

## WRITING SYSTEMS AND IDENTITY

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The Hittites used not one but two writing systems. On the one hand, thousands of clay tablets in cuneiform and, on the other, monumental inscriptions written in an apparently indigenous hieroglyphic script have survived. It is not at all clear where this script originated nor when, and moreover why the Hittites employed it. We easily note several disadvantages of the script: first, the shape of the hieroglyphic signs would be more difficult to write than cuneiform, especially on stone; second, the structure of the syllabary was even less suited to record the frequent consonant clusters of an Indo-European language; and last but not least, a return to a pictorial script seems to be a step backwards on the evolutionary ladder of writing systems.

## EVOLUTION OF SCRIPTS

Before examining the textual evidence, let us first consider this last point. In his *Study of Writing*, Gelb prominently stated that “there is no reverse development,” yet at the same time he conceded that writing evolved “along a path of trial and error” and further, that “a circular line of development” could induce even alphabetic writing – presumably the final stage of the development – to incline towards the practices of earlier stages (Gelb 1963, 200–201). As a result, the development of writing seems to be wholly unpredictable – although knowledge of the context in which changes occur may help to understand the reasons behind them. Japan, for instance, predominantly used a syllabic script by the end of the ninth century AD, but the increasing use of foreign loanwords after 1868 effectively meant a return to mixed logographic-phonetic writing (Schmitt 1980, 232–40). Even modern, literate societies do not use purely alphabetic characters but also employ pictograms, logograms and even mixed logographic-phonetic writing. For instance, many traffic signs use pictures rather than words, conveying sense even beyond linguistic boundaries as anyone can “read” such a sign in his own language. Numbers, similarly, function as logograms. Even an established alphabetic character may be used in many different ways, not only with its phonetic value. Thus the letter x can be used to abbreviate the syllable “ex” (Xtra), or stand for the numeral 10 (X), and in rebus-like spellings may stand for the word “cross” as in “crossing” (Xing), and further, the cross may even symbolise Christ as in “Christmas” (Xmas). As this illustrates, writing, to this very day, clearly evolves in many directions, not always the most obviously “forward,” and may also be used outside of standard writing practice.

## HITTITE SCRIBAL PRACTICE

What do we know about the Hittite scribal tradition? Evidence for writing practices is, unfortunately, scarce and circumstantial. We may presume that only scribes and professionals who needed to consult written

records, for instance doctors and priests, were literate. The large administrative centers of the empire, where archives of many thousand clay tablets have been uncovered, would have employed many scribes, who specialized in different areas such as redaction, copying or editing. The cuneiform texts differentiate two types of scribe, the <sup>LU</sup>DUB.SAR or “scribe” and the <sup>LU</sup>DUB.SAR.GIŠ or “wood scribe.”<sup>1</sup> The numerous clay tablets that name their scribe tell us that the <sup>LU</sup>DUB.SAR wrote cuneiform on clay. Whatever the <sup>LU</sup>DUB.SAR.GIŠ wrote on wood, however, has perished. The cuneiform records provide scant information on this specialized profession. A fragmentary list of personnel from the Great Temple at Hattusa names nineteen ordinary and thirty-three wood scribes (KBo 19.28 obv. 5); but as it is the only such document we cannot know whether the numerical relationship between the two types of scribe is in any way representative.

Archaeological finds illuminate the practice of writing on wood a little. The Uluburun shipwreck, a merchant vessel that sank ca. 1306 BC near Kaş in southern Turkey, has, among other things, conserved a hinged, two-leaf wooden tablet. The inner surface of each leaf was recessed to retain the wax writing surface; this is now lost. The wooden frame, meanwhile, preserves three hieroglyphic symbols that cannot as yet be connected to a known script (cf. Neumann 1995, 413). Similar writing tablets are depicted on several Neo-Hittite reliefs from the Neo-Hittite state of Maraş, portraying young men with styli and writing tablets. The most elaborate representation, MARAŞ 9 – datable to the second half of the eighth century BC – shows a woman holding a boy; his name is given in hieroglyphs as “Tarhupiya” (cf. Hawkins 2000, 274–75 and pl. 125). In his right hand he holds a stylus, in his left a bird on a leash. Underneath the bird we see a closed, hinged writing board. A description of such a folded writing tablet is also found in the *Iliad*, where it is the only reference to writing and, further, it is connected to Anatolia: King Proitos of Tiryns, wrongly believing Bellerophon to have coveted his wife, writes a fatal letter ordering its carrier to be killed,<sup>2</sup> and sends Bellerophon to deliver it to his father-in-law, King Iobates of Lycia.

