Egyptian Scribes Writing Northwest Semitic

Joseph Cross

Introduction

- Definition of a text by M. A. K. Halliday:
  - "any instance of language, in any medium, that makes sense to someone who knows the language"
 - "language functioning in context"

Introduction
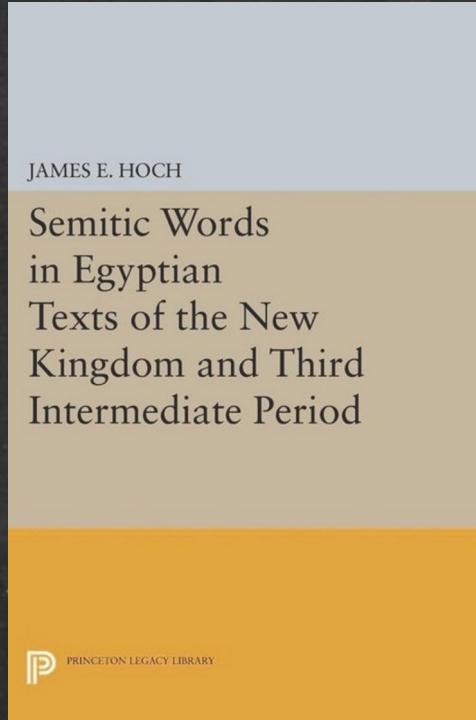
- Northwest Semitic texts written in Egyptian script means:

  – Text that is part of a written document that is readable by an Egyptian scribe (not only script, but inscriptional conventions)

  – And is also separable (to varying degrees) as a coherent Northwest Semitic linguistic utterance

Introduction

- What is not treated here?
  - Egyptian texts:
    - Execration Texts (Middle Kingdom)
    - Lists of Semitic names
  - Early "alphabetic" texts

Introduction

- ## What is not treated here?
  - – Semitic loanwords

JAMES E. HOCH

Semitic Words
in Egyptian
Texts of the New
Kingdom and Third
Intermediate Period

PRINCETON LEGACY LIBRARY

What I can offer today

- A state-of-the-art, critical walkthrough

- The result of sustained reflection and research on both the linguistic basis of the purported Northwest Semitic texts, as well as their full context in the Egyptian documents

What I cannot offer today

- Group writing

- Full discussion of the Northwest Semitic content

- In-depth consideration of sociolinguistics, bilingualism, and how Egyptians encountered NW Semitic speech

- Content of P. Amherst 63

The Corpus:
A Walkthrough

Distribution of texts: period

- Old Kingdom: 1 (0?)

- New Kingdom: 6 (5?)

- Late & Graeco-Roman Period: 2 (1?)

Distribution of texts: dialect

- Old Kingdom: 1 (?)
- New Kingdom: 6

← Canaanite

- Late & Graeco-Roman Period: 2 ← Aramaic

Distribution of texts: dialect

- Old Kingdom: 1 (?)
- New Kingdom: 6 ⟶ ← Group writing
- Late & Graeco-Roman Period: 2

Distribution of texts: period

- Old Kingdom:
  - Northwest Semitic incantations against serpents in the Pyramid Texts of Unas (5th Dynasty, 2375-2345 BCE)
  - Contested

Distribution of texts: period

- New Kingdom: texts from the milieu of scribal education and practice

Distribution of texts: period

- New Kingdom: texts from the milieu of scribal education and practice

  - Northwest Semiticisms, and a single sentence, in P. Anastasi I
  - Practice texts with lists of Northwest Semitic words (O. Cairo CG 25759, O. TT99)

Distribution of texts: period

- New Kingdom: texts from the milieu of magico-medical practice

Distribution of texts: period

- New Kingdom: texts from the milieu of magico-medical practice

  - Bilingual magical spells in the London Medical Papyrus (BM 10059, ca. 1550-1295)

Distribution of texts: period

- New Kingdom: texts from the milieu of magico-medical practice

  - A short sentence in an Egyptian spell, followed by a complete incantation, possibly originally a boasting song used during a lion hunt in the Harris Magical Papyrus (BM EA 10042, ca. 1100)

Distribution of texts: period

- Late and Graeco-Roman Period:

Distribution of texts: period
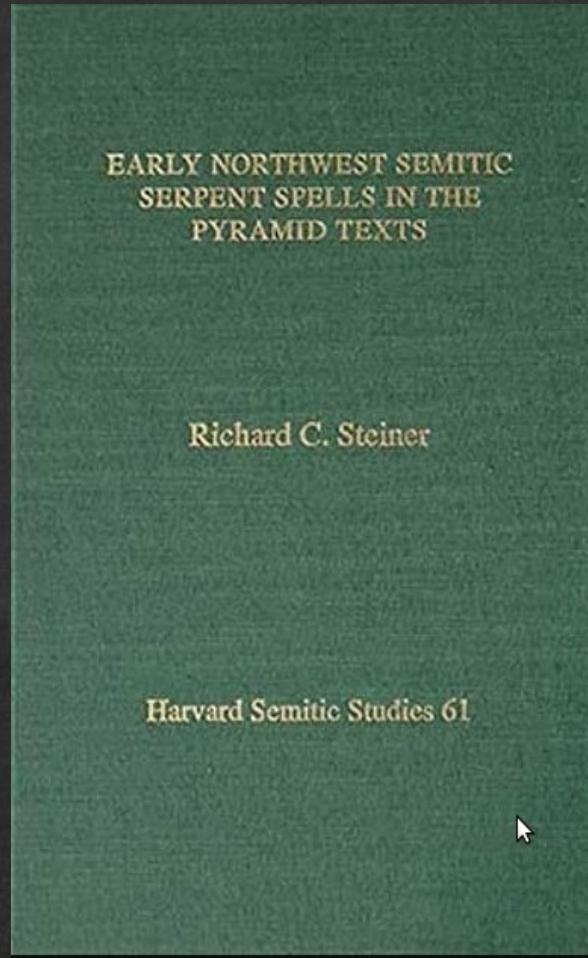
- Late and Graeco-Roman Period:

  - A graffito from the Wadi Hammamat recording an incantation against scorpions with Aramaic-sounding verbiage (6th or 5th century BCE)

  - Debated

Distribution of texts: period

- Late and Graeco-Roman Period:

- Papyrus Amherst 63

The pyramid of Unas, Saqqara (mid to late 24st century BCE)

Joseph Cross – Egyptian Scribes Writing Northwest Semitic

EARLY NORTHWEST SEMITIC
SERPENT SPELLS IN THE
PYRAMID TEXTS

Richard C. Steiner

Harvard Semitic Studies 61

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Joseph Cross – Egyptian Scribes Writing Northwest Semitic

Serpent spells in the Pyramid Texts

- The text in question stands out visually:
  - Uncommon hieroglyphic spellings
  - A lack of determinatives.

Serpent spells in the Pyramid Texts

- No convincing Egyptian translation has been offered

From Sethe's transcription of PT 235

ḏd-md.w kw ḏ33 jmḥw jmḥw
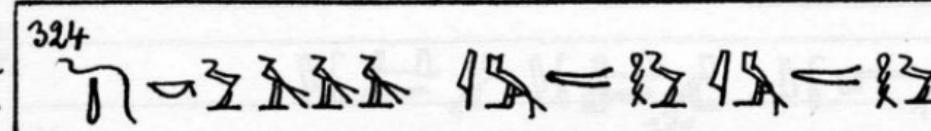
Spruch 235 (Schack Kap. 30).

From Sethe's transcription of PT 235

ḏd-md.w kw 333 jmḥw jmḥw

Steiner's reading:

*ḏd-md.w **qawwu Rīr-Rīr ʾimmu-ḫiwwi ʾimmu-ḫiwwi***
"Recitation: 'Utterance of Rir-Rir, Mother Snake, Mother-Snake...'"

Serpent spells in the Pyramid Texts

- Northwest Semitic text is found:
  - In the content of the spells
  - In brief, paratextual introductory formulas that identify the kind of spell and the speaker

Serpent spells in the Pyramid Texts

- While many of the spells are hybrid, the formulas are only in Northwest Semitic
- Two of them refer (arguably) to a "spell" and a "whispering, the uttering of his spell"

Serpent spells in the Pyramid Texts

- The appeal of Steiner's argument:
  - An actual reading
  - The NW Semitic text parallels surrounding Egyptian texts

Serpent spells in the Pyramid Texts

- The appeal of Steiner's argument:
  - Heightened contact with the S. Levant in this period of the Old Kingdom (following new chronology)
  - Stowaway snakes in ships from Byblos carrying lumber could be enchanted "in their own language"
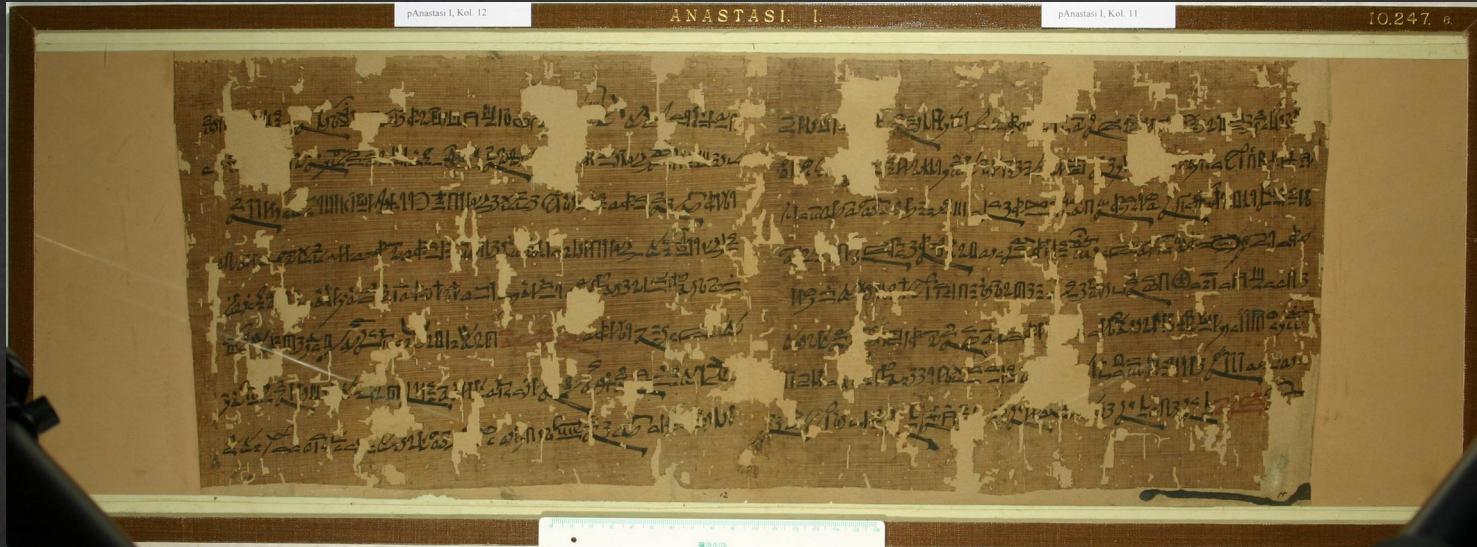
Serpent spells in the Pyramid Texts

- The appeal of Steiner's argument:
  - Many of the Pyramid Texts were redacted from non-royal/elite, texts for private practice (ultimately oral)

Serpent spells in the Pyramid Texts

- Criticisms of Steiner's argument:
  - Could be a matter of "eisegesis"
  - No serious engagement thus far with his philological arguments
  - Some readings seem to be a stretch

