

The Scribe's Outfit in the Deir el-Medina Pseudo-script Shapes and Uses

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Abstract. The sign for 'scribe' that occurs among identity marks on Deir el-Medina ostraca and other artefacts from the Ramesside Period (ca. 1290–1070 BCE) shows a remarkable graphic diversity. Its basic forms were inspired by hieroglyphic writing on the one hand, and by cursive (hieratic) writing on the other, and both forms appear to have enjoyed equal popularity in similar contexts. In addition to the information it provides on the reception of hieroglyphic and hieratic writing among semi-literate administrators, the sign is evidence for the existence of one 'senior scribe' at Deir el-Medina.

Keywords. Hieroglyphs, hieratic, identity marks, ostraca, pseudo-script

In the past two decades, the identity marks used by the community of royal necropolis workmen at Deir el-Medina during the New Kingdom (ca. 1550–1070 BCE) have become a prominent topic of research, after having been virtually neglected by Egyptology for almost two centuries.¹ The vast corpus of archaeological and textual sources from the site, and from the Valley of the Kings and Valley of the Queens, includes numerous objects bearing identity marks as well as graffiti and ostraca featuring such marks or clusters of them (fig. 1). The latter type of source has proved to be of great importance for the dating of the marks and the identification of their owners – success in the one objective depending on the other.

¹ The recent Egyptological interest in non-textual identity marks, and in non-textual marking systems more broadly, has been stimulated by interdisciplinary conferences in Berlin, Leiden and Warsaw from 2006 to 2013; see most recently Budka *et al.* (ed.) 2015; Haring *et al.* (ed.) 2018. The Deir el-Medina identity marks have been the object mainly by Leiden-based research; see Haring 2017 for a short overview and Haring 2018 for a synthesis.




















Fig. 1. Ostrakon Turin CG 57534
(image kindly supplied by the Museo Egizio, Turin, and reproduced here with permission)

The thousands of ceramic and limestone ostraca from Deir el-Medina and the nearby valleys include different types, textual (various hieratic and hieroglyphic genres) and pictorial (sketches and exquisite drawings, and pictorial ostraca of an administrative nature). The ostraca bearing workmen's marks would appear to belong to both the textual and the pictorial categories. Such ostraca may feature one or several marks only, but also additional data in the form of dots or strokes, numbers in hieratic, and pictorial signs for commodities. Their purpose appears to be largely or exclusively administrative, and they are currently thought to represent the work of semi-literate 'scribes' who thus assisted the professional scribes that composed administrative records in hieratic (Soliman 2018; 2021; van der Moezel 2023). By the mid-Twentieth Dynasty (ca. 1130 BCE), this type of record had developed into a sophisticated pseudo-written genre that mimicked the style of hieratic administrative texts, consisting of entries starting with calendar dates, presenting information on deliveries of foodstuffs and firewood, and the responsible persons.




Fig. 2. Ostrakon Turin CG 57393 obverse
(image kindly supplied by the Museo Egizio, Turin, and reproduced here with permission).

Taking ostrakon Turin CG 57393 as an example (fig. 2), we see entries starting at the right with days numbered 10 – 11 – 12 – 13 – 14 – 15. Every date is followed by a particular workman's mark:  –  –  –  – ; these marks were held by workmen named Harshire, Iyernutef, Nebnakht, Weskhet-nemtet, Pentaweret and Nekhemmut at the time the ostrakon was made.² Several of these marks betray a hieroglyphic (  ) or hieratic origin (). Only one of these can actually be connected with the name of the mark's holder:  is a hieratic equivalent of hieroglyphic  for *jwt* 'to come' or *nmt.t* 'step'; here it appears to represent the latter word as it occurs in the name *Weskhet-nemtet*.³ Two more marks ( ) may be inspired by hieroglyphs or hieratic, but they may also be pictorial or abstract signs of a different nature; the repertoire of Deir el-Medina marks includes signs based on writing, as well as pictorial (but non-hieroglyphic) and abstract signs (Haring 2018: 227–231).

