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Of marks and meaning : a palaeographic, semiotic-cognitive, and comparative analysis of the identity marks from Deir el-Medina.

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OF MARKS AND MEANING

A PALAEOGRAPHIC, SEMIOTIC-COGNITIVE, AND COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE IDENTITY MARKS FROM DEIR EL-MEDINA

Proefschrift

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door

Kyra Valeska Jorinda van der Moezel

geboren te Vleuten

in 1987

'In the process of reasoning, signs fulfill the function of useful and necessary tools since they serve as an 'abbreviation' of the more complex semantic concepts which they represent'

Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz
Paraphrased in Nöth, Handbook of Semiotics, 22

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FOREWORD

THE DISSERTATION that lies before you concerns the workmen's identity marks from Deir el-Medina. Deir el-Medina is the modern name for the site of the New Kingdom village on the West Bank of ancient Thebes, which housed the workmen who constructed the royal tombs in the Valley of the Kings and the Valley of the Queens. Deir el-Medina is known among Egyptologists for the major corpus of written documentation on all sorts of topics including private business, legal matters, religious and literary texts as well as administration of the work in the Theban Necropolis. The number of documents that derive from the village is truly unsurpassed. The reason for this, as well as for their good state of preservation, is first of all the fact that the village lay isolated in the desert protected from the more humid conditions in the Nile Valley. A second important fact is that the village was only inhabited for a certain period of time and was left untouched after abandonment. Therefore, the site itself remained well-preserved, which provided us with a wealth of archaeological material as well. On the basis of these rich documentary and archaeological sources, not only the work carried out by the Necropolis workmen can be studied in more detail than anywhere else in Egypt, also the personal life of the villagers reveals itself in all its facets. They appeared to have been active artisans, writers, and businessmen, who lived their daily lives working, settling business or arguments with other villagers, practicing religion and celebrating feasts. Their lives are known to a great degree of detail.

Construction of the village began under Thutmosis I, the period to which we can date the earliest evidence concerning the history of Deir el-Medina.[1] With a hiatus during the Amarna period the village was inhabited until the reign of Ramesses XI. The lifespan of habitation in Deir el-Medina is therewith estimated from approximately 1550 to 1070 BCE. During this timespan the workmen made intensive use of marks to convey their identity on ostraca, pottery, tools and all kinds of domestic and funerary objects, as well as in graffiti throughout the Theban Mountains. The marks were also used in administrative records with the aim to identify the workmen in relation to their work in the Theban Necropolis. The earliest marks on ostraca that could be dated with certainty come from the reign of Amenhotep III, but it is possible that some go back as far as the reign of Thutmosis III. The last dated marks come from the reign of Ramesses XI. The marks have been known to Egyptologists since the first archaeological excavations of the village proper along with its cemeteries by Bruyère under the auspices of the *Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale* in Cairo. Bruyère published his results in the series *Rapports sur les fouilles de Deir el Médineh* (1922-1951), in which he included several potsherds and ostraca with marks.[2] He did not, however, study them in detail, and he designated the marks generally as 'marques' or 'marques de potérie'.[3] Also after Bruyère the marks were noted, but as nobody could read or interpret them they remained to be variously called 'signes', 'marques', 'enigmatic' or 'cryptic' signs', 'signes cabalistiques' or 'funny signs'.[4] It was only after a study by

[1] Especially revealing was the discovery of bricks which were used in the village's surrounding walls, and which were stamped with the cartouche of Thutmosis I. Bruyère, *Rapport sur les Fouilles de Deir el Médineh* III, 26 (Fig. 2), 29.
[2] E.g. Bruyère, *Rapport sur les fouilles de Deir el Médineh 1948-1951*, pl XVIII nr. 01 with the beautiful key piece for dynasty 18 'Bruyère 1', now in the *Institut Français D'Archéologie Orientale* in Cairo, numbered IFAO OL 6788.
[3] See, for instance, the publication of his archives online:
http://www.ifao.egnet.net/bases/archives/bruyere/?id=MS_2004_0148_011 and
http://www.ifao.egnet.net/bases/archives/bruyere/?id=MS_2004_0166_009.
[4] Haring, 'Towards decoding the necropolis workmen's funny signs', *GM* 178 (2000), 47 and references.

McDowell of the ostraca in the Huntarian Museum in Glasgow in 1993[5] that the nature and purpose of the marks gradually became clear. She suggested that the marks ostraca could refer to the roster of day-duties (*wrš*), which give day-by-day recordings of workmen who were 'on watch' to receive provisions for the villagers that were brought from the Nile Valley up to Deir el-Medina. As these duty rosters contain dates, they have been an invaluable aid in the precise dating of hieratic ostraca from the reigns of Ramesses III and IV, but they now also appeared to be an aid in dating the ostraca inscribed with marks that convey similar information. The comparison of the marks ostraca to the duty-rosters led to the identification of individual mark owners: workmen who made use of personal identity marks. McDowell had already noted that some marks seemed to refer to proper names, such as for *Kɜsɜ* and for *Ms*. Haring made this very plausible when he elaborated on the idea of personal workmen's marks.[6] A key piece for him was marks ostracon Berlin P 12625, which shows entries of marks preceded by dates. The day-entries he compared to duty rosters from the end of the reign of Ramesses III and the first years of Ramesses IV. This led to a list of identifications between workmen and marks, the key marks being for *Kɜsɜ* and his son *Pn-ʿnḫ.t*, for *Ms*, for *Mry-Rʿ* and his son *Nfr-ḥtp*, for *Ḥr* and for *Wsr-ḫɜ.t*.

