

# Early Alphabetic Writing and its correspondence to New Kingdom Hieratic. Considering a BI-graphic sequence of signs on an ostracon from the New Kingdom

## مناظرة الأبجدية المبكرة بالكتابة الهيروغليفية في ضوء مجموعة من العلامات ثنائية الكتابة الواردة على إحدى كسرات الدولة الحديثة

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### ملخص

يتناول البحث تلك الكسرة الفخارية التي عثر عليها في وادي الملكات غربي طيبة، ويعتقد أن علامات تلك الكسرة تمثل نموذجًا للكتابة الأبجدية التي ترجع إرهاباتها الأولى إلى عصر الدولة الوسطى حسب أحدث الأبحاث العلمية. وهي تشبه في ذلك الكسرة الأخرى التي عثر عليها أيضًا في طيبة في مقبرة المدعوسن نفري من عصر الدولة الحديثة وتظهر ترتيب حروف كتابة تخص أبجدية سامية شمالية غربية يطلق عليها أبجدية 'هلحم'، وهي الحروف الأربعة الأولى التي وردت في سلسلة حروف الأبجدية السامية الشمالية (ه، ل، ح، م)، وتم استخدامها كما لو كانت مثل 'أبجد هوز'.

و طرحًا للسؤال عن كيفية تناول الكتبة المصريين لنظم الكتابة الأجنبية في الدولة الحديثة بغرض فهمها وتعلمها يعتقد الباحث أن هذه الكسرة بالإضافة إلى النصوص المسماة التعليمية من تل العمارنة تمثل دليلًا هامًا لتوضيح ذلك. كما أنه يرى أن العلامات الموجودة على كسرة وادي الملكات هذه هي محاولة تدريبية من أحد كتاب الدولة الحديثة لمقاربة الكتابة الأبجدية بالكتابة الهيروغليفية المصرية.

According to recent research, alphabetic writing was invented during the Middle Kingdom within the sphere of cross cultural contact between Semitic-speaking nomads and the Egyptian expeditions to south-western Sinai<sup>1</sup>. Furthermore, looking at individual objects in a close reading, we can understand an 18<sup>th</sup> Dynasty ostrakon from the tomb of Sennefer as an adaptation of alphabetic writing into the Egyptian culture of writing in the New Kingdom. It shows the southwest-Semitic *Halaḥam* sequence of letters<sup>2</sup> translated into Egyptian Hieratic<sup>3</sup>.

This new ‘alphabetic’ (or should we say *Halaḥamic*) understanding of the ostrakon from the Theban tomb of Sennefer<sup>4</sup> opens a new window to look at the history of early alphabetic writing from an Egyptian perspective. This specific example does not stand entirely isolated in New Kingdom of Egypt. Another ostrakon from the *Valley of the Queens* (Fig. 1), which has already been discussed occasionally<sup>5</sup>, seems to allow a far more coherent reading and understanding within the history of early alphabetic writing than had been previously assumed. I would suggest reading the bottom line as hieratic script corresponding to the top line containing alphabetic letters. Furthermore, both lines can be seen as closely linked in intertextual or even intratextual relation. Thus, we might think of some kind of advanced school text, but unfortunately any archaeological context is lacking for the ostrakon.



(Fig. 1) Mixed alphabetic–hieratic ostrakon from the *Valley of the Queens*.

For any attempts of interpretation, we should consider the layout and the framing lines indicating a certain demarcation between the two distinctly different types of writing on the ostrakon.

The upper line contains alphabet letters (Fig. 2).



Ostrakon	Alphabet letters	Letter names
		Alef
	m (also forms rotated by 90 degrees <sup>6</sup> )	Mem
	possible miswriting connected with the next letter <sup>7</sup>	∅
		Taw



(Fig. 2) Signs from the ostrakon and their equation with early alphabet letters.

Furthermore, we notice the following correspondences between the signs in the two lines on this ostrakon (Fig. 3).

Alphabetic writing	Egyptian–Hieratic	Hieratic forms for comparison
	abbreviation of  8	
	∅	∅
		closer:

(Fig. 3) Alphabetic–hieratic correspondences on the ostrakon.


For a palaeographic dating, it may be pointed out that the hieratic form of the *m* () is booked particularly for the time of Ramses III–IX, while the sign Sitting man with hand on his mouth has particularly good forms for comparison during the time of Ramses III<sup>12</sup>. This paleographic dating fits very well with the location in which the ostrakon was found, in the *Valley of the Queens*. Compared with the standard hieratic forms, the sign of the Sitting man with hand on his mouth  shows a higher degree of figurativeness. Here, the head is shown with a rather distinct eye. Concerning the drawing of the eye, there is a correspondence with the bovine head (the Alef), just coincidence or probably intention?

