

Meeting of the Scripts Institute

Minutes for

Monday, October 13, 2014

Attendants: Tom Palaima, Kevin Pluta, Joann Gulizio, John Huehnergard, JoAnn Hackett, Paula Perlman, Sarah Buchanan, Will Bibee, Aren Wilson-Wright, Tiffany Montgomery, Philip Zhakevich

The meeting commenced at 4:00 pm.

Wilson-Wright began with a 15 minute presentation on his new reading of the Wadi el-Hôl inscription, an early alphabetic inscription found along an Egyptian military road traversing the Qena bend of the Nile. The inscription dates to the reign of Amenemhet II (1853-1809 B.C.E), a Middle Kingdom pharaoh, based on other inscriptions found with this one mentioning people from this pharaoh's reign.

The script is pictographic based on an acrophonic principle. Wilson-Wright provides a new reading for the 13th and 16th letters of the inscription. He proposes that sign 16, originally read as R, should be understood as K, and sign 13 should represent Š. The attached handout provides his new reading, along with a transcription and vocalization of the Wadi el-Hôl inscription. His translation is as follows: "O Lord, appoint life for us (if/because) it pleases you."

Wilson-Wright noted that finding exact parallels for his translation of this inscription proved difficult, because the request for life is unusual and the use of the word "appoint" in the context of life is not typical. Instead, the phrase "give life" is more common. He offers the closest parallels for his translation of the inscription, which are listed on the attached handout.

Following his presentation, a question and answer session followed. Hackett began by asking what the Egyptian inscriptions (which were found in the same context as this one) say. Wilson-Wright stated that various types of information were recorded, such as mentions of people spending the holiday in this area, records of movements of Asiatic peoples, royal epithets, and the like.

Bibee asked if the inscription was from a primarily military context and if so, perhaps examining other military inscriptions for parallels might prove useful.

Pluta asked if there was a semantic difference between the use of "give" and "appoint" in these types of inscriptions. Wilson-Wright believes that there is some overlap in the use of the terms, such as "to give/appoint a king over a kingdom", but that there were specific uses of each, such as "to give a book" (but never "to appoint a book").

Palaima was also interested in the use of the phrase "appoint life," especially in comparison to its use in Linear B for appointing an official. He said he could imagine, in early Greek, a phrase such as appoint a *daimōn* (a supernatural entity like 'fear', 'discord', 'retribution', 'justice', 'abundance', and here 'life' as a kind of guardian). In Hesiod's view of the ages of man, the blessed human beings of the Golden Age when that age was over became benevolent *daimones* watching over human beings in different areas and occupations of life. Wilson-Wright noted that Egyptian divinities are often

depicted holding an ankh in the sense of giving over life. Huehnergard mentioned Egyptian divinities hold up an ankh to the nose of the king as a symbol of breathing life into the king.

Palaima (referencing the work of Merle Langdon on inscriptions written seemingly by shepherds on stone in Attica, Greece) wondered who would have read inscriptions of this sort. For an on-line video version of a lecture on this subject by Langdon, see

<http://www.ascsa.edu.gr/index.php/news/eventDetails/work-of-the-school-during-2013-and-rupestral-inscriptions-in-the-greek-world>

Wilson-Wright believed they were intended for mercenaries and Asiatics resettling in the region. However, this inscription is one of the earliest alphabetic so it is difficult to know. Only a few alphabetic inscriptions from the Sinai peninsula may be earlier. The significance of this inscription is that it suggests the alphabet may have been invented in Egypt, perhaps somewhere in the Nile delta, halfway between Sinai and this location in lower Nile river valley. Perlman asked how many other inscriptions were found along with the Wadi el-Hôl inscription. Wilson-Wright replied that over 100 inscriptions were found in this survey. Perlman noted that the prayer syntax used on this inscription is similar to those used on votive offerings which often suggest that they were part of some type of ritual. Therefore, it seems unusual to her that these inscriptions were written on living rock. Palaima asked if there was some sanctuary nearby, citing the parallel of rupestral inscriptions in an early sanctuary of Apollo on the island of Thera. Perlman referred to the section on these in L.H. Jeffery, *Local Scripts of Archaic Greece (LSAG)*.

See: <http://www.slideshare.net/dediego/the-local-scripts-of-archaic-greece-l-h-jeffery>

See also: <http://www.unil.ch/esag/en/home/menuinst/research/geometric-eretria/early-writing.html>

Wilson-Wright replied that there was not and that the area was quite remote. Huehnergard added that it is located between a garrison and the kingdom proper.

Bibee asked how large the living rock containing this inscription was. Huehnergard replied that it is part of a rock wall, approximately chest high and Wilson-Wright noted that there is an image of it in Darnell (see bibliography in attached handout). Huehnergard also noted that *šīāmu* (Aren, help me out here) in Akkadian can take an object and that it might be helpful to look at Amorite for parallels.

Perlman requested further explanation on Wilson-Wright's reading of sign 13 and how he determined its phonetic value. Wilson-Wright explained that it is likely a hierophyphic sign for the sun. The Semitic word for sun is *šamš*, but an older Semitic form is *šams*, which would result in the letter Š in an alphabetic script. He also noted a parallel in Ancient Northern Arabian where the hieroglyphic sign for sun becomes the letter Š. He also explained his reading of sign 16 (which can be written both vertically and horizontally) as a hieroglyph for **kapp*, meaning the palm of the hand and resulting in the letter K.

