



Fayoum University  
Faculty of Archaeology  
Egyptology Department

# **A Social History of Writing through the Hieratic Sources of the Middle Kingdom from El-lahun**

A dissertation submitted to Egyptology Department, Faculty of Archaeology- Fayoum University for the Degree of Ph.D. in Egyptology

By

**Marwa Ahmed Eweis Ali**

Assistant lecturer- Egyptology Department  
Faculty of Archaeology - Fayoum University

Under Supervision of:

**Prof. Dr. Nagh Omar Ali**

Professor of Egyptology  
Faculty of Archaeology  
Fayoum University

**Prof. Dr. Stephen Quirke**

Professor of Ancient Egyptian language  
Institute of Archaeology UCL

**Dr. Maher Ahmed Eissa**

Assistant Professor of ancient Egyptian language  
Faculty of Archaeology  
Fayoum University

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## Abstract

Despite the preponderance of dated Middle Kingdom features, the preserved remains of the site referred to as a cemetery used in almost all major periods through the history of ancient Egypt ranging from the Early Dynastic times up to the Coptic Period.

However, El-Lahun flourished and reached the height of its importance in the era of the Middle Kingdom during the time of the 4th Pharaoh of the 12th dynasty, Senwosret II. He chose this place to build his complex funeral pyramid and the El-Lahun settlement also played the role of a regional centre.

William Matthew Flinders Petrie the discoverer and excavator of El-Lahun town for many years (1889, 90, 1911, 1914 and 1920), revealed numerous quantities of furniture, implements and ornaments, which supply useful information about Egyptian town planning. He also unearthed one of the most significant papyri finds in the history of Egyptology. These papyri are dealing with such varied topics as healing and veterinary texts, administrative and business records and provide new knowledge about social aspects such as administrative and legal systems, insight into the daily life of the people, their attitudes, and customs, plus the personal issues of social interaction in the Middle Kingdom and El-Lahun society.

A short time after the discovery of the Petrie papyri in 1898 another group of papyri appeared on the Egyptian antiquities market at the start of 1899. Ludwig Borchardt obtained the permission of a survey on the site in June 1899, The investigations on the area during the 12th to 26th June, yielded the three rubbish heaps located East, North, and West of the town. Concentrating his activity on the western rubbish heap which was situated outside of the town wall to the north of the Valley Temple he found the papyri which is now called the Berlin papyri.

Through these excavations, the El-Lahun papyri were divided into two categories:

- 1- "The Town Archive" which is represented by the papyri which Petrie had found in the town. These papyri date to the late Twelfth and early Thirteenth Dynasties, and are now in the Petrie Museum.
- 2- "The Temple Archive" is represented in the papyri which Borchardt had discovered in the rubbish mound north of the Valley Temple of the Senwosret II pyramid complex, by the west wall of the town. These papyri date to the reigns of Senwosret III and Amenemhat III, and are now in the Egyptian Museums of Berlin and Cairo.

As a result of the great importance of this huge collection of hieratic papyri, which included many mysteries and information both in their content, form, design, and the method of their writing. By using the expressions and formulas which serve the type of the manuscript and its content, we can reflect on these papyri as to what they tell us

about the nature of El-Lahun society and the role of writing in the service of different institutions and elements in ancient Egyptian society. This prompted the researcher to choose this subject under the title: “A Social History of Writing through the Hieratic Sources of the Middle Kingdom from El-Lahun”.

The researcher has faced several questions about the concept of “the social history of writing”. To this I generally replied by saying the social history of writing - a vast field of research the purpose of which is to understand the level of education and literacy not only as the percentage of individuals able to read and write but also studying the levels of literacy in the society.

The topic of “social history of writing” has the potential for a substantial contribution to Egyptology and the wider history of the ancient world, because there has been little research into the question of the social context for writing (the manuscripts themselves and the materials used in writing).

Paleography as a social history of writing is not only interested in the morphology of the documents but by social practices that guide their creation<sup>XX</sup>. In using the term “social history” I am trying also to convey an interest in looking at and explaining the relation between writing and a variety of social institutions, such as legal, medical, educational, religious and economic interests. That is, I am interested in exploring the various ways in which writing has served these social institutions, how it has done so, and that by using the specific formulas, terms and expressions, form and design we can determine the purpose of each kind of object. Through that we can reach out to who wrote it, where and how they did it and why and for what was it done.

