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Exploring the Hieroglyphic Sign after Champollion[1]

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Abstract. Through a review of the approaches and achievements of our two hundred years of study into Egyptian hieroglyphic writing, we will first explore the analysis and classification of signs, the list of signs and palaeographies, as well as the relations of the hieroglyphic signs with representation, with an emphasis on the use of the figurative dimension of the sign. We will then study the expedients employed by writing in order to achieve a high degree of effectiveness for the sign: its colour, shape, mobility, smell and combination of different elements or its association with other signs. The question will be asked whether a sign needs to be read or visible in order to be effective. At last, the performative value of Egyptian writing, its origin and its use will bring to light the role that writing indeed plays in maintaining the harmony of creation.

Keywords. sign analysis, classification, palaeography, effectiveness, performative writing.

Champollion had succeeded in grasping the compositional richness of the hieroglyphic script, which was found to be capable of combining phonetic and figurative aspects at various levels.[2] It was a discovery all the more admirable because barely conceivable at the time, as the iconic appearance of the signs led rather to a symbolic approach, which did not allow for the possibility of a reading.[3]

Since then, other figurative scripts[4] such as Mayan, Aztec or Naxi have been acknowledged as *real* scripts, i.e., capable of communicating a discourse, a transcription of the word. For a long time,

1 Based on a lecture given on May 18th 2022, at the colloquium "Autour de Champollion – Deux cents ans après" at the Bibliothèque nationale de France in Paris.

2 Champollion le Jeune 1836: chap. 2, p. 22.

3 Thomas Young would be the first to assign phonetic values to some hieroglyphic signs in 1819, but he thought that phonograms were not wholly Egyptian, but only used to write Greek names (I thank R. de Spens for this point).

4 Beaux, Pottier, Grimal 2009; Houston & Stauder 2020.

this figurative dimension was granted as a concession to cultures that had not yet experienced the "triumph of the alphabet",[5] which represented the indisputable indicator of "civilisation" for the linguists of the time.

Today, we would no longer think in such terms. These scripts are explored in their richness, and their figurative dimension has received increasing attention over recent years. Signs are now studied as complex units, both phonetic and figurative.[6] However, have we really been able to approach the hieroglyphic script without being influenced by our own cultural bias?

Such an inquiry is daring. Have two hundred years really allowed us to advance our understanding of the writing of a remarkably rich culture, which developed over more than three millennia? Linguistic evolution is to be expected over such an extended period of time. From the dawn of a script, up until its sunset, many changes may occur. Hieroglyphic writing was born in the very first dynasties as a complex system,[7] as described by Jochem Kahl, and it later proceeded with the loss of compositional rules, adding pseudo-hieroglyphs, omitting signs or writing them backwards, such as in the Temple of Esna.[8] We witness this system crumbling, and progressively becoming less employed after the Roman conquest, before eventually disappearing in the 4th century CE, as analysed by John Baines.[9]

Over this vast period of time, not only did writing, society and belief systems change, but so did language. Thus, when we speak of the "hieroglyphic system," we are immediately struck by the magnitude of its implications: we are either tempted to simplify it in order to give a general description, or we risk being overwhelmed by its diachronic ramifications. This system, however—notwithstanding a few predictable adjustments—remained consistent throughout most of its history.

I would thus like to begin by reviewing the approaches and achievements of our two hundred years of study into this script. In doing so, I will only be able to briefly touch upon those different research paths that may hopefully disclose the beauty and sophistication of this writing, as well as its purpose.

1. An analytical approach

The genius of hieroglyphic writing consists in the fact that it is unlimited in its compositional potential. There exists no such thing as a finite list of signs, since the scribe could, at his leisure, model and complete words with new signs. No one will ever be able to provide an exhaustive list—and yet, the writing is legible.

5 Klock-Fontanille 2020: 4, § 2.

6 Polis 2008: 21–67; Polis & Rosmorduc 2015: 149–174; Houston & Stauder 2020.

7 Kahl 1994: 22 and 105–111. See also a general introduction by Silverman 2011: 203–209.

8 Sauneron 1975; 1982.

9 Houston, Baines, Cooper 2003: 435–450.

This is due to the fact that although a basic set of some 700 signs can be traced in many written compositions,[10] these signs could evolve and acquire new phonetic or semantic value, and the scribe could always—as far as the strictly figurative non-phonetic signs were concerned—create, enrich, and refine his thoughts by making use of new signs. On their part, the readers were able to understand the signs not only in virtue of the context or cultural values they shared with the scribe, but precisely because of the figurative dimension of the signs themselves.

