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Literacy in Pharaonic Egypt: Orality and Literacy between Agency and Memory

Abstract: The article presents a new conceptual framework for understanding literacy in ancient civilisations in order to conceptualise 'literacy' more broadly as a cultural and social practice. For this it is necessary to focus on the complex relationship between orality and writing, accentuate the materiality of writing as well as questions of agency and acknowledge the social role of texts and writing as part of Egyptian memory culture.

Zusammenfassung: Der vorliegende Artikel schlägt einen erweiterten konzeptuellen Rahmen für das Verständnis von Schriftlichkeit vor. Das Konzept ‚Schriftlichkeit' wird darin als kulturelle und soziale Anwendung und Tätigkeit verstanden. Das wird möglich bei Beachtung der vielschichtigen Beziehung von Mündlichkeit und Schriftlichkeit/Schreiben. Des Weiteren wird die Materialität des erweiterten Schreibprozesses und die Handlungsfähigkeit aller am Prozess beteiligten Instanzen diskutiert. Die soziale Funktion von Texten und Schreiben im Allgemeinen als Teil des altägyptischen kulturellen Gedächtnisses ist der dritte Bereich der diskutiert werden muss, um Schriftlichkeit innerhalb der altägyptischen Gesellschaft vollständig erfassen zu können.

> Look, no scribe will ever be lacking in food or the things
> of the House of the King, may he live, prosper and be well![1]

When discussing *literacy in ancient everyday life*,[2] we need to define or at least to think about two points: What is literacy? and what is everyday life? An answer to these questions will not be easy, as both terms include many layers. Additionally, these definitions are very contemporaneously biased. When assessing literacy in ancient everyday lives, these modern layers need to be stripped away.

Ancient – in its narrower sense as levels of Greek and Roman – literacy was beautifully discussed by William V. Harris in 1989.[3] The perspective chosen here is the question often asked: "[h]ow many people could read, how many people could write in

1 Satire of Trade (Instruction of Dua-Khety), (Pap. Sallier II, column XI, lines 1–4)

2 This was the title of the conference in Zürich from 10–12 November 2016 where the paper forming the backbone of this article was given. I thank the organiser, Prof. Anne Kolb, for inviting me and all participants for their stimulating discussions. I also would like to thank Dr Thomas Jansen for reading drafts of this paper.

3 Harris 1989.

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the Graeco-Roman world?"[4] To answer this, a distinction needs to be drawn between literacy and illiteracy. In the past, the discussion circled around the fact where this line should be set for individuals: is the ability to put one's autograph at the bottom of a document already a form of literacy, is reading capability needed or does the proficiency to understand short written statements make a literate person?[5]

In this paper, I would like to take the discussion beyond the Graeco-Roman world and widen the debate of what literacy means for the individual as well as society as a whole. The article aims to bring together three different dimensions, to provide a new conceptual framework for understanding literacy in ancient civilisations and to conceptualise 'literacy' more broadly as a cultural and social practice beyond the skill of an individual.

1. In order to understand *literacy* as a cultural practice, not only narrowly as a skill related to 'reading and writing', we need to focus on the complex relationship between orality and writing. The predominance of writing emerged only gradually, never really leaving the sphere of the oral. Both spheres remain intimately connected throughout all periods of Egyptian history.
2. A focus on the materiality of writing and questions of agency helps to extend the concept of literacy beyond the expression of ideas through reading and writing. Material expressions of writing cannot clearly be separated from the exchange of meaning; material aspects of writing culture are more than just the material carriers of meaning, they produce meaning themselves. One consequence is that everyone who is involved in the material side of the writing process, for example by producing, changing or reassembling objects that carry texts, is part of Egyptian literary culture.
3. The social role of texts and writing as part of Egyptian memory is the last piece towards a more comprehensive understanding of 'literacy' in ancient cultures. Memory culture exhibits all the different aspects discussed above—the intimate interplay between orality and writing, the materiality of writing, thus providing an overarching social vector for literacy without which the ability to read and write would lack its broader social dimension.

Networks around literacy start from the process of production of writing. Archaeologically, this can be revealed as a personal or even intimate process, being evident by a fingerprint left behind or the application of a specific ductus of text which characterises a certain writer, even we cannot name this author. However, usage of writing and text always goes beyond the individual. It can provide a stimulus for cultural change.[6] Different degrees of literacy complicate the overview on this topic, especially as lit-

4 Harris 1989, 3.
5 Harris 1989, 3–5.
6 Baines 2007, 143–144.

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eracy in ancient Egypt involves illiterate users who consumed written texts through oral performances and sensory experiences. I wish to postulate two different forms of literacy: specific – or individual – and collective. To follow this lead, we need to develop an anthropology of the past.

From the Present to the Past

Before we go to the past it is useful to look at present worlds. What does it mean today to be literate or illiterate? This seemingly straight forward question is difficult to answer even for our modern world with its wide compulsory education. Official definitions provide some guidance. The UN Literacy Decade (UNLD)[7] defines literacy as

- fundamental human right and foundation for lifelong learning,
- essential to social and human development,
- instrument of empowerment and
- exchange of knowledge.

This definition is not limited to a particular skill, but sees literacy much broader as an outcome of social activity. In doing so, this approach goes beyond the meaning of literacy established by the UNESCO in 1958 focussing on the individual and describing a person as literate when they can both read and write short simple statements on their everyday life and are able to understand them.[8]

According to UNESCO, four theoretical understandings of literacy can be differentiated: literacy as an autonomous set of skills, as applied, practised and situated, literacy as a learning process and finally, literacy as text.[9]

These four understandings can be applied to ancient Egypt. Here, literacy is mentioned and phrased as an important point to discuss, but until the recent past, there were relatively few ongoing fruitful debates. John Baines, together with Christopher Eyre, tried to (re-)define literacy.[10] There was only one immediate response,[11] whilst others came in sparsely and one at a time over the last 30 years.[12] Latest discussions attempt to track literacy from the archaeological[13] and anthropological[14] approach.

7 Literacy for all [n.d.]
8 UNESCO 1958.
9 UNESCO 2005, 148. For further explanations see 148–152.
10 Baines 1983 (anthropological audience) and Baines/Eyre 1983 (Egyptological audience; republished with additional footnotes in Baines/Eyre 2007).
11 Bryan 1984 on female literacy (Janssen 1992, 81).
12 Studies written by Baines collected in Baines 2007. On the reconstruction of documentary practice see Eyre 2013a. Short summary including literature until 2012: Zinn 2013c.
13 Pinarello 2015, 3.
14 Allon/Navratilova 2017, 3.