The scribe chose rather similar hieratic forms as equivalents to the alphabet letters. This is particularly obvious for the *m*, but even the sign *Sitting man with hands on his mouth* shows similarities to the bovine head when turned around 90 degrees  > , just coincidence or probably intention too?

Nevertheless, these formal similarities between the signs constitute only secondary formal correspondences chosen by the Egyptian scribe because the original alphabet letters and the earliest examples known from Serabit el Khadim were clearly based on other hieroglyphic prototypes, including, in many cases an acrophonic derivation within the Semitic language<sup>13</sup>. Thus, we can expect a reinterpretation of the primary alphabet letters within the horizon of a scribe trained in Egyptian New Kingdom hieratic script.

Both lines on the ostrakon show the following sequence of letters *ʔ+m+t*, one in alphabetic letters and the other in hieratic script. They might encode either the common Semitic root *ʔmt*<sup>14</sup> or a kind of consonantal skeleton with the first letter of the alphabet (Alef), a middle letter (Mem) and the final alphabet letter (Taw), indeed the scribe may even have combined both these aspects on the ostrakon<sup>15</sup>.

We have no additional information to determine the cultural identity of the anonymous scribe, but it seems safe to assume a scribe trained in Hieratic who searched deliberately for hieratic correspondences to the shape of Semitic alphabet letters. Another interesting feature is the miswriting of the letter

*Taw* which was then corrected in a second attempt (third and fourth letter). Indeed, this sign has some similarities to forms such as  (*sign list* N 14), but this choice probably was not considered to be appropriate by the scribe. Thus, we might assume the scribe to have been more familiar with Hieratic than alphabetic writing, and this assumption fits nicely with the observation that the scribe of this ostrakon appears to have chosen hieratic signs with formal similarities to the alphabet letters.

In addition to the 18<sup>th</sup> Dynasty cuneiform school texts from Tell El Amarna<sup>16</sup>, this ostrakon from the Theban Valley of the Queens provides important evidence for the question of how Egyptian scribes in the New Kingdom approached foreign writing systems to understand and probably learn them. While Akkadian cuneiform was used as a *lingua franca* in Late Bronze Age diplomacy in the Ancient Near East<sup>17</sup>, the interest of the Egyptian scribes in alphabetic writing might have been fostered more by intellectual curiosity and probably a more individual approach to a certain foreign writing system.

In addition to the HalaḤam–ostrakon from the tomb of Sennefri<sup>18</sup>, the ostrakon under discussion is another important document for the usage of alphabetic writing during the New Kingdom/Late Bronze Age. It is approximately 100 years earlier, but was found in the Theban area as well. Overall that is not very much, but it is enough to demonstrate the knowledge and usage of alphabetic writing in New Kingdom Thebes. Thus, the two ostraca can be analysed as examples for the early distribution of alphabetic writing which arguably originated in Serabit el Khadim<sup>19</sup>.

Furthermore, it is interesting to note the rather high degree of figurativeness of the signs on this ostrakon from 13/12 century BCE. Looking at the palaeography of early alphabetic writing, we may assume that for the second half of the second millennium BCE a more figurative and a more cursive version of the alphabetic writing would have been used side by side.