Following after the workman's mark in every entry except for the first, mention is made of commodities delivered, such as firewood and loaves of bread. The delivering person is sometimes mentioned as well; at the end of the third line (i.e., the entry of day 12/Nebnakht) we see , a sign inspired by hieroglyphic  or hieratic  *ms*, here as an abbreviation of *Ptahmose*. This man was a woodcutter responsible for the delivery of firewood to the gang of necropolis workmen. There is an important difference between the workmen's marks at the beginning of entries, and abbreviations such as  accompanying the deliveries: whereas the former were true identity marks, used also outside the ostraca as property marks and in votive graffiti, the latter merely appear to have been abbreviations used only for the creation of this particular type of ostraca (Haring 2018: 192). Such abbreviations usually refer, not to the necropolis workmen, but to members of a supporting workforce (*smd.t*), which consisted of date collectors, fishermen, gardeners, gypsum makers, potters, smiths, washermen, watercarriers and woodcutters (Gabler 2018). There are no indications that these men themselves used the signs, unlike the necropolis workmen who made frequent use of their identity marks, and transmitted them from generation to generation within their families and among colleagues. Such true identity marks are known at Deir el-Medina from the early Eighteenth Dynasty (ca. 1450 BCE) onwards, whereas the similarly-looking pseudo-script abbreviations are only known from the Ramesside Period (ca. 1290–1070 BCE).

Somewhere between these two categories of signs there are several that were used on ostraca as well as for other purposes, without being fully comparable to real identity marks. These are signs expressing the position or function of persons, rather than their personal or family identity. Among them are signs referring to the highest local authorities: the foremen or chief workmen of Deir

2 Which is the second month of the *peret*-season in regnal year 2 of Ramesses IV. The identifications and dating are based on the deliveries recorded and the watch rota (*weresht*) as known from contemporary hieratic sources; see Haring & Soliman 2014: 84–86 and van der Moezel 2023 for this particular ostrakon.

3 The extra stroke (diacritic) in  is occasionally found in hieratic *jwt* and *nmt.t*; see Wimmer 1995: 162 and pl. D. 54 (d), with ref. to O. Cairo CG 25783 obv. 12 and O. Turin CG 57006 rev. 4.

el-Medina (of which there were two: one for the right half of the gang, and one for the left), and the (senior) scribe. Other signs referring to position or task are those of doorkeepers and scorpion charmers. The latter, a door (𓂏) and a scorpion (𓂏 or variants), clearly refer to the tasks performed. In both cases the reference is indexical or metonymic; that is, the signs depict objects related to the signified, not the signified itself. The references made by signs used by the foremen are less direct: we know of a bee (𓂏) for the foreman of the right half, and an abstract(?) mark (𓂏 or 𓂏) for the foreman of left.⁴ The sign for the senior scribe of the community, however, is again a clear metonym: it is the scribe's outfit (e.g. 𓂏), and evidently inspired by the hieroglyphic and hieratic characters (𓂏 and 𓂏) expressing the notion of writing and the function of scribe (*sš* or *shʒ*). This sign is the central object of this paper. The questions to be addressed are: (1) Who used this particular sign, and how? (2) How to explain its remarkable graphic diversity? Answers to these questions must be based on the contexts, dates and graphic shapes of the sign as used in the community of royal necropolis workmen during the Ramesside Period.

The first important observation to be made is that very few of the sign's forty-seven documented occurrences follow the supposed hieroglyphic model 𓂏 or 𓂏 (Gardiner nos. Y3 and Y4).⁵ In fact, eighteen variants copy its hieratic equivalent (Möller no. 537; see Möller 1927), while the twenty-nine others have a more or less hieroglyphic appearance but omit or reduce certain details, such as the palette with pigments or the cap of the pen case.⁶ Many of these twenty-nine variants are more appropriately called pseudo-hieroglyphic, combining the hieratic 'scribe' character with a hieroglyphic rendering of the pen case, although that pen case is included in the pictorial origin of the hieratic sign.⁷ The hieratic variants always face right, just like surrounding signs whenever these

4 The sign 𓂏 probably represents the function of foreman of right, rather than an individual or family holding that position. Its use is perhaps to be explained by its meaning *bj.t.y* 'king of Lower Egypt' in hieroglyphic and as a royal emblem (Haring 2018: 196, 203), which could be used here to indicate the foreman's position at the top of the local hierarchy. The sign 𓂏 or 𓂏, possibly representing a carpenter's level, became a reference to the left side and its foreman by the mid-Twentieth Dynasty. It had been an identity mark of a family supplying at least two foremen of left during the previous dynasty, which may be the reason it came to be associated with the left side of the gang more generally (Haring 2018: 213–215, 223).

