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**Realignments of Memory... the *Prophecies of Neferty***

Victor Braga GURGEL



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# Realignments of Memory: Legitimacy of the Egyptian Past in the *Prophecies of Neferty*

Victor Braga GURGEL

The *Prophecies of Neferty*, whose sole complete copy is preserved on *Papyrus Hermitage 1116B recto*, has a narrative frame situated during Sneferu's reign. A great part of it describes the time of chaos (*isfī*) during the First Intermediate Period, with order (*m3ʿt*) finally being redeployed by Amenemhet I. Considering the above, in this paper we aim to comprehend the ways *maet* is used to construct an idealized image of the past in *Neferty*. In order to pursue these tasks, we define our theoretical approaches to "ancient Egyptian literature", as well as a brief introduction to cultural memory, according to Jan Assmann, settling its connection with *Neferty*. Subsequently, we give a description of the source, discussing the dating of the text, along with its content. Finally, we proceed with content analysis of the text, focusing on *maet* and its relation to the pharaoh and an ideal vision of the past.

*Rearranjos de Memória: legitimidade do passado egípcio nas Profecias de Neferti*

As *Profecias de Neferti*, cuja única cópia completa está preservada no *Papiro Hermitage 1116B recto*, possui um quadro narrativo situado durante o reinado de Sneferu. Grande parte do texto descreve o tempo de caos (*isfī*) durante o Primeiro Período Intermediário, com a ordem (*m3ʿt*) sendo finalmente reimplantada por Amenemhat I. Levando isto em conta, neste estudo nosso objetivo é compreender como *maet* é usada para construir uma imagem idealizada do passado em *Neferti*. Para tanto, definimos nossa aproximação teórica à "literatura do Egito antigo", assim como fizemos uma breve introdução à memória cultural, de acordo com Jan Assmann, estabelecendo sua conexão com *As Profecias de Neferti*. Em seguida, realizamos uma descrição da fonte, discutindo a datação do texto, bem como seu conteúdo. Finalmente, passamos para a análise de conteúdo do texto, nos focando na *maet* e na sua relação com o faraó e uma visão ideal do passado.

**Keywords:** Cultural memory; Prophecies of Neferty, *Maet*.

**Palavras-chave:** Memória cultural, Profecias de Neferti, *Maet*.

The *Prophecies of Neferty* constitutes a thriving example of ancient Egyptian literature, widely studied by Egyptologists. Without disregarding the recent discussions about the dating of the text,<sup>1</sup> this paper aims to offer a historical perspective on it, focusing on the

construction of an idealized memory of Egypt, "realigning" it.<sup>2</sup>

Thus, we have 2 goals with this study:

- 1) To comprehend how *Neferty* exalts the Middle Kingdom's political values, related to the pharaoh's strength and performance on the

<sup>1</sup> Stauder 2013: 337–443.

<sup>2</sup> This paper consists of a brief excerpt of our Master's dissertation, entitled "*Ensino e Memória: uma perspectiva a partir de textos literários egípcios do Reino Médio* - Teaching and Memory: a perspective from some middle Egyptian literary texts" – Universidade Federal da Paraíba, Brazil.

maintenance of Cosmic Order (*m3't*), that is, how the text provides a royalistic advocacy;<sup>3</sup>

- 2) Show the normative—answering the question “What do we do?”—and formative—answering the question “Who are we?”—characteristics of the text, from the perspective of the cultural memory. By doing so, we intend to demonstrate the way *maet* is connected not only with the pharaoh’s image, but with the Egyptian society as a whole.

Since there is a debate inside Egyptology about Egyptian literary texts and their use as historical sources, we briefly introduce some observations in this regard. The reflections on cultural memory and literary texts are made at this time. After this, we discuss the source and its dating, and then we proceed to the content analysis of the text.

## 1 | Theoretical issues

One of the difficulties in analyzing ancient Egyptian literary texts is the absence of their original archaeological context,<sup>4</sup> as is the case of *The Prophecies of Neferty*. For this reason, “their role in their culture is uncertain”.<sup>5</sup> The other concern is a definition of “literature”, or “literary”, applicable to those texts, and their use as historical sources of Egyptian mind and past.

The Egyptological view of these texts began in the nineteenth century, with J.-F. Champollion’s

contact with the collection of François Sallier, realizing “it contained non-funerary manuscripts”.<sup>6</sup> F. Chaba’s impression on the similarity of *The Tale of the Two Brothers* with Biblical narratives demonstrates the strength of Western conceptions in textual interpretation. By that time, the classicist approach of the texts made evident the scarcity of comprehension of the language.

In the twentieth century, the positivist school of criticism had a major influence on the frames of interpretation of Egyptian literature. They supported the idea of a connection between literature and historical past. A romantic view of literature was present, for example, in Gardiner’s works related to Egyptian literary texts.

From 1950, G. Posener’s production on the theme marked a turning point to an approach of Middle Egyptian literary texts. One of his works, *Littérature et politique*,<sup>7</sup> combined *belles lettres* and politics, whose vision was widely adopted by the Egyptology community, but later criticized.<sup>8</sup> W. Simpson noted that Posener intended to show that “several literary compositions had an element of royalist *advocacy*”,<sup>9</sup> and we believe that is the case of *Neferty*. Our understanding does not deny that works of Egyptian literature had a main entertainment element.<sup>10</sup>

This sense of beauty regarding the texts and writings appears more specifically in *Neferty*, 7, 13, *mdwt nfrwt tw stpw*, “goodly words and choice verses”.<sup>11</sup> The ancient Egyptians, however, had

a very different reception of their texts than our modern view, ranging from support issues to canonization.<sup>12</sup> Some texts were also written out of an administrative or religious scope, with a clear entertainment purpose; on the other hand, others were written with a prime utilitarian defined intention, later being elected, canonized, as “literary” by the Egyptians.<sup>13</sup>

Given the above considerations, a definition of “literature” applied to Ancient Egypt brings some difficulties. A. Loprieno takes into consideration the “fictionality”, “intertextuality” and “reception” as categories for labeling a text as “literature”.<sup>14</sup> Quirke elected the “function”, “form” and “content”.<sup>15</sup> R. Parkinson discusses the literary texts “as components of a coherent corpus that can be defined in terms of *fictionality*, *genre* and *social and discursive context*, and which occupied a distinctive place in the mainstream of Egyptian high culture”.<sup>16</sup> Our understanding of literary texts here comprises those whose reception by the ancient Egyptians and by the modern—be it Egyptological or not<sup>17</sup>—understands its aesthetic aspects, regardless of its genders.

