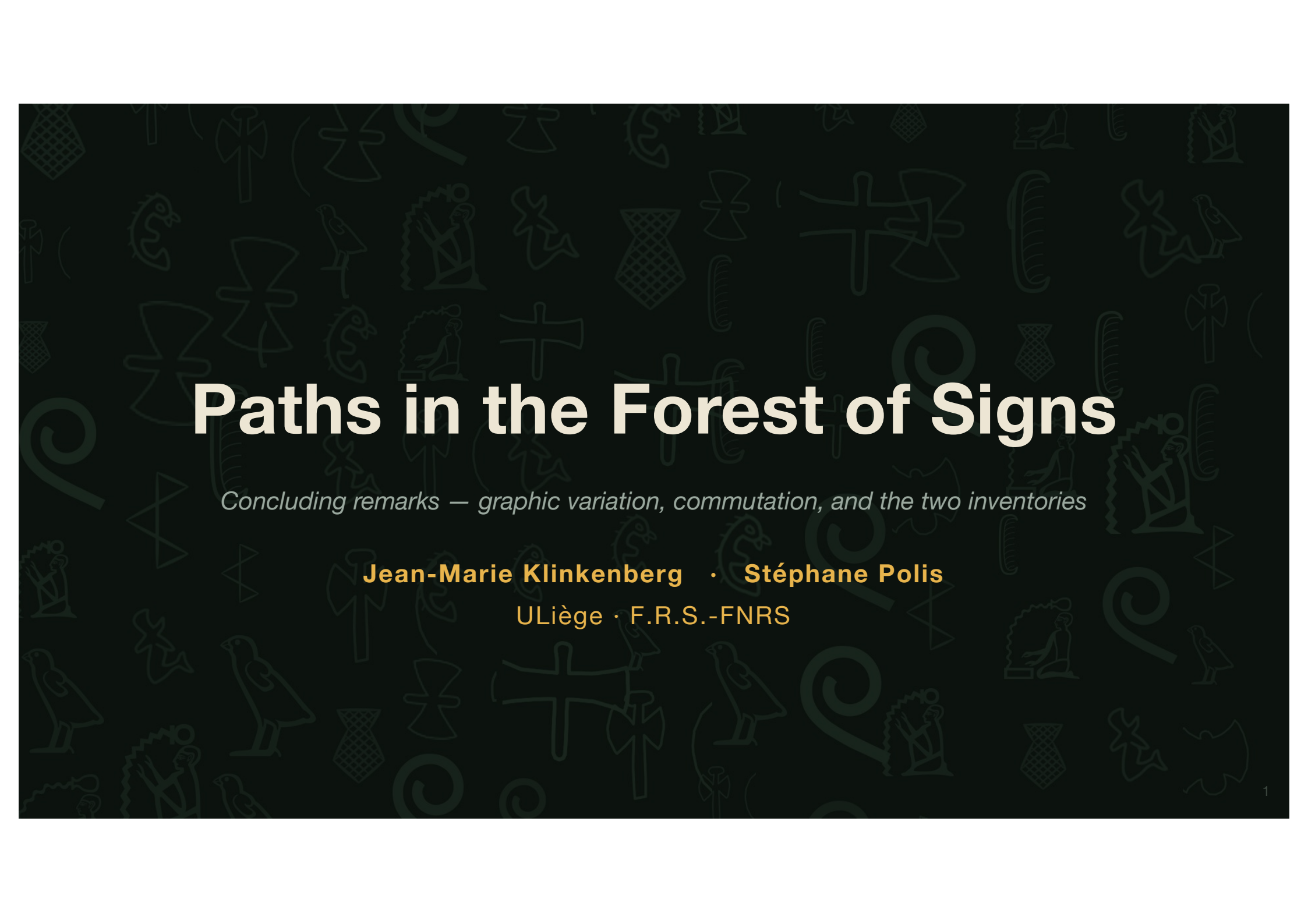


The background of the slide is a dark grey or black field covered with a repeating pattern of numerous small, light-colored (pale green or grey) symbols. These symbols are diverse in shape, including geometric forms like spirals, crosses, and triangles, as well as more complex, organic shapes that resemble stylized leaves, birds, or human figures. The overall effect is a dense, textured forest of signs.

Paths in the Forest of Signs

Concluding remarks — graphic variation, commutation, and the two inventories

Jean-Marie Klinkenberg · Stéphane Polis

ULiège · F.R.S.-FNRS

Before or after decipherment?

“

the identification of allographic relations is itself a precondition of decipherment

— Prager, on Classic Maya

“

not the precondition of decipherment but a categorisation it produces

— the Egyptian case

Before or after decipherment?

