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Persönliche Frömmigkeit; Gottesnähe
Piété personnelle

The Egyptian language lacked specific terms for "religion" and "piety." Nonetheless, Egyptologists recognize the significance of personal faith and piety in studying the religious sentiments and behavior of private individuals as expressed in texts and image. "Personal piety" was a complex phenomenon in ancient Egyptian religion and, as a result, the questions of how to define and apply the term remain controversial in Egyptology today. This article aims at presenting the Egyptological investigation of personal piety by providing both a history of its study and an overview of related issues and of the theories and methods applied to its research up to the present.

بالرغم من عدم وجود كلمة تعني ‹‹دين›› أو ‹‹تعبد›› باللغة المصرية القديمة،فقد أدرك علماء المصريات أهمية العقيدة الفردية والتعبد فى دراسة المشاعر الدينية والتصرفات الفردية كما عُبر عنها فى النصوص والمناظر. ‹‹التعبد الفردى›› كان ظاهرة معقدة فى الديانة المصرية ومسالة تعريف وكيفية إستخدام التعبير تشكل مصدر جدل بعلم المصريات اليوم. هذه المقالة تهدف إلى تقديم البحث العلمي لظاهرة التعبد الفردى من خلال تقديم تاريخ دراستها و طرح نظرة عامة عن المواضيع المرتبطة بها و النظريات و الطرق المستخدمة فى هذا المجال حتى الآن.

T he term "personal piety" was introduced into Egyptology in the early twentieth century by Adolf Erman (1911: 1086) and James Henry Breasted (1912: 349) to describe manifestations of personal religious faith and practices in ancient Egypt. At that time the main evidence for human-divine interaction was a group of Ramesside votive stelae belonging to workers at Deir el-Medina. These stelae displayed the phenomenon of personal piety in both their texts and their iconography. Because of the stelae's provenance, "personal piety" was considered to be an innovation of the Ramesside Period, which was in turn defined as "the age of personal piety" (Breasted 1912: 349). Battis-

combe Gunn's subsequent analysis (1916) of the same group of stelae focused on their social setting. In his interpretation, the stelae belonged to a "poor" class, "who would see in the new ideas of a merciful and forgiving god a solace for their difficult existence" (Gunn 1916: 93).

In response to these early surveys, three main issues have proven crucial in studies of personal piety: the apparent intimacy and strong internalization of the individual's emotions related to religiosity (Assmann 1996: 259; 1997: 17 - 43; Bickel 2002: 66; Brunner 1982; Gunn 1916; Otto 1964); the identification of religiosity as an innovation of the New Kingdom (Assmann 1996: 260 - 261;

1997; Bickel 2002: 66; Breasted 1912: 349); and the occurrence of religiosity within a lower social stratum (Gunn 1916). The discovery of additional archaeological material and the application of theories and methods of religious studies and the social sciences enrich research in this area with new input and perspectives.

Personal Piety: Intimate Personal Dimension or Aspect of Official Religion?

Helmut Brunner (1982: 951) argued that the piety of the Ramesside Period resulted from a feeling of fear, probably rooted in specific social problems stemming possibly from the preceding Amarna Age, when personal contact with a deity was not permitted except through the intercession of the king. Moreover, he defined Egyptian "personal piety" as a "eigene Erscheinung in der ägyptischen Religion"—that is, a pheno-menon specific to Egyptian religion (Brunner 1982: col. 951), parallel to the temple cults, myths, and funerary beliefs. In his systematic presentation of personal piety, Jan Assmann (1984: 22, 258 - 282; 1996: 259; 2004) takes up Brunner's idea that piety was a consequence of the Amarna Period but considers that it was decidedly opposed to the state religion and to the priestly temple cults, complex theology, and traditional religious forms. Assmann bases his arguments on the textual evidence of the Deir el-Medina votive stelae, as well as on the Ramesside prayers copied in school papyri of the Ramesside Period (the so-called "miscellanies"), which he believes reflected the religious feelings and faith of individuals for the first time in history. He therefore speaks of a new "dimension" within Egyptian religion, defining it as "Gottesnähe" ("closeness to a god") (Assmann 1984: 258 - 268; Brunner 1977), in addition to the three traditional, impersonal dimensions of divine presence in Egyptian state religion, which he defines as the cultic, or local, dimension, the cosmic dimension, and the mythical dimension (Assmann 1984: 16 - 17). This new view, in which the idea of a strong internalized religiosity is predominant, has