In this sense, interpreting Middle Egyptian literary texts demands a notion on their circulation on Egyptian society. The Ancient Egyptian

system of writing, since its first occurrence, was connected with royalty, even before the unification.<sup>18</sup> After this event, in the Old Kingdom (c. 2575 – 2134 BC), it only appeared on the tombs of kings and the closest elites, and there was no opposition between the domain of writing and the nobility.<sup>19</sup> By the Third and Fourth Dynasties (c. 2770 – 2575 BC), the evidence shows a transformation on the record, in a “more informal” context, as *e. g.*, marks on quarries.<sup>20</sup> In this time, the hieroglyphic code was capable of containing more complex sentences.<sup>21</sup> By the Fifth Dynasty (c. 2465 – 2323 BC), the *Pyramid Texts* were the most complex example of Egyptian writing.

The decrease in royal authority in the provinces was one of the main drivers of the political fragmentation that culminated in the so-called First Intermediate Period<sup>22</sup> (c. 2134 – 2040 BC). This time was characterized by an anti-centralizing action of power, which had a direct reflection in the writing that was now able to contain more complex sentences, and in the arts. The so-called *Coffin Texts* reflected new ideas developed during this time.

The reunification of Egypt by Mentuhotep II (c. 2061 – 2010 BC) recentralized the power in Thebes. Egyptian culture was at its highest, and “literature” flourished, based on earlier genres.<sup>23</sup>

3 Simpson 1996: 438.

4 Exceptions are the “archives”, *cf.* Quirke 2004: 10–11.

5 Parkinson 2001: 3.

6 Parkinson 2001: 11.

7 Posener 1969.

8 Simpson 1996: 438.

9 Simpson 1996: 438. For a discussion of *propaganda* applied to ancient Egypt, and ancient Egyptian literature, see: Posener 1969; Simpson 1982: 266; Simpson 1996; Eyre 1996; Parkinson 2001: 13–16; Redford 2008: 32–33; Vernus 2011: 83–87; Castillos 2018.

10 Morenz 2003: 102; Vernus 2011: 83–86.

11 Morenz 2003: 102.

12 Vernus 2011: 22.

13 Vernus 2011: 116–134. For a discussion on “literature” related to ancient Egyptian texts, *cf.* Parkinson 2001: 22–42.

14 Loprieno 1996: 43–54.

15 Quirke 2004: 24–28.

16 Parkinson 2001: 4, our emphasis.

17 A text that fits all those aspects is *The Dispute Between a Man with his Ba*, canonized in Antiquity, elected as *belles lettres* by the Egyptologists, being the most cited text outside the field (Assmann 1998: 387).

18 Baines 1988: 188.

19 Baines 1988: 191–192.

20 Baines 1988: 194.

21 Baines 1988: 194.

22 Willems 2010: 83.

23 Morenz 2003: 102–103.

Writing remained restricted to the pharaoh and his court, although less restricted than before. The literary texts, however, were primarily consumed by oral recitation,<sup>24</sup> and their appearance was linked to this practice.<sup>25</sup>

In this context, Jan Assmann's cultural memory offers a theoretical lens capable of understanding the mnemotechnics employed by the Egyptian pharaonic elite in order to create an identity and normative unity. The cultural memory is a form of memory created by a group through the crystallization or *symbolization* of important formative and normative elements.<sup>26</sup> The symbol has the power to contain a great quantity of information readily available to those belonging to the group, besides being an *external* component of memory. The recovery of this form of memory occurs through ritualization, and, in the case of the literate societies, through the "scholarly study of the written, foundational word."<sup>27</sup>

The formative character of the cultural memory answers the group question "Who are we?", and the formative texts have the knowledge that ensures the identity of the group. The normative texts, on the other hand, encode norms of social behavior,<sup>28</sup> answering the group question "What do we do?".

The break in tradition brings with it a stimulus for writing. According to Jan Assmann, in the so-called First Intermediate Period such stimulus referred to writings related to the norms of social life.<sup>29</sup> The tradition, formerly *excarnated*, becomes incarnated through writing. Here, our main focus is the way *maet* is thematized on *Neferty*. Taking into consideration the negative aspect of the text, we proceed to an analysis *a contrario* of the text.<sup>30</sup>

A portion of Middle Egyptian literary texts that have survived into our days have come from Late Second Intermediate Period or New Kingdom copies of scribe apprentices, *e. g.*, *Testament of Amenemhat*, *The Lamentations of Ipuwer*, *The Instruction for Merikarê* and *The Prophecies of Neferty*, the last being the one we propose to analyze here. The great number of copies, mainly attested by ostraca found in pit deposits, is evidence of the canonization of these works. "Canonical texts cannot be changed."<sup>31</sup> They embody "the normative and formative values of a community."<sup>32</sup> Additionally, their "meaning can only emerge through a three-way relationship between text, interpreter, and listener."<sup>33</sup>

The *Prophecies of Neferty*<sup>34</sup> is a masterpiece of the Egyptian writing and thought, written in

hieratic. The text is set in Sneferu's reign. He asks his Royal Council to bring to his presence someone who can speak "fine words, selected speeches" (*mdwt nfrwt tsw stpw*, 7, 13). Then, a lector-priest of Bastet is brought to the palace, and asks the king whether he wishes to hear about the past, the present or the future. The pharaoh chooses the last option, and then Neferty reports a time of generalized disorder, of social calamity such that it affects not only the earthly but also the cosmic plane, interfering with the elements of nature. The priest prophesies that the order will only return to Egypt with the coming of a savior king from the South, named Ameny—seen here as Amenemhet I—who will set the borders of the country, expel the foreigners, and make the land prosper again.