For instance, a zoomorphic sign rarely corresponds to a specific animal, according to our taxonomy. If we are to identify a zoomorphic sign, we should first determine its semantic field and isolate—by means of several examples—its characteristic features. Then, we can ask ourselves what could be a plausible identification.

For example, the scribe could choose, according to his social environment and experience, the reptile that best illustrated, in his eyes, the concept of "multitude", expressed by the word *ḫȝ* and whose sign takes on the shape of a gecko or a lizard, and, at times, even specifically a salamander (fig. 1).[11] He could likewise choose to combine the traits of animals that shared a relevant, distinctive feature, corresponding to the essential meaning of the sign. The L2 hieroglyph is a fitting example, as it is the result of combining traits typical of bees, wasps and hornets, all insects with a powerful stinger. Identifying this combination makes it possible to single out and emphasise the stinger—and perhaps, as Linda Evans points out,[12] to understand that the designation of the king as *bjty* might be suggestive of his power, in that he would be "the one who can sting with his stinger".

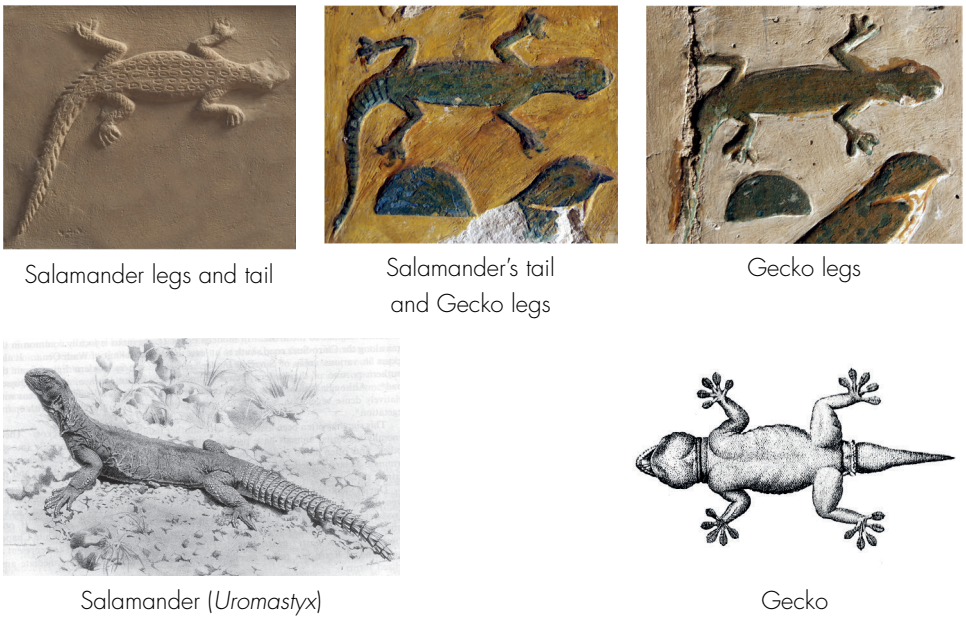

Fig. 1. Selection of distinctive features belonging to either or both Gecko/Salamander to express the concept of "multitude" (examples from the white chapel of Sesostris I at Karnak (photo A. Chéné), from the temple of Hatshepsut at Deir el-Bahari (photo N. Grimal) and from Anderson 1898: pl. XIV, and the *Description de l'Égypte* 1809: pl. 5).

10 Collombert 2007: 15–28.

11 Beaux & Goodman 1992: 125–134; see also Guilhou 2009: 1–25.

12 Evans 2016–2018: 11–16; see also Meeks 2010: 273–304.

1.1. Analysis and classification of signs

It could be said that hieroglyphic signs range from the entirely phonetic to the entirely figurative, passing through all possible combinations and degrees of semantic transcription.

The more we learn about ancient Egypt, the more we realise that things are not as simple as they seem. Texts can be read on several levels. In a given context, a sign may be read phonetically and still retain its figurative dimension as active on another level of reading, which is accessed by means of contexts or shared metaphorical references. These may be strictly visual or graspable through the semantic values suggested by the phonetic reading of the neighbouring signs.[13]

In the spirit of analytical classification, scholars have sought to describe the complexity and richness of the combinational system, such as, in recent years, Stéphane Polis through his research and the creation of the *Thot Sign List* database.[14] In a similar fashion, in her publications and in the *iClassifier* database,[15] Orly Goldwasser has focused on those "determinatives" renamed "classifiers," which are key in understanding how the ancient Egyptians conceived their world. These studies aimed not only at delving into the Egyptian system, but also at being part of a more universal linguistic reflection, both necessary and remarkable.

