The accessibility of Ramesside narrative

By Christopher Eyre

Narrative is a relatively late, ill-defined, and rather diverse genre in Egyptian writing, although by the Ramesside Period a considerable and varied corpus of text survives, both inscriptional and cursive. It is, however, the history of what actually survives – the documented use of writing for narrative – which best illustrates the socially embedded relationship between author/ performer and the audience/public. All Egyptian written narrative invokes performance in one sense or another, but there is a necessary distinction between narrative which is primarily a performance to an audience but happens to survive in writing, and narrative displayed – published – in writing: the spectrum between a live audience (for whom a work is performed, with degree of participation) and a public (to whom an autonomous work is published). The distinction is then a useful one for addressing the nature of Egyptian narrative, and literature in general. At the core of this is an address, taken from an ethnographic approach to literature, to the distinction between the text as a publication (in the sense of addressed to a potentially open public, in ways which may become relatively autonomous), and a performance, in which communication is to an audience[[1]](#footnote-1). The distinction is not merely a quibble, but involves the degree and nature of accessibility or restriction of the texts, and the culturally significant manner of its use. In the Egyptian context, publication overlaps conceptually with reification: deliberate fixing the form of the individual text, as well as the communication of its content[[2]](#footnote-2).

The relationship between functionality and aesthetic is even more difficult for Egyptian literature than for art[[3]](#footnote-3): although written literature always appears purposeful in context, it never appears to be crudely utilitarian[[4]](#footnote-4). The debate about the autonomy of art and literature – its disengagement from specific purpose or performance – is, however, largely anachronistic for the Egyptian material, and rooted in post-18th Century assumptions about the nature of authorship and publication. From a standpoint of deep scepticism about the existence of an autonomous written literature, and specifically written stories created for reading[[5]](#footnote-5), I would rather stress that, for Egypt, the way in which texts were communicated is more important than their authorship; or rather, one needs to think of different modes of authorship in the – to a large extent – pre-writing culture of Egypt: which at least include non-writing modes of authorship[[6]](#footnote-6).

In principle a broad enough range of narrative survives from the Ramesside period to address the generic interrelationships between papyrus and inscription. A history of what was actually written (genres, content, and literary form) is, however, more straightforward than a history of how people used those texts. The shortage of direct, incidental evidence makes a history of reading more difficult for Egypt than a history of writing. However, a consideration of the purpose of a narrative may provide internal evidence for accessibility and use, beyond apparently direct categorisations as propaganda or ideology. The simple question is how narrative, preserved in a monumental inscription or on a papyrus, was accessible to an audience or public, and who that audience or public might be: whether oral performance, either formal or informal, defines both inscriptional and papyrus literature[[7]](#footnote-7); or whether formats specific to inscription define the history of Egyptian literature as it is visible to us.

The medium of narrative

The diversity of narrative genre in Egypt relates very closely to the medium on which it was written – inscribed hieroglyphs or cursive hieratic on papyrus – but the relationship between the two media is complex, since they appear to differ in both purpose and dissemination, and there is little concrete evidence to describe the process of putting a narrative text into writing, either on a papyrus or on a monument: the relationship between text, performance, and processes of transmission. Narrative on papyrus survives only in private copies, made by and for individuals; so far as we can tell scripts for recitation[[8]](#footnote-8), and not as objects of written circulation for private reading; performances. The medium is essentially one of fiction and discourse. In contrast, inscribed text, like picture, makes incidents permanent, asserting their non-fictionality, and then reifying them at the borderline between fiction and reality, truth and ideology[[9]](#footnote-9). The inscription communicates, explicitly, with both an immediate contemporary public and a defined posterity. In that sense it takes on something of the character of a publication in fixed form[[10]](#footnote-10): in such a way that an original – although potentially fictional – performance, is reified as a visible and invariable public display, although in reality the inscription may be located in a position that makes practical reading a virtual impossibility.

The linguistic and stylistic relationships visible between inscriptional and hieratic narratives in the Ramesside Period are clearly rooted in the limited number – indeed the identity – of those who created both genres. Direct plagiarism is essentially a feature of written culture: direct coping of written text, as seen in the invitation to select and copy from the inscriptions in the 26th Dynasty tomb of Ibi [[11]](#footnote-11). Productive variation on a theme – often simply characterised as intertextuality rather than quotation – is normal, however, across the range of genres which comprise the common culture of the literate. All Egyptian creative writing depends on a rather open process of textual transmission, involving the productive reuse of phraseology in composition. This is rooted both in performance, but also in the way in which texts were copied: variation between individual literary manuscripts cannot simply be dismissed as scribal carelessness in copying, but in an attitude where the canonical accuracy of copying a primary text was not the immediate concern of the copyist[[12]](#footnote-12), despite the regular assertion in a colophon that the copy was as found[[13]](#footnote-13). The nature of transmission has to be contextualised in the way in which its content – the text – was the subject of oral performance or of reference and reading.

The New Kingdom textual corpus seems to indicate a significant development in the range of genres which were written, and which were not purely functional nor purely decorative, but potentially targetted for reading. The development of (written) narrative is then closely linked to the idea of the creation of (written) prose, against more poetically structured formal performance styles of earlier literature. The different communicative purposes of different media do then seem to suggest variation in the process of creating the written narrative. A narrative with genesis in story-telling to an audience puts into writing something that is potentially a writing-free genre; something that is not generic to writing, but to talking. A narrative that uses documentary styles of labelling, listing and captioning is characteristically monumental[[14]](#footnote-14), and implies a different attitude to its composition. This becomes more marked in post-Ramesside inscriptional and religious texts, where the use of an ‘Egyptian of tradition’, both linguistically and orthographically, marks a more written genesis.

