Essay Question

Topic 5: What are the important Egyptian texts relevant to the development of hieroglyphs, and what features of these texts are most significant (esp. the Narmer palette)? What part did a written script play in the development of Egyptian civilisation?

Synopsis

Hieroglyphic writing existed before the unification of Egypt by Narmer in Dynasty 0 through to its end in the first millennium AD. The pictorial character of the script was maintained throughout. This essay will examine the development of hieroglyphics using examples of texts from the archaic period to Middle Kingdom. The purpose and changes in semantics will be discussed as will be writing's effect on Egyptian civilisation.

Essay Response

Hieroglyphic writing was used by the ancient Egyptian civilisation from the fourth millennium BCE until its end in the first millennium AD. Though it is likely that Hieroglyphics were inspired by the Mesopotamian 'cuneiform', most scholars agree that the Egyptians developed their own forms of representation.[1] The pictorial character of hieroglyphics existed throughout Egyptian civilisation though it was adapted into cursive forms for everyday use, firstly hieratic, and later demotic and Coptic.[2] This essay will focus on hieroglyphics targeting the archaic period between c. 3400 BCE and 2660 BCE through to the Middle Kingdom c. 2000 BCE to 1300 BCE. The texts examined include those found on objects excavated from tombs in Abydos, the Narmer Palette, the Pyramid Texts, autobiographies and Coffin Texts. The subject matter of these writings was integral to the functioning of the Egyptian state and religious beliefs and practices. The semantics of hieroglyphics and the changes they underwent will be examined. Finally, writing's impact on the development of Egyptian civilisation will be revealed and how state ideology, ethics, bureaucracy and religious beliefs were influenced.

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[1] John D Ray, 'The emergence of writing in Egypt', *World Archaeology*, vol. 17, no. 3, 1986, p. 309.
[2] David P Silverman, 'Signs, Symbols and Language' in *Ancient Egypt*, ed. David P Silverman, Oxford, 1997, p. 236.

Hieroglyphics from the archaic period between c. 3400 BC and c. 2660 BC highlight the development of a centralised Egyptian state. Predynastic writings from excavations of tombs in Abydos identify state owned objects. Ivory labels depicting animals such as birds and dogs identified the contents and owners of goods. As Bard points out these are the first signs of phonetic writing.[3] Seals and ink signs painted on jars found in other tombs from Abydos may be those of royal names. These match similar findings of Dynasty 0 which utilised 'serekhs', rectangular icons inscribed with the king's name.[4] Combined, these elements suggest that writing was first used to identify goods belonging to the king, and hence the state.[5] The earliest known writing was an integral function of economic administration by the state.

The most significant find from the archaic period is the Narmer Palette (c. 3200 BCE) depicting the unification of Lower and Upper Egypt by the king, Narmer. On the back of the Palette, the king, wearing the white crown of Upper Egypt, prepares to smite an enemy. On the front the king, wearing the Red Crown of Lower Egypt, is shown above a lower scene of two subdued animals with long intertwined necks, which may represent the taming of the two kingdoms.[6] It is widely believed that the Palette depicts the forceful unification of Lower Egypt represented by papyrus plants and the Red Crown, and Upper Egypt represented by the White crown from which Narmer originated.[7] As well as an early commemoration of a historical event, it is a clear use of propaganda by the king to legitimize his rule over a unified Egypt. Therefore the Narmer Palette demonstrates the use of writing and images for the purpose of royal propaganda.

Hieroglyphics from the archaic period demonstrate the use of a formal, yet flexible, writing system. The labels found in Abydos utilise logograms, pictures depicting objects; phonograms, images representing sounds; and determinatives, images which clarify meaning. An example of this is an ivory label 'bak' (oil) which shows a tree as a determinative.[8] The Narmer Palette combines these principles with pictorial representations. The image of the king is captioned using the catfish hieroglyph, pronounced n'r, and chisel, /m-r/,

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[3] Kathryn A Bard, 'Origins of Egyptian Writing' in *The Origins of Horus: studies dedicated to Michael Hoffman, 1944-1990*, eds. Renee Friedman and Barbara Adams, Oxford, 1992, p. 300.
[4] Penelope Wilson, *Sacred Signs: hieroglyphics in Ancient Egypt.* Oxford, 2003, p. 9.
[5] *Ibid.*, p. 8.
[6] See Appendix II.
[7] Bard, 'Origins of Egyptian Writing', p. 304.
[8] See Appendix I.

