The Material Authority of Written Texts in Pharaonic Egypt

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The sociology of writing is a peculiarly acute issue for describing societies with extremely limited literacy, and pharaonic Egypt should be classified in that way. Egyptian literacy was genuinely limited in its functionality, and in the range of things put into writing. The archaeological record may be full of lacunae, but it can still provide a clear history of the extension of writing from virtually nothing in Dynasty 1 to a quite sophisticated technical competence, but still a limited range of content and functionality by the end of the Ramesside Period. In this respect, an essentially reductionist approach is valid: not to assume genres or uses of writing before they can be attested. The limitations of the record are to be treated seriously, and actual gaps in the record should not be filled on the basis of anachronistic hypotheses about uses of writing that seem self-evident in the modern world.[1]

Historians of literacy can too easily leave the impression that writing evolved through a set of deliberate and purposeful inventions: that the evolution of writing was purposeful – with individuals deliberately expanding functionality and range of content to target the resolution of consciously perceived social or intellectual needs.[2] For instance, there is a clear association in Egypt between early writing and a more general increase in archaeological complexity in the late Pre-dynastic and Early Dynastic periods. This has too easily led to hypotheses identifying the invention of (written) bureaucracy as causative in the development of the early state.[3] Yet neither the functionality of the Early Dynastic script, nor the range of content seen in early texts, can in any meaningful sense be presented as bureaucratic. Early Egyptian history is characterized by personal relationships of hierarchy, not by impersonalising institutional structures. The extension of political authority in such a society does not require the development of a fully functional writing system. There is, then, no justification in presenting the development of writing as primarily causal in the state development. The issue for historiography is, rather, the tendency to project backwards from a modern view of the role of writing as the transmission of language, with unlimited potential, to be used deliberately to communicate or record for reference.

The nature of any particular literacy is defined by the material form of the writing – the physical medium – and the way in which those physical writings are used. The physical writings, their

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[1] C. EYRE, *The Use of Documents in Pharaonic Egypt* (Oxford Studies in Ancient Documents, Oxford, 2013), esp. pp. 3-6, 9-12, 349-354.

[2] A.D. SMITH, 'Are Writing Systems Intelligently Designed', in: J. ENGLEHARDT (ed.), *Agency in Ancient Writing* (Boulder, Colorado, 2013), pp. 71-93.

[3] D. WENGROW, *The Archaeology of Early Egypt: Social Transformations in North-East Africa, 10,000 to 2650 BC* (Cambridge, 2006), pp. 198-207; cf. N. POSTGATE, *Bronze Age Bureaucracy: Writing and the Practice of Government in Assyria* (Cambridge, 2013) for comparable issues of the range of administrative writing and how it was used; B. ROUTLEDGE, *Archaeology and State Theory: Subjects and Objects of Power* (London, 2014) for the problems of defining an early state.

content, and their use, belong to the contemporary and peopled cultural history. The modern assumption that writing records and transmits language, and was invented to do so, cannot be projected back onto early Egyptian writing. The development of any potential to do so belongs to the history of its use in social context, which can only be traced on the basis of evidence preserved in the Egyptian record. That is to say, early writing from Egypt is better approached according to categories of material object, used in action, as part of social process or in forms of display. All such writing was embedded in its societal context. Material form, content, and use in practice belong to the contemporary and peopled cultural history. They are not explained by anachronistic understandings of the nature of literacy, rooted in later or modern practice, nor by assumptions that there are universal norms in exploiting the potential of writing. Egypt was a society where writings were as much, if not more, objects than texts.[4] The written object is then a tool, at least as much as a container for symbols. It is something used for doing – a context for agency[5] – rather than simply surface for the graphic representation of language.

Modern presumptions focus on communication and on memory as the purposes of writing and the movers of intellectual evolution.[6] Goody's classic analyses of the consequences of literacy in traditional and pre-printing societies focused on causative relationships between the development of writing, changes in the nature of text, of ways of thinking, and societal and intellectual development.[7] This reflects concerns derived backwards from discussion of the better-documented social and intellectual consequences of printing. Egyptology is, however, an archaeological subject. The history of Egyptian texts is an archaeological, and not simply a linguistic or literary exercise.[8] The surviving texts are themselves objects, where their form and function are as important as their content.[9] An archaeological approach, focussed on materiality and the agency of 'doing things', allows a more direct, bottom-up approach to the reality of the ancient data. Rooted in specific evidence, it contextualises the history of Egyptian writing, and then represents a sort of

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[4] Contrast A. LOPRIENO, *La Pensée et l'Écriture: Pour une analyse sémiotique de la culture égyptienne* (Paris, 2001); J. STAUDER-PORCHET, *Les Autobiographies de l'Ancien Empire Égyptien* (OLA 255, Leuven, 2017), p. 2.

[5] As A. GELL, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory* (with foreword by N. THOMAS, Oxford, 1998), p. 4: 'Culture has no existence independently of its manifestations in social interactions,' emphasising social interactions and primary data over symbolic abstraction or mental evolution as the subject of anthropology; cf. C. GOSDEN, *Anthropology and Archaeology: A Changing Relationship* (Oxford – New York, 1999), esp. pp. 119-127.

[6] J. ASSMANN, 'Cultural and Literary Texts', in: G. MOERS (ed.), *Definitely: Egyptian Literature* (LingAeg Studia Monographica 2, Göttingen, 1999), esp. p. 6; J. ASSMANN, *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization: Writing, Remembrance, and Political Imagination* (Cambridge, 2011) – translated and revised from IDEM, *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis: Schrift, Erinnerung und politische Identität in frühen Hochkulturen* (Munich, 2007).

[7] J. GOODY – I. WATT, 'The Consequences of Literacy', in: J. GOODY (ed.), *Literacy in Traditional Societies* (Cambridge, 1968), pp. 27-68; J. GOODY, *The Logic of Writing and the Organization of Society* (Cambridge, 1986); J. GOODY, *The Interface between the Written and the Oral* (Cambridge, 1987).

[8] Cf. W. SCHENKEL, 'Wozu die Ägypter eine Schrift brauchten', in: A. ASSMANN – J. ASSMANN – C. HARDMEIER (eds), *Schrift und Gedächtnis: Beiträge zur Archäologie der literarischen Kommunikation* (Munich, 1983), pp. 45-63.

