

Isle of Fire

A Tour of the Egyptian Further World
Volume One

Yakov Rabinovich



Invisible Books

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to

Brett Rutherford

author of *Poems from Providence, Whippoorwill Road*, and
The Gods As They Are On Their Planets,
an entirely great and nearly unknown poet

through his generosity with time, technology and expertise
the foremost benefactor of this press

through his love for Egypt, an inspiration to me
to undertake and persevere in the study of hieroglyphs

my friend for more than 25 years

this book is affectionately dedicated

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Part One:

The Passage to the Other World

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For the Egyptian, the Other World was located both under the ground and in the sky. It opened onto our world at many points: tombs, temples, the horizon, and of course in the “here be monsters” regions of the unexplored world. This Middle Egyptian tale of a voyage to the Island of the *Ka* is a fine example of the “dangerous passage” motif: the journey to the Center is never without its perils.

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An adventure story which is included here for its sensual description of funeral rites. I know of nothing which so vividly conveys the Egyptian romance of burial.

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May earth open its mouth to receive you . . .

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The soul's "birth" into the world of the dead compared to the emergence of the new moon and the Nile's flooding.

Coffin Text 335a glossed.....94

With its references to baptism and circumcision, this is a very valuable document on the symbolism of birth and initiation in Egypt.

Part Four: Gaining Magic Powers

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The famous "Cannibal Hymn." One of the more archaic pieces to survive, this gory, horrific paen to the original unification of Egypt is a general favorite.

Coffin Text 5.....120

You who are deceased! take over the sky . . .

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Spell to hold at bay Apophis, the serpent who personifies death and nothingness.

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Spell to “program” a *schwabty*. A vivid glimpse of the *corvée* labor expected of all Egyptians.

Book of the Dead 15b.....136

Sorrows of the dead.

Part Seven

Anatomy of the Soul

Book of the Dead 15a.....142

A valuable description of the functions of *ak*, *ba* and *ka*.

Book of the Dead 42.....148

A very rich account of the soul and its transformations, equating it with Time itself. It also contains a remarkable identification of the human body with the pantheon: a piece of cosmic humanism in the *magnum miraculum est homo* spirit.

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Part Eight Mythscape

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Nominally about the soul's successful passage into the world of the dead, this very popular spell offers a bird's-eye view of the cosmos from its creation. Particularly interesting are the mentions of the Phoenix, and of Hathor as "the great wader." The Glossed version is given above under *Rebirth*.

The Case of Horus versus Seth.....161

A bawdy Late Egyptian new year's play, which gives the fullest account we have of the the battle for kingship between Horus and Seth.

Coffin Text 160.....234

Seth's reintegration into the pantheon as guardian of Ra against the serpents of darkness.

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About This Translation

This book is a work in progress, to be republished in expanded versions. The present text, periodically updated, will be available at all times, without charge, on the internet at www.invisiblebooks.com. Since the book is unfinished, the somewhat unbalanced emphases of its content will (I hope) be pardoned. The provision of good texts and translations of the material seemed so pressing a need that I thought it a poor prudence to wait many years till the entire opus reached completion. This version differs from its predecessor (Sept. 2004) by the inclusion of the Late Egyptian tale *Horus versus Seth*. Also, the first chapter of the *Amduat* has been made part of a separate volume which contains the first half of that composition. The second half of the *Amduat* should follow sometime. On completion of the *Amduat*, I shall continue to expand the present volume with more material from the Pyramid and Coffin texts, as well as Late Egyptian and Coptic sources. This first volume will expand into three tomes, leading into the two-volume *Amduat* translation.

The focus of this anthology is the Egyptian Further World. One very appealing term they used for this was “The Isle of Fire.” I am selecting texts solely with an eye to what will provide the best understanding of this mythic realm. Thus I have eschewed works of purely historical or literary interest.

I have translated the material in my usual manner, writing notes and glosses directly into the text. The Egyptologist will, on comparison of the translations with the glyphs, see clearly what I am doing. The opacity of the completely word-for-word translations offered by other scholars is sufficient justification for this proceeding. Both the literal and the literary styles of translation have their value. The former is to be preferred for citation in a scholarly article or as a help to students struggling through the text, dictionary in hand. The latter, the literary style, can be the best and most concise commentary on the text’s *meaning*, and it is certainly the only style that can be offered to the non-specialist for pleasure and edification. Sadly, scholars tend to forget that the purpose of our work is to communicate and to share it with the world, not merely talk shop amongst ourselves.

Particularly as regards the best known of the funerary literature (the *Pyramid Texts*, the *Coffin Texts*, and the *Book of the Dead*), Egyptian religious writing presents certain unique problems to the translator. Frequently the spells make somewhat contradictory assertions. (E.g., “I *am* Atum. Atum is my protector.”) The logic here is partial and the meaning is cumulative, as in dreams or poetry. The translations are as clear as I could make them, but I stopped short of adding a distinctness foreign to Egyptian thought.

About This Translation

Nor did I add a distinctness which betrays the scholarship: names and epithets of places and deities which are no longer intelligible I have left in all their frustrating mystery. Where anything useful was known, I wove that information into the text. So the reader may trust that, in this translation at least, anything that seems obscure well and truly is.

The only names left bare are those like Atum or Osiris, where general knowledge, or the context, suffice to clarify. Egyptian names are given in a close approximation of the Egyptian form, except where the Greek form (e.g., Osiris for Weseyer) is too entrenched to be displaced. At times I put in glosses merely for the convenience of the non-specialist, and these are indicated by parentheses. The experienced reader can skip the parenthetical material. The slight awkwardness this involves seemed preferable to making the majority of my readers use a glossary. The rubrics which precede and follow many of the spells are sometimes incorporated into them to enhance clarity, but otherwise I have not reorganized the material, and gaps are indicated with (. . .).

In all cases I have established the text myself by careful comparison, and synthesized an edited version, in hieroglyphics. My versions include punctuation and paragraphing, in the manner standard for centuries in the publication of Classical texts. Such a treatment is now due for Egyptian, since the syntax is at last adequately understood.

The transcription in “algebraic” style is a new system devised by myself, which represents the uniquely Egyptian letters by adding numerals. Thus the four H sounds are represented by h, h2, h3, h4. This seemed the best solution for a legible transcription which could be printed out by anyone’s computer. The transcriptions are there primarily to aid students, who want to be able to look up the words. Also I often give a slightly fuller writing in the transcription where there is ambiguity. Usually this means the addition of a “w” for a participle or a stative. I do this sporadically, for the sake of making the reading easier for students. More consistent is the writing of the “j” of weak verbs in their conjugated forms: this is omitted only when the second letter duplicates, or where it becomes a “y.”

I would finally note that I am, like so many humanities scholars of my generation, in exile from academe. I am thus working independently, without benefit of funding, or the assistance of colleagues. Thus I will be particularly grateful to anyone who brings errors to my attention.

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Recommended Further Reading

Middle Egyptian Grammar

The classical form of the Egyptian language is best learned from **James Hoch's** *Middle Egyptian*. This is a sensible and practical adaptation of Polotsky's Standard Theory, and rapidly brings the student to where he can make critical use of Gardiner.

Sir Alan Gardiner's *Egyptian Grammar* is a book you will absolutely need. Though outdated as regards the entire verbal system, the rest is sound, and even what is wrong is presented with such a wealth of quotation that the book preserves its value. Ideally, after mastering Hoch, you should read through Gardiner with a pencil, correcting as you go. Gardiner was also a brilliant scholar and a splendid stylist. His old-school formal English is a pleasure to read.

