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NON-TEXTUAL MARKING SYSTEMS,  
WRITING AND PSEUDO SCRIPT  
FROM PREHISTORY TO MODERN TIMES

LINGUA AEGYPTIA

Studia monographica 8

*Herausgegeben von*

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Seminar für Ägyptologie und Koptologie  
Göttingen

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Göttingen 2009

Titelaufnahme

**Petra Andrásy, Julia Budka & Frank Kammerzell (eds.)**

Non-Textual Marking Systems, Writing and Pseudo Script from Prehistory to Modern Times /  
Göttingen: Seminar für Ägyptologie und Koptologie, 2009  
(Lingua Aegyptia — Studia monographica; Bd. 8)  
ISSN 0946-8641

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Printed in Germany

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Fernsehsendung sowie Speicherung in Datenverarbeitungsanlagen bedürfen einer schriftlichen  
Genehmigung der Herausgeber.

Reproduktion, Druck und Verarbeitung: Hubert & Co., Göttingen

Gedruckt auf säurefreiem, archivierfähigem Papier

**Bestelladresse**

Lingua Aegyptia, Seminar für Ägyptologie und Koptologie, Weender Landstr. 2, 37073 Göttingen, Germany

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## Script and Pseudo Scripts in Graeco-Roman Egypt

Alexandra von Lieven, Berlin

It is well known that Egyptian artefacts, even down to objects of everyday use, often carry inscriptions. In fact, the Egyptologist's supposed sole and universal reliance upon inscriptions to e.g. date an object has even become a sort of standard joke among adherents of other disciplines like Classical Archaeology.

Unfortunately, as it happens, not all inscriptions make sense. Of course, there are several explanations possible. Leaving aside the absolutely unlikely possibility that the Egyptologist dealing with the object is not quite up to the task, equally leaving aside the not so unlikely at all possibility that the object or at least the inscription is a modern fake, there still remains a disturbing number of cases. I am not talking about a few mistakes in an otherwise normal text but rather about whole, occasionally even rather lengthy inscriptions.

How to explain them? Firstly, it is important to differentiate carefully between the types of strange inscriptions one might encounter: there are those that look more or less like normal hieroglyphic script yet do not seem to make sense (type I). Then there are inscriptions which clearly do not merit the name 'inscription' strictly speaking, as they merely consist of rows of rather uniform signs or scratches (type II). However, they equally clearly fill the position normally taken by a proper inscription. Finally, I would like to also draw attention to 'inscriptions', which are just empty space (type III). While they again are not really inscriptions, they, like the scratches, fill the slot for inscriptions in as much as they mark spaces for inscriptions in the typical places where they should be and thus evoke the idea of inscriptions.

In the following I will deal with these three types. While the first is occasionally encountered already in the older periods, the latter two are most prominent in the Graeco-Roman Period. As for the first type, looking at different examples leads to a further differentiation of the picture.

Some of the seemingly 'senseless' inscriptions consist of pseudo hieroglyphs that do not at all exist in normal hieroglyphic writing, but they also cannot be explained as cryptography. Others, however, consist of more or less normal hieroglyphs, but there is no consistent text. In the latter cases, however, it is usually possible to make out bits of sentences that do indeed make sense, yet they break off sometimes in midsentence and there comes another bit of text. Occasionally, even the direction of writing differs in between those text fragments.

The explanation for this phenomenon is quite obvious: the fragments of sentences must have been copied from models by somebody who did not understand what he was doing and who also did probably not care too much, as long as there were real hieroglyphs involved. The process is not too different from what some modern designers do when for e.g. decorating bathing sandals with excerpts from the Pyramid

Texts of Unas<sup>1</sup> or the famous excerpt of the Book of the Dead in Asterix and Cleopatra, which can even be traced to a specific edition of Budge's Book of the Dead publication.

The same is possible to a certain extent with such copies of real inscriptions in antiquity. For example, Friedhelm Hoffmann has recently very convincingly demonstrated that the inscriptions on the famous Mensa Isiaca<sup>2</sup> are in fact derived from captions of a geographical monograph.<sup>3</sup> In the case of the Mensa Isiaca which was most probably produced in Italy, not Egypt, it is easy to see the reasons for this procedure. There was a traditional text, possibly even an illustrated one, available in the library of a Roman Isiac temple, but the ability to actually read it seems to have been already lost. Despite this inability there was clearly the intention to produce something looking as genuinely Egyptian as possible and therefore the artist was given the old text as a model to work from. Evidently, a good deal of care was invested into this project, which is also visible from the stylistic faithfulness to real Egyptian depictions as well as from the material quality of the multicoloured metal work.

