

Andréas Stauder

Introduction

Egyptian enigmatic writing (also referred as “cryptography,” see below) can be broadly defined as a variety of extended practices of hieroglyphic writing that are set against immediate decoding, foreground the iconicity inherent in hieroglyphic writing, and invite a more absorbed or experiential engagement by the beholder/reader. Through these delays, enigmatic writing can reveal meaning beyond the linguistic sequence; in its particular visual presence and iconicity, it can be boldly affirmative and even transformative.

The present set of two volumes (*Studies* and *Lexicon*) concerns enigmatic writing at the time of its richest development, the New Kingdom (c. 1550–1070 BCE).¹ In individual groups of signs or extending over the whole inscription, enigmatic writing is then found in a variety of settings corresponding to three main traditions: royal settings, with, notably, monumental full-figured friezes in temples and over the entrance of royal tombs; non-royal settings, with enigmatic groups of signs in texts inscribed notably in the entrances of funerary chapels and on scribal palettes; and (sections of) Netherworld Books and related cosmographic compositions inscribed in enigmatic writing, mainly but not exclusively in sealed-off royal tombs. The traditions of enigmatic writing associated with these settings are diverse yet interrelated; as a whole, the phenomenon represents one major dimension of New Kingdom written culture.

The pragmatics of enigmatic writing vary with settings and people. In some of its settings, enigmatic writing is ostentatiously displayed, while in others it is withdrawn from general visibility. In the sealed-off underground appartements of royal tombs, enigmatic writing contributed transforming the place in which it was inscribed. When seen, enigmatic writing could create a complicity with the beholder able to solve its challenges and appreciate the wit and ingenuity that had gone into making it, and further serve as an index of a restricted in-group sociology and identity.² While enigmatic writing excludes through its difficulty, it invites through its bold visual presence. There were various levels of participation in enigmatic writing: as the monumental display of Ramses II’s enigmatic frieze on the architrave of the forecourt of Luxor temple demonstrates,³ enigmatic writing was also geared at broader audiences.

1 General introductions to New Kingdom enigmatic writing: Darnell 2004, 14–34; Roberson 2013, 3–8; Klotz, this volume; and Darnell, this volume. For enigmatic writing in the broader frame of “visuelle Poesie” over the long history of Egyptian hieroglyphic writing, see Morenz 2008.

2 Diego Espinel, this volume; Werning, this volume.

3 Compare Klotz, this volume, observing that the signs were in part selected in relation to their monumental size and that to how they would be seen from the ground.

Hieroglyphic writing, in general, emphasizes the iconicity of the signs. Enigmatic writing, in its different instantiations, pushes this emphasis even further. It favors signs that have a high visual resolution, are highly iconic, carry culturally encyclopedic meaning, and/or are full-figured.⁴ Through its concentration on such signs, compounded with the deconventionalization of spellings, enigmatic writing comes with a visual otherness – particularly manifest in display settings, yet characteristic of enigmatic writing in general including in the *Netherworld Books*. As much as any added difficulty in decoding, this visual otherness arrests the eye, foregrounds writing as such, and causes the beholder to engage more deeply with the thickness of writing.⁵ Supplemental domains of signification, latent in regular hieroglyphic writing, can thus be revealed, beyond the sequential articulations of language.⁶

The heightened iconicity, visual otherness, and delayed reading associated with enigmatic writing also ground its performative dimensions. In appropriate contexts, such as on monumental friezes in sacral spaces, royal titularies inscribed in enigmatic writing could thus be seen as evoking the consubstantiality of the king with the gods, inscribing his name into the divine realm and turning it into a solar icon.⁷ In the *Netherworld Books*, the visual otherness of enigmatic writing could become indexical of the otherness of a space-time that was conceived of as *št3*, difficult to apprehend.⁸ In certain contexts, it was the enigmatic character itself of enigmatic writing that could become a – necessarily oblique – representation of domains of signification that are unknown, or otherwise impossible to represent directly.⁹

Interest in Egyptian enigmatic writing goes back to Champollion himself.¹⁰ The term “cryptography” is associated with the name of Étienne Drioton whose collections of inscriptions and early studies, beginning in the 1930’s were foundational in establishing this field of study.¹¹ “Enigmatic writing” is the earlier term, harkening back to pioneers such as Franz Lauth and Charles Goodwin in the 1860’s and 1870’s.¹² It has been more recently revived by John Darnell, who criticized tenets of Drioton’s method, notably the unchecked use of the acrophonic principle, and initiated a renewal in studies of enigmatic writing bearing on both its controlled deci-

4 Klotz, this volume; Stauder, this volume.

5 In this sense, compare also Assmann’s (1994) interpretation of Egyptian enigmatic writing as a “Kalligraphie,” with the deconventionalization of writing resulting in the beholder/reader getting stuck in the thicket of the signs (“im Dickicht der Zeichen”).

