Biographical Monuments: Displaying Selves and Lives in Ancient Egypt

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Abstract and Keywords

This chapter surveys the genre normally referred to by Egyptologists as 'biography' or 'autobiography', comprising texts, often inscribed on stone monuments, which recount, in various forms, events in a non-royal person's life and/or aspects of their moral character. Such biographies are attested from the third millennium BC to Roman times, making them one of the longest-lived and most characteristic textual genres known from ancient Egypt. The chapter begins by briefly summarizing issues surrounding the genre's definition, as well as the range of approaches taken by Egyptologists to its analysis. An overview of the display contexts for biography is then given, ranging across the walls of tomb-chapels to the bodies of stone statues set up in temples. The discussion deploys a broadly chronological structure in order to give a sense of development and scope. Some potential analytical implications of these contexts are highlighted, for example around performance and audience. The final discussion centres on features of content; these texts were products of a predominantly elite male world so, unsurprisingly, are usually highly idealizing presentations of character and action. The genre's richness and diversity in terms of themes and expression within this framework is highlighted.

Keywords: ancient Egypt, audience, autobiography, biography, commemorative statues, commemorative stelae, hieroglyphs, monuments, performance, subjectivity, temples, tombs

IMAGINE standing in the sun-soaked forecourt of a tomb chapel cut in the escarpment overlooking the Egyptian city of Elkab, which lies some 40 miles south of the ancient city of Thebes, modern Luxor. On stepping through the doorway into the dim interior of the chapel, a long hieroglyphic inscription, carved in forty columns on the chapel's east and south walls, becomes visible, partly lit by the sunlight streaming in through the door (Fig. 34.1).

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Fig. 34.1 The biographical inscription of Ahmose in his tomb at Elkab.

Source: Photo author's own.

A large figure of the tomb's owner, a man called Ahmose, is depicted on the wall with the text emanating from him in columns, as if it is his voice speaking. This performative effect is heightened by the fact that, unusually, the hieroglyphs are carved in reverse (retrograde), so that they face away from him towards the end of the inscription, and through the door towards the outside world. The smaller figure at his feet is his grandson who probably commissioned the composition—one of his titles given here is 'overseer of works in this tomb' (Baines 2020: 58–60). The inscription presents events in Ahmose's life, beginning in his youth but centred on his exploits and achievements as a soldier under three kings who ruled around 1539–1490 BC, the beginning of the Egyptian New Kingdom.

> I was born in the city of Nekheb (Elkab), my father being a soldier of the Dual King Seqenenre, true of voice…After I had established a household, I was taken to the ship (called) 'Northern' because of my valour. I followed the sovereign (life, prosperity, health) on foot when he paraded in his chariot. When the city of Avaris was besieged, I fought bravely on foot in the presence of His Person (the king)…I made a capture and carried off a hand, so when it was reported to the royal herald, the gold of valour was given to me. (Sethe 1906: 2.9–3.15, trans.: Lichtheim 1976: 12–15)

This is an example of the genre normally referred to by Egyptologists as 'biography' or 'autobiography', comprising texts which recount, in various forms, events in a non-royal person's life and/or aspects of their moral character. Such biographies are attested from the third millennium BC to Roman times, making them one of the longest-lived and most characteristic textual genres known from ancient Egypt. They were usually placed in mortuary settings, either inscribed on the walls of tombs or on commemorative statues (p. 464) and stelae set up in temples. They articulate and celebrate aspects of a life, developing themes concerned with the individual's relationship to the human sphere (including the dead), the king, and the gods.

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These compositions were generally intended for display—carved in hieroglyphs, the display form of the script, in contexts that were at least ideally visible to human audiences, the individual's family, peers, and future visitors (for discussions of exceptions: Baines 1992; von Lieven 2010), as well as to the gods. Thus, these texts are products of, and expound, a predominantly elite male world-view concerned with the public actions and character of men who held official, titled positions in the domains of the court, the administration, the priesthood, and the military. These were the men who could afford, or whose families could afford, to commission monuments. It is therefore unsurprising that Egyptian biographies are idealizing, almost always presenting the protagonist as a successful official who thought, spoke, and acted appropriately. References to untoward experiences or an individual's 'private' or 'inner' life are rare. In verses omitted from the extract quoted above, Ahmose mentions that he served in his father's stead before he took a wife. This mention of a wife, and the later reference to establishing a household, are relatively unusual evocations of what we might consider private life, and here they probably underscore distinctions and transformations in his status. Similarly, biographies of women, who normally were not title-holders in Egyptian hierarchies of power, are also unusual, and their occurrence is (p. 465) often associated with changes in the configuration of elite society and in the biographical genre in the first millennium BC (see e.g. Jansen-Winkeln 2004a; Baines 2020: 66–77).

