

Some Remarks on the Pig in the Egyptian pBrooklyn 47.218.156, x+IV, 1

*By Stefan Bojowald**

This article examines the Egyptian pBrooklyn 47.218.156, x+IV, 1. Specifically, it addresses the question of the meaning of the pig. The explanation recently proposed by Theis with a Sethian creature is further expanded. The solution offered here lies in a connection to the aspect of impurity. The principle is well-known in Egyptian literature. A comparison with Akkadian literature supports this explanation.

Keywords: *Egyptian literature, pBrooklyn 47.218.156, x+IV, 1, impurity of the pig*

Introduction

This article takes a new approach to the Egyptian pBrooklyn 47.218.156, x+IV, 1. The following lines aim to elucidate the meaning of an ominous pig in greater detail. Previous research has rarely addressed this topic. However, there seems to be some recent movement in this area. A definite breakthrough, however, has not yet been achieved. The emphasis here is placed on the aspect of impurity. Comparison with Akkadian literature provides the necessary clarity.

Material

The manuscript must first be briefly described. The most important technical data can be summarized as follows: Its provenance points to the city of Elephantine, located on the southern border of Egypt. The same origin applies to other hieratic magica from the Wilbour Lot. Based on palaeographic criteria, the text can be dated to the 26th dynasty (Verhoeven 2001, 304-328). Converting to modern dates, this corresponds to the 6th century BC. The division of Egyptian history into dynasties goes back to the Hellenistic writer Manetho, who compiled the annals of his own land for the Ptolemaic rulers (for Manetho cf. Helck 1956, passim, Hornung 2012, sp. 1-6). The Greek occupiers were thus made aware about the achievements of this ancient civilization. Posterity coined the term „Saitic Renaissance“ for that era, a time of rediscovery of historical heritage and the large-scale, faithful copying of artworks from the past. The phenomenon describes a cultural movement during the Late Period of Egypt, characterised by a strong focus on great models from phases such as the Middle Kingdom. The modern name for this cultural phenomenon was

*Lecturer, University of Bonn, Germany.

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borrowed from the capital city of the time. Some of the pieces created at that time, are, even to experts, virtually indistinguishable from the older models. Similar trends can be observed in Mesopotamia at that time. The intellectual climate thus dominated the entire Near East. The much-discussed Axial Age casts its long shadows before it. The name Karl Jaspers as its founding father should be recalled in this context. The concept of the Axial Age describes an era in which new philosophical and religious systems emerged independently across the globe – in China, India, Persia, Palestine, and Greece – transcending mythical thinking and shaping modern humanity. The papyrus under consideration likely originates from a temple library, which deviates from the usual pattern due to the absence of manuscripts from the normal temple cult (Quack 2021, 392). The content deals with the threat to the king posed by various evils. The manuscript, as a small piece of supplementary information, belongs to the most important accounts of multi-headed Bes figures. The dwarf god Bes was primarily invoked for the protection of pregnant women and newborns. The crucial text reads as follows:

„ḏd mdw ‘h’=tn (sic!)² ḏ3<ii> ḏ3<ii>.t ḥḏr.t š‘r.t ‘m3m.t n.t imn.tt śnḏ nb ‘
nb n iwiw mwt mwt.t śḥm(.t) ḏ3<ii> ḏ3<ii>.t ḥft(i) ḥft(i).t nti iw=śn r ii r
Pr-‘3 ‘nh wḏ3 śnb m grḥ m hrw nw nb n r’ nb“ (Sauneron 1970, 23; x+IV, 1)

„Words to be spoken: You shall stand still, adversary (and) adversary-woman, pig, door-guardian, devourer of the west, every³ fear, every influence of a dog, dead man (and) dead woman, adversary (and) adversary-woman, foe (and) foe-woman, who might act against the Pharaoh by night and day, every hour of the day.“

Discussion

The explanation of the meaning of the pig is of utmost importance here. The greatly abbreviated statement places considerable obstacles in the way of the task. The individual puzzle pieces must be fitted together to form the most convincing overall picture possible. Contemporaries faced fewer challenges, who had the advantage over their modern-day descendants of possessing the necessary prior knowledge. They were so deeply rooted in their own cultural environment that this ability can safely be assumed. Today’s interpreter is more or less reliant on conjecture. The only glimmer of hope is to coax one or two secrets from the text. In this sense, the following remarks are intended only as a working hypothesis.

