



ESSEX EGYPTOLOGY GROUP - REVIEW

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by Margaret Patterson

"A Middle Kingdom Mortuary Ritual Reflected in Writing: A Case Study from Asyut"

Ilona Regulski

At the beginning of July Ilona Regulski visited us to talk about her work on some Middle Kingdom texts written on papyrus fragments from Asyut. She is now working at the British Museum as a curator, but this talk was about the work she did before starting that job so the papyrus in question are not at the British Museum but instead are in the collection at the Neues Museum in Berlin. Their accession numbers are P10480-10482, and she used those as names for the pieces when talking about them.

Regulski began her talk by giving us context for the papyri. They were acquired by Ludwig Borchardt (who also acquired the Nefertiti bust for the Neues Museum), who bought them in Luxor. The seller said they had been found in Asyut and this provenance is confirmed by textual details which she explained later in the talk. Asyut is the most central point in Egypt, at the natural border between Upper and Lower Egypt. It was never the capital of Egypt, but was a trade nexus and a melting pot. These circumstances encouraged creativity and cultural development and it has had a big influence on the rest of Egypt.

The texts on these papyri include some of the Coffin Texts, which are a corpus of mortuary texts normally found written on coffins. This is the reason for the name, but she pointed out that it's a bit of a weird name because that is not the most important thing about them and they also aren't exclusively on coffins (as witness these papyri). The texts develop in the Middle Kingdom from the Pyramid Texts of the Old Kingdom, and later develop into New Kingdom texts such as the Book of the Dead. They were ritual texts intended to be used in rituals, so writing them down (whether on coffins or not) is a secondary context. They contain a lot of information about how living people interacted with dead people, and what rituals were used. They were probably written on papyrus for actual use and only transferred onto coffins as a later development. She gave us an example of a spell at this point - one of the first things the deceased must do is cross the Nile, and so there is a spell that lists the pieces of a boat and how to construct it so that the

deceased can demonstrate their knowledge of this in the afterlife. Which also gives Egyptologists information about boats and boat construction.

Regulski gave us the broad outlines of the conclusions she reached before telling us how she reached them, so that we would understand more clearly what the point of the various bits of evidence was. The papyri that she worked on come under three accession numbers. 10482 is a single complete sheet of papyrus. 10481 consists of 6 fragments, and 10480 of 36 fragments. There are two distinct groups - one is a collection of anonymous fragments and the other, consisting of 10482 and 10481a-b, is connected by their naming a man called Sedekh. The anonymous fragments might be templates for writing onto a coffin or copying for personalised rituals, and may relate to Sedekh's profession as a scribe. The texts that are addressed to Sedekh are a personalised mortuary ritual which is then re-activated to ask Sedekh for help, and a letter to Sedekh explaining what help is required.

There were three strands of evidence that Regulski had used to come to these conclusions: the content of the texts; the textual traditions; palaeographical evidence. For the rest of her talk she went through these in turn.

On the front side of the single sheet, 10482, is a personalised liturgy for Sedekh. Regulski stressed that we should remember that this was a ritual which was used and not just buried with him. The piece of papyrus it was written on was not fresh, it had been previously used. This is very unusual for a religious text; it was almost embarrassing not to have new papyrus to use. The previous text had only been at one end of the papyrus and was an administrative document - a list of names. After it had been mostly removed the new liturgical text started with a very wide margin so that it was only written on the virgin papyrus. The scribe then left an equally large margin at the other side of the document so that it was symmetrical. In the spells Sedekh is named. Sometimes on these sorts of documents there is a gap left for the name of the deceased to be filled in later, but not in this case - his name was written with the rest of the text. The name Sedekh is found in other contexts linked to Asyut - in tomb N13.1 in the necropolis at Asyut there is mention of a Sedekh, Chief of Cattle, and on a wooden statue base from Asyut now in the British Museum (EA45070) the inscription names a Sedekh. It isn't clear if either of these is the same man as the one named on Regulski's papyrus, but it does link the name to Asyut which backs up the assumed provenance for these papyri.

On the reverse side of 10482 there is an offering list at the top of the sheet, which is unusual. Below this was a dedication text which was added later as a postscript to the ritual and consists of transfiguration spells including those for turning into an Akh. If something went wrong in life which couldn't be explained it was assumed that it was the influence of someone who had died. And it must be that you had in some way failed to carry out the rituals properly, because if you had then the deceased would have transformed into an Akh and would not be haunting you. So this dedication is a re-activation and repeat of the rituals to essentially do a better job of burying the deceased. Added to this liturgical text is

a request for help in getting children. This was a common theme for texts requesting help from the deceased - if there is no obvious (to the Ancient Egyptians) medical reason for a failure to conceive then someone in the afterlife is involved. It might be the deceased you have improperly buried, or might be someone that your properly buried deceased can intercede with on your behalf. The text implies that Sedekh has helped in similar cases in the past. 10481a-b are two fragments that contain a letter to the dead. This text is very difficult to read, because pretty much every sentence in the text is missing its verb! As a result Regulski isn't entirely sure what the subject of the letter is - it could be about stillborn children or it could be a problem with inheritance. Inheritance is also the business of the deceased as it will affect his or her cult. The letter lists Sedekh's epithets as "effective one", "Akh in Necropolis" and "true of voice", which is more than in the other documents. This implies that the letter is the last text to be written - in earlier texts he's not yet an Akh, for instance.

