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On interpreting ancient Egyptian funerary texts

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Abstract

Ancient Egyptian funerary texts have traditionally been read as providing detailed, literal descriptions of afterlife beliefs, but various aspects of this view have begun to be questioned in recent research. The present article reviews such contributions in contrast to the classical view of funerary texts as established by Kurt Sethe (1931), arguing that it is possible in several respects to extend their stances and conclusions. The resulting view is one in which the very notion of “funerary texts” as a text genre *sui generis* is questioned, along with the defining feature that such texts contain literal descriptions of a transcendent, personal afterlife. Instead, it is suggested with reference to both Egyptological and interdisciplinary ideas that funerary texts can fruitfully be viewed as sharing their structure and function with other ancient Egyptian ritual texts. In questioning the intuitive reading of the texts as descriptions of the afterlife, such an approach opens up new interpretive possibilities of relevance both within Egyptology and in cross-cultural comparison.

Key-words: Ancient Egyptian Religion; Mortuary Cult; Afterlife; Funerary Texts; Ritual

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Acerca de la interpretación de los textos funerarios del antiguo Egipto

Resumen

Tradicionalmente se ha interpretado que los textos funerarios del antiguo Egipto proporcionaban descripciones literales y detalladas sobre las creencias en el más allá, aunque las investigaciones recientes han sometido a crítica diversos aspectos de este punto de vista. Este artículo pretende presentar estas investigaciones y contrastarlas con la interpretación clásica de los textos funerarios establecida por Kurt Sethe (1931), con el argumento de que en algunos aspectos es posible ir más allá de sus afirmaciones. Se puede así concluir que la misma noción de “textos funerarios” entendida como género textual *sui generis* es cuestionable, así como su supuesta característica fundamental, a saber que tales textos contienen descripciones literales de una vida trascendente y personal en el más allá. Por el contrario, el autor sostiene con el apoyo de ideas tomadas de la Egiptología y de la investigación interdisciplinaria que los textos funerarios comparten estructura y función con otros textos rituales egipcios antiguos. Por ello, al cuestionar la lectura intuitiva de los textos como descripciones de la vida de ultratumba quedan abiertas nuevas posibilidades de interpretación relevantes tanto para la Egiptología como para los estudios comparativos interculturales.

Palabras clave: Religión del antiguo Egipto; Culto funerario; Vida de ultratumba; Textos funerarios; Ritual

1 Introduction

The practice of inscribing or depositing texts in tomb chambers is among the most characteristic ancient Egyptian customs. Because of this location, early Egyptologists quickly concluded that such texts (and their accompanying images) must contain literal descriptions of, or even guidebooks to, the ancient Egyptian afterlife. On the one hand, this meant that the texts could conveniently be used to answer the main question modern observers had for the elaborate Egyptian burial practices, and on the other, the obscure and elaborate mythological ideas expressed in these compositions did little to contradict this interpretation (cf. Nyord 2018b). While the study of ancient Egyptian funerary texts has made great progress over the last century, this

fundamental stance has remained largely unquestioned. In this paper I will present an overview of some current developments in this area. I will argue that such recent progress can fruitfully be regarded as trajectories that can be extended, and that such a logical extension leads ultimately to the abandonment of the 19th-century assumption of the funerary texts as literal descriptions of a transcendent, personal afterlife. At the end of the paper, I present some considerations pointing forward towards a new approach to reading the funerary texts along with some points of intersection with wider cross-cultural work on related topics.

2 Ancient Egyptian funerary texts

While earlier scholars such as Champollion (e.g. 1833: 313–321), Lepsius (1842), and Erman (1885; 1905) played a crucial role in shaping the Egyptological understanding of funerary texts, it is Sethe's synthesis that has proven most directly influential in shaping the modern concept. In his seminal study introducing the notion of "Totenliteratur" (Sethe 1931), he presented his understanding of the funerary texts as completely parallel in nature to all the other grave goods an Egyptian tomb might contain, which he saw as intended to meet the needs of the deceased in the "material life" in the hereafter (Sethe 1931: 520). Unlike objects like weapons or tools, it was less straightforward to imagine what the use of such texts might have been. However, since the notion that they would be useful in the basic manner of a tool had been fixed from the beginning, Sethe was able to deduce the purpose of the texts from their very presence in the tomb:

"Es sind nämlich Sprüche mannigfachster Art, die jeder in seiner Weise kraft einer magischen Wirkung dem Toten den Weg ins Jenseits und im Jenseits bahnen sollen" (Sethe 1931: 521)

While the "magical effect" of the texts is thus the main manner in which they work, it is also clear that Sethe had in mind a more concrete readership of the texts. Thus, in the context of his remarks on the direction of writing in the Pyramid Texts, he noted that changes to the standard orientation were implemented for the convenience of the deceased "der offenbar beim Verlassen des Grabes die Texte möglichst bequem lesen sollte", and accordingly he deduced that the resurrection (be it of the body or the soul, as he went on to consider) of the deceased must thus be regarded as "die Voraussetzung für die Anordnung der Texte in den Pyramiden" (Sethe

