

# A Review of *Mrs. Tsenhor*

C. Casey  
Wilbour Hall 302  
[christian\\_casey@brown.edu](mailto:christian_casey@brown.edu)

August 31, 2016

Donker van Heel, K. (2014). *Mrs. Tsenhor: A Female Entrepreneur in Ancient Egypt*. The American University in Cairo Press, Cairo

*Mrs. Tsenhor* is Donker van Heel's most recent book about a family of choachytes who lived in Thebes during the Late Period. This book was published in 2014, just two years after the author's previous work on another family of Theban choachytes, *Djekhy & Son*. In many ways, *Mrs. Tsenhor* acts as a sequel to *Djekhy & Son*, and the author says so explicitly (Donker van Heel, 2014, p. xiii). However, both books deal separately with broader issues of law, society, economics, and gender, and their treatments of these issues make them each unique. The source material on which these books are based, family archives written in Abnormal Hieratic and Early Demotic, provide a surprisingly intimate view of lives of the people whose names appear within them. However, any attempt to extract this information from the primary sources requires close reading, which in turn requires a deep knowledge of the language and scripts in which these texts were written. *Mrs. Tsenhor* relies on the author's decades of experience in the study of Egyptian to present this material to a much broader audience. Though there are some problems with the author's suggestion that this book is "for everyone" (Donker van Heel, 2014, p. xiii), there is little doubt that this book provides a valuable tool for anyone interested in the study of ancient law and society.

The subject of these texts, a female choachyte living in Thebes during the Saite and Persian periods, seems to have been relatively well-off and successful in her business ventures. However, it is never entirely clear what she does for a living, even though the available linguistic and pictorial evidence gives some indication of the role of the choachyte in Theban society. The Egyptian equivalent of the Greek word: χοαχύτης is *wʒh-mw*, which literally translates as "water-pourer" (see Figure 3), a title which enables a straightforward interpretation of a choachyte's job, but which fails to tell the entire story. Theban choachytes organized themselves into a guild, sued each other in court over the rights to specific tombs, and were paid well enough to acquire property. In fact, they acquired so much property that they needed written documents to keep track of their affairs at a time when most contracts were verbal, and this is the only reason we know anything about them at all. It therefore seems reasonable to suggest that the phrase "water-pourer" is a convenient abbreviation for a much more complex task, but then we are left to wonder what is really going on behind the scenes.

This is not a question that we can overlook for the sake of convenience. In order to understand the lives and business dealings of choachytes, we should first try to understand what a choachyte actually did. This sounds like a simple question, and we might reasonably expect to find an answer

with a bit of reading, especially in a book that is nominally written about choachytes. Donker van Heel addresses the matter directly on several different occasions, and it is readily apparent that the question: “What is a choachyte?” drives much of the discussion in both *Mrs. Tsenhor* and in *Djekhy & Son*. This question also forms the basis for an earlier article by Donker van Heel (1992), and prompted S.P. Vleeming to write an article on the subject in 1995, which references Donker van Heel’s 1992 article as well, Vleeming (1995). The casual reader should be forgiven for assuming that this question has been answered thoroughly by now, but a closer look at the scholarship on this subject reveals that a great deal remains to be explained. There are two main reasons for this. First, all of the descriptions of choachytes follow the available evidence in a straightforward but naïve manner, rather than trying to direct the presentation of evidence toward the questions that readers are most likely to ask. Second, modern Egyptologists consistently fail to appreciate the importance of water in Ancient Egyptian life and ritual, perhaps because they live in societies where water is cheap and abundant.