highlighting that Narmer's name was of significance.[9] Though there is no clear sentence structure, this combination of representation and hieroglyphs elicits narrative. Archaic period writing also allowed multiple options for a single word. Loprieno demonstrates that a rosette ✳ /hrrt/ and falcon 𓅃 /hrw/ can both be used for the word 'Horus'.[10] Archaic writing demonstrated formal and flexible writing elements using images for pronunciation, imagery and structure.

Old Kingdom hieroglyphics (c. 2650 BCE – 2150 BCE) were the focus of funerary domain particularly the cult of the king. The Pyramid Texts, carved or painted inside pyramid burial chambers, are the most significant. These individual 'utterances' of varying length are spells, rituals and descriptions of the different stages of the king's journey to the Gods.[11] It is proposed that these writings are based on ancient rites and beliefs. Evidence of this may be seen in their language and orthography which, like the beliefs they represent, is archaic.[12] They indicate the emerging belief in the importance of having a written version of orations.[13] The texts were intended as a reference for the dead king after his resurrection.[14] This focus on the functional use of hieroglyphic writing is also reinforced by the lack of accompanying scenes and images in the Pyramid Texts. Hieroglyphics of the Old Kingdom became increasingly formalised. While archaic writing exhibited flexible systems of writing, the Old Kingdom became systematic.[15] The use of phonograms remained flexible, however logograms did not. The number of logograms was reduced to about a thousand and the different options for single words were limited.[16] The purpose of hieroglyphic writing in the Old Kingdom was largely to do with the funerary domain, while hieroglyphic structure became more formalised.

Classic Middle Egyptian was developed and used during the Middle Kingdom (c. 2000 BCE – 1300 BCE) and was the pinnacle of Egyptian writing. This period in Egyptian history was

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[9] Aidan Dodson, *The Hieroglyphs of Ancient Egypt.* London, 2001, p. 20.

[10] Antonio Loprieno, *Ancient Egyptian: A Linguistic Introduction.* Cambridge, 1995, p. 20.

[11] Margaret Alice Murray, 'Language and Literature' in *The Splendour that was Egypt: a general survey of Egyptian culture and civilisation.* London, 1950, p. 199.

[12] Rudolf Anthes, 'Remarks on the Pyramid Texts and the Early Egyptian Dogma', *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, vol. 74, no. 1, January 1954, p. 35.

[13] Wilson, *Sacred Signs*, p33.

[14] *Ibid.*, p. 33.

[15] Loprieno, *Ancient Egyptian*, p. 20.

[16] *Ibid.*, p. 20.

characterized by a diffusion of power from the pharaoh to the nomarchs.[17] Though the king did ultimately reaffirm his royal authority it was an age of democratisation of religious beliefs.[18] During the Old Kingdom, autobiographies were the first attempts by non-royals to attain an afterlife. It was thought that by listing their titles and rank from real life that nobles and officials could re-create their place under the king in his next life.[19] As writing evolved in the Classic Period use of narrative combined with catalogues of virtues and the addition of praise of the dead king and prayers to the gods lifted autobiographies to a new level. As Lichtheim states, autobiographies were often 'self-laudatory', extolling only positive virtues of the tomb's owner.[20] The Autobiography of Weni is one such example. Weni claims that 'there was a secret charge… against Queen Weret-yamtes, his majesty made me go in to hear (it) alone… because I was worthy in his majesty's heart beyond any official of his.'[21] The Pyramid Texts also evolved for use by private citizens who could afford them. The first line of Spell I of the 'Coffin Texts' begins by 'vindicating a man in the realm of the dead'.[22] Similar to the Pyramid Texts, these funerary texts were painted on the interior of wooden coffins with the purpose of assisting the dead to overcome many dangers to reach the west of the world.[23] The desire for private citizens to attain the afterlife was realised in writing during the Classic Period.