The liturgical text on 10482 is a purification ritual which mimics the mummification process, and Regulski went through various levels of meaning in part of the text. Coffin Text Spell 169 titles itself a spell for (re)assembling the two river banks. It then talks abstractly about drying out river banks, followed by putrefaction which his father should not see and finally about re-unification of river banks. The word used for river banks has two determinatives (which are hieroglyphs added to the end of a word to show what class of word it is). It has the determinative for words to do with land and the one for words to do with gods. So the banks are not just banks, they can also stand for the goddesses Isis and Nephthys. The part of the text that refers to putrefaction names a god "he who has putrefaction in his face" - this god is said to swallow the putrefaction of Osiris and spit it out as the flood, a metaphor for the removal of liquids from the body in the mummification process. Overall there are three levels of meaning in this sequence - firstly the reassembling of the river banks is a metaphor for the passage of the deceased to the afterlife. It is also a metaphor for unification of the father and the son. And finally it is a metaphor for the mummification process. So this text does several jobs for the deceased and his living family members. The text is written in a style that has the deceased taking an active role, so he is both beneficiary and performer. This lets the family member performing the ritual identify with the deceased, and so it re-integrates the deceased into the family at which point he can be asked for help. The text is also left in the tomb, so that the deceased has access to it whenever it may be needed.

Regulski's second strand of evidence was her investigation of the textual traditions of the different texts on these pieces of papyrus. Different areas had different textual traditions, and this was an evolving process not a static one. The first thing she noted was that the texts are in the 1st person, which is a style only found in texts from Asyut - backing up, again, the provenance of the texts. A collection of texts, like these papyri, may not all come from the same tradition. She talked about the Mesehti coffins, now in Cairo Museum, which have the largest number of coffin texts on any coffin. Each coffin has different texts, some

of which are nominally the same (i.e. we'd give them the same Spell number) but they are from different traditions on the two coffins. So having both traditions must have been important. This is also the case in Regulski's papyri - the texts on 10482 come from a different tradition to the ones on the other fragments.

Internal clues from the texts can be used to construct "family trees" for the different versions. Regulski explained that she can use things like the grammar used in a particular version to see how far away from the original Classical Middle Egyptian text it is. Also when scribes are copying the texts they may make mistakes, which then propagate through the "generations" of copied texts. From this sort of evidence she is able to say that the texts on 10482 are later adaptations, whereas the fragments are closer to the original texts. It's important to remember that being further from the template doesn't necessarily mean a text has been written more recently than a text that's closer to the template. There are examples of texts known to date to the New Kingdom that are closer to the originals than other examples of the same texts that date to the Middle Kingdom. What's more important than when in history it was written, was what texts the scribe had access to to copy.

The last strand of evidence that Regulski told us about was palaeography. This is the study of ancient handwriting and she was using it to answer questions about how many scribes were involved in writing the texts, and so what parts of them were written at the same time and what were subsequently added. It's generally a very subjective way to look at the text, so Regulski was trying to be more objective and mathematical in how she used it.

First she told us about her investigation of the liturgy text. One measurement she looked at was the spacing of the columns, and at a particular point in the text the gaps between the columns get narrower. Another measurement was the number of ligatures the scribe used. Ligatures are when a scribe joins two or three signs together when writing quickly, as the hieratic script develops these become standardised. This text is still early hieratic and not particularly cursive, but there are still some ligatures and Regulski counted their frequency in the text. At the same point at which the column spacing narrows, the frequency of ligatures increases. She also looked at the pattern of when the scribe dipped his pen to replenish the ink - the frequency of ink dips also increases at the same point that the other changes happen. So this text seems to have been written in two sessions - perhaps indicating two different scribes, but it's also possible that it was one scribe in two different sessions with the second one being more rushed.

There are corrections or additions in the first part of the text. All but one of these are additions that change the meaning of the text. They each change the tense of a verb from present tense to an enduring tense - changing it from saying something is happening right now, to saying something is repeatedly happening. Regulski speculated that this might be part of reactivating the ritual, and it shows that people re-interpreted these texts as necessary for the situation. There are no

additions to the letter to the dead, so she thinks this is contemporary with the corrections to the liturgical text.

Using these three strands of evidence Regulski has identified 5 or 6 phases of use of these personalised texts for Sedekh. First an already used piece of papyrus was cleaned for re-use and the first half of the liturgy was written on it. Then the second half was written. The offering list and dedication on the back were added next, and then corrections made to the liturgy. The letter was then deposited in the tomb as well. She believes there were 5 different scribes involved in the process. She particularly drew our attention to how, although the Coffin Texts were in some sense standard and produced en masse, each copy was unique and personalised to fit the deceased and their situation.

This was a fascinating talk, demonstrating just how much information you can glean from a small collection of papyri if you carefully examine them.