

## BOOK REVIEW

*Ancient Egyptian Scribes: A Cultural Exploration.* By NIV ALLON and HANA NAVRATILOVA. London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017. Pp. xi, 203. Hardcover, \$102.60. ISBN 9781472583956.

Alongside the Sphinx, Nefertiti, or the ever-popular King Tut, an iconic image of Pharaonic Egypt is that of the so-called “scribe:” a male, usually in the lotus position, writing implements at hand, taking notes or reading from a papyrus on his lap. The present book explores the social, political, and cultural power of the scribe through the biographies of ten such individuals from the New Kingdom (sixteenth to eleventh centuries BCE). Allon and Navratilova examine texts and monuments to understand how scribes “made sense of the term ‘scribe’ as well as of their standing in the Egyptian society, and how they conveyed it both to themselves and to others” (1). The book has been comprehensively reviewed in BMCR <http://bmcr.brynmawr.edu/2017/2017-12-14.html>, so I will not repeat that task here. Instead, I will provide a summary and a view of the work as a whole, with an eye to the audience of CJ.

After introducing the basic tasks and tools of a scribe (1–12), the authors present ten biographies which range from nine to seventeen pages (13–146). Two threads running through the chapters are, first, the characters’ use of scribal symbols to claim literacy, knowledge, and authority, and, second, the diffuse obligations of a scribe depending on political circumstances. Auxiliary materials consist of glossary (149–152), chronology (153–154), endnotes (155–175), bibliography (177–198), and index (199–203). Overall, the book bears out its thesis that “[the] constant negotiation of the notion of the scribe and his role in society employs a variety of media and contexts” (148).

The back cover touts *Ancient Egyptian Scribes* as “assuming no previous knowledge of Ancient Egypt.” This assertion is aligned with the Bloomsbury series in which the book has appeared, the goal of which is to provide “accessible studies in Egyptology.” Yet even Classicists will find this book a challenging read, since nearly every sentence does assume background in Egyptian history, geography, and Egyptology. In the introduction, for instance, we learn that the authors’ sources include “Eighteenth Dynasty technical texts, including Papyrus

Edwin Smith, Papyrus Ebers, and the Rhind mathematical papyrus... papyri Anastasi, D'Orbiney and Sallier... the Chester Beatty papyri," some of which "can be traced back to individual names, e.g. the Deir el-Medina scribes" (7). With only a fraction of these names explained in the glossary and the index, and with minimal endnotes, readers struggle already in the preliminaries. Essential terminology is casually dropped throughout without gloss in the back matter (e.g. "Ptahotep," 37; "Atenist" 38; "Hyksos," 43, "ushabti," 59, "métier," 147).

In the same vein, and because the authors aim to broaden established understandings of scribehood to include honorific capital alongside professional attributes, they tackle Egyptological debates of little relevance to neophytes. How crucial is it to know that a series of studies "took aim at the notion of literacy and the importance of documents in ancient Egypt, causing quite a stir" (2), or that a certain scholar was "a formidable and multifaceted personality [who] chose to apply a partisan view" (25)?

Besides misjudging its audience, the book also suffers from both infelicities of grammar and editorial neglect. Frequently, periods are introduced in mid-sentence (44): "Having defeated the Hyksos and the Kingdom of Kerna, the military machine." Similarly elsewhere (54): "If those other graffiti give rise to speculation that they were premeditated acts of personal commemoration in writing." Word order is often jumbled: "However, if it was important men around a woman who was king, likened later generations have added to the gender bias and have often Hatshepsut to other women in top positions" (25). One sentence is entirely nonsensical (80): "Work on the begun had not begin, with this plan in mind." Misplaced commas impede comprehension ("the shape of a stela, like those, which were carved" 45). Vocabulary can be obtuse or erroneous: for instance, we learn that the hieratic script "apart from governing on ostraca and papyri, appeared also in rock inscriptions" (11), or that "the military went to slaves Avaris" (16).

Finally, a general weakness of *Ancient Egyptian Scribes* is that it does not consistently link the scribes with their kings, and that it only alludes sporadically to the history of Egypt. Hence, readers are left to piece together both what happened during the New Kingdom, and how those events influenced the role of the scribes. The very last chapter, on Djehutimose Tjaroy (133–146), partly achieves this integration between the historical and the socio-cultural, resulting in the most coherent biography out of the ten.

I suspect that Egyptologists will get more out of this book than even those Classicists with publications on Greek and Roman Egypt. Those with no

knowledge of Egypt (Bloomsbury's intended audience) would be better served by an introduction setting scribes within the conversation of Egyptian literacy and material culture. The collective volume *The Oxford History of Ancient Egypt* edited by Ian Shaw (Oxford 2003), discusses scribes over a longer period but with more concessions to beginners.

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