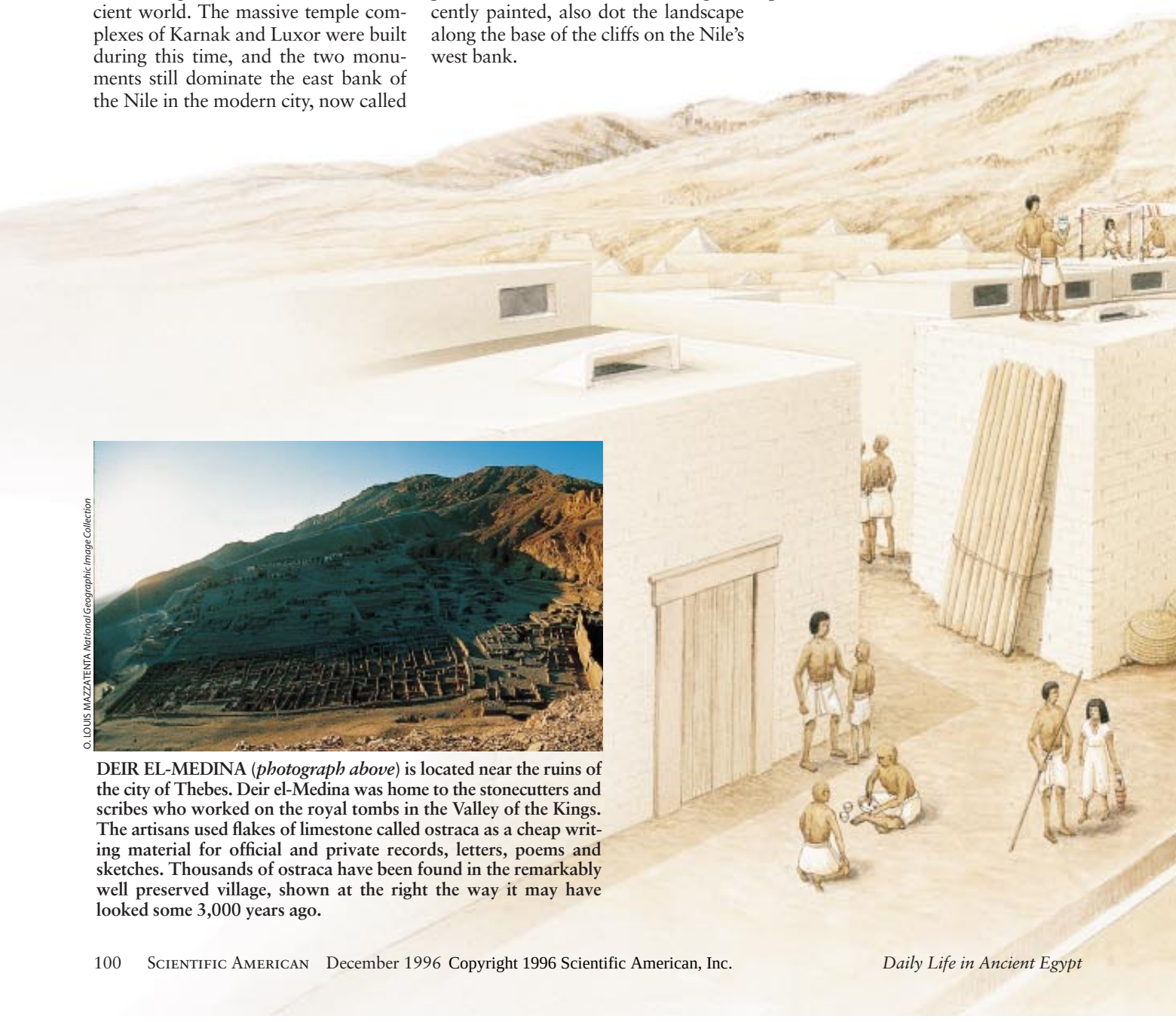
Daily Life in Ancient Egypt

Workmen and their families lived some 3,000 years ago in the village now known as Deir el-Medina. Written records from the unusually well educated community offer fascinating descriptions of everyday activities

by Andrea G. McDowell

During the period known as the New Kingdom (1539–1075 B.C.), Egypt's southern capital city of Thebes developed into one of the great urban centers of the ancient world. The massive temple complexes of Karnak and Luxor were built during this time, and the two monuments still dominate the east bank of the Nile in the modern city, now called Luxor. The nearby Valley of the Kings, on the west bank of the Nile, contains some 60 tombs, including that of the pharaoh Tutankhamen. Hundreds of private tombs, some of them magnificently painted, also dot the landscape along the base of the cliffs on the Nile's west bank.

