

6. THE EARLIEST EGYPTIAN WRITING

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Writing is classically defined as a conventionalized system of visual communication representing speech. At first sight, such a definition seems to imply a clear-cut divide between writing and other systems of visual communication that convey messages without reference to speech. In practice however, the distinction may be more complex, particularly when it comes to the earliest stages of the emergence of writing. In this essay I examine aspects of the earliest Egyptian writing concentrating on its gradually increasing representation of language and speech.¹

In proposing a developmental sequence for the earliest Egyptian writing, I further question the functional contexts in which the Egyptian developments take place in contrast to the roughly simultaneous, but largely different, evolutions in southern Mesopotamia. In particular, I focus on the inscribed material from the recently excavated “proto-royal” Tomb U-j which produced the as yet earliest evidence of writing in Egypt.

BEFORE AND BESIDE WRITING: EARLY CULTURAL CODES OF VISUAL COMMUNICATION AND NON-LINGUISTIC MARKING SYSTEMS

Prior to the emergence of writing proper, fourth-millennium Egypt witnessed a rich development of various, increasingly complex, types of visual communication. These included representational art (ceremonial objects, rock art, an elaborate painted tab-leau in an elite tomb), decorated pottery, and motifs on seals. The repertoire of graphic forms and their combining into broader compositions displays elements of conventionalization. Interpretation relied on specific cultural codes which, although largely unrecoverable to the present, would have been available to the original audiences (e.g., Graff 2009). Yet, such forms of visual communication differ from writing on

multiple levels. Crucially, they were not indexed to language: to be sure, a visual representation could always be paraphrased linguistically but such possible paraphrases were necessarily multiple ones, rather than corresponding to a single string of speech. The messages conveyed were generic ones, rather than related to any particular time, place, person, event. Visual forms were arranged according to the logic of pictorial composition, rather than following the later formal conventions of writing, such as orientation and adjustment of relative sizes of signs (see below).

So-called “pot marks,”² found in increasing numbers from the late fourth millennium onward (Catalog Nos. 64–67), stand closer to writing as far as formal aspects are concerned. They display defined, although variable, repertoires of graphic forms, combined according to specific rules. Moreover, the disposition of graphic forms defines a space of its own, different from pictorial composition. Yet, pot marks are not indexed on language either. Individual forms shared with simultaneously developing writing were associated with different values within the respective systems. Pot marks had specific identifying and marking functions and continued existing in historical times alongside fully developed writing as well as various other functionally specific non-linguistic marking systems (Andrássy, Budka, and Kammerzell 2009).

Some of these visual codes, as well as a few seals immediately pre-dating Tomb U-j, feature graphic forms later found as signs of writing. It is only natural — and well documented elsewhere — that a developing script would draw on pre-existing repertoires of visual forms within a given culture.³ Such visual forms become signs of writing only when they are associated with each other and integrated into a broader system that conventionally and unequivocally relates them to a linguistic meaning on a stable, context-independent basis. The above visual codes do not qualify as “proto-writing.” Rather, they are part of a general background of multiple semiotic explorations on which writing proper would draw.

THE INSCRIBED MATERIAL FROM TOMB U-J

The first forms of emerging writing were found in the “proto-royal” Tomb U-j in the Umm el-Qa’ab cemetery, in the vicinity of This/Abydos in Upper Egypt, in the late fourth millennium.⁴ The period witnessed the emergence of competing regional political entities along the Nile Valley extending to Lower Nubia (e.g., Kemp 2006, pp. 60–110). Ongoing excavations in Hierakonpolis document early developments in sacred architecture, urbanism, craft specialization, and modes of elite display. The extent of the domain over which the ruler buried in Tomb U-j held sway remains difficult to assess. Long-distance trade connections are evidenced by huge quantities of a Palestinian export ware found in the tomb.⁵ It has been proposed that some inscriptions in the tomb may refer to remote places such as Elephantine in the far south on the one hand, possibly a sanctuary close to Buto and Bubastis in the Delta on the other. Provided the inscriptions have been correctly interpreted, such far-reaching ties to important places and sanctuaries would have been essential in establishing the regional prestige and authority of the ruler buried in Tomb U-j. Political integration of Egypt occurred only in the course of the centuries to follow.

The inscribed material from Tomb U-j comprises two, perhaps three, different types of visual codes. The association with three different surfaces and modes of inscription points to different functions. Iconographic imagery on sealings elaborates upon previous traditions. Possible writing is found both in large painted forms on vessels (henceforth referred to as “dipinti”;⁶ figs. 6.1–2, 7), and on small incised bone tags (figs. 6.3–6). The tags have a small hole and were originally attached to goods, probably bundles of cloth as can be inferred from the particular type of numerical notations found on some of them. Inscriptions consist in short sequences of one or two signs (dipinti), or of one to four, generally two, signs (tags).

Among possible writing, the inscriptions on the dipinti and on the tags have been interpreted as two different formal realizations of the same underlying system. These have been further analogized with the hieratic (cursive) and hieroglyphic (non-cursive) varieties of later Egyptian writing and it has been proposed that they would reflect a similar functional complementariness (e.g., Baines 2004, pp. 160–61).

