

**Topic: How can we attempt to assess
what real power the scribes of
Ancient Egypt wielded ?**

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Introduction

Bard (1992) defines writing as a communication system utilising and expressing itself through visual markings on the requisite material. It is an all-encompassing definition conflating systems of symbols, such as ownership markers, and genuine writing systems which are segments of language. This is particularly important, as symbols portray extra independent meanings and the first Egyptian script was comprised of logographic symbols, whereby a word or concept is equated to and represented by one symbol (Postgate et al. 1995).

The Egyptian word for scribe was *sesh* (Shaw and Nicholson 1997). It described not only those who were clerks but also the small percentage of the population who were literate and worked in the bureaucracy in varying capacities. Fifth Dynasty documents from Abusir (Posener-Krieger 1986) record the deliveries of donations and tithes, which were then used to calculate the wages paid to the temples' employees.

The scribal practices and the positions held underwent significant changes during the Protodynastic, Early Dynastic, Old Kingdom and Middle Kingdom periods. These changes and the effects upon the power and status wielded by the scribes are deduced from the volume and scope of textual and archaeological records.

Background

The earliest surviving example of the preparation of papyrus as writing material dates from the First Dynasty tomb of Hemaka, c. 2900 B.C. (Wilson 1997). The plant material used was called *papuros*, and the writing material itself *bublos*, by the Greeks. The concepts for learning and writing were transcribed as a papyrus roll tied with a cord in hieroglyphic inscriptions. Indeed, papyrus was the most expensive material available to the scribes who otherwise used ostraca (stone flakes) for more mundane activities. From the Middle Kingdom onwards (Table 1), papyrus was also the material of choice for stories such as the Story of Sinuhe (Wilson 1997). However,

administrative records and official correspondence were also written on leather rolls for durability.

Period	Date
Nagada I	4000 – 3500 B.C.
Nagada II	3500 – 3300 B.C.
Nagada III	3300 – 3150 B.C.
Early Dynastic (Thinite Period)	3150 – 2700 B.C.
Old Kingdom	2700 – 2190 B.C.
First Intermediate Period	2190 – 2040 B.C.
Middle Kingdom	2040 – 1674 B.C.
Second Intermediate Period	1674 – 1553 B.C.
New Kingdom	1552 – 1069 B.C.

Table 1. Chronology of Ancient Egypt from the Nagada to New Kingdom periods. *After (Grimal 1994)*

The typical signifying pose of the scribe is well known from the statues of the chosen elite sitting cross-legged (Figure 1). Scribes were present at the harvest, cattle census and vintage. They dealt with financial matters, such as tax collection, and therefore also required accountancy skills. Scribes were also utilised in administering other sectors of the State such as the army and building projects. This is evidenced by specialist scribes who had titles such as “Scribe of the Herds” or “Scribe of the Sacred Offerings”, which may have signified them being on charge of specific departments within the governing bureaucracy. This contradicts Wenke’s claim that “the title of the scribe did not...necessarily indicate rank” in so much as it may simply have signified that a particular person was literate (Wenke 1995, 2211).



Figure 1. The chamberlain Pesshuper, from the Twenty-Fifth or Twenty-Sixth Dynasty, who holds a scroll in the pose of a scribe. *From (Shaw and Nicholson 1997, 254)*

Predynastic labels and pottery marks

Kathryn Bard writes that “Egyptian hieroglyphic writing is first seen at the time of the creation of a full-blown territorial state in Upper and Lower Egypt under central control” but contradicts herself by also stating, “It seems likely that the early use of hieroglyphs was motivated by political and economic concerns of the state that had emerged by the beginning of Dynasty 0 [in Nagada III]” (Bard 1992, 297). These two quotes highlight and focus the debate on the question of what constitutes writing. It

thus has a bearing on the socio-political, ideological and political spheres in and under which the early scribes operated.

Baines (1988) regards the early development of writing as a tool for the expression of ideology by the growing elite. He links the origin of writing to the increasing degree of cultural and economic integration between regions in the Nile Valley from the middle of Nagada III onwards, which necessitated an evolving ideology by the elite expressed through ceremonial and ideological forms of administration. The argument that writing was not developed indigenously (Ray 1986) has been largely dismissed (Baines 1988, Bard 1992, Postgate et al. 1995). However, this strikes at the heart of the investigation into what the emblems and markings on Predynastic pottery represent and how far they can be taken as representative forerunners of the Dynastic hieroglyphic systems.