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Remembrance, Memory, Memories

> We are what we remember, which is another way of saying that we are nothing other than the stories we can tell about ourselves and our past.[15]

Archaeologies of memory contribute to the understanding of the past.[16] The way past societies observed, presented and interpreted their past reflected their own ideas and formed their memories in the same way we observe their evidence and let this influence our social memory. The constructed social and cultural memory is evident in the archaeological context. This can be inscribed or incorporated.[17] Like us, the ancient Egyptians built places with words, they put texts in contexts and with the help of the connotative and performative aspect of narratives reflected on what these ideas were doing in their world.[18] This formed memory and with it identity.

The ability to preserve wisdom and knowledge via writing is expressed in several texts for ancient Egypt. One often cited example is a passage from P. Beatty IV,[19] often called *Eulogy of Dead Writers*.[20] This segment shows how the authors of Middle Kingdom wisdom texts were remembered due to their words being written down. Writing therefore guaranteed the creation of cultural memory. Such texts also convey ways on how to communicate culturally significant ideas without revealing too much of their hierarchical knowledge, often also called restricted knowledge.[21] Visual display accompanied the written and spoken word and allowed usage of languages beyond the restrictions of ancient knowledge. The set of rules behind these displays consisting of texts and images (*decorum*)[22] defined what was communicated and kept within the cultural memory as demarcation between the divine world of the kings and gods and the non-divine world of humanity.[23] Who was able to see, read or understand was hierarchically determined.

Words – which could have been spoken, should be spoken or were intended to be spoken – were given authority in writing. This is nicely highlighted in the tomb of Rawer (Giza 5270, 5th dynasty, reign of Neferirkare): "*His Majesty decreed that (it will be) put in writing on his tomb which is in the necropolis. His Majesty caused that there should [be made for him] an authorisation in respect of it, written beside the king himself on the stone-workshop of the palace, to write what was said in his tomb in the necropolis.*"[24]

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15 Assmann 2002, 9.
16 Van Dyke/Alcock 2003, 1.
17 Van Dyke/Alcock 2003, 4.
18 Smith 2008, 5–6.
19 P. Beatty IV = BM EA10684 verso 2.5–3.11 – translation: Parkinson 1991, 148–150.
20 Parkinson 2002, 30.
21 Baines 1990, esp. 6–10.
22 Baines 1990, 20.
23 Baines 1990, 21.
24 For translation and discussion see Eyre 2013a, 80.

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Literature and Literacy

Literature in its practice is deeply rooted in literacy: It includes authorship, transmission and reception which are all bound to the text provided. However, literature also goes beyond that in its – oral – performance and – material – transmission.[25] Literature therefore provides an insight in the social relationships connected with literacy. It was not meant for private use or silent reading, but as oral performance (recitation) directed to listeners.[26] Even poetry was characterised by its visual appearance, using inherent attributes of hieroglyphs as a form of display, as well as being read.[27]

Without going into the definition and interpretation of *literature* within the ancient Egyptian society,[28] it seems that fictional literature and poetry addressed the literate elite from the 12th dynasty (Middle Kingdom) onwards.[29] As such, it had high cultural value for the self-representation of the elite[30] and the formation of cultural memory. Following a different style than commemorative texts, literature and poems can show a different side of the society with the kings being fallible, the administration corrupt, and functioning as a "countercultural voice"[31]. Literature was distributed throughout the whole country, but interestingly showed variations in the text. Poems especially reached beyond the elite as they were meant to be recited, and thereby, undocumented, as were other notable literary events.[32] The performative character widened the audience beyond the literate elite. Narrative texts and literature were set out in writing, but they included vestiges of the oral tradition. Therefore, elite and popular storytelling overlapped.[33]

This could already be seen at the beginning of literary texts in the *Pyramid Texts*. They likely stem from an oral narrative and preserved a special language for the cognitive flow of the text.[34] Even written literature was not composed orally, it was set out for oral and aural performance.[35] To do so, it included certain forms such as an additive style, patterned rhythm or parallel phrasing.[36]

25 Eyre 2013b, 101.
26 Eyre 2013b, 103–104.
27 Eyre 2013b, 105.
28 See Loprieno 1996, Parkinson 2002, Enmarch/Lepper 2013, Parkinson 2015.
29 Parkinson 2015, 180.
30 Parkinson 2015, 180.
31 Parkinson 2015, 181.
32 Parkinson 2015, 182. Parkinson applied experimental philology by performing modern recitals of poems to show the emotional power inherent to these texts – see Youtube 2017, Parkinson 2015, Parkinson 2009.
33 Jay 2016, 19.
34 Jay 2016, 80–81. Morales 2017 on the process of monumentalising former oral forms (recitation).
35 Jay 2016, 80.
36 Jay 2016, 80–96.

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Literary works also had later impact, bridging not only literacy and orality,[37] but also did so over time. From the New Kingdom onwards, Middle Kingdom literary texts were ascribed on ostraca – pottery or stone sherds – being edited and adapted in the process.[38] Their importance for Egyptian identity seems to be indicated by the facts that they were no longer copied from the Roman Period[39] onwards. If this also meant that they were not read anymore, cannot be proven.

Ways of Remembering

Orality

As mentioned before, one of the flaws of previous discussion of literacy is the neglect of the role of orality, focusing mainly on reading and writing. This modern understanding is not supported by ancient Egyptian sources.

> Every plant perishes even as it exists – but not the spoken word.[40]

This sentence from Pap. Ramesseum II illustrates the importance the spoken word had in Egyptian society. In the theological treatise called *The Memphite Theology* preserved on the so-called Shabaka Stone,[41] the god Ptah – town god of Memphis – is described to have created the world by speaking out the name of things which then came into being:[42]

> (48) The gods who came into Ptah: (49) Ptah-on-the-great-throne ------. (50a) Ptah-Nun, the father who [made] Atum. (51a) Ptah-Naunet, the mother who bore Atum. (52a) Ptah-the-Great is heart and tongue of the Nine [Gods]. [...] (56) [...] As to the tongue, it repeats what the heart has devised. Thus, all the gods were born and his Ennead was completed. For every word of the god came about through what the heart devised and the tongue commanded.

High culture in ancient Egypt was not only characterised by writing, literacy and language. Orality stayed therefore important within the literate sphere as a parallel medium of communication. Additionally, written and spoken language were not on the same level. Monumental texts of the New Kingdom were written in Middle Egyptian while one already spoke Late Egyptian.[43] Written language was behind in compar-

37 Jay 2016, 19–78.
38 Parkinson 2015, 182.
39 Parkinson 2013, 182.
40 Pap. Ramesseum II, vso ii,5 – BM EA10755,2 (frame 2), transl. Parkinson 2015, 180; Eyre 2013a, 0.
41 London British Museum EA498.8
42 Lichtheim 1975, 54.
43 Baines 1983, 582–583, esp. table 3.

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ison to the spoken. This meant that written texts presented the reader / listener with a nearly foreign language including a different grammar and diverse words.

