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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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THE STATUS AND DEVELOPMENT OF MARKING SYSTEMS IN RELATION TO LINGUISTIC WRITING

Most of the marking systems that were described in the previous chapter predate the widespread use of linguistic writing. The general trend toward an increased linguistic component in marking systems on the one hand, and an overall dominance of linguistic writing in modern society on the other has led western scholars to formulate two general statements about the status of marking systems in relation to linguistic writing:

1. Marking systems are a form of visual communication older than linguistic writing;
2. Marking systems are used by and for illiterate people as an alternative to writing.

In this chapter we comment upon the extent to which these hypotheses are (in)valid.

1 MARKS AND THEIR RELATION TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF LINGUISTIC WRITING

In the Introduction to this dissertation we already objected to the idea that marks would be ‘proto-writing’, or ‘forerunners of writing’, because such traditional designations devalue marking systems as underdeveloped and imperfect systems that have yet to reach the status of writing. That is, they do not appreciate marking systems as independent fully-fledged systems of visual communication with their own structures, forms of signification, formal compositions and purposes, and they imply that marking systems are no longer relevant after linguistic writing is introduced. We hope to have shown by now that this idea is incorrect. Yet, then, how do marking systems relate to linguistic writing and the development and increasing presence of writing in society? Departing from the marking systems under study we can extract three hypotheses:

- a. Marking systems influence the formal development of a linguistic writing system;
- b. Marking systems and writing systems are not related and develop independently. Linguistic writing is rather an alien system that invades a marking system and imbues it with linguistic features;
- c. Marking and writing systems draw from the same pool of representations that belong to the cultural repertoire and are available for use as the visual signs of a system of communication.

a. Marking systems influence the formal development of linguistic writing

Although this option has traditionally been considered true as it fits the evolutionary idea of a development from primitive pictures to the ultimate system of alphabetic writing, there is in fact little evidence to support the hypothesis with actual examples from the marking systems under study. The hypothesis departs from the idea that marks are a pool of available signifiers from which a newly developing writing system could either draw inspiration, or select actual signifiers that were given a new phonetic signified and a new functional context within a linguistic system. The only tentative suggestions

that have been made are extremely speculative. Boardman, for instance, remarked that the identity marks from Anatolia and the Persian Achaemenid empire formally resemble the later Brahmi and South Arabian writing systems: ‘there are suggestive similarities in the composition of many of the characters and in their overall [lapidary] appearance.’¹ Brahmi and South Arabian scripts would have developed out of the identity marks. Yet, any link between the marks and the scripts is extremely uncertain as the marks’ development cannot be clearly followed after the Achaemenid Empire and the earliest development of the scripts is equally unknown.²

The hypothesis is also tentatively suggested by Evans Pim for the identity marks from Gallaecia. He places it within the broader theory that relates marks to early tallying and other mnemonic devices, from which a linguistic script would eventually evolve.³ In his thesis he connects Ogham script, an alphabetical script used by the Celts, to the Gallaecian marks. The majority of Ogham inscriptions has been found in Ireland, Scotland and Wales, carved in stone and dating primarily between the 3rd and the 6th centuries CE. Ogham has thus not been found in Gallaecia. However, the inhabitants of Gallaecia were Celtic people, and Evans Pim does not take the lack of inscriptions in the region as evidence against the idea that a Gallaic form of Ogham was ever developed or in use. He argues that Ogham in its earliest phases could have been recorded on wood of which no examples have survived due to the environmental conditions of the Atlantic region.⁴ Multiple theories exist on the origins of Ogham script. Some argue that the origins lie in a tallying system, for instance to record cattle. This view has received support among others from the structural order of Ogham characters in groups of five, which could relate to a numerical system. Others argue that the origins of Ogham rather lie in a more general mnemonic system to record information of various kinds. Early Ogham, in the opinion of Evans Pim, was nonlinguistic and would have served ‘as an identity and property mark’.⁵ He relates the origins of Ogham to the origins of the Gallaecian identity marks as mnemonic devices that must have been in use already in late Neolithic times. The collections of these mnemonic devices he calls *Corpus Signum Gallaecia*.⁶ It would have contained tallying units and devices to record territorial and genealogical information in nonlinguistic manner. It was only later in the northern regions, at least from the 3rd century onwards, that this corpus could have served as a source of inspiration in the formation of an alphabetic script that was developed for the recording of the northern Celtic languages. Although the Gallaecian marks, at least those before the invasion of the Roman alphabet, contain forms that could indeed be said to resemble characters from Ogham script, any relation between the marks and Ogham remains highly speculative. In sum, both the Anatolian-Persian and the Gallaecian corpora cannot support the process of a linguistic writing system that developed out of an earlier system of identity marks.

