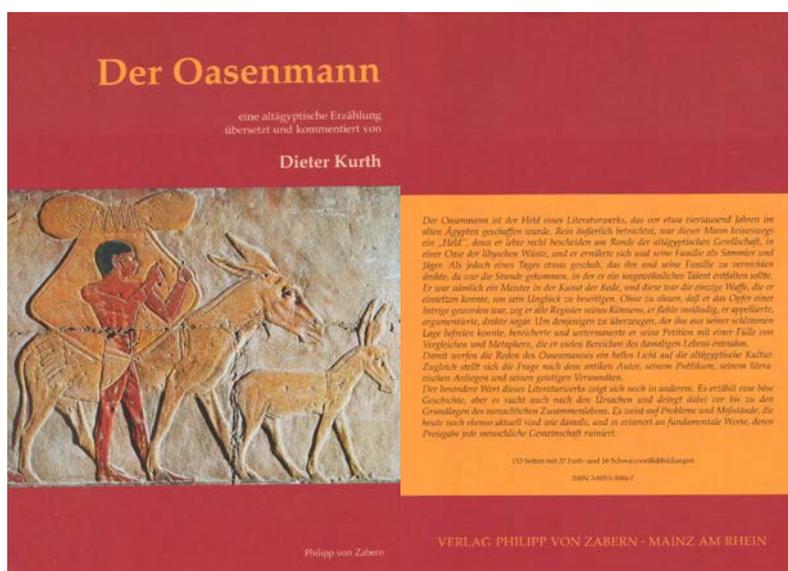


Kurth, D. 2003. Der Oasenmann. – Mainz am Rhein, Verlag Philipp von Zabern (Kulturgeschichte der antiken Welt 103)

Book review by F. Hagen



The composition known to English-speaking Egyptologists as ‘The Eloquent Peasant’ has long been seen as a central work of ancient Egyptian culture. As with much ancient Egyptian literature its modern reception has been varied, from Gardiner’s (1923: 6–7) dismissal of the author as “anything but a literary artist” to Parkinson’s (1997: 54) reading of the tale as a complex, ambiguous and highly literary work of “studied simplicity”. Kurth’s book is an admirable attempt to present the tale to a modern audience as a contextualised work of ancient literature. A monograph on what is, by modern standards, a rather short story, is an opportunity to present it in more depth than what is possible in more general volumes of translation of ancient Egyptian literature. Kurth, who has divided the book into two distinct parts representing two different approaches to the text, exploits this opportunity to great effect. The first part, which accounts for just under half of the book, deals with context. In the chapter entitled ‘Die Geschichte des Oasenmannes als historische Quelle’ (pp. 14–42), the author looks at various aspects of the socio-geographical environment in which the story is set, like the possible route taken by the protagonist from his home Salt-marshes (*sh-t-hm3t*) in the Wādi el-Natrūn into the Nile Valley. Other subchapters on the philosophical principles underlying the peasant’s petitions, on the justice system evident in the petitioning process and on the technicalities of sailing on the Nile are informative and serve to anchor the text in its socio-historical context. A second chapter looks at the story as a work of literature (‘Die Geschichte des Oasenmannes als Literaturwerk’, pp. 42–58), the intent of the ‘author’, and the ways in which the work may have affected those who read or heard the story in antiquity. He points out the possible function of the text as a ‘Beamtenspiegel’ for the bureaucracy, and draws parallels to the mediaeval *speculum regum* genre, but this reading may over-emphasise the text’s didactic aspect: in the absence of any evidence of reader reception (much less any ancient works of literary criticism), a less functionalistic approach is perhaps preferable. The last section before the translation itself, entitled ‘Wie fern ist die Antike?’ (pp. 58–65), points out some of the problems modern readers face when approaching a 4000-year old literary work, and highlights the two conflicting aims which influence the modern study of all ancient literature. These are on the one hand the desire to transmit it as *literature*, to let the reader experience the story free from philological crutches and footnotes, and on the other hand the desire to present it as a historical artefact embedded in its cultural context. Both are laudable aims in and of themselves, but they are not easily combined.