5 The known occurrences of the sign were collected by Kyra van der Moezel in her dissertation (van der Moezel 2016: table I3–2, no. I 24.003). Actually, they add up to 53 there, but include several published in hieroglyphic font type only, and some rather uncertain examples. Only 47 certain attestations are accessible as photos or facsimiles. The Gardiner numbers refer to the sign list in Gardiner 1957: 438–548. For the graphic development of the hieroglyph, see Fischer 1996: 222–225. The single difference between Y3 and Y4 is the orientation. Y4 (pen case followed by palette in reading direction) represents the usual orientation in Ramesside hieroglyphic texts; see the references in the following footnote.

6 The palette is, in fact, often reduced in Ramesside hieroglyphs; see Haring 2006: 136; Servajean 2011: 123; this appears to be a chiefly Upper Egyptian phenomenon: Moje 2007: 421 and tables Y 03–04.



7 As becomes clear from Old Kingdom specimens of Möller no. 537; see Goedicke 1988: 48a–b.

consistently adhere to the same orientation. The pseudo-hieroglyphic variants may face right or left regardless of the surrounding signs' orientation (fig. 3).⁸



Fig. 3. The sign for 'scribe' on pseudo-script ostraca from Deir el-Medina:

- a. hieroglyphic (Ifao ONL 6507 – unpublished);
- b. pseudo-hieroglyphic (BTdK 539 obv. – Dorn 2011: pl. 455);
- c. pseudo-hieroglyphic (Florence 2628 – Killen & Weiss 2009: 145);
- d. hieratic (Turin CG 57534 – López 1984: pl. 173 a). Facsimiles by Kyra van der Moezel.

Before going deeper into the distribution of the different graphic shapes of the sign, we must discuss its uses: where do we find the sign, and which scribe or scribes does it refer to? By far most of its occurrences are on ostraca inscribed with clusters of identity marks and with more complex types of information. Many of the relevant ostraca show horizontal or vertical sequences of marks (fig. 1) in a more or less fixed order, starting with the signs identifying the foreman of one side, the scribe, and the deputy of the foreman, followed by the identity marks of the workmen. In figure 1, for instance, the sign  (top right) represents the foreman of the left side; it is followed by the sign for 'scribe' and by , the identity mark of the workman who served as the foreman's deputy. On some of the ostraca the individual signs are followed by strokes or by numbers in hieratic, or by other notations. The signs for foreman and scribe are rarely attested on ostraca with dated entries, such as Turin CG 57393 (fig. 2), for an obvious reason: as superiors of the workmen, these persons were not included in the watch rota (*weresh*).⁹

Apart from its use on ostraca, the sign is attested as property mark on a few pottery vessels and limestone headrests from the workmen's settlement.¹⁰ Its use as a property mark appears to have been rare when compared with the numerous marked pottery sherds and other marked objects from the site, and from the Valley of the Kings and the Valley of the Queens. Its use as a single sign in graffiti is even rarer. Whereas many hundreds of graffiti in the Theban mountains feature individual workmen's marks or clusters of them, the nearly four thousand Theban graffiti documented so far include only a few possible similar uses of the 'scribe' sign. It is sometimes found together






8 Left-facing signs in right-facing context, e.g., O. BM EA 50716 rev. (Demarée 2002: pl. 109) and O. BTdK 539 obv. (Dorn 2011: pl. 455).

9 See note 2 for the watch rota. One ostrakon bearing calendar dates and featuring the scribe sign is Ifao ONL 338+339 (unpublished), where the sign is not included in the *weresh* duty roster, but in a series of marks preceding it.

10 The pottery is from ancient village waste; see Bruyère 1953: pl. XVI (bottom left, 2 sherds) and XVII (middle, 2 sherds); one sherd is from Tomb 359 (Nagel 1938: 49, no. 305). The headrests are from houses in the workmen's settlement: Bruyère 1939: 233, 300 and 302; their marks are rendered by Bruyère in hieroglyphic font type.

with one or more identity marks,¹¹ and once as an isolated sign if its presentation as edited is correct.¹² The sign is exceedingly often found in hieratic and hieroglyphic graffiti as writing of the title ‘scribe’, in combination with proper names.¹³ It would seem that professional scribes almost invariably chose to apply their hieratic and hieroglyphic writing skills, rather than the single marks often used by the semi-literate workmen. Finally, the absence of the scribe sign in the corpus of stones and sherds bearing single identity marks is noteworthy. Such pieces seem to present a semi-literate parallel to ostraca inscribed with single names in hieratic, mostly of necropolis workmen. That corpus includes several ostraca with names preceded by the title ‘scribe’, or even simply saying ‘the scribe’ (anonymous).¹⁴ Here as in the case of graffiti, it seems that scribes preferred writing out their title and names to the use of marks.