The idea that marks would lead to the development of linguistic writing is contradicted by the relation between the medieval European marks and the Roman alphabet. The latter predated the use of the medieval marks from the 11th century onwards. It was rather this alphabetic system that gradually began to influence the formal development of the marks, especially from the 17th century onwards.

¹ Boardman, ‘Seals and Signs’ in Evans Pim, Yatsenko & Perrin (eds.), *Traditional Marking Systems*, 165, 167.

² Although Al-Jallad & Al-Manaser argue to have found an inscription in South Arabian script that dates already to the mid-sixth century and mentions the Babylonian king Nabonidus. This would imply that South Arabian script and the Anatolian marks are contemporaneous, a case that would support our hypothesis ‘c’ for which see below. Al-Jallad & Al-Manaser, ‘A Thamudic B Abecedary in the South Semitic Letter Order’ in Butts (eds.), *The Semitic Languages in Contact* (forthcoming).

³ Cf. Part II, chapter 2, §2.

⁴ Evans Pim, ‘From Marks to Ogham’, *Re:marks* 1 (2013), 115-120.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 118. He also sees evidence in the use of Ogham as recorded in myths (117-118).






⁶ *Ibid.*, 96.

b. Marking systems and linguistic writing develop independently

A situation in which a marking system and a linguistic writing system developed independently from different sources, but in which the latter invades the former and increasingly imbues it with linguistic features can be seen in Brazil. The indigenous south American marks have been described as representing mainly pictorial and geometric patterns. The Roman alphabetic letters came from overseas and began to influence and replace the indigenous marks in the towns and villages under European control. Yet, although eventually the indigenous marks disappeared in favor of Roman letters, this was a long process in which the marks used by the white herders were similarly influenced by indigenous traditions: we have mentioned the forms of the *diferenças* as possibly having been inspired by the Kadiwéu marks. Most of the original Kadiwéu marks only became replaced by Roman initials from the 1930s and 1940s onwards.

A little more force seems to have been behind the contact between the marking system and the Roman alphabet in Gallaecia. The indigenous pictorial and geometric fishermen marks, whether or not having been a source for characters from the Ogham alphabet, had developed independently from the Roman alphabet in Europe. It was only with the introduction of the alphabet by the state bureaucracy that the latter began to influence the former. Despite strong resistance, the indigenous marks have nowadays disappeared in almost all communities. Whereas Brazil temporarily shows some mutual influence and what appears to be peaceful co-existence of the indigenous marks and the Roman alphabet, in Gallaecia we can rather speak of a more aggressive and enforced invasion of the alphabet.

c. Marking and linguistic writing systems draw from the same pool of inspiration

The situation in which marking systems and linguistic writing systems develop or are used around the same time and in their formal composition draw from the same cultural repertoire of representations is most clearly seen in Egypt. We argue that the earliest marks and linguistic writing developed contemporaneously in the Early Dynastic period from the same repertoire of forms available to the culture. In Part I, chapter 2, we have described the use of potmarks from this period onwards. These potmarks included forms that also gradually developed into signs of linguistic writing, most notably , , , , and . Contemporaneous to the potmarks we find the first docketts and seal impressions with *serekhs* and the first occurrences of linguistic writing. The potmarks on the one hand, and the docketts and impressions on the other represent two different systems of visual communications: whereas the latter developed into hieroglyphic, and subsequently into hieratic script, potmarks never developed into a linguistic system, neither in hieroglyphic nor in hieratic form. They remained in use as marks in nonlinguistic context. While drawing from the same repertoire of forms (forms inspired by natural and celestial phenomena as well as the domestic environment and the religious conceptual world) both systems followed their own developments and transformations from their beginnings onwards. In the potmarks and the docketts and seal impressions we see precisely what Mignolo, who was cited in the Introduction to this dissertation, described as ‘co-evolutionary processes’:⁷ different systems of visual communication following their own courses. This does not mean that both systems remained isolated. There was certainly interaction, to the extent that marks could include signs of writing, and writing systems could embed marks in linguistic context. This interaction explains the observed phenomenon of a

