

# Re-examining “the Book” through Ancient Egyptian Tomb Walls Une analyse des murs des tombes de l’Égypte ancienne pour réexaminer le livre

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## Article abstract

This article investigates how the seminal focus placed on portability as the defining characteristic of the book is erroneous and misguided. Based on Western concepts and early-modern bias that ultimately equates codex to book, the notion of portability is inapplicable to all book cultures and deserves re-examination. By redefining the meaning of the book to be an idea, an idea that can then be transposed textually and/or pictorially onto a substrate, scholars can come to understand how in ancient Egypt wall inscriptions and art were considered books, and how stone was a primary and fundamental book medium. Using Western, modern, and even global examples to explain how the book in its original state is a metaphysical entity, the notion of the book as object is in turn discarded because defining the book by its medium causes numerous restrictions – the object is not the book, merely its carrier. The importance of physical portability therefore becomes replaced in favour of metaphysical portability and its various implications. By using ancient Egyptian tomb walls as a case study, the meaning and boundaries placed on the book in book studies will be reframed and redefined by drawing Egyptian cultural practices, literature, ideologies, and the use of stone to establish examples of non-portable books. Any discussion of ancient book cultures primarily remains focused on papyrus or clay tablets (i.e., portable materials), a focus that skews the reality of ancient book cultures and gives rise to bias due to the neglect of other mediums that were far more important for ideological purposes. Egyptian book culture was, in fact, more than papyrus; a variety of materials were used as substrates, not all of which were portable in the conventional sense, but neither their use nor their significance to ancient Egyptian society should be dismissed.

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# Re-examining “the Book” through Ancient Egyptian Tomb Walls

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## *Abstract*

This article investigates how the seminal focus placed on portability as the defining characteristic of the book is erroneous and misguided. Based on Western concepts and early-modern bias that ultimately equates codex to book, the notion of portability is inapplicable to all book cultures and deserves re-examination. By redefining the meaning of the book to be an idea, an idea that can then be transposed textually and/or pictorially onto a substrate, scholars can come to understand how in ancient Egypt wall inscriptions and art were considered books, and how stone was a primary and fundamental book medium. Using Western, modern, and even global examples to explain how the book in its original state is a metaphysical entity, the notion of the book as object is in turn discarded because defining the book by its medium causes numerous restrictions – the object is not the book, merely its carrier. The importance of physical portability therefore becomes replaced in favour of metaphysical portability and its various implications. By using ancient Egyptian tomb walls as a case study, the meaning and boundaries placed on the book in book studies will be reframed and redefined by drawing Egyptian cultural practices, literature, ideologies, and the use of stone to establish examples of non-portable books. Any discussion of ancient book cultures primarily remains focused

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### *Résumé*

Cet article vise à examiner la nature erronée et malavisée de l'accent mis sur la portabilité en tant que caractéristique fondamentale du livre. La notion de la portabilité, étant principalement fondée sur des concepts occidentaux ainsi que les biais de l'époque moderne, ne s'applique pas à toutes les cultures du livre, et mérite donc d'être réexaminée. En redéfinissant la notion du livre afin de la transformer en idée qui peut ensuite être transposée textuellement et picturalement sur un nouveau substrat, les chercheur·euse·s arriveront à comprendre comment les inscriptions et les arts muraux des tombes de l'Égypte ancienne étaient considérés comme des livres, et également comment la pierre était un médium livresque élémentaire et fondamental. À l'aide d'exemples occidentaux, modernes, et même mondiaux, nous cherchons à expliquer comment le livre dans son état original constitue une entité métaphysique. Par conséquent, la présente notion du livre en tant qu'objet est à son tour remise en question, puisque la définition du livre par son médium entraîne de nombreuses restrictions — autrement dit, l'objet lui-même n'est pas le livre, mais simplement son vecteur. L'importance de la portabilité physique est donc remplacée en faveur d'une portabilité métaphysique, y compris ses divers enjeux. En nous fondant sur les murs des tombes de l'Égypte ancienne comme étude de cas, nous souhaitons contextualiser et redéfinir le sens et les limites du livre en examinant la littérature et les idéologies égyptiennes, ainsi que l'utilisation fréquente de la pierre, pour

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établir des exemples de livres non portables. Étant donné que les cultures du livre anciennes sont rarement discutées, et si elles le sont, l'accent reste souvent sur les papyrus ou les tablettes d'argile (c'est-à-dire des médiums portables), cette lacune fausse à son tour la réalité des cultures du livre anciennes, entraînant ainsi un biais par l'omission d'autres médiums considérés comme étant plus importants à des fins idéologiques. La culture du livre égyptienne comprenait bien plus que le papyrus — une grande variété de matériaux servaient de substrats, et si plusieurs d'entre eux n'étaient pas portables au sens conventionnel, ce fait ne devrait pas réfuter leur utilisation ni leur importance à la société de l'Égypte ancienne.

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Inscribing upon stone was a primary medium of communication in ancient Egypt, not just among humans but with the divine. Due to the long-standing practice of commemorating the King and the gods via stone inscriptions and art, a practice which later extended to the elite, certain Egyptian literary genres only appear on monumental stone architecture. Tomb walls, which contain written and visual language that work together to produce either an autobiography of the owner or important religious texts reserved for royal use, serve as one important example. Since the Fifth Dynasty (c. 2494–2345 BCE), stone was used as a substrate for private and funerary literary works, effectively making it a book medium. In the field of book history, however, a fundamental focus has been placed on portability as the defining characteristic of the book: if it is not inscribed upon a mobile substrate, it is not a book. Current scholarship clearly situates the book as a portable carrier of information; and this belief, in turn, has led to the misguided conception and argument that stone inscriptions cannot be considered books due to their immobility.

The notion of portability is ultimately rooted in Western bias and early modern constructs, and is thus inapplicable to every culture throughout

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history. Due to a lack of interdisciplinary communication, many are unaware of one important culture that serves as a counterargument to this synthesis of portability and the book, namely that of ancient Egypt. Using Egypt’s ancient past as a case study, this article reframes and redefines the meanings and boundaries imposed upon the book in book-historical discourse by drawing on ancient Egyptian scribal practices, literature, ideologies, and the use of stone to establish examples of non-portable books. It also seeks to redefine the meaning of portability, rejecting the physical sense of the term while acknowledging its metaphysical aspects, as information from stone inscriptions and art is mobilized through human interaction; and, according to ancient Egyptian belief, as books inscribed upon tomb walls figuratively followed their owner’s spirit into the underworld.

### *Looking to Book History and Concepts of the Book*

One of the most important (and most vexing) questions arising in book-historical discourse is “What is a book?” The common definition, as shaped by European notions extending back to Late Antiquity (c. 200–700 CE), is folia, containing text, which are bound together and nominally covered by various hard or soft materials.<sup>1</sup> Within the interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary nature of book history, this definition might be ideal for certain book cultures (i.e., cultures that produced codices), but it is not appropriate for all. A prime example is the digital book: eBooks and audiobooks are not tangible objects and thus cannot be included under definitions based on materiality. Recent book history scholarship, which recognizes the importance of examining the global network of the book,<sup>2</sup> has expanded the definition of the book to acknowledge other mediums

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<sup>1</sup> Neil Fraistat and Julia Flanders, editors, *The Cambridge Companion to Textual Scholarship* (Cambridge University Press, 2013), 194.

<sup>2</sup> See Michael F. Suarez and H.R. Woudhuysen, editors, *The Book: A Global History* (Oxford University Press, 2013). For a global examination of the book in the early modern period, in particular, see Elleke Boehmer, Rouven Kunstmann, Priyasha Mukhopadhyay, and Asha Rogers, editors, *The Global Histories of Books: Methods and Practices* (Springer International Publishing, 2017).

outside the norms of parchment and paper (e.g., clay, papyrus, bark, palm leaves, bamboo, etc.), but the definition still remains limited in scope, on account of a continued focus upon mediums that take codex form – subsequently resulting in the focus on portability. Robert Escarpit points out that, “when we hold a book in our hands [today], all we hold is the paper: the *book* is elsewhere.”<sup>3</sup> Escarpit thus situates the book as an idea, an idea that is transposed, as text or image, onto a medium. With this, it must be asserted that it is not the material support that is the book, as Jessica Brantley believes;<sup>4</sup> it is the notions that are conveyed, textually and/or pictorially, on the material support. Alexandra Gillespie mentions that book historians and literary scholars “perceive books as compounds of both physical materials and disembodied ideas ... predisposed to recognize that a literary text can be a thing *and* an idea, that a book can be an object independent from, and also the subject of, discursive reasoning.”<sup>5</sup> Although it is commonplace, in the West, for the book to mean the written text or the physical object that contains it,<sup>6</sup> the latter notion must be discarded as its focus upon portable, codex-style mediums imposes numerous restrictions and results in a skewed and biased view of global book history, since such views harken back to Roman times and the beginning of Christianity. Brian Cummings crucially states that the book “is not reducible to an object”;<sup>7</sup> and though understanding the physical form of the book is certainly a topic for scholarly analysis, as is apparent in bibliographic studies, materiality neither defines nor forms the book. To consider all papyri to be books simply because papyrus was the common material for rendering text in ancient Egypt is erroneous and misleading; therefore, I am not arguing that the stone comprises the book,

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<sup>3</sup> Robert Escarpit quoted in Leslie Howsam, editor, *The Cambridge Companion to the History of the Book* (Cambridge University Press, 2014), 54.

<sup>4</sup> Amaranth Borsuk, *The Book* (MIT Press, 2018), 15.

<sup>5</sup> Alexandra Gillespie and Deidre Lynch, editors, *The Unfinished Book* (Oxford University Press, 2021), 2.

<sup>6</sup> David Pearson, “Book (1),” *The Oxford Companion to the Book*, edited by Michael F. Suarez and H.R. Woudhuysen (Oxford University Press, 2010).

<sup>7</sup> Gillespie and Lynch, 21.

but that it is merely a book medium. It is the ideas relayed by the texts and/or artworks inscribed on the stone that are the book.

