Predynastic Egyptian iconography: Contributions and relations with the hieroglyphic system's origin

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Abstract: Roots of ancient Egyptian hieroglyphic writing system can be found during the 4th millennium, in the iconography. Iconography seems to contribute to the invention of writing at the end of the Naqadan culture. Different types of iconographic supports are included in this contribution: Decorated Ware, «powerfacts» (like palettes, maceheads, combs, knife handles), potmarks and ink inscriptions. In the Egyptian context, images maintain a close relationship with writing signs and the boundaries between both are tenuous. In their monumental form, called «*medou netcher*» in Egyptian tongue, that is to say «divine words», the hieroglyphs never lose their iconographic character and their iconicity. In this particular context, this article would explore how and how far the iconography of the 4th millennium contributes and prepares the emergence of writing. And why they are not themselves writing.

Since the end of the 4th millennium BCE, a complex writing system using pictorial, phonetic signs and classifiers was elaborated and used in the Egyptian Nile valley. Immediately after its invention, it seems that the system quickly spread to the urban centers of the country and soon its employ became widespread. We know its durability, too, because, *mutatis mutandis*, it will remain in use until the Roman period: the last inscription is dated to the 5th century A.D. This paper will discuss rather its genesis, the context in which it was created and the reason(s) which led to its finished form: for it did not issue from an accounting system for goods or cattle (like cuneiform writing in Mesopotamia), nor from divinatory practices (like scapulomancy in China), or a calendar system (as some Mesoamerican script). One other particularity of the Egyptian hieroglyphic script, which is very important if we are to understand the mechanisms underlying its creation, is its very pronounced iconic character which continues throughout all its history.

Appearance of writing in Egypt and its rapid dissemination

Most scholars agree that the first hieroglyphic inscriptions are represented by the little labels made of bone, ivory or ebony found close to storage containers in the U-j tomb in the Umm el-Qaab necropolis in Abydos. This tomb of the king Scorpion (III) was discovered in 1988 by the team of the German archaeologist Gunter Dreyer. These labels, squares or rectangles a few centimeters across, are perforated in one of the

upper corners and each bears one or more signs incised on a flat surface. The signs can be divided into two categories: on the one hand, there are numeric signs – the first attestation of a mathematical counting system[1], and on the other, signs which appear to be the first hieroglyphs. Their reading continues to be debated. When discovered, Dreyer thought that they were royal names[2], but others scholars prefer to read them as toponyms, in particular the names of towns which had contributed their gifts or tributes to the equipment of the royal tomb[3]. Later, Dreyer[4] modified his interpretation and gave greater importance to the names of the royal establishments that had contribute to the royal equipment.

The incised inscriptions are very short, probably corresponding to one word per label. Some signs already bear the phonetic values that are later known, while others are used like pictograms. No classifiers are present: these only appears ca. 150 years later, during the 1st Dynasty. Archaeologists have found fewer than 200 labels in U-j tomb, including both numerical and hieroglyphic items. Some inscribed signs appear only once, others more frequently[5]. Their classification reveals different categories of represented *realia*, the result of intentional choices made by the first scribes. So we find few human representations (4 examples; male only), different species of wild animals, isolated horned-animal heads, different species of birds, one possible fish, three snakes and three scorpions, plants, signs related to the environment (sky, mountain, water points), buildings or outdoor structures, boats, a siege scene(?), a sign interpreted by G. Dreyer as a piece of cloth, and some signs that resist interpretation.

Very succinct in the beginning, the system quickly becomes more elaborated with a multitude of new signs[6]. The 51 signs at the beginning will double during the reigns of the two first kings of the 1st Dynasty, Narmer and Aha, and the creation of new signs continues during the reigns of their successors, Djer and Djet. Afterwards, the number of signs decreases, becoming stabilized and harmonized during the reign of Djoser in the 3rd Dynasty. Summing up, during Early Dynastic period (1st and 2nd Dynasties), the corpus consisted of around 900 signs, and more than 1.000 signs in the middle of the 1st Dynasty. This number is not very much much larger than the 700 signs traditionally recognized during the Old Kingdom. There would be 1500 to 2000 signs at the end of the Old Kingdom[7].

