

Between Old and Middle Kingdom: palaeography of the clay documents from Balat

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Abstract

The documents from the 6th dynasty governors' palace in Balat-ʿAyn Asil were found more or less *in situ*. Texts on clay tablets and notes on clay sealings form a sizeable corpus. They give us an acute insight into the range of writing practices in this provincial administration at the end of the 3rd millennium. Although mostly incised by a stylus, it appears that some of the tablets were written with ink before the text was incised. In spite of the rather limited range of texts at play, several signs appear here for the first time in hieratic script. Different graphic registers can be perceived, depending on the status of the text and the writing skills of the officials. The general palaeographical trends in Balat are in line with what was recorded at that time in the Nile Valley.

The practice of writing on clay remains poorly documented in Egyptian epigraphy. For the 3rd millennium BC, it went nearly totally unnoticed until, during the last decades, more accurate techniques of excavation brought to light more objects of this kind, mainly sealings (in the Memphite area) and labels (in Elephantine). To date, the corpus from Balat is by far the widest, amounting to approximately 530 tablets (mostly fragmentary), 200 inscribed sealings, 115 labels and a few other odd pieces. After presenting briefly the epigraphic collections,¹ I will point out a few palaeographical and graphical aspects of the documents, which throw light on the scribal practices at the end of the Old Kingdom.

The documents

Several areas of the city site have yielded extensive collections of texts. The first area excavated in the late 1970s (so-called *sondage nord*) is located near the entrance of a huge building, which was presumably the residence of the first governors. The building was occupied for a long time, and two phases of occupation have revealed texts written on tablets, labels and inscribed sealings.

In the course of the 6th dynasty, during the reign of Pepy II, the governors moved their living and administrative quarters to a new complex to the South. This complex (the Southern palace, excavated since the mid-1980s by an IFAO team headed

1 For more details on the archaeological context, see now PANTALACCI, in: COLLOMBERT & TALLET (edd.), *Archives administratives*, in press.

by Georges Soukiassian), underwent several changes. Most of our documents date to an early phase (late dyn. 6–dyn. 8), and were destroyed by a fire. Inside the palace, the main collections of texts have been found in halls and courts where scribes and high officials gathered to work, and also in or near storage areas, like the South-East complex of storerooms.² Outside the palace precinct, to the North-east, was a dump area where outdated documents from the palace were regularly discarded.³ The consistency of seal-impressions and prosopographical data show that the documents found in the burnt palace and those coming from the dump are roughly contemporary.

So on the whole, all our documents date from the same period: the 6th to 8th dynasties and the very beginning of the First Intermediate Period. Palaeographically, they are close to the texts analysed by Goedicke in his *Old Hieratic Paleography* in the columns “Boulaq 8”, “Sharuna”, “Elephantine”, “Qubbet el-Hawwa”, “Hatnub” and “Funerary”.

A variety of objects was inscribed: tablets, jars and jar-stoppers, labels or tags, sealings of rooms or granaries, chests, boxes, and baskets. The sealings can combine a seal impression and a hand-written note. The convex surfaces of the clay were rather unsuitable for writing, and the handwriting was hasty, so the palaeography of such notes, irregular and often fragmentary, will not be presented here. Conversely, the tablets provide a rich palaeographic corpus, which allows interesting comparisons.

Basically rectangular in shape, they feature a smooth, even surface and can be firmly held. Their dimensions vary in average from approximately 11–13 × 8–9 cm, with a thickness of 1.5–2 cm. In fact, the format may vary greatly as some tablets were modelled *ad hoc*, depending on the anticipated length of the text to write. The text is usually written in columns for letters or reports, for accounts and name-lists; whenever there is a title or heading, it is written in a horizontal line. Signs were incised in the clay with a bone stylus. This technique could only be applied when the clay surface was softened, that is, moistened. In that state, the tablets, which were not intentionally baked once written, as was done in the Near East, could be wiped out and reused several times. Perhaps the scribes kept the tablets wet by wrapping

2 On this storage area and its epigraphic material, see PANTALACCI & SOUKIASSIAN, in: MEYRAT & VUILLEUMIER (edd.), *Mélanges Valloggia*, in press.

