“The Red Line” in the Ancient Egyptian Story of the Shipwrecked Sailor

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The present research aims at tracing out the functioning of the so-called “red line” in the Ancient Egyptian Story of the Shipwrecked Sailor and at establishing the method of researching that intriguing phenomenon which accompanies the classical written heritage of the ancient Egyptians.

The Ancient Egyptian Story of the Shipwrecked Sailor enters the scientific life of the egyptologists at the end of the 19th century owing to the works of the Russian egyptologist Wladimir S. Golénischeff. The appearance of this text enables the transition from the Egyptian grammar of A. Erman1 to the Egyptian grammar of Sir Allen Gardiner2 which is at the root of Egyptology achievements in the 20th century.

The basic scientific sources concerning the problems in the Story of the Shipwrecked Sailor have been collected by me in Some notes on the Story of the Shipwrecked Sailor, JEA. 80. (1994), 195 ff. The story has been translated in Bulgarian in the beginning of the 1980s in “Puls” newspaper. The translation in the book “The papyrus doesn’t grow on a rock”, Sofia 1987 (1st ed.), 1998 2nd ed.) is also available.

Egyptian texts often exhibit groups of symbols written in red ink. This is the so-called “red line” which has not yet been given a satisfactory explanation. The phrases and the separate words, marked in red ink, are characteristic of the period of the New Kingdom3. The researchers have long ago noticed that cit. “the scribes used red ink in order to attract the attention of the readers to certain passages. Red ink was applied to write the words in the beginning of a new passage, the colophons, the “ain” symbol marking the end of the separate independent sections of a text (the latter occur only in the texts from the New Kingdom), and in the later texts red ink was used in order to write the names of Seth and Apopi, the word lfrj “enemy, foe”, the phrase k2 dd in the beginning of a new passage and some symbols in the

1 A. Erman Aegyptische Grammatik, 4.Auf. Berlin, 1928
economic accountancy documents. Red ink was used when correcting the mistakes of the scribes as well⁴.

In the *Story of the Shipwrecked Sailor* there are 21 occasions of “red line” in the text. The analysis of its usage in the text enables us to throw light on a new and yet unstudied aspect of the “red line” in the texts from the classical Egyptian period. Here are the examples in order of their appearance in the text:

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12. sdm r.k n.j
21. sdd.j r.f
30. zr.sn
47. gm.n.j
56. ḫ.n sdm.j
67. iw wp.n.f
81. iw wp.n.f
97. zr.sn
109. ḫ.n.(j) in.kwj
124. rš.wj
129. ḫ.n sb³
138. dd.j r.f n.k⁶
144 zft.j
149. ḫ.n sbt.n.j im.j nn dd.(w).n.j
154. ḫ.n dp.t tf
161. ḫ.n rdj.n (j) wj
166. ḫ.n 3tp.n.j st
172. n.t pw ir(w).n.n
186. iw
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And then said “shemsiu”
Listen to me!
I will relate to you
They prophesied
I found
And then I heard
And then he opened
And then he opened
They prophesied
and then was I brought
Oh, how delightful (≡pleasant).
And then, a star
I’m telling you
I will slaughter
And then he laughed at me for what I said.
And then this ship
And I gave myself (prostrated myself)
And then I loaded up this
The doing that we did.
It (is) brought.

Today I can hardly tell what made me separate the “red line” from the context of the traditional analyses and leave it to the fate of its own stream which organizes all “red lines” as a micro text in the frame of the bigger whole. Even a cursory reading of the words and phrases marked in red ink shows that they are connected through meaning. The “red line” does not only indicate the beginning of a new paragraph; it rather underlines the most

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⁵ The figures show the number of the line in the text.

⁶ n.k – It is believed to be a mistake. It should be n.f, thus the translation is “I told him”.
important parts of the text, the most significant ones according to the views and concepts of the Egyptian contemporaries of the respective literary work. Collected together in their succession the “red lines” are a mixture of what we perceive both as contents and as a resume of a given text. This approach to the phrases written in red ink brings us closer to the Egyptian point of view. So, what is of most importance in the *Story of the Shipwrecked Sailor*?

1. The narrative of the shipwrecked sailor, Šmsjw. There is no underlining of the safe return to the capital which is described in detail on the starting Page 1.

