

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

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The scope of the PhD thesis is expressed and developed in a precise manner: to investigate the writing practice as a tool for communicating with the dead and Underworld. The PhD is organised around five parts: a) a very short introduction; b) a thorough analysis of the Egyptian letters to the dead and related sources; c) a shorter analysis of the Chinese letters to the Underworld and related sources; d) a rather short comment on similar practices in the Greco-Roman World and Northern Europe culture; e) an extremely synthetic page of conclusion. Beside this there are two appendixes: Appendix 1, which is a sort of bibliographic reference for the Egyptian letters to the dead, and Appendix 2, in a separate volume, which is a mere collection of images (mostly already published or accessible online).

The doctoral thesis aims at tackling a very ambitious subject: the exploration of the writing practice as a tool for communicating with the Underworld. More laudably, the work aims also to approach it from a comparative perspective. As explicitly expressed from the author, the advantages of a comparative approach are to open up the spectrum of research: the work can result in a very original and innovative research. The task is extremely ambitious, and nobody has yet approached this subject with such a wide perspective. Also, the topic of communication of the living with the dead is fascinating and still insufficiently researched in the field of Egyptology.

The thesis is mainly cantered around Egyptological material: the author analyses in very detail twenty-eight documents, which are usually known under the modern name of the letters to the dead. Not all the documents analysed can be fully classified under the label of the letters to the dead, although they similarly represent a sort of attempt of communication with the Underworld (see figurines Berlin ÄM 14517 and Louvre E 8000). The Egyptological part occupies the largest section of the PhD work and it really deserves a praise, since it is meticulous researched, thoroughly analysed and widely commented, reaching most – if not all in certain cases – of the bibliography produced. The analyses of the context and content of each letter is without any doubt the most commendable part of the research. Also the extensive and various bibliography read concerning the letters to the dead, demonstrates proficiency in the use of literature in different languages (English, French, German, Italian, beyond Chinese and Japanese, just to quote some), which is a very valuable and uncommon skill. The author also engages with security and full control in scholarly discussion concerning different types of interpretation. The part on Chinese material cannot be judged by the present reviewer but it seems much less well researched than what is achieved with the Egyptian material. Finally, the value of the work is enhanced by a hundred of illustrations, collected in the second volume, although it would have been useful to include a list images and references in the text to all of them. To be noted that none of the illustrated material is unpublished.

Beyond the good results produced in the analyses of the Egyptian corpus, the work presents a number of serious deficiencies which must be taken into account.

On a macroscopic lens, the title of the work “*Between the Living, the Dead and the Gods: Writing as a Tool for Communication with the Underworld in Some Ancient Civilizations*” does not fully overlap with the content of the research, as the research is mainly rooted on Egyptian material. Indeed, the thesis is not particularly well-balanced, since the first part (Egyptian Letters to the Dead) is the most detailed and researched one (consisting in circa 188 pages on a total of 234). The Chinese letters represents the other substantial bulk of the work, occupying 40 pages of the remaining 46 pages.

Only couple of pages are devoted to other “ancient civilisations”. While the author justified the length of the part devoted to the Chinese documents with the lack of a tradition of studies on these types of sources, the extreme brevity dedicated to other material (i.e. *tabulae defixiones*) has no explanation. The analysis of 12 Chinese documents occupies only 40 pages and for these the author does not go into details and provides less comments than what is done for the Egyptian corpus. The title should have been organised around the corpus of the ancient Egyptian letters to the dead, with the addition of a comparative strand, which would have helped final interpretation and comment (which is lacking, see comments below). It is also somehow ‘awkward’ the decision to use the term ‘some’ in the title before ‘ancient civilizations’; it does not sound extremely academic. The addition of ‘gods’ in the title does not mirror the evidence coming from the corpus, as the character of the documents is mainly immanent and the role played by the gods is certainly marginal. The present reviewer would have expected at least a more extensive analysis of the so-called ‘Letters to Gods’. The most striking deficiency of the work, however, is given by the absolute lack of a theoretical structure (proved by the lack of bibliography, see comments below) which reunite the different material assembled together: the conclusion is worth only a single page, with no new evidence or any further critical comment.

While the author has extensively analysed and commented each document for Part I, a number of choices are still very controversial: 1) the lack of transliteration (used in the common Egyptological practice); 2) the use of other authors’ translation (as explicitly stated at p. 8; it would have been at least useful to make clear which is the translation followed for each document); 3) the absence of philological and/or interpretative comments based on the original documents (which should have been mastered by a PhD student level); 4) the absence of a personal reconstruction of the meaning of the text (too often the author quotes the hypothesis of other scholars but there is an evident lack of personal and critical interpretation: e.g. controversies or grammatical doubts have been rarely solved but often simply quoted). Just to quote the main issues.