Evidence for the use of inscription as a medium for narrative goes back to a much earlier date than evidence for literary narrative on papyrus. This may be because inscriptions on stone survive better than papyrus texts, but it is actually more likely that the concept of writing literary narrative on papyrus – a less purposeful activity – considerably postdates the integration of narrative themes into highly prestigious inscriptional contexts. Even so, the development of narrative inscription comes in more than one way. The most obvious way is where text is directly associated with pictorial display, so as to produce a written narrative derived from the captioning of scenes[[15]](#footnote-15). This is seen in developed form at Deir el Bahari, in the narrrative of Hatshepsut’s expedition to Punt, where the text consists entirely of captions to the reliefs, all presented grammatically as labelling infinitives[[16]](#footnote-16). In both authorship and transmission these texts may be taken to represent a genuinely written format for narrative, which is not itself explicitly derived from an oral performance, but from visual display. The Punt reliefs are, however, unusual in that respect, in presenting a sequence of illustrated events to produce a continuous narrative frame. Primarily in these contexts, text is a support for the picture, and not *vice versa*[[17]](#footnote-17)*,* but in that respect the Qadesh Inscriptions of Ramesses II seem to reverse – or at least balance – the roles of text and picture, and the association of narrative texts with pictures as public display on the later 19th and 20th Dynasty temples seems to move a degree from labelled pictures as a sort of event-narrative, towards narrative with pictures of events.

The use of a daybook format to structure sequential royal narrative differs in genesis to raw captioning[[18]](#footnote-18), although it has the same early roots in labelling and listing for written purposes. This is the framework of annals familiar from the reign of Tuthmosis III, where the deliberately narrative address seems to expand on a more explicitly listing format preserved in older annal inscriptions[[19]](#footnote-19), where the distinction between bureaucratic listing and narrative is difficult to disentangle. Here, however, the inclusion of story-telling narrative, such as the build up to the attack on Megiddo, pulls together the different generic styles. In all cases, however, the inscribed narrative remains a reification of specific events, in which story-telling is only an element.

The occasion of narrative

The overlap between ritual and royal event, reified in picture and caption, lies at the origins of inscribed royal narrative. The point is illustrated, for instance, by the long sequences presenting the festival of Min preserved in the inscriptions of Ramesses III[[20]](#footnote-20). These begin with a scene setting, in captioning style, listing the participants[[21]](#footnote-21):

Processing of the king on palanquin, appeared in the Blue Crown, escort in front of him, equipped with shield, spear, sword and all gear for escorting; quadruple council at his rear; royal-children and army behind them. Senior lector-priest carrying out his function in the House of his father Min.

The core of the narrative is then built on a series of direct verbal addresses, by gods to the king and by the king to gods. The list of participants here – the particular audience – is characteristic for the narrative-praise inscriptions of Ramesses III[[22]](#footnote-22), as indeed of royal inscriptions throughout the New Kingdom: the praise of god and king is core to the narrative, and frequently completed by discourse with the audience. This description of the Min Festival is explicit in putting both actions and audience into the narrative of the specific event, while the location of the king in public appearance – here on his dais[[23]](#footnote-23) – is, from the earliest periods, characteristic of the presentation of royal event as narrative through picture and caption. The ceremonial appearance of the king had a strongly ritualised format, so that the narrative of royal audience and ceremony is then best understood as an incidental reification of the ritualised norm[[24]](#footnote-24).

Ramesses III’s narrative of his First Libyan War ends with a description of the post-campaign presentation of captives, hands and phalli ‘under the window’ (Xr sSd), where ‘the Thirty and the train (sSmw) of the king’ are described: ‘their arms stretched (up) and their acclamations to the sky’[[25]](#footnote-25). Then at the end of his Second Libyan War, the king[[26]](#footnote-26)

(...) said to the Royal-Children, great officials, chiefs of the army and cavalry: “Give me your attention, to (my) declaration (tp-r)! Hear it! I say to you, and cause you to know, I am Son of Re (...)”.

This is followed by self praise of a characterising style; then:

“I have felled the Meshwesh (and/of) the Land of Tjemehu by the strength of my strong-arm; I have caused them to be prostrate. Look at them in front of you! There is not boasting. It is the might of Amon which has brought them!”

There is a nice contrast to another passage of Ramesses III[[27]](#footnote-27), in which defeated foreign chiefs, declaring the depths of their subordination after defeat, are quoted:

“You have caused we stop boasting in our land”.

The theme of ‘boasting’ – a wholly inadequate translation of the Egyptian term aba –contrasts strongly, as a motif, with the emphasis on autopsy. The theme that seeing is believing becomes a strong theme of inscriptional narrative; in these texts the reference is to being present on the occasion of the performance of the relevant praise-narrative, which is itself transmitted in the discourse of its audience.

The relationship between royal inscription and private tomb-autobiography is extremely close here, both in genesis and purpose. Inscriptional narrative, both royal and private, is then purposeful in the sense of presenting an episode as evidence to an audience. The theme is characterised for the entire New Kingdom by the formulaic phrase:

The name of hero (qni) is in what he has done, without perishing in this land for ever.

First attested in the autobiography of Ahmose son of Abana[[28]](#footnote-28), it is repeated in the introduction to the Annals of Tuthmosis III, giving context to the listing of events in his narrative[[29]](#footnote-29). Tuthmosis III picks up the theme again[[30]](#footnote-30), asserting the truthfulness of what he says, and in particular when he describes this as

to public knowledge (r rxt b(w) nb).

Or when Amenhotep II on his Sphinx Stela characterises the narrative of his physical prowess[[31]](#footnote-31):

It is indeed an event (sp); one had not in the past (done) doing it; it has not been heard in the telling (*m sDdt*)[[32]](#footnote-32).

