

A Note on “Hieroglyphic (Il)literacy” and Access to Inscriptions in Ancient Egypt

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Abstract. The present article discusses the extent to which literacy in ancient Egypt extended to the hieroglyphic script in particular. Special attention is paid to late New Kingdom and Third Intermediate Period examples of apparently limited and non-existent understanding of the said script and its principles. It is argued that contact with hieroglyphs was not an everyday experience for the ancient Egyptians and that the rare examples of the script written by very inexperienced authors reflect the degree to which they have access to hieroglyphic texts generally. The discussion also touches upon the curiously neglected topic of access to cemeteries in Ancient Egypt.

Keywords. Ancient (il)literacy, Access to hieroglyphs, Pseudo-hieroglyphs, Coffins, Artisans’ workshops, Deir el-Medina, Saqqara in the New Kingdom.

In recent discussions over literacy in Ancient Egypt there has been something of a paradigm shift from quantitative problems (basically the estimated levels or percentages of literacy during different periods)¹ to qualitative issues such as complete versus partial literacy and the ability of painters and sculptors decorating monuments to actually understand what they were inscribing.² It is now commonly accepted that in ancient Egypt literacy, and, indeed, illiteracy, were a matter of degree and came in various sorts.³ For example, individuals characterisable as “literate” could perhaps read and write certain kinds of texts but lack the ability to compose freely, or they might be capable of reading and producing texts in the hieratic script but not necessarily equally well in hieroglyphs.⁴

1 The seminal discussions here are Baines & Eyre 1982; Baines 1983, and Janssen 1992. Cf. also Lesko 1994: 134–135 and Parkinson 2002: 66–67.

2 e.g. Laboury 2016 and Zinn 2018: 87–92.

3 See Allon 2019: 9–10 for a concise summary and references to the debate.

4 e.g. Laboury 2022: 61–65.

As always, evidence from one source in particular has dominated these discussions, namely the New Kingdom workmen's community at Deir el-Medina. This site, however, was in many ways exceptional in terms of literary life and culture. Not only do literacy levels in the village seem to have been considerably higher than what was probably normative,⁵ but the inhabitants were also exposed to writing much more than elsewhere. The reason for this was, of course, the special status of Deir el-Medina as a state institution and settlement for men who were all in various ways involved in building heavily inscribed royal tombs and surrounded by text-bearing monuments. Nevertheless, it is precisely the abundance of material from the site that has facilitated the more qualitatively nuanced image of ancient Egyptian literacy just noted, as well as raised questions of what may be called "script literacy" in general and hieroglyphic literacy in particular. As the form of writing intended for monumental use and usually (but not always) conspicuous display, hieroglyphs were not something that the Egyptian literate or "scribal" elite dealt with as part of their everyday business. Yet due to the special circumstances at Deir el-Medina, people with a defective understanding of writing would there still occasionally try their hand at producing hieroglyphic texts.

The workmen inhabiting the Deir el-Medina village had access to (state) resources that, during the later periods of the community's existence in particular, enabled them to build relatively sumptuous tombs for themselves and for each other. Here, as well as on stelae etc. left by the men, one sometimes finds hieroglyphic texts whose standards fall short of what spoiled Egyptologists are accustomed to find on elite or state monuments.⁶ Examples cluster to the earlier (Eighteenth Dynasty) part of the community's existence when the levels of local literacy and artistic excellence prevalent later in the Ramesside Period had not yet been attained.⁷ The eastern cemetery of the village has yielded coffins and other funerary paraphernalia with badly executed offering formulae.⁸ Particularly interesting in this respect are the wall decorations in the Eighteenth Dynasty tomb of workman Amenemhat (TT 340).⁹ The artist responsible for the work, Amenemhat's son Sennefer, was apparently not used to writing hieroglyphs. The texts that he added to the scenes abound in omissions and reversals of signs as well as display a tendency to spell words "alphabetically" using uni- rather than multiliteral signs (fig. 1).¹⁰ The latter feature is not, properly speaking, necessarily

5 Baines & Eyre 1983: 86–91; Janssen 1992; Haring 2003: 250.

6 A phenomenon related to this issue, but not considered here, is the system of early Deir el-Medina identity marks deciphered and extensively discussed by Haring (e.g. 2018; 2021; 2023: 36–44). See also e.g. Soliman 2015.

