

INDICATIONS ON THE NATURE OF THE LANGUAGE OF THE KEFTIW FROM EGYPTIAN SOURCES*

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In three occasions Egyptian texts give us extracts of the language of the Keftiw: a school writing tablet with personal names, an inscription with place names, and a papyrus with two magical spells.¹ The information that we can extract, although puny, could help us in our attempt to approach the Keftiw language and its nature. All difficulties of interpretation have to be analysed and each step has to be taken cautiously.

The study of the prevailing pictographic and Linear A scripts of Crete has not yielded satisfactory results so far. Thus it would not be prudent to claim that this study would assist the work on these scripts. What is claimed here, however, is that the Group writing (see further below) used for these texts in the Keftiw language is very detailed, at least as far as the consonants are concerned, and would yield interesting information. This information could be coupled with future developments in the field of the Cretan scripts. Under no circumstances should the results be used as conclusive proof for any type of interpretation on the subject. They should only be treated as mere indications.

All the above three sources are dated to the 18th dynasty of the New Kingdom (14th century). The stone inscription is dated in the reign of Amenophis III or a little later, whereas the school tablet and the London papyrus, dated on epigraphic grounds,² seem to come from the middle of the 18th dynasty. The papyrus, however, cannot be of Amenophis III date for he is mentioned in it as a king of the past; the fact that Amun is also mentioned, together with the palaeographic evidence

would give us a possible date around Tutankhamun's reign or slightly later.³ If the dating of these texts is correct, it is very encouraging to note that in the same period we have extensive interrelations attested in the archaeological records between the Aegean and Egypt. This is possibly a consequence of the internationalist spirit prevalent at that time in Egypt and more precisely at the time of Tuthmosis and Hatshepsut.⁴ The Minoan frescoes at Tell el-Daba dating to the beginning of the New Kingdom, are a possible reification of such contacts.

In our attempt to interpret these texts, we need to have a correct assessment of the evidence and its significance. To this purpose, knowledge of what these texts entail and the way they function may be of some use. A magical spell, for instance, has to be uttered properly to carry any force; that means it has to be pronounced correctly even when its text is incomprehensible. Consequently, the accuracy of the sounds involved in the utterance of the spell should be the greatest possible.⁵ A school tablet, on the other hand – if indeed it is one – and a palimpsest (as the verso of the board is) cannot be expected to be accurate; its text consists of personal names only. Names in general are scarcely transferred correctly from one language to another, as they do not bear any clear meaning and cannot be semantically memorised. The writing board, therefore, may be considered an uncertain source, and can only convey a very limited amount of information. Names of places included in the Amenophis III inscription may have also been transliterated inaccurately by the Egyptians.

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¹ W. HELCK, *Die Beziehungen Aegyptens zu Vorderasien im 3. und 2. Jahrtausend v. Chr.*, Wiesbaden 1962, 551–607; E. EDEL, *Die Ortsnamenlisten aus dem Totentempel Amenophis III.*, Bonn, 1966; T. E. PEET, The Egyptian Writing Board B.M. 5647, bearing Keftiw names, in: *Essays in*

Aegean Archaeology presented to Sir Arthur Evans, Oxford, 1927, 91–98.

² T. E. PEET, *op. cit.*

³ G. MÖLLER, Zur Datierung literarischer Handschriften, *ZÄS* 56 (1920), 38; and according to Wreszinsky, pers. com. with S. Quirke (Assistant Keeper of Egyptian Antiquities in the British Museum)

⁴ B. J. KEMP, R. S. MERRILLEES, *Minoan Pottery in 2nd Millennium Egypt*, Mainz am Rhein 1980.

⁵ R. K. RITNER, *The Mechanics of Ancient Egyptian Magical Practice*, Chicago 1993, 35 ff.

On the other hand, as these place names must have been heard many times, the likelihood of a correct pronunciation increases, although we cannot exclude the possibility that foreign place names were pronounced in a distorted form. Moreover, the fact that Egyptians transliterated foreign names with a specially devised script, as mentioned below, shows awareness of the different sounds that other languages would have. This again increases the possibility for an accurate treatment of the Keftiw words and names.

The aforementioned Amenophis inscription, like all other monumental inscriptions, is written in hieroglyphs; the other two texts, however, are in hieratic, the cursive Egyptian script. The writing conventions between hieratic and hieroglyphic scripts are different, and thus the nature of the writing affects our interpretation. This last fact is crucial, since the transcription of most foreign words, including Keftiw, is given in a special type of writing called ‘Group writing’.