We shall doubtless never know if the principle of writing was invented by an individual person or within a small group. Nevertheless, archaeological discoveries demonstrate that the idea was very quickly adopted after its invention. Hieroglyphic writing was born in Abydos, probably in the royal residence, but surely in the royal necropolis. One hundred years later, during the reign of Iry-Hor (end of the Dynasty 0), we find inscriptions in South Cairo, in Zawiyet el-Aryan; during the following reign of Sekhen/Ka, we discover inscriptions there and in Tarkhan (Cairo region) and in the Eastern Delta (Tell Ibrahim Awad) as well.

[1] See Graff 2016.
[2] Dreyer 1998.
[3] O'Connor 2009.
[4] Dreyer 2011: 134.
[5] See the sign-list in Dreyer 1998: 183-187.
[6] See Regulski 2010.
[7] After Collombert 2007.

During the reign of Narmer (begining of the 1st Dynasty), inscriptions are found not only in the Luxor and Cairo areas and the Eastern Delta, but also in the Egyptian establishments in the Palestinian region[8]. In just 150 years, this new tool demonstrably circulated and was adopted in ever larger circles. Writing had become a tool of royal power, in the hands of an administration which issued from the ruling elite.

Accounting systems before and contemporary with writing

Accounting *per se* does require the development of a writing system. Accounting systems existed before writing's creation and the use of writing did not make them immediately disappear.

The first system was based on the cylinder seal. This object is not an Egyptian invention, but was introduced from Mesopotamia before the end of Naqada II, before the creation of the writing system. The oldest cylinder seals are engraved with motifs from Mesopotamian tradition, especially the Master of the Animals motif. The Egyptians quickly adapted its iconography and replaced Mesopotamian themes by others of their own[9]. The seals were used to mark containers (e.g., vases, baskets, boxes), affixing the owner's mark to the container while also ensuring that they were not previously opened. Soon after the invention of writing, script was added to the seals, in particular the name of the supplier of the goods and their nature.

Another way to mark containers of foodstuffs is to incise signs on the body or shoulder of pottery before firing – so-called «potmarks» – a practice that existed in Egypt since Naqada I. Of course, this marking way stay fixed whatever are the jar's contents. Potmarks appear sporadically from Naqada I to early in Naqada III, and become more numerous during the dynasties 0 and 1[10]. They are most common during the second half of the 1st Dynasty. From the reigns of Andjib and Semerkhet, they quickly decrease in number until they all but disappear from the archaeological record[11].

Like the U-j tomb's labels, the potmarks are composed of 1 to 4 signs, with more than half being with 2 signs[12]. Until now, we understand what the potmarks are *not* indicating rather better than what they do mean: they do not give the contents of storage jars, nor the quality of foodstuffs, nor provenance, nor indicate the original owner of the vase nor of the tomb in which it was deposited. Hence, this system is still almost entirely mysterious.

Closely related to potmarks are ink-marks traced on the shoulder or body of storage jars but inked after the firing of the pots. They appear at approximately the same time as writing, continue until the end of the 3rd Dynasty and then, more sporadically, during the rest of the Old Kingdom.

The U-j tomb contains both incised labels and ink-marks on pottery. The marks differ not just in having different supports and technique, but in the signs represented on them which show strong disparities. Some of the ink-marks never appear on labels (and *vice versa*), and moreover are not prototypes of later known hieroglyphs. Some signs appear

[8] Tables of diffusion: Kahl 2001: 109-110, fig. 5 à 8.
[9] Hill 2016.
[10] Van den Brink 1992: 265.
[11] For a synthetic presentation of the types of the jars and their provenances, see Kolinski 2003: 85-86.
[12] Van den Brink 1992: 276, note 5.

only as ink-marks and on no other supports. Even the *realia* (for example, scorpion or bird) which do appear on both ink-marks and labels are not close in their schematization's pattern[13]. This led the scholar I. Regulski[14] to consider ink-marks as an independent and autonomous graphic-support category. For her, ink-marks are not writing. Three arguments support this hypothesis:

1. The almost complete absence of parallels on other writing supports.
2. The very short inscriptions and very limited sign list.
3. The notation system seems not be phonetic.

