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Damien Agut-Labordere

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Inserting or Ruminating: How Demotic Became Canonic

Damien Agut-Labordère

Canonization has an important place among the concepts of cultural phenomena. Borrowed from Medieval Latin and the law of the Catholic Church (“canon law”), the use of canonization, in its literary acceptance, results from a transfer of meaning from something that is specified with precision – that is, an act by which the Pope solemnly inscribes a person in the catalogue of Saints – to form a text that has the possibility of becoming definitive. This shift from the register of ecclesiastical law to that of the study of literature has certainly been facilitated by the use of the corresponding verb within the Church itself. “Canonize” can refer to the codifying of a decision taken by a Council, but also to inserting a *liber* within the corpus of the Holy Books. Therefore, and we shall return to this point, the canon appears first of all as a list (of books, laws, etc.).¹ It was only through a second semantic shift that the notion of canonization came to be used for designating a text as fixed. The multilayered nature inherent in the meaning of “canonization” certainly explains the great heterogeneity of answers given by specialists in Ancient Egyptian literature to the question of whether or not it was canonized. While the question of the canonization of Egyptian literature in the 2nd millennium BCE (what can be called “Classical” Pharaonic literature) has been well studied (we shall return to this a little later), the question of the canonization of Egyptian literature of the 1st millennium BCE has barely been sketched. In this essay I will deal with this second question. But first, it is worth recalling that a very large portion of Egyptian literature of the 1st millennium BCE is written in a cursive script called Demotic, deriving from the traditional Egyptian cursive writing, the Hieratic.² Demotic is attested in Egypt from the 7th century BCE to the

1 Smith 1982 and the comments made by Versluys in this volume, pp. 42–43.

2 I leave aside the question of literary texts written in abnormal hieratic, the other cursive script derived from hieratic. Abnormal hieratic is attested in Upper Egypt from the 8th to the 6th century BCE. Primarily because of the scarcity of the corpus, barely two texts – P. Queen’s College (Fisher Elfert 2013) and a wooden tablet from the Asasif (Vittmann 2006) – are known. Moreover, the work of deciphering the most important of them, P. Queen’s College, is still in progress.

middle of the 5th century CE. It is accompanied by an entirely new literature, which breaks completely with that of the third and second millennia BCE. Not only do new genres and works appear in Demotic, but the “Classics” of the Bronze Age (the *Story of Sinuhe*, *Instructions of Amenemhat* or works from the second part of the 2nd millennium BCE, such as *King Neferkare and General Sasetet*) also seemingly cease to be copied, and are therefore no longer transmitted. At the end of this essay I will return to the question of how to interpret this break in the transmission of literary works. Prior to that, it is important to emphasize that, while the “Classical” phase of Egyptian literature corresponds to a time when Egypt was the centre of an independent kingdom with phases of imperial extension (corresponding to the Middle and New Kingdoms), in contrast, the Demotic phase of the 1st millennium BCE corresponds to a historical period when Egypt was part of an empire (Persian, 5th–4th century BCE, Roman, from the end of the 1st century BCE) or was dominated by an exogenous elite (as was the case during the Hellenistic period, 3rd–1st century BCE). All this implies two major differences between Classic and Demotic phases of Egyptian literature:

- Demotic literature was growing in the context of the unprecedented increase of connectivity not only in the Eastern Mediterranean, but also in the Near East and North Africa.
- While Classical Egyptian literature emanated from a politically dominant class, Demotic literature belonged to a social group that no longer held political power.

The starting point for any discussion about the notion of canonization in Ancient Egyptian literature is Jan Assmann’s book, *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis*, published in 1992. This work truly introduced the concept into the field of cultural studies of Ancient Egypt. The three cultures at the centre of *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis*, Egyptian, Greek and Jewish, have in common that they were able to build collections of books. Assmann, however, distinguishes between Israel and Greece, on the one hand, where literature was canonized so as to fixate it as a basis for commentary, and Egyptian civilization, on the other hand, where the corpus was literally petrified on the walls of the temples that became the conservatories of a now immutable tradition. Following the classification proposed by Lévi-Strauss,³ he distinguishes between the “warm” memory of the Jews and Greeks, for whom the injunction “Remember!” simultaneously

3 “Ces notions, d’ailleurs relatives, n’ont rien de réel mais renvoient aux manières subjectives dont les sociétés conçoivent leur rapport à l’histoire: soit qu’elles s’inclinent devant elle ou y adhèrent; soit qu’elles préfèrent l’ignorer et qu’elles cherchent à neutraliser ses effets.” Lévi-Strauss 1993, 9.

constitutes an imperative of collective identity, and opposes it to the “cold” memory of the Egyptians, who confined themselves to recording sacred texts. For Assmann, Egyptian canonization is firstly a list-like written form of knowledge management, with lists attributed to gods or to certain emblematic scholars from the past. Assmann was, in this field as in others, a pioneer. While he did manage to set the terms of the discussion, he nonetheless only touched on the question of the fixation of Egyptian literature of the third and second millennia BCE. This question actually proves very difficult to answer, at least when judging by the oxymoronic expressions that specialists in Egyptian literature from the 3rd and 2nd millennia are obliged to use to describe the process of textual transmission.⁴ In spite of these difficulties, most seem to be attached to the idea of maintaining the notion of canonization. In 2016, Pascal Vernus published a very comprehensive article on this issue, which, in our view, represents a turning point. Vernus begins by adopting a very precise (and restrictive) definition of the notion of canonization. According to him, a canon can be identified by certain minimal characteristics:⁵

