

JAARBERICHT

VAN HET VOORAZIATISCH-EGYPTISCH GENOOTSCHAP

EX ORIENTE LUX

JOURNAL OF THE ANCIENT NEAR EASTERN SOCIETY “EX ORIENTE LUX”
 ANNUAIRE DE LA SOCIÉTÉ ORIENTALE “EX ORIENTE LUX”

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READING VIGNETTES
AN APPROACH TO ILLUSTRATIONS IN THE BOOK OF THE DEAD*

H. MILDE

Among the illustrations that have been added to various spells in the Book of the Dead we find exquisite pictures. Some of them prefigure the refined miniatures in medieval manuscripts. It is remarkable though to notice that the beauty of these vignettes disappeared in the everlasting darkness of the tomb. The deceased may seek comfort with the words of John Keats that 'a thing of beauty is a joy for ever'. But the illustrations have not been designed for rapture. However beautiful they may be, their meaning exceeds aesthetics.

Vignettes are of great importance for the understanding of the spells they accompany¹. According to Hornung they compress the often very complex text into a single image elucidating its content and often enriching it². In view of the 'spell for requesting a water-pot and a palette' (BD 94) Te Velde stated that 'the vignette not only summarizes the prayer, but anticipates upon the result'³. For the deceased is depicted having received already the writing utensils. In other words, these pictures are not just illustrations subordinate to the text in question. They have a surplus value, because they provide information that cannot be given by the text alone.

In order to penetrate into the meaning of vignettes it is necessary not only to look at the pictures as such, but also to scrutinize them in a way like 'close reading'. That is to say, vignettes or parts of vignettes have to be taken 'literally' instead of purely pictorially. We beat upon an open door, of course, referring to texts framed in buildings. Such a stichometrical adaptation does not seem to give any surplus value, as expressed above. On the other hand, arrangements like this often lead to extensions that go beyond textual data. The so-called *Gliedervergottung* is an integrated part of the text of BD 42. All members of the body are associated with different gods. This deification of the body has often been written within a chapel.

In fig. 1 the *Gliedervergottung* is divided in four registers. The gods are not only mentioned, in the lowest register they turn up visibly. This gives a boost to the building. The chapel is no longer of minor importance as a mere framework for the text. It has got substance as the appropriate lodging for the gods mentioned. That is to say, for the deceased himself, because he has become their equal and should therefore be admitted into the divine environment where they reside. We might say that the building has become a real vignette instead of an ornamental text-frame.

* I wish to thank Prof. M. Heerma van Voss for reading an earlier draft and his useful comments.

¹ M. Heerma van Voss, *LÄ VI*, 1044.

² Erik Hornung, *Geist der Pharaonenzeit*, Zürich, München 1989, 33.

³ H. te Velde, Egyptian Hieroglyphs as Linguistic Signs and Metalinguistic Informants, *Visible Religion. Annual for Religious Iconography* 6 (1988), 176.

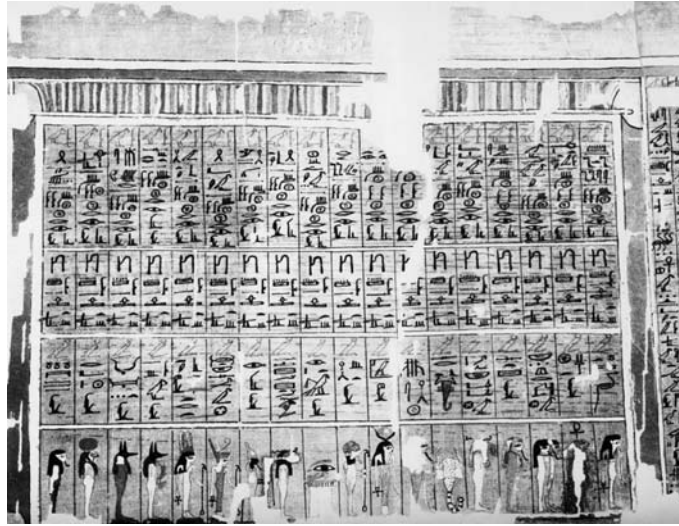


Fig. 1

A similar phenomenon can be seen in BD 99B, the ‘spell for bringing a ferry in the realm of the dead’. In order to secure its co-operation, the deceased must know all parts and fittings of the ferry. Generally the enumeration has been written down in separate columns. The hieroglyphs that determine the words may be lined up on the lower part of the columns or register. Sometimes they seem to grow out of their capacity of script-signs. In the pNeferrhenpet⁴ they have become real pictures (fig. 2).