Thus, while cylinder seals, potmarks and ink-marks could all serve in an accounting system, they are not writing.

Other contributions (D-Ware and «Powerfacts» = Objects of Power) and the iconographic environment during the 4th millennium

In contrast to what we believe to be the context from which cuneiform writing arises in Mesopotamia, writing in Egypt does not evolve from an accounting system, although it is closely related to the management of surpluses and the importation of luxury products. «… la répétition du graphème pictural hautement motivé qui renvoie au signifié a pu créer une «image-concept» stable implantée dans l'esprit du lecteur.»[15]. Figurative and non-arbitrary, hieroglyphic writing has its roots in the iconography of the millennium before its emergence[16]. This justifies a short excursus into the development of the iconography during the 5th and 4th millennia BCE in Egypt.

a. Synthesis of iconography on all supports during the 5th and 4th millennia BCE

The first occurrence of figurative images in the lower Nile's valley is dated from the Late Palaeolithic, with the rock art of Qurta and Wadi Abu Subeira[17]. The first three-dimensional representation is known from the site of Merimde Beni Salame, in the Western Delta, around 6.000 BCE in the shape of a human head pinched out from a ball of clay.

However, it is with the **Badarian** Neolithic culture in Middle Egypt that we began to find varied and plentiful iconographic production. This culture, dated to the end of the 5th millennium is a culture of farmers and cattle breeders, and sometimes hunters and fishermen. We know it mostly from funeral material placed in graves. In this funeral context were found some female statuettes and animals representations. The statuettes are made from clay, except for one in ivory (British Museum EA59648). They represent standing women, nude, more or less stylized. The animals representations occur in ivory and bone.

Badarian ceramics, frequently red with black rim («Black-topped Ware»), were sometimes decorated with fishbone or hatched motifs. One vase has an applied figure, though it is uncertain if it is a human or animal figure.

[13] Regulski 2008: 986 et fig. 1.
[14] Regulski 2008: 990-991.
[15] Goldwasser 2009: 350.
[16] See Graff and Jimenez Serrano 2016.
[17] Huyge 2009; Kelany 2015.

The **Naqada I** culture follows the Badarian (after ca. 3,900 BCE), without any evidence for a sharp break but extending further into Upper Egypt. No settlement dating from Naqada I has been excavated, with only a few archaeological tests having been made. Hence, the Amratian period (another name for Naqada I) is known only from funeral contexts, in all some 20 necropoleis, dotted along the Nile, in the borders of the cultivable valley, from Matmar in Middle Egypt in the north, to Hierakonpolis, in Upper Egypt, in the south. There is little evidence for social hierarchy.

Part of the funeral material are the painted vases named White-Cross lined Ware. The ceramic is divided into two types, corresponding to two periods: red ceramics with white decorations, dated from Naqada I to IIa-B, the White-Cross lined Ware (C-Ware); and pinkish beige with red and brown decoration, dated from Naqada IIC-D, and perhaps IIIA, called Decorated Ware (D-Ware). Until now, there are around 800 painted vases, whether complete pots or sherds[18]. Of the complete vases, fewer than 15% are C-Ware, the rest D-Ware. Predynastic painting is mostly know from this vase decoration with rare human representations and no female images.

On the other hand, female representation exists on *ronde-bosse* (sculpture in the round), carved in ivory or bone or made of clay. The females are depicted nude and generally standing. Stone carvings, still of small size, are also known from Naqada I and later. Volumes are simplified and geometric and the accent is generally on the face and, especially, the beard (long and pointed). Most of these figures seem to wear long pleated or straight coats, which fall to the feet. If the triangular beard is not yet the narrow false beard of the Pharaoh, it seems undeniable that it is already a metaphor of male power[19].

The iconography of violence seems very important in Naqada I. In addition, hunting scenes appears on a number of incised or painted vases and animals also appear, for example, on grinding stones (square during the Badarian period, and later zoomorphic: e.g. in the shape of tortoises, tilapias, elephants or Barbary sheep [British Museum EA36368]).