- I. Spécificité organique: un canon est une formation culturelle, non réductible à la simple addition de ses composants.
- II. Intangibilité: un canon est constitué par sélection, et demeure clos sur lui-même, à tout le moins pour une période ou un domaine donnés; pas de modification; pas d'ajout; pas de retranchement.
- III. Exclusivité: un canon ne tolère pas de canon concurrent dans le même domaine, pour la même période, aussi longtemps qu'il est tenu pour valide.
- IV. *Auctoritas*: un canon est porteur de règles auxquelles se rapporter; il est donc axiologiquement érigé en modèle normatif et fait autorité.
- V. Expression identitaire: un canon est valorisé et légitimé en tant qu'expression identitaire d'une 'communauté', dans un sens très large, depuis un groupe social limité, jusqu'à une civilisation prise globalement dans son opposition à d'autres.”

On the basis of this, Vernus reviews an extensive corpus of Egyptian texts and concludes as follows: “on a constaté combien les textes échappaient aux processus de canonisation.”⁶ I will rely on the definition proposed by Vernus, with

4 “The canon was not a closed system, but open-ended both in formal terms and the formation of genres.” Parkinson 1996: 308. See also the “dynamic canonicity” proposed by Goldwasser 1991, 141.

5 Vernus 2016, 273.

6 Vernus 2016, 332.

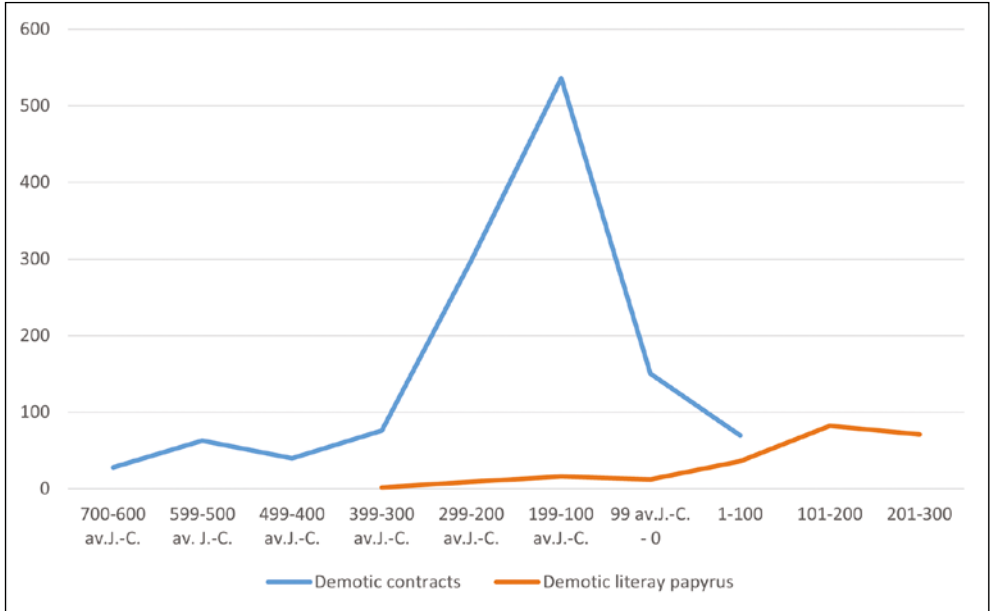


FIGURE 4.1 Comparative evolution of the number of Demotic contracts with the number of literary papyrus

particular reference to criteria II, ‘intangibility’, and III, ‘exclusivity’, to search for “canonized texts” in Demotic literature. The oldest Demotic literary texts in our possession were discovered on the Saqqara Plateau during the English excavations of the early 1970s. Palaeographic analysis allows us to date them to no later than the Persian Period.⁷ It therefore appears that, for three centuries, from the seventh to the fourth centuries BCE, Demotic was exclusively used as what French Assyriologists call “écriture documentaire”, dedicated to accounting and legal acts. The rise of Demotic literature then enters a second stage of Demotic history from the 4th century BCE to the 2nd century CE, when the use of this writing significantly declined in the legal or institutional fields. The more Demotic disappears from the world of public and private affairs, where it is replaced by Greek, the more its literary dimension seems to strengthen.

Asking the question of the canonization of Demotic literary texts will therefore allow us to understand how the Egyptians of the Hellenistic and Roman periods appropriated what we could call “Demotic culture”. The question

⁷ The chronology of Demotic literature is presented in Quack 2016: 1–7 and Quack and Hoffmann 2018, 14–21. See also Ryholt 1999, xiii.

can also be posed differently: how did Demotic become a *Kultursprache*? Answering this question implies the distinguishing of language from writing. The phase of the Egyptian language that we call Demotic indeed became a *Kultursprache*, a language able to convey norms, values and beliefs of general society, long before the end of the 1st millennium BCE. Indeed, some literary works dating from the 6th century BCE, such as the *Tale of Papyrus Vandier* or the so-called *Brooklyn Wisdom Text*, were written in Hieratic writing but in a language that can be described as Demotic. Therefore, the question that arises for the Hellenistic and Roman periods is: at which moment did Demotic writing become a *Kulturschrift*? A simple examination of the chronological graph above provides us with a first clue: the removal of Demotic writing from the realm of *textes de la pratique* would have increased its cultural value. Here we find the concept of “restricted knowledge” forged by John Baines:⁸ the growing scarcity of Demotic increased its cultural value. In fact, at the beginning of the Roman Period, the entirety of Egyptian literature ended up being written in Demotic. From specialized writing, used by businessmen and notaries, the Demotic had turned into the writing of priests, deeply rooted at the heart of Egyptian culture.