We should, moreover, mention the work of Gérard Roquet, whose reading texts with a careful eye to prosody led him to identifying in the sign a potential prosodic marker, considerably refining our understanding of the encoding of a text. Accordingly, the presence of a sign would no longer be deemed the result of chance, but rather, it would indicate that the sign had been used by the scribe as a prosodic key for the reader.[16]

It should also be borne in mind that the "system" evolved, as one might expect, between the Old Kingdom and the end of Pharaonic civilisation. For example, classification became more rigid after the Old Kingdom. In that respect, the way of classifying the divine or certain toponyms in the *Pyramid Texts* as compared to the *Coffin Texts* is significant:[17] in the former corpus, determinatives are mostly referring to the specificity of the god, and its generic identification as a "divinity" is only occasional, whereas in the latter corpus, there is a quasi-systematic employment of generic divine classifiers. Thus, the name of the goddess Uret-hekau, paired in the *Pyramid Texts* with the sign of the white crown  S2 or red crown S4 depicted on a basket—a *specific* determinative—is found exclusively matched with *generic* classifiers within *Coffin Texts*, the sign of the seated woman  B1—underlining her gender—, that of the erect cobra I12—indicating a female deity—or that of the seated god A40—a marker of divinity.

13 Vernus 2003: 196–218.

14 Klinkenberg & Polis 2018: 9–56; Polis 2023: https://thotsignlist.org/About.

15 See specifically Goldwasser 2002, and her database iClassifier https://www.archaeomind.net/about.

16 Roquet 2016.

17 Beaux 2004a: 43–56; Thuault 2018: 7–22. See also Shalomi-Hen 2000.

Similar results emerge from a study conducted by Simon Thuault on 3 toponyms occurring 93 times in the Pyramid Texts and the Coffin Texts: the variety of classifiers used in the first corpus—five—as opposed to the only two employed in the second corpus, emphasise the standardisation of writing following the end of the Old Kingdom. This gradual change underlines the desire for organisation and increasing categorisation, sometimes to the detriment of specific determination.

Caution is therefore required when elaborating theories on the hieroglyphic writing system. We should not only be specific as to which period we refer to, but our arguments should be backed up by supporting, dated examples. Analytical studies such as these undoubtedly allow us to refine our understanding of how writing functioned, while at the same time they help us grasp the forma mentis of Egyptians.

1.2. List of signs and palaeographies

Notwithstanding the theoretically infinite number of hieroglyphs, a taxonomy had to be drafted: in other words, a list compiling genus, species, and subspecies, as for any scientific study classifying living beings. The order of categorisation—what comes first: man, god, or the cosmos…? —is often more revealing of the researcher's cultural bias than of the Egyptian conception of life.[18]

Regrettably, the lists of available signs are quite scarce.[19] The difficulty in assembling them lies in paying attention to the time frame, the monument and the context from which the sign is copied, which often evolves throughout the history of its use. It would therefore be ideal to specify the period of use of the sign and its attested functions, and to include a few references for each type of use. Studies focusing on a specific period, such as that of Sylvie Cauville for the time of Cleopatra, are therefore valuable resources.[20] Moreover, as previously mentioned, an important database has been created by Stéphane Polis for the University of Liege and the Berlin-Brandenburgische Akademie der Wissenschaften.[21] We have, however, just now embarked on the challenging task of collecting all known examples, ideally following verification of the epigraphic or photographic record, and accompanied by the indication of the context of each sign.

In order to deepen our knowledge of the signs, we compiled palaeographies, where the variants and variations of the sign are carefully noted down. Palaeographies usually deal with a single monument: their degree of detail varies, they often consist only of plates of signs, occasionally accompanied by a commentary indicating the uses of each sign on the given monument. Palaeographies may

18 Compare, for instance, Gardiner's list, starting with the categories of man (A), followed by woman (B) (Gardiner 1957: 438–549), with the work by Meeks 2004, who also places man (A) first, then anthropomorphic kings and gods (B), followed eventually by the category of woman (C).

19 See the latest one: Polis 2023, https://thotsignlist.org/About edited by the University of Liege and the Berlin-Brandenburgische Akademie der Wissenschaften.

