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## 1 Introduction

In her 1974 translation of *The Eloquent Peasant*, Lichtheim breaks with a tradition dating back over half a century when she calls the Peasant's antagonist "Nemtynakht" rather than "Djehutynakht," as he had been known in earlier translations.<sup>1</sup> She justifies her decision with a short note, writing: "So [Nemtynakht] rather than Thutnakht, as shown by O. Berlev, *Vestnik Drevnei Istorii*, I (107) (1969), 3-30 [1] (pointed out to me by K. Baer)."[7]

Does Берлев's argument really decide the matter once and for all? And if so, how did other scholars read this name differently for so long? In order to answer these questions, we must consider the general character and limitations of the palaeographic evidence, as well as the different interpretations of that evidence that resulted from a developing understanding of ancient Egyptian mythology and a growing lexicon. In order to observe how palaeography and its relationship to other

sources of evidence evolved, this paper will step backward through the history of this issue as it developed over the course of the 20th century. But before considering the changing role of palaeography in the context of other sources, it is first necessary to define the task of palaeography itself as objectively as possible. In fact, as this paper will argue, it was the failure of early scholars to delimit the role of palaeography precisely that led to this error, and perhaps to many others which remain to be discovered and corrected.

## 2 Palaeography

The controversy over this name stems primarily from the difficulty of reading a single glyph: . Although this sign bears a strong resemblance to one that appears frequently in these manuscripts, the notion that both signs ought to have the same value on the basis of their visual similarity is overly simplistic. The history of the hieratic script includes numerous cases in which several distinct handwritten forms converged to a single common sign. This feature of their development gives hieratic signs a multivalent quality, making

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<sup>1</sup>The *terminus post quem* for the name "Djehutynakht" (or some variant thereof) is 1903, when Schäfer published his paper suggesting this as the correct reading.[13]

context indispensable in determining the correct hieroglyphic value.



Figure 1: Signs 99-100 & 105-6 in Möller's *Paläographie* showing the similarity in hieratic of several distinct hieroglyphs.

The hieratic script evolved from handwritten hieroglyphic signs,[8] a fact borne out most clearly by comparing the abbreviated forms of common signs (e.g., “ from “ with the highly detailed manner in which uncommon ones were occasionally written (or even drawn, as the distinction becomes irrelevant in such cases).



Figure 2: The eloquent peasant's name. The rare jackal determinative is especially detailed.

The close relationship of the two scripts means that hieratic texts can be transcribed into hieroglyphs, as they often are in modern publications.<sup>2</sup> However, because the

<sup>2</sup>A practice which in the past was probably motivated as much by the cost of publishing photographic

graphemic inventory of hieratic is considerably smaller<sup>3</sup> and does not uniquely represent every hieroglyph, producing such transcriptions is not always a straightforward process.

In more precise terms, the mapping from hieroglyphic to hieratic graphemes is epimorphic, and therefore, in order to be invertible, additional information must be adduced to replace that which was lost in the original (hypothesized)<sup>4</sup> transformation from hieroglyphic to hieratic. This information is

plates as it was by any expected benefit to the reader. Unfortunately, it seems to have become fixed by tradition, because it continues today, despite the fact that the cost of publishing text and photographs electronically is roughly the same, and despite the problems it causes. Specifically, transcriptions eliminate the alternative interpretations of a text and present the entire manuscript at a uniform level of legibility, thereby obscuring the uncertainty of reading various portions. Also, the hieratic script is (comparatively) easy to read, so there is no need to replace it with anything else.

<sup>3</sup>These number of hieroglyphic and hieratic signs in active use varied over time, but a rough comparison of Gardiner's *Grammar* with Möller's *Paläographie* puts the ratio at  $\approx 2 : 1$ . Though it provides a general impression, this value is essentially meaningless because it ignores the relative frequencies of signs. If, for example, the set of hieroglyphs included a high number of extremely rare signs (as it seems to), the frequency distributions of the two sets could be much more similar than their cardinalities would suggest (and they probably are). A more detailed consideration of the sign frequencies within the text might better inform the present discussion, but has proved impossible to complete within the available timeframe.

