

VISIBLE LANGUAGE

INVENTIONS OF WRITING
IN THE ANCIENT MIDDLE EAST AND BEYOND

edited by

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with the assistance of

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Library of Congress Control Number: 2010932119

ISBN-10: 1-885923-76-7

ISBN-13: 978-1-885923-76-9

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Published 2010. Printed in the United States of America.

The Oriental Institute, Chicago

Oriental Institute Museum Publications No. 32

Series Editors • Leslie Schramer and Thomas G. Urban

Series Editors' Acknowledgments

Rebecca Cain, Thomas R. James, Plamena Pehlivanova, Foy Scalf, and Natalie Whiting assisted in the production of this volume. Dawn Brennan, at press time, provided much needed help.

This volume has been published in conjunction with the exhibition
Visible Language: Inventions of Writing in the Ancient Middle East and Beyond.

Published by The Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago

1155 East 58th Street

Chicago, Illinois 60637 USA

oi.uchicago.edu

Front Cover Illustration: Perforated Tag (Catalog No. 41) and Inlay for Small Cosmetic Box (Catalog No. 72) on an Early Dynastic Lexical List (Catalog No. 56) and Cippus (Healing Statue) (Catalog No. 82);

Back Cover: Arrowhead Inscribed in Proto-Canaanite (Catalog No. 91)

Cover Design by Diane Hanau-Strain

Publication of this book was made possible by the generous support from
The Women's Board of the University of Chicago

Printed by M&G Graphics, Chicago, Illinois

The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of American National Standard for
Information Service — Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI Z39.48-1984

OBJECT DESCRIPTION: CATALOG NO. 86

86. FRAGMENT OF A FUNERARY SHROUD

Linen, gesso, pigment
Greco-Roman period, fourth-first
centuries BC
Egypt, Dendera
46.2 x 29.0 cm
OIM E42046
















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The texts on this shroud exhibit cryptographic writings, also called sportive writings, characteristic of the Ptolemaic and Roman periods. At that time, mummies could be wrapped in

painted funerary shrouds. Unlike most shrouds from the Roman period, which tend to combine Greek and Egyptian influences, the present one is truly Egyptian in style. Its design is reminiscent

of some Third Intermediate Period cartonnage coffin decoration. It displays columns of text as well as protective deities. The style, the paint colors, and the level of detail and complexity of the inscriptions seem more in keeping with an earlier, rather than a later, date, and would therefore argue in favor of a Ptolemaic dating. Only part of the decoration of the right side is preserved: Isis (upper register) and her sister Nephthys (lower register) are depicted as two kites to recall their role as mourners of the dead Osiris, with whom the deceased was identified. Isis is referred to as “the excellent god’s mother” as an allusion to the fact that she is the mother of Horus, and Nephthys is called “the foremost.” Both are said to be “offering the breath of life.” Between them, one can see a representation of a lozenge-pattern bead net, which often covered mummies in earlier periods.

Despite their fragmentary condition, the texts of the present shroud, consisting mainly of offering formulae, are of particular interest. Indeed, they provide us with both unusual epithets of Osiris and some good examples of cryptography. Worth noting are the writing of the epithet *mwt-ntr* “god’s mother” as  (e.g., right and left columns) instead of the standard form , and that of the adjective *wr* “great” as  (left column) for . Also characteristic is the word *hnty* “foremost” written  (e.g., center and left columns) for . However, the most interesting and innovative example is, by far, the cryptographic writing of the word *imntyw* “westerners” as  (bottom of center column) instead of  or . In this group, the sign , which usually stands for the letter *n*, reads *imn*, while the signs  represent the number fifty, which was pronounced *tyw*. Note that a more standard writing of the word *imntyw* occurs at the bottom of the right column and is written with a variant of sign , itself a variant of , followed by determinatives and plural strokes.¹ FG

TRANSLATION

Center column (reading right to left, top to bottom):

“[...]... the offering-bread of the *wabet*² for Anubis, from among the bread of Osiris,³ foremost of the westerners, the perfect youth [...].”

Left column (reading right to left, top to bottom):

[“... (to) Osiris, lord of] Abydos, the Great-Pillar, foremost of Dendera, (to) Isis, the great, the foremost, the god’s mother [...].”⁴

Right column (reading left to right, top to bottom):

[...] to Horus, consisting of bread, consisting of beer of the god’s mother (and) bread of Osiris of (?) [...]...., lord of the westerners [...].”

Upper bird, behind head:

“[Is]is”

Upper bird, between wings:

“the excellent god’s mother offering the breath of life.”

Lower bird, in front of head:

“Nephthys”

Lower bird, between wings:

“offering every breath of life, the foremost.”

NOTES

¹ I would like to thank Eugene Cruz-Urbe, Christina Riggs, Robert Ritner, and Emily Teeter for their comments, as well as Laura D’Alessandro and Alison Whyte for providing technical information on the shroud. Special thanks also go to John Sanders, Thomas Urban, Leslie Schramer, and Natalie Whiting.

² For discussion and references on the *wabet* “Pure Place,” see, for example, Wilson 1997, p. 214; Coppens 2007.

³ An alternative rendering of this passage could be “from among the bread of the loaves of Osiris.”

⁴ For a parallel to the text of this column on a stela whose provenance is also Dendera, see De Meulenaere 1973, pp. 56–59, fig. 3 (= stela E. 8242, lines 1–2).

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