By the time *Mrs. Tsenhor* was published in 2014, its author had been studying the lives and duties of choachytes for at least two decades. It is possible, after so much time thinking about this subject, that he has simply forgotten how confusing it was to him initially. However, there are indications that this is not the case. On one occasion, he specifically acknowledges the esoteric nature of this subject: “...even the existence of the choachytes seems to remain a well-hidden secret known only to papyrologists and the odd colleague working with New Kingdom material.” (Donker van Heel, 2014, p. 171). The author is clearly aware that the average person—even the average Egyptologist—doesn’t know what a choachyte is. Further, his own speculation makes it clear that experts have yet to address some of the most fundamental difficulties of explaining what choachytes actually did. Near the end of the book, Donker van Heel writes: “It is tempting to assume that the actual work done at the tomb by the choachytes involved not just offerings and pouring water, but also some prayer like the above.” (Donker van Heel, 2014, p. 197). The author’s uncertainty on this matter indicates that he is still pondering some of the most basic aspects of a choachyte’s duties, even after all of the work he has done on this subject. Further questions, such as whether the choachytes actually owned the tombs or merely brokered the rights to serve the funerary cults of the mummies within these tombs (Donker van Heel, 2014, p. 14), whether their duties were the same in other places and times besides Thebes in the Late Period (Vleeming, 1995, p. 241), and how these practices related to older traditions of *k3*-priests (Donker van Heel, 2014, p. 40) and (Donker van Heel, 1992, p. 19), arise often enough to justify writing an entire introductory chapter about the role of choachytes in general. Even some questions that may be impossible to answer, such as whether choachytes watered the plants in front of large tombs (Donker van Heel, 2014, p. 42), offer valuable insight into our current understanding of this subject.

The questions embedded in this book and related works make it clear that both the neophyte and the expert share much of their confusion. Thus, it would have been advantageous to begin these books by addressing such questions directly. Why was the Theban elite endowing funerary cults and paying people large amounts of money to carry water from the river up to the gebel, only to pour the water into the dirt? Would water be poured inside of the tombs, and if so, is it really wise to humidify a hot, windowless room full of dried corpses? Evidence of ritual water pouring from the earliest historical periods (Donker van Heel, 1992, p. 21), which seems to be the author’s best justification for this practice later on, fails to explain why the Ancient Egyptians were doing these things in the first place. Additional circumstantial evidence, such as records indicating that workers in Deir el-Medina took personal vacation days for the stated purpose of “pouring water” (Donker van Heel, 1992, p. 23), demonstrates that this practice was important to the Ancient Egyptians, but it says nothing whatsoever about why they thought it was important.

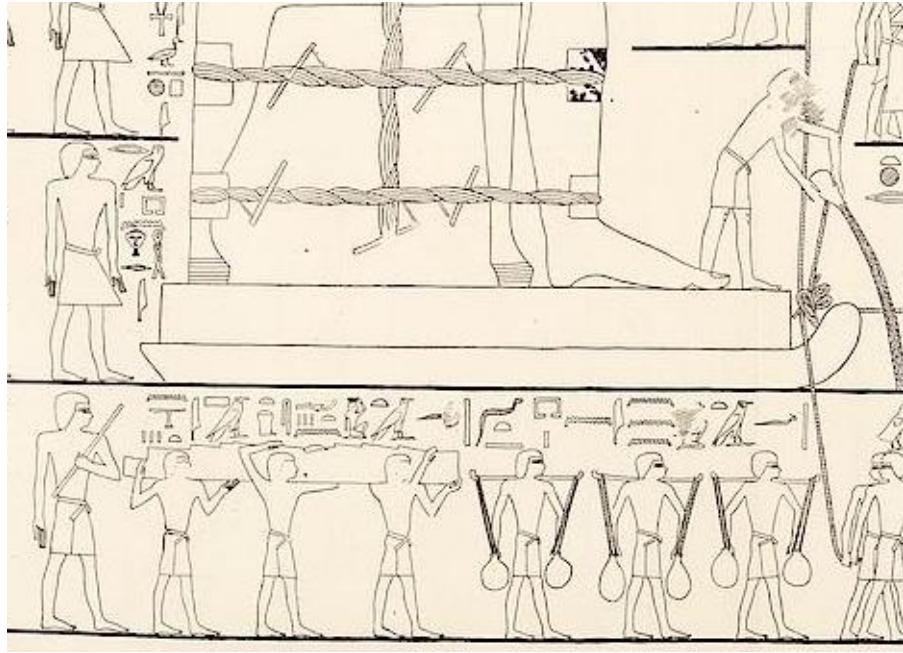


Figure 1: Workers dragging a statue. Even in this low-resolution image, the text can be read with certainty. Adapted from: [https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/7/78/Transportation\\_of\\_statue\\_of\\_Djehutihotep\\_II.jpg](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/7/78/Transportation_of_statue_of_Djehutihotep_II.jpg)

The simplest explanation is that the Egyptians cared an awful lot about water.

