

UDC 94(32):299.31

*W. Sherbiny*

PhD in Egyptology (Universiteit Leuven – Belgium)

Independent Scholar

wael.sherbiny@gmx.com

### **ECHOES OF A LOST LEGACY. THE RECENT RESEARCH ON THE SO-CALLED BOOK OF TWO WAYS IN ANCIENT EGYPT**

The so-called Book of Two Ways forms parts of the ancient Egyptian Coffin Texts. These religious texts appeared on some of the box-shaped coffins for most of the first half of the second millennium BC and slightly earlier. In its standard form, the so-called Book of Two Ways is a mixture of texts and images and is exclusively attested on the insides of coffins from a certain cemetery in Middle Egypt. This brief contribution sheds light on few results of the recent research on this intriguing and highly complex composition. A survey of the newly discovered and rediscovered documents challenges both the centrality of the geographical distribution of this composition and the originality of some of its pictorial-textual elements. This state of affairs opens up interesting interpretative possibilities as far as the editorial transmission history and the mechanisms of the contextual adaptability are concerned. These new findings ultimately call into question some of the widely-held opinions concerning the so-called Book of Two Ways.

**Keywords:** Book of Two Ways, Coffin Texts, Book of the Dead, Her-mopolis, religious texts, ancient Egypt, funerary literature, iconography, ritual, cult, Underworld Books.

#### **Sources of the so-called Book of Two Ways**

The so-called Book of Two Ways is a composition of magico-religious texts and images in a certain sequence. It is attested on the

---

© 2018 W. Sherbiny; Published by the A.Yu. Krymskyi Institute of Oriental Studies, NAS of Ukraine on behalf of *The Oriental Studies*. This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>).

insides of a number of coffins that date back to the ancient Egyptian Middle Kingdom (2055–1650 BC) originating from a single cemetery in Middle Egypt. It was the cemetery of the fifteenth province of Upper Egypt [Helck 1974, 106–109; Gomaà 1986, 287–304] known for its capital which the Greeks called “Hermopolis”. It housed the main cult center of the god Thoth who was associated with Hermes in the Graeco-Roman Period [Baines & Malek 2000, 126f; Kessler 2001, 94–97]. This geographical concentration of the sources led many researchers to suggest a Hermopolitan origin of this composition as one of the creations of the theologians at Hermopolis [Bonnet 1952, 882; Stadler 2009, 99–103].

Intriguingly, variants of a certain segment from this composition are attested in other regions. These include few Middle Kingdom coffins from the cemetery of Beni Hassan in Middle Egypt [de Buck 1956, 194; 1961, 107–108] and a burial chamber of an early Middle Kingdom tomb at Kom El Hisen in the western Delta [Silverman 1988, 73–82 and 50–52; 1989, 29–53; 1990, 853–876]. These attestations, however, have been mainly interpreted as variants of some excerpts from the so-called Book of Two Ways. Processes of text borrowing from a Hermopolitan source and a subsequent tailoring of the material to local traditions have been generally assumed to play dominant role in explaining these occurrences. However, recent scholarship has started to cast doubt on the Hermopolitan origin of several components of this composition [Sherbiny 2017a].

In the beginning of the twenty-first century a precursor of a spell that was only attested in the so-called Book of Ways surfaced among the fragments of the Pyramid Texts of the king Merenere (2287–2278 BC) from the Old Kingdom [Pierre-Croisau 2004, 268, 278, and *fig. 17*]. Furthermore, an interesting variant of a certain spell has been attested on a coffin from Lisht [Sherbiny 2017a, 17, 200f, 242]. Although this coffin was already known to the Coffin Texts project staff who assigned to it the siglum L1NY [Lesko 1979, 8], only a few number of its Coffin Texts were published. The spell occurs on the headboard of this Lisht coffin in the context of an old offering ritual. It is even introduced by Pyramid Texts spells [Allen 2006, 20–25] that had been positively recorded for the first time on the

subterranean chambers of the king Unas from the 5<sup>th</sup> Dynasty (2375–2345 BC).

