Episode 2

Bex: Welcome back to the Nile Chronicles. You have made it successfully to episode two. In this episode, we are talking about, well, I am talking about, um, literacy. The role of scribes. And I'm rounding off this episode talking about the political and economic power of literate women in society. Now you may be wondering why I'm talking about that last instead of gender roles first before this episode and to me it makes sense in my brain to kind of talk about literacy and literate women before going into gender roles because why not, you know? It makes sense to me. If it doesn't make sense to you, that's okay. We're still here to talk about ancient Egypt and women and give voice to the voiceless.

Now, when it comes to scholarships regarding literacy, I mentioned in the previous episode talking about John Baines, the American Egyptologist, and he talks about literacy quite a bit. And so, I start with his and then I move on to a few other book chapters which I will introduce when I get to them. So, starting with veins, literacy in Egypt was deeply tied to elite status and the state. That's what he says. So... This is very true. Across different scholarships, there were elite scribes and some elite scribes and all of them were men and literacy Was taught by father down to their sons. Um, so it was very patrilineal. And it makes sense that scribes were Elite status because access to literacy and learning how to read and write was not accessible to everybody. So that's why they're elite. And he says, so only a tiny silver sliver of the population, mostly scribes and official, could read and write.

For everyone else, writing was something that they didn't know. Yeah. Could have been mysterious or even sacred in some cases. Those cases being the site of hieroglyphics at temples dedicated to their gods. Baines describes writing in Egypt as part of a system of decorum. So, it wasn't just about communicating ideas like how we think of literacy today, like even in text messages. Um, and in books. It was more about communicating ideas. It was about communicating status. So, since literacy wasn't super accessible to just anybody, if you were literate, you weren't just someone who knew how to read and write. You were somebody who could access royal power, religious rituals, And other types of authority. And this was huge. You wanted to be in the know, if you know what I'm saying. It's like when you have access to that royal power, even if you're just writing down what they say, you know, you're employed by the royals, which is huge. That's like the highest social status in ancient Egyptian society. And you're right there with them alongside them. And I do believe there have been cases of pharaohs being buried alongside their scribes because they considered, um, Super, super important, or at least buried, maybe not alongside, I think that's the wrong, wrong wording, but in the same, in the pyramid, um, with them. And the writing system itself, or the writing systems, as we now know, reinforced that. So, because there were so many different scripts, like

hieroglyphics, For those monumental inscriptions that Middle Egyptian remember. And then there's the hieratic script, which is what the scribes were taught, and that was for everyday religious and administrative texts. And then later on you see Demotic and Coptic and everything. And that was for more routine matters. Each script had its own domain and mastering all of them took years. So in ancient Egypt, This was not your average literacy.

In fact, Baines points out that writing in Egypt was designed to reinforce social stability, Unknown So when Baines talks about the stability and change of language, it's interesting, uh, to say the least because he cites examples of non-literate societies. And he says, in comparative studies, writing is often claimed to be necessary to the cohesion of large societies and to promote their stability to enable them to exist above a certain territorial size. Which is interesting because I do think language is, goes hand in hand with stability. If everybody knows the same language, then you're likely to be able to speak with everybody and keep trade and everything going. Um, so it's really, it's really interesting. Um, the idea of language reinforcing social stability. And I guess it's just literacy was a valuable thing. Um, and knowledge is power and knowledge is power. Something that can be trained. So when Baines talks about the stability, he's really just talking about how language is, um. Crucial to the stability of civilizations, but even then, there's civilizations like the Incas and other Mesoamerican societies that did just fine with low literacy rates. So, I don't know. Now going into scribes, this is where um, my second reading comes in. A book chapter and a book written by Jennifer Cornwell and Hilla Halal Aho comes in. So they shift the spotlight to the world of private writing, particularly in Roman Egypt. Hundreds of years after the time of the pharaohs, but still stepped in that same scribal tradition. So the letters that I'm looking at specifically are during, they're written in Egyptian and Greek, and they're not necessarily, they're written, what, 800 A.D.? So the letters are written well before then, um, because Roman Egypt doesn't start until about thirty CE.

