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*Hieroglyphic Signs Scratched on a Sherd
of an Egyptian Late Roman Transport Amphora*

ARCHAEOLOGICAL OVERVIEW

An unusual and very interesting object was found in a rubbish dump that accumulated in front of the Coptic hermitage bearing the preliminary designation ‘hermitage in tomb TT 1152’.¹ It is a body sherd of an Egyptian late Roman wine amphora,² on which an anonymous monk scratched a few hieroglyphs (**Fig. 1**).³ Two of them are within a register formed by two vertical lines, three are written horizontally in the lower part of the sherd and three (four?) in the field to the left of the vertical register.

The monk must have been particularly struck by this ‘strange’ form of writing (if he was at all aware that it is writing), or perhaps by what was in his view a series of pictures or even magical characters, as he decided to ‘write’ them down.⁴ Maybe he wished to convey

¹ The author has published reports on the works conducted in the hermitage annually in *PAM* XV (Reports 2003) – *PAM* XX (Research 2008).

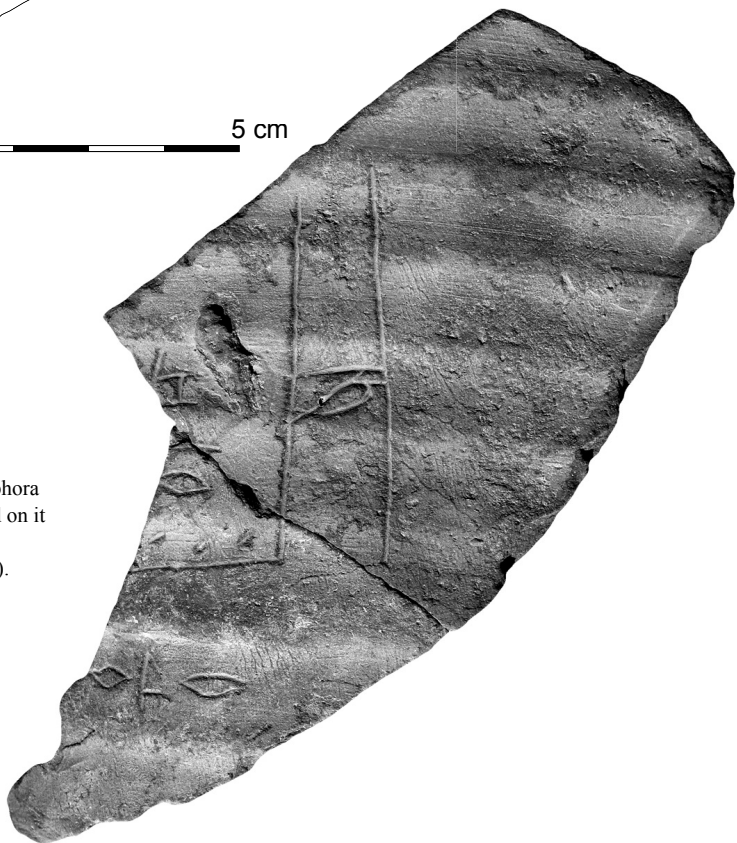
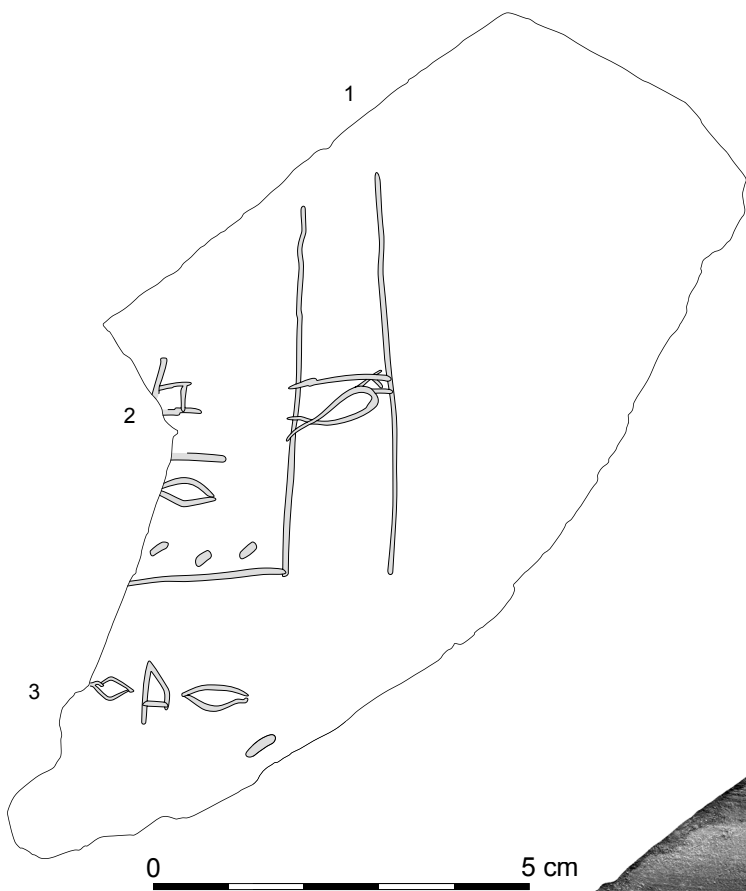
² The sherd comes from a Late Roman vessel used for the transport of wine made of Nile silt and covered with pink slip, representing a form popular in Upper Egypt and in the Aswan region, cf. R.D. GEMPELER, *Elephantine X. Die Keramik römischer bis früh-arabischer Zeit*, *AV* 43, Mainz a/Rhein 1992, p. 191, form K 715, dated to the sixth through early eighth century AD. The complete form of an amphora of this type is shown in: H.E. WINLOCK, W.E. CRUM, *The Monastery of Epiphanius at Thebes: Part I: the Archaeological Material; the Literary Material*, New York 1926, Pl. XXVIII (lower left corner); H. JACQUET-GORDON, *Les ermitages chrétiens du désert d’Ésna III*, *FIFAO* XXIX/3, Le Caire 1972, Pl. CXC, Fig. 5 (type P1). However, from the archaeological context of the Theban region one can conclude that amphorae of this type were in use in this area until the mid-seventh century at the latest.

