

Two translations of

The Instructions of Kagemni

Kagemni was, according to his *Instructions*, vizier of the 4th dynasty pharaoh Snofru (2613-2589), father of Khufu. His writings are contained in the Papyrus Prisse. He should not be confused with the 6th dynasty vizier of the same name, who served under Teti I and whose mastaba at Saqqara is famous for its reliefs [1].

The humble man flourishes, and he who deals uprightly is praised. The innermost chamber is opened to the man of silence. Wide is the seat of the man cautious of speech, but the knife is sharp against the one who forces a path, that he advance not, save in due season.

If you sit with a company of people, desire not the food, even if you want it; it takes only a brief moment to restrain the heart, and it is disgraceful to be greedy. A handful of water quenches the thirst, and a mouthful of melon supports the heart. A good thing takes the place of what is good, and just a little takes the place of much.

....

If you sit with a glutton, eat when he is finished; if you sit with a drunkard accept a drink, and his heart will be satisfied. Rage not against the meat in the presence of a glutton; take what he gives you and refuse it not, thinking it will be a courteous thing.

If a man be lacking in good fellowship, no speech has any influence upon him. He is sour of face to the glad-hearted who are kindly to him. He is a grief to his mother and his friends. All men say: "Let your name be known! You are silent in your mouth when you are addressed!"

Be not boastful of your strength in the midst of young soldiers. Beware of making strife; one knows not what may chance, what the god will do when it punishes.

The vizier had his sons and daughters called, when he completed his writings on the ways of mankind and on their character as encountered by him. And he said to them: "All that is in this book, hearken to it as if I said it." Then they placed themselves upon their bellies. They read it as it stood in writing, and it was better in their heart than anything that was in the entire land. They stood and they sat in accordance therewith.

The majesty of the king of Upper and Lower Egypt, Huni, came to the landing place (i.e., died), and the majesty of the king of Upper and Lower Egypt, Snefru, was raised up as a beneficent king in this entire land. Then was Kagemni made governor of the capital and vizier.

(...) the timid man prospers, praised is the fitting, open (is) the tent to the silent, spacious is the seat of the satisfied. Speak not (too much) ! (For) sharp are the knives against he who transgresses the road, (he is) without speedy advance, except when he faults.

When you sit with company, shun the food you like. Restraint of heart is (only) a brief moment! Gluttony is base and one points the finger at it. A cup of water quenches thirst, a mouthful of herbs strengthens the heart. A single good thing stands for goodness as a whole, a little something stands for much.

Vile is he whose belly is voracious; time passes and he forgets in whose house the belly strides. When you sit with a glutton, eat when his appetite has passed. When you drink with a drunkard, partake when his heart is happy. Do not grab (your) meat by the side of a glutton, (but) take when he gives you, do not refuse it, then it will soothe.

He who is blameless in matters of food, no word can prevail against him. The shy of face, even impassive of heart, the harsh is kinder to him than to his (own) mother; all people are his servants. Let your name go forth, while you are silent with your mouth. When you are summoned,

be not great of heart because of your strength among those your age, lest you be opposed. One knows not what may happen, and what god does when he punishes.

The vizier had his children summoned, after he had gained a complete knowledge of the ways of men, their character having come upon him. In the end he said to them: "All that is written in this book, heed it as I said it. Do not go beyond what has been set down." Then they placed themselves on their bellies. They recited it aloud as it was written. It was good in their hearts beyond anything in this entire land. They stood and sat accordingly.

Then the majesty of king Huni of Upper and Lower Egypt died. The majesty of king Snefru of Upper and Lower Egypt was raised up as beneficent king in this entire land. Kagemni was (then) made overseer of the city and vizier. It is finished."

Joseph Kaster, *The Wisdom of Ancient Egypt*

Gardiner, *Papyrus Prisse I & II : The Instruction to Kagemni*, 1946.