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*LingAeg Studia Monographica: New Publication*

Andréas Stauder, *Linguistic Dating of Middle Egyptian Literary Texts*, [Conference] “Dating Egyptian Literary Texts” Göttingen, 9–12 June 2010, Volume 2, *Lingua Aegyptia – Studia Monographica* 12, Hamburg: Widmaier 2013 (ISBN 978-3-943955-12-5, xx + 568 pages, € 85 [€ 69 for subscribers to *Lingua Aegyptia*]), reviewed by Christopher Eyre.

There is hardly a literary text surviving from Egypt on which one could, with absolute confidence, place a definitive date of authorship. Even for inscribed texts which are dated – autobiographies, praise poems, royal narratives – the frequency of borrowing – plagiarism – and the use of traditional formulae pose real questions about linguistic synchrony. There is, however, a working assumption that secular inscriptions attest to a datable linguistic register. The situation is less clear for ritual texts, and wholly problematic for literary texts. The traditional view, reinforced by the use of a colophon, has been that Egyptian literary works had long written traditions: rituals going back to very early periods, and literary works associated with the dates of supposed authors, or the political situations they overtly describe. In practice, however, such authorship typically seems to be an ancient fiction. It is also clear that fictional literature, written on papyrus, was itself characteristically located in a past of uncertain depth. The historical context, provided by internal evidence in written literature, then becomes wholly unreliable as a dating criterion for the language of the text, or for its ideological and political content.

The more sceptical view starts from the earliest preserved manuscript, and demands strong and specific evidence to justify the assumption of a written transmission back to a significantly earlier date (p. 53–55). Fifty years ago there was a clear impression that the beginning of Dynasty 12 was the classical period of literary creativity, with *Sinuhe* at the centre of a group of literary works presenting a contemporary political agenda. In contrast, the 18<sup>th</sup> Dynasty seemed (rather implausibly) to be a period which showed surprisingly little evidence of such literary creativity, although inscriptions of the period show clear innovation and new composition. The picture has long been modified in detail, with an extreme early date no longer fashionable for many texts. Here, however, Andréas Stauder is attempting to go to the other extreme, presenting reasons, categorised as linguistic, to deny a long tradition for works only preserved in 18<sup>th</sup> Dynasty manuscripts, and so identify both the black hole of the 13<sup>th</sup> Dynasty and the 18<sup>th</sup> Dynasty itself as hives of literary creativity: an hypothesis that, if correct, has huge cultural implications.

Linguistic dating has long been understood to mobilise series of narrow, corpus-based synchronic grammars of widely separated dates, so that gross change in the language is superficially clear. Individual changes, and the processes of change, are more difficult to follow, obscured by the fact that all data comes from written texts, where change is already completed, and where the simple regularisation of spoken language into written registers comes forcibly into play. Stauder’s argument begins, then, with a programmatic assertion (p. 135): “That Middle Egyptian compositions of as yet insecure dating resemble other Middle Egyptian compositions documented in Twelfth Dynasty manuscripts by ‘language and style’ is not an argument for an early dating of the former”.

He presents here a personal analysis of the complex linguistic situation in the relatively narrow period from the end of the Middle Kingdom to the late 18<sup>th</sup> Dynasty. Sceptical about the systematic importance of the intrusion of spoken Egyptian into the written record (despite the fact that this is the natural locus for linguistic change), he attempts to deal with variation only as an expression of written register, approachable through a sampling methodology applied to a series of individual literary texts. The target is to clarify datable sequences of written variety, and so provide a structure to hypothesise an historical sequence of writing – of dates of authorship – for the preserved corpus of literary texts. His work declares itself to be exploratory, beginning with extensive discussion around dating strategies. Methodology is defined by the data. The discussion of general principles is, however, deeply integrated with detailed characterisations of individual texts, and with frequent digressions and changes of focus forcing the reader to work very hard to find direct continuity in the special case argumentation, towards criteria testable in the analysis of individual literary works in the later part of the book.

