Anatolian Hieroglyphic Writing and Meta-Writing

The Name of Kubaba

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Abstract. This contribution discusses the writing of the name of the goddess Kubaba. In its fullest form, her name is marked with the classifier for "god" next to full phonetic writing of Kubaba as *ku-pa-pa-*. Curiously, most spellings include a bird sign (AVIS) after the first syllable, *ku*. This paper addresses the spelling, which seems to break with the current understanding of how Anatolian hieroglyphic writing functioned. It is argued that this particular writing exceeds the recording of linguistic content with the bird sign, which is to be understood as meta-writing, i.e., a visual comment on the writing.[1]

Keywords. Kubaba, Anatolian Hieroglyphic, Sign use and Function, Meta-Writing.

1. Introduction

The Anatolian hieroglyphic (AH) script is a mixed logo-syllabic writing system. Accordingly, the signs of writing have semantic and/or phonetic value. Semantic signs function as either logogram—to be read phonetically—or classifier—a silent marker of a semantic category. Syllabic signs are used to indicate phonetic sequences ranging from parts of to full words. Semantic and phonetic signs may be used on their own or in combination. Words can thus be represented in multiple ways

across the semantography-phonography continuum. As the following picture illustrates, a single word (here: Luwian *hawis*, sheep), can be expressed in several ways (fig. 1):

– either by a semantic sign functioning as a logogram: OVIS
– in a mixed logo-syllabic writing of varying length, with the phonetic writing always starting from the word end: OVIS-*sá*; OVIS-*wa/i-sá*
– in phonetic writing only: *há-wa/i-sá*
– or, last but not least, combining a semantic sign functioning as a classifier with full phonetic writing: (OVIS)*há-wa/i-sá*
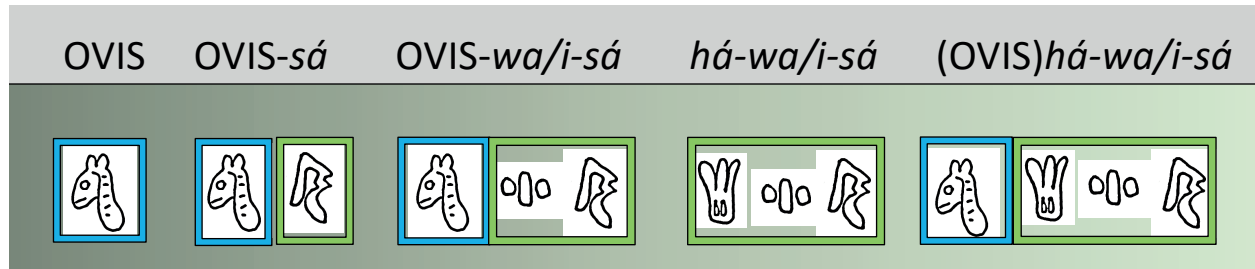

Fig. 1. The Semantography-Phonography Continuum

The fact that the historical development of the script attests full phonetic writings before their combination with a semantic classifier suggests that the original users of the script probably arrived through trial and error at an understanding which has recently been proven by modern neuro-science: namely that combining semantic and phonetic information offers more support for an effective reading process than using just one of these two channels.[2]

2.   Breaking the Pattern

Despite a high level of regularity, at a closer look, the surviving AH text corpus clearly preserves instances where writing deviates from the standard principles elucidated above. This article will address one particular writing which, while understandable, has long been acknowledged as awkward, yet not been examined from the vantage point of writing systems research. The name of the goddess Kubaba is commonly spelled as (DEUS)*ku*-AVIS-*pa-pa*-[plus nominal ending]. The divine classifier DEUS at the beginning of the word is unproblematic, as is the phonetic spelling *ku-pa-pa* for Kubaba, given that the AH script has no option but to use the voiceless series for the (otherwise non-existent) voiced counterparts, i.e., *pa* for /*ba*/. Curious, meanwhile, is the use of the bird sign AVIS (L128), both as regards its position and its use in the first place. Phonetic writings are not normally interrupted by other signs—how should the bird be read? Normally, hieroglyphic signs have a maximum of two readings, namely a semantic value, and derived from it by acrophony, a

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2   On the historical development, cf. Payne 2015: 32–34; on the reading process, cf. Dehaene 2009, esp. 38–41.

phonetic value. Given that the writing of the name of Kubaba appears complete without the bird sign, one might even entertain a heretical approach: should it be read? If we allow this last question, we are faced with three options:

1. The bird sign represents a phonetic syllable to be read
2. The bird sign represents a semantic sign: (a) a logogram, to be read in Luwian; or (b) a classifier, to indicate a category, guiding the reading process
3. The bird sign is not a sign of writing, and should not be "read."

