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Thoughts about the Papyrus Westcar

The Papyrus Westcar, acquired in 1838/39 by Richard Lepsius from Henry Westcar, was the matrix from which Adolf Erman established the principles of ancient Egyptian grammar[1]. Although generations of prospective Egyptologists were initiated into ancient Egyptian philology by reading and studying this text, it nevertheless is something of an enigma. Until now the text has been available in only one copy[2], and no parallels have come to light among the numerous ostraca which have become known. Despite the badly preserved beginning and the abrupt ending, suggesting that there was once more to the text[3], there are no major philological problems attached to it. However, if one poses as a premise that the notion of l'art pour l'art, i.e. the self-fulfilling creation of a piece of art or literature, is not appropriate for ancient Egypt, the question of what its "Sitz im Leben" had been requires pondering.

It is widely held that the Papyrus Westcar is a more or less random collection of rambling stories for entertainment, and comparisons with the "Arabian Nights" have been made[4]. Erman[5] had earlier emphasized the difference of the language used in comparison with the Story of Sinuhe and others. It has been explained as being popular[6] which, however, would be less an explanation than an additional problem. The limitation of writing to a mostly professional class poses major problems when persuing the question of the origin, background and aim of the papyrus. Its physical aspects add to these difficulties.

The available text, of which at least 13 tall pages are extant, though not all fully preserved, dates paleographically as well as by its format and arrangement[7], to the Hyksos Period. As for the language in which it is composed, it is blatantly different from the Classical language of the great literary works. While the difference is conspicuous, it is more difficult to draw chronological inferences from it. Even a comparison with the second group of Classical writings, such as the Satire of Trades or the Hymn to the Nile, helps little, nor does a comparison with Kha'kheperre'-seneb. Neither one favors the rather inelegant construction infinitive $+ pw + ir.n.f$, nor does it have the extent of repetitions[8].

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[1] Adolf Erman, Die Sprache des Papyrus Westcar, Königliche Gesellschaft der Wissenschaften zu Göttingen, Abhandlungen, 1890.

[2] A. M. Blackman, The Story of King Kheops and the Magicians, 1988; for the older bibliography, cf. Dieter Jankuhn, Bibliographie der hieratischen und hieroglyphischen Papyri, 1974, 107; Madeleine Bellion, Catalogue des manuscripts hiéroglyphiques et hiératiques et des dessins, sur papyrus, cuir ou tissu, publiés ou signalés, 1987, 353.

[3] The lack of a colophon as well as the fact that the last preserved sheet is of identical size as those preceding it supports this notion.

[4] Hellmut Brunner, Grundzüge einer Geschichte der altägyptischen Literatur, 1980, 46f.; cf. also Heinrich Schäfer, Die Lieder eines ägyptischen Bauern, 1903, pp. XIIf.

[5] Adolf Erman, Die Literatur der Alten Ägypter, 1923, 64.

[6] Adolf Erman, Die Märchen des Papyrus Westcar, 1890, 13ff.

[7] Jaroslav Černý, Paper and Books in Ancient Egypt, 1952, 18.

[8] For repetition, the Story of the Shipwrecked Sailor could be cited as a parallel in twice giving the sailor's account. However, the repetition there seems necessitated by the change in the setting. The first is a narrative vis-à-vis the alter ego, the second vis-à-vis the Snake, so that the latter can be understood as a "report."