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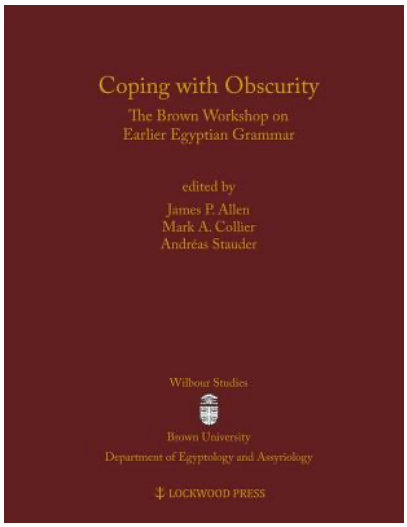

James P. Allen, Mark A. Collier, and Andreas Stauder, eds.

Coping with Obscurity: The Brown Workshop on Earlier Egyptian Grammar

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Coping with Obscurity is a collected volume of nine papers discussed at the Brown University workshop on Earlier Egyptian grammar in March 2013.[1] The workshop brought together scholars dealing with the central question of how to judge and interpret the grammatical value of the written evidence preserved in texts of the Old and Middle Kingdoms (ca. 2350–1650 BCE). Traditionally, the earlier phase of the language found in these texts is called "Old Egyptian" (e.g., Edel 1955–1964), although "Early" and "Earlier" Egyptian was adopted variously by the authors in this volume. As stated in the preface by the editors, the impetus for the workshop (and thus the volume) was a shared desire among the participants to critically examine grammatical forms and construction "in terms of morphology, function, and (contextualized) meaning; to identify the successes and limitations of existing approaches; and to determine what productive new directions are open for future research" (viii). The workshop grew out of earlier meetings to address new modes of thinking about Egyptian grammar that have emerged since the mid-1960s (a recent summary is Gracia Zamacona 2020). As noted by the editors, the field still lacks good grammatical descriptions of the genres found within this early textual corpus. The individual papers represent snapshots of evolving approaches to linguistics and phonology of Early Egyptian, with sustained focus on the challenges presented by studying the language of a period of Egyptian history for which written evidence is sparse when compared to later eras. The volume consists of the preface by the editors followed by nine papers, eight in English and one in German, and it is attractively typeset in the

1. The titles of the individual papers are appended to this review.

style established for the Wilbour Studies in Egyptology and Assyriology series published by Lockwood Press. The bibliography for the whole volume appears at the end of the work and is followed by a separate index for the citations of ancient texts.

In "Grenzen und Chancen bei der Erschliessung des älteren Ägyptisch" (1–27), Wolfgang Schenkel offers an introduction to the broader historical and contemporary situation in studies of Earlier Egyptian (§1), before turning to an analysis of the verbal inflections of infinitives, participles, and pseudo-participles (§2). The paucity of evidence is discussed together with the various methodological and theoretical approaches used to reconcile the written form with possible phonetic expression, with particular reference to Jürgen Osing's work in this area. Schenkel argues (23) that for most verbs the evidence in both areas is too weak to sufficiently grasp the ancient reality.

Daniel A. Werning's contribution, "Hypotheses on Glides and *Matres Lectionis* in Earlier Egyptian Orthographies" (29–44), focuses on the morphosyntax of Early Egyptian, particularly orthography, in order to nuance the connection between written forms of the language and their phonological counterparts. Werning argues that the presence of *matres lectionis* (called "semi-vowels" in some studies) in hieroglyphic writing may have indicated the presence of a vocalic phoneme. A particularly interesting suggestion by Werning is that the use of *matres lectionis* in Early Egyptian may have been a reader-oriented scribal practice.

"Marked and Unmarked Word Orders, Verbal Inflection, and the Cartography of Early Egyptian Sentence Structures" (45–95), by Chris A. Reintges, investigates syntactic variation in Early Egyptian clauses, drawing on the work of linguist Joseph Greenberg. Word order and verbal inflection in stative sentences are analyzed in particular. This essentializes a substantial body of work by the author on the stative and the morphosyntax of Early Egyptian.

In "To See an Invisible Form: Paradigms, Parallels, and Practices Once Again" (97–107), Sami Uljas examines the morphology of the Early Egyptian *sḏm=f*, with particular attention given to the use of "sets" in studying Egyptian language: Do parallel writings in texts surviving in multiple copies reflect "real" or underlying forms? Uljas presents the subjunctive *sḏm=f* in Early Egyptian as a case study of a paradigm possessing uniformly inflected form and clearly defined function.

Jean Winand's "The Syntax-Semantics Interface in Earlier Egyptian: A Case Study in Verbs of Cognition" (109–39) presents a compelling case for greater engagement with lexical semantics in studies of Early Egyptian, focusing on the relations between verbs and grammatical tenses. Verbs of cognition communicating the concepts of "knowing" and "searching" are analyzed as examples, culminating in a semantic map for a sample of these lexemes in Early Egyptian.