⁷ Mignolo in Boone & Mignolo, *Writing Without Words*, 13. See also the Introduction, pp. xiii-xiv.

growing influence of script on marking systems. Such influence is seen in the marks from medieval Europe, which became more heavily influenced by the Roman alphabet in the Early Modern period, as well as in the identity marks from Deir el-Medina. It is precisely the fact that there exists interaction between a tradition of marks and a parallel tradition of writing, both from a common pool of visual communication, that explains changes taking place in the marks; the interaction explains the shift of emphasis toward the domain of Writing as seen in the marks from Deir el-Medina represented in figs. II-8 and II2-62. The shift of emphasis takes place within the pool of visual communication which is common to both marking and linguistic writing systems. This pool is in fact analogous to Elkins' Venn-diagram of visual communication as it contains forms from all three domains: Writing, Picture and Notation. It is also similar to what Hjelmslev considered purport: the presemiotic, vague, shapeless and indistinct nebula that contains all possible forms and expressions.⁸ Marking and linguistic writing systems, once developed from the pool, may grow closer together in form and composition. However, the Deir el-Medina marking system clearly shows that a difference between them remained in structure and system. Despite the development out of a shared cultural repertoire of visual representations, and the formal resemblances of single marks and signs of writing, the marks remained nonlinguistic in their structure and context of use, while hieroglyphic and hieratic writing remained linguistic in structure and context of use.

2 CONCLUDING REMARKS

The three hypotheses can be summarized in three schematic models. Hypothesis 'a' is represented in fig. III2-18a. It shows a development from marks serving as a source of inspiration to writing systems. Although the use of the marks does not necessarily cease, the development of writing is considered to come forth from marks that served a more primitive purpose of tallying systems and mnemonic devices. Hypothesis 'b' is represented in fig. III2-18b, which shows marking systems and linguistic writing as two isolated developments from separate sources. Linguistic writing, however, invades the marking systems from outside influence or pressure, and imbues them with linguistic signs until eventually the original marking system in its own right ceases to exist. Hypothesis 'c' represented in fig. III2-18c appears to be the most natural development of linguistic writing and marking systems. Inspired by the natural and domestic environment, by the actual and conceptual world one lives in, several forms of visual communication may develop as parallel systems. These parallel systems follow their own courses and transformations, but may interact and mingle to various extents. In both Deir el-Medina and medieval Europe we see that the interaction became more intensive over the centuries due to a growing presence and knowledge of linguistic script.