I probably do not assume too much if I say most Egyptologists would expect nothing better to have been produced in Rome. In fact, they might even be astonished that the inscriptions on the Mensa are following a recognizable model at all and still make at least partial sense. Other inscriptions produced in Rome are indeed much worse, like the one on the obelisk Florence 3686 recently published by John Baines.<sup>4</sup> While he also points to models for certain parts, it seems to be private inscriptions on stelae and statuary, not manuals of priestly knowledge on papyrus. So the models are less exclusive than those of the Mensa Isiaca inscriptions. Of course one should not overstretch this fact, as also the obelisk itself is an object of stone. Therefore one might have consciously chosen stone statuary as models. Yet one strongly gets the impression that there are more seemingly senseless signs interspersed than on the Mensa. Again, a caveat is in order, however. Maybe, it is just the clumsiness of the engraving that makes signs unrecognizable. I cannot deny a certain feeling that things might actually be better than it seems on first view. When comparing the facsimile of the inscriptions to the photo I wonder whether a prolonged look at the original could not lead to a better understanding of what the sculptor intended to engrave.

Anyway, as already stated, this is Rome or at least Italy, not Egypt, and Egyptologists will not be surprised about an inferior quality of hieroglyphic texts there. Of course, such an unreadable jumble could not have been produced in Egypt herself, especially not in a temple. Or, could it?

On the ceiling of the second western Osiris chapel on the roof of the temple of Dendara there is a text that looks innocent enough to the casual observer.<sup>5</sup> There are no pseudo hieroglyphs and not even any daring Ptolemaic writings. However, if one actually tries to read this text, things look quite different. There are snippets of sentences easily understandable, but they do not make sense as a coherent text. Also, al-

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1 As seen by the author a few years ago for sale in a department store.

2 Leospo (1978).

3 Hoffmann (in preparation).

4 Baines & Whitehouse (2005a); on the subject in general cf. Baines & Whitehouse (2005b).

5 Dendara X 385-386, Pls. 204, 235.



though the direction of writing does not vary visibly, there are clearly parts of text which only make sense when read backwards. But in contrast to the well-established retrograde writing, it is not each sign, but whole words that have to be strung together back to front. But even then, no coherent sense seems to emerge and not surprisingly, it is the only text for which Sylvie Cauville did not give a translation in her study of the Osirian chapels.<sup>6</sup>

But how to interpret this text? In my view there is only one explanation possible. The text in question must derive from a model which itself derives from a long series of older models which have again and again been wrongly segmented during the copying process. There are two likely reasons for this. One is the fact that the text has a very peculiar layout, which is still preserved in the only known copy in Dendara. The other is that seemingly at least parts of the text were written in another direction. Maybe the whole was originally retrograde. In any way, there must have been several pitfalls which confused the later copyists considerably. This implies of course that the text is much older in composition than the Ptolemaic-Roman temple of Dendara. In fact, there is even a possible hint to this. While I have not been able to make sense of the text as a whole, I could nevertheless establish a general idea of its contents, as well as some sentences which find very close parallels in another text. The text in question is the latter chapters of the “Fundamentals of the Course of the Stars” or so-called Book of Nut.<sup>7</sup> There is very likely a connection between the two, although I have to confess that I myself have not yet fully understood it. Be this as it may, it anyway hints both at a great age of the composition as well as a great importance. Especially the latter factor is significant as it helps to explain why on earth somebody would fancy copying a completely garbled and incomprehensible text onto a temple ceiling. The only explanation is that this text was thought to be important, in fact, important enough to have a value as such, without being understandable. What counts is much more the idea of a certain text than the text itself, let alone its readability. In the case of a ceiling of a dark chapel, to which, moreover, access must have been extremely limited, this is not even that strange. Without doubt, no Egyptian would ever have tried to read this text from the ceiling,<sup>8</sup> once the decoration of the room was finished. Only Egyptologists today try this and get frustrated in the process.

