

Voices from African History: Be a Scribe!

The following document was written by an anonymous Egyptian teacher as a lesson to his recalcitrant student sometime during the Middle Kingdom. It seems that even in the third millennium B.C.E., students tried to get out of doing their readings! Aside from reminding us of the universality of human nature and the value of education, it also provides a valuable insight into the lives of everyday Egyptians.

The royal scribe and chief overseer of the cattle of Amun-Re, King of the Gods, Nebmare-nakht, speaks to the scribe Wenemdianun, as follows: You are busy coming and going, and don't think of writing. You resist listening to me. You neglect my teachings.

You are worse than the desert antelope that lives by running. It spends no day in plowing. Never at all does it tread on the threshing floor. It lives on the oxen's labor, without entering among them. But though I spend the day telling you "Write," it seems like a plague to you. Writing is very pleasant!

See for yourself with your own eye. The occupations that lie before you.

The washerman's day is going up, going down. All his limbs are weak, from whitening his neighbors' clothes every day, from washing their linen.

The maker of pots is smeared with soil, like one whose relations have died. His hands, his feet are full of clay; he is like one who lives in the bog.

The cobbler works in vats to tan leather. His smell is penetrating. His hands are red with madder [dye], as if he is smeared with blood.

The watchman prepares garlands and polishes vase-stands. He spends a night of toil just as one on whom the sun shines.

The merchants travel downstream and upstream. They are as busy as can be, carrying goods from one town to another. They supply him who has wants. But the tax collectors carry off the gold, that most precious of metals.

The ships' crews are from every house. They receive their loads. They depart from Egypt for Syria, and each man's god is with him. But not one of them says "We shall see Egypt again!"

The carpenter who is in the shipyard carries the timber and stacks it. If he gives today the output of yesterday, woe to his limbs! The shipwright stands behind him to tell him evil things. His worker who is in the fields, his is the toughest of all jobs. He spends the day loaded with his tools, tied to his tool-box. When he returns at night, he is loaded with the toolbox and the timbers, his drinking mug, and his whetstones.

The scribe, he alone, records the output of all of them. Take note of it!

Let me also expound to you the situation of the peasant, that other tough occupation. The flood comes and soaks him. He attends to his equipment. By day he cuts his farming tools; by night he twists rope. Even his midday hour he spends on farm labor. He equips himself to go to the field as if he were a warrior. When he reaches his field he finds it broken up. He spends time cultivating, and the snake is after him. It finishes off the seed as it is cast to the ground. He does not see a green blade. He does three plowings with borrowed grain. His wife has gone down to the merchants and found nothing for barter. Now the scribe lands on the shore. He surveys the harvest. Attendants are behind him with staffs, Nubians with clubs. One says "give grain." The farmer replies "there is none." He is beaten savagely. He is bound, thrown in the well, submerged head down. His wife is bound in his presence. His children are in fetters. His neighbors abandon them and flee. When it's over, there is no grain.

If you have any sense, be a scribe. If you have learned about the peasant, you will not be able to be one. Take note of it! . . .

I spend the day instructing you. You do not listen! Your heart is like an empty room. My teachings are not in it. Take note of it!

Furthermore, I instruct you to make you sound; to make you hold the palette freely. To make you become one whom the king trusts; to make you gain entrance to treasury and granary. To make you receive the ship-load at the gate of the granary. To make you issue the offerings on feast days. You are dressed in fine clothes; you own horses. Your boat is on the

(continued)

river; you are supplied with attendants. You stride about inspecting. A mansion is built in your town. You have a powerful office, given to you by the king. Male and female slaves are about you. Those who are in the fields grasp your hand, on plots that you have made. Look, I

make you into a staff of life! Put the writings in your heart, and you will be protected from all kinds of toil. You will become a worthy official.

Do you not recall the life of the unskilled man? His name is not known. He is ever burdened in front of the scribe who knows what he is about.

increasingly dry) territories. Such a double blow no doubt taxed the ability of the state to regulate the production and redistribution of wealth. Further, the Pharaoh's legitimacy was connected to the fertility of the Nile, and repeated failure of the floods could not help but undermine central authority. Beginning around 2250, Egypt saw the first of a series of famines that were to strike over the next three centuries. Under such a burden, central authority first weakened and later collapsed. By 2180, the Nile Valley was divided up between dozens of small states, each under the authority of local rulers. The rulers of Memphis still referred to themselves as Pharaoh, but their power was a mere shadow of their predecessors.

Just as in the initial unification of Egypt, the conquest that led to the reunification of the Nile and the formation of the Middle Kingdom came from the upper Nile region. In 2040 B.C.E., Pharaoh Mentohotep succeeded in completing a reconquest of the Nile that had begun in Thebes roughly a century before. It was during the Middle Kingdom that the power of Ancient Egypt reached its highest point. The Pharaohs of the period extended the boundaries of the state to include much of Lebanon in the northeast and Nubia in the south. These conquests greatly expanded the raw materials available to the kingdom. Trade was also expanded during the period, and there is considerable evidence that Egyptian traders ranged far into the Mediterranean. In particular, there seems to have been considerable exchange between Minoan Crete and Egypt.

The Middle Kingdom also saw fewer grandiose state structures and greater investment in productive endeavors. Perhaps most impressive was the agricultural development of the Fayum depression, which lies to the west of the Nile in Lower Egypt. Extensive irrigation works turned this marshy area into highly productive land, allowing for greatly increased agricultural output. Like the pyramids before it, this undertaking was a marvel of engineering and state organization.

The Second Intermediate Period and the New Kingdom

The Middle Kingdom was not immune to the forces of entropy that all states face. By the seventeenth century B.C.E., a series of disputes over succession had significantly weakened the administration in Thebes. When Lower Egypt was invaded by a people known as the Hyksos from the Middle East, the Middle Kingdom government was unable to maintain the unity of the Nile. In seizing the delta region, the Hyksos were aided by their use of bronze weapons and chariots, both of which gave them a significant advantage over the Egyptian troops of the time. Further, the