This case makes one realize the importance of careful ceramological identification of sherds (all ostraca on pottery) for an archaeologist’s work method. If the sherd had not been identified as a fragment of a Late Roman transport amphora, the signs on it would have most likely been interpreted as a draft or rather a writing exercise from the Pharaonic period.

³ It was most likely a monk (this area was inhabited exclusively by monks), but it may have also been someone who visited him: a messenger, a supplier, or a pilgrim.

⁴ Monks generally did not perceive hieroglyphs as vile magical signs, similarly as they saw no reason not to occupy Pharaonic tombs or convert Pharaonic temples into churches and chapels. Indeed, *i.a.* Shenute spoke unfavorably of hieroglyphs, cf. D.W. YOUNG, *A Monastic Invective against Egyptian Hieroglyphs*, [*in:*] D.W. Young (Ed.), *Studies Presented to Hans Jakob Polotsky*, East Gloucester 1981 [= *Monastic Invective*], p. 354 and commentary in nn. 6 and 18, but his view did not cause hieroglyphs to be widely effaced or concealed under paint or plaster layers. P. Grossmann cites the infrequent examples of concealing traces of pagan cult, cf. P. GROSSMANN, *Modalitäten der Zerstörung und Christianisierung pharaonischer Tempelanlagen*, [*in:*] J. Hahn, S. Emmel, U. Gotter (Eds.), *From Temple to Church. Destruction and Renewal of Local Cultic Topography in Late Antiquity*, Leiden-Boston 2008 [= *Christianisierung*], p. 318. In fact, the monks generally did not perceive hieroglyphs as ‘evil’ or dangerous characters and often painted inscriptions and figural representations or crosses in the empty spaces between rows of hieroglyphs, e.g. in the tomb of Ramses IV in the Valley of the Kings, cf. E. HORNUNG, *Zwei ramessidische Königsgräber: Ramses IV. und Ramses VII.*, Mainz a/Rhein 1990, Figs 17b, 94, 95), and colour photographs of this tomb in: M.-A. ZENTLER, *Ägyptischer Himmel in koptischer Erde. Pagan-altägyptische Reminiszenzen (Survivals) im spätantiken, koptischen Christentum*, PhD Dissertation, Tübingen 2011, Figs 15, 16, and esp. 17.

