

2.31 Scribal palette

Wood.

New Kingdom, late Dynasty 18 – early Dynasty 19,
c. 1330 – 1280 BC.

L. 35.6 cm, W. 5.8 cm, D. 0.9 cm.

This simple but elegant wooden palette is a good example of one of the standard tools of the Egyptian scribe. In the middle is a vertical slot with a movable lid, now missing, for storing the reed pens. Above it are two inkwells, one for black and one for red ink. Although the object probably comes from a tomb it is not a merely ceremonial palette such as have been found in elite burials, but a real tool which has actually been used. This is clear from the remains of red and black ink that have spilled over the edges of the inkwells onto the top surface of the palette.

The wood in the centre of the palette has split and the whole object is slightly warped. In its present condition it consists of two pieces which were once held together by means of two small wooden dowels. Since it is not very likely that the palette was originally made of two separate pieces of wood this is probably the result of a repair; presumably the object had broken in two halves and the edges were at some stage “tidied up” and then rejoined with dowels.

Each of the inkwells is surrounded by the hieroglyphic sign *shen*, which not only means “encircle”, but also represents “everything the sun encircles”, i.e. the universe. This *shen* sign is often found on scribal palettes, but the reason for this is uncertain. Generally speaking the *shen* ring is a protective symbol, and on scribal palettes it may refer to royal protection, for the king’s name was written within a *shen* ring (cartouche). Although not every scribe bore the prestigious title “royal scribe”, all scribes were ultimately in the service of the king. The scribe who “holds the palette freely” has “a powerful office given to him by the king”, he is “one whom the king trusts”.¹ All other professions are inferior to that of the scribe, for he alone records the output of all other occupations. Scribes were well aware of this powerful position and extolled the virtues of their craft in poems which are often found in schoolbooks. Perhaps the *shen*-shaped inkwells even refer to the universal character of the scribal profession; like their patron god Thoth, the “lord of the god’s words” and the inventor of the art of writing, they administered “everything which exists”. Between the inkwells and the slot for the pens is a single line of elegantly carved hieroglyphs which give the



name and title of the owner: “the scribe of the granary of the temple of Amun, Nafy, justified”.² The style of the hieroglyphs date the object to the last decades of the 18th or the beginning of the 19th Dynasty³ and the reference to the temple of Amun makes it likely that it comes from Thebes. The name Nafy is not very common, but unfortunately nothing more is known about this man. Clearly, his training as a scribe had “gained him entrance to treasury and granary, made him receive the shipload at the gate of the granary and issue the offerings on feast days”, as one schoolbook expresses it.

JvD

¹ These and the following quotations are from Papyrus Lansing, transl. M. Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature II* (Berkeley 1976), 168 – 175.

² The epithet “justified” is added to the name of the deceased, but on objects which were ultimately destined to accompany their owner into the hereafter this was often done in advance.

³ See Appendix B for C 14 readings.

