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THE INVENTION *of* HIEROGLYPHS:
*A Theory for the Transmission of Hieroglyphs
in Early-Modern Europe*



2 Vols.

VOLUME 1:
Text

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ABSTRACT

The present dissertation investigates the process of transmission of hieroglyphs from Egypt to Early-Modern Europe. This phenomenon has been studied by Egyptologists and Art Historians, mostly from a historical and descriptive standpoint, but here an original theoretical perspective was adopted: Grammatology or *the study of writing*.

In order to understand this process of stimuli diffusion, and its outcome, it was deemed necessary to delve into both the Egyptian writing-system and the hieroglyphic phenomenon in the Renaissance, which led the dissertation to be divided into two parts.

The First Part is devoted to *The Ancient Hieroglyph*: Chapter One addresses the mechanics of Egyptian hieroglyphs, their grammatological functions and the outline of a theory for the text-image dynamics in this context; Chapter Two examines the terminology of “hieroglyph” in Egypt, and its conceptual difference from the Greek and Contemporary views on the matter; Chapter Three describes the historical development of the Egyptian writing and a hypothesis for the emergence of a “hieroglyphic hermeneutics”; Chapter Four is dedicated to Horapollon’s *Hieroglyphica*, which is regarded as the main vector of diffusion between Ancient and Modern hieroglyphic traditions.

The Second Part focuses on *The Early-Modern Hieroglyph*: Chapter Five outlines the early process of diffusion and the first ideas of hieroglyph in the Renaissance; Chapter Six discusses the creation of new hieroglyphic codes; Chapter Seven tackles the role of hieroglyphs in the birth of the emblematic tradition and its continuous relationship on different culture levels; Chapter Eight look into the Spanish *jeroglíficos*, regarding it as a hybrid genre of hieroglyphs and emblems; Chapter Nine explores the impact of Renaissance hieroglyphs on the cultural perception of writing; and finally, in Chapter Ten, the process of convergence between hieroglyphs, alchemical iconography and emblems is analysed in the light of the previous chapters.

It was found that there is an objective relationship between Ancient and Modern hieroglyphs, not easily perceptible and often downplayed as a result of a certain *logocentrism*, but

of great importance – especially in terms of its impact on the establishment of a European text-image tradition.

Another conclusion is that, if Renaissance scholars, artists and poets thought it possible to write through images, and in fact created *speaking pictures*, visual compositions can be considered as a form of writing - being therefore a potential subject of Grammatology. This finding does not exclude other instruments of analysis, but creates a number of theoretical solutions in the field of text-image studies that have been employed in the present study.

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PREFACE

The present thesis is the result of research carried on first at the *Centre for Emblem Studies* and then at the *Stirling Maxwell Centre for the Study of Text-Image Cultures*, University of Glasgow, under the attentive supervision of Dr. Laurence Grove and Prof. Alison Adams. Its overall purpose was to offer an original contribution to the understanding of the process of cultural transmission of hieroglyphs from Egypt to Early-Modern Europe.¹

The motivation for such a study comes from the perception that the role of hieroglyphs in the Renaissance was frequently downplayed by contemporary scholarship, which often regards the phenomenon as a *mistake* or fantasy – or a mere source of motifs for artwork (something secondary, unsystematic and deprived of further layer of signification). The more I studied the subject, the clearer it became that this second-hand prejudice – that Jacques Derrida would regard as *logocentric* – created a vicious circle, pushing hieroglyphs away from their status in the Early-Modern period and making it harder to grasp their influence on other text-image phenomena.

Already in the early stages of the research, I observed two fundamental problems, to which I formulated respective working premises:

- The *lack of referential*: although individually both Egyptian and Renaissance hieroglyphs have been deeply studied by specialists, the actual definition of what a *hieroglyph* is, is far from a consensus. In order to solve this issue, it became clear that the study would necessarily start from the search for a definition of the Ancient Hieroglyph, and the adoption of a criterion for the Early Modern Hieroglyph;² and,

¹ Under the scope of this study, the term “Modern Era” will roughly designate the historical period between the European Renaissance and the Enlightenment (from c. 1420 to c. 1750).

² I decided to take into consideration anything self-entitled “hieroglyph” in primary sources, avoiding forcing other phenomena into this definition. The fundamental criterion was, therefore, the cultural convention.

- The lack of a *suitable framework*: in order to analyse the process of transmission between Egyptian hieroglyphs and Renaissance hieroglyphs, it was necessary to find a theoretical scope that would allow me to articulate both objects of study. I made a choice for Grammatology, here understood as the general study of writing, departing from the idea that both phenomena involve the use of visual elements to convey thought.

The research was divided into “cultural stages”, and involved a strong emphasis on primary sources. Given the volume of information that resulted from this process, and how difficult it would be to accompany, in a uniform text, the historical development of each individual idea or phenomenon, it was decided to present the thesis in a conceptual perspective. Consequently, the dissertation is divided into two parts: the first, dedicated to ancient hieroglyphs, their mechanics, definitions, and the circumstances that caused their transmission; and the second, focused on the process of cultural transmission of hieroglyphs in the Renaissance, its principles, features and codes – and its conceptual relationship with the text-image tradition.



In a dissertation dedicated to exploring the role of images in writing processes, special attention had to be paid to the use of plates. Their simple use as a secondary resource to convey information would invariably defeat the arguments presented in this thesis, regarding the importance of images.

Therefore, the plates elaborated for this thesis aim to provide pieces of evidence (*epiquirema*) for phenomena commented within the text and conceptual syntheses of the main arguments (*enargeia*) discussed in the dissertation, in the form of theoretical maps or infographics.

The images are expected to “speak for themselves” and, doing so, they can present another way of *reading* this dissertation.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The process of writing a dissertation combines moments of profound loneliness with the constant support of people who sacrifice their time, work and leisure to the altar of Aphrodite and Hermes. It is to their generosity that I dedicate this study.

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Finally I would like to thank the Brazilian Ministry of Education, and the CAPES Foundation, the generous scholarship which allowed me to complete this research.

AUTHOR'S DECLARATION

I declare that, except where explicit reference is made to the contribution of others, this dissertation is the result of my own work and has not been submitted for any other degree at the University of Glasgow or any other institution.



Signature

Pedro Germano Moraes Cardoso Leal

Printed Name



CHAPTER ONE:

A Grammatological Overview of Egyptian Hieroglyph

For more than three millennia, Egyptian writing was the pinnacle of this culture: a direct form of communication with the gods – and therefore a living proof of their existence for the Egyptians; a monumental vehicle of ideology; the guide map of souls on their way to the netherworld; a magical object of adoration and cult; a way to carve ideas in the stone-made body of eternity; the ultimate cause of civilization; or more simply put – a writing-system.¹

Throughout this period – longer than our use of alphabet writing – the Egyptian attitude towards hieroglyphs gained new nuances; the hieroglyphs themselves assumed different meanings and functions. Therefore, an ideal attempt to analyse, describe and define the Egyptian script in its amplitude would need to take into consideration an equally wide conjunct of factors. The very origin of the hieroglyphs, for example, is the origin of writing itself – and this poses a whole new problematic to the study of hieroglyphs, as one can imagine.

The complexity of such a task – the ideal analysis of Egyptian script – is so evident that even after more than a century and a half of Egyptological research “a full-scale study of the conceptual and historical origins of hieroglyphs – a history of *their* conditions of intelligibility, replication, and figurative dynamics – remains to be written” (Davis 1992: 270). This statement should not discourage any effort to understand Egyptian writing. On the contrary, it is just a reminder that different approaches are still welcomed and needed.

In this first chapter there will be very succinct reference to the nature of writing. From there, I will proceed to a grammatological study of the hieroglyphic modes of interaction between image and idea (in other words, a description of the Egyptian script). By no means is the objective

¹ See Baines; Christin and Goody.

here to teach how to read hieroglyphs: the fundamentals of Egyptian grammar will not be addressed within this thesis.

1. Undefined Writing

Western Civilisation did not create its writing-system “from scratch”, or witness this event. A succession of borrowings, assimilations and developments gave birth to our phonetic system of script: the alphabet. This very simple fact can provide the earliest reason for the secondary role that writing (as a semiotic system) assumed in Western culture. Although the importance of writing is self-evident and undeniable in our society, it is equally true that it plays no active role in Graeco-Roman or Christian mythologies – since no traditional myth explains the origin of writing, and the latter has absolutely no relevance in their cosmogonies.² Instead, the *raison d'être* of writing in our culture was to preserve the (spoken) *word* at minimum levels of figurative interferences.

Arguably, the necessary accuracy demanded to write down the *logos* also created a sort of “scriptural iconoclasm” that avoided the use of images to write – given their pluralistic interpretation –, denied their scriptural possibilities and therefore attempted to devoid it of the power of conveying thinking. The minimalism of alphabetic writing was then praised and considered culturally superior to any other writing-system.³

Despite its phenomenological and philosophical evidence, the study of writing as a main scientific problem came to light very late, in 1952 with Gelb's *A Study of Writing* that has created the field of Grammatology. However, the scientific notion of writing, until that point, was restricted to its physical component – the script – and *its relation to spoken language*.

² There are some “partial” exceptions: the development of Cretan and Mycenaean writing-systems (later abandoned); the myth of Cadmos (that in fact suggests the origin of writing in Egypt, but does not discuss it); and Plato's *Phaedrus* (that presenting Egyptian god Theuth/Thoth as the inventor of writing).

³ Cf. Havelock 1976; Gelb 1952.

This canonical *logocentric* attitude⁴ had been crowned by Saussure's definition of writing as something secondary: "language and writing are two distinct systems of signs; the second exists for the sole purpose of representing the first" (Saussure 2011: 23).

The prevalence of this perspective was challenged only decades after, by Jacques Derrida's influential *De la Grammatologie* (1967) that was the first work in the twentieth century to address writing on philosophical grounds, out of this *logocentric* scope. Still, the greatest problem of studying writing in the light of science remains the criteria for its definition, and its consequences. The discrepancy of definitions can be enormous, and no general "Theory of Writing" has been largely accepted.

For now, instead of trying to define what writing is, or is not, I will speculate briefly on what I consider three of its constitutive characteristics:

1.1. Writing is Thinking

Very often writing is referred to as a system of communication, and communication naturally implies the transmission of information from a *sender* to a *recipient*. However the daily use of writing reveals that it goes beyond that: writing is a powerful maieutic instrument. By writing something down, one creates a dialogue with its own thinking, and the process of rereading/rewriting works as a key to reformulate/lapitate thoughts; also, writing can be used to preserve one's own thoughts, as in private journals and diaries. In both cases, the sender and the recipient are the same person, and the objective is not only to communicate a thought, but also to explore it.

To work with this hypothesis implies that, in other words, thoughts do not precede their "materialization", as the process of expressing it reformulates the initial thought, taking part in the very act of thinking. And,

⁴ *Wikipedia* offers a perfect commonplace: "Writing is the representation of language in a textual medium through the use of a set of signs or symbols (known as a writing system). It is distinguished from illustration, such as cave drawing and painting, and non-symbolic preservation of language via non-textual media, such as magnetic tape audio".

If writing is the mediation of thought, then thought itself is unmediated or immediate: whether or not a thought is represented, expressed, or transcribed in script, it suffuses the consciousness of the thinker, to whom it is immediately "present". (Davis 1992: 256)

Needless to say, this perspective has an immediate impact on the notion of writing as "representation" – a concept that will also be discussed within this thesis. Provisionally, in order to complete and illustrate this section, I would say that *writing does not represent thinking* – it *renders* thinking, and by thinking I certainly mean more than a linear sequence of words (see Derrida 1967).

1.2. Writing as Communication

In the same way writing can be used to disclose one's own thought (to oneself, the writer), it can be used to communicate this thought to someone else (the reader) by means of a previously shared system of convention: the script or writing-system. The writing-system can vary immensely in its approach to thought and language, being more or less accurate.⁵ Usually, when discussing "writing-system", only this aspect of writing is taken into consideration, and this ultimately reduces the understanding of writing in general and even the importance of a script in particular.⁶

Obviously, the reading process must not be taken as something passive, because reading, in its turn, not only interprets the written thoughts: it also fills with new thoughts the spaces that for some reason could not be decoded, creating actively new meanings.

1.3. Writing as a Paradigm for Thinking

⁵ Cf. Ong 1982.

⁶ Cf. Daniels 1996; Christin 2010.

This “constitutive characteristic” is somehow a development of both the previous sections. If it is true that writing is thinking, and that a script is a system of convention, then something must explain this gap between something idiosyncratic (thinking) and something cultural (the writing-system).

The fact is that this gap does not exist, because thinking is not so idiosyncratic as one may think, nor is a script impersonal: the link between the two sides of the same coin has its place before the act of writing, with thinker/writer modelling a thought to the form of a script, thinking in terms of writing. In other words, before writing down a thought, one is already *thinking in writing*. While I write this thesis, for example, I am not only transforming thoughts into texts, but also adjusting my ideas to the possibilities given by the Roman alphabet (to my own writing process, and to my culture).

How this “scriptural paradigm” can affect a thought, however, is something to be explored (by neuroscience, cognitive and psychoanalytic studies, anthropology, etc.); it will depend on many factors. One of these factors is one’s awareness of the principles of a script, and the possibilities of subverting this system (when the thought affects the paradigm) according to one’s needs. The conscious ruptures caused in this paradigm can result in particular usages of writing (more or less understandable, or understood as mistakes), new tools (letters, symbols, forms, usages, functions), or even new scripts. In sum, thinking is constantly adapted to writing, and writing adapted to thinking.



To offer this very superficial description of these “constitutive characteristics” instead of presenting a definition of writing-system is intentional: the objective here is only to broaden the notion of writing so as to discuss its origin – and the origin of hieroglyphs, specifically – outside a too rigid culturally preconceived ambit.

I am aware of the difficulty that this suspension of judgment implies. The notion of writing is not normally an object of debate outside specialized academic circles as, I think, it should be (overall in schooling, when learning to read). In this lack of discussion, the law of least effort prevails and the concept of “writing” tends to be reduced to its most immediate and accessible sense: the alphabet.

1.4. Graphism

The first human experiences of creating images could probably be identified with the marks left by humans and other animals in nature, such as scratches, footprints, remains of food. Although these natural signs could be decoded (revealing essential information for hunting and protection, as identifiers of preys or predators), these first reproducible images had a function as indexes (in the semiotical sense of the word), indicating their origins, and therefore their employment to *present* ideas other than their immediate meaning was very limited.

It can be supposed, then, that the first signs would need to break away from this signifier immediacy so as to acquire new functions. And this new step is abstract graphism. [Plate 1]

The emergence of graphic signs at the end of the Palaeoanthropians' reign presupposes the establishment of a new relationship between the two operating poles [hand/tools, face/language] – a relationship exclusively characteristic of humanity in the narrow sense, that is to say, one that meets the requirements of mental symbolization to the same extent as today. (Leroi-Gouhran 1993: 187)

The earliest evidence of this “mental symbolization” dates back to the “end of the Mousterian period, and becomes plentiful in the Châtelperronian, toward 35,000 B.C.” (Leroi-Gouhran 1993: 188). In its origin, graphism was the visual mark of a gesture, of a rhythm, and necessarily a token of human self-awareness. One can but imagine the original functions of graphism, its magical and/or ornamental appeal, its usage to produce a mnemonic device, etc.

If there is one point of which we may be absolutely sure, it is that graphism did not begin with naïve representations of reality but with abstractions. The discovery of prehistoric art in the late nineteenth century raised the issue of a “naïve” state, an art by which humans supposedly represented what they saw as a result of a kind of aesthetic triggering effect. It was soon realized near the beginning of this century [20th] that this view was mistaken and that magical-religious concerns were responsible for the figurative art of the Cenozoic Era (...) (Leroi-Gourhan 1993: 188)

1.5. Figurativism: from Myth to Mythography

The first examples of figurative expression appear in the Aurignacian period (c. 30,000 B.C.E.) in parallel with abstract graphism.⁷ These figures did not *represent* something as a primitive photogram. Rather, they present a thought – articulating one of the above-mentioned scriptural characteristics. Rock paintings, therefore, did not reproduce natural landscapes, but reorganized nature on a symbolic level. [Plate 2]

The contents of the figures of Paleolithic art, the art of the African Dogons, and the bark paintings of Australian aborigines are, as it were, at the same remove from linear notation as myth is from historical narration. Indeed in the primitive societies mythology and multidimensional graphism usually coincide. If I had the courage to use words in their strict sense, I would be tempted to counterbalance “mytho-logy” – a multidimensional construct based upon the verbal – with “mythography”, its strict counterpart based upon the manual. (Leroi-Gouhan 1993: 196)

Mythology and mythography therefore respond to the same process – and perhaps impulse – of mythical thinking: the former, by means of the articulation of sounds, *tells a myth* by means of words (*logos*); the latter *shows a myth* by means of images, through a non-linear “syntax” of figures. Of course, this comparison between mythology and mythography implies a very particular notion of myth. For Roland Barthes, in his *Mythologies*, the myth is a “*type of speech*”:

[it] must be firmly established at the start that myth is a system of communication, that is a message. This allows one to perceive that myth cannot possibly be an object, a concept, or an idea; it is a mode of signification, a form. (Barthes 1972: 109)

The idea of myth, as Barthes asserts, is “perfectly consistent with etymology” (Barthes 1972: 109), which can be attested by checking the definition of myth according to Lydell-Scott-Jones:

- μῦθος, ὁ,
A. word, speech(...).
2. public speech (...).
3. conversation(...).
4. thing said, fact, matter (...) (Liddell et al 1996)

⁷ Leroi-Gourhan 1993: 190.

But the etymological argument, as Barthes also recognises,⁸ does not exclude other notions at all, as originally a myth also is “5. thing thought, unspoken word, purpose, design, 1.545 (pl.) (...)”, among other notions. This latter definition, in theory, precedes the others, as it defines myth in its latent state: “myth” is also, therefore a story in its yet untold essence – *and this is precisely the notion I will be working with*. In this *latent* state, the myth exists before the notion of form or content, but it can be manifested as both (form and content) in its *patent* state: mythology and mythography are precisely *patent* or *manifested* myths. [Plate 3]

The best analogy I can find for the myth’s latency is precisely the dream. This formulation is not new:

[Bill] Moyers: “Why is a myth different from a dream?”

[Joseph] Campbell: “Oh, because a dream is a personal experience of that deep, dark ground that is the support of our conscious lives and a myth is the society’s dream. The myth is the public dream and the dream is the private myth. If your private myth, your dream, happens to coincide with that of the society, you are in good accord with your group. If it isn’t, you’ve got an adventure in the dark forest ahead of you”. (Campbell and Moyers 2011: 48)

When one is awakened and recalls a dream,⁹ there is “something to tell”, i.e. the reminiscences of the dream. The rational process of converting the dream into a narrative imposes a logical organization so as to fit the dream in the form of story: this procedure creates gaps (that will need to be “explained”) and excesses (that affect the actual narrative in a subtle way, but that will appear only in a different account of this dream). Just like the dream, the myth can assume a “speech form” as a narrative, but as it is converted into *text*, an explicative and argumentative approach will also take place.

Going back to the definition of mythology and mythography, these two expressive attitudes, must not be taken as “pure” or “independent” forms of expression. Rather, their parallel development points out that gestures – materialized in graphism – and sounds – materialized in speech – had an intense interplay, or a symbiotic relationship. Mythographic compositions (panels) painted in rocks were conceived in the context of oral culture, which provided the necessary conventions to explain them; at the same time, the images mnemonically evoked the

⁸ “Innumerable other meanings of the word ‘myth’ can be cited against this. But I have tried to define things, not words” (Barthes 1972: 109, fn. 1).

⁹ See Goodenough 1991: 113-140.

sequence of a myth that was to be told, securing it a longer permanency and therefore the systematization of cultural transmission.

The question of whether or not mythography can be considered not only a precursor but the actual source of writing remains open and is generally addressed in many works on the history of writing. This issue will be discussed further on in this thesis.¹⁰

2. The Mechanics of Egyptian Hieroglyphs

In this section, I hope to continue my line of reasoning on writing – now introducing conceptually *the succession of innovations that became known as Egyptian writing*. Here I will try to approach critically the different degrees and techniques used to engage image and idea through hieroglyphs – not only on a “morphological” level, but also in terms of a scriptural “syntax”. This phenomenon, it is important to make clear, is not yet completely understood:

Even after a century and a half of research, the study of the hieroglyphic script is by no means at an end. Many problems of detail remain to be clarified. Two issues may be emphasised which, despite their central importance for the script, have not so far been adequately studied: the structure of the semantic components in the script, i.e. the nature of semograms, and their relationships with one another; and the relationship between the script and the language it writes, in particular the question of how far individual signs convey information about linguistic forms, and how far, as orthograms, they combine with other signs to record linguistic elements of a higher order. (Schenkel 1976: 7)

For the sake of objectivity, however, a detailed account of such developments in different moments of Egyptian history, and their full sociological impact, will be sacrificed – unfortunately. Nevertheless, a small introduction on the “invention” of such techniques (i.e. grammatical functions), together with a few examples, can be expected.

Ideally, this section could consist of a classic semiotic (or semiologic) analysis of the Egyptian hieroglyphs. However,

¹⁰ p. 60.

Although Saussure stressed the importance of the relationship of signs to each other, one of the weaknesses of structuralist semiotics is the tendency to treat individual texts as discrete, closed-off entities and to focus exclusively on internal structures. Even where texts are studied as a “corpus” (a unified collection), the overall generic structures tend themselves to be treated as strictly bounded. The structuralist's first analytical task is often described as being to delimit the boundaries of the system (what is to be included and what excluded), which is logistically understandable but ontologically problematic. Even remaining within the structuralist paradigm, we may note that codes transcend structures. (Chandler 2002: 194)

Therefore, the problem of such an internal approach to sign would be threefold:

- The semiosis of a particular hieroglyph can change through Egyptian history. Therefore a semiotic analysis, I suggest, favours a synchronic approach, but it is not ideal for a diachronic study;
- One given hieroglyph could accumulate different reading possibilities, which interfere directly with its semiosis (and makes it almost impossible to “delimit the boundaries of the system”);
- The outcome of such a complete task is not only very complex: the volume of information produced would easily exceed the word limits of a PhD thesis.

Insisting on a conventional semiotic study could lead to an effort of *categorization of signs* that would easily turn counterproductive for the scope of this thesis, as a workable set of sign-categories would easily produce more exceptions than rules. For this reason, the following description of Egyptian writing will privilege a grammatological approach, discussing “principles” and not “categories”, precisely because I understand grammatology – as a discipline – not only as the study of writing in a narrow sense, but also as a science focused on the dynamics of *systems* of signification (based on graphic notation).



The terms by which the grammatological functions of ancient hieroglyphic writing are presented here (mythogram, ideogram, phonogram, etc.), it is important to say, were not

employed by the Egyptians. It is unknown how the Egyptians referred to these principles, if they did. The description of these “principles” results from empirical observation of Egyptian writing throughout its history, and they are discussed, sometimes from a very different perspective, in most Egyptian Grammars.¹¹

2.1. Mythography¹²

It is common sense that countless numbers of different meanings can be attributed to a single image on a symbolic level. In the case of a mythogram, as commented above, the power to sustain its particular meaning depends on a parallel oral tradition – the mythology – that preserves the original convention (and continuously recreates it), and that at the same time is nurtured by the image in question, in a symbiotic relationship that presents a thought.

The oldest known mythography found in the Egyptian area is approximately 15,000 years old and was rediscovered recently, in 2007, near Qurta.¹³ It consists of a series of drawings with extraordinary visual similarity with what later became known as Egyptian hieroglyphs. Despite their appearance, it is unlikely that this tradition is the same one that was the source of the later continuum that led to the invention of the Egyptian hieroglyphic system. It is, however, an early evidence of the use of mythograms in the region. [Plate 4]

Around a thousand years later, Predynastic Egyptian cultures will still make use of rock drawings (or petroglyphs), with an increasing level of sophistication.¹⁴ Examples from Naqada I period will achieve a new standard of complexity and the “naturalistic” appearance of earlier petroglyphs will make way for more intricate drawings. [Plate 5]

The survival of rock drawings across history has a simple reason: as a hard and inorganic support, the images carved or painted on rocks could last for longer than those – that probably

¹¹ E.g. Gardiner 1957; Allen 2000; Collier and Manley 2003; Loprieno 1995.

¹² Other authors give various names for what I refer as Egyptian *mythograms*: “pictorial representation”, “Egyptian art”, etc., often in an unsystematic way, with an equally different approach.

¹³ See Huyge et al. 2007.

¹⁴ See Morrow et al. 2002; Rohls 2000.

existed – produced on any other natural surface (such as wood, for example). The rise of pottery techniques represented a further step in the search for long-durable media for imagery:

The assemblage of Predynastic pottery – C-Ware (White Crossed-Lined) and D-Ware (Decorated) pottery – is particularly renowned because of its captivating designs, which are reminiscent of rock drawings. Chronologically, C-Ware was an innovation of the Naqada I period, and was replaced by D-Ware during the Naqada II period (MacArthur 2010: 117)

I like to think that rock drawings finally have “slipped” from rock walls to vessels – and from there permeated Egyptian material culture. [Plates 6 and 7]

2.1.1. The Semiotic Status of a Mythogram

Because of the visual resemblance that these early mythograms have with later stages of Egyptian visual culture, it is extremely seductive for someone in the 21st-century to attempt to interpret them in the light of a later iconology. Intellectually, this process of “reinterpretation” of such mythograms would not be strange given the ancient attitude toward mythography. However, the belief that it is possible to identify the “correct” interpretation of a mythogram from this time must be based on the misconceived presumption that mythograms are a straightforward “pictorial narrative” – that therefore represented directly an idea or event.¹⁵ Semiotically speaking, the mythogram – in its complexity – is a “mute” signifier that stands for a yet undetermined signified (unless the exact intention of the author is known and preserved). The signified remains unknown until the moment the myth is *told* (and this “telling” can be just thought, i.e. not necessarily expressed). When this happens, pieces of the narrative will establish different levels of semiotic relation with the images: parts of the mythogram will assume the role of icons, indexes or symbols. In other words, the interpretamen gradually will fulfil the signified.

¹⁵ I would understand this exercise as a complete rupture with the understanding of mythography itself: again, a mythogram stands for a story in its *untold* state, and the “correct” interpretation of its “narrative” would depend on a *told* myth (mythology), that has been lost. It is precisely because of this difficulty that the ideography will be invented.

I must clarify, however, that my understanding of this phenomenon (that I call “mythography”) differs from other perspectives – sometimes radically. The term “mythogram” has previously been applied to pre-historical panels; but as far as I have been informed, it was never used for what other authors consider to be an example of what is known as “Egyptian art”.

2.1.2. Spatial Aspective

As was mentioned before, mythography “irradiated” the aesthetic principles that would become a non-exception rule in Egyptian visual culture (either in discrete or non-discrete signs). The high iconicity was a *conditio sine qua non* for Egyptian hieroglyphs. However, it is wrong to suppose that throughout history Egyptian iconography is purely *naturalistic*: especially from the Dynastic period on, Egyptian imagery did not respect the demands of natural perspective. Rather, the Egyptians made use of a principle known as “aspective”. Doing so, instead of choosing one single viewpoint to draw a human figure, for example, the Egyptian artist would choose different viewpoints so as to capture the best different angles of this single figure, thus putting them all together and producing an ideally harmonized image.

2.1.3. “Temporal Aspective”

The concept of spatial aspective described above is very helpful to explain what I consider another important feature of mythography: the power to assemble different moments of an event in the same panorama. Instead of presenting a succession of acts, arranged according to their

chronological order, a mythogram tends to group all of them in an ideal scene of the best temporal aspects of the entire event.¹⁶

2.1.4. Towards Ideography

From within the domain of Predynastic mythography new solutions for the problems of interpretation will appear. First, the recurrence of canonical motives will set a strong “pictorial convention” that will become the most easily recognizable feature of the entire Egyptian visual culture. Put in different words, the principle – or rule – of iconicity by which the Egyptian hieroglyphs are easily identified even nowadays was borne from this process. Secondly, from this system of convention, ideography will emerge.

Moreover, throughout the history of Egyptian hieroglyphic tradition, mythography will always be source for the creation of new signs or usages, and even much later, when mythograms will already be sharing the scriptural context with linear writing, they will become the images known among Egyptologists as “scene”, “vignette” or “illustration” – the problem with these labels is that they may imply a passive or secondary role of *mythography* in relation with linear writing.

2.2. Ideography

As mentioned above, a subsequent “innovation” in the mythographic system happens when the image deploys itself in meaningful parts that can be repeated and articulated, and that will not stand for an entire myth – as is the case of the mythograms – but for a particular idea, concept or word, thus becoming subject to a more rigid convention, that will help to identify

¹⁶ E.g. Fathers/sons will be often presented at the same apparent age (the difference can be made with size); the deceased will always have their best young appearance, Osiris will always be already dead, the result of the weighing of the heart is already displayed (success or failure).

elements of the mythogram, i.e. the *ideogram*,¹⁷ in the context of mythography, will have an identifier function, allowing the mythographic figure to “explain” itself. Essentially, the ideogram will allow the direct use of images as marks of place, identity (either divine or human), property, numbers, etc. [Plate 8]

Although some ideograms can be identified in late Predynastic rock drawings,¹⁸ their systematic use will be attested in two other different media or scriptural contexts: seals and tags, and funerary stelae [Plate 9]. These new writing places are of course symptoms of the new functions that image assumes in the light of ideography. Both tags and funerary stelae are very representative exponents of the two cultural axes that not much later gave birth to linear writing: rite (here related to the cult of the dead – which has a major place in Egyptian culture) and administration (here represented by the notation of numbers and objects for accounting); ideology and power.¹⁹

For cognitive reasons that will not be discussed here, it is relatively easy to understand and define a sign as an ideogram. However, the exact semiotic “classification” of each ideogram within the linear writing-system depends on the relationship that each signifier has with its meaning, in a specific context. [Plate 10]

2.2.1. Defining Spaces in Non-Linear Syntax: Encircling and Scale

Mythographic composition is by definition non-discrete, and occupies scriptural space in a non-linear order. Arguably, the importance of each element in a mythogram could be suggested by its proximity to the centre of the composition, its relation to human figures, and its proportional size. The advent of the ideographic principle within the mythographic domain demanded a new compositional solution to avoid confusion (as both principles would make use

¹⁷ I object to the term “logogram” here because very often the same hieroglyph could stand for one or more different words (logos). If ideograms were logograms or semograms they would not need determinatives or phonetic complements. However, I do employ the term *logogram* in the sense of a *schematograms*: i.e. as the “written part of a word that can be pronounced”. See p. 113.

¹⁸ As the serekh of King Narmer (before ca. 3150 BC), Dynasty 0. See [Plate 13].

¹⁹ See Goody 1987.

of the same visual signs with different functions), which appears in two main forms: scale and encircling.

Because the first function of an ideogram in the context of mythography is to act as an identifier, thus determining the sense of mythographic elements, it had to assume a discrete conventional form (smaller scale) that could be repeated elsewhere, without interfering with the mythographic domain:²⁰

Protodynastic pictorial narrative uses picture-signs on two distinctly different physical scales. The large pictures portray a “scene”, and the small pictures identify actors and places by including names. The small pictures therefore refer to *language* (names), the large pictures refer to the *world* (acts). It would be a mistake, however, to categorize only the small pictures as “writing”. The large pictures also act as writing. (Assmann 1988: 19)

A second strategy for separating the “mythographic” from the “ideographic” (and later also “phonetic”) reading was to isolate the identifier in a frame, by drawing its limits with a line (that could be a circle or square). This can explain the early examples of *serekh*,²¹ the writing of place names inside squares, and lately the use of *shenu* (also known as “cartouche”, that consisted of the *sen* ring hieroglyph within which the names of gods and humans were written).

2.3. Phonography: Alluding to Sounds through Paronomasia

Although more “specific” than mythography, the ideographic principle could still allow a number of different readings, and had serious limitations when employed to present an abstract concept (as “mother”, for example). A new writing strategy then emerged from the vocalization of ideograms: the principle of paronomasia. It was clear that a particular reading of an ideogram could allude to a specific sound, and that instead of reading the ideographical meaning of a sign,

²⁰ More or less in the same way paintings and drawings are signed by artists conventionally at the bottom of the canvas.

²¹ Serekh “was the device within which this name (the royal title known as “Horus name”) was written. It consisted of a rectangular “frame” with a section of recessed niche walling drawn at the bottom, and usually with the falcon symbol of the god Horus perched on the top” (Wilkinson 1994: 149).

one could employ this sound to write something else. This explanation can be clarified by one simple example. [Plate 11]

This made the pre-existing use of images for writing in Egypt much more complex, but at the same time allowed the Egyptians to allude to the sounds of their language. The Egyptian phonograms, in their “classic” form could refer to one, two or three consonants. [Plate 12]

The actual origin of the principle of paronomasia is disputed. It is generally accepted that the Egyptian punning is derived, by “stimulus diffusion”, from the Sumerian system that would be slightly older. The most ancient evidence of the use of phonography in Egypt comes from the Tomb U-j, and dates from around 3320 BC to around 3150 BC.²²

For the time being, it is sufficient to observe that by alluding to the sound, the already existent Egyptian use of images became more and more independent from the oral parallel culture, and gained more precision. *Not only ideography, but also phonography could be applied to “determine” a mythogram.*

The prototype of this encounter of mythography, ideography and phonography is the *Narmer Palette* (Dynasty 0, before ca. 3150). From this remarkable example, one can observe how mythography is employed to depict a possible historical event, in a highly ideological way, and how ideography and phonography united for the deixis of such an event. A great number of compositional conventions and motives can already be attested: even before the rise of linear writing. [Plate 13]

Here, I feel compelled to make a brief commentary on phonography in Egypt: despite the fact that this principle is taken as the cradle of Egyptian writing, the Egyptians’ allusion to sounds within their writing-system is far from perfect. On the one hand, although a contemporary scholar can *transcribe* in alphabetic writing the supposed phonetic value of a hieroglyph, the fact is that the Egyptians did not have this possibility. In the beginning, the reading of visual punning was probably as “enigmatic” as a rebus game – i.e. essentially, it was a charade. On the other hand, it is true that a small set of hieroglyphs that employed the principle of paronomasia, equivocally called “hieroglyphic alphabet”, was frequently used –to allude also to the sound of foreign words. As a matter of fact, these very few hieroglyphs were the most used ones, together with some recurrent

²² Dreyer and Hartung 1998. [Plate 09]

ideograms and determinatives. However, what is understood now as “phonetic writing” actually operated, to a great extent, as an orthographic convention (i.e. certain words were written in a particular way not because of an accurate allusion to their sounds, but because they were traditionally, or canonically, written with those hieroglyphs – even when the pronunciation of such words changed as time passed). Apparently, Bossuet’s maxim that

We do not read letter by letter; but the whole pattern of the word makes its impression on the eyes and on the mind, so that if this pattern suddenly changes considerably, the words lose the features which make them recognizable to the sight and the eyes are no longer satisfied (*Cahiers de Mezeray*, 1673)...

... can also be applied to the reading of hieroglyphs. Moreover, evidence suggests that the Egyptian scribes’ education for writing in hieroglyphs was more based on systematic copying,²³ than on the application of structural principles previously learned. It is this entire phenomenon – of writing words by convention, and not by the straightforward application of a principle – that I ultimately call “logography”.

2.4. The Determinative Sign

It is beyond doubt that phonography represented a great grammatological tool in Egypt. However, as the phonograms did not allude to vowels, one can suppose that the number of homographs could be considerable. To avoid the difficult work of reading by guessing a way through ambiguities, a creative solution was promptly designed: the addition of a special and “mute” hieroglyph²⁴ at the end of the word – the so called determinative – that would function immediately as a reading aid. [Plate 14]

Some of the earliest examples of the use of determinatives come from the aforementioned Tomb of U-j where the ideogram of mountain was used as a determinative of place to identify the

²³ See Baines 1983; for process of learning hieroglyphs, see p. 110.

²⁴ “Mute” because they do not carry any phonetic value. Simply put they cannot be read out loud, while ideograms or phonograms can.

city of Elephantine. During the Old Kingdom, their usage became more frequent, and from the Middle Kingdom on they assumed their celebrated systematic form. According to Assmann,

A new stage is reached when the “large” signs [i.e. *mythograms*] are integrated into the inventory of the “small” ones [i.e. *linear hieroglyphs*]. This is the origin of determinatives. The determinative is originally nothing more than a “picture” reduced to script size that joins the preceding phonogram as annotation. Their reference of these sense signs only gradually becomes generalized from sememes to classes. The word for “beetle” is originally determined by the picture of a beetle. Only later is the word for “beetle” determined by the picture of a bird as falling into the sense class “flying animals”, and even later by the picture of an animal skin as falling into the more general sense class “animal”. (Assmann 1988: 20)

Gardiner has a different and also interesting explanation for the origin of this principle, according to him:

The name “determinative” is in many cases historically inaccurate, the ideogram having been the original sign with which the word was first written, and the phonograms having been prefixed to it subsequently for the sake of clearness. In such cases it might be more truly said that the phonograms determine the *sound* of the ideogram, than that the ideogram determines the *sense* of the phonograms. (Gardiner 1957: 31)

My hypothesis is somehow a synthesis of Assmann and Gardiner: the phonogram, indeed, was created first of all for the purpose of “determining” the meaning of another image – either mythogram or ideogram – by alluding to its name (sound), as I discussed before. Therefore giving the name “determinative” only to the particular usage of hieroglyph presented here could imply that other writing strategies (mythograms, phonograms, ideograms and even rules of composition) did not have the function of “determining” something – as Gardiner suggests. I think that while the phonograms were used only to identify another image, they did not need the determinatives for themselves. But as phonograms began to be employed to write isolated words or expressions, out of a mythographic context, the determinative hieroglyph became more and more necessary – and they were, as Assmann says, mythograms incorporated among the “small” hieroglyphs.

“Determinatives” are elsewhere called “classemes” or “classifiers”.²⁵ Notwithstanding, I do not find these new terms very helpful either. First, because they presuppose an idea of “categorization” that is somehow strange to Egyptian culture²⁶ – and more importantly because they reduce or even subtract the expressive function or possibilities of such signs.

To illustrate my point– that the use of determinatives had a much more organic role – I offer some few self-explanatory examples of the functions of determinatives [Plate 15], and a list of the most common determinative signs from Classical Hieroglyphic Writing. [Plate 16]

In sum, the function of the determinative, *that is never an arbitrary sign*, goes far beyond the sole and secondary function of indicating the class for a word “phonetically written”.

2.5. The Birth and Development of Linear Writing

From Dynasty 0 on, the coexistence of mythograms, ideograms and phonograms in the context of Egyptian use of images to write *led to the gradual but inevitable development of this script as a closed system* (with a certain number of signs and rules). The articulated signs, as mentioned before, were introduced to material culture and assumed new functions: as indexes they were employed in tags and sealings, in pottery and wooden objects, in votive plaques and funerary stelae. This phenomenon led to the rise and advance of a new technology: the text – or linear writing. [Plate 17]

In the period between the 3rd dynasty and Old Kingdom,

Writing is reformed so that its potential to record continuous language is realized. Rates of literacy probably rise. The concept of a text appears, but perhaps only for ritual, that is, instrumental matter. The importance of scarcity decreases, and expression and comment are possible, being manifest first in biographies, which become the least instrumental writings. Writing is now prominent in law (where the legal document, another type of text, develops) and religion, which are the points of departure for later developments. (Baines 2007: 59)

²⁵ Only Goldwasser proposes a different name (and theoretical approach) for the “determinative” sign: classifier (2002: 13).

²⁶ See Chapter Two.

While in the Old Kingdom,

With the emergence of a society strongly founded upon what has been described as "the bureaucratic mind", the quantity and the complexity of written documents expands dramatically (Dyn. IV- VI, 2650-2150 BCE). From this period we have a wealth of texts exhibiting a full-fledged writing system based on a systematic, rather than random application of the principles described in section 2.2. The inventory of signs is slightly over a thousand and the possibility of substitute writings for the same word is reduced in the case of logograms, but maintained for the phonetic signs (...). Texts from this period are mainly documents pertaining to the administration of royal funerary domains, legends on the walls of private tombs of the elite in the necropoleis of the Memphite area, autobiographies on the external walls of the rock-cut tombs in Upper Egypt, and the theological corpus of the "Pyramid Texts" in the burial chambers of the royal tombs from the end of Dyn. V (about 2330 BCE) through the end of the Old Kingdom. (Loprieno 1995: 20)

2.5.1. Principles of Composition and the Order of Reading

In Dynasty I the articulated signs were more frequently put together to form small phrases. Such usage of hieroglyphs naturally created the need for an order of reading, which was immediately invented. It consisted in the establishment of a series of technical advances: the direction of reading starting from where the hieroglyphs were facing; the introduction of dividing lines;²⁷ etc. These principles of composition can be straightforwardly comprehended through some examples. [Plate 18]

The fundamentals of graphic composition were underlined by an aesthetic tendency or rule: the *horror vacui*. This "horror of the empty space" *could interfere with orthography and change the order of hieroglyphs in a word*, for example, just to avoid the unnecessary space between the signs.

To attend to this rule with perfection, after the Old Kingdom grids of squares were set so as to prepare the soil for an ideally elegant distribution of hieroglyphs in the space available (Schenkel 1976: 5).

²⁷ *Grosso modo*, the width of the space between lines would not be wider than two hieroglyphs – for vertical lines – or one standard hieroglyph – for horizontal line.

Beside the *horror vacui*, with the systematization of Egyptian writing other features could affect the order of hieroglyphs and words in textual production. One of these factors is “honorific transposition”. Words of particular importance (such as the names of gods, pharaohs, etc.) would be transposed to the beginning of the text: no matter the syntactical order.

2.5.2. The Changes in Mythography Related to the Introduction of Linear Writing (or Classical Egyptian Mythography)

While the discrete hieroglyphs evolved into an autonomous linear writing, mythography was also subject to a deep process of conventionalization. A set of canonical motifs was introduced, but this did not mean that the nature of mythography changed: even when depicting a historical event, these compositions preserved the atemporal presentation of a story, its “temporal aspective” – in other words, different moments could be brought together into a uniform and timeless panorama. Therefore, as in theory the mythogram initially was not a tool to display a succession of facts, it cannot be a “pictorial representation of an event”, *per se*.²⁸ However, it could become one as linear writing could introduce the notion of temporality in *full writing* (see below).

Together with the primacy of iconicity, four other tools were fundamental to this process of systematization of mythography: the highly conventionalized incorporation of gestures – that could merge with any figure and interfere with its meaning, mostly as an index of its psychological or physical attitude; the use of “attributes” to define the identity of figures – by means of hieroglyphs placed on the head or hands of gods, humans, and other beings; the progressive assimilation of linear hieroglyphs in the mythographic domain; and the use of canonical scenes. Also, given the importance of mythographic compositions, they could be regarded as the last and most elaborated stage of the scribes’ education: once a writer had mastered the linear signs, he

²⁸ In cases like the *Narmer Palette*, another technique is introduced: the separation of scenes by lines. However, there is not clear evidence of the sequential order of events.

would finally be able to produce mythographic inscriptions – taking into consideration their rigorous principles of composition.²⁹

For all those reasons, I once again reaffirm my reluctance in accepting that mythograms – even at this more developed and conventional stage – are “pictorial representations”, “symbols”, “illustrations” or simply “Ancient Egyptian art”. Generally speaking, the similarity between Egyptian mythography and the most relaxed sense of “art” is only superficial: and it can be resumed as a technique and an aesthetic preoccupation. In terms of function and cultural role, Egyptian mythography had a very specific purpose. Otherwise, one can affirm that mythography is an artistic modality – if the discrete hieroglyphs (and therefore also the linear texts they compose) are also understood this way, since they share the same aesthetic preoccupation.

2.5.3. Principles of Composition in Full Writing³⁰

In mythographic compositions that incorporated linear signs, the distinction between the (linear or non-linear) domains could easily be recognized by a number of distinct characteristics: scale (linear signs would be discrete), alignment (linear signs would be grouped together, in a sequence) and arrangement – groups of linear signs would be placed at the periphery of the mythographic composition. [Plate 19]

The proportional dimension of the elements of a mythographic domain (such as the figure of gods, kings, offerings etc.) was still determined by the importance of such elements, and their importance in a given context. Therefore, gods would frequently be bigger than human beings; ritualistic objects and offerings would be proportionally bigger (in relation to the image of a person, for example) than in nature. In linear writing, however, the size/proportion of a hieroglyph does not depend necessarily on meaning, but on their harmonious disposition (see Section 2.5.1. above).

²⁹ Schaffer 1986 and Wilkinson 1994.

³⁰ I call “full writing” here a composition that involves linear and non-linear domains.

2.6. Classical Hieroglyphic Writing (CHW): The Traditional Normalization of Hieroglyphs

So far I have presented the principles of hieroglyphic writing departing from their historical origin, or grammatological function, and not as unchanged aspects of a uniform writing-system. This choice aimed to echo the notion that this script was built from a succession of innovations that at some point were “institutionalized” in a particular system (from the Old Kingdom on, as observed above). This institutionalized script would “accommodate” the many principles of Egyptian writing in what can be understood as its classic systematization.

In the Middle Kingdom (2050-1750 BCE), the authority of the royal court is reaffirmed after about a century of centrifugal tendencies towards provincial centers of power (“First Intermediate Period”, 2150-2050 BCE). A newly developed school system for the education of the bureaucratic elite fixes Egyptian orthography by reducing the number of graphic renditions conventionally allowed for any given word: while in the Old Kingdom the spectrum of scribal possibilities was relatively broad, only one or two of the potential options are now selected as the received written form(s) of the word. This conventional orthography of the word usually consists either of a logogram (for the most basic nouns of the lexicon) or of a sequence of phonograms, often complementized, followed by a determinative (...). When compared with the Old Kingdom system, logograms [i.e. ideograms] have become less common and slightly varying hieroglyphic shapes have been reduced to one basic form, for a total of about 750 signs. The classical principles remain in use for monumental hieroglyphs as well as for manual Hieratic until the end of Dyn. XVIII (ca. 1300 BCE) (Loprieno 1995: 21)

This process of standardization that happened in the Middle Kingdom formed, in the first place, which is to be understood as the classic model of Egyptian writing, given that in the upcoming eras this system of convention will be regarded by the Egyptians themselves as a fundamental point of reference – more or less in the same way Latin or Greek were held in Modern Europe. Furthermore, given the abundant literature produced in this period, this model will be the basis for what I call “Classical Hieroglyphic Writing” (CHW).

CHW is the theoretical model that results from a descriptive analysis of Egyptian writing during the Middle Kingdom.³¹ In other words, it is the prototype of the hieroglyphic script that serves as the basis for contemporary Egyptian Grammars and introductions to Egyptian writing.³² Anyone studying Egyptian hieroglyphs will first come in contact with this model:³³ for that reason, probably, the CHW can be regarded as the paradigm of hieroglyphs as well.

Needless to say, the development of Egyptian hieroglyphic writing is not limited by this “classic format”; nor does this historical frame enclose the most sophisticated or complex use of hieroglyphs.

3. Discussion: A Grammatological Theory for Image-Text Dynamics.

*L'image comme écriture, l'écriture comme image. Dans l'univers sémiotique des anciens Egyptiens, image et texte s'unissaient de la façon la plus intime, la plus complice, au point de dissoudre la barrière entre l'iconique et l'écrit, infranchissable dans la pensée occidentale.*³⁴

This journey across the features of the Egyptian hieroglyphic system, despite its fragmentary and descriptive character, was absolutely necessary to give evidence of the complexity of this script in terms of the *use of images to write*. From this grammatological analysis, I identified two fundamental principles that are the backbone of my thesis: the vertical and horizontal modes of interaction between image and text (or idea).

³¹ No account explaining the rules that guided the use of hieroglyphs in this period survived to our days. For more about the Egyptian attitude toward their own writing, see Chapters Two and Three.

³² See fn. 11.

³³ From the basic knowledge acquired with the study of CHW, one can specialize in different periods of the history of Egyptian writing (Late or Graeco-Roman periods, for example) with the help of specialized literature that builds on this previous knowledge (Junge 2005; Kurth 2007).

³⁴ Tefnin 1984.

4.1. Vertical Modes of Interaction: Assimilation and Overlaying

That the most striking characteristic of Egyptian hieroglyphic writing is its iconicity, is self-evident. Nevertheless, there is another remarkable quality that is hidden under the (almost) immutable appearance of hieroglyphs: the phenomenon of “assimilation”. As one can observe from the previous sections of this chapter, at any given moment, Egyptian writing is the sum of its own historical process, i.e. the advent of new possibilities did not make earlier manifestations obsolete: the introduction of ideography did not “surpass” mythography; the use of phonography did not “overcome” ideography; the use of parallel systems (hieratic, demotic or alphabet) did not “supplant” hieroglyphic writing; and so on – as could have happened. The best and simplest analogy for this phenomenon seems to be the contrast between monotheism and polytheism: while in the former there prevails an attitude of exclusivity towards the divine (the system of belief cannot integrate other divine entities), in the latter there is a tendency towards accommodating other beliefs by means of syncretism.

This process of assimilation of successive grammatological principles (i.e. the invention of new techniques to write through images) unavoidably led to the equally important phenomenon of overlaying of meaning values, which affected the hieroglyphs at all levels of writing:

3.2. Polysemy and Allography

As frequently one single hieroglyph could accumulate new meanings (sememes) resulting from different reading techniques or conventions, the phenomenon of polysemy can be considered a natural trait of the Egyptian hieroglyphic script. And in the same way a signifier (hieroglyph) could have many different meanings, one signified (meaning) could be written in many different ways – and this is the definition of allography, another recurrent phenomenon.

Polysemy and allography were always present in Egyptian hieroglyphs: even if in some periods the orthographic rules were more restricted, especially in the CHW, in later times the increase of polysemy and allographs will play a fundamental role. According to Fairman, in this period there are:

- (a) An increase in the signs in common use and in the values they could bear (...).
- (b) A big increase in the number of ideograms and in the number of determinatives that are used as ideograms and phonograms.
- (c) An increase, as compared with Classical Egyptian, in purely alphabetic writings.(...) (Fairman 1945: 57)

In essence, this is the most immediate result of polysemy and allography, or perhaps evidence they were not an exception, but the rule in certain contexts.

It is important to observe that by the Ptolemaic era, Egyptian scribes were likely to be familiar with Greek alphabetic writing (see Chapter Three). This fact can be taken as a logical explanation for the increase of monoconsonantal phonograms (referred above by Fairman as “purely alphabetic writing”) through the use of acronyms, consonantal principle, or even simplification (by metathesis) applied to any discrete hieroglyph. [Plates 20 and 21]

It is said that the number of discrete hieroglyphs jumped from around 700 in Classical Hieroglyphic Writing to more than 7,000 during the Graeco-Roman period (see Chapter Three). However, I would say that it is not correct to infer that the majority of these hieroglyphs were “devised” all of sudden: most of them were already present in mythography, or in the Egyptian visual culture in general – and little by little assumed new meanings and functions. If that is the case, the relationship between mythography and linear hieroglyphs poses a very interesting problem to the idea of writing as a closed system, with a particular number of signs: the writing of discrete hieroglyphs allowed “access” to the wide mythographic repertoire.

3.2.1. Overlaying in the Linear Domain

- Sign-Level: [Plate 22]

It is a fact that an image can be read in many different ways. It is also true that the Egyptian hieroglyph is, externally, an “image”. As one can observe from this study of Egyptian script, originally the hieroglyphic image was part of a mythogram. Soon, with the advent of discrete signs, the ideographic principle was introduced, followed by phonography and by determinative signs.

Some signs could bear all these possibilities; others were (or became) specialized in one function, although I consider that all discrete signs kept their first mythographic essence.

As I mentioned before, the phenomenon of polysemy and allography are an undisputable consequence – and evidence – of the “overlying process”, and although it is almost impossible to determine the semiotic status of a hieroglyph, it seems clear that the hieroglyph is not an arbitrary signifier (in the sense that there is an *explanation* for the signifier-signified relationship). I would go even further and suggest that the *hieroglyph* is a scriptural category on its own.

- Word-Level: [Plate 23]

Because of the many different ways to read a sign (polysemy), and the numerous homographs produced by a consonant-based phonography, avoiding ambiguities when reading a word in Egyptian hieroglyphs could be a very difficult task. Fortunately the system of determination not only helped to identify the desired sense of a word, in linguistic terms, but often provided an expressive but silent surplus to the “logogram”. Therefore, it is clear that in many words at least two different functions were employed.³⁵ This means that even in the linear writing, in a word level, there was a relationship between linear and non-linear signs.

Despite this very “organic” explanation of how to compose a word in Egyptian, the fact is that convention plays a fundamental role. Evidence suggests that the canonical versions of words (orthogram) were learned in their entirety, by means of extensive copying exercises (see Chapter Three). It is in this conventional layer that abbreviation takes place, as well as compositional rules.

- Text-Level: [Plate 24]

Over the “word-level” layer, comes the fabric of text – and I mean text not only in its linguistic sense, but also from a grammatological perspective (i.e. in the way writing features can affect language). In this stratum, the rules are more conventionalized and the effect is more subtle – at least at first glance. The canonical formulae, in a strict sense, and the concision of epigraphic

³⁵ Especially in the case of nouns and verbs.

writing are responsible for a kind of phrasal orthography. The rules of composition are now affected by the principle of honorific transposition, and the placement of writing (its relation to objects/surfaces) plays a pivotal role. The place where something is written not only becomes a kind of genre, but interferes with the system of determination.³⁶

In terms of an “interlevel exchange” with the previous layers, this becomes the stage where the “overtone” emerges. So far it can easily be observed that the Egyptian writing had a wide spectrum of scriptural possibilities. A competent scribe, aware of this fact, could then use the opportunities given by the Egyptian system to write simultaneously “in more than one layer”. The sole choice of hieroglyphs used in the composition of a text can carry a message more or less evident that produces a grammatical effect that I refer to here as “overtone”.³⁷ [Plates 25 and 26]

According to Sauneron,

L'écriture, en d'autres termes, cesse d'être un simple outil du langage pour devenir en elle-même et indépendamment du texte, un moyen d'expression. (...) Le texte hiéroglyphique lui-même, par son aspect et ses multiples valeurs, possède sa propre harmonie et ses propres parallélismes. Indépendamment des mots lus et compris, les images de signes perçues par les yeux offrent l'étrange spectacle de signes semblables associés dans des groupes esthétiques, ou de tableaux dont l'aspect seul suggère déjà une idée. (Sauneron 1982: 54)

Although the use of these overtones can be identified in different stages of the Egyptian hieroglyphic writing,³⁸ it is in the Late and Graeco-Roman periods that these strategies are employed more systematically. In temple texts such as Dendera, Esna or Edfu, more than one overtone strategy could be cast, producing complex layers of meaning that *run the risk of being lost if these texts are superficially transcribed and translated (from the transcription)*. This subject will be further discussed in a historical perspective in Chapter Three.

³⁶ Statues or sarcophagi frequently assume the role of determinatives; certain parts of temples or funeral places demand a specific kind of text, etc.

³⁷ The notion of “overtone” used here is directly derived from Ernst Fenollosa’s celebrated essay *The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry*, edited by Ezra Pound (London: Instigations, 1920). Compare this phenomenon to the “complexograms” in Early-Modern period (Chapter Ten).

³⁸ “Figurative hieroglyphs occur as early as the Old Kingdom, from which it is attested on funerary monuments, often in lists of the tomb owner’s titles, where it was apparently intended to intrigue the passer-by and encourage him to read an otherwise standard formulaic inscription. It was also used to impart emblematic significance to a text” (Parkinson, 1999: 80).

Another scriptural strategy that takes place in this context (i.e. vertical text-image interaction) is the phenomenon of alliteration:

Alliteration in texts has the fortunate consequence for modern scholars of enabling them to read signs whose values would otherwise be obscure. It is a feature found from the Pyramid Texts onward and like punning it has the underlying aim of making words in a sentence effective, especially against hostile forces. Those puns which use two words, where one is derived from the other, could be argued to be the ultimate form of alliteration - with the whole words of a sentence alliterating and not simply the initial sign. In these cases both pun and alliteration serve the same purpose of explaining and emphasising the meaning of the phrase. Alliteration has a much more extensive use at Edfu, because punning requires a narrower variety of words than alliteration. The most striking set of alliterative phrases are in the texts describing the procession of standards at the New Year Festival. Each bearer of a standard has an accompanying line of text in the inscriptions and it may have actually been spoken by each priest - in each line the eight to nine words alliterate, each line alliterates a different sound but each expresses the same purpose - to remove impurity or hostile forces from the path of the procession. Each word is selected - firstly for its appropriate meaning and secondly to fit into the pattern of alliteration. (Wilson 1991: 87)

It is necessary to highlight that, in a composition, in the same way words (as signified) can be chosen to fit the intended alliteration, hieroglyphs (as signifier) can be chosen to fit intentional overtones. The conclusion is that alliteration can be understood as a sort of *undertone*. Although both overtones and undertones are manifest in text, as they depend on (and are designed to produce) repetition, they depend on choices that are made at a “word level” (thanks to polysemy and allography) and therefore they make evident the intense grammatological interplay between these two layers.

The sequence of “conventional layers” could go further to the formation of genres and literary canons, but analysing Egyptian literature in this perspective would take this description of Egyptian writing far away from the scope of the present thesis. Nevertheless, in addition to all the peculiarities mentioned above, in the textual domain there is one last characteristic that will reveal itself fundamental for this thesis: the “horizontal interaction” with non-linear domains.

3.2.2. Overlaying in Non-Linear Domain

Just as the linear writing, mythography also became covered with “layers” [Plate 27]. These different *strati* of grammatological signification affected the previous ground of mythography.

It is interesting to notice that while in the overlaying in linear writing there is a tendency toward subjectivity, with overlap of new meanings creating a profusion of new values, in the case of overlaying in non-linear writing, the effect is the reverse: *there is a tendency toward objectivity, as the new layers help to discern things*, somehow producing a kind of “path of reading” among the otherwise “mysterious” mythographic domain.

Some of these functional “layers” can be readily identified:

- Attributes: [Plate 28]

I have already mentioned the importance of the use of “attributes” for the creation of composite signs. The garments of a figure, and the object/hieroglyph that are placed on its head or hands, are an essential grammatological instrument in the semiosis of a mythogram. The relationship between the figure and these objects varies: sometimes the object/hieroglyph is related to a particular event in the mythology of this figure, and has a pertinent symbolical status; sometimes it is a phonogram that helps us to understand the name of this figure, or alludes to some other quality or issue.³⁹ The attributes may also convey aspects of the attitude of a figure, especially when related to an action (as is the case of holding weapons, for example). Besides any other additional meaning, the attribute points out the identity of a figure and its status.

- Drama: [Plate 29]

Another “layer of determination” can be recognised by the physical attitude, pose or *action* of animated figures.⁴⁰ In this case, the visual mimesis is clear, as the symbolic human gesture is performed in the mythographic domain. In terms of its signification, this dramatic component not only indicates the signification of a figure by means of an iconic “presentation” of a posture or gesture (that is a symbol), but it also operates as an index of the feelings to which this pose alludes.

³⁹ Attributes, as mentioned above, can be used as hieroglyphs to compose “overtones” in mythographic contexts.

⁴⁰ Images of gods, humans, animals and even some beings that are inanimate in principle, but that can assume animated existence (such as the sun that gains arms, or the Horus eye that might have wings, etc.)

In order to be used satisfactorily, the gesture must be deconstructed into its most ideal form,⁴¹ clear from the ambiguities of a naturalistic posture: resembling Meyerhold's idea of "biomechanics".

According to Wilkinson,

When Egyptian art is analysed from this perspective [gestures], certain types and groupings of gestures make themselves clear. One distinction which must be made from the outset is between what we might call *independent* and *sequential* gestures. A gesture which may be performed without reference to other gestures or actions (...) may be termed as independent, and many of the figural "poses" seen in Egyptian art reflect this kind of gesture. For example, the crossed arms of many mummies and statues representing a gesture of this kind (...). On the other hand, sequential gestures exist only as part of a larger complex of actions, gestures, or activities. (Wilkinson 1999: 193)

Put in a different way, the "independent" gesture is a pose (it assumes its meaning when a particular static position – of the body, legs, arms, etc. – is reached); and the "sequential" gesture is a snapshot of a dynamic gesture, usually taken from its most dramatic moment (as when a bow is armed, just about to shoot; when a mace is held up in the air just before striking a blow; or the moment when someone strikes his own chest as a sign of penitence, etc.). Frequently these gestures also appear in discrete hieroglyphs (especially in the case of determinatives in mimetic function).

In sum, the strong convention of gestures and actions shows that a kind of silent language can be apprehended quite objectively from the mythographic domain. If the internal argument is not convincing enough, the following passage fits this conclusion perfectly and points out the importance of visual communication for the Egyptians:

I say at her side that I rejoice in seeing her [Hathor]. My hands do "come to me, come to me". My body says, my lips repeat.⁴²

- Canonical Scenes: [Plate 30 and 31]

⁴¹ With few exceptions – such as the laughing face of Bes, for example – the humanoid figures usually preserve a serene facial expression.

⁴² Stela of Wahankh Intef II from Thebes, apud Lichtheim 1975: 95.

The ultimate “layer of convention” in mythograms is the set of canonical scenes. Here, figures and their attributes, gestures and actions are finally brought together in the same context. As is the case with the “textual stratum” of linear writing, the mythogram has its own kind of “formulae”, i.e. classic motifs that are frequently repeated.

From the examples available, one can observe that sometimes, in the same context, a whole conjunct of scenes is organized in one single and timeless context, without a clear separation or sequential order, due to its “temporal aspective”.

In sum, the mythogram – from its irradiation of “untold” meanings, to the possibilities given by the overlays described here – makes evident that this image is more than a subject for meditation, or an illustration. Although not by means of words, this form of expression might convey a vast volume of information that can be apprehended only by trained eyes.



In synthesis, the vertical text-image nexus, either in linear or non-linear writing, combines layers of both “essential” and “additional” instruments of signification and a strong system of convention. The occurrence of a clear interplay between these layers is not a rule, it is true, but it is not a rare phenomenon either: it is a vibrant evidence of the richness and pungency of this writing-system.

From this brief discussion, a small number of conclusions can be drawn:

- The semantic features of hieroglyphs are not restricted to the “writing of words” at their most basic level (i.e. logography in word-level layer). Instead, they contaminate all levels of writing; therefore, any attempt to reduce hieroglyphic writing by circumscribing it to a “simple phonetic writing with some ideograms” must be treated with caution;
- Although I have presented the text-image nexus in “layers” there is an intense interplay between the different and successive levels of signification. In point of fact, they are interdependent: any overlay depends on (and is affected by) its basis or previous layer. There are features, such as “overtones”, that, albeit manifest in a *textual* layer, depend on *sign* and *word-level* choices;

- As for the process of composition of hieroglyphic inscriptions, the process of overlaying can be compared to the stages of cinematographic production: script (when the logography is produced); storyboard (when the entire programme is shaped, including overtones and undertones and figurative strategies); shooting and montage (when the work is designed – especially in the case of mythographic domains); distribution (i.e. the physical context of the work, and its relationship with its environment) and exhibition (when the work is put in its social context, read aloud, re-enacted, read or simply admired or adored);
- There is a vivid and constant exchange between the domains of verbal and non-verbal communication under the aegis of visual expression (as is the case of the determinative signs). They also overlap (for instance, in the polysemy of some hieroglyphs);
- In the “vertical text-image nexus” there is a two-way traffic of forces of signification: on the one hand, there is an initial force of “suggestion” (logogram, text, linear domain); on the other hand there is a force of “determination” (determinatives, figurative strategies, written surface or non-linear domain), and these forces are mediated by a fine balance between convention and innovations;
- The hieroglyphic script, as it can be apprehended from its internal evidence exposed here, is a deeply motivated system of communication. It is also a fact that there is a profusion of different strategies of signification, which include an *impulse of determination*. By this impulse I do not mean the determinative sign *per se*, but the tendency (impossible to quantify) in the hieroglyphic system of assessing the meaning by contrasting two forces of signification. This principle of determination, *sensu lato*, is the same used to identify mythographic figures in the earliest examples of linear writing in a mythographic context; and it took more sophisticated form in the use of determinatives – in linear writing – and attributes and gestures – in non-linear writing. Wherever the image presents its meaning objectively (by convention), the determination tends to be subjective (as is the case for logogram + determinative sign); and where the image suggests its meaning in a subjective way, the determination acts objectively (as is the case for mythographic figure + attributes). Running the foreseeable but sometimes unavoidable risk of making a

postulation on non-quantitative grounds, I would say that the conjunction between the *necessary motivation of signs and the plentiful instruments (and forces) of signification* can create a very particular kind of expectation in the reader. With this expectation, the reader is never sure if he or she has exhausted the possibilities of reading of a given hieroglyph or inscription. This uncertainty and the consequent search for “hidden meanings” might *produce new meanings – sometimes even unintentionally* – and, from the perspective of the inner workings of hieroglyphic writing, it could be intuited as a magical quality of this script.

3.3. Horizontal Text-Image Nexus: Register, Ekphrasis and Synergraphy

Despite the intense exchanges between mythography and linear writing – often mentioned throughout this chapter – it is clear that they have created two distinct and autonomous domains where one of these two forms of expressions would be preeminent.

This autonomy, however, does not mean that these domains could not converge and cooperate so as to render meaning in a rich and full way. [Plate 32]

In this section I will discuss *the modes of interaction between different domains*, or text-image nexuses, as I was able to observe in the context of Egyptian writing. Nonetheless, I am not the first to observe this phenomenon. Jan Assmann, with his particularly keen vision, has already questioned “to what degree the spheres of world representation and language recording influenced each other”, and based on a typical example of this relationship (tomb of Count Paheri in El-Kab, New Kingdom), he reached some very interesting conclusions, finally calling attention to:

1. The complete *flexibility* of the writing. With the change in writing direction (right to left, horizontal to vertical), the writing is able to adjust completely to the composition of the picture and the direction of the figures, that is, to the “sense” of the scene (see Fischer 1977a, 1986; Vernus 1985).
2. The *fluid transition* between caption (the text integrated into the picture) and illustration (the picture integrated into the text) in the framework of mutual “determination”.
3. The *three functions* of the writing. The first is to *explain* the picture (scene titles in the infinitive, e.g., “Departure of Count Paheri to load the ships”). The second is to *identify* the persons

(annotations of names, e.g., “the grain accountant, who counts the grain, Thotnofer”). The third is to supplement the rendering of speeches, that is to *record sound*. (Assman 1988: 24)

In his last item in the passage above, Assmann identifies three “functions” in the relationship between what he calls “caption” and “scene”. Similarly, I identified three main modes of interaction between linear (text) and non-linear (image) domains:

LEAL		ASSMAN
1. Register	>	“Record Sound”
2. Ekphrasis	>	“Explain the Picture”
2. Ekphrasis, Identification	>	“Identify the Picture”
3. Synergraphy	>	[no equivalent]

In spite of the evident parallelism between our perspectives, one can observe a fundamental discrepancy: first, Assmann proposes that the linear text (which he refers as “writing” or “caption”) has a function in relation to the non-linear domain (“illustration” or “picture”) – and not that both domains engage in this relationship as equal parts; also he does not propose here an equivalent for what I will be referring as “synergraphy” – one of the image-text nexuses in hieroglyphic writing, which will be examined below. [Plate 33]

3.3.1. Register

The function of “register” occurs when the linear text registers what is being expressed by a mythographic figure [Plates 34 and 35]. At the same time, what is expressed can help to identify the figure, and of course affect the semiosis of the mythogram (especially in contrast with the dramatic gestures and actions). This function can be divided into “utterance” and “scribing”:

- Utterance: [Plate 36]

This is the case when a figure *says* something, and its voice is recorded in first person – or as Assmann puts, it is the “rendering of speeches”. It works precisely in the same way a graphic novel *balloon* or a medieval *banderole* does. In terms of the semiotic implication of this mode of text-image interaction, it is fascinating to observe that the idea of giving (a discursive) voice to a mythographic figure is, on a very complex level and scale, comparable to the use of linear hieroglyphs to produce or allude to sounds and words. Also, when the “speaking” figure is a god, the Egyptian name for hieroglyphic writing – “the words of the gods” – makes an even more poetic sense.

Frequently the utterance is introduced by formulae designed for this function.

- Scribing: [Plate 37]

It is very similar to utterance, but here, instead of *speaking*, the mythographic figure is shown *writing* or *drawing* the linear text.

3.3.2. Ekphrasis

Ekphrasis is the poetic figure that *grosso modo* comprises the description, in text, of an artwork. According to the Grove Art Online,

An ekphrasis can be characterized as an extended description of a rhetorical nature. The author displayed his skill with words as well as expressing the qualities of the work described. An ekphrasis generally attempted to convey the visual impression and the emotional responses evoked by the painting or building, not to leave a detailed, factual account. In an ekphrasis of a painting the author did not confine himself to the specific moment represented but was free to discuss the general narrative context, referring both forwards and backwards in time. He was also free to imagine what the characters might be feeling or saying and might even be moved to address them.⁴³

⁴³ Webb 2012.

This term here has a very specific sense: ekphrasis is the *rendition of something conceived in a domain into another* (non-linear to linear and vice-versa) – i.e. a translation between domains (even if both domains are conceived at the same time, by the same author). It is only in this context that I accept using the term *representation* as the same content is presented (at least) two times: in two different forms of expression. [Plate 38]

In this context and besides its “descriptive” nature (that unites the qualities of both domains to deliver essentially an approximate content from two different perspectives – in the case of words that employ phonograms and determinatives), the ekphrasis, can have two other basic functions:

- Primary level: Identification

This first function is equivalent to the first usage of discrete hieroglyphs in mythographic domains: it helps to identify the figure by naming it. By extension, it can be applied to any sort of “title” or “caption” that helps to understand the mythogram – or vice-versa. [Plate 39]

- Secondary level: Determination

The ekphrasis can also operate in a “determinative function”, where both domains determine each other precisely in the same way a determinative sign works. As a matter of fact, frequently a certain figure in the mythographic panel can serve as determinative for a related text, written in the same context. [Plate 40]

3.3.3. Synergraphy

Synergraphy is a neologism that I have coined to name what I consider the most sophisticated nexus between linear and non-linear domains, between text and image. Even though it is not as frequent as the other *nexuses*, and very difficult to identify (as it is also difficult to describe), I find it extremely significant as a grammatological phenomenon.

In general terms, synergraphy occurs when the interaction between linear domain A and non-linear domain B (apparently independent of each other in terms of signification) lead to a third (C) meaning, which would not be achieved by A or B individually. This *synergraphic meaning* (C) depends on a mythical interpretation of A and/or B, and one cannot say (unless it is stated by the author) if the achieved interpretation is correct or not – which ensures a strong subjectivity for this grammatological phenomenon and an enigmatic aura that invites and challenges elucidations. [Plates 41 and 42]

The synergraphy is, in effect, *the art of writing something without writing it*: in a “controlled experiment” of subjectivity and suggestion. By means of this process, a descriptive or narrative construction can become a powerful argumentation without any kind of intellectual confrontation (since a rhetorical proposition can be confronted or refuted only when it clearly postulated). This process will be discussed further on in the thesis, as I expect to identify its role in Horapollon’s *Hieroglyphica* (Chapter Four) and its “rebirth” in the context of the Renaissance hieroglyphic phenomenon (Chapter Five).

As for how synergraphy occurs, after I identified this phenomenon in my research, I searched for secondary sources dealing with this problematic, but this quest was not successful. Given the importance of this form of text-image interaction for the present thesis, I felt the need to outline a provisional hypothesis for the synergetic cognitive process of signification.

3.3.4. The Cognitive Process of Synergraphic: a Hypothesis

According to my examination, this phenomenon can be divided into five different cognitive moments, which I try to describe below: [Plate 43]

a) Recognition

The fundamental condition for the synergraphic effect is that the reader must get into contact with a panopticon and recognize that there are two domains – a linear and a mythographic

one – that are not an immediate ekphrasis of each other (i.e. that the text is not describing or identifying the mythogram, or vice-versa). It is in the contrast between the two domains that the synergy operates.

b) Expectation

I already have called attention to a kind of *expectation* that was created by the combination between a highly motivated system and the overlaying of different grammatological functions. Hypothetically, it is because of this expectation that, when a reader comes across two “non-ekphrasal” domains, he *suspects* that there is a “hidden” connection between the two domains, which must be deciphered or “guessed”.

c) Exegesis

The mythographic image is always enigmatic, and as I postulated before, even with many indications⁴⁴ that give hints in a certain direction, its discursive meaning depends on “retelling” the myth. This recounting of the myth may be a silent exercise, and I called this step “exegesis” because this process of telling the myth is naturally intercalated with interpretations and assumptions.

In semiotic terms, the movement of unveiling the meaning of a mythogram is like a projection of the interpretamen (motivated by previous knowledge of the myth, i.e. convention) over the signified.

d) Epiphany

⁴⁴ Such as identifiers, attributes, etc.

At some point, in the exercise of retelling and interpreting the myth mentally (in a process that can be confused with the act of deciphering), a particular aspect of the story will finally create a contrast with what is said in the linear domain: the whole composition will, then, “make sense”. I call “epiphany” the exact moment when the reader realises what he or she will consider being the “hidden” meaning of the composition (no matter if it is in line with the intention of the author of the composition).

e) Delectation

The result of this complex process of cognition is not only the epiphany (the understanding of the “hidden meaning”). There is a kind of pleasure that can be compared, in the way it affects the human brain, with the joy of finishing a puzzle or playing a video game.⁴⁵ Arguably, another consequence of synergraphy can be an anagogical effect: if the composition in question is of religious or mystical nature, the act of understanding it deeply may be the equivalent of a communion with the sacred, or a personal revelation.

The synergic process of discovering the “hidden meaning”, for effects of analogy, is very similar to the process of divinatory systems. I will take tarot as an example: the interpretation (exegesis) of the cards (mythogram) creates a series of meaningful contrasts with people and events (text). From this interaction, one can “deduce” an advice or “predict” future events (synergraphic effect).

3.3.5. On the Difference between Synergy and Ekphrasis and the Combination of Horizontal Modes of Interaction in the same Context

⁴⁵ See Koepp et al. 1998.

It is very difficult to set boundaries between such sophisticated (and sometimes subjective) strategies. For now, I would stress the difference between synergraphy and ekphrasis by pointing out two arguments:

- One of the conditions for synergraphy is an initial divergence – a non-obvious relationship. By definition, ekphrasis produces the contrary effect;
- Synergy alludes to something that “is not there”. Albeit in the case of ekphrasis each domain can be autonomous (and the determination reinforces and qualifies the other domain), without the two domains the synergraphy cannot exist.

It is important to highlight, however, that sometimes different modes of interaction can coexist in the same scriptural context. Just as the vertical the horizontal modes of interaction sometimes can *overlap each other*, different horizontal modes of interaction can occur manifested between *parts of domains*. For instance, in the same inscription, elements of the mythogram can possibly be described by a certain section of text (ekphrasis), and other parts of the same text can produce a synergetic effect in relation to the same mythogram, or another element from the non-linear domain. One can think of hypothetical and succinct illustration of the phenomenon in which the mythographic domain has two figures (for example, the gods Horus and Isis) and the linear text related to these figures is “behold my son, the young Horus”. The linear text consists in register, in relation to the figure of Isis (who is *saying* the text), and in an ekphrasis, in the relation to the figure of Horus (that it describes).



Beyond the technicalities of this chapter, what strikes me the most is the immense number of ways by which the image unfolded itself in writing. The grammatological functions presented here are not only instruments of signification: they are poetic possibilities. Paraphrasing Ernst Fenollosa, it is not absurd to think of “Hieroglyphs as a Medium for Poetry”.

CHAPTER TWO:

Defining “Sacred Writing”

This second chapter aims to shed light on a problem that, although not always apparent, is of great concern: the definition of *hieroglyph*. The necessity for this discussion came from the observation, during my doctoral research, that the modern notion of “hieroglyph”, continuously changing along history, is based in essence on an “outsider” perception of Egyptian writing, made during a comparatively short period of the history of hieroglyphs (the Graeco-Roman period). This notion, however, conflicts with the Egyptians’ own understanding of writing, image and hieroglyph.

