Scribes and Literacy in Ancient Egypt

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The Ancient Egyptian scribe statues (Pl. I)* are well known and impressive. They are the visible remains of Ancient Egyptian culture, in which writing and literacy was cherished, was learned, was practised and was handed over to future generations for thousands of years. Ancient Egypt could not exist, as it was and as it still is to us, without scribes and literacy. Scribes were the core and backbone of Ancient Egyptian civilization. They were the elite. All state officials of a certain rank, including priests and military officers, were able to read and write the fairly intricate script and were trained in the art of drawing up written documents and to consult and study them. On the other hand there is no evidence of scribes without an office in state or temple. Just as in modern Egypt, the government provides a job for anyone who has had a university education. Scribes were not outsiders in Egyptian culture. They were and had to be in a leading position. Not birth by itself, or the ability to fight and to command brought Egyptians to high positions, as was sometimes the case in other cultures. The ability to read and write, i.e. literacy, was the first prerequisite for a career in the Egyptian bureaucracy[1]:

One will do all you say
If you are versed in writings.
Study the writings, put them in your heart;
Then all your words will be effective.
Whatever office a scribe is given
He can consult the writings.

Of course it was the children of magistrates who were send to school and learned to read and write. But nonetheless it was written[2]:

The scribe is chosen for his ability (*ḏrt*);
His office has no children.

Scribal education was not always and everywhere restricted to children of officials. Enough examples can be given to demonstrate that not only the sons of magistrates became magistrates[3]. Sometimes in Egypt-

ian history it was even fashionable to boast about one's humble descent. It was possible to rise socially, but for becoming a magistrate a scribal education was necessary. Examples of self-taught men are extremely exceptional and doubtful[4].

The story of the Hebrew slave Joseph, who became the highest official under pharaoh, is rather unlikely from the Egyptian point of view. This is not because Joseph was a foreigner or because he had been a slave, but in so far that it is not mentioned that he was versed in the writings of Ancient Egypt. One may presume that he learned to read and write in the house of Potiphar or somewhere else, so that he could become an official in the Egyptian bureaucracy. The bible, however, is reluctant to take a positive attitude not only towards Egyptian religion - another remarkable omission in the story of Joseph - but also towards Egyptian script and literacy. The Egyptian maxims in the Book of Proverbs were not recognized as such. Even of Moses it is not related that he learned to read and write and became an Egyptian literate. Only later it is vaguely indicated that he was instructed in all the wisdom of the Egyptians (Acts 7:22). When christianity came to Egypt the bible was translated into the native Egyptian language, in its Coptic form, written with Greek letters, but not in the traditional scripts and language-systems, which had been used for millennia. Obviously these were not felt to be free from ideology, but on the contrary, as expressions of the typical Egyptian, heathen, world-view[5].

Although the scribes and their literacy were the core and backbone of Egyptian civilization, numerically they were only a small group in Egyptian society. According to acceptable calculations no more than ten thousand out of a population of one million could read and write in the Egypt of the third millennium B.C.[6]. In the course of Egyptian history there was a considerable growth in the population density and certainly also a concomitant growth of literates, but until Greco-Roman times their percentage was hardly more than one to hundred. For many observers life in Ancient Egypt may therefore resemble life in any illiterate or primitive culture. But it cannot be denied that there are important differences. Even a small minority of one percent of literates influences life in any culture, especially when they are in a leading position[7]. Words and sentences of a written text differ from the stream of oral information. A written text abstracts from the emotion and the "context" of life of the here and now. A writer summarizes and orders oral information in a special way and can correct his text. Even oral information, learned by heart,

ordered, and repeated in different situations differs from a written text. Visible information can be added to spoken words with a pictural script.

