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Necropolis journal: daily records of events in an ancient Egyptian artisans' community

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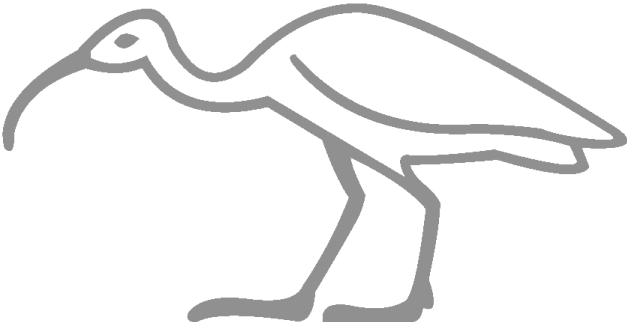
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PART I



1. Introduction

The past century has seen the appearance of an impressive number of studies, both general and detailed, on the artisan's community of Deir el-Medina.

Since the first official excavations at the site of Deir el-Medina by Schiaparelli (1905-1909), followed by Baraize (1912), Möller (1911-1913) and Bruyère (1922-1951), a yearly growing number of books and articles have been published, touching upon almost every aspect of the life and work of the inhabitants of this unique village. Objects from this site had already been noticed in the late 19th century, but the function or status of their original owners remained unknown. The meaning of their title was first correctly identified by Černý in his article "*L'identité des 'Serviteurs dans la Place de Verité' et des ouvriers de la nécropole royale de Thèbes*" (1929). To him we owe the knowledge that they were actually the artisan workers responsible for the creation of the royal sepulchers in the Valley of Kings and the Valley of Queens dating to the New Kingdom. Many years later Černý also was the author of a posthumously published work "*A Community of Workmen at Thebes in the Ramesside Period*" (1973a), which until today is still a comprehensive study of the workmen or artisans of that community. In 1985 another fundamental and essential work about Deir el-Medina, notably with detailed chapters on the ancient documents, was published by Valbelle: "*Les ouvriers de la Tombe. Deir el-Médineh à l'époque Ramesside*".

Although since then many ostraca and papyri have been partially published, a substantial number of documents once studied by scholars like Gardiner, Peet and Černý are still available only in transcriptions or summary translations (like in Kitchen, *Ramesside Inscriptions. Historical and Biographical* = KRI, 1975-1990), without any photo or facsimile. This state of affairs severely hampers knowledge about format and layout of the documents. With regard to translations, especially those by Allam 1973, Kitchen 1993ff (Kitchen, *Ramesside Inscriptions Translated & Annotated: Translations* = RITA, and Kitchen, *Ramesside Inscriptions Translated & Annotated: Notes & Comments* = RITANC), McDowell 1999 and Helck 2000 are useful, although most are often fragmentary and selective, as the authors often only translated what they needed for their own purposes¹.

¹ The work of Helck presents many mistakes and needs to be cautiously used. Demarée (Demarée 2004, 286-294) offers a list of major remarks, corrections and notes to this work.

A primary research tool for the study of the written documents that have been preserved from the artisan workers' community is the Deir el-Medina Database², which enables the user to retrieve information on the documents relevant to his researches from the corpus of non-literary or administrative texts produced by the “workmen of the Tomb³”.

From these texts, insight has been gained into all aspects of the life and times of these artisan workmen, their work, their collective administration, their private affairs and their contacts with higher authorities and the world outside their village. Amongst this mass of records, a certain type has been given a specific name ever since the first publication of such documents from the late 20th Dynasty by Botti and Peet 1928 (*“Il Giornale della Necropoli di Tebe”*). They were collectively labeled as “the Journal of the Necropolis” or later “Journal of the Necropolis”. Since they clearly record first of all “activities” or “events” linked to specific dates, the question has arisen as to whether indeed this was a specific type of document.

In order to understand how the idea and notion of “a journal” and notably “an events journal” developed amongst Egyptologists, it is necessary to discuss the various fundamental publications on this subject.

1.1 Status quaestionis

In the introduction of *“Il Giornale della Necropoli di Tebe”* (Botti and Peet 1928, 5 and 7), referring to the documents presented in the volume, it is said that *“abbiamo di preferenza rivolta l'attenzione ai papiri di carattere civile amministrativo che riguardano la necropoli di Tebe [...] e fra questi [...] quelli che contengono il Giornale, in gran parte tuttora inedito”*. Further on, in reference to the Drovetti collection, the term “the journal” is used again *“L'ornamento più prezioso di questi papiri è però il Giornale”*⁴.

