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Selected Administrative Principles and Their Regulation in Sapiential Literature in Ancient Egypt¹

Abstract

The paper is focused on the area of Ancient Egyptian administration with an emphasis on the central person – the official. The clerical profession was considered very lucrative, the official, an educated person taking into account the illiteracy of most people, enjoyed great respect. The highest officer, being the vizier, was (in some cases) the most powerful person in the state. However, there were certain boundaries that were not supposed to be exceeded in the practice of official functions. Today we still call them the same way: “the principles of good governance”. These principles are contained in a number of documents, mostly in so-called learnings, as well as in some non-legal documents. These principles were not merely recommended behaviour patterns – those who breached them were severely punished. Upon closer examination of the principles governing official functions it becomes clear that despite the fact that many of them are centuries old they are still used today. This paper is based on religious, educational, and literary text but also on legal texts which are reactions against above mentioned situations when the principles were breached.

Key words: governance, ancient Egypt, an official, principles of administration, impartiality, helpfulness, liability, predictability, timeliness.

Słowa kluczowe: zarząd, Egipt antyczny, urzędnik, zasady administracji, bezstronność, użyteczność, odpowiedzialność, przewidywalność, punktualność.

Introduction

The need for efficient administrative apparatus was found already in the oldest civilizations. It played the most important role in countries the agriculture of which was dependent on building and między innymi the agriculture of which, which was the case of Ancient Egypt. The stability of Egyptian economy was based on two facts in particular: regular flooding of the Nile and efficient administration. In unfavorable times, when

¹ This text is re-worked version of article amended by new sources published by the author under the title: *Vybrané principy dobré správy ve starověkém Egyptě*, “Právo, Ekonomika, Management” 2011, vol. 2, no. 1, p. 84–88.

floods were too weak or too intense and the subsequent crop was bad, the State economy was dependent on existing reserves and organization of works aiming to artificial irrigation of field on higher levels, or to liquidation of damages caused by intense floods and preparing the fields for the next season.

Should the administration fail to assure this, there was a risk of poverty and hunger² subsequently causing also the weakening of the ruler's position whose liability was considered personal.³

Officials in Ancient Egypt

The construction of the administrative machine of Ancient Egypt started already during the rule of the Dynasty I. It broadly developed later. The State administration was strongly organized. From territorial point of view, Egypt was divided into Lower and Upper Egypt, and subsequently to other 42 regions called nomos.⁴ Each nomos had its own administration subsequently divided into administration of the capital city and administration of province, to which administration bodies of all municipalities of the respective nomos were subordinated. Nomos represented administrative, territorial, economy, but also religious unit, as nomarch⁵ being its head was also the High Priest of the God worshiped in that respective nomos.⁶ The central administration had its seat in the capital city. Other administrations were subordinated to this central administration.⁷

After rather short period, when the ruler himself was the head of the broad state apparatus personally, a position of prime minister called *catej* was founded and he took this task over from the ruler. In literature we can more often see the Persian term *vizier* than original *catej*. In the most ancient periods, the oldest sons of the ruler usually hold this office, later than members of aristocracy. However, we can also find cases, when the king decided to nominate a capable man prime minister regardless of his origin.⁸ The prime minister was the most important man in the country after the king and in praxis we can

² As it happened in so called Old Kingdom, which collapsed due to long-lasting economy crisis. Document proving the collapse of power is a Papyrus of Leiden, available in translation by Z. Žába [in:] *idem, Tesáno do kamene, psáno na papyrus*, Praha 1968, p. 77ff.

³ In Ancient Egyptians ideas, the ruler as representative of God, or, as the case may be, God himself, was competent to assure favorable flooding using his influence to other Gods. Insufficient or excessive floods could make the impression, that the ruler fell into disgrace, and subsequently, also his right for throne could have been put into question. Relation of ruler with Gods is elaborated in more details: by *Náboženství ve starověkém Egyptě, Bohové, mýty a náboženská praxe*, ed. B.E. Shafer, Neratovice 2009, p. 57–82.