The rare use of the ‘scribe’ sign as property mark and graffiti is precisely the reason for not classifying it among the workmen’s identity marks, whose uses for these purposes are much more frequent.¹⁵ The distinction is understandable: whereas the workmen’s marks were primarily associated with families and their individual members, the sign for ‘scribe’ was primarily connected with a function, just like the signs indicating the foremen, scorpion-charmers and doorkeepers. These signs are also rare as graffiti and property marks.¹⁶ However, whereas the latter are only securely attested around the middle of the Twentieth Dynasty, the ‘scribe’ sign already appears on pseudo-script ostraca of a much earlier date: the middle of the Nineteenth Dynasty (ca. 1240 BCE). Several ostraca featuring the sign can be dated around this time and the following decades.¹⁷ For

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- 11 Theban graffiti 1713 consists of hieratic *sš* preceded by a lotus flower; similar groups are 1703 and 1704, which add a cross-shaped sign in between (Černý *et al.* 1970–1977: pl. IX and XII). Cf. graffiti 517: hieratic *sš Bʿy* preceded by a lotus flower (Spiegelberg 1921: pl. 59). Graffiti 2013 combines the mark  with pseudo-hieroglyphic *sš* and some more scratches difficult to interpret (Černý *et al.* 1970–1977: pl. IIII). Graffiti 2430 is probably hieratic (*sš J<...>* or *sš-qd* ‘draftsman’?) (Černý *et al.* 1970–1977: pl. CIX). Graffiti 2462 shows a seated figure with *Qn-ḥpš=f* in hieratic, the mark  and hieratic *sš* with vertical stroke (Černý *et al.* 1970–1977: pl. CXV). Graffiti 2851 appears to be a name in hieroglyphic ( for *Jmn-nḥt*) surrounded by marks and hieratic *sš* (Černý *et al.* 1970–1977: pl. CLXIV).
- 12 Graffiti 3072; Černý *et al.* 1970–1977: pl. CXCII.
- 13 Hieroglyphic graffiti are less frequent than hieratic ones; some examples are graffiti 2011.f (*sš Nb-nfr sš-nswt Dḥwty-ms*; Černý *et al.* 1970–1977: pl. IIIV) and 2716.b (*sš m s.t-mʿ.t <J>mn-nḥt*; Černý *et al.* 1970–1977: pl. CL).
- 14 O. Ifao inv. No. 1510 (unpublished). For the name ostraca as well as the stones and sherds bearing single marks (over 150 of which are known) see Dorn 2011: 139–143; Pietri 2021; Haring forthcoming.
- 15 See Fronczak & Rzepka 2009: 169–173 for occurrences of workmen’s marks in graffiti.
- 16 This is true, at least, for the sign for the foreman of right () attested once as graffiti (no. 2645; Černý *et al.* 1970–1977: pl. CXL). As a mark on pottery this sign is only a bit more frequent than the ‘scribe’ sign; the same is true for the scorpion (see, e.g., Bruyère 1953: pl. XVI–XVIII). I do not know of any occurrences of the door sign as property mark. Identifying  on pottery and other objects as the mark of the foreman of left is tricky, since it was also used by individual workmen prior to its becoming the sign for the left side of the gang (see note 4).
- 17 To this period belong ostraca Ashmolean Museum HO 1120, Hawass, Ifao ONL 6226 and 6487, Amenmesse Project Ostrakon (APO) 153 and 162. All are unpublished with exception of ostrakon ‘Hawass’ which is called thus here because it is shown by Zahi Hawass together with other objects found in the Valley of the Kings in a Youtube video:

many years in this period, the senior scribe of the workmen's community was Qenhirkhopshef. This scribe may therefore have been the earliest holder of the office for whom the sign is attested. As the sign refers to the office, not to the person holding it, reference may also be made in some cases to his predecessor Ramose or his successor Bay.¹⁸ The scribe himself is not likely to have been the author of the ostraca; instead, reference is probably made to him and to other persons by semi-literate creators of the ostraca, of which there seem to have been more than one in view of the differences in style, including both hieratic and pseudo-hieroglyphic versions of the 'scribe' sign.¹⁹

