

Egyptian Scribes Writing Northwest Semitic

July 28th, 2022
Humboldt-Universität
zu Berlin

Joseph Cross

Introduction

- Definition of a text by M. A. K. Halliday:
 - “any instance of language, in any medium, that makes sense to someone who knows the language”
 - “language functioning in context”

Introduction

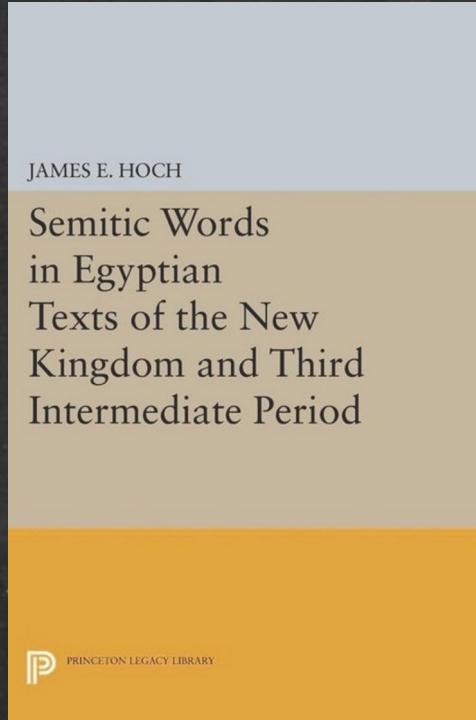
- Northwest Semitic texts written in Egyptian script means:
 - Text that is part of a written document that is readable by an Egyptian scribe (not only script, but inscriptional conventions)
 - And is also separable (to varying degrees) as a coherent Northwest Semitic linguistic utterance

Introduction

- What is not treated here?
 - Egyptian texts:
 - Execration Texts (Middle Kingdom)
 - Lists of Semitic names
 - Early “alphabetic” texts

Introduction

- What is not treated here?
 - Semitic loanwords



What I can offer today

- A state-of-the-art, critical walkthrough
- The result of sustained reflection and research on both the linguistic basis of the purported Northwest Semitic texts, as well as their full context in the Egyptian documents

What I **cannot** offer today

- Group writing
- Full discussion of the Northwest Semitic content
- In-depth consideration of sociolinguistics, bilingualism, and how Egyptians encountered NW Semitic speech
- Content of P. Amherst 63

The Corpus: A Walkthrough

Distribution of texts: period

- Old Kingdom: 1 (0?)
- New Kingdom: 6 (5?)
- Late & Graeco-Roman Period: 2 (1?)

Distribution of texts: dialect

- Old Kingdom: 1 (?)
 - New Kingdom: 6
 - Late & Graeco-Roman Period: 2
- ← Canaanite
← Aramaic

Distribution of texts: dialect

- Old Kingdom: 1 (?)
- New Kingdom: 6  ← Group writing
- Late & Graeco-Roman Period: 2

Distribution of texts: period

- Old Kingdom:
 - Northwest Semitic incantations against serpents in the Pyramid Texts of Unas (5th Dynasty, 2375-2345 BCE)
 - Contested

Distribution of texts: period

- New Kingdom: texts from the milieu of scribal education and practice

Distribution of texts: period

- New Kingdom: texts from the milieu of scribal education and practice
 - Northwest Semiticisms, and a single sentence, in **P. Anastasi I**
 - Practice texts with lists of Northwest Semitic words (**O. Cairo CG 25759, O. TT99**)

Distribution of texts: period

- New Kingdom: texts from the milieu of magico-medical practice

Distribution of texts: period

- New Kingdom: texts from the milieu of magico-medical practice
 - Bilingual magical spells in the **London Medical Papyrus** (BM 10059, ca. 1550-1295)

Distribution of texts: period

- New Kingdom: texts from the milieu of magico-medical practice
 - A short sentence in an Egyptian spell, followed by a complete incantation, possibly originally a boasting song used during a lion hunt in the **Harris Magical Papyrus** (BM EA 10042, ca. 1100)

Distribution of texts: period

- Late and Graeco-Roman Period:

Distribution of texts: period

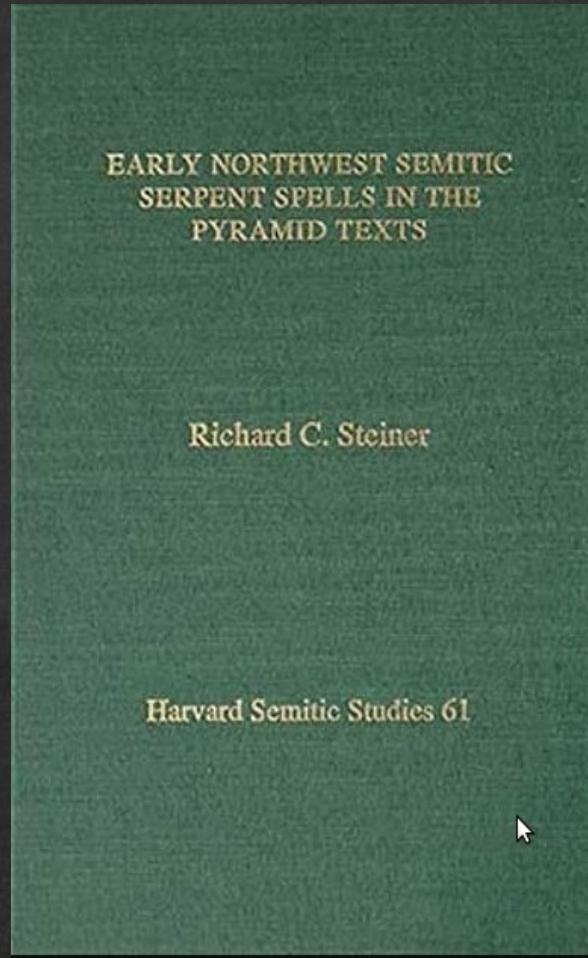
- Late and Graeco-Roman Period:
 - A **graffito from the Wadi Hammamat** recording an incantation against scorpions with Aramaic-sounding verbiage (6th or 5th century BCE)
 - Debated

Distribution of texts: period

- Late and Graeco-Roman Period:
 - Papyrus Amherst 63

The pyramid of Unas, Saqqara (mid to late 24st century BCE)





Joseph Cross – Egyptian Scribes Writing Northwest Semitic



Joseph Cross – Egyptian Scribes Writing Northwest Semitic

Serpent spells in the Pyramid Texts

- The text in question stands out visually:
 - Uncommon hieroglyphic spellings
 - A lack of determinatives.

Serpent spells in the Pyramid Texts

- No convincing Egyptian translation has been offered



Spruch 235 (Schack Kap. 30).

W. 324

239
a

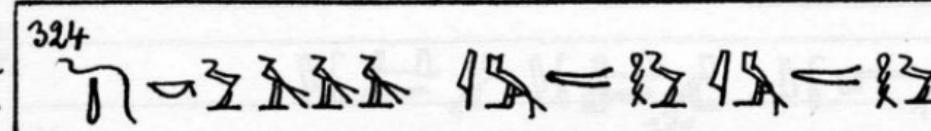
dd - md.w kw 333 jmhw jmhw

From Sethe's transcription of PT 235

dd-md.w kw 333 jmhw jmhw



Spruch 235 (Schack Kap. 30).

W. 324 
239
a

From Sethe's transcription of PT 235

dd-md.w kw 333 jmhw jmhw

Steiner's reading:

dd-md.w qawwu Rīr-Rīr 'immu-ḥiwwi 'immu-ḥiwwi
"Recitation: 'Utterance of Rir-Rir, Mother Snake,
Mother-Snake...'"

Serpent spells in the Pyramid Texts

- Northwest Semitic text is found:
 - In the content of the spells
 - In brief, paratextual introductory formulas that identify the kind of spell and the speaker

Serpent spells in the Pyramid Texts

- While many of the spells are hybrid, the formulas are only in Northwest Semitic
- Two of them refer (arguably) to a “spell” and a “whispering, the uttering of his spell”

Serpent spells in the Pyramid Texts

- The appeal of Steiner's argument:
 - An actual reading
 - The NW Semitic text parallels surrounding Egyptian texts

Serpent spells in the Pyramid Texts

- The appeal of Steiner's argument:
 - Heightened contact with the S. Levant in this period of the Old Kingdom (following new chronology)
 - Stowaway snakes in ships from Byblos carrying lumber could be enchanted “in their own language”

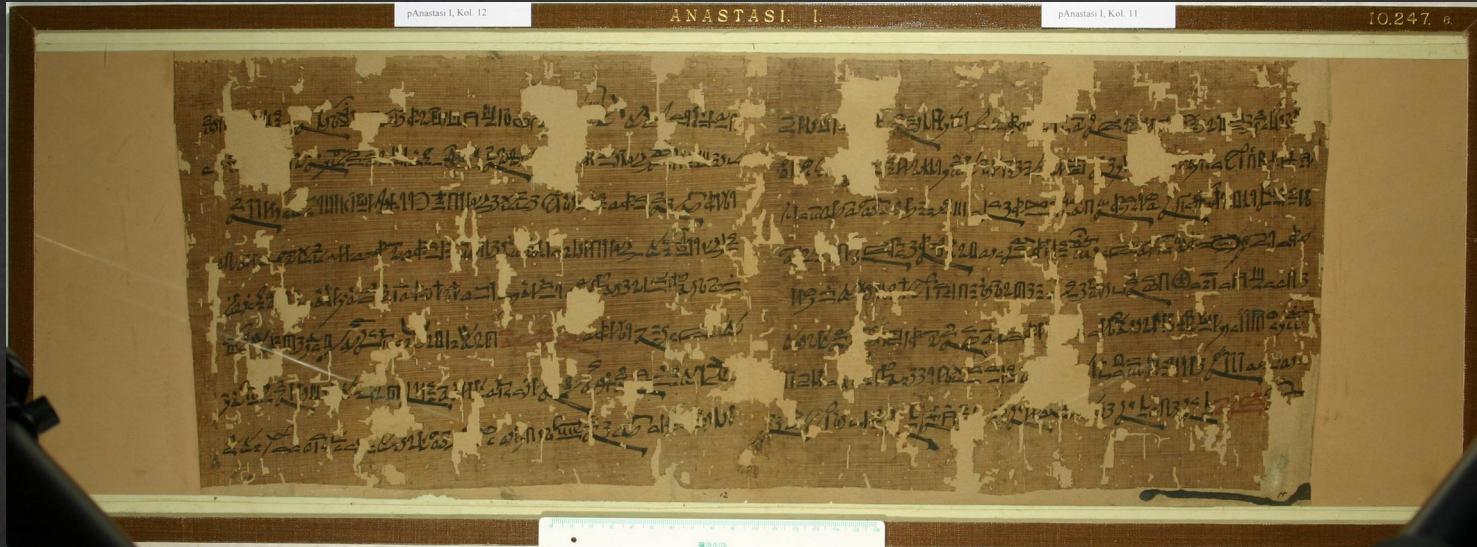
Serpent spells in the Pyramid Texts

- The appeal of Steiner's argument:
 - Many of the Pyramid Texts were redacted from non-royal/elite, texts for private practice (ultimately oral)

Serpent spells in the Pyramid Texts

- Criticisms of Steiner's argument:
 - Could be a matter of “eisegesis”
 - No serious engagement thus far with his philological arguments
 - Some readings seem to be a stretch

Papyrus Anastasi I

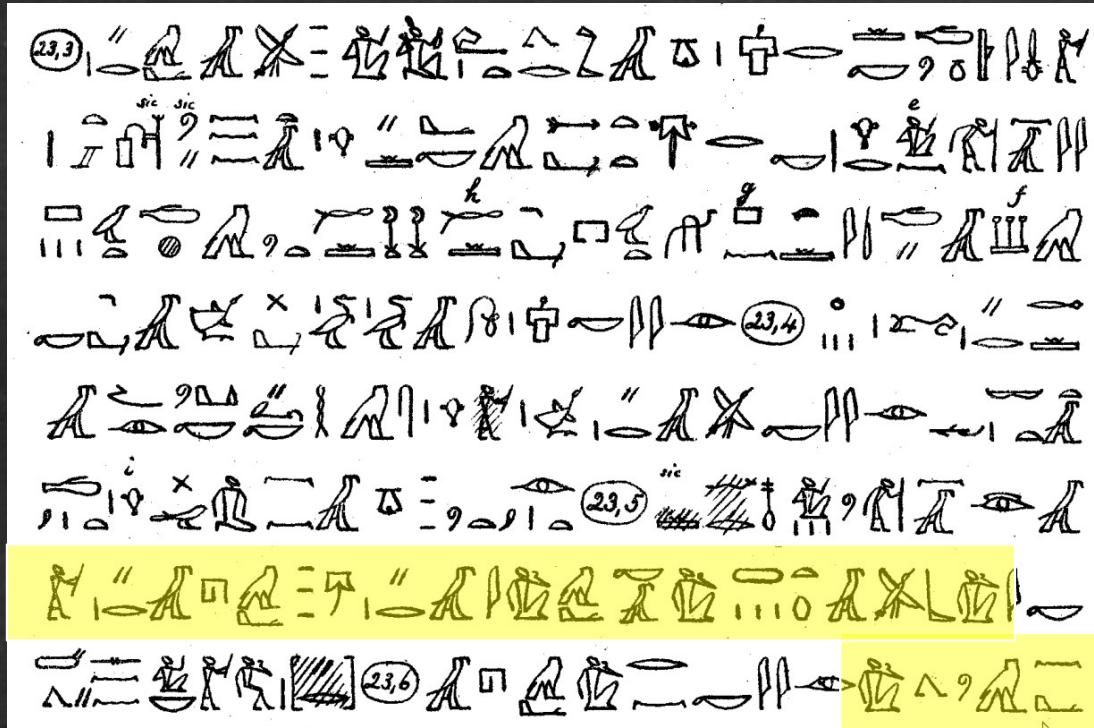


P. BM 10247, ca. 1295-1069

A literary letter to a young scribe from an experienced senior who peppers his speech with Northwest Semitic words