Papyrus Anastasi I
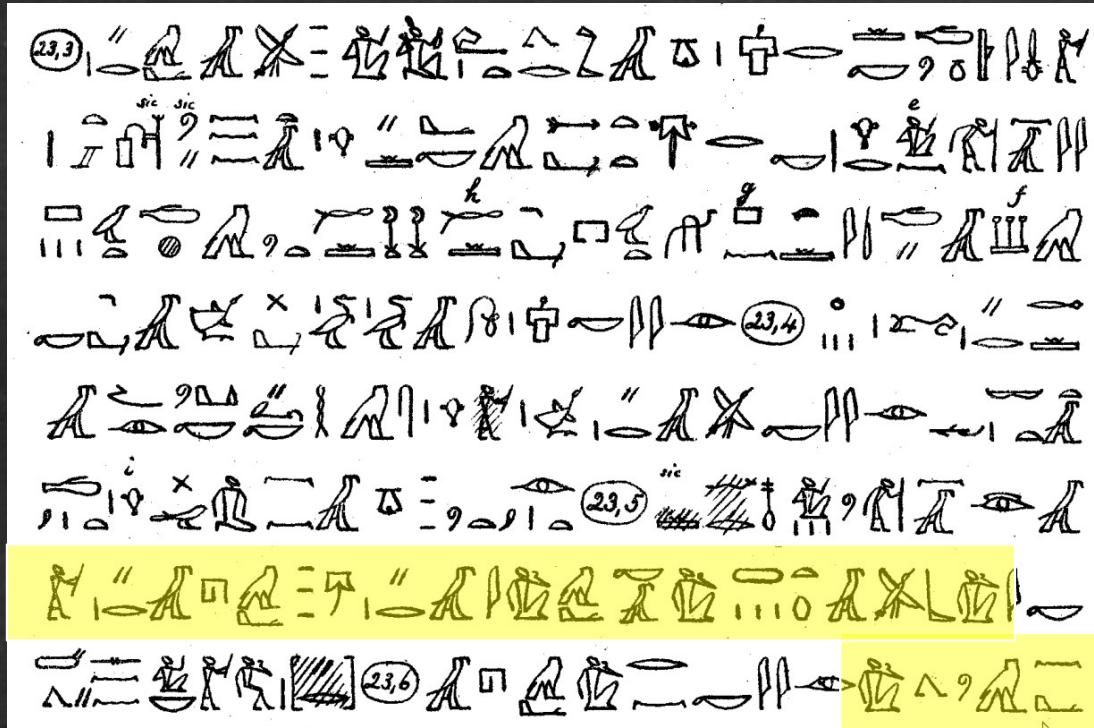
P. BM 10247, ca. 1295-1069
A literary letter to a young scribe from an experienced senior who peppers his speech with Northwest Semitic words

Papyrus Anastasi I

ʾbt km ʾyl mhyr nʿm
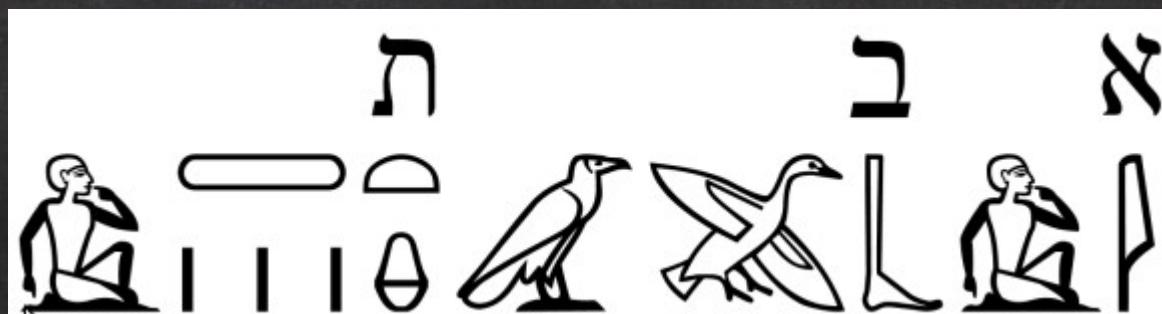
"You perish like a ram, dear *mahir*-soldier"

col. 23, l.5

Papyrus Anastasi I

ʾ*bt km ʾyl mhyr nˁm*

"You perish like a ram, dear *mahir*-soldier"

Cf. BH אֲבַדְתָּ
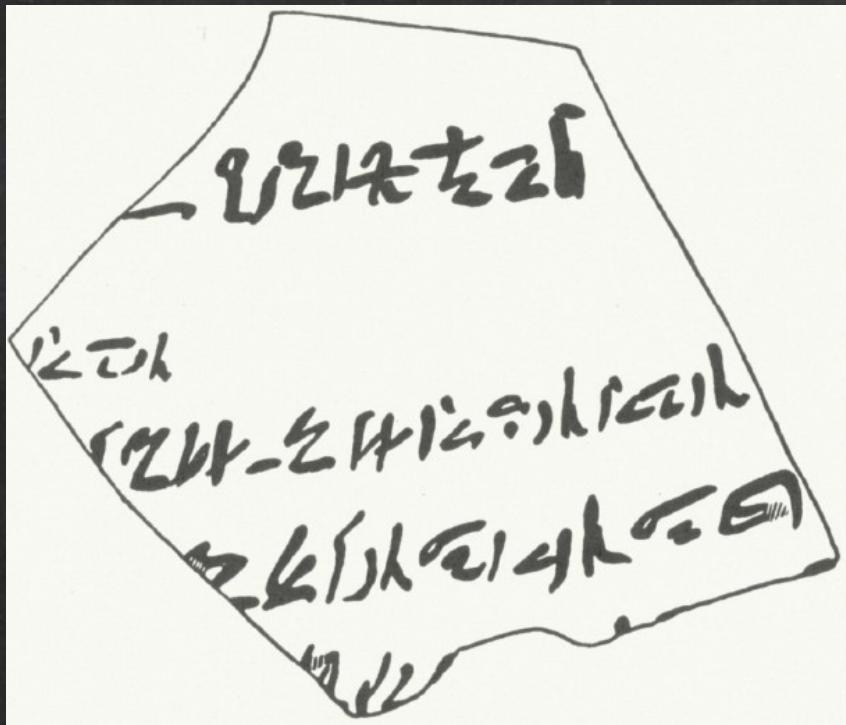
P. Anastasi I

- The only surviving example in a work of *belles lettres*

- The sentence may be uttered by the letter-writer (the sarcastic scribe), or by a NW Semitic speaker who is part of the scenario
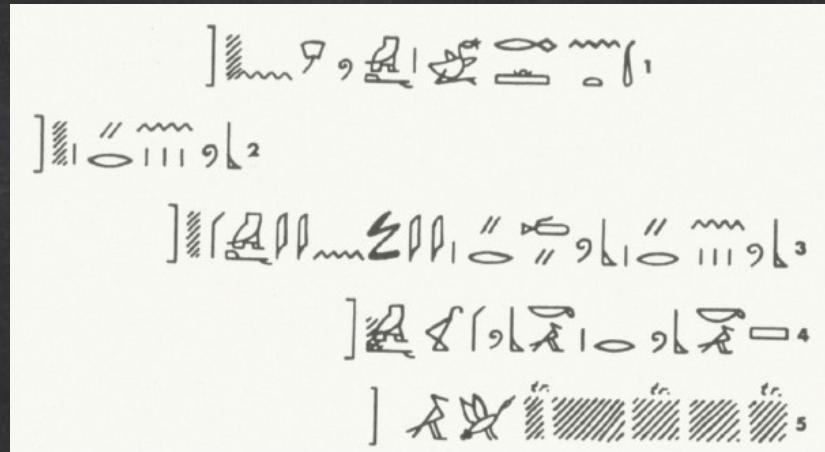
P. Anastasi I

- A clear example of a sentence that is composed anew by the author of the composition on P. Anastasi I

O. Cairo CG 25759
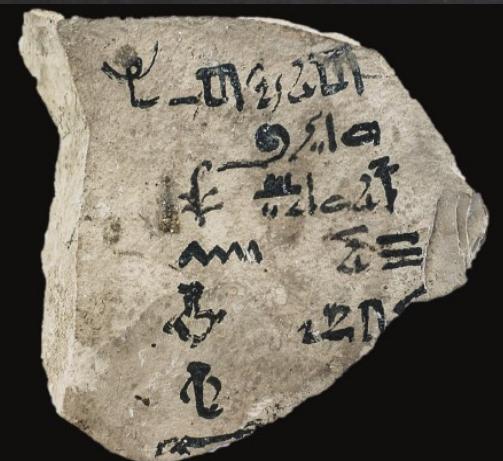
Černy, *Ostraca hiératiques*, CG 25501-25832 (1935), pl. XCVI
[Image from Shisa-Halevy, *Orientalia* (n.s.) 47.2 (1978)
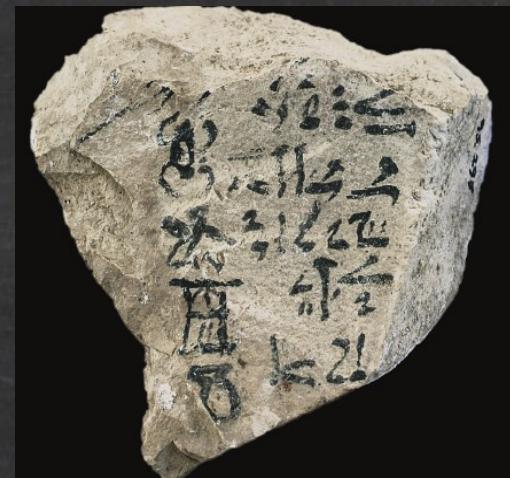
ca. 1100

O. TT99

Recto

Verso

Joseph Cross – Egyptian Scribes Writing Northwest Semitic

O. TT99

- Potentially "the earliest known alphabetically organized text in world history" (Ben Haring)

O. TT99

- If the words are Northwest Semitic, they are extremely rare

- Mnemonics for learning the alphabet?

- Jottings of a scribe practicing group writing, proceeding through words not randomly but alphabetically?
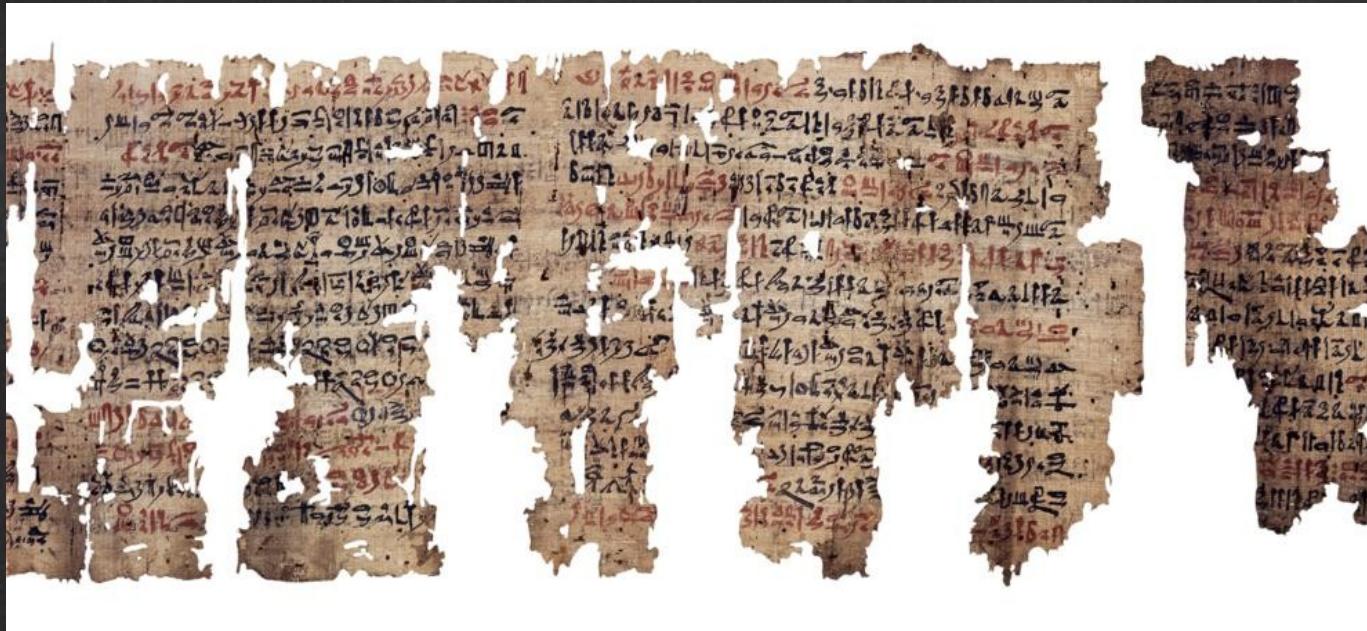
O. TT99

- The use of two systems of alphabetic ordering attested in the Levant suggests a degree of familiarity with Levantine scribal convention and schooling above and beyond a knowledge of Northwest Semitic.

