The Book of the Dead Project: Past, present and future

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It seems superfluous to introduce the Book of the Dead Project, because it has been in existence for over 15 years and the academic community is already familiar with its publications, the series Handschriften des Altägyptischen Totenbuches (HAT) and Studien zum Altägyptischen Totenbuch (SAT), which include a total of 25 publications to date.\(^1\) Some of the manuscripts published in these series belong to the most famous Book of the Dead papyri, such as the papyrus of Nespasefy (Verhoeven 1999) or Paennestitaui (Munro 2001a). Nonetheless, it is important to summarise the various aims and tasks of the project from time to time, in addition to describing the individual work of each team member, since many of them will publish their own research in this volume. The questions I wish to answer here are: What is the current status quo of the database of Book of the Dead manuscripts? Which manuscripts will the project edit in future? What are the aims and objectives of the project in the coming years?

In order to set the future aims of the project in perspective, we should first briefly analyse its recent past (Kockelmann 2006b). The Book of the Dead project has been in existence for over 15 years. At that time, Prof. Ursula Rösler-Köhler, who began working on the Book of the Dead in the 1970s, instituted a working group whose specific aim was the study of the history and development of the Book of the Dead genre. This was promoted by the Federal State of North Rhine-Westphalia at the beginning of the 1990s; the German Research Foundation (DFG) later provided funds for an additional period of 10 years. During this phase the Institute of Egyptology at the University of Cologne, under the direction of Prof. Heinz Josef Thissen, was also involved in the project. In 2004 the project was incorporated into the programme of the Academies of Sciences and Arts.\(^2\) The current project has two main tasks: to offer services to the academic community in general; and to prepare a number of studies, mainly based on editions of unpublished Book of the Dead manuscripts.

From the outset of the project, an archive has been built up as a basis for in-depth research on the Book of the Dead. This consists of a database containing information about all known Book of the Dead manuscripts in museums and private collections worldwide, and until now has focused on papyri and mummy bandages. At present, about 4000 records are registered, from small fragments to complete scrolls. Information about current location, provenance, dimensions, date, state of preservation, the ancient Egyptian owner and their kinship relations, the choice and sequence of Book of the Dead spells, and known literature is recorded for each object. In addition, the project maintains a photographic archive containing images of each registered manuscript. These range from images in publications to digital photographs from museums, as well as private photographs. It is remarkable that the project has assembled photographic material for about 80% of the known objects.

\(^1\) http://www.totenbuch-projekt.uni-bonn.de/publikationen [30 November 2009].

\(^2\) http://www.awk.nrw.de/ [30 November 2009], http://www.akademienunion.de/ [30 November 2009].
Both the photographic archive and the database can be used by scholars who visit the project in Bonn, but as it is not always possible for scholars to travel, the team is also prepared to answer enquiries from colleagues via e-mail. In the near future the database will also be made available online. The project team is working on the digitisation of the database in collaboration with the Kompetenzzentrum für elektronische Erschließungs- und Publikationsverfahren in den Geisteswissenschaften at the University of Trier. The database will be revised and enlarged by the winter of 2009–10, so that the results and the collected information will be available in 2011. Unfortunately the photographic archive cannot be made available online due to copyright restrictions.

The project’s aims are not only to provide the simple data on the material, however. Some data are also processed by the team and then published as resources. An updated bibliography has now been published (Backes et al. 2009), which expands upon that originally composed ten years before (Gülden and Munro 1998). Furthermore, Burkhard Backes has compiled a vocabulary of the Late Period Book of the Dead on the basis of Papyrus Turin 1791 (2005). The starting-point for this work was a complete translation of the papyrus which he had prepared for the Wörterbuch-Project in Berlin. In total, there are about 400 Book of the Dead spells in transliteration and translation from all periods. They can be viewed and used via the web portal of the Thesaurus Linguae Aegypti.

Some information which is registered in the database has also been indexed. Irmtraut Munro prepared a list of Book of the Dead spells documented in the Third Intermediate Period (2001b). In addition, the project has published lists on the internet, documenting personal names and titles known from the registered Book of the Dead manuscripts. There is certainly much further information to be gathered from the Book of the Dead, the analysis of which promises interesting results, and this will be of special concern to the project in the near future. The utilisation of the project’s database via the internet would be a great step forward in this regard.

