


A small stroke of hieratic and the grace of god

A note on *Sinuhe* B 147–8

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The Moving Finger writes; and having writ,
Moves on: nor all thy Piety nor Wit
Shall lure it back to cancel half a Line,
Nor all your Tears wash out a Word of it

E. Fitzgerald, *The Rubaiyat of Omar
Khayyam* (5th edition, 1889), lxxi

As a small gesture, I offer here a note on *The Tale of Sinuhe*,¹ that deals with a single hieratic sign. The importance of readings of individual signs can easily be exemplified in the famous re-reading of *Sinuhe* B 23–4, where a word was initially transcribed as *sꜣqt*,² before it was realised that the stroke to the left, the supposed *t*, was the foreleg of the crocodile sign (Sign I5 ³);³ this new reading had ‘significant grammatical implications, since it dispose[d] of what has been taken as the sole example of narrative *sꜣmt.f* with a verb having a masculine infinitive’.⁴ Often, we as readers have accepted the traces of signs as a fixed entity, rather than a contingent result of an imperfect human processes, and our readings should acknowledge the changing motions of a hand with a pen and the ‘world of swift changes, with the hand and mind moving in varying ways’.⁵ I here make only a short suggestion about a single stroke, noting as I do so that my gratitude to, and admiration for, Ulli would exceed the longest possible contribution.

I discuss the passage of B 147–8 (fig. 1), when *Sinuhe*, having narrated his victory over an enemy and the prosperity gained through this, says *hr.jr.-?-ntr r-htp n-ts.n:f-jm:f ...* In the Middle Kingdom version of the poem, this passage is preserved only in the 12th Dynasty B, and the 13th Dynasty R is lost at this point. The New Kingdom version has a slightly different version: *hr-nhm-ntr r-htpw*• (AO rto 56). The poem apparently shifts from past narrative tenses at this point to an internal monologue, and this shift is so striking that

¹ This is an excerpt from a complete commentary, *The Life of Sinuhe: A Reader’s Commentary to the Middle Kingdom Version(s)*, to be published in *LingAegStudMon*, but currently abandoned due to lack of research-time. A full draft is deposited in the Griffith Institute archive (Parkinson, R. MSS 1).

² Gardiner 1909, pl. 5a [bottom] n. d; Blackman 1932, 13a n. 11a.

³ Barns 1972, 160–161 [3]; Koch 1990, 20a n. 8a; Allen 2015, 73.

⁴ Barns 1972, 161 [3]; Schenkel 1973.

⁵ Parkinson 2009, 90.

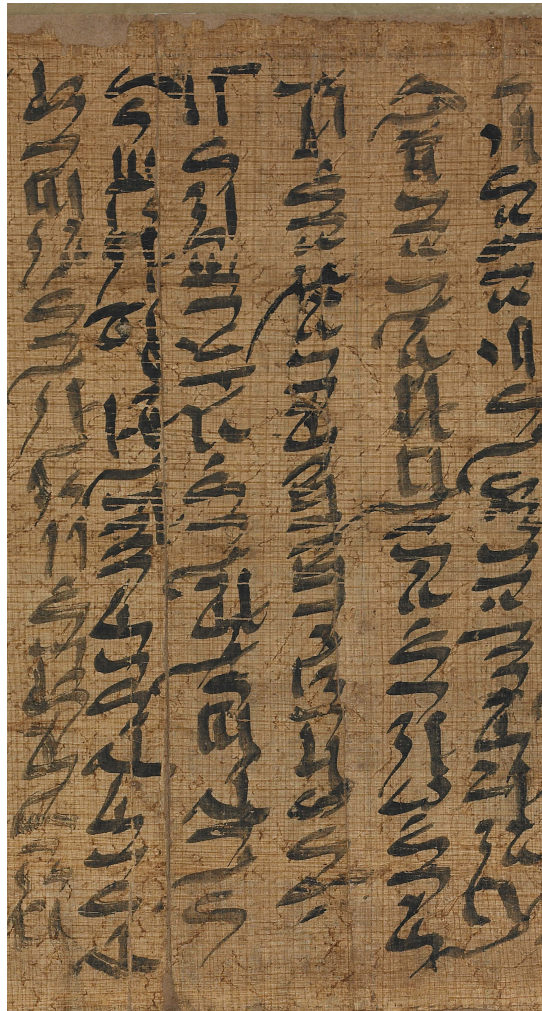


Fig. 1: P. Berlin P 3022: Sinuhe B 145–50 © Ägyptisches Museum und Papyrussammlung, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin; photographer: Lisa Baylis, the British Museum