‘Group writing’, also known as syllabic orthography,⁶ has been studied since the beginning of the century by many scholars. Helck has conducted the most systematic research,⁷ but many have contributed to the subject before and after him. The values for the groups have been reconstructed quite accurately through the known values of some of the Semitic words they represent.

The ‘Group Writing’ is a special script employing a wide variety of hieroglyph groups, or complete words, in order to represent phonetically syllables. Separate vowels or consonants are also utilised. This special script acts as an expansion of the inadequate hieroglyphic and hieratic script in order to accommodate more consonantal and vocalic sounds. Although ‘Group Writing’ may have been devised mainly for the Semitic languages, it has often been used for non-Semitic languages, such as Hittite, and one expects it to be adaptable to different language groups.

Despite all that, ‘Group Writing’ is still insufficiently developed with regard to vowels: The vowels represented are: **a**, **i** and **u**. **E**, **o** and the ‘in between’ (**oe**, **ae**, **ue**, etc.) are represented by their closest vowel (**u** for **o**, **i** or **a** for **e**, etc.). Certain groups can also be used to denote a consonant with more than one vowel (e.g. one sign only for **ti**, **ta**,

tu) and can only be transliterated into Latin characters with the consonant plus the possible vowels in brackets or just the sign **V** for the vowel [**tV**, **j(a,u)**]. Other problems may also occur with the consonants: there is only one liquid **r** representing both, **l** and **r**. Several sounds do not exist, or are very seldom used. They may alternatively be represented by closely related ‘groups’: the distinction for instance between **t**, **d**, **ḏ**, **θ** and **th** (as in **toy**, **domino**, **the**, **theme**, and **at home**) cannot be made always. These sounds may have been all represented by stops (**t**, **d** or even **ḡ**). On the other hand, ‘Group Writing’ includes a wide variety of consonantal or semi-consonantal phonemes as the aspirate, the ayin sound, the glides (**w**, **j**) as well as fricatives (**f**, **h**), voiceless stops (**p**, **t**, **k**); it also includes labiovelars and a great variety of sibilants which gives our study greater accuracy on these respects. The comparison between the table produced by Helck for the sounds of the ‘Group writing’ and the table produced by Ladefoged and Maddieson regarding the main consonantal phonemes that the mouth can produce can easily demonstrate that the Group writing is a fairly accurate way to represent any language at least as far as most of the consonants are concerned.⁸

The fact, therefore, that one of our inscriptions is in hieroglyphs and the rest in hieratic inevitably influences the groups of this special writing: The different kinds of hands, for instance, are all rendered similarly in Hieratic, whereas they are distinguished in Hieroglyphics. Thus, the hand with loaf for /**m**+vowel/ is not sufficient alone in Hieratic and needs the presence of the m-owl as a phonetic complement. Since the loaf is visible in Hieroglyphs, the existence of a phonetic complement becomes redundant. Furthermore, as was previously noted, the nature of the texts varies: this means that the study of each text, and in consequence the amount and the type of information that we can extract, have to be assessed separately. For our purposes the spells can yield more secure data and therefore will be studied first.

1. THE KEFTIW SPELLS

Spells in Egypt and in particular medical spells, as these two, seem to have a certain structure. In the

⁶ W. F. ALBRIGHT, *Vocalisation of the Egyptian Syllabic Orthography*, New Haven, 1934.

⁷ W. HELCK, *Die Beziehungen Ägyptens zu Vorderasien im 3. und 2. Jahrtausend v. Chr.*, Wiesbaden 1962, 551–607.

⁸ P. LADEFOGED, I. MADDIESON, *The Sounds of the World's Languages*, Oxford 1996.

beginning we have a sort of introduction on what the spell is supposed to do or any other background information; then follow the words, which are either imperative or vocative. An imperative structure would order the illness to leave or would order a God to clear the illness away (or bring it upon someone else). Vocative spells, on the other hand, take the form of a hymn to the deity asked to carry out the order. The caster would often speak as a certain God and/or would threaten in case the order was not carried out. After the words of the spell proper, some comments would follow on other components of the spell (usually on material) and instructions on how it should be cast. There is an intrinsic relationship between magic and the word both in the former's oral and written forms⁹ and this should render our reconstruction easier and more accurate.

