

THE PRECEPTS OF PTAH-HOTEP

TRANSLATED BY PHILIPPE VIREY

THE most ancient book in the world, the *Papyrus Prisse*, now preserved in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris, has furnished us with the text of a treatise, famous on account of its antiquity, of the glimpse that it gives us into the moral ideas of ancient Egyptian society, and of the difficulties it offers to the translator. I have studied it perseveringly since 1881, and have made it the subject of a philological essay, which I presented to the École des Hautes-Études in 1884-85 and published in 1887.¹ In this I gave the history of the manuscript, an account of the labours of my predecessors, a transcription of the hieratic text in hieroglyphic characters, and a translation accompanied by numerous critical observations and an index of the words employed in the *Papyrus*; but I did not intend to offer in it more than a purely philological study. In spite of its dry simplicity, however, the essay met with acceptance, and in the following year

¹ *Études sur le Papyrus Prisse, le Livre de Kaqimna et les Leçons de Ptah-hotep.* Vieweg, Paris, 1887.

Mr. Howard Osgood did me the honour to publish an English translation of it in the *Bibliotheca Sacra* (Oct. 1888), along with a good commentary and an interesting comparison of the work with the Precepts of Ani. In my turn I now undertake to present my work under another form; not that the translation can be very new, since after so short a lapse of time I could not greatly improve a work on which I have bestowed all my thought and care¹; but what can be remodelled is the commentary. The philological part of my previous publication can be reduced without inconvenience, as the reader who wishes to study this side of the subject can refer to my essay; on the other hand, the philosophical and historical portion of the commentary will be considerably increased. I shall utilise for this purpose some of the texts which I copied at Thebes in 1886 in the tomb of Rekhmara, who exercised at a later period the same functions as Ptah-hotep.

Both were feudal lords of the Egyptian empire, nomarchs or prefects, and were specially honoured with the royal favour. Rekhmara² is called *hesi n nuter nofer*,³ "favourite of the good god" (Thothmes III); Ptah-hotep, who dates his treatise in the reign of Assa of the Fifth Dynasty, boasts at the end of it

¹ Of course I do not mean that I consider my translation very nearly final.

² The inscriptions of the tomb of Rekhmara, prefect of Thebes under the Eighteenth Dynasty, have been published by me in the *Mémoires publiés par les Membres de la Mission archéologique française au Caire*; Leroux, Paris 1889.

³ *Tombeau de Rekhmara*, in the *Mémoires*, p. 114, note 3.

that he had enjoyed above all others the favour of the king, and in a text published by Lepsius (*Denkmäler*, ii. 115) we read: *Assa hesi Ptah-hotep*, "the favourite of Assa, Ptah-hotep."

In the preface of Ptah-hotep's treatise he even seems to declare that he was of royal descent, for he calls himself "the royal son, first-born, legitimate" (ch. v. ll. 6, 7); but I have elsewhere noticed that this title must not be interpreted too literally. We may ask why the elder and legitimate son of the king never reigned if he lived, and Ptah-hotep did not die young, since he was already 110 years old¹ when he published his work. We must attribute an extraordinary longevity to Assa if we hold that Ptah-hotep was his son and died before him.

But Prof. Maspero has already shown that we must not give too literal an interpretation to the titles "royal mother," "royal wife," "royal daughter," and that it was possible to be "royal wife" by right of birth before being married. Such titles served only to determine the rank occupied by a princess at court in questions of etiquette and precedence.

If the appellation "royal wife" were only an honorary title, we may infer that "royal son" also might be the same and signify nothing more than "prince." In this case, "the eldest legitimate son of the king" would be equivalent to "prince of the blood royal." That such a title can be given to a person not belonging to the royal family is not unexampled

¹ *Papyrus Prisse*, pl. xix. l. 7.

even in our own days in the West ; all the more could it be given in the East, where the most pompous titles are so easily accumulated. At the court of Egypt, where everything was referred to the king, the source of all honour, it is possible that a claim to nobility consisted in attaching oneself, at all events nominally, to his family, or even in making oneself part of it. The relations of the king enjoyed the highest titles, but even the "royal nurses" gloried in "the suckling which had mingled their blood with Horus."¹

If Rekhmara does not, like Ptah-hotep, bear the title of royal prince, he was perhaps of even higher rank, since he is called "the double of the Pharaoh," animated by his spirit, taking his place in his absence, governing all Egypt like him, addressed by the same titles,² and saluted like him by the courtiers. We must not be astonished therefore at the royal title given to Ptah-hotep ; the prefect of the capital was next to the king the first person in the kingdom.