An even more interesting piece of evidence has been retrieved earlier this century as well. Contrary to all the previous attestations of the entire so-called Book of Two Ways or parts thereof which came from funerary contexts, the new document may point to another direction. It is a fragmentary leather roll kept now in the Cairo Museum [Sherbiny 2017b]. Although its provenance is unknown, it can be conveniently dated to sometime between the late Old Kingdom and early Middle Kingdom on paleographical and linguistic grounds. Interestingly, this unique document includes a large segment combining texts and images from the so-called Book of Two Ways that can only be compared with the most lavishly illustrated example of this composition as attested on the Hermopolitan coffin of Sepi in the Cairo Museum<sup>1</sup>. There is no clear indication in the text that refers to its origin, and nothing can prove that it is Hermopolitan either. This is in fact the first time a complete pictorial-textual segment of this composition occurs in a document which might not have been come from Hermopolis. The manuscript can be compared with few other religious papyri of similar age, such as the three Gardiner papyri II–IV, and the “papyrus Golenishchev”<sup>2</sup>.

The survey of the evidence at hand alters the widely-held opinions about the Hermopolitan origin of several segments of this composition. The picture that emerges here is that both textual and pictorial variants similar (or almost identical – as in the case of the Cairo leather roll) to the material attested on the Hermopolitan coffins, were already known in other areas in Egypt and documented on much older material. Hence both the temporal and spatial boundaries of this intriguing composition are certainly extended beyond the apparent monopoly of the Middle Kingdom theologians of Hermopolis.

### **Publication History**

The earliest publications of the so-called Book of Two Ways at the hands of Schack-Schackenburg [1903] and Lacau [1904] were the

<sup>1</sup> For color images see, [Forman & Quirke 1996; Sherbiny 2017a].

<sup>2</sup> For these and additional manuscripts, see [Buchberger 1993, 40; Sherbiny 2017a, 16 and 22; 2017b].

primary sources of studying this composition (**Fig. 1**). This situation changed when the seventh volume of the *The Egyptian Coffin Texts* of the Chicago Oriental Institute saw the light of day [de Buck 1961]. Not only did de Buck include the previously published manuscripts of the so-called Book of Two Ways, but he also added a good number of new sources that were never published before from the museum collections in Cairo, Europe, and the United States of America. Nevertheless, the lack of both photographs (which were solely available for the editors of the Coffin Texts but were never published) and facsimiles of the original manuscripts drew thick veil on many iconographical elements that did not receive much attention by the textually biased Chicago Coffin Texts project [cf. Sherbiny 2009]. It is only recently that the quality of de Buck's treatment of the iconographic material of this composition started to lose the credence they once enjoyed [Sherbiny 2017a, *passim*]. In addition, one of the early sources (B6C), which was previously thought to transmit a purely textual version of the composition, turned out now [Sherbiny 2017c] to be the earliest illustrated source of the so-called Book of Two Ways in its standard textual-pictorial arrangement (**Fig. 2**).

### **The so-called Book of Two Ways versus the Underworld Books**

A recurrent idea in the Egyptological literature about this composition has to do with considering it a precursor to the famous “underworld” books or the cosmographies attested on the royal tombs of the New Kingdom, such as the Amduat and the Book of the Gates, and the like [e.g. Altenmüller 1970; Hornung 1972, 15–17; Hermsen 1991; Rößler-Köhler 2003]. It is then assumed to be as a guide to the Hereafter placed at the feet of the deceased in the coffin, and offering an imaginary map of the Netherworld.

Although some elements may seem to be somehow comparable, the general structure and formulation is very different. Contrary to the circular descriptions in the third person about the sun god and the passage through different temporal regions and their specific beings [Quack 2006, 595], the textual and pictorial characteristics of so-called Book of Two Ways are different [Sherbiny 2017a, 25ff]. As in many other spells from the Coffin Texts outside this composition, a

great deal of utterances recorded in the text represents recitations, originally in the first person singular of an anonymous speaker on his way to a certain destination. The text in some of the sources, mainly the early coffins, features the name of the deceased who appears to be spoken about instead of being the speaker as in the original first person formulations. This kind of deliberate change and adaptation of the text to the funerary context may allude to an original *Sitz im Leben* of these utterances which may have not been intrinsically funerary in the first place.