With the 5th dynasty it became necessary to give words authority by placing them in writing to survive beyond the single moment of the speaking situation. It took so long that the primacy of the written word emerged over the spoken word, which we take for granted. Authorisation happened via a king's document – ꜥ.[44] Oral and written forms together established the potency of language. This is clearly evidenced in tomb inscriptions mirroring royal decrees as a method to convey royal authority. Rawer described in his tomb the favour he received by the king Neferirkare (5th dynasty):[45]

> His Majesty decreed that (it will be) put in writing on his tomb which is in the necropolis. His Majesty caused that there should [be made for him] an authorisation (ꜥ) in respect of it, written beside the king himself on the stone-workshop of the palace, to write what was said in his tomb in the necropolis.

Even Ancient Egypt had very likely always a parallel oral tradition to the written material, it is difficult to trace this during the historic period[46] and nearly impossible for the time before the emergence of writing.[47]

Writing

"One will do all you say if you are versed in writings."[48]

Literacy understood as the individual ability to read and write was the stimulus for and prerequisite of ancient Egyptians entering a profession, connected with high social status as stated in the entry quote from the *Instruction of Ani*. Being literate could help to rise socially.[49]

In Egyptian hieroglyphic writing, hieroglyphs and images are overlapping and are fluent in their application.[50] Especially early forms of writing integrate art and writing to communicate their message. The meaning of texts is not only read, but

44 Eyre 2013a, 79 translates ꜥ with *authority*. It is however not so much authority per se than the document – a material object – which transfers the authority from the king to its recipient.
45 Tomb Giza G 5270 = Cairo JE 66682, lines 7–11 (Urk I,232) – see Eyre 2013a, 80 (further literature in fn 13).
46 Glimpses can be seen in some genres of texts: biographies written in the first-person-structure, enriched with fictionality (Jay 2016, 26). For the case study of letters, see below. Further examples: Jay 2016, 19–78.
47 Jay 2016, 23.
48 *Instruction of Ani* (Lichtheim 1976, 140).
49 Zinn 2013c, 4100.
50 Allen 2010, 655.

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also displayed.[51] This ensures meaningful communication beyond the early problems of limited writing of non-continuous language and the continuous problem of the absence of wide-spread literacy. This might indicate the origin in picture writing, but the earliest evidence – labels found in the tomb U-j in Abydos[52] – shows already the formal structure of writing as seen throughout the application of hieroglyphs: ideograms, phonograms and determinatives. The Egyptians mainly used an inventory of about 500 signs, although much more existed.[53] Theoretically, texts could have been written using one-consonant-signs – unilateral phonograms which stand for each of the language's consonants, similar to modern alphabet.[54] However, the ancient Egyptians deliberately stayed close to the hieroglyph – image connection and used their writing playfully.[55] This opened up possibilities beyond the straight forward literacy as ability to read and write. Monumental inscriptions on temple or tomb walls functioned also on meta-linguistic levels and could therefore be understood without the need to be read. Monumentality acts therefore as clear indication for the social function of literacy. The same principle applied to small scale objects like scarabs and their decorations on their bases.

The monumental display of writing was part of *decorum*.[56] This ideologically important communication system[57] describes a set of rules defining what can and will be presented on display, in which context and what form. These representations are pictorially – sometimes with captions – as well as written down.[58] Writing and images form the language which will be understood. Both writing and decorum were introduced before or at the brink of the dynastic time.[59]

In addition to the monumental form of hieroglyphs, the ancient Egyptians used a cursive form, written with a brush using ink / pigment, called cursive hieroglyphs. This form was used contemporary to the earliest hieroglyphic inscriptions on pottery. The more cursive variation of this is Hieratic, known from the Old Kingdom onwards, developing into abnormal Hieratic in administrative papyri of the Ramesside Period. The final script used is Demotic which appeared in the mid-7th century.[60] None of these writing systems indicates vowels.

These were the scripts taught to scribes as part of their education.[61] Learning to write and then to read was restricted to a specific pool of people – the educated. The

51 Baines 1989.
52 Allen 2010, 641, 655.
53 Allen 2010, 656.
54 Allen 2010, 656.
55 Morenz 2004, 14–17.
56 Baines 1983, 576.
57 Assmann 2011, 149–154.
58 Baines 1990, 20.
59 Baines 1083, 576.
60 Allen 2010, 659.
61 Overview with further literature: Zinn 2013a.

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number of literate people is estimated to 1–10 % of the population depending on the period and the definition of literacy.[62]

Writing transformed the spoken word into the written one which could overcome space and time, albeit based on strategies of expressing ideas orally. Orality as an important carrier of language and communication co-existed with literacy in different ways at all times. As mentioned before, the turn from speech to writing took place around 3300 BC. It then took nearly 600 years until the earliest known written sentence on an ancient Egyptian artefact was attested – a cylinder seal of Peribsen (2nd dynasty, c. 2690 BC): "the golden one has united the Two Lands for his son, the Dual King Peribsen".[63] The writing of the six centuries between the first appearance of writing and the first sentence are characterised by names, titles, place names and some markers of events on labels and stela. Despite being very short, these texts correlate with the then spoken language, Old Egyptian.[64]

Continuous texts appeared during the 3rd or 4th dynasty, very likely required by the advances in administration, law and religion.[65] Longer texts outside the administrative and legal sphere were introduced in the late Old Kingdom (religious text – Pyramid Texts), First Intermediate Period (biographical texts) and the Middle Kingdom (literary texts).

Not only took the transition from the spoken to the written word and from short to long literary texts very long, it is very difficult to draw a clear line between people being literate and illiterate throughout all phases of Egyptian history. Even already indicated by the large range of estimation regarding literacy, this not even shed light on the form of functional illiteracy or people being "semi-literate"[66]. Both terms describe Egyptians who had gone to school or learned to write by other means, but never had practiced it. Some recognised various signs still much later. The phenomenon of semi-literacy highlights another difficulty in assessing literacy in the past. As *scribe* is used as category within Egyptological research to describe a social class,[67] many officials use the title as main one in shorter texts. To assume this title in the first place, they needed to be educated in reading and writing. Using the title however does not necessarily indicate functional literacy.

It would also be interesting to know the level of active literacy among high officials. They presented themselves as scribes in statues, but in tomb reliefs they let others write and are depicted observing these agents. This indicates that they saw practicality of writing as a chore, but the status of being a scribe was kept as an indica-

62 Parkinson 2002, 66–67; Baines / Eyre 1983; Janssen 1992, 81.
63 Allen 2010, 646: *nb.wj d(m)ḏ.n.f tꜣ.wj n sꜣ.f nswt-bjt pr-jb.snj*
64 Allen 2010, 646.
65 Baines 1983, 577–578. Regulski 2015, 2.
66 Janssen 1992, 81.
67 Pinarello 2015, 19 even speaks of an exclusive caste based on the assumed literacy of its members.

