

Abbreviating names in ancient Egypt

Naming was an important practice in ancient Egypt. Proper names expressed existence and identity. Whenever a person's name was erased, this meant that the person himself was erased from remembrance as if he had never existed. It was therefore important to have one's name recorded and perpetuated. As The Tale of the Eloquent Peasant states: 'goodness should be potent ... he who performs it ... his name will never vanish upon earth'.¹ And said by the nomarch Khnumhotep II: 'I made to live the names of my fathers which I found destroyed upon the gateways ... indeed, he is an excellent son who perpetuates the names of ancestors'.²

Despite this importance of the explicitation of names, we encounter proper names written in abbreviated form. Onomastic lists contain abbreviations of geographic names, and it seems that the singular marks encountered on a corpus of marks' ostraca from the village of Deir el-Medina represent abbreviations of personal names.

The main question that will be addressed in the lecture is: how do the abbreviations relate to the full forms of proper names? In semiotic terms, how do the abbreviated forms transfer meaning, how do they signify the referent? Moreover, questions such as 'is there a system constrained by rules to which an abbreviated form must adhere in order to signify the referent?' and 'since Egyptian words have no fixed spelling, may we assume this for abbreviated forms as well?' will be addressed. During the lecture I will take into consideration the (non-alphabetic) writing of Egyptian names by means of pictograms with iconic or phonetic values closed by means of a determinative (classifier), as well as the observation that the marks and symbols used for abbreviation are signifiers of different kinds, thus presenting different semiotic relations with the referents.³

In spite of Langendonck's justified objections against the isolation of personal and geographic proper names in linguistic research, I will concentrate on these two forms of proprial lemmas mainly because the ancient Egyptian sources thus far do not seem to provide evidence for the abbreviation of other forms. After a brief introduction on Egyptian proper names, abbreviations of geographic names are discussed by means of the ancient onomastic lists and the symbols in Papyrus Reisner II. A discussion on the abbreviation of personal names built on Ranke's study on *Kurznamen*⁴ as well as on the Deir el-Medina marks' ostraca follows. In the conclusion I will recapitulate the methods of abbreviation and, using semiotics and cognitive linguistics, amplify the relations between abbreviated proper names and full forms, as well as the question whether the system within which they operated was rule-constrained.

References

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¹ R.B. Parkinson, *The Tale of the Eloquent Peasant* (1991), B1 334-342.

² Autobiography at Beni Hassan, recorded in A. de Buck, *Egyptian Readingbook I* (1948), p. 71 r. 3-6. Cf. also Middle Egyptian inscriptions on tombstones, which invoke passersby to pronounce an offering for the tomb-owner of the name NN. The remembrance and afterlife of the tomb-owner is therewith assured. E.g. K. Sethe, *Ägyptische Lesestücke* (2003), pp. 87-92; N.C. Strudwick, *Texts from the Pyramid Age* (2005), pp. 222, 225.

³ Some have forms that are known from script and might thus be interpreted as hieroglyphic or hieratic characters, while others have abstract forms or represent concrete creatures or objects that are completely unknown from ancient Egyptian script. Can we accommodate them all in a single, explanatory model?

⁴ H. Ranke, *Die Ägyptischen Personennamen II* (1952).