The act of writing itself is a training in logic. Writing and efficiency go hand in hand, or perhaps better, may go hand in hand more easily than speaking and efficiency. In the discussions between the Egyptian Wenamun and the prince of Byblos the latter acknowledges[8]:

> Indeed, Amun has founded all the lands. He founded them after having first founded the land of Egypt from which you have come. Thus efficiency came from it in order to reach the place where I am. Thus learning came from it in order to reach the place where I am.

The prince of Byblos thus specifies the cultural influence of Egypt on his country aptly as not only *sb3yt* i.e. 'learning' or 'written teaching'but also as *mnḫw* i.e.'efficiency'. At least the Egyptian scribe who drew up the vivid travel story of Wenamun, possibly Wenamun himself, who makes the prince say so. The Egyptian scribes were deeply conscious of the usefulness of schooling and literacy and its practical meaning for the wellfare of the land. Their pupils had to learn and write in school[9]:

> It is the scribe who assesses the taxes of Upper and Lower Egypt. It is he who receives the dues from them. It is he who accounts for them. All military troops are organized by him. It is he who conducts officials into the Presence (of pharaoh) and sets the pace for every man. It is he who commands the entire land. All business is under his control.

Indeed the scribes or state officials regulated and controlled the whole country. In literary works on the theme of social chaos, it is stated that in times of social upheavals, the rich became poor and the poor became rich and that also the privileged scribes suffered from the circumstances. But nowhere it is found that the illiterates actually replace the literates in their high positions. That was simply impossible. In the *Admonitions of Ipuwer* we read[10]:

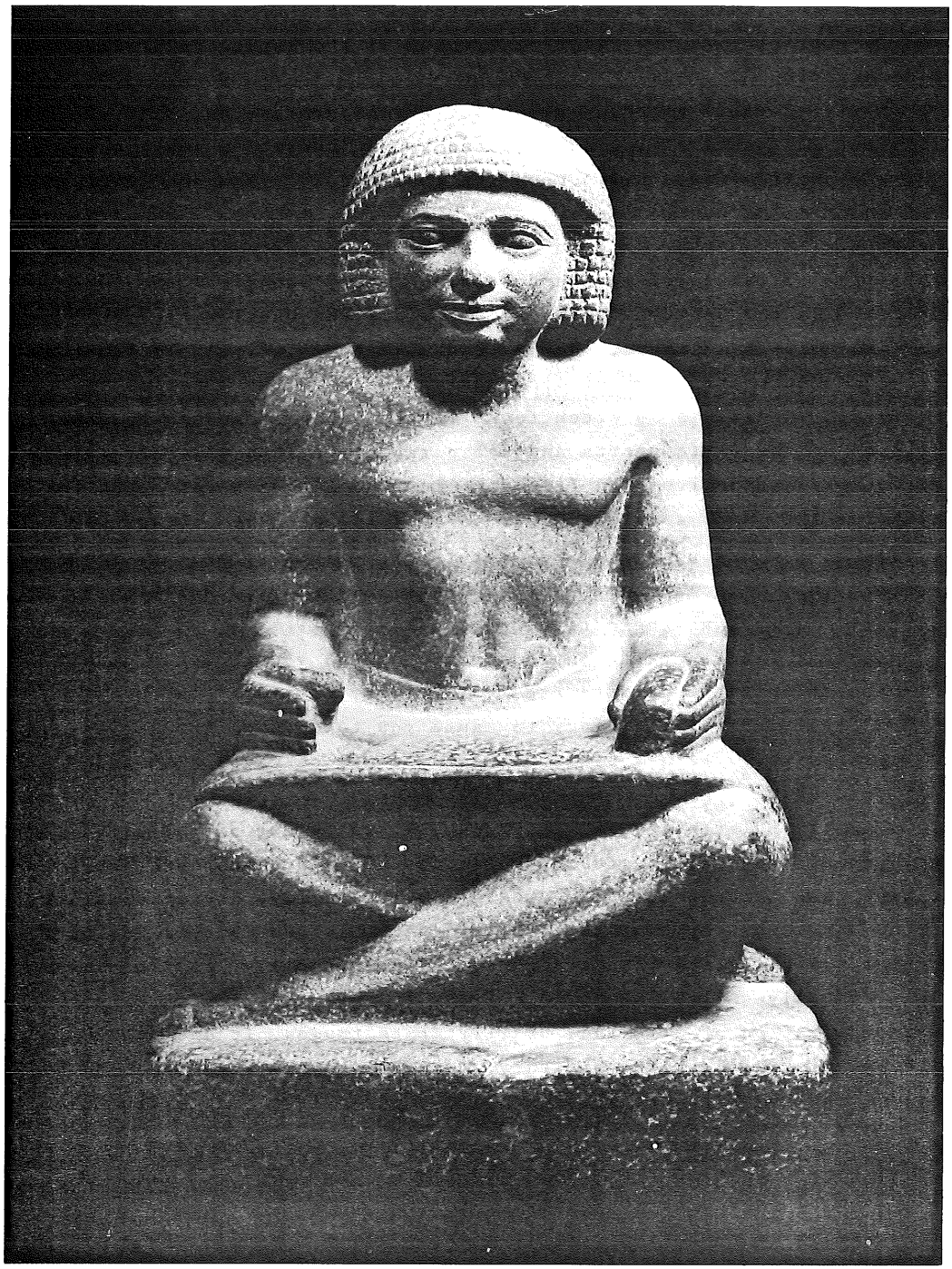
> Lo, the archives, its books are stolen,
> The secrets in it are laid bare.
> Lo, magic spells are divulged,
> Spells are made worthless through being repeated by people.
> Lo, offices are opened,
> Their records stolen,
> The serf becomes an owner of serfs.
> Lo, [scribes] are slain,