It may seem unnecessary to point out that a desert-dwelling people who depended on one river for survival would hold water in high regard, but this is only obvious in hindsight. Many Egyptologists have failed to appreciate the importance of water in the lives of the Ancient Egyptians. In a description of the famous statue dragging scene of Djehutihotep (see Figure 1), one author writes: “These figures probably relate to another person who is leaning down and pouring water or, more likely, milk, to facilitate the movement of the wooden cylindrical blocks underneath the sledge.” (Shaheen, 2007, p. 370). This interpretation seems to be based on a mistranslation of the caption above the porters (below the statue), which reads: *fȝt mw jn pr-dt, fȝt ht n stȝ jn tt* – “carrying water by the funeral domain (house of eternity), carrying beam-wood by the work-crew”. It is also possible, however, that the situation is reversed, and that this author’s mistranslation is actually based on a desire to believe that the liquid being poured in front of the statue is milk rather than water. This interpretation would explain how a trained Egyptologist could mistake such an obvious instance of the word “water”.

Another example, this time from the work of a well-known scholar, shows that the prejudice against water in Egyptology is real and widespread. In *Symbol & Magic in Egyptian Art*, Wilkinson writes: “A similar situation occurs in the case of the forms given by Egyptian craftsmen to a class of utensils still not fully understood—the so-called unguent dishes and ‘spoons,’ which may have been made to hold rejuvenating oils, ointments, or unguents...Often the bowls are incised with wave-like lines signifying water  in order to suggest that the bowl is a pool.” (Wilkinson, 1994, p. 20). In this example, it is striking how far the author goes to avoid acknowledging that a spoon with the word “water” written in the bottom might have been used to hold water. He suggests several possibilities, noticeably excluding water from that list, and then interprets the presence

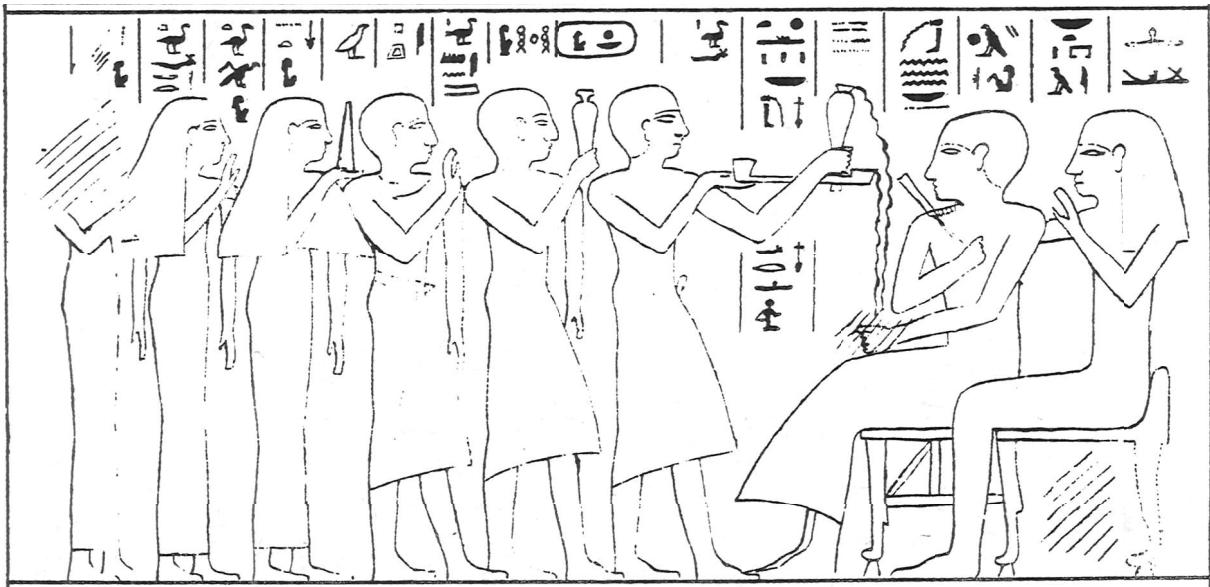


Figure 2: Stela showing a libation being given with both *hz*-vase and spoon simultaneously.

of the word “water” symbolically.<sup>1</sup> A much simpler explanation would be that these spoons were sometimes made to hold water, an interpretation which is supported by reliefs showing offerings of water being made with both *hz*-vases and spoons simultaneously (see Figure 2).