significantly impacted research on personal piety in ancient Egypt and has been a virtual springboard for both agreement and dissent.

In 1975 Georges Posener published a small group of 18th-Dynasty ostraca from Sheikh Abd el-Qurna whose short texts contained phraseology typical of later Ramesside prayers (1975: 195 - 210). This discovery caught the attention of many scholars. Whereas Assmann (1979) bases his philological investigation of their (personal piety) phraseology on a comparison with the formulas used in Middle and New Kingdom wisdom literature and consequently—as Gerhard Fecht (1965) had already done—considers the New Kingdom formulas a continuation of the older literary tradition (Loprieno 1996), John Baines (1987) contests this approach, stressing the elite character of Egyptian literature. He doubts whether it is right to consider personal piety a collective Egyptian phenomenon, proposing to search out religious *practice* in Egyptian culture and society prior to the New Kingdom. Baines' main argument is that restrictions imposed by decorum dictated the expression of religious practices: indeed many religious practices already existed before the New Kingdom, their under-representation in available material being a matter more of conventional display than of their existence. Other scholars, as well, have subsequently focused on the chronology of personal piety (Backes 2001; Baines and Frood fc.; Bickel 2003; Blumenthal 1998; Kemp 1995; Kessler 1998; Luiselli 2007; Vernus 1983). With the exception of Barry Kemp (1995: 29ff.), who considers religiosity to have been sparse in Egypt—both in the state and in domains not affected by the state—prior to the New Kingdom, the aforementioned scholars agree in considering Ramesside piety to be a continuation of an older and more complex cultural phenomenon.

Assmann's view of personal piety as a new and intimate form of religiosity is shared by some scholars. Among these, Susanne Bickel notes that the term "piety" is itself problematic due to its possible implications of Christianity. Consequently, Bickel (2002: esp.

66 - 67) proposes to speak of "individual religiosity" ("religiosité individuelle"), a term that she considers more appropriate because of its positive character ("positivité"). According to Bickel's view, individual religiosity includes not only devotional acts of piety but also reflections based on the individual's religious sentiments (cf. Knigge 2006: 41, n. 109). However, in this perspective, devotional acts are regarded as inferior to religious faith—thus, personal religious practices do not receive due consideration with respect to the role they play in the formation of, and increase in, religious faith.

Slightly different approaches are taken by John Baines (1987, 1991, 2002; Baines and Frood fc.), Geraldine Pinch (1993), Barry Kemp (1995), Dieter Kessler (1998, 1999), Enka Elvira Morgan (2004, 2006), Faried Adrom (2005), Anna Stevens (2003, 2006), and this author (Luiselli 2005a, fc.). Based on different premises and methods—for example, the analysis of single texts against the background of ritual theories (Adrom 2005; Kessler 1998, 1999), the link between religious practices and the social settings of their performers (Baines 1987, 1991, 2002; Pinch 1993), the setting and evaluation of archaeological findings related to religious practices (Kemp 1995; Morgan 2006: 351; Stevens 2003, 2006), as well as the functional and chronological contextualization of the different sources against the background of cultural premises (Luiselli 2005a, fc.)—these scholars challenge the alleged individualized character of the texts as a main source for the investigation of personal piety. According to their views, piety is, variably, a phenomenon associated only with temples and thus virtually imposed by the state (Kemp 1995: 29 - 32); a phenomenon restricted to the elite due mainly to decorum restrictions (Baines 1987, 1990, 1991); or a long-standing tradition of petitioning and praying to a deity on behalf of oneself or a family member (Adrom 2005; Kessler 1998).