⁴ Territorial division of the country into provinces called *nomos* was started by the first pharaoh of the Meni dynasty already. In the era of so called Old Kingdom there were thirty-eight to thirty-nine nomoses, later it was forty-two. Ch. Jacq, *Egypt velkých faraonů, Historie a legenda*, Praha 2002, p. 49.

⁵ The increasing power of nomarchos was successfully eliminated during the rule of pharaoh Senusret I, who cancelled their privileges and overuse of powers. *Ibidem...*, p. 130.

⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 49.

⁷ F. Lexa, *Veřejný život ve starověkém Egyptě, I. výklad*, Praha 1955, p. 62. More details of the structure of the administration in: G.P.F. van den Boorn, *The Duties of the Vizier, Civil Administration in the Early New Kingdom*, Great Britain 1988, p. 325–329.

⁸ I. Drapkin, *Crime and Punishment in the Ancient Egypt*, Toronto Massachusetts 1989, p. 38.

also find periods, when weak ruler hold his powers only theoretically, and actual ruler of the country was the prime minister. During the era of New Kingdom the division of the position of the prime minister occurred due to expansion of State administration and separate functions of Prime minister of Lower Egypt and prime minister for Upper Egypt were founded.⁹ Under the prime minister there was a broad administrative structure including agriculture, finances, public works, armories, army, etc. Also temples had their own administration.¹⁰

Position of an officer was connected with great esteem między innymi Ancient Egypt. Employment connected with regular income attracted Egyptians into scribal schools, as the knowledge of writing and reading was necessary for this employment.¹¹ The name “scribal school” may be misleading; however we have to mention that scribe was only basic qualification one could gain in these schools, as higher classes served for education of officers.¹² Preparation for the execution of officer’s employment started in childhood already, as the officer had to know not only to read and write, but also to know mathematical operations, calculations of areas and volumes, and he also had to have certain engineering knowledge.¹³ Nonetheless, similarly as other employments, the position of officer was hereditary¹⁴ and therefore schools were mostly visited by children of officers, Egyptians gave the opportunity to excel also to talented individuals regardless of their origin. Due to this fact schools were available also to descendants of men with other than white-collar jobs.¹⁵ During the education, the scribes and officers were reminded about advantages of this employment in comparison with others.¹⁶

The very education provided certain superiority to official status over other population, as literacy was very weak amongst the common men. Importance of official position was also increased by connection of certain offices with position of a judge, as administration was not separated from justice that time, as well as due to connection of office with religion.¹⁷

⁹ To the development of the office of vizier e.g. M. Verner, L. Bareš, B. Vachala, *Encyklopedie starověkého Egypta*, Praha 2007, p. 496 and subsequently also G.P.F. van den Boorn, *The Duties...*

¹⁰ In more details to the administration also W.C. Beyer, *The Civil Service in the Ancient World*, “Public Administration Review” 1959, vol. 19, no. 4, p. 243–245.

¹¹ Education of scribes is described in more details by H. Vymazalová, F. Coppens, *Moudrost svitků boha Thovta, Vědecké poznání za vlády faraonů*, Praha 2001, p. 18–28.

¹² Z. Žába, *Tesáno...*, p. 51. More details to education R.J. Williams, *Scribal Training in Ancient Egypt*, “Journal of American Oriental Society” 1972, vol. 92, no. 2, p. 214–222.

¹³ O. Berlev, *Úředník* [in: S. Donadoni, *Egyptský člověk a jeho svět*, Praha 2006, p. 94.

¹⁴ However, the heredity of the administrative position could be disrupted by decision of king, who could act based on his own will and subsequently he could nominate or recall anyone. *Ibidem*, p. 106.

¹⁵ O. Berlev, *Úředník...*, p. 102.

¹⁶ It is proved also by an excerpt from homework from scribal school, in which the student is warned by the scribe: “Become a scribe! He is free of forced work as well as of all other work. He does not need to hold hoe and basket; you will not need to hold the basket. [...] Officer entering into Syria does not hold his stick, does not have sandals, and is not sure if he is dead or alive amongst the lions roaring around, whereas the enemy is hidden in the bushes! [...] The baker bakes. When he puts the bread into fire, his head is in the furnace and his son holds his legs; should his son fail to hold him, he would fall into the furnace. However, the scribe is established to manage all works in this country.” F. Lexa, *Výbor ze starší literatury egyptské*, Praha 1947, p. 142–143.