Late Egyptian Grammars:

A word of warning in advance: all of these books suffer to varying degrees from pointlessly descriptive linguistics jargon. The study of Late Egyptian is still in the same disorder as Middle Egyptian before Hoch did his *fiat lux*.

There is really only one good teaching grammar: **Francois Neveu's** *La Langue des Ramses*. It is well organized, beautifully laid out, and concise. One needs a very sound grounding in Middle Egyptian to make use of this, but it is a marvelous piece of work. Still, it suffers from the general flaws of the genre and may well prove challenging to those without considerable linguistic attainments.

The standard treatment available in English is **Jaroslav Cerny's** *A Late Egyptian Grammar*. There is also **Frandsen's** *Outline of the Late Egyptian Verbal System* (out of print). I am doubtful, though, whether one could actually learn late Egyptian from these two English language books alone.

Dictionaries

Faulkner's *Middle Egyptian* is still the best in English, but it is far excelled by **Rainer Hannig's** *Großes Handwörterbuch Ägyptisch-Deutsch*. This covers not only Middle but also Late Egyptian, which is darned handy since Lesko's L. E. dictionary is out of print and near impossible to come by. The two companion volumes, one German-Egyptian and one arranged by topic like a thesaurus, are well worth having. One warning: Hannig has a rather peculiar way of organizing the headings when it comes to the last letter, so one is rarely sure when a final letter is going to be ignored and

Recommended Further Reading

the word listed near its more primordial form, or if it comes later as an independent word. This can lead to a bit of page-flipping. Having Faulkner on hand to find the word fast saves much time.

Finally, I should note that the beginner will find all his dictionary work greatly assisted by Gardiner's grammar because of the excellent pictorial key to the glyphs. Without this I don't know how you'd sort out some of the more abbreviated writings. Hannig's adaptation of this at the back of his dictionary, though nice, is not adequate.

As you may have gathered, you need to know German to read Egyptian. So much of the important scholarship is in this language that one would do better to master German first.

Secondary Sources

Best general history of Egypt: **John A Wilson's** *The Culture of Ancient Egypt*. This should be supplemented by **James Henry Breasted's** *A History of Egypt*, a larger work which fills in indispensable details of social history.

Best works on mythology: **George Hart's** *A Dictionary of Egyptian Gods and Goddesses*, a handy little guide; **Hans Bonnet's**, *Reallexikon der Ägyptischen Religionsgeschichte*, an indispensable encyclopedia, out of print for 30 years or so; **R.J. Rundle Clark's** *Myth and Symbol in Ancient Egypt*, a really brilliant study. **Reinhold Merkelbach's** numerous works about Egypt's influence on the late Classical world cannot be adequately praised. I mention in particular: *Roman und Mysterium in der Antike*, and *Isis Regina-Zeus Sarapis*. Both of these are fundamental, groundbreaking works. The first was greeted with bleats of dismay by Classicists and is no better accepted now than it was 40 years ago. Which says something, and spares me the trouble of saying it. **Bentley Layton's** *The Gnostic Scriptures, A New Translation* is the one of the best books I've ever seen on Gnosticism, and provides a dazzling vista of Egyptian religion's latest development, which recapitulates many themes that were there from the beginning. Finally, **Erik Hornung's** books have at last begun to appear in English. His *Valley of the Kings* is a beautiful art book and a tantalizing treatment of the mythscape.

As for translations into English: **Raymond Faulkner** for the Pyramid and Coffin texts and *The Book of the Dead*; **Miriam Lichtheim**, and most recently **R. B. Parkinson**, for the literary ones. Parkinson has an updated bibliography on the editions and full endnotes that are often very helpful. Also, some of his solutions to the more difficult readings are truly brilliant. Very admirable are the translations offered by **John Wilson** in the relevant sections of **Pritchard's** *Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, which have the best and most concise notes you will find anywhere. None of these translations, however, is any fun to read as

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literature. You have to read “through” them to divine what the original may have been like. Their main value is as a guide to the student struggling for the bare meaning of the glyphs.

The Exotic Character of Egyptian Myth

Ancient Egypt, protected on every side by deserts and seas, developed in safety and isolation for the three thousand years of its history. It never experienced invasion and the large-scale introduction of a new population as did Sumer, Greece, Rome and India, all of which were literally submerged by invaders who imposed their language on the populace. Egypt, like a tidal pool, untroubled by the nearby flow of history, developed as a static and pellucid world, neither experiencing nor exerting influence. The few exceptions to this rule, like the Hyksos invasion or the influence on archaic Greek sculpture, were just that, exceptions.

Thus Egypt's mythology never developed in the extravagant way others' did. From the start to the finish of its history, Egyptian myth was only concerned with the events of the beginning, and reduced almost everything to two symbols: the sun and the grain.

Like all peoples, the Egyptians envisioned a religious cosmos which mirrored the physical, and the central fact of life in cloudless Egypt was the course of the sun. Certain subsidiary images were drawn from the Nile. For example, the appearance of land from the Nile's subsiding waters seemed so well to express the rise of order from chaos that the pyramids were built as emblems of an original hill of land that surfaced from the waves of chaos. But nothing approached the rising sun, in adequacy or completeness, as an emblem of the creation.

Second only to the sun was the grain, on which life depended. The vicissitudes of the plant, yearly slain, buried and re-arisen, formed the pattern of the god Osiris, a type well known to us from Attis, Tammuz, Dionysus and Jesus.

There are certain movements discernible in Egyptian religious history, but they are little more than shifts of emphasis. The hieroglyphic record begins around 3,000 B.C.E., and in that first millennium, the Pyramid Age, the kingship was established whereupon arose priesthoods and nobles whose power increased at the pharaoh's expense. During this time Atum of Heliopolis became the foremost god, though it is not entirely clear whose interests this favored.

After a short age of chaos (the First Intermediate Period) the kingdom reestablished itself and made its presence felt throughout the Near East in the second millennium B.C.E. The new and leading role of Egypt in world events was echoed by the god Amun, another sun god like Atum, who took his place at the head of the pantheon. During this period, less absolutely monarchic than the Pyramid Age, the funeral rites which had once been exclusive to the king became the province of the nobles as well.

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The most spectacular development in Egyptian religious history came here, in the middle of the second millennium BC: the attempt by Akhenaten to make the Aten (an aspect of the Sun) the sole god. Afterwards Amun returned to power, where he remained.

In the last millennium of Egyptian history the country was made tributary to Ethiopia, Assyria, Persia, Greece and Rome. (A true conquest, altering cultural patterns, would not come until the Arabs.) This period saw the relative democratization of the social and religious world, and the production of the *Book of the Dead*, which put all the benefits of royal immortality within everyone's reach.

But for all the above-noted developments, the shape of Egyptian belief remained fairly static, just as did the language, which was virtually unchanged by 3,000 years of history. The sun god was the supreme deity at all times, with various alterations of name, and he provided the most important patterns for existence. This means that we have to go about studying the Egyptian myths in a different way than we are accustomed to.

Rather than looking for trends and developments, which really hardly exist for Egypt in the way they do for, say, Israel or Rome, we need to understand the *constant factors*, most of which have gone wholly unappreciated, and none of which have been given their due weight. Egyptian mythology needs to be studied thematically more than historically.

Egypt is, in a sense, the India of the west. Whatever was once believed and practiced there was so always, and the latest documents take up themes from the earliest. Nothing is discarded, nothing is excluded.