7 Haring 2023: 30–31. For the early Eighteenth Dynasty and writing in the village generally, see Haring 2006.

8 Näser 2001: 382, 384–87; Soliman 2015: 120–21; Haring 2023: 30–31.

9 Cherpion 1999: 3–55.

10 Kruchten 1999: 41–55; Laboury 2020: 88–90; 2022: 50–52; Haring 2023: 31–32. Conversely, Sennefer often used multiliteral logographic signs that had undergone phonological reduction for their contemporary rather than original values (thus e.g. 𓆎 'š' [11] for 'š and — [N16] for —).



Fig. 1. Workman Sennefer and some of his texts in the Tomb of Amenemhat, TT 340

an indication of a limited ability to read and write just hieroglyphs seeing that analogous tendencies are observable also in some hieratic texts.¹¹ Nevertheless, it has been suggested that Sennefer did not have access to good-quality models and that “The little he knew about funerary phraseology may have come to his notice solely by means of short texts on stelae or wooden chests, instead of more elaborate inscriptions in tombs.”¹² This is very probably so, although there may have been other factors at play as well. For the Deir el-Medina workmen, building and decorating a tomb often involved cooperation and pooling of communal talents,¹³ but the most skilled people were probably not always equally available to everyone, perhaps due to lack of personal contacts, finances, or both. Nevertheless, Sennefer still appears to have had *some* access to hieroglyphic texts that he then used as a basis for his own compositions. He was, it seems, “practically incapable of designing an original iconographic program and *a fortiori* texts to complement it,”¹⁴ but he was not *illiterate* in what pertains to the hieroglyphic script. He could “spell” and even compose, and the key to his

11 For example, the author of the so-called “misplaced” letter to dead (most recently Hsieh 2022: 221–232) on Michael Carlos Museum stela 2014.033.001 “spelled” the words *jnk* “I,” *w³h* “to place,” *grg* “establish,” and *w³h* “throw off” with the uniliteral sequences *j-n-k*, *w³-h*, *g-r-g*, and *w-h³*. In the case of the verbs he also did not employ any determinatives.

12 Haring 2023: 32; so too Kruchten 1999: 54–55 and Laboury 2016: 381–382; 2020: 89.

13 See Cooney 2006 for a general discussion and e.g. Keller 2001: 83–87 and Bács 2011 for examples.

14 Laboury 2020: 89.

skills, however limited, was access to texts. The latter may not as yet have been as extensive at Deir el-Medina as later on, but it was still enough to enable a mere necropolis workman to produce texts using the most prestigious of the scripts in which the Egyptian language was written.

To find evidence of an entirely different level of (un)familiarity with hieroglyphs, one must leave Deir el-Medina and move to the Memphite necropolis of Saqqara, where in 1985 a remarkable cache of intrusive Third Intermediate Period burials was discovered in the tomb of Iurufef, an official of the reign of Ramesses II.¹⁵ Some of the wooden coffins recovered carried wholly or partly meaningless inscriptions (figs. 2–3) that, according to one of the excavators, included “the most debased ever to be found in Egypt.”¹⁶ They have been occasionally noted in discussions of literacy. For Kammerzell these “asemic” texts represented mere strings “of indexical signs which transport nothing but the message that the producer makes use of ‘writing.’”¹⁷ According to Alexandra von Lieven, they illustrated a fall in standards induced by mass-production of low-quality goods to illiterate customers.¹⁸ Kammerzell’s view of the texts’ *raison d’être* seems persuasive, but the mass-production hypothesis is arguably more open to question. The Iurufef cache contained around