¹⁷ This is also connected with a theory that officers were anointed by inauguration into office. This theory was refuted by S.E. Thompson, *The Anointing of Officials in Ancient Egypt*, “Journal of Near Eastern Studies” 1994, vol. 53, no. 1, p. 15–25.

Egyptian sapiential literature

So called sapiential literature called also *sbójet*¹⁸ – advice, science, played an important role in life of Ancient Egyptians, officials, in particular. These were texts written by scholars, often also High Officers. These texts were written at the end of carriers of these men, as authority of their position assured that they will be respected by following generation.¹⁹ Is legend that the author of the first advice was the famous vizier Imhotep.²⁰ Until today there are still advices which date back to the reign of the III dynasty.²¹ Advices regarded many areas of life, we could also say that they included all spheres of human life: religious and secular, professional and personal. By their nature these advices are not sources of law, they merely represent a list of moral rules, which in many ways overlap with legal regulations. In these documents we can find principles of good administration, i.e. principles on which the Egyptian administration was based and the keeping of which should lead to due performance. Special amongst these documents is the Advice of vizier Ptahhotep²², it is conserved completely. Its text is important, but not unique, as we can search and find also the above mentioned principles in an advice of Ani, Kagemni, Amenop²³, and of others.²⁴

Principles of administration

Principles of administration in modern times are understood as rules for the function of the State administration, which are not always stipulated by law, however which we can legitimately request.²⁵ Compliance with law, impartiality, predictability, cogency, adequacy, cooperation, etc., belong to these principles. The acting of an official in line with

¹⁸ Or *sebájat* as used by R. Landgráfová, *Jak se stát nesmrteľným, Mudrosloví a nepsaný zákon ve starém Egyptě* [in:] T. Víték, J. Starý, D. Antálík, *Mudrosloví v archaických kulturách, Svět archaických kultur IV.*, Praha 2009, p. 31.

¹⁹ In the era of so called New Kingdom these texts were used as teaching aids for students of scribal schools and thanks to them students did not only study to write and at the same time they absorbed a rules contained in them. R. Landgráfová, *Jak se stat...*, p. 31.

²⁰ Z. Žába, *Tesáno...*, p. 41–42. However, Imhotep is famous, in particular, because of constructor of the first pyramid – typical symbol of Egypt. His first construction was so called step pyramid in Saqqara constructed for his king – pharaoh Djoser (Netjerikhet). Moreover, Imhotep acted as vizier and High Priest of Ptah. His descendants hold this office for incredible three hundreds of generations. O. Berlev, *Úředník*, p. 104–105.

²¹ J.O. Hertzler, *The Social Wisdom of the Ancient Egyptian Precepts*, “Social Forces” 1993, vol. 12, no. 2, p. 174.

²² The principles of good administration as listed in this document were briefly summarized by S. Balík, *Maximy vezíra Ptahhotepa – starověký etický kodex úředníka* [in:] *Principy dobré správy. Sborník příspěvků na pracovní konferenci*, ed. D. Hrabcová, Brno 2006, p. 21–26.

²³ This advice is analyzed in more detail by e.g. L. Keimer, *The Wisdom of Amen-em-ope and the Proverbs of Solomon*, “The American Journal of Semitic Languages and Literatures” 1926, vol. 43, no. 1, p. 8–21.

²⁴ To sapiential literature in more details R. Landgráfová, *Jak se stát...*, p. 29–52.

²⁵ K. Černín, *Principy dobré správy definované veřejným ochráncem práv* [in:] *Principy dobré správy. Sborník...*, p. 11.

principles of good administration is therefore not a demonstration of his “good will” but of his duty. We have to stress that also Ancient Egyptians took these principles very seriously.

