



ESSEX EGYPTOLOGY GROUP - REVIEW

March 2019 Meeting

by Margaret Patterson

"Decrees, Papyri and Biographies in the Age of the Pyramids" Nigel Strudwick

At the beginning of March Nigel Strudwick returned to the group to tell us about his work on Old Kingdom texts. He did his PhD on administration in the Old Kingdom, so he told us that he has read every Old Kingdom text that has been discovered. Since his PhD he has spent a lot of time researching the New Kingdom in Luxor, and tomb robbery in New Kingdom Thebes was the subject of the talk he gave to the group in 2016 (post: <https://ninecats.org/margaret/blog/2016/04/22/mechanisms-and-practice-egyptian-tomb-robbery-view-ancient-thebes-nigel-strudwick>). But more recently he has returned to the Old Kingdom texts with the desire to pass on his knowledge of them to a wider audience.

The standard compendium of texts was compiled by the German Egyptologist Kurt Sethe and published in the 1930s. It gives no indication of how the original text was written - it re-writes the hieroglyphs running in a left to right direction in horizontal rows. But the Egyptians normally wrote in a right to left direction and often in vertical columns as well so that gives a rather misleading view of what the original documents looked like. Despite this flaw the volume does give a lot of texts in one place so was a useful resource. However it's also pretty old and there have been significant discoveries of Old Kingdom texts since it was published. So Strudwick has published an updated compendium of Old Kingdom texts ("Texts from the Pyramid Age" as part of the Writings from the Ancient World series from SBL Press). The book contains about 300 texts, but it is not every known piece of written material from the Old Kingdom. He hasn't included the Pyramid Texts because they belong to a different category of texts - they are religious rather than administrative in nature. It also doesn't include 3 Wisdom texts which were ascribed to some Old Kingdom sages by the Egyptians themselves. They don't actually seem to be written in the Old Kingdom, they were just given ancient authors to increase their authority for their contemporary audience. A bit like the proliferation of quotes you see on facebook ascribed to some famous dead person when they're actually nothing to do with the named person.



The texts evolve from earlier beginnings. Strudwick showed us an example of an

Early Dynastic piece of writing - a label of Den that is in the British Museum (I don't think it was the one that I have a photo of here but it was similar). It is mostly disconnected signs that don't make up a sentence. In the 3rd Dynasty the first continuous texts are written, and the texts get longer in length throughout the Old Kingdom. The language used in these texts is Old Egyptian, not the Middle Egyptian that most people learn if they learn to read hieroglyphs, and our knowledge of Old Egyptian is rather more vaguely defined. The language uses the same basic set of sounds as Middle Egyptian, although some are later to develop than others. For instance in Old Egyptian š is the same as ḥ which is not the case later. Other sounds merge later, for instance in Old Egyptian z and s are distinct letters but in Middle Egyptian they're interchangeable as are the pairs d and ḏ, t and ṯ. Old Egyptian tends to have more variable and fuller writings of words - for instance the word for scribe is always spelt with an initial zš in Old Egyptian but that is elided in Middle Egyptian. There are several writings of the verb sḏm but Middle Egyptian just has one standard version (this is the verb, meaning "to hear" that is used as the example for conjugation when you learn Middle Egyptian). Another difference is that Old Egyptian plurals are written by repeating the determinative 3 times, but in Middle Egyptian the determinative is written once with three strokes underneath it. (A determinative is a sign at the end of a word which isn't pronounced but indicates what sort of word it is, like a person or a city or a thing made of copper etc.)

The texts in Strudwick's book are divided into categories, and the bulk of his talk was spent going through some interesting examples from five of these. The categories are royal decrees, administrative documents, letters, private legal documents and biographies. He began with an example of a royal decree, which was a way that orders could be sent to officials. There are more examples of them from the Old Kingdom than there are from later in Egyptian history. Many temples had a royal decree carved in stone on their walls which set out what was permitted and what was forbidden in the temple. It would have been sent from the king on papyrus and then quite literally set in stone on the walls. Strudwick's example was a decree of the 6th Dynasty king Pepi I regarding the pyramid town for the pyramids of Sneferu found at Dahshur and now in the Neues Museum in Berlin (ÄMP17500). It was found buried in the cultivation zone, but despite having been buried in damp conditions for so long it is still in very good condition as it was made of high quality limestone. Strudwick had a four month sabbatical in Berlin where he studied this object, not just as an Egyptian text because he was also interested in the museumology of it. The Neues Museum had a rather bad 20th Century - it was badly damaged during the Second World War, and then after the war finished, the Russians took many artefacts as part of the war reparations. These were eventually returned and the building rebuilt and refurbished, but it took decades to rebuild and re-display the collection.

