Are Libyco-Berber Horizontal \( t \) and Vertical \( h \) the Same Sign?

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In Michael Macdonald’s essay “Literacy in an Oral Environment” (2005), he explores the use of writing practices of Safaitic, and draws a comparison to the informal literacy of the Tuaregs in the Tifinagh script. As he points out, the Tifinagh letters “are thought to be descended from the letters of the Libyco-Berber script, which was used in North Africa from before the Christian era. However, the latter is still not entirely deciphered and the exact process of this descent is far from clear.” (Macdonald 2005: 56). Inspired by Macdonald’s invaluable contributions to the understanding of the Ancient North Arabian epigraphy, this article presents a humble contribution to the analysis of the grammar and orthography of the Libyco-Berber inscriptions.

Libyco-Berber (LB) inscriptions can be classified into two general types, which have slightly different orthographic practices.\(^1\) The first type is the horizontal script found in Dougga, in the form of longer, monumental texts (some of which are Punic bilinguals), written from right to left. The second type is the vertical script, which is mostly found in shorter, funerary inscriptions written from bottom to top. There are some orthographic differences between the two script types.

The sign known as \( t \) exclusively occurs in the horizontal script, and almost exclusively in word-final position.\(^2\) The horizontal script, moreover has a different sign for \( t \) than the vertical script. In the horizontal script, the sign looks like a leftward facing trident, while in the vertical script it consists of 4 vertical lines of equal length next to each other. Besides this, the horizontal script quite consistently marks word boundaries.

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\(^1\) The transcription used for Libyco-Berber is different from the one used by Chabot (1943). The following signs are different: \( U = w, Z = z², I = y, Ç = š, T₁ = posables.\)

\(^2\) The two exceptions to this are \( tgyṭh \) (R1L 3) and \( trbṭn \) (R1L 6).
That t occurs exclusively in the horizontal script and almost exclusively in word-final position is, of course, rather unusual. In this paper I wish to examine the possible phonetic value of this sign and its grammatical function in the Libyco-Berber texts collected by Chabot (1940).

1 The Phonetic Value of t

Chabot transcribes t as T₁ because it seems to correspond to t in Punic bilinguals. The evidence for this identification is rather limited. It is exclusively based on the LB ypmṭṯ :: Punic ypmṭt (RIL 1:1, 3).

This would appear to be quite strong evidence in favour of the identification of t as word-final *t. However, in other environments Punic word-final t corresponds to nothing in Libyco-Berber: LB wdštr :: Punic ʕbdštṛ (RIL 1:2).

Moreover, the Libyco-Berber name transcribed in Punic as mqlʔ (RIL 1:4) which does not having a direct equivalent in RIL 1, because damage has made the name unreadable, should probably be equated to the Libyco-Berber name mqlṭ (RIL 3:10), and mqlḥ (RIL 3:5), lending further credence to the idea that the final t may represent a word-final vowel.3

This irregularity of the representation of final t might be a result of a Punic-internal development. Final t appears to have been lost in Punic, while it remained written in the Punic orthography, see Kerr (2010:125) and Jongeling (1994:58, 67). The phonetic identification of t as t is therefore highly uncertain, and it is therefore likely that the sign t represents a word-final vowel.

2 The Syntactic Distribution of t

Outside of the name ypmṭṯ, t mostly appears on titles. Many of these titles are also attested without this t, which seems to suggest that t is some kind of suffix.4 The table below sums up an overview of the titles.

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3 I thank Dr. Maarten Kossmann for providing me with this important observation.
4 The idea that the t is a suffix is not new, e.g. Prasse (1972:158) suggests it is a deictic and Chaker (1984: 257) suggests it’s a 3sg.m. possessive suffix. Galand (2002: 39f.) shows that neither explanation is very convincing in the context of the inscriptions.