

# **Six papyrus from the Turin Egyptian Museum**

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## **Introduction**

This project focuses on a number of artifacts from the collections of the Museo Egizio (Egyptian Museum) in Turin, Italy.

The choice of the Museo Egizio as a source of the materials covered in this article is twofold.

The scientific reason is, the Museo Egizio is considered the second most important collection of Egyptian artifacts in the world, after the Cairo Museum. The Museum holds a number of unique pieces, some of which will be featured in this article.

There is also a sentimental reason for the choice: the author grew up in Turin, and spent many hours as a kid in the halls of the Egyptian Museum, developing a life-long interest for the history and archeology of Egypt.

### **The Egyptian Museum in Turin, an overview.**

The House of Savoy fascination for Egyptian antiquities predates the foundation of the museum in Turin; the first items in what was to become the museum collection were excavated in 1759 by Vitaliano Donati, and presented as gift to king Charles Emmanuel III.

The Museo Egizio proper was founded by King Charles Felix of Savoy 1824, after the crown acquired the collection of Egyptian artifacts belonging to Bernardino Drovetti, amateur antiquarian and French consul in Egypt under Napoleon. The building housing the collection was specifically designed to this purpose, as part of the Turin Academy of Sciences.

The Drovetti collection consisted of 8000 pieces, and included sculptures, mummies, religious objects and papyrus.

Late in 19th century, the director of the museum, Ernesto Schiaparelli, launched a series of excavation campaigns and acquisitions, bringing the total

count of museum pieces to 30.000.

In the 1960s, new pieces were donated by the Egyptian government - the most important of which is the small temple of Ellesiya.

Today, the museum consists of about 50,000 pieces – only a part of which is on exhibit – which document Egyptian history and culture from the Paleolithic to the Coptic Eras, and preserves unique pieces and collections of objects of art, of everyday use, and of funerary use, including, the Isiac Tablet, the Gebelein painted canvas, the intact tomb of Kha and Merit, and the already mentioned Ellesiya cliff temple.

## **The Turin papyrus**

The Turin Museum holds a number of unique papyrus documents, which shed light on a number of aspects of Egyptian history and daily life of both the upper classes and the working class.

The documents were central in the work of French Egyptologist Jean-Francois Champollion, who visited and perused the collections in 1825.

His statement “The road to Memphis and to Thebes passes through Turin” signals the importance of these documents in the interpretation of Egyptian writings and in the discovery of Egyptian life and history.

Six of the Turin papyrus will be featured in this document, as they provide windows through which different aspects of Egyptian life can be observed.

## **Item 1 - The Turin Royal Canon**

[Image from Wikipedia: <https://goo.gl/RW3xzA> ]

Also known as the Turin King List, this document is dated from the middle of the New Kingdom, or the 19th dynasty, under the reign of king Ramesses II.

The Royal Canon is an example of recycling - originally a tax roll, it was re-used to list, in hieratic writing, the rulers of Egypt, from the early mythical god-kings, up to the 17th dynasty.

The document was found by Bernardino Drovetti, in Luxor, in 1820, and later acquired by the Museum.

The papyrus lists the gods of ancient Egypt, the spirits and mythical kings, and then the rulers of the dynasties from the 1st to the 17th.

The papyrus is severely damaged, and a number of entries are missing and presumed lost.

And yet, in 2009, during the works for the renewal of the Museum, parts of the Turin Canon that had been listed as lost were found in the Museum storage rooms.

## **Item 2 - The Egyptian Book of the Dead**

[Image of the Egyptian Book of the Dead as exposed in the Turin Museum, earlier display, from the Gatto999 blog: <http://goo.gl/KTNCpB>]

The Book of the Dead (another translation of the title could be “The Book of emerging forth into the Light”) contains a selection of magical rituals and “practical” instructions to be followed to make sure the soul of the deceased would fare well in the afterlife.

The ‘book’ is a roll of papyrus with a variety of spells written in hieroglyphic script, and color illustrations as well.

Some of the spells are to grant the deceased control of his body after death. The ancient Egyptians believed that a person was made up of different elements: body, spirit, name, heart, they’re all embodiments of a person, and they were afraid that these elements would disperse when you died. Spells are provided to preserve the integrity of all the bodily and spiritual parts. Protective spells are also included. General suggestions on how to face the afterlife tribunal and go through the soul evaluation process are included.

First developed in Thebes during the Second intermediate period, as an alternative to Pyramid Texts and Coffin Texts.

A copy of the Book of the Dead would be placed in the tomb of Egyptian nobles and - later - high officials.

The Turin Museum holds one of the earliest copies of the Book of the Dead, found in the tomb of Ka, excavated by Ernesto Schiaparelli in Deir el-Medeina in 1906.

Ka had been an architect and scribe under the rule of Amenothep II (18th dynasty), and the king had awarded him a golden cubit ruler (actually wooden, with leaf-of-gold cover), as a sign of his appreciation.

### **Item 3 - Turin Papyrus Map**

[Images from Wikipedia

Left Half: <https://goo.gl/dhTWhJ>

Right Half: <https://goo.gl/KF6EVd> ]

The map was discovered by Bernardino Drovetti in Deir el-Medeina, Thebes, in 1824.