Their writings stolen,
Woe is me for the grief of this time!
Lo, the scribes of the land-register,
Their books are destroyed,
The grain of Egypt is "I-go-get-it".

What strikes us is not so much the complaint that books are stolen or destroyed, but that *ḥk3w*-spells, *šmw*-spells and *sḫnw*-spells are divulged and made worthless through being repeated by people. Obviously some people who could read had made public the contents of certain books. The literates should, however, according to this scribe, hold on to their monopoly. The mandarinate should maintain control[11].

One might think that the scribe statues of Ancient Egypt, especially those who squat so humbly (Pl. I), do not look as if they are 'commanding the entire land'. Indeed the squatting attitude of these scribes is to be explained as signifying their position as servants[12]. This was the *decorum*: scribes were servants of pharaoh. Pharaoh himself was never represented as a squatting scribe or in reading or writing position. He embodied the highest authority on earth. His status was divine.Yet, however humble the squatting scribe statue might seem to be, he represents the intellectual governement official, who regulates and organizes the life of the people in Egypt. Scribe statues represent not just 'clercs', but influential persons. One of the oldest known scribe statues represents Kawab, the son of Cheops[13]. Only higher officials were eternized as intellectual scribes by means of these statues placed in tombs and later in temples. However, scribes depicted in tomb-reliefs in the execution of their work of writing were lower, subordinate officials[14]. The higher officials who had scribe statues were depicted as fishing and fowling or as overseeing the work of others, including the work of writing, in the tomb reliefs. The work of writing was delegated by the higher officials to the clercs or lower officials. The scribe statue indicates the high status of literacy and learning of its owner, not that his daily work consisted of writing on papyrus in an office. The squatting scribe statue shows on the one hand the intellectual background of the owner, on the other hand it shows his subservient attitude to pharaoh and state. The idea of intellectual freedom seems to have been unknown.