O. TT99

- It is also possible that these origins of the "alphabet" originated in Egypt

The London Medical Papyrus

BM 10059, ca. 1550-1295

Six spells against skin disease contain Northwest Semitic content

The London Medical Papyrus

Richard Steiner, "Northwest Semitic Incantations in an Egyptian Medical Papyrus of the Fourteenth Century B. C. E.," *JNES* 51.3, 1992

The London Medical Papyrus

- Two short spells are entirely non-Egyptian, while others are mostly Egyptian with added Semitic texts

- NW Semitic parallels the Egyptian semantically

- Accurate, non-generic determinatives are used

The London Medical Papyrus

Sign	Description	Egyptian usage	Semitic application
	Seated man (A1)	Persons, proper names	*ḥmkt* "strangler demon" (§4)
	Man with hand to mouth (A2)	Cognition, eating, etc.; later in Demotic for abstract ideas	*ʾbd* "to perish" (§3); *km* "like" (§3); *nʿm* "dear" (§3)
	Walking legs (D54)	Movement	*yṣ(ʾ)* "to go forth" (§4)
	Horus falcon on standard (G7)	Gods	*rp(ʾ)* "healer" (§4)
	Erect cobra (I12)	Goddesses	Astarte(?) (§4)

Joseph Cross – Egyptian Scribes Writing Northwest Semitic

The London Medical Papyrus

- The Egyptians attributed some diseases to demons of Semitic origin, and thus the bilingual nature of these incantations resembles in purpose the serpent spells in the Pyramid Texts

The London Medical Papyrus

- *yṣ ḥmkt rpy*

- "Let the strangler, my healer, go out, O my Healer."

- The speaker requests that a benevolent protector banish a threatening "strangler" entity known from other Northwest Semitic texts

RS 1.001 ritual text (Ugarit)
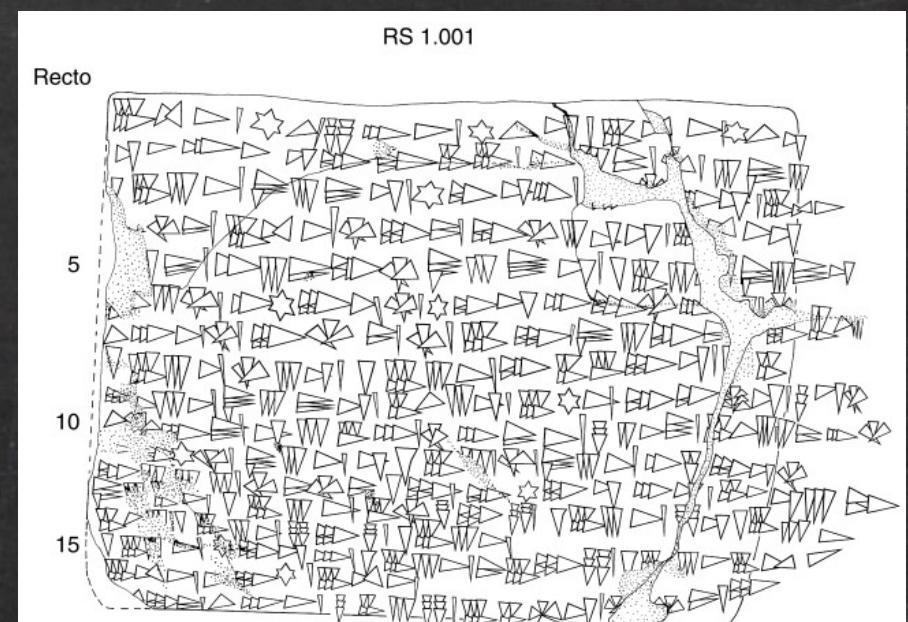
Arslan Tash amulets
(KAI 27)

Pardee, Dennis. "Les documents
d'Arslan Tash: authentiques ou
faux?" *Syria* 75 (1998): 15–54

The London Medical Papyrus

- *yṣ ḥmkt rpy*

- "Let the strangler, my healer, go out, O my Healer."

- The "healer" *rp(')* may refer to a divinized ancestor invoked for protection, a Northwest Semitic idea.

The London Medical Papyrus

Sign	Description	Egyptian usage	Semitic application
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Joseph Cross – Egyptian Scribes Writing Northwest Semitic
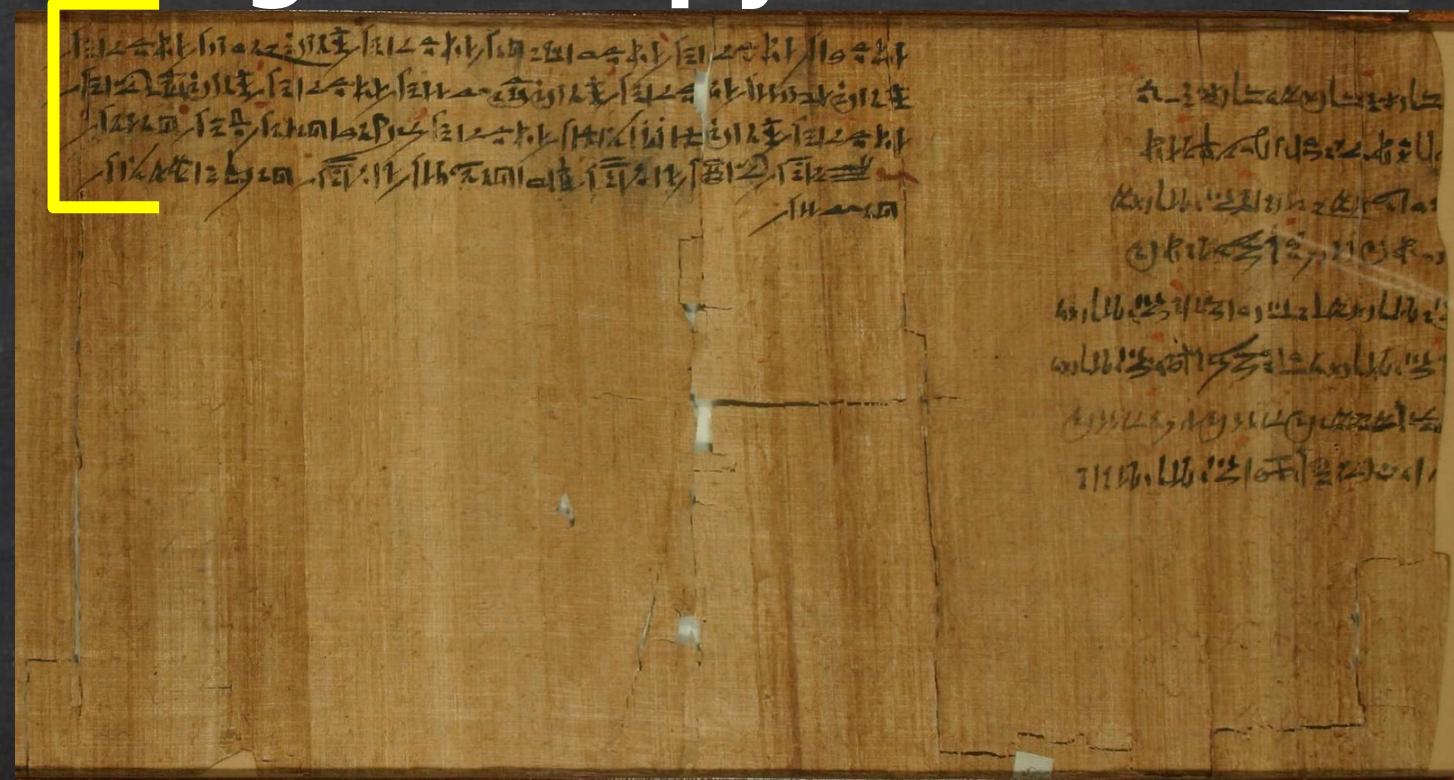
The London Medical Papyrus

- Interspersed within Egyptian-language texts (including spell headings/rubrics)

- Semitic text seems to parallel some Egyptian text

- How did the author of the text know the Semitic?
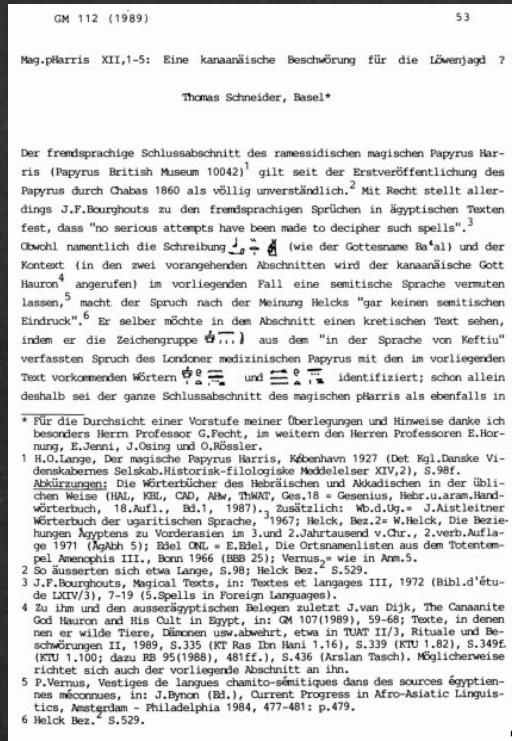
The Harris Magical Papyrus