early translations marked this passage as starting a ‘Petition to the king of Egypt’, noting that ‘the transition ... is not marked in the manuscript’, either due to an error or with a deliberate ‘sudden contrast’⁶. The Ramessid AO, however, does not mark this transition with a rubric as the start of a new stanza,⁷ and there is no rubric in the copy of O DeM 6.⁸ This suggests that the New Kingdom version had no change between stanzas here, making this

⁶ Petrie 1895, 110, 137; Griffith 1897, 5242 n. 2.

⁷ AO rto 56.

⁸ This ostrakon (O. Deir el-Medina 1439) is made up of fragments of a very large ostrakon with the remains of eight lines in black with red verse-points, with no rubrics (B 147–60); the surviving lines contain no passages where there is a rubric in AO. Collated at IFAO in November 2019, thanks to Annie Gasse.

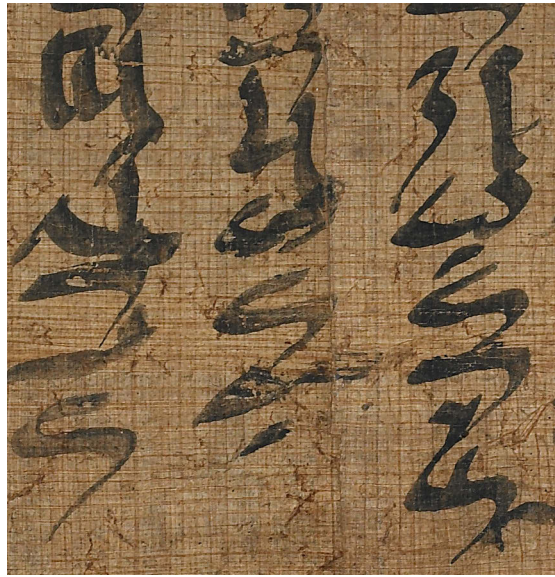


Fig. 2: P. Berlin P 3022: Sinuhe B 147 (bottom) © Ägyptisches Museum und Papyrussammlung, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin; photographer: Lisa Baylis, the British Museum

stanza both the central stanza of the poem and also the longest one.⁹ The syntax of the passage has been complicated by uncertainties over the reading in B of one sign (fig. 2). There is a small, un-ligated stroke after *jr* at the bottom of B 147, which is short like a *t*; the surface of the papyrus is not obviously damaged, and there is no trace of any erasures. The ink does not look like a palimpsest trace, and it seems to be of the same density as the ink of the previous sign, *jr*. It appears to be a single stroke, angled in a similar manner to other signs in the bottom part of this line. The shortness of this stroke cannot easily be paralleled in signs in the vertical lines of *Sinuhe*, or of *The Eloquent Peasant* (B1) that was written by the same scribe. The issue of reading has been problematic since the first editions,¹⁰ and the context of the passage seems to offer little help.

These verses describe god's reaction to 'one with whom he was angry', and the *ntr* is unspecified, generalised divine, as Griffiths noted: 'a deity of wider powers is probably envisaged as the one who ordained the whole course of events ... The traditional translation implies a deliberate withholding of the god's name'.¹¹ Later, *Sinuhe* will address 'whatever god' (B 156), suggesting that an unknown power is meant here, as earlier in his mention of 'a plan of god' (B 43). The 'god' is unlikely to be the previously mentioned Montu (B 141–2),¹² or the king:¹³ although Amenemhat I is referred to as 'the god' when he ascends to heaven (R 6), the word 'god' is elsewhere qualified by an adjective or a de-

⁹ See Assmann 1983, 26–27 [§21].

¹⁰ E. g. Gardiner 1909, pl. 9a [bottom] n. g.

¹¹ Griffiths 1988, 93–94.

¹² Contra Goedicke 2001, 40–41.