Of course, the notion of the book as idea is by no means novel. The twentieth-century French philosopher Jacques Derrida believed “that ‘the book’ is not an object ... but a metaphor and a paradox, a troubling *Doppelgänger* for knowledge or agency, which undermines or even cancels the metaphysics of presence (ordinarily) presupposed to constitute writing as a secondary or etiolated version of the speaking subject.”<sup>8</sup> Amaranth Borsuk dedicates an entire chapter to the concept of the book as idea;<sup>9</sup> however, she unfortunately interweaves this notion with that of the book as object. There is a fine line between the notions of the book object and the book as object. The former demonstrates that the book can take possession of an object through a physical state without being the object itself; and thus, the latter must be discarded in favour of the former if we are to engage with either ancient Egyptian book culture or with ancient book culture more generally. Cummings likewise interweaves various notions related to the book (e.g., object, contents, metaphor, technology, machine) to demonstrate its dynamic nature; but, in so doing, he contradicts himself, as he argues “that a book is, first and foremost, a physical object” and “a book is a concept rather than a particular thing, a concept that is associated with forms that range from Chinese stelae to smartphones.”<sup>10</sup> In attempting to reconcile the question “What is a book?” by providing a diverse, non-restrictive response, Cummings suggests various entities for the book rather than viewing it as a single entity that can possess various components: the book can become an object (although it is not one innately), which then renders its ideas through writing; the book is a metaphor for its contents; the book may be a technology or a machine via the material selected to be its object form. But each of these aspects of the book is rendered only through the book’s

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<sup>8</sup> Gillespie and Lynch, 25.

<sup>9</sup> See Borsuk, 111–95.

<sup>10</sup> Gillespie and Lynch, 20–21.



physical form, and therefore none of them, individually, comprise the book itself, but merely its various (potential) components. Although this is a challenging and complex question due to modern predispositions toward the book, we must realize that it is neither a question of idea versus object nor of either-or. Ideas are commonly relayed through objects – the latter being subjugated to the former rather than vice versa – and therefore the question becomes “What forms can ideas take?”

Those engaged in the field of library science – in particular librarians who deal with cataloguing – will recognize the concept of the book as idea in the entities *work* and *expression* in Group 1 of the Functional Requirements for Bibliographic Records (FRBR). As defined by the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA), “the entities defined as *work* (a distinct intellectual or artistic creation) and *expression* (the intellectual or artistic realization of a work) reflect intellectual or artistic content. The entities defined as *manifestation* (the physical embodiment of an expression of a work) and *item* (a single exemplar of a manifestation), on the other hand, reflect physical form.”<sup>11</sup> Upon seeing the contrast between the former two metaphysical entities and the latter two physical entities, one might deduce that FRBR reflects the Western, dualistic conception of the book as both text and object; in fact, this bibliographic model supports my argument in favour of differentiating and separating the book from its medium. A work is realized through its metaphysical expression, which is physically embodied in its manifestation and then exemplified by its item;<sup>12</sup> but a manifestation can take on any physical form, whether through text, image, code, or sound, and although an item can take only a single form, equivalent to that of a version (for manuscripts) or edition (for printed books), not every version/edition of the same work has the same materiality.

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<sup>11</sup> IFLA Study Group on the Functional Requirements for Bibliographic Records, *Functional Requirements for Bibliographic Records: Final Report* (K.G. Saur, 1998), 13.

<sup>12</sup> IFLA Study Group on the Functional Requirements for Bibliographic Records, 14.



A famous and global manuscript example is the *Alexander Romance*, a work detailing the life and achievements of Alexander the Great. Its expression (i.e., intellectual realization) can be any of the numerous expansions, revisions, translations, and even verbal retellings conceived throughout Late Antiquity, the Middle Ages, and the Renaissance. Examples of the manifestation (i.e., physical embodiment) of the *Alexander Romance* could be Walter of Châtillon’s *Alexandreis* or the *Libro de Alexandre*, while examples of its item (i.e., single exemplar) can be the British Museum’s Harley MS 4979 parchment codex, written in Old French, or the Walters Art Museum’s paper manuscript W.664, written in Arabic. Through the FRBR model, it becomes clear that the book is neither the parchment codex nor the paper codex, not even the Old French or Arabic texts. The book is the intellectual work known as the *Alexander Romance*. Of course, I am not arguing that the book is devoid of material form and, thus, that physical examination should be disregarded; rather, I am suggesting that the material form itself cannot solely be considered the book because it is merely its manifestation, not its innate creation. Clearly, even a modern bibliographic system such as FRBR challenges both the Western practice of equating book with object and the associated emphasis on portability, and demonstrates such beliefs to be ill-conceived because the object, its physicality, is viewed only as an aspect of the work rather than the work itself. The FRBR concepts may likewise be applied to our understanding of ancient Egyptian books, among many other misunderstood book cultures, reconciling the use of unconventional substrates, as this fundamental global cataloguing model aids in explaining the difference between the book and the book medium by placing it in a bibliographic perspective. As such, the book-as-object concept should be revised to the *book medium as object* and the *book as idea* in order to be applicable to all cultures, past and present.

It is not surprising that the idea of portability, as a determinative for the book, dominates the field of book history, since the field has been dominated by Western book cultures. Gillespie points out that the book

is, unfortunately, “a cornerstone of a civilization built ... upon the myth of Western inventiveness – the Roman alphabet, the Christian codex, German moveable type, American electronic media”<sup>13</sup> – in turn creating a bias that still affects conceptions of the book in modern scholarship. Borsuk describes the book as data storage that is portable,<sup>14</sup> while Sydney Shep argues that “the material form of the book is a fundamentally portable communication technology.”<sup>15</sup> What is surprising is that even scholars specializing in ancient cultures have fallen victim to Western bias and the requirement of portability. Assyriologist Eleanor Robson, for example, surmises that books are portable, durable, and replicable means of documenting and transmitting information and language;<sup>16</sup> when, contrarily, certain Sumerian and Akkadian literary works are found in immobile contexts.<sup>17</sup> It is curious that although portability is a Western notion, when looking at the history of the book in medieval Europe, the emphasis on portability is problematic and illogical considering the many missal codices, such as the Book of Kells or the Codex Gigas (see figure 1), that are not functionally portable due to their size and weight;<sup>18</sup> the fact that sacred manuscripts were, first and foremost, objects of veneration and were not meant to be portable;<sup>19</sup> and the practice, in ecclesiastical and academic libraries, of chaining books to lecterns, effectively immobilizing them.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Gillespie and Lynch, 3.

<sup>14</sup> Borsuk, 1.

<sup>15</sup> Howsam, 54.

<sup>16</sup> Eleanor Robson, “The Ancient World,” *The Oxford Illustrated History of the Book*, edited by James Raven (Oxford University Press, 2020), 28.

<sup>17</sup> See, for example, *The Building of Ningirsu’s Temple* (also known as the Cylinders of Gudea), which specifically remained in the temple complex of Girsu (Tell Telloh), and the *Annals of Ashurnasirpal II*, inscribed on the walls of the Northwest Palace in Kalhu (Nimrud). See Jeremy Black, Graham Cunningham, Eleanor Robson, and Gábor Zólyomi, translators, *The Literature of Ancient Sumer* (Oxford University Press, 2004); and Alan Lenzi, *An Introduction to Akkadian Literature: Contexts and Content* (Eisenbrauns, an imprint of Penn State University Press, 2019).

<sup>18</sup> Borsuk, 81–82.

<sup>19</sup> Simon Eliot and Jonathan Rose, editors, *A Companion to the History of the Book*, 2nd edition (Wiley-Blackwell, 2020), 214–15.

<sup>20</sup> Howsam, 17.



Figure 1. The Codex Gigas weighs 75 kilograms and has 310 parchment leaves, each of them 89 centimetres high and 49 centimetres wide. It is believed to be the world's largest preserved medieval manuscript. Photograph by B. Adolphson, courtesy National Library of Sweden, Stockholm.

Thomas Vogler, another “mobilst,” claims that, “although the history of writing might have to include anything from the cave walls of Lascaux to ancient stelae ... our definition of the book must be narrowed to records in portable form.”<sup>21</sup> This assertion, with its attendant restrictions, yields no merit, given that the Lascaux cave paintings can certainly be viewed as Palaeolithic picture books due to the fact that a narrative is clearly being evoked. If we accept a definition of book art wherein “books that are themselves works of art, in which imagery, text, materials ... respond to cultural metaphors of the book,”<sup>22</sup> then the Lascaux cave paintings certainly conform to that definition. To put the implausibility of portability into a global perspective, Cai Guo-Qiang cites an example, from China, of a permanent natural feature that is considered a book

<sup>21</sup> Borsuk, 8.

<sup>22</sup> Eliot and Rose, 661.

medium: a mountain in Quanzhou inscribed with maritime stories, including historical accounts of the mariner Zheng He’s famous travels.<sup>23</sup> It becomes imperative, therefore, that the seminal notion of physical portability be discarded: although it can be considered an aspect of the book, it cannot be deemed a defining or mandatory characteristic.

Although Robson focuses on portability, she does provide an important interpretation of the book that is readily applicable to ancient cultures: the book is “a means of recording and transmitting in writing a culture’s intellectual traditions,”<sup>24</sup> in which its “primary function ... is to convey information, ideas, or language through formalized notation.”<sup>25</sup> Since this is a non-restrictive definition that focuses on content, it allows for any material containing writing to be a book medium – including stone. Robson’s explanation should be taken one step further, however, to include pictorial renderings of a culture’s intellectual traditions. A book need not be restricted solely to text,<sup>26</sup> as art alone (i.e., visual narratives) may comprise a book’s physical make-up. This notion differs from current scholarship’s focus on the book, as an object, being a work of art,<sup>27</sup> rather than focusing on (and accepting) the visual narrative of an artwork as the book (e.g., the stories of battles and conquests illustrated on Roman reliefs; the mythical stories illustrated on Greek and Mayan pottery; the biblical, hagiographic, and Classical stories depicted in Renaissance paintings).<sup>28</sup> Robson must also explain the style of notation she refers to

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<sup>23</sup> Borsuk, 34.

<sup>24</sup> Eliot and Rose, 173.

<sup>25</sup> Robson, 28.

<sup>26</sup> Another oversight in book history, which recent research in the field is attempting to amend. See Eliot and Rose, 661–76; Gillespie and Lynch, 183–200.