20 Cauville 2001.

21 Polis 2023, https://thotsignlist.org/About.

come as plates of line drawings, as in the work by Philippe Collombert on the tomb of Mereruka; they also at times may consist of plates of photographs, such as those of the chapel of Senusret I and, whenever possible, even colour photographs, as in the case of the exquisite palaeography of the Giza stelae by Peter Der Manuelian.[22] Unfortunately, they are most often taken as dating sources, and are more rarely analysed for how they reflect the semantic field of the sign, what it represents, and its various phonetic or semantic values, which allow us to better understand the sign in all its richness. This is precisely the scope of regrettably rare specific, individual sign studies,[23] which, with the help of paleographies, enable us to catch a glimpse into how Egyptians conceived of the world.

A few scholars have been brave enough to create palaeographic databases on a number of monuments, accompanied by reflections on the collections of signs and their variants. Among these are David Nunn, who has made his polychrome hieroglyphic research project available online[24] and, most recently, Renaud de Spens,[25] whose work also sets out from a chromatic perspective.

The main obstacle to the establishment of these palaeographies is that they must be compiled from the monument itself, and not merely from its publication, since it is not possible to rely, at the level of a sign, on a published final plate, due to its scale. These palaeographies therefore require a great deal of time and rigour.

1.3. Sign and representation

Researchers quickly realised that thanks to their figurative aspect, signs could seamlessly shift between the text and the representation of a scene, as the former could be completed by an element of the latter, which thus operated as a unit of both the writing sign *and* the image. Valérie Angenot[26] shows how, in a scene where Hesire is consecrating offerings, and is depicted holding a libation vase and a round loaf of bread—which can be read as the signs *ḥsj* and *Rʿ*, corresponding to his name, Hesire—he is actually making an offering which he validates for himself, through this rebus. The work by Henry George Fischer[27] in particular uncovered these dynamics of exchange between

22 See, for instance, the series "Paléographie hiéroglyphique," based on line drawings and edited by D. Meeks for IFAO (such as Collombert 2010), or the palaeography based on colour photographs by P. Der Manuelian (Manuelian 2003)—a reference on the subject—, or that of N. Beaux (Beaux 2015), based on photographs.

23 There are several studies of that kind, both monographs (e.g., McDonald 2003) and articles (Roquet 1984; Beaux 1988, 2004b; Janák 2010; Relats-Montserrat 2014; Evans 2016–2018…).

24 Nunn 2018, 2020, 2021.

25 De Spens d'Estignols 2021.

26 Angenot 2018: 87–88.

27 See all the bibliography by H.G. Fischer, and especially Egyptian Studies (I–III) published by the Metropolitan Museum of Art of New York, between 1976 and 1996.

the image and the text, moreover allowing other scholars, such as Pascal Vernus,[28] to build on his arguments and enrich them further.

We observed how the sign tended to *escape* from the constrictions of the strict written dimension, diving into the adjacent visual representation—or rather, we understood that its figurative aspect allowed it to navigate freely between several dimensions—2 or 3—and different levels—linguistic, artistic, and so on.[29] The sign had thus been analysed and classified, but had its nature been fully grasped?

2. The effectiveness of the sign

When the sign for "life"—whose identification is still debated—is represented in three dimensions on a dish employed for a libation to the Ka of a deceased person, the water that was to be poured in became effective, vivified by means of its passage *through* the sign (fig. 2).[30]

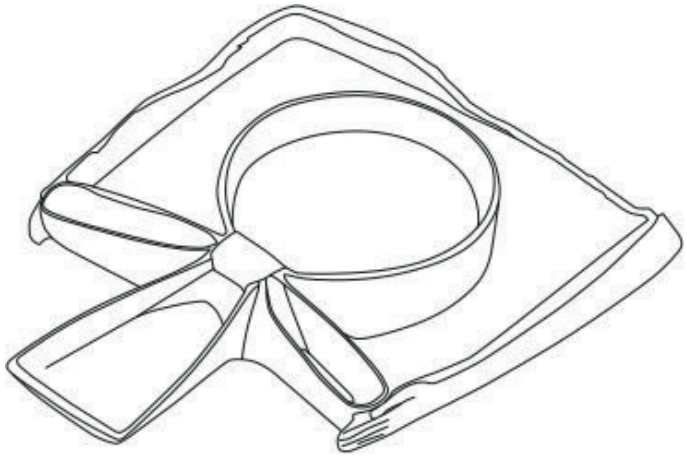

Fig. 2. Example of the performative function of the sign: A ritual vessel in the shape of an *ânkh* life sign (middle of dish), and *ka*-sign (arms on dish edges). When pouring water through the life sign the arms of the deceased (*ka*-sign) received it and were vivified by the ritual (after Fischer 1972: fig. 1).