Research has recently rediscovered this topic. In a new edition of the papyrus, Theis (2025, 89) seeks to define the pig as a Sethian creature. The term, derived

²The emendation of Theis 2025, 89, who adds „=tn“ behind „h“ and cancels „n.t“, is unnecessary if one understands „nt“ as a defective spelling of „tn“.

³The rendering of „nb“ as „jergendein“ by Theis 2025, 90, is far too weak and should therefore be rejected. The present author can not completely avoid the suspicion that this translation was inspired by Coptic.

from the fratricidal god Seth (to the god Seth cf. still Te Velde 1977, *passim*), refers to all kinds of evil powers. The pig thus acquires an extremely dubious character. The next lines start the attempt to get a little bit beyond Theis in the contribution just mentioned. The interpretation is retained here, but a somewhat different cause is sought.

In the next few lines, particular importance is given to the aspect of impurity. The concept behind it is by no means new. The Egyptian idea of the uncleanness of pigs can also be found in other texts. A brief overview of the relevant sources is provided below. The already illusory claim of completeness should not even be made. However, the examples mentioned can be considered representative. The impurity of pigs is also encountered in the calendar omens from the New Kingdom (Vernus 1981, 91), which contains reports of a boar which proximity causes an illness. The Book of the Dead is the next example which is part of the funerary literature of the New Kingdom and was intended to protect the non-royal deceased from the dangers of the afterlife. The content is made up of around 190 spells. Knowledge of the topography there should be conveyed as a further task. The Book of the Dead represents, in chronological order, the third largest text corpus of this type after the Pyramid Texts of the Old Kingdom and Coffin Texts of the Middle Kingdom. The postscript to BD 125 contains the requirement for soil that no pig has stepped on (Lapp 2008, 286a-287a). The containment from the pig should be kept away from the deceased. The line can even be extended to Late Antiquity. The decisive example consists of the Greek-written decree of the strategos of Ombos and Elephantine, which dates from the year 248/249 AD (Eide et al. 1988, 977). The inscription is on the wall of the pronaos of the temple of Mandulis in Kalabscha. The decree is directed against the pig owners of Kalabscha, who should keep their animals out of the temple. The uncleanness of the pig can also be imagined as a reason here. The Egyptian idea of the impurity of pigs is – incidentally – already mentioned by Herodotus (Herodot II, 47, for Herodotus cf. Erbse 1991, *passim*; Dewald and Marincola 2006, *passim*, Rengattos 2001, 338-380). The message dates only a little later than pBrooklyn 47.218.156. The statement must therefore definitely be taken serious. The explanation would also make a good sense with the pig motif in pBrooklyn 47.218.156, x+IV, 1. The example there can thus be placed in a larger context. The procedure should be methodologically permitted. The aspect fits well into the ranks of the other evil forces and is not a foreign body at all. As likely as this solution is, it remains hypothetical for now. To be absolutely sure, you have to look for further arguments.

In my opinion, the correct understanding cannot be found by considering the passage in isolation. The meaning only becomes really clear when the passage „nb n iwiw“ „every influence of a dog“ is included in the analysis. The connection between pig and dog – to put it in another way – must not be severed by force. The fact that these two animals were chosen is not based on mere arbitrariness. In truth, it is almost certain that a very specific calculation lies behind it. The alleged misplacement of the pig, which Theis (2025, 89) speaks of, meets with fierce resistance because of the clearly predetermined agenda (for the pig see Fischer-Elfert 2014, 43-50, Redding 2024, *passim*). The decisive prerequisite is

