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Assemblage Theory and Remix Culture in the Book of the Dead: A Case Study of Repeated Spells

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Abstract

Several Book of the Dead spells are repeated or duplicated *in toto* in many manuscripts. This phenomenon has long been identified, although rarely studied in detail. However, the broader intertextuality present in the form of shared passages across many spells has received relatively little attention. This article reanalyzes a collection of such intertextual features through a case study of two Ptolemaic Period manuscripts: the papyrus of Pasherashakhet and Iuefankh. One feature is the relationship between spells 51 and 52 as attested in the complete reduplication of spell 51 at the beginning of spell 52. The second feature is the insertion in the papyrus of Pasherashakhet of a passage—otherwise known from spell 42—at the end of spell 51. After assessing previous interpretations of these features, the author suggests that the frameworks of Assemblage Theory and remix culture can lead to a better understanding of the textual relationships and the processes of scribal transmission. These conclusions are then put into dialogue with recent developments in the study of ancient Egyptian literature to further clarify the benefits of approaching textual transmission as a functional, contextual, problem-solving, and creative craft.

Keywords

Book of the Dead, Assemblage Theory, Remix, Scribal Culture, Transmission, Coffin Texts, Production, Reproduction, Repeated Text, Textual Criticism, Saite Recension

Introduction

The phenomenon of the repeated¹ spells in the so-called ‘Saite Recension’ of the Book of the Dead has recently been studied by Malcolm Mosher, who concluded that their small variations demand a more nuanced view than considering them as simple equivalents.² Not all repetitions have been treated equally, however. The phenomenon of repeated text in ancient Egyptian religious literature is much more widespread than has been thus far recognized, and, in fact, such repetition is at the very heart of the process of composition. This paper begins with the Book of the Dead papyrus of Pasherashakhet, now in the J. Paul Getty Museum, which the author is preparing for publication. The manuscript shows a rare variant passage inserted at the end of spell 51 attested in a group of five other manuscript witnesses.³ The variant passage is otherwise known from spell 42. Its insertion into this section has been described as ‘inexplicable.’⁴ Yet, spell 52 immediately following spell 51 contains, in fact, a repetition of text found in spell 51, but with an expansion at the end of the spell. By invoking ideas borrowed from assemblage theory, and its counterparts in remix culture, we can recast the ‘inexplicable’ quality of this insertion as the very method by which new spells were created. That is, what our modern designations single out as spells 51 and 52 disguise the fact that the initial passage of both spells consists of the same composition. The variant passage in the papyrus of Pasherashakhet and its parallels bear witness to this process by which scribes ‘assembled’ passages to form new compositions, helping to shed light on methodological questions about transmission.⁵ This paper will provide a new view on the relationship between these compositions and their transmission history through the papyrus of Pasherashakhet.

The Papyrus of Pasherashakhet

The research for this paper began through my ongoing work on the papyrus of Pasherashakhet (fig. 1).⁶ The papyrus scroll consists of twenty-three sheets of papyrus joined together approximately

¹ For example, in the Bonn *Totenbuch* database, a selection of spells has been treated as duplicates categorized primarily under their lower spell number, e.g., spell 10 = spell 48; spell 11 = spell 49; spell 12 = spell 120; spell 13 = spell 121; spell 100 = spell 129; and spell 123 = spell 139. To find these spells in the *Totenbuch* list, the user is directed to the lower spell number and the higher spell number is omitted from the subsequent list.

² Mosher 2020: 341–46. See also the discussion of BD 120 in Mosher 2023: 418–23.

³ See Mosher 2016: 282, n. 422, and 298; Mosher 2017: 47, n. 23.

⁴ Mosher 2017: n. 23: ‘This entire section was inextricably moved from §6 of BD 42 to here, but note that the section was omitted in BM 9944 for both spells. See §6 of BD 42 and Observations for that spell.’ In personal communication with the author (June 2023), Mosher stated that ‘inextricably’ in this sentence was a typo meant to be ‘inexplicably.’ As such, ‘inexplicable’ has been used in the article above.

⁵ See the comments of Stadler 2023: 273: ‘Do the surrounding texts in the single manuscripts contribute to an understanding of each other? Is there a certain logic or—to use a problematic and well-worn term—a grammar of selection and combination behind them. Egyptologists have not dealt with those questions widely, and the sheer amount of texts witnesses, the great variation among them, and the range of manifold attestation contexts of the Book of the Dead seem to be a substantial obstacle.’

⁶ I would like to thank Sara Cole, Judith Barr, the Getty, and all the Getty staff for allowing me the privilege of working on their Book of the Dead manuscript collection and for all their help during several visits to examine and collate the manuscripts. Pasherashakhet’s papyrus will appear as catalog number 5 in Scalf 2024. I want to express my sincere appreciation for collaboration with Beth Wang and ongoing discussions with Malcolm Mosher. I would

every twelve centimeters. 2.5 centimeters of the first leading columns are missing and the final sheet breaks off after eleven centimeters. The top of the manuscript is lost throughout, but based on parallel manuscripts, only three to six centimeters of text are missing, plus several centimeters for the illustrations and upper border space. It was written in columns of cursive hieroglyphs⁷ with a selection of Book of the Dead spells following the so-called ‘Saite’ sequence,⁸ but with many ‘omissions’⁹ from the 165 spells known from papyri like Iuefankh’s in Turin, whence we get our spell numbers through Lepsius.¹⁰ The papyrus belonged to a man named *P3-šr-š3-ht* ‘Pasherashakhet’ who held the title of *iry-3 Hnsw m W3s.t Nfr-htp* ‘doorkeeper of Khonsu-in-Thebes Neferhotep,’ placing him in the larger Karnak temple administration.¹¹ His mother had the name *T3-br* ‘Taber’ and the title ‘head of the house.’¹²



FIGURE 1. An overview of the Book of the Dead papyrus of Pasherashakhet, JGM 83.AI.46.2 (Digital image courtesy of Getty’s Open Content Program; <https://www.getty.edu/art/collection/object/103XZZ>).

also like to acknowledge the support of the Institute for the Study of Ancient Cultures of the University of Chicago. Finally, much gratitude goes to Birmingham Egyptology, all the organizers, and the other participants for the opportunity to discuss these ideas at the Birmingham Egyptology Symposium in May 2023.