However, the evidence, both systemic and formal, may suggest otherwise (Regulski 2008a, 2009). The overlap in signs featured in both the dipinti and on the tags is relatively limited. Only the tags may display occasional cases of phonetic representation and semantic classification (see below). Moreover, the size of the dipinti is very large and fitted to the body of the vessels on which they were painted. Their execution is detailed with at times extraordinarily elaborate realizations of internal parts of signs (fig. 6.1). The dipinti thus hardly qualify as cursive. As a result, the relation between the two types of inscriptions found in Tomb U-j differs from the relation later to obtain between hieratic and hieroglyphic varieties, and remains unclear.

An interpretation of the Tomb U-j inscribed material⁷ builds on the contextual appreciation of the find as a whole, combined with an internal analysis of the inscriptions themselves (sign repertoires, combinations of signs). Several signs and sign combinations on the tags have been plausibly interpreted as place names, possibly the origins of the goods to which the tags were attached. The interpretation of the smaller sized corpus of the dipinti — which may

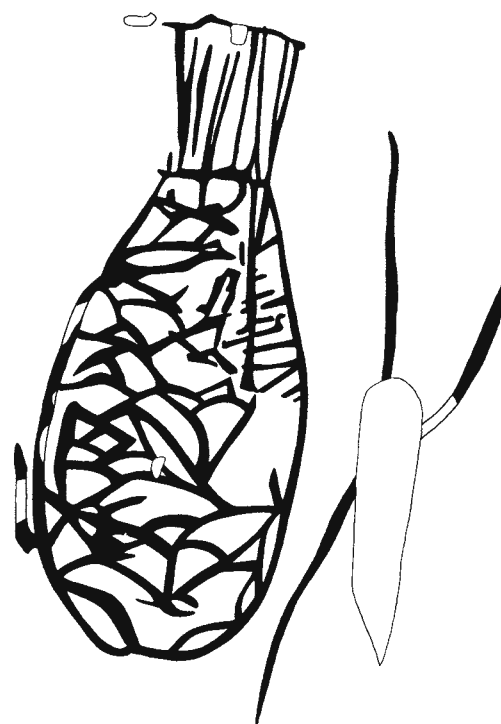


FIGURE 6.1. Dipinto with fish and tree from Tomb U-j. Height 33.1 cm. Note the extraordinarily elaborate internal details of the fish sign

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reflect a different system — remains tentative. Based on a recurring combination of a tree sign with various other signs, it has been suggested that some of the dipinti could refer to domains associated with the production or distribution of funerary goods. Based on its high relative frequency, a scorpion sign has been interpreted as standing for the ruler buried in the tomb (fig. 6.2). Overall, many signs and sign combinations remain unclear in interpretation.

Actual “readings” (a few examples below) rely on the application of general principles and values of individual signs as known from later stages of writing. Only some signs, however, can be readily identified with later ones, and the whole enterprise may involve some danger of back-projection. Further difficulties arise from the small size of the corpus and its relative isolation. Moreover, the very concept of “decipherment,” while historically at the heart of the philological disciplines devoted to the study of the written record of the ancient Middle East, may be partly misleading when it comes to the earliest forms of writing. These were only incipiently adapted to (or “oriented on”) representing language, let alone speech (Baines 2004, pp. 184–85; Wengrow 2008).

THE TOMB U-J MATERIAL AS AN INCIPIENT FORM OF WRITING

It is difficult to assess the status of the Tomb U-j inscribed material as writing — that is, as a visual code aimed at representing language — due to persistent difficulties in interpreting, let alone “reading,” the inscriptions. It is thus advisable to begin with issues of form (Vernus 2001). Intuitively, the Tomb U-j inscriptions, particularly the tags, “look” like writing. Signs shared with later stages of Egyptian writing, while not many within the overall repertoire, suggest some continuity of development. Asymmetrical signs tend to be oriented in the same direction on a given tag, as in the later script. More significantly yet, signs are calibrated to each other, irrespective of the relative sizes of their referents: for instance, a bird sign has the same size as an elephant sign (fig. 6.3).

The Tomb U-j visual code(s) may display emergent representation of language. According to the generally accepted interpretation of the material, this seems limited to names and designations, of places (sanctuaries/towns, estates) and prestigious beings (divine entities, ruler[s]). Provided the readings that have been proposed are correct, very few common words may also be found, embedded in place designations. One inscription may thus read “Mountain of Darkness” or “Western Mountain” (*ḏw*



FIGURE 6.2. Dipinto from Tomb U-j depicting scorpion and tree signs. Perhaps to be interpreted as “Plantation of King Scorpion.” Scale 1:2

FIGURE 6.3. Tag from Tomb U-j. Note the calibration of the size of signs to each other. Scale 2:1



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grh: fig. 6.4). It remains unclear whether the latter type of place designations are proper names themselves or not. Although names have a particular status in language, different from common words, their visual rendition similarly relates them to a unique segment of speech. By strongly focusing on names, the Tomb U-j visual code(s) thus differ from other forms of visual communication which lend themselves to multiple paraphrases in speech.

