Ghosts in Ancient Egypt from a Literary Perspective: An Analysis of 'Khonsemhab and the Spirit'. A Possible Pessimistic Tale of the Middle Kingdom?

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Abstract: In this study, we examine one of the most enigmatic compositions of Ancient Egyptian literature. Although preserved in a copy of Ramesside period from the New Kingdom, the text appears to be based on an earlier narrative tradition. The tale centres on the encounter and dialogue between its two eponymous protagonists: Khonsemhab, a priest of Amun, and Nebusemekh, a spirit. The narrative unfolds through their exchange concerning the spirit's lament over the dilapidated state of its tomb, a condition that prevents it from attaining eternal rest, and the assurances offered by the priest to restore it—assurances which the spirit receives with scepticism, shaped by past disappointments. Owing to the fragmentary preservation of the text, the fate of both characters remains unknown.

Based on its formal and thematic features, it is plausible to suggest that this tale could be tentatively situated within the corpus of so-called pessimistic texts traditionally associated with the Middle Kingdom. In this regard, it exhibits several noteworthy affinities with compositions from that period, such as its dialogic structure, the thematic tension between order and chaos, and the spirit's expressions of despair in response to the neglected state of his burial place.

In this study, I examine the tale in detail and seek to address a central question at the end of the article: Could this story have originally belonged to the tradition of Middle Kingdom Pessimistic Literature?

Keywords: Story, Ghosts, Analysis, Pessimistic Literature, Middle Kingdom, Ancient Egypt.

1. SOME CONSIDERATIONS ON MIDDLE KINGDOM LITERATURE: PESSIMISTIC LITERATURE

Pessimistic literature experienced a significant development during the Middle Kingdom (c. 2055-1650 BC)[1] (Rosell 2010: 232). This literary genre constitutes a unique and compelling manifestation, standing out precisely for its negative and critical perspective within a culture generally characterised by optimism and by an emphasis on the values of order and stability. These so-called pessimistic texts (Simpson 2023: 5-6) offer an alternative and challenging view of the world, exploring the catastrophic consequences that could arise from a disturbance of the cosmic and social balance, primarily embodied in the concept of Maat (Salem 2017: 148).

To understand the context in which these works emerged, it is essential to consider the historical and political characteristics of the Middle Kingdom. This period followed the First Intermediate Period (c. 2160-2055 BC), a phase regarded as turbulent in Ancient Egypt, at least from a political standpoint, as it was marked by the fragmentation of the State into two independent political entities —the kingdoms of Thebes and Herakleopolis —and by political decentralization accompanied by the emergence of a series of local powers. By contrast, the Middle Kingdom was defined by political reorganization, centralization, and the strengthening of the State, processed particularly evident under the rulers of the 12th Dynasty. Within this context of reaffirmation of central authority, Pessimistic literature may have played a distinctive role as an ideological transformation instrument for the consolidation of state power, that is, as a means of legitimizing the new political and social order (Rosell 2010: 234), Middle Kingdom literary texts are deeply shaped by political and ideological concerns (Posenser, 1956) that may have influenced in later compositions.

The sovereigns of the 12th Dynasty, while admiring the achievements of the early Egyptian dynasties, sought to emulate this glorious past, at the same time recalling the First Intermediate Period as an era of darkness and political fragmentation. Consequently, this literature articulates a contrast between order and justice—political centralization, unification, and state organization, identified with *Maat*—and chaos and injustice—political disorder, social injustice, and political fragmentation—associated with *Isfet*. Maat is not inherent to the world; rather, it must be continually created and maintained by both the king and human

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[1]The chronology adopted in this study follows that used in Shaw´s monograph (2000).

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beings. Emerging as a response to a state of deficiency and separation, its realization is essential for peaceful coexistence and for sustaining the connection between gods and humans (Assmann, 1994: 96–99).

In this way, the kings endeavoured to construct a negative image of that earlier period, which in turn allowed them to present their own time as one of order and stability in comparison with the immediate past. As Juan Carlos Moreno (2004: 14) has argued, these literary works, rather than constituting 'historical sources for the reconstruction of the events that took place at the end of the Old Kingdom, should be understood as an ideological construction of the Theban rulers of the Middle Kingdom, intended to legitimize and consolidate their power'.

Works of pessimistic literature display a set of distinctive features that clearly differentiate them from other literary genres. These compositions tend to present a disrupted vision of order, depicting Egyptian society as chaotic and unstable through references to catastrophic events, social injustice, unrest, and moral decay (Jesi, 1968: 20). In such narratives, order has been broken and justice has vanished. The genre frequently draws upon historical events from the past to explain or legitimize present circumstances, making use of the political context to emphasize the necessity of a strong and stable monarchy as the guarantor of order and social cohesion.

A further characteristic of pessimistic literature is the central role of its characters, who embody fear, anxiety, and hopelessness, expressing these emotions through dialogue. Their voices articulate doubt, despair, suffering, and loneliness in response to the chaos surrounding them, as well as a longing for solutions to both collective and personal afflictions. Some texts also question traditional religious beliefs, particularly those concerning the afterlife, by raising doubts about the existence or accessibility of eternal life in Beyond.

This literary corpus places particular emphasis on individual emotions and inner experience, often conveyed through internal dialogues that reflect the suffering provoked by a disordered world. Despite their bleak portrayal of society, however, these texts were not intended to promote the subversion of order. On the contrary, they sought to legitimize the need for strong authority, underlining the monarchy's essential role in preserving balance and stability in Egypt.

Pessimistic literature may broadly be divided into two categories: prophecies and reflective discourses or lamentations. Prophetic texts typically feature high-ranking figures who announce the advent of a chaotic world in which chaos prevails over order, signalling the absence of *Maat* (Allen 2000: 260). Reflective texts and lamentations, by contrast, focus on injustice and disorder across various aspects of Egyptian life, portraying extreme situations, social crises, and moral uncertainty. They frequently evoke anxiety and despair (Wilson 1953[1951]: 164) within a world where justice and order have been fundamentally disturbed (Lichtheim 1996: 249). It is important to stress that this literature did not constitute a critique of the existing social order. Although it depicts chaos and social breakdown, it does so from within the ideological framework of the state and the cultural milieu of the elite. Its purpose was therefore not to challenge authority, but to reinforce it and to justify its necessity. As a result, these texts often convey an implicit moral message which, even when not explicitly stated, may be inferred from their narrative structure and thematic focus. Among the most representative works of this corpus—frequently cited in studies of pessimistic literature (Rosell 2010: 237)[2]—are *The Admonitions of Ipuwer*, *The Dispute of a Man with His Ba*, *The Prophecy of Neferty*, and *The Lamentations of Khakheperrasnebu*.