Stauder's writing is at its strongest in the first chapter, providing a rich mine of detail collecting soundly dated first written attestations of verb-forms, constructions, new vocabulary, and writing the histories of specific grammatical features. He takes the view that form (especially related to function), and then lexicon, provide the most concrete criteria (p. 68–69). The target is a check-list of working criteria *ante quem non* and *post quem non* to apply to individual texts. Features that can be held as diagnostic *ante quem* are ferociously difficult to establish, since there is always the possibility of archaising usage. Features diagnostic as *post quem* (= at least the date of the earliest example) are in principle easier, but never absolutely secure. The impossibility of establishing criteria that would necessarily mark a 12<sup>th</sup> Dynasty date means that 'linguistic' dating turns out not to be purely linguistic, in the obvious sense of a history of change in the language itself, but more a set of stylistic criteria: not simple language diachrony, since, as the mantra of chapter 4 says (p. 237), "the construction did not arise in regular linguistic change". Stauder's approach then has to focus on the identification of linguistic packages for individual texts: a process which he categorises as 'squeezing', and which he tests extensively in his presentation.

The core of his argument is the premise that there are dateable differences between living Dynasty 12 and living post-Middle Kingdom forms of written Middle Egyptian, which is itself "not a stage in linguistic history, but a collection of expressions to do with register" (p. 132). Critical of any sort of "underlying language hypothesis", Stauder discounts the relevance or even existence of a "long hidden evolution". The position is not tenable, nor even held at a more general level – "against the substantial geographic, social-linguistic, and diachronic variation that must have existed" (p. 99) – but only in relation to the written record. His search for criteria is then disengaged from any vision of the processes of natural linguistic change in spoken language, or any relationship between a spoken-written diglossia, as he seeks "a model of how changes [...] spread across written registers" (p. 57). His methodology looks to deal with language insulated within its particular written format: the relevance of anything not visible is discounted. Linguistic variation is not then seen as a potential consequence of the transmission of old texts, written in a fossilised language

of tradition, but is treated as a set of individual packages – each a sort of individualised micro-corpus for the individual text – then datable from the variation seen in its specific constructions. He writes in deeply perceptive ways about the problems of language change *vs.* register *vs.* transmission *vs.* archaism, but in the end assumes that he is able to clarify all changes in the individual written register (allowing for “an intrinsic thickness of registers”), and to treat change as not continuous/linear for the period.

The earlier part of the 18<sup>th</sup> Dynasty is taken to show a complete (and so living) Middle Kingdom repertoire, while “in the Middle Kingdom there is no specific literary variety of Middle Egyptian” (p. 31). The *pʒ*, *tʒ*, *nʒ* paradigm is not then allowed to represent the historical penetration of a spoken feature, but is treated as an issue of register. Consequently there is a tendency to regard all change as sudden, since that is how it appears in writing: Late Egyptian is treated as a very rapid development, on a large scale at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> Dynasty, and not a parallel language in the context of a spoken/written diglossia: a new, rapidly developed language, and not a long-term demotic way of speaking, excluded from writing from the very fact that it was demotic. The problem of dialogue is then a difficult one for Stauder’s treatment of literature as a purely written form, and his consideration of the relationship of grammar to performance is never more than implicit, only making occasional allowances for the exploitation of colloquial features in dialogue (e.g., p. 50, 103, 113–117, 119, 128–131).

The establishment of individual datings necessarily imposes a degree of circularity in argument: cumulative, and in practice providing very few clear markers within the pre-Late Egyptian corpus. The criterion on which Stauder places strongest reliance – indeed uses as the model criterion – is Vernus’ analysis of the historical development of aspectual differentiation between constructions using *sḏm=f* and those using *hr* + infinitive: in simplest terms, the timing of the redundancy of *sḏm=f* constructions for habitual present, and the expansion of the *hr sḏm* (first present) construction from restricted progressive present to include all present tenses by the middle of Dynasty 18. The stimulus taken from Vernus’ dating of the composition of the *Eloquent Peasant*, close to the date of its earliest manuscript, results in an overconfident use of its constructions as linguistic markers *ante quem non* (p. 139–145, 203–207). This is central for his other systematically important criteria: changes in the range of use of *tw* passives and impersonals, as well as the use of *pʒ*, *tʒ*, *nʒ* as a datable marker of register (p. 502). For instance, the only hard linguistic criterion for a later dating of the *Instruction of Amenemhet* (p. 493) lies in a single passage with 3 lines containing “the construction of *tw* with non-dynamic events”: a passage confidently asserted not to be secondary – not a manuscript updating – and which as an innovation “can be dated precisely to the mid-Twelfth Dynasty”, which is simply to say that it is (first) found in the *Eloquent Peasant*. Partly the difficulty comes from the normative precision attributed to Vernus’ original analysis of the historical sequence of the aspectual change, but much more so with Stauder’s extensions and modifications, which repeatedly involve translational nuances that are liable to invoke tendentious special pleading: the old problem, that we tend to write grammars of our translations. In a similar way, Stauder’s analysis of early Dynasty 18 extensions of the use of *ist*

(p. 273) is used to date various texts to that period, discounting any possible depth of change, with diagnostic usages treated as features of writing and not normal linguistic change (p. 290). The observation has great interest, but the argument for use as a dating criterion is translation dependent.

