

Reviews of Books

Dating Egyptian Literary Texts. Edited by GERALD MOERS; KAI WIDMAIER; ANTONIA GIEWEKMEYER; ARNDT LÜMERS; and RALF ERNST. *Lingua Aegyptia, Studia Monographica*, vol. 11. Hamburg: WIDMAIER VERLAG, 2013. Pp. xiv + 653.

Linguistic Dating of Middle Egyptian Literary Texts. By ANDRÉAS STAUDER. *Lingua Aegyptia, Studia Monographica*, vol. 12. Hamburg: WIDMAIER VERLAG, 2013. Pp. xx + 568.

Literature, understood here in the narrow sense as *belles lettres*—hence excluding, for example, religious literature—first emerges on the world scene in Egypt and Mesopotamia, many centuries before appearing anywhere else. The present focus is on Egypt. One often reads that Egyptian literature took off in the early second millennium B.C.E., in Dynasty 12 (roughly 2000 B.C.E.–1800 B.C.E.), perhaps a little earlier. There is much to be said for this assumption and it has for some time been, and will probably remain, dominant. But in the end, there is no incontrovertible evidence in favor of it, only a rather sizeable set of plausible arguments. Nor is there definite evidence in favor of the existence of Egyptian literature before about 2000 B.C.E.

The two main branches of Egyptian literature are narrative texts and wisdom texts. In addition, there are a number of significant works that belong to neither.

The Egyptians viewed their earliest literature—composed in the so-called Middle Egyptian stage of the Egyptian language, which dates to the early second millennium B.C.E.—as a kind of classical literature for several centuries. The main evidence is as follows: Long after Middle Egyptian ceased being spoken and the Egyptian language had evolved into its so-called Late Egyptian stage of the later second millennium B.C.E., scribes kept copying Middle Egyptian literature. The overwhelming share of the evidence comes from the desert village of Deir el-Medina, where the artists who worked on the rock tombs in the Valley of the Kings lived.

Then, around 1000 B.C.E., Middle Egyptian literature dropped completely off the map. It is not fully clear why. In any event, when an entirely new literary corpus emerged from about 650 B.C.E. onward, it was written in Demotic, the stage of Egyptian following Late Egyptian.

There is also literature written in Late Egyptian. Most of it seems to have been composed in Dynasties 19–21, that is, roughly from 1300 B.C.E. to 950 B.C.E.—though some of it, not much, is a little earlier. Late Egyptian literature too ceased being copied after about roughly 950 B.C.E. The substantial Wisdom of Amenemope is a peculiar exception. The extant manuscripts all date to after 1000 B.C.E. Sections of Amenemope are cited in the Hebrew Bible’s Book of Proverbs. The late dates of the manuscripts of Amenemope make it easier to account historically for the transmission of some of its sections into Hebrew. Nothing certain is known about the modality of this transmission.

The focus of the two volumes under review is on pre-Demotic literature—and especially, though not exclusively, on Middle Egyptian literature. Accordingly, the time frame under investigation is for the most part the thousand-year period of the second millennium B.C.E., from its very beginning to its very end.

In terms of subject matter, the volumes’ main focus is on dating literary texts. The editors made the unusual decision of publishing two works belonging to different genres under a shared title, *Dating Egyptian Literary Texts*, namely: 1) the acts of a conference held at Göttingen on June 9–12, 2010 on dating Egyptian literary texts, styled as Volume 1; 2) the published version of A. Stauder’s habilitation thesis, styled as Volume 2. It so happened that the conference and the habilitation thesis deal with the same topic and materialized around the same time.

The more narrow subject-matter focus of much if not most of both volumes is described in the letter of invitation sent to potential participants to the conference and reprinted at the outset of the acts. It is as follows:

“There are a number of literary works written in Middle Egyptian that are preserved only in New Kingdom manuscripts of the later second millennium B.C.E., when Late Egyptian was the spoken

language of Egypt. There is therefore a gap in time amounting to centuries, potentially up to as many as seven or eight centuries, between the time when the Middle Egyptian literary works in question were presumably composed and the time when all the extant manuscripts transmitting them were copied.”

