Ancient Egyptian Biographies

Contexts, Forms, Functions

Edited by

Julie Stauder-Porchet

Elizabeth Frood

Andréas Stauder

ANCIENT EGYPTIAN BIOGRAPHIES

CONTEXTS, FORMS, FUNCTIONS

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Acknowledgments

Introduction

Julie Stauder-Porchet, Elizabeth Frood, Andréas Stauder

(Auto-)biography is a genre of ancient Egyptian written discourse that was central to high culture from its earliest periods. Inscribed in hieroglyphs, the formal, display-oriented, and sacralizing variety of the Egyptian script, these texts belonged to the nonroyal elites. They present, with rare exceptions in the first person, aspects of individual lives and experience, sometimes as narratives of key events, sometimes as characterizations of personal qualities, often bringing about a configuration of the speaker with distinguished beings or realities such as the king, the gods, or order (Maat). Thousands of such texts are known from the mid-third millennium BCE to early Roman times, undergoing significant changes over time.

Their interpretation has proved difficult. Even the labels "biography" and "autobiography" are controversial within Egyptology, as the titles of the essays in this volume show. Here, "biography" will be used as a neutral term, as in the title of the volume, but making exceptions in reference to those articles whose authors use "autobiography." The texts that we often conventionally term as biographies (or autobiographies) frustrate expectations associated with Western definitions of the similarly termed types of discourse, which may be misleading more than anything else in studying the Egyptian material. Egyptian biographical texts underwent significant changes in format, materiality, contexts, configurations of language, and functions over the three thousand years of their history. Despite such variety, they are intuitively recognized as a specific type of Egyptian written discourse, differentiated from other types (e.g., literary or funerary) by particular constraints of decorum and specific functions.

Examining these issues in further detail remains a major desideratum. In addition, various topics relevant to the study of Egyptian biography, with their associated frameworks, have become increasingly specialized. The present volume seeks to begin to bridge these growing disciplinary divisions by bringing together specialists from a range of relevant periods, approaches, and interests. We do not intend to provide a "handbook" to Egyptian biography, nor to define categories, but we wish to present a range of approaches to give a sense of the state of play and raise possibilities for the future.

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We have organized the volume into five sections, although each essay speaks to issues across and beyond these divisions. Section one—anthropological and comparative perspectives—is in some sense introductory, as each essay raises broader issues of methodology and theoretical frameworks. Michael Silverstein's essay sets the scene by highlighting similar issues in cultures outside of the ancient world using an anthropological-linguistic framework that is productive for our own material. Relevant parameters include the text-artifact versus text distinction, (the Bakhtinian concept of) narrative "voicing," and the distinction between the "denotational text" (what is communicated) and the "interactional text" (what the text comes to mean as a social event), "where socio-cultural individuals with 'biographies' emerge only in and through the latter." These dimensions are analyzed in one of

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the foundational texts of American "civil religion," the Gettysburg Address, monumentalized in the Lincoln Memorial—a lapidary inscription in a funerary memorial and ritual space. A second example of such an emerging "biography" of an individual over time is given in an analysis of textually recorded anthropological fieldwork, in the Kiksht language (easternmost Chinookan, once spoken along the middle Columbia River in Washington, Oregon) and dating to the early period of impact of Euro-American settler colonialism.

Christopher Woods presents aspects of autobiography in a contemporary high-culture, Mesopotamia, contrastively highlighting the significantly different settings and constellations there and in ancient Egypt. In Mesopotamia including Syria, texts that come closest to "autobiography" concern rulers, display strong literary dimensions, and are on a continuum ranging from the more historical to the more fictional. Autobiographical inscriptions in a Syrian tradition (e.g., the mid-second-millennium Idrimi of Alalakh) were inscribed in proximity to a statue representing that individual, and were in part connected with the cult of the royal ancestors. Other texts (e.g., the legends surrounding the Sargonic kings) are transmitted on tablets and framed in reference to a fictional original inscribed on a stela. All are written in the first person and are pseudo-epigraphic. They share a number of prototypical features, including a (semi-)poetic style, a didactic message, and dense intertextual relations with (other types of) literature.

