
PREMATURE DEATH METAPHORS DURING THE PTOLEMAIC PERIOD

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ABSTRACT

This study discusses the metaphors of the sorrow emotion over premature death through the ancient Egyptian literature specially the autobiographies of Ptolemaic Period.

The present article argued that these distress metaphors are considered a clear and strong indication to the Egyptian social abhor towards the premature death.

KEYWORDS: Metaphors; Ancient Egyptian literature; Premature death; Atoubiographies; Ptolemaic Period.

INTRODUCTION

A metaphor is a figure of speech for rhetorical effect; it is not a part of ordinary everyday language but rather a decorative and beautifully constructed phrase that can be found in literature.¹ Here, the metaphorical use means the transfer of a term from its literal sense into a more abstract context in which this term takes a figurative and symbolic meaning. In other words, it is a comparison between an object with the thing we wish to illustrate so that it is spoken of as if it were the first object.² However, the ancient Egyptians had their own words and their own specific

¹ For a very useful discussion about the definitions of metaphor see Abo el Magd A. (2016), *dehumanization of the "others": Animal Metaphors of Defeated Enemies in the New Kingdom Military Texts*, in: JARCE 52, p.330; Taehyung, K.(2007), *Teachers' Conceptual Metaphors for Mentoring*, Ph.D. Dissertation, Ohio State University, p.18.

² Revez, J. (2003), *The Metaphorical Use of the Kinship Term sn "Brother"*, in: JARCE 40, p.123.

linguistic system to convey an emotion such as feelings over premature death.³

In ancient Egypt, the terrifying crudity beings of the underworld did not just threaten sinners, but they were considered to be a general danger in the afterlife.⁴ With the rituals, one can protect himself from the dangerous aspect of certain gods and the world will continue in proper order.⁵ Through these threatens, a characteristic feature of the texts in using metaphors to describe the one's misery feeling towards his early sudden death in the autobiographies of the Ptolemaic Period. These presentations were not only used to symbolize the missing of the first life, but rather missing the joy in the afterlife because of the sudden, unexpected and unprepared death.

DISCUSSION

The origins of finality fear existed in the mortuary texts from the beginning of the Egyptian history. The ancient Egyptians feared to die before the appointed time because they hanged their existence on earth. Thus, certain spells must prevent a premature death. Spell 38 in the coffin texts reflected that fear:⁶

“I will not die hurriedly, I will not land (= die) because of them, I will not die suddenly”

Also, spell 40 in the coffin texts:⁷

“My horror is dying before I have become old before I have come to venerableness”

The ancient Egyptian autobiographies declared the wishes for long life and the concern of the premature death. *Pepiankh* the nomarch of 14th

³ O'Dell E. J. (2008), *Excavating the Emotional Landscape of Ancient Egyptian Literature*, Ph.D.

Dissertation, Brown University, p.6

⁴ Zandee, J. (1960), *Death as an Enemy According to Ancient Egyptian Conceptions*, Leiden, p.110.

⁵ Hornung E. (1982), *Conceptions of God in Ancient Egypt: The One and the many*, London, p.206.

⁶ Aleid de Jong, Coffin Texts Spell 38: The Case of the Father and the Son, *Studien zur Altägyptischen Kultur*, Bd. 21 (1994), pp. 141-157

⁷ Zandee, *Death as an Enemy*, p.70.

nome of Upper Egypt during the reign of Pepi II, declared in his tomb at Meir:⁸

“I spent a life time until a hundred years among living, in possession of my facilities”

Therefore, the well preparations for the funeral and the mortuary practices assured optimism, but the premature death left room for concern, doubt, and pessimism about the continuance in the memory of the community in ancient Egypt.⁹

The following negative metaphorical expressions convey the empathy feeling towards the premature death of children or, who had no children which reflect a pessimistic view towards their destiny. Their death was before appointed time, which would not assure their continuance between living communities.

TORN UP PLANT METAPHOR FOR PREMATURE DEATH :

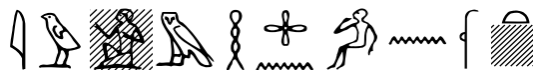
Young plant is a common metaphor for “young people”, in the other side, the sudden death of the young people similar to the harvest of the plant before its time of production. In the inscription of Sishu, he described the premature death:



rnpt nHm is iti m rnpi

“But a torn up plant is he who is taken young”¹⁰

Sishu probably referred to his grandson Thothrekh whom suffered from a premature death as in the same tomb Thothrekh talked about the years that have been robbed from him:



iw.i m Hwn r rnpt

“I was a youngster of years”¹¹

⁸ Janssen, R. & J.J. Janssen (2007), *Growing Up and Getting Old in Ancient Egypt*, London, p.197.

⁹ Burkes S. (1999), “*Death in Qoheleth and Egyptian Biographies of the Late Period*” *Society of Biblical Literature* 170, Atlanta, pp.152-157.

¹⁰ Taher, H. (2008), “*Petosiris, the high priest of Hermopolis, his life and religious thoughts*”, unpublished Ph.D Dissertation, Minia University, pp.30-33.