Although some of the paintings in the private monuments preserve tantalizing pictures of the luxurious life of the nobility, on the whole, the remaining temples and tombs tell us more about reli-



O. LOUIS MAZZATENTA *National Geographic Image Collection*

DEIR EL-MEDINA (*photograph above*) is located near the ruins of the city of Thebes. Deir el-Medina was home to the stonecutters and scribes who worked on the royal tombs in the Valley of the Kings. The artisans used flakes of limestone called ostraca as a cheap writing material for official and private records, letters, poems and sketches. Thousands of ostraca have been found in the remarkably well preserved village, shown at the right the way it may have looked some 3,000 years ago.

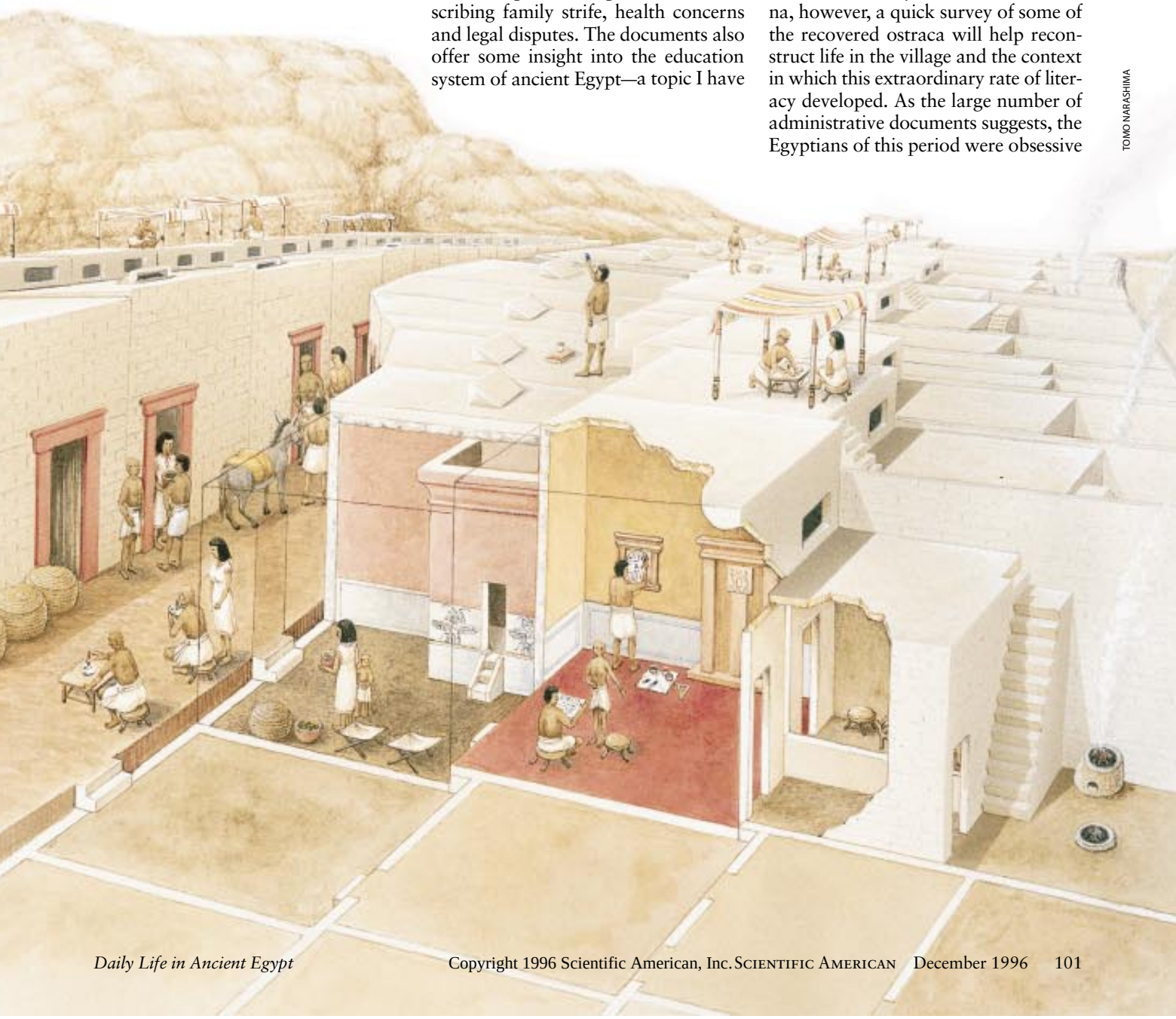
gious experience and beliefs concerning the afterworld than about the experiences of the living. Daily life is less well documented because, unlike the stone monuments we see today, the majority of homes, which were made of sun-dried brick, have succumbed to the damp of the floodplain, along with the furnishings and any written material that would have documented the lives of the literate few. On the westernmost edge of the sprawling ancient city, however, the remains of one small community escaped the general disintegration. This is the village now called Deir el-Medina, the home of the craftsmen who cut and decorated the royal tombs in the Valley of the Kings.