<sup>4</sup>It cannot be assumed that Egyptian scribes were conscious of the relationship between hieratic and hieroglyph signs when they were writing on papyrus. This is especially true in the case of literary texts, since these were almost certainly not intended to be inscribed on stone, and therefore their hiero-

most often provided by inference based on syntax<sup>5</sup> at the glyph and word levels: i.e., inference based on the known likelihoods of glyph sequences, which can be established independently by evaluating both hieroglyphic sources and hieratic texts that contain sequences of glyphs with unequivocal readings.

Given that the aforementioned inversion is usually possible even in non-trivial cases, where the aid of syntax becomes indispensable, it can be argued that word/glyph-level syntax is second only to the sign values themselves in its utility to the task of transcription. Though higher levels of syntax may also offer some evidence, their use is more problematic, in part because their rules varied between genres, but also because the syntaxes themselves are still an active area of research and may never be established with certainty due to the limited size of ancient Egyptian corpora. For example, because hieratic literary texts are themselves the source for determining Middle Egyptian literary grammar, and because of the high potential for *hapax legomena*, no reasonable grammatical interpretation can ever be completely excluded, which means that the infrequency of a particular structure provides only a circular ar-

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glyphic transcriptions were irrelevant to their composition. By contrast, the evolution of Demotic often combined several distinct hieroglyphic signs into single graphemes, suggesting that scribes eventually stopped recognizing this relationship.

<sup>5</sup>Here the word “syntax” is used according to the formal language theory definition.[9] This definition must be distinguished from the more-usual one regarding grammatical structure in language (to which it is analogous), because such phrase-level syntax plays a secondary role in determining a sign’s value.

gument against its presence in any given case. Semantic considerations are also possible, but it is worth remembering that one of the basic purposes of writing something down is to record a novel relationship between concepts. How novel this relationship might be is anyone’s guess. Plus, the nature of language and culture is such that an impossibly absurd combination of words in one language may be an everyday figure of speech when translated into another.

In reality, precise data on glyph transition frequencies have never been compiled. Instead, this information exists only in the minds of egyptologists. Though we might expect that this knowledge is a very close estimation of the truth, we are almost never able to judge for ourselves. However, because many scholars discussed the present case individually, it presents a rare and notable exception to this general rule.

### 3


The glyph in the name of the antagonist in *The Eloquent Peasant* is at the intersection of several rare events. The manuscript appears to have been written with care and remains in good condition, the linguistic and literary context of the name is highly certain, the forms of the signs themselves are clearly visible, and the papyrus on which they appear is free of lacunae. In addition, there are multiple instances of the same form, and two instances of a slightly different one, which is clearly a graphic variant of the others. In sum, the conditions in which this sign oc-














curs are ideally suited to palaeographic evaluation. If it were truly impossible to read a sign in such a case as this, it would call into question the decipherability of such texts in general and cast unsettling doubt on all of the knowledge whose acquisition was predicated on the assumption of their decipherability.

Fortunately, there is no need to entertain such doubts on the basis of this example. Its reading is, in fact, abundantly clear. The hieratic signs themselves can be directly transcribed without reference to syntax at any level.



Figure 3: Excerpt from lines 41-42 of P Berlin 3023 showing the unambiguous nature of the transcription into hieroglyphs.

Table 1: Attestations of   
(B1 = P Berlin 3023, B2 = P Berlin 3025)

B1- Line 19	B1 - Line 21	B1 - Line 24
		
B1 - Line 27	B1 - Line 32	B1 - Line 35
		
B1 - Line 41	B1 - Line 49	B1 - Line 57
		
B1 - Line 63	B1 - Line 74	B1 - Line 78
		
B2 - Line 139	B2 - Line 141	
		

The sign at the heart of the controversy 𓂏 is used unambiguously elsewhere in the manuscript to indicate the sign: 𓂏 (or 𓂏 in P Berlin 3025). This glyph, with the addition of the two phonograms: 𓂏 and 𓂏, spells the name of the god Nemty, whose name is attested both earlier in the pyramid texts and later in *The Contendings of Horus and Seth*. In the latter, the written form of Nemty's name is very similar: 𓂏𓂏𓂏.<sup>6</sup> In both, the name is clearly distinct from the name of the god Thoth, as it is in the manuscript of the Eloquent Peasant. There can be no reasonable



Figure 4: Lines 169 & 270 of P Berlin 3023 showing the name of Thoth.

doubt, the name of this character is Nemty-nakht.