1931: 524). The development of the interpretation is instructive: Moving from a descriptive observation on the orientation of the inscriptions, Sethe used the concepts at his disposal for interpreting a funerary context and was thus led directly, not only to a concept of “resurrection”, but also to a sense that this concept was derived in a straightforward fashion from the pure description of the monument. It is further noteworthy that the deduction about resurrection was retained, even when it turns out that the speech situation in the texts did not uniformly conform to the hypothesis of a resurrected deceased as the main reader of the text (Sethe 1931: 524–527); cf. the discussion of this point below).

One of the most immediately striking features of the funerary texts is their heterogeneous nature. Thus, among the first points in Sethe’s classical treatment was:

daß es sich nicht um Neuschöpfungen dieser Zeit [i.e. that of Unas] handeln kann, sondern daß wir es hier mit einer in langen Zeiten zusammengefloßenen Sammlung zu tun haben. Das wird denn auch durch Sprache und Inhalt der Texte vollauf bestätigt; in ihnen treten uns Sprach- und Stilformen des verschiedensten Alters entgegen; die verschiedenartigsten, sich vielfach widersprechenden Vorstellungen, theologischen Lehren, kosmischen und politischen Voraussetzungen, Bestattungssitten usw. kommen darin vor, die zu einem großen Teile nicht mehr der geschichtlichen Zeit angehört haben, sondern uns zwingen, die betreffenden Textstücke in die vorgeschichtliche Zeit zu setzen. (Sethe 1931: 521)

As the quote shows, Sethe’s primary interest in this phenomenon was the possibility of dating the different parts of the text, and he does not appear to have been troubled by the apparent contradictions arising from the juxtaposition of texts which seem to describe the afterlife in very different terms “je nach ihrer Herkunft und ihrem Alter” (Sethe 1931: 522). Sethe similarly noted that the Pyramid Texts, and even more frequently the Coffin Texts, contain writings “die von Haus aus gar nicht als Totentexte gedacht waren, sondern für Vorgänge im Leben bestimmt waren” (Sethe 1931: 531 n. 3). He did not comment further on this phenomenon, but his wording seems to indicate that he regarded such texts as having shifted in purpose once they have become “Totentexte”, so that like other such texts they can, despite their origin, be used to inform the modern scholar about the nature of the ancient Egyptian afterlife. We can thus observe the reification of

the category: The texts in burial compartments of tombs are “Totentexte”, and “Totentexte” describe the afterlife — ergo, if a text is inscribed in a burial chamber, it describes the afterlife, even if the text was first or also used in other contexts. Sethe suggested that the origin of the custom of funerary texts should be sought in the wish to perpetuate the mortuary cult. As Egyptian kings would inevitably have observed that the cults of their predecessors were abandoned, Sethe reasoned, they would have wanted to make the texts available independently of the ability and willingness of mortuary priests to perform them.

A tension was thus created, which remains unresolved in much subsequent work, between what we might label the “technology” (cf. Nyord, Fc.) of inscribing efficacious ritual texts in tombs, and the specific contents and cultural contexts of the texts that are inscribed in this way, both of which are conflated under the heading of “Totenliteratur”. Sethe inherited this problem from his predecessors (e.g. Lepsius 1842: 3–4) who also grappled with the tension between what the texts did (for the Egyptians) and what the texts can be made to tell (the modern scholar). While the focus on the texts as ritual in nature and origin was an important insight which in many ways presaged the most recent work, Sethe’s acceptance of the older idea that the funerary texts can be read as straightforward expositions of Egyptian afterlife beliefs ended up largely overshadowing this. Thus, Sethe’s in many ways perceptive analysis actually ended up cementing some of the problematic assumptions in earlier scholarship, and in introducing the new concept, he contributed to a reification that masks such tensions by combining a number of logically independent assumptions and observations, so that the presence of any one of those features (e.g. a text being inscribed or deposited in a burial chamber) would ascribe it to the category, which in turn allows the modern scholar to deduce all the other features (e.g. it being a description of the afterlife).

As already indicated by this, it is the notion of an “afterlife” described in literal terms in the funerary texts that is especially in need of rethinking. Before proceeding, a note of clarification of this is in order, because of the inherent vagueness of the concept. It would clearly be folly to deny that to the ancient Egyptians cosmic and social relations to deceased individuals continued after their death, and that *in one way or another* the texts and images in tombs can help us understand this (cf. e.g. Fitzenreiter 2008). In contrast, the idea that the Egyptians believed in a transcendent, personal afterlife in which the positive individual experience of the deceased was the main aim seems obviously dependent on frameworks from popular

Christianity. This in itself makes the interpretation somewhat suspect, along with the assumption that, conveniently for the modern observer interested in these questions, they happen to be described in detail in texts from Egyptian tombs. As I will argue in the following, a rejection of this particular notion of an ancient Egyptian “afterlife” is not only possible, but also very much in line with the trajectories of recent research. As I have noted elsewhere (Nyord 2018b: 87 n. 68), it is however likely that there is a (largely unexplored) chronological change in this regard, so the following discussion focusses mainly on the Old and Middle Kingdom stages of the tradition of funerary texts.

