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A PORTRAIT OF ANCIENT EGYPTIAN COMMON
LIFE: THE CYCLE OF ORDER AND CHAOS
IN *THE TALE OF SINUHE*

COURTNEY DOTSON

Centered in Egypt's literary history is the theme of order and chaos, usually shown on a grand scale in connection with the gods, the king or the physical land of Egypt. These themes of stability and mayhem are portrayed throughout the Middle Kingdom classic poem *The Tale of Sinuhe*. Yet the purpose of the tale is not to give mythological or a philosophical account of these themes. Instead it gives the story of a man, Sinuhe, who experiences the cycle of order and turmoil in his life. The author uses mainstream Egyptian ideology and imagery to thematically expound upon these cycles and how they were experienced by the common ancient Egyptian.

Before any plot in *The Tale of Sinuhe* unfolds, the protagonist reveals his personal status in Egypt. He maintains that, before the conflict of the tale, he was "a servant of the royal harem, waiting on the Princess, the highly praised Royal Wife of King Sesostris in Khenemsut, the daughter of King Amenemhet."¹ While Sinuhe originated from the upper class, he still represents the common Egyptian in that, he makes mistakes, gets hurt, and suffers. Being a servant of the royal family was a high position; it shows that the king had trusted Sinuhe and that Sinuhe had a stable and honored place in society.

The framework of the poem, namely, autobiographical, is one of the earliest Egyptian genres of literature. After reciting his identity and position, Sinuhe introduces the event that would trigger the spark of chaos into his life: "the god ascended to his horizon."² Amenemhet I, king of Upper and Lower Egypt, had died and ascended to heaven. By nature, the death of any king would bring some amount of chaos to a nation: Who would rule next? Would there be coups? Revolts? Yet when the king's eldest son, Sesostris, on a campaign in Libya, heard the news, "not a moment did he delay. The falcon flew with his attendants."³ On the outward appearance, the transition of kings appears to have commenced smoothly. However, there seems to be some evidence that Amenemhet I was murdered, though the death of the king is not what brings disarray into Sinuhe's life.⁴ It nevertheless has a part to play.

1. "Sinuhe," trans. by Miriam Lichtheim (COS 1.38:77–82), 77.

2. "Sinuhe," 77.

3. "Sinuhe," 77.

4. In *The Teachings of Amenemhat I*, an instruction written to his son and co-regent

Amenemhet's Political Role in Egyptian History

The death of Amenemhet I in *The Tale of Sinuhe* functions to compare the turmoil that is felt by the Egyptians as a nation to the turmoil that is soon to enter Sinuhe's life. Using the imagery of the demise of a king would bring to the minds of the Egyptian people the myth of the resurrection of Osiris by his son Horus. Belonging to the fourth generation of gods, Osiris was a king over Egypt and taught the people how to live civilly.⁵ His perfect kingdom came to a halt when he was killed by his brother Seth, cut up into little pieces, and spread across the Nile. This act symbolized the chaos that then entered the world. Order was not to be restored again until Osiris's son Horus had defeated Seth and sectored the cosmos. Applied to the time of Sinuhe, the dead father of the current king was considered to be an embodiment of Osiris and his son the living king was Horus.⁶ Ideologically, every time a king died chaos would enter the land of Egypt again, and order would not be restored until the new king ascended his throne.

On a broader scale, this happened during the First Intermediate Period prior to the Middle Kingdom. Near the end of the sixth dynasty, central control in the monarchy was crumbling. Discussion as to why this happened has not yet reached a conclusion among modern scholars. Suggestions include drought, which might have caused the people to rebel against the king, or "increased pressures from the frontiers" and "provincial families erod[ing] royal power by seizing privileges for themselves."⁷ What scholars do know is that ruling families emerged in Herakleopolis and Thebes. After civil war between the two ruling cities, the Thebans proved victorious and established the eleventh dynasty.⁸ Though a united monarchy was recognized in Egypt, the eleventh dynasty was not able to reach the point of unification the monarchies had maintained during the Old Kingdom. However, the eleventh dynasty was followed by a new age in Egypt: the Middle Kingdom. Considered the classical age of Egyptian history, the Middle Kingdom brought about the unity and glory of the Old Kingdom and even exceeded it.⁹ The eleventh dynasty ended in chaos, which allowed for the birth of the twelfth dynasty.