¹³ As suggested by e.g. Théodoridès 1984, 110–111.

monstrative whenever it refers to Senwosret.¹⁴ The ‘one with whom he was angry’ refers to Sinuhe, and is in the past tense.

God’s action, *jrj r-*, is ‘acting in order to’ as in B 161, and it is not ‘acting against’ with a sense of hostility as in B 183, 259. The construction here may of course play with the idiom ‘to act against’, but the following words reveal that god is ‘acting in order to be gracious’.¹⁵ The construction ‘to act in order to’ do something occurs in *The Eloquent Peasant*: ‘that you act is in order to act with me (*mk jrr:k r jrt hn:j*)’ (B2 123–4). *htp* is ‘to be gracious towards’, as frequently in the following verses (B 148, 157, 163, 165, 273), and the verb can denote both the happiness of the king with (*hr*) a nomarch and of the gods with a king.¹⁶ With an indirect object, the verb is ‘to be gracious to’, as in *Hymns to Sobek* where ‘may you be gracious to (*htp n-*) king Amenemhat; may your face be fair to him on this day’.¹⁷ Similarly, in a spell against the epagomenal days, the magician says ‘may the sky be gracious to me, may the earth be gracious to me, may the ennead of Re be gracious to me’.¹⁸ In Coffin Text spell 160, the deceased says ‘Re had been gracious to me in his evening’; in spell 166, he approaches the butler of Re since ‘Re’s face is gracious to you, the face of the two Enneads is bright for you’; spell 238 wishes that ‘you may you the Souls of Heliopolis to speak to me and that those who accompany Horus to be gracious to me’; in spell 821, Geb ‘is gracious to you, he loves you and protects <you>’.¹⁹ In an early Middle Kingdom letter to the dead, the deceased is urged ‘be gracious, gracious, so the gods of Tawer will be gracious to you (*htp-n:t*)’.²⁰ Later in the poem, the verb will recur with an indirect object ‘may the king of Egypt be gracious to me’ (B 165), ‘the Sungod shall be gracious to you [the king]’ (B 273). These parallels suggest that *htp* is to be understood as a verb here,²¹ although Goedicke suggested that it was a noun ‘to the satisfaction of the one whom he had to reproach’²² and el-Hamrawi ‘was der Gott macht ist zum Frieden...’.²³ *htp* is a noun in B 161, where Sinuhe wishes ‘may god give me grace’, but it seems more likely to be a verb here. Later, the noun *htpt* features in B 165 in conjunction with the verb *htp*.²⁴ In the dramatic context of the monologue, the verse could be taken either as a statement about the past or present actions of god or as a wish for the future.

The parallel of the New Kingdom version is also unhelpful in clarifying the general meaning. AO reads • *hr-nhm-ntr r-htpw • nn-[-..]•*. Barns suggested reading **hr-{n}hm* as a sequence of two particles,²⁵ as when Amunenshi says ‘and so Egypt must indeed be happy (*hr-hm-kmt-nfr.t(j)*)’ (B 76), and when Sinuhe says ‘and so good must be the patience which saves me from death (*hr-hm-nfr-w;h-jb nhm-wj m-.-mwt*)’ (B 202–3). *hm* is a particle

¹⁴ Parant 1982, 139; see Stadnikov 1994, 105.

¹⁵ Parant 1982, 146.

¹⁶ See e.g. Blumenthal 1970, 74 B2.6, 80 B3.6, 312 G4.2.

¹⁷ P. Ramesseum 6 l. 40–41; see Gardiner 1957b, 48, pl. 1; Blumenthal 1970, 81 B3.13.

¹⁸ P. Ramesseum 17 4B.x+6: Meyrat 2019, 167, 388–389.

¹⁹ Buck 1938, 385b; Buck 1947, 18b; Buck 1947, 317m–n; Buck 1961, 22o.

²⁰ Berlin bowl l. 2; Gardiner and Sethe 1928, pl. 5a.

²¹ As understood by e.g. Gardiner 1916, 57; Parant 1982, 145–146.

²² Goedicke 2001, 40–41.

²³ el-Hamrawi 2000, 148.

²⁴ See e.g. Blumenthal 1970, 319 G4.23.