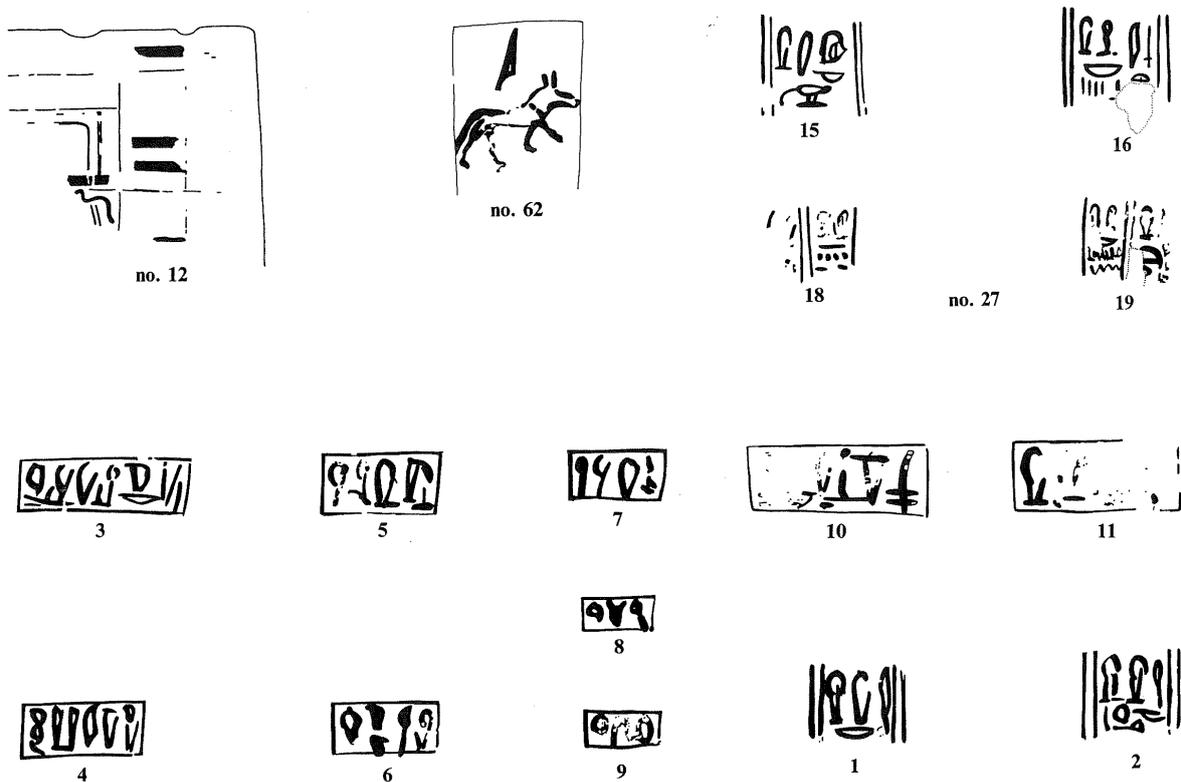


Fig. 2. Inscriptions from Iurufef coffins 12, 27, and 62

15 Martin, Raven, Aston 1986: 17–19; Aston, Raven, Taylor. 1991: 8–31; Raven et al. 1998.

16 Martin 1991: 144.

17 Kammerzell 2009: 299. Cf. Fitzenreiter 2015: 195–197; Jurman 2023: 168. For a comparative discussion of asemic and pseudo-scripts, see Houston 2018.

