Egyptian Writing

Direction of Writing and Transliteration

horizontal, left to right

horizontal, right to left

Transliteration:

\[ di.i\ m\dot{3}.sn\ \dot{hm}.k\ mi\ snwi.k \]

“I let them see your majesty as your two brothers”

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1 For the list of uniliteral signs and the transliteration conventions used in this web site, see the chart in “Uniliterals.”

2 From the Poetical Stela of Thuthmose III; the god Amun-Re speaks to the pharaoh Thuthmose III. The two brothers are the gods Horus and Seth, early mythological rivals to the Egyptian throne.
Hieroglyphic Spelling, Ideograms, Phonograms, Determinatives

On the Narmer Palette the royal attendant in front of the pharaoh has the title 🐫 tt “vizier” (highest official in the Egyptian administration) written with two one consonantal signs or uniliterals,³ and later as 🐫 tt(i), where the duckling 🐫 is the two consonantal sign or biliteral tβ and ideogram conveying the idea of “nestling.”

The noun “bird” in plural is usually spelled as 🐦 🐦 spdw [Neferti 29] with the first four signs being uniliterals and the bird determinative (showing that the composition of the preceding uniliterals is meant to be read as a single phonogram) and plural strokes⁴ at the end.

In the same text on Ostracon P38 this word is spelled as 🐦 🐦 with the bird sign now playing the role of the ideogram for “bird” with phonetic value 3pd.

Foreign (place) names usually have pure phonetic writing (no ideograms), for example 🐦 🐦 nhrn “Naharin” [Urk. IV, 613, 9] is ancient Mesopotamia, the land between the Euphrates and Tigris rivers. This is composed of four uniliterals and the mountain range determinative 🐦 for “foreign land, desert.” Note that the latter is used frequently (alone or in combination with other signs) as an ideogram with the same meaning and with phonetic value h3st. Determinatives are silent; they do not add any phonetic value to the phonogram they are attached to.

pr is a biliteral and the ideogram pr for “house, enclosure,” and also the determinative for “enclosure.” This sign appears in the biliteral phonogram 🐦 pr “house” with the uniliteral spelling out the second consonant of pr, the so-called phonetic complement.⁵

Similarly, 🐦 hd is a biliteral as well as the ideogram for h6d “mace.” This sign appears in the phonogram 🐦 ⊕ h6d “bright, white, shine” (with the cobra uniliteral 🐦 as a

³ In the Narmer macehead only 🐫 is shown.
⁴ See Nouns and Noun Phrases.
⁵ We discuss this in detail below.
phonetic complement and the sun determinative ( ), and in the phonogram \( \text{hd} \) “silver” (with the precious metal (bead collar) determinative \( \text{nbw} \) and three grains of sand playing the role of the plural strokes for minerals, metals, etc). Not surprisingly, \( r \) is also the ideogram for “sun, day” and the sun-god “Re,” and \( \text{nbw} \) is also the ideogram for “gold.”

The combination \( \text{pr-HD} \) means “treasury,” literally “house of silver” [Khetty Stela 2, 3]. In the first spelling, the first two signs are ideograms and the last is a determinative. The signs are symmetrically arranged for esthetic reasons. The second spelling uses the combined sign \( \text{pr-HD} \) which itself is an ideogram, and the last enclosure sign is a determinative (sometimes omitted).

When a phonogram is used as an ideogram the sign is usually (but not always) accompanied by a single stroke signifying that the sign is to be read as what it depicts. Examples abound: \( \text{hst} \) “foreign land, desert,” \( \text{pr} \) “house,” \( \text{hd} \) “mace,” \( r \) “mouth,” \( \text{ib} \) “heart, mind.”

The determinatives can be used to distinguish words that have the same spelling, and to convey a general idea of the general meaning of the word itself. The uniliteral \( s \) and the biliteral \( mw \) used in the combination \( \text{smw} \) with the sun determinative give “Harvest” (one of the three seasons of the Egyptian calendar), but the composition \( \text{smw} \) [Neferti 19] with the “barley, grain” determinative means the actual harvest. In addition, the pool sign \( si \) is also the ideogram (and determinative) for “basin, lake, pool,” \( mw \) is the ideogram and determinative for “water,” and \( iti \) is the ideogram for “barley, grain.”

The role of the determinatives in the following words is clear: \( dpt \) “boat,” \( pt \) “sky” (the sky determinative arching over the real world supported by the eastern and western

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\(^6\) Tomb 65, Stela 2 of the nobleman \( hty \) Khetty of Thebes, Cairo Museum.
horizons is also a frequently used ideogram pt, rmw “fish” (plural), and hpt “embrace” (with two determinatives: the embracing arms and the single arm). The scroll determinative or signifies abstract concepts as in ikr “excellent,” and the presence of the “evil bird” (sparrow) determinative is for negative words such as nhw “need” [Neferti 47].

