Report on:

Martin Pehal, *Ancient Egyptian Mythological Narratives. Structural Interpretation of the Tale of Two Brothers, Tale of the Doomed Prince, the Astarte Papyrus, the Osirian Cycle, and the Anat Myth*
— **by Andréas Stauder, 11.11.2015**

Martin Pehal's dissertation – comprising a thorough study of the *Astarte Papyrus* and *Tale of the Two Brothers* notably, as well as an additional study of *Tale of Doomed Prince* – addresses two central, highly complex, and widely discussed questions in Egyptology: the forms and functions of myth in Ancient Egypt and their relation to narrative, and the integration of mythological elements of foreign, notably Levantine/West-Semitic, origins in (early) New Kingdom narrative texts. I am glad to say already here that I find this to be a very remarkable work, methodologically rigorous and full of new insights.

In part I of his study, the author establishes in explicit ways the conditioning possibilities for his subsequent analyses. Chapter I is devoted to a discussion of two recurrent tendencies in Egyptological treatments of myth, namely historical reductionism ("evhemeristic approaches") and myth understood as an explanation of ritual, allegedly made necessary by the fading away of a supposedly original understanding of ritual. Although not phrased in quite these terms, the author effectively demonstrates how the latter approach harkens back to an ultimately Romantic horizon of an alleged initially full presence of meaning in ritual. While acknowledging the achievements of historical criticism, he also shows how the former approach falls much short of providing a sufficient account of the complex semantics expressed in myth. Both approaches are thus shown to be equally strongly reductionistic.

In Chapter II, the author directly addresses the vexed question of (the alleged absence of) myth before the New Kingdom. In introducing a distinction between "configurational coherence" and "narrative coherence", he demonstrates how the question has tended to be viewed mainly in terms of the latter (for example, famously, by Assmann, *GM* 25, 1977), due to the implicit "logocentristic" frame that constitutes the implicit cultural horizon of Egyptology itself. Once this frame is made explicit and "configurational coherence" accordingly given its proper place, myth appears to be as old as the Egyptian written tradition itself, narrative or not, and probably much older.

Part II constitutes the bulk of the study and centers around the detailed treatment of two major New Kingdom expressions of myth in a narrative form, the *Astarte Papyrus* and the *Tale of Two Brothers*. The former, which is famous for the central presence of foreign elements, is of difficult and disputed interpretation due to its sorry state of preservation. The latter, as well as other texts such as the ones referred to as the *Anat Myth*, here serve to build a broad interpretive framework in which the *Astarte Papyrus* may then be considered anew.

Chapter I presents a comprehensive summary of previous studies of the *Astarte Papyrus*, culminating in a renewed interest triggered by the only fairly recent rejoinder of pBN 202 with the long known pAmherst IX (Coulon & Collombert, *BIFAO* 100, 2000). Chapter II provides a translation of this fragmentary text with a synopsis of characters and a summary of the various elements of foreign influence that have been noted.

Chapter III introduces structuralism, particularly of the Levi-Straussian tradition, as an interpretive framework. The general tenets of the method are presented and set in their historical context (for example, the failed encounter between Levi-Strauss and Propp), and criticism, justified or unjustified, against the approach is examined. In particular, the author discusses the issue of how to fruitfully apply the method to thoroughly written cultural traditions and of how to overcome the essentially synchronic Levi-Straussian structures, thus giving the narrative mode its full importance, with reference notably to authors such as Turner and Leach. In relation to the core concepts of permutation and mediation, the narrative mode is shown to be, not just a somehow necessary expository accident, but an integral part of how myth can unfold its meaning dynamically ("mythomotorics") against the background of the essentially unsolvable antinomies that make up culture and society.