In fact, it is somewhat perplexing that the concept freedom did not seem to exist in Ancient Egypt, according to many egyptologists. It is indeed difficult to find the equivalent of the word "freedom" in the Egyptian language[15]. The nearest we come to "freedom" might be the verb *wꜣḏn* 'travel freely', 'be unhindered', which can also be used as



an adverb[16]. It is interesting to note that this term is repeatedly used to characterize the relative freedom of the scribe in praises of his profession[17]:

> Apply yourself to being a scribe, a fine profession, that is your destination. You call to one and a thousand answer you. You stride freely (*wstn.tj*) upon the road and do not become like an ox to be handed over.

The life of the scribe is free and rich in comparison with the miserable life of the soldier. The soldier has many superiors who 'are after him like a donkey'. Moreover there are the enemies, surrounding him with arrows. In short, 'He is dead whilst yet alive'. It might be that this recurring theme of long enumerations of the miseries of the soldier's life is so often found in schoolbooks because to some children of the elite sports and the perspective of a military career seemed more attractive than literacy. In school they were taught to write but they were also exercised already in 'all the arts of war'[18]. An effective means of social advance for Egyptians as well as foreigners was the army. This may have sharpened scribal polemics against the military[19], for, as the scribe teaches his pupils[20]:

> Behold, I am teaching you and making sound your body to enable you to hold the palette freely (*m wstn*), to cause you to become a trusty one of the king, to cause you to open up treasuries and granaries... Be a scribe, so that you may be saved from being a soldier.

"To hold the palette freely" and "to be a trusty one of the king" are juxtaposed. That intellectual freedom can be a problem does not seem to have been perceived, or is smoothed over. Anyway, there are traces of the consciousness that the squatting scribe, who is subservient to pharaoh, is more free than others in Egyptian society. Another schoolbook, commonly called *The Satire of the Trades*, contains a derisive characterization of all kinds of illiterate trades. It does not contain polemics against the military, because it was written before the time of the New Kingdom, which was the imperialistic and militaristic period of Egyptian history[21]:

> There is nothing better than books.
> It is like a boat on water.
> .....
> See, there is no profession without a boss,
> Except for the scribe; he is the boss.
> Hence if you know writing,
> It will do better for you
> Than those professions I have set before you

Each more wretched than the other.
A peasant is not called a man,
Beware of it!

Here the officially subservient scribe shows that he feels himself to be the boss. This indicates that a certain way of indulging in the feelings of freedom may be equivalent to a feeling of superiority. If indeed the satirical exaggeration in this text were to be taken seriously, as has been done in recent research[22], then only the literate considers himself to be a real man. Such a narrow conception of what man is reminds us of Herodot[23], who tells that Egyptian priests showed to Hecataeus of Abdera 345 statues on his visit to the temple in Thebes. Each statue represented a *piroomis* son of a *piroomis*. In this word one can find an Egyptian word for man (*p3 rmṯ*), and Herodot adds that this Egyptian word means *kaloskagathos*.

That pharaoh was never represented in scribal position does not imply that he was illiterate[24]. The group of literate higher state officials, and the group next to these - the clercs - were not subjected to illiterate royalty. Princes learned to read and write together with children of high officials. A future king may be exhorted to surpass his ancestors[25]:

Surpass your fathers, your ancestors,
.....
See, their words endure in books,
Open, read them, surpass their knowledge,
He who is taught becomes skilled.

He is given the advice:

Do not kill a man whose virtues you know,
With whom you once chanted the writings.

The 'chanting' of the writings happened presumably at school when the texts to be written had also to be learned by heart.
A scene in the great temple of Abydos[26] shows us prince Ramses, the later king Ramses II, beside his father King Sethos I; the prince is acting as a *sem* priest, and holding a partly unrolled papyrus in his hand. On the wall there is a list of 76 names of kings from Menes down to Sethos himself, a conspectus of royalty over about 1800 years. Prince Ramses is described as 'reading out praises'. The king is in ritual attitude with his right hand raised and an incensor in his left hand. He is not reading himself, not because he cannot do so but because it is proper that the reading is done for him. The king should know the ritual texts by heart, but one can imagine that the recitation of an unusual ritual text, such as this long list with royal names to be

recited in the correct order, required some help. It is possible to translate the description of the activity of prince Ramses in a more neutral way as 'reciting praises' (*nṯs ḥknw*), but since he is holding the papyrus up to his face, he is unmistakably reading. So we must conclude that, according to iconographical rules, a prince may be depicted as reading, but not so the king himself.

