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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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PART III

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

THE UNIVERSALITY OF MARKING SYSTEMS

Marking systems occur in cultures and societies diverse in temporal and geographical space. A variety of terms is used to designate them, among which ‘clan marks’, ‘tribal marks’, ‘livestock marks’, ‘border marks’, ‘masons’ marks’, ‘workmen’s marks’ or ‘trade marks’. Yet, all these terms have in common that they convey identity: identity of a group (e.g. communities, clans, tribes, teams), or identity of individuals (e.g. workmen, sculptors, noblemen, warriors). In many early societies such marking systems acted as a more universal form of visual communication before linguistic writing was widespread, for instance when writing was the privilege of a small literate aristocratic or religious group. In modern societies marking systems are still widely used beside linguistic writing, or even in combination with it: think of brand marks such as ,  and . From prehistory to the present day, marking systems are universal; but how universal exactly? To what extent are marks and marking systems throughout the world similar in terms of form, function, system, and use and status in society? Linguistic writing systems are universal in their aim to record oral language through the conveyance of phonetic information, but they differ with respect to how their signs relate to the sounds of language. There are formal and systemic differences between logosyllabic scripts, syllabic scripts, and consonantaries such as abjads and alphabets; their signs denote individual morphemes and/or particular syllables, separate consonants and vowels, or separate phonemes in which consonants are accompanied by a specific vowel in different writing systems.¹ Marking systems are universal in their principle of offering methods to record information that are not couched in a specific linguistic form. That is, although they may, but do not necessarily include a linguistic component in that they may use phonetic forms of information processing or other characteristics of linguistic writing such as sequentiality, they offer alternative graphic and graphic rhetoric forms of information processing that may be more pictorial in nature.² Can we, however, also discern differences among marking systems such as those that exist among writing systems? Unfortunately, it appeared not to be feasible to provide a comparative analysis of signification processes which underlie different systems, as these processes have in most marking systems hardly been investigated; any such undertaking is often hindered by complete or at least considerable lack of context and knowledge concerning signifieds and referents. Exact details of the semiosis of particular marking systems and of the meaning of particular marks can therefore not be compared. However, through a study of the forms, function, and patterns of derivation and development of marking systems, as well as of their use and status in particular societies in relation to writing, we can at least attempt to approach a phenomenological comparison.

For this chapter, a number of marking systems spread in time and space were closely examined. Four will serve as the main systems of comparison:

¹ For details and explanation of terms, see Daniels & Bright (eds.), *The World's Writing Systems*, 4.

² Such as those processes of information processing discussed in Part II.

1. Marking systems from the medieval period that occur in a range of European countries including Belgium, Britain, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Scotland, the Scandinavian Countries and Spain. The marks are often designated as ‘lapidary marks’ and defined as signs engraved on a block of stone with a specific function during construction processes.³ They are divided into two general categories: identity marks and function marks. The former identify individuals in relation to the amount and quality of the work accomplished;⁴ the function marks are mainly positioning and assembly marks, or marks indicating the height or thickness of blocks of stone. The function marks consist mainly of Roman or Arabic numbering systems or succeeding alphabetic letters that indicate successive courses of stone and will be left out of consideration.⁵ We confine ourselves to the identity marks, taking into account that their designation as ‘lapidary marks’ is in fact inadequate; the same marks used by individuals on stone in the course of a construction process were also used as signatures in official documents, such as building contracts, or as property marks on personal objects. An alternative designation is ‘masons’ marks’, but this misleadingly suggests that only masons made use of them, while carpenters, merchants and in fact craftsmen of almost any guild could identify themselves with a mark. It is therefore best to remain with a more general designation such as medieval European identity marks.
2. A system of identity marks used in small fishing communities in Gallaecia (Galiza and northern Portugal). The marks have been securely attested since the late Middle Ages and share formal similarities with the medieval European marks, but they functioned according to local Portuguese tradition. In the community of A Guarda they are still in use.
3. Systems of identity marks used in south America. The indigenous Wayúu peoples in northern Columbia and northwestern Venezuela and the Kadiwéu peoples in southwestern Brazil used identity marks that were very similar and probably came from a common source in the Amazon. The identity marks used in southeastern and northwestern Brazil used by ‘white cattle herders’ after the arrival of the Portuguese and Spanish colonizers were influenced both by the indigenous tradition and by European traditions.
4. Identity marks used in southwest Anatolia in the 7th to 6th centuries BCE (Lydia and Lycia) and in the Persian Achaemenid Empire in the 6th to 5th centuries BCE (mainly in Persepolis, Pasargadae and Susa).

Other marking systems will be mentioned in passing, such as identity marks used by the nomadic peoples of ancient Sarmatia,⁶ identity marks used by the nomadic herders in medieval to modern

³ Reveyron, ‘Marques lapidaires: the state of the question’, *Gesta* 42 no. 2 (2003), 161.

⁴ This is, at least, generally believed to be their main purpose. This and other purposes are discussed in chapter 2.

⁵ Notwithstanding we would like to mention that interesting examples can be found on the pavement in front of the Abbey of Mont Saint Michel, where a mix of Roman numerals, Arabic numerals and alphabetic letters occur. They therefore also show a mixed composition, and especially the latter are not always clearly distinguishable from identity marks. Personal observation and communication with Prof. Dr. D. de Vries, Leiden University (20-01-2012).

⁶ Sarmatia comprises a large geographical area from south Siberia, Central Mongolia, West China (Kansu, western Xinjiang) and northwestern India in the east, across to the boundaries of Iraq, Turkey and southeastern Europe at least as far as Hungary in the west. It is often divided into four main regions of importance: 1) Iran; 2) Transoxiana (western Central Asia) and Afghanistan; 3) Eastern Europe and the northern Caucasus; 4) South Siberia and Mongolia. The Sarmatian nomadic peoples were at the height of their power between the 7th to 3rd century BC, but their marking tradition has been preserved into the modern era – in some

Mongolia, identity marks used by nomadic tribes in northwest Africa up to the present day, and identity marks used by reindeer herders in present-day Norway. The various marks' corpora are plotted on a world map in Plate III1-1 and a map of Europe in Plate III1-2 at the end of this Part III. It should be emphasized that these maps are not meant to equate all the systems: each system is a system in its own right and context. The maps merely serve to familiarize the reader with corpus of each system discussed. One may find it convenient to consult them while reading the Comparative Analysis, in particular chapter 1.

In the first chapter of this Comparative Analysis we explore the question of how universal marking systems are with regard to form and composition, function and purposes, and derivational system and development. In the second chapter we offer a discussion in which we explore the use and status of marking systems in societies in relation to linguistic writing systems. Throughout the Analysis we refer to the marks from Deir el-Medina. We will see that this system shares especially formal and functional characteristics with marking systems in general, but is unique in other respects. By assessing the similarities and dissimilarities, the analysis helps to establish the nature of the marks and the system from Deir el-Medina, embedding them among marks and systems that are all part of a widespread phenomenon that offers methods to visualize information alternative to the mainly phonetic methods of linguistic writing systems.

northern Caucasian villages up to the present day. Yatsenko, 'Problems and Study Methods of the Ancient and Early Medieval Iranian-Speaking Peoples' Nishan-Signs' in Evans Pim, Yatsenko & Perrin (eds.), *Traditional Marking Systems*, 109.

