12.4: The Materiality of Writing Greek and Egyptian

When Ptolemaios wrote this letter he used a pen made of reed, both for the Greek and the Egyptian parts (Figure 1). But this was not usually the case in the 3rd century. Rather, there seems to have been a strict division between the tools that were used to write Greek and the tools that were used to write Demotic. A Greek writing Greek would generally use a pen made of reed while an Egyptian writing Egyptian would use a pen made of rush. Although the differences between these two pens have been described already in detail by Tait (1998) and Clarysse (1993), it is worth giving a quick overview again here.

When a Greek wrote Greek in 3rd-century BCE Egypt, the process of writing his or her language was quite different from an Egyptian writing Egyptian. The pen that a Greek used was made from Egyptian reed (Figure 2), to be exact the stem of the *Phragmites communis* (Tait 1988: 477). These reed stems could be cut as long as 26.5 cm, and after drying, would be sharpened to a broad point, and split at the nib in the same way that quills were later used. When the reed would lose its point it would have to be sharpened again in order to function properly (in a papyrus containing verses from the Greek playwright Menander, this reed sharpening occurred roughly every 50 lines, Turner 1971: 8). In this process, the originally long pen would eventually be whittled down pencil-like to a stump of some 6.0 cm long. One such reed-stump was even found lengthened with a bit of wood (Lucas 1934: 133).

The Egyptian pen (Figure 3), on the other hand, was really not a pen at all, but rather a brush. Not made from thick reed (the diameter of which was about 1.0 cm) but from the much thinner Egyptian rush (about 0.15 cm in diameter, or ~1/5 the thickness of the reed). The rush, or to be exact, the *Juncus acutus* (Tait 1988: 477), grew generally in Egyptian salt marshes, and its stem was cut to a similar length as the reed (specimens found from 16–23 cm, Lucas 1934: 133). But rather than being sharpened like the reed, it was cut diagonally at the end, bruised and frayed (some say by chewing, but others note that chewing is both unnecessary and, considering the ink, messy) in order to work the naturally-occurring fibers into brush-like form.
These different pens required different accoutrements. The Greek scribe used the reed with a metallic-based ink and an
inkwell (Figure 4): once the ink was absorbed in the nib, the writer held the pen at an angle, and wrote (from left to right)
until the ink dried up, at which point the pen was dipped back into the inkwell and the process started anew. The image
of this writer is not far off from modern writing (before the invention of the fountain pen which required the hand to rest
on the writing-surface in order to produce a sharper pen angle) — the dipping in the inkpot, the holding of the pen at the
angle, etc. For the Egyptian scribe, however, the process of writing is closer to our associations not of writing, but of
painting — especially watercolour painting. For one, the brush-like rush was not used with an inkwell, but a palette
(Figure 3), which held a cake of black, carbon-based ‘watercolour’ in one oval (a mixture of black pigment from charred
organic materials and a gum arabic binding) and a cake of red ‘watercolour’ in the other (red pigment from iron oxide;
see Nicholson and Shaw 2000: 238, and Clarysse 1993: 189 for the differences between Greek metallic based ink
versus Egyptian carbon-based ink). The writer then applied water with the brush to the ‘watercolour’, and then
proceeded to apply this ink to the surface (papyrus, ostracen, etc.), not holding the pen at an angle as one did with the
reed, but holding the brush vertically, with the hand floating freely over the papyrus (“about 5 cm from its writing end”
[Clarysse 1993: 189]), writing right to left.

The differences in these two types of pens may have even affected how the scribe sat when he or she wrote. From an
early Egyptian sculpture known as ‘The Seated Scribe’ (Louvre E3023), it can be seen that writing (c.2500 bce) was
practiced sitting on the floor in a cross-legged position — the scribe stretching his kilt tautly across his knees in order to
provide support for the papyrus. Although it has been supposed that this posture of writing continued not just for later
Egyptian scribes but for Greek ones as well, Turner makes the important observation that the Greek reed pen, unlike the
Egyptian rush, was hard, sharp, and, due to the pressure it some-times required, could easily have punctured the
papyrus if it were not supported by some harder surface. He suggests that some hard material such as a writing-board
might have been needed to support the reed’s pressure: and indeed, there have been finds of small writing desks
(Figure 5), as well as depictions of Greek scribes writing while seated on chairs (see Turner 1971: 7–8 for references).