The Dahshur Decree was found near the pyramids of two Middle Kingdom kings - Amenemhat II and Senwosret III - although the exact context isn't known. In the general area where it was found there is a lot of Old Kingdom pottery as well as Middle Kingdom pottery. Strudwick said that it was plausible that the pyramid town for the Old Kingdom pyramids of Sneferu was there and then it was subsequently a Middle Kingdom town for the two nearby pyramids.

One of the techniques he used to examine the stela was Reflectance Transformation Imaging (RTI) - essentially one takes several photos of the object with different lighting and merge them into a single image. The software then lets one alter the light source

and enhance the edge detection etc which often reveals details invisible to the naked eye. But in this case Strudwick said that the stela is actually in such good condition that there wasn't really much extra information to be found.

The text is a legal document, and as such is dense and confusing. There are five main sections: on the right hand side is a vertical column with the date, the top horizontal section gives the names of those the text is addressed to, the bulk of the text is in the middle section laid out both horizontally and vertically, and there are two more vertical sections to the left. The main part of the text is very efficiently laid out. The various statements start and end with identical phrases (e.g. several of them start "it is forbidden"). These headers and footers are written horizontally, and then the vertical columns that align with a particular header begin with that header. The headers are nested - so under one heading you have some columns that just start with those words, and another set of columns which have a secondary header. This meant the carvers didn't have to carve the same words over and over - a saving of both time and space on the stone.

The content of the text concerns things like exemptions from taxation and restrictions on what can be done at the temple or by the temple workers. So it lists specific taxes they don't have to pay, specific types of forced labour that the temple workers aren't eligible for, that the cattle belonging to the temple are exempt from levies etc. A lot of it is negative in tone - which gives some insight into what usually happened that the king is trying to prevent. There are also requirements to keep records up to date, and to keep the workforce at full complement (giving priority to the children of workers).

There are four references in the text to "pacified Nubians", which Strudwick said might be better phrased as "settled Nubians" or "Egyptianised Nubians". The Palermo Stone records campaigns by Sneferu into Lower Nubia from which he brought back a lot of captives. In fact he was said to have depopulated Lower Nubia between the numbers of captives brought back and the fleeing of the rest of the population. Strudwick suggests that these captives may have been settled near the site of Sneferu's pyramids and put to work to benefit the king's cult and it's the descendants of these people who are now being referred to.

Three sections of this decree have been deliberately erased and the people who chiselled out the sections of text were so thorough that there aren't even traces left to be picked up using RTI. Two of these erasures are in the list of addressees, what is left between them is the title "Vizier" without a name after it and with a big gap before it. One theory has been that it was more titles but Strudwick disagrees as that would not fit the usual format seen in other documents. Generally names are erased if the person concerned has fallen out of favour since the text was carved, and there is an inscription in the tomb of Weni that talks about Weni putting down a harem conspiracy at around this period. So Strudwick suggests that the large gap might have contained the name of a Queen who was later involved in this conspiracy, and the small gap after the title Vizier was the Vizier's name and he too was involved.

Strudwick now moved on to his second category of texts - administrative documents. His first example was the Wadi el-Jarf papyri which are perhaps the most famous of this type of document. Wadi el-Jarf was the site of an Old Kingdom harbour on the Gulf of Suez. It includes a series of galleries that the Egyptians used for storing boats. They weren't particularly adept sea sailors and so didn't sail during the winter when the weather was poor. If the boats were left in the harbour they might get damaged during

storms so the Egyptians dismantled them and stored them in these galleries. A collection of papyri was found at this site which turns out to be the log book of a man named Merer which dates to the 13th cattle year of Khufu. It's the working diary of a crew who were involved in building the Great Pyramid, and is the oldest papyrus discovered in Egypt. It's laid out in columns for each day with the date written horizontally above the columns.

