

# The Use of Cursive Hieroglyphic Script on Middle Kingdom Coffins

Tobias Konrad M.A.

Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz, Germany

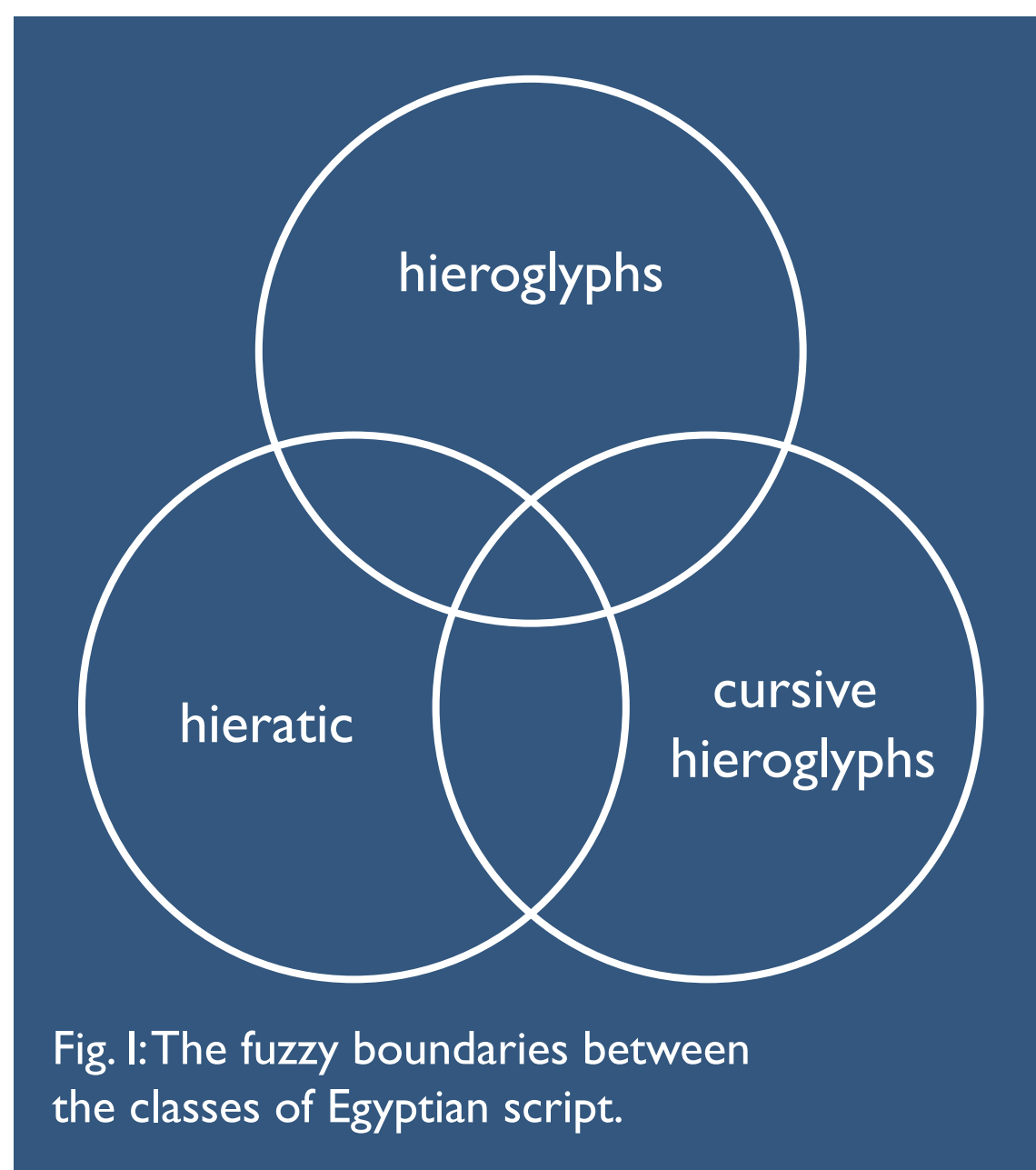
doi: 10.5281/zenodo.1306342

## 1. Introduction

Cursive hieroglyphic script has been known to egyptologists at least since the time of Jean François Champollion. Recognising the strong relationship between hieratic and cursive hieroglyphs, he coined the term *hiéroglyphes linéaires*.

Cursive hieroglyphic script has been labelled a static script, because of its frequent use in funerary texts, for instance the Coffin Texts (Middle Kingdom) or the Book of the Dead (New Kingdom) – in German: *Totenbuchkursive*.

However, the fuzzy boundaries between hieroglyphic, hieratic and cursive hieroglyphic script (fig. 1) result in different definitions of cursive hieroglyphs.



