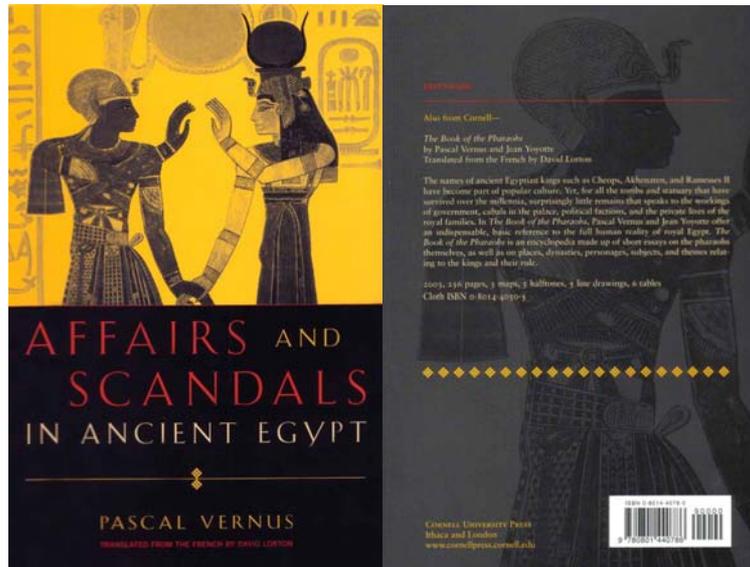


Vernus, P. 2003. *Affairs and scandals in ancient Egypt*. – Ithaca/London, Cornell University Press

Book review by S.M. van Roode



On a winter's day, a group of workmen who had not been paid for months, walked into the administrative centre responsible for distributing the wages and demanded that their wages. They returned day after day and their complaint was passed on to higher officials until the vizier himself had to interfere. Finally they received their payment. Detailed reports have been found on this matter; they record the earliest known strike in history. Its setting: ancient Egypt.

From the vast majority of books on ancient Egypt, a picture emerges of a people capable of creating exquisite art, that mastered techniques to build impressive temples and craft fine jewelry, and composed refined literature in equally pleasing writing. One would almost be tempted to think the Egyptians lived in a permanent state of bliss. Yet, their writings show not only wisdom texts and prayers, but they also convey records of trials and complaints of ordinary people. They speak of social unrest, corruption and conspiracies. In his book 'Affairs and scandals in ancient Egypt', Pascal Vernus discusses some of the better-known cases. The result is a vivid picture of a people with surprisingly modern problems.

The title of the book is slightly misleading. 'ancient Egypt' promises a range of affairs throughout the long history of this civilization, but in fact only the New Kingdom, and more precisely the time span of the Ramessids, is discussed. This appears to be a translation error, however, since the original French title indeed mentions only the Ramessids. Each chapter quotes, where possible, the original texts and at the end of the book extensive notes are included. It is a pity however, that the illustrations are poor, sometimes even miserable. Sometimes, the line drawings look as if they have been enlarged too much, resulting in rather crude pictures.

The book starts with an account of the Theban tomb robberies, followed by the strikes of the workmen working on the royal tomb, an account of the workman Paneb in particular, crimes on Elephantine, and the harem conspiracy. The book ends with a chapter on the crisis of values in the New Kingdom. In the book, one will read about Paneb, who was a worker on the royal tomb, and who committed a whole range of crimes varying from theft and lies to rape and murder. One of the queens of Ramses III actually tried to have him murdered in favour of her son; a part of the population of Thebes was engaged in robbing the tombs in the hills on the West Bank, and a priest on Elephantine stole from the temple.

Although most of the cases are well-known to Egyptologists, it is without a doubt an interesting book to read for both Egyptologists and generally interested people alike. For Egyptologists, it offers an overview of the most famous cases in one book. For those who would like to read more on ancient Egypt, this book will provide a glimpse of a world behind the finely crafted artefacts and stately kings and queens. The discussed situations sometimes are remarkably recognizable; the book shows us some 'flesh and blood' persons with 'flesh and blood' problems. All in all, this book will prove an entertaining read, especially for the generally interested reader.

Vernus, P. 2003. *Affairs and scandals in ancient Egypt*. – Ithaca/London, Cornell University Press. 256 pp. ISBN 0-8014-4050-5. Price € 29.95/£17.95. Cloth.