

## NON-ROYAL SELF-PRESENTATION

تمثيل الذات غير الملكية

*Hussein Bassir*

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## NON-ROYAL SELF-PRESENTATION

## تمثيل الذات غير الملكية

Hussein Bassir

Nichtkönigliche Selbstdarstellung  
Auto-représentation non-royale

*In ancient Egypt the primary intention of creating textual self-presentations—or self-portraiture in words, similar to that in paintings, statuary, and reliefs—was to present the explicit characteristics of protagonists in a corresponding fashion, introducing their values and effectiveness to live and rejoice in immortality, both in the afterlife and in the consciousness and thoughts of Egypt’s subsequent generations. The practice of self-presentation was rooted in Egyptian literature from at least the Third Dynasty, and through the course of dynastic history, it differed in aspect, composition, and theme. Self-presentations show the lives of the elites, vividly portraying their beliefs, culture, and expectations for the afterlife. The relationship between royalty and nobility in self-presentations is alluring and informative and compels us to envision the times and the circumstances in which they were created. These texts also make explicit their owners’ wish to be remembered—not forgotten—after death. The presentation of the non-royal self in ancient Egypt represents a window into its culture and historical periods.*

في مصر القديمة، كان الغرض الأساسي من وراء كتابة نصوص تقديم الذات - أو تصوير الذات بالكلمات، على غرار ذلك الموجود في الأعمال الفنية مثل النقوش واللوحات والتماثيل - هو تقديم الخصائص الواضحة للشخصيات بطريقة مناسبة لتقديم قيمهم وفعاليتهم؛ كي يعيشوا ويسعدوا بالخلود، سواء في الحياة الأخرى أو في وعي وأفكار الأجيال اللاحقة في مصر. لقد كانت ممارسة تقديم الذات متجذرة في الأدب المصري، منذ عصر الأسرة الثالثة على أقل تقدير، وخلال عصور الأسرات المصرية، غير أنها اختلفت في الشكل والتأليف والمضمون. وتُظهر نصوص تقديم الذات حياة الصفوة، وتصور بوضوح معتقداتهم وثقافتهم وتوقعاتهم عن الحياة الأخرى. وتعد العلاقة بين الملوك والنبلاء في نصوص تقديم الذات ممتعة وغنية بالمعلومات، وتدفعنا إلى تصور العصور والظروف التي تمت كتابتها فيها. وتوضح هذه النصوص أيضًا رغبة أصحابها في أن يتذكروا - لا يُنسوا - بعد الموت. ويمثل تقديم الذات غير الملكية في مصر القديمة نافذة على ثقافة مصر وعصورها التاريخية.

**I**n ancient Egypt the presentation of the non-royal self in writing (see Olshen 2001) was the primary literary tradition through which non-royal individuals aimed to reveal their identity and leave their impressions on time in order never to be forgotten and to secure an eternal existence in the afterlife (see Ames 2001). The non-royal life-writing tradition has witnessed several attempts by modern scholars to define

the various forms that protagonists used to express themselves. The best-known descriptive terms for this literary form are “autobiography,” “biography,” and “self-presentation.” In order to lead us to the appropriate term for this genre in Egypt, it is necessary to first define these terms and their application to ancient Egyptian literature (see Gnirs 1996, 2001).

*Defining the Genre*

Autobiography (see Jolly 2001: ix), according to Gunzenhauser (2001: 75), “is a self-produced, non-fiction text that tells the story of its writer’s life.” Etymologically, autobiography is a Greek term, literally meaning “self-life-writing” (Olney 1980: 6). However, as Greenstein (1995: 2421) points out, “there is no autobiography as such in the ancient world, if we describe ‘autobiography’ as the retrospective interpretation of the author’s own life—a contemplative self-scrutiny of the past.”

Biography, according to Hoberman, “is a notoriously difficult form to define because it borrows from and overlaps with other genres” (Hoberman 2001: 109). That implies that biography is written by a biographer, and not by the protagonist. Lichtheim (1988: 2) declares, “In Egypt the genre ‘biography’ did not develop at all.” She further states, “Biography and autobiography are not necessarily interrelated.” By ‘biography’ the present author refers only to the text, and not to the entire self-presentation, which is multilayered, concerned with text, image, architectural setting, archaeological context, and many wider issues and media than the limited scope of the textual biography tradition.

