John Baines, Cao Dazhi 曹大志

Material, Spatial, and Social Contexts of Early Writing: Egypt and China

Abstract: The earliest Egyptian complex sign system was ancestral to the scripts that developed from around 3100 BCE onward. In China the first writing is not securely attested until *c*. 1400–1250. In both civilisations the principal writing media were perishable and are lost but must be allowed for. Both systems had two realisations, one more pictorial and less cursive than the other. Egypt retained this feature, whereas it disappeared in China from *c*. 1050. Display inscriptions included titles relating to king and court. Shang 商 dynasty titles written with pictorial signs are generally termed 'clan emblems'. Interpretation as titles provides a more consistent reading, rendering desirable a rethinking of administrative structures. Kings manipulated titles as an instrument of control, as is exemplified by rather later inscriptions.

1 Introduction

In both Egypt and China, writing emerged from societal contexts in which information that might be transmitted verbally had no clear counterpart in visual forms. Over some centuries in Egypt, from the late fourth to the early third millennium BCE and through several phases, there developed first a way of recording meanings through a limited repertory of signs, and then a double, some centuries later triple, form of visual notation that conveyed all the essential features of the Egyptian language. That language stabilized gradually in writing, in forms that remained largely normative for millennia, despite changes in its spoken counterpart that included a fundamental transformation of its syntax.

Scripts, the visual contexts in which they were used, and the language were essential to the definition of Egyptian civilisation. At the same time as writing developed, oral and bodily practices that were no doubt equally essential took on forms that endured, although probably in more flexible and less slowly changing realisations. Whether these included writing displayed on the human body and its coverings is unknown, but parallels in Western Zhou China, where some inscriptions on bronzes narrate that inscribed artefacts documenting the award of privileges were attached ceremonially to a belt, remind us of that pos-

sibility (see Section 4 below). In this chapter we address more the written than the oral side of the domains just evoked. Nonetheless, the visual and material residues of writing, as well as the contexts for which evidence is available, would not have existed or have had meaning without the lived, oral setting, which must be borne constantly in mind.

China offers an altogether longer background than Egypt for the use of sign systems in predecessor societies, with graphic signs on elite ceramics stretching back into the later Neolithic, up to two millennia before the late second millennium, from which the script is well attested. So far, there is no consensus about how Chinese writing originated, what period is the earliest for which a writing system should be posited, how far the older graphic systems – which consisted of altogether fewer elements than the signs in the writing system – influenced it, or indeed which systems should come into consideration. Nonetheless, the visual character of the script, which was created and gradually acquired a distinctive appearance of its own, was surely influenced by its elite visual environment. Here, we seek to take into account Paola Demattè's arguments in her *The Origins of Chinese Writing* (2022), in which she valuably covers both writing as it is generally understood and the wider background of graphic systems, while pursuing the possible origin of writing further back than can be attested archaeologically.[1] The prime examples we use date to the Anyang period (安陽), corresponding to the last nine kings of the Shang 商 dynasty of traditional texts (*c.* 1250–1050 BCE); this was at least a couple of centuries after the initial development of writing. Later in this chapter we discuss aspects of Late Shang/Anyang and Western Zhou 周 evidence that offer enlightening parallels for Egyptian material mainly of the Old Kingdom (later third millennium BCE). Here, we build upon the approach that Cao Dazhi has developed and published in several articles (see Section 4 below).

---

1 Li Feng and Branner 2011 includes several chapters relevant to the earliest writing in China. We do not refer to them in this section because points in them that are valuable for our discussion are incorporated in other references we give.

Table 1: Early Egypt: very approximate, rounded dates.

Predynastic period	
Naqada IIA–C	*c.* 3450–3250
Naqada IIIA, B; 'dynasty 0'	*c.* 3250–3050
Early Dynastic period	
First dynasty	*c.* 3050–2850
Second dynasty	*c.* 2850–2700
Third dynasty	*c.* 2700–2625
Old Kingdom	
Fourth dynasty	*c.* 2625–2475
Fifth dynasty	*c.* 2475–2325
Sixth dynasty	*c.* 2325–2175

After a presentation of the two cases, the discussions below address two principal issues. The first concerns a characteristic that the earliest Egypt evidence and that of Anyang period China share, which is the presence of more than one set of graphic forms. In the Egyptian case, for the earliest phase of which we use the term sign-system rather than writing in order to leave some issues open, two styles are present in the find of Tomb U-j at Abydos, the earliest and most informative source, where they were applied to different material supports and at different scales (for dates, see Table 1).[2] In China too, two main surviving categories of material support – oracle bones and ritual bronzes – bear writing, but they use the same basic system (little writing survives on other non-perishable media). On the main prestige medium of bronzes a distinctive style of inscription was used in the Xiaoshuangqiao and Anyang periods for a very much more limited range of signs than occur in standard writing (see Section 3 below). This was much more formal and pictorial than the writing known from oracle bones; the latter began to be widely adopted on bronzes near the end of the Anyang period.

---

2 Fundamental publication: Dreyer, Hartung and Pumpenmeier 1998. We approach this material evidence along lines similar to Stauder 2021, whose brilliant discussion readers may wish to compare with our summary treatment.

Table 2: China: Central Plain chronology for Early Bronze Age; dates rounded.

Central Plain chronology	
Erlitou (Luoyang)	*c.* 1800–1500 BCE
Erligang (Zhengzhou; Early Shang)	*c.* 1500–1350 BCE
Xiaoshuangqiao/Huanbei	*c.* 1350–1250 BCE
Anyang/Yinxu (Late Shang)	*c.* 1250–1050 BCE
Western Zhou	*c.* 1050–771 BCE

A second issue that has longer-term ramifications is how and in which contexts kings and elites used writing to control and display status, and for what audiences. Here, Egyptian and Chinese bodies of evidence diverge strongly. Relevant Egyptian material spans more than a millennium, from about 3250–2150 BCE (hieroglyphic writing continued to be used in display throughout later times). By contrast, the Chinese sources we address are mostly of the Anyang and early Western Zhou periods (*c.* 1250–950 BCE), developing up to that point and beyond, into the fuller narrative and discursive context of long inscriptions on bronzes, as well as almost certainly on other, lost media. Egyptian and Chinese usage evolved in different directions, but the approaches of rulers to elites and elite display in the two contexts can be profitably compared. Interpretation of the meaning of the Chinese material relates closely to issues connected with the presence of more and less pictorial and formal styles of writing, whereas that is less the case for Egypt. A high proportion of display in both traditions is in contexts relating to the dead, in China notably in the ancestor cult but not restricted to it.

Both for Egypt and for China, the aesthetic context of writing is essential. Egyptian hieroglyphic writing remained tied to the symbolic domain of high-cultural works of art throughout its history of more than three millennia. Many centuries passed before inscribed hieroglyphic texts of any length began to be publicly visible, in the entrance areas of non-royal elite tombs of the late third millennium BCE, as well as perhaps in much less well attested royal monumental complexes. In China of the Erligang, Anyang, and Western Zhou periods, 'decorative' patterns rather than pictorial representation were at the core of surviving art, with the premier medium of bronzes – mostly vessels but also other types – acquiring writing, but not in visually salient settings. Pattern and writing remained separate, with writing mainly on vessel interiors and not immediately visible to the living (see further Section 3 below). As noted above, in Anyang times this writing had two realisations. These are a style of monograms and short groups with enhanced pictorial content that is widely termed 'clan

signs/emblems' and is the form found on bronzes; and the standard script that is found on vast numbers of oracle bones, which exhibits rather simple and rigid sign forms that are constrained by the recalcitrant medium.[3] For both Egyptian and Chinese traditions, mundane writing on perishable materials for administrative and other cultural purposes was very probably present, but apart from a few brush-written signs on oracle bones it hardly survives.[4] In both cases it is an open question how long it was before writing became central to administration. Even when it had acquired that status, administration possessed prestige alongside practical utility (or as some scholars emphasize, often at the expense of utility),[5] and this continues to be the case today.

There is no evidence that the earliest writing was used in monumental contexts. While such usages could be undiscoverable if they were practised on perishable media and in contexts inaccessible to archaeology, nothing points toward their having existed in the systems' initial stages of development. The only partial exception is the presence of rock art bearing Egyptian royal names from just before the Dynastic period and around its beginning. The relevant sites, however, are outside the settled area of Egypt even if sometimes very near it, and they exploited an existing mode of display in desert regions; they should probably be seen as adaptations of emerging practices of writing to a special context, rather than primary influences on it.[6] We know of no indication that the earliest Chinese writing was used on monuments; there too, however, it is improbable that any material that may have existed would survive to be discovered.

Writing has effects in the lived world, in many different ways. We mention below how in the Egyptian case key concepts could be materialized in hieroglyphic form in order to be rendered visible in action. This type of usage, which is on the fringes of both images and writing, has parallels almost everywhere, and it appears to have been particularly important in the earliest stages of writing.[7] In Western cultures, heraldry offers a compelling instance of a similar phenomenon that originated in periods of low literacy but has survived into the present.

Our comparison of bodies of evidence from the earliest accessible periods in the use of writing in Egypt and China can itself be compared with Anthony Barbieri-Low's treatment of the two societies through contrasting themes for later periods in his illuminating book *Ancient Egypt and Early China: State, Soci-*

**3** For background on oracle bones, see e.g. Keightley 2000; Thorp 2006, 173–185.

4 See notably Qiu Xigui 2000, 60–67; Bagley 2004.

5 For later periods in Egypt, see e.g. Eyre 2009.

6 Hardtke et al. 2022.

7 Compare Dahl 2023 for Iran.

ety, and Culture.[8] Like him, we select our materials on the basis of their thematic similarities, not in terms of absolute chronology. Our topics are separate from his. Neither of us can emulate his parallel expertise in the two traditions.
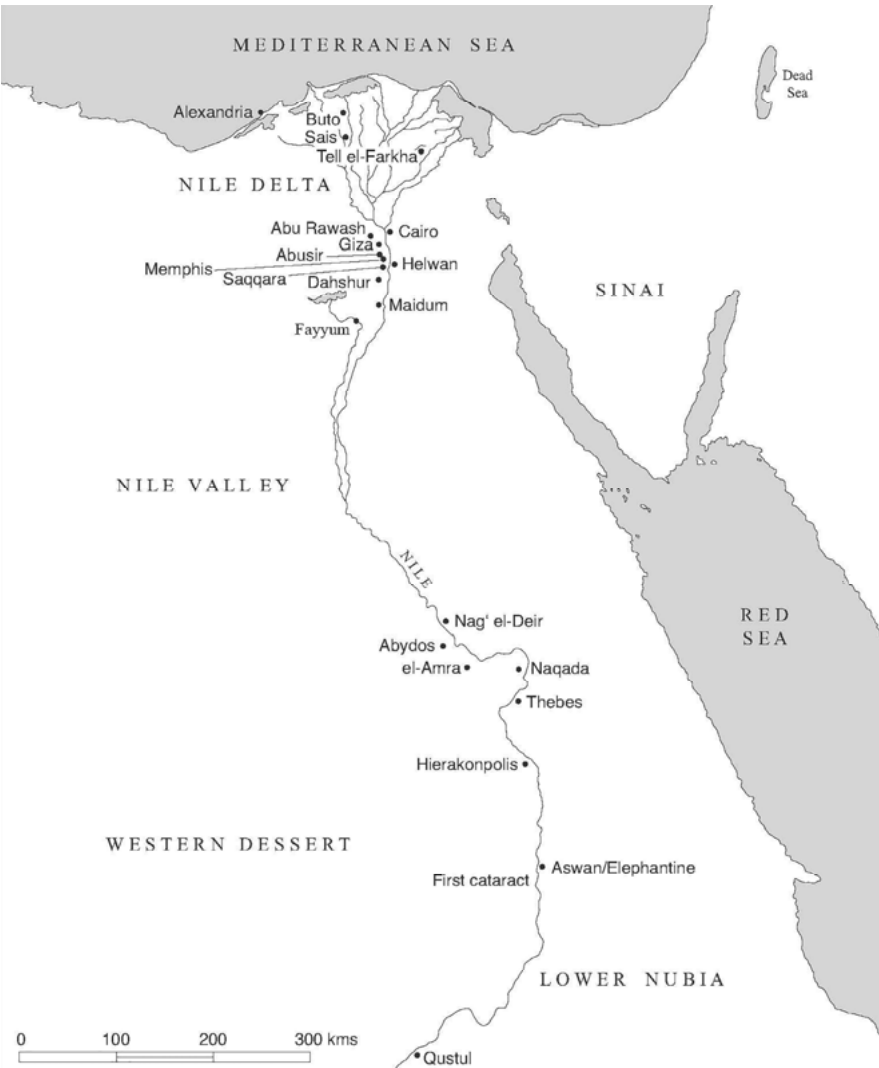
Fig. 1: Map of Egypt in early periods. Drawn by Alison Wilkins.

---

8 Barbieri-Low 2021.

2 The emergence of writing in Egypt

In Egypt, Tomb U-j at Abydos (see the map in Fig. 1), which was probably the burial of a ruler, has produced the earliest surviving examples of a complex sign system, dating from Naqada IIIA, *c.* 3200 BCE (see the chronology, Table 1).[9] The system has two realisations that hardly overlap: miniature signs carved into rectangular bone tags (Fig. 2), typically around 1.5 cm high, the majority of which bear two characters (some of them filled with pigment); and very large, relatively untidy signs, mostly single, painted in black on crude ceramic vessels (Fig. 3). The signs on both media are well and confidently executed; the system is unlikely to have been devised for the funeral and burial of the tomb's occupant. It is not known what the U-j sign system communicates. Günter Dreyer proposed that it recorded the sources of the goods to which the tags were attached and the contents of the vessels. His readings seem plausible, but they have been questioned, and some of his assumptions are backward projections of phenomena attested from later times. The material is too scant for confident interpretation. David Wengrow has pointed out additionally that the tags appear to have been produced in groups and might have been made for the funeral.[10]

The miniature signs on the tags are similar in appearance to later hieroglyphs, with which they share the characteristic of including a number of species of birds in the repertory (the extent of which is not known). Several signs depict important cultural features, notably the 'palace façade' motif, a throne, and what is known from later as the shrine of Upper Egypt. These representations of large pieces of material culture relate to an environment of buildings and furniture that were originally created in reeds and mudbrick. The co-presence of reeds and brick – the latter also being the material of Tomb U-j – suggests that the reed elements may have been material tokens of a disappearing but symbolically important tradition, not least because the palace façade motif was itself a transformation into brick of a pattern originally created in organic materials, as was the case also in ancient Mesopotamia.

