

**Some aspects of ancient Upper Egyptian civilization, from the study
of the principal erotic ostraca from Deir
El-Medineh.**

Sergios Emm. Maravelias

Abstract.

In the present paper an attempt is made towards understanding and approaching some aspects of the ancient Egyptian civilization of the south, as it is presented to us by sixteen erotic poems, which come from the ostraca Dem 1266, 1078 (r+v) and 1079. The main conclusion resulting from the study of those poems is the fact that ancient Egyptians considered the love inside family as the perfect integration of eros. This is proven in addition by a multitude of paintings inside the Theban tombs of the nobles, which at a time officially and sensually exalt the couples' love under the familial bonds and consist a testimony of admiration for matrimonial life and its pleasures.

Introduction.

A considerably great multitude of literary ostraca was found at Deir'el-Medineh, the known village of the royal necropolis workmen, during the excavations there. Deir ' el-Medineh is situated behind the hill of Qurnet Mura'i at the west bank of Luxor and as a working and resting place of the antiquity was really functional from the moment the first royal tomb was begun in the valley of the kings by Tuthmosis I. The workmen and their families lived and died there, within 7,500 m² of the whole settlement.

The bulk of our evidence stems from the Ramesside period, but this

does not necessarily mean that the place was less operational during the two hundred years of its history (Manniche, 1987). The male inhabitants who worked for a ten day spell at a time in the royal necropolis on the outside of the mountain, spending the nights in an encampment overlooking the valley of the kings, produced tombs and funerary equipment themselves and their colleagues during their time off work in the cemetery; the result of their work is of a most unusual dynamic character, charming and vigorous. By the reign of Tuthmosis IV the community was firmly established, though it is known that it reached its maximum activity peak under the Ramessides.

Hence, the aforementioned ostraca are so numerous that permit us to preview the statistics of frequency with which a certain literary genre appears (and thus its relative popularity).

On the other hand they present us with variants of known texts and enlarge the bulk of the extant ones considerably (Vernus, 1992).

One of the most interesting literary genres in ancient Egypt was that of erotic poetry. The love poems (or songs) of ancient Egypt comprise at least seventy pieces, of which ten are in a very fragmentary state, hence almost untranslatable in uniform speech (Maravelias, 1996). The whole corpus of those magnificent and lyric songs dates from the early XIX to the late XX Dynasty (terminus post quem: c. 1300 B.C.) and its bibliography is relatively rich (see for example Fox, 1985; Lj III, 1980 and refer therein; Maravelias, 1996 and references therein, etc.) The erotic poems of ancient Egypt are a source of information concerning the relations between sexes in antiquity, the customs appertaining in a highly civilized ancient society, and most important of all they prove unequivocally the true life of ancient Egyptians for life and its pleasures, the irresistible eros of the

for the continuation of life after death, a fact that pushed the Egyptians to immortalize inside their tombs scenes of daily life and everyday love in its familial constituent. The erotic poetry of ancient Egypt could be considered as an oral reflect of these very scenes, which exalt the family and the eternal feminine beauty "r dt h.n' nh.h.". Some of their thematologies are truly universal (Unesco, 1987); modesty versus desire, love versus detest (cf. the ancient Greek "paraklausithyra"), high society life and true love of nature (cf. Canticum Canticorum of the old Testament). But it is to be noted that their conception and form is really Egyptian.

In the present paper an attempt is made towards understanding some essential features of the ancient civilization in upper Egypt, as it is revealed from the study of a known group of erotic poems. These poems come from ostraca found at Deir 'el-Medineh, and are the following: oDeM 1266 (13 poems), oDeM 1078 r+v (2 poems), oDeM 1079 (one poem); oDeM 1038 v and oDeM 1040 are not examined in this paper. For bibliography on the first ostrakon see Maravelias, 1996 and Posener, 1972; concerning all the others see Posener, 1938 and Hermann, 1959).

Finally, the interrelations and mutual overlapping of some of the examined poems with Theban tomb paintings related there with are evoked, and the paper ends with a few conclusions.