The London Medical Papyrus¹⁰ includes two spells of the Keftiw against illness. The very existence of the Keftiw spells shows awareness on the part of the Egyptians of the magic, the religion and perhaps also the illnesses existing in the foreign land. This awareness has been also hinted at by other texts, such as the Middle Egyptian one called 'Sinuhe' where the gods of the islands of the Great Green are evoked (possibly including Crete). The Asiatic and the *Samuna* diseases, which feature in the two texts, may have been common in both the Keftiw and the Egyptian lands. Furthermore, the fact that the meaning of some Keftiw words are

known to the Egyptians is an indication of deeper knowledge on the latter's part.

Some of the words may have been divided in the original spell but are not so in the Egyptian transliteration. In general the word division of Helck has been followed. He maintains that whole Egyptian words were often used to render the final syllables of foreign words. Thus by spotting all the Egyptian words, he divides the Keftiw ones accordingly. This practice, although very frequent in the Middle Kingdom, was in decline during the New Kingdom. Furthermore, when the meaning of the word is known an Egyptian determinative may be put at the end of the foreign word (and it is to be hoped that they always got it right). The translated Egyptian text and the transliterated Keftiw one (or Egyptian when the meaning of the word is unknown) are as follows.¹¹

London Medical Papyrus (BM 10059) lines 11,4–7

*“Spell for the Asiatic Disease in Keftiw language:*¹²

*s(a,i) -n -t(a,i) -ka -pV-pi -wV -j(a,u)*¹³ *ʔ(i,a) -j(a,u) -mV*
-n -t(a,i) -r(a,i) -ku -ka -r(a,i)

*This spell is to be said over froth of a fermented drink,*¹⁴
urine and sd.t. To be applied on it.

Spell for the sa-mu-na disease:

*w-b-qi(det. disease) s(a,i) -ti*¹⁵ *s(a,i) -bu -ʔ(a,i) -j(a,u) (-)*
*ḡV*¹⁶ *hV -mV -ka -tu(seated man with hand on mouth*
*determinative)*¹⁷ *r-pV*¹⁸ *-j(a,u)(det. god) p(a,i) -ʔr*¹⁹ *ʔ(a,i)*

⁹ R. K. RITNER, *The Mechanics of Ancient Egyptian Magical Practice*, Chicago 1993, 35 ff; useful companions can be found in H. D. BETZ, *The Greek Magical Papyri in Translation*, Chicago 1986.

¹⁰ H. T. BOSSERT, Die Beschwörung einer Krankheit in der Sprache von Kreta, *Orientalische Literaturzeitung* 1931 – Nr. 4, 303–329. In general I am unable to follow Bossert's arguments and conclusions.

¹¹ Of the total number of vowels only the three will be transliterated as we do not know what the actual vowel values were. The sign 'ʔ' before vowels may be purely graphic.

¹² In bold are the characters written in different ink colour.

¹³ There is a street determinative employed here because the word *wʔ(j(a,u))* is written with that determinative and it is used here phonetically.

¹⁴ For the translation of this line see J. F. BORGHOUTS, *Ancient Egyptian Magical Texts*, Leiden, 1978, 37.

¹⁵ Here the word *ti* bread is utilised phonetically.

¹⁶ The word *ḡ* which is written with the legs determinative 'proceed' is employed here phonetically. Here the division of Helck has not been followed since it seems

absolutely arbitrary. The word *ḡ* was taken here (as also by Helck otherwise) to render a final syllable.

¹⁷ This determinative does not belong to an Egyptian word but must belong to the Keftiw one. In that case, this word may well be a verb associated with speech, drink, food, consumption, or thought.

¹⁸ The transliteration given by Helck here is *s* (from the S3 pintail duck). The transcription of Strange, however, shows *p* (from the p3 bird), as reconstructed here. This discrepancy is due to the unclear hieratic character which either depicts a pintail duck or one with wings open. This character is on a lacuna, which thankfully preserves the ticks for the wings, thus allowing us to follow Strange's transcription (pers. com. R. Parkinson). No matter which is the correct transcription, the conclusions drawn are not changed.

¹⁹ This *ur* is written by the word *wr*, for great, used here phonetically. Although Helck transcribes *wr* it as *u* in the group writing, the *r* sound seems to have been preserved, as it is an important element of the sign that survives till the Coptic times. Moreover, the *r* sound is stressed by the complementary *r* that follows the *wr* bird. In any case, our conclusions do not change.