It is equally important to understand that Egypt is *African*, not Greek. Let me first disassociate myself from the silly racist theorizing that thinks it a very important matter to know just how black the skin of the Egyptians was. Egypt is African, well and truly, and I mean by African not the superficial matter of melanin, but the style and content of thought. (Admittedly, the features I shall enumerate below occur elsewhere as well, but their combination and emphasis here make for a distinctively African style).

As a preliminary, we need to bear in mind that we are taught to view Greek myths as normative, and this is very mistaken. Greek myths are from a relatively late phase in modernization and desacralization, a phase where many of the gods have been re-understood as humans and the myths are turning into fairy tales. It's rather like the stage of German mythology evinced by the Brothers Grimm collection. This is why there are so many human heroes in Greek myth and why it seems so colorful and fast-moving. Everything is being telescoped down into folklore.

Since the Egyptian myths are, like all African mythology, archaic and traditional, they tell about cosmos and culture. Here, the realm of the

The Exotic Character of Egyptian Myth

personal and the subjective is omitted. The gods are primary characters, and humans have little to do with the action (why would they in a sacred history of the most important existential events?) This accounts for the, to our ears, wierdly matter-of-fact tone of the myths. Compared to African mythology, which isn't interested in the personal, Greek myth appears mawkishly sentimental.

Next, because this is Africa, we are dealing largely with the realm of animal fable, like the Uncle Remus stories, the Anansi cycle, or the tales of Bouqui and Ti Malice. Animal fable is an area of special richness in African culture, just as animals are the special richness of the African landscape. If we appreciate this, Egyptian mythology will make more sense and show its real depth. The contendings of Horus and Seth will make fullest sense only when we understand that squabbles between the falcon and the jackal over slain animals were an everyday feature of the Egyptian landscape.

Other specially African features include the predominance of *dialogue*. In Egyptian, as in all African myths, dialogue has a prominence that European literature reserves for plays. The special African sensitivity to the spoken word is well known, not only to anthropologists, but to anyone who's attended a Black Baptist church service, listened to a James Brown record, or used an up-to-date American slang expression. We are used to highly descriptive narratives, such as we find in European novels. The African style is more interested in the expression and the gesture. The non-descriptive non-naturalistic style of Egyptian and African narrative is well paralleled by African sculpture. (The realism of Egyptian sculpture is not an argument against this, for this realism was more apparent than real, the forms are highly idealized and made symmetrical in ways that look "right" to us because they were borrowed by the Greeks.)

Egypt did finally have an important influence on the west, though this has been ignored (or denied) to date by Egyptologists. The most important is the effect of Akhenaten's monotheism on Moses, which I will defend in detail elsewhere, but which Freud established as a serious theory in *Moses and Monotheism*. The other great influences are both from the Greek period, in western Gnostic mythology, whose account of the beginning has a clear debt to the Egyptian *Ennead*. Also, the Hellenistic novel (whence ours developed) is structurally dependent on Egyptian myth, as Reinhold Merkelbach has demonstrated in *Roman und Mysterium*. But these influences were not particularly interactive ones, so they may be passed over in our consideration of Egyptian myth in itself.

Part One

**The Passage To
the Other World**

The Shipwrecked Sailor

The Shipwrecked Sailor

Introduction

This tale comes from the early part of the Middle Kingdom (2052-1570 B.C.E.). A period of feudal anarchy (the First Intermediate Period, 2190-2052 B.C.E.) had just passed. Now came the recentralization of the state under the pharaohs at Thebes. Restored stability permitted the reestablishment of foreign trade, and mercantile ventures were carried on into lower Nubia, the Red Sea, Somaliland, Crete and Lebanon.

Punt was the name which Egyptians used for the Arabian and African coasts of the Red Sea, whence they obtained exotic luxury goods, particularly myrrh. The mystique of the region was comparable to that of "Araby the Blest" for Europeans of the age of exploration. Earlier parallel lands of wonder would be the setting for the Sinbad cycle and for the *Odyssey*. On the periphery of the known world, known only by its incense and perfumes and through travelers' tales, Punt was a region of marvels and magic islands.

The very beginning of the tale is gone (though possibly only a line or two is lost). The context seems to be this: an official returns to Egypt after an unsuccessful mercantile mission, fearful of his reception by Pharaoh. One of the sailors attempts to cheer him with his own tale of shipwreck and miraculous rescue. Nothing is missing from the body or conclusion of the narrative, and the "shaggy dog story" ending is intentional. The Egyptians were much given to moralizing and proverb quoting. No doubt the average Egyptian was well tired of it. The official's pert refusal to draw the expected moral uplift from the tale must have been quite a crowd pleaser.

The story is well told, and the melancholy giant snake, with his plaintive praise of family life, is a very memorable figure. The value of the work for us is primarily as an instance of how the Egyptians of this period saw the world: as a place where fairy-tale creatures lived just beyond the horizon, a cosmos unmaped and still suffused with the marvelous.

Isle of Fire: Part One

The Shipwrecked Sailor

Then the official's loyal retainer said: Be of good heart, my lord! Look, we've made it back to the palace: the mooring post's been hammered into the riverbank and the ship's tied up securely by the bow. The men have hugged one another in joy and relief, praising and thanking the gods. Our crew's home safe, without the loss of a single fighting man, though we went as far as Wawat (in Northern Nubia), we passed Es-en-Mewet (an island in the first cataract). Our journey was secure and now we've reached our own land. Listen to me, prince. I'm only stating the plain truth. Bathe, splash some water on your face, make a good showing when pharaoh calls you to report. You'll be collected when you speak to the king, you'll answer without stammering. Most times a man's tongue is all it takes to save him, and a well-chosen word covers well a fault.

You're just indulging your bitterness. I'm tired of trying to talk you into sense. Let me tell you about something similar that happened once to me. I'd shipped out to the royal mining regions in the Sinai, went out to sea in a boat 200 feet long and 70 feet wide with 120 of Egypt's finest aboard. They were lion-brave in facing either storm at sea or armies on land, able to read the weather signs of a wind before it rose, of a tempest before it darkened the sky.

D2d.jn s2msw jqr: Wd2a jb.k, h2aty-a2! Mke ph2.n.n b4nw; s2spw h3rpw, h2wjw mnjt, h2att rdj.tj h2r ta, rdjw h2knnw, dwaw nt2r; s nb h2r h2pt snw.f. Jswt.n. jj.tj a2d2.tj, nn nbw n ms2a2.n. Ph2.n.n Wawat, snj.n.n Snmt, mke rf.n.jj.n m h2tp: ta.n, ph2.n sw. Sd2m r.k nj, h2aty.j, jnk s2w m h2aw. Ja2j tw, jmj mw h2r d2ba2w.k. Jh3 ws2b.k ws2d.tw.k. Mdw.k n nsw jb.k m a2.k. Ws2b.k nn njjt. Jw r n s nb2m.f sw. Jw mdw.f dj.f t2am n.f h2r.

Jrr.k m h3rt jb.k! Srvd pw d2d n.k. Sd2d.j rf n.k mjtt jry h3prw m-a2.j d2s.j. S2m.knj r bjaw n jty, baj.kwj r wad2-wr m dpt nt mb2 s2t md2wy m aw.s, mh2 h2m m wsh3.s, sqdw s2t md2wy jm.s m stpw n Kmt. Ma.sn pt, ma.sn ta, ma2ka-jb.sn r maw, sr.sn d2a2 n.jjt.<f>, ns2ny n h2prt.f.