During this 'Classic' phase hieroglyphic writing reached its zenith. A new school system was developed for the education of the bureaucratic elite.[24] Hieroglyphic orthography became fine-tuned and the number of graphic representations for a word diminished from the existing Old Kingdom script. Logograms became less common and varied hieroglyphic shapes were reduced to only one or two choices, totalling approximately 750 signs.[25] As Egyptian hieroglyphics reached their peak dedicated educational institutions formalised the language.

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[17] B G MacGill, 'Hathor in the Context of the Coffin Text', *Studia Antiqua*, vol. 6, no. 1, 2008, p. 1.
[18] *Ibid.*, p. 28.
[19] Rosalie David, *Handbook to Life in Ancient Egypt.* New York, 2003, p. 254.
[20] Miriam Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature: Vol. I, The Old and Middle Kingdoms.* Berkeley, 2006, p. 4.
[21] The Autobiography of Weni in Miriam Lichtheim, 'Monumental Inscriptions from Private Tombs' in *Ancient Egyptian Literature.* Vol. I, *The Old and Middle Kingdoms.* Berkeley, 2006, p. 19.
[22] Spell I in Faulkner, R O. *The Ancient Egyptian Coffin Texts: Volume I, Spells 1-354.* Warminster, 1973, p. 1.
[23] Dodson, *The Hieroglyphs*, p. 64.
[24] Loprieno, *Ancienty Egyptian*, p. 28.
[25] *Ibid.*, p. 21.

The archaic period demonstrates the Egyptian civilisation's need to 'classify reality'.[26] The Narmer Palette is an example of the shift from predynastic circular to horizontal representation. Examples of objects from the second half of the fourth millennium utilise a spiral arrangement.[27] The Narmer Palette utilised sequential organisation with each scene appearing below the previous.[28] Betrò postulates that this can be seen as an awakening in Egyptian realism as their details of ownership and inventories of state goods further bare witness.[29] The Narmer Palette also demonstrates the power of the Egyptian elite over its civilisation. As literacy was limited to royalty and nobility, these few were able to standardize a formal art form. As Bard states, hieroglyphs were 'used to caption political information portrayed pictorially' and such royal propaganda can be seen in countless monumental artworks from the Archaic period onward where captions accompany often carvings of disproportionately large and aggressive Egyptian kings.[30] Archaic writing and monumental art demonstrates not only a mentality of sequential organisation but the standardisation of ceremonial art by royalty to legitimize its rule.

Writing influenced the status of, and expectations placed upon, the educated classes. Literacy was limited primarily to the elite royal and noble families. Literacy within the Egyptian population averaged less than one percent during the Pharaonic period ensuring that advancement to political or professional positions in society relied heavily on the ability to read and write.[31] Scribes were also rewarded with fine clothing and exemptions from some forms of taxation and labour intensive activities.[32] Educated scribes enabled the Egyptian state to flourish through a highly organised bureaucracy. One example of this efficient centralised administration can be seen in the construction of the pyramids of Dynasty IV. Taxation estimates made by educated local administrators was based on regular census of fields, gold and herds enabling the projection of crop estimates and ultimately the tax yield.[33] This in turn enabled the feeding and funding of the pyramid building projects. However, with high office came high responsibility. Education for scribes involved ethical and moral codes

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[26] Maria Carmela Betrò, *Hieroglyphics: The Writings of Ancient Egypt.* New York, 1996, p. 15.

[27] See Appendix III.

[28] See appendix II.

[29] Betrò, *Hieroglyphics*, p. 15.

[30] Bard, 'Origins of Egyptian Writing', p. 301; John Baines, 'Communication and display: the integration of early Egyptian art and writing', *Antiquity*, vol. 63, 1989, p. 476.

[31] Douglas J Brewer and Emily Teeter. *Egypt and the Egyptians.* Cambridge, 2007, p. 121.

[32] The Satire of the Trades in Miriam Lichtheim, 'Didactic Literature' in *Ancient Egyptian Literature.* Vol. I, *The Old and Middle Kingdoms*. Berkeley, 2006, p. 185.