The earliest evidence for writing comes from the tomb of U-j at Abydos, dated to c. 3150 B.C. (Wilkinson 1999) The symbols appear in two forms: bone labels and inscriptions on pottery. As the pottery marks became standardised, it has been hypothesised that the proto-city state rulers increasingly used this as a means to record and quantify the commodities (Postgate et al. 1995). These actions would have had the effect of bringing trade under their authority.

Debates have arisen over whether Predynastic pottery marks are indicative of a description of their contents or capacity, or even if there was a separate Lower Egyptian script. The latter idea has been refuted due to the wide range and distribution of the marks (Porat and Adams 1996, Postgate et al. 1995). The pottery primarily derives from the excavated cemeteries, rather than settlements, and the markings usually appear on the slip. A sherd from a Hierakonpolis tomb, dating to Nagada Ib-IIa, has three markings arranged in deliberate approximation to each other. Bard (1992) speculates it may be an early example of a nome standard. The codification of the markings occurred during Nagada III, immediately prior to the unification. Nagada III witnesses the first examples of royal *serekhs*, both phonetically (for example on the Narmer palette) and in sealings.

The pottery signs, which were either painted or incised, are closer in form to the Dynastic cursive writing than to the Dynastic central court-determined form of the hieroglyphs displayed on public monuments (Baines 1988). Indicating a degree of autonomy from centralised authority, by comparison to the later Dynastic periods, this creates a certain tension with Bard's (1992) view that these first hieroglyphs served the purpose of capturing and displaying political information from and about the elite. Signs for names of people and places, and notation would, under Bard's hypothesis, have been a central part of the iconographic repertoire surrounding the king, portraying him as the powerful centralised figure.

The growth of scribal power during the first one thousand years of the State

While concerns during the earlier period of state formation appear to have been primarily trade and ownership-related, the emergent state would have had to undertake tasks such as quantitative surveying.

The numbers of scribes involved in these processes appears to have been small, although this could be due to the scarcity and restrictive nature of the surviving modes of the writings and decorations available from the Early Dynastic. The conventions which governed stylistic representations seen in Predynastic reliefs on the Narmer Palette, Hunters Palette, Two Dog Palette and the Scorpion Macehead, amongst others, are no longer apparent in the First Dynasty (Baines 1997). The cult deities (e.g. the falcon on the Narmer Palette), in zoomorphic form, humans and royal signifiers are no longer displayed in direct interaction, such as the king and gods embracing. The main reason for this would have been the shifting emphasis from palette to wall decoration as larger scale architectural programmes were undertaken, such as temple building projects.

The composition of the early courts was likely based upon family ties (Hoffman 1993). The senior administrators were royal relatives. Increased differentiation between government departments, within a structured government bureaucracy, was later established under the Third Dynasty Pharaoh Djoser (Figure 2) (Wilkinson 1999).