1 Rémi Brague's Two Models of Appropriation

It is necessary here to reflect on the meaning of the words “deeply rooted”. How do we know what is “deep” in a culture? Or, conversely, how do we know what is superficial? The notion of canonization, in the very restrictive definition proposed by Pascal Vernus, has an important heuristic value in answering these questions. The fact that a text is considered, at a given moment in its history, to be intangible and exclusive attests to its importance within a given literate culture. In fact, canonized texts lie at the heart of a culture, as they are protected by rules, read, taught and commented upon. If we conceive of culture as an ocean, then canonical texts are abyssal organisms. How do we locate a canonical text? It usually signals itself to us in two ways: firstly, by the discourse that we hold about it – for example, its intangibility, with its authority are clearly stated; and otherwise, the canonicity of a text can be inferred, most particularly through the existence of a great many copies that are faithful to an original. However, neither of these two criteria can be applied to the field of Demotic literature. Instead, we need to find another methodology that allows us to find canonical texts. I propose approaching it from a different angle by

⁸ Baines 1990, 6–17.

not focusing on the more or less canonical nature of the texts themselves (are they intangible? are they exclusive?), but rather on the way in which the ancient Egyptians appropriated their own texts through time. For this purpose, I will use the two models proposed by Rémi Brague, a specialist in medieval Christian, Jewish and Muslim philosophies. As a point of departure, Brague asked himself how the Christian West and the Muslim world have integrated Greek philosophy and, more precisely, Aristotle. He distinguished two ways. He called the first one *digestion*: Aristotle's texts are integrated not in their original form, but through paraphrases and commentaries made by authorities (such as Averroes). The second is referred to as *inclusion*. In this process, the original text is conserved and integrated, as far as possible, in its original form through quotations.⁹ In the framework of the inclusion process, most of the effort made by includers and by later users is therefore focused on establishing the text in such a way as to return it to its original state. Brague did not invent the concept of *inclusion*, but borrowed it from another specialist in medieval philosophy, Kurt Flasch.

As an example for the *inclusion* ("Einsetzung") process, Flasch chose a piece of art rather than a text: the Cross of Lothaire kept in the Treasury of Aachen (the works of Flasch and Brague show that, in this field, there is no difference between the phenomena that occur in material culture and those observed in the history of texts).¹⁰

He notes that a Roman cameo representing an emperor is set at the centre of the cross produced by Carolingian goldsmiths: "Inserting was not just preserving; it was not just preserving some ancient jewellery by inlaying it into sacred objects; it was bringing the past into the present. [...] Even if an old coin was inserted as it was, it was transformed into its true function. It became part of a new historical world; it became 'inclusion'."¹¹ Flasch has a very evocative formula that reveals the very meaning of the *inclusion* process: "It puts the past into the present." Inclusion reflects deference to the object included, because it is perceived as coming from a higher court. The texts that are transmitted

9 Rémi Brague 2006, 266, note 1: "L'utilisation de l'image de la manducation pour l'apprentissage est attestée très tôt, en Égypte ancienne comme dans la Bible." There is, however, a misunderstanding here. The Egyptian verb that metaphorizes learning is *'m*, which means to swallow and not to chew. This distinction is of great importance because swallowing may imply that the food is ingested as it is, without having been crushed by the work of the teeth. If learning is swallowing, it means that one integrates the text as it is, one learns it by heart.

10 M.J. Versluys returns to this in his chapter in this volume: "Texts were not the only important instrument; objects could play a similar role." (p. 50).

11 Flasch 1992, 3.



FIGURE 4.2 Cross of Lothair. Front side. 50 cm height, 38.5 cm width, 2.3 cm depth

through the *inclusion* process have the two characteristics that Vernus attributes to canonized texts: intangibility and exclusivity. Canonization is therefore closely connected to *inclusion*. In contrast, *digestion* expresses a feeling of equality: the text or the object can be reformulated/modified at will. This distinction highlights the fact that the process of canonization/inclusion is closely linked to a perception of time in which the past is perceived as better than the present (this is, for example, Renaissance humanists' perception of Greco-Latin Antiquity). However, the process of reformulation/digestion is underpinned by the idea that the present is superior to, or at least equal to, the past. The heritage of the past must be reworked in order to be assimilated. *Digestion* and *insertion* processes are both attested in what we could call "Demotic culture". What part do both of these processes play in the production and transmission of Demotic literary texts?

2 The Digested Texts

In a recent book devoted to the scribes of the New Kingdom (1550–1069 BCE), Chloe Ragazzoli comes to a radical conclusion about the transmission of literary texts written in Hieratic script: "J'irai même jusqu'à proposer l'idée qu'un texte original, originel et idéal, n'est guère compatible avec la pensée égyptienne, éminemment analytique et aspectuelle [...] un texte égyptien sera plus juste en multipliant les variantes et les versions."¹² A review of an extensive amount of Demotic literature seems to prove her right, as well as for later periods. This is particularly true in the field of narrative texts, tales and "historical novels" (to use the expression proposed by Youri Volokhine for the Inaros Cycle).¹³ There are no parallel versions, strictly speaking, in these literary genres. In other words, narrative texts do not seem to have been perceived as organic units. The common thread that seems to unite these different works are the characters, warriors, kings, priests and magicians that we find connected to the adventures described, hence the term "Sagenkreis", borrowed from Scandinavian literature by Wilhelm Spiegelberg to describe some of these literary ensembles. When we are fortunate enough to have two versions of the same story, the same narrative framework can be of two very different lengths from one version to another. As an example, the framework narrative that introduces the wisdom of Chasheshonqy, which recounts the misfortunes that led an unfortunate priest to prison, unjustly accused of plotting against the

¹² Ragazzoli 2020, 84 and 294.