Similarly, when offerings, *ḥtpwt*, were placed on an altar in the form of a *ḥtp* sign—a 3D representation of a mat with a loaf of bread on top—they were, in a way, multiplied by virtue of their support, while bringing peace, *ḥtp*, to whomever they were offered. Here, phonetic and semantic values are linked, combined so as to boost the power of the offering.

These last two cases emphasise the so-called performative facet of the sign, that is to say that what the sign represents or means is considered by the ancient Egyptian as actually occurring. To

28 P. Vernus published extensively on the topic, see in particular Vernus 2016.

29 See especially Fischer 1972; 1973.

30 Fischer 1972: 5–14.

quote Yvan Koenig, whether it is "a simple vocal sound, image, writing or even gesture, the sign always carries an active, performative charge."[31]

Several expedients were employed in order to achieve this high degree of effectiveness, among these are: colour, shape, the combination of different elements or the association with other signs, and even smell.

2.4. Colour[32]

A sign may be identified with a specific colour corresponding to its semantic value, as happens with the shades of yellow and white that signify, respectively, nocturnal and diurnal light. However, in certain cases the scribe could have opted for another colour, because the general context meant to emphasize a different dimension than that of the individual semantics of the sign. Thus, in the *Pyramid Texts*, the blue/green colour applied to all the signs without exception was intended to stimulate and vivify the deceased pharaoh, insofar as these colours were characterising water and vegetation, sources of life (fig. 3).

Fig. 3. Blue/green colour applied on all the signs to vivify the king through the texts engraved in his tomb (Pyramid of Unas, photo N. Beaux).

31 Koenig 2013: 171.

32 Mathieu 2009: 25–52; De Spens 2021.

2.5. Mobility and animation

Signs could be activated through the addition of arms or legs, that allowed them to perform acts connected to their semantic value: these elements could be either integrated into writing and result in a composite sign,[33] or activated in a representation, as happened with the sign of life, *ankh*, when represented holding a fan behind the king with both arms, thus enlivening the royal shadow (fig. 4).[34]

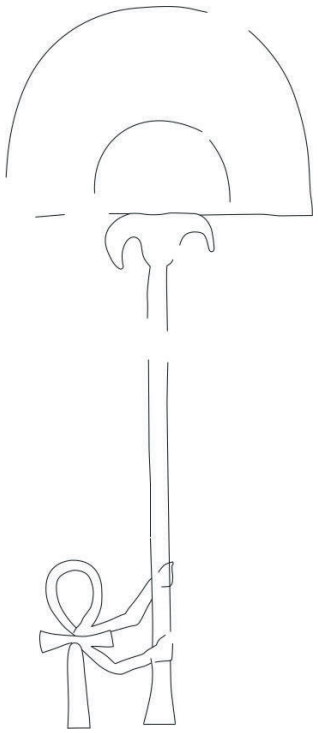

Fig. 4. Sign of life holding a sun-shade behind the king, vivifying the royal shade (after Beaux, Karkowski, Majerus, Pollin 2016: pl. 21).

2.6. Transformation

Over the course of its history, the sign could have been reinterpreted either because its original meaning had been lost, or due to the intention of enriching it with other semantic references. For instance, Renaud de Spens shows how the sign of the enemy A13 – A14 was originally represented with the hands tied behind his back; then, in the 18th dynasty, a stream of blood was depicted as gushing from the head: this same stream was reinterpreted in the Ramesside period as an axe lodged into the head, either struck inside the cranium by the enemy himself, as if he had lost his mind, or which he tries to pull out because he is wounded.[35] We may interpret it first as a

33 Fischer 1978.

34 Beaux, Karkowski, Majerus, Pollin 2016: plate 21.

35 De Spens 2021: 102–103, 269.

neutralisation of the enemy's power, then a killing of the enemy as he bleeds to death, and finally the powerlessness of the enemy who puts himself to death or is unable to avoid being killed. All of this reflects a desire for magical neutralisation that reaches an acme: we are, indeed, in the realm of magic. Furthermore, a sign could have also been over-motivated[36] through the combination of characteristic features of two distinct referents.[37]

