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### Peatland prose from the past: The ancient Egyptian ‘Tale of the herdsman’ (early 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BCE)

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The extensive papyrus reeds that once fringed the lower Nile River played an important economic role in ancient Egyptian society: they provided raw material for (among others) construction of buildings, ships, weapons, tools, and of course papyrus scrolls. Ample wildlife was an important food resource, but simultaneously the reeds were used for pleasure hunting and fishing. Furthermore, the reeds were used for cattle herding.

A peculiar text on peatland pasturing is the fragmented ‘Tale of the herdsman’ that dates to the beginning of the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BCE. It is preserved on papyrus ‘Berlin 3024’ where it occurs on a sheet that was glued to the main part of the papyrus containing the well-known but also fragmented ‘Conversation between a man and his ba’: the ba, extremely simplified, was considered a part of the human soul by ancient Egyptians. T. Schneider noted in his translation of the ‘Tale of the herdsman’ that the papyrus fragment with the text was possibly only used to strengthen the scroll with the ‘Conversation...’, and the fragment was most likely preserved only by accident. The beginning and ending of the tale are missing. R.B. Parkinson noted that around four lines at the beginning are somewhat visible but not readable, whereas at the end clearly four further lines were erased. It is unknown how much more of the text may have been written on parts of the papyrus that were cut-off. M. Escolano-Poveda found in 2015 some papyrus fragments with a few sentences that clearly belong to the continuation of the tale. According to notes in the editions by J.C. Darnell and H. Goedicke, the text contains many spelling mistakes and is grammatically poor. This makes a coherent translation complicated, and in fact the various editions partly contradict each-other. The text may have been written by an apprentice scribe, and - if it was written for study purposes - only a part of the complete tale may have been written down. This may be the reason that the person who strengthened the ‘Conversation...’ papyrus thought the herdsman-fragment was dispensable.

*“...Look, I... long... when I come... So, I went down into the marsh close to the pastures, and there I saw a woman who did not look human at all. My hair rose up when I saw her bristled hair, and her hairy skin [or depilated skin, dependent on the interpretation of the Egyptian text. Depilated, however, does not make sense for the description of a monstrous being with bristled hair]. I will never do what she said, and fear still runs through my limbs. I say to you [probably his companions in a word-play]: ‘Bulls, go aside and let’s ferry-over the calves; the herd can spend the night at the pastures, us herdsman behind them. Our skiff is for the transport of our bulls and cows [or guards according to the translation of Schneider], and the sages among us should recite a water spell: ‘Herdsman and men, my ka [another part of the human soul] will rejoice. I will not be driven away from this marsh in years with high floods [during the annual Nile River inundations] that command the ridges of the land [perhaps levees, or the slopes of the higher grounds adjacent to the Nile valley] and make the lakes [the inundated floodplains] indistinguishable from the river. Go back into your dwellings [probably the river should get back in its normal bed], while the cows [or guards according to T. Schneider] remain at their place. Now come, my fear for you is gone, my dread vanishes, until the rage of the Mighty Goddess and the fear for the Lady of the Two Lands disappear.’ “ At dawn in the morning, the herders did as they had been told. Then the goddess came to him [the herdsman] - when he had turned [his boat?] to the marsh - stripped-naked and caressing her hair [most translation state merely that her hair was loose or tangled] . ...more than the night, her teeth more than gypsum powder. She hastened to the skiff, transformed into a woman and asked about the cattle. ...then ...take... The herdsman answered, after the one responsible for the cattle had brought... in order to bow in pity... papyrus-like... (compiled from and paraphrased after the consulted translations; the first words are from the upper erased lines that R.B. Parkinson guessed in his translation; the latter lines starting with “more than the night” are paraphrased after the translation by M. Escolano-Poveda of the additional fragments).*

The I-person told about his encounter to his fellow herders, and then advised or ordered to flee. He also told them which spell to recite. Obviously, the woman in the marsh had spoken to him, but it is unknown what she had said: only the decision “I won’t do that” by the herdsman has been preserved. The final part of the text is in the third person and tells what happened the next day.

Most consulted editions place the tale in the Nile Delta or in the Fayum “oasis” – that is actually more an inland delta - that both included large papyrus marshes. Various notes in the consulted editions link the ‘Tale of the herdsman’ to the ‘Pleasures of fishing and fowling’ that tells of excursions by nobility to the marshes of the Fayum, and a connection to the early or mid-first Millennium BCE ‘Voyage of the Libyan goddess’ - that tells of a goddess traveling the Nile marshes – has also been made.

The additional text fragment in which the goddess transformed into a woman seems strange since she was already a woman in the second encounter. Since at least four lines were erased from papyrus ‘Berlin 3024’ and it is unknown what portion of the tale may have been lost in-between the ‘Berlin 3024’ scroll and the newly found fragments, it is conceivable that this transformation was during a later encounter. E. Brunner-Traut noted in her translation that - according to general ancient Egyptian storyline principles - the goddess would be successful after a third encounter. Since the fragment mentions that someone had brought something, a direct interaction between the different personages indeed seems to have been initiated.