Although ancient Egyptian biographies were similar to autobiographies according to our understanding of the term, Perdu (1995: 2243) denies the existence of biography in ancient Egypt, but maintains that autobiographies are “well attested” (see Naguib 1997). Perdu’s opinion is not new; Lichtheim previously made the same point, stating, “If autobiography is the narration of bits of one’s life from a position of self-awareness and reflection, then ancient Egyptian autobiographical inscriptions were true autobiographies” (Lichtheim 1988: 2).

Although almost all ancient Egyptian biographies were written in the first person, it is not known whether the protagonists themselves dictated their textual content or one of their family members dictated it on their behalf. Based upon this misunderstanding or

assumption, both titles are commonly used: “autobiography,” though we may not be certain whether the work’s author was in fact the protagonist, and “biography,” though we may not be certain of who actually wrote the work—the protagonist or someone else. Baines (2004: 34) prefers to employ the term “self-presentation,” rather than autobiography or biography.

The self-presentation of non-royal members of the elite through image and text, as a form of artistic and textual expression, was the oldest, most widespread, and most significant component of high culture in ancient Egypt from the Old Kingdom, if not earlier, until the Ptolemaic and Roman Periods. The elements of self-presentation varied according to the titles, professions, and background of the protagonists, and according to the reign of the ruler under whom the protagonists served, but they all focused on the meanings and history of self in the telling of a life story. Self-presentations were inscribed on statues, stelae, tomb and temple walls, and coffins.

Egyptian self-presentations exhibit a holistic approach (Assmann 1996: 55-56, n. 4; Simpson 1982; Assmann 1987; Lichtheim 1989: 211; 1992b; Bassir 2014; Bassir ed. 2019). They were written in a form that fused genres such as narrative, wisdom literature, funerary literature, and wishes for the afterlife. Self-presentations can be classified into two main types: 1) idealized self-presentations, which present the protagonist as living in perfect accordance with the moral concept of *maat*; and 2) event-based self-presentations, which reveal significant events the protagonist witnessed or experienced in his professional career, and from which history can often be derived.

Self-presentations were produced by the full spectrum of officials, from low ranking to high, including priests, artists, physicians, and military officers of varying ranks, as well as the administrative state officials who supervised the royal court, Egypt’s borders, and Nubia. In the Middle Kingdom, especially, a good number of middle-ranking officials (and

soldiers) recounted their exploits; indeed, most self-presentations that have come down to us are those of (male) officials. Self-presentations of women were not documented until the Late Period (see Jansen-Winkel 2004).

The primary intent of self-presentations was the representation of their subject in accordance with the beliefs of the elite class. In the Ramesside and Late Periods, for example, self-presentations often focused on highlighting the pious devotion of the protagonist before his or her deities, family, community, and future generations so that he or she would be—and remain—commemorated. It should be noted that a good number of self-presentations from the Pharaonic Period were more concerned with the protagonist's devotion to the crown.



Figure 1. Wooden panel of Hesy-Ra in the Egyptian Museum in Cairo, CG 1427.

### *Diachronic Presentations of the Non-royal Self*

Although their origins likely stem from at least the Early Dynastic Period (Baines 1999; Edel 1944), the earliest known Egyptian non-royal

self-presentations date to the Old Kingdom (2670 – 2168 BCE). One example is the Third Dynasty decorated wooden panel of physician Hesy-Ra (fig. 1), which was found in his mastaba S-2405 in Saqqara and depicts him at some stages of his life.

In the self-presentation text in his tomb at Giza (G8090), Fourth Dynasty official Debehen reports that his tomb was constructed as a personal favor from King Menkaura; as such, Debehen's text is the first known self-presentation to record a specific event in the life of the protagonist. His *htp dj njsw* formula, which depicts him with his titles above the tomb's entrance (fig. 2), itself constitutes a type of self-presentation (albeit a silent one), since his titles convey information about him (Lapp 1986; Baines 1997).

