

CHAPTER 8

Inscribing the Now and the Hereafter: First Writings in Early African History

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The material environment was being endowed with a new literate and trans-local readability, different from, but existing in parallel with, other interpretive schemata already constructed by local non-Islamic cultures. Parallelism was not mutual isolation: different frames of reference could influence each other.¹

The past decade has witnessed the emergence of new approaches to the study of early writing systems.² Critical of evolutionary models, and thinking comparatively of the four world areas where scriptural traditions are thought to have been invented independently (Ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia, China, Mesoamerica), recent scholars are asking more basic questions about what motivated the impulse to write. Linguists, paleographers and historians are probing the proto-scriptural graphic notational systems that preceded script, the relationship of writing to speech, and the varying and changing uses of the written word. Africa's place in the world of early writing systems, however, remains poorly understood. In much the same way as the field of Egyptology traditionally has suffered from isolationism, so too have the scriptural traditions of the African past been treated in a vacuum. Lingering presumptions

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about Ancient Egypt’s ‘exceptionalism,’ on the one hand, and the oral character of knowledge transmission of African societies, on the other, are among the epistemological reasons for this state of scholarly affairs.

This chapter is a reflection on early writing with a particular focus on the northwest corner of the continent. It draws on archaeological research and epigraphic corpora, including Paulo Fernando de Moraes Farias’ monumental study of the inscriptions of medieval Mali. The chapter seeks to understand the place in African history of Egypt’s pioneering scriptural heritage. It considers the debated origins of Libyco-Berber script or Tifinagh (also spelled Tifinay), the scriptural tradition of the Amazigh or so-called Berber people of northwestern Africa. It also reflects on the early uses of Arabic and Hebrew scripts in this region. The paper is informed by recent scholarship on the preconditions for the development of scriptural traditions, the motivations for acquiring literacies, and the first known functions of writing.

Three general observations emerge from this reflection. The first is that early writing in northwest Africa served multiple functions. Early inscriptions record meaningful messages varying from the sacred to the mundane. The second is that early inscriptions of both material culture (seals, glass weights, gold coins, household items and weaponry, stelae, slabs of rock and rock salt, plaques and tombstones), and livestock (primarily camels and cattle) fulfilled a need to record identity markers for immediate and future ends. In a sense, then, one could argue that the first writings of northwestern African societies were scriptural expressions of identity for the purpose of inscribing the now and the hereafter.

The third point raised here is a methodological consideration. How does one approach the history of Africa’s written traditions in order to better appreciate how, where and why certain groups developed or adopted, and made use of, script? For the case of West Africa, Moraes Farias’ scholarship has charted the way in two important areas: by carrying out empirical work on the first evidence of writing in a specific region, and studying the inscribed meanings of tombstones and non-funerary stelae; and by putting in conversation two scriptural traditions, Tifinagh and Arabic, in order to ascertain how one writing system could influence another. This chapter suggests Africanist historians follow suit and broaden the historical canvas by embracing a continental and comparative perspective to the history and expression of African scripts.


4 I thank Paul Lovejoy for suggesting that one should also consider body markings, from tattoos to scarification, as another form of bodily inscription; a subject I do not explore here.