

EGYPTIAN WRITING: EXTENDED PRACTICES

الكتابة المصرية: الممارسات غير التقليدية

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EGYPTIAN WRITING: EXTENDED PRACTICES

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Andreas Pries

Ägyptische Schrift: Erweiterter Gebrauch
Écriture égyptienne: Pratiques étendues

Among the idiosyncratic aspects of ancient Egyptian life and culture, Egyptian writing has long received particular attention—not only in recent academic discourse, but already in Antiquity. Compared to other writing systems, hieroglyphs and, to a lesser extent, their cursive derivatives, hieratic and Demotic, demonstrate extraordinary potential to express different aspects of both meaning and sound when employed beyond their conventional use. In its particular iconicity Egyptian writing, especially hieroglyphic writing, works even outside the framework of language and shares common features with Egyptian art. In the textual record non-standard creative writings highlight the potency and multidimensionality of Egyptian writing through the interplay of meaning, sound, and icon. The contours of the phenomenon are here outlined and the main characteristics of non-standard creative writings defined according to their varying forms and functions. In conclusion, a system of classification, as provided here, can further our understanding of the multitude of forms and functions involved, and thereby enhance appreciation of the potency of Egyptian writing.

من بين جوانب الحياة والثقافة المصرية القديمة، حظيت الكتابة المصرية منذ فترة طويلة باهتمام خاص- ليس فقط في الدراسات الحديثة، ولكن في العصور القديمة. بالمقارنة مع أنظمة الكتابة الأخرى، تُظهر الهيروغليفية وتطوراتها المتصلة، الهيراطيقية والديموطيقية، إمكانات كبيرة للتعبير عن جوانب كل من المعنى والصوت عند استخدامها بطرق تتجاوز استخدامها التقليدي. الكتابة الهيروغليفية، على وجه الخصوص، يمكن أن تعمل خارج الإطار القياسي للغة وتشارك في سمات عامة مع الفن المصري. الكتابات الإبداعية غير المعيارية تسلط الضوء على فاعلية وتعدد أبعاد الكتابة المصرية من خلال العلاقات بين المعنى والصوت والصورة. يتم تحديد الخصائص الرئيسية للكتابات الإبداعية غير القياسية هنا، وفقاً لأشكالها ووظائفها المختلفة، ويتم توفير نظام تصنيف لتعزيز فهمنا لفاعلية الكتابة المصرية.



Not only the apparent diversity of Egyptian writing, but also its idiosyncratic nature and its potency to create meaning beyond the linguistic sense of a word, phrase, or sentence, have impressed external recipients since Antiquity. Early Greek historians (or rather, ethnographers) and







philosophers were captivated by the fact that different types of writing were in use in Egypt at the same time to serve different purposes and to function even in an iconic, extra-linguistic context. Particularly, although not exclusively, the hieroglyphic script and its strong iconicity (or rather, pictoriality; for the difference between the two categories, see

Stauder 2020b: 881-883 with reference to Vernus) were main topics of interest. Issues of grammatology, etymology, and “etymography” (Assmann 2003, 2012) contributed equally to this discourse. The philosophical school(s) of Platonism and Neoplatonism widened the focus and even linked some special uses of hieroglyphs with ontological problems (Pries 2017 with further references). In fact, these basically epistemic attempts of pre-modern philosophers led to a misconstruing of the real nature of Egyptian writing in the Western reception before the nineteenth century and Champollion’s decipherment (Iversen 1961; von Lieven 2010; Engsheden 2013; Westerfeld 2019; Winand 2022; also Stauder 2020b: 880-881 with further references). But in retrospect, they also brought to the fore the wide-ranging capacity of this multidimensional system of writing.



Polysemy and the Interplay of Meaning, Sound, and Icon

The various scripts of genuine Egyptian origin all represent a logo-phonetic writing system that consists of phonetic, logographic, and classifier signs and thus combines the expression of meaning and sound. On that note, the use of hieroglyphs, hieratic, and Demotic is aimed at both the semantic and the phonetic notation of language. Notwithstanding the strong impact of visual and iconic features, both spheres are closely intertwined in the spelling of Egyptian words. On the main principles of Egyptian writing, which cannot be explained here in detail, see, for example, Schenkel (1971, 2003, 2005: 41-72); Quack (2010a); Stauder (2020b); and—with a wider focus—Polis (2022 with further references). For the differences between hieroglyphic writing and later cursive derivatives, especially Demotic, see Quack (2010a, 2014).

Furthermore, there is no fixed orthography for Egyptian words, nor is there a limited inventory of signs. Theoretically, an indefinite number of new or modified signs could be added to this open inventory as long as their meaning is more or less self-evident to their

recipients. But custom and tradition had a strong impact on what writings were possible in any given context and at any given time, though besides these standard writings the use of variant and also unconventional spellings is widespread. While conventional spellings follow typical, historically determined groups and eugraphic principles, Egyptian writing praxis in general shows not only an openness to incorporate new signs, but also a tendency to rearrange traditional groups or even to replace them by others that are phonetically similar or semantically complementary. This flexibility of writing could, on occasion, be used intentionally to create non-standard spellings as an expression of commentary and (re-)interpretation working on multiple, often interacting levels: phonetic and semantic, but also visual and allegorical. For instance, the verb *hpr* “to become, to manifest; to happen,” usually written  or  from the Middle Kingdom onwards, is occasionally written  or  to indicate the actual phonetic form of the word (compare Coptic Ⲭⲱⲡⲉ and Ⲭⲱⲡⲓ). The same applies, for example, to  as a phonetic spelling of  *ntr* “god” (compare Coptic ⲛⲟⲩⲣⲉ) with a complete loss of any semantic indication.