The case of the Dendara text is instructive in several respects. It is in a way comparable to the aforementioned Roman hieroglyphic pseudo inscriptions, in as far as it is not a correctly readable and understandable text. However, it is like this for completely different reasons. It copies faithfully from a model which was thematically suited to the target place. If the text is indeed related to the “Fundamentals of the Course of the Stars”, which is a manual of Religious Astronomy, using it for a temple ceiling is exactly the correct place. On the other hand, using private statue inscriptions

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6 Cauville (1997: 207).

7 von Lieven (2007). The parallels are to be found in the ‘Planetary Chapter’, which unfortunately is extremely damaged and difficult to make sense of in itself.

8 Of course, this holds true for most other temple texts as well (not only on ceilings), a fact much too often ignored by scholars used to deal with them in the form of a convenient book edition!

for an obelisk or using a geographical monograph for a decorative metal plaque<sup>9</sup> is on a completely different level. The Dendara artist may not have been able to actually read his text, but he knew exactly what it was and why he used it the way he did. The Roman artists to the contrary adapted texts according to their needs, although they had not even a superficial grasp of what these texts were about. They did not use them, but they reused, ‘recycled’ them – in my view a huge difference.

Therefore I think it is crucial in dealing with unreadable inscriptions to evaluate them in detail regardless of whether they make sense on first or even second or third view. They might still have a lot to say about their makers’ models and intentions.

Let us now leave the inscriptions that actually contain real script and tackle the pseudo inscriptions consisting just of single signs or squiggles and lines. The most substantial study to date on this is Heike Sternbergs article on the supposed decline and eventual death of hieroglyphic writing starting already in the middle Ptolemaic period.<sup>10</sup> Her evidence for this were the Horus stelae, where indeed a certain number of specimens do not exhibit intelligible text but rather sequences of horizontal, vertical and diagonal lines or senseless repetition of words or groups of signs.

Now, of course, there is a severe problem, as most of these stelae do not have an archaeological provenance. Of those named as evidence by Sternberg, only two have a provenance, one from Kition in Cyprus<sup>11</sup> and one from Benha<sup>12</sup>. As for the latter, as no real context is given, I wonder whether it was truly excavated or just bought there. As Sternberg did neither give the question of authenticity in general much attention nor spotted some obvious fakes,<sup>13</sup> I have to confess that I am extremely sceptical whether her ‘decline of writing’ is truly one of 2<sup>nd</sup>/1<sup>st</sup> cent. BC date or rather of the 19<sup>th</sup>/20<sup>th</sup> cent. AD. Even if most of the objects should be genuine, her chronology is problematic as it is not substantiated by any external evidence.

In case one was to accept all of this, one might say that Horus stelae are a very popular item, so they most likely were mass produced especially in smaller sizes. This might have led to a low quality product line for illiterate consumers. One might compare this with the senseless inscription on coffin 54+64 from the tomb of Iurudéf.<sup>14</sup> As horrible as this text is, it is indeed clearly genuine. Nevertheless, nobody did propose a decline of writing already in the 22<sup>nd</sup> dyn. – and with good reason. The authenticity of the Horus stelae with pseudo hieroglyphs notwithstanding, I at least cannot see

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9 Unless, of course, the Mensa Isiaca is in fact much more than usually thought. After all, the combination of several divine figures in little box-like structures indicating geographical distribution is just to be found in one famous geographical religious monograph, namely the Book of Fayum, see the plates in Beinlich (1991).

10 Sternberg-El Hotabi (1994).

11 Kition-Bamboula, KEF 940, Sternberg-El Hotabi (1999: 46).

12 Berlin 10.264, Sternberg-El Hotabi (1999: 8).

13 See the review by Quack (2002: 713-729, esp. 727-729).

14 Raven (1991: pls. 25, 37). See the comments on the inscriptions there on p. 23. While 54+64 is of particular ugliness also in respect of the general artistic quality, it should be compared to coffin 27 (pls. 17, 36, 37), which, although being aesthetically rather pleasing, nevertheless carries inscriptions not any better as far as textual correctness is concerned. In fact most of the coffins from this tomb are completely anepigraphic, while the rest all bear pseudo hieroglyphic texts.