The Admonitions of Ipuwer offers a vivid portrayal of a society in disarray. A sage named Ipuwer addresses the king at court, reproaching him for the calamities afflicting the land. The text describes social upheaval, injustice, and lawlessness, and—probably drawing on memories of the First Intermediate Period—serves a clear ideological purpose: to illustrate the disastrous consequences of a breakdown in social order and to affirm the necessity of a strong and stable monarchy as the guarantor of *Maat*. In contrast, *The Dispute of a Man with His Ba* presents an internal dialogue that foregrounds individual suffering rather than collective disorder. The text explores the despair and isolation of a man who contemplates suicide[3] as a means of escape from a chaotic and incomprehensible world, while his *ba* urges him to continue living. In doing so, the work questions aspects of traditional religious belief, particularly those relating to the afterlife, and focuses less on political order than on the search for

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[2]Other works that fall within this category include *The Lamentations of the Birdcatcher*, *The Lamentations of Khunanpu*, *The Lamentations of Neferpesdjet*, *The Discourse of Sasobek*, and The *Discourse of Rensoneb*.
[3]Some scholars argue that there is no indication that the man seeks suicide to put an end to his despair (Lichtheim, 1973: 163). Other authors, however, suggest precisely the opposite (Pritchard, 1969[1950]: 405–407).

inner peace. *The Prophecy of Neferty*, set during the reign of Sneferu of the 4th Dynasty, recounts the vision of the prophet Neferty, who foretells a future marked by chaos, foreign invasion, and the collapse of order. This period of instability is ultimately resolved by the arrival of a saviour figure named Ameny, widely identified with Amenemhat I, founder of the Twelfth Dynasty, who restores order and justice through strong leadership (Callender 2022[2000]: 208). The last one, *The Lamentations of Khakheperrasnebu,* presents the reflections of a priest of Heliopolis who, in dialogue with his own heart, struggles to articulate his anguish in response to Egypt's ruin, social indifference, and his own sense of powerlessness.

Taken together, these works demonstrate the distinctive nature of pessimistic literature and its critical engagement with chaos and disorder. Nevertheless, rather than advocating subversion, they ultimately reaffirm the existing order and may therefore be regarded as fundamentally conservative compositions. Their strong political dimension lies in their function as instruments for legitimizing and consolidating the authority of the Middle Kingdom elite (Moreno 2004: 273). By evoking a dark and chaotic memory of the First Intermediate Period—characterized by political fragmentation, the weakening of central authority, and social instability, these texts underscore the necessity of a strong monarchy to preserve order and to legitimize the present (Assmann 2005: 133).

Finally, this corpus attests to the richness and complexity of Middle Kingdom literary production. Through these compositions, we gain valuable insight into the concerns and mentality of the ruling elite, as well as into the role of literature as a medium of cultural and political expression and as a tool for reinforcing power, order, and social cohesion within Ancient Egyptian society.

2. ARGUMENT OF 'KHONSEMHAB AND THE SPIRIT'

The text is a short yet highly original tale in which two contrasting figures—a living man, a priest of Amun, and a dead man, the ghost—come into contact and engage in dialogue. It must be noted that this type of narrative involving interactions between the living and the dead was not common within Ancient Egyptian literature, which makes this composition an interesting novelty. Over time, the connection between the physical and immaterial spheres would eventually become a recurrent motif in the literary texts of the Ptolemaic period (Lefebvre, 2003[1949]: 175). The protagonists of the tale are the two characters that give its name. However, some scholars have debated the possibility of a third figure: a narrator who may have been a direct witness to the events, as we shall see. The two principal characters are, on the one hand, the ghost—named Niutbusemekh, Nebusemekh or Naubusemekh, depending on the translation—formerly a *"Director of the Royal Treasury"* under King Rahotep or Mentuhotep II (according to different interpretations) and, in life, a lieutenant in the king's army; and, on the other hand, Khonsemhab, High Priest of Amun, the living man to whom the spirit appears.

Following the introduction of the protagonists, the main body of the narrative begins with the dialogue exchanged between the two. The ghost laments the poor condition of his tomb at the time of the events, a result of neglect, which has left him entirely exposed to drafts of air that cause him distress. Khonsemhab, for his part, promises to build a new tomb so that the spirit may finally rest in peace. According to Lefebvre (2003[1949]: 177), this latter character—Khonsemhab—was invented, as no documentation has been found referring to any priest of this name, a point that López (2005: 185) later corroborates.

López (2005: 185–186) does not attribute the tale to any specific historical event, although he notes that toward the end of 20th Dynasty—when the extant copies of the story were produced, under the reign of Ramesses IX—tomb robberies and acts of profanation were widespread. As a result, the Theban authorities had to conduct investigations into the looting of royal and high-official tombs (cf. *pAbbott*), which were frequently targeted. This historical context may be connected to the narrative: although the tale does not mention it explicitly, it is likely that the tomb of Nebusemekh was in poor condition due to looting and subsequent abandonment, which in turn would have caused it to be forgotten over time. This can be inferred from one of the ghost's complaints: the drafts produced by shifting ground may have been the result of earth being disturbed during the plundering of the tomb. Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that the tale never mentions such a major event as the tomb's robbery, which raises the possibility that it was simply an old, long-forgotten burial place that had naturally deteriorated. In any case, the reality is that the ghost's tomb had been abandoned and left to decay. In line with this, it is worth highlighting that the text hints at a potential moral dimension: the necessity of maintaining tombs to ensure the eternal rest of the deceased.

Another interesting point is that the author of the text appears to have known what would happen in the future, since some scholars consider this work to anticipate events of the 21th Dynasty—namely, the moment when the priests of Amun ordered that the mummies be restored and removed from their plundered tombs to be concealed in the necropolis of Deir el-Bahari (López, 2005: 186).

