

THE PRISSE PAPYRUS

Chloé Ragazzoli – Now the story began, for me as an Egyptologist at the BNF, when the BNF decided to devote an exhibition to an explorer whose archives it had in house, Emile Prisse d’Avennes... Emile Prisse d’Avennes brought back one of the most beautiful papyrus of ancient Egypt, also one of the oldest, which is considered by the BNF as one of the jewels of its collection, and this was an opportunity to present to the public a papyrus scroll that was generally known only through its translations or from expert editions.

The papyrus had been met with a degree of publicity when Prisse returned from Egypt, a transcription was made of the cursive script in which it is written, which is hieratic, into hieroglyphics, then this was published as a whole, in a standardised format in which it had never been written, then it was cut into pages, which were put in the pages of a book, a codex, the lines where it was cut were such that the lines would fit in the pages of the book, they put side by side all the known versions of the text contained in the papyrus, and then all this was translated, so well that we get from the papyrus the meaning contained in the text, but not all the elements of meaning which are conveyed by a document, a physical manuscript...

So if we scrutinize, if we adopt the stance of an archaeologist towards these texts, if in fact we read them much as a ceramicist would read a fragment of pottery, that is to say in looking for evidence of dexterity, we find something tangible, true indicators of scholarly practice. By which I mean that we see the stroke of the scribe’s paint-brush, what that can tell us of his attitude to the text, because for example if a scribe is very careful with his calligraphy, he might lose touch with the sense of what he is copying, meaning that he is copying, not that he is writing, then one can see this for example by looking at the places where the scribe refreshes his quill with ink, if he recharges in the middle of a word or if he recharges in a structured manner, at the beginning of a verse.

So we discover that the scribe of the Prisse papyrus was clearly a professional scribe, so this is not a private copy, made in a corner, one evening, after work, but it is a scribe who is very erudite and competent, since we see that sometimes he gets carried away by the meaning of what he is writing, preferring to finish a phrase, so that the ink becomes more and more faint, and once he has finished the phrase, so that he has reached the end of a meaningful piece, he goes back and recolours the symbols which might be too faint! This is also a scribe who experiments, because at this time hieratic, which is the cursive writing in which one writes literary texts, is beginning to be written in lines! Which means that there must be blocks of text; now the papyrus roll is seven metres long and one isn’t going to write seven metre long lines, which for us seems quite straightforward, a block of text, we see what it is, it forms pages on the papyrus roll, but for our scribe, he is certainly in the middle of a moment of innovation and he has no visual reference for doing that... So he experiments, he makes pages which are sometimes sixty centimetres wide which is hard to follow, the field of human vision cannot follow a sixty centimetre line without getting lost, while there are also pages of twenty five centimetres, thirty centimetres, we see that the scribe experiments, innovates, tries to find a solution and sometimes has a bit of trouble, sometimes it doesn’t work out...

So what we knew, evidently, is that this is a text which belongs to the XIIth dynasty, an important period, when literature was invented, a period of very, very strong royal power, in fact, we certainly find ourselves at the heart of the élite, and everything leads us to believe that this papyrus comes from a tomb, the tomb of a dignitary, thus someone who has chosen to take with him at least one literary papyrus into the after-life.!

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