The text has its most complete copy on a papyrus—*pHermitage 1116B*—dated in the Eighteenth Dynasty.<sup>35</sup> Other fragments can be found in the tablet Cairo 25224, which contains the lines 35 to 71, and on the tablet BM 5647, containing the lines 9 to 12. Apart from them, there are nineteen *ostraca* with few fragments of the text. However, they have little relevance to the whole text, just helping to fill some gaps in *pHermitage 1116B*. Due to the considerable amount of mistakes on that papyrus, it was probably written by an apprentice scribe.

*pHermitage 1116B* has six "pages", each of them with eleven lines, despite the last one that contains just ten, the width of each sheet measuring from 15,6 cm to 15,8 cm. It was first published in a facsimile edition in 1913 by W. Golénischeff, along with *pHermitage 1115B (The Shipwrecked Sailor)*,

*pHermitage 1116A (The Instruction for Merikarê)*, and a hieroglyphic transcription from the hieratic of tablet Cairo 25224.<sup>36</sup>

In 1970, W. Helck published a transcription from hieratic to hieroglyph of the text as well, innovating by making the first eclectic text—that is, a final text made through comparison among all the available sources<sup>37</sup>—ever published. The most recent transcription was published in 2017 by K. Hassan,<sup>38</sup> being a study of the tablet Cairo 25224, besides criticizing Helck's transcription.

Regarding the dating of the text, the classical Egyptological view establishes it in the Twelfth Dynasty. More recently, however, A. Stauder demonstrated that *Neferty* has linguistic grounds which extends the temporal range for dating it "from some point in the Second Intermediate Period (mid-Thirteenth Dynasty at the earliest) to the early Eighteenth Dynasty."<sup>39</sup>

At the same time, A. Stauder himself writes that:

On the other hand, *Neferty* resonates with various Middle Egyptian literary texts, some dating to the Twelfth Dynasty (*e. g. Eloquent Peasant*), some later but still earlier, or possibly earlier, than the early New Kingdom (*Cheops' Court*, and *Khakheperreseneb*, respectively).<sup>40</sup>

From these excerpts, Stauder tries to define an *ante quem nom* to the dating of *Neferty*, positioning it in the late Second Intermediate Period and early New Kingdom. Nonetheless, from the same excerpts, we can see that Stauder himself situates the text as a transitional one, in some time during the transition from the Middle Kingdom to the New Kingdom.

24 Vernus 2011: 51–52.

25 Morenz 2003: 102.

26 Assmann 1995: 130; 2011: 6–7.

27 Assmann 2011: 71.

28 Assmann 1995: 132; 2008: 140–141.

29 Assmann 2008: 97.

30 Assmann 2010: 26–27.

31 Assmann 2011: 78.

32 Assmann 2011: 79.

33 Assmann 2011: 79.

34 We resonate Lichtheim (1973: 139): "The readers, ancient and modern, are to understand that the 'prophecy' is a literary disguise, veiling the contemporary character of a work composed in the reign of Amenemhet I, and designed as a glorification of that king. The work is a historical romance in pseudo-prophetic form."

35 Helck 1970: 1.

36 Golénischeff 1913.

37 Foster and Foster 2008: 221.

38 Hassan 2017.

39 Stauder 2013: 419.

40 Stauder 2013: 419, our bolds.

In addition to it, A. Stauder does not forget to mention the fact that, despite the copy on *pHermitage 1116B* dating to the Eighteenth Dynasty, “textual productions of the Middle Kingdom and Second Intermediate Period have been lost, perhaps in higher numbers than early New Kingdom ones”.<sup>41</sup>

In this way, we agree with K. Hassan’s choice to follow the traditional Egyptological dating of *Neferty* in the Twelfth Dynasty (Middle Kingdom), taking A. Stauder’s ideas into consideration.<sup>42</sup> Thus, the classic Egyptological view of the text as political propaganda of Amenemhet I is our choice in our inquiry of the text.<sup>43</sup>

By doing so, we focus on two aspects of the narrative, the first being a brief analysis of the way the figure of pharaoh is demonstrated: the pharaonic Old Kingdom, condensed in an idealized image of Sneferu; and the “saviour” king Ameny,<sup>44</sup> showed as a restorer of *maet*, related to the attempt to establish a connection between him and the traditional pharaonic royalty of the Old Kingdom. By doing so, we pay attention to

the way the text proceeds as a *royal advocacy* of Amenemhat I.

The second component is the Egyptian reality between these two kings, occupying a great part of the text: the ruin of Egypt; the presence of the Asiatics (*ʿ3mw*) and Libyans (*tmhw*); and the division between its own inhabitants. We will focus in this part on the social aspect of *maet*, rather than solely on how her relationship with the pharaoh is expressed in the text.

The idea of *maet* (*m3ʿt*) is fundamental for our interpretation, since the three moments of the text listed above correspond to a *maetic* or *isefetic* time: Sneferu’s reign (*m3ʿt*); the terrible time of chaos (*isfi*) related by Neferty; and later restoration by a king from the South, Ameny (reestablishment of *m3ʿt*).