BM EA 10042,
ca. 1100

Final column on the
verso is a complete
text in NW Semitic
without an Egyptian
paratext
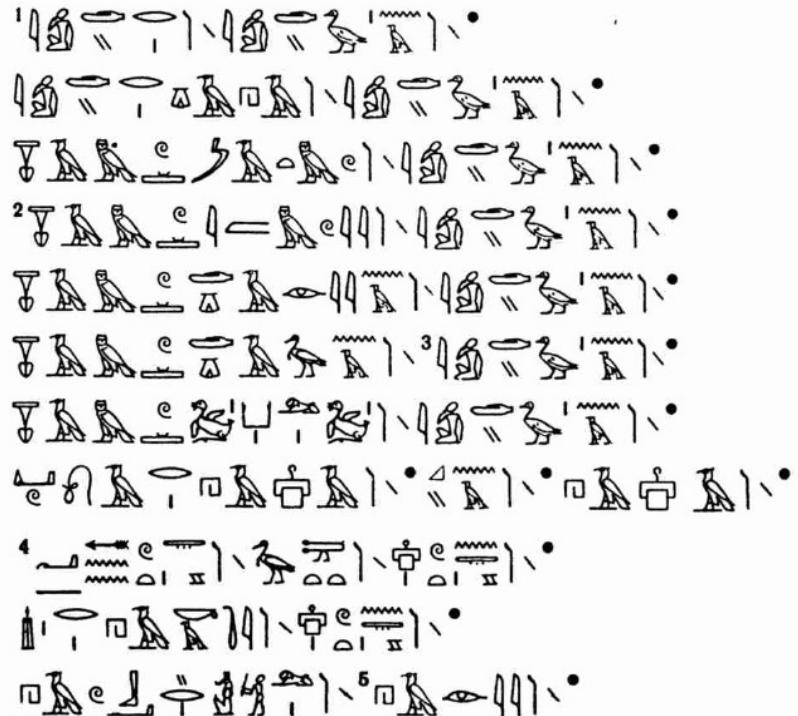
The Harris Magical Papyrus
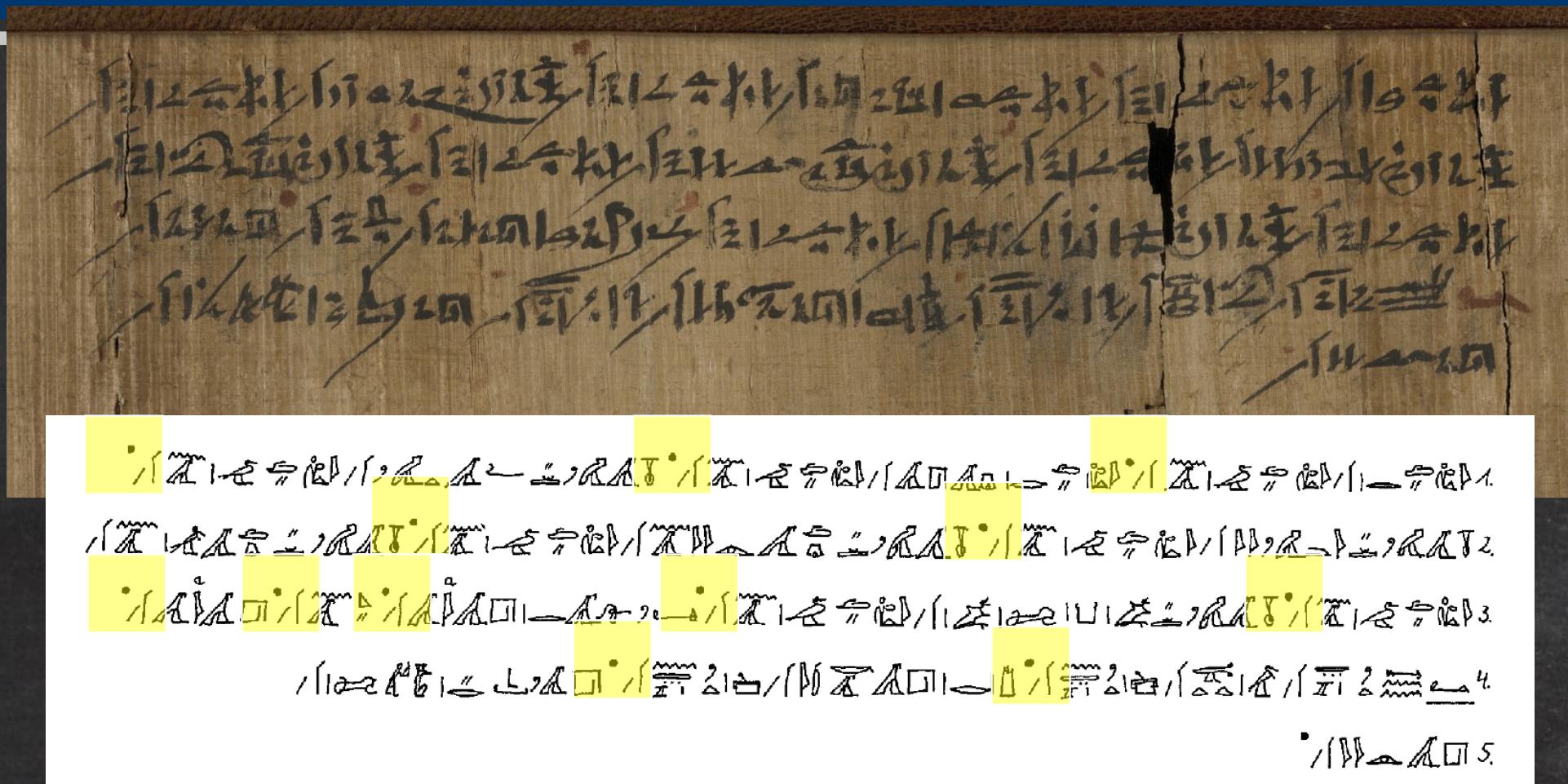
Thomas Schneider, "Mag. Harris XII,1-5: Eine kanaanäische Beschwörung für die Löwenjadt?" *GM* 112 (1989)

The Harris Magical Papyrus

ʾdr ʾdṯn (The mighty, I will crush (him))

ʾdr gh ʾdṯn (The mighty of its roar, I will crush (him))

sm mt ʾdṯn (Enabler of death: I will crush (him))

sm ʾmy ʾdṯn

sm dg ʾryn ʾdṯn   ʾryn = lion (cf. ארי)

sm dg bn ʾdṯn

sm skl ḏ ʾdṯn

mwr hʾ(!)   qyn hʾ(!) (Missile, ha!   Spear, ha!)

šnnt bʾtt šnt (I have sharpened when the red one came)
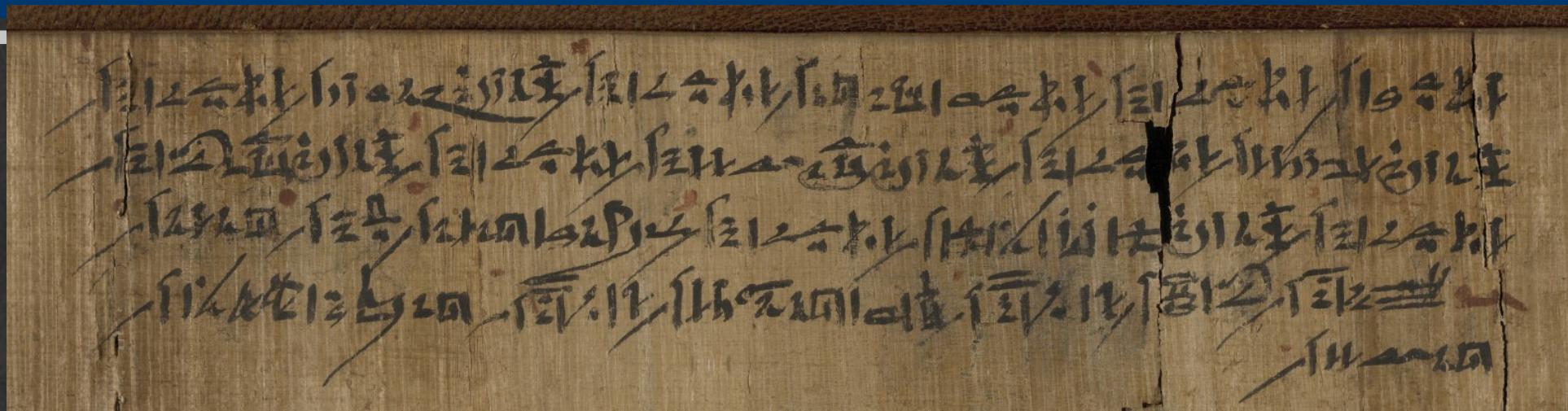
ʾl hkt šnt

hbʿl hʾry   hʾry = the lion (cf. הארי)

Final column, verso, of Harris Magical Papyrus. <u>Transcription</u>: Leitz, *HPBM* 7 (1999), pl. 23

Joseph Cross – Egyptian Scribes Writing Northwest Semitic

BM 134872

Unidentified literary text from Amarna

With verse points in red ink
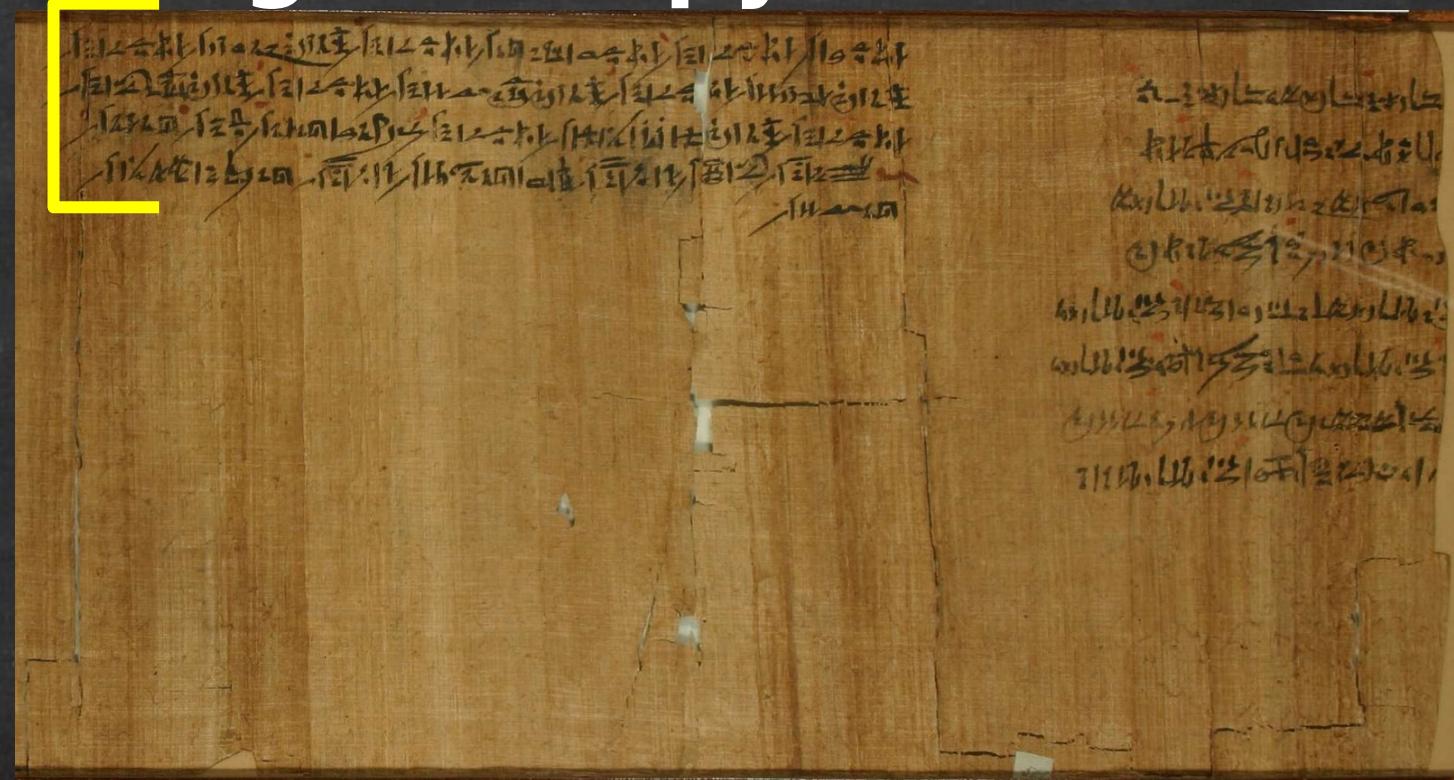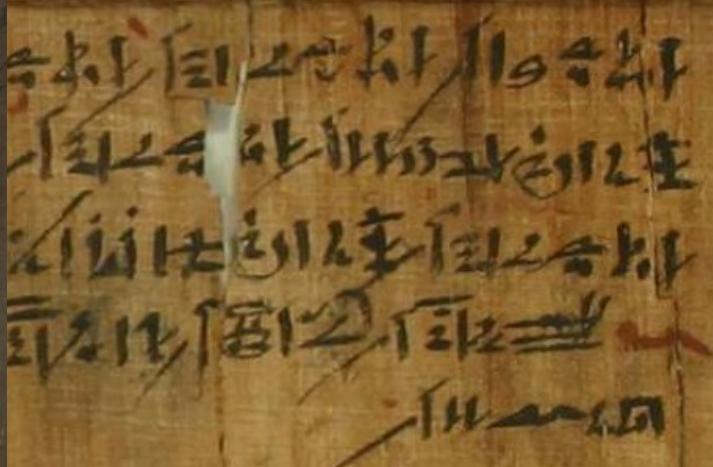
Final column, verso, of Harris Magical Papyrus. <u>Transcription</u>: Leitz, *HPBM* 7 (1999), pl. 23

