

There is a neglect or hesitancy in modern scholarship—whether in Egyptology or Ancient Near Eastern studies, and especially in book history—to consider stone as a book medium due to the seminal focus placed on portability as a defining characteristic of the book. Based off of Western concepts and early-modern bias that ultimately equates codex (i.e. leaves of text bound together with a cover) to book, the notion of portability is ultimately inapplicable to all book cultures and deserves reexamination. Throughout ancient Egyptian history, even into the Greco-Roman Period (c.332 BCE–400 CE), stone was used as a primary writing surface to communicate with humans and the divine. Inscriptions can be found on tomb and temple walls, stelae, statues, sarcophagi, ostraca (limestone flakes with writing), obelisks, and even in situ rocks—making stone a primary medium for royal and elite literary works. In this presentation I will be discussing the various uses of stone in ancient Egyptian book culture and the literary works inscribed, and some conceptual frameworks that can be used to better understand how stone can be considered a carrier for the book. I will also discuss other ways in which portability can be achieved via non-physical means, such as metaphysical portability.

So why stone? Understanding the use of stone as a book medium requires an understanding of Egyptian ideology, which was grounded in the idea of eternal existence. The notion of permanence—not portability—governed ancient Egyptian book culture from the very beginning because the notion of immortalization governed Egyptian ideology through funerary beliefs. Understanding the importance of eternity to the Egyptians is crucial, the idea of rebirth and cyclical renewal was imbued into every aspect of daily life. Egyptian literature itself arose out of the want to eternally commemorate the divine and the King, the best material being stone to immortalize someone or something, and this practice was then sought to be applied to the elite so they too would live for eternity. The hieroglyphic script was reserved for monumental and ornamental stone inscriptions due to its function of commemoration, becoming an elite script that required particular skill. The term used to denote the script in ancient Egyptian is *mdw-ntr*, meaning “god’s words”, which influenced the Greek term known today, *hierogluphikós*, meaning “sacred carved writing”. As a result, the importance of stone as a vehicle for text cannot be understated due to its association with the prestige of the hieroglyphic script.

There are many forms stone took on to produce literary works, and with this it is important to understand what constitutes a text as being literature in ancient Egypt because it is very different from what the modern Western world understands as being literature today—particularly in terms of definitional criteria, styles, and genres. Anything from funerary texts to lamentations (seen as “pessimistic” literary works) to royal texts (seen as propagandic literary works) are considered to be literature in Egyptology because they belong to at least one of the three main literary compositions of the Egyptians: narrative (*dd.f*), teachings (*sb3yt*), or lyric (*dw3w* or *shm-ib*). Intertextuality is a common feature of ancient Egyptian literature, in which texts combine various aspects of prose, verse, and/or oration from the three aforementioned literary styles. Most ancient Egyptian texts also fall under the category of *belles lettres* (in Egyptian *mdt nfrt*), which refers to works of “beautiful speech” as they are revered primarily for their aesthetic qualities.

Based on what has survived today, Egyptian literature only appears towards the end of the Old Kingdom in the 5th Dynasty (c.2345 BCE). The main sources are elite and royal tombs, the wall inscriptions being literary works that derive from the private and religious spheres, respectively. The tombs of elite officials are perhaps the most important in terms of chronological appearance because it is where basic writing turned into literature, giving birth to the literary genre of the autobiography. Autobiographies can take the form of being purely textual (as seen with the Autobiography of Harkuf here), purely pictorial (as seen with the Autobiography of Khnumhotep II here), or a mixture of both. Pictorial autobiographies can be viewed as a what we understand to be picture books—especially since the Egyptian image is a figurative script with a syntactic structure of subject-verb-object as it derives directly off of hieroglyphic signs, thus serving both an iconographic and syntactic purpose. Shortly after the appearance of autobiographies, funerary literature in pyramidal tombs of kings and queens came into play—known today as the Pyramid Texts, an example of which you can see here on the top left-hand side. Tomb walls, therefore, become the first example of stone being used to commission literary works. Into the Middle Kingdom (c.2055–1650 BCE), tombs expanded their literary output to include hymns and prayers, considered to be a part of the genre of religious literature. Tombs also diversified funerary literature into a variety of books because in the New Kingdom (c.1550–1069 BCE), the Netherworld Books (a collection of 6 books) and the Books of the Sky (a collection of 3 books) appeared in tombs from the Valley of the Kings. An example of one of the Netherworld Books is seen here with the tomb of Amenhotep II, which has a copy of the Amduat.