2.1 Recent developments in the reading of funerary texts

In most details, Sethe’s views on Egyptian funerary texts have remained dominant through the intervening nine decades. There is no need for our present purposes to document this development in detail, but as a recent example of Sethe’s influence, we may note a volume of commented translations carrying his designation *Totensliteratur* (Assmann and Kucharek 2008) as its title and understanding the eponymous phenomenon as a custom of “ihm [i.e. the deceased] Texte ins Grab mitzugeben, die ihm nach altägyptischer Vorstellung für seine jenseitige Existenz wichtig sind. So kommt es daß wir über die Welt der Toten im Alten Ägypten am detailliertesten informiert sind” (Assmann and Kucharek 2008: 617). Here we see both of the main ideas in Sethe’s interpretation: Funerary texts are meant for the benefit of the deceased analogously with other grave goods, and their contents provide us with concrete information about ancient Egyptian beliefs concerning the nature of the afterlife.

As noted above, Sethe stressed the diversity of the contents, background, and age of the funerary texts, but did not go into detail about what such original contexts might be. Even before Sethe, it had been a natural assumption, in some cases supported by details in the texts, that at least some of the recitations would have a connection to the funerary ritual, but until relatively recently this remained largely conjectural (e.g. Altenmüller 1972). However, in a series of works of the last decades of the 20th century, Jan Assmann was able to show through intertextual evidence and patterns of transmission that certain groups of texts were what he termed “mortuary liturgies” (e.g. Assmann 2005), i.e. texts apparently reproduced directly from recitations during ritual performances. This idea proved seminal for

subsequent works focusing on elucidating the ritual background of texts as a primary way of interpreting their contents (notable monographic examples include Willems 1996; Assmann 2005; Hays 2012; Regulski 2020).

This identification also led Assmann to suggest an overall formal distinction between two subcategories within the funerary texts, on the one hand “mortuary liturgies” and on the other “Totenliteratur” proper. In the Pyramid Texts, Assmann suggested, the texts are generally liturgical, and their function is that of a “prosthesis of voice” (Assmann 2005: 248). On the other hand, with the Coffin Texts and their rubrics and ritual instructions, texts are added which function as a “store of knowledge” or “artificial recollection” (*ibid.*). In making this distinction, Assmann thus brought to the fore the apparent tension referred to above between the form and ostensible function of the text. As he put it:

In the case of the mortuary *literature*, it is a matter of written codification of a store of knowledge that is placed in the tomb along with the deceased for the purpose of equipping him for the afterlife; in the case of the mortuary *liturgies*, however, it is a matter of recording cultic recitations whose salutary effect is to surround the deceased permanently. In the one case, writing serves as an artificial prosthesis of recollection that is to replace the recollection that has disintegrated in death, while in the other case, it serves as a prosthesis of the voice, specifically the voice of the reciting priest, which it will cause to ring out forever in the depths of the sarcophagus chamber. (Assmann 2005: 248f, emphasis in the original)

As can be seen from this quote, the notion of mortuary literature is heavily dependent on Sethe’s idea of the texts as a means of equipping the deceased with something that he or she would need in the afterlife. If such texts are ritual (as they seem to be both from rhetorical patterns and especially from rubrics and instructions for their usage), it is only in the sense that the deceased can carry them out in the afterlife. On the other hand, the mortuary liturgies occur in the tomb as a secondary usage dependent on their (actual or putative) performance by others for the deceased, and are meant to render their effect permanent, or perhaps even substitute for their actual performance.

An important criterion for Assmann’s distinction between mortuary literature and mortuary liturgy is that of the wording of the text, especially in terms of grammatical person. As mortuary literature in his narrower

sense is intended for the use of the deceased, it is typically worded in the first person (so the deceased can read it for themselves) or otherwise personalized by inserting the name of the text's owner. On the other hand, mortuary liturgies are performed by other people *for* the deceased and hence are worded with the deceased being spoken to in the second person. Subsequently, Harold Hays (2012) formalized this distinction in terms of grammatical person into an overall classification scheme for the Pyramid Texts. The main distinction for Hays, by contrast, was that between what he terms "sacerdotal texts", i.e. texts evidencing the involvement of more than one person by the reciter speaking either to (2nd person) or about (3rd person) the deceased, on the one hand, and those where the deceased seems to speak only of him- or herself (1st person) without explicitly involving anyone else and thus labeled "personal texts". In a recent contribution, however, Harco Willems (2019) has cogently questioned the general validity of this distinction, arguing that classification of dialog structure cannot be equated with different social functions of the text in any simple way. Willems cast doubt upon this basic premise by pointing to the inconsistency of dialog structure in copies of the same text (Willems 2019: 212–214) as well as the fact that internal evidence might lead to a redistribution of some of Hays's categories (Willems 2019: 214–217), making it unlikely that the dialog structure suggested by Hays would have corresponded directly to emic classifications by the scribes working with the texts.

