From Memphis to Thebes: Local traditions in the Late Period

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Many of the articles published in this volume deal with vignettes. The attention given to this topic is fully justified, for approximately half of all manuscripts with Book of the Dead spells have vignettes. In the Saitic Recension, which is the particular focus of this paper, there are over 1000 manuscripts with approximately 10,000 single vignettes in total. If one were to count the scenes in composite vignettes individually (such as the vignettes of the gate-keepers BD 144–147), this number would be even higher.

For a long time such attention was not paid to the vignettes, not even at the British Museum’s Annual Egyptological Colloquium in 2009. In most manuscript editions, remarks about the vignettes hardly go beyond a description of the scenes (Munro 2001, 66–68; Lapp 2004, 53–55). Several general studies of vignettes were presented about 20 years ago: Irmtraut Munro (1988, 13–137) discussed the vignettes of Dynasty 18 in detail in her thesis, and only a few years later Henk Milde (1991) described the development of about 50 vignettes from the New Kingdom to the Ptolemaic period in his thesis about the Papyrus of Neferrenpet.

The most extensive and complete study to date is that presented by Malcolm Mosher (1989; 1992, 151–53), who has commented on almost all of the vignettes. Unlike the two aforementioned works, however, Mosher’s thesis unfortunately remains unpublished and hence it has not received the attention which it deserves. Mosher clearly demonstrates the different traditions and clears away the prejudice that the vignettes are standardised in the Saitic Recension. Of course, the vignettes do become more uniform than before, but variants in the iconography indicate the existence of groups that can be distinguished from one other on geographical or chronological grounds. In addition to many other criteria which indicate the provenance of a manuscript—for example, the titles of the owner or the sequence of spells—the vignettes are also a useful aid.

Apart from the circumstance that his work is hardly known, Mosher had to confine himself to a mere 35 handwritten manuscripts, in most cases from the Louvre. In the light of the increased quantity of material available today, with well over 1000 known manuscripts, there is no doubt that this material must be reprocessed and an overview of the different traditions made. Attempts to classify manuscripts with regard to their provenance on the basis of the vignettes, such as the papyrus of Qeqa by Martin von Falck (2006, 59–65), demonstrate that this approach fails without sufficient comparative material and the necessary overview (Müller-Roth 2009).

I begin with some examples which demonstrate the current limits of our knowledge of the vignettes (Fig. 1). The first example is one that I have already presented in a previous paper (Müller-Roth 2008, 57–60): a fragment from the Asasif, published by Günther Burkard (1986, 36–37). It shows the tail of a bird with an upright neck in the centre. Below the tail there is a line, which is probably a leg. The text below is not helpful for identifying the vignette because it only records the name and title of the owner Isis-weret. Günther Burkard has reconstructed this as a Ba-bird from Vignette 85. The appearance of the bird's
back argues for this interpretation, whereas this feature does not correspond to the birds of Vignettes 83, 84 and 86 (Lepsius 1842, pls. 21–32). By contrast, the upright neck and the tiny fragment on the opposite side suggest a reconstruction of Vignette 88. Vignette 88 typically has no figure of a bird but an upright mummified crocodile. Most of the manuscripts show no additional elements (Fig. 2a). Only a minority show the crocodile with a \textit{w3s}-sceptre in its hands (Fig. 2b). In many manuscripts the crocodile has an extension to his back. Normally this extension is the body of the crocodile (Fig. 2c). However, P. BM EA 10315 and P. Lyon H 1579–1583 have variants with the tail of a bird (Fig. 2d). Because there are only two other manuscripts with that extraordinary motif, it is obvious that it would not be possible to identify the vignette of P. Cairo JE 97249 (Papyrus 5) without knowing the entire range of the variants of this vignette.

I next discuss some new examples to demonstrate the inadequacies of our knowledge of the variants. Figure 3 shows a section of P. BM EA 10253. On the left side there is a crocodile represented with a naturalistic body; this is the vignette of BD 31 or BD 32 (Lepsius 1842, pls. 16–17). Generally four crocodiles are represented, although manuscripts exist with three, two or even a single crocodile (see, for example, P. Milbank; Allen 1960, pl. 65). However, the two vignettes in front of the crocodile in P. BM EA 10253 and the texts below make it clear that this is not the vignette of BD 31 or BD 32. Rather, it is another variant of the aforementioned vignette of BD 88. This variant is only attested in two sources: P. BM EA 10253 and P. BM EA 10097.

