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THE RELATION BETWEEN WISDOM TEXTS AND BIOGRAPHICAL INSCRIPTIONS IN ANCIENT EGYPT

Emil Buzov

The aim of this article is to show the close connections and similarities between the two genres of Ancient Egyptian Literature – Wisdom texts and Biographical inscriptions. We will try to prove that within the framework of the Ancient Egyptian literature Biographical texts are mirror images of the literary works belonging to the genre of Wisdom texts. Wisdom texts, on one side, teach what a person must and must not do and why, i.e. what comes from a person's actions. Biographical inscriptions, on the other side, show us the link, between what the wise men say must and must not be done and what has been understood and learned by the dignitaries. Therefore there is a close resemblance in the content of these texts. As we will see later on, the connection between the two genres of the ancient Egyptian literature is clearly visible by the use of the same expressions and notions, which turn into terms that describe the qualities of a man and his actions.

Biographical texts in Ancient Egypt are the first clearly distinctive genre of literature. They are always written in hieroglyphs and their authors are men¹. The common practice of writing biographical texts to women starts in the beginning of I millennium BC². (Frood 2007, 3). Biographical texts, concerning the period that

¹ For women's biographies from the time of the Old and Middle Kingdom see (Strudwick 2005, 379–399; Lichtheim 1988, 37–38). For monuments dedicated to women, including stelae, biographies, and tombs see also: A. Roth. Gender Roles in Ancient Egypt. in: *A Companion to the Ancient Near East*, ed. by D. C. Snell, Blackwell, 2007; G. Robins. *Women in Ancient Egypt*, London 2001; M. Malaise. La position de la femme sur les steles du Moyen Empire. *SAK* 5 (1977), 183–193; W. Ward. Non Royal Women and their Occupations in the Middle Kingdom. in: Lesko, B (ed.), *Women's Earliest Records from Ancient Egypt and Western Asia: Proceedings of the Conference on Women in Ancient Near East*, Atlanta 1989, 33–43; D. Stefanovic. The feminine stelae of the Middle Kingdom: Stela Leiden 35. *GM* 218 (2008), 81–92.

² For typical representatives of women's biographies from the Late Period see (Lichtheim 1980, 58–65; Jansen-Winkel 1985, I, 156–167; II, 520–526).

we are interested in (from the Old Kingdom until the end of the New Kingdom, beginning of the I mil. BC), are written in Old Egyptian and classical Middle Egyptian. Even though the late Egyptian language starts to be used it does not show a significant influence in biographical texts and with some rare exceptions they are written in classical Egyptian³.

The aim of the biography is to preserve the memory of its owner. Probably these texts were being read by the people closest to the deceased during his funeral and again each time they visited his tomb to make offerings. The place where Biographical texts are written – close to the entrance of the tomb, also points to that fact⁴.

Teachings or Wisdom Texts are also a different genre of literature with its own characteristics. They all have a title, an author, a recipient, and similar content (Buzov 2016).

Thanks to the closeness of these two genres we could apprehend the Biographical texts as personal Wisdom texts of each nobleman, which in the form of a narrative of their life gives to the future generations the basic information of their life, the experience, which they acquired and the moral qualities that they had. These moral qualities are a product of the value system, which is proclaimed in Wisdom texts.

The likeness of a biography with a wisdom text has been noted for a long time by scholars of the Ancient Egyptian literature. In spite of that, a comparative examination of both genres and their similar ideas and notions, has not been made yet. During the last few years there is a thesis that there are no similarities between the two genres and they should not be bound together. It is noted that they have different structure, use, aim and literary characteristic. From the end of the New Kingdom on they are even written in different language – Teachings are written in Late Egyptian and Demotic and the Biographical texts continue to use Middle Egyptian (Jansen-Winkeln 2004). As it has already been noted, they represent two separate genres of literature and that makes it completely normal for them to have different form and structure. Their similarity is due to their content and means of expression.

³ Not until the time of the XX dynasty there are examples of Biographies, written in Late Egyptian: Hori and Amenhotep (Rameses IX – XI) (Frood 2007, 23, no. 34; 7).

⁴ Biographical texts are also found in inner rooms of the tomb, even in the sanctuary itself (tomb of Djehutjmhhab TT 194 – Ramesid Period: PM I, 1, 301, text: KRI VII, 153, 5–155, 4. the tomb has been published by Assmann (Assmann 1978). For a translation see (Assmann 1978; 1999, 399–401; Frood 2007, 91–94, no. 12)), but they are particularly rare and are connected with an extraordinary event (Frood 2007, 21).