The largest group of relevant ostraca is from the early Twentieth Dynasty (ca. 1190–1130 BCE), the most productive period for Theban ostraca in general (Haring 2018: 146).²⁰ Here as in the case of the Nineteenth Dynasty pieces, there are notable differences in style between these ostraca, and between the shapes of the 'scribe' sign—the examples in figure 3 are all from this period. Several of these ostraca probably refer to the best documented senior scribe of the Twentieth Dynasty: Amennakht, son of Ipuy, attested from the late years of Ramesses III until the end of the reign of Ramesses VI,²¹ and some quite possibly to his son and successor Harshire, who is attested until the late reign of Ramesses IX (Davies 1999: 132–133).²² This brings us to the late Twentieth Dynasty (ca. 1130–1070 BCE), to which six relevant ostraca can be attributed, including Turin CG 57534 (figure 1).²³ It is impossible, however, to identify scribes other than Harshire as users of the 'scribe' sign in this period, given the uncertainty about the precise dates of the ostraca, and about the status of the documented scribes.

A short note on the notion of 'senior scribe' is in order here. Other than 'chief workman' (or 'foreman'), this is not the translation of an Egyptian title, but an Egyptological expression that refers to the most important scribe of the royal tomb workforce, who was one of its three formal superiors (the other two being the foremen of the right and left sides), and as such presumably the

Heritage Key: Valley of the Kings – Part 2, June 2009 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OSTMyBuinPc>, accessed June 2023. The dating of the individual ostraca is mainly based on Soliman 2016.

18 See Davies 1999: 123–125, 283, for the scribes mentioned.

19 See Soliman 2021 for this type of ostraca in general.

20 Nineteen ostraca can be probably be dated to reigns in this period (Ramesses III–VIII), including several published ones: BM EA 50716 and 50731 (Demarée 2000: pl. 109, 129–130), BTdK 539 and 551 (Dorn 2011: pl. 454–455, 462–463), and Florence 2628 (Killen & Weiss 2009: 145). The dating of the individual ostraca is mainly based on Soliman 2016.

21 The most likely references are BM EA 50716 (Demarée 2000: pl. 109), and Ifao ONL 338+339, 6474, 6515 (unpublished).

22 BM 50731 (Demarée 2000: pl. 129–130) and Ifao ONL 6240 of the late Twentieth Dynasty (unpublished); see Soliman 2016: 276, 288–289.

23 Cairo JE 96647, Ifao ONL 6240, 6449, 6549, 6603, all unpublished; Turin CG 57534 (López 1984: pl. 173 a). The dating of the individual ostraca is mainly based on Soliman 2016.

main person responsible for local record-keeping.²⁴ It has been assumed in older literature that this scribe was referred to in Egyptian by the full title ‘Scribe of the Tomb’ (in hieratic documents) and ‘Scribe in the Place of Truth’ (in hieroglyphic). Subsequently it became clear that many other local administrators used the same titles; these administrators could be assistants to the senior scribes (some were their sons), scribes of the supporting workforce (*smd.t*), and (chief) draughtsmen. The Egyptian titles ‘Scribe of the Tomb’ and ‘Scribe in the Place of Truth’ are therefore unreliable as indications for the actual status and tasks of the persons thus designated. To make matters worse, there is the possibility that there were actually two ‘senior scribes’ in the mid and late Twentieth Dynasty; hence two superiors for each side of the necropolis workforce.²⁵ According to some sources, however, the second superior of the left side was the chief draughtsman.²⁶ It remains difficult to this day to establish the status and tasks of the known Deir el-Medina administrators, despite (or perhaps rather due to) the abundance of references to them.

