and effort again to grasp what these thinkers of old had contributed to Mediterranean sapience, religion and spirituality and well beyond.

So, if I wanted to understand the Ancient Egyptian mentality beyond what others had taught me and published about it, I had to constitute and translate my own choice of Egyptian texts. Besides, recent linguistic advances in understanding the verbal form (Loprieno, 1995, Allen 2013), combined with novel insights into the evanescent concept of ‘god’ (‘nTr,’ ‘netjer’ – Hornung, 1971), prompt a revision of most essential texts. As the Egyptians were never silent about the gods, a suitable choice had to be made.

In 2001, I embarked upon a translation project of which this book is the result. It contains English translations of major texts, including the complete *Pyramid Texts of Unas* and a French translation of a selection of hymns from the remarkable *Hymns to Amun*.

In 2006, I took refuge : **www.bodhi.sofiatopia.org**.

I needed nine years to be able to start comparing the Vajrayāna and its Shamanism (cf. Indian Shaivism, Tibetan *Bön*) with Ancient Egyptian (temple) Shamanism (Naydler, 2005).

Ancient Egyptian Readings

This exercise in cross-cultural studies would not have been possible without the translations offered here.

These texts constitute the textual backbone of my investigations into Ancient Egyptian sapience, magic, theology, ritual, and ceremonialism.

Of all egyptologists I had the privilege to learn from, I particularly wish to thank Herman De Meulenaere.

The various publications of Alexandre Piankoff, James Henry Breasted, Wallis Budge, Kurt Sethe, Henri Frankfort, Alan Gardiner, Erik Hornung, Jan Assmann, Raymond Faulkner, Miriam Lichtheim, James Allen, Serge Sauneron, Christian Jacq, and Jeremy Naydler were of particular interest to me.

A special thanks to the many scholars of the Egyptian language whose excellent translations have inspired me, particularly Budge, Breasted, Gardiner, Piankoff, Lichtheim, Faulkner, and Allen.

Given the recent publication of Allen's *Grammar of the Ancient Egyptian Pyramid Texts* (2017) and his review of the verbal system, my translation of *The Pyramid Texts of Unas* had to be revisited (*Renewal and Ascension*, 2019).

I also reworked *The Great Praise of the Aten* and *The Maxims of Good Discourse*, meanwhile separately published as *The Egyptian Gentleman* (2017). An earlier translation of *The Book of the Heavenly Cow* was also added.

Compared to the excellent work of so many academic giants, my contribution is that of the dedicated amateur wishing these translations to assist our understanding of the grand Ancient Egyptian civilization ; providing a readable introduction to its sacred and sapiential literature.

Introduction

This book offers a choice of translations of Egyptian texts in English (and one in French), bringing to life the sapience, ritual, magic, and theology at work in the ‘House of Life’ that was Egypt. It gives rise to three registers : sapiential, ceremonial, and magico-theological.

The sapiential register includes :

Instruction of Hordedef
Instruction to Kagemni
Maxims of Ptahhotep
Instruction to Merikare
Instruction of Amenemhat
Instruction of Amen-em-apt

The ceremonial register contains an integral translation of the oldest corpus of religious texts globally, namely *The Pyramid Texts of Unas*, the last king of the Vth Dynasty, interred about 2348 BCE.*

The *Pyramid Texts* entertain a rhythmicization of their teachings, have dramatic structures at work, and use repetitions. These refer to the dramatic, initiatic, and performative intent imbedded in this remarkable *corpus* of texts, containing funerary and *this-life* rituals.

The magico-theological register pertains to the power of magic, the goal of life, death, and the afterlife, natural religion, henotheistic theology, and peeks into the philosophy of mind of the Ancient Egyptians.

To Become Magic
The Discourse of a Man with his Ba
The Great Praise of the Aten
The Book of the Heavenly Cow
Hymns to Amun (with French translation)
The Shabaka Stone
The Adoration of Re

(*) all chronology according to Hornung (1999)

These readings span a period of 13 centuries, covering most periods of Pharaonic Egypt : the Old Kingdom (ca. 2670 – 2205 BCE), the First Intermediate Period (ca. 2198 – 1938 BCE), the Middle Kingdom (ca. 1938 – 1759 BCE), and the New Kingdom (ca. 1539 – 1075 BCE).