3 The practice of collecting systematically outdated documents in a specific dump area is well attested throughout Egypt in all times (for example in Old Kingdom Giza: NOLAN, *Mud Sealings*, 19–22, about the “Pottery Mound”; in Middle Kingdom Abydos: WEGNER, *Mortuary Temple of Senwosret III*, 253–285, particularly 253–254).

them in a piece of cloth also *before* writing; in any case, once written, the fresh text was apparently preserved this way.⁴

The use of ink on tablets is hardly detectable in the current evidence. So far, a single fragment of a letter written only in ink was found (6963, fig. 1).⁵ Already decades ago, a very special object similarly inscribed with ink, a male magical figurine (2326) from the *sondage nord* was published by Grimal.⁶ Since then, it has been observed that a number of tablets from the Southern palace and the dump area preserve ink traces. This is difficult to explain, since logically the signs engraved with a stylus over an inked draft of the same or a different text should have covered and deleted it, all the more so if the clay was moistened. Unfortunately, the ink traces are too poorly preserved to recognise any sign.



Fig. 1: Tablet 6963, fragment of letter written only in ink.

- 4 Presumably, the contact with the wet material allowed the clay to dry up more slowly, to avoid cracks in the written surface. The use of clay envelopes is common in Mesopotamia, but was unknown in Balat.
- 5 All the numbers are from the excavation inventory. Unless otherwise stated, the documents are unpublished.
- 6 GRIMAL, in: GEUS & THILL (edd.), *Mélanges Vercoutter*, 111–121; on the anthroponyms, EL SAYED, *Afrikanischstämmiger Lehnwortschatz*, 128–129, L 9 and L 10.

Signs and words

The Old Kingdom collection of graphemes includes a variety of pictographic signs or ideograms, which gradually fell out of use. They illustrate a wide range of human activities. We also find words and signs that are infrequent in the 3rd millennium documents, simply because the tablets from Balat address a rarely paralleled range of topics.

For instance, the cursive writing of the verb *ḥwj* shows the late Old Kingdom composite form, combining its phonetics (*ḥ* sign) and its meaning (a man beating with a stick) into one sign.⁷ In the course of the Old Kingdom, the size of the *ḥ* shrank, so that it could be placed under the stick, as if beaten. Rather common in hieroglyphic texts,⁸ this form is mainly attested in hieratic texts of this period in the Coffin Texts from the papyrus Gardiner II and III.⁹ Balat offers two new occurrences of this type (3691, 7206: fig. 2).



Fig. 2: The *ḥw*-sign A413  on tablets 3691, 7206.

Similarly, the verb *ꜣzh*, “to harvest”, is fairly frequent in the hieroglyphic texts on the Old Kingdom tomb walls. The determinative of this word shows a man holding a sickle in one hand and a sheaf in the other (A148 ) , and as such reproduces on a small scale the conventional posture of the harvesters in agricultural scenes.¹⁰ In

7 Classified by GOEDICKE among the sign-groups B (*Paleography*, 65a–65b), though forming a single sign (A413 ) , as underlined by FISCHER, *Varia Nova*, 230 n. 425; commented by COLLOMBERT, *Mérouka*, 10–11, § 9.

8 See for example the lintel of Nedjemib (6th dynasty), Cairo CGC 1732, *CG 1295–1808* II, 162 and pl. 94; PETRIE, *Denderah Extra Plates*, pl. XIA, lower right (Shen Seta, 8th–9th dynasties) where the man holds a mallet instead of a stick.

9 GOEDICKE, *Paleography*, 65b, col. “Funerary”.

10 This sign as a determinative is often omitted, its semantic role being filled by the large-scale figures in the harvesting scene. All the preserved hieroglyphic occurrences include the sheaf (*PT* 874a^M, with truncated man; *Deir el-Gebrâwi* II, pl. VI (Djau); *Deir el-Gebrâwi* I, pl. XII (Ibi); *Meir* IV, pl. XIV (Pepy-ankh ḥry-jb).