An emergent adaptation to (or “orientation on”) language may further be found in the very ways names and designations are notated. The Tomb U-j visual code(s) display clear elements of principled rules for combining signs. Per se, combinations of signs need not be grounded linguistically: non-linguistic combination of signs is characteristic of pot marks, for instance. Within Tomb U-j, similar modes of non-linguistic juxtaposition underlie the combination of a tree sign with various other signs (figs. 6.1–2, 5). The sequence can be interpreted — if this is correct — quite literally as “Plantation/Domain of X,” without reference to any particular language. In other cases however, on the tags only, two signs seem to notate a single name or designation. Such combinations may then be playing directly — even if limitedly — on the two articulations specific to language, the semantic (meaning) and the phonetic (sound). The following is based on a series of readings that have been proposed, the hypothetical nature of which cannot be over-emphasized.⁸

Names and designations were overwhelmingly notated through single signs, that is, through signs which, for more mature stages of writing, would be described as “logograms” (“word-signs”). In rare cases however, it seems that the interpretation of an individual sign could be further specified — and thus disambiguated — by another sign that offered some additional phonetic or semantic information. An often quoted instance of possible phonetic specification would be in the combination of a snake with a hill sign (fig. 6.4). If the proposed interpretation is correct, the snake sign would stand for its later value, a sound conventionally transcribed as *d*, derived via the rebus principle from *d(wwt)*, a word for a snake. The presence of the snake sign would suggest a reading *dw* “mountain” for the group, as opposed to other values the hill sign may have had in other contexts. It remains unclear whether wholly phonetic notation is documented in Tomb U-j. A case in point may be a group for which a reading *bꜣst* “Bubastis” has been both advocated and criticized (fig. 6.6). If the reading is correct, this would be a case of reciprocal specification of two signs: their combined occurrence would indicate that neither of them is to be read according to values they had when used in other contexts. Elsewhere, specification may work on the semantic (meaning) level, in a manner akin to “determinative” signs of later periods. This may be the case in a group of an elephant and a hill sign (fig. 6.5), if to be read as *ꜣbw* “Elephantine.” The hill sign would make it clear that the place name is

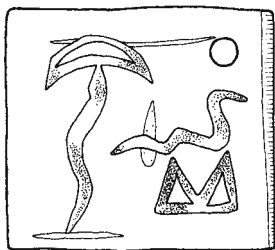


FIGURE 6.4. Tag from Tomb U-j, perhaps reading *dw grh* “Mountain of Darkness,” or “Western Mountain.” Scale 2:1

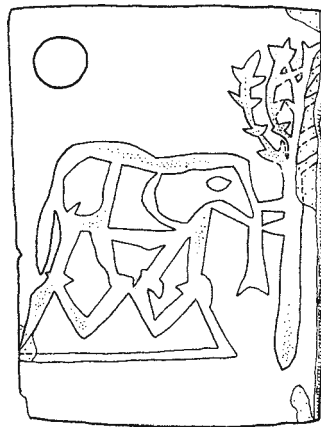


FIGURE 6.5. Tag from Tomb U-j, perhaps reading *ꜣbw* “Elephantine.” Scale 2:1

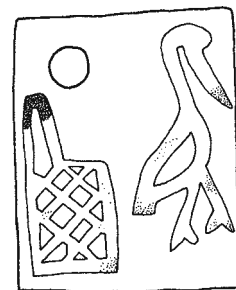


FIGURE 6.6. Tag from Tomb U-j, perhaps reading *bꜣst* “Bubastis” (?). Scale 2:1

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meant, rather than the animal, the iconic referent of the sign. Among the above “readings,” only the one proposed for “Elephantine” is supported by spellings known from historical times, while the others are not. This does not exclude them, given that historically attested spellings might have developed only later. Other interpretations, including ones based on less linguistically oriented “readings,” constitute a strong possibility.

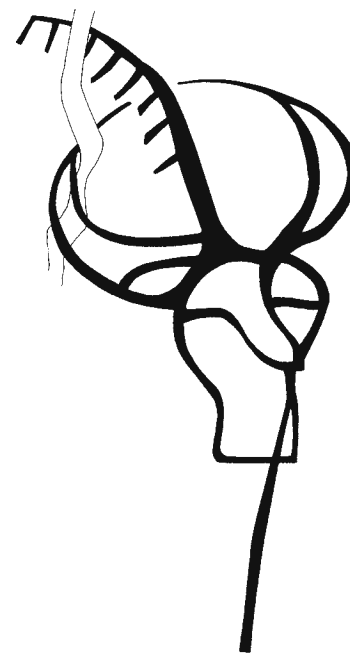
Even in a maximalistic perspective that would accept all the above readings, phonetically interpreted signs and semantically specifying ones play a very limited role only. Notation remains predominantly logographic (i.e., based on single signs). The balance between components, and thus the functional workings of the whole system, differ significantly from more mature stages of Egyptian writing. Moreover, the recourse marginally made to phonetic or semantic disambiguation — if indeed the case — may well reflect ad hoc strategies, rather than systemically entrenched “values” of these signs. Such strategies, as well as the rebus principle, pre-exist to any attempts to represent language and need not be part of a principled system. Suffice it to think of similar semiotic experimentations in contemporary text-messaging writing or in advertisements (e.g., “4U” as a rebus writing for “for you”). To be sure, it is precisely on the basis of such ad hoc explorations of the rebus principle, phoneticism, and semantic complementation that the later writing would develop, extending and systematizing their potential. In the stage witnessed by Tomb U-j however, there is no evidence that they constituted more than gradually emerging, still largely opportunistic, disambiguating strategies.