It soon became clear that the use of marks in Deir el-Medina was something more than casual. Indeed, the marking system is remarkable in several respects. First, the marks convey *individual* identity. Whereas systems of identity marks were known in Egypt since the Early Dynastic period onwards, they usually convey collective identity, referring to workmen's teams, workshops, (temple) institutions or domains. Second, the intensity with which the identity marks were used in Deir el-Medina is exceptional for ancient Egypt, if not for marking systems as a universal phenomenon. The marks were truly omnipresent, having been used on a variety of sources and in different contexts, private as well as administrative, and secular as well as religious. The many hundreds of ostraca, objects and graffiti with marks plus the wealth of archaeological and textual data for which Deir el-Medina is renowned give us a unique chance not only to study the workings of the marking system in its historical and functional context, but also to provide a case study of a marking system for intercultural comparative purposes.

That was exactly the aim of the research project *Symbolizing Identity. Identity Marks and their Relation to Writing in New Kingdom Egypt* for which Haring received funding by the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO) in 2011.[7] The project included two sub-projects to be carried out by two PhD candidates, who would analyze the marking system from different perspectives. The first sub-project was to include a palaeographic study of the system and its origins and a theoretical semiotic-cognitive study of its workings as compared to linguistic writing, as well as a comparative study of marking systems as a universal phenomenon. The second sub-project concerned a study of the historical functioning of the system in the village of Deir el-Medina, including a study of the mark-users, their degree of literacy and the exact role of the marks ostraca in the administrative functioning of the Theban Necropolis.[8]

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[5] McDowell, *Hieratic Ostraca in the Huntarian Museum Glasgow*.
[6] Haring, 'Towards decoding the necropolis workmen's funny signs', *GM* 178 (2000), 49-56.
[7] The research proposal can be found here: http://media.leidenuniv.nl/legacy/haring-symbolizing-id.pdf.
[8] The second project was carried out by Daniel Soliman. See Soliman, *Of Marks and Men. The Functional and Historical Context of the Workmen's Marks of the Royal Theban Necropolis*.

The present thesis concerns the first sub-project. Three main questions are central to it:

1. What is the form and graphic nature of the marking system?
2. What is the meaning of the marks and how do they convey that meaning?
3. How can the relation between marks and writing be defined?

The questions will be answered in an Introduction and three Parts that embed the marks from Deir el-Medina in a palaeographic, a semiotic-cognitive, and a comparative context and that discuss their relation to writing as a system of visual communication. In the Introduction we review the traditional and current status of marking systems as nonlinguistic systems of visual communication in relation to linguistic writing systems: how are both defined, and how could or should they be defined? Therewith, we create a theoretical frame that throughout the dissertation serves as a background against which to discuss the nature of the marking system from Deir el-Medina and its relation to writing.

Part I provides a palaeographic analysis of the system. It introduces the reader to the system by providing a classification, a description of forms and style, a description of formal and stylistic developments and an embedding of the marks in the context of other, earlier ancient Egyptian marking systems. It consists of three chapters. Chapter 1 focuses on classification and the problems inherent in any classification. It addresses the questions 'What are the actual marks?' and 'To what extent can we say that a mark carried phonetic or pictorial value?'; that is, 'To what extent can we say that a mark was inspired by hieroglyphic or hieratic script, or rather by a concrete object or being?'. The system includes marks with forms that seem to have been derived from hieroglyphic or hieratic script, but also marks with forms that do not seem to occur in script and rather represent concrete objects or beings. Yet, if hieroglyphic script itself consists of representations of concrete objects or beings, where can we draw the line? This problem as well as a development toward ever more influence from script will be reviewed. Chapter 2 primarily focuses on the questions 'What was the origin of the marks' and 'How were they created or selected?'. It discusses earlier Egyptian marking systems and compares them as sources of formal and functional inspiration to the marks from Deir el-Medina. Chapter 3 concerns the palaeographical tables with facsimiles of all specimens (Table I3-2) and metadata (Table I3-1), as well as information on how the facsimiles as well as the font that is used throughout this dissertation were created. The Tables are given as appendices in digital form as they are too elaborate to be included in the text. It is advised to consult the tables when reading the text especially of chapter 1; references are given when consultation of the tables is necessary for correct comprehension of the text.

