

The Concept of ‘Letters to the Dead’ and Egyptian Funerary Culture*

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The textual categorization ‘letter to the dead’ has been well known in Egyptology since the publication of the first corpus in 1928 by Gardiner and Sethe.¹ These texts, in which a living person presents an incidental problem to a dead (specifically a *ꜣḥ*) family member (or member of the *pr*-household), were written in hieratic script on various materials (ceramic, papyrus, stele) and deposited in the grave.² They are attested from the late Old Kingdom to the 7th century B.C., but the bulk of the corpus comes from late Old Kingdom—Middle Kingdom, the period *par excellence* of the genre (Table 3.1). There is an abundant literature on these documents, especially considering the known number of letters to the dead to date: we are aware of fewer than 20 documents for the entire 1500-year period.³ For the late Old Kingdom to the early Middle Kingdom period, there are around a dozen. By comparison, there are 37 known demotic letters to the gods from the late period and Ptolemaic period.⁴ The scientific interest in letters to the dead is consequently not justified by the size of the actual corpus, but of course by the quality of the information

* I would like to thank Rune Nyord and the referees for their precious remarks and comments on a previous version of this text, and Jean-Yves Bart for the revision of the English text. This article received support from the Maison Interuniversitaire des Sciences de l’Homme d’Alsace (MISHA) and the Excellence Initiative of the University of Strasbourg.

1 Gardiner, A.H. and K. Sethe, *Egyptian Letters to the Dead, mainly from the Old and Middle Kingdoms* (London, 1928).

2 On the archaeological contexts, see Miniaci, G., ‘Reuniting Philology and Archaeology: The “Emic” and “Etic” in the Letter of the Dead Qau Bowl UC16163 and its Context’, *ZÄS* 143 (2016), 88–105; Donnat, S., ‘L’écrit comme trace de rituel en Égypte ancienne’, *Archimède* 1 (2014), 88–95 (<http://archimede.unistra.fr/revue-archimede/archimede-1-2014/archimede-1-2014-dossier-lecrit-comme-trace-de-rituel/>).

3 For corpus inventories, see footnote 28.

4 Depauw, M., *The Demotic Letter: A Study of Epistolographic Scribal Traditions against Their Intra- and Intercultural Background* (Demotischen Studien 14, Sommerhausen, 2006), 308–309. For older letters to the gods, see Lefèvre, D., ‘Épistolographie et diplomatique: La rédaction d’une lettre aux dieux sous la XXI^e dynastie’, *Semitica et Classica* x (2017), 133–157.

TABLE 3.1 Letters to the dead and related documents (6th dynasty-SIP)

	Speech		Themes				Hieratic script
	Second person	Epistolary formula	Request for help	Legal background	<i>Akh</i> and/or rituals	<i>Per-</i> household	
Letters to the dead—'Epistolary corpus' (6th–12th dynasty)							
– <i>Cairo Linen</i> (Late 6th dyn.)	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
– <i>Qau Bowl</i> (FIP)	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
– <i>Naga ed-Deir N 3500</i> (FIP)	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
– <i>Naga ed-Deir N 3737</i> (FIP)	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
– <i>Hu Bowl</i> (FIP)	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
– <i>Chicago Jar Stand</i> (FIP)	+	–/+	+	+	+	+	+
– <i>Stele Michael C. Carlos Museum—Emory University 2014.033.001</i> (FIP)	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
– <i>Louvre Bowl</i> (12th dyn.)	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
– <i>Cairo Bowl</i> (12th dyn.)	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
Written communication (FIP)—closely related to 'epistolary corpus'							
– <i>Berlin Bowl</i>	+	–	+	+	+	+	+
Lists of valuables (6th–nth dynasty)							
– <i>Qubett el-Hawa Bowl, Caire JE 91740</i>	–	–	–	+	+	–	+
Postscript (12th dynasty)							
– <i>Papyrus Berlin 10.482 verso</i> (Sedekh)	+	–	+	–	+	+	+
Written statement? (SIP)							
– <i>Oxford Bowl</i>	–	–	–	+	+	+/-	+