

Writing Trauma: Ipuwer and the Curation of Cultural Memory

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IT IS MY PLEASURE to dedicate this essay to Jim Hoffmeier, a cherished friend and a scholar whose work on Egypt's eastern border fortresses continues to be fundamental to my own understanding of pharaonic imperialism. For this contribution, I've chosen to write on another subject close to his heart, namely the potential of narratives that are often dismissed as "literary" or "folkloric" to yield valuable information about Egypt's society and its history. In particular, this essay—which focuses on the embedding of cultural trauma in social memory—is intended to compliment his own consideration, in his book *Israel in Egypt* (Hoffmeier 1997), of the role of famine in intensifying intercultural contact.

The literary work known as the The Admonitions of an Egyptian Sage survived in only a single manuscript, dated to the Nineteenth Dynasty, the verso of which bore a hymn to the god Amun. Since its original decipherment, the text has frustrated scholars on almost every level. Its date, purpose, and historical worth are much contested. Minority opinions place it as early as the immediate aftermath of the Old Kingdom or as late as the Eighteenth Dynasty, while current consensus dates it linguistically to the late Twelfth or the Thirteenth Dynasty (Parkinson 2002, 50; Enmarch 2008, 4–25; Stauder 2013, 509). Whether this date would be coeval with its original composition, however, is not at all certain. Ipuwer, the text's narrator—who will here, for simplicity's sake, be referred to also as its author—was remembered as an overseer of singers (*jmj-r ḥsjw*).¹ If the original composer was indeed, first and foremost, a singer, it is likely that the work survived in oral form long before it was transcribed.

The text's date and genre, of course, have bearing on whether Egypt's frightening descent into chaos—about which Ipuwer admonishes the Lord of All—should be seen as relevant to the First Intermediate Period, the Second Intermediate Period, or to neither. Indeed, many scholars suggest that the work is essentially ahistorical and represents a theodic "reproach to god." Even the identity of Ipuwer's interlocutor is enigmatic, as the Lord of All might be the creator god, the king, or an intentionally obfuscating conflation of the two. A thorough discussion of all these debates may be found in Roland Enmarch's (2008) foundational study of the text, *A World Upturned: Commentary on and Analysis of The Dialogue of Ipuwer and the Lord of All*.

As if these points of confusion weren't enough, the text's evocation of chaos and misery seems to serve no discernable purpose. Unlike references to fear, hunger, and

1. The Egyptians often indulged in pseudigraphy. Thus, even if Ipuwer was in fact a composer of note, there is still no guarantee that he would have been responsible for the work attributed to him.

strife in the tombs and steles of individuals who lived through the First Intermediate Period (Vandier 1936; Moreno García 1997, 3–92), the text does not paint a picture of chaos in order that its author might be seen as an effective force for good. Throughout, Ipuwer remains but a passive spectator. Nor does the narrative advertise the coming of a future king, who would bring order to chaos (as was the case for the Prophecies of Neferty), or else offer a royal apologetic and road for recovery (as in *The Teaching for King Merikare*). Finally, unlike *The Lamentations of Khakheperre-sonbe* and *The Man Who Was Weary of Life*, the text does not serve as an exploration of the troubled psyche of its narrator. Rather, for the entirety of the text, Ipuwer gazes outward onto a present that he depicts as unremittingly bleak and essentially unrecognizable.

Given the absence of any redemptive message, it is extremely difficult to understand the text's purpose or the nature of its reception. For a work whose purported author was enumerated among the canonical literary greats, as the Egyptians remembered them (Enmarch 2008, 26), Ipuwer's admonitions seem never to have found a home in scribal schools. At a loss for how to view the text, most scholars in recent years have denied it any historical relevance whatsoever. Richard Parkinson (2002, 207), for example, states that "the contradictions that express chaos . . . signal the fictional nature of the text, while the elaborate use of wordplay foregrounds its character as a rhetorical tour de force." For his part, Enmarch (2008, 39) concludes similarly that

this sort of lament does not portray real contemporary chaos, or even describe a specific dramatic situation. . . . Instead these laments form a schematic anti-ideal "inverted world" (*verkehrte Welt*) that elaborates the topos of order versus chaos. The setting of Ipuwer is vague, with no clear references to specific historical events, emphasizing the lament descriptions' timeless relevance.

There is, however, another way of interpreting the text, and that is that the chaos described by Ipuwer is timeless only inasmuch as the societal suffering occasioned by the most ecologically devastating famines virtually always conforms to a broadly recognizable set of symptoms.

In this essay, I seek to bolster a hypothesis formulated by Fekri Hassan (2007) in "Droughts, Famine and the Collapse of the Old Kingdom: Re-reading Ipuwer," namely that the terrifying transformation of Ipuwer's world was wrought by famine. To support his claim, he presented ecological evidence for a pronounced environmental downturn at the end of the Old Kingdom, which has since been substantiated by a wide variety of other studies (cf. Arz, Lamy, Pätzold 2006, 432, 439–40; Marshall et al. 2011, 147, 159; Manning et al. 2014, 401, 414; Welc and Marks 2014, 124). In addition to arguments concerning the dating and composition of the text, Hassan also briefly alluded to catastrophic Nilotic famines that took place in 963 CE and 1200–1202 CE in order to make his case that *The Admonitions of an Egyptian Sage* faithfully represented the breakdown of social order typical in times of famine.

The effects of severe famines have been well documented throughout the world, and although each bears its own culture-historical peculiarities, societal responses to famines tend to follow quite similar trajectories. Unlike food crises, which may be managed via careful rationing and the distribution of grain from central stores, famines are—due to natural and cultural causes—intractable. Short in duration and mercifully

infrequent, they are nonetheless singularly traumatic events set off in stark relief from the comfortingly familiar life that precedes and postdates them. Indeed, according to historian David Arnold (1988), the bewilderment and terror occasioned by famines must be counted among their most defining characteristics.

Famine signifies an exceptional (if periodically recurring) event, a collective catastrophe of such magnitude as to cause social and economic dislocation. . . . It was a multiple crisis of subsistence, survival and order. The more protracted and intense the crisis the more the normal order of things collapsed and gave way to all that was abnormal and horrific. (Arnold 1988, 6, 19)

It is the aim of this essay, then, to take Ipuwer's words seriously and to place the chaos described by him in conversation with records of famines from other periods in Egypt's history, from other countries, and with the work of scholars who focus on trauma and social memory.

Writing Trauma

The memories of survivors of trauma are notoriously unreliable. In his book *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, Dominick LaCapra (2001) discusses the difficulties historians face in evaluating truth claims embedded in narratives of survivors that are often supercharged with emotion. By way of example, he asks: If an Auschwitz survivor speaks vividly of witnessing four chimneys go up in flames, when historians know that only a single chimney met this fate in an uprising of inmates, should this invalidate her entire narrative? Or, should one conclude, as does LaCapra, that the survivor's retelling

may, to a greater or lesser extent, be (or not be) an accurate enactment, reconstruction, or representation of what actually occurred in the past. It may involve distortion, disguise, and other permutations relating to processes of imaginative transformation and narrative shaping, as well as perhaps repression, denial, dissociation, and foreclosure. But these issues have a bearing only on certain aspects of her account and could not invalidate it in its entirety. (LaCapra 2001, 88–89)

This problem of discerning the effect of emotion and distortion on truthful narratives was further complicated for LaCapra by the book *Fragments: Memories of a Wartime Childhood* (Wilkomirski 1997), written by a man who claimed to have spent his childhood in a Nazi death camp. For many survivors and Holocaust experts who read it, the narrative rang true, and the points of confusion were attributed to the author's age at internment and to the long-term effects of trauma. Other particularly disturbing details, such as the tiny babies that he reported had chewed their fingers to the bone, gave pause. Yet, as LaCapra noted, events that were in equal measure surreal and horrific abounded in the camps and "what is plausible or implausible in events of the Holocaust is notoriously difficult to determine" (LaCapra 2001, 33).