---

9 For the tags and signs on the vessels, see Stauder 2021; discussion of the aesthetic context, Baines 2010.
10 Wengrow 2008.

Fig. 2: Sample bone tags from Tomb U-j at Abydos. Naqada IIIA, *c.* 3200 BCE. Courtesy Deutsches Archäologisches Institut, Abteilung Kairo.

Fig. 3: Inscribed pots 2/1 and 5/8 from Tomb U-j at Abydos. Naqada IIIA, *c.* 3200 BCE. Courtesy Deutsches Archäologisches Institut, Abteilung Kairo.

No palace, temple, or elite settlement of the period has been discovered. With exceptions at Hierakonpolis and in the Nile delta,[11] such elements were probably set on the floodplain beside the river and cannot be recovered. But the elite goods, of which the thoroughly plundered Tomb U-j produced tantalizing fragments of exquisite quality, may have been displayed in a rather plain environment, within which there was craftsmanship of a high order, notably in textiles and other forms of weaving, as well as a strong emphasis on colour. The practice of sealing, which had been introduced in the previous couple of centuries,

---

11 Hierakonpolis: see McNamara 2008; Tell el-Farkha: Ciałowicz, Czarnowicz and Chłodnicki 2018.

provides the clearest pointer to the types of context and material out of which the sign system emerged.

The U-j seal designs build upon those of the preceding Naqada II phase, while going beyond them and introducing a new level of complexity.[12] Five seal designs that have been reconstructed from fragmentary impressions found in the tomb use a paradoxical strategy of setting a rectangular field of decoration against a background pattern, as if what is shown is an impression of a seal on a fabric or, for example, basketry (Fig. 4); a similar treatment is attested for Proto-Elamite sealings from Iran. There is a pervasive miniaturisation, together with a focus on the animal world. Pattern is used largely as a background, within which the rectangular fields contain mainly discrete elements that include a human-made standard as well as a motif similar to the later *ka* sign (a pair of spread human arms joined to form three sides of a rectangle); these are schematic and of uncertain identification. Just one surviving motif is human, showing a man holding a stick and stretching his other arm forward. Two characteristics of these compositions seem significant: the pictorial character of major elements in the rectangular fields; and the separation of most of the motifs from one another, so that they do not interact straightforwardly. Hieroglyphic signs, including those of the beginning of the Dynastic period, were probably created in a setting that included a comparable visual language of images that are grouped at arbitrary scales and mostly do not touch one another.

The signs on vessels could be forerunners of later cursive scripts, but their large size suggests that their function in context was to act as a display more than to convey specific information, perhaps being exhibited during the funeral and/or in the deposition of grave goods in the tomb. The repertory includes emblems on poles, a post or tree, palm fronds, bucrania on poles, shells, and a fish. All of these are objects are attested as display items, notably in reliefs on palettes and on decorated ivories (although the fish may seem a little out of place). Thus, bucrania are depicted as prominent motifs on architecture, while palm fronds are shown on the prows of boats (and remain symbols of celebration to this day). This usage may thus have adapted an existing practice of pot-marking for a new purpose.

Both groups of signs are pictorial. Apart from natural phenomena such as birds, the repertories of what they depict belong in the elite milieu, either through being used locally, like the buildings mentioned above, or because they were arduously acquired imports, such as the elephants on the tags and seashells on the pots.

---

12 Hartung 1998.

Type I

Type II

Type III

Type IV

Type V
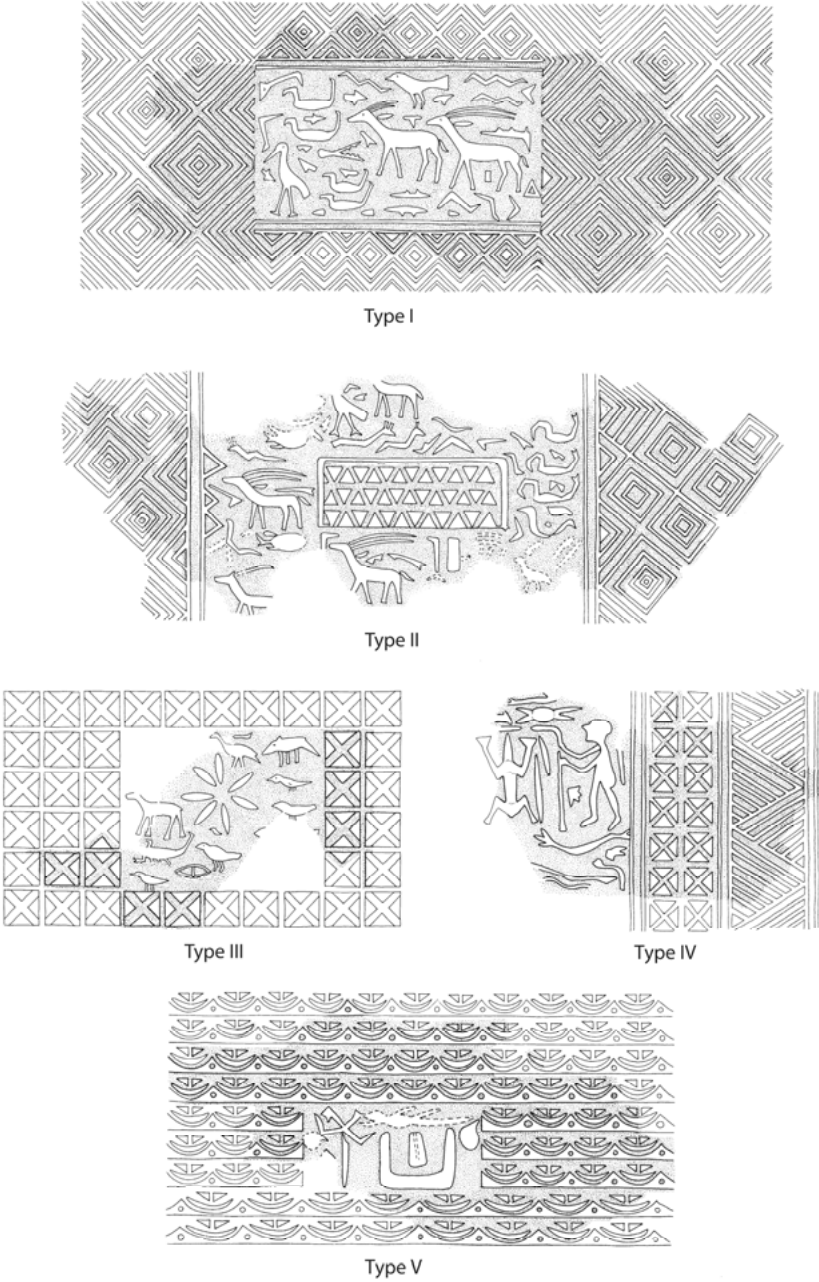
Fig. 4: Reconstructed seal designs from clay impressions from Abydos Tomb U-j. After Dreyer, Hartung and Pumpenmeier 1998, 109, fig. 72. Naqada IIIA, *c.* 3200 BCE.

Fig. 5a: The Hunters' Palette, probably from Abydos. Height *c*. 64 cm. Siltstone. London, British Museum, EA 20790 and EA 20792, Paris, Louvre, E 11254. After Smith 1949, 111, fig. 25. Naqada IIIA, *c*. 3200 BCE.
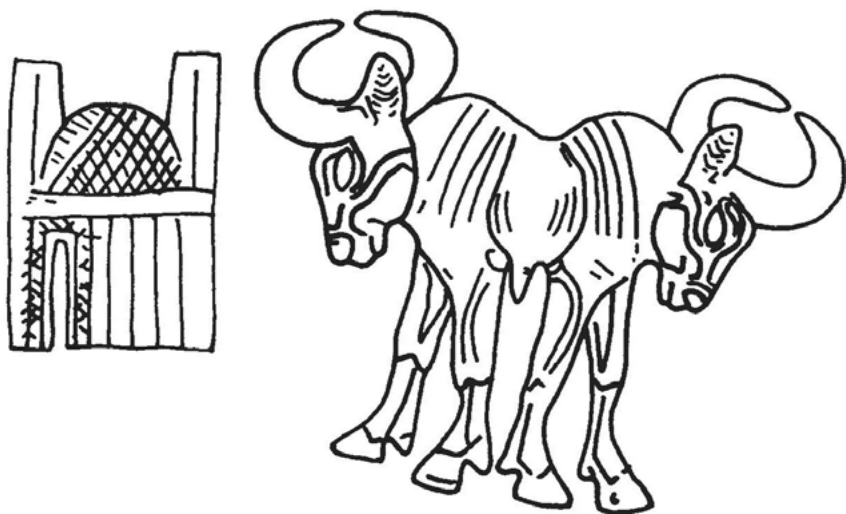
Fig. 5b: Enlarged drawing of the detail at top right in Fig. 5a.

On present evidence, the U-j sign system was an isolated phenomenon: nothing comparable is known from before or from the following century or more. The only possibly related object is the 'Hunters' Palette' (Fig. 5a), a piece of unknown provenance and now divided between the British Museum and the Louvre, that shows an elaborate elite hunt, with in its top right corner a pair of signs/motifs of a reed building and a double bull (Fig. 5b). These cannot form a direct part of the scene, and we suggest that they notate a king's identity. The signs are unique and can hardly be set within a history of writing, but their presence in a pictorial setting of stylistically more familiar character suggests that they, or just as probably their visual environments, were ancestral to the later integration of hieroglyphs – indeed their almost obligatory presence – in elite pictorial compositions.

Andréas Stauder argues that the U-j system should be evaluated on its own terms and that it is too limited to constitute a writing system in the sense of something that notates language.[13] In that respect, it has parallels with a number of other early systems, with the difference that it had a successor, seemingly after a gap, in a dual writing system with pictorial and cursive realisations. Probably both images and the marking of pots continued in the century or more after Tomb U-j, but in contexts that have not been discovered or identified. A rich range of images and three-dimensional works, such as other palettes, finds

---

13 This is the prime topic of Stauder 2021.

from the Main Deposit at Hierakonpolis,[14] and a deposit from Tell el-Farkha in the Nile delta,[15] may include objects that belong within this gap. If securely dated material becomes known, it may be possible to situate these assemblages more precisely; but very few of these pieces bear writing.

From Naqada IIIB or dynasty 0 (*c.* 3150–3050 BCE), there is clear evidence of writing that uses signs with phonetic values to notate words in the Egyptian language. The sign repertory includes some uniconsonantal signs, and by the mid-first dynasty, around a century later, almost the whole range of these is attested.[16] This change demonstrates that those who devised the script analysed the language as a language. From this point onward, there is no doubt that a script in the normal sense was present. It drew on very much the same cultural store of visual conventions as the U-j system, but at present it is impossible to say whether the latter influenced the former. The cursive form of the script, which is attested primarily in ink on pottery, is considerably abbreviated from full pictorial forms, suggesting it developed for at least some decades, perhaps corresponding to dynasty 0, which was a period of uniform culture over the Nile Valley and delta. The examples on pots are mainly annotations with royal names and information about the source of vessels or their contents.[17] Pottery is not a good primary medium for writing – although secondary writing on sherds became very common – and the existence of the ink cursive suggests that at the same date there was ink writing on organic surfaces. Egyptologists generally apply the term 'hieratic' only to cursive writing from about the third dynasty onward,[18] that is, from a date when a significant repertory of signs is attested, but we would argue that hieratic emerged from the existing cursive and is better not separated from it.[19] Systems of incised or painted potmarks that do not constitute writing predated the ink cursive and existed alongside it, in a pattern that must have limited the latter's range of use. Among possible organic media for writing, papyrus is not attested until more than a century later, around 2950 BCE, but it could have been invented already; or other materials such as bone – also attested for hieroglyphic writing – or palm products could have been used. Because almost all finds come from the desert and burial areas, the picture they give of the spread of writing is almost certainly unrepresentative.

---

14 Whitehouse 2002, with references.

15 See Ciałowicz 2011.

16 Morenz 2021, 80–85.

17 Kaiser and Dreyer 1982, 263, fig. 14, pl. 58.

18 Regulski 2009.

19 An intermediate script form, cursive or 'linear' hieroglyphic, is attested from the mid-third millennium BCE onward.

Fig. 6: Tomb stela of King Wadj of the first dynasty (*c.* 2950 BCE), with decoration consisting of his Horus name, from Abydos. Original height 2.5 metres, perhaps 40% below ground. Paris, Louvre, E 11007. Courtesy Hirmer Fotoarchiv München.

Fig. 7: Stela of Merika from Tomb 3505 at Saqqara. Limestone. Height of inscribed area 130 cm. End of first dynasty, *c.* 2900 BCE. After Emery 1958, 30–31, pl. 39.

Alongside the cursive, the hieroglyphic script was in active use. We mention the two in this order because, although cursive is a simplification of the more pictorial hieroglyphic, it was no doubt already the vast majority of writing. Both the writing system and its contexts of use developed greatly during the first dynasty. Perhaps the most striking change is the creation of large-scale inscribed monuments. Stelae well over a metre high bearing the names of kings were set up at their tombs (Fig. 6), whereas those buried in subsidiary tombs had small and crude hieroglyphic markers that were perhaps placed in the grave with them.[20] At the dynasty's end, the privilege of a large and lasting tomb stela was extended to one or two very high officials (Fig. 7; see also below, Section 4). In other contexts, the inherited restriction of such display to relatively small objects seems to have continued. The hieroglyphic script is often termed 'monumental', but a key characteristic of Egyptian art and its use of writing is its near-indifference to scale, a point that applies also to the core term in the Egyptian language: *mnw*, often rendered 'monument', refers to anything a king commissioned or created that was of lasting value, including quite small inscribed objects. At what would now be termed a monumental scale, writing often could not be read because viewers could not get close enough to it, so that it had an effect more of completeness and cultural significance – functions of writing that are common across the world – than of conveying linguistic meaning. Such usages often carry a message of privilege and exclusion.