-mV-(a,i)²⁰(det. god)²¹
To be said four times."

Although this is the most trustworthy Egyptian transliteration of a Keftiw text, the amount of information that can be deduced is minute. Nevertheless, it is extremely valuable to us, as the language in question is otherwise unknown. The morphology and morphophonology are two areas that we are unable to approach, and the most important information these texts can yield is on the grounds of consonantal phonology.

The following consonants are clearly available in the language of the Keftiw:

k (h?)²²
 p b
 t s
 q
 h
 s (s?)
 w j
 r
 m n.

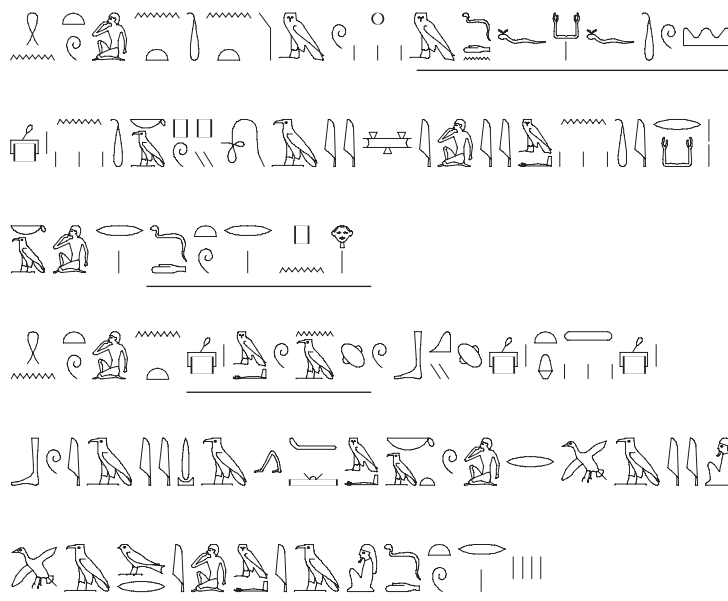
In other words, we have all three voiceless stops (p,

t, k), an indication of the existence of medials (b), an aspirate or fricative (h), two different sibilants (or a sibilant and an affricate) (possibly s, dj / zj), semi-vowel glides (w, j), at least one liquid (r), nasals (m, n), and labiovelar (q).

The q sound, despite what is mentioned above, could be another k and not a labiovelar. Of course, the possibility for the existence of a labiovelar would still exist and thus it cannot be discounted.

Interesting to note are the combinations of consonants **-rs-** and **-nt-**. The latter, as we will see further on, may be a sound preserved later in the endings of the 'pre-Greek' place names in **-vθ-**. More puzzling is the combination of **wbq** attested here, of which no interpretation can be offered. There can be no final verdict as to which language group does the Keftiw language belong. The combination **wbq** may suggest a Semitic language.

In the first spell we cannot make out clearly what the words are, and thus nothing on the nature of the words can be revealed. Thanks to the four existing determinatives to Keftiw words in the second spell, we have two names of Gods, one of an illness, and a candidate verb, i.e. three noun endings



The transcriptions to hieroglyphic are taken from
 J. STRANGE, *Caphtor/Keftiu. A new investigation*, Leiden 1980

²⁰ The two independent vowels of this word are rendered in a different way. This clearly implies their different phonetic value. Nevertheless, both signs were used for both *a* and *i* and thus we cannot make out what their actual value was.

²¹ These two determinatives do not belong to Egyptian words but, in all probability, to Keftiw ones.

²² Phonemes whose position is not certain are in brackets. The same phonemes exist without brackets in the position the writer thinks they belong.



