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Egyptian grain transport

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Abstract: I review here a recent publication of a papyrus document dating to the Ramesside period concerning the transportation of grain.

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Janssen, Jac. J. *Grain transport in the Ramesside Period. Papyrus Baldwin (BM EA 10061) and Papyrus Amiens*. Hieratic Papyri in the British Museum, vol. VIII. London: British Museum Press.¹

This small volume (pp. 119 + 22 plates) is a standard *editio princeps* of an important document dating to the Ramesside period (mid-Dynasty 20, ca. 1150 BC, from the reign of Ramses V, VII or VIII), known as P. Amiens/Baldwin. The text, presumably, comes from a tomb in the area of Asyut in Middle Egypt, although there is no confirmation of this in the text itself. Mr. Baldwin's note to the British Museum is the only indication that the text derives from Asyut. Both halves of the text were acquired in the same year, 1882.

P. Amiens/Baldwin is essentially an accounting text, dealing mainly with grain payments from various locations in the Nile valley in and around the modern town of Qâw el-Kebir (the Xth Upper Egyptian nome, ancient *Tjebu*) in Middle Egypt. The production and taxation of grain were, of course, at the heart of the ancient Egyptian economy, and while there were certainly institutional changes over the course of pharaonic history, the basic fact remained that the ability of the state to collect and distribute grain tax revenue was the main measure of economic power. The document published here is an important source for understanding the operations, to some extent, of the collection of grain, and the connection between land holding, social hierarchy and state finance, in late Ramesside times. The temple institution, here it is that of Amun-Re at Karnak, is of central importance in the New Kingdom agricultural economy, and the text reminds us, as we know from many other documentary sources, how much economic power this one temple wielded in Middle Egypt. Beyond the reach of this one temple, the text also provides additional evidence for just how complex interests in land were, making the simplistic claim of "ownership" of land, either state or private, a far too simplistic bifurcation of the actual complexities of ancient rural Egypt. The social hierarchy on the land is relatively clear here--from the cultivators themselves (in itself containing a wide range of persons, including priests) to middling officials "in charge of" temple domain lands, to higher officials under whose "authority" the land lay.

The book is divided into three parts: an Introduction, and a translation and commentary of the recto and the verso of the text. Appendix I lists the correspondence between the entries in the text, Appendix II treats diacritical signs and Appendix III briefly discusses writings of the preposition "under the authority of." Indexes, a hieroglyphic transcription of the complete text and excellent photographs conclude the volume.

This book is primarily a publication of Papyrus Baldwin because the upper half of the text (P. Amiens) has been well known since its discussion by Alan Gardiner in 1941.²

¹ Submitted to the journal *Ancient West and East*.

P. Baldwin was recently “discovered” in the British Museum. And therein lies a tale. After an exhibition of the papyrus, the text, at some point early in the Twentieth Century, was moved to the Student Rooms of the Western Asiatic Department. And there it remained, unknown to Egyptologists until Janssen saw it in the Papyrus room of the Museum in 1993. The whole text was part of an exhibition in the British Museum in 1999-2000, and this reviewer saw the text in a small museum in southern Belgium in the Summer of 2003. The addition of Papyrus Baldwin to the Amiens text (now in the Musée de Picardie) adds new information on specific cargoes, and allows Janssen to reject some of Gardiner’s suppositions on the accounting methods (and accuracy) in the text.

Part I is a brief introduction to the papyrus, some recent research on the text, and a discussion of the date of the text. Part II is devoted to the recto of the papyrus. The text in Janssen’s view forms a “single unit” and concerns the collection of grain from temple ships from a variety of sites in the Xth Upper Egyptian nome. The verso of the text, discussed in Part III, is more diverse in its contents. Among other things, it concerns an account of small amounts of grain coming from individuals and households, loaded onto a ship, and an account of garments from various villages. In contrast to the recto, grain mentioned on the verso as being “delivered” comes from households and individuals, without mention of a “threshing floor,” giving rise to the speculation that a different category of land (what has been called “apportioning land”) is involved.

There is very little to add to Janssen’s economical edition, and his very reliable transcription and translation. The author’s treatment of the difficult hieratic writing is masterful. Many questions are raised by the author, and some solutions are suggested for some of the interpretive problems of the text. It is interesting from an historical point of view to note that the temple of Amun appears to control much “island land,” (surely the terms *iw n m3wt* and *iw* are the same term, and become *m3y* land, i.e. land nearer the river in later demotic texts), a phenomenon paralleled later in texts such as the Edfu donation text.³ New vocabulary for types of grain, known previously from a literary source, are discussed briefly on p. 62, but exactly what the two terms discussed mean is unresolved.

Beyond the important vocabulary and toponyms in the text, the real value of it lies in our understanding of the pharaonic economy. The author is one of the foremost authorities on the ancient Egyptian economy, particularly during the New Kingdom, but nowhere in this edition is the economy mentioned nor is the historical context treated. This is something of a shame. An individual document such as Papyrus Amiens/Baldwin taken in isolation is not always easy to understand. But some amount of contextualization is surely important. There has been considerable discussion about the nature and structure of the New Kingdom economy recently, and since the 20th dynasty is one of the better-documented periods for ancient Egyptian economic history, Janssen’s opinions would

² “Ramesside texts relating to the taxation and transport of corn,” *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 27:19-73. The text is reprinted in Gardiner’s *Ramesside Administrative Documents*. Oxford, 1948.

³ Dimitri Meeks, *Le grand texte des donations au temple d'Edfou*. Cairo, 1972.

have added considerable value to the edition.⁴ The mid-20th Dynasty is well known for its social and economic problems, reflected among inter alia in the high price of grain at times. No hint of unrest may be found in the papyrus—does this indicate business as usual, or does an account such as we have here reflect unusual, that is to say stressful circumstances? The document certainly reflects the economic and geographic reach of the great temple of Amun at Karnak, and it hints also at the extensive social networks, and methods of control, involved in the storage and movement of grain, used as wages as well as basic food supply.

This is an important edition, and we should be grateful to Professor Janssen for bringing both halves of the text together in this superbly produced volume. Janssen's hesitation to interpret will, I hope, be offset by discussion among those interested in the pharaonic economy, and will provide some motivation for Egyptologists to move beyond the "primitivist-modernist" debate that has become sterile in most historical circles now.

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⁴ For a good summary of the structure of the New Kingdom temple economy, I recommend Ben Haring, *Divine Households. Administrative and economic aspects of the new Kingdom royal memorial temples in western Thebes*. Leiden, 1997.