A further characteristic of the emergent hieroglyphic system is that some single hieroglyphs notating important ideas possessed or acquired an autonomous form that could be used to display agency in pictorial compositions or in mixed pictorial-textual ones. These signs could also be shown with human limbs to render that agency more explicit.[21] The prime example of this is the sign for 'life' ☥ (*ꜥnḫ*/*ankh*), which depicts something like a looped and knotted strip of cloth, with likely amuletic associations.[22] A relief on a miniature ivory cylinder shows the god Horus giving the sign to King Narmer (or Narmeher), who is represented by the catfish hieroglyph of his name with added human arms smiting his enemies (Fig. 8).[23] Quite quickly the *ankh*-sign came to be used as a separate monumental element, notably along with *ḏd* 'duration', and *wꜣs* 'power'.[24] In later periods all these hieroglyphs were also made into artefacts. The sign for

---

20 Martin 2011.

21 Baines 1985, 41–63.

22 Not mentioned by Wendrich 2006, or Quack 2022, 84–98.

23 Whitehouse 2002, 434, fig. 4.

24 Fischer 1972.

'god' (*nṯr*), which is derived from a pole displaying a pennant, went through a similar process.[25] A comparable materialisation of signs is found alongside the earliest Mesopotamian (Uruk IV and Jemdet Nasr) and Iranian (Proto-Elamite) writing (*c.* 3200–2800 BCE), with emblems of place and of deities being used as discrete units of meaning in pictorial scenes (Fig. 9).[26]
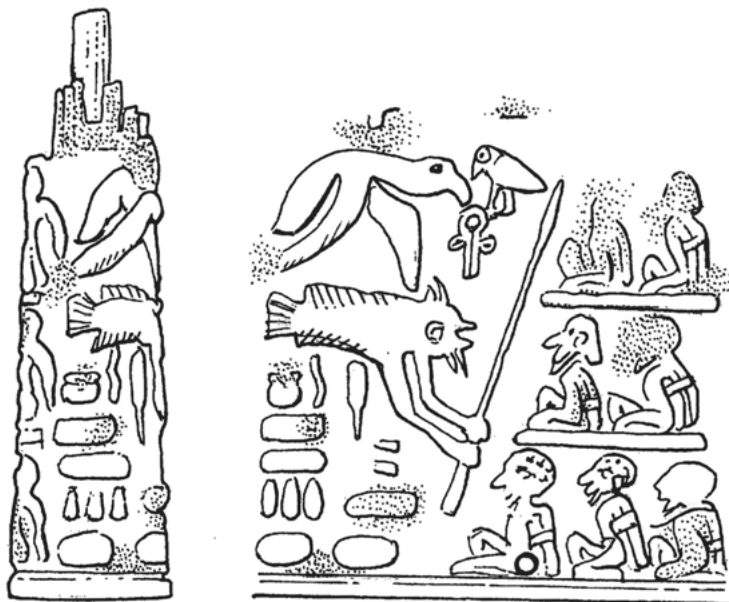
Fig. 8: Ivory cylinder of King Narmer (or Narmeher) from Hierakonpolis. Dynasty 0, *c.* 3050 BCE. Height 5.5 cm. Oxford, Ashmolean Museum, E.3915. Drawing by Marion Cox.

Despite the *ankh*-sign's seemingly ordinary background, it acquired great prestige, being depicted as held in the hands of deities. It is altogether less common even on figures of kings, as well as hardly ever being shown with non-royal people and never in an everyday setting; it is also rare as an amulet.[27] Thus, the usage of symbolically-laden hieroglyphs could become completely detached from their origin, functioning within the conventions of writing and images. For more than 1500 years, cursive writing, which was altogether less symbolically

---

25 Baines 1990.

26 Englund 1998, 102, fig. 31; Dahl 2023.

27 Quack 2022, 55, 265.

freighted than hieroglyphs, was only very exceptionally used in pictorial contexts. It was possible to transpose text from one system into the other, but their usages overlapped rather little, except where cursive script was used in preparing drafts for hieroglyphic inscriptions.
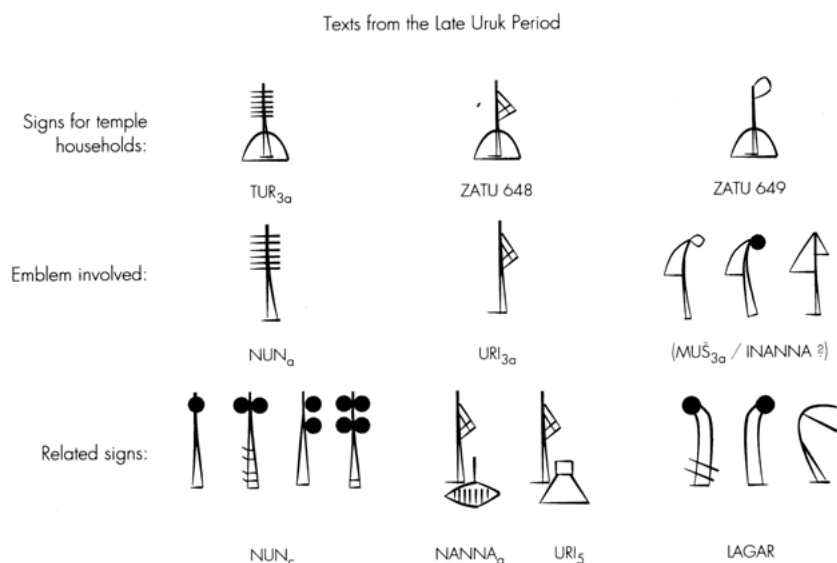
Fig. 9: Signs representing probable temple households on archaic Mesopotamian tablets from Uruk (*c.* 3200 BCE). After Englund 2006, 14, fig. 8.

By the end of the second dynasty, and plausibly up to a century earlier, hieroglyphic and its cursive counterpart had been extended to be used for texts in continuous syntax. We do not discuss that development here, but at the end of this chapter we analyse a text in continuous hieroglyphic script. On monuments, hieroglyphic writing was subordinate in status to images while also being essential to them, in an interplay that continued until the end of Egyptian civilisation. Inscriptions in hieroglyphs without accompanying images that were not integrated into an architectural setting were uncommon. The earliest plausible examples are of the fifth dynasty (*c.* 2400 BCE), but they happen to be on loose blocks that cannot be confidently placed in context.[28]

---

28 Hassan 1932, 81, pl. 18; Sethe 1933, 232; Brunner 1965, pl. 2; Brunner 1968 (correction to reading).

3 Early writing in Central Plain China

In China writing is first attested from the Early Bronze Age (see the chronology on Table 2).[29] The first Bronze Age phase on the Central Plain is named for Erlitou 二里頭, a very large site east of modern Luoyang 洛陽 (see the map in Fig. 10).[30] Excavations there have yielded finds of the earliest bronze vessels, the prestige medium that developed for more than a millennium, as well as elaborate forms of hardstone jewellery, but no definite writing. Graphic signs that are found on bone and pottery, including a few quite complex examples, are similar in appearance to those of both earlier and later periods, demonstrating a marked cultural continuity. Examples in pottery of important ritual vessel shapes that were later realized in bronze strengthen this impression of continuity. Thus, writing could have emerged alongside graphic usages that were present in the Erlitou phase, some of them inherited from earlier – significant urban sites appeared in the late Neolithic – but the juncture at which this happened could also have been a little later. Sites in the Central Plain are not favourable to the preservation of most organic materials, so that the patterning of finds cannot be a decisive criterion for identifying when writing appeared.

The Erligang 二里崗 phase, following Erlitou, was a state-level society, of a much larger scale than Erlitou, that expanded in many directions.[31] Its type-site is within the modern city of Zhengzhou 鄭州. This location makes detailed exploration impossible, but limited areas of sites around the city have been excavated. Moreover, culturally Erligang sites have been found over a vast distance. They include many bronzes, some of enormous scale (Fig. 11), weighing up to 150 kilograms and demonstrating great technical mastery, as well as having vessel forms that remained in use for over a millennium, decorated with patterns that continued to be developed for many centuries. Most are uninscribed.

---

29 For background to this section, see Demattè 2022.
30 Demattè 2022, 228–237; for Erlitou and Erligang, see also Wang Haicheng 2014, 41–43, 176–180.
31 Steinke and Ching 2014, with essays therein.
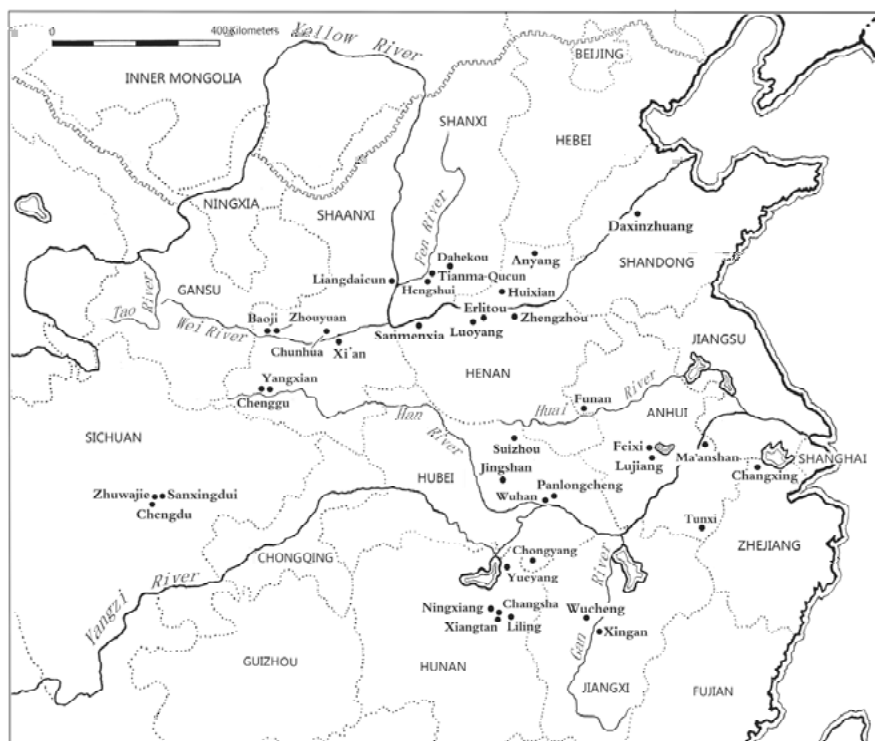
Fig. 10: Map of significant sites in China, Erlitou to Western Zhou periods (*c*. 1800–750 BCE). Drawn by Li Xiating 李夏廷.

From the 1950s onward just a few inscribed potsherds were found at sites in the Zhengzhou area, and their dating was controversial. The discovery in the late 1990s of comparable inscribed artefacts in secure archaeological contexts at the large site of Xiaoshuangqiao 小雙橋, north-west of Zhengzhou, established that the previous finds were not anomalous. This material dates to the late Erligang phase – up to a century before the Anyang period – that is often named for Xiaoshuangqiao or Huanbei 洹北, a capital site across the Huan river (Huanhe 洹河) from the later Yinxu 殷墟 site at Anyang.[32]

---

32 Demattè 2022, 246–250 (including potmarks belonging to systems that we do not consider here).

Fig. 11: *Ding* 鼎 discovered in 1982 in a cache of Erligang period bronzes in Zhengzhou; *c.* 1500 BCE. Photographed after conservation. Height *c.* 70 cm. After Tōkyō Kokuritsu Hakubutsukan 1986, 63, no. 32.

The clearest instances of writing from Xiaoshuangqiao were found in ritual deposits. The writing is in red on sherds from large ceramic vessels, and the colour is suggestive of mortuary rituals (Fig. 12a).[33] Writing is also found on jade and bone amulets from Huanbei (Fig. 12b–c). The material shows significant continuity with the subsequent Anyang period, notably in graphs for 'chief' (大, *da* [formerly read *tian*]) and 'deputy' (亞, *ya*). These are attested as levels in elite hierarchies of the Anyang period, and it is most economical to posit that they meant much the same in the predecessor period, when the polity was already very large. The publication of the material includes a table showing equivalences between Xiaoshuangqiao writing and the later forms found at Anyang (Fig. 13). The media are paint on ceramic and incised graphs on hardstone objects, but not ink on organic media, which would not survive in the local terrain but

---

33 Song Guoding 2004; Wang Haicheng 2014, 179–180.

may very well have been employed at the same date, as they were in later times. The writing's range of usage is thus unknown. It is also unknown to what extent it notated the syntax of the archaic Chinese language. The earliest inscribed bronzes come from the Zhengzhou area and may date to the Xiaoshuangqiao phase.[34] Their inscriptions are not more than three characters long. Most examples are in the pictorial style discussed below.

a   b   c

Fig. 12a–c: Sherd from large ceramic vessel with red graph in cinnabar. Excavated at Xiaoshuangqiao; *c.* 1350 BCE. After Song Guoding 2004, 99, fig. 2 (a); jade fish pendant (b) and bone spoon-shaped amulet (c) from Huanbei. Heights 6.7 and 5.5 cm. Fish in collection of Academia Sinica, Taiwan, spoon in collection of Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. After Li Yongdi 2009, 218, no. 205; Yue Hongbin, He Yuling and Yue Zhanwei 2004, pl. 18.3.

---

34 Demattè 2022, 266–273.

Fig. 13: Table of equivalences between Xiaoshuangqiao and Anyang sign forms. After Song Guoding 2004, 101, Table 1.