The idea that one scribe was more important than others is supported in dozens of texts by the expression ‘the scribe’ (*p³ sš*).²⁷ It is also supported by the very use of the ‘scribe’ sign among other abbreviations and identity marks. Presumably, only one person was thus referred to, especially when the sign was used as a property mark—although this seems to have been done rarely. It has already been noted that on many ostraca inscribed with sequences of identity marks, the ‘scribe’ sign appears at the start of such a sequence, directly after the sign representing the foreman (of the right or left). This use is a perfect parallel to the mention of foremen and scribes in hieratic accounts on ostraca and papyri, and therefore suggests that the ‘scribe’ sign in this position represents the scribe as one of the superiors of the workforce, that is, as the senior scribe. On several ostraca from the early Twentieth Dynasty, the ‘scribe’ sign refers to the senior scribe Amennakht, and is followed by the mark 𓂏 of his son Harshire.²⁸ We know that Harshire acted as an assistant to his father, and this may be the reason for mentioning him directly after his father and before the workmen, despite the fact that Harshire’s formal status was merely that of workman until he succeeded his father as senior scribe, on which occasion he himself started using the ‘scribe’ sign.²⁹ Although as an assistant

24 The expression ‘senior scribe’ appeared for the first time in Ventura 1986: 70, but the existence of a single scribe responsible for both sides of the workforce was convincingly argued earlier, on the basis of accounts of grain rations, by Janssen 1975: 461–462. See also McDowell 1990: 69–91; Davies 1999: 123–142.

25 Lines 6 and 10 of papyrus Turin Cat. 1894 (Ramesses IX) explicitly mention two ‘chiefs’ (*hr.y*) for each side (Kitchen 1983: 657). O. DeM 381 (Ramesses IV) mentions ‘four superiors’ on its obverse, but ‘three superiors’ plus a scribe on its reverse (Kitchen 1983: 140).



26 E.g., Papyrus Turin Cat. 2071/139 verso 2–3 and 7 (Ramesses IX; Kitchen 1983: 642–643).

27 Also found once on one of the name ostraca; see note 14.

28 Clear instances are ostraca Ifao ONL 6241 and 6515, both unpublished. O. BTdK 551 (Dorn 211: pl. 462–463) appears to have a non-hierarchical order but includes the senior scribe and Harshire. O. Ifao ONL 6474 (unpublished) has the sign for the foreman of left between the scribe and Harshire.

29 See note 22.

scribe Harshire is sometimes called 'scribe of the Tomb' in hieratic documents, just like his father and several other scribes, the ostraca inscribed with marks make a clear distinction between the senior scribe and his son, the workman.

A remarkable parallel to hieratic accounts is ostrakon Cairo JE 96647 (unpublished) from the late Twentieth Dynasty, which has two columns of marks, one for the right and one for the left side of the workforce. Both columns include the hieratic 'scribe' sign; in the right column it is preceded by the foreman of the right side (a very cursive variant of ) , while in the left column the preceding sign (damaged but probably ) seems to be that of a workman who may have stepped in occasionally for the foreman of the left, although the official deputy follows only after the 'scribe' sign.³⁰ The double occurrence of the same 'scribe' sign on the ostrakon may indicate that the same senior scribe is mentioned for the right and left side, as happens often in hieratic accounts of grain rations, where the senior scribe receives his ration in two portions, one for the right and one for the left side. Alternatively, given its late date, ostrakon Cairo JE 96647 may precisely show us the existence of two senior scribes, one for the right and one for the left side, even with the possibility that the left 'scribe' was actually the chief draughtsman.

Having discussed the uses of the 'scribe' sign throughout the Nineteenth and Twentieth Dynasties, we may now return to the distribution of the different graphic shapes of the sign, that is, the occurrences of the hieratic and the pseudo-hieroglyphic variants and their contexts. The possibilities one may envisage for their distribution are (1) chronological, that is, the increasing or diminishing use of graphic variants of the sign through the Nineteenth and Twentieth Dynasties (ca. 1290–1070 BCE, a period of approximately 220 years); (2) by scribal competence, that is, by the style of the inscribed sherds and stones featuring the 'scribe' sign, apart from the sign itself.

Starting with the second possibility, we may distinguish ostraca written by 'untrained' hands (that is, by persons apparently unexperienced in writing correct hieratic texts or hieroglyphs, e.g., Turin CG 57393 – fig. 2), hieratic hands (e.g., Turin CG 57534 – fig. 1), and hieroglyphic hands. The latter (presumably those of trained draughtsmen) are rare, and so, in fact, is the hieroglyphic shape of the 'scribe' sign itself, which is not necessarily found on hieroglyphic ostraca only.³¹ Nor do hieratic variants of the sign occur exclusively on ostraca written by hieratic hands: against six hieratic-style ostraca featuring the hieratic 'scribe' sign, there are six ostraca by untrained hands, and

30 As suggested by Soliman 2016: 328. The ostrakon is there said to be probably from the very end of the Twentieth Dynasty (reign of Ramesses XI).