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tor of being literate.[68] Had they become semi-literate by leaving the area of *functional literacy* due to lack of practice coming with their rank and standing? Another question results from the specific situation of the workmen of the royal tombs of the Egyptian New Kingdom at Deir el-Medina.[69] Here, literacy is assumed at a higher rate[70] and more people carried the title scribe than actually could have been employed as scribes by *the Tomb,* the institution responsible for the building of the tombs created by workforce in Deir el-Medina.[71] We have evidence for local schooling.[72] The two to four employed scribes were most likely practically literate as they not only wrote texts, but were responsible for the administration of the place. Therefore, literacy was a necessity. The case is not so clear cut for foremen and their deputies or the workforce cutting the hieroglyphs or writing hieratic texts to the walls.[73] They were in constant contact with writing, they might have recognised some signs, especially such for their own names and the name of the ruling king whose tomb they built.[74] Deir el-Medina also gives us – albeit very sparse – evidence for female literacy.[75] This seems to contrast with texts which mainly speak of male students / learners.[76]

Fluent Boundaries between Orality and Literacy

Despite the low percentage of literacy, ancient Egypt was a *literate society* due to the enormous influence the word – written and spoken – had on culture.[77] To explain this phenomenon, we must discuss the different levels of literacy and the phenomenon *collective literacy* I would like to postulate for ancient Egypt.

Writing down texts does not always reiterate strict literacy. Some text forms were potent due to their writing, others were written down to be orally recited and many stand between orality and literacy. Genres which are predominantly transmitted in written form are magical texts as it was important to keep the spell working by an exact copy of the word which aided the performance. Oracles also needed to be written down.[78] The writing preserved the magical power inherent in the spell. Written

68 Baines 1983, 580.
69 Baines/Eyre 2007.
70 Supported by the high percentage of ostraca from Deir el-Medina (Janssen 1992, 84–87).
71 pA xr – Baines/Eyre 2007, 90 ; Janssen 1992.
72 Baines/Eyre 2007, 92.
73 Baines/Eyre 2007, 90–94.
74 Baines/Eyre 2007, 93.
75 Janssen 1992, 89–90.
76 Allen 2010, 661. Wisdom texts encourage young men to become scribes – see *Teaching of Khety*, also known as the *Satire of Trades* (Helck 1970; Foster 1999).
77 Janssen 1992, 81; Baines 1983.
78 Baines 1983, 588.

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texts show signs of orality through all times, starting already from the Pyramid Texts.[79] Letters form an interesting case study to discuss the flowing perimeters between orality and literacy. Many letters, especially some from Deir el-Medina, were not only written down as part of a literate world with allusions to known literary texts.[80] However, they are part of a dialogue or conversation between communicating actors.[81] Eyre calls them "self-consciously oral"[82]. As expressed in their grammatical form and structure, both communicants engaged in speech acts[83] by formulating requests,[84] asking questions[85] and convey information.[86] Letters acted as transcription of the spoken word which was sent (*hꜣb*): The sender said something (*ḏd*) or greeted the other party (*nḏ ḥr qr swḏꜣ jb*), while the recipient heard the words (*sḏm*).[87] This correlates to polite oral behaviour.

The conversational character of letter writing is especially stressed by the fact that it was often referred to previous letters and therefore engaged in discussion as it is otherwise known from situations of oral communications. This could include third-party letters and opened the discussion beyond addressee and sender[88] Grammatically, two modes of reported speech were included: direct and indirect.[89] Ancient Egyptian letters, despite being a written genre, were therefore set out as direct speech,[90] which can already be seen in the greeting formula:[91]

> The overseer of cattle Bakenkhonsu, of the altar of Amun-Re, King of the Gods, greets the scribe of the offering table Iryaa, of the warehouse of deliveries. In life, prosperity and health! In the favour of Amun-Re, King of the Gods! I say to Pre-Horakhty, when he rises and sets, "Make you healthy! Make you live! Make you youthful!", every day.

Messengers were described to "bring a letter, saying ..."[92] using the verb Dd to express face-to-face contact.[93] Sometimes, short communications like face-to-face situations

79 Jay 2016, 79–82.
80 See Janssen 1992, 87, esp. fn. 35 and 36 for examples.
81 See already the title of Deborah Sweeney's 2001 book *Correspondence and Dialogue: Pragmatic Factors in Late Ramesside Letter Writing* (Sweeney 2001).
82 Eyre 2013a, 95.
83 Sweeney 2001, 29–43.
84 Sweeney 2001, 44–100.
85 Sweeney 2001, 101–149.
86 Sweeney 2001, 150–189.
87 Eyre 2013a, 94.
88 Sweeney 2001, 23.
89 Sweeney 2001, 24–25.
90 Eyre 2013a, 94; Janssen 1992, 87–88.
91 Pap. Mallet = Pap. Louvre 1050 (E11006), V, 1–5. I follow the translation given by Eyre 2013a, 94.
92 Pap. Bibliothèque Nationale 196, III. Černý 1939, 52, 5–6; Wente 1967, 67–68: "Statement for the scribe Butehamon, quote: Your father has sent me the letter saying, 'Cause them to take it to you.'"
93 Sweeney 2001, 28.

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without any greeting formulations or the names of sender and recipient are given. These otherwise often orally communicated messages were written down with the help of a scribe.[94] Some scholars argue against this and see such communications as examples of a widening of individual (semi-)literacy.[95]

This orality is bound to the written form and the medium it is written on. Letters were "purposeful communication" which conveyed a message beyond establishing social contact.[96] The composing milieu is that of the (wider) scribal class, but far more people were included as sender or recipient. We do not know if letters were dictated to scribes, if the recipients were reading them themselves or had the message read out to them like public communications.[97] We, however, know that scribal training started with the formulation of letters. The main textbook – the *Kemyt* – trained the pupils in key letter formulae.[98] Schooling and elementary education showed the closeness of orality and literacy by its methodology of memorising standard texts. The reading technique was also more geared towards orality: reading was done aloud, even though silent reading existed.[99] The written text was directly transformed back into speech. A similar phenomenon is captured by literature as ancient Egyptian literature is metric, performative and rhythmic.[100] These characteristics are criteria of oral forms.