There is probably a gap of some decades in the record between Xiaoshuangqiao and the Anyang sites Yinxu, Xibeigang 西北冈, and related areas that have yielded the most important evidence for the Late Shang phase. Like Erligang, Anyang was a large polity reaching to great distances, for example north-east to

the sea coast in modern Shandong. Writing is attested in the first instance from enormous numbers of oracle bones – cattle scapulas and turtle plastrons – on which were incised notes about the divination carried out with those materials (e.g. Fig. 14). This method of divination was already ancient, but finds from earlier phases are uninscribed. Bone and shell are recalcitrant media for writing, and the forms of Anyang characters are somewhat geometric, neat but not flowing. The writing system is completely formed and fully capable of encoding the language, in what could have been its state of development at that time or a stage inherited from that written in an earlier phase of the script. Elsewhere in the world, writing systems invented from scratch have evolved for centuries before notating a language in full, and the Anyang system is likely to have come near the end of a similar trajectory. It is a matter of guesswork whether its development was contained within the two or three centuries from the beginning of Erligang to Anyang,[35] or whether initial steps were taken earlier, for example in Erlitou times.

Thousands of bronzes have been found at Anyang and other sites of the period;[36] they have also been in collections in China since early imperial times (last centuries BCE). Very large numbers of them are inscribed (e.g. Figs 15–16, with details of inscriptions), but their inscriptions do not strike the eye because they are placed on interior surfaces or in inconspicuous locations on the exterior, such as under a handle. The dominant visual feature of the vessels is their decoration, which proliferated greatly, often covering more of surfaces than in Erligang times and acquiring a sculptural character.[37] The decoration concentrates on pattern rather than image. The patterns relate to a world of largely imaginary animals, neither to human beings nor to depiction of the inhabited world. In the contexts we are discussing, decoration evidently had a higher status than inscription, rather as in many periods in ancient Egypt pictorial images had a higher status than writing. In both traditions of modern scholarship, the dominant position of philology has tended to sideline this rather obvious point. Unlike ancient Egyptian conventions, Xiaoshuangqiao and Anyang decoration and writing of the standard type were very largely incompatible.

---

35 As posited by Bagley 2004.

36 Demattè 2022, 258–261.

37 See Bagley 1987.
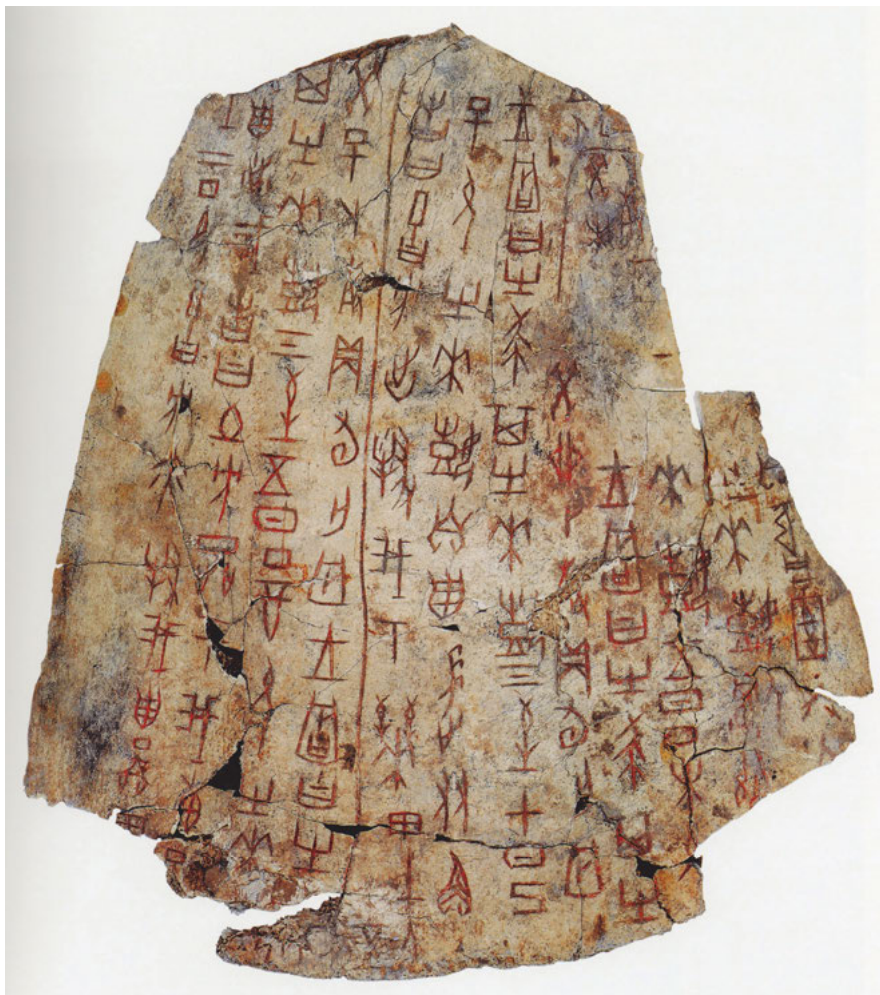
Fig. 14: Oracle bone on bovid scapula from Anyang, now in the National Museum of History, Beijing. Responses to divining about weekly fortunes are all negative, resulting in a series of disasters. *c.* 1200 BCE. After Pu Maozuo 2014, 256.

Fragmentary evidence shows that Anyang period decoration was not confined to bronzes but was pervasive both on other prestige artefacts and elsewhere in the ordered environment, and its motifs and character appear to have been similar in any context where it was used (Fig. 17). While the meanings that attached to it are largely unknown, its cultural salience is such as to make it seem perhaps a misnomer to call it 'decoration'. The only vessel types to bear writing

on the same surface as decoration are flat water dishes (*pan* 盤) that offer little or no other usable space (not illustrated in this chapter). On such dishes of the Anyang period the signs are small, not of the pictorial style discussed below, and placed so as not to interfere with the decoration, or to blend in and appear almost to be part of it. That usage changed in the Western Zhou period, when some *pan* surfaces bore long inscriptions but little or no decoration.

a   b

Fig. 15a–b: *Fangyi* 方彝 of the Anyang period. Bronze. Twelfth century BCE. Height with lid 30.2 cm. Cambridge, MA, Harvard Art Museums, 1943.52.109. Photo © President and Fellows of Harvard College (a). Inscriptions on the lid and interior of Fig. 15a: title 子蝠 'Prince' and name. Photo by Kyle Steinke (b).
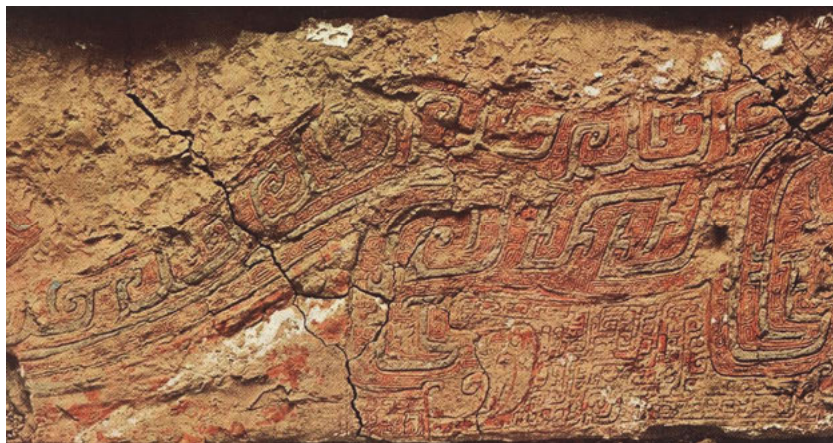
Fig. 16a: *Fanglei* 方罍 of the Anyang period, probably from Anyang. Bronze. *c.* 1100 BCE. Height 53 cm. Shanghai Museum. After Shanghai bowuguan 1964, vol. 1, pl. 13.

Fig. 16b: Inscription on the interior collar of Fig. 16a, reading 亞憲孤竹 *ya xian gu zhu*; translation uncertain (*ya* = 'deputy'). The view shows the complete rim. Photo by Kyle Steinke.

Fig. 17: Decoration of a wall with lacquer showing a tiger. Royal tomb M1001 at Xibeigang 西北岡; *c.* 1200 BCE. After Gao Quxun 1962, colour plate 1 (in supplement issued separately).

Those who handled and used bronzes could have read the inscriptions despite their often awkward locations. The longer inscriptions that began to appear in late Anyang times, and much more during the Western Zhou period, could have been performed, perhaps simply by being read out, on behalf of those present or of the ancestors to whom rituals were addressed, but the elite circles who commissioned the bronzes were presumably those most interested in the content of the texts, which would have been drafted on perishable media with their participation (see also Section 4 below). Performances would have required manipulating the objects themselves. Some containers with lids have duplicate interior inscriptions on the bottom and the lid (Fig. 18a–b, an unusually long inscription for an Anyang bronze),[38] and the copy on a lid could have provided ready access to the text. Despite these possibilities, knowledge of the inscriptions' existence might have mattered as much as having them available to be read; they would also have been available to the spirits of the ancestors for whom the rituals were performed. Comparable considerations of access and reading apply across the world: much writing is inscribed almost without regard to its ever being read. Furthermore, very many Anyang bronzes bear only identifications of their owners, often indicating the names of the ancestors to whom they were addressed but not saying in what contexts they were used. These would not have needed to be read, but they could have been displayed to interested parties.

---

38 Škrabal 2022, 148–151, figs 2–5 (Song *gui*, 779 BCE); discussed below, Section 4.

a   b

Fig. 18a–b: *You* 卣, said to be from Anyang. Bronze. Height 23.7 cm. Late Anyang, *c.* 1100–1050 BCE. Beijing Palace Museum. After Bagley 1987, 526, fig. 103.5 (a). Rubbings of the inscriptions on the interior of the lid and body of the *you* in Fig. 18a, which commemorate the gift of a jade to the 'Document Scribe (*zuoce* 乍冊) Zhi Zi'. After Bagley 1987, 526, fig. 103.5 (b).

The writing on the bronzes is in two styles. One is similar to the oracle bone script but more fluently written in the soft clay medium of models for casting. This style, which was evidently adapted from the standard way of writing with a brush on an organic surface,[39] was largely absent from bronzes until the end of

---

39 Compare Qiu Xigui 2000, 63–66.

the Anyang period. The other style (Figs 19[40] and 21), which is of greater interest for this chapter, is more pictorial, while quite simple and schematic in its manner of depiction (see collection of examples in Fig. 21). It is typologically and aesthetically unconnected with the main decoration, operating with lines, outlines, and solid areas, but not with the internal patterns which are fundamental to the latter. Signs are often artfully grouped. There seems to have been little concern with creating a consistent visual treatment across the range of signs, and apart from the careful arrangement of groups it does not appear to have been the subject of an aesthetic investment in any way comparable with that devoted to decoration. The pictorial element includes human beings, and in this respect among others it is completely different in content from the decoration. Almost all examples are limited to no more than four or five characters. Toward the end of the Anyang period the standard script began to be used more widely on bronzes. In early Western Zhou times there was some limited fusion of the two styles, but the pictorial one disappeared over a few generations. The content and reading of the signs remained largely the same before and after this graphic transition.

Thus, in the Xiaoshuangqiao and Anyang periods a pictorial style of writing was used in high-status aesthetic contexts, but without very high aesthetic pretensions. Except in aspects of treatment such as patterns of arrangement of signs, the style employed on bronzes used versions of a limited – but still extensive – range of graphs from the same basic repertory as the standard writing, which later gradually replaced it in that context. Perhaps the ritual purpose of bronzes favoured the use of a special style of writing. It cannot well have been adopted as aesthetically more suited to the decorated context because, as already noted, decoration and writing were almost always kept apart.

---

40 The rendering of *ge* 戈, the primary meaning of which is 'dagger-axe', as 'infantry officer' is based on the following evidence: oracle bone inscriptions include examples of '*ge* at X (place name)', which is a standard form of titles for officers and would not make sense as referring to a weapon. North, south, west, and east *ge*, which are also attested, have parallels as prefixes with other titles. Again in the oracle bone inscriptions, *ge* are assigned to military tasks; the dagger-axe was the most common weapon of infantry. Similarly, in the warring states period infantry were termed '*ji*-holders'; at that date the *ji* was the standard infantry weapon.

Fig. 19: Two selected titles on bronzes in their Anyang period (upper) and Western Zhou (lower) forms. Left above: *bei dan* 北單 'Northern Ward' (after *Jicheng* 3120); below: *bei dan zuo cong lü yi* 北單乍從旅彝 'Northern Ward commissioned the vessel' (*Jicheng* 2173). Right above: *ge* 戈 'Infantry Officer' (*Jicheng* 3023); below: *ge zuo bao yi* 戈乍寶彝 'the Infantry Officer made this precious vessel' (Zheng Junsheng and Tang Xianhua 2000, 59).

This case is comparable with ancient Egypt in the presence of two styles, one pictorial and more aesthetic (very much more in Egypt) and the other more cursive and of slightly lower status. The salient difference between the two is that the Chinese system was not directly compatible with the dominant artistic forms of Erligang to Western Zhou times, and it was relatively short-lived. One reason for its demise could have been that pictorial representation was largely absent from the wider artistic environment. When sculptural representation began to be included in bronzes, it was almost always of animals (e.g. Fig. 20), not human beings. In Egypt, where there was not just compatibility but integration between image and writing, the pictorial system of writing, including signs depicting elements from many domains of the natural and cultural world, endured for the whole civilisation. In both societies the pictorial style was a tiny proportion of writing as a whole, perhaps still tinier in China – even though widely attested in the surviving record – than in Egypt.

Fig. 20: *Guang* 觥, wine vessel with lid; decoration organised as sculptural images of a tiger and an owl. Two-character inscription on interior floor (not illustrated). Bronze. Height 25 cm. Twelfth century BCE. Cambridge, MA, Harvard Art Museums, 1943.52.103. Photo © President and Fellows of Harvard College.

There must have been a transformation in aesthetic priorities for the inclusion of writing on bronzes around the end of the Anyang period. Standard writing seems to have acquired a higher prestige in that context than before. Over the millennia it has been, and continues to be, a strongly aesthetic medium that has an autonomous character more than it is directly integrated with other elements or media. Another plausible factor in its displacing of the pictorial style is its suitability for recording longer texts. It remained incompatible with the dominant mode of decoration, but the latter's peak of creativity was in Erligang and Anyang times rather than later. Perhaps the slight reduction in the focus on decoration favoured the importance of standard writing.