### Here and Hereafter

The recent analysis of several sections of this complex composition points to a certain ritual background to some segments which seem to have been derived from the divine cult in the Egyptian temples. Not only did the processes of editing such religious texts take place in these temples, but also some ritual episodes were alluded to in the course of the composition. Interestingly, part of the material incorporated into the so-called Book of Two Ways seems to have originated in both the Osirian and solar cult centers. This background was rather reflected in the old manuscripts, which were once kept in the great temple of the god Thoth in Hermopolis, and from which the entire composition was eventually edited. Thus it was not necessarily an expression of actual religious practices in this temple. Interestingly, Barguet had already reached a similar conclusion long time ago [Barguet 1969]. He interpreted several texts against the background of initiating a priest into the realm of the divine and passing through sacred spaces within a divine cult temple. Although Barguet's approach was generally too speculative and not all his arguments can be easily accepted, the impressions the composition made on him seem to be (at least partially) consistent with some of the results of the recent research<sup>3</sup>. Needless to say a detailed appreciation of this view of this long and complex composition cannot be justifiably expressed in this succinct contribution. However, we may briefly refer to two examples.

Earlier scholars suggested that most of the textual material of the famous Book of the Dead chapters 144/147 was interwoven from, or

---

<sup>3</sup> E.g. [von Lieven 2002; Quack 2002].

at least inspired by, the many textual elements in the so-called two ways section in our composition<sup>4</sup>. This chapter from Book of the Dead mainly concerns the passage through seven heavily guarded gates (**Fig. 3**) leading to the sanctuary of Osiris. The non-funerary background of similar passages related to the gates is made clear by the publication of much later manuscripts. It is a papyrus kept in the Metropolitan Museum (MMA 35.9.21) that goes back to the Ptolemaic Period [Goyon 1999, 3–7]. Here the slender adaptation of the Book of the Dead chapters in the funerary liturgy of this papyrus (specifically from col. 7,16 until col. 8,5) clearly suggests a ritual origin of the text in the Osirian cult [Goyon 1999, 19, 34–35, *pls. VII–VII*; Quack 2006, 595; von Lieven 2012].

It has been also noticed that Book of the Dead chapter 137A, which concerns a certain nocturnal rites involving lighting a torch, is associated with an approach to these Osirian gates [Budge 1898, 309; Luft 2008; 2009]. An interrelationship between these two chapters found also expression in their spatial disposition on the walls of some later tombs and Book of the Dead manuscripts [Eigner 1984, 180–182; Quirke 2013, 307 and 310]. The application of similar material in ritual context including offerings turns up also in other texts from the Middle Kingdom and earlier [Franke 1994, 223–235].

Intriguingly, an allusion to the same nightly ritual in reference to the torch in analogous cultic milieu (using the same phraseology of these early texts and the later Book of the Dead chapter 137A!) turns up also in the so-called Book of Two Ways. In the close vicinity, clear references to the gates and their powerful gatekeepers and to offerings prepared for Osiris are mentioned [Sherbiny 2017a, 253, 263, 284, and 300]. These findings suggest that these rites had much longer transmission history before they found their expression in the famous Book of the Dead, which probably goes back to the Old Kingdom. They also draw our attention to a different conceptual setting of the so-called two ways section that probably had little to do with mapping the Hereafter and guiding the deceased in a nether-worldly journey to his final resurrection and an eternal life in the Elysian Fields. Such romanticized idea of the life after death with its

---

<sup>4</sup> E.g. [Waitkus 1983; Hornung 1979, 502ff; Quirke 2013, 323ff].

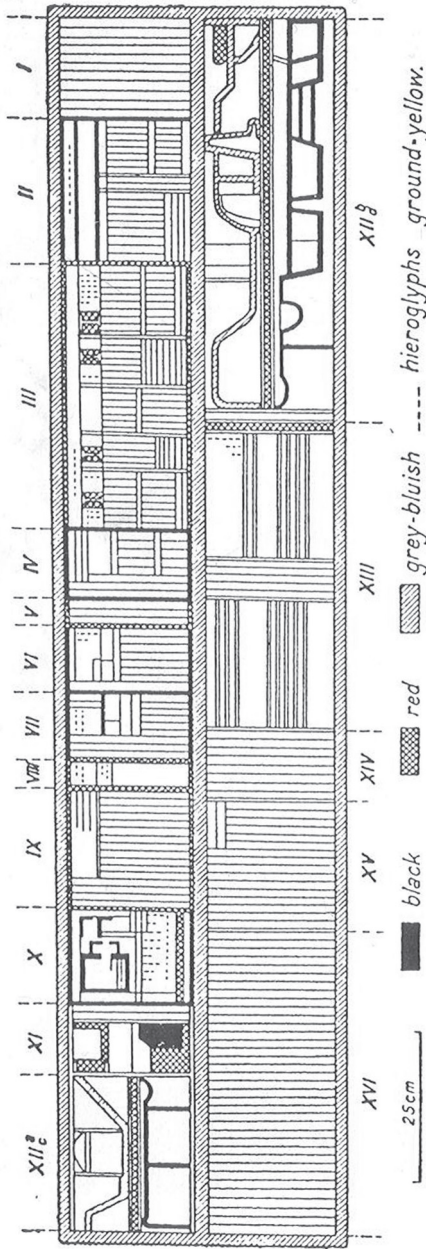
allegorical borrowing from Judeo-Christian traditions might seem very attractive for the modern mind. However, the situation described briefly above unmistakably refers to a specific mechanism that situates the text protagonist in a ritual landscape inspired by the acts of a living ritualist in a divine cult.