Balat, a poorly preserved harvesting scene from the mastaba of the governor Khentika shows the same harvesting posture as its parallels from the Nile valley.¹¹ Although the corresponding hieratic sign appears to be unattested in the Valley documents so far, it appears several times in Balat.¹² Yet the scribes' vision of the posture departs from the painters' model: whereas in the scenes the harvesters lean forward and hold their sickle either with its tip pointed upwards or horizontally,¹³ in document 3691 the tip is pointed to the ground and the sheaf is missing. Obviously, this was not a familiar sign for some scribes, as the ductus in document 6960 shows, where the sickle takes the exact shape of the corresponding grapheme U1  (fig. 3) and is only loosely connected to the man.



Fig. 3: The *zh*-sign A148  on tablets 3750, 3691, 6960.

Other signs show an even greater difference between the canonical, hieroglyphic grapheme and its hieratic shape. I already commented elsewhere the specific sign of the potter modelling a vase (document 3686).¹⁴ Rare hieroglyphs of the potter are known, for example from the mastaba of Ptahshepses,¹⁵ while cursive forms appear in the Gebelein papyri as well as in papyrus Gardiner II.¹⁶ Both show the craftsman sitting on a chair or bench while using the wheel (A158 ). In Balat, the potter is obviously squatting on the ground and no wheel is seen. The position of his hands and arms rather suggests that he is holding or modelling the pot with both hands (fig. 4). This could illustrate one of the most characteristic productions of the local potters, the storage jars, which, until the Middle Kingdom, were still partly mod-

11 CASTEL, CHERPION & PANTALACCI, *Balat* V, 128, fig. 82–83.

12 Inv. 3750+6100 (SOUKLIASSIAN, WUTTMANN & PANTALACCI, *Balat* VI, 363–364 (b); PANTALACCI, in: SEIDLMAYER (ed.), *Texte und Denkmäler*, 276), 3691, 6960, only partially preserved in 7229.

13 KANAWATI, *El-Hawawish* I, fig. 15.

14 PANTALACCI, in: SEIDLMAYER (ed.), *Texte und Denkmäler*, 276.

15 VACHALA & FALTINGS, in: *MDAIK* 51, 1995, fig. 1, 3rd register. In this case again, the PT give only truncated pictures of the human figure, but the wheel is constantly represented: see PT § 1184a^{PMN}, 1185a^P.

16 POSENER-KRIÉGER, *I papyri di Gebelein*, 25; papyrus Gardiner II: *CT* VII, 212 f (Spell 996).

elled by hand.¹⁷ The potters of ‘Ayn Asil were essential agents in the equipment of the Abu Ballas road, a major stake of the Egyptian presence in Dakhla, well documented both by archaeology and texts.¹⁸

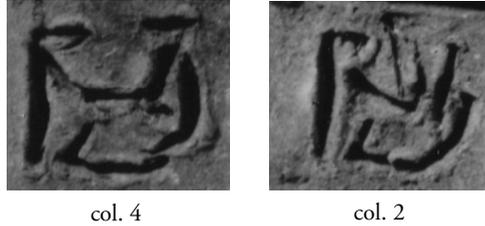


Fig. 4: The potter (cf. A140 ) on tablet 3686.

The precise hieroglyphic form of rare words was probably unknown to the local scribes. During the Old Kingdom, the verb *pnk*, “to bail out”, seems only attested in the Pyramid Texts *PT* (§ 335c^w, 950a^{PMN}). In each of those four occurrences, the determinative has a different shape, showing that even in the high cultural context of the royal workshop this representation was not standardised. The oasis scribe listing a religious feast called *hrw n pnk* in tablet 3113¹⁹ chose the clearer representation of a leaning man holding a bushel or bucket (A 144 ) , which usually appears as an ideogram for *hꜥj*, *hꜥw*, “to measure, measurer” (fig. 5).²⁰

Turning now to the divine world, I would like to draw attention once more to the original shape of the goddess determinative on the tablet 4437, a distribution of goods to divine entities.²¹ Though it resembles the *rp(w)t*-sign of the palanquin with its two handles, carrying a female squatting statue, it lacks the curving top that characterises such portable shrines, and thus departs strongly from the contemporaneous tradition (fig. 6).²² We have practically no data about the shape of the local

17 LE PROVOST, in: BADER, KNOBLAUCH & KÖHLER (edd.), *Vienna 2*, 358–359.

18 On the workshops, SOUKIASSIAN, WÜTTMANN & PANTALACCI, *Balat III*. For the potters’ contribution to the road equipment, see letter 3686: PANTALACCI, in: *BIFAO* 98, 1998, 306–309; FÖRSTER, *Abu Ballas-Weg*, 477–479.