Perhaps the best evidence for the importance of water in funerary rituals comes from the symbolic value of the *hz*-vase, a fact which both Donker van Heel and Vleeming come frustratingly close to noticing. A stela depicting a choachyte making offerings, reproduced in Vleeming (1995) and referenced by Donker van Heel, shows a deceased choachyte standing in front of a *hz*-vase in a stand surmounted by a lotus blossom (see Figure 3). In *Mrs. Tsenhor*, the author also notes the similarity between choachytes and other job titles, which are written with the *hz*-vase hieroglyph Ѓ: “The ancient Egyptians had more than one expression for ‘to make a libation,’ one being *iry qebeh* and indeed there were people calling themselves *qebeh*, or ‘libationer,’ leaving us to wonder whether they did the work of the choachytes.” (Donker van Heel, 2014, p. 15). The connection between these words is slightly tenuous, but their similarity does offer a valuable indication of the importance of water in Egyptian religion, a fact underscored by countless reliefs associating water with abundance, fecundity, and mortuary ritual (see Figure 4). The conclusion that choachytes really were tasked with pouring water for the deceased as their name suggests is strongly supported by a large quantity of evidence, but it is reasonable for modern readers to have some initial doubts about this interpretation. It would improve this book and any other work on this subject to acknowledge those doubts and address them directly, tailoring the available evidence to answer the questions that Egyptologists should be able to anticipate.

There are several cases in this book where arguments about language, especially lexicography, offer valuable information in a manner that is readily accessible to the reader, even to those readers who have not had much experience with Egyptian language. In addition to the problem of explaining what a choachyte is, the author also takes on the difficulty of distinguishing the meaning of *hm* and *b3k* (both meaning “slave”) (Donker van Heel, 2014, p. 113), and the challenge presented

<sup>1</sup>To his credit, Wilkinson does argue elsewhere for the importance of water in Egyptian religion (Wilkinson, 1994, pp. 94-95). However, it is still difficult to explain why he fails to consider the importance of water in this case.

