6.5.3 Private (Auto)biographical/Commemorative Texts from Tombs

This category of text is perhaps the best known from the Old Kingdom. Every Egyptian tomb has a variety of functions and probably played an important role during the life of the owner, not just after his death (Assmann 1991: 183–86). An important function is to commemorate, present, and promote the identity and personality of the owner, and it has also been argued that textual material such as biographies helps to represent aspects of the tomb owner which cannot be depicted in a pictorial manner (Baines 1999b: 20–21). For the purposes of this book, I place under the heading of “Biographies” those texts (all bar one from tombs) which have at their center the person and deeds, real or ideal, of the tomb owner, rather than the many other texts which are principally concerned with the needs and function of the tomb itself, and which are mostly covered in §6.7 and §6.8 below. This modern analytic distinction, one which the Egyptians themselves would surely never have comprehended, is in itself not always clear-cut.

The following is a brief summary of the development of the biography. Plausible antecedents to the classic biographical text accompanied by an enumeration of titles can be traced back to stelae of the First Dynasty
The best known of the Old Kingdom commemorative texts is the "Book of the Dead," which consists of spells and incantations designed to assist the deceased in the afterlife. These texts were usually written on papyrus scrolls and placed in the tombs of the elite. The Book of the Dead includes sections on判定 afterlife, protection from harm, and the journey to the underworld. The text reflects the ancient Egyptian belief in a complex afterlife, with different stages and challenges that the deceased must face.

The Book of the Dead has been studied extensively by scholars, who have used it to gain insights into ancient Egyptian beliefs and practices. The text is written in a series of chapters, each of which addresses a different aspect of the afterlife. Some of the chapters are concerned with specific deities or concepts, while others are more general.

One of the most famous chapters is Chapter 172, which deals with the practice of mumification. This chapter describes the process of mumification in detail, including the removal of internal organs and the wrapping of the body in bandages. The chapter also contains spells intended to protect the deceased from harm and to ensure a peaceful afterlife.

Another important chapter is Chapter 137, which deals with the journey to the underworld. This chapter describes the journey through various stages and encounters with different deities and demons. The chapter contains spells intended to protect the deceased from harm and to ensure a successful passage.

The Book of the Dead provides a fascinating glimpse into the beliefs and practices of ancient Egyptians. It is a rich source of information for scholars and a treasured part of Egyptian culture.

At the end of the Book of the Dead, there is a chapter that contains a detailed account of the deceased's relationship with the gods. This chapter is often referred to as the "afterlife autobiography," and it provides a fascinating glimpse into the thoughts and beliefs of the ancient Egyptians.

The Book of the Dead is not only a religious text, but it also serves as a kind of "life manual" for the deceased. It contains spells and incantations intended to help the deceased in the afterlife, and it provides guidance on how to interact with the gods and deities.

In summary, the Book of the Dead is a complex and multifaceted text that reflects the ancient Egyptian belief in a rich and varied afterlife. It is a testament to the rich and varied beliefs of the ancient Egyptians and a reminder of the enduring power of religious texts.
elements is not easy. Moreno Garcia 1998: 158–60 speculates whether in these texts can be identified early indications of some of the problems and instabilities which might have contributed to the eventual collapse of central authority at the end of the Old Kingdom, such as famine and abuse of power. This of course assumes that we take the content of these texts at face value, although I cannot help but feel that they are essentially little more than a development of the older idealizing phrases. Might it not be too fanciful to see in these writings perhaps the first stirrings of what was to become the motifs underlying much of the wisdom literature of the Middle Kingdom (see n. 28 above)?

It is unclear why these more extensive biographical texts should have flourished in the provincial cemeteries in the sixth dynasty. It used to be said that this was illustrative of the decline of central power in the Old Kingdom, but this view is now somewhat out of favor. Perhaps there were more formal constraints on what could be placed in tombs in the much larger northern courtly cemeteries, or perhaps the exuberance and initiative of those who might have been promoted from the capital to positions in the provinces might have been expressed in their texts.

The (auto)biographical inscription, in which the deceased tells us more about himself, is thus largely a product of the fifth dynasty. These inscriptions may be divided into two broad categories, those which form the "ideal" biography, composed of a number of largely standard phrases which indicate what the ideal person should have done, and those which apparently describe experiences which relate to that individual only (the "event-based" biography). Assmann sees these two types of biographies as clearly dealing with two different worlds, "wisdom" (ideal biography) and "historical discourse" (the event-based biography); he also observes that the latter sort of material remains the preserve of private inscriptions until the late Second Intermediate Period (Assmann 1991: 186–87).

