

Jennifer Miyuki Babcock. 2022. *Ancient Egyptian Animal Fables. Tree Climbing Hippos and Ennobled Mice*. ("Culture and History of the Ancient Near East," Volume 128). Leiden/Boston: Brill. 204 pages. Hardcover. € 133.75. ISBN: 978-90-04-46694-4

The publication to be discussed here is based on the author's dissertation, written at the Institute of Fine Arts at New York University. The subject of the study are the ancient Egyptian papyri and ostraca with anthropomorphized animals. The aim of the book is to examine the purpose of ancient Egyptian animal fables. The book is comprised of six chapters, in addition to a catalogue, index, and a bibliography.

In Chapter 1 an introduction to the materials is given. Ancient Egyptian ostraca can be divided in a "textual" type, including literary texts, and a "figured" type, consisting of illustrations and images (1). The figured type contains images of anthropomorphized animals, often performing activities such as banqueting or music playing (3). The drawings, which date to the 19th or 20th dynasty, can be observed on at least 79 ostraca and 4 papyri. The most often anthropomorphized animals in the imagery are cats, mice, canines, and caprides (4). None of the figured ostraca illustrating anthropomorphized animals can be linked to a specific findspot (5). The lack of archaeological context apart, the papyri and ostraca are usually associated with the New Kingdom village of Deir el-Medina (5).

In Chapter 2 Deir el-Medina and its inhabitants are tackled. The figured ostraca with anthropomorphized animals often refer to elite, non-royal themes (12). The vignette in Turin Papyrus 55001 with the such called "The Cat and the Mouse War" exhibits iconographical parallels to the monumental reliefs and chariot battles from Medinat Habu and the Ramesseum (13). The imagery might be understood satirically (13).

In Chapter 3 the ancient Egyptian aesthetic value is investigated. According to some contracts, prices of products depend on the skill and fame of the artist being commissioned (32). Craftmanship alone could apparently be evaluated, while an object's cost was measured on a sliding scale (35). The anthropomorphic animal images were more valued for their content and the quality of illustration, rather than the material on which these depictions were drawn (37). Common motifs in the animal iconography of the figured ostraca taken from imagery of elite mortuary contexts are elite mice being seated befor an offering table, game playing, pastoral scenes and musicians in banquet settings (41). As for the composition, the vignettes in pTurin 55001 belong to the most complex examples (49). In terms of artistic style or detail of content, the majority of the ostraca images do not exactly match any of the vignettes found on the papyri (52).

In Chapter 4 narratives in ancient Egypt are discussed. The persistent repetition of themes and figures in the anthropomorphizing ostraca suggest that the images refer to characters and moments in a story (66). The stock set of characters and motifs may point to lost narratives (67). The clearest indication to the narrative function of the ostraca is seen by the author in three ostraca, showing a young boy, cat and elite mouse (73). The proposed parallel between these ostraca and the Ramesside scribal papyri (74) remains rather speculative.

In Chapter 5 the purpose of fables is analyzed. The beast fable is as the most well-known fable type most relevant to the anthropomorphized animal imagery from Deir el-Medina (86). Most images from the Deir el-Medina corpus focus on the reversed roles of cats and mice (92).

In Chapter 6 concluding thoughts are formulated (101-103).

In the Appendix, a catalogue of the papyri (105-109) and ostraca (110-189) is prepared. The objects are partly colored, partly in black and white drawings. The illustrations are briefly described. The catalogue makes nevertheless an unfinished impression. The dimensions of the pieces should have been i. a. stated more clearly. The book ends with the bibliography (190-201), and index (202-204).

The reviewer's opinion of the book can be summarized as follows: The author's core thesis regarding the literary genre behind the depictions of animals can certainly be defended, but it is not entirely new. The author sometimes contradicts herself, e. g. with the costs of papyrus (35-36). In some cases she gets too busy with trivia, e. g. in the relationship of the genetival ny and the name for Thebes (24), comparison between the Amarna village and Deir el-Medina (24-26), tombs of Deir el-Medina's cemetery (40), circumcision scene in the tomb of Anchmahor (62), Book of the Heavenly Cow (77), and Song of the Orchard (84-86). In other cases she slips into secondary theaters of war, e. g. in Thomas of Aquinas (32), Hollywood films (34), and medieval Renaissance depictions of the Annunciation (68). The book constitutes nonetheless a good launchpad for students who wish to have an overview of the topic.

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