Hieroglyphs in the Renaissance: Rebirth or New Life?

(Part 1)

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Abstract. This paper (the first of a series) deals with the reception of Egyptian hieroglyphs in the Renaissance. Humanists and artists were not much interested in deciphering the ancient Egyptian writing, which was increasingly revealing itself in the monuments that were rediscovered in the 15ᵗʰ and 16ᵗʰ centuries, mainly in Italy. Stimulated by the (neo-)Platonic vision of a purely symbolic mode of expressing ideas, and comforted in this by the edition of the *Hieroglyphica*, attributed (probably wrongly) to Horapollo, they created their own system of writing, which was first put in practice in Francesco Colonna's *Hypnerotomachia* (Venice, 1499). After a general introduction, this paper presents the available documentation in a principled way, by sorting out the data according to their semiotic functions, whose mechanics will be dealt with in the second part of the study.

Keywords. Hieroglyphs, neo-hieroglyphs, Renaissance, Francesco Colonna, Hypnerotomachia Poliphili, neo-Platonism.

While the official death certificate of hieroglyphic writing has been conventionally set in 394 CE, three years after Theodosius I ordered the closing of the temples, the knowledge of hieroglyphs had already by then been circumscribed to a limited number of religious centers. Inscriptions on private stelae and coffins had either been reduced to some formulaic expressions, or mimicked the presence of hieroglyphs, sometimes with a limited set of arbitrary geometric strokes (Sternberg el-Hotabi 1994).

Despite some occasional interest displayed in Byzantine circles, the reminiscence of hieroglyphs, or more generally of ancient Egypt, in the collective mind in Western Europe had considerably

dwindled.[1] Genuine monuments of ancient Egypt had almost completely vanished out of sight after the sack of Rome in 1084 by Norman troops.[2] The *Memorabilia*, which were composed in the 12th–13th centuries for the usage of pilgrims, mentioned the pyramid of Cestius (*meta Remi*) and another one near Castel del-Angelo (*meta Romuli*), and the obelisk of the Circus Vaticanus, which was supposed to contain Julius Caesar's ashes at its top.[3] Access to hieroglyphs was mainly limited to the inscriptions that run on the base of the two sphinxes of Nectanebo which had been installed in front of the Pantheon by the late 12th century (Curran 1998–1999). Except for the uninscribed obelisk of the Circus Vaticanus, the place of some fallen obelisks bearing hieroglyphic inscriptions had also occasionally been spotted (Iversen 1968: 98, n. 3; Farout 2016: § 3), well before their eventual re-installment in strategic places in the city in the late 16th century and during the 17th–18th centuries.

In 1419, a copy of a curious manuscript written in Greek was brought from the island of Andros to Italy by Christoforo Buodelmonte. The manuscript (Laurent. plut. 69,27), which had been copied in the century before, contained three texts.[4] One of them, simply entitled *Hieroglyphica*, had been transmitted under the name of a certain Horapollo who was identified as an Alexandrian philosopher mentioned in the Suda.[5] The *Hieroglyphica* present themselves as a practical guide to hieroglyphs. Their structure is quite simple: when the Egyptians wanted to write down a specific idea A, they drew the sign B, because of C (Thissen 2001; Winand 2018: 224, 2022a: 46–49). While the correlation between A and B can sometimes be checked and eventually validated, the explanation is often dependent from sources alien to Egyptian realities.

Very early on, the *Hieroglyphica* sparked an interest—albeit a modest one—among humanists.[6] One had to wait 1505 to have the first edition (Greek text only), 1515 or 1517 for the first translation in Latin (Rolet 2021: 178–180), and 1543 for the first illustrated edition (the French version by Jean

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1   For the reception of hieroglyphs in Arabic sources during the Middle Ages, see Sundermeyer 2020a and 2020b.

2   See Hamilton 2003, who relativizes the importance of the so-called sack of 1084, when compared to the catastrophic event of 1527.

3   See the description of Master Gregorius (Wolff 2005: 167).

4   On the history of this manuscript, see Fournet 2021: 1–2, who notes that another manuscript was in Europe already in the 14th century.

5   Doubts have been recently voiced on Horapollo's identity. Recent scholarship now views Horapollo's name as a pseudepigraph. The redaction of the *Hieroglyphica*, which is made of several layers, should be placed in the Byzantine circles, at the turn of the 9th–10th centuries: see the collective volume Fournet (ed.) 2021.

6   As noted by Fournet 2021: 3, n. 8, the *editio princeps* by Aldo Manuce inserted the *Hieroglyphica* in a volume which was mainly devoted to fabulists. See also Dempsey 1988: 342, who underplayed the significance of the *Hieroglyphica*: "it (i.e. the *Hieroglyphica* – JW) was by no means the only source of such information available to Renaissance scholars (who used it with caution), and it was certainly not the most important".

Martin, edited by Jacques Kerver in Paris).[7] Partial copies and tentative translations and comments however already circulated in 15th century Italy (Rolet 2021: 180–183).

The *Hieroglyphica* were of course not a dictionary, not even a lexicon. Their notes could nonetheless be arranged in a simple tabular way to match signs and meanings; for instance, lion: power, vulture: mother, bee: king, etc.[8] With such an admittedly rather primitive list, a first attempt at deciphering the hieroglyphic inscriptions that were available in Rome could be expected. This was apparently Cyriacus' of Ancona ambition when he made his last trip to Egypt in 1438. He had indeed made for himself a summary of what he could understand from the *Hieroglyphica* in order to confront his list to the monuments he hoped to visit in Egypt (van Essen 1958). Apparently he could not achieve any result and he passed his query on to his friend Niccolo Niccoli, who was, as he wrote, the most capable man to find the solution to the hieroglyphs' mystery. Unfortunately, the famous humanist died shortly after receiving Cyriacus' letter without dealing with the matter. This genuine attempt in the first half of the 15th century to confront the *Hieroglyphica*'s notes with authentic hieroglyphic inscriptions remained isolated. Epistemologically, this attitude reflected an archaeological and philological approach: archaeological because it supposed that the understanding of hieroglyphs must be grounded in the study of monuments whose provenance and authenticity could be checked, and philological because it applied the methods that were experienced at the time for the edition of Latin and Greek classical texts. The archaeologico-philological approach is representative of the linguistic pole.

As already stressed, this position was disregarded for reasons that remained actually unexpressed. In the Quattrocento, leading scholarly figures like Marsile Ficino, Pico della Mirandola, Leon Battista Alberti, and Erasmus of Rotterdam were fascinated by Plato's philosophy, and hold in high esteem the works of the medio- and late Platonic schools. Prominent authors for the issue discussed in this paper, like Plutarchus and Apuleius, Plotinus, Porphyrus, and Jamblichus, as well as historians like Diodorus and Ammianus were progressively revealing to humanists and artists a convergent picture of what seemed the raison-d'être of the hieroglyphic writing: a system made of signs whose symbolic force was self-sufficient for expressing the highest values of religion without any link to a linguistic expression (Winand 2020). The vacuity of words when compared to the power of images was also vehemently expressed in the *Corpus hermeticum*, which was edited in 1471 by the indefatigable Ficino.[9] The *Hieroglyphica* did not at first seem to contradict this

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7   A previous illustrated edition of the texts with engravings by Dürer planned by W. Pirkheimer in 1516 was never edited. Dürer's drawings, which have fortunately been saved (Vienna Cod 3255), are reproduced in Raybould 2015: Appendix 4.

8   Simple and straightforward correspondences of this kind between sign and meaning can also be found in Alberti's *De re aedificatoria*, VIII, 5.

9   Cf. Ficino's often cited principle: *in quibus interpretandis dimitte voces accipe sensus* (*Opera omnia*, 1576, p. 1901), which actually goes back to Jamblichus' teaching. As he wrote elsewhere (p. 1768): "since God obviously has

widespread opinion. As the text was transmitted without illustrations or actual hieroglyphic signs, it left fully open the question what was actually a hieroglyph.[10] Furthermore—and this has not yet received the attention it deserves (Winand forthc.)—humanists and artists of the Renaissance were fully equipped to receive the *Hieroglyphica* as an Egyptian textbook on symbolic writing. On the one hand, theologians since Late Antiquity had been developing ideas that promoted symbolic thinking as powerful means to understanding God's design. In this they were elaborating upon the teachings of St. Paul (2 Corinthians, 3,6: "The letter kills, the spirit gives life"), St. Augustine (*De christiana theologia*; Schneider 2019: 70),[11] and pseudo-Dionysius Aeropagites (around 6th cnetury), a Byzantine theologian who had built a complex theory on symbolic theology. Dionysius' writings were translated into Latin by John Scotus Eriugena in the 9th century. They then quietly diffused into Western Europe where they had a deep influence on Albertus the Great and his most famous disciple, Thomas Aquinas (Humbrecht 2006).[12] On the other hand, the Middle Ages had widely popularized a mode of expression where symbolic imagery took a significant place. In this, the *Physiologos*, a treaty dealing with animals (and to a lesser extent with plants and minerals) that probably originated in Alexandria in the 2nd century CE played a decisive role (Zucker 2004, Lazaris 2016).

The *Physiologos* is both the recipient and the source of several traditions. It is itself a piece of work that underwent significant modifications, alterations and additions over the centuries. It was well received in Western Europe where it gave a decisive impetus to the genre of bestiaries that would burgeon and grow all over Europe till the Renaissance.[13] While the *Physiologos* partly relies on Aristotle and other scholars dealing with animals and plants,[14] the spirit and the purpose are completely different. The notices of the *Physiologos* follow a regular pattern (Schneider 2019: 63): after an introductory sentence from the Scriptures that gives the general moral tone, the author gives the characteristics of an animal (its φύσεις), which are then explained from a Christian moral

knowledge of everything, not as a multifaceted reflection on an object, but as a simple and solid form of the object" (*videlicet Deus scientiam rerum habet non tamquam excogitationem de re multiplicem, sed tamquam simplicem firmam-que rei formam*). See also Alciat's *De verborum significatione*: *verba significant, res significantur* (apud Raybold 2014: 254).

10   In the first half of the 15th century, the word hieroglyph was not systematically used for referring to the ancient Egypt script; neutral expressions like *figurae animalium* are also occasionally found.

11   According to the Church Father, nature speaks in a symbolic language which has to be deciphered. In other words, Nature presents itself with a theological text for those who are capable of reading it. This of course found an echo in Plato's teachings, for instance in *Phaedrus* to take a prominent example.

12   Denys' treaty *On the celestial hierarchy* was translated in 1436 by Ambrose Traversari.

13   See for instance the *Dicta Joannis Chrysostomi de naturis bestiarum* (now in the Pierpont Morgan Library ms. M. 832), which were highly popular during the 12th–15th centuries.

14   Actually, the *Physiologos* is also dependent from other genres: fables like Esopus' and Phaedrus', works on stones (*lapidaria*), like Xenokrates' of Ephesus, etc.

perspective. As has already been noted, while the *Physiologos* and the *Hieroglyphica* have demonstrably much in common, it would be going too far to claim that the latter directly and slavishly derives from the former (Zucker 2021). What is important to note for our purpose is the metaphorical, allegorical, or symbolic link made by the *Physiologos* between a particular behavior of an animal and a moral value in human nature. In this, the *Physiologos* paved the way for the reception of the *Hieroglyphica*. Communicating with images by using animals was also a common practice in the decorative programs of churches, monasteries, and other cult places. The sceneries found in the bestiaries were frequently transposed in sculpture, on capitals and porches of many religious monuments. Highly sophisticated compositions like the scene above the main entrance of the cathedral San Pedro of Jaca in Spain from the 11th century offered different layers of interpretation, from the simplest, which any uneducated pilgrim could understand, to the most complex, to be deciphered only by those who had a deep knowledge in theology and Church's history (Favreau 1996, Winand 2022b: 65–66).

In the Quattrocento, humanists were convinced that communication through images was the ultimate mood of expression to access the divine, the world of ideas. What they retained from the *Hieroglyphica* was not the practical information on the value of different signs, but their supposed guiding spirit. As the treaty had no reproduction of hieroglyphs (genuine or not), they felt free to compose their own hieroglyphs. The first attempt in this respect, whose inventiveness and quality were never surpassed, was Francesco Colonna's *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*, which was edited by Aldo Manuce in Venice in 1499. In this richly illustrated novel, probably one of the most beautiful printed book of the Renaissance, Poliphilo, the hero, in his search for his well-beloved Polia, in his dreams visits antique monuments and other pieces of architecture that sometimes bear a hieroglyphic inscription, which he thankfully translates for the ignorant reader. Figure 1 shows one of the novel's most famous inscriptions which will be inspirational for many artists through the 16th century.[15]

15   This inscription was indeed reproduced in the decoration of the court of the Escuelas Mayores of the University of Salamanca (1525–1530, fourth enigma), emulated in Hubert Mielemans' funerary inscription in 1568–1570 (Winand in press a), and integrated by Bocchi in his *Symbolicae quaestiones* published in 1574 (Rolet 2015).
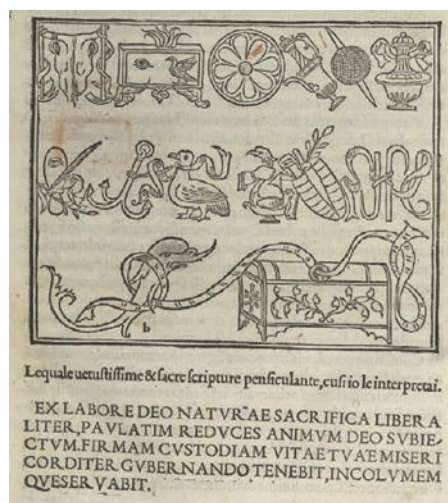
Fig. 1. Francesco Colonna's *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* (1499) – First inscription.

As is immediately evident, such inscriptions emulate the rules of classical, i.e. Latin epigraphy: the signs are calibrated, arranged in lines (or columns), submitted to rules of vectoriality, and belong to a more or less fixed repertoire. Furthermore, arrangements for suggesting syntactic relations could sometimes be found, like the inclusion of one sign into another for expressing grammatical dependency, the hand holding something for possession, or a ribbon uniting two signs for marking coordination.[16] Of course, a quick look at the inscription suffices to realize that the signs are as far away from real hieroglyphs as possible. Above all, as the signs have been chosen for their supposed symbolic value only, there is no indication as regards their morphological status or their syntactic relations with the others components of the inscription. Thus, if one takes for granted that the reader has correctly identified the bucranium (line 1, first sign) as the symbol of labour, work, he/she is still left in the dark as regards the morphological class it should be assigned to: a noun (labour, work), a verb (to work), an adjective (industrious), or an adverb (laboriously)? If a verb, new questions immediately arise: what are for instance its tense-aspect-mode features? The number of potential readings inevitably could not but quickly result in ambiguity. Last but not least, there is no cue suggesting how to segment the text into phrases, clauses, or sentences. It does not come as a surprise, therefore, that neo-hieroglyphic inscriptions, as they are usually called, only exceptionally contain more than fifteen signs. Even so, their translation remains a scholarly exercise full of pitfalls and uncertainties. While neo-hieroglyphic inscriptions that were inserted in printed texts or manuscripts are generally provided with their author's translation,[17] this is not the case for

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16   This will be discussed fully in Section 2.

17   Colonna's *Hypnerotomachia* gave the tone with translations in Latin. One can of course dispute the transposition into Latin as a translation *stricto sensu*, for the hero actually introduces its version with the formula "*cusi io le* (i.e. *lequale sacre scripture*) *interpretai,*" which is rendered "*i'interpertray en cette sorte*" in the French edition by Kerver (fol. 11b). This notwithstanding, neo-hieroglyphic texts are sometimes glossed word by word before coming to the Latin (or another

the ones that occasionally show up on paintings,[18] or in monumental art.[19] The underlying texts, usually in Latin,[20] that were the model of the neo-hieroglyphic inscriptions, have been lost. This raises a fundamental question that should ideally be settled before going any further in the study of these inscriptions: how confident can we be that a column of signs imitating the neo-hieroglyphic style can actually be translated or glossed in a natural language? As will be seen, there are several examples on paintings and in epigraphy where neo-hieroglyphs are actually only indexical of this type of writing, exactly as hieroglyphs in some late Antique inscriptions are indexical of writing, the best example being probably the inscriptions of the *Mensa Isiaca*. This Roman artefact of the 1st century CE, which was rediscovered at the beginning of the 16th century in Rome, was for some time seriously considered an important artefact for deciphering the ancient Egyptian writing.[21]

The term hieroglyph received a very wide extension during the Renaissance. From a typological point of view, it is interesting to contrast the polysemy of the term with the usages of writing in Ancient Egypt. The discussion of this paper is articulated as follows. After giving a general overview of the uses of the term hieroglyph in the Renaissance (1), I proceed to a semiotic analysis of some emblematic examples (2). The analytical criteria are then applied to the actual productions of Ancient Egypt (3). A comparison between the two cultural modes of expression is attempted in turn (4) in order to appreciate in a concluding section how far they typologically resorted to similar reflexes (5).