Within such seemingly normative contexts of composition and display, a highly developed and distinct sense of individual identity can be created, and this was evidently a priority for some Egyptian elites (cf. van Walsem 2013). Thus, biographical monuments are not only rich sources of social and political histories, which have been the traditional focus of scholarship, they also offer insights into processes and priorities of individual self-fashioning, how these changed over time, and how they operated, for example, in relation to audiences, other monuments, and the architectural spaces and landscapes in which they were set up.

Definition

'Biographies' encompass many styles of text found on monuments of non-royal people, ranging from narratives like Ahmose's, which present a significant event or a number of events in a person's career, to expository descriptions of an individual's character, often without any narrative frame: 'I was silent with the wrathful, one who mingled with the ignorant, for the sake of quelling aggression. I was cool, free from haste, knowing the outcome, one who foresaw what would come' (stela of Ineni, 12th dynasty; see Table 34.1 below for dates; Parkinson 1991: 62). Lengthy narratives like Ahmose's were relatively rare in all periods, and biographical epithets are generally the most widely attested formulation. These condensed declarations of adherence to codes of moral and ideal behaviour are often part of justifications in funerary wishes or incorporated into title strings:

> member of the inner circle of the king, to whom the king spoke in private, master of the secrets of the king in his every place, who loved his lord and was beloved of

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> his lord, overseer of north- and southbound river traffic, who was dressed as a pure one of the king in the king's own cloth, who did what the god of his town loves every day, who did not allow a prisoner to languish in misery…the prince Somtutef[nakht]. (statue of Somtutefnakht, 26th dynasty: translation after Leahy 2011: 204)

(p. 466) Epithets can be ordered chronologically, thus mobilizing narrative potential (e.g. Dorman 2002), or focus on a specific and individual action or event, such as the safe delivery of a foreign royal wife: 'royal messenger in every foreign land, who returned from Hatti bringing its princess' (stela of Huy, 19th dynasty: Kitchen 1980: 79.16–80.1).

The styles of text encompassed by 'biography' or 'autobiography' in Egyptology are thus substantially and materially different from those designated by these terms in Classics and for modern literature, and Egyptian texts are indeed rarely included in discussions of the development of forms of life-writing (e.g. Jolly 2001). A phrase like 'self-presentation texts' might avoid the connotations and expectations those terms bring with them from other fields of enquiry (e.g. Morenz 2003) and would encompass context more fully (Baines 2004: 34–35). However, since these texts, including epithets, do present an account of a life and self, however formulaic and idealizing, 'biography' and 'autobiography' continue to be used. Autobiography tends to be preferred since it is seen as reflecting the first-person voice of the majority of texts. This voice is a fiction, vividly evoking the immediacy of personal presence, just as Ahmose stands before, and seems to speak, his story. The texts were almost certainly commissioned rather than authored by their owners, so that scholars who use 'autobiography' accept the fictional identity between author, narrator, and subject (e.g. Gnirs 1996: 195–198). I use 'biography' partly because it leaves these relationships between subject and implied author, and subject and 'self', open and multiple (see Vernus 2020: esp. 169–180). This flexibility is valuable for texts that make play with the potential voices of biography through use of the second and the third person (e.g. Frood 2007: 84–89, 104–106; 2013: 164–166). 'Biography' also makes wider reference to 'life-course'—we speak of the biographies of cities, buildings, and objects, as well as people. Such broader frameworks, especially as developed in archaeology (e.g. Gosden and Marshall 1999; Langdon 2001), are useful because they can encompass the physical and social contexts of biographical monuments, including the landscapes in which they were set up, which are vital to their interpretation.

Biography (or autobiography) is normally used to describe texts set up by non-royals, although royal monumental texts from most periods also use the first person to recount the achievements of kings. These are often comparable in language and tone, sometimes including subjective quality, to their non-royal counterparts: 'I have made my boundary, outsouthing my forefathers. I have exceeded what was handed down to me. I am a king, whose speaking is acting; what happens by my hand is what my heart plans…As my father lives for me, I speak true; there is no boastful phrase which has come from my mouth' (boundary stela of Senwosret III, 12th dynasty: Parkinson 1991: 43–46; discussions: Eyre 1990; 1996). The compositional milieu and audiences of non-royal biographies and royal historical inscriptions were very close, if not identical, so comparative analysis

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is valuable, from the linguistic to the material (also Eyre 2013: 123–124); Andrea Gnirs observes that the syntax and phrasing of parts of Ahmose's text draw on those of royal annals (Gnirs 1996: 230 n. 206). However, in most periods, the king's semi-divine status made him absolutely distinct from other humans, and the purposes and aims of royal texts should also be understood as distinct. Royal material is not included in the discussion here.