Fig. 1 London Medical Papyrus (BM 10 059), © British Museum

and one of a verb. If the man with hand on mouth determinative does determine the Keftiw word and that is indeed a verb, as would one expect, then like most verbs of this type it would be a transitive. The location of the aforementioned nouns at the two ends of the sentence would favour such a construction. This determinative usually follows verbs or nouns signifying thinking, saying, eating, drinking, consuming. In that case, the first noun, the disease, will have to be the object, as we could not possibly conceive that an illness could eat, think, or consume a God. On the other hand, a God can easily curse, devour, or summon away a disease. In the spell formula we discussed earlier a God may be threatened with punishment. So one could place the two Gods in the object position; however, it is not possible to have such a structure, because one normally needs to ask a God to do something before threatening him with punishment. In other words one cannot have a secondary formula (threatening punishment) without a primary one (asking for something to be executed). In this way, the gods cannot be in the object case. Under these considerations, it seems we have here evidence for an OVS construction (Object preceding Verb and Subject following it). Nevertheless, it is extremely tentative and one cannot use this any further, as we may be facing a special spell construct or a data that we cannot control. In any case, there can be no final verdict on the sentence form of the Keftiw language from only one spell.

If there is an ending, i.e. if Keftiw is an inflectional or agglutinative language, then the disease word finishes in *-i*, which, if the reconstruction is correct, would be for the object case. If the gods

now are of the same sex, as the identical determinative would argue, then they must end in *-a*,²³ again if the above reconstruction were correct they would both be in the subject case.²⁴ The size of words in the second spell vary from five to two syllables; the first spell has two large eight and nine syllable words; at any rate, not much can be said about the size of the words as not all of them are divided with certainty.

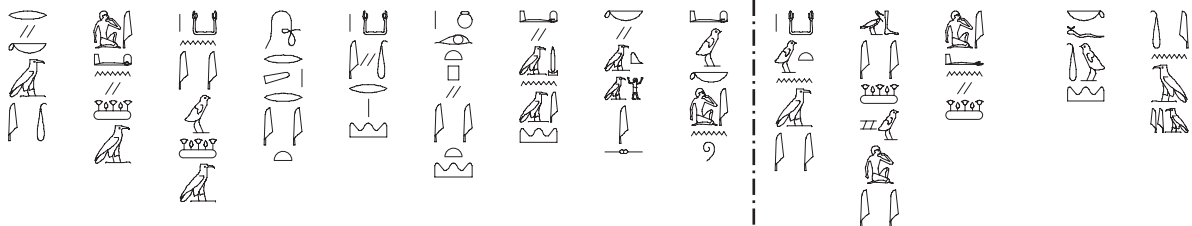
2. THE PLACE NAMES OF AMENOPHIS III

The inscription of place names lists all those within the horizon of (or known to) Amenophis III and is located in Kom el-Hetan, the site of the King's mortuary temple in western Thebes. These and other similar lists were not compiled as historical documents to reflect changes in the political scene, and there are quite a few clear cases of copying from older lists, for example the inclusion of Mitanni in the lists of Ramses II.²⁵ A list of names of cities in 'fortified' cartouches, all in the fifth register, are under the heading *kftiw* and *ti-na-jw* (there is a possibly correct theory that *ti-na-jw* are the *Danaoi*). It is interesting to note that this inscription was looking towards the north; it would not be inconceivable for Egyptian archaeology to have an inscription that would be oriented according to its contents:

'a-m(a,i)-ni-š(a,u) ba-jV-š(a,u) ku-tu-na-jV mu-k-(a,i)-nu di-q(a)²⁶-ju-s(i) m(a,i)-šV-n-(a,i) nu-pi-r(a,i)-i-jV ku-ti-r(a,i) wa-ta-r(a,i)-i-jV ku-n-ju-š(a,u) 'a-m(a,i)-ni-š(a,u) ri-ka-tV

It is also noteworthy that the Keftiw and the *Ti-na-jw* names are not distinguished between them.

Unfortunately, it is impossible to allocate with certainty which names belong to Keftiw and which



²³ In the highly unlikely case that the first 'word' of the first spell comprises the divine names of Santa (Sandon) and Kubaba (Cybele), as has already been speculated, then they must be in the vocative.

²⁴ W. P. LEHMAN, *Historical Linguistics*, New York 1992.

²⁵ R. GIVEON, *Fragen an die altägyptische Literatur*, Wiesbaden 1977, 171–183.

²⁶ The man with hands raised determinative comes from the word *qa* 'to be exalted'. This is unfortunately an

example of a whole word in 'Group writing' not used for a final syllable. This could be an argument against Helck's division of words in the first and second spells. Nevertheless, the four important words in the second spell are the three nouns and the one verb; they are recognised independently by their own determinatives, and thus this does not affect our study. It is possible that this toponym was conceived as two words by the Egyptians.

to the Ti-na-jw, since they are not distinguished between them and thus one has to be very cautious in the evaluation of the given information.