### **Insights into a lost legacy**

The picture that eventually emerges is that the Hermopolitan theologians most probably had access to manuscripts of older age and from different religious genres. These manuscripts had probably some iconographical and textual elements. However, they heavily treated and edited this material and attempted to interpret the obscure passages as far as they could. Although this procedure was not always successful, it proved to be an active and dynamic interaction with this old material on the part of the Hermopolitan theologians and scribes<sup>5</sup>. The so-called Book of Two Ways represents an exclusively Hermopolitan tradition as part of the local coffin decoration program. However, it seems to be a deliberate compilation of older textual and pictorial material that were combined, reworked, and arranged in a “canonical” order. The outcome of these processes was a pictorial-textual composition that was pragmatically used as a local tradition in decorating the coffin floorboards of the elite. This predilection to include rare and old material that was not used in the coffin decoration program of the other provinces has preserved to us some echoes of a lost world of ancient Egyptian iconographical and textual legacy.

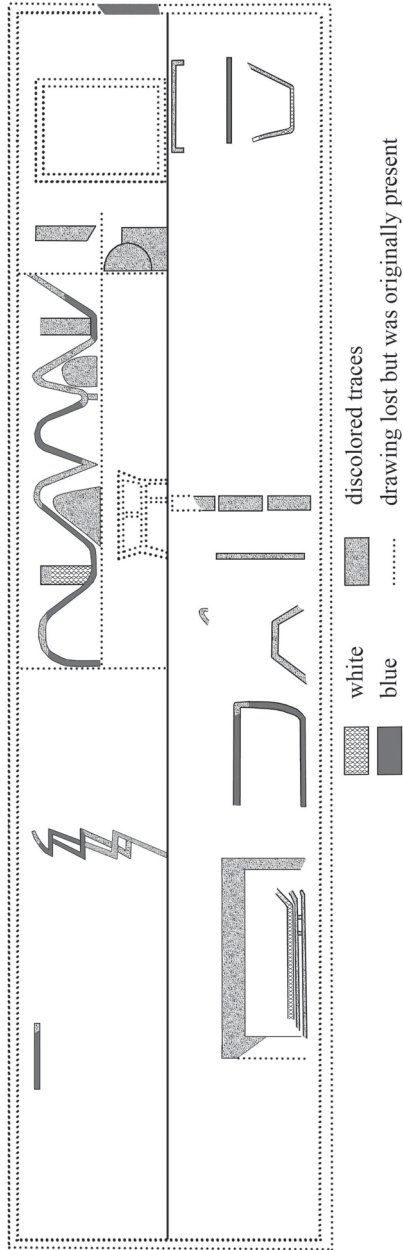
---

<sup>5</sup> E.g. [Sherbiny 2017a, 213].



**Fig. 1.** A plan of the so-called Book of Two Ways on the coffin floorboard of a dignitary called Sen, which was published by Schack-Schackenburg in 1903, and is now kept in the Berlin Museum (after [Bonacker 1950, 9, fig. 2])





**Fig. 2.** A plan of the floorboard of a coffin now kept in the Cairo Museum bearing the hitherto earliest attestation of the so-called Book of Two Ways in its standard pictorial-textual form. The drawing was meticulously made by Joanna Wisniewska indicating all the visible traces of the depictions and their original colors.