31 One possible published example is O. BM EA 50731 (Demarée 2000: pl. 129–130), the obverse of which has three columns of marks that include correct hieroglyphs (among which we find the hieroglyphic variant of the 'scribe' sign), or carefully mimic a hieroglyphic style. The style of the reverse seems different, which may be due to the different layout or to different writing circumstances. Another hieroglyphic specimen of the 'scribe' sign is that on O. Ifao 6507 (see fig. 3a), but the other signs on this ostrakon betray an untrained hand.

one possibly hieroglyphic, that use the same variant.³² The pseudo-hieroglyphic variant is the most frequent on ostraca: eight or nine examples are found on ostraca produced by untrained hands,³³ four to six on hieratic-style ostraca,³⁴ and one possibly by a hieroglyphic hand.³⁵ This distribution may suggest a preference for the pseudo-hieroglyphic form by ‘untrained’ (that is, semi-literate) producers of ostraca, but the numbers and their differences are really very small. It seems best, therefore, to say that the pseudo-hieroglyphic and the hieratic forms of the ‘scribe’ sign were both popular forms in these semi-literate inscriptions.

There appears to be no significant chronological development in the distribution of the graphic variants. The Nineteenth and early Twentieth Dynasties essentially present similar distributions of hieratic and pseudo-hieroglyphic sign variants on ostraca of different styles. The six ostraca that can be dated to the late Twentieth Dynasty seem to present a relatively clear-cut distribution of three pseudo-hieroglyphic variants made by untrained hands³⁶ and three hieratic variants on hieratic-style ostraca.³⁷ But a group of six ostraca is a very poor basis for this suggested division, which may easily be disturbed by a group of ostraca that are as yet undated, some of which might turn out to belong to the same period, and/or ostraca that defy stylistic categorization.³⁸ This means that no clear pattern can be discerned in the graphic diversity of the ‘scribe’ sign on Ramesside pseudo-script ostraca. The one thing that stands out clearly is this graphic diversity itself, with two basic forms (hieratic and pseudo-hieroglyphic) being popular throughout the period discussed, indicating how two different scripts used at Deir el-Medina inspired local semi-literate administrators.

- 32 Hieratic-style ostraca: Cairo JE 96328 and 96647, Chicago OIM 19215, Ifao ONL 1371 and 6603 (all unpublished); Turin CG 57534 (López 1984: pl. 173 a). Untrained hands: BTdK 551 (Dorn 2011: pl. 463), Hawass (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OSTMyBuinPc>, accessed June 2023), Ifao ONL 338+339 and 6487, Prague 3836, APO 162 (all unpublished). Hieroglyphic(?): Ifao ONL 6874 (unpublished).
- 33 Ashmolean Museum HO 999, Ifao ONL 6240(?), 6241, 6507, 6508, 6515(?) and 6549 (all unpublished), Petrie Museum UC 31989 (Petrie Museum Collections Online <https://collections.ucl.ac.uk/Details/petrie/46605>, accessed June 2023), Turin CG 57144 (López 1980: pl. 63a).
- 34 BM EA 50716(?) (Demarée 2002: pl. 109), BTdK 539 (Dorn 2011: pl. 455), Florence 2628 (Killen & Weiss 2009: 145), Ifao ONL 6684(?), 6851 and Leipzig 1821 (all unpublished).
- 35 KV 47/335 (unpublished).
- 36 Ifao ONL 6240, 6449 and 6549 (all unpublished).
- 37 Cairo JE 96647 and Ifao ONL 6603 (both unpublished), Turin CG 57534 (López 1984: pl. 173 a).
- 38 Ashmolean Museum HO 999 and 1120, KV 47/335, Ifao ONL 1371, 6226, 6240, 6449, 6474, 6572 and 6805 (all unpublished), Turin 57144 (López 1980: pl. 63a), Petrie Museum UC 31989 (Petrie Museum Collections Online <https://collections.ucl.ac.uk/Details/petrie/46605>, accessed June 2023), Michaelides 91 (Goedicke & Wente 1962: pl. LXXX).

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