Um... So anyway, I still think it's important to note, uh, because I haven't come across anything that is very specific to scribes in Egypt besides what Bane says. But because they're talking about private writing, I think it's still... Important. Um, so Cromwell and Halla-aho talk about That most private letters during Roman Egypt weren't written by the person signing them. They were written by scribes. Sometimes professionals, sometimes just literate family members who acted as ghost writers for the less literate or illiterate. These scribes didn't just transcribe what was said, they often shaped the style, tone, and even the grammar of the letter. In fact, in many letters from this period, you can actually tell who the scribe was based on handwriting, Or repeated spelling quirks. Some scribes had signatures not unlike the stylistic fingerprints of modern authors. So they give one example of From a man named Dio Skoros. Dioskros, writing from a Roman fort in the desert. He had beautiful handwriting, but his Greek syntax was a mess. This tells us

something important. Writing nicely doesn't mean writing correctly. And that's the truth. Even people who physically wrote letters might have struggled with spelling, grammar, or idiomatic phrasing. And all of these mistakes can also be seen in hieroglyphics early on, especially Griff, um, in the Griffith reading, uh, he Kind of talks about how messy it is and could be. So this is where Cromwell introduces the idea of social scribes. And Baines introduces the idea of sub-elite and elite scribes. So elite scribes were the ones that passed all the tests and became literate in all of the scripts and they were employed by the pharaoh. And then the sub-elite scribes There's not much really to know about them besides they just kind of fell into society and they were literate to some degree.

So again, that's probably where a lot of errors occur. So Cromwell or, um, Hilla Halla-aho talk about this idea of social scribes. And these were people who weren't professionals but still took on writing duties for others in their community. In their community, which I believe is what the sub-elite scribes did, although I don't think there's confirmation or evidence, that's just my theory. So these social scribes helped bridge the literacy gap and their influence shaped how everyday people communicated in writing. So the question is, did this actually work? Most of the time, the author dictated the message to a scribe, slowly, syllable by syllable. The scribe, in turn, would then write it down, often cleaning up the grammar or making stylistic tweets. Scribes did have their own style, which I think is super cool. And that's how we can kind of tell if it was written by a scribe or if it was written by an individual. And in some letters... In the formatting of it, it directly says, I am writing this letter.

Um, and in other ones that are just fragments, we have no idea who wrote them, but based on The scribal style, we can tell if it was a scribe writing it or not based on tweaks. Sometimes though, the scribe did a lot more in the sense that they polished the letters. Uh, there's instances of scribes essentially composing the letter on behalf of the author. Taking basic instructions and turning them into fully crafted texts. And this really was seen at the social level. You would not have seen this happen at This elite level of scribes writing for pharaohs. And now I know this, we're talking about Roman period, but Baines talks about the pharaohs employing scribes to write And they wouldn't, those scribes would not have changed anything. And it's because they're under authority, or they're under rule of that pharaoh, they don't want to mess up. Because who knows what's going to happen to them. What's interesting is that we can often tell when this occurs in this Roman period. Scholars can compare letters written by the same person One handwritten, one dictated, and the difference is obvious.

One letter might be clumsy, direct, and emotional. The other is smooth, formal, full of flourishes. The same person sent it, but it's a different voice. Why? Because the scribe made the executive decision to elevate the message. I have no idea if they actually would have told the person they were writing for or not. Who knows? The kicker, though, is that even in the cases where someone could write for themselves, they might have still used a scribe. Maybe out of convenience or social expectation or because a scribe just made the message sound better. It's like having an ancient Egyptian grammar league, but human. So, rethinking literacy, first, Literacy in ancient Egypt wasn't just a matter of can you read and write. It was a whole social system. It meant navigating scripts, conventions, and social norms. It meant having access to scribes or being one yourself. It meant understanding when to use certain phrases, how to signal respect, and how to make your voice heard. Even if it wasn't your hand holding the pen. And secondly, it reminds us that literacy is always about who gets to speak and who gets to be heard. So the next time you hear somebody mention scribes in Egypt, think beyond temple walls, think beyond those monumental inscriptions.

Think about this gross in the desert, scribes for hire in the busy market streets, and everyday people dictating love, complaints, and business orders one syllable at a time. So that's really what scribes did. Um, and literacy rates, you know, it wasn't high. And Baines himself, this is, I was reading his article, book, I had twenty-nine pages of information, so to speak, and he says this, and I stuck dead in my tracks, okay? Let me tell you. Boy, come on. Sorry, just waiting for these notes to open up. Okay, here we go. He says, and I quote, wills of women are known as well as ones that give women the right to decide on an inheritance. There was a high degree of legal autonomy for women in Egypt, hardly a product of literacy. But at least among the wealthier, written safeguards buttressed it. Most such women were probably not themselves literate. And he cites one of his previous writings that he did with two other scholars. What? I saw myself dead in my tracks. I was like, what do you mean women aren't literate? We have letters that they wrote.