[33] Jaromir Malek, 'The Old Kingdom' in *The Oxford History of Ancient Egypt*, ed. Ian Shaw, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003, p. 94.

of conduct befitting those of privileged professions. Schools attached to temples, government offices and palaces included exercises in the Instructions of Wisdom such as 'The Instruction of Ptahhotep' and other hymns and prayers outlining standards of behaviour.[34] While writing permitted a life of luxury for a highly effective centralised administration it also defined moral obligations of the educated elite.

The Egyptian civilisation's dependence on written scripts evoked a religious potency beyond that of mere communication. The very nature of writing was religious. Egyptians referred to hieroglyphics as 'words of the Gods' and were divine in creation ensuring a sacredness that guaranteed their use for all religious texts even into the last stages of Egyptian civilisation.[35] The importance of remembrance was a key use of religious writing. By writing a person's name, their memory would exist in the afterlife.[36] The importance of this memory can also be seen in the types of writing surfaces for religious purposes. Religious inscriptions on stone such as the 'Pyramid Texts' were guaranteed to last longer than administrative writing on papyrus.[37] Hieroglyphics transcended the boundary of life and death. Evidence of this can be seen in the 'Letters to the dead' written by the living on pottery, linen or papyrus, in attempts to contact the dead to ask for help with earthly matters.[38] The real power of hieroglyphics lay in their symbolism. Every image was thought to be alive, so much so that dangerous animals such as reptiles were often 'killed' in hieroglyphics to prevent them attacking the dead in the afterlife.[39] This importantly demonstrates that written words were believed to be real. Spells such as Coffin or Pyramid texts and offering lists depicting the dead person's worldly possessions were believed to ensure the attainment of, and sustenance in, the next world.[40] Though their origin was religious in nature, hieroglyphics also developed Egyptian religious thought.

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[34] David, *Handbook*, p. 249.
[35] Murray, 'Language and Literature', p. 195.
[36] Norma Jean Katan and Barbara Mintz, *Hieroglyphs: The Writing of Ancient Egypt*, London, 1991, **p. 15.**
[37] David, *Handbook*, p. 253.
[38] University College London, *Letter to the dead from Hu*, 2000, http://www.digitalegypt.ucl.ac.uk/hu/letterdead.html, accessed September 22, 2013.
[39] Christian Jacq, *Fascinating Hieroglyphics: Discovering, Decoding & Understanding the Ancient Art*. New York, 1998, p. 19.
[40] Brewer and Teeter, *Egypt*, p. 121.

Hieroglyphics were sacred writings which existed from predynastic times to the end of the ancient Egyptian civilisation. Their original purpose was for economic matters as well as commemorating the unification of the Lower and Upper Egypt. Through the democratisation of the Egyptian state the funerary cult of the king in the Old Kingdom evolved to include private citizens of the Middle Kingdom. Hieroglyphic spells and prayer texts written inside pyramids and on coffins, and autobiographies extolling personal virtues were believed to guarantee a life in the next world. The structure of written hieroglyphics was formalised over time. From the flexibility of the archaic period until the height of writing in the Classical period, schools dedicated to literacy defined hieroglyphic orthography and semantics. Hieroglyphics aided in the development of the Egyptian civilisation. Early ceremonial art like the Narmer Palette combined hieroglyphic captions with representation and demonstrated the ability of elites to define state ideology. This influence lasted through ancient Egyptian history. Writing encouraged a scholarly class who adhered to strict moral codes handed down through instructional texts. This educated elite were the basis of a flourishing centralised bureaucracy capable of building huge monuments. Finally, Egyptians believed that writing held a sacred power which influenced everyday life and the afterlife.

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Appendices

Appendix I
Hieroglyphics for 'oil' found in Abydos tombs.[41]

Appendix II

The Narmer Palette front and back.[42]

Appendix III
Circular movement within this image from the Predynastic period is typical of the phase before the appearance of writing.[43]

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[41] Hieroglyphics discovered in tomb U-j by Günter Dreyer reproduced in Théophile Obenga, 'Africa, the Cradle of Writing', *ANKH*, no. 8, 1999, p. 91.
[42] *Image - The Narmer Palette.* July 29, 2009. http://www.ancient-egypt.org//kings/01/0101_narmer/palette_main.jpg, accessed September 19, 2013.
[43] *Image - Circular Movement* from Betrò, *Hieroglyphics*, p. 15.