Guide to the Writing Systems of Ancient Egypt

Stéphane Polis (ed.)

INSTITUT FRANÇAIS D'ARCHÉOLOGIE ORIENTALE

Guide to the Writing Systems of Ancient Egypt

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Note to the reader:
The essays in the present volume have been translated by Colin Clement, with the exception of nos. 6, 8, 15, 27–34, 36, 41–42, 49, which were originally written in English.

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Translation into English
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LES GUIDES
DE L'IFAO

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Theban Tomb 71. © Alexis Den Doncker & Hugues Tavier/ULiège.

11. Cuneiform in Egypt: The el-Amarna Letters

LAURENT COLONNA D'ISTRIA

The "el-Amarna Letters" constitute the only corpus of texts in Mesopotamian cuneiform* writing that has been discovered in Egypt. The tablets come from the new capital of el-Amarna, founded by Akhenaton (ca. 1350 BC).

This unique corpus is composed of 382 clay tablets and fragments. Three hundred and fifty are diplomatic letters that shed light on relations between the Egypt of Amenhotep IV, also known as Akhenaton, and the great kingdoms of the era—Babylonia, Mittani, and Hatti—as well as certain Levantine rulers, some of whom were under Egyptian dominion. The remainder of the documents (32 tablets and fragments) are literary texts and school texts. They are probably examples of local training activities (§35).

The first tablets were most likely discovered in 1887. By 1907, some 358 were known, the majority of which came from illegal digs and which were acquired by European museums. Official excavations conducted in 1891–1892 led to the discovery of 32 tablets in their archaeological context: 26 came from a single building (Q42.21). This particular building is today understood to have been a storage space for the letters and a venue for teaching activities, as some tablets produced *in situ* as well as a reused tablet were found in the same spot. It is probable that the majority of tablets from the illicit excavations came from this building.

The el-Amarna Letters are evidence of the diversity of languages employed in ancient international correspondence. They include a letter written in *Middle Assyrian** (EA 15, Fig. 47), another sent to Tushratta of Mittani in *Hurrian** (EA 24), and two missives from the king of Hatti written in Hittite (EA 31–32). In addition, there are letters from Babylonia in *Middle Babylonian** and others from the Levant which reveal the use of a *Babylonian koiné* for epistolary purposes as well as two main scribal traditions: the northern tradition of *Hurro-Akkadian* (with the use of Hurrian terms) and a southern tradition called *Canaano-Akkadian* (which featured the use of Levantine dialectal particularities).

A particular graphic feature of the diplomatic correspondence originating from the Levantine sphere of this period was the use of the "glossenkeil", a sign that is well attested in the Amarna Letters sent from the Levant. This sign does not belong to the logosyllabic* repertoire of the cuneiform writing system. The "glossenkeil" appears as two partially overlapping oblique nails  , as two oblique nails one after the other  , or as a single oblique nail  . These forms reflect different scribal practices that run more or less along a

Fig. 47. Letter from Ashur-uballit to Akhenaton, reverse side following obverse side along a vertical rotation (EA 15 = MMA 24.2.11; 5.5 x 7.7 cm). © Metropolitan Museum.