Selected principles of good administration

Compliance with law

One of the most important principles in Ancient Egypt, as well as today, was the principle of compliance with the law.²⁶ However, the consequences of its breach in Ancient Egypt were perceived differently than today. Whereas for the modern man such breach has only secular consequences, in Ancient Egypt all rules were connected with religion namely both rules of legal norms as well as those of moral principles. It was crucial to follow the *maat* order including both justice and order.²⁷ Justice was personalized in Goddess named Maat, daughter of the God Ra. Maat played crucial role not only during the life of Egyptians, but also in posthumous proceeding considering good and evil acts of deceased.²⁸ Justice was to be protected by officers in the first place, and therefore their position was even more important. Subsequently, the king was the first protector of justice, followed by the prime minister. The prime minister as head of administrative forces was also the person, who should have been the model for officers under him. Therefore it was desirable that he was a model for his subordinates and that he strictly kept all principles. That connection of position of prime minister with justice was also emphasized by his position of High Priest of the Goddess of Justice Maat. With regard to powers held by officers, the moral profile was emphasized to minimize the risk of misuse of power. Therefore, many provisions pointed out the necessity of careful selection of these persons: “It is a bad time for the ruler, if he gives power to non-generous man. God leaves his city when the ruler is bad. [...] Don’t let ignorant and bad man in position, he does not know well.”²⁹ “Power of ruling ignorant leads soon to death.”³⁰ and strongly warned against arbitrary, in particular against the poor people: “Do not covet a poor man’s

²⁶ This principle in our circumstances is further elaborated by e.g. K. Frumarová, *Ochrana před nečinností veřejné správy v českém právním řádu*, Praha 2005, p. 15–29.

²⁷ Opposite of *maat*, i.e. opposite of “order” was *isfet* “non-order” or chaos. In more detail to this theme J. Janák, *Chaos a ne-řád ve starém Egyptě* [in:] T. Vítek, J. Starý, D. Antalík, *Řád a chaos v archaických kulturách, Svět archaických kultur VI.*, Praha 2010, p. 129–144.

²⁸ R. VerSteeg, *Law in the Ancient World*, North Carolina USA 2002, p. 109; J. Janák, *Brána nebes, Bohové & démoni starověkého Egypta*, Praha 2005, p. 108ff. More details about Maat E. Teeter, *The Presentation of Maat Ritual and Legitimacy in Ancient Egypt, Studies in Ancient Oriental Civilization, No. 57*, Illinois USA, 1997.

²⁹ F. Lexa, *Obecné mravní nauky staroegyptské, Svazek první, Demotický morální papyrus Leydenský*, Praha 1926, p. 36.

³⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 45.

goods, nor hunger for his bread, A poor man's goods are a block in the throat, It makes the gullet vomit."³¹

Impartiality

In praxis the impartiality showed to be the biggest issue. Same as today, the officers' objectivity was very often under stress of offers of advantages or property benefits in case of intervention for the benefit of the person who offered them: "Do not incline to the well-dressed man, And rebuff the one in rags. Don't accept the gift of a powerful man, And deprive the weak of his sake."³²

In the advices bribery is condemned on both sides: "Person who gives property for [statutory] power, will lay sober on the street."³³ As states František Lexa in his comment "laying sober on the street" is to be understood as *remiędzy* innymi without property as only the beggar or drunk sleep on the street.³⁴

Although the advices tried to convince the officers to be objective, it is clear that it was impossible to be absolutely successful in this matter. One of documents speaks about mistake of a person who should be a role model due to his function – the prime minister. Acts of vizier Cheti (or Chete) were condemned on the base of the breach of impartiality principle. The mistake he committed in connection with persons close to him, was surprisingly not due to the fact he provided them with an advantage, but, on the contrary, in a disadvantageous attitude to such persons. This non-objectiveness was the reason for loss the prime minister's enviable office. To avoid repeating of such situation, king Thutmose III³⁵ sent to his new vizier Rechmire, as a present for his inauguration into office, a document called Rights and obligations of vizier, in which the king reminded to his officer his obligations and also mentioned the mistake of his predecessor:

Avoid acting as the vizier Cheti. They say he used to be more stringent to his people than to others, fearing [to be accused he gives] unjustly [advantage to his own people]. When someone from them complained about the judgment he imposed to him, he confirmed he loss his case. That is more than just! Do not forget about just deciding, as Gods hates privileges! That is written in the advice, so keep it! Consider someone you know as someone you don't know; someone who is close to the king as someone who is far away from his palace.³⁶