## 2. Three Categories

Henry George Fischer extended the three categories of Egyptian hieroglyphic script (fig. 2), which are principally based on the materiality of the inscriptions:

1. temple and tomb (detailed signs)
2. stelae and similar objects (without inner details)
3. papyri (with or without inner details)

To the third category he added the use in inscriptions on various materials like wood, stone and metal, which show an execution technique that consists of adding or subtracting material.

A fourth category is formed by the hieratic script. The complexity of signs differs from high (type 1) to low (type 3).



Mohamed Sherif Ali refined these specifications and labelled types 3a and 3b (fig. 2) *hybrid forms*, which are used to create inscriptions in a hieroglyphic shape, but with a time saving effort in writing these (semi-)cursive forms.

## 3. Types and Use

Various types of hieroglyphs have been used on the same coffin, e.g.:

- the more hieroglyphic forms (fig. 2, 3a) in the offering list and
- the more cursive style (fig. 2, 3b) for the Coffin Texts or
- the ink written forms (fig. 2, 3a–b) on the lid and
- the carved forms (fig. 4, upper row) for the religious inscriptions.

The cursive hieroglyphic script can by definition occur in two directions of writing (fig. 3).

Some of these forms differ in their execution technique, which may depend on a specific writing tool (e.g. a painting brush, a rush or a chisel). It is unclear, how and why the scribe decided whether to use the more hieratic form or the more figurative one.

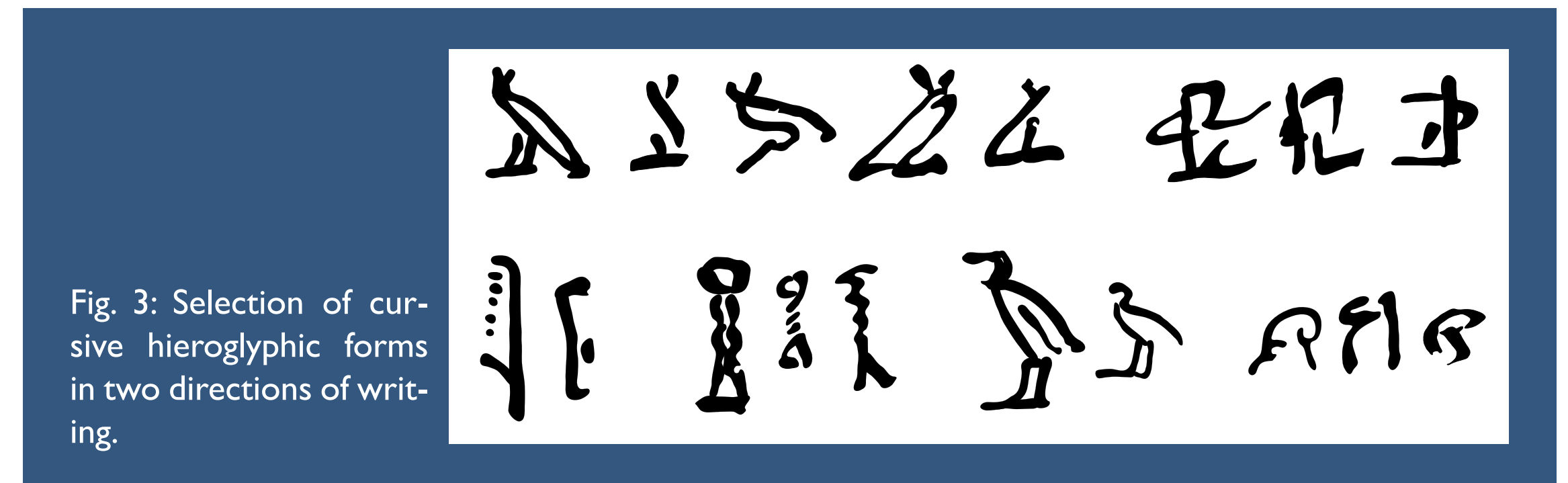
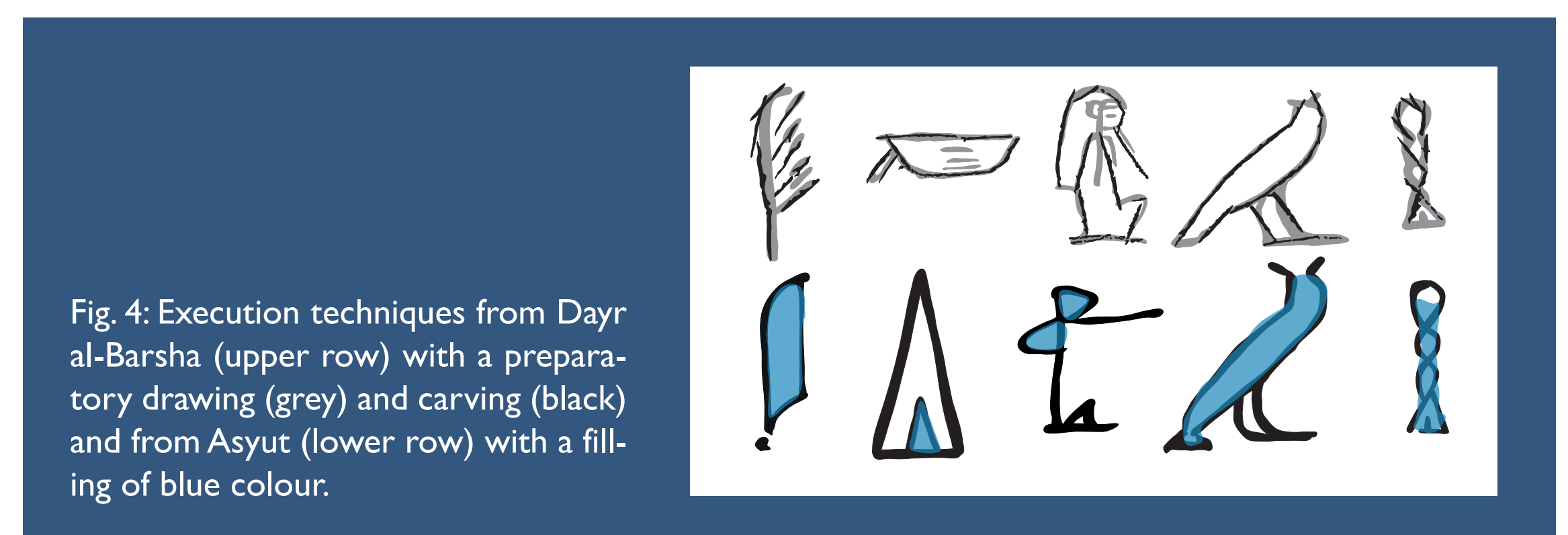


