

\*

\* \*

HARING, B. — *From Single Sign to Pseudo-Script. An Ancient Egyptian System of Workmen's Identity Marks.* (Culture and History of the Ancient Near East, 93). Brill Academic Publishers, Leiden-Boston, 2018. (24 cm, XVI, 296). ISBN 978-90-04-35753-2. € 171,-; \$ 198.00.

Since the beginnings of his Egyptological career, the author of the reviewed volume is engaged in the study of different aspects of New Kingdom administration and has demonstrated his profound insight into that sphere in several publications. Therefore, it is not surprising that also his latest monograph is devoted to a phenomenon from that period

which up till now offered resistance to all interpretative attempts: marks used by the workmen of Deir el-Medina on different objects which until recently have been described as “Funny Signs” for a lack of a better term. The author takes the reader from the initial discovery of the first “funny” signs from Deir el-Medina in 1868 to his involvement with them and finally to the year 2015 (Chapter 1, pp. 14-38). He describes their spatial as well as chronological distribution in Thebes and observes that the same signs occur in different contexts obviously as “expressions of identity” (p. 80).

During the past ten years, similar marks of unclear meaning moved into focus of research. Several conferences were held with contributors from different disciplines hoping that cross-cultural connections or solutions would present themselves<sup>1</sup>). Examples came from a wide array of cultures, periods, and crafts: Egyptian pot marks, medieval European masons’ or carpenters’ marks as well as colorful Indian floor decorations or graffiti on different surfaces. As an introduction to this field, the author presents a number of identity marks from a wide variety of locations (chapter 2, pp. 39-82). Some of these different graphic systems were employed at the same time as writing systems or preceded them so that it is necessary to discuss the relation between the two different systems. The question of literacy vs. illiteracy or semi-literacy also became an issue as well as the influence they have on each other (Chapter 3, pp. 83-118). But while the initial hope to find universal rules was not satisfied, the meetings and subsequent volumes widened the view for different approaches and situations in which marks might appear. This explains the scope of the volume in question: It reminds Egyptologists that there was and is life outside their own field of research that might inspire other ideas. In this case, reindeer marks (p. 58-59), European medieval masonry signs (pp. 60-62) and others are presented. This cross-cultural excursus is not an end in itself, but leads to the conclusion that the signs were generally taken from pictorial archetypes or geometrical patterns, while in cultures that already had a writing system also signs from that system were employed. The author quotes the equation of *nefer*- and *ankh*-signs (Gardiner F35 and S34) repeated once or twice which seem to have been taken by the writer as the same sign just written upside down (pp. 225-6), indicating that they were not taken to be writing in this place.

The non-Egyptological audience receives an introduction to Egyptological phenomena (e.g. writing system) necessary for understanding the subsequent chapters on the marks from Deir el-Medina. Deir el-Medina and its history is then described as the “exceptional village” (chapter 4, p. 121) it indeed is, and it is discussed in light of Egyptian history. The thousands of ostraca found in a well near the village allow a unique insight into the life of several generations of villagers. The high degree of literacy stimulated by the specialized craft of the village’s workmen distinguishes this settlement from probably any other in Egypt at that time which might

have given the inhabitants a certain advantage over their contemporary neighbors (p. 153). Still, not every inhabitant must have been able to read and write fluently. The author gives here, unlike other studies that focus on a single aspect of the village’s written or visual output, a complete picture of all the different sources, e.g. literary and non-literary texts mainly in hieratic, ostraca with different figures or simple strokes, parts of tomb equipment, tools, and other products from the settlement that carry marks or help otherwise understanding the marks (pp. 150-154).

Chapter 5 (pp. 158-206) then gives an overview of the manifold occurrences of the marks during the New Kingdom starting with the reign of Hatshepsut, but also trying to trace earlier attestations. It appears that the marks in question derived from those used in the building processes on several building projects which were beginning with the Eighteenth Dynasty meant not only to indicate teams, as had been the case for the preceding dynasties, but as a novelty also individuals (p. 166). Two Nineteenth Dynasty ostraca confirm this impression (p. 172, table 5.3): They list names of workmen and marks next to each other, with many of the marks being references to or parts of the names. Having established the signs as expression of ownership or presence, the author then documents the marks over several generations and detects the transmission of signs within families. The occurrence of signs and names in lists indicates their use in duty rosters or control lists, whereas their presence on the limestone floor of the local Hathor temple suggests that in this context the marks convey a votive meaning.