A study of oDeM 1266.

This ostrakon which is closely related to oGC 25218 of the Cairo Museum, before it was broken it was inscribed with a large collection of poems (Lichtheim II, 1976); three fragments of it have been known since 1897 (oGC. 25218); twenty eight more fragments were found in the excavations of Deir 'el-Medineh during 1949-1951. The thirty pieces have been published by Posener, 1972. The ostraca is still far from complete, hence most of the poems present us with lengthy lacunae. This poems have been translated for the first time in Greek from the original hieroglyphic transcription (Maravelias, 1996) and are the following:-

1. M XX (oDeM, 11. 7-11); 2. M XXI (ibid.11. 11-13);
3. M XXII (11. 13-14); 4. M XXIII (11. 15-16);
5. M XXIV (11. 16-18); 6. M XXV (11. 18-19);
7. M XXVI (11. 19-20); 8. M XXVII (1. 21);
9. M XLVIII (11. 1-3); 10. M XLIX (11. 3-6);
10. M L (11. 21-22); 12. M LI (11. 22-24); and 13. M LII (11. 24-28);

The love poems contained in this ostrakon are of the most characteristic, more beautiful and closely related to the concept of love inside nature from all the other extant, although the last idea is found also in pTurin 1966 r and pHarris 500 r.

In the first, the pleasures of swimming in the river, wearing a sensual bathing-dress are found while the eros of the man to the woman is evoked by means of a metaphore of symbolic character: she holds a small red fish(dsrt) in her fingers, which alludes to the captured by love heart of the young man. The fine royal linen (ss nsw) is also referred with admiration. In the second poem the young lover feels so powerful- because of the love of his dulcinée-that he thinks of the crocodiles as personifications of evil forces (Hnty)-as if they were tiny mice (pnw). These thoughts of the vigorous stripling continue in the third poem of this group, in which the love of the woman resembles a magical spell incantated inside the water(hsy mw), in order to protect him from danger. The heart of him is rejoicing at their final embracement, which takes place in the fourth poem, so erotically that the young man feels like an inhabitant of the exotic land of Pwenet(Pwnt), being also intoxicated by love.

In the fifth poem, which presumably is the final of this cycle, the lover says to a servant how to prepare the nuptial bed, using not royal linen sheets, while using perfect linen or byssus garments (pk3) in order to dress her. Scented oils and aromatic perfumes have also to be used for the sensual

excitement of the alluded marriage. In the sixth poem, from which a new thematic cycle seems to begin, paronomastic means are used, evoking mental transformations of the lover in order to meet his beloved woman: here he is transformed into a Nubian maid (Nhsy), following after her; to serve her; thus, fetching her mandragora fruits (rrmwt)- considered as aphrodisiacs-he could stare her body nude. In the seventh poem, in which the paronomastic transformations are continued we find the young lad disguised into a maid-servant who washes the garments of the beloved girl, and thus by cleansing the moringa oils from her diaphanous dress he feels as if he could touch the body of the desired woman, finally invigorated. In the eighth poem, which is the final of this cycle, the man is transformed into a signetring (htm) of small size, and as such he feels as the guardian of her fine fingers who is looking every day the face of his beloved, and finally he captures her heart. In the ninth poem, which is the first of oDem 1266, sensuality and lyrics are well amalgamated in a magnificent alloy of expressive simplicity and exaltation of desire: the woman is thinking of the pleasures of love and of her friend. In the tenth poem, one of the most exquisite masterpieces of the ancient Egyptian erotic poetry, which-although presenting us with several lacunae, like the previous one- reminds us the characteristic ancient oriental parallelism of members, the beloved woman expresses her aptitude in love and esteem of her lover by comparing her feelings to various erotic symbols (fine linen, incense, mandragora, dates and intoxicating beer), being sure that she will be in the presence of her man to the end of her life, not only as wife but as a faithful servant too. In the eleventh poem, which in the original follows M XXVII, a clever literary scheme is being used in order to express the beauty of the young woman: the land of Isy (t3 n' Isy)-presumably Cyprus, rich in copper-mines-rejoices because its copper ore, used as a mirror, stares every morning the