Especially in representational art, the king is considered as a god. Egyptian gods are illiterate or better preliterate. The famous exceptions are Seshat, mistress of writing, and Thoth, the lord of the god's words (*mdw nṯr*). But on the whole Egyptian gods do not write or consult books. They do not need scribal education and leaning; they know. They are superhuman beings also in comparison with the narrow conception of humanity of the literate elite of the Egyptian people. Their pronouncements, their divine words, are more efficient and concise, more literate than written words. In the polytheistic religion of Ancient Egypt the gods do not write down pronouncements themselves, as did the God of Israel (Exodus 31:18). Egyptian gods delegate the work of writing to their special scribe Thoth, just as high Egyptian officials delegate the scribal work to their clercs. It goes without saying that one should not underestimate the work of the clerc of the gods. A pharaoh may be proud to act as such in the hereafter[27]:

> I am the scribe of the god's book, who says what is and brings into being what is not.

Nevertheless,there is some textual evidence for the king reading and writing himself, not only while he is still a youthful prince, but also later while he is in his royal office and still on earth. Sometimes officials, referring to letters they received from the king, add with pride that these were written by the king with his own fingers[28]. Such an expression sounds exaggerated, but it need not be so. An official would not lightly record such a gesture, which seems not to be in accordance with *decorum*, if it were completely untrue. Just as the king is a better warrior on the battlefield than his army, and a better strategist in the council of war than his generals, according to the *decorum*, so he may also surpass the scribes in research in the library. Such royal research is described as something of a *veni, vidi, vici*, as it should be[29].

> Then his majesty spoke to the nobles and the companions who are in his following, to the real scribes of the hieroglyphs (*mdw nṯr*), and the masters of all secrets: "My heart has desired to see the oldest writings (*sšw p3wt tpt*) concerning Atum. Open for me for a great investigation that I learn to know how god looks like (*nṯr m ḳm3f*)....." Then these companions said:"May happen what

your *ka* commands. May your majesty go to the house of books and may your majesty see every hieroglyph." Then his majesty went to the house of books and his majesty spread out the bookrolls together with these courtiers. Then his majesty found bookrolls of the temple of Osiris...

Now it was his majesty himself who has [found] these bookrolls. A scribe whosoever in the service of his majesty would never have found it!

The vexing question behind this text is: Who is the oldest and thus the most important god in Egypt? Tradition of long standing, admittedly even adhered to by pharaoh (see beginning of the quoted text), would say that it is Atum of Heliopolis. But priests in several towns in Egypt claimed that it was the local god of their temple, and so did the priests of the temple of Osiris in Abydos, where this text originated. But how to make acceptable the primacy of Osiris? The argument is a literary one: The oldest books in the royal library are not about Atum, but about Osiris. And to cut short a lengthy discussion in literary criticism, they used the authority of pharaoh. It is pharaoh himself who has discovered this during a special search in the library. The *rabies theologorum* for once neglected the *decorum* that pharaoh does not read books.

Even more striking is the introduction to the so-called *Prophecies of Neferti*. The famous king Snefru once wished to hear 'perfect words'. Then Neferti,'a scribe excellent with his fingers', is brought in[30]:

His majesty said: "Come, Neferti, my friend, speak to me some perfect words, choice phrases, at the hearing of which my majesty may be entertained!" Said the lector-priest Neferti: "Of what has happened or of what will happen, O king, my lord?" (The king expresses his preference to hear more about the future and then the text goes on:) He stretched out his hand to a box of writing-equipment, took scroll and palette and began to put into writing the words of the lector-priest, that wise man of the East...