The self-presentations of the Fifth Dynasty are particularly informative for their outline of the interactive relationship between the king and the non-royal elite protagonist; this interaction constitutes the subject matter of the self-presentational text. From the end of the Fifth Dynasty and continuing through the Sixth Dynasty, self-presentations detail their protagonists' careers, including the reigns and state of affairs of the kings under whom they served. The self-presentations of the Sixth Dynasty, especially, reveal the achievements of their owners; as such, they are the forerunners of the laudatory self-presentations of the First Intermediate Period. The Sixth Dynasty self-presentation of the court official Weni, from Abydos (fig. 3), states: "When there was a secret charge in the royal harem against Queen Weret-yamtes, his majesty made me go in to hear (it) alone. No chief judge and vizier, no official was there, only I alone; because I was worthy, because I was rooted in his majesty's heart; because his majesty had filled his heart with me. Only I put (it) in writing together with one other senior warden of Nekhen, while my rank was (only) that of overseer of [royal tenants]. Never before had one like me heard a secret of the king's harem; but his majesty made me hear it, because I was worthy in his majesty's heart beyond any official of his, beyond any noble of his, beyond any servant of his" (Lichtheim 2006a: 19).



Figure 2. The *ḥtp dj nsw* formula above the entrance to the tomb of Debehen, Giza.



Figure 3. Stela of Weni the Elder in the Egyptian Museum in Cairo, CGC 1435.

Self-presentations of the First Intermediate Period (2168 – 1990 BCE) reveal Egypt’s political fragmentation. The competing nomarchs of the state expressed in their self-presentations their need to appear as successful rulers of Egypt and, in so doing, echoed the achievement-oriented self-presentations of the Sixth Dynasty. The self-presentation of Ankhtifi from Mo’alla, for example, states: “Horus brought me to the nome of Edfu for life, prosperity, health, to reestablish it, and I did (it). For Horus wished it to be reestablished, because he brought me to it to reestablish it” (Lichtheim 2006a: 85).

Upon the reunification of Egypt (2040 BCE) at the beginning of the Middle Kingdom the self-presentational tone changed, giving birth to the “encomiastic autobiography” (Gnirs 2001: 187), based upon the protagonists’ ethical merits (Janssen 1946; Lichtheim 1992b; Perdu 1995: 2249; Franke 1997). This new type of text presented the ideals and needs of the class of new officials who had restored Egypt to a single monarchy. Loyalty to the crown remained a prominent feature of these texts, whose non-royal elite protagonists had played a vital role in achieving Egypt’s stability and consolidation (Gnirs 2001: 187), as is exemplified in the self-presentation of Ikhnofret from Abydos: “I did all that his majesty commanded in executing my lord’s command for his father Osiris, Foremost-of-the-Westerners, lord of Abydos, great power in the nome of This. I acted as “his beloved son” for Osiris, Foremost-of-the-Westerners. I furnished his great bark, the eternal everlasting one. I made for him the portable shrine that carries the beauty of the Foremost-of-the-Westerners, of gold, silver, lapis lazuli, bronze, *ssndm*-wood, and cedar wood. The gods who attend him were fashioned; their shrines were made anew. I made the hour-priests [diligent] at their tasks; I made them know the ritual of every day and of the feasts of the beginnings of the seasons” (Lichtheim 2006a: 124).

The Second Intermediate Period (1640 – 1548 BCE) was a time of political, social, and economic crisis. The self-presentations of the period allude to that crisis through their

portrayal of individuals who appear independent and self-confident, thereby revealing the prevailing weakness of Egypt’s central administration (Kubisch 2008 and 2010).