1. What Determines the Origin of Egyptian Writing?

As difficult as finding a universal definition for writing is to ascertain a date for the origin of Egyptian writing. The problem, apparently, is not the dating of the pieces of material evidence available today, but a conceptual issue, in determining the sense of “writing” or “script” – in its relationship with natural language:

Existing descriptions of the “origins” of writing (hieroglyphic script) in Egypt are impoverished analytically as much from acceptance of the distinction between natural-language text and pictorial text as primary and their “relation” as secondary as from their failure to identify the semiological status and function of such signs as the cipher keys and the replicatory relations between pictorial narrativity and pictorial symbolism (for example in metaphor). (Davis 1992: 270)

With regard to Egyptian hieroglyphs, the discussion mostly focuses on the stage of its development at which Egyptian “iconography” or “art” becomes a script (according to a previous definition of writing, of course). This problematic, consequently, presupposes a distinction between Egyptian “iconography” and “writing”, and a turning point that connects these two

factors. I am not convinced that this is the only possible approach to the question of the origin of Egyptian hieroglyphs – perhaps because, so far, I did not come across any argument capable of persuading me that there is one single origin for them in semiotic terms: on the contrary, there is a constant succession of innovations in the Egyptian usage of images that culminated with the systematization of “Classical Egyptian writing” (i.e. Middle Egyptian).

According to Hornung,

Some earlier Egyptologists believed that the hieroglyphs grew out of an older, strictly pictorial writing system. A study by Kurt Sethe, published posthumously in 1939, announces this view in its title, *From Image to Letter (Vom Bilde zum Buchstaben)* (...). Several years after the publication of Sethe’s work, Alexander Scharff produced additional archaeological evidence to support the newer thesis that the Egyptians actually invented writing at the beginning of historical time. Today this view has found general acceptance (...). I am convinced that the ancient Egyptian system of writing represents an invention made around 3000 B.C. in order to express information that could not be conveyed by other means. From the very beginning writing has been a daughter of art. By 3000 B.C. the Egyptians had developed an extensive vocabulary in the visual arts that enabled them to represent such complex subjects as the hunt, the conquest of enemies, burials, even their hopes for the afterlife. To complement and extend this capability they needed a kind of writing that would allow them to do more than they could do with a script based solely on pictures. They needed a writing system with a phonetic, rather than a pictographic, basis. (Hornung 1992: 20)

Although I consider myself a deep admirer of Hornung’s work, this passage is problematic in many ways. First, because after his attempt to refute Sethe’s thesis, Hornung suggest that the Egyptians had, in their “art”, a vocabulary that allowed them to “represent... complex subjects”. The major issue, however, comes when he suggests that the Egyptians needed a system with a phonetic basis to develop their script. This assertion is to be proved. The Chinese, for example, did not need a phonetic basis to develop their writing-system – and I would disagree that hieroglyphic writing is “phonetically based”. Here, apparently, the Western confusion between word and sound reigns again – to develop their linear writing, the Egyptians needed to write words, not sounds.

Concerning the notion of an origin for Egyptian hieroglyphic writing, it is essential to bear in mind that the successive invention of new forms of interaction between image and idea did not supplant the previous ones, and in the case of some hieroglyphs, they even overlap. To determine *one origin* implies choosing one of these innovations as the fundament of the entire system, as if it were possible to isolate it from the remaining innovations. Semiotically speaking,

one of the most interesting characteristics of Egyptian hieroglyphs is precisely the assimilation of many different strategies of writing within one larger system, with an outstanding uniformity.

During the history of Egyptian writing, oral culture played different roles, with different levels of interaction with the image. In the first place, mythography – a non-verbal use of image – could not be dissociated from its verbal counterpart, mythology. Although independent as physical phenomena, mythograms would reveal a myth in its visual-spatial, whereas mythology would present a myth in its verbal-temporal form, and both forms of expression would operate often in the same context. Later the orality will still have a no less important part in the scriptural system of convention, as it will “invade” and permeate the domains of image, by means of the principle of phonography. The question here is: which stage of the development of writing should be determinant to its definition as a semiotic system? The usage of visual signs to convey human thought, from mythography to ideography, or its relationship with oral culture on a particular level? The hieroglyphic principles of iconicity, identification (which will become determination), ideography and mythography are no less important than the rebus (punning) principle for Egyptian script as a closed semiotic system. Therefore, why should we consider the latter the birth of writing?

This discussion, of course, cannot be restricted to its “internal” arguments, i.e. the stages of development of writing strategies. The “external” arguments – viz. the interaction between writing and culture – are equally important. Each innovation had an important impact on Egyptian culture: the inaugural mythography was the offspring of Egyptian mythological thinking, which was a fundamental development towards the formation of Egyptian civilization; ideography has created the first marks of identity and space occupation (*deictics*), which evolved into accounts of rulers’ names and places, and had an important role in administration (including the employment of numbers and labels of products); phonography permitted the documentation of (*or the allusion to*) sounds and led to linear writing.

From an anthropological perspective it is hard to say that any of these “externals” have a major or minor importance, especially given the causal relationship between them – and in the case of Egyptian writing, *coexistence*. I think that the choice to define writing according to the principles of linear writing – or phonetic writing – is nothing but ideological or ethnocentric, frequent and easily demonstrable in contemporary literature:

This, of course, is to overlook the utter discrepancy between the phonetic alphabet and any other kind of writing whatever. Only the phonetic alphabet makes a break between eye and ear, between semantic meaning and visual code; and thus *only phonetic writing has the power to translate man from the tribal to the civilized sphere, to give him an eye for an ear*. (McLuhan 1962: lxvi)

2. The Egyptian Mind-Set and Conceptions of Writing

2.1. Terminology

Nowadays the notion of hieroglyph inhabits the popular imaginary, which is filled with fictional or documentary films or pictures of Ancient Egyptian inscriptions. As a cultural phenomenon, this whole imaginary builds in its foreground a very strong concept of hieroglyph – that is very much under the influence of our own notions of “writing” or “image”. As a result, from common-sense, one might learn that hieroglyphs, among other things, are “a kind of picture-writing used in Ancient Egypt”.

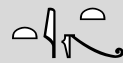
In academia, the so far indisputable concept of “hieroglyph” can be resumed in the following terms:

The basic writing system of ancient Egyptian consisted of about five hundred common signs known as hieroglyphs. The term “hieroglyph” comes from two Greek words meaning “sacred carvings”, which are a translation, in turn, of the Egyptian’s own name for their writing system, “divine speech”. Each sign in this system is a hieroglyph, and the system as a whole is called hieroglyphic (*not* “hieroglyphics”). (Allen 2000: 2)

To define a long-lasting and complex system such as Egyptian hieroglyphic writing is a hard task, and therefore always exposed to generalizations. For the sake of didactics, the precision of a definition is often sacrificed, and so demands later clarifications, exceptions and amendments. I do not aim to confront Allen’s assertions mentioned above, but it seems evident that his definition is a clear symptom of how our civilization perceives Egyptian culture through Greek terms, or “translations”. Anyone familiar with translation studies, however, will agree that in this process of rendering concepts from one culture to another, something is always lost. The word “hieroglyph”, no doubt, renders the most general understanding of Egyptian writing in our

culture, but is it really faithful to the *Egyptian understanding of their own writing-system*? The first step to find an answer for this question is to examine the terminology that the Egyptians employed to refer to their indigenous writing.

I was surprised that, despite my recurrent efforts, I was unable to find a book or paper dedicated to discussing the Egyptians' own conception of writing. Grammars and iconological manuals were – at least apparently – satisfied by the canonical notion that “hieroglyph” translates the Egyptian expression *mdw-ntr* that, in its turn, is said to correspond to the Egyptian writing-system. There is absolutely no doubt that this notion and etymology for “hieroglyph” is a sufficient *working concept* for most Egyptologists nowadays. However, in my opinion, a more critical inquiry on the very nature of “writing” in Egypt demands a more careful analysis of the Egyptian terminology applied to this matter. Regardless of the short space available for such discussion in this thesis, I would like to briefly examine some few Egyptian concepts (to be debated later):



*tj.t*¹

“image”; “form”; “sign”; “character”

The word *tj.t* is perhaps one of the most enigmatic concepts in Egypt. As one can observe, the semantic spectrum of this concept is wide and absolutely symptomatic of the Egyptian understanding of hieroglyphs as images – or of images as hieroglyphs. Penelope Wilson offers a very didactic explanation of the usages of this term:

At Beni Hasan (...) *tit* [alternative transliteration for *tj.t*] is used to designate “writing signs”. From the 18th Dynasty to the Roman period the king could be called *tit-n-R*’ where the king was understood to be the earthly symbol or sign for the sun god = rather like a sign which is used to write a whole word, but at the same time it is a representation or image of what it refers [Hornung, Mensch als Bild, p. 143]. At Edfu [Temple] *tit* occurs frequently and its use covers the range from *tit* “writing symbols” to *tit* “pictorial representations” (Wilson 1991: 1978).

¹ Erman and Grapow: 5, 239.1-240.11. As one can expect, there are other orthographs for this word.

In other words, *tj.t* can not only stand for “image” (or *mythograph*), as it was also employed to signify a singular discrete hieroglyph – i.e. the minimum unit of linear writing – as can be attested in the following passage:

Completed from beginning to end as found in writing, copied it *character* [*tj.t*] by *character* [*tj.t*], collated, checked and corrected.²


There is evidence that these “characters” had “names” (*ren*) that could be “said” or “pronounced” (*dd*):

Hold you back, I expect (it), (otherwise) <I'll> say the names of the four characters [*tj3*, pl.], who are in the Mansion of Benben in Heliopolis: “Small, Bes, Short, dwarf”³

And this fact is exceptionally significant as it might suggest the Egyptians’ awareness of their use of the paronomasia principle (in which they would *pronounce* the *name* of figurative images for abstract concepts – such as “small”) and how they would deal with this scriptural phenomenon.

If the meanings mentioned above are not enigmatic enough, the word *tj.t* could also signify the “form” or “image” of a being⁴ in the way in which a king could be the image of a god:

*Le roi de Haute et de Basse Egypte, l'héritier <des> dieux Évergètes, l'élue de Ptah, le ka de Rê est puissant, image vivante d'Amon, fils de Rê, Ptolémée, vivant éternellement, aimé d'Isis, l'image de Rê, qui est à la tête des deux pays.*⁵

Finally, one of the hints that could help a contemporary reader to better understand the meaning of this word resides in its written form – especially in the mysterious determinative frequently employed to write this word, the lower part of the *Udjat-Eye*: .⁶ Unfortunately, it


² *tj*, *t* 'character, figure, form "CG 51 189 pKairo (pJuja), Tb 149 (line [972]), apud *Thesaurus Linguae Aegyptiae* (henceforth *TLA*).

³ *tjA. (Pl.)* "Figur" *Papyrus des Imhotep Sohn des Pschentobe* (pNew York MMA 35.9.21), apud *TLA*.

⁴ *tj,t* "Zeichen, Figur, Gestalt" *Papyrus Paris Louvre 3092*, apud *TLA*.

⁵ *tj,t* "Gestalt" Ptolemaic and Roman Hieroglyphic Texts, Deir el-Medina, sanctuaire, décoration intérieure, paroi sud - moitié ouest, 2e reg, 2e scène. Apud *TLA*.

⁶ Cf. the Udjat-Eye sign:  *wd3.t*

is very difficult to ascertain the “grapho-etymological” connection between the concept and its determinative in this particular case. However, a good lead would be precisely the cosmetic painting used to underline eyes in Egypt, today known as “kohl”: these *marks* were made, probably, through the same process that could be used to produce other *drawings*, lines. From this original sense, others might have originated: this notion of *tj.t* as *mark* suits very well even the idea of “image of god” attributed to kings, for example, and this is especially interesting given its relationship with vision: “literally”,  brings together the notion of eye (where it was applied) and mark (as a sign) – which can result in intriguing mythological implications.⁷ Later on, when the image was destitute of its scriptural power, *tj.t* was still preserved in Coptic as τοε, i.e. “spot” (Cerny 2010: 180)



sš,⁸ or *zh3*⁹

“to draw”; “to write”; “writing”; “writings”

While *tj.t* can signify the minimum unit of writing, *sš* or *zh3* correspond to a broader sense of script: it can be used as verb or noun, and address both the notions of *writing* and *drawing* from which other senses are also derived.¹⁰ A representative example of its usage can be translated as follows:

To be recited over a crocodile of clay with grain in its mouth, and its eye of faience set [in] its head. One shall tie (?) (it) and draw [or write, *sš*] an image [*twṯ*] of the gods upon a strip of fine linen to be placed upon his head¹¹

⁷ If one considers that Thoth was creator of *w3ḏt* and writing...



⁸ Erman and Grapow: 3, 476.16-479.9; 16 attestations at *TLA*.

⁹ Erman and Grapow: 3, 476.16-479.9; 268 attestations at *TLA*.

¹⁰ 1. a device for writing; 2. write /a text/; 3. paint /a picture with a brush/; 4. a text, a book, a painting; 5. Script; 6. a writer; 7. an artist; 8. papyrus in the meaning of something (material) for writing (Erman and Grapow: 3, 475-481.); extremely frequent...

¹¹ *sš*, *w* Magical Papyri, *The Beatty Chester* pBM 10685, Verso 4.1 to 9 (line vs. 4.7), apud *TLA*.




This passage puts forward – from the Egyptian terminological standpoint – an argument that is extremely important for this thesis, and that I shall highlight over and again: that the Egyptians were aware that *images* (according to their own terms) were used to *write*, and that Egyptian iconology is, therefore, meant to be read. Another splendid occurrence is reported by Penelope Wilson:

At Edfu the verb refers to the writing of the texts on papyrus or wooden boards and also on the temple walls:   *shmw* written with images IV 13,4 (Wilson 1991: 1631)

In the occurrence above it is interesting to observe that the “images” in question are not *tj.t* – which would stand for “written images” – but “shmw” (*shm.w*, Erman and Grapow: 4, 245.3-8) and thus refers to “cult images” or “divine powers”:

The singular form of *shm* occurs very often as a variant on other words for images or cult statues. The word occurs from early texts, it is derived from *shm* “might” which took on the meaning ‘image of god’ perhaps as a visible sign of the god’s might. In the Canopus Decree the Greek translates the term as *εἰκών* and *ἱερὸν ἄγαλμα* [Daumas, Moyens p. 175]. In earlier texts it is often difficult to determine whether this is ‘might’ or ‘image’. In underworld literature the might of a deity proceeds from their external appearance. From Amduat 156,10 *shm* is parallel to *b3* as part of the personality – an image detached from the personality. (Wilson 1991: 1602)

This fact carries profound implications, again, with regard to which sort of image can be used to write – especially when the “image” of someone attains the same ontological status as the soul (*b3*), the name (*rn*), the heart (*ib*), the shadow (*šwt*) and the “spirit” (*k3*) as constitutive parts of the being.

As is the case with , the hieroglyph  is crucial to understanding the concept of *sš* or *zh3*. This ideogram shows the scribe’s apparatus (calamus, ink pot and palette) and stands for the object itself and the whole range of meanings in its orbit, such as “scribe”, “writings” and the verbs “to draw” and “to write”: actions that would be performed by using the same instruments. In the “standard” orthography presented here, the ideogram is complemented by the hieroglyph , a bunch of papyrus, that serves as a determinative for abstract and documental concepts and sophisticatedly complements the notion of drawing/writing through the display of both *medium* (scribe’s instruments) and *support* (papyrus)...

As for having the same word for “drawing” and “writing”, this might be part of a wider phenomenon: In different cultures, especially in the Indo-European group,¹² the use of words originally applied to *drawing* (engraving or inscribing) are extended to incorporate also the rising notion of *writing*. This is an observable fact in Greek, with γράφειν/γράφω; in Latin with *scriptura/scribo*;¹³ and even in English, with *writing/write*.¹⁴ Needless to say, this phenomenon is an important testimony of how *writing* was received in such cultures. Curiously, in most Indo-European languages – or in the totality of the languages I was able to verify – the words that shared bipolar meaning (drawing/writing) lost their initial sense in favour of the second, little by little. In order to illustrate my point, one example might suffice: in Old English, *writan* “to score, outline, draw the figure of” incorporated the meaning of “writing something down”. Today, however, “to write” would hardly correspond to “draw the figure of something”.

Although in Egypt the earliest aspect of this phenomenon occurs, *sš* will preserve both meanings for millennia – *even in Coptic*¹⁵ where later the status of hieroglyphic writing change dramatically.¹⁶

Finally, it can be claimed that this is a too general term. However *sš* or *zh* are frequently employed together with other relevant concepts (such as *tj.t*, *mdw.ntr*, etc.) in compound nouns or expressions, fitting a wide range of vocabulary nuances in the semantic field of visual expression.

¹² Which has not witnessed the creation of conventional writing-systems, but imported this cultural product.

¹³ *Scribere* “to write”, from PIE **skreibh-* (cf. Gk. *skaripasthai* “to scratch an outline, sketch”, Lett. *skripat* “scratch, write”, O.N. *brifa* “scratch”), from root **sker-* “cut, incise” (cf. O.E. *sceran* “cut off, shear”; cf. “shear”) on the notion of carving marks in stone, wood, etc. (*Online Etymology Dictionary*, “Write”).

¹⁴ “O.E. *writan* ‘to score, outline, draw the figure of,’ later ‘to set down in writing’ (class I strong verb; past tense *wrat*, pp. *writen*), from P.Gmc. **writanan* ‘tear, scratch’ (cf. O.Fris. *writa* ‘to write,’ O.S. *writan* ‘to tear, scratch, write,’ O.N. *rita* ‘write, scratch, outline,’ O.H.G. *rizan* ‘to write, scratch, tear,’ Ger. *reißen* ‘to tear, pull, tug, sketch, draw, design’), outside connections doubtful. Words for ‘write’ in most I.E languages originally mean ‘carve, scratch, cut’ (cf. L. *scribere*, Gk. *grapho*, Skt. *rikh-*); a few originally meant ‘paint’ (cf. Goth. *meljan*, O.C.S. *pisati*, and most of the modern Slavic cognates)” (ibidem).

¹⁵ Ⲫⲉⲗⲁⲓ, “write, paint” (Crum 1939: 381 b; Černý 2010: 172).

¹⁶ See Chapter Three.



*mdw-ntr*¹⁷

“god's word(s)” or “divine words”; “sacred writings”; “hieroglyphs”

Literally, the expression *mdw-ntr* can be “god’s words” or “divine words” (which I prefer). Nevertheless, nowadays it is frequently translated straightforwardly as “hieroglyphs”. According to Loprieno, e.g.:

This term [hieroglyphic writing] has been used since the Ptolemaic period (323-30 BCE) as the Greek counterpart (ιερογλυφικά γράμματα, “sacred incised letters”) to the Egyptian expression *mdw.w-ntr* “god’s words”.¹⁸

If one examines Loprieno’s explanation closely, something is missing: how can “god’s words” become “sacred incised letters” in Greek? I think that it is more likely that ιερογλυφικά γράμματα could be, at some point, a version of, for example:



*zh3.w-n-mdw.w-ntr*¹⁹

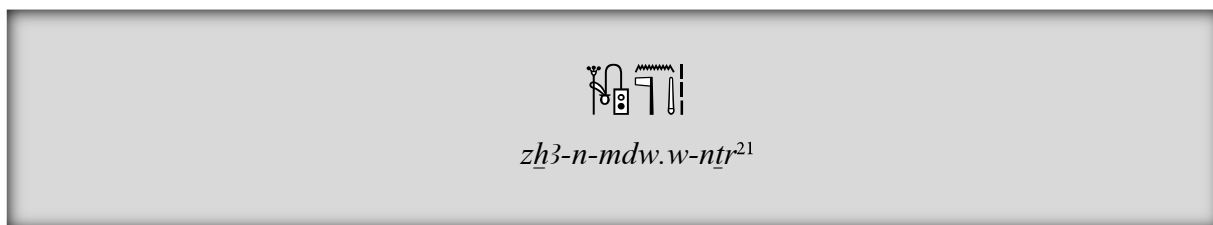
The above mentioned expression could be translated as “the writing(s) of the divine words”. Somehow, Loprieno’s explanation does not take *zh3* (𓏏) into consideration, and by doing so, follows other scholars that translate an incomplete connotative expression (“[the writing of] the divine words”) into a denotative word (“hieroglyph”). Just to confirm my suspicion and

¹⁷ Erman and Grapow: 2, 180.13-181.6; FCD 122; 23 attestations at *TLA*.



¹⁸ Loprieno 1995: 11.



¹⁹ Erman and Grapow: 2, 181.2.

better illustrate my argument, I decided to refer to an authentic source from the same period mentioned by Loprieno, which could include this expression in hieroglyphs and its translation into Greek. Providentially the famous Rosetta Stone²⁰ includes the perfect example. There,



is presented in Greek as ἱεροῖς [καὶ ἐγχωρίοις καὶ Ἑλληνικοῖς] γραμμασιν,²² which in its turn can be translated into English as “in sacred [and enchorial and Greek] letters”. Thus, as one can observe, the “writing” component (*zh3* > γραμμασιν) of the expression has been strangely omitted by Loprieno and others. According to Patrick Boylan, in his *Thoth, the Egyptian Hermes*,

There is (...) no doubt that “Divine words” often mean “hieroglyphic” in the texts of the Late Period. But in the texts of the M. K. (...) the “Divine words” seem to be something other than mere script: they are carefully distinguished from the  (= the written sign, script), and seem to be what is conveyed or expressed by the written signs, rather than the signs themselves. (...) When Thoth is called “Lord of the *mdw ntr*” his lordship over *spoken* words, rather than over *script*, is expressed. In his familiar epithet  (Cf. Mariette, Karnak, 16, Thutmosis III) “he who hath given word and script-sign” the “spoken word” (*mdw*) is clearly distinguished from the written symbol (*drf*). (Boylan 1922: 93)

Controversially, I would go so far as to disagree with Boylan and suggest that in general there is a clear distinction between the uses of  and , even in the Ptolemaic period. I would say that the apparent interchange between such concepts is nourished not only by their close relationship (since hieroglyphs *convey* divine words), but also because of mythological²³ and religious precedents.

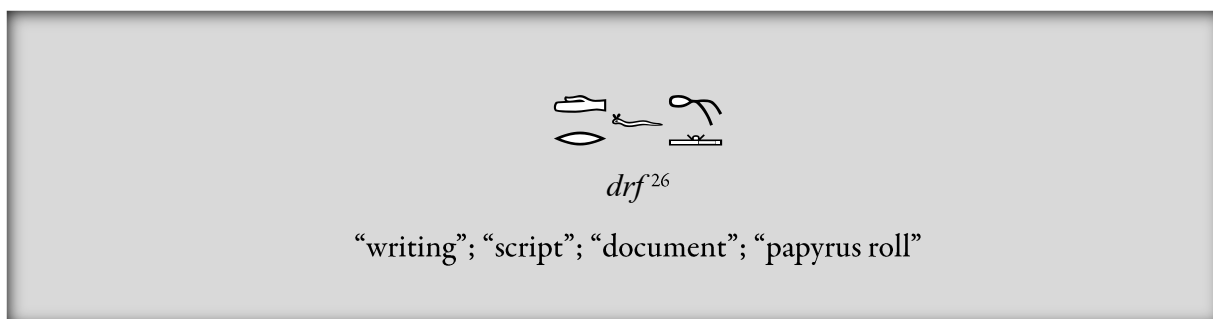
²⁰ Decree issued at Memphis in 196 BC on behalf of King Ptolemy

²¹ *Rosetta Stone*, hieroglyphic text, line 14.




²² *Rosetta Stone*, Greek text, line 54.

²³ As *dhwtj* (Thoth) is the lord of *mdw-ntr* and, at the same time, the creator of *zh3.w-n-mdw.w-ntr*. The relationship between writing and mythology in Egypt is further discussed below...

My humble etymological hypothesis for the origin of *mdw ntr* is that thanks to historical changes of the Egyptian language there has always been a gap between the language behind the orthography ancient linear inscriptions and the vernacular speech.²⁴ When the term *mdw ntr* became common in the Old Kingdom, it might have referred to this “liturgical language”,²⁵ not spoken anymore, but perceived as divine since it was always present in sacred contexts and it was different from that spoken currently. In fact, if one analyses the context of all the attestations for *mdw ntr* in the *Thesaurus Linguae Aegyptiae*, it becomes clear that whenever the expression *mdw ntr* alludes to “*hieroglyphic linear writing*” it is necessarily accompanied by *zh3* or *sš* (“writing”) as in the expression *zh3.w-n-mdw.w-ntr*. Otherwise, I would say *mdw ntr* refers to the liturgical language – the *divine speech*.



Penelope Wilson has translated *drf* as “written word” and postulated a particularly interesting hypothesis for the origin for this lemma:

Weber suggests that *drf* is something upon which one writes [Buchwesen, p. 99ff]. At Edfu: the king brings *tp-rd* to Horus *ts n.k*  and raises up to him writings II 16,6-7; Thoth is accredited with having initiated  VI 262,8; Thoth is the Lord of writing *rdi mdw*  who causes written words to be spoken II 80,12. (...) In origin *drf* may be connected with *drf* – the black line of the eyebrow (cf. Wb V 477,7 and 8) for the black line resembles the lines of writing. (Wilson 1991: 2110)

Wilson’s premise endows our conjectural etymology of *tj.t* with even more poetical substance. Also, it can be observed from Wilson and Boyler’s previous quotations that *drf* has

²⁴ See next Chapter.

²⁵ Such as the use of Latin by the Catholic Church.

²⁶ Erman and Grapow: 5, 477.8-19.

been used to reinforce the difference between *written* and *spoken* words. More specifically, *drf* is clearly employed as the *written medium of words*, not necessarily the “writing-system” itself. In order to assume this function, *drf* would need a complement – which is also used with *sš*:

There is no lack of other words [than *mdw ntr*] to express “hieroglyph” in Egyptian. The most familiar of these terms is *drf*, or better, “*drf* of Thoth”. An expert in hieroglyphics is “he who knows the *drf* of Thoth” (Berlin 7316: XVIIIth Dyn.). “Hieroglyphs”, meaning an inscription written in hieroglyphs, would be rendered as *sš3 dhwti* (Leyden I, 350, recto 4, 23) or *sš3 n dhwti*, Cairo, 20539, etc.). (Boylan 1922: 93)

Undoubtedly, as Boylan already observed, “the distinction between the script and what was expressed by it could be made with sufficient clearness in Egyptian” (1922: 94).



The few Egyptian concepts presented in this section constitute the starting point for a preliminary discussion on the Egyptian conception of writing – in contrast with its Greek reception (which is, still, the source of the Western understanding of “hieroglyph”).

2.2. Mythology and the Magic of Writing



It is almost a natural conclusion, after meditating upon the previous section, that the Egyptian terminology for writing (in context) is a help, but does not suffice to define the Egyptian conception of script or “hieroglyph” *per se*. A more complete understanding of writing clearly demands a deeper investigation of the sociological impact of writing in Egypt (see Goody and Baines), which can picture the *consequences* of writing in this society – although the *causes* of this impact, I would dare to suggest, rely mostly on the mythological power of this script, and its condition as an *object of faith*. This hypothesis implies that faith was not only the source and catalyst of the hieroglyph’s “organic mechanics” and ideological efficacy, but also the vector of its extent and permanency in Egypt as a kind of gravitational force of signification, bringing together several aspects of the native culture, which would, in their turn, nourish writing. In other words,

this wide system of signification, empowered by the presence of hieroglyphic writing and its meaningful correspondence with the Egyptian world, would become an evidence of its own supernatural character – thus legitimizing its *adoration* or *idolatry*.

2.2.1. Hieroglyphic Cosmogony

In the introduction to this thesis I made a point of mentioning the fact that the Western canon had not witnessed the birth of writing: the alphabet was “imported” (by stimulus diffusion) from another culture²⁷ – and that perhaps explains why it did not assume a preeminent role as a theological preoccupation.²⁸ In the West, writing becomes a neutral vehicle of the *logos*, while for the Egyptians it seems to be quite different – when the system of linear writing is institutionalized in Egypt, it was but a natural step: the visual culture was already at a very developed stage, with characteristics (eg. mythography) that would be preserved in this new medium (writing) and with a crucial visual similarity. Put in a different way, whereas in the alphabet the written signs were apparently abstract and arbitrary, foreign to Western iconography, in Egypt linear writing made use of a repertoire of images that already existed in its visual culture. From the theological perspective, therefore, one can speculate that there was no immediate factual contradiction in assuming that writing was invented by the gods – and then revealed to humanity.²⁹

In fact, for the Egyptians, writing is often referred to as invented by Thoth,³⁰ the patron of tradition and scribe of the gods.

In the M. K. the formulae of the mortuary offerings are expressly ascribed to Thoth. So we are told that the offerings for the dead were arranged  “according to this writing which Thoth hath given” (Lacau, *Sarcophages*, p. 147). Every offering for the dead should be made  “according to this script of the Divine words which Thoth himself hath

²⁷ There is a “memory” of the transmission of the alphabet: the Roman awareness that its writing came from Etruscan, which came from Greek, that derived from Phoenician (Cadmus’ myth).


²⁸ Hebraic is certainly an exception.

²⁹ Especially for the illiterate population.

³⁰ Also known as Djehuti or Hermes.

made” (Lacau, *Sarcophages*, p. 206). Thoth appears, then, in the M. K. as author of the “script of the Divine words”. (Boylan 1922: 92.)

Being the lord of writing and divine words, Thoth was the god of communication (therefore associated with Hermes) and also, by extension, tradition – since he created the laws and was the ultimate judge of the gods and the dead. From his epithets, one can assume that, at least mythologically, *words* and *writing* had the same source – as Boylan keenly demonstrates:

One of the very common epithets of Thoth is “who hath given words and script” (cf. Nav., *Totb. C.* 182, 3 f. etc.: Berlin 2293, XIXth Dyn.). The texts of the late period are particularly clear as to his invention of writing (Pap. Hearst VI, 9 f.: Ebers I, 8-10). The script of funerary tablets is called the “*drf* of Thoth” (Berlin 7316, XVIIIth Dyn.). *Drf* means primarily legible signs, the separate characters in script: but it sometimes means “writing” in the sense of documents or texts (cf. Mar., *Dend.* III, 72a), and, in this further sense of the word, Thoth was also regarded as the lord of script. One of his most widely used epithets is the *nb sSA*, “Lord of writing”. All kinds of texts, books, temple-inscriptions, collections of liturgical documents (“rituals”), inscriptions on stelae, and tablets were called . (Boylan 1922: 99)

I already mentioned the excerpt in which Boylan brings to light the fact that not only is the concept of “writing” present in Thoth’s epithet, but the corollary is also true:

There is no lack of other words [than *mdw ntr*] to express “hieroglyph” in Egyptian. The most familiar of these terms is *drf*, or better, “*drf* of Thoth”. An expert in hieroglyphics is “he who knows the *drf* of Thoth” (Berlin 7316: XVIIIth Dyn.). “Hieroglyphs”, meaning an inscription written in hieroglyphs, would be rendered as *sš3 dhwti* (Leyden I, 350, recto 4, 23) or *sš3 n dhwti*, Cairo, 20539, etc.). (Boylan 1922: 93)

So, Thoth is *the god of writing*, and the hieroglyphs are the *script of Thoth* (or *sš3 n dhwti*) – another definition of “hieroglyph”, sustained by its mythological source. These epithets can be considered a sort of “static or latent myth”: the title of a story that is not necessarily told in a context in which the epithet is used, but that makes part of the imaginary that surrounds this god. However, the relationship between the sacred and writing, between Thoth and hieroglyphs, can also be attested in a more *dynamic* way within this imaginary – registered in the narrated myths of creation, for example.

In the Shabaka Stone, from the 25th Dynasty, Ptah creates “all things and all divine words” from what he had first imagined³¹ and then announces:

Sight, hearing, breathing - they report to the heart, and it makes every understanding come forth (*hpr*). As to the tongue, it repeats what the heart has devised. Thus all the gods were born and his Ennead was completed. For every word of the god came about through what the *heart devised* and the tongue commanded.³²

In this cosmogonic account, Thoth “takes shape” as Ptah’s tongue and by doing so he plays his role as a creation god – which could be understood as reading out loud what he could see in Ptah’s heart. The demiurge imagination, therefore, was populated only by hieroglyphs – the divine thoughts that originated the divine words and, from them, the universe.

The creation account of the *Memphite Theology* teaches us (...) above all two things: one regarding the conception of the cosmos and another regarding the conception of hieroglyphs. It stresses the “scriptural” structure of the cosmos and the “cosmic” structure of the hieroglyphic signs... All creation accounts that view the world as generated by verbal articulation presuppose a structural analogy between language and cosmos. The late-Egyptian account, however, goes even a step further in conceiving of the world as the result not only of an act of speech, but of writing. (Assmann 2007: 29)³³

The introductory words of the *Onomasticon of Amenemipet* reiterate the role of Thoth as the *agent of* creation:

Beginning of the teaching, explaining to the heart, instructing the ignorant, to know all that exists, created by Ptah, *brought into being by Thoth*,³⁴ the sky with its features, the earth and what is in it.³⁵

From these two important examples, it can be suggested – in mythological terms – that hieroglyphs were not considered *doubles* or *representations* of beings, as is often suggested. Instead, they are emanations or echoes of the primeval signs (in Ptah’s demiurgic mind) that actually gave

³¹ For the Egyptians, the imagination was one of the faculties of the heart – not the brain.

³² *Shabaka Stone* (BM EA 498) translated by (Lichtheim, 1975: 51-57)

³³ Although I personally dispute the notion of “divine words” as a straightforward term for hieroglyphs, especially in the context of the *Shabaka Stone*, I would not discredit Assmann’s conclusions.

³⁴ Cf. translation in Assmann: “What Ptah has created and Thoth *has written down*” (1997: 114).

³⁵ *The Onomasticon of Amenemipet* (see Gardiner, 1947)

existence to the thing that the hieroglyphs are referring to. Metaphorically speaking, things are not the parents of hieroglyphs – they are identical twins. Although this notion can sound absurd in the light of modern understanding of writing and signs (semiotics), from an anthropological perspective it can provide a plausible explanation for the creative power of hieroglyphs and its impact on Egyptian culture:

In ancient Egypt writing was more than a means of communication because the written word had the power to create what was recorded. For example, the written reference to food offerings on a mortuary stela (see Catalog No. 80) ensured that those provisions would be provided for the deceased forever, and the written reference to a person's name ensured that individual's eternal existence in the afterlife. The connection between the writing of a person's name (or even the name of a god) and their existence is demonstrated by occasions where, for often unknown reasons, their name has been chiselled out or erased, thereby "killing" that individual. In a similar way, the identity of a statue could be altered by changing the name incised on it without recarving the facial features. In some contexts, signs of animals that might bite, sting, and consume funerary offerings were considered to be dangerous. When these signs appear in texts on coffins or on tomb walls, they are sometimes mutilated by knives or shown cut in two to render them powerless. (Johnson 2010: 156)

From the statement above, and the evidence that sustains it, it is a natural conclusion to assume that the signification of hieroglyphs was not restricted to its relationship with language or to its undeniable aesthetic appeal. The mythical or magical power of hieroglyphs also goes beyond a passive role in mythological accounts: it is effectively internalized in the signification of the image. Therefore, despite frequent statements that the hieroglyph of a snake, for example, does not mean the snake itself, but only the sound /f/ – as if the image of the snake itself was second (or perhaps even irrelevant) to the phonetic value of this hieroglyph – one can observe that for the Egyptians the hieroglyph was more than that, either as a sign or writing-system. More boldly, I would suggest that the hieroglyphs had not only the "internal" reading strategies described in the previous chapter, but also "external" reading strategies, i.e.: in the same way as a hieroglyph could have mythographic, ideographic, phonographic and determinative values, they also had a *magical* value (which, again – if not in the domain of language, at least in the domain of visual culture – impacts their ordinary signification no less importantly). In the case of talismans in the form of hieroglyphs, and other magical devices, this magical value was able to go beyond the writing-language connection and, for example, be appropriated by illiterate Egyptians in a much wider conventional system.

3. The Graeco-Roman and Christian Conceptions of Hieroglyphs: Cultural Clashes

As surprising as it might sound, the Egyptian notion of writing has been discussed frequently in alien terms. “Hieroglyph”, “mythogram”, “ideogram”, “phonogram”, “determinative”, etc. are all foreign words and perhaps even strange concepts for the Egyptian mentality. In fact, it is undeniable that the Graeco-Roman understanding of hieroglyph has received more academic attention than the Egyptians’ own conceptions. This might be for a number of reasons: first, the western interest in hieroglyphs could be focused only on its own reception of this notion, and its influence on western culture. In this case, it is absolutely legitimate – although not ideal – to ignore the Egyptian terminology and ideas on hieroglyphs. Second, the Egyptian broad notion of script is probably easier to understand if mediated by our own western viewpoint – as the Greek mentality is much closer to our contemporary one. This option, however, because it can be based on ethnocentric premises, is therefore prejudiced, as I hope I will be able to demonstrate in this chapter. Finally, there is the access to information. General access to Greek and Latin (both language and published sources), one might suppose, is wider than to Egyptian hieroglyphs.

In essence, I am of the opinion that it is absolutely acceptable to use the Greek understanding of hieroglyph as the basis to understanding the reception of hieroglyphs in the West. However, it must be clear that this notion, *per se*, contemplates only part of the story, and makes it very hard to discover what has been correctly interpreted in this process. The Greeks, for instance, witnessed only a fraction of the history of hieroglyphs. Compared with the “life” of hieroglyphs, the Greek-Roman accounts are *recent*.

Ergo, this section does not aim to produce an overview of the foreign conceptions of Egyptian culture *per se*.³⁶ It focuses rather on the alien notions of hieroglyph (including the etymology of such a concept) to later contrast them with the Egyptians’ own perspective – as discussed so far in this thesis.

³⁶ There are excellent sources on this subject. See Budge 1893; Iversen 1993; Hornung 2002.

3.1. Historical Accounts

There has always been a discussion on who the Greeks who first visited Egypt were, what they have actually learned, borrowed, and understood from that civilisation. By the middle of the 5th century B.C.E., Herodotus of Halicarnassus visited Egypt and later produced the first account of what he witnessed. With regard to Egyptian writing, he wrote:

The Greeks write and calculate from left to right, but the Egyptians from right to left... And they make use of *two kind of letters* (γράμματα), one of which is called “*sacred*” (ιερά) and the other “*popular*” (demotic). (Herodotus: II, 36)

The term he uses to describe the hieroglyphic system (“sacred”) is precisely the one that will often be used later, during the Egyptian Ptolemaic Period. It is important to highlight that the expression “ιερά γράμματα” (“sacred writing [letters]”) was the “official translation”, into Greek, of the whole expression *zh3-n-mdw. w-ntr* (“the writing of the divine words”).³⁷

The difference between sacred and popular writings would become canonical in Greek accounts of the Egyptian script. For instance, Diodorus Siculus in his *Historical Library* (Βιβλιοθήκη ιστορική), written between 60 and 30 B.C.E., gives a very similar introduction to this subject, centuries after Herodotus:

And the priests teach the boys two kinds of letters, those called sacred by the Egyptians and those containing more common sort of learning... Of the *two kinds of Egyptian letters*, the *demotic* are taught to all, but those *called sacred by the Egyptians* are known to the priests alone. (My emphasis. Diodorus Siculus, *Bibl. I*: 74. *Loeb Classical Library*, 1935)

However, the Greek from Sicily does not only name the system, but attempts to describe briefly its mechanics – and by doing so, employs the adjective “hieroglyphic” (ιερογλυφικός, from *ιερός*, “sacred”, and *γλύφω*, “I carve, engrave”) for the first time in known Greek literature:

We must now speak about the Ethiopian writing which is called *hieroglyphic* among the Egyptians... Now it is found that the forms of their letters take the shape of animals of every kind, and of the

³⁷ The best evidence for that is precisely the Rosetta Stone, further discussed below (1.5.4)

members of the human body, and of implements and especially carpenters' tools; for their writing does not express the intended concept by means of syllables joined one to another, but by means of the significance of the objects which have been copied and by its figurative meaning which has been impressed upon the memory by practice... by paying close attention to the significance inherent in each object and by training their minds through drill and exercise of the memory over a long period, they read from habit everything which has been written. (My emphasis. Diodorus Siculus, *Bibl. III: 4*. Loeb Classical Library, 1935)

Strikingly, Diodorus appear to make a distinction between *Egyptian letters* (“sacred” and “demotic”) and *Ethiopian letters*, which are “hieroglyphic” (according to the Egyptians). In this context, the only difference that can be drawn between “sacred letters” and “sacred carved letters” is the fact that the “hieroglyphic” is employed in monumental writing. For many, Diodorus’ conception of “sacred carved letters” fits perfectly the notion of hieroglyphic linear writing, but in my opinion, it might address even more than that, as it suggests a form of interpretation that is not strange to the notion of non-linear writing (mythographic compositions).

Many other authors will describe Egyptian writing and make use of the concept “hieroglyphic”, in general, *as an adjective to “letters”*, and not as a noun. Amongst these authors, the common denominator is the fact that none of them had knowledge at first hand: as a matter of fact, the foreign (Greek or Roman, Christian or Pagan) knowledge of hieroglyphs, with unknown exceptions, is based on secondary sources or hearsay. The iconicity of hieroglyphs, unsurprisingly, would inspire awe and foster the curiosity of strangers – but access to a deeper knowledge of the system, which was the gateway to the native metaphysics, was certainly reserved to Egyptians priests.

3.2. Neo-Platonism and Theurgy

The superficial interest and curiosity that marked the first “outsider” accounts of hieroglyphs, later on, suffered a major turn with the renewed attention that Neo-Platonic – and theurgic – thinkers cast on hieroglyphs. This dramatic change auspiciously coincides with the Graeco-Roman control of Egypt, i.e. the outsiders who produced the account not only visited the country, but often coexisted with the Egyptians’ priests in Egyptian territory. For the first time,

outsiders would consider hieroglyphs as objects of philosophical implications, and presumably their metaphysical applications.

The most illustrative example of this new attitude is, beyond doubt, Plotinus (c. 204/5 - 270 C.E.), also known as “the Egyptian”. For the Neo-Platonic philosopher,

The wise of Egypt - whether in precise knowledge or by a prompting of nature - indicated the truth where, in their effort towards philosophical statement, they left aside the writing-forms that take in the detail of words and sentences - those characters that represent sounds and convey the propositions of reasoning - and drew pictures instead, engraving in the temple-inscriptions *a separate image for every separate item*: thus they exhibited the mode in which the Supreme goes forth. For each manifestation of knowledge and wisdom is a distinct image, an object in itself, an immediate unity, not as aggregate of discursive reasoning and detailed willing. Later from this wisdom in unity there appears, in another form of being, *an image, already less compact, which announces the original in an outward stage* and seeks the causes by which things are such that the wonder rises how a generated world can be so excellent. (Plotinus: V, 8-6. Translated by MacKenna and Page³⁸)

Plotinus does not only present what he understood as the features of Egyptian writing, but attempts to formulate a philosophical model for the script – which bears similarities with the “enigmatic script” use in temples during the Graeco-Roman period.³⁹ Although Plotinus was born in Egypt, he apparently does not recognize that the hieroglyphs were able to “take in the detail of words and sentences”, but had he consulted any Egyptian priest on the meaning of temple-inscriptions of the period, the religious exegesis of the text would not be much different, at least at the level he would be allowed to know. The final passage is of particular interest here because it suggests that a “less compact” image (that I am inclined to interpret as his notion of mythogram) “announces the original” meaning of the discrete characters in an “outward stage”, thus working as a development of the philosophical investigation – mediated by visual signs – on the theme, which is to be interpreted. In other words, Plotinus seems to consider here the interaction between linear and non-linear scripts. Furthermore, according to Plotinus’ argumentation, the “outward” “form of being” is not only a kind of syntax of distinct images, it seems to be a more exoteric stage of writing.

³⁸ *The Six Enneads*. London: P. L. Warner, 1917-1930.

³⁹ See p. 121.

For the philosopher, the script in question would confirm and legitimate some of his arguments on intellectual beauty. His preoccupation is clearly not to present Egyptian writing (or philosophical viewpoints) systematically. And his explanation is even more incomplete – from a grammatological perspective – than Clement of Alexandria’s, which would probably be available then. It is absolutely clear that there is no influence of Platonism on the interpretation of Egyptian writing whatsoever, as some scholars might have suggested. Instead, there might arguably be an influence of hieroglyphic interpretation on Plotinus’ understanding of image – which transcends the scope of this thesis but nevertheless deserves to be further studied. According to Iversen,

In the intervening period after Plotinus, the interest [on hieroglyphs] remained as great as ever in Neo-Platonic circles, and quite an extensive hieroglyphic literature arose written in Greek, which, together with the so-called [sic] Hermetic writings, and books such as Iamblichus’ treatise on the Egyptian mysteries, bear illuminating evidence of the widespread Hellenistic interest in what was supposed to be Egyptian philosophy and mysticism. (Iversen 1993: 46)

In the hall of philosophers, there is a clear difference between Plotinus’s attitude to hieroglyphs and that of Jamblichus (c. 245 - c. 325). Jamblichus studied under Porphyry (who, in turn, was educated by Plotinus), and his interest in theurgy provoked a major disagreement with the latter. In response, Jamblichus wrote his *Theurgia, or On the Egyptian Mysteries*, in which he states:

I desire, beforehand, however, to interpret to thee the peculiar form of the theological system of the Egyptians. For they, endeavoring to represent the productive principle of the universe and the creative function of the gods, *exhibit certain images as symbols of mystic, occult and invisible conceptions*, in a similar manner as of Nature (the productive principle), in her peculiar way, makes a likeness of invisible principles through symbols in visible forms. But the creative energy of the gods delineates the genuine reality of the forms through the visible images. (Jamblichus, *Theurgia*: 15. Translated by Wilder 1911)

After introducing his conception of Egyptian images (he does not use the word “hieroglyph”, nor “sacred writing”), Jamblichus proceeds with an explanation of different Egyptian “symbols” from which he draws a philosophical interpretation. While Plotinus had a *latent* or passive interest in hieroglyphs, that he used as an illustration for his consideration of the intellectual beauty, Jamblichus presents a *patent* or active interest, i.e. he in point of fact draws conclusions *from hieroglyphs*.

3.3. Christianity

Hieroglyphs, by definition, were a fundamental and *indissociable* aspect of Egyptian religious rites. For “pagan outsiders”, who professed non-exclusive faiths (polytheistic, syncretic), Egyptian writing could be appreciated in its sacred or philosophical dimension. However, with the spread of Christianity, hieroglyphs would become at risk, as they became a strong symbol of Egyptian belief – which could not coexist with a monotheistic faith. Therefore, it is fascinating that the best extant “outsider” definition of the hieroglyphic system has been preserved precisely by a Christian priest. Clement of Alexandria (c. 150 – c. 215), in his *Stromata*, states that

Those instructed among the Egyptians learn first all the *genre of Egyptian letters* which is called “*epistolographic*”; secondly, the “*hieratic*” genre, which is used by the sacred scribes; finally and in the last place, the “*hieroglyphic*” genre, which partly express things literally by means of primary letters and which is partly symbolical. In the symbolical method, one kind speaks “literally” by imitation, and a second kind writes as it were metaphorically, and a third one is outright allegorical by means of certain enigmas. (Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata*: V 4, 20-21; cf. Horst 1997: 35)

As one can guess by the difficult access that “outsiders” had to hieroglyphs, such a precise account would demand an excellent source not only for the meaning of certain signs, but in the general mechanics of this script. Today, it is generally accepted that Clement’s probable source was Chaeremon’s treatise on hieroglyphs.⁴⁰ Having a source for his explanations, however, does not overshadow the merits of Clement of Alexandria who, despite his beliefs, was apparently interested in Egyptian writing. This tolerance, however, would not be shared by the following generations of Christians. For instance, here is how Shenoute of Atripe (ca. 385 to 465), archimandrite of the White Monastery,⁴¹ would regard hieroglyphs:

And if before today it was laws for murdering men’s souls which were in it, written in blood and not in black ink alone, *there is nothing else written with respect to them except the likeness of the snakes and*

⁴⁰ See Vergote 1939.

⁴¹ The White Monastery was located at Sohag, on the riverbank opposite Panopolis.

the scorpions, and the dogs and the cats, and the crocodiles and the frogs, the foxes, the other reptiles, the wild beasts and the birds and the domestic animals and the rest; moreover, (there is) also the likeness of the sun and the moon and all the rest, *all of their works being ridiculous and false things*. And in the place of these things, it is the soulsaving writings of life which will henceforth be in it, fulfilling the word of God. (Young 1981: 351)

In such a short passage, Shenoute maintains that hieroglyphs were mere “likenesses” of animals (something that denies the grammatological function of hieroglyphs); that they were ridiculous⁴² and false, and that therefore they should be vandalised with biblical graffiti. Shenoute’s ire and belligerence are the portrait of Egypt at that period, in which temples and religious symbols were systematically destroyed, and pagans persecuted. Through the violence justified with words and actions such as Shenoute’s, hieroglyphic writing would be strongly repressed and take its final steps into the oblivion.

4. Discussion: Lost in Translation: the discrepant understanding of “hieroglyph”

We can take nothing for granted (...) conceptions which are familiar—or even axiomatic—to us, may be irrelevant to ancient culture. (...) The paradoxes are founded on a discrepancy between our own outlook and the views and intentions of the ancients. (Frankfort 1948: 124-125)

It is almost certain that people who are formally educated, exposed to television documentaries, films or richly illustrated history books, have a picture in mind when it comes to Egyptian writing. In fact, often, one’s idea is based solely on the iconicity of hieroglyphs: whatever *looks like* Egyptian iconic signs, is a hieroglyph. It is not a matter of grammatological, religious or sociological functions. What remains behind the appearance of a hieroglyph can remain a mystery. With regard to Egyptology, it is clear that this science works with a definition of hieroglyph. The question is: is this notion really rooted in the Egyptian understanding of writing? Is the notion of “hieroglyph” in vogue loyal to its actual meaning? I dare to defend that even our scientific definition of hieroglyph cannot be taken for granted and that any challenge to it is welcome, as long as it is anchored in plausible arguments. The reason is that each definition of hieroglyph, at

⁴² Cf. Remondon 1952 and Frankfurter 1998.

the best of the hypotheses, is made for a time, to address a particular mentality – as I hope to succinctly demonstrate in this discussion.

4.1. Speculations toward the Egyptian conception of hieroglyph

Egyptian hieroglyphic writing is a cultural phenomenon that has been in use in Ancient Egypt for more than three millennia – perhaps longer than the first Phoenician contours of what would become our current system of writing (Roman alphabet). Therefore, *it is genuinely impossible to draw one single and uniform conclusion on how the Egyptians perceived their writing-system throughout History*. There is, however, a set of traits and characteristics that can be of use to enable contemporary theoreticians to create a more precise instrument of observation of such a phenomenon:

- Egyptians had their own nomenclature for writing, and these terms reveal not only important nuances of Egyptian thought, but a specific conception of writing;
- The distinction between phonograms, ideograms, determinatives, etc. *is an outsider theoretical model used to describe and categorize the Egyptian writing-system*. There is no extant document explaining how the Egyptians distinguished the different grammatological function of signs. By the Late Period, for instance, the distinction was unclear;⁴³
- At least one of the Egyptian terms for “hieroglyph” (*tj.t*, which is also the most frequent) could be applied either to individual linear signs or non-linear images:

It was not coincidental (...) that the Egyptians used the same word to refer to both their hieroglyphic writing and the drawing of their artworks, and it was often the same scribe who produced both. The

⁴³ See the notion of “grammatological gap” (Chapter Three, p. 101)

noted historian of Egyptian art Cyril Aldred stressed this fact when he wrote that “... once a scribe had learnt to draw the full range of ... [hieroglyphic] signs with requisite skill he had become *ipso facto* an artist, *since the composition of his pictures is the assemblage of a number of ideographs with some interaction between them*” (My emphasis. Wilkinson 1994: 151)

From the point of view of artistic skills, as is suggested by Aldred and Wilkinson above, mythography (i.e. the composition of pictures) was the pinnacle of hieroglyphic instruction;

- There was an active interaction between linear and non-linear domains, and there is no apparent prevalence of linear writing over mythography – on the contrary:

Many texts, primarily the younger ones, are accompanied by pictures. So several spells of the Book of the Dead are illustrated by vignettes. Some funeral papyri mainly consist of religious representations, to which a few explanations are added. In the description of the journey of the sungod through the netherworld, generally called *Am Duat*, the main thing is the representation of the voyage of the sun-god during the twelve hours of the night. Though there is a text which links up the different scenes, the texts, written around the pictures, have no significance in themselves, but serve as explanations. *This means that the illustrations of the texts are no artistic extras, but form an essential part of the texts, and sometimes even the main part.* One should therewith keep in mind, that hieroglyphs originally were a picture-writing. This cannot be purely accidental. Obviously the ancient Egyptians were endowed with imagination. (My emphasis. Bleeker 1975: 100)

- Ergo, the “hieroglyphic” image, the mythogram, was supposed to be interpreted and, I argue, must be regarded as a constitutive and fundamental part of the writing-system;
- Hieroglyphs had a genetic relationship with Egyptian religion: they were invented by gods and in at least one of the cosmogonies, they took part in the Creation of the world. From this fact, hieroglyphs could be “animated” and have magical properties – I am convinced that this should affect the Egyptian (and our...) understanding of the status of hieroglyph as a sign, as their meaning extrapolates their grammatological function;
- Mythograms (or non-linear hieroglyphic inscriptions) were subject to a different level *or form* of literacy, if those ignorant of linear writing were able to interpret (or at least guess) the meaning of these images – which relied on a much broader form of convention – the myth;

- According to the Egyptian perspective exemplified in Memphite Theology, I would suggest that hieroglyphic iconicity should not be regarded as a *representation* of something: they do not merely represent an entity from immediate reality (i.e., a picture of a being), but *render visible* the essential elements from which nature itself was created (in the heart of demiurge). Therefore, if a semiotic analysis of a particular hieroglyph is intended, it must take into consideration that, before being employed as a grammatological sign to convey elements of speech or ideas (phonograms, ideograms, etc.), hieroglyphs were considered *living* entities with intrinsic power and magical function.

In spite of the syntactic way these speculations are presented above, they are the preliminary result of the grammatological study of ancient hieroglyphs presented so far in these two first chapters. It is important to state, however, that these propositions are not universally – or perhaps systematically – accepted by Egyptologists. For this reason, I would like once again to stress the *grammatological* perspective of this thesis.

4.2. The “Outsider” Greek Conception of Hieroglyph: How Different it is from the Egyptian, and How it Affects its Contemporary Understanding

As far as, then, thou canst, O King—(and thou canst [do] all things)—*keep [this] our sermon from translation*; in order that such mighty mysteries may not come to the Greeks, and the disdainful speech of Greece, with [all] its looseness, and its surface beauty, so to speak, take all the strength out of the solemn and the strong—the energetic speech of Names. The Greeks, O King, have novel words, energetic of “argumentation” [only]; and thus is the philosophizing of the Greeks—the noise of words. But we do not use words; but we use sounds full-filled with deeds.⁴⁴

Although the passage above does not mention hieroglyph, it presents the clash between two cultures on the linguistic stage, advocating that it is not possible to preserve the original

⁴⁴ *The Corpus Hermeticum*. The Perfect Sermon of Asclepius unto the King, XV. Translated by Mead 1906.

meaning of Egyptian concepts in Greek. The impossibility of translation of Philosophical concepts is also discussed by Jamblicus, in a very similar way:

From this fact it appears agreeable to reason that the language of the sacred nations has been adopted in preference to that of the rest of mankind. For terms when they are translated do not always preserve their meaning the same as before; and besides, there are certain idioms with every nation that are impossible to express to another in intelligible speech. Accordingly, though, it may be possible to translate them; they no longer preserve the same force. "Foreign terms", likewise, have great emphasis and much conciseness, and contain less ambiguity, diversity and varied shades of meaning". (Jamblichus. *Theurgia*: 15. Translated by Wilder 1911)

These two quotations show that, in the context of ethnocentric conflicts, *translation is the first casualty*, as it might have the power of revealing – at a glance – the discrepancy between two different mind-sets. In that case, one can assume that the transposition of a crucial concept such as “hieroglyph” from its cultural cradle to the Greek mentality was not a simple task. Hence I would like to address what I consider the four fundamental problems in the translation of “hieroglyph”:

- **Problem 1:** Greek Logocentrism x Hieroglyphs

According to Plutarch, no barbarian could issue an order to the Greeks using their language; for it was impossible for a born slave to understand the language of freedom. The unbridgeable gap separating Hellenism from any other culture also made unthinkable the translation of Greek into another tongue. So Epicurus imagined that “the gods spoke Greek”, and asserted that the word “philosophia” could not be rendered into any foreign language. (Samellas 2010: 320)

I have mentioned already that the Greeks had a historical consciousness of the illiterate past. The most celebrated example of this assertion comes from Plato’s *Phaedrus*, in which Socrates attributes to Theuth (i.e. Thoth) the invention of writing – which, in turn, favoured forgetfulness as nobody would rely on memory anymore. For the Egyptians hieroglyphs took part in Creation, or at least were created together with humankind. This is a fundamental disagreement with profound consequences on the cultural attitude towards the visible sign.

Traditionally, Western philosophy has distinguished “reality” from “appearance”, things themselves from representations of them, and thought from signs that express it. Signs or representations, in this view, are but a way to get at reality, truth, or ideas, and they should be as transparent as possible; they should not get in the way, should not affect or infect the thought or truth they represent. In this framework, speech has seemed the immediate manifestation or presence of thought, while

writing, which operates in the absence of the speaker, has been treated as an artificial and derivative representation of speech, a potentially misleading sign of a sign. (Culler 2000: 11)

Since, for the Greeks, *writing had to represent a language* (which they expressed by means of apparently arbitrary signs – the alphabet), “hieroglyphs” could not be understood as a linear writing-system, as they were, I argue, more than that. Instead, and as a consequence, *hieroglyphs were understood as a purely mythographic system*, which in the Greek mentality would be accepted as allegorical or enigmatic “representations”.

- **Problem 2:** The outsider Greek perception of “hieroglyph”

They [Greek scholars] refused to acknowledge the phonetic functions of the signs, even in those cases where they explicitly spoke of them as “letters”, and they ignored entirely the distinction between the various elements of the script, such as ideograms, determinatives and phonetic signs... They [also] did not always distinguish between ordinary hieroglyphs and the iconographic representation frequently accompanying the inscriptions, and several otherwise enigmatic “hieroglyphic” interpretations become understandable when it is realized that they are not based on hieroglyphic inscriptions at all, but are iconographical explanations of reliefs, ornamental motifs, or conventional religious symbols. (Iversen 1993: 44)

The fact is that, when the Greeks in question formulated their assumptions, the “distinction between the various elements of the script” was not so clear in Egypt.⁴⁵ Moreover, for the Egyptians, the distinction between “ordinary hieroglyphs” and “iconographic representation” mentioned by Iversen was not so obvious either – which is evident by the Egyptian use of terms such as *tj.t* or *zh3* that, as it has been demonstrated, would involve both notions.

- **Problem 3:** The “outsider” Western contemporary notion of “hieroglyph”

The contemporary notion of “hieroglyph” (as can be attested by Iversen’s quotation above) abhors the Greek resistance to understand the “phonetic functions of the [hieroglyphic] signs”. However, *unconsciously motivated by the very same logocentrism*, it ironically takes the opposite side of this biased spectrum and assumes that “hieroglyphs” are *only the signs that are used*

⁴⁵ See p. 19.

to write words down, i.e. the linear writing, thus *denying its mythographic properties*. Which forcibly creates the need of frequently explain the “exceptions”.

- **Problem 4:** On the Etymology of the word “hieroglyphic” and its inconsistencies

Straightforwardly, for reasons already demonstrated, I am convinced that “*hieroglyph*” is *not a calque, nor translation, of mdw ntr*. It is evident, from the Rosetta Stone for example, that the expression *zh3.mdw-ntr* (literally, the *writing of the divine words*) is translated as ἱεροὺς γραμμασίην (Rosetta Stone, Greek, Line 54, literally, “sacred letters [writing]”). The adjective “hieroglyphic” (“sacred carved”), I supposed, evolved from a later need to distinguish the cursive (hieratic) and the monumental (i.e. carved) forms of *sacred letters* – especially those used in temple inscriptions from the Ptolemaic period on.⁴⁶

The contemporary insistence on linking the concept of “hieroglyph” solely to the expression *mdw ntr* (and not to *zh3.mdw-ntr*), obviously ignoring the word *zh3* (usually translated as “writing” or “drawing”), is very symptomatic. Its *raison d’être* appears to be reinforcing the outsider western conviction that only a language-based, linear writing should be understood *as writing*. However, *mdw ntr* (which, I argue, corresponds to a *liturgical language* and possibly, by extension, to *what has been written in this language*) is by no means an equivalent to the Egyptian notion of writing (*zh3*), which could perfectly be employed to express the use of images (either discrete characters or “iconographic pictures”) to write.

Another frequent source of misunderstanding is the word *tj.t*, which is rendered either as “image”, “written sign” or “hieroglyph”, as if they were not equivalents in Egyptian. This apparently naive inconsistency gives room for all sorts of misunderstandings on the meaning of hieroglyph in Ancient Egypt.

In sum, from an historical and theoretical perspective, the concept “hieroglyph” is far from a consistent and ideal definition. Something was lost – or perhaps left behind – in the process of coining such a concept and translating the Egyptian conception of writing into Greek terms.

⁴⁶ See Liddel-Scott-Jones *Lexicon*: “ἱερογλυφικός, ἡ, ὄν, hieroglyphic: ἱερογλυφικά, with or without γράμματα, τὰ, D.S.3.4, Plu.2.354f, Ps.-Luc.Philopatr.21, Dam.Isid.98, etc. Adv. ἱερογλυφικῶς PMag.Leid.V.8.29”.

To use Jamblichus's terms, the notion finally transmitted to Greek "no longer preserve[d] the same force". [Plate 44]

4.3. Working Premises about the Notion of Hieroglyph

In the light of the pieces of evidence and arguments raised in this chapter, and discussed in this section, it seems reasonable to put forward a small number of premises that guide my understanding of Egyptian "hieroglyph" in the present thesis.

- **Premise 1:** The frequently presented "structure" of hieroglyphs is solely a model of observation

Many works have dealt with hieroglyphs, their function, meaning and applications. However, in our age, this subject seems to *belong* to a certain academic discipline. This sense of intellectual property over a cultural phenomenon is harmful since it cements a perspective that is not necessarily historically accurate or theoretically ideal.

In other words, the theoretical construction presented in Chapters One and Two – or any other systematic approach to this subject – could be better regarded not as a faithful *x-ray* of the structures or meanings of hieroglyphs, but as a *portrait* made with the technology (and mentality) available. Most of the "workable" terms employed in the grammatological study of hieroglyphs (ideogram, phonogram, rebus, determinative, etc.), and of the ones I also use in the thesis (mythogram, synergraphy, overtones, etc.) are alien to the Egyptians' own conception of hieroglyphs. *There is no extant Egyptian text describing the grammatological functions of Egyptian writing*, or the terms they used to "categorize" hieroglyphs. In the absence of such evidence, the use of hieroglyphs by the Ancient Egyptians could be more "organic" than "structural".⁴⁷

⁴⁷ More or less in the same way an Ancient Latin or Greek speaker did not need to handle a set of grammar tables to employ the correct cases or declensions.

- **Proposition 2:** Mythography is a constitutive part of hieroglyphic writing

I am not convinced that the analysis (and understanding) of the hieroglyph as a sign should be circumscribed solely by its relationship to language in the linear system. On the contrary: the concept of mythography can offer a contribution not only to the comprehension of the origins of hieroglyphic writing and to the interpretation of “iconographic” material, but to the relationship between linear and non-linear writing, which has been insufficiently studied. In general, instead of including the frequency of the Egyptian use of images to convey either *verbal* or *non-verbal* ideas in our models of observation, as a general principle, we prefer to make a categorical distinction between “writing” and “iconography” that ascribes a secondary role to the image and, on occasion, fails to explain the frequent migration and exchanges between these domains – which are presented as a kind of anomaly of the system, instead of its very origin and essence.

CHAPTER THREE:

Hermeneutica Hieroglyphica

The already mentioned academic attention given to the Graeco-Roman interpretation of hieroglyphs might help to produce the false idea that the Egyptians did not reflect or philosophize about their writing-system and consequently it can overshadow the Egyptian treatises on hieroglyphs still extant. In this Chapter I hope to explore the tradition of hieroglyphic hermeneutics which reaches its zenith with Horapollon's *Hieroglyphica* (which will be discussed on Chapter Four). In order to situate Horapollon in the Egyptian hermeneutic tradition, I aim to create a conceptual map showing the historical contrast between linear writing and the spoken language throughout the history of the Ancient Egyptian civilization. From empirical observation based on this map, I will study the different solutions to the "grammatological estrangement" generated between graphic and spoken spheres, as a natural tendency.

1. Towards a Theory of the "Grammatological Gap"

1.1. The Historical Development of Egyptian Linear Writing in relation to the process of language changes

Any study aiming to explore the relationship between linear writing and spoken language must start from a fundamental premise: that both are dynamic systems in a different stage of transformation, despite any illusion of immutability.

It has been systematically postulated that the spoken language, as a system of convention, changes naturally and independently of any individual will or even consciousness. It is constantly subject to the principle of least effort, to contact with other languages (linguistic strata), to the

vicissitudes of its own culture that might cause profound phonetic and phonological, semantic and morphosyntactic changes. For cultural and political reasons, we distinguish different historical stages of the same continuous language as if they were different languages (such as Latin and Spanish, for example).

If in two thousand years Latin underwent such dramatic transformations that it became contemporary French or Portuguese, it is unreasonable to imagine that the Egyptian language would remain the same in more than three millennia of written records.

The history of the Egyptian language [Plate 45] – according to socio-cultural and linguistic criteria – has traditionally been divided into five distinct main stages: Old Egyptian (3000-2000 B.C.E), Middle Egyptian (2000-1300 B.C.E), Late Egyptian (1300-700 B.C.E), Demotic (7th century B.C.E. to 5th century C.E.) and Coptic (4th to 14th century C.E.).¹ The difference between such stages is relatively measurable and known to Egyptologists. As J. Ray observes,

The differences between Middle Egyptian and Late Egyptian are roughly similar to those which separate Latin from Italian, or Middle English from Anglo-Saxon: loss of inflection in nouns, development of definite and indefinite articles, and replacement of older conjugations by analytic constructions using auxiliary verbs. (Ray 2007: 811)

When Linear Writing emerged in Egypt, the vernacular language was Old Egyptian. The writing-system, therefore, was adapted to convey words and sentences from this language. Linear writing, however, does not change at the same speed as a language – as it obeys a different form of convention, more strict, which is transmitted through conscious teaching – and so it tends to preserve old orthographies, sentences-form, words, which had little by little been abandoned by the spoken language: “Although the norm of writing shifted very slightly all the time, inconsistencies in writing and grammar show that it never kept pace with the spoken language” (Baines 1983: 584). I am of the opinion that Egyptians were aware of the difference between the original language for which Old Egyptian Linear Writing was conceived and later the spoken language: at a given point, this difference was so clear that they were probably considered distinct languages – and this could be the reason why the language conveyed in hieroglyphic inscriptions in that period became known as “divine speech”.

¹ Loprieno 1995.

Frank Kammerzell has devised a theoretical model to describe what he calls “degrees of regularity and simplicity of graphophonemic correspondence rules of a language (L_q)” at any given point of time (T_q). According to him, the proximity between a spoken language and the writing-system that aims to record it depends on three parameters: [Plate 46]

- the *temporal distance* of T_q to the time of emergence of the writing system (T_p);
- the proportion of *typological distance* between L_q and the language system L_p for which the writing system was first developed;
- and the *retention rate* or its opposite, i.e., the rate of adjustment of the writing system to the particular characteristics of L_q . (Kammerzell 1998: 2)

From his model, he reaches the conclusion that “in general, the graphophonemic correspondence rules of an earlier diachronic state of a particular language are more regular than those of a later stage, if the writing system has not been modified” (p. 23) and, observing his model, it is reasonable to postulate that there is a *tendency* of a growing divergence in this “grammatological correspondence”, as I prefer to call it, which theoretically can only be inhibited by a change in the *retention rate* or a reform in the *typological distance* – since the diachronic evolution of language cannot be controlled.

John Baines, in his remarkable *Literacy and Ancient Egyptian Society* (2007: 582), compares spoken and written Egyptian using a model adapted from Striker. In this graphic [Plate 46], one can immediately observe that:

- Egyptian linear writing suffered major reforms which resulted in it getting closer to the spoken language;
- The linear writing systems tend to acquire a certain stability and become more or less “independent” of the spoken language;
- Older systems of convention (of linear writing) were not necessarily abandoned with the new reforms. They coexisted in different functions and eventually overlapped;
- Reform coincides with major socio-political changes in Egyptian society.

The distinct reforms that Egyptian linear writing underwent led to the development of a number of more or less stable codes of linear writing [Plate 47]. However, reforms were not the only responses to the “grammatological estrangement” (i.e. the growing distance) between written and spoken Egyptian, as I hope to demonstrate.

Reflecting on Baines/Striker’s model discussed here and other sources, I came to the conclusion that it would be useful to build a map which could embrace other responses or solutions so as to build a “big picture” of this whole phenomenon and its complexity [Infographic 1]. This Chapter is essentially an interpretation of this map – and a set of reference symbols will be employed in the course of this text in order to facilitate the link between the comments here and the corresponding items from the infographic.

1.2. Convention and Orthodoxy: *Maat* as a Force of Preservation

The first phenomenon I would like to discuss is the remarkably strict convention that gave an appearance of immutability to Egyptian writing. In fact, the preservation of the *iconicity* of hieroglyphs has no parallel in the history of writing. Sumerian writing, from a very pictorial system, became a sequence of lines arranged for unskilled eyes in more or less abstract fashion– it lost its iconicity, the figurative property of the written character. Likewise, Chinese writing became a very stylized version of its first figurative characters, undergoing many reforms in its history (the most recent is the one that created “simplified Chinese”). The figurative quality of Egyptian hieroglyphs, however, seems to have been preserved across the ages often by means of almost inflexible rules of proportion and design – and I would argue that the reason for such an attitude cannot be merely aesthetic: Sumerian and Chinese, although losing figurativeness, preserved a high aesthetic appeal.

Another important characteristic of Egyptian writing, concerning the rigorousness of convention, is the fact that the emergence of new grammatological functions did not supplant earlier principles of writing. In other words, the advent of phonetic writing, for example, did not

overshadow mythographic or ideographic uses of hieroglyphs. The same logic can be applied to the whole hieroglyphic system: it has not been abandoned even with the invention of more “practical” systems, such as hieratic, demotic and later even the alphabet – that coexisted in Egypt.

Contrasting this phenomenon with the sacred function of hieroglyphs (discussed in Chapter Two), it is reasonable to assume that any dramatic change in hieroglyphic writing – especially in its iconicity – was a tacit *taboo*. As there is no known direct statement defining its terms, this *taboo* can be better understood in the light of a broad and crucial fundament of the Egyptian culture: *Maat* (*m³t*)². *Maat* has been translated as “cosmic order”, “truth”, “right” and “justice”, but as Henri Frankfort aptly puts it,

We lack words for conceptions which, like Maat, have ethical as well as metaphysical implications. We must sometimes translate “order”, sometimes “truth”, sometimes “justice”; and the opposite of Maat requires a similar variety of renderings. In this manner we emphasize unwittingly the impossibility of translating Egyptian thoughts into modern language, for the distinctions which we cannot avoid making did not exist for the Egyptians. Where society is part of a universal order, our contrast has no meaning. The laws of nature, the laws of society, and the divine commands all belong to the one category of what is right. The creator put order (or truth) in the place of disorder (or falsehood). The creator’s successor, Pharaoh, repeated this significant act at his accession, in every victory, at the renovation of a temple and so on. (1948: 54)

Maat has a profound importance in the Creation of the World. In the Pyramid Texts, the god Re rises from primeval matter (*nun*) after “putting order (*maat*) in the chaos (*isfet*)”.³ According to the Hermopolite cosmogony, *Maat* is the companion of Thoth, and together with him she creates the Ogdoad (the eight gods of creation). She is therefore the divine order of the world, the overall principles that govern both cosmic and human existence. An interesting example of the latter comes from Tutankhamen’s Restoration Stela at Karnak:

He (Tutankhamen) is the effective King who did what was good for his father and all the gods. He restored everything that was ruined, to be his monument forever and ever. He has vanquished chaos from the whole land and has restored Maat to her place. He has made lying a crime, *the whole land being made as it was at the time of creation*. (My emphasis. Translated by Davies 1995)

² Erman and Grapow: 2, 18-20.9.

³ Frankfort 1948: 54.

The text alludes to the “restoration” of the old tradition after Akhenaten’s heresy and in this sense the notion of *Maat* can embrace the meaning of *tradition* – a particular tradition initiated by the demiurge(s), which is sacred, right and assumed to be perpetuated across the ages. Although we lack a word for this concept (that is why I would happily keep it), there is an English word of Greek origin which is suitable for the consequence of *Maat*: *orthodoxy*. I propose, with this expanded interpretation, a rapprochement between *Maat* and the notion of “decorum”⁴ – in which the latter is, conceivably, the observable consequence of the former.

The Houses of Life and the scribe caste (in their religious, legal and bureaucratic functions) were the institutions responsible for the transmission of this *norm* or *paradigm*, often personified in the figure of a Pharaoh – ultimate upholder and guardian *Maat* by divine authority. The preservation of the guidelines of such a concept and its transmission was intermediated, of course, by *records* and by their canonical repetition.

This transmission can be easily attested by the fact that the scribes were frequently admonished to act according to *Maat*, in other words, to respect *the taboo*;⁵ by the important literary genre (*sb3.yt* writings, which consisted of “teachings” that often involved respecting *Maat*) that came to light and reinforced this notion of preservation; and even by one of the most well-known myths (and mythographic scenes) in Ancient Egypt, which I consider to be the most emblematic example of the Egyptian orthodoxy: the ritual of weighing the heart (against a *Maat*), the apex of the path to the Afterlife. There, the lesson was clear: not respecting *Maat* could only result in damnation and chaos – an idea especially abhorred by the Egyptians.

Outsiders could testify to this aspect of the Egyptian mind-set, with especial regard to its impact in Egyptian art:

You will wonder when I tell you: Long ago they appear to have recognized the very principle of which we are now speaking - that their young citizens must be habituated to forms and strains of virtue. *These they fixed, and exhibited the patterns of them in their temples; and no painter or artist is allowed to innovate upon them, or to leave the traditional forms and invent new ones.* To this day, no alteration is allowed either in these arts, or in music at all. And you will find that their works of art are painted or moulded in the same forms which they had ten thousand years ago; - this is literally

⁴ Cf. Baines 1990.

⁵ Cf. Black 2002: 132.

true and no exaggeration - their ancient paintings and sculptures are not a whit better or worse than the work of today, but are made with just the same skill. (My emphasis. Plato. *Laws*: II. Translated by Jowett 1892)

The perfection – and therefore immutability – of the original cosmic order was a belief deeply rooted in Egyptian society. However, I would suggest that, ultimately, *Maat* is not only behind the social conservatism in Egypt, but also impacts on hieroglyphic culture – reinforcing the social conventions and legitimizing philosophically at least four important features of Egyptian writing:

- **Iconicity:** as I have commented above, the preservation of the stylized and easily recognizable figurativeness of the Egyptian hieroglyphs has no parallel in any other civilization. I am of the opinion that this phenomenon is the consequence of the specific beliefs that surround the hieroglyphic culture (discussed in the previous chapter) that, in their turn, were strictly preserved thanks to another principle that promoted obedience to ideal forms;⁶ the *faith* kept in the iconic forms of hieroglyphs is of the same nature as what I understand as the “belief in motivation”, or the principle of the impossibility of arbitrariness in hieroglyphic writing. In the same way the “form” could not be abstract, the “content” could not be arbitrary. The divine essence of hieroglyphs was an “unbreakable force”, as this link goes back to the creation of the world and any disruption would be regarded, as I suggest, as a *taboo* because of the principle of *Maat*. Moreover, the impressive aesthetic appeal of hieroglyphs causes such awe that it still provokes a profound fascination and curiosity centuries after the decline of the Ancient Egyptian civilization.
- **Overlapping of grammatological functions:** this phenomenon resulted in the profusion of allography and polysemy in hieroglyphs, already outlined in Chapter One. Mythography was not replaced by the advent of ideography, which was not replaced by phonography and so on. New writing possibilities were always incorporated, but older ones not discarded (although they could become obsolete). This general preservation of

⁶ In this sense, I suggest that in a wider sense, the notion of *Nefer* (beauty, perfection of form) is something to be preserved by *Maat*.

writing strategies made hieroglyphs an extremely rich – although complex – grammatical system, with a certain room for speculations (on “hidden” meanings) that will be widely investigated from the Late Period on. That the interaction between linear (mythograph) and non-linear (text) domains was also “kept alive” since the origin of hieroglyphic writing is of paramount importance in this thesis;

- **Preservation of the hieroglyphic system despite the advent of other systems:** the maintenance of Egyptian *sacro-inscribed writing* resisted to the principle of least effort, to the point of demanding more practical/cursive systems to be created;
- **Proliferation of Archaisms:** hieroglyphic writing had an extremely high resistance to adapting the writing-system to the language changes, as it would signify an estrangement from the original system, conceived by the gods. Consequently, archaisms became frequent.