[9] N. BOIVIN, *Material Cultures, Material Minds: The Impact of Things on Human Thought, Society and Evolution* (Cambridge, 2008); M.E.F. BLOCH, *How We Think They Think: Anthropological Approaches to Cognition, Memory and Literacy* (Boulder, Colorado – Oxford, 1998); M. FOUCAULT, *Archaeology of Knowledge* (translated by A.M. SHERIDAN SMITH, London – New York, 1972) – translated from IDEM, *L'Archéologie du Savoir* (Paris, 1969).

ethnographic approach to literacy, in which material form and limitations in content point to a contemporary reality at any particular date. In that way it attempts to avoid the potential trap of anachronism in more abstract or universalising attempts to comprehend the actual writings through a discourse rooted in symbolism or semiotics of ideas.

The materiality of the script

The materiality nature of writing is very marked in Egypt. Egyptian hieroglyphic writing clearly did not originate in symbolic representation of ideas, nor the representation of sounds, nor an abstract representation of language,[10] but the representation of things. Signs represent objects. The earliest writing from Egypt is visual, not phonemic, and its use was for labelling and naming. This is characteristic of the surviving seals, labels and marks of the beginning of Egyptian history, where purely pictorial and then visually punning (rebus) writings stand at the beginning of the hieroglyphic script. The continuing use of sub-literate, non-phonemic writing is then a feature of the later Egyptian archaeological record. Local corpora of signs were used for labelling and listing, in parallel to but distinct from the contemporary hieroglyphic and cursive writing systems.[11] In Ramesside Deir el Medina, for instance, a distinctive set of signs was used to provide identifying markers for the individual workmen, and these were sometimes used in lists instead of the normal hieratic writings of their names.[12] Hieratic and hieroglyphic writing systems required long apprenticeship to acquire, and their very nature meant that they were not functional for use as tools of partial literacy. In contrast, the parallel system of non-textual markers provided a local corpus of

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[10] Cf. J. BAINES, 'Communication and Display: The Integration of Early Egyptian Art and Writing', *Antiquity* 63 (1989), pp. 471-482, esp. pp. 474-475 (republished in IDEM, *Visual and Written Culture in Ancient Egypt* (Oxford, 2007), pp. 281-297 at pp. 285-288); L. BOSTOCK, 'Agency in Death. Early Egyptian Writing from Mortuary Contexts', in: ENGELHARDT (ed.), *Agency in Ancient Writing*, pp. 98-106; I. REGULSKI, *A Palaeographic Study of Early Writing in Egypt* (OLA 195, Leuven, 2010), p. 1 explicitly on such writing not representing language, although she still tries to treat the history of writing in the Early Dynastic period as sets of deliberate and purposeful changes to do with the development of administration and government, as a tool of centralisation.
Cf. M.A. JACKSON, 'The Mediated Image. Reflections on Semasiographic Notation in the Ancient Americas', in: ENGELHARDT (ed.), *Agency in Ancient Writing,* pp. 21-43 emphasising such writing as prompt and mediation for recitation, but not as representation of speech or language. For the relationship between picture, semiograph, and the encoding of language in Egypt see P. VERNUS, 'La naissance de l'écriture dans l'Égypte pharaonique: une problématique revisitée', *Archéo-Nil* 26 (2016), pp. 105-134.
[11] B.J.J. HARING – O.E. KAPER (eds), *Pictograms or Pseudo-script? Non-textual Identity Marks in Practical Use in Ancient Egypt and Elsewhere* (EgUit 25, Leiden – Leuven, 2009); P. ANDRÁSSY – J. BUDKA – F. KAMMERZELL (eds), *Non-Textual Marking Systems, Writing and Pseudo Script from Prehistory to Modern Times* (LingAeg Studia Monographica 8, Göttingen, 2009); J. BUDKA – F. KAMMERZELL – S. RZEPKA (eds), *Non-Textual Marking Systems in Ancient Egypt (and Elsewhere)* (LingAeg Studia Mongraphica 16, Hamburg, 2015).
[12] B. HARING – D. SOLIMAN, 'Reading Twentieth Dynasty Ostraca with Workmen's Marks', in: B.J.J. HARING – O.E. KAPER – R. VAN WALSEM (eds), *The Workman's Progress: Studies in the Village of Deir el-Medina and Other Documents from Western Thebes in Honour of Rob Demarée* (EgUit 28, Leiden – Leuven, 2014), pp. 73-93; B. HARING, 'Between Administrative Writing and Work Practice: Marks Ostraka and the Roster of Day Duties of the Royal Necropolis Workmen in the New Kingdom', in: BUDKA – KAMMERZELL – RZEPKA (eds), *Non-Textual Marking Systems*, pp. 133-142.

signs that were recognisable, and in that sense readable, to illiterate members of the community. They seem, then, to represent the nearest thing to evidence for a sort of partial literacy from Egypt. Hieroglyphic writing inherently mixed pictures and words: its phonemic coding remained limited at all periods. The modern student learns hieroglyphs on the practical assumption that the system is based on a set of phonemic signs: a consonantal alphabet, supplemented by bi-consonantal and tri-consonantal signs, to provide an incomplete phonemic key to identify the word. These are then followed by pictorial signs – determinatives – which help distinguish between homophones, and are supplemented by the use of a number of purely pictorial signs, which write the word for what they portray. This is a fair description of the fully developed system: a Roman Period sign list presents pictorial signs in essentially the same way as a modern textbook, naming them by what they depict and where they are used.[13] The history of the script was, however, the other way round: the picture signs were primary, with a gradual and erratic addition of phonemic signs as more and more words were added to the written lexicon.

The acquisition of written vocabulary through lists – notably onomastica – formed a significant part of later scribal apprenticeship, and the gradual establishment of that written lexicon can be understood as the core process in the historical development of practical literacy. The content of this lexicon can be taken to expand from the obviously concrete – concrete nouns and names – to the less obviously concrete verbs, but the encoding of grammatical features was slow and never complete in Egyptian writing. Individual words tended to retain a conventional orthography in the established script, in ways that aided visual recognition of the word. Spellings naturally varied according to the medium of the writing. Fuller spellings, using more phonemic signs to write individual words, are characteristic of cursive writing on papyrus. More abbreviated writings, using fewer phonemic signs, are characteristic of carved hieroglyphs on (harder) stone. Classic Egyptian orthography does, however, avoid the apparent possibilities for free variation of homographs in the phonemic representation of individual words.

