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.

Joseph Kaster, The Wisdom of Ancient Egypt
Gardiner, Papyrus Prisse I & II : The Instruction to Kagemni, 1946.

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