In this paper, the meaning(s) of hieroglyphs in the Renaissance is considered from two perspectives. I first deal with the definitions and theoretical discussions occasionally provided by humanists (§ 1), before examining how the concept of hieroglyph was actually used in the contemporary production by artists and writers (§ 2).

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language) version, suggesting that these interpretations were given the same status as a translation in the modern sense. Translations, for obvious reasons as it was intended to be a press book, are found in Alberti's manuscript (Royal MS. 12 C III, Winand 2022c: fig. 36). This is also the case in Jean Martin's composition for the Joyous entry of Henri II of France in 1549 (Winand 2022c: fig. 37–38), and in Jan van der Noot's *Lofsang van Brabant* in 1580 (Winand 2022c: fig. 42).

18 See below § 2.2.2.

19 The funerary monument for Hubert Mielemans (Church of the Highly Cross, Liège, around 1558–1560) is the best example of this category (Winand & Ogier 2022; Winand in press a).

20 But note that the linguistic equivalent of the neo-hieroglyphic inscription made for Henri II's Joyous entry in 1549 by Jean Martin is French.

21 On this exceptional artefact, which was somehow connected to the celebration of the Isiac cults, see Arroyo de la Fuente 2015, Budichowski 2018: 322–339. Despite some dissent voices that could be heard in early 17th century, Kircher gave the *Mensa Isiaca* a place of choice in his studies (1652–1655: t. 3, 80–160). Warburton in the *Divine Legation of Mose* has to be credited for the correct dating of the *Mensa*, which was however doubted by Montfaucon, who remained persuaded that it was a most ancient artefact (Winand in press b).

# 1.	Ancient Egyptian Hieroglyphs in the Renaissance: a definition

Ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs were occasionally discussed by humanists. While mainly relying on the testimonies of classical sources, they could also make an idea for themselves by studying the antique testimonia that were available. In this section, I first review the general statements on hieroglyphs expressed by Renaissance scholars (§ 1.1), before examining how they applied their theoretical views on actual monuments (§ 1.2).

## 1.1.	General statements on ancient hieroglyphs

The term hieroglyph was apparently not used in early Quattrocento. Poggio Bracciolini for instance, when dealing with ancient Egyptian writing, reports that he saw "another (needle) a bit smaller with diverse images of beasts and birds which were used by the ancient Egyptians instead of letters" (Poggio 1447–1448, I: vii). [22]

For Marsilio Ficino, hieroglyphs were used to express the secret and hidden realities of nature. To interpret them, it was therefore necessary to go beyond the words to directly reach the meaning. This theory was encapsulated in the phrase *in quibus interpretandis dimitte voces accipe sensus* "in interpreting this, welcome the senses, dismiss the letters." [23] This very popular adage was frequently cited by humanists down to Father Athanasius Kircher. [24] The distrust of natural language reconnected with the teaching of Late Antiquity on the effectiveness of hieroglyphs, but also with the impossibility of translating Egyptian into another idiom. The same idea would be taken up by Alciatus when he declared in the *De verborum significatione: verba significant, res significantur*, which could be rendered by "the words signify, the things have a signification." Marsilio Ficino's thought (1576: 1768) is made explicit in the following passage:

> To express the divine mysteries, the Egyptian priests did not use individual letter
> characters, but complete figures of plants, trees or animals since God obviously
> has knowledge of things, not so much a multifaceted reflection on the object, but
> a simple and consistent form of the thing.

In *De re aedificatoria*, published after his dead in 1485, Leon Battista Alberti (1404–1472), discussing the fate of funerary monuments, sadly observed what happened to Etruscan, Greek and Latin inscriptions: no one was able to understand them any longer. According to Alberti, these people, knowing only their own letters, were doomed to oblivion. However the system of notation used

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22	*Vidi alteram paulo minorem variis animalium, aviumque figuris, quibus prisci Aegyptii pro litteris utebantur.* Obelisks were by then called needles (*agulia*). On the *De Varietate Fortunae*, see Boriaud 1999.

23	This motto actually goes back to Jamblichus. In his commentary, Albertus the Great already argued that symbols are of prime importance, because they are con-natural (*connaturalia*) with our daily experience. As he put it, "through symbols we are led to meanings" (*per symbola ducimur in significationes*), see Humbrecht 2006.

24	Kircher *Obeliscus Pamphilius*, p. 398, probably taken from Ficino, *Opera Omnia*, II, p. 1901.

by the Egyptians, i.e. the hieroglyphs, could very easily be interpreted by educated people all over the earth. Alberti concluded this section by giving examples of famous tombs of Antiquity whose inscriptions consisted of a few figurative symbols, which were, according to him, in keeping with the spirit of ancient Egyptian compositions.[25]

Alberti's opinion is important in several ways. First of all, it establishes a hierarchy between the figurative writing of hieroglyphs and the alphabet. Writing in pictures, whose paragon were the hieroglyphs, is superior to any other because it speaks directly to the intellect without going through the medium of language. Language is an oversimplification, but also a source of ambiguities as demonstrated by the multitude of languages that resulted from the destruction of Babel tower. Following a tradition firmly anchored since Antiquity, Alberti reserved the understanding of hieroglyphics to highly educated people, worthy of being entrusted with such a secret.

In one of his most commented *adagia* (1001), Erasmus (Saladin 2011: 4–5) discussed Augustus' motto *Festina lente* (σπεῦδε βραδέως), which was emblematically rendered on his coinage by the famous composition of a dolphin entwined around a marine anchor.[26] He made a link between this figurative manner of illustrating a sentence and the ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs:

> We call hieroglyphs those enigmatic drawings so often used in ancient times, especially among the priests and theologians of Egypt, who thought it harmful to express the mysteries of wisdom in ordinary writing, exposing as we do to an uninitiated public. What they thought worth knowing, they wrote down by drawing shapes of animate beings, or various objects, in such a way that it was difficult for the ordinary reader to decipher them. It was necessary to first learn the properties of each object and the strength and special nature of each creature. And only the man who had a thorough knowledge of them could interpret the symbols and put them together, and thus solve the riddle of their meaning.

After reporting the common assumption that hieroglyphs were used by the priests to keep ignorant people at bay,[27] Erasmus insists on the learning of the properties of each object, which only could give access to their intimate meaning. By analyzing an object or an idea into its constitutive parties

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25 The famous medal with the winged eye is one of Alberti's best known contributions to this program (Raybold 2015: 73).

26 Actually, Augustus' coinage bears a crab and a butterfly. This was reused by Symeoni 1560: 174–175, and Claude Paradin 1583: 173–174, who contrasted the two illustrations. Paul Frellon in Lyon adopted it as his printer's mark with the motto *Matura*, which is reminiscent of one of Alciat's *emblemata*. The equivalence between *Festina lente* and *Matura* (or *Maturandum*) had already been discussed by Erasmus (Winand 2022c: 125–128). The motto of the dolphin entwined around an anchor is actually found on Titus' coinage (*RIC* II,110). It was reused in Colonna's *Hypnerotomachia* (§ 2.1.1), taken up by Manuce as his printer mark, and commented countless times in the *emblemata* and *imprese* in the 16th century.

27 The celebrated obscurity of hieroglyphs was a complete non-sense for Reformers who emphasized the clarity of the Holy Scriptures. As soon as in 1520, Melanchthon famously made a comparison between the scholastic theologians who could interpret allegorically some supposed secrets of the Bible and the hieroglyphs (Millet 2012: 268).

it was possible to render it figuratively. By encapsulating the essential properties of an object, a figurative hieroglyph was superior to any natural language.

Augustus' motto was also discussed in Geoffroy Tory's Champs Fleury (1529). The author considered hieroglyphic arrangements of signs bearing a discursive meaning, but also iconographic compositions whose elements could be interpreted as symbols constituting a complex discourse (Tory 1529: fol. 42v–43r). He comes back to this topic later (fol. 73r) when he mentions a hieroglyphic inscription he allegedly saw in Rome. As is immediately evident, the inscription was made according to the *Hypnerotomachia*'s principles and had nothing to do with ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs.

> Une teste de bœuf, ayant pendu aux deux cornes deux hoes, puis une grenoille
> et au dessus d'elle ung oueil, en apres une chaufrette pleine de feu, ung visage
> d'homme, ung vaisseau vuydant de l'eaue, des violettes en ung pot, ung œuil sus
> une sole de soulier, une ancre de navire, une grue tenant une pierre de l'ung de ses
> pieds et ung dauphin sus une lampe qui est tenu d'une main.

Tory, who had apparently made a translation of the *Hieroglyphica* in French for one of his friends—thus, well before Jean Martin's edition for Kerver in 1546—did unfortunately not provide us with a gloss, even less with a translation of the inscription in a vernacular language, which ironically shows how distant the neo-hieroglyphs were from being the universal writing celebrated by humanists.[28] He nevertheless concludes this section by underlining the Egyptian hieroglyphs' value since they had been conceived according to the principles of natural philosophy (fol. 73v).

This short review of the discussion found in humanists' writings is sufficient to give a general idea of what was by then the general assumption on the role and the functioning of hieroglyphs. Being heavily dependent on the testimonies of the Greek and Latin authors, and consolidated in their analysis by the pervasive (neo-)Platonic teaching, they put the hieroglyphs on the pinnacle of the philosophic expression because of their supposed disposition of expressing the essence of the objects and ideas.

1.2. Ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs in the Renaissance: the real and the fakes

Having a rough idea about the general appearance of the ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs was insufficient to make a difference between what was a genuine hieroglyphic inscription and what was an approximate imitation, without speaking of artefacts that had nothing to do with ancient Egypt.[29]

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28   The French edition by Kerver was an important milestone in the reception of the *Hieroglyphica*. The text was however already known in elite circles: on the relevance of ms. 682 of the Condé Library in Chantilly, dated from the beginning of the reign of François I, which proposes a partial translation in French of the text, and on Rabelais' familiarity with the *Hieroglyphica* and Colonna's *Hypnerotomachia*, see Menini 2021.

29   The *Thesaurus hieroglyphicorum* by Herwarth von Hohenburg (published in 1610) is a heterogeneous collection of everything that was supposed Egyptian or connected to ancient Egypt. The *Mensa Isiaca* was significantly given

The classical authors that had occasionally dealt with hieroglyphs usually limited themselves to giving a formal, visual description of the script (animals, plants, artefacts, geometric signs) without attempting a definition (with the notable exception of Clement) nor an explanation of its functioning. As a result, any monument bearing signs that were reminiscent of hieroglyphs, above all birds and wild animals, were qualified as Egyptian.[30] The consequence of this was very damaging indeed as the corpus became polluted with artefacts that contributed to the confusion of ideas and considerably delayed the progresses that could be made in the deciphering. Humanists and artists in the Renaissance, but also scholars of the Baroque Era like Athanasius Kircher, had not realized that ancient Egypt had become so popular and fashionable in Imperial Rome that it initiated an important local production. A first category of hieroglyphic inscriptions were created by people willing to stay as close as possible to the Egyptian tradition, but having limited skills in Egyptian epigraphy. In a second category should be placed monuments where hieroglyphs were carelessly used as an index of ancient Egypt without considering the adequacy of their production to authentic monuments. Figure 2 is an attempt to sort out the antique monuments found in Italy bearing hieroglyphic or pseudo-hieroglyphic inscriptions. This will be discussed in more details in Part 2.
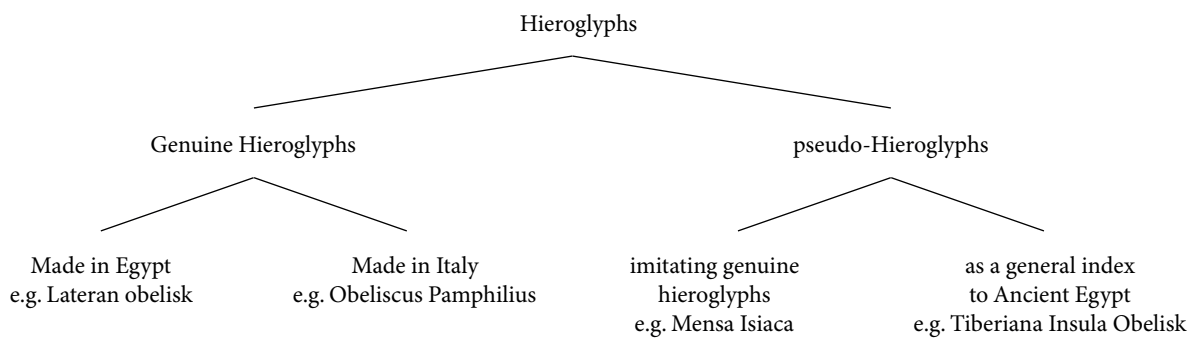

Fig. 2. Hieroglyphic monuments in Imperial Rome.

Genuine hieroglyphs could be seen on obelisks. Of course, no distinction was made between obelisks of Egyptian provenance, some of them dating back to the New Kingdom, and those that had been produced in Rome like the obelisk of Domitian (better known as Obeliscus Pamphilius in Kircher's time). Genuine hieroglyphs were not set apart from an important production of monuments decorated with signs imitating hieroglyphs. These pseudo-hieroglyphs can be sorted out in two categories. In the first one, the signs taken individually reproduce genuine hieroglyphs, and

primacy, with no less than 12 plates, followed by the obelisks that were known at the time. Also included were a statue of Mithra, another of the Artemis of Ephesus, some Roman Canopic jars, diverse alchemical and astrological objects, some Egyptian themes like Harpocrates sitting on the lotus, and a set of Bar Kokhba Revolution coins.

30   Birds were emblematic of the ancient Egyptians script as witnessed by the terminology in Greek and Arabic (Devauchelle 2014; Winand 2020) and the description in Coptic texts (Winand 2022b).

are grouped in such a way as to invoke hieroglyphic inscriptions. Nevertheless they do not make any sense when considered as possible sentences, at least according to the rules of ancient Egyptian epigraphy. The prototypical example for this category is the *Mensa Isiaca*. In the second category, the signs use some types found in the hieroglyphic repertoire without however respecting their actual shape; the general layout does not follow the rules nor the patterns of hieroglyphic writing, and obviously the signs, except for some possible symbolic meaning, are devoid of any linguistic sense. A nice example of this category is offered by the obelisk, actually a Roman artefact, that stood in Late Antiquity in front of the temple of Aesculapius on the Tiberiana insula.[31] From what can be grasped of what remains of the now destroyed monument,[32] the faces of the obelisk where divided into rectangular panels containing images of deities and sacred animals.[33] Its influence on humanists is unclear, but this type of decorative pattern dividing the obelisk faces into regular panels can be found on some Egyptianizing monuments of the late Renaissance.

2. From ancient to new hieroglyphs

As it seems, humanists quickly lost confidence in their ability to decipher hieroglyphic writing. In his *Hieroglyphica* (XXXIII, 331–332), Pierio Valeriano reported the distress of his uncle Urbano Bolzanio facing the immensity of the task, the poor quality of the sources, in particular the manuscripts of Horapollo, and the weakness of the contributions of his contemporaries, who were only scratching the surface (Curran 1998/1999: 159). This however did not diminish the taste for ancient Egypt to the least. All over Europe, the nobility was eager to claim for itself Egyptian roots. Emblematic in this respect was Pope Alexander VI Borgia, who followed the advice of Annius of Viterbo (1432–1502)[34] for decorating his apartments in the Vatican with frescoes showing Isis and Osiris, as well as the bull Apis, which was given a prominent place as it was connected to the Pope's central heraldic motto. Moved by political interests, some scholars tried by all means to reconstruct genealogical links between their people, their leaders and the land of Pharaohs. This frenzy also contaminated what were still embryonic comparative and etymologic studies: almost all European languages seemed to take pride in their supposed link to ancient Egyptian.[35]

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31 For the history of the shaping of the island into a boat to recall the installation of the god in 292–291 BCE, see Iversen 1968: 179–180.

32 A drawing of a panel was reproduced in Kircher 1652–1655: t. 3, 380.

33 A copy from the beginning of the 15th century, now in Oxford, shows a face of the monument (Curran 1998/1999: 149, fig. 6). The fragments, now in the Louvre (Iversen 1968: fig. 163 ad p. 161), can be completed with a drawing by Pococke (Iversen 1968: fig. 162). See Roullet 1972: n° 85 and fig. 95–102.