By now the reader will have noted that for these texts I use the terms "autobiography" and "biography" more or less interchangeably, with a preference for the second. Although many are couched in the first person, none are really autobiographies in our sense of the term, unless we really believe that the tomb owner composed them. Rather, I suspect he discussed the content with a scribe who then assembled the type of basic text he wanted, following current preferences. Kloth considers the question of authorship (Kloth 2002: 257–60) and has pointed out one possible text of the "ideal" genre which was almost certainly composed by the subject, the expedition inscription of Anusu (no. 75); however, the biography
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170 a of Anusu (no. 75); however, the biography 
170 of Washptah (no. 235) must have been assembled by others after his death. The former text is particularly unusual, as it is the only one of this biog- 
170 raphical genre to appear outside a tomb.
170 For either type of biography, the comments above about the impor-
170 tance of context must be remembered. These are above all tomb texts, 
170 documents whose main purpose was to fit into the function of the tomb in 
170 relation to the afterlife of the deceased. Whether or not the person carried 
170 out the deeds of the ideal biography is irrelevant; that he pronounced that 
170 he did them was what mattered. There is no reason to think that the 
170 intriguing events in the event-based, more personal biographies did not 
170 happen, but they are not placed in tombs for any historical or documentary 
170 reason which we would recognize; they are set there with the aim of pre-
170 senting the image of the deceased and stressing his personality and impor-
170 tance. The latter is illustrated most clearly either where it is commanded by 
170 the king that such an event should be recorded in the subject's tomb or in 
170 the importance attached to the "rewarding" sections of text which invari-
170 ably follow the brief account of the successful completion of some deed or 
170 other commanded by the king.
170 Classic phrases which characterize an ideal biography are usually 
170 translated "I went out of my house, I went down into my nome"71 and "I 
170 gave bread to the hungry and clothes to the naked" and so on; see Kloth 
170 2002: 54–128 for these phrases (a number are collected in Lichtheim 1992: 
170 9–19). A range of such phrases are encountered in these texts, but all are 
170 concerned to illustrate that the deceased did what was required of him and 
170 also to show his righteous nature. In Egyptian terms, they illustrate that his 
170 deeds conformed to the concept of Maat, which must, in the most general 
170 sense, indicate the existence of a basic set of moral expectations in Egypt, 
170 and that there were certain expectations of behavior toward one's fellow 
170 man, especially among the tomb-owning classes. Many texts contain 
170 unique expressions of these ideas, showing that there was a role for fram-
170 ing individual ideas, and sometimes it is difficult to decide whether to treat 
170 a text as an ideal biography or one of more specified content. In addition, 
170 a number of texts append the occasional ideal biographical phrase to texts 
170 of other categories, including those of the more individualized biographies. 
170 For example, some of the earliest such ideal phrases are found in conjunc-
170 tion with warning and payment type phrases for the tomb of queen 
170 Khnumenret-ibit (Giza, no. 277).
170 But the texts from the Old Kingdom which tend to attract the attention of 
170 the modern reader above all others are the more individualized bio-

graphical texts (Kloth 2002: 128–220). The earliest examples, such as those of Debehen, Nyankhsekhmet, Washtah, Rewer, and Ptahshepses, tend to concentrate on specific instances where they interacted with the king. Further fifth-dynasty texts stress particular associations with the king and also the donation of various parts of their tomb equipment. A change in biographies may perhaps be detected in the reign of Izezi; in particular, letters purporting to be from the king are found within biographical texts (see also §6.12), and a number of highly unusual phrases and personal stories of contact with the king make their appearance (texts of Senedjemib Inti [no. 232], Reshepses [no. 100], and Kaiemtjennet [no. 212]).

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fourth dynasty</th>
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<tr>
<td>Ideal biographical phrases attached to other texts, such as appeals and warnings</td>
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<td>Biographies commemorating individual events</td>
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<td>Career biographies</td>
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<td>Biographies with commissions etc for the king</td>
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Fig. 2: The development of the Old Kingdom biography over time. Diagram adapted and modified from Kloth 2002: 285.

From the end of the fifth dynasty, biographies begin to appear which purport to present very rough outlines of the official's career reign by reign ("career" biographies), and these continue into the sixth dynasty. The earliest examples of the best known type of biographical text, those in which missions and campaigns are carried out for the king, also begin to appear at this time and continue into the reign of Pepy II (see Eyre 1994 for an examination of how the text of Wen is might be used for historical information, although see also my comment in §4.1 on how one aspect of this has been undermined by archaeological discoveries).

Figure 2 gives an impression of the spread of these biographical types during the Old Kingdom.