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Writing Tradition during the 25th Dynasty in Ancient Egypt. The Perspectives on the Analysis of the Written Sources

Abstract

The recourse to the Egyptian past is a characteristic feature for the whole of the Late Period. During the 25th Dynasty it is connected to some extent with the Kushite rulers of Egypt. The texts of this period are the source of archaisms, but their relation to the rest of the Egyptian culture has not been sufficiently described. This article presents some of the perspectives for the comparative study of the whole of the material with an emphasis on the linguistic developments, presence of religious and administrative documentation and lack of the literary works.

General remarks*

The 25th Dynasty in Egypt applies to the years 747–664 BC, a part of the so-called ‘Third Intermediate Period’ which follows the New Kingdom and precedes the Late Period.¹ In fact these dates are not stable; the chronology of the 25th Dynasty strongly depends on the chronology of other Dynasties of the Third Intermediate Period (the 22nd to 24th Dynasties). The presence of the 25th Dynasty in the Third Intermediate Period is, rather, chronological. Its true nature could be described, based for example on the art of this period, as “an age of transition between the Libyan and Saite epochs”.²

In the frame of the Third Intermediate Period or the wider Late Period, it is artificial to focus only on the 25th Dynasty of rulers that came from Nubia. However, the evidence

* I am grateful to Ruth Humphreys for the revision of the English.

¹ Taylor 2000: 352–358.

² Kitchen 2004, § 119.

suggests that they brought a new dimension to the Egyptian culture, assimilating into it and appreciating the Egyptian past as well as consolidating a temporary unification of the country. Their historical and cultural meaning is discussed on the basis of the royal and private monuments, which have also preserved for us a part of the history of the Egyptian language. The texts of this period are considered interesting because of their diversity and epigraphy.

A characteristic phenomenon of this period is the Kushite respect for the Egyptian tradition. It is nothing new. A conscious going back to the models of the past in Egypt is known from different periods and is interpreted as an attempt to strengthen and consolidate the new cultural and political situation.³ The events of the 25th and 26th Dynasties in Egypt are so much more wide ranging and diverse than in previous times that they are usually described as a renaissance or archaism. It has been observed that the upper classes and kings copied archaic monuments. All aspects of culture appear to have been effected by the replication of Old Kingdom, along with some Middle and New Kingdom, styles.⁴

The renaissance phenomenon is mainly applicable to the 26th Dynasty.⁵ The general attribution of the archaistic trend to the 25th–26th Dynasties is also justified by the general dating of the artefacts or lifespan linked with non-royal elite, for example, Montuemhat.

The origins of this archaising tendency can be traced back to the later Libyan period, beginning during the first half of the 8th century BC and reaching its full phase in the 26th Dynasty.⁶

The list of the archaisms for the 25th Dynasty includes:

- The Old Kingdom names of the Kushite kings,
- Canon proportions from Old Kingdom (royal and private statues),
- The reliefs of the temple T in Kawa, which are copies of the Old Kingdom royal mortuary temples of Sahure, Niuserre (Abusir), Pepi I and Pepi II (Saqqara),⁷
- The royal religious texts: the famous Shabaka stone and Taharqa's sun litany,⁸
- Within the non-royal context – the biographical inscriptions of the Theban officials (Harwa, Montuemhat),⁹
- The burial customs – the enriching the funerary assemblage, new iconographic feature for coffins and tombs,¹⁰

³ See Assmann 2005: 375–376.

⁴ See Assmann 2005: 375–403. For the references to the older literature see Kahl 1999: 349–350.

⁵ Assmann 2005: 375–378 speaks about the 25th–26th Dynasties, but out of quoted examples it is clear that he means mainly the 26th Dynasty. See also der Manuelian 1994 and Schipper 2001: 307–318. Differently for example J. Taylor (Taylor 2000), and M.K.W. von Falk (von Falk 2001).

⁶ Taylor 2000: 356–357.

⁷ Kahl 1999: 350, n. 292.

⁸ Schenkel 1980: 37–39, Abb. 1–2.

⁹ Otto 1954: 122.

¹⁰ Taylor 2000: 357.

- Within the Theban area, by the production of the priests new edition of the Book of the Dead,¹¹
- A new style of funerary decoration connected with the reproducing the Book of the Dead on anthropoid coffins,¹²
- Using the religious texts: Pyramid Texts (with the memphitic pattern) and Coffin Texts; during the 25th Dynasty for the tomb walls of the members of the royal family and high officials in the Theban area,¹³
- Using diverse religious texts on coffins,¹⁴
- The reappearance of royal and non-royal scarabs, plaques with decoration on both sides and cylinders.¹⁵

The archaism touched the royal and private sphere, but there is still a question as to its depth and geographical penetration of the culture of the 25th Dynasty. Generally archaism in the Late Period is regarded as a distinct feature of the elite class in Egypt, and representative of the whole culture outside.¹⁶ As the texts of this period were one of the main sources of archaism, it is interesting to examine their language. Obviously the renaissance was partially possible due to Egyptian conservatism in writing and language. The texts were kept, because the knowledge of the classical Egyptian script was maintained.

