History

literature in ancient Egypt

The ancient Egyptians produced many types of written texts, such as religious works (funerary texts and autobiographies, hymns, and litanies, or collections of prayers), administrative documents (inventories and payrolls), legal documents, medical texts, historical texts, letters, manuals, onomastica (catalogues of things arranged by kind), spells, narratives, love poems, teachings, dialogues, and lamentations. The texts are diverse, so the question arises as to which of them can be categorized as literature in the Western sense of the word. This question is difficult to answer, and not all scholars agree.

Unfortunately, there is no Egyptian word to define the different types of writings. The blanket term writings was used by the ancient Egyptians to describe most of their textual material. Alternatively, the terms command and teaching were also sometimes applied. Modern scholars tend to categorize the documents based on their context, content, physical form, date, or script. The majority of what was written down was written to communicate or record information. However, there are several texts that seem to conform to modern ideas of literature.

Old Kingdom

In the beginning writing was used to label items, such as a person, a place, or a belonging and sometimes even an event. The art of writing was said to be derived from the gods, and there was a certain mystique that went along with the written word. The first time that writing emerges on a large scale is in the Offering List that appears in the Old Kingdom (ca. 2575–ca. 2134 BCE) private tombs. These tombs belonged to the wealthy nobles who generally invested everything they had in their tomb construction. This sort of list enumerates such items as materials, ointments, and food products. These were the items that the deceased wished to receive. The Offering List was a significant step toward the development of literature, and this occurred in the private realm.

Eventually the list increased in size and warranted reorganization. The Egyptians then decided to substitute for the list a "Prayer for Offerings." This prayer became the focal point for all tomb decoration. Simultaneously, with the addition of narrative, the long lists of the deceased's titles evolved into an autobiography. It was during the Fifth Dynasty (ca. 2465–ca. 2323 BCE) that both the prayer and the autobiography were standard features in tomb decoration. However, the "Prayer for Offerings" had certain limitations in that it was tightly bound to the cult of the dead; the autobiography, on the other hand, became quite elaborate in the Sixth Dynasty (ca. 2323–ca. 2150 BCE) and remained in use for the next two millennia.

The autobiography focused on the positive characteristics of the deceased, or the idealized characteristics created by society. Nothing negative or derogatory was ever included in these inscriptions. The purpose of the autobiography was to preserve the name of the deceased for all eternity. The deceased himself would be reborn in the hereafter, and his name would live forever on earth. An example of a Sixth Dynasty tomb autobiography is that of Weni, which consists of 51 vertical columns of hieroglyphs. It is from Abydos. A short excerpt reads as follows: "While I was senior warden of Nekhen, his majesty made me a sole companion and overseer of the royal tenants. I replaced four overseers of royal tenants who were there. I acted for his majesty's praise in guarding, escorting the king, and attending. I acted throughout so that his majesty praised me for it exceedingly." Often the tomb autobiography seems very self-laudatory to the modern reader. One of the most well-known Old Kingdom tomb autobiographies is that of Harkhuf, which also dates to the Sixth Dynasty and is found at Aswān.

Accompanying the autobiography was the more formulaic catalogue of virtues. This set of moral standards mirrors the ethical code illustrated in the second type of literature that emerged in the Old Kingdom: wisdom literature. Wisdom literature can be broken down further under the headings teachings (instructions), laments, and dialogues. Short maxims were created and then consolidated to form the instruction. The teachings, or didactic texts, take the form of instructions given by a father to his son. In some examples the characters involved are officials or royalty from the past.

The earliest surviving instruction is that of Hardjedef. This text has been compiled from nine ostraca (pieces of pottery with inscribed writing) of New Kingdom date (ca. 1550–ca. 1070 BCE) and a wooden tablet of the Late Period (ca. 712–ca. 332 BCE). However, it is thought that the text dates to the Fifth Dynasty; it opens, "Beginning of the Instruction made by the Hereditary Prince, Count, King's Son, Hardjedef, for his son, his nursling, whose name is Au-ib-re." One of the preserved instructions
advises that one should found a household, take a wife, and have a son.

The "Instruction Addressed to Kagemni" and the "Teaching of the Vizier Ptah-hotep" also date to the Old Kingdom. The former text is preserved in the Papyrus Prisse, but its beginning is lost. It is followed on the papyrus by the only complete copy of the latter text. The "Teaching of the Vizier Ptah-hotep" is also preserved on two additional papyri and a wooden tablet. This work is a very long instruction and consists of 37 maxims, a prologue, and an epilogue. The main themes of this work are self-control, moderation, kindness, generosity, justice, and truthfulness. Both of these two texts are thought to date to the Sixth Dynasty. At this time the evolution of the written word had come into its own and exhibited many similarities with the work of the succeeding period, the Classical Period of Egyptian literature.