Figure 4 shows some examples for specific combinations of execution techniques. For some coffins from Dayr al-Barsha, the hieroglyphic signs were first drawn in ink (black or red) and in a second step carefully carved into the wood (fig. 4, upper row). This technique is also known from the mitre inscriptions. Until now, it seems to occur only on surfaces without a grounding where the wood grain is visible.



Another remarkable combination of techniques can be observed on coffins from Asyut. In a first step, the cursive hieroglyphs were drawn in black ink. In a second step, the free spaces of the signs were filled (partially or completely) with blue colour (fig. 4, lower row).

A preliminary overview of the use of cursive hieroglyphs on coffins is shown in figure 5. My PhD research project analyses the cursive hieroglyphic script in the Middle Kingdom. The focus lies on palaeographical and functional aspects with the aim to understand the use and specifics of the so-called cursive hieroglyphs. The research is carried out in association with the project *Altägyptische Kursivschriften* under the direction of Univ.-Prof. Dr. Ursula Verhoeven-van Elsbergen.

	PT/CT	FdO	OL	DST	Two Ways	Mitre inscr.	with grounding	without grounding
3b black	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
3b black + carved	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
3b red	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
blue filling	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
3a black	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
3b red + carved	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
3a carved	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●

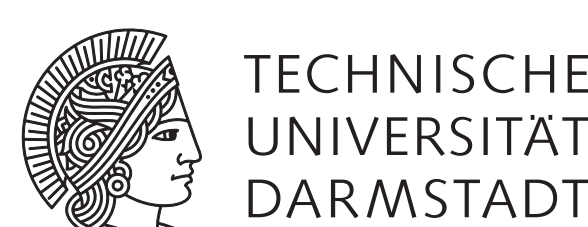
Fig. 5: Overview of the use of cursive hieroglyphs on Middle Kingdom Coffins. Abbreviations: PT/CT = Pyramid and Coffin Texts, FdO = *frises d'objets*, OL = offering list, DST = diagonal star table, Two Ways = Book of Two Ways

## Literature

- Ali, M. S. (2001). "Die Kursivhieroglyphen. Eine paläographische Betrachtung". In: GM 180, pp. 9–21.  
 – (2002). "Hieratische Ritzschriften aus Theben". GOF IV, 34. Wiesbaden, pp. 27–35.  
 Baines, J. (2012). "Scripts, High Culture, and Administration in Middle Kingdom Egypt". In: The Shape of Script. How and Why Writing Systems Change. Ed. by S. D. Houston. Santa Fe, pp. 25–63.  
 Fischer, H. G. (1987). "Archaeological Aspects of Epigraphy and Palaeography". In: Ancient Egyptian Epigraphy and Palaeography. Ed. by R. A. Caminos and H. G. Fischer. 3rd ed. New York, pp. 29–50.



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY 4.0).  
<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>



## Contact

Tobias Konrad M.A.  
 Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz  
 Institute of Ancient Studies | Egyptology  
 Hegelstraße 59  
 55122 Mainz, Germany  
 tokonrad@uni-mainz.de



<http://aku.uni-mainz.de/>

Altägyptische Kursivschriften. Digitale Paläographie und systematische Analyse des Hieratischen und der Kursivhieroglyphen