Purely phonetic “alphabetic” writings were already in use at the time of the Pyramid Texts. They become observably more productive from the New Kingdom onwards in a wider range of usages from the utilization of so-called syllabic writings in the New Kingdom to notate loanwords or, more frequently, foreign names of persons and places (“group-writing”), to Papyrus Amherst 63, a text in Demotic script but Aramaic language using the standard Demotic consonantal signs along with about 20 non-alphabetic groups to render Aramaic as a foreign language (see the overview in Quack 2010b with further references; on pAmherst 63 see also van der Toorn ed. 2018), as well as the Old Coptic glosses annotating texts of the second and third centuries CE borrowing Greek letters to reproduce traditional Egyptian words in their late pronunciation (Osing 1998: 52-64).

Bearing in mind the Greek fascination for Egyptian writing and, on the contrary, considering the way the Egyptians perceived the difference between their own writing system and that of the Greeks, the spelling of the word “writing,” or more precisely, “script,” in the hieroglyphic section of the inscription of the Rosetta Stone might be notable. The passage, which is also attested in other records (el-Masry et al. 2012: 148-149; von Recklinghausen 2018: 99-100, 167-168), regulates the mode of publication of the decree: it should be written down in hieroglyphs, Demotic, and Greek script, *sh3 n mdw-ntr*, *sh3 n šrt*, and *sh3 n H3w-nbw*, respectively. In connection with hieroglyphs and Demotic the text uses the ideogram  for *sh3* in conventional orthography. The same word, however, is written mono-consonantally as  (*s - h3 > h - 3/y*) when it refers to the alphabetic script of the Greeks. This particular writing, which is attested only on the Rosetta Stone, appears to have been designed by the local Egyptian editors of the decree's final clauses to allude to the difference between the multidimensional, semantic-phonetic Egyptian script on the one hand, and the Greek alphabet and its purely phonetic “one-sound-one-sign equivalence” on the other (Quack 2017: 31, followed by Love 2021: 62; *contra* Loprieno 2003: 145; Morenz 2008: 258-260; and Van den Kerchove 2012: 136). Such graphic allusions correspond to the elaborate style of writing displayed on other decrees, like the Naucratis Stela (von Bomhard 2012: 90-92).


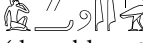
On “phonetic determinatives” and “unetymological writings”

Not uncommon are so-called “phonetic determinatives” (Gardiner 1957: 50; Stauder 2020b: 871, see also Arpagaus 2014, especially pp. 68-71 on their twofold nature between sound and meaning) and “unetymological writings,” a controversial term in the field of Demotic studies (see most recently Smith 2019: 55-70 with further references; Quack 2021; Love 2021: 160-165; Stadler 2022: 35-47, 52-53, 55-56; Pries 2022). Both target the phonetic substance of words. Generally speaking, they are characterized by the use of

single signs, groups, or even words that are related to the word to be represented in writing by homophony (or rather, homeophony; on this neologism highlighting that these writings could never truly reproduce the same, but only a similar, vocalization, see Widmer 2004: 675 with n. 34; Love 2021: 146, n. 77), but were actually borrowed from other etymologically unrelated words or roots. While it is a controversial issue how deep the impact of a different spelling of the word on its perceived sense actually was, it cannot be denied that here—contrary to the above-mentioned purely phonetic examples—the sphere of semantics comes into play. The scope of interpretation is thus much wider and far more intricate, for ancient and modern recipients alike.


The following examples demonstrate the potential of “phonetic determinatives” and “unetymological writings” as a driving force to alter or extend the meaning of a word. If, in a well-known offering spell with a long-standing tradition, the so-called *nmst*-vessel is written  instead of the standard rendering  (thus, in an inscription from Karnak dating from the earlier 19th Dynasty: Nelson 1981: pl. 219), this writing could be understood as a phonetic rendering of the word (compare *namša* in the roughly contemporary Amarna Letters: Contardi 2009: 109 with further references). Considering, however, the ritual context of the spell, it becomes apparent that the utilization of a *nms*-cloth, as indicated by the cloth-determinative  instead of the vessel-sign , is also quite conceivable (see most recently Pries 2023: chapter 7.3). So, what was the rationale behind this writing? If it traces back to the manuscript tradition of the spell, did it then really provide phonetic guidance for the lector priest who had to recite the spell in the course of the act of libation? Or should it rather be understood as an actual ritual variant using a *nms*-cloth in addition to the *nmst*-vessel, which is also explicitly and unequivocally addressed elsewhere in the Karnak text? Assuming the latter is true, this new interpretation of the text very likely traces back either to a phonetic commentary in written form or to oral

tradition, because this spell was recited many times a day in countless temples and tombs in Egypt. Numerous examples of a similar kind could be cited not only in hieroglyphs, but also in hieratic and Demotic texts using hom(e)ophone words of different etymology to comment on traditional texts in various ways: phonetically, semantically, and also historically, in giving a kind of translation of words that were no longer in use. (On the characteristics of Egyptian commentaries, see Assmann 1995, 1997; see Rößler-Köhler 1979, 1995 on Book of the Dead, Chapter 17; and, giving a broader view and more evidence, von Lieven 2007: 263-290; Cancik-Kirschbaum and Kahl 2018: 239-244; Pries 2019: esp. 50-52, fc.: chapter 6.2.) Presumably, many of these writings were once adopted from supralinear glosses, but as for all those texts that were recited and performed like the spell discussed above, the influence of oral tradition and practice has also to be considered.