Such gaps are nothing new to the student of Roman and Greek literature. The earliest manuscripts of most if not all classical authors date to many centuries after when they were composed. In that regard, ancient Egyptian manuscripts separated by centuries from the date of composition of the works that they transmit should hardly come as a surprise.

Still, the considerable gap in time between the presumed dates of composition and the dates of all the extant manuscripts in regard to certain Middle Egyptian compositions has led to efforts to date some of these compositions later, as late as the early New Kingdom, say between 1550 B.C.E. and 1400 B.C.E. It is these attempts that appear to have provided the germ for the Göttingen conference.

But other problems pertaining to dating Egyptian literary texts were also addressed. One prominent problem involves the fact that some Egyptian literary works have occasionally been dated to the Old Kingdom, to well before 2000 B.C.E. For example, the *Wisdom of Ptahhotep*—which has on occasion been styled as the oldest book in the world and has been transmitted principally in one of the most beautifully preserved ancient Egyptian papyri, the *Papyrus Prisse* kept at the Bibliothèque nationale in Paris—dates itself, so to speak, to the end of Dynasty 5 of the Old Kingdom, that is, to around roughly 2400 B.C.E., as Ptahhotep is said to have lived under Pharaoh Isesi. However, it seems as if many if not most analysts treat the date as fictional. But then, who knows?

An undercurrent of the conference is the allegorical battle between theory and empiricism. Among the protagonists are G. Moers and R. B. Parkinson, who do not hesitate to apply highly theoretical approaches, and J. F. Quack, who is nakedly philological and empirical. All contributed to the conference.

The two finely crafted and carefully edited volumes under review, weighing in at about 550 pages and 650 pages respectively, for a total of more than 1200 pages, evidence a rather intense engagement with the problem of dating ancient Egyptian literature. There are seventeen papers in the conference acts, whereas fifteen were read at the conference—or sixteen if one includes the introduction to the conference by G. Moers and A. Loprieno (p. [xiii]).

The relation between the written and the read is as follows. A paper read by S. Bickel on the dating of the *Wisdom of Merikare* is not published here and the paper read by Stauder on using linguistic criteria to date literary texts apparently found written expression in his monograph.

That reduces to thirteen the papers both read at the conference and published in the acts. It also means that four papers were added to the written acts, as follows: O. Goelet, Jr. writes on the format and paleography of the Middle Egyptian *Book of Kemyt*, R. B. Parkinson on the effect of the proposed later datings of Middle Egyptian literary works on his own theoretical conception of that literature, and D. A. Werning on the linguistic dating of the New Kingdom *Netherworld books*. In addition, G. Moers' introductory oral remarks were developed into a much larger written introduction about the “vanishing of certainties” (*Verschwinden der Gewissheiten*). G. Moers is referring here to the aforementioned attempts to date some Middle Egyptian literary works that had seemed with certainty dated to the Middle Kingdom to much later because no manuscript copies transmitting them date to earlier than Dynasty 19.

Middle Egyptian literature is the main focus of the conference. It is the main subject of nine of the seventeen written papers and the partial subject of two, for a total of eleven. Of the six other papers, three offer “comparative perspectives” by focusing on dating literatures other than Egyptian literature: M. Stolz's on dating Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzifal*, which was written in the early Middle Ages; S. Weeks's on dating Hebrew biblical texts; and J. Van Seters' on dating Hebrew biblical narrative texts as compared to dating the Egyptian *Admonitions of Ipuwer*.

The other three are concerned with the New Kingdom and beyond. D. A. Werning's aforementioned paper strictly speaking deals with religious literature. P. Vernus dates Amenemope, also mentioned before, by linguistic means to Dynasty 21, that is, around 1000 B.C.E. And D. Van der Plas defends his dating of the *Hymn to Hapi*—also known as the *Hymn to the Nile*—to the New Kingdom, fully realizing that it is usually dated to the Middle Kingdom.