Joseph Cross – Egyptian Scribes Writing Northwest Semitic

The Harris Magical Papyrus

BM EA 10042,
ca. 1100

Final column on the
verso is a complete
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without an Egyptian
paratext

Joseph Cross – Egyptian Scribes Writing Northwest Semitic
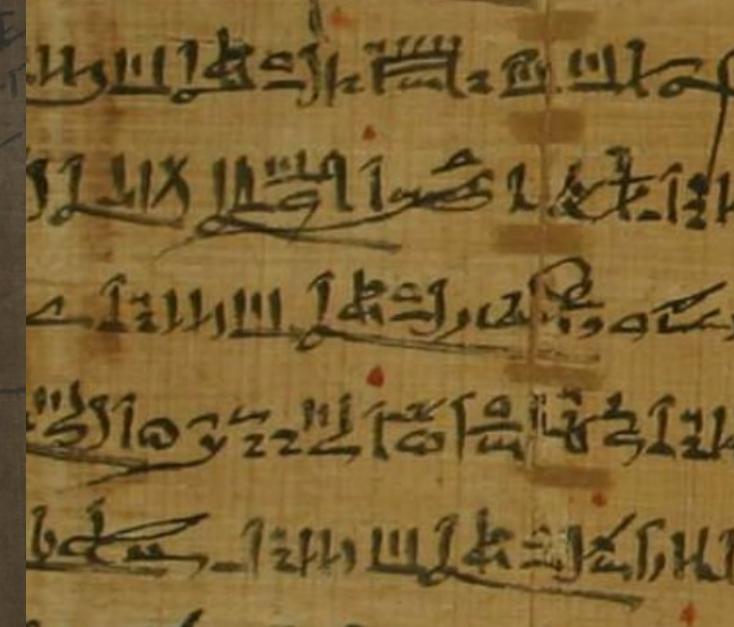
Northwest Semitic text, vso. col. 3   **Selection from rest of scroll**
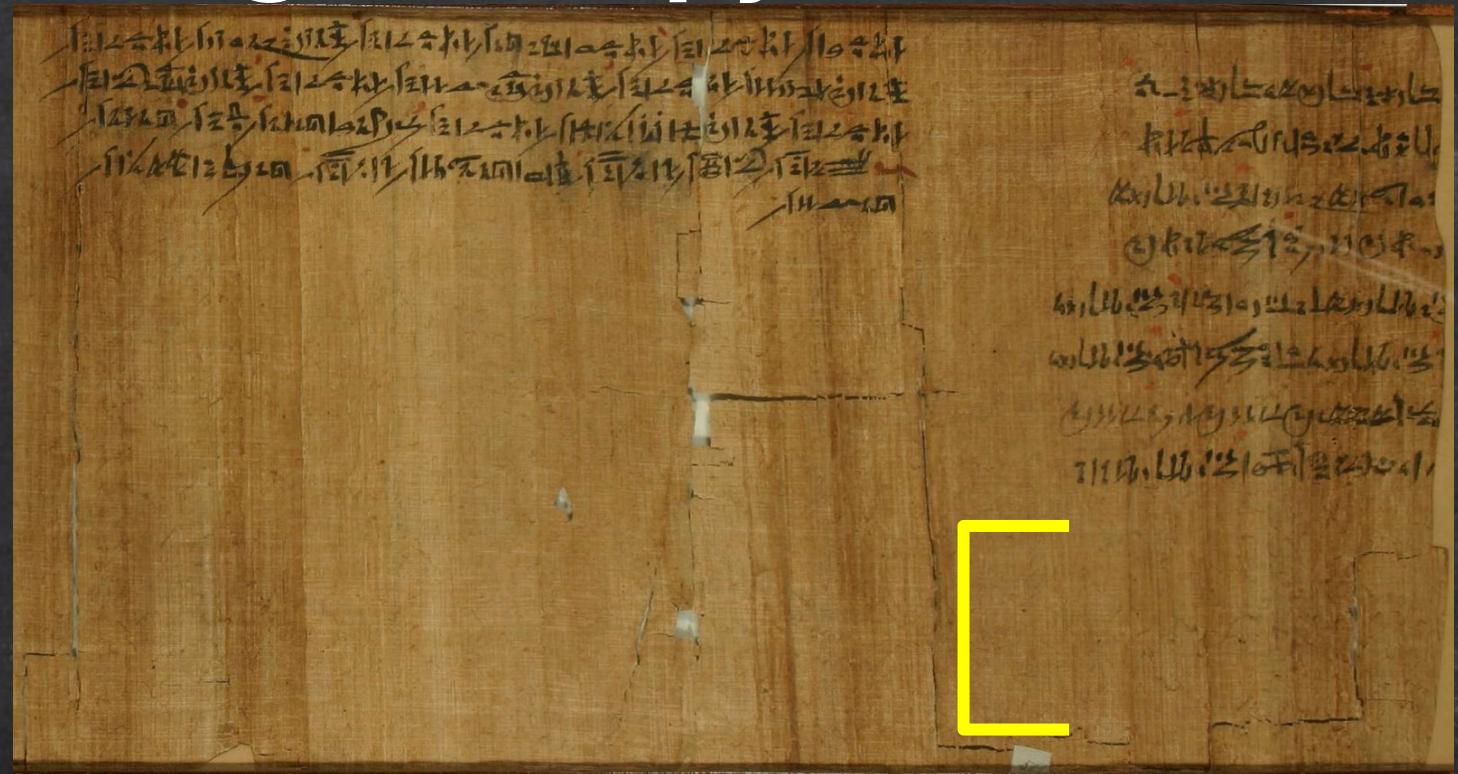
Final two columns, verso, of Harris Magical Papyrus

Joseph Cross – Egyptian Scribes Writing Northwest Semitic

The Harris Magical Papyrus

Joseph Cross – Egyptian Scribes Writing Northwest Semitic

The Harris Magical Papyrus

- This text was not intended to be used like the other texts in the scroll:

  - Appended to the scroll by someone else (a user)

  - Not accompanied by instructions or context for recitation

  - But available as a text that comprises a coherent utterance, possibly a pre-existing text

The Harris Magical Papyrus

First incantation of all conjurations on water…
O egg of the water, spittle of the earth, fluid of the Ogdoad! … I penetrate with you from your nest. I am Min, lord of the land of Coptos…

This incantation is to be spoken (over) an egg of clay, placed in the hand of a man at the fore of a boat. If there appears the one who is on the water, it is to be thrown into the water.

The Harris Magical Papyrus

- Why was it added?
  - The previous spells on the scroll were for warding off lions and other animals of the desert
  - Semitic deities Reshef, Anat, and Hauron invoked
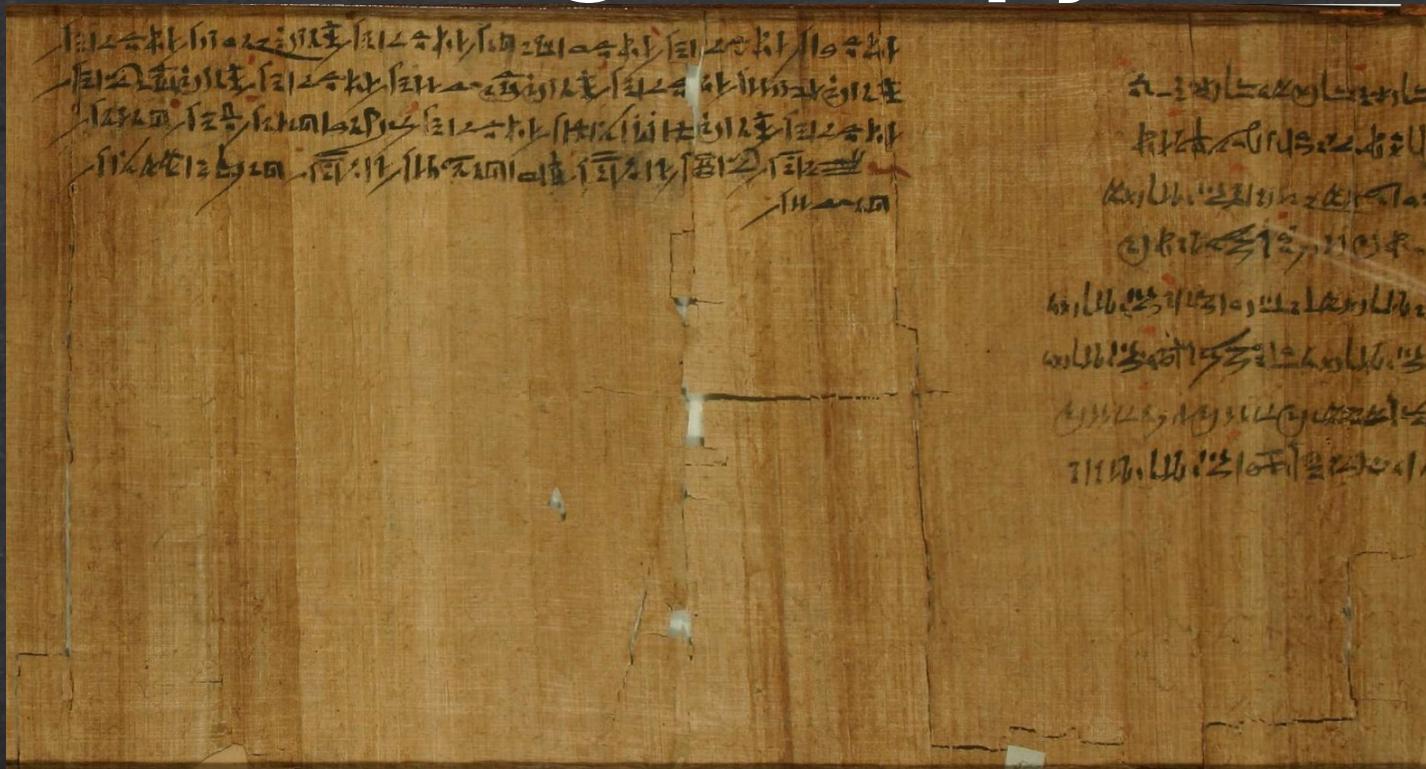
The Harris Magical Papyrus

- Why was it added?
  - Lions and other dangerous animals were conjured as stand-ins for disease
  - This matches what the NW Sem. Text seems to be about
  - Perhaps intended to be supplementary, esp. since earlier spells include NW Sem. content

The Harris Magical Papyrus

- Why was it added?
  - Perhaps a user had the serendipity to encounter a real-world, Northwest Semitic poem about lion hunting that could lend a magical verisimilitude to the Semitic-colored spells against lions at the end of the scroll

The Harris Magical Papyrus

The Harris Magical Papyrus

<u>Another incantation</u> …

Hauron, cast away for me from the field!

Horus, do not allow any prowling!