While the bibliography for the letters to the dead is certainly impressive, there are some unexpected titles missing: D. Czerwik, *Origins of Letters to the Dead*, *Meander* 6 (1999), pp. 577-599; D. Czerwik, *The Afterlife Beliefs in the Sixth Dynasty Private Inscriptions*, [in:] P. Kousoulis, N. Lazaridis (eds.), *Proceedings of the Tenth International Congress of Egyptologists*, Leuven - Paris - Bristol, CT, 2015, vol. I, pp. 1003-1015; Schiavo, Renata 2023. “Ancestors as a source of legal authority”. In Loktionov, Alexandre (ed.), *Compulsion and control in ancient Egypt: proceedings of the Third Lady Wallis Budge Egyptology Symposium*, 54-71. Oxford: Archaeopress; Donnat, Sylvie 2021. “Écrire aux morts - écrire les paroles divines: à propos d’écrits votifs et talismaniques dans l’Égypte pharaonique / Writing to the dead - writing the words of the divine: on votive and talismanic texts in the Egypt of the pharaohs”. *Gradhiva: revue d’anthropologie et d’histoire des arts* 32, 106-123; Lucarelli, Rita 2008. “Le Lettere ai morti e le manifestazioni dei defunti sulla Terra nell’antico Egitto”. *Studi tanatologici* 4, 149-160; Moreno García, Juan Carlos 2015. “Review: Donnat Beauquier, Sylvie 2014. *Écrire à ses morts: enquête sur un usage rituel de l’écrit dans l’Égypte pharaonique*”. *HOROS*. Grenoble: Jérôme Millon, Bryn Mawr Classical Review 2015.01.5. Absolutely essential would have been: Moreno García, Juan Carlos 2010. “Oracles, ancestor cults and letters to the dead: the involvement of the dead in the public and private family affairs in pharaonic Egypt”. In Storch, Anne (ed.), *Perception of the invisible: religion, historical semantics and the role of perceptive verbs*, 133-153. Köln: Rüdiger Köppe and Donnat, Sylvie and Juan Carlos Moreno García 2014. “Intégration du mort dans la vie sociale égyptienne à la fin du troisième millénaire av. J.-C.” In Mouton, Alice and Julie Patrier (eds), *Life, death and coming of age in antiquity: individual rites of passage in the ancient Near East and adjacent regions*, 181-207. Leiden: Nederlands Instituut voor het Nabije Oosten. Rather interesting, although more marginal to the specific subject, could have been also the following article:

Burgos Bernal, Laura 2017. “Comunicarse con los muertos: las cartas a los muertos egipcios y sus paralelos en Mesopotamia”. In Burgos Bernal, Laura, Antonio Pérez Largacha, and Inmaculada Vivas Sainz (eds), *Actas V Congreso Ibérico de Egiptología: Cuenca 9-12 de marzo 2015*, 1133-1145. Cuenca: Ediciones de la Universidad de Castilla-La Mancha.

However, one of the major (and influential) titles on the subject missing in the bibliography is Alan Gardiner, *The Attitude of the Ancient Egyptians to Death and the Dead: The Frazer Lecture for 1935*.

A work strongly focussed on a comparative approach should have also benefitted of a much larger and extensive theoretical structure and more substantial bibliography. Here some of the key works in Egyptological literature: Eyre, Christopher 2018. “The material authority of written text in Pharaonic Egypt”. In Hoogendijk, Francisca A. J. and Steffie van Gompel (eds), *The materiality of texts from ancient Egypt: new approaches to the study of textual material from the early Pharaonic to the Late Antique period*, 1-11. Leiden; Boston: Brill; Miniaci, Gianluca 2019. “Burial demography in the Late Middle Kingdom: a social perspective”. In Nyord, Rune (ed.), *Concepts in Middle Kingdom funerary culture: proceedings of the Lady Wallis Budge anniversary symposium held at Christ's College, Cambridge, 22 January 2016*, 117-149. Leiden; Boston: Brill; Baines, John (1989), ‘Communication and Display: The Integration of Early Egyptian Art and Writing’, *Antiquity*, 63/240: 471–482; L. Bostock, ‘Agency in Death. Early Egyptian Writing from Mortuary Contexts’, in: Engelhardt (ed.), *Agency in Ancient Writing* (Boulder, CO, 2012), pp. 98–106; P. Vernus, ‘La naissance de l’écriture dans l’Égypte pharaonique: une problématique revisitée’, *Archéo-Nil* 26 (2016), pp. 105–134; J. Baines, ‘Literacy and Ancient Egyptian Society’, *Man NS* 18 (1983), pp. 572–599; C. Eyre – J. Baines, ‘Interactions between Orality and Literacy in Ancient Egypt’, in: K. Schousboe – M.T. Larsen (eds), *Literacy and Society* (Copenhagen, 1989), pp. 97–103.