So, too, it is with first-hand famine narratives, which are also often inextricably entangled in emotion and suffused with the macabre (Arnold 1988, 17). Accounts of cannibalism, for instance, have been associated with many of the most desperate famines. In some cases, these claims—especially with regard to necrophage—have been found credible. More often, it seems, rumor transmogrified into truth, and such reports served to emphasize that in this new hellish version of reality there was nothing humane left in humanity (Tuchman 1978, 24; Edgerton-Tarpley 2008, 211–33; Ó Gráda 2009, 63–68; Herrmann 2011, 57–58). Claims of cannibalism made by Ankhtifi and Hekanakht—two men who lived through separate periods of low Niles that bookended the First Intermediate Period—are often rightly viewed with suspicion, as in both cases the practice supposedly occurred in a region that did not have the benefit of the narrator’s patronage. Yet, perhaps this abrupt dismissal misses the point, for references to cannibalism, true or not, may serve as an effective barometer for the severity of a crisis. Despite the fact that a great many instances of food insecurity are known from Medieval Egypt, for instance, chroniclers make reference to cannibalism sparingly. Such charges generally occur only with regard to famines known from other lines of evidence to have been extraordinarily devastating, for example, those of 1064–1065, 1199–1201, 1294–1296, 1402–1404; 1694–1695, 1790–1792 (al-Baghdādi 1965, 56r–59l; al-Maqrīzī 1994, 38, 41; Raphael 2013, 71–72, 85, 91; Sabra 2000, 153; Hassan 1997, 11; Mikhail 2011, 217).

Ipuwer—who, like the author of *Fragments: Memories of a Wartime Childhood*, may or may not have witnessed tragedy and who, like him, has been accused of a certain amount of “overwriting”—is uncharacteristically silent on the subject of cannibalism. There is no question, however, that much of his narrative is at once both hyperbolic and vague, as Enmarch observes. Does this, however, invalidate its claim to truth, especially as these two traits also characterize the narratives of survivors of famines as well as those of their direct descendants?

When Cormac Ó Gráda, a historian of the Great Irish Famine of 1847, for instance, compared contemporaneous accounts of this famine with the compilations of individual and societal memories collected in the 1930s and 1940s, he was impressed with the extent to which these memories were selective. Accounts nearly always lacked specifics and were tales of hardships that had fallen upon others. In assessing these materials Ó Gráda (2001, 130–31) concluded,

Asking folklore or oral tradition to bridge a gap of a century or more and generate reliable evidence on the famine was asking a lot. The long gap between the event and the collection of the evidence allowed ample time for confusion, forgetting and obfuscation. . . . And yet the folklore record at its best is vivid, harrowing, telling and, sometimes, intriguing and puzzling. Rejecting what it has on offer would be going too far.

As will be discussed toward the end of this essay, first-hand narratives and folk accounts of famines both tend to be composed after a significant amount of time has elapsed; thus, the two share many of the same stylistic traits.

In the analysis that follows, those elements of Ipuwer’s narrative that bear a strong resemblance to eyewitness accounts of famine are highlighted. In many cases, it will

be seen that Ipuwer's descriptions of the harbingers and horrors of starvation do not, in fact, appear overblown. It will also be argued that some details in Ipuwer's narrative suggest an origin in observation rather than extrapolation. By the same token, however, this analysis also endeavors to make note of those aspects of Ipuwer's text that either omit well-attested aspects of famines or else place a seemingly idiosyncratic emphasis on particular elements of them. Finally, the essay ends by revisiting the subject of why trauma is written and how it tends to be received.

The Onset of Crisis

It is here asserted that the litany of social ills Ipuwer describes ultimately arose as a result of famine. In his narrative, not only were customary dietary staples like barley, bread loaves, and sycamore figs nowhere in evidence, but people suffered from a hunger so overwhelming that it drove adults to steal food from children and to seek out other nourishment formerly deemed fit only for birds or swine (Ipuwer 5.1–5.2; 6.1–6.3; 16.1–16.3). In famines, as attested cross-culturally, the exploitation of starvation foods plays a central role (Arnold 1988, 79–80; Azeze 1998, 63–64; Ó Gráda 2009, 73–78). During analogous crises in Egypt, such as those that occurred in 1064–1065, 1199–1201, and 1294–1296 CE, for instance, people resorted to the consumption of dogs, cats, carrion, the excrement of animals, garbage, and even, purportedly, human corpses (al-Baghdādi 1965, 55f; al-Maqrīzī 1994, 38; Sabra 2000, 143, 167; Hassan 1997, 11; Mikhail 2011, 217; Raphael 2013, 85, 91; Davis 2017, 113). It is likewise characteristic of the most advanced states of famine that food-sharing networks—even among close family members—finally break down. Indeed, relief workers operating in places as diverse as Austria and Uganda have reported the necessity of enacting measures to prevent mothers from consuming rations intended for their own children (Dirks 1980, 30).²

In Ipuwer's narrative there is no mention of the failure of the Nile. Mentuhotep son of Hepi, by contrast, made reference to the "little inundation" that caused his province hardship during the First Intermediate Period (Bell 1971, 16). Likewise, in the Prophecies of Neferty, set in the same era, it was stated that "the river of Egypt is empty, and the waters may be crossed on foot. Men search for water that the ships may sail, but the watercourse has become a river bank" (Simpson 2003, 216). Ipuwer's omission, however, is not unusual. In her study of pharaonic famine texts, Barbara Bell observed that low Niles are most often referred to elliptically in Egyptian texts, through references to sandbanks, hunger, and dry conditions. This reticence, she suggests, was perhaps due to "some religious taboo, or at least a superstitious disinclination about speaking critically of the Nile" (Bell 1971, 13). Ipuwer evidently felt no compunction, however, about describing the effects of drought on land that the inundation had not reached. The desert, he said, was throughout the land, and all that grew had been transformed into brushwood (Ipuwer 3.1, 13.2).

Droughts that struck North Africa and the Eastern Mediterranean often happened independently of low Niles, but when the two cooccurred the scale of suffering in

2. A couplet from an Ethiopian famine song laments, "Ah, Year Seventy-Seven, I wish I was not born! My own mother snatching away, the scraps of food in my hand" (Azeze 1998, 59–60).

Egypt was particularly intense. In 1181, for instance, the historian Aḥmad ibn ‘Alī Taqī al-Dīn al-Maqrīzī wrote that “the Nile dried up so that it became but a ford. . . . Numerous islands of sands formed” (Raphael 2013, 81), while again in 1201 it was said that the riverbed of the Nile had dried up entirely (al-Maqrīzī 1994, 41). John Russell Young, who visited Egypt during the notoriously devastating drought of 1877–1879, likewise described the effects of this deadly combination on the land, stating, “Today the fields are parched and brown, and cracked. The irrigating ditches are dry. You see stumps of the last season’s crop. But with the exception of a few clusters of the castor bean and some weary, drooping date palms, the earth gives forth no fruit. A gust of sand blows over the plain and adds to the somberness of the scene” (Davis 2017, 3–4).