So, I, you know, and previous to this, he talks about writing is significant in the more open-ended, socially important area of law, which was fundamentally in the early extension of literacy and exemplifies the principle of scarcity. And he goes on to talk about the legal documents and he said, women aren't literate. And I'm like, what? Which is crazy. So this is why I did a bit more researching and this is when I came across Edwards and Sheridan And they're both super interesting. So the Edwards article, I believe, is actually a transcription or something. It's somebody giving a speech, somebody giving a presentation, um, And Edwards goes on and gives so many examples of literate women. Um, let me find them and pull them up and we'll get into it. Trust we will. Okay, so it wasn't Edwards that talked about literacy. I did, in fact, misspeak. Um, it's Sheridan. But I'm going to talk about Edwards because she talks about the social and

political position of women in Egypt. And I love the way that she starts this. She says, studying the laws and customs of ancient Egypt from the earliest times to the middle of the Greek period, covering a space that is to say of about 4,200 years. We are inevitably struck by the vast gulf which separates the history of women in the valley of the Nile from the history of women in any other nation of the ancient East. We find her always free, respected, and in the full exercise of personal rights as extensive and as widely recognized as the personal rights of man. She is distinctly his legal and social equal.

Now, I might talk about Edwards more so in the gender roles of everything, but I'm actually just going to talk about her here because why not? So she talks about queens, she talks more so about, she talks about the political position of women, and these are elite women, keep in mind, these aren't just any ordinary women, and most of what we know about women It's about elite women, um, I do hate to say. Or even, like, Or even upper status women we know a lot about. When it comes to ordinary women, there's some literature out there, but it's not nearly as in-depth. And the reason I say that this, I believe, was a presentation is because there's little notes in here that say slide, slide. So anyway. She talks about one of my favorite people in ancient Egypt. In the 18th dynasty, she says, And I quote, to the 18th dynasty belongs also the greatest female figure in Egyptian history, the renowned woman pharaoh, Queen Hatshepsut, or Hatshepsut. Hatsu? I don't know, I've never seen it that way. Who was not only the direct descendant of the previous queen, Queen Hamas Neferari and Amas I, Who reigned in her own right and reigned gloriously.

Queen Hatshepsut has been happily described as the Queen Elizabeth of Egyptian history and she was undoubtedly one of the most extraordinary women in the annals of the ancient East. Queen Hatshepsut. Pharaoh Hatshepsut. She ruled as a man because she wanted to. She wanted to gain that respect. Not because she didn't think she would gain respect of a, of being a woman, but because... She thought... Oh, that's a whole thing, isn't it? I totally lost my train of thought. She ruled as a pharaoh in order to gain respect of people saying that Just because I'm a woman, that doesn't mean I cannot be a pharaoh. And that means I'm gonna do exactly what pharaohs do but as a woman. So she even wore The false beard that pharaohs wore just to prove a point that women could be pharaohs. And I love it. I love the feminism in ancient Egypt. And... Queen Hatshepsut, again, a whole podcast could be dedicated to queens of ancient Egypt beyond just Cleopatra VII. And there's so, and there's so much that Edwards talks about. That these queens and how they legitimize themselves.

But I wanna, I'll, I'll dive into Edwards a little bit more talking about, um, gender roles. So as you can see, women in ancient Egypt is, you could probably tell by my enthusiastic, um, outreach. Or switch of tone of voice there. I love women in ancient Egypt and I love what Sheridan, Jennifer Sheridan did in her article that Not at a loss for words, the economic power of literate women in late antique Egypt because she talks about the plentiful sources of papyri. And she critiques them, saying that they're an inadequate source of evidence for women's literacy because they are products of a world to which women were not privy in large numbers. And I respect that because I don't see that in anywhere else. Um. And she says women, of course, sent and received letters, but this proves nothing about their literacy since they could and did employ scribes and readers. So what Sheridan is saying is that kind of... In late antique Egypt, she gives no dates, um, but she does talk about Roman Egypt, and I'm curious if... What Sheridan is saying kind of backs up the idea of social scribes, uh, that I just talked about. Um, so... Oh my gosh, I forgot about this source. How could I forget? Okay, there's um, the unveiling women in ancient Egypt. I just briefed over that, holy crap, okay. I'm going to stick with Sheridan and then I'm going to go back to that because Sheridan's is so much better.