The Tomb U-j inscribed material thus markedly differs from more mature stages of Egyptian writing. No connected speech was notated, and the scope of writing may have been limited to names, common words probably featuring only as components of such. These names were partly represented by emblems drawn from pre-existing modes of visual communication (fig. 6.7).⁹ Emblems are paralleled elsewhere as an early way of representing culturally salient names and may be integrated as a distinct subsystem into later, fully developed writing.¹⁰ While the evidence remains contingent upon archaeological findings, it seems plausible on internal grounds that the stage of development witnessed by Tomb

U-j involved only a limited inventory of signs, in accordance with the restricted functional scope just outlined. This repertoire may have been not much larger than the few dozens of signs actually attested in the extant inscriptions (Baines 2004, pp. 157–58). Other repertoires of — not necessarily linguistically oriented — signs might have been used in other functional contexts. If so, this would strongly contrast with the much higher number of signs found within a single repertoire in proto-cuneiform and reflect the very different functions of the two writings in their respective earliest attested forms.

In sum, the visual codes in the Tomb U-j tags — as opposed to the dipinti whose status remains unclear — represent a very early developmental stage of writing. Both types of inscriptions, tags and dipinti, can be characterized as functionally restricted marking systems (Kammerzell 2009, p. 304). The inscriptions on the tags additionally show formal features typical of writing (Vernus 2001) and emerging orientation to language. The potential for later developments may possibly be given by exploratory phonetic and semantic disambiguation strategies.

FIGURE 6.7. Dipinto from Tomb, U-j; emblem. Scale 1:2



EGYPTIAN WRITING AS A LOCAL DEVELOPMENT

Prior to the proper scientific excavation of Tomb U-j and its publication in 1998, the earliest clear instances of Egyptian writing dated back to the late Dynasty 0 (ca. 3200–3100 BC), a few centuries later than in southern Mesopotamia. It had long been known that later fourth-millennium Egypt witnessed sustained cultural contact with southern Mesopotamia and Susiana, tokens of which are found in elements of foreign iconography on Egyptian prestige objects, the adoption of the cylinder seal, and niched brick architecture. This led to the — always controversial — hypothesis that Egyptian writing may have originated as a result of cultural influence from Mesopotamia, whether through general awareness that writing was present elsewhere, or possibly through some actual knowledge of the workings of the Mesopotamian system. The distinctively indigenous nature of the Egyptian repertoire of signs was interpreted as a case of cultural adaptation of a foreign technology to local purposes. The hypothesis of a Mesopotamian influence on the emergence of Egyptian writing was at times embedded into a broader frame arguing that the original invention of writing, conceived of as a dramatic cultural achievement, would have occurred only once in human history, subsequently to spread elsewhere.¹¹

As to the latter issue, the decipherment of Mayan glyphs and other New World scripts, and the realization that these represent actual writing rather than pictography, now proves otherwise (e.g., Houston 2004b). Simultaneously, a more refined understanding of the working of early writing in general demonstrates that writing may develop gradually, rather than dramatically, a good case in point being, precisely, the stage witnessed by Tomb U-j.

The discovery of the Tomb U-j inscribed material, predating late Dynasty 0 evidence by a century, has further recast the debate. The earliest Egyptian evidence for writing, dated by the excavator to ca. 3320 BC,¹² has now moved significantly closer to the Mesopotamian one. The crucial point, however, lies elsewhere. As argued above, the Tomb U-j inscriptions represent a typologically very early developmental stage of writing, restricted in its inventory of signs and in its scope. The focus on

names is remarkable and strongly contrasts with early Mesopotamian writing which overwhelmingly notates goods and institutions of various sorts. As further suggested by the sign forms themselves, the incipient form of writing found in the Tomb U-j inscriptions is profoundly rooted in the emblematic modes of representation more generally found in late fourth-millennium Egypt. Rather than chronological, the importance of the Tomb U-j material lies with the window it opens on the very early stages of development of an emerging writing, which can now be modeled as a local sequence.