Papyrus Anastasi I

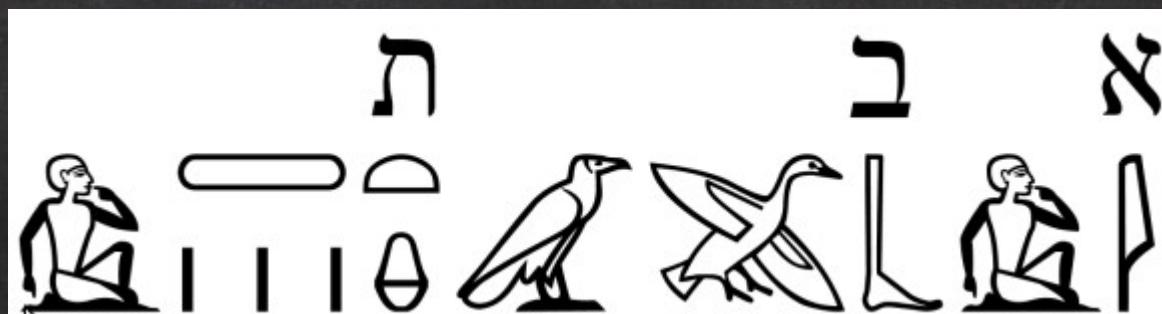


'bt km 'yl mhyr n'm

"You perish like a ram,
dear mahir-soldier"

col. 23, l.5

Papyrus Anastasi I



'bt km 'yl mhyr n 'm

"You perish like a ram,
dear *mahir*-soldier"

Cf. BH אָבְדָת

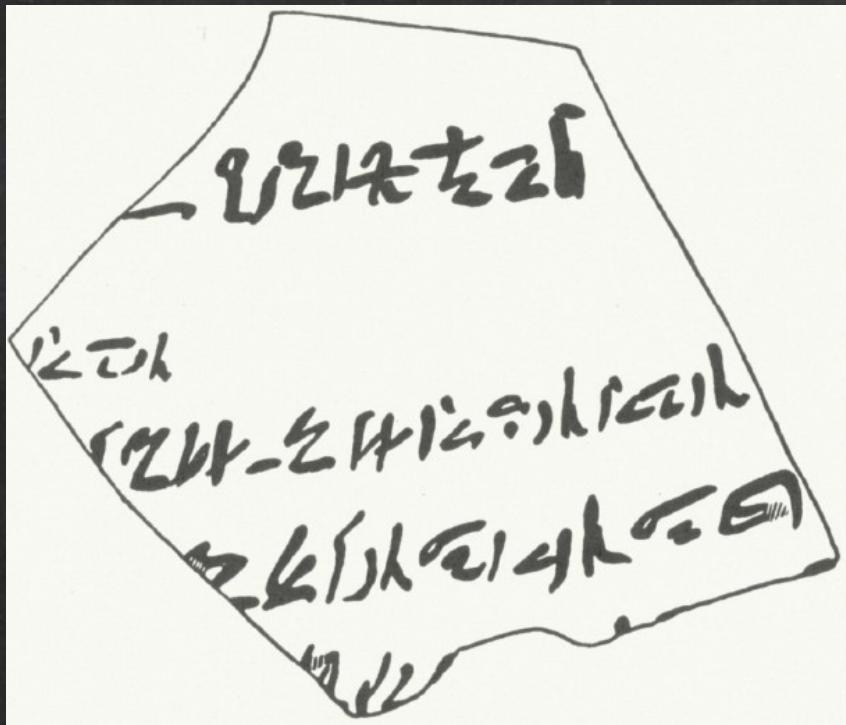
P. Anastasi I

- The only surviving example in a work of *belles lettres*
- The sentence may be uttered by the letter-writer (the sarcastic scribe), or by a NW Semitic speaker who is part of the scenario

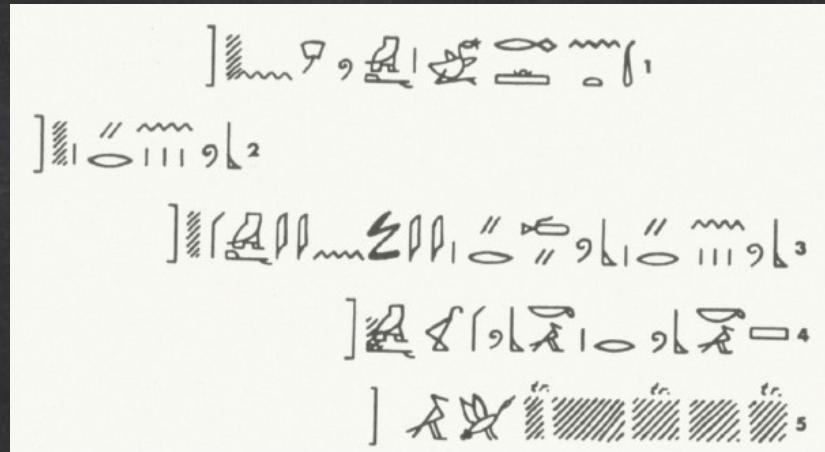
P. Anastasi I

- A clear example of a sentence that is composed anew by the author of the composition on P. Anastasi I

O. Cairo CG 25759



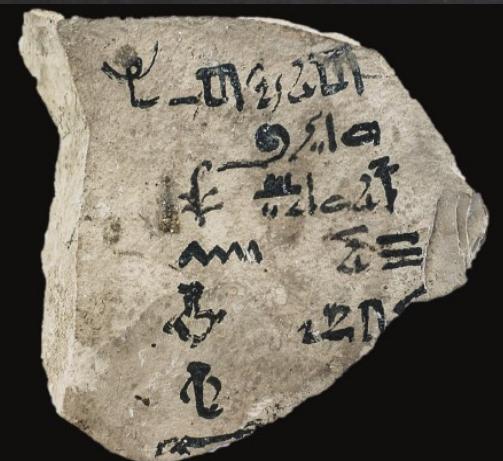
ca. 1100



Černy, *Ostraca hiératiques*, CG 25501-25832 (1935), pl. XCVI
[Image from Shisa-Halevy, *Orientalia* (n.s.) 47.2 (1978)]



O. TT99

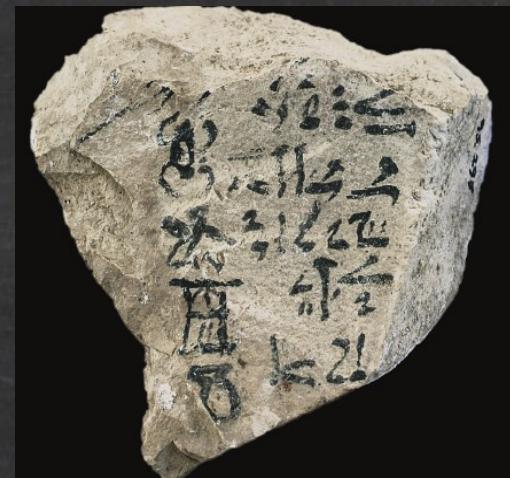


Recto

		1
		2
		3
		4
		5
		[...] 6
		[...] 7

Photos: T. Schneider, BASOR 379 (2018)

Transcriptions: B. Haring, JNES 72 no. 2 (2015)



Verso

		[...] x + 1
		x + 2
		x + 3
		x + 4
		x + 5
		x + 6



O. TT99

- Potentially “the earliest known alphabetically organized text in world history” (Ben Haring)

O. TT99

- If the words are Northwest Semitic, they are extremely rare
- Mnemonics for learning the alphabet?
- Jottings of a scribe practicing group writing, proceeding through words not randomly but alphabetically?

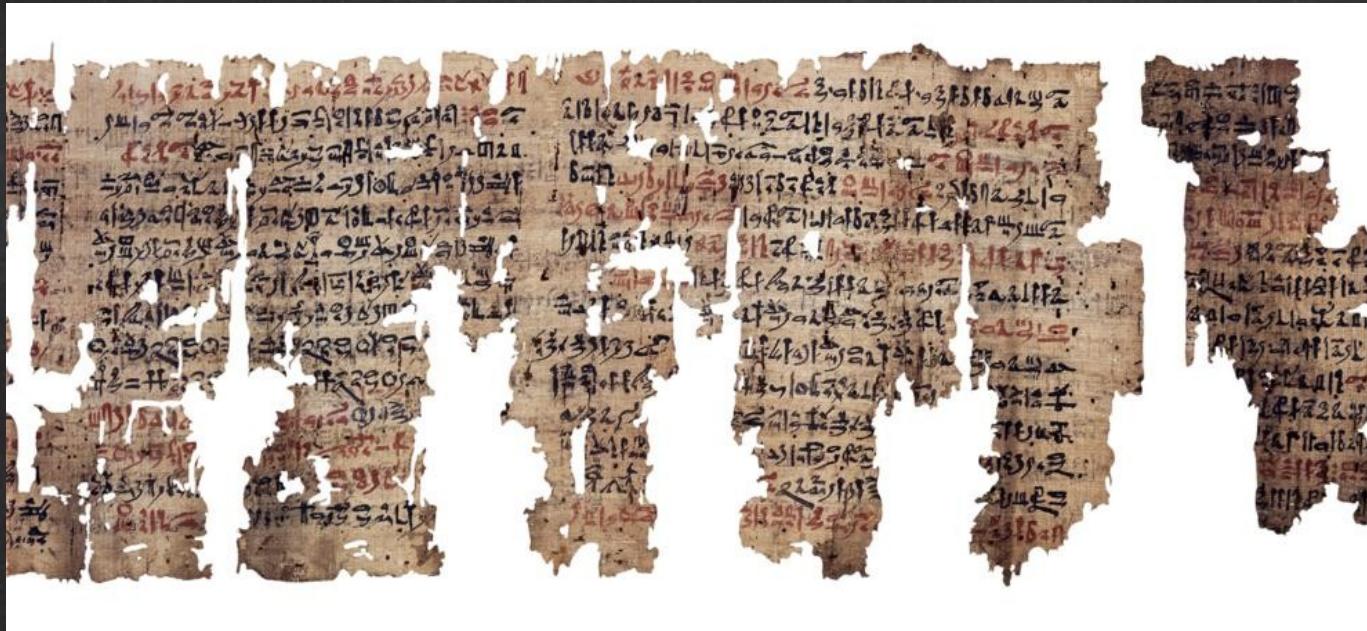
O. TT99

- The use of two systems of alphabetic ordering attested in the Levant suggests a degree of familiarity with Levantine scribal convention and schooling above and beyond a knowledge of Northwest Semitic.

O. TT99

- It is also possible that these origins of the “alphabet” originated in Egypt

The London Medical Papyrus



BM 10059, ca. 1550-1295

Six spells against skin
disease contain Northwest
Semitic content



The London Medical Papyrus

NORTHWEST SEMITIC INCANTATIONS IN AN EGYPTIAN MEDICAL PAPYRUS OF THE FOURTEENTH CENTURY B.C.E.*

RICHARD C. STEINER, Yeshiva University, New York

I. INTRODUCTION

THE London Medical Papyrus, published seventy years ago by W. Wreszinski,¹ contains a number of short Northwest Semitic magical texts transcribed into hieratic syllabic script ("group writing").² The only attempts I know of to decipher any of these texts have been by Egyptologists;³ Semitists seem to have ignored them entirely.⁴ This neglect is quite undeserved, since the papyrus in question is early by Northwest Semitic standards (fourteenth century B.C.E.)⁵ and since the Egyptian syllabic script is, in many ways, more informative than the native scripts of the Northwest Semitic languages.