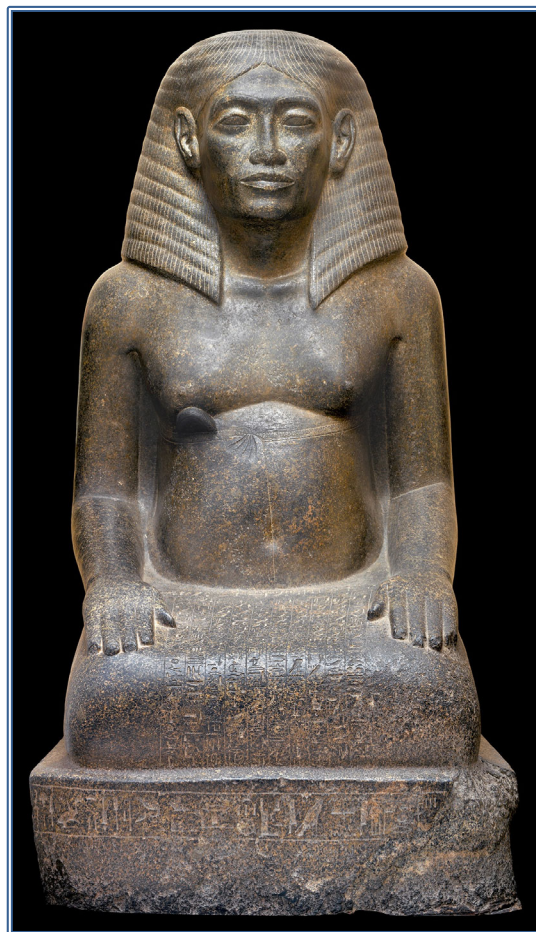


Figure 4. Statue of Amenhotep, Son of Hapu, in the Egyptian Museum in Cairo, Luxor J.4/Cairo JE 44862.

Starting from the New Kingdom (1548 – 1086 BCE), non-royal self-presentations contain a wide range of historical material due to Egypt’s expeditions into Asia and Africa. The military campaigns in Western Asia likely constitute a new development in the period, as does the extent of Egyptian presence in East Africa, though Egypt had long coveted its products (Rickal 2005; Simmance 2014; Perdu 1995: 2251; Guksch 1994; Hermann 1940; Schade-Busch 1997; Maderna-Sieben 1997). The scribal statue of Amenhotep, Son of Hapu (fig. 4), is one of the most well-known self-presentations of the Eighteenth Dynasty. It

represents the seated Amenhotep in full maturity, in his capacity as a scribe, with hieroglyphic texts mentioning his campaign to Nubia inscribed on his lap and on the statue plinth. The self-presentation at Elkab of Ahmose, son of Abana, who served under a succession of pharaohs in the 17<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> Dynasties, states: “Now when I had established a household, I was taken to the ship ‘Northern,’ because I was brave. I followed the sovereign on foot when he rode about on his chariot. When the town of Avaris was besieged, I fought bravely on foot in his majesty’s presence. Thereupon I was appointed on the ship ‘Rising in Memphis.’ Then there was fighting on the water in ‘Pjedku’ of Avaris. I made a seizure and carried off a hand. When it was reported to the royal herald the gold of valor was given to me” (Lichtheim 2006b: 12). The text of Ahmose’s self-presentation thus provides an element of historical documentation of Egypt’s military conflict with the Hyksos. Self-presentations from the Amarna Period are rare (Sandman 1938; Murnane 1995; Gnirs 1996: 230 - 233; 2001: 187; Guksch 1994: 29 - 39, 62 - 65, 73 - 77). The Ramesside self-presentations, some of them notable for their location within temples, demonstrate a heightened regard for funerary customs and beliefs—a phenomenon that endured through the Third Intermediate and Late Periods (Frood 2007).

In the Third Intermediate Period (1086 – 664 BCE), the textual compositions of self-presentations revealed a broadening of the protagonists’ concepts of personal piety and individual religious performance (Perdu 1995: 2252; Jansen-Winkeln 2007 a and b; Frood 2013). In the Twenty-fifth (Kushite) Dynasty, for example, the social and thematic variety of self-presentation was elaborated, recreating features produced in earlier periods, but with remarkable characteristics (Jansen-Winkeln 2009; Zibelius-Chen 1997; Gnirs 2001: 187 - 188), such as the absence of royal names in the non-royal self-presentations in Egypt; the absence of genealogy in the records of Kushite immigrants in Egypt; and the absence of biographical inscriptions and statuary for non-royal protagonists in Nubia (Pope 2019: 201 - 202). In the following elaborate self-

presentation text on the Theban block statue of Twenty-fifth Dynasty official Harwa, it is notable that no royal name is mentioned: “My Lady made me great when I was a small boy, she advanced my position when I was a child. The King sent me on missions as a youth, Horus, Lord of the Palace, distinguished me. Every mission on which their majesties sent me, I accomplished it correctly, and never told a lie about it. I did not rob, I did no wrong, I maligned no one before them. I entered the Presence to resolve difficulties, to assist the unfortunate. I have given goods to the have-not, I endowed the orphan in my town. My reward is being remembered for my beneficence, my *ka* enduring because of my kindness—Harwa” (Lichtheim 2006c: 27-28).