much signs of a *general* decline of writing in the 1<sup>st</sup> or 2<sup>nd</sup> cent. AD, let alone anywhere BC.<sup>15</sup>

With that, I wish to leave this thorny subject and instead turn to some pseudo inscriptions on Roman period objects that have a clear archaeological provenance from the Memphite region. One is a funerary shroud<sup>16</sup> from the tomb of Bakenrenef, the other the famous Saqqara tunic JdE 59117<sup>17</sup>. On the shroud, rows of stars dominate, while on the tunic it is rows of alternating *ḥnh* and *sʿ* signs. The latter are also found in one instance on the shroud. As there is no variation of signs, the effect created is rather geometrical and unlike any true inscription. In fact, these pseudo-inscriptions do not really pretend to be inscriptions. On another shroud<sup>18</sup> however, there are lines and squiggles which look more inscription-like, but do not resemble any actual hieroglyphs.

The same as for the former holds true for the third type of pseudo inscriptions, which is empty text fields which could hold an inscription but do not do so. They are found as labels to depictions of deities and the like on Roman period objects.<sup>19</sup> Of course, with a colourless stone relief one can never be sure whether it was not coloured once and the inscription was just painted in and is now lost. However, this phenomenon is rather frequent on brightly coloured funerary masks, where there cannot be any doubt that indeed there never was a text. So the empty field just evokes the idea of ‘text’ without actually providing anything, not even a single dot. Clearly, the concept of text fields in pictures was culturally so deeply ingrained to be enough to signal ‘text’.

I will return to both of these types in short. But before, a look back is in order. Thus far, I have limited my comments to hieroglyphic inscriptions. This must naturally lead to the question whether the phenomena discussed do also occur with cursive scripts, i.e. with Late Hieratic and Demotic. Needless to say, with empty spaces, it is an idle discussion whether they were intended to stand in for a hieroglyphic or a cursive inscription. One would expect hieroglyphs as the regular standard, however, as such inscription fields are attested also with Demotic text,<sup>20</sup> one cannot entirely rule it out. Interestingly, I do not know of a case of Late Hieratic being used in such a way.

Likewise, with round squiggles one might wonder whether they are intended to imitate Hieroglyphs or rather Demotic. However, the problem has about the interest of the proverbial argument about the emperor’s beard. So the really important question is mainly, whether Hieratic or Demotic pseudo-inscriptions of the first type are to be found.

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15 The same criticism has already been voiced by Quack (2002: 725) and by Stadler (2004: 553).

16 Cairo J.E. Prov. 9/12/95/1, Bresciani (1996: 32).

17 Perdrizet (1934: 97-128).

18 Berlin Inv. 8/65, Bresciani (1996: 51).

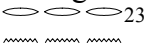
19 See for example Riggs (2005: 3, fig. 1; 21, fig. 4; 54, fig. 17; 59, fig. 20; 68, fig. 23 [stela with demotic main text!]; 87, fig. 35; 99, fig. 39 [note the longer demotic inscriptions naming the deceased herself!]; 102, fig. 40; 117, fig. 51; 127-128, figs. 53-54; 145, fig. 66 [just two inscriptions left empty]; 187, figs. 87- 88; 207, fig. 101, pl. 11).

20 Typically where not gods, but the deceased her- or himself is concerned, e.g. Gabra (1941: 47, l. XII,1 [tomb]); Riggs (2005: 52, pl. 5 [mummy mask]; 190, fig. 91 [coffins]).

I am aware of only few examples that have been proposed in the literature up to now. One consists of three lines of a mix of Hieratic and Demotic on the nape of a Roman period plaster mummy mask, which has been labelled by Günter Burkard as a “senseless sequence of signs”.<sup>21</sup> Looking at the piece again, however, I have a strong feeling that this is not at all a pseudo inscription. Even from the published photos it is possible to correct some of the proposed readings and a day or several of them in front of the original might well solve the mystery. Of course, that strongly suggests leaving this text out of the present discussion.

Of course there are copies of frequently used funerary texts like the Book of the Dead which occasionally exhibit a horrible textual quality, but this should not be subsumed under pseudo writings as it is merely a problem of sloppiness during textual transmission.