A similar metaphor for the death of who has no children like the death of a tree with its roots. Sons and daughters are the roots of the person whom ensure his survival in the afterlife. In Stela Cairo JE44065, Ptolemaic Period, *Padi-Sobek* a childless man, who did not take his share in life declared in his autobiography:¹²



mtn ir s nn bh.tw n.f tm (16) wn.f pw ...[wn.i m] (17) imnw ft.tw.f hn^c w3bwy.f

For behold, a man to whom no child was born is one who does not (16) exist..... [I am] (17) A tree that was torn out by its roots.

Padi-Sobek did not report about his life as a good example of ideal life. On the contrary, he spoke about what he missed in the course of his life “For behold, a man to whom no child was born is one who does not (16) exist!” He cleared his suffer with the metaphor “[I am] (17) a tree that was torn out with its roots”.

Thus, according to the previous expressions, missing one of “long moral life or having children” leads to being like “a torn up plant” a misery metaphor shows how the ancient Egyptian mind became less optimistic and more concerned about the memorial existence on this earthy life during the Ptolemaic Period.¹³

MAN CARRIED OFF BY SLEEP METAPHOR FOR PREMATURE DEATH:

*Thothrek*h was the elder son of Petosiris who died at young age, addressing this inscription to the visitors of the tomb, telling them about his early death:¹⁴

¹¹ Lichtheim M. (1980), *Ancient Egyptian Literature, Volume III: the Late Period*, Berkeley, p.53.

¹² Daressy, G. (1914) “Une Stele de Hawara” in: *RT 36*, pp.73-82; Lichtheim M. (1992), *Maat in Egyptian Autobiographies and Related Studies, OBO 120*, pp.191-201.

¹³ Burkes, *Death in Qoheleth and Late Egyptian biographies*, pp. 233-234.

¹⁴ Lefebvre G. (1924), *Le tombeau de Petosiris, I*, Cairo: IFAO, pp.113-114.



*sdm mdw.i dw ib.f hr.s hr nty ink hi kt iti m (3) h^cd3 shw^c
rnpwt m hm iti m shh m kt mi s iti.n qdt*

Who hears my speech, his heart will grieve for it, I am a little child (3) snatched by force, shortened in years as innocent one, snatched quickly as a little one, like a man carried off sleep.¹⁵

The expression *mi s iti.n qdt* “like a man carried off by sleep” is a metaphor describing the sudden death. It designed to signify that he did not have his share in this life, *emphasising that he is not ready and he did not know what is happening to him.*

The phrases “child snatched by force”, “a little one”, made the point that Thothrekh suffered from the sudden death. He had doubts about the comfortable afterlife, as he died before ensuring the elements for the eternal afterlife such as long life with good deeds to be in the memory of the new generation.

DEATH BEFORE FOLLOWING THE HEART METAPHOR FOR PREMATURE DEATH:

The autobiography Thothrekh the elder son of Petosiris, ended by declaring:



hi kt h^c.f sm shh n sms ib.f hr t3

“Little child whose time passed quickly, he couldn't follow his heart on earth”¹⁶

Thothrekh did not connect between his right-doing on earth and his hope for a blessed life in the beyond, which was very common in the autobiographies since the Old Kingdom but, he connected his short lifetime with the concept of following his heart, the source and expression of the moral knowledge.¹⁷ Dying before follow his Heart confirmed the point of losing the chance of having a long life with good deeds to help

¹⁵ *AEL III*, pp.53-54

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Karenga, M. (2004), *Maat the Moral Ideal in Ancient Egypt*, New York pp.248-249

him in the next life, this way of expressing the premature death of children, distinguished this kind of autobiographies in the Ptolemaic Period than before.¹⁸

BEING THIRSTY IN THE UNDERWORLD METAPHOR FOR PREMATURE DEATH:

The portrayal of the dead person as “thirsting in the necropolis” because of his premature death was common in the Ptolemaic period. In the Stela Leiden V 55 from Abydos, Ptolemaic Period, a young girl called *Isenkhebe*, in a worshipping attitude before Osiris and Isis, lamented her early death saying:¹⁹



sdr.ki m int m hwtnt ibi.kwi iw mw r-gs.i

“I lie in the desert valley, as a young girl, (3) Thirsting though water is beside me!”

Because of her early death, the distress metaphor assumed that all donated water of the graves did not help in getting rid of thirst in the afterlife. The same sentence occurred in the stela BM 147, dating back to reign of Cleopatra VII by lady *Taimhotep*, who died young while her son whom she waited long still infant:²⁰



mw snh nti (m) t3 r (nti)-nb im.f ibt pw hr.i ii.f iw nti hr-tp t3 ibi.n.i mw r-gs.i

“The water of life which is for all on it, It is thirst for me; (18) It comes to him who is on earth. I am thirst with water beside me!”

Thirst is one of the several negative images that expressed the idea of a person, who had a premature death, worried of being left in the desert,

¹⁸ AEL III, p.6.