⁷ For ‘cursive’ hieroglyphs, also known as ‘linear’ hieroglyphs (following terminology used by Champollion), see Lucarelli 2020: 578–89; Díaz Iglesias 2023: 1–26; Verhoeven 2023: 170–75.

⁸ Using ‘Saite’ recension is now a traditional designation, although it is important to point out that the sequence had already been established by at least the Twenty-Fifth Dynasty, and, therefore, the use of ‘Saite’ as a description no longer serves as a temporal limit. See *inter alia* Rößler-Köhler 1999: 226–27; Taylor 2009: 21–22; Einaudi 2012; Scalf 2017: 25; Munro 2017: 54; Balanda 2020: 70–71. 108; Mosher 2023: 446; Wüthrich 2023: 442–43.

⁹ I am hesitant to use the term ‘omissions’ for compositions that may or may not have appeared in a particular manuscript. Recent scholarship has focused on the unique nature of individual manuscripts, and it has become clear that Egyptian scribes, in general, did not conceptualize what we call the Book of the Dead, their *r3.w n.w prt.t m hrw* ‘spells of going out in the day,’ as a specific set of particular spells. Therefore, an individual manuscript may or may not have certain spells without implying those spells were ‘omitted’ from a necessary sequence. For further discussion, see Quack 2009; Scalf 2017; Stadler 2023; Weber 2023. Note the comments of Goelet 2023: 180: ‘No design feature of the Book of the Dead was absolutely required. An Egyptian scribe wished to produce a Book of the Dead—never *the* Book of the Dead, which, in any event, would be impossible.’

¹⁰ Turin 1791 = [TM 57201](https://www.turin.papyri.org/TIP/ViewDoc.aspx?docId=000001791). Images are available in the Museo Egizio’s online collection search (<https://collezionepapiri.museoegizio.it/en-GB/document/408/>). See Lepsius 1842. For historical accounts of Turin 1791’s pivotal role in nineteenth century Book of the Dead scholarship, see Lüscher 2010; 2017; 2023.

¹¹ Ranke 1935: 118; TM Name ID 967; TM Person ID 58624. On the role of *iry-3 n Hnsw m W3s.t Nfr-htp* ‘doorkeeper of Khonsu in Thebes Neferhotep’ in the larger Karnak administration, see Villar Gómez 2017. For this hypothesis of Khonsu, see Klotz 2012: 81–90. Cf. to the two stelae from the Khonsu temple inscribed with healing story of the princess Bentresh from Bakhtan. See Ritner 2003: 361–66. The second stela, previously under study by Robert K. Ritner, will appear in a future publication of the Epigraphic Survey of the University of Chicago (via personal communication to the author in November 2021).

¹² Ranke 1935: 356; TM Name ID 1193; TM Person ID 60978.

The papyrus ultimately derived from the collections of Sir Thomas Phillipps via a gift to the Getty by Mr. and Mrs. H. P. Kraus in 1983.¹³ Object biography prior to ownership by Phillipps is currently unknown. High resolution images are available through the Getty's online collection search.¹⁴ The papyrus has been treated by Malcolm Mosher as part of his publication project on the Book of the Dead, Saite through Ptolemaic Periods, where it appears among what he calls the 'early hieroglyphic set' as source Getty D.¹⁵ As Mosher's work is a collective study, it does not contain a continuous discussion of this papyrus, but extensive references and textual notes can be found under the treatment of individual spells.¹⁶ Mosher notes the difficulty in dating this manuscript, citing the work of Tamás Mekis which suggested that it may be late dynastic (thus pre-Ptolemaic), but in a later volume of the series, Mosher suggests 'that Getty D should be dated similar to that of Turin 1791, possible late third or early second century.'¹⁷ However, the similarity in many passages and orthographic conventions between Pasherashakhet's papyrus and the papyrus of Pasenedjemibnakht suggests that they are very closely related and likely derive from similar source material from a contemporary period.¹⁸ As the date range for Pasenedjemibnakht's papyrus has been established with a high degree of confidence to within a quarter century between 330–310 BCE,¹⁹ it is very likely that Pasherashakhet's papyrus dates within plus or minus approximately twenty-five years of this timeframe, ca. 375–275 BCE. A complete edition of Pasherashakhet's papyrus with introduction, transcription, transliteration, translation, and brief commentary will appear in the catalog of Book of the Dead manuscripts from the Getty that the author is currently working to complete.²⁰

Repetition as Assemblage: Book of the Dead Spells 51-52

During the research preparing the catalog edition for Pasherashakhet's papyrus, recent theoretical frameworks were invoked to better understand several interesting features of Book of the Dead spells 51 and 52. These new observations apply generally to aspects of spells 51 and 52, but also with respect to Pasherashakhet's specific papyrus. In general, these two spells are interesting because both contain the same composition. The complete text of spell 51 is repeated at the beginning of spell 52, where that section of text is then expanded by additional material added at the end.

¹³ For an account of the Egyptian manuscripts in Phillipps's collection, see Barr 2024.

¹⁴ JPM 83.AI.46.2 (<https://www.getty.edu/art/collection/object/103XZZ>); <https://totenbuch.awk.nrw.de/objekt/tm134875>.

¹⁵ Mosher 2016: 15–19, 74, 86, *et passim* throughout the volumes.

¹⁶ For the transliteration and translation of the individual texts, see under specific spells in the *SPBDStudies* series and Scalf 2024.

¹⁷ Mosher 2017: 2.

¹⁸ The papyrus of Pasenedjemibnakht is currently in the Louvre (E 11078 = [TM 56856](#)). Photos are available through the Louvre's collection search (<https://collections.louvre.fr/en/ark:/53355/cl010379006>).

¹⁹ Elias and Mekis 2020–21: 91–92, with diagram 2 on p. 94. See also De Meulenaere 2002: 492; Einaudi 2015: 21–22; Mosher 2016: 15; Einaudi 2016: 6.