34 Obsessed by the past glory of ancient Etruria, Annius of Viterbo, condottiere della scienza, made a name for himself as forger of antiquities (Popper 2011). He edited supposedly complete texts of the most famous historians of Antiquity, like Manetho, Berosus and Philo, from manuscripts he pretended to have miraculously retrieved.

35 This gave curious if not hilarious texts like the famous *Hieroglyphica* by Goropius Becanus (posthumously edited in 1580), where the primacy of writing and language was given to Dutch, the author's native dialect (Baker 2019). Dutch

In the Renaissance, Ancient Egypt was synonym of prestige and respect. It was the cradle of ancient wisdom, mother of all arts. The hieroglyphs were a brilliant testimony of the priests' achievement. This script, truly divine, made it possible to philosophically analyze the objects and ideas into their constitutive elements without being polluted by the vagaries of linguistic diversity. It could unfortunately not be deciphered, but its grounding principles were sufficiently understood thanks to the testimonies of the Greek and Latin authors, who hopefully had provided some examples. The recently discovered *Hieroglyphica* attributed to Horapollo were the ultimate proof of the validity of the system.[36]

For the artists, mainly painters and writers, there was no obstacle to put their feet in the footsteps of such a glorious tradition. Starting with Francesco Colonna's *Hypnerotomachia*, the Renaissance experienced a rich hieroglyphic production. Hieroglyphic must of course be considered here in the widest possible sense. Without exaggeration, every figure that could be interpreted in a symbolic or allegoric way was by then susceptible to be indistinctly called hieroglyphic. Figure 3 suggests a possible classification of this polymorphous production, taking, as the main criteria, the linkage to a linguistic rendering and, as a secondary criterium, the principle of vectoriality (which implies the principle of proportional scaling) for disposing the signs in lines or columns.

The two main branches make a fundamental distinction between hieroglyphs as bearing a semantic meaning and hieroglyphs used as an index (§ 2.3). The left branch can be subdivided according to some potential linguistic rendering of hieroglyphs. The left arm, which will not be discussed here, deals with hieroglyphs as linguistic signs in a narrow sense, that is hieroglyphs as they were used in ancient Egypt. The right arm considers hieroglyphs in their symbolic dimension as they were understood in the Renaissance. This class can in turn be subdivided in two categories. On the one hand, hieroglyphs were used as a kind of writing, respecting rules and usages that are normally found in classical epigraphy (§ 2.1). On the other hand, hieroglyphs could also be used as an iconic mode of expression; artists of course enjoyed much more freedom, for example by loosening the constraints imposed by vectoriality (§ 2.2), but in the same time they altered, and sometimes broke, the link with a possible linguistic rendering (§ 2.3). As a conclusion to this section, I shall briefly consider some cases where the presence of hieroglyphs can be suspected without being proven due to the lack of positive elements from the author to encourage the reader to do so (§ 2.4).

was not only the primitive language, but also the most perfect one, because it had preserved, so Goropius, its genuine simplicity. See Droixhe 2007.

36   Recent scholarship has cast reasonable doubts on Horapollo's authorship (see above). He is now better considered a pseudepigraph, whose prestige as philosopher, rhetor, and Alexandrian was sufficient to provide a prestigious authority to the *Hieroglyphica*. The redaction/compilation of the *Hieroglyphica* notices is now settled in a Byzantine milieu, around the turn of the 9th–10th centuries, if not later (Fournet 2021).
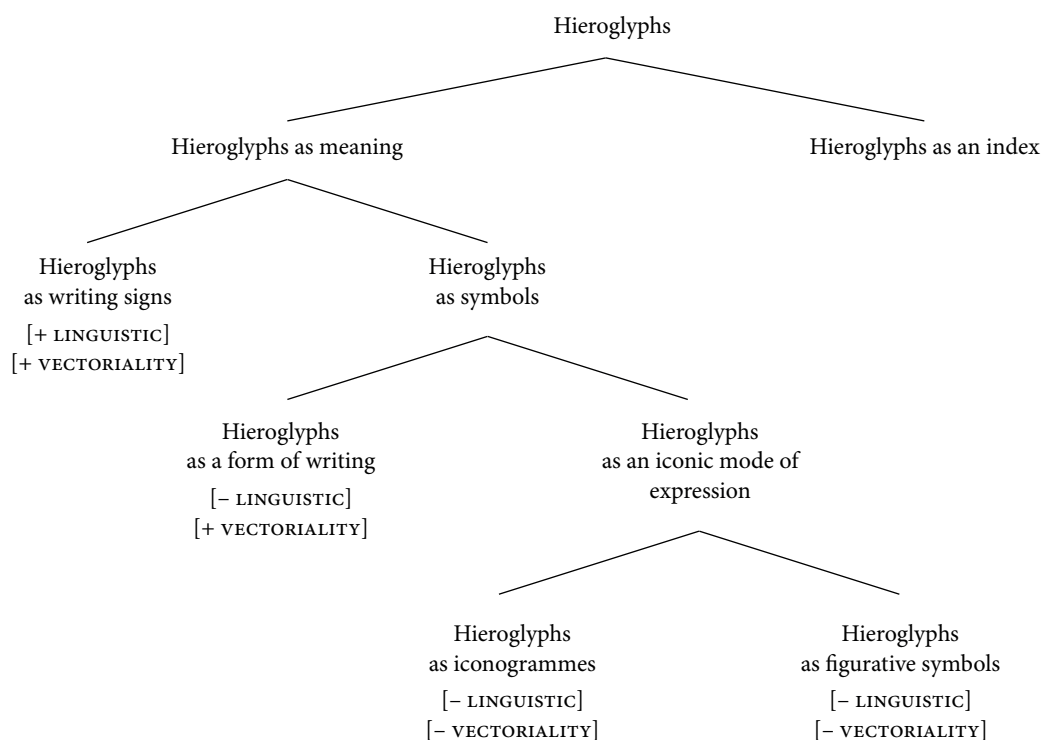
Hieroglyphs

Hieroglyphs as meaning

Hieroglyphs as an index

Hieroglyphs
as writing signs

[+ linguistic]
[+ vectoriality]

Hieroglyphs
as symbols

Hieroglyphs
as a form of writing

[– linguistic]
[+ vectoriality]

Hieroglyphs
as an iconic mode of
expression

Hieroglyphs
as iconogrammes

[– linguistic]
[– vectoriality]

Hieroglyphs
as figurative symbols

[– linguistic]
[– vectoriality]

Fig. 3. Functional classification of hieroglyphs.

In what follows, I seized the opportunity to present a large sample of examples, with figures. It does not, of course, pretend to be exhaustive, but it is the first time, to the best of my knowledge, that such a corpus is collected and arranged in a principled way. The hieroglyphs present in Colonna's *Hypnerotomachia*—the founding text which inspired artists till the end of the Renaissance—are dealt with systematically. This will hopefully give a sound basis for the semiotic analysis proposed in § 2.

2.1. Renaissance hieroglyphs as a new mode of writing

Inscriptions in hieroglyphic, or Egyptian letters as they were regularly called, appeared in Europe during the Renaissance. Inspired by Francesco Colonna's *Hypnerotomachia*, artists, mainly painters, took on this new mode of expression for communicating short messages. The model was antique epigraphy, following Alberti's comments in *De re architectura* (see above). Commemorative in essence, the inscriptions adorned funerary monuments and stelae, pieces of architecture whose function was to celebrate glorious events, like obelisks, porches and gates, or seemingly more modest artefacts which played however a central role in the scenery like altars, wells and fountains. Neo-hieroglyphic inscriptions are mostly found in places of catholic tradition, like Italy, France, the Southern Low Countries and Spain. This limitation should probably be correlated to the reluctance of Protestants to use a cryptic, hidden writing that was overtly designed to keep ignorant people at bay (see above). This was in frontal opposition to the Reformers' position of opening the divine message as wide as possible to everyone—a position that had already resulted in the rejection of

Latin as the vehicle of the Bible. The production of neo-hieroglyphic inscriptions is also limited in its chronological extension. The peak was apparently reached in the mid-16th century. Some new compositions were occasionally still created in the second half of the century and in the very beginning of the 17th century, but their fashion was clearly in decline.

After presenting the evidence of the *Hypnerotomachia*, Francesco Colonna's founding text (§ 2.1.1), I give an overview of the rest of the production of neo-hieroglyphic inscriptions as they are now usually called (§ 2.1.2). The last section (§ 2.1.3) deals with the curious translation in hieroglyphs of a supposedly ancient Egyptian inscription as reported by Plutarchus.

2.1.1. *Francesco Colonna's Hypnerotomachia*

As has long been recognized, the model of neo-hieroglyphic inscriptions is to be searched for in Francesco Colonna's *Hypnerotomachia*.[37] In his short *Praefatio* to the readers, Jean Martin, who translated the novel in French for the Parisian edition by Jacques Kerver in 1546, did not fail to mention ancient Egypt, its monuments—Obelisks and Pyramids—and its script, the "*characteres Egyptiens que l'on dict lettres Hieroglyphiques*", which undoubtedly were one of the book's main attractions.[38] In his wanderings, Poliphilo, the hero, comes across inscriptions he calls hieroglyphic several times. Three of them—the longest and most elaborate ones—bear resemblance with ordinary, Latin epigraphy. The first one is engraved on the base of a monumental elephant bearing on its back an obelisk.[39] Here is the description of the inscription made by Poliphilo himself, after the French edition:[40]

> *Premièrement l'os de la teste d'un beuf, avec instrumentz rustiques, liez aux cornes, un autel assiz fur deux piedz de chevre, puis une flamme de feu, en la face duquel y avoit un oeil, & un vaultour. après un bassin a laver, un vase a biberon, un pelloton de filet trauersé d'un fuzeau, un vase antique aiant la bouche couverte, une semelle avec un œil & deux rameaux, l'un d'oliue, & l'autre de palme, un ancre, une oye,& une lampe antique, tenue par une main, un timon de nauire aussi antique, auquel estoit attaché une branche, d'olivier puis deux hamessons, & un daulphin, & pour le dernier un coffre cloz & ferré, le tout entaillé de belle sculpture, en cette formé.*

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37   See already Grielow 1915 (apud Raibow 2015: 94–150).

38   The "hieroglyphic" signs in the *Hypnerotomachia* were accepted as genuine by humanists. Erasmus was persuaded that Colonna had succeeded in having a copy of the famous treatise written by Chaeremon (Dempsey 1988: 348).

39   This extraordinary composition inspired Bernini and Kircher in 1667 for the restauration in Piazza della Minerva of an obelisk recently discovered during the excavations of the Isieum. The inscription itself was popular in the Renaissance and henceforth copied many times (see below).

40   While reproducing the original typography, I have discriminated for the sake of the reader the typo [u] in /u/ and /v/, and the typo [f] in /f/ and /s/ as needed etymologically. I have also interpreted the tilde which is frequently used above a vowel as an abbreviation for /n/.

Fig. 4. First neo-hieroglyphic inscription in Colonna's *Hypnerotomachia* (1546: fol. 11b).

After thinking about it, Poliphilo, as he reported, was able to give the following translation in Latin, which was accompanied by its transposition into French in the Paris edition:

> *Ex labore deo nature facrifica liberaliter, paulatim reduces animum deo subiectum. firmam custodiam vitae tuae misericorditer gubernando, tenebit incolumemque seruabit.*
>
> Sacrifie liberalement de ton labeur au dieu de nature, peu a peu tu réduiras ton esprit en la subiection de dieu, qui par sa misericorde sera seure garde de ta vie, & en la gouvernant la conservera saine & sauve.

The second inscription is engraved on an obelisk below a medallion with an iconogram figuring a scale, which is also composed of hieroglyphs (see below § 2.2.1). The inscription, which runs in two lines, is described by Poliphilo as follows:

> *(Il) y avoit un oeil, deux espiz de froment liez, un braquemart antique, deux fléaux pareillement liez en travers dessus un cercle, un monde, un timon de navire, & puis un vase antique duquel sortoit un rameau d'Olivier, une platine, deux cigongnes, six pièces de monnoye mises en rond, un temple à huys ouvert, & pour le dernier deux plombz ou perpendicles.*

Fig. 5. Second neo-hieroglyphic inscription in Colonna's *Hypnerotomachia* (1546: fol. 85b).

Poliphilo did not apparently face any serious obstacle that could prevent him from giving the translation. As Jean Martin did previously, he first reproduced the Latin version found in the edition princeps of 1499 before giving its equivalent in French:

> *DIVO IVLIO CAESARI SEMPER AVGVSTO, TOTIVS ORBIS GVBERNATORI,*
> *OB ANIMI CLEMENTIAM, ET LIBERALITATEM, AEGYPTII COMMVNI AERE*
> *SVO EREXERE.*
>
> Au divin Jule Cesar toujours Auguste, gouverneur de tout le Monde, pour la clemence & libéralité de son courage les Egyptiens m'ont érigé de leurs deniers communs.

The last inscription stands on a chest, on the front panel facing the spectator (fol. 96a). The neo-hieroglyphic signs, which run on two lines, are described by Poliphilo as follows:

> *deux masques, & dessus chacun un œil, une fusée de fil, une vieille lampe, deux fléchés, l'une tournée au contraire de l'autre, un monde, une semelle de solier, des crochetz, du feu, un couteau, une mouche, deux brandons entraversez & liez par le mylieu, un coffre demy ouvert, & des branches de Cyprès sortans d'iceluy d'un costé & d'autre, avec un joug.*
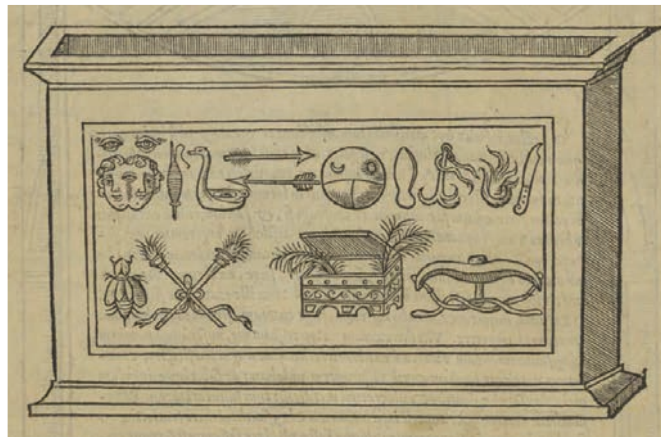

Fig. 6. Third neo-hieroglyphic inscription in Colonna's *Hypnerotomachia* (1546: fol. 96a).

Jean Martin kept the same pattern, first reproducing the Latin version of the original edition, then adding the French translation:

> *DIIS MANIBVS.*
> *Mors vitae contraria, & velocissima, quae cuncta calcat, suppeditat, rapit, consumit, dissoluit, mellifluè duos mutuô se strictim & ardenter amantes, hic extinctos conjunxit.*

> *AVX DIEUX INFERIEVRS.*
> *Mort soudaine & contraire à la vie, qui tout suppedite & ravit & consume & separe a icy conjoinct mortz deux personnages qui s'entr'aymoient tres doulcement, estroictement, & ardemment.*

Besides these three major inscriptions, the hero also notes smaller texts with only three signs. The first two, facing each other, he found on a bridge.

Un Cabasset antique, cresté de la teste d'un chien. Une teste de bœuf, seiche & des-
nuée avec deux rameaux à menu fueillage attachez aux cornes de celle teste, puis une
lampe faicte a la mode antique.

Fig. 7. Smaller neo-hieroglyphic inscription in Colonna's *Hypnerotomachia* (1546: fol. 22a-1).

Poliphilo of course was able to deliver a translation, however not without warning the reader of his hesitation regarding the correct interpretation of the second sign, as he could not guess precisely the nature of the palms flanking the bucranium: pine, fir tree, juniper, cypress, larice, or willow.[41]

Patientia est ornamentum, custodia, & protectio vitae
Patience est l'ornement, garde & protection de la vie.

The second one, which would become famous as already noted (see above, § 1.1), is described as follows, starting from the right:

Un Cercle, & un Ancre, sur la stangue[42] duquel s'estoit entortillé un Daulphin

Fig. 8. Smaller neo-hieroglyphic inscription in Colonna's *Hypnerotomachia* (1546: fol. 22a-2).

This is interpreted as:

Semper festina tarde
Toujours haste toy par loysir

One will immediately note here that Poliphilo's translation is different from the traditional one—*Festina lente*—and that the French equivalent introduces a nuance which is absent from the Latin version, with *par loysir* an only approximately rendering of Latin *tarde*.[43]

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41 The matter is discussed again later (fol. 45b). Logistique then explained to Poliphilo that pine and larice have distinct properties, for larice (Engl. larch) cannot burn, and pine cannot bend. The whole means that patience is to be glorified, for it does not take fire because of anger, and does not bend out of adversity.