I am provided with the perfect magical scroll

That Re has placed in my hand,

Which banishes lions and stops men,
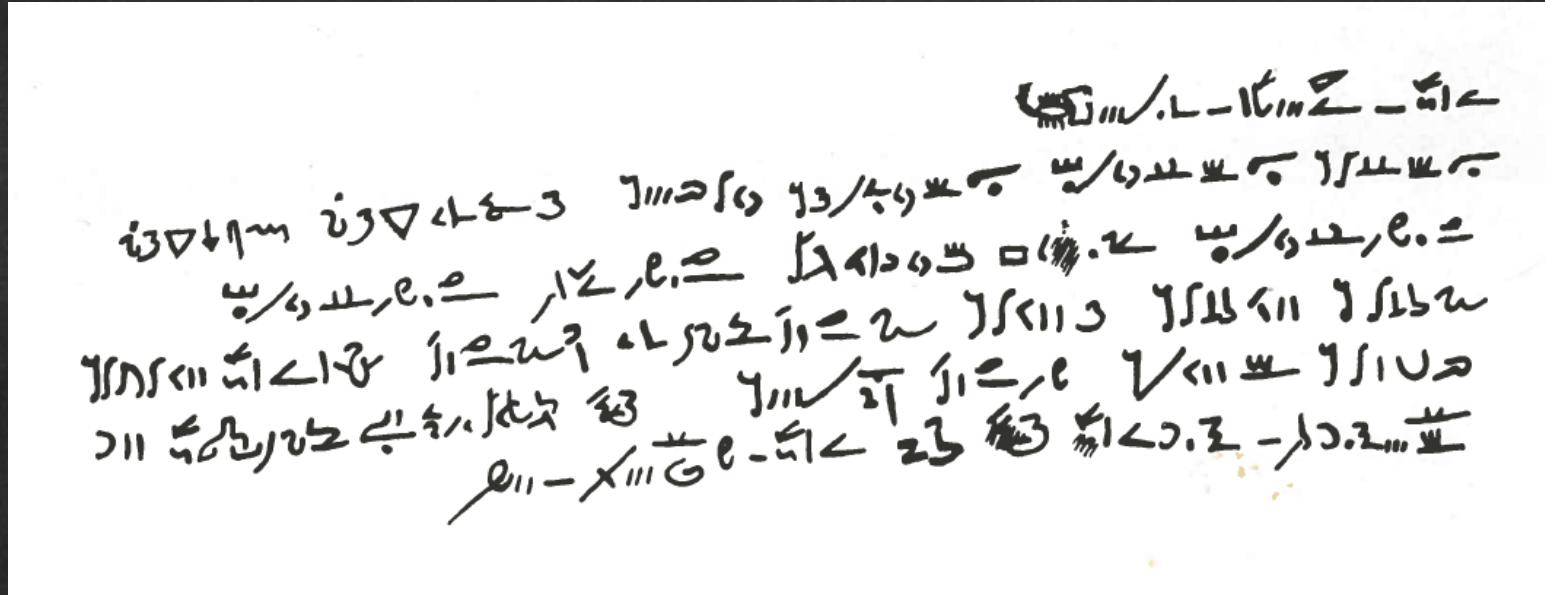
Which banishes men and stops lions.

May the mouths of lions and hyenas,

Of jackals, first of all animals, owners of raised tails,

Be closed up, who eat flesh and drink blood …

The Wadi Hammamat graffito

G. Vittmann, "Eine Zauberspruch gegen Skorpione im Wadi Hammamat," in Festchrift Lüddeckens (1984)

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The Wadi Hammamat graffito

Richard Steiner, "The Scorpion Spell from Wadi Hammamat: Another Aramaic Text in Demotic Script," *JNES* 60:4 (2001): 259-268

The Wadi Hammamat graffito

- 5th or 6th century BCE

- One of over 150 demotic graffiti, and many Aramaic as well, including an abecedary (see *TAD* D, 22.28-35)

The Wadi Hammamat graffito

- An Egyptian-language scorpion incantation, with Egyptian instructions/rubric

- Steiner argues that some stretches of gibberish-like language within is Aramaic

The Wadi Hammamat graffito

kp (')bw kp b'l kp 'tr (')m

"hand of my father, hand of Ba'al, hand of Attar my mother."

'npy b'l

"face of Baal" (cf. Bib. Aram. אַנְפּוֹהִי)

The Wadi Hammamat graffito

kp (')bw kp b'l kp 'tr (')m

"hand of my father, hand of Ba'al, hand of Attar my mother."

'npy b'l

"face of Baal" → in Demotic: "bring this Baal" ?

The Wadi Hammamat graffito
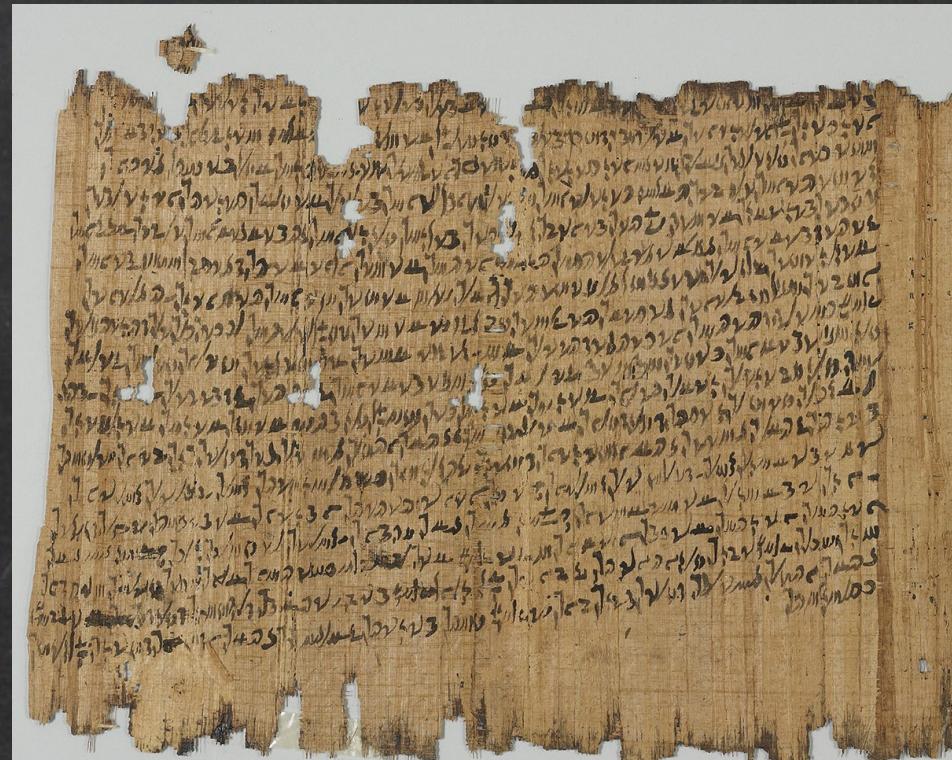
- Difficult to argue that there is coherent, extractable Northwest Semitic (Aramaic) text, and not isolated phrases or *voces magicae* with Semitic coloring
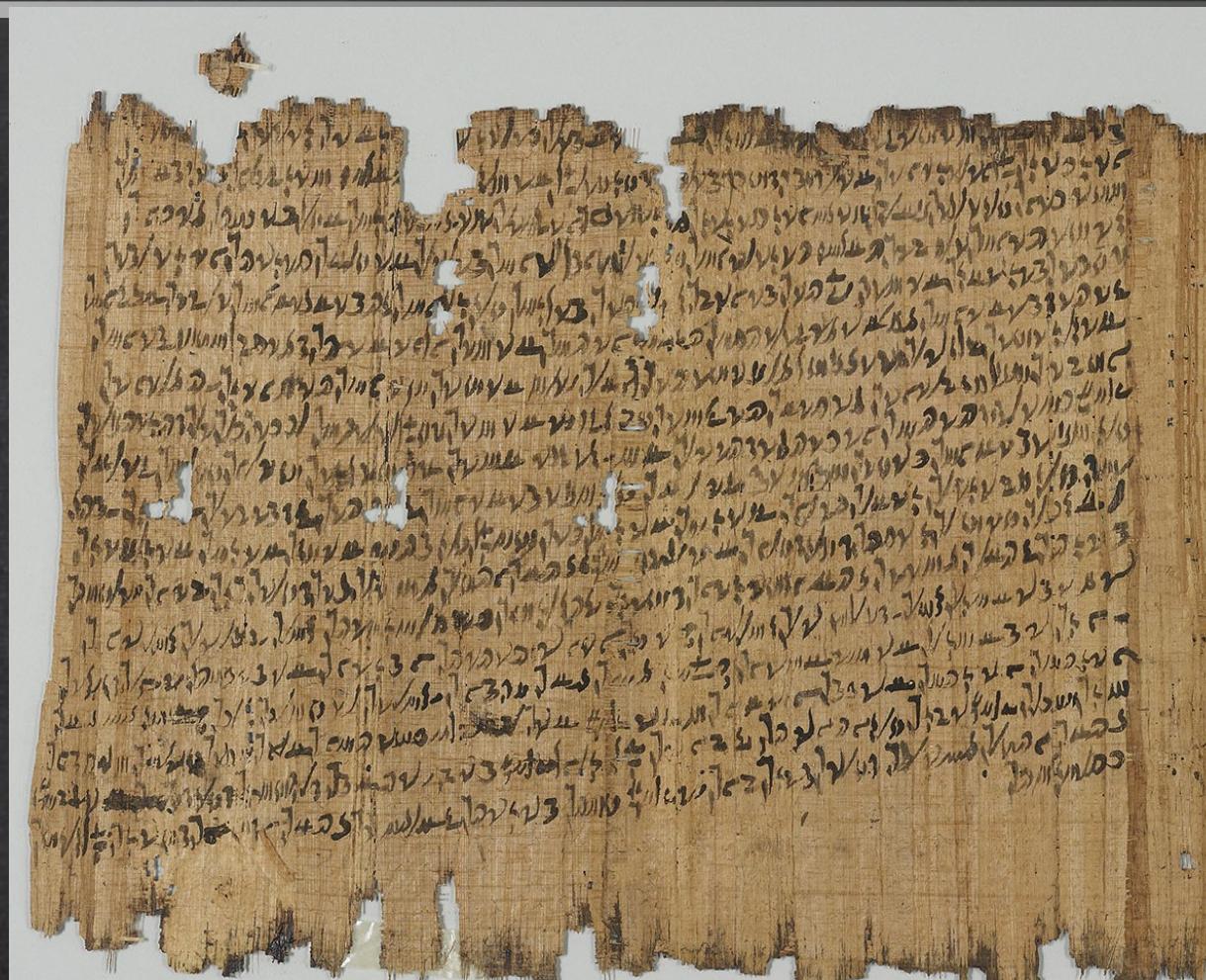
The Wadi Hammamat graffito