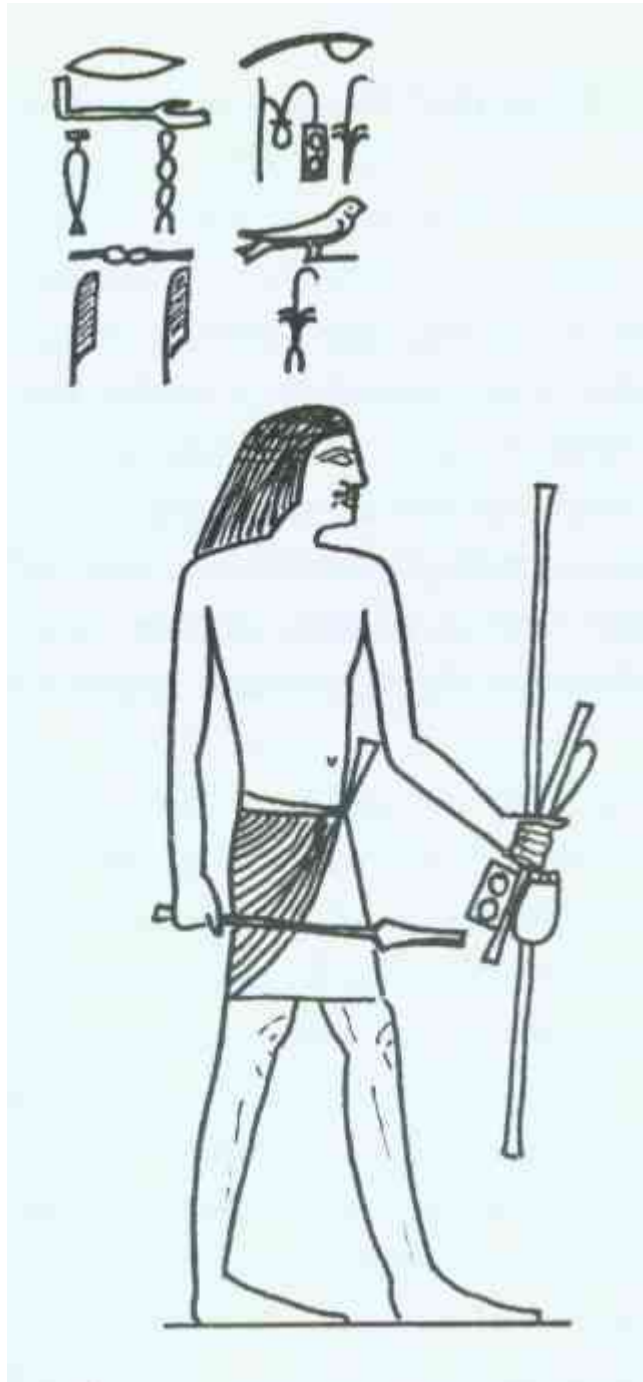


Figure 2. Hesyre, the Overseer of Royal Scribes and the personal assistant to Djoser. *From*
(Wilson 1997, 91)

Public inscriptions from the First Dynasty have mainly been found in funerary contexts, namely the royal stelae at Abydos. There are Second Dynasty stelae known from the mastaba fields at Saqqara, and examples of votive deposits at Hierakonpolis and Elephantine (Kemp 1989). As stated by Baines (1988, 197), “Unlike many elites,

that of ancient Egypt displayed no separate power bases, such as local land-holding or traditional allegiances or difference groups or regions, whether they had them or not. They were literate and had themselves depicted as scribes. In Egypt, this identification of the elite with writing restricted its autonomy, so that in early times there was no opposition between scribes and rulers.”

The scribes would have written both in hieratic (for business and administrative documents) and hieroglyphic (monumental inscriptions and reliefs) (Baines 1989). However, cursive hieroglyphs were used for later religious works such as the *Book of the Dead* (New Kingdom). It was also only officials' sons who were able to obtain a scribal education in the Early Dynastic and Old Kingdom periods (Wenke 1995). These barriers are estimated to have kept the literacy rate at about 1% of the population (Baines and Eyre 1983). It is questionable whether both females and males would have been literate; there is no conclusive evidence available for the former (Wenke 1995). The form of study during these early periods was based on apprenticeship, with the teacher being an experienced official. There were no formal training schools for scribes except perhaps at the palace for the sons of high-ranking provincial officials.

The reading aloud of the writings was not for utilitarian purposes but constituted a ritual value during the third millennium B.C. to the extent the reader possessed a separate title from a scribe, “bearer of the ritual book” or lector priest (Roccati 1990). The lector priest was involved in citing the sacred texts. As such, the lector priest possessed the writing knowledge of the scribes but held a superior rank. The Fifth Dynasty biography of Ptahuash refers to the title lector priest, but the title of scribe is missing. Also, Bia wrote in his tomb, positioned near Unas' pyramid, that “whatever scribe passes near to this my tomb and reads this inscription, I shall be his support in the courtroom of the great god, because I am a capable and genuine lector priest” (Roccati 1990, 64).

Many more official administrative texts survive by comparison to private notes, but it is not possible to determine how much of this is due to the non-survival of perishable materials. The important archival documents were kept in the administrative offices.

Such documents could have included agreements required by the illiterate general public to be drawn up and witnessed (Baines and Eyre 1983).