The key point in Willems's paper, however, and the point of greatest relevance for a new understanding of the funerary texts, deals with the identity of the speaker in such texts. Noting a number of examples from ancient Egyptian rituals, Willems suggested that texts in which the deceased is apparently speaking about him- or herself in the first person might very plausibly have been recited ritually on behalf of the deceased by a living person, meaning that both Assmann's residual category of "Totenliteratur" and that of Hays's "personal texts" become much less obviously distinctive. Willems (2019: 228) cautiously noted that "the question arises to what extent the traditional non-ritual hypothesis concerning these texts is justified". Not to put too fine a point on it Willems's argument strongly suggests that there is no such thing as "Totenliteratur" in Assmann's (and Sethe's) sense of non-ritual texts intended solely for the knowledge of the deceased in the afterlife¹.

¹Willems (2019: 240) clarified rightly that while it has not been demonstrated that his interpretation holds for all the texts formulated in the first person, it is a possibility that "cannot be ruled out".

In one sense, the mere fact that a large group of texts present deceased people as performing ritual recitations, sometimes accompanied with instructions for the pertinent ritual acts, makes it quite obvious that someone else must have performed those rituals on their behalf. The main obstacle to this conclusion is the long-standing assumption that the texts were intended for the use of the deceased in the afterlife, simply by virtue of their inscription in a burial chamber — an idea the historical contingency of which I have suggested both in the present paper and elsewhere (Nyord 2018b).

In Sethe's original conception of the funerary texts, we have noted a fundamental tension between what we might call the narrative layer, i.e. the events and situations described explicitly in the text and taken by Sethe to be literal descriptions of the afterlife, and their function as efficacious ritual texts, i.e. texts meant to benefit the deceased in ways that might or might not be directly derived from their informational context. In another recent contribution, Willems (2017) has taken up this question in a presentation of his method of "sequencing" for reading funerary texts. A fundamental idea in this approach is that Egyptian rituals, while to some extent open-ended and capable of expansion with the composition or addition of new texts, are nonetheless based on fundamental "narrative patterns" laying out the basic situations, roles, and sequences of events on which a given ritual draws (Willems 2017: 600–601). The underlying idea is thus that "the 'users' of Egyptian religious texts often had in their heads a narrative sequence, which (because it was known) did not have to be made explicit in writing" (Willems 2017: 603). The aim of Willems's method, then, is to clarify this sequence through close reading of the clues a given text provides.

This is clearly an eminently useful approach, some version of which is just about inescapable when attempting to make sense of ancient Egyptian (or other) ritual texts. As such, the systematization and explication that Willems has offered is a significant step forward towards a methodology relating to Egyptian funerary texts. At the same time, however, the concrete implementation of the method of sequencing may end up leaning in unfortunate ways on certain of Sethe's (as well as both earlier and later scholars') assumptions about funerary texts.

In Willems's discussion this is exemplified in this move from the basic mythological situation of Osiris being protected from Seth's attacks in the place of embalming (Willems 2017: 600–601) to the pattern that he suggested is found in a number of funerary texts relating to "the journey of the deceased through the hereafter" (Willems 2017: 605). In terms of the

questions occupying us here, there is a fundamental epistemic shift between these two examples. Whereas the first presents a mythological precedent which is used to structure the situation of the individual deceased, in the second case we are dealing not with a mythological precedent, but rather — as implied clearly by Willems's wording — with a scenario relating to an actual (if presumably transcendent) situation of the deceased. In other words, the application of the method of sequencing has moved subtly from elucidating the narrative structure underlying the ritual situation to establishing a sequence of events that the Egyptians allegedly believed would take place in the afterlife (and thus taking us back to Sethe's assumption that the texts describe the Egyptian afterlife in literal terms).

An interpretation avoiding this move is, however, entirely possible. In the exemplified case, what Willems suggests to be a literal description of the journey of the deceased in the afterlife could instead be understood as a structural pattern of a dynamic ritualist approaching a passive beneficiary without entailing that the Egyptians believed this to be a literal description of the fate of the dead. In fact, in a different contribution Willems (2019: 242) noted that structurally this concept is identical to that underlying the relationship between priest and god in the temple service. Thus, the specific expectation that this pattern should be a literal description of the afterlife appears based solely on vestiges of 19th-century expectations from the funerary texts.