<sup>27</sup> This is primarily seen with the topic of artists’ books or bookishness because the original focus of such art practices (which is still carried out today) was to consider the ways in which the codex could be rendered as an artistic form. See Johanna Drucker, “The Self-Conscious Codex: Artists’ Books and Electronic Media,” *SubStance* vol. 82, 1997, p. 94; part 2 of Viola Hildebrand-Schat, Christoph Benjamin Schulz, and Katarzyna Bazarnik, editors, *Refresh the Book: On the Hybrid Nature of the Book in the Age of Electronic Publishing* (Leiden: Brill, 2021), 311–478; Alan Loney, *In Search of the Book as a Work of Art* (Newtown, Australia: Opifex, 2019); Jessica Pressman, *Bookishness: Loving Books in a Digital Age* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020).

<sup>28</sup> For related scholarship, see David Petrain, *Homer in Stone: The Tabulae Iliacae in Their Roman Context* (Cambridge University Press, 2014); Luca Giuliani, *Image and Myth: A History of Pictorial Narration in*

in her definition because naturally not everything that is written down constitutes a book. Literary studies is one of the most influential disciplines in book history due to its focus on text to understand the book; and, although it is important that the field’s current push is toward bibliography and materiality, for understanding the physical nature of books,<sup>29</sup> it is mostly codex forms that are being examined, erroneously associating book and codex. The Domesday Book, held in the UK National Archives, is currently considered a book because at some point it had been bound together, which created a codex; but its original form was individual documents pertaining to survey reports of England from the eleventh century CE. With regard to Egypt, and to the ancient Near East more broadly, since a variety of book mediums were used – none of them bound forms – one must return to literary analysis to determine what can be regarded as a book based on emic cultural perspectives.

Focusing on written or pictorial language is important for distinguishing literary works (i.e., narratives of prose and/or verse, or pictorial narratives), and thus books, from administrative documents, and thus records. Forming such stark divisions, however, is not always pragmatic in Egyptology due to the common appearance of intertextuality in ancient Egyptian writing. Some Egyptologists believe that from an archaeological standpoint, assemblages of legal, epistolary, or administrative texts are archival records, whereas scholarly works of a cultic, scientific, or tale-like nature are books, since they are found in library assemblages;<sup>30</sup> however, the reality is that the lines are often blurred because some literary works contain legal or administrative components

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*Greek Art*, translated by Joe O’Donnell (University of Chicago Press, 2013); James A. Doyle, “Creation Narratives on Ancient Maya Codex-Style Ceramics in the Metropolitan Museum,” *Metropolitan Museum Journal*, vol. 51, no. 1, 2016, pp. 42–63; Keith Christiansen, *Early Renaissance Narrative Painting in Italy* (Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1983).

<sup>29</sup> Simone Murray, *Introduction to Contemporary Print Culture: Books as Media* (Routledge, 2021), 3–4.

<sup>30</sup> Eva Cancik-Kirschbaum und Jochem Kahl, *Erste Philologien: Archäologie einer Disziplin vom Tigris bis zum Nil* (Mohr Siebeck, 2018), 104–12; Kim Ryholt, “Libraries in Ancient Egypt,” *Ancient Libraries*, edited by Jason König, Katerina Oikonomopoulou, and Greg Woolf (Cambridge University Press, 2013), 23–37; and Kerry Webb, “‘The House of Books’: Libraries and Archives in Ancient Egypt,” *Libri*, vol. 63, 2013, p. 26.



while certain types of letters represent a literary genre.<sup>31</sup> What is clear, though, is the requirement of some literary structure to differentiate a work from a mere record. Although books may contain archival-like components with records, a prime example being annals, emphasis must be placed upon whether or not the work, overall, contains literary components in order to distinguish it from a document. Therefore, considering a work as a book is not solely about the transmission of information (i.e., content), but also the style of the transmission (i.e., composition). As a result, the concept of the book should not be defined by the form of the medium and its portability, not even simply by its content, but by whether it is or was considered to be literature by the culture in which it was created. In reality, Robson’s interpretation of the book is identical to the definition of literature in Egyptology – the written expression of cultural discourse used for codification and imagination<sup>32</sup> – meaning that *book* can be another term for literature. Simone Murray believes that equating book with literature is a blind spot in book history that overlooks nonfiction;<sup>33</sup> however, if we are using the Egyptological understanding of literature, rather than focusing on artistic merit or canons as is common in many Western belief systems, then literature certainly includes nonfiction.

### *Ancient Book Culture and Egyptology*

Few studies exist on ancient book culture. Sometimes one finds an overarching chapter, such as Robson’s, which discusses the various

<sup>31</sup> Examples include the *Book of the Temple*, which consists of rules and regulations governing the daily operation of temples; daybooks (journals), which record daily accounts and events in an annalistic format; and the literary genre of letters to the dead. See Joachim Friedrich Quack, “Translating the Realities of Cult: The Case of the *Book of the Temple*,” *Greco-Egyptian Interactions: Literature, Translation, and Culture, 500 BCE–300 CE*, edited by Ian Rutherford (Oxford University Press, 2016), 267–86; Donald B. Redford, *Pharaonic King-Lists, Annals and Day-Books: A Contribution to the Study of the Egyptian Sense of History* (Benben Publications, 1986); and the section “Lettres aux morts” of Bernard Mathieu, *La littérature de l’Égypte ancienne I: Ancien Empire et Première Période intermédiaire* (Belles Lettres, 2021).

<sup>32</sup> Miriam Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature* (University of California Press, 2019), 19–20.

<sup>33</sup> Murray, 46.

materials commonly used in ancient times, but provides little critical analysis. At the other extreme, one encounters chapters dedicated to a specific substrate, such as clay or papyrus,<sup>34</sup> and which thus provides a skewed and selective view of an ancient civilization’s book culture. What is most shocking is that Western notions of the book continue to imbue analysis of ancient subject matter, causing scholars to ignore the fact that in order to understand non-Western and ancient cultures, an emic approach must be taken so as to avoid bias. My research therefore relies heavily upon Egyptological scholarship to provide an introductory understanding, for the non-Egyptologist, of Egyptian cultural practices, ideologies, literature, and stone-working. My research remains focused on early Egyptian literature and book culture, and thus only the beginnings of stone use, since the history of Egyptian stone inscriptions alone is too vast to cover in one article, much less the history of Egyptian literature and its materiality.<sup>35</sup>

Although I am relying on Egyptological discourse, I must admit the subject of the history of the book is underrepresented in the field of Egyptology. Just as the focus on literary analysis dominates the field of book history, Egyptologists likewise predominately focus on the literature (e.g., compositional style, semantic/lexical/grammatical/linguistic analysis, sociocultural or historical importance, cross-cultural comparisons) rather than the dynamic interaction between the book and its medium.<sup>36</sup> To an Egyptologist, it is standard knowledge that stone was

<sup>34</sup> See Borsuk, 12–18; Eliot and Rose, 173–202; and Keith Houston, *The Book: A Cover-to-Cover Exploration of the Most Powerful Object of Our Time* (W.W. Norton, 2016), 3–17, 241–60.

<sup>35</sup> For a general overview of Egyptian literature, see Roland Enmarch and Verena M. Lepper, editors, *Ancient Egyptian Literature: Theory and Practice* (published for the British Academy by Oxford University Press, 2013); Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*; and William Kelly Simpson, editor, *The Literature of Ancient Egypt: An Anthology of Stories, Instructions, Stelae, Autobiographies, and Poetry*, 3rd edition (Yale University Press, 2003).

<sup>36</sup> There are instances when the materiality of Pharaonic books is briefly touched upon, particularly in scholarship regarding libraries and on scribal or writing practices. For some initial sources, see Günter Burkard, “Bibliotheken im Alten Ägypten,” *Bibliothek Forschung und Praxis*, vol. 4, no. 2, 1980, pp. 79–110; Cancik-Kirschbaum and Kahl, 19–22; Musée Royal de Mariemont, *Artisans de l’Égypte Ancienne* (Le Musée, 1981); Chloé Ragazzoli, *Scribes: Les artisans du texte en Égypte ancienne (1550–1000)* (Belles Lettres, 2019), 35–96; and Katharina Zinn, “Bibliotheken, Archive und Erinnerungskultur im Alten Ägypten: Eine Kulturhistorische Rekonstruktion” (PhD diss.,



used as a primary writing surface for royalty and the elite (as well as for addressing the divine), since it is discussed in literary studies when explaining the provenance of texts; however, such is the extent of the discussion. No Egyptological scholarship is, in fact, dedicated to stone as a book carrier, as one would find on the use of parchment or paper in book history, and there is little dedicated scholarship on Egyptian book mediums (as opposed to writing mediums) in general, except for papyrus. Stone is predominately explored in the context of archaeology and art; and, where it is analyzed as a writing surface, as primarily seen in epigraphical or palaeographical studies,<sup>37</sup> it is not discussed in relation to the use of stone as a book medium, but in terms of examining scripts, translations (of content), and the practices behind the recording of the text and/or art – very similar to bibliographical studies, but without any acknowledgment of stone as a medium for books. I believe that it is this lack of awareness on the Egyptological end that has subsequently caused non-Egyptologists to be uninformed about the realities of books in ancient Egypt, leading to the misconception of portability as being universally applicable to the book, the discrediting of wall inscriptions and misunderstanding of the use of stone.

Another issue in Egyptology is the primary focus on papyrus; indeed, scholars of the twentieth century who did address the topic of book production in ancient Egypt concentrated solely on papyrus.<sup>38</sup> With examinations of this material leading to its own scientific discipline – papyrology – it inevitably misled non-Egyptologists to believe that this substrate comprised the extent of Egyptian book culture. Even papyrologists, many of whom are classicists rather than Egyptologists, thus causing the field to succumb to Western bias, believe there were only

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Universität Leipzig, 2013). Of course, there is more scholarship on books in Greco-Roman Egypt (especially by classicists) and late antique Egypt (especially by Coptologists).

<sup>37</sup> See, for example, Vanessa Davies and Dimitri Laboury, editors, *The Oxford Handbook of Egyptian Epigraphy and Palaeography* (Oxford University Press, 2020).