The close proximity in time and the relative proximity in space of the southern Mesopotamian and Egyptian inventions of writing remains remarkable, but is explained by taking into account the broader context. The development of the earliest Egyptian writing is contemporaneous with, and directly related to, the emergence of regional political entities and associated elites. This in turn is part of a set of complexly interrelated phenomena that simultaneously affected various parts of the ancient Near East in the later fourth millennium, partly in relation to the development of, and attempts to control, supra-regional trade networks. In the context of major political and social changes affecting both southern Mesopotamia and Upper Egypt,¹³ the roughly simultaneous emergence of writing in the two regions is no coincidence.

THE FUNCTIONS OF THE EARLIEST EGYPTIAN WRITING

Writing may emerge and develop for a variety of reasons, specific to any given society.¹⁴ While proto-cuneiform is associated with the needs of already complex administrative structures and associated institutions of scribal training, Mayan writing shows a strong focus on ceremonial functions and elite display (see 15. *The Development of Maya Writing*, this volume). Against the background of these two contrasting poles, an appreciation of the functional range of the earliest Egyptian writing is made difficult by potential gaps in the archaeological evidence, almost exclusively from funerary contexts. Other possible contexts in which writing might have been used, such as settlements, often lie buried under the alluvium

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or present-day towns, have been insufficiently excavated, and could have involved perishable materials (Postgate, Wang, and Wilkinson 1995).

Due to the lack of direct evidence in the late fourth millennium, a general argument is sometimes made that the emergent Egyptian state must have needed writing for administrative control. This however need not have been the case. The classical image of the Egyptian bureaucratic state is based on material from considerably later times. It is also partly ideological, as in the funerary self-presentations of Old Kingdom elites. Furthermore, the situation as found in late fourth-millennium southern Mesopotamia cannot be generalized uncritically to the vastly differing Egyptian society, economy, and early state. Other parallels, such as in Mesoamerica (e.g., Inca quipus) or in fifth- and early fourth-millennium Greater Mesopotamia (e.g., Arslantepe in southern Turkey [Frangipane 2007]), illustrate how societies developing toward early state structures may well manage the level of administrative control they need by non-linguistically oriented record-keeping techniques of various sorts. Writing becomes a requisite only at a later stage. Such a stage was certainly reached in Egypt at some point no later than the early First Dynasty, but the generally limited knowledge of the Egyptian state and society of yet earlier periods makes it difficult to assess more precisely when.

The Tomb U-j inscribed material itself has been interpreted as directly evidencing an administrative function of the earliest attested Egyptian writing. Both the tags and the dipinti are physically associated with goods deposited in the tomb. Moreover, some tags display numerical notations. Yet, as appealing as this line of argument may seem, a closer consideration of the evidence suggests a more nuanced picture.

To begin with, the surfaces and modes of inscription point to a strong ceremonial dimension of writing in Tomb U-j. As discussed above, the dipinti hardly qualify as a cursive script, banning any conclusions drawn from the analogy with the functions of the later developing hieratic script. Furthermore, both the dipinti and the inscriptions on the tags involved a relatively time-consuming production process. The tags were first carved, then filled with paste, while the dipinti were painted with elaborate details, often in monumental size (fig. 6.1). Neither the paste fill of

the tags nor the internal details of the painted signs carried any added value in making the signs more distinctive for practical purpose. Rather, this value resided at the level of the materiality of the inscribed object itself.

It has also been observed that the tags were made out of large bone plates scored into a grid (Dreyer, Hartung, and Pumpenmeier 1998, p. 137). The plates were cut along the lines of the grid only after the inscription was applied, as is shown by several cases of overlap of signs from one tag to another whenever the break was not made in the right place. The tags were thus produced in whole series in one place, rather than being attached to the goods on their various places of production, or upon the different moments of arrival of such goods in This/Abydos. This suggests that the tags were, from the very outset, designed for the tomb. The many hands that can be identified on the tags (Kahl 2001) further point to the participation of numerous individuals in rituals associated with the burial of the Tomb U-j ruler, perhaps to be viewed as enacting group identity (Wengrow 2008, p. 1027).

The material aspects of the Tomb U-j inscriptions thus reflect a strong ceremonial dimension of the earliest attested Egyptian writing.¹⁵ To be sure, this is not exclusive of a utilitarian function, either within the particular context of Tomb U-j or more generally in late fourth-millennium Egypt. Numerical notations on the tags (Catalog No. 68) clearly reflect actual record-keeping practices. Similarly, the writing of names and places probably had a more mundane background in contemporary non-ceremonial marking practices. Within a proto-royal tomb such as Tomb U-j, the latter would have been transposed to a ceremonial level, through both context and material.

