How 'Royal' (and 'Mythical') Are the Coffin Texts? Reflections on the Definition and Function of Some Etic Concepts in a Middle Kingdom Funerary Text Corpus

Katja Goebs

The exact relationship of the funerary corpus of the Coffin Texts with its royal precursors, the Old Kingdom Pyramid Texts, continues to be a hotly contended topic among Egyptologists.[1] Issues debated include 1) The importance of format, such as the different types of text carrier—sunk stone relief on tomb wall vs. (predominantly) painted wooden coffin,[2] 2) Use and availability—where the observation that a much larger group of individuals, namely members of the high-ranking Middle Kingdom elite, had access to the Coffin Texts has entailed discussions about terms such as 'democratization' vs. 'demotization',[3]

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1 Good summary in Mathieu, B. 'La distinction entre Textes des Pyramides et Textes des Sarcophages est-elle légitime?', in Bickel, S. and Mathieu, B. (eds.), *D'un monde à l'autre: Textes des pyramides & textes des sarcophages: Actes de la Table ronde internationale, textes des pyramides versus textes des sarcophages: Ifao, 24–26 septembre 2001* (BdÉ 139, Cairo, 2004), 247–262; for a more recent, brief, take on the matter see Willems, H., *Historical and Archaeological Aspects of Egyptian Funerary Culture: Religious Ideas and Ritual Practice in Middle Kingdom Elite Cemeteries* (Culture and History of the Ancient Near East 73, Leiden/Boston, 2014), 201 with n. 238. An extensive discussion is included in Antonio Morales' dissertation *The Transmission of the Pyramid Texts into the Middle Kingdom: Philological Aspects of a Continuous Tradition of Egyptian Mortuary Literature* (PhD Dissertation University of Pennsylvania (= UMI 3565179), Ann Arbor, 2013), in which the transition from Pyramid Texts to Coffin Texts and a number of the dynamics or strategies underlying potential transfers are discussed.

2 Although some Pyramid Texts survive on Middle Kingdom coffins also; synoptic edition by Allen, J.P., *The Egyptian Coffin Texts 8: Middle Kingdom Copies of Pyramid Texts* (Oriental Institute Publications 132, Chicago, 2006); see also Morales, *Transmission of the Pyramid Texts into the Middle Kingdom*, e.g. p. 30, where the author posits that about 400 Pyramid Text spells out of a total of 900 were transferred into, and edited for inclusion in, the Coffin Texts.

3 Discussed extensively in Willems, *Historical and Archaeological Aspects of Egyptian Funerary Culture*, 124–229, with evidence for both private individuals adopting Pyramid (and Coffin) Texts—commonly religious personnel involved in the cult of Old Kingdom kings' pyramid cults—as well as quantifications that demonstrate the extremely high status of the persons using the Coffin Texts, especially in Middle Egypt and Thebes. Even more recently, the very

and 3) Content—such as the frequent use of captions and glosses in the Coffin Texts, the absence of certain central themes and a much higher incidence of dialogue in that later corpus,[4] paired with suggestions that regional religious ideas may be reflected in it. The latter have in turn led to a long-standing debate on the geographic origin of the two corpora in distinct (a northern vs. southern, or Middle Egyptian) cultural settings.[5] Many of these issues remain contentious in the scholarly literature and continue to be redefined in light of new findings.[6]

concept of a 'trickle-down effect' in the use of these texts has been questioned on the basis of their including evidence for certain rituals—such as offering formulae—that are also, and earlier, attested in private funerary contexts (thus Smith, M., *Following Osiris: Perspectives on the Osirian Afterlife from four Millennia* (Oxford/New York, 2017), e.g. p. 51, esp. pp. 95 ff.; id., 'Democratization of the Afterlife', in Wendrich, W. and J. Dieleman (eds), *UCLA Encyclopedia of Egyptology* (Los Angeles, 2009), http://escholarship.org.myaccess.library.utoronto.ca/uc/ item/70g428wj). Such a, somewhat superficial, evaluation of the materials should be weighed against the evidence demonstrating beyond any doubt that the funerary text corpora as they are attested today include materials from various contexts and of varying geographical, historical, and functional provenance—a situation that is showcased, among other things, in the fact that no two pyramids or coffins display the exact same selection of texts. Just because an overlap can be observed in the use of some types of text in both the royal and private spheres does not dictate that this overlap extended to all conceptions included in a corpus such as the Pyramid Texts. While Smith acknowledges that both spheres may have drawn upon a common source for the texts that they share (*Following Osiris*, 154), this scenario to him provides 'further support for the view that rulers and subjects shared common aspirations for the hereafter during the Old Kingdom', thereby ignoring a number of conceptions that are in fact not attested in the private sphere. I will return to this point at the end of the discussion.

4   E.g. von Lieven, A., 'Nun sprach aber Osirtis zu Re ... (Götter)Dialoge in den großen Corpora der ägyptischen Funerärliteratur', in El Hawary, A. (ed.), *Wenn Götter und Propheten reden: Erzählen für die Ewigkeit* (= Naratio Aliena? Studien des Bonner Zentrums für Transkulturelle Narratologie 3, Berlin, 2012), 97–98, who comments on differences between the two corpora, pointing out, for example, that a group of spells commonly known as 'Abscheusprüche', meaning 'Spells of loathing' or 'disgust', are absent from the Pyramid Texts as their royal users did not require them. On the increased use of dialogue in the Coffin Texts see Coulon, L., 'Rhétorique et stratégies du discours dans les formules funéraires: les innovations des Textes des Sarcophages', in Bickel and Mathieu (eds.), *D'un monde à l'autre: Textes des pyramides & textes des sarcophages*, 119–142. For the phenomenon and forms of dialogue in this corpus see also Bickel, S., 'Dialoge und das Dialogische in den altägyptischen Sargtexten', in El Hawary (ed.), *Wenn Götter und Propheten reden*, 65–82.

5   Summary e.g. in Gestermann, L., 'Sargtexte aus Dair al-Biršā: Zeugnisse eines historischen Wendepunktes?', in Bickel and Mathieu (eds), *D'un monde à l'autre: Textes des pyramides & textes des sarcophages*, esp. pp. 206–207.

6   To cite just one notable example from my own scholarly experience: A paper presented by Isabelle Pierre-Croisiau at a conference held at the IFAO in Cairo in 2001, later published as 'Nouvelles identifications de textes des sarcophages parmi les "nouveaux" textes des pyramides de Pépy Ier et de Mérenrê', in Bickel and Mathieu (eds.), *D'un monde à l'autre: Textes des pyramides & textes des sarcophages*, 263–278, identified, among various other CT numbers,