6 Darnell, this volume; Klotz, this volume; Morenz 2008.

7 Klotz, this volume; Darnell, this volume; Pries 2016.

8 Darnell 2004, 471–482; this volume.

9 Darnell, this volume. See also the arguably intended suspension of decidability in the graphic double entendres in the sculptor Irtysen’s presentation of his craft as restricted knowledge (c. 2000 BCE): Stauder 2018.

10 Overview of early *Wissenschaftsgeschichte*: Morenz 2008, 18–23.

11 Drioton 1933; 1940; and many other studies references throughout the present volume.

12 Lauth 1866; Goodwin 1873.

pherment and the interpretation of its high-cultural determinants.¹³ While rooted in this more recent, post-Driotonian, tradition, authors in the present volume use one or the other term. “Cryptography” remains well entrenched, but is technically a misnomer because enigmatic writing is not directed at “hiding” any denotational contents.¹⁴ Nor is it “encrypted” in the technical sense that a “key” would be generally needed to decode it: while a regularized “enigmatic alphabet” is used in some contexts, decoding of enigmatic writing more broadly is based mostly on a consideration of the various possible associative dimensions of hieroglyphic signs, including the cultural knowledge embedded in these, and taking into account further hints and cues that lie in the enigmatic text itself. Another term and approach to enigmatic writing, with broader scope in time and phenomena considered, is Ludwig Morenz’ “visuelle Poesie”: along with the sacral contexts of many such practices, this emphasizes visually ludic dimensions, supplemental meaning, the beholder’s fascinated gaze, and the interactional dimensions of the encounter with enigmatic writing.¹⁵

The studies in the present volume illustrate the diversity of traditions and practices of enigmatic writing in the New Kingdom (comprehensive overview by Darnell): in royal full-figured monumental friezes (Klotz), in private settings of the Eighteenth Dynasty (Diego Espinel),¹⁶ and in the Netherworld Books (Roberson, Werning, Stauder). Across these domains, they illustrate various approaches to enigmatic writing. The practice and method of decipherment are demonstrated in studies of Ramses’ II enigmatic frieze in the Luxor temple (Klotz) and of the Jackal Hymn in the Tomb of Ramses VI (Roberson). These show how proposed readings are validated based on textual parallels and on established principles of substitution and derivation (further, Roberson, Excursus). A sophisticated semiotic analysis of these principles of derivation and substitution is offered by Werning. Moving beyond the individual signs, the enigmatic text is considered in its specific visual dimensions and otherness (Klotz, Stauder, for two different traditions of enigmatic writing) and in its effects in bringing about a delayed and experiential reading (Darnell, Stauder). Addressing the high-cultural functions of enigmatic writing in its various settings, Darnell offers a general hermeneutics of enigmatic writing as transformative and as expressing significations that are liminal in nature.

¹³ Darnell 2004. The “acrophonic debate” has continued after Darnell’s study, e.g., in Morenz 2005 (allowing acrophony) and Werning 2008 and Klotz 2012 (criticizing it); see further Roberson, “A Brief Excursus,” in this volume (critically).

¹⁴ Similarly, Pries 2016, 468–469; Morenz 2008, 17–23; Klotz, this volume, introduction; with a view on the much later “graphic alchemy” at Esna, Sauneron 1982, 51–53.

¹⁵ Morenz 2008, and various studies by the same author. In this tradition, also, e.g., Arpagaus 2014.

¹⁶ Ramesside non-royal contexts were presented at the Basel conference (23–24 May 2015) by Philippe Collombert, who is preparing a separate study with a focus on the learned cénacle around Khaemwaset.

The second volume of the set, *A Lexicon of Ancient Egyptian Cryptography of the New Kingdom* (Roberson, with contributions by Klotz), includes a comprehensive list of enigmatic values found in texts of the New Kingdom, with indications of their derivation, textual attestations, and when necessary references to the discussion. The *Lexicon*, including its introduction, is presented as a handbook for further research and to make the study of enigmatic writing more broadly accessible.

Collectively, these studies and the *Lexicon* illustrate the diversity of practices and traditions of enigmatic writing in the New Kingdom. They demonstrate that enigmatic writing is not some arcane and recondite tradition divorced from “regular” hieroglyphic writing. Enigmatic writing is based on the very principles of regular hieroglyphic writing, extending these. Set against instrumentalist ideologies of writing understood as an ideally transparent vehicle for linguistic meaning,¹⁷ hieroglyphic writing, in general, is characterized by an excess: in the iconic load of its signs, in the cultural significations embedded in these, and in its aesthetic and virtuosic dimensions.¹⁸ Enigmatic writing pushes these very dimensions even further, delving deep into what makes a hieroglyph sign. A higher register of hieroglyphic writing, it is even more excessive: visually present, semantically dense, virtuosic. Through its enhanced iconicity, its visual otherness, and the resistance it affords to immediate decoding, enigmatic writing entices, challenges, dazzles. Through these delays, enigmatic writing invites to a more through-going experience of writing and opens to what, in native conception and absent substantial explicit meta-discourses, may have been conceived of as the very essence of hieroglyphic writing.

