

The Instructions Of
PTAHHOTEP
An Interlinear Translation

Ptahhotep, Sem Essesi, others...

Foreward by <someone>

August 28, 2024



For my father Ptah, who is South of His wall...

... and for Mut, the mother of all of my mothers.

May Seshat and Thoth be satisfied.

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Foreword

Someone else needs to write this explaining...

- their relationship with the authors
- how it is useful to people
- how they contributed to the work
- signing their name at the end

Preface

The *sebayt* of Ptahhotep, often called the "instructions" or "maxims" of Ptahhotep, is amongst the oldest complete work of wisdom literature that survives today.

The skill of the Ancient Egyptian scribes, engineers and artists have long captivated me. Their religious devotion to producing the finest quality of work is mind-boggling to the modern observer.

When I first began to explore the reading and writing of hieroglyphs I quickly noticed that, despite the ease of modern printing and digital artwork, many translations of Ancient Egyptian writings are presented in plain text, and those with hieroglyphs or hieratic text included use colourless or crude representations. They also tend not to be accompanied by images, even when the originals were.

I could not help but wonder how the ancients would make use of modern technology, and felt that they would strive to create considerably more beautiful renditions than we ordinarily do. What better work to attempt this with myself than Ptahhotep's teachings?

As a software engineer of some experience I produced for myself a "proof-of-concept" tool to render hieroglyphic text with support for coloured glyphs and automated layout. I quickly found a set of coloured glyph images for another tool made by an enthusiast, which I could recycle for my own purposes. The colours did not adhere to the ancient standards, and some glyphs were transposed or poorly rendered, and so I created a modified version of the glyph images the use of myself or others which remedied these mistakes.

Although I originally planned to do much more work, striving to create something perfect, or at least to a very high standard, I realised that I had enough tools and experience to attempt production of an illustrated interlinear translation of Ptahhotep's work.

My skill with the ancient language is not fully developed yet, but with the help of dictionaries and others whose skills far surpassed mine the goal seemed achievable.

The original is rendered in hieratic text on papyrus using red and black ink. This rendition uses hieroglyphs, which seem to me to be the modern "high quality" and print-equivalent to the hand written hieratic of the ancient scribe. This is how the ancients rendered text on monuments and funerary goods where the highest quality was desired.

So here we have my attempt at a beautiful, faithful and useful copy and translation of the *sebayt* of Ptahhotep as found in Papyrus Prisse.

Interlinear Translation

Introduction

Ptahhotep's Lament

Ptahhotep addresses his king, Djedkare Isesi and describes his plight, which is the suffering that comes with old age.

This is relevant to why he would want to pass down his wisdom as part of his legacy, and helps serve as an introduction to the rest of the text.

1 - The title *imi rA* is usually translated as "overseer" but is a pun around the *r* glyph having the shape of the mouth and being used for terms related to words and speech, and may mean something like "commander of words" or "commander through words".

2 - The *niwt* sign can also determine a place, a town or other settlement and the choice of the word city is to convey a modern equivalent to this title.

3 - The title of *TAti* translated as "vizier" is a somewhat modern projection here, it could perhaps also be translated as "prime minister", or as a "second in command" to the king.

4 - *Xprw* is closely related to the god Khepri, who symbolises the making of progress of the sun when it rises.

5 - *wr* as a determinative seems often to be used with concepts associated with *isfet*, as well as being a word on its own which is usually translated to mean "great" or "old". e.g. *Hrw wr* for "Horus the Elder" and *mHt wrt* for "the Great Flood"

6 - This appears to be a spelling mistake in the original.

7 - *iw* is a particle with no direct translation in English.

m r niwt t . TA t . p t H Htp t p A50 D d f			
<i>imi rA¹ niwt² TAti³ ptHHtp Dd.f</i>			
Overseer ¹ of the city ² vizier ³ Ptahhotep (he) says:			
it it nb G7 A1 t n i A19 xpr r			
<i>ity nb.i tni xprw⁴</i>			
sovereign, my lord, infirmity develops ⁴			
i A w A19 h A w D54 w g g wr⁵ D54			
<i>iAw hAw wgg</i>			
old age befalls, feebleness			
w⁶ i i H w wr⁵ Hr . mA A w Y1A			
<i>iw⁶ 7.w iHw Hr mAw</i>			
comes, weakness is renewed			

Ptahhotep continues to lament his old age, describing and analogising his difficulties.