A second example shows the well-known scene of the Ba-bird above the corpse of the deceased (Fig. 4). Normally this is the vignette of BD 89 (Lepsius 1842, pl. 33), although the vignette of BD 17 also uses this motif; from the edition of P. Hildesheim 5248 and P. MacGregor, both from the Akhmim group (Lüscher 2000, pl. 36; Mosher 2001, pl. 16), it is evident that this is a variant of BD 151. In P. BM EA 9902 the following vignettes and the sequence of the spells below make it clear that this is the vignette of BD 154 (Fig. 5b). Apart from this example, this constellation is only known from P. Geneva 23464/1–6 and P. Cairo JE 32887 (S.R. IV 930). In the vignette of BD 154 elements such as the sun (Fig. 5c) and the hieroglyph of the sky above (Fig. 5e) are known. A single example with wings above the deceased (Fig. 5d) is also attested from Akhmim.

Besides these very rare vignettes, there are also vignettes of which only one example is known. The identification of these vignettes has been uncertain until now. Because of their singularity it is unclear whether they can be identified simply by considering the BD texts occurring in, before, or after them. Many examples are known from P. Tübingen 2012 (Müller-Roth 2010, fig. 1) or P. Amsterdam APM 9223 (Fig. 6).

As suggested earlier and elaborated by Malcom Mosher, it is tempting to presume that the characteristics can be matched with local styles. One must be aware that the provenance of many of the manuscripts is unknown. Only one-third of the 1400 manuscripts with vignettes of the Saitic Recension have been assigned a precise provenance on the basis of their findspot, the titles of the owner or other evidence. The provenance of about 600 mummy bandages and over 250 papyri is as yet unknown. In these cases the vignettes can render a useful service.

I present below a summary of the results from the current study of BD 149. The vignette of this spell (Lepsius 1842, pls. 71–73), depicting the regions of the netherworld and the demons encountered there, provides significant examples of local styles.

http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/online_journals/bmsaes/issue_15/mueller-roth_memphis.aspx
The demon of the first mound is illustrated in very different and individual forms (Müller-Roth 2008, 62–63). The distribution of the manuscripts makes it clear that these are local styles. The Theban manuscripts use the form with a herb as a head (Fig. 7a). Some examples with the same provenance, such as P. Ryerson, show a human head with two objects which are probably feathers (Fig. 7b). The demon in the Memphite manuscripts, however, has the head of the god Bes (Fig. 7c). One exception, P. Louvre N 3081, shows a headless shape, possibly with spots of blood (Fig. 7d). In the manuscripts from Herakleopolis the demon has a black head without facial features, but with some stubble (Fig. 7e). In examples from Akhmim the head is also round, but it is definitely a human head here (Fig. 7f). A further variant replaces the head with knives. This variant is known from Middle Egypt, for example in P. Milbank (Fig. 7g).

In the ninth mound, the head of the demon is again the distinctive feature. The crocodile in front of the demon has no individual features (Fig. 8). Sometimes it is erect, but also sometimes inclined, although this is probably dependent upon the available space. The head of the demon can be composed of two, three or four snakes, or even three birds; alternatively, the demon can be replaced by three women. The snakes are known from different sites and probably represent the standard form, but the vignettes with heads of birds (Fig. 8d) are definitely from Memphis and the women (Fig. 8e) from Akhmim.

Other features also provide indications of local styles. The pot before the crocodile, which is rarely used in the Saitic Recension, occurs only at Akhmim. Even there, the pot only appears in manuscripts illustrating the demon with a head composed of three snakes. In some other manuscripts the pot is only a strap, as in P. Vienna ÄS 3862 (Fig. 8d). No matter which variants of the head are used, manuscripts in which the head is composed of three or four snakes, or three birds, are from Memphis. Manuscripts from Thebes do not contain this element of the vignette.

There are fewer variants in the fifth mound (Fig. 9). In this vignette a figure, probably the god Thoth, is shown standing on the head or the back of a lion. In some cases, there is a representation of wickerwork (Gardiner sign list V 32) in front of the two figures, which is replaced by the emblem of the goddess Neith from Dynasty 26 onwards (Fig. 9a). There are only two variations of the figure of the lion: either with the head of an ibis (Fig. 9a) or the head of a ram (Fig. 9b); only a few exceptions depict a figure which appears to have the head of a falcon (Fig. 9c). The head of a ram is known from many provenances and the head of a falcon is also known from both Memphis and Thebes, whereas the ibis is known only at Thebes.