A small number of texts, such as the stelae of Neferabu (Stela Turin 50058: Tosi and Roccati 1972: 94 - 96) and the so-called tomb biographies of Simut-Kyky (KRI III: 336 - 345; Vernus 1978) and Djehutyemhab (Assmann 1978), in which the protagonist declares his choice of a particular deity as his patron, are considered to be either paradigmatic of the supposed "fundamentalism" of the Ramesside Period (Gnirs 2003: 179) or, in contrast, absolute exceptions (Luiselli fc.). Whichever may be the case, these texts embody a mode of intellectual discourse reflecting the search for a personal deity by members of the Egyptian elite without articulating the theoretical premises of religious fundamentalism (namely, a strong conservative attitude featuring fundaments of tradition) or of an imposed religious code (Luiselli 2005b). Moreover, the great majority of sources other than the aforementioned stelae and biographical texts—that is, letters (Baines 2002; Bickel 2003; Sweeney 1985, 1994), votive offerings (Pinch 1993), archaeological evidence from domestic environments (Bomann 1991; Kemp 1995; Stevens 2006), and some passages in the Deir el-Medina "dream book" (Szpakowska 2003: 123 - 151)—display an actualization of this search through ritual practice, rather than a full individualization of religious beliefs. Intellectual discourse reflecting the search for a god and its realization in religious practice were two aspects of a single highly complex phenomenon that are visible in different forms according to the type of source.

The relationship between personal and official religion, and the role the latter played in the development of personal religious attitudes, is the principal focus of Bickel's article (2002) on aspects of the divinization of Amenhotep III. Bickel mainly uses iconographic material of the New Kingdom to identify and stress the role of official religion in supporting (rather than activating) the individual's need for religious feelings. In so doing, she distances her approach from Assmann's "bipolar" view, implicitly returning to the positions of Charles Nims (1954, 1971) and Waltraut Guglielmi (1991, 1995) on the function of specific architectural elements in (official) temples and shrines, as well as of the

so-called intermediary statues (Galán 2003) for individual religious practice. According to these views, personal piety is to be considered complementary, rather than opposed, to state religion, which supplied logistic points to support personal religious practice—a position already held by Brunner (1982: 951). Whether official religion played a supporting role or an activating one in relation to personal piety is a subtle distinction worthy of further investigation (Devauchelle 1994; Kemp 1995; Luiselli 2005a).

The Problem of Terminology

Both the proposed individualization of personal religion in Egypt and the investigation of its social roots are intricately connected with the terminology used by scholars to define this phenomenon. The first alternative to the term "personal piety" was suggested by John Baines, who recommended the broader term "practical religion," which was intended to widen research perspectives to include sources and cultural phenomena beyond hymns and prayers (Baines 1987, 2002). Geraldine Pinch (1993: 325) differentiates further between "personal piety," "popular religion," and "folk religion." While she defines the first term as "individual rather than corporate piety, but centred on one or more deities of the state cults," "popular religion" she defines as "religious beliefs and practices, whether corporate or individual, of ordinary Egyptians in daily life." Finally, "folk religion" is defined as "religious or magical beliefs and practices of the populace, independent of the state cults and centred on the home and family." While the term "popular religion" had been chosen already by Ashraf Iskander Sadek (1979, 1987), who applied it to New Kingdom evidence, Anna Stevens (2003, 2006) applies "private religion" to her archaeological investigation of cult installations in domestic contexts at Tell el-Amarna, and in so doing differentiates between religious action—referring to the performance of ritual acts—and everyday conduct (Stevens 2006: 21).

