BOOK REVIEW


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 An- 
astasi, D’Orbney 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 ter-
minology is casually dropped throughout without gloss in the back matter (e.g. 

In the same vein, and because the authors aim to broaden established under-
standings of scribehood to include honorific capital alongside professional at-
tributes, 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 Karna, 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 in-
stance, we learn that the hieratic script “apart from governing on ostraca and pa-
pyri, 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 con-
sistently 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 hap-
pened 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
REVIEW OF Allon and Navratilova, *Ancient Egyptian Scribes*

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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