The eighth mound has yet more variants (Fig. 10). The demon in this vignette takes the shape of a hippopotamus, or else is represented as a chimera with the body parts of a hippopotamus. The headdress has many variants: one snake or three, the horns of a ram, horns with a sun disc, or a uraeus with knives partially surrounding it. The last variants are known with two, four, or six knives. The demon may also be shown wearing the atef-crown or a hemhem-crown. Some manuscripts omit the entire headdress except the wig. This last variant has no distinctive features, and hence it is not surprising that it is known from different sites. Some variants occur only once or twice, and hence the number of manuscripts is too small to distinguish a specific local style. But other variants can be connected with particular provenances. The headdresses with snakes (Fig. 10e–f), for example, are both from Thebes,
similar to the hemhem-crown (Fig. 10c). The headdresses with knives on the ram’s horns (Fig. 10g–h) appear to be from Memphis and, naturally, Herakleopolis; the manuscripts with six knives (Fig. 10i) confuse this picture, being known only from two Theban papyri.

The hippopotamus in the vignette of the twelfth mound occurs in many different stylistic forms, but without any distinctive feature that can be used to characterise local groups (Fig. 11). The papyri from Akhmim are the only examples to represent the hippopotamus like a pig (Fig. 11a). However, the bin above the hippopotamus is illustrated with different objects. Most of the manuscripts show four knives (Fig. 11c), sometimes simplified to four strokes. Two exceptions transform them into four feathers (Fig. 11d). Many other manuscripts omit the objects entirely. Some have no extension except for two loops, as in P. Cairo CG 40029 (Fig. 11b); others arrange the four lines horizontally, so that they take on the appearance of handles (Fig. 11a). The distribution of the manuscripts demonstrates that all of the Theban examples contain the knives (Fig. 11c), but some from other sites do too. Furthermore, all Akhmim manuscripts show the bin with the horizontal strokes (Fig. 11a); the bin without the strokes or knives is known only from Memphis (Fig. 11b).

The vignettes of the thirteenth mound do not vary in the form of the demon’s head (Fig. 12). The figure on the right is always a hippopotamus and the figure sitting on the throne on the left has the head of a rabbit. However, there is some variation in the weapons held by the god on the left. Sometimes he is shown with knives (Fig. 12d), or a bow and arrow (Fig. 12b), while other manuscripts show a sceptre in his hand (Fig. 12c). Some manuscripts omit the weapons entirely (Fig. 12a). Although the vignette has up to four figures or elements, on the basis of these weapons alone it becomes clear that the bow and arrow are characteristic of Theban manuscripts, while the other types are used at different sites.

The vignettes of BD 149 are only one example from about 150 vignettes of the late Book of the Dead tradition. Considering that I have here analysed only 7 features from 14 individual vignettes, each together with about 40 elements—the demons, the icons of the mounds and other objects and creatures—the potential of the vignettes for further analysis is clearly evident.

Such results are helpful primarily for classifying manuscripts with regard to their provenance. Examining the vignette of BD 149 in P. Zagreb 604 (Fig. 13), for example, one recognizes the headdress of the demon of the eighth mound in position number three consisting of three snakes, which is a Theban feature. Another example—a papyrus now in Halle, Thuringia, published by Hans-Werner Fischer-Elfert (2008, 115–18, pl. 26)—exemplifies the value of the vignettes (Fig. 14). Fischer-Elfert gives no information regarding the provenance of the papyrus and does not discuss this question. Turning to the vignettes, the headdress of the hippopotamus in the vignette of the eighth mound consists of a snake. This headdress is known in five other manuscripts, all currently recognised as originating from Thebes. In this case the analysis of the provenance provides not only information about the Book of the Dead, but also about the text on the verso of the papyrus: an onomasticon listing trees and minerals, also known from Tebtunis. Even though the onomasticon was written by another scribe and at a later date, it is still indicative of the provenance of this text.

I have used only one vignette in both the above examples, but it goes without saying that such arguments must combine the analysis of as many vignettes as possible. Naturally this depends on the size of the individual manuscript. In this instance I have restricted my
argument to the vignette of BD 149. Furthermore, some of the limitations of this method must be mentioned. Firstly, not every distinction between individual vignettes provides reliable conclusions concerning the provenance of those groups. For example, a popular motif shows the Ba-bird over the deceased’s corpse. Even if it is used with unusual BD spells, such as BD 154 in the case of P. BM EA 9902 (Fig. 4), it is hardly characteristic of a local style or a special workshop. By contrast, the winged crocodile is very distinctive and therefore characteristic. This variant and the naturalistic crocodile are Theban styles (Figs. 1 and 3). We can therefore assume that a vignette with many characteristics is more significant than a vignette with fewer singularities.

