Formal Resonances and Iconic Remotivations

The Allograms of ◯ [D32] in New Kingdom Sources*

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Abstract. This paper aims to analyse the variety of formal resonances and iconic remotivations activated by specific occurrences of the hieroglyphic grapheme ◯ in New Kingdom sources. It will first be argued (§1) that the frequent combination of ◯ with the ○-*nw* pot in hieratic sources triggered the emergence of hieroglyphic variants of ◯. Their shape (e.g., ◯, ◯, ◯ or sim.) could not be interpreted easily from an iconic viewpoint during the Middles Kingdom (§2). In the New Kingdom sources, occurrences of this hieroglyph show that painters and lapicides adopted different approaches to monumentalizing the underlying cursive form, some of which clearly attest to a re-iconisation process (§3). In the discussion, I will attempt to identify the motivations behind the choice of specific variants, considering the context in which they were used, formal resonances with iconic motives, and indexical hieroglyphic networks (§4).

3.   Early history of the grapheme ◯

The early history of the grapheme ◯ [D32 – TSL_1_2156] is quite complex and is still debated (Sourdive 1984: 506–507; Kahl 1994: 451–452; Schweitzer 2005: 236; Regulski 2010: 358-359; Stauder 2022), but it assuredly entered the hieroglyphic repertoire by the reign of Djer (1st Dynasty) at the latest (Regulski 2010: 742). During the Old Kingdom (Lacau 1954: 17), its four most common shapes are the ones listed in fig. 1. The main palaeographic differences concern the angle at which the arms meet (a & b *vs.* c & d[1]) and the absence or presence of shoulders (a & c *vs.* b & d). A secondary feature (that appears to be contingent on the interaction

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[1]   See Collombert 2010: 31–32, §43-44 for this opposition in the group *ḥm-kꜣ*.

with other hieroglyphic signs placed underneath; see below) is the hands that can be more (c) or less (a) opened. For the purposes of this discussion, it is important to note that there are no diacritic marks—that is, lines or strokes of any kind—between the arms at this stage.
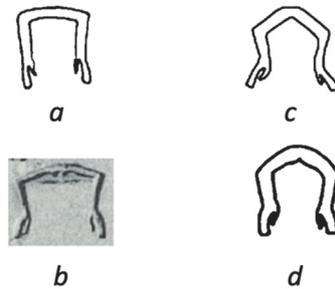

Fig. 1. Old Kingdom examples of D32 〈〉 in the *PT*

Such diacritic marks have been added to hieroglyphic occurrences of this grapheme by the early Middle Kingdom at the latest (§2), most certainly under the influence of the cursive hieratic script (Meeks 2004: 48, §124; see also Servajean 2011: 22, §38).

Fig. 2. Old Kingdom and First Intermediate Period examples of 〈〉 in hieratic sources
(Goedicke 1988: 7a-b)

I have argued (Polis 2024) that the hieratic shapes illustrated in fig. 2 directly derive from the frequent combination of the grapheme 〈〉 with the ○ *nw*-pot in the spellings of lexemes built on the root *zẖn*, especially in offering lists (fig. 3a). Many hieroglyphic examples of the Old kingdom attest to a correct understanding of this group, with the *nw*-pot placed between the arms (3b) or more directly held by the hands (3c).
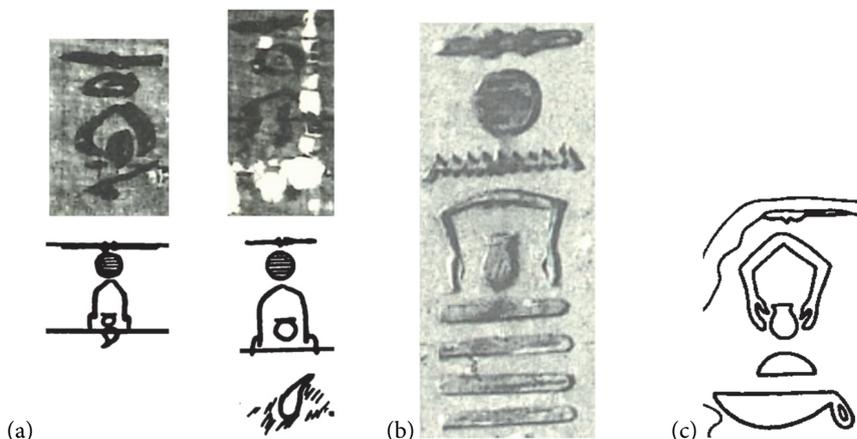

(a)   (b)   (c)

Fig. 3. *zẖn(w)* in the Abusir papyri (a) and in the *PT* (b = W and c = P)