²Demarée-Haring 1999 and online at: <http://dmd.wepwawet.nl/>

³ It is worth noting that in the previous publications (except Valebelle 1985), the workmen of Deir el-Medina used to be called “workmen of the Necropolis”, while nowadays we refer to them as “workmen of the Tomb”, since the institution to which they belonged actually was locally known as “the Tomb”.

⁴ Some fragments of texts included in the publication of Botti and Peet had already been published by Pleyte and Rossi in 1869 in *Papyrus de Turin*, but they were not called *Giornale*. The second half of the first page, the second and third page of the *Giornale dell'anno 17*, and part of the fifth and sixth page, indeed, had already been published in 1869 (Pleyte-Rossi 1869, Pl. XCIV and 130-131; Pleyte-Rossi 1869, Pl. XCII and 128-128). In that publication, however, the papyri later labelled *Giornale* are called *“fragments de compte”*.

The administrative papyri concerning the Necropolis are here for the first time called journals⁵. The title of the book clearly indicates a typology of documents, but no explanation is given in the introduction or elsewhere for the choice of this name nor any *criteria* to recognise such documents and distinguish them from others. The existence of such a genre is taken for granted and no question is raised about the meaning of this strict classification. Botti and Peet speak about *the journal*, and that led following generations of Egyptologists to think that there was such a thing as the one and only journal, although neither Botti-Peet nor later Valbelle, with a promising title “*Le Journal de la Tombe*” say clearly what makes these documents *the journal* (worth noting, Valbelle provides already the correct term ‘la Tombe’ almost innocently. See further p.18).

Since Botti and Peet 1928, the term journal is thus used to identify administrative records on papyri and ostraca describing activities of the community of Deir el-Medina. Nobody seems to have felt the need to investigate the intrinsic meaning of the term. In the introduction of *Hieratic Ostraca 1957*, Gardiner and Černý wanted to define the word ‘ostrakon’ more precisely and “to state explicitly the extent of the field which it will be used to cover”, but no question is raised about the term ‘journal’ which is then used to define the content of some of the ostraca (“*journal of work on the Royal Tomb*”).

On pp. 34-35 a classification of the documents included in the book is attempted according to their contents and we find: “journal of work”, “enumeration of work or workmen”, “distribution of victuals”, “supply of victuals”, “various accounts”, “list of goods”⁶. The terms are not explained in detail and the criteria for the classification are not provided. Most of the time the typologies seem to overlap somewhat.

In *A Community of Workmen at Thebes in the Ramesside Period* (Černý 1973a), references to the *Giornale* of Botti and Peet are often made in the footnotes, especially in Chapter X (104-120), and on page 226. Černý describes the notes of the so-called journals as “papyrus diary, a veritable chronicle of the Tomb”. On page 332 it is said: “...*the scribe who kept the journal of the work and the accounts of the presence and absence of staff of the Tomb...*”. The journal is mentioned here, but its existence and genre is taken for granted and no explanation or definition is given to the reader.

Again in 1973, a posthumously published work of Černý, *The Valley of the Kings. Fragments d'un manuscrit inachevé*, mentions the “journal of work” without any further

⁵ Griffith 1898, 55, already called a group of fragments (A, C, and D) “official journal” as if he would like to identify a specific typology of administrative documents, but no explanation is given there, nor any criteria for their identification.

⁶ Černý 1957, 34-35.

explanation: page 18 (*“Journals of the work were kept by scribes...”*), page 37 (*“...a journal of work of the Tomb...”*), and page 51 (*“Into the journal of the work...”*).

Valbelle, in *Les ouvriers de la Tombe (1985)*, in the chapter dedicated to “the journal of the tomb”, gives an overview of documents considered to be journals, but she doesn't give here any introduction nor any indication about the meaning of the term nor about the kind of documents she is selecting⁷.

However, in the previous chapter about the archives of the tomb, she states about the terms used for the classification of the documents that *“Je suis, en même temps, consciente de ce que peut avoir d'artificiel un essai de classification, pour nous nécessaire, de documents que les Egyptiens de l'époque juxtaposaient ou mêlaient volontairement”*⁸. And further on the same page, she describes briefly the contents of the “*journal de la Tombe*” as a mix of information about work, supplies and tools, food for the workmen and the officials, important events, etc. and she states that *“dans le journal, tous les jours sont notés, avec ou sans commentaire selon l'actualité, tandis que les autres documents ne présentent que les dates pertinentes en fonction du sujet traité”*.