Droughts and Displacements

Although the author of *The Admonitions of an Egyptian Sage* paid far less attention to the infiltration of Easterners into the Nile Delta due to drought than did, for instance, the authors of *The Prophecies of Neferty* or *The Teaching for King Merikare*, such incursions were nonetheless a subject of concern. Tribes of the desert, Ipuwer states, had become Egyptians everywhere. Bowmen had settled, and foreign people now not only lived in the delta, but they had also begun to take up its trades (Ipuwer 1.9; 2.2; 4.5–8). Such large-scale incursions of climate refugees were, in fact, typical of situations in which region-wide droughts occurred prior to (or in the absence of) Nile failure, as the honoree of this volume has discussed at length with respect to pharaonic Egypt (Hoffmeier 1997, 52–69).

There exist ample parallels in medieval records as well. In the severe drought of 1294–1296, for instance, it is estimated that thirty to fifty thousand Libyans from Cyrenaica migrated to the Nile Valley just in advance of a catastrophic failure of the inundation (al-Maqrīzī 1994, 43; Sabra 2000, 141–42). Dramatic rises in immigration during hard times, whether occurring in the First Intermediate Period, the end of the Late Bronze Age, or today, tend to result in a xenophobic backlash as well as in promises by leaders to combat such infiltrations and put preventative measures in place. It is thus significant that one of the few preserved statements of the Lord of All involves a pledge to do better in this respect (Ipuwer 14.12–15.3). So too, Neferty prophesies, will Amenemhet I stop such infiltrations, while Merikare’s father enumerates his successes in this regard with pride (Simpson 2003, 161–62, 220; Morris 2017).

If the immigration of foreigners to Egypt is entirely typical of times of drought, the most severe Nile failure tended to prompt movement in the opposite direction, as occurred in 1199–1201, 1402–1404, and 1449–1452 (al-Baghdādi 1965, 551, 611–12; Sabra 2000, 153, 160). The author of *Ipuwer* is silent on this subject, perhaps because this option would have been far more difficult during the pharaonic period than during medieval times, when an investment in infrastructure greatly facilitated travel out of Egypt by land and sea. Internal movement within the country, however, should have been a phenomenon worthy of note, as it was for ancient observers such as Ity of Gebelein and Ankhtify of Mo’alla. Indeed the latter remarked that the entire country had been transformed into locusts, journeying northward and southward in search of food (Bell 1971, 8–10)!

When famines were localized, people moved from dearth to plenty (Sabra 2000, 167). As a bedouin man explained it to former US president Ulysses S. Grant in 1877, during the latter's poorly timed pleasure trip, "The Nile has been bad, and when the Nile is bad, calamity comes and the people go away to other villages" (Davis 2017, 3). In times of severe famine, however, it became common for villagers to move toward the cities, where centralized stores of grain might be found in greater density (al-Baghdādi 1965, 55*l*, 60*l*; al-Maqrīzī 1994, 41; Sabra 2000, 160; Mikhail 2011, 217; Raphael 2013, 57, 66). Such "unusual wandering"—especially toward cities—is, in fact, characteristic of famines wherever they occur (Dirks 1980, 27; Ó Gráda 2009, 81–89). While Ipuwer's statement that fine linen was now used by Egyptians to make bedouin-style tents (Ipuwer 10.1–2) may hint at such internal displacement, the phenomenon received less attention from him than it likely deserved.

Property Theft and Banditry

Yet another of the notable silences in *The Admonitions of an Egyptian Sage* is the unrest caused by the rising price of food. In one of the few oblique references to this phenomenon, Ipuwer laments, "Riches are throughout the land, (but) ladies of the house say, 'Would that we had something we might eat!'" (Ipuwer 3.2–3.3; Enmarch 2008, 224). As hunger worsens in a famine, the acquisition of food increasingly becomes a life or death matter. Given that prices tended to rise directly upon even the forecast of an insufficient flood, such inflation in the cost of food served both as a harbinger and as a concomitant cause of famine (Sabra 2000, 137).

No records of prices have survived from the First Intermediate Period, but inflation may be indirectly signaled via an epidemic of tomb robbery, as also cooccurred with spikes in the price of grain in Egypt's Twentieth Dynasty. At that time, as the ecological crisis that marked the end of the Late Bronze Age worsened, authorities cracked down on a rash of tomb robbery in Thebes, generating a tremendous paper trail. According to Papyrus B.M. 10052, one woman told authorities that she had utilized one deben (ca. 91 g) of silver from her husband's share of the ill-gotten gains to buy grain. Another woman, caught with loot in her possession, explained it away stating, "I got it in exchange for barley in the year of the hyenas, when there was a famine" (Kemp 1991, 243). While such exchanges sound improbable and could be conceived of as attempts on the part of the thieves to garner sympathy from their judges, a tale survived of a woman who was unable to sell a thousand dinar necklace for flour during the famine that lasted from 1064–1072 (al-Maqrīzī 1994, 38). Certainly, there is no doubt that relative worth in times of famine is radically reassessed.

If inflation presages famine, so too does crime. Thus, *Indian Famine Codes* considered an uptick in crime as one of the early warning signs of famine, and statistics kept in Ireland during the Great Famine demonstrate that rates of burglary and robbery quintupled (Ó Gráda 2009, 52–53). Perhaps because Ipuwer claimed allegiance with the erstwhile elite, he expands at great length on what he viewed as an epidemic of crime. Both Ipuwer and the Lord of All, for instance, decry the practice of tomb robbery (Ipuwer 7.2; 16.13–14), a subject also discussed as emblematic of the First Intermediate Period in *The Teaching for King Merikare* (Simpson 2003, 159). Crimes

against the living, however, were of even greater concern to Ipuwer. Robbers, he said, did not hesitate to steal cattle and other valuables from the rich, and the owners of property were even on occasion forced to defend it from rooftops and guardhouses (Ipuwer 1.1; 2.2–3; 2.9; 7.5; 8.3–4; 8.9; 13.3). Indeed, this last observation is reminiscent of ‘Abd al-Baghdādi’s (1965, 65*r*) eyewitness report that in the great famine of 1199–1201 “it was necessary to fortify entrances, and salaried guardians were employed to guard property.” Perhaps not surprisingly, even gardens, in times of famine, required guarding (Dirks 1980, 29).

It was not solely the rich, however, who were preyed upon as unrest grew in pace with the worsening crisis. Farmers could be set upon in their fields (Ipuwer 1.4; 2.1), and travel too was dangerous. Bandits lay in wait for passersby, stealing their belongings and not infrequently murdering them in the process (Ipuwer 5.11–12; 13.4–5). “Look, the land has knotted together in gangs,” Ipuwer laments (Ipuwer 7.7). “If three men go on the road, (only) two are found! The many slay the few” (Ipuwer 12.13–14). Everyone, it seemed, was afraid (Ipuwer 2.9; 5.7; 9.14–10.1; 15.14–16.1). Such a deteriorated state of security is common to famine narratives in Medieval Egypt as well. Writing again of the famine that he witnessed in 1199–1201, al-Baghdādi stated that no single route was safe from murders. Indeed, captains would even offer discounted passage “and then butcher their passengers and divide their effects” (al-Baghdādi 1965, 60*r*). So too, al-Maqrīzī (1994, 37) stated of the famine that occurred from 1064–1072, “The lands remained uncultivated and fear prevailed. Land and sea routes became unsafe, and travel became impossible without a large escort; otherwise one would be exposed to danger.”

