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Of marks and men : the functional and historical context of the workmen's marks of the Royal Theban Necropolis

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OF MARKS AND MEN.
THE FUNCTIONAL AND HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF THE
WORKMEN'S MARKS OF THE ROYAL THEBAN
NECROPOLIS.

Proefschrift

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Daniel Soliman
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in 1985

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PREFACE

This work is one of two doctoral dissertations written within the framework of the research project ‘Symbolizing Identity. Identity marks and their relation to writing in New Kingdom Egypt’, financed by the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO). It revolves mainly around the corpus of ostraca from the Theban necropolis that are inscribed with identity marks. It will be pointed out in the Introduction that it is only since recent years that serious efforts have been made to analyse these marks and to examine their purpose. As is well known, the first ostraca from the Theban necropolis to be published – mostly hieratic texts and figurative ostraca – were cherry picked. Although this may sound somewhat depreciative of earlier research it is in no way a comment on the endeavours of previous scholars. It is understandable that the priorities of the pioneers of what are nowadays called Deir el-Medina Studies lay with the extensive hieratic documentation of the village, and ostraca with marks had therefore been set aside for a later moment.

Having said this, it is believed that the lack of a systematic study of the large corpus of objects and documents with workmen’s marks has left a considerable gap in our understanding of the administrative and social practices of the community of royal necropolis workmen of Thebes. This dissertation aims to address this situation by examining the ostraca with identity marks from a historical perspective. Simultaneously it is hoped that this work may be a stepping stone for prospective research into the area of documents from Deir el-Medina created in less conventional manners. There are still scores of unpublished ostraca with pictorial lists of commodities, tally lists, and ostraca with dots. Even published examples of this kind of documents have received very little attention. The majority of such records cannot be treated in the current work. Like our academic predecessors were forced to do, it was decided to exclude such ostraca from the current study. A number of interesting documents related to the topic of this work are therefore briefly mentioned but will not be studied *in extenso* within the scope of this dissertation.

Although it is expected that other material with workmen’s marks will surface in the future, the research project ‘Symbolizing Identity’ has attempted to collect all objects and inscriptions with identity marks. A database for this corpus created by the project members is accessible online,¹ and it is advised that reader of this work utilises the database for details about the dimensions and the bibliography of objects with marks. In addition the database provides images of the objects that could not be printed in the current dissertation, and for each object it presents an overview of the particular identity marks with which it is inscribed.

Most of the identity marks printed in this dissertation are characters of a font, meticulously developed by my colleague Kyra van der Moezel. The decision to use a font is grounded on two advantages: the font characters are clearly recognisable to the reader and easily integrated into the running text. This of course means that the marks represented in the text are not of the exact same shape as the original marks on the ostrakon the text refers to. Similarly the font does not include an individual character for every allomorph of a single mark.

To reduce the number of footnotes, this work will not refer to text editions of hieratic ostraca or papyri from the Theban necropolis. For such matters the reader is referred to the Deir el-Medina Database.²

This work builds heavily upon the seminal prosopographic investigations in Benedict G. Davies’ *Who’s who at Deir el-Medina*.³ Davies undertook the herculean task of sorting out

¹ <http://marks.wepwawet.nl/>; user name: test; password: xxxxxx.

² *The Deir el-Medina Database*, <http://www.leidenuniv.nl/nino/dmd/dmd.html>.

and enumerating the hundreds of individuals that lived in and around Deir el-Medina during the Ramesside Period. New evidence presented here will be able to amend a few of his ideas, but without Davies' work this current study would not have been possible. Davies assigned each individual mentioned in his book a Latin numeral written in lower case. His system is followed here, and individuals that were later attributed a numeral in other works are here mentioned with an upper case Latin numeral.

I am very indebted to Ben Haring, who made available his preliminary notes and his collection of relevant literature. As supervisor to this dissertation, always available to talk about the ostraca, I have greatly benefited from countless suggestions and discussions of the material. To my colleague Kyra van der Moezel I am very thankful for the fruitful cooperation in the research project, and for her many contributions to the project's database. Olaf Kaper is thanked for his support and useful comments on an earlier draft of this work, and Hans van der Berg for designing the database and for answering questions concerned with statistics.

Over the course of the project I have had the pleasure of discussing several topics related to the community of Deir el-Medina with a number of persons, and I want to express my gratitude for their advice and suggestions. First and foremost thanks go to Rob Demarée (Leiden University) for his incomparable expertise; to Kathrin Gabler (currently University of Basel); Maren Goecke-Bauer (University of Munchen); Koen Donker van Heel (Leiden University), who never failed to ask me if the "book had already been finished"; Mark Collier (University of Liverpool); David Aston (Austrian Academy of Sciences); Dirk de Vries (University of Leiden); Kent Weeks (American University in Cairo; Theban Mapping Project); James Allen (Brown University). The contributions of our two research assistants, Suzanne Knauff and Rikst Ponjee, cannot be overlooked, and I thank them for all of their hard work.

I have had the privilege of examining ostraca with identity marks in a number of museum collections and for that my thanks go to Maarten Raven and Christian Greco (National Museum of Antiquities, Leiden); Stephen Quirke (University College London Petrie Museum); Christian Greco, Paulo Delvesco and Enrico Ferraris (Egyptian Museum, Turin). The research conducted for this work would not have been possible without the gracious permission of various institutes and individuals to study unpublished documents. First and foremost Nadine Cherpion, Vanessa Ritter and Pierre Grandet are warmly thanked for granting access to the ostraca in the French Institute for Oriental Archaeology and for their assistance in the process. For the use of photos of unpublished ostraca from the Egyptian Museum in Cairo thanks are due to Mamdouh Mohamed Eldamaty, Ibrahim Abd el-Gawad, and Lotfy Abd el-Hamid. I am very grateful to a number of persons who shared with the Symbolizing Identity team photos of unpublished ostraca and ceramics: Anne Austin (previously University of California, Los Angeles), Edwin C. Brock (Royal Ontario Museum, Royal Sarcophagi Project), Debora Cilli (University of Basel, Mission Siptah – Ramses X (MISR)), Andreas Dorn (University of Basel, MISR), Nicholas Reeves (University of Arizona; Amarna Royal Tomb Project); Otto Schaden (University of Memphis, Amenmesse Tomb Project); and Rob Demarée (University of Leiden) and Fredrik Hagen (University of Copenhagen) for their photos of ostraca from the Griffith Institute in Oxford. Images from Deir el-Medina have kindly been passed on to me by Petra Ándrassy and Lenka Peacock. Finally, I want to thank my family and friends, in particular both of my parents, for their continuous assistance, patience, love and support I received while completing the dissertation.

³ Benedict Davies, *Who's who at Deir el-Medina. A prosopographic Study of the Royal Workmen's Community*. EU 13 (Leiden 1991).