Language

The language of the 25th Dynasty is classified as Late Egyptian. According to the latest research it is judged to be its final, third stage, covering the period of the 22nd to 25th Dynasties.¹⁷ However, there remain texts from the period in question that should be described as using the classical Egyptian language, called Late Middle Egyptian. This is the language used after the Middle Kingdom till the end of the Egyptian civilisation, mainly in a religious context. Of particular note are the royal stelae, the language of which has already been studied in terms of grammar, noting the use of Middle Egyptian forms.¹⁸

Nevertheless in the grammar of Late Middle Egyptian there is no place for that period.¹⁹ Karl Jansen-Winkeln explains that in his introductory remarks in the

¹¹ von Falk 2001: 785 and n. 28.

¹² von Falk 2001: 785 and n. 29.

¹³ von Falk 2001: 786.

¹⁴ von Falk 2001: 786–788.

¹⁵ Leclant 1984: 502.

¹⁶ Assmann 2005: 382.

¹⁷ Winand 1992: 17, 28. He is using in his study fourteen texts of the 25th Dynasty; the composition of two: P. Vandier and P. BM 10252 is dated by this author to the 25th Dynasty, but their copies are stated to be later (*ibidem*, 23–24).

¹⁸ Priese 1972: 99–124.

¹⁹ Jansen-Winkeln 1996.

book being a preparation for this grammar. His explanation of the chosen limits, means understanding Late Middle Egyptian in the Third Intermediate Period as the language of the 21st to 24th Dynasties, is simple: these limits are easy to put, because Middle Egyptian of the Ramesside period is clearly different and with the beginning of the 25th Dynasty the Egyptian culture notes on many fields a deep change, which is also clearly visible in the language – naming archaism in the texts, forms and formulae, clearly using other “models”.²⁰ However, this explanation is not satisfactory. First, the reality of the language was more complicated in the time of the 25th Dynasty and secondly, regarding the above mentioned features which are clearly visible in the language, one may observe that the expansion of the archaism in the texts is not clear. Forms and formulae are not described for this period, and, additionally, using other “models” is not generally recognised.

The same author also offers a slightly different interpretation in other place.²¹ First, he notes that the language of the Third Intermediate Period and Late Period is the fifth stage of the development of the Egyptian. In particular, since the 22nd Dynasty there are definite restrictions in using the classical and Late Egyptian, with also the presence of the mixed texts; classical is used in the ceremonial, planned communication with or inside the gods’ world or Netherworld. By contrast Late Egyptian is used in administration, literature and everyday, informal and spontaneous communication. He stresses also that the breaking of these rules was infrequent and this language structure remained more or less constant until the end of the 26th Dynasty, possibly even later. So it seems that the aforementioned linguistic boundary (the 21st–24th Dynasties for the Late Middle Egyptian) is not so clearly defined, especially when we take into consideration the problems with so called Shabaka stone. This, the most famous monument of the 25th Dynasty, is dated to different periods using the same language examples.²²

Writing

To comment on the language used, we have to first determine the texts. This cannot be done without discussing the Egyptian styles of writing. During the 25th Dynasty one finds mainly a continuation of the old tradition – using hieroglyphic and hieratic scripts. The hieroglyphic writing continues to be used in the monumental, representative texts on durable materials, e.g. stone. Hieratic writing was traditionally reserved for literature, religious manuscripts and everyday documents. During the 25th Dynasty all three kinds of hieratic sources are rare, at least those which can be conclusively dated to the period. Literary texts are generally rare for the whole period after the New Kingdom, whilst religious texts are considered unknown, perhaps because of the new custom of the so-called “hypocephala”; rounded discs with the funerary text in cursive hieroglyphs.²³ The

²⁰ Jansen-Winkel 1994: 1.

²¹ Jansen-Winkel 1995: 85–115.

²² Compare the arguments of IX. Sethe discussed by F. Junge (Junge 1973).

²³ Verhoeven 2001: 15–16.

few items dated to the 25th Dynasty in terms of hieratic texts are five amuletic papyri with the protective texts, and three hieratic stelae.²⁴

The hieratic used by the administration was probably replaced by ‘abnormal hieratic’, which is more cursive and sometimes similar to demotic, but certainly distinct. Abnormal hieratic was used before the 25th Dynasty, but only in Thebes. It first appears in the period from the 21st to 22nd Dynasties. Its second stage, the 25th–26th Dynasties is better attested by texts, which in both cases are administrative.²⁵ We know of about 100 documents written in the abnormal hieratic, but as published ones were stated 37 in the year 1982;²⁶ approximately 20 date to the 25th Dynasty. These texts are interesting sources of information about the everyday life of the Egyptians. However, they are somewhat problematic to study as their palaeography was never studied in chronological terms.

