

Challenging a Pseudo-Victorian Elitist Utopia: Writing in Ancient Egypt

Massimiliano Pinarello argues that the ability to write in ancient Egypt was not restricted to an élite scribal class.

Our modern understanding of the past depends on a large number of variables, including quality and quantity of resources, types of resources and their archaeological contextualisation, and the scholar's mind-set. But how far has this mind-set been shaped by nineteenth century expectations?

This brought me to investigate the idea of a separate social 'scribe' category. Did the familiar ancient Egyptian 'scribe' actually exist? Or have we been influenced by the need of 'pseudo-Victorian élitist' intellectuals to believe in an ancient Egyptian literate élite class set apart from the ignorant masses? So I carried out an in-depth investigation of archaeological literature and all excavated writing implements from UK museum collections, and compared these results with the material coming from my case study, the important Western Desert site of Balat Ayn Asil.

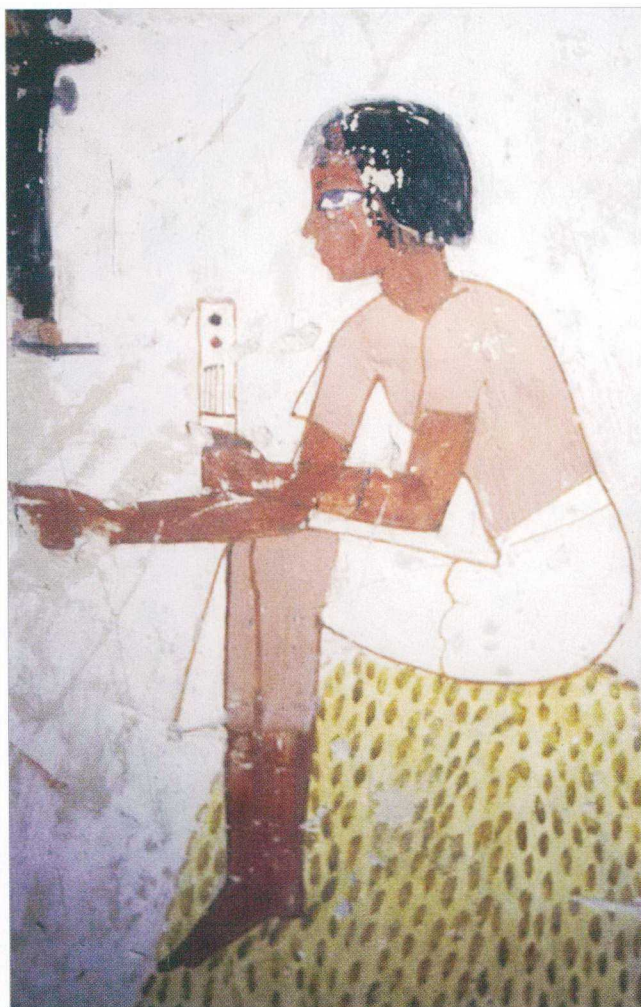
Marking Systems

The traditional Egyptological approach holds literacy as social identifier, making a strict sociological distinction between those that could replicate utterances into written signs (i.e. those that used a phonetic form of writing – a linguistic script) and those who did not. However, the latter group of people *did* write; this form of writing, currently defined as 'non-textual marking systems' – for example pot marks, marks made by stonemasons, quarrymen and craftsmen, and seal impression tags – was used by them to communicate with the rest of the people living in ancient Egypt. In the archaeological record, we can identify multiple forms of writing practice, which use both linguistic scripts and non-textual marking, defying the scribal category and the never-waning Egyptological infatuation for a literate élite.

Where are the 'Scribes'?

In my definition, writing is the act of leaving visible markings in order to communicate something, to record socially shared actions and events. Searching the archaeological record for ancient Egyptian writing implements, both single

tools and grouped sets of implements ('writing kits'), I realised that there is no actual representative element of literacy or class necessary to identify writing; the concept of a 'scribe' as an educated élite male, is not reflected; indeed writing implements have been found in women's burials. Neither is there any consistency in what makes a person a 'scribe', with reference to tools, practical skills, gender, or social class (which is already itself an alien concept to ancient Egyptian society). The Egyptological cliché of the pen-and-palette object pair designating a 'scribe' is not reflected in the archaeological record. Also referring to cemeteries and settlements, one simply cannot find a scribal area or a 'class' of pen-and-palette-bearers. Everyday writing seems to have been more related to accountancy and measuring activities, therefore placing numeracy already ahead of literacy in terms of skills necessary for the practice. Equally, even when restricting the scope of analysis to epigraphic and philological



An administrator holding a scribal palette, from the Tomb of Menna. But the possession of this equipment does not prove the man is from an élite scribal class. Photo: RBP

work concentrated on the title *zš*, which is normally translated as 'scribe', there is no direct correspondence between title-bearers and writing objects, as there is no clear social positioning based on the title's alleged prerogative to attribute literate status.