42 In heraldry, the *stangue* (syn. of *verge*) is the vertical staff, usually in wood, which holds the anchor *sensu stricto*.

43 The adverb *tarde* was also retained by Alberici 1507: fol. 9v.

Hieroglyphic inscriptions could also be found on banners, which is only natural if one considers the mutual influence of this new medium of expression and heraldry. Poliphilo described such an object that was fixed on the top of a ship's mast bearing three figures he unhesitatingly calls hieroglyphic (fol. 104b):

> *un vase antique plein de flammes de feu, & un monde, liez ensemble, avec un petit rameau de Pervenche, enrichy de fueillage.*

Fig. 9. Banner with hieroglyphs in Colonna's *Hypnerotomachia* (1546: fol. 104b).

The banner is then interpreted as follows:

> *omnia vincit amor*
> *Amour surmonte toutes choses*

2.1.2. *Neo-hieroglyphic inscriptions after Colonna's Hypnerotomachia*

The edition of the *Hypnerotomachia* in 1499, six years before the *editio princeps* of the *Hieroglyphica*, was the starting point of a rich production of inscriptions, but also of iconograms (see § 2.2.1), that took their inspiration in Colonna's book.[44] From a practical point of view, these inscriptions can be distributed in two classes: inscriptions which came with a translation in a natural language, and those which did not. In the latter case, one can dispute the fact that what presents itself as a meaningful inscription is actually what it pretends to be, instead of being a mere decorative composition that was used as an index of ancient Egypt (§ 2.3).

Neo-hieroglyphic inscriptions that were provided with a translation by their inventor are limited in number. This is not surprising as most inscriptions are actually found on paintings or

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44   One usually considers that the first edition's reception was limited compared to the 1546 first French edition, which almost coincided with the Italian reedition of 1545. This opinion should be nuanced as shown by some echoes already found in the Mantegna's series of the Triumph of Julius Caesar (1486), Bellini's *Predica di san Marco in Alessandria* (1504–1507), and Alberici's album (1507).

engraved on monuments, all places where a translation would totally be unexpected.[45] In this presentation, I shall focus on three productions.

I start with Filippo Alberici's album, a manuscript now in the British Library (BL Royal MS 12 C III), which was composed around 1507,[46] i.e. very early, a few years only after the publication of the *Hypnerotomachia*. Alberici, who died in 1531, went to England hoping to raise the interest of the nobility and the king himself in neo-hieroglyphic inscriptions, apparently without success. He made an album that could be considered as a kind of press-book, divided in two main parts. He started with a short lexicon of 60 signs which he described from a symbolic perspective before presenting some inscriptions of his own with a Latin translation.[47] The first part will be dealt with in section 2. I here limit myself to briefly discussing the first three of Alberici's exemplary inscriptions.[48]

Fig. 10. First inscription in Alberici's album (1507: fol. 19v).

The translation that stands at the bottom of the inscription runs as follows:

> *Perpetuo incolume vitam in pace custodies. et prudenter ac in mundo gubernes. amore divino retentus. in bello victor longanimis. ac dives. semper deo protegente invictus.*

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45   An exception is offered by the inscriptions engraved in the court of the Escuelas Mayores of the University of Salamanca, which are all completed with a translation. Actually, the exception is only apparent as these inscriptions are not original ones but reproduce well-known compositions, like the most famous first inscription of Colonna's *Hypnerotomachia*.

46   See Rundle 2005, Drimmer 2014/2015. The manuscript is accessible on line: https://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/Viewer.aspx?ref=royal_ms_12_c_iii_fs001r.

47   Cf. the preface in ms. Condé 682, which states "*ceulx qui scauront ce livre pourront escripre par figure les gestes des roys en marbre et tapisserie*" (Menini 2021: 227). Influence of ancient Egypt, with the insertion of hieroglyphs, in tapestry was materialized in Caron's memorial for the funeral of Henri II of France (see *infra*, Fig. 24–25).

48   The other inscriptions present nonetheless interesting features that will be discussed in the second part of this study.

You shall preserve for ever the life well and sound in peace, and you shall govern (it) with caution in the world being retained by divine love, magnanimous winner in war, and always rich and undefeated with the help of god.

Fig. 11. Translation of the first inscription in Alberici's album (1507: fol. 19v).

The relation between signs and meaning is rather straightforward:[49] the circle for eternity (l. 1 *perpetuo* and l. 4 *semper*), the dolphin for safeguard (*incolumnis*), the lamp for life (*vita*), the olive branch for peace (*pax*), the goose for keeping (*custodire*), the snake for prudence (*prudenter*), the globe for world (*mundus*), the rudder for governing (*gubernare*), the fire for love (*amor*), the eye for divine (*divinus*), the hook for keeping (*retenere*), the vase with flames for war (*bellum*), the sword with palms of victory and crown for winner (*victor*), the eagle extinguishing a fire for magnanimity (*longanimis*), the cornucopia for riches (*dives*), the helmet for protection (*protegere*), and the palm for victory (*invictus*).

Fig. 12. Second inscription in Alberici's album (1507: fol. 20r).

The translation is once more kindly provided by Alberici at the bottom:

Vivat rex per eterna secula. mundi ornamentum pacis servitor malora cades justitie conservator liberalis rerum copiam suppeditans et celeri prudentia ageris.

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49   The signs are of course commented in the first part of the book.

Live the king for eternal centuries, ornament of the world, servant of peace, you'll slain what is evil, liberal conservator of justice, provider of things in abundancy, you shall act with quick caution.
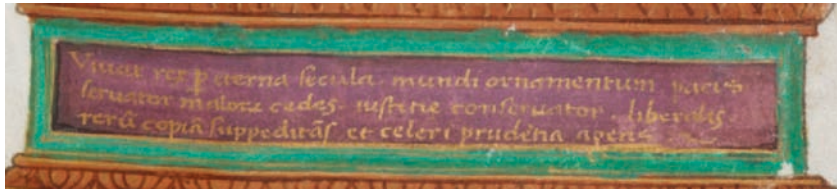

Fig. 13. Translation of the second inscription in Alberici's album (1507: fol. 20r).

There are no major obstacles for identifying the meaning of the signs: the lamp for life (*vivere*), the crown for king (*rex*), the circle for eternity (*eterna*), the bird (phoenix?) for century (*seculum*), the globe for world (mundus), the palms for ornament (*ornamentum*), the vase for peace (*pax*), the griffin (?) for servant (*servitor*), the spider for bad things (*malor*), the gladius for slaying (*cadere*), the scales for justice (*Justitia*), the helmet for preserving (*conservare*), the wheel for generosity (*liberalis*), the cornucopia for abundance (*rerum copia*), the sole for providing (*suppeditare*), the arrow for speed (*celeris*), the snake for prudence (*prudentia*), and the burning fire for activity (*agere*).

The third inscription is shorter. Its beginning is directly inspired by the third inscription in Colonna's *Hypnerotomachia*. Here is the transcription of the translation:

Diis manibus ac mundi inferioris regi. injusto in malis astuto modicique domino.
To the infernal gods and the king of infernal world, to the unjust lord, moderate and astute in bad things

Fig. 14. Third inscription in Alberici's album (1507: fol. 21v).

When comparing these inscriptions with the ones created by Colonna, the similitude is striking. There are however differences in the design of the individual signs, which clearly indicate how they were conceptualized as elements of writing. New signs are also used like the spider, the griffin, the scales, while some others already appeared in Colonna's iconograms as constituting elements like the scales, the crown, and the palms (§ 2.2.1).

In 1549, on the 16th of June, king Henri II of France made his Joyous entry in his capital. It was then the custom to build ephemeral monuments for such occasions to celebrate the new monarch. The accession to the throne of Henri II was no exception. The king entered the city through the gate of Saint Denis. He was welcomed by different portals and triumphal arches.[50] In front of the church of the Holy Sepulcher, situated in Saint Denis street, was a curious arrangement. On the back of a rhinoceros an obelisk had been erected. This unmistakably refered to Colonna's *Hypnerotomachia*, where Poliphilo comes across an obelisk standing on the back of an elephant.[51] The influence of the latter on the former is particularly evident since Jean Martin, who was responsible for the decorative program, had previously translated Colonna's book in French. As indicated in the text, the obelisk bore an inscription in hieroglyphs with the vows of the Parisians to the king.[52] On the top of the obelisk was a globe with a statue of approximately three meters figuring France.
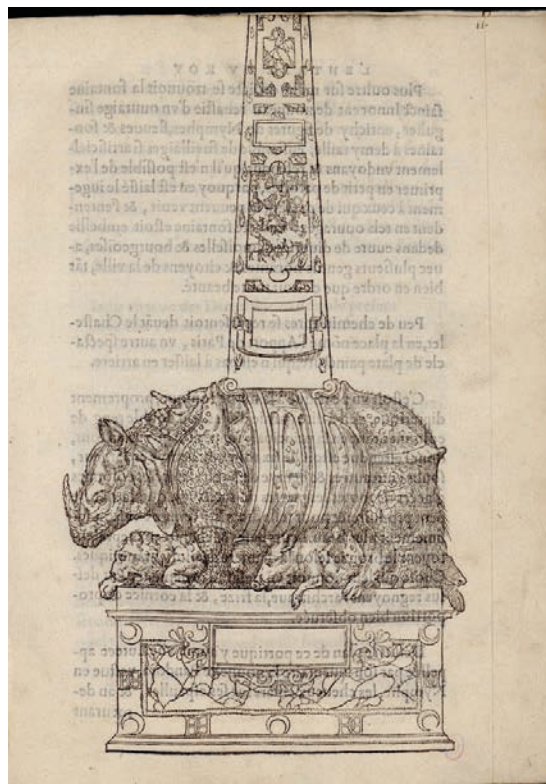

Fig. 15. Obelisk made for Henri II's Joyous Entry (1549).

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50   The detail of the decorative program, with illustrations, was immediately printed and circulated (Jean Goujon 1549). For the Joyous Entry of Henri IV in Rouen, see *infra* § 2.3.

51   On the competition between the elephant and the rhinoceros as the most powerful animal, see the confrontation organized by king Manuel Ist in Lissabon in 1516, see Winand 2022c: 122–123.

52   According to reports by various Italian ambassadors, nobody really understood the obelisk's meaning; most people did not even notice the presence of hieroglyphs. This probably suggests that familiarity with symbolic, cryptic expressions like neo-hieroglyphs was limited to a very small elite circle (Blanchard 2003: 494–495).

Before proceeding to the translation, Martin first gives a description of every sign:

> *Premièrement, il y avait un Lynx & un chien de front, reposans chascun sur un pied sur une couronne de France Impériale, estant au milieu d'eux un livre antique fermé a gros fermoirs, dedans le livre une espée nue traversante de bout en bout: un serpent tortillé en forme de couleuvre, un croissant large duquel les cornes reposoyent sur deux termes: un globe sur marche d'un pied du naturel, une poupe de navire & un trident, un œil ouvert, unes fasces consulaires, un rond ou cercle, un pavois, un ancre de long, deux mains croisées sur des rameaux d'olivier: une corne d'abondance dessus laquelle tomboyt pluye d'or, un cerf, un dauphin, une couronne de laurier, une lampe antique allumée, un mors de cheval, & puis le timon d'un navire. (Goujon 1549: 10v)*

Then comes the translation, which runs as follows:

> *May strength and vigilance guard your kingdom. With council, good enterprise and prudence, may your limits be extended so that to you be submitted all the brutal machinery of the earth, and that you rule the sea, always with God as avenger and defender against your enemies: by firm peace and concord, with affluence of all kinds of goods in duration and health, triumphant, may you live, rule and govern.[53]*
> *(Goujon 1549: 10v)*

Fig. 16. Detail of the inscription on the obelisk made for Henri II's Joyous Entry (1549).

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53   *Force & vigilance puissent garder vostre Royaume Par conseil, bonne expédition & prudence soyent vos limites estenduz, si qu'à vous soit soubmise tout la rude machine de la terre, & que dominez a la mer, ayant toujours Dieu pour vengeur & deffenseur contre vos ennemys: par ferme paix & concorde, en affluence de tous biens longuement & sainement triumphateur, vivez, regnez & gouvernez.*

One of the last neo-hieroglyphic inscriptions with a translation provided by its author is found at the end of Jan van der Noot's Cort *Begryp der XII Boeken Olympiados*, which was published in 1579 in Anvers (Zaalberg 1958).[54]

Fig. 17. Obelisk in Jan van der Noot's *Cort Begryp der XII Boeken Olympiados*.

The neo-hieroglyphic inscription concludes the poem. The signs are not identified, but a translation is provided in Dutch and in French:[55]

> *Tousiours te hastant à loger, t'accommodant selon le temps, par Labeur & Industrie,*
> *par Amour, & par Prudence, conduis peu à peu ton courage en l'obeissance de Dieu,*
> *lequel par sa benignité, & toute puissance, sera tres-ferme garde, protection, & gou-*
> *vernement de ta vie, & te donrá apres la mort, la vie eternelle.*[56]

As was already recognized by Zaalberg (1954: 227–231), the inscription took its inspiration directly from Colonna's compositions. This first impression is confirmed by other productions of the same vein.

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54   The monument first appears in the *Cort Begryp der XII Boeken Olympiados* published in 1579; it was then reproduced in the *Lofsang van Braband* printed in 1580, and in the *Veerscheyden poeticschee Weerken*, published in 1581.

55   It was augmented in a later edition with translations in Latin, Spanish, Italian, and German.

56   *V Haestende al-tijdt med staden, vueghende v na den tijdt, med Erbeydt en Vernuft, med Liefde, en med Veursightigheydt,*
      leydt alleynskens v ghemoedt in d'onderdanigheydt Godts, de welcke deur sijn bermhertigheydt, endeal-maghtigheydt,
      wesen sal een vaste wachte, beschferminghe, ende regeringhe dyns leuens, en sal v gheuen nae dese doodt dat eeu-
      wigh leuen.

Fig. 18. Neo-hieroglyphic inscriptions in Joncker Jan van der Noot (Waterschoot 1975: 502).

The left obelisk is translated as follows. One will note that the fourth face is not translated, probably because it was interpreted as a variant of the preceding face, which is a copy of the obelisk found at the end of the *Buch of Extasis*.

> *Celles qui sont sus la face 1 disent, Sustenez & abstinez, heureux ceux la qui ont tenus la mediocrité, celle sus la face 2. disent, voyant, oyant & taisant, temperez la hastivité seant, & la tardivite en vous levant: & celles sus la face 3. disent Tousjours te hastant a loisir, t'accommodant selon le Temps, par Labeur & Industrie: par Amour & Prudence, condui peu à peu ton courage en l'obeissance de Dieu, lequel par sa benignite, & toute puissance sera tres-ferme garde, protection, & gouvernement de ta vie, & te donnera après la mort, la vie eternelle.*

The obelisk on the right was apparently left untranslated. In the background, there is another obelisk, broken in two pieces with faint traces of hieroglyphic signs. The inscription on the obelisk in the foreground looks different from the one in the background. With some exceptions, most signs are unusual in neo-hieroglyphic inscriptions, their referents barely recognizable, and they seem to defy any transposition in a natural language. This would explain why there is no translation. In this case, this obelisk would be an illustration of our last category (§ 1.2.3).