Something has already been said above about three of the eleven papers concerned with the Middle Kingdom, Goelet's, Moers', and Parkinson's. I briefly characterize the remaining eight.

I first turn to the two papers that focus on all stages of the Egyptian language while including Middle Egyptian, S. Schweitzer's and A. von Lieven's. Schweitzer discusses the usefulness of vocabulary, or lexical criteria, in dating texts; von Lieven, that of grammar. That leaves six papers, the following:

A. Dorn is interested in where the manuscripts transmitting Middle Egyptian literature were found—to the limited extent that this is known—and what this means.

I disrupt the alphabetical order, characterizing A. Gnirs' paper before A. Giewekemeyer's because the latter makes much reference to the former. Gnirs's paper is central to the conference because she has prominently proposed dating certain presumed Middle Kingdom literary works attested only in New Kingdom manuscripts to the early New Kingdom. So have Bickel and van der Plas. These late datings have met with fierce opposition mounted by Quack and others (p. 415). But Gnirs is standing her ground. Gnirs walked straight into—and trampled on—Quack's own backyard by dating Merikare, of which Quack has provided a new edition, to much later than he would.

In the longest paper of all, A. Giewekemeyer treats Gnirs' thesis at length, focusing on *The Words of Neferti*, and generally rises in defense of it. Gnirs uses historical information in order to date what have generally been considered Middle Kingdom literary works to the New Kingdom. This procedure involves a second major topic. One generally does not read Jane Austen to learn something about the history of nineteenth-century England. That does not mean that one cannot learn a lot about nineteenth century England from reading Jane Austen's books. So should one read them with that aim in mind? Gnirs discusses the relation between history and literature at length.

U. Verhoeven discusses a remarkable set of New Kingdom graffiti from a tomb at Assiut citing statements from Middle Egyptian literary texts, mainly incipits of wisdom texts. What I personally find most remarkable about this find is that the citations are somewhat representative of what survives of Middle Egyptian literature, at least as far as Middle Egyptian wisdom literature is concerned. Because more than 99.9% of what we could have had of ancient Egyptian civilization is forever lost, there is always the temptation to assume that there are huge gaps in what we know about Middle Egyptian literature. The range of the citations seem to suggest that what has survived of Middle Egyptian literature may be somewhat representative of what once existed, again, as far as wisdom texts are concerned. Or at the very least, it is representative of what selectively kept being copied of it in the New Kingdom.

K. Widmaier analyzes the Teaching of Cheti, better known as the Satire of the Trades. He does not seem to be fully sure whether it is Middle Kingdom or New Kingdom. In any event, the question that he is trying to answer is as follows: What did copying the Teaching mean to New Kingdom scribes?

J. F. Quack's paper is a sweeping survey of the history of dating Egyptian literature in modern Egyptology. His bibliography contains 310 items, 33 authored by himself, if I counted correctly (I only counted once). Quack distinguishes three epochs that follow the epoch of the pioneers. Quack, here as elsewhere, demonstrates exceptional command of the literature. He also stresses the importance of knowing this literature, pushing this point by placing the following cynical quote by H. Heimpel as epigraph atop his paper: "Knowing the literature protects one from making new discoveries."

Indeed, J. W. von Goethe supposedly said that the history of a science is the science itself—I hope to find out some day where and if he did. Then again, should the truth not be independent of anyone's opinion? G. Boole speaks of searching for "truth" that is "not dependent, as to its essence, upon any human opinion," a truth that is "free from any personal admixture" (*An Investigation of the Laws of Thought* [1854], [viii]–[ix]). Does it matter who discovered a truth, beyond the desirability of extending due credit? The physicist J. C. Maxwell explains how it can. He believed that "science is always most completely assimilated when it is in the nascent state" (*A Treatise on Electricity and Magnetism* [New York: Dover, 1954], xi), and he was referring primarily to M. Faraday's work.