In general lines, *maet* (*m3ʿt*) constituted a notion of eternal order in the cosmic and earthly world, needed for the maintenance of life (*ʿnh*) and operation of Egypt in all spheres. Such idea encompasses what we nowadays call law, justice and religion, going beyond those modern

spheres. The whole Egyptian society played a role in the support of *maet*, and the pharaoh was primarily responsible for her maintenance.<sup>45</sup> In this regard, we see *maet* in *Neferty* as the bound between the times of peace, order, justice, whose establishment is a natural consequence of the king chosen by the gods to restore Egypt. In other words, we see *maet* here playing a fundamental role in the uses of the past made by *Neferty*, being responsible for the links between the past (Sneferu’s peaceful reign) and the “future” (Amenemhat I’s arrival). For A. Almeida, the reference to Sneferu is an endowment of historicity, whereby the author intends to consolidate the text in front of the audience.<sup>46</sup> For J. Sales,<sup>47</sup> the utility of the past comes from its representations as being a remote or closer time related to the present, and its speculation is related to a process of rejection/identification that integrates not only past and present, but also past and future.<sup>48</sup>

In this sense, the “invention of the Old Kingdom” by the kings of the Twelfth Dynasty (c. 1991 – 1783 BC) is based on a supposed bond between them and the kings of the Fifth and Sixth Dynasties (c. 2465 – 2150 BC), taking the person of Sneferu—from the Fourth Dynasty—as their model.<sup>49</sup>

Furthermore, we focus also in the *maet*’s connections with the social sphere, in order to achieve the normative and formative meanings

she has on *Neferty*. To do so, we pay attention to references to lack of action and lack of communication. As Assmann states:

De toute évidence, ces deux catégories, l’action et la parole, se réfèrent aux deux composantes principales de Maât, à savoir ‘justice’ et ‘vérité’: la justice est la Maât que l’on ‘fait’ en agissant, la vérité est la Maât que l’on ‘dit’ en communiquant.<sup>50</sup>

In the next moment, we proceed to the examination of such components of *Neferty*, through a content analysis.<sup>51</sup>

## 2 | Content analysis of *Neferty*: *maet* as a link between past and future in Middle Kingdom Egypt; *maet* as Egyptian’s social justice

The content analysis provides supplementary information to the critical reader of a message,<sup>52</sup> through inference or deduction. In this way, it enables the reader a contact with the latent aspects of the text.<sup>53</sup>

This methodology has three steps, namely, 1) the choice of documents to be analyzed; 2) the formulation of hypotheses and objectives; 3) the elaboration of indicators which support the final action.<sup>54</sup> *pHermitage 1116B* and its eclectic text made by Helck constitutes the

<sup>41</sup> Stauder 2013: 419.

<sup>42</sup> As K. Hassan asserts, “The discourse of Neferti is a widely copied literary text dating back to the Middle Kingdom, which is regarded as a piece of political propaganda, glorifying the founder of a new dynasty” (Hassan 2017: 264, our bolds). “The exact date of the prophecy is still debated; however the most likely dating is to the Middle Kingdom, contemporary with Amenemhat I or later in the 12<sup>th</sup> Dynasty, or the Second Intermediate Period. Parkinson 2001: 304. For more detailed information about the dating of the composition cf. Stauder 2013, 337–443.” (Hassan 2017: 26, note 27). Moreover, in the first note of his paper, K. Hassan states that A. Stauder commented on his text before being published (Hassan 2017: 1).

<sup>43</sup> Such perspective does not exclude A. Stauder’s ideas. In this paper we just intend to demonstrate a historical perspective to the interpretation of the *Prophecies of Neferty*. Just like K. Hassan (2017), we follow the interpretation that the text refers to Amenemhet I, A. Stauder’s discussion of its dating not definitely excluding the existence of that hypothesis.

<sup>44</sup> G. Posener’s point of view on Ameny being the hypocoristic name of Amenemhet I (Posener 1969: 26–29; 60) is reinforced by M. Lichtheim (1973: 139). More recently, J.-R. Pérez-Accino (2008: 1497) understands the prophetic tone in which Ameny’s (*imny*) arrival is announced as an intertextuality with the prophecy of the goddess Meskhenet (*mshnt*) about the royalty of Ruddedet’s three children, in which both sentences are similar in the *Westcar Papyrus* (*pBerlin 3033*). A. Stauder’s reflections about the dating of *Neferty* take those reflections into account (Stauder 2013: 339). “The reference in ‘Ameny’ is multi-layered; whether it also included a specific historical referent remains unclear. In view of the later date of *Neferti*, the reference to the ‘Walls of the Ruler’ is probably best interpreted as an echo to *Sinuhe*, be the expression fictionalizing or not in that composition” (Stauder 2013: 418).

<sup>45</sup> Assmann 2010: 12; Teeter 2001: 319–321; Menu 2005: 8–9, 23.

<sup>46</sup> Almeida 2012: 32.

<sup>47</sup> Sales 2015: 19.

<sup>48</sup> We emphasize that it is far from our goal here to make a discussion about time and temporality for the ancient Egyptians. For more recent discussions on the subject, *vide*. Pires 2019; Sales 2015; Servajean 2007; Winand 2003.

<sup>49</sup> Assmann 2011: 19; Wildung 1984: 38.

<sup>50</sup> Assmann 2010: 40.

<sup>51</sup> Bardin 1977.

<sup>52</sup> Bardin 1977: 133.

<sup>53</sup> Bardin 1977: 9.

<sup>54</sup> Bardin 1977: 95–101.

document, and the hypotheses were presented in the introduction. The indicators which support the final action, on the other hand, are the normative and formative qualities of the text, related to our second goal—to analyze how the image of Amenemhet I was constructed in the text—that is, indicative elements of action and identity present in our analyzed text.