Writing Equipment

In my investigation of writing kits, scattered implements, and the so-called 'burnishers' (long-handled bell-shaped



One Middle Kingdom kit from found in a tomb under the Ramesseum's Magazine 5, including a bundle of pens (centre left), a so-called 'burnisher' (below the pens) and a lotus-shaped cup (below)

An undated, possibly Late Period, writing kit from Lahun, Bashkatib Tomb 762, including a linen piece used as pen case wrapped around crushed pens, a linen thread, and a reed pen (bottom left).



Balat Ayn Asil

Balat was the governorate capital for the Dakhla Oasis (see *opposite, top*) and most likely in charge of all other oases in the Western Desert, at least between the Old and Middle Kingdoms. Peculiarly, its governors were authorised during the late Old Kingdom to be deified in their urban *ḥwt-k3* chapels. Discovered in 1971 by Ahmed Fakhry, the site has been excavated by the IFAO since then. The archaeological site includes the ancient town located at modern Ayn Asil and the neighbouring necropolis located at modern Qila el-Dabba (*opposite, bottom*). The site therefore offers a wealthy diversity of environments, including administrative buildings and archives, living quarters, religious communal parts, four pottery workshops, a lithic sickles factory, the governors' palace next to their *ḥwt-k3* chapels, seven mastabas, and several other burials of the local population. Context and preservation are also quite fortunate, as the town underwent a large fire at the end of the Old Kingdom (around 2175 BC), which preserved most



ABOVE AND RIGHT

Writing kits from the Manchester Museum, featuring a Predynastic Palette with ink (top), a bundle of reed pens, burnisher and lotus jar from a Middle Kingdom tomb found under a magazine at the Ramesseum (above centre and right) and a linen-wrapped set from Lahun that may date to the Late Period (above).
Photos: Campbell Price/Manchester Museum

tools), I concentrated on the largest UK collections of ancient Egyptian material. The Manchester Museum is rather outstanding, with the highest representation of actually excavated and archaeologically documented material among all UK collections and a great variety of object types including two writing kits. These objects include: Palettes dating to the Early Dynastic and Late Periods (*above, top*).





urban structures with the exception of those few areas rebuilt and used in the following centuries.

Examining Balat's corpus of writing products and implements (coming from a secure context, both daily and funerary) is of great value for an archaeological investigation. I concentrated my research on Balat's material dating between the Sixth Dynasty and the beginning of the First Intermediate Period, therefore including the major phases of the site development, settlement and necropolis, the fire, and its partial recovery before the Middle

Kingdom – i.e. providing a consistent historical and cultural continuum.

Multiple writing practices are attested in the archaeological record of Balat. Finds include writing tools such as bone styli from the town area, seals and clay sealings (impressed by stamp or button seals, cylinder seals, and hand-inscribed), coming from both town and necropolis areas, several clay tablets inscribed in hieratic script, incised bread moulds, clay tags or *pendentifs* to be hung on containers, and clay tokens. Different ways of writing are executed with different tools

ABOVE

The remains of the Old Kingdom town of Balat Ayn Asil, which was the governorate capital for the Dakhla Oasis between Old and Middle Kingdoms.

BELOW

One of the large Old Kingdom *mastaba* tombs at Qila el-Dabba. The local governors were authorised during the late Old Kingdom to be deified in their urban *hwt-k3* chapels.

Photos: RBP





by differently skilled practitioners, who produced both linguistic script and non-textual marking systems, shared in the same administrative daily life and funerary contexts. Also, within the same group of objects connected to writing, different practices coexist, as for example in sealings, which feature both hand-inscribed and impressed ones, with either drawn motifs or hieroglyphic characters, often all together on the same mud piece. Similarly, accounts were produced by incisions on clay tablets as well as being marked on walls with soot-based ink, for instance. Papyrus, reed pens and wooden writing boards are absent, as clay is the

essential material for most administrative writing media and for most of the other writing products. Notwithstanding this local choice of materials, Balat was directly connected to Memphis and it is genuinely Egyptian in its characteristics, in the material culture, and in the ritual aspects of the settlement's community.

Based on writing material and outputs, the administration in Balat seems to have relied on the written practice of message circulation, record cross-checking, and sometimes reuse, separating the practice of writing from literacy; this is further demonstrated by the vast majority of non-textual marking systems and the fact

ABOVE RIGHT

One of the local Old Kingdom governors of Balat, depicted in his tomb at Qila al Dabba in the Dakhla Oasis.

RIGHT

Literacy was not necessarily a requirement for power. The Fifth Dynasty royal hairdresser Ti (seen here enjoying a fishing trip in a relief from his Saqqara tomb) was powerful because he was able to touch the head of the King.

Photos: RBP



that the essential role in this system of communication was played by messengers, seal bearers, stewards, and servants operating by means of the spoken word, visual recognition, and mobility. This does not exclude the presence of fully literate officials in Balat, but a good segment of the administrative staff was most likely semi- or fully illiterate. Notably, accounting tablets and other examples of 'mute' accounts, mostly from the palace area, favour numeracy over literacy also in the administrative milieu.

