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Review of the thesis “Egyptian Historical Thought: the Visitors’ Graffiti of the New Kingdom at Saqqara and Abusir as a case study” by Hana Navrátilová.

Hana Navrátilová’s dissertation is devoted to the New Kingdom visitors’ graffiti in the Memphite area and conceived as a case study for Egyptian historical thought. While the material she relies on is, therefore, clearly defined as a corpus, the author’s interests are much broader, aiming at an analysis of the Egyptian “sense of history” as a whole. As such, the author must have known from the very beginning that her research would generate in her audience mixed reactions. On the one hand, material-driven specialists would look for empiric thoroughness: have all the witnesses been carefully analyzed, transcribed, transliterated, and translated? Has the material been treated, in other words, with encyclopaedic care? On the other hand, Egyptologists interested in the history of ideas would look in her book for new perspectives on the Egyptians’ use of their own past: do these graffiti mirror a specific approach to history? How is this picture distinguished from more explicit contemporary sources? Does the corpus allow cultural and historical generalizations at all?

In judging the results, the reader of this dissertation should therefore remain aware of the fundamental dichotomy inherent in Mr. Navrátilová’s choice of topic and appreciate the fact that, presumably, the corpus turned out to be less rewarding than the author had expected. This is how I would explain the intellectual fracture the reader detects between the first three chapters, which include a very general excursus on the schooling of scribes, and the portion of



the dissertation specifically dedicated to the analysis of the corpus. While the former chapters are clearly guided by the hermeneutic interest to determine fragments of an Egyptian sense of history, the latter portion offers a more “technical” presentation of the graffiti in their historical and geographic context. The intellectual bridge between the two portions is probably to be recognized in the final section of the chapter “Interpretations” (pp. 158-163), which can be read as an introduction to the very insightful “Conclusions” at the end of the volume (pp. 165-171): the particular fortune of visitors’ graffiti during Dyn. 18 has to be understood within the emerging “sense of history” in the wake of the nationalistic restoration after the Hyksos domination. Similarly, Dyn. 19 graffiti, which display an increased awareness of the religious qualities of royal worship, can be interpreted as a form of personal piety applied to individual figures of the past at the crossroads of human and divine nature. This combination of historical and religious motivations is most likely the meaning conveyed by the scheme on p. 161, which in future versions of the text might be made more perspicuous.

The conclusions summarize in a clear manner the complex interface between the authors of the graffiti and their social and ideological background: as members of the literate elite, they were at the same time the first addressees of the official approach to history, with its peculiar mixture of preservation of the past and distinction of individual achievements. The reader with a keen interest in historical models would have wished to see a more detailed study of the differences between Dyn. 18 and 19, if the author – as her references seem to suggest – agrees with the hypothesis that some figures of the latter dynasty (Khaemwaset is the first to come to mind) display a distinct “classical”, restorative view unexplored in earlier times.

The catalogue is detailed, if uneven. In future versions, it might be useful to opt for a more uniform type of presentation, in which all witnesses are equally rendered (ideally) in the hieratic original, (at least) in hieroglyphic transcription, and then transliterated and translated. In its present form, the items in the catalogue seem to derive directly from the excellent Graffiti Database Project conveniently described in pp. 87-94 of the main text, but do not conform to the “best practice” described in it. The author should strive for coherence between these two parts and in general (including the transliterations).

In its present form, Hana Navrátilová's dissertation offers a very solid backbone for a thorough study of the visitors' graffiti and ties this bulk of material into a broader reading of conceptions of history in general, and particularly in Ancient Egypt. What needs to be improved from a general point of view is the internal dialogue between the sections devoted to historiography and the discussion of the material evidence; from the standpoint of formal presentation, the reader may recommend – apart from editorial interventions such as correcting the frequent typing mistakes, unifying bibliographical entries and opting for homogeneous transliterations – completing the catalogue with the witnesses still left unexplored and establishing a more direct linkage between the latter and the discussion in the main text.



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Basel, September 1, 2006