¹³ Volokhine 2005, 48.

king, is known by two narratives whose lengths vary from single to triple. The absence of parallel texts in the field of narrative literature is of great importance to the question of textual transmission. This situation led Kim Ryholt to a conclusion not unlike that of Chloé Ragazzoli (quoted above): “These texts therefore attest to a remarkable degree of licence in the way wisdom literature was handled, no matter whether they are individual compositions which simply drew heavily upon other compositions or whether they are versions of the same original composition where the individual copyists felt at large to alter, exclude, and include whatever material they pleased.”

The malleable, fluctuating nature of the Demotic narrative literature may have been increased by two elements highlighted by recent research, namely, by both the oral and local dimensions of this literature.¹⁴ Thus, stories can be called *ꜥꜣꜣꜣ*, a “speech”.¹⁵ The story of Petese son of Petetum is presented as “The voice (*ḥrw*) which is before Pharaoh”, meaning that it has to be to be “spoken aloud to an audience rather than read”.¹⁶ The oral dimension of narrative texts has been underlined in a recent book by Jacqueline Jay. Using the concept promoted by specialists on Homer, she has identified two features in Demotic narratives that are specific to oral literature: the presence of elements of phraseology and the use of *Typischen Szenen*, scenes that occur two or more times in an identical manner or with some slight variations. Jay thus identified two major groups of *Typischen Szenen* within the Inaros Cycle: the armament in preparation for battle and the fight itself. She concludes that “any resemblances between the Inaros Cycle and the Homeric epics are to be explained by their common affinities to oral tradition in general rather than by any relationship between the two.”¹⁷ The tale, fable or epic narrative are first and foremost oratorical performances that are enriched by digressions, descriptions and adventures over time. The second point that could explain the fluctuating nature of Demotic narrative texts is related to the fact that they could be adapted to local constraints. Kim Ryholt found an excellent example of this in the story of the “Imprisoned Magician”. In this narrative, a magician is delivered from jail by two birds: one version places the story at Sais (Jar Berlin 12845 Krugtext A,1, 1/2nd CE), while another takes place at Elephantine (P. Heid. 736, First v. BCE).¹⁸

14 On oral dimension, see Ragazzoli 2020: 77–81 (for the 2nd millennium BCE) and Agut-Labordère 2011 and Jay 2016.

15 Ryholt 2005, 5, note 11.

16 Ryholt 1999, 69.

17 Jay 2016, 183.

18 Ryholt 1999, 89.

However, this shifting context is marked by a number of landmarks. Indeed, if the narrative texts are presented as works in perpetual transformation, we find sentences and elements of formulas to be particularly stable within them. These “canonized aggregates” (to take up a formula proposed by Orly Goldwasser)¹⁹ are made up of predetermined formulas as well as proverbs that are quoted from work to work.²⁰ Proverbs are the best example of these canonized masses. Their cultural importance is such that they have been the subject of specific collections, which we refer to as Demotic wisdom texts. The organic unity of these texts was felt to be necessary at the end of the Hellenistic period at least. This is evidenced by the fact that a collection of proverbs was preceded by a short narrative explaining the circumstances in which these maxims had been collected. I have briefly referred to the contents of this story above: after a conspiracy against the king led by the chief physician Harsiese, his friend, Chasheshonqy of Heliopolis, was locked up in the prison of Daphne. Deprived of his freedom, Chasheshonqy spent his time writing a collection of proverbs for his son so that he would not have to face the same fate. The same process is also attested in narrative literature to create collections of stories. The collection known as the *Story of Petese son of Petetum* contains 70 stories gathered by Petese after he learned that he had only 40 days to live.²¹ Egyptologists have become accustomed to calling these introductory narratives “frame stories”. Nevertheless, the story of Petese son of Petetum is not a *roman à tiroirs*, as the main story is not regularly interrupted by secondary stories before resuming its course once the secondary stories are completed (in the manner of the *Arabian Nights* or *The Canterbury Tales*). Each story actually functions independently, apart from the introductory story, which serves only to justify the very existence of the collection. The latter then acts like a magnet that has attracted to it tales or proverbs that had previously circulated independently. In Egyptian, this kind of collection of stories or proverbs was referred to as *s/hwy* “collection”.²² If, within these literary collections, proverbs are in a relatively stable form, narrative texts can become extremely abbreviated. Each narrative framework can be briefly outlined or simply summarized by an evocative incipit, the reading of which triggers the continuation of the narrative in the reader’s mind.²³