Besides bricks, new churches were also built using stone temple blocks bearing carved or hewn hieroglyphic signs. They were inserted into walls, used as floor tiles, so that the hieroglyphs were often (though certainly not intentionally!) visible. It was so in one of the monasteries of Shenute’s congregation, cf. GROSSMANN, *Christianisierung*, pp. 309f. and 323. In churches and chapels installed in some rooms of Theban temples (Medinet Habu, Ramesseum, Deir el-Medina, Hatshepsut Temple) hieroglyphs partly visible on walls did not stand in the way of prayer or liturgical practices. Although not all damage to the Pharaonic substance can be attributed to



1. Fragment of a late Roman amphora with hieroglyphic signs scratched on it (Phot. D. Dąbkowski; Drawing T. Górecki; digitizing M. Momot).

his impressions from an excursion in the area to another monk in the form of an image, or perhaps he wanted to find out (being used to writing Coptic or Greek letters every day) how his predecessors managed to draw these characters.

Although hieroglyphs were commonly found on walls of tombs and temples, on stelae, offering tables and some small objects, they were no longer comprehensible at the time.⁵ They were scratched on the sherd by a monk who lived most likely in the sixth, maybe in the seventh century. Between the vague and drawn out ‘twilight of hieroglyphs’ and the time when they were written by the Theban monk there is a vast time gap of 300–400 years.⁶

the Copts with confidence, there is evidence that hieroglyphs were destroyed by them in some places, e.g. E. WINTER, *s.v.* Hieroglyphen, RLAC 15 (Lief. 113), 101f., cites a historical testimony to the effacing of all hieroglyphs depicting birds on Philae because of the recent cult of Horus on the island.

We should also consider the magical aspect: the use of unintelligible words, letters and signs in magical formulae was common practice in all types of magic (also the Christian type), which was to give credence to the occult skills of the writer of the magical text. However, the grounds for this hypothesis are too weak to seriously consider it.

⁵ For more on this topic, see an outstanding article about the twilight of hieroglyphs: H. STERNBERG-EL HOTABI, *Der Untergang der Hieroglyphenschrift. Schriftverfall und Schrifttod im Ägypten der griechisch-römischen Zeit*, *CdE* LXIX, 1994, pp. 218–245, esp. pp. 218–220, and E. HORNING, *Hieroglyphen: Die Welt im Spiegel der Zeichen*, *Eranos* 55, 1986, pp. 404ff.

⁶ Despite the fact that only a select few among members of the elite, primarily the priests, could read hieroglyphs, cf. STERNBERG-EL HOTABI, *CdE* LXIX, 1994, p. 241, and the language of speech and writing was Greek, cf. R.S. BAGNALL, *Egypt in Late Antiquity*, Princeton 1993, p. 236; T.S. RICHTER, *Greek, Coptic and the ‘language of the Hijra’: the rise and decline of the Coptic language in late antique and medieval Egypt*, [*in:*] H.M. Cotton, R.G. Hoyland, J.J. Price, D.J. Wasserstein (Eds), *From Hellenism to Islam. Cultural and linguistic change in the Roman Near East*, Cambridge 2009, p. 416, they were still used in some contexts in the third and fourth century, for instance they are enclosed in cartouches containing names of Roman emperors (the latest one was of Diocletian cf. J. BECKERATH, *Handbuch der ägyptischen Königsnamen*, *MÄS* 49, Mainz a/Rhein 1999, pp. 264–267); on stelae from the Bucheum, cf. R. MOND, H. MYERS, *The Bucheum III*, London 1934, Pls XLIV–XLVI, and G. HÖLBL, *Altägypten im römischen Reich. Der römische Pharao und seine Tempel I. Römische Politik und altägyptische Ideologie von Augustus bis Diocletian, Tempelbau in Oberägypten*, Mainz a/Rhein 2000 [= *Altägypten*], Figs 33–35 (stelae for the divine bull Buchis). See also BAGNALL, *op.cit.*, pp. 262ff.

