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HIERATIC IS BEAUTIFUL: ANCIENT EGYPTIAN CALLIGRAPHY REVISITED

A recent excellent book entitled *Ancient Egyptian Calligraphy*[1] makes it clear in the subtitle that for the author—a deservedly outstanding authority on ancient Egyptian writing and art—"Egyptian calligraphy" ("beautiful writing") means the writing of the *hieroglyphic* script. This reflects the overwhelming response of western Egyptologists to Egyptian writing, a response very much in keeping with that of their Renaissance and Classical forebears.[2] In this attraction to, or exaltation of, the hieroglyphs as epitomizing the aesthetic dimension of ancient Egyptian writing, ancient observers and later scholars are ostensibly following the lead of the ancient Egyptians themselves, as the hieroglyphs are the "decorative," "artistic," "monumental" script *par excellence*, permeating artistic production in every medium and on every scale.[3] (The hieroglyphs are also by far the most publicly prominent and accessible—indeed omnipresent—of the ancient scripts as encountered by all travelers to Egypt, ancient, modern and in between.) It has thus been easy to overlook or even ignore the role of the *hieratic* script (Figure 1) as the one which, for most educated Egyptians of the Pharaonic period, probably would have loomed as the primary embodiment of "calligraphy" in their immediate experience and practice. The most explicit realization of, or receptivity to, this dimension of hieratic by an Egyptologist thus far is expressed by James F. Romano in a recent survey of Egyptian writing intended for an audience of professional scribes:

> Deftly moving his brush over the papyrus, the scribe produced rounded forms that, in the earliest stages of hieratic, were merely schematic forms of their original hieroglyphic paradigms. Eventually, however, the same aesthetic standards reflected in hieroglyphic writing began to influence hieratic as well. Several late hieratic texts achieve an ornateness and sophistication of design that prefigures by at least a millennium the finest Arabic calligraphy.[4]

We suggest that this assessment characterizes many more texts covering a far longer period.

The prevailing tendency to give something of a short shrift to hieratic is facilitated and reinforced by major habits and priorities of modern study:

1) Egyptologists publish, and initially study and learn to read, the mass of hieratic literary texts, documents, "technical" texts, graffiti, rock inscriptions and occasional stelae, as well as the important hieratic component of the mortuary literature, in *hieroglyphic transcription* (though the *editio*

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FIGURE 1.
A Sample of Egyptian Hieratic Writing

princeps includes photographs or facsimilies as well), fostering the misleading impression that most Egyptian writing in the Pharaonic period was done "in hieroglyphs," and diverting attention (including our own!) from the hieratic originals;[5]

2) Egyptologists learn to *read* hieratic, *transcribe* it into hieroglyphs, *copy* it intelligibly, and *date* it palaeographically and orthographically, but not really *write* it;[6]

3) Unlike the ancient Egyptian scribal students themselves[7], Egyptologists learn to read hieroglyphs *first*, and *only then* hieratic (which, even after it is introduced, is often not a major focus of the curriculum).

The manner in which Egyptian writing is normally introduced is conducive to another misleading impression, namely, that hieroglyphs are somehow "self-explanatory" and are also sufficient to "explain" what is found in hieratic—though Egyptologists have really known better, as much of the literature cited here indicates. In fact, the coexistence, interpenetration, and reciprocal influence of the two scripts is considerable and results in many features of specific hieroglyphic texts, as well as many commonly-used signs and orthographies, that need to be "explained" by hieratic.[8] In an important recent study, Parlebas shows how this "feedback" from hieratic forms even influences iconography:

> . . . ce qui nous semble le plus remarquable est l'opposition tranchée entre le caractère volontaire et conscient de l'utilisation des signes hiéroglyphiques proprement dits, en tant que signes exacts et précis, pour expliciter l'iconographie, d'une part, et d'autre part la manière inconsciente par laquelle, par le biais de mauvaises lectures ou de lectures approximatives de signes cursifs peu précis, l'iconographie traditionelle a pu être profondemment modifiée.[9]