Agency and Writing

The fluency between orality and literacy is also expressed in the material culture of ancient Egypt. The situation of direct communication as created in letters is also stated in objects. One example is the very impressive statue of the *Seated Scribe* (Fig. 1).[101]

The scribe, whose name and titles we do not know, is sitting in the usual writing pose where the stretched-out skirt over the crossed legs presents a good pad for the papyrus to rest on. This statue is an example for the group of *writing* scribe. The scribe's left hand holds the rolled-up papyrus while his right hands was once clutching a reed or a brush. This is now lost, but the act of writing with reeds is illustrated

94 Baines/Eyre 2007, 75–78.
95 Janssen 1992, 88–89.
96 Eyre 2013a, 96.
97 Baines/Eyre 2007, 73.
98 Eyre/Baines 1989, 94–95; Eyre 2013a, 95 (esp. fn 88).
99 Morenz 1996, 43–57; Eyre/Baines 1989, 102–104.
100 Eyre/Baines 1989, 110–112. For the discussion of Egyptian metrics see Fecht 1982, G. Burkard and W. Guglielmi in Loprieno 1996. Metric seems less important when we see the "material reality of the texts and their former contexts as a way to reconstruct [...] the literary space and the specific experience of these works" (Parkinson 2009, xiii). For the form of speech and its social contexts see Enmarch/Lepper 2013.
101 Le "scribe accroupi," Paris Louvre E 3023; Old Kingdom, Forth Dynasty (Seated Scribe [n.d.]).

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Fig. 1: The "writing scribe" – The Seated Scribe (Paris, Louvre E 3023) © Musée du Louvre, dist. RMN-Grand Palais/Christian Décamps

in many tombs, so in the scene of recording the harvest in the New Kingdom Theban tomb of Menna (TT69, Fig. 2).[102]

While the posture and body language of the Louvre scribe suggest an enclosed writing action, the position of the head and especially the mimic advocate a direct communication with an audience. The scribe faces towards an imaginary audience – see especially the design of the eyes (Fig. 3) – and does not look down to the papyrus. The eyes are carefully worked. The socket is white with red veins. In the middle sits a

102 Here is the pose translated from a 3-dimensional medium into the 2-dimensionality of a tomb painting. Tomb of Menna: Transverse Chamber, South wing, east entry wall: lower subregister of the upper register (Menna [n.d.]).

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Fig. 2: The measurement of the grain. Tomb of Menna (TT69), Transverse Hall, South Wing, upper register, lower subregister © www.osirisnet.net

polished rock crystal which encloses an iris, altogether giving the impression of life-like eyes, which even seem to follow the observer.[103]

Another type is the *reading* scribe as seen in the statue of Min-nakht (Fig. 4).[104] This scribe holds his right hand down on the papyrus on the open side while his left hand grasps the rolled papyrus. This compares to the modern gesture of reading a book. Again, the face looks towards an anticipated listener to whom the scribe reads the papyrus.[105] Here, facing the listener makes sense as reading is mostly reading out aloud, but it very likely is only one side of the medal. Comparing both types of scribal statues reveals that writing and reading are part of a wider direct communication situation which combines orality and literacy.

Important for the discussion is the approach of *material agency* which was inspired by Latour's *Actor-Network-Theory* as well as Gell's *Art and Agency*.[106] This methodology goes beyond the allocation of agency to humans alone and starts from premise that both humans and things can participate and initiate results. Following this interpretation, objects – i. e. writing and their materiality – are active in influencing the social sphere. Not only art, but also texts convey agency. The latter express both the what and how of agency.[107] This happens through the text plus the information conveyed by the (archaeological) object. It reveals the process of thoughts inherent of a society as opposed to the text which states what was thought.[108] This

103 Seated Scribe [n.d.]
104 Baltimore, Walters Art Museum 22.230, New Kingdom (Scribe Statue [n.d.]).
105 Morenz 1996, 43–52.
106 Latour 2005; Gell 1998.
107 Malafouris 2011.
108 Malafouris 2011, 70.

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Fig. 3: Eyes of Louvre scribe – The Seated Scribe (Paris, Louvre E 3023) © Musée du Louvre, dist. RMN-Grand Palais/Christian Décamps

information is discovered, if the wider context is taken into consideration: social and cultural predispositions, complex relationships between the actors, actors and materials as well as the materials themselves.[109]

Even ancient Egyptian writing is not so clearly connected with the idea of the individual author as modern writing is, it is nevertheless interesting that writing is very rarely discussed in connection with agency. We can trace some cases of individual agents – i. e. writers – in colophons,[110] as well as agents in history – i. e. people about whom is written. However, agency as archaeological concept goes beyond that.[111] Texts are outcomes of agency processes. They show their relationships as well as the materiality of the whole process. Following other areas of anthropological archaeology, such discussions involve ideas about intentional acts of individuals, personhood, identity, motivations and strategies of social actors, materiality of agency, cultural contact and much more.[112]

109 Englehardt/Nakassis 2013, 2.
110 Luiselli 2003; Zinn 2013d (esp. ch. 2.2.3.).
111 Englehardt/Nakassis 2013, 1–2.
112 Englehardt/Nakassis 2013, 2–5 (with further literature).

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Fig. 4: The "reading scribe" – Scribe Statue of Min-nakht (Baltimore, Walters Art Museum 22.230) © The Walters Art Museum

Agency of writing therefore goes beyond individual authorship. Due to its function as administrative device and part of monumental art, it was practiced by individual scribes, but benefited much more people directly and indirectly.[113]

Agency in ancient Egyptian reading and writing manifests itself in different ways:[114]

– Agency revealed in written documents
  Texts describe agency in cultures, their daily life and offer information about this society. As such, textual evidence of ancient civilisations could partially substi-

113 Baines 1983, 579–580.
114 Whitehouse 2013, 249–253.

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tute for areas, for which anthropologists can obtain information with different methods in modern societies (observation, recording of oral narratives, etc.).

- Agency needed to produce writing
  First, it is necessary to develop a writing system which can be used to express cognitive and linguistic issues and reflects the language. This focuses on the cultural ability to write texts and transmit them by looking on abstract agency instead of specific agents. An important type of agency relates to the process of writing content, another focuses on the artefact itself and the actual production of the inscribed object including all steps (choice of material, decision on the content, application of the intended text).
- Agency of writing itself
  The actions of the writer influence the end-product as does the written word itself. This includes the moment of the writing process and the extension of the direct communication beyond the time-space constraints of direct oral communication, describing both the agency of the writer and the writing itself.

Therefore, discussion of agency should include both anthropocentric as well as material agency.[115] Then we would be able to look at all aspects of *specific* and *collective* literacy. Agency beyond individual literacy is often discussed relating to the development of writing, focusing on the connection of origins and state formation,[116] even the term *agency* is not specifically stated. Writing in ancient Egypt started relatively late compared with other characteristics of a complex society with very short inscriptions. John Baines called this the "principle of scarcity."[117] The always inherent fluency between image/art and writing is then in time even stronger due to the representational characteristics of both.[118] It is not easy to state what is still iconography and what is already word. The meaning of many words is open for debate, the pool of signs is different to later times.[119]

Both the developmental process of the early writing system as well as the system itself show already characteristics which are typical for all agency processes connected with literacy in ancient Egypt. Writing and connected literacy allow communication across boundaries, especially time and space. For ancient Egypt we need to include the communication over the boundary of life and death, as writing mediates the relationship between the living and their ancestors and advocates a continued

115 For the non-anthropocentric approach and especially the neglect of the material networks see Knappett/Malafouris 2008 and Malafouris 2013 (esp. 119–149). This also includes *writing as material practice* which looks at the physicality of texts and their relations to writers and users (Piquette/Whitehouse 2013).
116 Regulski 2015, 3; Pinarello 2015, [1].
117 Baines 2007, 42.
118 Bestock 2013, 98.
119 Regulski 2015 with further literature.