beautiful face of the beloved woman. In the twelfth poem, the natural beauty of flowers, leaves and trees is compared to the prettiness of the desired woman. The symbolism is not only erotic but metaphysical too; the floral wreaths (m3hw) evoked (in 1. 22) are reminiscent of the verdancy of Osirian attributes, and hence of the religious faith of the Egyptians to the resurrection and eternal life; thus, eternal life and eternal love are connected here successfully. It is to be noted that the reference to the land of Hittite (Ht3) proves the late New Kingdom origin of the poems under study.

Finally, in the thirteenth poem, which has some lacunae, a male deity is evoked by the lover, in order to help him approach the lady-love, unlike the female deity who is usually evoked, namely Hathor, in other erotic cycles (cf. pHarris 500 r, pChester Beatty I v+r, passim et c.). This constitutes another one erotic / metaphysical poem, which proves -like several others- the deep religious feelings of ancient Egyptians, who connected even their love adventures with their heathen deities.

A study of oDeM 1078 (r+v) and oDeM 1079.

For bibliography concerning these ostraca see Hermann, 1959 and references therein. They were published for the first time by Posener, 1938, together with oDeM 1038 v and oDeM 1040, which are not examined here. Maravelias, 1996, translated them into modern Greek from the original hieroglyphic transcription of Posener. They are the following according to the numeration of former author:

1. M LV (oDeM 1078 r); 2. M LVI (oDeM 1078 v); 3. M LVII (oDeM 1079)

In the first poem the young lad is begging the woman not to express his love, using interesting literary schemes. In the second poem

intoxication is evoked and also the known story of the shipwrecked sailor because of the golden isle which is found before her in the land of drunkenness, where the lady-love is mentally transported.

The reference to the prince/deity of love, namely Mehy, reminds of other cycles of erotic poems and is poetically correct. Finally, in the third poem these very themes (i.e. intoxication by love and drinks, together with the invocation of Mehy) are reexamined, this time from the side of the woman, who praises the aforementioned deity, hoping that he will help her to find her true peer in love.

Interrelations of the examined poems with Theban tombs' paintings.

Although it would be more convenient to relate the poetical scene described in the studied poems with the pictorial scenes from some ostraca and even wall paintings from houses of Deir 'el-Medineh, it would be more interesting to restrict our comparisons only to private monuments of the broader area around the site of the royal necropolis workmen—namely Sheikh "abd"el-Qurna (i. e. the valley of the Nobles), Khokha and 'Asasif, and of course the very place of Deir 'el-Medineh—, because of the following reasons: (i) although the popularity of the erotic poems was presumably great between the somehow educated workmen of the royal necropolis, the milieu described in those poems is concerned more with the higher society classes of ancient Egyptian society, thus it would be just to limit our study to nobles' tombs; on the other hand these very poems were presumably written by nobles; (ii) the tomb paintings present us not only with the official aspects of the ancient Egyptian concepts of love, matrimony and sensual pleasures, but in addition they could be used as a basis for comparison with the thematology of love poems, because it is rather evident that the basic exalted unit of love in them was the couple—the fundamental cell of the

Egyptian society, namely the family. Concerning the related scenes from ostraca and wall paintings, Manniche, 1987a presents us with some interesting paradigms thus, M XX could be compared to illustration 68 (p. 88) and 54 (p. 63); M XXI and M XXII with illustration 54 too; M XXV with illustration 69 (p. 89); and M LI with illustration 6 (p. 16).