Lying in an arid and relatively isolated region, the site remains remarkably well preserved: houses and chapels are still standing to a height of up to two meters in some places. Archaeologists in the first half of this century found a wealth of religious monuments and household possessions among the effects, as well as intact tombs containing coffins, furniture and clothing. And across the entire site but especially in the town's garbage dumps, researchers recovered tens of thousands of written documents, most of them dating from the period between 1275 and 1075 B.C. Some of the texts are on sheets of papyrus, but most are on shards of pottery or smooth, white flakes of limestone, known as ostraca, that served as a sort of scrap paper for the community.

These writings bring the villagers to life. In them, one finds government records, love poems and private letters describing family strife, health concerns and legal disputes. The documents also offer some insight into the education system of ancient Egypt—a topic I have been investigating for some time. The wealth of texts from the site suggests that in some periods of its history, most men in the town could read and write. (Scholars do not know whether many women in Deir el-Medina were literate. Women in the village did exchange letters, but they may have dictated their thoughts to men.) This high literacy rate stands in stark contrast to the situation throughout the rest of ancient Egyptian society, which during the New Kingdom period had a total literacy rate hovering around only 1 or 2 percent. The ostraca illuminate how the villagers achieved such an impressive level of education.

"Bring Some Honey for My Eyes"

Before we look more closely at the educational system in Deir el-Medina, however, a quick survey of some of the recovered ostraca will help reconstruct life in the village and the context in which this extraordinary rate of literacy developed. As the large number of administrative documents suggests, the Egyptians of this period were obsessive



TOMO NARASHIMA

FITZWILLIAM MUSEUM, UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE

EGYPTIAN MUSEUM, CAIRO

PORTRAITS of a stonecutter (*left*) and a scribe (*right*) demonstrate two distinct styles of drawing found on ostraca in Deir el-Medina. The rather informal sketch of the stonecutter with his chisel and mallet shows a bulbous nose, stubbled chin and open mouth, no doubt exaggerated for comic effect. The self-portrait of the scribe Amenhotep adoring the god Thoth adheres to the formal canons of Egyptian art.

bureaucrats, keeping careful records of the tools issued to the men laboring on the tombs, the rations delivered to the gang, the overall progress of the work and almost every other detail that could be quantified.

The residents' private jottings are even more varied. Many are purely practical: receipts for purchases or records of legal battles (the villagers were avid litigators). The most intriguing texts are perhaps the personal letters, which take the reader straight into the world of New Kingdom Egypt. In one such missive, a father, Pay, writes to his son about his eye disease—apparently one of the hazards of tomb building because of the dust, bad lighting and flying splinters of stone associated with the task:

> The draftsman Pay says to his son the draftsman Pre[emhab?]: Do not turn your back on me; I am not well. Do not c[ease] weeping for me, because I am in the [darkness(?) since] my lord Amon [has turned] his back on me.
>
> May you bring me some honey for my eyes, and also some ocher which is made into bricks again, and real black eye paint. [Hurry!] Look to it! Am I not your father? Now, I am wretched; I am searching for my sight and it is not there.