19 POSENER-KRIÉGER, in: LALOU (ed.), *Les tablettes à écrire*, 49 and 52, fig. 9. In late sources, the second epagomenal day is called *pnk nn hmw.f*, “who bails out without his oar”: SPALINGER, in: *JNES* 54, 1995, 35.

20 COLLOMBERT, *Méréroutka*, 18–20, § 21, for comments and references. This verb is not attested in *Balat* so far.

21 PANTALACCI, in: SEIDLMEYER (ed.), *Texte und Denkmäler*, 277. The sign occurs again on tablet 4435.

22 KEMP, *Ancient Egypt*, 144–146, with fig. 51 on p. 145. According to the *Wb II*, 414, 12–415, 9, in ancient versions the female statue is not always depicted, but the canopy always is. Only



Fig. 5: Writing of *pnk* with the *h:w*-sign A144  on tablet 3113.



4435



4437

Fig. 6: The determinative of goddesses' names on tablets 4435, 4437.



Fig. 7: Unidentified sign on tablet 6718.

deities, apart from the name of some of them,²³ but this determinative may point to a specific cultic image.

Some signs remain obscure because of a lack of hieroglyphic parallels. This sign in text 6718 (fig. 7) is probably a human being, followed by a sort of curved stroke.

archaic objects, like king Scorpion's mace-head, show ladies squatting in carrying boxes without a top.

23 POSENER-KRIÉGER, in: LALOU (ed.), *Les tablettes à écrire*, 48.

It seems close to a determinative registered by Goedicke²⁴, and used in the CT with the verb *nwn*, “have messy hair, mess one’s hair”, especially on a couple of Assiut sarcophagi.²⁵ The text lists pearls and amulets from, or more probably for, the palace: the mention of an ostrich egg in this list may point to desert neighbours of the governorate, whose name would be so determined.

Finally, I have to mention the numerous cases in which the palaeography is legible enough, but the words read are unknown. Sometimes the letters, and even more regularly the object lists that lack further context, feature words that are still missing from our dictionaries. These *hapax legomena* belong to various semantic fields: textile, furniture, tools and weapons, animals, joints of meat, etc.²⁶ Their meaning, and sometimes even their reading, still elude us. On the whole, our shortcomings in understanding the documents are more often lexicographic than palaeographic.

The scribes: spatial and social data

On the site, the archaeological evidence, in particular pottery or seal impressions, offers reliable material for relative dating, although the stretch of time between the end of Pepy II’s reign and the 11th dynasty remains ill-defined.²⁷ In any case, palaeography is not expected to be the primary criterion for dating, all the more so as the writing medium itself probably influenced the evolution of the ductus. Although the writing is cursive, ligatures are infrequent. The scribes had to be light-handed, since scratching the wet surface too deeply produced micro-lumps of clay, which obscured the reading.²⁸ Thus, keeping the signs separated improved their legibility. This circumstance slowed down the evolution of the graphic system that is visible in other writing media, and when compared to them, gives our documents an archaic look. Though coming from the same site and being strictly contemporaneous with our tablets, the fragments of funerary texts found in the mastaba of Medu-nefer palaeographically resemble contemporary papyri from other sites (in particular the

24 GOEDICKE, *Paleography*, 51a.

25 S3C, SIC, belonging to *Īt-jbj* and *Mšhtj*, in the Spell 257 (CT III, 368a). There, the man is similarly followed by a curved stroke, interpreted elsewhere as a belt knot or a tail (?) by FISCHER, *Dendera*, 179 and n. 752.

26 See e.g. PANTALACCI & LESUR-GEbremariam, in: RIEMER et al. (edd.), *Desert Animals*, 251; PANTALACCI & LESUR, in: *BIFAO* 112, 2012, 302.

27 BAUD, in: HORNUNG, KRAUSS & Warburton (edd.), *Ancient Egyptian Chronology*, 156–158; SEIDLmayer, *ibid.*, 159–167.

28 POSENER-KRIÉGER, in: LALOU (ed.), *Les tablettes à écrire*, 43 and 51, fig. 4–5.

papyrus Gardiner II–IV inscribed with CT²⁹) more closely than the documents from ‘Ayn Asil.