19 Goldwasser 1991, 141.

20 Agut-Labordère 2011.

21 Ryholt 1999.

22 Vernus 2016, 285–286.

23 Vernus 2016, 284–285.

If the narrative texts do not seem to have been canonized (at least during the Hellenistic period), was the same true for the collections of stories and proverbs? There are several indications that, at least from the end of the Hellenistic period, these collections were stabilized. First, we have to underline the fact that each of the 70 stories allegedly gathered by Petese son of Petetum was assigned an individual number.²⁴ In the same vein, one or several collections of short stories were organized according to an alphabetical principle where the different letters are designated according to birds whose Egyptian names begin with the relevant letter.²⁵ This type of enumeration is also attested in the greatest Demotic wisdom text, that of the *Papyrus Insinger*. This text is not only divided into numbered thematic chapters, but the number of verses contained in each chapter is counted and appears as a total (*dmd*) indicated at the end of each chapter. Numbered sections are also attested in the herbal of Tebtunis (P. Carls. 230).²⁶ More significantly, a divinatory treatise (recently published by Joachim F. Quack) was also organized into numbered sections.²⁷ Several copies of this treatise, of which at least seven different hands are attested, show that this work was perceived as organic, thereby confirming the hypothesis formulated by Kim Ryholt about the history of Petese son of Petetum: “The purpose of the numbering may have been an attempt to protect the integrity of the works in question.”²⁸ Hence, we have here a first element of what can be called the canonization of Demotic literature.

If we now examine the contents of these collections, a clear distinction must be made between collections of stories, on the one hand, and collections of proverbs and oracles, on the other.²⁹ Unlike narratives, divine words and proverbs were gathered and preserved as such collections. This means that not only were the structures of these collections fixed, but also the various elements that make up their content. Returning to the typology proposed by Brague, since the oracles and proverbs already existed before their subsequent collections, Demotic wisdom texts and oracular treaties are composed of *included*

24 Ryholt 2005, 4–6.

25 Devauchelle 2014.

26 Tait 1991.

27 Quack 2019.

28 Ryholt 2005, 5.

29 The compilation of sapiential and ritual texts known as the *Book of Thoth* could fall into the latter category. This opus is known from different versions dated to the 1st and 2nd centuries CE. Proverbs and elements of rituals as well as funerary compositions are cited in a dialogue between a master (identified with the god Thot if we are to believe the editors, Jasnow and Zauzich 2005) and a disciple designated as the *mr-rh* “the one who is eager to know”. Joachim Quack offers a very different analysis of this opus which, in his view, is a manual used for the initiation of professional scribes (Quack 2007a and 2007b).

elements. The intrinsic value of these elements thereby added to the quality of the collection, implying that these works deserved to be fixed. Therefore, in Egyptian literary culture a proverb or an oracle is felt to be endowed with a unity stronger than that of a tale or fable. The former must be transmitted as they are, they must be *included*, while the latter can be reworked as needed, they can be *digested*. This distinction does not correspond to modern perceptions of literature: it is hard to imagine the idea that *Madame Bovary's* text could be reworked at will. How can we understand this distinction within the different types of texts within Egyptian culture? What is the basis for the choice to include rather than digest?

3 The Logics of Inclusion

Before going any further, it is worth asking whether the Egyptians of the 1st millennium BCE conceived texts (whether narrative, theological or “scientific” texts) as organic units for a longer period than proverbs or oracles. The answer is yes, without hesitation. The best example that can be found is the famous inscription from the end of the 8th century BCE, known as the *Memphite Theological Document*.³⁰ This text, which records a cosmogony and elements of mythography, was copied onto a granite slab and placed somewhere in the Temple of Ptah in Memphis. It is striking that the stone copy preserves the appearance of the original on papyrus even in its lacuna. Several columns have been left unengraved to evoke the missing parts of the papyrus. It is indeed the notion of the original document that is central here; the text on papyrus, even degraded, was placed at such a high level that any attempt to restore its contents would have been unfruitful. The introductory text that describes the conditions under which the stone was engraved states very explicitly that the text is in conformity with the original on papyrus:

[it] was copied by His Majesty [...] in the house of his father Ptah-who-is-south-of-his-wall, for His Majesty found it as made by the ancients, eaten by worms, so that it was not known from beginning to end. Then His Majesty copied it again, so that it was more beautiful than before, so that his name should remain and his monument should remain in the house of his father Ptah [...] for all eternity [...].

30 Quack 2006.

The discovery of ancient writings, whose prescriptions must be followed to the letter, is commonplace in the history of the foundation of Egyptian temples. For example, the plan of the temple of Edfu is said to have been inscribed on a papyrus that fell from the sky north of Memphis.³¹ The temple of Dendera is described in the texts that adorn its walls as the “renewal of the monument executed by the king of Upper Egypt Menkheperre, son of Re the Lord of the Crowns, Thutmes, after it was found in ancient writings from the time of King Cheops.”³² It is not surprising that the Egyptian temple, which dominated the Egyptian city with its strong silhouette of hard stones, here presents itself as an *inclusion* from a very ancient past in the urban landscape of the Hellenistic and Roman Egyptian city.