Chapters IV and V then propose a detailed structural analysis of the *Tale of Two Brother*. Several important results emerge from this discussion. A new overall structure of the composition is proposed, consisting in Episodes and Clusters of such Episodes, identified by the author in textual analysis. Each Cluster of Episodes is described in analogy to the Hegelian triad, each individual Episode presenting an element of negation with respect to the preceding. The author further shows how the overall compositional form of the *Tale* can be described in Clusters of Episodes (Clusters I, II, IIIa-c with an inner gradation), each preceded by Initial Episodes (I, II, III) setting the frame for the developments to follow, with an additional final Episode closing the *Tale*. The structure thus identified correlates in no small way with the one marked by the rubra on the sole surviving manuscript copy of the *Tale*, Papyrus d'Orbiney, yet does not fully corresponds to it. The author rightly stresses that this need not be a contradiction, since the *rubra* may reflect subdivisions in editorial, scribal or even performance practices. In the structure identified, each Cluster, along with its associated Initial Episode, is focused on one of the various planes on which the antinomies of the *Tale* manifest themselves: social hierarchy and kin, order (/life, /Egypt) and chaos (/death, /the outside), and legitimacy and illegitimacy in relation to the office of kingship. The narrative dynamic is thus demonstrated to be operative through a series of adjustments and permutations, analogies and inversions, moving forward from a partial imbalance on one level to a partial imbalance on another level. This delineates an overall arc leading to the Terminal Episode which is in turn related to the Initial Episode I as an inversion thereof (cf. e.g. the diagrams on p.170 and p.172). The narrative dimension of the myth is thus shown to be integral, rather than incidental, to the deployment of the structural semantics it embodies. As the author argues, it is these "mythomotorics" that make for much of the semantic density of the myth, as a necessary articulation of the unsolved, and unsolvable, antinomies expressed by the myth itself.

This appraisal of the dynamic structure of the *Tale of Two Brothers* forms the basis for a rich analysis of "character transformations", particularly of the most complex of all, Bata. As had been previously observed, the character of Bata displays strong Osirian features (e.g. Hollis, *The Ancient Egyptian Tale of "Two Brothers"*, 2008), but also strong Sethian features (e.g. Wettengel (*Die Erzählung der Beiden Brüder*, 2003), while the rubra imply a further relation with the solar cycle and thus with the mysterious unity of Osiris and Ra during the night hours (e.g. Wettengel). Against this apparently problematic overabundance of possible associations, the author capitalizes on the fundamental insight that a character displays X-ian features only in relation to some other character, not inherently: like linguistic meaning itself in the structuralistic tradition (and beyond), characterization is necessarily relational. The author then provides a thorough analysis of how Bata relates to other characters in the *Tale*, discussing the cultural intertext against which such associations are defined (and recoverable both to the ancient audiences and to the present-day interpreter). Bata is thus shown to successively assume all the above features, Osirian, Sethian, solar and even Horian. As the author convincingly demonstrates, Bata does not stand as an (essentially static) sign for any of these figures (as in previous interpretation), but gains his significance from the very transformational processes by which he successively embodies the various networks of relationships associated with all these figures, relating these networks to one another on a higher level.

Chapter VI broadens the perspective beyond the *Tale of Two Brothers* to the *Osirian Cycle* (known from texts of various sorts, literary or not, continuous or not) and the often neglected set of (magical) texts referred to as the *Anat Myth*. The author demonstrates how these various myth are related to one another by strong structural similarities, as well as through the role of the feminine mediator. This is shown to be essential to moving the myth forward, to bringing about new structural configurations, in a variety of compositions. This possibility for feminine characters to act as mediators is analyzed in relation to the placement of women in society, partly outside the androcentristically defined order and hierarchies.

Chapter VII turns back to the highly fragmentary *Astarte Papyrus* in which structural relationships similar to the ones analyzed at greater length in the better preserved material can now be identified. In particular, the conflict opposing Seth-Baal to Yam is read in structural relation to the Seth-Osiris opposition, set in relation to the contrast between the center and the outside, itself mediated by the feminine and liminal figure of Astarte (and secondarily Renenut). While the background of the West-Semitic Baal Cycle is present in the *Astarte Papyrus*, the latter need not represent a cultural translation, or even a matrix, of the former. Rather, it is shown, the *Astarte Papyrus* presents yet another re-configuration of (inherently permutable) native representations.