This text gives us what official representational art can not give: a writing pharaoh. The evidence, however, is not totally unequivocal. The official roles seem to be deliberately reversed here. A scribe is speaking and a king is writing! More examples, precisely about king Snefru, could be given in which he does what is not done by a pharaoh according to his divine status[31]. It is understandable that Egyptians liked those stories in which pharaoh appears out of his official role, and shows himself to be a human being, in this case someone who has literary interests and himself writes down 'perfect words' spoken by a literate. Although the *decorum* stressed the difference between the

sacred king and the literary elite, it is evident that the Egyptians might imagine their pharaoh also as a human and literate being. In his youth, before becoming a pharaoh, he was taught to read and write and was instructed in literacy, and during kingship he may have practised it.

So the elite of the Egyptians, including pharaoh, was versed in literacy. Egypt was governed by intellectuals. The most famous culture heroes of Ancient Egypt are not the great warriors or commanders, but literates. The scribes Imhotep and Amenhotep, son of Hapu, were venerated as divine intermediaries[32]. Pharaoh and the higher officials of Ancient Egypt, though versed in literacy in their youth, did not spend all their active life reading and writing. Strictly speaking, the squatting scribe statue of Leiden is not reading nor writing. He has an intellectual attitude of listening attentively to what is coming to him from outside or from inside. This is the inner strength of the statue. A recurrent theme in Egyptian schoolbooks and wisdom literature - too many examples exist to enumerate here - is precisely listening. The wise king Solomon, during whose reign Egyptian influences were probably stronger than ever in Israel, asked from his God for "a hearing heart (1 Kings 3:9)." More than a thousand years before Solomon the connection between heart, hearing and wisdom was already made in Egypt[33]:

> He who hears is beloved of god;
> He whom god hates does not hear.
> The heart makes of its owner a hearer or non-hearer.
> Man's heart is his life-prosperity-health.
> The hearer is one who hears what is said;
> He who loves to hear is one who does what is said.

It would seem appropriate at the end of this contribution to observe this "hearing heart" not only in the statue of an Egyptian scribe. It could be found in a living person, who might be sitting at the head of the table, drinking a cup of coffee,smoking a cigar and enjoying the good things of life. May he live, prosper and be healthy!

Notes

* National Museum of Antiquities, Leiden. Inv.nr. AST 31. Grey granite. Height 32 cm.; ± 2400 B.C.