Accurate dating can, in principle, be provided by inscribed texts, but the surviving 12<sup>th</sup> Dynasty inscriptions are underused here. In contrast, the texts of Dynasty 18, which pose deep systematic problems, are used extensively, but in rather tendentious ways. Early Tuthmoside inscriptions show a complete Middle Egyptian linguistic repertoire (p. 26–27), making them perfectly attributable by his criteria to the early Middle Kingdom. In contrast, narrative inscriptions of the very early 18<sup>th</sup> Dynasty often show an idiosyncratic, deliberately literary register, with numerous rather odd-seeming or innovative constructions. In the reigns of Hatshepsut and Tuthmosis III (p. 18, 238–239, 327) there then seems to be a degree of deliberate archaism (including plagiarism from 12<sup>th</sup> Dynasty texts), and expressions which seem to be false forms. The uncertainty of using internal evidence for dating is then well exemplified by the *Duties of the Vizier*. An essentially literary instruction, appearing in tombs of the 18<sup>th</sup> Dynasty, it describes administrative structures which does not fit the period institutionally, but which cannot be located in any earlier period: a mixture, probably with an element of idealising fictionality. Stauder simply dates it to its first appearance, as a Thutmoside composition (p. 191–193). Similarly with *Ipuwer*, institutional features in the content seem to point to an earlier date, but linguistic criteria – especially passivisation – lead him to prefer a later dating (p. 145–148, 463–467). At the core of the problem of marshalling criteria lies the variety found between individual Middle Egyptian texts: a tendency for many texts to appear idiosyncratic, and individually to show what are apparently new or original constructions (p. 505). The term ‘register’, when allowed to cover the complexities of authorial literary intent – authorial originality – is then lost in a black hole between systematic linguistic change and ordinary register.

In practice all written Egyptian has its own specific register. Scribes did not transcribe speech as such, but they put into writing: a standardising and rather artificial format, characteristic for the transcription of testimony in all societies. Stauder’s hypothesis envisages a situation where variation – say between (undatable) Coffin Texts (p. 99), literary texts, inscriptional and documentary texts – reflects register and not gelled varieties of historical stages of language change. The vision has much to say for it, but it implies a view of the nature and variety in the use of writing that he does not articulate into a clear exposition; and which poses difficulties when a spoken/written diglossia is discounted. The underlying textual issues are best encapsulated in the transmission of the Pyramid Texts: traditionally dated (without any firm evidence) to roots in a very early oral tradition, on the basis of the difficulty and apparent archaism of their (highly poetic) language, they represent in practice (part of) a traditional ritual corpus that was productively reused, but not transmitted as a fixed canon, into the Roman Period. The methodology for dating written texts requires clearly stated hypotheses about both the nature of the language represented, and the nature of textual transmission, which are not the same thing.



Middle Egyptian literary manuscripts come from a performance culture, with individuation of text (p. 70 n. 23), which belongs to a different mode of use to inscriptional display or documentary annotation. Literary transmission consistently involves both intentional and unintentional change beyond simple copying: in Egypt it has to be understood as an ‘open transmission’ (p. 74–79), that Stauder recognises, but does not give enough weight to as a factor complicating his recognition of secondary readings (p. 187–188, 198–199, 215–221). The difficulty lies in testing Stauder’s repeated claim that his methodology is sufficiently robust to identify works of Middle Kingdom composition which only survive in later manuscripts: it is just that he does not find any. A key example here is the discourse of *Khakheperresonb*. Stauder argues that Vernus’ aspectual criterion places the composition under no circumstances earlier than the very end of Dynasty 12, while isolated lexical terms point later. Despite the use of the Middle Kingdom formula ‘B’s son A’ for filiation, he allows for any time frame from early Dynasty 13 to early Dynasty 18 (pp. 156–174). His conclusion is hard to maintain on the very nebulous evidence base presented, and would of course be entirely invalidated if this text does really turn out to be the missing beginning of the *Lebensmüde*.