The instructions are some of the few texts that identify an author. It is generally thought that the people to whom the texts are attributed are genuine people, for example, Prince Hardjedef, the son of King Khufu of the Fourth Dynasty (ca. 2575–ca. 2465 BCE), and the vizier Ptahhotep, who lived under King Isesi of the Fifth Dynasty. Some scholars, however, suggest that the names are pseudographic, meaning that these were false names. These attributions do not correspond to other dating criteria, namely, the language in which the text was written. The "Instruction of Hardjedef" contains certain archaic phrases that may indicate a Fifth Dynasty date, but its structure makes a Fourth Dynasty date seem unlikely. The "Instructions Addressed to Kagemni" and the "Teaching of the Vizier Ptahhotep" are written in Middle Egyptian; therefore, they could not date to the early Old Kingdom, at least not in the form in which they are preserved. This situation in turn presents a whole new set of problems for dating because there is no parallel for an Old Egyptian text being translated into Middle Egyptian. Likewise, the mention of King Huni, the last king of the Third Dynasty (ca. 2649–ca. 2575 BCE), and Snefru, the first king of the Fourth Dynasty, at the end of the "Instruction Addressed to Kagemni" confuses the matter further, in that the art form is more evolved in this text than in that of Hardjedef. These Old Kingdom examples inspired scribes to continue this genre, and it became very popular.

The situation was slightly different in the royal sphere in the Old Kingdom. Kings had no tomb inscriptions. Some scholars suggest that the lack of royal autobiographies is due to the sanctity of kingship, because a king's persona was stylized and idealized. The royalty of the Old Kingdom created three types of monumental inscriptions: the decree, the annals, and the recording of one event, none of which qualifies as literature. However, the royal religious compositions did include literary notions. The Pyramid Texts offer myriad literary devices that were written to ensure the successful transfiguration of the king's spirit into the afterlife. These texts were inscribed on the inside walls of the pyramids of some of the late Old Kingdom kings and queens. Various scholars have categorized them as poetry. As an example, Pyramid Texts "Utterance 337" reads as follows:

Heaven shouts, earth trembles
In dread of you, Osiris, at your coming!
O you milch-cows here, O you nursing cows here,
Turn about him, lament him, mourn him, bewail him,
As he comes forth and goes to heaven
Among his brothers, the gods!

First Intermediate Period

In the following period, the First Intermediate Period (ca. 2134–ca. 2040 BCE), the tomb autobiography appeared on stelae, monumental slabs of stone or sometimes wood. The autobiography was accompanied by the offering prayer and a scene. The stela was the focal point of the private funerary cult. Since most of the tombs dating to the First Intermediate Period have been destroyed, these stelae function as an all-in-one funerary memorial. At the time, they were also handy because they were easy to transport to Abydos, the cult place of Osiris, so that the deceased could be near him.

The second type of literature that the First Intermediate Period produced was the royal instruction. This genre follows the idea of the Old Kingdom instruction, but instead the departing king educates his son and successor. Most likely such a work as the "Teaching for Merikare" was not composed by the father of Merikare but was commissioned by the reigning king. The "Teaching for Merikare" is an ambitious literary work and surpasses all previous instruction compositions. It is a treatise on kingship, and the historical context is assumed to be accurate. This type of literary genre was further developed in Hellenistic times and in the Islamic world; however, there is no direct correlation between its appearance in ancient Egypt and its later popularity. The work is preserved on three New Kingdom papyri. The topics presented in this composition consist of ways in which to defeat rebellion, deal with subjects (both rich and poor), acquire troops for battles, perform required religious duties, and be a good king.
The works that were created up to this time were, for the most part, experimental. The Middle Kingdom (ca. 2040–ca. 1640 BCE) was known as the Classical Period for both its use of language and its literary output. Vast numbers of works were composed at this time, and many new genres of literature appeared. The autobiographies of the Old Kingdom continued to be used and were now much more elaborate than before. They contain additional elements, such as hymns to deities and exultations of the king. The "Teaching of Amenemhet I" develops the themes first presented in the royal "Teaching for Merikare," in which the king cautions against fully trusting one's subjects. The themes of wisdom literature expanded in the Middle Kingdom, and two more types developed: laments and dialogues. The laments discuss the absence of truth and justice in a chaotic world. It has been postulated that the emergence of this type of literature at this time has to do with the poor state of affairs in Egypt during the First Intermediate Period. The prosperity that Egypt had previously enjoyed no longer existed. Others think that "pessimistic" literature was only a literary theme and had very little to do with the actual state of affairs when the pieces were composed.