John Baines emphasizes the variety of elements that can carry biographical significance and how these could have been visible, or not, in the contexts surrounding the creation of the memorial as well as in later reception. In polities without writing, be it Hierakonpolis in southern Upper Egypt (ca. 3500 BCE) or early Classic Kerma in Nubia (ca. 1900–1700 BCE), buried animals and bucrania have biographical significance, demonstrating "how a monument could incorporate the past life of the deceased and provide a focus for later narratives about him." In historical times, narrative remained just one mode among several of presenting biographical material. In the early New Kingdom funerary chapel of Amenemhab, multiple biographical strands were thus distributed among a highly fictionalized narrative biography, as well as in images and captions across the entire broad hall. Biographical presentation was bounded strongly by cultural norms, decorum, and a general reticence around presenting the negative and the subjective. These dimensions are nowhere more visible than in textual compositions that play with, tease, and stretch these bounds, as is visible, notably, in compositions with complex framing strategies and/or those that follow models from literary fictions. For example, Late period biographies of women were perhaps less constrained by settings and existing models.

Section two addresses Egyptian biography in relation to its original setting in the Old Kingdom, the funerary chapel of the elite tomb. Julie Stauder-Porchet discusses the two autobiographical genres of the Old Kingdom as distinct by forms, functions, modes of address, degrees of integration with other types of texts inscribed in the funerary chapel, and the different relational persons of the speaker that they project in that space. Formally, the so-called "ideal autobiography" consists of a single sequence, itself an amplification of an opening sequence that defines the speaker's action as "having done Maat." The genre displays distinguished relations (both textual and physical) with, most notably, appeals to the living, the offering formula, and ritual self-characterizations of the speaker, and its formulations are generic because of its ultimately ritual nature. The so-called "event autobiography," for its part, is based on a generative scheme in which the speaker's diligent action is entirely framed by the king's agentivity, beginning with his initiating command and culminating with his "praise" (ḥzj) and rewards for the speaker. The genre expresses the speaker's uniquely distinguished relationship with the king and, in so doing, introduces the king into a space in which he cannot be represented pictorially: the official's funerary chapel. Both genres crystallize in the late Fifth Dynasty. The "ideal autobiography" emerges in relation to broader developments in the textual inscription of the funerary chapel and to changes in funerary religion. The "event autobiography" has its prehistory in the earlier Fifth Dynasty, in inscriptions commissioned by the king as gifts to the official. These (royal) inscriptions staged a ceremonial occasion of the king's speech to an official; the king's "praise" (ḥzj) in later "event autobiographies" is a direct echo of these early inscriptions of royal speeches.

In a complementary fashion, René van Walsem focuses on the iconographic program of the Old Kingdom elite tomb and introduces the concept of "(auto-)bioconography." Observing that each and every tomb is different, van Walsem defines and illustrates analytical parameters and quantitative measures for describing degrees of freedom available to the tomb owner and for comparing the iconographic programs of the tombs. A comparison between the programs of, for example, Hetepherakhti and Akhethetep, an analysis of Hezi's program compared with his contemporaries, and a consideration of the distribution of, and realization of details in, hunting scenes (a rather uncommon theme) all reveal the highly personal design of individual programs, including unique combinations and details. Beyond indexing such dimensions as economic potential, social status, and cultural education, individual programs are determined by the choices made by their instigators, their sensitivity and expressive drive, and by their sense for innovation and even for stretching the rules. Considered as an encoded entity aimed at the living, each tomb, viewed integrally as a bioconography, can thus be seen "as the outcome or materialization of unique and highly complex thought processes of a once living individual," and as expressive of the competitive individuality of the tomb owner.