“

the identification of allographic relations is itself a precondition of decipherment

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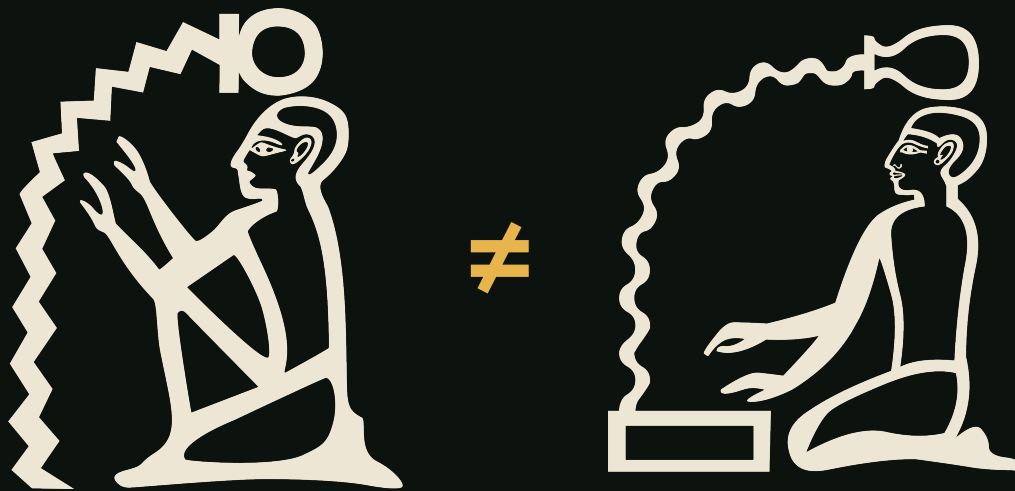
not the precondition of decipherment but a categorisation it produces

— the Egyptian case

The right question:

***To which graphic inventory
is a given visible difference pertinent?***

Why resemblance will not do



w'b "to be pure"

z'f "libation"