18 Von Lieven 2009: 104.



Fig. 3. Inscriptions from Iurudef coffins 27 & 54 + 64

70 burials and 37 coffins of which 27 were anthropoid and ten rectangular/trapezoidal.¹⁹ Only the former carried “texts” or decorations of any kind. Some of the anthropoid coffins too were entirely undecorated (particularly small ones for children and infants), but others were embellished to varying degrees of extent and finesse. These latter included some finely crafted and richly decorated specimens, one of which (no. 27) has subsequently adorned the cover and/or frontispiece of publications on the find and the New Kingdom archaeology at the Saqqara necropolis generally.²⁰ The coffins seem to be products of more than one workshop operating over a period of time and/or of different teams of craftsmen. Nevertheless, from the simplest of undecorated boxes to the most elaborate anthropoid creations, they form one continuous scale of cheaper and hence rougher and more expensive and thus better worked goods. That is, rather than mass-production, it is more probable that the Iurudef coffins simply reflect their buyers’ relative wealth and investment capacity. Notably however, the inscriptions on the coffins are always bad, regardless of the quality of their workmanship: in fact, the “most debased” hieroglyphic text noted above derives exactly from coffin no. 27, the aesthetically most pleasing specimen in the entire assemblage. This raises the intriguing but, alas, unanswerable question of whether the people who inscribed the coffins were in fact the same ones as those responsible for the rest of their decoration. Whatever the case here, the artistic and linguistic skills of the craftsmen did not correlate.

The most interesting thing about the Iurudef “texts” is not that they are bad, but *how* bad they are, and in what ways. Poorly executed hieroglyphs produced by artisans who apparently did not understand the script are not altogether rare, but examples of wholly meaningless inscriptions derive mostly from small

19 For what follows, see Aston, Raven, Taylor 1991: 8–13.

20 Raven 1991; Martin 1991.

objects that usually date to the Graeco-Roman Period.²¹ The Iurudef coffins seem to be the earliest group of this kind of material, and even a cursory glance of them suffices to demonstrate beyond doubt that the individual(s) who inscribed the coffins had no idea of even the basics of hieroglyphic writing.²² The mutual placement of the signs, insofar as they are identifiable at all, is definitely not based on the standard imaginary “square” that every undergraduate learns at their first encounter with the script.²³ Signs that are recognisable as depicting living things also do not face the same way.²⁴ What is perhaps most striking, however, is the almost complete absence of what one might call “paradigmatic” hieroglyphic signs. The modern folk idea of Egyptian hieroglyphs is that the script consists of small pictures of birds, snakes, human beings, and body parts—particularly eyes, hands, and feet. If asked to draw (note the nomenclature) hieroglyphs, people with no real knowledge of them usually produce strings of pictures depicting precisely these things. The producers of the Iurudef “texts,” however, mostly did not do even this. Except for one or two poorly executed bird-like creatures and *wdʿ.t*-eyes (D10), their “script” consisted mostly of dashes, lines, ovals, and loops that even non-Egyptologist modern viewers would hardly regard as “hieroglyphs.” Only in one case, a coffin numbered 40 by the excavators, the craftsman (or -men?) managed to produce a passable approximation of the standard *hṯp-dj-nsw* offering formula (fig. 4).²⁵ It consists of genuine and relatively well-executed hieroglyphs, and the inscription is immediately recognisable for what it is, but closer scrutiny reveals a good number of corruptions that again speak of very imperfect understanding. This text is also unique in that it contains the name of the deceased, but the writing of this seems muddled save for—interestingly enough—the name of god Ptah that, of course, is written using uniliteral signs only. Similar specimens have been found



Fig. 4. Inscription
from Iurudef coffin 40

- 21 See von Lieven 2009 for examples. The Ptolemaic and later Horus-stelae discussed by Sternberg-El Hotabi 1994 are the most extensive and widely cited category of such material. Besides badly inscribed shabtis etc., a particularly interesting category of early evidence of this sort are the Second Intermediate Period Canaanite scarabs inscribed by foreigners (Ben-Tor 2009). See also n. 40 below. However, the question of what is a “meaningful” hieroglyphic text is complicated by e.g. the phenomenon of “textual tokens” on Middle Kingdom coffins discussed by Landborg 2019.
- 22 Against what follows, the argument that “It is out of the question that the craftsmen responsible for creating these inscriptions lacked a proper understanding of the sign repertoire and graphemic rules of the hieroglyphic writing system then in use” in Jurman 2023: 168–169 seems disputable.
- 23 *Locus classicus* Gardiner 1957: § 16. More recently e.g. Vernus 2020: 20–23.
- 24 Note also the upwards pointing ends of the sign *.....n* (water-ripple, N35).
- 25 There is another example within the corpus of what appears to have been the same formula (coffin no. 59), but the text is badly damaged and seems to have been considerably more garbled than that on no. 40.