An additional example refers to an “unetymological writing” attested among others of this kind in a recently edited Demotic ritual papyrus of the first century BCE (Smith 2019). The passage in question is a late copy of Pyramid Text spell 25. The frequently attested formula uses the verb *sbj* “to go” within an anaphoric pattern: *sbj* X *hn̄ k̄z=f* “X will go with his *ka*.” In each instance in pBodleian MS. Egypt. a. 3 (P), col. 10, II. 11-13, the verb is written , i.e. , as if it were *shy* “to laugh” (the older *shl*, ^ⲥωⲃⲉ, ^ⲃⲥωⲃⲓ). Considering that *sbj* “to go” was no longer used in the Demotic language, this unetymological spelling as “laugh” could have been employed for phonetic reasons. However, a different reading of the text as “X will laugh with his *ka*” is at least not meaningless, as Smith pointed out with reference to the creative laughter of the sun-god (Smith 2019: 143). Potentially, such a polyvalent spelling could have had an impact on the subsequent reception of the text and its transmission. For further examples of this writing praxis, see the evidence in Smith (2019) and, in addition, Quack (2021); for other texts, see, e.g., Gill

(2019) (hieratic); Widmer (2015); Stadler (2022) (Demotic); and also Gallo (1997); Osing (2016); and Love (2021).







Extended meaning through polysemy and iconicity

Just as the ability of Egyptian writing to express the phonetic reality of words is limited compared to other scripts, its ability to create multifaceted reflections of meaning through polysemy is enormous. Polysemy is already rooted in the sign itself. A sign can have different phonetic values associated with distinct words with distinct respective meanings. For instance, the star  stands (besides a number of special readings) for two different roots: 1) *dw̄z* with a basic meaning “morning,” but also with the meaning of “to adore” derived from the former, and 2) *sb̄z* with yet different meanings (“to teach” and derivatives, as well as “door” and “star”) that can be attributed to the same root (Quack 2010a; Westendorf 1984). One may also compare here the digressing, but not aberrant, Greek explanation of the star-sign in book I, chapter 13, of Horapollo’s *Hieroglyphika* (Thissen 2001: 12-15; von Lieven 2010: 567-568; and on this treatise in general, Fournet ed. 2021). In combination with the iconic value of a sign, this polysemic complexity made special applications of the Egyptian scripts possible. In recent scholarship these are most commonly labeled as “ludic” (i.e., playful) or “sportive” writings (see, among others, Parkinson 1999: 80; Klotz 2014: 34; and Stauder 2020b: 885) conveying elements of “visual poetry” (Morenz 2008), or as “enigmatic” or “cryptographic” (see, among others, Drioton 1933; Brunner 1959; and Darnell 2004; also Sauneron 1982: 51-53; Leitz 2001a: 252; Cauville 2002: 91, n. 2; Stauder 2020a, esp. 3; fc.; and Klotz 2020: 49, and their disambiguation of the term “cryptographic”), or as “emblematic” (see esp. Budde 2011: 203), “decorative,” “suggestive” (Cauville 2002), or “figurative” (see, among others, Sauneron 1982; also Pries 2016: 468-469, n. 117, including a special connotation of this term, which is not to be confused with the term “figurative” used synonymously with “pictorial” or “iconic,” as pointed out by Vernus 2020, esp. 13-14; see also Stauder



2020b: 882). These terms, which obviously name quite different things, are often used in an arbitrary way and do not provide a model of accurate selectivity. Even though this is well known in the field, Egyptology has become accustomed to it.

Leaving aside some rare cases of presumably true cryptography or *écriture secrète* in mysticized texts and purely ludic rearrangements of signs, all these types of writing have one thing in common: though they are legible as proper words, unconventional in their spelling but conventional in their reception through reading based on common philological standards, they also function beyond that scheme by extending the regular principles of Egyptian writing and reading. The fact that the same sign could stand for different sounds and that the same sound could be represented by different signs led to a creative process in which Egyptian scribes and priests formed a system of mainly visual evocations that developed its full potential through the (highly serious) play of permutable variants of writing. The semantic content of the written word was thereby enriched with a whole aura of connotations and suggestive power. Without losing its original sense, a word was additionally supplied with meta-levels of meaning. The purpose of script in this context was therefore to accumulate meaning, rather than refine it. This writing praxis, felicitously compared to the *basso ostinato* performed in Baroque music as a basic musical pattern allowing a high degree of variation (Eco 1993: 161-162), was most productive in hieroglyphs but extended also to hieratic and Demotic.