© Wael Sherbiny

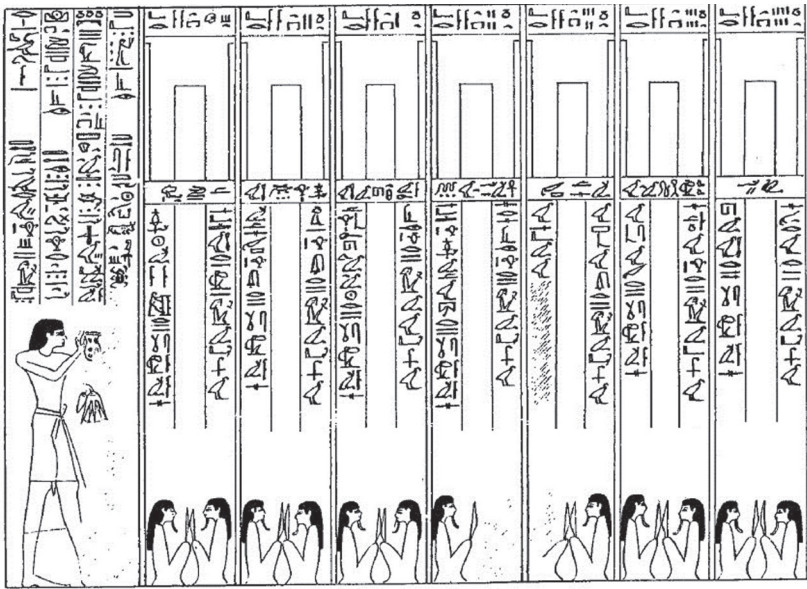


Fig. 3. Book of the Dead chapter 144 – pBrocklehurst II  
(after [Navelle 1886, pl. CLIV]).

The vignette shows the seven complex gates in numerical order depicted above and their guardians below

### REFERENCES

- Allen J. (2006), *The Egyptian Coffin Texts Volume 8: Middle Kingdom Copies of Pyramid Texts*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago.
- Altenmüller H. (1970), “Jenseitsbücher, Jenseitsführer”, Spuler B. (ed.), *Ägyptologie: Literatur*, Handbuch der Orientalistik, Erste Abteilung 1 (2), Brill, Leiden and Cologne, pp. 69–81.
- Baines J. and Malek J. (2000), *Cultural Atlas of Ancient Egypt*, Checkmark Books, New York.
- Barguet P. (1969), “Essai d’interprétation du Livre des Deux Chemins”, *Revue d’Égyptologie*, № 21, pp. 7–17.
- Bonacker W. (1950), “The Egyptian ‘Book of the Two Ways’”, *Imago Mundi*, № 7, pp. 5–17.
- Bonnet H. (1952), *Reallexikon der ägyptischen Religionsgeschichte*, de Gruyter Verlag, Berlin.
- Buchberger H. (1993), *Transformation und Transformat: Sargtextstudien I*, Harrassowitz, Wiesbaden.

de Buck A. (1961), *The Egyptian Coffin Texts. Vol. VII: Texts of Spells 787–1185*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago.

Budge E. A. W. (1898), *The Book of the Dead: The Chapters of Coming Forth by Day: The Egyptian Text According to the Theban Recension in Hieroglyphic edited from numerous papyri, with a translation, vocabulary, etc.*, Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner, London.

Eigner D. (1984), *Die monumentalen Grabbauten der Spätzeit in der thebanischen Nekropole*, Verlag d. Österreich. Akad. d. Wiss., Vienna.

Forman W. and Quirke S. (1996), *Hieroglyphs and the Afterlife in Ancient Egypt*, British Museum Press, London.

Franke D. (1994), *Das Heiligtum des Heqaib auf Elephantine: Geschichte eines Provinzheiligtums im Mittleren Reich*, Heidelberger Orientverlag Heidelberg.

Gomaà F. (1986), *Die Besiedlung Ägyptens während des Mittleren Reiches I: Oberägypten und das Fayyūm*, Harrassowitz, Wiesbaden.

Goyon J.-C. (1999), *Le papyrus d'Imouthès Fils de Psintaès au Metropolitan Museum of Art de New-York (Papyrus MMA 35.9.21)*, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

Helck W. (1974), *Die altägyptischen Gaue*, Harrassowitz, Wiesbaden.

Hermesen E. (1991), *Die zwei Wege des Jenseits: Das altägyptische Zweibegebuch und seine Topographie*, Universitätsverlag and Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Freiburg and Göttingen.