²⁰ To appear as *The Getty Book of the Dead* in Scalf 2024.

For the sake of illustrating the parallels between the two spells, Table 1 below displays the two spells side by side from their Ptolemaic version in the papyrus of Iuefankh from Lepsius's edition.²¹ Following the note of recitation by the owner, the initial body of the spell is nearly identical in both cases and the textual parallels can be followed phrase by phrase throughout the spells.²² Spell 51 has the incipit title²³ *rʿ n tm šmī.t m šhd m hr.t-ntr* 'spell for not walking upside down in the realm of god,' while spell 52 has the incipit title *rʿ n tm wnm ḥs.w m hr.t-ntr* 'spell of not eating feces in the realm of god.' Incipit titles helped to recast the texts for different audiences over time, what Milstein has called 'revision through introduction.'²⁴ Furthermore, the so-called 'repeated' spells in the religious literature serve as pertinent examples of the somewhat flexible nature of such 'titles,' since the same texts have been given separate descriptive 'titles' through reuse, suggesting that these 'titles' do not have a direct, one-to-one relationship expressing the 'purpose' or 'meaning' of a given composition (i.e., spell) as such meanings change and are reinterpreted over time. An excellent example directly related to this discussion is the papyrus of Irtyuru (ISACM E10486F), where the title of spell 52 occurs in the header above the spell, but then the title and text of spell 51 follow in the columns below.²⁵ Additional evidence of this fact can be found in the development of the use of such incipits at all, which were a less common feature in the Pyramid Texts, but they became more common *for the same texts* as such compositions were transmitted through the Coffin Texts and Book of the Dead.²⁶ Later reversing this trend, in manuscripts of the First Book of Breathing, which were assembled and remixed from a 'Saite' sequence of Book of the Dead spells, spell titles were most often omitted, but occasionally still present.²⁷

Table 1. Spells 51 and 52 from the Papyrus of Iuefankh (Turin 1791 = [TM 57201](#))



²¹ Lepsius 1842: pl. XXI. Collated with the online images of the Museo Egizio.

²² Mosher 2016a: 42, n. 1, and 61, n. 40 places the papyrus of Iuefankh in his version 1 of spell 51 and version 3 of spell 52. For additional resources to compare versions of spells 51 and 52, see: Lepsius 1842: XXI; Carrier 2010a: 185–88; Carrier 2010b: 121, 183–84; Quirke 2013: 131–32; Lüscher 2022: 57–63.




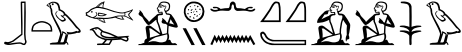









²³ The implications of the English translation "title" are at least partially inappropriate for how the ancient scribes and users appear to have understood these phrases, since incipits show variation and repetition between compositions. On the use of 'incipit' as an alternative, cf. van Dijk 2007. The use of 'incipit title' in this article designates these sections of text simply as at the beginning of the composition, describing the text according to at least one version in the redaction history.

²⁴ Milstein 2016.

²⁵ See Allen 1960: LXIX; Scalf (ed.) 2017: 269. Such remixes demonstrate one limitation of our system of spell numbers. Additionally, the scribe made a conscious and meaningful substitution at the end of that spell by replacing *n ḥnd.n=i ḥr=f m tb.ty=i* with *nn šmī=i ḥr=f* 'I will not walk on it.'

²⁶ I will discuss the how incipit titles developed and helped to recast texts in future publications (e.g., Scalf and Wang forth.).

²⁷ See Scalf 2020: 163.

§T	<i>r3 n tm šmi.(t) m šhd m hr.t-ntr</i>	‘Spell of not going upside down in the realm of god’	<i>r3 n tm wnm ḥs.w m hr.t-ntr</i>	‘Spell of not eating feces in the realm of god’
				
§P	<i>ḏd mdw in Wsir Tw=f- nḥ m3'-hrw</i>	‘Recitation by Osiris Iuefankh, true of voice.’	<i>ḏd mdw in Wsir Tw=f- nḥ m3'-hrw</i>	‘Recitation by Osiris Iuefankh, true of voice.’
				
§1	<i>bw.t=i sp-sn nn wnm=i sw</i>	‘My abomination! I will not eat it.’	<i>bw.t=i sp-sn nn wnm=i sw</i>	‘My abomination! I will not eat it.’
				
§2	<i>bw.t=i pw ḥs.w</i>	‘My abomination is feces.’	<i>bw.t=i pw ḥs.w</i>	‘My abomination is feces.’
				
§3	<i>nn wnm=i sw</i>	‘I will not eat it.’	<i>nn wnm=i sw</i>	‘I will not eat it.’
				
§4	<i>ḥtp-k3=i ky ḏd tn nn ḥm=i im</i>	‘As for my—variant: your—excrement, I will not fall therein.’	<i>ḥtp k3=tn ḥr m ḥ.t=i</i>	‘As for your excrement which fell from my body,’
				
§5	<i>n{n} r.n=i r=f m 'wy=i</i>	‘I do not touch it with my hands’	<i>nn r=i r=f m 'wy=i</i>	‘I will not touch it with my hands’
				
§6	<i>n{n} ḥnd.n=i hr=f m tb.ty=i</i> (Spell 51 ends)	‘I do not walk on it with my sandals.’	<i>n{n} ḥnd.n=i hr=f m tb.ty=i</i> (Spell 52 Continues) ²⁸	‘I do not walk on it with my sandals.’

²⁸ To save space, only a translation of the remainder of spell 52 is provided here as there is no further text from spell 51 for comparison. Textual notes have been omitted. For other versions and editions, see Quirke 2013: 132–33; Mosher 2017: 56–70; Lüscher 2022: 59–63; cf. CT 772 in Faulkner 2004: 302.

‘On what—variant: what—will you live, so say the gods who come to him, in this (place) where you were brought? I will live on these seven loaves of bread which were brought, her bread before Horus and his bread before Thoth. Where has it been granted to you that you have eaten? So said the gods to him. Osiris Iuefankh, true of voice, will eat under this sycamore of Hathor, (my) sovereign. For the offering gifts, I have given my leftovers. I have apportioned the fields in Busiris. It is fertile for me in Heliopolis. I will live on the bread of white emmer and my beer of red barley. The household of my father and my mother were given to me. O doorkeeper of the canal, open for me. Be wide for me. Make for me a path so that I may dwell in any place I want.’