On page 39, regarding P. Turin Cat. 1883 (+2095) it is said that *“la structure du passage convient à un journal”*. Why? What is a journal and what does it look like? What are the criteria to define a document as such? No consideration is given to the notion of a journal according to Egyptian standards and point of view.

Further on page 40, to understand if the document can be considered a journal, its structure is compared with the *Giornale* of Botti and Peet, taking for granted that ‘the journal’ as a genre existed and that it was the kind of document Botti and Peet published⁹.

Valbelle also briefly examines other types of notes that might have something in common with the journal: *“Je ne connais pas, à l'heure actuelle, de chronique proprement semblable à celle-ci, quoiqu'on puisse la comparer aux tableaux de services des P. Abousir¹⁰, aux registres des P. Reisner I et III¹¹, au «Tempel Tagebuch» des P. Illahoun¹² ou encore aux deux journaux de bord des P. Leyde 350 v° et P. Turin cat. 2008 + 2016¹³. Les premiers, par leur structure même de tableaux (plus ou moins détaillés), ont une forme plus systématique. Leur propos aussi est assez éloigné, puisqu'il s'agit essentiellement d'indiquer nominativement la tâche quotidienne dans le temple d'un personnel employé par roulement. Les inventaires, comptabilités, listes de*

⁷ Valbelle 1985, 33-35.

⁸ Valbelle 1985, 27-32.

⁹ Valbelle 1985, 40, note 2.

¹⁰ Posener-Kriéger 1976.

¹¹ Simpson 1963 and Simpson 1969.

¹² Griffith 1898.

¹³ Janssen 1961.

fonctionnaires semblent tous des documents très spécialisés et je ne vois pas, dans ces archives, apparemment tenues avec une grande minutie, de document à la fois régulier par ses notations journalières, hybride et souple dans le choix des informations retenues, comme l'est le journal de la Tombe¹⁴.

Papyrus Reisner I and III are more similar to a journal according to Valbelle because of their contents: the scene is a building site, and the progress of the work is presented in large “tableaux-calendriers”, lists of workers and some accounts. The main purpose of the texts is the accounting of working days to control productivity.

With Papyri Illahun, Valbelle states that the context is a funerary temple, but the fragments are too small to attempt a true comparison. It seems to be a daily log, with information on the various activities of the temple, personnel, land and wages.

Regarding ship's logs, Valbelle notes that they record the daily progress of boats, the nature of their cargo, crew rations of bread and the correspondence between boat owners and captains. A variety of content and the irregularity of the layout are similar in many respects to Necropolis journals, but the setting is obviously different.

Valbelle thus briefly analyses different kinds of notes that can be compared with the journal, but she never poses the question whether such a Necropolis journal existed and what, according to Egyptian standards, a journal would eventually have looked like.

Some years later, Janssen (Demarée and Egberts **1992**, 91) presents a list of journal texts on ostraca describing what we should call a “typical journal” and providing the (insufficient) criteria for the inclusion of a document in such a list: “...*the possibility of dating it [i.e. the ostrakon] after the names,...besides, of course, being a day-by-day record of deliveries to the workmen*”.

Häggman, in *Directing Deir el-Medina. The External Administration of the Necropolis (2002)*, in the background information, writes a short paragraph about “Administrative documents: the necropolis journal and other work-related texts”¹⁵. She accepts the earlier definition of the documents that she is analysing as “journals”: “a series of records of the daily activities of the Necropolis is found in log form, in texts representing what is called the Necropolis Journal”.

In Donker van Heel and Haring (**2003**, 68), Donker van Heel differs from Janssen's view about the definition of Necropolis journal saying: “*It appears, then, that our views differ on what a necropolis journal really is. To my mind 'the' necropolis journal of Deir el-Medina would be made up of two separate but equal parts, namely the labour journal*

¹⁴ Valbelle 1985, 45-49.

¹⁵ Häggman 2002, 19-20.