The intertextual relationships that biographies have with other genres, from royal inscriptions to poems, religious texts, and letters, have been one focus of analysis (e.g. Eyre 1990; Gnirs 1996). In many periods, biographies are also mixed, or set in meaningful (p. 467) association, with other genres that were traditionally included on non-royal monuments, such as hymns and songs (e.g. Gnirs 1996: 215–217; Frood 2013). These connections mean that biographical texts should not be defined rigidly. The same applies to texts that are more specifically biographical in content and inscribed in comparable contexts though not conventionally considered biographies. These include legal texts (e.g. Frood 2007: 89–91, 213–216) and texts and images recording an individual's appointment to office and reward by the king (e.g. ibid.: 35–39, 216–218). Extended texts inscribed in the early 4th-dynasty tomb of the high official Metjen (*c.*2550 BC), which are usually understood to be the earliest-known exemplar of the genre, comprise records of land endowments and include the description of an orchard (Baines 1999a: 32–34; Strudwick 2005: 192–194). The equally complex interplay with elements of monumental context, including pictures, is discussed below.

Although Egyptian biography, like any genre, is unstable, and has shifting, fuzzy boundaries, the degree of continuity in context and content across millennia shows that it was a recognized text type that was commissioned deliberately by officials and their families for monuments, always individualized to a greater or lesser extent, modernized (or not, therefore fashioned in an antique style), and occasionally subverted. An example of ancient awareness of the genre's potentials and limits is the fictional poem the *Tale of Sinuhe*, composed in the early second millennium BC, which begins as a traditional biographical text before utterly subverting that type in order to recount an individual's self-imposed exile from Egypt and the ideals of Egyptian life (Parkinson 1997; discussion: Parkinson 2002: 149–168). Verses from the poem are quoted in biographies hundreds of years later, probably without mobilizing the faultlines that they create (Parkinson 2009: 176–179). Similarly, a small number of biographical texts are explicitly framed as tales (e.g. Vernus 1978; Frood 2007: 85–86, 104–106; J.P. Allen 2009; Baines forthcoming), integrating them with these high-cultural forms and pointing to play with the fictionality of 'the self as a tale told' (A. Hahn 1998: 27) inside the normalizing framework of official, monumental discourse, as *Sinuhe* does outside it (Parkinson 2002: 167).

Scholarly Approaches

The self that is fashioned in biographical texts and through the monumental contexts in which they are inscribed is largely relational: the individual is often defined through his

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actions for, and the responses of, gods, the king, and people, including his peers and dependants, as well as the dead, with whom he is at least partly assimilated. Scholars therefore often use biographies as primary sources for examining these social connections, how they are expressed, and their changing implications for political and social history. A simple example is provided by themes of self-regulation, self-reliance, and care for one's own town or region, which are characteristic of texts from the First Intermediate Period (*c*.2125–1975 BC), a time of political fragmentation when some local areas were largely or entirely independent (but see Strudwick 2005: 43–44). Biographies have been productively integrated with other textual and archaeological evidence to explore a range of questions for this period and for the adjacent Old and Middle Kingdoms (e.g. Kóthay 2020; Moreno García 2001; 2013; 2020), notably social structure, patronage networks, and non-elite communities.

In treating biographies as historical sources, a primary approach is to study their phraseology by breaking texts down into their component parts, producing at minimum catalogues of phrases that are organized and analysed according to themes, such as relationships to social spheres including the king (e.g. Guksch 1994; Doxey 1998) or the treatment of indigenous concepts like *maat*, 'truth' or 'justice' (Kloth 2002: 77–111). Such lexicographic studies illuminate broad themes and allow nuanced analysis of continuity and change especially when integrated with discussions of whole texts (e.g. Rickal 2005). However, the isolation of phrases from their textual and spatial contexts can elide difference and diversity, as well as directing analysis away from the individual who constituted the ultimate focus of these texts.

