On Ancient Egyptian Philology

بعض الملاحظات على علم الفيلولوجي في اللغة المصرية القديمة

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ملخص:

تأتي هذه المداخلة لإبداء بعض الملاحظات على ورقة بحثية تم نشرها في مجلة *ZÄS* (S.D. Schweitzer, 'Zum Lautwert einiger Hieroglyphen', *ZÄS* 138 (2011), 132-149). تعقب هذه الورقة على النقطة الأخيرة في المقال المذكور، وهو الفرق بين التحليل الصوتي الذي أفرزته العلامات التصويرية وبين تطور هذه العلامات في مرحلة اللغة القبطية.

This essay is due to a recent paper that has been published in the *ZÄS*, a sanctuary of modern Egyptological philology.[1] As a result, I present a defence of the ancient Egyptian philology, discussing especially the last point it dealt with, which is the difference between the phonetic analysis that ancient sources provide a logogram, and its unexpected Coptic outcome.

𓏴 is listed in the Wörterbuch as *whm*: the first and last consonants are often (especially the last one) specified in writing by uniliteral signs. The middle one, very seldom indeed, is consistently rendered by the sign *ḥ*, and this disagrees with the established phonetic rules. Accordingly, the Bohairic Coptic outcome ⲟⲩⲱϩⲙ would require an *h*-sound, namely the one registered in the Wörterbuch. Although in a Pyramid Text a thorough phonetic spelling, as *wḥm*, was provided, this feature was explained by Lacau as an error by of the craftsman, who would have replaced 𓏴 by 𓎛. Indeed, this kind of error is not exceptional, see: S. Hassan, *Giza I* (Oxford, 1932), 92 where '*nfr*' replaces '*b*' mistakenly beyond any doubt.

This issue was raised again and again by additional examples of 𓏴 replaced by 𓎛, and never by ☐, perhaps owing to the resemblance of the vertical signs.[2] Now Schweitzer attempted to dismiss them in the same way Lacau did with the Pyramid Text, assuming that the requirements of phonetics are stronger than the skills of any craftsman.

Even if I too am concerned by the antinomy between the written evidence of hieroglyphs and the Coptic outcome, and cannot find any satisfactory explanation, however, I must draw attention to the nature of the hieroglyphic documents, whose testimony cannot be simply dismissed, lest some important cultural implications are overlooked.

The Pyramid Texts provided just one example; therefore, it could be attributed to ignorance of the

stonecutter. Otherwise it ought to be admitted that the stonecutter was aware of his task to the point of being able to replace a logogram (𓏴) with the required (middle) consonant in a full phonetic writing of the word.

It is observed that the latter possibility is not far-fetched. Why this was done by the craftsman is not apparent, whether consciously or not, but it was repeated throughout the history of hieroglyphic writing.

Let us turn our attention to the case of the Saite Period. It was too easy for Schweitzer to dismiss the example from the Theban tomb of Sheshonq (TT27), owing to the confusion between both sounds (*ḥ/h*) in the Late Period, which had already started perhaps during the Ramesside Dynasties.[3] What Schweitzer failed to consider, is the knowledge and the awareness displayed in the monument of an outstanding learned man, who lived in the heart of the Egyptian culture during its Renaissance. The wall in the entrance staircase where the concerned word was beautifully engraved displays a collection of ancient sentences mostly reproduced by means of a kind of alphabetic rendering, regardless of the shape and pronunciation they had in older times.[4] There is no reference to Pyramid Texts. It would be strange that such a learned man, wanting to write 'alphabetically' 𓏴, would be incorrect in choosing the correct *ḥ*!

At this point the example from the Second Intermediate Period, coming from a provincial town as Gebelein, would say the final word. It is on a fragment from a private stela, where the text runs in horizontal lines, and the expression *wḥm n ꜥnḫ* 'repetition of life' is spelt *wḥm* with uniliteral signs only. Once more it would be very odd that the incorrect *h* was chosen by an ordinary speaker in a not particularly erudite environment, while the choice never fell on ☐.