The crucial texts are *Sinuhe* and *Ptahhotep*, where both Middle Kingdom and 18<sup>th</sup> Dynasty manuscripts survive (p. 92–96). In these texts the systematic problems of transmission and linguistic dating are closely parallel to those seen later in the manuscripts of the *Maxims of Ani*, where again a really detailed address to the erratic-seeming differences between earlier and later manuscripts is core to understanding the nature of text alteration in text transmission, in ways that cannot be written off as scribal incompetence (as can be the case for Ramesside manuscripts of Middle Egyptian literature). Stauder dates *Ptahhotep* to the Middle Kingdom (p. 108–109), on the basis of constructions not found earlier, although the limited range of the Old Kingdom textual corpus – entirely inscriptional – hardly provides a reliable comparison for that particular genre. His assertion that despite late features, his analysis of the 18<sup>th</sup> Dynasty manuscript would have securely recognised its earlier genesis (p. 499–500, 504, 513) is not demonstrated, and does not carry real conviction; nor indeed for *Sinuhe*, nor the *Eloquent Peasant*, nor *Lebensmüde*. His argument for *Ptahhotep* is more strongly grounded in the intertextuality shown with other Middle Kingdom works, and particularly its relations with autobiographies of the period. Here the argument is mobilised effectively, but elsewhere the role of intertextuality is underplayed.

Two other crucial texts complicate the argument, to the point of clear contradiction. Firstly Stauder accepts the (extremely dubious) early dating of the manuscript fragment of the Astarte story (p. 33), which one naturally classes as transitional to Late Egyptian. And secondly he rather gives up on Papyrus Westcar: a manuscript that is probably 18<sup>th</sup> Dynasty, but which does not happily fit the categories of analysis used for other literary manuscripts of that date. The impossibility of dating it linguistically is treated as a problem of unusual register (p. 110, 120–126, 132), at the interface between high and low traditions (p. 515): ‘thickness’ of ‘register’ provides an excuse for special pleading (or uncertainty) in dating.

The real point of discussion is, then, the extent to which 18<sup>th</sup> Dynasty manuscripts in Middle Egyptian record works with a long transmission or relatively contemporary compositions. The absence of earlier evidence carries limited weight of itself. More important to the general argument is the nature of Egyptian textual transmission. If we envisage a process of visual copying of written manuscripts, to a strict tradition, focussed on the transmission of canonical sacred works, then later linguistic features can reasonably indicate a later composition. In practice, however, Egypt was not an accurate copying culture, despite the claims of colophons. If we envisage a more open transmission, in which a scribe's personal copy represents his own contemporary version, an updating of constructions can only serve to date the particular manuscript – the individual version – and not an original date of composition. This is the context in which Stauder's arguments should be evaluated.

This book is a work of immense scholarship, with massive exemplification: the narrative of a personal exploration of ideas, full of digressions, often repetitive, and mixed with polemic for a theory of dating which was the starting point: a huge mine of data which the author himself obviously found impossible to index, beyond listing the passages quoted. The detailed discussions of individual texts need to be read in their own terms as separate essays in the philology of Middle Egyptian literature. The general discussion provides an extraordinary survey of issues necessary to the study of the ancient literature – deeply perceptive for individual texts – but it remains an exploration and not a coherent result.

Characteristically the discussion of each text comes back to the guiding principle, that clear evidence is required to accept a dating earlier than the earliest surviving manuscript (p. 53–55), and such evidence is never clearly found. However the weight of argument applied to case after case of highly contextualised evaluations of individual texts, and the careful presentation of personal judgements in hypothetical language, do not conceal the tenuous nature of the evidence on which systematic conclusions are based. The weight of special pleading regularly creates a false impression of the weight of argument: every unusual expression is taken as indication of late date, never as textual up-dating, nor as an example of the ability of the Egyptian author to manipulate the language for semantic precision or literary effect (e.g., p. 318). The important point for a reviewer to make is, therefore, that the datings suggested in the final listing (pp. 508–513) must be taken as the author's personal proposals, tentative at best, and not securely demonstrated by firm criteria from the linguistic data-base.