¹⁹ Boeser, A. (1915), *Beschreibung der aegyptischenSammlnng des NiederländischenReichsmuseums der Altertümer in Leiden*, Vol. VII, no.13, pl.15; Otto, E.(1954), *Die biographische Inschriften der ägyptischen Spätzeit*, p.187; Assmann, J. (2005), *Death and Salvation in Ancient Egypt*, translated from the German by David Lorton, London, p.436

²⁰ Panov, M. (2010), “Die Stele der Taimhotep” in: *Lingua Aegyptia* 18, pp.169–191; Booth, C. (2006), *People of ancient Egypt*, London, p.272.

fated to sleep eternally, and thirsting for the life-giving water, just out of his reach.

TAKING INFANT WHILE STILL NURSING METAPHOR FOR PREMATURE DEATH:

In the Stela Leiden V 55, the young girl *Isenkhebe* lamented over her death:²¹



*snk(t) b(w)t n nḥnw ʿr.wi s ḥr.i mnd tp r3.i ḥtpw(5) n ʿryt tn ḥr šnʿ nb rmt ḥr.i
iwty m tr n wʿi*

“The dark, a child’s terror, extend over me, While the breast was in my mouth!
(5)The demons of this Gateway bar everyone from me, I am not in the right time for being alone!”

Children were nursed till the age of three in ancient Egypt,²² while the expression “*the breast was in my mouth*” is a metaphor emphasised her sudden Death. *Isenkhebe* is incapable of talk to defend herself similar to the infant in his roll. She continued “*The demons of this Gateway bar everyone from me*” because she is still too young to have such this self-defense from the terrifying beings inspiring pity and empathy of the reader, this young girl is still afraid, asking for offerings with the pessimistic view on the surface at that period literature.²³

BACK TO THE ORIGINS

The appearance of lamentation over death of children in the autobiographies of the Ptolemaic Period was quite similar to the bad fortune of children’s Death in Greek culture.²⁴ The ancient Greeks conditioned the mature person who can escape from Hades by following one of the mystery cults of certain gods such as Orpheus, Dionysus and the Eleusis mystery cult of Demetrius. In this way, one who died before

²¹ Erman A. (1915), “Zwei Grabsteine griechischer Zeit” in: Weil G.(ed.), *Festschrift Edward Sachau zum Siebzigsten Geburtstage gewidmet von Freunden und schülern*, Berlin, pp.103-112.

²² *AEL III*, p.59.

²³ Otto, *Die biographischen Inschriften*, p.47.

²⁴ *AEL III*, pp.6-7; Erman, *Zwei Grabsteine griechischer Zeit*, p.103.

the puberty age cannot change his bad fortune of being in *Hades* (the Greek underworld or Hells).²⁵

No effect could be found from Greek culture to the Egyptian autobiographies during the Ptolemaic period. The negative way of premature death of children occurred much earlier in the Egyptian texts. In the text “The Man Who Was Weary of Life” (or: man and his *ba*), which was one of the pessimistic literature of the Middle Kingdom, the *ba* told the man a series of stories to persuade him to live. One story involved a peasant who loaded his harvest into a boat at the time of taxation. He saw the darkness of a storm from the north, so he took the whole night watching over the boat. Unfortunately, his wife and children died “on a lake infested at night by crocodiles”. Finally, the widowed man set into his grief and began to cry. The text explained:

“Finally, he sat down and cried aloud, saying, ‘I weep not for the mother, for it is not within her power to go out from the West for another life on earth. I grieve for her children who were crushed in infancy, and who saw the face of the crocodile, without ever having lived’.”²⁶

The man did not weep for his wife, but rather for his children. He demonstrated that his grief is selective and that the death of his children is more tragic and worthy of grief than that of his wife.²⁷ The expressions of “crushed in infancy” and “saw the face of the crocodile before living the life” convey the tragic state for these kids.

CONCLUSION:

- Metaphors for premature death formed an especially important group among the metaphors classifications, which provided an image for the negative feelings over the sudden death in ancient Egypt.
- Metaphors for the premature death such as “torn up plant”, “carried off by sleep”, “breast in my mouth” and “Thirsting though water is beside me!” led to a pessimistic view towards those who died before the appointed time.
- Their death was before the appointed time, which did not assure their continuity between living communities, which convey the empathy feeling of the reader towards their situation, as they missed the joy in the second life unless be remembered.

²⁵ I am grateful to Dr. Nagwa Ibrahim, Professor of Tourism Guidance, Fayoum University for her discussion about mystery cults in Geek culture and clearing the point of missing the mystery cults for children caused them ending up in Hades; Garland R.(2001), *The Greek way of death*, Cornell pp.78-81.

²⁶ Simpson W. K.(1973), *The Literature of Ancient Egypt*, New Haven, p.182.

²⁷ O'Dell, *Emotional Landscape*, p.219

- No transaction of such these thoughts between the Greeks and the ancient Egyptians as both developed from two different views, Greeks conditioned practicing cult after puberty age to survive from hades. While, in Egypt, it is a matter of the deceased's memory among the living new generation.

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