A text that comes to mind, even if its interpretation is hazardous and its state of preservation does not make matters easier, is pLouvre N 3176 H, or, as its editor François-René Herbin called it, “the papyrus that stuttered”.<sup>22</sup> This papyrus is a tiny sheet with a very abbreviated version of a Book of Breathings. The text is reasonably good as far as it is preserved, which however, is very little. The name of the owner *Pyr<sup>c</sup>mn*, that is Philammon, however, is written in a most peculiar way: *P<sup>3</sup>-p<sup>3</sup>-p<sup>3</sup>-r-r-r-[r]-<sup>c</sup>-<sup>c</sup>-<sup>c</sup>-mn-[mn]-mn*. Herbin thinks this to be a malicious joke on the part of the scribe, who supposedly made fun of his stuttering client Philammon. Of course, one cannot exclude such a possibility, yet I have my doubts. After all, the importance of the name in Ancient Egyptian religion is well known, especially in funerary belief. Is it really imaginable that a scribe would do something like that, when possibly his client’s wellbeing in the hereafter might be jeopardized? Interestingly, also other words, like *ḥnḥ* seem to have been repeated as well. Apart from such general considerations, I find the joke hypothesis hard to believe as I know another, somewhat similar unpublished papyrus.

Anyway, it is questionable, whether these phenomena should be called ‘pseudo-hieratic’. I think there must be other reasons at work. The most likely explanation for the Herbin papyrus in my view would be a will to magically fix the name even more effectively by repeating the signs it is written with. It reminds me of Old Kingdom plural writings which write a sign trice, or even the whole word, like the famous example <sup>23</sup>. I cannot help but think that the scribes of the texts in question might have seen something similar in their temple libraries and got ideas from that.

Herbin mentions two other unpublished papyri where there are supposedly senseless fillers within the text.<sup>24</sup> However, in the case of pLouvre N 3103, which is now published,<sup>25</sup> the text is written completely in hieroglyphs, therefore not really comparable to the papyrus published by Herbin. The gods in the vignette above the text are,

21 Beck (1993: 445-451, nr. 117). Frankfurt, Liebieghaus, Inv.-Nr. 2574 (M 472).

22 Herbin (1999).

23 EG § 73,2.

24 pLouvre N 3103, pBM 9978.

25 Bosson & Aufrère (1999: 181, 192, No. 19). I wish to thank Friedhelm Hoffmann very much for having provided me with a xerocopy of this publication.

by the way, accompanied by empty type III-inscriptions. Unfortunately, I was unable to check on the other.

Martin Stadler recently edited a couple of short funerary texts written partially in demotic and partially in hieratic.<sup>26</sup> He labels the hieratic parts, which seemed ununderstandable to him, pseudohieratic, and links them with the hieroglyphic pseudo inscriptions on the Horus stelae treated by Sternberg. Again, I have to confess that I am very sceptical. While I am more than willing to admit that the readings are not exactly a trifle, it is nevertheless possible to get a bit further than Stadler, and like in the case of the Frankfurt mummy mask, I think it should be possible to crack much more of the texts by staring at and thinking long enough on them.

In sum, I do not know of any pseudo hieratic nor pseudo demotic inscription of which I would be sure that one can safely call it thus.<sup>27</sup> As stated in the beginning, a text that does not yield its reading easily because of paleographical or other difficulties is not a pseudo inscription merely because we scholars do not understand it.

So the phenomenon of pseudo inscriptions seems indeed to be limited to hieroglyphs. I think there is a clear reason for this. Because of the seemingly pictographic character of the hieroglyphic script it appeals much more to the eye of the beholder, especially if that person is *not* able to read the text as a *text* in a non-pictographic way. This is surely the explanation for the true pseudo hieroglyphic inscriptions on Roman monuments. They cater to the idea of pictographically encrypted deep mysteries – and who knows whether they were not indeed intended to be read in some such way. Just think of the hilarious ‘hieroglyphic’ inscription on the Potsdam pyramid<sup>28</sup> – it really has a reading, although not a genuine Egyptian one!

Of course, as it is not genuine Egyptian, we would not know it without preserved sources from the period. So for Roman pseudo inscriptions it would be very difficult to establish a sound methodology how to read these texts, if indeed they were intended to be read. But maybe the idea of it was already enough, or at least so it seems.