4 Comparing the Anyang and Egyptian elite contexts

So far, we have left aside the content of the Xiaoshuangqiao and Anyang pictorial writing, the signs in which are generally termed 'clan signs/emblems' (族徽 *zuhui* – or 徽記 *huiji* / 徽號 *huihao* 'emblem graphs').[41] They have mostly been understood as signifying clan names and personal names. This approach sees the society of the later Shang dynasty as court-focused but very strongly lineage-based, with a dominant ancestor cult, and lacking a developed administration. For some time, however, appreciable numbers of the signs have been identified as official titles. Cao Dazhi has expanded this approach to argue that the majority of them represent official titles rather than clan names.[42] About 25 of perhaps 140 graphs among the thousands of inscriptions had previously been identified as titles. To these can be added between 70 and 80 further titles, so that at least two thirds of the repertory of well-attested signs (Fig. 21) can be interpreted in this way. As remarked above, the titles are notated with very few characters, hardly ever more than six. Interpretation of their meaning is aided by occurrences of some of them in oracle bone inscriptions. In speech titles might have had more elaborate forms.

A continuing system of titles with hierarchical qualifiers (Fig. 22), of which two were mentioned above for Xiaoshuangqiao times, could have been developed further from an older oral-performative, and non-literate or marginally literate, court context; around a dozen of the total number of titles are attested from the earlier period.[43] Fixed designations of roles are common in ruler-focused societies of any scale. People of high status and power need to have tasks that place them close to the ruler. Ruling groups often maintain titles designating such roles that come over time to signify different functions from what their literal meaning may suggest. It is also normal for court titles to be paired with quite different administrative duties, either on a customary basis or through a ruler's selection of an individual. Court titles, administrative functions, or both can be associated with an income derived from central sources, with awards of signs of honour, estates and other resources, or both.

---

41 Demattè 2022, 261–276.

42 Cao Dazhi 2018; Cao Dazhi 2019; Cao Dazhi and Zhang Jianwei 2022. Short exposition in English of an early stage of this research: Wang Haicheng 2016, 142–145.

43 There is no reason to suppose that notation of these titles was a major driver in the initial development of writing.

Fig. 21: Rubbings of the large majority of types of pictorial-style characters (official titles or 'clan names/emblem graphs') found on Anyang period bronzes. Excerpted and assembled by Cao Dazhi from the volumes of *Jicheng*, with some instances from other publications.

The examples in Fig. 21 are from the Anyang period. Each of the pictorial characters selected for analysis occurs on ten or more bronzes; the underlying dataset is thus very large. Most occurrences are isolated or accompanied by just a few further characters. Consequently they are difficult to date within the Anyang period. The titles appear on bronzes from high- and middle-level elite tomb. Only low-ranking elite tombs (containing between one and four bronzes) may yield bronzes that bear no titles. Thus, a high proportion of the thousands of known Anyang period bronzes is inscribed. That proportion decreases with the Western Zhou period, when access to these prestige goods became wider.
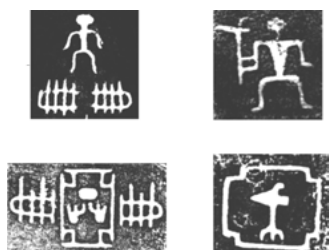
Fig. 22: Selected rubbings of title names with hierarchical elements. Left above: *da ce* 大冊 'Chief Scribe' (after *Jicheng* 1822, see also Fig. 23); left below: *ya ce* 亞冊 'Deputy Scribe' (*Jicheng* 6483). Right above: *da ge* 大戈 'Chief Infantry (Officer?)' (Zhang Tian'en 2016, 1371); below: *ya ge* 亞戈 'Deputy Infantry (Officer?)' (*Jicheng* 3327).

Rulers manipulate their elites by requiring their presence (or by banishing them), and when they are present by rewarding them with privileges that can be made visually salient in the court setting. Such practices are compatible with the crucial role of ancestors, lineages, and their maintenance that is generally attributed to ancient Chinese society. Formalities of court life and ceremonial among lineage elites could have been comparable. In any complex hierarchical society there is an uneasy tension between holding an office that is answerable to a higher authority, on the one hand, and the obligations of kinship on the other hand, but neither excludes the other. Prominent naming of titles can make sense both in relation to the king, who might originally not have been mentioned, either out of deference or through avoidance of a type that surrounds rulers in many societies. Moreover, the royal point of reference for a title would have been known to all who were interested. Inscription of title and name on a bronze would be a centripetal and unproblematic form of display, as well as being meaningful to an elite group, either of other officials or of kin, and it would remain valid in a lineage context after its award in the royal setting.

We believe that the interpretation of Xiaoshuangqiao and Anyang 'emblem graphs' as official titles offers a more coherent picture than that of 'clan emblems'. It is worth exploring briefly implications for the possible background of administration and writing. It is now widely accepted that writing was invented before the Anyang period, and the interpretation of a number of titles as relating to scribal materials and activities points in the same direction because it implies the presence of an administrative apparatus of appreciable scale, very plausibly conducting many tasks on lost organic writing media. Paola Demattè makes a similar argument, but we would not follow her in extrapolating it quite as far back as around 2000 BCE, which she does mainly on the basis of very much later traditional texts.[44] The presence of hierarchies of titles in the earliest intelligible material, however, is telling, because they include 'chief' and 'deputy' ('deputy' often forming a monogram enclosing the title it qualifies), demonstrating a structuring among members of the elite who were high-ranking enough to have inscribed bronzes. The king, as the apex of society, is above the hierarchy, although he is very much present in the oracle bone texts, where he sometimes speaks in person, and of course in the archaeology of Anyang, with its royal precinct and the enormous royal tombs at Xibeigang.[45]

The inscribed oracle bones (Fig. 14), some of which were rendered into more clearly aesthetic objects by pigment inlays, are perhaps intermediate in status

---

44 Demattè 2022, 357–363.
45 Wang Haicheng 2015, 136–150.

among categories of objects bearing writing (see also below, Section 5). Around a third of the perhaps 200,000 known oracle bones are inscribed. Very high-status artefacts include bronzes and other display pieces, such as the bone of a tiger that bears an inscription, inlaid in turquoise, stating that the king had killed the animal in a hunt.[46] Normal administrative uses, which surely constituted the overwhelming majority of writing, are in general too ephemeral and low in status to leave archaeologically recoverable traces. Only indirect evidence is available for writing on bundles of strips, most likely made of bamboo, of which the oldest currently known physical examples are from a waterlogged tomb of the fifth century BCE.[47] Such evidence comes instead from graphs for 'document, scribe (*ce* 冊, *zuoce* 乍冊)' (Fig. 23), from surviving brush writing on some oracle bones,[48] or from data recorded in oracle bone texts that are suggestive of book-keeping:[49]

1. *Raising an army*
Crack-making on *dingyou* (day 34), Que divined: 'This season, if the king raises 5,000 men to campaign against the Tufang, he will receive assistance in this case.' (*HJ* 6409)

2. *War booty*
Junior Servitor Qiang followed (the king) to attack. Mei [enemy leader] of the Wei [enemy state] was captured, persons 24 ... persons 570; *xi* (?) 100 ... chariots 2; shields 183; quivers 50; arrows. (*HJ* 36481)

3. *Game taken on a hunt*
On *renzi* (day 49) the king made cracks and divined: 'Hunting at Zhi, going and coming back there will be no harm.' The king read the cracks and said: 'Prolonged auspiciousness.' This was used (?). (We) caught foxes 41; *mi*-deer 8; rhinoceros 1. (*HJ* 37380)

4. *Tribute*
Wo brought in 1,000 (shells); Lady Jing ritually prepared 40 (of them). (Recorded by the diviner) Bin. (*HJ* 116b)

5. *Animal sacrifice*
Crack-making on *jimao* (day 16), Que divined: 'In performing an exorcism for [Lady] Hao to Father Yi, cleave a sheep, offer a pig, pledge ten penned sheep.' (*HJ* 271)

6. *Human sacrifice*
On the eighth day, decapitate 2,656 persons. (*HJ* 7771)
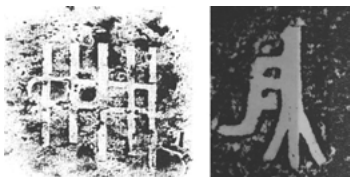
---

46 Bagley 1987, 525.
47 See conveniently Škrabal 2022, 144–147.
48 Bagley 2004, 213–220.
49 Material in oracle bone texts that is likely derived from book-keeping sources, after Wang Haicheng 2014, 182.

Fig. 23: Rubbings of scribal title characters, left *ce* 'Scribe' (*Jicheng* 9147), right *yin* 尹 'Officer' (*Jicheng* 6040).

Indirect arguments for a widespread presence of writing that relate to the administrative requirements of a large-scale state can also be made from the official hierarchies, as attested by the pictorial signs, which name administrative roles in domains such as storage, probably of grain, animal husbandry, and the maintenance of long-distance routes.[50] These, which can be paralleled from ancient Mesopotamia and Egypt, may not appear to be intrinsically prestigious, but they are vital for a large agricultural state, and they would offer economic potential to their holders. Among the pictorial signs, offices like these seem to be more prominent than in the Egyptian material, where for those in the inner elite designations that conveyed status but had no associated function or displayed proximity to the king are more salient.

Possible interpretations of this difference can only be sketched here, but the significance of titles for their holders should be emphasised. Elites care about their status and rank relative to other members of their group, which they typically display through events where the ruler rewards them. Western Zhou period bronze inscriptions offer explicit examples (see below). Rulers cannot avoid having matching concerns. The Egyptian king had a more strongly divine role than his Shang or Western Zhou counterpart, but this difference may not have had a direct effect on his need to control his elites. Conventions of visual display in the two societies were very different. The near-absence of pictorial representation in early China gives a greater role to texts than to images, but it does not necessarily follow that verbal display was more important in the lived world of the elites in one culture than in the other.

A convenient example of differences in display is royal hunting, which is a vital role of rulers across the world.[51] Images of the Egyptian king hunting are potent both in themselves and in foregrounding his relations with the court and high officials. A caption accompanying a large relief of bird trapping that is the longest

---

50 Cao Dazhi 2019; Cao Dazhi and Zhang Jianwei 2022; see already Wang Haicheng 2016.
51 Compare Allsen 2006.

third millennium royal inscription so far published exemplifies the maintenance of tales of royal prowess.[52] Hunting is equally prominent among the Anyang oracle bone texts, but apart from trophies like the tiger bone cited above, it leaves less trace than can be found in Egypt.[53] As Wang Haicheng has noted, typically brief Anyang titles naming 'dog' or 'horse' may relate to the same crucial sphere of kingly action.[54] In Egypt, the very high official Metjen, the owner of the earliest known extensively inscribed and decorated non-royal tomb (early fourth dynasty, *c.* 2600 BCE), displayed his title and role of overseer of royal hunting through an exceptionally large hieroglyph of a man controlling a dog (Fig. 24).[55]

Anyang bronzes, and Erligang ones before them, are thought to have been made in foundries that were under royal control, so that the pictorial signs that wrote titles would have been known to the ruling group, whether they used writing themselves or delegated that task to scribes. The setting of production near king and court and may have favoured the selection of official titles for inscription over other possibilities. The titles on Anyang period bronzes never name the king, who is nonetheless a pervasive presence. Just a few bronzes have been found in the heavily looted royal tombs, but they too do not carry kings' names. The court context and the enormous significance of bronzes for elites guarantee that what was inscribed on them would be of great interest to the actors, as well as to the king and those through whom he exerted control. The change to longer inscriptions at the end of the Anyang period would surely have been with royal consent or participation. Such developments are normally negotiated between the interested parties, and the impetus could have come from the officials rather than the king.

Here, Egypt offers a larger range and more diverse evidence, over a period from the earliest longer inscriptions at the end of the first dynasty to the vast proliferation of titles and narrative texts in the sixth dynasty (a span of eight hundred years, see Table 1). For the third millennium more than 3700 titles and combinations of titles are attested.[56] Scholars understand the titles as being of two broad types, 'ranking' and 'functional'. Ranking titles, which are a small minority of the total, are nearly pure status indicators, and the highest ones occur in a fairly fixed sequence. Functional titles signify something relating to associated duties, but

---

52 Baines 2013, 187–234. Mohamed Ismail Khaled is preparing to publish a longer inscription, from the same monument, that is not about hunting.

53 Fiskesjö 2001.

54 Wang Haicheng 2016, 142.

55 Gödecken 1976, 81–82, fig. 1 (following p. 168).

56 Jones 2000.

often not in a straightforward way because the system retained terminology while realities changed. A good example is *ḫtmtj nṯr*, literally 'Seal-Bearer of the God', which by the sixth dynasty designated an expedition leader.[57]

Fig. 24: Metjen as overseer of hunters. Relief from his tomb at Saqqara. The titles in three columns above his figure can be rendered: '[1]Administrator of the Low Desert; Controller of Hunting; [2]Controller of Scouts; Great one of the Ten of Upper Egypt; [3]Leader of an Estate; Supervisor of the Distribution Centre; Metjen'. Neues Museum, Berlin. After Lepsius *s.a.*, pl. 3. Digitization kindly made available by the Berlin-Brandenburgische Akademie der Wissenschaften.

---

57 Jones 2000, vol. 2, 767–772, nos 2791–2803 (not all relating to expeditions).

Elites inscribed their titles in their monumental tombs, in selected arrangements that were constrained by available space and aesthetic considerations (Figs 25 and 27). In a strongly structured example, the high-ranking official Ptahshepses listed the offices he held under eight kings of the fourth and fifth dynasties in columns of inscription on niche surrounds in the offering place of his tomb (Fig. 26). The interiors of tombs were not open to a wide public, so that the primary audience of this display was the owners' peers, priestly personnel, and dependants. By the sixth dynasty, however, some inscriptions giving titles and other content were carved on tomb exteriors, later followed by extensive, very carefully laid out narrative texts.[58] This major shift toward a more public and extensive use of hieroglyphs happened early in a new dynasty and could have been connected with the change in regime.

