The Importance of Copying

Although many studies have appeared recently on writing, authorship, and the *Sitz im Leben* of literature in ancient Egyptian society, it is my opinion that more attention should be paid to a far less intellectual, but undoubtedly more practical, aspect of the scribal occupation—the copying of documents of all sorts, literary and otherwise. Copying was the initial and most essential step in scribal education, to be sure, but was thereby also the first step in learning to read. Without copying, ancient literature would not have survived. It is rare to read a discussion of Egyptian literature without encountering the word “copy” or “copyist” several times. In this vein, Jan Assmann has usefully noted that Egyptian religious literature in particular often went first through a productive stage, followed by a reproductive stage, when a text became canonical and innovations were no longer introduced. We instinctively realize that the dissemination of certain types of information such as royal decrees could not have been done unless the professional scribes were well trained in reproducing texts from master copies. As intriguing as the problem of copying and disseminating multiple versions of a hieroglyphic inscription might be, my main focus in this study will instead be how scribes were trained to produce and copy hieroglyphic texts on papyrus, particularly the most common of all Egyptian afterlife books, the mass-produced afterlife texts known as the *Book of the Dead*.

Nearly four decades ago, Shafik Allam investigated the possibility that a large proportion of the non-literary ostraca from Deir el-Medina might actually be drafts used in the final preparation of more polished, or “fair copy,” versions on papyrus. This issue, as well as some broader questions of scribal training and practice, has been extensively re-examined by K. Donker van Heel and Ben J.J. Haring with a focus on Deir el-Medina.

The need to compose documents, whether religious texts, literary works, or financial records, then to collate the whole into a “fair copy,” was hardly confined to the Ramesside Period. For instance, as far back as the Old Kingdom, some of the more complex administrative papyri among the Abusir archive could not have been so neatly prepared unless the scribes had been using stored papyri as format models. Once the complex layout of the document had thus been achieved, the final archived copies were probably produced by carefully transcribing...
material from more informal, temporary records. Another example of sophisticated copying of complex material in the earliest times is provided by the Pyramid Texts, whose similarity between parallel versions from monument to monument could hardly have been achieved unless there had been a well-tested procedure for copying sections of the corpus on papyrus, editing them, and finally formatting them into the columnar wall inscriptions. This tradition continued throughout Egyptian history with the production of other afterlife texts, first with the Coffin Texts inscribed on the sides of coffins, then eventually the Book of the Dead on papyri. From the New Kingdom onward, copying of the Book of the Dead was doubtless an important source of income for some specialized scribes working in funerary workshops.6

The Role of Copying in Scribal Training

The Book of the Dead, like most religious papyri, may have been written in cursive hieroglyphs, yet the scribes—more accurately scriveners in this role—who wrote out these texts were first trained extensively in the hieratic script, the form of writing employed in the transactions of everyday life. We have several indications of how important learning the art of accurate transcription was within the scribal curriculum of the Ramesside Period. Given the abstract nature of hieratic forms, the vast repertoire of signs, and the numerous ligatures employed, much of the initial training certainly involved imitation of the teachers’ writing and rote learning of words as sequences of strokes rather than groups of individual characters. Developing skill with a brush and a neat flowing hand were the primary objectives at this stage of scribal education.

Some of the more cultivated members of the Deir el-Medina literate community, such as Qenher-khepeshef, were clearly motivated by a combination of interest in the past and pride in their status as the intellectuals of their village to collect literary and other materials, so we should be cautious in associating any given literary ostracon or papyrus as a didactic exercise. Yet, it would not be overstating things to say that during the Ramesside Period, the genre of texts we confidently identify as “literature” was intimately connected with scribal training, an activity in which a far less lofty spirit prevailed than the one we normally would associate with “belles lettres.” As noted above, the first step in scribal training entailed writing by conscious imitation of the master’s script. Eventually, students would gain enough skill so that they progressed beyond producing something akin to a facsimile to the point where they were actually copying manuscripts with ease. The very table of contents of Gardiner’s publication of student manuscripts known as The Late-Egyptian Miscellanies alone provides evidence of the pervasiveness of copying as an instructional method. The Miscellanies contain quite a number of didactic exercises that are closely similar from version to version as they appear on the several papyri, an indication that the scribal schoolmasters had a standard repertoire of texts that the students