Founder Amenemhet I is believed to have been the vizier of the last king of the eleventh dynasty, Mentuhotep IV.¹⁰ This assumed, then Amenemhet

Sesostris, he tells him about attempts that have been made on his life. More details can be found in Ian Shaw, ed., *The Oxford History of Ancient Egypt* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 160.

5. R. T. Rundle Clark, *Myth and Symbol in Ancient Egypt* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1978), 103.

6. Clark, *Myth*, 107.

7. Amelie Kuhrt, *The Ancient Near East c. 3000–300 B.C.*, vol. 1 (New York: Routledge, 1995), 171.

8. It was fourteen years into the reign of Mentohotep II that the final phase of civil war ended. The Tomb of the Warriors at Deir el-Bahri are believed to be the bodies of the heroes in the battle during the civil war because of their proximity to the royal cemetery. For more information. See Shaw, *The Oxford History*, 151.

9. Wolfram Grajetzki's states in his book *The Middle Kingdom of Ancient Egypt* that "for the ancient Egyptians of later times, the Middle Kingdom was the classical period of their arts, history and literature" (London: Duckworth, 2006), 1.

10. Grajetzki states that "four Wadi Nammamat inscriptions mention the vizier Amenemhat. . . . It has been assumed that he was the future King Amenemhat I and that he

I came to acquire the throne of Egypt through an exceptionally scandalous method: usurpation. Most likely, Amenemhet I was accepted as the new king of Egypt by the people, but he still needed to propagate that he was *the* legitimate king. A popular theory among scholars of how he accomplished his goal was through the production of the literary text of *The Prophecies of Neferti*.¹¹ I agree with scholars like Hans Goedicke, who argues that the text was not purely propaganda; I do believe, however, that propaganda was a driving force in the creation of the literature. The setting of the tale takes place during the reign of King Snefru in the fourth dynasty. At court, Neferti prophecies that soon calamities would befall the land of Egypt; “Re separates himself (from) mankind,” “the land has perished” and “man killing his (own) father.”¹² Probably alluding to the First Intermediate period, the author is trying to conjure the imagery of the disorderliness during that time. While the gods most likely did not forsake Egypt, the land probably did not completely “perish,” and not every son was killing his father. The audience nevertheless got the message that Egypt was not in her glory days.

Yet Neferti tells the court to not despair, feeding hope to the king Snefru and readers of Amenemhet’s day by declaring that “a king will come from the south, Imeny, the justified, is his name.”¹³ The king named in the prophecy is Imeny, which according to Miriam Lichtheim and other scholars is a nickname for Amenemhet.¹⁴ The literary motif used to introduce the new king is sometimes referred to as a “redeemer” king—Lichtheim says that “redemption [comes] through the rise of a great king,” and Goedicke uses the term “savior king.”¹⁵ Essentially, if the dating of *The Prophecies of Neferti* is correct, then the tale was used in part as propaganda to instill in the minds of the Egyptians that Egypt needed to be saved and that Amenemhet I was the one to save them.¹⁶

was the real power in Egypt at this time.” Grajetzki also acknowledges that this “assumption is not proven, though hypothesis that the vizier and the later king are identical is at least possible” (Grajetzki, *Middle Kingdom*, 26).

11. Many scholars, such as R. O. Faulkner, Miriam Lichtheim, and Hans Goedicke, believe that the Prophecy of Neferti was written during or in connection to Amenemhet I, though they do not agree as to the purpose of why it was written. Faulkner believes that it was written “to ensure his position” as political propaganda (R. O. Faulkner, “Prophecies of Neferti,” in *The Literature of Ancient Egypt* [ed. William Kelly Simpson. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1973], 234). Lichtheim believes it was written as a “glorification” of Amenemhet I and as a “historical romance in pseudo-prophetic form” (“The Prophecies of Neferti,” *Ancient Egyptian Literature* [Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1975], 1:139). Goedicke believes that “there is no reason to doubt Neferyt’s contemporaneity with Amenemhet I” but he gives the caveat that “there is no indication in the text of any contact by Neferyt with the court of Amenemhet I” (Hans Goedicke, *The Protocol of Neferyt* [Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977], 11).