While much information on the manuscripts can be found in the SAT series, the central part of the project is the edition of manuscripts in the HAT series. The HAT publications present representative manuscripts from individual periods, but also manuscripts which stand out because of their textual composition, their style or other unusual features of redaction. While the first seven volumes in the HAT series are devoted to manuscripts from the earlier periods, in the last few years the project has focussed on the Saitic Recension. Indeed, the later Book of the Dead production deserves more attention. Moreover, in this way the project can avoid duplicating the research of Günther Lapp and Barbara Lüscher in Basel.

Two new editions of papyri were recently completed: Irmtraut Munro has published a Dynasty 25 papyrus in Moscow (2009). Few objects can be dated with any certainty to this period; the dating of this papyrus was carried out using palaeographic evidence which John Taylor has confirmed by studying the related coffins. Burkard Backes has studied three papyri in Berlin and Aberdeen, which also contain many unusual spells that are not part of the

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3 http://germazope.uni-trier.de/Projects/KoZe2/ [9 June 2010].

4 http://aaew.bbaw.de/tla/ [30 November 2009].

5 http://www.totenbuch-projekt.uni-bonn.de/publikationen/online-publikationen [30 November 2009].

6 http://www.orientverlag.ch/ [30 November 2009].
Book of the Dead tradition, in addition to those from the classic corpus (2009). These peculiar spells were incorporated in a typical Book of the Dead manuscript and accompanied by vignettes, so that they appear like other Book of the Dead spells. These papyri were produced in the same workshop.

What are the tasks currently occupying the project? Irmtraut Munro is undertaking a new study of a group of papyri from Dynasty 26, fragments of which are distributed across numerous museums and collections worldwide. Collections with fragments of these papyri are mostly in Cairo and Heidelberg, but also in Assisi and Cortona in Italy, in the Bible Lands Museum in Jerusalem, and also in the Institute of Fine Arts in New York (Verhoeven 1998, 224–25; Munro 2006b, 240–43).

In addition, Susanne Töpfer and I are focusing on papyri which apparently come at the end of the Book of the Dead tradition, in order to be able to adequately describe the Saitic Recension and to understand the development of the Book of the Dead. Among other things these papyri show strongly modified vignettes as well as the intermixing of the Book of the Dead text with the Documents of Breathing. The principal source is Papyrus Tübingen 2012 (Fig. 1) which has already been partly published by Emma Brunner-Traut (Brunner and Brunner-Traut 1981, 294–95) and mentioned by Marc Coenen in his studies on Late Period papyri (Coenen 1998, 106–7). However, there is an unpublished papyrus in the Louvre (N 3085) which seems to be from the same workshop. An examination of these papyri and the study of the final period of the Book of the Dead tradition is a topic worthy of future attention.

Commencing in 2010 and 2011, Rita Lucarelli, Annik Wüthrich and I will work on a very peculiar manuscript: a large mummy bandage with the layout of a papyrus, now in Princeton (Pharaonic Roll No. 8). It is one of only four known mummy bandages in this format and the only one which has been preserved in excellent condition, totalling 12m in length. It probably originated from the Memphite area.

This leads us on to the project’s main aim for the coming years. While most manuscripts from Thebes and the Akhmim group have been broadly studied to date, the Memphite tradition has yet to be closely examined. This fact influenced our decision to work on the mummy bandage from Princeton and to devote ourselves to the study of the vignettes of the Saitic Recension (Müller-Roth 2008; 2009). We have not yet selected the Memphite papyrus to be edited, although the project will ultimately lead in this direction. There are very well-preserved pieces in the Austrian National Library in Vienna, in the Louvre in Paris and in the Egyptian Museum in Cairo.

Besides the editions of Books of the Dead, the project also focuses on single spells which are examined in their entirety (Luft 2009). One of these is a joint study by Rita Lucarelli, Susanne Töpfer and myself on BD 149 which will be published in 2010. The spell will be examined on a textual and pictorial level, and with particular regard to the content. In addition to this, a study on BD 191—the so-called Address to the Bringer of Bas—has been in progress for a long time, but had to be interrupted due to a change in personnel. Until now, many scholars have been more familiar with the sarcophagi and ritual papyri with BD 191 than they are with the two dozen Books of the Dead bearing this spell (Fig. 2; Quack 2009, 21). This edition will be continued soon and will be completed in the course of 2010.

The project also includes a range of other works in addition to the well-known publications. Thanks to Backes’ Index (2005), for example, it is now possible for Egyptologists to identify Book of the Dead spells more easily. Nonetheless, this kind of work can be extremely difficult and time-consuming, particularly when dealing with fragments containing only a few components of text, or for smaller collections and private individuals who do not have access to an Egyptologist. Much of the material which reaches us has not been previously identified.