The way in which very basic hieroglyphic writing inherently conflates picture and word is particularly clear in early Old Kingdom offering slabs, which display an offering list as a tabulation of pictorial signs in front of the seated recipient. This develops into the classic tabulated offering lists of the Old Kingdom, where different types of cloth or food are spelt out in upper compartments, above lower compartments containing picture (determinative) and number. In practice Egyptian writing could not function simply as a phonemic script. As the pictorial origins of individual signs and sign groups became obscured in cursive scripts, determinative groups became

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[13] F.Ll. GRIFFITH – W.M.F. PETRIE, *Two Hieroglyphic Papyri from Tanis: I. The Sign Papyrus (a Syllabary); II. The Geographical Papyrus (an Almanack)* (London, 1889). For discussion of late systematic organisation of signs and words see J.F. QUACK, 'Die spätägyptische Alphabetreihenfolge und das 'südsemitische' Alphabet', *LingAeg* 11 (2003), pp. 163-184.

to a limited extent formalised as standard markers of word ending, but they remained important for reading.

A so-called syllabic orthography was used from the Middle Kingdom as a way of representing foreign words and names in hieroglyphs, and Late Egyptian orthography used a similar semi-syllabic orthography for new written coinages, to expand the established written lexicon of earlier periods. By the Ramesside Period, the pronunciation of Egyptian had changed considerably from that of the periods in which standard orthography had been established. Occasional late texts then play with more extreme phonemic orthographies, in an attempt to represent something nearer to contemporary pronunciation: for instance the post-Ramesside *Tale of Woe* in hieratic,[14] or the Naucratis stela of Nectanebo I in hieroglyphs.[15] Such texts are extraordinarily difficult for the modern reader. Graeco-Roman hieroglyphic orthography then exploited a much freer variation in the phonemic orthography of individual words. This practice was, however, rooted in the expanding use of multiple phonemic readings for individual signs, and not the establishment of a set of standard phonemic signs that might facilitate the effective representation or communication of language to a reader. At the extreme, when hieroglyphic writing was fully separated from the cursive script used for business and literature, this exploitation of homographs for the hieroglyphic orthographies of temple inscriptions became a specialist or esoteric discourse. It was only comprehensible to those initiated into hieroglyphs – an advanced study at that date – and used for a limited range of religious content, but powerful in its visual materiality.

The history of reading

In early writing, the relationship between written and spoken language is not simply one of style or degree of formality. Writing developed very slowly, limited in both use and functionality. The range of written vocabulary grew in Egypt, as spellings gradually exploited additional and more explicit phonemic representation, but the uses of writing remained limited by the slow development of regular orthography. More extended writing is then characterised by the establishment and use of highly formulaic phraseology. Formulaic writing, in ritual and administrative contexts, is then unproblematic for the reader, but snatches of real speech, quoted as conversations between subordinate figures in Old Kingdom tomb decoration, are remarkably difficult to follow. The development of writing, to communicate a fuller range of linguistic expression, was slow, and the presentation of extended continuous prose was a late development.

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[14] R.A. CAMINOS, *A Tale of Woe* (Oxford, 1977), pp. 6-7.
[15] See M. LICHTHEIM, *Ancient Egyptian Literature III: The Late Period* (Berkeley – Los Angeles, 1980), pp. 86-89.

In reality a history of reading is considerably more difficult than a history of writing, although the practicalities of reading are crucial to any hypothesis about the use of texts and social or intellectual consequences of writing. The physical record from Egypt does provide a reasonable overview of what was written at different periods, although there are gaps. This preserved record should then be sufficient to indicate the purely technical limitations of literacy at different dates, and provide the basis for hypotheses about developments in reading practice.[16] However, writing and reading are not a single process, and in practical use the ability to read is not quite the same as the ability to write. The ability to recognize particular marks or written words in context does not add up to a real (or even meaningful partial) literacy,[17] although it was clearly important in a variety of localised practical contexts in Egypt, both at the beginnings of the script, and in the use of non-verbal markers at later periods. Initially a writing system that is incompletely graphemic is only able to act as a prompt or trigger discourse. The slow development of fuller and more systematic representation of the elements of language – whether letters, sounds, words – is what allows a writer or reader greater freedom to spell out a fixed text. This is at the root of extending the functionality of writing, and so broadening the use of writing. At the same time this would seem to require an increasing degree of specialisation, in order to acquire and apply the conventions of writing.

It is helpful here to draw comparisons with other systems where forms of writing similarly do not fully represent language. For instance, the knotted-string *khipu* of the Inca are claimed to have included narrative information, so that they could function in some way as mnemonic notations for their readers, but hardly as transcribed language.[18] More obviously comparable, Mayan hieroglyphic manuscripts were written in an incomplete pictorial script, not fully read, but, it is argued, serving as 'mediatory devices in the hands of skilled singers or readers, who performed them and used them as part of local social events'; that is to say 'mediatory paraphernalia for performance-based oratory'.[19] A more cautious way of putting it is that they do not seem to represent linguistically complete texts, but to provide sufficient linguistic keys to prompt the expert into a performative reading.

The Egyptian scripts – both hieroglyphic and cursive – are not ones where an inexperienced reader could readily 'spell out' individual words through the self-conscious decoding of individual phonemic and pictorial signs. It is, rather, a system where the experienced reader recognised word-groups as a whole, and where highly formulaic composition aided a reader. This, at least, was the

[16] J. BAINES, 'Literacy and Ancient Egyptian Society', *Man* NS 18 (1983), pp. 572-599 (republished in IDEM, *Visual and Written Culture*, pp. 33-62).