12. “The Prophecies of Neferti,” trans. Miriam Lichtheim (COS 1.45:106–110), 108–9.

13. “The Prophecies of Neferti,” 109.

14. “The Prophecies of Neferti” (AEL 1:139). The same interpretation for Imeny as a nickname for Amenemhet I is accepted by Hans Goedicke, *The Protocol*, 4, as well as by Grajetzki, *The Middle Kingdom*, 29.

15. “The Prophecies of Neferti” (AEL 1:139), and Goedicke, *The Protocol*, 4.

16. Goedicke states that “the date of the composition as well as its authorship is still an unsettled question” (Hans Goedicke, “Sinuhe’s Epistolary Salutations to the King,” *Journal of the American Research Center in Egypt* 41 [2004], 5).

Legitimizing his rule, Amenemhet I was finally able to justify his taking of the title of king of Upper and Lower Egypt, uniting the two lands under one ruler after three hundred years of turmoil. Knowing the history of how Amenemhet I ascended the throne helps us to fully understand and sympathize with Sinuhe when mayhem enters his life.

The Chaos of Sinuhe

In *The Tale of Sinuhe*, the co-regent and prince, Sesostri, is on his way back to Itj-towy to claim the throne.¹⁷ Before he arrives, Sinuhe finally reveals what it is that turns his world upside down. He claims:

The royal sons who had been with him on this expedition had also been sent for. One of them was summoned while I was standing (there). I heard his voice, as he spoke, while I was in the near distance. My heart fluttered, my arms spread out, a trembling befell all my limbs. I removed myself in leaps, to seek a hiding place.¹⁸

It is not necessarily the death of the king that throws Sinuhe into confusion, it is what he overhears one of the royal sons say. Unfortunately, Sinuhe never reveals what was said, but three popular theories have been proposed: (1) that he overheard the news of the pharaoh's death and became irrational, (2) that he misunderstood the message, or (3) that he overheard the "hatching of the plot" to kill pharaoh.¹⁹ Sinuhe was in Libya with Sesostri and the other royal sons at the time; he decided though to "set out southward. [He] did not plan to go to the residence."²⁰ By leaving Egypt, Sinuhe metaphorically leaves order and descends into chaos.

At this juncture in the text, the format changes from autobiographical to several different forms, including narratives, eulogies, royal decrees, etc. Thus the framework of the tale itself mirrors the erratic nature of Sinuhe's state of mind, once again emphasizing the order and chaos cycle that happened in the individual lives of ancient Egyptians.

Finally descending into chaos, Sinuhe informs the reader that "land gave me to land. I traveled to Byblos; I returned to Qedem. I spent a year and a half there."²¹ The wanderings of Sinuhe in the Levant illuminate his psychological frame of mind. Egyptologist Antonio Loprieno states that the journey motif in Middle Kingdom literature is "a paradigm of an intellectual journey to a fuller understanding of humans in society," illustrating a dramatic change in their perspective.²² Sinuhe knows when he leaves Egypt that he will not find peace until he returns to the land of order. This opinion does not change in Palestine.

17. Amenemhat I moved the Egyptian capital from Thebes to Itj-towy, because it was a more neutral setting for the capital between Upper and Lower Egypt.

18. "Sinuhe," 77.

19. Scott Morschauer, "What Made Sinuhe Run: Sinuhe's Reasoned Flight," *Journal of the American Research Center in Egypt* 37 (2000): 187–198.

20. "Sinuhe," 77. Itj-towy is translated as "the residence," referring to returning to the palace in the capital.

21. "Sinuhe," 78.