- Intriguing evidence for a literate Egyptian quarry worker (prob. scribe) knowing Aramaic
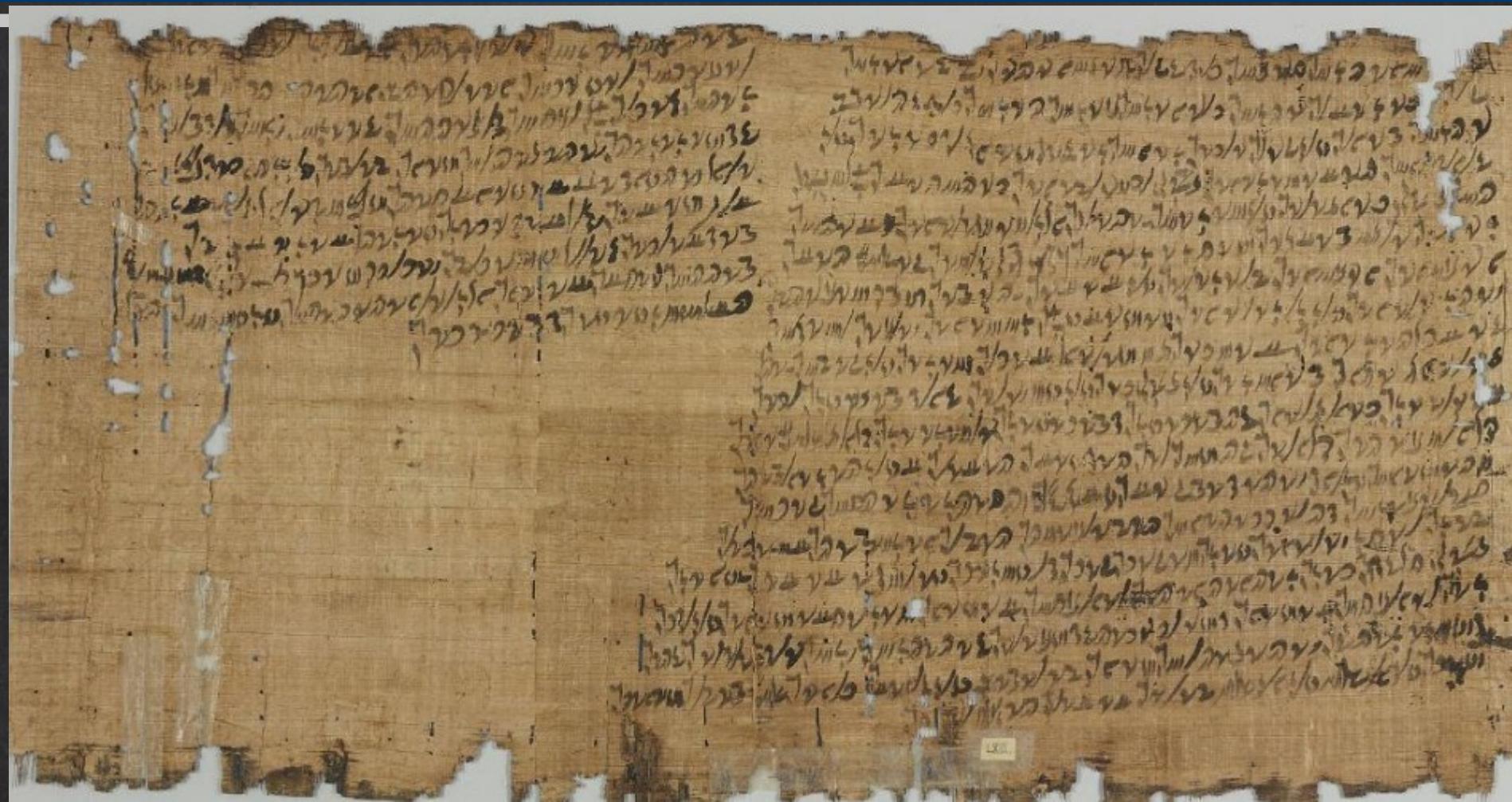
Papyrus Amherst 63

First col. of verso
(Photo: Morgan Library)
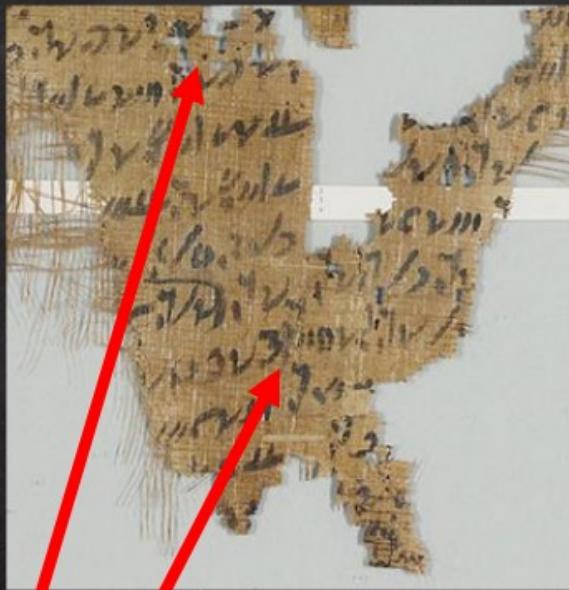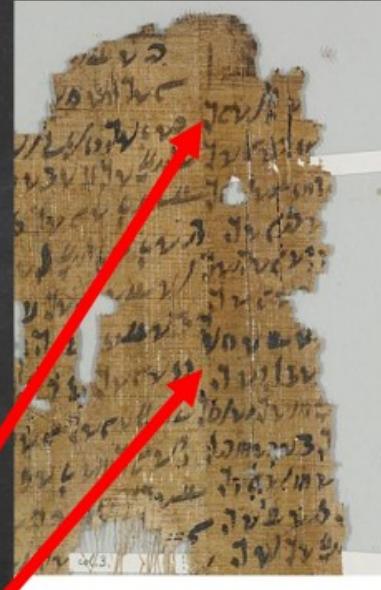
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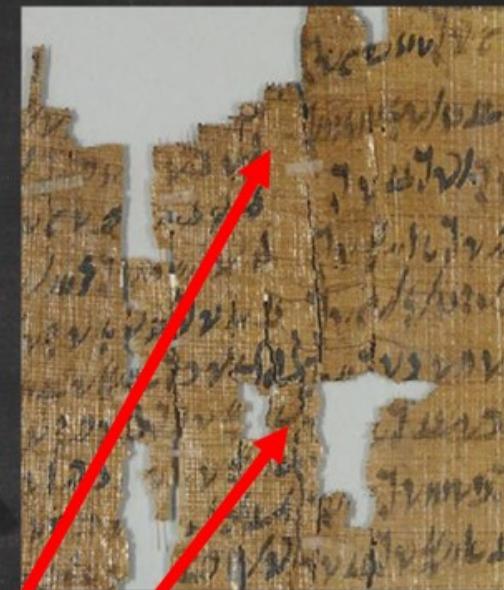
Joseph Cross – Egyptian Scribes Writing Northwest Semitic
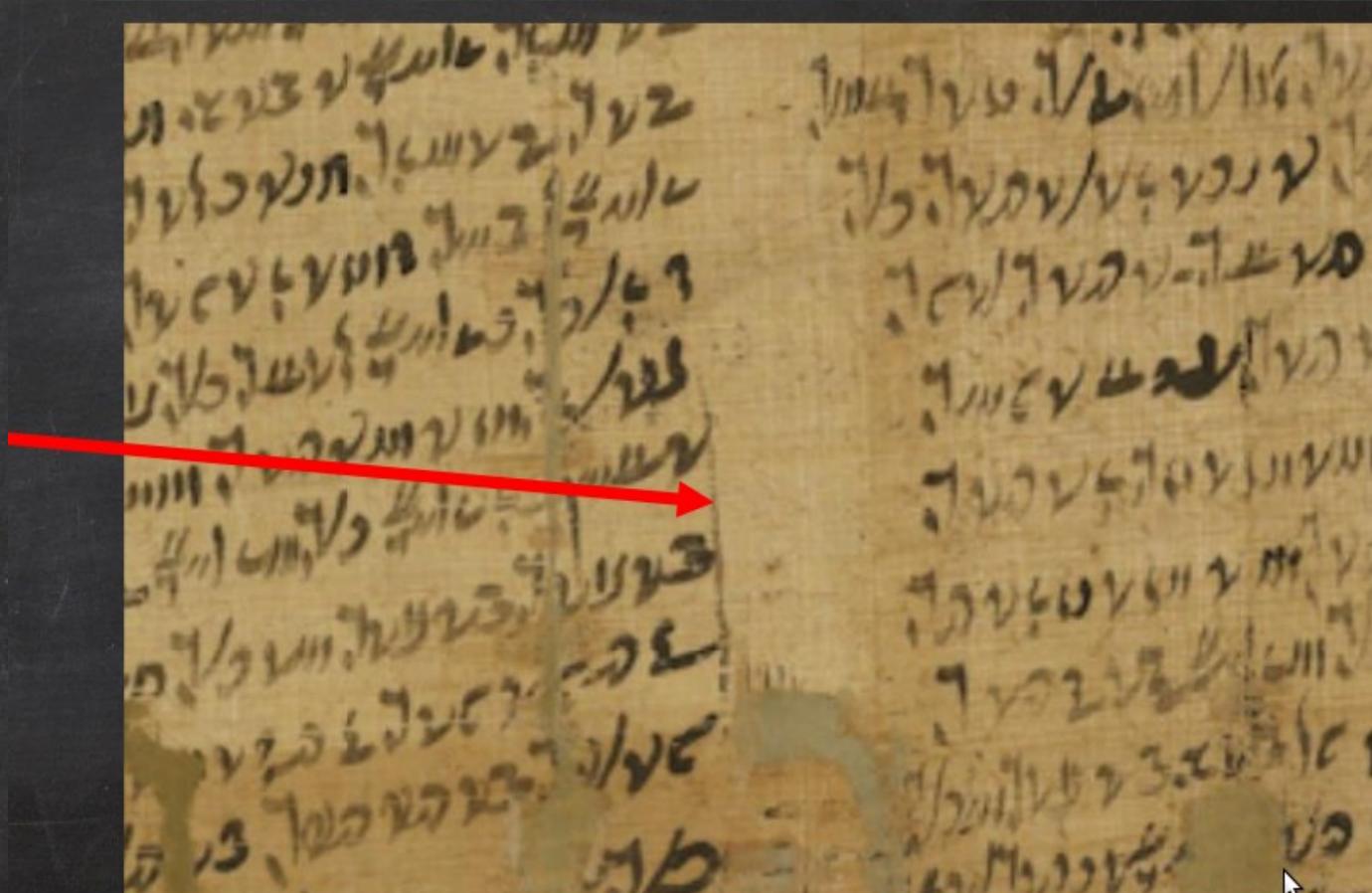
Recto, col. 1-2

Recto, col. 2-3

Recto, col. 3-4

Joseph Cross – Egyptian Scribes Writing Northwest Semitic

Joseph Cross – Egyptian Scribes Writing Northwest Semitic

Papyrus Amherst 63

- The scribe's eye appears to not be fixed on the lines as they are being inscribed

Papyrus Amherst 63

- Is the scribe reading Aramaic documents and transcribing them into Demotic?

- More likely to be an Egyptian scribe

Papyrus Amherst 63

- Or focusing on someone dictating?

Papyrus Amherst 63

- Either suggests the scribe being less skilled in Aramaic than in Demotic (at least the script)

Papyrus Amherst 63

- If they can read the Aramaic abjad, why transcribe into Demotic?

Papyrus Amherst 63

- If they can read the Aramaic abjad, why transcribe into Demotic?

  - Demotic is more phonetically nuanced

  - More indications of vocalization and prosody can be inscribed

Papyrus Amherst 63

- The technique of rendering the foreign language text into Demotic is similar to the (common) technique of writing Greek names in Demotic, and indicating vowels

Papyrus Amherst 63

- Regardless, what are the implications of the document? (depending on *what kind of document* it is)

- Can go the route of cultural memory, Aramean identity, etc.

- Or of accessibility of texts/documents/literature

Papyrus Amherst 63

- Assuming P. Amherst 63 is 4th-3rd century
  - "Afterglow" of a bourgeoning cosmopolitan literature (and culture?) as well as a "hidden" vernacular
  - Tantalizing indicator of a worldwide "republic of letters" as well as a widespread use of Aramaic for local, private "literary" culture

Conclusions

Conclusions

- Problems with magical texts:
  - Magical gibberish (*voces magicae*) that is Semitic sounding?
  - Inserted by someone who knows a Semitic language?
  - Transcribed by ear from an oral recitation?

Conclusions

- Problems with magical texts:

  - Should be considered in light of magical imagism and the Egyptian concern for coherence in magical texts and practice, i.e., how accurate is "accurate enough"?