²⁵ AO rto 56: Barns 1952, 14 [56].

of asseveration.²⁶ Barns considered that ‘the reading seems good, though palaeographically quite unlike what B has here’,²⁷ and the same writing of the particle as {n}ḥm occurs in AO vso 20 (= B 202–3). He read this passage as ḥr-{n}ḥm-ntr r-htpw • {n}n-[š;:n:f-<n:f> skskt] ‘god shall be gracious to him <to whom> he decreed destruction’, restoring from OP4.²⁸ At this point, O DeM 6 reads nḥm-n:j [...] (l. x+1), and from this Parant noted that ‘la lecture ḥr nḥm ntr (ḥr sḏm.f) donnerait également un sens acceptable, au futur’.²⁹ and so that phrase could be as a subjunctive sḏm:f with a dative: ‘may [god] rescue/take for me’. AO could similarly be read ‘so shall god rescue (me) to grace’. However, it is also possible to read the phrase in O DeM 6 as a sḏm.n:f (‘I have taken’), possibly by confusion from the particle nḥm.n-wj.³⁰

Given these uncertainties about the New Kingdom version, the meaning of the phrase in B thus hangs very much on the reading of the small stroke. Various transcriptions have been suggested, as follows:

1. The sign has been transcribed as *t*, placed centrally under the preceding sign, producing a reading ḥr-jrt-ntr.³¹ The hieratic-induced end of the narrative sḏmt:f form means that, as Parant noted, ‘il s’agit, non de la forme sḏmt.f mais de l’infinitif de narration, ce qui permettrait de donner un sens présent à ḥr jrt ntr’.³² Given the poem’s use of narrative infinitives, this is a plausible (albeit apparently otherwise unattested) phrasing. The signs could also be read as a passive verb-form, jr.t(w)-ntr ‘god shall be made to be ...’.³³ Another possible reading is jrt-ntr, a relative verb-form, ‘what god has done’³⁴ or ‘what god will do’,³⁵ which would give a sense ‘so what god has done/shall do shall be gracefulness’. However, the stroke is short and unlike the more firmly formed short and un-ligatured *ts* that the B-scribe wrote elsewhere in these lines (e.g. in B 145). In particular, this group seems less decisively and clearly written than in his other writings of the group *jrt* (B 5, 117, 183, 205, 223, 250, 299, 307, 308; compare also his *Eloquent Peasant* B1 330).
2. The sign has been transcribed as *n*, which is short because it had been partially erased,³⁶ producing a reading as ḥr-jr.n-ntr.³⁷ This seem grammatically possible: the construction ḥr + n-sḏm.n:f occurs in the Installation of the Vizier Rekhmire: ‘and what he does cannot be unknown (ḥr-n-ḥm.n-tw-jrjw:t:f)’,³⁸ and earlier in the poem,

²⁶ Gardiner 1957a, §253; Oréal 2011, 351–393, esp. 384–385.

²⁷ Barns 1952, 14.

²⁸ Barns 1952, 14 [56]; so Feder 2020.

²⁹ Parant 1982, 144–145. The immediately preceding *nb* in O DeM 6 is arguably part of the preceding phrase about cattle (i.e. [mnmn<t>]:f-nb<t>).

³⁰ As suggested by Koch 1990, 53a n. 16a. Compare the particle nḥm.n- in B 46, which is written as nḥmw in AO rto 118, and nḥm.n-wj in B 117–18, which is written as nḥm.n-wj in AO rto 46.

³¹ Gardiner 1909, pl. 9a; 1916, 57; similarly, Blackman 1932, 29a n. 6a; Koch 1990, 53a n. 13a.

³² Parant 1982, 145.

³³ Sethe, as cited by Gardiner 1916, 57.

³⁴ Fecht 1984, 484.

³⁵ el-Hamrawi 2014, 146–148.



³⁶ Gardiner 1909, pl. 9a [bottom] n. g; so Allen 2015, 107.

³⁷ Gardiner 1957a, §239 n. 4.

³⁸ Sethe and Helck 1906–1958, 1089 l. 2; Davies 1943, 2: pl. 14 l. 8; Faulkner 1955, 19 l. 8; see Vernus 1990, 66.