Although the Prophecy of Neferti was composed at the beginning of the Twelfth Dynasty (the start of the Middle Kingdom), it provides a basis for hypothesising that the 5th Dynasty pharaohs, if not all the way back to Sneferu or before, were literate. The Prophecy states that Sneferu, to whom Neferti was summoned to entertain, “stretched out his hand to his box of writing materials and took a papyrus roll and a palette. Then he wrote down what the chief lector priest Neferti said” (Baines and Eyre 1983, 77). Similar implications are echoed in the Instruction for Merikare, which is addressed to a pharaoh of the Tenth Dynasty and may therefore date from the First Intermediate Period.

Line 1146c of the Pyramid Texts (Utterance 510) describes the pharaoh as “the scribe of the god’s book, who says what is and brings into being what is not” (Faulkner 1986). Areas which were mined during the Sixth Dynasty often have official graffiti left behind which make references to scribes present undertaking various administrative duties (Roccati 1990).

The Fifth Dynasty official Kuper’s tomb biography refers to him as the “scribe of the administration, scribe of the pasture of pied cattle, scribe of the documents department, inspector of the scribes of State, scribe of the acts of State, scribe of the royal expeditions” (Roccati 1990, 66). Roccati (1990) believes Kuper was merely boasting about his accountancy powers and his skill in hieratic writing. A more focused example comes from the Pharaoh Isesi’s archive at Abusir, where the papyri, written in hieratic, describe how the scribes were organised into hierarchies (Posener-Krieger 1986). These hierarchies were modelled on the structure of other government departments and scribes were allocated on the basis of their specialised skills.

By the end of the Old Kingdom writing was changing from something which was itself the end into a product designed for those reading it. This is exemplified by an inscription at the entrance to a tomb dating from this period, which differs from the previous writings centered around the persona of the pharaoh: “He is loved by the king, by Osiris presiding over the Westerners and by Osiris the lord of Busiris: each

scribe who reads (aloud), each man who listens, each pure priest who observes (i.e. reads silently) (while) saying, ‘praise Osiris and glorify Anubis who stays on his mountain, lord of the holy land, Senetites, the vindicated’ ” (Roccati 1990).

The expansion and development of the scribal profession

Scribes, during the First Intermediate Period, expressed views about their contemporary society and the institution of kingship in ways never seen before. The closing section of Ipuwer’s Admonitions reads (Grimal 1994, 138),

See now, things were done that never were before,
The king has been robbed by beggars.
See, one buried as a hawk is...
What the pyramid hid is empty.
See now, the land is deprived of kingship
By a few people who ignore custom.

The internal wars of the First Intermediate Period would have enhanced the value of scribes in another direction: they became more deeply entrenched within the military. The Darnells investigated rock art and rock inscriptions from Gebel Tjaut, north of Qurna, an ancient caravan route. In describing two of the inscriptions, dating from the Eleventh Dynasty expansion of Theban authority, they note that the Gebel Tjauti stelae records the improving of the road by the Coptite nomarch Tjauti and possibly a military expedition against the Thebans (Darnell and Darnell 1997).

The status of the scribal profession during this period is eloquently expressed in the Satire of Trades (The Instruction of Khety), written by the scribe Khety for the benefit of his son at the beginning of the Twelfth Dynasty (Wilson 1997, 79-80):

I have seen many beatings – set your heart on Books!
I have watched those conscripted for labour – there is
nothing better than books! Read to the end of your instruction
book and there you will find this saying; ‘A scribe at

whatever post in town will never suffer in his job. As he fills another's needs he will not lack rewards.' I know of no other calling of which the same might be said. I will make you love scribedom more than your own mother, I will cause its advantages to become obvious to you. It is the greatest of all callings, there is none like it in all the land.

Khety continues to extol the virtues of the profession at the expense of others. Contra Roccati (1990), who claims that because the professions listed are modest it translates into the scribal profession also being humble, the text illustrates that becoming a scribe was a career which was prized and sought after (Wilson 1997, 80):

The reed-cutter travels as far afield as the Delta to get arrows. When he has done more than his arms can take, mosquitoes have half killed him and gnats have eaten him alive. He is quite worn out... The weaver in his workshop is worse off than a woman; working with knees drawn up to his chest he can hardly breathe. If he misses a day of weaving he is beaten fifty strokes. He bribes the doorkeeper with food to let him see the light of day... See there is no profession without a boss, except for the scribe; he is his own master. Hence if you know writing it will do better for you than all these other professions which I have described, each more wretched than the last.

