Why do we read Ancient Egyptian Literature?

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I will offer some reflections on a very basic question: why do we read literature from Ancient Egypt? The impact of Egyptian culture on Europe has been usually visual, and we are very familiar with its plastic art and architecture, but its verbal art is less familiar and often completely unknown outside academic circles. From the decipherment of the Egyptian hieroglyphic script in 1824, texts have been used to reconstruct the lost history of Egypt, providing an invaluable resource of historical facts, linguistic and philological data. This approach reached a highpoint in the Berlin school of the early 20th century, and with the work of scholars such as sir Alan Gardiner (1879–1963), who established the text and commentary of the poem I will talk about today, the Tale of Sinuhe, composed about 1825 BCE and often regarded as the masterpiece of Egyptian writing. It is the life-story of an official whose life goes wrong, who deserts his culture and eventually returns home after an exiting but troubled life in an alien land; it is a dark and potentially subversive probing of the ideals and fears of Middle Kingdom culture.

Sir Alan Gardiner however seems to have thought little of the text as a work of literature, only as a source of philological data and an insight into the 'old Egyptian national character'. In such issues of culture, English scholars of that period had a somewhat isolationist attitude that excluded the aesthetics of other cultures: If poems did not belong to the great stream of tradition that leads to us, then they were in a sense primitive, and were not true culture. This attitude was unsurprising in an age of Empire, but it is one that persists in many of our academic attitudes: we read such literature only for the sake of our academic training, because we are producing scholarly editions, and these exotic sources exist only to provide the information we need. We read them for the sake of our own science. In this vision, philology is very objective, and avoids anything personal such as subjectivity, ambiguity and imagination, but unfortunately these qualities seem to be abundantly present in the ancient poems.

We can contrast this model of an ideal and somewhat abstract philology with other 20th century treatments of this same poem. For example, the poem was the basis of the historical novel, Sinuhe the Egyptian, by Mika Waltari in 1940s, which
was later made into a (deeply regrettable) Hollywood blockbuster in the 1950s. In these the ending is utterly rewritten, and Sinuhe dies abroad in existential isolation, instead of being buried in Egypt after a life abroad as in the original. It is of course very ridiculous, and we can see how easily Hollywood re-writes the text for its own concerns, including exotic splendour and sex. But academics perhaps do exactly the same – we too take the ancient poem and edit it, often emending/changing the text so that it provides the historical information that we seek. In our commentaries we examine manuscripts and passages to resolve any logical difficulties, as opposed to exploring any poetic ambiguities. Not all imaginative treatments are as ridiculous as Hollywood’s: in the 1940s Naguib Mahfouz wrote a short story based on Sinuhe, which is also free and romantic, but is a sophisticated living work of art.

When one works in an international institution such as the British Museum where the artefacts belong not only to specialist scholars, but to the public and to the entire world, one gets a sense that academic practices are sometimes limited means of describing reality. Trying to find ways of approaching the poem closely I have worked with anthropologically inspired models of criticism, in particular the New Historicist School. This deals with texts form English early modern culture, in particular Shakespeare, and tries to analyse the poems in their own cultural context. With Egyptian literature, we have little evidence of this original context. The only time that we have a copy of Sinuhe and know its exact find-spot, is this stone writing-board with the first few stanzas now in Cairo. It comes from the village of Deir el-Medina, the famous tomb-chamber of the royal craftsman Sennejem. If he wrote it, it was probably here in c. 1200 BC in his house in the village on his divan. It was apparently placed in his burial as a display of his education – it is only a writing exercise, an excerpt, and (to be frank), it is not an entirely 100% legible as a copy of the poem. Already it seems the poem was something that would be learnt when being educated, but we must remember that this is already some six centuries after it was first composed. In the Ramessid version of Sinuhe, the text has changed and Sinuhe, who was a fallible commoner in the original, is made into a prince – instead of saying ‘I was a poor wretch’ he now says ‘I was a king’s son’ – suggesting that the processes that made this poem into an educational classic, also lessened any potentially subversive elements. Sinuhe’s aberrant life-story is subsumed into a version of history that is a sequence of royal figures. It has become a classic text that will have been read by all the great educated figures of Egyptian history, and as a classic it is quoted on the walls of temples, as here the temple of Queen Nefertari at Abu-Simbel.