When discussing the plot of *Khonsemhab and the Ghost*, it is important to consider the short length of the tale, which is due both to the absence of several intermediate fragments and to the lack of an opening and a conclusion, all of which makes the full understanding of the story difficult. In line with this, the tale may be divided into three distinct sections.

The first part of the story consists of the introduction and presentation of the characters. Here the deceased, Nebusemekh, appears before Khonsemhab; the latter asks him to state his name and that of his parents so that he may make offerings to them. Although the beginning of the work is unknown—since no manuscript preserving the opening has been found—the text suggests that it was the priest himself who summoned the ghost for reasons we do not know. The absence of this section may be due either to the loss of the original beginning, as mentioned above, or to the possibility that such information was assumed, given that priests of this rank were those who performed sacrifices and maintained contact with the immaterial realm.

In the second section, the two characters engage in a dialogue in which Khonsemhab makes several promises, the ghost recounts aspects of his life before death, and laments the poor state of his tomb. According to the spirit, the tomb has fallen into this condition because it has been abandoned, a situation that prevents him from resting peacefully. Khonsemhab promises to build a new tomb; however, the ghost does not trust him, since he had been given similar assurances before, none of which had been fulfilled. The priest insists on his commitment (offering slaves for water libations, grain offerings, and so forth), but the spirit remains unconvinced.

The third part of the text shows that, despite everything, Khonsemhab ultimately keeps his promise. After the priest and the workmen rejoice upon finding a new resting place for the ghost, he returns to the city—presumably Thebes—to rest. However, the ending of the tale is completely missing, so we do not know what occurred afterwards. It is possible that the ghost might have appeared again to his benefactor in gratitude for having kept his word—an idea proposed by Wente (2003: 112), who assumed that "the story would conclude with the successful completion of the spirit's tomb under the supervision of Khonsemhab[4]. If so, the tale might have ended with the priest seeing the ghost in a dream (Wente, 2003: 115)[5] or with a new apparition (von Beckerath, 1992: 107)[6]. Brunner-Traut (2000[1963]: 347), however, argues that the spirit's gratitude would not have been made explicit in the text, and that the ghost therefore would not reappear at the end of the story, since "the High Priest's plea is formulated in very general terms (that the ghost may be willing to grant him his favour in the Hereafter)."

3. DOCUMENTS AND PROBLEMS RELATING TO ITS CONTEXTUALIZATION

It was Gardiner (1936: 89) who gave this story the title *'Khonsuemhab and the Spirit'.* The original text of the tale has not been preserved; instead, what survives is a series of several fragmented copies, all of them dating to Dynasties 19th-20th of the New Kingdom (ca. 1550–1069 BCE), written in hieratic on the surface of various ostraca found in Deir el-Medina, near Thebes. Nevertheless, it is believed that the original story may have been composed earlier[7]. As for the title of the work, most Egyptologists retain the title proposed by Gardiner, although some scholars assign different titles to the narrative. Lefebvre (2003[1949]: 175) called it *'Una histoire de revenant';* Wente (2003: 112), *'A Ghost Story';* Brunner-Traut (2000[1963]: 224), *'Das Gespenst'* and von Beckerath (1992: 90), '*Zur Geschichte von Chonsemḥab und dem Geist*'.

The main characteristic of this work is that, from a grammatical perspective, all surviving copies are written in a very incorrect manner, containing numerous orthographic mistakes. This raises several doubts regarding the process of writing: whether these errors reflect the poor grammatical quality of the original text—subsequently reproduced in later

[4]'We may assume that the story concluded with the successful completion of the spirit´s tomb under Khonsemhab´s direction'.

[5]'… possibly saw the spirit again in a dream'.

[6]'Die Hervorhebung der ganz banalen Tatsache, daß Chonsemhab nach Erledigung seiner Geschäfte schlafen geht, deutet doch wohl darauf hin, daß ihm ein Traumerlebnis bevorsteht. Gewiß erscheint ihm dabei der Geist noch einmal, um seine Zufriedenheit darüber zum Ausdruck zu bringen, daß nun endlich statt leerer Versprechungen wirklich an der Wiederherstellung seines Grabes gearbeitet wird; vielleicht verheißt er dem Hohenpriester auch etwas Gutes'.

[7]The dating of the original story is inferred by translators based on the reference to the mentioned king (Lefebvre, 2003[1949]: 176).

copies—or whether they were introduced by the scribes themselves. In any case, the reality is that the work is poorly written and contains a significant number of orthographic errors. According to López (2005: 183), it may have been a local tale or imaginary story transmitted orally by the necropolis workmen and eventually committed to writing by a careless scribe[8], which would explain such mistakes.

The tale has been reconstructed because of a series of highly fragmented ostraca scattered across different collections, which has made the reconstruction process very complex. The total number of attested ostraca is not large, but sufficient to reconstitute almost the entire story to some degree. The documents are listed in López (2005: 186):

- oTurin CGT 57314, 57315, 57317 and 57318
- oVienna 3722 a (Dynasty XIX)
- oFlorence 2616 and 2617 (Dynasty XIX)
- oLouvre 667 + 700 (Dynasty XIX)
- oIFAO 1251 (I–II)
- oGardiner 306

Regarding the contextualization of the work, certain doubts remain about its dating, since the original composition is unknown. The most interesting clue derives from the name of the king mentioned in the tale, King Rahotep or Rahetep (ca. 1622 BCE). However, even the king's name gives rise to significant uncertainty, as errors in its writing have led to divergent scholarly opinions concerning the dating of the narrative.

López (2005: 184), based on oFlorence 2616, states that the name *n nswt Ra-Ḥtpw* can be read clearly, which should pose no problem for its identification. However, the scribe later makes a mistake—whether deriving from the original author or from a copyist is unknown—by confusing *Rahotep* (the fourth element of the royal titulary), when in fact it is the fifth element, the title preceded by *sA-Ra* ("Son of Re"). According to the same author, column 11 of the *Turin Royal Canon* records the name of a king of 17th Dynasty, "The Son of Re, Rahotep," first ruler of the dynasty (Ryholt 1997: 392–393), whose tomb was likely located in the necropolis of Dra Abu el-Naga, the very place where the events of the tale would unfold—since, as we recall, at the end of the story Khonsemhab returns to Thebes (the city) to sleep. Up to this point the situation appears clear.

