

From: Michael Tilgner <mtilgner@baan.nl>
To: 'Ancient Egyptian Language List' <AEgyptian-L@rosta.demon.co.uk>
Subject: AEL First hieroglyphic sentence (long)
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When I found the last hieroglyphic inscription of AD 394 (see my earlier posting) I wonder whether there is something like a first "meaningful text". Please, don't discuss the meaning of "meaningful text". For me it is: a complete sentence according to Egyptian grammar, which is not a (personal or other) name [names could be sometimes read as a sentence].

For solving this question, I looked - also - into this book: Jochem Kahl, "Das System der aegyptischen Hieroglyphenschrift in der 0. - 3. Dynastie", Wiesbaden, 1994.

It discusses the origin and development of the hieroglyphic writing system in a very systematic manner. Let's start with the appendices. The first appendix compiles all known hieroglyphic inscriptions of this period: Kahl lists 3859 inscriptions and their sources (publications). 3374 of them are "dated", meaning that they can be attributed to the reign of a king. The rest - 485 - belong somehow to this period, but it cannot be said to which king or dynasty. (In a second appendix a list of all signs of this period followed with a reference to the source(s), including the first one.)

Kahl analyzed in a lengthy introduction of 167 pp. the development of the graphical peculiarities of the early hieroglyphic writing system. In a chapter about word recognition he noted (p. 139) that "the context of a sentence plays only a minor role in the 0.-3. dynasty, as most inscriptions contain only words, but no sentences" and he added in a footnote that the earliest known sentence is from Peribsen, source no. 2902! Peribsen is a king of the 2nd dynasty, ruling about 2700 BC. It took over 600 years from the first hieroglyphic signs (ca. 3300 BC) to the first sentence!

This inscription is a reconstructed seal and published in: Peter Kaplony, "Die Inschriften der aegyptischen Fruehzeit", Vol. III, Wiesbaden, 1963 (Aegyptologische Abhandlungen, Vol. 8), fig. 368 on pl. 95. Kaplony's translation is in Vol. II, p. 1143.

The original sealings are reproduced in: Edouard Naville, "The cemeteries of Abydos, Part I 1909-1910 - The mixed cemetery and Umm el-Ga'ab", London, 1914 [33rd memoir of the Egypt Exploration Society], pl. XI.

The inscription consists of six columns read from left to right. The WinGlyph format follows:

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s\110*U29\110 x*t nb !  
n-b-t S12 !  
n-i*b ..\25 S12 !  
d-D-n-f\120 !  
N17-N17 n G39-f !  
M23*L2 t\60*t\60 (pr\60:ib\80)*s-n
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Please use the following WinGlyph options:

Left to right

Columns without lines

Height of lines (=columns): 0.75

Distance between lines (=columns): 0.20

I use some scaling factors to approximate the seal's appearance.

Transcription (by Kahl):

sDA.wti ix.t nb.t nb[w].t nbw.i d[m]D.n=f n sA=f nsw-bit pr ib=sn

Translation (by Kahl):

"Seal-bearer of all golden things; Nbwi ['the Golden One', a god], he united the Two Countries for his son, the King of Upper and Lower Egypt Peribsen."

Formerly dD.n=f was translated as "he gave over" as sDm.n=f of di "to give", but Kahl believes that this a defective writing of dmD "to unite". Later we often find rmT.w "people" also with a missing m, even for Old Kingdom texts.

What about Nbwi? Is it possible to read ni b[w] nbw "he, who belongs to the golden place"? It is known from other seals that Peribsen replaced Horus by Seth in his titulary, where a seth-animal instead of Horus is over his name in a serekh. Seth was the principal god of Ombos (Egyptian nbwt the gold-city). Can anybody comment on this?

Anyhow, this first sentence has two statements:

- (1) A god united the Two Countries.
- (2) Peribsen was King of Upper and Lower Egypt.

Both statements are supporting each other.

On the other hand, it is now common opinion of the egyptologists that Peribsen ruled only in the South due to archeological evidence. Wolfgang Helck, Untersuchungen zur Thinitenzeit, Wiesbaden, 1987, p. 200 commented "this [sentence] may be understood as an intention". Here we have a situation of indirect reasoning vs. a contemporary statement. As we know, not all statements on temple walls or stelae can be taken at face value. But, however, my doubts on the current state of discussion remain.

Anyhow again, this first sentence is about

- the relationship between god and man, or better: god and king and
 - the unification of the country,
- topics which will govern Egypt over thousands of years!

In the beginning there is a strong god acting for the king. And in the end a god should only speak ("words to speak by Mandulis: ---"), but he can't. These two sentences are the brackets of Egyptian civilization.

Hope you enjoy my rather long posting!

Michael Tilgner