But from the 6th Dynasty onward, this cursive feature—i.e., the presence of a nw-pot between the arms—spread formally to hieratic occurrences of ⟨⟩ where this nw-pot is graphemically superfluous, and hence unexpected (fig. 4).
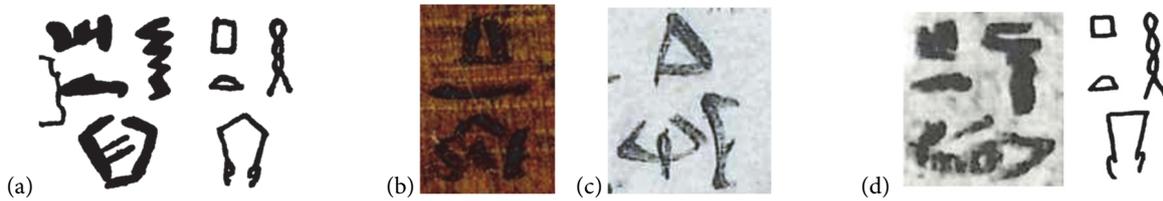

Fig. 4. *ḥpt* in the Elephantine papyri (a), *qn(j)* in P. BM EA 10676 (b) and in a Graffito from Hatnub (c), and *ḥpt* in P. Turin CG54003 (d)

Hieroglyphic occurrences of this grapheme dating to the Late Old Kingdom (fig. 5a) and First Intermediate Period testify to a difficult iconic interpretation of this hieratic group[2], even in the common *zḥn(w)*-offering (Callender 2019: 54, §74), where spellings such as the one of fig. 5b have assuredly interfered.
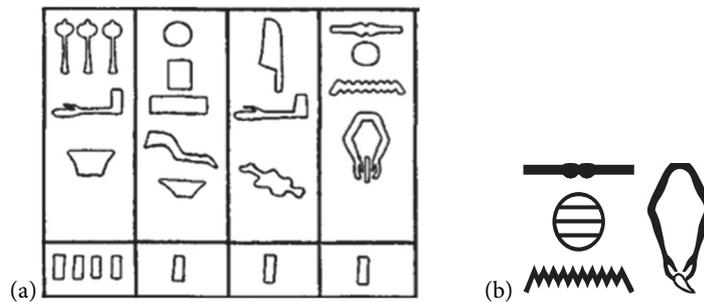

Fig. 5. ⟨⟩ in the *zḥnw*-offering of the Coffin of Idu 2–6th Dyn. (a) and in FIP sources (b)

4.   Outliers in the Middle Kingdom and SIP sources

The different ways the hieratic group is rendered in hieroglyphs become more obvious in sources from the Middle Kingdom and Second Intermediate Period. There are two main strategies: one is to reinterpret the *nw*-pot as a piece of meat (or as a stone, or sim.) held between the hands (fig. 6a-b; compare with fig. 3c). The other is to add diacritic dots (fig. 6c) or diagonal strokes (fig. 6d) in the middle of the arms.

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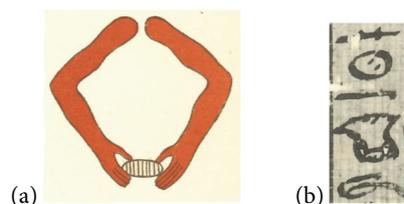
2   See also the *zḥnw*-offering in the offering list of the False of Satinteti (Boston MFA 24.593*).

Fig. 6. The grapheme ⟨⟩ in the tomb of Amenemhat – Beni Hassan (a), in the P. Ramesseum 6 (b),

in the mastaba of Senwesertankh* (c) and in Stela Munich GL WAF 35 (d)

In the sources of the Second Intermediate Period, the latter strategy is predominant (fig. 6). But determining whether the strokes and dots in question are interpreted as a trickle of water (Meeks 2004: 48, §124) by the Egyptian scribes in such cases or rather as a simple transposition of the hieratic strokes remains challenging for this period.
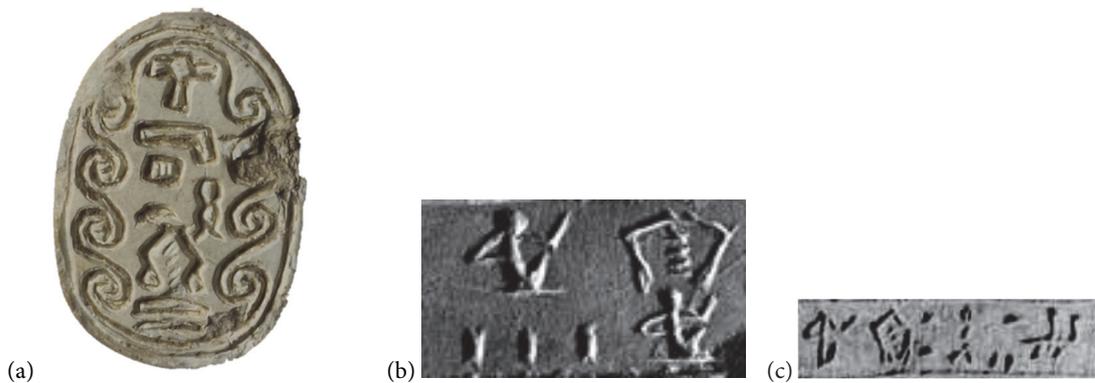