However, the problem arises when, later in the narrative, the designation of the king changes precisely at the moment when the ghost recounts his burial: *"I was buried in Year 14, during the summer months, (of the reign) of King Ra-{Men}-hetep,"* a translation of *(nswt bjtj) Mn-Ḥtpw-Ra* which Wente (2003: 113) identifies with Mentuhotep II (ca. 2055 BCE), the 11th Dynasty king who reigned 51 years according to the *Turin Royal Canon* and whose funerary complex is located at Deir el-Bahari, adjacent to the funerary temple of Hatshepsut, west of Thebes. This shift in reference is likely attributable to an error in copying, given the overall poor orthographic quality of the text.

Lefebvre (2003[1949]: 176) had already noted the discrepancy between the two monarchs, leaning toward the view that the tale refers to Mentuhotep II, that is, "a sovereign who transmitted to posterity a glorious name," and ruling out Rahotep, since he was a little-known king who, moreover, reigned for only a short time, making it impossible for Nebusemekh to have been buried in Year 14 of that ruler. Von Beckerath (1992: 106) likewise believes that the king in question is Mentuhotep II. In his words, '*I am convinced that in a story of this kind one could only have had in mind the earlier and more significant Mentuhotep II, the founder of the Middle Kingdom*'[9], dismissing Rahotep because '*it is improbable that, in this story, despite the scribe's clumsiness, a minor king of 17th Dynasty would have been mentioned*'.[10] Along similar lines, Brunner-Traut (2000[1963]: 226) also states that the king referred to in the text is Mentuhotep. Although she does not specify which king bearing that name, it must be Mentuhotep II, since she remarks that the ghost's tomb would have been located "next to the pyramid of King Mentuhotep in Deir el-Bahari." In the following section, when we compare the different translations, we shall briefly return to this problem.

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[8]Von Beckerath (1992: 19) argues, about the handwriting and punctuation marks (verse points) in the copies, that two scribes were responsible for recording the tale from a very specific section of the original story.

[9]'…bin ich jetzt überzeugt, daß man in einer solchen Erzählung nur an den früheren und bedeutenderen Menthotpe II., den Begründer des MR, gedacht haben kann'.

[10]'…ist doch unwahrscheinlich, daß man hier, bei aller Ungeschicklichkeit der Erzählung, einen Kleinkönig der XVII'.

4. TRANSLATIONS

For the preparation of this section, we have consulted the anthologies and articles in which the tale is included[11][12], all of which are listed in the corresponding bibliography section. It should be noted that although these works exhibit differences regarding the names of characters, places, and some minor details, we shall focus on the most noteworthy variations, that is, those that may be considered worthy of discussion.

First part: the Spirit is Summoned before Khonsemhab

This portion, which may be regarded as an introduction to the characters, recounts how Khonsemhab[13], the priest of Amun, summons the spirit of Nebusemekh. In this first fragment we already find some differences, since some authors argue for the existence of a third protagonist based on the presence of a first-person singular pronoun—possibly the narrator of the events—mentioned earlier. For López (2005: 183–184), the presence of this pronoun may be due to a scribal confusion, something quite common in this text according to the author. He notes that the presence of a first-person pronoun is also frequent in other tales such as *The Shipwrecked Sailor* and *The Story of Sinuhe*, although in the present case the narrator disappears completely from the plot[14]. Lefebvre (2003[1949]: 177), by contrast, does not doubt the existence of a third character, who would be the narrator of the story. In von Beckerath's translation (1992: 103), it is Khonsemhab who speaks: '[He] crossed over, arrived at his house, and had [an offering (?) prepared, saying: I am going to offer (or something similar)] all good things (when) I reach the West (that is, the western bank of the Nile)'[15].

Another interesting moment in this first section occurs when the spirit manifests itself. Lefebvre (2003[1949]: 178) draws particular attention to the problem of the spirit's name, transliterated as *Niwt-bw-smx*. Elsewhere in the text, however, it appears as *Niwt-bw-sxn*, 'the city (Thebes) does not forget (me)'. The other translators do not comment on this matter in their works.

Second Part: The Lamentations of Nebusemekh and the Promises of Khonsemhab

This second section is the longest in the entire tale, as it contains the dialogue between the two protagonists of the story. Naturally, given its length, it is in this part that we find the greatest number of differences among the translators.

First, all the translators broadly agree that Khonsemhab commits himself to restoring the spirit's tomb to guarantee his eternal rest. They differ in certain nuances, but the general meaning of this passage is essentially the same across the translations. One of the most distinctive aspects concerns the materials that the priest of Amun will use to rebuild the tomb. López, Wente, and Brunner-Traut mention these materials with slight variations[16], whereas Lefebvre omits this part entirely[17]. An interesting detail is that throughout the text there are repeated references to the spirit's "status," which clearly expresses the respect accorded to individuals of high social rank, such as royal officials.

Next come the spirit's lamentations concerning the poor condition of his tomb[18]. In this section of the narrative, we find several noteworthy differences among the translations. For López, Wente, von Beckerath, and Brunner-Traut, these lamentations are spoken directly by the spirit, whereas Lefebvre attributes them to the priest; in his interpretation they

[11] We have not used the translations by G. Maspero and A. Erman, since, according to López (2005: 187), they are outdated and incorrectly situate the manuscripts. Nor have we used G. Posener's 1960 translation, as it is incomplete, nor included his later 1975 study with the remaining ostraca, because the fragments published by Posener were already incorporated into J. von Beckerath's translation (1992: 90-107).

[12] We attempted to consult M. M. Sarmiento's work, *Muerte, memoria y olvido. Un análisis de Khonsuemhab y el espíritu* (2017), but were unable to do so, as the volume in which it is included is currently out of print. We also made efforts to contact the author directly; however, these attempts were likewise unsuccessful.

[13] Transliterated from Gardiner (1936: 89). Ḫnsw-m-Ḥb, literally 'Khonsu is in jubilation'.