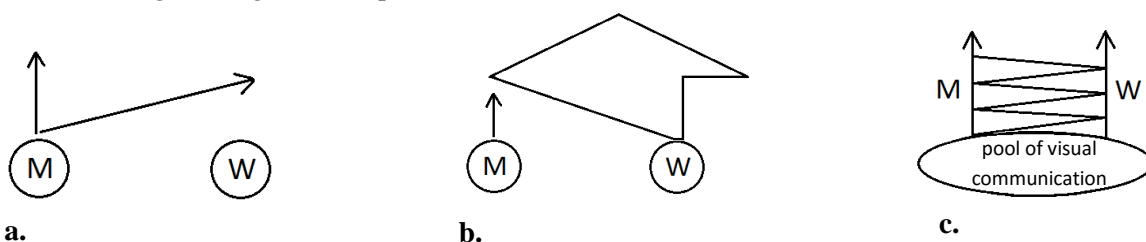


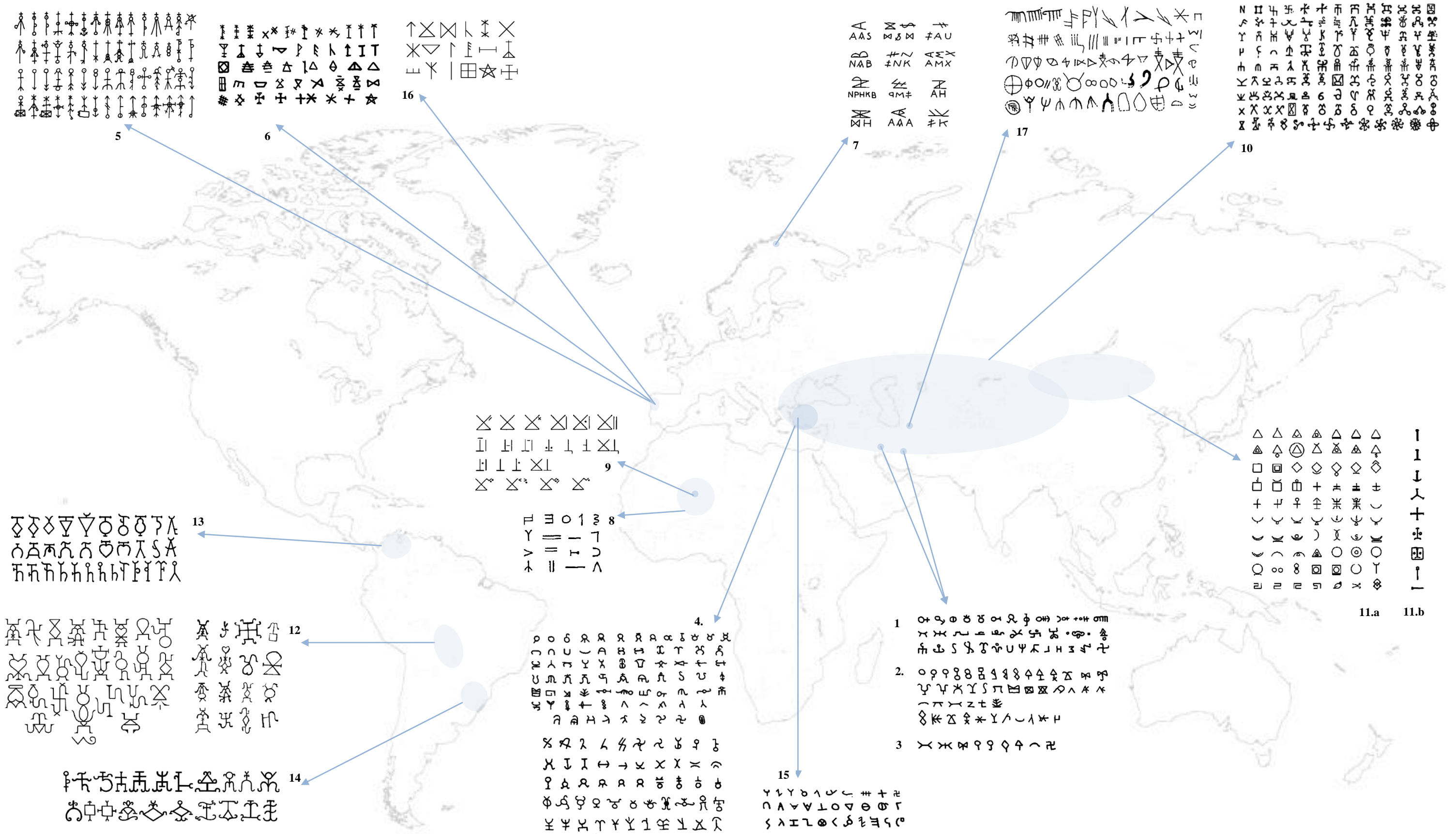
Fig. III2-18a. Marking systems influence the formal development of linguistic writing; **b.** Marking systems and linguistic writing develop independently, but the latter invades the former; **c.** Marking and linguistic writing are two parallel, interacting systems that draw from the same pool of inspiration.