As all the sources on the mysterious Egyptian scripts always deal with hieroglyphs and only with hieroglyphs and their pictorial value,<sup>29</sup> I think there is truly a structural reason why there are no cursive pseudo inscriptions.

Now, while this explains hieroglyphic pseudo inscriptions with actual hieroglyphs – or what is intended to be hieroglyphs – for the second and third types of ‘inscriptions’ discussed here, I think the explanation is a bit different. Interestingly, such pseudo inscriptions occur mostly in Egypt herself and not in places like Rome. This

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26 Stadler (2004: pls. XLVIII-LI, see especially the remarks on 552-553).

27 The example Leiden RMO Inv. F 1954/2,6 given by Quack (2005: 717) is also mainly hieroglyphic, although there seems indeed to be a demotic group (as a mirror-image!). As cursive sign forms occasionally also intrude in high quality temple inscriptions, such a group is no argument to deny the essentially hieroglyphic character of the whole inscription. Quack doubts the Egyptian provenance of the piece, but I do not see any stylistic reason to do so as far as the carving of the relief itself is concerned. The occurrence of a demotic group also in my opinion speaks rather in favour of an Egyptian provenance instead of a product of a Roman workshop.

28 On the latter see Fitzenreiter (1999: 389-392); Humbert (2003: 25-39); Tietze (2005: 505-530).

29 Of course some classical authors mention the existence of the cursive scripts, but the speculations on the supposedly hidden wisdom always focus on the hieroglyphs. On this subject see Iversen, (1961: 38-56).

again speaks strongly in favour of the supposition that the first type is for people enamored with the idea of little images as script. The second and third types, to the contrary are not pictorial at all, so they would be of no interest to ‘pictographiliac’ people. They typically occur on objects from Egypt, where there was no need for inscriptional exoticism. Most of these objects come from private funerary paraphernalia, as e.g. masks, coffins or the like. As I have discussed elsewhere, such objects tend to very closely emulate iconographic models from Osirian temple contexts.<sup>30</sup> The whole funerary theology of the Greco-Roman period is based on this link to the temple sphere. With this background, it is clear why there are text fields marked everywhere – a typical temple offering or other cult scene requires them. Often, real inscriptions are also to be found on private funerary objects, but equally often they are missing. Less often, they are replaced by type II pseudo inscriptions. It would be interesting to see whether there is any chronological development discernible, but at present I fear the ground for this is still shaky. My personal feeling is that the type II-inscriptions are later and are basically just type III-inscriptions which have succumbed to a horror vacui.<sup>31</sup> Also, I know of much more type III-inscriptions than of type II.

So how to interpret the type III-inscriptions? The first thought would of course be to think they would betray illiteracy.<sup>32</sup> However, this seems not to be the case, as in many examples small empty type III text fields show up in front of the deities in the pictorial scenes, while larger text panels are filled with good readable hieroglyphic texts.<sup>33</sup> Clearly, there is no reason why the scribe doing the latter should not also have filled in the former. Therefore, the decision to leave them empty must be deliberate. And it is not even too difficult to see why. The longer text panels contain funerary wishes for the deceased and excerpts from liturgical compositions necessary for the glorification of the dead owner. The pictures to the contrary are mostly self-explaining and the deities are easily identifiable by their iconography, so strictly speaking, it is not necessary to fill in their names. This might seem astonishing as we are used to the Egyptian obsession with names, but I think nevertheless that this is the best explanation for the observable facts. The empty text field alone conveys the idea of the name.

This interpretation is further substantiated by a much earlier, but structurally similar case. It would in fact merit to be called type IV, as it is a text field without text like type III, but it is completely filled with exactly vertical or horizontal equally spaced hatching. To date, I know of only one example per direction of hatching, but as I came across this type just by chance, a more systematic search might change the picture. The vertical hatching occurs on the coffin Copenhagen National Museum AAa 78,

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30 von Lieven (Forthcoming).

31 However, there are still some extremely late type III-inscriptions, e.g. Riggs (2005: 234, fig. 117; 237, fig. 119).

32 This might indeed be the reason in case of the oldest example known to me, coffin 61 from the tomb of Iurudef (Raven 1991: pl. 31).

