Law in Ancient Egypt
Law in Ancient Egypt

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Preface

This book is intended to serve as a general introduction to law in ancient Egypt. Professional Egyptologists may consider much of this material too general, and they may find fault with my reliance on sources in English (rather than French and German). If so, I hope that its breadth, organization, and simplicity provide a clarity and scope that make up for its shortcomings. In this type of work one always strives to strike a delicate balance between exhaustive specificity on the one hand (to keep the scholars happy) and simplistic generality on the other (to keep the general readers happy). For good or ill that is the balance that I have tried to achieve. This may be as difficult a task as the deceased Egyptian had in pursuing a balance between his soul and the justice of Ma‘at. Nevertheless, I decided that the game was worth the candle. Therefore, I have endeavored to present a work that is both sufficiently detailed and extensive to interest and assist scholars and also sufficiently general yet simple enough to educate and enlighten students and generalists. In short, I hope that Egyptologists, historians, legal historians, students, and educated layreaders find this book beneficial.

Several individuals have helped me in the preparation of this book. Dr. Janet Johnson of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago and Dr. Richard Jasnow of Johns Hopkins University read an early draft and provided me with helpful comments and criticisms. My father, Bob VerSteeg, read the manuscript when it was near completion, and set me straight on many matters of prose style, grammar, punctuation, and the like. I did an appreciable amount of my work while on sabbatical at the University of London’s Institute for Advanced Legal Studies in the Fall of 1999. There the staff and librarians were quite helpful. It was in London also that my son, Carl, encouraged me and kept my spirits afloat even when my laptop went to visit Osiris. To all these people (and many more I’m sure) I owe a great deal of thanks.

More than once the Board of Trustees of New England School of Law and Dean John O’Brien provided funding through Honorable James R. Lawton Summer Research Stipends. This book would not have been possible without those stipends, and I thank the Board and Dean O’Brien for
their generous support. Portions of this book have previously appeared in journal articles (or parts thereof). Much of the material relating to The Tale of the Eloquent Peasant appeared in Law in Ancient Egyptian Fiction, 24 Georgia J. of Int’l & Comparative Law 27 (1994). Most of Chapter 3 is taken from The Machinery of Law in Pharaonic Egypt: Organization, Courts, & Judges on the Ancient Nile, Cardozo J. of Int’l & Comparative Law (2001). And most of Chapter 4 is taken from Legal Procedure and the Law of Evidence in Ancient Egypt, 9 Tulane J. of Int’l & Comparative Law 233 (2001). I appreciate the editors of those journals allowing me to reuse material originally published by them for the present work.

For the sake of consistency and clarity I have standardized most of the spellings of ancient words and names (even in quoted material and titles of works). For example, I have preferred “Horemhab” to “Har-em-hab”). Similarly, I have referred to Egyptian dynasties (even changing quoted material) with Arabic ordinal numerals (e.g., 4th Dynasty) rather than either Roman numerals (e.g., Dynasty IV) or spelled-out (e.g., Fourth Dynasty). For dates and chronology I generally followed those given by Nicholas Grimal in his A History of Egypt.