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The papyrus scroll known as 'The Erotic Papyrus of Turin' is a unique document of ancient Egyptian sexual life. In twelve scenes it testifies to the imagination of a draftsman of more than 3000 years ago. The age and setting may be exotic but the subject matter is one that all human beings can immediately relate to. Twelve positions of intercourse, performed by more than a single couple, with ancillary figures and various props to hand may at first give the appearance of a catalogue of the kind that is known from other civilizations.

Considering the extent, permanence and impact of ancient Egypt as well as the conditions so favourable to the preservation of even fragile objects and documents, it is surprising that relatively few examples of erotic drawings have come to light here, the more so considering the importance of such matters and the way in which sexuality permeated all aspects of Egyptian society to a degree that may not be apparent at first sight. Where literary sources are fairly explicit, unambiguous pictorial evidence is more scarce, the Turin papyrus providing an intriguing exception. However, the vital importance of sexuality was conveyed on the walls of tombs and temples in pictorial metaphors which required a century and a half for scholars to decipher. The Egyptians sought to explain phenomena around them in terms that implied sexual duality. A corpus of texts relate to the creation of the world, expressing this male/female perfection in no uncertain terms, and a celebration of this event as it happened 'the first time' was symbolically re-enacted by the king and queen, impersonating the divine principles, on the royal marital bed. In funerary beliefs, the carefully construed union of Isis with her defunct husband Osiris influenced the customs not only of royalty, but also of ordinary mortals of the elite who desired to rekindle their own sexual powers for eternity.

The significance and purpose of the Turin papyrus have been interpreted differently by Egyptologists, ranging from a manual, an illustrated pornographic tale to a satirical rendering of life at the royal court or among priests. Most commentators ignore the texts which are interspersed among the scenes, added after the drawings were made in the space available, and maybe by a different scribe. The texts render scraps of conversation, albeit fragmentary, which have a direct bearing on the illustrations and give an intriguing glimpse of the sexual act as a pastime with no further goal than that of immediate pleasure. This would lend support to seeing the composition as an early example of erotic satire. The alleged provenance is Deir el-Medina, the village of the craftsmen who excavated and decorated the tombs in the Valley of the Kings. A large corpus of texts and drawings testify to both the sense of humour and the sexual activities among the inhabitants, and the Turin papyrus would be at home in this ambience.

In addition to the few sketches and graffiti which show Egyptian draftsmen and amateurs at ease with erotic subjects, a far larger proportion of objects such as figurines, particularly of the later part of Egyptian history, concern sexuality and fertility. Wooden phalloi, given as votive offerings to certain deities, reveal a focus on such essential matters as procuring offspring. Both phalloi and phallic figurines have been found in the vicinity of temples and chapels whereas figures of naked, anonymous women, with or without children, are also known to have been included in non-royal burial equipment.

The Turin papyrus also contains a depiction of animals playing musical instruments. Although a musical instrument (a lyre) occur in both, the two subjects may not necessarily be related, apart

from the element of satire, but may for other reasons have been juxtaposed such as is the case on other scrolls with more than one subject. The discovery seems to have taken place in 1820. The scroll came to the Accademia delle Scienze in Turin from the Drovetti collection, acquired by the king of Sardinia in 1824. Drovetti's agents were particularly active in the area of Thebes. When seen by Champollion in 1824, he proposed that it was part of a mixed archive unearthed from a tomb at Deir el-Medina. Ever since his description of its contents as 'obscene' and at variance with the wisdom of the Egyptians as he imagined it to be, interpretations over the past close to 190 years have been forthcoming from a great many egyptologists (conveniently quoted in the 1973 publication by Jos. A. Omlin).

But how did the transmission of this papyrus happen, and what did these scholars actually have before their eyes? Until recently, the first copies of the drawings were believed to have been made by Gustav Seyffarth, a German who moved to the USA in 1856, and author of many works that were not generally accepted by the egyptological community at the time. During the years 1826-1828 he had toured all the major museums of Europe and compiled 15 folio volumes of inscriptions, later bequeathed to the New York Historical Society. He was no mean draftsman, and during his stay in Turin, among other things he turned his attention to the erotic papyrus. Seyffarth's basic linedrawings of the papyrus, now kept in the Brooklyn Museum in New York, give the appearance of being facsimile tracings. In those days two methods of copying were in use: a camera lucida used for projecting wall-decoration, at a reduced scale, onto white paper on which the motive was traced in pencil, later sometimes enhanced in watercolour; or else the copyist would make use of semi-transparent paper fixed on the surface to be copied, the lines being drawn in pencil at a 1:1 scale. A third possibility is a freehand copy which will always be recognizable as such. The first method is impossible with a fragile piece of papyrus, itself at a small scale. As Seyffarth's copy is far superior to a handcopy, the second method must have been used.

Seyffarth also produced a handcopy with substantial differences in the details but with added watercolours. The original papyrus now appears mostly monochrome. However, parts of the exposed skin of the male figures show substantial remains of red bodycolour, and the females may have had a yellow wash. Sashes, garlands and necklaces show traces of green. A new tracing was made by Francesco Rossi, but only the scene with the girl on the upturned pot and the adjoining two scenes were published with Willem Pleyte in 1869. By this time the papyrus had greatly suffered from inexpert handling. At some stage a tracing (now in Leipzig) was produced for Adolf Erman (1854-1937). This may have been seen by his first student Georg Steindorff (1861-1951) who emigrated to the USA in 1939. To all intents and purposes a drawing by him (now in New York) is a copy of the coloured version by Seyffarth. Along with a more recent drawing by Mario Tosi based on Seyffarth's tracing, these early copies are included in the 1973 publication Omlin, but without any discussion of their sequence, importance and purpose. The author also refers to another copy of Seyffarth's coloured drawing as being in the Louvre. Considering the amount of comments made on the erotic scenes it is surprising that with the exception of the three scenes published by Pleyte and Rossi, the only way for scholars to acquaint themselves with this extraordinary documentation of the intimate life of the ancient Egyptians would have been by obtaining access to the original, until around 1882 and again from 1943 locked away in the museum in Turin, or else by consulting one of the secret drawings in New York, Leipzig, Paris or Turin. For the past ten years or so the papyrus has again been on display in the galleries.

In the present work another early copy of the scroll is being brought to the attention of the public. In 1824, when the Drovetti collection arrived in Italy, Luis de Usoz was living in that country. Like

Seyffarth, he was drawn to the unusual subject and traced the drawings on transparent paper. Some minor differences between the copies of Seyffarth and Uzos can be explained by the way the fragile scroll was arranged and displayed, and, perhaps, different and inadequate light conditions. Only in 1946 was the papyrus framed between two airtight glass plates. It is beyond question that the papyrus was in a more complete state when seen by both Uzos and Seyffarth, and that lines complementing parts now missing were based on fact rather than on imagination.

Along with the library of Luis de Uzos, his copy was presented to the National Library of Spain in 1873 and catalogued as “Calco de pinturas egipcias”. The present edition of the papyrus has two aims. One is the publication of this highly interesting unknown copy of the scroll, superimposed on the existing fragments. The second is a reassessment of its contents, followed by an additional free interpretation of the erotic scenes in narrative form.

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