8 - This appears to be a spelling mistake in the original.

9 - Literally "all suns", *rA* meaning "sun" and *nb* used as a suffix meaning "all". *rA* is identical in spelling and form to the name of the sun god Ra.

10 - The *-ti* and *-wi* endings signify duals, which are here translated by saying "both", whereas in English one might say "the eyes" or "the ears". In the original hieratic the singular signs are duplicated to convey the dual, and so the transcription here does the same.

11 - *ib* is directly translated as heart, but the ancient Egyptians considered the heart to be the seat of intelligence and decision making, much as we today think about the brain.

12 - The word *r* seems to be used for both the mouth and for speech.

13 - Speech is only implied, this construct seems to mean something more like the colloquial or artificial english construct "wording" or "to do words".

s Dr r A55 n f			X d⁸ r wr			r A rA nb		
<i>sDr.n f</i>			<i>Xrd⁸.w</i>			<i>rA nb</i>		
one sleeps			like a child			every day ⁹		
ir ir			n D s W wr			Anx Anx sDm sDm		
<i>irti</i>			<i>nDs.w</i>			<i>Anxwi</i>		
both ¹⁰ eyes			blind,			both ¹⁰ ears		
p H pHt t w A3			Hr .			wr r d A2		
<i>pHtiw</i>			<i>Hr</i>			<i>wrd</i>		
strength			is			tired		
r .			gr A1			md d w A1 n f		
<i>r¹²</i>			<i>gr.w</i>			<i>mdw.n f</i>		
mouth ¹²			is silent,			speaking ¹³ words		







Ptahhotep's lament continues.




14 - This reading is uncertain.

15 - This is not an obvious translation, and the pieces referred to are not explicitly body parts. This could also be translated as places or things, although the usual word for things is *xt*.

				
ib ·	tm m W wr	ni	s X A n f	sf rA
<i>ib</i>	<i>tm.w</i>	<i>ni</i>	<i>sXA.n f</i>	<i>sf</i>
heart	failing,	not	remembering	yesterday

		
qs T19	mn n n wr f n	Aw w Y1A
<i>qs</i>	<i>mn.n f n</i>	<i>Aww</i> ¹⁴
bones	hurt me from	high age ¹⁴

					
b W	nfr	xpr	n	b W	b i n_{wr}
<i>bw¹⁵</i>	<i>nfr</i>	<i>xpr</i>	<i>m</i>	<i>bw¹⁵</i>	<i>bin</i>
pieces ¹⁵	beautiful	develop	to	pieces ¹⁵	evil

 <p>d p t ns A2</p> <p><i>dpt</i></p> <p>taste</p>	 <p>nb t</p> <p><i>nbt</i></p> <p>all</p>	 <p>Sm m t i</p> <p><i>Sm.ti</i></p> <p>gone</p>
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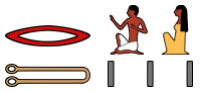


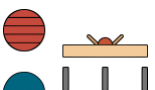

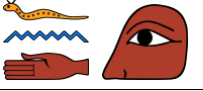
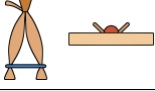

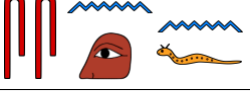



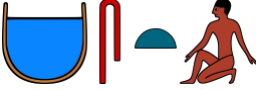
Ptahhotep's lament continues further.

16 - This is a spelling mistake of *ni* for *n*.

17 - The plural mark Z2 is vocalised as *w*.

18 - It is slightly uncertain if the reading is *xt* or *xtw*, since the *w* is often absent as are the plural marks. This word occurs frequently in offering formulae. This kind of construct is called a "false plural".