The development of Egyptian literature, from solitary hieroglyphs (in the Predynastic Period) to its classical form (in the Middle Kingdom), keeps pace with the characteristics of the first stages of our cognitive genesis, the so-called ‘ante-rational stage’ of cognition, with mythical, pre-rational (imaginal) and proto-rational (operatoric) layers. These are always bound to a given context or horizon (abductive instead of deductive or inductive).

Understanding these features helps discover the linguistic layeredness or palimpsestic stratification present in a text, calling us to investigate its general, medial and immediate horizons, as were the text an archeological object of its own. It is interesting to translate Egyptian texts with this ‘filter’ in mind. In the genetic epistemology of the ante-rational mind of children worldwide, Piaget (1978) discovered three strata, each with its logic. These strata differ and interact :

- mythical logic : notions are developed without a clear distinction between the source of thought, the mind, and its clustering, constellational stream of thoughts. Events are put together based on a *shared embodied meaning*, explicit or not, in terms of physical processes, like any rhythmical or recurring pattern (coordination of actions) or signal ;
- pre-rational logic : the formation of pre-concepts and a more stable source of thought or *primitive subjectivity*, one still linked to the coordination of actions (and not yet, to a concrete conceptual model). Psychomorph, active iconization happens, and grammatical structures are worked out. Contradictions are not reconciled. Concepts have no stability outside their ritual or practical use and are always linked to person, place, and time.
- proto-rational logic : a real conceptual structure with practical (not theoretical) tools to manipulate thoughts. To solve problems abductively, subject and object are distinguished and mental operations have ‘closure.’ This never leads to any discursive articulation (and its conceptual freedom) because of the ever-present context to which the concrete operations remain bound.

Ancient Egyptian civilization as a whole never attained the next stages of cognitive growth : the formal, critical, creative, and nondual modes of

Introduction

cognition. The first two encompass rationality (apprehension, conceptual reason), the last two meta-rationality (prehension, intuition). These stages, and the epistemology to which they give rise can be found in the *Book of Lemmas* (2016) and *In Togetherness* (2018).

Kemet never escaped context. In their theologies (of Atum-Re, Ptah, Thoth, Osiris, and Thebes), this works out as a ‘constellational view’ on the deities, always appearing as ‘families.’ The libidinal (mythical), tribal (pre-rationality), and imitative (proto-rationality) styles intermingle and form a *multi-layered reality* in which the divine king and his representatives transcend the dualities. Because Ancient Egyptian civilization never relinquished a contextual (abductive) approach, no formal, abstract framework was ever put in place. To reflect this, words like ‘divine,’ ‘god,’ ‘goddess,’ and ‘pantheon’ are not capitalized.

Ante-Rationality	Egyptian literature	in Egyptian
mythical	Predynastic ware design schemata early palettes	individual hieroglyphs no texts, no grammar, ‘cartoon’ style
pre-rational	Reliefs Biographies Inscriptions Testamentary Enactments Pyramid Texts	words in archaic sentences first in ‘record’ style with a rudimentary grammar leading up to the style of the Pyramid Texts
proto-rational	Maxims of Ptahhotep, Coffin Texts, Sapiental Literature Great Hymn to the Aten, Memphis Theology, etc.	from simple sentences to a classical literary language capable of further change as well as interiorization

Only in the *Great Hymn to the Aten*, the *Hymns to Amun*, and the *Adoration of Re* is this restriction lifted, for these exceptional texts evidence that an exceptional individual (like Akhenaten), or group of individuals (like some Heliopolitans or the late New Kingdom Theban priesthood) did at times embrace some *formal notion* of the Divine, either in terms of a proto-monotheism (of the Aten) or as the henotheism of Re or Amun. When this happens, ‘God’ and ‘Gods’ are accepted formats, but this happens only a few times.

Because of its ante-rational features, Egyptian favors a *multiplicity of approaches* (Frankfort, 1978), accommodating a wide range of possible translations. In the present book, all translations are in chronological order. Titles are added to assist reading.

The following codes are used throughout the text.