In "Earlier Egyptian Prepositions: Between Grammar and Lexicography" (141–50), Julie Stauder-Porchet examines prepositions in Early Egyptian from multiple perspectives, with particular attention to *prj* + *m*. Prepositions are dynamic and versatile, but Stauder-Porchet emphasizes that their polysemous qualities are greatly reduced when close attention is given to the written environment in which they occur. For a reader less familiar with Early Egyptian, the opening section on the limits of sources, similarly found in the contributions of Schenkel and Vernus, offers important contextual background.

Mark A. Collier's "Alternatives and the Grammar of Earlier Egyptian: Negation with Low-End Indefinites and Negation with *n* … *js*" (151–68) considers inferred alternatives in Early Egyptian grammar, with reference to examples of negation that appear in written texts (especially from the Heqanakht letters), as well as those evoked from grammatical construction.

In "The Earlier Egyptian 'Emphatic' Construction: An Alternative Analysis" (169–99), Andréas Stauder analyzes the "emphatic" construction in Early Egyptian. Stauder proposes a broadening of the traditional understanding of this verb form, once derived from Hans J. Polotsky's (e.g., 1944) studies of second tenses in Coptic, and with respect to aspect, voice, and event semantics.

Pascal Vernus concludes the volume with "Restricted Circulation in Old Egyptian as Mirrored in Later 'Repristination von Tradition' and Revivals: The Dependent Pronoun *kw*; the *nfr-n* Negation; the *n wnt sḏm=f* Negative Construction" (201–33), a brief answer to the question: What is Early Egyptian? Vernus's paper addresses the issue of diachrony within the period of use assigned to Early Egyptian and the restricted text categories present in data from this period of Egyptian history. Occurrences of three case-studies—the pronoun *kw*, the *nfr-n* negation, and the *n wnt sḏm=f* construction—are traced in texts of later periods, demonstrating the issues inherent in historical dating.

Due to the nature of the volume, a single overarching approach to transcription and transliteration was not imposed on the papers (e.g., *sḏm=f* is found also as *śḏm=f*, *sḏm-f*, and *sḏm.f*). Indeed, as stated by the editors (viii), the goal of the workshop was to emphasize the diversity in approaches to Early Egyptian language: a "multiplicity of approaches" was preferred over a "unifying paradigm." The varying forms of transcription and transliteration will not pose much difficulty for readers familiar with ancient Egyptian linguistics and phonology (and they are discussed by Schenkel, 8–10), but a short summary of the conventions used by the authors following the preface of the volume may have aided a wider spectrum of readers who include, as Winand (110) aptly notes, "Egyptologists who unfortunately turn out to be non-linguists, which seems to represent the majority of our community, and non-Egyptologists who take an interest in the study of language(s), who probably outnumber our small community." Some papers make use of a short table of abbreviations at the conclusion of the paper (e.g., Werning) or in the opening footnote (e.g, Uljas). This situation is mirrored in the variable nomenclature adopted by the individual authors (e.g.,

"Old" versus the more prevalent use of "Early" and "Earlier" Egyptian). The reasons for preferring the latter over the former are not explicitly stated by the editors, although one of the organizers is quoted (viii) in the preface as asking participants, "what is it, after all, that we call Earlier Egyptian?" Some authors provide their own definitions (e.g., Reintges, 45 n. 1; Winand, 109–11; Vernus, 201). While the following do not diminish the volume as a whole, a small number of errors occur in the printed volume, such as incorrectly linked tables in Werning's paper (37, 40 n. 26, 41 n. 32) and minor typographic slips (e.g., consistency in capitalizing earlier/Earlier Egyptian; Heqankaht = Heqanakht [153 n. 5]; Jcabus = Jacobus [255]).

A minor observation concerns the stated desire (viii) to consider the "broader, extra-grammatical factors" that could influence the production of an early Egyptian text. In many papers, such factors are assessed with regard to pragmatics; for example, the relationship between scribe and reader is considered by Werning; the social-material context and register of Old Kingdom compositions is discussed by Stauder-Porchet (141–43) and Vernus (203–4); and their circulation and revival in later periods underscores Vernus's paper. However, one factor that receives less attention in this publication—yet perhaps was present in orally delivered, illustrated talks—is the materiality and visual qualities of the texts themselves and/or the various modes of hieroglyphic writing employed in the analyzed examples. Few images are used in the papers (the exception is Winand), and thus the graphic dimension is not present, which was an integral part of extralinguistic expression of Earlier Egyptian written texts and also affecting their meaning. This is not intended as a criticism of the authors, some of whom consider such aspects extensively in their work elsewhere, but rather as a juxtaposition of this volume with an existing body of thought (e.g., Meeks 2015, 63–64; Polis and Rosmorduc 2015, 185–86; McDonald 2014, 518–19) that the graphic nature of ancient Egyptian written language is not (yet) easily reconciled with context-sensitive approaches to text and grammar in Egyptological publications.

In summary, this is an important collection of specialist papers on earlier Egyptian language by scholars at the forefront of the field. It is likely to be of most interest to those working on ancient Egyptian linguistics and phonology of the Pharaonic period, and the comparative use of Coptic found in several papers may further extend interest in the volume to those working on Egyptian languages in later eras. *Coping with Obscurity* succeeds in communicating the results of a workshop challenging the field to move toward "a new understanding of Earlier Egyptian," a credit to both the editors and the participants.

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