[17] Any more, for instance, than the use of signature as a criterion for literacy in the early modern world. See, for instance, P.D. MANUELIAN, 'Semi-literacy in Egypt: Some Erasures from the Amarna Period', in E. TEETER – J.A. LARSON (eds), *Gold of Praise: Studies in Honor of Edward F. Wente* (SAOC 58, Chicago, 1999), pp. 285-298.

[18] JACKSON, 'The Mediated Image', pp. 29-31.

[19] JACKSON, *op. cit.,* pp. 31-33; M.D. CARRASCO, 'Performance, Presence and Genre in Maya Hieroglyphs', in: ENGLEHARDT (ed.), *Agency in Ancient Writing,* pp. 139-163 for the more nuanced view, while still emphasising the relationship between continuous text and performance.

way in which basic training in (cursive) literacy took place in Ramesside Deir el Medina: pupils learning by transcribing (and reciting) sections of classic literary texts, and acquiring knowledge of the writing of extensive lists of words. In late-Ramesside hieratic there is then a marked trend for standard determinative groups to turn from genuinely pictorial signs to conventional markers of word ending, so clearly aiding fluency of reading for the experienced scribe.[20] Yet the move from reading pictures to reading language is never complete in Egyptian writing. Word plays which are not simply phonemic, but involve a play on pictorial orthography, remain normal in all Egyptian writing – including cursive scripts – in ways that evidently reflect the way in which the text was written and read:[21] for example a frequent, formulaic play between the auxiliary *ỉw=f*, 'he is', written without determinative, and the noun *ỉwf*, 'flesh, meat' written with a 'flesh' determinative.

It is difficult, then, to tell how readily texts – and especially cursive texts – were readable (or read) by scribes other than their writers, or their writers' immediate circle. The number of literate was clearly very limited in the Old Kingdom, and they comprised a narrow and socially connected group.[22] The earliest significant papyri from Egypt are tabulated listing accounts: the Fourth Dynasty expeditionary daybook from Wadi el-Jarf,[23] the pyramid temple accounts Abusir in the Fifth and Sixth,[24] and the late Fifth or Sixth Dynasty village accounts from Gebelein, probably representing the management of a large personal estate.[25] These are better understood as tools of process than as communication or record. They represent what scribes are widely depicted as doing in contemporary tomb relief: exercising their hierarchical function of control and audit of persons through writing,[26] with the material text serving as both symbol and tool of authority. The Wadi el-Jarf lists include short, formulaic diary entries, and the Abusir papyri include check-lists for the regular transfer of objects from one rota of the priesthood to the next: characteristic tabulation of the performance of supervision. Tabulation is the characteristic organisational format for early texts, for listing, but also as an underlying format for all categories of text.[27]

Lists and accounts represent the primary scribal activity for all periods. In particular a daybook format seems to have been the primary category of working text through which the scribe exercised function. The way in which such texts were used, beyond physically demonstrating a control

[20] C. EYRE – J. BAINES, 'Interactions between Orality and Literacy in Ancient Egypt', in: K. SCHOUSBOE – M.T. LARSEN (eds), *Literacy and Society* (Copenhagen, 1989), pp. 97-103.

[21] LOPRIENO, *La Pensée et l'Écriture*, pp. 18, 130-142, 146-152.

[22] J. BAINES – C.J. EYRE, 'Four Notes on Literacy', *GM* 61 (1983), pp. 65-77 (republished in J. BAINES, *Visual and Written Culture*, pp. 63-78).

[23] P. TALLET, *Les papyrus de la Mer Rouge I. Le «Journal de Merer» (Papyrus Jarf A et B)* (MIFAO 136, Cairo, 2017).

[24] P. POSENER-KRIÉGER – J.L. DE CENIVAL, *Hieratic Papyri in the British Museum. Fifth Series: The Abu Sir Papyri* (London, 1968); P. POSENER-KRIÉGER – M. VERNER – H. VYMAZALOVÁ, *Abusir X. The Pyramid Complex of Raneferef: The Papyrus Archive* (Prague, 2006).

[25] P. POSENER-KRIÉGER, *I papiri di Gebelein. Scavi G. Farina 1935* (edited by S. DEMICHELIS, Turin, 2004).

[26] P. D. MANUELIAN, 'Presenting the Scroll: Papyrus Documents in Tomb Scenes of the Old Kingdom', in P.D. MANUELIAN – R.E. FREED (eds), *Studies in Honor of William Kelly Simpson* 2 (Boston, 1996), pp. 561-588.

[27] EYRE, *Use of Documents*, pp. 42-47.

process as they were written down, is more of a problem. For instance, diaries from Ramesside Deir el Medina, record the deliveries of wage commodities, and note deficits to be made up by the contracted suppliers: deficits of fish by fishermen, or (fire)wood by wood-cutters, and particularly deficits in the regular grain rations distributed to the workmen. At the same time extensive work-registers were kept, recording individual absences. Yet there is never any indication that wages were reduced for days not worked. Similar difficulties arise in attempting to envisage how the great land and revenue documents of the Ramesside and post-Ramesside Periods, such as Papyrus Wilbour, may have been used: their role in the process of collection, and the extent to which their potential for reference might have been exploited.[28] Historically the use of writing in accounting should be seen primarily as a demonstration of control, and evidence for immediate process. The potential for the submission of such accounts as written evidence for detailed higher-level audit, or their practical availability for external reference, is at best secondary.

Continuous writing as materialisation of speech

As the range of content for writing expanded during the later Old Kingdom, beyond labelling, listing and administrative formulae, the preserved examples of continuous text explicitly present speech. As such they are still best understood as a materialisation or reification of that speech, rather than the development of a distinctive medium of written communication. Letters, as the primary context for continuous secular writing, are always referred to internally as things 'said' and 'heard', never as 'written' or 'read'. They explicitly present direct speech, addressed by one person to others.[29] In a face-to-face society they were delivered by personal messengers. That is to say, they present a limited materialisation of things said, exploiting highly formulaic modes of address, primarily as prompts to reading aloud, and only secondarily displaying potential as a separate medium of writing.

