

Literarischer Brief. Two major literary letters have come down from ancient Egypt;¹ both are written in the Late-Egyptian idiom. One is dealt with s. v. *Pap. Anast. I. The other, which is the subject of the present article, is a narrative work of fiction cast in epistolary form and preserved in full in a hieratic papyrus lodged in the A. S. Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts in Moscow (Pap. Pushkin I, 6, 127). No other copy, either whole or fragmentary, is known to exist. The papyrus might have been written on c. 1000 B. C.; the story itself was probably composed sometime between 1300 and 1000 B. C.

The entire story is told within the framework of a single letter which, in keeping with New-Kingdom epistolary practice, is dateless and begins with the identification of the writer and the recipient, followed by elaborate salutations and good wishes. Wermai, who in better days had been a father-of-the-god priest (*Gottesvater) in the temple of *Re-Atum at *Heliopolis, is both the professed author of the letter and the hero of the tale. He writes to his friend Usimarenakhte, a scribe in the royal court (*Schreiber), describing his past and present misfortunes and seeking assistance. He complains of having been removed from office, stripped of his property, and ousted from his town by unnamed enemies whom he also accuses of murder, kidnapping and robbery. Following his dismissal Wermai set out on a long, rambling journey throughout Egypt while war raged in the entire land. He roved around the country partly by boat, perhaps in his own chariot for a while, but mostly on foot, always indigent, lonely, and ignored or despised by everyone. Finally he settled in a poverty-stricken locality in the Great Oasis (*Oase). It is from that forlorn spot, where he is living in straitened circumstances, that Wermai writes to Usimarenakhte for help. The place is lorded over by an unscrupulous mayor and his ruthless staff; the common people lead a hard, miserable life. The writer gives a description of local conditions which is an unparalleled account of the perennial ills of an Egyptian rural community under misrule: vain official promises, official fraud, low wages, oppressive taxation (*Abgabe und Steuern), the arrest of tax-debtors, famine (*Hunger, *Hungersnot), even the *anachoresis* resorted to as the final release. What has sustained the protagonist throughout his sufferings and tri-

bulations is his faith in a powerful benefactor, a proven friend of the poor and protector of the oppressed whose identity and whereabouts are not disclosed in the story—he may be conjectured to be Pharaoh himself. Be that as it may, he is said to have emerged unscathed from the war, which has just come to an end. The banished priest closes his letter, and his tale, by voicing his hope that the unidentified champion, in hearing of his troubles, will fly to his assistance and punish all wrong-doers.

¹ Caminos, in: LÄ I, 858; Posener, in: Fragen an die altäg. Literatur, Gs E. Otto, Wiesbaden 1977, 392.

Lit.: Michail A Korostovtzev, Иератический папирус 127 из собрания ГМИИ им А. С. Пушкина, Moskau 1961; Ricardo A. Caminos, A Tale of Woe from a Hieratic Papyrus in the A. S. Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts in Moscow, Oxford 1977.

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