### **Structure of the work**

The present study is divided into nine chapters as follows:

#### **Chapter I: Introduction to El-Lahun**

This chapter includes an overview introduction of the town of El-Lahun, terms of the names that were fired at the town, as well as the location of the town. The most important archaeological missions, which carried out excavations in the area, the aim of the construction of the town, the settlement planning, the internal division of the town shown through the papyri and the architectural installations in each section of the town, and the pyramid area. It will also track the region historically through pharaonic times. Then at the end of this chapter, the El-Lahun papyri will be discussed as well as the method of registration.

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<sup>XX</sup>Armando, P., *Alfabetismo, Escritura, Sociedad* (Barcelona: Gedisa, 1999) 33-35 y 117-119.

## **Chapter II: Administrative Institution**

Through the information given from the El-Lahun papyri the administrative division, the administrative institutions and offices and different economic, legal, healing, military, and educational organizations will be discussed in this chapter.

## **Chapter III: Educational Institution**

The chapter provides information on the educational system in the El-Lahun community by recognizing the writing system, orthography, as well as the form and layout of the papyri. Then the chapter will deal with the concept of literacy in El-Lahun through the study of papyri, and the education of women in El-Lahun society. Finally, a display of literary and mathematical papyri.

## **Chapter IV: Legal Institution**

This chapter will be dealt with legal practices in El-Lahun society through looking at the documents, especially the inventory of the El-Lahun legal papyri. As well as a study of the classification of these documents, and the formulae that have been associated with each type of these papyri, then the legal transactions that were conducted in accordance with these legal documents in El-Lahun society.

## **Chapter V: Healing or Medical Institution**

This chapter includes an introduction to the healing practices in ancient Egypt, and the terminology used in the Healing Papyri. It also displays the inventory of El-Lahun Healing Papyri, and their classification. It also explains the main features of the Gynaecological papyrus in terms of: its format and content, its writer (author) and the persons to whom this text is addressed.

After that this chapter presents papyri that deal with spells and incantations in the field of treatment and healing in El-Lahun. The last part in this chapter deals with the veterinary papyrus: its content, design and main features and the writer of the papyrus.

## **Chapter VI: Economic Institution**

The chapter presents a quick look on the most important accounts and administrative papyri until the Middle Kingdom, and the entire inventory of economic papyri found in El-Lahun and classification of these papyri. It also shows the most important economic and account terminology in the papyri, whether technical or general terms. Also it deals with the relationship between the Account Papyri and various activities and industries, in addition to the institutions and sectors concerned with the economic aspects in El-Lahun society.

At the end of this chapter the social identity of the people living in the area, their labor organization; whether permanent or temporary employment will be dealt with, in addition to the identity of the accountant or the writer of these types of texts.

## **Chapter VII: Religious Institution**

This chapter provides an overview on the religious documents and their contents: the temples, temple staff, methods of work, and the main gods of the temples.

It also deals with the festivals, whether religious or secular, that were mentioned in the documents, comparing them with those mentioned in the list of UCL with those of the Berlin archive. It displays the most important religious festivals associated with the most important and most popular gods in El-Lahun society.

The last part of this chapter deals with the most important papyri that are related to religious and funerary literature by giving an inventory of these papyri and their contents.

## **Chapter VIII: Letters**

This chapter includes a full inventory of letters under study, which were found in El-Lahun, and the properties of the formulae which related to correspondence writing in El-Lahun. Moreover it focuses on the different handwritings in these letters through the paleographical comparisons.

## **Chapter IX: Foreigners and Women in El-Lahun**

This last chapter in the dissertation deals with information about foreigners in El-Lahun in terms of archaeological and textual evidences. The chapter also contains an inventory of foreigners and their names in the El-Lahun papyri, in addition to their social position and the professions which they occupied.

In the second part of this chapter, the researcher displays the role of women in society through the El-Lahun papyri.

The study ends with a conclusion that will display the most important results reached from the El-Lahun papyri.

A list of the main references used will be given at the end of this work.