So far as I know, these incantations have the distinction of being the earliest Semitic texts written in an Egyptian script.⁶ The "Amorite" material in the Exorcism Texts, etc.,⁷ is much earlier, but it consists solely of names. The Northwest Semitic texts in the

* This article is dedicated to the memory of Klaus Baer. It was he who introduced me to the Semitic texts in Egyptian script published by W. Wreszinski.

¹ In his treatment of one Egyptologist, "no serious attempts have been made to decipher" the Semitic spells in Egyptian magical texts; J. F. Boeghouts,

"Magical Texts," *Textes et langages de l'Egypte pharaonique. Cent cinquante années de recherches 1872-1972*, Bibliothèque d'études, vol. 64, pt. 3 (Cairo, 1972), p. 17.

² According to Quirke (personal communication).

³ Wreszinski dated the document on palaeographical grounds to the late 19th or early 20th Dynasty, ca. 1100 B.C.E. (see *Monatsschriften für Ägyptologie und Ägyptische Archäologie*, 1903, pp. 58-100).

⁴ I would like to thank S. G. J. Quirke and R. Ritter for their patient guidance in Egyptological matters.

⁵ Blau in his comments on the Semitic interpretations offered here, and the staff of the Göttingen Library of the University and the Witbaur Library of the Brooklyn Museum for their efficient and friendly assistance.

⁶ W. Wreszinski, *Der Londoner medizinische Papyrus* (British Museum Nr. 106359) und der Papyrus

Medizin der alten Ägypter, vol. 2 (Leipzig, 1912). I am indebted to S. G. J. Quirke for this reference.

⁷ See S. W. Schenkel, "Syllabische Schreibung,"

Lexikon der Ägyptologie, vol. 6 (Wiesbaden, 1985), cols. 114-22. I am once again indebted to Quirke for this reference.

⁸ H. T. Bossert, *Asia* (Istanbul, 1946), p. 114;

JNES 51 no. 3 (1992).

© 1992 by The University of Chicago.

All rights reserved.

0022-2968/92/5103-0003\$1.00.

Richard Steiner, "Northwest Semitic Incantations in an Egyptian Medical Papyrus of the Fourteenth Century B. C. E.,"
JNES 51.3, 1992



The London Medical Papyrus

- Two short spells are entirely non-Egyptian, while others are mostly Egyptian with added Semitic texts
- NW Semitic parallels the Egyptian semantically
- Accurate, non-generic determinatives are used

The London Medical Papyrus

Sign	Description	Egyptian usage	Semitic application
	Seated man (A1)	Persons, proper names	<i>hmkt</i> “strangler demon” (§4)
	Man with hand to mouth (A2)	Cognition, eating, etc.; later in Demotic for abstract ideas	<i>'bd</i> “to perish” (§3); <i>km</i> “like” (§3); <i>n'm</i> “dear” (§3)
	Walking legs (D54)	Movement	<i>ys()</i> “to go forth” (§4)
	Horus falcon on standard (G7)	Gods	<i>rp()</i> “healer” (§4)
	Erect cobra (I12)	Goddesses	Astarte(?) (§4)

The London Medical Papyrus

- The Egyptians attributed some diseases to demons of Semitic origin, and thus the bilingual nature of these incantations resembles in purpose the serpent spells in the Pyramid Texts

The London Medical Papyrus

- *yṣ ḥmkt rpy*
- “Let the strangler, my healer, go out, O my Healer.”
- The speaker requests that a benevolent protector banish a threatening “**strangler**” entity known from other Northwest Semitic texts

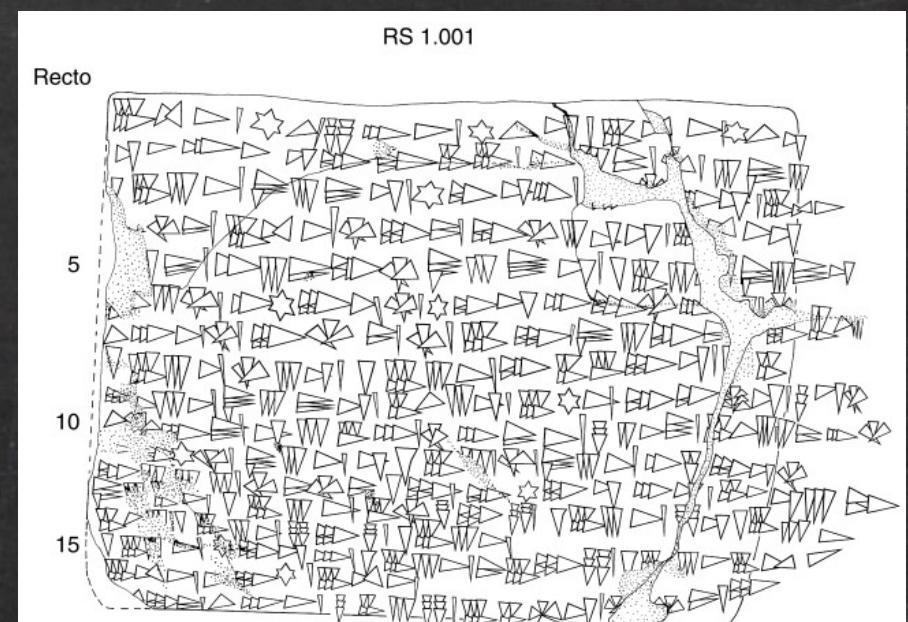


Arslan Tash amulets (KAI 27)

Pardee, Dennis. "Les documents d'Arslan Tash: authentiques ou faux?" *Syria* 75 (1998): 15–54



RS 1.001 ritual text (Ugarit)



The London Medical Papyrus

- *ysize hmkt rpy*
- “Let the strangler, my healer, go out, O my Healer.”
- The “**healer**” *rp(’)* may refer to a divinized ancestor invoked for protection, a Northwest Semitic idea.

The London Medical Papyrus

Sign	Description	Egyptian usage	Semitic application
	Seated man (A1)	Persons, proper names	<i>hmkt</i> “strangler demon” (§4)
	Man with hand to mouth (A2)	Cognition, eating, etc.; later in Demotic for abstract ideas	<i>'bd</i> “to perish” (§3); <i>km</i> “like” (§3); <i>n'm</i> “dear” (§3)
	Walking legs (D54)	Movement	<i>ys()</i> “to go forth” (§4)
	Horus falcon on standard (G7)	Gods	<i>rp()</i> “healer” (§4)
	Erect cobra (I12)	Goddesses	Astarte(?) (§4)

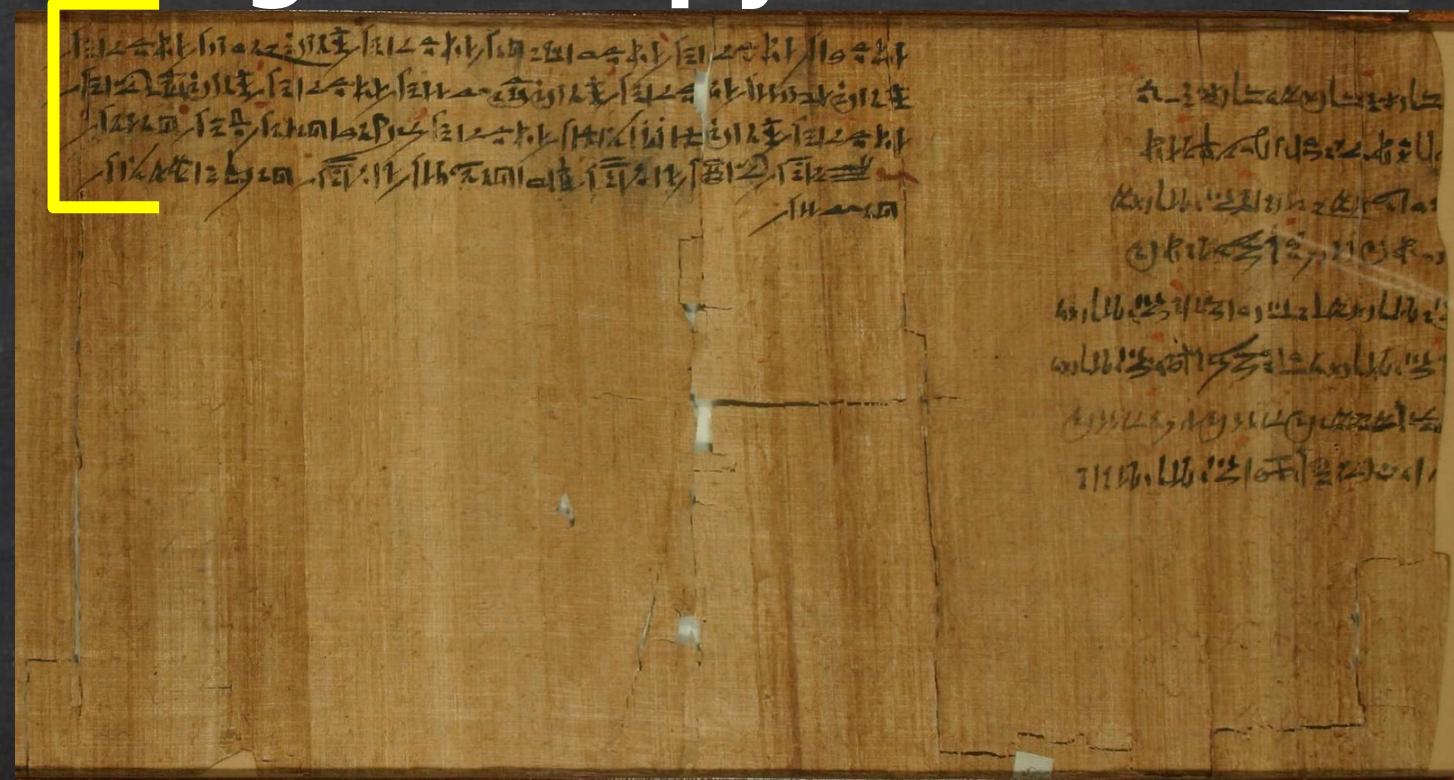
The London Medical Papyrus

- Interspersed within Egyptian-language texts (including spell headings/rubrics)
- Semitic text seems to parallel some Egyptian text
- How did the author of the text know the Semitic?

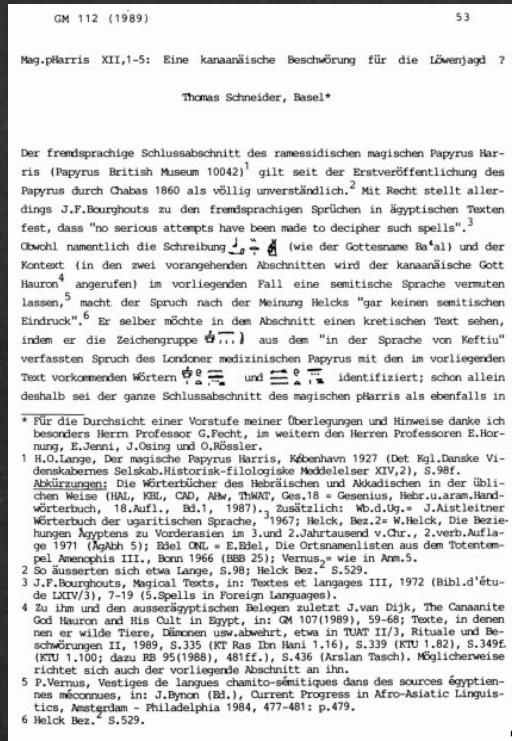
The Harris Magical Papyrus

BM EA 10042,
ca. 1100

Final column on the
verso is a complete
text in NW Semitic
without an Egyptian
paratext