The intangible nature of the writings relating to temples and rites certainly explains how they are translated through the different phases of Egyptian language. Hence, the *Temple Manual*, describing all aspects of the functioning of an Egyptian temple, is a Demotic translation of a book originally written in Middle Egyptian.³³ This means that this kind of book cannot be transmitted by means of a simple paraphrase, and that only a faithful translation is capable of preserving the high value of its contents. The same phenomenon of translation or rejuvenation of the text can be observed for another type of book: medical books containing therapeutic magic formulas. The vocabulary of the P. Brooklyn 47.218.138 has been actualized without any alterations to the structure of the formulas or even to the structure of the work.³⁴

Where do these books that command such respect come from? The circumstances of their discovery are described in colophons that guarantee the origin of the book and state the “effectiveness” of its contents.³⁵ These passages sometimes detail the miraculous conditions in which these books were discovered, which was a sign, also here, of their exceptional value. As we have seen, such a book may have fallen directly from the sky³⁶ or may have been “found at night deposited in the forecourt of the temple of Coptos”³⁷ or at the foot of a divine statue.³⁸ What all books perceived as units have in common, is their origin in a distant past, a past that is perceived as intrinsically superior to the present. The way that these works, reputed for their antiquity, were

31 Edfu VI, 6.4, Volokhine 2005, 62.

32 Dendera VI 173, 9–10, Volokhine 2005, 63.

33 Quack 1992/1993.

34 Goyon 2012 and Quack 2013, 258.

35 Volokhine 2005, 49, note 10 and 50–55.

36 Sauneron 1988, 85–86.

37 Volokhine 2005, 55.

38 Volokhine 2005, 55–56.

transmitted within Egyptian culture verifies the logic of *inclusion* mentioned above: “putting the past into the present”. The Egyptian past, the 3rd or the 2nd millennium BCE, seems to have functioned as a normative point of departure for almost all books that were perceived as organic. As an example of this, P. Berlin 3057 (also called P. Schmitt), a composition from the Ptolemaic period that has gathered liturgies from the Pyramid Texts, would have been found on a “scroll” dated to the time of Thutmes III and Amenhotep III in the library of the temple of Osiris in Abydos.³⁹ Similarly, a series of formulas against snakes engraved on the east wall of the chamber of the sarcophagus of Ounas was reproduced on a Late Period stele.⁴⁰

Some of these “real” books were attributed to a small group of authors of the 3rd and 2nd millennia BCE, including Imhotep, Hordjedef, Amenhotep and Khaemweset. In addition to these ancient figures, we find more recent “Demotic” authors, such as Chasheshonqy and Petese son of Petetum, already mentioned above. Among the “Classical” authors, it is particularly striking that, although the wisdom attributed to Hordjedef no longer seems to have been transmitted in the 1st millennium BCE, its (supposed) author has nonetheless remained a literary reference.⁴¹ The figure of Imhotep dominates the group of Classical authors. He is credited with the authorship of the plan of the temple of Edfu,⁴² as well as with a well-known astrological work whose introduction reads as follows: “Here is a copy of the book of Imhotep the Great, son of Ptah, the great god” (*tw=s ḥ.t p3 dm' Iy-m-ḥtp wr s3 Pth p3 ntr '3*, P.CtYBR 422).⁴³ Here, we touch on a very important point that allows us to understand the Egyptian notion of author: a true author is more or less a god. That probably explains why the works that are attributed to him are perceived as “real” books.

The question of the divine origin of the Egyptian books can be posed in two ways, as being either historical or mythological. The first way consists of taking the writing of the books back to a moment that is both inside and outside of history: the time when the gods ruled Egypt.⁴⁴ The second way consists of attributing the books to a deity without specifying when the work was written. In this latter case, it is obviously the god Thot who stands out as the “god-author” *par excellence*. Clement of Alexandria therefore places the whole of Egyptian priestly literary production under the authority of Thot.⁴⁵ Turning

39 Backes 2016.

40 Osing 1992, 476.

41 Hordjedef also appears in the Book of Temple, Quack 2003, 13–15.

42 Volokhine 2005, 63.

43 Ryholt 2005, 13.

44 Luft 1978, 155–176; Vernus 1995, 39–42.

45 Sauneron 1988, 146–147.

to the Egyptian texts themselves, two categories of work are attributed to Thot: funerary and magic books. In the first category, according to a Roman-period text, the *Book of Breathings* is said to have been discovered by a priest on the bandages of the mummy of Psamtik I, coming from a book written by Thot “with his own fingers”.⁴⁶ Several chapters of the *Book of the Dead* also include a colophon mentioning their invention by Thot (chapters 30 b, 64, 137 a, 148). All of these “Thotian” rubrics function as certifications of sacredness, and thus, once again, of the effectiveness of these divine books that have fallen into the hands of men.⁴⁷

Death, magic and (how could it be otherwise?) rites and oracles, are the exclusive domains of the gods. It is striking that, with the exception of funerary books, other types of works constitute the bulk of what we know about the contents of Egyptian libraries.⁴⁸ Ritual books are the subject of dedicated catalogues (the most famous ones are engraved on the walls of the temples of Tod and Edfu).⁴⁹ One of them, drafted in Demotic, was recently published by Kim Ryholt.⁵⁰ It contains the titles of at least twenty books. Each of them is introduced by *dd r* “said concerning”. Basically, the ritual book contains words “to be said” aloud at a given moment in the liturgy.⁵¹ This presents the opposite of the textual relationship observed for narrative literature, which is connected with orality; canonized/included texts are closely related to reading aloud, which forbids any *faux pas*. The canonization of a text and its transmission through the process of *inclusion* is the only way to preserve the effectiveness of a ritual, magical or prophetic text that has been forged at a higher level than that in which the reader evolves. This helps us to understand that it was not the past, as such, that was perceived as superior by the Egyptians of the 1st millennium BCE, but the divine world. As the gods happened to have left texts to the men of the past, it was these texts of divine origin that philologists and archaeologists of Ancient Egypt (such as Prince Setne Khaemweset in the Demotic tale) have primarily sought.