The primary subject of the diary is the work that Inspector Merer and his crew shipping stone from the quarries at Tura and what they did in the area of the Great Pyramid (which they called Ahket-Khufu). There are also entries detailing the departure and return of people sent to Heliopolis to bring back food for the work crew. In one sense the entries are quite banal - things like: "Cast off in the morning from Tura, sailed down river towards Ahket-Khufu, stayed overnight". But on the other hand this gives Egyptologists an insight into the organisation and lives of the Old Kingdom workers that they otherwise would not have.

After a break for coffee and cake Strudwick gave us a couple more examples of administrative papyri. The first of these were found at Abusir, between Giza and Saqqara. The first collection of papyri were found by illegal diggers in 1893, with more being discovered at the site in 1973. Abusir is a 5th Dynasty site with four pyramids. In the 5th Dynasty each pyramid has an associated Sun Temple - only two of these have been found but the texts say that every pyramid had one. The layout of these temples wasn't the same as the "standard" Egyptian temple - the altars for the sacrifices were in a courtyard open to the sun, in fact quite similar to the Aten temples at Amarna a millennium later. The Sun Temples also had an obelisk at the centre of the temple. The papyri collection record the administration and duty rosters for the temples but have no religious content except for incidental references. One example Strudwick showed us was a service list for the Festival of Sokar. It starts with the date and which group or crew of priests the document was drawn up for (using the same word for crew as in the Merer logbook). It says which priest should do which job - for instance "Those in charge of the Teba..." followed by two names. Another example was a delivery note, which gives the date and what was delivered to whom exactly as you'd expect from a parcel delivery service today! The third example was another short document - an entry pass with the names of two priests and the specific part of the temple they have permission to go into. Another example from these documents was another duty roster, this time for the daily rituals for a month. It looked exactly as you'd expect: it was divided into 30 rows, one for each day of the month, and there were different columns for the duties. A name was then written in each box, or someone was dittoed down the whole month for a particular job. The common theme of these documents is how very well organised the Egyptians were, and this is how they could manage such labour intensive and complicated jobs as building the pyramids.

Strudwick now turned to some examples of letters. The first of these was from an overseer writing to a Vizier (of a 6th Dynasty king) which was found near Saqqara. This is a reply to a previous letter of the Vizier's in which he'd order the overseer to send all the men on his work crew to come across the river to Saqqara to receive new clothes. But the overseer is writing back to complain that this is a ridiculous way to do things - why didn't the Vizier send the clothes with the letter carrier? If he'd done that they'd only lose one day of work, but everyone travelling to Saqqara would lose them 6 days of work!

Another letter was written on mud. It was found at the Dahkla Oasis, where they didn't have easy access to papyrus but did have a lot of mud. So they made mud tablets and then wrote on them with a stylus - much like the Mesopotamians did, but writing in hieratic not cuneiform of course. This letter complains that the builder hasn't yet turned for a job, and can he be sent immediately. Strudwick emphasised that these letters show us how the Egyptians were people just like us, with the same sorts of concerns and personalities despite the cultural differences.

The next texts Strudwick showed us were legal documents. The first was a house purchase contract discovered at Gebelein which used to be the oldest discovered papyrus before the Wadi el-Jarf documents were found. It's in four parts. The first is the date of the contract. Next the first party (the seller) offers his house, and it gives the dimensions of the building. In the middle is the name of the witness and the oath he swears that this is what he witnessed. And lastly is the second party (the buyer) offering a large piece of linen. So this is another familiar type of document to modern eyes. It also tells us just how valuable linen was at the time.

Another legal document is found on the wall of the tomb of Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep, the king's manicurists. This text sets out the funerary cult that they want established for themselves. Like the royal decree that Strudwick discussed earlier in the

talk it is primarily negative - it says what the priests should not do and sets out penalties for reneging on their duties. So it's another example that gives information on what must have been common practice (otherwise they wouldn't be telling them not to do it).