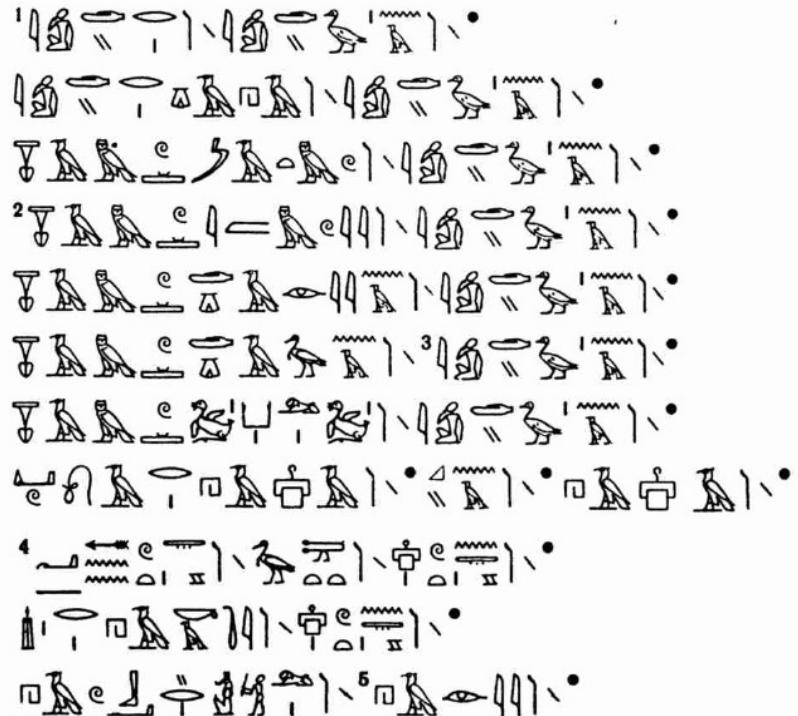
The Harris Magical Papyrus



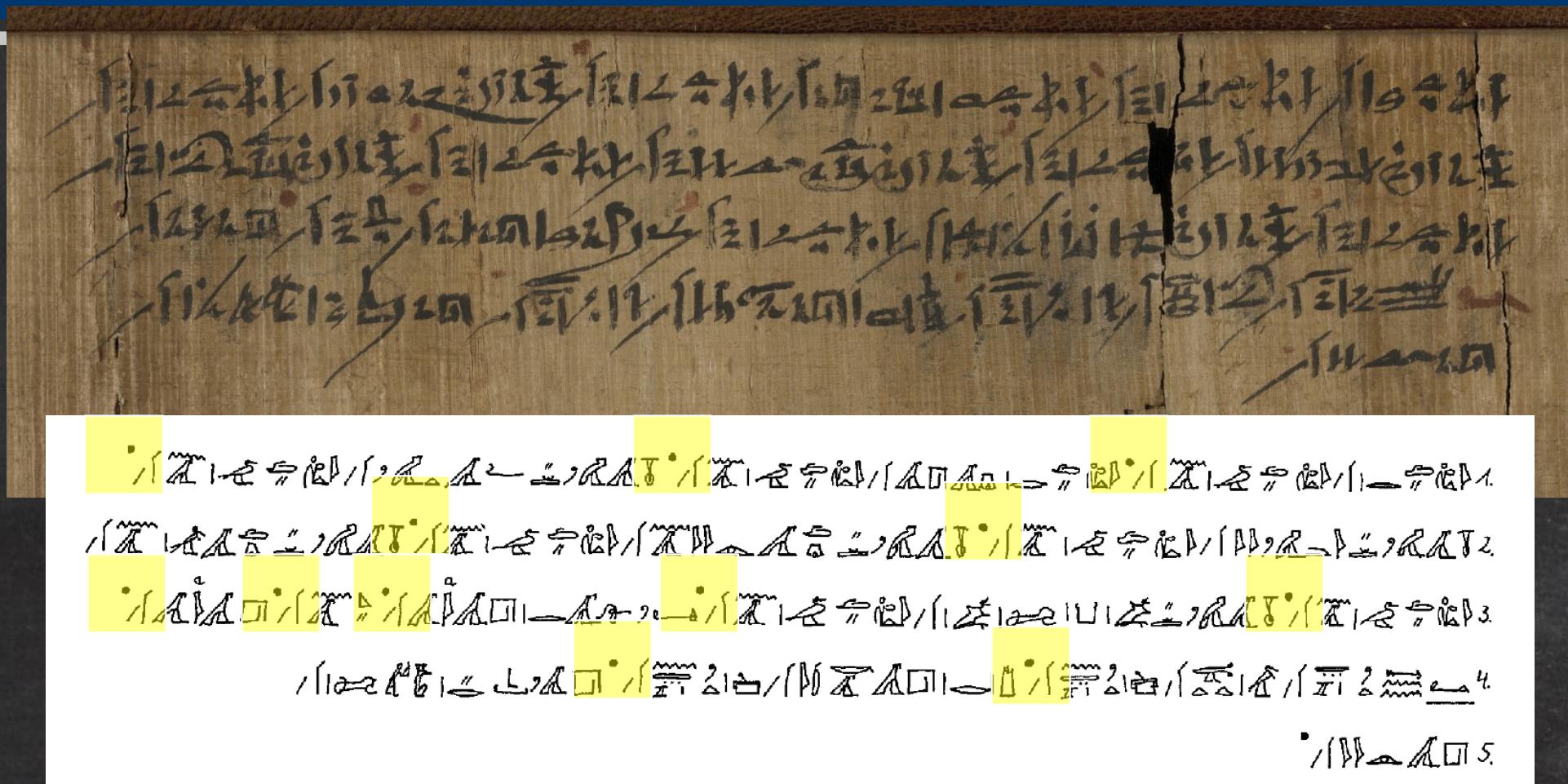
Thomas Schneider, "Mag. Harris XII,1-5: Eine kanaanäische Beschwörung für die Löwenjadt?" *GM* 112 (1989)



The Harris Magical Papyrus


 A vertical column of ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs from the Harris Papyrus. The symbols represent various deities and concepts, including a hawk, a lion, and other mythical creatures, often accompanied by the sign for 'power' or 'strength'.

- 'dr 'dtn (The mighty, I will crush (him))
- 'dr gh 'dtn (The mighty of its roar, I will crush (him))
- sm mt 'dtn (Enabler of death: I will crush (him))
- sm 'my 'dtn
- sm dg 'ryn 'dtn 'ryn = lion (cf. אָרִי)
- sm dg bn 'dtn
- sm skl d 'dtn
- mwr h ^(!) qyn h ^(!) (Missile, ha! Spear, ha!)
- šnnt b' tt šnt (I have sharpened when the red one came)
- 'l hkt šnt
- hb 'l h'ry h'ry = the lion (cf. הַאֲרִי)



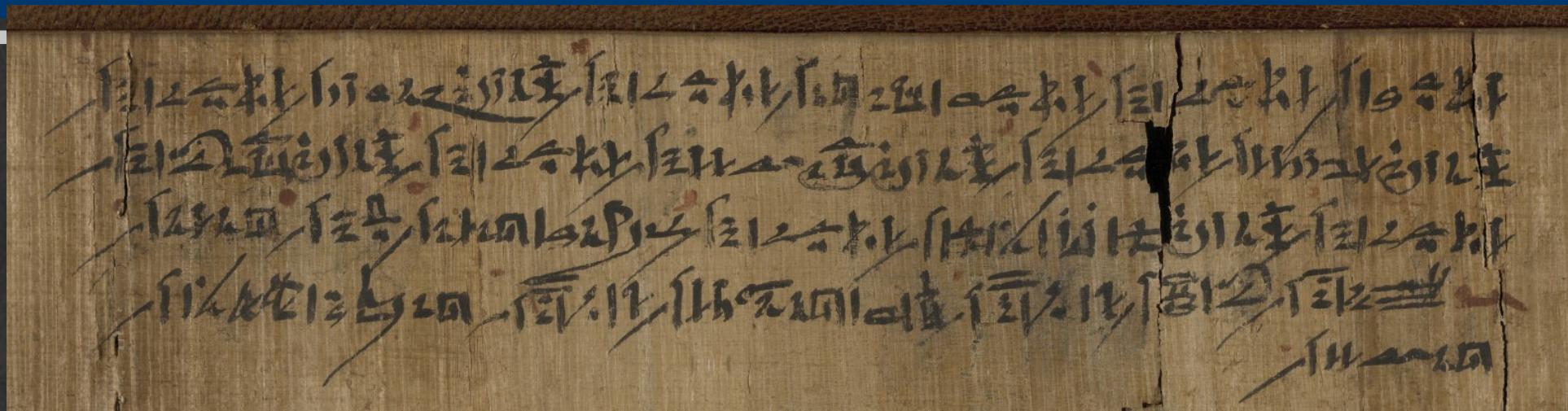
Final column, verso, of Harris Magical Papyrus. Transcription: Leitz, *HPBM* 7 (1999), pl. 23



BM 134872

Unidentified literary text from
Amarna

With verse points in red ink



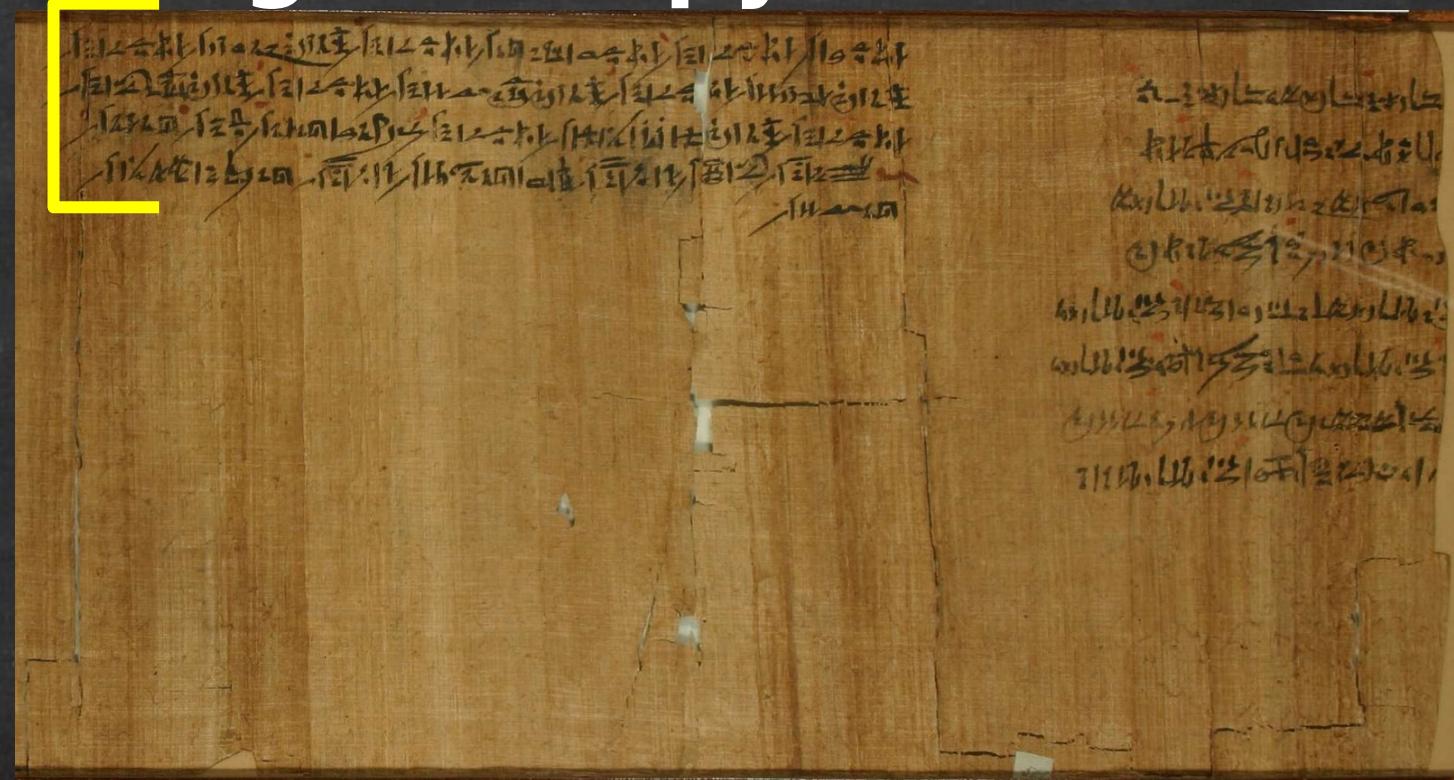
۱. ۲. ۳. ۴.
 ۵. ۶. ۷. ۸. ۹.
 ۱۰. ۱۱. ۱۲. ۱۳. ۱۴.
 ۱۵. ۱۶. ۱۷. ۱۸. ۱۹.
 ۲۰. ۲۱. ۲۲. ۲۳. ۲۴.
 ۲۵.