A written example 𓎛𓃀𓏤𓄿 from the chapel of

a private mastaba of the Fifth Dynasty, would be even older than the one quoted in a Pyramid Text,[5] but it has been disregarded through a different interpretation of the involved words. However, the reading *wḥm* may not be certain here, though the reading proposed by Altenmüller *ḥmsi* is altogether questionable, a confusion of *s/z* sounds could likewise be exceptional at that time. The paronomasia in that instance with *ḥmww* 'craftsman' is similar with the reading *ḥmsi* as well, but I also pointed out a palindrome of *wḥm* with *mḥw* in the Middle Kingdom, again supporting the *ḥ* sound.[6]

Gardiner had already envisaged a solution of the problem with Coptic, showing that some transformation of the sound *ḥ* into *h* could have occurred since the Ramesside times.[7] Anyhow, we should be much more confident about the knowledge and precision the ancient Egyptians were accustomed to, albeit from a different perspective from ours.

Back to the Saitic example of Sheshonq, one should place its occurrence in its cultural environment. The inscription on the right side wall of the access stairs is an outstanding attempt to render ancient biographical clichés through a new application of the hieroglyphic writing adapted to the model of contemporary alphabets (both Aramaic and Greek).[8] That performance, not unusual in the Late Period, was not without remembering the way of writing in the Old Kingdom, especially in the Pyramid Texts, where the components of a logogram were quite often spelt individually. Most likely the learned people in the Late Period, inspired by the spread of contemporary alphabets,[9] had forgotten the syllabic nature of the ancient 'uniliteral' signs, similar to the structure of the coeval cuneiform writing.[10] Much like a modern Italian can read the words of a Latin text, which are often written exactly the same, according to the rules of modern Italian orthography, but these do not correspond entirely to the Latin ones.

The absence of written vowels may not have embarrassed those learned people, who could check only consonants, because the same was a customary occurrence in the fashionable North-West Semitic alphabets, although in the writing of some foreign personal names some hieroglyphs were redefined to express vowels.

In my opinion, this was the main difference between the phonetic spellings of *wḥm* in the Pyramid Age and the Late Period. In comparison to them, the Coptic outcome may have represented a phonetic development in the current speech.

Eventually none of the writers of the phonetic occurrences of *wḥm* were aware of any other, and could not be influenced by any known model, as far as we know, but they reproduced individually every time the same spelling. It is now unlikely to question whether it was established each time according to the actual pronunciation or school rules. In any case, no doubt remains about the very nature of the 𓍼 logogram.

Notes

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1   S.D. Schweitzer, 'Zum Lautwert einiger Hieroglyphen', *ZÄS* 138 (2011), 132-149: 146 *wḥm*.

2   *CT* II 379 *wḥm* (determined by the flame) has nothing to do with *wḥm* 'repeat', and is a mere variant of *wḥn* (*Wb* I 345, 15); but Schweitzer shows that it can be also spelled later *wḥm*, cf. note 7 below.

3   In an unpublished Turin Papyrus of that period *wḥm* plays with *thm*, cf. note 7.

4   A. Roccati, 'Ricerche sulla scrittura egizia II – L'alfabeto e la scrittura egizia', *Or.Ant.* 26 (1987), 73-87; Idem, Ricerche sulla scrittura egizia VI - Traduzioni grafiche in egiziano: *Faraoni come dei, Tolemei come faraoni (Atti del V Congresso Internazionale italo-egiziano)* (Torino-Palermo, 2003), 40-43.

5   G. Roquet, '*Wḥm*, verbe plein et semi-auxiliaire. A propos d'une inscription d'Ancien Empire', *BIFAO* 78 (1978), 487-496 : 489.

6   A. Roccati, ‘⟍ se lit *wḥm*’, *RdE* 25 (1973), 254-255.

7   A.H. Gardiner, ‘Minuscula Lexica’*, Ägyptologische Studien H. Grapow gewidmet* (Berlin, 1955), 1-3:3; A.H. Gardiner, ‘Remarques sur la particule démotique *hmy*’, *CdE* 60 (1955), 288-293:290. See note 2 for the opposite interchange.

8   A. Roccati, ‘Le iscrizioni della scala’, *Or.Ant.* 12 (1973), 23-37.

9   A. Roccati, ‘The alphabet(s) at a turning point: A view from Egypt: *Moving across Borders. Foreign Relations, Religion and Cultural Interaction in the Ancient Mediterranean*’, in P. Kousoulis, K. Magliveras (eds.), *OLA* 159, (Leuven, 2007), 327-335⌡

10   A. Roccati, ‘Ricerche sulla scrittura egizia – VII. Il sillabario e la scrittura egizia’, *Atti dell'Accademia delle Scienze di Torino* 142 (2008), 55-65.