As early as 1939, Güterbock suggested that the Hittite wood scribes wrote hieroglyphs.<sup>3</sup> Theoretically, either cuneiform or hieroglyphs could be impressed on wax, and indeed, this might well have been the case. Yet the respective scripts would require styli of different shapes. The excavations at Boghazköy have unearthed over thirty writing tools, mainly made out of bronze but also bone. As the writing tips of most of the bone styli are damaged,<sup>4</sup> let us consider the bronze ones only in the following. They show a pointed tip used for writing at one end, at the other a flattened, chisel-like head for erasing or leveling the writing surface (Boehmer 1972, nos. 1207–1238, 2046–2050). Of course, one might question whether these objects were indeed styli used to write on wax-covered wood tablets. It seems likely, not just because of the depictions on the Maraş reliefs but also because the tips of some of the bone styli show signs of burns. Warming the tip in a fire would have softened the wax where it had made contact with the stylus and made it easier to write on, while not softening the remaining surface unnecessarily and smudging parts already written.

When regarding the shape of these writing tools, one cannot fail to notice that not one of the bronze styli has the triangular head needed to impress wedges; nor is it plausible that outlines of wedges would have been drawn when an impression would be a far quicker and more effective way to write. Therefore, if these styli were not used to write cuneiform, could they have been used to write hieroglyphs? The answer is decidedly affirmative. While we cannot illustrate this with material evidence from the Hittite Empire period, there is some handwritten confirmation from the Iron Age to support this hypothesis. The traces left by the writing tool used to incise hieroglyphs on lead strips found at Assur suggest that the writing implement used had a pointed head, like the styli discovered at Boghazköy.<sup>5</sup>

If correct, the assumption that the <sup>LU</sup>DUB.SAR.GIŠ, or wood scribe, wrote hieroglyphic texts in the employment of the Hittite state or temples has implications for the extent of hieroglyphic writing in Hattusa and thus of its role in Hittite society. Other factors, too, point towards a wide-spread usage of the script. We know of several stone blocks from Boghazköy that preserve scribal names (see Dinçol and Dinçol 2002). One of these, for instance, was found in a wall close to one of the northern gates at Hattusa, and names two

scribes, Patasina (Bentesina) and Samituli.<sup>6</sup> Presumably, they were advertising their services as public scribes and may have had their stall underneath this sign. If the hieroglyphic script was confined to the surviving corpus of seals and royal inscriptions, Patasina and Samituli would hardly have found much business to advertize for. It is exceedingly more likely that a large part of the hieroglyphic text corpus is lost to us because it was written on perishable materials.<sup>7</sup> Only regular use of the script can explain two other facts: first, that the few surviving full-length empire inscriptions already show a fully functioning writing system, albeit not developed to the level encountered in the Iron Age; second, that during the empire period there is already evidence of cursive sign forms, notably on seals (see, e.g., SBo II, 130, 238). This move towards more abstract, simpler shapes is commonly interpreted as the result of frequent, handwritten usage.

#### ORIGINS OF THE SCRIPT

What do we know about where the script came from? Hittite records do not preserve any information on the invention and origin of the hieroglyphic script. Whether this is due to chance survival or lack of reflection on this matter, we cannot know. Material evidence provides little more than a rough time scale.