Pay's lament is not surprising: blindness would have completely incapacitated a draftsman, who painted the figures and hieroglyphs inside the tombs. Descriptions of the mixture of honey, ocher and black eye-paint that Pay requested appear in specialized medical papyri, suggesting that it was a common remedy. Indeed, honey does have antiseptic properties, and ocher, an ingredient in many other prescriptions of the day, feels cool on the eyelids and was thought to reduce swelling. Because

MINISTRY OF CULTURE AND ENVIRONMENT, EGYPTIAN MUSEUM, TURIN

TOOLS OF THE TRADE included brushes of all sizes, a pot of red pigment and raw minerals. Scribes used these tools to paint the figures and hieroglyphs that decorated the royal tombs.

so many workmen suffered from this type of eye disease, this treatment may have been well known, and Pay was ordering it for himself. Alternatively, Pay could have been asking his son to fill a doctor's prescription.

Roughly half the texts found at Deir el-Medina are religious or literary pieces. Copies of most of the "classics" from ancient Egyptian literature have been found at the site; in some cases, ostraca from the village provide the only surviving example of a work. These classics were a fundamental part of a student's education: thousands of school texts bear extracts from the masterpieces of Middle Kingdom (roughly 2000–1640 B.C.) literature, composed in a language as remote from the vernacular of the students as the English of Chaucer is from ours. Furthermore, many of the villagers were authors in their own right, composing instruction texts, hymns and letters. For example, the scribe Amennakhte wrote a poem in praise of the cosmopolitan city of Thebes, located just across the Nile:

What do they say to themselves
in their hearts every day,
those who are far from Thebes?
They spend the day
dreaming [?] of its name, [saying]
"If only its light were ours!"…
The bread which is in it is more tasty
than cakes made of goose fat.
Its [water] is sweeter than honey;
one drinks of it to drunkenness.
Behold, this is how one lives
in Thebes!
The heaven has doubled [fresh] wind
for it.

The villagers held knowledge of and ability in the literary arts in high esteem, as indicated on a papyrus found in the archives of a resident scribe. In this extract, the writer presents an unusual tribute to learning: whereas other documents tend to emphasize primarily writing skills and familiarity with classical literature, this description of the profession of scribe emphasizes authorship, the creation of texts and the fame that can come after death. In short, the writer appeals to the great Egyptian aspiration for immortality:

As for the learned scribes from the time that came after the gods—those who foretold the things to come—their names endure forever, although they have gone, having completed their lifetimes, and their relatives are forgotten.

They did not make for themselves pyramids of copper with tombstones of iron. They were unable to leave an heir in the form of children [who would] pronounce their name, but they made for themselves an heir of the writings and instructions they had made.

The Importance of Being Educated

The exceptional rate of literacy among the workmen at Deir el-Medina no doubt developed because the many skilled artisans needed an understanding of hieroglyphs for their job in the royal tombs. Early in the history of the village, the pharaohs' tombs contained only simple copies of the guides to the afterworld, written in cursive script with accompanying vignettes drawn in stick figures. But at the end of the 14th century B.C., elaborately carved and painted scenes began to appear in tombs. At the same time, the literacy rate in the town rose sharply, as evidenced by the increase in the number of texts written after this period.

The king Horemheb, who ruled from 1319 to 1292 B.C., introduced these painted reliefs to the Valley of the Kings. The more elaborate projects of Horemheb and later kings required a team of draftsmen to do the initial drawings and the final paint job; because the tomb paintings included large amounts of hieroglyphic texts, these workers had to be literate.

Perhaps more surprising was that at least some of the men responsible for

A Lesson in Egyptian Literature

The ostracon shown here bears an excerpt from the poem "Satire on the Trades," a classic of Middle Egyptian literature. The poem describes a variety of occupations, such as weaver, arrow maker and courier, that the author considered inferior to the laudable profession of scribe. The student who made this copy was apparently unfamiliar with the archaic language of the poem—written more than 700 years earlier—and garbled the original text. At the end of the lesson, the student wrote the date in red ink. —*A.G.McD.*