[14] This author does not rule out the possibility of the existence of a third character. It is possible that this mysterious narrator appeared on the lost first page and that he was indeed someone recounting the story to another person, whether a high dignitary or someone of similar status. The presence of a narrator is a characteristic feature in some tales. For example, in *The Shipwrecked Sailor*, the protagonist—the shipwrecked man—relates the story of his ordeal to the official.

[15] '[Er]' setzte über, er erreichte sein Haus und er ließ machen (herrichten) [ein Opfer (?), indem er sagte: „Ich werde darbringen (o. ä.)] alle guten Dinge, (wenn) ich zum Westen (d. h. auf die Westseite des Nils…)'.

[16] 'Entonces Khonsu[emheb], el sumo sacerdote de Amón-Ra (…) «dime lo que está en tu corazón. Yo ordenaré que se haga para ti y mandaré que se te construya una [nueva] sepultura. Yo ordenaré que se te haga un ataúd de azufaifo y tú […] y mandaré que se haga para ti todo lo que se debe hacer para quien es [de tu condición]»' (López, 2005: 185). '«Dime lo que deseas, yo haré que (se) haga para ti; y se rehará [de nuevo] tu sepultura»' (Lefevbre, 2003[1949]: 175). 'And I Will have a sepulchre prepared [anew] for you and have a coffin of gold and zizyphus-wood made for you, and you shall ['rest therein'], and I Will have done for you all that is done for one who is in [you position]' (Wente 2003: 113). 'Y haré que te hagan un ataúd de oro y madera de sísifo, y (podrás dormir de nuevo en tu tumba) …' (Brunner-Traut, 2000: 225).

[17] LeFebvre (2000: 175) notes that he has not dealt with some of the fragments "recently" discovered and therefore still unpublished at the time of writing this anthology. He mentions that G. Posener has examined and deciphered them, communicating to him all the necessary amendments.

[18] Adams (2016[2007]: 9) considers the spirit to be an excellent and persuasive interlocutor. Educated at court, he knows how to use the appropriate words, rhetoric, and metaphor to make Khonsemhab aware of the poor condition of his tomb, with the aim of persuading him to have it restored.

would not be lamentations per se, but rather the advantages of obtaining a new burial place—that is, the benefits resulting from the fulfilment of the promise to build the deceased a new tomb[19]. Aside from such differences, the remainder of this section is very similar across the translations, with only minor variations. Immediately afterwards, Khonsemhab sits down, either 'covered in tears' or 'weeping', depending on the translation, and he laments the ghost's incredulity.

The spirit then begins to speak about his past. In this part, the translations are very similar, most likely because this is the best-preserved portion of the tale. The spirit states that he was a royal official who died and was buried 'in the summer of Year 14 of King Ra-{men}-hetep'[20]. This is the passage that leads translators to debate which monarch the tale refers to[21], since two different kings are mentioned within it[22]. It must also be considered that references to the king elsewhere in the text are not entirely clear, suggesting that even the author of the story may not have been certain about the reign in which the narrated event was set.

The text continues describing the features of the burial: 'He assigned me my four canopic jars[23] and my alabaster sarcophagus, and he ordered that everything that ought to be done for someone of my status be carried out for me. And he ordered that [I] be buried in my tomb, at the bottom[24] of the shaft of ten cubits depth' (López, 2005: 188)[25]. The spirit then persists in his lamentations, once again referring to the poor state of his tomb: "the lower ground is in poor condition and slips outward. I begin to cough, and (the coughing) tears my tongue out" (López, 2005: 188).

On this latter point we find several discrepancies among the translations: Wente, Lefebvre, and von Beckerath mention exposure to the wind as the main reason why the deceased's tongue is torn out (or taken)[26], whereas for López, as we have seen, it is the coughing itself that causes this misfortune. Brunner-Traut's translation differs entirely here, as she relates the loss of the tongue directly to the wind[27]. The passage continues with the spirit's explicit distrust regarding the reconstruction of his tomb, since 'this has (already been promised) to me on four occasions. But what has become of that promise? And what am I to do with similar promises that you (now) make to me?' (Lefebvre, 2003[1949]: 180)[28].

Further promises from Khonsemhab follow. Faced with the ghost's incredulity, the priest of Amun commits himself to fulfilling his word: 'Give me a precise command, saying: 'It must be done for me!'—and I will

[19]'[El noble espíritu] le dijo: «No hay calor [para quien] está desnudo en el viento en invierno, (ni para) quien está hambriento sin alimentos […]. No deseo vagar como (la corriente del) Nilo. No […] no vea (?) y (hasta que) no sea enterrado en ella. Dices (?) […] (pero) después de las muchas palabras [que has pronunciado (?)] […]»' (López, 2005: 187). '[The august spirit then] said to him, «No one can be overheated [who] is exposed in the wintry win, hungry without food, […]. It is no my desire to overflow like the inundation, / not […], not see[ing…] my ['tomb']…»' (Wente, 2003: 113). '(El espíritu) le respondió: «no quiero seguir sufriendo por más tiempo el calor (en verano), ni pasando frío con el viento en invierno, ni pasando hambre… Mi corazón no está por la labor de inundar (tener que salir de mi lecho) como el Nilo. No quisiera… Así ya no puedo llegar (a mi tumba) bajo tierra…»' (Brunner-Traut, 2000: 225). '[Da] sprach [der erhabene Geist] zu ihm: „Nicht ist es heiß [dem, der]" entblößt ist im Wind des Winters', der hungert ohne Nahrung"" ... (Größere Lücke) ... Nicht ist es mein Wunsch zu fluten (?) wie der Nil" ..., nicht sehe [ich] ..., mein [Grab]", nicht erreiche ich es. [Man] sagt [mir Versprechungen (?)] ... Nun aber nach dem Vielen, das [du] gesprochen hast (?)'. (von Beckerath, 1992: 104). 'Tú no tendrás que aguantar más, desnudo, el viento en invierno; hambriento [tú] no […]. Mi corazón no estará agitado como el Nilo, [yo] no [tengo intención de abandonarte; si no,] yo no me habría ocupado de esto' (Lefebvre, 1949: 179).

