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Necropolis journal: daily records of events in an ancient Egyptian artisans' community

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2. Research context

Since the existing literature provides extensive background details and general information²⁷, only a brief introduction to the village of Deir el-Medina will be included in the present work.

2.1 The village

The village of Deir el-Medina was created *ex nihilo* at the beginning of the 18th Dynasty to house the members of the community of craftsmen who built the tombs for the kings, for their spouses and children and for the most important nobles of the New Kingdom.

The community of workmen, or “gang”, seems to have been established at the site around the beginning of the 18th Dynasty, at least by the reign of Thutmose I, since mudbricks from the enclosure wall of the village are stamped with the name of this Pharaoh and could indicate that the earliest settlement was created under this ruler²⁸. The fact that the villagers held Amenhotep I and his mother Queen Ahmose Nefertari in high esteem over many generations, possibly as patrons of the Tomb²⁹, seen for many years as evidence that this ruler had founded the village, it is now considered highly uncertain³⁰.

The 18th Dynasty occupation of the site is not well documented and until the reign of Horemheb, information about the history of the village and its inhabitants is lacking due to the scarcity of the available records³¹.

It is still an open matter if the site was abandoned, at least partially, during the Amarna interlude, when Amenophis IV (Akhenaton) moved his royal residence and had his tomb prepared at Tell el-Amarna. Most of the community was believed to have moved with him to the new capital³². Workmen’s marks at Amarna, however, “do not offer any hard evidence that allows for an identification of the workmen at Amarna with the Theban necropolis workmen of the end of the 18th Dynasty or from the early 19th Dynasty”³³. At

²⁷ For a general bibliography about the village see *A Systematic Bibliography on Deir el-Medina* online at <http://dmd.wepwawet.nl/> under *General Information* and *The Village*.

²⁸ Bonnet-Valbelle 1975, 431-432 (with note 2 referring to Bruyère Fouilles 1934-1935, 24-26) and Pl. LXVI.

²⁹ See i.a. Gitton 1975.

³⁰ Valbelle 1985, 2 and n. 1.

³¹ We lack hieratic documentary texts, nonetheless we have ostraca with marks dated to this period, see Soliman, D. M. unpublished PhD Thesis 2016, chapter 1, 4.1.

³² See Müller 2014, 156-168.

³³ Soliman, D. M. unpublished PhD Thesis 2016, 54.

the very end of the 18th Dynasty, during year 7 of the reign of Horemheb, the royal work gang was installed in western Thebes. The community at Deir el-Medina thrived during the 19th and 20th Dynasties.

At the end of the 20th Dynasty, the situation in western Thebes was insecure. Recurring incursions by raiding Libyans³⁴, followed by civil war, in combination with irregular and insufficient payments, may have forced the inhabitants of the village to gradually and partially leave the site of Deir el-Medina. It seems probable that the villagers moved to within the mighty walls of the mortuary temple of Ramesses III at nearby Medinet Habu³⁵. Here they stayed until the beginning of the 21st Dynasty, when the abandonment of the Theban Necropolis as burial place for sovereigns made it pointless to maintain the community of craftsmen³⁶.

The tomb of Ramesses XI was the last royal tomb to be built in the Valley of the Kings. The history of the community of Deir el-Medina developed thus in parallel with the history of the monarchy of the New Kingdom, whose fate it shared.

2.2 The workmen of Deir el-Medina³⁷

The modern name of the workmen's settlement, Deir el-Medina (in Arabic دير المدينة "the monastery of the town"), originally referred to one of the late antique monastic settlements between Medinet Habu and Deir el-Bahari. In present-day Egyptology, Deir

³⁴ For a general overview see Haring 1993.

³⁵ The date of the abandonment of the village is uncertain and scholars have voiced different opinions on the matter. Valbelle (1985) postulates that during year 16 or 17 of Ramesses IX, the inhabitants are still living in Deir el-Medina, but she is not able to give an exact date for the abandonment of the village ("Il n'est pas très aisé de situer avec précision la période d'abandon du village"). Taylor (1995) states that "...in the reign of Ramesses XI the workmen left their village and moved to...Medinet Habu" while McDowell (1999) suggests that the date of the move probably "fell late in the reign of Ramesses X or in the first few years of his successor". Peden (2000, 288) states that "...perhaps early in the rule of Ramesses IX, and certainly by the first decade of Ramesses XI, the crew and their officers were moved from Deir el-Medina and resettled behind the high walls of Medinet Habu", and Demarée (2016) confirms the uncertainty of the date for the abandonment of the village: "The final stage of the history of the workmen of Deir el-Medina is still shrouded in mystery. Part of the community may have left their houses in the village at the end of the Twentieth Dynasty to go live somewhere near the temple of Ramesses III at Medinet Habu. Whether this move had anything to do with incursions of Libyans, as has often been asserted, still lacks unequivocal proof".