The last neo-hieroglyphic inscriptions that I am aware of are panels that were composed for Agostino Carraccio's funeral in Bologna in 1603. A commemorative obelisk had been set up in the cathedral. According to the written documents commenting or reporting the event,[57] the obelisk

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57   See Morello 1603 for the reproduction of the neo-hieroglyphic inscriptions and their translations, and Giovanni Pietro Bellori 1728. In the latter's work on the lives of artists (*Le vite de pittori, cultori ed architetti moderni*), is a copy of a letter by Morello to Cardinal Farnese with additional information on Carraccio's funeral.

was apparently divided into panels. Poets and artists, friends of the painter, were commissioned to decorate the obelisk. Four short neo-hieroglyphic inscriptions were composed by Lionello Spada (1576–1622). While clearly anchored in the tradition initiated by Colonna, these texts differ from the production of the previous century in many ways (see § 2 for the details). The repertoire was indeed improved with new signs, which had apparently never been used before; ancient signs sometimes received another meaning, and the general layout took some liberty with what was done before.
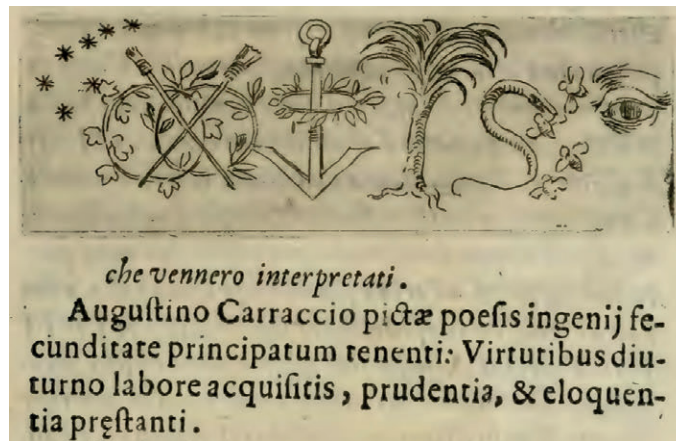

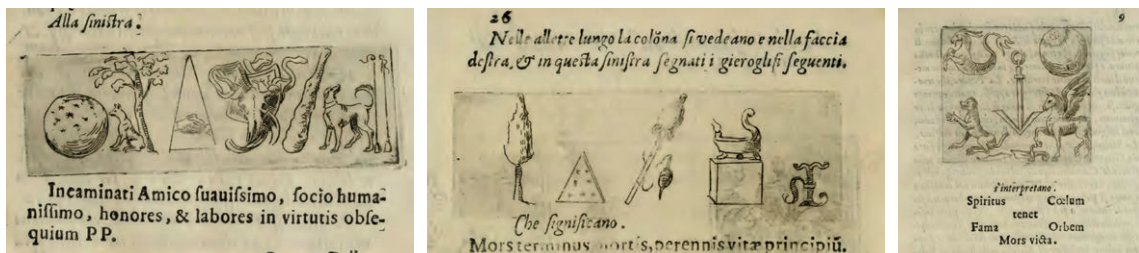Fig. 19. Lionello Spada's first inscription (Morello 1603: 17).

Fig. 20. Lionello Spada's 2nd, 3rd, and 4th inscriptions (Morello 1603: 17, 26, and 9).

I here limit myself to commenting the first inscription. The Latin translation is given below the inscription. Bellori (1728: 78–79) provides a description of each sign, followed by their explanation.

> *Sette Stelle del Carro Celeste, due corone, l'una di lauro, l'altra di Quercia interse-cate insieme con due pennelli, l'ancora con un altra corona, l'albero della palma, un serpe, quatro api, un occhio.*
>
> *Le sette Stelle del Carro significativano il cognome d'Agostino Caracci, le due corone co'pennelli la dipinta poesia, per l'ancora con l'altra corona si volle intendere, che egli teneva il principato di essa, la palma il premio della virtù acquisata con fatica, il serpe la diuturnità del tempo, l'occhio la prudenza, e tale era il titolo.*

The explanation looks a bit curious. The inscription would rightly deserve a detailed study, which is impossible to give here, but a few words are in order to point out some problems. In the last part of the inscription, the snake is interpreted as meaning eternity (*diuturnità del tempo*), and the eye prudence. The bees, which are correctly identified (*quatro api*), are left unexplained. The eternity, which is absent from the Latin translation given below the inscription, is normally figured by a ring or an ouroboros, but certainly not by a zigzagging snake. Actually, the snake looks rather like an eel, and this animal was knowingly connected to caution and prudence.[58] Labour is normally represented by the bucranium, one of the commonest neo-hieroglyphic signs (see above, fig. 4), but the bees can also symbolize industrious activity. As they operate during the day, they would perfectly render the phrase *diuturno labore* in the translation. The eye, which closes the inscription, is normally and ubiquitously linked to everything divine (see above, fig. 4). I wonder if it could not stand here for Augustino, the first name of the monument's beneficiary. The seven stars, which symbolize the Charriot, here stand for the family name. If we accept the hypothesis, the core of the inscription would be totally included in the two components of the dead recipient. The remaining signs would clearly benefit from a throughout investigation, which I hope to give in another paper.

∼

In the Renaissance, artists, mostly painters, took a fancy in putting neo-hieroglyphic compositions in their work. Unfortunately, in those cases, the underlying text that was necessarily the starting point before proceeding to the neo-hieroglyphic inscription has been lost. This raises a preliminary and fundamental question. While in most cases, one can remain rather confident that the signs do compose a text that can be translated or rather transposed in a natural language, as was the case in the previous section, the issue should remain undecided for some pieces. If it one day turns out that these compositions are devoid of any linguistic counterpart, they should then rather be placed in the last section (§ 2.3).

I shall here review some significant monuments in a chronological order. The first one is actually a description made by Geoffroy Tory (1480–1533) in his famous treaty *Champ Fleury*, published in 1529. In the last part of his work, Tory briefly deals with Egyptian hieroglyphs. After reporting what was common knowledge in his times about the script (external appearance and functions), he makes an allusion to Horapollo's *Hieroglyphica*, which he pretends to have translated for a friend (Cordier 2006: 24). He then recalls hieroglyphic inscriptions that he saw in Rome on three obelisks without giving much detail.[59] Finally he claims to have seen a painting in a house next to the palace

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58 See, for instance, BL Royal MS 12 C iii, fol. 6v (*Anguis prudentiam innuit quoniam summe est calliditatis animal*), where the eel has an identical shape.

59 Fol. 79r. Tory mentions the square before Notre Dame la Ronde, the church of the Cordeliers in *ara coeli*, next to the Capitol, and finally another obelisk (called *esguille*, cf. *aguglia* in Italian) close to the Minerva.

of Mount Jordan. He gives a description of the inscription sign by sign, without producing a fac-simile of it nor providing a translation. Clearly, the description perfectly suits the tradition initiated by Colonna, even if there are some idiosyncrasies. A doubt will however subsist as to whether such an inscription ever existed or if it was a mere fantasy dreamed by Tory.

> *Une teste de boeuf, ayant pendu aux deux cornes deux hoes, puis une grenoille et au dessus d'elle ung oueil, en apres une chaufrette pleine de feu, ung visage d'homme, ung vaisseau vuydant de l'eaue, des violettes en ung pot, ung oeuil sus une sole de soulier, une ancre de navire, une grue tenant une pierre de l'ung de ses pieds et ung dauphin sus une lampe qui est tenu d'une main.*[60]

The next text to be considered is a funerary inscription found on the monument of Hubert Mielemans in Church of the Holy Cross in Liège (Belgium). In the lower part of the monument, flanking a Latin inscription that bears the name and the most significative elements of Mieleman's life, are two columns with a neo-hieroglyphic inscription. As shown elsewhere (Winand 2022c and in press), the inscriptions are deeply influenced by Colonna's *Hypnerotomachia*, without being totally dependent of it. Even if this cannot be definitely proven, it is not unreasonable to suggest that the great artist Lambert Lombard dealt with the texts in a way or another. Indeed, Lombard, who had been sent to Rome by the Prince-Bishop Erard de la Marck, took a fancy in the symbolic way of expressing ideas. As will be shown below, he left several sketches of neo-hieroglyphic compositions with glosses, and regularly put neo-hieroglyphic signs into his compositions.

Fig. 21. Funerary monument of Hubert Mielemans (ca. 1558), Holy Cross Church, Liège.

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60   This text has been interpreted by Dempsey 1988: 353 as follows: "The labor (or works) of man are contemptible in the eye of God. By his divine love for the man who little by little subjects his soul to God, He will take firm custody of his life and vigilantly preserve it in safety."

I here give my interpretation of the two inscriptions without any further comment.[61] As I suppose that the underlying text was composed in Latin, I also propose a reconstruction of the Latin prototype. The left column is a very common statement on the destiny of life, a general statement reinforced by the medallion with the skull and bone on the outer left, and by the Greek inscription under the sarcophagus ΑΠΟΒΛΕΠΕ ΤΕΛΟΝ (*sic*) "consider the end."[62] The right column is an appeal to moral rectitude, which is the best way to fight death and secure a good reputation for oneself. The two texts in Mielemans' inscription connect thus rather well with the topoi found in the funerary and wisdom literature of ancient Egypt.

LEFT COLUMN

Morti vita semper subiecta, rapienti, consumenti, truncanti omnium fortunam (ou fatum)

Life is always subjected to death, which steals, consumes and cuts the destiny of all

RIGHT COLUMN

lumina mundum! custodia et labore vitam guberna liberaliter prudenterque per horas morti contrariam

Be a light for the world! with a sure guard and labour, govern your life in a liberal way, in opposition to death, with noble prudence, hour after hour

The next two inscriptions stand on an obelisk, which was used as a decorative element by the artist in two famous paintings. The first one is Giovanni Bellini's *Predication of saint Marcus in Alexandria* (1504–1507), now in the Pinacoteca di Brera in Milan, the second is Joachim Beuckelaer's *Ecce Homo* (1565), now in Stockholm. According to Dempsey (1988: 348), who devoted a detailed study to Bellini's inscription, the hieroglyphs represent:

a crooklike form and a circle, the soles of two sandals, the Roman letters V.L., an owl, an eel (or less likely, a snake), an awl, and the old moon cradled within the full circle of the new.

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61   See also Dempsey 1988: 355 for a somewhat similar interpretation of the left column, except for the syntactic arrangement. Demspey did not deal with the right column.

62   On the mistake ΤΕΛΟΝ for ΤΕΛΟΣ, see Deroy 1946–1948: 31. The general idea developed in the right column receives some support from the first inscription in Alberici's album (fol. 19v, see above fig. 11).

Fig. 22. Giovanni Bellini's Predication of saint Marcus in Alexandria (Wikipedia).

The inscription, whose signs can to some extant be related to ancient and contemporary sources, would deliver a message perfectly in accordance with the general theme of the painting.[63] After explaining the meaning of each sign, Dempsey first gives a gloss enumerating the core ideas expressed by the individual signs:

> Serapis, subjects, willing vow, death or ignorance, envy or hatred, life to come, and
> a declining fortune

He then concludes his demonstration by introducing morphological classes and syntax to build an acceptable sentence in Latin, suggesting one of the two following translations:

> *a) Serapis subjectis suis vovit libens: ex ignorantia invidiaque in vita ventura fortuna sua decrescet.*
>
> *b) Serapis subjectis suis vovit libens: ex ignorantia invidiaque in spe futurae salvationis (or in signo crucis) fortuna sua decrescet.*
>
> (a) Serapis willingly makes a vow to his subjects: out of ignorance and envy his fortune will decline in the life to come (b: in the hope of future salvation or in the sign of the cross).

In his paper, Dempsey also briefly deals with an inscription found on an obelisk in Joachim Beuckelaer's *Ecce Homo*. He first draws a parallel with André Thévet's *Cosmographie du Levant*, which was published in Lyon in 1554 (and reprinted in 1561). The book displays a plate with two obelisks (one standing, one laying on the ground) that Thévet reportedly saw in Alexandria. One

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63   Dempsey 1988: 379–361 "refers" to the well-known episode of the destruction of the Serapeium as reported by Rufinus, Sozomenes and Socrates. On this, see Winand 2022b: 70–73.

is immediately led to wonder whether the traveler did really set a foot in Egypt as the hieroglyphs seem the creation of his owns inventive mind. According to Dempsey (1988: 362), Thévet relied on another source, namely the "hieroglyphs" that Cyriacus of Ancona sent to his friend Niccolo Niccoli during his last trip to Egypt, but this does not sound very convincing. The relation between the drawing of Thévet and Beuckelaer's painting cannot be questioned. The issue however is whether one can give some credence to such a succession of signs as expressing a meaningful sentence. To start with, Thévet does not seem to care too much about the hieroglyphs as shown by the comparison between the 1554/1561 edition of *Cosmographie du Levant* and the 1575 edition (published in Paris) of *Cosmographie universelle*.[64]

Fig. 23. (a) Joachim Beuckelaer's *Ecce Homo* – (b) and (c): André Thévet 1556: 129 and 1575: 33b.

Dempsey, who elaborates upon the conclusions drawn from his study of the obelisk painted by Gentile Bellini, is confident that the inscriptions reproduced by Beuckelaer in *Ecce homo* can be deciphered by the same method. Without denying the possibility that Thévet, Beuckelaer's source, had concealed a message in his inscription that could be translated in a natural language, the hypothesis is rather doubtful. First, Thévet does not comment the inscription nor provide any translation, which is contrary to what is observed elsewhere. Where a neo-hieroglyphic inscription is reported, his benevolent inventor usually provides the reader with the solution. This is not the case here, in neither edition. In the 1554/1561 edition, Thévet mentions the obelisk in passing,

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64   Thévet 1556: 128–130: "*Y a une Coulomne carrée de couleur rouge inscrite de plusieurs lettres sacerdotales, & hiéroglyphiques.*" The text in Thévet 1575: 33b is a little more expanded: "*I'ay veu une Obelisque quarree, de couleur rougeastre, avec plusieurs figures de bestes, oyseaux, mains d'hommes, vases à l'antique, d'arcs & carquois, corselets, cousteaux, astres du ciel, yeux, & autres choses semblables, qui iadis estoient lettres sacerdotales, que nous nommons Hieroglyfiques: l'interprétation desquelles n'estoit entendue que des Roys, des Prestres & Sacrificateurs de ce peuple idolatre.*" The second obelisk is only mentioned in the latter edition.

without insisting, only as an object of curiosity. If one now turns to Beuckelaer's integration of the obelisk in his composition, one fails to see the link between the meaning of the inscription as reconstructed by Dempsey and the general theme of the composition, which is a strong indication in favor of his interpretation of Bellini's inscription. Indeed, according to Dempsey (1988: 362), the inscription would first celebrate the magnanimity of Alexander the Great towards his enemies and then deplore the fate of the king whose life had been cut too short. Finally, as far as can be known, there is nothing in Thévet's education or centers of interest suggesting that he was interested in or had any knowledge of the symbolic interpretation of hieroglyphs.[65] The responsibility of the signs figuring on the obelisk probably rested on the engraver, who nourished his inspiration with what he could collect in the books and albums available around him.

The last example I would like to discuss here very briefly is a cartoon out of a series that was designed for a tapestry made for Catherine de' Medici, widow of king Henri II.[66] In this cartoon, the queen, like a new Artemisia, is deploring the tragic passing away of her husband in 1559.[67] The landscapes and the monuments are directly inspired by Antiquity, mainly Greek and Roman, but also augmented by some elements that passed for oriental in the Renaissance. Ancient Egypt is discreetly reminded by the presence of its most emblematic monuments, obelisks and pyramids, which can be seen in the background,[68] but also of sphinxes with hieroglyphic inscriptions carved on their base, the sources of which are Nectanebo's famous sphinxes.[69]
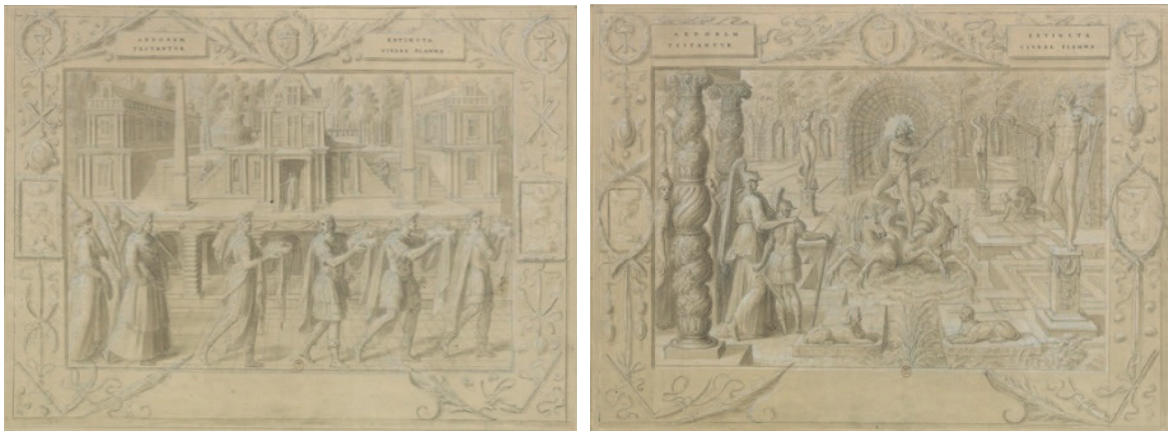

Fig. 24. A. Caron, *Histoire de la Royne Arthemise*, BNF ms. fr. 306 (cartoon #5 and 23).

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65   This opinion is apparently shared by Baydova 2021, who does not know Dempsey's study.

66   Histoire de la Royne Arthemise, BNF ms. fr. 306; see Hueber 2018. The theme of Mausolus' lament by his widow is already present in Colonna's Hypnerotomachia (see below, § 2.4).