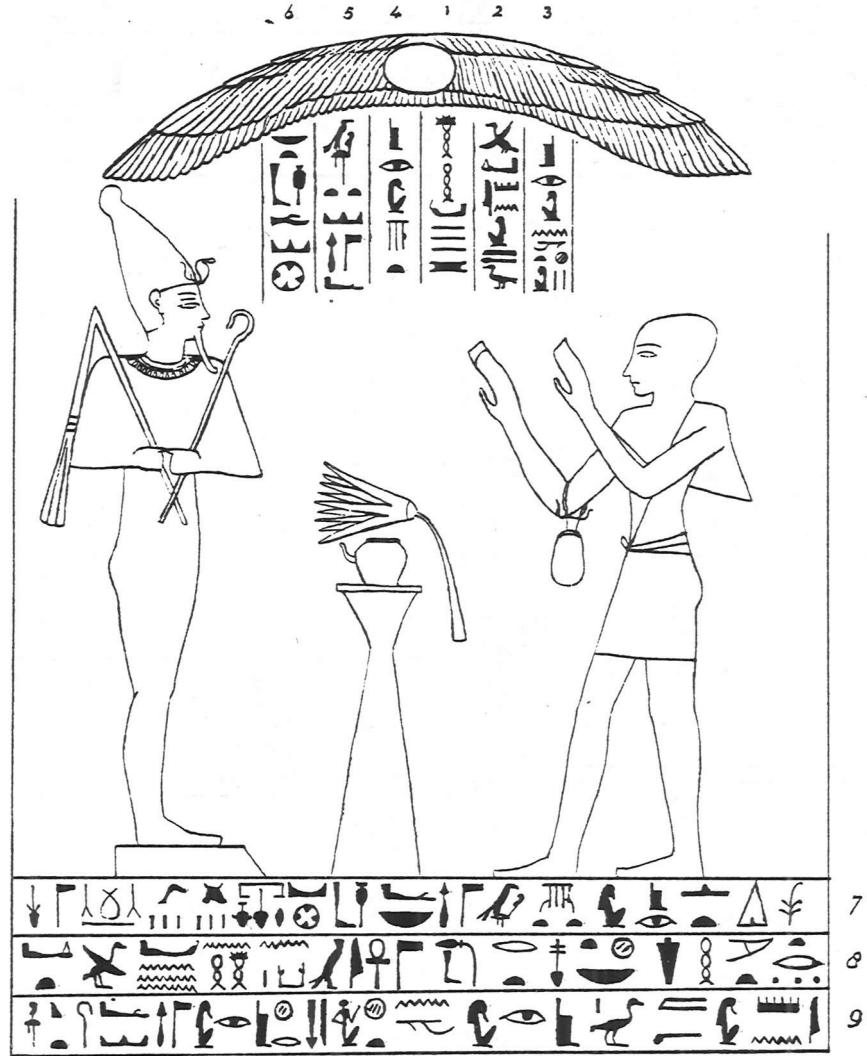


Figure 3: Stela depicting a choachyte. The title *wʒh-mw* appears in lines 1 and 8. Note the *hz*-vase in a stand between the two large figures. Also note that the choachyte's name, which is easy to read in Egyptian, is much more difficult to decipher in Greek: Πετεαμουνις Ὀσαρναχθις (Lüddeckens, 1980, pp. 281, 125).



1 *Seti I offering libation, Temple of Seti I, Abydos. Nineteenth Dynasty.*

2 *Offering table of Harsiese with water jar motifs, from Akhmim. Eighteenth Dynasty.*

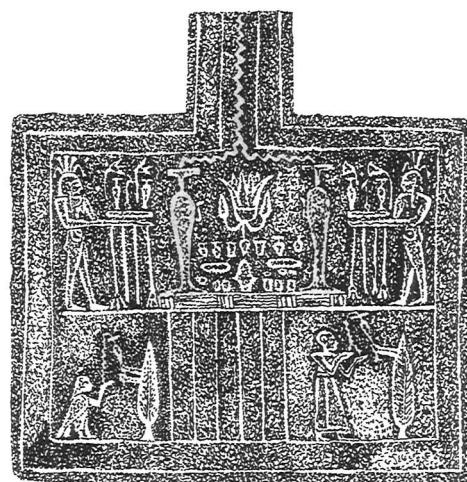


Figure 4: Images accompanying the entry for W15 (the *hz*-vase) in (Wilkinson, 1992, pp. 204-205). The offering table is correctly dated to the Ptolemaic period in the text.

by the word *pr* (house) in the presence of the newly-developed word ‘*wy*’ (Donker van Heel, 2014, p. 132). In one case, translations are supplemented with facsimiles of the hieroglyphic source, and the nearness of the English to the original makes it possible for those interested in language to look more closely at the text (Donker van Heel, 2014, pp. 101-102). At times the translations indicate that some choices made by the author will not be explained, (e.g. the translation of *jt* as “it grain” rather than “barley” (Donker van Heel, 2014, p. 2 et passim)); however, explaining all of these choices would be needlessly tedious, and the decision to present most primary sources in translation without commentary was clearly the best possible option. Ultimately, this is a book about a group of Egyptian texts, which is not about language, but rather tells the story of the texts themselves. The author’s references to Pestman and Vleeming (1994) provide the reader with the means of accessing a detailed study of the texts if necessary.

This book (together with *Djekhy & Son*) is a prosopographical study of Theban choachytes, and as such, it requires very little consideration of language or palaeography, although these texts offer special insights into those subjects as well. Instead, it relies heavily on the names of known individuals within the texts to support its claims. Most of these names are typical of the time and place, making them foreign to anyone alive today and therefore quite difficult to parse, even for a student of Egyptian. The reference given to the *Demotisches Namenbuch* in *Djekhy & Son* (Donker van Heel, 2012, p. 153), is not repeated in *Mrs. Tsenhor*, and even if it were, this book is not accessible to the majority of readers. The author tries to alleviate these difficulties by offering English translations for many of the names when they first appear, but this technique is used inconsistently, and even upon close examination it is not clear what factors determine whether a name will be translated or not. For example, the names Burekhef (“he does not know”) (Donker van Heel, 2014, p. 3) and Tsenhor (“the sister of Horus”) (Donker van Heel, 2014, p. 4) are both translated in the book, while Tsenhor’s daughter’s name Ituru is never translated, although the author frequently points out that her nickname is Ruru. The name Setairetbint (“pluck out the evil eye”) is never translated (Donker van Heel, 2014, p. 64), while the name Khedebirbin (“kill the evil eye”) is given with translation (Donker van Heel, 2014, p. 111). These examples also illustrate that there is a certain amount of confusion regarding the transcription of Egyptian names: should they be transcribed with phonetically-accurate pronunciations based on Coptic or Greek, or should they be transcribed according to Egyptological convention? Even assuming a standardized transcription method, the difference between Setairetbint and Khedebirbin is difficult to justify. These names are feminine and masculine, respectively, but the gender of the word *jrt* never changes. In the frequent case of Padiu (Donker van Heel, 2014, p. 81 et passim), the name is almost always given as: “Padiu (Pendiu),” without any explanation for why there is any doubt about its reading. The name seems to be “Padiu”, an abbreviation of *p3-tj-irj-hms-nfr* (Πατρασνουφις or Πατρανσνουφις) (Lüdeckens, 1980, pp. 288, 429), with an additional ν appearing only in the full spelling in Greek. Whatever its actual realization, it is unlikely that the average reader would need such a nuanced phonetic reading of this name without desiring the translation of the name in the first place, so it is not clear what considerations are determining the presence or absence of this sort of information.