[20]The original spelling of this pharaoh's name is *Ra-mn-Ḥtpw*. However, Gardiner notes that although *mn* can still be read, it is very poorly preserved—almost erased in comparison with the rest of the name (Gardiner, 1936: 91–91a). López believes that this deletion was intentional on the part of the scribe, as he had made a mistake. By removing *mn*, the result is *Ra-Ḥtpw* (López, 2005: 185).

[21]It is precisely in this context that the discrepancies arise. López insists that the king in question is Rahotep, referring to paleographic considerations and arguing that this is a confusion made by the original scribe of the work, given the poor grammatical quality of the narrative. Wente, for his part, considers that the monarch mentioned is Mentuhotep II and consistently associates this name in his translation every time the king appears. On this last point, Lefebvre would agree.

[22]'Entonces el espíritu le dijo: «Cuando estaba aún vivo sobre la tierra, yo era el director del tesoro del rey Rahetep, Vida, Prosperidad, Salud, y era lugarteniente del ejército: yo estaba ante los hombres y tras los dioses. Yo fui enterrado en el año 14, durante los meses de verano, (del reinado) del rey Ra{men}hetep, Vida, Prosperidad y Salud»' (López, 2005: 188).

[23]The use of canopic jars varied throughout the history of Ancient Egypt, with the earliest examples dating to the Old Kingdom and intended exclusively for the elite and the royal family. These early jars were simple containers, in most cases without any inscription. It was from 8th Dynasty (ca. 2100–1940 BCE) onward that canopic jars with lids shaped as human heads were introduced. Their use continued during the Middle Kingdom and the Second Intermediate Period with few changes, but it was not until the New Kingdom that they became widespread. By the end of 18th Dynasty, the lids of canopic jars had taken on the form of the four protective sons of Horus: Imsety, Hapy, Qebehsenuef, and Duamutef. Each jar contained one of the deceased's internal organs: the liver (Imsety), lungs (Hapy), intestines (Qebehsenuef), and stomach (Duamutef) (Herrerín and Sánchez, 2023: 200–207). Unfortunately, this information does not allow us to establish a precise chronological framework, as the use of canopic jars spanned a very long period. We do know, however, that beginning in 21st Dynasty, the four packets containing the viscera were placed directly inside the body of the deceased rather than outside it, as had been customary until then, with some exceptions (Taylor, 2001).

[24]There are doubts as to whether the text refers to the ground or to the bottom of the shaft.

[25]In this part of the text, Wente provides a translation very similar to that of López. Lefebvre and Brunner-Traut do not mention anything about the depth of the pit in which the deceased was buried.

[26]'(se) deja que el viento sople (?) (ahí), y él toma la lengua (?)' (Lefebvre, 2003[1949]: 180). 'The wind blows (there) and 'seizes a tongue' (Wente, 2003: 114). 'Der Wind macht ... (?)", er ergreift die Zunge (??)' (von Beckerath, 1992: 104).

[27]'Pero mira, el suelo que está debajo se ha deslizado hacia afuera. El viento entra silbando en el interior y alza su lengua (¿voz?)'. (Brunner-Traut, 2000: 226). Although the passage is unclear, this latter translation considers that the sentence refers to the howling of the wind in the underground part of the tomb.

[28]The other anthologies show hardly any variation in this regard, since all of them indeed state that the promises concerning the restoration of the tomb were made four times, without being fulfilled on any of those occasions.

ensure that it is done for you' (López 2005: 188)[29]. The offerings are then enumerated (ten slaves—men and women—to make water libations, the provision of a sack of grain per day, etc.), in a clear attempt to win the spirit's trust. The ghost, however, continues to mistrust him, believing that despite good intentions nothing will ultimately be accomplished: "What is the use of what you intend to do? Is wood not abandoned in the sun? Is it not left behind at the entrance of the garden, to the point that no one can enter? The stone, once aged, collapses […]" (Lefebvre, 2003[1949]: 181)[30]. The rest of the passage has not been preserved, so we do not know how Khonsemhab responded.

Third part: Khonsemhab fulfils what he promised

Finally, the priest ends up fulfilling his promise. This passage begins with yet another variant of the king's name, Rahepi (López, 2005: 189)[31], a detail that supports López's hypothesis that even the scribe himself did not know the monarch's name with certainty. The narrative would ultimately conclude with the success of the workmen in finding an appropriate place for the spirit's rest and with the priest's invocation of Menkau.

We find some differences among the translations, the most interesting being Wente's proposal, as he identifies in his translation the name of the necropolis of Deir el-Bahari—let us recall that he equates Rahotep with Mentuhotep II[32]: "in it, being 25 cubits away along the causeway of the king in Deir el-Bahari" (Wente, 2003: 114)[33]. The remaining translations do not mention this.

Finally, the tale ends with the workmen confirming to the priest that they have succeeded in finding an ideal resting place for the spirit: "we have found the appropriate place to [ensure that the name of Niutbusemekh endures]" (López, 2005: 189). After invoking Menkau, "lieutenant of the domain of Amun," and informing him of their task, Khonsemhab would return to Thebes at dusk to rest. Here the story ends abruptly, as the remainder has been lost. We understand that the spirit ultimately found the peace he so deeply longed for.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The text under study offers a very interesting perspective on Ancient Egyptian funerary culture. It is a fictional narrative, yet it contains a cultural background and a final moral message that are clearly perceptible throughout the story.

First, it is worthwhile to examine the conception of the spirit in Ancient Egypt. As noted earlier, ghost stories are not especially common in Egyptian literature, particularly during the pharaonic period, which makes this text exceptional. The notion of a ghost or spirit in this culture differs considerably from our modern conception. What is striking, however, is that in both cases these beings are immaterial and tormented. In Western culture, ghost stories are almost always associated with fear or terror, as such tales normally carry those connotations. In the present text, Nebusemekh is indeed a tormented being, suffering because his tomb has been abandoned, yet the story does not aim to produce fear but rather empathy—a sense of compassion toward a being who has been deprived of his eternal rest. The narrative centres on an endearing figure, someone who is distressed because he has been forgotten and his tomb has been completely neglected. It is likely that this empathetic conception of the spirit derives from the cultural need to respect the dead, a respect expressed through the care and maintenance of tombs—an attitude that persists today, as it is common to see people tending the graves of their relatives, especially on significant dates.