Klaus Baer showed that the order in which titles were ranked changed in a patterned way in the fifth and sixth dynasties (evidence is insufficient to say whether this was the case earlier).[59] Typically, at the beginning of a reign a new sequencing would appear; during a long reign there might be one or two further re-orderings. This manipulation of the expectations of elites was probably aimed at maintaining royal control against pressures of expansion and desires for promotion. Not just individuals but whole groups would need to show that they were worthy of their status. Manipulation of sequences would have worked together with competition among elites, of which we give an example in a narrative text below.

In a parallel development during the same period, narrative biographical inscriptions of elites appeared, slowly increasing in length.[60] These give clear evidence of the importance of court ceremonial and of the significance of titles to elites' sense of self, as well as instances of people stating that they were assigned roles that were above their nominal status, hence claiming – not always truthfully – that their selection was based on ability rather than descent. The cross-culturally prevalent phenomenon of grade inflation is also attested, as is the posthumous award of a title as a mark of honour that enhances the standing of the son who requests it.[61]

---

58 Detailed analysis of an example: Stauder-Porchet 2020.

59 Baer 1960.

60 Collections of material with translations: Lichtheim 1988; Strudwick 2005; Kloth 2018; study of the text genre: Stauder-Porchet 2017.

61 Djau of Deir el-Gebrawi: Strudwick 2005, 365–366, no. 266.
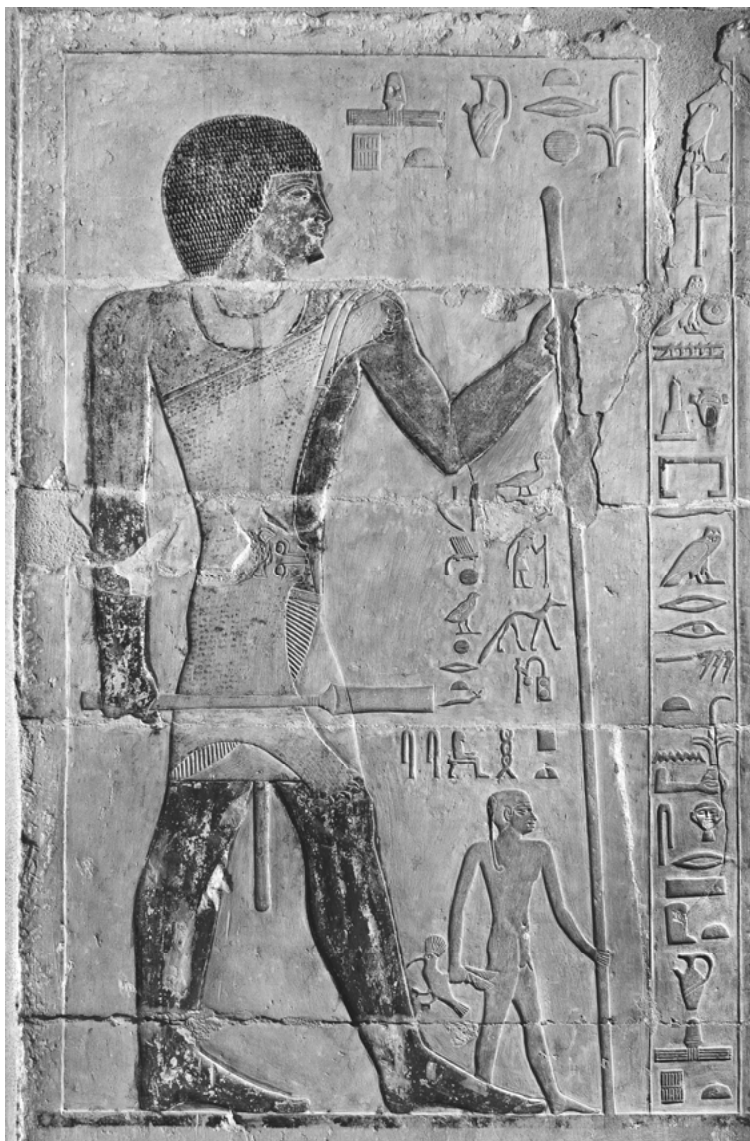
Fig. 25: Khnumhotep and his son Ptahshepses; relief facing the entrance to the inner tomb of Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep at Saqqara. Khnumhotep's titles are 'King's Acquaintance/Dependant' (immediately before his name); priest of an earlier king's solar temple; 'Overseer of the Manicurists of the Palace'; 'One Rewarded by the King'; 'Keeper of Secrets'. His son is 'his eldest son, the Gentleman Scribe, one provided for by his father, Ptahshepses'. Late fifth dynasty, *c.* 2400 BCE. Photo by Paolo Scremin, by kind permission of Yvonne Harpur and Paolo Scremin.
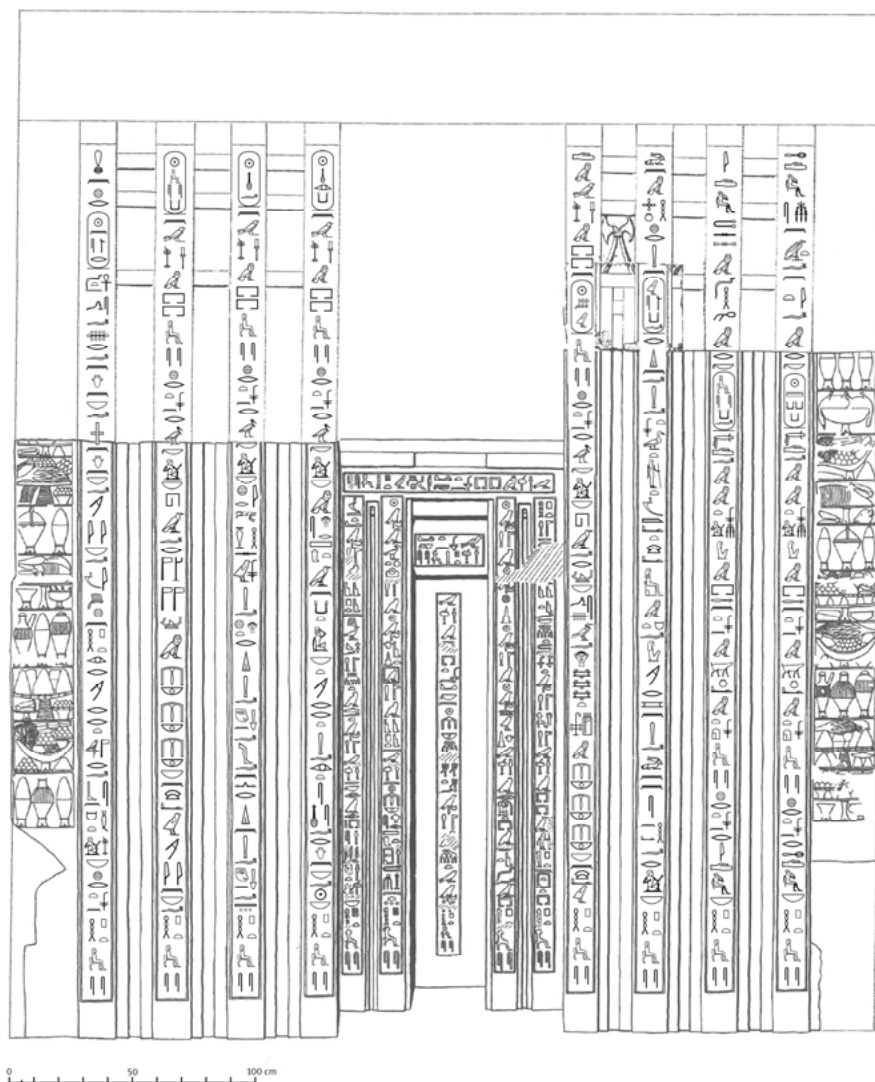
Fig. 26: Ornamental offering place ('false door') from the tomb of Ptahshepses at Saqqara. Fifth dynasty, c. 2400 BCE. London, British Museum, EA 682; Chicago, Institute for the Study of Ancient Cultures Museum, ISACM E11048. Original height with lost architrave c. 4.2 m. After Gundacker 2015, 96–97, figs 1–2, with kind permission.

Fig. 27: Caption to a large-scale figure of the Vizier (highest state official) Ptahhotep on the east wall of his tomb at Saqqara. Column 1 (left) describes the scene: 'Seeing all sorts of perfect delights which are done in the entire land'. Columns 2–4 are headed by 'Overseer of the City', from the vizier's title string, with beneath 'Supervisor of Priests of Nefer-Izezi (royal foundation); King's Subordinate; Staff of the Subject People; Pillar of *knmt*(?); Supervisor of *wab*-Priests of Enduring-of-Places-of-Neuserre (pyramid complex); Administrator of the Foremost Throne(?); Supervisor of Priests of Divine-of-Places-of-Menkauhor; the Revered One Ptahhotep (off picture)'. Photo by Paolo Scremin, by kind permission of Yvonne Harpur and Paolo Scremin.

Several of these elements of self-presentation are found in one of the three in-
scriptions in the tomb of Hezy from the early sixth dynasty (*c.* 2300 BCE), includ-
ing claims to have exceeded the duties and expectations of a particular status,
to have been rewarded with promotion to a higher-ranking status, and to have
caught the king's personal attention and participated regularly in court cere-
monial (Fig. 28; titles are capitalised):[62]

Fig. 28: Inscription on the west reveal of the entrance to the cult room of the tomb of Hezy at
north Saqqara. Early sixth dynasty (*c.* 2300 BCE). Drawing by Jennifer Houser-Wegner, repro-
duced by kind permission.

---

62 Baines 2015, 523–524 (my translation; following Egyptological practice, parentheses in the
translation give supplements and clarifications to the text, which is completely preserved).
Independent treatment from the same year: Stauder-Porchet 2015.

I was a Gentleman Scribe in the reign of Izezi;
I was a Gentleman Supervisor of Scribes in the reign of Wenis.

It was Teti, my lord,
who appointed me as Gentleman Administrator,
who appointed me as King's Subordinate.

His Person had (it) done for me
because His Person knew my reputation
in taking a scribe for his task without any deficiency.

He remembered me and he said he was satisfied.
I acted as scribe
before His Person at the head of scribes.

I acted as an Official (*sr*, a higher grade)
before His Person at the head of Officials.

His Person used to cause
that I go down to the Great Barque of the Royal Tour of Duty;

that I come to the ways (of the king);
that largesse be granted to me;

as if (I) were a King's Subordinate,
although I was a Gentleman Administrator,
whereas the like had not been done for any peer of mine.

His Person used to consult
with me as if I were among the Officials,

although I was a Gentleman Supervisor of Scribes,
because His Person knew that my reputation
was more distinguished than that of any Servant (a broad designation of status).

This interplay between ruler and elites can be compared with examples on Western Zhou period bronzes, which offer a most illuminating parallel for the setting of the court and high officials. Bronze inscriptions recording gifts from the king first appear at the end of the Anyang period and became increasingly elaborate over the following two centuries. The inclusion of such material on bronzes must have been a major change, and it was later followed by the significant development of narrating the ceremonial exchanges of king and elite official. The content of the inscriptions would have been sanctioned by delegation from the king and presumably transmitted on lost organic media. The Zhou king was slightly less distanced from humanity than the king of Egypt, but the record

of an official's reception at court is more formalised. As on oracle bones, the exact date is crucial, whereas Egyptian sources give much less attention to such matters. The award and display of status markers, as well as the practice of inserting the physical document attesting to the reward that the protagonist receives into a ceremonial belt, make a very public statement, which is desirable also for the long term because the conferring of a position is involved.[63] We cite here the Song *gui* 簋, as translated and discussed by Ondřej Škrabal (Fig. 29):[64]

Fig. 29: Inscription in the interior of the bronze *gui* of Song. 825 or 779 BCE. Height 29.53 cm, width 43.82 cm. New Haven, CT, Yale University Art Gallery, 1952.51.11a–b. Public domain.

---

63 For relationships between such documents and the inscriptions on Western Zhou bronzes, including longer and shorter versions of the same text, see e.g. Falkenhausen 1993, 156–163.
64 Škrabal 2022, 148–150, dating the vessel to 779 BCE. It has also been dated to 825 BCE. Compare the very similar text on the Song *ding*, Li Feng 2013, 149; see further Kern 2007, 133–140; Falkenhausen 2011, 273–276. For the process of drafting and inscribing from manuscript to casting in the vessel, see Škrabal 2019.

It was the third year, fifth month, [the period] after the dying brightness (of the moon), [day] *jiaxu* (11/60). The King was in Zhou, in the palace [dedicated to Kings] Kang and Zhao. At dawn, the King arrived at the Grand Hall and assumed [his] position. Superintendent Yǐn accompanied Song, entering the gate and standing in the centre of the courtyard. Sir Yin passed the command document (*ling shu*) to the King. The King called out to the Secretary Guosheng to command Song by means of the manuscript roll (*ce ling*):

'The King says: "Song! [I] command you to take office in charge of merchants in Chengzhou, and to supervise as an overseer the newly arrived merchants, in order to supply the palace. [I] award you a black jacket with embroidered hem, a red apron, a scarlet girdle, a banner with jingles, [and] a bronze-studded bridle. Use them in [your] service!"'

[I,] Song, did obeisance, bowed and prostrated myself, received the roll with the command (*shou ling ce*), hung it [on my belt] and came out [of the courtyard]. [I then] returned to present a jade tablet.

[I,] Song, take the liberty to extol in response the Son of Heaven's illustrious [and] blessed beneficence, [and] take this occasion to make [for] my august deceased father Middleborn Gong ('the Respectful') and august mother Gong ('the Respectful') Si [this] treasured sacrificial *gui* tureen.

[I, Song shall] use it to pursue filial service, to pray for abundant ..., pure [divine] protection, pervading wealth, and eternal mandate. For ten thousand years of abundant longevity without limits, relentlessly serving the Son of Heaven until the sprightly end, [I,] Song shall for generations of descendants eternally use [this vessel] as a treasure.