Hieroglyphic symbols were used in Anatolia as early as the eighteenth century BC, but as Mora has argued, these early hieroglyphs seem to record “complex messages” rather than “words” and cannot be connected either to a specific language or to the hieroglyphic script used during the Empire period (Mora 1991; 1994). Indeed, there is no evidence for the connection besides some analogous sign forms; yet it is conceivable that well-known symbols found their way into the new writing system because of whatever meaning they already held. As an organized writing system, hieroglyphs first appear on seals before making their appearance on stone inscriptions: New evidence in the form of the Ankara silver bowl may push the date for the latter as far back as ca. 1400 BC (Hawkins 2003, 145–46). Together these objects document how the medium of script from its early logographic phase slowly approached language: phonetic sign values were first introduced to write personal names, as at this stage logograms alone were no longer sufficient. Late Bronze Age inscriptions and also archaizing Iron Age ones seem to indicate that phonetic signs were used to record first the sound of words, and only secondarily the syntax, that is, case and verbal endings and sentence-introductory particle chains.

In light of the limited text corpus, many questions regarding the origin of the script must remain open until further discoveries hopefully provide new evidence. Nonetheless, to understand the rise and role of the script under the Hittite Empire, we should at least consider a few possible scenarios as to who invented the script, where and why. Güterbock’s answer, “the Luwians, in Luwian countries, for the Luwian language” (Güterbock 1956, 518), is attractive because the language of the surviving inscriptions is almost exclusively Luwian. Yet there is no evidence placing the script distinctly in a context of Luwian people or countries outside of possible Luwian influences in the Hittite capital itself. Is there a possibility that it may have been Hittite scribes who organized the hieroglyphic symbols into a codified writing system, and if so, why did they employ a second script?

To narrow down the potential places where the script might have been invented, let us consider the question of influences from other writing systems, since a creation in complete isolation is at this time hardly conceivable. Knowledge of at least one of the contemporary writing systems – whether it be Egyptian hieroglyphic, cuneiform or one of the Aegean scripts – can be expected. It is generally ruled out that Egypt served as a model because the geographic distance makes a connection less likely, especially if one seeks a Luwian region as place of origin. Nonetheless, Egypt may yet have offered a stimulus for the execution of hieroglyphic monuments in Hatti; we shall return to this later. As regards a possible Luwian homeland of the script, one may consider the Arzawa lands in western Anatolia, or Kizzuwatna (Cilicia) to the south. The former region was presumably ignorant of cuneiform but in close proximity to the Aegean scripts,

whereas the latter would certainly have been acquainted with cuneiform. Scholars have previously sought and found parallels with either Linear B or cuneiform.<sup>8</sup> In my opinion, the similarities with Linear B are few and insignificant.

Both on Crete and in Anatolia we find hieroglyphic symbols first appearing on seals, later as a codified writing system – yet at different periods in time. Although direction of writing and sign order of the two scripts differ, similar design of a number of signs has often been seen as proof of common roots. But while there are resemblances between some Linear and Hieroglyphic signs, the same can be claimed with regard to Sumerian! Further, both scripts show a similar range of and types of logograms – but their usage differs markedly. Linear B tends to separate logograms from the syllabic writing, whereas Hieroglyphic knows the following four stages: Logogram – logogram with phonetic complements (unknown in Linear B) – logogram acting as determinative plus full phonetic writing (Linear B does not use determinatives) – purely phonetic writing. Finally, like Linear B, Hieroglyphic shows a predominance of open syllable (CV) signs, only few signs have a different structure. The lack of closed syllable (CVC/VC) signs, however, may represent nothing other than an attempt to simplify the script and reduce the number of syllabic signs. Nor can we reconcile Linear B's full series of five vowels (a/e/i/o/u) with the tripartite hieroglyphic system (a/i/u). Since Hittite cuneiform already only partly differentiates i/e, this may be another attempt to simplify the script. Further, homophones, a feature that Hieroglyphic shares with cuneiform, are virtually non-existent in Linear B. The principles of phonetic writing differ also: Linear B omits all final consonants, Hieroglyphic only omits final dental stops. Linear B further omits preconsonantal *l, m, n, r, s*, whereas Hieroglyphic only omits preconsonantal *n*. Silent vowels of a cluster are indicated through repetition of the preceding vowel in Linear B, while Hieroglyphic, on the other hand, predominantly uses the *a*-series.