Fig. 6. The grapheme ⟨⟩ on the Scarab Berlin 32576 (a),

Stela Cairo CG 20765 (b) and Stela Cairo 20281 (c)

5.   New Kingdom evidence for variants of ⟨⟩

While most sources depict the simple "etymological" shape of ⟨⟩ (fig. 7a-c), even when the underlying (red) drawing shows the strokes characteristic of the more cursive writing norms (fig. 7c), a variety of shapes are evident in New Kingdom sources.
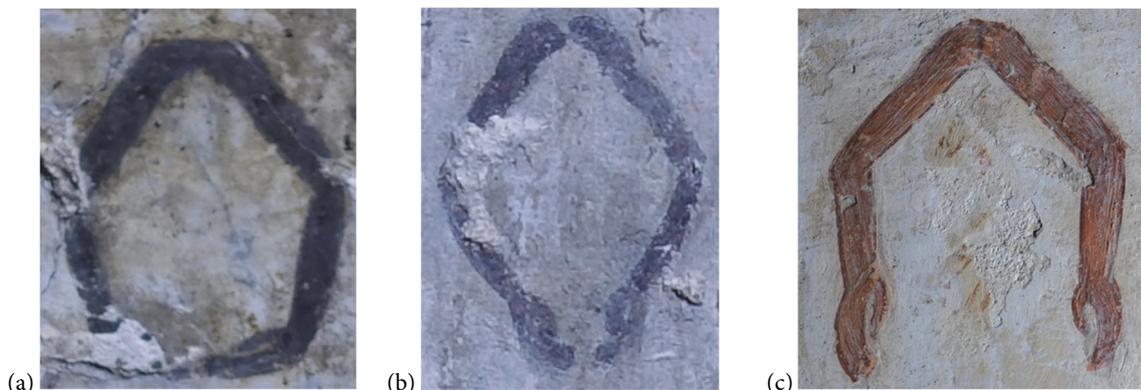

Fig. 7. Three occurrences of the grapheme ⟨⟩ in TT100

Some of them perpetuate formal traditions attested during the Middle Kingdom and Second Intermediate Period (fig. 8), possibly adapting them, for example with the oblong shape held between the hands in the Kamose Stele (fig. 8a).

(a)

(b)

Fig. 7. The grapheme ⟨⟩ in the Stela of Kamose (a), and on the lid of Merenptah's coffin (b)

However, other shapes are known for this grapheme. Depending on the shape of the element placed between the arms, they fall into one of the following categories: (a) a straight line; (b) a straight line with a forked top; (c) an inverted triangle with diagonal strokes below; (d) a trickle of water pouring into a pot; (e) a dotted line with a triangle shape below.

Fig. 8. The main "deviant" classes of the grapheme ◊ in New Kingdom sources

Additionally, there are more cursive shapes that cannot be easily placed into one of the above categories (fig. 9).

Fig. 9. The main "deviant" classes of the grapheme ◊ in New Kingdom sources

6. Discussion

In the discussion, I will present three main hypotheses to explain the iconic remotivations of the element between the arms of ◊ (fig. 8b-e):

–   Its interpretation as a *sḫn(.t)*-post ╎ [O30] and the formal resonances it creates with common shapes of the *sḥ*-booth ⊓ [O22].
–   Its interpretation as a beam of light placed between the arms, with echoes in the hieroglyphic repertoire of iconic representation such as the one of Fig. 10.

Fig. 10. Western goddess welcoming the setting sun (TT219)

– Its interpretation as a ripple of water (with the possible addition of a vase ensuing from the influence of hieratic shapes and ligatures such as the ones of fig. 11), which could interact with hieroglyphic spellings of *pnq* "to pour, to spread."
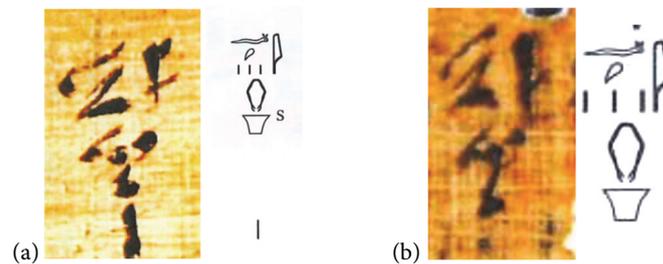

Fig. 10. P. Boulaq 18

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