The iconographical choices in Naqada I attest to a valorisation of wild fauna and, in particular, of Nilotic fauna. The African megafauna (elephants, ostriches, and felines) were still presents in the Nile valley during Naqada I, but later withdrew southward. Yet, some tombs with young male elephants found in Hierakonpolis[20] attest that occasional pachyderms, usually young males between 10 and 12 years, presumably rejected by the herd, were found in Upper Egypt during the beginning of Naqada II.

The fauna is of great importance, not only as representations but also for raw materials, with ivory, above all, from the hippopotamus, and bone predominating. Clay is an important material too, while stone still plays a secondary part. At this time, carving in low relief is non-existent and high relief very rare.

Among human representations, male and female images are at opposite poles. While men are marked by their triangular beards, women are naked, and with no other attribute than their nudity. Men and women are never represented together on the same artefact but are isolated. This isolation of figures, which don't interact with each other, is characteristic of Amratian iconography. The subject exists by itself in splendid isolation.

[18] For a complete and recent study of painted vases, see Graff 2009; or more concisely, Graff 2016b.

[19] Hendrickx and Eyckerman 2011: 531-532.

[20] Friedman 2004.

In those cases where several elements are present, as on vases or elements fixed to walls, they are simply juxtaposed one next to the other.

During **Naqada II**, we find the development of more complex social organization and the emergence of new social stratification. Some graves in necropoleis are bigger than others and filled with rich and plentiful equipment. Sometimes, the rich tombs are grouped together in a special place for the elite, as in Hierakonpolis, locality 6. One can now speak for the first time of a monumental architecture, albeit built of wood, wattle and daub.

This is the content in which we must place Naqada II iconography. In the earlier stage, male representations are still pictured with triangular beards, as during Naqada I. But this model of masculinity signification eventually disappears and is replaced by a virility iconography (so to speak) which emphasizes the male sex organ and penis sheath. Female figurines in the round are increasingly pictured with bird-like heads.

A unique group of representations, which dates from the begining of this period (Naqada I-IIAB), was found in Tomb 100 at Hierakonpolis[21], a tomb discovered by the English archaeologist F.W. Green in 1897/1898. After 1899, its location was lost and the painted wall, which had been removed, was destroyed while being transported to London; a few surviving fragments are now in the Egyptian Museum in Cairo. The whole painting is known only from drawings made at the time of discovery. The main panel, about 4.5 m long, covered the south-western wall of the tomb. A wall divided the burial chamber and was decorated, too. The decoration centres on five large boats arranged in a central band. Around them were many smaller sequences, with humans and animals (antelopes/gazelles, lions, bull), picturing events in the hunt and war. Such images (and, especially, scenes of human confrontations) are uncommon during this period, becoming more common in Naqada III.

There is no break between Naqada I and Naqada IIA and B (perhaps emphasizing the artificial character of these cultural archaeological subdivisions). The iconographic division comes with Naqada IIC and D, when new supports, techniques and themes are introduced. For example, the iconography of violence that we saw in Naqada I, now fades into the background. The artists switch from sculpture in the round (*ronde-bosse*) to low relief. Iconographic themes are reduced, or concentrated, but the subjects are no longer isolated. The combinations of subjects on the same artefact and the rules governing these associations seem to indicate new importance given to common objectives, super-individuals, and to interactions. Animals, whether wild or domesticated, seem to be now only represented in connection with their relationship to humans.

During the second part of the period, the male figure takes the initiative in action among hieratic but passive women and, sometimes, ferocious but dominated animals.

In the next phase, **Naqada III**, painting on vases disappears and the new supports are chosen to express complex scenes. These are the new «Powerfacts», prestigious objects on which the images become more important than whatever was the primary function of the object. Such objects are characteristic of Naqada III and, even more so, the 1st Dynasty, after which they essentially disappear.

Sculpture in the round (*ronde-bosse*) becomes standard. There was also a notable development of stone vases and stone statuary. Images of the reigning king is the most

[21] Case and Crowfoot-Payne 1962.

important icon. He is shown wearing the crown and other *regalia*, which become part of the visual vocabulary of kingship. Monumental architecture, now built of bricks, is constructed for the king and his very close entourage. Brick-built mastabas, enclosed by thick walls with the distinctive paneled construction, that probably imitate the façade of palaces – of which we know regrettably nothing.

These new tendencies, which appear in Naqada III, are centred on the key character of the king. We recognize the same tendency in related themes.