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agency of the dead.[120] A good example are offering formulas, a standardised text which guarantees continued offerings of everything the deceased would need in the afterlife. When recited by the funerary priest, the relatives or simply by being written down in the tomb, this text corpus ensures provision of the tangible things mentioned. It also embeds the deceased into wider social structures as the offerings are given by the king on behalf of one of the funerary gods.[121]

The beginning of writing is well evidenced in connection with mortuary practices and projected power and relationships from this life to the afterlife.[122] We find the first ever known writing in the tomb U-j in Abydos dating to the Naqada IIIa period (c.3300 BC).[123] Already, different media are used: ivory or bone tags, pottery and mud seals.[124] All three material groups seem specifically linked to the type of inscription they contain and are differently distributed within the tomb.[125] This suggests an already sophisticated approach towards writing, its different usages and functions. Best known are the group of 150–175 tags.[126] They were produced by different writers maybe at point of one of the stages of collection of the jars/objects to whom they were attached.[127] Similar signs are on the above-mentioned pottery storage jars.[128] Seals are found on mud jar stoppers.[129] They seem to be the least advanced media, and might not yet be writing in the sense of expressing words.[130] These sealings were connected with jars whose types are interpreted as being of Canaanite origin.[131] The manifold media and their inclusion in the funerary sphere show that writing was beyond specific – individual – literacy and combined several areas for its application.

It would take another 2–300 years until the First Dynasty before writing presents more legible words,[132] while the material which was inscribed stayed the same.[133] During this period, the wish to stay connected with the king in the afterlife was expressed more clearly as seen in about 360 private stelae from Abydos which marked subsidiary graves around the royal tombs. Their inscriptions personified these graves,

120 Bestock 2013, 95–96.
121 Barta 1963.
122 Bestock 2013, 98.
123 Dreyer 1998; Kahl 2003. Even we do not know who the owner of U-j was, Dreyer assumes him to be a king. Against some arguments in Dreyer's discussion see Wengrow 2006, 202.
124 Bestock 2013, 101.
125 Bestock 2013, 99–101.
126 Dreyer 1998, 113–145; Bestock 2013, 104.
127 Kahl 2001, 108–112; Kahl 2003, 111.
128 Dreyer 1998, 47–91.
129 Hartung 1998.
130 Bestock 2013, 105.
131 Dreyer 1998, 92.
132 Bestock 2013, 98.
133 Bestock 2013, 106.

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Fig. 5: Stela of a Woman Named Niseret (New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art 1. 4. 93) © www.metmuseum.org

most of them recognise women.[134] The phonetic value of the hieroglyphs is not always clear as these signs still preceded standard hieroglyphic readings. So, the name of the owner of stela MMA 1. 4. 93 (Fig. 5) could be read differently: Senba, Niseret, and Nitkhnum. The female figure under the hieroglyphs which form the name serves as determinative for the word category *women*.[135] Being visualised in image and personified in writing established authority and displayed prestige in this life and after. Personhood and existing social relationships continued beyond the border of time, space and death.

The Materiality of Writing

Material culture and with it the materiality of writing is dependent on memory and also forms memory. The mentally stored human memory is prone to get lost, being forgotten and can only be described as fragile.[136] Every form of material culture used

134 Stela [n.d.].
135 Stela [n.d.].
136 Jones 2007, 1.

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to hold cultural memory is not only increasing capacity to create cultural memory, but especially allows us today to track the role memory played in the transmission of cultural ideas and specifics.[137]

Literacy is always connected with the materiality of texts and writing practice. Writing is essentially material practice which deals with substances, specific surfaces and acts as a medium.[138] This materiality connects the transmitted text with the social sphere. This grants agency to the materiality of writing. Artefacts are actants within the writing process.[139] All involved material can cause actions and reactions which influence the writing process including reading. Graphic media in this context is either concerned with the production of new content or the repetition of already stated one.[140] Choices were made regarding different materials and the forms of writing attached (hieroglyphs on stone walls, hieratic on papyrus to name only two). This determined not only the production of the actual text but also its reproductivity: using seals allowed reproductivity compared with the usage of reed or chisel where a text had to be written completely new every time.[141] Contexts are dependent from the materiality of writing and form it as well.[142]

The materiality of texts reveals agency in the first stage production of the text, its material form and forms of usage as well as any changes in the materiality of texts – transformation, reworks and de(con)structions.[143] After a first inscription is done, further text can be applied, (partially) erased, and maybe re-inscribed.[144] Materiality determines display, text forms, expression and appearance of the text attached. This means changes occurring here can alter the identity of the artefact[145] including the text. The materiality of ancient texts always also includes the archaeology of the texts understood as the entangled interplay of archaeological and textual characteristics. This forms the identity of texts, their visual and symbolic encoding of the language present at the time, the storage and transmission of ideas and therefore supporting the memory,[146] brought to light by archaeological investigation.[147] Writing practice is also based on datasets representing the technical side of writing: used scripts, tools to write and media containing script.[148]

137 For different approaches towards interplay of memory and materiality of things involved see Jones 2007.
138 Piquette/Whitehouse 2013.
139 Malafouris 2013, 130.
140 Pinarello 2015, 18.
141 Pinarello 2015, 18.
142 Pinarello 2015, 19.
143 Piquette 2013.
144 Piquette 2013, 217.
145 Piquette 2013, 222.
146 Rutz/Kersel 2014.
147 Kersel/Rutz 2014, 3.
148 Pinarello 2015, 26; Allon/Navratilova 2017, 5–12; Schlott 1989, 29–98.

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Texts could be written in a monumental form (hieroglyphs), hieratic, demotic or Coptic.

Hieroglyphs are best known today, the implements shown as marker or status symbol for a scribe are forms of the scribal palette and the rolled papyrus which were used for the conception of the handwriting forms (hieratic, demotic).[149] People involved with these writing practices and especially their archaeologically presented implements do not necessarily possess specific / individual literacy.[150] The materiality of the writing process opens up a new horizon of engaging with texts that goes beyond a narrowly defined reading/writing skill. For example, the craftsmen involved in producing the material objects associated with writing have to be considered an essential part of ancient Egyptian literary culture.