The noun nf means “wrong, wrongdoing” (with the evil bird determinative), but the composition [Neferti 33] also spelled as nf (with two determinatives, the striking man or “force, effort” and the seated man), must mean the person who does wrong, that is, the “wrongdoer.” (Note that the plural strokes here do not really mean plural, they signify that this noun is collective.7)

The noun hrwyw (also spelled hrwt) means “war” and in the spelling the oar is the triliteral hrw and the determinative is similar to “force, effort” above. In the composition [Neferti 33] the seated man determinative rules out the possibility that this means “war;” it stands for “enemy, foe,” The plural strokes again indicate that this is a collective noun.

In the last example we deliberately ignored the uniliteral y. This is because the so-called weak consonants, i, y and w are often omitted in writing.

The most typical determinatives are as follows: “seated man,” man; “speaking man,” eating, drinking, speaking, thinking, emotions; woman; people; child; old man; official; king, god; god; “walking legs, motion,” walk, eye, sight; evil bird; sky; (irrigated) land, canal; canal, path with shrubs, foreign land, desert; house, enclosure; town; water, boat; “abstract.” Most of these signs are also ideograms with phonetic values to be discussed later.

7 See Nouns and noun Phrases.
To illustrate the possible complexities of determinatives, we discuss two examples.

(1) The first sign in the word $\text{を持忘}$ “marsh, swamp,” the the biliteral $\text{美}$ as well as the ideogram $\text{を持忘}$, is the oxyrhynchus (a not clearly identified fish of the Nile). The uniliteral $t$ is either added to the biliteral or it is the phonetic complement of the ideogram. The evil bird and swollen gland determinatives suggest bad odor, and the irrigation canal determinative with a single stroke conveys the idea of a location.

In the composition $\text{地}_{i} = \text{美}$ the land sign (with three pieces of sand) is the biliteral $t$. The whip $\text{條}$ is a biliteral with the phonetic complement $h$. The papyrus $\text{草}$ stalk is the determinative for “Delta” as well as the ideogram “marsh” with phonetic value $\text{條}$ just spelled out. The sign $\text{草}$ is the determinative for “plant, reed” (as well as the biliteral $\text{草}$). The plural strokes signify false plural, and finally the town determinative $\otimes$ points to location. All in all this beautiful but complex composition simply reads as $\text{美-条}$ “Delta,” lit. “land of the marsh.”

**Hieroglyphic spelling** is flexible in the sense that the same word can be spelled in different ways.

Ignoring the weak consonants, the verb $\text{叫}$ “call, summon” [Neferti 8] is a variant spelling of $\text{叫}$ or $\text{叫}$. Sometimes the scribe replaced difficult signs with the slanted stroke $\text{条}$. In [Neferti 26] in the usual spelling of the verb $\text{预}$ “foretell, predict” [ShS. 30-31] the giraffe is omitted: $\text{预}$. The sun god $\text{日} “Re”$ noted above has different spellings: $\text{日}, \text{日}, \text{日}, \text{日}$. Perhaps because the Nile river played a central role in Egypt, the noun $\text{江} “river”$ (mostly designating the Nile itself) has many spellings: $\text{江}, \text{江}, \text{江}, \text{江}, \text{江} (the recumbent lion is

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8 Note that $\text{を持忘}$ means “corpse.”
9 The heraldic plant of Lower Egypt, the Delta.
10 See Nouns and Noun Phrases.
11 It is not known why the giraffe is a determinative of $\text{预}$. 
the biliteral rw and the tongue of land [- is a determinative), (note the graphic transposition\(^\text{12}\)) and \(\text{I I ||} \) (where the plural strokes signify liquids).

**Contracted spelling** (omitting some signs) occurs if the composition does not form a compact esthetic looking group. The two most typical examples are \(\text{I I I I r(m)t} \) “people” [Neferti 30] and \(\text{I I I I h(n)kt} \) “beer” [Irtysen 4] (with the pot determinative and ideogram \(\text{I I I I} \) hnk).

### Biliterals, Triliterals and Phonetic Complements

Bilaterals\(^\text{13}\) such as the rope sign \(\text{I I w3} \) were used by themselves to compose words such as \(\text{I I I I w3w3t} \) “Wawat” (Northern Nubia). More often, however, a biliteral appears with a following uniliteral sign, the so-called **phonetic complement**, that spells out the second consonant of the biliteral. In the spelling of the verb \(\text{I I I I sw3(i)} \) “pass” the \(\text{I - bird} \) is the phonetic complement of the biliteral \(\text{w3} \) and it should not be spelled out as \(\text{sw3I(i)} \). In the verb \(\text{I I I I nhm} \) “take away” \(\text{m} \) is a phonetic complement of the biliteral \(\text{I I lhm} \). In the noun \(\text{I I I I mdw} \) ”speech” \(\text{d} \) is a complement the biliteral \(\text{I I md} \).