The inscriptions are full of errors and ineptly cut from the third century onwards (and few are securely dated), cf. WINTER, RLAC 15(113), 86. That people did not understand them is indicated, *i.a.*, by the so-called Horus stelae from the Roman period, in which various strokes only symbolize hieroglyphs; the ‘inscription’ is schematic and only seemingly fulfills the ‘canonical’ requirements, cf. STERNBERG-EL HOTABI, *CdE* LXIX, 1994, pp. 235f. According to the general opinion, the last dated (to AD 394) hieroglyphic inscription was carved on Philae, on the wall of the Gate of Hadrian: HÖLBL, *Altägypten*, Fig. 36. The case of Philae is exceptional and it cannot be transposed onto Egypt as a whole; the situation of Philae is best elucidated by J.H.F. DIJKSTRA, *Philae and the End of Ancient Egyptian Religion. A Regional Study of Religious Transformation (298–642 CE)*, *OLA* 173, Leuven 2008, and J. HAHN, *Die Zerstörung der Kulte von Philae. Geschichte und Legende am ersten Nilkatarakt*, [*in:*] J. Hahn, S. Emmel, U. Gotter (Eds), *From Temple to Church. Destruction and Renewal of Local Cultic Topography in Late Antiquity*, Leiden-Boston 2008, pp. 203–242.

It was most likely only certain individuals (temple and cult priests, savants) who were aware of what hieroglyphs are and how they should be understood, but in the latest interpretations of hieroglyphs there were more errors than correct translations. The work *Hieroglyphica* by Horapollo testifies to an interest in hieroglyphs among a part of the elites, but at the same time the author’s interpretation (their allegorical meaning dominates) is a proof that in the fifth century AD they were no longer understood, cf. A. LOPRIENO, *Ancient Egyptian. A linguistic introduction*, New York-Cambridge 1995, p. 26; H.-J. THISSEN, *Horapollinis Hieroglyphika. Prolego-*

Significantly, the inscription is scratched, not written in ink. To a moderately skilled scribe, writing in ink is an easy and popular means of conveying information (letters), writing accounts, receipts, documents, recording psalms and biblical passages. Carving letters or sketches with a hard object into the surface of the sherd is uncommon, as it was, *i.a.*, more time-consuming, and a text drafted in this manner was not as clear as a text written in black ink.⁷ Letter-writing was usually done at the place of permanent residence (in this case, at the hermitage), where the writing tools were kept, so we can assume that, since the hieroglyphs were scratched, they must have been written elsewhere. The text could have been scratched out anywhere without a need for ink. Being away from the hermitage and without writing tools at hand, one could scratch a text on a sherd using a sufficiently sharp object, randomly picked up from the ground or brought along. It is, therefore, likely that the hieroglyphs were not carved at the dwelling place but ‘on the move’ – the monk did not have writing tools with him and used a sharp metal object or a piece of flint with sharp edges to carve it.

We are faced with two possibilities: either the monk carved the hieroglyphs at the place where he saw them (a tomb?) or he scratched them already after his return to the hermitage, talking about his journey to a place in the area. I am inclined to the second possibility. It seems that the scratching took place some time after he had seen the hieroglyphs, as the signs are not arranged in an intelligible order. Had they been copied on site, we would most likely be looking at a series of characters forming a logical, readable sequence.