(...)

textual additions to bring out the sense and/or to clarify

< ... >

conjectured translation of an unknown word or a brief documentary remark

[...]

a fragmentary, uncertain, or corrupt word or passage, but restored

short lacuna

long lacunae or a section of text with a lot of lacunae

...

incomprehensible word or passage

The Old Kingdom



The Instruction of Hordedef

son of Pharaoh Khufu – reconstructed fragment (Munich Ostrakon 3400)
– Vth Dynasty – Old Kingdom – ca.2400 BCE ⁽¹⁾

PROLOGUE

Beginning of the written teaching made by the hereditary prince, count, King's son, Hordedef, for his son, his nursling, whose name is Au-Ib-Re. He says :

THE TEACHING

[‘Cleanse] yourself before your own eyes, lest another cleanse You.

When You prosper, found your household, take [a mistress of] heart, a son will be born to You. It is for the son that You build a house when You make a place for yourself.

[Make a good dwelling] in the graveyard. Make worthy your station in the West.

Accept death humbles us, accept life exalts us, the house of death is for life. Seek for yourself well-watered fields. Choose for him (the funerary priest) a plot among your fields, well-watered every year.

He profits You more than your own son, prefer him even to your --- ‘



Munich Ostrakon 3400



The Instruction to Kagemni

vizier of Pharaoh Snefru – a fragment – VIth Dynasty – late Old Kingdom
– ca.2200 BCE ⁽²⁾

‘ --- the timid man prospers,
praised is the fitting,
open (is) the tent to the silent,
spacious is the seat of the satisfied.

Speak not !
Sharp are the knives against he who transgresses the road,
(he is) without speedy advance, except when he faults.

When You sit with company,
shun the food You like.
Restraint of heart is (only) a brief moment !
Gluttony is base, and one points the finger at it.

A cup of water quenches thirst,
a mouthful of herbs strengthens the heart.

A single good thing
stands for goodness as a whole,
a little something stands for much.

Vile is he whose belly is voracious ;
time passes, and he forgets
in whose house the belly strides.

When You sit with a glutton,
eat when his appetite has passed.
When You drink with a drunkard,
partake when his heart is happy.

Do not grab (your) meat
by the side of a glutton,
(but) take when he gives You,
do not refuse it ; then it will soothe.

He who is blameless in matters of food,
no word can prevail against him.

The shy of face, even impassive of heart,
the harsh is kinder to him than to his (own) mother,
all people are his servants.

Let your name go forth,
while You are silent with your mouth.
When You are summoned,
be not great of heart, because of your strength among those your age,
lest You be opposed.

One knows not what may happen and what god does when he
punishes.

The vizier had his children summoned after he had gained complete
knowledge of the ways of men, their character having come upon him.

In the end, he said to them :

“All that is written in this book, heed it as I said it. Do not go beyond
what has been set down.”

The Instruction to Kagemni

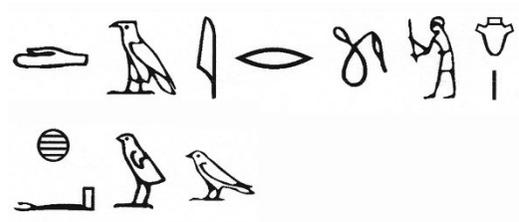
Then they placed themselves on their bellies. They recited it aloud as it was written. It was good in their hearts beyond anything in this entire land. They stood and sat accordingly.

Then the Majesty of King Huni of Upper and Lower Egypt died.

The Majesty of King Snefru of Upper and Lower Egypt was raised as a beneficent King in this entire land.

Kagemni was (then) made overseer of the city and vizier.’

It is finished.



**Restraint of heart
is (only) a brief moment !**



**the Scribe of Saqqara
IVth or Vth Dynasty
Louvre**



The Maxims of Good Discourse

by vizier Ptahhotep – complete – VIth Dynasty – late Old Kingdom –
ca.2200 BCE ⁽³⁾

PROLOGUE

Teaching of the noble, chief, god's father, beloved of god, the one who listens in the six great domains, the mouth appeasing throughout the Two Lands, the overseer of the city, under the Majesty of king Izezi of the Sedge and the Bee, may he live according to everlastingness and eternal repetition.

The overseer of the city, the vizier Ptahhotep, he says :

'O Sovereign, my Lord !
Infirmity is here, old age arrives,
exhaustion comes, weakness is renewed.
One lies down in discomfort all day.
Eyes are dim, ears deaf.
Strength wanes ; the heart is tired.
The mouth, silent, speaks not.
The heart, stopping, cannot remember the day before.
The bones ache throughout.
Good becomes evil !
All taste is gone !

What age does to people is evil in every respect.
The nose clogged, breathes not.