

Non-textual Marking Systems: The Case of Deir el-Medina

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Even with the advance of modern techniques, Egypt is still an exception among all archaeologically studied areas: climate and other circumstances resulted in the preservation of a wealth of information archaeologists working in other fields can only dream of. Material expressions of the Ancient Egyptians' beliefs and their ideas about the afterlife and the sphere of gods are countless. The remains of daily life are only less present because scientific work focused for more than a century on prestigious objects that could easily be displayed in museums.

But even the most advantageous setting in Egypt is excelled by one site with singular conditions: Deir el-Medina. The case of a settlement of royal workmen whose living quarters, short time habitations, work place, and tombs in combination with textual records informing about the settlement's inhabitants, their relations and work is unique. Although (or because?) we have a dense written record from the village, there is also a huge number of signs that belong to non-textual marking systems. Therefore, four contributions in this volume deal exclusively with these markings from Deir el-Medina on different kinds of objects and in different contexts.

Sławomir Rzepka presents rock graffiti marks in several areas of the Theban Hills. By employing distribution charts, he links the so-called "funny signs" to certain readable rock inscriptions that help dating the otherwise undatable signs to mid Twentieth to early Twenty-first Dynasty. This finding is crucial for a diachronic approach to the Deir el-Medina "funny signs," as there are no more ostraca with such signs attested in the Late New Kingdom (see Soliman and Haring), making the rock graffiti a special case.

The three other articles of the Deir el-Medina section concern movable objects from the site and its surroundings. The variety in which non-textual marking systems were used is exemplified in the case of different objects marked with name signs. The names were those of workmen who participated in building the royal tombs, since the objects were found in workmen's huts in the Valley of the Kings. Thanks to the density of records at Deir el-Medina, Andreas Dorn identified several individuals known from other documents. He was also able to differentiate between official and private uses for these non-textual markings depending on the context of the marks, touching the question whether these marks were used by literate or illiterate persons.

The same issue is addressed by Ben Haring who made out several groups of people whose writing skills (or the lack thereof) seems to have influenced the choice of notes taken and the material employed. The names of workmen are expressed with different signs in numerous lists that survived on ostraca. The non-textual marking

signs in this context allow insight into different administrative levels and practices. Since these ostraca cover a rather long time span, Haring is able to show that the use of writing in Deir el-Medina increased over time. While at first scribes who came from outside the village were responsible for controlling the workmen, they were integrated into the community by the end of the Nineteenth Dynasty and finally became an integral part of the village's population.

The period before the advent of professional scribes, i.e. the Eighteenth Dynasty, is studied by Daniel Soliman who describes a number of signs from Deir el-Medina that were found in the two adjacent cemeteries. Written evidence from that period is still scarce, so that the non-textual markings from the burials receive proper attention. Soliman concludes that the signs link the tombs and their owners to the workmen and/or their families. In addition, the non-textual markings hint at communal burial practices that are otherwise hardly recognizable.

Despite the huge amount of written documents from Deir el-Medina, the non-textual markings that in many cases refer to workmen of the royal necropolis offer an important insight into aspects of daily life and administration in New Kingdom Egypt that are often inaccessible to us, thereby filling a gap between the literate elite and the illiterate or semiliterate majority of the population. Hopefully the recent improvement in the research of non-textual marking systems at Deir el-Medina will enable the interpretation of similar occurrences at other sites.