The earliest surviving Egyptian texts of any real length are the Pyramid Texts. These appear for the first time, in fully developed form, in the Pyramid of Unas at the end of the Fifth Dynasty. They contain sets of ritual recitations, the majority of which can be connected directly (if not exclusively) to the royal burial ritual and continuing mortuary cult. The antiquity of the wording of these rituals is not clear,[30] and there is no evidence for a previous written tradition on any medium other than the pyramid wall. As a corpus they do not present a single canon transmitted through writing. Each

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[28] Eyre, *op. cit.*, pp. 179-186.

[29] M.T. Clanchy, *From Memory to Written Record: England 1066-1307* (London, 1979; 2nd edition, Oxford, 1993), pp. 253-254 for the comparable orality of early mediaeval documents.

[30] C. Eyre, *The Cannibal Hymn: A Cultural and Literary Study* (Liverpool, 2002), pp. 17-19; for different emphases, see H.M. Hays, 'The Entextualization of the Pyramid Texts and the Religious History of the Old Kingdom', in: P.D. Manuelian – T. Schneider (eds), *Towards a New History for the Egyptian Old Kingdom: Perspectives on the Pyramid Age* (Leiden – Boston, 2015), pp. 200-226.

pyramid varies in the texts it includes. The location of the texts on the walls, inside the sealed pyramid, excludes any possibility that they were inscribed to be read directly. If written on papyrus, their format would obviously be appropriate to prompt oral recitations, but as recitational texts – representing performance – they are not communications published directly through writing. For the modern reader, the very limited nature of their orthography severely obstructs accurate grammatical analysis and precise translation, although the texts are generally comprehensible for form and content.[31] One can reasonably assume that also, for contemporary readers, these were not texts that were used, or usable, as free text for reading without primary knowledge and training in the rituals they contain. As they survive on the internal walls of a pyramid, they are best understood as the material reification of the rituals, made permanent by writing, for the benefit of the individual king in his pyramid. In that sense, they act in the same way as the largely pictorial decoration of contemporary private tombs acted for their owners. Each set of texts appears to contain a personal ritual corpus, fitted to the particular architecture of the individual pyramid.[32] The inscribed text then seems to embody the ritual and performance as part of the architecture of the pyramid. Together they materialise the passage of the individual king from this life.[33]

The materialisation of ritual through writing is marked, from the Old Kingdom, by the iconography of the ritualist, who is consistently shown carrying an open papyrus. The etymology of his title is, however, not definitive: it may define him as *ḫry-ḥb* 'under the ritual', just as plausibly as the conventional etymology of *ḫry-ḥb(t)* 'under the ritual-book'.[34] His papyrus can be understood as the embodiment of the ritual through its materiality as well as a script to follow: an emphasis on its materiality – through reification – to give authority to the performer. Similarly in more literate societies, a ritual expert does not habitually perform liturgy, or recite holy scripts, however well memorised, without breviary or written text. The materiality of the writing gives authority to the ritual and ritualist, even though Egyptian rituals have a performative flexibility, and were not rooted in a canonical attitude to a fixed text. That is to say, Egyptian ritual texts do not invoke an exclusive, dogmatic, or precise literal reading of canonical holy books. It is rather that the writing or depiction of a ritual materialises the performance. A contemporary attitude to the materiality of writing is, then, displayed in the relatively late examples of so-called healing statues, and magical

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[31] J.P. ALLEN, *A Grammar of the Ancient Egyptian Pyramid Texts. Volume I: Unis* (Winona Lake, 2017).

[32] J.P. ALLEN, *The Ancient Egyptian Pyramid Texts* (Writings from the Ancient World 23, Atlanta, 2005).

[33] J.P. ALLEN, 'Reading a Pyramid', in: C. BERGER – C. CLERC – N. GRIMAL (eds), *Hommages à Jean Leclant,* 1 (Cairo, 1994), pp. 5-28.

[34] EYRE, *Cannibal Hymn*, pp. 11-17, 20-24. That etymology is based on the misreading of a single example by K. SETHE, 'Miszelle', *ZÄS* 70 (1934), 135, for which see D. JONES, *An Index of Ancient Egyptian Titles, Epithets and Phrases of the Old Kingdom*, II (BAR International Series 866, Oxford, 2000), p. 781, no. 2848.

stelae: objects covered with magico-medical recitations, over which water was poured and drunk, in an Egyptian version of the magical practice of 'drinking the word'.[35]

The authority of writings

The authority of writing is a marked theme at all periods in Egypt, but a degree of care is needed in evaluation of how this is expressed. For instance, from the Middle Kingdom onwards, literary manuscripts can bear a colophon asserting that the content was copied accurately. The archetype is seen at the end of the Middle Kingdom Story of the Shipwrecked Sailor: 'It comes, (from) its beginning to its end, like what was found in writing, in the writing of the scribe, clever of his fingers, Ameny's son Amenaa'.[36] However, the reality of textual transmission was significantly more open and fluid: not sign-by-sign orthographic transcription, nor accuracy seeking a proof-reading style of canonical accuracy, but the individual copyist producing a personally usable literary or ritual text. In contrast the apparently most authoritative of ritual texts – Coffin Texts and Books of the Dead – were written for inclusion (unread) in the burial. These then provide examples of the most careless and inaccurate copying.[37] The ritual authority of the physical writing is then illustrated by a number of examples of late-Ramesside coffins, which carry inscriptions that in fact make no sense,[38] using pseudo-hieroglyphs which mimic real inscriptions to give an impression of hieroglyphs. They have an appearance similar to that of crude forgeries, which simply mimic the layout of genuine inscriptions.

A similar issue arises with the relative frequent claims made, from the New Kingdom onwards, that (for instance) a ritual innovation is based on the finding of a very ancient text, even a text written in the hand of Thoth himself.[39] The claim is rooted in the topos of ancient authority, passed down by the material object and the ancient process of writing. It does not represent any normal form of archival practice, nor any normal tradition of textual transmission through copying. The broader ritual corpus in Egypt does indeed show a remarkable continuity. Versions of rituals found in the earliest corpus – the Pyramid Texts – continue to appear in other contexts right through into the Roman Period; not, however, as examples of precise transmission of canonical text, but as productive re-workings, incorporated into individual and varied sequences.