Types of Literacy in Ancient Egypt

Specific Literacy – the Individual Ability to Read and Write

Even the concept of individually known authors as creators of a text is not typical for ancient Egypt, we distinguish some literate people. Certain names of wise men from the Middle Kingdom to whom instructions are allocated, are known from the *Eulogy of Dead Writers* from Pap. Chester Beatty IV.[151] Egyptologists can track known scribes beyond typical scribal careers.[152] The title scribe indicated high status, (some form of) literacy and gave access to elite experiences and high culture.[153] As such, being depicted as a scribe or holding scribal titles was often seen as a symbol for high culture, carrying the scribal palette was a sign of membership to the elite. Good examples are the three wooden panels from the mastaba of Hesire from Saqqara which show Hesire in different stages of his career, always carrying the traditional scribal palette.[154]

Privately owned book collections existed, but in contrast to private libraries of the more present past, they were less literary than magical or professional.[155] Often cited are the *Ramesseum Library* which was found with professional magical equipment,[156] the *Berlin Library* which has four literary papyri whose connection is not proven beyond being grouped together by the first collector in modern times[157] as well

149 Allon/Navratilova 2017, 5.
150 Allon/Navratilova 2017, 12.
151 See above.
152 For 10 famous New Kingdom scribes see Allon/Navratilova 2017.
153 Baines 2013, 40–41, see also fn.1
154 Cairo, Egyptian Museum, CG1426–1428; 3rd dynasty, reign Djoser (Netjerikhet).
155 Quirke 2004, 14–23; Blumenthal 2011.
156 Parkinson 2017; Blumenthal 2011, 67–71.
157 Blumenthal 2011, 72; Morenz 1996, 135–141.

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as the very heterogeneous *Collection Deir el-Medina* of the scribe Qenherkhepshef, Accountant of the Project for the King's Tomb.[158] They are also evidenced in literary texts. In the Pap. Westcar, the magician Djedi asks the king to call his children to bring his books.[159] Such a bringing of books is visually presented on the Stela of Jkj:[160] In the middle register a musician is accompanied by a helper carrying book chests.[161] Many of the papyri found in tombs might also have been evidence for privately owned books.[162]

Beyond this specific evidence, literacy rates for ancient Egypt are not known and need to be estimated. The number of literate people varies depending on used estimation model, period and place.[163] Literacy was practiced in administration – maybe to the fullest functional sense – as well as religion, especially within the ritual and temple sphere. Temples seem to have become the largest depositories of books and otherwise written knowledge.[164] The figure suggested by Baines and Eyre lies by about 1 % of the population,[165] estimated based on Old Kingdom tomb inscriptions and reliefs. Literacy rates very likely rose already during the Old Kingdom and clearly from the New Kingdom to 5 %[166] and is sometimes calculated even higher.[167] It is argued that the Intermediate Periods saw a decrease with a rise at the begin of each following period.[168] Evidence from the 4th century BC suggests that 7 % of the whole population were literate. The proportion of the Egyptian population is slightly lower (6 %) which suggests that the Greek and other foreign population at the time had a higher rate.[169] This might be related to the increase of semi-literate people who needed to be able to write their names under contracts.[170]

158 Blumenthal 2011, 73–80; Pestman 1982.
159 Pap. Berlin 3033, 8,3–4 (Middle Kingdom). Blumenthal 2011, 65; Lichtheim 1975, 218. For Djedi as *homme de lettres* see Morenz 1996, 107–123.
160 Leiden, Rijksmuseum van Oudheden AP 25 (Middle Kingdom). Stèle van Iki [n.d.].
161 Morenz 1996, 77 argues for book chests to be carried while Yamamoto 2015, 157 sees sandals being carried.
162 Blumenthal 2011, 80–83.
163 Zinn 2013c with further literature. For Deir el-Medina see above.
164 Zinn 2013b; Zinn 2011; Zinn 2008.
165 Baines/Eyre 2007, esp. 64–73. For special groups (royal sphere and women) and places (Deir el-Medina) see 78–94. Baines 1983, 584. For a short overview on Greco-Roman Egypt, please see Clivaz 2012.
166 Baines/Eyre 2007, 94.
167 Lesko 1994; Janssen 1992. This can go up to 15 % in urban hotspots like Lahun (Literacy 2003), which housed the workers and administrators associated with the Middle Kingdom pyramid complexes nearby.
168 Baines 2007, 68.
169 Ray 1994, 65
170 Depauw 2012, 499–500. As this paper focusses on pharaonic Egypt, specifics of Graeco-Roman Egypt will be deliberately left out.

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Within this already very low number of literate people, different levels of literacy are included. Even it is often assumed that there are two nearly opposing groups – literate vs. illiterate – this is not the case.[171] The borders are fluid and literacy starts from limited reading ability of the people who carved the monuments and leads over several degrees of reading ability to extended forms of literacy which include the skill to compose texts for administrative, literary or religious purposes.[172] As discussed above, literacy could also be assumed for relief sculptors or painters who were able to carve signs despite having a limited reading ability.[173] Writing as part of monumental art could be practiced by craftsmen with limited or no literacy as they were controlled by a foremen or other literate person.[174] This is proven by corrections found on tomb and temple walls.[175]

Studies were conducted regarding the individual literacy of certain groups of people beyond that of scribes. Of special interest were literacy of women[176] and the personal ability to read and write by kings[177]. Even this could have promised an extension of the understanding of literacy beyond the individual case by looking at certain social groups, this last step was often not pursued.

Collective Literacy – Orality and Literacy as Tools to Express Shared Historical and Cultural Memories

Literacy understood as personal ability to read and write does not recognise the position of scribes[178] and other literati as social figures with an important place within society.[179] Both orality and literacy are able to create a shared identity via the cultural memory they transmit. Texts and images were kept re-usable as they carried the self-understanding of the culture and stabilised the society. Myths were orally performed, but preserved in writing. Literacy via the media text and image shaped the interest in "history" and renewed in this way identity. These patterns created a *collective literacy* beyond the practiced individual literacy mentioned above which con-

171 Lesko 2001.
172 Baines/Eyre 2007, 63–70; Baines 1983, 584.
173 Laboury 2016.
174 Baines 1983,
175 Tomb of pharaoh Horemheb (KV 57): hieroglyphs were outlined in red above which black corrections are applied (Strudwick/Strudwick 1999, 181).
176 Bryan 1985; Robins 1993, 111–114; Zinn 2013a, 2321 (with further literature).
177 Schlott 1989, 54–56, 165; Morenz 1996, 24–26; Eyre 2013, 280.
178 The category *scribe* is currently re-discussed and critiqued (Pinarello 2015; Allon/Navratilova 2017). Pinarello reasons that our view of ancient Egyptian scribes stems from the romanticised perception of ancient Egypt by the "modern educated men" (Pinarello 2015, 19, 23).
179 For the many – often contradictory – roles of scribes see the case studies in Allon/Navratilova 2017.