This passes very directly to the question of who inscriptional narrative was addressed to, and how it was addressed. Specifically an inscription might seem to fit the category of a publication: free to be looked at by an individual, and potentially read privately. Yet the inscription presents itself as a subject for discourse, as in the classic example from the 12th Dynasty stela of Montuwoser[[33]](#footnote-33):

Then as for every person who will hear this stela, being among the living, they will say “It’s the truth!” Their children will say to (their) children, “It’s the truth! There is no falsehood there.” And as for every scribe who will read this stela, all people – they will come up to him (spr=sn ir=f).

The theme is picked up directly in the Ramesside autobiography of Nefersekheru[[34]](#footnote-34), where the inscription is presented as a publication to be subject of discourse:

“I say to you, who are on earth, who will exist, wab-priests and associates of the king, [… who decipher the] texts ([….. ?wHa? d]rf(?)) in my tomb which is in the Oryx nome, your hearts shall ponder (?) (HH ibw=Tn) in front of this writing, and you will say in firmness (?), in doing (?) attention (?) to […. ] so that the ignorant may know, like the skilled, all I have said on my chapel.”

Narrative of events

Autopsy gives focus to the purposeful narrative, characteristic of inscriptions, just as the key term sp gives focus to their episodic nature: the sp as specific events referred to in an autobiography, and the single event narrative typical of the so-called *Königsnovelle* [[35]](#footnote-35). The generic term is modern, and necessarily flexible in what it describes: archetypically the king holds a council, listens the advice of his courtiers but decides himself, and his specific enterprise succeeds, exemplifying the human superiority of the king. This is not so much a genre of itself, but an artefact of the relatively short, episodic structure of all Egyptian narrative. In that sense it is not really functional to draw a distinction between *Idealbiographie* and *Ereignisbiographie*[[36]](#footnote-36), at least for the Ramesside Period, where ideal and event merge into a purposeful evidential narrative. That distinction does, itself, involve the application of a modern construct of objective, factual historiography onto an ancient genre with quite different purpose. The *Königsnovelle* may then serve as a crucial structural element in royal narrative, generically closely comparable to the sort of individual episode that one finds in papyrus narrative. Structurally the episodic focus on individual events is deeply embedded in the listing style of characterising eulogy, and autobiographical self-presentation: narratively undeveloped, but rooted in the assertion of character and worth on the evidence of specific behaviour and actions.

The Egyptian verb which seems most obviously to convey a sense of narration is sDd, most obviously at the beginning of the Story of the Shipwrecked Sailor, where he declares that “I will then sDd to you a comparable set of events that happened to me personally”: a play on the denial of fictionality[[37]](#footnote-37). Or in a Middle Kingdom stela which invokes its readers expectations, that on return home, “You shall sDd your travels to your wives”[[38]](#footnote-38). The root sense seems to be oral communication, not limited to narrative as a genre, but normally focussed on the oral presentation to an audience[[39]](#footnote-39), when the performance of song and story-telling can overlap. Characteristic of the New Kingdom is its use in the phrases sDd nxtw and sDd bAw: communicating specific episodes of royal and divine success and intervention, in purposeful way, using the event, experienced and declared true, to praise and to and proselytise for the king or god[[40]](#footnote-40). In these contexts, eulogy and royal or autobiographical narrative are essentially inseparable, both in purpose and presumably in occasion for performance as for publication in text[[41]](#footnote-41).

Episodic structure is a key compositional technique in Ramesside literary narrative on papyrus: each episode about a page long. This is reinforced by significant repetition, giving structure. This includes both repetitions of content and the use of attention-collecting formulae, like xr ir hrw qnw Hr-sA nn, ‘And so many days after this’: a phrase which is not literal in its time reference, but in practice is used to in the sense ‘And so later’, or ‘And so then’. These are not themselves section-beginning phrases: not paragraph marking as such, but rather attention catching formulae. I take them to be features of recitational performance, not narrative structure. It is, however, such features of format and structure of the text, as well as linguistic register and content, which provide the only direct evidence for the target audience or public[[42]](#footnote-42). The differences between inscription and papyrus go deeper than contrasts of linguistic register.

Papyri and inscription

Inscribed narrative, royal and private, is explicitly purposeful, providing forms of written evidence that are propagandistic, in the sense of praise and (self-)justification. Inscribing the event – putting it into writing – gives a documentary authority. Typically presented as a reified performance, non-fictional, and with a marked public audience, royal and private narrative self-presentation stands in marked contrast to papyrus literature, which can include idle story-telling and explicit markers of fictionality. Narrative inscription (whether royal or individual self-presentation) is characteristically personalised, marked by its direct formal address to a public, and by its invocation of discourse between the narrator and his public. Papyri seem more impersonal in their address to a general audience and not a specific public, and characteristically claim written transmission by copying. Two particular features of Egyptian narrative – and literature as a whole – are then directly relevant to the nature of interaction with audience or public: the episodic form of all narrative, and the highly allusive nature of the language and plot.

