

REVIEW

Review of Mrs Naunakhte and Family: The Women of Ramesside Deir el-Medina by Koenraad Donker van Heel

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This is the third book of this type published by Dr Donker van Heel. Each claims to be able to access the ordinary people of ancient Egypt via textual sources. This work is based on the ostraca and papyri from the New Kingdom village of Deir el-Medina. Whilst this work would have benefitted from the incorporation of more non-textual sources, the reviewer concludes that overall this is a thoughtful, yet pragmatic interpretation of texts, leading to interesting discussions on sometimes little considered topics.

Mrs. Naunakhte and Family: The Women of Ramesside Deir al-Medina, by Koenraad Donker van Heel, Cairo; New York: The American University in Cairo Press, 264 pages (Hardbound), \$34.95, LE250, 2016, ISBN: 9789774167737.

Keywords: Egyptology; Deir el Medina; Hieratic; Papyrus; Social History; Archaeology; New Kingdom

This is the third book of this type published by Dr Donker van Heel (2012, 2014), each claiming to be able to access the ordinary people of ancient Egypt via textual sources. The content of the book is based on the ostraca and papyri from the New Kingdom village of Deir el-Medina, the home of the men who constructed the Valley of the Kings, and their families. As an Egyptologist who works on a site that is not textually rich, one is constantly reminded of the astounding finds at Deir el-Medina, that have led to the compilation of a Who's Who of residents (Davies 1999), and where individual scribes can be identified by

their handwriting. The depth of the sources is incredible. It makes sense that we should attempt to use these texts to try to enter the world of the ancient inhabitants and understand their everyday interests and concerns. However, we are dealing in large part with lists and legal documents, and a great deal of words that are difficult to translate because they are rare, legal terms, or village slang. Thus the documents are not altogether scintillating reading. The author is clearly an expert in hieratic, but one feels that does not always lead to the most relevant approach in the narrative. At several points the reader becomes enmeshed in a detailed and seemingly interminable discussion on the precise interpretation of a hieratic symbol, or translation of a difficult term, the outcome

of which barely seems to impact on the subject of the book. No doubt very interesting for the specialist, but perhaps a bit much for the general public, the audience the author claims to be angling at. Another difficulty is the abundance of Egyptian names, never easy at the best of times, but even more confusing when there are several people with the same name, plus nicknames. However, this is not the author's fault, and he does a good job of trying to explain who all these people are, and to separate one from another.

He is attempting to read obscure legal texts and conclude something meaningful about the lived lives of the people of Deir el-Medina, which is a high aim, but one that he often achieves. There are interesting and lively discussions on the subjects of marriage, sex, parties, divorce, and comments on the vernacular (I even learnt a swear word in ancient Egyptian). His approach is to try to understand these people and he thinks of them as living feeling flesh and blood, with desires and jealousies, vulgar and recognisable. However there are moments when modern sentiments creep in. Although all humans have a certain amount in common, our experience of living in the world is highly

historical, and we cannot assume that an ancient Egyptian's world-view is similar to ours. I would have enjoyed the incorporation of more non-textual sources, but overall this is a thoughtful, yet pragmatic interpretation of texts, leading to interesting discussions on sometimes little considered topics.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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How to cite this article: Fulcher, K 2017 Review of Mrs Naunakhte and Family: The Women of Ramesside Deir el-Medina by Koenraad Donker van Heel. *Papers from the Institute of Archaeology*, 27(1): Art. 14, pp. 1–2, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5334/pia-527>

Submitted: 12 April 2017

Accepted: 26 April 2017

Published: 02 June 2017

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