*Ancient Egyptian pictures of cattle. Left: calf running through a papyrus marsh (from the palace of pharaoh Amenhotep III at Malqata, first half of the 14th century BCE). Right: from the tomb of Tomb of Meketre (Thebes, early 19th century BCE) with the leg of a cowherd to the right. Both pictures from the Metropolitan Museum of Art (New York).*

It is unknown which divine being the herdsman had encountered. H. Goedicke noted that the woman was part animal and had a furry skin, and her naked occurrence at the end of the text would mean that she had laid-off the fur and was now completely human. Possibly the being was the goddess Hathor (see the explanations by H. Goedicke and J.C. Darnell), who – among various other tasks – was related to female sexuality. Apart from an anthropogenic form she was also regularly depicted as cow dwelling papyrus reeds (Hart 2005; Wilkinson 2017; De Klerk & Joosten 2019). In that case, the animal-like creature of the first encounter may have been the lioness goddess Sekhmet, who was an alter-ego of Hathor: in Egyptian religion - again extremely simplified - many divinities were envisaged to occur in different manifestations. Also the protagonist of the ‘Journey of the Libyan goddess’ may have been encountered by the herdsman, for which there are ample indications in the text of the ‘Journey...’ that she was Hathor too. Indeed, Hathor was also a goddess of foreign lands (Hart 2005; Wilkinson 2017). The text itself identified the Libyan goddess as a Mut-Neith-Sekhmet trinity, of which Sekhmet was an aspect of Hathor.

M. Escolano-Poveda noted similarities between the description of the goddess in the second encounter with the description of a princess on the ‘Stela Louvre C100’ and posed that the latter may have been based on the ‘Tale of the herdsman’.

There are also some references in ancient Egyptian texts to a not well-known wetland goddess that may also have been the being encountered. In translations she is generally not named but denoted as “fen goddess” or “marsh goddess”, but her actual name was “Sekhet” or “Sechet” (or variations thereof), which is the ancient Egyptian word for marsh or field (cf. Dickson 2006). The goddess Sekhet is mentioned among others in the ‘Pyramid texts’ (Utterance 341, 555), the ‘Coffin texts’ (spells 571, 607 and 1015), and the ‘Pleasures of fishing and fowling’. She was, however, more a goddess of bird-catching than of marshes.

L.D. Morenz speculated in the notes of his translation that the encountered goddess may have been another not well-known deity Seret that he tentatively also connected with Hathor. The goddess Seret is known only from a single 25<sup>th</sup>/24<sup>th</sup> centuries BCE inscription (Franke 2003) and was a feline goddess (Lange 2016; Mark 2016;

Wilkinson 2017) although this is probably mere speculation (cf. Franke 2003). Her worship likely originated from an area in the Nile delta that in the mid 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium BCE had a Libyan population (Wilkinson 2017) and in this sense there may also have been a connection with the Libyan goddess (see above), although there is a time-gap of some 2000 years between the mention of Seret and the text of the 'Libyan goddess'. Seret is sometimes also thought to be connected to geese - which may link to Sekhet as fowling goddess - but Wilkinson (2017) noted that this derives from a misreading of the original inscription (see also Franke 2003).

The intention of the goddess is unclear, but most commentators agree that it was of sexual nature. M. Escolano-Poveda, however, posed that it was not at all sexual, but that the goddess was interested in the cattle, e.g. for food. This would explain why the shepherd immediately took action to protect the herd, and it would also fit the newly discovered text fragments.

Apart from the encounter with the goddess, the text provides also some information on cattle herding. There were various kinds of domesticated bovines in ancient Egypt (Wassell 1991), whereas also wild aurochs may have roamed the Nile marshes (Beierkuhnlein 2015). Among many different kinds of animals worshipped by ancient Egyptians, their bovine cult seems to have been one of the most prominent (Wilkinson 2017).

The pastures were obviously near marshes, and it seems logical to infer that these were reclaimed reedlands prepared specifically as paddocks. The herd was carefully guarded as the Nile marshes were dwelled by dangerous and possibly lethal animals such as crocodiles and hippopotami.

Furthermore, small boats were used for the transport of cattle, but not the complete herd. H. Goedicke noted that the transport of calves on a boat would encourage the adult cows to follow swimming. Also E. Brunner-Traut wrote that calves were transported by boat whereas the other animals would swim. A. Erman noted that cows and bulls would swim, whereas the calves were led on a rope. G. Roeder noted that the cowherds on the skiffs pulled the calves by their front legs.

The water spell recited by the sages is identical with spell 836 of the 'Coffin texts' - that was found on only one coffin from Thebes (see the original text edition by A. de Buck) - which, however, lacks a context and is therefore difficult to comprehend. Faulkner noted in his translation "The whole spell gives the impression of being but a fragment of a longer text". Several notes in the used editions of the 'Tale of the herdsman' pose that the spell was addressed to the Nile flood [i.e. not to the river itself but only to the inundation it caused] to protect the herd from dangerous animals. Other notes from several of the 'Herdsman'-translations suggest that the spell was directed against dangerous riverine animals such as crocodiles or hippopotami.

The 'Tale of the herdsman' is one of only few known texts that play directly in the riverine reeds and provides information on how ancient Egyptians perceived wetlands, on their utilisation of wetlands, and on the relationship between papyrus reeds and the divine. It can only be a matter of speculation what the remainder of the tale contained and whether it would have provided even more information on reedland utilisation or divine sexuality. It is unlikely that the complete text may be discovered in future, but the discovery of additional lines by M. Escolano-Poveda provides hope that further text passages indeed may be revealed.

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