As seen above, the tradition of interpreting Egyptian funerary texts in this vein has a long history behind it, but as will also have become clear from the preceding discussion, this illustrious history is arguably the main thing this line of interpretation has to commend it. It is entirely possible to draw on the undisputed advantages offered by the method of sequencing without accepting the traditional epistemic stance that the result of such an analysis is a literal description of the ancient Egyptian afterlife. Rather, as in the case of the situation surrounding the embalming of Osiris as analyzed by Willems, the result is one or more underlying conceptual patterns, whereas any translation of such patterns into literal beliefs about the afterlife on the part of the Egyptians would need to be argued separately (which turns out to be difficult in practice, or at least has never really been attempted).

As mentioned above, Sethe was very clear that some of the funerary texts had their origins in cultural domains not related to burials. However, it was also seen that he regarded their adoption in the category of funerary texts as evidence that they were now understood as relating in a direct and literal fashion to Egyptian ideas about the afterlife. Possibly for this reason,

Egyptological discussions about the potential non-funerary uses of funerary texts have been a matter of some controversy, a state of affairs not helped along by the relatively limited vocabulary and conceptual frameworks offered by Egyptology for classifying such phenomena.

As the texts were regarded primarily as descriptions of the afterlife, their use amongst the living quite logically became connected with mystical experience of the beyond while the experiencer was still alive (notable contributions include Federn 1960; Wente 1982; cf. Hays 2012: 49–50). This notion in turn seemed somewhat at odds with the apparently highly formalistic and carefully scripted practices of ancient Egyptian religion, which has tended to make the question very much a matter of different scholars' individual models for what Egyptian religion was like on the one hand, and on the other hand of more technical questions of the transmission of individual texts (see the summary of this debate in Willems 1996: 279–284).

Most recently, various scholars (Gee 2006; von Lieven 2012, 2017, 2019; Nyord 2015; Quack 2006; Willems 2019: 229–239) have focused on texts from the funerary corpora which, on the basis of a variety of text-internal and/or intertextual evidence, can be argued to be non-funerary in origin. As noted above, while this recognition is quite old, certain interpretations of the phenomenon have remained controversial, so for the present purposes, the question becomes what the implication of funerary “adoption” of such texts should be taken to be. The traditional idea already alluded to above is that whatever its origin, once a text is written or deposited in a tomb chamber, it becomes a funerary text, usually implying that either its purpose or its contents indicates the nature of the Egyptian afterlife. As an example of this stance, von Lieven (2019: 114–115) has suggested that a spell interpreted to have been originally meant for making a newborn child breathe is included in the Coffin Texts “for the benefit of the deceased, as the wish for breathing air again after death was of major relevance”.

If the main approach to the funerary texts has thus been to assume that their recitations offer a straightforward, literal description of situations and events in the afterlife, Mark Smith (2014: 87–90, 2017: 141–144) has cautioned in recent works that this is not necessarily the case. Building on the by now robust case of the texts as being ritual in nature, Smith argued that recitations accompanying rituals are not generally speaking expositions of dogmatic beliefs, but rather can be freely chosen and combined by principles governed by the aim of ritual efficacy. Accepting this consequence of the understanding of the funerary texts as ritual texts solves one of the

fundamental interpretive problems noted by Sethe as well as his forebears (e.g. Erman 1905: 114), namely that the numerous apparent contradictions and incompatibilities did not seem to bother the Egyptians (Smith 2017: 138-141).

On the other hand, this stance leaves us without an answer to the fundamental question that the funerary texts have traditionally been deployed to explain — namely what the ancient Egyptians believed the afterlife was like. As a solution to this unsatisfying situation, Smith (2014: 89; 2017: 147–155) suggested that a different subset of tomb texts may in fact provide this information, notably the paratextual elements sometimes accompanying the recitations themselves in funerary texts, as well as the wishes incorporated in the traditional offering formula in tomb inscriptions.

Smith's move thus avoids a number of problems and constitutes a crucial step away from the 19th-century assumptions still underlying the study of funerary texts. However, such texts on the margins of the traditional category of funerary literature (paratexts and offering formulae) are still very much lodged in the ritual situations of funeral and ancestor cult without any clear indication that they do in fact refer to the kind of transcendent afterlife realities that we would like for them to describe. In fact, many of the most common such wishes refer clearly to ritual actions in the necropolis rather than transcendent realities (wishes for offerings, a perfect burial, and so on, cf. Barta 1968). While others do indeed seem more amenable to a transcendent “afterlife” interpretation, even this can be questioned in many cases. Thus, for example, a wish to “cross the great canal” (*Urk.* I, 190, 16) sounds in principle like the kind of thing we have come to expect the deceased doing in the afterlife. However, the determinative with which the word *wrt* is written is clearly reminiscent of a waterway depicted as part of funerary processions (e.g. Junker 1940: 11; Settgast 1963: 66f), so that in this case, where we happen to have an indication of the context, the wish once again seems to refer to ritual in and around the tomb. On the other hand, firm evidence that such wishes refer to dogmatic belief in a transcendent afterlife is much more difficult to find, and the expectation to find this mainly seems to come out of the traditional way of reading the funerary texts, which has thus been carried over to the mortuary wishes without questioning its history and basis.

