Poetry and Culture in Middle Kingdom Egypt
A Dark Side to Perfection

R.B. Parkinson
University of Oxford

The Middle Kingdom (c.1940-1640 BC) was a golden age of Ancient Egyptian writing. This pioneering book is the first comprehensive study of this literary legacy. The status of literature is controversial in many ancient civilizations, and Middle Kingdom poems have often been regarded as propaganda for the ruling dynasty. This study radically reassesses their cultural role, drawing on recent studies of the individual texts, some by the author, and on general developments in literary criticism, to argue that they were entertainments that voiced potentially dissident views while also being integral to elite culture. The book explores literature’s status as a differentiated form of discourse, suggesting what social practices made its role possible and offering an innovative model for the reader’s engagement with these subtle and complex ancient works. The book also surveys the social and ideological context of literature and proposes readings of the main tales, discourses, and teachings. The conclusion sets the readings in a broad context, while an appendix surveys the entire range of surviving texts.

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**Reviews**

"The book reviewed here certainly represents a landmark. It is the first monograph devoted to an integral study and interpretation of the entire corpus of literature preserved from the Egyptian Middle Kingdom.

Joachim Quack, Professor of Egyptology, University of Heidelberg, *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 124.2"

"I thoroughly enjoyed reading Parkinson’s Poetry and Culture in Middle Kingdom Egypt. It is a literate and sensitive work that provokes and makes one think anew about various aspects of all ancient literatures, not just that of Middle Kingdom Egypt. This is an extremely important book.

Piotr Michalowski, George G. Cameron Professor of Ancient Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations, University of Michigan"

"Dr Parkinson has produced a work which surpasses all that has been written on Egyptian literature of the “classic” period till now. It is an extremely well-balanced and comprehensive study, considering all main aspects of the subject, always seen against the background of literature in general and bringing to light the literary qualities of each text, but also the social"
Erik Hornung, Professor Emeritus, University of Basel

• R.B. Parkinson, Poetry and Culture in Middle Kingdom Egypt: A Dark Side to Perfection (London: 2002). • R.B. Parkinson, The Painted Tomb-Chapel of Nebamun (London: 2008). • R.B. Parkinson, Reading Ancient Egyptian Poetry: Among Other Histories (Chichester: 2009). • R.B. Parkinson, Hunefer and His Book of the Dead (London: 2010). • R.B. Parkinson, The Tale of the Eloquent Peasant: A Reader’s Commentary (Hamburg: 2012). • R.B. Parkinson, A Little Gay History: Desire and Diversity across the World (London: 2013). Blog post: Giving a Voice to Ancient Egyptian Poetry. Podcast with Barbara Ewing: The Middle Kingdom is considered the classical age of Egyptian literature. This situation resulted in a democratization of art and culture as individual regions developed their own styles which were valued as greatly as royal art had been in the Old Kingdom. The Middle Kingdom scribes, however, looked back on the time of the First Intermediate Period and saw it a clear departure from the glory of the Old Kingdom. The Egyptian love poem of the New Kingdom is remarkably similar on many levels to the biblical Song of Solomon and the much later compositions of the troubadours of 12th century CE France in their...