The inscription of Hezy was set up in a public place, whereas Song's text was cast within a food vessel that was to be used in rituals of an elite descent group. Despite these salient differences in material context, the two texts place the king at the centre of their narratives, evoking comparable court settings and concerns of their protagonists to celebrate their achievements for an audience that could have included a wider group who were interested in the reputation of their peers. However significant Song's ancestors were, they cannot have been his only audience, as is confirmed by his text's description of the setting of the king's grant of favour.

Two further types of contrast between these examples should be mentioned. First, the social structures in the background to the texts differ. The Egyptian text says nothing about anyone apart from the king, the elite protagonist, and indirectly the other high officials with whom Hezy competes. The only element of the physical setting is the king's ceremonial barque. Hezy does not mention family or ancestors.[65] In general, however, and despite the vast households

---

65 Kanawati and Abder-Raziq 1999.

implied by the layout and decoration of major tombs, Old Kingdom monuments give little information about families, in particular almost always omitting generations previous to the tomb owner. Egyptian kinship terminology is of minimal complexity, and although families were vital to the structure and networking of the elite, they are not emphasised.[66] Mortuary cults in tombs seem to have lasted at best around a century after their owner's death. By contrast, in the Chinese case the final sections of the text focus on its protagonist's ancestor cult and on aspirations for an indefinite future of the lineage in which he seems almost to blend himself with his descendants. Lineage is fundamental to the social context. The wishes, which are conventional, belong in a long-established realm of discourse.

Second, the physical settings of the two inscriptions differ greatly. Hezy's text is carved in the doorway thickness of the entrance into his tomb and could be read by any literate person who entered the portico, in a necropolis that contained hundreds of inscribed tombs. The tomb of Hezy was in a close-packed 'street' of tombs.[67] By the time he commissioned it, inscriptions commonly addressed passers-by, inviting them to read and pronounce an offering formula for the deceased's benefit. Hezy's inscriptions happen not to include a direct address of this type, but the content of the formulas is fairly standard. A sense of the location is instead conveyed by his other thickness inscription (not translated here), which uses direct and threatening language to discourage people from entering the interior in an improper state. Perhaps this outspokenness was one reason for his end: he fell from favour, and all images of him, as well as all but one occurrence of his name, were erased, with the tomb being assigned 'by royal funerary gift' to another man.

Song had been an officer at the Western Zhou capital Zongzhou and was later stationed at the eastern capital Chengzhou. His *gui*, however, is unprovenanced and its context cannot be reconstructed in a similar way to the inscription of Hezy, but the piece dates either to fifty years or to just a few years before the fall of the Western Zhou dynasty. The aspirations for a continuing cult of the ancestors and memory of himself that it invokes might not have been even minimally realised; in other cases, evidence of hoards suggests that some family temples were in operation for most of the Western Zhou period. What comes alive from Song's text is especially the ceremonial court setting, with detailed statements of the time of day, the location, and the movements and bodily ges-

---

66 Here is valuable to contrast the very different setting of Egypt in the eighteenth dynasty (fifteenth century BCE) that Andréas Stauder presents in his chapter in this volume.

67 Betbeze 2023.

tures of the actors. The resulting inscription was cast into the tureen and taken to the residence and ancestral temple of Song, where its presence, and in principle reading, would reactivate it as part of ritual meals.[68] Portable but monumental texts as long as this that are contained within significant and usable objects are cross-culturally unusual. For the Chinese case, something of the layout of a palace context can additionally be recovered from excavations of complexes from Huanbei and Anyang (Yinxu) to Western Zhou.[69] In this respect, and more particularly in its narration, the Chinese case is far more evocative than the Egyptian. The latter can instead contribute its remarkably well-preserved location in the necropolis, as well as a stronger sense of the ambitions and tensions, and in this case the individuality, of the elites who served rulers and whom the rulers sought to control.

5 Conclusion

For both Egypt and China, the long inscriptions we discuss immediately above date more than half a millennium after the initial appearance of writing. The development of inscribed texts which exploit a writing system that notates full syntax opened up new possibilities, more rapidly in China than in Egypt. These stood out from most mundane writing, as well as from its high-cultural and religious uses on perishable media, both of which tended in Egypt to favour tabular and list formats, as is likely also to have been the case in China, from which no such media survive.[70] The pattern of usage and of change was different there, with the evidence of oracle bones central to what can be known about the Anyang period. These exhibit several types of spatial organisation while sometimes notating full syntax and discourse. Thus, they fit in a setting where uses of writing would have been diverse.[71] Oracle bones, however, are difficult to assess because they form a special case that had no clear successors. Although they deal with matters of the greatest importance, they are not 'sacred' as a sacred book might be; when they were buried in pits after ceasing to be needed, this seems to have been in an orderly fashion but not reverentially. After the early Western Zhou period the practice of inscribing them disappeared. In looking for the range of what might have been written in the Anyang

---

68 Several other vessels from his ritual set are known.

69 See Thorp 2006, 133, fig. 3.6: Huanbei; Rawson 1999, 392–394, figs 6.9 and 6.10: Western Zhou.

70 For Egypt: Baines 2004; for China: Wang Haicheng 2014, 180–198.

71 See Thorp 2006, 172–182.

period, it is therefore best to seek evidence in other sources, among which oracle bones and titles primarily inscribed on bronzes are very informative; our discussions in this chapter attempt to do that.

For Egypt perishable materials are just a little more accessible, and genres such as daybooks and letters are attested from the mid-third millennium.[72] For a more convincing picture of the spread of writing, however, indirect evidence and arguments are again crucial. The *Pyramid Texts*, spells inscribed on the walls of the burial apartments of late third-millennium kings and some queens, provide a window onto vast corpora of ritual texts from which they were selected and adapted in complex processes of editing both of their wording and of the signs and sign-forms with which they were inscribed.[73] Their location inside large stone monuments leads to their being uniquely well preserved, despite the later use of those pyramids as quarries for lime and limestone. If they had not survived, scholars might not have imagined the extent of the textual corpora that were transmitted, as well the traditions of working with inherited texts that can be modelled. Genres that are not attested for the same period, such as mathematical and medical texts, may or may not have existed, but contexts that might have provided indirect evidence for them, as the *Pyramid Texts* do for ritual corpora, are far less likely to survive, so that no reasonable basis for speculation may be available.

To return to the discussion at the beginning of this chapter, it may be equally hazardous to address the point of departure for the appearance of writing in different traditions. It is natural to think that writing will grow out of marking practices on a variety of media and that perishable surfaces for larger-scale usages will follow later.[74] Anyang oracle bones suggest that almost the opposite could have happened in Shang China: perishable forms most plausibly had precedence, with writing on bamboo or wood – for compositions of entirely unknown length – preceding its specialised application to the more durable bones and plastrons used for divination. Similarly, in Egypt, papyrus is attested as a medium at an earlier date than has been posited for any long compositions (the surviving physical example is uninscribed), whether or not these would have been formulated in continuous syntax.

The comparison of Egypt and China – or of other pairs or groups of cases – is invaluable for developing broader hypotheses about the development of writ-

---

72 Tallet 2017; Tallet 2021; general and contextual presentation: Tallet and Lehner 2021; Wente 1990, 17–21, 54–58.

73 See Alvarez 2022, with literature cited there.

74 Maiocchi 2019 gives an excellent presentation of related issues for Mesopotamia.

ing in the millennium after its first introduction. Qiu Xigui 裘錫圭 used a similar comparative approach in his landmark work *Chinese Writing* 文字學概要.[75] For the topics of this chapter, implications of the presence of both standard and pictorial script styles on Xiaoshuangqiao and Anyang materials might not have been explored without the analogy of the very different Egyptian case of duality, which in its case endured for millennia. In addition to the material context, investigating the meaning of what was written with the pictorial signs involves thinking about the shape of the elite group and the polity in which they were used. Here too, a comparative approach is extremely helpful. Research in all the areas we have sketched continues.

Acknowledgements

Abbreviations

HJ = Guo Moruo 郭沫若 (1978–1983) (ed.), *Jiaguwen heji* 甲骨文合集, 13 vols, Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju 中華書局.

Jicheng = Zhongguo shehuikexueyuan kaogu yanjiusuo 中國社會科學院考古研究所 (1984–1994) (ed.), *Yin Zhou jinwen jicheng* 殷周金文集成, 18 vols, Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju 中華書局.

---

75 See Qiu Xigui 2000, 2–4, 10, 44; for comparisons with Egyptian writing, see Qiu Xigui 2000, 7, 10–13, 28. The author also includes Mesopotamian writing in his comparisons.

References

Allsen, Thomas T. (2006), *The Royal Hunt in Eurasian History*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Alvarez, Christelle (2022), 'Monumentalizing Ritual Texts in Ancient Egyptian Pyramids', *Manuscript and Text Cultures*, 1: 112–142, <https://doi.org/10.56004/v1a112>.

Baer, Klaus (1960), *Rank and Title in the Old Kingdom: the Structure of the Egyptian Administration in the Fifth and Sixth Dynasties*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Bagley, Robert W. (1987), *Shang Ritual Bronzes in the Arthur M. Sackler Collections* (Ancient Chinese Bronzes in the Arthur M. Sackler Collections, 1), Washington, DC: Arthur M. Sackler Foundation.

Bagley, Robert W. (2004), 'Anyang Writing and the Origin of the Chinese Writing System', in Stephen D. Houston (ed.), *The First Writing: Script Invention as History and Process*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 190–249.

Baines, John (1985), *Fecundity Figures: Egyptian Personification and the Iconology of a Genre*, Warminster: Aris & Phillips / Chicago, IL: Bolchazy-Carducci.

Baines, John (1990), 'Trône et dieu: aspects du symbolisme royal et divin des temps archaïques', *Bulletin de la Société Française d'Égyptologie*, 118: 5–37.

Baines, John (2004), 'Modelling Sources, Processes, and Locations of Early Mortuary Texts', in Susanne Bickel and Bernard Mathieu (eds), *D'un monde à l'autre: Textes des Pyramides et Textes des Sarcophages* (Bibliothèque d'Étude, 139), Cairo: Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale, 15–41.

Baines, John (2010), 'Aesthetic Culture and the Emergence of Writing in Egypt during Naqada III', *Archéo-Nil*, 20: 134–149, <https://doi.org/10.3406/arnil.2010.1007>.

Baines, John (2013), *High Culture and Experience in Ancient Egypt* (Studies in Egyptology and Ancient Near East), Sheffield: Equinox.

Baines, John (2015), 'On the Old Kingdom Inscriptions of Hezy: Purity of Person and Mind; Court Hierarchy', in Hans Amstutz, Andreas Dorn, Miriam Ronsdorf, Matthias Müller and Sami Uljas (eds), *Fuzzy boundaries: Festschrift für Antonio Loprieno*, vol. 2, Hamburg: Widmaier, 519–536.

Barbieri-Low, Anthony (2021), *Ancient Egypt and Early China: State, Society, and Culture*, Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press.

Betbeze, Romane (2023), *Représenter les morts, captiver les vivants: Les façades décorées des tombes memphites à l'Ancien Empire: formes, fonctions et réception* (Swiss Egyptological Studies, 4), Basel / Frankfurt: Librum.

Brunner, Hellmut (1965), *Hieroglyphische Chrestomathie*, Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz.

Brunner, Hellmut (1968), 'Zur Hundeinschrift des AR', *Zeitschrift für Ägyptische Sprache und Altertumskunde*, 95/1: 72.

Cao Dazhi 曹大志 (2018), '"Zuhui" neihan yu Shangdai de guojia Jiegou' '族徽'内涵與商代的國家結構 ['The nature of Shang "clan signs" and the structure of the Shang state'], *Gudai Wenming* 古代文明, 12: 71–122.

Cao Dazhi 曹大志 (2019), 'Lun Shangdai de liangchu sheshi – lin, cang, jing' 論商代的糧儲設施———亩、亩、京 ['On Grain Storage Facilities in the Shang Dynasty'], *Gudai Wenming* 古代文明, 13: 169–200.

Cao Dazhi 曹大志 and Zhang Jianwei 張劍葳 (2022), 'Shangzhou shiqi de lu' 商周時期的盧 ['Ephemeral Buildings of the Shang and Zhou Periods'], *Kaoguxue Yanjiu* 考古學研究, 13: 323–358.

Ciałowicz, Krzysztof M. (2011), 'The Predynastic/Early Dynastic Period at Tell el-Farkha', in Emily Teeter (ed.), *Before the Pyramids: the Origins of Egyptian Civilization*, Chicago, IL: The Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, 55–64.

Ciałowicz, Krzysztof M., Marcin Czarnowicz and Marek Chłodnicki (eds) (2018), *Eastern Nile Delta in the 4th Millennium BC*, Kraków: Institute of Archaeology, Jagiellonian University in Kraków / Poznań: Profil-Archeo.

Dahl, Jacob L. (2023), 'The Heraldry of Early Iranian Religion', in Nicola Laneri and Sharon R. Steadman (eds), *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Material Religion in the Ancient Near East and Egypt*, London: Bloomsbury Academic, 213–224.

Demattè, Paola (2022), *The Origins of Chinese Writing*, New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Dreyer, Günter, Ulrich Hartung and Frauke Pumpenmeier (1998), *Umm el-Qaab I: Das prädynastische Königsgrab U-j und seine frühen Schriftzeugnisse* (Deutsches Archäologisches Institut Abteilung Kairo, Archäologische Veröffentlichungen, 86), Mainz: Philipp von Zabern.

Emery, Walter B. (1958), *Great Tombs of the First Dynasty*, vol. 3, London: Egypt Exploration Society.

Englund, Robert K. (1998), 'Texts from the Late Uruk period', in Josef Bauer, Robert K. Englund and Manfred Krebernik (eds), *Mesopotamien: Späturuk-Zeit und frühdynastische Zeit* (Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis, 160/1), Fribourg: Universitätsverlag / Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 15–233.

Englund, Robert K. (2006), 'An Examination of the "Textual" Witnesses to Late Uruk World Systems', in *huanji* 古代東方文明專輯 / *Special Issue of Oriental Studies: A collection of Papers on Ancient Civilizations of Western Asia, Asia Minor and North Africa*, Beijing: 經濟 日報出版社, 1–38.