This episode is all over the place. Um, anyway. Okay. Um, where was I? Oh, yes. Okay. So women employed scribes and readers and, you know, that reinforced the idea of, like, the social scribe. And... There was an increase in the ratio of illiterate women to illiterate men in the papyri during the first and second centuries CE. So I do believe we're at the Roman period in this time. But she says rates of female literacy in Egypt seem to have changed over time. And this would make sense. In the Ptolemaic era, the education of girls was common, at least in literate Alexandria, where, of course, a number of female authors were well known who could serve as role models. However, with the coming of Romans, female literacy rates dropped off only to increase again in the second and third centuries CE. Certainly there are a number of factors at play here, including where a woman lived and what social class she belonged to. So that's what Sheridan says, and that brings into a whole other aspect of the different... The different states of ancient Egypt. Because you had Alexandria, but you had everywhere up and down the Nile. Um, and all of those places were different. It's kind of like how... The city-states in ancient Greece, they were all so vastly different based on the geography. And you would think ancient Egypt is relatively flat because it's a desert, which means you're like, how... How are women in Alexandria? How do they have access to literacy education? But women somewhere else don't.

Well, yeah. It's a desert, it's huge, and you know, the Nile, boats, that's really the only way to navigate. But anyway. Um, it's not surprising that literacy rates in women dropped off with the coming Romans because we know how Romans, well, Romans, Roman women, uh, And the way that Romans felt about women, if you're interested and you know nothing about it, do some research. Because, again, it could be a whole other podcast. But anyway, um... She says, since we are dealing with an imperfect body of data what appear as changes in the literacy rates of women over time may just be distortions of facts. Which is true. So... She continues, and I'm kind of just reading what she's writing, um, because she writes it beautifully. She says, the literate women we do know about are statistical abnormalities. That is, they cannot be used in a general argument concerning female literacy rates since they are such a deviation from the norm. And she goes on to talk about their papyri. And Sheridan focuses on one particular literate woman, and we know for sure that she was literate. And she lived between 320 and 350 CE. And she's mentioned in forty-two documents, five of which are written wholly or partially. Uh, by herself. So this woman's name is Aurelia Charit. Charit? C-H A-R-I-T-E. Charit? Charit? I love the name Aurelia. I think that's beautiful. Anyway, so this woman is mentioned several times and she's written several things. And two of those, what, forty-two documents specifically mention her literacy. And this is an example of a woman, a few woman's signatures to survive from Greco-Roman antiquity. So, as far as where she was from and what she looked like, it's near to impossible to conclude anything without the body. Um, if we're just looking at the words on the page or the names, It's, it's hard to conclude anything about the ethnicity of, of these individuals, because many of them have Greek names, which may have been Egyptian in origin. So who really knows? Um. But yeah, so, Aurelia, uh, she was, she was literate and she understood the importance of literacy in economic affairs. Let's get into it a little bit more. Let's, let's keep going on this bandwagon. Unknown So background about Aurelia, uh, she was born into an affluent landed upper class of Hermo, Hermopolis. There we go. At the end of the third century CE. And her mother was the daughter of a city councilor and her mother herself was literate. By 1314 CE, she married, they had a son, um, Asclepiades. Blah, blah, blah, blah. Um, so eight documents, eight of the forty-two documents record her leasing property to others. Um, so they say she let farm, let farmland, foddered land and orchards. A number of her tenants appear repeatedly in the documents and must have had long-term business. Relationships with her according to a few documents. She also lent them money. Um.

The forty-two documents are either written by her or mention her literacy. The number itself is not significant of the forty-two documents and the dossier. twenty-four are addressed to her, eight are lists, one is a letter written by her mother, and two are of questionable content. Of the just mentioned literacy documents, the only one that contains a definitive date is a receipt for a paid lease dated 348 C.E. So in the opening lines of that receipt, she's referred to as daughter of Amazonius from splendid

Hermopolis. A knower of letters acting without a guardian and with the ius liberorum. And I love... I love how she's described, she's described as a knower of letters. And that sounds, that might sound a little bit goofy, right? It's just like you're a person who knows letters. Yippee, you know, good for you. But I'm like, a knower of letters. It kind of has a nice ring to it. It kind of has a, I know something you don't, uh, type vibe to it. And in the Greek, um. Nowhere of letters is translated as Eudea grapamata. Gra-ma-ta. Beautiful, again. Um, and her claims to literacy appear to be genuine. Um, Sheridan continues to say, her hand is neat but not elegant, the hand of a literate, not a semi-literate person. Her letters are written with definitive strokes indicating that she wrote somewhat regularly and without hesitation. AKA, in the words of me, she was a confident, she was a confident woman when it came to writing.