## Notes

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- 1 Most recently: L. Morenz, ‘Sinai und Alphabetschrift’, as *Studia Sinaitica* 3 (in press).
  - 2 The initial four letters hlhm may be understood as a mnemonic device meaning “the bread”. This might correspond to northwest-Semitic alphabet or *abgad* which might be interpreted as meaning *abu* father followed by *gad* “grandfather”, discussion in L. Morenz, ‘Die Genese der Alphabetschrift. Ein Markstein ägyptisch-kanaanäischer Kulturkontakte’, *Kulturgeschichtliche Beiträge zur Ägyptologie* 3 (Würzburg, 2011), 215. For the relationship of the two different “alphabetic” sequences cf. F. Kammerzell, ‘Die Entstehung der Alphabetreihe. Zum ägyptischen Ursprung der semitischen und westlichen Schriften’, *LingAeg Studia Monographica* 3 (Göttingen, 2001), 117–158.
  - 3 Discovered by B. Haring, ‘Halaḥam on an Ostrakon of the Early New Kingdom?’, *JNES* 74 (2015), 189–196. Building on that brilliant article is H.W. Fischer-Elfert, M. Krebernik, *Zu den Buchstabennamen auf dem Halaḥam Ostrakon aus TT 99 Grab des Senneferi*, 2016; Morenz, *Studia Sinaitica* 3 (in print). Ein frühes Alphabetexperiment aus dem ägyptischen Neuen Reich – wie und warum?
  - 4 N. Strudwick, ‘The Theban Tomb of Senneferi’, *Memnonia* 11 (2000), 241–266.
  - 5 Introduced into scientific discussion already by J. Leibovitch, ‘Recent Discoveries and Developments in Protosinaitic’, *ASAE* 40 (1940), 119f; B. Sass, *The Genesis of the Alphabet and Its Development in the Second Millennium B.C.*, *ÄAT* 13 (Wiesbaden, 1988), 104. Wrote: ‘However this is merely a hieratic ostrakon with some non-hieratic signs, which are probably workmen’s identification marks’. Most recently Orly Goldwasser, ‘From the Iconic to the Linear—The Egyptian Scribes of Lachish and the Modification of the Early Alphabet in the Late Bronze Age’, in I. Finkelstein, C. Robin, T. Römer (eds.), *Alphabets, Texts and Artifacts in the Ancient Near East, Studies presented to Benjamin Sass* (Paris, 2016), 139, suggested concerning the first line, Sass’ identification with workmen’s marks would not work out. Looking at the early alphabetic repertoire, three out of four signs are easy to understand as alphabetic letters while the remaining are problematic. Concerning the second line of three letters she wrote ‘The lower part of this ostrakon seems to present signs written, again, in a ‘non-Egyptian’ style but not fitting any known letters of the Canaanite alphabet’. In contrast I’d rather understand the three signs to be distinctly hieratic.
  - 6 One of the earliest sources is the Lachish-ewer (Sass, *The Genesis of the Alphabet and Its Development in the Second Millennium B.C.*, *ÄAT* 13, 60f. und Fig. 156–160) while the two supposedly alphabetic inscriptions from Wadi el Hol might be still older; for the rotated *Mem*-sign cf. G.J. Hamilton, *The Origins of the West Semitic Alphabet in Egyptian Scripts, The Catholic Biblical Quarterly Monograph Series* 40, (Washington, D.C., 2006), 140f.
  - 7 This sign was probably miswritten by the scribe, then immediately corrected in a second attempt as a *Taw*, so we do not necessarily have to consider it for further interpretation.
  - 8 This was a typical usage in hieratic writing during the New Kingdom; also in writings of Semitic words, J. Hoch, *Semitic Words in Egyptian Texts of the New Kingdom and Third Intermediate Period* (Princeton, 1994), 506.
  - 9 For this form and similar ones, see Möller, *Hieratische Paläographie II*, 565. Formally, the shape fits nicely but it does not lead directly to the sound *t*.
  - 10 This sign can be compared structurally, but it does not show a proper cross. Its hieroglyphic equivalent is (Möller, *Hieratische Paläographie II*, 317, Lederhs).
  - 11 K.T. Zauzich, *Hieroglyphen mit Geheimnis. Neue Erkenntnisse zur Entstehung unseres Alphabets* (Darmstadt 2015), 80, derived the alphabetic letter from the hieroglyph *STAR* (*Sign-list* N 14, = *sb3/dw3*) but the hypothetical hieratic prototype does not show a proper cross: Möller, *Hieratische Paläographie II*, 314. So it does not fit palaeographics to the earliest forms of the letter *Taw* (cf. the variants from the inscription S 346 from Serabit el Khadim).
  - 12 S. Wimmer, *Hieratische Paläographie der nicht-literarischen Ostraka der 19. und 20. Dynastie Band 2, Ägypten und Altes Testament* 28/1.2 (Wiesbaden, 1995), 129 und 10.

- 13 Morenz, *Kulturgeschichtliche Beiträge zur Ägyptologie* 3; most recently: Morenz, *Studia Sinaitica* 3, in press.
- 14 Here we might think of a variety of meanings, especially *ämät* = steadiness (and various similar meanings).
- 15 We might not even have to rule out B. Sass interpretation as ‘Workmen’s Marks’ entirely, but when following along this path we would have to interpret the usage of three Semitic letters as marks of identification which would have been translated into Egyptian writing. This assumption does not seem impossible, but it is not very likely, and even this scenario would point to the knowledge and usage of alphabetic script by an Egyptian scribe in the Theban area during the New Kingdom.
- 16 Y. Wiechmann, *Mesopotamische Schreibertraditionen in Ägypten* (Bonn, 2016).
- 17 M. Liverani, *Prestige and Interest* (Padua, 1990).
- 18 Haring, *JNES* 74, 189–196.
- 19 Morenz, *Studia Sinaitica* 3, in press.