If a spell or sequence carries a title like *Spell of the ba of Shu. Transformations to Shu* (*CT* I, 314a [75]), that would indeed seem to indicate that such a goal was useful or desirable to the person in whose coffin it was inscribed. However, we can no more translate that into dogmatic

afterlife beliefs along the lines that “The Egyptians believed that the dead were transformed into Shu” than is the case with the recitation itself. Rather questions like “What does it mean for a person to be transformed into a god?” would still need to be the starting point of the analysis, as opposed to a particular concept of a transcendent, personal afterlife into which notions like “becoming Shu” can then be fit in through theological exegesis.

The solution to this problem would seem to be to take Smith’s move even further. Just like the funerary texts, because of their ritual nature, cannot be read as literal statements about beliefs, the same is true of the mortuary wishes and paratexts for precisely the same reason, namely their embedding in funerary and mortuary ritual. While cautioning against the literal reading of funerary texts as description of beliefs about the afterlife, Smith nonetheless upheld the underlying assumption that the “world” in which the texts are meant to be efficacious “is not our world, the world of the living, but the afterlife” (Smith 2017: 148). As has been seen, this assumption has a long history in Egyptology, but if we cannot use the funerary texts themselves to demonstrate it, Smith’s caution actually raises the question how we could establish on a firm basis that the texts do in fact describe the afterlife.

One answer might be that if we wanted firm evidence of an ancient Egyptian belief in the afterlife (and the exact nature of this afterlife), we would want to find it in texts that are not directly related to the rituals, for example wisdom texts, or non-literary texts such as letters. In most other societies in which the afterlife was an important religious concept (popular Christianity, say), such texts are full of references to rewards, punishments, and more general expectations of the afterlife. In ancient Egypt, such considerations are in fact conspicuously rare for most periods of Pharaonic history, and the passages that have been interpreted along these lines are generally relatively obscure and open to different readings, in addition to often drawing on a somewhat different vocabulary from that found in the funerary texts (e.g. *Merikare* E 40–42 and 50–57 = Quack 1992: 171 and 173–175). In other words, a dogmatic belief in a transcendent, personal afterlife the way it has been imagined along the lines of popular Christianity (as opposed to the well-attested continued existence of ancestors in the tomb in a new form) is still in need of demonstration in ancient Egypt, if the largely unquestioned assumption that this is what the funerary texts describe does not hold up.

A good example that it is possible to read ancient Egyptian funerary texts without necessarily foregrounding their role in personal afterlife

salvation is offered by studies by Katja Goebis (2008; 2019). Building on earlier scholars who identified the central role of various cosmic elements in the funerary texts (see overview in Goebis 2008: 4–6), the focus in Goebis’s approach is particularly on astronomical (as opposed to transcendent “celestial”) processes and the ritual implements and actions associated with them.

Certain elements of astronomical readings of the funerary texts like that presented by Krauss (1997), on which part of Goebis’s approach is based, remain controversial (cf. e.g. Depuydt 2000). However, the methodological move of attempting to understand the world of the texts on its own terms without interpolating an overarching narrative of personal salvation from the beginning is important to note in the present context. Reading the texts primarily as references to cosmic and mythological processes in which a given individual can be embedded through ritual performance, as opposed to the assumed primacy of the salvation of an individual in whose service a barrage of mythology is deployed, offers a subtle but crucial distinction. Without in any way explicitly rejecting the framework of personal salvation, Goebis thus has offered relatively rare examples in modern Egyptology of a reading of the funerary texts which is not directly dependent on this framework and can hence provide an inspiration for future studies in this direction.

2.2 What are “ritual” texts?

Sethe’s notion of the texts as ritual in nature and origin presages in an embryonic form many of the arguments in recent scholarship. However, Sethe combined this insight with the older notion that the funerary texts (conveniently for the modern scholar) contain literal descriptions of the ancient Egyptian afterlife. This uneasy conflation has remained through subsequent scholarship, and plays some role also in the most recent contributions as seen above, so the implications of the identification of a text as “ritual” are worth exploring briefly, both within and outside of Egyptology.