The poem changes in its reception across the millennia. Earlier still, we have another manuscript, from the collection of a lector priest of the 13th dynasty (c. 1680 BC), whose partly plundered tomb was discovered in 1895, under the later funerary temple of Rameses II. The papyri, which are now mostly in the British
Museum, are very fragile, but seem to belong to a collection owned by someone who also owned magical equipment. The French team investigating the Ramesseum are kindly re-investigating the site for us, in the hope we can date the tomb more precisely. In this library, Sinuhe is a work associated with the word of a specialist priest from a temple, who performed rites for healing. It is a very official and professional set of documents. This person read the texts in a very different context from the scribes in Deir el-Medina, although his version of the poem is already partly in the form of the text that was copied out by the Ramessid apprentice scribes.

Earlier still in the high 12th dynasty, around 1800 BC we encounter the earliest manuscript, and the most complete one. This was discovered in a tomb together with two other poems in the 1830s and unfortunately they were offered to the British Museum, and we turned them down – they are now in Berlin. The catalogue says they are from Thebes. Many years of searching through archives suggests that the tomb was probably in the valley in front of Deir el-Bahari, probably in a provincial middle class sort of burial, like this one. Here all the papyri are poetic, and the scribe – who has been much denounced by editors such as Alan Gardiner – wrote his copies very hastily. He makes mistakes, but he also corrects himself, and one can see his enthusiasm as he copies. He even redips his pen at the start of metrical lines, wherever he can. He reads as he writes, and he knows little of the foreign world that the poem evokes, as he garbles the name of the Palestinian kingdom where Sinuhe spends his life. He is no great man, but a provincial bureaucrat, and his other poems are all surprisingly dark and ambiguous masterpieces – The Tale of the Eloquent Peasant is a lament against social injustice and the third poem is a pessimistic Dialogue between a Man and his Soul about death. Why did this person read the poems, why did he choose these poems? He was wealthy, and an official, but this does no seem professional as a library. All are dark, and all concern to a remarkable degree a sense of interior identity.

One question that new historicist theory poses is how can we try to recapture his sense of the poems, how analyse his place as a reader in his culture? Our lack of context is a problem, but we can study – as Prof Ignatov has shown – the contemporaneous intertext to reconstruct a sense of these poem’s meanings. Close readings suggest a world very distant from our modern expectations of the text as historical source. Instead of a monumental biography, providing and commemorating the historical information of a life, Sinuhe’s life-story offers its readers a view of experience that is almost a parody of such monumental discourse. Because it is fictional, the poems can express aspects of life that were excluded from official discourse. As such it can evoke for us not only the ‘structure of feeling’ of an ancient culture, but also aspects of that society that were in effect written out of history. The poem celebrates the Egyptian king, but it also dwells on a human
individual, and at the heart of the poem are scenes where the hero is simply
panicking and emoting in away that we do not expect the noble dead to do. In this
interiority, that seems to have been valued by this ancient reader, I find one useful
reason to reads these texts. Sinuhe defies our tendency to see in the past a world
of verifiable historical facts. These poems show us human fallible people, caught
in a contingent and fluctuating world. And the different manuscripts show that the
texts, readings and meanings of these poems varied.

They also simply engage us with expressive beauty: the sheer wonder of this
poetry is largely lost to us, since the script does not record vowels, but sometimes
the magic can break through.

\[ phrt-pw \text{ 'nh} \]
\[ jw-hwt \text{ hr:sn} \]

Life is a transitory time,
The trees fall.