It is noteworthy to observe in the story how certain issues—such as the Afterlife—are addressed and how they are associated with the condition of the tomb, conceived as the resting place of the body at the end of life. Beliefs concerning the Afterlife in ancient Egypt consistently revolved around the notion of eternal life and the enduring connection between the living and the dead, a relationship exemplified in the interaction between Nebusemekh and the priest of Amun. The Egyptians understood death as a process of

[29]The remaining translations are very similar: 'Entonces el Primer Profeta Amonrasonter, le dijo: «exprésame alguna orden clara, prescribiendo: Él debe hacer (esto) por mí, y yo haré que se cumpla para ti' (Lefevbre, 2003[1949]: 180). '(…) Khonsemhab, said to him: «Please express to me a fine commission such as fit to be done for you, and I will surely have it done for you»' (Wente, 2003: 114). 'Entonces, el sumo sacerdote de Amón-Ra, el rey de los dioses, Konsemheb, le dijo: «Ah, hazme, pues, un encargo concreto que pueda ser realizado para ti, para que yo haga que se realice para ti…»' (Brunner-Traut, 2000: 226).

[30]The remaining translations are very similar, differing only in minor nuances.

[31]Other variants of this name are found in Wente (2003: 115), which would refer to the throne name of Mentuhotep II—an interpretation supported by Lefebvre (2003[1949]: 181) and Brunner-Traut (2000: 346). Lefebvre (2003[1949]: 181) considers *Nb-Ḥtp-Ra* to be the spelling closest to one of the first two kings named Mentuhotep.

[32]As I have already mentioned, Brunner-Traut (2000: 227) follows the same line: 'They (the three men) crossed the Nile, ascended (through the desert to Deir el-Bahari, where the tomb was) next to the splendid funerary chapel of King Mentuhotep'.

[33]'…in it, it being twenty-five cubits distant along the king's causeway at Deir el-Bahari'. He identifies the spelling *t ḥwt-ḏsr.t* with that necropolis. López likewise agrees in associating this spelling with that necropolis (López, 2005: 186).

transformation and continuity, in which the deceased was required to overcome both physical and social isolation. For this reason, mummification was essential, serving as the means to preserve the body and enable the reunion of its spiritual components—such as the *ka*, *ba*, and *akh*—thereby ensuring survival in the Afterlife. This realm was conceived as a place where the dead could be reborn and continue a life parallel to earthly existence, engaging in everyday activities such as hunting or agriculture. The deceased were regarded as powerful beings, capable of interceding with the gods and protecting the living, but also capable of causing harm if not properly honored. This latter aspect is clearly reflected in the story, as the character appears tormented due to the absence of eternal rest. Consequently, a wide range of rituals, offerings, and ceremonies were performed to maintain a harmonious relationship with the dead. Within this dynamic, preserving the tomb in good condition was of fundamental importance, like nowadays.

Judgment in the Afterlife represented a crucial moment, during which the deceased had to demonstrate purity and a life lived in accordance with the principles of *Maat*. This judgment determined their access to the Afterlife and their integration into the community of the gods. Funerary practices such as the Opening of the Mouth ritual and the dedication of offerings were intended to guarantee resurrection and maintain the individual's connection with the divine realm.

Moreover, the Egyptians believed in the existence of powerful spirits who could be either benevolent or malevolent. Relations with the dead were often ambivalent, giving rise to various magical practices—such as execration rites and letters to the deceased—intended to interact with them and thus avert their potential wrath.

Second, it is possible that this empathetic portrayal of Nebusemekh served a practical purpose. We know that plundering, desecration, and abandonment of tombs were frequent in Ancient Egypt, especially during the Ramesside period—the very period to which the ostraca containing the tale are dated. Thus, the story may have functioned as a deterrent against such depredations, particularly those affecting royal tombs and the burials of high officials. López expresses this as follows: 'the tale is, of course, a work of imagination, but it reflects the feelings of the personnel of the Theban cemetery concerning robberies and destructions of tombs' (López, 2005: 185). However, although it seems clear that the tale carries a moral stance regarding the care of tombs, it says nothing explicitly about acts of desecration. For this reason, we believe that if the story were truly intended as moral commentary on this issue, it would have mentioned it directly. In fact, in Brunner-Traut's (2000[1963]: 226) and Wente's (2003: 114) translations of the passage from which this idea is inferred, both use impersonal constructions that give the impression that time and lack of maintenance—not plundering—are responsible for the tomb's poor condition. We therefore lean toward the view that it was time, rather than looting, that caused the degradation of Nebusemekh's tomb and, consequently, his lack of eternal rest.

Third, there is no consensus among translators regarding the contextualization of the tale; attempting to situate it within the vast and rich history of Ancient Egypt is arguably the most controversial and complex point. Although the copies found at Deir el-Medina leave no doubt as to their dating, the original story has been completely lost. The text frequently mentions a monarch, Rahotep, which would place the narrative near the end of the Second Intermediate Period (ca. 1650–1550 BCE). As noted earlier, a king of that name did exist in 17th Dynasty, but the *Turin Royal Canon* assigns him a very short reign of only three years, making it impossible for Nebusemekh to have been buried in Year 14 of that reign, in addition to the fact that Rahotep is a relatively obscure king. Another hypothesis is that the monarch mentioned is Mentuhotep II, a possibility supported by authors such as Wente, Lefebvre, von Beckerath, and Brunner-Traut. López, after reviewing Gardiner's notes, concludes that the discrepancy likely stems from a scribal error or even from the scribe's uncertainty regarding the king's name. Moreover, he argues that one should consider the likelihood that the story was not intended to possess historical validity at all—its aim was simply to recount a tale. If we accept that the story was written on ostraca and constitutes the written form of an orally transmitted narrative, it is evident that errors could easily have occurred, such as failing to recall the regnal years of Rahotep or not knowing his exact name. Mistakes in the royal titulary are likewise possible, particularly in the *sA-Ra* name, in the confusion between Rahotep and Mentuhotep II. López (2005: 185) concludes decisively that 'it would be useless to employ an imaginary tale in order to reach any conclusion of historical order'. We agree that the tale is fictional in nature, which complicates any attempt to derive historical validity from it. However, it

is plausible that it was nonetheless framed within a historical context, as occurs with other fictional narratives—for example, the *Story of Sinuhe*, which begins with the assassination of Amenemhat I, the first king of 12th Dynasty. Von Beckerath (1992: 107) also stresses this fictional character of the tale, describing it as a simple and popular story. He has no doubt that, based on the characteristics of writing and language, the copies should be dated to the early Ramesside period. He also believes that the original document on which the copies were based cannot have been much older, although he notes that the underlying idea could reach back to an earlier period—perhaps the Middle Kingdom?—which would not be surprising, since, as Brunner-Traut (2000[1963]: 35) observes, most narratives are older than their written fixation.