References are kept to a minimum throughout, but even so there are a few surprising omissions that stand out, such as in the sub-chapters ‘Die inhaltliche Gestaltung’ (pp. 47–53) and ‘Die formale Gestaltung’ (pp. 54–58) where no mention is made of Parkinson (1992), or the section on the composition date of the work (pp. 11–13) where Simpson (1991) is cited but not Parkinson (1991b). The textual commentary (on pp. 107–144) to the translation (on pp. 66–97) is thorough – it even suggests some new readings of the hieratic – but its presentation is inconvenient to say the least. At no point in the translation (or indeed the other parts of the book) are there indications of where the author has commented upon it in the references at the back of the book (pp. 99–144). The commentary itself lists the sections on which it comments under headings that consist of translations of parts of the relevant passages, which makes locating the place referred to something of a chore. In addition, the

practice of referring to the hieroglyphic text by page and line number in the latest text edition (Parkinson, 1991a) rather than lines in the original manuscripts – as is standard in scholarly literature on the tale – is unfortunate and inconveniences the reader unnecessarily.

In his book Kurth correctly draws the reader's attention to the problems of translating the word *sh*t used to describe the protagonist throughout the story: the traditional rendering 'Bauer' (peasant) is not satisfactory, but, as he admits himself (p. 107), "Die für den nachfolgenden Text gewählte Übertragung „Oasenmann“... ist deshalb auch nur eine Notlösung". One wonders whether substituting one inadequate translation with another is really constructive, or if retaining the traditional rendering with a suitable *caveat lector* would be preferable. Despite such efforts to be precise in his renderings, there are cases where this falls short of the desired standard. For example, in the section entitled 'Zur Rechtsordnung' (p. 30) he cites sentences from various literary works ('Shipwrecked Sailor', 'Ptahhotep') and insists on calling them 'Sprichwörter', yet there is no evidence of these sentences being transmitted outside the original compositions themselves. Semantically loaded words like 'proverb' or 'saying' are best avoided in the absence of transmission histories to justify them – or alternatively one can do as Kurth himself does in the above example, and specify to the reader what problems of interpretation are involved.

Illustrations in the book are plentiful and generally of a high standard. They complement the text and serves to link it to its cultural, if not always historical, context: out of roughly 50 objects and scenes depicted, only 19 date to the First Intermediate Period or the Middle Kingdom in which the tale was respectively set and composed. The most striking images to a modern reader are perhaps those of the 3-D miniature models (figures 12, 17, 27, 42, 48) which provide the story with a colourful and, paradoxically, a lively backdrop against which the story unfolds.

The commentary to the translation is frequently informative and enhances the reader's experience of the text, and it will no doubt prove a useful resource to those reading the original Egyptian (although discussion of syntax is sparse). With translations such as this there are invariably a number of problematic passages where scholarly opinion may differ as to their exact interpretation, but there are also instances where a more thorough reading of the text and the secondary literature might have improved the accuracy of the translation. At the beginning of the tale (R 1.4) he reads the number '26' but without any justification (p. 66, cf. p. 108), against the latest editor of the text who explicitly stated that there is not sufficient room for this restoration (Parkinson 1991a: 1a). In R 1.4 Kurth restores *h3.n=f n=s* to *h3.n=s n=f* which is unnecessary and not "vom Kontext verlangt" (p. 108, compare the translation by Parkinson, 1997: 58). His rejection of the standard reading of *šsp* in B1 23 as a magical charm or similar in favour of 'Idee/Einfall/Vorstellung' (p. 110) disregards the divine determinative of the word in both papyrus Butler (Bt 25) and the Ramesseum manuscript (R 7.2).

There is no doubt that the book is most welcome, primarily because it makes the text accessible in a contextualised manner to a wide readership; it is a book that reads well and which, with its detailed textual commentary, will undoubtedly appeal to readers of all levels of experience.

Kurth, D. 2003. *Der Oasenmann*. – Mainz am Rhein, Verlag Philipp von Zabern (Kulturgeschichte der antiken Welt 103). 153 pp. ISBN 3 8053 3084 7. Price € 34.80 (hardback).

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