Striking examples in Demotic can be found in the Myth of the Sun's Eye, the Demotic Chronicle, and the Book of Thoth (Lippert 2001, cf. also Jay 2016: 100-104; Leitz 2012; Jasnow and Zauzich 2005, 2021). Hieroglyphic writings of this kind are far too numerous to list or quote here. They are broadly attested from the earliest periods onwards (see Morenz 2008; Darnell 2004: 17 with further references on some early examples). After their initial peak in the New Kingdom and continued presence in texts of

the Third Intermediate and Late Periods (Jansen-Winkeln 1996: §§ 10-12), the most extensive evidence comes from temple inscriptions of the Ptolemaic and Roman Periods (Kurth 2007: 14-100). For instance, in the temple of Esna, inscription 106, 1 (Sauneron 1963: 209), the group  shows a ram as a manifestation of the god Khnum, the lord of the temple, filling the space between the firmament, represented by the word-sign *pt* "sky," and the earth, represented by the word-sign *t3* "land." In the context of the inscription, the group is to be read phonetically as *psd* "to shine." According to the well-established acrophonic principle,  is to be read *p*;  as a logogram has the reading *sr* "ram," hence here *s*; and  represents the last consonant of the root (Derchain-Urtel 1999: 195-199; cf. also Morenz 2002: 93; Klotz 2014: 34-35). Visually, the depiction of the ram between the two cosmic borders of heaven and earth expresses the magnitude of this cosmic god in the temple of Esna, which was seen as a cosmos in itself. This idea, which was early recognized by Maspero and de Rochemonteix (see Traunecker 1991: 303; Arpagaus 2021: 75), is already explicitly shown in some standard principles of temple decoration: The lowest register, at ground level, was adorned with depictions of marsh plants (see in detail Dils 2014), while the ceiling was decorated with depictions of the starry sky, so that the whole temple was visually outlined as a cosmos in effigy. The offering scenes featured in between were also framed by  and  signs to exhibit their microcosmic nature as it was copied in the writing of *psd*. Taking this concept even further, in these spellings the sign itself does not just stand for its linguistic values, and the relations between signs were not perceived as traditionally contingent, but rather—as Stauder put it—"as phenomena that were given in the created and ordered world, and thus relevant for expressing and exploring contiguities between entities graphically denoted or evoked. This late sacerdotal 'theology of writing' (as it was termed by Sauneron) expressed the world polyphonically, and thus performatively recreated it as a multivalent system of signs,

analogically reflected in hieroglyphic writing and the Egyptian language” (Stauder 2020b: 886). Therefore, the whole cosmos could be conceived as a corpus of signs, and writing as a corpus of entities (Assmann 1991: 91).

This basic assumption is reflected in numerous examples of unconventional creative spellings shaping the orthography of single words and whole texts. Recently, the group  as an exceptional writing of the word *jbj* “thirst” was discussed in detail (Arpagaus 2014: 68-71). It was used in E IV, 318, 1. 15, an offering of the *mmw*-vessel for Hathor on the exterior wall of the pronaos in the temple of Edfu. Conventionally, the word *jbj* was written mono-consonantly as  with the sign of the kid functioning as a “phonetic determinative” (see Arpagaus 2014: 68 with further references). But in the offering scene in Edfu—a scene that could be associated with the Feast of Drunkenness in favor of Hathor—the panther leans over a water-filled canal denoting various bodies of water in writing. This unconventional writing is again based on hom(e)ophony: compare *šby* “panther” and *jbj* “thirst” (also Demotic *šby* and Coptic Ⲫⲏⲃⲉ, Ⲣⲁⲃⲏ). But taking a closer look, it seems plausible that the writing was also to be understood as an allusion to the unquenchable thirst of feline predators and as a mythological reference to the theology of Hathor and her aggressive counterpart, Sakhmet, highlighting the actual context of the Edfu episode. Many writings of this kind functioned as sophisticated instruments of reference showing a highly advanced degree of intellectual agility. But their utilization in hieroglyphic inscriptions stands for even more than that.

Remarks on the ontological status of sacerdotal writing and hieroglyphic signs

In the Ptolemaic and Roman temples, in passages treating the birth of the sun-god from the lotus, the priests and scribes who designed the text for its use as a temple inscription evidently accumulated different types of the sign  in as many words and morphemes as possible (Cauville 1990: 90-92). Today these signs representing early

childhood show a high degree of secondary abrasion, and the powdered sandstone from the wall inscriptions was probably applied as the main ingredient of a remedy or potion—thus the use of these spellings is not to be seen as a matter of mere play, but as an enhancement of the evocation of magical powers. A conceptually similar case is to be observed on the outer wall of the sanctuary of the temple of Hathor in Dendara. Here, the behavioral characteristics of certain animals were assigned to their hieroglyphic representations. The hieroglyph for the owl, for instance—the owl being a nocturnal animal—was featured exclusively on the west side of the wall, whereas the corresponding text on the east side avoids this very common sign. Similarly, the signs of those fishes that naturally swim close to the water bottom were used in the lower registers, and those that swim in middle or upper water layers were featured in the registers above (Leitz 2001b: 325-326; Arpagaus 2021: 92-93 with further references). Elsewhere on this wall, the text corresponding to a field-offering scene was supplied with a large number of herons, evoking not only the fact that the swampy field is their natural habitat, but also the powerful image of a piece of land that is emphatically fertile (Leitz 2001b: 170-171; Pries 2016: 471).

Since hieroglyphic signs could be conceived as entities in their own right and as places of divine indwelling, their conception and use were also regulated by animistic beliefs. They could be ritually efficacious, and their ontological status was similar to that of divine statues that were worshipped in the temples (see Pries 2016; also 2017, with further references on ritually efficacious writing covering a wider range of Egyptian scripts). Thus, the visual approachability of an inscription—that is, its intuitive comprehensibility and the attracting effect it has on its recipients—supports its performative relevance as a sacred, intrinsically efficacious text. This, at least, was what Egyptian priests believed, according to the details provided in the *bandeau*-inscription on the eastern wall of the second eastern chapel of Osiris on the