<sup>38</sup> See Jaroslav Černý, *Paper and Books in Ancient Egypt: An Inaugural Lecture Delivered at University College, London, 29 May, 1947* (published for University College by H.K. Lewis, 1952); Muhammad Ahmad Husayn, *Vom Papyrus zum Codex: Der Beitrag Ägyptens zur Buchkultur* (Edition Leipzig, 1970).

two types of books in antiquity – the scroll and the codex<sup>39</sup> – fuelling even further the notion of the book as object by applying it to ancient studies. Only recently has the materiality of writing shifted to acknowledging other fundamental substrates, such as ostraca;<sup>40</sup> but much more work needs to be done if Egyptologists are to engage in the examination of Egyptian book culture directly and holistically. Lexically, Egyptologists nominally use the term *texts* instead of *books* when referring to literary works, although it is certainly not uncommon to find the latter in scholarship.<sup>41</sup> This again demonstrates an avoidance of the topic in the field, as the subject instead becomes textual material culture in lieu of book culture – topics that are not one and the same: the former is highly restrictive with regard to the book and naturally comes to exclude pictorial narratives or works in which both text and art are fundamental to the book’s physical manifestation (e.g., the Book of the Dead, Netherworld Books). It is necessary, however, to point out that when Egyptologists use the term *book* in relation to an ancient literary work, they are not referring to the medium on which it appears but to its composition (i.e., the content) because a single type of book can appear in numerous forms and on numerous substrates throughout its history.<sup>42</sup> In so doing, Egyptologists

<sup>39</sup> Adam Bülow-Jacobsen, “Writing Materials in the Ancient World,” *The Oxford Handbook of Papyrology*, edited by Roger S. Bagnall (Oxford University Press, 2011), 18–25.

<sup>40</sup> See Clementina Caputo and Julia Lougovaya, editors, *Using Ostraca in the Ancient World: New Discoveries and Methodologies* (De Gruyter, 2020); Fredrik Hagen, *Ostraca from the Temple of Millions of Years of Thutmose III* (Brill, 2021); F.A.J. Hoogendijk and Steffie van Gompel, editors, *The Materiality of Texts from Ancient Egypt: New Approaches to the Study of Textual Material from the Early Pharaonic to the Late Antique Period* (Brill, 2018); and Jacques Pelegrin, Guillemette Andreu-Lanoë, et Christine Pariselle, “La production des ostraca de calcaire dans la région thébaine. Etude préliminaire,” *Bulletin de l’Institut français d’archéologie orientale*, vol. 115, 2016, pp. 325–52.

<sup>41</sup> It is found designating certain literary works (e.g., the Book of Two Ways, the Book of Kemyt, the Book of the Dead, Netherworld Books, the Books of the Sky, the Book of the Heavenly Cow, dream books, etc.) and used in modern publications. For examples of the latter, see Christopher Eyre, *Use of Documents in Pharaonic Egypt* (Oxford University Press, 2013), 16–54; Erik Hornung, *The Ancient Egyptian Books of the Afterlife* (Cornell University Press, 1999); and Anthony John Spalinger, *The Books behind the Masks: Sources of Warfare Leadership in Ancient Egypt* (Brill, 2021).

<sup>42</sup> A primary example is the Book of the Dead, a compilation of funerary spells with vignettes nominally appearing on papyrus that were used to guide the deceased through the underworld and into the afterlife. Over the course of 1,500 years, however, this book also appeared on a variety of objects made of faience, wood, cartonnage (layers of linen and/or papyrus with painted plaster), fine clay, metal, and stone, on tomb walls, and on linen mummy wrappings. See Foy Scalf, editor,

are therefore unconsciously agreeing and engaging with the concept of the book as idea. Nevertheless, because there is little communication between Egyptologists and book historians, and when Egyptologists themselves hesitate to address the subject explicitly, it becomes understandable, in part, why book historians disregard stone and its inscriptions in book studies. At the same time, the hesitation on Egyptologists' part is also understandable as it likely arose out of the need to avoid Western implications attendant upon the term *book*. Nonetheless, taking standard Egyptological knowledge for granted has consequently caused a gap in scholarship and skewed understanding of the history of the book. An attempt to syncretize these two disciplines, therefore, is a primary goal, as Egyptology neglects the study of book history and the field of book history lacks a holistic understanding of ancient Egyptian book culture.

It is unquestionable that the codex definition of the book that dominates book-historical discourse is inappropriate and inaccurate when examining ancient Egyptian books because the Egyptians had access to very different materials compared to cultures that were able to create codices. The Egyptian term commonly used to refer to a book was *mdꜥt*, which can refer both to the physical papyrus scroll and to the book that resides upon it; thus, a logogram used to convey this term took the shape of a roll of papyrus (𓏏). Although the use of papyrus was extremely common, to propose that Egyptians viewed the papyrus as the book itself – in a one-to-one correlation and thus an iteration of the idea of book as object – would be misleading and incorrect. Not only was the plant used to create a wide variety of objects (e.g., boats, baskets, sandals, boxes, ropes, mats, etc.), the word *mdꜥt* can also mean *letter* or *document*. Moreover, there were numerous other Egyptian words for designating books, with certain works being ascribed specific terms (e.g., sacred books were called *bꜣw Rꜥ*, commonly translated as “Emanations of Re”), and not all of them

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*Books of the Dead: Becoming God in Ancient Egypt* (Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, 2017).

used the papyrus roll hieroglyph.<sup>43</sup> This demonstrates that Egyptians did associate papyrus as one of the main book mediums since it was a fundamental and common writing surface – clearly evident in scribal practices because it was the norm to write literary works, first, in an office on mobile media (e.g., papyrus, ostraca, leather) to allow for easy transport to remote locations (e.g., tombs) and for direct copying onto stone so as to avoid (grammatical) mistakes<sup>44</sup> – but it certainly was not the only substrate available, based on archaeological evidence. Such an association is also seen among the Greeks, as the ancient Greek term for book is *biblion* (βιβλίον) or *bublion* (βυβλίον), which derives from *búblos* (βῦβλος). Though *búblos* means papyrus, it was also used to refer to the port city of Byblos (*Bῦβλος*), in Lebanon, which was the Greeks’ supplier of papyrus; and, like the Egyptian term for book, *biblion* or *bublion* can also mean tablet, letter, and even writing. The Greeks therefore associated the term *book* with the city that exported their main book medium rather than equating it with papyrus rolls,<sup>45</sup> especially since they did use other substrates (e.g., wax tablets, wooden boards, leather scrolls, stone, etc.).<sup>46</sup>

<sup>43</sup> For a dictionary of Egyptian words relating to the term *book*, see Siegfried Schott, *Bücher und Bibliotheken im Alten Ägypten: Verzeichnis der Buch- und Spruchtitel und der Termini technici* (O. Harrassowitz, 1990). For explanations on other common words for *book*, see Zinn, 80–91.

<sup>44</sup> See Eyre, 286–89; Barbara Lüscher, “Kursivhieroglyphische Ostraka als Textvorlagen: Der (Glücks-) Fall TT 87,” *Ägyptologische “Binsen” – Weisheiten I–II: Neue Forschungen und Methoden der Hieratistik*, bearbeitet von Ursula Verhoeven (Akademie der Wissenschaften und der Literatur, 2015), 85–117; Antonio J. Morales, “From Voice to Papyrus to Wall: Verschriftung and Verschriftlichung in the Old Kingdom Pyramid Texts,” *Understanding Material Text Cultures: A Multidisciplinary View*, edited by Markus Hilgert (De Gruyter, 2016), 72–77; and R.B. Parkinson, “Libraries in Ancient Egypt, c. 2600–1600 BCE,” *Libraries before Alexandria: Ancient Near Eastern Traditions*, edited by Kim Ryholt and Gojko Barjamovic (Oxford University Press, 2019), 115–67.

<sup>45</sup> Cummings mentions that “‘Bible’ is the Greek word for a ‘book,’” thus solidifying the book as object. See Gillespie and Lynch, 20. One must understand the differences, however, between modern Greek and ancient Greek, as well as the derivations between them. The modern Greek word for Bible, *Vivlos* (Βιβλος), derives from the modern Greek word for book, *vivlio* (βιβλίον), which derives from the ancient Greek word for book, *biblion* (βιβλίον), and again ties back to the city providing the material support for the Bible, especially since *Bῦβλος* (Byblos) is lexically similar to *Bιβλος* (Bible). Rather than presupposing the Bible as a physical object, linguistic analysis merely confirms that the Bible is a book and its medium during Late Antiquity likely still came from the Levant.

<sup>46</sup> Bülow-Jacobsen, 3–17.

Other materials employed as book mediums in Egypt included wood, leather, linen, clay, and ostraca (limestone flakes<sup>47</sup> or pottery sherds), as well as stone – the latter being widely overlooked and omitted in scholarship.<sup>48</sup> In Egypt, stone was extensively used as a substrate for literature and art, as evident from temple and tomb walls, stelae, sarcophagi, statues, obelisks, and rocky natural features. Scholars’ refusal to consider wall inscriptions as books solely on account of physical permanence is illogical because stone’s imperishable nature was precisely the main reason for its use.<sup>49</sup> The hieroglyphic script (one of four ancient Egyptian scripts) came to be reserved for monumental and ornamental stone inscriptions, for the purpose of eternally honouring royalty and the divine through ideograms and phonograms,<sup>50</sup> and, as such, became an elite script that required great carving skill. The Egyptians called this script *mdw ntr* (god’s words), which appears to have influenced the ancient Greek term known today, *hierogluphikós* (ἱερογλυφικός), meaning sacred carved writing.<sup>51</sup> The Egyptian writing system was attributed to the divine; therefore, given its association with divinity and the prestige of the hieroglyphic script, the importance of stone as a vehicle for text cannot be understated. There was also an economic practicality attached to stone, as it was one of the most abundant natural resources in Egypt. The Nile River valley is flanked by two deserts, the Western Desert (the Libyan Desert and part of the Sahara), made up of sand and small oases,<sup>52</sup> and

<sup>47</sup> Limestone flakes were just as common as papyrus and many Egyptian literary texts have only survived on this medium. Simpson, 6.

<sup>48</sup> Although it does briefly appear in some book-historical scholarship. See Howsam, 74–77; and Suarez and Woudhuysen, 40.

<sup>49</sup> Howsam, 74. For Egyptian ideologies on the interconnectedness between permanence and stone, see Davies and Laboury, 44–57.

<sup>50</sup> Davies and Laboury, 536–662; David Finkelstein and Alistair McCleery, “From Orality to Literacy,” *An Introduction to Book History*, 2nd edition (Routledge, 2013), 30.

<sup>51</sup> Although hieroglyphs originally were used for economical writings on labels made from bone or ivory and on seals. See Jochem Kahl, *Das System der altägyptischen Hieroglyphenschrift von der 0.–3. Dynastie* (Harrassowitz Verlag, 1994).