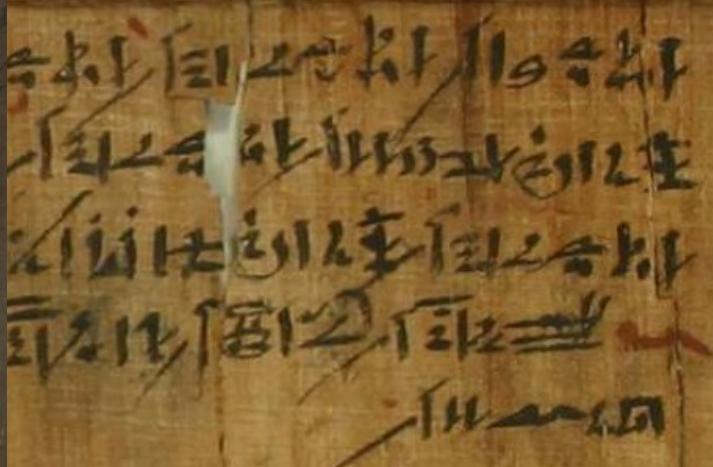
Final column, verso, of Harris Magical Papyrus. Transcription: Leitz, HPBM 7 (1999), pl. 23

The Harris Magical Papyrus

BM EA 10042,
ca. 1100

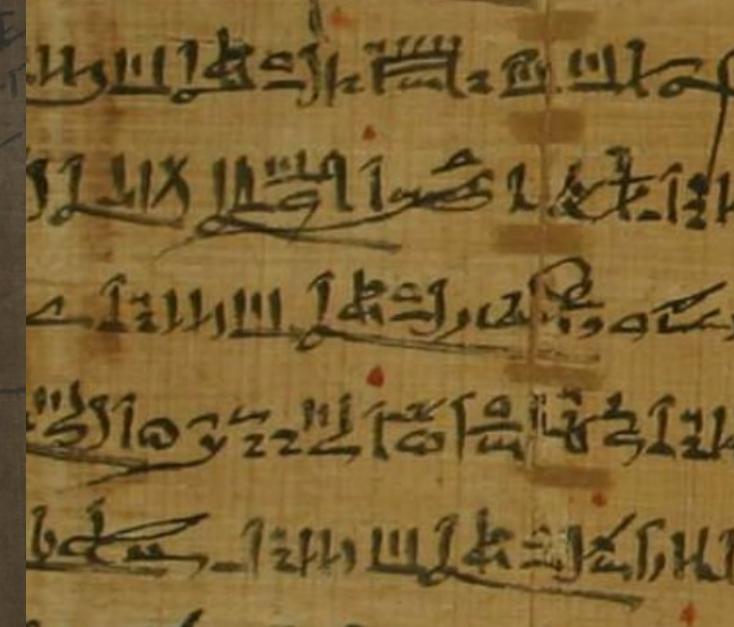
Final column on the
verso is a complete
text in NW Semitic
without an Egyptian
paratext





الله يهويك يا رب يا رب يا رب يا رب
يا رب يا رب يا رب يا رب يا رب يا رب
يا رب يا رب يا رب يا رب يا رب يا رب
يا رب يا رب يا رب يا رب يا رب يا رب

Northwest Semitic text, vso. col. 3

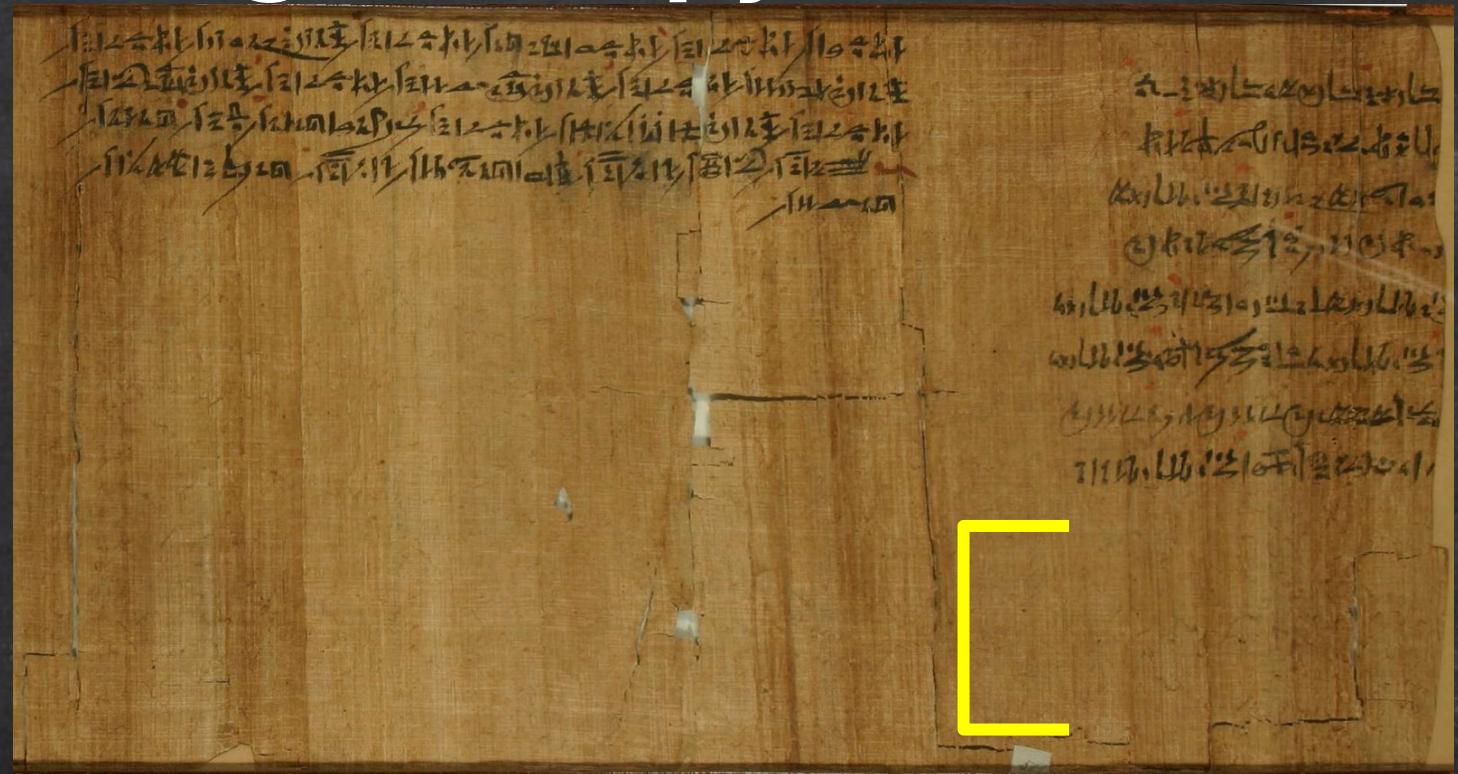


الله يهويك يا رب يا رب يا رب يا رب
يا رب يا رب يا رب يا رب يا رب يا رب
يا رب يا رب يا رب يا رب يا رب يا رب
يا رب يا رب يا رب يا رب يا رب يا رب

Selection from rest of scroll

Final two columns, verso, of Harris Magical Papyrus

The Harris Magical Papyrus



The Harris Magical Papyrus

- This text was not intended to be used like the other texts in the scroll:
 - Appended to the scroll by someone else (a user)
 - Not accompanied by instructions or context for recitation
 - But available as a text that comprises a coherent utterance, possibly a pre-existing text

The Harris Magical Papyrus

First incantation of all conjurations on water...

O egg of the water, spittle of the earth, fluid of the Ogdoad! ... I penetrate with you from your nest. I am Min, lord of the land of Coptos...

This incantation is to be spoken (over) an egg of clay, placed in the hand of a man at the fore of a boat. If there appears the one who is on the water, it is to be thrown into the water.

The Harris Magical Papyrus

- Why was it added?
 - The previous spells on the scroll were for warding off lions and other animals of the desert
 - Semitic deities Reshef, Anat, and Hauron invoked

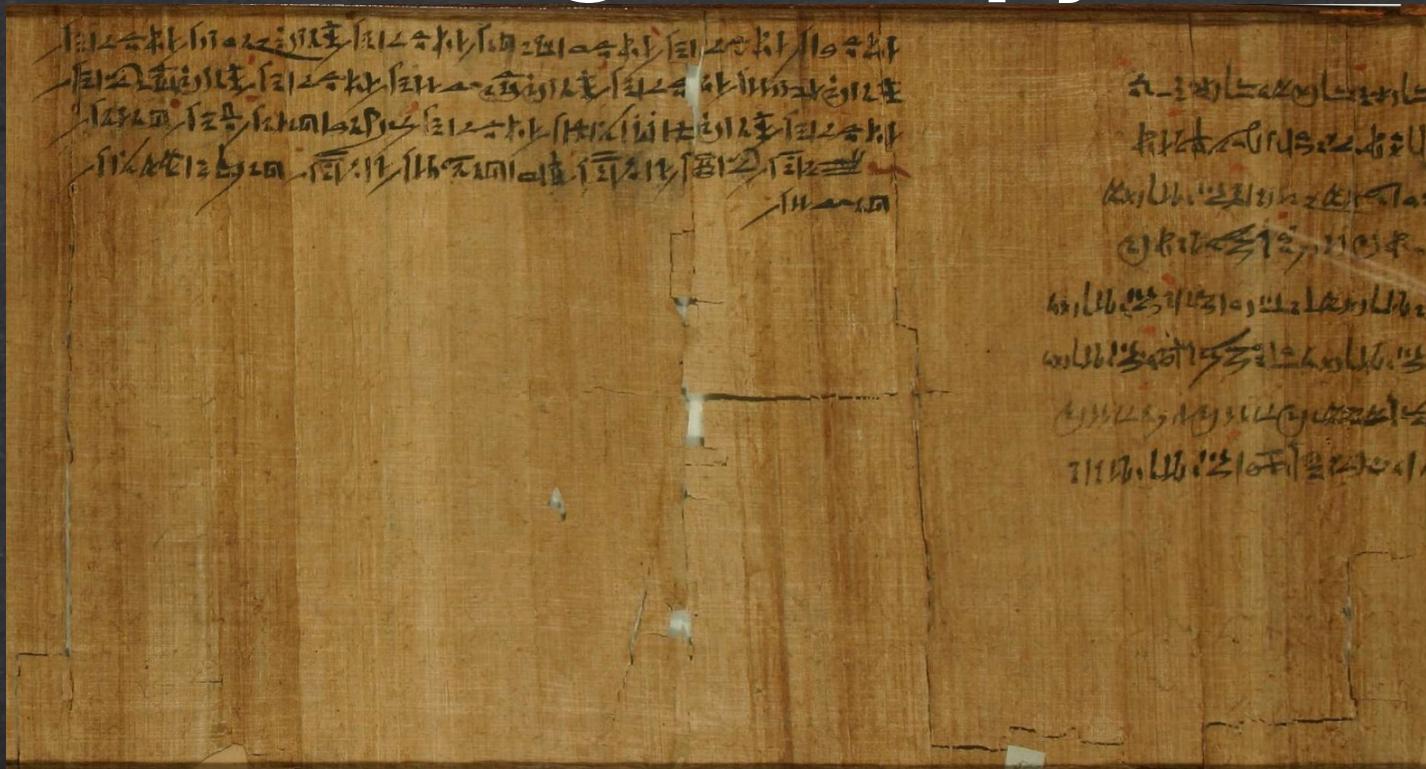
The Harris Magical Papyrus

- Why was it added?
 - Lions and other dangerous animals were conjured as stand-ins for disease
 - This matches what the NW Sem. Text seems to be about
 - Perhaps intended to be supplementary, esp. since earlier spells include NW Sem. content

The Harris Magical Papyrus

- Why was it added?
 - Perhaps a user had the serendipity to encounter a real-world, Northwest Semitic poem about lion hunting that could lend a magical verisimilitude to the Semitic-colored spells against lions at the end of the scroll

The Harris Magical Papyrus



The Harris Magical Papyrus

Another incantation ...

Hauron, cast away for me from the field!

Horus, do not allow any prowling!

I am provided with the perfect magical scroll

That Re has placed in my hand,

Which banishes lions and stops men,

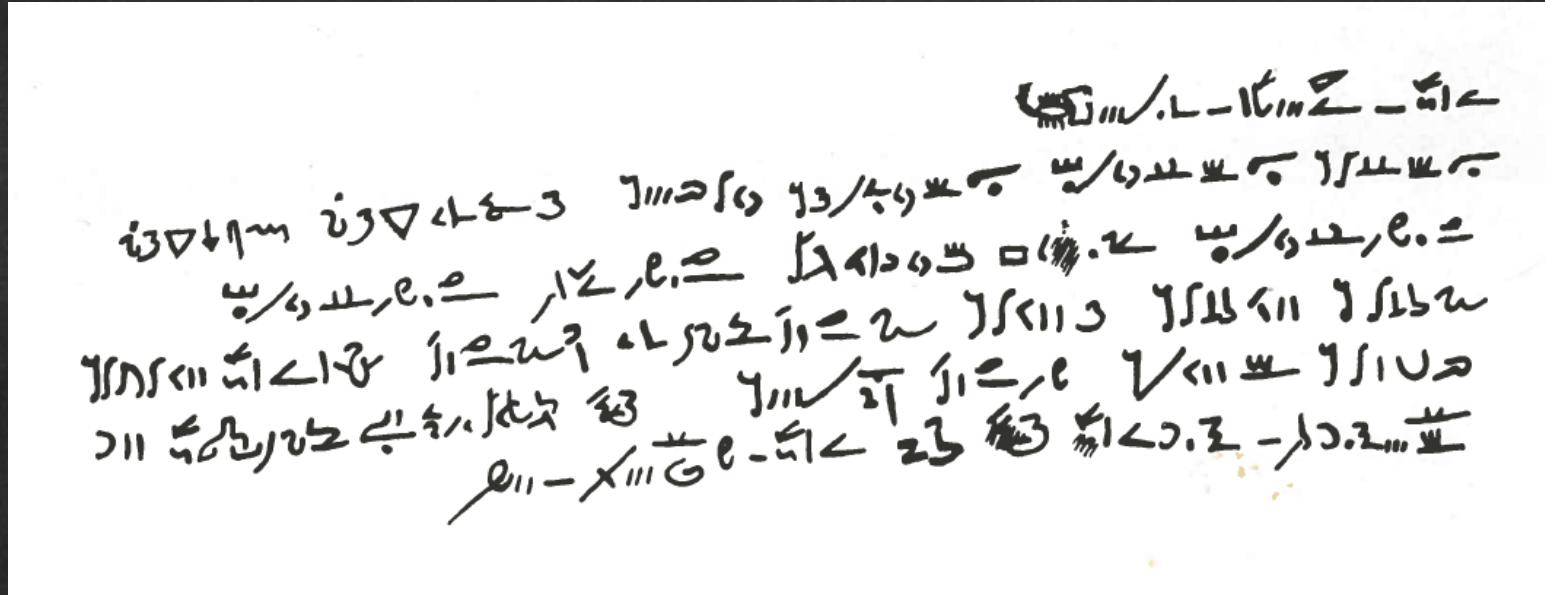
Which banishes men and stops lions.