Social Banditry, Strikes, Riots, and Revolution

Bandits are rarely, if ever, a homogenous group. Many were no doubt driven to crime out of desperation. Other bands of thugs, the Lord of All implies, may have consisted of former troops gone rogue, as indeed is frequently attested in weak and failed states alike (Ipuwer 14.14–15.1; White 2013, 151–52, 168). There is, however, yet another class of bandits that would certainly have been of concern to a member of the old guard elite, like Ipuwer, and that is social bandits. Such men, as Eric Hobsbawm (1959, 13–29) has famously explicated, saw their actions as righting social wrongs perpetrated by the rich against the poor—a situation that may well have felt more urgent and justified as access to food increasingly became a life and death matter.

Social bandits, for instance, were especially active between Sohag and Girga during the 1877–1879 famine that killed more than ten thousand people in Upper Egypt. At this time the government, despite being fully aware of the suffering of the peasantry, had continued to overtax farmers, often beating them and confiscating their property when the deteriorating ecological situation meant that they were unable to meet their obligations. Peasant protest at such treatment led the government to send two thousand troops into the region, at which point fifty or sixty individuals headed for the hills. Those that fled their villages raised the call of social revolt, employing “a rhetoric of social justice, vowing to unite those peasants oppressed by the state’s overtaxation and brutal treatment of its subjects” (Cole 1999, 89). While relatively few

peasants found the resolve to join this band, local sympathies were with them, and their activities rendered travel in the region unsafe for government officials and their sympathizers (Cole 1999, 87–89).

Studies of famine narratives reveal that in addition to the ubiquitous victims, tales are frequent of both heroes and villains. The former acted to alleviate suffering while the latter caused it (Edgerton-Tarpley 2008, 79–89).³ Social inequality among the haves and have-nots is never more starkly visible than during a famine, and it is notable that in virtually all of the eyewitness accounts of famine from ancient Egypt, presented on tomb walls and commemorative stele, members of the elite were at great pains to emphasize their status as heroes. These men claimed to have utilized grain stores to nourish those in their district first and those in neighboring districts second. They forgave tax debt, and when they could not prevent deaths they subsidized funerals.⁴ They ensured peace by rationing water for the fields and invested in agricultural improvements so as to maximize what harvests there were to be had in those “years of misery” and “painful years of distress.” When forced by necessity, they imported grain and facilitated its equitable distribution. As important as what these self-proclaimed heroes did do, however, was what they didn’t. They didn’t utilize their positions of strength to dispossess others of their houses, fields, or property. Nor did they seize a man’s daughter—which was perhaps a reference to the radically increased prevalence of slavery and prostitution in times of famine (Vandier 1936; Bell 1971, 8–17; Moreno García 1997, 3–92).⁵

What is fascinating and absolutely unexpected, then, considering Ipuwer’s presumed status as a member of the elite, is that nowhere in his exceedingly long descriptive text do heroes make an appearance. Neither Ipuwer, nor the remaining owners of wealth, nor the Lord of All step in to alleviate the sufferings of those less fortunate than themselves. Indeed, as even Ipuwer himself admitted, “Officials do not associate with their people, who cry out(?)” (Ipuwer. 2.5; Enmarch 2008, 222).

In the narratives of historic food crises that never escalated to the status of famines and in other tales of heroic but doomed efforts at combatting ecological calamities, the quick and efficient role of the governing elites in remitting taxes and in redistributing grain to the poor was absolutely essential (Shoshan 1980, 463–66; Ó Gráda 2009, 195–202). Indeed, in *Poverty and Charity in Medieval Islam: Mamuk Egypt, 1250–1517*, Adam Sabra (2000, 141) asserts that the “message [of famine narratives] is clear: the Mamluk ruler enjoys legitimacy by virtue of his care for his subjects.” Thus, almost certainly, the extravagant quantities of grain stockpiled by the king, temple officials, and the elite in ancient Egypt were only tolerated because of a governing moral economy that mandated the sharing of such stores in times of need. If pharaonic society was by and large built on a nested system of patron-client relationships, as Mark Lehner (2000)

3. Along these lines, the sociologist Pitrim Sorokin (1942, 14) in his “Law of Diversification and Polarization” postulated that disaster has the power both to bring out the very best of people or, conversely, the very worst.

4. In cases when the death toll was not yet unmanageable, elites in later famines also occasionally subsidized funerals (Sabra 2000, 147).

5. The author of Ipuwer barely touches upon two of the most common strategies of survival in famines: prostitution and the selling of oneself or one’s family members into slavery (see Edgerton-Tarpley 2008, 192–97; Ó Gráda 2009, 56–60). The single exception is perhaps his observation “[Lo]k, rich ladies and great ladies, owners of riches, are giving away their children (in return) for beds” (Ipuwer 8.7–8.8).

and Barry Kemp (2012, 163) have recently argued, then the most seemingly stale of all elite boasts—that of regularly giving bread to the hungry—must have been treated by workers and dependents in times of real hunger not as a platitude but as an obligation.

In an ideal world, then, patrons and people in positions of power would step up to their duty to provide for the needy in times of famine. Cross-culturally, however, famines often brought out the worst in elites, many of whom took to hoarding rather than sharing both to ensure their own well-being and also to potentially turn a profit, as prices for the commodity they commanded had now skyrocketed (al-Maqrīzī 1994, 39–40, 43; Sabra 2000, 136–37, 145, 159; Raphael 2013, 60, 63, 66). In such cases, laborers were let go or else were woefully stinted in their wages (Arnold 1988, 82–83). Thus, it came to pass in Ipuwer’s narrative—as in many famines no doubt both before and since—that the poor were forced to take matters into their own hands.

When wages were cut, ceased, or were simply rendered insufficient to purchase basic foodstuffs, the response on the part of laborers was often to refuse to work altogether. The first-known labor strike occurred in the Twentieth Dynasty, during the period of inflation and rampant tomb robbery discussed above. Ipuwer’s observations that “washermen have not agreed(?) to carry <their(?)> loads” and that “all craftsmen . . . have (ceased) to work” (Ipuwer 1.2, 9.6; Enmarch 2008, 221, 232), however, suggest that such tactics were not, in fact, unprecedented. Craftworkers and wage laborers have historically numbered among the most vulnerable in times of crisis (Sabra 2000, 146–47, 161–62). In the famine that occurred between 1199 and 1201, for instance, the making of crafts ceased altogether (al-Maqrīzī 1994, 42). Moreover, out of the nine hundred makers of rush mats in Cairo, al-Baghdādi (1965, 64^r) reported that no more than fifteen made it out of that particular ecological disaster alive!

The worst famines have two stages: anger and despondency.⁶ The former, which requires more strength, occurs when hunger pains are acute enough to provoke panic, but not so acute as to be physically debilitating. Historic accounts of famine in Egypt are filled with references to food riots, which frequently targeted granaries and bakeries; these occurred, for instance, during the crises of 1294–1296, 1336–1337, 1415–1416, 1694–1695, 1784–1787 (al-Maqrīzī 1994, 45; Sabra 2000, 144, 155; Mikhail 2011, 217–18). Indeed, drawing on his own studies of Mamluk grain riots as well as the work of George Rudé on French and English equivalents in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth centuries, Boaz Shoshan (1980, 460) concludes that

the moral economy gave crowds what might be called legitimacy to riot whenever their expectations concerning grain supplies were not met. . . . Seen in this light, grain riots cannot be regarded merely as an impulsive reaction to dearths and famines, but rather they appear as a coherent form of political action—a critique of rulers.