As a prosopography, this book is not supposed to be about names, instead it is meant to use the case studies offered by the people in these texts to inform our understanding of the societies in which they lived. One crucial and unavoidable component of that society is the role of money. Donker van Heel handles this topic well, putting the important issues in terms that a modern reader can understand without imposing too much modern economic thinking onto an ancient culture. The study of an ancient economy on its own terms forms a major theme of both this book and its predecessor. At various times he makes this explicit, writing: “One very profitable way of looking at ancient Egypt is simply to follow the money.” (Donker van Heel, 2014, p. 99)

and: “Tombs and mummies were business and business was money. And money creates greed.” (Donker van Heel, 2014, p. 107). This is probably being done in response to the works of other Egyptologists that fail to appreciate the importance of early market economies for understanding the history of the ancient world. No specific citations are ever offered, but a statement in *Djekhy & Son* leaves little doubt that this is the case: “Some Egyptologists who have studied the ancient Egyptian economy seem to deny the existence of a market of demand and supply.” (Donker van Heel, 2012, p. 59).

It might be the case that the absence of coinage leads some scholars to ignore the role of money, when coinage and money are really two separate things. Donker van Heel directly addresses this possibility by pointing out that markets do not depend on a money supply, only on a willingness to trade: “Egypt was to become a real money economy only in the Ptolemaic period, although barter probably remained the most popular way to trade things in large parts of the country.” (Donker van Heel, 2014, p. 54). Whether it is accurate to say that coinage was slow to catch on after its introduction (no evidence is given for this claim) (Donker van Heel, 2014, p. 54), it is certainly true that money played a major role in Tsenhor’s decisions about her life, and there is no way to understand her world without acknowledging this fact.

However, money and property do not tell the entire story, but the book quickly skips over the issue of class, a subject which lies just beneath the surface of most of its discussions. At various points the author makes oblique references to Tsenhor’s social class in ways that illustrate the many similarities between the culture of first-millennium Thebes and the world we live in now. In particular, the details of Tsenhor’s life that can be gleaned from these texts make it clear that she was a member of the lower middle class (Donker van Heel, 2014, p. 3), and the author clearly understands her in this way: “If Tsenhor were alive today, she would be wearing jeans, driving a pickup, and enjoying a beer with the boys.” (Donker van Heel, 2014, p. 1). However, she was not poor or even *nouveau riche*, (she was a landowner who inherited most of her wealth), highlighting the fact that wealth and class are not inextricably linked in any society. She belonged to the lower middle class in Thebes because that is the sub-culture she was born into and lived her entire life in, and it is probably unlikely that any amount of property could have changed that. These texts offer the perfect opportunity to study the interrelationship of money and class, an issue which is still often misunderstood today.

By contrast, the relevance of these texts for the study of gender may be a bit overstated. It is certainly useful to take this opportunity to discuss the rights of women in Ancient Egypt. Egypt is often incorrectly presented as a model for equality in the ancient world, when the truth is (as usual) much more complicated than that, so it is important to address the issue. Donker van Heel makes this intention overt in his concluding remark on the subject: “...is this proof that women always had the same rights as men in ancient Egypt? Probably not.” (Donker van Heel, 2014, p. 149). However, much of the discussion of gender seems to use the fact that Tsenhor was a woman as a springboard for arguments that stray far from the data under consideration.