The importance of employing clear terminology appears in a joint article by John Baines and Elizabeth Frood (fc.). While defining "personal piety" as "the sense of selection and active involvement between a deity and a human being or king," they attempt to limit its application to a specific type of source, where traces of choice can be recognized, thus marking the borderline between piety and more general religious practices. Their definition is intended to avoid risky parallels with Christian beliefs, suggestions of an excessive individualization of religion, and reductions of the dialogue between men and gods to the mere execution of formal ritual practices. Baines and Frood define "piety" as an individual's choice of a god as personal patron. Thus, they stress the human agency within that relationship, rather than the divine one. This definition differs slightly from Assmann's "theology of will" ("Theologie des Willens") (1990: 252), according to which deities were believed to intervene willingly and actively in everyday life, and which defined the relationship between man and deity as a contract (Assmann 2006: 276).

When discussing problems of terminology related to Egyptian personal religion it is necessary to mention the German term "Gottesnähe" (closeness to a god). The term was introduced principally by Brunner (1977) and Assmann (1984: 9 - 21, 25 - 26; 1995). Few other scholars have adopted it, the majority focusing rather on defining the distinction between terms such as "personal piety" and "practical/private religion." The reason for this resistance may be linguistic, as such compounds are less widespread in English and French, for example, than in German, and there remains no corresponding Egyptological term in English or French. Nevertheless, the term "Gottesnähe" is potentially quite valuable, because it can express a state to which one aspired either through practical religious activity or through emotion. As long as care is taken to translate "Gottesnähe" as "closeness to a deity," rather than "closeness to God" (and all that such a term may imply), it has no particular

connotations (Graf 1996) that would reduce its applicability.

New Research Foci and Perspectives

In today's studies of Egyptian personal religion two major schools of thought can be recognized. On the one hand, much attention is given to its phenomenological aspects, according to which the individual search for a god was a phenomenon that affected Egyptian cultural identity as a whole. Personal piety in ancient Egypt is today often investigated through the application of theories and methods borrowed from religious studies as well as from theology, a representative example being the so-called "primäre und sekundäre Religions(erfahrung)" ("primary and secondary religious experience") taken from a research model developed within "Missionstheologie" ("theology of mission's studies") (Sundermeier 1980) to counter the traditional evolutionary view of ancient and ethnic religions. Several scholars (Assmann 2006; Loprieno 2006; Schipper 2006) have endeavored to adapt this model to the Egyptian religious system in general and agree in defining personal piety as a secondary religious experience (Assmann 2006: 275 - 277; Loprieno 2006: 260; Schipper 2006: 198), in which knowledge of the divine is substituted both by the individual's deep faith (Loprieno 2006: 262) and by the individual's personal relationship with a god (Assmann 2006: 275). Against this background, Antonio Loprieno (2006: 260) suggests that secondary religious experience should be understood as a "transformative moment of Egyptian religion," in contrast to the traditional "encyclopaedic" approach.

On the other hand, current research also focuses on the social and functional settings of evidence for personal religion, giving less priority to the investigation of religious emotions than to the study of religious practices, and considering piety to be the result of elements such as social setting and ritual performance that cannot be isolated from their cultural roots. Although archaeological evidence has been introduced in some studies of Egyptian personal religion, few studies have dealt specifically with iconographic topics—for example, the scenes depicted on votive stelae (Baines and Frood fc.; Morgan 2004) and the gesture of prayer as a mode of access to a deity (Luiselli 2008)—or with strategies of self-presentation and public display in monumental form (Frood 2004). Moreover, social issues identified in the material are mainly analyzed in relation to class differentiation, whereas less attention has been paid to gender. It should be noted, however, that research on gender and religion in Deir el-Medina is currently being conducted, and that research on personal religious beliefs and practices, though still based largely on evidence from Deir el-Medina, is not entirely lacking from other sites in Egypt (Devauchelle 1994; DuQuesne 2007). Finally, while chronological debates have mostly concentrated on the origins of personal piety, little attention has been given to developments after the New Kingdom, for which existing studies only address detailed aspects (Bell 1948; Bommas 2005) and no synthesis has been attempted.

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