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nected high and low culture spread over all levels of the whole society with the literal elite encoding the information and providing decoding tools for non-elites. History and identity were kept alive through the creation of a shared cultural memory via text transmitted in writing or orally as well as imagery.[180]

One specific example for this process can be found in the scene of *Pharaoh smiting his enemies*,[181] in which the king holds one or more prisoner and smites them with a mace, sword or axe.[182] This presented the longest-lasting iconographical motif and pictorial description of an ideal event which needed to be re-confirmed by every Pharaoh. The first example might already be depicted in Tomb 100 in Hierakonpolis (Naqada II, around 3300 BC), but the best known early example is on the Narmer Palette (ca. 3100 BC, transition from dynasty 0 to 1).[183] The motive is still used in the decoration programme of Graeco-Roman temples, such as Edfu. The collective remembrance in this mostly but not always monumental scene is knowledge about important events which formed Egyptian identity: The king who is doing his duty and upholds Ma'at, the right order, by being victorious. In the case of the Narmer Palette this is the first unification of Upper and Lower Egypt, a sacred event which needs to be re-enacted and confirmed by every king who followed. This scene is very often found on temple pylons and is directed towards the gods to whom the king proves his dutiful action. However, it is enacted for all members of the society and could therefore be understood as performed, acted and substitutional literacy. The latter conclusion can be drawn from a motive typical to the Amarna Period of the 18th dynasty which shows the *Smiting of the enemies* as an image-in-image decoration on the cabins of the royal barges of Akhenaten and Nefertiti, depicting both the king and the queen in the pose of smiting.[184] The audience of the scene is here much wider, extended beyond the divine world of the temple: Everybody who saw the ships passing by on the Nile could "read" it and remembered the mythical past without a written record had survived of the first happening as a quasi-historical event.[185]

The same mechanism was used depicting the account of the Battle of Megiddo fought by Thutmose III on the walls in the Hall of Annals of the Karnak Temple.[186] It mentions a second transcript: *jw=sn smn ḥr ꜥr.t n.t ḥw.t-nṯr n.t Jmn m hrw pn* – they were stored on a leather roll in the temple of Amun on this day.[187] The same text is adapted to different audiences which are supposed to use it even they do not read it personally as outlined in the more traditional definition of individual literacy. The monumental

180 Assmann 1992, 52–53.
181 Luiselli 2011.
182 Schoske 1994.
183 Luiselli 2011, 13–14.
184 For the discussion of the unusual case of the queen as the protagonist see Zinn 2015, 43–46.
185 Luiselli 2011, 20.
186 Zinn 2011, 188.
187 Urk. IV, 662.

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version set in stone of the temple wall was directed to the gods and as such fixed the event in time, while the archival copy on a leather role was kept elsewhere in or nearby the temple, likely in a *pr-ꜥnḫ*, the *House of Life*.[188]

This shows the mythological function of the temple as part of an idealised place to store knowledge – a huge library in stone of important texts. Jan Assmann called this phenomenon *the temple as book*,[189] characterising the temple as a three-dimensional and monumental translation of a book into space. *Book* should be understood as an ideal text corpus comprised from all sorts of texts covering a wide knowledge in the sense of a monumental library. Here, texts are often only indicated by title or part of the text. This was enough to enable the agency of these text within the temple as image of the (ideal) world. These so presented and preserved texts act as *cultural texts*[190] and are outcome, part and originator of cultural memory. Two of the main functions of writing are storage and communication of ideas. As Assmann explains, the first function preserves knowledge and ideas from forgetting as an extended human memory while the second ensures an extended audience.[191] Even it is clear that the cultural memory is shaped by written and visual narratives which placed the literate elite in a special position, these narratives are closely connected to and influenced by parallel oral traditions. This was the case from the beginning of texts, but becomes more poignant from the New Kingdom onwards. Therefore, cultural memory is not only shaped by the literate elite but the Egyptian society in its entirety.[192] Such ability to use these texts was extended to all meaning that all were "literate" to use or consume them. This is a more comprehensive understanding of literacy which looks at the society in its entirety, instead of looking at literati only. Literacy in this sense is mediated literacy.

Collective literacy was institutionalised literacy: Texts to be used were stored as collections. That could be on temple walls as mentioned above or in libraries and archives.[193] Even only very few libraries are architecturally known,[194] their setup documents an interface between orality and literacy. The temple libraries in Edfu and Philae (both *pr-mḏꜣ.t*) were small special libraries used for the daily cult-ritual.[195] The small room – 2m² – in Edfu was inscribed with a book catalogue and decorated with scenes of offering book chests to Horus Behedeti – the main god of the temple. In the east and west wall of this room there were several niches, which might have contained

188 Schlott 1989, 218. For different institutions holding such documents see Zinn 2013d, esp. ch. 3.4 and 3.5.
189 Assmann 1992, 177–185; Assmann 2011, 156–170.
190 Assmann 1999, 7.
191 Assmann 1999, 5–6.
192 Jay 2016, 348–349.
193 Ryholt 2013; Assmann 2001; for libraries and archives as crucial institutions within the process of transmission of knowledge see Zinn 2008; 2011; 2013b; 2013d.
194 Zinn 2008.
195 Zinn 2011, 191–196.

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wooden book chests as shown in the offering scenes in this room. Interestingly for the interplay between literacy and orality is the usage of these libraries being bound into the daily cult ritual. If we look on the performance of the ritual in the way of an organigramm, we can state that the priests cleansed and robed themselves as preparation for the ritual in the adjacent Morning House (*pr-dwꜣ.t*), which in Edfu is situated as a mirror image over the central axis and in Philae next to the *pr-mḏꜣ.t*.[196] When proceeding into the temple inner, the priests picked up the books needed for the ritual in the *pr-mDA.t*. From the papyri, the incantations and recitations for the ritual were made while proceeding towards the sanctuary.

Summary

In order to re-conceptualise *literacy* for ancient Egypt, I focussed on three different areas: the relationship between orality and the written word; the materiality of writing and agency; and writing/literacy as constituent part of Egypt's memory culture.

Taken together, these three aspects underpin the role of writing/reading as the main criteria in the discussion of literacy. They help to re-focus the discussion with the aim of conceptualising 'literacy' more broadly as a cultural and social practice beyond the skill of an individual. Literacy should not be seen too simplistically as individual capacity to read and write or establishing the status of literate person within the society as a result of their literate skills. Literacy also reveals an overarching component which enables society to deal with texts and documents as well as the information contained. This is necessary to build up a social memory which creates a shared cultural identity and keeps the society alive. In this sense, a literate elite culture is working for and in the everyday life of all members of this society, be it consciously or subconsciously.

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196 Zinn 2011, 194.

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