Moreover, strong differences can be observed between the hands of the scribes who wrote on clay. A comparison between the file of letters stored in the Western entrance room and tablets retrieved in the storage areas makes this obvious. The letters were sent to Balat from outside settlements, and the respect of village scribes for the governorate staff clearly shows through the use of polite circumlocutions.³⁰ The status of a letter sent to the governorate by a remote scribe was certainly felt by him to be high and the letter itself was worth devoting special attention and care to. Good penmanship was a first step towards *captatio benevolentiae*.³¹ The ductus is rather stiff, the graphemes are large, well separated and firmly outlined, and there are very few ligatures or sign-groups. Although they wrote regularly,³² the village scribes certainly did not produce written documents in numbers comparable to those working in the oasis capital. The documents written in the palace show signs that can be much smaller and more cursive, and their engraving was shallow as if the scribe was either in a rush, or already anticipating the next erasure of the tablet.³³ If found outside their archaeological context and in isolation, these texts would certainly not be ascribed to the same period. The variety in handwriting depends on multiple factors: the spatial distribution (whether the text was produced close to or remote from the centre of power), the individual skill of the scribe, and his status in the hierarchy. Similar to what we mean when we speak about “language registers”, we could use the phrase “writing registers” for our documents.

Interestingly, a spectrum of writing proficiency is also detectable inside the palace itself. It has been long observed that the accounting routines involved moderately literate or even illiterate people.³⁴ On several tablets that list hundred objects (or persons?) or more, the writer drew bars to count units one by one, thus recording an interim operation usually not written down.³⁵ This suggests the presence in

29 VALLOGGIA, *Balat* I, 74–78 and pl. 62–63; GOEDICKE, *Paleography*, XXI.

30 PANTALACCI, in: *BIFAO* 98, 1998, 308–309 (g).

31 This is clearly seen in the oversized calligraphy of the “Memphite formula” at the beginning of the Old Kingdom to early Middle Kingdom letters on papyrus: EDEL, in: GAMER-WALLERT & HELCK (edd.), *Gegengabe*, 76–77; JAMES, *The Hekanakhte Papers*, 120–126 and pl. 8. Cf. also the angular ductus of the “Letter to the Vizier” noted by GOEDICKE, *Paleography*, XVIII.

32 For example, the two letters 3686 and 3689–4 + 5, 4766 were probably both sent from the city or village of Aïret.

33 Cf. for example the name-list 6097, SOUKIASSIAN, WUTTMANN & PANTALACCI, *Balat* VI, 361–362, the ductus of which is closer to the First Intermediate Period to early Middle Kingdom texts, with the letter 6100+3750 on page 363.

34 PANTALACCI, in: *BIFAO* 96, 1996, 364–367.

35 3446 (POSENER-KRIÉGER, in: LALOU (ed.), *Les tablettes à écrire*, 49 and 51, fig. 3; SOUKIASSIAN,



Fig. 8: Example of large, poor handwriting on tablet 8605 recto.

the administrative *chaîne opératoire* of less qualified officials, who could count, but not easily write. Coming back to writing skills and palaeography strictly speaking, several collections found in storage areas included a few tablets with very short texts in a large, awkward handwriting (fig. 8). They were kept together with more complex documents that show the usual swift, small hands. In spite of their poor penmanship, less experienced writers were included in teams working in strategic areas, such as royal storerooms. This supports the view of a group of officials with various proficiency levels, ranging from simple counting and marking to highly professional writing.³⁶

Nevertheless, apart from these rare exceptions, the training of the oasis scribes seems to have been systematic and it left little to individual variations. Uniformity prevailed, both in the shape of the graphemes and in the graphemic choices. Anthroponomy is a special case: in Balat, like elsewhere in Egypt, proper names can show developed or shorter writings depending on their context. Thus, hieroglyphic texts

WUTTMANN & PANTALACCI, *Balat* VI, 339), for a number of 110 units; 4414, totalling 100 objects; 6717, totalling 15 x 2 objects. For the notion of “accountancy” in Balat, PINARELLO, *Archaeological Discussion*, 111.