Original excerpt

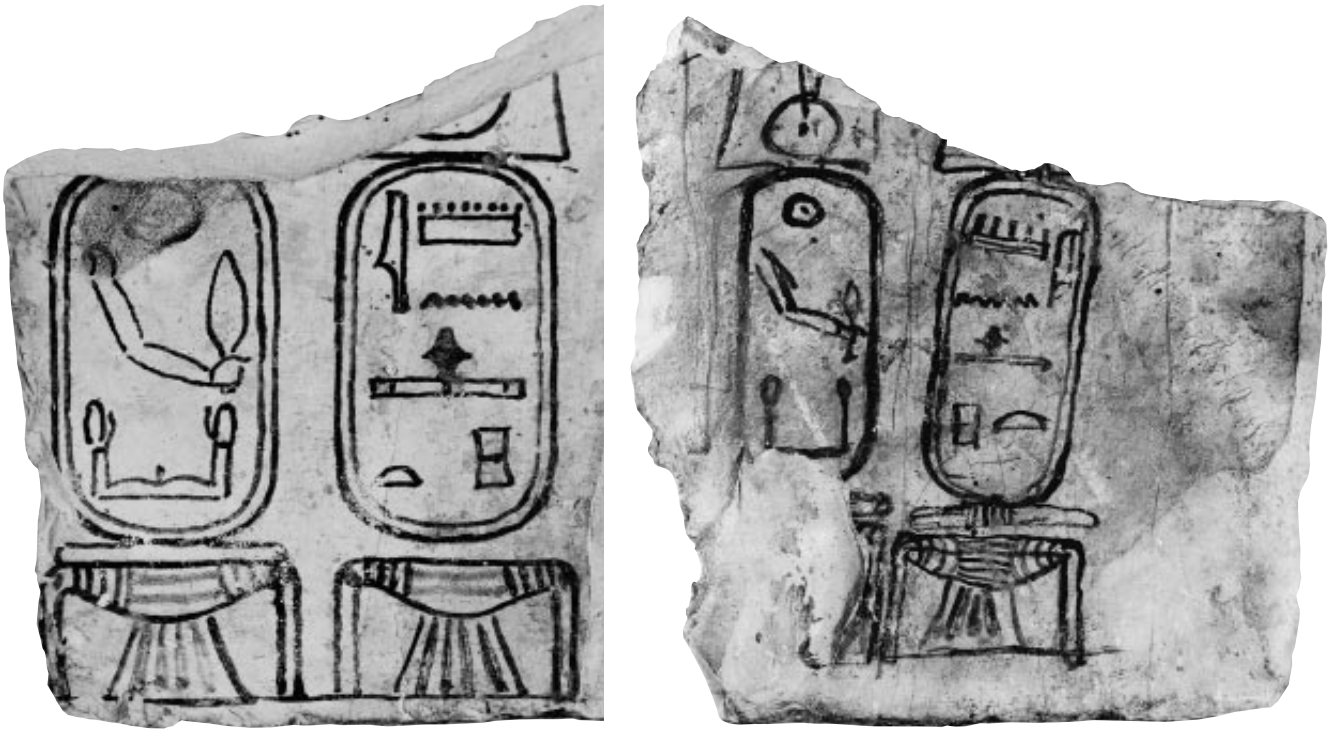
The courier goes into the desert,
Leaving his goods to his children;
Fearful of lions and Asiatics,
He knows himself [only] when
he's in Egypt.
When he reaches home at night,
The march has worn him out;
Be his home of cloth or brick,
His return is joyless.

Translation by Miriam Lichtheim, from *Ancient Egyptian Literature I* (University of California Press, 1973)

Student's copy of excerpt

The courier goes into the desert,
Leaving his goods to his children;
Fearful [of] lions and Asiatics,
What is it when he's in Egypt?
When he reaches home distressed,
The journey has divided him.
While he comes forth [from] his
cloth [or] brick,
He will not come it in joy.

—Third month of winter season, day 1



MEDELHAVSMUSEET, MUSEUM OF MEDITERRANEAN AND NEAR EASTERN ANTIQUITIES, STOCKHOLM

TEACHER'S EXAMPLE of the cartouches of King Amenhotep I was drawn with a confident hand on one side of this ostracon (*left*). A student then turned over the ostracon and made a copy (*right*), in the process reversing some of the signs.

the grueling task of carving the tomb out of the mountainside were also literate, even though their job did not call on such skills. Ambition may have motivated these laborers: education and literacy offered the keys to a good career in Egypt, separating the artisan class from the peasants, and the skills would have stood the workers in good stead had there been no job for them among the tomb builders. In addition, the culture of learning in the village may have also been a powerful stimulus, encouraging young people to study to keep up with their peers.