³⁶ Evidence that the workmen lived inside Medinet Habu could be the fact that the *htm* as place of delivery of goods is no longer mentioned in the documentation after Ramesses IX, nor the regular series of names of men on watch (*wrš*) who had been based there. Furthermore, the water carriers, who used to bring water regularly to the village, no longer appear as for example in Tur. Cat 2018 dated to Ramesses XI. It is likely that the provisions were already inside the temple and that they were distributed to the workmen there. Peden (2000, 288-289) relates the marked decline in graffiti in the Theban Mountain, other than the protected Valley of the Kings, to the move of the community of Deir el-Medina into Medinet Habu.

³⁷ See Černý 1973, Chapter X.

el-Medina has become a brand name for studies about the village inhabited by the workmen and their families throughout most of the New Kingdom. This group of men engaged in the work on the king's tomb was called "the gang of the Tomb/Necropolis"³⁸. The "gang", which was also the word used for a ship's crew (*ist*), was divided into two halves: a "right side" and a "left side". A foreman was in charge of each side, "great one of the crew", and he was assisted by a "deputy". Probably each side worked on a different zone of the tomb that was first excavated in the rock and then decorated and completed before the funerals could take place. The administrative work of each "side" was under the responsibility of a scribe (or even two scribes), who had to keep records of the activities and wages of the gang possibly for the benefit of higher authorities and other departments of the administration³⁹. For an attestation of more than one scribe at work, an example is P. Turin 1898 + P. Turin 1926 + P. Turin 1937 + P. Turin 2094 (dated to Ramesses X⁴⁰), which is clearly written by two different hands. The first six lines in column II are indeed in a different handwriting than the rest of the text (visible from a photo and clear especially from the difference in noting month 2 of *šmw*). Moreover, P. Turin 2018 (dated to Ramesses X), containing accounts from regnal years 8-10 of the delivery of grain, includes the names of the two Necropolis scribes who recorded the distribution among the right and left sides of the gang: the right side under scribe Pawero and the left side under scribe Dhutmose⁴¹. Further, in Papyrus Chester Beatty III, verso 4, 12, a copy of a letter written by scribe *Qn-hr-hps=f* to the vizier *P3-Nhs.y* about construction work on the royal tomb, rations and other matters, it is said "...write to the two scribes of the Tomb..." (*h3b n p3 sš 2 n p3 Hr*⁴²).

The average number of recorded workmen varies from around 30 to 60 men (see Davies 2017), the highest number of workmen noted being 120 during the reign of Ramesses IV (P. Turin 1891), but this should be understood to be an exceptional situation.

Although the workmen were direct employees of the state and the king was the nominal head of the institution, his active involvement in Tomb matters and in the administration of tomb work was very limited. Still, there was a strong link between the Tomb and the king. In theory, the king was the nominal superior of the institution, the workmen's source of employment and income, as the "gang" worked on his tomb. In reality, however, responsibility for the Tomb laid with the vizier of Upper Egypt who

³⁸ Denoting the central administrative unit at Deir el-Medina. See also Introduction p. 18.

³⁹ Häggman 2002, 156-158.

⁴⁰ KRI VI, 687-699, 850 and 851.

⁴¹ KRI VI, 852, 1 and 853, 10.

⁴² KRI IV, 87, 6.

resided in Thebes⁴³. The vizier was responsible for the supplies and well-being of the community, and he instructed the gang on the work to be done and periodically checked the progress (see note 201 for examples of documents with records of his visits or arrival of letters with instructions to the gang).

2.3 Necropolis journal and writing material⁴⁴

The documents called Necropolis journals are generally records, written on ostraca or papyri, concerning the work carried out by the Deir el-Medina community of workmen: the group of men employed in the construction of royal tombs in the Valleys of the Kings and Queens throughout most of the New Kingdom. Clearly it was important in Deir el-Medina to list incoming food, tools and other goods, as well as to record who was absent from work on a daily basis and make note of all events related to village life.