The arrangement strongly recalls the layout of an offering list⁵. As the provisions are thought to be at the deceased’s disposal by their presence *in effigie*, so the ferry will function, because its parts turn up similarly.



Fig. 2

⁴ The letter p followed by a name is an abbreviation for ‘papyrus (of) ...’.

⁵ What is more, the association is suggested by the spell itself. Immediately after the interrogation the deceased declares: *wb3=i r=tn di=tn n=i dbht-htp r r=i mdw=i im=f* ‘I have penetrated to you that you may give me a funerary meal for my mouth, that I spoke with’. See Günther Lapp, *The Papyrus of Nu*, London 1997, Pl. 64 col. 32-33. In fig. 5 (left) we see the deceased Nebqed in the ferry with an offering table in front of him.

The pKamara offers an example of pictures that remained script-signs. The steering-oars of BD 148, generally depicted separately in a vignette, are drawn here within the text-columns (fig. 3). These objects remained real determinatives to be read, even though they have been blown up.

Some components in fig. 2 cannot be considered as mere pictures only. Mast and sail, for instance, that we see behind the skipper, do not represent mast and sail. They form an ideogram to be read: *t3w* ‘wind’. Mast (dismantled in various parts) and sail occur at the foot of preceding columns.

This symbolic use of objects recurs in vignettes of some spells that should enable the deceased to breathe in the netherworld. In fig. 4 we see the deceased Nebqed grasping the *t3w*-hieroglyph just mentioned for ‘wind’, ‘air’, ‘breath’. This is another example of anticipation, for the vignette shows the result of the conjuration in the text.



Fig. 3



Fig. 4

In fact, illustrators often resorted to hieroglyphic symbols. Fig. 5-22 display further examples. The series is far from exhaustive and serves only to illustrate the point of this contribution. Sceptres, *ankh*-signs, *djed*- and *tit*-amulets etc. are ignored here, because these hieroglyphs may represent the objects themselves.

- The sky-hieroglyph (☰), to begin with, is favourite. It alternates with ☰, the *š*-sign which specializes the sky as celestial waters, as can be seen e.g. in two other illustrations of the ferry-spell (BD 99B) just mentioned (fig. 5).

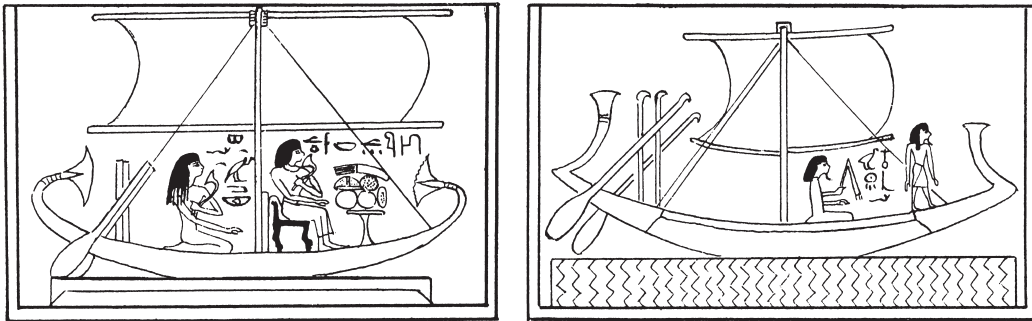


Fig. 5

We even have a mix sometimes: a sky-ideogram filled with water like an *š*-sign (fig. 6).