These means of expression in their nature are terms and notions, widely used in Teachings and from the beginning of the Middle Kingdom they are also found in Biographical texts. A typical representative of this new tendency in the genre of Biographies is the stele of Intef, son of Senet⁵ built in Abydos, now in the British museum (BM 581)⁶. The stele is 66 cm high and 37 cm in width. It is divided into two parts. The upper part holds an image of Intef and 7 horizontal lines of text, which contains a summoning of the gods Osiris and Wepwawet, as well as a short hymn in their honor. The bottom part of the stela is divided into two equal parts, with 10 vertical rows in each part. Each sentence of these 20 columns starts with the independent pronoun *ink* "I am" followed by a description of the character of the owner of the stele.

The literary monument is of great significance due to the fact that all of the most important terms for Wisdom literature are mentioned in it. Ever since the beginning of the Middle Kingdom, these terms had clearly been widely used and at least one part of the inhabitants of Ancient Egypt were aware of their meaning. In the stele of Intef they were used without the need of a comment or clarification, which clearly means that the owner was familiar with them.

Each of these 20 columns of the text refers to a term that is a subject of interest by didactic literature and its full meaning might be found only in this text. All of these facts lead to the thought that the author of the stele was familiar with all of the Didactic texts written by that time. He had already accepted the Moral Values described in it and follows it. In order to visualize this we are going to examine only the terms and their use in wisdom texts, we will also try to outline some of their characteristics in their interconnection:

1. *grw* – "the silent man". There is no doubt that "silent man" in the ancient Egyptian texts is a positive virtue of the character (Buzov 2016, 74–77). There are multiple examples in Wisdom texts and Biographical inscriptions pointing to that fact. Contrary to the opinion of Morschauser (Morschauser 1994,

⁵ Intef, son of Senet and Sobekwnu, lived in the time of Senusret I. Except the name of his parents we also know the name of his wife – Papu. The monuments of Intef that we know of are three stelae and one statue (BM 461, Hier. Texts II, pl. 24, h. 64,8 cm.). All of the stelae were erected in Abydos and are now in the British museum (BM 572 Hier. Texts II, pl. 22, 109,2 x 45,7 cm.; 581 и 562 Hier. Texts II, pl. 24, 59,7 x 49,5 cm.).

⁶ The first publication of the stele was in 1912 (Hieroglyphic Texts from Egyptian Stelae, etc., in the British Museum, Vol. II (London, 1912), pl. 23). The hieroglyphic text with translation and commentary has been published by Sethe (Sethe 1928, 80–81; 1960 126–128). Photographs of the monument were given by Simpson (Simpson 1974 pl. 12). There have been many translations of the stele: (Spiegel 1935, 38–40; Lichtheim 1973, 120–123; 1988, 109–111; Parkinson 1991, 61–63).

180–181) in the eyes of the ancient Egyptians the “silent man” is the one who knows what to say, but has not been summoned to do so. That is the reason why he is silent (Amunnaht 11). It is wrong to believe that the “silent man” is a poor man, who has no right to speak in public (David 2011, 81–82). On the contrary! When a person is among those who do not know (незнаещи) the right manners requires for him to be silent, because only then he may restrain their aggression. The whole society and the flow of things depend on him. That same idea is shown in the Teaching of Ptahhotep (Pt 126–130; 362–369). The “silent man” is also „straight one” (*mtj* or *ʕk3*) – another positive virtue. On the other hand the term is opposed to “jabberer” (*wgj*) and “hateful man” (*šmm*) (Foster 2001b, 504). Examples in Wisdom literature supporting this interpretation are: Pt. 68–73; 165–166; Kagemni I,1–2; I, 12; Amenemope 6, 1–12; 7,9–10; 10, 10–11, among Biographical texts: Urk. IV. 993; KRI III 297, 11; KRI V, 410, 10–13. As well as Peas. B1 242; 285.

2. *kb* – “calm, quiet”. The calm person is devoid of hasty actions. He carefully considers his words and actions, because he knows what will happen and what the consequences of what will come to pass. This term is often used in biographical texts. There it is used in combination with *grw* “the silent man” – KRI V, 410, 10–13. Opposite of *kb* is *h3h-ib* or *h3h-r3* □ Peas. B1 239 – 244.

3. *mdw* – “talker, speaker”. The “knower” has mastered the art of speaking. He speaks because he knows. He is capable of pacifying people, because he won’t use words that may cause anger. He only speaks when he is summoned (Amunnaht 11) and his words are always the right ones and he is in unison with *maat*. The term is at the base of wisdom texts. The speech itself and the ability to speak are among the most important qualities that turn a person into a „knower” – Merikare 32–33.