Cryptographic writing also functioned as a means of reinforcing the power of a message, or a name, such as that of Hatshepsut's royal and Horus names, *M³ʿt-k³-Rʿ* and *Wsrt-K³w*, which in the cryptographic scheme are written as a combination of three signs in one—the sign of the erect cobra uraeus set up between the arms of the Ka and surmounted by the solar disk.[38] Therefore the name, inscribed in the upper register of the walls, dominated and "protected" the monument through the sign of the erect cobra, which is both royal and divine, as it is the classifier of the goddesses, here read as *Maat* and *Wsrt*. Similarly, in the realm of tridimensionality, the addition of signs to a statue of Ramesses II allows us to read his name as part of the statue.[39]

2.7. Perfume

Alexis Den Doncker and Hugues Tavier[40] have recently discovered on the walls of New Kingdom tombs in Thebes that certain elements of decoration—including signs—could be coated with a scented resin or beeswax: this practice was meant to render certain offerings more effective, or could serve to sanctify the name of a deceased person.

We have therefore observed how the sign, endowed with semantic value due to its phonetic and figurative referents, could become more effective by means of a specific colour, by association with other signs, or even through the addition of scents: in addressing the various senses, the sign could be seen, heard, smelled, touched, moved, transformed into three dimensions, and be integrated in a visual scene.

But did the sign need to be read, or to be visible, in order to be effective?

3. Conditions for the effectiveness of the sign

The existence of inscriptions in hidden or inaccessible places indicates that the sign did not need to be read by someone to be efficient: its mere existence was enough. This is exemplified, for instance, by the representations of Senenmut in the temple of Hatshepsut at Deir el-Bahari, which were

36 Beaux 2009a: 364–371.

37 See for instance Evans 2016–2018.

38 Drioton 1938: 239–240 and Graefe 1980: 45–51; Beaux 2012: 4–5 and Beaux, Grimal, Pollin 2012: figure 9. On enigmatic writings see Klotz & Stauder 2020.

39 Angenot 2018: 103.

40 Den Donker & Tavier 2018: 16–19.

engraved on walls yet hidden by doors when opened.[41] Though his depictions were not visible to those entering the room, the worship of Senenmut was still ongoing.

In another area––much later, at the time of the Meroitic restoration of Kushite temples in Gebel Barkal––bronze plaques[42] in the shape of an enemy with tied up arms––corresponding to the Egyptian hieroglyphic sign for the enemy––were discovered with a nail piercing through the chest or the head; they were fixed to the base and under the oriflamme masts, now disappeared (fig. 5). These plaques were found in front of the B500 temple pylon. They were completely invisible but allowed the enemy to be crushed forever under the weight of the erected mast, through an act of sympathetic magic.

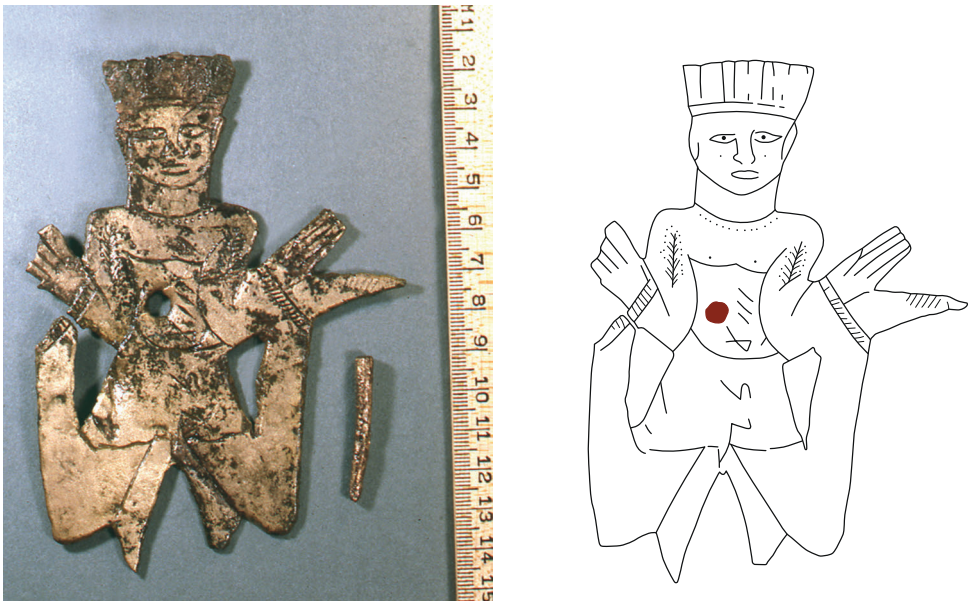

Fig. 5. Bronze plaques in the shape of a bound enemy prisoner, a figure ritually nailed to the wooden bottom of the flag mast at the entrance of Gebel Barkal Temple (B500) in order to kill it forever. The figure was inscribed in Meroitic script with the name of the particular enemy tribe represented and it was pierced through the chest (Courtesy T. Kendall, drawing E. Majerus).