Ipuwer, too, reports on a food riot that had turned violent: “the storehouse is razed, its guard stretched out on the ground” (Ipuwer 6.4). While a description such as this could

6. Robert Dirks adopts Hans Selye’s three-stage response system of the human body to stress—alarm, resistance, and exhaustion—to subdivide progressive reactions to famine (Dirks 1980, 26–31). Culturally speaking, however, the first two stages are easily conflated.



be interpreted prosaically as a smash-and-grab raid on food supplies, other portions of his narrative make it clear that attacks such as this were in some instances directed expressly at the extractive organs of the government.

Ipuwer laments the targeting of offices and deliberate destruction of records. According to him,

office<s> have been opened and th<eir> inventories removed; dependent people have become the owner<s> of dependents. O, yet scribes are slain, and their writings removed. . . . O, yet scribes of the field-register, their writings have been obliterated; the life-grain of Egypt is a free-for-all (Ipuwer 6.7–6.9; Enmarch 2008, 228).

Documents targeted for destruction, then, seem to have stipulated which people belonged to the category of serf or dependent laborer, who had rights to specific fields, and what taxes were in arrears. If, once all such records were obliterated, the life-grain of Egypt was indeed a free-for-all the masses must have been elated. Indeed, Ipuwer's admonitions provide an otherwise rare glimpse into the hatred harbored by many toward the disciplinary arm of the state. His distress at attacks on pharaonic rules, regulations, and labor prisons, for example, makes for a stark contrast with the evident exhilaration felt by commoners at storming their own version of the Bastille. As Ipuwer recounts it, nobles did indeed lament while the poor rejoiced:

O, yet the rulings of the labor enclosure are cast (lit. put) out, and one walks on th in the alleys; wretches tear them up in the streets. . . ; (the) ordinance <of> the House of Thirty has been stripped bare. O, yet the great labor enclosure is in commotion; wretches come and go in the great domains (Ipuwer 6.9–6.12; Enmarch 2008, 228).

The burning of public records and the storming of prisons are, of course, two classic revolutionary goals. It is thus of interest that, according to Ipuwer, an antiauthoritarian sentiment had swept over much of the population.

Regarding this insurgency, he writes, "Every town says, 'Let's drive out the strong among us!'" (Ipuwer 2.7–2.8; Enmarch 2008, 223). Adding, "porches, pillars, and partition walls(?) are burnt . . . the ship of the south is in an uproar, towns are hacked up" (Ipuwer 2.10–2.11; Enmarch 2008, 223). Evidently deprived of its revenues through popular resistance to taxation (Ipuwer 3.10–3.12; 10.3–10.5), and both fearful and impoverished through want, the crown found itself unable to reassert order or even to protect itself from the wrath of those it had once ruled. The palace fell in an hour, and "wretches" removed the king (Ipuwer 7.1–7.6).

As stated at the outset of this essay, the proper milieu into which Ipuwer's account should be placed and how much credence to give it are much debated. There is little doubt, however, that during famines populist anger and weak governments felt to be venial and corrupt made for a combustible mix (Dirks 1980, 27–30). If more governments didn't fall during Egypt's later history, it seems often to have been due to the fact that the country was at that point part of an empire, and the king resided elsewhere. Antiauthoritarian actions, infighting, and serious strife, however, were

certainly witnessed in a series of famines that took place in the tenth century, as well as in 1055–1056, 1294–1296, and 1790–1796 (al-Maqrīzī 1994, 29–30, 36–37, 47; Mikhail 2011, 229–30; Raphael 2013, 189–90).

Debilitation, Disease, Despondency, and Death

Outbursts of anger are to some degree a luxury typical only of the early stages of famine. What follows, in the worst-case scenario, is far more disheartening: namely, mute suffering in the face of an enormous death toll. A combination of migration, starvation, and pestilence (brought on by the increasingly compromised immune systems of the malnourished) has been known to account for the loss of up to half of a total population. Indeed, in Egypt at a local level, it was not uncommon for entire villages to be depopulated in the course of a famine (al-Baghdādi 1965, 641; Arnold 1988, 20–21; al-Maqrīzī 1994, 45; Mikhail 2011, 217). Ipuwer seems to describe just such a scenario, when he laments: “pestilence is throughout the land, blood is everywhere; there is no lack(?) of death. . . . [H]e who places his brother in the earth is everywhere” (Ipuwer 2.5–2.6; 2.13–2.14; Enmarch 2008, 222–23). “O, yet the many dead,” he notes, “are buried in the river” (Ipuwer 2.6–2.7; Enmarch 2008, 222).

A rendition of the various dates when disease and pestilence—two of the four horsemen of the apocalypse—rode roughshod together across Egypt is unnecessary, for the two were always inseparable, and their combined death toll was by all accounts stunning (Sabra 2000, 137; Raphael 2013, 56). One line in *The Admonitions of an Egyptian Sage*, open to differing interpretations, may well be relevant: “O, yet the river is blood and one drinks from it; one pushes people aside, thirsting for water” (Ipuwer 2.10; Enmarch 2008, 223). While it is possible that Ipuwer is here specifically referencing the prevalence of selfishness and the dearth of empathy that often characterize famines, his imagery may, in fact, be far grimmer. What might be described is the increasing need to push aside dead bodies in order to reach the water (Bell 1971, 12).

While seemingly hyperbolic, the picture Ipuwer would be painting is not without parallel. In his eyewitness account of the famine that occurred in Egypt between 1199 and 1201, al-Baghdādi stated that the death toll was so extraordinary that corpses were commonly thrown in the Nile. He himself paid people to clear bodies in this manner, and, on other occasions, he witnessed numerous corpses “swollen and inflated like water skins filled with air” float by. Indeed, he wrote of observing body parts scattered at the water’s edge during a boat trip as well as of having talked to a fisherman who claimed “that he had seen pass close to him, in a single day, four hundred corpses that the waters of the river carried with them” (al-Baghdādi 1965, 61r). Certainly, in at least three other epidemics (e.g., 963–971, 1294–1296, 1790–1796) deaths were stated to have been so numerous that recourse was taken to pitching bodies in the Nile, tossing them in wells, or interring them in hastily excavated mass graves (al-Maqrīzī 1994, 31, 45–46; Mikhail 2008, 256). Likewise, in 1791, when an estimated one to two thousand people died each day, it was stated by a chronicler that “there was not any work left for people except death and its attendant matters” (Mikhail 2011, 222). The official count of the dead from this epidemic amounted to three hundred thousand.

Bringing new life into this world of death was understandably fraught. Demographic losses during famines tend to be exacerbated due to the fact that female fertility plummets in such situations. Ipuwer observed this for himself, stating, “women are barren(?) and can’t conceive; Khnum cannot create because of the state of the land” (Ipuwer 2.4; Enmarch 2008, 222). Such a decline in fertility—well documented in places as diverse as India, China, Leningrad, and Athens—not surprisingly, is thought to be both situational and physiological (Stein and Susser 1975; Ó Gráda 2009, 103–7; Raphael 2013, 73). Even when babies are born, however, many don’t survive long, dying because they were delivered prematurely or due to the malnourishment of their mothers. Still others are victims of infanticide (Ó Gráda 2009, 61). Classical authors agree that this was a practice Egyptians abhorred in times of plenty (Strabo, *Geography* 17.2, 5; Diodorus Siculus, *Library of History* 1.77, 7), yet Ipuwer reports that the crisis in his day was so dire that even the children of the wealthy and “children of prayer are placed on high ground” (Ipuwer 5.6; Enmarch 2008, 226; also Ipuwer 4.3; 5.6).