67   The drawings were made by Antoine Caron (1521–1599), appointed court painter by Catherine de' Medici. See Capodieci (in press).

68   See also cartoon #11 (obelisks put on the gate and roof of a monument reminiscent of the Pantheon), cartoon #16 (obelisk in the background of the Rhodes harbor), cartoon #21 (obelisks in the background of Halicarnassus).

69   On the last cartoon are represented in the foreground two sleeping lions laying on a base with hieroglyphs.

The composition also follows some rules that were established in Colonna's *Hypnerotomachia*. For instance, the procession of the servants carrying the emblems of cities (cartoon #6) is reminiscent of a similar scene in Colonna (1547: 121v). The garlands and flowers adorning the bulls' horns that are led to the sacrifice are a recurrent motive that goes back to ancient Roman sacrificial practices.[70]

On the penultimate cartoon stands a large obelisk (called a pyramid in the preceding accompanying sonnet) with a column of hieroglyphic signs that are obviously inspired by contemporary productions. Unfortunately, there is no description nor translation. Some signs look familiar (from the middle down to the base): an owl, a globe, scales (?), sun, an eye in a square, a crest upholding a leg, a wheel, and a rectangle. The upper signs are difficult to identify in the numeric rendering provided by the Bibliothèque nationale.[71] The glosses that can be appended to the signs of the lower half do not seem to make an immediately obvious and general sense: owl = DEATH, globe = EVERY-THING, ALWAYS, EVERYONE, scales (?) = JUSTICE, sun = SUN, LIGHT, eye in a square = GOD, DIVINITY,[72] crest upholding a leg = PATIENCE, PRUDENCE, wheel = FORTUNE, and a rectangle = ?

Fig. 25. A. Caron, *Histoire de la Royne Arthemise*, BNF ms. fr. 306.

2.1.3. *The so-called inscription of the temple of Sais*

Humanists and artists of the Renaissance did not really bother to deal with genuine hieroglyphic inscriptions. They rather preferred to discuss the testimonies of classical authors to evaluate how they could fit in a general theory of communication. Although the hieroglyphic inscriptions that

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70   The bucrane with garlands and agricultural tools hanging from the horns is an emblematic sign in the neo-hieroglyphic repertoire, opening for instance the first inscription of Colonna's *Hypnerotomachia* (see *supra*, fig. 4).

71   From the top, there is a circular sign, then three strokes, like a roman number (III), two unidentified signs, and once again III.

72   The square does not seem to add something to the meaning. As shown in the *Hypnerotomachia*, the eye is sometimes included in another sign, altar or sole, to express a syntactic relation (see *supra*, fig. 4).

could be seen in Italy were firmly keeping their secrets, they apparently quickly persuaded themselves that they had at least understood the mechanisms of hieroglyphic writing. This explains why they confidently composed their own inscriptions in the same spirit. There is however at least one exception worth mentioning here because of its success. In his influential treaty *De Iside et Osiride*, 32, Plutarchus mentions the following sequence of figures supposedly engraved on a corridor of the temple of Sais: a boy, an old man, a hawk, a fish, and a hippopotamus. He explains that these figures are symbols, with the following meaning: "o you who are coming to life, and about to leave, God hates impudence." The same adage is reported by Clemens (*Stromata* VII, 41,4–42,1), who however locates the text on a pylon of a temple in Diopolis, with a graphic variant since impudence is iconically expressed by a crocodile.[73] He translates the sequence as follows: "o you who come to birth and perish, God hates impudence." This passage became extremely popular in the Renaissance and prompted artists to propose their own version of what was supposed to be a genuine hieroglyphic inscription. Here is an illustration in Valeriano's *Hieroglyphica* (XXXI: 311) followed by Kircher (1650: 198), and another one in Junius Hadrianus' *Emblemata* (# 45).

Fig. 26. Deum odisse impudentiam. a) Valeriano, b) Kircher, c) Hadrianus.

2.2. Renaissance hieroglyphs as an iconic mode of expression

I have already stressed the fluidity of the term hieroglyph in the Renaissance. Using hieroglyphs—or rather neo-hieroglyphs—as if they were elements of writing supporting a linguistic rendering sign by sign remained limited (§ 2.1). On the other hand, hieroglyphs could be the constituting elements of figurative compositions. The main consequence was the loss of the principle of rectilinear vectoriality. Some compositions could still be glossed, sometimes translated sign by sign (§ 2.2.1), while others only retained the symbolic power of the "hieroglyphs." In the latter case, the meaning of the composition could only be accessed by adding the individual meaning of the composing elements in a kind of cumulative effect (§ 2.2.2).

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73   See Winand 2020.

2.2.1. *Hieroglyphs as iconograms*

In Colonna's *Hypnerotomachia*, Poliphilo had several times the chance to see iconograms, that is symbolic figurative compositions that can be interpreted linguistically. He discovered the first ones (called *sculpture hieroglyphique*) on the sides of a bridge (fol. 46a). On the right side is a woman sitting with her right leg slightly lift up. In her right hand, she is holding a turtle and in her left one two wings. The meaning of the tableau was explained by Logistica as follows:[74]

> VELOCITATEM SEDENDO, TARDITATEM SVRGENDO TEMPERA.
>
> *Modere la legiereté par t'asseoir, & la tardiveté par te lever.*

When given the right interpretation, the functioning of each component is rather straightforward. The composition is articulated in two antithetic pairs that oppose the turtle (*tarditas*) to the raising leg (*surgere*) on the one hand, and the wings (*velocitas*) to the resting leg (*sedere*) on the other. The semantic relation between the two pairs (*tempera*), which is supposed to express the inscription's moral instruction, remains opaque, however. The only clue can be found in the second instruction, which celebrates those capable of staying within right proportions (*medium tenere* "to hold the [correct] middle"). As was already the case in the preceding section, the solution to the hieroglyphic enigma could not be easily found without the proper explanation of their inventor.

The second sculpture is described by Poliphilo as two angels facing each other. On the figure, they seem to hold something circular, which is not commented upon in the text. Logistica offers the following translation:

> MEDIUM TENUERE BEATI
>
> *Ceux sont heureux, qui ont tenu le moien*

Fig. 27. Hieroglyphic sculptures in Colonna's *Hypnerotomachia* (1546: fol. 46a).

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74   In this occasion Logistica, as if to apologize, repeats that she is aware that Poliphilo does not understand hieroglyphs.

Poliphilo had another opportunity of contemplating an obelisk—a quadrangular one—posed on an elevated base.[75] On this base four medallions were engraved, each containing a hieroglyphic figure. Below one of these was also an epigraphic text in neo-hieroglyphs (see above Fig. 5). The four medallions are fine examples of iconograms analyzable in elements which receive a linguistic interpretation. In contrast to the neo-hieroglyphic inscriptions *stricto sensu*, the vectoriality is here no longer rectilinear. It is thus up to the reader to discover the right and meaningful arrangement. Very fortunately for the poor people not drilled in this particular exercise, the translation is kindly provided by Poliphilo. The first medallion represents:

> *une balance, & au mylieu une platine en façon de bassin, de l'un des costez duquel y avoit un chien, & de l'autre un Serpent: puis au dessoubz un coffre antique, avec une espée nue, la poincte droitte contremont, surpassant le ioug des balances, & entrans dans une coronne.*

This was interpreted as follows:

> IVSTITIA RECTA, AMICITIA ET ODIO EVAGINATA ET NVDA, PONDERAT AQVE LIBERALITAS, REGNVM FIRMITER SERVANT.
>
> *justice droiste, nue despouillée de hayne & amytié, avec liberalité bien pesée, gardent fermement les royaumes en leur entier.*

Fig. 28. First and second medallions in Colonna's *Hypnerotomachia* (1546: fol. 85b–86a).

The second one was then described:

> *un Caducée ou baguette sur laquelle deux Serpens s'estoient entortillez. Devers le bas d'un costé & d'autre, y avoit un Formy, qui croissoit en Elephant: & devers le hault deux Elephans, qui declinoient en Formy. Entre les deux d'un costé y avoit un vaisseau plein de feu, & entre les autres deux, un comble d'eau.*

followed by the translation (in Latin with its French transposition):

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75   In the drawing of the Kerver edition (fol. 85a), the base has the shape of a truncated obelisk (thus extending the lines of the obelisk down to the ground), which does not match the description found in the text. The original drawing of the Aldus edition however correctly makes a difference between the two components of the monument.

PACE AC CONCORDIA PARVAE RES CRESCVNT: DISCORDIA MAXIME DILABVNTVR.

Au moyen de paix & concorde, les petites choses augmentent: & par discorde les grandes se ruinent.

The third and fourth medallions are then presented to the reader. The third is composed in Poliphilo's words of:

un Ancre en travers, & sur la stangue un Aigle à aëlles estendues: une Gomene[76] attachée à l'Ancre: au dessoubz un homme armé, entre aucunes machines de guerre, regardant un serpent qu'il tenoit en sa main.

which is interpreted like this (in Latin with its French transposition):

MILITARIS PRVDENTIA SEV DISCIPLINA, IMPERII EST TENACISSIMVM VINCVLVM.

La prudence ou discipline militaire, est tres fort lyen de l'empire.

Fig. 29. Third and fourth medallions in Colonna's *Hypnerotomachia* (1546: fol. 86a–b).

The fourth and last medallion is first described as composed of:

un Trophée: & au bas de la lance qui le soustenoit, deux rameaux de Palme en travers, attachez à deux cornes d'abondance: à l'un costé un oeil, & à l'autre une Comete.

before being translated (in Latin with its French transposition):[77]

DIVI IVLII VICTORIARVM ET SPOLIORVM COPIOSISSIMVM TROPHJEVM, SEV INSIGNIA.

C'est le copieux & abondant Trophee avec les enseignes des victoires & despouilles du divin Iule Cefar.

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76   "Gomene" is borrowed from Italian (*gomena*), whose French equivalent is "*(h)aussiere*" (engl. "hawser"), which refers to the thick rope that is now used for mooring a ship. Here it means the rope that links the anchor to the ship.

77   For this last piece, Poliphilo expresses in the French edition some reserve as regards his interpretation: "*qui signifioient à mon advis*" (Kerver 1547: fol. 86b), which contrasts with the flat statement of the Aldine edition: "*Questo diceva.*"

I now turn to another emblematic composition which heavily relies on the *Hieroglyphica*, with no apparent connections to Colonna's *Hypnerotomachia*. The pharaonic project of Maximilian's Arch (295 × 357 cm), also known as the Triumphal Arch (*Ehrenpforte Maximilians I.* in German), is a woodcut commissioned by the emperor before 1515, which is the date of the print.[78] On the top of the central gate is a portrait of Maximilian sitting on a throne, turning left. The emperor is surrounded by unexpected items, mainly animals but also different objects and body parts, such as two feet on water, which have to be understood as symbolic elements highlighting the qualities and virtues of the imperial ruler. These elements are directly brought from the *Hieroglyphica* whose text circulated in Eastern Europe in the first decades of the 16th century after the first edition (in Greek only) of 1505. Among the several artists working on the emperor's project, Albrecht Dürer was directly responsible for the part discussed here. Dürer shared his interest in hieroglyphs with Willibald Pirkheimer, who had projected to publish his own edition of the *Hieroglyphica*. The project never materialized in print, but Dürer's drawings to illustrate the publication have come down to us on a manuscript now in Vienna.[79] In his commentary on the Triumphal Arch, Johannes Stabius (1468–1522), wrote about the emperor's portrait: "*Conspicitur etiam in tabernaculo, supra titulum, Mysterium Hieroglyphicum a Rege Osyride exortum.*"[80]

Fig. 30. Maximilian's Arch – Detail of the top (Wikimedia Commons).

As is clear since Volkmann's work elaborating on Giehlow's pioneering study (Giehlow/Raibouw 1915/2015: 14–20), the figure was composed by Pirkheimer who first wrote the emperor's panegyric in Latin and then appended the relevant hieroglyphs, inspired to him by his intimate knowledge

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78   See Lüken 1998.

79   A reproduction is available in Gielhow/Raibouw 1915/2015: 295–329.

80   See Giehlow/Raibouw 1915/2015: 14.

of the *Hieroglyphica*, to the keywords. According to Pirkheimer, the figure should be interpreted as follows:[81]

> *Immortalis ac sempiterne famae heros, antiqua ab origine natus, princeps optimus, animosissimus, fortissimus, vigilantissimus, cunctis nature bonis praeditus, artibus et disciplinis egregie eruditus, divus Maximilianus, Romanorum imperator semper augustus ac magne terrarum orbis partis dominus, virtute bellica summaque animi modestia victoria excellenti superavit regem Gallum potentissimum, quod universis ferme impossibile videbatur hominibus, sicque ab insidiis inimici sapienter se vindicavit.*

I here reproduce Volkmann's translation as transposed into English by Raybould. I added in brackets the hieroglyphic elements that are present in the figure as identified in Volkmann (1923).

> A hero of immortal and eternal fame [BASILISK], born of an ancient lineage [BUNDLE OF PAPYRI], the greatest leader [DOG WEARING A STOLE], the most courageous, the strongest, most vigilant [LION], endowed with all the goods of nature, arts and learning [HEAVENS DROPPING DEW], the Divine [STAR] Maximilian, Emperor of the Romans [EAGLE], perpetually august, lord of the greater part of the orb of the world [SNAKE CUT IN TWO], with warlike virtue and the greatest modesty of spirit [BULL] overcame in an excellent victory [HAWK] the most powerful King of the French [SNAKE + COCKEREL] which for most men seemed almost impossible [THE FEET OF A MAN WALKING IN WATER], and thus defended himself from the wiles of the enemy.

I have already pointed out the difficulties in translating neo-hieroglyphic compositions in a natural language: the absence of morphological and syntactic markers, and, in the case of iconograms, the absence of a natural, sequential vectoriality. In the case of Maximilian's arch, the task is to a certain extant simplified as this is mainly a list of attributes, without the complex relations linking a verbal predicate to its arguments and satellites. In a way, Pirkheimer's panegyric renewed in spirit the pharaonic eulogies and the divine aretalogies that were composed in Graeco-roman times.

Figurative compositions that could be linguistically interpreted were probably very common in the Renaissance. It remains difficult, however, to add new evidence when the linguistic counterpart is missing. Even in Colonna's *Hypnerotomachia*, for instance, there are iconographic compositions that are in every respect similar to the ones discussed in this section, but not provided with an explanation, a gloss, or a translation by Poliphilo or his muse (see § 2.4). In sculpture or in painting, the underlying texts written in a natural language, which undoubtedly preceded the symbolic composition, have not been preserved. Very fortunately, such models sometimes survived as in a handful of sketches made by the artist Lambert Lombard (1505/1506–1566), who worked mainly in

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81   See Volkmann/Raybould 1923/2018: 189–200, for an explanation of the individual symbols.

Liège. Architect, painter, numismatist, Lombard was sent to Rome by his patron, Érard de La Marck, prince-bishop of Liège, to get acquainted with Italian humanists and artists. As we shall see in the next sections, he frequently added panels of hieroglyphs in his paintings. These inscriptions—if I am not mistaken—were rarely intended as texts in the sense of Colonna's neo-hieroglyphs, but rather as indexes of a certain idea of Egypt and symbolism. Lombard no less played with the idea of composing iconograms, that is allegorical scenes the elements of which could be arranged in such a way as to form sentences in a natural language. His drawings have been partially preserved in the so-called Album d'Arenberg and Album of Clérembeault (now in the Cabinet des Estampes, Liège). Two of them are worthy of attention. The sketch of fig. 31a shows a bull standing right, crowned by a winged Victory. On the background (rather than on his back), a caduceus with ears of wheat; before the bull, a helmet and a wheel. The drawing comes with a translation which runs as follows:

> *Sapientia congionto co['] la fortuna*
> *corona di gloria et d[']abondanti[a]*
> *li vigilanti labore nostre in tra(n)[qui]*
> *lita di pace*

Fig. 31. Lambert Lombard, Liège, Cabinet des Estampes, N 207 and 208.

The second sketch is different as each sign is provided with an identification or gloss: the distaff is the symbol of Atropos, the name of one of the three Fates, whose Roman equivalent was Morta; the hand holding a knife was simply paraphrased by the phrase *trunca il filo*; the dolphin on the back of the lion stands for *festina*; and the wheel is glossed as *instabile*. The lion is not interpreted, but its meaning is clear from the caption that stands above the scene: *breve et veloci è la vita dei grandi*.

The interest of Lombard in this figurative way of conveying meaning is also supported by another document showing that the artist had created for himself a repertoire of signs.[82]

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82   Cabinet des estampes, Liège, D-210.