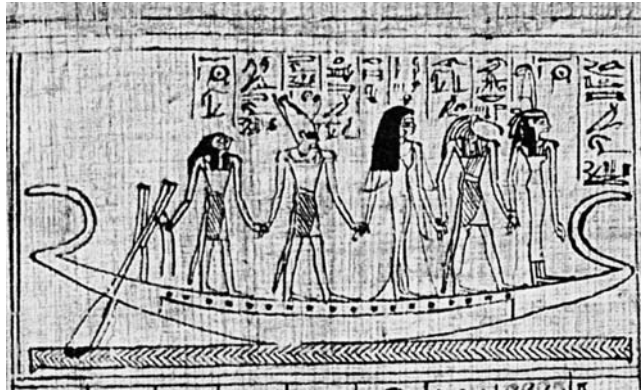


Fig. 6

- Important cosmic locations like East and West are ideographically represented. The East may be specified as the *akhet*, the place where the sun rises between the hill-tops of the eastern mountain (Sign-List⁶ N 27: ☉). Such an image is shown in fig. 7: the deceased Tjenna (adorned with a heart-amulet) rising with the sun in the *akhet*. On the right we see the mummy of the late priest and scribe Nebqed in front of the tomb where he is about to be buried (fig. 8). The tomb-chapel is characterized by the *imntt*-hieroglyph of the West.
- Although the east is inviting as a scene of resurrection, it is also frightening as a place of slaughter. The deceased is anxious about the prospect to come to grief here. BD 93 should protect him from being seized and ferried over to the East unvoluntarily. Vignettes of this spell show the ferryman sailing away alone, often looking back upon the deceased who remains safely ashore (fig. 9). Here the course of the ferry has been indicated within the ship: the *išbt*-sign for the East has been put on the forward deck. This might be due to lack of space, as Munro observes⁷.

⁶ Based on Alan Gardiner, *Egyptian Grammar*, London 1957 (3rd edition, revised), 438-543.

⁷ Irmtraut Munro, *Der Totenbuch-Papyrus des Hor aus der frühen Ptolemäerzeit*, Wiesbaden 2006, 61 Anm. 77.

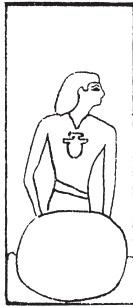


Fig. 7



Fig. 8

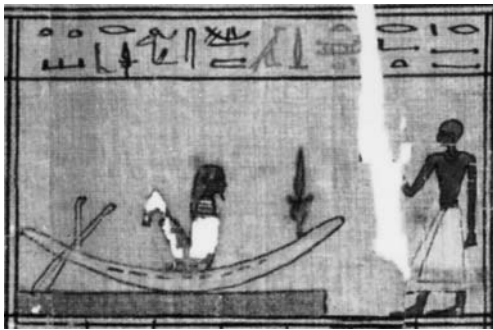


Fig. 9



Fig. 10

However, the destination may be seen more often within the ship. So in the pLeiden T.3 *e.g.*, where the localities in the Field of Offerings that Tayuheryt is rowing to, are represented as *nwt*-signs piled up near the prow (fig. 10).

In the pNakht-Amun the destination of Osiris can be read on the forward deck, too (fig. 11): two large *djed*-pillars surmounted by the preposition *r* 'to'. This reflects the first sentence of the spell in question, BD 100: *d3.n=i bnw r i3bt Wsir r Ddw*, 'I ferried the phoenix to the East and Osiris to Busiris'. The next picture (fig. 12) shows the

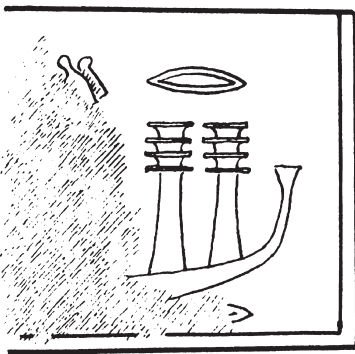


Fig. 11

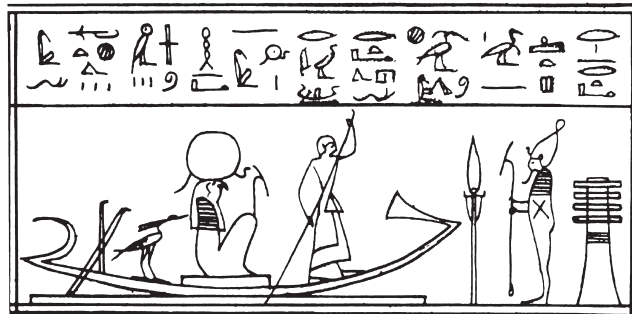


Fig. 12

arrival of the god: Osiris standing before a *djed*-pillar representing Busiris, whereas the *ibtt*-sign in front of him marks the East, the destination of the phoenix who is still in the ferry. The representation of the destination within the vessels may be considered as an anticipation upon the outcome of the journey.

