

port the existence of an original, longer papyrus, much speaks for the completeness of the text itself, especially its contents and the logic of its composition.

**Contents.** The story occurred in Thebes. A naval expedition to the south has obviously returned without success. Its leader, a nomarch, nameless as all other protagonists in the story, is afraid of having to report to the king. A follower tries to console him by telling the story of his own experience, which takes up most of the account: sole survivor of a shipwrecked expedition, he reaches an island ruled by a huge, 30 meter (100 foot) snake deity. The situation, which appears dangerous at first, soon turns to the good and the snake deity prophesies a safe return home for the shipwrecked sailor. The deity then begins to tell of its own fate as the presumed sole survivor among seventy-five snake deities after a cosmic catastrophe. (The fate that befell his daughter, especially mentioned in the tale, remains unclear.) The prophecy is fulfilled; the story ends in a sentence whose meaning has not been clearly established, leaving the question of the nomarch's ultimate fate unanswered and the overall meaning of the story open to interpretation.

**Meaning.** The variety of interpretations reflects the puzzlement this story has generated: fairy tale, sailor's tale, teaching fable, eschatological story, allegory, royal propaganda writ, antiroyal opposition document, or text with esoteric knowledge. Accordingly, the island has been viewed as a real, fictional, or mythical place. The snake deity has been variously interpreted as a god of creation, a mythical creature, or even as an embodiment of the king, while the shipwrecked sailor has been seen as an anti-hero or as a genuine adviser. The conclusion has been understood partially as positive/optimistic but also as negative/pessimistic. The numbers mentioned in the story (e.g., seventy-five snakes, four months' residence on the island) have been assessed as being incidental, without meaning/significance, or strongly symbolic (e.g. seventy-five manifestations of the sun king, annual cycle of seasons in four months, and more).

Recent studies emphasize, above all, the ambiguity and many layers of the text, which allow for different approaches to interpretation that complement one another. In other words, the understanding of the text as a piece of entertaining literature or as a text with a "teaching character" (on whatever level and with whatever intention) would have depended on the education of the reader.

**Form.** The complexity, and thus the literary value, of the story is also discernible from its carefully crafted composition: its character of a "story within a story within a story" (i.e., functioning simultaneously on three levels in terms of time and logic) is generally recognized today as a structure that invests the story with a literary quality. Composed in verse and grouped in a first level as thought

**SHIPWRECKED SAILOR.** The *Story of the Shipwrecked Sailor* is one of the most mysterious and inspiring of all Egyptian texts, as the many publications and variety of interpretations confirm.

**Source of Attestation Date.** The *Shipwrecked Sailor* is sourced in a single papyrus from the Middle Kingdom, the Papyrus Petersburg 1115. The period has now been widely established as most probably the twelfth dynasty. Less consensus exists with regard to the completeness of the papyrus and/or the account. While some scholars sup-

couplets, the whole text is clearly divided into twenty “chapters” which are in turn structured in four major contextually-coherent sections. Stylistic means such as *parallelismus membrorum* or centered structure (the whole story is roughly based on an A-B-C-D-C’-B’-A’ pattern) are clearly evident throughout.

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Baines, John. “Interpreting the Story of the Shipwrecked Sailor.” *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 76 (1990), 55–72. In-depth discussion of the different options for interpretation.
- Burkard, Günter. *Überlegungen zur Form der ägyptischen Literatur: Die Geschichte des Schiffbrüchigen als literarisches Kunstwerk. Ägypten und Altes Testament*, 22. Wiesbaden, 1993. Completely revised translation of the *Shipwrecked Sailor* in the context of studying the structures of Egyptian literary texts; the poetic (verse) form of the text is reconstructed.
- Foster, John. “The Shipwrecked Sailor: Prose or Verse?” *Studien zur Altägyptischen Kultur* 15 (1988), 69–109. Overall convincing reconstruction of the verse structure of the text with English translation.
- Kurth, Dieter. “Zur Interpretation der Geschichte des Schiffbrüchigen.” *Studien zur Altägyptischen Kultur* 14 (1987), 167–179. Especially important for the elaboration of different levels of interpretation.

GÜNTER BURKARD

Translated from German by Elizabeth Schwaiger