Signs, however, could also be mutilated: in this way, the power of that which the sign represented, judged to be dangerous or harmful, was neutralised, while the sign was still allowed to function within the text.[43] This was valid even if the sign was intended to function strictly phonetically, as happened, for instance, with the hieroglyph of the elephant in the *Pyramid Texts*: while in the

41 Beaux, Karkowski, Majerus, Pollin 2012: plate 44–67.

42 Some of the plaques were uncovered in 1920 by G.A. Reisner (Harvard University-Museum of Fine Arts Expedition. MFA 24.1791; Kendall & El-Hassan 2016: 66, figure 4), while another one was discovered in 1987 by Kendall (Kendall & El-Hassan 2016: 66, figure 3).

43 Pierre 1994: 302–303; Lacau 1914: 1–2, 36–41. See also the latest study by Thuault 2020: 106–114.

Pyramid of Pepi I it is found half-plastered within a word where it functioned as a phonogram,[44] in the case of the Pyramid of Unas, the sign remained intact (fig. 6). In most circumstances of sign mutilation, it is the sign in its iconic aspect, and what it refers to, that is being targeted.

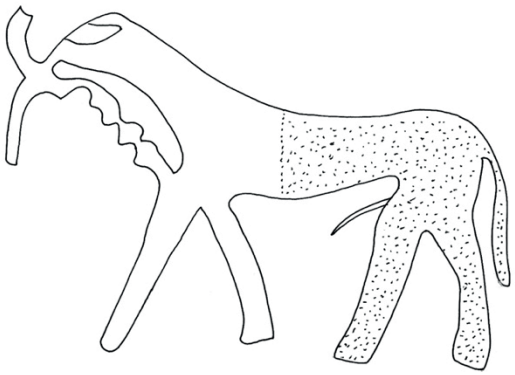

Fig. 6. Mutilated elephant sign in the pyramid of Pepy I. Although the sign in that text was functioning only as a phonogram, the plaster filling its back legs is meant to prevent the image from being active, a potential danger for the deceased (Drawing E. Majerus).

Signs could even be completely erased: it appears, at first sight, that ancient Egyptians considered it enough to annihilate their power. Accordingly, the cartouches of disgraced kings, as well as their representations, were chiselled out or smoothed; moreover, they were often covered up and replaced by the name and representation of another king. But is it as simple as it appears to be?

In the case of the reuse of statues erected by a previous king, as has been proved by the work of Simon Connor,[45] one may wonder whether a ruler selected statues of a particular king—not just any king—to remodel them in his own image, as a way of appropriating his appearance, by "slipping into" his shape, in order to gain his power and fame. Ramesses II, for example, did not reuse representations of proscribed pharaohs, but rather chose those portraying pharaohs of the twelfth, thirteenth, and eighteenth dynasties, including highly renowned kings such as Senusret I, Amenemhat I, Thutmose III, and Amenhotep II. If we are to accept this hypothesis, it is clear that statues preserved their initial effectiveness through the outer appearance, even if the name of the possessor had disappeared. The new owner would *double* his power by adding the power of the previous king to his own. In addition, the power of the statue of the original king was reactivated by giving it/him the opportunity to "participate" in the building of a new temple. One can imagine that the same was true for erased signs: by reusing a cartouche and adding one's name, the power was doubled. At times, moreover, the cartouche with the original royal name was preserved in a

44 Beaux 2009b: 250–251, figure 4.

45 Connor 2022: 114–116.

discreet place—such as the belt—and the name of the new owner was added in a different, larger and more visible, place.

In short, it sufficed for the sign to have been written for it to convey an effective message. A magic formula could be licked by the patient who would consequently ingest it, as happened with water that was drunk when poured over a healer-statue covered in magic formulas. Here, the trace of the sign itself is lost, but through the contact by ingestion its effectiveness was guaranteed.[46]

It is therefore clear that the sign, even out of context, always remained potentially active, be it through its figurative value, or by means of a more complex process—for example, by being read differently from the linear reading of the text. This potential of the sign was always taken into consideration by the scribe, who played with its various aspects to multiply the levels of readings, but also to empower his inscription.