These approaches also centre almost exclusively on the texts, in keeping with the previously dominant trend in the subject. Holistic studies that assess whole texts on something like their own terms, such as Eberhard Otto's (1954) thematically organized analyses of Late Period and Graeco-Roman Period biographies (also, e.g. Lichtheim 1992; 1997; Rickal 2005), treat context as an important framework but its implications remain underdeveloped. Fuller treatments of text, image, and physical context have tended to be in article-length, case-study analyses of single monuments or small groups of them (but see Bassir 2014). Particularly influential have been examinations of the earliest attested biographical inscriptions and their implications for the development of fictional literature (Baines 1999a; 1999b; Baud 2005). These studies emphasize the potential of a whole tomb space to thematize a life, an approach that is also relevant for later sources. Modelling related practices in temples is more difficult but is being developed (e.g. Baines 1996; Leahy 1999: esp. 191–192; 2011; Zivie-Coche 2001; Frood 2013). Such total analyses highlight individual choices and selections and can elucidate the meanings of personal monuments more broadly—what monuments do and how they do it (cf. Ma 2013). At the opposite level of detail, biographical texts have been a primary source in studies of syntax, while the particularities of their formulations have only recently become a strong focus (e.g. Stauder-Porchet 2015; Coulon 2020; Stauder 2020; Vernus 2020).

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Implications of Context, from Body to Landscape

The earliest surviving biographical texts were inscribed on tomb walls in cemeteries near the major northern city of Memphis (south of modern Cairo) around 2500 BC, during the 4th dynasty. They seem to have developed out of extended title strings, which were the earliest form of written self-presentation (Baud 2005: 93–96). Biographies are then almost continuously attested, in some form or other and with varying degrees of popularity, until the Roman conquest in 30 BC. Unlike earlier periods, including the preceding Ptolemaic dynasty, this conquest signalled a fundamental break in many traditions, including the inscription of biographies, which are attested by a single known outlier in the mid-second century AD (see Baines 2004). This section highlights some developments in biography (p. 469) over these millennia through discussion of elements of context and content. For reference, Table 34.1 gives conventional period designations with rough date ranges (from Baines and Malek 2000: 36–37).

Table 34.1 Chronology of Dynastic Egypt

Period	**Dynasties**	**Dates**
Old Kingdom	4–8	*c*.2575–2150
First Intermediate	9–11	*c*.2125–1975
Middle Kingdom	11–13	*c*.1975–1640
Second Intermediate	13–17	*c*.1630–1520
New Kingdom	18–20	*c*.1539–1075
Third Intermediate	21–25	*c*.1075–715
Late Period	25–30	*c*.715–332
Graeco-Roman		332 bc–ad 395

Note: date ranges are approximate until 664 bc, and are bc except where noted.

The physical context of monumental inscriptions is fundamental to any analysis of their meaning (e.g. E. Thomas 2013). For Egyptian biography, context encompasses media—the location of a text within a tomb and its relationship to other images and texts, pictures on a stela, the form of a statue—and landscape—the location of a tomb in a necropolis, visibility and proximity to other tombs, the position of a statue in a temple, the association of

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one text with others carved on a quarry wall. The dynamics of biography in different spaces and landscapes are variable and must be taken into account. The narrated selves of biography are shaped by, and shape, the spaces in which they are inscribed.

Egyptian biography was originally a tomb genre, inscribed, like Ahmose's, on walls or other architectural elements as part of decorative programmes in the accessible, 'public' parts of monumental complexes. Tombs centre on the body of the deceased, marking his burial place, which was normally underground and inaccessible after the funeral. They also ensured the perpetuation of his cult and memory after death through the public areas, which could encompass a room, or series of rooms, and courts, ideally decorated with scenes and texts and often statues. The content of decorative programmes is diverse and changed over the millennia, but in many periods included images of 'daily life' (e.g. agriculture, hunting and fishing, games and music) and/or ones relating to the tomb-owner's official duties and activities (e.g. tax-collecting, royal audiences, supervising workshops). Biographies tend to be inscribed in outer areas that also bear less sacred material, as opposed to primarily religious scenes and texts, such as those relating to the funeral, images of ritual, and images of gods. These scenes celebrated the deceased and his lived world, as well as inviting visitors to maintain his cult, particularly through offerings, ideally ensuring the individual's continuing role in this world and his survival in the next.