the aspect of that same impurity, resulting from the status as commensally animals and scavengers. The remnants of humanity's throwaway society served as a food source for both animals. The religious and ritual background of the dog is not even acknowledged by Theis in any commentary. However, the role of the canine is most easily explained in the manner just described. The following argument might also help a small step further: The dog's impurity is also reflected in other Egyptian texts, primarily an inscription from the temple of Isis at Philae (Philae III, 70, for this passage cf. Kühnemund 2021, 626). The temple of Philae was visited by the southern Nubians as a pilgrimage until the 6th century AD and was only been closed under the Byzantine Emperor Justinian I as the last Egyptian religious building. The passage in question certainly offers itself as a source. The dog is mentioned there in a row with other typhonian apparitions that could desecrate the temple. The text dates to the Greco-Roman period, meaning the time gap remains within reasonable limits. The difference is only three quarters of a millennium, which, based on experience so far, is not all that much by Egyptian standards. Oral tradition, which played an important role in many ancient culture, should also not be underestimated in such cases. Other explanations are all ruled out upon closer examination. The dog-like form of demons only appear in Late Antiquity, which is why it must be rejected for anachronistic reasons in such an early text as this one. The idea of an older precursor seems highly improbable. The dog was at least partly in bad reputation in Egypt, as can be seen from the comparison of the subjugated enemies with this animal. The development already began in the Middle Kingdom. The heyday saw this perspective in the war reports of the Pharaohs of the New Kingdom. The impurity of the dog can – by the way – also be observed in Palestine, where reference can be made to the Persian period dog burials in Askelon (Borowski 2002, 420). The admittedly late evidence is compensated for by the Roman bishop Kallist's paraphrase of Gen 7, 1-3, where the dog also appears among the unclean animals on Noah's Ark (Hausmann 2001, 142). The message about this paraphrase comes from Hippolyte. The Egyptian word „*ꜥꜣ*“ „influence“ only appears in this instance directly next to the dog. The context suggests that it refers to something negative. The nuance apparently needs not to be enhanced by a complementary adjective. In this case you may be dealing with a certain sociolect or idiolect. The existence of technical languages in Egypt has been sufficiently proven, with the soldier's language playing a special role (for the special idiom of soldiers cf. Breyer 2002, 53-56, Breyer 2011, 448, Schneider 2008, 181-205, Jansen-Winkel 2016, 274). The series could be supplemented by a reference to the language of metal craftsmen (Fecht 1996, 247ff., Bojowald 2018, 260-263) or butchers (Grunert 2001, 43-57). The expression „*ꜥꜣ*“ „influence“ in our text would then belong to the magical language. The possibility is not excluded that the word refers to the uncleanness of the dog. The solution appears to be the most convincing given all the remaining uncertainties. The theory that was initially put forward so blatantly now needs to be further substantiated.

The text itself leaves the reader in the lurch during further interpretation. The statement appears again in the same text, but a different pig name is chosen and the dog is omitted. The text passage is therefore even darker at first glance, so no

help can be expected from this side. In the past, no one has dared to thoroughly interpret this passage. The reason for the change in pig names is not immediately obvious. In the absence of a better alternative, poetic freedom or the well-known principle of “*variatio delectat*” could be considered as the cause. In any case, the meaning does not seem to change. The assumption is that both pig names refer to the same animal. However, the last word on this topic may not have been spoken yet. The question should be deferred here until further notice. If you still want to make progress, an interdisciplinary comparison with Akkadian literature would be worthwhile. This could shed even more light on the obscurity. The same scenario can be observed in Akkadian texts, where dogs and pigs also appear together as waste consumers (Cooper 1996, 51). The connection is there secured on a sufficiently broad basis. The similarity is immediately apparent. The situation there is therefore suitable as support. For the sake of completeness, it should be said that the pig was only considered unclean relatively late in Sumerian-Akkadian literature (Guichard and Marti 2013, 48-49). However, this does not change the fundamental matter. Additionally, the pig was not decried as unclean in all oriental cultures. The Hittites, for example, saw no problem in using the pig as a sacrificial animal in magical rituals (McMahon 2023, 227). The reservations about the pig do not seem apply to the Aegean world, as the excavations from Nopigeia-Drapanias show (Chahoud and Vila 2023, 280). The osteological findings speak for themselves in this regard. The phenomenon can nevertheless be transferred to the Egyptian passage without hesitation. The explanation also serves very well here. The details are discussed in more detail below.

Conclusion

The text in pBrooklyn 47.218.156, x+IV, 1 shudders at the contamination caused by the impurity of the two condemned animals. The Egyptian’s thoughts had always revolved around the problem of purity and impurity (Quack 2013, 115-158). If this line of reasoning is justified, it becomes evident that the magical power of the word protects the king from a very real danger. The proposal is by no means isolated. This also explicitly acknowledges the possibility of a threat from worldly powers. Viewed from this angle, the king should then be protected from a possible illness caused by the transmission of the pig’s miasmas. The passage from the calendrical omens could have a pilot function for this. The validity of this explanation remains to be seen, since illnesses are not explicitly addressed in pBrooklyn 47.218.156, x+IV, 1. It seems possible that they were subject to a certain taboo, with complete marginalization depriving them of their harmful effects. The descriptions were apparently sufficient for those initiated into the matter. If this is too specific, the interpretation can also be generalized somewhat. The Egyptian king was surrounded by a semisacred aura, from which all impurity had to be kept away. The gist of the statement can also be grasped more or less accurately in this way. The decision between these two alternatives is left to the reader.