The quite clear *mu-k-(a,i)-na* as Mycenae and that of *ku-ti-r(a,i)* as Kythera is in support of the reconstruction of *ti-na-jw* as *Danaoi*, which is further supported by other names on the list.²⁷

Of all the Cretan names the only one which is very easily recognisable is the twice repeated 'a-*m(a,i)-ni-š(a,u)*. Its striking similarity with the modern 'Amnisos' and with the Linear B *a-mi-ni-so* is conclusive, though its repetition in the same text is puzzling. Several notes have to be made on this. The association of the name of Keftiw with a port site so close to Knossos, the largest Cretan city, renders the association of Keftiw with central Crete very likely indeed. The less likely identification of the word *ku-n-ju-š(a,u)* as Knossos or Linear B *ko-no-so* reinforces the above observations.²⁸

The identification of the place name Amnisos will further give us a new sound: that of š. This is the first clear evidence we have to date for a š origin for the later alphabetic Greek -ss-. It may have been that this later -ss- was to accommodate the sound š (and possibly that of tš as we will later see) in alphabetic Greek without the invention of a new letter. A similar approach has been adopted also by Allen; Bartoňek, though, agrees only with the association of -ss- with an earlier /ts/ or /tsh/ sound represented in several Ionic dialects by Tsade.²⁹ There is a third type of sibilant or possibly an affricate, ś, which is already attested in the two spells. Here the name including it, *m(a,i)-śV-n-(a,i)*, is most probably Mainland Greek and its reconstruction as Messena is inviting. In that case we have a phonetic value ś in a Mainland Greek (possibly pre-Greek linguistically) place name which was later written with -σσ- in alphabetic Greek. The ś may have a sound like tš which Allen suggests as a precursor of -σσ-. It is interesting here to note that one Semitic word having the sound ś was transliterated into Greek as -σσ-.³⁰

²⁷ And by the possible association to the Cretans (if all our speculations are correct).

²⁸ Several other toponyms have been reconstructed in a more tentative way: Phaestos, Kudonia, Thebes, Messena, Nauplion, Lyktos.

²⁹ W. S. ALLEN, *Vox Graeca*, Cambridge 1966, 57f.; A. BARTOŇEK, *Vývoj Konsonantického Systemu v Reckých Dialektech*, Praha 1961.

³⁰ E. MASSON, *Recherches sur les plus anciens emprunts sémitiques en grec*, Paris 1967

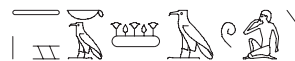
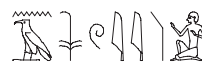
3. THE SCHOOL WRITING BOARD

The school writing tablet includes several personal names of the Keftiw. The only use of this piece of text is to verify the observations that we have made earlier. On the verso it has turned into a palimpsest and we cannot be sure whether the names continue on that side too. Peet³¹ included two words on the verso together with the names on the recto but they will not be discussed here, as they are incomplete, problematic and difficult to interpret in terms of 'Group writing'. Two Keftiw names are clearly Egyptian ones; if it is assumed that they are not so due to confusion, it is possible to speculate two things. Either the Egyptians knew the meaning of the Keftiw names and translated them in their language, or that they offered an Egyptian example of similar sounding words.

The recto reads (what is legible of it):

"Making the names of the Keftiw:

'i-š(a,u)-hV-r
na-su-jV
'i-ka-š(a,u) b-n-nu-sV-b(a,i)-r(a,i)
'i-di-na
pi-na-ru-ta
ru-s(a,i) ..."