Egyptologists can glean numerous details from the ostraca found in Deir el-Medina, but unfortunately, we still know little of how the residents actually learned to read and write. Egyptian texts of the New Kingdom refer to schools only incidentally, indicating that they existed and that relatively young children attended them. For example, a short story found in the village describes the experiences at school of its young hero, a boy whose mother is not married:

> He was sent to school and learned to write very well. He practiced all the arts of war and he surpassed his older companions who were at school with him. Then his companions said to him: "Whose son are you? You don't have a father!" And they reviled him and mocked him: "Hey, you don't have a father!"

But scholars have no evidence for an actual school at Deir el-Medina—no textual references to a school building, no structure that looks like a schoolroom,

EGYPTIAN MUSEUM, LEIPZIG UNIVERSITY

OVENS for baking stood in the kitchen areas behind the houses in Deir el-Medina. In this sketch, the words "blowing into the oven" can be seen in the text to the left of the woman.

and no concentrations of student exercises that might signify a teaching area. In fact, we have no clues about how the workmen's children learned their primary skills of reading and writing.

Some of the ostraca left behind do give a somewhat more complete picture of what could be called secondary education—additional training in reading, writing and culture. Many of the documents found in the village are obviously exercises for advanced students, occasionally signed with the names of the student and teacher. Some of the writings bear a date marking the end of a day's lesson; some texts include several such dates, suggesting that a student used a single ostracon for several lessons.

From the various signatures on the ostraca, it is clear that fathers or grandfathers often supervised their sons' or grandsons' education, although on some occasions, fathers—even literate ones—might send their sons to someone of a higher rank for advanced training. (One signature, unfortunately badly preserved, may be a female student's, so at least one woman might have received her education in this fashion.) Pupils would have been from any station in life, including not only the future leaders of the community but also some boys who would never rise above the rank of stonecutter. Teachers consistently came from higher classes, however: the instructors mentioned in the ostraca were primarily scribes, draftsmen or chief workmen.

The students seem to have fit their lessons around their jobs at the tomb, as indicated by the dates in the ostraca—for example, texts often contain multiple dates separated by several days, indicating that there was usually time between lessons when both the instructor and pupil were presumably at work. Nevertheless, there was plenty of time for learning. Workers had many days off, especially as the tomb neared completion toward the end of a pharaoh's reign. During the final stages of construction, they might spend no more than one day out of four in the Valley of the Kings.

FRENCH INSTITUTE OF EASTERN ARCHAEOLOGY, CAIRO

STUDENT'S DRAWING of a royal portrait on this ostracon has been corrected in white by his teacher. In Deir el-Medina, young men had individual tutors who educated them in reading, writing and culture.

The education system in Deir el-Medina differed from that in other cities and towns around Egypt, most notably in who learned to read and write. Furthermore, the writing materials used and the time available for instruction also stand in contrast to practices elsewhere. Student exercises found in other locations were composed on reused papyrus—readily available to those in official positions—and appear to be the handiwork of young apprentices who were being groomed for government service. These students pursued their studies daily and managed to complete several pages of papyrus a day.

Although some aspects of the schooling system in Deir el-Medina diverged from the typical approach to education, the residents of the village apparently agreed with widespread notions about what should be taught and why. Teachers in this workmen's village might train stonecutters in between days on the job, writing on flakes of limestone (the material most available to them), but they still instructed their students in the great classics of Egyptian literature, with the goals of passing on wisdom and ensuring a successful career. As one village scribe wrote to a young pupil: "Set your heart very firmly on writing, a useful profession for the one who does it. Your father had hieroglyphs, and he was honored in the streets." SA

The Author

ANDREA G. McDOWELL began her study of Deir el-Medina while working on her Ph.D. in ancient history at the University of Pennsylvania. She was a lecturer at Leiden University, junior research fellow at Somerville College at the University of Oxford and an assistant professor of Egyptology at Johns Hopkins University before moving to Yale University, where she is now a student in the law school. McDowell is also working on a book about Deir el-Medina, tentatively scheduled for release next fall.

Further Reading

A Community of Workmen at Thebes in the Ramesside Period. Jaroslav Černý. French Institute of Eastern Archaeology, Cairo, 1973.

Commodity Prices from the Ramessid Period: An Economic Study of the Village of Necropolis Workmen at Thebes. Jac. J. Janssen. E. J. Brill, Leiden, 1975.

The Tomb-Builders of the Pharaohs. Morris Bierbrier. British Museum Publications, London, 1982.

Letters from Ancient Egypt. Translated by Edward F. Wente. Edited by Edmund S. Meltzer. Scholars Press, 1990.