36 PINARELLO, *Archaeological Discussion*, in particular 114–125.

normally use a maximum number of graphemes, whereas the cursive documents prefer shorter writings.³⁷ If the practical reasons of such choices are obvious, certainly the status of the document is also at play. This graphic distinction of texts on stone is also well exemplified by the word *sšm*, “distribution”, a key-word of the Egyptian scribes in their everyday tasks.³⁸ The two decrees found in Balat include the elaborate sign of the whetstone combined with the walking legs (T32 )³⁹ whereas all the hieratic texts, in Balat and elsewhere, and even the royal Old Kingdom stone decrees from other sites, use the simple T33  instead.⁴⁰

Such data suggest an efficient local school of scribes and stonemasons, where the future staff was trained in highly standardised practices, just like it happened elsewhere in Egypt during this period. Variations are exceedingly rare and rather come from village scribes, who may have indulged in a more personal style than the officials operating in the central administration. One of these features is the use of eulogised phrases in letters, which remains uncommon.⁴¹ A rare example of individual graphic variability is the writing of the causative verb *šhwdj*, “to enrich”.⁴² Examples from the Valley show some uncertainty in the choice of its determinative: few occurrences are known previous to the New Kingdom, and a frequent semagram for the simple *hwdj* is the “doubtful” sign Aa9 .⁴³ In Balat, two letters from different places, both found in the entrance bureau, use this word (3685; 3689-4, 5+4766). In one text, the scribe simply wrote , remaining on an abstract level.



In the other, the determinative is the carrying-chair (*hwdt*, from the same root): . Here, richness and prestige are concretely visualised by the scribe.⁴⁴ The context is identical in both cases: a travel through the desert; and the image of the noble travelling

37 SOUKIASSIAN, WUTTMANN & PANTALACCI, *Balat* VI, 312 (h) & 341 (c); PANTALACCI, in: SEIDLMAYER (ed.), *Texte und Denkmäler*, 279.

38 POSENER-KRIÉGER, *Archives*, 6–7, 220–221.

39 3153, 3241: SOUKIASSIAN, WUTTMANN & PANTALACCI, *Balat* VI, 314, 316.

40 GOEDICKE, *Königliche Dokumente*, fig. 1 and 11; ID., *Paleography*, 38a–b; PANTALACCI, in: SEIDLMAYER (ed.), *Texte und Denkmäler*, 279.

41 See above, n. 30.

42 PANTALACCI, in: SEIDLMAYER (ed.), *Texte und Denkmäler*, 280.

43 Also occurring before the New Kingdom in Deir Rifa, tomb VII: *Siût*, pl. XIX, col. 22. According to GARDINER, *Egyptian Grammar*, 541, Černý thought that the Aa9 sign might be the “abbreviated form” of the Old Kingdom carrying chair, but the graphic evidence from Balat and elsewhere does not support this hypothesis.

44 On the carrying-chair as status marker, see BROVARSKI, in: DER MANUELIAN & FREED (edd.), *Studies Simpson*, 134–135, 152–154.

in his carrying chair and avoiding the tiredness of walking or donkey-riding came to the scribe's mind.⁴⁵

The preservation of these collections *in situ*, in a non-funerary context, is thus particularly interesting to study not only a new range of palaeographic data connected to original semantic fields, but also the practices and, to a degree, the mentality of a community of officials on a local and regional scale. Whereas in other Egyptian provinces the evidence is mainly funerary and hieroglyphic, in Balat it is mainly administrative and hieratic. Nevertheless, a close study of the cursive forms confirms the links of the oasis with the literate culture of other cities, and its inclusion, despite its remoteness, in the cultural networks of this period. Although the context of the Balat archive is unique for the 3rd millennium, the documents probably follow practices that prevailed in many provinces at that time.

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⁴⁵ A carrying-chair was probably represented in the funerary chamber of Khentika: CASTEL, CHERPION & PANTALACCI, *Balat V*, 124 and fig. 75. Such a luxury object was a privilege of the higher elite. As the verb applies here to a simple craftsman from Balat long expected in the remote settlement from which the letter is written, this grapheme might convey some irony.

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