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[35] R.K. RITNER, *The Mechanics of Ancient Egyptian Magical Practice* (SAOC 54, Chicago, 1993), pp. 92-110; P. ESCHWEILER, *Bildzauber im alten Ägypten* (OBO 137, Freiburg – Göttingen, 1994), pp. 101-102, 110, and 263-265; C. PRICE, 'On the Function of 'Healing Statues',' in: C. PRICE – R. FORSHAW – A. CHAMBERLAIN – P.T. NICHOLSON (eds), *Mummies, Magic and Medicine in Ancient Egypt: Multidisciplinary Essays for Rosalie David* (Manchester, 2016), pp. 169-182.

[36] G. LENZO MARCHESE, 'Les colophons dans la littérature égyptiennne', *BIFAO* 104 (2004), pp. 359-376.

[37] EYRE, *Cannibal Hymn*, pp. 13-16; J.P. ALLEN, 'The Funerary Texts of King Wahkare Akhtoy on a Middle Kingdom Coffin', in: J.H. JOHNSON – E.F WENTE (eds), *Studies in Honor of George R. Hughes* (SAOC 39, Chicago, 1976), pp. 1-29.

[38] M.J. RAVEN, *The Tomb of Iurudef: A Memphite Official in the Reign of Ramesses II* (Leiden – London, 1991), pl. 17, 25, 35-37.

[39] EYRE, *Use of Documents*, pp. 278-282.

The problem lies in modern assumptions about the literate purposefulness of writing. It is more realistic to envisage the history of the use of writing in Egypt as organic and process-based, and not as a sequence of deliberate invention(s) focussed on purpose. This is not to exclude the role of individual agency in the development of writing – that individuals and individual practice are important movers of change – but to locate uses and changes within plausible and contemporary practice.[40] The Egyptian record says little that might provide evidence for a discussion of literary communication as an abstracted intellectual activity. In contrast, it provides extensive evidence for writing as a material activity, and the use of the written object is as a tool for mediation in ritual performance and in processes of social control. Even by the Ramesside Period, learning to write, and education as a whole, bore the marks of an apprenticeship and not an intellectual activity.[41] At this date the core syllabus involved the copying of an archaic classical literature. As a training, this restricted access to literacy, serving as the acculturation into a restricted skill. That skill itself was then limited by the methodology of the apprenticeship, rooted in learning and copying model texts as a whole. As an educational approach it was the direct opposite to a structured and progressive training. It did not promote the ordered acquisition of minimal, partial and eventually full and unrestricted literacy.

The primary acts of writing and reading in Egypt are acts of control and agency, regardless of content. The point is illustrated effectively by observations Lévi-Strauss made about uses of writing in specific contexts of limited literacy or of initial contact with literacy. He described the way in which Brazilian Indians mimicked his writing, making meaningless wavy lines on paper, and then the chief pretended to read them: attempting to exploit meaningless writing as a mode of increasing his prestige and authority 'for a sociological rather than an intellectual purpose'.[42] This mimicking of writing by illiterate people is, of itself, a trivial and commonplace observation, but the connection between writing, writer and authority is not. Similarly Lévi-Strauss observed in rural Pakistan, where each village had its local scribe, that: 'All the villagers know about writing, and make use of it if the need arises, but they do so from the outside, as if it were a foreign mediatory agent that they communicate with by oral methods.'[43] The observations are likely to be valid for the relationships between illiterate Egyptians and the written texts used by the scribal hierarchy. Lévi-Strauss's conclusion, although politically articulated, emphasizes that in contexts of limited literacy the role of writing as process was primary, over that of communication: 'My hypothesis, if correct,

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[40] Cf. SMITH, 'Writing Systems', pp. 74-75; for the argument for individual agency in the particular orthography variations of an inscription of the Saite Period, cf. O. PERDU, 'Un témoignage inédit sur un grand dignitaire Saïte. Le précepteur Horirâa', *RdÉ* 67 (2016), pp. 76-139. The use of unusual spellings, manipulating the system, is seen in isolated examples of high prestige texts from all periods, usually referred to as cryptographic orthography, and sometimes these seem to be individual displays of virtuosity in manipulating the potential of hieroglyphic orthography.
[41] EYRE – BAINES, 'Interactions between Orality and Literacy', pp. 93-97.
[42] C. LÉVI-STRAUSS, *Tristes Tropiques* (translated by J. and D. WEIGHTMAN, London, 1973, from the original French, Paris, 1955), pp. 296-300.
[43] LÉVI-STRAUSS, *op. cit.,* p. 298.

would oblige us to recognize the fact that the primary function of written communication is to facilitate slavery. The use of writing for disinterested purposes, and as a source of intellectual and aesthetic pleasure, is a secondary result, and more often than not it may even be turned into a means of strengthening, justifying or concealing the other.'[44]

At issue here is the materiality of the manuscript itself: the document is not just a text, in the sense of written words, but an object, used as an object, and not simply the incidental carrier of a communication or record. It is important to emphasise this materiality of the document. Old Kingdom royal decrees – a term which include any sort of communication or order from the king[45] – are phrased in the first person, as direct spoken address, and are noted to be 'sealed beside the king'.[46] The papyrus 'sealed beside the king' is referred to as an ꜥ (ꜥ-document). Its etymology seems to be 'arm/hand', then 'piece', but also 'assistance'. The crucial usage is then in the compound term ꜥ-nsw, 'king's-ꜥ', which is written by a sš-ꜥ-nsw 'scribe of the king's-ꜥ'. Such a document materialises the agency of the king, both through the embodiment of his words and the act of sealing. In that way it reaches out beyond the face-to-face context of the court sitting. Typical Old Kingdom usage refers to the ꜥ as something an individual has or does not have, so that in a number of contexts a translation as 'authorisation' or 'permission' seems to fit the holding of such a decree as a physical demonstration of authority.

Egyptian documents were not signed. The use of autograph as a marker of the authenticity of a document only begins to appear after the Ramesside Period. Similarly Egyptian seals were not used in ways comparable to the mediaeval European practice of attaching a to a charter, itself to serve as validation and materialisation of proof. Egyptian mud seals were too fragile for such a role. Egyptian documents were sealed in the same way as letters: rolled, tied, and a mud sealing attached to the knot.[47] This had to be broken before the sheet could be unrolled for reading, so that it served as a marker of the origin of the (unknown) text inside, but not as a validation of the open and visible text. The sealed sheet of papyrus was then, of itself, an object, which marked the immediate authority of the messenger, and of the message delivered.[48] In practice, modern knowledge of Old

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[44] LÉVI-STRAUSS, *op. cit.*, p. 299.

