

# Going back to Ancient Egypt: were the Princes of Elephantine really 'overseers of dragomans'?

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## Abstract

*Among the different titles the Princes of Elephantine had, that of "overseers of dragomans" has drawn the attention of researchers in the history of interpretation. This title has always appeared as a recognition of the status and importance interpreters enjoyed in Ancient Egypt. The denomination "overseer of dragomans" is the translation that Sir Alan Gardiner proposed of inscriptions found in different regions of Ancient Egypt, among which the island of Elephantine. In 1960, Goedicke criticised Gardiner's translation on the basis of historical and linguistic reasons. His objections, unknown to the Interpreting Studies community until today, seem to deny the role of the Princes of Elephantine as "overseers of dragomans".*

## Keywords

Interpreters in Ancient Egypt, Princes of Elephantine, overseers of dragomans.

After the advent of conference interpreting in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, scholars started to include in their articles mention of the presence of interpreters throughout history (e.g. Herbert 1952; Paneth 1962; Haensch 1956; Cary 1956; Van Hoof 1962), or indeed dedicate entire studies to the matter (e.g. Thieme *et al.*)<sup>1</sup>. Amongst the best-known works in the area are the ones published by Kurz (1985, 1986a, 1986b), which served as a basis for further investigations by au-

1 For further reading see Falbo (2004).

thors such as Delisle/Woodsworth (1995, 2012) and Kellett (1999) over the following 30 years. One of the most famous historical accounts of interpreting may be the one regarding the Elephantine Princes, one of the “earliest references to interpretation in Pharaonic Egypt”, as phrased in the subtitle of Kurz’s article (1985). In the collective imaginary of interpretation scholars and/or practitioners, the fact that even princes worked as interpreters and, above all, ‘overseers of dragomans’ is tantamount to recognising the utmost importance of the essential and high-profile position interpreters and interpretation held. A prestigious role that throughout history witnessed a number of vicissitudes. Indeed, the stereotypical use of the word “translator” as a synonym of “traitor” does not apply only to written translation but to its oral counterpart as well, as the emblematic case of Malinche teaches us. Nevertheless, the Elephantine Princes have undoubtedly represented the prestige of interpretation in the history of humankind so far.

However, there are details regarding this “glorious debut” of interpreting that still cause some perplexity, as Kurz herself admits in her article (1985: 218), by observing the following:

It might be argued that with the exception of the title ‘overseer of dragomans’ there is no reference to interpreting in any of those inscriptions. This is not surprising since, after all, the princes of Elephantine were foreign affairs experts who were entrusted with highly important and often difficult political, economic and occasionally military missions. It is only natural, therefore, that the tomb-wall inscriptions should relate the tomb-owner’s economic and diplomatic achievements. In view of what has been said about the Egyptians’s lack of interest in alien languages it is quite remarkable that the princes’ interpretation skills in dealings with peoples speaking a foreign tongue were deemed sufficiently important to merit special mention and inclusion in the enumeration of their many other titles and epithets (such as seal-bearer, unique friend, lector-priest, confidant of royal commands, etc.).

When reading these lines one cannot help but wonder whether the epithet ‘overseer of dragomans’ referring to the Princes of Elephantine was indeed “quite remarkable” or simply very unusual. This perplexity led to the following question: what if the Princes of Elephantine were never overseers of dragomans?

The question gave rise to a research endeavour aimed at discovering the origins of the said epithet and the causes leading to its attribution to the Princes of Elephantine. The investigation started with the examination of the sources mentioned in Kurz’s article. Along with Hermann’s essay (1956), the author largely draws on Gardiner’s article (1953) regarding the inscriptions found in the tomb of general Haremhab in Memphys, Egypt. In his description of the scenes painted in the tomb and their accompanying inscriptions, Gardiner (*ib.*: 5-6) mentions the duplicated depiction of Haremhab, which is facing the Pharaoh with one half and “a smaller personage whose figure is similarly duplicated” with the other. According to Gardiner, the “smaller personage” is an interpreter: “[t]he huddled group of foreigners to whom this man turns proclaims him to be an interpreter”. Clearly, this personage is an intermediary between the foreigners standing before the Pharaoh and Haremhab, who subsequently refers to the Pharaoh the words of the supposed interpreter. According to Bresciani (in Reggiani 2013: 128-

129), the available documents bear witness to the presence of “a class of bilingual foreigners (‘interpreters’) – foreigners by birth or born of mixed marriages? – accepted in Egyptian society and used as professionals, [...] in the Ancient Kingdom”<sup>2</sup>. Indeed, it is reasonable to assume that interpreting, just like language, was present since the dawn of time, and that encounters between different language speakers entailed the necessity of cross-linguistic communication. The presence of interpreters in Ancient Egypt, therefore, is not surprising. However, it should be underlined that none of the preserved fragments containing the inscriptions examined by Gardiner contains the word “interpreter”. This word and its existence in the lexicon of Ancient Egypt are central to Goedicke’s essay from 1960, in which the author refutes Gardiner’s thesis from 1915. In his article, Gardiner puts forward an interpretation of the meaning of a set of words, including  $\overline{\text{𓂏}}$ . Motivating his stance, Gardiner (1915: 125) states:

It will be noted that I render the Old Kingdom word  $\overline{\text{𓂏}}$  by ‘interpreter’ or ‘dragoman’, whereas the New Kingdom predicate  $\overline{\text{𓂏}}$  is translated ‘foreigner’. The reason is that the former is clearly a *title*<sup>3</sup> while the latter equally clearly is not. It would be more literal to substitute ‘speaker of a foreign language’ in each case, this being... the true etymological meaning.