The expansion of the sphere of hieratic into monumental texts is a significant aspect of the history of that script,[10] although in said domain the hieroglyphs always reigned supreme (finally to be joined by *demotic* in the well-known "bi-" or "trilingual" inscriptions such as the Rosetta Stone). The importance and influence of hieratic beyond the borders of Egypt has been noted in the use of hieratic numerals on Iron Age Hebrew ostraca,[11] and hieratic has been suggested as a possible model for sign-forms and values of both the Ugaritic and "linear" Canaanite alphabets,[12] though that has not represented a consensus.

Recent Egyptological work has been characterized by a (most welcome and overdue) increasing sensitivity to the *visual* and, one might say, *metaphonetic* aspects of Egyptian writing.[13] While this has mainly focused on the *hieroglyphic script*, the visual dimension of hieratic has occasionally been

noted, for example by Foster in his discussion of the multi-layered endeavor of translating the Late Egyptian love songs (which, though written in hieratic, as he discusses at length, he nonetheless characterizes as "*Hieroglyphic* Love Songs" in the title of his article!)[14] Though Te Velde considers that "the hieratic and demotic was (*sic*) developed . . . to meet the practical need of rapid writing,"[15] and that in hieratic "the pictorial character of Egyptian writing is hardly recognizable,"[16] he discusses the signs used in the *incipit* of Papyrus Prisse (a Middle Kingdom literary hieratic text) giving full scope to the determinatives as encoding/conveying "metalinguistic" information (i.e., semantic/visual information transcending what he regards as the fundamental identity/meaning of the word).[17] (His judgment that the logograms, as opposed to the determinatives, "do(es) not seem to add much extra- or metalinguistic information to the strict linguistic information"[18] has nothing to do with the use of hieratic *per se* but hinges on his definition of "metalinguistic.")

Insofar as the use of hieratic signs is affected by the modification/ "mutilation" and avoidance of certain signs and types of signs in some mortuary and religious contexts, a phenomenon mainly studied by Lacau,[19] the "semographic" content or nature of the signs is being treated as important. The "mutilated" representation of the snake/inimical snake determinative, with knives on each of its upraised coils, is attested—sparsely—in hieratic beginning in the 21st Dynasty, when the orbit of hieratic expanded to include an appreciable corpus of mortuary papyri (though some of these were still written in hieroglyphs through the Graeco-Roman period).[20] For the avoidance/substitution of signs, *orthography* must be examined carefully, and *context* is of paramount importance, as the phenomena observed and studied by Lacau are characterized by *mortuary* contexts, uses in the *tomb* and parts of the tomb, and *proximity* to the deceased.[21] Other special cases of such "singling out" of signs include the avoidence of signs connotative of the traditional religion and deities at Amarna,[22] avoidance of the name/hieroglyph of the god *Set* at Abydos,[23] and, in the Old Kingdom, avoidance of logographic/determined writings of divine names within private theophores.[24] Many of these uses have been and would be found primarily in hieroglyphic texts, but is also necessary to make a thorough study of mortuary/religious literature in hieratic; the latter must be defined to include some exemplars of the *Coffin Texts*, which are about a millennium earlier than the post-New Kingdom introduction of well-attested hieratic mortuary papyri, and some of which were part of the material originally studied by Lacau.[25]

How fitting a culmination to the history of hieratic that in the Graeco-Roman period, in the words of Gilbert Bagnani,[26]

> The great majority of the scribes could not read the earlier scripts (i.e., *including hieratic*—ESM), although they were able to write and perhaps understand them, or, to put it less paradoxically, they knew the meanings of the various words and signs but were not able to render them phonetically. *Their knowledge was purely visual and mnemonic*. (!—our emphasis.)

The specifically visual content of signs can be highlighted even in *demotic*,[27] despite the further attenuation or dilution of the visual aspect of that script.[28] That, however, is perhaps a subject for another study.