elsewhere; for example, the offering formulae recorded by Petrie on Twentieth Dynasty and later coffins from Illahun are quite reminiscent of the text on Iurufef coffin no. 40.²⁶

The reason for this level of ineptitude is probably again to be sought in access and exposure to hieroglyphs. It is not known where the Iurufef coffins were produced, but it is a fair guess that they are products of workshops located not too far away from the necropolis where they were ultimately found. Some of the craftsmen were no mean artists (if properly paid), but they apparently had no hieroglyphic texts at their disposal that they could have used as models.²⁷ This raises a whole range of issues worth considering. In seeking to fix a date for the coffins, the excavators were faced with the dearth of comparative material from the Memphite area.²⁸ Consequently, they compared them with the much more abundant Theban burials and found that the overall decorative programme of the coffins was closely paralleled by late Twentieth and Twenty-First Dynasty data from Thebes.²⁹ This is interesting seeing that the Iurufef craftsmen almost certainly had no access to Theban coffins, and it is equally unlikely that they had seen genuine examples of them either. However, although the already noted lack of comparative data makes discussion hazardous, it is likely that what is called the Theban traditions set something of a current standard in coffin decoration more broadly. Artistic (as well as architectural etc.) trends are concepts that travel wide and far even when the actual products do not. It often suffices for a few to have witnessed something to introduce it to the many, and the Iurufef artisans probably need not have ventured far to have seen specimens that could pass for "Theban" coffins. The transfer of texts, however, relies on the existence and ready availability of written *Vorlagen*, and it is these that the Iurufef craftsmen—who either were the same people as the artists or not—were arguably lacking. They were apparently wholly illiterate, did not know the principles of the hieroglyphic script, and had no access to models to aid them in preparing the so-called inscriptions, which they nevertheless went on to write on the pieces ordered from them. The person who inscribed coffin no. 40 may have had a model to work with, but more probably he had simply memorised the *hṯp-dj-nsw* formula—the most common of all Egyptian funerary litanies—to a sufficient extent to be able to reproduce a broadly readable version of it. Nevertheless, he too was apparently first and foremost a craftsman, and probably almost completely illiterate at that. Rather like his earlier colleague Sennefer of Deir el-Medina, he could create

26 Petrie 1890: pl. XXV.

27 That said, Martin 1991: 144 believed that the craftsmen were working from models, which over the years had worn out so badly that "the painters, unable in any case to understand the hieroglyphic script, would have been reduced to the expedient of making up their own signs as they went along!"

28 Aston, Raven, Taylor 1991: 17–23. See also Raven et al. 1998 for a detailed defence of the date proposed, based also on associated finds of Twentieth-to-Twenty-First Dynasty pottery.

29 More particularly, of the commonest iconographic details on the coffins, the yellow face, the lotus headband, the floral collar, the winged central goddess surrounded by smaller figures in compartments, and the divine figures on the sides are all common in the late Twentieth and Twenty-First Dynasty Thebes (Aston, Raven, Taylor 1991: 19, 21).

decent-looking hieroglyphs and appears even to have possessed a limited ability to write common words consisting of uniliteral signs independently. Otherwise, however, he did not recognise when he made a mistake in the process, and, given that his client was almost certainly equally incapable of understanding hieroglyphic texts, probably did not care.