We chose the qualitative modality of content analysis instead of the quantitative, because the first does not require the exact reference to an analyzed element—here, *maet*. The qualitative content analysis focuses on the *semantic* aspects of the analyzed particle instead of focusing on the *linguistic* ones, as in the case of the quantitative modality. So, our search for *maet* on the text does not stay restricted to the presence of her name.

Our content analysis of *Neferty* takes as subject the ways *maet* appears on the text, seeking the associations between the times presented in the narrative with *maet*. We also take into consideration those references *a contrario*.<sup>55</sup> By doing so, we focus on the semantic instead of the linguistic aspects related to *maet*. First, let us observe how the narrative frame in the past—the Old Kingdom—is represented in *Neferty* (*pHermitage 1116B*, 1–8).<sup>56</sup>

*hpr.n swt wnn hm nsw-bity snfrw m<sup>3</sup>c-hrw m nsw  
mnh m t3 pn r-dr:fw<sup>c</sup> m nn hrw hpr  
k pw iri.n knbt nt hnw r pr-<sup>3</sup> nhy wd<sup>c</sup> snb r nd hrt  
prt pw iri.n.sn nd.sn hrt mi nt-<sup>c</sup>.sn ntr<sup>c</sup>nb  
dd.in hm.f<sup>c</sup>nhy wd3 snb n sd3wty nty r-gs.f  
isy in n.i knbt nt hnw prt <sup>3</sup> r nd hrt m hrw pn  
s3 ini.tw.f hr-<sup>c</sup>  
wn.in.sn hr ht.sn m-b3h hm.f<sup>c</sup>nhy wd3 snb m w<sup>h</sup>m-<sup>c</sup>  
dd.in hm.f<sup>c</sup>nhy wd3 snb n.sn  
rh<sup>w</sup> mt<sup>n</sup> rdi.n.i i3<sup>c</sup>s.tw n.tn*

*r rdt d<sup>c</sup>r:tn n.i s3.tn m s33 sn.tn m ikr  
hnms.tn wdi sp nfr ddt<sup>c</sup>.f n.i nhy n mdwt nfrwt  
tsw stpw wd3y hr n hm.i n sdm st*

It all occurred back when the Majesty of Egypt, Sneferu [true of voice], was a mighty King throughout the land.

And one fine day this happened:

The Royal Council made an entrance into the palace [life, prosperity, health!] to offer their respect, Moving in ordered procession to report their concerns as was their daily custom.

Then said his Majesty [life, prosperity, health!] to the messenger beside him,

‘Go. Bring the Royal Council to me, which has come to pay obeisance on this day.’

And those he brought were ushered in immediately. Then they were upon their stomachs, prone in the presence of his Majesty [life, prosperity, health!] once more;

And his Majesty [life, prosperity, health!] said to them,

‘Comrades, I have had you summoned so that you might search out for me a son of yours with wisdom, a brother of yours with skill, or a friend of yours to furnish entertainment, who shall offer me a bit of eloquence or some choice wisdom which my Majesty [life, prosperity, health!] delights to hear.’

This excerpt exposes the setting choice of the narrative frame of the text in Sneferu’s reign because of his idealized image as a king. Such is even clearer when we look at the passage above, when he is declared as a “mighty King throughout the land” (*nsw mnh m t3 pn r-dr:f*). The entrance of the Royal Council (*knbt*) in the palace (*pr-<sup>3</sup>*) in their regular daily custom indicates a narrative frame set in a time of an idealized order, balanced, that is, *maet* (*m<sup>3</sup>c*). According to

<sup>55</sup> Assmann 2010: 26–28.

<sup>56</sup> Henceforth, the translations quoted here are from Foster 2001: 76–84. The transliteration is taken from Helck 1970 and Canhão 2014: 643–672.

G. Pires,<sup>57</sup> in the *n<sup>h</sup>h* cyclic eternity, *maet* was established after the Creation by the Demiurge, being pharaoh’s duty to accomplish her in his daily rituals and attitudes. Then, in our eyes this moment of *Neferty* is the establishment of *maet* as a natural time, associated with the idealized Old Kingdom.

After the Royal Court leaves the palace, Sneferu asks the treasurer besides him to bring them back, and search out for him someone able to speak “fine words, selected speeches” (*mdwt nfrwt tsw stpw*)<sup>58</sup> to entertain him. That is the time when *Neferty* is introduced into the narrative: “There is a lector priest, a high priest of Bastet, whose name is *Neferty*” (*iw hry-hbt <sup>3</sup> n b3st ity nb.n nfrty rn.f*, 9–10).

Then, begins the longest part of the text, in which *Neferty* describes Egypt in chaos, disorder, famine, with the predominance of the lack of social solidarity and greed above all else. *Neferty*, speaking before Sneferu, denounces the violation of the commitment to social solidarity. That is, he denounces to the king that *maet* no longer predominates in Egypt. In this way, he speaks *maet* before pharaoh. Such intention can be certified in *Neferty*’s speech “Do not hold back! Set it before your eyes, that you may stand against what rises in your presence!” (*m wrd mk st hft hr:k h<sup>c</sup>.k r ntt m-b3h.k*, 21–22). *Neferty*’s narrative seeks to restore the world to an earlier state, not to create a new reality.<sup>59</sup>

In order to facilitate the comprehension of this portion of the text, we divide it in thematic sections, following T. Canhão.<sup>60</sup>

Ruin of the country in the face of general indifference (17–29): *Neferty* exposes his concerns about the eastern condition, what would happen there, when the Asiatics (*<sup>3</sup>mw*) advanced with their curved swords (*hps*), terrorizing the hearts of those at harvest (18–19). Then, the lector-priest speaks with his own heart (*ib*), “Be stirred, my heart, that you may mourn this land whence you have sprung!” (*hwsi ib.i rmw:k t3 pn s3<sup>c</sup>.n.k im.f*, 20). From the beginning of line 20 to the last part of line 24, he mourns the broken and infertile Egypt. From the end of the line 24 to the beginning of the line 29, *Neferty* shows that the solar disc (*itn*) will be covered by the clouds, making life impossible. The course of life will be turned into a riverbank, and the riverbank into flood, and the winds of Egypt will be reversed.<sup>61</sup>