Compiled by Ammenakhte, Scribe-of-the-Tomb, in 1160 BC, the Papyrus Map is the world's earliest geological map.

It describes Wadi Hammamat, the bekhen-stone (an especially prized green sandstone used for bowls, palettes, statues, and sarcophagi) quarry, and the gold mine and settlement at Bir Umm Fawakhir.

The map was prepared for the expedition of Ramses IV, to obtain bekhen-stone blocks for the statue of Lord Samdee.

The map is heavily annotated in hieratic script, and shows main routes to the quarries and the gold mine, and a fine rendition of the area topography.

Often (and probably erroneously) called “The Seti I map”, the papyrus also shows the location of a stela, set in place by Seti I. This artifact has yet to be found.

An interesting study has also been made about the fold lines shown in the map – that are considered by some one of the earlier examples of origami-like paper folding. Other researchers consider the lines seen on the map to be just signs of wear.

#### **Item 4 - Judicial Papyrus of Turin**

[Image from the Scala Archives: <http://goo.gl/6NM19g>]

The papyrus summarizes the trials held against the conspirators that attempted to assassinate king Ramesses III, whose reign was characterized by a generalized state of crisis.

In what was called “The Harem Conspiracy”, second-tier queen Tiye acted to place her son Pentawer on the throne instead of the son of the favored queen Eset.

The attack consisted in a magical ritual to divert the king's guards, and a direct physical attack from the harem.

The conspirators were discovered and tried.

Interestingly enough the summary of the trial does not list the names of the defendants, but rather their designations - one of the conspirators is identified as Mesedsure, meaning “Re hates him”; a clear sign that the defendants were guilty until proven innocent.

No capital punishment is mentioned - but the leaders of the conspiracy were forced to commit suicide.

The trial also had a tabloid-worthy appendix, as six of the twelve judges were caught in “compromising attitude” (or “carousing”, according to the papyrus) with five of the harem women on trial. All involved parties were harshly dealt with (by disfigurement or death) for embarrassing the crown.

As a side note, it must be pointed out that CAT scans of the mummy of Ramesses III reveal that the king's throat was cut. The conspiracy succeeded in eliminating the king, but not in preventing the rise of his son by Eset, Ramesses-Heqamaatre-Meriamun, known to us as Ramesses IV.

## Item 5 - The Strike Papyrus

[Image from Dianaguja Blog: <https://goo.gl/dBDjGz>]

Another interesting document from the turbulent reign of Ramesses III is the Strike Papyrus.

In the 29th year of the reign of Ramesses III, two squads of workers, protesting for the three-weeks delay in their payment, staged what amounts to a sit-in in the Thebes/Deir el-Medeina area, blocking access to the mortuary temples of Tuthmosis III, Ramesses II and Seti I.

*“We are hungry, for 18 days have already elapsed in this month.”*

Workers were paid in food, and it is easy to imagine the plight of the workers. The strike was effective, and despite various further delays, the food was finally distributed.

The papyrus was compiled by Ammenakhte, and not only covers the workers' strike, but also describes the general state of corruption which plagued the Ramesses III administration.

Collateral evidence from other holdings in the Turin Museum provide details about the form of payment for the workers. A salary statement of Deir el-Medina for the workmen of the necropolis:

*First month of summer salary for the second month of summer: the foreman 7 ½ sacks, the scribe 7 ½ sacks, each of the 17 workers 5 ½ sacks, 93 ½ sacks, the two youth each 2 bags, 4 bags, guards 4½ bags ; all the maids (together) 3 sacks, porter 1 ½ bags; physician 1 ½ bag; which makes the total 117 ½ bags.*

## **Item 6 - Turin Erotic Papyrus**

[Image from Experience Ancient Egypt : <http://goo.gl/7qGPGo> ]

The so-called Erotic Papyrus of Turin has been called “the world's first men's magazine”, but the definition is probably wrong.

The scroll presents a series of vignettes, opening with a sequence of pictures of animals doing human work. These scenes have no sexual or erotic contents - there's a donkey playing the harp, a cat holding a crook and flail like a king, etc.

The remaining images in the second part of the papyrus do have a sexual content, presenting a number of love-making situations between men and women.

It must be noted that the images do not conform to the standardized “Egyptian art” representations of the human figure. The characters portrayed are grotesque, with extravagant features and various deformities. This has led many researchers to see the "Erotic Papyrus" as a satirical or humorous text, lampooning the habits and affectations of the upper class, and destined to the same individuals that it mocked.

For certain, the papyrus, discovered in Deir el-Medeina in 1824, caused no end of embarrassment in the earlier Egyptologists, and remains the only example of erotica from the New Kingdom.

## **Conclusions**

The six objects selected for this essay show a multi-faceted view of Egyptian life between the 18th and 19th dynasties. The picture that emerges is one of a curiously modern culture, in which spiritual concerns and magical thinking existed side-by-side with corruption, workers' strikes, crime (with curious magical connotations) and even the need for comedy, satire and light entertainment.

A somewhat different version of Ancient Egypt compared to what is commonly portrayed in popular media.