- Various houses and towns appear as large ideograms: fig. 13 shows the deceased Nesitanebtishru before the Great House (BD 123, on the right) and approaching Heliopolis (BD 75, on the left) in the pGreenfield.

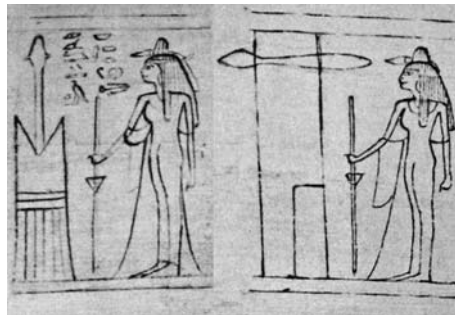


Fig. 13

Another city recognizable by hieroglyphs is *Hwt-nn-nswt* 'Heracleopolis' mentioned in BD 42. Fig. 14 shows an example from the pGatseshen. Instead of the city, this spell may also be illustrated with an act of prevention the slaughter that is threatening in this place: in the pSutimes the deceased is tackling a *š't*-hieroglyph (Sign-List F 41), the hieroglyphic symbol for 'slaughter' (fig. 15).

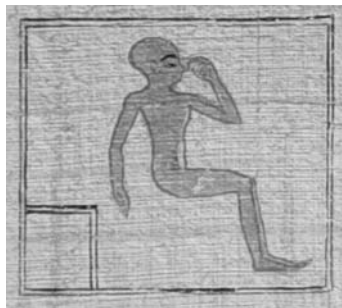


Fig. 14

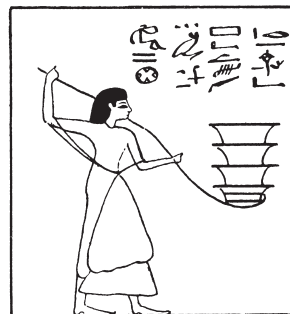


Fig. 15

- Another harmful place is the Lake of Fire, where the unrighteous will come to a bad end. In the pAni we see the lake as an *š*-sign with red waves (fig. 16). The heat suggested by this colour comes from brazier-hieroglyphs that have flames ending in streamlets flowing into the lake.

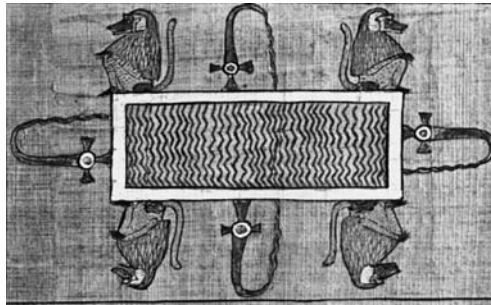



Fig. 16

The deceased may escape this ordeal if he is found righteous. This righteousness, *mš't*, is recorded by the divine clerk Thot, who, in the pLeiden T.3, is drawing a huge feather (a *mš't*-ideogram) on behalf of Tayuheryt (fig. 17).



Fig. 17

- In an anonymous Book of the Dead in Dublin Thot is also recognized among the members of the crew in the sunbark conveying Khopri (fig. 18). The sungod is implored to save the deceased from those who examine and execute enemies (BD 17b). Other papyri, however, like the pQenna in Leiden (fig. 19), replace the different members of the crew by , the *šms*-hieroglyph, designating them collectively as 'followers' of the sungod.

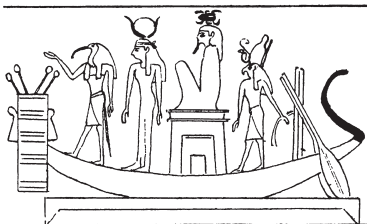


Fig. 18

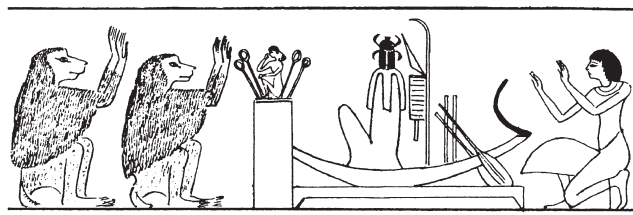


Fig. 19

- Adversaries may often be rendered symbolically by snakes in various restraint positions (fig. 20), but in the pIouiya we see a hieroglyph (Sign-List A 13/14) instead (fig. 21), illustrating BD 10: 'Spell for letting Iouiya go out against his foes in the West'.