Each owner and his family created his own distinctive tomb by adapting and transforming a general model (e.g. Hartwig 2004; van Walsem 2013). Biography was one possible component of the model, adding dimensions of meaning to the whole space. An example at a detailed level is an unparalleled scene in the New Kingdom tomb of Amenemhab showing him confronting an impossibly large hyena, 'an imaginary depiction, perhaps of a nightmare episode with personal importance for Amenemhab, which resonates with the fictionalizing and dramatizing biographical text inscribed nearby' (Baines 2013: 83–84, with Fig. 20). These implications extend to landscape, as Janet Richards (2010; forthcoming) shows through her studies of the dynamic political and religious landscapes of late third millennium Abydos, at the heart of which lies a biographical monument of one high official.

Potential locations for biography diversified at the end of the third millennium BC, when inscriptions recording expeditions through deserts and into quarries included biographical statements (e.g. Strudwick 2005: 146). By the First Intermediate Period, biographies could be inscribed on stelae and statues that were set up in places of cult and festival other than cemeteries. No later than the Middle Kingdom, these included temples for gods. Temples were dwelling places for deities and stages for the ritual performances that surrounded them, including festivals. By setting up stelae or statues in temples, or by dedicating them for family members and colleagues, people sought to maintain their own cult, while also (p. 470) asserting their presence in the temple and ongoing participation in the divine cult and festivals.

Biographical monuments are increasingly well attested in temples from the early New Kingdom onwards, concomitant with massive royal investment in temple-building. Non-royal temple monuments reached a high point during the Third Intermediate Period and

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Late Period in Thebes, when many hundreds of statues, often bearing biographies, were dedicated in the temple complex of Karnak (e.g. Jansen-Winkeln 1985; 2001). This development may have been stimulated in part by changes in burial practices, at a time when monumental tombs had largely ceased to be built in the area, so that temples were the prime loci for individual commemoration. The content of biographies changed too, including revelatory descriptions of the experience of temple space, such as that inscribed on the rear surface of the statue of the 22nd-dynasty vizier Nespaqashuty (Fig. 34.2): 'I saw (the god) Amun in his *akhet*-horizon in the hall of images, after he emerged from the *bakhu*-horizon, and then I understood that the gods are his manifestations, since I saw them before him arranged in two rows; I was (appropriately) robed, bearing the insignia of (p. 471) Maat' (Jansen-Winkeln 1985: 558). There was a resurgence in tomb-building and tomb biography in the Late Period, but temple statues and stelae remained central media for these texts into Ptolemaic times.

Fig. 34.2 Limestone biographical statue of Nespaqashuty (height: 73cm) from the temple of Amun at Karnak.

Source: after Legrain (1914: pl. 40).

The claim to temple space made by dedicating a stela or statue was extended and transformed by a biographical text. As the most strongly individualizing text type, biographies had the potential to personalize and individualize the spaces in which they were set up. Statues, which depict a person in however conventional and idealizing a manner, encapsulate this potential most powerfully because they could be agents. A statue of the New Kingdom high priest Roma, set up in the temple of Amun at Karnak, speaks about its presence in the temple, requesting that it 'be established on earth, my name carved and visible on it for eternity…so that (the god) Amun address it each time he appears, and (the gods) Mut and Khonsu assent to it as they do to the great ones' (Kitchen 1982: 130.13–15; Frood 2007: 53). The statue also bears a biographical text describing Roma's

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service for Amun and the roles his sons took up in the temple, binding the separate lives of statue and person, the expectations and practices that encompassed them both, and the prospect of its and his endurance down the generations. Moreover, when temple walls became a medium for non-royal self-presentation in the New Kingdom—formal temple decoration was usually restricted to images of kings and gods—biographical material is prominent (e.g. Caminos 1998: 27–31, pls. 14, 18–19; Frood 2007: 54–59; and see Bickel 2013).

Tombs, monuments in temples, and inscriptions carved in quarries or on expedition routes represented investments by individuals in perpetuating themselves and their memories beyond death, but they were also immensely important for the living. I began this chapter with Ahmose's tomb and his biography, partly to give a sense of engagement with material that might be unfamiliar; such compositions also raise questions about the ancient experience of these texts, especially audience and performance. Who would know of them? Who would read or hear them?

Members of the individual's group—family, colleagues, friends, dependants—as well as his superiors, sometimes even including the king, would have been aware that a monument was being commissioned, and that a biography was being composed. A text inscribed on the 5th-dynasty false door stela of Niankhsakhmet, which records his request for this false door from the king and the king's subsequent gift of two, acknowledges the social institutions that could surround monument creation:

> The great controller of craftsmen and a workshop of craftsmen then set to work on them (the doors) in the presence of the king himself. This work was carried out daily and the results were apparent every day during the palace tour. His majesty arranged for pigment to be placed on them, and they were decorated in blue. (translation after Strudwick 2005: 303; see also Baines 1999b: 22–23; cf. Chauvet 2013)

The ceremonial palace tour was probably a regular event including members of the court, so the prestige Niankhsakhmet accrued through this remarkable royal favour was also highly competitive.