A Nineteenth Dynasty teaching text outlines further the benefits of leading a scribal life (Wilson 1997, 80):

The scribe directs the work of the people. For him there are no taxes for he pays tribute in writing and there are no dues for him... Put writing in your heart that you may protect yourself from hard labour of any kind and be a magistrate of high repute.

From the late New Kingdom onwards, the mode of transmission for training in the writing of the sacred texts switched to the House of Life. The House of Life was a

scriptorium annexed to a temple (Baines 1983). Due to the divergence between written and spoken language which had occurred by then, this contributed to the scarce distribution of high culture and reinforced the picture of “traditional” texts being the realm of the priests.

Scribes during this period, attached to the House of Life, were also investigators. An example from the Ramesside Period exists where the scribes performed a function previously reserved for the lector priests: “His majesty ordered the scribe of the House of Life, Ramesseashahdo, the scribe of the Pharaoh, Hori, and the priest of the temple of Har-Min and Isis at Coptos, Usermaranakht, to investigate works at the Seat of Truth (the Theban necropolis) around the site of the Bekhen-stone, after having discovered the existence of large and wonderful monuments.” (Gardiner 1938)

It was the office of the overseer of the Treasury which, in practice, was responsible for compiling a unified report of the agricultural assessment of the land from the records of the regional scribes. Setau, Ramesses II’s viceroy to Kush who was also the vizier’s chief scribe, boasted of using his “mighty reed brush” to measure the land (Wenke 1995). Furthermore, as building projects required precise calculations and planning, scribes were involved in their execution with the architects (Figure 3). Another duty for scribes would have been to conduct census for army recruitment.

The largest quantity of archaeological and literary knowledge on scribes in the New Kingdom comes from the village of Dier el-Medina, located at the base of the Theban desert escarpment (Janssen 1992). Here the scribes’ houses were similar to those of the workmen and their wages similar to the higher-ranked foremen. They were appointed by the vizier and one of their duties was dealing with the local villagers’ complaints (Wenke 1995).