A phenomenon of Late Period (664 – 332 BCE) self-presentations is a marked rise of individualism, as exhibited in the self-presentation of Montemhet, who held, among other titles, that of Governor of Upper Egypt. His text, inscribed on his statue (Berlin Museum 17271), states: “I was count of the Theban nome, and all of Upper Egypt was in my charge, the southern boundary being at Yebu, the northern one at Un. I bestowed my benefits on Upper Egypt, my love on Lower Egypt; the citizens longed to see me, like Re when he shows himself, so great was my beneficence, so exalted was my excellence!” (Lichtheim 2006c: 32). It is furthermore during the Late Period that the first known self-presentations by women appeared (Jansen-Winkeln 2004).

The Saite Period in Egypt (664 – 525 BCE) was a time of huge political change in which the non-royal elite enjoyed a prestige that had normally been restricted to royalty in earlier periods of more centralized authority. Saite self-presentations mirror the continued rise of individualism (Perdu 1995: 2252 - 2253; Jansen-Winkeln 2014; Rössler-Köhler 1991; Heise: 2007). For example, the Saite self-presentation of Neshor named Psamtikmenkhib is a remarkable display of autonomy. Inscribed on the back pillar of his statue Louvre A90 (Bassir 2016) (fig. 5), Neshor’s self-presentation text narrates his activities at Elephantine in late Saite Egypt,

especially his role in the mercenaries' revolt against King Apries early in the king's reign, and also sheds light on unnamed affairs taking place in the south (Bassir 2014: 38; 2016: 66 - 95). The Late-Period self-presentation of Payeftjauemawyneith, inscribed on his statue from Abydos (Louvre A93), provides a similar affirmation of authority: "I built the temple of Khentamenti, as a solid work of eternity, at his majesty's command, that he might see prosperity in the affairs of Tawer" (Lichtheim 2006c: 34). Significantly, the name of Saite king Amasis (Ahmose II) is featured only once, at the end of Payeftjauemawyneith's self-presentation (see Bassir 2015).



Figure 5. Statue Louvre A 90 of Neshor named Psamtikmenkhib.

Non-royal self-presentations demonstrate, historically, how the relationship between kings and non-royal elites changed over time. In some periods, self-presentations mirrored the rising power of non-royal elite individuals who presented themselves as highly independent and possessed of a king-like autonomy (see Lichtheim 2006b: 4; Baines 1995 a and b; 1996; Leprohon 1995; Gundlach 1997 a and b; 1998). Self-presentations can thus provide insight into the nature of Egyptian kingship and, moreover, documentation of the relationship between the crown and nobles, the king occupying a preeminent place in protagonists' texts during periods of strong rule and relegated to a brief mention, or none at all, in times of waning royal authority.

Self-presentations allow us to see their protagonists as multifaceted individuals. Reflected in their self-presentations are not only how the protagonists understood themselves but also their rulers, deities, and cultural traditions, intertwined as they were in the individuals' life, career, and afterlife. The genre of self-presentation is rightfully established in the spectrum of Egyptian literary and aesthetic traditions.

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- Figure 2. The *hꜥꜣ dj nꜥsw* formula above the entrance to the tomb of Debehen, Giza. (Photograph by the author.)
- Figure 3. Stela of Weni the Elder in the Egyptian Museum in Cairo, CGC 1435. (Photograph by Ahmed Amin © Egyptian Museum in Cairo.)
- Figure 4. Statue of Amenhotep, Son of Hapu, in the Egyptian Museum in Cairo, Luxor J.4/Cairo JE 44862. (Photograph by Sandro Vannini/Laboratoriorosso.)
- Figure 5. Statue Louvre A 90 of Neshor named Psamtikmenkhib. (Photograph © 2008 Musée du Louvre, dist. RMN-Grand Palais/Georges Poncet.)