May the mouths of lions and hyenas,

Of jackals, first of all animals, owners of raised tails,

Be closed up, who eat flesh and drink blood ...

The Wadi Hammamat graffito



.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....

G. Vittmann, "Eine Zauberspruch gegen Skorpione im Wadi Hammamat," in Festchrift Lüdeckens (1984)





Joseph Cross – Egyptian Scribes Writing Northwest Semitic

The Wadi Hammamat graffito

THE SCORPION SPELL FROM WADI HAMMAMAT: ANOTHER ARAMAIC TEXT IN DEMOTIC SCRIPT*

RICHARD C. STEINER, Yeshiva University, New York

I. INTRODUCTION

IN 1984, G. Vittmann published a Demotic incantation against scorpion sting from the cliffs of Wadi Hammamat in Upper Egypt.¹ He dated it on paleographic grounds to the second half of the sixth century (or possibly early fifth century) B.C.E.

Although the *script* of the entire inscription was Demotic Egyptian, as was the *language* of the title and the instructions, the incantation itself was largely unintelligible to Vittmann. After an unsuccessful search for Semitic words in the text, possibly inspired by the orthographic parallels that he noted between this text and P. Amherst 63 (the Aramaic text in Demotic script),² he concluded that the incantation proper was simply magical gibberish:

Der Großteil des Spruches besteht aus Wörtern, die offensichtlich nicht ägyptisch sind. In Anlehnung am PREISENDANZ, *PGM*, bezeichne ich sie einfach als "Zauberwörter". . . . Außer dem Namen des Baal und einem äußerlichen Anklang von "w-nj" an arab. "عوني" "aunt" "meine Hilfe, mein Beistand" kann ich in dem Zauberspruch übrigens nichts Semitisches finden.³

A year later, K.-Th. Zauzich, published a new study of this text.⁴ Like Vittmann, Zauzich concluded that the orthographic parallels with P. Amherst 63 were not a clue to the language of the incantation; indeed, he categorically rejected the possibility that it was in Aramaic: "Der Zauberspruch ist jedoch mit Sicherheit nicht in aramäischer Sprache abgefaßt."⁵ Unlike Vittmann, he attempted to show that the spell could be read as Egyptian. He was led in this direction by his understanding of the words *ȝ-ȝ-w s-ȝ-w m-s-w* (line 4) as Egyptian imperatives with pronominal objects: *ȝȝ=w stȝ=w ms=w* "nimm sie, zieh sie, bring sie herbei!"

Zauzich's decipherment does not appear to have convinced other Demotists. A few years after its appearance, Vittmann published a list of seven objections to it.⁶ His first objection concerns *ȝ-ȝ-w s-ȝ-w m-s-w*: if these words are Egyptian imperatives, they must be plural imperatives—not infinitives used as imperatives with pronominal objects. More

* As always, I am greatly indebted to R. K. Ritner for his expert guidance in Egyptological matters.

¹ G. Vittmann, "Ein Zauberspruch gegen Skorpione in Wadi Hammamat," in H.-J. Thissen and K.-Th. Zauzich, eds., *Grammata Demotika: Festschrift für Erich Lüddeckens zum 15. Juni 1983* (Würzburg, 1984), pp. 245–56 and pl. 35.

² See further below.

³ Vittmann, "Zauberspruch," p. 248.
⁴ K.-Th. Zauzich, "Abraukabara oder Ägyptisch? Versuch über einen Zauberspruch," *Enchoria* 13 (1983), 19–35.

⁵ Ibid., p. 119.

⁶ Vittmann, "Zum Verständnis des demotischen Zauberspruchs im Wadi Hammamat," *Discussions in Egyptology* 13 (1989); 73–78.

[JNES 60 no. 4 (2001)]
© 2001 by The University of Chicago.
All rights reserved.
0022-2968/2001/6004-0002\$02.00.

Richard Steiner, "The Scorpion Spell from Wadi Hammamat: Another Aramaic Text in Demotic Script," *JNES* 60:4 (2001): 259–268



The Wadi Hammamat graffiti

- 5th or 6th century BCE
- One of over 150 demotic graffiti, and many Aramaic as well, including an abecedary (see *TAD* D, 22.28-35)



The Wadi Hammamat graffito

- An Egyptian-language scorpion incantation, with Egyptian instructions/rubric
- Steiner argues that some stretches of gibberish-like language within is Aramaic

The Wadi Hammamat graffito

kp (')bw kp b'l kp 'tr (')m

“hand of my father, hand of Ba’al, hand of Attar
my mother.”

'npy b'l

“face of Baal” (cf. Bib. Aram. אַפְזָה')

The Wadi Hammamat graffito

kp (')bw kp b'l kp 'tr (')m

“hand of my father, hand of Ba’al, hand of Attar
my mother.”

'npy b'l

“face of Baal” → in Demotic: “bring this Baal” ?

The Wadi Hammamat graffito

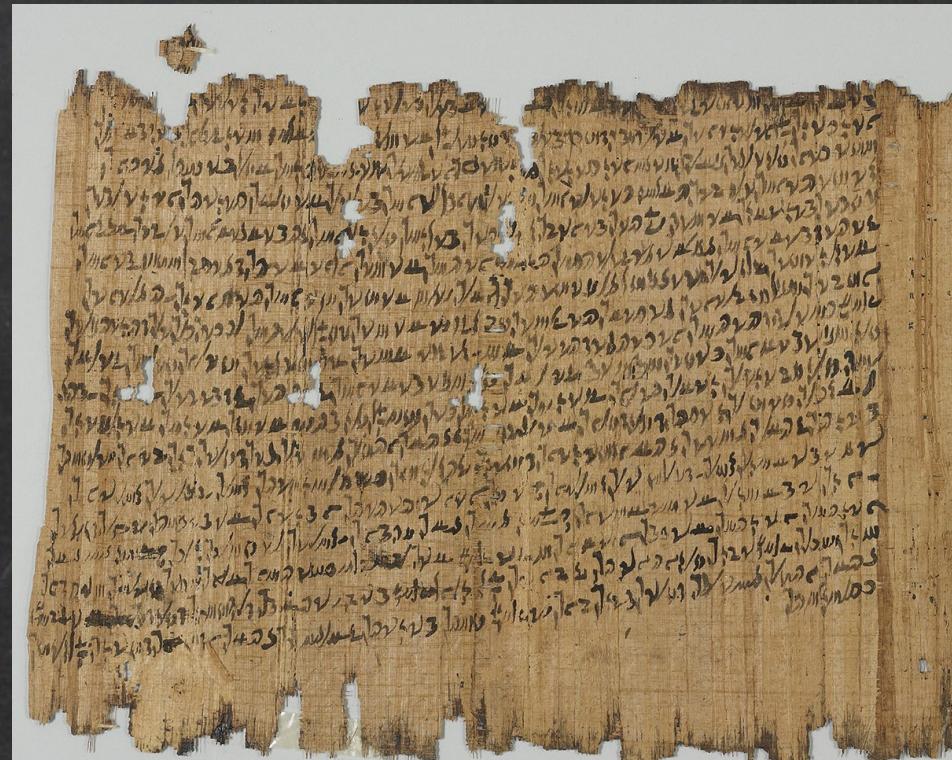
- Difficult to argue that there is coherent, extractable Northwest Semitic (Aramaic) text, and not isolated phrases or *voce magicae* with Semitic coloring

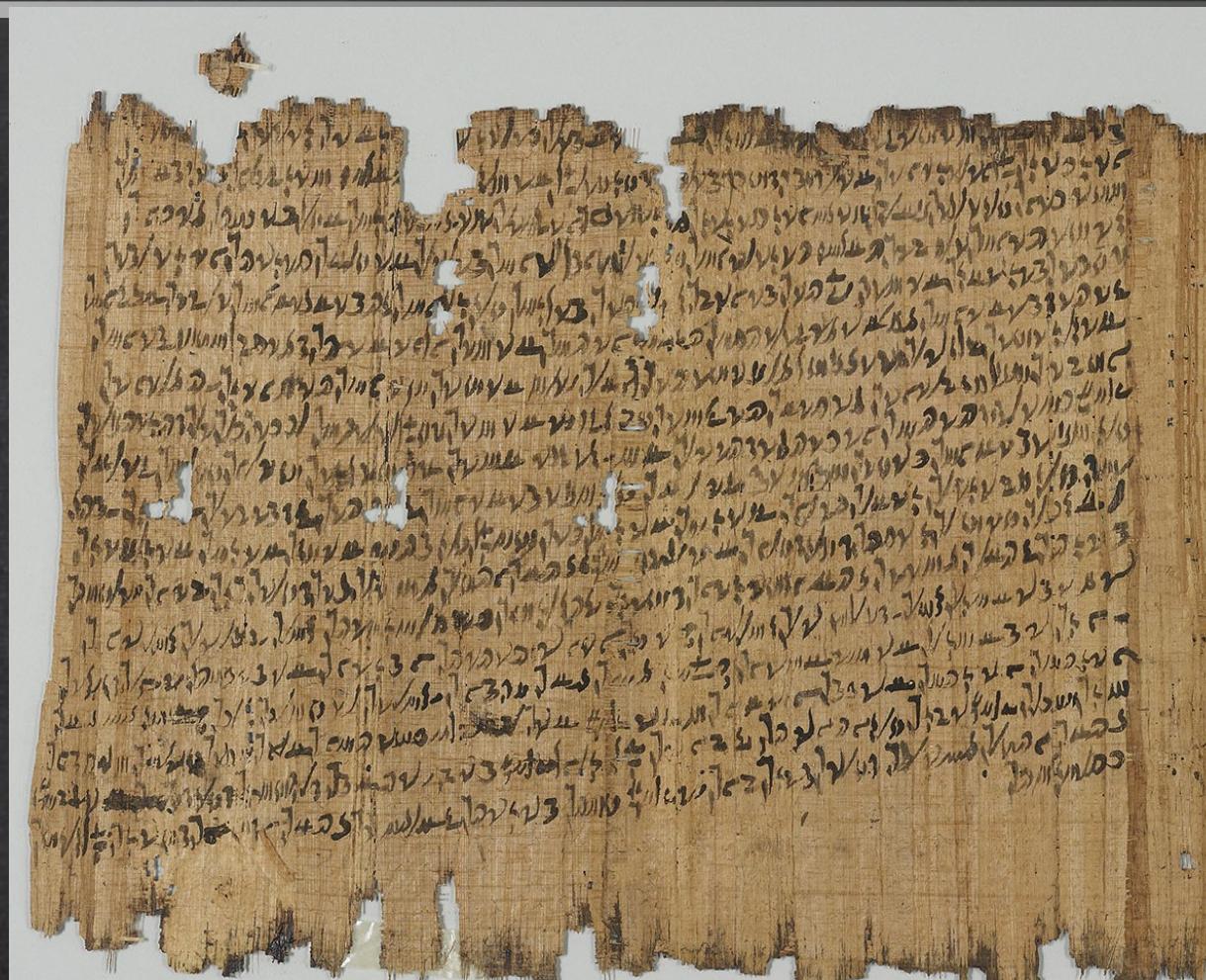
The Wadi Hammamat graffito

- Intriguing evidence for a literate Egyptian quarry worker (prob. scribe) knowing Aramaic