⁸ Cf. Part II, chapter 2, p. 130.

One could ask the question why two different systems of visual communication that follow their own courses and transformations would have to develop. Why was it, that one of them, having developed and being available, was not considered sufficient? Several explanations may be suggested at least for the existence and usage of marking systems. First of all, during the course of Egyptian history in general and among the earliest inhabitants of Deir el-Medina in particular, knowledge of linguistic writing was not widespread. That is, the forms of linguistic signs may have been known, as ideograms or symbols (e.g. \dagger , \uparrow , \mathbb{H} , \downarrow), but their linguistic structure was known only to the initiated few. Marking systems that do not make use of this linguistic structure, but rather of other semantic connections between form, interpretation and referent, were more universal in that they were available to all degrees of literacy in society. Second, the marking system in Deir el-Medina was an independent system in its own right that could be universally used also in a time when linguistic writing was still absent. It was an alternative system available in the absence of writing. Third, the use of marks may be more efficient than linguistic writing in that they convey several aspects of identity (potentially including origin, profession, lineage, and so forth) compressed into one mark for which only a small surface is needed. As such, one can comprehend their use on small surfaces and in daily administrative tasks. Even those who knew how to write resorted to using the marks as they were available, they were efficient, and they were understood by all. The marking system seems to have been an accepted system of visual communication in the workmen's community and the local administration of the Theban Necropolis. As such, it was truly a system parallel to, yet not isolated from linguistic writing.

In sum, to come back to the two traditional statements on the status of marking systems in relation to writing, the first statement which argued that marking systems are a form of visual communication older than linguistic writing has no overall validity. In several cases it became clear that linguistic writing was already present or just developing at the moment marks were in use. The second statement, which argued that marking systems are used by and for illiterate people as an alternative to writing, does have validity, at least with regard to Deir el-Medina and medieval Europe. Yet, this must not be considered the only reason to use marks: also the literate could resort to marking systems as an efficient and universal alternative to linguistic writing.

WORLD MAP WITH REGIONAL MARKING SYSTEMS



1. Persian masons' marks from Pasargadae, post 547 BC; 2. Masons' marks from Persepolis, post 547 BC; 3. Masons' marks from Susa, post 547 BC; 4. Identity marks on seals and coins from southern and western Anatolia, 6th century; 5. Tombstone marks Santa Maria a Nova cemetery, Noia; 6. Votive and pilgrims' marks on chapel doors, Santa Tegra (A Guarda); 7. Livestock marks of the Lapps, Kautokeino (Norway); 8. Tuareg livestock marks from the Ahaggar mountains; 9. Tuareg camel marks and derivations of 4 different tribes; 10. Sarmatian identity marks, occurring from the Crimea Peninsula to the southern Ural and from the Bosphorus to Kazakhstan from the Late Bronze Age onwards; 11. Mongol clan and livestock marks (a) and complementary marks (b); 12. Clan marks of the Kadiwéu Indians of Mato Grosso (Brazil); 13. Clan marks of the Wayúu Indians of north Colombia and north-west Venezuela; 14. Non-alphabetic cattle marks of 'white' herders after colonization in Rio Grande do Sul (southern Brazil); 15. Masons' marks from Sardis, 7th-6th centuries; 16. Fishermen's marks from Póvoa de Varzim; 17. Kazakh clan marks from Sidak sanctuary.

PLATE III-1-2 MAP WITH MEDIEVAL EUROPEAN IDENTITY MARKS



1. Cathedral of Geneva, ca. 1170-1240; 2. Cistercian monastery in Velehrad, Czech Republic, 1210-1240; 3. Monastery in Visegrád, Hungary, 1484; 4. Burg Lahr, Schwarzwald, 1220-1240; 5. Freiburger Münster, first half 14th century; 6. On stairs of office building in Gerolzhofen, 1614; 7. Crypt of Cathedral of Trier, 1160-1170; 8. Ulmer Münster, 15th-16th century. Janse & De Vries, *Werk en Merk*, 49-57.