In other words, the truths of mathematics and physics can be better comprehended by studying how they were established in the first place. Then again, in a humanities field such as Egyptology, there are fewer universally accepted truths. The need therefore arises to cite everyone all the time. The ability to do so is admirable but simply not practical and in the long run even impossible. A partial remedy may be the use of a scientific idiom that combines explicit reference to the very few hard facts with the repeated acknowledgment of how little can be inferred from them. This may frustrate some who find certain points of view very improbable. But the state of the evidence is such that it often allows a minority or even outlandish position to keep evading positive falsification.

It is noted at the outset of the conference acts that some of the contributions are of “epic dimensions” (p. ix). The longer contributions are by Giewekemeyer (81 pages), Widmaier (75), Moers (67), Quack (65), Vernus (47), Werning (45), and Gnirs (37).

It is not easy to get on top of more than 1200 pages containing hundreds and hundreds of footnotes. These two books are not styled as reference works. But it may be advisable to treat them as such. I certainly intend to. In teaching ancient Egyptian literature, as I do, I will make grateful use of the books’ indexes to locate fresh opinions regarding any matter pertaining to ancient Egyptian literature.

But in the end, fundamental questions that any teacher of ancient Egyptian literature is likely to ask about the two volumes under review are as follows: Have any mileposts been moved radically in regard to dating ancient Egyptian literature? What in these volumes will require me to fundamentally revise the way in which I present Egyptian literature to students?

Clearly, the authors of the conference acts struggle with these issues. I note a lot of uncertainty, a lot of debate, and a lot of disagreement, which renders the task of translating all this into concrete results more difficult. Stauder does not shrink from proposing ranges of dates for literary works (pp. 508–13). But these dating ranges are fairly broad and for the most part do not radically depart from what has been said before, depending upon who is talking.

What is the cause of all the uncertainty? A remark by Quack (pp. 415–16), who gave the conference’s keynote lecture, confirmed the following suspicion on my part: Do we have enough evidence to move matters beyond what has been said before, again and again, and accepted or rejected before, again and again?

According to Quack, the possibility that we do not has been “too rarely made explicit” (*zu selten ausgesprochen*). I agree. It would be interesting to search the volumes’ more than 1200 pages for confessions that something cannot be known. In fact, looking for such statements in Egyptology generally might be interesting. It seems that the duty of the professional student of antiquity is to ascertain positively—for the benefit of fellow Egyptologists, academics in other fields, and serious amateurs—as much what we can know as what we cannot know.

In addition, in my experience, it is often useful to reflect on what kind of evidence one would need in order to prove something. This mental exercise sometimes in fact helps in locating positive evidence.

Meanwhile, is the discussion on dating Egyptian literature in danger of going on endlessly in circles, locked into much intense but fairly inert footnote diplomacy, with everyone citing everyone else, as in this fictional scene observed in a *Weinstube* in a bucolic German university town: *Es wurde den ganzen Abend lustig zitiert und alle gingen zufrieden nach Hause*, senses numbed by too much time spent in the vast paradise of the-not-totally-impossible, with its turquoise waters, pink beaches, and infinite flow of strawberry daquiris?

I am willing myself to believe that there is hope. Why?

It is a fact that the two volumes arrive after two to three decades in which a remarkable number of Egyptian literary works, especially difficult wisdom texts, have received updated editions or new commentaries or both, and in which a new handbook (*Ancient Egyptian Literature*, ed. A. Loprieno [Leiden: Brill, 1996]) has appeared. It can be said that the study of Egyptian literature has witnessed a kind of renaissance in recent times.

The two volumes under review are part of this renaissance. And all this activity serves as evidence of what a high level of sophistication and expertise the analysis of ancient Egyptian literature has achieved.

While it is not fully clear to what degree the two volumes under review have sharpened the dating of ancient Egyptian literature, they overflow with useful observations about countless discrete points, some contentious, some not, pertaining to Egyptian literature, many of them found in the more than 4000 footnotes.

Let this be a good omen of what is to come.

LEO DEPUYDT
BROWN UNIVERSITY