Um, if she had those definitive strokes going, um, she was practiced enough in writing to To have some letter combinations such as alpha iota and epsilon iota, she used abbreviations and symbols, which again, displays her comfort in writing. When I read that, I didn't even consider When people use abbreviations and symbols, that that's an indication that they're comfortable with writing. Like, they're so comfortable with it, they just abbreviate things. And I think that's such an interesting point. That is made in this article. Um, because that's like, it's just something I didn't consider, but I think it's super important because yeah, if you're not comfortable with writing, then you're not going to abbreviate anything because you run that possibility of being wrong. So. She was just so cool. Even though she was a confident writer, that doesn't mean she was a great speller. Her documents show some fairly typical misspellings and she regularly confused epsilon iota for just iota. For example. And her and her mother's writing styles are strikingly similar. And You know, Aurelia probably had that luxury of her mother being able to educate her. Um. And yeah, I mean, she's a knower of letters. Cut her some slack if she spells some things wrong, am I right? So, um, Sheridan continues and says, we of course know that she was literate because she identifies herself as such. Um, and she specifies it And we know this because other literate women give us a clue. All women who, like Aurelia, are described as knower of letters. A-U-D-A-G-R-A-M-A-T-A. All parties to contracts, documents, which would require that literacy of parties to be specified. Um, and she, and Sheridan goes on and on, and it's... Um, oh yes, okay, here we, here we go. Sorry, I just scrolled down to my notes here.

There's another person in 263 CE, another woman called, um, Lolia. And she writes a petition requesting that she be granted exemption from guardianship according to the rights of Lex Julia. So she says, This is, this is starting to give voice to those letters. Laws have been made long ago. Most eminent. Prefect. Which give authority to women who are honored with the right of three children to be independent. Oh, ah, like, and um. Able to write easily, fully assured, I appeal to your highness with this application that I be able without hindrance to perform all businesses I henceforth will transact. This, yeah, this is

really interesting, um, and I love it. So since literate people were, were higher up in society and What this woman is arguing is like, hey, my kids, they're fantastically literate. So much so fantastically. Is that a word? I don't know. But she's like, my kids are extremely literate. They're good at what they do. They know how to read. They know how to write. They do it so easily that I don't need a man. I don't need, I don't, I don't need a man. To, um, run my everyday business, um, operations. Maybe not business operations, but I don't need a man to conduct deals and trades for me because look, I have these, these kids that can help me with it. So therefore. I want to run all businesses that she transacts and I just, I just think that's a cool loophole, truly. If you don't want to become literate yourself, make your kids do it. Um.

And so Sheridan says the original editors of this papyrus thought it was interesting that literacy might be required for the grant of eos liberarium, but it has long been recognized that this privilege never did require literacy. But this woman is not claiming that literacy is a legal necessity for a woman to act without a guardian. She's saying that by being able to read and write, she's particularly capable of acting on her own behalf. And that's Sheridan's, uh, deduction of this letter. I love it and I fully agree with it because, yeah, I have nothing else to say on that. And she's the perfect example of a woman who understood the practical economic advantages of literacy. And there's no social security. Social stigma that is associated with illiterate women. So she's just like, I know what I'm doing. You can't screw me over because, you know, in economic scenarios, people, people screw each other over all the time. Um, so Laliah, she knew what was up. Um, and Sheridan actually points this out by saying we have little direct evidence for illiterates being cheated. However, common sense dictates that this must have happened regularly. Like, yeah, you're going to try to get more out of people. Um, and screw them over.

And then, uh, oh, there's just so much more that Sheridan talks about. Um, but she returns to a really, uh, she writes, um, saying she was an active, she was an active literate writing her own documents that would have been seen by others. Um, The preceding argument suggests that her choice of exercising her literacy was probably not social. Perhaps it might have been economic, she was very rich, had a lot to lose, and as a widow throughout her whole adult life. Since being identified as a knower of letters, her documents speak volumes to those who were collecting taxes, leasing land from her, or borrowing money from her. The message is clear. And I love this. I love what Sheridan writes. Um, she says, the message is clear. I know what you're writing. So don't think you can get away with anything. That is such a power move as an ancient Egyptian woman right there being like, you cannot screw me over because I know exactly what you're writing. That's just epic, truly. Um, And she says the knower of letters is clearly gender specific during this period because it's only applied to women. Um. And that's. That's really all that Sheridan says that I want to touch on. Um, but truly if you're not to read

any other document in my bibliography or take a look at Sheridan's, um. It's so interesting and it's the whole reason why I'm like, yeah, ancient Egyptian women, they knew what they were doing. Here's at least this one case. And the, I mean, this overall question of like, were women literate? And there's two cases of this, Aurelia and Lolia. And- Yeah, women were literate. Do they employ scribes? Sure. But at the end of the day, they knew what they were doing to some degree, so. That's that for this episode. It's kind of been all over the place, but episode three is all about gender roles and status in ancient Egyptian society, so I'm looking forward to it. Unknown Until next time on the Nile Chronicles.