Hornung E. (1972), *Ägyptische Unterweltbücher: Eingeleitet, übersetzt und erläutert*, Artemis Verlag, Zürich and München.

Hornung E. (1979), *Das Totenbuch der Ägypter: Eingeleitet, übersetzt und erläutert*, Artemis Verlag, Zürich and München.

Kessler D. (2001), "Hermopolis", Redford D. (ed.), *Oxford Encyclopedia of Ancient Egypt*, Vol. 2, Oxford University Press, Oxford.

Lacau P. (1904), *Sarcophages antérieurs au Nouvel Empire, Catalogue général des antiquités égyptiennes du Musée du Caire – Nos 28001–28086*, T. 1, IFAO, Le Caire.

Lesko L. (1979), *Index of the Spells on Egyptian Middle Kingdom Coffins and Related Documents*, Berkeley University Press, Berkeley (California).

von Lieven A. (2002), "Mysterien des Kosmos: Kosmographie und Priesterwissenschaft", Assmann J. & Bommas M. (eds.), *Ägyptische Mysterien?*, Fink, München, pp. 47–58.

von Lieven A. (2012), “Book of the Dead, Book of the Living: Book of the Dead as Temple Texts”, *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology*, № 98, pp. 249–67.

Luft D. (2008), “Ein weiterer Ritualtext im Totenbuch: Überlegungen zur Funktion des Totenbuches anhand Tb 137”, Rothöhler B. and Manisali A. (eds.), *Mythos & Ritual: Festschrift für Jan Assmann zum 70. Geburtstag*, Berlin, pp. 83–93.

Luft D. (2009), *Das Anzünden der Fackel: Untersuchungen zu Spruch 137 des Totenbuches*, Studien zum altägyptischen Totenbuch, Bd. 15, Harrassowitz, Wiesbaden.

Naville E. (1886), *Das ägyptische Totenbuch der XVIII. bis XX. Dynastie*, Bd. I–II, Berlin.

Pierre-Croisier I. (2004), «Nouvelles identifications de Textes des Sarcophages parmi les “nouveaux” Textes des Pyramides de Pépy Ier et de Mérenrê», Bickel S. & Mathieu B. (eds.), *D’un monde à l’autre: Textes des Pyramides & Textes des Sarcophages. Actes de la table ronde internationale, “Textes des Pyramides versus Textes des Sarcophages”*, IFAO – 24–26 septembre 2001, Le Caire, pp. 263–78.

Quack J. F. (2002), “Königsweihe, Priester, Isisweihe”, Assmann J. and Bommas M. (eds.), *Ägyptische Mysterien?*, Fink, Munich, pp. 95–108.

Quack J. F. (2006), “Review of Backes, ‘Zweiwegebuch’”, *Journal of American Oriental Society*, № 126, pp. 594–96.

Quirke S. (2013), *Going out in Daylight – prt m hrw: The Ancient Egyptian Book of the Dead: Translation, Sources, Meaning*, GHP Egyptology, London.

Rößler-Köhler U. (2003), “Religion und Macht. Das altägyptische ‚Zweiwegebuch‘: Zum Schicksal eines Vorläufers des königlichen Amduat während der 12. Dynastie”, Gielen M. and Kügler J. (eds.), *Liebe, Macht und Religion: Interdisziplinäre Studien zu Grunddimensionen menschlicher Existenz (Gedenkschrift Helmut Merklein)*, Stuttgart, pp. 113–38.

Schack-Schackenburg H. (1903), *Das Buch von den zwei Wegen des seligen Toten (Zweiwegebuch): Texte aus der Pyramidenzeit nach einem im Berliner Museum bewahrten Sargboden des Mittleren Reiches*, Leipzig.

Sherbiny W. (2009), “A note on the arrangement of textual elements accompanying the drawings in Coffin Texts Spells 1120, 1122, and 1123”, *Göttinger Miszellen*, № 222, pp. 77–87.

Sherbiny W. (2017a), *Through Hermopolitan Lenses: Studies on the So-called Book of Two Ways in Ancient Egypt*, Brill, Boston and Leiden.

Sherbiny W. (2017b), “The so-called Book of Two Ways on a Middle Kingdom religious leather roll”, Guidotti M. & Rosati G. (eds.), *Proceedings of the XI International Congress of Egyptologists, Florence, Italy 23–30 August 2015*, Archaeopress, Oxford, pp. 590–92.