Most tombs of officials have some sort of biographical information - the theme is to project one's self into the afterlife, to memorialise oneself as Jan Assmann would say. In the Old Kingdom era the Egyptians thought the spirits of the deceased remained in the vicinity of the tomb so making sure that people who visited the area knew who was interred there was important. A very early example comes from the Old Kingdom tomb chapel of Metjen which is now in the Neues Museum (ÄMP 1105). It was discovered by Lepsius who published the reliefs. Strudwick has been working on this tomb chapel looking at both the object itself and Lepsius's original publication and squeezes. Squeezes are

a technique used in the 19th Century to get accurate representations of a text on a wall - wet blotting paper was pressed on to the wall to take up the shape of the relief then peeled off once it was dry. Sadly this is a destructive technique and will pull any paint present off the wall, thankfully in this case there's no traces of paint on the squeezes from this chapel. The lithographs in the publication represent a great



Tomb Chapel of Metjen

technological advance for the time - prior to this publication the illustrations would be engravings and generally made by an engraver who had no knowledge of the subject matter. But these lithographs were done under the supervision of someone who knew what they were looking at so are much better quality. The text in the chapel is a very early example of a biographical text, and in fact it can be argued that it might not really be biographical in nature. Instead it might be better thought of as a legal document detailing the setting up of funerary estates.

Strudwick's next example was from the tomb of a brewer at Giza from around 2470 BCE, and is definitely biographical in nature. During this period the key things that people wanted to record were to do with how close they were to the king or events that they were part of that involved the king. And this biography details an accident that the brewer had in the presence of the king and not only that the king had addressed him! It seems he fell during some ceremony and the king accidentally hit him with his mace. The king then ritually said that he had not intended to hit him and that he should be well - otherwise the divine nature of the king and his mace would cause harm to the brewer. And the king also commanded that this should be recorded in the brewer's tomb.

Another example of this sort of recording of the proximity of the deceased to the king is found in the tomb of Nekhebu at Giza from around 2300 BCE. Nekhebu was an architect and his biography talks about the building works that the king put him in charge of all across the kingdom. He also makes sure to mention that the king rewarded him for doing his job well. So while there's more information about the man and his role in society the emphasis is still on the king and the king's opinion.

During the Old Kingdom the concept of an "ideal biography" arises. This lists everything that the deceased did right in his life, and includes phrases familiar to us about feeding the hungry and clothing the naked. An early example of this is the biography of Harkhuf in his tomb at Aswan, dating to around 2700 BCE. He does include personalised sections as well as the general "I was a good person" text. So his biography also details his three journeys to Nubia, and the trade goods he brought back. And it also has an example of the importance of the king's opinion - one of the things he brought back from one of his trips was a dancing dwarf for the king (Pepi II, who was a child at the time). Pepi II wrote to him to make sure he was taking proper care of this dwarf on the journey, and Harkhuf has recorded that letter on the wall of his tomb.

The next example that Strudwick discussed was the tomb of Weni at Abydos. He'd actually mentioned the inscriptions in this tomb earlier in the talk when explaining the inscription on the Dahshur Decree of Pepi I. It is Weni's biography that gives us evidence for the harem conspiracy that might explain the erasures on the decree. Weni's biography also has poetic sections rather than just prose, so it lets us see the development of rhetorical styles during the Old Kingdom. This theme was reinforced by Strudwick's last example which was the tomb of Henqu II at Deir el Gebrawi dating to around 2150 BCE. Over the century or so since Harkhuf's biography was written new sections of the idealised biography have been developed.

Strudwick concluded by telling us he doesn't really have a clear conclusion for this work! It's not the sort of thing that lends itself to neat wrapping up statements, as it's a catalogue of all the texts we know of. There were some themes that he'd drawn out through the talk, however. One of these was that the Egyptians of the Old Kingdom

were people, if not just like us then not very different. They had many of the same concerns even though their cultural context was different. Another point he made is that Old Kingdom texts don't include a couple of categories that we see from later Egyptian texts - literary texts and religious texts (other than the Pyramid Texts). There must surely have been oral traditions for both of these cases that weren't written down, although it's also possible that they simply haven't survived.