Passage to the Other World: The Shipwrecked Sailor

1
[Hieroglyphic text block 1]

20
[Hieroglyphic text block 2]

Isle of Fire: Part One

But a squall came on while we were on the high seas, and before we had a chance to make land howling winds arose, bringing on 15 foot waves. The mast took their impact for me—and the ship sank. Not one of the crew survived. A wave carried me to an island in the middle of the sea. There I passed three days alone, with only my anxieties for company. I constructed a hut for myself and there I lay, with nothing but my shadow to keep me warm.

Then I figured it was time I stretched my legs, I needed to see if the isle had anything I could put in my mouth. What I found was figs and grapes, and vegetables of all kinds, sycamore fruit in various stages of ripeness, wild cucumbers fine as a farmer would grow, and also fish and birds. After I'd satisfied my hunger, I still had armloads of what I'd gathered and these I piled neatly on the ground. I cut myself a fire drill to kindle a flame and this I used to make an offering to the gods.

Then I heard a sound like thunder — at first I thought it must be the roar of oncoming waves, but trees were crashing and the ground shook. When I peeked through my fingers I saw a serpent coming: it was easily fifty feet in length with a three or four foot beard, its body covered with gold scales, with eyebrows of lapis lazuli — it was coiling itself up to face me.

D2a2 prj.w jw.n m wad2-wr, tp-a2 sab2.n ta, faj.tw t2aw jrj.f wh2myt, nwyt jmj.f nt mh2 h3mn. Jn h3t h2wj n.j st. A2h2a.n dpt mt.tj. Ntyw jm.s, n spj wa2 jm. A2h2a2.n rdj.kwj r ta jn waw n wad2-wr; jrj.n.j hrw h3mt wa2.kwj, jb.j m smw.j. Sd2r.kwj m b4nw n kap n h3t. Qnj.n.j s2wyt.

A2h2a2.n dwn.n.j rdwy.j r rb2 djt m r.j. Gmj.n.j dabw jarrwt jm, jaqwt nbt s2psst, kaw jm h2na2 nqa2wt, s2spwt my jrywt, rmw jm h2na2 apdw. Nn ntt nn st m b4nw.f. A2h2a2.n ssaj.n.j wj, rdj.n.j r ta n wr h2r a2wy.j. S2djt.j d2a sb3pr.n.j h3t, jrj.n.j sb-n-sd2t n nt2rw.

A2h2a2.n sd2m.n.j h3rw qj, jb.kwj waw pw n wad2-wr, h3t h2r gmgm, ta h2r mmmn. Kfj.n.j h2r.j gmj.n.j h2faw pw, jw.f m jjt! Nj-sw mh2 ma2ba, h3bswt.f wr.s r mh2 sn, h2a2w.f sb3rw m nbw, jnh2wy.fy m h3sbd ma2a. A2rq sw r h3nt.

Passage to the Other World: The Shipwrecked Sailor

32
[Hieroglyphic text block 1]

44
[Hieroglyphic text block 2]

56
[Hieroglyphic text block 3]

Isle of Fire: Part One

He opened his great mouth for me: I was on my belly trembling before him. He said: “Who brought you, who brought you to this island, wretched man? Who brought you? If you keep me waiting for an answer you’ll find nothing remains of you but ashes, there won’t be enough of you left to put a question to.”

I babbled back: “I hear you speaking to me, but I can’t put your words together to make sense of them. I know I’m here before you, but I’m too terrified to even remember who I am.”

Then he took me in his mouth, brought me to his home, set me down without a scratch, safe, completely uneaten. He opened his mouth at me again. I threw myself on my belly before him.

Then he said to me: “Who brought you, who brought you, unhappy man, who brought you to this isle in the ocean? Far off, surrounded by water, no man could have swum here.”

Raising my arms in the gesture of adoration as if addressing a god, I answered: “It’s like this: I set sail for the Sinai mining region on my king’s business, in a ship 200 feet long and 70 wide. One hundred and twenty of Egypt’s finest were on board. They were lion-brave in facing either storms at sea or armies on land, able to read the weather signs of a wind before it rose or a tempest before it darkened the sky. Each one was stronger of arm and more courageous of heart than the next. There wasn’t a fool among them.

Jw wpj.n.f.r.f.r.j.jw.j h2r b4t.j m bab2.f. D2d.f.n.j: “Nm jnj tw sp-sn, nd2s, nm jnj tw? Jr wdf.k m d2d.n.j <nm> jnj tw r.jw pn, rdj.j rb3.k tw.jw.k m ss h3pr.tj m nty n ma.tw.f.”

“Jw mdw.k n.j, nn wj h2r sd2m st. Jw.j m bab2.k, h3m.n.j wj.”

A2h2a2.n rdj.f.wj m r.f, jt2j.f.wj r st.f nt snd2m, wab2.f.wj nn dmjt.j, wd2a.kwj, nn jt2jt jm.j. Jw wpj.n.f.r.f.r.j. Jw.j h2r b4t.j m bab2.f. A2h2a2.n d2d.n.f.n.j: “Nm jnj tw sp-sn, nd2s? Nm jnj tw r.jw pn n wad2 wr nty gswy.fy m nwy?”

A2h2a2.n ws2b.n.j n.f.st, a2wy.j h3am m bab2.f. D2d.j n.f: “Jnk pw haj.kwj r bja m wpt jty m dpt nt mh2 s2t md2wy m aw.s, mh2 h2m m wsh3.s, sqdw s2t md2wy jm.s m stpw n Kmt. Ma.sn pt, ma.sn ta, ma2ka-jb.sn r majw. Sr.sn d2a2 n jjt.f, ns2ny n h2prt.f. Wa2 jm nb, ma2ka.jb.f, nb3t a2.f.r.snw.f. Nn wb3a m h2r-jb.sn.

Passage to the Other World: The Shipwrecked Sailor

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Isle of Fire: Part One

“But a squall came on while we were on the high seas, and before we had a chance to make land howling winds arose, bringing on fifteen foot waves. The mast took their impact, then the ship sank. Of all who were on board, not a one survived, except me, whom you see here now. No one brought me — I was carried here from the wreck by an ocean wave.”

Then he said: “Don’t fear, don’t fear, poor man, don’t pale and tremble, you’ve made it to me. Some god saved your life when he brought you to this magic island. It is an island of *Ka*, the vital generous force that gives growth to all that lives. The island lacks for nothing, it’s full of every good thing.

“You will pass the months here until you have completed four moons, then a ship will come from your home, manned by sailors whom you know, you will return with them. You will not die in a foreign land. Happy the man whose sufferings become a tale he may tell, when all his pain has passed.

“Let me tell you about something that happened to me, right on this island. I lived here with my brothers and sisters and our children — together we numbered 75 serpents, all of them my dear kin. I’m not even going to mention my little daughter, whose birth came in answer to a prayer.

“D2a2 prj.w jw.n m wad2-wr, tp-a2 sab2.n ta faj.tw t2aw jrj.f wh2myt, nwyt jmj.f nt mb2 b3mn. Jn b3t b2wj n.j st. A2h2a.n dpt mt.tj; ntyw jm.s, n spj wa2 jm b2r-b3w.j, mk wj r gs.ke. A2h2a2.n jnj.kwj r jw pn jn waw n wad2-wr.”

D2d.jn.f n.j: “M snd2w mj sp sn, nd2s, m aytw-h2r.ke ph2.n.ke wj. Mk nt2r rdj.n.fa2nb3.ke, jnj.f tw r jw pn n ka. Nn ntt nn st m b4nw.f. Jw.f mb2 b4r nfrt nbt.

“Mk tw r jrjt abd h2r abd r kmt.ke abd fdw m b4nw n jw pn. Jw dpt r jyt m b4nw sqdw jm.s rb3w.n.ke. S2m.ke h2na2.sn r b4nw, mt.ke m njwt.ke. Rs2 wy sd2d dptw.n.f snj b3t mr.