Sherbiny W. (2017c), “The earliest source of the so-called Book of Two Ways as a coffin floorboard decoration from the early Middle Kingdom”, Tomorad M. & Popielska-Grzybowska J. (eds.), *Egypt 2015: Perspectives of Research: Proceedings of the Seventh European Conference of Egyptologists, 2<sup>nd</sup>–7<sup>th</sup> June 2015, Zagreb, Croatia*, Archaeopress, Oxford, pp. 87–96.

Silverman D. (1988), *The Tomb Chamber of Hsw the Elder: The Inscribed Material at Kom El-Hisn, Part 1: Illustrations*, American Research Center in Egypt, Winona Lake.

Silverman D. (1989), “Textual criticism in the Coffin Texts”, Simpson W. K. (ed.), *Religion and Philosophy in Ancient Egypt*, New Haven, pp. 29–53.

Silverman D. (1990), “A spell from an abbreviated version of the Book of Two Ways in a tomb in the western Delta”, Israelit-Groll S. (ed.), *Studies in Egyptology Presented to Miriam Lichtheim*, Jerusalem, pp. 853–76.

Stadler M. (2009), *Weiser und Wesir: Studien zu Vorkommen, Rolle und Wesen des Gottes Thot im ägyptischen Totenbuch*, Mohr Siebeck, Tübingen.

Waitkus W. (1983), “Anmerkungen zu der Verteilung der Dämonennamen aus TB 144/147 im ‘Zweiwegbuch’”, *Göttinger Miszellen*, № 62, pp. 79–83.

*В. Шербіні*

**Відлуння загубленої спадщини.**

**Останні дослідження т. зв. “Книги двох шляхів”**

**у Стародавньому Єгипті**

Так звана “Книга двох шляхів” є частиною давньоєгипетських гробничних текстів. Ці релігійні тексти з’явилися на деяких коробчастих саркофагах протягом більшої частини першої половини II тис. до н. е. і навіть раніше. У своїй стандартній формі так звана “Книга двох шляхів” являє собою поєднання текстів та зображень, засвідчених суто на

внутрішніх поверхнях саркофагів, що походять з певного некрополя в Середньому Єгипті. Ця коротка стаття проливає світло на деякі результати недавніх досліджень цієї інтригуючої та дуже складної композиції. Огляд недавно відкритих і знову відкритих документів кидає виклик як думці щодо центрального географічного місця появи цього корпусу, так і оригінальності деяких його графіко-текстових елементів. Такий стан справ відкриває цікаві можливості інтерпретації щодо історії редагування та механізмів контекстної адаптації. Запропоновані нові висновки в кінцевому підсумку ставлять під сумнів деякі вельми поширені думки щодо так званої “Книги двох шляхів”.

**Ключові слова:** “Книга двох шляхів”, гробничні тексти, Книга мертвих, Гермополь, релігійні тексти, Стародавній Єгипет, похоронна література, іконографія, ритуал, культ, книги про загробний світ

*В. Шербини*

**Эхо утерянного наследия.**

**Последние исследования т. н. “Книги двух путей”  
в Древнем Египте**

Так называемая “Книга двух путей” является частью древнеегипетских гробничных текстов. Эти религиозные тексты появились на некоторых коробчатых саркофагах в течение большей части первой половины II тыс. до н. э. и даже ранее. В своей стандартной форме так называемая “Книга двух путей” представляет собой сочетание текстов и изображений, засвидетельствованных исключительно на внутренних поверхностях саркофагов, происходящих из определенного некрополя в Среднем Египте. Эта краткая статья проливает свет на некоторые результаты недавних исследований этой интригующей и очень сложной композиции. Обзор недавно открытых и вновь открытых документов бросает вызов как мнению о центральном географическом месте появления этого корпуса, так и оригинальности некоторых его графико-текстовых элементов. Такое положение дел открывает интересные возможности интерпретации в отношении истории редактирования и механизмов контекстной адаптации. Предложенные новые выводы в конечном итоге ставят под сомнение некоторые из широко распространенных мнений относительно так называемой “Книги двух путей”.

**Ключевые слова:** “Книга двух путей”, гробничные тексты, Книга мертвых, Гермополь, религиозные тексты, Древний Египет, погребальная литература, иконография, ритуал, культ, книги о загробном мире

*Стаття надійшла 07.05.2018*