In the notes, written by the scribe in hieratic, we indeed find information about the workers' attendance, matters regarding rations and the collective administration of the crew, as well as private problems concerning individual crew members. The scribe would also note, sometimes in great detail, the circumstances of the work carried out; lists, not only of the workmen but also of other staff; the regular supply of the materials used and the huge deliveries of food; the internal perturbations (strikes, demonstrations, trials...); or the visits or incursions of Meshwesh (*Mšwš*) and Libu (*Rbw*). The documents also keep record of the great events which were announced to the community, such as the death of the king, change of reigns and local festivals. The records are therefore of extreme importance as they provide detailed information about the life of the village and its inhabitants during the Ramesside period.

Despite the abundance of documentary texts from the Deir el-Medina community, many matters about administrative practices remain unsolved. First of all the purpose of the records and the reason for an uneven chronological distribution of ostraca and papyri. From the beginning of the 19th until the end of the 20th Dynasties, the period when journals were produced, a change in writing material seems to occur⁴⁵.

⁴³ From year 29 of Ramesses III, the vizier becomes vizier of both parts of the country (see O. Berlin P 10633).

⁴⁴ For a general overview on papyrus, its manufacture, dimensions, use, and evolution in time see Černý 1985. For remarks about changes in writing style, handwritings within a single document and color changes in a piece of papyrus, see Frandsen 1991, 22 and 48-49 as an example.

⁴⁵ At least this is what we can conclude from the corpus of material we have found so far (see fig. 43-44).

The preserved journal fragments from the 19th Dynasty are almost exclusively written on ostraca⁴⁶. Over the course of the 20th Dynasty, however, papyrus becomes the primary writing material for this type of note and the number of accounts written on ostraca decreases⁴⁷. Then, with the shift from ostraca to papyri, the earlier brief and succinct accounts are partly replaced by more elaborate lists, covering a wider range of subjects, since papyrus provided more space to be used for one document.

Whether the great number of ostraca of earlier periods represent actual official documents or merely temporary drafts to store information, which would then be transferred to a more presentable form onto papyrus, is still debated⁴⁸. References to the same event in more than one document have been found and point to the existence of preliminary notes and drafts, probably intended for use as a basis for journal texts⁴⁹. The matter is still open to debate because if it is accepted that drafts on ostraca were later copied onto papyrus, the question remains as to why so few papyri are preserved from the 19th and early 20th Dynasties and why there are no drafts or temporary notes from later times on ostraca⁵⁰.

⁴⁶ With the exception of few papyri: P. Berlin 23300 and 23301, P. Ashmolean Museum 1960.1283, P. Greg P.UC 34336, P. DM 32 (three very small fragments of an absence list) certainly belonging to the 19th Dynasty (in Černý 1986, pl. 22) and small fragments in Berlin strikingly similar to P. DM 32 and probably belonging to it (P. Berlin P. 14485 A-D + 14449 C+G; I and 14448, in Fischer-Elfert 2000, 101-107, pl. XX-XXII).

⁴⁷ According to Häggman 2002, 19, the choice of material may have been affected by the new location of the administrative centre of the temple of Medinet Habu, where papyrus may have been more readily available and where the immediate availability of limestone was instead more limited; nonetheless, we have to consider that maybe there were more papyri earlier, which are now lost or reused.

⁴⁸ Some ostraca were clearly discarded, some were possibly used as drafts (e.g. O. DM 40 and O. DM 41 and here 7.3 for examples of Necropolis journals that cover the same date and could possibly be considered as drafts), and some were kept and reused (e.g.: O. Cairo 25504 years 7 and 8 under Merenptah, O. Turin N. 57072 records notes from three different years, 28, 29 and 30 of Ramesses III), so perhaps one should not consider every ostrakon as a draft, and consider instead a number of applications for the ostrakon, that of having served as a draft of a main copy being only one of these.

For the possibility of the existence of archives of ostraca, see Allam 1968, 124-128 and here note 53. For archives in ancient Egypt, see Hagen-Soliman 2018. For a general view see Donker van Heel-Haring 2003 and further below p. 28.

⁴⁹ See here 190-195 for the examples: O. Turin 57031 and O. Glasgow D.1925.67; O. Cairo 25530, O. IFAO 1255 + O. Varille 39, Turin Cat. 1880 and O. Brussel E.7359; O. DM 47 and O. Berlin P 12641+12628; Papyrus Turin 1949+1946 and Ostrakon DM 39+174.