Having amply illustrated the visual component and "visual connection" of hieratic throughout its history, and the change and growth that the visual/"semographic" aspect of that script was capable of manifesting in the larger context of the development of Egyptian writing and scribal traditions of the Egyptian language, let us proceed now to focus on what might more narrowly be understood as the *calligraphic* dimension of hieratic.

This is seen most fundamentally in the scribal hands themselves, their general execution as well as the often beautiful and powerful renditions of individual signs and groups. Especially eye-catching for the modern observer are (e.g.) those representing living things.[29] The overall effect, however, is far from limited to isolated individual signs but clearly indicates expert and cultivated styles. Looking at many administrative as well as literary/"liturgical" hands, the point is made indelibly that it falls far short of reality to regard hieratic merely as a utilitarian exercise or a concession to the need for a cursive script (though it was certainly treated as such by unimaginative scribes of varying degrees of mere competence, or the absence thereof).[30] The teachers who "corrected" their pupils' sign-forms were teaching not merely accuracy but elegance.[31]

It is this writer's firm conviction that hieratic texts would richly repay a study by scholars specializing in calligraphy as it is practiced in living traditions such as Chinese, Japanese and Arabic, in terms of the actual execution of the texts with the appropriate writing materials, the strokes involved in the making of given signs and sign-groups, etc.—a study which the present writer can recommend but unfortunately, at least at this point, is not qualified to pursue.[32]

We can, however, draw attention to a scribal practice employed in the writing of hieratic that can be regarded as "calligraphic," that is, motivated by the desire to enhance the appearance of the text, to beautify the script (and perhaps thus underscore, as it were, the proficiency of the scribe). One obvious such feature is the elongation of signs in some exemplars of epistolary formulae (e.g., in the Hekanakhte Letters),[33] reminiscent of the elongated or attenuated letters found in Hebrew and Arabic calligraphy.

The boast of the proud ancient Egyptian scribe, *ink sš ikr n(y) ḏb^{c} w·f* "I am a scribe whose fingers are excellent/skillful/pleasing" (sometimes translated "nimble"),[34] would not seem to have applied merely to speed, accuracy, reliability, or efficiency.

NOTES

"Hieratic is beautiful" is a spontaneous comment of a first-year student of Egyptian at the Institute for the History of Ancient Civilizations, Northeast Normal University, Changchun, China. The writer thanks Ms. Mary Gow and the staff of the Wilbour Library of Egyptology and Department of Egyptian, Classical and Ancient Middle Eastern Art of the Brooklyn Museum, for promptly and cheerfully providing many references and copies of publications as yet unobtainable in China. Without their help this article could not have been completed.

1H.G. Fischer, *Ancient Egyptian Calligraphy: A Beginner's Guide to Writing Hieroglyphs*, New York, 1979.

2E. Iversen, *The Myth of Egypt and Its Hieroglyphs in European Tradition*, Copenhagen, 1961; *idem*, "The Hieroglyphic Tradition," in J.R. Harris, ed., *The Legacy of Egypt*, 2nd ed. (Oxford, 1971), pp. 170-196; M. Pope, *The Story of Archaeological Decipherment from Egyptian Hieroglyphs to Linear B* (New York, 1975), Pt. 1, "The Egyptian Hieroglyphs," pp. 11 - 84.

3For an excellent overview see W.V. Davies, *Egyptian Hieroglyphs* (Reading the Past), Berkeley-Los Angeles-London, 1987.

4J.M. Romano, "The Scribe and Writing in Ancient Egypt," *Journal of the Society of Scribes* 1.2 (Spring/Summer, 1986):12f.

5Cf. the present writer, "Remarks on ancient Egyptian writing with emphasis on its mnemonic aspects," in P.A. Kolers, et al., ed., *Processing of Visible Language 2* (NATO Conference Series, Series III: Human Factors. Vol. 13, New York-London, 1980), p. 60; Davies, op. cit., pp. 21-23. It is an interesting phenomenon in the history of Egyptological taste that briefly, in the late 19th Century, a hieratic type font (based on a New Kingdom/Late Egyptian literary hand) was employed.