4. Efficiency and synergy

We acknowledged the performative value of Egyptian writing, an aspect rooted, as Pascal Vernus describes, in "a fundamental belief characteristic of Pharaonic thought, a belief according to which the Egyptian language, when encoded by hieroglyphic writing (…), is capable of summoning the very essence of what it states, and thus of making it effective."[47] This belief had its roots in the realm of magical thinking, where the word is intimately linked to that which it describes. To represent or describe a ritual is to perform it, and this ritual continues to be performed as long as the mark—the writing—persists: just as happened with the execration figurines covered in texts which cast a spell for eternity,[48] or the signs of the nine bows under the king's feet that established his royal authority forever, a form of both iconic and graphic domination, the two being intimately linked.

Thomas Schneider[49] stresses the importance of sympathetic analogy in Egyptian thought. Magic, the energy of the creator god through which the world was conceived, also contributed to maintaining what had been created. And the use of writing takes place in this context. Yvan Koenig claims that "language was considered as a divine creation that brings to life that which is signified by words (…) Representations were supposed to have a powerful effect, and therefore to be capable of acting on concrete reality."[50]

46 Koenig 1994: 100–126.

47 Vernus 1996: 557–558, n. 2 specifies that the term "performative" is two-fold: the second aspect, taken in a broader sense, "designates the 'illocutionary' force of statements, the fact that they can lead to the accomplishment of action. Here, I use the adverb 'performatively' to describe a fundamental belief characteristic of Pharaonic thought, a belief according to which the Egyptian language, when encoded by hieroglyphic writing (…), is capable of summoning the very essence of what it states, and thus of making it effective".

48 Posener 1987.

49 Schneider 2000: 37–83.

50 Koenig 2013: 171.

We thus come to understand the role that writing plays in maintaining the harmony of creation. If language is a divine emanation that yields creation, writing is the efficient means by which creation is maintained in harmony.

Let us return, in conclusion, to the Egyptian word for the written sign: *mdw nṯr*, literally "divine speech."

In reading the story of the world's creation by the demiurge, it appears that the event takes place through enunciation associated with intelligence (capacity to connect matters), *ḥw* and *sj*^{3}.[51] And, as is written in the Payrus Bremner Rind 49 (28: 22) about the demiurge: "It is by myself that I have made use of my mouth, for Magic—*ḥk*^{3}—is my name." Therefore, it is through magic, *heka*, that enunciation and intelligence together produce speech, which in turn generates creation. Now, the sign for *mdw*, "speech", is representing a stick, analogous to the device Egyptian supervisors leaned on: a metaphoric way of expressing that the demiurge literally leans and relies on speech for creation.

The "sign", *mdw nṯr*, is therefore interpreted as "support / speech of the god". The distinction that we make between "spoken word" and "writing" was perhaps irrelevant to an Egyptian, since both were actually referred to as "speech". Moreover, the ingestion of magic formulas allowed the word, emitted by the mouth and inscribed on a support, to return to the patient's mouth as speech, together with all of its power. This course and effectiveness of the spoken word are made possible by the medium of writing.

The sign was thus designated as the "divine speech." However, how can a sign be divine, exactly? By means of its visual, tangible dimension, and through the hand of the god Thoth, "master of writing,"[52] the sign is "engraving" this creating word––note that the word "book," *mḏ*^{3}*t*, is a homophone of *mḏ*^{3}*t*, the "sculptor's chisel." The demiurge thus secures creation through writing, and ensures that it will endure by acting upon it. Therefore, the sign is both a witness and a guardian of creation. It is characterised by this double visual/audio facet, and it also conveys a divine creative energy. Asclepius later said that "the sound of Egyptian words contains the energy of the things that they speak of," while insisting on the part played by figurative writing in "the clarity of the meaning of words."[53] It is within this energy that its effectiveness lies: the sign acts in synergy with the demiurge and its creation, ensuring its harmony and durability.[54]

Besides being a linguistic tool, we are now able to perceive that the sign was to the Egyptians no more and no less than the guardian of creation: an indispensable, vital element in the Pharaonic edifice.

51 Beaux 2009b: 246–248.

52 *AL* 79.1427.

53 He speaks of the "proper character of spelling" concerning the iconic feature of writing (Nock & Festugière 1945: 231–232). See Grimal 2014: 99.

54 "In Egypt, writing established and ordered the cosmos" (Frankfurter 1994: 189–221).

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