Both texts begin *bw.t=i sp-sn nn wnm=i sw bw.t=i pw hs.w nn wnm=i sw* ‘My abomination! I will not eat it. Feces is my abomination. I will not eat it.’ Here, after the introductory phrases, there is a slight difference between the two spells. Yet, in the manuscript of Iuefankh, the difference itself is revealing. Both texts use *htp-kʹ* as a euphemism for excrement.²⁹ Note that in spell 51, the first-person pronoun *=i* is used, but then a second person plural *=tn* ‘you’ is marked by *ky dd* ‘another saying’ as a variant. It is exactly this variant, using *=tn* in *htp-kʹ=tn*, that is found in the version in spell 52,³⁰ suggesting a further relationship and potential dependence in the transmission history of spells 51 and 52 (at least in Iuefankh’s manuscript version since this variant is not present in all traditions). After this variant, the two texts once again sync with two final passages: *nn r=i r=f m ʹwy=i* ‘I will not touch it with my hands’³¹ and *n hnd.n=i hr=f m tb.ty=i* ‘I do not tread upon it with my sandals.’³² At this point, spell 51 comes to an end. However, spell 52 continued with a long passage following the section that was identical to spell 51. This helps to illustrate how ‘new’ religious compositions could be formed by ancient Egyptian scribes. They often repeated, glossed, or expanded on material at hand to produce ‘new’ texts.³³

When we look then at the bigger picture, we see that the beginning of spell 52 was a repetition of spell 51; that spell 52 is distinguished from spell 51 by its final elaboration; and that spells 51 and 52 may have been ‘assembled’ by remixing the same composition.

A Brief Overview of the Transmission of Spells 51-52

Like many other compositions within the corpora of ancient Egyptian religious literature, the transmission history of spells 51 and 52 is exceedingly complex, with our modern numbering system for individual ‘spells’ and terminology for distinct corpora adding to the convolution.³⁴ That is, the ancient Egyptians did not recognize a corpus of ‘Pyramid Texts’ separate from the ‘Coffin Texts’

²⁹ TLA Lemma 111500; *Wb.* 3: 195.

³⁰ Note the appearance *htp kʹ=tn* in spell 51 of the papyrus of Nesshutefnut (and others of “Version 1” of Mosher 2017: 43).

³¹ There is a slight variant in §5 where the scribe added *.n* to the verbal form in the version found in spell 51.

³² In both cases, the scribe employed *nn* as the negation reflecting the interchange of *n* and *nn* in post New Kingdom texts.

³³ For further discussion, see Scalf 2015, 2020, and 2023.

³⁴ For further discussion, see Scalf and Wang forth.

separate from the ‘Book of the Dead’ and so on, at least not in the same manner we do.³⁵ Rather, these modern designations make attempts to delineate research strategies for tackling what had been a large body of religious literature with intertextual relationships across vast time and space. These limitations in our disciplinary methodologies have long been known and identified, with strategies developed to reduce the effect on research results; nevertheless, established conceptualizations based on these categories have proven difficult to transcend. In the cases of Pasherashakhet’s and Iuefankh’s papyri, the sequence of spells 51 to 52 were not assembled newly for those manuscripts. Rather, these compositions and parts of these compositions had been subject to extensive editing and remixing for over a millennium prior to their appearance in these two manuscripts.³⁶

In the context of the present study, various phrases from Book of the Dead spells 51 and 52 had a long and prolific history, for ‘feces’ (*hs.w*) as ‘abomination’ (*bw.t*) was a particularly popular theme in the religious literature. This prolific history is only partially revealed in T. George Allen’s cross indexes, which shows that passages from spell 51 are not only repeated in spell 52, but also in spells 102, 124, and 189.³⁷ Furthermore, these spells are not the only places where these passages have been repeated, assembled, and remixed in the Book of the Dead, as selections of these same passages appear in spells 51, 52, 53, 82, 102, 116, 124, 178 Naville, and 189. To be clear, the intertextuality of these passages does not imply a direct dependence upon each other. Rather, the repetitions simply demonstrate how common it was for scribes to incorporate, rework, and assemble short passages together in the composition and transmission of these texts.

Assembling and remixing these very passages had already been occurring for centuries, as versions appeared among the Coffin Texts in spells 173, 174, 181, 184, 185, 186, 187, 188, 189, 190, 191, 192, 193, 195, 197, 199, 201, 202, 203, 204, 205, 206, 207, 208, 211, 213, 214, 217, 218, 220, and 772,³⁸ as well as among the Pyramid Texts in spells 210, 409, and 710. This plethora of repetition calls into question several entrenched ideas: first, that each of these was considered a distinct, individual composition (as suggested by separate modern numbers), and second, that transmission can be accurately summarized by suggesting only one version such as CT spell 772 is the ‘origin’ of a particular descendent such as BD spell 52.³⁹ While CT spell 772 and BD spell 52 are clearly and closely related, it is much more difficult to pinpoint specific origins for the shorter version of text found in BD spell 51, as this short text appeared in so many versions during its transmission history. In studying transmission, we of course cannot rely solely on such short passages to determine genealogical relationships between compositions or manuscripts, particularly because such terse, distinctive passages would have been easily memorized. In fact, these assemblages further demonstrate the difficulties in untangling the many layers of these compositions and the problematic nature of direct, linear stemma.⁴⁰

³⁵ See, e.g., Mathieu 2004; Hays 2006–7.

³⁶ Where additional edits were made such as the variant discussed above.

³⁷ Allen 1950: 140.

³⁸ For a comprehensive study of these spells, see Topmann 2002.

³⁹ Or, e.g., the same repeated passages as found in CT 218 and BD 53, as noted by Quirke 2013: 134.

⁴⁰ See the discussion in Scalf 2015.