Although an interval of many centuries separated the two prefects, it is probable that both governed according to the same rules, and that little change had taken place in the social state and ideas of the Egyptian people. Rekhmara, after exercising the

¹ The title of "royal nurse" was independent of the function of nurse, and was merely a title of etiquette. Under Amenophis II there were at least two commanders of the royal armies, Amenemheb and Pehsukher, whose wives were royal nurses. As it is very improbable that there were two nurses, both of whom married, one after the other, the commanders of his army, we must suppose that the wife of the commander, in virtue of the dignity of her husband, could claim the same rank as one who had really been a nurse of the king.

² For example, *smen hapu* (*Tombeau de Rekhmara*, pl. xviii.)

vicerealty in the absence of Thothmes III, insists before all else on the conservative character of his government.¹ The temples, the laws, the principles on which society rested, all remained unshaken; the children of the nobility succeeded their fathers regularly; everything, in short, continued as if the king remained perpetually in his capital, and the same hand had governed Egypt since the mythical age of Horus. All its kings and their ministers were only the images and substitutes of the god who had been the first to reign over the country; the principles of government, like the principles of morality, were of divine origin; nothing could be changed. Ptah-hotep had asserted this of the past and predicted it of the future; innovators had no place in Egypt, and their ephemeral success had always been followed by reaction. "Let none make innovations," he had said, "in the precepts of his father; let the same precepts form his instruction to his children."² Doubtless innovators sometimes made themselves heard by the uninstructed multitude and influenced the public for a moment, but their triumph was momentary. Nothing, then, must be taken away or added, nothing changed in established principles, and whoever found contrary ideas growing up in himself must be careful to root them out.³ Thus, in order to discover the earliest trace of the struggle between established custom and new ideas, between the conservative and the radical,

¹ *Tombeau de Rekhmara*, p. 42.

² *Papyrus Prisse*, pl. xvii. ll. 11-13, ch. xlii.

³ *Id.*, pl. xviii. ll. 2-8, chap. xlii.

it is necessary to go back to the oldest book in the world.

Thanks to this horror of change in the government and society of ancient Egypt, the documents which relate to the occupations of the prefect Rekhmara doubtless give us sufficient information in regard to the occupations of the prefect Ptah-hotep. Interesting resemblances, moreover, between certain chapters of the *Papyrus Prisse* and the texts of the Tomb of Rekhmara authorise us in making this comparison. These texts depict to us the divan of the Pasha or Prefect of Thebes: "He sits in the divan, in order to hear the petitions . . . to *give peace* to the whole country, dispensing justice without paying attention to bribes, applications, (or) offerings, and he who has petitioned him has not wept.¹ . . . From early dawn he has been up to listen all day to the petitions of the provinces of the South and the provinces of the North. He has not repelled small or great; the evil done to the poor, the aged, or the afflicted is requited by Horus to its author.² . . . There is no inattention in him to the matters about which he has been petitioned; he estimates the poor equally with the rich, appearing as peace-maker."³

Ptah-hotep also tells us how the prefect ought to apply himself to fill the office of "leader of peace," with what care he ought to hear the explanations offered by the parties to a suit, with what patience he

¹ *Tombeau de Rekhmara*, pp. 26, 27, pl. iii.

³ *Id.*, pp. 170, 171.

² *Id.*, p. 165.

should try to unravel the truth from obscure statements and useless details: "When thou art a leader of peace, listen well to the words of the petitioner. Be not abrupt with him; that would trouble him. Do not say to him: Thou hast [already] said this. Indulgence will encourage him to do that for the sake of which he is come. As for being abrupt with the plaintiff because he describes what happened when the injury was done instead of complaining of the injury itself, let it not be! The way to obtain a clear explanation is to listen with kindness."¹

With the object of maintaining peace among their subordinates by means of justice, one of the chief cares of the prefects was to provide subsistence for the people and to preserve them from want. Every centre of population accordingly possessed a *larit* or assemblage of magazines, where corn, wine, and all sorts of provisions were stored and thoroughly well guarded. No place, in fact, could have been more secure, and we shall see how strictly all access to it was forbidden to the stranger.

The word *larit* appears to mean a well-guarded enclosure²; among the duties which Ptah-hotep insists upon in his Precepts, one of those to which he attaches most importance is that of vigilantly guard-

¹ *Papyrus Prisse*, pl. xi. ll. 3-7, chap. xvii.

² See my study on the Tomb of Am-n-teh and the office of *mer larit*, "overseer of the *larit*," in the *Recueil de travaux relatifs à l'archéologie et à la philologie égyptiennes et assyriennes*, vol. vii. Comp. Gen. xli. 48. Joseph "gathered up all the food of the seven years, which were in the land of Egypt, and laid up the food in the cities: the food of the field, which was round about every city, laid he up in the same."

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