Goedicke (1960: 60) quotes these self-same words at the beginning of his essay, observing that “This conclusion of Gardiner’s seems to me rather strange and I wish to discuss the matter again as far as the Old Kingdom inscriptions are concerned”. Goedicke investigates the meaning of  $\overline{\text{𓂏}}$  taking into consideration the various contexts in which it is found, and observes that ‘foreigner’ rather than ‘interpreter’ must be its real meaning, which is closer to Gardiner’s “etymological meaning” of “speaker of a foreign language”. Goedicke (*ib.*: 62-64) distinguishes between at least three inscription groups containing the above-mentioned word as an honorific title.

The first group is made of inscriptions found outside Egyptian borders, and, more specifically, in the Sinai Peninsula and Southern Nubian territories. All inscriptions in this group concern expeditions. Gardiner considers this sufficient evidence to prove the need for interpreters. Goedicke, however, believes that the presence of ‘overseers of dragomans’ would have required “an administrative institution, such as a ‘bureau for foreign languages’”, which he deems “highly unlikely”. Indeed, according to Goedicke, Tomâs’ inscription mentions no less than eight ‘overseers of dragomans’, which could not possibly indicate the simultaneous presence of so many representatives of the self-same administration. It is likelier that such a title traditionally referred to ‘overseers of foreigners’. After all, according to Goedicke, Gardiner<sup>4</sup> himself identifies  $\overline{\text{𓂏}}$  as an equivalent of the Greek word βάρβαρος, namely ‘foreigner’.

2 Original quotation: “una classe di stranieri bilingui (‘interpreti’) – stranieri di nascita o figli di matrimoni misti? –, inseriti nella società egiziana e utilizzati professionalmente, [...] nell’Antico Regno”.

3 Italics in the original.

4 Goedicke does not name his sources. For further reference see Gardiner (1915: 121).

The second group is closely related to the island of Elephantine, on the border with Nubia, and therefore, a strategic Egyptian outpost for trade and military purposes: “activity, both military and economic, against Nubia lay in the hands of officials residing there” (Goedicke 1960: 63).

The third group concerns the region of Memphis and, in that context, it seems clear that the ‘overseer of  $\overline{\text{A}}\overline{\text{A}}$ ’ refers to individuals responsible for foreigners belonging to military groups. All these inscriptions were found in border areas, where Egypt used to line up its military forces and carry out its trade operations, both of which would likely involve the presence of soldiers. Egyptian troops frequently included mercenaries<sup>5</sup> from foreign regions, which would explain the need for ‘overseers of foreigners’.

As regards the Princes of Elephantine, Goedicke (*ib.*: 64) maintains that “[t]he bearing of the title by the governors<sup>6</sup> of Elephantine resulted from their general military commission to screen the southern frontier of Egypt against Nubia”. The author bases his assumptions on verified historical documents that confirm the presence of foreign troops. This does not rule out the possibility that in those circumstances interpreters were needed, but according to Goedicke’s conclusions their role seemed to be quite marginal. Furthermore, Goedicke (*ib.*: footnote 2, 61) points out that “The problem of foreign languages, particularly in relation to the south, was hardly of any great importance. Thus, today at Aswan, the majority of the population is bilingual, speaking Arabic and Nubian”. Such a statement holds true even today and would therefore cast a shadow on the hypothesis of a dire need of interpreters in the region.

Goedicke’s study seems to erase any doubt regarding the meaning of  $\overline{\text{A}}\overline{\text{A}}$ , which, at least in the above-mentioned texts<sup>7</sup>, is ‘foreigner’ and not ‘interpreter’ or ‘dragoman’. Goedicke’s arguments seem a critique of Gardiner’s hasty attitude: indeed, even when considering foreigners as ‘speakers of a foreign language’, they cannot be automatically identified as interpreters based on this sole assumption. After all, even today, besides the interpreting profession itself, there are numerous professions for which a knowledge of foreign languages is an essential requirement. Before the Paris Peace Conference (1919), which conventionally marks the birth of modern conference interpreting, the interpreting profession was performed by individuals specialising in other areas, and whose profession required the knowledge of foreign language(s) (Delisle/Woodsworth 2012). Moreover, Goedicke’s essay indirectly answers questions emerging from Kurz’s conclusive remarks, as it explains why tomb inscriptions do not mention any interpreting task carried out by the so-called ‘overseer of dragomans’.

5 Goedicke (*ib.*: 64) confirms that the presence of “mercenary troops [...] in the Old Kingdom is well attested from other sources”.

6 It is worth noting that Goedicke always speaks of the ‘governors’ of Elephantine and not of ‘princes’.

7 The word  $\overline{\text{A}}\overline{\text{A}}$  is still wrapped in mystery. According to Jones (2000, entry 1309), when in the following context  $\overline{\text{A}}\overline{\text{A}} \text{ } \overline{\text{A}}\overline{\text{A}} \text{ } \overline{\text{A}}\overline{\text{A}}$ , it means “interpreter of the liquids hidden within the [...]”, where the word “interpreter” is used in its hermeneutic sense, namely “the one who knows”, in German “der die (verborgenen) Flüssigkeiten in der [...] kennt”.

Both Gardiner and Goedicke's observations seem to bear evidence of the fact that words are neither harmless nor neutral. Their (non) existence and/or meaning have a direct impact on making and re-making history. Words – interpreters and translators know it well – are invaluable, treacherous, or simply mirror life and society. A rigorous philological analysis of their evolution in time may shatter dreams and hopes, but is nonetheless essential to describe reality in its most objective – albeit uncertain – dimension.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to express my gratitude to Prof. Franco Crevatin, Full Professor of Linguistics at the Department of Law, Language, Interpreting and Translation Studies until 2015, whose help was essential in guiding my research and finding Goedicke's essay.

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