22. Antonio Loprieno, "Travel and Fiction in Egyptian Literature," in *Mysterious Lands* (ed. David O'Connor and Stephen Quirke; University College London: Institute of Archaeology, 2003), 37.

Considered the most historically accurate part of the tale, Sinuhe lives in Syria until he is an old man. After his first couple of years of wandering, he meets Ammunenshi, the ruler of Upper Retenu. Ammunenshi says to Sinuhe, "You will be happy with me; you will hear the language of Egypt." Sinuhe claims he said this "because he knew my character and had heard of my skill, Egyptians who were with him having borne witness for me."²³ It is possible that Egyptians would have been in the Levant at that time. In fact the "Middle Kingdom culture was now more open to foreign influences than that of the Old Kingdom."²⁴ Earlier Sinuhe mentioned some cities that he went through during his wanderings; one of the mentioned cities was Byblos.²⁵

The twelfth dynasty was able to get a foothold into Palestine and commenced in trading with its many cities, Byblos among them. From Byblos, ancient Egyptians would obtain high-quality cedar wood imported from Lebanon.²⁶ Egyptian influence also extended southward to Nubia, where they built massive fortresses with glacis and watchtowers. Whereas the ancient Egyptians occupied Nubia and subjected the population for mining and quarrying, it seems that Egypt was interested "in fostering close diplomatic relations" with Palestine.²⁷ *The Tale of Sinuhe* gives support to this claim of Egypt trying to foster good relations. During his wanderings Sinuhe becomes famished; he declares that "this is the taste of death."²⁸ Asiatics²⁹ then arrive on the scene and give him water and boiled milk. Sinuhe claims that the leader recognizes him. The kindness bestowed on Sinuhe from the Palestinians paints a picture of strong relations between Egypt and Palestine. While the evidence is not definite, archeological remains and insights from literary texts seem to validate these descriptions.

During Sinuhe's first meeting with Ammunenshi, Ammunenshi inquires about the state of Egypt after the death of Amenemhet. Assuring Ammunenshi that Egypt is doing well, Sinuhe launches into a beautiful panegyric on the merits of the new king, Sesostri. Claiming that "he is a God who is peerless, before whom no other exists. He is a lord of understanding, excellent of plans, effective of orders."³⁰ The praise which Sinuhe lavishes upon Egypt in a foreign land illustrates that he has not undergone a dramatic change intellectually; he still believes that Egypt is the paramount nation and that the king is the embodiment of all that was good. His faith in this had not wavered, so it is interesting to note that he does not return to Egypt after a few years. This leads the reader to the conclusion that Sinuhe needed to find resolution before the grip of chaos would let him go. And because Egypt is doing fine, chaos does not stem from the death of the king. Only when the resolution of his panic and fleeing is resolved can he obtain peace and stability in his life.

23. "Sinuhe," 78.

24. Grajetzki, *The Middle Kingdom*, 133.

25. Byblos was the Phoenician capital, also known as Gebal.

26. Grajetzki, *The Middle Kingdom*, 136.

27. These watch towers were established between the first and second cataracts. Kuhr, *Ancient Near East*, 168–71.

28. Sinuhe," 78.

29. "Asiatics" is a term for people who lived in Asia or in the eastern desert (Grajetzki, *The Middle Kingdom*, 20).

30. "Sinuhe," 78.

Another device utilized in the tale to expound upon Sinuhe's turmoil is his creation of a new life and identity in Palestine as a substitute for Egypt. Ammunenshi, the ruler of Upper Retenu, takes the place of the king of Egypt in Sinuhe's life. At the beginning of the tale, Sinuhe claims the title of "true acquaintance of the King," then, while living with Ammunenshi, he claims the same intimacy with him, informing the reader that "much also came to me because of the love of me; for he had made me chief of a tribe in the best part of his land."³¹ Sinuhe had now obtained the trusted friendship of two kings. Heaping on him praises and luxuries, Ammunenshi gave Sinuhe his eldest daughter to wife and appointed him ruler over a tribe. Spending almost the rest of his life in Palestine, Sinuhe gained a family, occupation, wealth, and respect. Yet prospering in Retjenu was not enough for Sinuhe; it could not give him the stability that Egypt divinely maintained.