The hieroglyphic signs here discussed certainly were not meant to convey any information. Of course we also cannot interpret them as the last hieroglyphic ‘inscription’ in Egypt. We should rather consider them a monk’s random fancy and a simple sketch drawn during or after a walk around the Sheik Abd el-Gurna necropolis,⁸ which should rather be perceived as a testimony of his fascination or curiosity about a part of the scenery, which he may have considered odd or even mysterious. What seems of significance is the fact

mena, [*in:*] M. Minas, J. Zeidler (Eds), *Aspekte spätägyptischer Kultur. Festschrift für Erich Winter zum 65. Geburtstag*, *AegTrev* 7, Mainz a/Rhein 1994, pp. 255–263. Horapollo’s Greek text, which may have had a Coptic prototype, cf. WINTER, *RLAC* 15(113), 94, and M. KRAUSE, K. HOHEISEL, *s.v.* Ägypten II (literaturgeschichtlich), *RLAC Suppl.*, *Lief.* 1/2, 44f., contains a few Coptic words, cf. M. WILDISH, *Hieroglyphic Semantics in Late Antiquity*, PhD dissertation, Durham University, 2012 (<http://etheses.dur.ac.uk/3922/>, accessed July 2012), p. 142 (list of Coptic words occurring in *Hieroglyphica*).



⁷ A scratched text is more durable than one written in ink, which does not change the fact that it was very rarely made, primarily for practical reasons, and it was always very short. In the group of ostraca from TT 1152 that I am familiar with only two have a short text consisting of a few words carved on a sherd. They are, of course, neither letters nor documents.

⁸ Monks wandered around Thebes on errands, visited various places and sometimes (which may have also been the aim of their excursions) sought out various objects, mostly of practical use, in the vicinity and brought them to hermitages. This is difficult to ascertain in the field, although sometimes such occurrences can be observed. For instance, to the hermitage in TT 1152 the monks brought several funerary cones (including one from the tomb of Ramose, TT 132, cf. T. GÓRECKI, *Archaeological Research in the Hermitage in Tomb 1152 in Sheikh Abd el-Gurna (West Thebes)*, *PAM* XX (Research 2008), p. 230, Fig. 6), papyri for re-use (from tomb TT 99), fragments of stelae, decorated stone blocks (cf. T. GÓRECKI, *Sheikh Abd el-Gurna. Hermitage in Tomb 1152 and Chapel in Tomb 1151*, *PAM* XIX (Reports 2007), p. 303, Figs 6 and 7), lamps and vessels, as well as many parts of wooden objects (coffins, boxes, etc.) often used as firewood at the hermitage.


that from a larger text the monk seems to have copied mainly simple signs, ones that were easy to remember and draw/carve from memory.

Overall, it is irrelevant who carved the hieroglyphs and we will never know this. Whether it was a monk or his disciple, or another monk visiting TT 1152, or a pilgrim – in any case it was someone from the monastic milieu or affiliated with it, who most likely could write and had the habit of using sherds for this purpose. On impulse, perhaps when telling about ‘wonders’ seen during an excursion or stroll, he reached for a sherd and, using what was more likely a metal tool than a piece of sharp flint, he carved signs that he had seen somewhere and partly memorized. It may have been an illustration of some observation, an attempt to describe and discuss what he had seen, or simply pseudo-hieroglyphic gibberish written for fun. (T.G.)

EGYPTOLOGICAL INTERPRETATION

The hieroglyphic signs scratched on the amphora sherd do not clearly correspond to any known Egyptian word (**Fig. 1**). The three groups of signs have to be read from right to left, in columns (1, 2) and in a horizontal register (3). One inscription (1) starts at mid-height of a column flanked by vertical lines; the left line continues horizontally. Two groups of signs (2, 3) are written separately; they may be incompletely preserved because of their position at the edge of the broken sherd. In one group (2) the left sides of three signs are lost. The hieroglyphic signs of group (1) are ambiguous. Texts (2) and (3) consist of the following: (2) , (3) . The middle sign of group (2) is just a horizontal line, which can also be a way of writing other signs. Additionally, three oblique strokes were scratched under group (2) and one stands in front of text (3).