The following three sections are organized thematically, based on themes that are consistently significant across all biographical production. Section three concerns text format and language. Pascal Vernus defines "autobiography" as a text format (not a genre per se and not limited to self-thematizing monuments) that makes a selective self-thematizing record of an "I-speaker." Vernus studies the linguistic hallmarks of the format, among which are the use of the first-person singular and the classifying pattern, or nominal predication construction. Addressing the question of authorship, Vernus outlines the complex distribution of responsibilities among multiple contributors involved in making the final artifactually inscribed text and argues that, while in many cases the self-thematizing I-speaker may not have been the real author, he (rarely she) nonetheless remains the "semiotic author" of the text. Biographies in the second and third person are considered in turn. The former occur as an address by a son to his father, or as an address by the king to the official as a quotation of a "royal command" (*wḏ*). The latter come in various types: the titulary format, the obituary format, the "humble prayer" format, and the overcoding format. The essay concludes with an analysis of one instance of genuine pseudepigraphy, an autobiography of the Eighteenth Dynasty individual Amenhotep son of Hapu inscribed, more than a millennium after his death, on a colossal statue dating to early Ptolemaic times.

Drawing on modern literary and discursive studies, Laurent Coulon studies the pragmatic value of formulaic expressions in the rhetorical construction of ancient Egyptian autobiographies. "Clichés" are most generally positively perceived and have their performative efficacy rooted in repetitiveness. Negative appreciations of clichés, as in assertions of truthfulness (for the corpus of which Coulon provides a diachronic overview), generally concern not the formula itself but a speaker's possible unworthiness to pronounce it. Clichés have a strong "attractive force" in textual production, as is illustrated by examples of a creative adaptation to the context of the inscription or to the personality of the owner. As the "care formula" illustrates, an "effet de réel" can be achieved through anchoring the action to a specific place or through enumerating realia. Beyond individual clichés, formulaic schemes function as generative patterns that allow infinite variations while being "immediately reminiscent of official and ceremonial context in which the nominations, rewards and honors had been conferred." Formulas and formulaic schemes are thus shown to support the integrative function of autobiographical discourse.

Andréas Stauder discusses the linguistic expression of completed action in Old Kingdom autobiographies. In general, the speaker's past actions are presented as having lasting consequentiality in the open-ended present of the inscription. In the early and mid-Fifth Dynasty, royal inscriptions staging an episode of interaction by the king with the official were set in the king's perspective and tensed in a narrative past, disconnected from the present. Along with a change in perspective, materialized in the first person, the rise of the event autobiography in the late Fifth Dynasty thus involves a shift in tensing, expressing the lasting consequentiality of the now speaking official's action. In the Sixth Dynasty, the king's action is often set on a different temporal plane than the speaker's, expressing an essential separation of the two participants. In some texts, only the king's praise is set

apart in this way, thereby highlighting it as the culminating point of the sequence. In addition, very few event autobiographies, some among the most elaborate of the time, set the speaker's actions in a resultative form. This provides a stylistically marked expression of the fact that the speaker's action has resulted in a lasting state of being an ever-worthy recipient of the king's praise.

Section four is devoted to the social dimensions of biographies, focusing again on earlier periods. Juan Carlos Moreno García discusses biographies of the Old and Middle Kingdoms as highly elaborate expressions of a refined palatial culture, conveying the defining codes, values, and expectations of the ruling class. From this the formalism and restraint of biographies also derives, as well as differences in regional, non-Memphite necropoles. Changes in biographies are analyzed in relation to shifting social and political contexts, notably the administrative innovations, the partial renewal of the ruling elite in the early Sixth Dynasty, and the restoration of a different monarchical order in the Middle Kingdom. Moreno García stresses the relation to other genres, notably "judicial texts," which, like biographies, point to royal rewards and distinctions in the context of intense competition with peers. He describes literature, developing in the Middle Kingdom, as an outcome of the same palatial culture as biographies: while the latter represent the culturally more affirmative pole, the former conveys hesitations and conflicts in a socially more complex world in which the king has ceased to be the sole source of wealth and privilege.