This couplet is linguistically simple and dull, and tells us nothing of history,
but it is still strangely beautiful and powerful; it still addresses issues that touch
our soul. If we pause to consider how the poetry was once probably recited and
performed – probably in manner similar to modern Egyptian performance artists –
we cannot escape the fact that to the original audiences this was not just a text to
be studied and analysed, but something immediate and highly expressive, creating
delight and emotion. Too often the modern scholar is ‘trained to detachment’, and
in our concern with our own objective scientificity may lose more than we gain. We
must try to read these texts for entertainment and beauty, to reconstruct the sense
in which they address the political, cultural and real human issues of their world.
We have experimented with modern performances of Sinuhe and the poem that
takes several months to read in class, when performed by actors becomes a rapid,
highly emotional work that lasts only some 35 minutes. It is hard to accommodate
this difference into our academic perception of the text, and to remember how alive
these dead archaeological traces once were.

For me, the physical sensation of reading the manuscripts is itself challenging
and stimulating in its material specificity, as the ‘New Philologists’ of English
studies have argued. It is possible, for example, to sit and read a facsimile of the
Sinuhe Berlin papyrus in the excavated Chapel of Heqaib on the frontier island of Elephantine. This is one way to experience a manuscript in a place that
recalls its original context, and to draw as close as I am able to the original actors’
experience, in attempting to ‘read over the shoulders’ of the dead. While reading
the manuscript, how can one imagine what a 12\textsuperscript{th} dynasty reader saw as he looked
up from his roll, and how can one conceive what he would have thought and felt as
he read? This is to attempt the impossible, of course, but all anthropological study
is by its nature incomplete, as Clifford Geertz has remarked. As we read from this
manuscript we can be aware that all poems are parts of their material culture; poems are not abstract or absolutely autonomous entities but cultural artefacts, and the manuscripts we have are only the surviving traces of a lost human habits of composition, circulation and performance. The aesthetic 'contemporary' impact of the poem that we read is now untranslatable, but it did once exist. Although the original poets and audience are dead, modern academics do not have a privileged vantage point – studying such texts is to engage in a dialogue with these dead, in which our attempts to perceive the original actors' perspectives should occasionally be prioritised. This is an idea that would have appealed to the ancient readers for whom the dead continued to be part of their communities; and it is one that is not so different to our own ideas of poetry. Is not the great myth of European poetry opera and music all about talking with the dead – the Thracian bard Orpheus and his half-regained Eurydice? Rigorous philology and theoretical frameworks are essential for any understanding, but the poems were not written for the sake of such things but for a more immediate experiential reception by their living audience for ‘pleasure’. And so from a constant awareness of our own subjectivity, we should in the words of Marguerite Yourcenar, ‘travailler à lire un texte du IIe [millénaire] avec des yeux, une âme, des sens du IIe [millénaire]’ (Yourcenar 1991 a: 528). We must attempt to reconstruct a historical act of reading, or rather, multitudinous readings through both scholarship and empathy.

But why? Because ancient expressive culture can reach beyond its materiality, and although it cannot answer back, it preserves the expression of other cultures and of other individuals who can challenge our own assumptions. These poetic manuscripts are only fragments, but they continually pose a question that is fundamental to our engagement with ancient texts, although it is often not explicit: what and how would I – this culturally constructed consciousness that I call I – have felt if I were sitting in the 12th dynasty Chapel of Heqib on Elephantine not now, but then? Reading the same poem, not now, but then? Or in the 13th Dynasty Thebes, or in the Village of Deir el-Medina? If we need a reason to enjoy these poems, Egyptian literature gives us a reminder that everything is as shifting as these manuscripts, as varied as these histories: we as scholars are nothing absolute, only one stage in this poem’s huge history. And in reading. we – the ancient, modern and future readers – are all united in imagining the experiences of other (functional) beings: not ourselves, but Sinuhe. Through this process we can experience other forms and other histories, and taste the full diversity of the world’s cultures. Such reading is perhaps one of the most subversive and liberating actions that we can take. And it is also something we do together.