While variant or reminiscent passages appeared across the spells listed above, the predecessors to spells 51 and 52 in the papyri of Pasherashakhet and Iuefankh are not well attested for the New Kingdom. Only four sources (three papyri and one tomb) were gathered by Barbara Lüscher for spell 51 and only two sources for spell 52.⁴¹ In these sources, spells 51 and 52 do not appear together in close sequence.⁴² Likewise, very few sources have been identified from the Third Intermediate Period. Therefore, it seems likely, although unsurprising, that an important occurrence of remixing these compositions and their sequencing as found in the manuscripts of Pasherashakhet and Iuefankh (among others) happened during the Twenty-Fifth and Twenty-Sixth Dynasties as the so-called ‘Saite Recension’ was established.⁴³ This is perhaps further demonstrated by the fact that, despite being rather uncommon on manuscripts from the early New Kingdom, the shared text of spells 51 and 52 also began to appear on coffins from the Twenty-Fifth and Twenty-Sixth Dynasties.⁴⁴

Assemblage of Spells 51-52 in Pasherashakhet’s Papyrus

How do the features of spells 51–52, as exemplified above from the papyrus of Iuefankh, apply to Pasherashakhet’s papyrus and its unusual variant? Well, like the papyrus of Iuefankh, the papyrus of Pasherashakhet has spell 51, which is followed by spell 52. However, there is an additional passage found between the two spells (fig. 2). As Malcolm Mosher and others have noted, this passage contains a section of text otherwise known from spell 42.⁴⁵ If we laid out a simple identification of the passages, it would seem like we have the interloper passage from spell 42 interspersed between an otherwise ‘typical’ sequence for manuscripts of this period. It is important to remember in this context that Pasherashakhet’s papyrus does not include many spells in this larger ‘Saite’ sequence. In Mosher’s edition he described the passage as ‘inextricably moved from §6 of Book of the Dead spell 42 to here.’⁴⁶ However, this framing suggests that we should treat this

⁴¹ Lüscher 2022: 55–63. Only two of these sources are given in the Bonn *Totenbuch* database for spell 51 (Lüscher 2022: XXV notes the missing reference to spell 51 in the database for TT 183), while an additional source (TM 133557) is listed for spell 52.

⁴² In the papyrus of Nu, spell 51 appears between spells ...→47→108→47→104→103→51→119→36→37→... in ‘sequence 2’ of Lapp 1997: 38. However, note that spells 52→53 do appear together in sequence in this papyrus (Lapp 1997: 39, ‘Sub-sequence 4a: 52-53-61-28.’ Sequences in the papyrus of Ptahmose (TM 133562) and TT 183 (TM 135027) are uncertain.

⁴³ In the papyrus of Iahtesnakht, the scribe wrote the text of spell 51, repeated the same text in spell 52, but then left a blank space before and after *nh=f r=f*, signaling where the repeated text ended and the elaboration for spell 52 began.

⁴⁴ E.g., PAHMA 6-19912. The coffin has been edited as part of Rita Lucarelli’s *The Book of the Dead in 3D* project. Note that on the project’s webpage for the coffin, the confusing nature of the repeated text is reflected in the description of the coffin’s inscription as: ‘The inscription is derived from a combination of Book of the Dead spells 51 and 52’ (likewise, several improvements can be made to the edition of the text). Other coffins include Cairo CG 41001, Cairo CG 41058, and BM EA 22940.

⁴⁵ See Mosher 2016: 298; Mosher 2017: 47 and 49.

⁴⁶ Mosher 2017: 47, n. 23. In personal communication with the author (June 2023), Mosher notes that he had intended to write ‘inexplicably’ rather than ‘inextricably.’

passage as a section of spell 42, rather than treating the entire composition as a reworking of the composition we call spell 51.⁴⁷

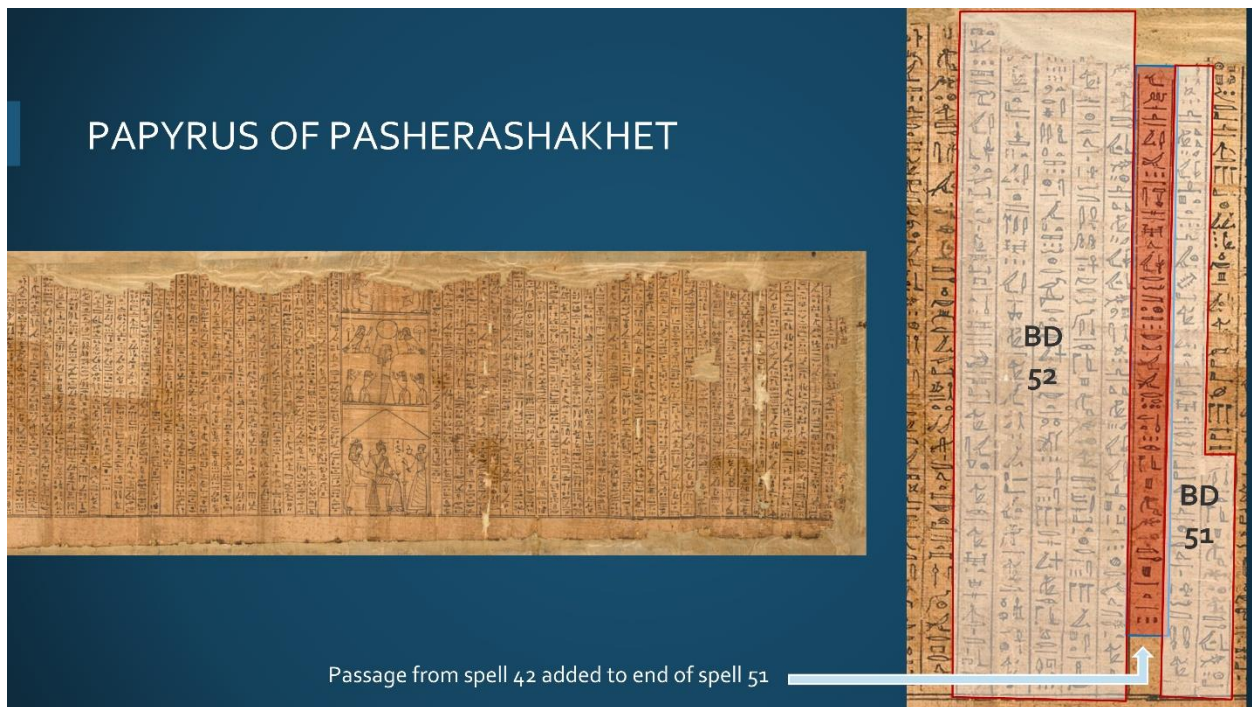


FIGURE 2. Book of the Dead spell 51, a passage known from spell 42, and spell 52 from the Papyrus of Pasherashakhet JPMG 83.AI.46.2 (Digital image courtesy of Getty’s Open Content Program).