Katalin Kóthay analyzes models of upward mobility in biographies from the Old through the Middle Kingdom. Old Kingdom biographies reflect a context of intense intra-elite competition. Rather than actual mobility, they concern privilege and distinction among the highest-ranking individuals and construct the king's role as the ultimate source of social status. By contrast, biographies of the First Intermediate period show a new perception and representation of personal performance and ability to advance economically and socially, along with the importance of social capital (patronage). In their expression of (aspired) adherence to a prominent group, these inscriptions also have a strongly integrative dimension and convey collective identity. Kóthay's detailed contextual analysis of common phraseology demonstrates how this conceals subtle shifts and alterations in meaning, for instance in the transition to the early Middle Kingdom, when the possession of property comes to replace the acquisition of it. In the Middle Kingdom, social mobility ceases to be an important theme of biographies, giving way to a new concern with ancestry, as well as characterizations of the aspiring official in competitive contexts, as known already in the Old Kingdom.

Sabine Kubisch discusses references to the "town" (*njw.t*) in biographies of the Second Intermediate period. After reviewing criteria that have been proposed for defining a city in ancient Egypt, she concentrates on the relationship between an urban center and a rural hinterland. Second Intermediate period biographical inscriptions from Edfu and El-Kab focus on supplying and provisioning. Reflecting the same regionalist development, the king himself in the Theban area refers to "his town," thus emphasizing his role as its patron. With the new consolidation of royal power at the eve of the New Kingdom, the rulers' perspectives shift once again to the whole land, and biographies similarly return to traditional themes, emphasizing the officials' close relationship to the king.

Section five addresses religious experience in autobiographies through the complementary perspectives of participation and experience with a general, although not exclusive focus on later periods. Drawing on analytical methods provided by cultural phenomenology and the anthropology of religion, Michela Luiselli describes the general accentuation of topics related to religion and religious experience over time and focuses on the exceptionality of single life experiences recalled in autobiographies. In Ramesside times, at least in the Theban area, the display of religious experience is linked to an interpretation of it as the result of divine will and intervention in one's life. In the Libyan period, autobiographies stressed genuine personal religious beliefs, recalling life events that brought the protagonist close to the divine sphere.

David Klotz addresses participation in religious ceremonies as a prominent theme that displays the same tension between conformity and individualization, integration and competition that is more generally characteristic

of Egyptian biographical discourse. On the one hand, the participation in ritual implies a loss of individual identity while reinforcing solidarity, especially on the communal level. On the other hand, through particular religious titles or sacerdotal roles, an individual may signal elevated status within the royal court. With the caveat that the iconography of tombs and statues provided additional modes of presenting religious activity, Klotz then lists some of the most common categories of rituals and festivals as mentioned in Egyptian biographical inscriptions and discusses some noteworthy examples.

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A number of themes and approaches resonate with each other across the essays in the five sections of this volume. While the volume is concerned primarily with "biography" in the specific sense of a genre of written discourse (for issues of genre and format, see in particular Stauder-Porchet, Vernus, and Stauder), various essays also address "biographical material" in a broader sense, referring to diverse ways of presenting aspects of a person in other modalities: noncontinuous text, images, and/or architecturally and artifactually defined spaces (e.g., Baines for funerary biographical materializations in societies without writing; van Walsem and Baines for biographical dimensions of the Egyptian tomb as a whole and its iconographic program in particular; Silverstein for the ritual space of the Lincoln Memorial; Moreno García for so-called judicial texts inscribed in the tomb). Beyond the narrowly referential dimension of language (what words say), "biographical indexicality" (how texts and other types of biographical materials not only represent, but point to, aspects of a person and life) is a recurrent theme, implicit in most essays and fully explicit in some (in particular, Silverstein and van Walsem).