It is almost impossible to contemplate how it must have felt to live through a time when one’s familiar world devolved into a state of chaos, misery, and death. According to Ipuwer, one common consequence was a debilitating depression (Ipuwer 1.8; 3.13–3.14), which resulted in suicidal thoughts that plagued all, even the very young and those that occupied the uppermost stratum in society (Ipuwer 4.2–4.3). Indeed, for many sufferers, according to Ipuwer, such thoughts manifested in action. Concerning this he states simply, “the crocodiles gorge, but do not seize (for) men go to them themselves” (Ipuwer 2.12; Enmarch 2008, 223). Data on suicides during famines, as Ó Gráda points out, is rarely available in more than an anecdotal form, but he notes spikes that occurred in both India and Finland during 1867–1868, when records were indeed kept. Deaths by drowning during famines are reported by Livy in Rome during the fifth century BCE and for India in 1291 CE. Moreover, it was apparently common to see the poor “everywhere . . . hopelessly, apathetically killing themselves” in the course of a famine that struck China in 1931 (Ó Gráda 2009, 62–63).

With regard to pharaonic Egypt, it is notable that the only known cultural meditation on suicide—The Man Who Was Weary of Life—seems to have been quoted by the author of The Admonitions of an Egyptian Sage and to have been put to papyrus perhaps as early as the reign of Senwosret II. Given its heavy subject matter and the similarity of its narrator’s critiques to those of Ipuwer, it is perhaps not surprising that it, too, is known from only a single manuscript (Parkinson 2002, 50; Simpson 2003, 184–85; Enmarch 2008, 24). Clearly, while the effects of trauma might linger, the ability of such dispiriting subject matter to attract widespread interest did not.

Why Write Trauma?

If Ipuwer has been accused of hyperbole, it is not by scholars who have delved in-depth into the effects of famine on society. While any long-lived Egyptian was likely to have experienced worrisome food crises, famines that raged out of control and caused widespread suffering and death occurred far more infrequently. Indeed, the famines discussed in this essay, which qualify for such a dubious distinction, were limited to those that occurred in 963–971, 1064–1072, 1199–1201, 1294–1296, 1372–1373,

1402–1404, 1415–1416, 1459–1452, 1694–1695; 1784–1787; 1790–1796, and 1877–1879. Thus, only in the fifteenth and in the eighteenth century would it have occurred that an individual might have been unfortunate enough to witness more than one of these catastrophic events.

The only positive aspect one can point to regarding famine in Egypt is that it occurred infrequently and for a duration that rarely exceeded a few years of concentrated misery, save for periods of extended ecological downturns. Demographically, societies tend to recover from even the worst famines within a decade or so (Ó Gráda 2009, 123), and so it comes to pass that societal memory inevitably fades in the face of normality. The fragility of memory even among survivors, however, has often been noted. For instance, one of the challenges Fekade Azeze (1998, 28–29) faced in compiling material for his book *Unheard Voices: Drought, Famine and God in Ethiopian Oral Poetry* is that within a decade of the Ethiopian famine, which lasted from 1984–1985, most peasants had forgotten (or perhaps repressed) the poems that they themselves or others had composed during their time of suffering.

The curation of social memory is made even more difficult by the fact that survivors suffering from posttraumatic stress are often famously reticent to speak of their experiences to their descendants or to contemporaries who have only experienced situations of peace and plenty. It is worth noting, however, that the reluctance of survivors to communicate often lessens as they age. Facing the recognition that their memories might well die with them and also that history that is forgotten runs the risk of repetition, survivors often begin to speak of the unspeakable only after many years have passed. It is notable that the stories that emerge, then, well seasoned with time and steeped in the personal preoccupations of the narrator, on occasion, bear a marked resemblance to The Admonitions of an Egyptian Sage.

In *Tears From Iron, Cultural Responses to Famine in Nineteenth-Century China*, Kathryn Edgerton-Tarpley (2008) discusses a vivid account of the “Incredible Famine” that ravaged north China from 1876–1879. Known in Chinese as the “Song of the Famine Years” (*Huangnian ge*), it was composed by an ordinary man by the name of Liu Xing, who concluded the song with an exhortation:

I fear taking these disaster years as past and not thinking [of them]. Thus I wrote this song to hand down to the generations. Upon obtaining this song, hide it in your home and read it often to your sons and younger brothers. People of the whole household, remember it in your hearts (Edgerton-Tarpley 2008, 227).

It is both affirming and disheartening, then, that Edgerton-Tarpley first became aware of this particular song from a yellowed handwritten manuscript that a collector—whose grandfather and mother had told him of the famine in his youth—had bought from the grandfather of a fellow villager. He did so because he wanted to preserve these memories and to pass them on. To his dismay, however, he found children to be uninterested in them. “Those who have full bellies,” he explained, “don’t want to hear about such circumstances” (Edgerton-Tarpley 2008, 43).

The Song of the Famine Years tells of a drought that parched the fields and forced people to resort to famine foods. Prices rose, crops again failed, and then the corpses began to pile up, exposed to the open air. According to Edgerton-Tarpley (2008, 48),

Liu describes how hungry people gathered in crowds that refused to disperse. During the day, they begged, but at night they plotted rebellion. In the countryside, some “evil people” formed gangs armed with guns and rope whips. Entering villages in the dark of night, they stole valuables and grain and tore the clothing off women.

People swiped food from one another, ate cats and dogs, and finally resorted to cannibalism, eating first the dead and then their own family members. All businesses, he said, closed for trade. Everyone attempted to sell their belongings. Women sold themselves, and a pestilence swept through the population. Although corpses were interred in mass graves, they piled up like mountains (Edgerton-Tarpley 2008, 47–50).

The points of comparison with Ipuwer’s narrative should be obvious, but the tales converge in other respects as well. It is fascinating that both texts reference the destruction of ornate wooden furniture for firewood (Ipuwer 3.5; Edgerton-Tarpley 2008, 49), a necessity driven home by al-Baghdādi’s description of Egyptians resorting to the destruction of architectural elements within their own houses to maintain fires in their hearths and ovens (al-Baghdādi 1965, 62*l*, 64*l*). Moreover, two years into the famine Liu laments that no offerings were placed in ancestral halls, nor did people sing traditional songs or perform the rites and celebrations that always accompanied the New Year’s holiday. Affection for and trust in the emperor had also ceased. For Ipuwer, too, faith in god and king had all but vanished along with the performance of religious cult (Ipuwer 5.7–5.9; 11.1–12.13). Rituals, like riots, studies have shown, tend to decrease in prevalence the longer a famine wears on with no relief in sight (Dirks 1980, 27–28, 31; Arnold 1988, 75–78). “If I could perceive, and know where god is, then I would act for him!” Such sentiments, Ipuwer asserts, had become increasingly and understandably common (Ipuwer 5.3; Enmarch 2008, 226).⁷

In Trauma, Emphasis Is Personal

If famines have a way of resembling one another, what differs most about the stories they inspire is emphasis. In Ipuwer’s case, his narrative is most strongly colored by his concern for the plight of the rich. Here his pity appears misplaced, for famines are not—at their start, at least—equal opportunity killers. The Great Famine in Ireland, for example, is in this respect typical. As Ó Gráda writes, “A disaster that struck the poor more than the rich . . . the famine’s impact was very uneven; poverty and death were closely correlated, both at a local level and in cross-section. . . . It produced a hierarchy of suffering” (Ó Gráda 2001, 121, 123). The plight of the poor was nearly always precarious. Thus, what is shocking in the Song of the Famine Years is not that many of the poorest families perished. It is rather that among the scions of the great families over half starved to death (Edgerton-Tarpley 2008, 50).