Similar shapes, unrelated values

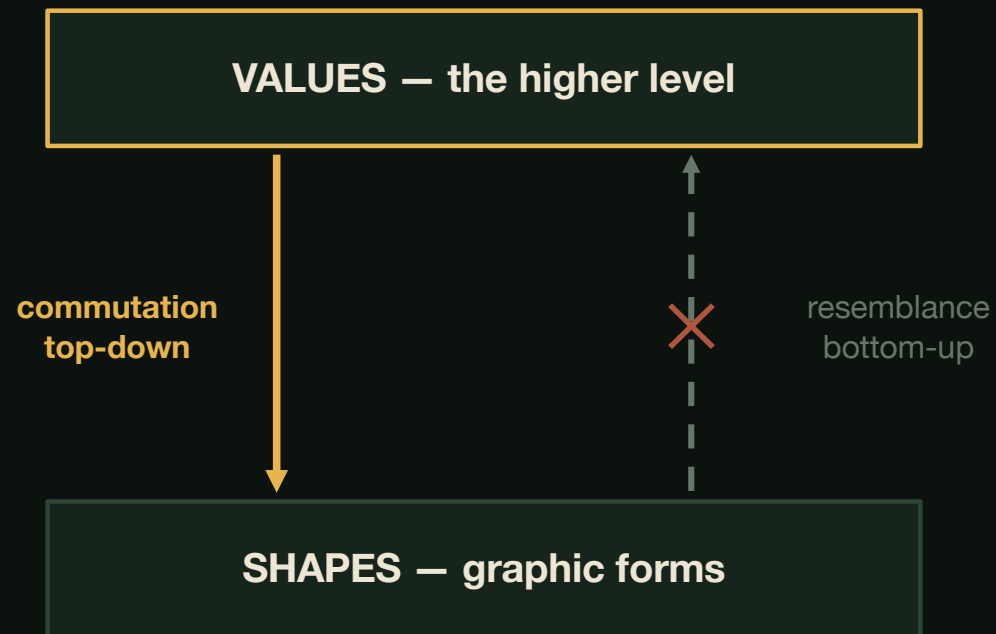
“

*visual analysis alone cannot
be the sole rationale for sign
definition*

— Wells & Fuls, on the Indus script

The same warning: Stein · Greco

The commutation test



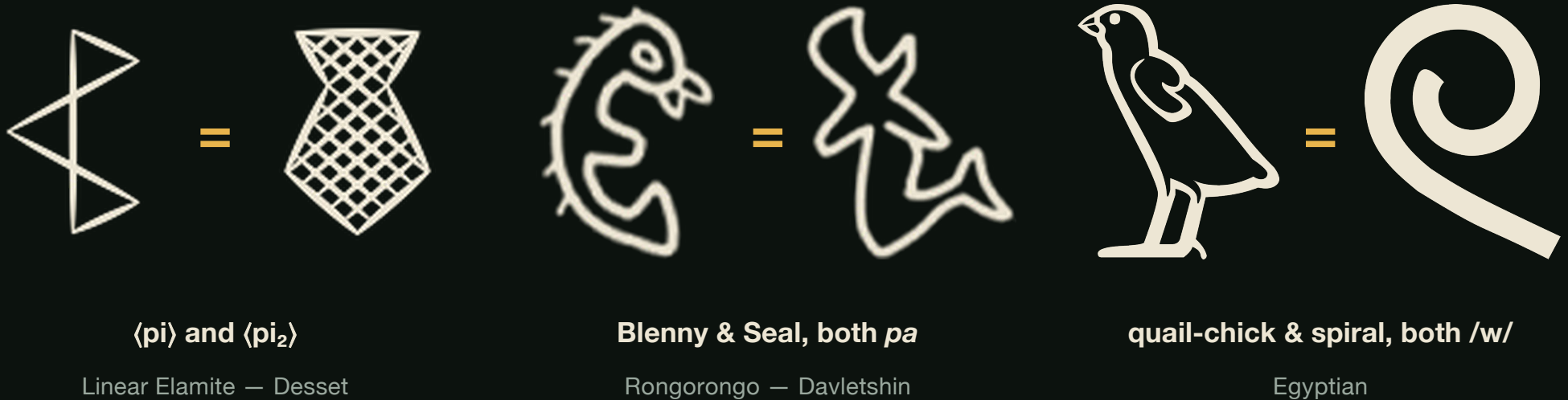
“

graphic variants and allographs
*“substitute for each other in
identical contexts”*

— Davletshin, on Rongorongo

Independently converging: Davletshin · Fuls · Bonmann · Kelley et al. · Prager

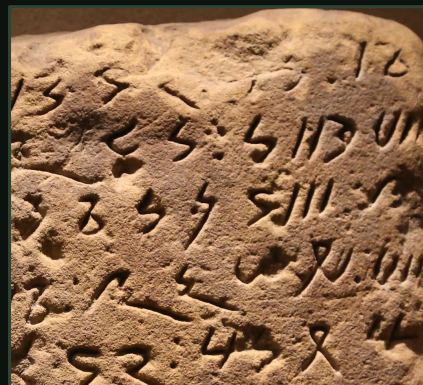
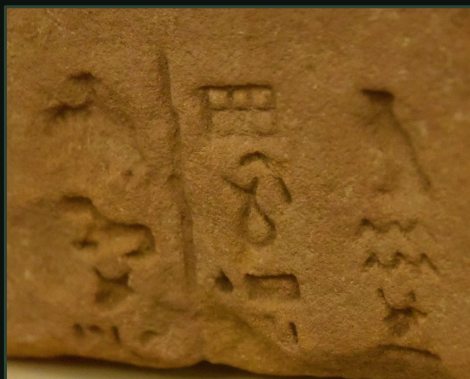
Strictly the same values: allographs



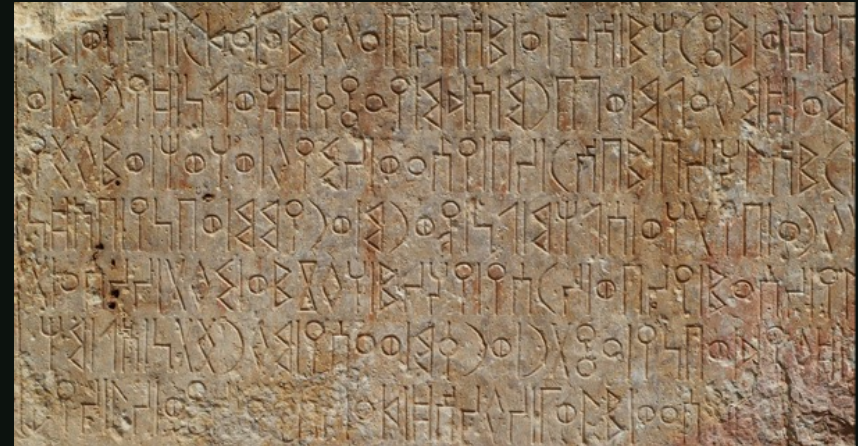
Free allography — the commutation holds in every position

Medium and context

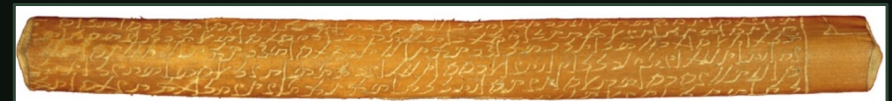
Meroitic — one alphasyllabary, two scripts (Rilly)



Ancient South Arabic (Stein)



stone — *musnad*



wooden stick — *zabūr*

*The support is not a passive receptacle
but a regulator of which allographs may surface*

Rilly · Stein · Bonmann · Fuls

Sharing some values — not all

ALLOGRAPHY

distinct graphs —
strictly the same graphemic values

ALLOGRAPHY

graphs of distinct graphemes —
at least one value shared

*Egyptian: seated-man &
seated-woman both write
=j — each keeps other
values*



Won by commutation in context

Colonna d'Istria & Wilkes · Zadworny

The figurative explosion



a formal series — the double-axe CH 042

“the writers were still conscious of and worked from the physical referent rather than a standardised sign”

— **a Campo**



“recognition cues” — Haring

Proto-Sinaitic signs as imprecise depictions of real-world objects

Fish, or comb?



both spell /ka/ — Classic Maya

Allographs? Both spell /ka/.