6The most fundamental literature comprises: G. Möller, *Hieratische Paläographie* (3 vols.), Leipzig, 1909/27/36, reprinted 1965; *idem*, *Hieratische Lesestücke für den akademischen Gebrauch* 1-3, Berlin, 1927 (1-2)/35 (3), reprinted 1961; H. Goedicke, *Old Hieratic Palaeography*, Baltimore, 1988; E. Dévaud, *L'age des papyrus hiératiques d'après les graphies de certains mots*, Paris, 1924; G. Posener, "L'écriture hiératique," in *Textes et langages de l'Égypte pharaonique* 1 (*Bibliologue d'Etude* 64/1, Cairo, [1973]), pp. 25-30. The correct understanding of a text or of a grammatical form often hinges on the correct understanding of hieratic signs; e.g., *idem*, "Notes de transcription," *Revue d'Egyptologie* 28 (1976):146-148; J.W.B. Barns, "Some Readings and Interpretations in Sundry Egyptian Texts," 3. "*Sinuhe*, B 23-4, (Blackman, *Middle Egyptian Studies*, p. 13, line 11)," *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 58 (1972):160f. J.J. Janssen, "On Style in Egyptian Handwriting," *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 73 (1987):161-167, attempts to identify *individual hands* in Ramesside hieratic, a type of study that can lead to a greater appreciation of the individual scribe as *calligrapher* (cf. below). Many text editions contain excellent palaeographies and palaeographical/orthographic comments.

7R.J. Williams, "Scribal Training in Ancient Egypt," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 92 (1972):219; the writer, *op. cit.*, p. 61.

[8]Ibid., pp. 58-61; Davies, *op. cit.*; H. Satzinger, "Hieratisch," *Lexikon der Ägyptologie* II 1187-1189.

[9]J. Parlebas, "Écriture idéographique, écriture cursive et iconographie dans l'Égypte pharaonique," in *Méthodologie iconographique. Actes du colloque de Strasbourg 1979* (Strasbourg, 1981), p. 110.

[10]A. Leahy, "The Libyan Period in Egypt: An Essay in Interpretation," *Libyan Studies* 16 (1985):60 and the literature there cited.

[11]E.g., R. Cohen, "The Excavations at Kadesh-Barnea (1976-78)," *Biblical Archaeologist* 44.2 (Spring 1981):93-107, esp. "Addendum" 105-107.

[12]C.T. Hodge, "The Hieratic Origin of the Ugaritic Alphabet," *Anthropological Linguistics* 11 (1969):277-289; G.R. Driver, *Semitic Writing from Pictograph to Alphabet*, 3rd ed., revised by S.A. Hopkins (London, 1976), pp. 129f. with p. 130, n. 1.

[13]The writer, *op. cit.*, pp. 43-66; Davies, *op. cit., passim;* H. Te Velde, "Egyptian Hieroglyphs as Signs, Symbols and Gods," *Visible Religion* 4-5 (1986):63-72; *idem*, "Egyptian Hieroglyphs as Linguistic Signs and Metalinguistic Informants," *Visible Religion* 6 (1988):169 - 179; Parlebas, *op. cit.*, pp. 107-113; J.M. James, "Signs in Ancient Egypt: Another Look at the Relation of Figure to Hieroglyph," *Visible Language* 14 (1980):52-61; P. Vernus, "Jeux d'écriture dans la civilisation pharaonique," *Littoral* 2 (Oct. 1981):21-32; H.G. Fischer, *L'écriture et l'art de l'Egypte ancienne*, Paris, 1986.