33 See for example Riggs (2005: 54, fig. 17; 59, fig. 20; 145, fig. 66 [just two inscriptions left empty]; 187, figs. 87-88). For earlier examples see e.g. Stewart (1986: pls. 12-14 [22<sup>th</sup> dyn.]); Küffer & Siegmann (2007: 107 [25<sup>th</sup> dyn.]).

dated to approximately 650-630 BC.<sup>34</sup> The horizontal hatching is to be found on a roughly contemporary stela, Cairo A 9408 (= JE 3394), dated by Munro to 660-640 BC.<sup>35</sup> In both cases, the objects are fully decorated with texts, just the name tags for the gods in the pictural registers are left uninscribed, but are nevertheless indicated. While the hatching seems to be rare, empty type III-inscriptions are already quite common on such funerary objects already in the Late Period.<sup>36</sup>

So, having such a text field is typical and constitutive for a temple scene, therefore, the field as such is not dispensed with, just the text which should fill it. Of course such empty text fields would not at all be understandable to a Roman, therefore this type of pseudo inscription is just found in Egypt where it evoked a strong sense of a temple setting, but never in Rome or the rest of the Roman empire.

The same holds true for the type II inscriptions. As I said before, I have a feeling they are later than type III, without really being able to substantiate it, as datings float freely through the centuries depending on which publication one uses. In any case it is interesting to see what they consist of. As stated above, it is rows of stars, or alternatively, rows of alternating *ḥn* and *s* signs.<sup>37</sup> They invoke the late writing of *nḥr.w* 'gods' with three stars on the one hand and the gifts the gods might give – life and protection – on the other hand. Therefore they are not entirely senseless as a decorative filling for the otherwise gaping empty text fields, even if they are not real texts. They at least retain an idea of what such texts should say.

However, as far as I can see, they are never to be found on an object that also shows real hieroglyphic texts that make sense. Therefore, I suspect that *they* are truly due to artists not able to read or write true hieroglyphic texts, unlike the ones responsible for the empty spaces. This is even more evident in the cases where there are indeed no recognizable signs at all but just lines and squiggles.

Eventually, there is no denying that the knowledge of hieroglyphs did die out slowly in the Late Roman period. However, firstly, I think it happened much later than is usually thought – and certainly not as early as the Middle Ptolemaic period. Secondly, I would wish that not every text written in an ugly claw and thus difficult to decipher would be labelled as pseudo inscriptions so quickly. They might very well turn out to be pseudo 'pseudo inscriptions'! Thirdly, from a careful observation of the contexts and usances of supposed or real pseudo inscriptions there can be gleaned

34 I would like to warmly thank Tine Bagh for having provided me with a xerox of the museum inventory card and further information on this piece. For good color photos see now Hansen (2008: 70-71 [full view], 88 [detail with inscription fields very well visible]).

35 Munro (1973: 215, pl. 9, fig. 33).

36 For examples see Munro (1973: pl. 3, figs. 11-12, pl. 8, figs. 30-31). Quite instructive is pl. 3, fig. 10, which shows the same extremely short, rather symbolic text columns like the cited Late Period type III-pseudo inscriptions, but in this case, the artist apparently nevertheless still felt a need to actually fill in the inscriptions themselves. Especially in the case of Osiris the effect is rather peculiar.

37 There exist possibly others with other signs like the text columns flanking the solar falcon on the top of the Roman period mummy mask Copenhagen ÆIN 297 (Jørgensen 2001: 300-301), which contain several water lines (☉) above each other. Of course, zigzagging lines are a rather basic indicator of 'script' in general. On the other hand, the offering of water was essential to late Egyptian funerary belief, so again, this could retain a certain idea of the contents of traditional funerary wishes.

much more than a simple conclusion that the knowledge of hieroglyphs had deteriorated.

It is e.g. possible to grasp the cultural importance of the ‘text’ concept within Egypt, which did not even require a single hieroglyph to work. On the contrary, to the Romans the hieroglyphs as picture-script were the important concept, which did carry implications of mystical knowledge because of their pictographical character. This concept in its very essence is of course bound to the inability to read the hieroglyphs, otherwise one would have seen the banality of much of the supposed wisdom.

I hope to have demonstrated that *these* questions actually are the interesting ones, which in fact would require a much wider study than it was possible here.

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