As it appears from Part I that a classification and analysis of the marking system on the basis of palaeographical study alone is insufficient for a correct assessment of the nature and functioning of the system, Part II contains a detailed semiotic-cognitive analysis that addresses the question 'How do the marks convey meaning?'. It attempts to accommodate the marks in a model that explains their nature and functioning, as well as the structure of the system in general. It consists of three chapters. Chapter 1 is a short introduction to the field of semiotics, giving the main questions it is concerned with as well as the reason for using it in the frame of the present dissertation. Chapter 2 is an intensive chapter that leads the reader through a number of semiotic theories and models that concern the analysis of linguistic and nonlinguistic systems of visual communication. The chapter has been set up so as to lead toward an integrated model that makes use of aspects of all theories and models discussed. The outcome is a synthetic multi-layered model that accommodates the manners in which the marks generate

meaning and which is based on a theory that explains the nature and function of the marks on the basis of graphic, graphic rhetoric, phonetic and phonetic rhetoric signification. Chapter 3, then, forms a bridge toward the cognitive sciences and enters into the question how the human brain is involved in the processing of linguistic and nonlinguistic information. It specifically focuses on the question of how we can accommodate the semiotic theories and models of chapter 2 in our human cognition.

Part III, finally, provides a comparative analysis of the system from Deir el-Medina and similar systems with the aim to study the practice of using marks as a universal phenomenon and the position of the Deir el-Medina marks within this phenomenon. A number of marking systems from other times and places was selected on the basis of availability of published research. Chapter 1 of Part III primarily focuses on the question 'Which characteristics of marking systems are in fact universal?'. It discusses the marking systems with respect to formal composition, function and development. Chapter 2 primarily focuses on the question 'How can the status of marking systems in relation to linguistic writing be defined?', and involves again the traditional and current ideas on nonlinguistic marking systems in relation to linguistic writing as were discussed in the Introduction.

The dissertation ends with a Conclusion that offers an answer to the three main questions that were outlined above.

Two further notes should help the reader go through the work that follows. First, during the four-year project a database was kept which contains photographs and metadata of all our research material, including ostraca, pottery, tools, building blocks, domestic and religious objects, as well as graffiti with workmen's marks. This database is available with a guest account. When its consultation is convenient to the reader with regard to a correct understanding of the text this is mentioned in a footnote that refers to the Database *Symbolizing Identity*, giving key terms to ease the search. Second, an explanation of the different fonts that are used throughout the text and the appendices may be useful. For the representation of hieroglyphs as known from hieroglyphic script I made use of the program JSesh. Transliterations are in *ṯrlỉt_ŚG ṯỉmes*. For the marking system, including those marks that are related to hieroglyphic or hieratic script, I made use of the font specifically created for the marking system.[9] For the representation of specific specimens of marks I have used the facsimiles as they are presented in Table I3-2. By using these facsimiles it was possible to show graphic variations between specimens of the same mark and font-type. Facsimiles were also used in the text to represent those marks that had not yet received a font-type at the time of writing. The reason why several marks were not yet included in the font is explained in Part I, chapter 3.

I take this opportunity to express my deep gratitude to many without whom this dissertation would not have been achieved. First of all, I am particularly grateful to Ben Haring and Daniel Soliman for their cooperation, valuable discussions, useful critiques and reflections as well as the encouragement and support they offered during the last four years of funny signs. I would also like to thank Professor Olaf Kaper for the time invested, and Rob Demarée for always bringing us new material and insights. The work carried out by Hans van den Berg in creating the database *Symbolizing Identity* and the font used for the identity marks was indispensible, as was the assistance provided by Suzanne Knauff and Rikst

[9] Many thanks go to Hans van den Berg and Rikst Ponjee for their assistance in the creation of this font. Details on how the font-types were created are given in Part I chapter 3.

Ponjee. Their help in maintaining the database, even after our second return from Cairo with hundreds of new documents, is much appreciated. Rikst furthermore deserves special thanks for her assistance in creating the font and in organizing conferences, as well as for the good old Fridays that were dominated by tea. I wish also to express my gratitude to Kathrin Gabler, and to Alex de Voogt and Dirk de Vries for valuable discussions and for offering their advice and insights on various topics. My appreciation also goes to the organizers and participants of the conferences *The Idea of Writing* (Alex de Voogt) and *Non-Textual Marking Systems* (Frank Kammerzell, Julia Budka, and Petra Andrássy) over the years 2011-2014. It was during these conferences that I found inspiration in the insights and material generously shared by fellow scholars. The Department of Egyptology at Leiden University, The Netherlands Institute for the Near East (NINO), and the Leiden Institute for Area Studies (LIAS) have all been indispensable for the resources offered. Carola Bronkhorst deserves special appreciation for her help in making it through the last mile, as well as for the necessary moments of distraction. Finally, I would like to thank my mother, Annemiek Steenbergen, for her help and support, as well as my father, Bob van der Moezel, and my brother and sister, Rowan and Maroussia, for their encouragement throughout my study. My special thanks go to Alper van Sijl for supporting and encouraging me, for giving me advice and keeping me on track, for offering perspective and reflection, but above all for his confidence in me. No matter how far apart, the knowledge that you are there keeps me going on.

Kyra van der Moezel