One interesting point in this part is the reference to the chaos (*isft*) in such magnitude that the creation itself will vanish: “what was made is become unmade, Ré (must) begin his creation” (*iry<sup>t</sup> m tmt iri s3<sup>c</sup> r<sup>c</sup> m grg*, 22).<sup>62</sup> We see this part as establishing the pinnacle of crisis in the narrative: the return to the uncreated state. Egyptian’s tradition was lost, the entire land was in chaos, Ré withdrew from the land of Egypt. From now on in the text, everything will get worse.

Foreign people invading Egypt (29–46): the Asiatics (*<sup>3</sup>mw*) are here associated with alien

<sup>57</sup> Pires 2019: 145.

<sup>58</sup> Stauder (2013: 347) shows that this motif appears in other middle Egyptian texts, like in the *Eloquent Peasant* and in *Ptahhotep*.

<sup>59</sup> Almeida 2012: 34.

<sup>60</sup> Canhão 2013: 157–166.

<sup>61</sup> The Egyptians feared the inversion in all its forms. An example is the Spell 173 from the *Coffin Texts*, intended to protect the deceased from the threat of eating feces and urine (that is, eating what comes out the body, a radical example of inversion).

<sup>62</sup> Adapted from Quirke 2004: 136. Similarly, in the lines 38–39, we have “Let me offer you a land like sickness, where what should not happen does.” (*di.i n.k t3 sny mn tm hpr hpr*).

birds that will nidify in Nile's Delta.<sup>63</sup> The lector-priest explains its causes as the neglect of the Egyptian themselves (29–30); foreigner's search for food from Egypt (32); the lack of an effective fortress in the East (33), culminating with the invasion of Egypt by this place. Such excerpt (29–46) contains a significant number of references to the lack of social solidarity of the Egyptians as a cause of this time of misfortune. Funeral ceremonies are not strictly followed, and murderers are a common thing.

The following passages are worth mentioning, in which Neferty denounces the greed of the Egyptians, pointing it out as one of the causes of cosmic disorder he prophesies (*pHermitage 1116B*, 42–45):

*ib n s m-s3.f ds.f*  
*nn iri.tw s3mw min*  
*ib stni n hr.s r-3w*

The heart of a man will only be after himself.  
No mourning will be observed today –  
the heart is turned entirely to itself.

Selfishness will be so strongly present within society that funeral ceremonies will be set aside. The passage also speaks of greed in the hearts of the Egyptians: it is noteworthy that this is a prerogative of the heart (*ib*)<sup>64</sup> which, as Neferty says, will no longer be concerned with its fellow man but with his bearer (*i. e.*, the individual), a sign of selfishness (*isefet*).<sup>65</sup>

Such resonances with *isefet* bring with them dramatic consequences for the Egyptians: in Total disorder (46–58), we find several references to the lack of social solidarity among the Egyp-

tians. Neferty denounces the social injustice, such as inconsistency in weights and measurements, basis of taxes on peasants' plant and animal products (15–36).

Then, Neferty emphasizes the silence and lack of communication (*pHermitage 1116B*, 48–50):

*tw r rdit ht m msdd r sgr r mdw*  
*wšb.tw ts c prw hr ht*  
*mdw.tw m sm3 sw*  
*hn mdwt hr ib mi ht*  
*nn whd.n.tw pri n r*

Goods are given out only hatefully, to silence the speaker's mouth.

The phrase is answered at the arm raised with a stick,

and people speak by murder.

Speech alights on the heart like fire

No-one can bear a word from the mouth.<sup>66</sup>

It is interesting to note that the prevalence of the silence over speech (48–50) also appears in many middle Egyptian literary texts, *e. g.* the *Lamentations of Khakheperreseneb*, the *Dispute of a Man with his Ba*, and the *Admonitions of an Egyptian sage* (Ipu-uer).

As discussed earlier, soon after in the text, Ré himself will withdraw because of such conditions in which Egypt was found (*pHermitage 1116B*, 51–52):

*iw r c iwd.f sw rmt*  
*wbn.f wn wnw*  
*nn rh.tw hpr mtrt*  
*nn tni šwyt.f*

Ré withdraws himself from mankind, so that he shines down but fitfully –

One never knows when midday happens,  
one cannot distinguish (his own) shadow.<sup>67</sup>

A. Almeida associates Ré's withdrawal with the Myth of the Destruction of the Cosmos, with one of its references appearing in Chapter 175 of the *Book of the Dead*.<sup>68</sup> Therefore, in our eyes, the fact that an Egyptian cannot distinguish his own shadow indicates physical and metaphysical disorientation. According to J. Allen, the shadow (*šwt*) was one of the main components on the Egyptian concept of an individual, along with the ka (*k3*) and the ba (*b3*).<sup>69</sup> It is noteworthy that *maet* was connected to Ré and to royalty, representing the Universal order desired by the Demiurge, reflected both on the nature as in the world.<sup>70</sup> Moreover, she withdraws to the sky when *isefet* prevails.<sup>71</sup>

After this long exposition of Egypt's chaotic state, Neferty seems to have no hope. But:

Lorsque le desordre prévaut, Maât ne disparaît pas: chassée par Isfet du monde terrestre, elle se retire au ciel, auprès de son père, Rê. Il appartiendra alors aux hommes de faire apparaître un nouveau pharaon, un roi unique et puissant qui, par des actes conformes à l'ordre voulu par les dieux, fera revenir Maât sur terre pour le bonheur de tous. La crise de la Première Période intermédiaire joue un rôle paradigmatique, à la fin du troisième millénaire.<sup>72</sup>

In this way the final "prophecy" is spoken, about the coming of a southern king named

Ameny, who will reestablish *maet* and *isefet* to their respective places, causing the Cosmic and social order again, "reviving, "recreating" the world.