Amunenshi used a *hr*-headed construction with Noun + stative (B 75–6).³⁹ As Parant noted, ‘dans ce cas, la forme verbale ne pouvant exprimer qu’un passé, *hr* ne peut être qu’une simple particule de liaison, malgré sa place devant une forme verbale. Cette situation, qui n’appelle pour Gardiner “no special remark” [1957a, §239] ... ne paraît pas cependant de toute clarté à Satzinger [1971, 65]. La particule proclitique *hr* doit ainsi être rendue par “Et, alors, ainsi ...”.’⁴⁰ On this reading, the phrase can be understood as a reflection on the past duel: ‘so god shall have acted in order to ...’⁴¹ However, the stroke is very short, and there is no obvious trace of attempts at erasure; from examination, the surface surrounding the sign seems clear and without any smudges or traces of erasure. The B-scribe wrote a relatively short *n* elsewhere in B 164, but he did that as an inserted correction, making *jn:f* into *jn.n:f*, and that inserted sign is still a longer stroke than here.

3. The sign has also been transcribed by Parant as a poorly formed *r*: ‘ce qui donnerait soit le perfectif *jr(r)* qui est parfois mais exceptionnellement écrit *jrr*, soit l’imperfectif *jrr*, mais qui ne semble pas attesté précédé de *hr*’.⁴² The B-scribe occasionally wrote *jr* with a phonetic complement,⁴³ but once again the shape, size and position of the sign make this reading unconvincing.

The lack of erasure and the angle and shortness of the stroke make me speculate that it could be a sign that was abandoned, half-written and unfinished. The Berlin papyri are full of corrections and re-writings; there are many cases where a sign was re-touched as the pen was re-dipped, and the papyri are very much works of a moving hand.⁴⁴ In one case, in *The Eloquent Peasant* the B-scribe started to write one sign (Sign Gardiner A2 ) and then realised it was a mistake and wrote another determinative (Sign Gardiner Y1 ) over the half-written finished sign, producing a strange amalgam (B1 353).⁴⁵ The scribe of the *Man and Ba* at one point started to write the wrong the refrain (l. 106), stopped after the first sign, washed it out and then left the space blank.⁴⁶ This is a speculative suggestion, and completely unverifiable, but such a process of leaving a sign unfinished is arguably a real possibility here.

What that sign was intended to be is even less certain. Perhaps the B-scribe started to write *hr-jr-n:j* and then stopped, realising that he was making a mistake, and then discontinued. However, if the stroke was the start of an unfinished *n*, one might expect him to have been started the sign further to the left. The position of the sign at the bottom of a line makes me wonder if he might have started to write the horizontal top stroke of his

³⁹ Vernus 1990, 65 n. 37, 76 [143].

⁴⁰ Parant 1982, 144–145.

⁴¹ Compare Blumenthal: ‘so hat ein Gott gehandelt’ (1995, 898); Allen: ‘god has to have acted ...’ (2015, 107–108).

⁴² Parant 1982, 144–145.

⁴³ The B-scribe occasionally wrote a phonetic complement in *jrj* elsewhere in the poem (e.g. B 28, 117, 282–283, 307; see Allen 2015, 64). In his *Eloquent Peasant*, he wrote *jr{r}yt* in B1 56 and *kw:k-jr{r}:k* in B1 292–293; other possible examples are in B1 266, 267.

⁴⁴ Parkinson 2009, 90–112.

⁴⁵ Parkinson 1991, 45a n. 7.a.

⁴⁶ E. g. Parkinson 2009, 109.

next sign (*ntr*) and then stopped in mid-stroke, thinking that there was insufficient space for it at the bottom of the line; he then re-dipped and wrote *ntr* at the top of the next line (B 148). If he had written the sign at the bottom of B 147 at the same size as he subsequently wrote it in B 148, the line would have been longer than the immediately surrounding ones (and the same length as the long line of B 149). *ntr* should arguably be the next word in the text, but against this suggestion is the fact his formation of the *ntr* sign in vertical lines varies considerably (B 43, 44, 47, 67, 70, 126, 156, 161), and from these it looks as if he usually wrote the vertical stroke first (as e.g. in B 262). In addition, he placed the short stroke quite centrally in the line, whereas one might expect him to have placed an initial stroke of *ntr* further to the right, on order to allow space for the vertical stroke to its left (Sign Gardiner Z1 1); however, he did write the word *ntr* without a vertical stroke elsewhere in this copy, albeit usually in horizontal lines (B 47, 216, 229, 253).