Fig. 20



Fig. 21

- Finally one more example from BD 110: the abundance in the Field of Offerings can be seen (man-sized crops), but can also be read in the same vignette (fig. 22): the *b^h*-hieroglyph, a heron on a perch (Sign-List G 32), which takes its reading from the inundation that causes the abundance.











Fig. 22



Thus far we have been reading within the scope of pictures. But the pictures themselves require an approach that may be labeled as reading. A complex illustration as the plan of the Field of Offerings should not be 'read' as usual from top to bottom, but the other way round, as Heerma van Voss demonstrated⁸. Only then there is a correspondence to the spell.

Looking at vignettes and similar pictures we should be aware of the fact that we are not dealing with snapshots. In Egypt, the measure of all things was not man, curtailing reality to his point of view. On the contrary, instead of such an anthropocentric approach we meet with the cosmocentric principle of *m3't*, the 'divine order'. Reality should not be shown as it appears to man accidentally, but as it is essentially. Reality is complex, though. Therefore the

⁸ M. Heerma van Voss, Von oben nach unten lesen, *JEOL* 40 (2006-2007) 41-42 and Matthieu Heerma van Voss, Zur Vignette des Opfergefildes, Totenbuch 110 in: B. Backes, I. Munro, S. Stöhr (ed.), *Totenbuch-Forschungen. Gesammelte Beiträge des 2. Internationalen Totenbuch-Symposiums Bonn, 25. bis 29. September 2005*, Wiesbaden 2006, 115-120.

ancient Egyptian apperception of reality is characterized by what Henri Frankfort called a ‘multiplicity of approaches’⁹. We cannot grasp the meaning of a picture at a glance, but we have to take in the multiple parts like words in a sentence. This requires a certain familiarity with the ‘grammar’ of pictorial compositions. Fundamental in this respect is the work of Heinrich Schäfer¹⁰, whose ideas have been introduced into the Anglo-Saxon world by John Baines¹¹. A key notion is Schäfer’s word *geradvorstellig*, rendered by Baines with ‘based on frontal images’¹². Frontal means a perpendicular projection of an object on one of the sides of a cube, in which the object may be embedded. From the six possible views the most significant one is chosen¹³. Thus we see a human head like  or . A turtle is seen from above: . An object is shown according to the aspect which is essential for the object itself. An object is never shown according to perspective, which, after all, renders the observer and his vision essential. The qualification ‘aspective’ has been introduced¹⁴ in order to mark the distinction from the perspective way of representing. Aspectivity gives the various aspects of an object a certain independency with regard to the whole. The hieroglyphs just cited display this peculiarity. For it should be noted that the ears on  are attached at an angle of 90 degrees (), whereas the eye in  is represented in front view (.

Components preserve their idiosyncrasy and show a remarkable independence, as we noted already concerning the different members of a single body (BD 42) and the various parts of a ferry (BD 99B). They are added in a way that can be labeled as ‘paratactic’ in contrast to the ‘hypotactic’ position forced by perspective. Parataxis is relatively loose in contrast to the fixed proportions in a hypotactic arrangement. Schäfer gave a clear example, showing a sarcophagus closed with a vaulted lid. The characteristic curve of the lid’s short side has been drawn out in order to fit the oblong side of the coffin¹⁵: . In other words, facets are neither fixed nor scaled according to perspective, let alone that they would disappear in the vanishing-point of an accidental observer. Their position is defined by intrinsic properties and requirements of composition. Such principles of ‘pictorial grammar’ should not be ignored when interpreting vignettes.