For many texts, reading, in the sense of reading by and for oneself, is unlikely to have taken place for a number of reasons, from the basic issue of limited literacy through to the practicalities of reading a temple statue such as Nespaqashuty's (see Fig. 34.2), which probably would have sat in the bright sunlight of an open court that was perhaps cluttered (p. 472) with other statues. Oral performances are easier to model. Although the gap between spoken and written language was significant in most periods, something like a biography would, at least ideally, have been declaimed during the funeral, the dedication of a monument, or as part of significant occasions during a life, such as promotion or reward (Eyre 1993; 2013: esp. 122–124). Verses inscribed on Niankhsakhmet's door voicing his praise for the king may relate to a ceremony in which he offered the king thanks for the gift, as well as to events connected with its presentation to him (Baines 1999b: 22–23, also 29–31). Biographies like Ahmose's mobilize this possibility explicitly by being framed

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as an address: 'The crew commander Ahmose son of Ibana, true of voice, said: I speak to you, all people! I let you know what favours accrued to me…The name of the brave man is in what he has done; it will not perish in the land forever' (Sethe 1906: 1.16–2.6). That proverbial sentiment would have been known to an elite audience, and would have had a powerful effect when uttered. Imagining some sort of spoken performance sits well in tombs, which were places of return for the living and the dead. Similar addresses are attested on temple statues (e.g. Salvador 2014), which could have been the subject of performances relating to the texts inscribed on them, for example, when they were dedicated or a priest was initiated (Baines 2004: 35). Audiences may have been comparable too: temple space, especially the major state complexes from which much provenanced material comes, was probably restricted to staff and officials, groups that might have been substantial for some temples and at particular times such as festivals, which also provided occasions for performance.

Biographies are sources for other biographies. The transmission of formulae such as 'I gave bread to the hungry, clothes to the naked' across millennia suggests that there were repositories of phraseology (see e.g. Coulon 2020). There were also probably models of whole texts. One quite personal example is where stanzas from a temple statue of a 19th-dynasty high priest were copied a century and a half later in an inscription belonging to another high priest, then more than five hundred years later found on another statue, all three being set up in the same temple (Frood 2007: 78; Heise 2007: 90–91, 359–360). Some texts were known and sought out. The physical inscription remained vital, not just for its presence, but for details of its content and the materiality of its carving.

Aspects of Content: Ideals and Subjectivities

The relationship of biographical texts to spoken address is intertwined with the notion, stated explicitly from the Middle Kingdom onward (e.g. Posener 1976), that they could be teachings, offering models of behaviour and character along lines also found in the wisdom literature (but see Jansen-Winkeln 2004b): 'He says, in an instruction to his children: I speak so that I may cause you to hear what happened to me since the first day, since I came out between the thighs of my mother' (tomb inscription of Amenemhet, 18th dynasty: Helck 1956: 1408.17–1409.2). Among the very diverse contents of biographical texts, service to superiors—including the king and the gods—responsibilities for dependants, and proper conduct in speech and action are often central. There was a productive tension between generalized, conventional statements of adherence to norms and (p. 473) traditions and the articulation of distinct, unique lives and selves: 'Come and read this inscription which is on it (this stela). I have reported what actually happened to me; this is not something heard from the mouth of another' (stela of Khereduankh, Ptolemaic: translation after Jansen-Winkeln 1997: 93; and see also Coulon 1997). Many biographies include only formulae relating to moral character, but they too exhibit meaningful variability in selection, patterning, and context (e.g. Stauder-Porchet 2020: 90–96).

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A number of important biographical topics emerged in the 5th dynasty, crystallizing in the 6th. Texts changed gradually from short reports of single events, often formulated in the third person, to potentially lengthy first-person compositions sometimes encompassing whole careers (Stauder-Porchet 2011; 2015; 2020: 96–102). They also came to incorporate statements of ethical and moral values (for which see Lazaridis 2008; Moreno García 2020).