“Sd2d.j rf n.ke mjtt jry b3pr m jw pn. Wn.n.j jm.f h2na2 snw.j, b4rdw m qab.sn. Km.n.n b2faw sfb3yw djw, msw.j h2na2 snw.j. Nn sh2a.j n.ke sat ktt jnyt n.j m ss2a.

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Isle of Fire: Part One

“Then a star fell on us and they all vanished in its flame. By merest chance I wasn’t there with them when they burned. I wasn’t there — but when I found them, all one heap of ashes, then I died too. Losing them was really nothing less than death.

“Now, if you’re as brave a man as you look, pull yourself together! You will hold your children in your arms again, you’ll kiss your wife, see your house — there’s nothing more beautiful and good than these things. You’ll make it home, be back with your brothers and sisters.”

I was outstretched before him, flat on my belly, touching the ground with my forehead. I answered: “I will make report of your power to my sovereign, make your greatness known in the palace. I will see to it that you are sent precious resin, rare fragrant oil, incense and spice, as well as the holy incense of our temples that placates all the gods. I will relate everything that has befallen me, the eyewitness account of your magic powers. The gods will be thanked for your existence, in the capital, before all the princes and officials of the land. I will slaughter cattle and offer them on altars to you, I will wring the necks of birds in sacrifice. I will send you ships laden with all the finest products of Egypt, as is done for a foreign god, hitherto unknown, who has shown favor to us in a distant land.”

“A2h2a2.n sba bajw, prj.n na m h3t m a2.f. H3pr.n {rs} nn wj h2na2 a2m.n.sn. Nn wj m h2r-jb.sn. A2h2a2.n.j mt.kwj n.sn, gmj.n.j st m b4ayt wa2t.

“Jr qnj. {n.}k, d2ar jb.k! Mb2.k qnj.k m h4rdw.k, snj.k h2mt.k, ma.k pr.k. Nfr st r h3t nbt. Ph2.k h2nw, wn.k jm.f m qab snw.k.”

Wn.kwi rf dma.kwj h2r h4t.j dmj.n.j satw m bab2.f. D2d.j rf n.f: “Sd2d.j baw.k n jty, dj.j ss2a.f m a2a.k, dj.j jnj.tw n.k jbj h2knw jwdnb b4sayt snt2r n gsw-prw sb2tpw ¹ nt2r nb jm.f. Sd2d.j rf h3prwt h2r.j m mawt.n.j m baw.k. Dwa-nt2r.tw n.k m njwt h3ft-h2r qnbwt ta r d2r.f. Sft.j n.k jh2w m sbj-n-sd2t. Ws2n. {n.}j n.k apdw, dj.j jnj.tw n.k h2aw atpw h4r s2spw n Kmt mj jrjt n nt2r mrrw rmt2 m ta wa n rb3 sw rmt2.”

¹ I can only take this to be an imperfect participle: “incense of the temples, which placate every god with it.”

Passage to the Other World: The Shipwrecked Sailor

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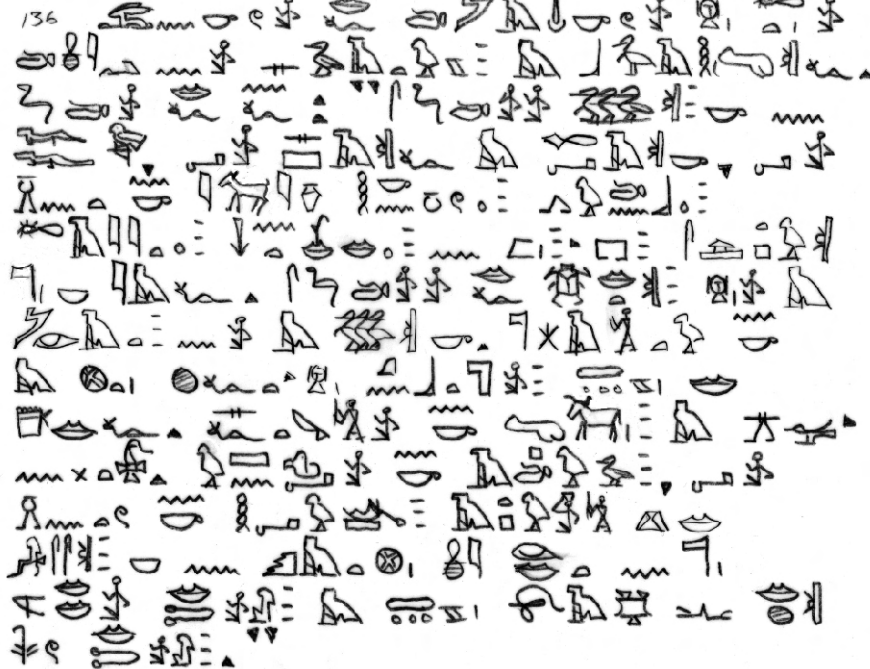
This line of hieroglyphs begins with a small figure of a man carrying a staff, followed by various symbols including a lotus flower, a seated man, a bird, and a heart. The text is arranged in approximately seven rows.

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This line of hieroglyphs starts with a seated man, followed by a lotus flower, a bird, and a heart. The text is arranged in approximately seven rows.

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This line of hieroglyphs begins with a seated man, followed by a lotus flower, a bird, and a heart. The text is arranged in approximately seven rows.

Isle of Fire: Part One

Then he laughed at me and my solemn declarations, which seemed very silly to him. He said: “Myrrh and holy incense are not so common in Egypt that you can spare them. I am, however, the ruler of Punt, and the world’s myrrh supply comes from me. The precious oil you promise to bring is the principal product of this island. Further, I don’t believe you can plan on sending me anything, for as soon as you leave this island it will vanish into the waves never again to be seen.”

Then that ship came, just as he had prophesied. I went and climbed to the top of a tree and saw what sort of men were on it. I returned to report what I’d learned, only to find he already knew. Then he said to me: “Safe journey, safe journey, poor man, to your home. You will see your children. Make a good report of me in your city, that’s my one demand of you.”

I prostrated myself before him, lifting my arms to him in worship. Then he gave me a load of myrrh, precious oils, incense, spice, kohl and other cosmetics, giraffe tails, holy incense in chunks, elephant tusks, dogs, long-tailed monkeys, baboons, every noble and excellent good imaginable.

So I loaded this onto the ship and once more prostrated myself to him in adoration. He told me: “You will reach home in two months, you will hold your children in your arms, you will live and flourish in your home to a good age and enjoy a fine burial.”

A2b2a2.n sbt2.n.f jm.j m nn d2d.n.j n.f m nf m jb.f. D2d.f n.j: “N wr n.k a2ntyw, h3prt nb snt2r. Jnk js h2qa Pwnt, a2ntyw n.j jmy sw. H2qmw pf d2d(w).n.f jnit.f, bw pw wr n jw pn. H3pr js jwd.k tw r st tn, nn sp ma.k jw pn h3pr(w) m nwy.”

A2b2a2.n dpt tfjj.ty my srt.n.f h3ntw. A2b2a2.n s2m.kwj, rdj.n.(j) wj h2r h3t qa sja.n.j ntyw m hnw.s. A2b2a2.n s2m.kwj r smjt st. Gmj.n.j sw rh3(w) st. A2b2a2.n d2d.n.f n.j “Snb.tj sp-sn, nd2s, r pr.k. Ma.k b4rdw.k. Jmj rn.j nfr m njwt.k. Mk b4rt.j pw jm.k.”