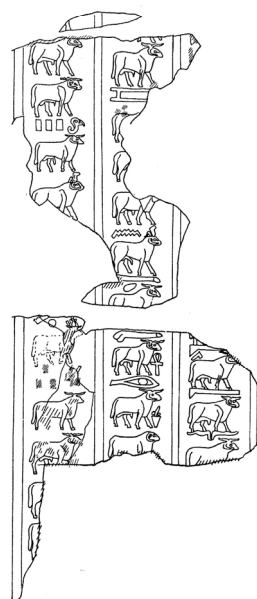
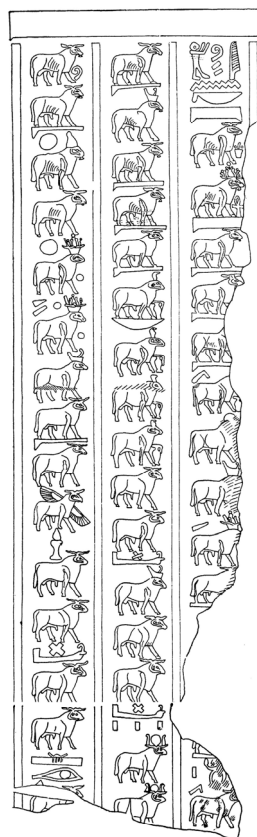


Figure 1a: Esna 103: a hymn to Khnum-Ra, consisting almost exclusively of ram signs, inscribed at a side entrance of the temple of Esna.

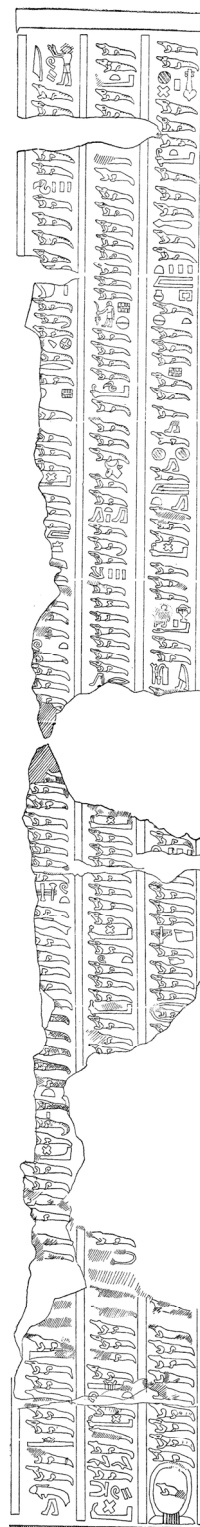


Figure 1b: Esna 126: a hymn to Khnum-Ra, consisting almost exclusively of crocodile signs, positioned antithetically to Esna 103 at the northern side-entrance of the temple of Esna.

roof of the Dendara temple (D X, 151, 9-12: Cauville 1997; Junker 1910: 6-7), where the god Osiris is invoked to conflate with the sacred hieroglyphs carved there. In this respect, Egyptian writing could serve as an appropriate and potent representation of divine power. Perhaps it was even applied as an eye-catcher addressing the gods explicitly and targeting the desired indwelling of the divine (Pries 2016: 472). Indeed this underlying concept constituted a driving force for the creation of such aforementioned spellings by Egyptian priests. Of an even more animate nature than the group in Esna 106 are the famous hymns to Khnum-Ra at the small side-entrances of the temple of Esna. One of them, Esna 103 (fig. 1a), is positioned close to Esna 106 in the same corner of the columned hall and consists almost exclusively of different variants of the ram-sign preceded by the introductory formula *j3w n=k, ...* “Praise to you, ...,” which is typically used in hymns and written in regular orthography. The second text, Esna 126 (fig. 1b), was inscribed antithetically at the northern side-entrance. It shows the same structure, but instead of the ram signs, it comprises crocodile signs. These animal signs have been shown to represent sets of epithets of the god in writing; these were well known and thus easy to read for at least the majority of all literate priests of this temple (Leitz 2001a). But for what purpose could such curious writings have been conceived, if not to facilitate divine indwelling, as was explicitly stated in D X, 151, 9-12?

A similar potency of visual approachability and performativity, as well as a strong analogy between hieroglyphs containing divine power and efficacious images of gods and goddesses, is also demonstrated by some graphic elaborations of names and epithets in mostly large-scale and highly detailed monumental inscriptions. These can be traced back to earlier times but became more frequent from the New Kingdom onwards (see, among others, Drioton 1934, 1940; Hornung in Abitz 1989: 92-93; Hornung 2001: 79-80; Cauville 2002; Darnell 2004: 17-27; Werning 2008, esp. 126; Budde 2011: 10; and Klotz 2020), one example among many being the titulary of

Ramesses II inscribed on a doorjamb at Abu Simbel (fig. 2). These well-known inscriptions (the components of which are simultaneously depictions) are characterized by the use of seated and striding anthropomorphic figures