Two examples of this type of wisdom text are the "Prophecy of Neferti" and the "Admonitions of Ipuwer." The "Prophecy of Neferti" was probably created as a form of propaganda to legitimize the rule of the reigning king Amenemhet I (r. ca. 1991–ca. 1626 BCE), the same Amenemhet mentioned earlier. The "lament" takes the form of artificial despair that pervades the prophecy of the sage Neferti, who foretells the civil war and destruction that are to come. Amenemhet is the savior who will rescue Egypt from ruin. The idea of "national distress" was a societal issue that became a literary theme. This composition is preserved on Papyrus Leningrad, which dates to the Eighteenth Dynasty (ca. 1550–ca. 1295 BCE), and on various ostraca that date to about 1295–1069 BCE.

The "Admonitions of Ipuwer" is another work that is thought to be centered on the notions of order versus chaos and social disorder—themes that did not carry over to New Kingdom literature. In this text the sage Ipuwer recounts the anarchy occurring within Egypt while he is speaking with a divinity, possibly the creator god:

Lo, hearts are violent, storm sweeps the land,
There's blood everywhere, no shortage of dead,
The shroud calls out before one comes near it.
Lo, many dead are buried in the river,
The stream is the grave, the tomb became a stream.
Lo, nobles lament, the poor rejoice,
Every town says, "Let us expel our rulers."
This text could also be categorized as a dialogue.

The third category of instruction literature is the dialogue. Dialogues present contemplative discussions on various themes. The composition modernly entitled "Dispute between a Man and His Soul" is one example of a dialogue, or discourse. This text is very intriguing, and there is a variety of interpretations as to its exact significance. In general, the work explores the idea of death, its dreadfulness and its sacredness. One of the mainstream interpretations sees a man who is not enjoying life and is longing for death. His soul, on the other hand, wishes that he would stop complaining and enjoy life. The man is tired of living and repeatedly says so; his soul is angry at the man's complaints and threatens to leave him. According to ancient Egyptian religious belief, one cannot resurrect in the hereafter without one's soul (ba). This threat scares the man, and he tries to convince his soul of his opinion. In the end they rectify their differences and stay together.

"The Tale of the Eloquent Peasant" is another example of a dialogue, or discourse, of which there are four Middle Kingdom copies. In this narrative a peasant is robbed by a nobleman and appeals to the king's high steward for help. The peasant returns to the high steward nine times, each time providing the opportunity for a poetic speech, before his goods are returned. As it turns out, the high steward fervently enjoys the man's eloquence and therefore makes the man continue his speech until he can do so no longer. In this tale it is eloquent speech that is used to defend justice. In essence, this work is a serious discourse on social justice that humorously expounds the virtues of fine speech.

The second major category of Middle Kingdom literature is the fictional narrative. Examples of the fictional narrative include "The Shipwrecked Sailor," "The Tale of Sinuhe," "The Tale of King Neferkare and General Sasenet," and Three Tales of Wonder. These stories would be most familiar to the Western reader as examples of literature. Some suggest that these tales are derived
from the educated class and were the products of the court. Thus, it would not appear that these written works evolved from oral folklore because of their content and the style in which they were written. Others believe that these narratives appear for the first time fully formed, perhaps suggesting that these same stories did exist in the oral tradition. Those pieces that belong to the late Middle Kingdom are less elaborate than those that date earlier; likewise, those appearing from the Twelfth Dynasty (ca. 1991–ca. 1783 BCE) onward are written in a more colloquial language. These texts were privately owned. The Middle Kingdom stories were regarded as classics and have been discovered in private libraries from later periods. Some date to the Middle Kingdom, while a larger number of them date to the New Kingdom; examples are preserved from later periods. In the New Kingdom this corpus of texts was organized and used to instruct scribes on the classical language of Middle Egyptian.

The "Shipwrecked Sailor" survives in only one manuscript whose provenance is unknown. The story is about an official who is returning home from an unsuccessful venture and is worried about reporting to the court. He is accompanied by a subordinate who attempts to cheer him up. The subordinate tells him a wondrous tale about his own ship having once capsized, thus causing him to land on a desert island inhabited by an enormous snake. This tale is one of the simpler stories as far as Egyptian grammar is concerned and is actually a story within a story.