The first point is the importance of dynastic memory. Royal activities are the measurement of time's division. This is the first relative chronological system developed by Egyptians.

A second point is the frequency and importance of representations of foreigners and captives, a theme almost unknown earlier. Frequently, the captives are foreigners who were taken prisoner by Egyptian troops during a razzia or military clash.

Naqada III is time when Egyptian civilization extends from North (Sinai and Palestine) to South (Lower Nubia). It seems likely that this expansion was motivated by the predynastic kings' desire to control sources of exotic and precious raw materials. Thus, when not pictured as prisoners, foreigners are represented as offering tribute. The raw materials coveted by the kings of Upper Egypt included gold, ivory, animals skins from the South, and timber, wine, oil, semi-precious stones from the North. The domination of iconography by the king and elite male circles (dignitaries, servants or enemies) led, perhaps as a consequence, to a remarkable lack of female representation in this period.

All converges at this moment in Egyptian history to establish a cosmogonic vision, with Egypt as the centre, supported by Powerfacts as propaganda to extol both a pyramidal-hierarchical society and the regulating role of the Pharaoh. Everything depended on the king and his legitimacy and dynastic continuity – as much for the raw materials as time and power. He is the human being *par excellence*. It is therefore not surprising that, in this place and at this moment, in order to answer his needs for keeping accounts and memorization, that his close entourage invented hieroglyphic writing. Two categories of objects produced during the second half of the 4th millennium will help us understand how the first attestations of writing are anchored in the iconographic substratum.

b. D-Ware example: uses, functions and relationship with graphic systems

D-Ware appears for only a short moment in predynastic iconographic production, at the end of Naqada IIB (around 3650 BCE) and it disappears at the end of Naqada IID (around 3400 BCE). Although classified as D-Ware, the pottery of Naqada III with geometric decoration (alternating full and empty squares, points, spirals, and so on) seems not part of the same group as the vases with figurative pattern[22]. At this time, there is a corpus of approximately 600 items (complete or fragmentary). Most are known from graves but some were found during excavation of settlements.

D-Ware is of pinkish-beige (marly) fabric with red and brown decoration. Ornaments consist of different signs placed next to each other[23]. The signs are categories of men and women, wild animal species (except dogs), small cattle of the desert, canidae, birds (mostly ostriches), reptiles and saurians, some fish, plants (generally unidentified),

[22] See Graff 2009: 121-122.

[23] See Graff 2016: fig. 4.

geographical elements (mountains, waterholes, rivers) and man-made artefacts: boats, mats, weapons, animal skins, and other elements not yet identified.

These elements are combined into scenes, following strict rules of association or exclusion. These rules produce patterns that give no information on how people lived nor their environment, nor social structures, nor productive activities. Some patterns evoke natural biotopes or activities such as navigation or the hunt. More especially, they seem to evoke contemporary ritual practices.

In an earlier work[24], we drew parallels between the lay-out constraints of D-Ware and some syntaxical rules used in the hieroglyphic script. These parallels allow to highlight deep convergences between the two systems. For example, the plural is indicated by the triple repetition of an element, the marked duality between male and female, opposition of passive and active forms, absence of marked temporality but use of accomplished and unaccomplished forms, formation of a predicate adding some preposition to the verbal root to modify the sense. Clearly, D-Ware's contribution to writing, like a system of encoding data, proves to be more important at the syntaxical level. Indeed, a study of the signs used in the decoration of the D-Ware as prototypes to hieroglyphs yields only a short catalogue, most often of determinatives[25].

c. Powerfacts: categories of objects, use and non-functionality; relation to the social system; iconography as added value

The name of Powerfact (by analogy with «arte-fact») is given to a series of prestigious items that appear at the end of Naqada II and are characteristic of Naqada III. They are linked to the finalization of the process that establishes the social hierarchy characteristic of this period. Unlike the earlier iconographic supports, these were more often discovered in cult deposits than in burials (in particular, in the Main Deposit, archaeological trenches filled with outdated cultic material when the Archaic Temple in Hierakonpolis was restored at the end of the 6th Dynasty).