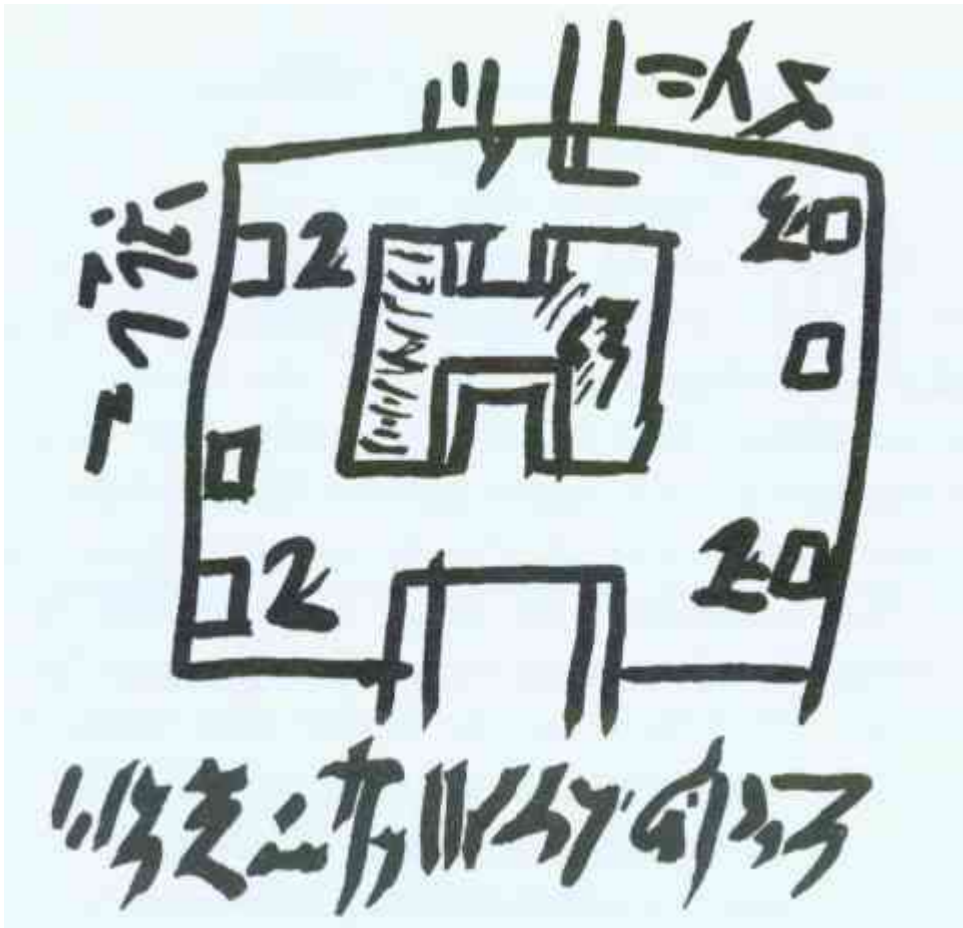


Figure 3. A map of a shrine on a pottery sherd, written in hieratic. It gives measurements and details on the building's orientation. *From (Wilson 1997, 90)*

Discussion

Writing became more centralised under the control of the central court and focused on the state ideology surrounding the institution of kingship during the formative first couple of centuries after unification (Baines 1983). At the start of the First Dynasty, scribes were no longer an ordinary but essential component of developing state mechanics. Instead, they became one of the most revered professions integral to the new socio-political, economic and ideological order.

When scribal trained officials were employed as priests in the Old Kingdom temples, they were sometimes in an authoritative enough position which did not require them to do the writing themselves. Utterance 309, which Faulkner (1986) sub-titles "The

king as secretary to the sun-god”, states on Line 491, “I open his boxes, I break open his edicts, I seal his dispatches, I send out his messengers who do not grow weary, and I do what he says to me”.

With continuous text emerging in the Third and Fourth dynasties (legal texts, letters and contracts), the royal funerary texts (Pyramid Texts) and the private biographies of the Fifth and Sixth dynasties, it was a brief step to take to the differential evolution of writing from the Middle Kingdom onwards. It is, however, questionable, to what extent the scribal profession would have changed if it had not been for the First Intermediate Period, which saw a breakdown in central royal authority and the devolution of responsibility to the provisional governors (Grimal 1994). Schools developed in the newly decentralised order and greater uniformity thereby ensued in scribal education, evolving away from the master-apprentice relationship. However, the capital city (Itjtawy) retained the premier school in the Middle Kingdom (Wenke 1995).

Conclusion

Writing was a tool for economic manipulation. U-j’s tomb contained quantities of imported vessels from Palestine (Postgate et al. 1995). The symbols would have assisted in recording the transactions and in marking the goods. While writing was accommodated into the developing royal iconography, its primary purpose during the Predynastic was therefore accountancy. As the unification occurred, iconography, manufacturing production and the emergent writing system came under the direct control of the central court (Kemp 1989).

Scribes of the First and Second dynasties can be hypothesised to have been high-ranking clerks with direct authority, influence and power. The breakdown of the Old Kingdom, with its attendant closely-knit bureaucracy, brought about increased provincialism.

The examples of literacy and military writings from the First Intermediate Period reinforce the viewpoint that the scribal profession was progressively becoming more

open in terms of its breadth as well as increasing in prestige amongst other government apparatus. The first mention of a scribal school comes from the First Intermediate Period (Wenke 1995). The government, from the Middle Kingdom onwards, ranked scribes alongside officials in terms of status and it became mandatory for officials and priests to write (Roccati 1990).

The archaeological record from the Middle Kingdom has also yielded numerous literary texts from tombs, for edification purposes and/or to serve a roll in the afterlife. The Satire of Trade is evidence that the scribal profession was not exclusive and there was an expansionist ideology at work recruiting, at least from the start of the Twelfth Dynasty.

Literacy was required to perform the religious and temple rituals. Some reputed authors of Middle Kingdom texts were viziers (Baines 1983), which further illustrates the regard in which scribal education was held and the power which such educated officials could aspire to wield.

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