It is fundamental to bear in mind, as well, that *Maat* was not only a philosophical concept: it was also a highly organized social order, which would reflect on the education of scribes, for example, and therefore interfere in the process of writing acquisition, use and conception.

1.2.1. Learning the System

Learning the hieroglyphic writing-system was the apex of the processes of literacy in Ancient Egypt. Since the Middle Kingdom, “hieroglyphs were not the script of education, as they were not the script of literature or administration”.⁷ Instead, until the Late Period, hieratic was used with this function (which then was replaced by demotic), as can be attested by schoolboys’ exercises and textbooks from the Twelfth Dynasty on (together with literary evidence).

⁷ Eyre and Baines 1989: 93.

Hieroglyphs, therefore, were a further specialization which would finally reach its zenith in monumental linear inscription and mythographic compositions. This confirms the particular uses of hieroglyphs derived from their ideological, political and profound sacred function, a power consolidated around the figure of the “sacred scribe”.

a) An “Orthodox” Methodology: Learning by Copying

Be a craftsman in words, that you may be strong... A king’s tongue is his might; words are more powerful than any fighting. No one can circumvent the craftsman of the mind... A knowledgeable man is a storehouse for nobles. Those who know that he knows do not attack him. [Iniquity] has not arisen in his time, but *Maat* comes to him (well-)strained, in accordance with what the ancestors have said. *Emulate your fathers, your ancestors... See! Their words remain in writing; open, read and emulate (their) knowledge.* An expert becomes a teacher. (My emphasis. *The Instruction of Khety to Merikare* apud Williams 1972: 217)

In terms of its didactics, evidence has established that schooling education in Egypt was essentially based on repetition:

Students in the scribal schools initially learned to read and write by spending several years reciting and copying from stock texts before being apprenticed to an individual master for practical instruction in their future specialization. This rote learning and copying gave rise to a number of standardized “school texts” which were considered canonical compositions, and hence were copied again and again, generation after generation. (Black 2002: 127)

According to Eyre and Baines,

Elementary school exercises consisted of a single, simultaneous process of memorising standard set texts in both oral and written form. A passage of a few lines was copied out and worked over phrase by phrase. Each phrase was a unit of a few words, of convenient length for oral repetition and additive memorising. (...) The student presumably learned each phrase aloud by oral repetition, wrote it, and then progressed to the next, until the whole exercise had been completed. (...) Writing, reading, and reciting were thus closely connected from the beginning. Visual, oral and auditory aspects of reading were not separated, and all written texts were also heard. The schoolboy’s understanding of the script was built up from whole phrases, through words, to individual sense units or morphological units (such as pronominal endings), *sign groups and only in the last resort to individual signs.* (My emphasis. Eyre and Baines 1989: 94)

It becomes clear that at least the institutionalized education largely favoured tradition – the ancestors’ words that “remain in writing” and were transmitted through rigid orthographical

and canonical convention (that should be mastered through repetition), rather than a “structural” knowledge of the principles of writing and its application, which, as I already mentioned, did not have equivalent concepts in Egypt (as far as the extant literature is concerned). One of the outcomes of this pedagogical model is notably a strong resistance to improving the relationship between the spoken language and the writing-system.

With regard to the preservation of old cultural habits and its impact on the normative notion of history,

The peculiar conservatism of hieroglyphic script and the thoroughness of Egyptian school education kept the knowledge of the classical language and its seminal texts alive. These factors, together with the ongoing usage of archaic texts in cult, ensured that the monuments of the past were not only visible but also readable. (Assmann 2003: 343)

In view of that, one can observe a vivid “virtuous circle”: cultural orthodoxy would influence hieroglyphs (preserving its conventions), which would cement cultural orthodoxy (legitimated by ancient authority and examples exposed and preserved by hieroglyphs).

b) Schematograms and Sign Groups

An important collateral effect of this orthodox methodology can be demonstrated by the “whole word” process of learning linear writing:

The most important factor in the development of the script's structure is probably the reluctance to give up sign groups, especially groups used for writing complete words, once they had been introduced; this can be observed at all periods. As the language changed, but the script did not follow these changes fast enough, historical writings developed. These are sign groups whose constituent elements no longer directly supply information about the linguistic forms they encode. If the greater complexity of the hieroglyphic script is disregarded, this results in an orthography whose relationship to the spoken language is very similar to that of contemporary English. (Schenkel 1976: 7)

Erik Iversen explains this phenomenon in very similar terms:

[In the twelfth dynasty,] The spellings of individual words became standardized into a more or less consistent sequence of ideograms, phonetic elements, and determinatives. The use of the latter was systematized and for the first time fully developed, and each word became, to a certain extent, *a distinct graphic unity, forming a characteristic word-picture on which subsequent periods based their*

orthography. It was (...) the final as well as the highest development of the script. (...) What followed was, therefore, decline, which began sporadically as early as the eighteenth and nineteenth dynasties (ca. 1546-1200 B.C.). The origin [i.e. grammatological function] of various signs was at this stage already forgotten, with a resulting confusion in their employment, and deliberate attempts to improve on the established word-pictures, in order to make them conform with the linguistic evolution, led to an increasing orthographic confusion. (My emphasis. Iversen 1993: 21)

With the “increasing orthographic confusion” generated by the “word-picture” orthography, why would the Egyptians preserve this system? I think the answer resides in two preponderant arguments that are related to *Maat*: (a) this phenomenon would preserve the “divine words” as they have been conceived (possibly) by the gods – they were not, therefore, thought to be arbitrary or simply based on the sounds of spoken language; (b) this conservatism would allow Egyptian literates to read and preserve their cultural identity, through their knowledge about their own history and religion, as recorded by their ancestors. In a culture in which the cult of the ancestors had a preeminent place, it is to be expected that hieroglyphs would assume the function of a two-way connection between the past and the present.

The method of learning to write through “whole-word”, “word-picture”, “sign groups” or “schematograms”,⁸ as I prefer, should not be regarded as something absurd to us. Even nowadays there is a lively theoretical debate between defenders of “phonic” and “whole-word” reading instruction methods (cf. Dehane, 2009). The former emphasizes the grammatological function (in this case, the alphabetical phonography) to “build” words, while the latter is based on the hypothesis that one “grasps” the meaning of an entire word at once – visually (see p. 94). Recent developments in Neuroscience suggest that our brain, in the process of reading, does recognize “whole words” concomitantly to the functions of individual characters. (cf. Sala & Anderson 2012)

It is premature to establish a hypothesis for the relative success of this methodology in preserving the conventions of hieroglyphic writing despite its “estrangement” with the spoken language. However, whenever a theory for this phenomenon is drafted, I would suggest that three premises are of equal importance: the orthodox cultural mentality (encapsulated by the notion of *Maat*); the cognitive process of “visual word” reading that permits this strange “separation” between the written and spoken languages (an “orthodox-friendly” method based on the

⁸ Junge 2005: 38.

grammatological meaning of each hieroglyph, parallel to the contemporary “phonemics”, would hardly be effective in the learning of hieroglyphs because of the latter’s rich allography and polysemy values); and the fact that:

Colloquial language differs from the language of writing not only in grammar, but also in the content of the messages conveyed: when writing one obeys different linguistic norms. In learning to write, the users of a given language have also learnt involuntarily to observe the unwritten rules governing expression in any given kind of text – they move to another register. (Junge 2005: 21)

1.2.2. Normalization: Preserving the Conventions through Onomastica, Word Lists and Canonical texts.

Evidence for the strengthening of the conventions that rule “logographic orthography” could be attested in at least two literary genres: “set books” and “onomastica” (word-lists, encyclopaedias):

- **Set Books:** one of the best examples of these texts, composed around the Eleventh Dynasty, is the *Book of Kemyt* (“completion” or “perfection”).⁹ It was written in cursive hieroglyphs and consists of a choice of sayings, formulae for letter writing, funerary texts and idioms, copied from different sources and that “was used for a thousand years” (Williams 1972: 217) as a source for copying in schools (!). From this initial text, the student would have access to the classics of Egyptian literature. I would insist that this particular book, and any other of its kind, can be understood not only as an introduction to more elaborated literary forms, but as a collection of conventions to be preserved in written language;

⁹ See Meltzer 1990.

- **Onomastica:** In his comprehensive critical edition of Egyptian “word-lists”,¹⁰ Alan Gardiner has employed the term “onomasticon” to refer to the Egyptian “catalogues of things arranged under their kinds” (Nims 1950: 253). The term was a clear and successful attempt to avoid naming these treatises “glossary” (like the one then known as “Golénischeff Glossary”), “dictionary” or “encyclopaedia”, since the listed words were not organized according to an “alphabetical order” and did not include any explanation for the “entries”. I am of the opinion that these texts had an overall function: to preserve orthographic and cosmological conventions – through the explicit orthographic model and implicitly by the way words were grouped into categories organized according to the apparent hierarchical order of the world. Moreover an onomasticon probably worked as an aide-memoire comprising key-words that a scribe should always have at hand, when writing new texts or reading old compositions (so as to avoid constant searches for words in different papyri). Onomastica have, therefore, an important role in maintaining the “sign group” system across the ages, despite their non-adequacy for the spoken language – to which they can be regarded as a *response*. [Infographic 1]

1.3. Antiquarianism versus Reforms

Hieroglyphic writing existed in the margin between two powerful opposite forces: the cultural antiquarianism of the Egyptians and the natural distancing between linear writing and spoken language.

In general there was a tendency among Egyptian scribes (as indeed among scribes everywhere) to render archaic texts more intelligible “on the fly” by substituting more modern orthography, vocabulary, grammar, and syntax for expressions which had become obsolete. (...) To make matters even more interesting, in several periods of Egyptian history there was an officially sponsored antiquarianism which sought to reinstate the artistic and literary norms of the past. One example of this process was the reform of the writing system during the reign of Thutmose III in an attempt to bring official hieratic into closer conformity with the corresponding hieroglyphic signs.

¹⁰ See Gardiner 1947.

Another was the resurrection of a purer form of Middle Egyptian at the end of the Twentieth Dynasty as a *"scholastic" language which was no longer understood even by a majority of the scribes*. (My emphasis. Black 2002: 142)

This indicates that the archaism in hieroglyphic writing was not only the product of the conservatism manifested in strict orthographies, but also the result of *antiquarian* “renaissances” that emulate *Maat*-motivated quest for the original times and have a major impact on Egyptian cultural – and historical – identity. One of the consequences of this archaism is the gradual alienation between written and spoken languages, the “grammatological estrangement”, which could lead to the impracticality of the use of hieroglyphs – at least for some of its functions.

1.4. The Grammatological Gap

As one can imagine, the insistence on preserving the writing convention (for religious reasons) of “sign groups” despite the increasing “grammatological estrangement” could have a radical consequence in the long run:

The great majority of the scribes could not read the earlier scripts, although they were able to write and perhaps understand them, or, to put it less paradoxically, they knew the meanings of the various words and signs but were not able to render them phonetically. *Their knowledge was purely visual and mnemonic*. (Bagnani 1933: 166)

Thanks to the oblivion of the grammatological function of each hieroglyph used to write a word (since this function has become secondary through a strong conventionalized orthography), a “grammatological gap” would emerge between a word written in hieroglyphs and its meaning [Plate 48]. Beyond doubt, this *alienation* was not a sudden, large-scale phenomenon – it was subjected to the different ways a language changes, the frequency of certain words and even the idiosyncrasies of cultural memory.

Remnant words from historical scripts were a constant source of grammatological gaps and were frequently accessible in ancient monuments and documents.

1.5. Responses to “Grammatological Estrangement”

In order to preserve the hieroglyphic system, despite the increasing distancing between form and content, of which the “grammatological gap” is the most radical proof that the grammatological estrangement had reached its peak, different “grammatological solutions” would emerge in different historical moments:

a) Adoption of Parallel Systems

Alongside epigraphic hieroglyphs, there has always been an ephemeral, cursive counterpart. The parallel scripts were essentially a simplification of the same script (except Coptic), without the burdens of the sophisticated iconicity of hieroglyphs, more flexible to adaptations to the spoken language, and initially designed to daily needs. Since these scripts were more *practical*, they allowed hieroglyphs to maintain their complexity and sacred function. [Plate 49]

The very manner in which a text is written conveys a strong message: the types of text recorded in hieroglyphs (stelae and temple inscriptions) are more resistant to linguistic innovation than cursive hieratic texts (papyri and ostraca). Playing with linguistic forms and with the frequency and method of use of more ancient or more colloquial forms is another means of expression used by ancient Egyptian authors. (Junge 2005: 18)

For the sake of comparison, the contemporary world has at least two examples of extant writing-systems that coexist with traditional writing:

- Chinese: In China, the traditional writing (*hanzi*), suffered a major reform in the 20th century (in order to “simplify” the system). Nowadays, the Chinese characters coexist with *pinyin* (the official system that transcribes Chinese characters into Roman alphabet). Pinyin is often used to teach Chinese language to foreigners, to spell Chinese names and terms in foreign publication (and vice-versa) and as an input method to generate Chinese characters (*hanzi*) in computers.

- Japanese: in practice the modern Japanese writing-system uses four different scripts: kanji (originated from Chinese *hanzi*); *kana* (two syllabaries, *hiragana* and *katakana*) and *romanji* (Roman alphabet). These different scripts did not supplant completely their predecessors, and – different from Ancient Egyptian – they can be mixed in the same written text, with particular functions.

b) Orthographic Reforms

Although the hieroglyphic system was resistant to major changes, they actually occurred. It would be inconsequent to suggest that the reforms that the hieroglyphs underwent were motivated exclusively by the increasing grammatical estrangement. Rather, the reforms coincide with major socio-political changes, which possibly involved times of instability that made way for such significant cultural changes. Moreover, I imagine that the native centralized power and organization was a *conditio sine qua non* to implement these reforms – not only because of the coercive force, but thanks to what can be understood as a “*Maat*” authority of the ruling elite in cultural matters.

Again, the reforms meant important changes, configuring historical scripts that, again, would not necessarily replace the previous ones (as can be observed in the [Infographic 1](#)). Instead, each reform is, essentially, a re-convention of the hieroglyphic system that would supposedly adapt it to the spoken language and to a certain extent remodel the script according to new aesthetic values – without losing its essence. In other words, reforms were a sort of *renaissance* in which the past was the reference not for the archaic conventions, but for the (grammatological) principles that were revived for their active engagement with language and other semiotic systems.

1.6. Marginalization and the Impossibility of Reform: a Hypothesis for the “Cryptographic”, “Enigmatic” or “Ptolemaic” Hieroglyphs.

The introduction of the demotic script in the Late Period consolidated the exclusive religious-ideographical use of hieroglyphs, and it is reasonable to suggest that gradually there would be less expectation that hieroglyphic writing would adjust itself to the spoken language. In the long run, this relative “freedom” from the current language (and affairs) would allow hieroglyphs to explore their grammatological possibilities.

During the Ptolemaic Period, Greek was introduced as the bureaucratic and elite script (alongside demotic), and this arguably resulted in a further increase in the “grammatological estrangement” of hieroglyphs¹¹ not only from their relationship to the language, but from their preeminent place in the social spectrum as well – and this becomes evident with the loss of bureaucratic power from the priestly caste:

Avec l'occupation grecque, et la mise en place d'un système administratif différent, les écoles d'administration civile ou militaire changèrent d'aspect; la culture se sacralisa, le clerc sacré se distinguant désormais du notaire et de l'écrivain public. Quant à l'écriture hiéroglyphique, son usage se restreint progressivement dans tous les domaines, sauf dans son usage lapidaire, et plus spécialement dans l'utilisation qu'on en fait pour décorer les murs des temples. (Sauneron 1982: 49)

With the Roman and Byzantine rule of Egypt, the native religion was systematically undermined, as the priests were perceived as a possible threat to the foreign power.

The reforms, in effect by the end of the first century B.C.E., involved the reorganization of the entire hierarchy of the Egyptian priesthood, such that a Roman official became the “High Priest of Alexandria and All Egypt” or *Idios Logos*, temples and priesthoods were to rely entirely on imperial munificence (the *suntaxeis*) rather than their own lands (with few exceptions), and every aspect of priestly life was accounted for through a complex bureaucratic system laid out in the “*Gnomon* of the *Idios Logos*”. Thus, as Milne observed, “the power and influence of the Egyptian priesthood were diminished by their conversion (put in extreme terms) from territorial magnates to State pensioners”. (Frankfurter 1998: 198)

This power displacement, from the native hierarchy to the Roman rule, apparently favoured the religious independence of local cults and in fact, even allowed the flourishing of a number of earlier existent or recently created temples (such as Dendera, Edfu, Esna, Karnak, Philae and Kom Ombo) until the third century C.E. However, it caused major rupture in the

¹¹ The emergence of Greek language and its logic/didactics, essentially of virtually abstract signs for sounds, probably had a great impact on the Egyptian understanding of their own writing-system and pedagogy.

ancient religious tradition (until then maintained by the principle of *Maat*). In this context, without a religious central power and hierarchy (dismantled for political purposes), without a “*Maat*-authority”, a reform of Egyptian writing was inconceivable.

This *process of marginalization*,¹² I suggest, had a deep influence on hieroglyphs and their fate. More and more confined to niches, distant from daily demands (and their connection to the spoken language) and far from any authority which would oversee the conservation of conventions and the unity of the system, hieroglyphs enjoyed a certain independence that rapidly resulted in a rich and radical exploration of the different grammatological possibilities of the system and led to what became known by Egyptologists as “enigmatic”, “cryptographic” or “Ptolemaic” writing.¹³ I particularly disagree with all these terms on conceptual grounds.¹⁴ First, because the hieroglyphs were not more “enigmatic” now than they were in earlier moments – they were still written to particular addressees; second because the same grammatological possibilities as earlier attestations, although in a much more free and prolific way; and third, because it started long before (see Darnell 2004) and reached its peak after the Ptolemaic period, already under Roman power.

I am afraid that the “marginalization” hypothesis discussed above is opposite to Erik Iversen’s, as for him,

The knowledge of the hieroglyphs was undoubtedly one of these professional secrets, since hieroglyphic inscriptions still served the political purpose of proclaiming the fiction that the old state religion was still alive, and the foreign rulers still the pharaonic king-gods; but it became subject to material changes in the hands of its priestly guardians, who wanted it to be primarily an instrument of displaying their professional mythical knowledge, and took deliberate pains to make the actual writing more complex and intricate, so as to add to the exclusiveness of their art. (Iversen 1993: 24)

Iversen seems to present an arguable *consequence* of the phenomenon as its *cause*. In the first place, the priests “whimsical” attitude to “show off” their aptitudes to the foreign rulers does not make sense if one considers that it is unlikely that the foreigners had enough knowledge of hieroglyphs to judge the priests’ ability. Second, it does not explain why religious inscriptions

¹² That leads each temple to create its own scriptural “dialect”.

¹³ Cf. Fairman 1945; Drioton 1934 et alii.

¹⁴ Together with Sauneron (1982: 51).

(without any political connotation of public appraisal) would make use of such intricate script; third, the scribes' art was, indeed, exclusive – without any further action needed to hide its secrets (the evidence being that no foreign author has been believed to have any deep knowledge of hieroglyphs). It is important to clarify here that I am discussing the conjunct of factors that probably allowed this form of writing to flourish¹⁵ and not the particular motivation of each inscription (in opposition to Iversen).

My conjecture is that without a main authority in interpreting hieroglyphic texts, in firming the orthographical conventions, the script itself became the object of philosophical investigation (and even cultural identity, in a historical moment in which the native culture was, again, under foreign rule) and each temple developed a particular form of hieroglyphic writing.¹⁶ The meaning supposedly hidden in the relationship between hieroglyphs and the sacred became patent – assuming the voice that earlier would have belonged to exegetes: the reader-priests. Instead of becoming “enigmatic” or “cryptographic” the script employed all its grammatological resources to *reveal* its own second intentions, its own mythical interpretation or magical qualities – by using *mythographic strategies* in linear writing at its best.

Fairman makes a notable synthesis of three characteristics of this script, which I quote and comment:

(a) The language of these inscriptions is largely a dead one, it is not the spoken language of the time but is something traditional and in the nature of a priestly revival. (Fairman 1945: 55)

A good analogy for this use of hieroglyphs to write a “dead language” is the case of Neolatin as an artificial written language for the use of intellectuals in the Modern Era. Here and there, the possibility of making a living (written) use of a dead language can lead to an important reflection on the different degrees of (in)dependence that linear writing can have in relation to a spoken language.

¹⁵ *viz.* the “marginalization of hieroglyphic writing”: decentralized religious authority and dismantlement of priestly hierarchy, relaxation of writing conventions, increasing “grammatological estrangement” creating a bigger gap between written and oral language (on top of the introduction of Greek and later Coptic as the ruler's script), impossibility of reforms, etc.

¹⁶ See Fairman 1945: 55.

(b) As a system of writing it is essentially a temple writing, something monumental, it does not find its way into contemporary hieratic texts (except a few passages in Papyrus Salt 825), not even into those of a religious nature, it is only present to a very limited extent in the hieroglyphic stelae of the time, and is found in its full, normal and most typical form only on the walls of temples. (Fairman 1945: 55)

I am inclined to accept that the walls of temples are an evidence of the religious or philosophical function of this form of writing, which is a response to a general “sacralisation of the culture”, to use Sauneron’s words (1982: 48).

(c) It is not an isolated phenomenon out of touch with the main stream of hieroglyphic writing, but is the logical continuation, in a more developed form, of a manner of writing that tended to become increasingly common throughout the Late Period. It is in the direct line of descent from writing employed in the New Kingdom and possibly even Old Kingdom. There are good indications that its roots lie in the early stages of the Egyptian language. It is something, therefore, that has always existed in Egyptian, although, perhaps, it adopts a more extreme form in Ptolemaic. (Fairman 1945: 55)

The “enigmatic” nature of hieroglyphs was not a new phenomenon, as a matter of fact. Throughout Egyptian history, there are many other examples of “enigmatic” orthographies. Moreover, mythographic scenes are, in their essence, *enigmas* that are supposed to be interpreted according to specific myths. With the process of marginalization of the hieroglyphs, myths were reincorporated in linear writing in a systematic way and this is what arguably sets the difference between each temple’s script: the theological-mythological elements, characteristic of each temple, that would guide the interpretation of these inscriptions.

Additionally, in terms of its mechanics, the hieroglyphic writing of this period has a number of distinctive characteristics:

(a) An increase in the signs in common use and in the values they could bear (...) (Fairman 1945: 56)

The number of signs in use increased from approximately seven hundred in Middle Egyptian, to more than six thousand, depending on the methodology employed to obtain this

number.¹⁷ I am of the opinion that these hieroglyphs are not exactly new to the hieroglyphic system: on the contrary, often this number corresponds to the incorporation of existing mythographic signs in the linear writing – either preserving their mythographic meaning or acquiring another grammatological function.

- (b) A big increase in the number of ideograms and in the number of determinatives that are used as ideograms and phonograms; (Fairman 1945: 56)

One can imagine that the proliferation of ideograms had an important role in substituting “forgotten” schematograms or signs (thanks to the “grammatological gap”) enabling the scribes to write in a language that was not spoken anymore.

- (c) An increase, as compared with Classical Egyptian, in purely alphabetic writing;
- (d) The deliberate employment of a variety of alternatives for known signs, values and spellings; (Fairman 1945: 57)

These two items are intimately related. For “alphabetic writing” Fairman refers here to the use of monoliterals (phonograms alluding to only one consonantal sign), using the acrostic or consonantal principle (and not the rebus or paronomasia that characterize the earlier hieroglyphs); this system would allow the incorporation of allograms to be used according to figurative needs and have a different approach to phonography, that can be associated with the introduction of the Greek alphabet in Egypt;

- (e) The deliberate revival of archaistic spellings and old values, constructions and usages;
- (f) A certain attempt, clearly based on real knowledge, to indicate phonetic changes or the current pronunciation. (Fairman 1945: 57)

The items (e) and (f) simply reflect the contradictory state of hieroglyphic writing in the face of the rising grammatological estrangement and the impossibility of reforms: on the one hand, traditional spellings were still available not only in ancient texts, but hieroglyphic lists; on the other hand, schematograms subject to “grammatological gap” would be replaced by new spellings.

¹⁷ Hornung 1992: 25.

Another crucial element of the “enigmatic” writing, not indicated in Fairman’s list of features, is the frequent and *intentional* use of “overtones” and figurative strategies, facilitated with the loosening of orthographic rules and the proliferation of allograms and polysemes.

With their particularities, “marginalized” temple scripts from Ptolemaic, Roman and Byzantine periods constituted an interesting response to the external threats imposed on the hieroglyphic writing. Given the impossibility of reforms and the risk of complete alienation between linear writing and spoken language, they secured the sacred dimension of the script and faithfully explored the core of the grammatological principles of this writing-system. According to Wilson,

Once the principles of what is allowed in writing texts are understood – then the texts express not only the basic message but in cryptic writing and heightened diction can denote a great amount of allegorical and metaphorical information in addition. As a result more is “understood” from the texts than they actually say in one sentence. In this way the intellectual content of the text is increased, the knowledge imparted by the text is augmented and it is the use of the vocabulary and the way in which it is written which is the tool used to do this rather than grammatical constructions or expressions. (Wilson 1991: xxxvii)

The relative orthographic freedom – in relation to earlier historical periods of Egyptian writing – that the “enigmatic” writings reached is the point at which every inscription became not only a text, but *the only example of its own script*. Thus, although traditional convention was loosened, this does not mean that these scripts would not have any convention whatsoever: instead, what happens is that these scripts demand the creation of new paradigms, new conventions or guides to interpretation, so as to be preserved – especially because for obvious reasons *repetition* would not be an efficient pedagogical tool in this context. Indeed, one can observe that, alongside the “enigmatic” tradition, a number of hermeneutic manuals emerge (see p. 112). Although only a few of these manuals are still extant, they give fundamental support to the assumption that learning (reading and understanding) hieroglyphs was not focused on the repetition of texts and schematograms anymore, but went back to the understanding of the philosophical (mytho-grammatological) meaning of each hieroglyph.

1.7. Discussion: A *Transcending* Script

The appreciation of the “enigmatic” writing, as a grammatological phenomenon, is not to be regarded as a simple “exception” or “degeneration” of the hieroglyphic script, first, because it is not an anomaly but a sophisticated and conscious use of all grammatological possibilities of this system; second, because it poses important questions concerning the relationship between linear and non-linear writing-systems – which seems to be vitally important to understanding the relationship between word and text.

By definition, the notion of *linear writing* as it has been discussed in this thesis refers to the script as a vehicle to language: namely, it aims to record a temporal sequence of *words*. There is an order that tends to be the same as the oral language, and the outcome is a text. The *linear domain*, however, is not a *pure* sequence of words: hieroglyphic writing is an extraordinary example of how *non-linear elements* can permeate the *linear domain*.¹⁸

With “enigmatic writing”, logography (i.e., writing words in sequence) is not the only fundamental outcome of linear script. In a systematic manner, hieroglyphic inscriptions are composed in a way that will not convey only a text, but something else that transcends it (and it is not straightforwardly convertible into words). The process of reading these texts, I argue, is not the same as reading sequences of schematograms or logograms: before *being able to read the words*, it is necessary to interpret (decipher, understand) the *hieroglyph* as a grammatological unit that can potentially correspond to many different things (often at the same time).

Reading an inscription becomes then a very intriguing cognitive course of action, as the hieroglyphs are supposed to be understood not only on their linguistic-linear surface, but also in their non-linear grammatological depth. This immersion, however, is not linear, but a kind of maze in which different paths are attempted intuitively (unless a manual is used to interpret a given inscription).

A propos of the steps that the modern Egyptologist should take in order to decipher – and therefore read – “Ptolemaic” inscriptions, Fairman states that:

(a) Ptolemaic is a logical system of writing and as such it is not to be treated as a game without rules or method;

¹⁸ With hieroglyphs creating non-linear “overtones” or interfering with the semantics of a given word or text.

(b) At the outset an attempt should be made to read and interpret it in exactly the same way as normal Egyptian writing until or unless it can clearly be proved that such a course is impossible. (Fairman 1945: 59)

It is reasonable to think that at least these two first principles were valid as well for contemporary Egyptian readers. Given that a course of decoding was “impossible”, and that the hieroglyphs were supposed to mean something, the reader is left to wonder *why* that sign was chosen, and to look for hints (which can often depend on their knowledge of a specific mythology) and integrate the possible meanings of a given sign before proceeding to the next in the linear order.

From the grammatological point of view, one can suppose that the process of reading these special compositions was made in two axes:

- The linear axis: which is based on a sequence of logograms, in which the signs have a *predictable* or *immediately accessible* meaning (for the reader);
- The non-linear axis: that is based on the in-depth interpretation of the meaning of each hieroglyph (also in its relationship to the general context).

These two axes are combined in a “holistic interpretation”: right in the beginning and also at the end of the reading, the reader could feel impelled to step back and appreciate the “big picture”, taking into consideration what the visual aspect of the inscription and its context might inspire, observing the final composition and noticing if there is any apparent “overtone” or figurative strategy to be understood. Again, the final meaning of the inscription is more than the sum of words.

I think that this non-linear process of *guessing* meanings is rooted in mythography: there is no hierarchy or rule to be followed in order to “decipher” the “enigmatic hieroglyphs” or the figurative composition. Instead, it is often myth (along with the knowledge of grammatological possibilities) that will guide the reader’s intuition or knowledge until the right path of interpretation is chosen and fits the composition. As one can assume, these compositions can acquire deep theological or even magical implications, as a result of this whole process – and for this reason I disagree with the idea that such inscriptions are mere “*word-games*” or void displays of technical acuity. In certain cases, the “result” of the reading process of these “transcending

texts”, in which verbal and non-verbal elements are contrasted, can cause an effect similar to the horizontal interaction between linear and non-linear domains. From the point of view of the framework proposed in the present thesis, *this can mean that the two axes (linear and non-linear) of grammatical interaction (between image and text) could be intentionally “aligned” or “superposed”, thus creating the “transcending” effect of these texts.*

So far in the present study, I have carefully used quotation marks when referring to the “enigmatic hieroglyphs” as I do not think that this label is particularly precise: Egyptian writing has been, since its birth, an “enigmatic” phenomenon. Nor is “cryptographic” an adequate designation, as this script was aimed to be understood and had “*pas de souci d’occultation*” (Sauneron, 1982: 51). The reference to this phenomenon as “Ptolemaic writing”, championed by important scholars such as Fairman and Sauneron, is also problematic – simply because the principles of this script are rooted deep in the history of hieroglyphs and lasted longer than the Ptolemaic dynasty... Unable to find a suitable definition from the Egyptians (who used the Greek term “hieroglyph” precisely to characterize this *temple script* in opposition to the “sacred writing”), I coined myself at least a workable definition “transcending script”. This notion does not imply only the religious use of the “enigmatic script”: it refers to a *grammatical transcendence* of the linear text into something else.

The definition of the phenomenon discussed here as a “transcending script” also enables its distinction from “transcending writings” (i.e. the use of “enigmatic” principles before the Graeco-Roman period) – and even facilitates the reference to the “transcending meaning” of a particular text or hieroglyph. [Plate 50, see also Plate 25]

2. Hieroglyphic Hermeneutics

By the Ptolemaic period, hieroglyphic writing faced an important threat, as discussed above. The most visible outcome of this challenge was the emergence of the “enigmatic script”, i.e. the new hieroglyphic inscriptions on temple walls that enjoyed a relative orthographic freedom

(and grammatological sophistication) and demanded, as a logical consequence, new manuals of convention.

These scripts were an answer to the need of new hieroglyphic compositions. In other words, they were a *creative solution*. This means that they could not solve the problem of the *interpretation* of the traditional hieroglyphs and historical texts. As one can observe, the phenomenon of grammatological estrangement, facing the impossibility of reforms and the dismantlement of the priestly hierarchy, led to an increasing grammatological gap between “schematograms” and their meaning. Here is where the hieroglyphic hermeneutics will play a crucial role: to recreate the then lost grammatological bounds that connected hieroglyphs and their meanings, through a deep immersion in their philosophical nature and possibilities. To put it differently, I would say that the *hieroglyphic hermeneutics consisted, essentially, in filling up the grammatological gap with mythography*.

Therefore, hermeneutic treatises¹⁹ had two roles: at first, they can be regarded as a reaction to the rise of “enigmatic” writings, given their need for documenting new conventions, and later they probably also became a source for new “enigmatic” inscriptions. In this sense they continued and assumed the function of ancient onomastica; on the other hand, these treatises could be used to read or “decipher the secrets” (through mythographic interpretation) of ancient inscriptions, re-establishing the sacred connection between hieroglyphs and meaning and, by doing so, helping to preserve their sense (with mythology working possibly as a kind of mnemonic device). Furthermore, a third function can also be envisioned: the difficult task of harmonizing both those roles so as to preserve the continuity of the system.

Beyond their grammatological function, or perhaps deepening the purpose of writing, the hermeneutics treatises became a source for deep philosophical and theological speculation through the investigation of the meaning of hieroglyphs and the “archaeology” of their connections with the divine or natural world.





¹⁹ For a discussion on the particularities of some of these treatises, see p. 132.

2.1. Premises

The hypothesis for the rise of an organized culture of hermeneutic treatises that I am putting forward is constituted from three premises:

- The process of marginalization results in the impossibility of reforms of the hieroglyphic system (leading it to “enigmatic” changes);
- There is a fundamental belief in the impossibility of arbitrariness: i.e. the consciousness that each sign had a grammatological function and a sacred motivation. This has always been very clear for a number of hieroglyphs that, besides their objective grammatological function, always carried a strong magical or mythological content.²⁰ With this principle in mind, the “grammatological gap” would *demand* to be filled somehow;
- The process of “filling up the grammatological gap with myth” can be regarded as a natural extension or as the *systematization of the mythographic attitude towards the image* (which has always been present in Egyptian culture). Without the certainty of which grammatological principle connects the hieroglyph and its meaning, the tendency would be to go back to the mythological fundament which is – to all intents and purposes – the primordial connection between image and meaning.

In addition to these premises, it is important to have in mind that this late-systematized hermeneutics of hieroglyphs is not only a way to assist the composition or interpretation of particular inscriptions: the action of “filling the gap” of hieroglyphs with myths also re-organizes the native culture and beliefs around the writing-system. Myths, rites, stories that before would rely on a vast literature or oral tradition are grafted onto the hieroglyphic signs, thus reinvigorating

²⁰ Such as , , , , ideogram of gods, and so on. In this sense, the process that the hieroglyphs undergo in the hermeneutic treatises has always existed – in a tacit way – in other hieroglyphs. Therefore, it can be regarded as an extension of a tradition, rather than a creation from scratch.

the significance and power of writing and the authority of the ancestral Egyptian wisdom.²¹ As for the importance of myth as the substance of Egyptian thought, Iversen is precise:

The abstract “truth”, which is the final aim of our science and our theoretical thinking, becomes to the Egyptians a mythical truth, a truth which can only be expressed and conceived in mythical form, that is, magically connected or identified with a mythical manifestation. All Egyptian thinking therefore necessarily becomes mythical thinking, and the fundamental logistic problem becomes the establishment of the necessary connection between the “practice” of the phenomena and the problems, and the “theory” of the myths, a connection which is mainly established by means of metaphors and their linguistic equivalents, the alliterations. (Iversen 1958: 10)

Perhaps, the establishment of hermeneutic treatises can be perceived as a response to the Greek ethnocentrism and philosophy, as it constitutes a native method of philosophical investigation or a “sacred science”²² which is essentially substantiated by myth. The fact that there is an analogous hermeneutic tradition in Judaism (the *Pardes*, biblical exegesis, and the three cabalistic methods²³ used to interpret the Torah through the combination of letters) might facilitate the understanding and contextualization of the intellectual and cultural status that the hermeneutics of hieroglyphs probably enjoyed in Egypt.

2.2. Treatises on Hieroglyphic Hermeneutics

A parallel appreciation of the exegetical traditions and the “enigmatic script” discussed within this chapter can suggest that, at some point, these transcending attitudes toward writing would merge. The amplification of the hermeneutical possibilities of the hieroglyph, as it becomes clear with *Papyrus Salt 825*, would demand a consistent set of principles to help the decipherment of these writings – so as to avoid the risk of complete *estrangement* and more “grammatological gaps”. It is likely to imagine that each time a text could not be correctly translated the scribe would

²¹ From an anthropological perspective, ancient hieroglyphs could be understood as an “uncontaminated” source of native culture – to disclose their philosophical fundamentals would be an important way to investigate the ancestor traditions, and configure an instrument of cultural resistance.

²² Sauneron 1982.

²³ *Temurah* (anagrams), *notarikon* (acrostics) and *gematria* (numerology).

have the sensation that something was lost. This feeling could naturally evolve to the fear that his writings would also be forgotten in the future and, perhaps, justify the creation of a hermeneutic manual.

Although it might sound awkward to speculate on the “psychology of the exegesis”, there is certainly a cultural background that makes it very propitious: the impossibility of reforms in the script, the natural changes of language that are not followed by the script (creating a gap), the specialized function that hieroglyph inscriptions acquired, the process of marginalizing the native religion, the belief in the transcending power of hieroglyphs, the already existing exegetical culture, all contribute to the systematization of Egyptian “hermeneutic treatises”.

Although most of these manuals have been lost or are now extant only in a fragmentary form, their importance must not be underestimated – the treatises discussed here are the pinnacle of the hermeneutic attitude towards hieroglyphs and the symptom that writing was developing a new role.

2.2.1. Tanis Sign Papyrus (British Museum ESA 10672)

This papyrus is the only list in which hieroglyphs appear drawn in their original form (together with their meanings) that survived from Ancient Egypt. It is dated from the 1st or 2nd century C.E. and it was discovered in 1884 by Flinders Petrie in a collection of papyri (fragments of circa 150 manuscripts, along with a number of other objects) kept in the “house of Bakakhuiu” (the name being a misreading of Ashaikhet). It is believed that the original document had 33 pages, comprising c. 462 signs (Griffith 1889: 4).

The manuscript is divided into three columns: the first for each hieroglyphic character, the second for a transcription of the sign in hieratic and the third with a further explanation (showing its schematogram and/or “phonetic transcription”), also in hieratic [Plate 51]. Griffith had manifest difficulties in understanding the *raison d’être* of this manuscript, from the apparent randomness in the order of the signs displayed, to the whole structure of the document:

This third column seems to contain names by which the signs were ordinarily known, or might be recognized. It evidently was not intended as a syllabary of phonetic values, for in many cases the sign is not transcribed, while in others the note is expanded into a phrase; nor a glossary of ideographic

meanings, for the alphabetic signs which are included have no such meaning; nor again explanation of the form [...]. Nor, again, are these groups a series of notes illustrating the use of the sign in practice. [...] On the other hand, a need must have been felt in Egypt of some means of distinguishing hieroglyphic signs *viva voce*, both in the schools and in ordinary life. Names must therefore have been attached to the immense hieroglyphic syllabary, and taught with care, from the earliest times. If we consider the third column as devoted to the names of the signs, we shall find a fair explanation. (Griffith 1889: 5)

I suspect that, when Griffiths says “for the alphabetic signs which are included have no such meaning”, he probably ignores the relative flexibility of the use of monoliterals in “enigmatic inscriptions” – of which Egyptological studies became fully aware long after the publication of this work.²⁴ Nevertheless, I share Griffith’s opinion that the third column corresponds to the name by which these signs were probably known by the time the manuscript was written. The reason for this compilation, therefore, could have something to do with the grammatological estrangement, which led to the need for a new convention or explanation of the sign (especially when more than one name is offered). That hieroglyphs could have a name (or several) is particularly interesting, as their meaning could derive from the meaning of the name/hieroglyph or from one of the sounds (or part of them) of the name. The purpose of such a manual, therefore, would be at the same time to preserve conventions, to establish grammatological connections and, by doing so, cover the needs of a reader of a hieroglyphic inscription.

Despite the fact that the list of signs lacks mythological interpretations, it is important to draw attention to the way some signs are named, which might be related to current beliefs. A good clue to investigate is, for example, the sign of *ntr* (god) being named “embalmed” while the same sign, repeated three times, preserved the meaning of “gods”. The “names” – sometimes quite metaphorical – of this list await a more detailed research on their meanings and correlations.

If one takes into consideration that this papyrus was found in the same collection as a famous onomasticon, the Tanis Geographical Papyrus, then the sign list can be an adequate piece of evidence of the right moment in which a transition from an onomasticon tradition to a hermeneutic treatise was taking place.

²⁴ Cf. Sauneron notion of “alphabetism” in the litanies of Esna (1982: 91).

2.2.2. *Explanation of the Employment of the Hieroglyphs* (Papyrus Carlsberg VII)

Published by Erik Iversen as *Fragments of a Hieroglyphic Dictionary* (Copenhagen, 1958), this manuscript preserved its original title, which runs as follows:

Explanation of the employment of the *hieroglyphs*,²⁵ explanation of the difficulties. Disclosure of the things hidden, explanation of the obscure passages by their noble protection. Explanation of what emanated from the Gods, the noble ancestors, the sacred traditions from the nomes of Upper and Lower Egypt (found on) a leather-roll in the temple of Osiris, the first of the Westerners, the great God, Lord of Abydos, in..... (Iversen 1958: 14)

The first lines of this title can be understood as a definition of *hermeneutics of hieroglyphs* in Egyptian terms. Indeed, although extant only in a very fragmentary form [Plate 52],²⁶ this work is very important insofar as *it constitutes the prototype of a hieroglyphic hermeneutic manual*. In this manuscript, all constitutive elements of an exegetical treatise are present: the sign (in cursive hieroglyph), the meaning and the “mythographic explanation” that *fills the grammatological gap* with an interpretation of the mythical connection between sign and meaning. The purpose of this interpretation is not only to present the different meanings that hieroglyphs can address: more than that, it aims to clarify the mythical foundations that explain and justify their etymology. The function of hieroglyphic hermeneutic manuals – as has been discussed here – is therefore fulfilled in this treatise, since it does not only point out how to use or read the signs (or the “explanation of the employment of the *hieroglyphs*”, according to the title), but also synthesizes Egyptian mythological culture in the body of hieroglyphs (or “the explanation of what emanated from the Gods, the noble ancestors, the sacred traditions from the nomes of Upper and Lower Egypt”). It becomes clear, then, that this work can be understood as a symptom that, at that moment, writing is not only supposed to convey a linear latent linguistic content, but to (organize and then) enable

²⁵ Iversen translates *tj.t* as “sign”.

²⁶ “Of the present text only scanty fragments of two pages are left, together with three loose fragments” (Iversen 1958: 1)

an in-depth interpretation of the hieroglyph (perhaps with the purpose of *revelations*: “disclosure of the things hidden”)²⁷ and by extension, of the whole of Egyptian culture.

Here is the first hieroglyphic exegesis from *Carlsberg VII*:



I.e. An Ibis. *I.e.* “A heart descends”, in accordance with what Re’ said about it: “it descended from the body”. *I.e.* A ba descends. *I.e.* Everything is perceived through him. It is a “hjn”, It is the ancient one, who emerged from the box [chest]. It is the palette Everything in this land is perceived through the treatises and the utensils, which came into existence through him. It is his finger Thot[h], the chief of the marvels in the “house of clothing”, who regulates the entire land, the comes into existence through him. (Iversen 1958: 17)

Even with the lacunae imposed by the vicissitudes of time, this passage displays a number of extremely remarkable features, which were shared in all the hieroglyphs discussed in *Carlsberg VII*:

- a) It provides a name for the sign (“an ibis”);
- b) It is organized as a sequence of entries;
- c) The explanatory remarks are introduced with *dd* (in this context it is equivalent to “id est” or “that is”, although it can also mean “say” or “speak”);
- d) Each entry offers a different potential meaning for the hieroglyph in question, which is grounded in a specific mythical explanation;
- e) The *exegesis* not only elucidates the connection between hieroglyph and meaning, or proposes an etymology, but explains the myth or mythical figures themselves;
- f) The relationship between the hieroglyph and this mythical explanation can be analysed, in its turn, according to the modes of horizontal interaction between non-linear (the hieroglyph) and linear (text) domains (See p. 45); [Plate 53]
- g) One can identify a “tripartite” structure: signifier (hieroglyph), signified (meanings) and exegesis (interpretation).

²⁷ Which operates as a *vertical text-image nexus*.

There are reasons to believe that these characteristics reached in this work a certain degree of sophistication and consistency, and this may have outlined the model for other hermeneutic manuals. Iversen puts it very clearly that: “it must be mentioned that it was undoubtedly from texts like the present one that authors like Horapollon and Chaeremon drew the material for their works” (Iversen, 1958: 13). Moreover, it is generally accepted that *Papyrus Carlsberg VII* came from the same source as *Papyrus Carlsberg I*, mentioned above, and I do not think that this fact is a coincidence – both these manuscripts are the outcome of a very specific mind-set and attitude towards hieroglyphs (that here shows its systematized form). It is not possible to determine, however, if *Carlsberg VII* is the *very first or the most influential work* in which the characteristics presented above became assimilated: the title of this papyrus indicates the provenance of the original source of this work: “a leather-roll in the temple of Osiris”. Should this statement be true, it could imply the existence of a canon of similar treatises being preserved in temples.²⁸ Should it be proven false, this assertion can be linked with the tradition of attributing the authorship of literary works to ancient sources and authority, as a way to reinforce the truth and correctness of the content.²⁹

2.2.3. Chaeremon’s *Hieroglyphica*

Chaeremon of Alexandria was a priest³⁰ and Stoic philosopher who flourished in the 1st century C.E. He had reached some of the most preeminent positions for an intellectual in his time: he was the head of section of the Library of Alexandria in the Serapeum and was summoned to Rome in 49 C.E. where he became tutor of Nero, who would become the Roman Emperor.

²⁸ See next Section.

²⁹ Cf. *Berlin Medical Papyrus* XV, 1ff. and the *Shabaka Stone* (British Museum, EA 498).

³⁰ “Hierogrammarian” was a priest class. He is mentioned by Eusebius as *Χαίρημων ὁ ἱερογραμματεὺς*. The best source for Chaeremon and his fragments is Horst 1984.

Although he was known as a prolific author, none of his works survives in a complete form. However, one of his lost books is of major importance in the scope of the present thesis: *περὶ τῶν ἱερῶν γραμμάτων* (“On the Sacred Letters”)³¹ now traditionally referred to as *Hieroglyphica*.³² Fragments of this influential hermeneutic treatise on hieroglyphs were preserved in the form of commentaries by the Byzantine scholar John Tzetzes and arguably by Clement of Alexandria,³³ among others. This work was probably written in Greek (so as to be accessible to Tzetzes), and its advent probably conferred a great intellectual and political authority to Chaeremon since his work could be perceived as the first bridge between the dominant culture and the native religious secrets, allowing an outsider reinterpretation of Egyptian hieroglyphs. History has shown that he enjoyed the favour of the Roman rulers of Egypt.

At least one hundred years after Chaeremon’s *Hieroglyphica*, Clement of Alexandria would describe with precision – and examples – the processes of interpretation of a hieroglyph in that time. Until the first century of the Common Era, this sort of information was very unlikely to be accessible to anyone – especially a Christian. In my opinion, Clement’s description (already quoted on p. 75), shows very clearly the steps by which the meaning of hieroglyph could be interpreted *in the light of the Greek terminology and categorical mentality*, highlighting the “enigmatic” way that is equivalent to the mythographic process as it has been discussed in this thesis.

When Clement, probably based on Chaeremon, distinguishes Egyptian writing in three distinct scripts (epistolographic [i.e. demotic], hieratic and hieroglyphic)³⁴ he shows a difference between “hieratic” and “hieroglyphic”, previously known simply as “sacred letters” in Greek. This distinction corroborates my hypothesis that the term “hieroglyph writing” (“sacred carved letters”) emerged so as to distinguish the cursive sacred writing and the “enigmatic writing” that was used in the temples’ walls.³⁵ More than eighteen centuries later, Clement/Chaeremon’s

³¹ This title has been preserved in Tzetzes’s *Chiliades*.

³² We know of this name from Suidas: “Χαιρήμων γράψας Ἱερογλυφικά” (Suidas, Χαιρήμων) and “Ἱερογλυφικά ἔγραψεν ὁ Χαιρήμων” (Suidas, Ἱερογλυφικά).

³³ I fundamentally agree with Horst (1984) who, echoing Vergote (1939), ascribes Chaeremon as the source for Clement’s comments on hieroglyphs.

³⁴ See p. 89.

³⁵ See p. 97.

grammatological typology, I would suggest, became the parameter for Champollion and the Egyptological description of the hieroglyphs.

Chaeremon was not alone in providing this insight into the mechanics of hieroglyphic writing. Commenting what he believed to be the allegorical nature of the *Iliad* (*Exegesis in Iliadem*, I, 97), Tzetzes quotes correctly a series of hieroglyphs and their meanings, naming Chaeremon as his source [Plate 54]. He also suggests that *Hieroglyphica* could deal with the mechanics of hieroglyphs, including phonograms: “at another place, if you want, with the aid of Chaeremon I will speak also about the Ethiopian pronunciation of the characters themselves”.

From the twenty signs described by Tzetzes (out of “innumerable” others from Chaeremon, according to him), it is not possible to ascertain if the original included mythographic explanation for the relationship between the hieroglyph and its meaning (it was probably not in the Byzantine author’s interest). However, Tzetzes elsewhere gives an interesting indication that it might have been the case in Chaeremon’s work:

As Chaeremon, the Egyptian sacred scribe (ιερογραμματεὺς), demonstrated in his lessons about the sacred letters (ιερώων γραμμάτων), the phoenix dies once in seven-thousand and six years, when it is in the districts of Egypt. (Tzetzes, *Chiliades*: V, 395-398)³⁶

It becomes clear that there was a mythical content in this work, which was probably related to the meaning of hieroglyphs. This information is relevant because it can help to situate Chaeremon’s *Hieroglyphica* in the context of other hermeneutic treatises, such as *Carlsberg VII*.

2.2.4. Lost Hermeneutic Books?

In one of the chambers of the Temple of Edfu, there is a wall inscribed with a list of sacred books deposited there. One of these scrolls is entitled *Instructions for decorating a wall*³⁷ or

³⁶ Adapted from Host 1997: 25.

³⁷ Sauneron 1960: 138.

Specification for the painting of a wall.³⁸ It is likely that such a treatise, probably in use during the Graeco-Roman period, referred to the temple inscriptions and their principles: the title itself resembles *Carlsberg VII's* title (*Explanation of the Employment of the Hieroglyphs*).

The fact that the title has been preserved but that the work itself is now lost, suggests that this might be the case with other hieroglyphic treatises: effectively, there are at least two other accounts of books that did not make their way from Antiquity:

- **Bolos of Mendes** (3rd Century B.C.E.): According to Diogenes Laertius,³⁹ the Egyptian philosopher (with Greek education or background) Bolos of Mendes wrote two hieroglyphic hermeneutic treatises: Περὶ τῶν ἐν Βαβυλῶνι ἱερῶν γραμμάτων (“*On the Babylonian Hieroglyphs*”) and Περὶ τῶν ἐν Μερότη (sc. ἱερῶν γραμμάτων) (“*On the Meroitic Hieroglyphs*”). It is uncertain if Laertius quoted the titles correctly, or if he ever read such works. Some ancient authors, such as Diodorus Siculus, did suggest that Egyptian hieroglyphs had their origin in Ethiopia. Perhaps, taking into consideration the involvement of Bolos with alchemy and other arts, the notion of hieroglyphs as purely “Egyptian” was not “exotic and not arcane enough”⁴⁰ to grant his authority. Or, perhaps, Bolos did not have access to Egyptian religious circles. One way or the other, if these titles ever existed as books, they reveal that at that moment there was in Egypt a systematic tradition of interpretation of written characters.
- **Apollonides Horapius** (or Orapius Apollonides) was allegedly the archiprophet of Memphis in the first century C.E. Among other works on Egyptian history and religion, he is said to have written a book called Σεμενουθι (*Semenouthi*).⁴¹ This title is likely to be the Greek version of the Egyptian *sm.ntr*: or “the sacred images (or forms)”. Although it

³⁸ Chassinat 1928: 339-51.

³⁹ *Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers*, 9.49.

⁴⁰ *Pseudo-Democritus, or Bolos of Mendes* (263): Brill's New Jacoby : Brill Online

⁴¹ “Besides, he is found in every way to talk nonsense, and to contradict himself. For when he mentions earth, and sky, and sea, he gives us to understand that from these the gods were produced; and from these again [the gods] he declares that certain very dreadful men were sprung,—the race of the Titans and the Cyclopes, and a crowd of giants, and of the Egyptian gods,—or, rather, vain men, as Apollonides, surnamed Horapius, mentions in the book entitled *Semenouthi*, and in his other histories concerning the worship of the Egyptians and their kings, and the vain labours in which they engaged” (Theophilus, *Antiocheni ad Autolycum*: 2.6).

is not possible to ascertain that this was a hermeneutical work, there are at least three indications that it might have been the case: (i) the historical context, in which other similar works have appeared; (ii) the access that Apollonides, as a leading priest, would have to the information needed to write a hermeneutic treatise; (iii) the title itself, which is certainly not extant in full.



I am of the opinion that the conjunct of the treatises discussed above constitutes reliable evidence for the “hermeneutic tradition” of hieroglyphs that was systematized in Egypt from the Ptolemaic Period on. Such treatises, of course, did not appear without reason: there are decisive factors and cultural precursors that might help explain this change in the perception and attitude towards writing.

For this thesis – including the hypotheses proposed here – the importance of this phenomenon is twofold: first, because it draws attention to the process of interpretation of writing, showing how hieroglyphs incorporated non-linear elements of writing in their linear system, and thus created a *transcending* kind of *script*; on the other hand, the whole process discussed in this Chapter hopefully also explains the emergence of a crucial book – certainly one of the most significant for the phenomena studied in the present thesis: Horapollon’s *Hieroglyphica*.

CHAPTER FOUR:

Horapollon's *Hieroglyphica*.

Hieroglyphica was probably written in the second half of the 5th century by Flavius Horapollon.¹ The oldest extant copy, in manuscript, dates probably from the 14th century and is presented as a translation into Greek of the original (together with further amendments), made by an otherwise unknown Philippos. This influential manuscript is surrounded by controversies since it was rediscovered in Andros by Christoforo Buondelmonti in 1419 and taken to Florence in 1422.² It is divided into two books, the first containing 70 “chapters” and the second 119, and bears no illustrations or drawing of hieroglyphs: nothing but Greek letters. [Plate 55]

In this version of the work, Book 1 is entitled *The Hieroglyphs of Horus Apollon of the Nile*³ and subtitled “composed in Egyptian language by the author and translated into Greek by Philippos”.⁴ Book 2, however, has a very interesting expanded heading that might clarify the function of this work:

The second book of Horapollon of the Nile *on the hermeneutics* (ἐρμηνείας) *of the hieroglyphic writings* among the Egyptians. Now, in this second treatise I will set forth for you a good account of the remaining ones which, having no explanation (ἐξήγησιν, *exegesis*), I have necessarily added from other sources.⁵

The use of terms such as “hermeneutics” and “exegesis” makes it very clear that, at least for the compiler/editor/translator (Philippos), the purpose of this work is not merely to list the

¹ Maspero 1914.

² The impact of this work in European Renaissance will be one of the subjects of the next Chapters.

³ Ωρου Απόλλωνος [i.e. Horapollon] Νειλώου Ιερογλυφικά.

⁴ ἃ ἐξήνεγκε μὲν αὐτὸς Αἰγυπτίᾳ φωνῇ, μετέφρασε δὲ Φίλιππος εἰς τὴν Ελλάδα διάλεκτον.

⁵ ΩΡΑΠΟΛΛΩΝΟΣ ΝΕΙΛΩΟΥ τῆς τῶν παρ' Αἰγυπτίοις ἱερογλυφικῶν γραμμάτων ἐρμηνείας ΒΙΒΑΙΟΝ ΔΕΥΤΕΡΟΝ. Διὰ δὲ τῆς δευτέρας πραγματείας, περὶ τῶν λοιπῶν τὸν λόγον ὑγιῇ σοι παραστήσομαι ἃ δὲ καὶ ἐξ ἄλλων ἀντιγράφων, οὐκ ἔχοντά τινα ἐξήγησιν, ἀναγκαίως ὑπέταξα.

meaning of hieroglyphs, but to interpret mythically the relationship between signifier and signified. *Hieroglyphica* is, therefore, a *hermeneutic treatise* – as will be discussed in this chapter – par excellence: and it remains the best preserved document of its kind. Nevertheless, the title of Book 2 also reveals that something has been added to the original text. These “contributions” are probably responsible for the discrepancy between the two books (both in form and content) and the second book’s own heterogeneity, which according to modern scholars is an indication that they might be the product of different authors.⁶

Before attempting an assessment of *Hieroglyphica*, it is necessary to consider to what extent it corresponds to Horapollon’s original. In this chapter I explore a methodological approach that can be of help to make this necessary distinction.

To start with, this difference becomes evident if one contrasts chapters from the two books:

- **Example X: Book 1, Chapter 1:**

Signifying “Aion” [Αἰών] they [the Egyptians] write the sun and the moon, because these are the eternal⁷ elements. Wishing to write⁸ “Aion” differently, they draw a serpent with its tail covered by the rest of its body. The Egyptians call this “uraeus” – that is, “basilisk” in Greek. They make this of gold and place it round the gods. The Egyptians say that “Aion” is shown by this animal because, of the three existing species of serpents, the others [two] are mortal and this alone is immortal; and [because] it kills all the other animals by blowing upon them, even without biting. Hence, since it seems to have the power over life and death, they place it upon the head of the gods. (*Hieroglyphica*: 1.1)

- **Example Y: Book 2, Chapter 32:**

Wishing to signify a woman who remains a widow until death, they draw a black dove; for this bird does not unite with another male as long as it remains widowed. (*Hieroglyphica*: 2.32)

⁶ Since Sbordone (1940).

⁷ αἰώνια

⁸ γράψαι

A number of observations can be drawn from a comparative analysis of these two typical chapters: (a) **X** is considerably longer than **Y** and bears a remarkable similarity to other hermeneutic manuals; (b) **X** offers two ways to *write* the concept in question, whilst **Y** presents only one way to *signify* it; (c) the “concept” from **X** correspond to a single word (*Aion*), whereas in **Y** it is much longer (“a woman who remains a widow until death”); (d) the “*uraeus*” is attested in Egyptian hieroglyphs, but the “black dove” is not; (e) the meanings offered in **X** can be attested (sun and moon to write “eternity”, for example), while the meaning and exegesis shown in **Y** cannot; among others.

Despite the differences, the structure of the first example (the triad: hieroglyph, meaning and exegesis) is clearly imitated in the second one – and this fact has led many critics to underestimate the importance of *Hieroglyphica* for “errors” that occur in Book 2, even with the consensus that these books probably have different authors. Also, this inconsistent criticism makes it very difficult to discuss *Hieroglyphica* in its historical context. As a consequence, I have suggested elsewhere⁹ that a qualitative or quantitative analysis of this work would benefit if a differentiation was made between the “Extant *Hieroglyphica*” (i.e. the Greek manuscript as it has been found¹⁰) and the “Original *Hieroglyphica*” (i.e. the hypothetical work written by Horapollon, partially preserved in the extant version). In order to establish this distinction I then proposed a number of objective criteria:

- **Textual Analysis of the formula <signifier VERB signified>:**

A study of the linguistic structure of the chapters in Greek suggests that there is a clear difference in the distribution of verbal locutions that connect signifier and signified (derived from the verbs γράφω, “write”; δηλώω, “show”; and σημαίνω “signify”) throughout the manuscript. The most frequent structure in Book 1 (γράφοντες + signified + VERB + signifier), for example, does not occur at all in Book 2;

- **Number of “entries” (signifier + signified) per chapter:**

⁹ “Reassessing Horapollon”, The Society for Emblem Studies International Conference, University of Glasgow, 2011.

¹⁰ Bibliotheca Laurentiana Medicea (Florence): *MS. Plutei 69: Codex 27*

As one can observe from the examples quoted above, some chapters can present one or many different meanings for each hieroglyph. In Book 1 there are substantially more entries per chapter than in Book 2; [Plate 56]

- **Attestation of hieroglyphs in earlier Egyptian sources:**

e.g. the *uraeus* occurs in Egyptian linear and non-linear writings; the *black dove* does not;

- **Authenticity:**

The attestation or plausibility of the “entries” in earlier Egyptian sources (i.e. if the use of the hieroglyph described really corresponded to the meaning attributed in *Hieroglyphica*).

The result of this analysis suggests that the “extant *Hieroglyphica*” can be divided into three distinct sections of consecutive chapters that I refer to as **A**, **B** and **C** [Plate 57]. Based on this criterion, it is possible to elaborate on different authorship scenarios, discerning which sections of the “extant *Hieroglyphica*” correspond to the original version of this treatise – at least provisionally, for the sake of a pertinent criticism. This distinction might be relevant, as well, to develop specific translating strategies for the books, which would improve our understanding of such a work.

1. Authorship and Language

My working premise is that only sections **A** and **B** can be considered a translation or even to be related to the conjectural “original *Hieroglyphica*” written by Horapollon. The basis of my hypothesis is that these two sections are the only ones that are derived from authentic Egyptian sources. Moreover, I do not agree that the work as it is now corresponds to a verbatim copy of Horapollon’s original text. Some scholars have suggested that *Hieroglyphica* was written originally

in Greek, following Sbordone.¹¹ I dispute this possibility on two grounds: first, Flavius Horapollon was one of the best grammarians of his time,¹² while the Greek in this manuscript has been described as *poor* – what would explain this contradiction? I am of the opinion that the “quality” of the text might result from the translation *into Greek*; second, I think that an inaccurate translation might be responsible for some imprecision in the meanings given by Horapollon – here is an example:

Θεὸν βουλόμενοι σημήναι, ἢ ὕψος [...] ἱέρακα ζωγραφοῦσι (*Hieroglyphica*: 1.06)

Literal translation from Greek:

“Wishing to signify god, or height [...] they draw a falcon”

Anyone trying to attest the use of the hieroglyph of a falcon to write the word “height” (ὕψος) in Egyptian will probably be unsuccessful. However, as this animal was consecrated to the god Horus, its hieroglyph could be used as a phonogram, to allude to the sound of *hr* – and in Egyptian the notion of “upper part, above” (ἄνω, in Greek) happens to be written precisely as *hry* (or ⲭⲣⲁ in Coptic). Although there is no attestation of the hieroglyph of a falcon to write *hry*, it is *plausible* that it could be used to write this word. Therefore, there is a case for believing that Horapollon wrote ⲭⲣⲁ and the translator chose the wrong Greek word to translate it (after all ὕψος and ἄνω belong to the same semantic field). This hypothesis is reinforced by the frequent use of words that, in Coptic, would produce alliteration (frequent in Ancient Egyptian texts) through the repetition of the consonants *hr* (ⲭⲣ).

If the hypothesis presented above is not convincing enough to sustain that Horapollon wrote his work in Coptic, it at least provides a good case to suggest that Horapollon had direct access to early sources belonging to the hermeneutic tradition.

¹¹ “*Il Lauth immagina ch’ egli componesse il libro in Copto quando ancora non era padrone della lingua greca, alla quale avrebbe finito col dedicarsi completamente in età matura*’ [... However] *Questa trama d’ ipotesi è tutta infondata*” (Sbordone 1940: xxviii). Cf. Lauth 1876.

¹² Maspero 1914.

As for section C, I was not able to find any evidence that this section was written in any language other than Greek. Many of the hieroglyphs presented in this section do not even occur in Egyptian iconography and the exegesis is almost totally drawn from Graeco-Roman literary sources. For this reason, I would attribute this whole section to a later compiler – probably Philippos himself, who imitates the structure (namely the triad *signifier*, *signified* and *exegesis*) and the linguistic style (with some symptomatic differences) present in section A. This author is probably responsible for some interventions in section A, adding new chapters (such as chapter 1.09) or digressions to the “original”.¹³

2. “Original *Hieroglyphica*”

The identification of what can be considered derived from the “original *Hieroglyphica*” is of great importance: it certainly sets the parameters for analysing this work in its historical context and, by doing so, underlines the importance of this work as the *consolidation of a genre*. Here I will examine some of the characteristics of *Hieroglyphica* in the light of what has been discussed so far in this thesis.

2.1. Genre Structure of the Work

Hieroglyphica starts *ex-abrupto*: there is no introduction or preamble to the text and the first chapter starts right after the title. This might be an indication that the work was found in fragments or is actually an *epitome* of someone who studied *the original text* and translated briefly the passages of his or her interest. The fact that the chapters seem to have had a different treatment

¹³ Cf. Crevatin and Tedeschi 2002: 21.

(with the first ones being well described, while others lack an elaborated exegesis) might reinforce this hypothesis.

As is the case with other hermeneutic treatises, *Hieroglyphica* is not a grammar of the Egyptian language: at no point is it mentioned that this work was produced with the objective of *teaching* how to write in hieroglyphs. In fact, the most common phonographic hieroglyphs are surprisingly omitted from this work.

Moreover, different from other treatises on the hermeneutics of hieroglyphs, the chapters of *Hieroglyphica* have different *departure points*. *Grosso modo*, there are two possible angles:

- **“Homographic Perspective”**: this is the same arrangement adopted by *Papyrus Carlsberg VII*, for example, in which a hieroglyph [signifier] is introduced together with its different meanings [signified]:

Showing “monogenes”, or “genesis” [γενεσις]¹⁴, or “father”, or “cosmos”, or “man”, they draw a *scarab*. “Monogenes” because this animal is self-generated¹⁵ [...]; “Genesis” for the aforementioned reason; “Father”, because the scarab takes its genesis by a father only; “cosmos”, since its genesis makes the figure of the cosmos [κοσμοειδη]; “male”, since there is no female genre among them [...] (*Hieroglyphica*: I.10)

- **Allographic Perspective**: here, the concept [signified] is presented followed by one or more corresponding hieroglyphs [signifiers], showing the different ways it can be expressed:

*When they want to show a “year”, they draw “Isis”, that is, a woman. By the same [sign] they signify the goddess. Among them Isis is a star, called in Egyptian “Sothis”, and in Greek “Astrocyon”,¹⁶ that seems to reign over the other stars, rising sometimes greater, or lesser, sometimes brighter, and at other times not so. And moreover, according to the rising of this star we learn everything that will be accomplished in the year to come: on which very account, not without reason, they call the year ‘Isis’. Writing “year” differently, they draw a “palm tree” [branch], because this is the only tree, among all others, that produces a single branch at [each new] moon rising, so that in twelve branches the year is completed. (My emphasis. *Hieroglyphica*: I.03)*

¹⁴ γενεσιν, “genesis” or “creation” < from *hpr, kheper*, “to become”, “to take shape”.

¹⁵ αυτογενες, self-generated; *kheper-djesef*, self-generated, “he who created himself” is a common epithet in Egypt.

¹⁶ Αστροκυων, the dog-star, i.e. Sirius.

From the viewpoint of genre analysis, this subtle difference in how the content is presented reveals an original contribution by *Hieroglyphica* to the hermeneutic tradition. While in the hermeneutic treatises the signifier [hieroglyph] is the “protagonist” of the entries, to which many meanings can be attributed, in *Hieroglyphica* the concept [signified] is also elevated to the same ontological status as the hieroglyph. Considering that this change does not facilitate the organization and presentation of the work, and in the absence of further explanation, the reason for this phenomenon dwells in the realm of speculation. In my opinion, it might be a sign that this work is not limited purely to the boundaries of “philological interest”. Instead, there appears to be a strong ontological dimension that *justifies* the reason why a hieroglyph is attributed to a concept (sometimes a philosophical entity) by its philosophical (and mythical) nature – and not only the contrary.

2.2. The Choice of Hieroglyphs

With regard to the choice of the hieroglyphs explained in *Hieroglyphica* (sections A and B), it is certain that Horapollon had the opportunity to see hieroglyphic inscriptions on monuments and ruins. From Zacharias’s description of the inscribed wall of the Shrine of Isis in Menouthis – that Horapollon visited– it is to be supposed that he had, in fact, a very close contact with them (see p. 141). So, *why did Horapollon not explain in his work the most frequent hieroglyphs he could see in such inscriptions (mostly phonograms)?* Three hypotheses may be explored here: a) the treatise is not complete and he would have explained such hieroglyphs in his original work, now lost; b) he did not aim to create a treatise on *how to write in hieroglyphs* but to compose – as its title and content suggests – an explanation of hieroglyphs with particular theological and enigmatic meanings (as is the case with *Papyrus Carlsberg VII*); c) he did not know the meanings and relied on previous hermeneutic treatises and/or other sources.

2.2.1. The Order of the Hieroglyphs

One of the questions that remain unanswered about *Hieroglyphica* is if there is an order for the sequence of chapters. As has been mentioned in the previous chapter, Egyptian onomastica would organize words in hierarchical groups – more or less in the same way as hermeneutic treatises used to. In *Hieroglyphica* the chapters are sometimes dedicated to hieroglyphs, sometimes to concepts. In this sense, it is impracticable to establish an alphabetical sequence. That having been said, one can observe the configuration of different categories in *Hieroglyphica*. The following sequence of chapters illustrates this argument:

CHAPTER	THEME
1.36	Heart (Thoth)
1.37	Education
1.38	Egyptian Letters
1.39	Sacred Scribe
1.40	Government or Judge
1.41	Bearer of the Shrine
1.42	Horoscopist

All the themes above are associated with the notion of priesthood in Egypt, and the first chapter of this sequence is dedicated to the *Ibis* – i.e. the animal consecrated to Thoth, patron of the priests, Egyptian writing, astronomy, etc.

2.3. The “Tripartite” Structure of the Chapters

From the passages quoted so far, it is easily observable that the chapters are conceived around an underlying tripartite structure that combines signifier (hieroglyph), signified (concept) and exegesis. Although present in most of the chapters, this triad is not stable (some chapters have

one signifier, one signified, and multiple exegeses; others have one signified, many signifiers and exegeses, etc.). As discussing the details of the relationship between these three elements in all chapters in *Hieroglyphica* would most certainly exceed the limits of this thesis, I present one illustrative (and famous) example from which I will draw a few considerations:

When they want to write “cosmos”, they draw a serpent devouring its own tail and covered with many-coloured scales. By the scales they allude to the stars of the cosmos. This animal is very heavy, like the earth; but it is also very smooth, like water. Every year, it strips off its old age with its skin, as in the course of a year the cosmos changes and becomes young again. [The fact of] using its own body as nourishment signifies that all the great things divine providence engenders in the cosmos are taken back again into it by [a process of] diminution. (*Hieroglyphica*: 1.02)

2.3.1. The Signifier

The most ancient example of a “serpent devouring its own tail” that is still preserved is in a mythographic panel pertaining to the tomb of Tutankhamen, dating back to the 14th century B.C.E. There, two ouroboros-serpents (called “Mehen, the one who encircles”) surround the head and the feet of the mummified Tutankhamen [Plate 58: A]. R. T. Rundle Clark interprets these serpents as the earth and the sky enclosing the “Cosmic Form” (1959: 81).

Many other examples occur in Egyptian mythograms: the *Papyrus of Herytwebkht* (Cairo Museum 10254), from the 21st Dynasty (c. 11th century B.C.E.), shows the ouroboros as giving birth to the young Horus, “supported by the two lions of the horizon” [Plate 58: B];¹⁷ Erik Hornung recollects another excellent example from the same period: [Plate 59: A]

The image of an ouroboros is found on a coffin painting from Dynasty 21. The ouroboros surrounds a rabbit, the Egyptian written sign for *wen* (being). The rabbit appears on a standard otherwise reserved for the images of the gods. Words can only approximate what this single image expresses so beautifully: divine being is enclosed by nonbeing, representing the world’s horizons. Nonbeing is the space in which being continually renews itself, and is also the locus of the dissolution of being at the end of time. The nocturnal regeneration of being takes place in the body of the snake. In the New Kingdom text of the Amduat, the hour-by-hour account of the nightly voyage of the sun god

¹⁷ Goff 1979: figures, 102.

through the Netherworld, we read that this process takes place inside “the encircler of the world”. (Hornung 1992: 51)

Later, in the Graeco-Roman period, the ouroboros is converted into an influential Gnostic symbol, appearing with frequency in Gnostic gems [Plate 59: B], and also an alchemical sign.¹⁸

There is absolutely no doubt that the ouroboros was an important and genuine Egyptian *mythogram*. However, there is absolutely no occurrence of this sign in linear writing. Would that mean, then, that this sign is not a *hieroglyph*? If one judges this chapter from the logocentric conception of hieroglyph as only linear writing, it would be hard to argue the contrary. However, if one takes into consideration what the Egyptians understood as *tj.t*, the ouroboros is certainly a hieroglyph, an element of the Egyptian writing culture. This is one of the practical occasions in which a vacillating notion of hieroglyph may represent lead to an unsatisfactory understanding of a scriptural phenomenon.

In *Hieroglyphica*, other cases like this one will occur. But, this was also the case with other hermeneutic treatises (for instance, the *ibis* discussed in *Papyrus Carlsberg VII* can be interpreted perfectly as a mythogram). Nevertheless, more frequently the hieroglyphs discussed by Horapollon are signs affected by “grammatological gap” (due to the long and inexorable process of “grammatological estrangement”). As it is then impossible to identify the scriptural functions (ideogram, phonogram, determinative, etc.) of these signs, they all become understood as mythograms.

2.3.2. The Signified

In the modern translations of *Hieroglyphica* (George Boas 1950; Alexander Turner Cory 1840), “cosmos” is often translated as “the universe”. This choice is problematic, since the contemporary scientific conception of “universe” and even “world” is radically different from the

¹⁸ See Chapter Ten for the continuation of the use of the ouroboros in Alchemy.

ancient cosmological model that Horapollon probably refers to – which involves a celestial vault where the stars are represented by the scales of the serpent.

To correctly interpret this chapter, it is also fundamental to understand that for the Egyptians – since remote ages – the concept of “cosmos” does not only encompass the whole notion of space, but involved the notion of cyclical time:

The Egyptians called the year “that which rejuvenates itself” (*renpet*). On every New Year’s Day it starts again and after a small beginning it increases in size. The New Year’s Day marks both the birthday of the sun god and “the beginning of time”; in short, it signals the return of creation. (Hornung 1992: 52)

In the few chapters of *Hieroglyphica*, one can see that a number of fundamental concepts are presented and interpreted in the light of a culture that was then marching to its *ruin*. Given the relative critical distrust of Horapollon, modern scholars have failed to propose an interpretation of *Hieroglyphica* as a philosophical work – on the edge between abstract Hellenistic metaphysics and the visible world of hieroglyphs. There is, for instance, a strong philosophical principle beneath the correspondence between signifier-signified in hermeneutic treatises. According to Porphyry,

Chaeremon and the others do not believe in anything prior to the visible cosmos (κόσμων), stating that the basic principles are the gods of the Egyptians and that there are no other gods than the so-called planets, and those stars which fill up the zodiac, and all those that rise near them, and the sections relating to the decans, and the horoscopes, and the so-called mighty rulers. (Apud Eusebius. *Preparatio Evangelica*: 3.4. Adapted from Horst 1987)

The idea, in Late Antiquity, that there is a direct correspondence between the gods and the stars is parallel to Horapollon’s statement that Isis corresponds to the star Sirius (*Hieroglyphica*: 1.03, quoted above). This principle is very similar to the ancient Egyptian conception of a mystical unity between hieroglyph and its meaning.