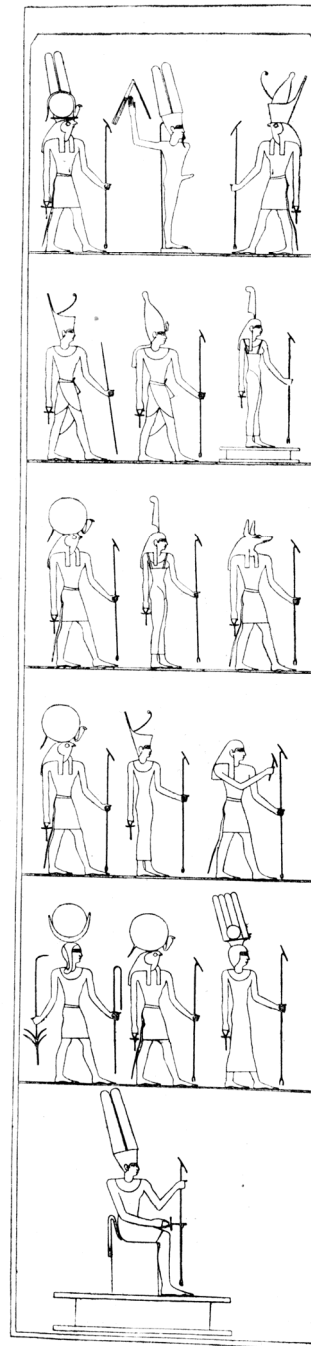


Figure 2. The titulary of Ramesses II inscribed on a doorjamb at Abu Simbel.

in combination with divine emblems and sacred animals. Despite a noticeable absence of phonetic elements, the individual compositions are fully legible, but, as a whole, they look more like scenic representations, as they are typical of offering scenes on Egyptian monuments. Furthermore, statues and sculptured objects survived—especially from the monumental heyday of the Ramesside Period—that were, in fact, designed to be read by their beholders as names and epithets in the same way as the aforementioned depictions (cf. Taterka 2015; Pries 2016: 470; and Stauder *fc.*, with further references and a number of examples). Both conceptions, wherein images were used not only in script, but also *as* script, are aimed at evoking a kind of conjoint substantiality between the “written” name or epithet and the figures embodying divine power. Or, as Hornung put it, relating to pharaoh’s deification, which was intended by such a titulary: “*Wie er (Pharao) in der ‘Gliedervergottung’ Glied für Glied zum Gott wird, so wird sein Name hier Konsonant für Konsonant göttlich*” (in Abitz 1989: 93). On that note, these “effigial writings,” as the present author would call them, mark the peak of all figurative utilizations of Egyptian hieroglyphs. They were also productive in the Ptolemaic and Roman Periods.

*Categories of Non-Standard Creative Writing
According to Form and Function: A
Classification Model*

A classification model covering all relevant types of unconventional Egyptian writing according to their varying forms and functions can help us determine the potency and multidimensionality of Egyptian writing *in toto* and classify specific cases within this framework. Most types of non-standard creative writing do not correspond with just one or two categories, but with many at the same time. Accordingly, the model presented below works more like a system of coordinates, in which all possible types of writing can be located. Such an approach is, at least, more expedient at covering the incomparable richness, diversity, and capacity of Egyptian writing than the alternative of

continuing with a potentially endless and unavoidably insufficient selection from among myriads of possible examples. Beginning with form, three main categories can be distinguished:

Formal Category I: Alphabetic consonantal writing

This category covers alphabetic, particularly consonantal, writings forfeiting the semantic determination of a word. Excluded are, however, non-semantic determinatives with functions not linked to the etymology or meaning of a written word, such as ꜥ (“man-with-hand-to-mouth”) when used as a marker of phonetic renderings in Demotic texts. The use of the writings in this category is not limited to a certain script. It is documented in hieroglyphs, in hieratic, and in Demotic, and even in so-called Old-Coptic glosses using the Greek alphabet. New Kingdom syllabic, or group, writing is a specific form within this category.

Formal Category II: Unetymological, hom(e)ophone writing

Writings in this category show, at least formally, a semantic connotation different from that of the words they represent in writing, yet they are phonetically similar or show the same consonantal root structure. Examples, like the ones discussed above, can be found in hieroglyphic, hieratic, and Demotic texts.

Formal Category III: Others

This third formal category covers all other types of unconventional writings. Contrary to the writings in the aforementioned groups, these are derived through specific principles of sign substitution such as rebus, acrophony, and pars-pro-toto, including comparable techniques (Werning 2020: 208), as well as by various methods of thematically motivated sign association and so-called *Differenzierungsaufhebung* (lit. differentiation removal) (Kurth 1983, 2007), leading to a suspension of the originally distinguishing features of the signs. Also to be included here are figurative and emblematic writings, or the “effigial” writings of names and epithets discussed above, which are of high expressivity

according to their pictorial character and show an increased semiotic density.

These three formal categories are complemented by the following functional categories:

Functional Category I: Phonetic rendering

This category comprises those writings that targeted the exact phonetic rendering of a word. Such writings were employed for the transmission and accurate representation of foreign names, words, and idioms, as well as for sentences or specific formulae (especially magical spells), and even longer texts. This category applies equally to Egyptian words and idioms that no longer corresponded with current terminology or required phonetic clarification because of dialectal diversity or historical sound change. Phonetic spellings occur frequently in texts that were intended for oral presentation, functioning essentially as reading aids. Phonetic spellings make use of Formal Categories I and II: they follow an alphabetic consonantal pattern or employ so-called syllabic or unetymological writings.

Functional Category II: Interpretative writing and commentary through script

This category was productive across all types of Egyptian scripts. Many of them may have derived from glosses that entered the main text by scribal transmission. Their influence on the perceived meaning of a text was both potent and versatile. They functioned as a method of text interpretation—a commentary of sorts—and correlated with the traditional text para- or metatextually. In doing so, they not only could clarify the intended perception of a text but also extend or even change its original meaning. By means of deliberate deviations in orthography a word or phrase could be enriched with additional layers of meaning, or its proper sense could be replaced by a completely new one. As for the latter case, modern recipients are often confused whether changes are to be understood as cases of elaborated writing or as true textual variants. The actual extent of the shift in meaning depends mainly on three factors that are central to the process of text transmission: the experience and skills of the recipient, the

clarity of the context, and the traditional authority of the text. A fundamental study of these complex issues with numerous examples is given in Pries (fc.). Interpretative and commentary writing corresponds to Formal Categories II and III. In cases, however, where a spelling comments on the phonetic structure of a word rather than on its meaning, it is sometimes difficult to draw a distinction from Functional Category I. Similarly, if these writings aim to ascribe new meta-levels of meaning to a word, and if further determining factors such as the sacrality and magical power of the related texts are effective, a relational nexus between Functional Categories II and III exists.