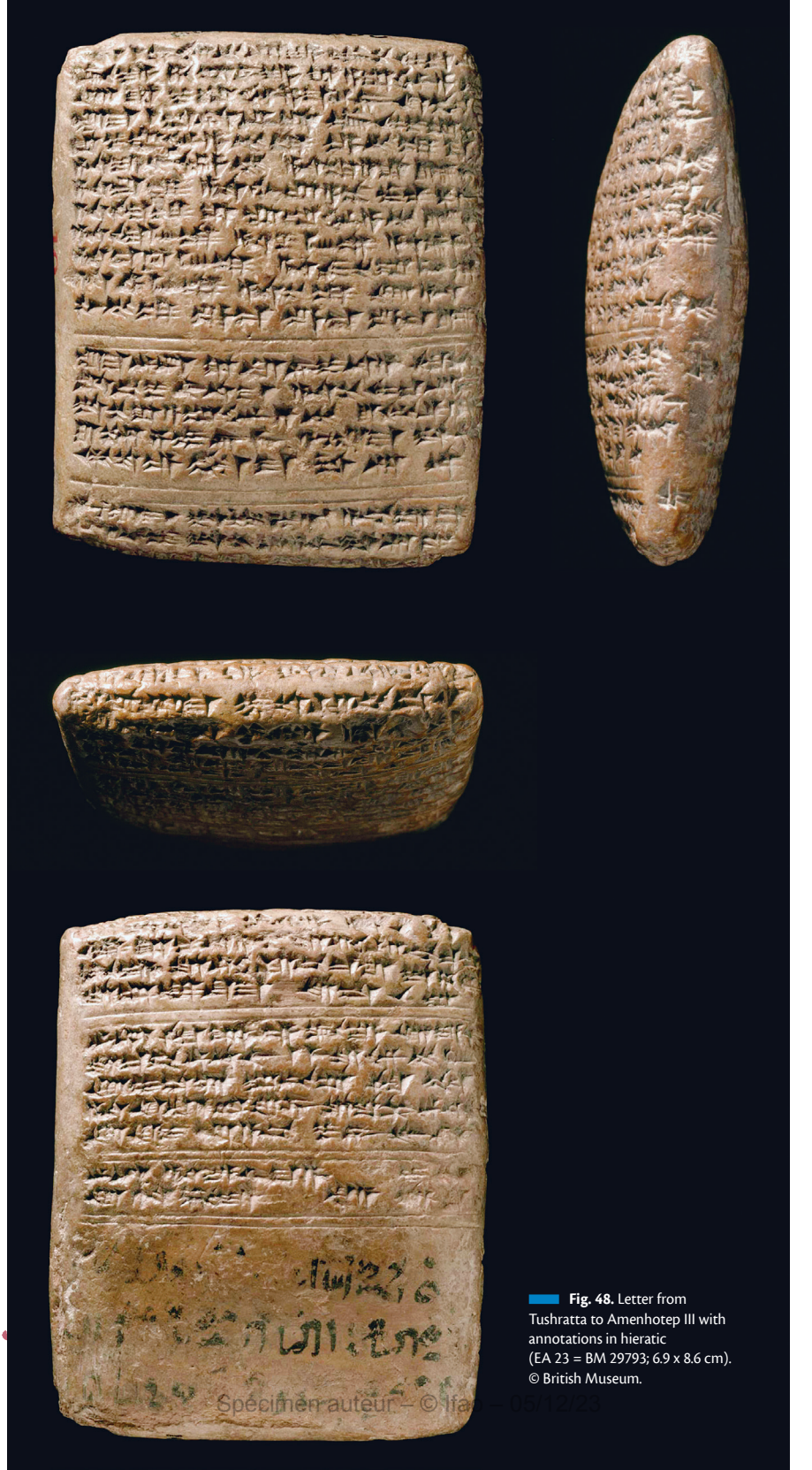

Fig. 48. Letter from Tushratta to Amenhotep III with annotations in hieratic (EA 23 = BM 29793; 6.9 x 8.6 cm). © British Museum.

north-south line. The “glossenkiel” had multiple functions. It might appear, for example, between two terms from different languages that have the same meaning. The sign could also introduce a lexeme in a language other than Akkadian* (for example, in Levantine dialect or Hurrian). Moreover, if a scribe had to add signs on the next line to finish a sentence (or sim.), the sign was used to signal that the text was continuous with the text on the previous line.

Another particularity of the Amarna Letters is the presence of annotations in ink (Fig. 48). At least 15 letters bear texts in black or red ink in hieratic writing (§7). These annotations concern the origin of the letter as well as the place and circumstances of the receipt of the missive. Others are composed simply of one or more signs noting that the tablet had been successfully communicated. It is also noteworthy that three of the literary compositions in the corpus display traces of red dots marking prosodic units.