2.3.3. The Exegesis

In the chapter quoted here, Horapollon produces what I would call a “mythographic *tour de force*”. In order to confirm the relationship between signifier (ouroboros) and signified (cosmos) he recovers or *retells* a series of myths in an excursus – using the same model present in other hermeneutic treatises:

- a. “By the scales [of the serpent] they allude to the stars of the cosmos”

Here, the author associates the “many-coloured scales” with the stars in the firmament. A constitutive part of the signifier, therefore, is associated with a constitutive part of the signified. Therefore, in this case, there is a correspondence not only between the entities, but also between their parts – configuring an interesting form of synecdoche.

- b. “This animal is very heavy, like the earth; but it is also very smooth, like the water”

This is a particularly enigmatic passage. If one is unfamiliar with the Egyptian myths of creation, it is very hard to find an association between this quality of the animal and the meaning of cosmos. However, according to some Ancient Egyptian cosmogonies, the primeval chaos was essentially made of water (*nun*) and from these waters the earth emerged in the form of a mound (*benben*, which often occurs in Egyptian visual culture in the form of a pyramid). The Egyptians often associate amphibians and reptiles with the beings that dwell in the limits between the created world and the primeval waters – the Ogdoad (the eight gods of creation) are often presented with the head of frogs. In this fragment, Horapollon again associates the qualities of the serpent (its weight and smoothness) with the quality of the cosmos (the earth and the water).

- c. “Every year, it strips off its old age with its skin, as the course of a year in the cosmos changes and becomes young again”

The association between the ouroboros and the year was in vogue in the 4th Century when Servius explains that “according to the Egyptians, before the invention of the letters the year was indicated by a picture of a serpent biting its own tail, because it recurs on itself”.¹⁹ Servius’

¹⁹ “*Annus secundum Aegyptios indicabatur ante inventas litteras picto dracone caudam suam mordente, quia in se recurrit*” (Servius. *Commentary on Aeneid*: 5.85)

“tripartite arrangement” is remarkably similar to Horapollon, and this suggests, once more, that Horapollon is part of a canon. In *Hieroglyphica*, the year is not only associated with the bite, but more specifically with the serpents’ shedding their skin. Similarly, the poet Nonnus from Panopolis²⁰ (by the end of 4th century or early 5th century) suggests that Aion (that Horapollon discusses in chapter 1.01) “changes the burden of old age like a snake who sloughs off the coils of the useless old scales, rejuvenescing while washing in the swells of the laws [of time]” (*Dionysiaca*: 41.18off)

d. “[The fact of] using its own body as nourishment signifies that all the great things divine providence engenders in the cosmos are taken back again into it by [a process of] diminution”

The quotation from Servius appears to be fully developed here. This passage can be perfectly metaphorically interpreted in its own terms, viz. that the cosmos, as the serpent, is in constant change, consuming its own existence. In fact, in the early 5th century, Macrobius associated the ouroboros with Janus (who moves the sky), stating that:

(...) the Phoenicians in order to express him [Janus] in their sacred images would fashion a dragon reduced in an orb and devouring its own tail, so it appears as the world (*mundum*) that gets nourished by its very self and revolves in itself. (*Saturnalia*: I, 9, 12)

However, when Horapollon mentions the “diminution” that takes place in the cosmos, he might be suggesting that there is a second analogy in this exegesis – the hermetic process of diminution of the being:

The people call change death, because the body is dissolved, and life, when it's dissolved, withdraws to the unmanifest. But in this sermon (logos), Hermes, My beloved, as thou dost hear, I say the Cosmos also suffers change - for that a part of it each day is made to be in the unmanifest - yet it is never dissolved. These are the passions of the Cosmos - revolving and concealments; revolving is conversion and concealment renovation. (*Corpus Hermeticum*: 11, 14)

This idea that the cosmos is eternal, but that its elements *dissolve* (becoming “unmanifest”) within its boundaries provoking its change is in absolutely harmony with Horapollon’s conception. This chapter, consequently, does not only present a series of myths in

²⁰ Horapollon was probably born in the same nome (Panopolis, Akhmin), where his family had properties.

order to justify the relationship between signifier and signified – it goes further and also *addresses* a theoretical model of the universe.

The function of exegesis in *Hieroglyphica* is to fill up the “grammatological gap” with myth (preserving the understanding of the hieroglyphs) and, by implanting the exegesis, to preserve the myth itself, organized in a systematic and harmonic way as the explanation of hieroglyphs. As for its exegetical model, roughly speaking, it is mostly based on the similitude of forms (when hieroglyphs and their meanings have a similar appearance) and in the correspondence of its direct or constitutive qualities (at a metaphorical level). Sometimes, the exegesis might also offer a linguistic explanation, via paronomasia, for an entry (the best example being chapters 1.07 and 1.38).

Hieroglyphica, therefore, is much more than a list of hieroglyphs and their meanings, together with “useless” explanations. Although its primary function might be interpreting hieroglyphs, its collateral effect is a unique synthesis of surviving ancient myths, contemporary myths, philosophical speculations, naturalism, hieroglyphs and language.

2.4. Authenticity of Horapollon’s Hieroglyphs

As *Hieroglyphica* was written by the end of the 5th century – approximately a hundred years after the last known dated hieroglyphic inscription (394 C.E., Temple of Isis, Philae), the authenticity of Horapollon’s hieroglyphs has always been a preoccupation of its critical fortune. For many years, this work was taken as something completely wrong or suspicious – partly as a logocentric biased response to the prolific reception of *Hieroglyphica* in the Renaissance, and partly given the problems that could be easily identified in “section C” of the document.

One of the most common mistakes for the appreciation of this treatise was probably the attempts to compare the hieroglyphs explained by Horapollon with classical hieroglyphic writing, which was in use two millennia before he was born. The prejudice against *Hieroglyphica* was so largely accepted that even today one can still read its echo. To quote a recent example, from a

preeminent scholar (Peter Parsons, Regius Professor of Greek at Oxford University, from 1989-2003):

[...] Only later, in the fourth century AD, when the old Egyptian scripts were history, do we find the charlatan Horapollon interpreting the ‘meaning’ of hieroglyphs for Greek readers – a few facts buried deep in pure fantasy. (Parsons 2007)

It is not particularly hard to refute this anthology of mistakes:

- There is evidence showing that the Egyptian scripts were still in use in the 4th century;
- Horapollon flourished in the second half of the 5th century – and became the head of the most important school of Alexandria;
- There is a hypothesis that *Hieroglyphica* was written in Coptic – if so, the public for this work was not the Greeks;
- About being “buried deep in pure fantasy”, there is not much to say as this statement lacks any criterion.

The first systematic studies of *Hieroglyphica* in the light of Egyptology revealed that many of the hieroglyphs discussed there could be attested in earlier Egyptian sources. The efforts of Sbordone (1940), Walle and Vergote (1953) are of paramount importance as they were pioneers in changing the academic perspective towards Horapollon. More recently, standing on the shoulders of their predecessors, Thissen (2001), Crevatin and Tedeschi (2002) contributed decisively to the problem of the authenticity of *Hieroglyphica* chapters.

The question, however, has not been entirely exhausted. Even the modern editions of Horapollon come to conclusions that can be the object of a pertinent debate. For instance, here is how Crevatin and Tedeschi present their quantitative findings on the authenticity of *Hieroglyphica*:

[...] If we take into account mere quantitative data, we find a total of 162 hieroglyphs (as many as we may find in books I and II-30 and 118), the interpretation is (more or less) true in about 90 cases,

i.e. in 57% of the total. This shows unequivocally that the knowledge referred to by Horapollon was generally of mediocre quality. The rate is also too low to admit that Horapollon had actual knowledge of the Egyptian hieroglyphic system, as all other scholars have so far acknowledged. (Tedeschi and Crevatin 2002: 21).

I have absolutely no intention of discrediting their work, but I must firmly disagree with some of their results. And I enumerate some of my reasons: (1) the *Hieroglyphica* we possess is not the original work (I maintain that even “sections A and B” are but a translation or adaptation of the original); (2) it is not clear what the authors consider to be the “Egyptian hieroglyphic system” here (is it the Middle Egyptian? Does it include mythograms or “images”?); (3) the authors do not demonstrate their criteria to establish what is “more or less”, “true” or “false”; (4) the conclusion is at best an *argumentum ad ignorantiam* and an appeal to authority. If one were to compare an “enigmatic” inscription in an Egyptian temple from the Roman period with another from a text written in Middle Egyptian, the difference between them, at first sight, would be even more expressive. Would that mean that the author of the first inscription had no actual knowledge of hieroglyphs? The answer is no. I do not find terms such as “true, false, right or wrong” particularly useful for the study of any cultural phenomenon, especially in the case of writing and language. The validity (or “trueness”) of a semiotic system does not depend on earlier stages of its own development – but on a synchronic social convention. Ergo, in order to state that a hieroglyph from Horapollon is “false”, it is necessary to prove it from a source *from the period*. Otherwise, one falls into an argument from ignorance, i.e. the *absence of evidence* (of written texts from the period) becomes the *evidence of absence*.

Speaking hypothetically, if Crevatin and Tedeschi reached the conclusion that *Hieroglyphica* is only 57% accurate *by comparing it with earlier Egyptian sources* (criterion), the logical consequence could be only that Horapollon would not have knowledge of an *earlier stage of the Egyptian hieroglyphic system*.

In order to avoid problems of that nature, I propose a small number of criteria for the analysis of the “veracity” of the hieroglyphs from Horapollon:

- **Terminology:** the entries (signifier-signified relationship) from *Hieroglyphica* should be identified as “attested”, “plausible”, “undefined”, or “non-attested” – thus avoiding judgements of taste. All these labels except the first must be regarded as provisional (i.e.

likely to change in the face of new evidence). In my study, I define an entry as “attested (in earlier sources)” if the hieroglyph in question can be verified with the same meaning, in earlier stages of Egyptian writing, by comparing it with a sign list (Kurth 2010), lexica (Wilson 1991; Daumas 1988-1995), or inscriptions/objects; by “(grammatologically) plausible”, I understand the hieroglyph that – although not attested in the sources available – makes use of the principles of hieroglyphic writing;²¹ when the hieroglyph is attested, but the meaning is not exactly the meaning ascribed by Horapollon, or when the hieroglyph is not exactly the same as described by Horapollon, but the meaning is the same, I consider the entry “undefined”; finally, when I cannot attest the relationship between signifier and signified, I understand it as “non-attested (in earlier sources)” – and that does not imply that the hieroglyph is *false*: it means that the only source available is *Hieroglyphica* (and could still be “correct” if it was accepted as so by Horapollon’s circle);

- **Corpus:** the difference between the “extant *Hieroglyphica*” and the “original *Hieroglyphica*” must always be clear, as it entails different authors and sources; this also means that further comparative studies between Greek and Coptic should be undertaken, so as to verify the uses of alliteration and paronomasia;
- **Definition of Hieroglyph:** the working notion of “hieroglyph” should be closer to the Egyptian concept of *tj.t* (used in the title of *Papyrus Carlsberg VII*), and not restricted to the vulgar idea of hieroglyph (as linear characters only). In other words, mythograms or “images” must be considered as “hieroglyphs”, precisely as they were (see Chapter Two).

²¹ E.g. Horapollon states that vulture be used to write “boundary” (or “limit”). I have been unable to attest any use of this hieroglyph with this meaning. However, the vulture can often be used phonetically to write the sound “n” (Kurth, 84) and the Egyptian word for territory is “hyn” (Wilson, 1080). Therefore, although not attested, the vulture could “plausibly” be used to write phonetically the word “hyn”. Because of the many and enigmatic possibilities of hieroglyphic writing during the Graeco-Roman Period. Fairman (1945), Drioton (1953) and Sauneron (1982) constitute an indispensable reference for determining the “plausibility” of Horapollon hieroglyphs, not excluding other sources.

So far, applying the above mentioned criteria in my studies, I have been able to *identify 91% of the 177 entries from sections A and B with earlier stages of the Egyptian writing*. Of these, 62% have been attested and 29% are plausible.²² Hypothetically, Philippos and other later interventions may be responsible for the other 9%, and/or it can simply refer to new hieroglyphs or usages – not attested in earlier sources. [Plate 60]

Some further considerations can be derived from these findings:

- The internal evidence of *Hieroglyphica* is not sufficient to determine whether Horapollon *did or did not* write texts in hieroglyphs: the author does not write a single sentence in hieroglyphs, he does not claim to have this competence nor present this treatise as a method to do so;
- Crevatin and Tedeschi's claims that Horapollon "had actual knowledge of the Egyptian hieroglyphic system" are, to say the least, imprecise. What did they mean by "knowledge of an Egyptian hieroglyphic system"? The "true" correlation between signifier and signified, or the understanding of the grammatological functions that originally linked hieroglyph and meaning? If their commentary focused on the "signifier-signified" issue, the postulate was simply ill-formulated (because it does not mean "the knowledge of Egyptian hieroglyphic system"). However, if the intention was to discuss Horapollon's awareness of grammatological knowledge, then there is a problem, as this knowledge was long forgotten due to the "grammatological estrangement": "It is greatly to be feared that, had any one asked the Tebtunis scribe [from the first or second century C.E.] for an explanation of the characters he was writing, he would have received an answer not very different from the statements of Horapollo[n]" (Bagnani 1933: 166);
- I disagree in the strongest terms with the idea that Horapollon's work is of "mediocre" quality – especially if this assertion is *derived from quantitative data*. On the contrary: the

²² The complete results of this study will appear in a commented edition (and translation from Greek into English) of *Hieroglyphica*, which I hope to prepare in the near future.

rate of 91% of attested and plausible hieroglyphs demonstrates quantitatively that Horapollon (or his source) had a considerable knowledge of these signs (even if not a practical one). Qualitatively speaking, the exegetical components of *Hieroglyphica* are yet to be fully understood, but indicate a deep and systematic knowledge of native mythology and philosophy – at a time when this knowledge was becoming more and more scarce.

2.5. Context: Author and Purpose

Flavius Horapollon²³ was a distinguished grammarian-philosopher from Phaenebythis, a village in the Panopolite nome in the Thebaid, who flourished in the second half of the fifth century, having taught and lived in Alexandria and Menouthis. He was descended from an important lineage of intellectuals and philosophers:²⁴ his grandfather, Horapollon (the elder, fl. 408 A.D. - 450 A.D.) was a famous grammarian (Suda Ω 159) who established his reputation in Alexandria and later worked in Constantinople (under Theodosius II). He is said to have written a treatise on the sacred places or temples (Τεμενικά), a *Patria* (Πάτρια, usually a long poem about the origins of a city, exalting its mythical and historical events) about Alexandria (Photius. *Bibliotheca*, 280), a work on Homer (Εἰς Ὅμηρον), commentaries (ὑπομνήματα) on Sophocles and Alcaeus and other literary pieces (δράματα) in iambic verse.²⁵ He had at least two sons, Asclepiades and Heraiscus, who followed in his footsteps. Asclepiades (Flavius Horapollon's father), according to Damascius,

had been educated mainly in Egyptian literature, [and] he had a more accurate knowledge of his native theology [than his brother, Heraiscus], having investigated the principles and methods and having enquired into the absolute infinity of its extreme limits. One can clearly see this from the hymns that he composed to the Egyptian gods and from the treatise he set out on the *agreement of all theologies*. He also wrote a work dealing with Egyptian prehistory, which contains information covering no less than thirty thousand years, indeed slightly more. (apud Athanassiadi 1999: 187)

²³ Cf. "Horapollon 2" in Jones et al. 1980: 570.

²⁴ See Maspero (1914).

²⁵ Miguélez-Cavero 2008: 7-10.

The fact that Damascius praises Asclepiades and mentions, as evidence of his qualities, his “harmony of all theologies” suggests that this work was considered an important source of knowledge in this time and is likely to have become one of the sources for *Hieroglyphica*. Heraiscus, at his turn, was no less brilliant:

They say that even Proclus is said to agree that Heraiscus was his superior; for [it is said that] what he himself knew the latter also knew, but [that] what Heraiscus Proclus still did not.²⁶

According to Suda, drawing from Damascius’ *Life of Isidore*, Heraiscus was equally brilliant, but from a different perspective: he had more “magical” approach towards the Egyptian lore (Suda: *Ηραίσκος*, H 450).

Identifying (Flavius) Horapollon’s filiations is fundamental to understand his sources in composing *Hieroglyphica* and his cultural militancy – which could help explain the purpose of such a work. In Egypt, since ancient times, the knowledge, occupation and sometimes even the name was traditionally transmitted from father to son. In effect, Horapollon acknowledges that he was educated by his father, who was a teacher for all his life.²⁷ These closed circles explain partially the difficult access that “outsiders” would have to obtain information on Egyptian hieroglyphs – which would become more and more restricted with the growing Christian persecution of pagan culture.

Since the Roman Empire’s conversion to Christianity, many violent incidents erupted between Christians and Pagans in Egypt.²⁸ It is of particular interest here to highlight one of these episodes. Even before Horapollon was born, by the time when his grandfather was active, Panopolis was under constant harassment caused by Shenoute of Atripe (ca. 385 to 465), archimandrite of the White Monastery,²⁹ who destroyed pagan temples and cults, and systematically preached against paganism.³⁰ One aspect of Shenoute’s *modus operandi* is very

²⁶ Damascius. *Vita Isidori*: 107.15-6. Apud Photium. *Bibl. Codd*: 181, 242.

²⁷ Maspero 1914.

²⁸ Cf. Athanassiadi (1993) and Rémondon (1952).

²⁹ The White Monastery was located at Sohag, on the riverbank opposite Panopolis.

³⁰ Beda’s *Life of Shenoute* gives an account of his actions and “victories” against paganism, including the description of temples and objects destroyed.

symptomatic, indeed: the tactic of denying the fact that the hieroglyphs were a writing-system (see p. 75).

Together with the efficient strategy of “provoking and destroying”,³¹ the attack on hieroglyphs is not a simple collateral effect of iconoclasm, but a way to alienate pagans by cutting their bonds with (or even their curiosity toward) their own ancestral tradition. In addition, convincing people that hieroglyphs were just “ridiculous and false things” would: (i) discredit Egyptian theological sources and their importance; (ii) support Christian iconoclasm and “cultural supremacy”; and (iii) taunt crypto-pagan cultists – who would not be able to refute the argument without giving themselves up.

It is with this background that Horapollon became the head of an important school of rhetoric and philosophy in Alexandria. His *museion* attracted some of the most prominent scholars³² of his time and welcomed disciples from both Christian and Pagan lineage. Horapollon’s position set him as the champion of this intellectual milieu, a condition that naturally resulted in rivalry and enmities.

In the autumn of 485,³³ one of Horapollon’s students, Paralios of Aphrodisias, influenced by one of his brothers (Stephen, who became a Christian monk in the monastery of Enaton), took advantage of a day when Horapollon would not be at the school³⁴ to mock and insult Pagan beliefs and gods in front of his colleagues and teachers, provoking their anger. As a result, he was ferociously beaten by a band of pagan students.

This incident³⁵ was the perfect bait to catch pagans. The Patriarch of Alexandria, Peter Mongus,³⁶ immediately instigated a counter-reaction, incriminating Horapollon before Entrechius, the Prefect of Alexandria, who was a crypto-pagan himself. Horapollon then went into hiding together with other colleagues, to some extent with the connivance of Entrechius. Continuing their retaliation, the Christians united under the command of Peter Mongus to

³¹ Cf. Hahn et al. 2008.

³² Such as Heraiscus, Isidore, Ammonius Hermias, the Christian sophist John Semeiographos, the Christian rhetorician Sopater, among others.

³³ For a discussion on the date, see Jones et al. 1980: 569.

³⁴ On Fridays, teachers and students of philosophy had their activities at the school, while the rhetoric teachers worked at home.

³⁵ A recent summarized account of this episode can be found in Watts 2010.

³⁶ According to Damascius, “a reckless and truly evil man” (Athanasiasi 1999: 113I).

attack and destroy the shrine of Isis at Menouthis,³⁷ with the help of Paralios, who knew the place. The dismantled shrine was a house, according to Zacharias Scholasticus, “totally covered by pagan inscriptions”, i.e. hieroglyphs, with hidden idols and altars “covered with blood”:³⁸

Quand il vit la multitude des idoles et qu’il aperçut l’autel couvert de sang, il s’écria en égyptien: “Il n’y a qu’un seul Dieu”, ayant voulu dire par là qu’il fallait extirper l’erreur du polythéisme nous tendit d’abord l’idole de Kronos qui était entièrement remplie de sang, ensuite toutes les autres idoles des démons, puis une collection variée d’idoles de toutes espèces, notamment des chiens, des chats, des singes, des crocodiles et des reptiles; car dans le temps les Égyptiens adoraient aussi ces animaux. Il tendit encore le dragon rebelle. Son idole était de bois, et il me semble que ceux qui adoraient ce serpent, ou plutôt que ce dernier en voulant être adoré de la sorte, rappelaient la rébellion des premières créatures, qui se fit par le bois (arbre), sur les conseils du serpent. (My emphasis. Kugener 1907: 29)

The “idol of Kronos” that Severus refers to seems to be the same that, according to Damascius, Heraiscus was able to identify as a “living image” of the god *Aion*:

Heraiscus had the natural gift of distinguishing between animated and inanimate sacred statues. He had but to look at one of them and immediately his heart was afflicted by divine frenzy while both his body and soul leapt up as if possessed by god. But if he was not moved in such a way, the statue was inanimate and devoid of divine inspiration. It was in this way that he recognized that the ineffable statue of Aion was possessed by the god who was worshipped by the Alexandrians, being at the same time Osiris and Adonis as a result of a truly mystical act of union. (Athanassiadi 1999: 76E)

I am convinced that the *Aion* mentioned above *is precisely the one described in the first chapter of Hieroglyphica*, where it is associated with the *uraeus*. This fact not only proves the “veracity” of Horapollon’s claims in that chapter, but it can be taken as a piece of evidence to confirm his authorship.

As a consequence of the events described here, possibly at Easter in 486, Horapollon was publicly execrated in Christian homilies in Alexandria where he was called the “Soul Destroyer” (*Psychapollon*). Meanwhile, under the orders of Peter Mongus, twenty camels were loaded with

³⁷ Menouthis was a city near Alexandria that disappeared underwater in the 8th century.

³⁸ For a complete account of what was found, see Zacharias’ *Life of Severus* (Kugener 1903: 27-35)

idols and other sacred objects from the shrine of Isis, and brought to Alexandria, where they were first mocked, vandalized, then set on fire, and finally pulverized in public.³⁹

In late 487 or 488, Nicomedes, an official from Constantinople came to Alexandria to investigate the possible supporters of the conspiracy against the emperor Zeno a couple of years before.⁴⁰ As Watts argues, “though it cannot be proven, there is good reason to suspect that Peter Mongus was behind this” (Watts 2006, 222). And, again, Horapollon was involved. This time he was captured and tortured, together with Heraiscus, to reveal where Harpocras and Isidorus (suspects of conspiracy) were, but according to Damascius, “racked with tortures in order to betray their accomplices, they gritted their teeth and proved themselves superior to yielding to the tyrant”.⁴¹ Probably because of torture-related wounds, Heraiscus died soon after that, while hiding in Gesios’ house.

Between 487-91 and some time before 526,⁴² Horapollon is said to have “go[ne] over to the other side and abandon[ed] his ancestral customs”, becoming a Christian. Despite Damascius’ statement that there was no apparent reason for this dramatic turn,⁴³ it is clear that Horapollon suffered the violent consequences of being a pagan leader, and for that reason it is not surprising that he may have become a Christian (or Crypto-Pagan, like Entrechius⁴⁴) to find peace, escape exile or simply survive.

On top of that, his wife left him to live with another man. While Horapollon was away, she took the opportunity to steal from their home in Phaenebythis – the reason why Horapollon wrote a formal appeal against her. This document, which was discovered by Maspero, is important not only for being a personal testimony by Horapollon, but because it gives evidence of the quality of his literary skills in Greek.⁴⁵

In sum, Horapollon’s life was a sea of troubles, but he took part in the most important historical events in Egypt. By no means is he an obscure character or “charlatan”: he was one of

³⁹ The exact site where these objects were destroyed may have been rediscovered recently in Alexandria (Rodziewicz 1992)

⁴⁰ In 481 or early 482 the poet Pamprepus went to Alexandria and tried to convince a number of pagan intellectuals to take part in the revolt.

⁴¹ Damascius, *Life of Isidore*. (Athanasias 1999: 17C).

⁴² Cf. Jones et al.: “Horapollon 2”, 569.

⁴³ Damascius, *Life of Isidore* (Athanasias 1999: 120B).

⁴⁴ Zacharias, *Life of Severus* (Kugener 1903: 25-26).

⁴⁵ Cf. Maspero 1914.

the greatest intellectuals of his time. Curiously, Horapollon is not usually presented as a philosopher – on the contrary: Damascius declares clearly “Horapollo[n] was not a philosopher by nature; but he kept hidden deep within himself some of the theological concepts of which he was aware”.⁴⁶ And Zacharias stresses Horapollon’s quality as a grammarian, in contrast with his pagan interests:

[le] grammairien (γραμματικός) Horapollon [...] connaissait d’une façon remarquable son art et son enseignement était digne d’éloge; mais il était de religion païenne, et plein d’admiration pour les démons et la magie. (Kugener 1907: 15)

Why do neither the Neo-Platonists nor the Christians recognize Horapollon as a philosopher, as he considered himself? It is certain that his familiar circle had an intense relationship with Egyptian native cults.⁴⁷ Would Egyptian religion or sources not be considered philosophy by his time? Why would Horapollon represent more risk to the *status quo* than a Neo-Platonist such as Ammonios?⁴⁸ How subversive could a *grammarian* be? The answer may lie in the purpose of *Hieroglyphica*.

Considering Horapollon’s life and its historical context, I think that there is also a strong case for understanding *Hieroglyphica* as an argument against the Christian disbelief in hieroglyphs, crossing the border of its hermeneutic function to also become *an evidence of the native wisdom*. Should *Hieroglyphica* be accepted as true, it would contradict the dominant paradigm and shed light on a wealth of pagan knowledge; Horapollon would be considered the intellectual link between his contemporaries and the ancient mysteries hidden in hieroglyphic inscriptions. Furthermore, the characterization of Horapollon as a “magician” is possibly evidence of his interest in the native culture – as opposed to a chaste affiliation to Christian or Greek philosophy.

⁴⁶ Damascius, *Life of Isidore* (Athanassiadi 1999: 120B).

⁴⁷ According to Damascius, Asclepiades – Horapollon’s father – mummified his brother, Heraiscus: “Asclepiades prepared to render him the honours customary to the priests and in particular to wrap his body in the garments of Osiris, mystic signs [diagramma] appeared everywhere on the sheets and around them divine visions which clearly revealed the gods with whom his soul now shared its abode” (Athanassiadi 1999: 76E).

⁴⁸ Horapollon was persecuted and consequently forbidden to teach and later allegedly converted to Christianity. Ammonios, who was part of Horapollon’s circle and taught in his school, kept his position as a teacher.

3. Discussion

The discussion of this chapter, dedicated to presenting a new perspective on *Hieroglyphica*, appears to be more concise in comparison to the previous chapters, but this should not be regarded as a sign that it is a less important passage of the current thesis. Rather, the conclusions or inquiries offered here are the succinct outputs of the premises obtained from the previous chapters.

3.1. Horapollon as a Continuum of the Egyptian Hermeneutic Tradition

Since its reception in the Renaissance (or, quite possibly because, of it),⁴⁹ *Hieroglyphica* has frequently been presented as a Neo-Platonic work. Recently, Mark Wildish made a very erudite study of the Greek perception of hieroglyphs in his thesis *Hieroglyphic Semantics in Late Antiquity*.⁵⁰ The provisional title of his dissertation was “Neoplatonic Hieroglyphics with particular reference to Horapollon” and in its abstract, available online, it was stated that:

Philosophers, psychologists, and linguists, both ancient and modern, are typically and all but inexplicably prone to far-reaching and seemingly ineliminable misapprehensions about how language is related to thought and how each is related to the world. *The Neoplatonists, amongst whom I count Horapollon*, were no exception. (My emphasis)⁵¹

However, in the final version of his thesis, defended in 2012 at the University of Durham, his conclusion seems different:

⁴⁹ See Chapter Five.

⁵⁰ Wildish, 2012.

⁵¹ <http://www.dur.ac.uk/classics/postgraduate/students/wildish/>

The historical argument intended to address the possibility of situating the Hieroglyphica in the broader hieroglyphic tradition on which it might be thought to depend, either generically or as a resource for specific exegetical content, is not, however, conclusive evidence of specifically Neoplatonic philosophical commitments. Though at various points I have in fact suggested that certain aspects of Neoplatonic theory cited as parallel to those in the Hieroglyphica are matters of historical contiguity, these cannot on their own establish direct historical influence on the presuppositions of the latter. They do, however, exhibit a number of formal similarities which justify the possibility of reading the Hieroglyphica with a view not to descriptive clarifications or explanatory hypotheses it offers *ad intra*, but to its reflection of broader methodological commitments *ad extra*. (Wildish 2012: 128)

Although he could not find “conclusive evidence of specifically Neoplatonic philosophical commitments” in *Hieroglyphica*, he understands that there are parallels between this work and the Neo-Platonic theory of hieroglyphs:

Though the text of the Hieroglyphica does not offer any explanatory hypotheses of a kind which explicitly address, for example, Iamblichus’ theoretical considerations of how hieroglyphs might be thought to bear sapiential significance by means of similar independent or analytically simple principles, I have argued that it does reflect other features of Neoplatonic analysis and exegesis. *First, it uncontroversially maintains the tripartite distinction between linguistic expressions, their meanings, and the objects or name-bearers which they depict. Second, I have argued that the distinction is further aligned with three modes of hieroglyphic expression: representative, semantic, and symbolic.* Third, in certain cases a procedure of principled (if not systematic) analytic explanatory ascent from empirical observation through discursive reason to metaphysical or cosmological insights is arguably employed in the exegesis of the sapiential content of the hieroglyphs. (My emphasis. Wildish: 127)

There is absolutely no doubt that Wildish made a competent research into the Greek attitude towards hieroglyphs. However, although I happily agree with his conclusion (that *Hieroglyphica* and “Neo-Platonic theory” coexist in the same historical context), I beg to differ with his reasoning. In Chapter Three I have presented evidence of the tripartite structure that appears in *Hieroglyphica* in at least one of the Egyptian hermeneutic treatises – notably *Papyrus Carlsberg VII*. This evidence, deeply rooted in Egyptian tradition, as I hope that I have demonstrated, predates Plotinus, Iamblichus and therefore the Neo-Platonic theory of hieroglyphs.

The “three modes of hieroglyphic expression”, in my opinion, should be regarded as a symptom that both *Hieroglyphica* and the Neo-Platonic view on hieroglyphs derive from the same source – Egyptian writing – through different historical paths: while I situate *Hieroglyphica* as a *continuum of the Egyptian hermeneutic tradition of hieroglyphs* (Chapter Three), the Neo-Platonic conception of hieroglyph results from an outsider perception based on second hand information

on the understanding of hieroglyphs during the Graeco-Roman period (Chapter Two). In sum, I would say that the Egyptian notion of hieroglyph in Late Antiquity (that produces a tradition leading to Horapollon) influenced the “Neo-Platonic theory” of hieroglyphs, and not the contrary.



As for the basis for *Hieroglyphica*'s content and construction, I would suggest that Horapollon was influenced by at least three main corpora: the hermeneutic tradition (in the form of a manuscript or fragment – that would provide the genre characteristics); the reminiscences of Ancient Egyptian mythology (from oral, written and iconological sources); and, just as importantly, *his father's work on the harmony of the theologies*. As far as I can see, the latter was never recognized as one of Horapollon's sources of inspiration. However, in *Hieroglyphica* one can observe frequent associations between Greek and Egyptian gods (such as Aion and Serapis/Osiris, etc.). I used to regard this fact solely as a reflection of the syncretism that was current in the Alexandrian milieu. It was with surprise that, during my studies, I came across more compelling evidence that can challenge the limits of mere coincidence, and that is not mentioned elsewhere. In the *Hermetica* (a corpus of Egyptian-Greek wisdom texts written between the 1st-3rd centuries C.E.), Mind says to Hermes:

Mind: Hear [then], My son, how standeth God and All.
 God; Aeon; Cosmos; Time; Becoming.
 God maketh Aeon; Aeon, Cosmos; Cosmos, Time; and Time, Becoming <or Genesis>.
 The Good - the Beautiful, Wisdom, Blessedness - is <the> essence, as it were, of God; of Aeon, <the essence is> Sameness; of Cosmos, Order; of Time, Change; and of Becoming, Life and Death.
 The energies of God are Mind and Soul; of Aeon, lastingness and deathlessness; of Cosmos, restoration and the opposite thereof; of Time, increase and decrease; and of Becoming, quality.⁵²

Is there any relationship between this cosmic model and *Hieroglyphica*? A parallel between the basic concepts from the text above and the general subject of the first 15 chapters of Horapollon's treatise can be revealing. [Plate 61]

⁵² *The Corpus Hermeticum*: Mind Unto Hermes. Apud Mead 1906: 11, 2.

The sequence of concepts in the two texts is strikingly similar – even the explanation of some hermetic concepts resonates in Horapollon (between brackets). The basic difference is that *Hermetica* deals with unique entities, which in *Hieroglyphica* are broken down into “categories” and explained in different ways. Also, while *Hermetica* conceives god as a unique entity, for Horapollon the gods are “mixed” with the fundamental hermetic principles. This undeniable similarity does not necessarily mean that Horapollon had this particular text as a direct source (there is a philosophical tradition behind *Hermetica*), but suggests that he is likely to have taken them into consideration, and *harmonized them* with his theurgic background that is also the product of theological syncretism (between Egyptian, Greek and Roman deities) and with the hieroglyphs. Through this complex cosmic model of *Hieroglyphica* – as yet not fully understood – one can come close to imagining the genius of Horapollon’s work.

3.2. Horapollon and the Nexus between Image and Text

In Chapter One I have proposed a theoretical approach to hieroglyphs based on the observation of *two modes of interaction between image and text* in Ancient Egypt. In this section I am going to discuss how this theoretical model can be applied to understanding *Hieroglyphica*’s tripartite structure (signifier-signified-exegesis) from a grammatological point of view.

The “vertical text-image nexus” refers to the succession of grammatological innovations that the mythography underwent in order to finally be able to express the language (and, by doing so, produce a text). Conceptually speaking, the original conception of image, that should be interpreted like a myth, *the mythogram*, first incorporated a more specialized grammatological function so as to be able to identify its constitutive elements, creating the *identifier*; these new discrete signs grew in number and became employed in different contexts to convey an idea - as *ideograms*; these hieroglyphs then began to *lend* their sound to allude to other words with similar sounds, via paronomasia, and are now referred to as *phonograms*; finally, in order to avoid the ambiguity (between *ideograms* and *phonograms*, or homographs) and help “determine” the correct

meaning of words, a new usage of hieroglyphs emerged – the *determinative*.⁵³ From the *linear writing* of these words, the image finally became able to *convey the text*.

3.2.1. Linear and Non-Linear Domain of Writing

The need to discern the earliest non-mythographic hieroglyphs from the mythograms in the same inscription established the first boundaries between non-linear hieroglyphs and *linear* hieroglyphs. The solution used to clarify this distinction was in the spatial organization of the signs: the linear ones would be small, have the same size in relation to each other and be discrete in relation to the mythographic panel. The rise of *linear writing* – which depends on a strict sequence of characters in order to be interpreted as sentences – reinforced this difference and caused a significant rupture with the way that non-linear writing (*mythography*) was organized and read. This process resulted in the creation of the *linear* and *non-linear domains* of writing.

3.2.2. Vertical Text-Image Nexus

As each grammatical innovation (ideography, phonography, etc.) came “on top” of previous functions of the images, the hieroglyph – as a grammatical entity – could sometimes accumulate different meanings according to each new *scriptural layer* that it would receive, either in the linear *or* non-linear domains. The rapport between hieroglyphs and their grammatical functions (*mythogram*, *ideogram*, *phonogram*, *determinative*, etc.) is what I call “vertical text-image nexus”.

⁵³ N.b. the determinative was essentially conceived to perform the same function, in relation to the orthography of a word (*schematogram*), that the first identifiers served in relation to the mythogram.

3.2.3. Horizontal Text-Image Nexus

In my opinion, the linear writing code in Egypt was borne from a code for a non-linear form of writing. Even with the creation of different domains, however, the Egyptians' perception of hieroglyph (as *tj.t*, see Chapter Two) remained the same. In other words, there was no difference, for the Egyptian; the distinction between the linear and non-linear codes did not create the necessity of different words for *image* and *letter*. Moreover, in the hieroglyphic culture, the linear and non-linear domains were often combined in the same context so as to produce a number of “synergic” effects. Since I understand that this relationship is a natural phenomenon of writing, it should be considered an object of grammatological investigation. In effect, I have identified three different “horizontal nexuses” between the linear and non-linear domains: register (in which the “text” gives voice to a mythographic figure); ekphrasis (in which the “text” aims to describe the “image”, or vice-versa) and synergraphy (in which “text” and “image” have no apparent relationship but, by means of their exegesis, one can reach a third meaning).

3.3. A Case Study

In principle, the relationship between a hieroglyph and its meaning is in the field of the *vertical nexus*: [Plate 62: 1]

This is the way a particular hieroglyph, its (partial) meanings and the grammatological functions (that explain these meanings) could be presented by a modern Egyptologist.

However, as was discussed in Chapter Three, by the time that Horapollon wrote his *Hieroglyphica*, Egyptian writing had been subject to a long process of “grammatological estrangement”. In other words, there was a “gap” between signifier and signified: Horapollon could know the right meaning for a hieroglyph, but he was probably unaware of the grammatological function that would connect a hieroglyph and its meaning. For instance, one can


take into consideration a passage from *Hieroglyphica* already quoted (p. 128) in which Horapollon states that “showing [...] ‘genesis’ [...] they draw a scarab”. [Plate 62: 2]

In fact, the hieroglyph of a scarab, in Ancient Egypt, was equivalent to the concept of “to become”, which could be translated in Greek as “genesis”. However, Horapollon probably does not know that the reason for this fact is that “*hpr*” (scarab) and “*hpr*” (to become) were approximate homonyms, at a certain stage of the Egyptian language. Facing this grammatological gap between signifier and signified, he fills it with a long mythological exegesis of this hieroglyph:

This animal is self-generated, being not gestated by a female, for his genesis can occur only in the following way: when the male is desirous of begetting [offspring], taking ox-dung, he shapes [it] into a spherical form about equal to the shape of the cosmos. Then he rolls it with his hinder parts from the sunrise to sunset, looking himself towards the sunrise, so as to render the shape of the cosmos – for the same [the scarab] proceeds from east to west, while the course of the stars [proceeds] from west to east. Then, having dug a hole, [the scarab] buries the sphere for twenty-eight days, and in as many days the moon completes the circle of the twelve zodiacs. By thus, remaining there [under the earth], the scarab’s offspring is engendered. And upon the nine and twentieth day, unearthing the sphere, [the scarab] casts it into water, for it is acknowledged that upon that day the conjunction between the moon and the sun takes place, as well as the genesis of the cosmos [γενεσινκοσμου]. As it [the sphere] is opened in the water, the animals, i.e. the scarabs, come out. “*Genesis*” for the *aforementioned reason* (My emphasis. *Hieroglyphica*: 1.10)

Horapollon could simply state that the scarab indicates “genesis” because this animal is “generated” as the cosmos itself. However, he provides a conjunct of mythological information that goes far beyond what could be considered necessary: it *transcends* the relationship between signifier and signified.

It can be suggested that the hieroglyph is interpreted by Horapollon not simply as ideogram, but as a mythogram, since it is the myth that explains its meaning. This possibility can lead to an interesting reflection in the light of the theory that I am proposing in this thesis: if the mythogram belongs to the non-linear domain of writing, and the concept/word belongs to the domain of linear, then Horapollon’s perspective toward the hieroglyphs might not be a “vertical” but rather a “horizontal” one. [Plate 62]

One can then analyse the model above according to the *horizontal text-image nexus*. At first sight, it cannot be considered an example of “register”, because Horapollon does not state that the scarab is *saying*, *writing* or *drawing* the word “genesis”; nor is it an ekphrasis, because in this case  would be “scarab” (or “insect”). Therefore, since there is no obvious relationship

between the image and the text, and they are not put together randomly, the outcome must be that the text-image nexus in question is *synergraphy*.

This conclusion can be illustrated by a not so distant analogy: if one were to imagine a photograph of a scarab in an exhibition bearing the title “genesis” – what would be the reaction of the reader? Initially, one could think that the relationship is arbitrary. However, accepting that the author of the photography had a motivation for choosing this title, the reader would find herself traversing mentally his (mythical, literary, scientific) knowledge of the “scarab” and “genesis” in order to find the “non-evident” link between these two domains. Let us suppose that the hypothetical reader would finally come across a *Wikipedia* “exegesis” giving the following information:

Khepri (also spelled Khepera, Kheper, Khepra, Chepri) is a god in ancient Egyptian religion. Khepri was connected with the scarab beetle (kheper), because the scarab rolls balls of dung across the ground, an act that the Egyptians saw as a symbol of the forces that move the sun across the sky. Khepri was thus a solar deity. Young dung beetles, having been laid as eggs within the dung ball, emerge from it fully formed. Therefore, Khepri also represented creation and rebirth, and he was specifically connected with the rising sun and the mythical creation of the world. The Egyptian connected his name with the Egyptian language verb kheper, meaning “develop” or “come into being” [“to become”].⁵⁴

The connection between “scarab” and “genesis” would not only be made clear: to the reader’s eye, this interaction would, from then on, carry this third mythological meaning (which I have named “synergraphic effect”) which *transcends* the cognitive sum of this image and the concept [Plate 63]. This is precisely what happens with Horapollon, with the difference that he explains the *synergraphic effect* right in the same context where the interaction is presented, in the form of *Hieroglyphica*’s exegesis.

As I have mentioned before, in this discussion, Horapollon’s *exegesis* in this chapter (as in many others) goes beyond a simple mythical association between the hieroglyph and its meaning. It has a clear anagogical purpose, since it teaches to the reader elements of the complex system that can lead him to a deeper understanding and appreciation of pagan wisdom. The anagogical quality

⁵⁴ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Khepri>

of Horapollon's exegeses (*Hieroglyphica*, sections A and B), unsurprisingly, is not present in Philippos' work. There, instead, the exegesis tends to be of a tropological (i.e. moral) nature:

When they wish to signify a wife who hates her husband, and plots his death, and mates with him only through flattery, they draw a viper. For when the viper mates with the male, she puts his head in her mouth, and after mating bites off his head and kills him (*Hieroglyphica*, 2.59. Translated by Boas 1950)

This is yet another major difference between Horapollon's and Philippos' work. Nevertheless, the combination between these two in the form of the "extant *Hieroglyphica*" will be of extreme importance for the reception of this treatise in the Renaissance (as I will demonstrate in the next Chapter).



A thorough chapter by chapter examination of *Hieroglyphica* from a grammatological perspective is yet to appear. The application of the model of observation proposed in the present discussion is merely an illustrative fraction of the studies that I carried out during my doctoral research. For the time being, the modest example presented above suffices to verify the applicability of the method of analysis in the context of the ruin of Egyptian hieroglyphic culture and consequently postulate a hypothesis to be confirmed in future studies: the inexorable grammatological estrangement (discussed in Chapter Two) deepened the "grammatological gap" causing a slow but sure split between signifier and signified in the hieroglyphic code – to the point that they became more and more regarded as pertaining to different domains.

The application of this grammatological method to the tripartite entries from *Hieroglyphica* can reveal different levels of complexity in its modes of interaction, and shed light on the scriptural processes that the hieroglyph writing went through towards the end of its history, when it gradually became dissolved into different traditions of interpretation of images (bestiaries, Christian iconography, alchemical iconology, and so on). This methodology, initially conceived to understand the different modes of interaction between "image" and "text" in Egyptian hieroglyphs, is fit for the purpose of analysing the "hieroglyphic phenomenon" in the Modern Era, in order to identify what was actually transmitted from antiquity.

CHAPTER FIVE:

Motivation Factors and Theoretical Nuclei

This chapter is dedicated to the conceptions of hieroglyphs in the Renaissance and their impact on the visual-literary culture of the Modern Era. Since Giehlow's inaugural efforts,¹ this phenomenon has become the object of concern of great experts whose work results in extremely rich studies covering different aspects of this extremely intricate discussion.²

Nevertheless, the subject studied here has not been approached, as far as I am informed, from a grammatological or anthropological perspective – and perhaps this is one of the reasons why Renaissance hieroglyphs are often referred to as “fantasy”, “wrong” or a “fraud” when compared to “authentic” Egyptian hieroglyphs. I think that this negative perception undermines the importance of such a phenomenon which has been successfully traced as being at the heart of European Renaissance text-image culture.

Moreover, the general historical approach – which often privileges the recollection of important events, individuals, objects and the contextualized interpretation of documents of the period – rarely aims to offer an answer to two questions, still extremely pertinent in my view: why did hieroglyphs become so important in the Renaissance? And can “Renaissance hieroglyphs” be considered “hieroglyphs” – i.e. are or were they considered a form of *writing*?

The present chapter dwells on these questions and hopefully presents a contribution to the understanding of this phenomenon which will later be contrasted with the role of hieroglyphs in the emblematic tradition and alchemical/hermetic iconology. The limits of a thesis required here a very succinct and rather schematic presentation of the phenomenon rather than a more detailed narrative of the events; that can be found in the bibliography.

¹ Giehlow 1915; I will be referring to the Italian edition, Giehlow 2004.

² Volkmann 1923, Dieckmann 1970, Curran 2007, Iversen 1993, Hornung 2001, Drysdall 2013 and others.

1. The New Status of Image in the Renaissance

It is certainly very dangerous to identify whole cultures and then create simplistic dichotomies: to say, for example, that medieval culture was oral-based and that the Renaissance represented a major turn to a visual-based culture. Beyond doubt the Middle Ages possessed strong visual traditions,³ just as in the Renaissance orality was not simply put aside. Nevertheless, it is undeniable that visual culture acquired a new social status in the Renaissance – especially in the context of the ruling classes: the improvement and systematic use of printing; Gutenberg’s invention and its impact on literacy rates; the new techniques and appreciation of the art of painting – and the acknowledgment of the painter as an artist (not only an artisan);⁴ the appropriation of elements of visual identity, such as badges and devices, by artists and intellectuals – which before were reserved for the nobility; the rise of the emblematic tradition and even the Council of Trent’s endorsement of the pedagogical function of images had a fundamental role in the *ascension of visuality*.

Regarded in its entirety, this phenomenon can also be understood – from a conceptual standpoint – as a major rupture with scholastic logocentrism, which was essentially dominated by a strong religious doctrine, where image had a secondary, not to say almost non-existent, *intellectual* role. In the context of Humanism, it would be natural that such drastic “innovation” in the conception of image would need to be legitimized by ancient authorities: to use Erasmus of Rotterdam’s words, above all it was then necessary to “hasten to the sources [*ad fontes*] themselves,

³ *Grosso modo*, although visually rich, the meaning of images in the Middle Ages dwelled in their intrinsic sense, be it religious or political. Oscillating between waves of iconoclasm and the domain of Christian logocentrism, the medieval visual codes preferred the objectivity of *ekphrasis* and *register* modes of interaction between text and image, as one can observe in heraldry or miniature traditions (with the inspired exception of figures such as Hildegard von Bingen or Hrabanus Maurus, and marginal canons such as the alchemical iconography) – avoiding the more “suggestive” function of *synergraphy*. This does not mean, however, that images were not systematically employed. With much propriety, Prof. Alison Saunders called my attention to the didactic use of images in the Middle Ages, especially in the context of illiterate audiences. Still, this use did not imply a primary role for images as a vehicle to convey intellectual contents – in other words, they were not regarded as *a form of writing* per se or as an instrument to educate the (already) literated. Acknowledging the scriptural nature of images, I argue, is a phenomenon that would take place in the Renaissance and the diffusion of hieroglyphs had a strategic role in the emergence of this new status.

⁴ Cf. the *Ut Pictura Poesis* paragon and the emancipation of painting (Lee 1967).

that is, to the Greeks and ancients” (Erasmus Apud Waszink 1971: 79-151). My understanding is that this preoccupation is one of the tacit motivations behind *literati* attention to Egyptian hieroglyphs – which were, among other things and according to classical accounts, the most sophisticated use of images in antiquity.

2. Renaissance Hieroglyphs in the Light of the Theory of Stimulus Diffusion

The notion of “stimulus diffusion” appeared for the first time in a homonymous essay by the North-American anthropologist Alfred Louis Kroeber (1940). The author observed that not only whole cultural patterns, systems or complexes are diffused in the inter-influencing of cultures, but sometimes, another form of diffusion

occurs in situations where a system or pattern as such encounters no resistance to its spread, but there are difficulties in regard to the transmission of the concrete content of the system. In this case it is the idea of the complex or system which is accepted, but it remains for the receiving culture to develop a new content. This somewhat special process might therefore be called “idea-diffusion” or “stimulus-diffusion”. (Kroeber 1940: 1)

The history of writing has many examples of this phenomenon.⁵ For instance, the alphabet that we have today is probably the result of the diffusion of an idea that “emanated” originally from Egyptian hieroglyphs.⁶ In very simple terms, by the Medium Bronze Era Sinaitic peoples that neighboured Egypt, in a context of cultural exchanges, probably became aware of the advantage of having a writing-system. This awareness probably evolved to a need for appropriating this cultural trait. However, there were a number of problems in this Sinaitic culture appropriating the whole Egyptian system – of which I cite a few: first, Egyptian hieroglyphic writing was very complex, and its learning was exclusive to the native religious or ruling classes; second, the system of belief was different (therefore, they did not abide by the same principles that preserved the complexity and iconicity of hieroglyphs; Egyptian mythography, for instance,

⁵ Kroeber, for example, discusses a number of phenomena, including the rise of the alphabet.

⁶ Gardiner 1916; Goldwasser 2010.

probably did not mean anything for a foreigner); there was no similar social structure to incorporate the Egyptian system of education, which depended on a whole social recognition of the importance of writing; the language was different and therefore the set of phonograms (and logograms) was absolutely unfitting (i.e. the “concrete content”, or set of signs, of the Egyptian writing could not be transmitted to the Sinaitic language). What was the alternative, then?

The Sinaitic communities incorporated one of the principles of Egyptian writing (phonography, by acrostic principle) *to meet their specific needs*⁷ reusing some few signs and creating new “letters” according to the necessity. The use of this writing-system spread to Canaan and later evolved to the Phoenician writing (which is a visually simpler version of Proto-Sinaitic), which in its turn was the basis for the Greek alphabet. One of the variations of the Greek alphabet, the Cumaean was appropriated by the Etruscans and later transmitted to the Romans, who created the Latin alphabet, still in use today.

All this course of events naturally leads to a question: would Proto-Sinaitic script be invented independently from the Egyptian hieroglyphs? No. Does our alphabet then descend from Ancient Egyptian writing? Somehow, the answer is yes. Paraphrasing Kroeber,

In this sense [the] original invention was dependent upon culture contact, and is an example of diffusion as well as of invention. It seems that this case exemplifies very well the appropriateness of the terms stimulus-diffusion and idea-diffusion. (Kroeber 1940: 3)

The alphabet was *invented* and at the same time grounded in an idea that was transmitted by another cultural trait, from another culture. Although the alphabet is not a continuum of the hieroglyphs *per se*, there is an interesting form of continuity in the grammatological function (*phonetic writing*) that was transmitted by Egyptian hieroglyphs.

⁷ The choice of this particular grammatological feature can be explained, hypothetically, in different ways: the system would be easy to learn (small set of signs) and there was no interest, in the Sinaitic culture in the cultural/religious aspect of the hieroglyphs: the appropriation was possibly motivated by practical – perhaps commercial – reasons. In this sense, it is interesting to confront the Proto-Sinaitic with another writing-system that also “derived” from Egyptian hieroglyphs, such as the Meroitic: “By comparison, in the Proto-Sinaitic alphabet [script], the adaptation of the Egyptian writing to a language that was still linguistically related involved a complete disintegration of the Egyptian system where only a few consonantal signs and the principle of acrophony were retained. On the African side [Meroitic] of the Egyptian sphere of influence, the Egyptian script was adapted more carefully, probably because it was chiefly an affair of state. The rulers of Kush considered themselves as the legitimate heirs of the glorious Egyptian Pharaohs at the time when Egypt itself was in the hands of foreigners such as the Macedonians or the Romans” (Rilly 2010: 233).

[This] process is of interest because it combines development within a culture with influence from outside. It contains the element of invention in the wider sense, as well as that of diffusion of a special kind. What is really involved in every true example of stimulus diffusion is the birth of a pattern new to the culture in which it develops, though not completely new in human culture. There is historical connection and dependence, but there is also originality. Analogically, ordinary diffusion is like adoption, stimulus diffusion like procreation, with the influencing culture in the role of the father; though by strict rules of historical evidence paternity is sometimes clouded. In essence, stimulus diffusion might be defined as new pattern growth initiated by precedent in a foreign culture. (Kroeber 1940: 20)

It is precisely in this light that I would like to assess the conception(s) of hieroglyphs in the Modern Era. This perspective differs to a great extent from other studies in the field, because it focuses precisely on what is commonly immediately dismissed by other scholars: that there is an actual connection between the two cultures, although they are not – of course – a continuum of each other.

The link and the cultural phenomena that involved the diffusion, however, are not as evident as one would expect:

This process ["idea-diffusion" or "stimulus-diffusion"] is one which will ordinarily leave a minimum of historical evidence. In a great many cases in history, as just pointed out, evidence as to the process of diffusion is much more scant than of the effects. In other words, much diffusion takes place below the surface of historical record. The evidence for it is therefore indirect or inferred, although the conclusions may be none the less indubitable. With idea-diffusion the situation is different [from other forms of diffusion previously discussed], because while systems or complexes in two or more cultures may correspond in functional effect, the specific items of cultural content, upon which historians ordinarily rely in proving connection, are likely to be few or even wholly absent. Positive proofs of the operation of idea-diffusion are therefore, in the nature of the case, difficult to secure long after the act, or wherever the historical record is not quite full. Theoretically they would be best observed in contemporary culture, were it not that the culture historian necessarily lacks perspective in interpreting the contemporary; he cannot discriminate, in the flux that surrounds him, which features will develop and lead to further effects, and which will prove to have been only transient fluctuations or abortive starts (Kroeber 1940: 1)

2.1. Two *Motivating Forces*

Much has been discussed concerning where, when and how the hieroglyphic reception in the Renaissance took place, with a profusion of details. However, I am afraid that little has been done to understand *why* it had happened and *what* was actually transmitted from ancient

hieroglyphs. Indeed, it is not uncommon to find suggestions that the reception was motivated merely by “Egyptomania”,⁸ a craze at best, and that “Renaissance hieroglyphs” – although known to be rich and influential – have nothing to do with authentic Egyptian hieroglyphs. I am of the opinion that these attitudes emanate from theoretical premises correctly applied to the well-documented “patent state” (or effects) of the reception, but fail to offer a comprehensive explanation, for example, of the widespread reach and popularity of this cultural phenomenon – which goes far beyond its possible affiliations to the Egyptian past. A humble contribution which I would like to offer to this question resides in the fact that, if the reception of hieroglyphs is to be appreciated as a phenomenon of stimulus diffusion as I propose here, there must be a Renaissance *need* that is to be fulfilled by the appropriation of exogenous cultural traits, system or complexes. In my view, concerning the cultural motivation for the diffusion of hieroglyphs in the Renaissance, there are two background forces at play: the *cult of antiquity* and the phenomenon of *legitimization*. The first case, which is also the earliest (particularly strong in the 15th century), is powered by the fascination for ruins and the preoccupation with authenticity and creates a *force of attraction* between the original idea (Egyptian hieroglyphs) and the receptor culture (the Renaissance *literati*); and that results in a consistent attempt to exploit all the sources available, compare and harmonize them. The overall objective seems to be to *discover and decipher* ancient hieroglyphs and hopefully appropriate some of the reputable Egyptian wisdom. This whole impulse can be regarded as a collateral effect of the general “*ad fontes*” perspective towards antiquity in the Renaissance.

The phenomenon of *legitimization*, in its turn, consists in “borrowing the authority” from ancient hieroglyphs in order to legitimize the new status of images (and text-image forms of expression). It is fundamentally an *expanding force* that appropriates the notion (and grammatological features) of *hieroglyphs* in order *to create or justify* new forms of text-visual expression. In the same way the Sinaitic people (and later the Phoenicians, Greeks, Etruscans and Romans) had a demand for a particular kind of writing-system (that after all motivated the

⁸ Curiously enough, the re-appropriation or “revival” of Graeco-Roman cultural features in the Renaissance is not regarded as “Graeco-Roman-mania”, but as a noble quest for classical models. This perspective, of course, has long characterised Western ethnocentrism, and the “entitlement” of appropriating elements of an “ancestral culture”.

transmission of the idea found in Egypt), Renaissance men of letters and artists became avid for a cultural trait in which images were effectively used to *write*. The identification of this necessity with the new status of image is crucial to understanding the whole phenomenon, in view of the fact that other cultures had been exposed to the same stimuli (Egyptian hieroglyphs) and the idea was not diffused nor resulted in a major cultural phenomenon.⁹

In essence, a point I would like to make is that the “reception” of hieroglyphs in the Renaissance should not be regarded as a passive event. Rather, in the big picture, it consists of an *active search* not only to satisfy a profound intellectual inquisitiveness – typical of Renaissance man – but above all to *legitimize a novel visual culture* in the light of the ancient world authority, leading to an especial kind of cross-cultural appropriation of the hieroglyph in which the diffused object is not a particular cultural trait, but a cultural complex (see p. 169): I am convinced that this perspective helps to explain Giehlow’s thesis on the significant influence of hieroglyphs in the realm of Renaissance “symbolism”, since this problem surpassed the limits of a niche or transient curiosity to occupy some of the greatest intellectuals and artists who conceived an intricate form of communication through images.

This *legitimizing* flux, which is nourished by the *cult for antiquity*, has three basic “diffusion strategies”: (i) naming pre-existent visual or text-visual imagery or genres as “hieroglyphs”; (ii) ascribing the Egyptian hieroglyph as the father of such visual phenomena; or (iii) creating new hieroglyphic genres, repertoires and cultural products (paintings, engravings, friezes, drawings, etc.). In any case the purpose was similar: by recognizing an image as a *hieroglyph*, one would be implying that it was meant to be read and could potentially convey sacred or philosophical contents. By doing so, images were invested with a new social and grammatological status in keeping with the *zeitgeist*,¹⁰ allegedly borrowed from the authority of ancient hieroglyphs. From the point of view of grammatology (and iconology) this phenomenon is of

⁹ One can think of the non-appropriation of hieroglyphs by the Greeks despite their direct contacts with the Egyptians; or even the contact of Byzantine scholars, such as Tzetzes, with Chaeremon’s *Hieroglyphica* – that did not trigger a widespread interest in hieroglyphs. Tzetzes does, however, employ Chaeremon in order to legitimize his perspective that Homer’s *Iliad* was actually an allegory.

¹⁰As a response to the aforementioned “ascension of visuality”.

interest because visual products which were not intended to be “scriptural” become subject to interpretation – and incidental or “hidden” meanings or messages could be discovered.

Though the two driving forces discussed here can be found in an isolated state, igniting particular conceptions of hieroglyph, they are not necessarily of opposite nature. Instead, in the big picture, they fuelled each other and often can be identified in the same contexts, creating a vast spectrum of direct and indirect influence.

Finally the importance of being aware of these forces is twofold:

- First, it helps in understanding an apparent contradiction in hieroglyphic studies in the Renaissance, in which “authentic” hieroglyphs would be discussed as seriously as notoriously “non-authentic” hieroglyphs – often by the same author. I would suggest that, from the anthropological point of view, the “forces” involved in the process of diffusion of hieroglyphs in the Renaissance focus on two different objects: the *cult of antiquity* focuses on the diffusion of hieroglyphs as a specific *cultural trait*,¹¹ lacking in the Renaissance; whereas the *legitimizing* impulse involves the transmission of a broad cultural complex¹² (and is triggered by the first one). This perspective gives yet another dimension to the plain dichotomies of “right” vs. “wrong”, “authentic” vs. “non-authentic”, which often feature in this debate.
- Second, together with other factors (such as the quality and depth of information available), the motivation defines what precisely is going to be diffused in terms of grammatological features and, luckily, it might also help explaining both the reason for the transmission and the popularity of its outcome.

2.2. Mechanism of Diffusion

¹¹ i.e. a single attribute or minimum unit of a given culture.

¹² i.e. a combination of *cultural traits*.

With regard to the anthropological process of transmission, there is an important difference between the case of the hieroglyphs/alphabet and hieroglyphs/"hieroglyphic phenomenon" which I advocate here: the *mechanism of diffusion* of the phonetic principle from Egyptian hieroglyphs to Proto-Sinaitic and then on was *direct* (i.e. the cultures were in contact in the context of diffusion); and typifies an *expansion diffusion* – where the idea transmitted remains strong in its source-culture. Whereas in the case of Renaissance hieroglyphs, the mechanism of diffusion was *indirect* (i.e. there was a mediation between these cultures, which I will discuss below) and, by the time this diffusion was made, the idea in the source-culture was no longer active, i.e. when hieroglyphs were discussed in the Renaissance, hieroglyphs had not been in use in Egypt for almost a thousand years.

The intermediation in the process of stimuli diffusion between ancient hieroglyphs and the "hieroglyphic phenomenon" in the Renaissance did not take place through a uniform and constant source of information. In fact, not only the source was heterogeneous or even incomplete in nature, but the exposition (i.e. contact between the intermediary stimuli and the target-culture) occurred in different moments and sometimes different stimuli could be contradictory among each other.

This complex intermediation will be discussed in the next section.

3. The Vectors of Diffusion

The hiatus between the cultures involved in this intricate process of cultural transmission was not only spatial, but also temporal. The fragile bridge between these cultures, therefore, was essentially of material or literary nature – in other words, the mediation was in ruins. The very notion of "ruins" should be taken here in the dimension that Walter Benjamin gives to this concept in his *The Origin of the German Tragic Drama*.¹³ The contact with the ruin alone triggers

¹³ "Allegories are in the realm of thought what ruins are in the realm of things" (1978: 178).

imagination: before the remains of a destroyed building one can chimerically reconstruct its past glory and wonder about the action of time or man that produced its fate. An object is not an object anymore: it carries in itself its glory and tragedy (recreated in the realm of imagination) and becomes a token of *memento mori* – a motif frequently revisited by the arts. This is one of the reasons why the notion of ruin is so important in the Renaissance, and why it can be regarded as the allegory of the “*ad fontes*” humanistic impetus. As a sign, *every ruin is a mythogram in itself*.

The term “ruin”, however, should be regarded here not only as an exclusive trait of material culture – it also permeates the immaterial facet of human endeavours: a ruined book is also a ruined content; the Romanic languages are ruins of Latin;¹⁴ and what is the “grammatological gap” of hieroglyphs if not a ruin of their meanings? In this sense, the work of the Renaissance academies and printers finding, identifying, comparing, editing and publishing old manuscripts is not only a sort of archaeology (amid ruins) but also a *reconstruction* (or perhaps more precisely *transcreation*) – just as etymology reengages and often imagines the ancient meaning of words. It would not be different with the “hieroglyphic phenomenon”.

The mediation of the stimulus diffusion discussed here can be divided into two basic groups: primary and secondary sources. Before exploring any specificity, it is paramount to understand at this point that *none of the sources of stimulus comprises in itself a full explanation of the Ancient Egyptian hieroglyphic code* and that they could not be comprehensively detailed within the limits of this thesis. [Plate 64]

3.1. Secondary Sources

3.1.1. Classical Accounts:

¹⁴ Especially Renaissance Neo-Latin, which is essentially a “literary language” and the *lingua franca* of intellectual affairs.

As one might well suspect, the whole classical tradition was not readily available for Renaissance scholars. Ancient books were little by little rediscovered, bought, translated, copied and later on also printed. In the first half of the *Quattrocento*, some “outsider” comments on hieroglyphs could already be found in Herodotus, Diodorus Siculus and Plutarch (in Greek), Pliny the Elder, Lucan, Tacitus, Apuleius, Martianus Capella, Macrobius and Isidore of Seville (in Latin). To this list, other authors and works were later incorporated, such as Ammianus Marcellinus or Clement of Alexandria’s *Stromata* (which was not quoted until the 16th century, but was possibly available in the 15th century). One can argue that these works constitute the first source of inspiration for the Renaissance interest in hieroglyphs and its inaugural discussions, but as these accounts did not fully explain Egyptian writing (consisting in a very incomplete repertoire of signs), and could be easily identified as “outsider” comments, they can hardly be acknowledged as an ultimate catalyst for this whole phenomenon.

3.1.2. Chacremon and Horapollon

Presumably, the earliest source of information on these two important Egyptian authors was the Byzantine lexicon *Suda*, available in Italy from at least 1408¹⁵ (first published in 1499, by Demetrios Chalkokondyles). There, it is clearly stated that Chaeremon wrote a work called *Hieroglyphica*.¹⁶ The mere existence of such a comment most likely created a major expectation among those already interested in hieroglyphs, which would later be fostered by the circulation of fragments quoted in John Tzetzes’ *Scholia* on the Iliad. Although Chaeremon’s work on hieroglyphs was never found, Horapollon’s *Hieroglyphica* was discovered and acquired on the Greek island of Andros in June 1419 by Cristoforo Buondelmonti.¹⁷ One can imagine that Cristoforo was aware of the content and importance of such a manuscript (Giehlow: 30) when he took it to Florence, attracting the attention of the Florentine circle of intellectuals that quickly

¹⁵ See Botley 2006.

¹⁶ *Ἱερογλυφικὰ ἔγραψεν ὁ Χαιρήμων* (*Ἱερογλυφικά*, iota, 175). The first to mention this connection in the Renaissance is probably the elder Beroaldo of Bologna.

¹⁷ Cf. Chapter Four.

began studying the opusculum. Since its early reception, *Hieroglyphica* was received as a piece of evidence and authority on ancient hieroglyphs, triggering a complex process of appropriation. At this first moment, however, no illustrations accompanied the manuscript and scholars were in general unaware of the iconicity of hieroglyphs. In other words, nobody had associated them with authentic inscriptions yet, or to any rule of composition. In fact, nothing would then suggest that hieroglyphs were a closed system, with a defined number of signs.

3.2. Primary Sources

3.2.1. Archaeological Evidence

The best source for first-hand hieroglyphic inscriptions was, by far, the Egyptian obelisks in Rome. Until the 15th century, they were believed to be signs of power of the ancient emperors: legends would suggest that the remains of Caesar were hidden in the Vatican obelisk.¹⁸ This speculative mentality would give way to a more accurate perspective when in 1417 Poggio Bracciolini discovered the manuscript of Ammianus Marcellinus' *Rerum Gestarum Libri* in Fulda. He immediately sent a copy to his colleague Niccolò Niccoli in Florence. In this manuscript the monument then erected in the circus maximus was described:

An obelisk is a very hard stone, rising gradually somewhat in the form of a turning post to a lofty height; little by little it grows slenderer, to imitate a sunbeam; it is four-sided, tapers to a narrow point, and is polished by the workman's hand. Now the infinite carvings of characters called hieroglyphics, which we see cut into it on every side, had been made known by an ancient authority of primeval wisdom. For, by engraving many kinds of birds and beasts, even of another world, in order that the memory of their achievements might the more widely reach generations of a subsequent age, they registered the vows of kings, either promised or performed. For not as nowadays, when a fixed and easy series of letters expresses whatever the mind of man may conceive, did the Egyptians also write; but individual characters stood for individual nouns and verbs; and sometimes they meant whole phrases. The principle of this thing for the time it will suffice to illustrate with these two examples: by a vulture they represent the word "nature", because, as natural

¹⁸ Petrarch mentions this legend, which was probably very popular (Curran 2007: 51)

history records, no males can be found among these birds, and under the figure of a bee making honey they designate “a king”, showing by this imagery that in a ruler sweetness should be combined with a sting as well, and there are many similar instances (Ammianus apud Curran 2007: 57)

Between 1422 and 1424 (just after the arrival of *Hieroglyphica* in Florence), Niccoli and Poggio went to visit the ruins in Rome, and there they probably identified the inscription on the obelisks as hieroglyphs, although none of them was able to translate the signs – despite having a copy of Horapollon (Giehlow: 35). This impossibility piqued the interest of these intellectuals even more, and highlighted the notion of hieroglyphs as a mysterious form of writing. Not much later, most likely in the 1430's, Poggio wrote his *Ruinarum Urbis Romae* (published in 1448) in which he discusses the obelisks and correctly identifies their carvings as hieroglyphs:

There is no need to tell about the obelisks, which were transported from Egypt with great effort and expense, as Pliny records [...]. I saw another of them, a little smaller, and with various figures of animals and birds that the ancient Egyptians used in place of letters [...]. (Poggio apud Curran 2007: 58)

Although Poggio succeeded in recognizing visually Egyptian signs, his correct observation did not limit the spreading interest in hieroglyphs to authentic inscriptions.

3.2.2. Expeditions

Cyriacus of Ancona is another important character in the seminal hieroglyphic studies in the Renaissance. He visited Egypt on different occasions in the first half of the 15th century, and prepared a synopsis of 35 hieroglyphs¹⁹ from Horapollon in Latin – possibly to support his investigations. Giehlow argues that Cyriacus probably wanted to use this abridgement on one of his trips to Egypt, more precisely in 1436, but Curran finds this possibility “far from certain” (Curran 2007: 59).

¹⁹ Book I, Chapters 1-37, except 26 and 35.

In his *Itinerarium*, Cyriacus mentions the 1436 expedition, during which he came across a pyramid inscribed with “the most ancient Phoenician²⁰ characters” that were “unknown by the man of our own age, I think because of its antiquity and our ignorance and loss of the great arts of antiquity”.²¹ While he confesses that he could not understand the inscription, he immediately states that he “transcribed this remarkable text and rightly added it to my notebooks, and sent the final copy to Niccolò Niccoli, who is the man most interested in these things” (Cyriacus apud Curran 2007: 60). This episode is important for a number of reasons: it demonstrates the Renaissance interest in authentic hieroglyphs, highlighting Niccolò’s authority on the subject; Cyriacus blames “our ignorance” and forgetfulness rather than any enigmatic or mysterious nature of hieroglyphs; it reveals that these transcriptions were sent to Florence, only to find Niccolò on his death bed (he died on 3rd February 1437)... These drawings of authentic hieroglyphs from Egypt are now lost (despite the efforts of De Rossi, who tried to find them fruitlessly, cf. Giehlow: 37), and it is impossible to ascertain their particular influence. One relevant fact, however, was certainly propagated by Cyriacus’s vivid testimonies: that Egyptian hieroglyphs were indeed commonly employed on monuments. Although this idea can sound simplistic now, it will be of great importance in the Renaissance appropriation of hieroglyphs.²²

Other expeditions to Egypt took place in the following centuries, keeping alive not only the idea of hieroglyph, but also its aesthetics and the interest in their original meanings.²³

4. The *Levels of Diffusion*

After presenting the two motivating forces and the different sources available for the process of diffusion, it is important to emphasize once again that the reception of hieroglyphs in

²⁰ Cyriacus’ terminology seems to be derived from a misinterpretation of Tacitus (Curran 2007: 50) or Lucanus (Giehlow 2004: 36)

²¹ Cyriacus 1741 (1472): 42.

²² For the relationship between hieroglyphs and monuments in the Renaissance, see p. 209.

²³ For the permanency of the discussions around “authentic” hieroglyphs, p. 228.

the Renaissance is not a heterogeneous process: different conceptions and outcomes were achieved by interweaving the basic sources with modern perceptions and creations.

In this brief section I hope to propose a new framework to understand the phenomenon of the early reception of hieroglyphs, suggesting that it occurred at different levels (as is also the case with Horapollon's *Hieroglyphica*).²⁴ Each of these levels [Plate 65] is a response to the contrast between the two motivating forces and different stimuli/sources, and constitutes the diffusion of one or more traits of Egyptian writing (as will be shown in contrast with the grammatological features discussed on the previous chapters).

4.1. Conceptual Level: The *Theoretical Nuclei*

The triumvirate composed by Niccolò Niccoli, Poggio Bracciolini and Cyriacus of Ancona interwove, for the first time, the sources of stimulus available and, by doing so, initiated the hieroglyphic phenomenon in the Renaissance. As pioneers, they certainly faced enormous theoretical problems, such as the contradictions between the sources and the impossibility of translating authentic inscriptions,²⁵ and also practical issues.²⁶ Nevertheless, even not authoring a treatise dedicated to hieroglyphs, they achieved many things, such as discovering, acquiring, studying, translating and preparing literary sources that later nourished this discussion. They also identified the notion of hieroglyphs (transmitted by ancient accounts) with authentic inscriptions, recognizing the epigraphic (or monumental) function of hieroglyphs. Moreover,

²⁴ Although I present a new theoretical perspective, which is based on anthropological and grammatological standpoints and that includes topics that are not always covered in the scope of specialized bibliography (such as the importance of the Renaissance hieroglyphs for the conception of writing in occidental culture, see Chapter Nine), this critical construction does not aim to replace the solid *fortuna critica* that has been established in the field of Renaissance hieroglyphs. Quite the opposite: it hopes to constitute a way of looking at this richly detailed scholarly resource, articulate it and by doing so hopefully find answers to questions that in my view remained open under different critical theories.

²⁵ Contrasting the obelisk and Horapollon, Cyriacus was able to identify only 35 hieroglyphs. See p. 206.

²⁶ By this time Niccolò and Poggio were not proficient in Greek, which might have prevented them from discussing Horapollon's *Hieroglyphica* in more detail. Poggio begun studying Greek in 1424, when he was 44 years-old (Shepherd 1837: 6).

their interest – spread in conversations, letters and lectures – was the catalyst that precipitated the whole hieroglyphic phenomenon.

This first awakening unfolded four *conceptual nuclei*²⁷ on hieroglyphs. Each *nucleus* constitutes a more or less stable set of ideas (rather than uniform), with a particular outcome and range of influences in the realm of Renaissance hieroglyphs. Although they can be taken as relatively independent canons, there is a complex system of cross-influence at play.

One of the determinant factors for the development of these *nuclei* is the spread of the *Hieroglyphica* of Horapollon, which somehow provoked different intellectual circles to create new responses, either theoretical or practical. Above all, the *nuclei* provided the conceptual foundation for the different levels of diffusion of hieroglyphs.

4.1.1. The Monumental Nucleus

This first *conceptual nucleus* can be regarded as a logical consequence of the first impact of hieroglyphs in the Renaissance, enlightened by the genius of the polymath Leon Battista Alberti and others. The seminal hieroglyphic interest was in the mainstream of Florentine intellectual life of the first half of the 14th century, and it would not take long to reverberate in creative propositions, i.e. a practical appropriation.

The influence of Niccolò and Poggio on Alberti is known, and it is hard to ascertain exactly how much of the latter notion of hieroglyph was transmitted from the former scholars. Even so, in his *De Re Aedificatoria* (“On the Art of Building” written between mid 1440s and early 1450s, with later work until the death of the author in 1472²⁸), Alberti is the first to state in written form a conception of hieroglyph that would become extremely influential:

²⁷ I chose the word “nucleus” instead of “lineage” or “tradition” because I do not focus on a linear sequence of influences (even if they will often occur). Rather, I would like to present authors and phenomena that, throughout time, will have similar sets of ideas, even if/when there is no direct influence involved.

²⁸ In 1460s it circulated in manuscript copies and only in 1485 it was printed for the first time.