On balance, I would therefore hold it likely that the creators of Hieroglyphic were acquainted with cuneiform. One final argument may further strengthen the ties with the Hittite world. For a growing number of hieroglyphic signs, we can now prove that the syllabic value was derived acrophonically from the name of the object depicted, i.e. using the first syllable of the word, e.g., the sign “gazelle's head” has the value *sà* from the Hittite-Luwian *šaša-* “gazelle.” This indicates that the script was the product of an educated scribal class; the same principle, incidentally, was employed by scribes in Hattusa to derive new phonetic values, e.g., the Sumerogram GEŠTIN “wine” got the phonetic value *wi*, because of Hittite *wiyan(a)-* “wine.” On this basis, I would seek the origins of the script in an area acquainted with cuneiform, possibly Kizzuwatna if not Hattusa itself.

Can we decide at all whether the script was invented by Luwians purely for the Luwian language? While almost all surviving inscriptions use the script to write Luwian, exceptions, such as the Hurrian epigraphs of Yazılıkaya or Semitic names, for example, on seals from Emar, attest that other languages could be, and were, written with the script – to what extent, sadly, we shall never know. As mentioned, a good number of phonetic values were derived acrophonically. Unfortunately, we shall never prove that only Luwian words were used, because many symbols defy description, while even where we can identify what the sign shows, its Luwian name is often unknown to us. Nonetheless, could one also make a case for sign values being derived, using the same principle, from either Hittite or Hurrian words? This would build a reasonable case for an involvement of Hittite scribes in the creation of the script. Again, the same limitations apply, and additionally, there are only few instances where Hittite and Luwian would have realized the first syllable of a shared Proto-Anatolian word differently.<sup>9</sup> Also, there is no reason why a Proto-Anatolian root, which we so far know only from one of the two languages, may not have existed in the other. To sum up, while theoretically possible, there is no irrefutable example of an acrophonic value derived from a language other than Luwian. Whether or not the script was originally Luwian in the strictest sense, the ongoing debate on the Luwianization of Hattusa opens up yet further possibilities, namely that the Luwian homeland might even have lain in Hattusa itself. At any rate, the bigger question seems to be why the need or desire for a second script? Why did the Hittites write representative inscriptions in Hieroglyphic Luwian and not Cuneiform Hittite?

#### WHY DID THE HITTITES WRITE HIEROGLYPHS?

Two features seem to recommend the hieroglyphic script over and above cuneiform: first, it is used only within a Hittite context, and thus clearly represents an autochthonous script of some kind; second, it is highly visual. This may be why it is the only script used on Hittite monuments, and on seals one might view hieroglyphic symbols as a more personal and recognizable signature. As far as we can tell by the surviving material, hieroglyphs were used for monuments and documents aimed at a certain – one must assume largely illiterate – public. The advantages are obvious: a visual script can depict details, such as the shape of objects, that an abstract, “reading” script leaves out. Moreover, the pictorial character made it possible for people to recognize a number of important signs, thus achieving a basic understanding without actually learning to read and write. Testimony to such a recognition value are inscriptions set up marking boundaries and documenting territorial claims.<sup>10</sup>

Comparison of ancient and modern script inventions shows that writing arises chiefly out of an economic need and/or the desire to show off power. While the prior use of cuneiform under the Hittite Empire rules out an economic need for a new writing system, might demonstration of power have inspired the use of hieroglyphics? A not insubstantial part of the aesthetic appeal of a hieroglyphic script is that most people find it fascinating and impressive. Especially in light of the monumental character of the surviving inscriptions, it is hard not to view them as both an internal and an external display of power – a comparable case in point seems to be the invention of Persian cuneiform under Darius I. Within the Hittite Empire, such demonstrations could have been part of forging a collective identity that set them apart from their neighbors, while reminding the various vassal states of the power of their overlord. Without going into the question of Hittite identity (for which see Gilan in the present volume), suffice it to say that the “people of the land of Hatti,” as they called themselves, clearly did not define themselves as a homogenous ethnic or linguistic group but as the inhabitants of a specific geographic area. A collective identity of some sort would have helped greatly to make such a geopolitical unit stable enough to last as long as the Hittite Empire did.