The textual output of the settlement ends with the abandonment of the Valley of the Kings as burial ground at the end of the Twentieth Dynasty, but only after about 1100 ostraca with marks and perhaps more than ten times as many with hieratic writing had been produced (p. 242). The marks on ostraca, however, were no longer produced after the reign of Ramesses III (p. 190). In the records using the marks, a certain standard sequence of entries can be detected: the lists follow a hierarchical order, mentioning first chief workmen, scribes, deputies before ordinary workmen. Marks were acquired through inheritance, position or personal choice, and the author points to medieval masons’ marks that follow the same pattern. Since a workman used his sign until he retired or died, only one son could take his father’s sign that started working after the father had given up work. The other son(s) had other options: taking their grandfather’s (or even great-grandfather’s) mark or creating a new one. New ones often were based on name or nickname of the workman (p. 210). Examples show an open border between the signs’ use as hieroglyphs or marks as is explained with the signs of Meryre whose name could be written with the hoe (Gardiner U6) as a mark or with hoe and sun-disk (Gardiner N5) as hieroglyphic writing (p. 224) depending on writer or purpose of the document.

Other marks relate to profession or hierarchical position. This is the case with scribes, written with the scribe’s tool (Gardiner Y3), but also for lower charges of which the author mentions a scorpion charmer written with a scorpion (Gardiner L19; p. 199). In some cases signs were adapted and slightly altered. Other signs were modified during the period of their use, usually beginning with graphic forms and developing towards more abstract shapes.

Different details of the marks indicate that they were often used by semi-literate persons. Hints are, among others, the

<sup>1</sup>) E.g., Ben J.J. Haring/Olaf Kaper (eds.), *Pictograms or pseudo script? Non-textual identity marks in practical use in Ancient Egypt and elsewhere*, Egyptologische Uitgaven 25, Leiden 2009; Petra Andrassy/Julia Budka/Frank Kammerzell (eds.), *Non-Textual Marking Systems. Writing and Pseudo Script from Prehistory to Modern Times*, Lingua Aegyptia Studia Monographica 8, Göttingen 2009; Julia Budka/Frank Kammerzell/Slawomir Rzepka (eds.), *Non-Textual Marking Systems in Ancient Egypt (and Elsewhere)*, Lingua Aegyptia Studia Monographica 16, Hamburg 2015.

quoted exchangeability of *nefer* and *ankh* or the different writings of names like in the case of Meryre. The duty rosters illustrate this best: the lists of names use the pattern of hieratic lists from which also the writing of numbers is copied. But contrary to the hieratic model the direction of writing can be changed from right to left to left to right (p. 233). The documents that include the marks therefore combine several aspects from hieroglyphic or hieratic writing with their own rules.

It is impossible to detect rules for the personal choice of models for the single signs (i.e., hieroglyphic or hieratic signs, picture or abstract shapes), but the principles they followed became clear: The marks from Deir el-Medina formerly called “funny signs” seem to be an adaptation of people who were “not fully familiar with writing” (p. 228) to the needs of a local administration. The different hands that produced the record show the different involvements of the users in writing activities: it was used by “real” scribes as well as by people who had only a limited knowledge of hieroglyphic and/or hieratic writing (p. 241). The author suggests convincingly that different areas of responsibility of scribes and their assistants might have been the reason for the use of different kinds of recording and that the marks originated in the lack of local scribes early in the Eighteenth Dynasty.

An epilogue on the creation of the alphabet concludes this book that is overall well explained, suitable for Egyptologists and readers outside that community.

The present volume is a detailed and in-depth study resting on the author’s profound knowledge of the countless published and, even more important for the present topic, unpublished sources which are quoted extensively throughout the book, the only flaw being the quality of some of the photographs for which the publisher is responsible. With this publication, the author exemplified how a close familiarity with a subject enables research in areas of Egyptian society that had not been touched until now and how the resulting insight is presented properly.

Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin  
February 2019

Eva-Maria ENGEL