A2b2a2.n rdj.n.(j) wj h2r b4t.j, a2ny.j h3am(w) m bab2.f. A2b2a2.n rdj.n.f n.j sbjt m a2ntyw, h2knnw, jwdnb, b4sayt, tjs2ps, s2aa2s, msdmt, sdw nw ma2ma2w, mrryt a2at nt snt2r, nd2h2yt nt abw, t2smw, gwfw, keyw, s2psst nbt nfrt.

A2b2a2.n atp.n.j st r dpt tn. H3pr.n rdj.kwj ¹ h2r b4t.j r dwa-nt2r n.f. A2b2a2.n d2d.n.f n.j: “Mk tw r spr r b4nw n abd sn. Mb2.tw knj.k m b4rdw.k, rnpy.k m b4nw, qrs.tw.k.”

¹ The text reads *rdj.tw.j*, which is not really possible: a “vivid” shift to the present doesn’t fit. The emendation of the bread loaf to the handled basket fits easily and makes the tense sequence work.

Isle of Fire: Part One

I descended to the shore, approached the ship, called to the crew to raise anchor, and there on the sand I raised a shout of thanks to that island's kind lord — the whole crew joined me in it. We sailed north up the Red Sea, making for Thebes, passing the deserts of Arabia on our right and the land of Nubia on our left. Exactly as foretold we reached the royal palace at the end of two months. I was brought into his majesty's presence and delivered all the gifts I'd brought from the magic island. The king thanked the gods for my return, in the presence of the whole court. I was made one of his majesty's retainers and endowed with a household of servants. That's how it worked out for me after I returned, when I set foot on solid Egypt after all my adventures. Listen to me, it's good for a man to be open to advice."

The official, having heard the entire tale, replied: "Friend, don't try and give me your mature and sensible view of things. What's the point of giving fresh water to a bird at dawn on the morning he'll be slaughtered?"

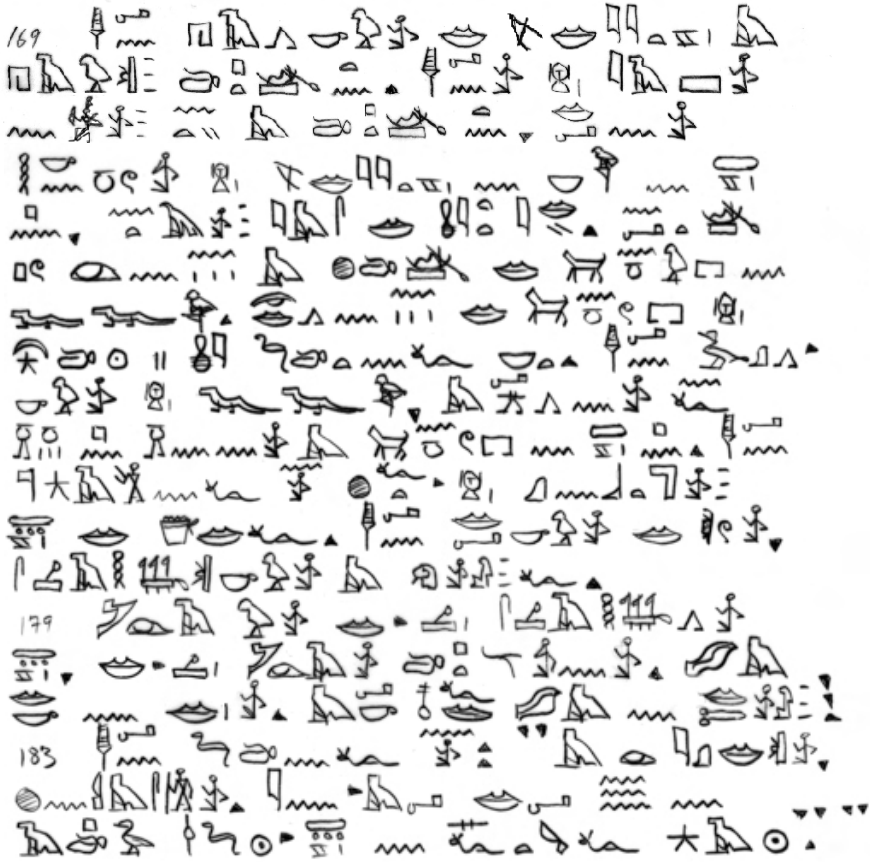
A2b2a2.n baj.kwj r mryt n baw dpt tn. A2b2a2.n.j h2r jas2 n ms2a2 nty m dpt tn, rdj.n.j h2knnw h2r mryt n nb n jw pn, ntuyw jm.s r mjtt jry. Na2jt pw jrj.n.n m b3d r b4nw n jty. Spr.n.n r b4nw h2r abd sn mj d2dt.n.f nbt. A2b2a2.n a2q.kwj h2r jty, ms.n.j n.f jmw jnjw.n.j m b4nw n jw pn. A2b2a2.n dwa-nt2r.n.f r.j h3ft-h2r qnbt ta r d2r.f. A2b2a2.n rdj.kwj r s2ms2w, sab2.kwj m tpw.f

Ma wj r-sa sab2.j ta, r-sa ma.j dpt.n.j. Sd2m r.k [n r.j]. Mk nfr sd2m n rmt2t!

A2b2a2.n d2d.n.f n.j: "M jrj(w) jqr, h3nms.j. Jn-m rdj. {t} mw n apdw h2d2-ta n sft.f dwa?"

Passage to the Other World: The Shipwrecked Sailor

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Sa Nehet

Sa-Nehet

Introduction

A few lines into our story we learn that the hero, Sa-Nehet, lived in the time of Es-en-Weseret, whose regnal dates are 1918-1875 B.C.E.. For this reason the composition is generally placed after this latter's death, which means it's probably from the mid 19th century B.C.E. That makes it a later Middle Kingdom composition, from the 12th dynasty.

There are a great many extant copies of this tale, which testifies to its popularity — a popularity which may be hard to understand on the basis of the heretofore available English translations.

In fact, this tale is a *tour de force*, switching nimbly from literary genre to literary genre, showing a dazzling mastery of each. It opens as a tombstone autobiography, an extended epitaph, a mode which it follows with elegance and dignity. The body of the narrative is in brisk, terse prose, as befits an adventure story (a style which I was not always able to reproduce, since it is upon me to weave in explanations and glosses as well). This is in turn relieved by passages of highly competent if somewhat formal poetry. The most impressive feature of the work is its use of proverb. Proverbial wisdom was an essential part of an official's education in the ancient near east, and here we see it in action as Sa-Nehet quotes his way through his dealings with Amunenshi.

The tale of Sa-Nehet shows a real though not profound acquaintance with Bedouin culture, and the characterization of Amunenshi — gracious and calculating, generous and suspicious — is the vividly real depiction of a type yet to be met with in the Nile to Oxus region.

The interest of the story is not however Sa-Nehet's travels, or even his combat with the Goliath-like desert warrior, though these exotic and adventurous touches were enjoyed by the contemporary audience. The fascination lies rather in Sa-Nehet's Ulysses-like ability to present himself to and reinvent himself for every person who may have power over him, from Amunenshi to Pharaoh. Sa-Nehet was a model of skill and address, a true diplomat, such as anyone who wished to rise in a monarchy had to be. It is to bring this out that the story deploys its range of tones and styles.