Powerfact categories include palettes to grind eye pigment, maceheads, knife handles, and combs, all decorated in low relief. The materials are graywacke (palettes), fine sandstone (maceheads), gold and hippopotamus ivory (for the knife handles and combs). Whether mineral or organic, the raw materials are of local origin despite the quantities of luxury items and materials imported from distant lands that also marked social distinctions in this period. Even if the real function is ignored, we qualify palettes with the term of «ceremonial».

The Powerfact objects had been functional, objects principally used by men (with the combs perhaps used by both sexes) but they lost their utilitarian role when covered with iconographic patterns. Only an empty cup, for example, on one of the faces of the palette is a reminder that it had been used to crush make-up. During the first half of the 4th millenium, they were still used, either in the context of war (macehead, grinding palette) or to enhance social preeminence (knife handle, comb). The main subject of Powerfacts is violence and domination. They are mostly scenes of war and hunt. In the war and tribute-presentation scenes, the scene is built around the opposition between the warior/hunter as opposed to the foreigner/enemy defeated. The relationship with «the other»

[24] Graff 2009: 108-111.
[25] See Graff 2009: 111.

can only have one of two outcomes: either the enemy is subdued and pays tribute or he is defeated, dead or taken prisoner.

Wild animals – and the artists or theoreticians of power were only interested in wild fauna, not domesticated beasts – are very often pictured on Powerfact objects, obviously in scenes of hunting, but also in association with war scenes. Some animals represent the king – like a lion, a wild bull or a falcon. African megafauna, among them giraffes, lions, and ostriches, already then in the course of disappearing from the northern Nile valley, are often represented. Except in the case of Davis' comb[26], the elephant does not appear among the megafauna. The African wild dog, on the other hand, appears for a relatively short period after which it drops out of the iconographic repertory. In addition to real animals, each with its particular meaning, the iconography includes a number of fantastic and composite animals, like griffins or serpopards.

Put all together, Powerfacts are the important elements that affirm the purpose of the iconography in which order, represented by the king (that is to say, the predynastic state and society) battles against the chaos emanating from foreign lands and wild forces of the desert. This is the pre-eminent issue at the time when pharaonic power was being established.

Situating the borders and the links between archaic writing with very high level of iconicity and prehistoric iconography

Even if 4th millennium iconography is not the direct ancestor of writing, writing is nonetheless deeply anchored in the predynastic iconographic substratum.

The continuity does not lie in the sign list but more, in the beginning, in the relationship between the sign and its support: the prevalence of the three-dimensional support-sign (in *ronde-bosse*, where the sign is confused with its support) gives way to a sign shared by a three-dimensional support (as with the sign represented on a vase, an ostrich egg, and so on).

Relatively soon, a different scenario appears with a bi-dimensional support which does not rely on the depth of field (as, now, the Gebelein's cloth or painted walls of Tomb 100 in Hierakonpolis). The change comes when the sign is freed from the depth of its support and is no longer situated in three-dimensional space but is put on a flat surface that is significant in himself. The value of the sign no longer evaluated in relation to the support but in and of itself.

At this moment, after the sign's emancipation from the global sense of the object which is constituted together with its support, we see a withdrawal from the support with interest now more focussed on the sign as an autonomous element. This evolution, of course, did not cause the disappearance in any way of the earlier supports of images, like *ronde-bosse* or tri-dimensional figural objects (see Table 2).

Egyptian writing never loses either its iconic character nor its deep links with figurative image, unlike the Chinese and Mesopotamian scripts. At first glance, the distinction between writing and image is not evident. Egyptians themselves maintained this ambiguity during all the time that they use hieroglyphic script.

[26] See Patch 2011: cat. n 178, p. 261.

Nevertheless, P. Vernus[27] distinguished three criteria to mark a difference of status. This primarily relies on the linearity of the language encoded in the written signs:

1. Orientation: «Les signes non symétriques sont tous tournés dans une même direction, en général celle du point de départ de la lecture»[28].

2. Habitual rectilinear division of the space: «Les signes se suivent en ligne droite, horizontalement ou verticalement, en lignes ou en colonnes le plus souvent matérialisées et délimitant étroitement l'espace dévolu à l'écriture»[29].