Stelae, which are upright stone slabs, began to produce autobiographies in the Middle Kingdom, a well known example being the Autobiography of Ikhnofret seen here. Stelae as well contained hymns and songs, the former a part of religious literature as they are dedicated to the divine (as seen with the hymn to Osiris and Min on the stela of Sebekiry and Sebekhetep here), and both considered to be Egyptian poetry. Royal historical texts also appear, many of which are annalistic in nature, but discuss campaigns and expeditions in a narrative-like format. These texts are what Egyptologists like to call propagandic literature, a prime example being the Kamose Stela here which explains the successful military campaign that King Kamose waged against the Hyksos—foreigners of Levantine descent who ruled most of Egypt during the Second Intermediate Period (c.1650–1550 BCE).

Ancient Egyptian temples are distinctly characterized by mass hieroglyphic inscriptions which virtually cover every surface of the building—the walls, the columns, and even the ceilings. Temples contain royal historical texts (such as the annals of Seti I seen here in the Karnak Temple Complex), hymns and prayers (such as the Hymns to Hathor seen here at the Temple of Denderah), and even plays. The latter is most famously seen at Edfu, shown here, with the drama known as the Triumph of Horus. It is considered to be oldest complete play in the world, and it was inscribed during the Ptolemaic Period (c.305–30 BCE) when the Greeks ruled Egypt. This demonstrates how late the tradition of stone as a medium for writing spanned in ancient Egypt, and it did continue well into the Roman Period (c.30 BCE–400 CE).

Sarcophagi, so stone coffins, from the New Kingdom onwards contain excerpts of funerary literature (an example being the sarcophagus of King Nectanebo II shown here with excerpts of the *Amduat*), as well as autobiographies on the rare occasion. What is interesting about the sarcophagi shown on the slides is that the stone coffins of Iniuia and Wennefer are inscribed with chapters from the Book of the Dead, a funerary book which in origin was written on papyrus—the ancient Egyptian version of paper. This becomes a prime example of how ancient Egyptian books were not restricted nor defined by one single substrate, there are constant divergences throughout the various periods and dynasties of ancient Egyptian history. This further solidifies that materiality cannot be a defining characteristic of a text because such would in turn cause a skewed understanding of the bibliographic (physical) aspects of a literary work.

During the Third Intermediate Period (c.1069–715 BCE) onwards, statues of various types also began to contain autobiographies. The most common were the block statue as seen with the Autobiography of Harsiese C, characterized by its block-like nature, and the naophoros statue as seen with the Autobiography of Udjahorresnet, characterized by a figure holding a *naos* (shrine).

The use of limestone flakes for writing, which are considered ostraca in Egyptology, was in fact just as common as papyrus—perhaps even more so as it was much cheaper. Many Egyptian literary texts have only survived on this medium, such as wisdom literature (also known as instructions/teachings, an example being the Satire on the Trades shown here), admonition literature (such as the Prophecies of Neferti seen here), prose tales (the most famous one being the Tale of Sinuhe seen here), hymns, and prayers (such as to Amun as seen here). Ostraca in particular demonstrates a way in which stone can be made to become portable. Now looking at the fragments on the slide, you can see that a different script was employed. It is no longer hieroglyphs, but hieratic, a cursive form of hieroglyphs used for everyday writing since the Early Dynastic Period (c.3000–2686 BCE). The reason this script appears is because these works do not try to commemorate, which I previously mentioned was a primary purpose for the use of hieroglyphs. Instead, these works try to instruct or tell a story by non-royal people. While the fragment of a prayer to Amun clearly commemorates the divine, the script (and language) employed is actually Demotic. Originally, Demotic was the “everyday” script that came into use from the Late Period (c.715–332 BCE) onwards—deriving off of hieratic in an even more simplified form, and hieratic now changing to being the script used for religious texts. During the Ptolemaic Period, to which the fragment dates, however, Demotic began to hold a higher status as it was increasingly used for literary and religious texts, the content of which is this fragment.

The last stone form in which literary works were inscribed are in situ rocks, or boulders. This is most commonly found in wadis (dry riverbeds throughout Egypt’s deserts where mass mining occurred, and some of which became major trade routes) when kings went on quarrying expeditions to acquire precious and semi-precious materials. These texts are considered to be graffiti in Egyptology since the inscriptions appear to be scratched onto rocks, rather than the standard scribal carvings found on all the aforementioned stone forms. Nevertheless, wadis contain extensive amounts of propagandic literature (as seen with the Famine Stela shown here), as well as hymns and prayers. The greatest amount of graffiti on display is found at Wadi

Hammamat, a major trade route to the Red Sea that began at Coptos in Upper Egypt. Evidence of pictorial etchings go back to the Predynastic Period (before 3000 BCE), but hieroglyphs only began to appear during the 4th Dynasty of the Old Kingdom (c.2613 BCE). Only during the Middle Kingdom was there a surge of inscriptions documenting in detail royal expeditions, continuing into the New Kingdom as seen here with the Great Rock “Stela” of Ramesses IV.