Let us first address option (1). The established late phonetic value, zi_4,[3] for the sign L128 makes little sense in reading the sequence (DEUS)*ku*-AVIS-*pa-pa*-, and thus cannot be intended here. Postulating another phonetic value for the sign, either as an addition or a precursor to the established one, would simply exchange one problem of this reading for another. How, then, about option (2)? If the bird was a semantic sign, could it represent a logogram?[4] The existence of full phonetic writing rather suggests that it should function as a classifier, just as the sign DEUS, which indicates that *Kubaba* belongs to the "divine" category. In general, it would not be unusual to have two classifiers, i.e., DEUS and AVIS. Yet in the writing under discussion, the unparalleled position of a second classifier AVIS outside a linear sequence with the first classifier, instead placed within the phonetic spelling, would need explaining.

3. Ligatures

Before returning to the question of how to read the bird sign, the question of ligature writing and its relevance in this spelling needs addressing. The standard transliterations of the name of Kubaba in inscriptions and on seals indicates instances of ligature and of clear separation, indicated with either a plus or a hyphen. Having checked all instances against the publication photos, I cannot concur everywhere with the standard transliterations but arrive at the following pattern for the 91 examples studied:

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3   Cf. Hawkins 2000: 32.

4   Within the context of a personal name on a seal, it has been argued that the sign represents the kukula-bird, thus to be understood as a logogram with a Luwian reading of *kukula-* (D'Alfonso 2009). While this works for the seal in question, *kukula-* would be problematic in reading Kubaba, and a derived value *ku-* alone would conflict with zi_4 and is thus no viable option. Even if accepted as a redundant repetition of the syllable *ku*, the rare parallel for redundant double writing of the phonetic sequence in the use of another bird sign (*133), *ara/i*, (cf. Payne forthcoming) differs in some significant details. The redundancy of this spelling is emphatic, as is the differential iconicity of integrating the double bars of the vowel *a* into the bird's wing (on differential iconicity, cf. Stauder 2018). In my opinion, the use of the sign AVIS in the name of Kubaba does not conform to the same pattern, as even the instances which show ligature of *ku* and the bird, do not result in an integration into a single shape but rather show distinctly single signs, albeit touching. It will be argued that the bird serves a different function altogether.

24 show ligature (of which 2 seals)[5]	24 %
45 do not show ligature (of which 5 seals)[6]	51 %
10 possibly show ligature (photo not good enough to decide)[7]	12 %
12 remain uncertain (no or bad photo)[8]	13 %

Thus half of all attestation do not show ligature whereas only a quarter do. If we exclude the uncertain examples from the equation, the percentages are even more strongly in favour of non-ligature writing (two vs. one third). There are several possible ligatures, not all of which can be indicated by the transliteration, i.e. when the ligature occurs between the classifier DEUS and a following sign:[9]

(1) DEUS+*ku*+AVIS	15 examples	most frequent ligature
(2) DEUS+*ku*	4 examples[10]	possibly but not necessarily a question of space (two or three signs above each other)
(3) DEUS+AVIS	2 examples	only attested in handwritten writing
(4) AVIS+*sa*	2 examples	the bird sits with its feet perched on the archaized *sa*-sign[11]
(5) *ku*+AVIS	1 example	The DEUS sign is placed to the left of this sequence

The variety of ligatures attested across the samples studied, as well as the dominance of non-ligature writing suggests that existence and form of ligature were not used to encode relevant meaning. Furthermore, the fact that option (4) seems to explore the pictorial potential in using another sign of writing as the perch for the bird, as a tree branch might serve in real life, could also be taken in support of this interpretation.

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5   KARKAMIŠ A21 § 1; 3; A24a2+3 § 9; A13a–c § 1; 5; A18i; A29k; A12 § 3; A13d § 7a; A14a § 9; A14b § 4; A11b+c § 9; 16; 18c; 25; A2+3 § 23; A6 § 21; POTOROO 2a; 6b; GULBENKIAN seal; BEIRUT § 3; ALEPPO 2 § 26; BOROWSKI seal 1; MALATYA 13.

6   ANCOZ 1 § 2; ANKARA § 11; BABYLON 2 § 4a; HOGARTH seal 1; PORADA seal; KAYSERI § 11; MARAŞ 10 l. 1; KARABURUN § 8; 10; KARKAMIŠ A11a § 7; 26; A18e § 2; 3; 6; A18j; A31+ § 1; 3; 7; 15; A4a § 13; A15b § 12; KARKAMIŠ fragments A19j1, l. 1; l. 1–2; A27hh, l. 2; ANCOZ 5 § 1; ANCOZ 7 § 4; BOYBEYPINARI 1 § 10; BOYBEYPINARI 2 § 1; 8a; 10; 20; TELL AHMAR 2 § 2; ÇIFTLIK § 9; KÂHTA 1 § 1; KULULU 1 § 11; GELB § 4; DELAPORTE seal; HOGARTH seal 2; NINIVEH seal; SULTANHAN § 32; KULULU 5 § 1; BULGARMADEN § 4; 17; ISTANBUL ("ATHENS") § 3; SAMSAT 3.