Again we find here the reference to the advice. The reason is that there guidelines did not include any new rules, only reminded of principles already existing emphasizing the necessity to keep them. Therefore, if we follow the official text and rules, Ancient Egypt seems to be birthplace of a democratically equal attitude towards all its inhabitants. In praxis however this was not the case. If such society would exist in its ideal

³¹ M. Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, Vol. 2, *New Kingdom*, California USA 2006, p. 154–155; F. Lexa, *Výbor...*, p. 258.

³² M. Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian...*, p. 158; F. Lexa, *Výbor...*, p. 262.

³³ F. Lexa, *Obecné...*, p. 32.

³⁴ *Ibidem*.

³⁵ King of the Dynasty XVIII ruling in the era of so called New Kingdom. F. Lexa, *Veřejný život ve starověkém Egyptě, II. doklady*, Praha 1955, p. 62.

³⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 54–55.

form, the literary relic called Story of golden-mouthed countryman (in other documents translated also as Story of farmer speaker) would never have occurred. It was translated by the leading Czech Egyptologist Zbyněk Žába, who speaks about it as about a satiric work, the aim of which was the criticism of circumstances, in which the position of common men was not very strong and it was definitely not simple to enforce fair treatment.³⁷ In the story the poor countryman tries to claim his rights and at the end he succeeds, although not because of the legitimacy of his claims, but thanks to his better-than-average rhetoric abilities.³⁸

Predictability

The principle of predictability is certainly closely connected with the first principle mentioned above, i.e. with the principle of compliance with the law. If a decision is not based on legal regulation, this principle could not come fully true:

Behold, the petitioner of the South, [the North] and the whole land, shall come, supplied - - - - -. Mayest thou see to it for thyself a to do everything after that which is in accordance with law; to do everything according to the right thereof.³⁹

As it was mentioned in instructions for vizier Rechmire, it is necessary to decide in such a way, as it is expected in line with legal regulations.

Refuge of official is to decide the matter in compliance with regulation. If he acts like this, applicant being subject of decision, will not say afterwards: "It was not decided pursuant to law in my matter."⁴⁰

It results from these provisions that common Egyptians could expect a certain decision in the matter based on his knowledge of legal regulations, and that it was expected that he would be treated in the same manner used in similar cases.

Cogency

One of the subsequent principles, the principle of cogency, was in Ancient Egypt not connected merely with the reasoning of administrative proceedings, i.e. with the content of statement, but also its form. Egyptians were very fond of rhetoric and capable speakers were strongly admired, which is proved also by the Story of golden-mouthed countryman, in which a common man is praised for this ability. Rhetoric is mentioned also by the Advice of Ptahhotep. The importance of rhetoric art can be deduced also from other extracts: "Don't let others call you 'fool' for the fatigue caused by your speech."⁴¹ We have to stress that the term "fool" is very common in advices and it is one

³⁷ Z. Žába, *Tesáno...*, p. 75.

³⁸ This story is contained in: F. Lexa, *Beletristická literatura staroegyptská*, Kladno 1923, p. 129–152.

³⁹ J.H. Breasted, *Ancient Records of Egypt*, vol. II., *The Eighteen Dynasty*, Illinois, USA 1906, p. 269; F. Lexa, *Veřejný...*, p. 54–55.

⁴⁰ F. Lexa, *Veřejný...*, p. 54.

⁴¹ F. Lexa, *Obecné...*, p. 23.

of the worst designations for men. Cogency does not mean only capability to speak ably, but also in listening to others: “Don’t ask stupidly and listen passionately”.⁴²

Timeliness

The principle of timeliness was, to a certain extent, regulated by restraint, as based on advices, wise man should listen and think before expressing his opinion: “Do not rush while providing an advice, if no one asked you [to provide it]. A wrong answer is usually given by those who speak quickly.”⁴³ Therefore, restraint and thoughtfulness cannot be considered negative, as they did not represent arbitrary delays, but rather increased the quality of the whole process. It was emphasized that it is more important to listen than to speak quickly: “Do not ask stupidly and listen passionately,”⁴⁴ Ancient Egyptians apparently knew, that only a man who carefully listens to others can create a correct opinion. A correct decision was more important than a speedy decision:

Don’t start a quarrel with a hot-mouthed man, Nor needle him with words, Pause before a foe, bend before an attacker. Sleep (on it) before speaking, A storm that bursts like fire in straw.⁴⁵

Discuss the answer with someone suitable for you, but do not hurry with it.⁴⁶

Liability

The fact that officers were liable for consequences of their decisions is clear. If they made mistakes while holding their office, they could have been punished seriously. By loss of their position as a minimum punishment, which was a quite unpleasant sanction while holding the office was very attractive. The punishment for improper execution of administration could have been much severe than just loss of the office, based on the extent of offence and seriousness of offence committed by the officer. Laws of Horemheb stipulated corporal punishment in comiędzy inymition with panel labor for misuse of function and even capital punishment in the case of the breach of a judge’s duties:

Now, as for any official or any priest (concerning whom) it shall be heard, saying: “He sits, to execute judgment among the official staff (k7zb.t) appointed for judgment, and he commits a crime against justice therein;” it shall be against him a capital crime.⁴⁷

⁴² *Ibidem*, p. 45.

⁴³ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁵ M. Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian...*, p. 150; F. Lexa, *Výbor...*, p. 253.

⁴⁶ *Nauka Amenemopova* [in:] F. Lexa, *Výbor...*, p. 253.

⁴⁷ J.H. Breasted, *Ancient Records of Egypt*, vol. III, Illinois USA 1906, p. 32; F. Lexa, *Veřejný...*, p. 73.

Helpfulness

As it results from the below mentioned quotations, the principle of helpfulness was very important. The officer had to act helpfully in all occasions, i.e. also in the case that the applicant's application was not fully right: "Do not refuse the supplicant before hearing his speech! If it is the supplicant who comes to you and does not speak as he should, do not refuse him, but explain him why you refuse him."⁴⁸ Based on this provision, the prime minister and subsequently all officers are invited not to refuse formally incorrect applications without reasoning, but they should inform the respective applicant (or plaintiff) about concrete deficiencies and shall show him the correct way.

The subsequent part of the text is even more interesting, as the officer had to be helpful also in the case it was clear to him, that it was impossible to grant the application of the applicant: "See, it is said: 'Supplicant worships more being heard than granting the matter in which he came'."⁴⁹ It is clear from this that the officer shall be gentle to the applicant, that applicant should not feel humiliated or ignored, but, on the other hand, that applicant should have considered the office as a place where his problems will be heard regardless if they could have been solved there or not, or regardless if the respective officer is competent to solve them or not.

Of course it is a question, to what extent this idea was implemented and if the officers were really helpful to these persons, in particular if such person was of a low social stand. The provision is also amended by the fact that the officer shall have authority, or even inspire fear: "Make them fear you! A high official is a high official only if people fear him."⁵⁰ On one hand we can understand it as a necessity to keep a certain distance between the officer and a common man to keep the respect towards officer and his decision, as well as towards the whole State administration. On the other hand, this provision should make it possible for officers not to lose time unnecessarily with cases they could not resolve, in particular with such cases which could become obstacle to smooth functioning of the office.

Conclusion

The text above definitely does not process all the principles of good administration, or all principles of administration of Ancient Egypt. The aim of it is to demonstrate, that many of these principles exist and are respected for thousands of years. Apparently, humankind has a clear vision of effective public administration that it is not only service to State but, in particular, service to common men. In our continental conception of law it often occurs that principles become marginalized and to their detriment, the written law is strictly enforced. We have to realize that principles are holders of basic values of the society as a whole. Ancient Egyptians honored such principles very much, and

⁴⁸ F. Lexa, *Veřejný...*, p. 55.

⁴⁹ *Ibidem*.

⁵⁰ *Ibidem*.

although they were not able to assure their absolute respect, they understood their importance. Legacy of these legal principles may be considered timeless and, at the same time, they represent another proof that legal history can be inspiration for today also in our times.