The royal and private monuments of the west bank, at Thebes, have been extensively studied during the past (see, for example, Porter and Moss, 1964; Bierbrier, 1982; Romer, 1984; Manniche, 1987). In this paper a selection of private tombs is dealt with, including familial banqueting scenes, in order to present some conclusions. Firstly, it is to be noted that of all the love poems presented in the previous sections of this paper only one, namely M XLIX, shows direct mentions to the concept of the family. Anyway, this concept, disguised sometimes perfectly under the concept of the eternal couple of lovers, is always discreetly present in those poems. On the other hand it can be proved (cf. for example, p. CHester Beatty I v) that the ideal integration of love, according to the ancient Egyptian morality was meant inside matrimony, as is the general rule even in modern times in the Middle East. We believe that the central axis of ancient Egyptian love poetry was the concept of, eros inside the family bonds. Even the adoration of underworld divinities, like Anubis, Osiris and Hathor, was effectuated in familial form from the couples of the nobles; Th. T. 1 that of Sennedjem (Sennedjem), servant in the place of truth, during the XIXth Dynasty, and Th. T. 217, that of Ipuy (Ipwy), the sculptor, which dates from the same period present us with superb paintings, illustrating the deceased with their families adoring the gods of the nether world; these tombs are situated at Deir 'el-Medineh.

Banqueting scenes are abundant and symbolize the erotic unity of the couple inside the familial environment, even in the presence of relatives

and friends. Exquisitely painted such scenes are found in the following tombs: Th.T. 38, that of Djoserkare's soneb (Dsr k3 R snb), grain counter of the granary of offerings of Amun (temp. Tuthmosis IV);

Th.T. 52, that of Nakht (Nht), astronomer of Amun (temp. Tuthmosis IV ?) ; Th.T. 55, that of Ra'mose (R' msl), the vizier and governor of the town (temp. Akhenaten) ; Th.T. 56, that of Userhat (Wsr h3t), the royal scribe and child of the royal nursery (temp. Amenophis II) ; Th.T. 69, that of Menna (Mnn3), scribe of the royal fields (temp. Tuthmosis IV ?) ; Th.T. 78 that of Horemheb (Hr m hb), the scribe of recruits (temp. Tuthmosis III to Amenophis III); Th.T. 81,

that of Ineni (' Inn.), overseer of the granary of Amun (temp. Amenophis I to Tuthmosis III) ; Th.T. 96, that of sonnefer (snnfr), mayor of the southern city and overseer of the granary (temp. Amenophis II) where the couple Sonnefer and Meryt are illustrated together in official but sensuous scenes, as a family of typical Egyptian nobles, with the wife in one scene offering flowers to her deceased husband ; Th.T. 100, that of Rekhmire' (R' m R'), the vizier and governor (temp. Tuthmosis III); Th.T. 181, that of the sculptors Nebamun (Nb ' Inn) and Ipuky (' Ipwky) (temp. Amenophis III and Akhenaten) ; etc.

Tree-godess scenes, and, couple under tree scenes, are found between others, in the following tombs: Th.T. 23, that of Thay (T3y), the royal scribe of pharaoh's dispatches (temp. Merenptah); Th.T. 49, that of Neferhotep (Nfr htp), the chief scribe of Amun (temp. Ay) ; Th.T. 51, that of userhet, called Neferhebef (Nfr hb.f), first prophet of the royal k3 (temp. Tuthmosis I (temp. Sethy I) ; Th.T. 96, mentioned above; et c. The

scenes, closely related to love and nature, could be compared to the erotic poem, M LI, examined above.

Epilogue: conclusions.

From all the above it is evident that the examined erotic poems from Deir 'el Medineh, present us with high standards of lyric conceptions and sensual metaphysical symbolism. They-like all the relevant poems-are as luminous and charming as the tiny stars pictured on the roofs of ancient Egyptian tombs. Golden and shiny, like the colour of Hathor, the goddess of love and music, they prove the love of the Egyptians for life and eros and are faithful testimonials of the high position women had in Egypt during pharaonic times. Closely related to the Theban tombs' paintings, presenting the exaltation of love and familial life, they echo the adoration of ancient Egyptians to the very concepts of family and eros inside matrimony.

Egyptians of antiquity overshadowed the realm of death by the imperium of love and their irresistible desire for pleasant life, hence, not only by religion but also through eros.

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