[45] P. VERNUS, 'The Royal Command (wḏ-nsw): A Basic Deed of Executive Power', in: J.C. MORENO GARCÍA (ed.), *Ancient Egyptian Administration* (HdO I 104, Leiden – Boston, 2013), pp. 259-340.

[46] EYRE, *Use of Documents*, pp. 93-94.

[47] EYRE, *op. cit.*, pp. 268-269. For broader discussions of practice see *Le Sceau et l'Administration dans la Vallée du Nil : Villeneuve d'Ascq 7-8 juillet 2000* (CRIPEL 22, Lille, 2002); I. REGULSKI – K. DUISTERMAAT – P. VERKINDEREN (eds), *Seals and Sealing Practices in the Near East: Developments in Administration and Magic from Prehistory to the Islamic Period* (OLA 219, Leuven – Paris – Walpole, 2012).

[48] EYRE, *Use of Documents*, pp. 93-97. Cf. CLANCHY, *From Memory to Written Record*, pp. 89-90, 254-263. Cf. M. MAUSS, *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies* (trans. W.D. HALLS, London – New York, 1954/2002, from the original French *Essai sur le don*, Paris, 1950), pp. 62, 65, 79 on the power of the thing, and the importance of pledges in early Roman law; he is trying to envisage and reconstruct an undocumented prehistory of Roman law, by comparisons, and contrasting this against (p. 69) 'authentic written law'. The point here is that writing is a physical thing, not an abstract, so that the written object can itself be a symbol, like other objects, and the consequences of literacy are not purely intellectual or bureaucratic.

Kingdom sealed decrees comes almost entirely from the habit of copying temple endowment and protection decrees on stone. These were then erected as a permanent material display, mimicking their original format on papyrus.[49] The erection of royal protection decrees at the entrance to temples, like the display of endowment regulations on tomb walls, embodied the speech of the king or the tomb owner in material form.[50] The text is a thing, used physically, and the materiality of the individual manuscript or inscription was crucial to the authority of its content. Its reification on stone then declared the permanence of that authority.

Narrative as a written genre, and the development of continuous prose, come relatively late in the Egyptian corpus. Earlier continuous writing appears rather as the embodiment of speech: in letters, in rituals, and in the addresses to the living on tomb walls. In these contexts, the material inscription – whether papyrus or stone – had functions which went beyond linguistic communication.[51] The text is characterized by a sort of self-sufficient agency, through which it acts as an object, materialising the ritual process or recitation, and through this make concrete interactions, which are central to social and hierarchical process. The corollary to this is the relative frequent Egyptian practice of *damnatio memoriae*, through the deliberate destruction of inscribed picture and text. This is seen commonly in the record in both contemporary and later attacks on faces and names on monuments, but it also involved the theme that, in a period of social disorder, the broader destruction of papyrus texts marked a rejection of their role and authority in hierarchical process.[52]

The reading of texts

Assumptions about the role of writing as a repository of memory in Egypt need to take into account the practice of reading, and the accessibility of written texts. The nature of archive is crucial here.[53] Collections of papyri written in one place – one administrative context – are normal: the Sixth Dynasty Abusir Papyri from the pyramid temples of Neferirkare[54] and Raneferef[55] provide the earliest substantial examples. However the habit of consultation of such collections for outside, archival reference is not documented. It is more likely that they simply represent writing as a local process of control. Rare references to the reading of old texts, from temple storage, emphasises their obscurity, and the peculiar expertise required to make sense of them. This is the case, for

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[49] EYRE, *Use of Documents*, pp. 133-136.
[50] EYRE, *Use of Documents*, pp. 79-86.
[51] For an address to the relationship between inscription and literature see J. ASSMANN, 'Schrift, Tod und Identität. Das Grab als Vorschule der Literatur im alten Ägypten', in: ASSMANN – ASSMANN – HARDMEIER (eds), *Schrift und Gedächtnis*, pp. 64-93.
[52] EYRE, *Use of Documents*, pp. 334-342.
[53] EYRE, *Use of Documents*, pp. 319-332, 342-347.
[54] POSENER-KRIÉGER – DE CENIVAL, *The Abu Sir Papyri*.
[55] POSENER-KRIÉGER – VERNER – VYMAZALOVÁ, *Abusir X*.

instance, in the 13th Dynasty inscription of a king Neferhotep, who claimed to restore ritual at Abydos on the basis of an ancient text that only he, the king, was competent to read.[56] The existence and the authority of old texts are assumed, but not that a temple archive was a source of regular reference, and the difficulty of the reading is emphasised.

Early genres of Egyptian text are highly formulaic in format and content. There can have been few graphic surprises in the texts of accounts, royal decrees, even letters, that would have caused major difficulties within the likely group of specialist readers. The reading of a ritual manuscript poses different questions. The earliest ritual texts – the Pyramid Texts – are written continuously. Other ritual texts – both manuscript and temple or tomb inscription – characteristically mix text and picture. For instance, the so-called Ramesseum Dramatic Papyrus, of the late Middle Kingdom,[57] contains columns of text above illustrations of ritual activities, making up 44 discrete ritual episodes. The episodic structure is similar to that seen in temple decoration. It is, then, difficult to visualise, how the Ramesseum Papyrus might have been read or used. It can hardly be considered the complete script for the recitation of a complex ritual, nor a systematic set of direct instructions for the preparation or conduct of that ritual. The papyrus was found in a private tomb, as part of an eclectic group of ritual, magico-medical and literary texts. The papyri are, then, best understood as the personal working manuscripts of a magician-ritualist and performer of literature.