Thus, there are a number of differences between the material practices of writing for an Egyptian and a Greek — not just
regarding the pens used (rush, reed), but also the accoutrements (inkwells, palettes), the holding positions, and possibly
even the sitting positions for the writing as well. With such striking physical differences between these two practices of
writing, one wonders whether there were also conceptual differences between Egyptian rush-writing and Greek reed-
writing.

That is, would Ptolemaios, for example, in writing the Egyptian of this letter with a reed and not a rush, have considered
himself to be writing in a ‘Greek’ way? Would such practice have seemed strange to him? During this same period when
Ptolemaios was writing this letter with a reed pen, Egyptian scribes elsewhere were just beginning to abandon the rush
pen and adopt the reed for writing Greek, the language of the new ruling class (although Egyptian documents still were
written with the rush); gradually, the reed pen came to dominate more generally (by the 2nd century ce, both Greek and
Egyptian were written with the reed pen; Clarysse 1993; Depauw 1997: 83; Tait 1988: 481). But in Ptolemaios’ day,
there was still a fairly strict division between writing Egyptian with a rush and Greek with a reed.

One would expect that if there were truly a different conception of ‘Greek’ and ‘Egyptian’ writing — i.e. that Greek is a
language to be written with a reed, and Egyptian a language to be ‘painted’ with a rush — Ptolemaios would have
switched pens for the Egyptian portion of the letter. But this would have been extraordinarily inexpedient:
understandably, when Ptolemaios switched to Egyptian for his dream, he did not put away the reed, clean the inkpot,
locate an Egyptian rush, cake some watercolour onto a palette, fill up a clean pot with water, and begin writing again.
Instead he continued on with the reed pen — and the same thing seems to have happened in P.Duk.Inv. 675 (cf. Sosin and Manning 2003). Yet that expediency, I think, ought not erase those two images of Greek ‘writing’ and Egyptian ‘painting’. Even at the moment when transition between the two practices seems most effortless (i.e. when the Egyptian language is written with a Greek reed), this does not mean that the images and cognitive associations of ‘Egyptian’ and ‘Greek’ writing disappeared. One might think, for example, of melodies associated with certain instruments, or sculptures associated with certain materials. The ease of transference for the immaterial aspect of those melodies or forms does not abrogate the memories of the materials associated with those forms, or the performances associated with those melodies. Although now lost behind the remaining object, when Ptolemaios shifted from Greek to Egyptian, it seems likely that there was a vast network of different images and physical memories flooding his mind, not just those less material aspects of communication (e.g. meanings, sentences and sounds).

The reason why raising such questions is important, is that it helps one to begin to think of language in more material terms, and language-shifts not as purely cerebral events, but as events interconnected with physical practices and the memories of such practices. For the Greco-Egyptian of Ptolemaios’ day, the processes of writing Greek and Egyptian were highly different — while Greek was ‘written’, Egyptian was ‘painted’ — and so Ptolemaios, in his language shift, was not just choosing between two different languages, but between what were usually two very different practices of writing. Of course, there is more to this notion of ‘painting’ Demotic than just its material practice: there is also the script itself. Like Egyptian trilingual inscriptions where a hierarchy of scripts is on display — a relief picture at the top, hieroglyphs at the second tier, Demotic on the third and Greek on the fourth — certain scripts claim a higher level of visuality than others (i.e. certain scripts are logographic rather than alphabetic, creating images rather than spellings). It might be claimed that there are two aspects to ‘painting’, then: not just the painting materials used to ‘paint’ Demotic, but the Demotic script itself which demands a higher level of visuality than an alphabetic script like Greek. This difference in scripts is the subject of the next section.