Yet, this need not imply a utilitarian function of the earliest Egyptian writing itself. Strictly speaking, the transposition of marking practices to a ceremonial level — to which the Tomb U-j inscriptions are a witness — primarily pertains to the very marking practices themselves, and does not necessarily extend to the repertoires and systems of signs employed in such. To be sure, it is safe to assume that contemporary non-ceremonial marking practices would have shared numerical signs with the Tomb U-j tags. However, they need not have shared much else. Numerical signs stand out as a subsystem in

any writing because they do not point to words or names. As to the non-numerical inscriptions in Tomb U-j, they seem to relate mainly to a small number of culturally important names. These are marked with a limited inventory of signs, most of which are highly prestigious visual forms, partly derived from emblematic representations. The manipulation of such visual forms was no trivial thing in late fourth-millennium Egypt. In actual record-keeping functions — to the extent to which such were needed at these early times — marking would have been done by largely different sets — and possibly even systems — of signs. There is no necessity,¹⁶ nor any evidence as yet — neither internal to the Tomb U-j inscriptions, nor elsewhere in the period — that such contemporary utilitarian marking practices should have begun representing language, thus qualifying as incipient writing.

SUBSEQUENT DEVELOPMENTS

Written evidence becomes more abundant in late Dynasty 0/early First Dynasty (ca. 3200–3000 BC), roughly one century after Tomb U-j. While keeping a strong focus on names (e.g., fig. 6.8; Catalog Nos. 71–72, 74, 78), writing expanded from its initially highly restricted functions to other domains.¹⁷

On ceremonial objects (palettes, mace-heads, ceremonial tags) writing was used to complement

pictorial compositions (Baines 1989). The latter remain predominant on such objects, expressing generic ideological archetypes associated with kingship. Writing allowed these visual representations to be secondarily related to the singular identity of a specific king, as well as, when place names are featured, possibly to a particular event (Vernus 1993). At the same period, written signs rapidly evolve toward distinctively “hieroglyphic” forms (fig. 6.8; Regulski 2010), while pictorial conventions of representation were established, many of which would be defining of Egyptian visual culture and remain remarkably stable throughout later history. Writing thus developed as one component of Egyptian centrally driven formal culture.

Standing alone, writing is found on seals, funerary vessels, private funerary stelae, and in offering lists. So-called “taxation marks” from late Dynasty 0 to the mid-First Dynasty have been reinterpreted as reflecting largely ritual dimensions of funerary economy, rather than narrowly utilitarian purposes (Kahl 1995). In its conspicuous usage on seals (Catalog Nos. 76–77; Kaplony 1963c; Pätznick 2005) — contrasting with Mesopotamia where seals remained largely un-inscribed at this period — writing was associated with marking functions that could be both utilitarian and prestige bound, depending on the type of seals and contexts of sealing practices. References to written administration are found from the mid-First Dynasty (ca. 3000 BC) onward, as well as indirectly, with the

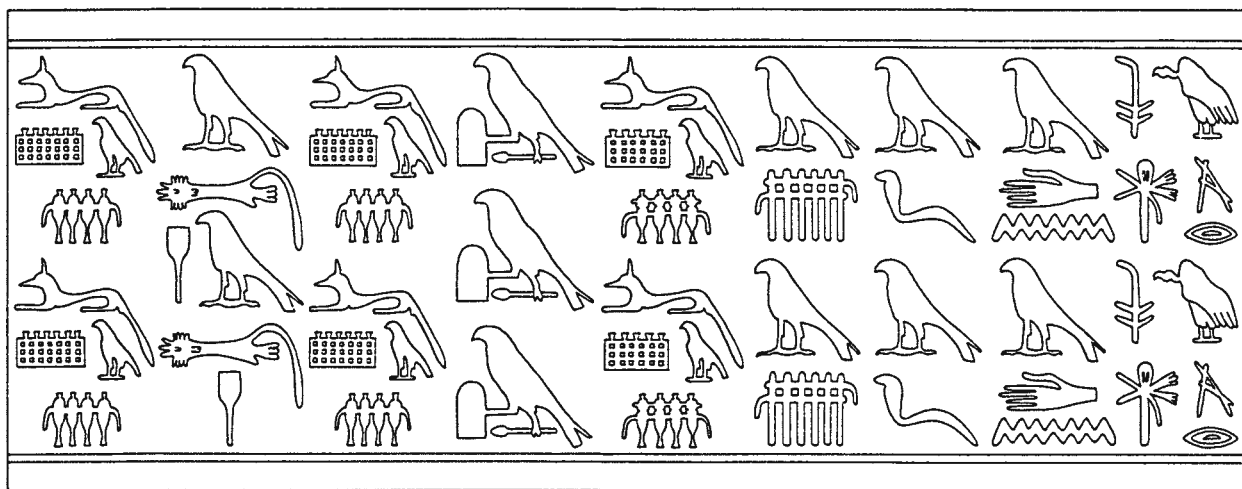


FIGURE 6.8. Seal with a complete list of royal names ranging from the beginning to the middle of Dynasty 1. From Abydos, Umm el-Qa'ab (seal reconstructed from multiple individual sealings). Note the distinctively hieroglyphic shape of the signs. Scale 1:1

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appearance of a hieroglyphic sign depicting a papyrus scroll (reign of Qa'a, end of First Dynasty [Kahl 1994, p. 36]). During the Second Dynasty, increasing cursiveness of ink-drawn signs and the development of consistent modes of abbreviating signs — such as emphasizing the distinctive visual features of the object depicted — similarly point to a widening range of usages of writing. These developments may be described as the earliest stages of hieratic proper — as opposed to ink-written signs found already in late Dynasty 0, which are mere painted versions of hieroglyphs (Regulski 2009).

