BOOK OF THE DEAD
Divine guardian before a netherworld gate as part of BD 146 from Papyrus Hynes. OIM E25389H = Cat. No. 17 (D. 19871)
BOOK OF THE DEAD
BECOMING GOD IN ANCIENT EGYPT

edited by
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with new object photography by
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Manuscripts with Book of the Dead spells had been used for nearly two thousand years before they finally disappeared. A great deal of attention has been devoted to the development of the Book of the Dead out of the Pyramid Texts and Coffin Texts (Chapter 2). The earliest attested spells and spell sequences identifiable as the Book of the Dead appeared in the Thirteenth Dynasty (ca. 1773–1650 BC) on heart scarabs and coffins, before the real flourishing at the end of the Seventeenth Dynasty (ca. 1580–1550 BC) and into the Eighteenth Dynasty (ca. 1550–1295 BC). However, what eventually happened to the Book of the Dead?

The last attested Book of the Dead spells date between the first and second centuries AD and were written in Demotic. In between the birth of the Book of the Dead in the eighteenth century BC and its final disappearance in the first century AD, Egyptian funerary literature went through many phases in which new compositions were created, old compositions abandoned, and various styles of decorum governed how each was employed. In many cases, it can be difficult to determine the exact reason why particular traditions arose and others vanished. All of these changes and developments were influenced by a complex interaction of social, cultural, and political developments, many of which have yet to be completely understood. One aspect that is certain and often not emphasized is that the Book of the Dead was never alone. It always existed within a much larger corpus of ancient Egyptian funerary literature. The Pyramid Texts and Coffin Texts continued to be used even after the Book of the Dead developed and development did not end there. Already in the early New Kingdom, just as the format of the Book of the Dead as we know it was being crystallized, new compositions were already being written to supplement it.

The Book of the Dead reached an early zenith in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Dynasties (ca. 1295–1069 BC) when the manuscripts of the “classic” format were produced for an elite class with the wealth to afford them. Royal funerary literature focused on new compositions that can be divided into two basic sets, the Books of the Netherworld and the Books of the Sky, which decorated their tombs in the Valley of the Kings and the Valley of the Queens. For kings of this period, no Book of the Dead papyri have been identified (with two exceptions, the Book of the Dead papyrus of Pinudjem I, and a Book of Caves papyrus found in the Tomb of Amenhotep II, but that did not
name the king), but Book of the Dead spells are found throughout their tombs on the walls and on funerary objects. It is not clear why kings did not have Book of the Dead papyri. Certainly it is possible that they simply have not been preserved. However, with the wealth of funerary material from ancient Egypt, it is hard to imagine that not a single fragment remains. Even king Tutankhamun's tomb had no Book of the Dead papyrus; all the BD spells from his tomb were on the tomb walls or on items in the burial, such as his famous golden mask (BD 151), his funerary figures (BD 6), and his magic bricks (BD 151) found in niches made on each wall.

As the plural designations suggest, Books of the Netherworld and Books of the Sky are rough categories that encompass many individual compositions, including the Book of What is in the Netherworld otherwise known by its Egyptian name as the Amduat (imy.t-dwꜢ.t), Book of Gates, Book of Caverns, Book of Caves, Book of the Earth, Book of Nut, Book of the Day, Book of the Night, Book of the Heavenly Cow, the Litany of Re, and others. The earliest examples of these texts already appear at the beginning of the Eighteenth Dynasty, such as copies of the Amduat associated with the tombs of Thutmose I and Hatshepsut (Mauric-Barberio 2001) or the Litany of Re inscribed on the burial shroud of Thutmose III (fig. C2). When they first appear, these texts are used by New Kingdom royalty, but they are quickly adopted for more general use.