In fact, it can be argued that the consideration of law and inheritance can be disentangled from questions of gender roles. Once it is acknowledged that women in Ancient Egypt were able to own property and manage their own affairs, the specific evidence found within these texts has little more to say about gender, except in comparison to the laws of other ancient civilizations (which are never discussed). While it is certainly an important point of interest to note that one scribe referred to Tsenhor using masculine pronouns instead of feminine ones (Donker van Heel, 2014, p. 127), this fact does little to determine whether a specific Coptic word meant “miscarriage” or “menstruation” (Donker van Heel, 2014, p. 179), or explain the phenomenon of menstrual synchrony (Donker van Heel, 2014, p. 181), which are issues that rely entirely on evidence not

contained within these texts. Simply put, the present material does not afford the best opportunity for the study of gender, though the book does still offer a great deal of value to those interested in this subject. It might be preferable to address the subject more generally and offer references to Wilfong (1994) and Sweeney (2006) as opportunities for further reading, since those works deal more directly with material that enlightens our understanding of gender.

A brief comparison with Wilfong (1994) reveals the complex position of women in Egyptian society during the Christian era. Men and women were not equal in every regard, but it is important to determine where this inequality manifested itself in order to have the best hope of understanding it. A closer look at the textual evidence reveals that legal matters are not the best indicators of Egyptian gender distinctions: “This is not to say that the legal status of women was equal to that of men, but it does show that in all but the most exceptional cases women could and did use the law in much the same way as men: they derived the same sorts of benefits and were subject to the same sorts of regulations.” (Wilfong, 1994, p. 93). In other words, women seem to have been treated equally by the law for the most part, with particular exceptions standing out precisely because they are exceptional. For example, brothers inherited twice as much as sisters by default (Wilfong, 1994, p. 136), but a will specifically overrides the usual rules of inheritance by definition, so we should not expect to find much evidence of gender-based discrimination there.

In matters of religion, women were clearly not equal to men. They were even less equal to men under Christianity than they had been previously: “In addition, unlike earlier periods in Egyptian history, women were not even permitted to act as priestesses, to officiate at religious ceremonies and act as an intermediary with the divine within the structure of the cult.” (Wilfong, 1994, p. 122). However, religion does not figure very prominently in the Tsenhor papyri. Most of these documents deal with property ownership, which was a comparatively egalitarian sphere of Egyptian life, as Wilfong’s study of the later material from Jême clearly demonstrates. Despite the fact that this archive concerns the property of a Theban woman, it is not the best evidence we have for gender relations in antique Thebes.

This book might be better understood as a starting point for a discussion of gender in Ancient Egypt, rather than the final word on this subject, and this might have been the best way to present things. In a similar way, the texts under consideration offer little to inform our understanding of material culture, a fact which the author points out directly in *Djekhy & Son*: “There is still a wide gap between the written early demotic material and the archaeological evidence.” (Donker van Heel, 2012, p. 145). The same is obvious from a close reading of *Mrs. Tsenhor*. Evidence from archaeology rarely appears in either book, but it is not clear to the reader why it is absent. Perhaps this information is not available, or perhaps it does little to inform the current discussion. Whatever the explanation, it would be beneficial to include an overt analysis of the role for archaeology in this and subsequent work.

Perhaps the most likable quality of this book is the author’s dry wit and casual use of personal observation, the overall effect of which is a deep sense of connection, both with the material and with the man writing about it. He frequently compares the circumstances in ancient Thebes with experiences that will be familiar to a modern audience. His personal story about an aunt who died in infancy and the way in which this tragedy affected his grandmother brought poignant reality to the experience of losing a child, something which would have been a common experience for Ancient Egyptian women like Tsenhor, but which is completely unimaginable to most people in our time (Donker van Heel, 2014, p. 162). His light-hearted criticism of Egyptologists is sure to win favor with students and experts, who are bound to have noticed the same sorts of problems: “...as things often go in Egyptology—[Golenishchev’s] view was generally accepted until someone decided to take a look at the evidence.” (Donker van Heel, 2014, p. 51). Some of his jokes

suggest the hard-won wisdom of personal experience: “Sadly, these timeless pieces of advice [from Onchsheshonqy] only refer to sleeping with married women, not women in general.” (Donker van Heel, 2014, p. 70). But the best parts of the book come from his observations of human nature, which are informed by the behavior of people who lived very long ago, but which anyone can relate to now: “...it sometimes also happened that the builder of a new house simply appropriated a path belonging to the house that was already there...Some people are like that.” (Donker van Heel, 2014, p. 146).

In the end, the world we glimpse in this book is surprisingly like our own. Donker van Heel’s close reading of the texts and presentation of this material to a broad audience makes this era more accessible than it ever has been before. It is an ideal read for students of Late Period Egypt, human history, and life itself.

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