While extending its functional range, writing came to represent ever more aspects of language. Besides royal and geographical names, it notated private names and an increasingly large variety of words. The latter notably included titles, administrative entities, and commodities (Catalog Nos. 70, 76–77). Simultaneously, writing tended toward increased autonomy from the material surface on which it was inscribed. In a first stage, isolated names or entities stood in exclusive relation to non-written elements, such as the object they were written on and/or pictorial compositions they were embedded in. In a second stage, names or entities were directly associated with each other, in inscriptions on seals, in lists (of titles, of offerings, probably also in administrative usage), and in more elaborate captions to pictorial scenes. Within the latter, verbs are significantly found in the infinitive only, rather than in a conjugated present or past tense. Complete clauses with predicative forms are found from the late Second Dynasty onward, initially in the context of expressing the relation of the king to the gods. Continuous texts appear only with the Old Kingdom, bundling individual clauses into cohesive written discourse. As a result of the above developments toward higher textual integration, the meaning of written messages became increasingly less dependent upon extra-linguistic frames of interpretation associated with their context of inscription.

The system itself underwent profound changes with gradually augmenting recourse made to strategies for secondarily specifying the readings of individual signs. Such strategies involve both phonetic and semantic complementation (“determinatives”), increasingly on a regular and systemic basis (Kahl 1994, 2001). A near complete set of signs representing

the consonantal phonemes of the Egyptian language is attested by the early/mid-First Dynasty (ca. 3100–3000 BC). A large set of signs representing discontinuous sequences of two consonantal phonemes (so-called “biliterals”) is developed before the Third Dynasty (ca. 2750 BC). Such values are derived by the rebus principle, now fully productive. Phonetically interpreted signs are used both in purely phonetic notations and, increasingly, for complementing otherwise notated words. Various strategies for semantic (meaning) specification are developed. These include both determinatives specific to one word and more generic ones that could be applied to a whole class of words. Double semantic complementation of a word by both a specific and a generic determinative is found by the Third Dynasty. As a result of the above developments, solely logographical notations, while still prominent, increasingly give way to more explicit writings of words through multiple signs. The overall number of signs dramatically increases to about a thousand, a figure comparable with proto-cuneiform.

The strong development of the phonetic component in notation and complementation is striking and becomes even more so when compared to the still predominantly logographic modes of notation found in contemporary Mesopotamia. At a general level, this contrast reflects two different possible trajectories in script evolution. The written representation of grammatical morphemes was extremely slow to emerge in both areas and did not play any significant role in the rapid phoneticization of the early Egyptian writing. It remains unclear whether the latter process is to be related to the particular morphological structure of Egyptian, with its salient consonantal root morphemes. To some extent, it may be related however to the distinctive focus of the earliest Egyptian writing on personal names. Names have a special status within any language because their referent is an individual, rather than a class of entities with particular semantic features potentially exploitable for written representation. While names found in Tomb U-j, mostly prestigious ones, could still largely be represented emblematically (fig. 6.2), the extension of writing to a wide range of personal names from late Dynasty 0 onward could have been one favorable locus for the phoneticization of the early Egyptian writing. Some names are clauses,

each word of which could be notated logographically (Catalog No. 71). Other names, however, have no particular linguistic meaning and are rendered purely phonetically (fig. 6.9).

The development of determinatives is also interpreted as a response to the widening functional ranges of writing. With more words being written, the need for disambiguation, both phonetic and semantic, increases. Determinatives, which stand at the end of a given word, further contribute to signaling word boundaries. With the extension of writing to continuous sequences of speech, this secondary function of determinatives becomes important. As the relative chronology of development suggests, the rise of determinatives may also have been an indirect consequence of increased phoneticism. Ambiguity — and thus the need for further specification — may be higher in solely phonetic notations, as opposed to such containing a logogram, dedicated to one, or very few, specific word(s). Furthermore, while a logogram immediately indicates the word boundary (the latter being identical with the sign itself), phonetic notations use multiple non-specific signs for representing one word, with the effect that word boundaries are not given *a priori* any more.

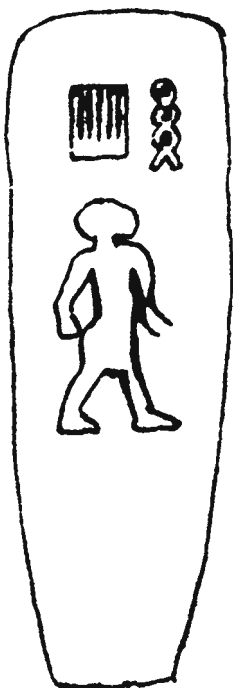


FIGURE 6.9. Dynasty 1 funerary stela from Umm el-Qa'ab, Abydos. Personal name reading *ḥp*. The name has no particular meaning in the language, and is notated purely phonetically *ḥ + p*. Scale 1:2