Now that I have briefly gone over the various uses of stone and the literary works inscribed on them, many might be asking how can stone be considered a book—particularly those in the field of book history. Western tradition and modern conceptions stipulate, or at least cause the predisposition, that books are fundamentally portable objects made up of *folia* (leaves) with text that are bound together with a cover—a very materialistic definition derived specifically off the codex. Many scholars in the field of book history believe stone inscriptions cannot be considered books because they do not conform to this traditional understanding, primarily on account of portability (viewed as a defining characteristic) since they naturally are carved onto an immobile surface. It also does not help that within the field of Egyptology, and ancient studies in general, it is uncommon to find scholars using the term book. Instead, terms such as text, literary text, or literary work, are employed, just as I have predominately done so throughout this presentation. Because of this reluctance to use the term book, non-Egyptologists are subjected to a skewed understanding of ancient Egyptian book culture. The only instance when book is used in Egyptology is when discussing the Book of the Dead, a compilation of funerary spells nominally written on papyrus that were used to guide the deceased through the Underworld and into the Afterlife. Due to such, book historians have come to accept papyrus as being a book because of the term being associated to this funerary text. However, Egyptologists also employ the term book when discussing the Netherworld Books and the Books of the Sky, a variety of texts written on royal tomb walls and are collections of funerary books created for the same purposes as the Book of the Dead. Yet because the awareness of these stone-based funerary books is much less known to non-Egyptologists than the Book of the Dead, the idea of applying the term book to stone inscriptions is overlooked and disregarded. To an Egyptologist it is standard knowledge that stone was used as a primary writing surface due to archaeological and literary studies, but little Egyptological scholarship is in fact dedicated to stone as being a book carrier. There is also little work done on ancient Egyptian book mediums in general—except for papyrus, and only more recently ostraca. Instead, stone is predominately explored as an architectural technology in the context of archaeology, or as a sculptural form in art. When analyzed purely as a writing surface, it is not discussed in relation to book culture per se like papyrus is done so in papyrology, but rather in terms of palaeographical or epigraphical analysis—looking at scripts and the recording of text and/or art, rather than the actual material retaining the recording. It is due to this lack of scholarly output and the taking of standard knowledge for granted on the Egyptological end that I believe has subsequently caused non-Egyptologists to be uninformed about the realities of books in ancient Egypt, and thus skewing the history of the book.

Now due to the inherent interdisciplinary nature of book history, a fundamentally global field as it encompasses all cultures from a variety of time periods, while the traditional Westerncentric definition of the book might be ideal for certain book cultures (i.e. those that produced codices),

it is not realistic nor appropriate for all. A prime modern example is the digital book, as ebooks and audiobooks are not tangible, and thus cannot assume such a materialistic definition grounded in the physical world. The furthering of scholarship on book history has expanded the definition of the book to acknowledge other mediums aside from parchment (animal skin) and paper (e.g. papyrus, clay tablets, bark, palm leaves, and bamboo), however, the definition nevertheless remains limited in scope due to the continued focus on portability. Robert Escarpit, a renowned French academic who specialized in the sociology of literature and communication science, crucially pointed out that when we hold a book today, all we are holding is the paper—the book is elsewhere. Escarpit's rationale ultimately centers on the book as being an idea, an idea which can then be transposed as text and/or image onto a medium, or even be communicated through speech as evident with oral literature. It therefore must be realized that it is not the material support that is the book, it is the textuality and/or pictoriality (or orality) of the material support. A book ultimately cannot be defined by its medium because implementing such restrictions creates bias and a misleading reality of the book since portable mediums are the focal point. Consequentially, the book cannot be defined by the notion of portability, even though it governs book historical scholarship and is cemented into traditional understanding.

The book must be viewed as an idea because in reality, a book is defined by its content, not the substrate. As a result, I am not arguing that stone is the book, but merely its medium—what it carries, the text and/or art, is the book. Now in terms of textual content, the notion of *book as idea* should be further elaborated upon to state that what makes an ancient text a book is dependent on its composition, since not everything written down can be considered a book. This stems from the need to understand the difference between a book, which is literary in nature—literature being written or oral expressions of cultural discourse used for codification and imagination—and a record, which is transactional in nature and thus involves administrative, legal, or epistolary documents. Such documents cannot be considered books because they do not contain literary components (i.e. a story). While books can contain records, a prime example being annals, the text must contain some narrative form in order to make the distinction from being a document. To put this into an Egyptological context, the Palermo Stone is a fragment that belongs to a much larger text known as the Royal Annals of the Old Kingdom. It is only a list of significant royal events that occurred up to the early 5th Dynasty—evidently bearing no literary features which is why it is not considered to be literature in Egyptology. The Annals of Thutmose III, in contrast, clearly takes a narrative form due to its detailed story-like description of military campaigns and conquests. This text is considered to be Egyptian literature according to Miriam Lichtheim, one of the foremost scholars in this discipline, and thus a book since it does comprise of one of the ancient Egyptian literary compositions.