The above study is complemented by an additional, shorter study on the *Tale of the Doomed Prince*. The author here demonstrates how his method of structural analysis (identification of Episodes, Clusters of Episodes; analysis of the dynamic relationships between these episodes in terms of relationships between characters and placements of these; etc.) can be fruitfully extended to other texts, including such with less

obviously "mythical" material. It further reveals rather remarkable elements in common between the *Doomed Prince* and the *Tale of Two Brothers*, previously analyzed. More strongly than the main part of the dissertation submitted, this additional study draws on intertextuality for interpretation, notably with love poetry (with which the *Doomed Prince* is associated through its sole surviving manuscript copy, on P. Harris 500, also containing love poems), and also with funerary and mortuary corpora such as the figures of Isis and Nephtys in the *Coffin Texts*. The overall discussion reveals how rich and structured the text is, beyond its simple and straightforward first appearance.

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Throughout, Martin Pehal's work is written in a clear expository style, fluent to read. References are rich, yet without footnotes overburdening the printed page. Some redundancies can be noted, particularly in chapters IV-V, but these are determined by the author's option of a fully explicit structural analysis.

Explicitness is more generally a major quality of the work submitted. Other author's positions are clearly exposed in terms of their strengths and limitations, and in relation to broader intellectual contexts or debates to which they relate, explicitly or implicitly (for example the vexed question of the "Verborgenheit des Mythus" in Egypt, as related to the "Myth-Ritual School" and "logocentristic" approaches). The author shows a strong degree of reflexivity in defining his own position.

The author demonstrates a command of a very broad range of literature, both field-internal and beyond Egyptology. The use of approaches from outside the field of Egyptology is well reflected and never dogmatic. It may be worth emphasizing here that the use of a structuralist approach of the Levi-Straussian tradition, with more recent additions, is very uncommon in current Egyptology. Yet, the author succeeds in making it fruitful, demonstrating by his own practice how results can be gained through such an approach. The overall intellectual project of this dissertation is thus defined by a strong intellectual independence and originality.

That the study reaches important new results was already referred above. Some may be singled out here, among several. The analysis of the structure of the *Tale of the Two Brothers* goes much beyond previous analyses. It shows the dynamics behind the narrative, and thus how narrative is integral to how the myth deploys its meaning, as a series of processes of transformations and permutations. Noteworthy is also the analysis of the female mediator figure, which had not been made before in such clarity, if at all. By its insisting on the relational and processual dimensions, the following analysis of character transformations solves a series of problems present in previous, more static and non-relational, analyses. Contrary to received wisdom, the discussion of the *Astarte Papyrus* shows that the presence of foreign elements need not necessarily imply a cultural translation or adaptation from foreign material.

Although the author takes great care to remain cautious in this respect, one side effect of the analysis of transformations and permutations is also, in the present reviewer's opinion, that the "political-propagandistic" readings that have been proposed for the *Tale of Two Brothers* (thus Wettengel) and other texts (e.g. *Contendings of Horus and Seth*) cannot be upheld. As the author shows, these texts are (among other things) about the institution of kingship (more specifically, of "positional kingship" in the author's terminology), but not about any specific conception of kingship as could have been championed by hypothetically competing political parties.

While texts such as the *Tale of Two Brothers* have been the object of a great many studies, and are often even part of the standard Egyptological curriculum, the analyses here proposed contribute to raise the debate to a new level, well beyond the previous state-of-the-art previously represented by the studies of Hollis (2008) and Wettengel (2003). On a more general level, the author contributes a fresh perspective on the whole debate on myth and narrativity. Any discussion to come will have to take these into account, while some other views can now be safely considered obsolete. More literary oriented studies of Late Egyptian narrative texts (and possibly also of Middle Egyptian ones, see below) will also have to take into account what is proposed in Martin Pehal's work.

