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Mark Depauw: The Demotic Letter

This new book by Mark Depauw, an experienced publisher of Demotic texts who is currently teaching at the Catholic University of Leuven and who is best known for his well-documented, handy introduction to Demotic studies [1], is a comprehensive and meticulous investigation of the features of Demotic letter writing, and especially of its position within the multicultural society of Greco-Roman Egypt. This book is a result of Depauw's long doctoral and post-doctoral work on scribes and their work and practices that, in the case of post-Ppharaonic Egypt, was a vast playground on which Egyptian traditions met and interacted with Greek and other foreign ones. The main purpose of this study is to offer its readership a glimpse over this field of intercultural co-existence, and especially its influence on the development of Egyptian epistolography.

The long analysis of the Demotic epistolographic material, which is the core of this book, is in most cases exhaustive. It starts with useful definitions of what the author means by *Demotic* and *letter* (3-5). The definition of the latter, as a written communication involving a sender who is spatially separated from his/her addressee, is crucial at this point, since on the basis of this feature Depauw defines his corpus of Demotic texts, which excludes literary texts in epistolary forms, receipts, contracts, petitions, as well as letters to divine beings, a genre that was very popular in Greco-Roman Egypt. The corpus assembled is then presented in a database format (7-63), which in its turn is followed by a brief survey of previous secondary literature with the focus on the current state of publication of similar Demotic texts and the need for improvement (65-70).

The third chapter in Depauw's book begins with an elaborate presentation of the different types of surface on which these letters were written, their writing material and the techniques involved (71-85). Here the important issues of the transportation and the reading of the letter are also discussed in the light of material or internal textual evidence. The possibility of the letter being read out not by the addressee, but by the messenger or a third party is marked in this chapter (82-83), a topic that is interestingly linked to the role of orality in ancient epistolography. At this point, the question whether an oral, rather than a written, transmission of a message would resemble the format of a written letter could have been also brought up.

Closely connected to the examination of writing surfaces and the other material involved in the making of a letter are the duties of the student of Ancient Egyptian letters to determine the date and the provenance of their study material. The importance of these duties and the various tools one may use to meet them (for instance, prosopography and paleography) are presented in the next part of Depauw's work (85-94).

The previous reference to prosopography as a historical tool for determining the date of a letter is much related to the following discussion of the profile of the correspondents involved (94-101). In this part of the book Depauw examines the internal evidence of the letters' texts in order not only to unfold the social dynamics associated with letter writing, but also to consider the ways of determining what is formal and informal within the framework of epistolography.

A significant topic is briefly discussed in the next part of Depauw's work: namely, that of Egyptian degrees of literacy and the way it was connected to letter writing (101-106). The author here, after criticizing earlier works pointing towards a low degree of Demotic literacy, strongly states that there is no evidence for a third party, other than the addresser him/herself, to have written these letters, while the use of formulaic language at specific parts of the letter argues for a high degree of literacy among the scribes who wrote them.

Chapter Three of this book ends with a short discussion of the differences between literary letters and other sub-genres, on the one hand, and real epistolography, on the other (106-109). The distinction between such types of letter writing is based mainly upon the style and the contents of the letters.

The next two chapters constitute the core of Depauw's analysis: Chapter Four discusses the framework of the main body of the letter and the various formulae used in it (113-237) and Chapter Five discusses the main body of the letters and the messages they conveyed (239-284). All the different aspects of the form, stylistics and semantics of epistolographic language studied in these two chapters share the same structural backbone, consisting mainly of observations on: (a) the sources; (b) the variants and the combinations; (c) other occurrences; and (d) their predecessors and parallels. In the first section Depauw indicates in which letters from the previously presented database the specific point under discussion is found, while in section (b) he suggests possible variants, combinations with other linguistic aspects, and readings when the cases are dubious (see also his proposed new readings given in Appendix 1). Under (c) Depauw mentions other occurrences in other Demotic or foreign texts. Finally, under (d) he compares the nature and use of these aspects of Demotic epistolography with similar features of non-Egyptian letters and related texts.

In the last part of the book, which consists of Chapters 6 to 8, Depauw sums up the points made in the course of his analysis, drawing conclusions about the relationship between Demotic epistolography and letter writing in Late Egyptian, Coptic, Aramaic and Greek. In these conclusions the author speaks of interacting epistolographic traditions, stressing the fact that Demotic letter writing was well rooted in the Egyptian scribal traditions and that its developments were the results of a gradual transition from the Late Egyptian and abnormal hieratic traditions (298). In addition, the foreign influences over Demotic epistolography were mainly Greek, since the Aramaic parallels identified are limited and often questionable. [2]

In this part of his study Depauw also draws comparisons between Demotic letters and other similar genres of Egyptian writing, such as *oracle questions* and *letters to deities* (Chapter 7), as well as between independent letters and those incorporated in Demotic works of literature (Chapter 8). An interesting point arising from the latter comparison is the role of the letter motif in the structure and plot of literary narratives, a topic that needs further investigation.

The book ends with one page of conclusions, the most important of which are: that the epistolographic traditions in Ancient Egypt were uniform and did not involve any significant geographic variations, and that the parallels observed between them and other foreign similar traditions (especially the Greek ones) could reflect cross-cultural interactions, although that is to be confirmed by more work in cross-linguistic influences and their role in the development of Ancient Greek epistolography. In regard with the first point, I would search for reasons behind the uniform nature of Egyptian letter writing not only in common scribal school curricula, but also in the very nature of epistolography and the circulation of its conventions facilitated by the sending of letters from one location to another. Finally, I would also stress the universalism of the use of conventions and formulaic language in letter writing, and its possible role as a reason for finding parallels among various epistolographic traditions. [3]

The text proper of this book is followed by two appendices. In Appendix 1 Depauw gathers all his proposed new readings for the text of Demotic letters, while in Appendix 2 he offers a short index of selected Demotic words. After these appendices the author presents a number of colourful figures illustrating statistical results.

The structure and format of this book reminds of studies from natural science disciplines, where chapters are divided into small sections and sub-sections, all bearing different titles and discussing in brief different aspects. This type of book structure, I believe, is solid, but it may often interrupt the attention of the reader. In addition, this database-format does not grant space for elaborate flowing arguments, since these are frequently broken down into pieces that the reader may find difficult to connect. [4]

Overall, I would like to emphasize the importance Mark Depauw's exhaustive study of Demotic epistolography holds not only for Egyptology and Demotic Studies, but also for the wider fields of ancient literature and linguistics. This work constitutes a remarkable model for further cross-cultural studies that should consider aspects of ancient cultures in relation with their wider international context.

Notes:

[1] Mark Depauw: *A Companion to Demotic Studies* (Papyrologica Bruxellensia, 28), Brussels 1997.

[2] See, for instance, Depauw's observations on the phrase 'if it happens that it is agreeable to [...]' used in a small number of Demotic letters (265-266). In this case the Aramaic influence hesitantly assumed is, I believe, doubtful, since the phrase did exist also in Demotic and was employed in other writing contexts. This shows that this phrase was not exclusively an epistolographic formula, but rather a formulation of polite requests available in some phases of the Egyptian language.

[3] Compare my discussion of parallel formulae in ancient sayings in Nikolaos Lazaridis: *Wisdom in Loose Form. The Language of Egyptian and Greek Proverbs in Collections of the Hellenistic and Roman Periods* (Mnemosyne Suppl., 287), Leiden 2007, 238-244.

[4] So a sense of fragmented arguments is conveyed by one- or two-sentence conclusions found, for example, on p. 155 and p. 168.

Nikolaos Lazaridis