1) *Instructions of Ani*; see M. Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature* (= *AEL*) vol. 2, Berkely-Los Angeles-London, 1976, p. 140.
2) See note 1; *ḏrt* literally means "hand".
3) P. Vernus, "Quelques exemples du type du parvenu dans l'Egypte ancienne" in *Bulletin de la Société Française d'Egyptologie* vol. 59, 1970, pp. 31-45; H. Brunner, *Altägyptische Erziehung*, Wiesbaden 1957, p. 42.
4) Vernus, *op. cit.*, p. 38.
5) H. te Velde, "Egyptian hieroglyphs as signs, symbols and gods" in *Visible Religion* vol. 4, 1986 (in the press).
6) J. Baines - C.J. Eyre, "Four notes on literacy" in *Göttinger Miszellen*, vol. 61, 1983, pp. 65-96.
7) J. Goody, *The Domestication of the Savage Mind*, Cambridge 1977; J. Goody - I. Watt, "The consequences of literacy" in *Literacy in Traditional Societies*, ed. J. Goody, Cambridge 1968, pp. 27-69.
8) *The Report of Wenamun* 2, 20-22, cf. Lichtheim, *AEL* vol. 2, p. 227.
9) *Pap. Chester Beatty* IV 4, 1-3; cf. A.H. Gardiner, *Hieratic Papyri in the British Museum. Third series*, London 1935, Pl. XIX, Text volume p. 41.
10) *The Admonitions of Ipuwer, Pap. Leiden* I 344, 6, 5-8; cf. Lichtheim, *AEL* vol. 1, p. 155.
11) A fascinating account of the problems of divulging written knowledge is given by U. Eco in a novel situated in the European medieval history: *The Name of the Rose*.
12) M. Eaton-Kraus, *The Representations of Statuary in Private Tombs of the Old Kingdom*, Wiesbaden 1984, p. 20.
13) W. Stevenson Smith, *A history of Egyptian sculpture and painting in the Old Kingdom* , Boston 1949, p. 31; W.K. Simpson, *The mastaba of Kawab, Khakhufu* vols 1 and 2, Boston 1978, p. 7 and fig. 17.
14) J. Baines, "Literacy and Ancient Egyptian society" in *Man* vol. 18, 1983, p. 580.
15) S. Morenz, *Ägyptische Religion*, Stuttgart 1960, p. 144, n. 1.
16) A. Theodorides, "Freiheit" in *Lexikon der Ägyptologie*, vol. 2, 1977, pp. 297-304.
17) *Pap. Lansing* 8, 1-2; cf. R.A. Caminos, *Late-Egyptian miscellanies*, London 1954, p. 396.
18) *Truth and Falsehood* 5, 1; cf. Lichtheim, *AEL* vol. 2, p. 212.
19) J. Baines, *op. cit.*, p. 595 n. 34.
20) *Pap. Lansing* 8, 8-9; cf. R.A. Caminos, *op. cit.*, pp. 400-402.
21) *Satire of Trades;* cf. Lichtheim, *AEL* vol. 1, pp. 185, 189-190.
22) W. Helck, *Die Lehre des Dw3-Ḫtjj*, Wiesbaden 1970, pp. 161-162.
23) Herodot, *Histories*, Book II, 143.
24) The material on kings and literacy is gathered by J. Baines - C. Eyre in *op. cit.*, pp. 77-81.
25) M. Lichtheim, *AEL* vol. 1, pp. 99, 100-101, and W. Helck, *Die Lehre für König Merikare*, Wiesbaden 1977, pp. 19, 29.
26) A. Mariette, *Abydos*, Paris 1869, pl. 43; K.A. Kitchen, *Ramesside Inscriptions*, vol. 1, Oxford 1975, pp. 177-179, cf. also T.G.H. James, *Pharaoh's people*, London-Sydney-Toronto 1984, p. 132.
27) *Pyramid-text 1146c*; R.O. Faulkner, *The Ancient Egyptian Pyramid-texts*, Oxford 1969, p. 186.
28) K. Sethe, *Urkunden des Alten Reiches*, Leipzig 1933, p. 60; cf. A. Roccati, *La littérature historique sous l'Ancien Empire Egyptien*, Paris 1982, p. 124; W. Helck, "Eine Stele des Vizekönigs Wśr-śt.t" in *JNES* vol. 14, 1955, pp. 23, 25.
29) W. Helck, *Historisch-biographische Texte der 2. Zwischenzeit und neue Texte der 18. Dynastie*, Wiesbaden 1975, pp. 22, 25; cf. G.Roeder, *Mythen und Legenden um Ägyptische Gottheiten und Pharaonen*, Zürich 1960, pp. 286, 290.

30) W. Helck, *Die Prophezeiung des Nfr.tj*, Wiesbaden 1970; cf. Lichtheim, *AEL* vol. 1, p. 140.
31) G. Posener, *Littérature et politique dans l'Egypte de la XIIe dynastie*, Paris 1956, pp. 31-34.
32) D. Wildung, *Imhotep und Amenhotep. Gottwerdung im Alten Ägypten*, München-Berlin 1977.
33) *The Instruction of Ptahhotep* 545ff.; cf. Lichtheim, *AEL* vol. 1, p. 74; H. Brunner, "Das hörende Herz" in *ThLZ* vol. 79, 1954, pp. 697-700.