46 Erichsen 1956, 64, col. III.8.

47 Volokhine 2005, 50–51.

48 Vernus 2005, 320; Ragazzoli 2020, 156–161.

49 Thiers 2004.

50 PSI inv. D 67, Ryholt 2019, 151–159.

51 Such a respect for the original text could explain why the *Tägliche Ritual*, originally written in traditional Egyptian, was transcribed into Demotic without having been translated into the language associated with that script. This explains the presence of many non-etymological scripts, i.e. words written in an unusual way, composed of signs used to write homophone words (Stadler 2016, 37–38).

The Wilbour papyrus lot, kept in the Brooklyn Museum, very probably from Elephantine, documents the contents of a library around the 5th and 4th century BCE,⁵² before Demotic became a *Kulturschrift*. Was it a library belonging to a private individual, or to a temple? We do not know. The fact remains that it contained only works written in Hieratic script that partially overlap the same three areas, mentioned above, that we find in the “god-made books”: medicine and magic, rite and mythology, and oracles.⁵³ Only the so-called *Brooklyn Wisdom Text* does not fit this category. This exception helps us to nuance the dichotomy established between god-made, included books and human-made, digested literary works. Between these two categories we find the wisdom texts, although they are never explicitly presented as being of divine origin, and proverbs nevertheless need to be quoted exactly, that is to say *included*, in order to retain all their power. It is perhaps not by chance that the structure and content of the wisdom of the *Papyrus Insinger* was fixed early on, at least at the beginning of the 1st century BCE. It was around the same time that Egyptian funerary literature came to be written in Demotic script. The first funerary papyrus written in Demotic does not appear until the very end of the Ptolemaic Period, with the *Book of Transformations* preserved on P. Louvre E 3452 dated to 57/56 BCE.⁵⁴ From that moment onwards, Demotic really became a *Kulturschrift*, worthy of being used to write works that should be *included*.

4 Conclusion: Anchoring Demotic in Egyptian Culture

In his groundbreaking article, Pascal Vernus wrote:

Que les écrits anciens – sur support à fin de maniements mais aussi sur supports monumentaux – et reconnus comme tels soient investis d’une *auctoritas* qui les qualifie comme instances normatives est maintes fois explicitement proclamé. Ils émanent immédiatement des prédécesseurs et ancêtres humains, et par leur truchement, des dieux, en dernière instance, les uns et les autres étant souvent associés comme origine indirecte et directe, l’origine des textes s’avère, en définitive, supra-humaine.⁵⁵

52 Sauneron 1966/1967; Quack 2013.

53 Guerneur 2012, 542, note 4 provides the bibliography.

54 Smith 2009, 627–649.

55 Vernus 2005, 275.

At first glance, Demotic literature seems to be in line with Vernus' assertion. Nevertheless, a review of Demotic literature conducted in light of the *digestion/inclusion* distinction proposed by Rémy Brague, makes it possible to qualify and somewhat clarify this latter statement.

Only texts or collections of texts produced by the gods or a limited number of authors of exceptional authority (some of whom are subsequently deified) have an organic unity and must be transmitted as intact as possible. The contents of these texts deal with very specific fields, such as the future in the Afterlife, rites, myths and oracles. Contrary to this, another part of Demotic literature comes from men and is rooted in their history. These texts, mainly of a narrative nature, could be largely reworked and modified according to circumstances.

Demotic tales are subject to the slow process of *digestion* that seems to have been completed at the end of the 1st century BCE, as attested by the versions kept in the Tebtunis temple library. Kim Ryholt describes the phenomenon of *digestion* in different words: "Egyptian literature might have been continuously reedited and brought up to date."⁵⁶ The notion of "editing" is directly related to

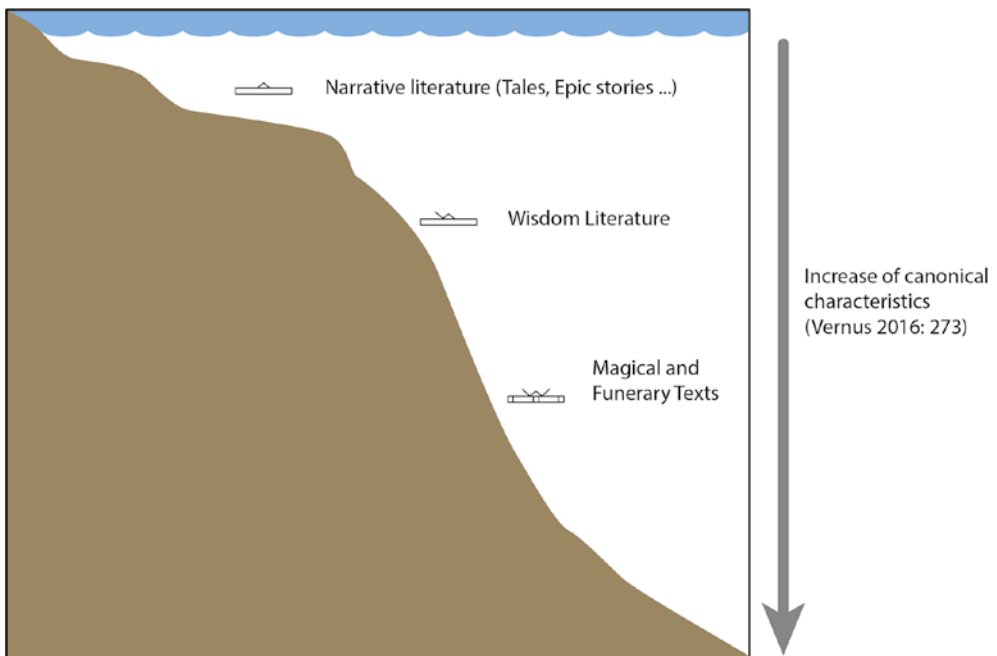


FIGURE 4.3 Textual genres and degree of canonicity in Egyptian culture of the 1st millennium BCE: an oceanic metaphor