At the request of the group, Wilson-Wright explained the acrophonic uses of all the signs in the inscription as follows:

Sign #	Semitic word	Translation	Alphabetic Letter
1	* <i>ra's</i>	“head”	R
2	* <i>bayt</i>	“house”	B
3	* <i>lawī / lamd</i>	“coil of rope” or “ox-goad”	L
4, 6 and 8	* <i>naḥas</i>	“snake”	N
5 and 14	* <i>may</i>	“water”	M
7 and 11	* <i>hē'</i>	“hey”	H
9	* <i>pi'</i>	“corner?”	P
10	* <i>tinn</i> → * <i>sinn</i>	“compound bow”	T/S
12	* <i>ʔalp</i>	“ox”	ʔ
13	* <i>śams</i>	“sun”	Ś
15	* <i>ḥarm</i>	“wick?”	Ḥ
16	* <i>kapp</i>	“palm of the hand	K

Perlman asked what the vertical Wadi el-Hôl inscription said. Wilson-Wright stated it was a petition plus four letters followed by the phrase “the lad of God.” Perlman asked about its proximity to the horizontal inscription. Wilson-Wright replied that it was near it but not next it and was clearly written in two different handwritings (most clearly indicated by the difference in the rendering of the letter R). Palaima asked if there was any particular reason why it was written vertically as opposed to horizontally, such as the available space on the stone. Wilson-Wright did not believe so, and noted that it was common for inscriptions at this time to be written either horizontally or vertically or sometimes both within the same inscription. Bibee agreed that Egyptian inscriptions are often written in different directions.

Pluta wondered about the large graffito of the ankh next to the inscription and asked if this was common in Egyptian inscriptions. Wilson-Wright replied that it was common.

Perlman asked if the inscriptions written on this stone were respectful of the others; that is, was it common for one inscription to encroach upon another. Wilson-Wright replied that they did not tend to overlap with each other.

Palaima wondered what significance the discovery of this inscription had on our understanding of the introduction of the alphabet. Wilson-Wright replied that this inscription, which was found in 1995/1996 and published in 2005, was quite significant in this regard. Previously, the earliest alphabetic inscriptions were found in the Sinai peninsula and it was presumed that the alphabet was invented in this region. The discovery of this inscription now suggests that the invention of the alphabet likely occurred in the Egypt. It also has helped to re-date the inscriptions from Sinai which were originally believed to date to the 15th century BCE and pushes back the date for the invention of the alphabet. Palaima then asked how we think the alphabet made its way into the Sinai peninsula. Wilson-Wright believes that it probably was introduced via turquoise mining and trading expeditions between Egypt and Sinai. Hackett added that there are no inscriptions this old in Canaan, so the alphabet was not invented Palestine.

Palaima asked if the use of writing at this time was an indication of social status, since this seems to be case with written document in Linear B. Wilson-Wright believes that literate individuals were

likely free, high ranking personnel, though he would not rule out that some lower ranking miners were literate.

Perlman asked if there was any evidence for metrical texts, i.e. inscription written in poetic form based on longs and shorts or containing any rhyming lines. Wilson-Wright stated that it was difficult to tell, partly because of the lack of vowels, but also because Semitic poetry is typically not metrical. Instead, Semitic poetry prefers parallelisms, i.e. the same phrases stated in different ways.

After the question and answer session, we discussed who would be interested in presenting their research at the next meeting. Pluta offered to discuss his fieldwork on RTI and the Linear B tablets.

The meeting adjourned at 5:30 pm.

Minutes were taken by Joann Gulizio.

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Scripts Institute Meeting
 Austin, TX
 October 13th, 2014

Life and Happiness: A Petitionary Reading of the Horizontal Wadi el-Ḥôl Inscription

I. Background

- [1] Found along an Egyptian Military Road traversing the Qena bend of the Nile
- [2] Written in early alphabetic script
- [3] Dated to the reign of Amenemhet III (1853-1809 B.C.E.) by Darnell *et al.* based on context

II. Proposed Reading



Fig. 1: Photoshop Trace of a WSRP Photograph of the Inscription

Transcription: RB LN MNH NPS H? ŠMḤK

Vocalization: *rabbu li-nā mannīhā napsa hu?a šammiḥakā*

Translation: O Lord, appoint life for us (if / because) it pleases you.

III. Parallels

[1] The vertical Wadi el-Hôl inscription

[2] Middle Kingdom Egyptian Personal Names

dī-ptḥ-^ḥnḥ ‘Ptah gives life’

[3] Neo-Babylonian Personal Names

DN-nādīn-napišti ‘DN gives life’

[4] Biblical Hebrew Personal Names

yimnâ ‘(DN) appoints’ (Gen 46:17; Num 26:44; 1 Chr 7:30; 2 Chr 31:14)

[5] Psalm 61:7

yāmîm ^{al-yēmē-melek tōsîp}
^{šēnôtāyw kēmô-dōr wā-dōr}
yēšēb ^{ôlām lipnē ’ēlōhîm}
ḥesed we-’emet **man** *yišrūhū*

Add to the days of the king;
 May his years be like the passing of generations!
 May he sit enthroned forever before God;
 Appoint faithfulness and truth to guard him!

[6] Judges 9:13

heḥādaltî ^{’et-tîrôšî ha-měšammēaḥ} ^{’ēlōhîm} *wa’ānāšîm*

Shall I stop producing my new wine, which gladdens gods and men?

References

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- Ranke, Hermann. *Die ägyptischen Personennamen*. 3 Vols. Glückstadt: J. J. Augustin, 1935—76.
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- Vanderhooff, David S. “Wadi el-Hôl Inscription 2 and the Early Semitic Alphabetic Graph *ḡ, *ḡull-, ‘yoke’.” *Hebrew Bible and Ancient Israel* 12/2 (2013): 125-135.