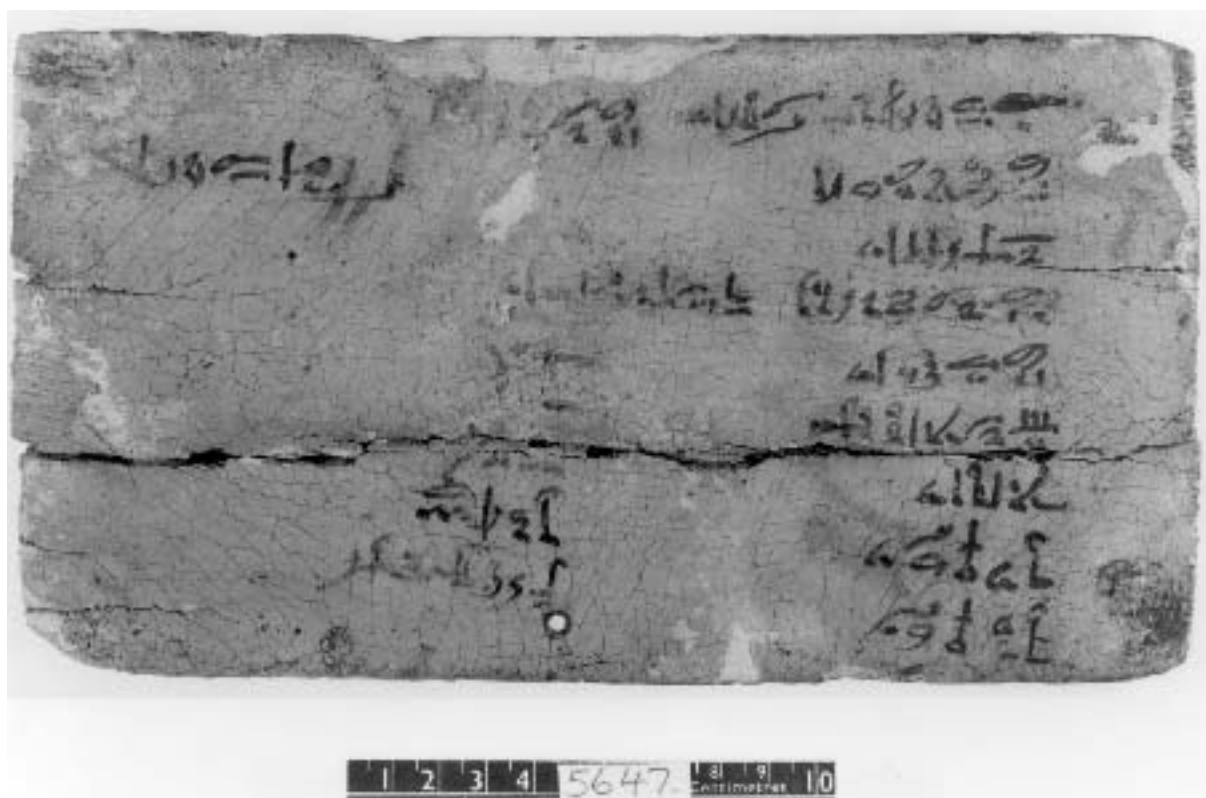


Fig. 2 The school writing board (BM 5647), recto
© British Museum



Fig. 3 The school writing board (BM 5647), verso
© British Museum

The consonantal phonemes represented are:

k (h)
p
t d
s sh
r
h
j
n

k (h)³²
p b
t d s̄
q
h
s sh (s̄)
w j
r
m n.

There is confirmation of the third sibilant *š* both in the middle and at the end of the words. The size of the words does not seem to be larger than six syllables as was the case in the second Egyptian spell. The only sequence of consonants without any apparent vowels in between is that of *-bnn-* which again is puzzling. It is just conceivable that it might be the Semitic filiation *ben* ‘son of’.

CONCLUSIONS

As we have already seen, the three Egyptian texts overlap on the information they convey, but their credibility varies on matters of accuracy. Their phonology can be considered a safer ground; here we can possibly approach the values of several consonants. If we combine the information of all three texts, a tentative table of consonantal phonemes would be:

Many scholars would find it difficult to accept a *š* and a *s̄* sound, as well as a phoneme *b* in initial position for any old Indo-European language. And indeed there exists the possibility that the Keftiw language may belong to another distinct language group.

With regards to the sentence structure we have an indication from the second spell that this is of OVS formation. The information is of course too tentative to use it on its own for a reconstruction and other pieces of information should be drawn together before such an attempt is made. Furthermore, the size of words is from two to nine syllables and some vowels which could have been part of an ending (if that is an existing feature of the language) were pointed out.

The above, however scanty it may be, is useful since all Linear A decipherment attempts so far, have not provided such evidence. Nevertheless, these findings have to be used with caution and – if possible – in combination with other sources.

³¹ T. E. PEET, The Egyptian Writing Board B.M. 5647, bearing Keftiw names, in: *Essays in Aegean Archaeology presented to Sir Arthur Evans*, Oxford 1927, 91–98.

³² See above note 22.