By the Ramesside Period – as in the Qadesh texts – there is a very clear interaction between papyrus and monumental writing[[43]](#footnote-43). However, this direct interaction is already seen at the beginning of written literary narrative. The Story of Sinuhe exploits the format of inscribed autobiography, including the captioning use of narrative infinitives; it includes passages in the (written) format of letters; and it also includes sections in the recitational format of oral eulogy[[44]](#footnote-44). Sinuhe can, at the extreme, be treated as a script for performance[[45]](#footnote-45), but the interaction between the inscriptional – written – style of presentation, merged with the story-telling and presumably fictional genre, poses complex questions about the new habit of writing narrative on papyrus. There is a real issue here, of the historical sequence in which particular genres (for want of a better term) were actually written down[[46]](#footnote-46). The argument has been complicated by recent attempts to date much of the classical corpus of Egyptian literature into the 18th Dynasty, closer to the dates of the earliest surviving manuscripts. The implications are potentially very serious for the history of writing literature on papyrus, implying a much slower establishment of narrative as a written genre on papyrus, and giving a different focus to the relative lack of inscribed royal narrative in the Middle Kingdom. It remains most likely, however, that the issue is simply one of the limited physical preservation of textual material – both inscribed and cursive literary – from the Middle Kingdom[[47]](#footnote-47). The roots of written literature clearly lie, however, in the history of the practice of writing: the extension of what was written down, through culturally embedded extensions of the use of writing – simply writing more, and more varied texts – rather than a series of step change in cultural behaviour, that the application of a model of cultural evolution to literary development would imply. For instance, the exploitation of letter formats in literary narrative, and the integration of rhetoric and listing in inscriptional narrative point strongly to the conclusion that no clear distinction can be drawn between a person who writes in well-attested documentary formats, a person who performs literature, and one who is responsible for literature that is newly put into writing. And conversely, that the idea of writing narrative – distinct perhaps from the idea of narrative itself – is closely related to the practice of writing as something purposeful.

The Ramesside scribe Pentaweret[[48]](#footnote-48), writing for his chief, the Scribe of the Treasury Amenemone, was responsible for both Papyrus Sallier I and Sallier III. Both seem to come from a personal collection of literary works, from a tomb at Saqqara[[49]](#footnote-49). Sallier I contains texts of the Instruction of Amenemhet I, the Story of Apophis and Seqenenre, and a set of Late Egyptian Miscellanies (including a eulogy of Merenptah). Sallier III preserves a copy of the Qadesh Poem of Ramesses II, otherwise known from temple inscriptions, but also in the partial copy of the scribe Qeniherkhopeshef on the verso of pChester Beatty III. Pentaweret’s range is impressive[[50]](#footnote-50). This obviously poses direct question of the Qadesh inscriptions, how or if they were read, how they relate to papyrus copies, and how in fact their narrative was disseminated as performance or written publication.

What is important is that there is no identifiable division between different literacies, but clear inter-textuality between documentary formats and literary compositions: the culture of literacy seems homogenous, so that even where it seems possible to envisage a different genesis for genres of narrative text, this need not come out of, or even relate to different scribal competencies or different contexts for the use of literacy[[51]](#footnote-51). For instance, the inscription of Samut Kyky has the same literary beginning as the story of the Eloquent Peasant: his personal narrative uses an echo of what seems to be a low-tradition ‘once upon a time’ formulation[[52]](#footnote-52). Similarly the formula xpr swt, used to begin the story of Apophis and Seqenenre[[53]](#footnote-53), is found in the same way in the stela of Ahmose concerning his donation for Tetisheri[[54]](#footnote-54), and at the beginning of an account of the coronation of Tuthmosis III[[55]](#footnote-55). The autobiography of Nefersekheru[[56]](#footnote-56), as a variation, seems to use a quotation from Ptahhotep to define himself as a person good to listen to, before he begins his direct address to posterity (Dd=i n=tn ‘I say to you…’), recounting his career as display of his merit. The dividing-line between direct quotation and formula is often impossible to draw[[57]](#footnote-57), but it marks the fact that literate culture was not on a large scale; and that the people who were cultured wrote all sorts of texts.

Superficially the historical section of the Great Harris Papyrus[[58]](#footnote-58) – a summary of his reign – would appear to be an exception to Ramesside norms of narrative style: difficult to separate, in theme or presentation, from inscriptional texts, although it survives a long cursive text. The scene-setting description of the chaos existing before his time is a repeated theme of royal inscriptions, although notably that of Ramesses III compares very closely with inscriptions of Merenptah, who faced similar military and political problems. The descriptions of Ramesses’ recognition as heir, his accession, campaigns, and their results then fall into styles entirely familiar from the inscriptions of the period[[59]](#footnote-59):

I made the entire land flourish with trees and plants (? *AxAx*). I caused the populace (*rxyt*) to live (*Hmsi*) in their shade. I ensured that the woman of Egypt went about where she wanted, with nobody else molesting her on the road. I caused the army and chariotry to rest (*Hmsi*) in my time – the Sherden, Qeheq in their towns (*dmi*), lying on their backs, unperturbed, without Nubian conflict, nor Syrian war – their bows and equipment put into storage.

The initial list of those to whom the king speaks is broadly phrased, but is not outside what one expects in an inscription of his reign:

to magistrates, leaders of the land, army and cavalry, Sherden, the ordinary archers, all living-ones of the Land of Tameri. Listen as (?) I cause you to know about my benefits (Axw) which I performed when I was king.

The real exception, that it is a text post-mortem, legitimising Ramesses IV, is the oddity: it is otherwise in the format of a royal inscription. Access to, or readability of that text is untestable. One can hardly take seriously Grandet’s suggestion that the entire papyrus was posted up as some sort of public notice, but the particular section does fit as well as other inscriptions of the period into a vision of formal recitation to an audience on a formal occasion[[60]](#footnote-60).

The inscriptions, whether more rhetorical or more documentary, provide the primary source for modern reconstruction of historical narrative, and are too frequently then valued according to their potential for reconstructing an objective sequence of historical facts. The use of historical narrative is, however, equally central to Ramesside narratives on papyrus. While classical Egyptian literature is characteristically situated in a past of indeterminate depth, the sorts of story that appear in the Ramesside Period include works that have as specific a focus on events as autobiography and inscriptions do: notably the Taking of Joppa, Apophis and Seqenenre, the Turin Story about Tuthmosis III, and Louvre N3136 about Ramesses III[[61]](#footnote-61), but the Doomed Prince as well: a use of history that is seen slightly earlier in the stories of Papyrus Westcar, but probably also in the Eloquent Peasant and even Sinuhe. Most particularly they have the character of the historical narratives that appear in Herodotus and Manetho as history, and where the generic link through Demotic historical narratives, can be demonstrated directly[[62]](#footnote-62). The interplay between fiction and non-fictionality is particularly strong in the Story of Wenamun: currently (like Sinuhe) taken as a work of fiction, it exploits the non-fictional format of a letter of report, and seems to mark a movement to a more extended, less markedly episodic story-telling. The relationship between story-telling and historiography – what became native knowledge of the past – is then visible in inscriptional form in the Ptolemaic Bentresh Stela: presented as a narrative of events in the reign of Ramesses II – as history – its date and purpose of composition seem at least to be post-Ramesside[[63]](#footnote-63).