Yet, there are several reasons why this passage may have been placed here. First, it is not found only in Pasherashakhet’s papyrus, but a small group of manuscripts reliant on the same sources, as identified by Malcom Mosher.⁴⁸ If we remember that spell 51 had the incipit *rʿ n tm šmī.t m šhd m hr:t-ntr* ‘spell for not going upside down in the divine realm,’ then one reason this passage may have been added here was because it began: *tnw p.t tnw ʿ* ‘Where is the sky? Where is the earth?’—an appropriate contextual symmetry for a ‘spell for not going upside down.’ Furthermore, if spell 52 was itself a remixed composition using the same text assembled in spell 51, why couldn’t this interspersed section be a scribe’s attempt at remixing spell 51 in yet another way—the same way we find similar text remixed previously in the Coffin Texts and Pyramid Texts (as listed above). From this perspective, no longer is the appearance of this passage ‘inexplicable’ because it is exactly through such remixing practice that the compositions were developed in the first place,⁴⁹ as

⁴⁷ It is important to note here that ‘spell 51’ is a modern designation. It has not yet been completely determined how ancient Egyptian scribes delineated individual compositions from each other in the ancient Egyptian religious texts like the Book of the Dead. See the article of Scalf and Wang forth. For one approach, see Mosher 2020: 341–46.

⁴⁸ Mosher 2017: 47 (with n. 23) and 49.

⁴⁹ Cf. the use of the masculine dependent pronoun *sw* in the passage *nn wnm=i sw* in BD 51–52 following feminine *bw:t=i sp-sn*. It seems that *sw* is masculine because it refers to *hs* (not *bw:t*). Other occurrences of the text support this interpretation. For example, in copies of BD 124, like that in the papyrus of Nu, we find *nn wnm=i hs* ‘I will not eat feces.’ However, note that in Nu’s papyrus, BD 51 has *nn wnm=i bw:t* in the first reference and *nn wnm=i sw* in

made immediately clear by the remixing of the same passages in Book of the Dead spells 51, 52, 53, 82, 102, 116, 124, 178 Naville, 189, and their predecessors.⁵⁰

It is possible that this passage from spell 42 entered the manuscript tradition through a copying error, the scribe looking up at their source and choosing the wrong column. However, there are several lines of reason to suggest against it. First, if this was the case, the scribe just so happened to choose to start at the beginning of a completely cogent grammatical construction (not in the middle of a passage). Second, even if this were the case, it would still be legitimate to ask what the other scribes who produced a version of the text following this “tradition”⁵¹ thought they were writing. Third, as Mosher has pointed out, in most of the manuscripts that included this phrase at the end of spell 51, this very passage did not appear in spell 42. In this regard, it seems more likely that the text was produced with intention and that scribes who found it in their source material produced versions of it that they believed were meaningful. Constant remixing occurred as scribes attempted to interpret their source material.⁵²

Assemblage Theory and the Book of the Dead

Using the ideas of assemblage theory and remix culture, we can therefore reorient our perspectives about how ancient Egyptian religious texts were created away from modern conceptualizations of ‘original authorship’ and more to ideas of sharing present in the collective practices of ancient text creation. Furthermore, assemblage theory reframes the entire discussion away from the distinction between production and reproduction, the utility of which has, in my opinion, largely run its

the second reference after *hs* had been introduced. In the various remixing processes that produced BD 51–52 in Pasherashakhet and Iuefankh, the scribes freely employed the masculine pronoun *sw* despite not yet introducing a masculine antecedent to which it referred. Several manuscripts (e.g., Iahtesnakht and Amenemhet) used *s*, an ambiguous writing of the pronoun that could be either *s(y)* or *s(w)*.

⁵⁰ The type of assemblage demonstrated in Pasherashakhet’s papyrus appears all throughout ancient Egyptian religious literature (as well as other literature) and is particularly prominent in the Book of the Dead. For example, compositions known by the modern designation spells 55 and 38B were often combined (see Quirke 2013: 138 for Leiden T5). In Pasherashakhet’s papyrus, the spell sequence follows 54→56, omitting spell 55 as found in Iuefankh’s papyrus. These two spells may have been grouped together, without the intervening spell 55, because of their similarity, as each spell overlaps in most of its content. However, the text of spell 56 here is interesting. It begins with a version of the text that has been used to distinguish spell 56 from spell 54. Spell 56 reads *i Itm di=k n=i ꜥw nꜣm imi šr.ty=k ink smsw wr hry-ib Wnw.t* “O Atum, may you give to me the sweet air which is in your nostrils. I am the great elder who is in the Hermopolite nome.” Spell 54 reads *i Itm imi n=i ꜥw nꜣm imi šr.ty=k ink swḥ.t twy n.t (n)gg* “O Atum, give to me the sweet air which is in your nostrils. I am that egg of the cackler.” Pasherashakhet’s papyrus follows the version of spell 56 here, but the remainder of the spell adheres to a version of the text also found in spell 54 (perhaps this is why it was omitted from the sources for spell 56 in Mosher 2017: 129–46; however, columns x+65–67 are also omitted from the sources for spell 54 in Mosher 2017: 101–20). Several elements of these spells were repeated again in spell 59. Spell 54 itself expanded upon earlier redactions in Coffin Texts spell 223. Rather than seeing these compilations reduced to, or dismissed as, “errors” or “confusions,” such variants help to document how spells were transformed during the process of transmission.