The Order of Sinuhe

Lamenting in his old age, Sinuhe cries out, "Whichever god decreed this flight, have mercy, bring me home! Surely you will let me see the place in which my heart dwells!"³² Nearing death, Sinuhe longs for resolution in his life; his cries are answered. Sesostis is told of Sinuhe's longings to return home and sends a letter of hope to him. Telling Sinuhe that he has done no evil in his eyes, Sesostis declares to Sinuhe that it was own heart which carried him away and "it was not in [Sesostris'] heart."³³ The king offers Sinuhe an olive branch, insinuating that even though he does not understand the reasons for his flight from Egypt, he does not care; he just wants him to come home to Egypt. R. B. Parkinson contends that a "royal letter is a motif of autobiographical inscriptions and marks the start of a gradual reassertion of order on a formal level."³⁴ Just as the passing of an Egyptian king symbolizes chaos entering his life, the emergence of an Egyptian king symbolizes the return of order to his life. The king gives Sinuhe a sarcophagus of gold and lapis lazuli as a house-warming gift. The gift of a coffin by the king was considered a great honor and a sign of respect. In the *Autobiography of Weni* from the Old Kingdom, Weni records that the king had given him a white sarcophagus and "never before had the like been done in this Upper Egypt."³⁵ Assuring Sinuhe that he is wanted back in Egypt, the king also reminds him that Egypt is his home and where he should be buried.

Returning to the land of Egypt is not enough to take the chaos out of the life and heart of Sinuhe, however. It does symbolize that a transition would soon take place; just as chaos had entered Sinuhe's life when he left Egypt, returning foreshadows order about to enter his life again. Kneeling before the king, Sinuhe declares, "Here I am before you. Life is yours. May your Majesty do as he wishes!"³⁶ Putting his life into the king's hands was the only way for

31. "Sinuhe," 77, 79.

32. "Sinuhe," 80.

33. "Sinuhe," 80.

34. R. B. Parkinson, *The Tale of Sinuhe and other Ancient Egyptian Poems* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 24.

35. Miriam Lichtheim, "The Autobiography of Weni" in *Ancient Egyptian Literature: A Book of Readings* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), 21.

36. "Sinuhe," 82.

the chaos in Sinuhe's life to end. The king was the *only* one who could end the turmoil in Sinuhe's life because he was the *only* one with the authority to forgive him. Upon pardoning him, Sesostriis decreed that Sinuhe "shall not fear, he shall not dread! He shall be a Companion among the nobles."³⁷ Sinuhe is then washed, shaved, and given Egyptian garments. His physical cleaning is as a metaphor to show that now all evidence of his life in chaos had been washed away.

The last paragraph gave hope to ancient readers that the stability and peace Sinuhe found in the latter end of life would be forever experienced in the afterlife. Parkinson suggests that the tomb is a "link between the imperfect world of men and the perfection of the otherworld."³⁸ Therefore it is appropriate that Sinuhe's described his "stone pyramid," "funerary . . . garden" and a golden statue of himself that the king made.³⁹ The author is now transcending the everyday rustics of chaos with the eternal bliss of peace. Thus Sinuhe finds order in his death, order which will carry on with him into the afterlife. Echoing the words of Weni, Sinuhe ends his tale with "there is no commoner for whom the like had been done."⁴⁰

Conclusion

While many scholars mainly view *The Tale of Sinuhe* as nationalist propaganda, and though it certainly contains that element, they are missing the insight that the tale reveals to modern readers about the everyday life of an ancient Egyptian. In the minds of the ancient Egyptians, the cycles of order and chaos were real, manifested through myth, religion, and the propaganda of new kings. Yet this psychological view on the ups and downs of life did not just exist to the ancient Egyptians as stories on papyrus—it was lived by them all the days of their lives.

37. "Sinuhe," 82.

38. Parkinson, *The Tale of Sinuhe*, 26.

39. "Sinuhe," 82.

40. "Sinuhe," 82.