Private elites sought to imitate royalty in their funerary preparations. This had already happened at the end of the Old Kingdom and into the Middle Kingdom when they had copied the Pyramid texts into their own tombs (Hayes 1937). A similar process of imitation took place at the end of the New Kingdom and by the time of the Third Intermediate Period (ca. 1069–664 BC) it was common to find two funerary papyri in elite burials (Niwiński 1989, pp. 213–14): a Book of the Dead manuscript and a highly illustrated papyrus decorated with scenes from the Books of the Netherworld (fig. 12.1). Scenes and texts from the Amduat (fig. 12.1) and Litany of Re (figs. 9.3–9.4) were especially common on these second papyri. All of these texts, the Pyramid Texts, Coffin Texts, Book of the Dead, Books of the Netherworld, and Books of the Sky (among others) remained part of standard funerary literature from the Third Intermediate Period through the Ptolemaic Period. After the Twenty-first Dynasty, production of elaborate papyri waned and relatively few extensive papyri are known from the Twenty-second Dynasty until the end of the Twenty-fifth Dynasty. Coffins and sarcophagi of the Late Period, therefore, became increasingly important conveyors of these texts.

Under the Kushite (Twenty-fifth Dynasty) and Saite (Twenty-sixth Dynasty) rulers, increased attention was paid to the religious literature of the past in an archaizing trend to emulate Egypt’s ages of past glory. We find new copies of all the old

FIGURE 12.2. The sarcophagus lid of Wennefer from the Thirtieth Dynasty shows an image of the deceased’s soul as a ba-bird with human head. It is surrounded by texts from the Book of the Dead, but the trough of the sarcophagus had texts from the netherworld books. Metropolitan Museum of Art 11.154.1
compositions, including Pyramid Texts, Coffin Texts, Book of the Dead, Books of the Netherworld, and Books of the Sky reappearing in the tombs of these eras. The texts were often combined together in interesting conglomerations, such as the BD spells found on the sarcophagus lid of Wennefer from the Thirtieth Dynasty (fig. 12.2) that had been juxtaposed with Amduat texts on the sarcophagus trough (Manassa 2007). It was at this time, near the end of the Twenty-fifth Dynasty and into the Twenty-sixth Dynasty, that the so-called Saite Recension of the Book of the Dead was formed. It is called the Saite recension because it was previously believed to have developed during the Twenty-sixth Dynasty, a line of kings from the delta city of Sais. However, research in recent years has shown that this process was already well underway under the Nubian kings of the Twenty-fifth Dynasty. It is possible that their search into Egypt’s ancient past spurred the priests of the time to collate and formalize the Book of the Dead. This resulted in a more standard format, layout, and spell sequence for the Book of the Dead than is known from prior periods. From this period forward, most papyri would follow the basic outline of the Saite recension, although there were plenty of deviations, until the Book of the Dead ceased to be used at the end of the Ptolemaic Period.

At the beginning of the Ptolemaic Period (332–30 BC), Book of the Dead papyri were still the most popular funerary manuscripts being taken to the grave (Coenen 2001). By the end of the Ptolemaic Period, the Book of the Dead had nearly disappeared from use completely, with only a handful of spells attested into the Roman Period. What happened in these intervening three centuries that made the ancient Egyptians abandon one of their most important religious texts that had been in use for fourteen centuries and had been standardized three centuries prior? The traditional answer is that the Book of the Dead had been replaced by new compositions. While this seems to be an indisputable fact, the complete picture requires a more detailed discussion.

There are three compositions that came into use beginning in the late fourth century BC that began to replace the older Book of the Dead manuscripts based on the classic model of the Saite recension. These compositions are known collectively as the Books of Breathing. The earliest attested of these had the title Book of Breathing which Isis Made for her Brother Osiris (figs. 12.3–12.4), the first example of which dates to the end of the fourth century BC (Hornung 1999, p. 22; Coenen 1998). Over the course of the Ptolemaic Period, two further “books” appeared, often labeled in Egyptian on the papyri as the First Book of Breathing (fig. 12.5) and the Second Book of Breathing (fig. 12.6). The Books of Breathing become more and more common while the Book of the Dead

FIGURE 12.3. The papyrus manuscript of Wesirwer inscribed with the “Book of Breathing which Isis Made for Her Brother Osiris” and ritual instructions in hieratic between the two vignettes. Louvre N 3284, 6 (© RMN-Grand Palais, Art Resource, NY)
became less and less common, until by the end of the first century BC it had effectively disappeared (with a few exceptions discussed below). This disappearance has been traditionally described as a replacement of the Book of the Dead by the Books of Breathing. However, recent research suggests that there was a much closer relationship between the Book of the Dead and the Books of Breathing than has been previously recognized.