Inscription (1) consists of two signs; only the second may be identified as one of the small birds: a swallow (Gardiner’s sign list G 36) or a sparrow (Gardiner’s sign list G 37). The first sign is unclear; it is rather a part of a sign than waves of water (Gardiner’s sign list N 35). In general, the choice of signs seems to be accidental. The fact that the text starts in the middle of the column indicates the writer’s illiteracy in ‘hieroglyphs’. However, the text was likely based on an original. The composition and the hieroglyphic writing point to an inscription from a tomb or stela. Leaving the text in the column unfinished indicates that the idea of copying was quickly abandoned, maybe because it was too difficult for the writer, especially in comparison with texts (2) and (3) consisting of signs that were easy to copy.

It is possible to propose a reading for text (2) because the middle sign, a horizontal line, can be read in the connection with the seat sign (Gardiner’s sign list Q 1) as the sign of a platform (Gardiner’s sign list Aa 11). If so, then these first two signs of text (2) may be read as a simplified rendering of the group  *s.t m3^c.t* ‘Place of Truth’,⁹ a common

⁹ This name can have different writings, but specially the platform sign can be noted by a simple line, see e.g. M.L. BIERBRIER, *Hieroglyphic Texts from Egyptian Stelae etc.*, Part 10, London 1982, Pls 80 (A2, C), 81, 82 (B2, C3).

designation for Western Thebes during the New Kingdom, found on monuments with hieroglyphic texts.¹⁰ Usually the phrase appears as the last element of a title,¹¹ suggesting that the following *r* may be the beginning of a personal name. Titles with the expression *s.t m3^c.t* are part of the rich material documenting the activities of workmen in Deir el-Medina during the New Kingdom. Some of the names start with the sign *r*.¹²

The sign *r* also starts text (3). The group *rir* does not have any meaning and can be considered accidental writing of simple signs. However, if the model for all characters on the sherd was the same, it could be a wrongly or incompletely copied personal name, the same one as in text (2). The horizontal writing would support its function as a legend.

The strokes next to texts (2) and (3) may also be accidental and unconnected with them. In both cases their position is not aligned with the texts. Three strokes express the plural in Egyptian; in their obliquity, they resemble the grains determinative $\text{ }^{\circ}\text{ }^{\circ}\text{ }^{\circ}$ (Gardiner's sign list: M 33). One stroke has an ideographic function. The simplicity of the signs could be the reason they were written alone, without the phonetic signs of words.

The order of executing the signs is difficult to determine because the inscriptions are not clearly readable and complete. The dating of the sherd to the period when the Egyptian was no longer in use and understood explains the problems with grasping the sense of the text. However, the writer tried to correctly reproduce the order of the signs in the columns and the line. Thus, the copying of an original text taken out of its context, like a legend from a tomb or stela, has to be taken into consideration. The scratching of the signs could allude to the sunk relief of the original, but can also be accidental. (E.K.)

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¹⁰ However, it refers also to other places and is in use till the Saite Period, see J. ČERNÝ, A Community of Workman at Thebes in the Ramesside Period, *BdE* 50, Le Caire 2001², pp. 35–67.

¹¹ For writing the name in front of the adverbial phrase in titles, see B. KROEBER, Die Neuägyptizismen vor der Amarnazeit. Studien zur Entwicklung der ägyptischen Sprache vom Mittleren zum Neuen Reich, Tübingen 1970, pp. 209–211.

¹² Also known from the Nineteenth Dynasty, the scribe Ramose (i), see B.G. DAVIES, Who's Who at Deir el-Medina. A Prosopographic Study of the Royal Workmen's Community, *EgUit* XIII, Leiden 1999, pp. 303–304.