Phonetic complementing is sometimes applied to both consonants of a biliteral: \(\text{I I b3t} \) “bush” (with both consonants of the \(\text{b3 - bird} \) complemented). Phonetic complementing can also be used for triliterals\(^\text{14}\) and more than one complement can be indicated. For example: \(\text{I I I I sdm} \) “listen, hear” \((m \) complements the triliteral \(\text{sdm} \), \(\text{I I I i dw3} \) “praise” \((3 \) complements the triliteral \(\text{dw3} \)), but \(\text{I I I I smsw} \) “follower” has no complements to the

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\(^{12}\) See below.

\(^{13}\) For the list of biliteral signs, see the chart in Biliterals.

\(^{14}\) For the list of triliteral signs, see the chart in Triliterals.
triliteral $\text{šms}$. In the noun $\text{ẖḥt} “\text{Inundation}”$ (season), the ideogram $\text{ẖḥt}$ has three phonetic complements. Note also the “multiple” complementing in the noun $\text{ẖnw} “\text{interior, capital}.”$ ($\text{ẖn}$ and $\text{nw}$, the so-called $\text{nw}$-pot, are both biliterals.) The phonetic complement can be incorporated into another sign to form a combined sign as in $\text{wḏd}$, where the cobra complement $\text{ḏd}$ is added to the triliteral $\text{wḏd} “\text{green/blue, fresh, fortunate}.”$

There are many examples of unusual and even playful spellings in Middle Egyptian. The usual spelling of “mother” is $\text{mwt}$ (with the vulture triliteral $\text{mwt}$), but in one instance [Pr. I, 12] the scribe used the phonetic value $\text{mw}$ of water to spell it as $\text{mwt}$.

The verb $\text{psḏi} “\text{shine}”$ [Neferti 25] has the usual sun determinative but here it is replaced by the spine since $\text{psdw}$ means “back, spine.”

“East” is usually spelled as $\text{iḏbt}$ (with the spear emblem $\text{iḏb}$), but in [Kamose Stela 2, 27] it is written as $\text{(i)ḏbt}$. One of the phonetic values of the chisel biliteral is $\text{ḏb}$ and the weak consonant $\text{i}$ is suppressed.

The usual determinative of the verb $\text{ḥmsi} “\text{sit}”$ is $\text{ḥḥ}$, but, in [Pr. I, 3] in a playful mood the scribe wrote $\text{ḥḥ}$ with the determinative and ideogram of a seated woman giving birth $\text{msi} “\text{give birth}.”$

$\text{ḥps}$ means “strong arm, strength” in which the foreleg (of ox) $\text{ḥḥ}$ is a determinative as well as the ideogram $\text{ḥps}$. Interestingly, the scimitar/battle axe with the same phonetic value $\text{ḥps}$ is added to the determinative [Neferti 19].

The typical spelling of “monuments” is $\text{mnw}$ with the biliteral $\text{mn}$ complemented

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15 Also biliteral $\text{ḥḥ}$.  
16 Also biliteral $\text{mt}$.  
17 The other is $\text{mr}$.  
18 As in $\text{mnw.ḥḥ} “\text{my monuments}”$ in the Abydos stela of Thutmose I.
by \( n \), and the plural strokes are replaced by three \( nw \)-pots. For the same word in the Poetical Stela of Thutmose III [Urk. IV, 618, 15] the phonetic complement \( n \) is suppressed and the \( nw \)-pots are arranged a bit more artistically as \( \square \).

The usual spelling of “king” is \( \square \square \) \( nswt \) [Neferti 57] (with the biliteral \( \overline{sw} \) “sedge”\(^{19} \) in front).

In the last example the signs are in a mixed order. In a simpler setting, there are many examples of \textit{graphic transposition}, the swapping of two signs within a word. For example, in \( \overline{wd} \) “command” [Bull Hunt Scarab 10] the biliteral \( wd \) has the phonetic complement \( w \) at the back.

Similarly, there is a graphic transpositions in the following examples: \( \overline{gbA} \) “arm” [Neferti 10] (with a piece of flesh as a determinative), \( \overline{itrw} \) “river” [Neferti 26], \( \overline{ch3wti} \) “warrior” [Urk. IV, 8,2] (with the ideogram \( \overline{ch3} \) “fight”), and in \( \overline{hft} \) “opposite, according” [Neferti 44] (for esthetic reasons).

Finally, note that in certain words the \( t \) ending has been suppressed. In addition, due to sound changes the consonants \( t \) and \( d \) changed to \( t \) and \( d \), respectively.

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\(^{19}\) The heraldic plant of Upper Egypt, the Valley. \( nswt \) is a contracted writing of \( n(i)-swt \) “he who belongs to the sedge;” see Adjectives.