There are probably several interrelated reasons why this shift took place, but one of the primary factors was likely that major sections of the Books of Breathing were derived directly from Book of the Dead spells and they were therefore not viewed as substitutes for each other, but actually part of the larger continuum through which the “Book of Going Forth by Day” was expressed. In fact, the Books of Breathing could themselves be referred to as Books of Going Forth by Day (cf. P. Louvre N 3166, 1–4, Herbin 1999, p. 216) and the title “Book of Breathing” (šʿ.t n sns.t) in Egyptian was likewise applied to a great variety of texts.

The best example of how the Books of Breathing were derived from the Book of the Dead is the First Book of Breathing, which was produced by condensing and combining texts from a sequence of Book of the Dead spells from the Saite recension (Scalf, forthcoming). Since the Saite recension was the standard spell sequence of contemporary Book of the Dead manuscripts in the Ptolemaic Period, it is logical that texts such as the First Book of Breathing would be derived from it. When the First Book of Breathing is laid out next to the sequence of Book of the Dead spells 18–23, 26–28, 30, 42, and 62, it is clear that a priestly scribe had taken, often word for word, passages from these spells and combined them into a new composition (Scalf, forthcoming). He then added an introduction that was inspired by BD 15 and its associated vignettes. What the scribe skipped is almost as interesting as what he copied. Notice that nearly a dozen spells between BD 30 and 42 were passed over.

It seems likely that the scribe saw the apotropaic spells of BD 31–41, which warded off various noxious animals, as less theologically significant than the text of BD 42, which identified the body parts of the deceased directly with the most important deities in the Egyptian pantheon (Chapter 9).

It should be remembered that many of these spells were extremely important within the corpus. BD 18 is a spell for justification in which Thoth confirms the testimony of the deceased against his enemies in the tribunal just as he justified Osiris against his enemies. It appeared throughout the mortuary assemblage in the first millennium BC, including on cartonnage cases (fig. 1.6). The sequence of BD 26–28 was extremely common on Third Intermediate Period papyri for which they had been extracted and written by themselves (fig. 3.3). Thus, the spells were not chosen haphazardly. Likewise, the Book of Breathing which Isis Made for Her Brother Osiris has many sections based directly on the text of BD 125, including the invocation of gods and the negative confession. This is among the most important spells in the entire Book of the Dead and its vignette appeared ubiquitously both in tombs as well as in temples.

When looked at closely then, much of the text found in the Books of Breathing derived directly from the Book of the Dead. Their composition and

FIGURE 12.4. Kerasher’s Book of Breathing which Isis Made for Her Brother Osiris is unusual for its extensive illustrations. British Museum EA 9995, 3 (© Trustees of the British Museum)
12. THE DEATH OF THE BOOK OF THE DEAD

compilation must have taken place in the temple
scriptorium, called the “House of Life” (pr ʿnh) in
Egyptian, by priestly scribes studying and copying
the manuscripts. No single author is probably re-
sponsible as the ancient conception of authorship
differed from ours. In antiquity, authorship was of-
ten a collective enterprise and texts built up through
layers of exegesis and commentary, much like the de-
velopment of BD 17 from CT 335. In the process of
researching ancient manuscripts, codifying Book of
the Dead spells, and composing new sections of text,
the Books of Breathing were formed and quickly co-
alesced. However, just as great variation was embed-
ded into the Book of the Dead tradition, so too was
tere great variation in the Books of Breathing. They
had long and short forms. They could be inscribed
together on the same manuscript with other texts.
For example, the Book of Breathing which Isis Made
has been found on manuscripts that included Book
of the Dead spells (Coenen 1998, pp. 42–43) and other
funerary compositions from the Greco-Roman reperto-
ire. The First and Second Books of Breathing could
be inscribed on the same papyrus (fig. 12.7).