Fig. 32. Lambert Lombard, Liège, Cabinet des Estampes, D 210.

This first impression is confirmed by another drawing of Lombard, with a handful of seemingly unrelated figures. A closer inspection, however, reveals that the depicted objects were commonly used as hieroglyphic signs. One will note here especially the six items in the middle register, separated by a tripod and another unclear signs, actually sacrificial tools, that are clearly taken from Colonna's inscriptions in *Hypnerotomachia* (see above fig. 4).

Fig. 33. Lambert Lombard, Cabinet des Estampes D-163a.

2.2.2. *Hieroglyphs as figurative symbols*

In Colonna's *Hypnerotomachia*, Poliphilo notes the presence of a triangular obelisk (fol. 44a–b). On each face a circle has been carved, and above it a Greek letter: O, Ω, and N. Below, on the base were three hieroglyphs: the sun, a rudder, and a vase full of flames. Here are the properties of these three signs as explained to Poliphilo by Logistica, his philosophical guide:

> *Le soleil p(ar) sa belle lumière crée, conserve & enlumine toutes choses. Le tymon*
> *ou gouvernail signifie le sage gouvernement de l'universel par la sapience infinie.*
> *Le troisieme qui est un vase plein de feu, nous donne à entendre une participation*
> *d'amour & charité qui nous est communiquée par la bonté divine.*

These three symbols are interpreted separately; they do not constitute a sentence nor a clause in a linguistic sense. However, considered together they form the essential components of a higher unity, as detailed by Logistica:

> *Et combien que les trois images soient separées, si est-ce une mesme chose indivisible, eternellement comprise en un, & inseparablement cojoincte, laquelle nous départ & communique benignement ses grâces & ses biens, ainsi q(ue) tu peulx comprendre par les cornes d'abondace posées sur les coingz du triangle, qui est ferme sur tous ses coftez: par quoy il nous signifie que dieu est immuable & invariable, sans jamais recevoir alteration ne changement.*

This statement is completed by additional considerations about the symbolic power of the obelisk (also sometimes referred to as a pyramid). The obelisk, by its shape, but also by its decorative program is nothing else but a summary of the supreme power of God. This argument will be later developed and expanded by Athanasius Kircher, who considered that the hieroglyphs had been invented specifically for concealing the secrets of wisdom and the religion, and that the obelisks were the natural receptacles for this.[83]

Symbolic hieroglyphic compositions, with no linguistic transposition, are numerous in the Renaissance. For consideration of place, the presentation will be limited here to some emblematic examples: a) Andrea Doria's epitaph by Sebastiano del Piombo, b) the letter Y in Tory's Champ Fleury, and c) the pedestal of a young divinity in Lambert Lombard's painting Saint Paul and Denis before the altar of the unknown deity.

a)   Andrea Doria's symbolic epitaph by Sebastiano del Piombo

The painting (now in the collections of the Palazzo Doria-Pamphilj, Rome) was realized around 1526. Its subject is the famous naval commander Andrea Doria (1466–1560). The symbols that have been drawn at the bottom, exactly where a title should be expected, refer to emblematic parts of a battle ship: anchor, prow, stern, and rudder. These elements are copied from a relief that could then be seen in the basilica of San Lorenzo fuori le mura (now in the Museo Capitolino); together with the sacrificial tools coming from the temple of Vespasianus, they had been integrated in the repertoire of neo-hieroglyphs by the artists of the Renaissance. Except for the anchor [STABILITY, SLOWNESS] and the rudder [GOVERNANCE, RULE], the other elements are never used in neo-hieroglyphic inscriptions. The titulus is emblematic of Andrea Doria's activities as fleet admiral, but the sequence cannot pretend to be an inscription that could be rendered in a natural language.

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83   See Winand in press b. This explains, among other reasons, why Kircher rejected Hermapion's translation as reported by Ammianus (XVI,4,17–23). To the Jesuit scholar, it was inconceivable that such trivial matters as the names and actions of a king would be recorded in a hieroglyphic inscription.

Fig. 34. Sebastiano del Piombo, Portrait of Andrea Doria (around 1526), Wikipedia.

As such they were reproduced on a plate in Herwarth von Hohenburg's the epoch-making *Thesaurus hieroglyphicorum*, published in 1610.[84]

Fig. 35. Herwarth von Hohenburg, *Thesaurus hieroglyphicorum*, 1610 (ULL R-36E).

84   See Winand & Chantrain 2022: 294–295.

b) Lambert Lombard

As already noted, Lambert Lombard was very fond of hieroglyphs as an original way of expressing ideas with images. His interest was nurtured in Rome and materialized later in his paintings. While Lombard composed iconograms (§ 2.2.1), he did not invent regular neo-hieroglyphic inscriptions in the sense of Colonna's *Hypnerotomachia*.[85] As will be shown in the next section, Lombard regularly adorned his paintings with neo-hieroglyphic signs, but apparently only as an index of symbolic writing, thus without an underlying message that could be interpreted in a natural language.

Lombard also occasionally included hieroglyphic signs whose symbolic meaning was important in the general context of the composition. The painting of Saint Paul with Dionysius in front of the altar of the unknown God is a good example thereof (fig. 36). In the background stands a statue of a young naked man, holding a sword upright in his left hand and supporting flames in his right hand. His left foot assumedly lays on a shield. Near his right foot is a globular shaped item with a tail behind, which has been identified as a helmet.

On the pedestal, three figures have been drawn: a radiant sun, an open eye, and a lion passing right. These figures have long been recognized as hieroglyphic signs.[86] However, their meaning—at least for two of them—is open to discussion. The open eye is of course a well-known representation of God. The radiant sun alone is not a frequent item in neo-hieroglyphic inscriptions; it is most often included in a large circle with the moon for representing the universe.[87] According to Valeriano (*Hieroglyphica*, XLIIII) the sun can have one of the following meanings: the divine principle, the principle of unity, the principle of truth, Christ, the light, the principle of *maiestas*, life, and the expression of time. As for the lion, Lombard uses a similar image in one of his sketch with the meaning of powerful one, referring to princes and rules (see above). According to Horapollo's *Hieroglyphica*, the lion also means "vigor" (I,17), "vigilance" (I,19), the Nile in flood (I,21), and "anger" (II,38). Valeriano (*Hieroglyphica*, ch. I) extended the possibilities by adding the following meanings: "magnanimity," "vigor of spirit," "strength," "terror," "subduction," "cunning, subtelty," "indomitable furor," etc.

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85   A possible exception could be the two inscriptions carved on the funerary monument of Hubert Mielemans (§ 2.1.1). The place (Liège) and the date of Mielemans' death (1558) reasonably point to Lombard, who was probably among the very few people having sufficient knowledge of this mode of expression in the city.

86   See lastly Laboury 2006: 52–54, Oger & Winand 2022: 146–147.

87   See already the first note of the *Hieroglyphica*: "for representing eternity, they draw the sun and the moon."

Fig. 36. Lambert Lombard and his school (?),
s. Paul and Dionysius in front of the altar of the unknown God (Musée de l'art wallon, Liège).

Behind the god, three Greek words can be seen, engraved on an arch: ΑΔΙΗΓΗΤΟΣ "inexpressible," ΑΔΙΑΧΩΡΙΣΤΟΣ "imperceptible," and ΑΔΙΕΡΕΥΣΗΣ "inscrutable." The shapes of the letters show that the drawer probably did not understand what he was writing. Suffice it here to point out the different, sometimes odd, shapes of the same letter, like delta, sigma, and even alpha. Moreover, the last, much rarer, spelled ΑΔΙΕΡΕΥΣΗΣ for ἀδιερεύνητος, was obviously beyond the understanding of the artist. As has been suggested, these words are some of the attributes of God as described by Dionysius Areopagites (*Divine Words* I,2), whose story was mixed with that of Dionysius, to whom the paintings were dedicated. The statue of the god has been identified as Mars whose model should be looked for in Marcantonio Raimondi's drawing "Jeune homme au brandon."[88]

This however leaves unexplained the fire the god holds in his hand and the relation between the symbols and the Greek words.[89] The provenance of the three attributes of God in Greek may ultimately go back to Dionysius Areopagites' treaty entitled "On the divine words,"[90] but it is unlikely that Lombard, who did not master Latin nor Greek, had a direct access to this theologian's works. Actually, the link was mediated through a source that was much more popular in Lombard's time.

88   Brussels, Cabinet des Estampes, SII 26891 (Denhaene 1987: 90, 2006: n° 127, p. 482).

89   Denhaene 1987: 90–91 already noted that the presence of Mars looks odd in a composition that is entirely dedicated to the exaltation of god's qualities.

90   See Krönig 1974: 125; cf. Denhaene 1987: 91; 1990: 148.

It has often been underlined that Lombard was familiar with the *Hypnerotomachia*, very probably in its French edition. I would like to suggest here that this part of the painting can be directly related to a passage of Colonna's novel. In his erratic journey, Poliphilo, the hero, comes across several hieroglyphic inscriptions, as he calls them. Most of them, but not all, are on monuments that are clearly connected to ancient Egypt: pyramids and obelisks. An obelisk in particular gives the opportunity to Logistica, Poliphilo's guide and teacher, to develop a tight reasoning of the secret meaning of obelisks in general and of the elements that can be seen on this particular monument. Two points are here of interest. First, Logistica describes the three hieroglyphs that have been engraved on the base of the obelisk (I here reproduce the French edition by Kerver, fol. 44, v°):

> *Autour de la circumference & rondeur sont contenuz ces trois hiéroglyphes, la propriété desquels est attribuée à nature divine. Le soleil par sa belle lumière crée, conserve & enlumine toutes choses. Le tymon ou gouvernail signifie le sage gouvernement de l'uniuersel par la sapience infinie. Le troisieme qui est un vase plein de feu, nous donne à entendre une participation d'amour & charité qui nous est communiquée par la bonté divine.*

Logistica then proceeds to explaining the theological significance of different symbols and the relevance of certain numbers in contributing to the general harmony as created by God. She particularly insists on two divine attributes: immutability and invariance. This is confirmed by the presence of three words written in Greek on the obelisk:

> *Regarde cette parole greque escripte soubz la figure du soleil, ΑΔΙΗΓΗΤΟΣ. soubz celle du tymon, ΑΔΙΑΧΩΡΙΣΤΟΣ. en celle du feu, ΑΔΙΕΡΕΥΝΗΣ.*

Colonna's text is undoubtedly Lombard's source for this part of the painting. The mistake in the spelling of the last word in the painting—ΑΔΙΕΡΕΥΣΗΣ for ἀδιερεύνητος—is proof of Lombard's dependence on ΑΔΙΕΡΕΥΝΗΣ in Colonna's text.[91] The first extract from Logitica's speech also suggests a possible explanation for the fire in the god's hand, which is the symbol of love and charity as they are given to humankind by god. Actually the image of a god, in this case Jupiter, holding fire is illustrated in Colonna's text, on the next page after the one with the Greek words.

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91   As the three adjectives are absent from the pseudo-Dionysian corpus and, according to the digitalized *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae*, they do not seem to be used together, their presence in Colonna's text remains to be explained.

Fig. 37. Medaillon with Jupiter sitting in Colonna's Hypnerotomachia (1547: fol. 45a).

The radiant sun, which is carved on the pedestal, is "the sun which by its splendid light creates, preserves and illuminates everything." The two objects that lay at the feet of the god also deserve attention. As already noted, they have been identified as a helmet and a shield. This might be problematic. Of course, if the identification of the young man holding a sword with Mars is valid, the presence of a helmet and a shield is only natural, but one fails to understand how the figure of Mars fits in the general theme of the unknown god. I once considered the possibility that the item on the right could be a rudder. If so, this would be an echo of the emblematic signs on Colonna's obelisk (fig. 38, a). When shown horizontally, the shape of the rudder comes close to that of a shield, as suggested in a drawing in Lazarus Le Baïf's *Annotationes in legem II* (1536: 37). But as I cannot for the moment suggest an alternative explanation for the other item on the pedestal, which might look like a helmet, I prefer to leave the question open.
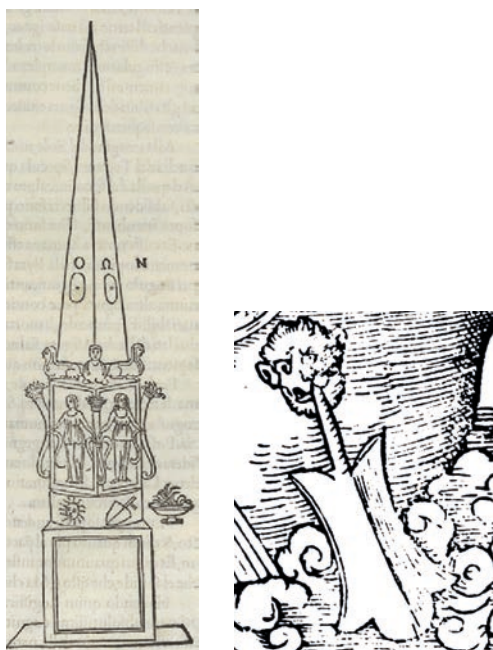

Fig. 38. (a) Colonna, *Hypnerotomachia*, Venise, 1499 –
(b) Lazarus Le Baïf, *Annotationes in legem* II, Paris, 1536, 37.

In this painting, Lombard succeeded in distributing essential qualities of god in different places and formats. The Greek inscription ΑΓΝΩΣΤΩ ΘΕΩ "to the unknown god" that is given the prominent place naturally induced Lombard to resort to symbolic means as possible clues to unveil the mysterious attributes of god. This he did by using text (the three Greek adjectives painted on the arch) and symbolic figures that pointed to supposedly ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs, which were deemed to be particularly well suited to express hidden aspects of the divine truth.

c) Letter Y in Tory's Champ Fleury

Hieroglyphs as they were received in Europe during the Renaissance were sometimes accommodated in curious symbolic representations. This was for instance the case in Geoffroy Tory's *Champ Fleury*. As has been already recalled, Tory was vividly interested in hieroglyphs. In his book, he devoted some lines on ancient hieroglyphs, reported to have translated Horapollo's *Hieroglyphica*, and described an inscription that he saw in Rome with neo-hieroglyphs (see above, § 2.1.2). In his recommendations on the right proportions of letters, which is the main focus of the book, Tory discusses the symbolic properties of the letter Y, following the Pythagorian interpretation.[92] The two arms of the letter symbolizes indeed the two ways that open to the young man: the left one, which is the wider and easier one, symbolizes the pleasures. This road leads to the soul's devastation and punishments. The right arm, which is narrower and tougher, symbolizes the virtuous way. He who takes it and lives according to moral principles will be crowned and awarded.[93] The two figures nicely illustrate the text in a very suggestive manner.

Fig. 39. Geoffroy Tory (1529/1549).

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92   See Drucker 1995: 164. On Geoffroy Tory, see Jimenez ed., 2019. The symbolism of the letter Y was commented upon by Greek and Latin authors, but also by Christian theologians (e.g. Lactantius, *The Divine Institutes*, VI,3: *Of the Ways, and of Vices and Virtues; And of the Rewards of Heaven and the Punishments of Hell*).

93   See also the poem by Pierre Coustau 1560: "*Pythagoras Philosophe d'esprit, / Vice & vertu soubs l'Ypsilon comprit, / Le trac de vice en val ses suyvans meine, / Cil de vertu les conduit en la plaine*" (cf. https://www.emblems.arts.gla.ac.uk/french/emblem.php?id=FCPa105). In his collection of emblems, Coustau also devoted a notice "*Sur la Vipere, selon les Hieroglyfiques des Aegyptiens. Contre les femmes qui haissent leurs maris*" (Coustau 1560: 412), and another on the ouroboros, entitled *Ex hieroglyphicis Aegyptiorum* (p. 255). The letter Y also retained Erasmus' attention (*Adagia*, 1.1.2).

Although Tory did not explicitly call these figures hieroglyphs, one can suppose that they are to be considered as such. In the *Epitome emblematum panegyricorum Academiae Altorfinae* published in 1602 in Nuremberg, Levinus Hulsius reproduced a token that on its obverse figures the Pythagorean Y in a simplified way.

Fig. 40. Token, 1578 in [Hulsius 1602].