Distinct signs? Not the same picture.

Both — at distinct levels of analysis.

Fish, or comb?



both spell /ka/ — Classic Maya

Allographs? Both spell /ka/.

Distinct signs? Not the same picture.

Both — at distinct levels of analysis.

What the graphemic eye would discard



the defeated ruler's glyph, tipped to follow its referent — "The reading of the sign remains unaffected."

Aztec — Whittaker



the dongba holds the implement the ritual requires — an element "not read"

Naxi — Poupard

(Hand 1)

(Hand 2)

the same ⟨di⟩, two scribal hands — indexical: the writer's identity

Linear B — Greco

Whittaker · Greco · Thele · Xu · Poupard

Two intertwined inventories

GRAMMEMIC INVENTORY



*one glyph —
both inventories
at once*

GRAPHEMIC INVENTORY

structured by language —
allography · suballography · allographemy

structured by visuo-spatial values
symbolic · indexical · iconic

“

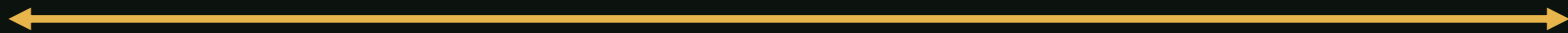
***not one inventory of
signs but two
intertwined inventories***

Intertwined axes: no master tree from
the grapheme down to the glyph can be
coherent.

The same path, walked from either end

“Allograph, or distinct sign?” means “to which inventory is this difference pertinent?”

the same operation



UNDECIPHERED — prospective

distributional commutation,
before any value is read (Prager)

DECIPHERED — retrospective

the categorisation decipherment
produces (the Egyptian case)

Carian (Adiego) — circularity gone wrong, then right. The Kaunos bilingual: the disputed letter
“was not an allograph of the letter for š, but rather an allograph of the letter t”.

How many signs? The tell-tale quarrel

250 → 715

Indus sign-lists — Wells & Fuls

356 → 1 623

proto-Elamite — Kelley, Born, Monroe & Sarkar

up to 3 “scripts”

Kushan, lumpers v. splitters — Bonmann

under- & over-counted

Cretan Hieroglyphic — a Campo · Salgarella

“no list can be exhaustive”

Naxi, a generative script — Poupard

Not a better single list — intertwined repertoires

A translation between idioms

Phenomenon	Definition	Terms used at this conference
Allography (free / conditioned)	distinct graphs, strictly the same graphemic values	Davletshin “allographs” · Whittaker “allographs” · Desset “graphic variants of the same grapheme” · Xu yixie zi 異寫字 · Wells & Fuls “sign variants” *
Suballography	coherent formal series within one allograph	Davletshin “graphic variants” · Prager segmentation / animation · Salgarella stable vs variable components · a Campo referent-driven forms
Allographemy	graphs of distinct graphemes sharing at least one value	Zadworny DUG-type cases · cuneiform plurifunctionality (Colonna d’Istria & Wilkes) · Thele kanji / kana switching · Whittaker dimensionality, colour, orientation
Allogrammy / allogrammemy	distinct grams, same / partly shared visuo-spatial values	Greco scribal hands · Thele katakana-as-foreignness · Poupard “situational variants”

ENVOI

Out of the forest

Building an inventory without a reading

Cretan Hieroglyphic — a Campo
Linear A — Salgarella
Proto-Byblos — Fuls
proto-Elamite — Kelley, Born, Monroe & Sarkar
Indus — Wells & Fuls
Rongorongo — Davletshin
Proto-Sinaitic — Haring
Ciphers — Desenclos & Pierrot

Keeping two inventories apart

Egyptian — Polis & Joubert
Maya — Prager
Luwian — Oreshko
Aztec — Whittaker
Naxi — Poupard
Guodian Chinese — Xu
Linear B — Greco
Carian — Adiego
Avestan — Martínez Porro

Variation conditioned by support & register

Meroitic — Rilly
Ancient South Arabian — Stein
Japanese — Thele

All three at once

Linear Elamite — Desset
Kushan — Bonmann
archaic cuneiform —
Zadworny; Colonna d'Istria &
Wilkes