FIGURE 12.5. The First Book of Breathing often looked very similar to earlier Book of the Dead papyri, although the text
and vignettes have been reduced. Berlin P. 3028 (© SMB Ägyptisches Museum und Papyrussammlung, photo: Sandra
Steiß)

These phenomena reflect the great vitality and
resurgence of funerary literature after the fourth
century and during the Ptolemaic Period. Not only
were ancient texts studied and revived, a plethora
of new material entered the tradition, at least par-
tially inspired by this research into the past. Over the
centuries, new texts had been created and absorbed
into the larger corpus of ancient Egypt funerary lit-
erature, but the older compositions were retained. A
primary source for much of this new material was the
small libraries. Literature that had previously been
reserved specifically for use in the temple cult was
now adapted for use on behalf of private individuals.
As the deceased sought to become an “Osiris So-and-
so” himself, it was the Osiris cult that saw many of its
ritual texts repurposed as new funerary compositions
(fig. 12.8). This put further pressure on the use of the
Book of the Dead, as the Books of Breathing and these
new compositions provided a wealth of options to the
potential purchaser.

In addition to the compositions already
mentioned in this chapter, dozens of other funerary
compositions were used in the Ptolemaic and
Roman Periods to perform the similar function of
transforming the deceased into a powerful spirit
in the company of the gods. Some of the more
important of these compositions included: the
Book of Traversing Eternity, the Glorifications, the
Lamentations of Isis and Nephthys, the Embalming
Ritual, the Great Decree Issued to the Nome of
Tekh. In addition to
these, there also appeared many unique compositions
that have no direct parallels with other texts. The
phraseology of such texts was inspired by the
standard religious literature of the time, but
each individual text contained its own set and
FIGURE 12.6. This papyrus contained a short version of the “May my name flourish” composition characteristic of the Second Book of Breathing. The first two lines at the top contain the owner’s name, Padiamun, whom Tarenenuet bore. The refrain is written in the long vertical column on the right: “May my name flourish like flourishes the name of ….” The remaining horizontal lines contain the names of deities and their sacred localities, from Osiris to Thoth. A.1956.357 D (© National Museum of Scotland)
sequence of phrases. Furthermore, any individual manuscript could have any combination of these texts. For example, Papyrus Hynes (Cat. No. 17) was a compendium of Book of the Dead spells, the Book of Traversing Eternity, and the Second Book of Breathing, with many short original texts interspersed among them. Such originality and diversity demonstrate the creativity of the Egyptian scribes working in the Greco-Roman Era. Most manuscripts of this period show similar multiplicity and it should be remembered that this multiplicity is reflective of Egyptian funerary literature in general because the Pyramid Texts, Coffin Texts, and the Book of the Dead were also collections of individual compositions.

At the end of the Ptolemaic Period further pressure was placed on the Book of the Dead by the use of Demotic for Egyptian funerary literature, which is first attested in 57–56 BC in a composition reminiscent of the transformation spells from the Book of the Dead (Smith 2009a, pp. 627–49). Up until this point, Egyptian funerary literature was written in either the hieroglyphic or hieratic script (Chapter 3). Demotic was the name of both the script and phase of the language that developed in the mid-eighth century BC. Thus, it represented a more contemporary vernacular than the archaic grammar often found in the religious texts written in hieratic. An element of this interplay can be seen in the Demotic note left by the scribe for the illustrator of Papyrus Ryerson (Cat. No. 14; fig. 3.8). In that case, the scribe probably wrote the note in Demotic so that the illustrator could read it, presuming that the illustrator could not read the archaic grammar imitating Middle Egyptian behind the hieratic text. In fact, our terms for these scripts reflect this situation. It was Herodotus who called the scripts hieroglyphic (“picture writing”), hieratic (“priestly writing”), and demotic (“popular writing”), accurately reflecting the use of hieratic for religious texts and Demotic for everyday texts at the time.