4. *sfn* – “kindly, merciful”. To be condescending when you hear your name means not to become proud about people knowing you and cherishing you. In Teachings this idea may be expressed through negation of the term *ʕ3-ib* „the one with the big heart – arrogant one”. The term comes from the word *sf*, which is loosely translated “be mild, merciful, mercy, gentleness” (F.D. 224) and describes a positive quality of a person. One who acts *sf* or is *sf* is acting according to *maat*. The lack of this quality means that a person has transgressed the norm and lives in accordance with *isefet*. This idea is visible in the Tale of the Eloquent Peasant. Having a fit of the mopes from the inactivity of the high steward (*imj-r3 pr wr*), the peasant attacks the representative of authority, accusing him in lack of mercy (*sf*) – Peas. B1 235–236. The meaning of the term is most visible in the Teaching of Ptahhotep Pt. 319; 422–427; 446–447.

5. $\text{3}dw \text{ } ^c n \text{ } sfn$ – “careful⁷, pleasant, friendly”. This is the person who takes care of the people around him every time he has the opportunity to do so. He is the one, who shall give bread to the hungry, cloths to the naked one and ferry the one with no boat. For sfn see 4.

6. $hd-hr$ – “bright-faced = generous”. For a person to be with an open face means that he does not run from responsibility and that he sticks to his deeds. The opposite of this is $hbs-hr$ „covering of the face”. It means that a man does not pay attention to his duties, does not respect his family and his subordinates; he ignores his work/duty/job. Examples: The stele of Menuuser = Les. 79, 12–14; U.C. 14333, 12–13; Peas. B1 198–199.

7. mtj – “straight one”. This is an obligatory condition for a life in accordance with *maat*. As Gardiner says it always contain a suggestion of balance, moderation, the middle road (Gardiner 1946, 71). Moreover the “straight one” is a term, which expresses a collective term of the knowing man, one who does everything the right way. The term is a synonym of $^c k^3$ and is equal to „knower” (rh). To be mtj means to speak only the truth, to be calm, quiet and your actions to be a reflection and confirmation of *maat*. Examples: BM 562 HT. II. Pl. 24 = Simpson, The terrace of the Great God at Abydos, ANOC 5, 3 – Pl. 12; Brit. Mus. 581 = Les. 80, 20–1; Urk. IV. 63, 12–14; Urk. IV. 48, 13–14; Kagemni I. I

8. $hd-hr$ See 6

9. $hnms$ – “friend”. In that case a friend to the poor, meaning a man, who knows his social position and the responsibilities, which derive from it.

10. $sm/3w \text{ } \underline{drt}$ – “one open-handed = helpful”. Terms, which are equal to $\text{3}dw$ from 5. Only this term and the one used in 18 are not part of the terms, used in Didactic Literature. Despite the fact that they express the same principles and ideas, which are put into Didactic Literature.

⁷ Finding the meaning of the word is difficult, because in the original text is written only the hieroglyph of a crocodile and a quail – w , which means that the word might be $msh \text{ } hntj \text{ } skn \text{ } hnt \text{ } ^c hm$ or $\text{3}d$. Most of these words mean “crocodile” in general or some kind of aggression, i. e. the action of a crocodile. Lichtheim offers ‘controlled’, and Parkinson – “collected” without specifying anything about the word. The only opportunity for this word not to have a negative meaning, which would be appropriate here, is to be translated as “caring” Wb. I, 24, 23 ‘sorgen’ – a meaning, which according to the dictionary is used only in Pap. Leid 370, 15 and Rs I. That meaning is confirmed by the second sentence “the one who makes the crying ones silent”.

11. *rh* – “knower”. It might be considered a synonym of “straight one”, but expresses only one of the aspects of this term. A person cannot be “straight one” without being a “knower” and vice versa. Knower is the one who has learned the words of his predecessors and lives in accordance with them. The meaning of Wisdom Literature is to turn the not knowing one into a “knower” – Pt. 47–50 (Buzov 2016, 73–74). It happens when one listens to the words of wise men from these texts, and that leads to their acceptance and understanding. By doing this a man turns into “listener” (*sdm*), and the words themselves become part of the person (literally “enter his heart”). He is capable of controlling his heart (*d3ir-ib*), meaning that he controls his thoughts, his deeds, and his desires and becomes “knower” (*rh*). A “knower” is “the straight one” (*mtj*), “correct one” (*ḳ3*) with his thoughts and deeds.

12. *mtj* – “straight one” see 7.