Considering that the tale reflects features characteristic of Middle Kingdom pessimistic literature, presenting a distorted vision in which order and chaos are juxtaposed. Chaos manifests in the deteriorated state of Nebusemekh's tomb, with his spirit lamenting continuously and refusing to trust Khonsemhab's promises to repair it. This social injustice and disorder contrast with the idealized order represented by a tomb in good condition that would grant the spirit eternal rest—an ideal that seems to be realized at the end of the text. Moreover, another feature typical of the literature of this period is the sustained dialogue between two characters. In *The Dispute Between a Man and His Ba*, the dialogue takes place between a man and his *ba*; in *The Lamentations of Khakheperraseneb*, between the protagonist and his heart; and in the case before us, between Nebusemekh and Khonsemhab. This dialogue also embodies another characteristic of this genre: lamentations, present in the Middle Kingdom´s tales and likewise in the tale at hand, which repeatedly emphasizes the complaints of a desperate being—the spirit. Additionally, if we accept the proposal of some translators that the king mentioned is Mentuhotep II, then the narrative alludes to a strong and powerful Middle Kingdom ruler—the 11th Dynasty king who unified Egypt and ended the First Intermediate Period, that is, a time of fragmentation and chaos[34]. Finally, if we consider the lengths of reign, among all the Middle Kingdom kings named Mentuhotep, he is the only one who reigned long enough for Nebusemekh to have plausibly been buried during his rule. If the character had truly existed, he would probably have lived during the reigns of Intef II, Intef III, and Mentuhotep II, assuming the translators' proposal is correct.

Finally, Is '*Khonsemhab and the Spirit'* a possible Pessimistic literary tale of the Middle Kingdom?

It is essential to emphasize that the pessimistic literature of the Middle Kingdom is not merely a literary manifestation but also a reflection of the cultural memory and social concerns of the period. In a society profoundly shaped by the notion of cosmic balance, literary production becomes a privileged instrument for exploring— as is the case here— the consequences derived from the transgression of *Maat* and the universal order. These narratives not only depict a world plunged into chaos but also articulate a moral discourse underscoring the necessity of safeguarding order and justice, values fundamental to social and political stability. Within this context, the narrative under analysis may be interpreted as an extension of these cultural preoccupations. The story highlights the significance of the tomb as a sacred space entrusted with ensuring the eternal rest of the deceased and, consequently, the continuity of the cosmic order, which becomes disrupted when such a space falls into deterioration. Neglect in the maintenance of burial sites, as illustrated in this tale, symbolizes the rupture of the equilibrium between the living and the dead, generating suffering and ultimately chaos.

This perspective reinforces the notion that respect for the deceased, and the proper upkeep of their tombs were fundamental elements for preserving harmony within Egyptian society.

In this respect, the tale *Khonsemhab and the Spirit* present certain elements that allow us to draw parallels with Middle Kingdom pessimistic literature. One of the most notable aspects, mentioned above, is the tension generated between the priest and the spirit regarding the poor condition of the tomb. The opposition between chaos and order is a recurring theme in this type of composition. In the case of the story, the deterioration of Nebusemekh's tomb and the suffering it causes him could be interpreted as a symbolic representation of the rupture of cosmic and social balance—a concept which, as we have seen, was associated with the loss of *Maat* and the predominance of *Isfet*. This contrast between disorder—the ruined tomb—and order—the promises of restoration—may be seen as a metaphor for equilibrium and cosmic harmony.

[34]According to Assmann (1994: 99–100), the ambivalence of the divided world reflects the dual nature of the king, who must embody both protection and strength in order to uphold order and combat chaos.

The spirit's lamentations, expressed through despair, disbelief, and skepticism, are further elements that evoke the melancholic and introspective tone characteristic of pessimistic literature. In other works, such as those mentioned above, the protagonists articulate their anguish and question the state of the world, social justice, and the viability of life in the hereafter. In a similar fashion, Nebusemekh expresses his suffering through the neglected state of his burial place and his skepticism toward Khonsemhab's promises, which could be interpreted as a social critique of the lack of care for the dead and, by extension, the erosion of essential values within Egyptian society. Moreover, the use of a dialogic structure—also present in *The Dispute Between a Man and His Ba*—is another feature associated with pessimistic literature, although it is not exclusive to it. Indeed, works such as *The Shipwrecked Sailor* also consist of sustained dialogue between two characters, yet this does not make them part of the pessimistic genre.

However, unlike the pessimistic texts of the Middle Kingdom, *Khonsemhab and the Ghost* do not explicitly address political or social disorder, nor does it question religious beliefs or the system of governance. Its focus is confined to an individual concern—the restoration of Nebusemekh's tomb—rather than offering a broader reflection on the state of the world. Therefore, although the work shares certain traits with pessimistic literature, such as its dialogic structure and its expression of negative emotions, its content and purpose appear to diverge from the ideological and political aims that characterize this genre. This analysis suggests that, while the tale may have been influenced by Middle Kingdom literary traditions, its classification within pessimistic literature should be approached with caution. I agree with some scholars who mentioned above that the story itself was likely earlier than the Ramesside copies. Yet the original copy has not survived, and the version that has reached us dates to the Ramesside period, when it was written in several ostraca from Deir el-Medina by careless scribes or perhaps by apprentice scribes, as evidenced by the poor grammar and numerous orthographic errors.

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