Popular literature in ancient Egypt
Wiedemann Alfred
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The Ancient East

No. V

Popular Literature in Ancient Egypt

By

A. Wiedemann
POPULAR LITERATURE IN ANCIENT EGYPT

BY

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POPULAR LITERATURE IN ANCIENT EGYPT

For many centuries past and until recently the civilised world was accustomed to regard the ancient Egyptians as a people leading a monotonous and joyless life, unrippled by any passing breeze of ordinary human pleasure, and with minds entirely absorbed in meditations on death or in deep religious and philosophical speculations. It was indebted for this picture in the first place to the allusions made by Greek authors to the wisdom of the Egyptians, while the austerity of Egyptian plastic representations of gods and men, and the vital significance ascribed by this people to all rites and worship connected with the dead, pointed to the same conclusion. This view of the matter was confirmed by the tone of the pompous royal inscriptions and almost exclusively religious texts which were the earliest results of the deciphering of Egyptian writing. Great interest was therefore excited
when, in 1852, Emmanuel de Rouge discovered that a papyrus lent to him in Paris by an English lady (Elizabeth d'Orbiney) contained a story. The new fact met with but tardy recognition in scientific circles, and attempts were made to prove that the subject of the text was not a simple narrative, but a religious myth, retold in a popular form. The legend of Osiris was the original first suggested, but the details of the papyrus showed this to be an unsatisfactory explanation. The next hypothesis was that threads of the traditions prevailing in Asia Minor regarding Atys, Adonis and other divinities had been interwoven with the fabric of the Egyptian myth. This solution likewise proving inadequate, scholars gradually became reconciled to the idea that in the Nile Valley, as elsewhere, men and women had taken delight in romance and song; and before long the discovery of new texts removed every doubt.

In the year 1864 a wooden chest was discovered at Thebes, not far from the temple of Deir el Bahari. Besides many Coptic documents, it contained several literary papyri belonging to the later period of ancient Egypt, the most important of which was a demotic text containing the story of Prince Setna, a tale of magic and enchantment. From this time onward find followed find, and now the variety of such remains