The Egyptians employed the following sign language: a god was represented by an eye, nature by a vulture, a king by a bee, time by a circle, peace by an ox, and so on. They maintained that each nation knew only its own alphabet, and that eventually all knowledge of it would be lost – as has happened with our own Etruscan: we have seen sepulchres uncovered in city ruins and cemeteries throughout Etruria inscribed with an alphabet universally acknowledged to be Etruscan: their letters look not unlike Greek, or even Latin, yet no one understands what they mean. The same, the Egyptians claimed, would happen to all other alphabets, whereas the method of writing they used could be understood easily by expert men all over the world, to whom alone noble matters should be communicated. (Alberti: 8.4. Apud Alberti 1988)

From the examples of hieroglyphs quoted by Alberti, it is clear that his main ancient sources on the subject were Ammianus, Macrobius and Diodorus (or Horapollon) – that he shares with many other Renaissance scholars. However, his conception goes further when he compares hieroglyphs and the Etruscan alphabet. He makes a clear distinction between the alphabet script of a lost language and a *method of writing* that is universal, to be understood in any language – by experts. Following this line of argument, the consequence is no other than that this script is the fittest to the noble purpose of occupying the façade of buildings and monuments, in their turn, built to resist the passing of time longer than men. Furthermore, Alberti managed to align hieroglyphic writing with the Roman tradition of reliefs:

Our own Latin ancestors chose to express the deeds of their most famous men through sculpted histories. *This gave rise to columns, triumphal arches, and porticoes, covered with histories in painting, or sculpture.* (My emphasis. Alberti: 8.4. Apud Alberti 1988)

The influence of the Egyptian hieroglyphs on the decoration of Roman temples, particularly from the 1st century on, is still to be fully understood. But by making this connection, Alberti *legitimized* the grammatological function of Roman reliefs and made a sensible repertoire of Roman signs available to the Renaissance scholars and artists, who would not be restricted to the aesthetics and inventory of Egyptian hieroglyphs: the influence of this attitude was immediate. Curiously, I would suggest that the identification of Roman signs as a hieroglyphic script also circumvented the problem of ethno-cultural identification, as Renaissance scholars would be able to speculate on or even revive hieroglyphs that belonged to their own ancestors – therefore facilitating the spread of the phenomenon of diffusion. The “Roman Hieroglyphs” would also be more visually recognizable (i.e. the objects depicted there were more likely to be identified than objects present in Egyptian hieroglyphs). Notwithstanding, Alberti also understood hieroglyphs as an economic form of expression, suggesting that inscriptions for public or funerary monuments

“should either be written – these are called epigraphs – or composed of reliefs and images [*imagines*]” (Alberti, apud Curran 2007: 72), an idea that would be of extreme importance if one take into consideration the emblematic way of thought, privileging a panoramic expression,²⁹ that soon would rise.³⁰

If with Alberti hieroglyphs became an architectonic preoccupation, with Filarete the proposition was confirmed. In his *Libro Architetonico* (now known as *Trattato dell'Architettura*), finished in 1464, he introduces the fundamentals of architecture so as to describe the construction of Sforzinda, a utopian city, through a dialogue between the “architect” (a possible projection of the author) and the “duke” (most likely to be Francesco Sforza, then Duke of Milan, patron of Filarete). At some point, the characters come across an obelisk and its “Egyptian letters”:

Era ancora nel mezzo uno luogo, dove credo stavano quegli avevano a giudicare; ed eravi ancora nel centro uno obilisco, cioè una guglia, la quale era scolpita tutta di lettere egiziache come già anticamente s'usavano.

“Do, dimi quello che dicono quelle lettere”.

“Non vel so dire, perché non si possono interpretare: sono tutte lettere figurate, chi a uno animale e chi a un altro, e chi a uno uccello e chi a biscia; alcuna è una civetta, alcuna come dire una sega; chi come uno occhio e come dire ancora una figura, e chi in una cosa e chi in un'altra, tanto è che pochissimi sono che le possino interpretare. Vero è che 'l poeta Francesco Filelfo mi disse che quegli animali significavano chi una cosa e chi un'altra, ciascheduno ognuno per sé; l'anguilla significa la 'nvidia, e così ognuna ha sua significazione, se già loro ancora non avessino fatto ch'elle fussino pure come sono l'altre e potessinsi compitare. Quelle che io ho ritrovato, che sono pure in forma d'animali e d'altre cose, pure si compitano come l'altre nostre lettere.” (Filarete [1464]: Book XII)

Here Filarete not only reveals his perception of hieroglyphs (and the importance of employing them on obelisks), but identifies his source of information on the subject: the poet Filelfo and, indirectly, Horapollon. Despite the lack of drawings for the signs on the obelisk that figures in the manuscript, Filarete's work – which would prove to be very influential – supports the use of hieroglyphs on monuments, not only in those historical ones, but also in future or imaginary buildings.

In essence, the recommendation or suggestion of using hieroglyphs in two fundamental treatises on architecture (Filarete's and Alberti's) in the Renaissance was more than a re-evaluation

²⁹ See p. 35.

³⁰ On the relationship between hieroglyphs and emblems, see Chapters Seven and Eight.

of the tradition (*legitimizing* Roman use of images in monuments and buildings): it resulted in the re-appropriation of this canon, since these books clearly advocated the revival of ancient architecture, regarded as ideal. They created a norm.

The practical outcome of this conception of hieroglyph (which I regard as an inaugural *legitimizing* leap) would be immediate – but it would take place at another *level of diffusion* (see p. 190).

4.1.2. The Neo-Platonic Nucleus

Another early conception of hieroglyph that emerged from Florence is the *Neo-Platonic Nucleus*, developed under the auspices of the Platonic Academy (also known as Florentine Academy), sponsored – again – by Cosimo de Medici (that at this point should indeed be regarded as a champion of hieroglyphic studies). This informal institution was constituted in order to reintroduce Platonic philosophy in the Renaissance – possibly as a response to Pletho’s acclaimed participation in the Council of Florence (1438-1439) – and assembled some of the most brilliant scholars of the time. Beyond their intellectual cultivation, in the form of study and discussions, the *literati* were involved in the ambitious project of translating Plato and his philosophical lineage into Latin.

Marsilio Ficino was the head of this group. He translated and commented all of Plato’s works, together with, among others, Plotinus’ *Enneads*, Jamblichus’ *Mysteries* and the *Corpus Hermeticum* (which would be highly appreciated in the Renaissance). If this achievement is not impressive enough, he also wrote his own works, thus becoming one of the most important and influential philosophers of the Renaissance. Given his intellectual circle (and patronage), and the content of the works he reintroduced in the Modern Era, he could not escape the discussion on hieroglyphs, to which he contributed a new philosophical dimension.

While the *monumental nucleus* regarded hieroglyphs as a universal form of writing, to be used in public inscriptions (i.e. an *exoteric* script par excellence), the “Neo-Platonic” conception

of hieroglyph would be of a more esoteric nature. Commenting on Plotinus' passage on hieroglyphs in his *Enneads*,³¹ Ficino states that:

The Egyptian priests, when they wished to signify divine mysteries, did not use minute characters or letters, but rather whole figures of plants, trees, animals: for God doubtless has a knowledge of things which is not complex discursive thought about its subject, but is, as it were, the simple and permanent form of things. The discursive knowledge of time is, with you, manifold and flexible, saying, for instance, that time is passing, and through a certain revolution, connects the beginning again with the end. The Egyptians, however, comprehend an entire discourse of this kind in one stable image, by painting a winged serpent that bites his tail with his mouth; and other things which Horus describes with similar figures. (Ficino's comment on his translation of Plotinus' *Enneads*, 1492. Adapted from Curran 2007: 97)

The first thing to take into consideration in the passage above is that even the linguistic structure of the first phrase ("when they wished to signify x...") is almost a paraphrase of the one frequently used by Horapollon in his *Hieroglyphica* (see Chapter Four). However, despite his knowledge of Horapollon's treatise, the example that Ficino quotes (ouroboros = time) here is not straightforwardly derived from *Hieroglyphica*, as one would imagine given his direct mention of the Egyptian author. According to Horapollon, the *ouroboros* (which is not described as winged) corresponds to the *cosmos* (or the annual circle of time) whereas *time* (*Aion*) is associated with the *uraeus*. It is clear that the Florentine philosopher has other sources for this interpretation.³² In grammatological terms, Ficino's conception of hieroglyph is not that of the ideogram – in which the hieroglyph signifies a single idea or concept. Instead, it is clear that the sign *corresponds to an "entire discourse"* – in the words that have been discussed in the present thesis, Ficino's hieroglyph could be perfectly regarded as a *mythogram*. Furthermore, the relationship between hieroglyph ("ouroboros"), concept ("time") and exegesis (that "time is passing, and through a certain revolution, connects the beginning again with the end", a "discursive knowledge" that was unnecessary for the Egyptian priests) one can observe a latent text-image interaction, with a synergraphic nexus. In his conception of hieroglyphic writing, which is essentially theological-philosophical, Ficino seems to favour the "simple and permanent

³¹ See p. 86.

³² Although the winged ouroboros can often be found in Gnostic or Alchemical literature, I was unable to identify Ficino's inspiration. Drysdall (2013) identifies Eusebius's *Praeparationes Evangelicae* (I,10) as a possible source.

form of things” rather than “complex discursive thought about its subject” – this implies a significant rupture with the logocentrism that will be crucial to the emblematic mentality that would emerge in the following century.³³

In another commentary, Ficino also advances a brief history of writing, or rather a mythic canon, which also explains the motivation to invent writing:

In order for his priests to have their own secret literature apart from the vulgar, Zoroaster established letters in the characters of the celestial signs and constellations. Mercurius Trismegistus, who was moved by Zoroaster’s example, gave letters to his priests in the shapes of animals and plants, so that the vulgar should not partake of theology. But there flourished in Egypt’s Naucratis, as Plato describes in the *Phaedrus*, among those worshipped by the Egyptian as gods, one whose name was Theuth; among the Greeks he is Hermes Trismegistus, and the Latins call him Mercury. In Hermes’ time the king of Egypt was Tamus of Thebes, where Jupiter is worshipped as Hammon. Hermes was a friend of this Tamus. Inspired by the god Hammon, Hermes discovered arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and moreover introduced the use of letters as an aid to wisdom and a prop to the memory. Tamus, however, considered the use of letters would make men forgetful (Ficino’s comment on his translation of Plato’s *Philebus*, 1496. Apud Curran 2007: 97)

This narrative reveals an imaginary example of *diffusion*, and there are a few points I would like to highlight: (i) the esoteric perspective of using hieroglyphs to keep theology “apart from the vulgar”; (ii) the understanding of constellation signs as a form of writing; and (iii) the distinction made between the sacred nature/function of hieroglyphs and the use of letters “as an aid to wisdom and a prop to the memory”. This perspective is quite different from Plato, especially because it preserves hieroglyphs from the depreciative attitude of Tamus toward the letters, as narrated by Socrates in Plato’s *Phaedrus* (*Phaedrus*: 274e–275b)³⁴

Ficino’s idea of hieroglyph will gain yet another layer in his translation of Jamblichus. Departing from the hermetic notions that Egypt was an image of heaven³⁵ and that everything

³³ Regarding the synthetic power of hieroglyphs, it seems impossible not to think of the Egyptian/Gnostic criticism of the Greek verbosity, which not coincidentally appears in the *Corpus Hermeticum* (that was translated by Ficino): “The Greeks, O King, have novel words, energetic of “argumentation” [only]; and thus is the philosophizing of the Greeks—the noise of words. But we do not use words; but we use sounds full-filled with deeds’deeds (*Corpus Hermeticum*: 15, 2. Mead 1906).

³⁴ This passage is largely associated with the western conception of writing (Cf. Derrida 1967; 2004)

³⁵ “Do you not know, Asclepius, that Egypt is an image of heaven or, to be more precise, that everything governed and moved in heaven came down to Egypt and was transferred there?” (*Asclepius*: 24. Apud Copenhaver 1995: 81).)

that is “superior” must be similar to what is “inferior”,³⁶ Ficino associates the way Egyptians write through hieroglyphs with the way universe expresses its “occult causes”:

The Egyptians imitated the very nature of the universe and the work of the gods; they also showed the images of the mystic and hidden notions in the form of symbols, in the same way in which nature too expresses occult causes in apparent form or in symbols, as it were, and the gods explain the truth of the ideas of manifest images. Therefore, since they understood that everything that is superior delights through its similitude with the inferior, and since, moreover, they wish to be filled with goodness by the superior, since they wish to imitate it according to their abilities, they rightly offer, according to their abilities, a way of action agreeing with the superior, when they put the hidden mysteries in manifest symbols. *When you interpret these, dismiss the sounds and accept the meanings.* (My emphasis. Ficino’s commentary on his translation of Jamblichus’ *De Mysteriis Aegyptiorum*, 1497. Apud Dieckmann 1970: 36)

From that one can assume that hieroglyphs are elaborated divine language, reserved for sacred affairs, and that it is the human equivalent of Nature’s own form of expression. Not only is this notion curiously very similar to the Egyptians’ own conception of “writing of the divine words”, but it will also be very influential in alchemy and “philosophy of nature”, especially in the 17th century.³⁷ Nevertheless, Ficino’s idea that sounds are to be dismissed in favour of meanings, although correct for mythograms and determinatives, reflects his own notion that *hieroglyphs are essentially not discursive*, in other words, non-linear. Needless to say, this is again another subtle difference between this “Neo-Platonic conception” and the notion of hieroglyph embedded in monuments as defended by Alberti and others, in which each sign corresponds to a particular concept and can be read linearly. Finally, Ficino’s notion proposed here promotes an idea that will become very popular in the Modern Era: that *hieroglyphs are a silent script*.³⁸

All this elaborated notion of hieroglyphic writing proposed by the head of the Florentine Academy, no matter how well conceived, was scattered in different works, i.e. Ficino never wrote a dissertation or essay specifically on hieroglyphs. Still, as his comments were indissociable from

³⁶ In a Latin version of the well-known *Tabula Smaragdina*, then attributed to Hermes Trismegistos, one can read: “*Quod est inferius est sicut quod est superius, et quod est superius est sicut quod est inferius, ad perpetranda miracula rei unius*” (Polydorus 1541). In English, this could be translated as: “That which is below (or “inferior” – the same term used by Ficino) is similar to that which is above (or “superior”), and that which is above is similar to that which is below, so as to perpetrate the miracle of the one”.

³⁷ See p. 369.

³⁸ For Alciato, see p. 261. For Valeriano, p. 250.

his translations of Plato, Plotinus, Jamblichus, etc. they enjoyed wide circulation in the Renaissance.

Ficino's involvement with Pagan philosophy and esoteric subjects (astrology, hermeticism, etc.) would not go unnoticed. In 1490 he was informed that he was being accused of heresy and magic.³⁹ In his work one can observe a tension between the sacred (i.e. Catholic) and the profane that generates a philosophical problem, which could only be solved through the conciliation between the *prisca auctoritas* and Christianity.⁴⁰ The way chosen by Ficino (and other scholars from his circle, such as Pico della Mirandola, his student, who attempted to "rehabilitate" the Cabbala through this same process of legitimization) to solve this *conundrum* was to "align" the pagan authors⁴¹ with the canon of Christianity, by presenting them as wise foreseers of Christ and his theology.⁴² Even though this approach creates a special form of syncretism (in which one religious component remains as more important), it is reasonable to think that it is strongly influenced by the Graeco-Roman/Greek/Gnostic syncretism which was closely related, for example, to Chaeremon and Horapollon.⁴³ Following Ficino's logic, therefore, hieroglyphs were not to be regarded as a script of pagan priests, but a divinely inspired script that kept the mysteries that would only be revealed by Christ.⁴⁴

Contrasting the "*prisca theologia*" as proposed by Ficino with the *legitimizing* force of motivation for the hieroglyphic phenomenon results in a complex *game of authority*: in the same way as hieroglyphs would confer their authority to the new status of image, they also needed to be rehabilitated from the theological point of view. The proof of the success of Ficino's intellectual endeavour in relation to hieroglyphs is the fact that, despite being closely associated to Egyptian

³⁹ See Kristeller 1996: 275.

⁴⁰ In 1489 Ficino published *De Vita Libri Tres* (Three Books on Life) in which he discusses Rufinus of Aquileia's comments on the meaning of the ankh hieroglyph (ⲛ), regarded as a presage of Christ's advent (*Historia Ecclesiastica*. ii., c. 29). The same idea was accepted by other Christian authors (cf. Sozomen, *Hist. Eccles.* vii., c. 14; Socrat. *Hist. Eccles.* v., c. 17). The Egyptian Copts, in fact, adopted the Ankh hieroglyph as their most important religious symbol, the *crux ansata*. Cf. p. 392.

⁴¹ Such as Zoroaster, Hermes, Pythagoras, Orpheus, Philolaus, Plato and others.

⁴² In Ficino's own words, Hermes Trismegistos "foresaw the ruin of the old religion, the rise of the new faith, the coming of Christ, the judgment to come, the resurrection of the race, the glory of the blessed and the torments of the damned" (Ficino introduction to *Pimander* apud Copenhagen 1995: xlviii)

⁴³ Whose father, as discussed above, composed a treatise on the "agreement of all theologies" (see p. 172).

⁴⁴ Despite all best intentions, this proposition constitutes an *argumentum ad ignorantiam* – since there was no evidence found in actual Egyptian hieroglyphs. However, it was possibly a sufficient excuse to study hieroglyphs.

“paganism”, they were to be studied and even promoted by Catholic and Protestant clerics in the following two centuries.⁴⁵

Ficino’s ideas on hieroglyphs were further developed by at least three of his fellow members of the Platonic Academy: his students Pico della Mirandola and Angelo Poliziano, and Pietro Crinito. In his *Heptaplus* (1489), Pico suggests that Moses wrote the *Old Testament* in hieroglyphic allegories (Giehlow 2004: 158), and he reaches this conclusion inspired by Philo’s reference to Moses hieroglyphic education⁴⁶ – of which he was very aware – possibly associated to Tzetzes’ understanding of the *Iliad* as hieroglyphic allegories,⁴⁷ which would later influence Crinito. The expansion of the concept of hieroglyph to a mental image (either allegory or metaphor) will be extremely important to later conceptions of hieroglyphs.

As for Poliziano, he published only occasional comments on hieroglyphs, although Giehlow (p. 140) suspects that he might have authored a more comprehensive work on hieroglyphs, now lost. However, there is compelling evidence of more systematic studies of his: to start with, he was the one in charge of the *editio princeps* of Alberti’s *De Re Aedificatoria*; he is referred to by Pierio Valeriano as one of his precursors in hieroglyphs (see p. 203); and finally he is the tutor of Pietro Crinito, who wrote on the subject, *περὶ τῶν ιερογλυφικῶν τῆς αἰγύπτου* (“On the Egyptian Hieroglyphs”, now lost), in which he modestly claimed to have explained “almost everything contained in the secret doctrine of the Egyptians” (Giehlow 2004: 153). Drawing on a very short chapter on hieroglyphs that Crinito wrote in his extant *De Honesta Disciplina* (1504, VII.2),⁴⁸ Karl Giehlow (2004: 153-162) spares no effort in speculating on Crinito’s conception of hieroglyph that in sum appears to be a synthesis of his precursors in the Academia,⁴⁹ in a systematic

⁴⁵ Ficino’s argument, further developed by Pico, will find its most extreme advocate in Athanasius Kircher, who certainly benefited from the *prisca theologia* in his hieroglyphic studies (see p. 394). Moreover, the “hieroglyphic genre” was commonly and freely employed in religious festivals and temples in Golden Age Spain – even in the worst days of Inquisition (see Chapter Eight), not to mention the “hieroglyphic bibles” in vogue in the 18th century.

⁴⁶ Philo of Alexandria. *The Life of Moses*: 1, V-23.

⁴⁷ See p. 144.

⁴⁸ To his merit, in this chapter Crinito quotes at least six hieroglyphs (scarab, bee, river [water], ox, vulture, cross [ankh]), all of which could be found in authentic Egyptian inscriptions in Rome. See Curran 2007: 182.

⁴⁹ Another important aspect of Crinito’s work on hieroglyphs relies on the fact that he inherited the Florentine Academia authority and intellectual rigour in their hieroglyphic studies. Invested with this right, he denounced Annio of Viterbo’s claims on hieroglyphs as “impudent” (Crinito 1543: XXIV.12.). Such a drastic measure presupposes Crinito’s confidence in his peers and sources.

approach that sets the landmark of hieroglyphs as a philosophical preoccupation (and as a philosophical medium *par excellence*).

4.1.3. The Aristotelian Nucleus

If in the *Neo-Platonic Nucleus* hieroglyphs were appreciated in the light of Platonism, in the *Aristotelian Nucleus* the referential will be an Aristotelian interpretation of Diodorus (and Horapollon). The merit of clarifying this connection – which I consider perhaps the most important contribution to the understanding of the early reception of hieroglyphs since Giehlow – belongs to Denis Drysdall and his meticulous studies on the role of hieroglyphs at Bologna.⁵⁰

As Drysdall observes, one of the pioneers of hieroglyph studies at Bologna is Giovanni Battista Pio, who in 1494 wrote a short text in which he interprets a hieroglyph from Apuleius, quoting the passage from Diodorus (1.97) that runs as follows:

Now it is found that the forms of their letters take the shape of animals of every kind, and of members of the human body, and of implements and especially of carpenters' tools; for their writing does not express the intended concept by means of syllables joined to one another, but by means of the *significance* of the objects which have been copied and by its figurative meaning which has been impressed on the memory by practice. (Diodorus 1962: 97)

This passage had been translated by Poggio Bracciolini, and is quoted by Pio in full:

*Sunt aegyptiorum litterae variis animantibus extremitatibusque hominum atque instrumentis sed praecipue artificum persimiles non enim syllabarum compositione aut litteris verba eorum exprimuntur sed imaginum formatarum significatione usu memoriae hominum tradita.*⁵¹

As Drysdall compellingly argues, the word “significance” (in the English version) corresponds to ἐμφασις (emphasis) in the Greek original, by which Diodorus meant something

⁵⁰ Drysdall 2013: 55-74.

⁵¹ Drysdall correctly observes that: “The first edition of Poggio's translation has an error here – ‘*imaginum formarum significatione*’ – which Pio corrects” (2013: 59, fn. 12).

like "by means of the appearance [ie. images] of the things copied" (Drysall 2013: 59). However, as one can observe above, this term is translated by Poggio as "*significatio*" – probably under the influence of the rhetoric manuals then in vogue:

Emphasis (ἐμφασίς) is the figure which leaves more to be suspected than has been actually asserted. It is produced through Hyperbole, Ambiguity, Logical Consequence, Aposiopesis, and Analogy. (*Rhetorica ad Herennium*: IV, 67. Apud Cicero 1977)



Emphasis (ἐμφασίς)... succeeds in revealing a deeper meaning than is actually expressed by the words. There are two kinds of emphasis: the one means more than it says, the other often means something which it does not actually say. (Quintilian. *Institutio Oratoria*: 8.3.83. Apud Quintilian 1920)

I concur with Drysdall when he observes that Poggio's translation, most probably under the influence of Quintilian, misled Pio: perhaps, instead of referring to *the meaning resulting from the image of a hieroglyph*, ἐμφασίς (emphasis, *significatio*) might have been perceived as a rhetorical *figure of thought*, causing the reference to "metaphor" to be redundant, and therefore omitted from Poggio's translation. Nevertheless I think that this trivial "mistake" has a major implication: if one accepts that Poggio in fact made this confusion, one will be producing strong evidence of hieroglyph being understood as a rhetorical figure "which leaves more to be suspected than has been actually asserted" (a notion, again, that is not too far from the grammatological function discussed here as "synergraphy", widely present in Horapollon's *Hieroglyphica*), which is hardly a surprise since the Bolognese *Nucleus* discussed here seems to be headed by professors of Rhetoric and poets – differing from the Neo-Platonic *nucleus* dominated by philosophers.

One of those men of letters was Filippo Beroaldo the Elder, arguably the most important exponent of humanism at Bologna, where he taught Rhetoric and became a celebrated professor. Beroaldo apparently takes on the discussion on the hieroglyphs in Apuleius, initiated by his contemporary Pio, in his six-hundred-page commentary on *Metamorphoses*, published in 1500. In a short commentary, he makes a synthesis of Ammianus, Macrobius, Pliny, Tacitus and Diodorus to present his conception of hieroglyph:

In fact, these sculptures and effigies [in the sense of carved figures] that we see [on obelisks] are Egyptian letters. With regard to these letters – each of which corresponded to a single noun and

sometimes it signified the whole meaning [of a sentence]⁵² – Cornelius Tacitus wrote the following: the Egyptians were the first to engrave the ideas of their minds by the figures of animal, and one can still see these records, the most ancient in the human memory, engraved on stone & they claim to be the inventors of the letters⁵³ (Beroaldo. *Commentary on Apuleius*: Book XI. Translated from Drysdall 2013: 72).

From a grammatological standpoint, again, there is a number of features that can be derived from this conception of hieroglyphs: they are clearly a *form of writing* – and not simply independent symbols – which is the precursor of the alphabet itself. Moreover, it seems that hieroglyphs are understood in two basic functions: as ideograms (signs for single words) and mythograms (signs for whole sentences).

Beroaldo is also known by his interest in Horapollon's *Hieroglyphica*, of which he produced a compilation. According to Drysdall, this short selection was “probably made after 1500, for at that date he accepts without comment the meaning of ‘year’ for the serpent eating its tail, whereas in Horapollon he would have found ‘world’” (2013: 57). I beg to differ on this particular point. On the contrary, not only did the knowledge of Horapollon not impede other authors from ascertaining, for example, the meaning of the ouroboros as “time”,⁵⁴ but rather I assume that Beroaldo is in a perhaps unclear way, actually *relying on Horapollon*.

In 1476, Beroaldo composed his first work, *Annotationes contra Servium* (later published at Venice, 1508), proving himself to be quite familiar with Servius' *Commentary on Aeneid*. In this work, Servius affirms that “according to the Egyptians, before the invention of the alphabet *the year was symbolized by a picture, a serpent biting its own tail*, because it recurs on itself”.⁵⁵ I am

⁵² Cf. Ammianus: “Now the infinite carvings of characters called hieroglyphics, which we see cut into it on every side, have been made known by an ancient authority of primeval wisdom. For by engraving many kinds of birds and beasts, even of another world, in order that the memory of their achievements might the more widely reach generations of a subsequent age, they registered the vows of kings, either promised or performed. For not as nowadays, when a fixed and easy series of letters expresses whatever the mind of man may conceive, did the ancient Egyptian also write; but individual characters stood for individual nouns and verbs; and sometimes they meant whole phrases” (Ammianus Marcellinus. *Historia*, XVII, 4, 8. Apud Ammianus Marcellinus 1935).

⁵³ Cf. Tacitus: “It was the Egyptians who first symbolized ideas, and that by the figures of animals. These records, the most ancient of all human history, are still seen engraved on stone. The Egyptians also claim to have invented the alphabet, which the Phoenicians, they say, by means of their superior seamanship, introduced into Greece, and of which they appropriated the glory, giving out that they had discovered what they had really been taught” (Tacitus. *Annals*: VII, xi. Apud Tacitus 1877).

⁵⁴ See Ficino's comment on this same hieroglyph, p. 214.

⁵⁵ “*Annus secundum Aegyptios indicabatur ante inventas litteras picto dracone caudam suam mordente, quia in se recurrit*” (Servius. *Commentary on the Aeneid*, 5.85). See Shanzer 1986: 159.

convinced that this is one of Beroaldo's sources. Now, it seems unlikely that Beroaldo would be unaware of the meaning of the ouroboros as "time" (such as in Ficino and other authors) or even "eternity", for example. Confronted with these meanings, which would be the one chosen by Beroaldo?

Horapollon affirms that the hieroglyph of an ouroboros signifies "cosmos", but he also states that "every year, [the serpent that bites its own tail] strips off its old age with its skin, as in the course of a year the cosmos changes and becomes young again".⁵⁶ (*Hieroglyphica*: 1.02; see p. 131). And by doing so, he confers a certain plausibility to Servius' commentary (which retains Virgil's assertion on the relationship between a serpent and a year).⁵⁷ In other words, I suggest that Beroaldo followed Servius' interpretation of the ouroboros because it was backed by Horapollon (and Virgil). As a consequence, Beroaldo's statement does not necessarily imply his lack of contact with Horapollon before 1500: perhaps the contrary (if one contrasts his position with that of Ficino who, despite being aware of *Hieroglyphica*, still refers to ouroboros as "time"). And so, he might have had contact with *Hieroglyphica* before it is acknowledged nowadays. My point is that Beroaldo's epitome of *Hieroglyphica* (which was unsurprisingly printed as the final section of *Servii Honorati vocabula in Vergilium annotata* in 1522, a book intended for schoolchildren) probably circulated and was discussed in his classes on Apuleius. I can conceive of Beroaldo as the intellectual responsible for introducing hieroglyphs (and Horapollon) to his considerable number of students – the reason why Valeriano would identify him as one of his predecessors.⁵⁸ His contribution to hieroglyphic studies, in this sense, was not only to formulate an interpretation of the phenomenon, but to embed this subject in the formal process of learning. In other words, his students would learn of hieroglyphs as part as their education (together with Rhetoric and

⁵⁶ καθ' ὃ καὶ ὁ ἐν τῷ κόσμῳ ἐνιαύσιος χρόνος, ἐναλλαγὴν ποιούμενος, νεάζει.

⁵⁷ "Atque in se sua per vestigia voluitur annus" (Virgil. *Georgica*: 2)

⁵⁸ Together with Poliziano (his correspondent) and Crinito. See p. 250.

Latin⁵⁹). I think that this could explain his wide influence on other important authors who dealt directly or indirectly with this subject.⁶⁰

The next important figure in the *Aristotelian Nucleus* is Filippo Fasanini – the successor of Beroaldo who became the chair of Rhetoric and Poetry at Bologna in 1511 and authored the earliest printed translation of *Hieroglyphica* into Latin in 1517 (which would be overshadowed by Bernardino Tribazio’s one, which appeared earlier and was better distributed and reprinted). Fasanini was the first scholar to teach a course on hieroglyphs as an autonomous field of study (Giehlow 2004: 252) and his experience in the subject certainly fitted him to compose an “Explanation of Sacred Writing” (the first commentary to appear in an edition of *Hieroglyphica*), in which the author covered all known sources on hieroglyph. Here is how he synthesises his conception of hieroglyph:

They were enigmatic and symbolic engravings, which were much used in ancient times and preceding centuries, especially among Egyptian prophets and teachers of religion, who considered it unlawful to expose the mysteries of wisdom in ordinary writing to lay people, as we do. And if they judged something to be a worthy piece of knowledge, they represented it in plain drawings of animals and other things in such a way that it was not easy for anyone to guess. *But if anyone had learned and studied thoroughly from Aristotle and others the properties of each thing, the particular nature and essence of each animal, he would at length, by putting together his conjectures about these symbols, grasp the enigma of the meaning and, because of this knowledge, be honoured above the uninitiated crowd.* (My emphasis. Fasanini apud Drysdall, 2013: 84)

The excerpt above shows, at the beginning, an approach similar to that promoted by the *Neo-Platonic nucleus*, in which the hieroglyph is a sort of esoteric code for religious matters. However, there is a major turn when Fasanini suggests that, despite the method used by the Egyptians, the study of Aristotle and the property of things could allow someone to enter the

⁵⁹ For instance, according to Beroaldo: “if the Muses wished to speak Latin, they would speak in the language of Apuleius. And to give my opinion: frequent reading of Apuleius can contribute greatly to the cultivation of style and is especially suitable to that part of eloquence which is called conversational [...] Wherefore, reader, I beseech, I advise, I urge you to let this writer become well known to you and be your manual and handbook” (Beroaldo. *Commentarii*: fol. 1v. Apud Gaisser 2008: 202). Considering that Beroaldo’s notion of hieroglyph is “implanted” in his commentary on Apuleius, this passage is of particular significance – especially if one observes that Bologna was, then, one of the most reputed places to study Latin.

⁶⁰ Such as Fasanini and Geoffroy Tory – directly – plus Erasmus, Alciato, Valeriano...

secrets of the sacred writing. This passage corroborates Drysdall's thesis, which I embrace, on the Aristotelian reception of hieroglyphs in Bologna.⁶¹

Moreover, Fasanini's notion of hieroglyph seems to advocate the contemporary use of hieroglyphs. For example, he manifests the desire of having his edition of *Hieroglyphica* illustrated,⁶² "so that by observation and sight, no less than by hearing and reading, the meaning should be perceived and greater pleasure and greater usefulness too should result for the readers" (Fasanini apud Drysdall 2013: 92) and regards the treatise as a repertoire of hieroglyphs to be used in all sorts of media.⁶³

4.1.4. The Antiquarian Nucleus

The last of the *Conceptual Nuclei* to be presented here is the one actually engaged in compiling and eventually interpreting authentic (or thought-to-be) Ancient Egyptian inscriptions. Theoretically it is the continuation of an attitude that could be detected early on in Cyriacus of Ancona, but that would find many other followers in the Renaissance, until it

⁶¹ "The hieroglyph in this case is a representation, a sign which is not the idea itself, but an intermediary between the idea and the reader, not unlike the word, but with this difference from the arbitrary verbal sign, that it is rooted in a natural quality of the object portrayed, and functions like a simple metaphor in the manner known to all from Aristotle" (Drysdall 2013: 60). Fasanini's explanation seems to be almost a paraphrase of Erasmus (who also studied at Bologna): "Hieroglyphs is the name given to those enigmatic designs so much used in the early centuries, especially among the priest-prophets and theologians of Egypt, who thought it quite wrong to express the mysteries of wisdom in ordinary writing and thus expose them, as we do, to the uninitiated public. What they thought worth knowing they would record by drawing the shape of various animals and inanimate things, in such a way that it was not easy for the casual reader to unravel them forthwith. *It was necessary first to learn the properties of individual things and the special force and nature of each separate creature; and the man who had really penetrated these could alone interpret the symbols and put them together, and thus solve the riddle of their meaning*" (My emphasis. Erasmus, *Adagia*: 137. Apud Curran 2007: 156).

⁶² The first illustrated manuscript is Pirckheimer's Latin translation (from around 1510, see p. 241); and the first illustrated edition is the one made by Kerver, in 1543 (see p. 242).

⁶³ "From this [...] work many will be able to borrow short sayings or signs which they can inscribe on swords, rings, hairnets, belts, a cithara, on beds, couches, ceiling panels, carpets, doors, in the study, on a table, on mirrors, in the bedroom, on earthenware and silver vases. Indeed they could, with these signs both painted and carved, wrap their secret thoughts in veils and put them all over the walls of their houses" (Fasanini apud Drysdall 2013: 83). A desire – very similar to that expressed by his student Andrea Alciato – that will also be fulfilled by the emblematic tradition (see Chapter Seven).

culminated in a kind of proto-Egyptology in the late 17th century (with Athanasius Kircher, who was also influenced by other *nuclei*⁶⁴).

The most systematic approach to this *nucleus* has been put together by Curran, in his *The Egyptian Renaissance* in which he refers to these hieroglyphs as “real” (with quotation marks). Curran successfully refers to the manuscripts of Michele Ferrarini who, decades after Cyriacus of Ancona, compiled two collections of inscriptions: *Liber Antiquus* (c. 1480), in which one can find an accurate copy of the hieroglyphs from the Nectabo lion in Rome; and *Antiquarium sive Divae Antiquitatis Sacrarium* (from late 1480’s), which carries a rearranged version of the same inscription.

Although it is probable that Ferrarini was aware of the contemporary discussion on hieroglyphs, he did not put forward his own conception of hieroglyph, nor discuss the authors that during his lifetime were occupied with hieroglyphs. Nevertheless, he had a manuscript sylloge, *Signa Egyptia Hieroglyphica*, which consisted of a Latin version of thirty-six chapters from Horapollon’s book I.⁶⁵ I like to think that this particular choice is revealing (both in the case of Cyriacus and Ferrarini): they are the result of a contrast between authentic Egyptian inscriptions and Horapollon’s *Hieroglyphica*. As I already mentioned in Chapter Four, Horapollon’s treatise did not focus on the most frequent signs employed in the Egyptian writing. Thus, the thirty-six chosen signs are possibly the ones Ferrarini (and earlier Cyriacus) managed to identify in the inscriptions he had access to. One might infer, therefore, a methodological approach in which scepticism plays an important role (since Ferrarini does not attempt to translate the inscriptions that he copied).

The “antiquarian” attitude would encompass Egyptian (or pseudo-Egyptian) objects and monuments. As this *nucleus* is the closest to the iconicity of hieroglyphs, it will often be associated with the whole realm of Egyptian aesthetics. Obelisks will be copied (re-erected and recreated) throughout the high Renaissance,⁶⁶ and this interest will later culminate in a systematic approach,

⁶⁴ See p. 389.

⁶⁵ This epitome is often associated with the one produced by Cyriacus of Ancona, already mentioned above (cf. Curran 2007: 103)

⁶⁶ See Curran 2007: 239. For a brief list of the many authors who discussed or drew Egyptian relics, see Curl: 112-116.

such as in Michele Mercati's *De gli Obelischi di Roma* (1589), in which the author composed a chapter on hieroglyphs, echoing the conceptions of hieroglyph then discussed, but also making an important distinction between authentic and non-authentic hieroglyphs.⁶⁷

One object in particular deserves more detailed attention: the discovery of the *Mensa Isiaca* [Plate 66],⁶⁸ sometime before 1520, and the discussions around it constitute the backbone of the *Antiquarian nucleus*. It consists of a bronze tablet, inlaid with silver and covered with hieroglyphs (either discrete or mythographic ones). Despite its appearance and richness of detail, this object is a

Roman or Alexandrian creation of the early Imperial period in Egyptianizing style (...). It was presumably executed for a Roman sanctuary (?) under Claudius (41-54 C.E.) whose name, written in hieroglyphs on the table, is the only meaningful fragment of the text. (Roullet 1972: 144)

The *Mensa Isiaca* is a very peculiar object. At first sight, even in the reproductions, it is possible to recognize its visual similarity with authentic Egyptian objects. Most of the discrete hieroglyphic signs employed here are (at least visually) of Egyptian origin, the compositional rules are respected (such as the spaces and proportion between linear and non-linear domains; the distribution of signs in linear writing, etc.), the linear hieroglyphs are in the correct direction (facing the main figures) and the mythograms are quite correct. Nevertheless, it is claimed that the inscriptions make no sense. One can only imagine how the author managed to reorder the signs he saw somewhere, copied them in detail without repeating any sequence of signs from the original, preserving the traditional rules of composition and still failing to produce a readable text (from the Egyptological point of view).

The first copies of the *Mensa Isiaca* were commissioned by Cardinal Bembo, who acquired the tablet when it was rediscovered and immediately circulated copies of it among intellectuals of the time – probably looking for a translation of his relic, then believed to be “one of the most valuable and important antiquities ever found” (Iversen: 85). Among these intellectuals were Ranerius and other scholars from the Aldine Academy, who turned to Fra Urbano Bolzanio, the uncle of Piero Valeriano, who left an account of a meeting on this subject:

⁶⁷ See Iversen 1993: 84.

⁶⁸ Also known as Tabula Bembina (Bembine Table). See Curl 2013: 110; Curran 2007: 234; Roullet 1972: 144. For a detailed description and bibliography, see Leospo 1978.

The cause of this enquiry was that my friend Bembo sent to me [Ranerius] from Rome a copy of a certain tablet remarkable for its antiquity and also very many characters which are to be found there [in Rome] on the obelisks. Since it is clear that these were once brought from Egypt, and since you have visited Egypt, where there is a huge quantity of inscriptions of this kind, and since you have always displayed great care, zeal and attentiveness in becoming acquainted with the entire ancient world, we think that you are not ignorant of things of this kind. In addition we have received the Egyptian Horus that has been translated into Greek by a certain Philip, who dealt with this material, but we find that this codex, although it has been published by Aldus, is mutilated and incomplete in very many places, not by any negligence on the part of Aldus, a very careful fellow, but from deficiencies in the copies, which are very few and far between and all damaged. For this reason we have come to you, hoping to hear about these things from you if you should know anything about them. (Valeriano 1556: 233r. Apud Curran 2007: 235)

In this excerpt, it is clear that if Horapollon's *Hieroglyphica* was considered the one key to reading hieroglyphs; the *Mensa Isiaca* was the inscription to be deciphered. However, the task was clearly unsuccessful. Curran sees this passage – and I agree – as a symptom of the frustration and, again, *scepticism* that the application of *Hieroglyphica* caused in attempts of deciphering.

In 1559, Eneas Vico, the father of Numismatics, made an engraving of the relic discussed here, which served as the base for the widespread discussion on its origin and meaning, until 1605, when Lorenzo Pignoria published his commentary of the *Mensa Isiaca*, in his *Vetustissimae Tabulae Aeneae Sacris Aegyptiorum* (Venice). His perspective was quite different from his predecessors:

He declared from the very beginning that he was unable to give an explanation of the monument as such, and that he would not even attempt it. He was interested in the table as an archaeological object, and not as a symbolical manifestation, and all attempts to attribute a hidden allegorical meaning to the various pictures and ornaments were therefore deliberately excluded from his book. (...) He could hardly be expected to rise entirely above the prevalent prejudices of his time, and the allegorical expoundings of Horapollo and Valerianus are not infrequently found in his commentary, but his great methodical innovation and improvement consisted in the use of tangible archaeological material as evidence and material of comparison, such as gems, seals, amulets, and statuettes, which were not merely referred to, but engraved and reproduced as illustrations for everybody to judge and criticize. (Iversen 1993: 85)

Proof of its acceptance, Pignoria's work would soon be reprinted in 1608 in Germany (*Characteres Aegyptii*. Frankfurt: Matthias Becker), this time beautifully engraved by Johan Theodor de Bry and his brother Theodor Israel; and in 1669 in Amsterdam (Frisius, 1669).

Not long after Pignoria's first edition,⁶⁹ the *Mensa Isiaca* reappeared in Hewart von Hohenburg's *Thesaurus Hieroglyphicorum* (1610) together with van Aalst engravings of many accurate (fig. 10-17; 32-34) and fictitious Egyptian inscriptions [Plate 67]. While Pignoria tried to describe each figure to the best of his knowledge, Hohenburg apparently attempted to interpret the whole tablet as a "nautical description of the world" (cf. Iversen 1993: 86). The striking visual appeal of this work would cause a great impact on Athanasius Kircher⁷⁰ and later esoteric orders.

Just as all other *theoretical nuclei*, the antiquarian one is not a *pure* canon. It will often be involved with all other conceptions of hieroglyphs. However, from a strict point of view, one can say that it is from this *nucleus* that Egyptology will emerge as a discipline.

⁶⁹ After 1607 (Iversen 1993: 158. n. 97), 1608 (Curl 2013: 112) in Germany (Munich?).

⁷⁰ For Kircher and hieroglyphs, see p. 389.

CHAPTER SIX:

The Emergence of New Codes

This chapter examines the process of *normalization* by which the theoretical nuclei and early uses of hieroglyphs evolved into three new codes (also repertoires), which are extremely important to the hieroglyphic phenomenon: *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*; the modern version of Horapollon's *Hieroglyphica* and Valeriano's *Hieroglyphica*.

1. Hypnerotomachia Poliphili and the “Italian Geroglifici”

In 1499 Aldus published one of the masterpieces of art of printing: Francesco Colonna's *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*. This influential book has attracted the attention of many scholars, not only for its beauty, literary merits or love of antiquity but because it constitutes one of the first – and most successful – systematic applications of hieroglyphs in the Renaissance.

The book, which was concluded in 1467, tells the story of Poliphilo (“the one who loves many things”) in a quest for his Polia (“many things”), which takes place amid forests, dreams and the ruins of an ancient civilization – which is endowed with obelisks, pyramids, tombs and a number of hieroglyphic inscriptions.

Hypnerotomachia (which can be translated as “The Strife of Love in a Dream”) seems to be a logical continuation of the *monumental nucleus*.¹ It has been suggested that Alberti worked for Francesco's father, Stefano Colonna and had direct contact with the family (Lefaivre 2005:

¹ Curran has also suggested that Colonna might have had intellectual exchanges with Urbano Bolzanio and studied Ferrarini's manuscripts (Curran 2007: 147).

103). More than half of the book, in fact, consists of detailed architectural descriptions,² bringing it also close to the kind of narrative that characterized Filarete's work.

With regard to hieroglyphic studies, Alberti's suggestion that the Romans employed sculptures similar to hieroglyphs in arches and other monuments (see p. 172), inspired by the Egyptians was fundamental for Colonna's conception of hieroglyph (also influenced by Horapollon): and a landmark for the new use of hieroglyphs in this context as inaugurated literarily in the *Hypnerotomachia*.

By the middle of the *Quattrocento*, an engaged scholar could have access to a number of literary references to hieroglyphs. However, any intellectual wanting to recreate ancient inscriptions of this kind, employing the diffused ideas in actual writing, would require a visual referential of the signs. Colonna (and whoever assisted his endeavour) found this reference in the Roman temple-friezes which could be found in Rome preserved in the church of San Lorenzo Fuori le Muri, in the Temple of Vespasian or in the Arco degli Argentari. The same signs could also be found in Mérida, Spain, amongst the ruins of a Roman Temple.³ [Plate 68]

The influence that these friezes had on the hieroglyphic inscriptions in the *Hypnerotomachia* is evident when they are compared. However, while the exact meaning of the Roman friezes is yet to be understood, Colonna's inscriptions are fully translated in his book. In the realm of Renaissance hieroglyphs, this work can be considered the first to render complete sentences and by comparing each hieroglyph with the text, one can grasp the grammatological function of each sign, thus understanding the rich mechanics (and even syntax) of this proper *writing-code*. [Plates 69]

Besides this linear script, Colonna's hieroglyphic system includes mythographic inscriptions, which seem to translate ancient mottoes to a visual domain [Plate 70], producing an interaction between the two domains. Both the linear and non-linear writings from *Hypnerotomachia* will be extremely influential across Europe,⁴ lending its hieroglyphic signs

² "Two hundred pages out of 370" according to Lefaivre (2005: 9).

³ A hypothesis that is yet to be explored is that these friezes, dating from the Imperial period (which underwent a strong Egyptian influence), were in fact inspired by hieroglyphs (or in the Roman accounts of the temple inscriptions in Egypt). Other possibilities exist: that it refers to a sequence of ritual sacrifice or that it corresponds to "symbols or badges of the various priestly Collegia in Rome" (Middleton 1892: 339).

⁴ See Dorez 1896.

(either linear or non-linear) to new artworks. There are at least two examples I would like to mention: the hieroglyphs in the University of Salamanca, from about the first third of the 15th century,⁵ and the frescoes in the cloisters of Santa Giustina at Padua, from approximately the same period.⁶

The idea that monuments – such as arches and obelisks – and decorative devices should be inscribed with hieroglyphs motivated the first uses of hieroglyphic signs in the visual arts. Mantegna, in his *Triumph of Cesar* (1484-1492) [Plate 71] and Dürer's work for the *Triumphal Arch of Emperor Maximilian I* (1515) pioneer this phenomenon.⁷ Allied to Colonna's hieroglyphs and other sources (especially Horapollon), this principle would be responsible for the rise of yet another genre: which I call "Italian *Geroglifici*".

With the establishment of Renaissance festivals, strictly linked with ideological displays of power aimed to revive the glory of the past, hieroglyphs became one of the devices used to decorate ephemeral architecture (together with paintings, devices, coats of arms etc.). The creation of triumphal arches for entries and marriages, catafalques for funerals, statues and facades made a large demand for hieroglyphs. *Hypnerotomachia* and Horapollon's *Hieroglyphica* (and later Valeriano) became the repository for the creators of the iconological programmes of such events, and shaped what can be perceived as a new paradigm for the use of hieroglyphs.

One of the earliest examples of application is in the Entry of Carlos V into Naples (1535), after his victories in Tunis and La Goleta. On this occasion, the allegorical programme incorporated the hieroglyph of an ouroboros encircling a crown which appears in the hand of an ephemeral statue of *Fortuna*.⁸ Other examples possibly occurred, but were not included in the account of the festival. Not much later, in 1539, the wedding of Cosimo I de Medici and Eleanora of Toledo⁹ will again make use of hieroglyphs together with other devices. Among the large paintings (quadrone) that decorated the Palazzo Medici, there was a depiction of

la Solennissima Coronatione del Serenissimo Carlo V. fatta dal septimo Clemente, & haveva nel suo architrave, un serpente, che tenendosi la coda in bocca, faceva di se stesso un cerchio, & in quello dipinto

⁵ See p. 301.

⁶ See Giehlow 2004: 127; Volkmann 1923 24; Wittkower 1987: 126.

⁷ See p. 241. Their source of inspiration is different: Mantegna is clearly influenced by the idea that Roman friezes are hieroglyphs, and Dürer follows Horapollon's descriptions.

⁸ Sala 1535: ii.

⁹ Described in Giambullari 1539.

un' Palazzo, come gia lo figuravano gli Egipty per un' Monarca dello universo, & eravi questo motto, IMPERIUM SINE FINE. (Giambullari 1539: 26)

The reference to Horapollon here is clear (*Hieroglyphica*: 1.61), and the Egyptian author is indeed named in the text (p. 29) when another painting is described: an imperial crown, having in its architrave the hieroglyph of a *pigeon* and *laurel leaf* (*Hieroglyphica*: 2.47) in its mouth (p. 29). As it is the case with the hieroglyphs in the entry of Carlos V, these compositions are essentially non-linear and accompanied by a motto. The inclusion of such a linear component (text) creating a contrast with the hieroglyph suggests that hieroglyphs could also be perceived as a text-image construction. There are, however, occasions in which hieroglyphs will be arranged linearly (with a *Hypnerotomachian* process) so as to produce their own textual component. For example, in the Entry of Henri II and Catherina de Medici into Paris, in 1549, an obelisk was erected in front of the Eglise du Saint-Sépulcre. The monument was raised on the back of a rhinoceros, surrounded by other “hieroglyphic” animals, and had a hieroglyphic “linear inscription” [Plate 72]. I would attribute this monument to the artist Jean Cousin (who is believed to have illustrated the French translations of *Hieroglyphica* and *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*, from 1546) and Jean Martin (the supposed translator of the mentioned works¹⁰) – both known to have worked on this entry.

The examples mentioned above are but a small sign of the introduction of hieroglyphs in ephemeral arts, which was probably initiated earlier (and seems to have close ties with the Medici family). This incipient use evolved consistently, together with other devices, to the point of constituting a stable genre.¹¹ Among the still undetermined number of occasions in which hieroglyphs were conceived to be displayed on monuments, another case attracts attention: the hieroglyphic monument that the Florentine intellectual Gabriele Simeoni imagined to celebrate his own death, as recorded in his *Le Sententiose Imprese, et Dialogo del Symeone*. Composing this mausoleum, Simeoni – who is known for his work on *imprese* – describes a number of “characters and figures” (Simeoni 1560: 207), particularly hieroglyphs, which he regarded as “moral

¹⁰ *Hieroglyphica*'s 1551 edition.

¹¹ See Chapter Eight.

sentences” (Simeoni 1560: 216). These hieroglyphs are described with their individual meaning and sources and, at the end, read together so as to constitute a whole text. [Plate 73]

To illustrate the stability and relative independence of the “Italian *Geroglifici*” genre, one can refer to the account of the moving iconographical programme made by the *Accademia degli Incamminati* for the funeral of Agostino Carracci, held in Bologna in 1603.¹² There, again, devices, emblems and hieroglyphs are presented as very distinct forms of expression. The monument in homage to Agostino [Plate 74] was built inside the Church of the Compagnia della Morte and the work was divided between various distinguished members of the academia. The synthesis of the programme was written in hieroglyphs on the side of the obelisk (called pyramid) facing the altar (Reni 1603: 8) [Plate 75: A]. Hieroglyphic inscriptions also decorate the wings between the series of emblems and are very similar in terms of appearance and grammatological function to *Hypnerotomachia*, although only very few of the signs correspond to Colonna’s. [Plate 75: B, C, D]¹³ The message of one of these hieroglyphic inscriptions, originally translated into Latin, has a remarkable poetic value, especially if one considers that it was *written through images*. [Plate 75: B]

Carracci’s monument, and the hieroglyphic inscription mentioned above particularly, not only praised the deceased – known to have been interested in the relationship between text and images [Plate 76] – and his qualities: it can be considered the materialization of the argument, promoted by the artistic *Accademiae*, that painting should be regarded on a par with other arts, such as Poetry and Music. This metalinguistic (or better: “metahieroglyphical”) demonstration that images could express poetic contents confirms, to a certain extent, the use of hieroglyphs to legitimize the new status of image (and its creators).

Even with its variables, the “geroglifici” genre created a new paradigm for Renaissance hieroglyphs. They came to be applied systematically with a particular function. Curiously, they also revived the monumental purpose of ancient Egyptian writing – which indeed had a strong ideological character.

¹² Described in Reni 1603. The person responsible for the programme was Giovanpaolo Bonconti who, in a twist of fate, died a few days after executing the funeral – possibly due to the “extreme efforts of mind and body” that he employed in this task (Malvasia 2000: 182). “Agostino died in Parma on 23 February 1602, and the funeral celebration mounted by the Carracci Academy in Bologna was held the following year on 18 January 1603” (Malvasia 200: 180, fn. 228)

¹³ His source might well be Achille Bocchi’s *Symbolicarum Quaestionum* (1555), since he had worked “retouching” its engravings.

2. The Renaissance's *Hieroglyphica* of Horapollon

This thesis already discussed some of the fundamentals and inherent details of this crucial work. Some attention has also been given to its role as an intermediary in the process of stimulus diffusion through the way it has been “read” and “popularised” by the different *conceptual nuclei*. Now the moment has come to consider very briefly how *Hieroglyphica* was counter-influenced by the way it was translated, edited, illustrated and distributed in the Renaissance, in a process that helped *establish the parameters for a hermeneutic genre*.

2.1. Manuscript Tradition

After being brought to Florence in 1422, it is known that *Hieroglyphica* was quickly copied and spread in other Italian cities, making considerable impact in the most important intellectual circles of the time even before it was printed. The main events of this initial influence have been presented here in the form of the systematic studies of hieroglyphs, particularly in the case of the monumental, Neo-Platonic and Aristotelian *conceptual nuclei*. It is in this context that the first (full or partial) translation from Greek into Latin emerged.¹⁴

2.2. Edition, Translation and Commentary

¹⁴ For a list of the extant manuscripts of *Hieroglyphica*, see Wildish 2012: 143; for an annotated list of Latin translations, see Sider 1984: 77.

In 1505 Aldus published *Hieroglyphica's Editio Princeps* in Venice.¹⁵ To establish the text, he was helped by Fra Urbano – then regarded as one of the most learned scholars on the subject.¹⁶ Naturally, this edition had a significant impact on the dissemination of the manuscript, creating a new wave of intellectual and artistic interest in the opusculum. New translations (not always accurate) and editions would rapidly follow – some of them containing “new hieroglyphs”.¹⁷ Including new entries would have consequences: either the author identified credible references to such hieroglyphs in other sources or he is actually *creating* new hieroglyphs. The inclusion of new signs, in its turn, presupposes the understanding of the code and the clear intention of having it used effectively to write (since the sign does not exist elsewhere yet, ontologically speaking).

Moreover, introductory studies (the first being Fasanini's) and commentaries (Jean Mercier, 1548 and Hoeschel, 1595) would reinforce the legitimacy of *Hieroglyphica*, preparing it to be appropriated by “non-specialists”. With the incorporation of critical apparatus, the book would not only carry the *code*, but a synthesis of the whole *cultural complex* around hieroglyphs and their relationship with natural sciences, mysticism/religion, classical authors, antiquities, etc.

2.3. Illustration

It is true that for many readers *Hieroglyphica* is an invitation to visualize mentally the hieroglyphs presented there. However, since the Buondelmonti manuscript had no illustrations and the known Egyptian inscriptions then available for Renaissance scholars did not contain all signs described in *Hieroglyphica* and vice-versa,¹⁸ there was a significant gap of visual referential for anyone interested in producing illustrations for the manuscript. Moreover, the uncertainty of whether hieroglyphs should follow a traditional iconicity¹⁹ or could be drawn *ad libitum*, probably

¹⁵ Horapollon 1505.

¹⁶ See p. 230.

¹⁷ Drysdall made an indispensable comparison between translations of *Hieroglyphica* (Drysdall, 1989). For a list of editions, see Wildish 2012: 145.

¹⁸ As discussed above, p. 206, only 35-6 hieroglyphs were identified by Poggio and Cyriacus.

¹⁹ i.e. if there were strict rules for their drawings, as one can suppose by observing the repetition of signs in any Egyptian inscription.

made the first hieroglyph scholars very reticent in adding illustrations to *Hieroglyphica* in the 15th century. It would take almost a century, and a sort of cultural distancing, for this work to be illustrated for the first time.

The oldest known illustrated copy of *Hieroglyphica* is the manuscript with the partial Latin translation offered by Pirckheimer to the Emperor Maximilian I between 1510 and 1514, with sketches by Albrecht Dürer [Plate 77], who also designed Stabius and Pirckheimer's hieroglyphic eulogy [Plate 78] that reappeared in the pinnacle of the *Triumphal Arch of Emperor Maximilian I* [Plate 79]. My hypothesis is that this first set of drawings is a symptom that *Hieroglyphica* was regarded by the authors as a code to be employed in new creations, rather than a key to reading Egyptian inscriptions (designed in a different fashion). The fact that Pirckheimer and Dürer were unaware of the details of the specialized discussions taking place in Italy at that time certainly helped this task.

Not much later, Fasanini would register the intention of illustrating his edition of *Hieroglyphica*, in the following terms:

When I realized that it [the hieroglyph of an anchor and a dolphin] derived from a similar engraved figure of the Egyptians, I resolved, since models are more effective, to attach engraved figures and signs of similar type to each chapter and symbol of this work, so that by observation and sight, no less than by hearing and reading, the meaning should be perceived and greater pleasure and greater usefulness too should result for the readers. But because this was apparently rather more work and [would take] more time, I did not want to delay the job [of publishing his translation of *Hieroglyphica*] in any way when it was begun, and spend a lot of time on things which everyone can supply for himself. (Fasanini apud Drysdall 2013: 92)

If this argument is true, I cannot help but imagine that Fasanini's hurry to publish his work stopped him from producing an edition of *Hieroglyphica* which could have had more success than it actually did. However, there is a chance that this justification is only an excuse for not undertaking the complex attempt to finding proper illustrations – which hypothetically could risk his established reputation as a hieroglyph scholar.

The first illustrated edition will appear together with the earliest translation into a vernacular language: the famous French edition by Jacques Kerver (1543). Again, there is a distancing between the discussions that took place in Italy and this edition. The woodcuts

accompanying each chapter, attributed to Jean Cousin,²⁰ are completely different from Egyptian or Roman (or “*Hypnerotomachian*”) sources, and also differ from Dürer’s drawings. Here, the 197 woodcuts must be regarded as unambiguous mythograms (with accompanying *fatti*, i.e. background figures) and the hieroglyphs described in each chapter seem to interact with each mythographic scene (which will carry a meaning of its own). In fact, I would suggest that *this way of illustrating hieroglyphs is actually a counter-influence of the emblematic tradition* at the hands of an artist who is known to have written an emblem manuscript.²¹

The variation between the illustrations of Horapollon, therefore, easily transposed the limits of mere aesthetic preferences: they differ essentially on grammatological grounds [Plate 8o]. Like commentaries on the text, each of these *graphic translations* presupposes a process of interpretation and recreation that has concrete consequences in the reception of the work, given that they set parameters for the visual aspect of hieroglyphs and their mythographic possibilities. Put differently, *the mythographic use of Renaissance hieroglyphs also implied a rupture with the realistic ideal being pursued by the art of painting in this historical context*. In mythographic constructions, hieroglyphs could appear as heads without body, men eating clocks, tongues suspended in the air and other creations that would evoke an alternative to the canonical aesthetics – which was particularly welcomed by the print culture. Furthermore, the introduction of mythograms in the text also represents the establishment of linear and non-linear domains in Horapollon’s work (allowing it to be interpreted as a text-image horizontal phenomenon).

2.4. Normalization of the Genre: Becoming the Parameter

The successive influences on *Hieroglyphica* discussed here, caused by its own process of diffusion and re-appropriation in the Renaissance, resulted in its re-normalization as a humanistic hermeneutic genre, in other words, the reestablishment of its original function, but with new

²⁰ Not surprisingly, Cousin also illustrated Kerver’s French edition of *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* (Colonna: 1546).

²¹ Cousin, Jean. *Liber Fortuna*, 1568. For an excellent discussion on the authorship of this work, see Saunders 1997. For the relationship between hieroglyphs and emblems, see Chapter Seven.

particularities that would feed a new *zeitgeist*. Being perceived as a code that could be filled with new entries, *Hieroglyphica* was conceptually widened and became accepted as a sort of “etymology of images” in which each new “addition” to the repertoire would be made according to the tacit principles absorbed by study of this work. In my opinion at a certain point this procedure acquired some autonomy in relation to the original repertoire, paving the way for the creation of new codes. So, more than a source of ideas and inventory of hieroglyphs, *Hieroglyphica* became a model for other genres – especially from the 16th century on.

Among the important works that might be a result of this phenomenon, with different aims and purposes, one can list Valeriano’s *Hieroglyphica* (1556),²² which is a continuum of the genre (sharing the same purposes, but with a further elaboration), Alciato’s *Emblemata* (1531) and Ripa’s *Iconologia* (1593), which are different genres that are nevertheless inspired by *Hieroglyphica*’s characteristics as a code,²³ and many others (especially if we consider the vast influence of the cited works).

2.5. Factors of Dissemination and Convention

In terms of *Hieroglyphica* dissemination in the Renaissance, the first thing to consider is its support. One must not be surprised to know that as long as *Hieroglyphica* remained within the manuscript tradition, it dwelled in the libraries of nobles and specialist circles and its dissemination would depend on the slow process of copying by hand – which would also require the permission of the owner. With the advent of numerous printed editions and translations (and even imitations), the spread was immediate and access to this treatise was facilitated.

However, the distribution of the book is not the only factor for its dissemination. In the case of *Hieroglyphica* there are two decisive aspects that should be taken into consideration: the application of Horapollon’s hieroglyphs in other media (devices, coins, printmarks, artwork) –

²² See p. 247.

²³ This process takes place in the *complex level*. See Chapters Seven, Eight and Ten.

even in public (e.g. its frequent use in ephemeral architecture) – which became more common with printed editions, and the *adoption of Hieroglyphica as a textbook*.

I have already mentioned the fact that Beroaldo introduced *Hieroglyphica* (and hieroglyphs) into the “curriculum” of young students. He not only circulated, but printed his epitomized version of the treatise in a schoolbook. Fasanini, as well, transformed hieroglyphs into an academic discipline, and much later, in 1597, Franceschini would print a “prudish edition” of Horapollon – with woodcuts inspired by Kerver’s edition – for the use of teenagers at Jesuit schools.²⁴ All this is compelling evidence of how *Hieroglyphica* consciously pervaded the European imaginary (i.e. “tacit convention”) to the point of becoming a manual of visual literacy for Renaissance man.

2.6. *Hieroglyphica*’s Different “Levels of Diffusion”

The *popularization* of this treatise can be discussed from various perspectives, and is a condition to understanding its role in the consolidation of the hieroglyphic phenomenon (subject of Chapter Six). Running the risk of repeating myself, one of my main preoccupations is to debunk the myth that *Hieroglyphica*’s influence in the Modern Era comes down to a set of mistakes and motifs. In reality, it is the only “intermediary” that contributed with stimuli at each “Level of Diffusion” of hieroglyphs in the Renaissance discussed in this chapter. [Plate 81]

It goes without saying that these levels can interact among each other; and that a given phenomenon can involve one, many or even all of these levels. For instance, there will be signs from *Hieroglyphica* that will be employed in paintings (as motifs) without being considered “hieroglyphs” *per se*, and so on.

²⁴ In Franceschini own words, “*in publicis gymnasijs adolescentibus proponerentur*” (1597: 3). See Drysdall, 1989: 232.

3. Pierio Valeriano's *Hieroglyphica*: a Hieroglyphic Encyclopaedia

Karl Giehlow's detailed account of Pierio Valeriano's life and work remains unrivalled.²⁵ My objective here is solely to stress the role of Valeriano's *Hieroglyphica* (1556) as the most developed expression of a genre (derived from Horapollon's work) that harmonizes, with great skill, the core ideas and examples of Renaissance hieroglyphs in vogue in his time. In Curran's words, "the most significant and influential treatment of the subject to be produced during the sixteenth century" (Curran 2007: 228).

The story of this extraordinary character begins in Belluno, where Valeriano was born (1477) to an impoverished family who left him an orphan and uneducated by the age of 15. In the following year, he moved to Venice to study with his uncle – none other than the learned scholar Fra Urbano, with a known interest in hieroglyphs: in a twist of fate the young Valeriano found himself in the middle of a heated debate that would shape his intellectual aspirations. With a few years of solid education provided, among others, by Giorgio Valla (who had translated Horapollon's work around 1500²⁶), Pierio was most probably already in the course of his hieroglyphic investigations by the time his uncle was assisting Aldus in the preparation of the first edition of Horapollon's *Hieroglyphica* (1505).²⁷ In effect, Valeriano seems not only to have been raised by his uncle with all the intellectual resources to become the perfect hieroglyph scholar, but also his circle of close friendships was full of well-known intellectuals with similar interests²⁸ who would support the lifetime²⁹ and challenging task that he set himself: to produce his own *Hieroglyphica*, which seems to have consisted, initially, of comments on Horapollon addressed to

²⁵ Giehlow 2004: 217-246.

²⁶ Sider 1984: 19. See Gaisser 1999: 328.

²⁷ Valeriano also worked for Aldus' printing house, where he is known to have corrected Lorenzo Valla's translation of the *Iliad*.

²⁸ For example, Celio Calcagnini, who translated *Hieroglyphica* after Aldus's edition (Sider 1984: 25; Giehlow 2004: 245) and to whom Valeriano dedicated Book 6 of his hieroglyphic treatise (the *Cynocephalus*); Achille Bocchi (Book 7); Paolo Giovio (Book 30) and others.

²⁹ Thanks to his talents, he became a protégé of Giulio de' Medici, who would become Pope Clement VII. Remaining in the favour of the Medici granted Valeriano the necessary time and means to compose his opus, without compromising his work as a poet and professor (in Rome he attained the *cattedra* of Rhetoric at the Collegio Romano).

his friends, then further elaborated in an impressive and influential opus, that will be discussed below.

3.1. Purpose, Sources and Conception of Hieroglyph

In his *Epistola Nuncupatoria* (addressed to Cosimo de Medici), Valeriano speaks of the complications involved in the composition of his work:

[some] advised, since the difficulty of the matter was so evident to them, that the effort of this task should be declined, particularly since not a few Greek, Latin, and Barbarian writers had used up all their study and their energy fruitlessly in explicating them, and because such a task encompasses the reason and nature of nearly all objects and arts. Moreover, with the ancient monuments of those letters having been destroyed, partly through time's natural destruction and partly through the neglect of humanity, people said that it was necessary to work hard because one had to work with such a shortage of writers (...), since particularly at that very time there was no one of sufficiently profound erudition who was capable of either understanding or interpreting the obelisks which are still to be seen at Rome or elsewhere, or that admirable table of Bembo; and they said that it was vain to try to undertake that which you can never be able to carry through to completion. (Valeriano: fol. *3r. Apud Curran 1998: 160)

In this passage, one can perceive a trace of Urbano's erudite scepticism, to which Valeriano has a daring response:

To these people I want to respond that I am not unaware that very many of these things have been extinguished along with the kingdom of the Egyptians, with their learning, their social structure, and almost every name of theirs; so that even if Heraiscus himself were to come to life again, Heraiscus of whom it is said that he understood all their priestly monuments and mystic letters at first sight, and could at the same time have made an interpretation of the objects, even he would now labour in vain if he were to approach such a thing as this. But if it is not possible for me, and not possible for any other person to wander completely around this holy place, should one therefore flinch from undertaking a huge and eminent task which is not yet begun, because it is not possible for one person to excel in all spheres? (Valeriano: fol. *3r. Apud Curran 1998: 160)

Arguably, what Pierio is proposing here is that there are two possible attitudes towards the problem of writing *Hieroglyphica*: either one accepts that the paucity of Egyptian evidence is

so drastic that even a learned Egyptian³⁰ would not decipher hieroglyphs because their meaning is hopelessly lost; or by studying all sources on the subject, one can reconstitute this writing fully – which would involve the colossal endeavour of collecting all possible testimonies on the subject, which “encompasses the reason and nature of nearly all objects and arts”.

Valeriano follows the second path and by proudly showing a list with the nearly 200 authors that he consulted to write *Hieroglyphica* he almost makes a statement: that he covered all known sources on the subject. Despite the time and sources that he had available, it is not to be expected, of course, that he would discover all these testimonies by reading everything ever written. Effectively, he acknowledges his three precursors in hieroglyphic studies: Poliziano, Crinito and Beroaldo.³¹

However, as has been discussed in the present chapter,³² the authors mentioned had different philosophical (and grammatological) opinions on hieroglyphs. To ascertain the contribution of each of these authors is particularly difficult since the treatises by Poliziano³³ and Crinito (the two members of the Neo-Platonic nucleus) on the subject are now lost, but investigating the idea that Valeriano promotes can reveal the weight of these different judgments in his work.³⁴

Right on the frontispiece of the first edition of Valeriano's *Hieroglyphica* there is a letter to the reader in which one can find that “speaking through hieroglyphs is nothing but to disclose the nature of divine and human things”. This straightforward definition of hieroglyph immediately poses two problems (that eventually lured much of his public, including some specialists): the misleading notion that for Valeriano the “Sacred Letters of the Egyptians” can be spoken and that anything could be regarded as a hieroglyph. A close look into his arguments can cast some light on the matter:

This mysterious knowledge, used in the paintings and the buildings of the ancients, who had invented a mute language, conceivable by means of the pictures of things alone, without any sound

³⁰ Including Heraiscus, Horapollon's uncle.

³¹ “*Mihi igitur vitio verti non debet, si omnem operam et studium ad harum rerum explicationem contulerim, quas tanto in pretio a praestantissimis quibusque semper habitas novimus. Angelo Politiano, Petro Crinito, Philippo Beroaldo summae laudi datum, quod primi unum vel alterum ex his locum interpretati sint*” (Valeriano: *4r)

³² See discussion on the Neo-Platonic and Aristotelian theoretical nuclei.

³³ Crinito also claimed to have investigated almost all sources available on hieroglyphs (see p. 220).

³⁴ And at least conjecture their possible contribution.

of the voice or combination of letters. Undoubtedly on the authority of Egyptian priests, this discipline was very soon imitated by other nations by tacit consent. (Valeriano 1556: fol. 194r)

Pierio advances here two fundamental premises that must be kept in mind here: that originally hieroglyphs are a mute form of writing³⁵ and that this discipline³⁶ was imitated by other nations. According to Valeriano, the Egyptians were the first to use hieroglyphs, when their antediluvian ancestors created “two pillars” on which they inscribed their secrets so as to protect them from the deluge.³⁷ The Egyptians inherited this discipline (*disciplinam haereditariam possiderent*) that was then taught to Moses, and so forth. Moses not only would be able to write using this script, but to talk in hieroglyphs so as to veil the divine secrets. Like him, David, the prophets, Jesus and the apostles would make similar use of parables (Valeriano: fol. *3v). In other words, with the process of idea diffusion, hieroglyphs became the source of parables. But in the sense proposed here, *even with the act of speaking the divine secrets remain silent*.³⁸

I think that the apparent “universalization” of the concept of hieroglyph (i.e. widening the notion to encompass what was regarded as its products: parables etc.) is in fact the result of a Neo-Platonic approach to the matter, which might be a development of Poliziano or Crinito’s lost treatises. Under the aegis of hieroglyphs Valeriano not only formulated a system in which the meaning of ancient inscriptions could be grasped, but he also created a universal parameter by which new philosophical messages could be encoded and transmitted.³⁹

The skilled way Pierio presented his work can help explain its success – in particular in Jesuit circles and catechetical endeavours.⁴⁰

3.2. Structure and Content

³⁵ See p. 261.

³⁶ That Iversen translates as “language”, perhaps seduced by the letter to the reader... (Iversen 1993: 72).

³⁷ Cf. Josephus. *Jewish Antiquities*: 4.33.

³⁸ The key for this apparent paradox is in Ficino: “dismiss the sounds and accept the meanings”. See p. 217.

³⁹ Pierio was also the first European to discuss the origin of the “Egyptian alphabet” from the form of hieroglyphs (see p. 349).

⁴⁰ *Hieroglyphica* was largely adopted as a repertoire to compose sermons, and many Jesuits would study the subject, such as Caussin, Masen, Menestrier and Kircher (see Chapter Ten).

Regarding Valeriano's method of composition, Giehlow has observed that Horapollon is his referential (2004: 237). It seems that Pierio's original intent was to produce a commentary on the Egyptian treatise in the way he presents (using the tripartite model) and explains the meaning of his hieroglyphs (almost paraphrasing Horapollon⁴¹). However, unlike the extant version of the Egyptian *Hieroglyphica*, in which the quality of information changes according to the sections (see Chapter Four), Pierio's work gives a uniform treatment to all of his hieroglyphs, which are also presented in an elegant literary style.

The organization of the work is also different. Valeriano meticulously reorganized the whole structure of the work, and gave it a new proportion. If Horapollon's opusculum was regarded as a kind of dictionary (with about 200 entries), Valeriano's *Hieroglyphica* would be better compared to an encyclopaedia of hieroglyphs (with over 1400 entries).

The work comprises 58 books, which were written at different periods (Iversen 1993: 71). Each book has an introduction where it is dedicated to a different Maecenas or friend of the author, and it is divided into commentaries (similar to *Hieroglyphica*'s chapters) explaining one or more hieroglyphic subject (such as "lion", "elephant", "rhinoceros", etc.). Every general label has then a number of headings (that consist of the meaning, usually a sentence or a word), under which a variation of the main hieroglyph is finally explained, possibly with the help of a woodcut.⁴²

[Plate 82]

For example:

Book 1 is dedicated to Cosimo de Medici, and concerns the hieroglyph(s) of a lion. There are 40 headings (or *entries*) with variations of this hieroglyph and respective meaning. Some of these headings are "vigilance and guard" (indicated by the head of a lion), "strength subordinated by wisdom" (with the woodcut of a lion prostrated before an owl), "strength subordinated by eloquence" (a lion prone in front of a caduceus), etc. Every entry is interpreted and attested by either Horapollon, classical and biblical passages or even objects (such as coins).

⁴¹ According to Iversen, "the allegorical method used to explain the individual signs is copied from Horapollon[n] and the other hieroglyphical classics" (p. 72). My point, of course, is that this work results from the influence of Horapollon's *Hieroglyphica* as a genre.

⁴² The work also provides a table of contents, a list of biblical passages, a list of quoted authors, and at the end a 46-pages comprehensive Index (p. 852-898), which can prove itself very helpful.

If in the general discussion on the concept of hieroglyph one can identify Valeriano's debt towards the Neo-Platonic nucleus, in the way he organizes his work and effectively explains his hieroglyphs the influence of the Aristotelian nucleus can be traced. As Iversen (1993:71) observes,

The arrangement is undoubtedly based on Diodorus' remark that Egyptian hieroglyphs could be divided into distinctive categories according to the objects they represented, Gods, human beings, parts of the body, and ordinary objects and utensils being quoted as examples.

As discussed earlier in this chapter, Diodorus was extremely important to Beroaldo (one of Pierio's precursors), who also stated that hieroglyphs could signify *a word or entire sentence* (see p. 182). There is yet another clue which I think corroborates my hypothesis: the quality-based relationship between hieroglyph and meaning. In his commentaries, Valeriano seems to explore all known qualities of the described entities so as to present each of them as a hieroglyphic meaning. This approach is in line with Fasanini's assertion (quoted on p. 184) that studying the property of everything one could grasp the meaning of hieroglyphs: precisely the task that Valeriano claims to be undergoing in his *Hieroglyphica*. If my hypothesis is correct, it becomes clear how Pierio balanced Neo-Platonic (Poliziano and Crinito) and Aristotelian (Beroaldo) influences so as to produce his nevertheless original work.⁴³

3.3. Woodcuts and Text-Image Interactions

In style, the woodcuts (around 273 in number) bear some resemblance to the ones made for Kerver's 1543 edition of *Hieroglyphica*, and some parallels can certainly be traced (to start with, the squared frame, the backgrounds, and some of the hieroglyphs). However, different from Kerver's edition, the nature of Valeriano's work (particularly its volume) would not allow the hieroglyphic frames to be centred on the page, without any text at its sides: they are instead aligned to the right margin and wrapped by the text.