In fig. 23 we see heaven and earth, that is to say, we read the hieroglyphs of heaven () and earth (). In between we ‘read’ a portal: two door-leaves (mirrored hieroglyphs, Sign-List O 31). This gate of heaven and earth is miraculously scaled according to both the cosmos and the deceased. It is an illustration of BD 68 in the pNeferenpet. At first sight the door-leaves seem to hinder Neferenpet from passing and his gesture gives the impression of an attempt to open the door. Reading the vignette we find the door open already. The rotation-points of the door-leaves prove this. Confirmation is gathered from another occurrence of this portal (BD 17). Here (fig. 24) the door-leaves are either open, to give way to the sun (left), or

⁹ Henri Frankfort, *Ancient Egyptian Religion*, New York 1961, 18, 20, 25.

¹⁰ Heinrich Schäfer, *Von ägyptischer Kunst, besonders der Zeichenkunst. Eine Einführung in die Betrachtung ägyptischer Kunstwerke*, Leipzig 1922 (zweite stark vermehrte Auflage).

¹¹ Heinrich Schäfer, *Principles of Egyptian Art*. Edited, with an epilogue, by Emma Brunner-Traut. Translated and edited, with an introduction, by John Baines. Oxford 1986 (= Schäfer, Baines, *Principles*).

¹² Schäfer, Baines, *Principles*, xvi.

¹³ See also Erik Hornung, *Geist der Pharaonenzeit*, Zürich, München 1989, 14-15.

¹⁴ Emma Brunner-Traut, *Frühformen des Erkennens am Beispiel Altägyptens*, Darmstadt 1990, 7-40.

¹⁵ Schäfer, Baines, *Principles*, 115-116; fig. 77, 78.



Fig. 23

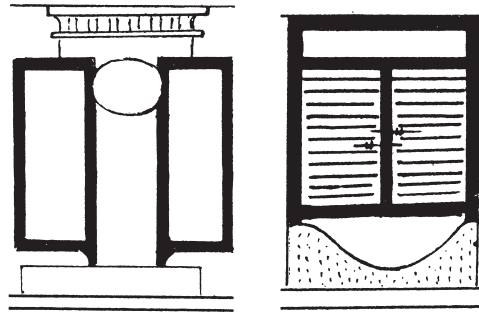


Fig. 24

closed and bolted (right). In BD 68 the deceased Neferrenpet just managed to clear the passage, however narrow the escape may seem. What we see is the outcome of the sentence:



‘He opened the door of the sky, he opened the door of the earth.’¹⁶

In the vignette the door-leaves are treated rather independently from the entire portal itself.

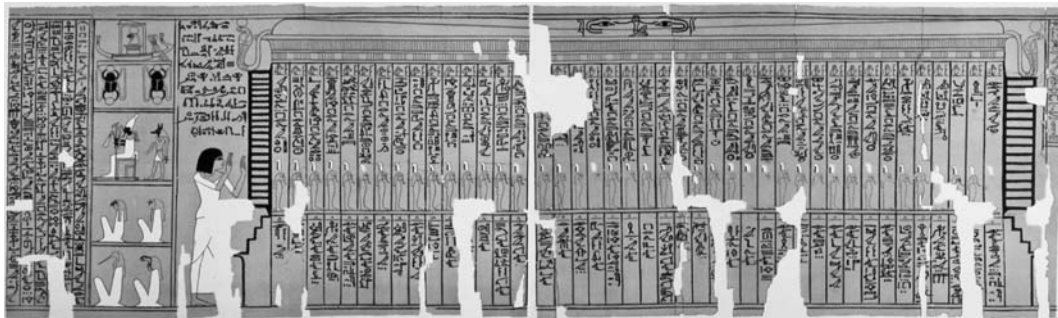


Fig. 25

A similar independency of the components of the portal can be seen in BD 125b, albeit to the opposite effect. In fig. 25 the deceased Nebqed is about to climb the stairs in order to enter a chapel known as the ‘Hall of Truth’. Here, too, the door-leaves are open, but in contrast to the portal of heaven in fig. 23, the opening is extremely wide. The artist split the front side of the chapel and mirrored them as suggested in fig. 26 (the representation of the curved roof is indicative of the procedure).

He stretched the opening between the two door-leaves in order to show each of the 42 judges within the chapel. Their arrangement strongly recalls the *Gliedervergottung* of BD 42 mentioned above.

