

Djekhy and Son: Doing business in Ancient Egypt

By Koenraad Donker van Heel

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Review by Charlotte Booth MA

### **General**

This book promises to tell the story of real business men in ancient Egypt using their archive of documents. The book was interesting but hard work because of the structure. The tone is confused, written in a combination of trade-book conversational language, interspersed with academic discussion on linguistic issues which do not sit comfortably together. The author (or indeed the publisher) should have decided whether this was a trade book for general readership telling the story of two business men, or an academic book discussing the study of the papyri from a linguistic and historical point of view. This confusion led to a couple of oddities in style such as the use of 'Mrs' to denote a female. The Egyptians did not use this title so why did van Heel choose to use it? Another rather grating issue is the jumbled layout of the text. A chapter may start with a description of a text, stop half way through for an in-depth academic discussion on something seemingly irrelevant only to return to the main discussion several pages later. It makes the reading experience a little disjointed.

There is a short note section at the back and two sets of indexes; general and deities, real names and place names. There is no further reading section and the only illustrations are a number of facsimiles of hieratic text, which only holds interest if you read hieratic.

The subject matter however, is rather interesting with the opening chapter introducing us to the main 'characters' of the book Djedkhonsuiufankh, known as Djekhy and his son Iturech, who lived in the Theban area in approximately 590 BCE. They were funerary priests (choachytes) responsible for carrying out rituals and making offerings to the dead on behalf of others, for a fee. This fee often took the form of land which was then rented out to others.

An archive of documents belonging to Djekhy and Iturech were discovered dating back to 675 BCE and it is thought they also acted as trustees for important documents belonging to colleagues, as well as maintaining their own records. These archival records were bought by German Egyptologist August Eisenlohr from Muhammad Muhassib in 1872. Muhassib was a famous Theban antiquities dealer who was taught English by Lucie Duff Gordon and regularly sold items to Wallis Budge among other famous Egyptologists. There were 31 records in the box, covering the period from 675 BCE to 534 BCE and one document from 118 BCE. They were written in a combination of demotic and abnormal hieratic (a script local to Thebes). At the time no one was able to read abnormal hieratic so these elements of the archive were unknown. All of these archival documents are in the Louvre Museum and two further documents in the British Museum mention Djekhy and Iturech.

Since discovery the texts have been translated, although as the author explains only in isolation and never as an entire collection. Whilst there is one document in the archive significantly older than Djekhy and his son Iturech, the content regards a land lease which connects it to the content of the archive indicating it is part of it. The archive covered documents of land leasing, harvest tax receipts, private letters, a marriage contract, hostile takeover of a tomb, donation of land, business conflicts and the purchase of a son. Throughout the rest of the book each of these texts is discussed in detail, outlining the intricacies of carrying out business in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE.

All of the documents seem to be written by five scribes from the same family; Peteamunip, Teos, Neshor(pakhrat), Dykhonsuiut, sons of Petehorresne, who all call themselves Overseers of the Necropolis. It would seem these overseers were the go-to guys if you wanted anything done on the west bank.

The company Djekhy & Son appears to have been rather successful even though Egypt was politically unstable at this time. Amasis had just taken over the throne from Apries in a hostile takeover resulting in economic and political instability. As a businessman Djekhy may have been ruthless and one document discusses a loan where Hepy, an embalmer, borrowed one deben of silver from Djekhy which he was to pay back within seven months. He used all of his possessions even his children as collateral. A later document relating to Iturech indicates that people were indeed used to pay back debts, as Iturech leaves a document where he purchases a 'son', Hor. The document is a statement from Hor claiming he is happy with the money paid and that he and his children will be 'sons' of Iturech. It is uncertain how old Hor is although the author suggests that as his name is not signed as one of the witnesses, he was possibly a minor. Van Heel further suggests the word son was used as being more acceptable at the time than 'slave'.

The main business of Djekhy and his son Iturech were as funerary priests and they carried out all the rituals on behalf of others and the archive deals with some of these daily concerns. One document discusses another priest, Petosiris son of Iturech and two other men who were spreading the news that he had been commissioned to service a new tomb in the Theban Necropolis. However this tomb 'belonged' to Djekhy and his colleagues. Therefore the author entitles this a 'hostile takeover'. After raising this problem Petosiris had to relinquish any claim on the tomb, passing it back to Djekhy and his colleagues. He had to file an oath before the god Khonsuemwasneferhotep to say he agreed to the terms.

Another document deals with Iturech's acquisition of two new 'mummies' to perform funerary rites for, increasing his income. Iturech and a partner Khausenmut signed a contract to split the role; half the practices and half the payments each. These new mummies brought the recorded 'clients' of Iturech to four, perhaps five.

The 31 documents, which are all discussed in detail really do bring to light the varied roles of businessmen in ancient Egypt including complex tax issues, as well as the rather mundane storage of receipts which tell us about their daily transactions. What is particularly intriguing are the 'minutes' from the meetings of the Theban Choachytes' Association which was the organisation for funerary priests. In the archive there are two meeting records, which essentially list the people attending the meeting with a weight in silver next to their name. It is not stated what these figures relate to, but the author assumed that as Iturech had a larger number than some other signatories that he was perhaps a more important member of the Association. The patron god of the association was the

scribe Amenhotep son of Hapu and one of the meetings was held on his festival day, and the author hints at perhaps a 'party' at the same time as the meeting.

This is an interesting and potentially valuable book as it publishes in a novel way a number of what would otherwise be rather dull hieratic texts of land leases, receipts and contracts, bringing them to a wider audience. By studying them as a whole the author has recreated the business world of Djekhy and his son providing an intriguing glimpse into their daily lives. A useful edition to any bookshelf.