

Beijing Forum 2019

Writing Practice in Early Civilizations: Origins, Formation and Circulation (I)

On the Morning of November 2nd, the sub-forum Five of Beijing Forum (2019) was held at the Meeting Room No. 2, Yingjie Exchange Center, Peking University. The theme was “Writing Practice in Early Civilizations: Origins, Formation and Circulation”, and all scholars focused on ancient Egyptian writing.

The first presenter was Professor Andréas Staider from EPHE, who shared his research on “Visual Signs Evolving into Early Writing: Explorations and Contexts in Late Fourth Millennium Egypt”. He explained that early Egyptian writing emerged in relation to state formation, but not as a technology for coding and transmitting information in any narrow sense. Rather, it developed as part of an increasingly refined aesthetic culture. In various practices, some visual signs evolved into signs of writing. The process concerned multiple interrelated dimensions, such as their particular contexts of use. One of the cultural factors of early phoneticism was name, including emblematic names, logographic names, and phonetic names; the other fact was the background of the iconicity of the signs. These early contexts helped to shape the forms of later Egyptian writing, and to make it distinctively hieroglyphic.

The second presenter was Professor Ivan Guerneur of EPHE, whose topic was “Hieratic Script and Standardization”. Hieratic was the simplified cursive counterpart of hieroglyphs, which was usually found on non-monumental materials like papyrus, leather, ceramic or wood. Over time, besides the elegant uncial script developed for copying texts of a religious or literary character, there appeared also a cursive “business hieratic” reserved for administration and correspondence. From the 1st millennium BCE onwards, this business hieratic became an extremely abbreviated and ligatures script called “abnormal hieratic” in the Theban region, while demotic developed in the north of the land during the 7th century BCE stimulated by the Sais Dynasty, which finally established itself throughout the country in the mid-6th century. Demotic was subsequently used for all administrative and epistolary documents, and the hieratic script was used exclusively in literary, scientific, religious, ritual or funerary texts. From this moment onwards, the individual hand of a copist becomes difficult to distinguish. Between the 7th century BCE and the 2nd century CE, the

development of hieratic was very slow, and the only major progress was the introduction of a new writing instrument, the kalamos.

The third presenter was postdoctoral researcher Wen Jing from Tsinghua University. She shared her topic on “The Ritual Function of Ancient Egyptian: Private Funerary Texts in the Old Kingdom”. She considered that, as early as the Old Kingdom, ancient Egyptian writing began to play an essential role in both daily life and religious rituals. Inscriptions in private tombs ritually expressed the identification of the tomb owner. Through writing, the ancient Egyptian defined the existence of the dead. People wrote to their dead relatives in return for their protection and bless. All these writings were language games that took the living and the dead as players. The process of writing and reading thus became an everlasting ritual to span time and space.

The fourth presenter was Professor Pascal Vernus of EPHE, whose topic focused on “Writing and ‘Restricted Semiographies’: Clarifying Their Relationships in Light of the Ancient Egyptian Data”. He explained that one of the basic practices of the human societies is the use of graphically materialized codes to store, display and carry information. He suggested that these codes be called “semiographies”. There should be a clear distinction between writing and semiographies. Since in its essence writing carries definite linguistic utterances, it reflects the paramount hallmark of the language, that is to say, the capacity of expressing the infinity of the possible worlds with a finite number of signs. On the contrary, semiographies are unable to attain such an extraordinary semiotic power. However, writing and semiographies are not wholly alien to each other. Ancient Egyptian writing and semiographies shared a part of their signs because of their common cultural legacy and because they were manipulated by social groups that often had much in common.

The fifth presenter was lecturer Huang Qingjiao from CAFA, and her topic was “Ancient Egyptian Secrecy and Identity Expression in Greco-Roman Egyptian Period”. Secret knowledge was an important character of ancient Egyptian culture. It was a way of expression for the Egyptian elite while facing the world around themselves. Secret knowledge included astronomy, geography, ethical moral, political conceptions and religious rituals, which were products of the unequal distribution of knowledge in ancient Egyptian society. It was a symbol of power and identity. During the Greco-Roman period, secret knowledge was tightly connected with identity expression.

The last presenter should have been Professor Yan Haiying from Peking University.

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Unfortunately, she could not attend the forum, and Wen Jing introduced Professor Yan's topic "Amduat and Resurrection Ritual". Amduat was one of the classical funerary texts in New Kingdom showing the characters of the religion of this period. The combination of the Sun-god and Osiris was crucial, since it was necessary for resurrection. Amduat contained the knowledge for both the living and the dead, and the core theme was the blending of the king and the Sun-god/Osiris for the purpose of resurgence, which was a powerful stabilizer in ancient Egyptian society.