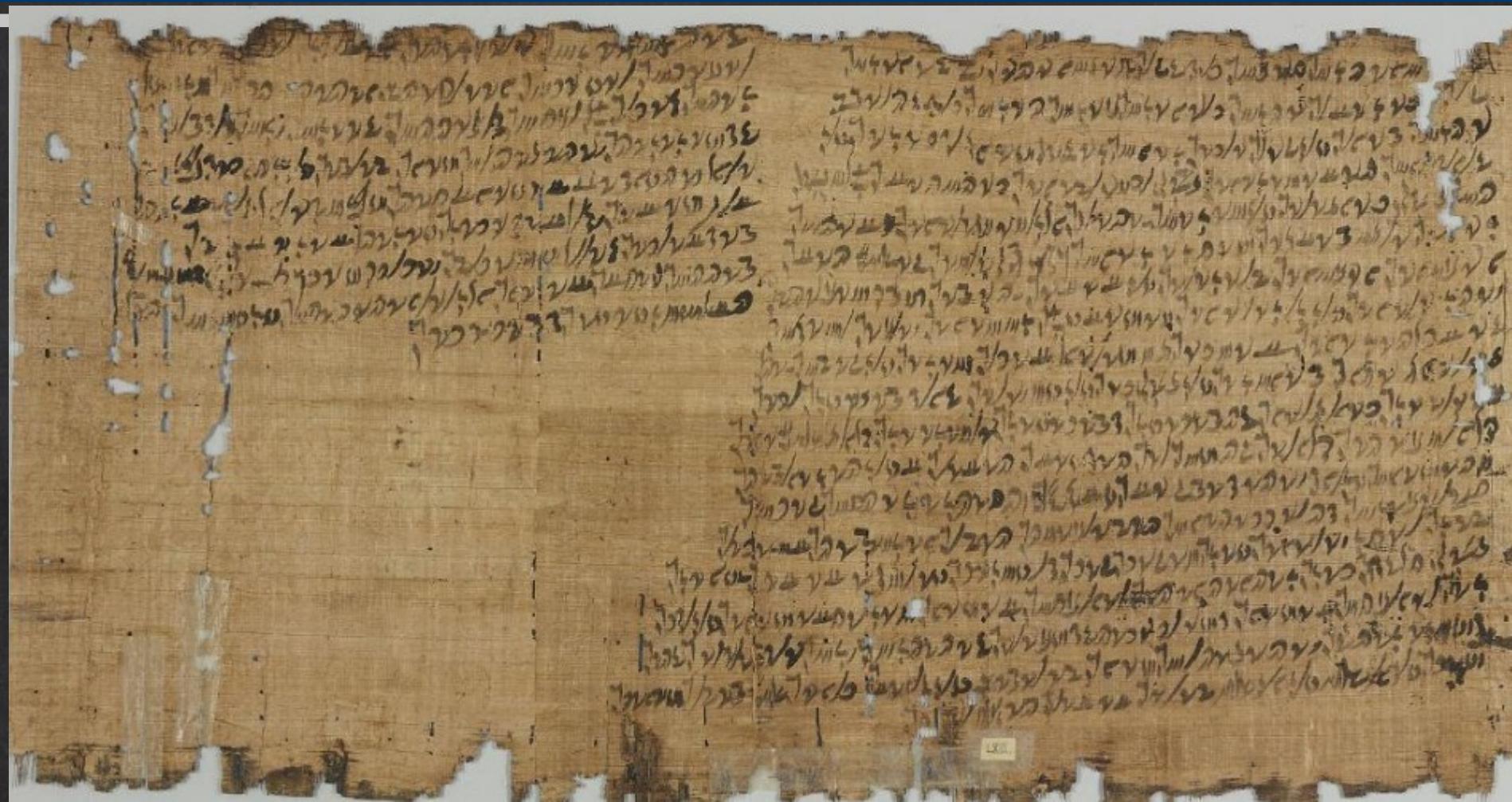
Papyrus Amherst 63

First col. of verso
(Photo: Morgan Library)

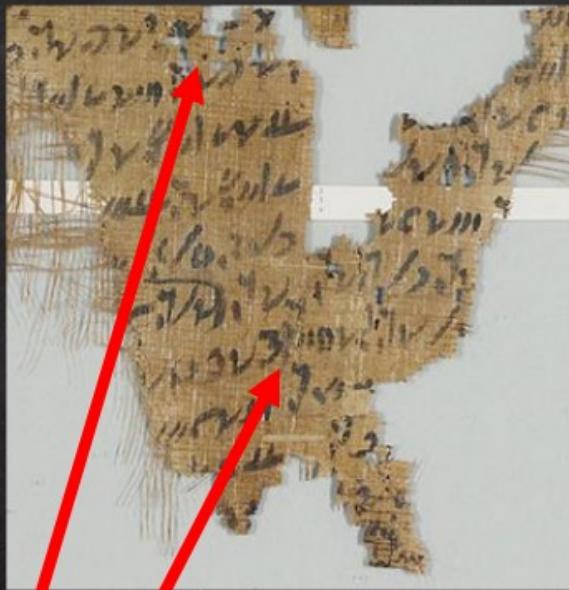




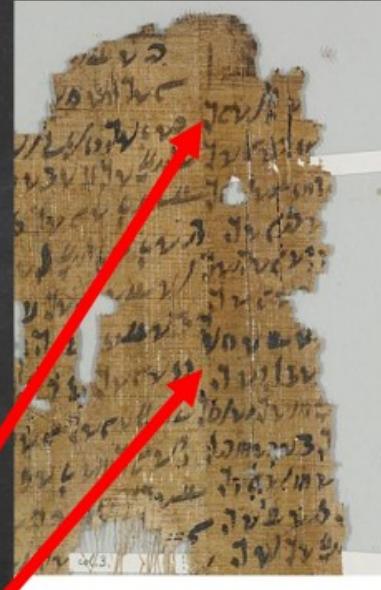
Joseph Cross – Egyptian Scribes Writing Northwest Semitic



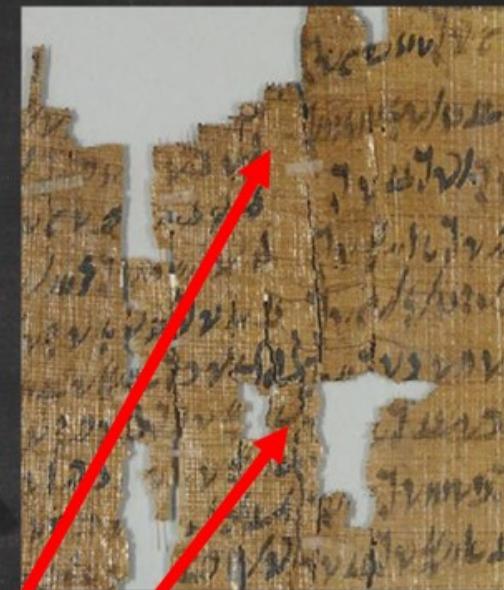
Joseph Cross – Egyptian Scribes Writing Northwest Semitic



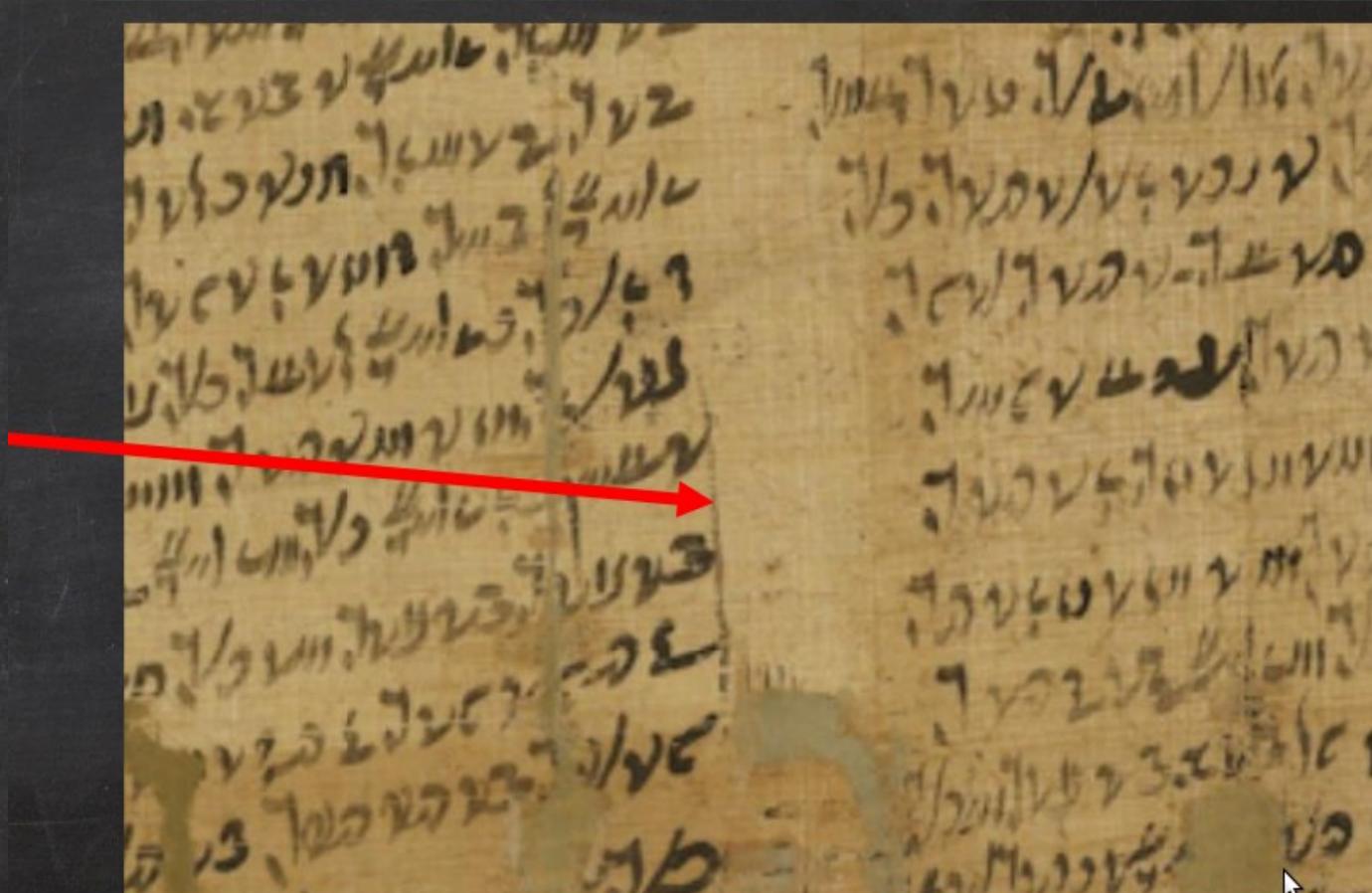
Recto, col. 1-2



Recto, col. 2-3



Recto, col. 3-4



Papyrus Amherst 63

- The scribe's eye appears to not be fixed on the lines as they are being inscribed

Papyrus Amherst 63

- Is the scribe reading Aramaic documents and transcribing them into Demotic?
- More likely to be an Egyptian scribe

Papyrus Amherst 63

- Or focusing on someone dictating?

Papyrus Amherst 63

- Either suggests the scribe being less skilled in Aramaic than in Demotic (at least the script)

Papyrus Amherst 63

- If they can read the Aramaic abjad, why transcribe into Demotic?

Papyrus Amherst 63

- If they can read the Aramaic abjad, why transcribe into Demotic?
 - Demotic is more phonetically nuanced
 - More indications of vocalization and prosody can be inscribed

Papyrus Amherst 63

- The technique of rendering the foreign language text into Demotic is similar to the (common) technique of writing Greek names in Demotic, and indicating vowels

Papyrus Amherst 63

- Regardless, what are the implications of the document? (depending on *what kind of document* it is)
 - Can go the route of cultural memory, Aramean identity, etc.
 - Or of accessibility of texts/documents/literature

Papyrus Amherst 63

- Assuming P. Amherst 63 is 4th-3rd century
 - “Afterglow” of a burgeoning cosmopolitan literature (and culture?) as well as a “hidden” vernacular
 - Tantalizing indicator of a worldwide “republic of letters” as well as a widespread use of Aramaic for local, private “literary” culture

Conclusions

Conclusions

- Problems with magical texts:
 - Magical gibberish (*voces magicae*) that is Semitic sounding?
 - Inserted by someone who knows a Semitic language?
 - Transcribed by ear from an oral recitation?

Conclusions

- Problems with magical texts:
 - Should be considered in light of magical imagism and the Egyptian concern for coherence in magical texts and practice, i.e., how accurate is “accurate enough”?

