



# HOTEP

Issue 56: December 2020



## Review of November meeting

The title of our November talk was '**A Scribe's Life**', presented by **Hana Navratilova** who is currently a lecturer at the University of Reading. In 2017 she authored a book with Niv Allon, '*Ancient Egyptian Scribes; A Cultural Exploration*' published by Bloomsbury.

In her talk Hana covered such questions as what is a scribe? What did they do? Did the role change over time? Is a literate person also a scribe? How they lived and worked and how did they see their role? This was a lot to cover in an hour but was done in a clear and knowledgeable way.

The title of scribe is one that most officials claimed, usually one of many, and it can relate to simple clerical duties or to a specific type of scribe such as a Royal Scribe or Scribe of Recruits. On statues and wall paintings a scribe may be shown with the traditional scribal equipment. This is a wooden palette with at one end two circular

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holders for a 'cake' of black and red ink and a reed pen and a small pot for water. Generally, texts were written in black ink with corrections being marked in red. Red was also used to indicate the start of new sections of text.

Literacy in ancient Egypt has been variously estimated at 1%, 5% or 10% of the population and Hana looked at different definitions of literacy, from the ability to read hieroglyphs – an elite skill – to the simple writing skills. She suggested that most scribes were initially trained to use the cursive forms of hieroglyphs, hieratic later demotic, and only trained in hieroglyphs if they were to specialise in formal inscriptions on temple or tomb walls. There are tomb models and scenes that show a scribe sitting on the ground with a roll of papyrus spread over his lap and reed pen in hand keeping a record of what is happening in front of him. Working scribes were record keepers and note-takers, and officials used the title of scribe to show that they were literate.



An example of a scribe taking notes was mentioned by Hana from the temple of Ramesses II at Abydos, photo below (the photo is mine).



The site that had a higher rate of literacy than the rest of the country was the workman's village a Deir el-Medina where a particular example of the sort of material on which, generally, notes were written was found in abundance. These are flakes of limestone called ostraca. There were also wooden writing boards covered with stucco which could be washed and re-stuccoed to be used again.

Hana considered the issue of whether women were taught to read and write. Elite women probably could at least read, receiving tuition in the home alongside their male siblings. The discovery in the tomb of Tutankhamun of a scribal palette inscribed with the name of Princess Meketaten would seem to support this idea. Interestingly this is an artist's palette as it has more ink colours than just red and black, the extra colours being white, yellow, green and blue.

Apart from formal texts and documents there are lots of written comments, known as graffiti, scribbled onto the walls of monuments, rocks and cliff faces near tombs by scribes who were recording that they had been there and what they are doing. These can give important information such as recording official investigations into the state of tombs following reports of robbery. Others can comment on their fellow scribes such as the example Hana gave of a scribe from

Memphis who saw an earlier graffito while visiting the step pyramid complex of Djoser:

*There came the scribe of skilled fingers, he has no equal in his qualities in the whole of Mennofer, Scribe Amenemhet. I say – tell me, these words, my heart is distressed (?) while I see (OR: it is heartrending to see) the work of their hands. This is not [...] skilled on front of [...] it is like a work of a women who is not knowing / lacking the knowledge were they not allowed to enter [...] to see the temple – I saw such sloth; this is not [...] writing/scribe enlightened by Thoth*

This dates from the New Kingdom and shows that one scribe was not above critiquing the work of a fellow scribe.

Training to be a scribe probably started early and Hana considered this to be in small groups, with one-to-one training later. She also mentioned the text known as the *Satire of the Trades* in which the life of a scribe was very favourably compared with all other types of work.

One of the questions asked at the end of the talk was about specialist scribes and the one group that falls into this category were translators. The Amarna Letters show that there were scribes in the Egyptian Foreign Office who could read, write and translate foreign languages and no doubt acted as translators.

This was a great talk and made me rethink the role of scribe and what the general title of scribe actually meant to the ancient Egyptians.

**Glenn Worthington**



## Review of the evening meeting: 3 December

As the first contribution to an occasional series of evening meetings, **Beth Asbury** gave the first lecture entitled '*Maat, Morals and Justice in Ancient Egypt*', a topic she had first explored for her MPhil dissertation at the University of Birmingham.

The Ancient Egyptians' version of morality was Maat, which may be the world's earliest 'concept'. Maat represented order, equilibrium and rightness, all that held in check the opposing ideas of chaos, confusion and transgression. Maat was anthropomorphised into a goddess around 2350 BC and seen as the opposite of Isset, who represented those disorderly activities, such as crime and violence, which might be considered 'taboo'.



Maat had no dedicated temples until the New Kingdom but stood out with her signature single feather. Beth discussed the hieroglyphic sign for Maat, in particular the wedge-shaped glyph that might be the determinative for 'evenness'. It is the same shape as the dais on which a god is shown standing in 'The Book of the Dead of Nakht' from the late 18<sup>th</sup> Dynasty, (above). Alternatively, it could be a representation of the primordial mound, or even a measure of land. Egyptians were great believers in duality so the sign may have had more than one meaning.

Beth explored the potential meanings of Maat through a wonderfully

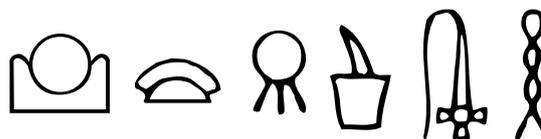
illustrated talk ranging from the Turin Strike papyrus, to Rhinocorura – a colony for those unfortunate people who had had their noses cut off as punishment – to adultery ('Montu's abomination').