*made at the worksite and the duty-roster and day-to-day deliveries to the workmen, probably at the *h̄tm*¹⁶.*

Summing up, while both Griffith (1898) and Botti and Peet (1928) did not bother to define what a journal is, Valbelle (1985), Janssen (1992) and Häggman (2002), offer us at least a few suitable criteria, albeit still insufficient, for the definition and identification of journal(s) as genre: a series of day-by-day records of daily activities of the Necropolis including details about work, supplies and administrative matters, but also including notes on official important events like the death of the sovereign. Nonetheless, what the ancient Egyptians would have understood by the term 'Necropolis journal' was never investigated and therefore needs to be ascertained.

Before presenting what our intention is in the present work, a clarification about the term is needed: the term 'necropolis journal' is actually a misnomer. This is not a journal of a necropolis as cemetery, but rather a journal of the daily affairs of an institution called "The Tomb", therefore "Necropolis" with a capital "N". The term was coined by Botti and Peet and also used by scholars such as Gardiner and Černý, based on the translation of the term *p3 hr* as "the tomb", "the necropolis", but since an institution is meant (the department that employed the Deir el-Medina gang of artisans to build royal tombs), it is now common to write the term with a capital "N". The same applies (see note 3) to "the gang of the Tomb/Necropolis", denoting again the group of artisans at Deir el-Medina.

It is also worth noting that unfortunately these texts do not refer to themselves. There are no internal references that can clarify us what they were called and what they meant for the Ancient Egyptians. The lack of a specific term is clear, for example, in a letter (Papyrus DM 28¹⁷) to the chief workmen, in which the vizier Neferronpet confirms that he has received their *r-c-sš.w* (verso 1). Eyre¹⁸ translates the term as "drawing equipments(??)", while, according to Neveu¹⁹, this word can stand both for a process and for its result and, in this context, it seems possible that the term refers to a document containing technical administrative data for the construction of the royal tomb, instructions to start or to continue work on the site. The word itself, to our mind, means nothing more than writings, documents²⁰, a very generic word that indicates the absence of a precise term to define what eventually was a Necropolis journal. In Papyrus JE

¹⁶ For hypothesis on the role and location of the *h̄tm n p3 hr* see Burkard 2006.

¹⁷ Černý 1986, 5, pls. 18-19a.

¹⁸ Eyre 1987, 18-19.

¹⁹ Neveu 1990.

²⁰ See Papyrus Ambras 1, 5 (KRI VI 837, 1): "Total: papyrus rolls which were in the jar, 9 documents" (*r-c-sš.w*). That the nine *r-c-sš.w* mentioned are written documents is no doubt here; they contain records on robberies, thieves and stolen goods.

52002 line 4 (the tomb construction journal of Saqqara, see further Chapter 4.2.q) *r-ḥ-ss.w* is indicated to describe the “documents of all the commissioned works which are to be executed on the construction site of the Place of Eternity...”.

Furthermore, in a fragment of an unpublished journal from year 14, in Cartellina F 257 in Turin, it is noted that there seems to be a special box for keeping the “writings of the lists of workmen”: *ḥd.t ss.w n p3 imy-rn=f*²¹). Here once again, what we expect to be a Necropolis journal, is described as ‘writings’.

Before trying to understand the Egyptian point of view about the so-called journal, we need to determine what a journal is for us nowadays. The Oxford English Dictionary provides the following definitions²² for the words “journal”, “diary” and “log”:

Journal: “1. (In bookkeeping by double entry) book in which each transaction is entered, with statement of accounts to which it is to be debited and credited. 2. Daily record of events.” Journal comes from Latin *diurnalis*, meaning diurnal, daily.

A day-by-day kind of note is therefore expected.

Diary: “Daily record of events or thoughts, journal; book prepared for keeping this in; book etc. with daily memoranda esp. for persons of a particular profession.” Diary comes from Latin *diarium* (*dies* = day).

Here as well the main thing to expect is a day-by-day list of information.

Log: “3. --(-book), book with permanent record made of all events occurring during ship's or aircraft's voyage(s) (including rate of ship's progress shown by log).”

The daily record of notes is not fundamental here, even if the writer is supposed to write down and note the events at a consistent frequency.

Nowadays the term *journal* is therefore used for both *account journal* (intended as a double-entry bookkeeping system) and *event journal*, intended as a daily record of events (e.g. a newspaper published everyday²³). Concerning the event journal, both the facts which happened and those which still need to happen are included (on newspapers

²¹ For the word *ḥd.t.* as ‘chest’ for documents see Demarée 2005, 10-11 (BM EA 75017 recto 3) and 21-22 (BM EA 75021 verso 9).