⁴³ Valeriano was also well informed about the Antiquarian nucleus, as he mentions hieroglyphic inscriptions on obelisks and the *Mensa Isiaca* (that belonged to his friend Pietro Bembo).

A quick analysis of the woodcuts in *Hieroglyphica* shows that from a grammatological perspective most of them consist of *mythograms*. This is especially true when there is an interaction between the figures within the frame [Plate 83]. It is not possible to be sure if it is due to the compositional options mentioned above that almost all of Pierio's hieroglyphs have their meaning written in small capitals on top of their frame, but one can certainly recognize that it does facilitate consulting the material and, of course, creates an immediate text-image contrast (synergraphy). However, there are exceptions: particularly when one speaks of hieroglyphs that can be used to compose a discourse. In this case, the frames tend to be rectangular, the hieroglyphs assume a linear sequence and the translation is presented in different ways [Plate 84] – in a way very similar to Colonna's textual compositions.

Aesthetically speaking, the design tends to be free, but I would suggest that Pierio must have supervised this work – given his preoccupation with previous hieroglyphic programmes, such as his possible collaboration in Piombo's portrait of Andrea Doria⁴⁴ [Plate 85] and in the creation of one of Giulio de' Medici's devices.⁴⁵

Concerning the role of the *antiquarian nucleus* in Pierio's *Hieroglyphica*, Curran argues that although Valeriano was familiar with copies of authentic hieroglyphs (which can be attested clearly in his *epistola*, in which he mentions obelisks and the *Mensa Isiaca*), the “author avoids any opportunity to test his methodology on a hieroglyphic text of the sort copied generations before by Ferrarini” (Curran: 230).⁴⁶ I disagree with that proposition for at least two reasons: first, Valeriano does not claim this was his objective (therefore it is not within the scope of his treatise, which aims to be a commented repertoire); second, Pierio claims himself that much of the Egyptian culture (i.e. meaning) was lost, and that even for Heraiscus it would be impossible to

⁴⁴ “It has been proposed in a recent study that Valeriano, possibly working in collaboration with his colleague Paolo Giovio, devised the ‘hieroglyphic’ frieze of triumphal naval images – taken directly from the San Lorenzo friezes that had inspired the hieroglyphs of Poliphilo and that appear on Sebastiano del Piombo's portrait of the Genoese naval commander Andrea Doria, commissioned by Pope Clement VII [Giulio de' Medici] in 1526”. (Curran 2007: 231)

⁴⁵ Giulio de' Medici, while cardinal, asked Valeriano which would be the most appropriated hieroglyph for his motto “*aliorum pravitatem bonorum operum ope pervicendam*” and Valeriano suggested a white rose (*Hieroglyphica* 1556: fol. 399r).

⁴⁶ Erik Hornung agrees: “‘genuine’ hieroglyphs played no role in the work of Valeriano, who preferred to translate descriptions by classical writers into visible pictures” (Hornung 2001: 88).

read the relics of his civilization; and finally some of the woodcuts from *Hieroglyphica* reveal an interesting connection with authentic hieroglyphs, probably inspired by the *Mensa Isiaca*. [Plate 86]

3.4. Editions, Translations, etc.

The popularity and authority of Valeriano is unquestionable. In the course of 150 years, *Hieroglyphica* was printed many times,⁴⁷ translated into French (first edition: Lyon, 1576) and Italian (first edition: Venice, 1602), augmented (in two books by Celio Agostino Curione. Basel, 1556) and summarized (in the “pocket edition” by Schwalenberg, 1606). Importantly, Valeriano’s work would be appended to other books (especially Horapollon’s *Hieroglyphica* and later, in 1621, Caseneuve’s *Hieroglyphicorum, Emblematumque Medicorum Dodekakrunos*)⁴⁸ – becoming the flagship for the dissemination and concentration of hieroglyphic works. This “orbital attraction” that *Hieroglyphica* exerted on the related literature is crucial to appreciating the rise of the Baroque repertoires and theories of image.⁴⁹

Pierio’s *Hieroglyphica* was widely employed by artists and intellectuals, and as in his spectrum almost everything could be read as a hieroglyph, it becomes impossible to ascertain – through an analysis of the visual surface – where his immense influence on the visual arts, performing arts and literature can be found. But just like Horapollon’s treatise, the impact of Valeriano’s opus takes place at many different levels.

⁴⁷ Hornung identifies 16 issues until 1678 (2001: 88), but I came across at least 29 printings until the same date, and another one in 1685.

⁴⁸ Another work of great interest here. See p. 388.

⁴⁹ See p. 354.

CHAPTER SEVEN:

Hieroglyphs and Emblematics

For the purposes of this thesis, the “emblem” can be defined as a text-image genre that became very popular between the 16th and 18th centuries, compiled in thousands of “emblem books”. The prototype for this tradition is Andrea Alciato’s *Emblematum Liber* (1531), who also coined this new meaning for the term “emblem”.¹ The formula of each emblem usually encompasses three basic features – a title (lemma, motto, saying or *inscriptio*), an image (*pictura*) and an epigram (also known as *subscriptio*)² – that must be interpreted by the reader as a single composition, so as to indicate a possible hidden meaning. Generally speaking, emblems, from a range of different themes, point to a moral exegesis, though religious, historical, mystical, interpretations are frequent. They could also be *applied* in other codes (such as paintings, tapestry, ephemeral or permanent architecture, literature, etc.) and would have a strong influence in Early Modern Europe, to the point of developing an “emblematic way of thought”.³

The relationship between hieroglyphs and emblematic tradition is widely known: be it in primary or secondary sources, the mutual reference is constant. However, especially in recent literature, this acknowledgment is often downplayed, I would say, due to the artificial distancing created

¹ The word “emblem” comes from the Latin *emblema* (pl. *emblemata*) that means a particular kind of mosaic. It is believed that Alciato employed this word after Budé’s definition: “Emblem means a work of mosaic joined and put together from insertable small pieces [...] For the Ancients emblems were used to decorate silver, gold and bronze vases: they could be removed as and when one wished...” (Gillaume Budé. Apud Grove 2005: 124). The word “emblematura” appeared earlier with that meaning in Colonna’s *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* (1499), and Alciato was probably aware of that as well (Giehlow 2004: 277).

² There are emblems that lack one of these features and/or include other elements, such as translations, commentaries and eventually even music scores.

³ A carefully introduction to emblematics, including searchable fac-simile books, translations, bibliography, can be found at the excellent *Emblems at Glasgow Website* (<http://www.emblems.arts.gla.ac.uk/>). The University of Glasgow houses the largest collection of emblem books and relative literature and a specialized study centre: the *Stirling Maxwell Centre for the Study of Text/Image Cultures* (formerly known as the *Centre for Emblem Studies*).

essentially by *logocentric* descriptions of the Egyptian writing⁴ and by reducing the role of hieroglyphs to a passive source of motifs.

In this section I explore interaction between hieroglyphs and emblems from a new perspective, viz. a process of diffusion in different cross-influencing culture levels, with the objective of demonstrating that not only was the emblem tradition constantly inspired by hieroglyphs, but a significant part of the hieroglyphic phenomenon was consolidated (as a form of expression) in the realm of emblems. As a consequence, I will suggest that the parallel between these two cultural phenomena is such that emblems can be studied as a grammatological phenomenon.

1. Hieroglyphs at the Birth of Emblem

The first point of contact between emblems and hieroglyphs takes place precisely at the cradle of the emblematic genre, with Andrea Alciato's *Emblematum Liber* [Plate 87].⁵ Between 1511-12 the Milanese author was probably a student of Felippo Fasanini in Bologna,⁶ and had his first systematic contact with the *Aristotelian Nucleus* of hieroglyphs. As Giehlow demonstrates, this contact was extremely influential on Alciato and his creation.⁷

The role of hieroglyphs in Andrea Alciato's emblems can be observed from three standpoints – (i) the purpose of his *Emblemata*; (ii) the conception of the image and the genre structure; and (iii) the eventual use of hieroglyphs in the emblems:

1.1. The Purpose of Alciato's *Emblemata* in the Light of Fasanini

⁴ Schöne, for instance, considers Modern hieroglyphs as “a capricious invention with no validity” (Schöne 1968: 38); Russell and Daly will agree that there is “no more similarity between emblems and Egyptian hieroglyphs properly understood than between apples and oranges” (Daly 1998: 27).

⁵ For different editions of this work, see *Alciato at Glasgow* website: <http://www.emblems.arts.gla.ac.uk/alciato/>

⁶ Giehlow 2004: 280.

⁷ Giehlow dedicates an entire chapter to Fasanini and Alciato's hieroglyphic studies (Giehlow 2004: 265-302).

Fasanini, in the “Explanation of Sacred Writing” that accompanies his translation of Horapollon’s *Hieroglyphica*, defines one of the purposes of his translations as follows:

From this [...] work many will be able to borrow short sayings or signs which they can inscribe on swords, rings, hairnets, belts, a cithara, on beds, couches, ceiling panels, carpets, doors, in the study, on a table, on mirrors, in the bedroom, on earthenware and silver vases. Indeed they could, with these signs both painted and carved, wrap their secret thoughts in veils and put them all over the walls of their houses. (Fasanini apud Drysdall 2013: 83)

In other words, Fasanini suggests that hieroglyphs could be applied on different supports. In Alciato’s *Emblematum Liber*, one can read in the dedication:

While boys are entertained by nuts and youths by dice, so playing-cards fill up the time of lazy men. In the festive season we hammer out these emblems, made by the distinguished hand of craftsmen. *Just as one affixes trimmings to clothes and badges to hats, so it behoves every one of us to write in silent marks [tacitis notis].* (My emphasis. Alciato 1531: A2r)⁸

In terms of the general intentions of both works, a striking parallel can be noticed here – not that Alciato’s motivation resides exclusively in this specific purpose, but it is pertinent to highlight that variations of “Fasanini’s *repertoire* project” can also be found in other books by authors who were influenced by the Bologna nucleus, such as Achille Bocchi and Pierio Valeriano. Moreover, this similarity can be regarded as yet further evidence of Alciato’s contact with Fasanini’s translation of *Hieroglyphica*.

1.2. The Conception of Image as a Silent Mark and the Genre Structure

As mentioned in the previous chapter, hieroglyphs were extensively associated to the idea of “writing in silence”, which was reinvigorated by Ficino (see p. 177). Even though Alciato’s

⁸ Translation from <http://www.mun.ca/alciato/e000.html>

emblems were conceived only as texts (the woodcuts being produced without his approval for the publication), it is clear that he had the use of *mute marks*⁹ or concrete images in mind. In fact, in his *De Verborum Significatione*, he states that:

Words signify, things are signified: though sometimes things signify, as the Hieroglyphs of Orus [Horapollon] and Chaeremon. Based on their arguments I have composed a small book of poetry, whose title is “The Emblems” [Emblemata]. (Alciato 1530: I, 530)

This passage reveals the importance of two hieroglyphic treatises to the general conception of the emblem book,¹⁰ which can be verified in different ways. To begin with, perhaps the most compelling evidence of a possible influence of Horapollon on Alciato can be perceived straight away in the *triplex* structure that would define the emblem genre [Plate 88]. But he also mentions Chaeremon, which is at least curious – since, differently from Horapollon, he does not use Chaeremon’s hieroglyphs as motifs for his emblems. The answer for this enigma might reside in Erasmus’ *Adagia*, which was another of Alciato’s known sources.¹¹ Commenting on one of his adages, *festina lente*,¹² Erasmus affirms that:

Though Horus the Egyptian, author of two books which still survive on symbols of this [hieroglyphic] kind, tells us that the serpent-image represents time and not the year; the symbol for a year is sometimes an image of Isis and sometimes of a phoenix. The same question was considered by Plutarch in his essay “On Osiris”, and among the Greeks by *Chaeremon*, according to *Suidas*, from whose works are excerpted, I suspect, the records of this sort of thing which I have seen lately. These included among other things a design to this effect: a circle to begin with, then an anchor, the middle of which, as I have said, has a twisted body of a dolphin twined around it. According to the explanation which was attached, the circle as having neither beginning nor end represents eternity. The anchor, which holds back and ties down the ship and binds it fast, indicates slowness. The dolphin, as the fastest and in its motions most agile of living creatures, expresses speed. If then you skilfully connect these three, they will make up some such principle as “Ever hasten slowly”. (My emphasis. Erasmus 2001: 137)

⁹ In Alciato’s words: “*Et valeat tacitis scribere quisque notis*” (1531: A2r). Stockheimer’s commentaries on Alciato’s dedication demonstrate that, at least for the readers, the relationship between these “mute notes” and hieroglyphs was clear (Alciato 1621: 6).

¹⁰ With regard to this passage, Stockheimer states that Alciato *imitated* the Egyptian authors.

¹¹ See Callahan 1973.

¹² Cf. emblem *Princeps Subditorum Incolumitatem Procurans* (Alciato 1531: B2r).

This passage was published soon after Erasmus's stay in Venice¹³ and Bologna, and leaves little room for doubt that the book he "had seen lately" is *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*. Erasmus's "suspicion" that *Hypnerotomachia*'s hieroglyphs are taken from Chaeremon could have been dismissed by Fra Urbano (an expert in hieroglyphs), Aldus (the publisher) or even the author of the *Struggle of Love in a Dream* himself. It is hard to believe that an intellectual of his stature would make such an assertion without any reasonable motivation (such as private discussions). Howsoever, my hypothesis is that Erasmus's concatenation probably induced Alciato to refer to *Hypnerotomachia*'s hieroglyphs as the model by the "Chaeremon" that he quotes in the excerpt transcribed above. This proposition could explain, for example, why none of Chaeremon's hieroglyphs made their way into Alciato's emblems – while *Hypnerotomachia*'s did (see section 1.3 below). But more importantly, it could shed light on Alciato's *hieroglyphic method*: Chaeremon's hieroglyphs, as previously discussed, appear in Tzetzes' comments on Homer's *Iliad*, i.e. an ancient Greek source. In *Hypnerotomachia*, many of the signs referred to as hieroglyphs are derived from Roman friezes and other antiquities. In both cases, therefore, one can find *hieroglyphs being used to interpret Graeco-Roman imagery* – and I would suggest that this is an underlying premise of Alciato's *Emblematum Liber*. This can become clearer if one considers Alciato's previous antiquarian and literary interests: a good starting point for exploring this reasoning could be remembering that in the 1520's Alciato translated a series of epigrams from the *Anthologia Graeca*, of which 153 were published by Janus Cornarius in the *Selecta Epigrammata Graeca Latine versa...* (Basel, 1529). Theoretically, with this material in hand, and before *Hypnerotomachia*'s illustrated hieroglyphs, Alciato might have decided to apply the "hieroglyphic method" to a choice of these poems¹⁴ to reveal their meanings.

Although a couple of comparative examinations are certainly not enough to confirm my hypothesis *per se*, they may be sufficient at least as an illustration. The epigram below, for instance, is taken from the *Greek Anthology*, was translated by Alciato and included in the *Selecta*:

Julianus

¹³ Where he participated of the Aldine circle and was in contact with Fra Urbano.

¹⁴ One possible criterion for the choice might have been the preponderant figurative qualities of some of these epigrams.

On a Bronze Statue of Icarus which stood in a Bath

Icarus, wax caused thy death, and now by wax the worker in bronze has restored thee to thy shape. But beat not thy wings in the air, lest thou fall from the sky and give thy name to the bath. (*Greek Anthology* 16.107. Apud Paton 1918: V, 219)

Let us compare it to an emblem from Alciato's *Emblemata*:

Against the Astrologers

Icarus, you were carried through the heights of heaven and through the air, until the melted wax cast you headlong into the sea. Now the same wax and the burning fire raise you up again, so that by your example you may provide sure teaching. Let the astrologer beware of prediction. Headlong will the imposter fall, as he flies beyond the stars. (Alciato 1531: C7r. Translated in *Alciato at Glasgow* website¹⁵)

As can be observed, the epigram from the Greek Anthology provides the basis for Alciato's emblem (which is almost a paraphrase). Adopting the terminology used throughout the present thesis, Icarus is clearly taken as the *signifier*,¹⁶ receiving a description that can be identified with that used by Horapollon for his hieroglyphs. However, the original piece lacks the *otherness* of a hieroglyph from Horapollon for example, i.e. Horapollian hieroglyphs almost always mean something *different* from the signifier that is described. "Icarus" meaning "Icarus" would not characterize a hieroglyph, since the meaning would be obvious. Alciato, however, associates Icarus (signifier) with the invective *Against the Astrologers* (signified). These two elements have no immediate connection between each other, but they are put together in the same context and the exegesis makes the connection. I would suggest that this is *a quite clear case of what I have called synergraphy*: the hermeneutics of Icarus' myth and the interpretation of the actions of astrologers meet in a tropological idea (as in an "epiphany").

Many more occurrences of this kind of construction can be attested. For example, from the *Greek Anthology*:

¹⁵ <http://www.emblems.arts.gla.ac.uk/alciato/emblem.php?id=A31a054>

¹⁶ The woodcut made for this emblem in the 1531 edition, made by Hans Schäufelein (after Jörg Breu), shows the wrong figure: an astrologer. This was corrected from the 1534 edition on, that will have the image of Icarus.

Anonymous
On a Statue of Nemesis

Nemesis warns us by her cubit-rule and bridle neither to do anything without measure nor to be unbridled in our speech. (*Greek Anthology* 16.223. Apud Paton 1918: V, 293)

In Alciato, this passage becomes:

Injure no-one, either by word or deed.

Nemesis follows on and marks the tracks of men. In her hand she holds a measuring rod and harsh bridles. She bids you do nothing wrong, speak no wicked word, and commands that moderation be present in all things. (Alciato 1531: A7r. Translated in Alciato at Glasgow 2014)

Here, the statue of Nemesis would stand for the *signifier*, and the motto “injure no-one, either by word or deed” would be the *signified*. In order to make the connection between these two elements, Alciato makes an exegesis of Nemesis and her attributes – already present in the original poem –, adding that the goddess is pursuing men. In this case, as it can be observed, Alciato had no need to add more information, since all elements for a synergraphy are present (signifier different from signified, with an exegesis explaining the relationship).

In order to construct his emblems, Alciato apparently attempts to supply the epigrams from the *Greek Anthology* with the elements that he apprehended from the “hieroglyphic models”. The best evidence for this procedure can be found in the following example:

Anonymous
Sayings of the Seven Sages

I will tell you in verse the cities, names, and sayings of the seven sages. Cleobolus of Lindus said that measure was best; Chilon in hollow Lacedaemon said “Know thyself”; and Periander, who dwelt in Corinth, “Master anger”; Pittacus, who was from Mytilene, said “Naught in excess”; and Solon, in holy Athens, “Look at the end of life”; Bias of Priene declared that most men are evil, and Thales of Miletus said “Shun suretyship”. (*Greek Anthology* 9.366. Apud Paton 1916: III, 199-201)

This is re-worked into:

Sayings of the Seven Sages

If you wish to represent the sayings of the Seven Sages and celebrate them in picture, you may have the following suggestions. - “Moderation is best”, as Cleobolus said. This the balance teaches or the plumbline. - Chilon of Sparta bade each man know himself. A mirror or glass taken in the hand will represent this. - The saying of Periander of Corinth, “Rein in your wrath”, pennyroyal held to the

nostrils will show. - Pittacus said, “Nothing in excess”. The same thing is said by those who suck cassia with wry mouth. - Solon bids us look to the end. Set at the field end is Terminus, who would not yield to mighty Jove. - How truly did Bias say, “There is great store of evil men”. Make a Sardinian rider sit upon a wild sheep. – “Do not stand surety”, said Thales. Even so, smeared with bird-lime, the lapwing or bee-eater draws its fellow-bird into the snare. (My emphasis. Alciato 1546: D8r ¹⁷. Translated in *Alciato at Glasgow* 2014)

What Alciato does here is to provide each author/saying with an image (that did not exist in the Greek Anthology reference). He could have left each philosopher to represent his own saying, however, one can imagine that it would be hard to distinguish one from another – and the text/image interaction would produce a *register* effect, rather than a *synergraphy*. So, he introduces objects that, being interpreted according to their qualities or literary evocations, reveal an *emblematic* connection with the saying.

At least 31 emblems from the first edition of *Emblematum Liber* (1531) are based on epigrams from the Greek Anthology.¹⁸ In my opinion, Alciato perceived the “hieroglyphic potential” of these epigrams, and their appropriation as emblems was mediated by the “argument” that he found in *Hypnerotomachia* and Horapollon. This, of course, is a limited aspect of Alciato’s poetic constructions that must not be taken as a mechanical procedure applied indiscriminately nor underestimated.

1.3. The Application of Hieroglyphs in Emblems

Although Alciato’s *Emblemata* is Graeco-Roman centred, some hieroglyphs did make their way into emblems. In some cases, the transmission is evident because of its iconicity – even if the meaning is amended by Alciato. For example, the emblem *Poverty prevents the advancement of the best of abilities* (Alciato 1531: A82) is clearly derived from *Hypnerotomachia*’s hieroglyph

¹⁷ This emblem does not appear in previous editions.

¹⁸ See Saunders 1982. Denis Drysdrahl has published an inestimable set of tables comparing different editions of Alciato’s *Emblemata* and his epigrams from Greek Anthology, which can be found at the *Emblems at Glasgow* website (<http://www.emblems.arts.gla.ac.uk/alciatoeditions.html>).

translated as “temperate the speed by sitting and the laziness by standing” [Plate 89].¹⁹ The difference between the two *picturae* is that in the original a female figure holds a tortoise and in the emblem a man holds a rock instead of a tortoise. Again the ingenuity of Alciato can be attested. He aims to associate this hieroglyph with Juvenal’s passage saying that “it is hard for people to rise when straitened circumstances stand in the way of their natural abilities” (*Satires*: 3.164-5). Even though the wings can be easily associated with the “advancement of the best of abilities”, the tortoise would remain as a sign for slothfulness (and not of poverty). Wisely, he substitutes the stone for the animal, in order to attain the desired meaning.

Another case in which something previously discussed as a *hieroglyph* receives a classical treatment to enter Alciato’s *Emblemata* appears with the famous hieroglyph of a dolphin around an anchor. The first appearance of this image was in a coin from Vespasianus, which was associated with the motto “make haste slowly” (*festina lente*²⁰) [Plate 89: C]; in *Hypnerotomachia...* (1499) it appeared as “haste slowly” (*festina tarde*) [Plate 89: E] and with this same meaning it was also adopted by Aldus as his personal mark [Plate 89: D], being discussed by Erasmus in detail.²¹ In *Emblematum Liber*, however, this image re-emerges with a completely different meaning – again supported by the author’s erudition in classical references. In the emblem “The Prince Caring for the Safety of his Subjects”, the dolphin and the anchor are interpreted in a different way: [Plate 89: F]

Whenever the brothers of Titan race churn up the seas, then the dropped anchor aids the wretched sailors. The dolphin that cares for man wraps itself round the anchor so that it may grip more securely at the bottom of the sea. - How appropriate it is for kings to bear this symbol, mindful that what the anchor is to sailors, they are to their people. (Alciato 1531: B2r. Translated in *Alciato at Glasgow* 2014)

Again, the change creates an intriguing synergraphic effect, preserving the original image and changing the exegesis, so as to reach a new signified.

¹⁹ See Giehlow 2004: 2.

²⁰ Suetonius affirms that this adage was one of Augustus’ favourites: *Nihil autem minus perfecto duci quam festinationem temeritatemque convenire arbitrabatur. Crebro itaque illa iactabat: σπεῦδε βραδέως; ἀσφαλὲς γάρ ἐστ’ ἀμείνων ἡ θρασὺς στρατηλάτης; et: "sat celeriter fieri quidquid fiat satis bene". (Suetonius. *De Vita Caesarum*: Augustus 25.4)*

²¹ *Adagia* II, 1, 1: *Festina Lente*.

The two cases discussed above are most likely to have derived from *Hypnerotomachia*. But there is also evidence of hieroglyphs from Horapollon entering the realm of emblems. Giehlow discusses a number of examples: from the stork as a hieroglyph for “filial affection” (*Hieroglyphica*: 2.58) which appears in “Show Gratitude” (Alciato 1531: A3v);²² to the use of the ouroboros in “Immortality won through literary pursuits”.²³ [Plate 90]

It is my opinion that in this emblem Alciato employs Horapollon’s ouroboros (*Hieroglyphica*: 1.2) with its correct meaning: the universe (cosmos, or in Alciato’s words, the “orb” or “world”) and not “eternity”, as often proposed by other scholars. In my reading, this emblem establishes a parallel between world fame and the literary immortality that results from it: whoever is dedicated to the study of letters will have its qualities spread by fame and consequently will be read around the world and attain immortality. This interpretation brings Alciato very close to one of Petrarch’s sonnets, offered to Pandolfo Malatesta, in which the poet offers to write something so as to increase the name of the honouree, which would be better than a marble sculpture:

Do you think that Caesar or Marcellus
or Paulus or Africanus are still known
by means of an anvil and a hammer?
My dear Pandolfo, in the end those works
are fragile, *but my study is the one*
that by fame makes a man immortal. (My emphasis. Petrarch. *Il Canzoniere*, sonnet 104)²⁴

As the passage highlighted shows, even the wording (“study”, “fame”, “immortal”) is the same. In the light of Petrarch, Alciato’s emblem generates a fascinating paradox – inasmuch as it creates a figurative expression for the idea that literary study (and not a sculpture, for example) can lead to eternal life.

In the scope of hieroglyphic studies, another relevant piece of information surrounding this particular emblem relies on the fact that it introduced one of the most popular motifs in

²² Giehlow compellingly argues that there is textual evidence in the epigram that this emblem might have been taken from Fasanini’s translation (2004: 298).

²³ The *pictura* from the first edition (lacking the ouroboros) is again “corrected” from 1534 edition (Paris, used in the corresponding Plate) on.

²⁴ A similar idea appears in Horace (*Odes*: VIII) and Ovid (*Amores*: I, XV).

emblematics – the ouroboros: a hieroglyph that will become a common-place in other emblematic repertoires.²⁵



In sum, since the explanation above is limited to the scope of the thesis. This can give the impression that I am overestimating the role of hieroglyphs in Alciato's *Emblemata*. On the contrary, I recognize that one of the greatest qualities of *Emblematum Liber* is precisely Alciato's ingenuity in bringing together different sources – hieroglyphs being one of his favoured sources.

One can argue that “notwithstanding the claims of various emblem writers very few hieroglyphic signs, including Renaissance imitations, found their way into actual emblems”²⁶ – *but that was precisely the point!* That Alciato was motivated by hieroglyphs to compose his book he stated himself, but I go further and suggest that he did indeed accomplish his objective: beyond its undeniable poetic qualities, *Emblemata* are to classical culture what *Hieroglyphica* are to the hieroglyphic phenomenon. Using a “hieroglyphic method of construction” – taken mostly from Horapollon (but also Colonna, taken as Chaeremon) – Alciato made a tropological exegesis of the Graeco-Roman signs, perhaps aspiring to the Renaissance of Graeco-Roman moral philosophy.

Therefore, I think that there is evidence enough to suggest that the hieroglyphic phenomenon affected the birth of emblems at different culture levels: as a motivation; as model and even as motifs. In this process of diffusion, however, perhaps the most exclusive outcome (that would be hardly result from other sources of inspiration) relies on the *transmission of a systematic use of synergraphy, which is the quintessence of what would become known as an emblematic language.*

2. Situating Emblems in the Hieroglyphic Tradition

²⁵ In my opinion it almost creates a sub-genre of emblems, in the way that the same structure (ouroboros around another figure) repeats with little variation.

²⁶ Daly 1998: 27.

Probably due to their structural resemblance and to the text-image nexus (especially the underlying synergraphic effect) hieroglyphs were quickly identified as the precursor of emblems and other image/text genres (such as devices).²⁷ This process is of interest here since it keeps alive the connection between the two phenomena and because it might demonstrate how emblems borrowed the authority of hieroglyphs as a form of “legitimization” and consequently how they were culturally perceived.

The early spread of emblems in Italy and other European countries provides good evidence of how deeply these “hieroglyphic genes” were rooted in emblems since the beginning of the emblematic tradition. In the following section, I will demonstrate how hieroglyphs kept influencing emblems in many different ways throughout the following centuries.

2.1. Hieroglyphs and Emblem: A *Multi-Level* Relationship

Since the objective here is to show that the mutual influence between hieroglyphs and emblems is continuous and takes place at different levels, it would be impossible for me to continue in a primarily chronological way. Therefore, I will present this phenomenon in a conceptual perspective, discussing and arranging similar ideas together rather than giving a chronological and even more fragmentary account of the events. The purpose here is to highlight different points of contact between hieroglyphs and emblems, so as to dispute the myth that the influence of hieroglyph was limited to its mere use as motifs in emblem books.

2.2. Conceptual Level: The Perception of Hieroglyphs as a Precursor of Emblems and *Imprese*

²⁷ In fact, hieroglyphs became the point in common between all these viso-literary traditions – something that would have major consequences for the phenomenon studied in this thesis (see Chapter Ten).

Beyond the actual role of Horapollon and Chaeremon in Alciato's creation, the first and perhaps strongest idea that emerges from this relationship is that emblems are a historical continuum of hieroglyphs. This notion must be regarded as a logical conclusion, given that hieroglyphs were acknowledged as older than emblems and also aimed to convey philosophic thought (i.e. they had the same general function). Moreover, at some point hieroglyphs and emblems were presented in a very similar *triplex* fashion, reinforcing the hieroglyphic conception of emblem. This process can easily be observed in the way hieroglyphs are mentioned in early French and Italian books.

In France, the early transmissions of emblems was embedded with references to hieroglyphs. Gilles Corrozet, for instance, in the prefatory matter of his *Hecatomgraphie* states that:

*Chascune hystoire est d'ymage illustrée
Affin que soit plus clairement monstrée
L'invention, & la rendre autentique
Qu'on peult nommer lettre hieroglyphique
Comme jadis faisoient les anciens
Et entre tous les vieulx Egyptiens
Qui denotoient vice ou vertu honneste
Par ung oyseau, ung poison, une beste,
Ainsi ay faict affin que l'oeil choisisse
Vertu tant belle & delaisse le vice. (1540: A3v)*

In this example one can already observe how the "hieroglyphic letter" is compared to the author's intention of associating an image with a story, so as the latter can be rendered "authentic". The same conception would be further developed by Guillaume de la Perrière in *Le Theatre des Bons Engins*:

Au surplus (Ma dame) ce n'est pas seulement de nostre temps, que Emblemes sont en bruict, prix & singuliere veneration: ains c'est de toute ancienneté, & presque des le commencement du monde. Car les AEgyptiens, qui se reputent estre les premiers hommes du monde, avant l'usaige des letres, escrivoient par figures & ymages, tant d'hommes, bestes, oyseaulx, & poissons, que serpents: par icelles exprimant leurs intentions, comme recitent tresanciens autheurs, Cheraemon [sic], Orus, Apollo, & leurs semblables, qui ont diligemment & curieusement travaillé à exposer & donner l'intelligence desdictes figures Hieroglyphiques. (1544 [A4v])

In this passage the logic is inverted with a similar result: emblems are as old as the world and hieroglyphs are an ancient version of them.

Probably because of these previous associations in France, when Aneau's French translation of Alciato appeared (*Emblemes*, 1549), the word "hieroglyphs" was implanted, in the commentary to his first emblem (A8v), setting a new "space" for the presence of hieroglyphs in the *scholia*. The use of different "spaces" of hieroglyphic presence in emblems can be attested in Paradin's *Devises Heroïques*. In the 1551 edition, for example, the introduction page (A1r) already displays Paradin's own device with an ouroboros [Plate 91: A]. Later on, discussing the origin of devices, he also mentions the hieroglyphic precursor.²⁸ Finally, in the 1557 edition, one of his devices is partially interpreted using Horapollon as a key, again situating emblems in the hieroglyphic realm:

Orus Apollo dit, que les Egipciens entre leurs lettres Hieroglifiques, pour sinifier la vie future, peingnoient ce sine de deux lignes, à savoir l'une perpendiculaire, sous l'autre diametrale: & de telle chose ne savoient rendre autre raison, fors que c'estoit une certaine sinificacion de divin mistere. (1557: A5r)

In Barthélemy Aneau's *Imagination Poétique*²⁹ the hieroglyph of an eye was used as a kind of metaphor for honour's splendour:

Car la tresclaire splendeur d'honneur est en marque Hieroglyphique designée par L'oeil: qui jecte ses rays luyans exterieurement: & puy avec les images des choses veuës, rapporte à soy plus de lumiere qu'il nen a expandu. (1552: A2v)

Such *hieroglyphic* interpretation is no surprise here if one observes the author's own device [Plate 91: B] and its poetic exegesis.³⁰

One can argue that these discrete discussions may not constitute, by themselves, evidence of the major role of hieroglyphs in the constitution of emblems. In my opinion, however, such a

²⁸ "(...) l'Egyptien s'aydoit à exprimer son intention, par ses lettres Hieroglifiques: quasi par mesme moyen, se pourra ayder le vulgaire ignorant, à congnoitre & aymer la Vertu". (1551: A4r)

²⁹ In fact, a French version of his *Picta poesis*.

³⁰ Aneau 1552: A7v.

perspective would be based only on a superficial observation of the phenomenon. Little by little the promotion of the idea that hieroglyphs are the origin of emblems became more elaborated and eventually smoothed the formulation of more complex theories of text/image interaction. It is in this context, for example that Claude Mignault's *Syntagma de Symbolis* emerged.

The "Treatise on Symbols" appeared as part of the 1577 Plantin edition of Alciato's *Emblemata*³¹ and in the view of the author it constitutes the first theoretical treatment of symbols.³² It certainly inaugurated an important discussion on the difference between emblems, hieroglyphs, devices etc. Mignault adopts the more general idea of symbol as his standpoint and, again, hieroglyphs appear to be at the core of this discussion:

We observe therefore that the Egyptians were the first to use those symbols which they called hieroglyphs, and with these they sought to ensure that their remarkable and indeed abstruse knowledge should be perceived only by themselves. (1577: 31)

Although the treatment is different, the conclusion can be very similar: hieroglyphs are the origin of symbols, and emblems are a kind of symbol. Not surprisingly Mignault is also the first to refer, in the context of emblems, to Alciato's passage in which the father of emblems affirms he was inspired by Chaeremon and Horapollon (1577: 42). If one considers that the "Treatise on Symbols" was incorporated into Alciato's editions, it is possible to grasp that the readership would be more and more aware of the notion discussed here.



Moving the discussion back to Italy, instead of emblems, it is *imprese* that will be emphatically associated with hieroglyphs, as one can see in Capaccio's *Delle Imprese*:

Questo sò ben io, e'l tengo per paradosso, che sono i Ieroglifici quasi una base ove si fondano L'Imprese. Et ancor che di contrario parere sono aluni, dicendo che i Ieroglifici, cose divine significano, pur non si sono accordi c'han ristretto il Ieroglifico ad osservata relligione, per che se fù egli per segretezza di divinità ritrovato, si dilatò nondimeno a gli atti morali, & insino al significato di bassissime cose, come si vedra

³¹ Mignault's comments became very popular. They were incorporated in Plantin's editions of Alciato in 1573, 1581, 1583, 1590, 1602 and others.

³² "Many people have written something about symbols and signs of things, but there is no one among them until now, as far as I know, who has dealt with the theory and matter in a full exposition" (1577: 29).

nel secondo libro, da quel che osservò Pierio, che quasi Ape famelca sugghiando da tutti gli antichi, fece il miele di quell'opera sua molto feconda. (1592: 5)

In addition to situating *imprese* in the hieroglyphic canon, Capaccio makes an extremely important observation that neutralizes one of the arguable differences between the two genres: he recognizes that hieroglyphic exegesis is not exclusively anagogical (or religious), and that Horapollon's second book in fact reveals tropological (i.e. moral) interpretations of hieroglyphs.

Like Mignault, Capaccio attempts to distinguish *imprese* and hieroglyphs from other genres (1592: 2-3) – a discussion that will become a commonplace in *impresa*, emblem or hieroglyphic treatises.

Another relevant hieroglyphic theory that emerges from emblematic treatises can be found in Torquato Tasso's *Dialogo dell'Imprese* (1594). The dialogue between the *Count* and a *Foreigner* begins in front of an Obelisk, with a discussion about hieroglyphs, where he defines two different kinds of Egyptian letters – sacred and demotic³³ – being informed by Clement of Alexandria. This initial discussion is important because it establishes a fundamental premise to enter the debate on the “hieroglyphic origins” of *imprese*, which, in the opinion of the *Foreigner*, was not yet solved.³⁴ The *Count* then points out a fundamental *conundrum*:

CONTE: *Io hò letto che son molte differenze frà l'imprese, e i simboli, e gl'emblemi, e i roversci di medaglie, e i Hieroglifici, ma quella mi pare assai principale, e per così dire specifica, laqual consiste nel motto, perche l'impresa è ricercato il motto à guisa d'anima, che dia vita al corpo, ma nel Hieroglifico, ò nel simbolo non è necessaria l'incrittione.* (Tasso 1594: 11)

For the *Count* the most striking divergence between a hieroglyph and an *impresa* is the fact that the hieroglyph does not need an inscription, whereas the *impresa* does require a motto. The solution to this puzzle, proposed by the *Foreigner*, is original: he suggests that as the Egyptians had two forms of writing, they might have created compositions with their two scripts³⁵ and in that case there would be “no major difference between *imprese*, symbols, the reverse of medals” etc.

³³ “CON: due erano le maniere di lettere, usate da gl'Egittii, l'una sacra, e l'altra popolare, le lettere popolari havean somiglianza con l'Hebraiche, ò con le Caldee” (Tasso 1594: 5). For the idea of an Egyptian “popular script”, see p. 343.

³⁴ (Tasso 1594: 9).

³⁵ (Tasso 1594: 11)

According to this idea, the Egyptians not only wrote through images,³⁶ but were in fact the first to combine linear texts and images³⁷ in the manner that was then adopted by *imprese*, emblems etc.

As evidence shows, many different conceptions of hieroglyph were involved in the attempts to situate emblems as a historical continuum of hieroglyphs. As dissimilar as these conceptions can appear among themselves, four underlying elements inform this process: the traceable importation of hieroglyphs into emblem books, and the explicit comments on Alciato's hieroglyphic inspiration (that became well known thanks to Mignault); the similarity between the genres of hieroglyphs and emblems (as one could perceive at a glance by comparing Kerver's illustrated editions of *Hieroglyphica* to any emblem book); the fact that it was widely accepted that in both cases images were used to write philosophical thoughts; the *legitimization* that emblems could enjoy being analogous to the Ancient Egyptian writing of philosophers and priests.

The initial process of "alignment" of hieroglyphs and other text-image genres is particularly relevant because it brings together all these different traditions, in a context where they would need to be conceptually "harmonized" or "accommodated".³⁸ It is also the gateway for new forms of interaction between hieroglyphs and emblems, which can be observed on different levels.

2.3. Sign Level: Hieroglyphs in Emblems

A quick look at specialized emblem literature would suggest that the way by which hieroglyphs leaked into emblems was essentially fanciful and unsystematic – i.e. a simple matter of picking hieroglyphic motifs. This perspective is absolutely understandable if one compares the role of hieroglyphs in two isolated books, for example, where the use of hieroglyphs may appear unintentional or of minor importance. However, if the phenomenon is viewed from a more panoramic perspective, the big picture may reveal a more multifaceted and motivated relationship,

³⁶ i.e. "vertical nexus" between text and image, to use the nomenclature propose on Chapter One.

³⁷ i.e. "horizontal nexus".

³⁸ For a discussion on what I refer as "process of convergence", see Chapter 10.

where ideas are constantly evolving. To demonstrate my point I would like to present four ways by which hieroglyphs entered emblems:

2.3.1. Hieroglyphs as Motifs

Just as Alciato created some emblems from hieroglyphs from Horapollon and *Hypnerotomachia*, other authors followed the same process, using these signs as motifs. With the emergence of Valeriano's *Hieroglyphica*, this phenomenon became even more intense. In fact hieroglyphic repertoires were immense repositories of signs, which could be borrowed, transformed, adapted according to the needs of the emblemists. Generally speaking, this borrowing can either be *patent* – when the source is textually quoted or mentioned – or *latent*, when the same figure can be found in hieroglyphic repertoires but it is uncertain what was its original source.

To quote a few examples of this frequent trend, beyond those already mentioned in Alciato's *Emblemata*, one could think of La Perrière's use of Horapollon: the hieroglyph of a headless body (meaning something "impossible"; *Hieroglyphica*: 1.64) in emblem XVI of his *Théâtre des Bons Engins* (1544) [Plate 92: A]; the hieroglyph of a hare in emblem LXI (*Hieroglyphica*: 1.26) [Plate 92: B]; the hieroglyph of the ouroboros in emblem LXXXIII (which is beautifully associated with the idea of self-knowledge) [Plate 92: C]; and Horapollon's hieroglyph of the "unformed man" possibly inspiring emblem XCVIII where unformed bear cub appears.³⁹ In his *Morosophie* (1553), La Perrière employed the hieroglyph of the viper in his emblem 65 [Plate 93] and in emblem 97 he seems to make a poetical interpretation of the hieroglyph of a "heart suspended by the throat" (*Hieroglyphica*: 2.4). [Plate 94]

Barthélemy Aneau in his *Imagination Poétique* (1552) also employs hieroglyphs as motifs for his compositions. In addition to his personal device, his emblem "*Le Bon Prince Veillant a*

³⁹ See Drysdall's note 6 to Mignault's *Syntagma* (http://www.emblems.arts.gla.ac.uk/Mignault_letter.html). Regarding its sources, Professor Alison Adams calls my attention to the fact that this same motif appears in Erasmus' *Adagia* and in the introduction of 1534 Wechel edition of Alciato.

Justice” is clearly derived from Kerver’s edition of Horapollon where the eye and the sceptre stand for the virtues of a king. [Plate 95]

Pierre Coustau’s *Pegma* (1555) also incorporates hieroglyphs in its emblems, with straightforward reference to Horapollon. This can be observed in the emblem “On the endless nature of lawsuits” [Plate 96] and in the non-illustrated emblem about the Viper (“On shameless women”: X6v, p. 332). This last hieroglyph will also appear in Hadrianus Junius’ *Emblemata* (1565) in emblem XXXVIII [Plate 97], alongside many other examples,⁴⁰ such as the ouroboros in emblem III and emblem XLVI “*Irae Malagma Philosophia*”, where Horapollon is also used as a learned reference for interpreting images.

With the transmission of emblem books, the use of hieroglyphic motifs became deep seated as a widely acceptable strategy for composing emblems – although not always easily detectable, unfortunately. The earliest known emblem book engendered in England, Thomas Palmer’s manuscript *Two Hundred Pooeses* (1566), is already strongly influenced by Valeriano’s *Hieroglyphica*, to the extent that he eventually *paraphrases into emblems*, as Manning has demonstrated.⁴¹ Valeriano also appears in Henry Peacham’s *Minerva Britanna* (1612), more specifically, in the emblem “*Phlegma*” (p. 129) [Plate 98], where the tortoise is referred to as the “sloth’s hieroglyphick (sic)”⁴² and in many other emblem/*impresa* books.



A particularly interesting case, and perhaps more *latent* one, resides in Lorenzo Pignoria’s interest in Alciato’s emblems, and particularly their *picturae*, which was of great importance to the reception and diffusion of the *Emblemata* (overall among Jesuits). Pignoria, the antiquarian already mentioned in this dissertation thanks to his work on hieroglyphs (p. 188), “corrected” (with a keen antiquarian eye) all *picturae* from Alciato:

⁴⁰ Cf. emblems, XIII, XV, XVII, XVIII, XXII, etc.

⁴¹ See Manning 1990: 87; Manning 1988.

⁴² Cf. “*Alias pigrum segnemque hominem, aut rei cuiuspiam tarditem atque contationem significare qui vellent, Testudinem gradientem pingere consuerunt*” (Valeriano 1556: lib. XXVIII).

He brought a curator's eye for detail and accuracy. Eschewing allegorical inferences and intuitions, he offered no meaning for which he could not cite evidence in classical texts (...). He castigated the iconography of the earlier editions, claiming that the artists who produced them were either ignorant, drunk or mad. (Manning 2004: 117)

The method that he applies to reinterpret Alciato's *picturae* is essentially the same that he employed earlier while studying the *Mensa Isiaca* or preparing Tozzi's edition of Cartari's *Le Image degli Dei degli Antichi* (Padua: Tozzi, 1615):⁴³ Pignoria would try to attest all the visual elements with ancient authorities. In the case of emblems, this methodology would lead inevitably to a new immersion into hieroglyphic sources, that become a source of comparison (some commentaries show how similar ideas from Alciato can be found among Horapollon's hieroglyphs, for example). Tozzi's first edition of *Emblemata* under the merciless supervision of Pignoria (Alciato 1618) became the model for Joannes Thuilius' massive edition (Alciato 1621)⁴⁴ where the effect of hieroglyphic interpretation can be attested not only in the *picturae*, but in the general apparatus for the work.⁴⁵ In the very complex index for this edition, for example, hieroglyphs are quoted more than one hundred times. It is no exaggeration to say that this edition of Alciato incorporated a whole treatise on hieroglyphs.

All this demonstrates that scholars (and, naturally, the readership) could, beyond the intentions of the author, aggregate "hieroglyphic meanings" to emblems according to the notion of hieroglyph prevailing in the context of their literary reception. A beautiful illustration of this form of active reception is the portrait of Alciato made for Raphelengius' 1608 edition of *Emblemata* [Plate 99]. The image speaks for itself.

2.3.2. Figures (i.e. elements of the mythogram) as Hieroglyphs

⁴³ Which included a new book on Mesoamerican and Japanese iconography and extensive annotation.

⁴⁴ With more than 1,000 pages.

⁴⁵ *Mutatis mutandis*, I would say that there is something similar between what Pignoria does to *Emblemata* and what Valeriano did to Horapollon's *Hieroglyphica*.

One of the possible consequences of the frequent reference to hieroglyphs within emblems discussed above is the “transference” of the notion of hieroglyph from a particular motif to the element within the mythogram. In other words, by contamination the hieroglyph is no longer only the signifier/signified (collected from other sources), but also the function of an image within the *pictura* (which can be used to create new signs).

The ideal confirmation of this phenomenon comes with George Wither’s *Collection of Emblemes ancient and modern* that consisted of a “re-creation” made from the emblems found in Gabriel Rollenhagen two emblem books.⁴⁶ Wither’s creative process could be described as the re-use of the two hundred excellent copperplates produced by Crispin de Passe, to which he added an English motto and a long exegesis (which the author calls “illustration” and that can be “morall and divine”) in metric verses, explicitly influenced by other emblem composers such as Reusner, Junius and Sambucus. In his letter to the reader, Wither advises that:

There be no doubt, some faults [were] committed by the Printer, both Literall and Materiall, and some Errors of the Gravers in the Figures (as in the Tetragrammaton; in the figure of Arion; and in the Properties due to some *other Hieroglyphicks*...). (Wither 1635: A2)

This mention of hieroglyphs lacks any sort of previous introduction. All of a sudden a sequence of “figures” is terminated by the expression “*other* hieroglyphs” suggesting that for the author the two concepts are equivalent, but not providing any further detail – and perhaps creating a false impression that this association could be arbitrary or simply devoid of deeper implications.

As a matter of fact, de Passe’s engravings already abounded in hieroglyphic motifs, with a number of variations of the ouroboros, for example [Plate 100]. However, in his poetical illustrations of the emblems, Wither refers to the elements of the *picturae* as “hieroglyphs” [Plate 101]⁴⁷ at least sixteen times,⁴⁸ often making a distinction between “modern” and “old” or “ancient” hieroglyphs. I would suggest that, just as the letter to the reader suggests, Wither regards “hieroglyph” as the

⁴⁶ *Nucleus Emblematum Selectissimorum* (Arnheim: 1611) and *Emblematum Centuria Secunda* (Arnheim: 1613).

⁴⁷ See “An Owl (the *Hieroglyphicke* us’d for Night)” (Emblem 9, first line)

⁴⁸ First book, 9, 19, 21, 38 (2 times); second book, 5, 11, 26, 37, 41, 49; second lottery, 23; third book, 3, 4, 15, 20, 45.

source of the motif *and* as the pictorial elements that appear within the *pictura*. To support my conclusion I would highlight three points:

- The term “hieroglyph” tends to make reference to elements of the mythogram (and not to the whole *pictura*, which is referred to as “emblem”);
- The number of references is significant (even if the term “figure” is more frequent);
- According to *the British Bibliographer*,⁴⁹ Wither himself wrote *A Treatise of Antient Hieroglyphicks, with their Various Significations* (a manuscript now lost). This sufficiently demonstrates that the author had a clear idea of “hieroglyph” in mind: and that the hieroglyph could be applied directly within the mythogram. His references to “modern hieroglyphs” hint to the possibility that they actually corresponded to the “figures” (elements in the mythogram) – the “atoms”, or minimum units, of an emblem.

2.3.3. The Whole Mythogram (*Pictura*) as Hieroglyph

Another case of “transference” or “contamination”, triggered by a constant repetition of hieroglyphic motifs and other external factors, that affected the perception of hieroglyphs in emblematic contexts involves the idea of the whole *pictura* (i.e. the visual component of an emblem/device) as a hieroglyph, such as in Typotius’s *Symbola Divina and Humana* (1601-1603).

Typotius puts forward a theory according to which the art of making devices is to be understood as “hierographia” and each device is divided into “*hieroglyphicum*” (i.e. “*pictura*”) and “*symbola*” (“*scriptura*”), as one can observe in his own scheme [Plate 102]. This theoretical solution is very specific and can easily affect his readership’s perception of both devices and hieroglyphs – let alone his vast use of hieroglyphs as motifs [Plate 103]. Different from other authors (such as

⁴⁹ Brydges and Haslewood 1812: 378.

Mignault), “symbol” here stands for the linear domain of the device, as this simple fact demonstrates how equivocal the suggestion that hieroglyphs and symbols are synonyms can sometimes be.

Apart from emblematic collections, another evidence of the whole picture referred to as a hieroglyph can be found in Jackman’s pamphlet *Syons calamitye or Englands miserye hieroglyphically delineated* (1643), composed in the course of the English Civil War [Plate 104]. This composition (a single-sheet print), which in my opinion owes much to the process of “convergence”,⁵⁰ shows how the mind-set of hieroglyph evolves to the point of being perceived as a way to express things visually (including complex political discussion) by means of a *complex emblem*.⁵¹

Although the two cases listed above have no direct connection, I am inclined to think that they can only occur thanks to a pre-existent mentality shaped by the previous ideas of hieroglyphs in emblematic contexts.

2.3.4. Hieroglyphic Inscription within Emblems

The last form of transference I would like to address here is also the most atypical one: it consists of emblems that had “hieroglyph writing” as their main or partial subject.

One of the very few cases in which this precise phenomenon occurs is Achille Bocchi’s *Symbolicarum Quaestionum* (1555), which was particularly influential in Italy and received a second edition by the Accademia Bocchiana, in 1574 (with engravings “retouched” by Agostino Carracci). Bocchi was a Bolognese scholar and a friend of Valeriano⁵² and Alciato, with whom he shared the same interest – and, perhaps, similar “Fasaninian” motivations.

Although his book focuses on Graeco-Roman culture, he does employ hieroglyphic motifs: such as the *bucranium* to signify “work”⁵³ – which appear in different places in the very first

⁵⁰ See Chapter Ten.

⁵¹ Something I define as an “emblem within an emblem”. See p. 377.

⁵² Who dedicated the book VII of *Hieroglyphica* (1556) to him.

⁵³ According to *Hypnerotomachia*, which also appears in 1543 Kerver edition of Horapollon.

emblem of the book, “*Victoria ex Labore Honestā, et Utilis*” [Plate 105], or within symbols XXXVI and XLIV; and inscribed obelisks (referred to as “pyramids”) in symbols XLVIII and XCVII [Plate 106], which he associated with the human senses.

These examples provide enough evidence to situate Bocchi in the “tradition” of including hieroglyphic motifs in emblems. However, it is another emblem that makes Bocchi’s use of hieroglyphs *Symbolicarum* so special: “*Ex Mysticis Aegyptiourm Litteris*” (sic, symbol CXLV). [Plate 107]

The *pictura* of this emblem is taken from a whole hieroglyphic inscription from *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* (1499: 41).⁵⁴ The only difference seems to be the image of a winged figure (a frequent motif in Bocchi’s work), which holds the support for the hieroglyphic inscription. By comparing this figure with *Symbolicarum*’s emblem III, one realizes that it corresponds to the Socratic *daemon* – the spirit that according to Socrates⁵⁵ was a kind of self-conscious voice that would give him advice against mistakes.

As for the source for the hieroglyphic inscription, the original consists of a series of linear signs that result in a specific linear text of moral character, which is not included in the emblem. Different from other *Symbolicarum* emblems this one does not have a literary *inscriptio* – instead, in its place, there is a dedication to his son, Pirro Bocchi, and a reference to the source of the *pictura* (“from the mystic letters of the Egyptians”).

In my opinion the *inscriptio* of this emblem is the Latin translation that accompanies the original hieroglyphs in *Hypnerotomachia*, and this can be confirmed by comparing the meaning of these hieroglyphs with the strongly moral advice that Bocchi dedicates to his son (which explains the figure of the *daemon*).

There is an underlying complexity in the construction of this otherwise simple emblem. One can imagine that the figure of *daemon* actually serves the purpose of transforming an otherwise linear inscription into a non-linear one, by embracing it and thus encapsulating it into a mythogram. Besides, the relationship *daemon*/hieroglyphs produces a “recording” nexus between non-linear and linear domains.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Agostino Carracci was also influenced by this particular emblem (see p. 238).

⁵⁵ Plato. *Apology of Socrates*: 31c-d, 40a.

⁵⁶ See p. 51.

While other interpreters of this emblem may disagree, I think that this case of “transference” differs from others because the original inscription (from *Hypnerotomachia*) produces a complete and articulated text. This “hieroglyphic text” itself is the subject for the emblem.



Another example of hieroglyphic inscription appearing within an emblem occurs in Jean-Jacques Boissard’s *Theatrum Vitae Humanae* (1596). His emblem XV [Plate 108: A] entitled “The Gods of the Egyptians” displays a number of enigmatic signs.

Its *subscriptio* does not constitute an *ekphrasis*, and one is left to wonder what the source for this *pictura* was but for a mention of its possible location: “in the garden of Julius III P[ontifex] M[aximus]”.⁵⁷ This puzzle becomes clear when an improved version of the same composition is used to illustrate the second tome of Boissard’s *Antiquitatum Romanarum* (1598) [Plate 108: B]. *Antiquitatum* was an extensive antiquarian work made in collaboration with de Bry that aimed to show all the ancient monuments and inscriptions that could be seen in Rome. The monument that appears in these engravings is now lost, but one can suggest that it was produced in the 1st or 2nd century B.C.E. for the *Iseum Campense* (mixing Egyptian and Roman motifs, as was common in the Roman cult of Isis). Most of the elements in the monument are easily recognizable, such as Hermanubis,⁵⁸ the heads of Serapis and Apis, etc., but just like other similar *Egyptianizing* creations it cannot be translated. Notwithstanding, this picture was highly regarded, to the point of being included in Hohenburg’s *Thesaurus Hieroglyphicorum* (1610) [Plate 109], which was so important to Athanasius Kircher,⁵⁹ as an authentic “hieroglyphic effigy”.

Although in this case the hieroglyphs were not translated into a text, I would still regard it as a “hieroglyphic inscription” which, again, assumes the role of the *pictura* in an emblem book,

⁵⁷ A reference to the gardens of Villa Giulia.

⁵⁸ Also known as the “Cynocephalus” (see Horapollon 1.14, 1.15 and 1.16)

⁵⁹ See p. 389.

from a very different perspective – that of the “antiquarian nucleus” that once again crosses the path of emblematic culture.

Other examples of hieroglyphic inscriptions occur,⁶⁰ but those mentioned here suffice to illustrate my point. Although quantitatively rare, qualitatively they are of great importance to the phenomenon studied here – as an example of the versatility and variety of hieroglyph/emblem relations.

2.4. Hybrid Genres: Moral Hieroglyphs, Sacred Emblems (*Code Level*)

With the frequent exchanges between emblems and hieroglyphs at *sign level*, it comes as no surprise that this relationship would be explored also at *code level*. In this phenomenon, the cultural transmission/appropriation is not based on individual borrowings (e.g. a hieroglyph used as motif in one out of many emblems in a given repertoire), but the whole structure is shared to the point that it is hard to determine if the product is an emblem or a hieroglyph – which is why I treat it as a “hybrid code”.⁶¹ Usually these hybrid forms are based on a combination of core characteristics (form, function, content, purpose and even self-perception or reception), usually regarded as belonging to a specific code (hieroglyphic, emblematic, iconographic etc.). This process can be better understood with the help of a few examples:

2.4.1. Hieroglyphic Content and Self-Perception + Emblematic Form and Purpose

Valeriano’s *Hieroglyphica* collection of the different text-image traditions inaugurated the perception of “hieroglyphs” as a general label for other genres. Curiously, this very same work was

⁶⁰ With particular sophistication in Romeyn de Hooghe’s *Hieroglyphica of Merckbeelden* (1735).

⁶¹ Although I do not aim to postulate a theory for this phenomenon, I have verified that it also occurs between other text/image genres – between emblems and *imprese*, heraldry, books of portraits, numismatics, etc.

“subverted” as an emblem book, Baruch Romaelius’ *Cervus* (1602), which *transformed* Valeriano’s hieroglyphs of the stag (*Hieroglyphica*, Book VII) into a series of 16 emblems. The *modus operandi* is evident: the *inscriptio* and hieroglyphic motif are taken directly from Valeriano and Baruch just adds a poetical epigram (in Latin and German) and a new version of the *pictura* [Plate 110]. While he presents the work as taken from “Egyptian letters”, the structure is that of an emblem – making it very hard to define to which “category” this book belongs. This case demonstrates that changes in the structure of a whole hieroglyphic work could give birth to a hybrid emblem/hieroglyph book, something quite different from motifs taken from another book – since the exchange here happens at code level (with the whole construction).

2.4.2. Moral Hieroglyphs: Emblematic Form and Function + Hieroglyphic Content and/or Self-Perception

Despite certain definitions that dwell in a comfort zone, not even the combination between *moral function* and the *tripartite (emblematic) structure* results, necessarily, in something perceived as emblems. From the 17th century on, there are many examples where books self-perceived as “hieroglyphic” adopt characteristics traditionally regarded as “pure” emblematic constructions.

To illustrate this principle, one can start with Heinrich Oraeus’ *Viridarium Hieroglyphico-Morale* (“The Hieroglyphic-Moral Garden”) from 1619. In its frontispiece the purpose of the work is clear: “virtues and vices... *are skilfully illustrated with hieroglyphic images*”. Such a statement, by itself, could easily situate this book among those where the hieroglyph is perceived as emblematic mythogram.⁶² However, the role of hieroglyph in this book is more intricate than that. In the dedication letter the subject of hieroglyphs is introduced (Oraeus 1619: 3), which the author uses to justify his decision to make use of them. Alongside a brief comment on Egyptian writing, he mentions a number of “hieroglyphs” taken from the sacred scriptures (such

⁶² See p. 286.

as the eagle, for divine providence; the serpent, for prudence, and the dove for simplicity) demonstrating that the work has a somewhat hieroglyphic motivation. Moreover, the great majority of the mythograms of *Viridarium* also present a systematic form of composition, which I would regard as an important symptom of the unique idea that the author has of “hieroglyphs”: the fantastic arrangement of the elements within the *pictura*. [Plate 111]

Another instance of this same process, albeit less sophisticated, comes with Oelschlegel's *Ekatontas seu Centuria Imaginum Hieroglyphicarum* (1623). *Ekatontas* was conceived as a schoolbook and the idea of hieroglyph is related to “images of certain animals” (Oelschlegel 1623: F2). The woodcuts, of poor quality, are presented – in most cases – without a border or *fatti* [Plate 112: A]. In most cases, the name of the animal stands for the motto, the source then is explained in a short text that is followed by a Latin and German poetic *subscriptio*. Among the emblematic sources, Alciato and Camerarius are quoted a number of times, but the most interesting composition is an “emblematic interpretation” of Plutarch's account of an inscription in the temple of Saïs⁶³ [Plate 112: B], which also appeared in Valeriano's *Hieroglyphica*. Since the author adds a *subscriptio* to this linear inscription, one is certainly facing another case of hieroglyphic inscription within an emblem.



The diversity of works using this kind of hybrid hieroglyph/emblem construction suggests that this same idea flourished from different canons and perspectives. Vincenzo Ricci's *Geroglifici Morali* (1626), for example, consist of a sort of iconology (rather than a conventional emblem), where an abstract concept is followed by a detailed description of a figure and its attributes, eventually followed by a woodcut, supplied by an exegesis taken from the sacred scriptures [Plate 113]. This specific work, where the hieroglyphic/emblematic structure is stripped of Pagan contents in favour of Christian sources is not an isolated case. For instance, in the same year of 1626 Oonsel's

⁶³ “At Saïs in the vestibule of the temple of Athena was carved a babe and an aged man, and after this a hawk, and next a fish, and finally an hippopotamus. The symbolic meaning of this was: ‘O ye that are coming into the world and departing from it, God hateth shamelessness’” (Plutarch. *De Iside et Osiride*: 32. Apud Plutarch 1936: 79). Cf. Clement of Alexandria. *Stromateis*: V.41.4.

Hieroglyphica Sacra appears with a very similar project. I imagine that this is an intentional turn, with the objective of supplying emblem authors and other artists with Christian (here Catholic) motifs, so as to use widely appreciated emblematic tradition as an instrument of propaganda.

The last occurrence I would like to present here comes from Giovanni Palazzi's *Monarchia Occidentalis* published in Venice in many volumes (*Aquila inter Lilia*, 1671; *Aquila Saxonica*, 1673; *Aquila Sancta*, 1674; *Aquila Franca*, 1679; *Aquila Sueva*, 1679; *Aquila Vaga*, 1679 etc.). In this extensive work about the life and deeds of European monarchs, the hieroglyphs are presented in the form of beautiful full-page engravings [Plate 114], explained by one or more epigrams.⁶⁴ The conception of hieroglyphic here is very similar to that of the Spanish "jeroglífico" genre.⁶⁵ Here, the religious purpose highlighted in the previous paragraph is replaced by a political/ideological one, once again demonstrating the versatility of the hieroglyphic-emblematic constructions.

2.4.3. Sacred Emblem: Emblematic Form + Hieroglyphic Function

A further hybrid form was attained by composing emblems with a hieroglyph function (and self-perception). A case in point emerges from Francis Quarles' emblematic work. In order to grasp the author's thoughts about the interaction between emblems and hieroglyphs, one can consult his *Emblemes* (1635),⁶⁶ where – in the letter to the reader – he declares:

An Embleme is but a silent Parable. Let not the tender Eye checke, to see the allusions to our blessed Saviour figured, in these Types. In holy Scripture, He is sometimes called a Sower; sometimes, a Fisher; sometimes, a Physitian: And why not presented so, as well to the eye, as to the eare? Before the knowledge of letters, God was knowne by *Hieroglyphicks*: And, indeed, what are the Heavens, the Earth, nay every Creature, *Hieroglyphicks* and *Emblemes* of His Glory? I have no more to say. I wish thee as much pleasure in the reading, as I had in the writing. Farewell Reader.

⁶⁴ The exception comes from *Aquila Romana*, 1779, which reuses the engravings from previous editions and lacks the poetic epigrams.

⁶⁵ See Chapter Eight.

⁶⁶ Wither's *Collection of Emblemes* was published in the same year. W. Marshall, in charge of Wither's frontispiece, made the engravings for Quarles's works discussed here.

Quarles conception of hieroglyph does not escape those already favoured by the canon – that hieroglyphs predated the use of letters and that they are parallel to emblems. However, the notion that (a singular) God was known by hieroglyphs is telling and approximates his view to the *Prisca Theologia*. Not surprisingly, in the following years Quarles published another work: *Hieroglyphickes of the Life of Man* (1638). Again, the letter to the reader alludes to the connection between the two text-images genres: “if you are satisfied with my Emblems, I here set before you a second service. It is an Aegyptian dish, *drest on the English fashion*” (sic, Quarles 1638). The author’s culinary metaphor makes it clear that the content of this work is hieroglyphic and its form is emblematic. To understand the difference between the two genres, in Quarles’ conception one can compare the two works (which will be published in a single volume from 1639 on): one can easily observe that all 15 compositions of *Hieroglyphickes...* involve variations of a candle (leitmotif), with a motto, followed on the next page by a biblical quotation and varied epigrams [Plate 115]. As for the general structure, the two books have the same principles, confirming that the difference here lies in the content of the hybrid compositions.

Just as happened with the “moral hieroglyphs”, “sacred emblems” could also represent a move from pagan iconology to religious motifs. The example I have in mind is Groenewegen’s *Hieroglyphica, Anders Emblemata Sacra* (1693). A good definition for this work is given in its full title:

The Hieroglyphs, or the Sacred Emblems of the Treasure of Emblems (*zinne-beelden*) and examples... A written and true explanation of the words and things that, from the natural and literary use of speaking, have been converted to spiritual explanations in engravings and paintings in God’s Temples.⁶⁷

The book presents a series of headings (in Dutch and Hebrew) followed by lengthy Christian exegeses, angled towards iconological purposes.

⁶⁷ I would like to thank Catherina Çizakça for her kind support with the translation from the Dutch.

2.5. Discussion: A *Multiplex* Network of Influence

This Chapter has focused on the variety and characteristics of the hieroglyph/emblem relations. The main objective here was to demonstrate, through examples, how this relationship is far more complex, wide and motivated than usually accepted by recent scholarship – where hieroglyphs are downplayed as a flat and rare source for emblems.

From the study presented here (see [Plate 116] for a theoretical synthesis) one can draw a number of conclusions:

- The relation between hieroglyphs and emblems takes place at different cultural levels (ideas, including function and motivation; signs; codes; system), and not in a single link of influence;
- The categories “emblem”, “hieroglyph”, etc. are not absolute in working as a general point of observation of the whole phenomenon. Therefore, approaching the process of influence through cultural levels/characteristics can be a useful tool (especially when dealing with hybrid genres);
- According to this process of “multilevel” cultural transmission, it is clear that the same sample can have different hieroglyphic influences acting simultaneously. I would propose that a pertinent way to observe this phenomenon is to apply the theory of social network where the relation between hieroglyph and emblem can be regarded as *uniplex* (i.e. when there is only one link between the two entities) or *multiplex* (when there are more links of influence). The more links, the stronger a network gets, and closer is the conceptual relationship between hieroglyphs and emblems;
- It is possible to trace *leitmotif canons* (i.e. single motifs, of hieroglyphic origin, that are diffused from one composition to another, losing contact with the original source – such as the ouroboros, the bucranium, the sceptre with the stork head, etc.) and perceive that

their persistence is more likely in multiplex relationships. Eventually, the source of a given idea or hieroglyph is *forgotten* in the process of transmission. In this case, these “orphan” traits remain accessible in a kind of “hieroglyphic aura” that surround the realm of text-image constructions (the imaginary of writing through images);

- These networks are part of the process of diffusion of hieroglyphs, to which they are mutually dependent (different text-image constructions are legitimized by hieroglyphs, and the expansion and rooting of hieroglyphic transmission depend on this active engagement);
- From the examples shown in this chapter, one can observe an increasing level in the complexity of the constructions.

The consequence of these strong networks and their complex construction will be further discussed on Chapter Ten.

CHAPTER EIGHT:

Spanish “Jeroglificos”: The Study of a Hybrid Genre

The role of hieroglyphs in Spain is a well-studied,¹ extensive and significant aspect of the “Modern hieroglyphs” which, to my knowledge, has not been included yet in the main studies of the *hieroglyphic phenomenon*. My hypothesis is that this is related to the generalized confusion between hieroglyphs and emblems in secondary sources and the impact of the revival of emblem studies in the 20th century, which led the most specialized scholars to regard the “*jeroglíficos*” in Spain simply as applied emblems, arbitrarily labelled as “hieroglyphs”. In this section I will demonstrate that the Spanish reception of hieroglyphs, and its outcome, can be far more complex than these assumptions.

In order to do so I divide the role of hieroglyphs in Spain into three different stages, in which the *conceptual nuclei* are diffused and new solutions emerge according to specific demands.

1. First Stage: Routes of Diffusion of Hieroglyphs in Spain

There are many accounts of exchanges between Hispanic travellers and Egypt in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance.² Perhaps the most vital of these contacts took place in 1501, when the Catholic Monarchs, Ferdinando and Isabel, sent a diplomatic mission to Egypt in order to convince the Sultan not to persecute the Christians living in the Levant as a response to the Spanish *Reconquista*. The envoy of this successful mission was Pietro Martire d'Anghiera (Pedro

¹ Campa 1990; García Arranz 2002; Manero and Lorente 2004; Ledda 1992 and their respective bibliographies.

² See López Grande 2009.

Mártir Anglería), a Milanese scholar in the service of the King. He offered the first descriptions of Egypt (and its writing, *en passant*) to be published in Spain.³

Regarding hieroglyphs more specifically, the process of transmission of hieroglyphs into Spain was often mediated by combinations of the *conceptual nuclei* discussed in the previous chapter and their outcome. However, it would be wrong to assume that the hieroglyphs in Spain were secondary to or less important than elsewhere in Europe. For example, as early as 1520-30,⁴ one can find the famous hieroglyphs of the University of Salamanca [Plate 117], strongly influenced by the *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*,⁵ with linear and non-linear text-image constructions. Although some of these hieroglyphs were direct reproductions, other are reinterpreted or invented using the same “hieroglyphic principle”.

I would suggest that the prelude of what would become the Spanish hieroglyphic tradition is set around the figures of Antonio Agustín, Álvaro Gomez de Castro, Martínez Silício and Calvete de Estrella. Agustín, who studied in Alcalá, *Salamanca*, Padua and Bologna – was tutored by Andrea Alciato and obtained his doctorate in 1541. Given his interest in law, coins and antiquities, he certainly found in Italy the place to investigate these subjects – and so the contact with Alciato is telling. Apart from introducing debates on numismatics in Spain, Agustín was also a close friend of Gomez de Castro, professor of Latin and Greek in Toledo who, in 1546, made the iconographic programme for the entry of the bishop Juan Martínez Silíceo into Alcalá de Henares. The account of this solemnity was published by Gomez de Castro as *Publica Laetitia*,⁶ anticipating the use of woodcuts⁷ to record iconographic devices conceived for festivals in Spain (in this case a set of *paintings* followed by mottoes). [Plate 118]

Publica Laetitia not only pioneers the use of such woodcuts but introduces the discussion on hieroglyphs, quoting Horapollon’s *Hieroglyphica* for the first time in Spain,⁸ in order to legitimize the use of such “paintings” or “images”. According to him, the Egyptians’ hieroglyphs “were better than letters, since they not only indicate the notions of the soul but delight the eyes

³ See García y García 1947.

⁴ In this period, in Italy, hieroglyphs were beginning to be used in architectonic decorations. See p. 233.

⁵ Pedraza y Martínez 1983.

⁶ (Madrid: Juan de Brocar [ca. 1546])

⁷ 12 or 24, depending on the edition.

⁸ In a print source, as far as I was able to determine.

with the painting and teach the science of nature” (Gomez de Castro [1546]: 87). Already in its first appearance, *Hieroglyphica* is associated with paintings in ephemeral contexts.

Curiously, the earliest document attesting the presence of *Hieroglyphica* in Spain is the copy that entered Prince Philip’s private library in 1543.⁹ Silício – the bishop honoured in *Publica Laetitia* – was the preceptor of Philip, eventually responsible for directing his studies. I cannot help but suspect that this copy specifically was bought by the Erasmian scholar Juan Calvete de Estrella, who was in charge of important book acquisitions for the Prince between 1541 and 1547.

Calvete de Estrella, another of the Prince’s tutors, accompanied him on his important journey through the Low Countries and Italy, between 1548 and 1551. The account was published in 1552 as *El Felicísimo Viaje...*, and the ceremonial entries of the Prince recorded in this book mark another route for diffusion of hieroglyphs. In the Entry to Trento, on 29th January 1549, the triumphal arch erected before the central square was covered “with so many symbols and devices [*impresa*] taken from those hieroglyphic letters, used by the Egyptians” (Calvete de Estrella 1552: 46). Calvete describes each of these non-linear hieroglyphs (mostly taken from *Hieroglyphica*) together with their accompanying motto [*letras*]. For the first time, hieroglyphs were being described as an active part of an ephemeral programme in a Spanish book and this would have a significant impact on the Spanish *fiestas* – as Estrella’s book would be taken as a model not only for iconographic programmes, since it attests the most recent tendencies in European courts, but for the future *relaciones de fiestas*. It is after this episode that hieroglyphs began to be systematically included in ephemeral art.

2. Second Stage: The Appropriation of Horapollon and Valeriano in Ephemeral Art and New Experimentations

⁹ *Orus Apollo Niliacus De hieroglyphicis notis, à Bernardino Trebatio Vicentino latinitate donatus*. Estienne: 1530. Recorded as: ene/jul-1543 De jeroglíficos de Horus. REME. 16-V-22, no. 2.

By the middle of the 16th century, hieroglyphs were becoming popular in Spain – and gradually they attracted the interest of Spanish scholars, albeit still timidly: Pedro Mexía, for instance, in his famous *Silva de Varia Lección* (1500), suggests that the Egyptians had “images, characters and figures for everything, by which they understood each other as if writing with letters. Horapollon [Oroapolo] made a book about them, where the curious will find pleasing and useful things” (Mexía 2003: 59).¹⁰ This early interest would soon provoke the demand for the first Spanish edition of Horapollon’s *Hieroglyphica*, in the auspicious year of 1556,¹¹ when Valeriano’s *Hieroglyphica* was also being edited for the first time.¹²

In the following years these two books would be absorbed by Spanish intellectuals and immediately provide motifs for the iconographic programmes of *Siglo de Oro*’s festivals.¹³ As not all festival apparatuses were documented and many were probably lost, it would be almost impossible to trace exactly the first occasions on which hieroglyphs directly obtained from *Hieroglyphicas* were used and quoted, but by 1568, when the Spanish Queen Isabel died, one could have a grasp of how widely this practice was accepted in funerary ceremonies: in Madrid, Juan López de Hoyos described some of the devices of the queen’s catafalque as “imitating the letters of the Egyptians” (1569: 131v, 146v); and in Seville, Lorenzo de San Pedro made extensive remarks and also sketched the linear and non-linear hieroglyphs displayed on the tomb ([1569]).

At the same time as these applied hieroglyphs entered the tradition of funeral ceremonies, they also served to celebrate other events. It comes as no surprise, therefore, that López de Hoyos explored hieroglyphs again in 1570, when he prepared the programme for the Entry of Ana de Austria, the new queen.

Juan Mal de Lara is another key element to understanding this stage of the diffusion of hieroglyphs in Spain. He not only mentioned Martire d’Anghiera’s descriptions of hieroglyphs in previous works (*La Psyche* and *Philosophia Vulgar*),¹⁴ but he also made detailed descriptions of

¹⁰ Similar commentaries were made by Sebastián Fox Morcillo (*De Historiae institutione dialogus*. Paris and Amberg, 1557).

¹¹ Horapollon 1556.

¹² See p. 247.

¹³ At this stage, hieroglyphs themselves are not yet a kind of device but a source for images and figures (often referred to as “imitating” the Egyptian sources).

¹⁴ García y Marraset 2012: 1894.

hieroglyphs, professedly taken from Valeriano, in his accounts of at least two important iconographical programmes of his: the Entry of King Felipe II in Sevilla (1570) and the description of the Royal Galley of Juan de Austria (c. 1570).¹⁵

Apart from these examples, hieroglyphs progressively infiltrated the formal literary code. In effect, Lorenzo San Pedro's manuscript *Diálogo llamado Philippino* ([c. 1579]) is a remarkable example of the early use of hieroglyphs as rhetorical devices: [Plate 119]

The exceptional character of the Escorial manuscript resides in the fact it included emblems and hieroglyphs as evidential arguments of the hundred congruencies by which a character called Bético tries to convince... a nobleman, Lusitano, to abandon his "painful lament for the most serene king Don Sebastián" and recognise Felipe II's aspirations.