The early funerary literature in Demotic reflected closely the same situation as the hieratic manuscripts. Demotic funerary manuscripts were often compilations of multiple texts. No two of these Demotic funerary manuscripts were the same.

FIGURE 12.7. Both the First and Second Books of Breathing could be inscribed on the same papyrus as in this example, which shows the final column of the first book and the first column of the second book. Rylands Hieratic 6 (reproduced by courtesy of the University Librarian and Director, The John Rylands University Library, The University of Manchester)
A famous set of papyri written for a priest named Hemsuef and his wife Tanewat had original texts written in both hieratic and a Demotic translation (Möller 1913). Some of the Demotic compositions had similar titles to, but different content from, their hieratic counterparts. For example, a Demotic text on a papyrus in the British Museum is titled the “Book which Isis Made,” but its content is completely different than the hieratic Book of Breathing which Isis Made. Likewise, there is a group of papyri preserving a ritual called the Liturgy for Opening the Mouth for Breathing, which, however, bears only a slight relationship to the opening of the mouth ritual known from earlier sources.

A significant change seems to occur in the first and second century AD when the final manuscripts of ancient Egyptian funerary literature were produced. Hieratic copies of the Books of Breathing and the previously mentioned Demotic compositions were still being used. Yet, at this time, a new, somewhat standardized text appears written in Demotic (fig. 12.9). Over fifty examples of this text are known, mostly inscribed on papyri, and labels on many of them refer to them each as a “Document of Breathing.” This label is yet another generic term applied widely across funerary literature of the time. Its content is short, usually less than ten lines, and consists of funerary wishes on behalf of the deceased. Rather than the long ritual and magical spells of previous funerary literature, these short funerary wishes encapsulated the bare essentials of Egyptian afterlife theology. There was a focus on the revitalization of the ba, provision of the deceased, and companionship with the gods. Many of them were illustrated with black line drawings for vignettes. These papyri were folded up, tied, and sealed prior to deposition in the grave. Their formulae seem to derive from an oral tradition, evidence for which is found in earlier graffiti recording the same texts on sacred spaces around Thebes, including both temples and tombs. Although these “Demotic documents for Breathing,” as they have been called (Ryholt 2010), showed variation, elements of their phraseology remained remarkably consistent, none more so than their opening lines of “May the ba live” (nḫ pꜢ by), by which scholars often refer to the texts today.

What is extremely interesting about this corpus is that we see a renewed attempt toward rough standardization at a time when variation in the corpus is at its height. The Books of Breathing, for example, were still being used in the mid-second century AD as demonstrated by the manuscripts belonging to the so-called dossier of Soter (Herbin 2008, pp. 4–10), an important official in Roman Period Thebes. Soter was buried together with extended family members in TT 32, many of whom had hieratic Books of Breathing buried with them and these Demotic Documents of Breathing inscribed on their coffins. These are the last securely dated vestiges of Egyptian funerary literature. Although hieroglyphic, hieratic, and Demotic
inscriptions continue to be used into the fourth and fifth centuries AD, they are restricted to the far south of Egypt, mostly prominently at the temple of Philae. By the end of the native Egyptian funerary text tradition, the large, illustrated Book of the Dead papyri based on the Saite recension had not been used for nearly two centuries. Individual spells lived on for a short while, having been translated into Demotic and incorporated into other manuscripts. Use of the First Book of Breathing, a direct descendant of the Book of the Dead, extended into the early second century AD, coinciding with the rise of the Demotic Document for Breathing. These texts represent the last holdouts of the pagan funerary religion of pharaonic Egypt as Christianity rapidly spread through the country. Nearly all the latest material derives from the city of Thebes, a rural enclave for these Egyptian religious practices until the sweeping Christianization of the third and fourth centuries AD.

FIGURE 12.9. An illustrated Demotic Document of Breathing from the Roman Period, with the front on the left and the back on the right. Moscow I.1d.142 (drawing by Foy Scalf)
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