19 - List of terms without conjunctions are infact lists, and so "and" is implied.

			
ir r t	i A w A19	ni¹⁶	r T A1 B1 Z2¹⁷
<i>irt</i>	<i>iAw</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>rmTw</i>
make	old age	to	people
			
b i n wr	m	x t Y1 Z2	nb t
<i>bin</i>	<i>m</i>	<i>xt¹⁸</i>	<i>nbt</i>
evil	in	thing(s) ¹⁸	all
			
f n d D19	dbA Y1	ni	s s n D19 n f
<i>fnd</i>	<i>dbA.w</i>	<i>ni</i>	<i>ssn.n f</i>
nose	blocked	not	(he) breathes
			
n	t n nw w	aH A D54	Hm s t A7
<i>n</i>	<i>tnw</i>	<i>aHA</i>	<i>Hmst</i>
is	difficult	standing	(and) ¹⁹ sitting

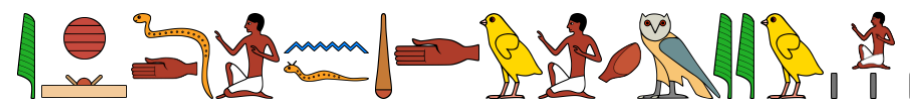
Ptahhotep's Request

Ptahhotep's lament is complete, and he requests permission to instruct his son in the inherited wisdom of his ancestors.

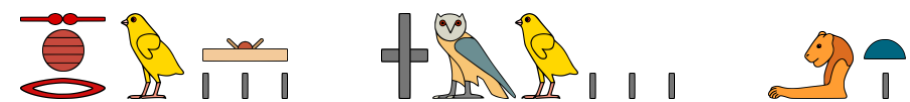
20 - *pAw* is actually more of a past tense marker, but the translation given here fits.



wD w t Y1	n	bA k i m	ir t	md iAw A1
<i>wDwt</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>bAk im</i>	<i>irt</i>	<i>mdw iAwi</i>
orders	to	humble servant	make	staff of old age



ix Y1	D d A1 n f	md d w A1	sDm m y w A1 Z2
<i>ix</i>	<i>Dd in f</i>	<i>mdw</i>	<i>sDmyw</i>
therefore	say to him	words	those who listened



z x r w Y1 Z2	im m w Z2	HAt t .
<i>zxr w</i>	<i>imw</i>	<i>HAt</i>
counsels	ancestors	fore(most)



pA A w Z2	sDm m n	ntr ntr ntr
<i>pAw</i> ²⁰	<i>sDm.n</i>	<i>nTrw</i>
in the past ²⁰	listened to	the gods

Ptahhotep expresses hopes that his king, Djedkare Isesi, experiences suffering driven from his people, and receives their support.

21 - The dual marker Z4 is vocalised as y






22 - The shores referred to are those of the Nile, and the unity of both of them is a way of referring to the land of Egypt.


i x Y1A	ir t n k	mi t t Y1	
<i>ix</i>	<i>ir.tw n k</i>	<i>mitt</i>	
therefore	made for you	likewise	
d r Y1 t w	Sn n nw	m	r x y t w G23 A1 B1 Z2
<i>ix</i>	<i>Dd in f</i>	<i>mdw</i>	<i>sDmyw</i>
driven	suffering	from	subjects
bA k A24 n k	idb idb w Z4²¹		
<i>bAk.n.k</i>	<i>idbwy²²</i>		
serve you	both shores ²²		

Djedkare Iseki Responds

Djedkare Iseki responds to Ptahhotep's request.

23 - literally "under front" (?)

				
D d i n	x m .	n	n T r .	p n
<i>Dd in</i>	<i>xm</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>nTr</i>	<i>pn</i>
spoken by	majesty	of	god	this

					
sbA A A24	r k	sw w	r	md d t A l	Xr r H A t t .
<i>sbA</i>	<i>r.k</i>	<i>sw</i>	<i>r</i>	<i>mdt</i>	<i>Xr HAt</i>
teach	you to	him	to	the words	past ²³

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