Figure 3 shows a selection of 10 fragments with Book of the Dead spells in the Michael C. Carlos Museum in Atlanta. To my knowledge, the Carlos Museum has in its collection about 270 fragments with remains of the Book of the Dead. Peter Lacovara sent photographs of them to the project in 2006 and 2009. Even though the fragments preserve only two or three words, the Book of the Dead spells can often be recognized. If such fragments, or even larger sections, are identified, pieces of the same manuscript can often be found in the project archive; particularly helpful features in this regard are the identification of ancient owners and their relatives, the palaeography, and the style of the vignettes. The fragments from Atlanta are unfortunately too small for this kind of reconstruction, but several other examples of manuscripts which have been published by the project’s team members should be mentioned.

Holger Kockelmann, who currently works at the University of Trier, has recognized that papyrus fragment 784 in the Columbia University Library, New York, is part of the lost beginning of the well-known Papyrus Ryerson in Chicago (Kockelmann 2006a). Moreover, in his recently published PhD thesis, Kockelmann has worked on the mummy bandages of Hor from the Ptolemaic period (2008). Most parts of this set of bandages are in the Egyptian Museum in Berlin, although sections have also been found in the Pierpont Morgan Library, New York, and in the British Museum. Prior to this project, researchers paid little attention to the use of linen in the Book of the Dead tradition.

Other examples of papyri edited by the Book of the Dead Project which are distributed in museums around the world include the Dynasty 26 papyri of Nespasefy in Cairo, Albany and Marseilles (Verhoeven 1999) as well as the Ptolemaic Period Book of the Dead of Hor (Munro 2006a). Sections of manuscripts in the Art Museum in Denver and the Art Museum in Cincinnati, as well as fragments in Cologny, Switzerland, also belong to this papyrus. Irmtraut Munro’s discovery that a total of four scribes worked on the papyrus is particularly striking.

In addition to the above, the project supports museums in reconstructing and restoring papyri. Irmtraut Munro, for example, was involved in the restoration of the papyrus of Ramose in the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge. Figure 4 demonstrates how the fragments were assembled on the basis of photographs, while Figure 5 shows the finished restoration. On two occasions in 2008, Irmtraut Munro and two German conservators visited the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto to restore a Dynasty 26 papyrus. Figures 6 and 7 show one of the conservators, as well as a part of the papyrus prior to unrolling, while Figure 8 shows the condition of the judgement scene (BD 125) after the reconstruction and restoration.

This report has summarised some of the past, present and future activities of the Book of the Dead Project. With the publication of the database in particular, the project hopes to make an important contribution to academic research. Generally, the team is open to further suggestions and collaborative projects, and can always be contacted at the address below.

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http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/online_journals/bmsaes/issue_15/mueller-roth_project.aspx
Bibliography


Fig. 1: Papyrus Tübingen 2012 (Part A). Photograph: Thomas Zachmann, courtesy of the Institute for Ancient Near Eastern Studies, Department of Egyptology, University of Tübingen.

http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/online_journals/bmsaes/issue_15/mueller-roth_project.aspx
Fig. 2: P. BM EA 10751 with BD 191 inside the vignette of BD 129. Photograph: Annik Wüthrich (Book of the Dead Project), courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum.

Fig. 3: Papyrus Atlanta MCCM 2004:22.1, Fragments 4, 16, 20, 21, 45, 58, 59, 78, 79, 83. Courtesy of the Michael C. Carlos Museum, Emory University.

http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/online_journals/bmsaes/issue_15/mueller-roth_project.aspx
Fig. 4: Papyrus Cambridge E.2.1922 (re-assembly). Photograph: Wolfgang Schade, courtesy of the Fitzwilliam Museum, University of Cambridge.
Fig. 5: Papyrus Cambridge E.2.1922 (restoration), courtesy of the Fitzwilliam Museum, University of Cambridge.
Fig. 6: Papyrus Toronto ROM 978x43.1 (rolled). Photograph: Wolfgang Schade, courtesy of the Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto.

Fig. 7: Conservator Sabine Güttler at work. Photo: Wolfgang Schade.
Fig. 8: Papyrus Toronto ROM 978.43.1 (BD 125, judgement scene). Photograph: Wolfgang Schade, courtesy of the Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto.

http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/online_journals/bmsaes/issue_15/mueller-roth_project.aspx