7   KARKAMIŠ A25a § 6; A25b § 3; A30h § 1; A15b § 1; A23 § 3; 10; A26a1+2 § c; A20a1 § 2; A6 § 20; TELL AHMAR 1 § 2.

8   KARKAMIŠ A15e l. 1; A26 d l. 2; A4b § 4; 6; N1 § 4; Stone Bowl § 1; ALEPPO 7 § 3; KÖRKÜN § 3; CEKKE § 24; 27; TULEIL 2 § d; TELL AHMAR 6 § 2.

9   Because in transliteration, the classifier is already separated from other signs by brackets.

10   Two of which break off after the *ku*, so could also have belonged to the first category.

11   It remains impossible to know whether this reinterprets the sign as an object from the real world, i.e., some kind of footbar, or whether the bird should be understood perched on a sign of writing.

4.   Birds

The hieroglyphic script contains more than one bird, which the sign list separates into eight entries (L127–L135). It has already been suggested that the signs AVIS$_{1-3}$ should be identified with different birds, and thus represent different readings for the logograms.[12] I have discussed the bird renderings of the sign AVIS (L128) collected for this article with Thorsten Trede who draws an even more differentiated picture. According to him, these attestations represent more than a single variety of bird, based on the relationship of wing to tail and the types of feathers, yet might be loosely grouped together as birds of prey. This raises questions regarding sign identity—and at the same time contrasts sharply with their occurrence in stable, repeated instances of the same name, which would lead a reader to expect sign identity.

Is it possible to disregard the graphic differences as free, i.e., meaningless variation? This seems unlikely in the context of the script having several bird signs to represent different logograms according to the bird names behind the animals depicted. One might reasonably expect that also different birds of prey would have had different names, and that these would have been familiar to the ancient scribe. Most likely, such a person would have been more familiar with his natural surroundings than the average modern reader.

5.   Writing and Meta-Writing

The simplest explanation that integrates the different shapes of birds is therefore one which does not require sign identity. In fact, it does not even require reading, either. The diversity of form is resolved if we adopt a different approach altogether, namely if we understand the bird as *showing*—rather than writing—the domain of the goddess Kubaba as "Mistress of Wild Animals" (cf. the Greek Πότνια θηρῶν). In this interpretation, the bird looks like a sign of writing (and theoretically, it could of course be one) but is in fact not used as such but as a pictorial element, which should be understood as a visual meta-discourse on the written form of the divine name, (DEUS)*ku-pa-pa*, i.e., it is not writing but a commentary on writing.
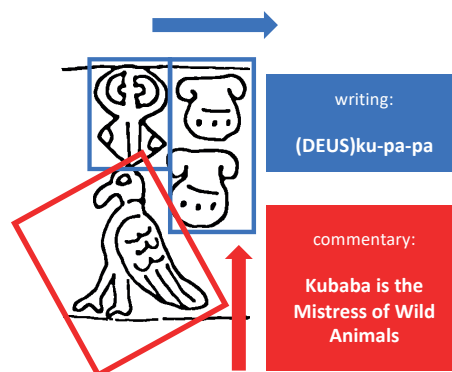

writing:

(DEUS)ku-pa-pa

commentary:

Kubaba is the Mistress of Wild Animals

Fig 2. KARKAMIŠ A11b+c, § 18c, Kubaba

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12   Hawkins 2005: 298.

As such, it realizes the iconic potential of hieroglyphic signs in the opposite direction to that expected by the reader. For the reader, this is a stumbling block, as it interferes with the reading process. The position within the divine name makes sense on two levels, firstly, it evokes the domain of the goddess as literally being within her (reach). Secondly, the fact that is disrupts the reading process simultaneously indicates its intended function on the level of meta-discourse. Like hieroglyphic signs of writing, the bird explores the tight interrelationship between pictorial writing and representative art, yet in this instance favours the latter. Most likely, it carries some additional connotations on top of this, which escape us: ornamental, ludic and religious come to mind. In fact, this type of visual commentary might be more widely-spread across the surviving text corpus, as it hides behind what looks like "normal" hieroglyphic writing. Another example comes to mind, which shows a similar strategy for writing in the name of another goddes, namely Ba'alat from Hama (HAMA 8, § 2). One single writing of her name replaces the expected divine classifier with a pair of hands which are shown to encompass the first phonetic sign of her name. As already pointed out by Hawkins, this could plausibly indicate the protective qualities of the goddess.[13]

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13   Hawkins 2000: 410.