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In the following, I make a few comments, mostly very minor. Beginning with the main study:

- p.64, n.177: on *tl* as a Hurrian loanword, in more details also Thomas Schneider, "Eine Vokabel der Tapferkeit: Ägyptisch *tl* – hurritisch *adal*", *Ugaritforschungen* 31, p. 677-723, 1999.
- p.79, n.236: the assmannian categories of "Genotext" and "Phänotext" seem to have been reversed.
- p.96: structural studies in Egyptology are indeed uncommon in recent times, particularly in the Levi-Straussian tradition (Assmann and Loprieno being not recent, and more strongly inspired by the linguistic tradition, as the author rightly observes). One currently active exponent of the Levi-Straussian can be named, however: Frédéric Servajean.
- On the Seth-Baal connection, see also Niv Allon, "Seth is Baal – Evidence from the Egyptian script", *Ägypten und Levante* 17 (2007), p. 15-22.
- On Renenutet (ch. 7), with a focus on the spellings, also Philippe Collombert, "Renenoutet et Renenet", *BSEG* 27 (2005-2007), p. 21-32.

Additional study on the Doomed Prince

(Cultural) intertext:

- p. 34, " …went out to stroll for amusement …": this is a New Kingdom literary motif, with other attestations in *Neferkare and Sisene,* T.OIC 13539, 4-5; on Prince Amenmes' stone vessel (*Urk*. IV 91.12-14); Thutmosis IV's *Sphinx Stela* 5 (*Urk*. IV 1541.9-12); and further in visitors' graffiti, e.g. Graffito M.2.3.P.19.3, 1 (Nineteenth Dynasty, probably Ramses II; Navrátilová 2007: 108-111, 133).

- Episode I (Rubrum VIII), the intoxication of the snake as a means to make it innocuous: could this be compared with the similar motif in the *Himmelskuh*?

- on the Crocodile, would the author perhaps also contemplate a motivic relationship with P. Westcar?

Some additional references, none essential:

- p.36, n.77, on the Snake Spells in the Pyramid Texts, also Christian Leitz, "Die Schlangensprüche in den Pyramidentexten", *Orientalia* 65 (1996), p. 381-427.

- p.37, on the Seth classifier, see also Angela McDonald, "A metaphor for troubled times: the Seth deity determinative in the First Intermediate Period", *ZÄS* 134 (2007), p. 26-39; *ead*., "An evil influence? Seth's role as a determinative, particularly in letters do the dead", *LingAeg* 10 (2002), p. 283-291.

- p.40, n.104, on Sobek, in addition to the titles quoted, there is now also a synthesis by Mario Zecchi, *Sobek of Shedet: The crocodile god in the Fayyum in the dynastic period*, Todi 2010 (the book is admittedly difficult to find).

A few technicalities:

- p. 29: … *sḫm m ḥ꜂.t=f* (not *h꜂t=f*).

- p.30, CT I 306f: no final (*w*) in transcription (these are subjunctive *sḏm=f*'s, not prospective ones).

- p.31, CT III 296b T3C: not "*ḳḳ*": is a fairly regular spelling for *wnm* (compare the parallel versions).

- p.30, CT I 215a *ḫr sd꜍* … rather than "Fall and tremble …", "Tremble falls/fell …".

Two broader comments on the main study, to be considered for discussion in the defense

- In ch.7, the author rightly observes that the density of loanwords is in itself meaningful, and further rightly observes that this need not in itself imply that the *Tale* is adapted from a West-Semitic source. I would suggest that the density of loanword is indexical of novelty, and particularly of novelty of genre, subject matter and expression: genre here combines royal eulogy with a "mythological tale", while also making an initial reference to the text being a *sḏd nḫtw* "extolling of strong/victorious deeds", a phrase otherwise found in royal inscriptions of Thutmosis III/Amenhotep II notably. Put differently, I would suggest that the dense use of words of non-native stock may relate to the fact that genre and expression are themselves highly innovative, with relatively little in ways of past *textual* models? (This would of course remain fully compatible with the author's analysis that the *Astarte Papyrus* need *not* be a transposition/adaptation of a foreign myth.)