Functional Category III: Magical efficacies of writing

While readable as standard text, writings in Functional Category III held magical connotations and were conceived as entities in their own right. Their actual function was to unfold their power within an act of performativity based on the concept of divine indwelling. Thus such writings could be labeled as figurative or substantive, which explains their prevalence in the epigraphic record. But they are also attested on many portable text-artifacts used in rituals, including papyri and ostraca. The general underlying principle shows strong parallels with Gnosticism, Hermeticism, and (Neo-)Platonism, and bears comparison with the later cabalistic tradition (Dornseiff 1925; Eco 1993, 2007). Therefore, the use of figurative writing with magical connotations is related to names, epithets, and titles in particular (Morenz 2008: 175-251), but those writings were also employed for other words as was shown above in the first example from the temple of Esna. Their formal character corresponds to categories II and III, and predominantly to the latter. As for their function, overlappings with categories II and IV are possible.

Functional Category IV: Ludic writing

This special category refers to a group of writings that could be described as ludic in a narrower sense of the word. While an obvious play of signs is essential to these writings, they do not follow an exegetical approach (as in

Functional Category II), nor do they have a discernible theurgical background (as in Functional Category III). In fact, the play of signs characterizing these cases is aesthetically motivated. It mainly concerns the appearance and layout of texts, and not their content or meaning. These texts are mostly written in conventional orthography. Therefore, they do not correlate to the formal categories defined above. They show, however, distinct features of sign arrangement. Relevant examples are so-called crossword texts, attested from the Amarna Period until late Ptolemaic times (fig. 3 a, b; cf., among others, Clère 1938; Stewart 1971; Parkinson 1999: 84-85; Vleeming 2001: 199-209; Morenz 2008: 43-44; Cancik-Kirschbaum and Kahl 2018: 323), and layouts of closely intertwined hieroglyphs and images in which elements of the representations accompanying the hieroglyphic inscriptions function simultaneously as script and depiction. The latter applies especially to emblematic signs such as the *Maat*-feather (Gestermann, Teotino, and Wagner 2020: pl. 31; Seeber 1976: 68) or the winged scarab (von Lieven 2007: 51-52). A similar technique is the retention of certain determinatives (or classifiers) that are already part of the depiction (Fischer 1977: 3-4 with fig. 1; Vernus 2020: 25 with further references). On the blurred lines between script and depiction in general, see Assmann (1991: 81), Seidlmayer (2012: 127), and Collombert (2016 with further references). There are also cases in which the material of the inscribed object

comes into play: on one of the two known scribal palettes of *Rn-nfr* dating from the late 18th Dynasty, a blank space was left where one would expect the word *mrj* “beloved” as required by context. But if the blank space is read *mrj* “wood”—i.e., the material the palette is made of—it would function as a hom(e)ophone writing of the expected word (Seidlmayer 1991; 2012: 131-132; on the use of intentional lacunae see Arpagaus 2013: 10-11).

In addition to the omission of signs, the inversion of signs could also be associated with ludic writing. Leaving aside simple cases of what is often referred to as honorific transposition (Fischer 1977; Vernus 1982; Peust 2007; Vernus 2020), the special writing of $\overline{\text{P}}\overline{\text{A}}$ *dw3-ntr* “praise god” (cf. Morenz 2008: 53 and notes 227-228; Vernus 2020: 13 with variants and further references) might serve as an example. It works on two levels: 1) as writing, employing the abbreviated notation of two word-signs; and 2) as a minimal pictorial scene showing a man in a gesture of adoration in front of the emblem of divinity oriented towards him. This is not a mere play but is rather aimed to evoke substantiality by means of figurative writing. Therefore, it shows a greater proximity to Functional Category III than to the non-semantic/non-theurgical ludic writing as defined here.

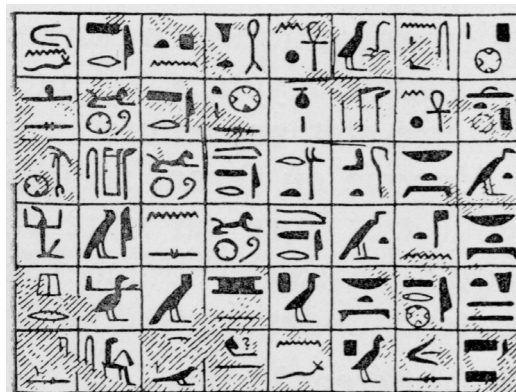
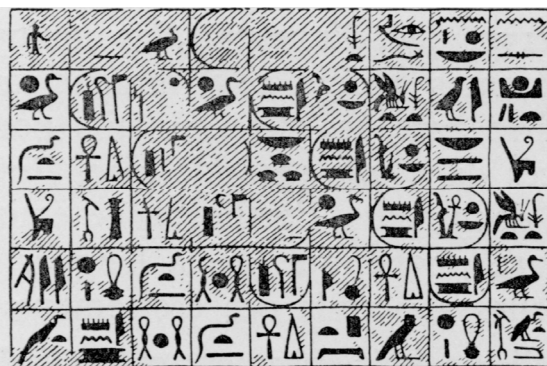


Figure 3. A section from the “crossword” stela of Paser (BM EA 194) showing at left (a) the royal cartouche and at right (b) the toponym Isheru.