3. Calibration: «A l'intérieur des lignes ou des colonnes, les proportions mutuelles des signes d'écriture dépendent de leur répartition en unités idéales, les quadrats.» [that is, the virtual «cells» in which it has to fit][30].

From a later vantage point, the invention of writing appears as a break through moment. Nevertheless, in the predynastic context, it is far from sure that it can be considered as such. Rather, it could be seen as an off-shoot of a method of treating images that had begun a few centuries earlier. What seems to be new (if it really was new at this time) was the application of phonetic values to the signs. Painted vases, Powerfacts, painted linen cloths could have been used as *aides-mémoire* to support structured or ritualized speech. Certain elements suggest this use, like the «parallelistic» sequences[31] in D-Ware iconography, that we find again in the repetition of sentences in the Pyramid Texts. However, the link between speech and image was neither arbitrary nor rigid[32]. In the case of script, every sign bears a phonetic or ideogrammatic connection that is fixed and codified. A long apprenticeship of the discource was unnecessary: what needed to be known was the code and the value of the signs. However, as we saw, the first inscriptions do not at all reproduce the fluidity of speech; they use just a few signs every time. Jar labels were clearly not supports for narration or ritual discourse. They contain limited and practical information (contents, provenance, owner, quality). However, if, as P. Vernus[33] remarks, these labels are probably only connected to a mundane administrative context, why are such prestigious and durable supports like ebony, bone, ivory or wood used to make them? Why is so much care expended in their manufacture? The labels come from the funeral offering chambers in the king's grave; its architecture and the rich funeral offerings allow us to imagine, even in such an early period, the complexity and ostentation of royal funeral rituals. Our knowledge of the ritual performances practised on similar occasions remains tenuous and indirect. Using the new and still experimental system of encoding data, the labels are charged with memorizing which locality or which foundation (in the Egyptian language *«hout»*, the domain) had contributed to the grave equipment. Writing is the registration which is made durable of a presence and a gift. The first written inscriptions are marks of vassalage and loyalty to the royal person, coming

[27] Vernus 1985: 46-47.

[28] Vernus 1985: 46.

[29] Vernus 1985: 47.

[30] Vernus 1985: 47.

[31] Elaborating an anthropology of the memory, C. Severi (2007) highlight a construction, called by him parallelistic, of the pictograms used like memorial support (Severi 2007: 153). These images, bearing memory, are always used in a « contexte d'énonciation rituelle» (Severi 2007: 153). This image' structuration is called parallelistic, because built by image repetitions which contain constants into which are introduced some variants. This defines very exactly the construction of the images such as we were able to recognize it on Decorated ware from Naqada II (Graff 2009: 111).

[32] See Deleage 2013.

[33] Vernus 2012: 161.

from persons not sacrificed in the burial. The attendants give their name and the price paid for a (more or less) voluntary contribution to the assemblage of funeral equipment.

During Early Dynastic times, in the centuries immediately following the invention of script, young men and some women, too, will be sacrified to follow or serve the king in the afterlife. They are the ones that A. Testart[34] called «Les Morts d'accompagnement». The collective entities, localities or land foundations listed in these first inscriptions thus register their allegiance to the king and accompany him – but without human sacrifice – by giving wealth (imported wine, first quality oil…) consecrated in their name. Writing affirms the links of the society represented by towns and rural domains with the person of the king. The question then arises: what is the nature of the debt that these institutions and collectivities were paying? What was the royal service? This probably refers to the king's primary role, which, as we have seen, is so prominent in contemporary iconography: the king maintains the universe and social cohesion and order in the country, linking the worlds of humans and gods. This is the concept that Egyptians of the pharaonic period called «Maât».

The development of the code which was going to become writing was probably created by a person or a small group of people within the very close royal entourage. It is in Abydos, the capital of the kingdom that it took place. Thus, writing was not created by the contributors of the royal funerary hoard from the liminal provinces of the kingdom, but by people closely linked to the king (family? vassals?). Although this word is anachronistic, it is fair to say that the theoreticians of royal power elaborated this new encoding system as one element in the program that justified the monopolizing of power by the king and his close entourage. To do this, they used what already existed and they contributed to its further development: iconography already in the service of the ideology that was then in the course of elaboration.

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