[14]J.L. Foster, "On Translating Hieroglyphic Love Songs." I, *Chicago Review* 23/2 (1971): 70-94; II, 23/3 (1972): 95-113, esp. I pp. 75-78, II pp. 103f. (23/2:66-69 and 23/3:93f. are also material to the article).

[15]Te Velde, *Visible Religion* 6 (1988):171.

[16]Ibid.

[17]Ibid.:174-176. P.T. Daniels questions Te Velde's use of this passage because it is in hieratic and he accordingly regards the visual dimension as dubious (review of *Visible Religion* 6 in *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 100 (1990):333), a view the present writer considers to represent a sort of amputation of hieratic from the living body of classical Egyptian writing—a living body whose integrity is essentially recognized and understood by Te Velde.

[18]Te Velde, *op. cit.*:175. This writer does not quite see eye-to-eye with Professor Te Velde's distinction between words written with logogams and with "phonograms" + determinatives, nor with his classification of the information supplied by determinatives as "metalinguistic," but prefers to regard them both as providing *metaphonetic* information. His mention of words written with "ideograms" + determinatives brings up an interesting "gray area." This set of issues goes beyond the bounds of the present study.

[19]"Suppression et modification de signes dans les textes funéraires," *Zeitschrift für Ägyptische Sprache* 51 (1913):1-64; *idem* , "Suppression des noms divins dans les textes de la chambre funéraire," *Annales du Service des Antiquités de l'Egypte* 26 (1926):69-81. Cf. Davies, *op. cit.*, p. 19; Te Vende, *Visible Religion* 4-5:66f.

[20]Möller, *Paläographie* II, p. 23 no. 249; III, p. 23 no. 249, examples from the Book of the Dead belonging to Nedjmet (21st Dynasty) and Papyrus Bremner-Rhind (4th Cent. BCE) respectively. (For Middle Kingdom mortuary papyri, see n. 25 below.)

[21]For a possibly analogous observation regarding representations of animals in Old Kingdom tombs, see K. Weeks, "Art, Word, and the Egyptian World View," in *idem*, ed., *Egyptology and the Social Sciences: Five Studies* (Cairo, 1979), pp. 59-81; cf. the review by the present writer in *Journal of the Society for the Study of Egyptian Antiquities* 11 (1981):111-114. For the use of the "West" hieroglyph with and without the perching hawk in Old Kingdom tombs, see J.R. Ogdon, "The IMNT-Sign: The meaning and history of a symbol," *Serapis* 7 (1981-82):61-70; and *idem*, "A further remark on the symbolism of the IMNT-Sign," ibid.:70-73.

[22]E.g., F. Behnk, *Grammatik der Texte aus El Amarna*, Paris, 1930; this writer, "Glossary of Amenophis IV-Akhenaten's Karnak *Talatat*," in D.B. Redford, *et al.*, *The Akhenaten Temple Project* Vol. 2, *Rwd-Mnw and Inscriptions* (Aegypti Texta Propositaque 1), Toronto, 1988. The hieratic material from (the) Amarna (period) needs of course to be included with the hieroglyphic; cf. the collection of M. Sandman, *Texts from the Time of Akhenaten* (Bibliotheca Aegyptiaca 8), Brussels, 1938.

[23]E.g., for the writing of the name "Sety," K. Lange and M. Hirmer, *et al.*, *Egypt: Architecture, Sculpture, Paintng in Three Thousand Years*, 4th ed. (London-New York, 1968), Pls. 225-229, XLVIII-LI. For a general discussion of the treatment of the *Set*-animal in hieroglyphic writing (sometimes subsuming hieratic), see Te Velde, *Visible Religion* 4-5:67-71.

[24]E.G., H.G. Fischer, "Two Replies," 2. "An Emblematic Reference to the Name of *Hzy/Hzy - Rc*," *Göttinger Miszellen* 49 (1981):28-31.

