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Review of doctoral dissertation

Between the Living, the Dead and the Gods: Writing as a Tool for Communication with the Underworld in Some Ancient Civilizations

written by

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Doctoral dissertation written by Łukasz Maciej Byrski entitled *Between the Living, the Dead and the Gods: Writing as a Tool for Communication with the Underworld in Some Ancient Civilizations* was made under supervision of prof. Kazimiery Mikoś in 2023.

It is consisted of two parts. The first part is thesis written on 272 pages, and the second part is appendix (illustrative material) written on 102 pages.

In the first part *Introduction* (pp. 8-9) candidate discuss his main idea and the new interdisciplinary approach of this interesting topic. In it he emphases that only several scholars (A. Gardiner, K. Sethe, G. H. Hughes, and K. Enderffy) so far have done some research of the letters of the dead and they all called for the need of future comparative study.

The second part of the dissertation is devoted to the analysis thirty letters to the dead which have been found in various places in Egypt. Most of them have been previously published and now they are kept in various museums in the world. Introduction chapter of part 2 in consisted of three parts: the description of what are the letters of the dead (pp. 10-12), the way they supposedly work in the Ancient Egypt as author describe it as “communication with the Otherworlds” (pp. 13-18), and the last part in which he addresses the previously, very rare, study of such letters (pp. 19-21). This last subchapter also includes one table which includes 27 letters with 12 authors who previously mentioned or published them. One, last letter, papyrus from the British Museum is the only one which was not previously published in this table. This table mentioned less letters than the table of contents (it has 30 letters), so I think that some

things are missing in this table. For the easier understanding of this table maybe author should add inventory numbers of each letter (p. 21). Also, the title of the Table 1. is on the page 22, and it should be below the table on page 21.

The biggest part of the next section (2.2) is compilation of the “letters of the dead”. Methodologically it is consisted of several parts: 1) title, 2) background context, 3) translation, and 4) commentary. Each of the previously mentioned 30 letters are written according to the same methodology which is good. Authors approach is very consistent, and I think that he did excellent job in this part of the thesis (pp. 22-188).

The next, Part 3, is consisted of the Chinese letters to the Underworld. In the introduction of this part of the thesis author wrote about the magical power of writing in ancient Chinese beliefs (pp. 189-192), and then about the communication with the Otherworld in Chinese sources (pp. 193-194). The last part, which is written in the same methodology as Egyptian letters, author gave the history of the previous research of this topic (pp. 195-197) which includes the table (pp. 196-197) with 13 letters of the dead which were discovered between 1973 and 2016 (pp. 198-228). Sadly, this table does not include details of the museum collection. I think that both tables (pp. 21, and 196-197) should include information about the museums and the relevant inventory numbers. If there are not enough space in the current table, author can make new one with such information. These are very important for the any scholar who can continue this important work.

The last, Part 4 is written like some annex to the previous part of dissertation. It supposes to analyse the Greco-Roman and Northern Europe world, but this is not the case. In this form this part of the thesis is lacking many important information, and methodologically is not well prepared and written. It does not contain introduction, history of the research of relevant material. It is only consisted of three examples (Tabulae Defixiones, pp. 229-230), Celtic letters to the Dead (p. 231), and Runic Inscription of the Dead (p. 232) which mentions “curses tablets” and “walking corpses” which could harm the living but without letters who address directly to the dead. I think that examples of the Celtic and Nordics parts are good but in my opinion the problem in this chapter is Roman world. Also, I am not sure why author mentioned Greco-Roman world because he did not mention any letters related with ancient Greek mythology or funerary traditions. The biggest problem of this “Part 4” is Roman world. Author mentions that there are 1600 texts about this subject. Which is great, but the part which is missing is methodology, history of the research, and context. I think that this “Part 4” should be removed from the thesis or the way better it should be written on the same methodology as introduction

of the Egyptian and Chinese part. It does not need to contain written sources or examples like the Egyptian and Chinese part, for a simple reason – they are too many inscriptions of that kind. I think that author should add to whom these inscriptions are addressed (it should give at least couple of examples to which gods, goddesses, being like Manes (the most commonly they include formula *Dis Manibus - D.M.*), Lemures, deceased, or important Roman, Greek, or Oriental gods.

The last part of the thesis is conclusion. It contains the little bit more than a page of text. This is simply not enough for dissertation. It started with “the fact that three great civilizations ...”. In my opinion he has talk only about the two which are greatly done (Egyptian and Chinese) but which one is third? Roman, Celtic, or Nordic? How can he conclude about the third without lacking the greater analysis of and of them? Candidate mentioned that these civilizations had connection with the dead but as much I emphasise earlier this last chapter is missing many important elements of methodology to be included this way. Also, the conclusion should include all the relevant part of the analysis and in it author should write the results of his interdisciplinary analysis. Now this is lacking. Maybe some kind of interdisciplinary points in table should be include in this part of the research. At my university conclusion has at least 4-5 pages of text in which candidate emphasis the results of his methodology and research, and discuss the results of the research of his/her hypothesis. Now I am not satisfied how it looks like. But, as maybe this is ok with the rules of the University of Krakow.

Bibliography and appendix well included in the dissertation. The only thing that I am not quite sure it the way how certain aspects of the bibliography is written. The style of bibliography and footnotes are very strangely written. The most commonly title of the books and journals are written in italics. Titles of the articles are written in “”. The name of the authors of always written after surnames. But this is not the case in this dissertation. In some cases, place of publication is written in brackets. There is no consistency of rules in it. I think author should fix it.

In text reference numbers should be always written after the dot (.). If it's written before the dot it refers to the word on it. I think that author must fix this. This is elementary part of methodology of writing and its common mistake to the students. I am teaching the methodology or historical research and writing for 20 years, and I am well aware of this common mistake. Author used it this way in all his footnotes. He should move them all after the dot.

In footnotes it will be much better if author write down information about the artifact and museum collections this way: Place (Town), *Name of the Museum*, inv. number.

Again, I am not sure about the rules of the University of Krakow, but commonly dissertations have small summary with key words in the beginning or the end of it.

Conclusion: As I mentioned earlier candidate did really good job with Egyptian and Chinese analysis of the dissertation. In the introduction part I did not see the clear thesis and aim of this work. His introduction has same elements of it but not all. I understand that this should be interdisciplinary research which will analysis of various cultures and how they treat dead and write to them. That part is clear – but what is hypothesis of this dissertation? What are the concrete results of this thesis? None of that is clear in my opinion, specifically in the conclusion. I think that candidate and his mentor should work in that part and add it.

At the same time candidate is missing real conclusion of the thesis which need to cover details of the results of his interdisciplinary research of these two civilizations. The part of Greco-Roman world lacking the same methodology as previous two parts so not sure what to do with it. This is really good thesis in some parts, but the last part of it is not so good. His mentor and him should decide what to do with it. There are two ways to sort it out: the remove the last part which is related with Greco-Roman world or two add introduction aspects of it (the way better). If that would be the case this research will be extraordinary. In any case conclusion should not look like it is now.

Taking into account the above analysis and argumentation, I hereby state that the submitted doctoral dissertation does not meet all conditions and that certain aspects of it should be changed before it proceeds to the further stage of the doctoral procedure. At the moment candidate should add hypothesis in the introduction and should write down proper conclusion in which he will states the results of his analysis (some elements are already there but that is too short for doctoral dissertation). He should also fix some above-mentioned details where to write footnotes and should unify bibliography.

After all these changes this dissertation can meet all the criteria and should move to the final stages of the procedure.

Zagreb, May 23, 2024.

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