¹⁶ H. Milde, *The Vignettes in the Book of the Dead of Neferrenpet*, Leiden, 1991, Pl. 27, 27-28.



Fig. 26

Vignettes are compositions with a loose, but well-considered cohesion between the elements, which largely preserve their idiosyncrasy. This cohesion requires an approach comparable to reading. The vignette in fig. 27 provides a further incentive in view of this attitude. We see the scribe Nakht-Amun making a stand against a noxious creature. As a matter of fact, it is ridiculous to fight such a tiny insect with a spear, as Nakht-Amun is doing. But this is not about every day life, where a shoe would render better service. The weapon should not be taken pictorially ('a spear') but literally ('repelling'). We should not see the beetle as an accidental inconvenience; we should read it as a permanent threat for life in the hereafter. Thus we understand the meaning of this scene as 'repelling a beetle', which is, indeed, the title of the spell in question, BD 36.



Fig. 27

The text within the vignette confirms the subject of this article: *in Wsir zš Nht-Imn* 'by the late scribe Nakht-Amun'. For there is no text whatsoever to complete these words to a full sentence. The completion required is rendered in the vignette. What has to be done 'by the late scribe Nakht-Amun' has been drawn. Text and picture form an inextricable unity. There is no getting away from 'reading' the vignette together with the genuine text.

Munro made a fine observation to the reverse effect that text should not only be read, but also be contemplated. The determinative of the insect in the title of the papyrus Nakht-Amun is not a usual scarab (fig. 27, 5th column from the left). Here the beetle has quite extraordinary legs that differ distinctly from other *hpr*-writings¹⁷ (3rd column from the left, *e.g.*). There might be a reason for this, because we are not dealing with an ordinary beetle, but with a very special insect, called *apshay*. The ancient illustrator apparently had not the faintest idea any more about the real shape of this animal; hence the common beetle in the vignette.

The illustrator of another papyrus resorted to a much more radical solution (fig. 28): like a sorcerer's apprentice he cut the *apshay*-insect in two, creating thus an *ap* ('a snake') and a *shay* ('a pig'). This mental process can only be traced out, if we 'read' the vignette¹⁸.

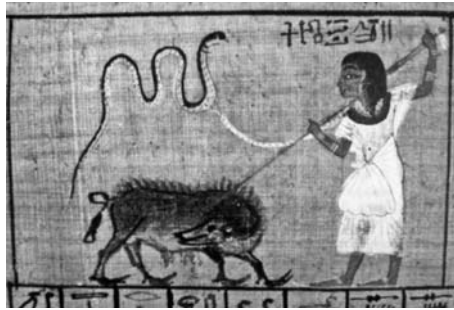


Fig. 28

I conclude with an observation regarding the function of vignettes. Phrases like *in Wsir zš Nht-Imn* usually conclude the title of a spell, which is in general a kind of summary of the entire spell. Now that they appear to be applicable to vignettes too, these illustrations seem to have a function comparable to titles, establishing the entire text in a nutshell. What is more, they generally show in anticipation the outcome of the spell in question, as we stated above. These features may account for the strong position that vignettes gained in the genre of the Book of the Dead.

¹⁷ Irmtraut Munro, *Das Totenbuch des Nacht-Amun aus der Ramessidenzeit*, Wiesbaden 1997, 16, Tb 36, obs. a).

¹⁸ See also Henk Milde, Vignetten-Forschung, in: B. Backes, I. Munro, S. Stöhr (ed.), *Totenbuch-Forschungen. Gesammelte Beiträge des 2. Internationalen Totenbuch-Symposiums Bonn, 25. bis 29. September 2005*, Wiesbaden 2006, 227-228.