⁵¹ E.g., spell 51 ‘Version 3’ of Mosher 2017: 47.

⁵² Many examples could be cited, but perhaps relevant to our discussion here is the repetition of spell 75, back-to-back, in the Papyrus of Hor. See Mosher 2017: 421, 427.

course.⁵³ In the remainder of this paper, I would like to provide an introduction to applying this framework to ancient Egyptian religious texts, first to explain the phenomena in the manuscripts described above, and second in an effort to challenge the ongoing application of a productive/re-productive dichotomy, with the ultimate hopes of dismantling its least productive aspects.⁵⁴

Unfortunately, there have been significant divergences and confusions in the way the terms ‘assemblage’ and ‘assemblage theory’ have been used in the secondary literature. I want to point out that the concept of ‘assemblage’ that I am using here is not necessarily that of Deleuze, Guattari, and DeLanda.⁵⁵ The issue was pointed out by Ian Buchanan who noted the problem ‘can be seen in its application in the social sciences, where there is an emerging emphasis on the process of assembling itself. This way of approaching the concept is only possible if one forgets or overlooks the fact that “assemblage” is a translation of “agencement.”’⁵⁶ Thus, I am working with the conceptualization of assemblage theory developed in an article by Johnson-Eilola and Selber. They focused on shifting views in teaching away from valuing traditional ‘originality’ and focusing on problem-solving through remixing. In this regard, this paper uses the term ‘assemblage’ in the sense of Johnson-Eilola and Selber: ‘assemblages are texts built primarily and explicitly from existing texts in order to solve a writing or communication problem in a new context.’⁵⁷ This is a traditional and so-called ‘machinic’ sense, as opposed to the theoretical framework stemming from the work of Deleuze and Guattari. Johnson-Eilola and Selber were trying to reduce the theoretical gap between original composition and ‘remixed’ assemblages: ‘We then consider texts as assemblages, highlighting the rhetorical dimensions of this articulation and challenging the view that remixed texts are essentially derivative texts, a naïve and uncreative form of plagiarism.’⁵⁸

⁵³ See the essays in the volume edited by Gillen 2017. The contributions of Ragazzoli 2017 and 2019: 77–84 and 294–304, particularly how she reinterprets the ‘variant’ (‘le variant’) and the ‘open text’ (‘textes ourverts’), offer useful frameworks for reanalysis. I too follow the same approach as her, in that: ‘... I move from the “paradigm of errors” to a “paradigm of variants” as opening up an avenue to “the psychological and creative aspect of the act of copying”’ (Ragazzoli 2017: 99), where she cites McGillivray 1990, and the basic supposition that ‘... open texts are precisely the result of ... input by a scribe who understands what he is copying and is freely modifying a model, the rules of which are fully understood by him’ (Ragazzoli 2017: 106). Although this approach recognizes the so-called ‘mechanical errors’ often made by scribes, its basic assumptions are quite distinct from a common, traditional approach in Egyptology, partially exemplified in the assessment of the early hieroglyphic Book of the Dead papyrus by Mosher 2016: 15: ‘Further, the texts of many spells [of the early hieroglyphic set] contain a great degree of corruption and confusion ... and it is clear that the master scribes responsible for the master source were considerably ignorant of what the texts were supposed to say, ignorant of words, and occasionally ignorant of signs.’

⁵⁴ I have serious reservations about the universality of the dichotomy suggested in the introductory essay of Gillen 2017: 7, which states: ‘... productive or open traditions are in a state of flux that stands in dialectic relation to shifting social and historical circumstances, while reproductive or closed traditions are frozen at a particular historical moment and their formulations are thereafter faithfully passed down verbatim. ... a continuum between the two poles of dynamic productivity and static reproductivity is by all means relevant to and useful for the description of various types of symbolization, and probably all types of cultural production.’ Further elaboration of my approach is forthcoming within an ongoing project to study the transmission of ancient Egyptian religious literature. See, e.g., Scalf 2015; Scalf 2020; Scalf and Wang forth.

⁵⁵ Deleuze and Guattari 1987; DeLanda 2006.

⁵⁶ Buchanan 2021: 19.

⁵⁷ Johnson-Eilola and Selber 2007: 381.

⁵⁸ Johnson-Eilola and Selber 2007: 376.

Thus Johnson-Eilola and Selber challenge the idea that remixed assemblages of texts are ‘essentially derivative,’ and they suggest that ‘the distinction between original and existing fragments in a text is, if not meaningless, at least secondary’ by noting that ‘To participate productively in culture, we must recognize that previous discourse always-already shapes and constrains the activities of writers, that there is no neutral, non-regulated space from which to begin a writing activity.’⁵⁹ Their focus in the article is on context, ‘understanding how the remixed artifact was redesigned for the new context or how the redesigned artifact is performing in that context.’⁶⁰ They conclude by reconfiguring their notion of ‘creativity,’ which ‘involves extensive research, filtering, recombining, remixing, the making of assemblages that solve problems.’⁶¹ These types of actions are the very ones undertaken by scribes working with ancient Egyptian religious texts like the Book of the Dead. For those scribes, the goal was not ‘original authorship’ in the modern sense, but rather conforming to notions of truth by contributing to the collective cultural lexicon that infused their societies’ belief system. In simpler terms, they sought to reinforce their cultural norms through creative research and writing—the craft (*hmw.t*) of the scribe.⁶² Taking this perspective, the dichotomy of production versus reproduction loses much of its relevance since *all writing by necessity embeds productive and reproductive acts*. The results of an assemblage theory framework dovetail nicely and well complement the ‘Beyond Authors and Copyists’ approach of Chloé Ragazzoli, who observes:

If variation is to be considered as the main mode of transmission, the author moves into the shadows, as well as the copyist, to the benefit of the scribe, the textual craftsman. ... Rather than a deficiency of Egyptian literature, this phenomenon must be read as paradigmatically and functionally linked to the condition of the production and reception of texts in Ancient Egypt. ... In a manuscript and scribal culture, the pairing of an author with his work is much less relevant than processes such as “re-creation,” “re-writing,” “re-appropriation” and “reading-writing.”⁶³

If we then return to where we began, we see that ancient scribes often created assemblages, like spells 51 and 52.⁶⁴ Of course, these assemblages developed from earlier versions of these compositions like Coffin Texts spells 199, 203, and 772.⁶⁵ Rather than seeing the assemblage of passages as ‘inexplicable,’ we should rather retool our frameworks since such repetition and assemblage were the norm. There are several sets of Book of the Dead spells that are repetitions, reflected by the fact that in the Totenbuch project’s database, they can only be looked up by their first occurrence.⁶⁶ For example, spell 10 is listed as 10/48, but no spell 48 is provided in the list of

⁵⁹ Johnson-Eilola and Selber 2007: 381.