<sup>52</sup> There is evidence, however, that the Western Desert contained stone quarries. B.G. Trigger, B.J. Kemp, D. O’Connor, and A.B. Lloyd, *Ancient Egypt: A Social History*, 2nd edition (Cambridge University Press, 2008), 119–20.



the Eastern Desert (the Red Sea Hills), a mountainous region with plentiful stone quarries (see figure 2).



Figure 2. Eastern Desert, Egypt. Source: Wikimedia Commons, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Hurghada\\_desert\\_by\\_Hatem\\_Moushir\\_8.JPG](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Hurghada_desert_by_Hatem_Moushir_8.JPG).

The quarrying of stone in Egypt goes back to the Predynastic Period (prehistoric times), demonstrating that stone-working was part of a long and ancient tradition in Egyptian history and culture, as it was a seminal aspect of their architecture and art.<sup>53</sup>

#### *Looking to Egyptian Literature and Early Literary Works*

To examine Egyptian book culture, a brief discussion of Egyptian literature becomes necessary for explaining why stone inscriptions can be considered as part of the physical rendition of books. When dealing with ancient Egyptian books, it is pertinent, first, to understand that literature from Egypt differs from Western conventions in terms of definitional criteria, styles, and genres. From religious and funerary works to

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<sup>53</sup> For a general overview, see Rosemarie Klemm and Dietrich D. Klemm, *Stones and Quarries in Ancient Egypt* (British Museum Press, 2008).

lamentations (i.e., pessimistic works) to royal texts (i.e., propagandistic works), all are considered to be literature in Egyptology because they belong to one of Egyptians’ three main literary compositional forms: narrative (*ḏd.f* or *ṣḏḏ*), teachings (*ṣbʿyt*), and lyric (*dmʿw* or *šhm ib*).<sup>54</sup> As previously mentioned, intertextuality is a common feature of Egyptian literature, in which texts combine various aspects of prose, verse, and oration from these three literary styles. Many Egyptian literary works also fall under the category of *mdt nfrt*, which refers to works of beautiful speech revered for their aesthetic qualities (comparable to *belles lettres*).<sup>55</sup> Based on what has survived to today, Egyptian literature in its complete and formalized state appears only toward the end of the Old Kingdom, in the Fifth Dynasty, the main source being elite and royal tombs, in which the wall inscriptions and art relay literary works that derive from the private and religious spheres, respectively. In terms of their chronological appearance, the tombs of elite officials are perhaps the most important because it is there that simple writing turned into literature, as the literary genre of autobiography was conceived,<sup>56</sup> and thus the first book.

Autobiography can fall under the narrative or teaching literary styles (sometimes both) due to its reflection of social and political history.<sup>57</sup> Its fundamental purpose is to create a self-portrait of the tomb owner, summing up their positive characteristics and displaying eternally their moral stature. There are two main types of autobiographies: the ideal autobiography, which recounts the virtuous aspects of the deceased to demonstrate that they upheld *mʿt* (cosmic harmony), the governing concept of Egyptian society; and the event biography, which enumerates exceptional events that occurred during the deceased’s career. The

<sup>54</sup> Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, 23.

<sup>55</sup> Simpson, 2–4.

<sup>56</sup> Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, 34.

<sup>57</sup> For more on this genre, see Elizabeth Frood, Andréas Stauder, and Julie Stauder-Porchet, editors, *Ancient Egyptian Biographies: Contexts, Forms, Functions* (Lockwood Press, 2020); Nicole Kloth, *Quellentexte zur ägyptischen Sozialgeschichte I: Autobiographien des Alten Reichs und der Ersten Zwischenzeit* (LIT Verlag, 2018); and Miriam Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Autobiographies Chiefly of the Middle Kingdom: A Study and an Anthology* (Universitätsverlag, 1988).



Inscription of Nefer-sheshem-re, for instance, contains the *catalogue of virtues* which proclaims formulaically the deceased’s morality, while the Autobiography of Weni discusses the deceased’s close relationship with various Egyptian kings, as he ensured the prosperity of the royal house through numerous tasks as a court official.<sup>58</sup> Tombs of the elites also contain pictorial autobiographies – wall paintings or reliefs that illustrate the daily endeavours of the deceased in relation to their status (at times more idealized than realistic, to ensure prosperity in the afterlife).<sup>59</sup> In Egyptology, it is common to discuss the image as text, and vice versa, because the Egyptian image, in reality, is a figurative script with a syntactic structure of subject-verb-object, in which the use of hieroglyphs (being pictorial in nature) in scenes can serve an iconographic purpose rather than solely a written one.<sup>60</sup> It is important to note, though, that these scenes do not always act as pictorial supplements to the contents of the written autobiography; they comprise, nominally, their own, image-based text and relay different or additional information. As a result, the Egyptian autobiography engages in multimodality, a subject commonly discussed in material culture studies – some scholars in book history refer to it as *intermediality*<sup>61</sup> – due to its multiple modes of physical and visual communication with the viewer in an affective nature.<sup>62</sup> A prime example

<sup>58</sup> Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, 49–55.

<sup>59</sup> The only scholarship related to pictorial autobiographies is Froom, Stauder, and Stauder-Porchet, 52–58, 117–56. On Egyptian art as narrative more generally, see G.A. Gaballa, *Narrative in Egyptian Art* (P. Von Zabern, 1976); Fredrik Hagen, John Johnston, Wendy Monkhouse, Kathryn Piquette, John Tait, and Martin Worthington, editors, *Narratives of Egypt and the Ancient Near East: Literary and Linguistic Approaches* (Uitgeverij Peeters en Departement Oosterse Studies, 2011), 269–86; and Melinda K. Hartwig, editor, *A Companion to Ancient Egyptian Art* (Wiley Blackwell, 2015), 98–119, 344–59.

<sup>60</sup> Marina Sartori, “Art as Writing, Writing as Art: Selected Case Studies from New Kingdom Theban Tombs,” *BEC 4: Proceedings of the Fourth British Egyptology Congress*, edited by Carl Graves (Bloomsbury, 2020), 124–34; Roland Tefnin, “Discours et iconicité dans l’art égyptien,” *Gottinger Mitteilungen*, vol. 79, 1984, pp. 55–71.

<sup>61</sup> Michelle Levy and Tom Mole, *The Broadview Introduction to Book History* (Broadview Press, 2017), 101.

<sup>62</sup> For an introduction on the concept, see John Bateman, Janina Wildfeuer, and Tuomo Hiippala, *Multimodality: Foundations, Research and Analysis. A Problem-Oriented Introduction* (De Gruyter Mouton, 2017). For the application of multimodality within Egyptology, see Davies and Laboury, 36–39;

is the Autobiography of Khnumhotep II, from the Twelfth Dynasty (c. 1985–1773 BCE). The work is of the “laudatory event” form of autobiography; it concerns Khnumhotep II’s governorship over the Oryx nome in Upper Egypt (southern Egypt) and the favours provided to him by the King;<sup>63</sup> yet his tomb paintings reflect everyday hunting activities set in the marshes and the desert (see figure 3).

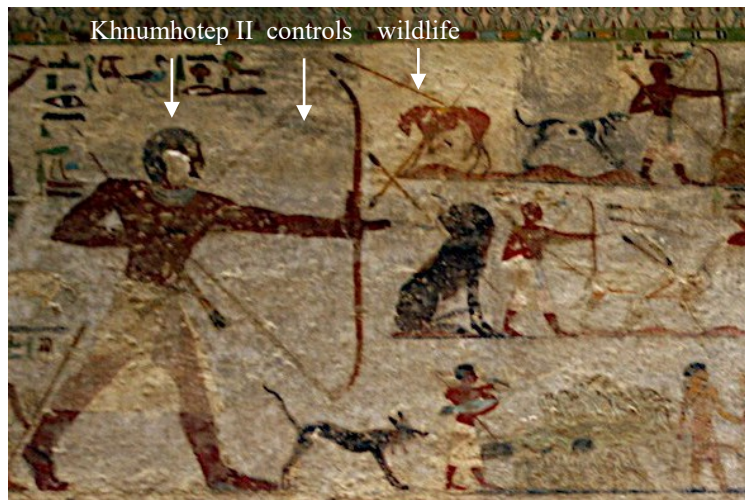


Figure 3. Detail of hunting scene from the tomb of Khnumhotep II, at Beni Hassan. Source: Wikimedia Commons, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:EgypteBH161.jpg>.

The importance of depicting these activities, in contrast to the written material, is to represent the deceased as a champion of *ḥt*, shown to be eternally warding off *isft* (chaos). It is essentially a pictorial version of the ideal autobiography; thus, the tomb inscriptions engage in both types of autobiography at once. The semantic translation of the pictorial scene, following the subject-verb-object structure, reflects the following: Khnumhotep II controls wildlife. Art in private tomb contexts, therefore, can act as its own book form separate from the written autobiography – a

and Silvia Kutscher, “Multimodale graphische Kommunikation im pharaonischen Ägypten: Entwurf einer Analyse-methode,” *Lingua Aegyptia*, vol. 28, 2020, pp. 81–116.

<sup>63</sup> Simpson, 420–24.

picture book that is frequently captioned to guide the reader and explain the scene, just like modern-day comic books. Here, the art evidently moves beyond the subject of text-image relations in book-historical discourse because the ideas and narrative conveyed through the art form the book itself, rather than just being artistic features or mere aspects of the book, as seen with marginalia and miniatures in codicology. Ultimately, it was the individualizing texts and pictures within the tomb – books about one’s life on earth – rather than the tomb itself or the objects within that ensured continued life.

Although autobiographies first appeared in a funerary context, they are not considered funerary literature in Egyptology because such literature is categorized by eschatology, primarily that which deals with guiding the deceased into the next life, to live among the divine.<sup>64</sup> Funerary literature is viewed as a lyric and narrative composition due to its highly performative nature, which involved reciting incantations with verbal force,<sup>65</sup> and it was royal tombs in the shape of pyramids that gave birth to this literary genre and its books. The Pyramid Texts,<sup>66</sup> the first funerary book to be produced, appeared at the end of the Fifth Dynasty,<sup>67</sup> in the burial chambers of King Unas, and later in the tombs of kings and queens throughout the Sixth Dynasty (c. 2345–2181 BCE). This book is, first and

<sup>64</sup> Susanne Bickel and Lucía Díaz-Iglesias Llanos, editors, *Studies in Ancient Egyptian Funerary Literature* (Peeters, 2017), xvi.