For the historian of religion the most valuable datum here is the portrayal of burial. In the modern west death is hidden like a shameful secret. The sensuous description of burial given in the king's letter of invitation is invaluable for correctly understanding the Egyptian view of death, and indeed Egypt itself. This nation viewed itself as the great Necropolis, capitol of the world of the dead. As low as the Egyptian opinion was of

life in barbarian lands, far more intense was the horror they felt at the thought of burial there. Egypt itself was the populous city of eternity, the very Manhattan of death. Life and even more Death in Egypt was infinitely desirable.

Isle of Fire: Part One

Sa-Nehet

The noble lord, minister of Egypt's laws and land, prince among the savage Bedouin of Canaan, beloved of his sovereign, trusted and true, Sa-Nehet, may he rest in peace, left this account of his career as his fitting epitaph:

I was a warrior of my master the king, resident at court and member of the royal household, servant of that most noble and gracious lady Queen Neferew (peace be upon her!), wife of King Es-en-Weseret (who now rests in his pyramid at Henem-Sewet) and daughter of King Amun-em-hat (who now sleeps in his tomb at Qa-Nefereu.)

My story begins about 1875 B.C.E., in the first half of the Twelfth dynasty, in the thirtieth year after Amun-em-hat had renewed the world by his coronation, in the third month of the Nile's autumnal flooding, on the seventh day of the month, when

King Amun-em-hat, now a god, ascended to the further world;
this lord of Egypt, he soared to heaven, rejoined Ra;
the divine earthly king became one with his creator.

The royal apartments were silent, everyone was dazed,
the great gates of the palace were sealed.
Courtiers sat on the ground, head on knees,
all the nobles moaned.

*Jry-pa2t h2atj-a2, sab ad2-mr, jty m taw stjw, rh3 nsw maa2 mry.f, s2msw
Sa-Nbt: d2d.f:*

*Jnk s2msw s2msw nb.f, bak n jpat nsw, jrt pa2t wrt h2swt, h2mt nsw S-n-wsrt m
H4nm-Swt, sat nsw Jmn-m-H2at m Qa(j)-Nfrw, Nfrw, nbt jmah3.*

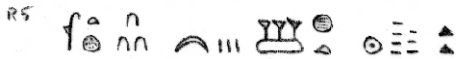
H2a2t-sp ma2ba, abd h3mt ah3t, sw sfh3:

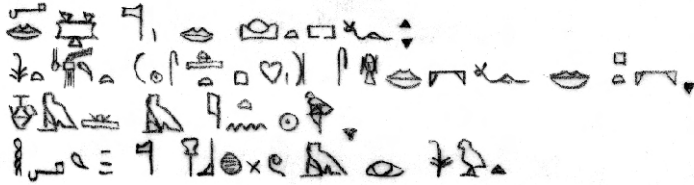
*(J)ar¹ nt2r r ab3t.f;
n-sw-bjt (Sh2tp-Jb-Ra2), sb2r.f r pt,
b4nm(w) m jtn,
h2a2w-nt2r abh3(w) m jr(j) sw.
Jw b4nw m sgr, jbw m gmw,
rwty wrty h3tmw;
s2nyt m tp h2r masty,
pa2t m jmw.*

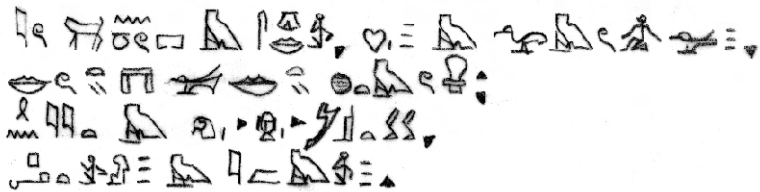
Passage to the Other World: Sa Nehet

R¹ 

R² 

R⁵ 





¹ First instance here of the emphatic second tense. The frequency of this structure is one of the most striking features of the tale. (The emphatic second tense isn't always particularly emphatic, although it does reliably shift the emphasis away from the verb and onto the circumstances surrounding the action.) Though this is the author's favored structure, virtually all the other means of avoiding an introductory particle are employed as well, *e.g.*, statives, fronted nouns, predicate adjectives, &c. By avoiding introductory particles, the author achieves a terse, abrupt tone, such as we would associate with a military dispatch or a "hard-boiled" detective novel. It creates a mood of high but understated drama.

Isle of Fire: Part One

Shortly before his death, Amun-em-hat had sent his army against the Libyans. Es-en-Weseret, his eldest son, was commander of the expedition. He'd been dispatched to ravage the land and its people, and he was now on his way back, having taken many of the inhabitants captive, as well as seizing immense herds of their cattle.

At this point a certain faction at court sent messengers to the western border, to Es-en-Weseret, informing him of the events at the palace: King Amun-em-hat was dead (and apparently assassinated). The envoys reached Es-en-Weseret at sunset, on the return march. Hearing the news, he didn't hesitate a second. He knew exactly what to do. He gave orders that the army was not to be informed, and flew back to the palace fast as a falcon, taking with him only his personal bodyguards.

Envoys came from Es-en-Weseret at the palace. All the other royal princes were still with the army, without any idea of what had occurred. The envoys summoned one prince to return with them for an appearance before the throne.

(Es-en-Weseret had seized power, and now he was going to execute anyone who'd had a part in the killing of Amun-em-hat, and probably anyone he thought might later challenge him for the crown.) I happened to be standing nearby when the royal envoy delivered his message. I knew what this "invitation to appear before his majesty" meant. As I listened, my body went rigid and my brain shut off. I felt terror in every cell. I bolted, ran to find a place to hide. I lay on the ground under a clump of bushes until the army had passed and there were no more travelers on the road.

Jst rf sb(j).n h2m.f ms2a2 r ta T2mh2w, sa.f smsw m h2ry jry, nt2r nfr S-n-Wsrt. Tj-sw hab(w) r h2w(j)t h3swt, r sqrjmyw T2h2nw. Tj-sw h2m jj.f, jn(j).n.f sqrw-a2nb3 n T2h2nw, mnmnt nbt nm d2rw.sn. Smrw nw stp-sa hab.sn r gs jmnty r rdjt rh3 sa nsw ss2m h3pr(w) m a2b4nwtj. Gm(j).n sw wpwtyw h2r wat. Ph.n.sn sw r tr n h3awy. N sp sjn.n.f rsj. Bjk ab4(j).f h2na2 s2msw.f nn rd(j)t rh3 st ms2a2.f.

Jst hab(w) r msw nsw wnw m-h3t m ms2a2 pn. Njs.n.tw n wa2 jm. Jst wj a2h2a2.kwj sd2m.n.j h3rw.f. Jw.f h2r mdt, jw.j m a2rw. Psh3 jb.j, ss2 a2wy.j, sda h3r(w) m a2t.j nbt. Nfa2.n.j wj m nfnft r h2h2y n.j st dgt. Rdjt.j¹ wj jmjtw baty r jwdt wat s2msw.s.

¹ *Rdjt.j* is a narrative infinitive, of which we shall see many more; *r jwdt wat s2msw.s* is literally "until the road's separating its travelers."

Isle of Fire: Part One

I proceeded southwards, though I'd no intention of going as far as the capital, Thebes. I expected there would be fighting there between Es-en-Weseret's supporters and whatever factions thought they had a chance at making their own man king. I didn't expect to survive that, whoever won. I went south, passed the Truth canal near Giza and Hathor's great sycamore tree and shrine. My plan was to continue south till I got beyond the delta, so I could cross the Nile at a single ford. I reached the Happy Fields Funeral Estate, a park-necropolis temple complex founded back in the Fourth dynasty (27th to 26th centuries BCE, a good 600 years before my time). There I passed the night at the edge of a field. I rose at daybreak.