7. Ipuwer’s reproaches to god are closely echoed in some Ethiopian famine songs. One asks, for example, “When I shout ‘My God! . . . Oh my dear God!’ Why are You silent? Why pretend You are not there? When I know You *are!* (Why pretend You have nothing? When I know You *have!*)” (Azeze 1998, 98).

Like cannibalism, the suffering of the rich served as an exclamation mark in famine narratives—a way to emphasize that the particular famine being described was truly exceptional. For instance, concerning the famine of 1064–1072 in Egypt, al-Maqrīzī (1994, 38) writes that even the Fatamid Caliph

was compelled to sell everything in his palace, including precious objects, clothes, furniture, weapons, and the like. He was reduced to sitting on a mat, his administrative apparatus collapsed, and his dignity was lost. The women of the palaces came out—their hair undone and screaming: “Hunger! Hunger!”

Or, as Ipuwer had put it long ago “Look, rich ladies have come to (the point of) hunger!” (Ipuwer 9.1; Enmarch 2008, 231). Likewise, the chronicler Ibn al-Dawādārī indulged in black humor with reference to the scourge of 1294–1296, quipping, “Many died, those who were lucky and those who were poor” (Raphael 2013, 92–93). The sufferings of the nobility were also noted, somewhat more soberly, with respect to the famines of 1199–1201, 1372–1373, 1449–1452, 1469–1470, and 1790–1796 (al-Baghdādi 1965, 64; Shoshan 1980, 467; Sabra 2000, 147, 159, 162).

Famine and Opportunity

Ipuwer’s concern for the sufferings of his own social class is not particularly surprising, especially as plotlines that feature a Dickensian fall from riches to rags exert a lurid fascination and have provided plotlines for pulp fiction ever since the genre was invented. What is strange, however, is Ipuwer’s insistence that the fall of the rich was counterbalanced by an enrichment of the poor (Ipuwer 2.4–2.5; 3.2–3.4; 3.14–4.1; 4.8–4.14; 5.2; 7.8–8.5; 8.11; 9.1–9.2; 9.4–9.5). It is this aspect of the text, more than any other, that has caused scholars to dismiss it as essentially ahistorical (*AEL* 1:150; Enmarch 2008, 63–64).

Ipuwer’s insistence that riches were redistributed on a large scale is without a doubt overplayed and flies in the face of cross-cultural observations about societal dynamics during famines. It may not, however, be entirely baseless. The unusual opportunities for social advancement that occurred during the famine of 1199–1201 were remarked upon by al-Baghdādi (1965, 62*l*), who wrote:

Meanwhile it is a thing worthy of admiration that a group of people who until now have always been of limited means, are become happy this year. Some have amassed wealth by trade in wheat; others in receiving rich inheritances. Some others have been enriched, and no-one knows the origin and cause of their fortune.

By way of redeeming Ipuwer’s credibility, then, it is important to briefly consider three broad mechanisms that tend to facilitate income redistribution and the mixing of social classes both during and after particularly devastating famines: crime and social banditry, revolt and the destabilization of the erstwhile nobility, and the readjustment of resources in the wake of demographic changes.

Ipuwer himself ties social inversion in part to the enrichment of robbers (Ipuwer 2.9). The prevalence of social banditry during famines has already been discussed, and there is little doubt that anger toward wealthy families and institutions that hoarded grain must have run high. As Ó Gráda (2001, 129) observes,

Not only are famines uneven [in terms of their effects on social classes] but they are also, always and everywhere, deeply divisive tragedies. The charity and solidarity that bind communities together are strengthened for a while, but break as the crisis worsens: hospitality declines, crime and cruelty increase.⁸

Lessened security, increased resentment, and desperation no doubt led to the frequent targeting of the wealthy—not only with respect to the property found in their homes but so too that interred in their “houses of eternity,” as tombs were known in Egypt. Providing that robbers survived the famine and were not forced by necessity to sell their goods for grain, the breakdown in order did indeed provide an opportunity for wealth to be redistributed at knifepoint.

Famines radically reduce the ability of a state both to inspire allegiance and to enforce it. Likewise, as discussed above, the righteous anger of a mob can lead to the downfall of a ruler whose legitimacy has been lost together with those that had most directly profited from his regime. Thus the centers that grew to greatest prominence in Egypt’s Intermediate Periods were often new to power, as were the elites that erected monumental architecture and tombs therein. The hereditary nobles who had been ousted with an old regime did not necessarily constitute the cornerstone upon which the new order was founded. Nor were they the primary beneficiaries. In the wake of the famine’s political consequences, then, it may well have seemed to Ipuwer as if the poor had become rich and the rich poor.

If famine has two stages—anger and despondency—the third cross-culturally attested avenue of social advancement is occasioned simply by survival. The worst famines typically resulted in a great deal of unclaimed property. As al-Baghdādi (1965, 64) observed after the famine of 1199–1201, Egypt’s richest estates were for the most part totally deserted due to the death or flight of their inhabitants. The seizure of the possessions of those that fled or died during the famine that raged from 1790–1796 likewise constituted a unique opportunity for enrichment (Mikhail 2011, 224). Indeed, the virulence of the plague that accompanied this particular famine had been such that not only did it kill Egypt’s leader, but “successors immediately rose to power only to die themselves three days later. Those who replaced them also died in the course of a few days. . . . Leaders came to power in the morning and died by late afternoon. . . . Many large Cairene families were decimated by the plague” (Mikhail 2008, 256). New families, however, undoubtedly rose to take their place.

The effects of plague on societies that emerged from it are perhaps best known from records of the Black Plague, which hit Europe in waves during the fourteenth century. Reports suggest that for some survivors, the plague’s aftermath proved a boon.

8. Although not discussed here, instances of cruelty, selfishness, and the fraying of even familial bonds are noted in Ipuwer’s narrative (Ipuwer 1.1; 5.10; and 9.3) as well as in later historical and anthropological accounts of famine (Tucker 1981, 222; Dirks 1980, 28, 30).

With a glut of merchandise on the shelves for too few customers, prices at first plunged and survivors indulged in a wild orgy of spending. The poor moved into empty houses, slept on beds, and ate off silver. Peasants acquired unclaimed tools and livestock, even a wine press, forge, or mill left without owners, and other possessions they never had before (Tuchman 1978, 117).