The fact cannot be emphasized strongly enough, that pigs and dogs are not mentioned in such close proximity anywhere else in Egyptian literature. In this case, a Semitism could be fictionally considered on the basis of the much better confirmed Akkadian examples. Semitic influence could also be inferred from the use of the loanwords „ḥḏr.t“ (for this word cf. Theis 2011, 85) „pig“ and „š'r.t“ (for this word cf. Hoch 1994, 273 (Nr. 390); for the possible connection to Arabian “s'l” cf. Vittmann 1998, 285) „door-gurdian“. The fact that Egyptian magical incantations occasionally show Semitic influence (Bojowald, in preparation) could also be called a support. However, the entire circumstantial process is on weak ground. In truth, such a conjecture would not only be unprovable, but also extremely unlikely. The assumption of a non-Egyptian origin of the motif is – formulated even more sharply – completely wrong. The reason for this reluctance lies in the following consideration: the motif has a longer history in Coptic (von Lemm 1923, 150, Nagel 1983, 117, Pearson and Vivian 1993, 72-73, Lanzillotta and van der Vliet 2023, 196, Balestri and Hyvdernat 1955, 115, for the combination of dog and pig in Coptic cf. recently Bojowald 2024, 171-175), which significantly increases the chances of an autochthonous origin, even in Egypt. The sight of stray dogs and pigs rummaging through the village and urban garbage heaps must have been part of everyday life on the banks of the Nile as well. In this case, we are therefore dealing with a pan-Oriental phenomenon. Incidentally, Dosoo (2022, 532) and Peled/Saar (in press) share this same opinion. The Akkadian example has already been mentioned above. The assumption of a survival in Coptic is therefore unnecessary. The term “survival” serves as a designation for the pharaonic remains in late ancient Christian Egypt (Behlmer 1996, 567-590, Krause 1985, passim, Zentler 2011, passim). The phenomenon has given rise to its own branch of science called “survival research” (Morenz 1963, 54-59). The targeted search would probably yield further material. However, the current amount is definitely sufficient as an initial basis. The Coptic evidence itself covers a period of approximately one thousand years. Coptic marks the most recent stage of Egyptian; today's church service uses the Bohairic dialect as its liturgical language (Loprieno and Müller 2012, 102-144). The motif's history can now be traced in Egypt for almost three millenia. The lack of even older examples is likely due to the randomness of transmission. The methodological difficulties of this approach are known but are accepted. The evidence base could therefore still shift, meaning this is only a snapshot in time. The proposal presented here may also aid the interpretation of the contemporaneous inscription of the statuette Paris Louvre, E 11554, 49f, where, however, only a pig without a dog appears. This brief reference should suffice. The detailed treatment of the topic would go far beyond the scope of this article. Perhaps someone else will take up this suggestion.

Finally, this new development necessitates a partial modification of my own remarks in an earlier work (Bojowald 2024, 174). Despite their cautious formulation, the words there could have unintentionally given the impression that pharaonic literature in such cases was limited to mentioning only the dog. According to the above, this exclusivity is no longer accurate. The situation has

changed thanks to the fortunate discovery of the missing link. The pair of pig and dog is now also documented in literature for Pharaonic Egypt. If the ideas presented here are correct, the number of Egyptian evidence for the impurity of pigs continues to increase. The phenomenon is often encountered in a sacred or ritual sphere. In this respect, a consistent pattern emerges. The quantity is still manageable, so every new example is welcome. In this way, the flexible term “Sethian” by Theis is simultaneously made concrete and precise. The publication generates a certain profit for this reason alone. The future will show whether this will remain just one evidence or whether more will be added. To close with a little anecdote, we should remember Schenkel’s well-known bon mot that one secure evidence counts more than a thousand uncertain one. In this sense, the above comments may be understood as a preliminary sketch.

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