With regards to the seminal focus placed on portability in the field of book history, it is important to remind people that our understanding of portability is relative, just like our understanding of the book. With the right tools and enough man power, anything can be portable—even stone. The ancient Egyptians themselves are proof that stone is physically portable because it was a part of their technology. The amount of stone architecture found in Egypt displays that the cutting and transport of large stone blocks was a feat of Egyptian structural engineering. Obelisks are another

stone form that contain literary works, specifically propagandic literature, but out of the 30 or so obelisks that survive today, only 11 currently reside in Egypt. To look at some examples, the obelisk on the left was moved from Karnak to Constantinople by Roman Emperor Theodosius I, 1800 years after its creation and almost 2,700 km away. The obelisk on the right was moved from the Temple of Re in Heliopolis to Rome by Augustus, 1200 years after its creation and over 4,000 km away. Moreover, when looking to modern times, due to the unethical handling of cultural heritage practised by 19th and 20th century archaeologists and curators, wall fragments, statues, and even entire monuments can be found in the most famous museums and art galleries around the world. The Egyptian Museum in Cairo has the Autobiography of Weni, which was inscribed on the tomb walls of the deceased in Abydos, and the Louvre has parts of the Annals of Thutmose III, which was inscribed within the Temple of Amun-Re in Karnak.

It is also important to keep in mind that while stone might not be considered portable in the physical sense, books appearing in a funerary context provide a different understanding of portability—metaphysical portability—due to Egyptian funerary beliefs and practices. Tomb inscriptions and art were first and foremost sacred objects, talismans traveling between the physical and spiritual planes as they were created to aid with the quest for immortality. Tombs were places where text and art could be employed as a means to make the existence of the person last forever, travelling in the memory of humans that visited the deceased. The fundamental purpose of an autobiography was to create a self-portrait of the tomb owner that was carried over into the Afterlife—to sum up the positive characteristics of the deceased so as to eternally display his moral worth. Pictorial autobiographies were functional rather than decorative, not only serving as testaments to status, but as objects to be transferred to the next life—depicting the luxuries experienced on Earth so as to reinforce their eternal occurrence in the beyond. Funerary literature, a collection of spells dealing with eschatology that were designed to guide the deceased into the Afterlife and achieve rebirth, was recited by specialized priests before and during burial as the funerary rituals—therefore originating from the oral sphere and oral tradition. The only reason funerary literature was transmitted into writing was to assure the deceased had the proper spells to take with them on their journey to rebirth by providing a physical presence. This reality is primarily noted by the fact that many times the text of funerary spells transitioned from being in the third person, the voice of the priest, to the first person, the voice of the tomb owner. This therefore means that certain spells were to be specifically recited by the deceased in the Underworld. Now what the Egyptians believed allowed autobiographies and funerary spells to travel with the deceased was *ḥkꜣ* (magic), as it caused the written and spoken word to come to life. The written word had magical potency because the hieroglyphic script was attributed to the divine, seen by the Egyptians as a living entity endowed with divine power since it was associated with the god of wisdom, Thoth—patron deity of scribes, and thus of writing. To speak was one of the tools the creator god Ptah used in his process of creation. Magic, therefore, was used to help mortals recreate such divine creative processes. Reciting the funerary spells effectively activated them for eternity so the deceased could be provided with the Underworld equivalent of what was spoken, while the physical existence of the written word or pictorial scenes reinforced their immortal nature.

So looking forward in terms of how we can change the understanding of books and of ancient Egyptian book culture, it is vital that Westerncentric notions are dismissed when discussing non-Western book cultures in order to avoid bias. With this it is important to apply the concept of the book as idea, which focuses on content, rather than the book as object, which focuses on materiality and is thus limited in its scope. Stone clearly was an important substrate in ancient Egyptian book culture, as evident by the various forms employed and the variety of literary genres present. By looking at ancient Egypt, it becomes unquestionable that inscriptions and art can be considered books if they clearly display literary components, and stone therefore being a book medium. While we must discard the seminal emphasis placed on physical portability to be inclusive of all book cultures, by looking specifically at ancient Egyptian funerary beliefs and practices, we can account for, and in fact should not neglect, the aspect of metaphysical portability because it was the reality of Egyptian books that belonged to the funerary sphere—spiritual agency created due to the magic imbued in the act of speaking and writing. Employing the conceptual framework of the book as idea opens a world of possibilities to understanding the book and its physical and/or non-physical nature, providing a necessary reexamination of ancient Egyptian book culture and the history of the book altogether. Thank you.