The research would have strongly benefitted of more theoretical premises and consideration. For instance, nowhere the author defines the term ‘communication’ and no attention is paid to the concepts of the ‘listener’, ‘persuasion’, ‘mediator’, etc. Here just some suggested bibliography of broader impact, just to quote some: Griffin, E. 2009. *A first look at Communication Theory*, New York; Bormann, E. G. 1980. *Communication theory*, New York, NY; G. L. Dahnke and G. W. Clatterbuck (eds.), *Human communication: theory and research*, Belmont, CA; Miller, G. R. 1966. ‘On defining communication: another stab’, *Journal of Communication* 16, 88-98; Muers, R. 2004. *Keeping God's silence: towards a theological ethics of communication*, Malden, MA. and Oxford; Neuliep, J. W. 1996. *Human communication theory: applications and case studies*, Boston, MA; P., Beavin, J. H. , and Jackson, D. D. 1967. *Pragmatics of human communication: a study of interactional patterns, pathologies, and paradoxes*, New York, NY. and London; Gass, H. and Seiter, J. S. 2015. *Persuasion: social influence and compliance gaining*, Oxford and New York.

In several cases, when the author goes outside of the specific field of the letters to the dead, the bibliography of reference is not updated. See for instance for the improperly so so-called tomb of the magician of the Ramesseum (p. 96), see now Miniaci, Gianluca 2020. *The Middle Kingdom Ramesseum papyri tomb and its archaeological context*. Kitab - Egyptology in Focus: Material culture of ancient Egypt and Nubia 1. London: Nicanor Books. For the female figurines see the work of Beha, Johan and Sylvie Donnat 2020. “Du référent au signifié: réflexions autour de deux figurines (paddle doll et apode) de l'Institut d'égyptologie de Strasbourg”. In Donnat, Sylvie, Régine Hunziker-Rodewald, and Isabelle Weygand (eds), *Figurines féminines nues: Proche-Orient, Égypte, Nubie, Méditerranée orientale, Asie centrale (VIIIe millénaire av. J.-C. - IVe siècle ap. J.-C.)*. Actes du colloque de Strasbourg (25-26 juin 2015), 57-73. Paris: De Boccard.

The introduction to the letters to the dead (and similarly also for the Chinese counterpart) seems to be not so much connected with the main bulk of the analysed corpus. Useful works to expand the introductory discussions for the Egyptological parts are: Allen, J. P. 2006. 'Some aspects of the non-royal afterlife in the Old Kingdom', in M. Bárta (ed.), *The Old Kingdom art and archaeology: proceedings of the conference held in Prague, May 31 – June 4 2004*, Prague, 9-17; Assmann, J. 1989. 'Death and initiation in the funerary religion of ancient Egypt', in W. K. Simpson (ed.), *Religion and philosophy in ancient Egypt*, New Haven, CT., 135-159. [translated from the original 1983 article, 'Tod und Initiation im altägyptischen Totenglauben', by M. Grauer and R. Meyer]; and definitely, Quirke, Stephen 2015. *Exploring religion in ancient Egypt*. Blackwell Ancient Religions. Chichester; Malden, MA: Wiley Blackwell.

Some minor inaccuracies: The number of pages in the table of contents is unexpectedly missing. The English needs an important and fundamental revision, as there are repeated grammatical errors, for example, one amongst several, the use of the verb in the third person singular is often incorrect. There is also no consistency in the choice of spelling rules, British vs American version. The transcription of Egyptian names is rather inconsistent.

In conclusion, the aim of the research was a very ambitious and weighty task, probably too much to be achieved in a PhD work, and although the candidate shows a high level of knowledge in a specific subject (letters to the dead in ancient Egyptian world), the work do not present many original characters in the analyses of the sources (no unpublished documents, no different interpretation of the text, no relevant comparative association with materials from other cultures). If correctly implemented, especially in the conclusion, I can judge the level of this work still adequate to confer the PhD title to the candidate.

Therefore, I hereby state that the submitted doctoral dissertation meets the conditions specified in Article 13.1 of the Act of 14 March 2003 on scientific degrees and academic title and degrees and title in art (Journal of Laws No. 65, item 595, as amended) and in the Regulation of the Minister of Science and Higher Education of 19 I 2018 on the detailed procedure and conditions for conducting activities in doctoral dissertation, habilitation proceedings and proceedings for the conferment of the title of professor (Journal of Laws of 30 I 2018, item 261) and I apply for admitting mgr. Łukasz Maciej Byrski to further stages of the doctoral procedure.