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- Fig. 12 BD 100 in the Ptolemaic pTurin 1791 of Iuf-anekh. See R. Lepsius, *Das Totenbuch der Aegypten nach dem hieroglyphischen Papyrus in Turin*, Leipzig 1842, Pl. XXXVII.
- Fig. 13 BD 123 (right) and BD 75 (left) respectively in the 21st dyn. pBritish Museum 10554 of Nesitanebtishru. See E.A. Wallis Budge, *The Greenfield Papyrus in the British Museum*, London 1912, Pl. 33.
- Fig. 14 BD 42 in the 21st dyn. pCairo CG 40012 / JE 95838 of Gatseshen. See R. Lucarelli, *The Book of the Dead of Gatseshen*, Leiden 2006, Photos 30. (= E. Naville, *Le papyrus hiératique de Katseshni*, Paris 1914, Pl. XXX).
- Fig. 15 BD 42 in the Ramesside pParis BN 38-45 of Sutimes. See E. Naville, *Das ägyptische Totenbuch der XVIII. bis XX. Dynastie*, Band 1, *Text und Vignetten*, Graz 1971 (= Berlin 1886), Pl. LVII, Pd.
- Fig. 16 BD 125 in the 19th dyn. pBritish Museum 10470 of Ani. See E.A. Wallis Budge, *The Papyrus of Ani*, Vol. 1, London 1913, Pl. 33 and R.O. Faulkner, *The Ancient Egyptian Book of the Dead*, New York 1972, 118-119.
- Fig. 17 Detail from BD 125 in the 21st dyn. pLeiden T.3 of Tayuheryt. See M. Heerma van Voss, *Zwischen Grab und Paradies*, Basel 1971, Taf. 18.
- Fig. 18 Detail from BD 17 in the anonymous Ramesside pDublin 4. See E. Naville, *Das ägyptische Totenbuch der XVIII. bis XX. Dynastie*, Band 1, *Text und Vignetten*, Graz 1971 (= Berlin 1886), Pl. XXX, Da.
- Fig. 19 Detail from BD 17 in the Ramesside pLeiden T.2 of Qenna. See E. Naville, *Das ägyptische Totenbuch der XVIII. bis XX. Dynastie*, Band 1, *Text und Vignetten*, Graz 1971 (= Berlin 1886), Pl. XXX, La.
- Fig. 20 BD 65 in the 19th dyn. pBrussels E 5043 of Neferrenpet. See H. Milde, *The Vignettes in the Book of the Dead of Neferrenpet*, Leiden 1991, Pl.26, vignette 43.

- Fig. 21 BD 10 in the 18th dyn. pCairo CG 51189 / JE 95839 of Iouiya. See T.M. Davis, *The Funeral Papyrus of Iouiya*. Theodore M. Davis' excavations: *Bibân el Molûk*. London 1908, Pl. XI.
- Fig. 22 Detail from BD 110 in the 19th dyn. pBritish Museum 10470 of Ani. See E.A. Wallis Budge, *The Papyrus of Ani*, Vol. 1, London 1913, Pl. 35 and R.O. Faulkner, *The Ancient Egyptian Book of the Dead*, New York 1972, 110-111.
- Fig. 23 BD 68 in the 19th dyn. pBrussels E 5043 of Neferrenpet. See H. Milde, *The Vignettes in the Book of the Dead of Neferrenpet*, Leiden 1991, Pl.27, vignette 46.
- Fig. 24 Detail of BD 17 in the anonymous Ramesside pDublin 4 (left) and the Ramesside pLeiden T.2 of Qenna (right). See E. Naville, *Das ägyptische Totenbuch der XVIII. bis XX. Dynastie*, Band 1, *Text und Vignetten*, Graz 1971 (= Berlin 1886), Pl. XXVIII, Da and La.
- Fig. 25 BD 125b in the 18th dyn. pLouvre 3068+3113 of Nebqed. See Th. Devéria, P. Pierret, *Le Papyrus de Neb Qed, exemplaire hiéroglyphique du Livre des Morts*, Paris 1872, Pl. 8-9.
- Fig. 26 Golden shrine of Tutankhamun in the Cairo Museum (JE 61481), mirrored duplication.
- Fig. 27 BD 36 in the Ramesside pBerlin P. 3002 of Nakht-Amun. See Irmtraut Munro, *Das Totenbuch des Nacht-Amun aus der Ramessidenzeit*, Wiesbaden 1997, Taf. 15. Also in E. Naville, *Das ägyptische Totenbuch der XVIII. bis XX. Dynastie*, Band 1, *Text und Vignetten*, Graz 1971 (= Berlin 1886), Pl. XLIX, Ba.
- Fig. 28 BD 36 in the 19th dyn. pBritish Museum 10471 of Nakht. See R.O. Faulkner, *The Ancient Egyptian Book of the Dead*, New York 1972, 59.