Strong cultural norms and conventions presided over what could be said or not said, and how, in biographies. While the negative and the subjective are expressed only rarely (Baines), sensuous aspects of religious experience can be presented in biographies, particularly in later periods (Luiselli, and Klotz). Small deviations or shifts in phraseology can be analyzed as significant of social or cultural changes, if not signaling broader changes to the norms themselves (e.g., Kóthay, Coulon, and Kubisch). Biographies (and "bioconographies" similarly) can play with the conventions by which they are bound, stretching the limits of those conventions in ways that can then themselves come to count as expressive and/or individualizing gestures (see, notably, van Walsem, Baines, and Vernus). Biographies also entertain productive relationships with the categories of fictiveness (Coulon, on clichés; Vernus, on a pseudepigraphic autobiography) and with (fictional) literature (Baines, Moreno García; and Woods for Mesopotamia, where this relationship is in fact defining).

A number of essays analyze the particular kind of first person that is found speaking in biographies, in terms of its historical genealogies (Stauder-Porchet), of the distributed agency that has gone into making the inscription (Vernus, Silverstein, concurring with the fact that the speaker is the person benefiting from, responsible for, and in this sense authoring, the discourse), or of the linguistic calibration of this first person in the text (Silverstein, and Stauder). This leads to discussions of framing strategies (Baines, Woods, and Stauder) as well as the non-first-person formats that are also found (Vernus, and Stauder-Porchet). The biographical first person speaks in specific places, usually funerary chapels or temples, in which biographical inscriptions do not just tell but effect things (Luiselli, van Walsem; Woods on Mesopotamia, where autobiographical discourse—whether artifactually or, more often, fictionally—concerns similar types of places as in Egypt, as well as stelae and statues; Silverstein on the Lincoln Memorial as a biographical space imbued with ritual and performativity).

In the places where they are inscribed and displayed, biographies of various periods reflect, and are themselves a locus for, an intense competition between the nonroyal elite (e.g., Kóthay, van Walsem, and Klotz; also Kubisch, for a particular context in which weakened rulers come to adopt elements of biographical phraseology themselves). The court and its ceremonials are one major stage or point of reference for such competition (e.g., Moreno García), and direct and indirect references to ceremonial speech at court are central in biographies at various periods (Stauder-Porchet, Coulon, and Silverstein). Simultaneously, biographies have a strong integrative

dimension, sustaining culture and society (Luiselli, Klotz, Kóthay, and Moreno García). This is supported by the formulaic nature of language and compositional schemes, which also has ritual dimensions (Coulon, on the positive pragmatic values of clichés; Stauder-Porchet, on generative schemes in both the Old Kingdom ideal and event biographies; Stauder, on the linguistic correlates of these schemes; and Vernus, on the classifying pattern in biographies expressing that the speaker inhabits a role).

In addition to these complementary dimensions of competition and integration, biographies often focus centrally on expressing, or establishing in-and-through writing, relationships with beings that belong, at least partly, to another realm, be this the king (Stauder-Porchet, and Stauder), the gods (Luiselli, Klotz, and Silverstein), or the dead (Luiselli). Various essays thus emphasize the pragmatic dimensions of biographies, including their performance, modes of address, and reception (Baines, and Stauder-Porchet). Through a number of diverse approaches, they aim more broadly at the "interactional text," the culturally defined social action (possibly shifting over time) that a text accomplishes at various occasions of its own life history (Silverstein).

Egyptian biographies offer a unique opportunity to examine the ways in which individuals fashioned distinctive selves for display and the significance of the physical, religious, and social contexts they selected. Biographical texts also resonate intertextually, formally, and linguistically with other types of written discourse. In addition, biographies are a major source for other areas of research, including the social contexts they reflect, the cultural values they embody, or the particular types of highly formal language they are phrased in; a refined understanding of these texts is therefore crucial to a great many areas of Egyptological research. Although traditional studies of ancient Egyptian biographies have been determined by a broadly philological paradigm, this perspective has widened significantly over the past decade to include approaches based on linguistics, archaeology, anthropology, and social history. Being more theoretically informed and methodologically self-aware, this multiplicity of approaches has contributed significantly to renewing discussions of various aspects of the textual presentations of the self in ancient Egypt. We hope that this volume shows the considerable potential for the integration of a multiplicity of approaches to such a complex and diverse genre.