2. The ability of the sailors to make prophesies and to predict – not the phrase “they have seen heaven, they have seen earth” which stresses on their experience.

3. The fact that Šmsjw has found “a heavenly garden” on the island. The act of finding!

4. The rumble preceding the appearance of the serpent. This passage requires a special comment. I will only mention that the sound is the primal form of any energy. The sound always has a referent, an object which it signifies. I will remind you of the knowledge about the creation of the world by Ptah. Man is a creation of the sound which generates our different bodies. This holds true for the world and the worlds, for the whole.

5. The scene where the serpent yawned open its huge mouth in front of the Egyptian. This motif is present both in many Egyptian texts and in pictures. It is repeated twice in red ink.

6. The story of the shipwrecked sailor, this time intended for the serpent. The stress is laid once again on the ability of the sailors to make prophesies.


8. The joy, the delightful moments when one narrates about what he has experienced when everything is already in the past.

9. The star, the heavenly body which has destroyed the world of the serpent – the most important moment in his story.

10. The promises of the Egyptian about what he would do for the serpent if he returns to Egypt. A kind of relationship between a God and a human being. If the serpent takes care of the Egyptian to go home safely, then in return the man will...

11. The fact that the serpent does not take seriously the promises made by the man. The derision itself. In the sense of: “Come on, relax, you tiny
creature! I don’t want what you are promising me, I don’t need it. But! I do want that my name…”

12. The arrival of the ship predicted by the serpent.
13. The act of worship, the Egyptian expressing gratitude and respect.
14. Loading the gifts of the serpent.
15. Sailing back to Egypt.
16. The beginning of the colophon. “Bringing” the story of the shipwrecked sailor from the beginning to the end in the “book”.

Indeed if we imagine for a moment an Egyptian library with a great number of scrolls, the most easily achievable way to understand what a certain text is about is to unroll the scroll and take a cursory look at the “red lines”.

Is our observation confirmed by other literary works? Sinuhe is a good source of examples. The text is sufficiently long, a whole “court novel”. It relates about experiences outside Egypt, i.e. we have an account of an Egyptian who happened to act under extreme conditions abroad, very much like the shipwrecked sailor. The examples are from the referential edition by Blackman. Sinuhe or rather its fragments which we connect into an integrated whole are scattered in a great number of copies of different date.

1.R=OB3 rp*tj h3tj-§
2.C śmsjw§
5.R=G=OB3 h3t-sp 30 3bd 3 3ht sw 7
9.C §
9. OB3 l(s)t r.f sb.n
11. G g[m].n sw wpwtjw hr w3t
15. G irt.j śmt m hntjt
23. G. (ir.j śmt) tr n h3(wj)
31. OB3 3hr.n rdj.n.f n.j mw pfs
9. OB4 3bd 2 3ht sw 13

Hereditary prince and count, “shemsiu”
Year 30, month 3, Akhet season, day 7
“ain”, ending an independent section, copy from the New Kingdom.
Here, he has sent
The messengers found him on the road
I started up the stream (southwards)
(I started) in the night
And then he gave me water, they boiled…
month 2, Akhet, day 13

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7 A. Blackman. Middle Egyptian Stories. Bibliothesca Aegyptiaca 2. Brussels 1932, 1-41
8 Only C is in red ink.
And then he told me
Copy from the decree about
his return in Egypt, brought
there by the servant.
You will have abundant
treasures gifted by them, you
will live on their generosity.
This decree reached me
while I was with my tribe
A copy of the report
concerning this decree. The
court servant Sinuhe
Master of knowledge, knower
of the human line. He
knows/let him know...
Let Your Majesty now order to
be brought...
A man from the marshes of
Elephantina
The offspring created by this
servant on this place.
(Royal gifts) for the Asians
who came to see me to the
paths of Horus
And then His Majesty told to
one of the semers
I am too alone in front of you.
Yours is life. May Your
Majesty do as he wishes.

Both in Sinuhe and in the Story of the Shipwrecked Sailor the “red
lines” form a text within the text. Innumerable such examples can be given,
but the ones cited here are informative enough for the needs of this volume.

In the final analysis, the use of the “red line” in the Middle Egyptian
texts builds up a contents/resume of the corresponding literary work. This
conclusion will cause a rearrangement of the paragraphs and the sections in
the process of study of Ancient Egyptian literary works bringing them in
harmony with the worldview of their authors.