<sup>65</sup> Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, 38.

<sup>66</sup> Note that this is a modern title (as with most titles ascribed to funerary books). We do not know what the ancient Egyptians called this particular composition, but we do know that funerary books in general were called *šḥw* (what makes an *akh*). See James P. Allen, *The Ancient Egyptian Pyramid Texts* (SBL Press, 2005), 7–8. It is also interesting to note that, while current scholarship refers to this work as “The Pyramid Texts,” French scholarship of the early twentieth century referred it as “Livres des Pyramides.” See Émile Amélineau, “Un chapitre difficile du ‘Livre des Pyramides,’” *Journal Asiatique*, vol. 1, 1913, pp. 5–98; and Georges Daressy, “Stèle de la XIXe dynastie avec textes du Livre des Pyramides,” *Annales du Service des Antiquités de l’Égypte*, vol. 16, 1916, pp. 57–60.

<sup>67</sup> It is believed that the Pyramid Texts, or at least their prototype, likely appeared at an earlier date, since what has survived already shows a fully formed composition and since recitations and performances of the same nature were already in existence. The master copies would have been produced, collected, and stored in a temple library (either the *pr-nḥ*, or House of Life; or the *pr-mḏt*, or House of Books), either in papyrus, leather, or ostraca, so they could be consulted by priests and composed anew for each pyramid. See Cancik-Kirschbaum and Kahl, 253; Morales, 69–70; and Ryholt, 25.

foremost, a corpus/compilation of spells (also referred to in Egyptology as utterances, incantations, or recitations) designed to guide the deceased royalty into the afterlife and achieve rebirth through divine transfiguration. Its primary use was to be read aloud by the *hry-hbt* (lector-priest)<sup>68</sup> before and during burial, serving as the funerary rituals.<sup>69</sup> Each spell can be seen as corresponding to a chapter in the deceased’s journey and each royal tomb as an edition of the funerary book, the Pyramid Texts, since additions, removals, and modifications were constantly made for later kings and queens according to preference. PT 217,<sup>70</sup> “The Deceased Ascends to Re-Atum,” demonstrates another important aspect of the book: guiding royalty to take their place among the gods and, specifically, to ascend into the sky to join their father Re, the sun god, on his solar bark. The Pyramid Texts, one of the world’s oldest religious works, reveal considerable religious thought in the Old Kingdom and are viewed by some Egyptologists as religious literature because they allude to mythology, theology, cosmology, cosmogony, and cultic associations. As such, funerary literature and religious literature are often used interchangeably, due to the high degree of religion associated with the funerary sphere. With funerary literature appearing on royal tomb walls in northern Egypt, and autobiographies appearing on private tomb walls in southern Egypt, it is clear that stone became a primary book medium used throughout the land to immortalize the dead.

A spell from the Pyramid Text of King Pepi I reinforces the notion of books first taking a non-physical form through intellectual conception, rather than equating books to their substrate. PT 510 states that “Pepi is the scribe of the god’s book, who says what is and who gives rise to what

<sup>68</sup> Male priests who recited spells and hymns at rituals and ceremonies. In this particular instance, such recitations came from papyrus rolls since it served the needs of the lector-priest, whereas inscribing books such as the Pyramid Texts on tomb walls served purely the needs of the deceased by means of eternalization. For a general overview on such priests, see Roger Forshaw, *The Role of the Lector in Ancient Egyptian Society* (Archaeopress, 2014).

<sup>69</sup> Geraldine Pinch, *Egyptian Mythology: A Guide to the Gods, Goddesses, and Traditions of Ancient Egypt* (Oxford University Press, 2004), 10–11.

<sup>70</sup> The numbering of spells is also a modern designation. PT stands for Pyramid Text.

is not,”<sup>71</sup> indicating that the “god’s book” is a metaphysical thing conceived of royal thought (and with divine intervention, since the King is the earthly embodiment of the god Horus) and unfixed to a single substrate, but which can eventually take a physical form through Pepi I’s scribal writings. The Egyptian word for writing was *ṣṣ*, which likewise contains the papyrus roll logogram, but this is not to suggest that the Egyptians only wrote on papyrus because, as previously mentioned, archaeological evidence points to the use of many other substrates; and, moreover, *ṣṣ* can also mean *inscribe* or *paint*. The use of the logogram here again demonstrates that, for Egyptians, writing was nominally associated with the papyrus roll, but not exclusively, since it was an expensive commodity. One must also keep in mind that the hieroglyphic script demanded the use of symbols and phonetic sounds reflective of the word being relayed, leading Egyptians to choose specific signs generally associated with a word for linguistic reasons, but without excluding sociocultural realities. Such realities are not only evident through archaeological investigations, but also via art, as the god of wisdom, Thoth, also the patron deity of scribes, is often shown with a stylus engaged in the act of writing, as though he is literally inscribing onto the medium upon which he is depicted (see figure 4). Moreover, statues of scribes often depict a seated male figure holding either a papyrus roll or a wooden writing board.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Raymond Faulkner, *The Ancient Egyptian Pyramid Texts* (Clarendon Press, 1969), 186.

<sup>72</sup> Brooklyn Museum object no. 49.18 contains the papyrus roll logogram within the hieroglyphic text, but the scribe is shown holding a palette or board, likely made of wood.





Figure 4. Thoth inscribing the cartouche of Seti I onto a leaf of the sacred iśd tree and effectively onto the stone of the temple of Amun, in Karnak. Source: Wikimedia Commons, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Luxor\\_Karnak-Tempel\\_2016-03-21\\_Große\\_Säulenhalle\\_12.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Luxor_Karnak-Tempel_2016-03-21_Große_Säulenhalle_12.jpg).

*What about Metaphysical Portability? Humans, Orality, and Magic*

Given that most scholars are quick to assert that stone inscriptions are anything but books since they are written on an immobile material, it becomes important to define the meaning of portability. Shep points out that the book is intrinsically mobile; but there are other forces, aside from its medium, that permit its intrinsic mobility.<sup>73</sup> If we accept the notion of the book as idea, transposed into texts or pictures to lend it a physical form, rather than define it by its materiality, as is the common practice, then, although the substrate of the book is not physically portable, the book itself (i.e., the content, the ideas) is, of its nature, metaphysically

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<sup>73</sup> Howsam, 54.

portable – especially in and for cultures fixed in oral tradition. If, as Robson suggests, “books serve universally to transport community memory through time and space,”<sup>74</sup> then why can stone inscriptions not be considered the physical rendition of books, given that the information they carry transports cultural memory through time and space via the human beings that once wrote and now read them? If a digital device can serve as a carrier for eBooks and audiobooks, books that in their original, intangible form are not physically portable because they are attached to a Web server, then humans can act as the carriers of books on stone. This can be viewed as the dematerialization of book culture explained by Murray, in which book communication causes people to be part of an intercultural community sustained not only by face-to-face contact, but also through reading.<sup>75</sup> It can also be viewed in the terms of the book being a cultural transaction, as mentioned by Leslie Howsam: “a relationship of communication and exchange ... that operates within a culture.”<sup>76</sup> It is an accepted fact in archaeology that material objects carry information that travels between cultures and through time, and that a material object is a substrate that carries propositional knowledge.<sup>77</sup> Such is evident in Egypt, since autobiographies and funerary literature appear and evolve throughout Egyptian history: autobiographies from the Twenty-Seventh Dynasty (c. 525–404 BCE) onward focused on descriptions of private life, but still incorporated notions of morality and career events;<sup>78</sup> and variants of the Pyramid Texts are found, almost two thousand years later during the Twenty-Sixth Dynasty (c. 664–525 BCE), upon tomb chapels instead of in burial chambers.<sup>79</sup> The themes of

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<sup>74</sup> Robson, 53.

<sup>75</sup> Murray, 9.

<sup>76</sup> Howsam, 4.

<sup>77</sup> Simona Valeriani, “Facts and Building Artefacts: What Travels in Material Objects?” *How Well Do Facts Travel? The Dissemination of Reliable Knowledge*, edited by Peter Howlett and Mary S. Morgan (Cambridge University Press, 2011), 49–50.

<sup>78</sup> Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, 605–63.

<sup>79</sup> Mariam F. Ayad, “The Pyramid Texts of Amenirdis I: Selection and Layout,” *Journal of the American Research Center in Egypt*, vol. 43, 2007, pp. 71–92. For a brief (yet thorough) historiographical examination of the Pyramid Texts, see Cancik-Kirschbaum and Kahl, 253–56.



pictorial autobiographies remained consistent, but, over time, they became more detailed and began to include divine figures, and may even be considered examples of intercultural book communication, as Egyptian funerary iconography appeared on objects throughout the ancient Mediterranean world for millennia.

It is important to keep in mind that although the book will always endure, “the format of the book changes radically across centuries. [One] cannot assume that [book] culture exists ahistorically,”<sup>80</sup> not even within the same society. Ancient Egyptian civilization lasted for almost 3,500 years, until Egypt became a Roman province, meaning that the history of tombs and the various literary genres is extensive and not always linear. Most periods witnessed changes in materiality, content, and composition, as dynasties made additions or modifications, sometimes resulting in an entirely new sub-group of books in a particular genre. Funerary literature is a prime example, evolving by way of its democratization<sup>81</sup> as the contents of the Pyramid Texts became available to Egypt’s elites during the First Intermediate Period (c. 2180–2055 BCE) and were transposed onto wooden coffins (subsequently called the Coffin Texts). Moreover, this new, wooden edition of the texts became an example of books within books, as the Coffin Texts contained the Book of Two Ways.<sup>82</sup> During the New Kingdom (c. 1550–1069 BCE), funerary books essentially became available to anyone who could afford to pay for their production, whereupon the medium was changed to papyrus to accommodate

<sup>80</sup> Murray, 42–43.

<sup>81</sup> The Egyptological concept of the “democratization of the afterlife” derives from the historical fact that due to Egypt’s central administration collapsing toward the end of the Old Kingdom, a power shift occurred as nomarchs (the governors of Egypt’s *nomes*, or provinces) became exceedingly influential, which in turn resulted in the sacred knowledge of the Pyramid Texts becoming available to the elite. With funerary literature now appearing on the coffins of the upper class, the spells were no longer reserved for solely royal use. The phenomenon is considered a “democratization” due to the fact that the spells became more widely available, which meant that the achievement of the afterlife, along with its benefits, was no longer monopolized by royalty. Harco Willems, “The Coffin Texts and Democracy,” *Historical and Archaeological Aspects of Egyptian Funerary Culture*, by Willems (Brill, 2014), 124–229.