Early as it was, I still ran into a man who happened to be on the road. He scared me out of my wits with his "Good morning!" By evening I'd reached the crossing at Oxenford and I set out over the Nile in a shallow, rudderless skiff. The west wind filled its sail and so it brought me to the eastern shore. I proceeded now northeast, skirting the quarries near the fertile knolls called the Red Hills of Hathor. I kept on northwards, to where Egypt ends and the Sinai peninsula begins. Finally I reached Fort Royal, a border outpost built to keep Bedouin and other sand rovers in their place and out of Egypt. I curled up to sleep in some underbrush where the soldier on watch-duty wouldn't notice me.

At nightfall I continued on. The sun was rising when I reached Peten. I was now out of Egypt and on the Sinai. I'd left fertile ground behind for rocks and sand. When I reached the salt marsh at Kem Wer, I paused in my flight. That's when thirst caught up with me, and when it did it tackled me, brought me to my knees. I was totally dehydrated, my tongue was stuck and my throat wouldn't open. I thought to myself: "So this is what death tastes like." But suddenly I found myself coming out of my daze, picking myself up — I'd heard the sound of cattle lowing and saw, in the distance, Bedouin! And they saw me, alone and helpless. But their sheikh, who had been in Egypt, recognized me, and so he gave me water, prepared me a dish made from yoghurt (which was as much as my stomach could have handled) and I went with him back to his tribe.

Jrt.j s2mt m h3nty. N ka(j).j spr r h4nw pn, h3mt.n.j h3pr h2aa2yt. Nn d2d a2nb3 r-sa.f. Nm(j).n.j Maa2ty m haw Nbt. Sma.n.j m Jw-Snfrw. Wrs2.n.j m a2d2 n sb3t. H2d2.n.j wn hrw, h3p(j).n.j s a2h2a2(w) m r wat. Twr.n.f wj smd2(w) n.f! H3pr.n. tr n mswt, sab2.n.j r Dmj-Ngaw. D2a(j).n.j m wsh3t nn h2mw.s m swt n jmnty. Sn(j).n.j h2r jabty jkw m h2ryt Nbt-d2w-ds2r. Rd(j)t.j wat n rdwy.j m h3d. Dm(j).n.j Jnbw H2qa, jryw r h3sf styw r ptppt nmyw s2a2y. Ss2p.n.j ksw m bat m snd2 maa wrs2y tp jnb jmy hrw.f.

Jr(j)t.j s2mt r tr n h3any. H2d2.n ta ph2.n.j Ptn; h3n(j).kwj r ta n Km-Wr. H3r.n. jbt, as.n.f wj; ntb.kwj, h3h3 h3m(w). D2d.n.j: "Dpt mwt nn." T2s.j jb.j, saq.j h2a2w.j,¹ sd2m.n.j h3rw nmj n mnmnt. Gmh2.n. wj styw! Sja.n wj mt2n jm pa wnn h2r Kmt. A2h2a2.n rd(j).n.f.n.j mw, psjf.n.f.n.j jrtr, s2m.n.j h2na2.f n wb2yt.f.

Isle of Fire: Part One

They were most kind, but I passed on from land to land, seeking somehow to recover my fortunes. I went up as far as Byblos on the coast of Lebanon, then further inland into the Qedem region. I'd been there a year and a half when Amunenshi, ruler of northern Canaan, summoned me to his court.

"You're going to like this place," he told me. "It's no backwater—we speak Egyptian here!" This was an invitation to stay at his court. He had a number of Egyptians in his retinue, and it was they who'd recommended me to him as a man of character and experience.

"What brought you to Canaan?" asked Amunenshi, "Did something happen in the palace?" Now we'd gotten to the point, and I had to address it nimbly.

"King Amun-em-hat the First passed on to glory, and no one knew precisely under what circumstances" — and, I thought to myself, if Amunenshi ever did, it wouldn't be from me. "I was returning from the Libyan expedition when the news reached me. My mind went blank, I was sick to my stomach with grief and fear. All I could think of was to run.

"Not that I needed to. I wasn't even thought of in relation to the king's death, much less discussed, blamed, spat upon or even grumbled at. No herald was summoning *me* to appear and explain. I really don't know what sent me fleeing here from Egypt. Looking back, it seems like some god made it happen. I was, as the proverb goes,

*bewildered as a man from the delta marshes would be
to find himself all the way up the Nile
where the first cataract pours down the mountain;
lost as a man from the Nile-mouth lagoons
in the wooded hills of Nubia. "*

Nfr jr(j).t.n.sn, rd(j).n wj h3ast n h3ast. Fh3.n.j r Kpnj, hs(j).n.j r Qdm. Jr(j).n.j rnpt gs jm jn(j).n wj A2mwms2j. H2qa pw n Rt2nw H2rt. D2d.f n.j: "Nfr tw h2na2.j. Sd2m.k r n Kmt!" D2d.n.f nn rb3.n.f qd.j, s2sav.j. Mtr.n wj rmt2 Kmt ntyw jm h2na2.f. A2h2a2.n d2d.n.f n.j: "Ph2.n.k h2r sy-jss2t? Jn jw wn h3prt m h4nw?" A2h2a2.n d2d.n.j n.f:

"N-sw-bjt (Sh2tp-Jb-Ra2) wd2aw r ab3t, n rb3.n.tw h3prt h2r.s." —D2d.n.j swt m jwms. "[j.n.j m ms2a2 ta T2mb2, wh2m.tw n.j: ¹jb.j adv, h2a2ty.j ntff(w) m h4t.j. Jn(j).n.f wj h2r want wa2rt, n wfa.tw.j, n psg.tw r h2r.j, n sd2m.j t2s-h2wrv, n sd2m.tw rn.j m r wh2mw. N rb3.j jn(j).t wj r h2ast tn. Jw mj sb3r nt2r.

*Mj maa sw jdh2y m Abw,
s n b4at m ta Styw."*

¹ Another historical present.

Passage to the Other World: Sa Nehet

028
[Hieroglyphic text block 1]

036
[Hieroglyphic text block 2]

[Hieroglyphic text block 3]

Isle of Fire: Part One

Amunenshi now spoke in low and reverent tones, as though I were an envoy from Pharaoh.

“And what is the state of your country,” he asked, “deprived of that powerful god Amun-em-hat? All foreign lands feared him like the plagues Sekmet sends in a year when she’s angry.”

I drew myself up, looked him in the eye, and improvised this poem in reply:

Be at ease, his son has ascended the throne,
entered the palace, his father’s rightful heir,

a god, without his fellow in the firmament,
supreme in knowledge, wise in strategy,
peerless as a leader.

He it was who conquered barbarian lands:
his father remained in the palace
while this one made decrees realities.

He’s a hero who achieves with his own right arm,
a force without parallel
when he moves on foreign bowmen,
when he faces down opponents.

*A2b2a2.n d2d.n.f h3ft.j: “Wnn jrj ta pf mj-m m h3mt.f, nt2r pf mn3, wnnw
snd2.f h3t h3aswt mj Sh3mt rnpt jdwt?” D2d.kwi r.j n.f:*

*Nh2mn sa.f a2q(w) r a2h2,
it2j.n.f jwa2t nt jt.f,*

*nt2r pw grt nn snw.f,
nn ky h3pr b4r-h2at.f;*

*nb saj2t pw, jqr sh3rw,
mn3 wd2wt,
prjt hjt h3ft wd2.f.*

*Ntf dar h3swt;
jw jt.f m b4nw a2h2.f
smj.f s2ajt.n.f h3pr.*