At the final judgement it was Maat's feather against which an individual's heart was weighed to assess their fitness to enter the Afterlife. All tomb and 'Book of the Dead' images show the scales balanced, pre-empting the heart's owner achieving immortality. But texts tell a more realistic story about the behaviour and interactions of the Ancient Egyptians, who clearly found it just as difficult to live up to society's ideals as we do today. The concept of Maat provided a form of uncodified laws, moral and civil, which allowed the world to continue existing as intended.



**Anna Welch**

## November Quiz Answers



The hieroglyphs represent, from L to R:

'Horizon, sunset', 'appearance, sunrise', 'shine, radiate', 'incense burner', 'flame, fire', 'candle wick'.

## In the News

Fragments of cedar wood found in the Great Pyramid of Khufu have been rediscovered in a cigar tin in the store rooms of Aberdeen University, by Egyptian curatorial assistant, Abeer Eladany. See the story here:

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-north-east-orkney-shetland-55315623>

**Sat 16 January 2021:**



**'Art of the Old Kingdom'**  
by **John Billman**

By the time of the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> Dynasties, Egyptian artistic conventions and the canon of proportion were well established. Old Kingdom tombs, especially those at Saqqara, contain some of the most vivid images which provide a wealth of information about everyday life. This talk



will examine the ways in which the Egyptian artist conveyed layer upon layer of detail within each scene and includes material from tombs only recently opened to the public.

John Billman holds a Masters in Egyptian Archaeology from UCL and teaches Egyptology for the Continuing Education Department of Oxford University and the WEA. John is Chairman of the Thames Valley Ancient Egypt Society and Chairman of the South Asasif Conservation Trust.

You need to register in advance for this meeting, even if you have pre-paid the meeting fee.

**Prepayment does not guarantee a place at this meeting** so, to avoid disappointment, register early.

**Registration will be open exclusively to Members until 30 December.**

Thereafter it will be opened to non-members on a first-come, first-served basis.

**Zoom Meeting Joining Instructions**

To join the meeting on **16 January** all you have to do is follow these steps:

**1:** Click/tap on the registration link at any time from receipt of this message:

[https://us02web.zoom.us/meeting/register/tZEvc-qvrzMuH9QLJ5xHXWVX\\_2L--GqGkEx4](https://us02web.zoom.us/meeting/register/tZEvc-qvrzMuH9QLJ5xHXWVX_2L--GqGkEx4)

You will be asked to enter your name and email address to register for the meeting.

**In the week before the meeting**, you will receive a confirmation email containing information about joining.

**2:** The Member's fee for this meeting is £3; Overseas Member £4; Non-Members £6. Contact the Secretary at [saesinfo55@gmail.com](mailto:saesinfo55@gmail.com) to arrange payment. Payments can be made by direct bank transfer, through PayPal, or by cheque and will be acknowledged by email. Details on the website.

**3:** Look out for the **meeting link** which will be sent during the week before the talk. You may need to check your junk or spam folders in case it goes astray. A reminder will be sent on Friday 15 January. If you have not received this link by the day of the meeting please try registering again or contact the Secretary. **For reasons of security and copyright the meeting link should not be shared with anyone else.**

**The waiting room will be open from 1.30 pm**

**Participants will be admitted to the meeting from 1.45 pm.**

**The meeting will start at 2 pm.**

## January 2021 Evening Meeting

We are pleased to announce the second of our occasional evening meetings on:

**Wednesday 27 January 2021, 6.30 pm  
for a 7 pm start  
(admission from the waiting room  
from 6.45pm)**

***'Life & Death in ancient Kheny, based  
on new discoveries at Gebel el-Silsila'***

by

**Maria Nilsson & John Ward**

**Directors of the Gebel el-Silsila  
Project, (Lund University)**



*The Swedish mission has conducted archaeological work at Gebel el-Silsila (Upper Egypt) since 2012, with several ground-breaking results ranging from Prehistory to Late Antiquity. This talk will focus on the lives, and deaths, of the people of ancient Kheny, based on recently excavated material, with special focus on the New Kingdom.*

**Meeting fee: £5 flat rate**

The registration link will **NOT** be available before **17 January**

**Registration for Members Only until  
23 January, thereafter open to all.  
This meeting is likely to be very  
popular so book early to avoid  
disappointment.**

## More Good News

After a long absence from the Internet, the Theban Mapping Project website is up and running again, thanks to the generosity of the American Research Centre in Egypt. Check it out at:

<https://thebanmappingproject.com/>

where you can spend many, many happy hours exploring the tombs and temples in and around the Valley of the Kings.

## December Quiz

Can you identify the contents of the three presents beneath the tree from these clues?



The box is the colour associated with one of his followers.

Her nickname is the colour of the parcel ribbon.

This amulet represents rebirth and the colour of the parcel's ribbon.

The wrapping design includes one of her sacred symbols.

The amulet is in the box coloured like the stone quarried at Mons Porphyritis.

He pushed his brother into a box and threw it in the Nile.

Answers in the next Hotep

**Wishing everyone as Happy a Christmas as  
you can achieve in the circumstances. See  
you in the New Year!**