Announcement of the coming of a savior king (58–70): Due to its central place in our analysis, we will expose the entire section, excluding the colophon (*pHermitage 1116B*, 58–70).

*nsw pw r iit n rsy*  
*imny m3c-hrw rn.f*  
*s3 hmt pw n t3-sty*  
*msi pw n hnw nhn*  
*iw.fr šsp [hd]t*  
*iw.fr wts dšrt*  
*iw.f sm3 šhmty*  
*iw.fr šhnp nbwy*  
*m mrwt.sn*  
*p hr-ihy m fh c wsr m nwdt*  
*ršy rmt nt h3w.f*  
*s3 n s r irt rn.f*  
*r nh h hn c dt*  
*w3yw r dwt k3y[w] sbiw*  
*sh r.n.sn r.sn n sndw.f*  
*iw c3mw r hr n š c t.f*  
*timhw r hr n nswt.f*  
*iw sbiw nw ndnd.f*  
*h3kw-ib nw ššft.f*  
*iw r c t imy hnty*  
*hr shryt.f h3kw-ib*  
*tw r kd inbw-hk3 nh wd3 snb*  
*nn rdit h3y c3mw r kmt*  
*dbh.sn mw mi shrw šs c w*  
*r rdit swri c wwt.sn*

63 As noted by Stauder (2013: 430), the migratory birds indicate an intertextuality between *Neferty* and the *Hymn to Hapi* (2. 1–2): "The migratory Bird (*kbhw*) is descended (*h3i*) and finds the Southern Part as a lake; it settles on the tells of Upper Egypt, Chemnis having becoming their<sup>sic</sup> nest (*š3*)".

64 Assmann 2010: 49.

65 Assmann 2010: 50.

66 Quirke 2004: 137.

67 According to Helck (1970: 45), there is a suffix "f", whose semantic consists of a singular masculine possessive pronoun (𓆎) after the "t" (𓆏) in *šwyt*, what made us opt for "one cannot distinguish his own shadow" instead of "one cannot distinguish shadows" (Foster 2001: 83) or "shadows cannot be made out" (Quirke 2004: 138). Our option is closer to Lichtheim's: "no one will discern his shadow" (Lichtheim 1973: 143) and Canhão's: "ninguém distinguirá a sua sombra" (Canhão 2014: 711).

68 Almeida 2012: 20–30.

69 Allen 2001: 277–278.

70 Menu 2005: 11; 23.

71 Menu 2005: 23.

72 Menu 2005: 23.

*iw m3ʿt r iit r st.s*  
*isft dr sy r-rwty*  
*ršy gmḥty.f*  
*wnt.fy hr šms nsw*

But a king shall come from the South,  
 Ameny, blessed, his name,  
 Son of a girl of Ta-Sety, the Southland,  
 child of the palace at Hierakonpolis.  
 And he shall seize the White Crown of the South,  
 and he shall raise up the Red [Crown] of the North,  
 And he shall unite the Two Mighty Ones,  
 let Horus and Seth be at peace, and their fellows;  
 And he shall gather the lands in his grasp,  
 strong since the days of his swaddling clothes!  
 Joy shall be to the people of his time –  
 for a worthy son who shall make his name  
 to endure forever and forever.  
 Those fallen to evil, those plotting rebellion –  
 they have silenced their mouths in fear of him;  
 Asiatics shall fall to his sword,  
 Libyans shall fall to his fire.  
 Rebels shall be given to him for instruction,  
 the disaffected made to respect him again –  
 And the serpent-goddess (ʿrʿt) going before him  
 shall soothe surviving antagonists.  
 They shall build Walls-of-the-Ruler, the fortress –  
 no more Asiatics to come down into Egypt!  
 Let them beg for water according to custom  
 to let their cattle drink.  
 Justice (m3ʿt) shall rise to her throne;  
 Wrongdoing (isft) be utterly driven away!  
 How fortunate those who shall see him,  
 who shall swell the train of that king! (Our bolds)

Here, Neferty “prophesies” about the coming of Amenemhat I. He so carefully specifies the ways in which the savior king will establish *maet*: his use of the Two Crowns (*hdt* and *dšrt*); the appeasement of the Two Mighty Lords (*štp nbwy*),

Horus and Seth pacified—what can be interpreted as both the pacification of the people of the desert—symbolized by Seth—with the people of Egypt—symbolized by Horus—as with the union of the Two Lands (*sm3 t3wy*). Mentuhotep II changed his royal protocol twice, and “his third Horus name *sm3 t3wy*, ‘Unifier of the Two Lands’, would reflect a policy of reintegrating the two parts of Egypt”.<sup>73</sup> Taking that into consideration, we see those references to the Unification as not only an attempt to historicize the text, but also as an indication of the creation of the monarchy through the unification of the Two Lands, an association with the “First Time” (*sp tpy*).

Furthermore, pharaoh, with his power, will defeat the Asiatics (*3mw*) and the Libyans (*tmḥw*) associated in the text with *isefet*. The coming king is merciful and brings balance: “Rebels shall be given to him for instruction, the disaffected made to respect him again” (*iw sbiw nw ndnd.f h3kw-ib nw ššft.f*, 64).

The *iaret* cobra is commonly associated with the idea of a deity who protects the pharaoh against his enemies, through her spit fire. Here, on the contrary, she appears as a “peacemaker” “soothing surviving antagonists” (*iw ʿrʿt imy ḥnty hr shryt.f h3kw-ib*, 65). In our vision, this antagonism reinforces an idea of a merciful king, ready to treat well even those who oppose him.

