

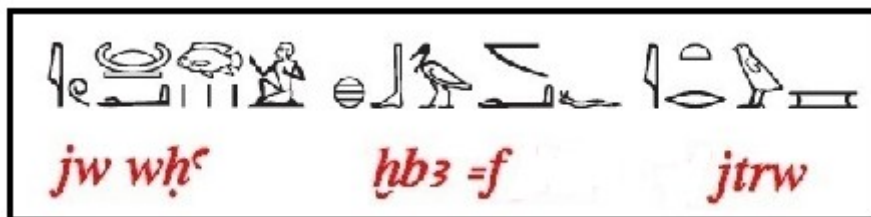
# The Eloquent Peasant: fifth petition

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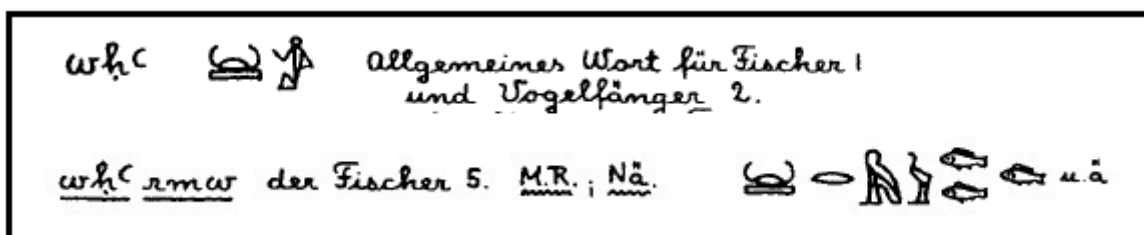
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The peasant's fifth petition, even though very short, hides in fact a lot of subtle subtexts, starting from its very beginning which depicts an extended and highly detailed fishing scene. This is quite uncommon, since all the other petitions begin either with a direct and varied address to the High Steward (regarding both his moral and his official stature) or with abstract reflections about righteousness and justice. Thus our fishing scene would be more appropriate if presented "in medias res". However if we take note of the setting of the previous petition we may in fact consider the fifth one as a sort of virtual continuation of it, which took place at the gate of the temple of *Herishef*, namely "He who is over / who reviews his lake". And that may indeed be considered an operative introduction to our fishing scene.

Let us examine its sequence. It is composed of five "snapshots", which probably, as Richard Parkinson suggests, knowingly wink at the "fifth" petition. However when he says that the scene is "the description of lowly and savage riverine activity" I think that his interpretation (which is basically shared by many, if not all, other translators) should be given a close and attentive scrutiny. As a matter of fact the "savagery" is openly declared only as regards the fifth fisherman



who is denoted with the word "wh", a generic term

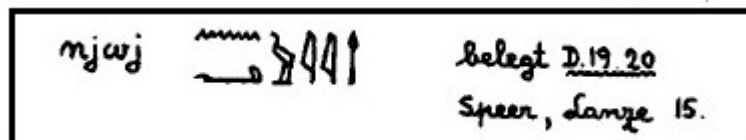


which, according to its determinative, may be applied either to a fisherman (Fischer) or to a bird-catcher (Vogelfaenger).

The other possible “savagery” may be found in the second snap-shot:



where the verb “*sm3/ sm3m*” (to slaughter, to kill) may assume a ravaging aspect. But I would not be so sure. The “*nyw*” fisher comes from a guessed reconstruction based on a possible “*njwj*” (spear)



Of course fishing through a spear is definitely more violent than using nets, nonetheless it is a common technique for specific fish. I would not call that “savagery” (I am sure animalists will disagree, but that’s another story) as I would not call “savagery” the Sicilian “mattanza” (tuna fishing technique) or the “whale hunting” of Melville’s Moby Dick.

In any case, as regards this passage, since the text is damaged I venture to propose another possible guess. The fishing technique of the “*\*nyw*” might be a sort of “line fishing” using hooks



which would definitely “pierce and spike” fish, hence “*sm3*”.

At this point one might legitimately ask what's my aim. The fact is that I am more inclined to consider the depicted fishermen as members of two different social groups. The first four are low rank, but highly specialised, workers who fish for earning a living; the fifth, a generic “*whc*”, either an occasional fisherman who may fish just for leisure and personal fun (like *nobles* do) or a greedy one whose only care is that of accumulating as much fish as he can in order to sell it and increase his wealth; both of them never minding what kind of damage they may do to the local fish fauna, so necessary for the nourishment of people, especially those belonging to the lower ranks of society.

Needless to say that in our specific context the generic “fisherman” might allude to the “high ranked” Nemtinakht who plunders the peasant's goods, the peasant himself being a metaphorical representative of the skilful and specialised fishermen. The detailed list of fish hinting at the long list of various merchandise which the peasant loads on his donkeys as described in the prologue.

In any case either a reckless fishing or a plain robbery would be an exploitation of the “needy” ones.

A point that may sustain this hypothesis is the “one to one” relation between the fisherman and the fish, underlining, as I said, the specific professionalism of the workers. And the description is indeed a professional one, as in a sort of documentary. If the expected image was that of “savagery” why taking so much care in describing the various techniques?

As a matter of fact there might be a possible explanation, although somewhat far-fetched. From a metaphorical perspective the fishermen might be seen as “official bureaucrats” (the “*srw*”) each one taking advantage of ordinary people (the various fish) within his specific jurisdiction. But I can hardly admit such a cerebral extrapolation; in any case, even supposing there might be such an allusion, in my opinion it should be listened to as a side resonance, the main one being the class division I hinted at in my above suggested remark. This would, and not by chance, mirror a similar passage in the second petition (B1 140-142):

*wḏ rf pw jr n jrr*  
*r rdjt jr =f*  
*dw3-ntr n =f pw ḥr jrrt =f*  
*njt ḥt pw tp-ᶜ stt*  
*wḏ ḥt pw n nb ḥnt*

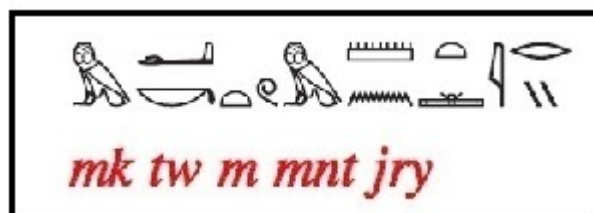
This (is) the decree: act on behalf of the maker  
 so as to make him make.  
 That means thanking him for what he keeps making.  
 That means parrying a missile before (its) running through.  
 That means ordering something to a master of craft.

In other terms a praise of productivity and of professional work in the hands of the low classes and the importance of its protection (parrying a missile → *the insolence of office and the spurns / that patient merit of the unworthy takes!*).

A further circumstantial evidence that can sustain my hypothesis about two different groups of fishermen is given by the use of the introducing particle “*jw*” present in the first and in the fifth snap-shots and missing in the second, third and fourth ones:

*jw ḥwdw ḥr ḥᶜm mḥyt*  
*nyw ḥr sm3 jy*  
*st-rmw ḥr ḥ3ḥ ᶜwbbw*  
*ḏ3bḥw r p3krw*  
*jw whᶜ ḥb3 =f jtrw*

So the first four might be considered as an ideal company of professional fishermen juxtaposed to the unscrupulous profiteer concerned only about his own advantage. This last one is the figure whom the High Steward is compared to.



With his neglectful silence he allows the plunderers to destroy the society’s productive stratus and in a certain sense he himself becomes a depredator.