Narrative as history and myth

The context is one in which history is a form of story-telling, exploiting multiple genres: like Herodotus, Manetho, and their roots in Demotic Romances, so the New Kingdom rooting of narratives in historical events, Cheops, Sesostris, Tuthmosis III and Ramesses II are the prime, but not only examples. It is not quite enough to explain this, as Manassa recently does, on the basis that ‘history itself was found to be entertaining’[[64]](#footnote-64). On the one hand there is the formality – ideologically normative and characteristically humour-free – of the inscriptions, against the characteristically ironic and satirical humour of the papyrus narratives. Ramesside stories focus on the behaviour of the great – typically royal or divine characters – and their fallibility, so that the rare examples of illustrated narrative on papyrus are also satirical in their engagement with formal ideology: the interplay between inscriptional and papyrus genre is marked by that between an engagement with public seriousness and audience entertainment: a theme that is rather less marked in the Middle Kingdom stories of Sinuhe and the Eloquent Peasant, which carry a stronger didactic seriousness in their performability.

When Ramesside Stories overlap with, and contextualise myth, they humanise deities even more than kings: Horus and Seth, Two Brothers, Truth and Falsehood. They do this, however, at a level that is not itself obviously ‘popular’ in the necessary awareness of mythology and theology[[65]](#footnote-65). It is not clear how one might tell whether these themes represent the intrusion of informal narrative genres into a more formal performance, or even written context, or whether its genesis – characteristically ironical, satirical, joking – derives from a play on the formal more apparently functional-context narrative, seen in inscriptions. The parallel with the appearance of love poetry[[66]](#footnote-66) falls into the same area: whether it is a Ramesside intrusion of the popular, or the appearance in writing of an oral performatory style. Stylistically love poetry is complex, both linguistically and thematically, and it survives on manuscripts which contain narratives: pChester Beatty I with the Story of Horus and Seth[[67]](#footnote-67), and pHarris 500, with the Doomed Prince and the Taking of Joppa, as well as the copy of the Harper’s Song of Antef[[68]](#footnote-68). The contexts of copying, ownership and use evidently overlap, whatever the specific use might be.

Evaluation of Ramesside narrative has characteristically sought to find relationships with a genre of folk-literature: itself rather problematic as a (universal) genre[[69]](#footnote-69). In papyrus narratives the balance between apparently serious and apparently idle narrative tends to be distinguished in Egyptological commentary as the contrast between a high and a low tradition. Yet this model is not properly embedded as a functioning culture-specific model in Egypt[[70]](#footnote-70). It is somehow difficult to envisage the Ramesside scribal class – the owners of the relevant papyri: Pentaweret, or Qeniherkhopeshef – going out collecting folk literature among the peasants, on a par with 19th Century folk-story collectors[[71]](#footnote-71). Models of performance literature in non-writing contexts, or limited writing contexts, are, however, difficult to locate in specific cultural contexts. There remain serious problems of expectation about the nature of oral literature, that are not easily rooted in ethnographic observation: a tendency to use the term in a very loose way, when the real issue is one of conventions and occasions for formalised linguistic performance. In principle, however, the Ramesside material permits an address to the interrelationships between art, fictionality and accessibility in the full range of written expression of narrative.

The Stories of Horus and Seth and the Two Brothers, for instance, are characterised by a structure based on short and self-contained episodes, and by the use of verbal games: *doubles-entendres* based on the sounds of words and phrases. These relate more obviously to a recitational performance, invoking reactions from a a live audience, than they do to the publication or dissemination of a written narrative. They invoke the participation of their audience in the same way as the contemporary love-poetry[[72]](#footnote-72), in ways quite different from a written publication. The level of externalised knowledge necessary to participate fully in literature like this is not self-evident. Egyptian literature is characteristically allusive – a general characteristic of oral literatures – not requiring narrative cohesion, much less the narrative continuity expected in modern writing. The theme of necessary knowledge is, however, an important criterion for considering the accessibility of different Ramesside narratives to specific audiences or publics. Engagement with content – for entertainment as much as communication – evidently requires a degree of cultural knowledge[[73]](#footnote-73), but it is more likely that the surviving literary texts stand as evidence of a broad spectrum of cultural engagement with ritual knowledge than imply narrowly restricted, initiate access to the narratives. This is quite distinct from the episodic narrative of royal inscriptions and private autobiography, which fit events into what are evidently publically understood cultural and ideological norms.

The characteristically referential use of myth in ritual performance[[74]](#footnote-74), provides a sort of anti-narrative, that is allusive but not fictional, suggesting a degree of initiation into restricted knowledge for full comprehension: a level of external, possibly restricted knowledge. But full comprehension is not necessary for different levels of participation around a performance, in the same way that lack of knowledge restricts cultural appreciation of (written) publication.

Narrative as self-presentation

The discourse in Egyptian genres of narrative self-praise uses exactly the same referential technique for characterisation in constructing the essentially non-narrative aretalogy of the *Idealbiographie*. In contrast, the more narrative-seeming language and structure of some New Kingdom autobiographies, which are more direct and include more self-contained events, seem to address a broad public able and interested to discuss and comment, in ways which seem to show a relationship to papyrus stories. The Ramesside inscriptions of Nefersekheru are particularly interesting in this context. His autobiography contextualises formal recitation of praise[[75]](#footnote-75):

I have been praised without cease, every day (…). I would go out at the gates of the king’s house, all people are acclaiming to the height of the sky; everyone who saw me (say)ing: “It is fitting for him, Nefersekheru, true of heart”.