Texts

As previously mentioned the most well known and significant text of the period is the monument of Shabaka.²⁷ It is a theological text emphasising the importance of the Old Kingdom residence at Memphis and of its god Ptah. The document is supposed to be a copy of a papyrus manuscript, but is written in hieroglyphs, which are judged to be the preferred script of the priests during the Late Period. The original date of the text is still under discussion, but there are good arguments to suggest it is not an Old Kingdom composition, but hails from the 25th Dynasty.²⁸

The rest of the texts of the 25th Dynasty are not described in the light of an archaistic phenomenon. The material of the period proves quite difficult to handle. What we often have is a very general view,²⁹ or detail. With the exception of those monuments of the 25th Dynasty which come from Thebes,³⁰ or from Abydos,³¹ and the most famous stelae,³² the remaining monuments, although rich are somewhat scattered in publications, like series of articles by various authors.³³

Currently, a corpus of 25th Dynasty texts does not exist, but the expected publication of the third part of Karl Jansen-Winkel’s collection of texts from the Egyptian Third Intermediate Period and Late Period (the 21st to 30th Dynasties) should rectify this.³⁴

²⁴ Verhoeven 2001: 15–16.

²⁵ Malinine 1974: 31–35.

²⁶ Vittmann 1982: 748–750.

²⁷ Assmann 2005: 382–396.

²⁸ Junge 1973: 195f.; Assmann 2005: 383.

²⁹ Leclant 1974: 123–142.

³⁰ Leclant 1965.

³¹ Leahy 1994: 171–192.

³² Schäfer 1905; Grimal 1981a; Grimal 1981b.

³³ In particular K. Jansen-Winkel, P. Vernus and G. Vittmann.

³⁴ Jansen-Winkel 2007; Jansen-Winkel 2008.

With regard to the religious hieratic texts the boundaries are clear. Recorded practice prior to the 25th Dynasty in the best attested religious text, the Book of the Dead, is different to the 26th Dynasty Book of the Dead papyri. During the 26th Dynasty the new redaction of this compilation was fixed in a stable order and number of spells.

Despite previously stating that the religious hieratic texts for this period are largely unknown,³⁵ fragments of papyrus dated to the 25th Dynasty (name of the owner, the 4th prophet of Amon, Wj a h o r) were found during the excavations in TT 1152 lead under the direction of Polish archaeologist Tomasz G ó r e c k i in 2006 and 2007. All the fragments have text on both sides. The recto, which is studied by the author, reads as an untypical hieratic funerary text (containing part of the Book of the Dead; a spell similar to Pyramid Texts, a liturgical spell and one unidentified spell), and the verso as an abnormal hieratic one, studied by G. V i t t m a n n.

Literature

Similar to the Third Intermediate Period, the amount of literature hieratic texts is scant; the only one of any length is P. Chassinat I (the story about N e f e r k a r e and the general S i s e n e); and probably three other literary fragments. One wooden tablet with a teaching (in abnormal hieratic) on one side and on the other the beginning of the Middle Kingdom literary text; “Teaching of Cheti”; P. Chassinat II, a very fragmentary story about a king and a ghost may also date to this period.³⁶ However, even if the manuscripts are dated to the 25th Dynasty, the origins of these texts date usually to the earlier periods.

The lack of literature is not surprising;³⁷ this period was not peaceful and the cursive writing was changed from hieratic to abnormal hieratic. During the 26th Dynasty the new, demotic script appeared, with new literature. However, this was first attested later, around the 27th Dynasty by a small literary fragment and first longer texts appeared in the 4th–3rd centuries BC.³⁸

Language in the cultural context – the perspectives

The description of the language from the 25th Dynasty and its characteristic features, from the cultural, Egyptian background, is supported by increasingly detailed descriptions of Kushite cultural features provided in recent years. These include work on clothes

³⁵ Verhoeven 2001: 15–16.

³⁶ Verhoeven 2001: 15–16.

³⁷ However, compare an opinion about P. V a n d i e r in note 17 supra.

³⁸ Quack 2005: 1.

and appearance,³⁹ names, titles, non-Egyptian words⁴⁰ and burial customs.⁴¹ However, we need to establish the different linguistic registers and social functions of the texts by separating royal and elite non-royal texts from simple everyday language, and then we can begin to analyse and describe their language. The geographical division of the material (especially locally produced material) may bring also new information, particularly because we know that the supremacy of the 25th Dynasty over the whole Egypt did not remove the local centres of power.

The recourse to the past in the 25th Dynasty may be judged as archaism, but also as tradition,⁴² because the context of using the old models is correct; e.g. scenes from the funerary context were copied into the funerary context. Finally, drawing parallels to the beginning of Egyptian history, when there was no attested literature, but all other kinds of texts, royal, religious and administrative, were present, we may see the emergence of a ‘new beginning’ of the Egyptian culture.

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³⁹ Lohwasser 1999: 586–603; Lohwasser 2001.

⁴⁰ Priese 1968: 165–191; Vittmann 2007: 139–161.

⁴¹ See the project of Seminar für Archäologie und Kulturgeschichte Nordostafrikas, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin „Kuschiten in Theben: Die Spiegelung Kultureller Regelsysteme in archäologischen Befunden aus dem spätzeitlichen Ägypten“ directed by F. Kammerzell and J. Budka, http://www2.hu-berlin.de/aknoa/forschung/asasif/index.html#Kuschiten_in_Theben (28.01.2009).

⁴² Compare Kahl 1999: 349.

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