This leads to the second limitation: that the analysis of vignettes works on the basis of probability. If five or six manuscripts of a specific type have the same provenance—for example, Memphis—one may conclude that one or two other manuscripts of the same type are also from Memphis. But the reverse can also be true. In many cases one must be cautious: the papyrus discussed by Irmtraut Munro in this volume, for example, is obviously from Thebes but has vignettes with many Memphite features.

This in turn leads to the third restriction: the need to differentiate between iconography and style. In principle, iconography refers to a sample from a specific provenance, but it does not refer to the provenance in itself. If stylistic features point to a different provenance than that suggested by the iconography, one must assume that a sample was carried from one region to another. In these cases the vignettes provide an interesting insight into the development of the Book of the Dead and the specific manuscript. Nonetheless, this illustrates the problem of using the iconography of vignettes to identify the provenance of a manuscript. Therefore, the vignettes can be only one part of a string of arguments.

In his article in the Festschrift dedicated to Leonard Lesko, Malcom Mosher (2008) stated that the texts also offer variants that can be connected with local styles. Barbara Lüscher (2007) has illustrated this on the basis of Book of the Dead manuscripts of the New Kingdom dealing with the tradition of Deir el-Medina. Both have dealt with the well-known group of Akhmim papyri (Lüscher 2000; Mosher 2001). They point out that features of local styles can be found at different levels. But it is also clear that one could produce many additional arguments because the Book of the Dead has about 150 vignettes with more than 300 individual scenes and a multiplicity of elements, such as figures, animals and objects. The potential is therefore almost endless.

There is certainly a great deal of work to be done, because there are more than 1000 manuscripts for the Late Period alone. In the future, the Book of the Dead Project in Bonn will attempt to record the vignettes and their features in a database in order to handle the mass of material and to analyse this information efficiently. To date, I have manually collected evidence to identify about 100 manuscripts; I hope that it will be possible to double this result by using technical support.

The question that remains is: what is the reason for the occurrence of different vignettes? Specifically, what is the meaning of the demon with the head of the god Bes in Memphis (Fig. 7c)? What is the meaning of the birds in place of the snakes as the head of a demon in Memphis (Fig. 8d)? And what is the meaning of the wings on the mummified crocodile in some Theban manuscripts (Fig. 2d)? These are the types of questions which accompany the study of local styles. I am curious about the answers.
Cover image: P. BM EA 10558.27. Courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum.

Bibliography


Fig. 1: P. Cairo JE 97249 (Papyrus 5), fragments 2–3.

a) P. Turin 1791   b) P. BM EA 10558   c) P. Berlin P. 3149   d) P. BM EA 10315

Fig. 2: Vignettes to BD 88.
Fig. 3: P. BM EA 10253.3. Photograph courtesy of the Trustees of The British Museum.

Fig. 4: P. BM EA 9902.4. Photograph courtesy of the Trustees of The British Museum.
Fig. 5: Vignettes to BD 154.
Fig. 6: Vignettes in P. Amsterdam APM 9223.

a) P. Vienna ĀS 3862   b) P. Chicago OIM 9787   c) P. Heidelberg Portheim (A)

d) P. Louvre N 3081   e) P. Colon. Aeg. 10207   f) P. Berlin P. 10478   g) P. Chicago OIM 10486

Fig. 7: Vignettes to BD 149a.
Fig. 8: Vignettes to BD 149i.

a) P. Aberdeen ABDUA 84123  
b) P. Turin 1791  
c) P. Louvre N 3079  
d) P. Vienna ÄS 3862  
e) P. New Brunswick

Fig. 9: Vignettes to BD 149e.

a) P. Turin 1791  
b) P. Vienna ÄS 3862  
c) P. Louvre N 3079

http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/online_journals/bmsaes/issue_15/mueller-roth_memphis.aspx
Fig. 10: Vignettes to BD 149h.

a) P. Vienna ÄS 3852  
b) P. Chicago OIM 10486  
c) P. Leiden T 19  
d) P. New York MMA 35.9.20  
e) P. Cologny CV  
f) P. Turin 1791  
g) P. Vienna ÄS 3862  
h) P. Cairo CG 40029  
i) P. Louvre N 3079
Fig. 11: Vignettes to BD 149m.

a) P. BM EA 10479
b) P. Cairo CG 40029
c) P. Turin 1791
d) P. Cairo JE 95859

Fig. 12: Vignettes to BD 149n.

a) P. BM EA 10479
b) P. Turin 1791
c) M. London UC 32435
d) P. Cairo CG 40029
Fig. 13: P. Zagreb 604. Courtesy of the Archaeological Museum in Zagreb.

Fig. 14: P. Halle Kurth Inv. 33 A-B. Courtesy of the Archaeological Museum of the Martin-Luther-University Halle.