There is an additional issue involved here that makes an interesting comparison with Deir el-Medina. The modern popular image of Ancient Egypt is that of a society where hieroglyphic texts were visible everywhere. This, however, was not the reality. Outside (particularly later) Deir el-Medina and, perhaps, the sphere of the elite living and working in and near state religious buildings, seeing hieroglyphs was not an everyday experience to the majority of ancient Egyptians, who lived in rural village communities and mostly stayed there all their lives. Memphis was a large context where access to models and resources available to workshops producing e.g. funerary equipment must have varied considerably. Yet also the craftsmen who produced the Iurudef coffins probably lived and practised their craft in a non-urban environment bereft of monuments with hieroglyphic inscriptions on display.³⁰ Assuming that this lay relatively close to the Saqqara necropolis, they might, in theory, have ventured thither to study models of such texts. This, however, they did not and probably could not do. The question of access to necropoleis in Ancient Egypt is a remarkably neglected topic, and the following brief remarks should be seen as strictly preliminary. Egyptian cemeteries have often been envisaged as busy places that were much frequented by the living.³¹ This, however, need not have applied to the population as a whole. Wealthy ancient Egyptians, whose relatives were buried in rich tombs and who themselves possessed or would possess similar sepulchres, had more reasons to make the proverbial “visit to the necropolis in a carrying chair” than those who had no illustrious forefathers buried there and who could not aspire to build a monument crowning the Memphis skyline. Yet more importantly, given the prevalence of tomb robbery and vandalism, it is likely that *hoi polloi* approaching elite cemeteries would have been viewed with intense suspicion. Necropolis guards, however incompetent or corrupt they may have been, were there for a reason, and at least officially access to areas with elite tombs was probably much more restricted than what is usually imagined.³² Written memorials such as visitors’ graffiti and Letters to Dead are products of the literary elite, and also the subject matter of the latter, which usually revolves

30 In major cities such as Memphis or Thebes, large cult temples with inscriptions will have been a ubiquitous feature, but the history of the monumentalisation of Egyptian religion is simultaneously the history of their increasing social exclusiveness and barring of access (Bussmann 2017: 77–85).

31 Most recently Almonsa-Villatoro 2015: 741, 743.

32 So too e.g. Redford 2000: 156. “Official” security and monitoring of necropoleis is a problematic area where much of the evidence (e.g. the paths around the workers’ village and tomb construction sites at Amarna, perhaps interpretable as evidence of state surveillance) is circumstantial. Notable exceptions to this are the evidence from the Giza necropolis—for which see below—and the *medjay* security corps associated with the Theban necropolis in general and the Valley of the Kings in particular (Černý 1973: 261–264 and more recently Vogel 2016: 438–441).

around property, domestic servants, and large estates, serves to show that their authors were, as a rule, high society. They do not provide evidence of non-elite access to cemeteries.³³ Secondary burials such as the Iurudef cache itself or small pit graves surrounding larger elite tombs obviously do exactly that, and it is true that e.g. in Third Intermediate Period Thebes reuse of older sepulchres had become something of a norm.³⁴ Nevertheless, it remains unclear whether or to what extent this reflects officially approved practises, particularly in periods of more centralised government than during the Third Intermediate Period.³⁵ In the Old Kingdom large numbers of non-elite people were used as *corvée* labour in royal cemeteries, but they were then housed in closely guarded, purpose-built settlements set physically apart from the areas where the tombs of the royalty and officialdom lay. The topography of the Giza necropolis is a case of point here: access to the area was closely monitored, and workers accommodated near the pyramid construction sites were strictly restricted to their own living quarters.³⁶ They did not roam free among the monuments and hence were not exposed to hieroglyphic inscriptions even in such short-term and special circumstances. Briefly put, those with a low social status had little incentive to visit cemeteries with which they had no personal links and where they were probably not welcome anyway.

As noted in the beginning, “literacy” is, *ipso facto*, a scalar notion, and opinions will always differ over what actually ranks as such.³⁷ Nevertheless, although the issue obviously warrants a much more systematic discussion, one could argue that in Ancient Egypt, “hieroglyphic (il)literacy” was similarly a continuum along which several groupings and nodes are identifiable.³⁸ At one end of the scale, there were the most highly educated individuals of the society who were trained in all the scripts used to write the Egyptian language, including hieroglyphs. Aside these there were the true “scribes” running the administration whose skills were restricted mainly or solely to the hieratic rather than hieroglyphic script. Outside this “elite” there were those like workman Sennefer of Deir el-Medina, who had had some exposure to hieroglyphs and had consequently acquired a

33 Contra Almansa-Villatoro 2025: 743.

34 Kaczanowicz 2020: 168 and *passim*.

35 Kaczanowicz 2020: 168–173. The ancient Egyptians’ attitude towards desecration of tombs is well-known, but their views on reuse thereof is more difficult to gauge. At least insofar as dismantling or removal of architectural elements was considered, their stance was fundamentally negative (e.g. Merikara E 78–79).