Similar questions about reading arise, quite directly, with the Underworld Books inscribed on the walls of New Kingdom royal tombs. The primary theme of these texts is the passage of the dead, into and through the other world. To do this, they exploit a similar mixture of illustration, with captions, and of recitations. Indeed the Amduat – 'What is in the Underworld' – claims to be a ritual for recitation, although preserved versions are far from providing a continuous verbal script. Words and picture are inextricably mixed, and the books have a distinctive iconography. They are presented on the wall in the format of a papyrus copy, comparable to that of the Ramesseum Dramatic Papyrus. The illustrated rituals, which forming the regular decoration of temple walls, are highly episodic. Each episode depicts a single ritual action – characterized as 'doing things' (*i͗ri͗t t*) for the deity – accompanied by a performative statement entitled 'saying speech' (*d mdw*). These seem more obviously to reify the performance of the ritual itself than to provide any sort of prompt to the specialist performer. The text was not read from the wall during the ritual, although cursive

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[56] W. HELCK, *Historisch-biographische Texte der 2. Zwischenzeit und Neue Texte der 18. Dynastie* (2nd edition, Wiesbaden, 1983), pp. 21-29; EYRE, *Use of Documents*, pp. 279-282.

[57] D. LORAND, *Le Papyrus Dramatique du Ramesseum: étude des structures de la composition* (Lettres Orientales 13, Leuven, 2009); L. GESTERMANN, 'Das Ritual des Dramatischen Ramesseumspapyrus', in: B. ROTHÖHLER – A. MANISALI (eds), *Mythos und Ritual: Festschrift für Jan Assmann zum 70. Geburtstag* (Berlin, 2008), pp. 27-52; J.F. QUACK, in: 'Zur Lesung und Deutung des Dramatischen Ramesseumpapyrus', *ZÄS* 133 (2006), 72-89.

manuscripts survive, from the New Kingdom, containing texts of the daily ritual, parallel to those seen on the walls.[58]

None of these texts can be regarded as publications for broader reading. The extent to which Egyptian inscriptions were actually read is impossible to assess. Private inscriptions – on tomb, stela or statue – present the offering formula, and ask for its recitation. By the middle of the Old Kingdom this is characteristically in the form of a direct verbal address by the tomb-owner, calling on passers-by to listen. These addresses take the form of self-praise, and target the recitation of the offering ritual as a form of social reciprocity. Sometimes this includes the explicit promise that the dead recipient will then provide supernatural protection to the person making offering. The address to the living reifies, in this way, the continuing interactions between the living and the dead. The clearest description of reading is seen in the inscription of a steward Montuhotep, of the 12th Dynasty. His stela is read (aloud), heard, and discussed in the same way as a letter:[59] 'Then as for every person who will hear this stela, being among the living, they will say; 'It's the truth!' Their children will say to (their) children, 'It's the truth! There is no falsehood there.' And as for every scribe who will read (*šdi*) this stela, all people – they will come up to him.'

This text presupposes reading, even by random visitors. Such reading is made explicit in stelae from the Middle Kingdom pilgrimage site of Abydos.[60] A similar theme is seen later, in the New Kingdom habit of visitors leaving graffiti expressing their appreciation of the monuments they saw on visits to the sites. For instance, at the end of the 18th Dynasty, on the pylon-gateway of his tomb, Maya directly calls on the graffito-writing public, using their own formulaic vocabulary: 'he says to people who will come, desiring diversion on the West and walking about in the district [of eternity]'.[61] The majority of temple and tomb inscriptions were, however, unreadable in practice, simply from their location on the wall. The reading of inscriptions probably belongs to a very small group of people, for whom contact with inscriptions contextualised their life and activities.

Conclusion

Egyptian texts provide a history of the development of writing from pictorially based, non-linguistic marking systems towards a script that is able to represent language, although limited in functionality and range; which is also to say, the history of writing as an object becoming writing as

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[58] N. TACKE, *Das Opferritual des ägyptischen Neuen Reiches* (OLA 222, Leuven etc., 2013).

[59] MMA 12.814, 16-18: R. LANDGRÁFOVÁ, *It is My Good Name that You Should Remember: Egyptian Biographical Texts on Middle Kingdom Stelae* (Prague, 2011), pp. 130-34.

[60] M. LICHTHEIM, *Ancient Egyptian Autobiographies Chiefly of the Middle Kingdom* (OBO 84, Freiburg – Göttingen, 1988), pp. 65-66, 129-134.

[61] G.T. MARTIN, *The Tomb of Maya and Meryt I: The Reliefs, Inscriptions, and Commentary* (London, 2012), p. 20, pl. 14, lines 4-6; E. FROOD, *Biographical Texts from Ramessid Egypt* (Writings from the Ancient World 26, Leiden etc., 2007), p. 142.

a medium. The potential for broader uses of writing considerably precedes actual use in the history of what was written, by whom, for what purpose. The way in which texts were read is then an important criterion for tracing how texts became a medium for the full and direct written communication of language. The comparison with other contexts of limited literacy is then valid for Egypt: for instance, the way in which both Inca *quipu* and Mayan hieroglyphs were apparently used as prompts for recitation, and especially as prompts for ritual recitation, but also served as embodiment of the text.[62] This provides a cautionary warning against linguistic over-interpretations of the nature of Egyptian reading and the purposes of Egyptian writing, where the contemporary evidence is not able to show clearly how fluent the reading of an unfamiliar text was at any specific period.

The interaction between the material embodiment of a text in writing – whether inscription or on papyrus – and its oral performance is very strong in Egypt. The role of texts as communicative publication is less clear: the extent to which the written object disseminated content, and did not just display it. The contrast is between writing which deliberately published a text to a reader, disseminating its linguistic content – not merely displaying it – and the use of writing in working and social processes, where it is important to its writer or copyist, but is not intended directly to communicate to another reader. The range of things written by the end of New Kingdom Egypt is very considerable, but the contemporary literacy remains limited by the social applications of writing, by restricted access to literacy, and most directly by scribal practices in writing and reading. Egyptian writing did not fulfil the broad intellectual potential for use and for communication that seems natural to modern thinking. This means that ethnographic and historical comparisons, and an archaeological approach focussed on the material evidence, provide better contexts for writing the history of literacy in Egypt, and the differing nature of literacy at different dates, rather than working back from modern, intellectual preconceptions to find precursors of modern behaviour in the ancient record.

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[62] See CARRASCO, 'Performance, Presence and Genre', pp. 140-141, 145-149, 162.