⁶⁰ Johnson-Eilola and Selber 2007: 387.

⁶¹ Johnson-Eilola and Selber 2007: 400.

⁶² We should also note that this assemblage theory is not limited to the texts only, but we can also apply it profitably to the remixing of layouts, use of scripts, illustrations, and materiality as well.

⁶³ Ragazzoli 2017: 118.

⁶⁴ And the repetition of the same text again in other spells such as 53 and 189 (which I have not treated in detail in this article). See Lüscher 2022: 155–65.

⁶⁵ As already noted by Quirke 2013: 131–33 and others.

⁶⁶ See under ‘Sprüche’ at <https://totenbuch.awk.nrw.de/>.

spells, since spell 48 is a ‘repetition’ of spell 10.⁶⁷ However, only certain kinds of repetitions have been treated in this fashion, and thus spells 51 and 52 are listed separately, as are spells 2 and 65 Lepsius, even though their texts also overlap.⁶⁸ Yet, this type of repetition is absolutely fundamental to the dissemination of ancient Egyptian religious literature, going back to earlier corpora such as the Coffin Texts and Pyramid Texts. For example, on the inner and outer coffins of Djehutynakht, several compositions are repeated, including the same composition found on four separate occasions in three copies of Coffin Texts spell 93 and one copy of Coffin Texts spell 152 (both of which contain overlapping text passages).⁶⁹ Likewise, the coffin of Iry has three copies of Coffin Texts spell 93, as well as many other ‘repeated’ spells.⁷⁰ These facts raise the question of how ancient scribes delineated individual spells, a topic treated elsewhere.⁷¹ Suffice it to say, it is clear that the ancient scribes’ conceptions of individual spells do not overlap with our own in a simple, one-to-one correspondence. In fact, some evidence suggests that new avenues of research can be inaugurated if we take cues from oral performance and ritual. In oral and ritual performances, each performance represents its own ‘version’ of the composition, each with slight differences and a specific context. Given the oral background and ritual context that is so fundamental to ancient Egyptian religious literature,⁷² new interpretations can be derived from the perspective that written instantiations of these compositions may have likewise been treated as unique to their moment of creation and/or implementation.⁷³

⁶⁷ These are the ‘repetitions’ treated by Mosher 2020: 341–46.

⁶⁸ There are obvious differences and good reasons why all repetition isn’t treated the same; thus, no criticism is here meant for previous treatments. I am only pointing out how different texts have been the subject of various approaches. For an analysis of the transmission history of the composition found across Book of the Dead spells 2, 65 Lepsius, CT 93, and CT 152, see Scalf and Wang forth., based on a talk given at ARCE 2023 from the data being gathered as part of the CEDAR Egyptian Book of the Dead project.

⁶⁹ B1Bo and B2Bo, See Lesko 1979: 15–19.

⁷⁰ S10C, see Lesko 1979: 83.

⁷¹ See Scalf and Wang forth. Note Mosher 2020: 346, with regard to the ‘repeated’ spells, that, as far as the Post-Saite manuscripts are concerned, he believes the scribes recognized two different spells since the texts differed in certain ways, however minor, between the two copies/spells (e.g., 9 and 73, 10 and 48, 11 and 49, 12 and 120, 13 and 121, 100 and 129).

⁷² Made explicit by *ḏd mdw* ‘recitation’ and the designation *ꜣ* ‘utterance, saying, spell’ used throughout the religious literature. See, e.g., Reintges 2011, Willems 2019, Scalf forth. For an analysis of Demotic literature applying frameworks from the study of orality, see Jay 2016.

⁷³ For more, see Scalf and Wang forth.

Conclusions

As fitting for a conference whose theme was ‘preliminary research,’ much more can be said about applying assemblage theory to ancient Egyptian religious literature, and I intend to make lengthy contributions to this discussion by means of several ongoing research projects.⁷⁴ In the meantime, what can we then take away from this preliminary research in applying assemblage theory to the ancient Egyptian Book of the Dead? Ideas from assemblage theory and remix culture can help us better understand some of the following. Ancient Egyptian sacred texts were part of a ‘stream of tradition’⁷⁵ by which scribes assembled and remixed ideas. Such remixing, including repetition, was the norm, and the resulting ‘assemblages require[d] the same rhetorical sophistication as any text.’⁷⁶ Focusing on ‘effect in context’ allows us to evaluate how an assemblage works (as in Pasherashakhet’s papyrus), rather than leaving us perplexed about a particular passage’s placement.⁷⁷ Recognizing assemblages among the Egyptian corpus does not ‘replace other methods of writing,’ but ‘was one valid practice among many.’⁷⁸ Assemblage theory is one way we may begin to treat these compositions on their own terms, apart from their modern categorizations, to reveal the shared complexity behind the ‘practice’ and ‘performative art’ that was inherent to their craft.⁷⁹

⁷⁴ E.g., the Egyptian Book of the Dead project under the framework of Critical Editions for Digital Analysis and Research (CEDAR) at the University of Chicago.

⁷⁵ Invoking here the concept of Oppenheim 1960.

⁷⁶ Johnson-Eilola and Selber 2007: 391.

⁷⁷ Cf. “inextricable” in Mosher 2017: 47, n. 23.

⁷⁸ Johnson-Eilola and Selber 2007: 382.

⁷⁹ Ragazzoli 2017: 118.

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