Eyre, Christopher J. (2009), 'On the Inefficiency of Bureaucracy', in Patrizia Piacentini and Christian Orsenigo (eds), *Egyptian Archives: Proceedings of the First Session of the International Congress Egyptian Archives / Egyptological Archives, Milano, September 9 – 10, 2008* (Quaderni di Acme, 111), Milan: Cisalpino, 15–30.

Falkenhausen, Lothar von (1993), 'Issues in Western Zhou Studies: a Review Article', *Early China*, 18: 139–226.

Falkenhausen, Lothar von (2011), 'The Royal Audience and Its Reflections in Western Zhou Bronze Inscriptions', in Li Feng and David Prager Branner (eds), *Writing & Literacy in Early China: Studies from the Columbia Early China Seminar*, Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 239–270.

Fischer, Henry George (1972), 'Some Emblematic Uses of Hieroglyphs, with Particular Reference to an Archaic Ritual Vessel', *Metropolitan Museum Journal*, 5: 5–23.

Fiskesjö, Magnus (2001), 'Rising from Blood-stained Fields: Royal Hunting and State Formation in Shang China', *Bulletin of the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities (Stockholm)*, 73: 48–192.

Gao Quxun (Kao Ch'ü-hsün) 高去尋 (ed.) (1962), *Houjiazhuang (Henan Anyang Houjiazhuang Yin dai mudi)* 侯家莊 (河南安陽殷代墓地), vol. 2/2, Taipei: Zhongyang yanjiuyuan lishiyuyan yanjiusuo 中央研究院歷史語言研究所 [photomechanical reprint 1991].

Gödecken, Karin Barbara (1976), *Eine Betrachtung der Inschriften des Meten im Rahmen der sozialen und rechtlichen Stellung von Privatleuten im Alten Reich* (Ägyptologische Abhandlungen, 29), Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz.

Gundacker, Roman (2015), 'Die (Auto)Biographie des Schepsesptah von Saqqarah: ein neuer Versuch zur Rekonstruktion der Inschrift und ein Beitrag zur stilistischen Grundlegung des wiederhergestellten Textes', *Lingua Aegyptia*, 23: 61–105.

Hardtke, Frederick E., Wouter Claes, John C. Darnell, Hendrik Hameeuw, Stan Hendrickx and Dorian Vanhulle (2022), 'Early Royal Iconography: a Rock Art Panel from el-Hosh (Upper Egypt)', *Archéo-Nil*, 32: 25–49, <https://doi.org/10.2143/ANI.32.0.3291130>.

Hartung, Ulrich (1998), 'Prädynastische Siegelabrollungen aus dem Friedhof U in Abydos (Umm el-Qaab)', *Mitteilungen des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts Abteilung Kairo*, 54: 187–217.

Hassan, Selim (1932), *Excavations at Gîza 1929–1930* (The Egyptian University), Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Jones, Dilwyn (2000), *An Index of Ancient Egyptian Titles, Epithets and Phrases of the Old Kingdom*, 2 vols (BAR International Series, 866), Oxford: Archaeopress.

Kaiser, Werner and Günter Dreyer (1982), 'Umm el-Qaab: Nachuntersuchungen im frühzeitlichen Königsfriedhof, 2. Vorbericht', *Mitteilungen des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts Abteilung Kairo*, 38: 211–269.

Kanawati, Naguib and Mahmud Abder-Raziq (1999), *The Teti Cemetery at Saqqara V: The tomb of Hesi* (Australian Centre for Egyptology Report, 13), Warminster: Australian Centre for Egyptology / Aris & Phillips.

Keightley, David N. (2000), *The Ancestral Landscape: Time, Space, and Community in Late Shang China (ca. 1200–1045 B.C.)* (China Research Monograph, 53), Berkeley, CA: Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California.

Kern, Martin (2007), 'The Performance of Writing in Western Zhou China', in Sergio La Porta and David Shulman (eds), *The Poetics of Grammar and the Metaphysics of Sound and Sign* (Jerusalem Studies in Religion and Culture, 6), Leiden: Brill, 109–173.

Kloth, Nicole (2018), *Quellentexte zur ägyptischen Sozialgeschichte I: Autobiographien des Alten Reichs und der Ersten Zwischenzeit* (Einführungen und Quellentexte zur Ägyptologie, 12), 2nd edn, Münster: Lit.

Lepsius, C. Richard (*s.a.*), *Denkmaeler aus Aegypten und Aethiopien ..., Abtheilung II, Denkmaeler des Alten Reichs*, vol. 3, Berlin: Nicolai.

Li Feng (2013), *Early China: A Social and Cultural History* (New Approaches to Asian History), Cambridge / New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.

Li Feng and David Prager Branner (eds) (2011), *Writing & Literacy in Early China: Studies from the Columbia Early China Seminar*, Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press.

Li Yongdi (Li Yung-ti) 李永迪 (ed.) (2009), *Yinxu chutu qiwu xuancui* 殷墟出土器物選粹, Taipei: Zhongyang yanjiuyuan lishiyuyan yanjiusuo 中央研究院歷史語言研究所.

Lichtheim, Miriam (1988), *Ancient Egyptian Autobiographies Chiefly of the Middle Kingdom: A Study and an Anthology* (Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis, 84), Fribourg: Universitätsverlag / Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht.

Maiocchi, Massimo (2019), 'Writing in Ancient Mesopotamia: the Historical Interplay of Technology, Cognition, and Environment', in Alan C. Love and William C. Wimsatt, *Beyond the Meme: Development and Structure in Cultural Evolution* (Minnesota Studies in the Philosophy of Science), Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 395–424.

Martin, Geoffrey Thorndike (2011), *Umm el-Qaab 7: Private Stelae of the Early Dynastic Period from the Royal Cemetery at Abydos* (Archäologische Veröffentlichungen, Deutsches Archäologisches Institut, Abteilung Kairo, 123), Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz.

McNamara, Liam (2008), 'The Revetted Mound at Hierakonpolis and Early Kingship: a Reinterpretation', in Béatrix Midant-Reynes and Yann Tristant (eds), *Egypt at its Origins II: Pro-*

ceedings of the International Conference *"Origin of the State. Predynastic and Early Dynastic Egypt", Toulouse, 5th–8th September 2005* (Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta, 172), Leuven: Peeters, 899–934.

Morenz, Ludwig D. (2021), *VerLautungen von Macht: Entwicklung von Schrift-Bildlichkeit und Bild-Schriftlichkeit im Niltal des vierten und frühen dritten Jahrtausends v. Chr* (Thot: Beiträge zur historischen Epistemologie und Medienarchäologie, 2), Berlin: EB-Verlag Dr. Brandt.

Pu Maozuo (P'u Mao-tso) 濮茅左 (ed.) (2014), *Yinshang jiaguwen* 殷商甲骨文, Shanghai: Zhongxi shuju 中西書局.

Qiu Xigui 裘錫圭 (2000), *Chinese Writing*, tr. Gilbert L. Mattos and Jerry Norman (Early China Special Monograph Series, 4), Berkeley, CA: Society for the Study of Early China; Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California [translation of Qiu Xigui 裘錫圭, 文字學概要, Beijing: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1988].

Quack, Joachim Friedrich (2022), *Altägyptische Amulette und ihre Handhabung* (Orientalische Religionen in der Antike / Oriental Religions in Antiquity, 31), Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck.

Rawson, Jessica (1999), 'Western Zhou Archaeology', in Michael Loewe and Edward L. Shaughnessy (eds), *The Cambridge History of Ancient China: from the Origins of Civilization to 221 B.C.*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 352–449.

Regulski, Ilona 2009, 'The Beginning of Hieratic Writing in Egypt', *Studien zur Altägyptischen Kultur*, 38: 259–274.

Sethe, Kurt (1933), *Urkunden des alten Reiches* (Urkunden des Ägyptischen Altertums, 1/1), 2nd edn, Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs.

Shanghai bowuguan 上海博物館 (ed.) (1964), *Shanghai bowuguan cang qingtongqi* 上海博物館藏青銅器, Shanghai: Renmin meishu chubanshe 人民美術出版社.

Škrabal, Ondřej (2019), 'Writing before Inscribing: on the Use of Manuscripts in the Production of Western Zhou Bronze Inscriptions', *Early China*, 42: 273–332.

Škrabal, Ondřej (2022), 'From Royal Court to Ancestral Shrine: Transposition of Command Documents in Early Chinese Epigraphy', *Manuscript and Text Cultures*, 1: 143–204, <https://doi.org/10.56004/v1s143 >.

Smith, William Stevenson (1949), *A History of Egyptian Sculpture and Painting in the Old Kingdom*, 2nd edn, London: Geoffrey Cumberlege / Oxford University Press.

Song Guoding 宋國定 (2004), 'The Cinnabar Inscriptions Discovered at the Xiaoshuangqiao Site, Zhengzhou', translated by Zhang Liangren 张良仁, *Chinese Archaeology*, 4/1: 98–102, <https://doi.org/10.1515/CHAR.2004.4.1.98>.

Stauder-Porchet, Julie (2015), 'Hezi's Biographical Inscription: Philological Study and Interpretation', *Zeitschrift für Ägyptische Sprache und Altertumskunde*, 114/2: 191–204, <https://doi.org/10.1515/zaes-2015-0015>.

Stauder-Porchet, Julie (2017), *Les autobiographies de l'Ancien Empire égyptien: étude sur la naissance d'un genre* (Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta, 255), Leuven: Peeters.

Stauder-Porchet, Julie (2020), 'Harkhuf's Autobiographical Inscriptions: A Study in Old Kingdom Monumental Rhetoric', *Zeitschrift für Ägyptische Sprache und Altertumskunde*, 147/1–2: 57–91, 197–222, <https://doi.org/10.1515/zaes-2020-0027>.

Stauder, Andréas (2021), '"Was heißt erfinden?" Prozesse und Akteure in der Entstehung der frühen ägyptischen Schrift', in Susanne Bickel, Alexandra Verbovsek, Kathrin Gabler, Matthieu Götz, Eva Hemauer and Seher Parlak (eds), *Formen kultureller Dynamik: Impuls – Progression – Transformation. Beiträge des zehnten Basler und Berliner Arbeitskreises*

Junge Aegyptologie (BAJA 10) 29.11.–1.12.2019 (Göttinger Orientforschungen, 4. Reihe: Ägypten, 68), Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 31–74.

Steinke, Kyle and Dora C. Y. Ching (eds) (2014), *Art and Archaeology of the Erligang Civilization*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Strudwick, Nigel (2005), *Texts from the Pyramid Age* (Writings from the Ancient World, 16), Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature.

Tallet, Pierre (2017), *Les papyrus de la Mer Rouge I: Le "journal de Merer" (Papyrus Jarf A et B)* (Mémoires publiés par les membres de l'Institut français d'archéologie orientale, 136), Cairo: Institut français d'Archéologie Orientale.

Tallet, Pierre (2021), *Les papyrus de la Mer Rouge II: "Le journal de Dedi" et autres fragments de journaux de bord (Papyrus Jarf C, D, E, F, Aa)* (Mémoires publiés par les membres de l'Institut français d'archéologie orientale, 145), Cairo: Institut français d'archéologie orientale.

Tallet, Pierre and Mark Lehner (2021), *The Red Sea Scrolls: How Ancient Papyri Reveal the Secrets of the Pyramids*, London: Thames & Hudson.

Thorp, Robert L. (2006), *China in the Early Bronze Age: Shang Civilization* (Encounters with Asia), Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Tōkyō Kokuritsu Hakubutsukan 東京国立博物館 (ed.) (1986), *Kōga bummei ten* 黄河文明展, Tokyo: Chūnichi Shimbunsha 中日新聞本社.

Wang Haicheng (2014), *Writing and the Ancient State: Early China in Comparative Perspective*, New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.

Wang Haicheng (2015), 'Writing and the City in Early China', in Norman Yoffee (ed.), *Early Cities in Comparative Perspective, 4000 BCE–1200 CE* (Cambridge World History, 3), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 131–157.

Wang Haicheng (2016), 'Administrative Reach and Documentary Coverage in Ancient States', *Archéo-Nil*, 26: 135–147, <https://doi.org/10.3406/arnil.2016.1106>.

Wendrich, Willeke (2006), 'Entangled, Connected or Protected? The Power of Knots and Knotting in Ancient Egypt', in Kasia Szpakowska (ed.), *Through a Glass Darkly: Magic, Dreams, and Prophecy in Ancient Egypt*, Swansea: Classical Press of Wales, 243–269.

Wengrow, David (2008), 'Limits of Decipherment: Object Biographies and the Invention of Writing', in Béatrix Midant-Reynes, Yann Tristant, Joanne M. Rowland and Stan Hendrickx (eds), *Egypt at its Origins 2: Proceedings of the International Conference "Origin of the State, Predynastic and Early Dynastic Egypt" Toulouse (France), 5th–8th September 2005* (Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta, 172), Leuven: Peeters, 1021–1032.

Wente, Edward F. (1990), *Letters from Ancient Egypt* (Writings from the Ancient World 1), Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press.

Whitehouse, Helen (2002), 'A Decorated Knife Handle from the "Main Deposit" at Hierakonpolis', *Mitteilungen des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts Abteilung Kairo*, 58: 425–446.

Yue Hongbin 岳洪彬, He Yuling 何毓靈 and Yue Zhanwei 岳占偉 (2004), '1998 nian ~ 1999 nian Anyang Huanbei Shangcheng Huayuanzhuang Dongdi fajue baogao 1998年 ~ 1999年安陽洹北商城花園莊東地發掘報告', *Kaoguxue Jikan* 考古學集刊, 15: 296–358.

Zhang Tian'en 張天恩 (2016), *Shaanxi jinwen jicheng* 陝西金文集成, 16 vols, Xi'an: San Qin chubanshe 三秦出版社.

Zheng Junsheng 鄭均生 and Tang Xianhua 唐先華 (2000), 'Hunan Hengyang faxian Shangdai tongyou 湖南衡陽發現商代銅卣', *Wenwu* 文物, 10: 58–60.