

Studying and Understanding Emotions in Ancient Egyptian Texts

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The current discourse on emotions contends that emotions are biocultural phenomena. Although emotions may have a universal physiological basis, cultural attitudes, values, and beliefs play a fundamental role in shaping how they are conceptualised, lexicalised, expressed and appraised in different historical and cultural contexts. Furthermore, the words used to label emotions, such as ‘sadness’, ‘happiness’, and ‘fear’, are highly variable and rarely have exact equivalents across languages. These insights have important implications for how we study emotions in an ancient context. It is not possible to examine “what made the ancient Egyptians ‘sad’?”, for example, without first determining whether an emotion resembling this Anglophone concept existed in the ancient Egyptian context in the first place. In other words, the existence of universalist emotion categories should be problematised.

Against this background, this paper explores the methodological and theoretical approaches that can be employed to study and understand emotions in ancient Egyptian texts, as well as the challenges of this endeavour. It proposes that the combination of lexical semantic and lexicographic approaches with concepts from the History of Emotions framework is a viable method by which this can be achieved. This paper demonstrates the rich insights to be gained from this method through a case study examination of ancient Egyptian lexemes traditionally ascribed to the lexical field of ‘sadness’.

Bio

Madeline Jenkins has recently submitted her PhD thesis at Macquarie University. In her doctoral research, she undertook lexical analyses of ancient Egyptian words that are traditionally translated as ‘to be sad’ and ‘sadness’ in the dictionaries of the ancient Egyptian language. This research was supervised by Dr Camilla Di Biase-Dyson, Associate Professor Boyo Ockinga and Associate Professor Trevor Evans. More broadly, her research interests include the ancient Egyptian language, lexical semantics and lexicography, emotion studies, and the History of Emotions approach.