Other cases of ludic writing are based on the principle of reading what is actually seen in script. Roots of Hwj, for example, could be written. These two H-signs are not to be read *hh*, but rather *h-wj*, because the set of two signs graphically marks the dual ending *-wj* (Stauder fc.: n. 44). These writings are most likely an expression of intellectual prowess and scribal enthusiasm and thus can be differentiated from other examples within this overall model of non-standard creative writings.

Functional Category V: Restricted readership and “écriture secrète”

Writings of this category were used to impede a straightforward reception of either whole texts or specific contents of a text. Their reception was either truly limited to that of adept priests in special cults or, conversely, they were intended to give the impression of being very arcane. The latter case is obvious when “encrypted” texts are found side by side with the same texts in normal orthography. This very particular category of non-standard creative writing is limited to a few, mostly esoteric, texts from the realm of funerary and (Solar-)Osirian cults, inscribed either in sealed tombs or places of extremely restricted accessibility allowing only a limited number of readers or beholders.

As defined here, the *écriture secrète*—adopting a term applied by Champollion to subsume a variety of formal types (including what has been called “abjadid” enigmatic writing, see Darnell 2020; Stauder fc.) and avoiding the misleading term “cryptography”—is hardly ever “thematically” motivated (Darnell 2004: 14-34; von Lieven 2007: 33; Darnell 2020: 10-11). The fact that it does not convey its own meaning or alludes to another meta-level of meaning marks a decisive difference between these writings and those of the

abovementioned Functional Categories II and III. Besides the principles defined for the formal categories above, of which the omission of classifiers and phonetic derivations as in abjadid enigmatic writing are quite productive, the *écriture secrète* also includes the substitution of signs by others, whose shape is somehow similar (see, e.g., Pries 2011: 444-445). In many cases, the use of these writings involves a downright disfiguration of the normal typeface. But as in abjadid enigmatic writing there were at least some conventions to limit possible entropy and to keep these texts legible (Werning 2020; Stauder fc.). As for the function of these writings, it has to be stressed that cryptography may be not the main rationale behind it. Though the texts were considered to be arcane and “secret” in the sense of Egyptian *štꜣ*, they could stand side by side with duplicate texts in regular writing, and there was also no apparent need to encrypt them as long as they were sealed off. Why, therefore, did Egyptian priests and scribes make great efforts to transcribe texts in this way? Based on some important considerations about the possible reading experience connected with abjadid enigmatic writing, Stauder (fc.) has recently presented an intriguing approach: These writings, which show a clearly reduced “resolution” relative to regular hieroglyphic writing and which give the impression of being in a state that is not yet fully differentiated, create not only a blur to the reader, but contribute “to making the place in which” they are “inscribed indexically contiguous with the realms with which it is associated.” This is far more elaborated than the simple correlation of an abnormal script with the abnormal nature of the places and creatures described in these texts, as was argued by many scholars previously (see also Werning 2022: 205).

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Iversen (1961), Vernus (1990), Schenkel (1994), Parkinson (1999), Schenkel (2003), and especially Stauder (2020b), to name just a few works, give valuable overviews of the main principles of Egyptian writing, its development, and different methods of use. An elementary handbook covering numerous aspects of the topic is Polis (2022). For the differences between hieroglyphic writing and later cursive derivatives, especially Demotic, see Quack (2010a) and (2014); for further differentiation within hieratic see Fischer-Elfert (2021). On the interconnection of Egyptian writing and art, see Fischer (1986); Baines (1989); Vernus (2003); Assmann (2012); and Seidlmayer (2012). On aspects of phonetic writings see Osing (1998) and Quack (2010b). On “enigmatic writing” (or “cryptography”) see Darnell (2004); Klotz and Stauder eds. (2020); Stauder (fc.). On different forms and modes of application of “visual poetry” see Morenz (2008). The discussion on so-called unetymological writings is reflected in Smith (2019); Quack (2021); Love (2021); Stadler (2022); Pries (2022). A summary analysis of non-standard creative writing in epigraphic sources from Ptolemaic and Roman times is given in Fairman (1945); Sauneron (1982); Leitz (2001); and Kurth (2007); cf. also Klotz 2012 with further references and short but useful insights into the environment of late hieroglyphic writing and Roman “Egyptomania.” On the ontological status of hieroglyphs and its ramifications for later developments in theology and philosophy, see Pries (2016 and 2017).

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- Figure 1. Left (a): Esna 103: a hymn to Khnum-Ra, consisting almost exclusively of ram signs, inscribed at a side entrance of the temple of Esna. Right (b): Esna 126: a hymn to Khnum-Ra, consisting almost exclusively of crocodile signs, positioned antithetically to Esna 103 at the northern side-entrance of the temple of Esna. (After Sauneron 1963.)
- Figure 2. The titulary of Ramesses II inscribed on a doorjamb at Abu Simbel. (Drioton 1940: p. 315, fig. 44.)
- Figure 3. A section from the "crossword" stela of Paser (BM EA 194) showing at left (a) the royal cartouche and at right (b) the toponym Isheru. (Clère 1938: 49, figs. 6, 7.)