Ritual texts often draw on mythology to establish the patterns that the ritualist wishes to apply to the situation at hand. Thus, the indomitable cycle of the sun can be used to effect the protection of a child from spirits of the dead by enlisting Re as an ally (e.g. *Mutter und Kind*, spells Q–T = Yamazaki 2003), the healing and protection of the young Horus in the Delta marshes can structure the protection against attacks from venomous animals (e.g. *Mutter und Kind*, spell E, *ibid.*), and the solar cycle or Osiris mythology

can be used to pattern the fate of a dead human being (as frequently in the funerary texts). However, the latter instance has received a special status in Egyptological scholarship because of the research history sketched above. Thus, rather than being understood as presenting mythological patterns applicable to a specific situation, they have come to be understood as *concrete* and *literal* descriptions of what the Egyptians believed about the afterlife. We can illustrate the problematic nature of this through the parallelism with the other ritual situations just mentioned (cf. also Smith 2017: 141–144).

At least since Erman (1905), we have become used to seeing statement like “the Egyptians believed that the dead ascended to the sky” or “the Egyptians believed that the dead became Osiris”. However, this is based on a literal reading of the mythology in ritual texts, and would thus be similar to saying “the Egyptians believed that newborn children became the rising sun” or “the Egyptians believed that people stung by a scorpion became Horus” — in other words, the pattern deployed to solve a challenge experienced in the life of the users of the text was misunderstood as a dogmatic belief, because that is what modern scholars expected to find.

It thus seems that the study of ancient Egyptian funerary texts – and because of their central traditional status by implication ancient Egyptian mortuary religion more widely – would be ripe for rethinking. One option, which in light of the discussion above I regard as the least promising, would be to construct an argument in favour of the traditional reading of the funerary texts as literal descriptions of the afterlife. As has been seen throughout the present discussion (and cf. Nyord 2018b), to the extent such arguments have been attempted in the past, they have tended to be apodictic and circular, but in principle it should be possible to approach this idea as a hypothesis to be argued rather than an unquestioned assumption.

Setting this possibility aside for the moment, two more innovative ways forward present themselves. One would be to regard the texts as fundamentally similar to other ancient Egyptian ritual texts. In this reading, the references to the various roles and activities taken on by the deceased would be no more literal descriptions of his or her experiences in the afterlife than the identification of a living patient in a healing ritual with roles of Horus or Re. The mythological pattern in both cases holds relevance within the ritual situation where it is instrumental for achieving the desired effect, but is not (necessarily) concerned with any change in identity or status of global and permanent relevance. This solves one of the core problems that has tended to be sidestepped, but not resolved, since the 19th century,

namely that the texts apparently introduce so many contradictory views of the afterlife. This is only a problem if the texts are regarded as literal descriptions of dogmatic beliefs, whereas for ritual texts this type of shifts and contradictions are no problem at all as long as each pattern can be applied to the situation of the ritual.

The second possible way forward would to be focus more closely on what the texts do tell us. If we do not need to fit all of the contents of the texts into the mould of a quest for personal salvation and empowerment, we can begin to see all of the mythological references in the texts in a new light. As indicated by Goebis, much of what happens in the texts has to do with cosmic processes of creation and maintenance. It is likely in principle that such ideas, and the notion that human beings can take on the roles of beneficial gods, first came out of the divine cult, and the implications of this can be explored anew in this light. In the use in burials, however, the phenomenon of funerary texts also raises the question of what it tells us about ancestors in ancient Egypt that they were equipped with such writings.

Answering these questions require a renewed interest in, and exploration of, the phenomenon of funerary texts. In a sense the most crucial step is to begin approaching the texts with an open mind rather than assuming that we have known intuitively since the 19th century what the texts are and how they work. Simply reading the texts again, while ruling out of court the notion that they are conveniently literal descriptions of the ancient Egyptian afterlife (at least until such a view has been plausibly argued) will be a necessary first step.

In a recent contribution (Nyord 2018a), I have argued that formulations across a variety of different text genres occupied with mythology (hemerologies, narratives, texts for healing and protection, funerary texts) indicate the outline of a general ancient Egyptian model for the relationship between mythology and the phenomenal world. In this interpretation, mythological patterns are the language used to describe the hidden processes leading to observable phenomena, making it possible not only to speak about, but also to divine or manipulate their coming into being. The latter process is referred to in various Egyptian texts as *hpr*, a word which would thus appear to have a much more precise technical meaning in ancient Egyptian ontology than the conventional glosses like “come into being” or “transform” indicate. Notably for the present purposes, the word can be used to indicate the relationship between a mythological pattern and the ritual that instantiates it, a mechanism which, as has been seen, straddles the

traditional categories of “cultic”, “magical”, and “funerary” rituals (Nyord 2018a: 63–67).

The importance of this idea in the present connection is that it thus implies precisely the kind of general concept of ritual uses of myth that was suggested above. Mythological references in ritual can be understood as a technical language for conceptualising (and manipulating) the world’s coming into being. If the use of myth in the funerary texts is governed by similar considerations, we can see just how amiss we would be to understand individual mythological episodes referred to in the texts as literal descriptions of the afterlife simply because that is what modern observers since the 19th century have expected and wanted to find.