Egyptian writing at the beginning of the Old Kingdom (ca. 2650 BC; Schweitzer 2005, pp. 21–98) represented language in both its phonetic and semantic articulations. As a result of the complementary developments toward strong phonetic and semantic complementation as outlined above, one-sign notations of words had receded dramatically. Solely logographic notations, as well as purely phonetic ones without any semantic complementation, were mostly confined to high frequency items, such as core vocabulary and some grammatical words, as well as to predictable contexts, such as in sequences of titles. By and large, Egyptian writing had moved by the mid-third millennium to notations in which semantic and phonetic information, both incomplete, complemented each other to indicate the accurate reading. The particular balance between phonetic and semantic components allowed for the remarkable variability of spellings found in mature hieroglyphic writing. These developments strongly contrast with mid-third-millennium cuneiform which used complementation strategies only in a more limited way and remained predominantly logographic at the time.

CONCLUSION

The Tomb U-j inscriptions offer a rare view of a typologically extremely early developmental stage of writing. Based on internal analysis, this may be described as a marking system with a highly restricted scope of application. It displayed formal features typical of later writing and emergent representation of language. The latter occurred in relation to notating names, which point to a singular referent. The probably limited inventory of signs, as well as the strong, perhaps exclusive, focus on names, stand in a stark contrast with contemporary proto-cuneiform. Egyptian writing thus emerged as a local development, rooted in late prehistoric visual culture, notably in emblematic modes of representation.

As far as current evidence goes, the motivation for the earliest development of Egyptian writing would have revolved around marking, prestige, and ceremonial functions associated with the nascent kingship. Administrative needs need not have been a prime motivating factor and were possibly initially

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managed by other, non-linguistically oriented, marking systems.

The focus on names kept for some time after Tomb U-j may have played a role in the early and thorough phoneticization of Egyptian writing. This in turn may have been instrumental in the increasing recourse made to semantic complementation, leading to a remarkably complex system of determinatives. The early Egyptian and contemporary cuneiform writings thus followed significantly different paths of development. Yet later, writing was extended to notate continuous strings of words and clauses, leading to an increasing alignment of written messages with actual speech.

In the past, Western semiotics — reaching back to Aristotle who was thinking within the cultural horizon of Greek alphabetic script — have tended to view writing exclusively in terms of its function of representing speech, i.e., as a secondary code, as “speech made visible.” The Egyptian material contributes to a more differentiated perspective on early writing, one that is less strongly pre-defined by what is known from later developments.¹⁸ Written messages only gradually gained autonomy from non-linguistic frames of interpretation. Full orientation of writing on speech was a process that took almost a millennium to be completed.

NOTES

¹ For a broader discussion of issues relating to the earliest Egyptian writing, see Baines 2004; Morenz 2004.

² <http://www.potmark-egypt.com>.

³ In German Egyptology, the phenomenon is aptly captured by the phrase “Heraus-bildung” (of writing), meaning both “emergence” and “development out-of-images.”

⁴ The tomb and its material are magisterially published by Dreyer, Hartung, Pumpenmeier 1998; Hartung 2001.

⁵ Hartung 2001. The origin of the vessels has been debated; for references, see 5. *The Conception and Development of the Egyptian Writing System*, this volume.

⁶ In epigraphy, “dipinti” generally refers to painted inscriptions, as opposed to incised ones, referred to as “graffiti.”

⁷ Dreyer, Hartung, Pumpenmeier 1998; Breyer 2002; Kahl 2003; Jiménez-Serrano 2007.

⁸ Discussion in Kahl 2001, pp. 119–20, 122; Baines 2004, pp. 161–64.

⁹ For example, Dreyer, Hartung, and Pumpenmeier 1998, pp. 173–77; Morenz 2004, with a discussion of possible parallels outside Tomb U-j.

¹⁰ For example, Michalowski 1993 for Mesopotamian place names. In the Egyptian domain, a similar phenomenon is observed with standards, which were later integrated into full writing as a sub-system for designating the various “nomes,” or provinces, of the country, centered around a sanctuary for which the standard stood as a token.

¹¹ “Monogenesis” of writing was notoriously advocated by Gelb (1963).

¹² Boehmer, Hartung, and Pumpenmeier 1993. For a lower date (ca. 3200 BC), see, for example, Joffe 2000, pp. 113–14, n. 4.

¹³ For the latter, see Wengrow 2006.

¹⁴ See, for instance, the studies collected in Houston 2004a.

¹⁵ For further discussion, see Wengrow 2008; Baines 2004.

¹⁶ For various forms of non-textual marking and record-keeping techniques, coexisting with writing in historical times in Egypt, see, for example, Pantalacci 1996; Gratien 2001; Andrassy, Budka, and Kammerzell 2009.

¹⁷ For the material, see Regulski 2008b; Kahl 1994. For a general presentation and discussion, see Baines 1999. For an introduction to the period, see Wilkinson 1999.

¹⁸ For similar perspectives in other cultures, see the studies gathered in Houston 2004a.