Externally, such monuments would serve to impress visiting foreigners, such as diplomats, merchants and craftsmen, displaying imperial might and splendor as well as claiming territories. Being credited, rightly or wrongly, with inventing your own script certainly carried prestige; in the case of the Hittites, it placed them on par with other great script inventors, namely the Mesopotamian fathers of cuneiform and, of course, the Egyptians. While comparative newcomers amongst the great powers, the Hittites had become Egypt's main rival, as various military campaigns, culminating in the battle of Qadesh and the ensuing peace treaty between Hattusili III and Ramses II attest. It may even be conceivable that the Hittites went as far as to invite comparison with Egypt by erecting monuments in a script that seemed to proclaim equal standing. While the two hieroglyphic scripts are clearly different, there are also some similar aspects. Both scripts held a similar role as indigenous writing systems used at home, particularly for monumental inscriptions. For outside contacts, a common medium, the internationally understood cuneiform script was utilized. I am not aware of any contemporary reaction to the Hittite hieroglyphs, but a well-known story from the Greek historian Herodotus illustrates that this script was at least once in antiquity thought to be Egyptian. In his *Histories* (2.102–111), he reports having visited two relief figures of the Egyptian pharaoh Sesostrius on the road from Ephesus to Sardis. Authoritatively, he translates from “Egyptian”: ἐγὼ τήνδε τὴν χώραν ὤμοισι τοῖσι ἐμῶσι ἐκτησάμην, “I myself won this land with the might of my shoulders.” Excessive fame, one might think, for Tarkasnawa, the king of Mira, one of the Arzawa lands, whose inscriptions of the Karabel pass have been identified as the reliefs of Herodotus's story, and simply state the king's name, title and ancestors (cf. Hawkins 1998).

To conclude, many open questions remain and it is not necessarily likely that explicit data will be forthcoming even through new discoveries. But even on the basis of the available material, it may still be worth investigating further the connection between the Hittites and this peculiar script.

NOTES

- 1
- For the <sup>LU</sup>DUB.SAR.GIŠ see Pecchioli Daddi (1982, 166–68).
- 2
- Il. 6.169: γράψας ἐν πίνακι πτυκτῶ θυμοφθόρα πολλά, “graving in a folded tablet many signs and deadly” (trans. A. T. Murray).
- 3
- Güterbock (1939, 36). For a more recent and detailed study of Hittite writing on wood, see Marazzi (1994).
- 4
- Boehmer (1972, nos. 2046–50). Note that nos. 2044–45 may show a triangular head such as would be needed to write cuneiform. Cuneiform writing on a wax tablet is preserved once at Nimrud (cf. Mallowan 1954; Wiseman 1955), and may conceivably also have been practiced at Hattusa.
- 5
- See Payne, forthcoming.
- 6
- BOĞAZKÖY 8, published by Bittel (1957); for the reading see Poetto (1987).
- 7
- Dinçol and Dinçol (2002, 210) come to the same conclusion: “Diese Anzeigen oder Schilder legen nahe, daß es einen großen Bedarf für die öffentlichen Schreiber in der Hauptstadt gab und daß das unoffizielle Schrifttum der hethitischen Gesellschaft viel reicher war, als wir von dem materiellen Befund entnehmen können.”
- 8
- See, e.g., Hawkins (2003, 168), Neumann (1992, 26–27 and n. 5).
- 9
- Namely Proto-Anatolian \**ke*, \**kæ*, \**gwe*, \**gwæ*, \**ge/ge*, \**gae/gæ*.
- 10
- One might view the YALBURT, KÖYLÜTOLU YAYLA and EMİRGAZİ inscriptions of Tudhaliya IV in central Anatolia in this manner; also the LATMOS and KARABEL pass inscriptions in the west.

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