[25]For the hieratic, not merely "cursive hieroglyphic" nature of some of the cursive CT material, cf. J.P. Allen, "The Funerary Texts of King Wahkare Akhtoy on a Middle Kingdom Coffin," in *Studies in Honor of George R. Hughes* (Studies in Ancient Oriental Civilization 39, Chicago, 1976), pp. 1-29; J.F. Borghouts, "An Early Book of Gates, *Coffin Texts*, spell 336," in J.H. Kamstra, *et al.*, ed., *Funerary Symbols and Religion. Essays Dedicated to Professor M.S. H.G. Heerma van Voss* (Kampen, 1988), pp. 12-22. Note that Middle Kingdon funerary papyri are known though very rare, and include the use of hieratic: Borghouts, "A New Middle Kingdom Netherworld Guide," in S. Schoske, ed., *Akten des Vierten Internationalen Ägyptologen - kongresses München 1985*, vol. 3 (*Beitreft, Studien zur Altägyptischen Kultur* 3, Hamburg, 1988), pp. 131-139.

[26]G. Bagnani, "The Transcription of Late Hieratic," *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 19 (1935):166.

[27]One example is the treatment of the snake sign in the word *dt* "eternity"—the "phonogram" *d*, not a determinative or (superficially at any rate) a "logogram"—in several demotic religious texts, discussed by N.J. Reich, "An Abbreviated Demotic Book of the Dead. A Palaeographical Study of Papyrus British Museum 10072," *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 17 (1931):89; cf. this writer, "Three Notes on Late Texts," 3. "The Snake in I Khamwas Once Again," *Varia Aegyptica 5#4* (1989):214.

[28]Te Velde, *Visible Religion* 6:171; cf. the writer, "Remarks on ancient Egyptian writing," pp. 59-62; Davies, *op. cit.*, p. 24. (As a further illustration of some modern reactions to the different ancient Egyptian scripts, note the disparaging and even contemptuous dismissal of demotic by Romano, *op. cit.*:13, for whom it "lacked any of the elegance of the other two

scripts, and has been referred to, somewhat pejoratively, by one modern scholar as ancient Egyptian chicken scratches"—a supreme insult generally reserved for cuneiform. To this writer's mind/eye, even the ostracon that Dr. Romano reproduces as his Figure 6 belies that assessment.)

[29]See Möller, *Paläographie* and *Lesestücke, passim;* also, for a vivid juxtaposition of handwriting of notable Egyptians of the 26th Dynasty, R.A. Parker, *A Saite Oracle Papyrus from Thebes in the Brooklyn Museum (Pap. Brooklyn 47.218.3)*, Brown Egyptological Studies 4, Providence, 1962 (cf. Davies, *op. cit.*, fig. 28). Cf. also Janssen, *op. cit.*

[30]That we Egyptologists have been aware of these gradations is shown by the kind of comments one finds in editions of hieratic texts—e.g., A.H. Gardiner, *Late-Egyptian Stories* (Bibliotheca Aegyptiaca 1, Brussels, 1932), pp. IXf., XII, XIVf.; R.A. Caminos, *A Tale of Woe: Papyrus Pushkin 127* (Oxford, 1977), p. 3. (Sometimes the evaluation of the quality of handwriting is based merely on the convenience of legibility to the modern scholar. To a large extent, the writer suspects that we—and he includes himself!—are in the position of the proverbial museum-goer who says, "I don't know much about art, but I know what I like!")

[31]Cf. Davies, *op. cit.*, fig. 35.

[32]Several such studies are included, and referred to, in *Visible Religion* 6, *The Image in Writing*.

[33]T.G.H. James, *The Hekanakhte Papers and Other Early Middle Kingdom Documents* (Metropolitan Museum of Art Egyptian Expedition Publications, Vol. 19, New York, 1962), P1. XVIII.

[34]A.H. Gardiner, *Egyptian Grammar*, 3rd ed. (Oxford, 1957), §95 with n. 3; for the word *ikr*, see R.O. Faulkner, *A Concise Dictionary of Middle Egyptian* (Oxford, 1962), pp. 31f.