Conclusions

- Problems with magical texts:
  - The act of inscription *itself* was a magical act which could be understood as ritual activity
  - Magical texts did not need to be *read* to be effective

Conclusions

- Re: New Kingdom examples
  - NW Semitic texts (as reconstructable) pre-existed the invention or the widescale proliferation of the Phoenician abjad and its descendants

Conclusions

- Re: New Kingdom examples
  - No Akkadian texts in Egyptian script, despite the evidence of the Amarna Letters, which suggest that some scribes in the palace could read and write cuneiform

Conclusions

- Re: New Kingdom examples

    - Compared to the limited number of scribes who would have encountered Akkadian, a significant number would have been in contact with actual Northwest Semitic speakers in the day-to-day administration of the empire, both at home and abroad in the Levant

Conclusions

- Re: New Kingdom examples
  - The scribes responsible for the texts in the corpus could have been non-Egyptians from the Levant who rose through the ranks

Conclusions

- Re: New Kingdom examples
  - Or Egyptian scribes who took their knowledge of Northwest Semitic words (hundreds) to another level

Conclusions

- Re: New Kingdom examples

  - These texts are another example of the prestige in a colonial context that Levantine culture and religion attained in the period of the Egyptian empire

Conclusions

- Re: New Kingdom examples

  - Cf. the nature of Egyptian control of the Levant: more "absentee landlord" than "homeowner" (Ellen Morris)

  - Not annexation or widescale Egyptianization

Conclusions

- Re: Papyrus Amherst 63
  - Local interaction with a *lingua franca*
  - A result of the imposition of standardized training in Aramaic and administration practices by the Achaemenians

Conclusions

- Re: Papyrus Amherst 63

  - Anticipating two trajectories of textual culture in multicultural Egypt through the Hellenistic and Roman periods and into Late Antiquity

Conclusions

- Re: Papyrus Amherst 63

  1) Religious texts: appropriation of divine names and religious textual traditions from the wider MENA and Eastern Mediterranean world (cp. the PGM)

  2) Narrative text: widescale interest in historical fiction, esp. concerning the Assyrian Empire and the end of the Iron Age, in Egypt, Judea, and Babylonia

Thank you!

The Mechanics: Group Writing

What is group writing?

- Or "syllabic orthography"

- An alternative orthography used in hieroglyphic and hieratic texts

- Origins in the Middle Kingdom, but used frequently in New Kingdom

What is group writing?

- Used for:
  - Loanwords
  - Foreign proper names
  - Native Egyptian words which recently entered the scribal reportoire
  - Native Egyptian words which are written differently from the received spelling (reasons of pronunciation)
 - Nicknames

Why use group writing?

- Without a doubt:
  - To differentiate words whose etymologies are not transparent to a reader
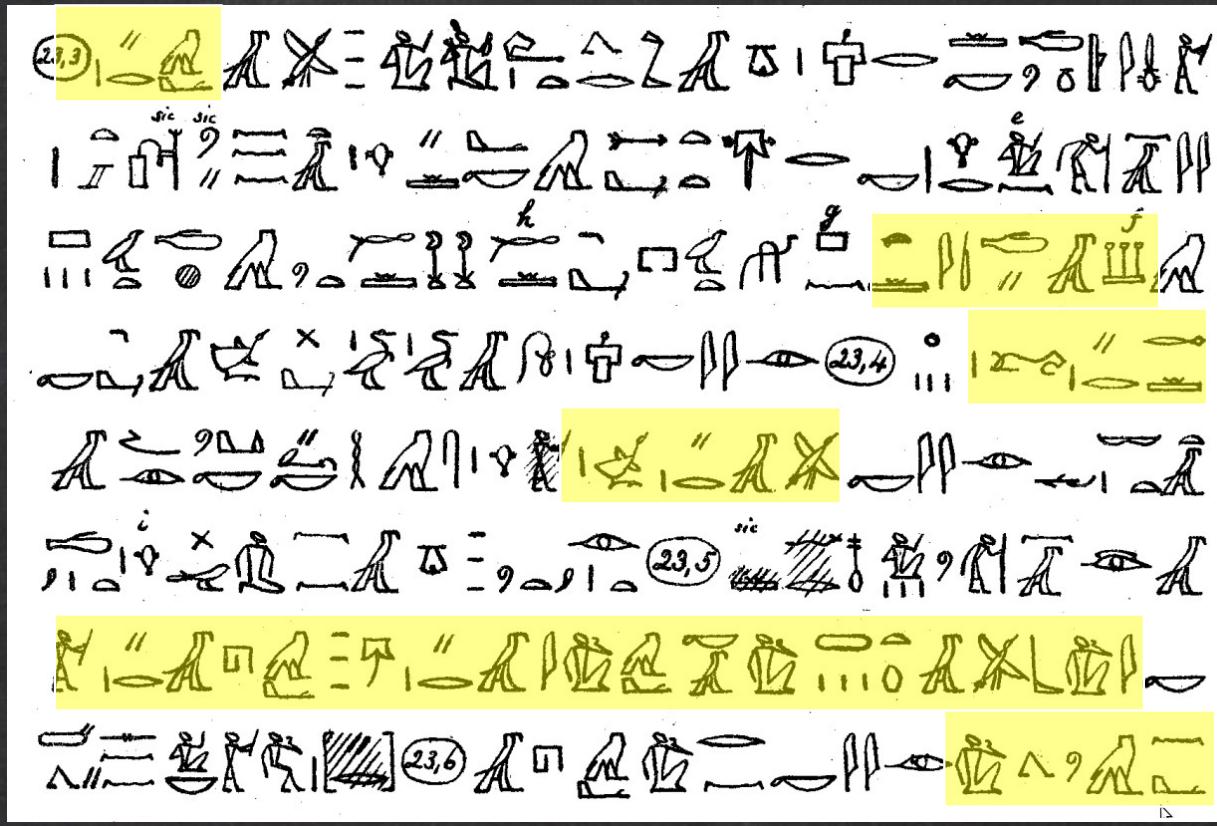
Why use group writing?

- Without a doubt:
  - To keep such words visually distinct from words in the traditional, received orthography
 - Like putting foreign words in *italics* today

Why use group writing?
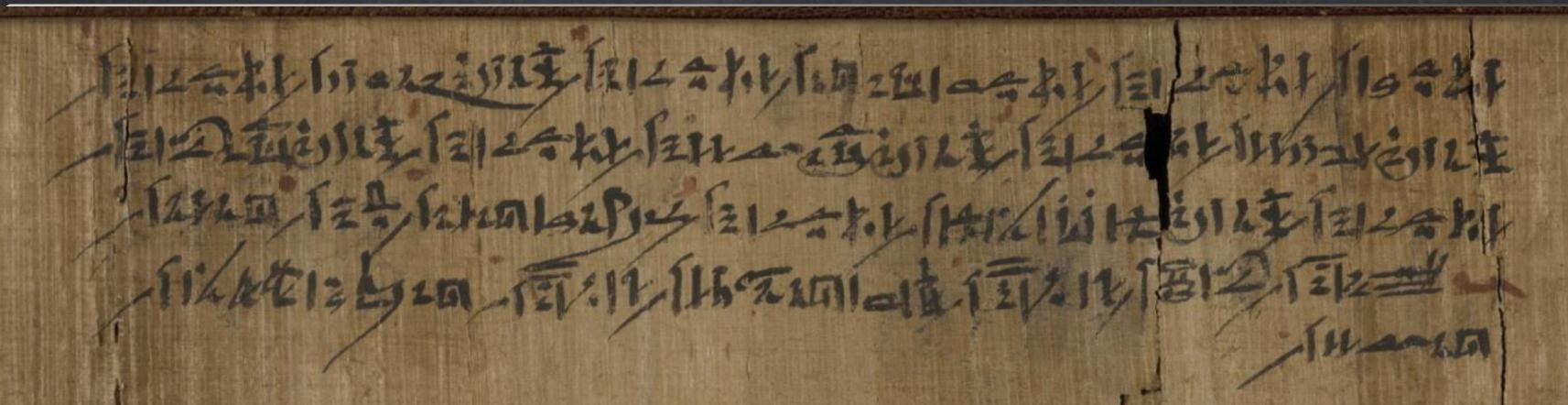
- To provide more information for pronunciation ("vocalization")

- Definitely consonants

- Vowels?

Group writing in P. Anastasi I, col. 23 (19th Dyn.)

Group writing in the final column of the Harris Magical Papyrus (BM EA 10042, ca. 1100)

Joseph Cross – Egyptian Scribes Writing Northwest Semitic

Wolfgang Helck, "Grundsätzliches zur sog. "Syllabischen Schreibung," *SAK* 16 (1989), 121-143

Why use group writing?

- Difficult to reconstruct a system for vocalization, though there are cases where correct pronunciation seems to be an important factor

  - Note: Middle Kingdom group writing *is* systematic (but limited in scope)

Why look for vocalization?

- Since the 19th century, research on group writing has sought to find rules to reconstruct vowels from the weak consonants

Why look for vocalization?
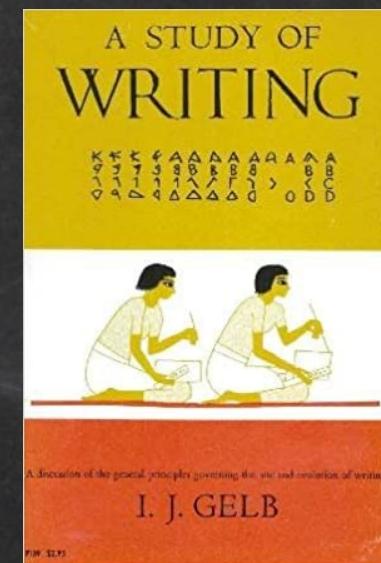
- Encouraged by the prominence of the "weak consonants" *ꜣ*, *y*, and *w*

- Resembling the use of *matres lectionis* in the Iron Age (and later) Northwest Semitic *abjads*

Why look for vocalization?

- This works on an assumption:

  - Since the standard hieroglyphic/hieratic orthography does not indicate vowels, a modified orthography <u>must</u>, and that is the reason for the modification in the first place

Why look for vocalization?

- This demonstrates a bias:
- Cf. Ignace Gelb's "principle of unidirectional development": all scripts proceeded from the most archaic forms to ones where both consonants and vowels, i.e. in the true alphabet, could be rendered lucidly

A STUDY OF WRITING

I. J. GELB
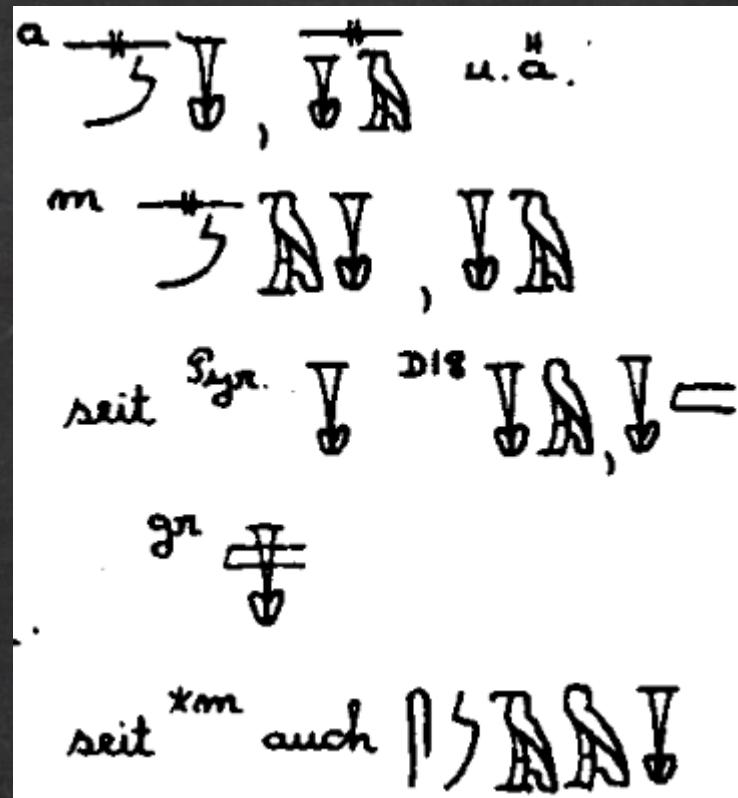
What group writing is based on

- Builds on orthographic techniques, some found already in the Pyramid Texts:

  - Biconsonantal signs with "weak" second components to stand for monoconsonantal

What group writing is based on

- Draws on techniques to update orthography for words whose pronunciation changed, esp. involving "weak" consonants

sm3 "to unite," *Wb.* 3, 446
Later > *s3m*

Group writing in NWSemitic/Eg texts

- New Kingdom texts only

- Only found in Demotic indirectly as part of the evolved standard orthography