- In ch. 4-5, 7, and in relation to the *Doomed Prince*, the author repeatedly analyses the crossing from one ontological zone into another, discussing the implications of such crossing for myth and narrative. From a more literary-oriented perspective, the crossing of boundaries is also crucial to the analyses by Gerald Moers (*Fingierte Welten in der ägyptischen Literatur des 2. Jahrtausends vor Christus: Grenzüberschreitung,*

Reisemotiv und Fiktionalität, Probleme der Ägyptologie 19, Leiden/Boston), who views these as a defining index of fictionality of Middle and Late Egyptian literature as such.

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Some further suggestions for discussion during public defense

- The author makes a strong point that the foreign motifs studied need not be cultural translations in the Egyptian texts in which they appear in the New Kingdom but are related to much older, native conceptions. For an earlier period (the Middle Kingdom), I would like to ask the author about his position regarding Gnirs' proposal that the Snake in the *Shipwrecked Sailor* could be of Levantine origin and possibly in relation to the Baal Cycle (Andrea Gnirs, "Die levantinische Herkunft des Schlangengottes", in *Stationen. Beiträge zur Kulturgeschichte Ägyptens Rainer Stadelmann gewidmet*, ed. Heike Guksch & Daniel Polz, Mainz 1998, p. 197-209).

- On a more literary plane, connections with older times, specifically Middle Kingdom narrative literature, may be deeper than suspected as well. This direction is already hinted at by the author himself (thus, Bata's stay abroad, set in perspective with Sinuhe's stay abroad). Pursuing with *Sinuhe*, the following elements may be relevant to the *Two Brothers*: Sinuhe's initially wrong placement (when overhearing what he should not have heard: … *m ʿrw wꜣ* "… in the vicinity, aside"); Sinuhe's transgression of boundaries that are not only geographical and cultural but also ontological; Sinuhe's ultimate reintegration to the sphere of the king; moving in parallel to the above, Sinuhe's initial bodily disintegration, before and after his flight away from the king (first section), then his only late bodily reintegration, in relation to his reintegration to the king (fifth and last section).

- Still in relation to *Sinuhe*, the *Doomed Prince* may also warrant some comparison: the attempt, ultimately bound to fail, to craft a meaninful existence "outside"; the figure of the chief of Naharin (rightly described by the author as a "mirror image" of the King) which seems structurally like Amunenshi in *Sinuhe*; Episode F (Rubrum VIb), "Then he gave him his daughter for a wife and he gave him a house and arable land and likewise cattle and every good thing", which seems strongly reminiscent of the similar passage in *Sinuhe*.

- Concerning *The Astarte Papyrus*, as well as *Two Brothers*, would the author consider a relationship with the *Hirtengeschichte* (fragmentary and of admittedly difficult interpretation), in particular regarding the following elements: events occurring in a liminal zone, associated with the watery element; events involving a divine temptress, which appears naked, with an emphasis on her sexual attractiveness.
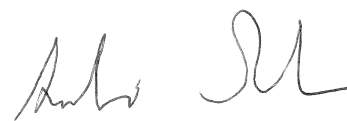
I emphasize that that I am not suggesting that the author should have addressed any of these possibilities, which definitely transcend the scope of his study. Rather, I am introducing these here as an illustration of

how reading the author's study has proven stimulating to me, to raise further questions. The above may then be addressed during the defense.

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In sum, Martin Pehal presents a methodological rigorous, well reflected, and highly original work. The author demonstrates a broad command of the literature and a strong intellectual autonomy in defining ways very much of his own, while constantly reflecting the epistemological status of his own practices. He succeeds in shedding new light on important and difficult Egyptological questions (myth, narrativity, accommodation of foreign elements). On the above grounds, I find that the work submitted by all means "meets the standard customarily required of a doctoral dissertation". I therefore recommend the public defense, and I assess the final product as "Pass".

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