## 4 History

The obvious question is: if this sign is so easy to read, why did it defy the efforts of the best Egyptologists for more than half a century? This difficulty has several simultaneous causes. First, the sign appears in a personal name.<sup>7</sup> Because names may be composed of elements that do not usually appear

<sup>6</sup>This is the form given by Gardiner in [6], who writes: “For this writing of the name of the god which in M-E. is written 𓂏 see ZÄS. xlvii, 51 foll.[15]”

<sup>7</sup>A fact that was observed even before the value of the sign was known.[13]

together in the general lexicon, this excludes both glyph- and word-level syntax from consideration, which eliminates the most immediate method of confirming a sign's value. Even though this appears to be a writing of 𓂏, the combination of this sign with the others around it is not very common. Second, the sign does not appear to be a phonogram,<sup>8</sup> and therefore must be a logogram as part of a word that was common enough to be spelled with a single logographic sign followed by two phonetic complements. As Schäfer observed, this word is probably the name of a god, because the pattern [god] 𓂏𓂏 is found in many other theophoric names.

This marks the point at which the erroneous reading of an uncertain sign became canonical. Because he was writing before other attestations of the name Nemty were studied,<sup>9</sup> Schäfer concluded that the god who fit these criteria was Thoth.<sup>10</sup> As a result of his paper, Möller listed this sign (specifically) as a possible shortened writing of 𓂏.

Schäfer's conclusion was perfectly reasonable given the available evidence, and it would be improper to disparage past scholars for their errors. Nevertheless, there is an important lesson to be learned from this example. The flaw in Schäfer's argument lies not in

<sup>8</sup>Although Maspero thought it was 𓂏.[13]

<sup>9</sup>For example, the name appears multiple times in *The Pyramid Texts* and later in *The Contendings of Horus and Seth*. [6][14]

<sup>10</sup>Sehen wir uns nun unter den bekannten Götternamen, die auf 𓂏 ausgehen, um, so fällt uns sofort der Name des Gottes Thot in die Augen, der in den Handschriften des m. R. unter anderen die Formen 𓂏 und 𓂏 hat.[13]



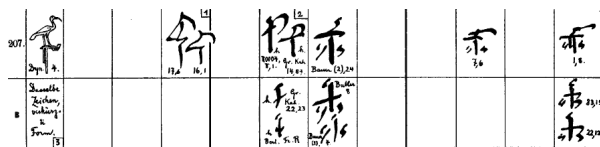






Figure 5: Sign 207 in Möller’s *Paläographie*

the limitations of the available extralinguistic evidence, but on the prioritization of that evidence over what the Egyptian scribe actually wrote. He wrote . This does not become  just because we would like to find a nice way to translate it. If there were no attestation of the name Nemty, the word  would simply be untranslatable. This is as valid a scientific conclusion as any other, regardless of whether we like it, and more valuable for being true.


Contrary to popular belief, it is not the answers to our questions that science offers, but a window into the truth. When there is insufficient evidence to determine the truth beyond some reasonable level of doubt, grasping for answers can do more harm than good. If Schäfer had limited his conclusion to the fact that  is the name of a god, leaving the name itself as a burning question, then others would have been more likely to fill the gap as attestations of Nemty gradually came to light. Instead, Möller enshrined Schäfer’s conclusion in his *Paläographie*, and it took 72 years for Берлев to notice their mistake, and two papers<sup>11</sup> to prove what should have been patently obvious by that time.

<sup>11</sup>One in 1969 to establish the evidence for the name Nemty,[1] and a second in 1975 to demonstrate definitively that this is the name found in *The Eloquent Peasant*. [2] Lichtheim only cites the first.

In considering this case, we see that the decipherment of ancient Egyptian did not begin and end with a single momentous event, as it is commonly portrayed. Instead, it has proceeded gradually through the combined efforts and occasional mistakes of numerous scholars. As Goethe might have said (and should have if he didn’t): “The history of a science is the science itself.”

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