13. *sdm* – “listener”. This is one of the most important terms in wisdom literature. A listener is a synonym of knowing (*rh*). The accumulation of knowledge, according to the ancient Egyptians, happens through listening. The one who listens perceives what is being said and becomes a “listener”, meaning “knowing”. This idea is shown best in the epilogue of the Teaching of Ptahhotep (Pt. 534–596).

14. *bnr* – “pleasant”. Well disposed towards everybody. A man whose deeds are accurate and are being remembered by those around him. It is frequently in combination with *hnms* – “friend” – Pt. 298 – 315.

15. *nfr* – “kindly”. The term *nfr* describes a positive quality of a person. It is often translated as “beautiful, fair, good, kind, happy, and well” (F.D. 131). As a noun *nfr* / *nfrw* is used for describing the manifestation of the Creator in the visible world and shows that, which is hidden from human eyes (Λεков 2007, 295). It is being used as an epithet, which explains the actions or words of a person. Those words put into Teachings are *nfr: mdt nfr:t* (Pt. 42; 48; 58), and the deeds of a person, in case he acts the right way are “beautiful for the heart” *nfr hr ib* (Pt. 130; 132). The term is widely applied. When it is attached to words that describe the human personality it acquires a different meaning. The best instance for this is its use alongside the name of a man: *rn nfr* “beautiful, young name”. When it is being used independently, not explaining other term, *nfr* should be understood as doing everything the right way, in accordance with *maat*. For its use in didactic literature see: Kagemni II, 8–9; Pt. 519; 627; 629; Ani 18, 5; Amenemope 10, 17–18; 17, 5.

16. *nfr* – “kindly”. See. 15.

17. $\text{ḥ}3$ – “correct, straight one”. The term is a synonym of *mtj*. The man who is correct does not differ from *maat* (Lekov 2007, 242), for he is equal to the scales and is similar to god Thot. Examples: Merikare 46; Pt. 529–530; Urk. IV. 507, 6–7.

18. *mn rd* – “firm-footed”. Another collective term. One who is firm with the feet has excellent plans and is loyal to his superiors and to the king. In this pair of sentences the expression *mdd mtn* „be loyal” is interesting. It is a root phrase in the so-called Loyalist Instruction (Loprieno 1996, 406).

19. *rh* – “knower”. See 11. Here the meaning of the term is expanded. “Knower” is the one who keeps on learning constantly and accepts the guidance of others⁸.

20. *mdw* – “talker, speaker”. See 3.

The stele of Intef shows that in the beginning of the XII dynasty all the terms that the ancient Egyptian didactic literature uses are already differentiated. Their meaning was clear for a big part of the educated people of Egypt and their further explanation was not needed. This conclusion comes to support the thesis that the Wisdom Texts (or Didactic Literature) existed before the time this monument was created. If in the beginning of the Middle Kingdom the whole system of mutually connected terms is already in existence, than this means that the texts, which deal with them had appeared on an earlier stage. Although, there is one possibility that should not be excluded: the whole amount of terms was being used only in the colloquial speech without the need of their written fixation, that’s why texts of this kind did not exist during the Old Kingdom. However, the strict hierarchy of the separate notions and their connection do not support this position.

As Lichtheim justly renders, given the fact that she has translated 60 biographical texts from the First Intermediate Period and the Middle Kingdom, there most certainly stands out a gradation in the understanding of the place of a person and that is conditioned by his sense of right and wrong. In the stele of Intef, the son of Senet, one can see a peak in the rising of the moral qualities of a person and the necessities of them. Lichtheim even takes out the terms from her description and considers it as a moral dictionary of the Middle Kingdom (Lichtheim

⁸ Both sentences are to be seen in the stele of Intef, who lived during the reign Amenemhat II. The stele has been raised in Abydos and is currently in Leiden (Leiden V 6 = No 4), row 12–13. The only difference is in the preposition *r* in front of *rh*: “I am a knower who taught himself to know. Who consult so as to be consulted” (Lichtheim 1988, 112). The use of the combination of words in other monuments shows that it is an expression and used to be well-known to the educated people in the beginning of the Middle Kingdom.

1988, 142–143). The one thing that Lichteim misses to do is to compare this dictionary of terms, mentioned by Intef with their description in the Wisdom Texts. If this had been done then the conclusion would have been that the moral values, which every nobleman must possess, have been examined and studied by the ancient Egyptian wise men during the First Intermediate Period. They are described through a system of terms, which gradually enter into the spoken language. Consequently they become part of the understanding of ancient Egyptians of morality and take main place in Wisdom Literature. Their reflection is most clearly visible in biographical texts.

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