⁵⁰ According to Černý (1985, 23), the ostraca of the Ramesside period were used as substitutes for papyrus (and “commonly used for texts of ephemeral importance”) since it (papyrus) was a “relatively expensive material”. In reality, it was simply a matter of how and where to get it. The price of papyrus, as we understand from business transaction texts, is indeed quite low (see Janssen 1975, 447-448). Furthermore, Eyre (1980a, 5 and 2013, 26) tells us that in Ramesside time, the cost of a papyrus was about two *deben* (after P. Turin 2008+2016 verso II, 1), which, when compared to other commodities, is in fact not expensive. The problem was thus not the price, but possibly its availability, since we lack clear information on how papyrus was supplied or acquired.

A connected problematic topic concerns the storage of the documentation. If the material was produced to be used as draft, consulted or copied, indeed, we expect it to be stored somewhere.

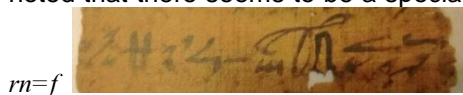
Allam states that there were archives of ostraca at Deir el-Medina⁵¹. For some ostraca, it is indeed clear that they were reused even after several years to write down new notes⁵². It may therefore be assumed, according to Allam, that ostraca were kept in archives to be used again and not discarded as drafts⁵³. According to Allam, ostraca were therefore not drafts for official texts on papyri, they simply had other purposes than journals written on papyri⁵⁴.

However, it must be noted that this difference on the spatial and chronological distribution of documentary ostraca and papyri could also be due to the different conditions required for finding and preserving the documents. Therefore, the absence or presence either of ostraca or papyri could also be ascribed exclusively to these conditions⁵⁵. The state of preservation, especially of papyrus, indeed, could be the main reason of its absence. Papyrus is a very fragile material, and even if the dry climate of the Theban necropolis can help to preserve it, much of it is now unfortunately lost. If we add the fact that this material was often reused, i.e. papyri were washed off and recycled, and at least 40% of the material is a palimpsest, we get a better picture of what might have happened⁵⁶. For ostraca, approximately 5% are palimpsest and it seems that the scribe did not just choose a random chip of limestone; instead, according to recent

⁵¹ Allam 1968, 124-128.

⁵² Allam cites O. Cairo CG 25517, which was erased and reused three times.

⁵³ No definitive proof has been found so far as for a Deir el-Medina archive (see, Donker van Heel-Haring 2003, 7-18), nonetheless, as noted by Allam, the fact that a single document records notes separated in time (sometimes even yearly accounts!) means that the document was not discarded but stored for a period of time before being used again, i.e. the scribe needed to store the documents somewhere for future reference. For administrative archives in Pharaonic times, see Allam 2009 and for the terminology concerning the archives, see Trapani 2009. Interestingly, on some documents from Deir el-Medina, it is stated that the scribe kept its documents in a particular box (i.a. on a fragment of an unpublished journal from year 14, in Cartellina F 257 in Turin, it is noted that there seems to be a special box for keeping the lists of workmen: *ʿfd.t shʿ.w n p3 imy-*



rn=f and again in Demarée 2005, 10-11 (BM EA 75017 recto 3) and 21-22 (BM EA 75021 verso 9).

If the documents were kept somewhere, in an archive, how could the scribe retrieve one of them from a large collection? We can imagine making use of wooden labels. Unfortunately the archaeological evidence is scanty and, if they ever existed, we have to accept that they went lost (Donker van Heel-Haring 2003, note 72).

⁵⁴ Eyre is of the same opinion (Eyre 2013, 251): “The mass of texts on ostraca were ends in themselves, and not drafts: not preparatory notes nor compositional drafts for reports of record”.

⁵⁵ More about this matter in Donker van Heel-Haring 2003, 1-82.

⁵⁶ Data after Haring “Material matters. Documentary Papyri and Ostraca in Late Ramesside Thebes”, forthcoming.

studies and lithic analysis, there was a specific process for the production of these scribal supports⁵⁷.

In our opinion, due to the fact that we will never have the whole corpus of documents available for study for obvious reasons (preservation of documents, documents still to be found or definitely lost), too much time shouldn't be spent speculating. Furthermore, if we consider that new fragments of papyri belonging to the first part of the 20th Dynasty are being re-discovered in the archives of Turin Museum (see e.g. note 175, 177, 178), it seems that the uneven chronological distribution of ostraca and papyri over the Ramesside period is not that strongly pronounced anymore and the different opinions formulated could possibly change in the next few years.

⁵⁷ Pelegrin-Andreu-Lanoë-Pariselle 2016.