The "Story of Sinuhe" is considered the most advanced piece of Middle Kingdom literature. Numerous fragmentary copies of this work have been preserved, confirming its prominence within the literary sphere. This composition is a fictional autobiography of an official who takes flight from Egypt when he hears of the king's death. He lives abroad, marries a local chieftain's daughter, has a family, and achieves success. When he reaches old age, he wishes to return to Egypt. One of the major themes of this piece is the contrast between the ordered state of Egypt and the impulsive way of life abroad.

**New Kingdom**

The New Kingdom brought with it a continuation of all the old genres of literature. The autobiography is still represented in the "Autobiography of Ahmose, Son of Abana." Annal-style historical writing flourished in this new international age, as evidenced by the "Annals of Thutmose III" (r. 1479–1425 BCE), the "Poetical Stela of Thutmose III," and the "Sphinx Stela of Amenhotep II" (r. 1427–1401 BCE). Hymns to the gods were very popular in the New Kingdom, and the works from this period elaborate on those from the previous period. Two of the more significant hymns are the "Great Hymn to Osiris," recorded on the stela of Amenmose, and the "Great Hymn to the Aten," from the site of Amarna. In the realm of funerary literature the Book of the Dead continues the ideas of the Coffin Texts, which comprise a set of spells that were inscribed on coffins in the Middle Kingdom. These texts evolved from the Old Kingdom Pyramid Texts. Likewise, new books of the underworld emerged. There was also continuity from the Middle Kingdom in the narrative fiction.

Two new genres of literature appear in the New Kingdom—love poetry and the epic poem. Some suggest that the love poems are immature and simple; however, the appearance of new and rare words within this group of compositions reflects the precision with which these works were created. "The Poem" in the "Kadesh Battle Inscription" and the "Poetical Stela of Mernephtah" are two examples of the latter genre. These works represent the first time that poetry had a narrative purpose. There were many relations between nations at this time, and many new ideas and concepts arrived in Egypt from its neighbors. Another interesting development was the emergence of school texts. A school text may consist of a variety of texts put together to make a "schoolbook," these texts having no relation to one another.

**Late Period**

In the Late Period narratives and instructions flourished. The tales at this time became longer and more complex. In the Ptolemaic Period (304–330 BCE), Greek themes mingle with Egyptian themes, and animal fables appear for the first time. So far, no school texts or love poems have come to light from this period. Many ancient Egyptian texts cannot be categorized under just one heading. For example, "The Tale of the Eloquent Peasant" is both a literary narrative about a man who petitions to get his goods back through dialogue and a lament that has a somewhat didactic undertone.

Most of Egyptian literature was anonymous. The emphasis was not placed on the author, and the texts were identified by their protagonists. The narratives also lacked titles; only the wisdom texts had titles. Specifically in the New Kingdom, there existed a series of literary texts that praised the scribal profession. The Egyptians held the idea that the tomb could crumble, but writing was imperishable. This idea was probably reinforced in society by the fact that ancient wisdom was clearly admired and wisdom
literature was cherished. Certain preserved texts patently declare that the idea of being a scribe was a virtuous occupation. One such text states, "As for those scribes and sages from the time which came after the gods—those who would foresee what was to come, which happened—their names endure for eternity, although they are gone, although they completed their lifetimes and all their people are forgotten…. Be a scribe! Put it in your heart, that your name shall exist like theirs!" This text is a eulogy to dead scribes from Papyrus Chester Beatty IV. The ancient Egyptian scribes imagined writing as a means to immortality.

Ancient Egyptian literature was written in either hieroglyphic or hieratic (cursive) script. There was also an intermediary stage of cursive hieroglyphs. If hieroglyphic script corresponds to our modern printing, then hieratic script corresponds to our writing. Hieroglyphs were inscribed on stone, plaster, or wood and could be written from left to right, right to left, or top to bottom. Cursive hieroglyphs usually appear on wood or papyrus, and hieratic script usually appears on papyrus or writing boards. The Egyptians used papyrus as their main writing surface. This material came from the papyrus plant, which was grown in the marshy delta region in the north. Strips were cut from the plant and made into sheets. The papyrus rolls were used over and over again. Some papyri have various documents on them while others had the original text erased and then were reused. These are called "palimpsests." Scribes used both red and black ink. The red was used for titles and headings, corrections, insertions, and highlighting.

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