Challenging Perceptions

The variety of writing practices found in a well-preserved centre such as Balat is free from the scribe cliché and proves literacy unreliable in defining social identity. I find it interesting to notice that only three examples of writing palettes were found in Balat, from two governors' *mastabas*. Literacy is not necessarily a requirement for power – the élite are not elevated because they can write. The Fifth Dynasty royal hairdresser Ti (see *opposite, bottom*) could touch the head of the King, which made him very powerful and wealthy enough to afford an expensive tomb at Saqqara.

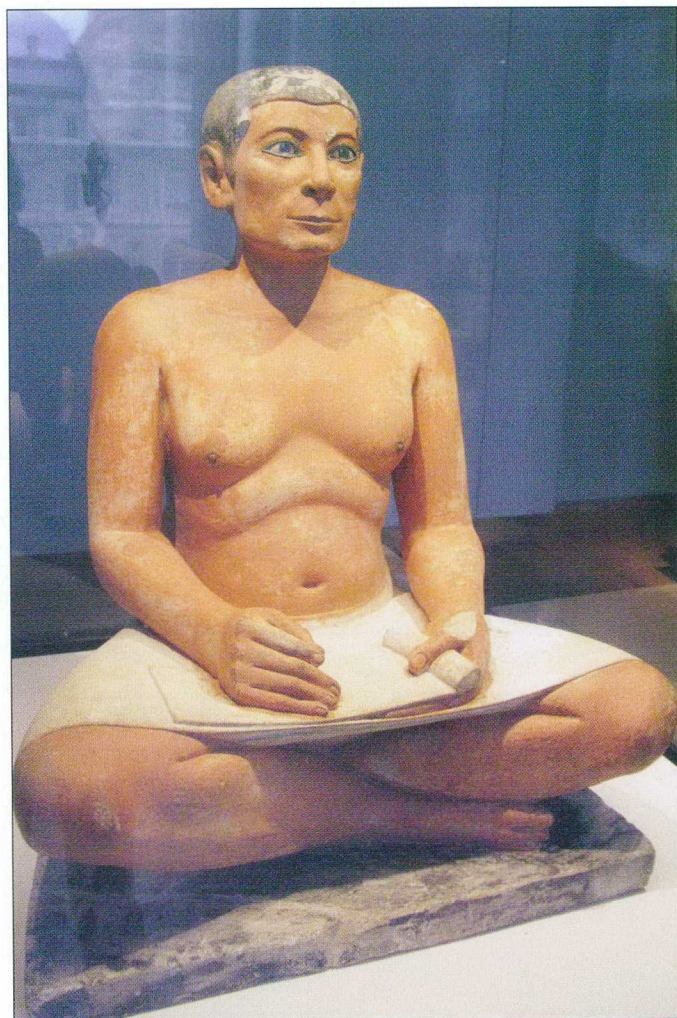
Further challenges can be encountered when testing our expectations in terms of writing, communication, and categorising an object. In the case of Old Kingdom statues, depictions of men are identified as 'scribal' whenever the individual is writing with a pen, reading a scroll (as on the right), or simply squatting, and yet they do not bear any titles to suggest the role of 'scribe'. Conversely, other statues of officials presumed to be literate and numerate because of their titles (such as 'Overseer of Granaries') are not shown in this way. This categorisation epitomises a restrictive view of ancient Egyptian society and its written forms of communication: writing practice is reduced to institutionalised exclusivism and literacy is held as a social identity marker. Rather, writing is likely to have performed a role, rather than signifying a distinct bureaucratic class.

It is therefore plausible to look at these representations of squatting men without implying literacy, class, and other *a priori* conceptual labels, enabling a new agenda for social studies of ancient Egypt.

Conclusions

Our Egyptological heritage greatly shapes our view of ancient Egypt. We need to be aware of how we recreate the past: how far our modern perception of ancient Egyptian writing practices determines the interpretation of iconography and the extent to which our own biases and the beliefs of the 'pseudo-Victorian élitist' intellectuals have been projected onto the ancient world. Archaeology does not support the existence of a scribal class – in fact, there seems to be no correspondence between literacy, its representation, officials' titles, and social ranking. Contrary to the conventional vision of a society based on literacy-driven exclusion, the development of the ancient Egyptian communication system, based on written marks, led not to social exclusion but to a huge variety of ways of cross-social communication.

Massimiliano Pinarello



A statue of a man sitting cross-legged with a scroll on his lap, from the Fourth or Fifth Dynasty, now in the Louvre. Statues like this have been described as "scribal", even though they do not bear any titles specifying a "scribe".

Photo: RBP

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Further Reading

- Pinarello, M. (2015) *An Archaeological Discussion of Writing Practice. Deconstruction of the ancient Egyptian scribe*. London: Golden House Publications.
- Haring, B. J. J. and KAPER, O. E. (eds.) (2009) *Pictograms or Pseudo Script? Non-Textual Identity Marks in Practical Use in Ancient Egypt and Elsewhere: proceedings of a conference in Leiden, 19-20 December 2006*. Leuven: Peeters;
- Pantalacci, L., 1996. "Fonctionnaires et analphabètes: sur quelques pratiques administratives observées à Balat." *Bulletin de l'Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale* 96, 359-367.

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