Conclusions

- Problems with magical texts:
 - The act of inscription *itself* was a magical act which could be understood as ritual activity
 - Magical texts did not need to be *read* to be effective

Conclusions

- Re: New Kingdom examples
- NW Semitic texts (as reconstructable) pre-existed the invention or the widespread proliferation of the Phoenician abjad and its descendants

Conclusions

- Re: New Kingdom examples
- No Akkadian texts in Egyptian script, despite the evidence of the Amarna Letters, which suggest that some scribes in the palace could read and write cuneiform

Conclusions

- Re: New Kingdom examples
 - Compared to the limited number of scribes who would have encountered Akkadian, a significant number would have been in contact with actual Northwest Semitic speakers in the day-to-day administration of the empire, both at home and abroad in the Levant

Conclusions

- Re: New Kingdom examples
 - The scribes responsible for the texts in the corpus could have been non-Egyptians from the Levant who rose through the ranks

Conclusions

- Re: New Kingdom examples
- Or Egyptian scribes who took their knowledge of Northwest Semitic words (hundreds) to another level

Conclusions

- Re: New Kingdom examples
- These texts are another example of the prestige in a colonial context that Levantine culture and religion attained in the period of the Egyptian empire

Conclusions

- Re: New Kingdom examples
- Cf. the nature of Egyptian control of the Levant: more “absentee landlord” than “homeowner” (Ellen Morris)
- Not annexation or widespread Egyptianization

Conclusions

- Re: Papyrus Amherst 63
 - Local interaction with a *lingua franca*
 - A result of the imposition of standardized training in Aramaic and administration practices by the Achaemenians

Conclusions

- Re: Papyrus Amherst 63
- Anticipating two trajectories of textual culture in multicultural Egypt through the Hellenistic and Roman periods and into Late Antiquity

Conclusions

- Re: Papyrus Amherst 63
 - 1) Religious texts: appropriation of divine names and religious textual traditions from the wider MENA and Eastern Mediterranean world (cp. the PGM)
 - 2) Narrative text: widespread interest in historical fiction, esp. concerning the Assyrian Empire and the end of the Iron Age, in Egypt, Judea, and Babylonia

Thank you!

The Mechanics: Group Writing

What is group writing?

- Or “syllabic orthography”
- An alternative orthography used in hieroglyphic and hieratic texts
- Origins in the Middle Kingdom, but used frequently in New Kingdom

What is group writing?

- Used for:
 - Loanwords
 - Foreign proper names
 - Native Egyptian words which recently entered the scribal repertoire
 - Native Egyptian words which are written differently from the received spelling (reasons of pronunciation)
 - Nicknames

Why use group writing?

- Without a doubt:
 - To differentiate words whose etymologies are not transparent to a reader

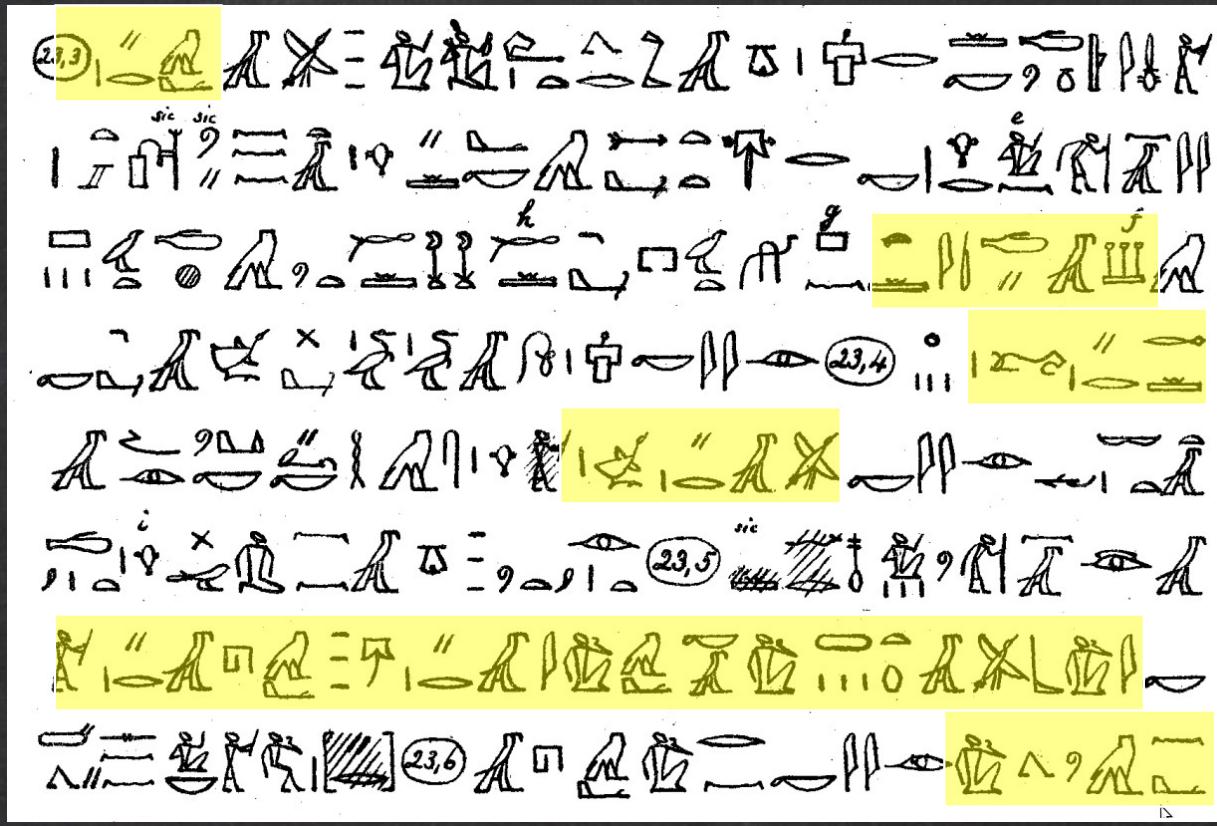
Why use group writing?

- Without a doubt:
 - To keep such words **visually distinct** from words in the traditional, received orthography
 - Like putting foreign words in ***italics*** today

Why use group writing?

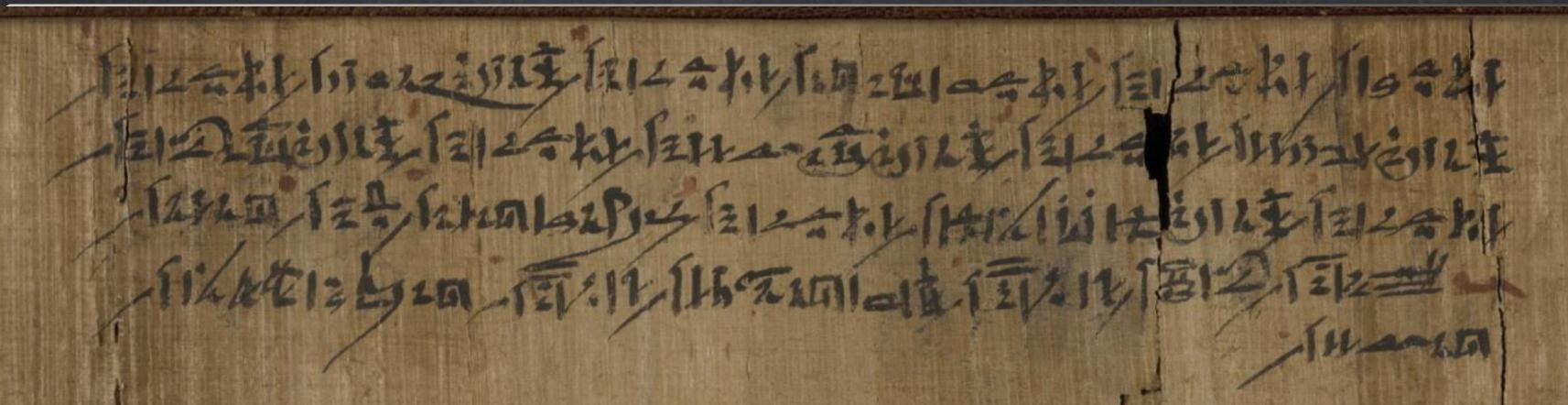
- To provide more information for pronunciation (“vocalization”)
- Definitely consonants
- Vowels?

1. The Mechanics: Group Writing



Group writing in P. Anastasi I, col. 23 (19th Dyn.)





© Trustees of the British Museum



Group writing in the final column of the Harris Magical Papyrus
(BM EA 10042, ca. 1100)



1. The Mechanics: Group Writing

	□							
28	pa		2 1' 53	pê pi pu				(8)
		52	pá	2 1	pé pi			(9)
11	fa			5	fi			(10)
263	ma		5 14 23	mê mi mu	16	s.u.	mú	(11)
		42	má	1 mé	1 mü			(12)
89	na/la	299	na/la	1 ne	33 ni	6 nu	57 25 18	nu ₄ (13)

Wolfgang Helck, "Grundsätzliches zur sog.
"Syllabischen Schreibung," SAK 16 (1989), 121-143



Why use group writing?

- Difficult to reconstruct a system for vocalization, though there are cases where correct pronunciation seems to be an important factor
- Note: Middle Kingdom group writing *is* systematic (but limited in scope)

Why look for vocalization?

- Since the 19th century, research on group writing has sought to find rules to reconstruct vowels from the weak consonants

Why look for vocalization?

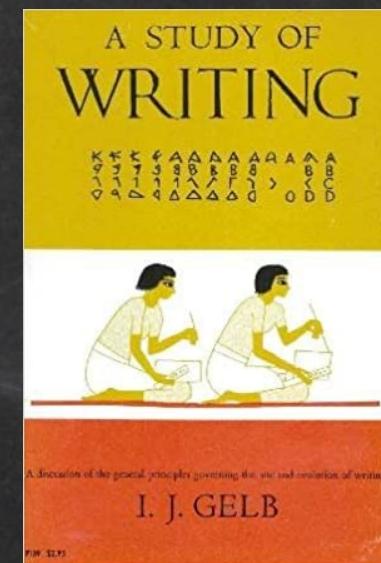
- Encouraged by the prominence of the “weak consonants” ȝ, y, and w
- Resembling the use of *matres lectionis* in the Iron Age (and later) Northwest Semitic *abjads*

Why look for vocalization?

- This works on an assumption:
- Since the standard hieroglyphic/hieratic orthography does not indicate vowels, a modified orthography must, and that is the reason for the modification in the first place

Why look for vocalization?

- This demonstrates a bias:
- Cf. Ignace Gelb's “principle of unidirectional development”: all scripts proceeded from the most archaic forms to ones where both consonants and vowels, i.e. in the true alphabet, could be rendered lucidly



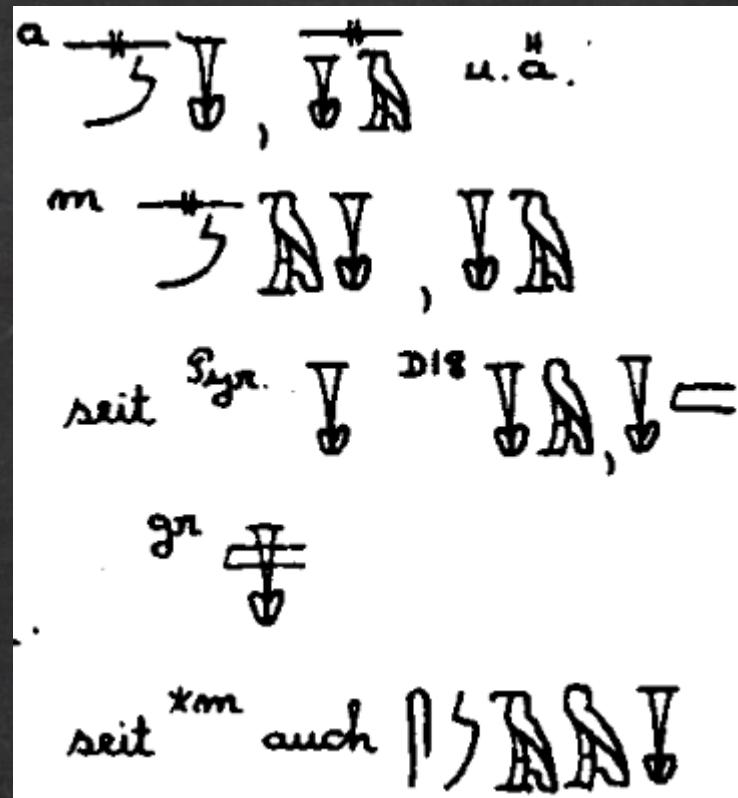
What group writing is based on

- Builds on orthographic techniques, some found already in the Pyramid Texts:
 - Biconsonantal signs with “weak” second components to stand for monoconsonantal

What group writing is based on

- Draws on techniques to update orthography for words whose pronunciation changed, esp. involving “weak” consonants

sm3 "to unite," *Wb.* 3, 446
Later > *s3m*



Group writing in NW-Semitic/Eg texts

- New Kingdom texts only
- Only found in Demotic indirectly as part of the evolved standard orthography