2.3. Hieroglyphs as an index: Decorative hieroglyphs as entertainment

Hieroglyphs, every kind of hieroglyphs, Egyptian ones, neo-hieroglyphs, or whatever figure that could pass for hieroglyphic, were sometimes used without any linguistic or symbolic meaning. They served as indices pointing either to ancient Egypt or to some symbolic way of writing ideas. This opened the path to hieroglyphs as decorative items, a practice that is still well alive today.[94]

I shall here limit myself to (neo-)hieroglyphs that clearly mimic inscriptions without having — as far as one can judge—any precise meaning translatable in a natural language. The first example is provided by one of the many paintings by Lambert Lombard where signs imitating neo-hieroglyphs have been added. Figure 41 represents a small panel figuring on the well that constitutes the central motive in "Rebecca et Eliezer au puits," one of the paintings in the cycle of the "Wirtuous women."[95] Except for one or two, the signs are barely recognizable. They are clearly no genuine hieroglyphs. They rather relate to the repertoire that was inaugurated in Colonna's *Hypnerotomachia*, obviously trying to imitate neo-hieroglyphic inscriptions by respecting the general layout as observed elsewhere, *sensu lato*. However, they do not seem to imply anything more than a vague link with Antiquity. Strictly speaking, the presence of hieroglyphs is a little odd in a Jewish context, even if the story of Jacob can be loosely connected with Egypt. The presence of such small panels with pseudo-inscriptions is recurrent in Lombard's work.[96] If some neo-hieroglyphic inscriptions can

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94   In the Renaissance, hieroglyphs were close to the genre of the grotesque, that was very popular after the rediscovery of the paintings in Nero's Domus aurea (see Hansen 2018).

95   See Dehaene 1990: 508.

96   See for instance "Christ and Samaritaine" (London), "The Holy family" (Windsor), where the inscription is partly missing, the right part being out of frame. As regards the "Healing of the blind man" (Amsterdam), the signs are better to be analyzed as symbols pointing to cultic practices, without however constituting an "inscription" translatable in a natural language.

be taken in a Colonnesque sense of the term, like that figuring on the base of the altar in the "Joachim's Offering repelled" (see § 2.2.2), they should rather be explained as mere indexes of a certain representation of Egypt and Antiquity, *sensu lato*.

Fig. 41. Lambert Lombard, *Rebecca et Eliezer au puits* (detail), Grand Curtius, Liège.

The second example is a detail on an architrave in the background of Mantegna's Caesar's triumphs (1486), as interpreted by Andrea Andreani in 1598–1599 in his album where he engraved the nine paintings of Mantegna's cycle. The signs that have been schematically drawn are clearly related to Colonna's *Hypnerotomachia* inscriptions. They also imitate the cultic items from Vespasianus' temple on the Forum, which were partly the source of inspiration for Colonna (see above).

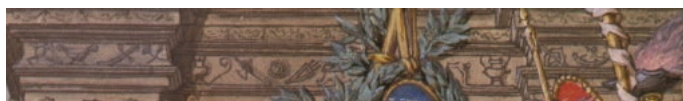Fig. 42. Andrea Andreani, *Triunph(us) Caesaris* (Wikimedia).

Fig. 43. Andrea Andreani, *Triunph(us) Caesaris* (detail, Wikimedia).

The third example is provided by Marteen van Heemskerck (1498–1574), taken from the series "Wonders of the World," which were engraved in 1572 by Philips Gale (Sammut 2022). Van Heemskerck, who also spent some time in Rome (Rather 2017: 158–159), was apparently fond of Egypt as shown by the obelisks he frequently draws in the background of his paintings. More concretely, in 1570 he erected an obelisk (2,2 m high) in the memory of his father in his eponymous native town, which is the earliest monument of its kind in the Low Countries (Rather 2017: 155–157). The *Pyramides Aegypti* shows a phantasmagoric representation of Cheops' pyramid surrounded by six obelisks.[97] The two closest to the viewer bear signs on one of their faces. The signs that are on the one in the background are made of geometric forms in the lower part; in the upper part, the signs seem to refer to objects and animals, but are barely identifiable. Quite to the contrary, the signs adorning the obelisk that stands in the foreground can easily be identified, at least one can assign them a referent.

Fig. 44. Marteen van Heemskerck, *Pyramides Aegypti* (Wikimedia).

The last monument to be briefly discussed here is the ephemeral obelisk that was erected in Rouen in 1596 for the Joyous entry of king Henri IV of France, as reported by Raphaël Du Petit Val.[98] The faces of the obelisk, which stood on four female sphinxes (called "harpies" in the accompanying text), were divided in ten panels. The figures reproduced on the plate represent the famous labours

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97 One will also note a possible representation of the sphinx at the right of the pyramid. As has been frequently noted, pyramids and obelisks, either by name or by shape, were usually confused with one another. Like the pyramids, the obelisks were considered funerary monuments, a tradition that goes back to the Middle Ages. For instance, the obelisk of the Vatican supposedly contained Caesar's ashes at its top.

98 See Raphaël Du Petit Val 1599. For the Joyous entry of the same king in Lyon, obelisks with military emblems were also present, see Ancelin 1598.

of Hercules.[99] As explained in the booklet, the capital H at the top of the obelisk stands both for Henri and Hercules. On the face of the pedestal facing the church was written in golden letters "*Hercules Gallicus.*" The section of the booklet concludes with these words (p. 53): "*Le Roy ayant contemplé ce magnifique ouvrage vray hieroglyphique de ses vertus, etc.*," which shows that the scenes figuring Hercules in his activities were understood as hieroglyphic because they had a symbolic force as epitomizing the virtues of the king.

Fig. 45. Raphaël Du Petit Val 1599: ad p. 52.

This manner of distributing the decoration in panels was already present on the obelisk standing on the Insula Tiberiana, in front of the temple of Aesculapius (see above). In the Renaissance, such monuments are attested in the last decades of the 16th century and the beginning of the following century. The first example in a printed version seems to occur in Van der Noot's collection of works

99   Actually, the uppermost panel was reserved to the king's emblems. Only three faces of the obelisk were decorated. The fourth one was left blank to signify all the splendid works the king would achieve during his reign.

(see above, fig. 18). It is also attested in the funeral monument made for Augustino Carraccio (see above, fig. 19–20). Another example is the funerary monument of Edward Seymour, 1st Earl of Hertford (died in 1621), in the cathedral of Salisbury, surrounded by four obelisks.[100] The panels have been decorated with trophies and panoplies that symbolically recall the earl's military career. Such items are already present in Colonna's *Hypnerotomachia*, which makes their identification as hieroglyphs very likely.

Fig. 46. Funerary monument of Edward Seymour, Cathedral of Salisbury, 1621 (photo Jean Winand).

2.4. Possible hieroglyphic compositions

As a final remark, some arrangements that could easily pass for hieroglyphic were not apparently considered as such. This is particularly striking in Colonna's *Hypnerotomachia*, where every image has a high potential of symbolic force. It is thus curious that some architectural pieces that seem to meet all criteria were not analyzed as instances of neo-hieroglyphic compositions (fol. 32a).

This is also the case for a medallion, presented as a diamond, showing Jupiter standing on a throne, holding in his left hand a cornucopia and in his right hand a flame of fire (fol. 45a–b).

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100   See also the plate in Androuët du Cerceau 1584: 31; cf. Winand 2022c: fig. 31. This format is also found on an obelisk erected for the Joyous entry of Henri IV in Rouen in 1596 (see § 2.3).

Logistica gives Poliphilo the required explanation without suggesting a transposition into a natural language. When discussing the object, neither Logistique nor Poliphilo makes an allusion to Egypt or to hieroglyphs. It is all the more intriguing as this figure is followed by the hieroglyph of the women sitting with a leg lift-up (fol. 46r, see above fig. 27).

Fig. 47. Medaillon with Jupiter sitting in Colonna's *Hypnerotomachia* (1546: fol. 45a).

The same contrast can be observed elsewhere. In a dramatic scene, the two lovers meet an old woman leading a group of six young women. The older, so Poliphilo, was holding a sword turned upright with a crown and a bough engaged in the middle of the blade (fol. 47b).[101] This is rather curious as the sign of a sword with a crow engaged in the blade reappears later (fol. 85b) in an iconogram which is interpreted as a hieroglyphic figure (see above).

Fig. 48. Medaillon" with Jupiter sitting in Colonna's *Hypnerotomachia* (1546: fol. 47b).

Later in the text (fol. 57a), Poliphilo describes a panel showing people looking in the sky Cupido who is busy drawing with his arrow four animals: a dragon, a goose (?), a horse, and a goat (?). The nature of the animals is not specified, and no explanation is given as to what this could signify:

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101   *"& veint à notre reception une matrone de regard furieux, tenant une espée fourbie, la poincte contremont, passée atravers une couronne parmy laquelle passoit un rameau de palme."*

devant estoit Cupido en aage d'enfance, volant en l'air, & paignant contre le ciel atout une fleche trenchant toutes manieres de bestes & oyfeaux: dont il sembloit que les hommes estans en terre s'esbahissoient de la merveille.

Fig. 49. Cupido drawing in Colonna's *Hypnerotomachia* (1546: fol. 57a).

After visiting the obelisk that displays the four medallions already presented (§ 2.2.1), Poliphilo saw nearby a fragment of a pediment of antique craftsmanship, where two figures could still be recognized: a bird, whose head is missing, but tentatively identified by the hero as a kind a vulture (a Chahuant) and a lamp (fol. 87a). Poliphilo did not explicitly call them hieroglyphs, but he nevertheless suggested a translation, proceeding exactly as he did previously for neo-hieroglyphic inscriptions:[102]

Fig. 50. Pediment with two figures in Colonna's *Hypnerotomachia* (1546: fol. 87a).

This was interpreted by Poliphilo as follows:

VITAE LETIFER NVNTIVS

Le messager de mort à la vie

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102   The translation is introduced by the very expression that is used everywhere in the text: "*ie l'interpretay ainsi*" (*Cusi io le interpretai* in the Aldine edition, with occasional slight syntactic variations).

One of the most famous pieces of architecture visited by Poliphilo is undoubtedly the funerary monument of Mausolus erected by his widow Artemisia.[103] At the bottom was reportedly a trophy, commemorating, so Poliphilo thought, his victory over the Rhodians. The trophy, which bears some resemblance with the one figuring on the fourth medallion (interpreted as a hieroglyphic figure), is described as follows (fol. 98b):

> *Ceftoit l'esperon d'une gallere, avec partie de la proe sur laquelle estoit dressé un tronc d'arbre, revestu d'une cuyrace antique, les branches passant par l'ouverture des bras: en l'une desquelles pendoit un escusson, & en l'autre le manche d'une trompe à vuyder la sentine[104]: au dessoubz de la cuyrace un ancre, & un tymon entraversez. Sur la poincte du tronc qui sortoit par le collet de la cuyrace, estoit un cabasset à creste.*
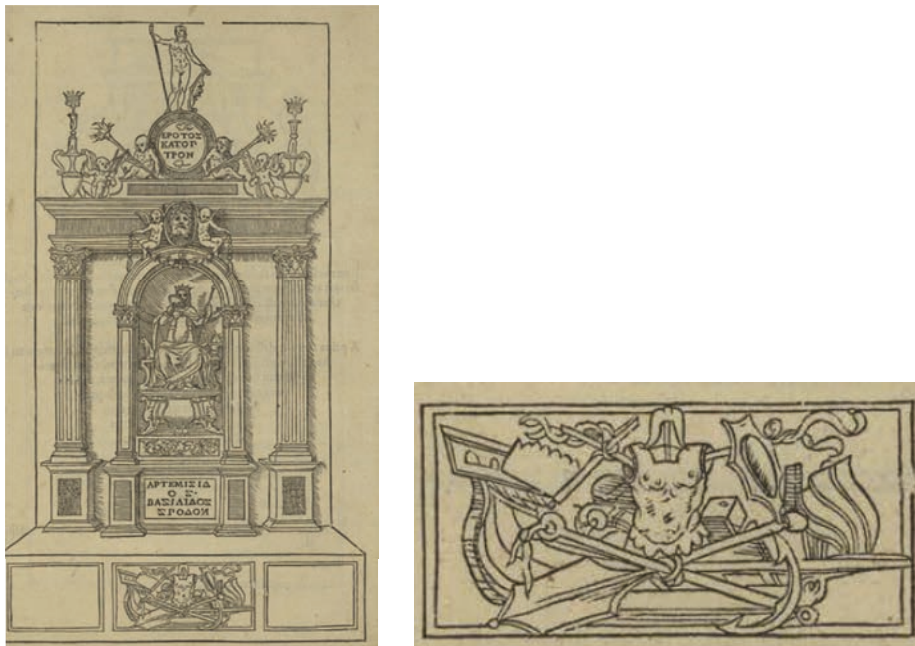

Fig. 51. Mausolus' funerary monuments in Colonna's *Hypnerotomachia* (1546: fol. 98b). General view and detail of the trophy.

When entering a beautiful garden, Poliphilo notes a bucranium engraved on the base of a small monument (fol. 114a). The head is decorated with festoons and garlands, in a manner that reminds hieroglyphic texts mentioned earlier by the hero. In this case however, no attempt is made at suggesting a symbolic interpretation, even less a translation.

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103 This theme will be later treated by Caron for commemorating the laments of Catherine of Medici after the death of her husband, king Henri II of France (see above, § 2.1.2).

104 *Sentine* is an ancient word (Latin *sentina*) designating the lower part of a ship (Fr. *cale*, Engl. *hold*).

Fig. 52. Bucranium in Colonna's *Hypnerotomachia* (1546: fol. 114a).

Upon his arrival on the island of Cytherus, Poliphilo sees several Nymphs coming, each bearing richly elaborated ensigns which by their shape and arrangement very much remind the trophy described earlier by the hero as hieroglyphic (fol. 116a–117b). In this case however, the ensigns are very precisely described, but no proposition is made for interpreting them symbolically, which would normally be followed by a translation. The seven ensigns are reproduced below without any further comment:
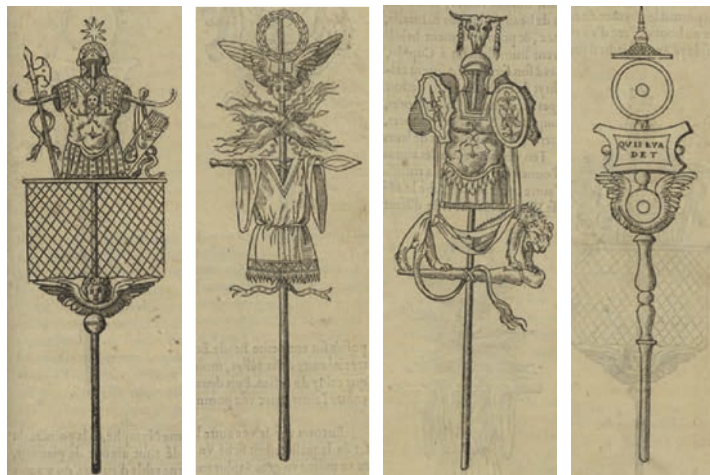

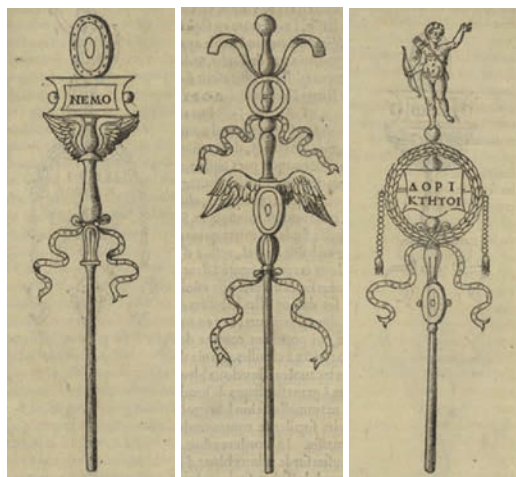Fig. 53. Ensigns in Colonna's *Hypnerotomachia* (1546: fol. 116a–b).

Fig. 54. Ensigns in Colonna's *Hypnerotomachia* (1546: fol. 117a–b).

I voluntarily limited myself to examples coming from Colonna's *Hypnerotomachia* as this set the standard for the neo-hieroglyphic tradition in the Renaissance. All examples provided in this section have typologically close counterparts that are interpreted as hieroglyphs by the hero or his muse. I cannot offer a satisfactory explanation for a different treatment, but I can at least suggest two possible causes. First, and this would easily apply to the last examples, the figures that were left untranslated are in the second part of the book, and they are typologically repetitive. Could it be that a certain fatigue fell on Colonna, who ended up dispensing himself of these cumbersome descriptions? Another, maybe more gratifying possibility would be that Colonna, having trained the reader in the mysteries of his neo-hieroglyphic writing system, finally considered that he/she was now up to the task of deciphering the figurative enigmas presented to him/her in the last part of the book. This would be well in accordance with the spirit of the times. One should not indeed underplay the pleasure coming from the personal discovery of the meaning of such compositions, especially if this required some skills that would unequivocally remind the reader that he/she and the author belonged to the same cultural circle.

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