Thus in the aftermath of a massive loss of life, the plight of many survivors may well have improved due to the demand for their labor and to their ability to lay claim to the property of people who had perished.⁹

What is fascinating, however, is that such social advancement did not come uncontested. Instead, the medieval equivalents to Ipuwer did their best to stem such tides. Thus, governments throughout Europe issued ordinances to regulate wages and to restrict the bargaining power of laborers and artisans (Cohn 2007, 479). Such ordinances were not at all dispassionate. Rather, as Samuel Cohn (2007, 480) explains,

these new laws reflect elites' further anxieties about class. . . . The laws alleged that labourers now "demanded quality wines and meats beyond their station." For these elites the world had suddenly been turned upside down: to quote a Florentine decree of 9 October 1348, "while many citizens had suddenly become the poor, the poor had become rich," The Florentine chronicler Stefani said much the same.

This jealous desire to safeguard their own status prompted governing elites in Florence and England to enact sumptuary laws, legislating that servants and workers were no longer permitted access to clothing, jewelry, or luxury goods deemed inappropriate to their social class. As recent revisionist historical work has shown, however, those that benefited most from the plague in its immediate aftermath were not the poor, but rather those survivors that had maintained a grip on their riches and could use them to invest in other sources of wealth (Cohn 2007, 481). Thus, the laws, while indeed prompted by some degree of true social advancement on the part of the lower classes, are perhaps better understood as symptomatic of exactly the type of elite anxiety and fear of falling that permeates *The Admonitions of an Egyptian Sage*.

The Reception of Trauma Literature

Widespread trauma creates societal scars that often endure in art. Some creative meditations, such as the famine songs of Ethiopia, are composed in the thick of tragedy, though the words are not always preserved. Ipuwer, who was remembered as an overseer of singers (Parkinson 2002, 308), makes mention of the fate of artists during his time: "[Music]ians are at the loom(?) within the weaving rooms, their weavers' songs being dirges; the tellers [of words(?) are at] quernstones" (Ipuwer 4.12–4.13; Enmarch

9. Ipuwer may indirectly reference the growing demand for laborers when he states that Upper Egypt had become empty fields and that even when the inundation met a mark of plentitude no one plowed (Ipuwer 2.3; 2.11). His observation anticipates al-Maqrīzī's (1994, 42) statement, with respect to the famine of 1199–1201, that "When God succored His creatures through the flooding of the Nile, no one was left to plow or sow."

2008, 226). This observation—that new songs were indeed being composed and sung, but in an era without official patronage—is reminiscent of much artistic production in times of societal chaos.

Mohammed Othman, for instance, wrote an article in *Al-Monitor* in 2015 on the sad irony that right at the point when the most urgent stories remain to be told of life in the Gaza Strip, its literary scene is almost extinct. He states,

Writer-novelist Yousra al-Ghul said that culture has become a luxury for Gazans, indicating that publishing is in crisis. . . . “Funding is weak and so no one is sponsoring these writers, so [the writers] isolate themselves. The Gaza Strip is packed with a lot of young novelists from both sexes. They participate in Arab competitions, but [these efforts will remain meaningless] until publishing houses start printing them.”

In the famines and food crises of the First Intermediate Period, for instance, the literary genre of the dirge may well have been invented and sung, as uniquely appropriate to its time. But the second step in the artistic process—namely, the commitment of an oral composition to writing—may well have been delayed until the reassertion of political stability, when artists were once again provided with the funds, leisure, equipment, and encouragement to pursue their craft exclusively.

As touched upon in the beginning of this essay, there are a variety of times that “bearing witness”—undertaking to retell a traumatic event in unsparing detail—becomes a priority. The first appears to be in the face of impending death. This might be the death of the individual holding the memory, as was often the case for Holocaust survivors. So too Liu Xing, whose *Song of Famine* memorialized China’s Incredible Famine of 1876–1879, waited twenty years before committing his narrative to writing in order to cause others to remember. For those who listen to such stories, the tenacity of memory is remarkable. Thus, in researching her book on the Incredible Famine, published in 2008, Edgerton-Tarpley (2008, xiv) was able to interview elderly inhabitants of Shanxi who had heard first-hand reports of the famine directly from their own grandparents. So, too, roughly a century later, the Irish Folklore Commission succeeded in assembling a wide variety of tales that were still in circulation about life during the Great Irish Famine of 1847.

If a recognition of the transience of living memory is one impetus for the writing of trauma, so too is its repetition. The target demographic for memoirs penned by those battling cancer is not the young and healthy. Analogously, stories of societal traumas may be all but forgotten until the lessons learned from those experiences prove once again valuable. Thus, in China, there was little widespread interest in curating memories of the Incredible Famine until roughly eighty years later, when the country again faced a critical shortage of food due to Mao’s failed Great Leap Forward. At that time the government sent out local historians to gather and publish famine songs, poems, stele inscriptions, and other sources. These, interestingly enough, were often employed by Mao’s government so as to downplay the difficulties of its current crisis (Edgerton-Tarpley 2008, 5, 228–30).

If recent linguistic analysis is correct in its tendency to date much of the pessimistic literature, including *The Admonitions of an Egyptian Sage*, to the Thirteenth Dynasty,

a parallel with the resuscitation of interest in the Incredible Famine during Mao's time may well be apt. During the Thirteenth Dynasty rulers cycled in and out of power at a dizzying rate, perhaps even due to a plague—the likes of which may be witnessed in the roughly contemporary levels of Tell el-Dab'a (Bietak 1996, 35–36). Nile floods may well have been erratic, foreigners had taken up residence in the delta, and toward the end of the period the central government failed altogether. Thus, it is perhaps only natural that writers of this time should have expressed an interest in the last era during which disorder had threatened the natural and political world, prompting them to copy down older famine songs and perhaps even to compose new works modeled after the old.

What is fascinating about *The Admonitions of an Egyptian Sage*, which is the longest and most relentless of its genre, is that the composition seems to have existed outside the literary canon, at least inasmuch as it survived in only a single manuscript, which is dated to the Nineteenth Dynasty. Unlike the Prophecies of Neferty, plausibly a dirge of similar antiquity that was tied up in a neatly propagandistic bow at its end and served up to school children as part of a scribal curriculum, Ipuwer's song was curated and respected, but seemingly stayed on its shelf. Indeed, it has been suggested that when it was recopied parts of its original text were no longer decipherable (Gardiner 1969, 2).

Just when the narrative was copied down on Papyrus Leiden I 344 is uncertain, but the hand of the scribe that penned the hymn to Amun, which shared its papyrus, was dated paleographically to the late Nineteenth or Twentieth Dynasty (Gardiner 1969, 1). If *The Admonitions of an Egyptian Sage* had been copied at some point between Merenptah's time and the end of the dynasty, it may well, once again, have seemed particularly relevant. A drought had struck the ancient Mediterranean world at that time and inspired revolts among Egypt's subject territories as well as invasions from Libyan tribes and Aegean climate refugees, who were fleeing famine and upheaval in their own homelands. Moreover, after Merenptah's death the country suffered from a succession of short-lived rulers of little legitimacy and civil strife. Perhaps, it was at that point that a particularly learned scribe felt it was time to take Ipuwer's lamentation down from the shelf and to dust it off for a new audience.

Writing trauma, either *in* or *in response to* a period of societal turmoil, preserves painful memories in hopes of preventing future occurrences. Historical and climatological evidence indicates that periods that saw the natural world wreak havoc on the social world were few and far between, typically sparing multiple generations at a time from their universal misery. When they did occur, the events of such periods caused tremendous anxiety and suffering, and spawned narratives populated both with heroes and villains—though who exactly was cast in what role no doubt differed according to the teller and the intention. Regarded with indifference in times of order and plenty, works like Ipuwer's may well, like Homer's shades, have drawn new life from fresh blood.

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