This specific narrative is in fact illustrated directly by scenes in the tomb of Neferhotep[[76]](#footnote-76). The theme is important: that formal praise is two sided. Praise is directed to the lord, as well as issued by the lord; for big men as well as for kings. Nefersekheru’s personal narrative is striking because, like a small number of other Ramesside autobiographies, it moves significantly out of the earlier focus of autobiographical narrative on (military) expeditions, by expansion of different ranges of events, to make the individual’s self-narrative a central part of his self-presentation: more personally and incidentally autobiographical. But equally interesting is the association of this autobiography with highly poetic laments and songs: Nefersekheru has literary inscriptions, in a way that connects his cultural environment with that of the owners of papyri[[77]](#footnote-77).

Also central to the narrative of the New Kingdom is the wider use of prose. In the long term, and crudely over-simplifying, the victory of prose over poetic formats is that of writing over recitation: of factual narrative over rhetoric. Prose becomes more common in the New Kingdom material: the Peasant wraps his rhetoric in prose, but the early 18th Dynasty inscriptions – autobiographical accounts, private and royal – expand the use of prose very considerably in a linguistic sense. The implication would naturally be that this material attests to a different style or register of performance, whether that would be a change in performance itself, or in the decorum of what was written. I am, however, deeply sceptical of any suggestion that this might seriously reflect a change from a literature – and specifically narrative in literature – that might be better characterised as publication (for reading) over performance for (immediate) audience.

Narrative and the individual

To come back to the collection of material associated with the scribe Pentaweret, which allows the possession of text to be problematicised. Papyrus Sallier I includes a section of the Instruction for Amenemhet I. One possibility is that such texts, by the Ramesside Period, were in practice dead literature, which is to say material that counts as published, in that its essential use is written acculturation in scribal training and no longer performed. However, the same papyrus also contains Miscellany texts: a category that includes what appear to be writing or compositional exercises in sophisticated documentary (particularly report and letter) writing, but they also include performance texts – specifically transmitted (copied) literary performance texts – in recitational format: prayers, but most specifically praise texts, for cities and for the teacher. These put praise in a more secular context: praise to master from his subordinates, in contrast to the formal praise he expected from his superior or king. Royal praise is another motif of the Miscellanies: pSallier I specifically includes a praise of Merenptah (in whose reign the manuscript was written). This connects reasonably directly with Pentaweret’s copy of the Qadesh Poem on pSallier III, comparable to the fragment on pChester Beatty III from the collection of his contemporary Qeniherkhopeshef. Papyrus Sallier I also contains the Story of Apophis and Seqenenre.

For inscriptional texts – royal inscriptions often rather clearly, but also autobiography – the scenario of public ceremony provides a context for performance to an audience. Counter-intuitively it is much more difficult to contextualise access to performance of the literature preserved on papyrus. The limited evidence in the pre-Ramesside material seems to locate performance at court – an address to the king in audience – although there are wider overlaps with ritual performances or festival occasions, and with musical performance. Clearly, however, the context is that of a performer, and one of performance, not publication: not circulation of physical copies to a reading public. Pre-Ramesside poetry is essentially rhetorical, not lyrical, which is more characteristic of material we have in the Ramesside and post-Ramesside Period.

At the centre of our problem over the cultural role of narrative in Egypt is an essentially ethnographic question: the degree to which simple story-telling was an ordinary everyday cultural activity, or regarded as essentially time-wasting, disapproved of and culturally problematic at lower levels of society. Contempt for fictionality (and indeed literature), as a waste of time, can potentially be a marker of (lower) social hierarchy, without excluding its mobilisation in non-everyday contexts. In Egypt the surviving narrative on papyrus evidently belongs physically to a culturally higher stratum of society, from the fact that it is written. That is not to argue that story-telling was necessarily an elite activity, but that the evidence we have suggests a contextualised, formalised, and purposeful activity. The minimal evidence we have for its use then seems to put it into higher status contexts of entertainment, but entertainment that is not only secular but can also overlap with ritual and formal occasions[[78]](#footnote-78).

The most plausible guess, and it remains only a guess[[79]](#footnote-79), is that praise narrative, historical narrative, and mythological narrative all belong to formal performance around festival occasions. These are occasions where the celebration and cult of kingship are to the fore, but also they are occasions where the role of drunkenness and riotous behaviour should not be underestimated: as recent publications of Demotic texts have once again served as reminder[[80]](#footnote-80), the *mulid* has always been disordered in Egypt. This does not resolve the question of the popular nature of literary narrative: its survival is within the context of those who are particularly literate; its language and content are culturally complex; and its themes and forms link very directly with inscriptional texts. Perhaps counter-intuitively, the apparently late writing down of stories in Egypt does not necessarily define them as an intrusion of an oral culture that is culturally distinct from what was written earlier, or of a socially more popular literature, compared to the more formal, more poetical/rhetorical literature known earlier. Nor does the fine language of an archaising, poetic dialect of praise poetry mean that it was inaccessible to a large stratum of society. A performance – ritual, praise, rhetorical, display – is not necessarily inaccessible, especially in that cultural pleasure can come from sound and rhythm and does not require complete comprehension. The problem of all Egyptian literature can be encapsulated in the problem of its accessibility: to whom it was targeted, and the specific circumstances of its use.