The use that a jurist like Lorenzo de San Pedro makes of the images goes beyond a mere illustration since it implies that each one of them comprises a concept that that would be better attained by visual exposition; in other words, his emblems and hieroglyphs prove and authorize the congruency of his exposition in the same way a syllogism or quotation would do. (Bouza 1998: 76)

The rhetorical use of hieroglyphs, very important for "Spanish reception", will flourish in the next stage's literature and theology, but it is important to highlight this seminal idea at this point, when Horapollon and Valeriano's treatises could be strictly taken as something designed for *conversations*:

C. Hai alguna manera para entender essas letras [hieroglyphicas]? A. Un librillo hai de Horus Apollo, y otro grande moderno de Pierio Valeriano *que no sirven sino para conversacion*. (Agustín 1587: 139)

3. Third Stage: The Normalizations of Hieroglyphs in Spain

The scenario outlined above would undergo a major intensification in the 1580s. The popularity of *ephemeral hieroglyphs* reached a new threshold and became generally accepted. Apart

¹⁵ Mal de Lara 1570; [c. 1570].

from that, I think that two factors emerged to consolidate the new identity and role of hieroglyphs in Spain: the inclusion of hieroglyphs in the poetic competitions held in preparation for festivals and the emergence of the Jesuit *Ratio Studiorum*.¹⁶

3.1. Poetic Competitions and Norms: Hieroglyphs in Transition

When hieroglyphs entered the *justas poéticas* of the festivals, logically, rules had to be conceived in order to evaluate them and this would naturally result in a process of *normalization* that delineated a new text-image genre with specific rules. The *justas* also had several collateral effects:

- a) They decentralized the iconographical programmes, allowing other people to participate. On the one hand, this meant that more people were interested and apt to do it. On the other hand, the division of work also contributed to the rise of more complex constructions (and the search for new sources), as more time could be spent on one single composition;
- b) They multiplied the number of hieroglyphs created and displayed;
- c) They affected the education of the poets – including hieroglyphs in the set of skills that they would need to practise, also eventually requiring a partnership between writers and painters, this certainly affected the wide hieroglyphic “terminations” in Spanish literature;
- d) From a grammatological/literary perspective, some of these changes are more or less evident, in this transitional decade:

¹⁶ See Pavur 2005.

- Hieroglyphs gradually became more of a text-image entity: from images taken from Horapollon and Valeriano, often without a motto, the meaning is incorporated as a Latin *inscriptio* (or, to use the Spanish nomenclature, *letra* or *lema*); approximately at the same time this *inscriptio* can be replaced by a biblical passage in Latin or other compositions;
 - When the genre is finally stabilized, a new practice emerges: to incorporate an exegesis in the form of popular poetic forms, such as *tercetillo* (tercet) or *redondilla* (quartet);
 - As reproductions of the paintings were expensive, and due to the ephemeral character of these hieroglyphs, it became common to collect or present these literary compositions with an ekphrasis of the image, generally introduced by the formula “painting an [ekphrasis]”.
- e) The creation of a specific set of rules for these hieroglyphs would lead to a theoretical discussion on the relationship between emblems and other genres (see Chapter Seven)

3.2. Jesuits and the *Ratio Studiorum*

The rules for composing these hieroglyphs, and their popularity, are not the exclusive element in their general spread and consolidation. As in many aspects of Spanish society of the time, the Jesuits were a determinant moving force here.¹⁷

¹⁷ For the Jesuit appropriation of emblems, see Dimler 2007.

Beyond doubt, hieroglyphs were perceived as an effective rhetorical tool by the Jesuits and proved to be an excellent vehicle of politico-religious propaganda. As a result, they were included in the *Ratio Studiorum*, the general curriculum for Jesuit schools.¹⁸

In the section dedicated to the teaching of Rhetoric, item 12 says the following:

The class contest or exercise should include such things as correcting the mistakes which one rival may have detected in the other's composition, questioning one another on the exercise written in the first hour, discovering and devising figures of speech, giving a repetition or illustrating the use of rules of rhetoric, of letter writing, of verse making, and of writing history, explaining some more troublesome passages of an author or clearing up the difficulties, reporting research on the customs of the ancients and other scholarly information, *interpreting hieroglyphics* and Pythagorean symbols, maxims, proverbs, emblems, riddles, delivering declamations, and other similar exercises at the teacher's pleasure. (My emphasis. *Ratio Studiorum* apud Farrell 1970: 77.)

In this passage it is clear that *interpreting hieroglyphs* was taken as an important subject: in fact, the first of a series of intricate literary genres. More than that, translating a hieroglyph became a class exercise to be done in the classroom. Moreover, according to the ratio,

For the sake of erudition, other and more recondite subjects may be introduced on the weekly holidays in place of the historical work, for example, hieroglyphics, emblems, questions of poetic technique, epigrams, epitaphs, odes, elegies, epics, tragedies, the Roman and Athenian senate, the military system of the two countries, their gardens, dress, dining customs, triumphs, the sibyls, and other kindred subjects, but in moderation. (*Ratio Studiorum* apud Farrell 1970: 78)

Again hieroglyphs appear as the first of a series of complex subjects to be studied “for the sake of erudition”.¹⁹ Now, I would say that whereas for an Italian student “hieroglyph” would mean essentially Horapollon and, overall, Valeriano, for a Spanish student the concept would gain another contour: the literary genre with growing popularity and frequent use in festivals.



¹⁸ The first committee to create such a curriculum was established in 1581, but it did not attain the expected outcomes. In 1584 another committee was formed and the first version of the *Ratio* appeared in 1586. The document was sent to the schools in order to receive more contributions which resulted in the 1591 version – which was adopted by all Jesuit colleges around the world for three years. The final version was published in 1599. For a translation in English, see Farrell 1970. It comes as no surprise that the Jesuits patronized the Roman edition of Horapollon's *Hieroglyphica* in 1597, already discussed on p. 245.

¹⁹ Advice that Athanasius Kircher took quite seriously. See p. 388.

The consequences of this process of increasing normalization would be shown, of course, in the apparatus of festivals created by Jesuits, and soon would appear in manuscript and published accounts of such events. In 1589, for example, Gabriel de Mata publishes his *Vida, Muerte y Milagros de San Diego... con las Hieroglyphicas y versos que en alabanza del Sancto se hizieron en Alcala* (1589) and at the 1592 visit of Felipe II to the Colegio de los Ingleses in Valladolid many hieroglyphs and emblems were widely exhibited.²⁰

3.3. The Rise of Classic *Jeroglificos*: Characteristics of a Hybrid Genre

The funerary celebrations in honour of Felipe II in 1598 confirmed the social status and popularity of ephemeral hieroglyphs in Spain:

A partir de este momento, el mundo de la época consideró a los jeroglíficos como la parte más sorprendente y entretenida de las exequias; se pintaban en grandes pliegos de papel que se colgaban en cuerdas en torno al túmulo o pendientes del propio túmulo, el público se los disputaba y arrancaba, y se ponían guardias durante el día y la noche para que duraran los días de las celebraciones; la universidad o los ayuntamientos convocaban los concursos para su ejecución y sólo se exhibían los premiados y aceptados. (Manero and Lorente: 86)

In different cities, the king's ephemeral tombs were covered with *jeroglificos*: in Seville, eight were hung on the catafalque alone, largely inspired by Valeriano, and their description follows the model *ekphrasis* (*of the corresponding image*) + *Latin motto* + *translation of the motto* + *exegesis*, e.g.:

... Estaban en el primero cielo dos manos trabadas, y en medio dellas un manojó de espigas y flores; luego estaba un círculo con unas letras que decian:

FIDES PUBLICA.

PUBLICA FIDELIDAD.

²⁰ Ecclesal 1592a; 1592b; Anonymous [1592?].

Las dos manos asidas significaban, que es la fidelidad del pueblo á su Rey, demás que significa en otros lugares otras cosas, según lo trata Valeriano en sus Hieroglíficos: el manojo de espigas, y ellas, significaba la grande abundancia que hay en todas las cosas naturales, porque les dan su grano cultivadas de los hombres, que eso significaban las flores. (Apud Collado 1869: 35)

In Zaragoza, the iconographical programme comprised thirty-eight hieroglyphs, the product of a literary competition; in Murcia even more (Almela 1600; Manero and Lorente 2004: 86), and so on.²¹ In these accounts, hieroglyphs would be placed together with, for example, emblems. This is a vital evidence that they were regarded as independent genres: and that they, in fact, had a privileged place amongst other text-image codes used in the programmes.

This new status of hieroglyphs (and their success) is perhaps the best explanation why, soon after the Felipe II funerals, the College of the Society of Jesus would publish a report of the exequies of María de Austria (1603), founder of the college, in which the thirty-six hieroglyphs would not only be described, but *printed* [Plate 120].²² This time, the lemma (mostly quotations from the Scriptures, in Latin) would appear in banderoles as part of the woodcut, and a *subscriptio* would appear in varied verses (in Spanish or Latin).

In fact, the Jesuit colleges embraced the *hieroglyphic genre* in Spain diligently, and another case of great interest is the festivals held in honour to the beatification of Ignacio de Loyola, founder of the Society of Jesus, in 1609. In the celebrations prepared in Salamanca,²³ for example, the outcome of the poetic contests is described in detail and includes sixteen “naked” hieroglyphs,²⁴ such as Pedro de Aragon’s *Hieroglyphico al Glorioso Padre San Ignacio*:²⁵

Pintase el sancto con una diadema, y en ella al rededor Padres de la Compañía, con las insignias de sus martirios, con esta letra:

Corona senum filii filiorum. Prov.c.17.

²¹ Anonymous 1600.

²² Society of Jesus (College, Madrid) 1603.

²³ Salazar 1610.

²⁴ i.e. With an textual description instead of an actual image.

²⁵ As one can observe, the formula involves the ekphrasis – now introduced by *pintase* [one paints], which together with *pintose* [it was painted] became the typical opening of a hieroglyph *when described in books of festivals*; a religious quotation; Latin verses and their reinterpretation (and not verbatim translation) in Spanish verses. This structure tended to be adopted in the whole book, but variations could be expected (excluding the Latin verses, for example).

Mas abaxo.

Quas velit multis sumat sibi quisquibus coronis,
Est mea sed soboles grata corona mihi.

Letra Española

Elijan con regozijos
Todos para sus victorias
Coronas, que yo mis glorias
Las corono con mis hijos. (Salazar 1610: *IV*)

Besides “classical” constructions such as Aragon’s, creative interpretations of the genre also appeared as in José (Ioseph) Sanchez’s²⁶ hieroglyph (Salazar 1610: 73f), that obtained the first prize, in which the painting (“*un ave Fenix, abrasandose en su llama à los rayos de un Sol, en que està un Iesus*”) receives the motto “*Muriò Inacio*” (that can be interpreted as “Ignacio has died” or “He died and was born”); and Antonio de Solis’ invention where the hieroglyph receives two different exegetical Latin epigrams, one according to the sacred letters (Salazar 1610: 73f) and another according to human letters (Salazar 1610: 73r). More importantly, the book includes Alonso de Ledesma’s *Discurso en Hieroglyphicos de la Vida, Muerte y Milagros de San Ignacio de Loyola* – that comprises no less than thirty-five hieroglyphs²⁷ about the life and deeds of the Jesuit patriarch.²⁸ Ledesma’s compositions are representative of a new standard for ephemeral hieroglyphs discussed here and, at the same time, it develops the genre to beyond its applications in iconographic programs.²⁹

In the celebrations that took place in Sevilla, the poetic contests were so prolific that not all resulting creations could be hung...

No es de passar en silencio, la multitud de papeles bizarramente pintados, y con gallardas letras escritos assi de varia poesia, Latina y Castellana, como de Hieroglyphicos, Enigmas y obras de ingenio, en alabanza del Santo, de manera que no siendo possible acomodarse todos, sin notable estoruo, al adereço del Claustro, que se quedaron mas de setezientos carteles, por fixar: tales que pudieran ser adorno, en qualquiera demonstracion, de fiesta solemnisima (Luque Farjardo 1610: 26r)

²⁶ Ioseph Sanchez was son of the famous humanist scholar Francisco Sánchez de las Brozas, el Brocense. His father was responsible for an edition and commentary on Alciato’s *Emblemata* (Sánchez de las Brozas 1573) and was friends with Mal Lara.

²⁷ All of which follow the formula: dedication (to different qualities or biographic events of Loyola); ekphrasis (introduced by “pintose”, “pintase”, “pintandose”), religious motto; Spanish verses (varied).

²⁸ The book also includes a similar work, this time based on forty emblems, by Felipe Tirleti (Salazar 1610: 84f).

²⁹ See p. 327.

...or even described in the festival book (Luque Farjardo 1610), which includes no less than seventy-five emblems and thirty-five hieroglyphs, that use the same formula employed in Salamanca:

Hieroglyphico XI. (sic)

Pintòse un ave Fenix renaciendo de unas cenizas, con una letra Latina del Psalmo. 102. que dezia. Renovabitur ut Phoenix juvenus tua. Y la Castellana.

En la misteriosa lumbre
Que Ignacio dexta escendida,
Consiste mi nueva vida.

The way hieroglyphs were structured in two different places at the same time gives a clear indication that by 1609 hieroglyphs had achieved a stable formula of genre. This can be confirmed two years later by the celebration in honour of Margarita de Austria's death, held at the University of Salamanca (Céspedes 1611). The winner of the hieroglyphic competition was the rector of the University, Melchor de Moscoso y Sandoval, who declined the award which was then given to José Sanchez (the same as is mentioned above). Sanchez's hieroglyph follows almost the same structure employed in the previous festival:³⁰

Era este Hieroglyphico de muy vistosa pintura, que representava levantada del suelo una gran tumba cubierta de un paño negro y encima una almohada, que tenia una corona Real grande de oro, y en medio de el cerco della estava un circulo vazio, dando à entender que faltava una piedra redonda, ò perla preciosa de alli. (...) En medio del arco desta portada estava una hermosa perla, que era la que faltava à la Corona, y la letra dezia:

PORTA NITET MARGARITA

(...) La perla estava rodeada de unos gloriosos rayos de luz significando, que la preciosa Margarita, que avia faltado de la Corona de España, estava gloriosa en el cielo. Debaxo de la tumba estaban tres versos en Romance muy ingeniosos, que dezian asi:

*El cielo para su puerta
Adonde tal piedra hallara
Si de aqui no la quitara? (Céspedes 1611: 33v)*

³⁰ Instead of a quotation from the scriptures, Sanchez employed an epigram involving the name of the deceased – the same strategy employed for the hieroglyph he prepared for the beatification of Ignacio of Loyola.

Although the examples offered so far in this section are very representative of the genre and, I think, they support my argument regarding its consolidation, the divergence is also telling. At the same time that the *Spanish jeroglífico* was reaching a stable form, one can find a voice against the general formula of hieroglyphs: Jerónimo Martínez de la Vega. In his account of the *fiestas* for the beatification of Tomas de Villanueva in Valencia,³¹ in 1618, Martínez de la Vega criticizes what he considers the faults of almost all festival books of the time in which hieroglyphs: a) include the human figure; b) adjoin Latin or Spanish verses (*letra*), or both; c) name what was painted in the body (i.e. figure) of the hieroglyph.³² In his opinion, “b” and “c” would mean conveying two or three times the same message.³³

His book contains a considerable number of hieroglyphs [Plate 121], described according to the place where they are displayed: in the church, there were thirty of his own authorship; on the walls of the cloister, close to the chapel, more than forty (which were probably lost the following day); on the façade of one of the houses in the convent square another twelve, conceived by de Martinez la Vega;³⁴ and finally another thirty emblems by other authors exhibited close to the university.³⁵ Martinez de la Vega states that more hieroglyphs were made, but he did not collect them because the quality was not so good, as they were “very characteristic of student festivals”, and that the book would be too big (p. 404).

In total fifty-three hieroglyphs appear with woodcuts and another nineteen naked. The number is impressive in contrast with his attitude toward the general practice, which is very conservative. His “purism” seems to resist the recently stabilized genre of hieroglyphs (in the form that became popular in the universities, as he confirms) in favour of a more traditional genre, in the format suggested by Valeriano, Mignault’s comments on hieroglyphs (see p. 223) and *imprese* authors.³⁶

³¹ Martínez de la Vega 1620.

³² op. cit.: 97.

³³ Curiously, although he attacks the subscriptions as something superfluous, in his descriptions of hieroglyphs he adds an exegesis in prose of the meaning of the hieroglyph...

³⁴ All of them illustrated with woodcuts (1620: 313-336), and having a heart as main motif.

³⁵ Of which sixteen illustrated (1620: 405-435).

³⁶ The prohibition of the use of human figures is one of the rules for composing *imprese*, according to Giovio 1551: 37-38.

3.3.1. The Proliferation of Printed Hieroglyphs and the Apex of the Tradition

In the next years the use of *classic Spanish jeroglíficos* would become widespread and appear in most festivals and poetic competitions – documented or not. Attestations of its popularity will be found even in verse:

*La poesía de esta edad
a mi intento se acomoda
que es jeroglíficos toda.*³⁷

But images would also flourish. Some fine examples of illustrated festival books would provide an excellent parameter for the status of hieroglyphs in the period. When Isabel de Borbón died in 1644, a major funeral took place in the Convent of S. Geronimo, Madrid. The account of this event appeared in 1645,³⁸ with the engravings of the twenty-four main hieroglyphs used in the programme – eight large ones displayed on the façade of the convent [Plates 122 and 123], painted in oil and with golden frames, and another sixteen that decorate the catafalque, also illustrated. Interestingly, although these hieroglyphs are engraved, their explanation follows the tradition of being introduced by “*pintòse*” followed by an ekphrasis:

Pintòse una Muerte, dividiendo un Coraçon coronado, en dos partes. La letra Latina. Siccine separat amara mors? I. Reg. Capit. 15. vers. 32. Y la Castellana.
Assi el consorcio Real,
Que la unión mayor advierte,
Partiò, i dividió la muerte. [Plates 123: A]

In fact, besides these engraved examples the book describes another forty-two hieroglyphs using the same model (Anonymous 1645: 83r-93v), suggesting that they were all conceived/collected in this way and later painted/engraved.

³⁷ *Justa Poética a San Isidro* (1620). Apud Entrambasaguas 1969: 27-133.

³⁸ Anonymous. *Pompa Fvneral Honras...* 1645.

Another event in which illustrated festival books containing hieroglyphs were produced is the death of king Felipe IV – celebrated in provinces around the Hispanic world. For the exequies that took place in Madrid, Pedro Rodriguez de Monforte elaborated perhaps the most elegant volume.³⁹ The engravings that Pedro de Villafranca Malagon made for the forty-one painted hieroglyphs are of such fine quality that further descriptions were dispensable [Plate 124].

The funerals for Felipe IV in Nueva España (México) also resulted in printed *jeroglíficos*,⁴⁰ sixteen in total [Plate 125]. In this particular case, the *subscriptio* is longer than traditionally used, and for that he presents an explanation that could contemporize Jerónimo Martínez de la Vega's angst about the length of hieroglyphs:

Aunque es regla de los Geroglíficos la brevedad en las letras, sendo como observò Claudio Minoes [side note: idque sententia brevi, arguta, vel adagio, aut etiam hemistichio] en su sintagma de symbolis, lo mas à que llega la licencia un verso; esto se entiende entre los motes, no en lo que se subscribe al Geroglífico, que la subscripcion, como explicacion, y aplicacion de lo pintado sufre toda la latitud que necesita. (Sariñana y Cuenca 1666: 42r)

In other words, the rules for the brevity of the textual component of a hieroglyph apply only to the motto, and not necessarily to all other elements included in the composition. He goes on and mentions how Alciato used long epigrams and how helpful his *Emblemata* was for composing such hieroglyphs.⁴¹ It is worth noticing that each time a creator moved away from the canon, he tended to feel the need to justify his choice...

Returning to Spain, the second half of the 17th century still produced memorable events abundant in hieroglyphs, two of them resulting in excellent festival books that sum up the canon of the time: Torres Farfán's *Fiestas de la Santa Iglesia...* (1672) and Tassis y Villaroel's *Noticias Historiales de la Enfermedad...* (1690).⁴²

The first of these accounts contains a plates of Seville Cathedral's façade, decorated with paintings and other devices [Plate 126], plus forty-four etchings of the hieroglyphs used in the festival. The engravings were produced by Juan de Valdés Leal and Matías de Arteaga, who

³⁹ Monforte 1666.

⁴⁰ Sariñana y Cuenca 1666.

⁴¹ He also quotes Valeriano and other sources, which gives a good sense of his inspiration.

⁴² Tassis y Villaroel was the editor and publisher of his friend Calderón de la Barca.

probably painted the originals. Here, the hieroglyphs follow the classic model, with a minor variation – a Latin distich. [Plate 127]

A point of interest in this book is the documented association between the painter and engraver Valdés Leal and the ephemeral hieroglyphs. Since the original paintings of hieroglyphs are almost all lost⁴³ this association becomes important because one of Valdés Leal's most important works are the *Jeroglíficos de Nuestras Postrimerías* ("Hieroglyphs of our End" in a free translation): *In Ictu Oculi* ("In the Blink of an Eye" [Plate 128: A]) and *Finis gloriae mundi* ("The End of Earthly Glory" [Plate 128: B]), painted in the same year, 1672. These two oils on canvas were part of the iconographic programme conceived by Miguel de Mañara for the Hospital de la Caridad de Sevilla, and are located in the church's nave. In my opinion, *these paintings are the best indication of how the best hieroglyphs painted in oil would look*. There can be no doubt that Valdés Leal knew what a hieroglyph meant in that time.

Moving on to Tassis y Villaroel, *Noticias historiales de la enfermedad...* (1690), this work's importance extrapolates the forty beautiful etchings [Plate 129]⁴⁴ that reproduced the original painted hieroglyphs (approx. 2.5 m² each), which according to the author

(...) *estaban dibuxados, y coloridos de valiente, y hermosa pintura; tanto, que parecía que sus científicos Artífices, à imitación del singular Apeles, pintaban para la eternidad, y no para el limitado tiempo que sirvieron, pues los mas peritos, y escrupulosos en esta noble sciencia, no hallaron defecto que ponerles.* (p. 170)

The hieroglyphs follow the classic Spanish model, and are not described in the text (the engravings, again, are sufficient). The lack of explanations of each hieroglyph gives place, however, to an elaborated and unique theory of hieroglyphs and other iconographic apparatus. Tassis y Villaroel explains that hieroglyphs are different from other genres (1690: 171); discusses their origin and history (saying that hieroglyphs "originated from the Egyptian notes", 1690: 176), quoting many sources; acknowledges the problems with the definition of the genre and finally produces an extraordinary and precise definition of the Spanish hieroglyph:

⁴³ Only few sets of ephemeral hieroglyphs are extant, but they are of late production and painted on card/paper (in contrast, many hieroglyphs composed for important events in the apex of the tradition were painted in oil). See Azanza López and Molins Mugueta 2005.

⁴⁴ By Francisco Ignacio Ruiz de la Iglesia.

The hieroglyph must have much soul, and little body; an obscure clarity, a mysterious explanation, an independent union of the Latin and Castilian mottoes, since although one is linked to the other, they must not be a version of each other, and none of them should declare the figure entirely – instead, only a little of it, without mixing living things in human nature; the Latin lemma must have one or half verse, and the Castilian three or four verses. (Tassis y Villaroel 1690: 180)

My perception is that *Tassis y Villaroel's definition is the crown of the classic Spanish hieroglyph*, in which not only the rule is declared⁴⁵ but this specific notion of hieroglyph is theoretically harmonized with other conceptions, genres and the whole hieroglyphic phenomenon.⁴⁶ Moreover, one should observe that this discussion is actually unexpected since it does not take place in a theory book where it would belong perfectly. It would not take long for a similar (albeit simplified) conception to finally appear in a famous *Ars Poetica*⁴⁷ or painting manual.⁴⁸

4. Multi-Level Relationship: A Case Study of Spanish Hieroglyphs and Literature

This prominence of *ephemeral hieroglyphs* did not prevent other original explorations of the phenomenon in Spain, rather it fostered them. Generally speaking, I think that whereas in Italy hieroglyphic codes made their way into visual arts codes, such as painting, Hispanic hieroglyphs more or less descend from the result of this transition. They were at least originally a

⁴⁵ The norm naturally already existed, both in tacit or written forms, but here it is incorporated in the account.

⁴⁶ Caussin's conception of hieroglyph is central for Tassis y Villaroel's argument: "*En definicion de Causino (... hieroglyphs) no son mas que imagines, ò caractères mudos, los quales necesitan de divina sabiduría que los declare, como añade Iamblico, por ser unas señales de las mysticas, y obscuras inteligencias*" (1690: 179). For Caussin, see p. 359.

⁴⁷ In the form of Joseph Vicens' additions to Rengifo's *Arte Poetica Española...*: "*Hieroglyphico, viene del griego Hieros, sacer, y de glypho, sculpo, que suena lo mismo que sagrada escultura. Es el Hieroglyphico: Figura significativa de otra cosa ordinariamente Sagrada. Se declara con Lema, ò Letra. Los Egypcios, y Chaldeos usaron de los Hieroglyphicos en vez de letras viniendo por ellos en cognicion de los arcanos mas ocultos (...). El Hieroglyphico se puede explicar con qualquier genero de Poema; pero ordinariamente con un Lema, ò Mote, que es una sentencia, dicho, ò agudeza, que declare lo que representan las figuras; despues con un Terceto, ò Redondilla*"... (Joseph Vicens in 1703: 177)

⁴⁸ Not surprisingly, Tassis y Villaroel's collaborator Antonio Palomino affirms that: "*El Geroglífico, es una Metaphora, que incluye algun Concepto doctrinal, mediante un Symbolo, ò Instrumento sin Figura humana, con Mote Latino de Autor Clasico, y Version Poética en Idioma vulgar*". (1715: 54)

painted text-image genre – nurtured by other codes, motifs and ideas – that permeated a literary genre (the festival books), by which they are known nowadays, and not the contrary. If such a hypothesis is accepted, this inverted dynamic could pose an interesting problem for the notion of Spanish hieroglyphs as an *applied* language.

As I have mentioned in the previous section, at a *complex level* one can observe that there are intense transitions between the cultural levels, and I think that the intensity of the process of diffusion, or the strength of a particular notion of hieroglyph, can be perceived by this power of *transition*. To better illustrate this idea, I will take the infiltration of Spanish hieroglyphs in conventional literature as a brief study case, with the *caveat* that the details of this phenomenon could not be included in the scope of the present dissertation.

4.1. *Terminations*: Permeating “Conventional” Literature

Given that the educational model (largely influenced by Jesuits) stimulated the composition of hieroglyphs, that the most important literary competitions offered prizes for hieroglyphs, and that they were largely employed in the festivals, and the positive environment of Hispanic *Conceptismo*, the perception that these hieroglyphs had influence on Spanish literature causes no difficulty. At least two basic strategies can be observed, which can of course overlap – the appropriation of motifs; and the use of hieroglyphs as rhetorical devices:

4.1.1. Motifs and References

The vast conjunct of hieroglyphs and the habit of composing them facilitated their infiltration in Spanish prose, poetry and drama.⁴⁹ An excellent prototype of this phenomenon can be found in the novel *Los Entretenimientos de la Pícara Justina* (1603), attributed to Francisco López de Úbeda. In this novel hieroglyphic motifs are implanted by Justina in her monologues. In a study of all the text-image techniques used in this work, Joseph R. Jones⁵⁰ has inventoried all the *geroglíficos*,⁵¹ which are frequently introduced by the same introductory formula employed in festival books (“pintase...”, or similar expression).⁵² *Pícara Justina* is not an exception, but a symptom of a paradigmatic practice in the Hispanic literature of the time: in some authors, who actually produce hieroglyphs in poetic competitions, such as Lope de Vega, Calderón de la Barca and many others, the reference to genre (and examples) would be evident in their linear literature. In others, among which Quevedo can be cited, the hieroglyphic structures were dissolved in the text, without direct reference to the concept, in such a way that it can hardly be detected. Moreover, in the late 16th century the word “hieroglyph” seems to be explored as a metaphor in a literary medium – for example, in the work of the Mexican Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz.⁵³

Regarding this *strategy*, I think that a pertinent open question resides in the use of *jeroglíficos* in popular theatre (especially in Calderón’s work): given the temporal nature of a performance, the actual reference to hieroglyphs⁵⁴ would be compromised, since the aimed “synergraphic” effect would not have to be explored (something that would naturally be possible in conventional literature or visual arts). This can suggest that even a non-elite audience not only knew the genre but was familiar with a number of hieroglyphic motifs (I suppose, thanks to their wide use in ephemeral apparatus). Further research could establish this phenomenon as another evidence of the popularity of hieroglyphs and emblems in Spain – and how critically they were able to influence the mentality of the *Siglo de Oro* beyond the educated elite.

⁴⁹ This relationship has been consistently addressed by Spanish scholars, but in most cases the notion of hieroglyph is replaced by that of emblematics.

⁵⁰ Jones 1974: 415-429.

⁵¹ A word profusely used in the *scholia* of the novel, with many variations.

⁵² For a more recent treatment of the subject, see Torres 2000.

⁵³ See Paz 1983.

⁵⁴ Something, I would say, that is *different* from finding inspiration in emblem books, to the extent that the “synergraphic” value is intended, and the public is not necessarily highly educated.

4.1.2. Hieroglyph as a Rhetorical Device

Having a separate item for hieroglyphs as rhetorical devices does not mean that their literary uses mentioned above are not rhetorical, obviously. Instead, here the finality of *convincing* has a preponderant role.

Since the earlier stages of the hieroglyphic phenomenon in Spain hieroglyphs entered the realm of sermons. Valeriano's statement that one could "*speak* through hieroglyphs"⁵⁵ together with his attestation of Christian sources certainly facilitates the adoption of these mysterious images in theological discourse – that became official with the Jesuits. In a paper entitled *Los Jeroglíficos en los Sermones Barrocos*,⁵⁶ Giuseppina Ledda gives an excellent overview of such a custom, as well as the resistance that some priests expressed to it, especially from late 16th until mid-17th century, that invariably reaffirms the extent of the practice in Spain.

For the sake of brevity I will mention only a single unconventional book here, which seems to consist of a monumental defence of the use of hieroglyphs in predications, written by Lorenço de Zamora: *Monarquía Mística* (1594).⁵⁷ Conceived at a crucial moment for the phenomenon in Spain, the work aims to present essential theological fundamentals (identified in divine hieroglyphs) through "human symbols". In Zamora's words:

Y como me halle con alguna letura de las letras humanas y que comenzava ya a ver algo de las divinas, quise hacer con todas una ensalada, y mistura, declarando los jeroglíficos de las divinas con los simbolos y pinturas de las humanas. (Zamora apud Torres 2004: 644)

This synthesis of sacred and profane literature constructed in the aegis of the hieroglyphic phenomenon uses a rather *dissolved* form of hieroglyph (i.e. related to a notion of hieroglyph closer to Valeriano's, without the genre features of classic *jeroglíficos*), *exegetical* (mostly anagogical but

⁵⁵ See p. 250.

⁵⁶ Ledda 1994: 111-128.

⁵⁷ This work is auspiciously introduced by an "Apology against those who reprehend the use of human letters in sermons and commentaries of the Sacred Scriptures".

with potential tropological meanings).⁵⁸ This work's importance does not reside only in its conceptual justification of profane letters, but in the precedent it sets for other explorations of the idea.

4.2. *Transitions*: Books of Classic *Jeroglíficos*

In the section above I presented very succinctly the case of hieroglyphic traits entering conventional literature, as an example of “termination”. Here, however, not only is a hieroglyph inserted in another code, but the whole genre structure is transposed to a discursive code. Two examples illustrate my point: Alonso de Ledesma's hieroglyphs and Nicolás de la Iglesia's *Flores de Miraflores*.

Ledesma, already mentioned as a famous poet, friend of Lope de Vega, explored many different literary genres in his religious poetry. In his miscellanea *Conceptos Espirituales* (three volumes, 1600-1612), for example, he assembles variations of *redondillas*, *letras*, *glosas*, *quintillas*, *décimas*, *ensaladas*, *conceptos*, *jeroglíficos* and *enigmas*. The hieroglyphs collected here consist of no less than eighty-six compositions following the classic structure, introduced by a dedication:

A LA CONCEPCIÓN DE NUESTRA SEÑORA

*Pintóse un Sol, y una Luna llena, y en medio
la tierra, sin hacer sombra.*

Tota pulchra es amica mea, et sine macula. (Cantic. 4)

Gratia plena

*Pues la tierra de la culpa
jamás del Sol la enajena,
siempre será Luna llena.* (Ledesma 1600-1612: III, 182)

⁵⁸ An extremely helpful rationale with all 109 hieroglyphs and related information can be found in Torres 2004: 646-651.

Already in this work, that resembles the result of a poetic competition, hieroglyphs are taken as a specific and stable poetic genre, employed in independent pieces. For the already mentioned beatification of San Ignacio (1610), Ledesma composed his *Discurso en Hieroglyphicos de la Vida, Muerte y Milagros de San Ignacio de Loyola*,⁵⁹ and at this point something changed – not in the inner structure of the hieroglyphs, but in how they were brought together. What he refers to here as a *discourse*, is in fact, a sequence of thirty-three classic hieroglyphs, such as:

Sentencia, a las armas de su illustre familia, y a las de su sagrada religión.
HIEROGLIFICO I

Pintose un Iesus en una target, y en otra una Luna. En la del Iesus està esta letra. Sol iustitia. Mala. 4.
En la de la Luna esta letra. Et luna sub pedibus eius. Apocal. 12.

Tuvo por armas la Luna
 Este bizarro Español,
 Mas trocola por el Sol. (Ledesma apud Salazar 1610: 76v)

The example suffices to demonstrate that the classic structure is applied (although eventually the tercetos can be replaced by other poetic forms) and that each hieroglyph is dedicated to a specific episode of the life of Ignacio de Loyola. The *ekphrasis* and *lemmata* associate each event to a passage from sacred scriptures, and the vernacular verses introduce a strong ideological message. Ledesma was most probably aware of Zamora's *Monarquía*, therefore aware of the discursive possibilities of hieroglyphs⁶⁰ and possibly developing this idea he was able to create a whole discourse on the life of Loyola through a poetic code that he mastered –Spanish hieroglyphs. Although presented in a festival, these compositions are not miscellaneous creations, but a concise literary project: a book of hieroglyphs. Ledesma will follow the same path to produce his last published work: *Epigramas y Hieroglíficos a la Vida de Christo* (1625).

Another interesting work in which the hieroglyphic genre will compose a whole book (and cohesive discourse) is Nicolás de la Iglesia's *Flores de Miraflores* (1659). Between 1653 and 1654, Nicolás decided to cover the chapel of the Immaculate Conception in Burgos with

⁵⁹ See Flor 1982.

⁶⁰ See Torres 2004: 643.

hieroglyphs of his own authorship (Iglesia 1659: fol. 5v). Later, he commissioned woodcuts of those painted and new ones in order to produce a whole book [Plate 130] in honour of Mary. Each of the fifty-one *classic hieroglyphs* is followed by a lengthy exegetical comment by de la Iglesia.⁶¹ In *Flores de Miraflores* the pre-existent structural components of hieroglyphs are brought together, in a harmonious way, and advanced in a domain previously exclusive to emblem books.

In both cases mentioned in this section, one can observe what I have been calling an *alternation* between cultural levels: *grosso modo* and disregarding parallel phenomena, hieroglyphic repertoires (codes) such as Horapollon and Valeriano in Italy are individually used (at a sign-level) for ephemeral apparatus (code), this practice is transmitted to Spain where it undergoes a process of normalization to become a specific genre (code); which is applied (sign) in iconographic programmes (code) of Spanish festivals and eventually transposed to festival books (code) – not as a painting with textual components, but as text (not always including prints). Later, following the model of these compilations and external factors, a collection of hieroglyphs becomes a literary project (code), which can incorporate the function and medium of emblem books.

5. Discussion: Relationship with Emblems

On an earlier occasion I had the opportunity to address the commonly accepted confusion between hieroglyphs and emblems in Spain, although not yet in a fully systematic manner.⁶² I still agree with my central argument – that the confusion takes place in primary and secondary sources, and affects the analysis of the phenomenon – but present circumstances allow me to tackle a more nuanced perspective, regarding the phenomenon as an example of hybrid genre.

In the first place, conceptual discussions on the relationship and difference between hieroglyphs and other text-image genres in primary sources is not a privilege of Spain. In fact, as

⁶¹ See Escalera Pérez 2009.

⁶² Leal 2011.

examined here,⁶³ this debate is widespread in Europe, and this is justifiable for three fundamental reasons: hieroglyphs are widely perceived as a precursor of these other genres (thanks to the process of *borrowing authority* discussed in the previous chapter); there is an intense exchange and cross-influence between these genres; and they are – at least superficially – very similar.

In Spain this debate will be “imported” by Juan de Horozco. In his *Emblemas Morales* (1589), under the heading “what are emblems, *imprese*, insignia, devices, symbols, pegmas and hieroglyphs” he affirms that:

We should not be surprised by the fact that these ancient letters [*letras*] of the Egyptians are used in many part of the New World until our times.⁶⁴ Of all letters only those that teach the truth and the path of virtue should be called letters. They called them [hieroglyphs] “sacred” and those [letters] that we call Emblem in this book were invented by imitating them. (Horozco: *Book I*, 17r)

The notion of hieroglyph he is referring to, however, is that of Horapollon and Valeriano – *and not of the “Classic Spanish Hieroglyph”*.⁶⁵

Although it is true that a few authors use these concepts as synonyms (or similar alternatives), there is a fairly strong preoccupation in distinguishing the genres which should not be ignored. In many festival books⁶⁶ both emblems and classic hieroglyphs are collected, with clearly different poetical structures and labelling.

5.1. Analysing the Phenomenon at Different Levels/Stages

In order to clarify some aspects of the relationship between hieroglyphs and emblems in Spain, I am convinced that an analysis of the process of diffusion through different cultural levels can be helpful. So, I synthesize my argument as follows:

⁶³ See Chapter Seven and Ten.

⁶⁴ See p. 334.

⁶⁵ Which is the case with Tassis y Villaroel (1690).

⁶⁶ Such as Luque Farjardo (1610).

- *In the First Stage - Diffusion:* I identified applied hieroglyphs in Italy (which predates Alciato) as the source for the use of hieroglyphs in Spain.⁶⁷ The prevalent idea of hieroglyphs here is that of Horapollon and Valeriano's codes. Although emblems are introduced in Spain around the same time, they do not seem to be directly associated to hieroglyphs;
- *In the Second Stage - Appropriation:* the use of hieroglyphs in ephemeral apparatus becomes widespread. One of the factors for the success of hieroglyphs at this point is certainly Valeriano's profusion of signs: for the sake of comparison, Alciato could offer a maximum 212 emblems to be applied, with a strong pagan thematic, whereas Valeriano compiled around two thousand hieroglyphs of notoriously religious character. At some point, Valeriano (different from Alciato and non-religious emblem authors) gained institutional support from the Society of Jesus, which would be determinant. The hieroglyphs are now perceived as an image-text genre (in which a painting is followed by a Latin motto);
- *In the Third Stage - Hybridisation:* the Classic Spanish hieroglyphic genre is consolidated. Although it can be argued that emblems offered the model for the addition of a "*subscriptio*" to the genre, there is no clear evidence for that. The "*subscriptio*" of the Spanish hieroglyph rarely follows the Italian metric, tends to be more succinct and have preponderantly anagogical value; at this stage, emblem books provide motifs for hieroglyphs (especially in terms of motifs) – somehow transforming the "classic Spanish hieroglyphs" into a hybrid genre.

⁶⁷ The phenomenon of the diffusion of ephemeral hieroglyphs is therefore generically independent from emblems.

CHAPTER NINE:

The Perception of Writing

One of the aspects of the hieroglyphic phenomenon that is still underestimated by contemporary scholarship is its influence on the Western perception of writing, rarely acknowledged. As has been discussed tangentially in this thesis, Western ethnocentrism tends to regard the Roman alphabet as the most sophisticated form of writing, as a given and sufficient truth. Yet, in the Renaissance, thanks to the hieroglyphic phenomenon and other factors, the notion of writing was much wider (and, I argue, can help explain the richness of its text-image culture) and subject to further explorations...

1. Shaping the European Attitude towards other Writing-Systems

In July 1519, Hernán Cortés sent the “Royal Fifth” of the treasures he had amassed in the New World to Emperor Charles V in Spain. Among the items of the booty were two Mayan codices, beautifully written in the native script, which were then examined with great interest by European scholars. In the oldest extant description of these codices, a letter dated 7th March 1520, one can read:

I had forgotten to say that there were some paintings of less than a hand-span all together, that were folded and joined in the form of a book, [that being] unfolded, stretched out. *In these little paintings there were figures and signs in the form of Arabic or Egyptian letters which over here they have interpreted as their letters.* (My emphasis. Giovanni Ruffo da Forlì apud Coe 1989: 4.)

In the context of such exotic writing-system made of figures, it is natural to imagine that European intellectuals would associate them with the best referential they had available: Egyptian writing. Forlì's interpretation was followed by his friend Martire d'Anghiera, who reaffirmed this

impression about Mesoamerican writing, by commenting in his *Decadas de Orbe Novo* (1530) that “los caracteres que usan son muy diferentes de los nuestros y consisten en dados, ganchos, lazos, limas y otros objetos dispuestos en línea como entre nosotros y casi semejantes a la escritura egipcia (apud Fernández 1994: 450).

The same comparison was later made by Francisco López de Gómara and Cervantes de Salazar in the 1550's and soon the word *hieroglyph* would also serve to designate the different Mesoamerican scripts. As Hamann aptly puts it:

The explicit baptism of certain Mesoamerican practices as “hieroglyphs” was established by the 1560s: Giovanni Battista Ramusio wrote of “imagini ieroglifice... del Messico” in his 1563 *Navegazioni e Viaggi*. André Thevet compared Mexican texts to Egyptian hieroglyphs in his 1575 *Cosmographie Universelle*, and the aforementioned Diego Valadés even cited the aforementioned *Hieroglyphics* [sic] of Horapollon in a 1579 comparison of the scripts of Egypt and Mexico. At the end of the century, Acosta... write of the “Hieroglyphicos” of Mexico in his 1590 *Historia Natural y Moral de las Indias*. (2008: 24)

Not surprisingly, this logic will apply also to the Chinese and Japanese writing-systems:

The hieroglyphic baptism of Chinese script had taken place by 1588: Giovanni Pietro Maffei's *Historiarum Indicarum* wrote that the Chinese “use letters like the Egyptians, which the Greeks call hieroglyphic”. This hieroglyphic naming was repeated in the 1615 publication of the journals of Jesuit missionary Matteo Ricci, who described Chinese script as “similar to the hieroglyphic signs of the Egyptians”. By 1625 Ricci's accounts of China and its hieroglyphs had been translated into English, French, German and Spanish. (Hamann 2008: 24)

And even to the Pictish inscriptions found in Scotland, as one can read in Hector Boece's *Scotorum Historiae*...

Those [Picts] who died fighting the Britons should be honored with conspicuous monuments, and obelisks should be erected over their tombs to match the number of men they had killed. A large quantity of these obelisks can still be seen in the Highlands. In later times the custom arose that the tombs of the most famous and distinguished men were held in veneration like shrines, and men would build cairns of stones and erect large ones on which were inscribed the shapes of fish, snakes, and birds (that age used these instead of letters of the alphabet for writing arcane things), to advise passers-by who they were and what fair things they had achieved in life. (Apud Sutton 2014)

Or in Holinshed's *Chronicles of England, Scotland, and Ireland* (1577), where the reference is yet more explicit:

They used at the first the rites and maners of the Aegyptians from whence they came, and in all their private affaires they used not to write with common letters, as other nations did; but rather with ciphers and figures of creatures made in maner of letters, as their epitaphes upon their toomes and sepulchers remaining amongst us doo hitherto declare. Neverthelesse in our times *this hieroglyphicall maner of writing* (I wot not by what meanes) is perished and lost, and yet they have certeine letters proper unto themselues, which were sometime in common use: but among such as reteine the ancient speach, they have their aspirations, diphthongs, and pronounciation better than any other. (Apud *The Holinshed Project* 2014: 1577, II, chapter 3)

Naming a script *hieroglyph* has implications – not only to the perception of the newly “categorized” writing-system, but also to the changes that the understanding of “hieroglyph” would undergo with this comparison. The most immediate change is the possibility of regarding *hieroglyphs as a living writing-system*. However, while it is probable that this new idea would reinforce the practical use of hieroglyphs (reverberating in the 17th-century debates on the “universal character”, as discussed below), it is also true that hieroglyphs would be associated with civilizations then regarded as “inferior” or “primitive” (Mesoamerican, Chinese), changing the cultural attitude to hieroglyphs.

Nevertheless, the impact of the reception of other writing-systems in the scope of the hieroglyphic tradition was so decisive that Chinese characters were called “hieroglyphs” until the 20th century (especially in Neolatin philological literature) and even in our days Mayan characters are also known as hieroglyphs (although “glyphs” is preferable to avoid confusion). As a significant result, the insistent association between Egyptian hieroglyphs, Mesoamerican glyphs and Chinese characters (*hànzì*) would serve as the basis for the thesis of the *monogenesis of writing*¹ and would set the basis for what John DeFrancis (1986) perceives as the “ideographic myth” of Chinese writing.²

¹ i.e. The theory that all writing-systems descended from the same script (either Sumerian or Egyptian), as advocated until recent times by important intellectuals such as Ignace Gelb (1952), who coined the term “grammatology”, and Alfred Schmitt.

² A parenthesis must be opened to say that I do not condone his views regarding Chinese writing: I simply affirm Western reception of hieroglyphs was strongly influenced by the discussion on hieroglyphs. This reception, therefore, tended to exclude some uses of paronomasia or phonetic complements that exist, to a certain extent, in the Chinese writing-system. My response to this quarrel would go in the direction of the “filling up the grammatological gap” theory proposed in the present thesis, which I would like to address on another occasion.

2. The “Universal Character”

The hieroglyphic phenomenon, together with the reception of Chinese writing, contributed to an important debate in 17th-century intellectual circles: the quest for the “universal character”, which was often addressed both as a pedagogical and philosophical subject.

One of the most influential thinkers to discuss the fundamentals of this subject was Francis Bacon. In his *Advancement of Learning* (1605), after examining the human capacity for “retaining of knowledge” (either by writing or memory) he declares that the “notes of cogitation”³ were divided in the following way:

Notes of Cogitations are of twoo sortes; The one when the Note hath some Similitude, or Congruitie with the Notion; The other Ad Placitum, hauing force onely by Contract or Acceptation. Of the former sort are Hieroglyphickes, and Gestures.⁴ For as to Hieroglyphickes, (things of Ancient vse, and embraced chiefly by the Aegyptians, one of the most ancient Nations) they are but as continued Impreases and Emblemes. And as for Gestures, they are as Transitorie Hieroglyphickes, and are to Hieroglyphickes, as Words spoken are to Wordes written, in that they abide not. (Bacon 1605: II. xvi, 3)

Bacon repeats the tradition and presents emblems and devices (‘impreases’) as the *continuum* of hieroglyphs, and it is important to remember that, for him, an emblem “reduceth conceits intellectual to images sensible, which strike the memory more; out of which axioms may be drawn” (op. cit. II, xv). Thomas C. Singer suggests that Bacon’s views on hieroglyphs subverted the notion of *Prisca Theologia*:

Bacon says that “hieroglyphs were before letters, so parables were before arguments”. This is not, as Italian Renaissance scholars like Valeriano thought, because secret wisdom needed to be concealed from the vulgar. To the contrary, “the cause was, for that it was then of necessity to express any point of reason which was more sharp or subtile than the vulgar in that manner, because men in those times wanted both variety of examples and subtilty of conceit...” Bacon’s point is perfectly clear. The ancients used this form of writing not because their wisdom was superior to that of the moderns but because it was inferior. Simply put, they were lacking in “subtilty of conceit”. (Singer 1989: 51)

³ i.e. the kind of writing which does not use letters.

⁴ Here understood as the gestures used by ancient merchants or deaf-mute individuals to communicate. The opinions that hieroglyphs were a *mute* script must have a role in this association.

However, Singer's interpretation seems to me rather absurd since Bacon affirms that the ancients used hieroglyphs (and parables) precisely because they *wanted* to express "subtleties of conceit" which could be achieved in this way. So much so that if the continuation of Bacon's quotation were reproduced, the sense would be clearer: "and as hieroglyphics were before letters, so parables were before arguments; *and nevertheless now and at all times they* [hieroglyphs/parables] *do retain much life and rigour, because reason cannot be so sensible nor examples so fit*" (my emphasis). In other words, according to the categories that Bacon's establishes for Poetry, *narration* and *representation* (reason) cannot be as sensible or fit as *allusion* (parable) for certain purposes.

Another proof that Bacon's attitude does not condemn hieroglyphs as "inferior" is the fact that his theory of "notes of cogitation" somehow challenges the Aristotelian stance on language: "Aristotle saith well, 'Words are the images of cogitations, and letters are the images of words.' But yet it is not of necessity that cogitations be expressed by the medium of words". And he gives as an example precisely the Chinese script that "write in characters real, which express neither letters nor words in gross, but things or notions" (Bacon 1605: II, xvi, 2).

Nevertheless, it is clear that for the English philosopher hieroglyphs were not necessarily *sacred* anymore. They were not a way to hide mysteries from the vulgar, but simply a form of expression.

Bacon's propositions regarding these *real characters* will resonate, for example, in the Webster-Ward-Wilkins dispute (Singer 1989: 58). When John Webster attacked the curricula and teaching at Oxford and Cambridge in his *The Examination of the Academies* (1654), he followed the Renaissance tradition that emblems and hieroglyphs were "probable, pleasant and useful" (Webster: 24), and that all creatures are "significant and lively characters, or *Hieroglyphicks* (sic) of his [God's] invisible power, providence, and divine wisdom. (Webster: 19).⁵ Not surprisingly, citing Bacon as a reference, he includes the Chinese script as an example of real characters in this discussion (Singer 1989: 58).

Ward and Wilkins, in their aggressive response to Webster (*Vindiciae Academicarum*, 1654), however, had a completely different standpoint:

⁵ See Francis Quarles' *Emblemes* (1635). See p. 296.

For Ward and Wilkins, the words of a natural language cannot merely reflect or mirror ideas or things, they must define them. Consequently, they argue that Webster's discussion of the Egyptian symbols is not appropriate in the context of a debate about the teaching of grammar, for '*Hieroglyphicks*... were invented for *concealment* of things,' rather than 'for *explication* of our minds and notions' (Singer 1989: 61)

In 1668, John Wilkins radicalizes his views with his *An Essay towards a Real Character, and a Philosophical Language*, where he declares that:

There is no reason to doubt whether there be any thing in these [hieroglyphs] worth the enquiry, the discoveries that have been hitherto made out of them being but very few and insignificant. They seem to be but a slight, *imperfect invention, suitable to those first and ruder Ages*... And it seems to me questionable, whether the Egyptians did not first use their *Hieroglyphicks*... for the want of *Letters*. (Wilkins, apud Singer 1989: 62)

The view expressed here unveils a dramatic change not only regarding hieroglyphs *per se*, but towards *ancient authority* (so important to the reception of hieroglyphs, as discussed in the previous chapter), that was little by little losing its recognition as a source of wisdom.

Around the same time as the events presented above, Athanasius Kircher was – not unexpectedly⁶ – occupied with hieroglyphs, Chinese characters and the idea of a perfect universal language. In 1663 he publishes his *Polygraphia Nova seu Universalis* that puts forward his own model of universal language, and in 1667 his *China Illustrata* appears – in which he asserts that China was populated by the lineage of Ham, who came from Egypt. The thrust of Kircher's hypothesis *was the fact that both civilisations made use of hieroglyphs* (Kircher 1667: 226), which were invented by Hermes Trismegistus (a son of Ham, according to Kircher).⁷

⁶ For Kircher's polymathy and interest in hieroglyphs, see p. 388.

⁷ This thesis was contested in John Webb's *The Antiquity of China*, on the basis that if Kircher were correct, the same reasoning would necessarily be applied to Mesoamerican writing, which would need to be traced to Egypt (Webb 1699: 61-62). However, Kircher did not believe that Mesoamerican writing should be understood as "hieroglyphic" (Kircher 1552: 28). Kircher's rationalization of the idea that Egyptians colonized China, chiefly sustained by his notion of hieroglyph, became a long-lasting paradigm in Europe, as one can see in Joseph de Guignes' *Memoire dans lequel on Prouve, que les Chinois sont une Colonie Egyptienne* (1759), Turberville Needham's *De Inscriptione quadam Egyptiaca* (1761) – being later disputed by de Corneille de Pauw's *Recherches Philosophiques sur les Egyptiennes et les Chinois* (1774), until its final dismissal in the 19th century.

One of Kircher's correspondents, Leibniz (a well-known admirer of Chinese writing and philosophy), was also interested in this debate – which would culminate in his *characteristica universalis* unfinished project. His concern can be found, for example, in some of his letters:

I believe that the hieroglyphics of the Egyptians and Chinese and, for us, the signs of the chemists, are examples of real characters, but such as have been designated by authors until now, not such as are ours (Leibniz to Oldenburg, 1673-1676. Cf. Leibniz: VII, 25, 204)

Leibniz was aware of some differences between the two writing-systems discussed here, as one can observe from the first of fourteen questions that he sent to Andreas Müller in 1679, who claimed to have the (same) key for Egyptian and Chinese writing:

1. Whether such a *Key* is unfailing and certain as in reading our a, b, c's or numbers, or whether from time to time one is in need of help, as often happens in reading hieroglyphics (Lach: 568).

This enquiry reveals that Leibniz was not a sceptic regarding hieroglyphs, since he states that reading them was possible. However, the questions (that were not satisfactorily answered by Müller) also suggest that he was not yet entirely convinced of the way Chinese characters worked, despite his many informants in the subject...⁸

Even though it is true that the association between Chinese characters and the “universal character” is well-known in specialist scholarship,⁹ there has been insufficient attention to the fact that the *hieroglyphic phenomenon* “contaminated” the European reception of Chinese writing, especially when mediated by Jesuits, and that these conceptions of ideographic writing influenced – in unclear degrees – not the quest for a universal character (since the possibility of a real character script could be “confirmed” or “substantiated” by the very existence of Chinese script, for example) but, by extension and paradoxically, to the developments of Logics.

⁸ Such as, for example, the Jesuit missionary Bossuet: “Do not doubt that one day we will arrive at an analysis which will reduce them [Chinese characters] to Egyptian hieroglyphs and demonstrate that they both are the writing used among the learned before the Flood” (Bouvet to Leibniz, La Rochelle 28th February 1698, apud Swiderski 1980: 138).

⁹ See Weststeijn: 2010.

3. Alphabet Letters and its Origins

Another effect of the hieroglyphic phenomenon on the European notion of writing can be perceived precisely in the perception of its own native scripts.

Perhaps, the preoccupation with the writing-systems, motivated by hieroglyphic speculations, might have had its first result in the subtle concern that some intellectuals (who were involved with hieroglyphic studies) had with their own calligraphy, orthography and script. Poggio Bracciolini, for example, became famous for his handwriting, creating a new style of humanist script that would become known as Roman type;¹⁰ his friend Niccolò de Niccoli became famous for *italic type* (thanks to Aldus Manutius); Geoffroy Tory, among other outcomes of his hieroglyphic interest, introduced the apostrophe, the accent and the cedilla in French; and others. This, of course, is merely a hypothesis – and maybe just a coincidence. But the influence of hieroglyphs can be felt on many other occasions.

One of the most “emblematic” examples of the documented relationship between hieroglyphs and the alphabet is in Geoffroy Tory’s *Champfleury* (1529). Tory’s interest in hieroglyphs must be taken into consideration: he was one of Beroaldo’s students in Bologna, and there he most probably became aware of Horapollon (which he claims to have translated into French).¹¹ Although his *Champfleury* is not the first work to address the ideal design and proportion of letters,¹² he is the first author, in this context, to propose an exegesis for the alphabet – something that could be regarded as a special case of the “filling the gap” theory:¹³ in the light of the example given by Horapollon, one can imagine that Tory could have asked himself why alphabetic writing should not receive the same treatment...

¹⁰ Precisely the same typeset that is being used in this thesis, and is commonly used in computers.

¹¹ Tory 1529: lxiii.

¹² The first known work to do so is Feliciano’s *Alphabetum Romanum* (1460), followed by other authors such as Luca Pacioli (1509), Albrecht Dürer (*Unterweysung der Messung*, Nuremberg: Formschnyder, 1525), to quote a few (See Witcombe 2004: 285).

¹³ See Chapter Three.

In this book, he retells one of the ancient creation myths for the alphabet:¹⁴ the young Io is seduced by Jupiter, who transforms her into a heifer in order to escape Hera's jealousy. After being rescued by Mercury, she proves her identity to her father Inachus by writing "I" and "Ω" (her name) with her hoofs.¹⁵ For Tory, the two letters "I" and "O" are the foundation from which all other letters derived (and he demonstrates this, letter by letter). Moreover, based on a 10/10 grid, he identifies the letter "I" with Apollo and the nine muses, and "O" with the seven Liberal Arts [Plate 131], and by doing so he creates yet another set of possible interpretations. In this very unique way, therefore, *Tory creates a hermeneutic manual for alphabetic writing*.

The relationship with *Hieroglyphica* is even clearer when he designs a set of "fantastic letters" [Plate 132]¹⁶ and states that:

Lettres Phantastiques viennent après leur Ordre, lesquelles je vous ay figurees après ung Exemple que jay aporte de Rome... Les Egyptiens en leurs Cerimonies escripuoient par Images comme lancien Autheur nomme Orus Apollo le descript moult bien au long en Grec. On le treuve en Latin aussi, & je lay translate en Francois/pour en avoir faict ung present a ung myen bon seigneur & amy. Les dicts Egyptiens, comme jay dict escripuoient par Images afin que le rude Peuple ne peult entendre leur Cerimonies/sans avoir cognoissauce de profonde Philosophie. (Tory 1529: lxiii)

In the same book Tory also publishes not only a list of calligraphic models, but sets of characters from many different (and ancient) scripts, something that would become common among typographers. One of such authors is Giovanni Battista Palatino, who included in his *Libro Nuovo d'Imparare a Scrivere...* (1540) the first edition of an enigmatic *alphabetum Egyptiorum* ("alphabet of the Egyptians") [Plate 133],¹⁷ which will reappear in later editions of the same work¹⁸

¹⁴ Ovid. *Metamorphoses*: Book I, 716-943.

¹⁵ This story is particularly interesting because Io ends up in Egypt, where she gives birth to Cadmus' ancestors. According to other mythological accounts, Cadmus is regarded as responsible for bringing Phoenician letters to Greece.

¹⁶ Although he is the first to associate this kind of letters with hieroglyphs, he is not a pioneer in its composition: in fact, he might have been inspired by the mnemonic letters from Publicius' *Ars memorativa* (1482). With little or no modification, Publicius' alphabet will reappear in many other treatises, including Giovan Battista Della Porta's *Ars Reminiscendi* (1602). Tory's method seems to be dislocating this writing from the realm of the art of memory to the domain of scripts – under the auspices of hieroglyphs. The likely influence of these experimentations on the so-called "hieroglyphic methods" to learn to read through images (Bertaud, Lemare, Castilho et alii...), extremely important to the French and even Brazilian education between the 18th and 19th centuries, is yet to be fully studied.

¹⁷ These characters, which do not correspond to Coptic, may have connections with the *litterae Aegyptiacae* mentioned Valeriano (Book XXXVII).

¹⁸ Such as the *Compendio del Gran Volume* (1566); *Compendio de l'arte del bene scrivere* (1578) and later editions.

and similar publications. It is also necessary to draw attention to the fact that Palatino includes rebuses/paronomasia in his book [Plate 134] – implying that he recognises this as a kind of script and, once again, setting a precedent for future alphabetic collections.

Johann Theodor de Bry and his brother Johann Israel, for example, would explore both the idea of the mythical origins of the alphabet and the collection of scripts. In 1595, in Frankfurt, they published the *Nova Alphati Effictio* with “stories corresponding to each letter”. This work is essentially an *emblem book on the alphabet*, in which the *picturae* consist of a letter and other rich iconographical motifs (with strong Christian connotation) [Plate 135]. *Nova Alphati Effictio* lacks the simplicity and objectivity required for a pedagogical or calligraphic work. Instead, it seems to have the same meditative function (and construction) as an emblem book which addresses the Christian connotation that can be behind every letter.¹⁹ It goes without saying that this can be regarded as a process of *filling the grammatical gap* with myths.

In the following year, 1596, the de Bry brothers brought to light *Alphabeta et Characteres...* in which they aim to present the alphabet of all nations in a historical context.²⁰ In this collection they reproduce no fewer than four different sets of alphabets related to Egypt (referred to as “*Mercurius Thoyt, Aegyptiis Sacras literas conscripsit*”; “*Isis Regina Aegyptiarum literarum inventrix*”; “*Alphabetum Aegyptiorum*” – that corresponds to Palatino’s one; and “*Aegyptiacum*”) [Plate 136]. These four scripts will reappear in the *Virga Aurea* (1616) by James Bonaventure Hepburn, keeper of oriental books and manuscripts at the Vatican, in which they appear together with 68 other scripts in a large print of strong Christian cabbalistic influences [Plate 137]. Besides each alphabet, Hepburn also sets an emblematic figure surrounded by a motto in the given alphabet and a quotation from the scriptures (related to that *pictura*). Moreover, this composition is more than a list: it is a model of theological understanding – or in other words the

¹⁹ Another exploration of the “alphabetic emblem-book” is Giuseppe Maria Mitelli’s *Alphabeta in Sogno...* (1683), which has another general purpose: to teach how to draw.

²⁰ For Johann Theodor and Johann Israel, the first alphabet was the Chaldean (invented by Abraham), and Philo thought that the first people to use writing were the Chaldeans, Assyrians and Phoenicians; Moses brought them to the Hebrews (even if the latter attributed this invention to Ezra); Linus to the Greek (although according to the Phoenicians it was Cadmus who did it); Memnon to the Egyptians (although the Egyptians thought that Mercury invented them); and the Latin, brought by Carmenta (De Bry and De Bry 1596: 3)... Their presentation was taken almost *verbatim* from Agrippa (1530: II), who also quotes the poem about the genealogy of writing that Crinito claims to have read in an old book (see Crinito. *Honesta Disciplina*: XVII).

codes are here understood as a vehicle of meaning themselves (and not only the message produced by them), just as is the case with De Bry's *Nova Alphati Effctio*.

The discussion on the nature of hieroglyphs, in this context, reached a new stage – not that it came to constitute a new interpretation of the phenomenon (which would lead me to regard it as a new *nucleus*) for it consisted mostly of a compilation of other ideas – in which the Egyptian writing was now approached in a *comparative way*, together with other grammatological systems. It is not hard to imagine that such analogical and chronological treatment would at some point favour a sense of *derivation* between the different writing-systems – already known by myths, but still unexplored visually and theoretically. And here Athanasius Kircher's ingenuity, combined with different aspects of the tradition, presents a new unexpected contribution.

In *Prodomus Coptus sive Aegyptiacus* (1636), his first publication, he maintains for the first time that Coptic was the linguistic continuum of the Ancient Egyptian language. Leaving aside the actual correctness of this hypothesis,²¹ one cannot help but notice that one of his premises is that the Coptic alphabet derives from the already mentioned “Egyptian letters”. Defending this position he quotes Plutarch: “Hermes was the god who first invented writing in Egypt. Hence the Egyptians write the first of their letters with an ibis, the bird that belongs to Hermes” (Plutarch apud Kircher 1636: 235)

This passage also inspired Pierio Valeriano, who in his *Hieroglyphica* (Book XVII) suggests that the first letter that Plutarch refers to is the letter “Δ” (delta). Not surprisingly, Valeriano is also quoted by Athanasius, who rather associates Plutarch's assumptions with the letter “Α”, giving as evidence a reformulation of Valeriano's ibis. Kircher was so convinced of this hypothesis that in *Oedipus Aegyptiacus* (1654: III, 49) he developed it into a theory for the hieroglyphic origin of all 22 “vulgar letters” and their correspondence with the Greek alphabet.

[Plate 138]

Kircher's speculations are not completely absurd²² – in fact, the origin of many Greek and Coptic letters can be traced back to Egyptian hieroglyphs and he actually manages to interpret the meaning of the hieroglyph of water (xv) correctly, in perhaps an interesting case of serendipity. The order of factors, however, is mistaken (Greek is the source for Coptic, and not the contrary).

²¹ And its positive impact for the birth of Egyptology.

²² He was also certainly inspired by Arabic manuscripts that offered the phonetic correspondences of some hieroglyphs, see p. 390.

Unfortunately for the decipherment of Ancient Egyptian writing that was not sufficient for him to grasp the phonetic function of hieroglyphs. Still, this project represented a great leap in the understanding of the history of our own writing-system (to the point that even today one can find similar tables with the transformation of the characters in history of writing manuals), through the quest for the original iconicity of our apparently arbitrary alphabetic letters.

4. Rebuses and Other Systems

To conclude this short overview of the influence of the hieroglyphic phenomenon on the European perception of its own writing *stricto sensu*, it could be interesting to indicate some other developments of the concept of “hieroglyph”, either in the fashion for European-made experimental scripts made with the use of ideograms or paronomasia, or in mixed grammatological systems. To illustrate this phenomenon I will refer here to the “hieroglyphic catechisms” used in the American continent from the 16th to the 19th century.²³

- **Hieroglyphic Catechisms**

Also known as “Testerian Manuscripts”, after Jacobo de Testera who allegedly invented this method,²⁴ these little books [Plate 139] were employed in the catechesis of native peoples of the Spanish colonies in America (especially in Mexico, but also in the Andes up until the early 20th century). One can think of a number of factors which might have been decisive to the creation of this text-image genre and its widespread adoption:

²³ See Haberly 1963 and Normann 1986.

²⁴ The historiography, constituted from the conquerors’ narrative, tends to focus on the priests’ invention of such systems. However, it seems to be much more logical that the trigger for this script was the indigenous annotation of Christian doctrines employing their own scripts. *Becoming aware of this phenomenon*, the priests adapted the procedure to their purposes – with the help of converted scribes.

- a) The ideas of hieroglyph in vogue in Spain during that period;²⁵
- b) The assumption that the natives had a hieroglyphic system of their own;²⁶
- c) The fact that they needed to evangelize the indigenous immediately (in Latin!), in a foreign language, to an illiterate people;
- d) The cultural role that a visual writing could have in these societies, and their previous knowledge of writing;
- e) The help of converted *tlacuiloque* (native painters or scribes) in developing such a code, by extensive use of rebus, mythograms and ideograms.

This “hieroglyphic” script was a kind of pidgin writing-system: a bridge between the European priests and the natives, similar to the scripts used by different social groups engaging in linguistic contact²⁷ by means of a common code. In the 17th century, Friar Juan de Torquemada left an account of one of the strategies conceived with the intention of teaching the “Our Father”:

The word [in the Aztec language] which comes closest to the pronunciation of “Pater” is “pantli”, which means a little flag, which is their sign for the number of twenty. So, in order to remember the word “Pater” they draw the flag “pantli” and so say “Pater”. For “noster” the closest word they have is “nochtli”, which is the fruit called by the Spanish here “tuna”, and in Spain “the fig of the Indies”... Therefore to call to mind the word “noster” they draw a tuna fruit alongside the little flag they call “pantli”, and so they are able to continue along until they finish the prayer, and in the same way they find other similar characters and ways by which they are able to teach themselves those things they must commit to memory. (Apud Clendinnen 2013: 48)

Surprisingly, this is exactly the same process used to write in Ancient Egypt (rebus or paronomasia), and it certainly employed other grammatological traits such as ideograms, mythograms, and so on. Here one cannot speak of a single stable system in use: systems varied according to circumstances – such as the linguistic (or grammatological) “substrate” on which the script would be based.²⁸

²⁵ See Chapter Eight.

²⁶ See p. 334.

²⁷ As was probably the case with the *Nsibidi* script in West Africa, and Chinese writing when used as a common code between speakers of different languages. Cañizares-Esguerra makes a similar analogy (2001: 90).

²⁸ A good introduction to this particular subject can be found in Acker 1995. For a more extensive treatment, see Valenzuela 2003.

A variation of these manuscripts, directly inspired by them, can be found in the design of a new figurative alphabet. As one can observe in Torquemada's passage quoted above, *memory* was something that the priests were concerned with – especially in the context of the encounter between the two civilizations. The same preoccupation appears in Diego de Valadés' *Rhetorica Christiana* (1579). He was born in Tlaxcala to a Spanish family and his book is centred on Christian indoctrination in New Spain, with comments on hieroglyphs, the art of memory and didactics.²⁹ Valadés suggests that the native script was a kind of *ars memoriae* itself and departing from this premise he conceives a new visual alphabet combining the two traditions, based on acrostics adapted to the native language and on native characters. [Plate 140]

The use of these non-usual writing-systems, with expressed or latent relationship with the hieroglyphic tradition, was extremely important for centuries of cultural exchange and literacy in Latin-America³⁰ – and there is no reason why they should not be understood as part of the hieroglyphic phenomenon.



The discussion of the hieroglyphic influence on the European notion and uses of writing-systems is included in the present dissertation because it shows how the hieroglyph set a new parameter for writing in the Modern Era. The frequent approximations and experimentations between text and images³¹ in a grammatological context demonstrate that not even the alphabet remained untouched by the hieroglyphic phenomenon. This is all significant to understanding that, although at first sight a writing code can be seen as relatively stable (in terms of its grammatological function, and not appearance or orthography), the historical understanding of writing changes in ways that cannot be perceived through the contemporary (and strict) dimension of script – in other words, the History of Writing (or the Grammatology) should not

²⁹ Discussing “religious man teaching the indigenous through images” he offers an engraving of Pedro de Gante, one of the most important missionaries to use the “hieroglyphic method”, teaching the natives.

³⁰ Curiously, one can easily establish an analogy between these “catechisms” (which are in fact writing codes that happened to be used in religious contexts) and the “hieroglyphic methods” to learn to read. One of the meeting points between these independent canons is the idea of hieroglyph.

³¹ Including other phenomena explored in this chapter.

only be regarded as a sequence of codes, but also as an organic sequence of ideas (at different *cultural levels*) that determine the meanings of such codes.

CHAPTER TEN:

The Phenomenon of Convergence

This final chapter contemplates what I considered the last factor of consolidation of the hieroglyphic phenomenon in the Early Modern period: the process by which different text-image codes (discussed throughout the second part of this dissertation) were interwoven with hieroglyphs into stable systems that could be used to express, hide or reveal ideas.

In my view this *Process of Convergence* had two different facets that occurred simultaneously: the theoretical attempts at *normalization* of the complex and the rise of *transcending scripts* or complexograms. Below I present these two phenomena.

1. Normalization: The Quest for a General Theory of Writing through Images.

Although it is a fact that Valeriano's *Hieroglyphica* incorporated almost all sources available in his time to create his encyclopaedic compilation, it is also true that the invention of new hieroglyphs, emblems etc. continued in a *crescendo*. The process of creation would naturally demand, on the one hand, constant sources of motifs and, on the other, a set of rules for their creation. But more importantly, the profusion of text-image compositions (elaborated under the aegis of distinct genres – not always clearly distinguished among each other – seems to have developed the need for the constant re-compilation and normalization of a phenomenon spread in a cultural complex. I think that this process of normalization can be divided into three main groups: 1) the persistence of “hieroglyphic repertoires” along the lines of previous works (especially Valeriano); 2) the emergence of Iconologies; and 3) the design of new theories of images.

1.1. Hieroglyphic Repertoires and General Compilations

The proof of success of Valeriano's *Hieroglyphica* relies not only in its quality, influence on other authors or numerous editions, but also in the standard that it set for new hieroglyphic treatises (that are somehow a continuation of Horapollon's seminal work). I would argue that this stability suggests that these hermeneutic books fitted its specific demand in such a way that they did not need radical changes.¹ On the contrary, they would little by little embrace all satellite text-image cultures.

For a start, this can all be observed in L'Anglois' *Discours des Hiéroglyphes Aegyptiens, emblèmes, devises et armoiries* (1584). L'Anglois' departure point is the idea that the Egyptians invented hieroglyphs, which were later "enriched" by Greeks and Romans with further subtleties and inventions – such as "proverbs, symbols, sentences, enigmas, devices" (1584: 5v). He then follows the canon and assigns hieroglyphs as the precursor of emblems, devices and coats of arms (1584: 6v).² To produce his discourse (and the collection of 54 "Hieroglyphic Tables"³ that accompanies it), the author not only draws on the most important hieroglyphic authorities (Horapollon, Clement of Alexandria) and scholars (especially linked to the *Aristotelian Nucleus*: Beroaldo, Crinito, Erasmus; also including Poliziano and Valeriano) – but also on sources connected to other text-image traditions (Alciato, Mignault, Giovio, etc.).⁴

Other works will follow a similar tendency, with few significant changes. For instance, Dinet's *Cinq Livres des Hiéroglyphiques* (1614) may have a different organization of the subject,⁵ but reveals some of the conceptions already present in L'Anglois' (such as the relationship between

¹ This somehow confirms that the main preoccupation of these treatises was no longer to translate Egyptian hieroglyphs, but to fit the requirements of Early Modern text-image interpretation – from any source.

² See Chapter Seven.

³ These "tables" are very similar to Valeriano's "books": each focused on the meanings of an animal (or kind of animal), dedicated to a different person, and introduced by a short poetic piece.

⁴ The attack he makes against the alchemists in this work (1584: 2v) is particularly interesting if contrasted to the rise of the "alchemical nucleus" (see p. 372).

⁵ Each of the "five books" deals with a different group of hieroglyphs: 1st – inanimate matter (minerals, natural elements, architecture and objects); 2nd – plants, fungi etc.; 3rd – animals; 4th – humanoids, objects, parts of the body; 5th – ancient gods and deities.

hieroglyphs and coats of arms) and also composes his work in a form of discourse (highlighting the signifier/signified in the marginalia). Finally, Simson's *Hieroglyphica* (1622), which appeared in Scotland, is the only example of Valeriano-like *Hieroglyphica* published in Britain (and just like Dinet's work is divided in parts corresponding to large categories).⁶

Unsurprisingly, in the same way that hieroglyphs incorporated other text-image genres, as can be observed from the examples mentioned above, they also inspired and integrated more compilations made from the viewpoint of other codes/genres possibly in order to better fit their specific purpose. This seems to be the case with Abraham Fraunce's *Insignum Armorum, Emblematum, Hieroglyphicorum... Explicatio Symbolica Philosophica* (1588) that hints at the idea of a general "philosophy" of images; and with Estienne's *L'Art de Faire les Divises* (1645). In terms of specialized repertoires, two works are worth mentioning: Scarlattini's *L'Huomo e sue Parti* (1695), whose objective was to assemble the meaning of the human body and its parts, extracted from symbols, hieroglyphs, proverbs, emblems and so on – and integrated with notions of anatomy; and Labia's *Horto Simbolico* (1700), which does more or less the same with plants.



A distinct aspect of the tendency of compiling hieroglyphs comes from a completely different angle: the continuation of the *antiquarian nucleus*, which will make the first collections of "authentic" hieroglyphs flourish, such as Hohenburg's *Speculum Hieroglyphicorum* (1610) and Liceti's *Hieroglyphica, sive antiqua schemata gemmarum anularium* (1653)⁷ – these new compilations will become crucial, both as a mind-set and a repertoire, to the rise of Egyptology.

1.2. The Emergence of Iconologies

⁶ The work was published in four parts. The first (1622) had 41 chapters on animals; the second (1623), 74 chapters on birds; the third (1623), 26 on fishes, etc.; and the fourth (1624), 18 chapters on insects.

⁷ A kind of "antiquarian book" in which the images of "ancient gem rings" are interpreted in the light of vast literary sources.