'I said what was perfect and repeated what was perfect. I spoke and acted truly. I gave bread to the hungry, clothes to the naked. I was respectful of my father and kind to my mother as far as I was able. I never said anything evil, unjust, or devious to any man' (tomb inscription of Idu, 6th dynasty: Strudwick 2005: 278). Variations on these themes and on parallel phrases are attested on monuments into Ptolemaic times, extending core meanings with sometimes elaborate imagery: 'I am…a refuge for the wretched, a float for the drowning, a ladder for him who is in the abyss…I have done what people love and gods praise, one truly revered who had no fault, who gave bread to the hungry, clothes to the naked' (Statue of Harwa, 25th dynasty: Lichtheim 1980: 26–27).

Themes of social responsibility assert the protagonist's superior status and resources. This inequality, as well as the need for actions to sustain it, resonates with wider principles of elite ideology—the maintenance of harmony, balance, and justice (*maat*)—as expanded in the wisdom literature. While most encomiastic biographies tend to be utterly secure in such claims to right action, others, as also in the wisdom literature, hint at the contingencies of lived experience, as in Idu's qualification above 'as far as I was able' (also Parkinson 2002: 259).

The king is a primary point of reference and motor for action, especially when the theme centres on events or career (e.g. Stauder 2020). In most periods, power and position are said ultimately to derive from him: he recognized potential, rewarded service, gave promotions and gifts, granted tomb sites, and commissioned works and expeditions. Formulations along these lines can seem all-encompassing, but the king also recognizes a person's inherent qualities, so character prefigures and stimulates favour. Biographies evoking palace life give some sense of the ritualized etiquette that surrounded the king and of how his presence regulated everything from speech and movement to accoutrement:

> Favourite of the king in his palace, in keeping commoners distant from him, to whom grandees came bowing at the gates of the palace…one whom grandees greeted, who was in front of the courtiers who approached the palace, who knew [what was secret] on the day the courtiers spoke, incense-laden, possessor of dignity on the day the poor could enter, one who reported to the king in privacy, whose seat was near (him) on the day of assembly. (Stela of Intef, 11th dynasty: translation after Lichtheim 1988: 50; Coulon 2002)

The final verses in this quotation assert the protagonist's privileged proximity to the king, in contrast to ordinary people as well as his peers. Themes of intimacy are developed in myriad ways, from a childhood spent at court—'he received swimming lessons together

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with the royal children' (ibid.: 29)—through patterned statements of service and reward like (p. 474) Ahmose's, to emotive reports of the experience of royal favour: 'One (the king) gave thanks to the god for me because of it (my deeds). He dispensed rejoicing and it filled my body; jubilation pervaded my limbs' (Baines 2013: 84). However, some of the earliest biographical accounts present an intimacy that could be problematic for the individual and the king through descriptions of illness or accidents. An inscription from the massive 5th-dynasty tomb complex of Rewer narrates how the king inadvertently struck Rewer with a club during a ritual, requiring this potentially dangerous contact to be neutralized (J.P. Allen 1992; Baines 1999b: 23–24; Strudwick 2005: 305–306). This stresses Rewer's prestige through proximity, and the value he was deemed to have, while the presentation of the king's fallibility humanizes his ideological position a little.

Expressions of comparable intimacy with gods are rare before the late second millennium BC, in keeping with restrictions in decorum around the representation of gods in non-royal contexts (e.g. Baines and Frood 2011). The increasing significance of temple environments as locations for biography from the Middle Kingdom onward influenced developments in this direction, as suggested by the emergence of priestly texts offering detailed accounts of cult performance:

> I was a pure-priest of the lord of Armant, libationer for the king of the gods, who entered the temple-door (called) 'lasting of years', who broke the seal in the sanctuary, who embellished the interior of the chapel, who removed impurities with his hands, who revealed those who are before him (images of gods). (Stela of Samontu, Second Intermediate Period: translation after Kubisch 2008: 328–332)

Possibilities for expressing unmediated relationships with gods expanded in the late second and first millennium BC (overview: Luiselli 2020). Some texts present conversations with gods, dreams about them, divine punishment, and forgiveness, while some, like Nespaqashuty's quoted above, give a vivid sense of personal experience of the divine through ritual.