<sup>82</sup> A guidebook that maps and describes the two safest routes that the deceased can take to reach the afterlife, one by land and one by water. See Pinch, 14–15; and Wael Sherbiny, *Through Hermopolitan Lenses: Studies on the So-Called Book of Two Ways in Ancient Egypt* (Brill, 2017).

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demand, resulting in one of the most famed texts of ancient Egypt, the Book of the Dead. Due to the democratization of the Pyramid Texts – once deemed highly sacred and reserved for royal use – during the New Kingdom, new groupings of funerary books came into play: the Netherworld Books and the Books of the Sky, which originally returned to the medium of stone, first appearing on the tomb walls of kings. Both groupings contain various sub-series of books (e.g., the Book of Gates, the Book of Caverns, Amduat, the Book of Day, the Book of Night, etc.) dealing with specific themes that originally appeared in the Pyramid Texts, but which elaborate further on the deceased’s journey and the various obstacles encountered in the underworld, generating new secrets about the divine so that royalty might again monopolize the benefits of the afterlife as previously achieved via the Pyramid Texts.

Egyptian society was ever-changing, but these changes were fluid and rooted in tradition. Egyptians rarely discarded concepts; rather, they preferred to improve or expand upon ideologies because they found unity in plurality. With traditions being passed down for millennia, Egyptian society became the carrier of its literature because, although the Egyptians had created an advanced writing system, they were still a civilization within which beliefs, ideas, and stories were either circulated orally or written down in a manner that unquestionably reflects the oral tradition. Book historians David Finkelstein and Alistair McCleery remark that an “important aspect of orality and oral discourse is its reliance on memory and repetition ... in order to retain knowledge, information has to be passed on orally in repetitious manner ... fixed, formulaic thought patterns were essential.”<sup>83</sup> Due to the ritualistic nature of the Pyramid Texts, its spells are highly formulaic and focus on repetition, such that even the written transmission of its various editions across millennia exhibits only minor changes, demonstrating evidently that it derives from

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<sup>83</sup> Finkelstein and McCleery, 33.

oral tradition.<sup>84</sup> Even Egyptian autobiography is believed to be rooted in orality and in lived, performative experience, due to the interactions and role-playing between the king and his officials invoked at formalized ceremonial occasions.<sup>85</sup> What Finkelstein and McCleery do not acknowledge, however, is that a society can be both literate, with an advanced writing system, and still be steeped in orality – it is not a defined line and both forms of communication can co-exist. In Egypt, likely as in many other oral-based cultures, writing was essentially a materialization of speech.<sup>86</sup>

This co-existence is noted by book historian John D. Niles in his explanation of oral literature, which he believes is the product of an oral art form being textualized; thus, oral-derived texts are by nature hybrids, combining features of literacy and orality.<sup>87</sup> Information naturally disseminates via word of mouth, even where writing is available, making humans not books but *book carriers*, as they embody oral tradition and engage in oral literature. Therefore, it becomes important to acknowledge that the book is subject not only to textual or pictorial renditions, as it can take on solely verbal forms. The book may be rendered in writing, code, art, or speech – meaning, again, that it is not a question of metaphysical versus physical, since books engage in an ever-changing cycle of manifestations, constantly shifting back and forth between the boundaries of the metaphysical, the physical, and, in our current age, the digital. The book, from its inception, is unquestionably metaphysical; from there, it may continue to take on a metaphysical form or change into a physical or digital form – and, most of the time, it can possess all forms (the digital form especially, with the growing practice of digitization). Thinking back

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<sup>84</sup> For an in-depth examination of the relation between orality and the Pyramid Texts, see Nils Billing, *The Performative Structure: Ritualizing the Pyramid of Pepy I* (Brill, 2018); Hagen, Johnston, Monkhouse, Piquette, Tait, and Worthington, 3–54; and Jacqueline E. Jay, “Going Deeper: The Evidence for Orality,” *Orality and Literacy in the Demotic Tales* (Brill, 2016), 79–100.

<sup>85</sup> Enmarch and Lepper, 153–84; Jay, 22–23.

<sup>86</sup> John Baines, *Visual and Written Culture in Ancient Egypt* (Oxford University Press, 2007), 146–71; Hoogendijk and Gompel, 5–11.

<sup>87</sup> Fraistat and Flanders, 211–12.

to the FRBR model, the book can remain in its metaphysical state through its verbal expression (i.e., oral literature, audiobooks, music) and/or take on the manifestation of an object (physical or digital). As a result, materiality is merely an aspect of the book because the book is not bound by physicality.

Keeping Egyptian beliefs in mind, the idea of metaphysical portability also becomes evident as we realize that tomb inscriptions and art are first and foremost sacred objects, talismans for travelling between the physical and spiritual planes, as they were created as aids in the quest for immortality. The notion of the book taking on spiritual manifestations (perhaps better conceived of as lending spiritual agency to the place where it resides) is by no means a novel one in book-historical discourse.<sup>88</sup> Cummings alludes briefly to this important aspect of Egyptian book culture and points to the book as a symbol,<sup>89</sup> but he does the topic insufficient justice. Understanding the importance of eternity to the Egyptians is crucial, as the ideas of rebirth and cyclical renewal were imbued into every aspect of daily life; this was certainly the goal of funerary rituals, namely the deceased’s divine transfiguration into an *ʿḥ* (effective spirit). The tomb was the end-product of such desire because it was the eternal house<sup>90</sup> for the deceased, a place where text and art made the existence of the deceased dwell forever in the memory of the living and of the divine – effectively a repository of knowledge (i.e., a library)<sup>91</sup>

<sup>88</sup> This topic is often discussed in relation to religious books, particularly from the Middle Ages, acting as talismans of protection over the places in which they were created or stored. See, for example, Heather Bamford, “Faith in Fragments,” *Cultures of the Fragment: Uses of the Iberian Manuscript, 1100–1600* (University of Toronto Press, 2018), 110–33; and Jinah Kim, *Receptacle of the Sacred: Illustrated Manuscripts and the Buddhist Book Cult in South Asia* (University of California Press, 2013), 44–87.

<sup>89</sup> Suarez and Woudhuysen, 93.

<sup>90</sup> One of the Egyptian words for tomb was *pr-ḏ.t*, literally meaning “the house of eternity.”

<sup>91</sup> The notion of tombs (as well as, and perhaps more so, temple walls) acting as libraries has received significant attention in Egyptological scholarship. See Jochem Kahl, “The Egyptian Tomb as an Epistemic Site,” *Collect and Preserve: Institutional Contexts of Epistemic Knowledge in Pre-Modern Societies*, edited by Eva Cancik-Kirschbaum, Jochem Kahl, and Eun-Jeung Lee (Harrassowitz, 2021), 65–82; Dimitri Meeks, “La mémoire des murs ou l’offrande écrite dans l’Égypte ancienne,” *Préfaces: Les idées et les sciences dans la bibliographie de la France*, vol. 12, 1989, pp. 70–75; Claude Traunecker, “The ‘Funeral Palace’ of Padiamenope: Tomb, Place of Pilgrimage,

– and in which the spirit of the deceased was able to return to its body nightly, as the practice of mummification preserved its recognizable features. Tomb chapels not only allowed the living to visit the deceased; they also permitted the deceased to engage in the world of the living through the provision of offerings and the recitation of prayers inscribed on the walls. In this way, they could live eternally through the recognition and commemoration of their *mn* (name). Tomb art (the pictorial autobiographies) was functional rather than decorative, as it served not only as a testament to status but as the representation of objects destined to be transferred to the next life – the depiction of luxuries experienced on earth to ensure their eternal existence in the beyond. The only reason for the Pyramid Texts’ transmission into writing (since they came from the oral sphere) was to ensure that the deceased had the proper spells with them on their journey to rebirth, evidenced by the fact that such texts frequently transitioned from third person (i.e., the voice of the lector-priest) to first person (i.e., the voice of the tomb’s owner), meaning that certain spells were to be recited by the deceased during their journey into the underworld.<sup>92</sup>

Understanding the materials of creation in Egyptian ideology is also crucial because of the fundamental importance of the notion of the “breath of life.” To speak was a process of creation as speech was one of the primary tools of Ptah,<sup>93</sup> one of Egypt’s various creator gods. The act also related to the primordial god Hu, who was seen as the personification of divine utterance. Associated with Hu was Heka, another primordial god, who was the personification of magic and who particularly reflects the close link between Egyptian magic and the word, whether spoken or written.<sup>94</sup> On a mortal level, it was with the help of *ḥk* (magic) that caused

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and Library. Current Research,” *Thebes in the First Millennium BC*, edited by Elena Pischikova, Julia Budka, and Kenneth Griffin (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014), 213–21; and Zinn, 109–10, 113–14.

<sup>92</sup> PT 304, King Climbs to the Sky on a Ladder, is a prime example. See Lichtheim, 72–73.

<sup>93</sup> John Baines, Leonard H. Lesko, and David P. Silverman, *Religion in Ancient Egypt: Gods, Myths, and Personal Practice*, edited by Byron E. Shafer (Cornell University Press, 1991), 96.

<sup>94</sup> Pinch, 139, 198.

the spoken word to come to life; it was also what allowed the spells to travel into the underworld with the deceased. The spoken words of the lector-priests were particularly imbued with magic because they were viewed as the principal magicians and the holders of the sacred knowledge<sup>95</sup> contained in the Pyramid Texts. Speaking activated the spells for eternity, so that the deceased in the underworld and the afterlife could be provided with the knowledge (e.g., names of demons, how to leave the underworld, how to pass through the horizon, how to enter the sky, etc.) and luxuries (e.g., food, libations, objects)<sup>96</sup> that was spoken. Even the written word had magical potency: since the hieroglyphic script was attributed to the divine, it was seen as a living entity endowed with divine power – especially as it was associated with the god Thoth, who was profoundly linked to writing – and thus the written word became a vehicle for sacred power representing the creative force to maintain life.<sup>97</sup> Its physical existence created agency and reinforced its immortal nature, while also allowing texts that were not recited by lector-priests, such as autobiographies, to become intangibly mobile. Private and funerary literature, therefore, became metaphysically portable, as the desire for eternity and the use of magic caused the books to be available to the deceased in the underworld, helping them either to achieve the afterlife by acting as their self-representation of moral worth and status, as in the case of the autobiographies, or as a guide for navigating the netherworld to reach the hereafter, as in the case of the Pyramid Texts.