Regardless of what the intended sign was going to be, I suggest that the scribe abandoned the stroke as a mistake and then moved to the top of the next line to continue writing. On this understanding of his movements, the text reads *hr.jr-ntr*, a standard *hr* + subjunctive *sdm:f*.⁴⁷ The *hr*-headed constructions have a sense of necessity, sequentiality and general inevitability,⁴⁸ and are the diachronic successors to the *sdm.hr:f*.⁴⁹ The *sdm.hr:f* expresses ‘the logical consequence or deduction stemming from the premise(s) expressed in the preceding statement(s)’.⁵⁰ These constructions are often associated with instructions in medical and mathematical texts and in documents involving a ‘fixed procedure’⁵¹ which may add a suitable overtone of inevitability to the passage here. *hr sdm:f* has a sense of future consequence as in the Installation of the Vizier: ‘as for the official who acts like this, he will flourish (*hr-rwd:f*) here in this place’.⁵² In *The Eloquent Peasant*, both *hr:f sdm:f* and *sdm.hr:f* occur, as in ‘if (the scales) tilt, then you can/shall tilt (*jr gs:f hr:k g{w}s:k*)’ (B1 193–4), and in that poem, the *sdm.hr:f* occurs at the start of a speech: ‘this peasant said “So shall Meru’s son still err (*s; mrw tnm.hr:f*)”’ (B1 218–19). That verse almost has reference to the present time as an ongoing situation, and is ‘inferential’,⁵³ as when Amunenshi is drawing an inference from what has happened, in the *hr*-headed ‘so, Egypt must then be happy ...’ (B 75–6). Here, the *hr*-headed statement with a subjunctive *sdm:f* would draw on the preceding victory to state that given this event, god must now continue to be gracious and act so as to help Sinuhe. One might expect a present tense (‘so god now acts ...’), but the sense of futurity is increased with the following phrase ‘in order to be gracious (*r-htp*)’ and *htp* is also a wished-for future action in the following verses ‘may you be gracious and place me at home’ (B 165). Although the verse is re-phrased in the New Kingdom version, it is presented as a future statement there also.

In this passage, Sinuhe has described his newly gained prosperity with a sequences of *sdm.n:fs* (B 143–7). Here, the particle *hr* recalls the verb *hr* ‘to fall’ that has been much

⁴⁷ See Vernus 1990, 65–66 n. 39.

⁴⁸ Vernus 1990, 78–84; Allen 2010, §20.9.1, 22.7.

⁴⁹ Vernus 1990, 60–71.

⁵⁰ Green 1987, 89.

⁵¹ Vernus 1990, 80.

⁵² Sethe and Helck 1906–1958, 1090 l. 8; Davies 1943, 2: pl. 14 l. 12–13; Faulkner 1955, 20 l. 12–13; see Gardiner 1957a, §239.

⁵³ Gardiner 1957a, §430.2; Vernus 1990, 81.

used in the immediately previous narration (B 135, 139, 139–40), assonantly continuing the thought that Sinuhe's victory is surely a sign that god will be gracious. The particle also echoes the start of a speech earlier in the poem (B 75–6), reinforcing a sense of a transition from past narrative to discourse addressing present and future issues. 'So shall god still act ...' becomes a confident statement that the god will act, as an ongoing situation, and Sinuhe then relates this to the present moment, asserting that 'today his heart is now satisfied (*iw-mjn jb:f-j(w)*)' (B 149), and he turns to describe his present prosperity in an elaborate lyric that seeks to distance his present wellbeing from anything to do with flight. As this produces a fuller self-realisation of his true state, he moves to a desperately wish for grace that is phrased, once again in the future, as a wish that he will return 'home' and to 'the place where my heart still stays' (B 157–8).⁵⁴ The reading *hr.jr-ntr* fits into this broader context of shifting reflections on his present and future state. The stanza articulates the fictional narrator's ideas and feelings that change even as he speaks. It is clear that the B-scribe also changed his mind occasionally, even as he was writing, and this passage may be another example of this.

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⁵⁴ E. g. Parkinson 2002, 158–159.

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