⁵⁶ Ryholt 1999, 88.

the field of written literature and, even more so, to literature after the invention of printing. That said, Kim Ryholt formulates a hypothesis: “This opens the possibility that the 1st century saw a general re-edition of older literature...”⁵⁷ This means that, at the end of its existence, Demotic was deemed worthy of fixing the entirety of what we call literature: books created by men as well as books of divine origin. During the first centuries of the Roman period, Demotic was actually used to freeze an entire section of Egyptian literary culture. Narrative texts may have acquired a relatively fixed form and passed from the realm of texts subjected to *digestion*, to that of books that had to be *included*. At that time, some narrative literary texts were finally perceived as organic units. Precisely because some of these texts are attested by several parallel versions, Kim Ryholt is justified in using the term “reedition”.

How do we explain such canonization of the works themselves as well as of the books that should be found in any good Egyptian library? It is most certainly in the second adjective that an answer may be found. From the second centuries, Demotic writing had been withdrawn from the temples, and the Roman administration, which still used it until the middle of the 1st century in Upper Egypt to raise taxes, stopped doing so. The Egyptian nature of this writing, then, was full and complete, just as the evolution of the spoken language had given the Demotic literary texts a touch of archaism, which sometimes made explanatory notes necessary. In short, Demotic literature of the Roman period had acquired a strong identity value.

In the end, the adoption of Demotic by Egyptian literature, at least at the very end of the Hellenistic Period, displays the anchoring of Demotic writing, invented seven centuries earlier, at the very core of the Egyptian culture – its naturalization, in fact. In the eyes of the Egyptian priests of the Roman period, Demotic writing had indeed become a traditional script, constituting their cultural identity.⁵⁸ It was by gradually moving from “digestible” works to books “that could be included” that Demotic both penetrated and encapsulated the heart of Egyptian literary culture. This movement took place from the end of the Hellenistic period to the first centuries of Roman domination, leading to a paradoxical situation. While the phenomenon of canonization is most often seen as an inaugural phenomenon in the development of a culture (whether one thinks, for example, of the fixation of the Biblical canon or of Chinese literature of the 3rd century BCE), the creation of a Demotic literary canon, which can be guessed from the contents of the Tebtunis library in the 1st and 2nd centuries CE, occurred shortly before the disappearance of traditional

57 Ryholt 1999, 88.

58 For such processes of anchoring, but of Greek texts, see Lardinois and De Jonge this volume.

Egyptian culture. Canonization is not endowed with its own virtues; the perpetuation of canonized works depends closely on the situation of the institutions with which they are associated. In the case of Demotic literature, the Egyptian temples entered a phase of slow but real impoverishment during the Roman period. With them, Demotic literary culture faded away.

All this helps us to understand better how empires, by their very existence, give rise to canonizations. Corpora of intangible and exclusive texts can appear at the very heart of empires to justify their existence,⁵⁹ but also in the provinces as a reaction of provincial cultural communities to the dominant imperial culture. In the case of Egypt, the confrontation with the Persians, Greco-Macedonians, and finally the Romans, added to the relegation of Egyptian-language culture to the temples, thereby forcing the Egyptian speakers to redefine themselves. It was in the midst of this redefinition effort that Demotic writing, once confined to the fields of administrative and legal documents, gained its status as a *Kulturschrift*. Driven out of the public domain, Demotic found a new career in the temples. It became the writing of those who regard themselves as heirs to the Egyptian traditions and who helped Egyptians “to maintain their sense of orientation, identification and continuity” in a world dominated by foreign empires.⁶⁰ In this sense, Persian, Greek and Roman dominations led to the creation of the Demotic canon.

In this context, it is very striking that we can chronologically reconstruct a sequence from the progressive canonization of Demotic texts that corresponds with the one Hervé Gonzalez observed concerning the canonization of the Hebrew Bible:

- From the Persian period until the beginning of the 2nd century BCE, we can observe a progressive composition of some important *opera* (for example, the *Book of Breathings* and very probably the wisdom of the *Papyrus Insinger*) on the basis of the traditions of the Saite period.
- From the end of the 1st century CE and 2nd century CE, Demotic literature seems to have acquired a stable form: it includes classical works whose content is stabilized, as evidenced by the Tebtunis temple library.

The intermediate period between these two phases, from the 2nd century BCE to the 1st century CE, is still rather poorly known due to a lack of sources. It seems, however, that it corresponds to a period during which narrative and wisdom collections crystallized. Since Judea and Egypt experienced a fairly similar political situation during this second part of the 1st millennium BCE, it is very likely that the similarities observed in the chronologies of the Judean

59 Billeter 2014, 16–19.

60 I use the words of M.J. Versluys, cf. pp. 37–39 on the notion of anchoring.

and Demotic “canonizations” are a result of the same phenomenon of reaction in a context of growing connectivity. These are the elements for a new Axial Age, at least for Egypt and Judea, which would have peaked at the end of the Hellenistic period.⁶¹ But that is another story.

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61 Concerning Axial Age and canonization, see M.J. Versluys in this volume.

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