

Graphemic change in Ancient Egypt: Hieratic writing of the New Kingdom

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AG 5

Hieratic handwriting was ubiquitous in Ancient Egypt. It was written with reed brushes and ink on i.a. papyrus, wood, clay, or it was carved into stone. It was in use for over 3000 years and played an essential role among officials, priests and scribes in daily communication and administration, but also in literary, religious and scientific texts. Nonetheless, hieratic has not yet been fully inventoried. Palaeographic lists have been published, but the most elaborate work is 100 years old and contains only 33 sources, whereas thousands of hieratic documents are now known. It is estimated that hieratic script contains ca. 600 graphemes (phonograms and ideographic signs), but how many of these are actually graphemes and how many rather allographs is not yet fully known.

The project *Altägyptische Kursivschriften* (Akademie Mainz) works on a digital palaeography that will contain the complete hieratic sign repertoire including elaborate metadata of the signs and their sources. It will allow its users to systematically explore questions concerning the emergence and development of hieratic script; its relation to hieroglyphic script; its adaptation to specific needs and contexts; the use of abbreviations; the choice for layout; or the assignment of manuscripts to scribal hands, schools or periods.

The presentation discusses changes in hieratic writing of the New Kingdom (ca. 1500–1750 BCE). On the one hand, we see different sorts of graphemic change, e.g. sign redundancy, increase in allographs, hypercharacterization against the background of phonetic loss and limitation of classifiers. On the other hand, some graphemic changes seem to have taken place under influence of a non-linguistic marking system. These changes were temporary and local and concentrated in a village called Deir el-Medina near the Valley of the Kings. The two systems (linguistic hieratic writing and non-linguistic marks) interacted, which is seen in ‘ultra abbreviations’ and new pictograms used by scribes in their administration of the area.

After having set the stage by discussing the general developments, research questions concerning the local effects on hieratic writing are:

- (1) How did the marking system and hieratic writing interact?
- (2) How did this interaction influence the administrative hieratic writing system?

It will become clear that the use of linguistic and non-linguistic systems is not per definition linked to (semi-)literate and non-literate communities. Deir el-Medina shows that both systems were creatively merged in order to maximally use the advantages of both.

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