In 1593, Cesare Ripa published his *Iconologia* for the first time.⁸ This work – highly influenced by Valeriano and Cartari – differed from all other repertoires discussed so far in this dissertation because its purpose was not to discover the ancient Egyptian secrets, or the mysteries hidden in hieroglyphs and emblems. Instead, this work aimed to be a model for “poets, painters and sculptors, to represent the human virtues, vices, affections and passions”. In order to achieve his objective, Ripa adopted a very efficient strategy:

- He focused the meaning of the figures on a single concept (such as “friendship” or “greed”);
- He used the human figure (with attributes, gestures, expressions, colours, etc.) rather than animals (which can hardly display the nuanced expressions so much cultivated and esteemed by painters of this period) and other signs;
- By doing so, he allowed a great variety of signs and eliminated ambiguities. This would prove to be the greatest advantage of *Iconologia* as a code: since it is the “translation” from an applied source it would always be correct;
- His text-image interaction was almost exclusively vertical (i.e. he did not include mottoes for the pictures, disarticulating any collaboration between image and text⁹);
- His language was simpler, direct, and the exegesis (on the few occasions it appears) is kept short.

⁸ Ripa 1593.

⁹ My hypothesis is that he actually integrated, in the mythogram, the elements that would appear in a linear/textual counterpart, through the detailed characteristics and attributes. Here I would like to develop a hypothesis that could have relevant consequences: Renaissance innovation in the use of non-descriptive (ekphrasis) titles to name artistic works (such as paintings, prints, sculptures, etc.) *configures a kind of text-image genre which was deeply influenced by the hieroglyphic phenomenon and emblematic tradition and persists to the contemporary days*. In other words, because of the phenomenon studied here, every painting/title is in fact a text-image composition (sometimes more or less successfully explored).

To some extent it is thanks to these changes that *Iconologia* enjoyed an immense popularity among artists (such as Pietro da Cortona, Gerard de Lairese, Willen de Mieris, Vermeer, Voldel, Quellinus, Cavalluci, to quote just a few) – thus justifying its numerous editions¹⁰ and imitations.

Despite the radical changes that characterize *Iconologia* in relation to other hermeneutic treatises, for its readership the links with hieroglyphs were still present – and this can easily be attested from the frontispiece of Baudoin’s edition (Ripa 1636) [Plate 141], or by the way Tempest presents his English translation of the work (Ripa 1709). A century after Baudoin’s edition, De la Feuille will “reclaim” the iconology to the hieroglyphic phenomenon, by naming his iconological work *La Science des Hieroglyphes...* (1736).

1.3. The Formulation of Theories of Images

It is at the heart of the “theoretical” *convergence*, where the demand for normalizing the different text-image codes was the strongest, that the idea of hieroglyph would be more crucial. Although emblems and *imprese* were important, their origin was still in the collective memory, and from a conceptual perspective using one to understand the other would not always be successful. The hieroglyphic phenomenon was the only conjunct of ideas that, when situated as the original source of all text-image cultures, could give a sense of unity and historical legitimacy to the convergence. It is from the development of this “norm” (regarded here as a theoretical framework) that the rhetoric of images would become evident and systematized.

It is hard to think of any institution that embraced the pedagogical and propagandistic to the extent and depth that the Jesuits did. It comes as no surprise, then, that it is from this intellectual setting that image will emerge as a rhetorical device.

¹⁰ The first edition lacked illustrations, which first appeared in 1603. For then on the treatise tended to have accompanying pictures (sometimes of great quality). The number of images/allegories was also augmented by the author and different editors – from 684 (1603) to almost its double in later editions (1764).

I would say that through the works of the “Jesuit triumvirate” – as I would refer to Caussin, Masen and Menestrier – one can see how the *hieroglyph* triggered a whole theory of images.

1.3.1. Caussin’s Symbolic Wisdom of the Egyptian

In the introduction to his *De Symbolica Aegyptiorum Sapientia* (1618: iii [x]) [Plate 142], while presenting the purpose of this work, Caussin manifests discontent with the treatment that Horapollon’s work received elsewhere. He complains that *Hieroglyphica* was also referred to with very little fidelity, that its many interpreters have corrupted the work and that the translations into Latin (such as Mercier’s) are not adequate.

It is easy to deduce that his objective, therefore, would be to produce a more faithful translation of *Hieroglyphica* (adding his comments after the text) and Clement of Alexandria’s accounts on hieroglyphs. But before doing that he presents his views on hieroglyphs.

Caussin argues that the “symbolic science of the hieroglyphs” is most ancient, being learned by Moses among the Egyptians (a clear case of *Prisca Theologia*, using Philo of Alexandria as his source) and adopted by the first Greek philosophers (1618: [x-xi]). He disputes Egyptian authorship of the hieroglyphs, suggesting that the “first seeds of hieroglyphic science” were taught to the Egyptians by Abraham in Heliopolis (Caussin 1618: [xii]) and that later the Egyptians “cultivated” this science in a special way ([xiii]). He moves on to observe that the Egyptians consecrated the use of their hieroglyphs in pyramids, obelisks and temples (xv).

After revitalizing an argument that was frequently used after Valeriano, Caussin states that the Egyptians were not the only ones to write through hieroglyphic letters (referring to the Scythians, Ethiopians and Greeks, 1618: [xvi]); it comes as no surprise that the French Jesuit addresses the famous topic of the difference and similarities between hieroglyphs and other genres (more specifically symbols, enigmas, emblems, parables and apologies [xvii]). In this context, his quite succinct definition of hieroglyph runs as follows:

According to most, hieroglyphs (a word now established by us) are, properly speaking, certain images and figures used to signify something from the will of man, which the wise man among the Egyptians used in the place of letters. (Caussin 1618: [xx]).

Although it is true that his definition is disappointingly vague, the way it is articulated with his sources is significant. For a start, Caussin is the first to investigate the life of Horapollon (quoting Sudas and Photius, who do not prevent him from reaching a mistaken conclusion), and to bring Clement of Alexandria to a place of major importance in the debate about hieroglyphs. In my opinion, Clement is more representative of Caussin's opinions about hieroglyphs than the Aristotelian or Neo-Platonic ideologues. Clement's approach is the earliest extant attempt to explain the different grammatological functions of hieroglyphs (something that Horapollon does not do), explaining this phenomenon from different viewpoints. Even if Clement's conception is not fully explored by Caussin, its introduction (and the popularity of *De Symbolica...*) could be regarded as an important element for the rise of the "theories of images" discussed here.

While other authors (notably Valeriano) merged all possible authorities' accounts into their texts, Caussin chooses to preserve the original source from further interpolations. Then, inspired by the Egyptian symbols, and based on different ancient sources, he builds his own repertoire: *Polyhistor Symbolicus* ("The Symbolic Polymath").¹¹ Here, each *book* would focus on a particular category,¹² where each "symbol" would be introduced in a similar way, e.g.:

IV. HEAVEN

The Figure of a Perpetual Work

The Egyptians expressed heaven, in terms of its eternity (αἰδιότης), i.e. perpetuity, through the picture of a heart with ardent fire under it. Plut. in Isid. & Osid. (Caussin 1618: [265])

Each entry was then followed by an *apodosis*¹³ that essentially works as an interpretation of the symbol with a deep relationship with classical literature. In the example quoted above, the *apodosis* associates the idea of the heart over fire with disquietude (associated with the perpetual movement of the heavens), and therefore concludes that great man should die while standing, substantiating this conclusion with a reference to Pacatus' panegyric to Theodosius. Whereas this interpretative arrangement is not strange to the hieroglyphic culture, the examination of the sign

¹¹ *Polyhistor Symbolicus, electorum symbolorum, & parabolarum historicarum stromata, XII Libris complectens* (1618: [238]), which he bounds in the same volume.

¹² Book I: The World and its Elements; II, The Pagan Gods; III, Goodness of Man; IV, Evilness of Man; V, The Rites of the Pagans; VI, Birds; VII, Quadrupeds; VIII, Fishes; IX, Serpents and Insects; X, Plants; XI, Stones; XII, Manufactured Things. (Caussin 1618: [243])

¹³ Apodosis is the main clause of a conditional sentence. e.g. "if you call me, *I will visit you*" (the *apodosis* is in italic).

via *apodosis* implies that the author recognized the signifier/signified as a *protasis*, a subject of further logical exploration. The question is: from the point of view of the study of images, would that mean a shift from a relatively free hermeneutics to a more narrow rhetoric? The answer is extrapolated from Caussin's own monumental work on rhetoric (*De Eloquentia Sacra et Humana Libri XVI*, 1619) and rests in the transmission of this idea among other Jesuit scholars – such as Jakob Masen.

1.3.2. Masen's *Mirror of Images of the Hidden Truth*

In his *Speculum Imaginum Veritatis Occultae* (1650), Jakob Masen advocates the superiority of images¹⁴ within the framework of rhetoric, delineating a new art: the *iconomystica*. In this extensive work, Masen gives an unprecedented treatment of the subject. In his opinion,

The image, just like the discourse, can be sometimes proper, sometimes metaphoric [*translata*] or figurative. And the latter signifies either by convention [*instituto*], by nature [i.e. quality], or by both. (Masen 1650: 1)

The meaning of figurative images can be tropological, allegorical or anagogical and, with regard to their form, images can be divided into symbols, emblems, enigmas and hieroglyphs (*ibidem*). The *iconomystica*, therefore tackles the long-lasting debate on the difference between the different text-image genres, and proposes yet another set of very systematic and precise definitions that can be resumed as follows:

Symbol: “a figurative image that through similitude of a non-intelligent thing represents the life and customs [*mores*] of an intelligent thing in one single clear concept”. (Masen 1650: 4)



Emblem: “a figurative image transferred from the nature of intelligent things to present the life and customs [*mores*] of an intelligent thing in one single clear concept”. (1650: 7)

¹⁴ See Vuilleumier Laurens 2000: 252.



Hieroglyphs: “figurative images created from anything to signify (by convention) any other thing”. (1650: 8)



Enigma: “figurative image, transferred from any created thing to signify (in an obscure and allegoric way) any other thing” (1650: 9).

In *Speculum...* Masen gives detailed information on how to compose using each of these kinds of image, with vast references and examples from the masters of the genre (therefore also producing a repertoire). In the case of hieroglyphs, he not only discusses the nature, form and contents of the subject but quotes all of Horapollon, Clement, Josephus and Diodorus’ hieroglyphs (1618: 680). The Jesuit, however, seems to have instituted his *iconomystica* in opposition to that discipline of *iconology*. The focus of this dispute resides in the fact that many iconologists fail to produce compositions where the properties of the *protasis* are transferred to the *apodosis*, producing an irremediable redundancy.¹⁵

The reference to *protasis* and *apodosis*, which I would suggest is a re-elaboration from Caussin, is crucial in Masen’s theory, where the *protasis* stand for the “poetic image” (which can include an *inscriptio*) and the *apodosis* – the logical conclusion of the *enthymeme* produced from text-image interaction (and that can also have a textual counterpart: *subscriptio*).¹⁶

According to the author, while it is suitable for an ordinary painter to create something with the same properties as the thing signified (i.e. *ekphrasis*), for the poet this is unacceptable, since the “poetic image” requires a difference, where an *enthymeme* will be produced.¹⁷

An *enthymeme* is a syllogism in which one of the premises or the conclusion is unexpressed, either because it is obvious¹⁸ or because of the author’s interest. In my opinion, the strength of the *enthymeme* (and therefore of the synergraphy) resides in the fact that, being a not-

¹⁵ Masen 1650: 453.

¹⁶ Masen 1650: 483.

¹⁷ Masen 1650: 454.

¹⁸ And I would say that here the notion of *enargeia* (*evidentia*) applied to the *pictura* is fundamental.

stated argument, it can hardly be refuted: if the argument is not there, the objector will need to assume the author's intention, necessarily producing a fallacy of presumption (or an *argumentum ad ignorantiam*).

Resorting to the *ars rhetorica*, Masen produced a unique *normalization* of the text-image complex – a whole discipline of images ready to serve the most varied purposes. The sense of unity and legitimacy previously derived from the hieroglyphic phenomenon was replaced by a more “structural” approach.¹⁹

1.3.3. Menestrier's *Philosophy of Images*

The third member of the Jesuit “triumvirate” of image theorists that I propose to study here is Claude François Menestrier. Three of his works, *L'Art des Emblemes* (1662), *La Philosophie des Images* (1682) and *Des Décorations Funebres* (1683) form an important episode of the process of convergence.

In *L'Art des Emblemes*, Menestrier uses the expression “learned images” (*images sçavantes*)²⁰ as the general category of images that are more than an imitation of nature. Following tradition, he identifies the hieroglyph as the source of this kind of image (and consequently all its variants):

La peinture n'est pas seulement une imitation nue de la nature, elle sert à l'explication des connoissances les plus recherchées, & depuis les Egyptiens, qui commencerent les premiers à couvrir leur mysteres sous des hieroglyphes, toutes les autres nations ont fait gloire de les imiter. C'est de cet art merueilleux, que sont sortis les Emblemes, les devises, les Enigmes, les chiffres, les blasons, & les empreintes des medailles & des monnoyes, qui font une partie des belles lettres. La Poësie mesme & l'Eloquence sont des peintures

¹⁹ In this sense, see Tesauro's *Cannocchiale Aristotelico* (1654). In the *Tratato degli Emblemi* included in later editions (1670, 1678), Tesauro affirms that *impres*e and emblems are “poetic arguments, because the similarity between the signifier property and the signified property has a tacit enthymematic virtue to persuade or dissuade something” (1678: 360). Despite all argumentative developments, the hybrid relationship between hieroglyphs and emblems persists (“an emblem is a metaphor (...) meaning a given moral document or doctrinal teaching, by means of a hieroglyph...”, 2678: 777).

²⁰ According to Menestrier, the *images sçavantes* were part of Belles Lettres.

sçavantes, puis que l'une n'est qu'une pure imitation, & que l'autre a ses figures, & ses Images [...]
(Menestrier 1662: 4)

His own definition of hieroglyph is unsurprisingly orthodox, for someone who mentions Pierio, Caussin and Kircher as his sources:

Les Heroglyphes (sic) sont des Peintures mystérieuses, qui font Le caractere d'une personne, d'une actiō, ou d'une chose sacrée. Comme quand nous representons le S. Esprit sous La forme d'une Colombe, & La Trinité par un Triangle. Les Egyptiens furent les premiers, qui les inventerent pour donner plus de maiesté à leur mysteres en les cachant aux ignorans. Ainsi ils representoient la providence divine par une baguette sur laquelle estoit un oeil. Il semble que c'est de nos livres sacrez qu'ils emprunterent ces mysteres & que les livres de Moyse leur servirent d'Idée & de modelle pour ces inventions, dont Horus Apollo composa un livre entier. (...) (Menestrier 1662: 5)

Following this characterization Menestrier follows the steps of other authors already mentioned in the previous chapters and points out the differences between the genres of *images sçavantes*. The difference between hieroglyph and emblem, for instance, is that the subject of the former is sacred, whereas the latter is related to moral affairs (Menestrier 1662: 19).

The French Jesuit seems to undertake the extremely different task of presenting and harmonizing the whole critical tradition – even when the sources diverge. His perspective, in connection with the authors already mentioned in this chapter, is not a specifically rhetorical one: instead, one can consider his work as a historical account not only of the genres, but of its theoreticians. This becomes even clearer in *La Philosophie des Images*, where Menestrier makes a detailed “judgement of the authors who wrote devices” and, albeit praising his erudition, criticizes Jakob Masen because the subject of his work was “not sufficiently digested, nor things sufficiently distinguished” (Menestrier 1682: 59).

Finally, the importance of *Des Décorations Funebres* (1683) for the argument that I have been trying to develop in the present chapter resides in the fact that it articulates within the same creative conjecture all the genres that Menestrier explores in the works mentioned above. This book itself demonstrates that the decoration (iconographic programmes) of festivals (such as funerals, entries, etc.) was a *place of meeting par excellence* where all sorts of *images sçavantes* could be found.



In synthesis, each of the works discussed in the present section can be regarded as a theoretical response to the phenomenon of convergence – resulting in theories of images that could be applied in many different genres, thus characterizing a general *normalization* of the profuse text-image codes scattered at a complex cultural level (in other words, restoring the conventions). Given this scenario, one can justifiably speculate that *the process of normalization tends to condense the complex level into an applicable and homogeneous system* (in ways that can be compared to earlier episodes of normalization when different graphic domains were condensed into a hieroglyphic *transcending* script, see p. 106).

2. Complexograms: Hieroglyphs, Emblems and Alchemical Iconography

The second aspect of convergence studied does not take place in primarily theoretical treatises, but in practice – i.e. in the *concomitant use of different codes within a single composition*. Different from hybrid forms where emblems and hieroglyphs would become a homogeneous entity, the compositions that will be presented in this section have active layers of at least three different genres (hieroglyphs plus emblems, alchemical figures or written characters) *functioning at the same time*.

This phenomenon is only possible thanks to the distinction between the codes, frequently reiterated in theoretical treatises: without this distinction, references to “hieroglyphic emblems” like the ones which will be discussed in this section would be redundant, and the reader would not have a reference to interpret the different layers of these sophisticated creations. Consequently, wherever this phenomenon takes place, it debunks the wide-spread myth that symbols, hieroglyphs, emblems etc. were always synonyms.

2.1. Alchemical Hieroglyphs

Before analysing some examples of this particular kind of *complexogram*, it is first necessary to introduce another conception of hieroglyph, which took a different path of transmission from Egypt: the Alchemical Nucleus.

2.1.1. The Origin of Alchemical Hieroglyphs and their Diffusion

The first alchemical interpretations of hieroglyphs date back to Egypt during the Graeco-Roman Period – the alleged cradle of alchemy.²¹ Although discussing the origins of the discipline itself goes far beyond my objectives here, it is certain that the early alchemists made use of images in a way that other philosophers did not.

To my knowledge, the earliest source of the alchemical use of images seems to be Cleopatra's *Chrysopoeia*, believed to have been written in Alexandria between the 3rd and 4th centuries. Among the images that appeared in this book, one can see an ouroboros encircling the motto "in all" [Plate 143] – the same that would later be described as a hieroglyph in Horapollon's work. By around the same time, Zosimos of Panopolis,²² often regarded as "the first historical figure of Greek alchemy",²³ allegedly wrote an important work on alchemical hermeneutics: *The Tome of Images* (*Muṣḥaf aṣ-ṣuwar*).²⁴ Some of the pictures that are subjected to the alchemist's interpretation and appear in a later Egyptian manuscript dated from 1270 bear a significant similarity to Egyptian motifs (such as the sun and moon on the head of humanoid figures, scenes of offerings, subjugation etc.) [Plate 144] – given the context where this work was conceived, the influence of hieroglyphic inscriptions and the importance that the author grants to images²⁵ are not exactly surprising.

²¹ See Lindsay 1970. I will refer to the Italian edition of this book (Lindsay 2001).

²² Panopolis is the region where Horapollon's family had properties, later known as Akhmim.

²³ Abt 2007: 9.

²⁴ See Abt 2007. For an excellent review of this publication, see Hallum 2009. The *Tome of Images* is "the earliest known example of a continuous series of allegorical alchemical images. On the date of this manuscript alone, the advent of this genre of illustration can be seen to predate its appearance in the West by almost two centuries" (Hallum: 77).

²⁵ See Abt 2007: 29.

Undoubtedly these experiments have inspired generations of Arabic alchemists and scholars.²⁶ Dhu al-Nun Al-Misri (9th century), for instance, was also native to Panopolis (Akhmim) and is regarded in Arabic literature as one of the scholars who could read hieroglyphs:

Dhu'l Nun al-Misri al-Akhmimi, the ascetic, was a philosopher who pursued a course of his own in religion. He was one of those who elucidate the history of these temple-ruins (barabi). He roamed among them [the temples] and examined a great quantity of figures and inscriptions.²⁷ (Masudi. *Muruj al-Dhahab*. Apud Nicholson 1906: 312)

A similar statement would also appear in Al-Bakri's *Al-Masalik*,

[he] was able to comprehend as much as he could of the sciences of the *birba* (temple), so much that he mastered the craft, made diamonds, and was carried to Iraq in one night; he mastered other sciences as well, because in his youth he served a monk called Sas who was at Akhmim, who taught him the script and showed him (how to make) the offering (...). When Dhu Al-Nun learnt what he learnt, he plastered the "House of Wisdom" with the clay of wisdom which cannot be removed unless the stone is removed with it, and if removed (this) will damage the script used for the symbols (Al-Bakri. *Al-Masalik* 2: §901. Apud El-Daly 2005: 165).

And in Ibn al-Qift's epitomized *Ta'rikh al-hukama'* (*History of Learn Men*).²⁸ In fact, at least one work attributed to Dhu'l Nun, *Deciphering Symbols*, deals with the subject of writing – including Egyptian scripts (El-Daly 2005: 68). The prospect of scholars being able to read hieroglyphs entered Islamic culture²⁹ and soon more works on hieroglyphs would appear, such as Ibn Wahshiya's *Kitab Shawq al-Mustaham* [Plate 145]³⁰ which attempts to decipher a considerable number of hieroglyphs (9th/10th century).³¹ Not much later, the alchemist Ibn Umayl would advocate the study of hieroglyphic inscriptions in the walls of the temple of Akhmim (*Ad-Durra an-Naqiya*) and give practical demonstrations of this procedure.³² Ibn Umayl himself was

²⁶ See El-Daly 2005.

²⁷ Examples of translated inscriptions are quoted by Masudi in the sequence.

²⁸ See Nicholson 1907: 387.

²⁹ See Al-Idris. *Geography* (1154) apud Lindsay 2001: 121.

³⁰ Which happened to be translated into English by Hammer (1806).

³¹ Wahshiya aims to demonstrate the phonetic values of a number of hieroglyphs – centuries before Champollion reached his conclusions.

³² "His commentary to his *Al-Qasida an-nūniya* is an alchemical interpretation of Pharaonic images on temple walls" (Abt 2007: 10).

regarded as a follower of Zozimo's method,³³ and believed that the pictures (hieroglyphs) should not be interpreted according to their appearance, but their properties.³⁴ In one of his works, *The Silvery Water* (*Al-ma' Al-Waraqī*), Ibn Umayl produces an extremely important example of visual exegesis. In the book he narrates in detail his visit to an Egyptian temple where he found the statue of a learned man holding the tablet of wisdom (known as the *Letter of the Sun to the Moon*) – which is covered in hieroglyphs [Plate 146], carefully described.

The hieroglyphs from this book will not only be incorporated in the meticulous hieroglyphic studies of his follower, Abu al-Qasim al-'Iraqi, who would combine their study with the study of linear Egyptian signs [Plate 147],³⁵ but will be transmitted to the West, through its Latin commentary: *Aurora Consurgens*.³⁶ From there, the “tablet of wisdom” will become known as *Tabula Chimica* and will appear in modern alchemical compilations, such as Zetzner's *Theatrum Chemicum* (Vol. 5, Strasbourg, 1622).³⁷

The conclusion is inescapable: alchemical iconography is another route of diffusion of hieroglyphs to the European Renaissance. Even if the name “hieroglyph” did not accompany the signs in the process of transmission – something that can be explained by the apparent lack of a specific term for hieroglyphs in medieval Arabic (El-Daly 2005: 64) – when this hermeneutic of images was appropriated and rediscovered by Early Modern scholars,³⁸ they became known precisely as *hieroglyphs*,³⁹ in a twist of serendipity. The iconography and hermeneutics assumed an important role in the alchemical quest – as important, I would say, as experimental alchemy. In the context of an esoteric art, the visual aspect of alchemy allowed its followers to transmit secrets through an intricate code, in which a particular sign could hide a planet, chemical component, zodiac sign, part of the body, in a system of correspondences.

³³ Starr 2009: 65.

³⁴ Starr 2009: 73.

³⁵ To which, like Wahshyia, he attributes ideographic and phonetic values.

³⁶ See Berlekamp 2003.

³⁷ Berlekamp 2003: 40.

³⁸ In a cultural context where hieroglyphs were very much in vogue.

³⁹ Thanks to a *legitimizing* motivating force.

2.1.2. The Alchemical Theoretical Nucleus

The relationship between hieroglyphs and alchemy in the Renaissance has received even less academic attention than the emergence of alchemical emblems.⁴⁰ One of the problems is that contemporary scholars may eventually call “symbol”, “allegory”, etc. something created or regarded as a *hieroglyph*, as I hope I will demonstrate.

The earliest alchemical book to adopt the word “hieroglyph” in its title is John Dee’s *Monas Hieroglyphica* (1564),⁴¹ dedicated to Rudolph II [Plate 148]. Concerning the notion of hieroglyph in this enigmatic and popular book, the most striking element is its apparently non-figurative nature. In fact, the “hieroglyphic monad” is the quintessence of all alchemical (and astrological, etc.) signs: each of its constitutive components represents different philosophical theorems – in a way that is curiously similar to that method that Geoffroy Tory applies to the alphabetic letters.⁴² He calls this particular kind of exegesis “hieroglyphic art” (Dee 1564: theorem XXI).

Turning to a more figurative approach, the so-called *Ripley Scrowle*, is a text-image document on the alchemical opus attributed to George Ripley and allegedly produced by the end of the 15th century. However, the oldest extant dated copies were made in Lübeck, in 1588 [Plate 149].⁴³ The short title of these scrolls hides an important aspect of its reception (if not creation): they were in fact entitled *Rotulum Hieroglyphicum Pantarvae Philosophorum Georgii Riplea* (“The Hieroglyphic Scroll of the Pantarva⁴⁴ of the Philosophers by George Ripley”).⁴⁵ Even if this title is

⁴⁰ See Adams and Linden 1998.

⁴¹ See Forshaw 2005.

⁴² See p. 344.

⁴³ It is suggested that these copies were commissioned by John Dee. For a good introduction to this manuscript, see Linden “The Ripley Scrolls” in Adams and Linden 1998.

⁴⁴ The word *pantarva* is most probably a reference to the *pantaúra* (Philostratus. *Life of Apollonius*: 3.46) a wondrous stone, containing all colours, which was to other stones what gold is compared to metals (Ficino. *De Vita*: III, 14.). Hypothetically, since George Ripley studied in Italy for a long period, he might have known the account of the stone found by Apollonius – who would most probably be the human figure in *Ripley Scrowle* (instead of Hermes, as is frequently suggested).

⁴⁵ Cf. *Rotulum Hieroglyphicum Pantarva Philosophorum Georgii Riplea, Eq. Aur.* (MS. Sloane 2523B; Sloane MS 2523 B2524 A); *Rotulum hieroglyphicum G. Riplaei Equitis Aurati* (Wellcome Institute MS. 692, 693 – copies of 1588 manuscripts); *Rotulum Hieroglyphicum Pantarvae Philosophorum* (University of Pennsylvania Library MS. Schoenberg 187733, dated 1575 – information which I was not able to confirm). At total there are 23 extant copies.

not the original (now lost), and a product of the reception of the manuscript under the aegis of the hieroglyphic phenomenon, it truly represents a “*reconciliation*” between the alchemical visual tradition and the idea of hieroglyph – which, in its turn, will influence a new set of ideas around the concept of hieroglyph.

In 1612, *Le Livre des Figures Hiéroglyphiques*, attributed to the famous alchemist Nicolas Flamel appeared in France.⁴⁶ In this work he interprets the figures that he created for the arch of the *Cimetière des Innocents*⁴⁷ in Paris, by means of a theological/alchemical exegesis. As clearly stated in the translation that soon appeared in England (Flamel 1624), these images could be interpreted in different ways at the same time, thanks to its hieroglyphic properties:

The most true and essential marks of the Art, yet under veils, and Hieroglyphical covertures, in imitation of those which are in the guilded Book of Abraham the Jew, which may represent two things, according to the capacity and understanding of them that behold them: First, the mysteries of our future and undoubted Resurrection, at the day of Judgment, and coming of good Jesus (whom may it please to have mercy upon us), a History which is well agreeing to a Church-yard. And, secondly, they may signify to them, who are skilled in Natural Philosophy, all the principal and necessary operations of the Mastery.

The work that would synthesize the “alchemical nucleus” is beyond doubt Michael Maier’s *Arcana Arcanissima, hoc est, Hieroglyphica Aegyptio-Graeca* (1613) [Plate 150]. Acknowledging the differences, this work represents to the alchemic ideas of hieroglyphs what Valeriano’s meant to the hieroglyphic context of its time. Its overall objective is to prove that Egyptian hieroglyphs and Greek myths were allegorical secrets of Alchemy. Although it does not constitute a repertoire *per se*, many hieroglyphs are discussed and interpreted, to the extent that it can be regarded as a hermeneutic model – which Maier will apply himself in an emblem book.⁴⁸ The conception of hieroglyphs as allegories proposed by Maier is very similar to that advocated by Ibn Umayl and, before him, Zosimos (see p. 293) – and became well diffused especially in Anglo-Germanic countries.

⁴⁶As part of Arnould 1612.

⁴⁷Destroyed in 1786.

⁴⁸See p. 380.

But nuances also existed, taken from exchanges with other hieroglyphic theories: let us consider, for instance, the case of Thomas Browne. In a letter dated 25th January 1658 he listed a copy of the scroll (rightfully called “Ripleys Emblematicall or Hieroglyphicall Scrowle”)⁴⁹ that he lent to Elias Ashmole – who, in his turn, had published its verses in the *Theatrum Chemicum Britannicum* (1652). A question emerges: did Browne use the word “hieroglyph” arbitrarily or did he have a particular conception in mind? In *Religio Medici* (1642),⁵⁰ Browne affirms that:

There are two bookes from whence I collect my Divinity; besides that written one of God [i.e. the Bible], another of his servant Nature, that universall and publik Manuscript, that lies expans'd unto the eyes of all; those that never saw him in the one, have discovered him in the other: This was the Scripture and Theology of the Heathens; the naturall motion of the Sun made them more admire him, than its supernaturall station did the Children of Israel; the ordinary effect of nature wrought more admiration in them, than in the other all his miracles; surely the Heathens knew better how to joyne and reade these mysticall letters, than wee Christians, who cast a more carelesse eye on these common Hieroglyphicks, and disdain to suck Divinity from the flowers of nature. (Sect. xvi⁵¹)

With this hieroglyphic conception Browne harmonized Christian Theology and the Philosophy of Nature (alchemy). Later, in his *Pseudodoxia Epidemica* (1646) also known as *Vulgar Errors*, Browne dedicates one entire chapter to “Egyptian hieroglyphs”, pointing out that:

CERTAINLY of all men that suffered from the confusion of Babel, the Ægyptians found the best evasion; for, though words were confounded, they invented a language of things, and spoke unto each other by common notions in Nature. Whereby they discoursed in silence, and were intuitively understood from the theory of their Expresses. (Browne 1646: 5.20)

The conception here is very close to that of Athanasius Kircher’s *Oedipus Aegyptiacus* (see p. 308), greatly admired by Browne,⁵² especially in terms of his inclination to the *prisca philosophia*. The idea of tacit writing that reappears here was put into practice in the enigmatic *Mutus Liber* (“The Silent Book”, 1677), in which “all hermetic philosophy is *painted by hieroglyphic figures*”, according to the title page. Attributed to “Altus”, the whole book consists of images (i.e.

⁴⁹ Bodleian MS Ashmole 1788.

⁵⁰ The book was written in 1634 and published in 1642 by Andrew Crook without the author’s permission. One year later the first authorized edition would appear. William Marshall, who made George Wither’s *Choice of Emblemes*, was in charge of *Religio Medici* title-page.

⁵¹ Translation from <http://penelope.uchicago.edu/relmed/relmed.html>.

⁵² Browne 1646: 1.9.

hieroglyphs) and is structured in a way that might recall a contemporary graphic novel [Plate 151]. Without doubt, images could convey a silent explanation of complex philosophical notions – or the very formula for the alchemical stone. The hieroglyph also appropriates another visio-textual dimension: the sequential dynamics (it seems to combine, in the same construction, alchemical sequences and mythograms).

Although different notions of hieroglyph appear in Browne, no English author would have a more eclectic hieroglyphic education than Isaac Newton. Newton treats the subject from an alchemical perspective (largely taken from Maier⁵³ and Flamel) but also from a more “traditional” standpoint,⁵⁴ as can be attested in the second chapter of his *The Chronology of Ancient Kingdoms Amended* (London: 1728):

In those days the writing of the Thebans and Ethiopians was in hieroglyphicks; and this way of writing seems to have spread into the lower Egypt before the days of Moses [...]. Now *this emblematical way of writing* gave occasion to the Thebans and Ethiopians, who in the days of Samuel, David, Solomon, and Rehoboam conquered Egypt, and the nations round about, and erected a great Empire, to represent and signify their conquering Kings and Princes, not by writing down their names, but by making various hieroglyphical figures (My emphasis: 225-6)

Considering hieroglyph an “emblematical way of writing” is in my opinion an excellent reflection on the status of hieroglyphs during his lifetime in connection with what I have been calling here a “process of convergence”. While the ideas presented above were being discussed, new compositions combined hieroglyphs, emblems and alchemical hermeneutics.

2.2. Complexograms: Transcending Scripts

⁵³ In the manuscript Keynes MS. 32 (King's College Library, Cambridge University) Newton copies passages or the integrity of several works by Maier: *Symbola aurea mensæ duodecim nationum* (Francofurti, 1617); *Lusus Serius* (1616); *Atalanta fugiens, hoc est Emblemata nova* (Francofurti, 1617); *Viatorium, hoc est De montibus Planetarum septem* (Rothomagi 1651); and *Septimana Philosophica* (Magdeburgi, 1620).

⁵⁴ In his library Newton had copies of Valeriano (*Hieroglyphica*), Caussin (*De Symbolica Aegyptiorum Sapientia*) and Tesauro (*Cannocchiale*). See Harrison 1978: 116.

In this section I will present some of the cases of *complexography* which I encountered earlier. The first thing to be observed is that, excepting one example (Caseneuve), they all come from Anglo-German sources – something that can be at least partially explained by the status that alchemy enjoyed in these intellectual environments.

2.2.1. From Alchemical Series to Complex Emblems

Alchemical series of images, as discussed above, were one of the most appropriate forms of hermetic expression. Different Arabic documents made their way into European alchemical circles and were exhaustively copied and transformed and interpreted, creating canonical sequences of enigmatic images of uncertain origin.⁵⁵

It was only a matter of time before these series reached scholars contaminated by the hieroglyphic or emblematic mentality, in a cross-influencing process. I will present two cases of this specific phenomenon.

2.2.2. From the *Book of Lambspring* to Michael Maier's *Atalanta Fugiens*

Apart from its resemblance to other alchemical series, little can be said for certain about the origins of the *Book of Lambspring* [Plate 152]. The oldest known manuscript copies of this work, also known as *De Lapide Philosophico*, date from the second half of the 16th or early 17th century.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ Such as *Pretiosissimum Donum Dei*, *Rosarium Philosophorum*, *Splendor Solis*, *Turba Philosophorum*, *The Twelve Keys of Basil Valentine* and many others.

⁵⁶ Germanisches Nationalmuseum, Ms. 16752 (German with Latin translation, 1579); Österreich Nationalbibliothek. MS 10102 (second half of 16th century); *Tractatus de lapide philosophorum*. University of Salzburg library MI 92 (German with Latin translation of Nicolaus Majus, 1607).

The book consists of 15 figures with an epigram and an alchemical exegesis – in a way very similar to emblem books.

I think this opuscle was the inspiration for the form of Michael Maier's *Atalanta Fugiens* – a groundbreaking emblem book on alchemy, published in 1617, where each of the 50 emblems comprised a title, an engraving (beautifully made by Matthäus Merian⁵⁷), an epigram⁵⁸, a musical score⁵⁹ and a long alchemical discourse [Plate 153]. *Grosso modo*, I would say that in this work Maier makes an interpretation of the alchemical opus through a “hieroglyphic exegesis” of the myth of Atalanta – in the same way that he interpreted the Labours of Hercules and the Trojan Expedition in his *Arcana Arcanissima* (books V and VI, respectively). This perception can be demonstrated in emblem XIV, where Maier affirms that “in the first book of our Hieroglyphics we have fully explained and reduced the allegory of Osiris to its true origin, which is Chemical”, thus implying that all Ancient Alchemy was “sung and figured” by poets (1617: 186). The same idea appears in different emblems:

Achilles is likewise said to be hardened by his Mother after the same manner as Triptolemus was before, and of this we have treated at length in the sixth book of our Hieroglyphicks. (Maier 1617: Emblem XXXV)

This proves that, while *Lambspring* can be regarded as a possible inspiration for the structure of *Atalanta Fugiens*, the key to its interpretation relies on *Arcana Arcanissima* since the references to hieroglyphs abound:

The Ancients also joined him [the Dragon] to Æsculapius as a Hieroglyphick. But the chemists appropriate Dragons to their Work not in reality but as an Allegorye. For a Dragon always denotes Mercury, whether he be fixed or volatile. Hence Mercury has two serpents about his Caduceus (for a dragon is a great serpent), and Saturn has but one which devours his Tayle, as also has Janus. (Maier 1617: Emblem XXV⁶⁰)

⁵⁷ Who also illustrated Fludd's *Utriusque Cosmi... Historia*.

⁵⁸ A Latin sestet, with its translation to German.

⁵⁹ A fugue in three voices (Atalanta, Hippomenes and the golden apple), singing the first two verses of the Latin epigram.

⁶⁰ Translation from British Library MS. Sloane 3645.

Although Maier advocates that the hieroglyph is not adopted *in reality, but as an allegory* (using more or less the same expression as Ibn Umayl), he hints at the idea that the reality provides the source for such allegories – given the qualities of the beings:

The Philosophers therefore observing the wonderfull Nature of this Beast [the Lion] have made diverse Allegories from Him, which they use as so many Hieroglyphicall writings relating to their secret work. (Maier 1617: Emblem XVI⁶¹)

By doing so he harmonises two apparently different notions of hieroglyph, which will fit his alchemical exegesis, according to a tacit correspondence between the signifier and its different meanings.

Maier therefore concatenates different codes – hieroglyphs, emblem and alchemical iconography (and music!) – and lets them operate at the same time in each complex composition: to the extent that if one of these codes is ignored, the meaning will be lost. It is also important to notice that each of his complexograms is a multiplex phenomenon,⁶² since different notions of hieroglyph are brought together.

The hieroglyphic method applied in *Atalanta Fugiens* will reappear in other works from the same author, such as *Symbola Aureae Mensae* (1617) and *Septimana Philosophica* (1620) and will be very influential.⁶³ Curiously all these works were published by Lucas Jennis, son-in-law of Johann Israel de Bry, who also published an illustrated edition of Lamspring (1625).

2.2.3. From *Pretiosissimum Donum Dei* to *Coronatio Naturae*

Another example of an alchemical series crossing the threshold to the convergence phenomenon originates in the twelve images of the *Pretiosissimus Donum Dei*, attributed to

⁶¹ Ibidem.

⁶² See p. 299.

⁶³ Particularly on Isaac Newton, who studied *Septimana...* extensively, and copied down many passages of this book (Keynes MS. 32, 35r).

Georgius Aurach de Argentina and dated from 1475.⁶⁴ This very characteristic sequence of flasks showing the alchemical process was copied a number of times⁶⁵ and, as one might expect, varied substantially – including its accompanying text. *Donum Dei* probably influenced another famous alchemical manuscript, *Splendor Solis* (c. 1532-35), which reworks the theme of alchemical flasks.

By the end of the 16th century, or at some point in the following century, another composition with a parallel thematic appears: the anonymous series *Coronatio Naturae* [Plate 154] – a sequence of c. 67 images. But this time, the creation of this work (or its early transmission) took place under the aegis of the hieroglyphic phenomenon and as a result, this work received different titles, among which two are of particular interest: the first, *Emblemata seu Hieroglyphica Chymica Enigmatica*,⁶⁶ has an English *subscriptio* for the two first emblems. Emblems 1 to 40 have an *inscriptio* and the other 41-67 bear no text – it could be suggested that this is rather an incomplete work, which lacked the rest of its textual components (that would characterize the work as *emblemata*); the second is *Coronatio Naturae, sive Doctrina de Summa Medicina Hieroglyphicis explicata...*⁶⁷ which has approximately the same structure and is signed by Franciscus Steuart and dated “*anno regne Regine Elizabeth XXXII*”.⁶⁸

Even if this example is not as complex as Maier’s one, it is still a good demonstration of the process by which existing traditions were dragged into the convergence melting pot.

2.2.4. Rosicrucian and Bohemist Complexograms

⁶⁴ Cf. the final lines of the manuscript *Pretiosum Donum Dei* (University of Glasgow Library: MS Ferguson 148): “*Explicit Liber qui intitulatus Praetiosum Donum Dei scriptum per me Georgium Aurach de Argentina, et etiam depictum manibus propriis sub Anno Domini 1475*”.

⁶⁵ More than 60 manuscript copies are extant.

⁶⁶ University of Glasgow Library, MS Ferguson 253.

⁶⁷ University of Glasgow Library, MS Ferguson 245.

⁶⁸ A short commentary is pertinent here. I associate the possible owner of this copy with the controversial Francis Stewart, 5th Earl of Bothwell, known for his political plots and occult interests. Unless it is a forgery, the date, 1591 (in the 32nd year of Elizabeth’s reign), corresponds to the moment when he was arrested on charges of witchcraft (15th April) with the objective of killing King James VI, his cousin.

The notion of hieroglyph, and other forms of visual expression, was adopted by hermetic schools of thought in the 17th century. Although there are those who think that the adoption of labels such as “hieroglyphs” and “emblem” was a matter of fancy for these authors, as a substitute for a mere “symbol”, I tend to see this phenomenon in a more meaningful and motivated way – connected to the rest of the events studied in the present thesis. Here I present two different circles, where the phenomenon can be evidenced.

2.2.5. Robert Fludd

Between 1611 and 1616 Michael Maier lived in London, where he published his *Arcana Arcanissima* and probably met Robert Fludd. Like Maier, Fludd was an early Rosicrucian apologist⁶⁹ with deep alchemical interests and happened to have the same publisher and engraver at that period: Johann Theodor de Bry and Matthäus Merian, respectively.

In 1617, the De Bry house⁷⁰ in Oppenheim printed the first volume of *Utriusque Cosmi Maioris*,⁷¹ considered Fludd’s masterpiece. The macrocosm is synthesized in one large print with the caption “Mirror of the Entire Nature and Image of the Art” [Plate 155]. On the following page, Fludd refers to this cosmogram as an “emblematic mirror” (1617: 6) and proceeds to a two-page exegesis which can be regarded as the *subscriptio* of the composition (which will be further discussed in the rest of this first tome). In relation to the whole *pictura*, the *subscriptio* is predominately an *ekphrasis*, explaining each element of the mythogram (eventually producing a synergraphy) – but more important is the effect of *enargeia* (or *evidentia*), taken from the

⁶⁹ Huffman 2001: 25.

⁷⁰ Which was famous for its emblem books: e.g. Boissard, Jean Jacques. *Emblematum liber*, Frankfurt, Theodore de Bry, 1593; Bry, Johann Theodor de and Johann Israel de. *Emblemata saecularia, mira et iucunda varietate saeculi huius mores ita exprimentia*. Frankfurt, 1592; Bry, Johann Theodor de. *Proscenium vitae humanae, siue Emblematvm saecularivm*. Frankfurt, 1627.

⁷¹ Fludd 1617-1624.

emblematic tradition, that Fludd aptly uses as a rhetorical device throughout his work to *demonstrate* his arguments with a rich visual apparatus (1617: 20).

Fludd's visual rhetoric will be further employed in later works. For example, in the first volume of his *Medicina Catholica* (1629), the work is introduced by an engraving entitled "the *hieroglyphic emblem* that explains the totality of the Mystery of Catholic⁷² Medicine", which contains a text-image interaction (the texts are biblical passages) and is followed by a 5-page exegesis [Plate 156]. Soon after that another mythogram is presented, with the *inscriptio* "Hieroglyphic description of the mystic defense of health", showing a "healthy man" in a fortress, being protected by four angels (Gabriel, Mizael, Uriel and Raphael) from the attack of four fallen angels. In the *subscriptio*, the content of the engraving is referred to as an emblem, which will have its hieroglyphs explained (1627: 2r). [Plate 157: A]

Two years later, the second volume of *Medicina Catholica*, intitled *Integrum Morborum Mysterium* ("The Entire Mystery of the Diseases", Fludd 1631) appeared. In accord with the subject of this book, the central figure in the mythogram is now a sick man lying on his bed, in a fortress invaded by devils [Plate 157: B]. Again, Fludd interprets the main figure *hieroglyphically* and many other engravings receive a similar treatment.

Finally, in *Philosophia Mosaica* (1638), published one year after the author's death, the first plate from *Medicina Catholica* is reused, and this time it is referred as "the Hieroglyphical description of the opposite Emblem or Figure".

Fludd's use of images was not only a strategy of communication. His *hieroglyphs* were the only possible way to demonstrate or display complex thoughts on cosmic harmony – a notion that would fit the idea that hieroglyphs were a sacred writing of god's will, secrets to be unveiled by few. And as such, these signs were one of the points of tension between Fludd and Kepler:

Whereas for Kepler only that which is capable of quantitative, mathematical proof belongs to objective science, for Fludd nothing can have objective meaning unless it is directly connected to alchemical or Rosicrucian mysteries. This is why he dismisses as "sedimentary substance" the quantities represented in Kepler's geometrical diagrams and acknowledges only his own hieroglyphic figures (*picturae aenigmata*) as the symbolical expressions of the "inner nature" of cosmic harmony. He also criticizes Kepler for having shifted cosmic harmony too much into the

⁷² From Greek *καθολικισμός* "according to the whole". The sense here is close to the notion of "holistic" nowadays.

subject, thus taking it out of the physical world instead of leaving it in the *anima mundi*, dormant in the matter. (Pauli 1955)

2.2.6. Pordage's Explanation of the World

Two years after the publication of the English version of *Philosophia Moysaica*, Pordage's *Mundorum Explicatio* (1661) appeared. The subtitle of this work explains that its objective was to provide "the explanation of a hieroglyphical figure wherein are couched the mysteries of the external, internal, and eternal worlds". The hieroglyphic figure in question [Plate 158] is again a cosmogram, fully interpreted by almost 6.500 rhymed couplets.

Although it is known for a fact that John Pordage and his son, Samuel, nourished sympathies for Jacob Böhme's thought, *Mundorum Explicatio* traces an undeniable parallel with Fludd's conception of the hieroglyph and the book's structure around it (as an emblem): they even use the same expression "hieroglyphical figure". Therefore, even if Pordage does not refer to his composition as an "emblem", I regard it as a reflection of Fludd's notions (and consequently of the convergence process).

Mundorum Explicatio is in fact a complex emblem: its single mythogram concentrates a number of text-image compositions which are further interpreted by an enormous *subscriptio*, to the point of constructing an emblem of emblems, in order to give an explanation of the entire universe.

2.2.7. Freher's Paradoxical, Emblematic and Enigmatic Hieroglyphs

Another noteworthy boehmist is Dionysius Andreas Freher, a German active in London by the end of 17th century and early 18th. His work is known not only by his interpretations of Jacob Böehme, but also for his unique capacity of rendering Böehme's complex system of thought in diagrams and images. Two of his manuscripts are of special interest in the context of convergence:

Hieroglyphica Sacra and *Paradoxa, Emblemata, Aenigmata, Hieroglyphica, de Uno, Toto, Puncto, Centro*.⁷³

Hieroglyphica Sacra is a manuscript series of 13 theosophical drawings [Plate 159] from the late 17th century, with accompanying *subscriptio* (and eventually *inscriptio*), which were published in the second volume of *The Works of Jacob Behmen, the Teutonic Theosopher* (London, 1764),⁷⁴ wrongly attributed to the compiler William Law (and called simply “illustrations” in the print version). The text-image structure is clearly emblematic and resembles that of Robert Fludd’s cosmograms.

Paradoxa Emblemata Aenigmata Hieroglyphica, in its turn, is a metaphysical emblem book that was published for the first time in the fifties by C. A. Muses in *The Jacob Boehme Society Quarterly* (1955-56).⁷⁵ In this work, 153 *picturae* are drawn in circles surrounded by Latin enigmatic *inscriptiones*, with the English translation at the top and bottom of the emblem. [Plate 160]

Since Jacob Böhme himself did not use the term “hieroglyph”, choosing instead the notion of “signature”,⁷⁶ it is clear that Freher must have been motivated by the emblematic and hieroglyphic tradition, it being almost impossible to determine a single source of inspiration: I suspect that Dee, Fludd and Cramer⁷⁷ could be a good starting point for this study.

2.2.8. Louis de Caseneuve’s *Twelve-Spouts Fountain*

Bound in Fellon’s 1626 edition of Valeriano’s *Hieroglyphica*⁷⁸ [Plate 161], Caseneuve’s treatise *Hieroglyphicorum et Medicorum Emblematum Δωδεκάκρονος* (“The Twelve-Spouts

⁷³ See Freher MS. Add. 5790; and MS. Add. 5789.

⁷⁴ Law 1764.

⁷⁵ See Muses 1988. For a more recent edition (Freher and McLean 1983).

⁷⁶ With the same purpose, according to Dieckmann 1957: 318.

⁷⁷ Cramer 1617.

⁷⁸ Valeriano et al. 1626.

Fountain⁷⁹ [made] of Hieroglyphs and Medical Emblems”) is an outstanding example of convergence.⁸⁰ This little book is an emblematic version of this fountain, called “the emblem of emblems” directed to someone interested in medicine (*philiater*. Caseneuve 1626: 1).

Each of its twelve spouts is a medical emblem – with *inscriptio*, *pictura* and *subscriptio* [Plate 162]. Every *pictura*, in its turn, consists of a number of *hieroglyphs*: numbered one by one with specific meanings and described in a long exegesis (based on Galen, Hippocrates, Avicenna, and a great number of classical authors).

In this example, again, one can observe how this complexogram unfolds layers of depth, that operate in distinct codes working at the same time. Curiously, it is the base of the construction that retains the most complex meanings (represented by a long and authoritative interpretation, that often produces *synergraphy*), while the top provides a synthesis of all emblems in its *pictura* – with an epigram that reveals the purpose of the work.

2.3. Athanasius Kircher: *The Egyptian Oedipus*

The work of Athanasius Kircher, the Jesuit polymath, is the pinnacle of the transmission of hieroglyphs in the Early Modern Era. His extensive interests in hieroglyphs have received reasonable academic attention in the past, and recently Daniel Stolzenberg produced an excellent study of Kircher’s *Oedipus Aegyptiacus* (1652-54).⁸¹ Yet, given the dimensions and sources of Kircher’s work, much remains to be said – and the present discussion will certainly not exhaust the subject.

Oedipus Aegyptiacus [Plate 163], the most comprehensive of Kircher’s works on hieroglyphs, was published in Rome (Kircher 1652-1654). In the first volume (1652), he gives a general introduction to Egyptian culture (according to the sources available and his own suppositions).

⁷⁹ This is a reference to a fountain in Athens (see *δωδεκάκρονος* in Suda. *Lexikon*: δ 1440 Adle, and Tzetzes. *Chilliades*: 8. Hist. 18).

⁸⁰ For a helpful introduction, including the translation of the emblems into Spanish, see López Poza 1993.

⁸¹ Stolzenberg 2004. Stolzenberg provides a good bibliography on studies about Kircher’s hieroglyphs.

He discusses the scope and motivation of the work; the delta of the river Nile; the “Politics of the Egyptians”; the “Theogony or Architecture of the Gods”; the Hebraic pantheon; and other cultures that he believed to be similar to that of Egypt. The second tome (1653) is divided into two parts, dealing with a number of subjects related to hieroglyphic culture, including “Hieroglyphic Mathematics”, “The Astrology of the Egyptians and the Hieroglyphs of the Chaldeans”, Calendar, “Mechanics or Architecture”, “Hieroglyphic Alchemy”, “Magic” and “Theosophy”. The third tome (1654) finally discusses the origin of hieroglyphs and provides a number of Kircher’s translations from obelisks, monuments and objects. In the light of the structures discussed here, one could say that the first tome offers a historical context to Egyptian hieroglyphs (discussing general ideas about them), the second tome deal with Kircher’s interpretation of the hieroglyphic cultural complex (its relationship with other codes and systems) and the third tome presents the system and its traits.

The point I would like to make here is that Kircher’s knowledge did not come from nowhere. He did not invent a whole new conception of hieroglyph: instead, like no other, he embraced the whole hieroglyphic complex thanks to his particular erudition, producing a unique syncretism – or, to be faithful to terminology I have been using here, a *convergence*. For this reason, in this section I will demonstrate in brief how some of Kircher’s views in his *Oedipus Aegyptiacus* can be associated with other subjects already discussed in this thesis.

2.3.1. *Antiquarian Sources*

It is believed that Kircher’s interest in hieroglyphs was triggered in 1628 when he saw a copy of Hohenburg’s *Thesaurus Hieroglyphicorum* (1610).⁸² This contact seems to have affected Kircher’s future studies and ambitions. Different from the majority of hieroglyphic scholars of his time, Kircher’s interests were focused on “authentic Egyptian hieroglyphs”. This means that for him the iconicity of the signs should be respected – be it to obtain a translation or to compose new inscriptions.

⁸² See p. 232. See Hamilton 2006: 203.

His objects of study would therefore be samples from Hohenburg, the *Mensa Isiaca* (see p. 187) and above all the Egyptian obelisks in Rome.

2.3.2. Arabic Sources and Alchemical Hieroglyphs

Kircher was a specialist in classical and oriental languages (such as Coptic, Hebrew, Syrian and Arabic). Thanks to this knowledge he was the first European scholar to turn to Islamic culture looking for any possible evidence of hieroglyphic culture. In fact he quotes a number of Arabic authors such as Gelaladdin, Aben Regal, Ibn Wahshiya⁸³ and “Barachias Abenephius”.⁸⁴

Another point of proximity between Kircher and Islamic scholars is alchemy. Athanasius Kircher dedicates an entire chapter of this *Oedipus Aegyptiacus* to what he calls “hieroglyphic alchemy” (1653: II, 388), where he discusses, for example, “hieroglyphic symbols that express alchemical secrets” (1653: II, 394), “alchemical allegories” (referring to the “Labours of Hercules”..., 1653: II, 395) and the parallels between Egyptian and Greek myths (1653: II, 396). Although Kircher does not reveal it, I maintain that these passages are clearly inspired by Maier’s *Arcana Arcanissima*.⁸⁵ Again omitting the source, Kircher also explores John Dee’s *Monas Hieroglyphica*,⁸⁶ which he refers to as the “Hermetic Cross”.⁸⁷ In fact, he develops Dee’s ideas,⁸⁸ associating this sign with the Egyptian *ankh* hieroglyph (also known as *crux ansata*) and demonstrating that the zodiac signs are all derived from this cross.⁸⁹ [Plate 164: A]

While Kircher attacks the *Turba Philosophorum*,⁹⁰ he admits that “the Egyptian alchemical knowledge was transmitted by hieroglyphs” and, not surprisingly, examines the

⁸³ See p. 370.

⁸⁴ Kircher quotes this otherwise unknown author quite extensively. El-Daly (2005: 58) convincingly identifies him with Abu Al-Barakat Ibn Kepir.

⁸⁵ See p. 374.

⁸⁶ See p. 372.

⁸⁷ Kircher 1653: II, 399.

⁸⁸ See p. 372.

⁸⁹ Kircher 1653: II, 402.

⁹⁰ Kircher 1653: II, 418.

alchemical enigma behind Ibn Umayl's *Tabula Chimica* [Plate 164: B].⁹¹ Athanasius testimony is an important confirmation of the relationship between hieroglyphs and alchemical iconography.

2.3.3. Perception of Writing

The study of Arabic authors (such as Wahshiya) introduced a phonetic preoccupation in his hieroglyphic studies – which would become determinant later for the development of Egyptology. It was thanks to such sources that he studied Coptic in 1633 and published a grammar (*Prodromus Coptus sive Aegyptiacus*, 1636). In his *Lingua Aegyptiaca Restituta* (1643) he finally advocated, for the first time in the context of the hieroglyphic phenomenon, that Coptic was the language spoken by the Ancient Egyptians, and therefore the knowledge of this language was essential to decipher hieroglyphs. Not that he believed that hieroglyphs could represent Coptic, but precisely because Coptic was “a source of information about ancient Egyptian beliefs” (Stolzenberg 2004: 293).

Moreover, Kircher also discussed the Egyptian origin of the letters, suggesting that Coptic, derived from the “first Egyptian letters” (1653: II, 47-55), was the origin of the Greek alphabet.⁹² Although his hypothesis and explanation do not correspond to the historical facts, the idea that a figurative system could give rise to letters is correct – and with this theory he conceded that Egyptian hieroglyphic characters could have phonetic values, even if he considered that this phonetic function was vulgar and inferior (Stolzenberg 2004: 292, fn. 14).

2.3.4. The Notion of Hieroglyph

⁹¹ Kircher 1653: II: 400.

⁹² His views on the development of letters were discussed on p. 347.

From *Oedipus Aegyptiacus* it is clear that Athanasius had a clear idea that hieroglyphs were a code, and that the signifiers of this code were defined (i.e. the iconicity should be respected). However, what did Kircher understand as *the meaning* of a hieroglyph? The answer for this question relies on the *Neo-Platonic nucleus* and in the notion of the *Prisca Theologia* – that again reconciled his religious beliefs with the study of an otherwise pagan culture.

In the “Hieroglyphic Theatre” (1654: III), Kircher postulates six premises for “The Hermeneutic Art, or The Interpretative Suppositions of the Hieroglyphs” (1654: III, 4). Two of these premises synthesize his conception of hieroglyph:

1. The hieroglyphic doctrine of the Egyptians is nothing but the secrets about God and divine Ideas, Angels, Demons, (...) inscribed above all on stones.
2. Hieroglyphic symbols are instituted from examples of nature. They shape the meaning (*sensu*) of the hidden mysteries through Ideal concepts, and not letters, syllables, voices, periods.

In his *Prodromus Coptus...* a similar idea emerges, since hieroglyphs were to be understood as a form of writing:

Much more excellent, sublime, and nearer to the abstract ideas (*mentes*), by which the whole reasoning and conception of the highest things, or some remarkable mystery hiding in the bosom of nature or divinity, is presented to the wise man in a single view with an appropriate, skillful connection of symbols. Therefore in writings of this kind, the attributes of speech . . . having been abandoned, it is necessary to be led from the external visible image to the hidden forms of things, and from the sensible object to the idea of the intelligible, in the manner of that common [saying] of the Kabbalists, “[when] I found a pomegranate, I ate the seeds and threw away the rind”. Since, nevertheless, the hieroglyphic mental concept of the things depicted can hardly be grasped without conceiving of things indicated by names, words, and other parts of speech, on account of the dependence of the formal concept on the object or sensible things, a certain [kind of] reading was established appointing names and words for things signified through symbols... (Kircher 1636: 260-1. Apud Stolzenberg 2004: 306)

This demonstrates his affiliation to the Neo-Platonic notion that hieroglyphs are ideographic (or mythographic) and essentially non-linear. However, he also acknowledges that these signs, aligned, could produce texts. The problem is that, since Athanasius’ hieroglyphs did not correspond to discursive elements, how they could be interpreted if the key was lost/forgotten? Kircher’s solution for this is *emblematical*.

2.3.5. An Emblematic Method?

To understand Kircher's "method", it is a condition to comprehend his education. He was 12 or 13 years old when he was admitted to the Jesuit College in Fulda, Germany, in 1614. In 1618 he became a novice of the Society of Jesus. As already discussed,⁹³ Jesuit education at this time was much influenced by emblems and hieroglyphs, from Greek and Latin classes using Horapollon's *Hieroglyphica* as a schoolbook, to emblematic books on the history of the order or complex theological concepts. Pupils used to compose emblems as a rhetoric exercise in their free time, and this certainly had a great impact on their mentalities. With Kircher it would not be different: he not only composed a conventional emblem in his work [Plate 165], but employs an "emblematic method" to discuss his notion of hieroglyph.

2.3.6. The Ideal Readings

If hieroglyphs were non-discursive and their meanings were not remembered anymore, the solution would necessarily be *restoring* (a word he uses) them. Therefore,

According to Kircher, the "Egyptian Oedipus" needed to be familiar with three things in order to decipher the hieroglyphs: the doctrine of the ancient Egyptians, the inscriptions on the surviving obelisks, and the method of combining one with the other. (Stolzenberg 2004: 288)

In other words, the *doctrines* were supposed to *fill the gap* of the hieroglyphs. Once again in the process of transmission of hieroglyphs one is facing the combination between image (non-linear) and the discursive doctrine (linear). In order to make the association, Kircher would resort to the method that he was most familiar with: emblematics. As Stolzenberg correctly observes,

Although his [Kircher's] understanding of hieroglyphic writing was rooted in a complex of notions about symbolism that had wide currency in early modern culture, out of these notions he developed

⁹³ See p. 309.

a novel, practical hermeneutic for producing his unique translations. The essential element of this hermeneutic—the basis for combining the inscriptions with the doctrines—was the understanding that visual symbols must be supplemented with texts, a concept that he took from the art of *imprese* or devices within the European emblem tradition. Matching texts that supposedly preserved ancient Egyptian wisdom with hieroglyphic inscriptions, and accepting the Platonist conception of the hieroglyphs as signs of ideal reality, Kircher produced what he called “ideal readings” (*lectiones ideales*), which rendered the non-discursive Egyptian symbols in the form of ordinary language. (Stolzenberg 2004: 289)

For Kircher, the status of hieroglyphs, having lost their precious meanings, was comparable to that of an *impresa* or *phrenoschemata*.⁹⁴ Arguing for the non-discursive nature of hieroglyphs, he presented the *imprese* of the Parthenian Congregation of the Collegio Romano and affirmed:

Behold how much meaning and contemplation hide under only one device (*phrenoschema*). It happens in exactly the same way, I say, in the hieroglyphic doctrine, in which the subject and argument of an entire philosophical observation is present through abstract concepts in but a single symbol (Kircher 1654: III, 560–1. Apud Stolzenberg 2004: 301)

For him, in the same way an *impresa* cannot be understood without their *sententiae*, neither could a hieroglyph.⁹⁵ So, the secret of hieroglyphs, as revealed by the Egyptian Oedipus, relied on the combination between the Egyptian *pictura* and its correct meaning dispersed in different ancient cultures and authorities,⁹⁶ creating the “ideal reading”, which which was already in use by Kircher, as in his *Obeliscus Pamphilius* (1650) [Plate 166] – an excellent demonstration of his method [Plates 167 and 168]. My impression is that this ideal reading, was a step of the process of discovering and retaining mentally the not-obvious meaning of a hieroglyph inscription, which should then be *transferred* and understood through the hieroglyphs alone (a phenomenon that occur elsewhere in the hieroglyphic tradition, in text-image contexts).

Kircher’s “combinatory method” not only produced sense as it served as a framework to authenticate and legitimize his translations.⁹⁷ If his interpretation of a given inscription matched a

⁹⁴ Another term for *impresa* which became popular in the 17th century. It could be translated as “the drawing of a mental image”.

⁹⁵ Kircher 1654: III, 552-3.

⁹⁶ Therefore making clear the function of tomes I and II of *Oedipus Aegyptiacus* in supplying the basic (mythological and scientific) information so as to interpret hieroglyphic inscriptions.

⁹⁷ In fact, a strong preoccupation in his work. See Stolzenberg 2004: 309.

piece of ancient authority, then its correctness was proven. The Jesuit would call this kind of *epiquirema* a “moral demonstration”, whose

Certainty... is established by the unanimous reckoning and testimony of all doctors, and that is accepted up until today; and it includes all secular and ecclesiastical histories, as well as the memorials of ancient authors accepted in different places that have been left to posterity. These [histories and memorials], since they have been accepted by everyone, from so many centuries ago until these times, are worthy of necessary trust (*fides*). Without this [trust] the acts of all human affairs, as I have said, would dissolve, nothing certain could be written or said, and all would be murky and obscured by doubt. I do not speak here of authors and histories of suspect credibility (*fides*), but about those with an excellent reputation that have been granted authority for many centuries Kircher 1650: b2v. Apud Stolzenberg 2004: 311).

2.3.7. A Synthesis of Kircher's Hieroglyphs as a Case of Convergence

In the light of all that has been argued in the second part of the present dissertation, one could resume Kircher's relation with the hieroglyph phenomenon as a case of convergence. Regarding his approximation with different hieroglyphic theoretical trends, he bases his work on signifiers taken from authentic Egyptian primary sources, which connects him to the *Antiquarian nucleus*; the essence of hieroglyph (and its legitimization) is derived from the *Neo-Platonic nucleus*; in his study he integrates different notions of hieroglyph, with a strong influence from the *Alchemical nucleus*; the perception of hieroglyph as a text-image entity is very much influenced by the emblematic tradition (and consequently by the *Aristotelian nucleus*). It goes without saying that Athanasius' conception involves *multiplex* ties of influence with the hieroglyphic phenomenon.

In terms of multi-level exchanges, his hieroglyphic system engages other systems (alchemy, architecture, medicine, etc.), which produce the meaning for some hieroglyphs (sign-level). He perceives different codes within Egyptian writing, and his perception of writing influences a general perception of writing-systems (complex).

Finally, Kircher produces a *transcending script*: made of hieroglyphs (with their individual exegesis) being articulated to produce an *ideal reading* which can be apprehended from them. Also, the structure of an obelisk has a meaning on its own, which is to be read simultaneously with the rest of the inscription – as a complexogram. Moreover, it must be stressed that Kircher not

only interprets hieroglyphs: he also creates them (as the obelisk dedicated to Emperor Rudolph II).⁹⁸

As this intricate fabric of sources demonstrates, Athanasius Kircher is the apex of the convergence. His involvement with hieroglyphs is so deep that it influenced even the visual composition of his works – which can be regarded as a sign of his attitude towards the status of images as a vehicle for philosophic discourse. The extension of his influence either on the hieroglyphic phenomenon or on the rise of Egyptology is fundamental, but is outside the aim of the present study.

⁹⁸ Kircher 1652: preliminary matter.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of the present thesis was to investigate what hieroglyphs are and why and how they were transmitted in Early Modern culture. Each chapter particularizes different aspects of this extensive phenomenon, in such a way that it became possible to create a map outlining this intricate process of diffusion [Infographic 3]. It is based on this map that I would state that, *mutatis mutandis*, in the same way that the Roman alphabet is the result of a series of cultural borrowings that had their origin in Egypt, Renaissance Hieroglyphs are also the result of an intricate cultural transmission and therefore should not be regarded as a mere mistake of Renaissance scholars.

This is the gist of my research, in the sense that it is a response to my original research question, but it also implies a series of consequences which I would like to briefly present in this conclusion.

1. A Grammatological Theory for the Transmission of Hieroglyphs in the Renaissance

The first point I would like to address is that the process of transmission of hieroglyphs examined here is by no means arbitrary. Instead, it is a highly motivated cultural phenomenon with major implications for the *use of images for writing* in the Early Modern Era. The literature available on the subject often discusses the *effect* of the hieroglyphic phenomenon, rarely investigating its *causes*. Acknowledging the *motivation forces* that conducted the diffusion, for

example, not only clarifies the fertile mentality behind the appropriation of hieroglyphs, but can explain how their reception was different according to different Renaissance cultures.¹

If the process of transmission, therefore, has a logical spine that can explain its development, the role of hieroglyphs should not be downplayed. Labelling something “hieroglyph” in the Renaissance was more than a mere caprice: it had concrete semantic and cultural implications, situating its object in a whole tradition. The later emergence of the word “hieroglyph” as a metaphor is just a reflection of the main phenomenon² and will become particularly relevant after the decline of hieroglyphic interest.³

At the same time, by arguing that the issue studied here should be regarded as a process of cultural diffusion, I do not suggest that a Renaissance scholar could read Egyptian hieroglyphs. Consequently, a legitimate question would be: can they then be considered *hieroglyphs*? My answer is yes. For a number of reasons:

- The transmitted hieroglyphs were culturally accepted as such, and capable of attaining meaning (legitimizing their perception as a form of writing);
- In the case of writing-systems, being the result of a process of transmission does not imply that the capacity of reading the original source must be preserved. In other words, although our alphabet can be traced back to the Egyptian writing-system, those who are “literate within the conventions of alphabetized writing” do not read Egyptian hieroglyphs (unless trained to do so);
- Even if the Egyptian code was not directly transposed into the Renaissance in full, the fundamental ideas about hieroglyph (and many of its grammatological functions) were actually transmitted and formed new text-image codes.

¹ A good point of comparison can be drawn between the prevalence of *jeroglificos* in Catholic domains and the flourishing of *alchemical hieroglyphs* in Protestant countries.

² Another analogy can be established with the adjective “emblematic” that at some point become disassociated from the emblem genre.

³ This can be observed in the adoption of the concept of hieroglyph in German Romanticism (Dieckmann 1955) or in the American Renaissance (Irwin 1980).

I cannot ignore the poetical serendipity that, in the Renaissance, brought together the alphabet writing (derived from a process of diffusion of the Egyptian principle of phonography) and writing through images (derived from a process of diffusion of the Egyptian principles of mythography and ideography, etc.). It is, of course, a coincidence – but a highly significant one.

1.1. What Was Actually Transmitted?

As the map shows, a number of grammatological features were transmitted from its original Egyptian context to the Renaissance. By observing this map (which, it is important to say, could not cover all the details of the process of diffusion), one can reach the conclusion that many ideas, some symbols and most of its grammatological functions (mythography, ideography, paronomasia, synergraphy etc.) found their way into the European Early Modern Period. Grammatologically speaking, the most significant difference, however, is that whereas in Egypt all these cultural features could be found concentrated in one single code or system, in the Renaissance they were spread in different codes within a complex cultural level. In this regard, the adoption of the “multilevel” framework in this dissertation was a theoretical choice to facilitate the study (and visualization) of the process of transmission/cross-influence of hieroglyphs in the Renaissance. This option was particularly useful, for example, to explore the relationship between hieroglyphs, emblems and other cultural entities – where it offers a more “organic” perspective (for lack of a better expression) than the use of inflexible *categories*, which often forces certain phenomena to fit conceptions that, in their turn, are culturally constructed.⁴ Also, a collateral effect of such a perspective is that many ideas and uses of hieroglyphs were collected and are displayed in a way that can be of help whenever it might be necessary to contextualize a particular case of a hieroglyph not included here.

⁴ One outcome of such an attitude can be found in the assumption that “hieroglyphs were more important [than emblems] as a mode of symbolic thought” (Daly 1998: 27).

2. Are Renaissance Hieroglyphs a Form of Writing?

Granting that Renaissance hieroglyphs are the result of a process of transmission from Egyptian script, another question emerges: does it mean that they are a *form of writing*? I would not attempt answering this before taking two points into consideration – the understanding of *writing* at issue and the analogy between the development of the Ancient and Modern hieroglyphs.

2.1. The Understanding of Writing

If one assumes that a *script* is merely a code to register verbal communication (something I have been referring to as *linear writing*), then Renaissance hieroglyphs should not be regarded as a *script*. However, this poses a problem: the perception of writing assumed above is a cultural construction – which is dramatically different from that of the Renaissance. As can be observed in the second part of this dissertation, very often Modern hieroglyphs are referred to as a form of writing, writing through images, writing before the use of letters, a vehicle for philosophical thought, etc. At the same time, since different conceptions of hieroglyphs are at play, a more anthropological answer to the question would rely on the self-perception of each case (in other words, it depends on a specific social convention).

An alternative to the problem, therefore, is to observe the phenomenon from a richer notion of writing – such as the one that I have been embracing throughout this dissertation. The fundamental premise of this perspective is that the use of images to write myths (mythography) gave birth to other grammatological functions (ideography, phonography...), thanks to its own expressive needs. In this conception, both non-linear and linear codes can register thoughts – and be combined in a system that articulates the qualities from both domains for the sake of a particular intellectual experience.

Moreover, the evidence from this dissertation indicates that the very notion that writing is simply a *code* should be challenged. Writing, I would suggest, exists at many cultural levels at any given time:

- **Traits:** written signs, ideas of what writing is, idiosyncratic signs and marks; grammatological functions;
- **Codes:** such as the alphabets, Chinese script, the Egyptian linear script, traffic signs, iconologies;
- **Systems:** the use of more than one code, such as Japanese writing, the Egyptian hieroglyphic system (when non-linear and linear are articulated together); a number of text-image genres; and
- **Complexes:** which involve all the sorts of systems involved with writing – from the social relations intermediated by script and processes of learning writing to rituals and literature (in its broadest sense) and so on.

From this perspective, which I would like to investigate further in the future, Renaissance hieroglyphs can be understood as different kinds of script – and that the same logic applies to iconological codes (such as Cesare Ripa, etc.) with the aim of writing through images, or emblems, which are expressed through images and text.

Although this notion of writing can initially be regarded as too wide, it creates a theoretical environment in which all these *phenomena*, and their relationship, can be discussed – without compromising any other analytical instrument. On the contrary, I think that it provides a critical apparatus that can serve to analyse iconographic compositions: in the context of my research I often found myself using grammatological terminology to interpret images (using concepts such as mythogram, ideogram, rebus, etc.) or the interaction between image and text (linear and non-linear domains, register, ekphrasis, synergraphy, etc.).

2.2. A Development Analogy

Another standpoint to examine the scriptural nature of Renaissance hieroglyphs is a comparative analysis between the macro-stages of development in Ancient and Early Modern hieroglyphs. Curiously, the possibility of performing such a comparison was not predicted at the beginning of the research and was only viable thanks to the methodology applied here.

In this comparative chart [Plate 169], it is possible to see that:

- Both traditions (Egyptian and Renaissance) began with the exploration of the different meanings that image could acquire. I call this stage the *conceptualization* of the grammatological functions;
- Next, these ideas form codes, in a process of *normalization*, so as to create systematic ways of registering ideas;
- The need to preserve conventions creates new parallel systems, with different cultural functions, in a process of expansion or *consolidation* (which can affect the whole cultural complex);
- At some point the *convergence* between different codes and systems becomes systematic. In Egypt, the linear and non-linear codes will converge in temple inscriptions (“transcending scripts”), in Europe, the conceptual harmonization and application of different systems (genres) will take place, forming complexograms;
- Finally, both traditions faded, I suggest, in a very similar way: the conceptual principle that kept this complex together was disrupted by external factors, and the complex was consequently *dissolved* into different phenomena, pushed to the fringes of high-culture. In Egypt, the Graeco-Roman period suffocated native culture, and Christianity banned the cult of the ancient gods, causing the notion of *maat* to erode in the face of logocentrism. As a result, the Egyptian hieroglyphic complex was little by little

“dissolved” into Coptic iconology, bestiaries, alchemical iconography, and so on... In Europe, the rise of a new mentality, the Enlightenment, defused the *prisca theologia*⁵ and eventually discovered the key to reading Ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs – thus “dissolving” the Early Modern hieroglyphic complex (which will preserve “hieroglyph” as a literary metaphor for something obscure, or as Rosicrucian or Masonic symbols, etc.).

These “cultural impulses” as I would like to call them are continuous and happen on different scales (from ideas to the cultural complex), and of course the time involved is different (the Ancient Egyptian phenomenon lasted around 3.5 thousand years, whereas the Early Modern, as studied here, no more than one tenth of this measure).

It is important to clarify that I would by no means suggest that this parallel shows that the two traditions are identical, or that this analogy was acknowledged by its protagonists. Instead, it shows that despite their differences, both phenomena enjoyed similar cultural constructions and impulses. Put differently, the Renaissance hieroglyphic phenomenon behaved, from a macrocosmic anthropological (and grammatological) perspective, as a writing-complex.

I am particularly interested in how the transmission of writing-systems from one culture to another (already literate) culture evolves at a complex level, often resulting in the invention of genres of visual poetry (or text-image interaction). Acknowledging differences, the phenomenon studied here has important similarities with the 20th-century Western reception of Chinese writing, which paved the way towards Concrete Poetry, or the 17th-century reception of Hebraic script – that influenced the creation of the “Labyrinth” genres in Spain,⁶ among others.



⁵ The notion of *prisca theologia* served the Renaissance hieroglyphic scholars in a strangely similar way to the Egyptians’ use of the notion of *maat*... Faith, I suppose, kept things together.

⁶ In the future I expect to address these phenomena, again from a grammatological perspective.

In sum, I regard the present dissertation as a *dynamic grammatology* in the sense that it explores writing beyond the limits of an inflexible system of linear expression. The title chosen for this thesis, *The Invention of Hieroglyphs*, is a reflection of such a premise, since the word “invention” stands for something created and/or discovered – precisely the balance of simultaneous forces that took place in the process of transmission of hieroglyphs from Egypt to the Early Modern period, creating new ideas and forms of writing.

✿ End ✿

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