So far, the discussion has very much focused on internal Egyptological discussions of the characteristic ancient Egyptian custom of funerary literature. As has been seen, following and extending the vectors of a number of recent such contributions lead to a point of convergence where the main reason to uphold the special status of funerary texts turned out to be purely conventional. As it happens, such a reinterpretation also aligns with certain strands of recent theoretical work in neighbouring fields, and these connections are worth bringing out briefly by way of conclusion.

The first of these concepts relates to the strand of the preceding discussion concerning cogent ways of reading ritual texts. Historian of religions Jørgen Podemann Sørensen (e.g. 1993; 2006) has long advocated for a cross-cultural understanding of ritual dynamics along the lines presented here. According to his model, ritual constitutes a distinct “level” at which religions can be studied (analogous to the linguistic distinction between phonology, morphology, semantics, etc.), and is characterized by its specific purposefulness or efficacy — rituals aim at making some manner of change in the world. The second key feature is that rituals are “representative acts”, i.e. they make use of standard, notably linguistic, signification, but unlike ordinary communication, they are not dependent on a receiver decoding them.

The latter point is crucial when analyzing rituals, because many ritual recitations indeed look like ordinary communication, however, “[t]he logic and meaning of the representations displayed in ritual are not there to inform or persuade, but to work” (Podemann Sørensen 1993: 22). Reading ritual texts as if they were ordinary communication is precisely what leads to the kind of contradictions that have been seen as a frustrating feature of the funerary texts. As Podemann Sørensen pointed out in relation to the old debate about the alleged ancient Egyptian monotheism:

It is an astonishing, but I think undeniable, fact that participants in almost a hundred years of discussion about “monotheist tendencies” in ancient Egyptian religion simply failed to acknowledge that their source material was ritual texts, in which they should not expect to find catechetic statements on the nature of God. (Podemann Sørensen 1993: 15)

As seen in the preceding discussion, we could say something very similar about the transcendent, personal afterlife as it has been sought in the funerary texts.

The second concept to be discussed briefly here can be used to put the ancient Egyptian understanding of the relationship between myth and ritual into perspective. In his analysis of Cuban Ifá divination, anthropologist Martin Holbraad (2012) related the methods by which one of 256 mythical “paths” becomes connected to the real-life problem prompting the divination, thereby establishing a new state of the world in which the mythical pattern is seen to underlie the phenomenal situation. It is a fundamental claim among practitioners that Ifá divinations are by definition “true”, and much of Holbraad’s analysis concerns the question of what concept of “truth” can make sense of such statements.

In a more recent contribution, Holbraad (2020) noted the fundamental “asymmetry” between the two colliding paths (the mythical and phenomenal) that lead to the new truth:

The mythical paths of Ifá are so powerful precisely because, deemed to contain within them the truth about “everything,” as practitioners say, they can have a transformative effect on “anything,” that is, any particular life-circumstances that happen to occasion the consultation. To move in the opposite direction and try to alter the content of the mythical corpus of Ifá by bringing to bear on it the contingencies of any given personal life circumstance – the imponderabilia of everyday life – would for the practitioners of Ifá be a cosmological *non sequitur*. It would be something equivalent to a Catholic pilgrim saying that he goes to Our Lady of Lourdes to cure the ailments of the Virgin Mary. (Holbraad 2020: 20)

While the general relation between myth and ritual in Ifá divination and ancient Egypt is thus otherwise similar, in Egypt the relationship does in fact seem to be capable of going both ways in very similar ways to

the counterfactual Catholic example given by Holbraad (e.g. the priest approaching the shrine in order to restore the body of Osiris). This brings into relief another example of a theme that is certainly prevalent in the funerary texts (e.g. Willems 1997), but can be seen in a quite different light if understood, for example, as originating in the temple cult, as opposed to being a literal description of events that happen to take place in the transcendent afterlife.

3 Conclusion

Abandoning the idea that funerary texts necessarily contain literal descriptions of a transcendent, personal afterlife opens a number of new interpretive avenues. Perhaps most obviously, it spurs on a renewed interest in the possible original social and conceptual contexts of individual spells and sequences. As seen above, the traditional approach has tended to assume as default that unless a case could be made for a different origin, texts could be regarded as literal afterlife descriptions, and often even when such a case could be made, the inclusion of such texts in the funerary corpus could be taken to indicate a broadened concept of the afterlife. Instead of this convenient stance, we now need to take up the difficult task of reconsidering, e.g. what it can mean for a reciter to claim identity with a god, what ontological assumptions underlie this, and in what possible social setting(s) such a recitation might have worked. Some of these questions are clearly difficult to answer. Yet, as we have seen, simply shrugging at the contents of a text and concluding that apparently that is what the Egyptians believed happened in the afterlife can no longer be regarded as a cogent alternative to an engagement with the text and its concepts on this more fundamental level.

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