References

- Arpagaus, D. 2014. “Auf der Suche nach der vollkommenen Schrift. Zur Schriftbildlichkeit im engeren Sinne in den ptolemäisch-römischen Tempeltexten,” in: G. Neunert, K. Gabler, A. Verbossek (eds.), *Bild: Ästhetik – Medium – Kommunikation. Beiträge des dritten Münchner Arbeitskreises Junge Ägyptologie (MAJA 3)*. GOF IV 58, 63–78.
- Assmann, Jan. 1994. “Zur Ästhetik des Geheimnisses. Kryptographie als Kalligraphie im Alten Ägypten,” in: Susi Krotzinger and Gabriele Rippl (eds.), *Zeichen zwischen Klartext und Arabeske. Konferenz des Konstanzer Graduiertenkollegs „Theorie der Literatur“ veranstaltet im Oktober 1992*. Internationale Forschungen zur allgemeinen und vergleichenden Literaturwissenschaft 7, 175–186.
- Darnell, J. C., 2004, *The Enigmatic Netherworld Books of the Solar-Osirian Unity: Cryptographic Compositions in the Tombs of Tutankhamun, Ramesses VI and Ramesses IX*. OBO 198.

¹⁷ E.g., Wilhelm von Humboldt’s view (1826) that a sign is all the more more functional the emptier it is. Such alphabetistic ideologies of writing are linked to instrumentalist ideologies of language itself, reinforced during the Enlightenment (for a critique, see Silverstein 2014, 130 and throughout the article).

¹⁸ Houston and Stauder 2020. In a similar sense, Morenz (2008, 1): “Im Sinn einer klassische westlichen Semiotik erscheint die Sättigung der Zeichen mit Sinn als dysfunktional.”

- Drioton, É. 1933, "Essai sur la cryptographie privée de la fin de la XVIII^e dynastie," RdE 1, 1–50.
- Drioton, É., 1940, "Recueil de cryptographie monumentale," ASAE 40, 305–429.
- Goodwin, C. W., 1873, "On the Enigmatic Writing on the Coffin of Seti," ZÄS 11, 1873, 138–146.
- Houston, S., and A. Stauder, 2020, "What is a hieroglyph?," L'Homme 233, 9–44.
- Von Humboldt, W. 1826, "Über die Buchstaben-Schrift und ihren Zusammenhang mit dem Sprachbau," *Abhandlungen der Königlichen Akademie der Wissenschaften in Berlin: Philosophisch-Historische Klasse. Aus dem Jahre 1824*, 161–188, <https://visuallibrary.net/130755>.
- Klotz, D., 2012, "Once again, Min (𓂏𓏏): Acrophony or Phonetic Change?" GM 233, 21–29.
- Lauth, Fr. J., 1866, "Änigmatische Schrift," ZÄS 4, 24–26.
- Morenz, L. D., 2005, "Akrophonisches oder konsonantisches Prinzip – eine angemessene Alternative für die Visuelle Poesie?" DE 61, 101–113.
- Morenz, L. D., 2008, Sinn und Spiel der Zeichen: visuelle Poesie im Alten Ägypten. *Pictura et Poesis* 21.
- Pries, A., 2016, "ἔμψυχα ἱερογλυφικά I. Eine Annäherung an Wesen und Wirkmacht ägyptischer Hieroglyphen nach dem indigenen Zeugnis," in: S. Lippert, M. Schentuleit, M. Stadler (eds.), *Sapientia Felicitas. Festschrift für Günter Vittmann zum 29. Februar 2016, Cahiers « Égypte Nilotique et Méditerranéenne »* 14, 449–488.
- Roberson, J. A., 2013, *The Awakening of Osiris and the Transit of the Solar Barques. Royal Apotheosis in a Most Concise Book of the Unverworld and Sky*. OBO 262.
- Sauneron, S., 1982, *L'écriture figurative dans les textes d'Esna*. Esna VIII.
- Silverstein, M., 2014, "Denotation and the Pragmatics of Language," in: N. J. Enfield, Paul Kockelman, and Jack Sidnell (eds.), *The Cambridge Handbook of Linguistic Anthropology*, Cambridge, 128–155.
- Stauder, A., 2018, "Staging Restricted Knowledge: The Sculptor Irtysen's Self-Presentation," in: G. Miniaci, J. C. Moreno García, S. Quirke, A. Stauder (eds.), *The Arts of Making in Ancient Egypt. Voices, Images and Objects of Material Producers 2000–1550 BC*, Leiden, 239–271.
- Werning, D., 2008, "Änigmatische Schreibungen in Unterweltbüchern des Neuen Reiches: gesicherte Entsprechungen und Ersetzungsprinzipien," in: C. Peust (ed.), *Miscellanea in honorem Wolfhart Westendorf*. GM Beihefte 3, 124–152.