²² The Oxford English Dictionary 1982.

²³ An Italian newspaper issued daily since 1974 is very simply called *Il Giornale*.

for example, we usually find news of the last events happened in the world but also weather forecast, horoscope, and events which will happen during the coming days).

Our first and basic intention in this study is therefore to try to answer the questions: What is a 'Necropolis journal' and did the concept of a Necropolis journal exist in the minds of the scribes of Deir el-Medina?

What the Ancient Egyptians understood by this term should be investigated. Detailed research questions will now follow.

1.2 Research questions

1.2.a Did the concept of a Necropolis journal exist?

As we have seen above, the texts called "Giornale della necropoli di Tebe" have been known since Botti and Peet's 1928 work. Until this publication, such Necropolis documents were unknown. Is it correct to define such notes as journals? What was their format? Would they be considered to be journals from an ancient Egyptian point of view? The need at the time was to manage a community of workers. Was the journal the administration's answer to this need? This type of document Botti and Peet published, according to scholars and to the keyword in the Deir el-Medina database, are commonly labelled *journals*²⁴.

The crucial research questions to answer in this study must therefore be: **What is a Necropolis journal and, primarily, did the concept of a Necropolis journal exist?**

In order to answer these questions, the definition of journal in Egyptian terms must be ascertained.

1.2.b What do the different kinds of annals and day-books have in common?

In order to understand what in Egyptian terms a journal would or should look like, an overview of annals and day-books, ranging from the Old Kingdom until the New Kingdom, is therefore, according to me, necessary (Chapter 4). Comparing common features and differences amongst the material, we want to extract the guidelines which will allow me to formulate the necessary criteria to select the material (i.e. Necropolis journals) for this study. The comparative material to be analysed includes different kinds of documents, such as ship's logs and temple day-books, which contain different types

²⁴ <http://dmd.wepwawet.nl/>

of information. Even if these records are of a different nature, they share common traits. **What do the different kinds of annals and day-books have in common? Can they be compared with the so-called Necropolis journal? What features are similar?** It is therefore only after this overview and comparison, when we will be able to set the criteria and use them to define what is commonly called a Necropolis journal (Chapter 5).

1.2.c Who was the intended readership of the day-books?

After compiling a new list of “Necropolis journals” from Deir el-Medina (see chapter 5.2), a review of all available photos or facsimiles of the documents to identify the layout of the text and its arrangement on the writing material will be undertaken. The study of the layout of the documents and the format of the lines of text on papyri and ostraca, together with the content, could help determine when the notes were written and this may in turn provide information about the possible use of these documents²⁵.

The present study will therefore analyse the layout of the available material and try to answer the following questions: **Under what circumstances were they drawn up? How are the documents organised? Who was their intended readership? Were they for internal use or to be consulted and audited by someone else?**

1.2.d How many types of journal can we identify?

Once we have defined what a Necropolis journal is and who was the intended readership, if there was one, we could see if it is possible to isolate subgroups into this massive corpus of documents. The aim of this work is not to make a strict classification of different types of journal as separate genres, the intent is not to trace the boundaries of neat categories or typologies, but instead to identify and list the differences between individual journal texts. For reason of study, identifying smaller subgroups of texts is useful due to the large number of texts available. Whether or not the differences in style and type of document preserved is a real reflection of administrative choice or simply the result of chance (some types of material being more prone to preservation and discovery), shall remain uncertain, but because the aim of this work is to treat the whole large corpus of documents, this is, to our mind, inevitable²⁶.

²⁵ See chapter 7.2.

²⁶ Whilst creating a classification, we must always keep in mind that this is only a modern tool that makes the work within the corpus easier. Naturally, it is unlikely to reflect the actual method of categorising these notes in ancient times.

If such notes can be called journals, the fourth research question is therefore: **How many types of journal can we identify?**

1.2.e. How can the list of documents become a useful updatable tool available to all scholars interested in the subject?

The new list of texts created (see chapter 5.2) inevitably remains incomplete, but is nonetheless necessary for the present study. Without it, research in the vast number of documents to retrieve the necessary information would be an almost impossible task. The last step of this study is therefore to ensure that the research is not undertaken only for its own sake, but also as something useful to all interested Egyptologists, with easy reference to the contents of an important group of ancient records.