36 Lehner & Tavares 2010: 173–174, 213. The authors add that the same seems to have held with the pyramid field at Abusir.

37 Thus, within Egyptology some scholars would apply the term “functionally literate” to people knowledgeable of individual signs or groups thereof (cf. e.g. der Manuelian 1999) whereas for others “The ability to recognize particular marks or written words in context does not add up to a real (or even meaningful partial) literacy” (Eyre 2018: 4).

38 Or, as formulated by Almansa-Villatoro 2025: 741, “literacy exists along a continuum, and [...] various forms of literacy were cultivated based on practical needs, shaped by exposure and functional requirements.” Cf. also the diagram provided by Laboury 2022: 64 making much of the same point.

basic understanding of the script that enabled him to produce clumsy but decipherable texts.³⁹ Far below him in terms of skills there were those like the craftsman who produced the *ḥtp-dj-nsw* formula on the Iurufef coffin no. 40. Whether or not he had recourse to a model of this most basic of funerary texts, he nevertheless seems to have had a broad idea of what he was inscribing and how it should be done. Nevertheless, the level of his actual “literacy” was evidently very low. At the bottom or other end of this scale there were people like the producers of most of the Iurufef “texts” whose access and exposure to hieroglyphs was extremely limited and who, as a consequence, neither knew the principles of the script nor could produce convincing imitations of it. This last group must have represented the vast majority of the population. In scalar systems it is often the middle ground that is the largest and most ubiquitous, but this is not the case with the continuum of ancient Egyptian “hieroglyphic (il)literacy.” Individuals such as Sennefer and the Iurufef artisans are difficult to detect in the surviving evidence for the simple reason that they were few in number and seldom produced anything written. As noted by Laboury, the training of an artist and a draughtsman at Deir el-Medina appears to have included an introduction to at least the aesthetic principles of hieroglyphs.⁴⁰ Yet adventurous autodidacts like Sennefer or incompetents such as the Iurufef artisans were always rare, and surviving works by them are rarer still.

Before concluding, one might perhaps set up still a further type of “hieroglyphic illiteracy” that is hardly attested in ancient Egypt before Graeco-Roman times but which is, paradoxically, its most common *modern* form.⁴¹ Figure 5 provides an image of part of the decoration on an “Egyptian” souvenir (a tea mug) from the infamous Luxor Hotel and Casino at Las Vegas. The “artist” who designed the item clearly used genuine ancient Egyptian artwork as a model. The most “paradigmatic” hieroglyphs—eyes, snakes, birds, etc.—are present and reasonably well copied, but the same does not hold with rarer signs or ones with which it is not immediately clear what they depict. The arrangement of the signs is awkward, many are randomly reversed, and some are turned upside-down. This farrago is obviously a product of someone who had ready access to hieroglyphic inscriptions as a model—no doubt thanks to the internet—but who nevertheless understood nothing of the script. It is somewhat ironic that modern means of unlimited access to Egyptian hieroglyphs should have encouraged a type of inability to deal with them that the ancient Egyptians themselves could scarcely have imagined.

39 The label “elite” is here used in the loosest of terms. According to an anonymous reviewer to the present article, one might also consider Sennefer as an “elite” craftsman since he had access to materials, techniques, and models.

40 Laboury 2020: 90. For an overview of the varying evidence of artists’ literacy, see Laboury 2016; 2022.

41 See von Lieven 2009: 102–104 for examples of texts cobbled together from genuine models and displaying reversals of signs, meaningful sections interspersed with gibberish, etc.



Fig. 5. “Hieroglyphs” on a modern “Egyptian” souvenir

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