1. Barber 2007; Eyre 2013. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. This overlaps with, but differs from the distinction drawn by Franke 2003, 122-135, between ‘publication’ of a text on a visible monument against ‘recording’, where it will be invisible, on a coffin or in a tomb chamber. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Eyre 2013, 102-106, 132-133; Baines 2015. Neither picture nor text can be treated as an autonomous category in a modern sense, but embedded in functional or performative context; cf. also Arnold 2008. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. To put the Egyptological issue into broader context one may contrast Barthes’ 1967 declaration of the death of the author: „in primitive societies, narrative is never undertaken by a person, but by a mediator, shaman or speaker, whose “performance” may be admired (that is, his mastery of the narrative code), but not his “genius”. The author is a modern figure, produced no doubt by our society insofar as, at the end of the middle ages, with English empiricism, French rationalism and the personal faith of the Reformation, it discovered the prestige of the individual, or, to put it more nobly, of the “human person”.”The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture.’ Cf. Simon 2013, 227-231. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The expectation of a specially written – autonomous – literature imposes a modern written vision of creativity, where the publishing of a literary artefact is a stage in a developmental and evolutionary aetiology. This is anachronistic for Egypt, where it is more appropriate to minimise the functional distinctions between author, plagiarist, and performer, and to bring into stronger focus the differentiation between audience and public, performance and publication. Despite Simon 2013, 225-226, 298, 302, 305, 312; Janssen 1992, 86-87; Spalinger 2011, esp. 363, 370-374, I express doubt about people reading literature for themselves. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. For recent survey of the state of the argument about authorship in Egypt see Simon 2013, 227-281; Eyre 2013, 130-138; for specific discussion of the authorship of monuments see Popko 2006, 45-55; for a joking description of how a text was cobbled together, see pAnastasi I, 5, 5-7, 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Cf. Roeder 2009. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Illustration of, or as narrative is exceptional on papyrus, Brunner-Traut 1968; O’Connor 2011. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Cf. Loprieno 1996, introduction; Moers 2001. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Eyre 2013, 138-139. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Kuhlmann/Schenkel 1983, 71-73. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. The same issues arise, in the transmission of texts from wall to wall, as they do from papyrus to papyrus: common speculation about the use of ‘pattern books’ for art, and the common assumption that an inscription was necessarily transcribed onto a wall, contrast with the ‘formulaic composition’ of texts, where in neither case is a concrete vision established for the reality of practice and the working of productive reuse, in cultural production – text and picture – rooted in apprenticeship. The more living the text, the less mechanical the copying: the contrast between Middle Kingdom classical literature, copied badly but deliberately in Ramesside schooling, or the often careless copying of Books of the Dead, contrasted with the more open transmission of living texts, cf. Morenz 2002; Verhoeven 2009, 315; Eyre 2013, 138-139, and see below n. 47 on transmission. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Lenzo Marchese 2004. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Assmann 1983. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Spalinger 2011; Farout 2014 for Old Kingdom roots stressing text as support of picture, and not *vice versa*. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Dorman 2014, 5, talks about the „public narrative art” of the reign of Hatshepsut. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Popko 2006, 81-83. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Spalinger1982; Redford 1986. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Altenmüller 2015; Barbotin/Clère 1992. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Kitchen 1983, 200-213 from Medinet Habu, and 213 from Karnak (?). [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Kitchen 1983, 201, 2-4. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Similar contextualisations, such as the meeting of the king with the barks of Amon, Mut and Khonsu, with very extensive praise-interaction discourses between gods and king Kitchen 1983, 216-218, can be taken as equally realistic, although the degree of incidental scene-setting is much more limited. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Cf., for example, the narrative presentation of prisoners and praise to Tuthmosis II, sitting on his dias, in his Aswan stela, Sethe 1906, 140, 15-141, 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. The description by Diodorus Siculus I, 70-71, of the formal constraints on the life of the Egyptian king grossly exaggerate in order to idealise, but the underlying point of a highly ritualised behaviour must be valid. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Kitchen 1983, 23, 12-14. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Kitchen 1983, 66, 6-7, 12-14. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Kitchen 1983, 86, 11-12. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Sethe 1906, 2, 5-6. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Sethe 1907, 684, 9-10; also 780, 14-15, façade of the 7th Pylon. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Sethe 1907, 833, 11-14. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Helck 1955, 1281, 2-3. The contrast between the use of the auxiliary in the first clause n pAi.tw irit=f – the origins of the later Egyptian negation, and the classical n sDm.tw=f m sDdt in the second clause provides a direct linguistic contrast between the ‘doing’ and the ‘relating’ as objects of the verbs. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Cf. Kitchen 1979, 254, 1 (Hittite Marriage Text), referring to things not remembered either mouth to mouth or in ancient writing. Cf. the sub-title of Popko 2006 on the royal narrative of the 18th Dynasty „…damit man von seinen Taten noch in Millionen von Jahren sprechen wird”. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Sethe 1928, 80, 1-4. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Osing 1992, 46, and pl. 9, 35; Frood 2007, 144. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Loprieno 1996. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Assmann 1987; Kubisch 2008, 2; Stauder-Porchet 2011. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Lines 21-23 = Blackman 1932, 42, 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Tübingen Inv. Nr. 458.11 = Sethe 1928, 88, 22-23; see also above n. 30. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Cf. Eyre 2013, 125. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. For recent discussions see Fischer-Elfert 1999; Spalinger 2006, 26; Gnirs/Loprieno 2009, 243, 267, 278; Quack 2009, 302; Collombert/Coulon 2000; Simon 2013, 127. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Coulon 1997; 2009; Spalinger 2011, 359. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Eyre 2013, 136-137; cf. also Verhoeven 2009. For inscriptions, the generic questions naturally focus on the relation to the inscription of ritual, in which obfuscation was structural to the composition, evidently requiring a degree of initiation for comprehension: a level of external, perhaps highly restricted knowledge. In contrast, the discourse in Egyptian genres of narrative self-praise is direct and self-contained, seeming to assert a broad public able and interested to discuss and comment. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Gnirs/Loprieno 2009, 262-267, 279-281; as earlier in the monumental and hieratic versions of the Kamose Stela, and cf. Eyre 1990,152, on the style and content of direct address in the Semna Stela of Sesostris III, and the overlap between literature, royal inscription, and self-praising autobiography, and the question of the extent to which what is on the wall is an exploitation of literary/ritual performance that is not a written, but a performance genre, with an audience. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. On structuring a narrative from all sorts of bits of different genres, cf. Barber 2007, 147. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. Parkinson 2009. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. Compare the narrative autobiographies of Khnumhotep II from Beni Hasan (Lloyd 1992) and of his son Khnumhotpe from Dahshur (Allen 2008), which pose some of the same compositional questions as the Story of Sinuhe. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. Stauder 2013 with review Eyre 2014. At the root of the argument is a question of transmission: whether the appearance of post-Dynasty 12 features in 18th Dynasty manuscripts provide reliable evidence to date composition, or merely reflect a degree of modernisation, conscious or unconscious, in texts that retained a living role – recitational and performative – and had not become canonised as written. Note also Buchberger 2006 using similar arguments to date the Tod inscription in the name of Sesostris I to a New Kingdom date, in the same way that the text of the Berlin Leather Roll is frequently treated as a later, pseudo-epigraph. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. Spalinger 2002, 330. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. Quirke 1996. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. Including the updating of the more traditional language of the Qadesh inscription into the slightly more literary Late Egyptian found on the papyrus, and despite Spalinger’s assertions that Pentaweret was incompetent in his understanding of the grammar and his editing of the inscribed text. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. Cf. Loprieno 2001, although his approach seriously over-emphasises the written over the oral. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. Negm 1997. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. Sethe 1906-1909, 85, 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. Sethe 1906-1909, 26, 12. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. Sethe 1906-1909, 180, 16. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. Osing 1992, 46 and pl. 9, 35; Frood 2007, 144; Fischer-Elfert 1994, 45. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. Eyre 2013, 133-134. [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. pHarris I, 75, 1-79, 12; Maderna-Sieben 199; Grandet 1994, I, 335-340. [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. pHarris I,78.8–11. Compare specifically the description of the consequences of his First Libyan War, Kitchen 1983, 27, 4-5. [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
60. Grandet 1994, I, 122-127; cf. Haring 1997, 158-161. [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
61. Manassa 2013. [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
62. Ryholt 2005, 41; Jay 2015, esp. 243-244. [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
63. Kitchen 1979, 284-287. For recent translation and re-evaluation of the state of knowledge, see Witthuhn, et al. 2015. [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
64. Manassa 2013, 144-146. [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
65. Written myth appears in Egypt as incidental reference in (ritual) performance, and only later as coherent narrative, cf. Quack 2009, 291-301. The argument about generic priority – indeed the very essence of myth as narrative, see Baines 1991, 100 – or that the presentation of myth as narrative is itself an indication of its de-sacralisation (Vernus 2001; cf. Eyre 2002, 4-5, 32-35; Eyre 2011, 177, 182; Eyre 2013, n. 129) marks different foci on the use and function of myth, but any approach assumes contexts of knowledge related to expectations of contact and discourse with the divine world. [↑](#footnote-ref-65)
66. Quack 2009, 300-301, makes the point for pChester Beatty I and pHarris 500. [↑](#footnote-ref-66)
67. Which also, notably, contained a fragment of a hymn and a praise text for Ramesses V. [↑](#footnote-ref-67)
68. On the love songs see Eyre 2013, 110-113. [↑](#footnote-ref-68)
69. Wettengel 2003, 1-16; Spalinger 2006, 123-136; Spalinger 2007. [↑](#footnote-ref-69)
70. Eyre 2011, 178; Eyre 2013, 121, 135-136. [↑](#footnote-ref-70)
71. Manassa 2013, 145, following Spalinger’s argument for the Satire on the Trades, that „satirical attitudes” were „reflections of the social distance desired by the scribal class”. [↑](#footnote-ref-71)
72. On the manner of audience participation see Eyre 2013, 113-119. [↑](#footnote-ref-72)
73. Cf. Barber 2007, 147; cf. Eyre 2013, 140-142, arguing a different position to the cultural-evolutionary analysis of Assmann 1996, 1999. [↑](#footnote-ref-73)
74. Quack 2009, 305-306: „Für die Ägypter ist eben nicht ein neutrales Erzählen die normale Situierung des Mythos, sondern seine Verwendung in Kompositionen mit dem Ziel des Preisens und Aufwertens (?)“, and then a little below „Genau genommen ist er weniger ein narrativer Mythos, sondern eine Aretalogie“. The underlying problem is a differentiation between incidental ‘praise’ and continuous ‘narration’. [↑](#footnote-ref-74)
75. Osing 1992, 46, and pl. 9, 35 (lines 12-14); Frood 2007, 144. [↑](#footnote-ref-75)
76. Davies, 1933, I, pl. 16, and II, pl. 1; cf. also Schulman 1988, 117-118, with partial collection of related material. [↑](#footnote-ref-76)
77. von Lieven 2010, 47-50, for tomb as archive: discussing royal tomb decoration of walls with ritual and religious astronomy texts, and arguing for their originally non-funerary origins. [↑](#footnote-ref-77)
78. Quack 2009, 302, stressing the need to include the ritual as well as the literary and political dimensions of ‘historical’ inscriptions. [↑](#footnote-ref-78)
79. As for the Chester Beatty manuscript of Horus and Seth: Verhoeven 1996. [↑](#footnote-ref-79)
80. Depauw/Smith 2004; Jasnow/Smith 2010-2011. [↑](#footnote-ref-80)