On the other hand, the Nehri graffiti at Hatnub provides evidence of war conditions in Middle Egypt at the end of the Eleventh Dynasty or at the beginning of the Twelfth,<sup>74</sup> and some consider that those events took place during Amenemhet I’s reign.<sup>75</sup>

The construction of the “Walls of the Ruler” (*inbw-ḥk3*) in the Delta borders of Egypt appears in the *Story of Sinuhe* as well (B17).

73 Willems 2010: 87.

74 Willems 2010: 90.

75 Willems 2010: 90.

Then, pharaoh will finalize his pacification with the foreign people by giving them water, letting them “beg for it according to custom”. We see this as a reference to “Wild desert beasts shall come to drink the water down by Egypt’s river” (36), earlier in *Neferty*. The fact that they (the foreign people) will “beg for water according to custom” indicates a return to a previous state, in which the Asiatics and Libyans were dependent on Egypt’s natural resources, having to beg for the king’s mercy in order to access them. That is, a return to *maet* (m3ʿt).

Finally, “*maet* shall rise to her throne, *isefet* be utterly driven away”.<sup>76</sup> In this way, Amenemhet I ends his creation process. “In fact, Creation is not the end of Chaos: it is only its relegation to the peripheral boundaries of the Cosmos”.<sup>77</sup> Neferty’s narrative, then, seeks restoring the chaotic world to a previous lost state (*maet*’s state), not creating a new reality.<sup>78</sup>

### 3 | Final remarks

The following considerations take into account the restricted character of circulation of written texts in Ancient Egypt, made for and by the written elite, associated with pharaoh. Such an aspect is fundamental to the understanding of the cultural memory related to *Neferty*.

We understand *Neferty* as a literary text with a royal advocacy content. In this way, pharaoh as an institution is shown firstly as an idealized image—through the narrative frame, during Sneferu’s reign, in which he appears as a benevolent king—associated with *maet*. A great part of the

text relates the chaotic state in which Egypt and the Cosmos were *after* this balance time, located in an idealized, mythical past: as a result of the collapse of the centralized state, Egyptian’s borders were invaded by foreign people, the inversion took place of the entire land, the solar disc (*itm*) and Ré himself faded away, greed and hatred took hold of the Egyptians.

Social justice has an important task to fulfill as well, along with the pharaoh: as demonstrated, the main sign in the text related to the absence of *maet* in the hearts of the Egyptians is the *silence/lack of action*. Neferty, thus, denounces the social connivance with the *status quo*, for the Egyptians stand against each other, desecrating the traditions (which in our vision is also a way to unbalance *maet*). In this sense, the “justice” and the “truth”, the two main components of *maet*, are expressed with its relations to the action and the speech in the following scheme:

**Speech ↔ Action (to listen/to act accordingly to *maet*) ↔ Truth/Justice**

Then, we see here an important normative aspect of cultural memory presented in *Neferty*: Egyptians as a whole shall not only *speak* about *maet* but also *act* accordingly. Through listening, the Egyptian understands what happens around him/her, and becomes able to sympathize with others, speaking and acting in a *maetic* way. Thus, the Egyptian has a role in the maintenance of *maet*, not just pharaoh. By “Egyptian” we understand an idealized vision of an Egyptian that is present in literary texts. In historical terms, it is related to those who had access to the texts, either in written form or through

76 In our eyes, there is here an intertextuality with *Khakheperreseneb* (*recto*, 11): *rli.tw m3ʿt rwty isft m-ḥnw sh*, “*Maet* was expelled out, *isefet* is in the Council Room” (our translation). The same word used to refer to *maet*’s expulsion (*rwty*) appears referring to *isefet*’s leaving out the interior of the room.

77 Pires 2019: 145.

78 Almeida 2012: 34.



recitation. But the king remains the main component in this equation. In such a way that in the text the “coming king” Amenemhet I is responsible for the return of *maet*, incarnating the Demiurge, acting as in the “First Time” (*sp tpy*), expelling (*rwty*) *isefet* to the borders of the Cosmos, and installing *maet* in her rightful place, that is, inside Egypt.

This brings us to another aspect of cultural memory expressed in *Neferty*: its formative quality, that is, the way the text expresses the idea of “Who we are” to a collectivity. This corresponds to the incarnation of the tradition, formerly lost, in a previous period of chaos. In this sense, the cultural memory begins to be formed in what Egyptology calls the Middle Kingdom. The text strongly associates the Egyptians with *maet*, differentiating them from the foreigners, associated with *isefet*. Such a perspective is fully in line with the already discussed responsibility of the Egyptians in *maet*'s maintenance, as well as their identification with Amenemhet I's reign.

The “prophecy” of the coming king seeks also to establish in the minds of the audience an association of the new pharaoh with the Demiurge and with *maetic* forces, through uses of the pharaonic past based on the creation of the “Old Kingdom”, although we do not see this aspect as primary in the text. We see a reinforcing aspect on cultural memory regarding it.

Finally, the cultural memory is then “re-aligned”, establishing a break between the past and the present, the first being the chaotic time—associated with *isefet*—and the second being the eternal present, consolidated in the “First Time” (*sp tpy*). The boundaries of Egypt are then strengthened, as well as the “Egyptianizing” way of being, bounded with the figure of Amenemhet I. In the optics of cultural memory, the Ramesside copies of the text tells us about a canonization of earlier Middle Kingdom versions, turning around this realignment of memory, confirming the continuity of the text in the cultural memory of the Egyptians in later times.

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# Trabajos de Egiptología

Papers on Ancient Egypt

## Horizonte y perspectiva Estudios sobre la civilización egipcia antigua

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