*Is Stone Truly Physically Immobile?*

For argument’s sake, one can even contend that stone inscriptions and wall art are physically portable in a most extreme sense. Just as it may be argued that, with enough manpower, a massive medieval codex such as the Codex Gigas can be made physically portable since it is on a mobile

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<sup>95</sup> Baines, Lesko, and Silverman, 166.

<sup>96</sup> For further examples, the list of spells and their English translation, see Allen.

<sup>97</sup> Cancik-Kirschbaum and Kahl, 229–48; Webb, 26; Finkelstein and McCleery, 31; Pinch, 209–11.



support, one might also observe that, with the right tools and sufficient power, stone inscriptions too can become physically portable through removal. Due to the unethical handling of cultural heritage practised by certain nineteenth- and twentieth-century archaeologists and curators, various wall fragments, life-sized or colossal sculptures, and even entire monuments can be found in famous museums and art galleries around the world. Think of the Neo-Assyrian palatial wall reliefs mounted throughout the halls of the Louvre; Michelangelo’s *David* in Florence’s Galleria dell’Accademia; and the Nereid Monument in the British Museum. Egyptian literary works on stone are no exception: the entire Autobiography of Weni resides in the Egyptian Museum in Cairo (see figure 5); fragments of the Pyramid Texts from Pepi I’s tomb are held in the Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology in London; and fragments of the Pyramid Text from Pepi II’s tomb are housed in the Neues Museum in Berlin.

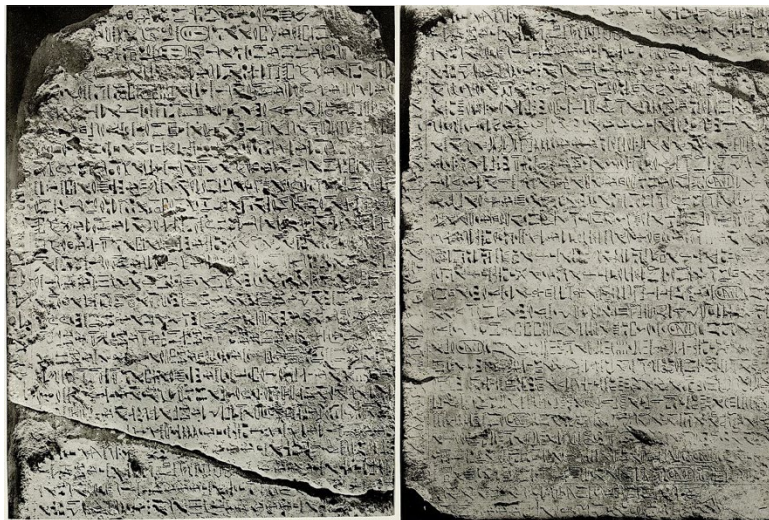


Figure 5. Autobiography of Weni, Egyptian Museum, Cairo, CGC 1435. Source: Wikimedia Commons,

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Autobiography\\_of\\_Weni,\\_from\\_Abydos,\\_now\\_at\\_the\\_Egyptian\\_Museum\\_in\\_Cairo.png](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Autobiography_of_Weni,_from_Abydos,_now_at_the_Egyptian_Museum_in_Cairo.png)



The ancient Egyptians themselves have provided us with ample proof of the physical portability of stone, as evident in the significant amount of stone architecture they created – materials for which were often transported across great distances within Egypt or even from foreign lands (e.g., the Sinai Peninsula) – demonstrating it was a fundamental part of their technology and structural engineering. I bring up this argument merely to demonstrate that the idea of portability is a relative concept, just as the understanding of the book is relative to the cultural environment in which it was produced. The immobile can become mobile due to technological advancements and the tangibly permanent can become portable through intangible means.

### *Conclusions and Looking Forward*

By looking at the dominant narrative of the book in book-historical scholarship, which emphasizes the importance of physical portability and favours the notion of the book as object, and in juxtaposing it against both non-Western and Western book examples that contradict such traditional notions, it is clear that the book is not the same as its medium; rather, it is the ideas relayed by its compositional style of texts, images, and/or speech. As such, I have not attempted to argue that stone inscriptions, or the medium of stone itself, are the book, but rather that inscriptions physically render the book onto the substrate of stone, lending it a material form within which the contents of the inscriptions are the book. Ultimately, the book cannot be bound to physical mobility because, although the latter idea may be seen as characteristic in certain book cultures, to regard it as a central characteristic risks excluding some fundamental book mediums. Cummings provides a vital outlook on the meaning of the book that supports the non-restrictive, non-Western concept for which I advocate: the book “signifies something abstract, the words and the meanings collected within it. ... Even in its textual form, the book becomes more than itself, a visual representation not only of the contents within but of

the idea of the book altogether.”<sup>98</sup> Through the examination of ancient Egyptian autobiographies and funerary literature, as well as the ideologies that governed these literary genres, ancient Egypt becomes a case study in which physical portability was not considered an important feature of the book; instead, the book’s most important attribute was permanence. There was a sacredness to inscribing its text and image upon stone and speaking it aloud, as they possessed spiritual agency caused by an everlasting divine and magical force. Stone ensured that the magic imbued in the text and images on tomb walls would continue to exist and remain visible for eternity. Due to this spiritual aspect, it is also crucial to acknowledge the inherently metaphysical side of portability, namely the universally applicable capacity of human beings serving as carriers of book content (especially in cultures involved in oral traditions). The specific Egyptian example here, of course, is the magical nature of books inscribed upon tomb walls, whereby they travel along with the deceased into the afterlife. The book-as-idea concept certainly acknowledges that the book is portable, only not in the Western material notion of portability, which should be discarded in order to avoid bias in the field of book history.

Of course, the arguments that I have set out in this article by no means discard the undeniable fact that the book can, and most often does, take on a physical material form – resulting in the need for, and seminal importance of, bibliographic studies. It is important to remember, however, that bibliographers do not analyze the book, but the book’s medium and its associated material features; it is literary scholars who analyze the book. Here, I would implore book historians to revise their understanding of the book by shifting away from portability and codex forms, regardless of the materials used, and engage in material discussions by thinking in terms of studying the object of the book, or the book’s object (i.e., medium), in lieu of the *book as object*, so as to avoid Western biases and a skewed understanding of the history of the book. Unfortunately, modern thinking has predisposed us to believe that the

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<sup>98</sup> Suarez and Woudhuysen, 95.

book is a physical object; but again, it must be stressed that the substrate is merely the book’s medium, and, although examination of the latter is important, it should not be our guiding focal point if we are truly to understand and engage in global book history.

The acts of opening, closing, and carrying books inherently implies materiality and sensory engagement – hence, the book as object – but one can neither physically open or close a book on an electronic device in the truest sense, nor a book on stone, which also cannot be carried. When we hear the word *cookbook*, we think a book of recipes, which then causes us to conjure up images of an object that contains recipes, rather than believe that the recipes themselves are the book. The term *diary* generally means a book documenting a person’s life, but when we visit a bookstore or an office-supply store, we may see objects that are composed of bound blank sheets of paper and labelled as diaries. Here, it is not the physical diary that is the book, but the events narrated in the handwritten account of the person’s life, which are then given a physical form through the object known as the diary. In other words, there is a significant difference between speaking of a *paper book* and a *book made of paper*, the syntax of the latter statement being the more appropriate as it neither associates the book to a specific substrate nor brings with it the concept of the book as object and notions of portability; paper gives the book a physical form, but it is not the book itself. Although Western and modern beliefs, as well as commercial production, have caused the meaning of the book to evolve into the possibility of being defined solely as an object that is portable, such practices have caused society and scholarship to diverge from understanding the book’s original meaning and function. The book, for all intents and purposes, is a metaphysical being born of thought processes that are structured into narratives using literary devices, and which may be given a material form through the use of a medium; but this medium need not be physically portable, and the book need not be conveyed solely through text, as it can take on visual, verbal, and/or digital forms.

Evidently, the discipline of book history has unfinished business in terms of understanding the book, something Gillespie makes very clear.<sup>99</sup> In regard to the discussion of stone inscriptions being books and stone being a book medium in ancient Egypt, I have but scratched the surface. Now that an understanding has been established as to what defined and was considered a book in ancient Egypt, in terms of its content and (metaphysical) characteristics as ascertained through historical and literary analysis, we must turn to the discipline of bibliographical analysis, and to descriptive bibliography in particular, which becomes seminal for reconstructing and dispelling misconceptions about the substrates used in Egyptian book culture, and for comprehending the various forms that specific materials assumed and their associated attributes (e.g., colour, script, pictorial elements, erasures/errors, marginalia, ancient or modern damage, etc.). Moreover, Egypt is not the only ancient culture to have made extensive use of stone as a book medium, as Mesopotamia and Persia (among many others) also produced numerous examples that further support the notion of the book as idea and discredit the importance of the book’s portability and its being defined by its medium.<sup>100</sup> Advancing this research, not only in the field of book history but also in Egyptology and other non-Western disciplines, is therefore seminal for understanding Egyptian and other ancient book cultures, and, more importantly, for re-examining the history of the book altogether.

### *Author Biography*

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<sup>99</sup> Gillespie and Lynch, 5–10.

<sup>100</sup> Consider the visual narrative reliefs of Ashurbanipal’s Elamite campaign on the wall of the North Palace in Nineveh (Kouyunjik) and the Behistun Inscription of Darius I on Mount Behistun. See Marc Van de Mieroop, *A History of the Ancient Near East, ca. 3000–323 BC*, 3rd edition (Wiley Blackwell, 2016), 250–55, 328–30.

(Near and Middle Eastern Civilizations) and MI (LIS & BHPC) from the University of Toronto. Trained as an Egyptologist, rare book librarian, and book historian, her research interests lie in fostering interdisciplinary communication between these fields to ensure a clear understanding of each others' strengths and realities by dispelling misconceptions. She as well focuses on iconographic studies and cross-cultural relations in the ancient Mediterranean world.

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