In such accounts of the impact on the self of superior beings, who can 'penetrate minds, perceive hearts, and know what is in bodies' (translation after Frood 2007: 155), biographies open up to 'unexpected registers of feeling' (de Waal 2010: 37). Texts occasionally allude to subjective experience, like the account of joy in royal favour quoted above; the king's accident in Rewer's text might be comparable to this. Some focus around inner worlds of thought and feeling rather than external matters: 'He searched within himself and found (the goddess) Mut at the head of the gods' (Frood 2007: 86). The diversification of ways experience can be thematized and expressed intensifies in the first millennium BC with the emergence of new voices and themes in biography, alongside new media, such as coffins and sarcophagi (Baines 2004: 41–44; also Derchain 1999). For example, a text on the 30th-dynasty sarcophagus of the dwarf Djeho articulates the aspirations of his patron Tjaiharpta rather than his own (Baines 1992). Graeco-Roman Period biographies of women, although still composed by men, can express particularities of female experience:

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> I was pregnant by him (the high priest) three times but did not bear a male child, only three daughters. I prayed together with the high priest to the majesty of the god…he heard our pleas, he hearkened to our prayers.…In return he (the god) made me conceive a male child. (Stela of Taimhotep, reign of Cleopatra VII, 42 BC; Lichtheim 1980: 62)

The companion stela of Taimhotep's husband is a little more conventional in content, but the greatly desired birth of the son is still defining (Baines 2004: 56–59; 2020: 73–76). Thus, (p. 475) while traditional frameworks for biographies remained in place, the pluralistic Hellenistic world offered expansive and very distinctive alternatives for self-fashioning (also, e.g. Vittmann 1995; Coulon 2001).

Many biographies, including some quoted here, emphasize 'perfect speech' and the protagonist's education, including his skill in writing (Ragazzoli 2016). These themes not only assert elite ideals of eloquence and literacy, they also relate to the artfulness of the texts themselves: biographies were meant to delight as much as to teach. Clever wordplays developed through meaning and through the visual potential of the script, literary allusions, quotations, proverbs, vivid metaphor, and complex formulations all contribute to their aesthetic impact. This impact encompasses their material qualities, as is powerfully evoked in a Middle Kingdom artist's description of his unsurpassed skill in carving pictures, including hieroglyphs: 'I know the goings of male figures, the comings of female figures, the attitude of the eleven birds of prey, the convulsions of an isolated prisoner, the glances of one eye to its fellow, the expression of fear in the faces of enemies' (stela of Irtisen, 11th dynasty: translation after Andreu in Andreu et al. 1997: 79–81). This account also describes reflexively the beauty of the monument on which it is inscribed.

Conclusion

Egyptian biographies are texts of mediation and transformation, as Ahmose's text vividly illustrates. It mediates between his transfigured self and the outside world in multiple, highly self-reflexive ways, from its frame as a voiced address to the living, one that was very obviously made posthumously, to the way the inscription itself is carved to lead a 'reader' out the door. Despite such complexity, it can be tempting to discuss these texts in narrowly functional terms—one can say that they are almost entirely celebrations of individual and group qualities, competitively asserting status and prestige. That is, of course, part of their point. But there is resonance with other features of the lives told in the classical world, from the aesthetics of their composition and settings to the desire to articulate a contoured and distinctive self within the boundaries of established discourse. We can ask comparable questions about how we get from a life to a text (e.g. in classical sources), to a text on a monument (e.g. in Egyptian). In all these contexts, the construction of a self-presentation is obviously more likely to be reflexive than daily, lived experience where such issues may play out in different ways. As is so often observed (e.g. Assmann 1982: 971; A. Hahn 1998: 27–28), the necessary brevity and selectivity of a self-presentation make it more cohesive than is possible in lived experience, but it retains flexibil-

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ity and multiplicity, the potential for which is further extended in ancient Egypt by the monumental context. It is important to do as the texts ask and pay attention to this complexity, this art, this vibrant diversity and individuality.

Further Reading

The most detailed overview of the genre, geared to specialists, is Gnirs (**1996**; brief English summary: 2001). An edited volume by Stauder-Porchet, Frood, and Stauder (2020), also for specialists, treats various aspects in detail. Anthologies of translations, organized by periods and often with useful (p. 476) introductory discussions, make a range of texts accessible to non-specialists, e.g. E. Otto (1954), Lichtheim (**1988**), Frood (**2007**), Kubisch (**2008**; summary article in English: 2010), and Landgráfová (**2011**). Collections of translations of a wide range of texts, including biographies, allow them to be compared to other genres and styles of monument, e.g. Lichtheim (**1973**; **1976**; **1980**), Parkinson (**1991**), Simpson (2003), and Strudwick (**2005**). The best introduction to Egyptian biography in the Graeco-Roman period, thus closest to material that is the focus of this volume, is Baines (**2004**). A highly accessible edited volume treating Egyptian self-presentation in language and art, encompassing a range of media and genres, and organised chronologically (but excluding Graeco-Roman material) is Bassir (2019).

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